Imitation Wood:
Quatremere de Quincy's Fiction of Materials

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The postmodern re-readings of Quatremre de Quincy's theory by Moneo and Vidler concern themselves with the composition of type in the urban context to re-establish a continuity of architecture within history. In the works of Rossi, Vidler finds a composition of imitated historical building forms to be loaded with political meaning[1]. New types are recognizable reconfigurations of historical forms. For the postmodernists, Type is a mechanism to invent new types to establish a "chain of related events in which it is possible to find common formal structures" and renew and emphasis on communication of meaning and signification[2]. They are rejoining in the often unproductive task of searching for a singular model for imitation. Within Quatremere's theory, however, can be found nuanced understanding of expression and sensation found not in the theory of type, but in character. Quatremere's theory is not limited to a search for origins, but can be wielded as a means of producing art in familiar materials. While type is explored through the model architecture object or urban form, character is specifically engaged with the pleasure of communication found in the subtleties of the process of imitation. Metaphorical language transforms materials beyond their inherent qualities into the realm of artifice. Advancing fabrication techniques have revitalized an interest in novel material effects. Through ornamentation and digital construction techniques, contemporary practices are transforming the language of materials. These are, however, often lacking in character and historical relevance. It is necessary to once again engage in critical discussions concerning the imitative processes found in Quatremere de Quincy's theory of character to more precisely imbue materials with fiction.

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[1] Vidler, "The Third Typology," p. 293-294.
[2] Moneo, "On Typology," p. 39-44.

<u>Imitation</u>

Carpentry was the model process of Greek architecture. Wood, as a medium both solid and light, was the most prone to variation. Moldings, modifications and ornaments were easily crafted from the mutable material. As the Greeks transitioned into stone construction, a peculiar metamorphosis occurred as they conserved "all the forms of the former material, the art enriched itself even more by means suggested by the latter thus reunited the two"[3]. The processes of carpentry were imitated into the much less malleable material. Stone projections, cornices, and dentils received their form from wood construction[4]. The Greeks found pleasure in the deliberate artificial quality of the stone-wood[5]. If stone had only copied itself, it would have never been given the qualities of proportion and beauty that were found in wood. The appeal of the artificial material was the very "pleasure of being half deluded, which makes dear to man fictions and poetry and has them prefer disguised truth to naked truth"[6]. This process of imitation in materials is the basis for the production of art.

Laugier had proposed the wooden hut as the mechanism returning architecture to a state of natural simplicity[7] (fig. 1). Abiding by his theory meant that architecture would relentlessly replicate the ideal. Columns would be formed figuratively as trees. Quatremere, instead, suggested that the wooden hut would be no more than a vaguely defined idea and that the artist would create a distance between these models. This leads

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[3] Quatremère de Quincy, "Architecture," p. 29.
[4] Younés, <u>The True, the Fictive and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy</u>, p. 21.
[5] Quatremère de Quincy, "Architecture," p. 30.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Lavin, <u>Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture</u>, p. 110.

into his theory of type. Imitation was not oriented towards an ideal object, but towards a complex process to achieve a suitable identity of deception in the artificial product[8]. Filtered through our imaginations, familiar models would be transfigured. There is a metaphorical dialogue created between the original and imitated object[9]. These metaphors are communicated to the public through architectural character.

<u>Character</u>

Character, as conventionally defined, is to engrave or imprint. It signifies a word, mark or sign of an object made into stone, metal, paper or other materials with a tool[10]. Within Quatremere's Encyclopedie Methodique, character is an active engagement in the process of altering the relationship between appearance and meaning. It is less concerned with the state of an object, but with the qualities and the impressions that imitation engenders in the public. An object put through a successful process of imitation engages the moral and intellectual interests of the public with strong character. Strong character can be sensed in the singularity and distinctiveness of an object[11]. These objects are easily recognizable in relation to their models. The transformative potential of a model is revealed through character. To identify a true type, is to find unambiguous character in its form[12].

In contrast to an intellectual ontological approach, character is immediately perceived. The artificial object is no longer carefully analyzed for its model, but is

[8] Lavin, <u>Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture</u>, p. 111.
[9] Steil, "On Imitation," p. 9.
[10] Di Palma, "Architecture, Environment and Emotion: Quatremere de Quincy and Concept of Character," p.45.
[11] Younés, <u>The True, the Fictive and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy</u>, p. 103.
[12] Vidler, "From the Hut to the Temple: Quatremere and the idea of Type," p. 155.

unleashed to stir emotions in the public. Rationalization does not occur at the formation

of a process, but at the end in the public realm. The process of imitation is oriented

towards the pleasure of the imitator and his public. The postmodern interpretation of

Quatremere leads to a dead-ended reconciliation of origins. Though restoring historical

relevance, works done in this mode are highly symbolic and referential. They become

self-involved and autonomous intellectual flirtations. Character, instead, appeals directly

the autonomic system as a potential for change in our emotions.

