

Aarhus School of Architecture // Design School Kolding // Royal Danish Academy

CRAFT

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Publication date:
2012

Document Version:
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Gammelgaard Nielsen, A. (2012). *CRAFT: Craft at the millennium*. (1 ed.) Arkitektskolen Aarhus.

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Layout
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Print
www.blurp.com

ISBN 978 87 910 5108 1

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Publisher
Aarhus school of Architecture

CRAFT

CRAFT AT THE MILLENNIUM

AARHUS SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

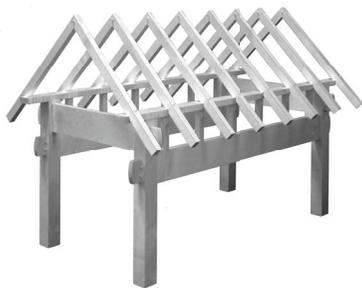
Craft at the millennium

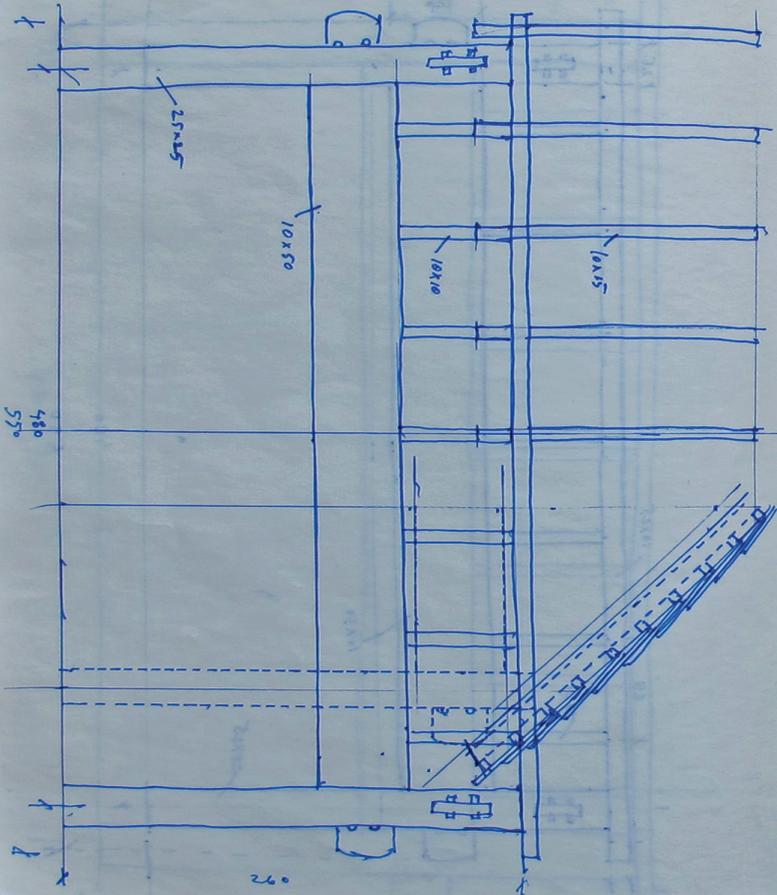
At the Aarhus School of Architecture, Associate Professor Anders Gammelgaard has erected a solid wood construction, based on traditional craftsmanship. The entire structure is made of heavy oak timber that is joined together using the old techniques of tongue and groove and dowels.

