



Beyond Incidental

Incidental Space was the result of an extremely intense process since the office became responsible not only for the design but also its realisation. During this time, I began writing about the project not by explaining it specifically, but by writing about architecture in general ways. I deliberately refrained from providing any written explanation or description of the space exhibited. Rather, the space became the manifestation of an architectural experience, pure and devoid of words. And in doing so, I realized that *Incidental Space* was not about architecture as exhibitions in biennials usually are but that the exhibition was Architecture itself. Weighing 7 tons and with an envelope surface of 280 sqm, *Incidental Space* was an attempt to guard Architecture in its own right against any given constraints.

THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

The actual work of architectural design doesn't consist in drawing, in building models, in speaking or writing, but exclusively in making decisions. These decisions may be reached intuitively or arrived at by a long process of weighing and cogitating, but in the final analysis they result in an architectural structure — a heavy, physical body in space.

Every construction is the outcome of a series of traceable decisions. But for many buildings, these decisions just accumulate without any relation to each other. The finished building, to a certain degree, represents a catalogue of the measures that were taken. But a holistic spatial experience or a cogent architectural statement can only come about when all the decisions in the design process are reciprocally determined by one another. In that way, they take on their own imperative. In other words, a decision no longer becomes a question of personal taste, but one of architectural consistency. It is no longer a question of personal authority; the decision takes on a generally valid character, comprehensible to anyone. In this way, the search for criteria becomes the actual work of design; decisions result from this. These criteria of judgment can in turn only be derived from an overall architectural problem,

an idea, which must be further reconsidered with every successive decision. Every new architectural problem demands its own specific means of investigation and specific means of reflection for valid criteria to be derived from it. And if, for us, the architectural problem includes the search for alterity, or for the enigmatic, that changes nothing in this definition of architectural design. On the contrary, it confirms this definition by different means.

Many buildings, particularly in contemporary architecture, achieve a holistic character via a shortcut in the design process: they borrow from architecture that has already been built, from something that has already been holistically worked out.

This was precisely the shortcut that was precluded for us in *Incidental Space*, since we didn't want the built space to refer to some other space. We didn't want it to atrophy into mere illustration, like a model, a drawing, or some film. Instead, the space was meant to assert itself as an event at a particular location, for a particular time. For this reason, there was no option to depend on any existing work of architecture to attain some measure of certainty and efficiency in the design process. Instead, with our goal of generating new experiences, we were forced to understand architectural design as an intellectual adventure, full of risk. Nonetheless, *Incidental Space* is emphatically not a space that has been created at random, or worse, a space that has generated itself.

In contrast to an architecture of disconnected elements, a holistic approach to architecture can only come about through the simultaneity of all forms of representation and all modes of looking. This means that all decisions, even if they were reached sequentially, must nonetheless coincide in the moment of looking at the structure. This precludes a linear design process, in which decisions are made independently of each other in disconnected sequence.

These gypsum models were not made at once; they were produced over many months. During this time period, we already developed methods of representing and discussing these models at a 1:1 scale. Through photographic enlargements, it was thus possible to evaluate the spatial ornamentation at the scale of the space that would eventually be built. Half the exhibition hall in Venice has been recreated in a workshop in Zurich; the space has been built to the scale of the individual gypsum model in order to insert the corresponding spatial

model. Throughout this iterative design process, the space was synchronically represented and designed; its representation and its design were one indivisible process.

STRUCTURE AND ORNAMENT

An ornament in architecture can be understood as an added, separable element: something like wallpaper, which can be removed from a wall, or a carpet that can be rolled up and then unrolled elsewhere. This idea of ornamentation as a decorative accessory, as worthless and superfluous ballast, underlies modernism's criminalisation of ornament.

But ultimately even Adolf Loos designed highly emblematic architecture, structures that would be unthinkable without the ornamental properties of marble surfaces or the jointing of wood. If economic limitations meant a space couldn't be clad with natural materials, Loos had no hesitation in turning to paint.

Although Loosian architecture shares much with the writings of John Ruskin, an early thinker of the Arts and Crafts movement, the criminalisation of ornament isn't something they share. A key point of departure for the Arts and Crafts movement, which can be seen as a precursor to the modernist avant-garde, was that ornamentation should emerge and be derived directly from construction. It should never be an extraneous accessory, but should instead reinforce the character of the materials and construction techniques used.

However, even if ornamentation is understood on these terms, it still can very much be described as an additive architectural element. There is an unsettlingly, austere beauty to be found in construction photographs of Loos's Villa Müller, with the brick walls of the building's skeleton frame exposed. At the same time, the exposure of the rough mortar joints raises the question of whether precisely these ornamental qualities of the building's brickwork could have helped incorporate the sensuality and the building's collage of strict classicist spatial figures into a more integrated overall structure.

An indivisible unity of spatial form and ornamentation, ornament as an inseparable and irreplaceable element of a spatial structure, ornament as a fragment of this very space: this holistic approach to ornament served as the basis for our far-ranging search

for a space of maximum complexity, variety, density, and unfamiliarity. All the models developed for the experimental design of *Incidental Space* are characterised by an indissoluble unity between spatial form and texture.