Historically, character was closely bound to the expression of purpose found in

the strong sensual qualities of a work of art[13]. In Le Camus de Mezier's initial writings on

character, literal physiognomic traits of buildings inhabitants are transposed into the

decoration and construction systems of a building[14]. Character, as redefined, should not

be limited to the modernist paradigm of "form follows function". It is a much more

active quality expressed not through form but as carefully articulated qualities found in

elevation, ornamentation and constructional considerations. An object of character

exudes the suggestive tendency for further imitation. We desire to imitate objects of

distinct character. These objects are more prone to our process of imitation and, in this

sense, have a greater potential for metamorphosis.

Quatremere provides three kinds of character. Essential character is immediately

visually perceived as the physical indication of nature. It is the species of an animal or

vegetable. This character is unchanging and can never be affected by exterior causes. It is

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[13] Younés, The True, the Fictive and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy, p. 105-107

[14] Linazosoro, "The Theory and Practice of Imitation," p.13.

from this character of place that primitive societies derived their primitive forms[15].

Distinctive character is the result of environmental influence. It is the physical imprint of

temporal location upon an object. These are temporary modifications of weather, site

conditions, and material choice modified by location. Relative character is the

manifestation of internal potentials in outward appearance. It is the most susceptible to

cultural influence. Again, this is not limited to functional concerns, but should be

considered in the production of imitation[16]. Each of these conditions of character is

revealed as different qualities in the architecture. Essential character provides force and

grandeur, distinctive character as physiognomy and originality and relative character as

propriety and convenance[17]. Though Quatremere reveled in essential and distinctive

character's dependency on nature, relative character should be understood as that which is

most mutable to the tendencies of the architect and most appealing to the emotions.

Relative character is not found in every building but is "to architecture as poetry is to

language, and just as not all subjects are conducive to poetry, so not all buildings are fit

vessels for this kind of character"[18]. It is the most distinctive of the characters and, as a

work of poetry, is the most powerful in its metaphorical tendencies.

Character is not limited to the intellectualizing of type, but can be actively

experimented on through the architectural process. After qualifying these three conditions

of character, Quatremere delved into precisely how character is developed in architecture

through elevation, ornamentation and constructional considerations.   The exterior

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[15] Vidler, "From the Hut to the Temple: Quatremere and the idea of Type," p. 156.
[16] Di Palma, "Architecture, Environment and Emotion: Quatremere de Quincy and Concept of Character," p. 47.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Di Palma, "Architecture, Environment and Emotion: Quatremere de Quincy and Concept of Character," p. 52.

elevation of a building expresses character through a "gradation in the use of lines, forms, masses and material ornamentation"[19]. These necessary distinguishing marks are found within the use of the building. The theatre is circular while the bank is lavishly ornamented. However, he warns, decoration is not to be overused. Decoration is "a kind of language whose signs and formulas must also have a necessary rapport with a certain number of ideas. If decoration ceases to be so, then one can see in it only a dead language"[20]. There are limits and careful considerations to not excessively ornament. The villa should not be ornamented to the extent of a bank. Finally, character can be made distinct through constructional considerations. Variation of apertures, vaults, dimension, volume, size, strength, gravity, richness, delicacy, delight and elegance produce strong affects of terror and delight. The quality of materials and color combinations make impressions of character. Dark marble can have the impression of sadness or seriousness[21]. Character is the range of sensual impressions that we can find in an object. There is a "language of passions" shaped by our material surroundings[22].

In these descriptions of material qualities, there is an unmentioned allusion to Burke's "Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" which had been previously published in 1757. For Burke, instances of the sublime were found in qualities of obscurity, silence, vastness and infinity as sensations of pain and pleasure[23]. Although these could be artificially translated into architecture, they were first

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[19] Younés, The True, the Fictive and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy, p. 107.
[20] Ibid. p. 110.
[21] Ibid. p. 107.
[22] Vidler, "From the Hut to the Temple: Quatremere and the idea of Type," p. 156.
[23] Burke, Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, p. 57-87.

found in nature. These moments of the sublime were suspensions of the autonomic system in-which transformation is made possible. Character, in its capacity to affect individuals, appeals directly to this emotional state of the sublime. He found it reasonable, if not necessary, for architecture to imitate these transformative capacities of nature[24]. Quatremere found landscapes to have definitive character[25]. If each of the primitive societies had found their model through their emotional response to their surrounding environments, then it was the role for architecture, towards the development of new models, to produce artificial natures.

