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# the architecture of will bruder

# Bruder's America & The Invention of a Laminar Tectonic

Nader Tehrani

## Prologue

The Phoenix Central Library opened its doors in 1995, but for the young practitioner that I was, the building also opened my eyes to a unique condition that defined American architecture in its time. By way of context, the decade before that had seen a construction boom, with the rise of corporate architecture under the inertia of postmodernism, and this, in turn, had given materiality to a new way of building. After the waning days of Brutalism, with the barren materiality of concrete, wood, and glass on their way out, architecture was revisiting the glory of Bramante, Palladio, and Alberti through the eyes of figures like Michael Graves, James Stirling, and Robert Venturi whose translation of classicism was not only mediated by their education in modernism, but even more so by the standardized construction systems of their time. Under this new regime, the deep poché of load-bearing walls would be entrusted to the pitiful frailty of a  $2 \times 4$  stud wall with a  $5/8$ " Sheetrock veneer. That is not to say that these same buildings did not enjoy the splendor of weighty granites and opulent marbles, but what they all somehow lacked was a strategy to translate these new laminar systems of construction into contemporary terms. By extension, the debates of academia were primarily couched in either theoretical terms, borrowing from philosophy, semiotics, and other fields, or were materialized primarily in pictorial terms, escaping construction as a productive terrain for debate. Through the clarity of its constructed systems, the Phoenix Central Library captured both a physical and discursive quality that was virtually absent in the architecture of its time—what I will try to expand on in this brief essay.

## The Curious Mind

One day in late 1995, I received a call on a landline—the only type common at the time—from a gentleman who introduced himself as Will Bruder. Having already seen the Phoenix Library in *Architect Magazine*, I was familiar with the name, but also street-smart enough to know the call was a prank to which I would play along.

Enthusiastically, the caller launched into an analysis of Casa La Roca—our recently premiated project in Progressive Architecture<sup>1</sup>—an analysis of such detail that it would have defied the abilities of just any prankster, thus narrowing down my list of culprits; I knew I was at least speaking to an architect. It was only later in his filibuster of praise, when the gentleman would divulge the details of jury comments, that I started to mistrust my intuition, realizing I had been duped: not by an imposter but by the one and only Will Bruder, who had passionately led the jury to its results. He would fly to Boston a few weeks later and pay a visit to our office, where he would display the curiosity, patience, and enthusiasm that are a deep-seated part of his character.

## An Alternative Pedagogy

Free from the shackles of a conventional architectural pedagogy, Bruder was educated as an artist. Others will elaborate more faithfully on the tutelage of Paolo Soleri and Gunnar Birkerts, but his entry into architecture revolved around direct engagement and practice—an empirical process. On the one hand, as a sculptor, Bruder relished material properties as much as he enjoyed his collaborations with the trades whose knowledge of means and methods would often inform his moments of invention. On the other hand, trained through

practice, he would educate himself through direct experience of spaces, places, and what he came to appreciate as architectural phenomena. Indeed, his appreciation of the world, its cultures and histories, all primarily stem from his myriad visits to architectural sites—pilgrimages that were visually far more detailed than any architectural book could cover.

In effect, if conventional students were educated by standards of professionalism, then they were also tested by two poles of cultural legitimization. They were expected to know the architectural canons and to weigh in on a historical body of work that, in some way, had been preordained, with authority. But they were also trained to become part of a professional workforce, to know construction conventions, and to work with industry standards. Bruder's less-than-orthodox entry into the discipline freed him from the very limitations that the canons would have cast on him from above and the industry would have prepackaged for him from below.

## A Different Era from the Modern Masters

Bruder's own position within history is no less relevant to this argument: long gone were the days of grand patronage and the assumed authority of the architect as a centralized figure. For the most part, mid-century figures such as Eero Saarinen, Gordon Bunshaft, and Paul Rudolf saw the end of their careers by the 1960s and '70s. With their departure, and a new eye on corporate protocols, there emerged a form of institutional standardization that aligned effectively with the rampant expansion of the American suburbs—a world that Bruder would inherit. No longer was "standardization" a modernist polemic, but a burden of American conventionalism and acquiescence to industry practices, something Bruder would have to work hard on to overturn. Bruder may have viewed the promise of architecture from the extraordinary achievements of these predecessors, but his immediate obstacles came in the form of practices that would almost entirely obliterate the possibility of the architectural imagination he had cultivated.