To generalise, all plaster models could be described as casts of different materials. But whereas plaster casting is usually employed to accurately reproduce clear-cut forms, for the positive moldings for *Incidental Space* we mostly used formless elements like sand and sugar. Other materials were added in a deliberately unformed state. For example, instead of using a cubic, well-delineated pile of uniform paper—which would have produced a clearly-defined, right-angled space—we used scraps of paper, crumpled paper, wet paper and corrugated paper.

These positive molds composed from a variety of materials might have been called collages. But after the casting, the varied materials resulted in a single hollow space, coherent and unified, a form neither planned nor predictable.

The beauty of these models that appeared when the casts were sawn open came from the complete correspondence between their spatial form and their surface texture. Or to put it another way, the correspondence between structure and ornament. The dried plaster represented a kind of petrified motion, aggregating the transitions between the materials and drawing them into a holistic spatial form. From the variety of materials that were used more or less simultaneously emerged a fluid movement of apparently organic transitions.

For this reason the shift from one niche to the next, or from one cavity to the next, is never abrupt. Yet at the same time the surface textures within any specific space of the model remain highly detailed, even where the textures were altered when the materials being molded were squashed or even effaced by the substance used for casting.

As with “Chinese scholars’ rocks,” individual components can still be recognised within these seamless transitions — from one reproduced surface to the next, from one surface ornament to the next, from one cavity to the next — and within the fusion of spatial form and spatial ornamentation. But while specific elements can be identified by their surface form and texture, the surfaces themselves remain enigmatic in their overall appearance and

composition. What led us to this experimental design, and to the name *Incidental Space*, was a desire to represent a specific event, one neither predictable nor calculable, but not at all random. An event where structure and ornament are one.

ARCHITECTURE AND ITS REPRESENTATION

With the over-regulation of today’s architecture practice, one particular mode of representation takes on enormous significance: rendering. More than any other medium, rendering promises control over the future building project. Rendering, as a form of representation, can leap over the entire design process, skipping over construction and the occupants moving in, to arrive at the end stage of those processes: photographic reproduction, and the possibility of publication. It is clear just how happy the users of architecture are with rendering. Time of day and season are important elements of this elaborate, photorealistic mode of representation. I would even say that many buildings today look like renderings, while renderings no longer look anything like buildings.

In a sense, with *Incidental Space*, we are bringing this most manipulable of all forms of representation back down to reality – to the architecture itself – and re-incorporating it into the construction process. Our project is actually the scan of a cracked open plaster form — in other words, an enormous immaterial data cloud. However, the project in the Swiss Pavilion looks nothing like a normal rendering: renderings very often involve volumes constructed using simple geometry, which for this reason are transparent. They are drawn with a computer, then wallpapered over with photographs of materials or patterns. By contrast, our data cloud is a digital cuckoo’s egg, not drawn with a computer, but measured, mapped, or scanned at high resolution.

This gigantic mass of data is the basis for the plotting or milling of the project’s formwork elements, and also the basis for all the renderings of *Incidental Space*. This means that both the built three-dimensional space and the printed rendering are direct depictions of the same dataset. In this way you could say the space is a built rendering, while the rendering is a space printed on paper.

During the building process, the renderings were printed out in the same dimensions as the completed space. They served as an implementation plan, as a detailed plan on a 1:1 scale and as an overview on a 1:5 scale.

Using the renderings, we were able to keep track of the accuracy of the milling and printing processes and monitor how different computer programmes reproduced the same basic data.

Rendering used as a detailed plan — nothing could be further from the commercial aesthetic of rendering usually seen in competitions! On one side of the token, Building Information Models (BIM) representations exert ever more systematic control over the work done by architects; on the other side even when drawing up the implementation plan, layouts and facades can only be wallpapered on top using standard digital solutions. Who then can hold it against architects if they rework their buildings on screen, or even need renderings to represent buildings they have already finished?

In our case, as accurate and realistic as our reproduction based on renderings may be, the pictures themselves remain enigmatic: there is hardly a space less suited to two-dimensional representation than *Incidental Space*. Surfaces that appear to the observer of the three-dimensional space as crooked, burst, messy, or at an angle to an upright wall, are collapsed in the rendering into one and the same surface. Things that in the actual space seem set back or to jut further forward, here appear at the same distance from the spectator. Without exact knowledge of the form of the physical space, these renderings can only be read as an accumulation of strange textures and ornaments, on a sliding scale of brightness, created by slicing open a closed space.

The original spatial model was repeatedly evaluated using photographic enlargements. Spatial conditions and cost specifications necessarily meant using a variety of different scalings: from the start, these could be implemented using the photographic reproductions. In this creation process, the depiction of the space was more than simply a form of representation; it was an inherent part of the chain of production. The space constructed for the Venice Biennale can be understood as a materialised scan, one large enough to walk into, since here the representation of the space and the space itself are simply two manifestations of one and the same thing.

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