

Detailing Time

The Architectural Drawing as a Temporal and Speculative Construct

future foresight
temporal architecture
speculative drawing
architectural pedagogy
integrative technological thinking

This paper examines the detail drawing as a research tool for exploring speculative visions of future life, situating it as both a pedagogical and conceptual instrument for architectural inquiry. Drawing on a series of design studio and construction courses led by the author, the discussion traces how the detail evolves from a technical exercise into a lens for investigating material, temporal, and social transformation. Through references to writings from Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow, the Smithsons, Peter Salter, and Cedric Price, the paper frames the detail as a field of negotiation between design intent, material agency, and lived experience. Within this framework, drawing is approached not as a fixed representation but as a performative act; an anticipatory process that reveals architecture's mutable continuity with time and use. The case study 'Tech(no)-Cosmos' extends this approach, envisioning a technologically integrated future where architecture, body, and machine co-evolve. By tracing the micro-temporalities embedded in constructional and representational processes, the paper argues for an expanded understanding of detail as an active, temporal construct. Ultimately, it advocates an architecture that embraces indeterminacy and transformation; an architecture that is, in the fullest sense, alive.

Menikou, Markella¹

¹University of Nicosia, Department of Architecture, Nicosia, Cyprus.
<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1332-0235>
 menikou.m@unic.ac.cy

Citation: Menikou, M. (2025). "Detailing Time", UOU scientific journal #10, 116-127.

ISSN: 2697-1518. <https://doi.org/10.14198/UOU.2025.10.12>
 This document is under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0)

Invited Article 

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to discuss how the detail drawing acts as a research tool for exploring visions of future life. The detail becomes a lens through which to trace the life of materials and space in flux: moments of use, adaptation, decay and renewal that reveal architecture's mutable continuity with everyday life.

The idea of the 'detail' will be presented as a pedagogical tool utilised under the agenda of a series of architectural design studio and construction courses taught by the author. These courses culminate in an advanced level design studio research laboratory with a theme that poses technology as a lens to inspect the future of architecture. The common denominator across all of these courses is the attempt to test how the subject of technology fuses in the architectural design studio and vice-versa.

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF DETAIL DRAWING

In the theoretical construction courses the focus is to introduce the principles underlying performance criteria in construction, identify reference texts to build knowledge and understanding and explore contemporary case studies to test analytic capability and develop a 'language of construction'. Additionally, students are introduced to detail drawing as a tool for studying and devising construction applications, in the context of both 'instrumental' and 'experiential' performance (Fig.1). The courses move from basic technical knowledge and understanding to an integrated approach of technology with design strategies.

Integrative technological thinking is accumulatively developed in the curriculum. At the end of Year 3 students follow a design studio with a focus on building technology where the idea of working with a slice of the project at 1:20 scale is introduced at the very start of

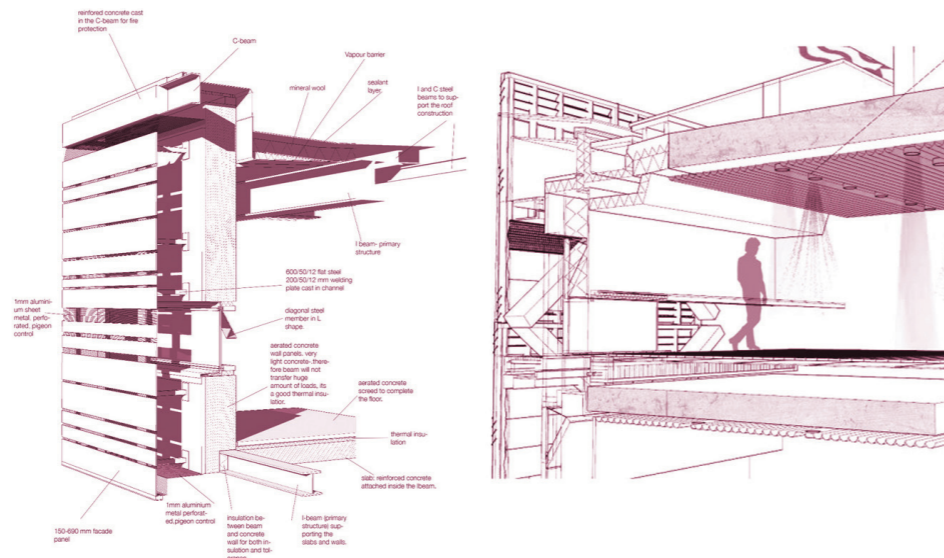


Fig.1 - Typical construction course detail drawing studies.

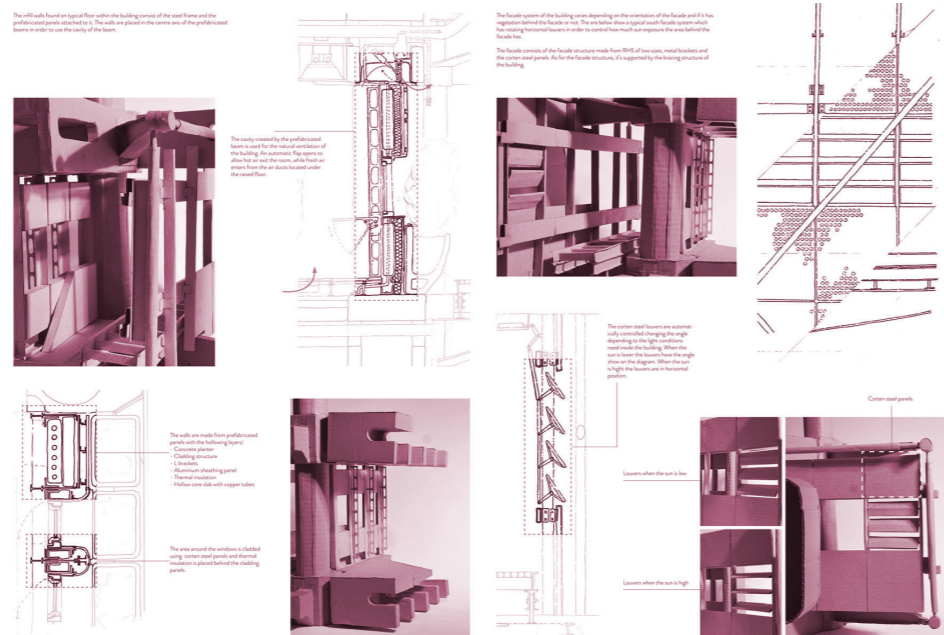


Fig.2 - 1:20 scale drawn and modelled investigations of building slice.