## Embedded within Means and Methods

Bruder's early years of practice in Arizona opened up avenues for modest forms of local patronage: first, houses of moderate size, and later, institutional projects with a civic imagination. Notwithstanding, these commissions operated with relatively modest budgets that required a genuine understanding of conventional building practices --what Bruder would navigate towards bespoke details and well-crafted materials. Unlike his predecessors, Bruder also had to collaborate with and mediate between complex stakeholder groups, participatory design processes, and intensive engagement with communities. If control of architectural vision is one of the ultimate myths that education cultivates, then Bruder had to work against the grain of that narrative to build trust through material knowledge and a process of inclusion that, in an uncanny way, gave him even more control over the specifications he required.

Long before the days of Home Depot, Bruder would work from the materiality of the commonplace to forge a connection with builders whose familiarity with construction

<sup>1</sup> The Progressive Architecture Awards were the one and only significant awards program for unbuilt architecture. Premised on actual commissions, the idea of the awards series was to celebrate speculative and experimental work of its time.

severity of the Arizona sun to capture the depth of every misalignment, allusively evoking the image of Jerusalem's Western Wall. Semantically, maybe what is more important about this reference than its cultural quotation is that the displacement of blocks produces the sensation of archaic construction: Bruder displaces the idea of the image by the perceptual qualities of sensation, and the mere offset of a 1/4 inch allows the mind to read blocks akin to four-feet deep. In effect, the imperfection of this wall's alignments leads to the perfection of a particular architectural experience.

Similarly, for the Hill Sheppard Residence, Bruder draws lessons from Lewerentz: not so much focused on the concrete block itself but more so on the mortar, the space between. If the labor of setting masonry involves the laying down of mortar, followed by the insertion of a block, and the swiping clean of mortar edges, then Bruder eradicates the third step from the mason's expected practice. A texture is born out of the imperfection of seeping mortar, the organization of the running bond giving visual cadence to the disarray of mortar overflow.

For the Nellis Cox Residence, Bruder plays on the innate craft of "clinker" bricks but taps into the inner structure of the concrete block as its basis; that is, the double-H configuration that produces its hollow interior. Broken into halves and rotated on edge, the blocks are laid out to produce the rustication of its courtyard wall. Capturing light in all the serendipitous ways possible, the character of this space emerges not so much from the perfection of the smooth concrete block as conceived for the market, but rather from an inner constitution whose structure gives discipline to the imperfections of its grotto-esque surface. If the artful craft of these textures plays on the accidental nature of the laborer's hand, the precision of the configurational thinking is not lost on Bruder.

So too, in the stacked corbeled wall of the Byrne Residence we discover a deliberate exactitude that is present throughout the entire body of Bruder's work, with the wall leaning away from the house to open a crack above, allowing the light to illuminate the texture of the wall in its inescapable perfection. The concrete block, perfunctory in its aesthetic promise as it may seem to the untrained eye, is transformed into a myriad of effects by a simple dimensional offset.

As individual commissions, these projects address their own programs, challenges, and problems. However, what binds them together is an intellectual project rooted in the material transformation of a single medium, transported from one commission to the next, with an eye towards the production of knowledge—what I am attempting to characterize as the unique promise of this work as a whole.

### **Thinness: The Laminar Industry**

If Temple Kol Ami's main hall is defined by blocks that envelope the space of prayer, then the wings that extend classrooms towards the south expose the end-grain of the same blocks on the southern flank, revealing the precariousness of the block as a tectonic unit. The tectonic effect associated with this thinness is confronted not as liability but as an experiential asset—something that Bruder explores with some consistency.

Averse to denial, much of the work is dedicated to finding a strategic expression for the reality of laminar construction as we know it today—be it with plywood, Sheetrock, polycarbonate panels, or even concrete block walls. For this reason, the tectonic effect produced by the slanted wall of the Byrne Residence is even more poignant, creating out

of a compressive system of aggregation the effects of a wall in tension. Accordingly, when Bruder adopts Cor-Ten steel walls for the Deer Valley Petroglyph Preserve, the razor-like thinness of the steel walls appears natural; the "honesty" of its laminar extrusion is only exacerbated by the thinness he exposes on the edges of walls and canopies. This is only enhanced further as one witnesses the tilt-up concrete panels whose smooth edges serve as a foil for the thick geological amalgamations of aggregate fragments on its raw side (the result of copper slag in the bottom of formwork).