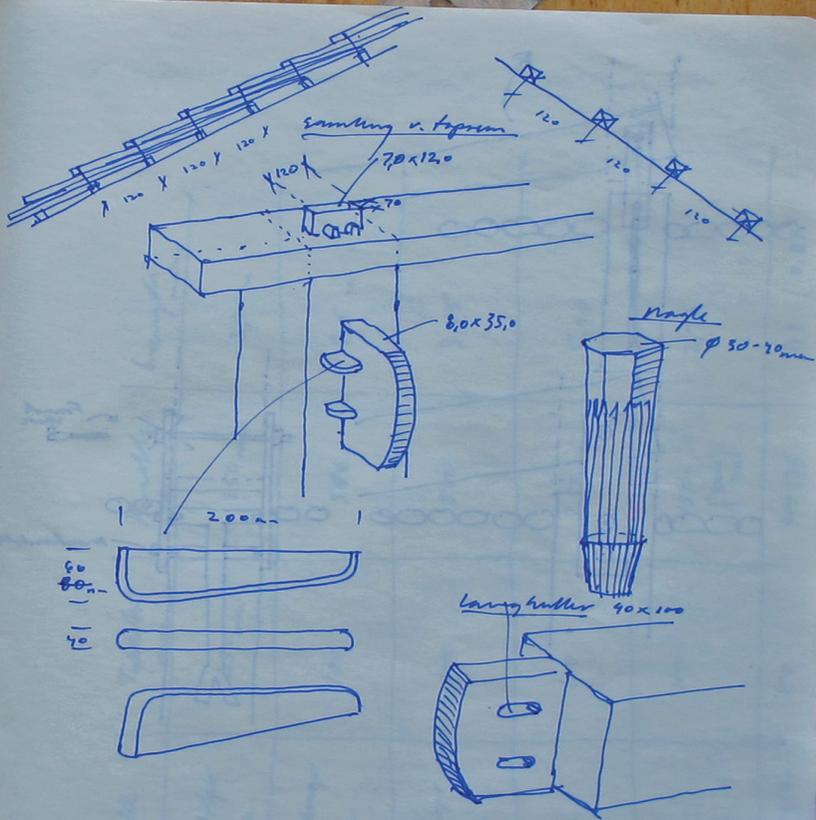
The motivation for the design has been to reflect upon the importance of craftsmanship in relation to the contemporary building culture. Is there any future at all for craftsmanship in a building culture, which in recent years has undergone a major industrialization? Or should craftsmanship left be to a life in open-air museums, as a performing art in front of an audience.

In this article the author discusses the importance of craft and craftsmanship in contemporary architecture in relation to its users.

What would happen if an entire nation were to stop using its hands? The short answer would be the loss of cultural and artistic identity, that as it has taken generations to develop. We would in other words become poorer as a nation.







John Ruskin and the values of craftsmanship

The decline of crafts and the resulting consequences is not only an issue of recent origin. As early as in the middle to the 19th century the English art historian and political philosopher John Ruskin (1819-1900) discussed the decline of craftsmanship in the context of the emerging industrialization in England. According to Ruskin the changes in the production methods did not only influence the aesthetic and artistic landscape, but it also led to changes within the social life and challenged as well the moral values of society.

In relation to the artistic values, Ruskin argued that man creates it unfinished. The unfinished is invigorating and offers artistic quality. The machine made is finished and through its perfection it lacks life and artistic quality. Additionally Ruskin argued from a social perspective that in the transition from craft to industrial production, workers lost both their working class identity as well as their self-awareness as individuals. The possibility of artistic expression existed in craftsmanship, whereas this was not an option within the industrial production.

Ruskin's critiques of the contemporary changing forms of production were largely directed against the rising industrial production of everyday household items at the expense of arts and crafts. In an attempt to parallel this critique to contemporary building culture one



is involuntarily committed to a series of fallacies. Thus modernism in architecture gains its impetus within the various industrial production forms. Therefore the critique of Ruskin is unilateral and does not justify the fact that the artisanal and the industrial production forms merely offer different possibilities for architectural design.

When Ruskin's critique still is relevant is it due to the fact that craftsmanship can enrich architecture with a number of sensory qualities. These are relevant in a time when we face large-scale renovations of our schools and health care buildings. Schools and hospitals represent intimate environments that not only influence our well-being but also affect our daily performances.







Crafts today

The hallmark of the contemporary building culture is the production of prefabricated building components and units, that are produced in closed industrial circuits and either mounted or installed on-site. This production method benefits from both technical and economic advantages. Not only does it ensure a high degree of uniformity and thereby a low error rate, it is also independent from various weather conditions as the production takes in a controlled environment. Finally, due to the rapid production and assembly on-site, a significant reduction in construction time is ensured. In total these production improvements save time and money, but on the other hand, the craft and craftsmanship is lost. This has a direct consequence for the craftsman and the user as well as the overall artistic quality of the building.

With the disappearance of craft, the craftsman becomes a technician and a fitter. According to Ruskin, he is losing the opportunity of embedding an individual character into his product and therefore influencing his own working situation. The result is that wages becomes the only remaining motivation factor.

The situation has escalated and clearly seen in the loss of prestige associated with being a craftsman. It has simply no appeal among young people to become a craftsman. The Crafts Council has long recognized this unfortunate trend and has launched various promotional



campaigns to attract young people to become craftsmen. However, this has proven to be an uphill battle, as the pride and glory earlier associated with craftsmanship fades proportionally to its disappearance in the building industry.