While type is concerned with a more conservative notion of origins, character engages the public's potential for transformation. Character is architecture's means of communicating emotions through qualities of material expression. Although the postmodern writings of Moneo and Vidler take interest in Quatremere's theory of imitation, character is rarely discussed as a catalyst. Instead, typology is emphasized as a methodology to reposition the ontology of architecture in the city. Imitation is no longer done through nature, but in the urban typology[26]. Character should instead be considered architecture's agent of change in the public realm. While type indirectly appeals to historical notions of the urban context, character directly confronts the individual with wild sensations of the sublime. With the advent of digital fabrication techniques, character is the capacity of the avant garde to inject new material qualities into architectural discourse through a poetic language of transformation. The metaphor of language and materials is strengthened through the precision and intricacy of the tools.

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[24] Di Palma, "Architecture, Environment and Emotion: Quatremere de Quincy and Concept of Character," p. 49.
[25] Vidler, "From the Hut to the Temple: Quatremere and the idea of Type," p. 155.
[26] Vidler, "The Third Typology," p. 293.

Imitation revitalizes a common architectural language of the past within technological innovations. To give character is infuse the richness of history into new conditions. Behrens imitated traditional elements in the AEG building (fig. 2). The brickwork alludes to the Gothic tradition while immense columns are identifiably classical[27]. The cultural relevance of architecture is restored as the building is given familiar character. Architecture is repositioned to assert itself in political reformations, just as it did in 18th century France[28]. Through Character, architecture makes itself relevant through a reconstructed language. Lavin is especially preoccupied with "legibility" communicated as the sensations of character. Architecture was no longer configured by a god or an ideal object, but an artifice of social convention[29]. Under the appearance of fiction, the object produces pleasure in the public. The Greeks had been "friendly and truthful liars" who were openly mimetic because the process of art was inherently unnatural[30]. Through the metaphorical transformation of wood to stone, they had found an effective means of communication by giving materials culturally relevant character. The linguistic device of metaphor expands the properties of materials by giving them qualities that they would not normally be given. The articulation of carpentry into stone gives the material a stronger character and potential to stir pleasure in the public.

<u>Fabrication</u>

Wood is the material most prone to fictionalization. It has been primary medium

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[27] Linazosoro, "The Theory and Practice of Imitation," p. 15.

[28] Lavin, "Re Reading the Encyclopedia: Architectural Theory and the Formation of the Public in the Late-Eighteenth Century France," p. 184.

[29] Lavin, <u>Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture</u>, p. xii.

[30] Ibid. 112.

of experimentation because of its malleability and appeal to convention. Just as wood was the catalyst of invention for the Greeks, digital fabrication techniques have rapidly advanced the limits of the equipment. Historically, the material offered a vast array of "analogies, inductions, and free assimilations"[31]. The metaphor is stronger in the material because it is the most prone to being given deceptive qualities. Through advanced fabrication processes, firms have begun to fabricate peculiar materials which imitation processes in nature. Wood is liquid (fig. 3). The metaphorical capacity of materials is enhanced through clarity of architectural vocabulary. It is difficult to distinguish between novelty and character in these material prototypes. Within the design process, how is one to judge the strength of character given to a material through metaphor? How are these imitation materials to be applied to architectural space? What precedents successfully generate distinctive character through imitation? While typology can be evaluated, character is more elusive.

Robert Venturi imitated the typical image of the vernacular wooden American in his houses in Nantucket (fig. 4). While he maintained the idealized image is maintained on the exterior elevations, the interior is disconnected from any antiquated resemblance. Memory is challenged as he actively reforms the interior to suit contemporary needs. These added interior elements lack a strong relationship to the historical model towards the formation of a formal structure. As singular discontinuities, they do not attempt to become a new model. Venturi reduces type to image. The external appearance can be recognized as a type, while the internal structure remains unconventional[32]. And so, the

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[31] Younés, <u>The True, the Fictive and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy</u>, p. 21.
[32] Moneo, "On Typology," p. 39.

architecture imitates itself as a model. The discontinuity between internal structure and external appearance is articulated in elevation through ornamental applications of materials. The home is given strong character and deceptive potential through its artificial exterior. As a precedent, this suggests that the advancing material processes be applied to architecture's appearance in elevation, ornamentation, and constructional logic. These are applied to the exterior and do not necessarily constitute the reformation of interior space.