the studio project. The 'detail' is articulated through processes of drawing and making (Fig.2). The exercise is intentionally parachuted quite early into the design process to avoid misinterpreting it as a 'detailing' exercise towards linear/traditional building resolutions. The objective is to equally appreciate this as a conceptual driver of the propositions and thus as an invitation to dare to propose. Conditioning space is considered on both an operational/instrumental level as well as on an experiential/conceptual way. The detail drawing shifts from an analytical tool to a speculative one. Emphasis is given to developing an understanding of how technological phenomena can inform and drive design development and

'realisation'. The detail drawing becomes a tool for uncovering the interactive, temporal, and material entanglements that shape lived space (Fig.3). Students are encouraged to deal with overall arrangement, not as an imposed fixed narrative, but rather as an open-ended process; from the part to the whole and vice-versa, where the fragments are designed to invite a series of future scenarios in line with a developing overall narrative (Fig.4). Students understand the detail as having a value which transcends its definition as an abstract architectural mechanism towards technical resolution. The detailed slice of space is truly understood and tested as a slice of the future life of the project. The detail drawing is not tested

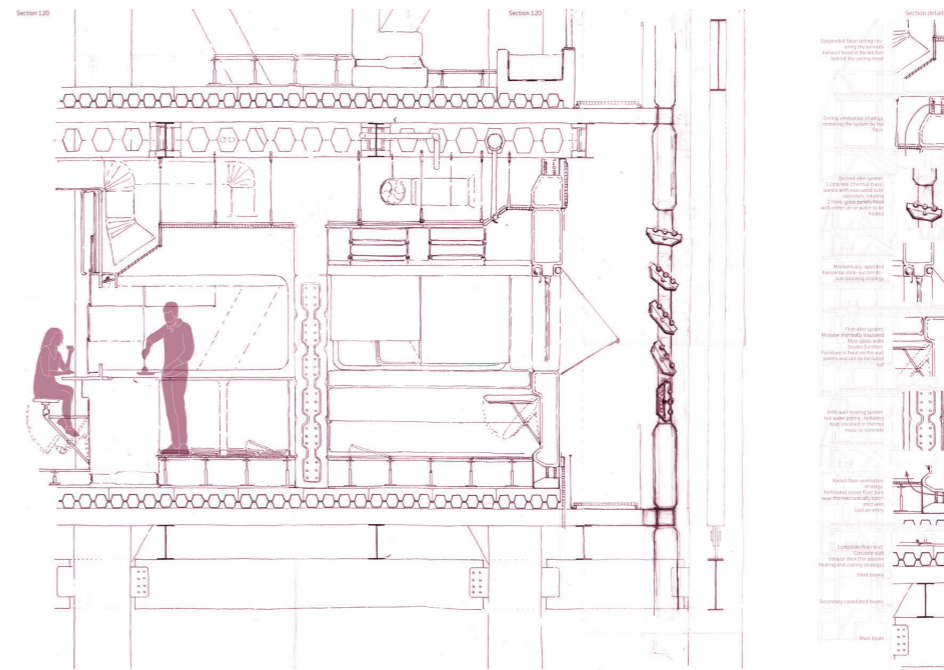


Fig.3 - 1:20 building slice; the detail drawing becomes a tool for uncovering the interactive, temporal, and material entanglements that shape lived space

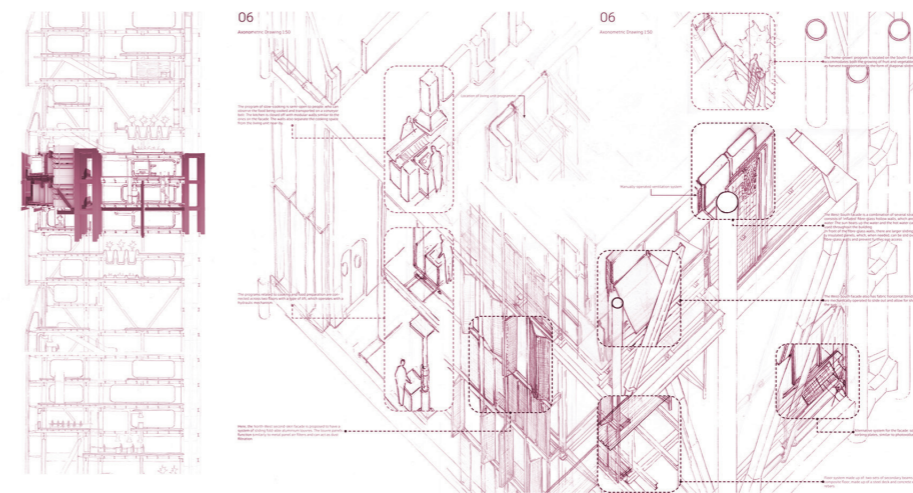


Fig.4 - Continuously shifting from the part to the whole and vice-versa

in isolation but viewed as part of a bigger story; it becomes the speculative proposition, the conceptual axis towards the whole. Eventually the act of drawing operates not as a fixed

representation but as a generative medium for relational thinking; whether envisioning the material presence of a future space or probing the corporeal dimensions of lived experience, it ultimately



Fig.5 - The 1:20 detailed slice of space is truly understood and tested as a slice of the future life of the project.

serves as a visual record of life itself (Fig.5). Students are exposed to theoretical references in order to develop a conceptual understanding of technology, detail, function, programme and performance. The relationship between material, time and architectural authorship has been a recurring theme in architectural discourse from the mid-twentieth century to the present. A number of theorists and architects have explored how architecture is shaped not only by its initial act of construction but also by its subsequent transformation through weathering, appropriation and renewal. The evolution of the detail drawing reflects an understanding of architecture as a temporal process, shaped by a set of generative rules for detail.