Another consequence is a specialisation taking place within the different crafts. This has given rise to what seems to be an "A" and a "B" team. The "A" team is responsible for maintenance of the existing building stock, which is based on traditional craft methods. The "B" team fits the prefabricated components and units in the industrialized building projects.







The unbearable lightness of existence

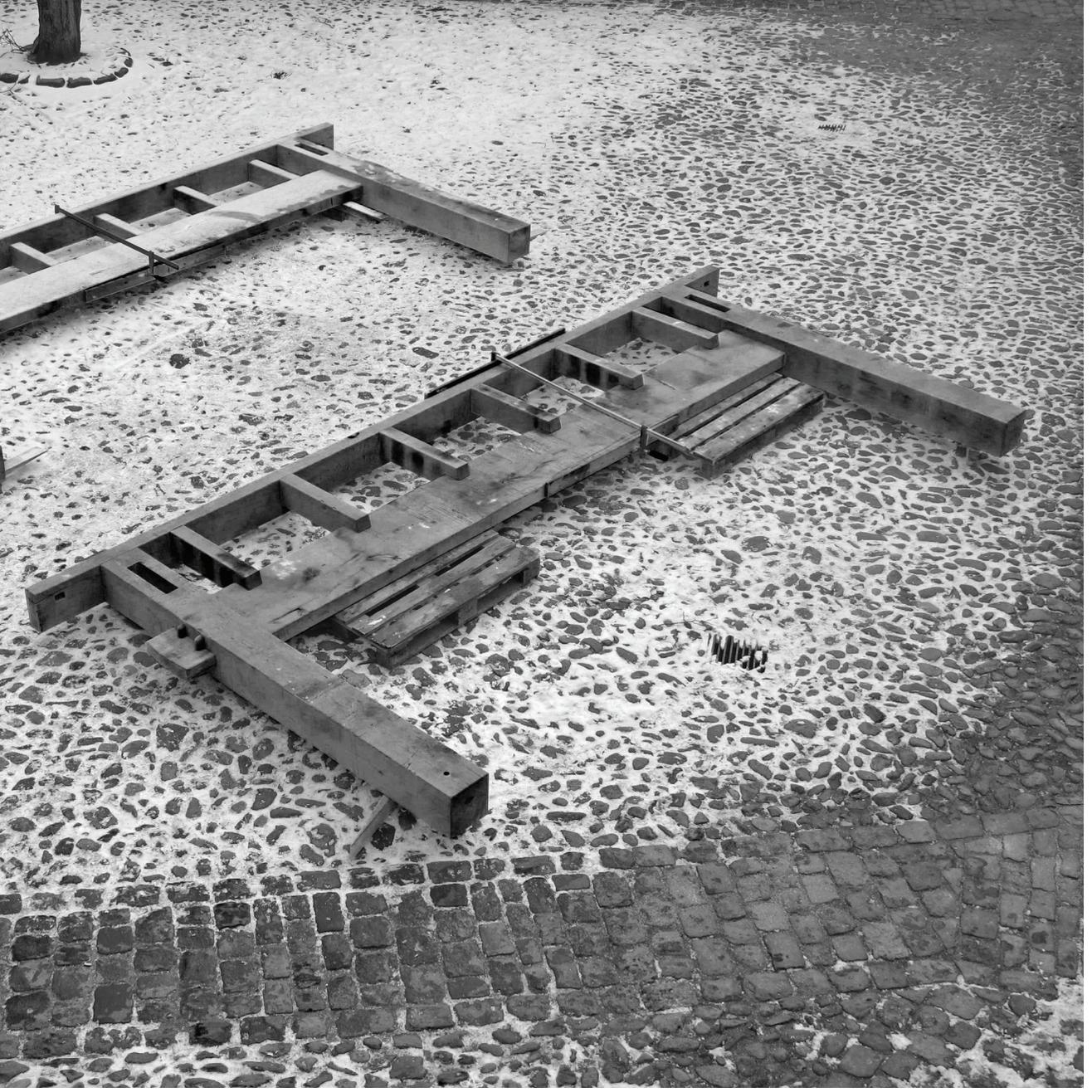
The decline of crafts seems to be a natural consequence of economic conditions that exist within the building industry. However this might be a cliché and just a poor excuse for the industry's incompetence and a general lack of architectural ambition.

