

Making of...

The experiment as great seducer

Prologue

'I was born in a valley of bricks'

(The Nits: In the Dutch mountains, 1987)

Through my window in the Amsterdam new built area IJburg a sample map of divergent brick walls unfolds. They add variation to the otherwise little extreme contemporary building styles.

One red brick I take — for a moment — from a building site. I pick up the brick; feel the granular structure which the reddish pigment like dust leaves behind on my finger tips. Earthlike clay, like mud. I also feel the heat of the sun that it has absorbed. Just like one of those summer evening sensations when you are leaning against a facade.

Born in the 'valley of bricks' in the post war Amsterdam New West I recognize the listlessness of the past. After paying out on the streets you feel the steamy wall in the evening sun. Once at home you know you are safe behind the brickwork. There, every brick has invisibly become part in the sum of all parts. The building block as basis. The house built with that as mile stone of being cosseted, but also as starting point for the adventure which is called experiment.

1

'A brick wants to be something more than it is'

(Woody Harrelson as an architect, Indecent Proposal, 1993)

The pleasure for the architect, technician or craftsman is determined by the challenge of creating. To improve on something and yourself with the materiality and technology as driving force.

I wonder: To what extend can the brick – in whichever experimental shape – tempt the architect with a grand gesture to the detailing which is so characteristic for product designers? And where do architect, designer and craftsman meet each other in this experiment?

At the drawing table, behind the computer screen or in the workshop after all?

Does everything fall into place in sketching, modelling or when the kiln door opens and the object – according to expectation or not – has already taken on its given shape. When it is right, the object or the material challenges the architect and/or designer.

An object in development loses its obedience half way through the process and steers towards specific actions itself. The object talks back.

That is how it goes in playing, learning, experimenting and experiencing for the makers in taming and controlling the material and the final shape. Can the stubborn material object determine its own logic? Write its own vocabulary? Architect Louis Kahn (1903-1974) held a rhetoric discussion

on these issues with a brick: 'Brick, what do you want?'
And the brick said: 'I want to be a bow.'
Kahn establishes: 'When you want to give something
presence, you have to consult nature and that is where

2 Vertical Sea

design comes in.'

As soon as the brick in 1858 in the Stone kilns of Hoffmann became an industrial product, it lost its sincerity as craftsmanship. Achieving a reliable quality led to a uniformity that purists like art historian John Ruskin (1819-1900) resented. Thanks to the manual production and masonry the pre-industrial brick wall in Venice or Delft vibrates like colour keys on an impressionist painting.

Compared to that the industrial bricks are often flat, monochrome and uniform. A machine can break down, fall apart and bring forth nothing, while a flamboyant craftsman can actually experience downfall as a challenge to make new discoveries. In acting he encounters these blessings in disguise. In 1946 the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) intentionally made use of chance. He did admittedly use industrial bricks, but allowed for these to obtain various shades and morph through random firing and stacking methods. Also the randomly arranged brickwork of Baker House, the student dorms of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge (1946-1949) with the slightly bent walls was given an honesty and a 'true traditional and natural character.'

Brick has become a vertical sea

Through – again – using brick, Aalto showed himself as a mild, humane modernist who does not just use the materials privileged by modernism – glass and steel. He indulges in seemingly subtle detail and shows himself to be an architect with a designer's eye.

Aristotle poses in the *Metaphysics*: 'Architects – in the broad sense – are the most highly esteemed because they know more and are wiser that the craftsmen and because they know the reason why things are made.'

The craft – and its practitioner – distinguishes itself from the repetitive production work like the sheer compliant hand differs from the eye of the master. Richard Sennett, philosopher and sociologist, describes in *The Craftsman* (2008) craftsmanship along the full spectrum.

To true craftsmanship he counts studying a piano etude, preparing a stuffed chicken à la d'Albufera, just as much as the development of a Linux programming or blowing glass. Practice, rehearsal or training – like in music or sports- can be considered as construction, the stacking of knowledge and skills.