In contrast, Office dA's methodology is motivated by "dissatisfaction with the drab iconoclasm" of modernism and the "frivolous rhetoric of post-modernism"[33]. This attitude is not much different from Quatremere, who sought to abolish inventive jargon with his theory of imitation. Both target the same proponents of self-conscious novelty with a critical position between language and matter[34]. Convention and conservatism can be found in both. While Office dA exhibits sophisticated surface and tectonic considerations with each of their works, their consideration of programmatic and landscape conditions are conventional[35]. The basis for Quatremere's critical theory of imitation does not seek an ideal, but unbuilt, idea of positive beauty. As he observed, the ideal building has been made many times. To produce novelty, we must only filter these existing buildings through our individual process of material imitation. Much like Venturi, the spatial conditions are not challenging, but the exterior surfaces are heavily articulated to re-engage in a dialogue with history.

In Office dA's design for a home, Casa la Roca, terra cotta is given the characteristics of a textile (fig. 5). The fired clay reveals its new properties as it is drawn

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[33] El-Khoury, Office dA, p. 10.
[34] Garric, "The Imitative Being," p. 16.
[35] El-Khoury, Office dA, p. 7.

back along a metaphorical curtain rail. The implications of language are directly sensed in the material. Through imitation, the terra cotta is given a potential for character. The truthfulness of matter is challenged as the performance of terra cotta extends beyond presence into allusion and metaphor. The home exists beyond perception becoming relevant in its cultural presence as art[36]. Through works such as these, Office dA's exhibit beautiful surface effects as the product of a translation from language to materials. Architecture is no longer limited to a truthful expression of materials, but becomes open to fictions and metaphors. The potential for transformation becomes limited only to the capabilities of the tool and the eloquence of the analogy.

The conventional materials of digital fabrication- mdf, foam, and chipboard- are devoid of characteristic properties. However, within their relative simplicity of form is the potential for elaborate fictions. As they are processed through the machines, they are given character and an enhanced appeal to the emotions. In recent artwork at Carnegie Mellon University, attempts have been made to gives these denatured materials an elevated metaphorical presence as wood (fig. 6-12). Chipboard is given a perforation patterning based on an image of wood. Foam is cnc milled with wood joints and spray painted with a grain patterning. MDF is inscribed with artificial wood grain and stacked into a small hut. The various processes of imitation produce relatively poor imitations but received strong responses once shown in the student gallery. The gold spray painted foam was given distinctive character through its metaphorical relationship to wood. The effectiveness of each imitation process could be judged based upon the affective response of the public. In Quatremere's theory society was not naturally determined, but was an

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[36] El-Khoury, Office dA, p. 8.

artificial structure that could be reshaped by art[37]. In the interest of developing character in materials, imitation through digital fabrication should be exhibited in the public.

The potency of Quatremere's theory of imitation is not found in typological urban form, but through intricate material processes. In his initial essay on imitation, "De l'imitation", Quatremere writes "I think that beautiful work of art have more often given birth to theories than theories have given birth to beautiful works of art. However, theories do exist that are themselves, in their way, beautiful work of art that have given many great pleasures. Hence, one should no more ask the purpose of a poetic than one should ask the purpose of a piece of poetry"[38]. Theory and the process of fabrication feed into each other. Language constructs art through metaphor. Art positions language in the public realm as materials to evaluate its potential for distinctive character. The model for architectural imitation is not the ideal hut, but the poetic process of fabrication as the Greeks transformed wood to stone.

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[37] Lavin, Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture, p. xi.
[38] Ibid. p. xvi.

Bibliography

Burke, Edmund. <u>Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful</u>. 1756, 1958: 57-87.
The sublime is found in artificial qualities of nature. Vastness, infinity and deprivation are among the intense qualities received from our material environment. Quatremere describes these qualities in his definition of "distinctive character".

Di Palma, Vittoria, "Architecture, Environment and Emotion: Quatremere de Quincy and Concept of Character." <u>AA Files</u> 47, (2002): 45-56.
Character is evaluated for its capacity to influence our emotions. Distinctive, relative and essential character is distinguished in relation to Quatremere's theory of imitation.