Industrialization of the building process has definitely made everything much easier, but is that a quality? In perspective with classic American cost-benefit thinking it is an unconditional success. The same picture emerges within the building industry where "easy" seems to be a commonly preferred adjective to the process of building. Easy handling, easy fit, easy grip, easy fastening etc. From echoing the spirit of America, easy, has infiltrated every aspect of the construction process, and has become synonymous with Lean production. Consequently this has seriously effected for the architectural quality. An "easy" architecture has emerged, that admittedly arouses our senses as delightful artefacts, but which is superficial and easily digestible. Meanwhile, the international standardisation of the construction process has contributed to a blurring of virtually all-cultural differences. An airport in Kuala Lumpur and the local dental clinic tend to radiate the exactly same atmosphere.

In a state of unbearable lightness of existence, modern man sits back







with a yearning for substance and the narrative. We are nourished by natural surroundings, which are saturated with meaning and atmosphere.

The industrialized building, with its standardized and uniform production, is unable to meet these requirements. Thus, the quality of industrial production is assessed on the ability to produce uniform products. This represents the basic manifesto of industrialization. According to Ruskin this does not call for a multitude of sensory stimulation, nor does it lead to artistic quality.

With buildings that are insufficiently capable of stimulating the human senses, not to mention enriching both intellect and spirit, we have been forced to resort to artistic decoration in order to meet the imbalance. We have adapted our cultural policy in such a way, that large parts of state-sponsored art compensates for an architecture that is not capable of attaining artistic quality within itself. Art becomes a kind of entertainment, detached from the architecture.



Crafts qualities

Craft has a number of qualities, which are of great importance to the physical environment that surrounds the modern man. The “white modernism” has changed the discourse from the 19th century material awareness, to the exploration of space configurations. Conversely, there is a quest back to the basic textural qualities of architecture, obtained through craftsmanship. Generally, one can distinguish two main tendencies that characterize the time. On the one hand, there is a tendency of dematerialisation. This is highly reflected in information technology, where the physical world is gradually replaced by intangible surfaces in the virtual space. On the other hand, there is a tendency for pronounced aesthetic value in the materials. This is expressed through a longing for materiality and a body-in-nature culture. In the latter context, craft is essential.

The German architect Gerhard Auer (b. 1938) has described the two trends, and refers to them as the basic conditions for the current Zeitgeist - respectively represented through a world, that has been reduced to images and surfaces, an increase in intangible modes of perception, and at the same time a regression back to the materiality. Back to experiencing the world through our senses. The latter trend holds, according to Auer, different ideological undertones. Either it reflects a cultural pessimism, the fear of the future, expressed



through a general nostalgia, or it is an expression of a basic (positive) human need for sensory stimulation. Whatever might be the underlying reasons for our choice of trends - the tangible or intangible - it is the point of Auer, that we as humans possess an option. This option the present-day man handles in a pragmatic way, while "shopping" between the two trends.

Crafts opportunities for stepping out of its shadowy existence behind the industrialized building culture, lies in its ability to adapt to individual and personal needs. Through its imperfection and multi-faceted variations, it represents a series of sensory stimuli, which are impossible to achieve through industrial mass-production. At the same time both traces of tool marks and thought processes are left as fingerprints in the building, enriching it and heightening the artistic quality. Finally, craftsmanship represents a slowness that may prove to be precisely the quality, which causes it to survive. The German philosopher Gernot Böhme (1937) describes a relation with materials, *Der arbeitenden beziehung* (the working relation), where we establish a relation to materials through the act of touching and handling. In regard to craftsmanship this relationship is characterised by the embedment of significance into building. This is especially prevalent in the older building stock, dominated by craftsmanship. Here it is experienced as a perceptual saturation derived from the human consciousness,