In *On Weathering* (Leatherbarrow, Mostafavi, 1993), Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow establish the foundation for this line of thought. They argue that the traditional notion of 'completion' in architecture is an artificial one, imposed by the conventions of design and construction. Buildings are, in fact, in a state of continual making, their surfaces altered by environmental exposure and human use. For Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow, weathering is not a form of decay but a mode of construction that continues beyond the architect's control. Materials react to moisture, sunlight, pollution, and occupation, creating an evolving aesthetic that expresses the passage of time. This is challenging the modernist aspiration for permanence and perfection, suggesting instead that

architectural beauty emerges from this negotiation between intention and inevitability.

In their view, weathering is an essential part of architecture's communicative capacity—its ability to reveal the processes of making, use, and aging.

This notion is echoed in the phrase "*Finishing ends construction, weathering constructs finishes,*" (Leatherbarrow, Mostafavi, 1993, 5) which encapsulates the idea that architectural completion is never final but perpetually redefined by time and use.

This sensibility resonates with the 'as found' attitude articulated by Alison and Peter Smithson during the 1950s and later examined in *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary* (Lichtenstein, Schregener, 2001). The Smithsons' concept of the 'as found' also arose from a critical response to the idealised purity of modernism. They sought instead to recognise value in the ordinary, the contingent, and the already existing. The 'as found' is not simply an aesthetic choice but an ethical one: it expressed a willingness to work with reality as and when it is encountered.

In his writings Peter Salter develops these ideas at the scale of construction, in particular referring to concepts such as rules for detail and "tolerance as strategy" (Salter, 1997, 79). Salter's approach to detailing treats the junctions and connections of a building not as purely technical resolutions but as opportunities for expression and negotiation. He suggests that rules in architecture are not fixed laws but frameworks that guide interpretation and adaptation. The detail, therefore, becomes a site of encounter between materials, trades, and intentions—a space where the unpredictable nature of making can be acknowledged rather than suppressed. Similarly, Salter reframes tolerance from a technical parameter into a conceptual stance.

Rather than striving for absolute precision, he advocates designing for difference: allowing gaps, overlaps, and misalignments to

become part of the architecture's character. This notion of tolerance echoes the acceptance of imperfection found in both the Smithsons' and Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow's writings. It recognises that architecture is a material and social process subject to negotiation, error, and change. Salter's notion of tolerance transcends the mechanical; it becomes a design strategy that allows the unexpected to emerge, acknowledging imperfection as an intrinsic quality of making.

The interplay between finish, weathering, and tolerance underscores a broader reconsideration of how architecture performs over time. The statement "*Finishing ends construction, weathering constructs finishes,*" (Leatherbarrow, Mostafavi, 1993, 5) highlights this dynamic: the moment construction is declared 'finished,' the building begins its next stage of becoming, as life unfolds.

Weathering becomes an active form of design, extending the architect's authorship into a dialogue with time, climate, maintenance, and use. Salter's tolerance strategies can thus be read as a means of accommodating this dialogue; of creating conditions where the inevitable shifts of time and matter can occur without undermining the architectural whole.

DETAIL AND THE FIVE STAGES OF ARTIFICIAL TIME

Across the aforementioned references a consistent theme emerges: architecture is not a static object but a temporal condition. Either through the slow erosion of weather, the adaptation of detail, or the acceptance of the 'as found,' these authors advocate for a mode of practice that acknowledges impermanence and embraces the contingencies of making.

The building becomes an open system subject to material transformation, environmental influence, and human inhabitation.

The architect does not just control every aspect of form and finish but rather becomes a collaborator with time and circumstance.

The act of 'finishing' is not an end but a threshold, marking the point at which the environment and life takes over the work of construction.

Students understand early on that in order to be able to embrace the drawing as a tool of interrogation from the detail to the whole, they have to challenge its assumed authority as an objective mediator between design intent and material realisation. Cedric Price's speculative and temporal approach to design, what he termed "anticipating the unexpected" (Price, 1996, 38), further destabilises the fixity of representation by privileging adaptability and indeterminacy.

Thus, to interrogate the drawing from detail to whole is to acknowledge its role not merely as documentation, but as an active participant in shaping architecture's evolving material and conceptual realities. Price's notion of architecture as an evolving system of temporal and material relations, through his definition of the "*five stages of artificial time: use, re-use, mis-use, disuse, refuse*" (Price, 1996, 38), sets a promising framework for interrogating the micro-scales of architectural detail.

Architectural drawing, traditionally positioned as a means of control and precision, has increasingly been conceived as a generative and interpretive act; an instrument through which the contingencies of material, time, and inhabitation may be explored rather than resolved. As Robin Evans suggests, the drawing is not a transparent vehicle for transmission but a translation that both produces and distorts architectural intention. In this sense, the drawing operates as a site of negotiation, where detail becomes a lens for examining the relational dynamics of making (Evans, 1997).

