

From small things

Expressively, Patrick Lynch's house extension (pp106–118) and Michael Wigginton's prototype classroom (pp120–131) tell very different stories. But behind the contrasting surfaces of both lurks the same technical innovation – insulation protected by rainscreen cladding. The environmental advantages of placing insulation on the outside of the construction, and thereby allowing its mass to act as a thermal flywheel, are familiar. The formal consequences, by contrast, have received surprisingly little attention in the architectural literature – in part, perhaps, because a relevant body of theory on the 'dressing' of buildings (stemming from Gottfried Semper via Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos) began to be re-evaluated around the same time.

Like many technical innovations with far-reaching implications, rainscreen cladding seems to have begun life modestly, as the 'upside down' flat roof, for which it was invented as a means of reducing the impact of thermal variations on notoriously unreliable coverings. By the 1980s it had migrated to walls, prompting Stirling and Wilford to offer, on their Staatsgalerie extension in Stuttgart, that architectural rarity, a successful visual joke – in the form of the stones that had apparently fallen out of a solid, uninsulated wall to ventilate the car park behind: lying forlornly on the grass, they declared its status as the only 'real' wall in sight.

The rest, as they say, is history: from PoMo exercises in graphic Classicism to the rigours of the 'Swiss Box', the radical divorce between surface appearance and structural fact allowed an expressive freedom – or, as some saw it, licence – unimagined by Modernist proponents of the 'free façade'. Equally, by encouraging the exposure of massive structure as part of passive systems of environmental control, it could be exploited internally as a means of recuperating the truth-to-construction tradition which, externally, it threatened radically to undermine.

The rise of rainscreen cladding more or less paralleled the supplanting of the drawing board by CAD systems. To anyone who remembers the joys of scratching out the nth revision on an increasingly fragile sheet of tracing paper, the practical advantages of digitisation and layered drafting are obvious, and found a ready formal echo in the layering of grids and site data in the work of Peter Eisenman and others in the 1980s. But the impact on mainstream practice, on the way designs are conceived, developed, detailed and represented remains – so far as we are aware – largely unexplored. As Açalya Allmer reminds us in her letter in this issue (p102), such transitions are rarely as abrupt or revolutionary as passionate advocates of new technologies and techniques sometimes like to believe; nor are they ever 'purely' technical.

THE EDITORS

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