Thinness is not so much a choice but an imperative of this historic moment. What is a choice is the denial of its existence, to which Bruder spends an inordinate time artfully crafting a series of responses that accept the reality of our era but raise the stakes of thinness to a poetic edge. For this reason, it is maybe no surprise when we see the systemic frontal address to the laminar thinness of our contemporary condition in the Agave Branch Library. Here, within what would otherwise be construed as a generic "big box," the lyrical transformations of sheet materials are exploited in their many iterations, with stacked bond walls whose crenellated tops frame the sky beyond, padded quilted walls that serve as acoustic mitigation, chromatic polycarbonate walls that produce immersive translucent interiors, and simple steel tablets that frame the book shelves; all of these together create a language for contemporary technologies for which no others have developed an apt expression.

### **From Material Facts to Transcendence**

Maybe the most beguiling aspect of Bruder's work stems from the directness of his material resources and the corollary indirectness of their requisite effects. The apparent contradiction behind his clinical protocols in combination with transcendent effects produces a consistent wonder that only experience can capture. What photography captures eloquently in the oeuvre almost never matches the necessity of spatial immersion within the architectural promenades Bruder choreographs in great detail, a movement that is cinematic in its splendor and attention to the fourth dimension. The light that is anticipated, the views that are framed, the sense of levity and weight, none of these can aptly be captured outside of direct experience.

It is with this sense of estrangement that I have returned to Bruder's buildings each time, awaiting new discoveries on each visit. Of them all, the Phoenix Central Library delivers repeatedly. The irrepressible relationship between structure, light, and weight is delivered with such mastery that one can almost never ascend to the reading room without a sense of awe. The synthetic triangulation between these three architectural strategies would suggest a conventional integration that the solution defies. Indeed, the self-conscious alignment of columns with skylights overhead produces the impossibility of structural trabeation. Thus, the necessity of structural displacement introduces the tenserity as alibi to stretch the vectoral forces towards the saddlebags on the east and west. The roof, then, is laid down as a thin membrane, falling short of its supporting walls, capturing a crack of light that illuminates the walls. In turn, the walls are punctuated by a cadence of oculi, receiving the structure's tensile members before disappearing into a void: a lacuna escaping our visual reach but also our desire for rational reconciliation. The moment of wonder, then, is reserved for the delicate moment of levity, as the skylights hover inexplicably over the supporting columns, a roof pulled down as much as held up. It is this sensation that defies conventional logic, what becomes for Bruder a *leitmotif* for constant invention.

systems was grounded in conventional practices. One could say that instead of resisting the “ordinary,” Bruder operated as a Trojan Horse, communicating with builders through a kit of parts they recognized as wholly part of their own lexicon. Bruder’s understanding of the trades—and their means and methods—become a strategic *leitmotif* of his practice, overturning convention through the seduction of extraordinary crafts, allowing the trades to see areas of invention embedded in their own work, hitherto untapped. He often worked with their details, practices, and sense of economies as a launching pad, but invariably he also deformed, transformed, and deviated in ways that defamiliarized the reality of the everyday, something that came to radicalize his buildings.

### **The Rational Configuration, the Speculative Figure**

As planner, Bruder operates as a deep-seated rationalist, with building layouts that are beguilingly simple in their configurational and typological affinities. Deformations in these plans commonly emerge as a result of adaptions to topography, sun orientation, exceptional views, or other such environmental phenomena. With an appreciation of Alvar Aalto and Carlo Scarpa as backdrop, one can revisit Bruder’s plans in order to examine how he would interpret, and subsequently transform their thinking: with Aalto, it was the way in which an organic “figure” is introduced onto a rationalist armature, and with Scarpa, the way in which sequential experiential phenomena become alibis for planning strategies that evade preconceived orders, be they symmetrical or serial. Absent of the city as a cultural reference point, Bruder often works with the natural landscape as a source for both spatial and semantic orientation; for him, mesas, canyons, and saguaros are not only natural elements but come with an architectural potency ripe for translation.