Building on Evans's conception of drawing as a generative and interpretive translation, the students explore how Price's anticipatory approach transforms

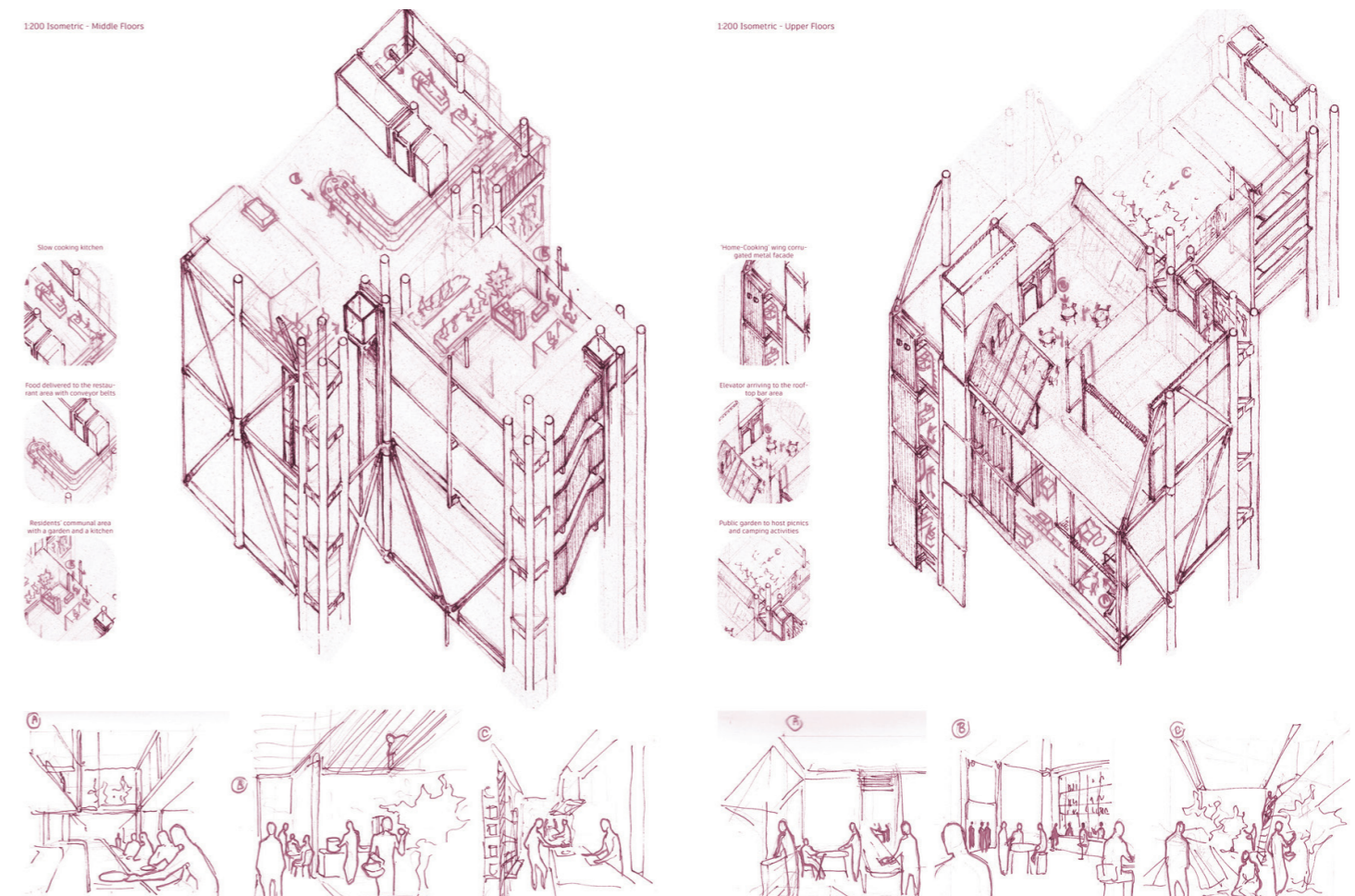


Fig.6 - Interrogating the micro-scales of architectural detail inspired by Cedric Price's anticipatory approach.

the architectural detail from a point of resolution into one of perpetual negotiation. The drawing, rather than fixing material certainty, becomes a dynamic tool that reveals the latent possibilities within processes of change, decay, and renewal (Fig.6).

TECH(NO)-COSMOS; A CASE STUDY TESTING DETAIL DRAWING AS A TOOL FOR EXPLORING VISIONS OF FUTURE LIFE

The awareness of time in architecture is most useful when particular intervals of the process are recognized. As Cedric Price stated "fine-tuning of intervals of time or relevant speed becomes even more critical when the human factor is considered" (Price, 1996, 38). His project the Fun Palace, conceived as an architectural machine design for time, was an

architecture of probabilities in present time. It acknowledged the inevitability of change, chance, and indeterminacy by incorporating uncertainties as integral to a continuously evolving process. Inspired by Cedric Price's notion of time as a design element, all student projects produced under the advanced level design studio research laboratory Unit 4 "Divining the Future; Technology is the answer but what was the question?"¹ are developed through timelines. Through the timeline process the aim is to frame the future in sequential stages through depth of time, ranging from 50-1000 years ahead. It is therefore invaluable to understand the evolutionary momentum developed over the past to assist in the understanding of a trajectory for the future. The timeline of up to a thousand years forward becomes the speculative proposition, the conceptual axis for incrementally projecting architecture into the future. It is worth noting that envisioning the future is not an

end in itself, but it is the process of contemplating it through a timeline that may inform better present-day propositions.

Presented here is a series of selected student output, from the project 'Tech(no)-Cosmos'. The theme of Unit 4 poses technology as a lens to inspect the future of architecture, therefore it provides a fertile ground for testing how the detail drawing acts as a research tool for exploring and enabling visions of future life.

The project 'Tech(no)-Cosmos' envisions a speculative future in which technology and human life become inseparably integrated, erasing traditional limits of mortality, mobility, and physical ability. The proposal projects from the technological condition of today—where digital interfaces, virtual reality, and prosthetics already extend human capacity—towards the year 2200, when architecture, body, and machine form a continuous ecosystem of adaptation and support. In this

where users rent adaptable layers rather than fixed units, allowing occupation by the hour or day, thereby questioning fixed notions of domestic permanence. Facilities like the Fun Zone and other communal areas evoke Cedric Price's Fun Palace, reinterpreted here as a space of interaction between humans and intelligent systems (Fig.10).