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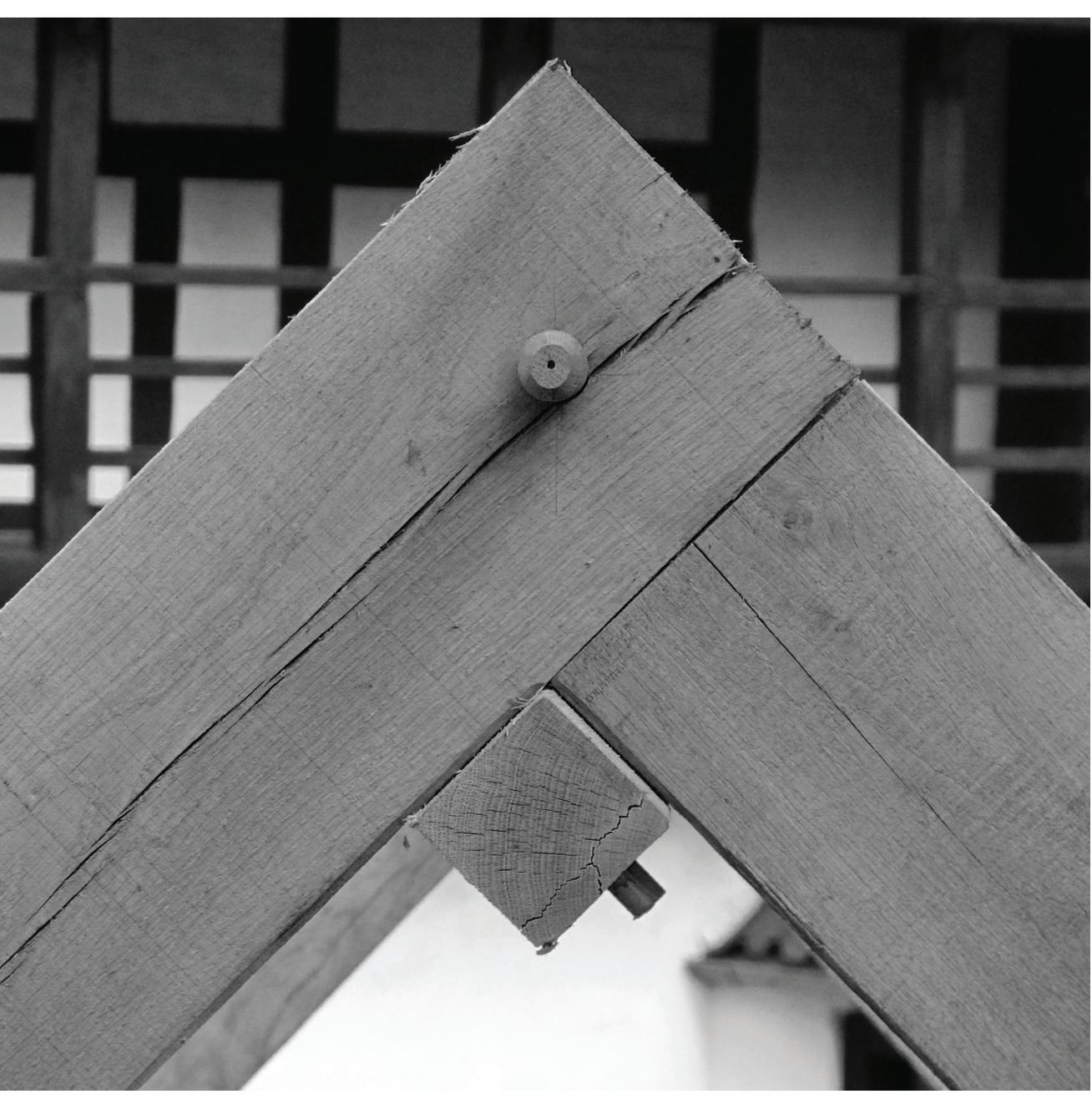
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that is left as “fingerprints” all over the “body” of the building. Unconsciously, one can feel the innumerable decisions that have been taken giving the building its strong identity. Nothing is left to chance, the idea is present everywhere. Thus, there are no doubts that this has taken time and has been difficult. This is the insignia of great quality.

Super tanker vs. row boat

With a characterisation of man as one whose mental state is invigorated by the diversity and unpredictability of the intimate environment, it is necessary to rethink our building culture in order to meet these basic needs. Craftsmanship seems inevitable in this context in order to enrich the sensuous qualities of our surroundings.