El-Khoury, Rodolphe. <u>Office dA</u>. Cloucester, Massachusetts: Rockport Publishers, 2000.
Articles and images cataloging Office dA's speculative and built work. The editor writes of the clever deceit implicit in their treatment of surfaces. Conventional plans are deliberately covered in elaborate wood, terra cotta and brick surfaces to challenge the notion of postmodern signification.

Garric, Jean-Phillippe, "The Imitative Being." <u>Imitation and Innovation</u>, (1988): 16-17.
Imitation is considered distasteful in industrial societies. Garric argues that imitation develops from a desire to challenge systems of perpetual novelty. Our natural tendency for imitation provides an effective means of evaluating artwork.

Lavin, Sylvia. <u>Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture</u>. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.
Quatremeres theory establishes the crucial relationship between language and architecture. Quatremere provided a productive and conventional theory of imitation that allowed for conceptual transformation. Art has an active relationship in the formation of society.

Lavin, Sylvia. "Re Reading the Encyclopedia: Architectural Theory and the Formation of the Public in the Late-Eighteenth Century France." <u>The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians</u> 53:2 (June 1994): 184-192.
Quatremere theory of imitation was intimately linked to his mode of discourse. Through the "nomadic" and "topological" organization of the Dictionary, readers could explore the vast knowledge of art. The information was conventional but the structure of the text allowed for various paths of interpretation.

Linazosoro, Jose Ignacio, "The Theory and Practice of Imitation." <u>Imitation and Innovation</u> (1988): 10-15.
Character is given to technology through imitation of history. Behren's AEG building is distinguished by its referencing of gothic and classical elements.

Moneo, Rafael. "On Typology." Oppositions, no. 13, (Summer 1978): 22-45.
Type is a methodology for restoring historical relevance to architecture that was lacking in modernism. The architectural object is not an isolated event, but an element in the rich discourse of architectural theory.

Quatremère de Quincy, A.-C. "Architecture." <u>Dictionnaire d'architecture</u>, vol. 1 in <u>Encyclopédie Méthodique,</u> (1788): 25-31.
Translated entry from the Dictionairre defining "Architecture". Includes an introduction by Janis Hinchcliffe.

Quatremère de Quincy, A.-C. "Type." <u>Dictionnaire d'architecture</u>, vol. 3 in <u>Encyclopédie Méthodique</u>, translated in Oppositions 4, (1977): 147-150.
Translated entry from the Dictionairre defining "Type". The entry introduces the differences between the copy and the imitation.

Steil, Lucien. "On Imitation." <u>Imitation and Innovation</u>, (1988): 8-9.
A distinction is made between the pastiche, copy and imitation. The theory of imitation is considered a productive process of the imagination. Architecture has no model in nature, but captures the principles of nature through repetition of form.

Vidler, Anthony. "From the Hut to the Temple: Quatremere and the idea of Type." <u>Writing of the Walls,</u> (1978): 147-164.
Quatremere's articles on type and character are reformatted into contemporary relevance. Vidler includes a vast number of divergences and allusions to other theoretical texts.

Vidler, Anthony. "The Third Typology." Oppositions 7, (1977): 1-4.
Postmodern text revitalizing the use of typology in the urban context. Through the work of Rossi, Vidler proposes a new typology beyond the natural or mechanical analogy found in the city.