These drawings only present a moment in the timeline of this project, as the premise of the proposition understands building as a 'development': a system of objects and processes over time. The project starts within the spatial limits of an existing urban square yet progressively transcends its boundaries through a process of

absorption and transformation. It appropriates materials and architectural fragments from the surrounding fabric, reconfiguring them into its own structural and spatial logic. This act of subsumption operates as a form of urban metabolism, an ongoing cycle of decay, reuse, and renewal, where the city continuously reconstructs itself from its own residues. Drawings of various scale reveal the detail as a site of negotiation between permanence and transformation (Fig.11). The project matured to a coherent proposition as a sum of numerous detail drawings that were never conceived as a static instruction but as a performative act that anticipates transformation, embodying Cedric Price's call to "anticipate the

unexpected" (Price,1996, 27).

The idea of tolerance transcends its technical definition, as the permissible deviation from precise dimensions is detail drawings. Instead in these drawings it gains a conceptual dimension and drives the technical resolutions: it is an accommodation of difference, an acceptance of uncertainty and imperfection as inherent conditions of space inhabitation. The tolerance here becomes a space of negotiation between intention and reality, manifested through the proposed systems and materials (Fig.12).

The sectional drawing (Fig.13) suggests a vertical city, interwoven with transportation infrastructure

such as a metro station, where boundaries between inside and outside, private and collective domains are deliberately blurred. Through its intricate spatial connections and overlapping functions, the drawing explores architecture as a living organism—adaptive, porous, and responsive to the complexities of future urban life.

The resulting architecture possesses a sense of vitality and temporality—what Peter Salter describes as a willingness to accept the life of the building as an ongoing process. The proposition also shares Salter's fascination with detail as a vehicle for ambiguity, where constructional precision coexists with a tactile roughness that invites human engagement (Fig.14).

The selection of drawings produced evidence how representational practices might transcend the fixity of technical detailing to articulate architecture as an event of continual becoming.

For example, the drawing operates as a tool of interrogation (Fig.15) by moving from detailed mechanical and spatial components to the overall architectural and experiential concept. At the micro level, it reveals precise mechanisms; robotic arms assisting in fitting the 'armour', truss systems supporting adaptive prosthetics, and pin arts capturing body measurements, highlighting the interaction between human and machine.

These details integrate into

a larger spatial and narrative framework, where structure, branding, and user experience merge into a unified environment. The composition thus interrogates how technology, design, and embodiment converge, transforming individual components into a holistic vision of augmented human performance and architectural adaptability.

Ultimately, 'Tech(no)-Cosmos' proposes a vision of a cybernetic structure that grows, heals, and learns alongside its inhabitants. It explores how the merging of human anatomy, artificial intelligence, and architectural design can generate new definitions of community, care, and continuity in a post-human, post-anthropocentric future (Fig.16).

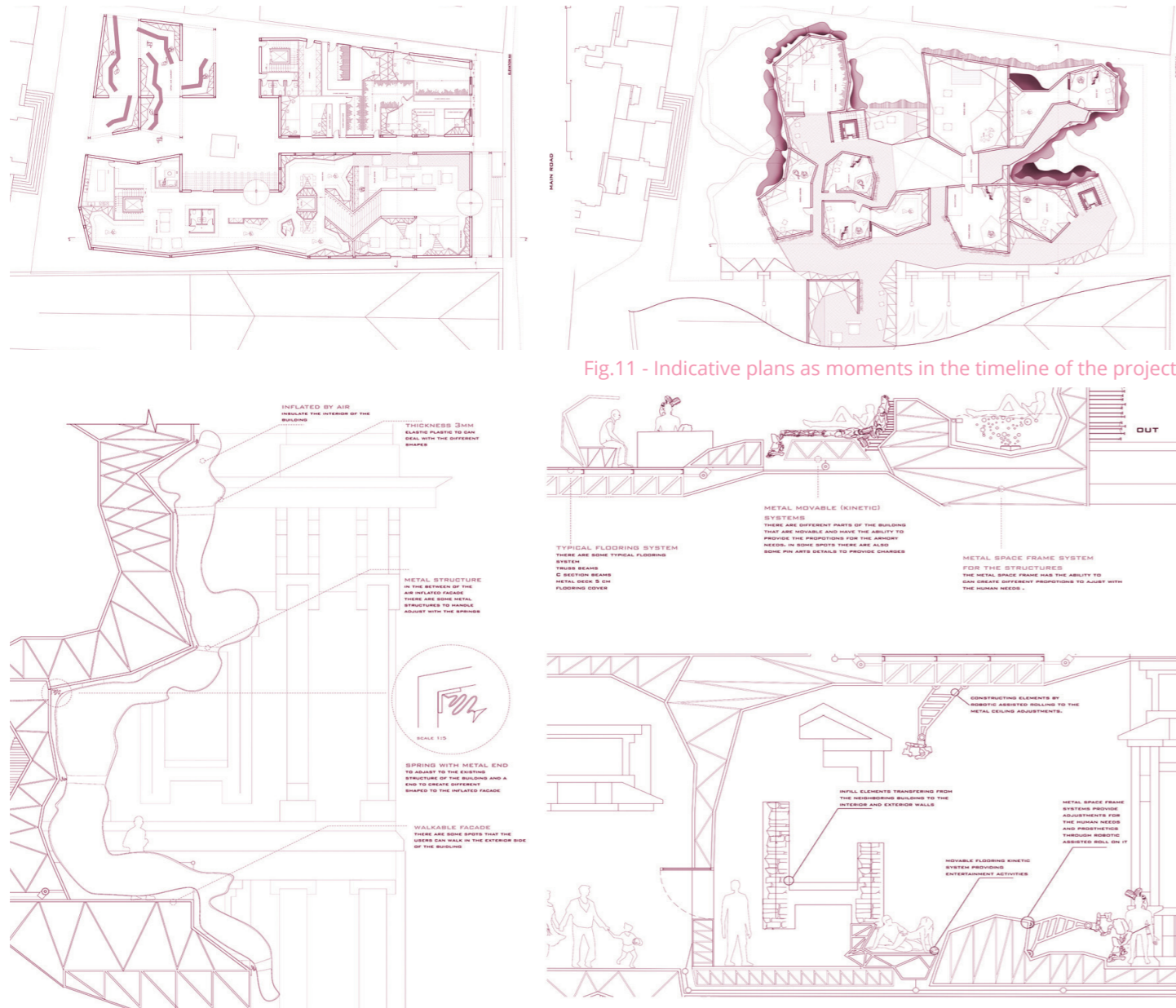


Fig.12 - "Tolerance" tested as a space of negotiation between intention and reality, manifested through the proposed systems and materials.