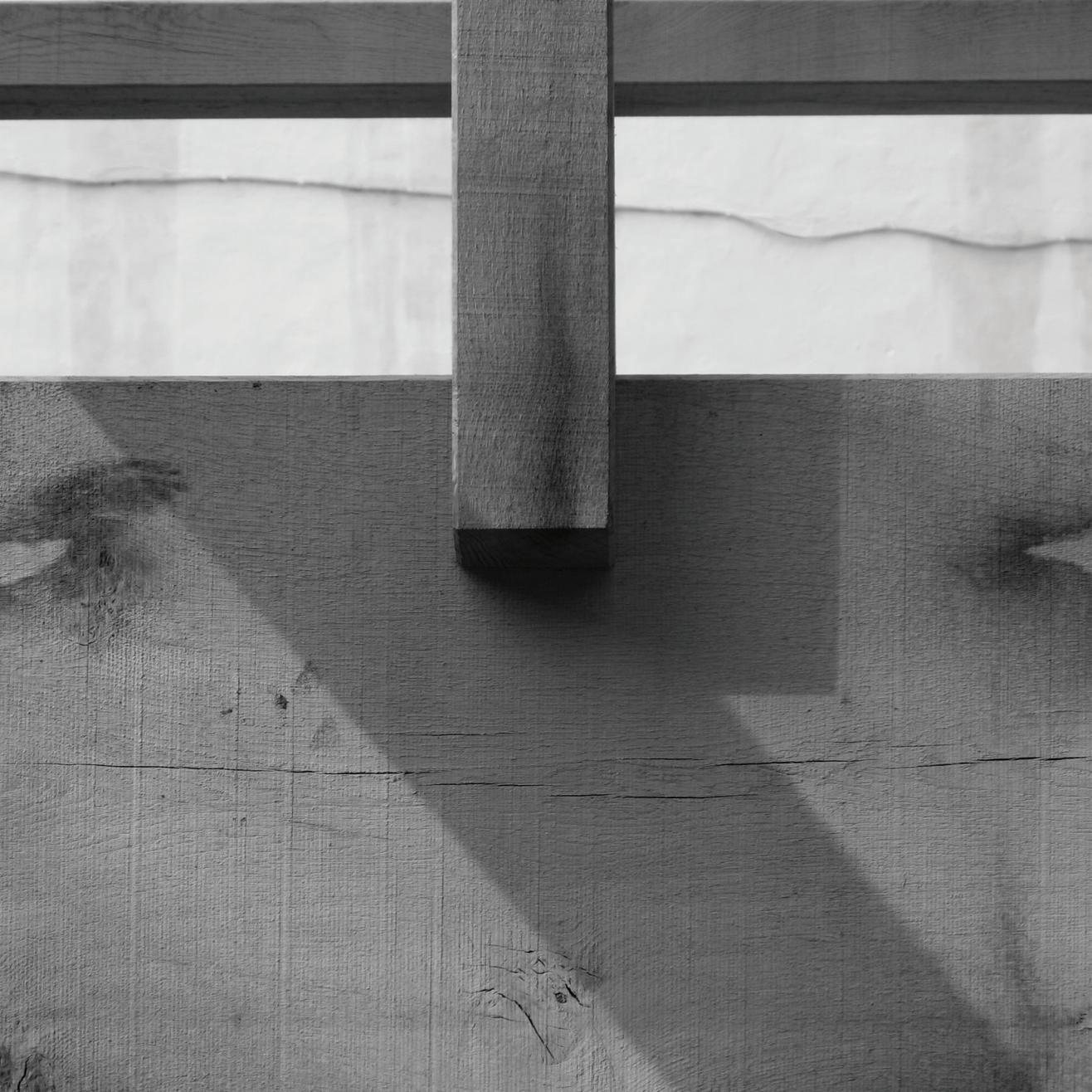
This challenge is related both to the way we think as well as our cultural heritage. A confrontation with the “easy-easy” culture seems inevitable when re-establishing slowness. This challenge may seem insurmountable in a society where the time concept is in a process of collapse. However, according to the French cultural theorist Paul Virilio, there are signs that the “meltdown” in our perception of time is to be followed by an expansion of time. In other words, we will only have time to take time.



There is no doubt that craftsmanship and industrial production can be harmonised with benefits for both production methods. This has happened gradually ever since the introduction of the first industrial construction processes in the early 19th century. However, there is a need for a reversible process in order to add sensory qualities to buildings that are conceived predominately through industrial processes.

There seems to be little evidence that the major architectural offices set a new course, which emphasizes a re-integration of craft into building industry. With all respect many offices have turned into "super tankers", unable to set a new course through unknown seas dominated and determined by economic parameters. Therefore the change has to come from elsewhere and with a high degree of idealism.

According to John Ruskin man wishes to express himself through work and in this way contribute to the production of quality. Thus, there is hope for the future generations of architects and builders in numerous small offices to establish a network of general contractors, striving for quality as their main goal. This is an idealistic goal, but the question is whether there is any alternative.









Anders Gammelgaard Nielsen (* 25 September 1963 in Aarhus) is a Danish architect and sculptor. He is an associate professor at Aarhus School of Architecture. His field is materials and technology. He has a Ph.D. degree in material aesthetics. His research work is especially directed towards the perceptual relationship to materials as well as the opportunities of creating atmospheres through building materials.

