



The large-scale form alone is nothing – the detail decides

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Abstract

I will demonstrate with the help of just a few significant buildings, two bridges, one ensemble of halls, one historical building, that the detail is the essential factor for the architectural perception. It can either amplify or weaken the effect up to the point of indifference. It can even sabotage the initial design intent. It appears that the large-scale form **alone** is not a sufficient criterion for the architectural quality of a structure. The impression that a structure makes is created by a property that you might call “power of expression”, “vitality”, “intensity of life that it enables”. Such a structure heightens the place and the surrounding in which it stands. The deciding factor is not the “big picture” alone but foremost it is the detail, the way a structure appears from up close. This is what we have to realize and what we have to build our actions on.

Keywords: Measuring design quality, Innovative design concepts, collaboration of engineers and architects

1 Introduction

I want to start with a cartoon (*figure 1*). Just recently I visited an exhibition of works by the renowned French cartoonist Sempé. Looking at this image I immediately thought: This fits into my lecture! It shows everything that makes today’s lecture necessary because it contains nothing of what I consider relevant: It depicts a world



Figure 1. Cartoon of Sempé (detail) [1].

without details. The monotony here is so overwhelming that the tiny and lost people we see here – architects apparently – really want to change something about it: The caption on the lower right reads: L’important sera de créer un climat érotique – The important thing will be to create an erotic atmosphere.

Desire and reality do not coincide at all. It is like the difference between a human face and a football.

From early childhood on our eyes are used to experiencing reality **in a totally different way**: For example:

Lilac: Flowery shrubs from afar: **The “large-scale form”**, a colored patch amidst green foliage and

Lilac blossoms close up: **The detail** (*Figure 2*).

This is a law of nature we experience from childhood on. This is the structure of our experience: The closer we get the more alive, the