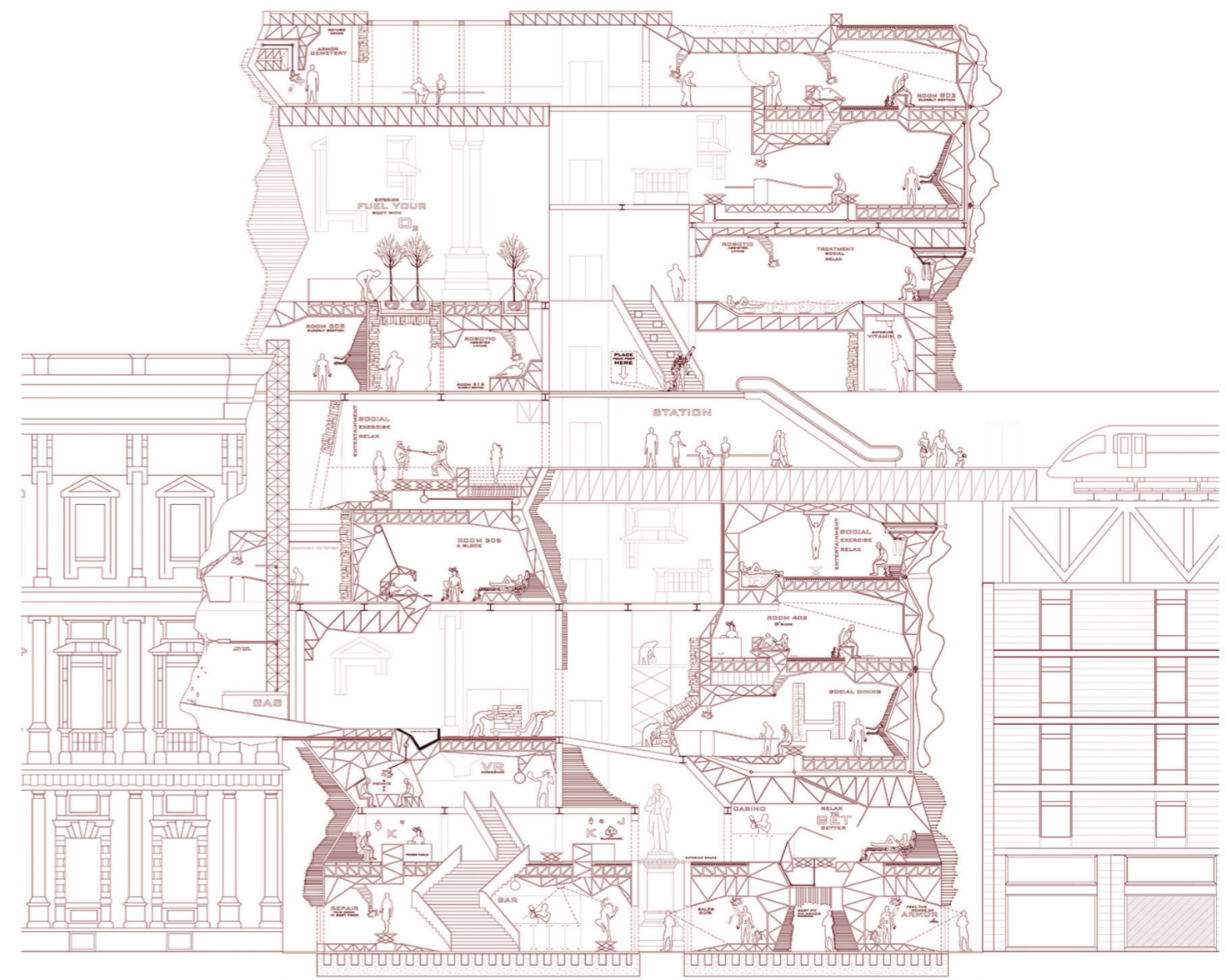


Fig.13 - The sectional drawing unfolds as a narrative of inhabitation within a continuously transforming future urban organism.