Younés, Samir. <u>The True, the Fictive and the Real: The Historical Dictionary of Architecture of Quatremère de Quincy</u>. Papadakis: 1999.
Translation of Quatremere's Dictionnaire d'architecture. The text includes a lengthy introduction analyzing the content of the dictionary in relation to the distinction made between truth, fiction and reality.
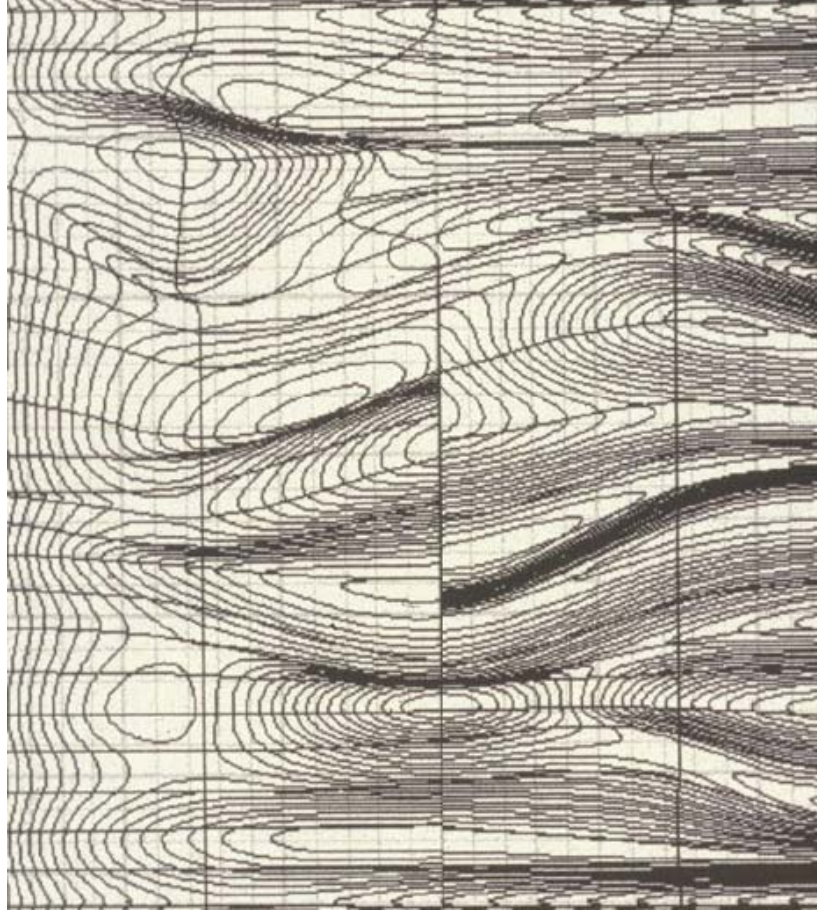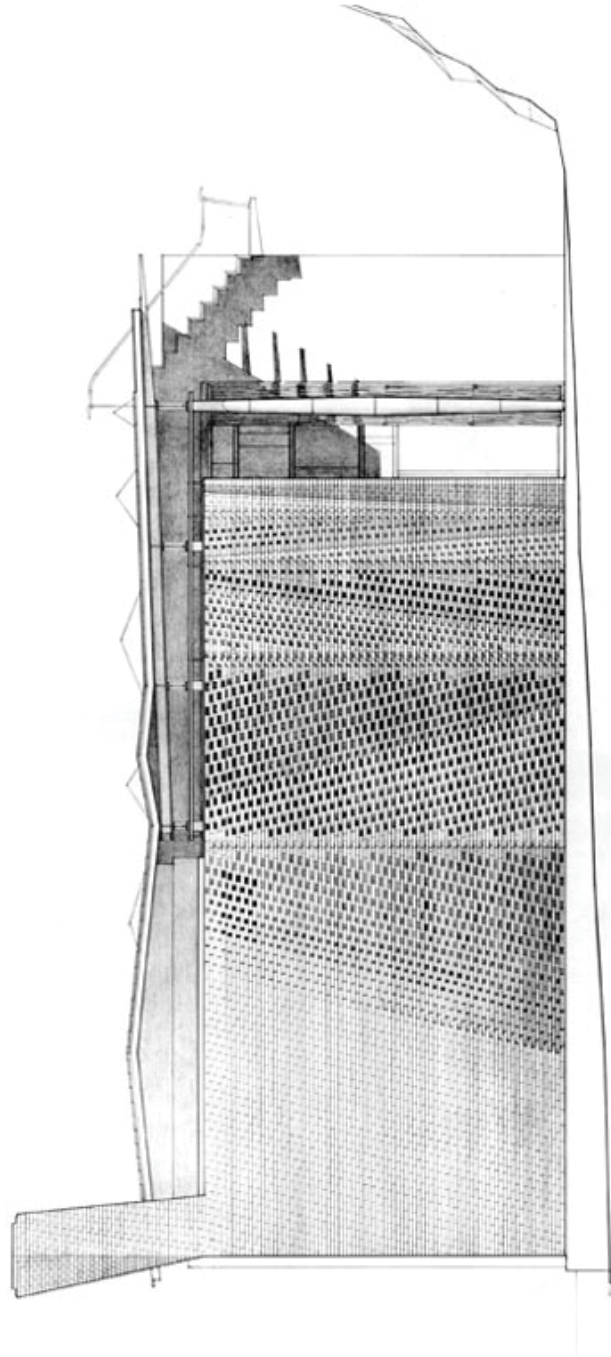
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