Bruder manages to reconcile two distinct architectural tendencies, the first dictating strong *partis*, diagrams, and organizational tropes, and the second allowing for open-ended spatial research, flexible planning, and a diagram that invites metabolic expansion when required. Thus, Bruder’s buildings come from a place that is deeply practical in their programmatic responsibilities, but also equally compositionally speculative in terms of spatial and organizational adaption. Still, in my mind, what manifests as the most salient aspect of his architecture is how his planning is manifest through its material conditions: specifically, the way in which Bruder thinks through the detail, *a priori*, as a catalyst for his transfiguration of conventions into extraordinary architectural conditions, moments of invention, and episodes of experiential epiphany.

### **The Tectonic Mind: The Catalytic Detail**

If the architecture of the 1980s was characterized by the expansive mindset of evoking other histories, it often lacked an intellectual project for “tectonic” thinking—treating construction akin to a pictorial practice. Whether in the articulation of thick, load-bearing walls, or in the thinness of light, diaphanous surfaces, the conventional tool kit of details often relegated architects to industry standards whose 2 x 6 Kawneer window frames, brick veneered curtain walls, and hollow stud-walled interiors were composed as a stage set for visual desires, almost entirely evacuated from tectonic nuance.

Thus, an invigorated discussion on tectonics is at the core of this argument. Construed in divergent ways, some theorists have commonly constructed an alliance between constructive thinking and a morality of truth, with the “honesty” of materials, functions,

and building performance as evidence. Other theorists have oriented tectonics around the question of representation, and how architectural language serves as the medium through which expression is gauged. Bruder’s work cuts through this dichotomy—one could say a false one—to explore how tectonic assemblies absorb and negotiate between material actualities with linguistic imaginations, programmatic functions and expressive projections, technical performance and visual theatricality.

From a methodological perspective, the primacy of materials and their requisite means of assembly form a more important part of the imaginative process for Bruder than an open-ended drawing process. In this sense, while his loose sketches are a delight to behold, they often conceal the constructive precision behind his thinking, what is normatively happening on a parallel track, at a different scale. For instance, as he scales up the drawing of a wall, the plane that he represents on paper is not merely an abstraction but rather a constructed entity; Bruder constructs the drawing as a prerequisite for “building.” He doesn’t merely draw lines but stacks them as if laying masonry. I am reminded of Louis I. Kahn’s First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, and of how, in the absence of the ability to build with actual thickness, he would plan the exterior wall with chapel-like bays, producing the illusion of depth with what was only a brick veneer construction system. If Kahn evoked the weight of “the Ancients” through this spatial device, he also achieved it through tectonic dexterity, in contrast to the blunt pictorial bias of the architecture of the 1980s. The denial of material agency that was characteristic of that era, Bruder overturns, underscoring the instrumentality of building matter as the prerequisite for architectural action.

### **Thickness: Assembled Stereotomy**

From a lineage that includes such characters as Sigurd Lewerentz, Kahn, and Wright, Bruder builds a narrative all his own, examining dimensions of materials, building systems, and conventional means of assembly. Through this, he arrives at an understanding less dependent on preconceived architectural forms, and more aligned with a construction process that biases material units, the labor of assembly, and the crafted detail as the basis of value. Consider the age-old example of the Doric column and its requisite entasis. The classical column was conceived and delivered through a combination of protocols: the carving of blocks that are of a size that can be lifted into position, the stacking of those blocks as cylinders, the chiseling of fluting that gives vertical continuity to what is fundamentally a stacked system, and most importantly, the sculpting of the column to render its entasis, which bears the evidence of weight as its expression. That last step delves into the realm where the effects rendered onto the column serve as a surplus to mere necessity, and this is where Bruder’s internalization of tectonic culture allows him to examine thickness, thinness, weight, and lightness with phenomenological nuance.

There is possibly nothing more mundane than the 8 x 16 concrete block in contemporary construction, and for that very reason, it is most often used as the inner core of composite walls—or, alternatively, as infill between the structure of industrial sheds. For Bruder, this economic block would become a source of exploration and experimentation, squeezing depth, texture, and figuration out of a humble medium. Conventional wisdom and construction tolerances call for a wall to be erected in such a fashion—to demonstrate a level, plumb, and right relationship of parts to whole. For his Temple Kol Ami, Bruder misaligns the blocks in limited dimensions such that they maintain structural integrity, while using the