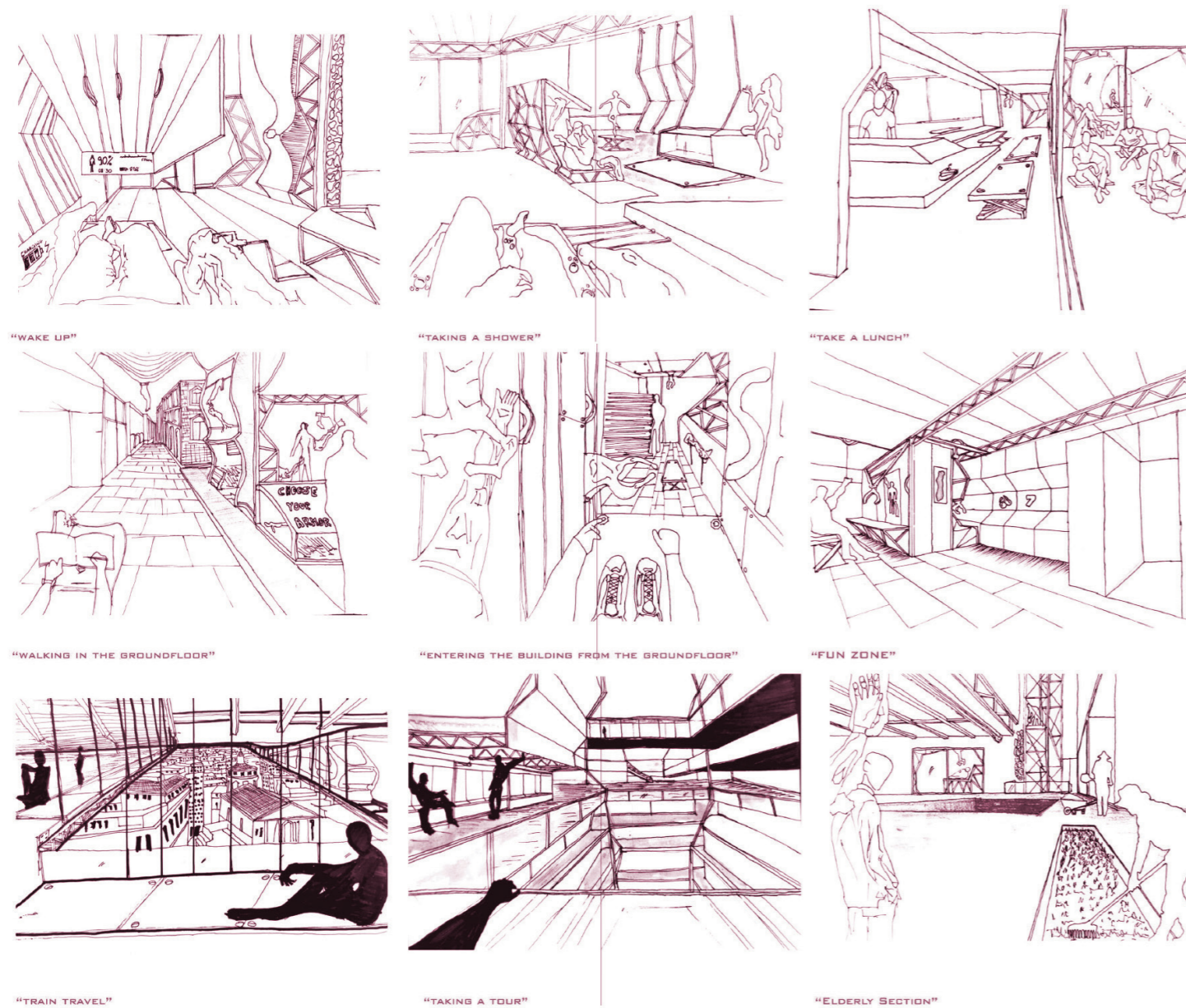


Fig.14 -The overall narrative developed via a series of detailed moments

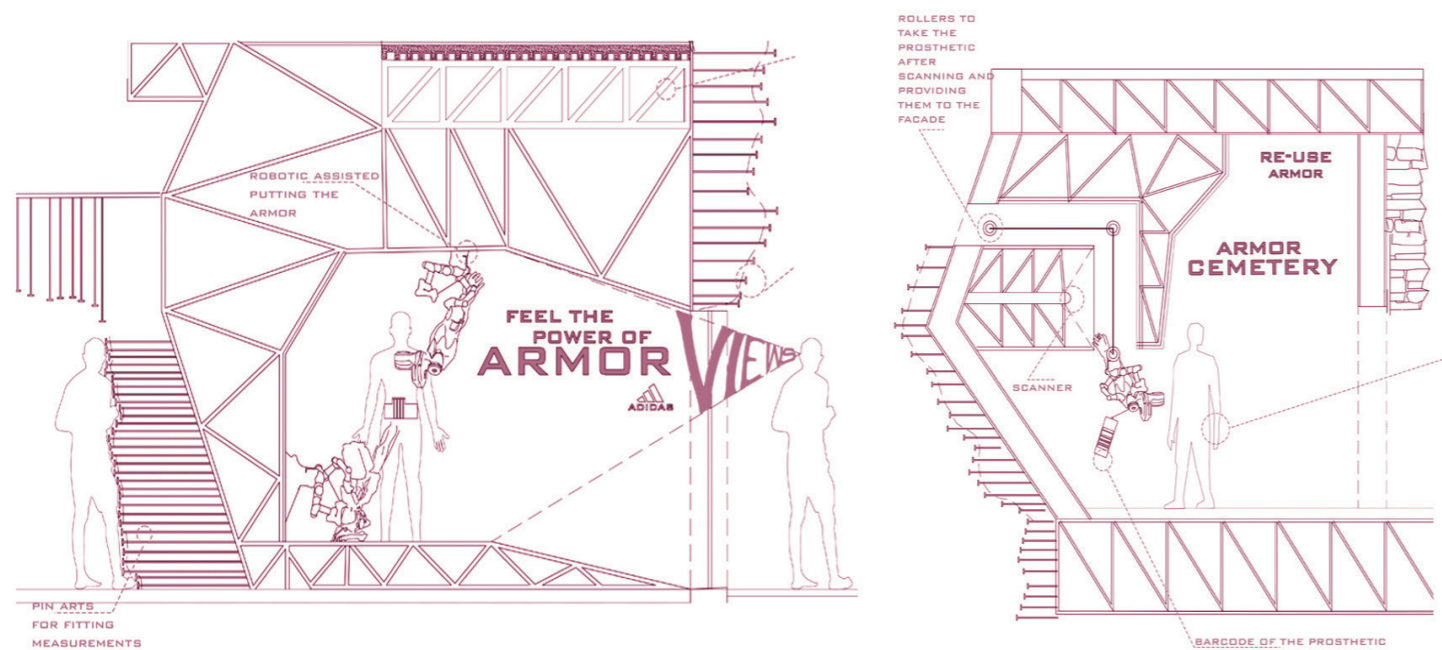


Fig.15 -Detail drawings as a tool of interrogation from the zoomed-in mechanical and spatial components to the overall narrative.

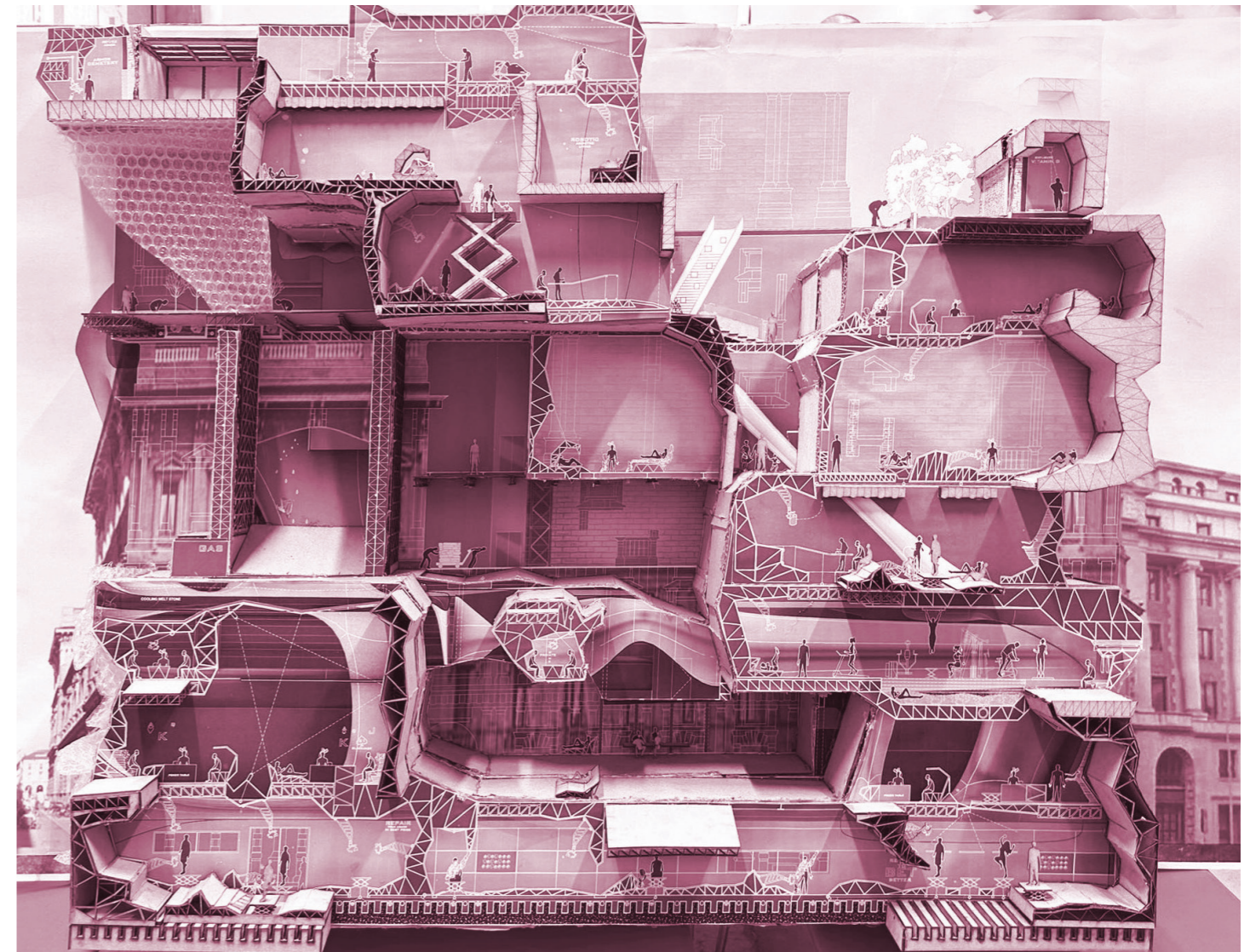


Fig.16 -Hybrid overall sectional model of 'Tech(no)-Cosmos'

CONCLUSION

The paper argues for an expanded understanding of detail as an active, temporal construct that situates architecture within continuous processes of interaction and becoming. By positioning drawing as both an instrument of foresight and a testimony to the lived, temporal nature of architecture, it challenges the notion of the building as a fixed object, proposing instead that architecture exists in a state of in-betweenness; a condition of ongoing transformation. Within the pedagogical context of the design studios and selected output discussed the detail becomes a site where technology and architectural thinking converge, enabling students to speculate on how buildings evolve through time.

Tracing the micro-temporalities embedded within material junctions

and adaptive processes, the study frames the detail as a site of negotiation between human and nonhuman agencies. In doing so, it aligns with Price's vision of an architecture that finds beauty not in permanence but in transformation; an architecture that is, in the fullest sense, alive.

WORKS CITED

BANHAM, Reyner. A Critic Writes: Selected Essays by Reyner Banham. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. ISBN 9780520219441.

EVANS, Robin. Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays. London: Architectural Association, 1997. ISBN 9781870890687.

LEATHERBARROW, David, Mohsen, MOSTAFAVI. On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993. ISBN 9780262631440.

LICHTENSTEIN, Claude, Thomas SCHREGENBERGER. As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary. Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2001.

ISBN 9783907078433.

PRICE, Cedric. Anticipating the Unexpected. In: The Architects' Journal, 5 September, volume 204, 1996. pp. 27-39. ISSN 00038466.

PRICE, Cedric and others. Cedric Price (Works). Architectural Association Publications, 1984. ISBN 978-0904503456.

SALTER, Peter. Tolerance as strategy: Mechtild Stuhlmacher in conversation with Peter Salter on the work of Sigurd Lewerentz. In: OASE 45/46, Essential Architecture. 1997, pp. 79-92. ISBN 9061685532.

SALTER, Peter and others. 4 + 1: Peter Salter - Building Projects. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000. ISBN 9781901033366.

SMITHSON, Alison, Peter SMITHSON. The 'As Found' and the Found. In: The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty, edited by David Robbins, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990. 201-202. ISBN 9780262181396.

NOTES

1. Design studio research laboratory Unit 4 'Divining the Future; Technology is the answer but what was the question?' is taught by the author and Adonis Cleanthous, Associate Professor, University of Nicosia.