Urban Cadence

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Abstract

Walls encasing equivalent modules of space, form a structure that visually connects individual elements into a single organism. The placement and form of these walls allows each module to retain distinct lighting qualities conversely drawing the individual out of the whole.
Urban Cadence
More so than walking down Main Street do I feel as if I am penetrating a place when visiting the local farmers market...
Farmers markets provide a connecting point between food, land and culture; possessing the ability to contribute to the understanding of a place. Because markets connect people to places the structures they inhabit become symbols of community values. By attending to what is local, market structures can enhance a sense of community, creating a perceptible theme through cultural continuity. Rather than attempting to adapt a market into a public area that may be inappropriate to vendors’ or patrons’ needs, suitable space should be made for them. This thesis proposes a structure for the Blacksburg farmers market that would not only provide a permanent market space, but also serve as a symbol for the market and subsequently its’ community. The site is located within downtown Blacksburg, currently housing the farmers market along its street edges.

When questioning Blacksburg vendors on characteristics of an ideal market, one vendor stated, “The perfect market would have more trees, like a garden.” This response was striking because instead of focusing on obvious pragmatic market elements it began to acknowledge a market’s full potential as a connecting point between a place and its community values. The statement touches upon the importance of preserving a sense of nature, of connecting oneself back to the land, a value arising from Blacksburg’s location and agrarian roots. Blacksburg has retained its sense of place by allowing strong community values to shape the character of its environment. Historically the town has emphasized planning initiatives including the preservation of sightlines, emphasis on pedestrian scale and creation of greenways. Values that enhance Blacksburg’s sense of place, such as the idea of openness, are promoted through the shape and character of this project.
The proposed market buildings are created by a series of individual walls, employed to create and separate spaces for distinct market stalls. Like a tree, each wall grows solidly from the ground, establishing itself as a permanent fixture within the land. Emphasizing its permanence, the wall rises from an anchored base of concrete, changing to a slightly more refined surface clad in travertine tile. As it ascends, the wall becomes thinner while gently twisting away from its original orientation. A grouping of these walls is used to compose a building, creating a rhythmic form; wall, void, wall, void and so on. Each wall is placed at a slight angle to the next, allowing the building to curve as each module is added.
Certain programmatic requirements of a market promote the inherent permeability of this form allowing the ground level to be seen as a continuation of the urban floor rather than an interruption. By situating the two curving buildings along opposing perimeters of the site, their arching nature is used to perceptively encase a central open area. This plan resembles ancient Greek markets as they often took the form of long narrow stoas surrounding a central courtyard or agora. The central greenway, similar to the agora, becomes an extension of the market, evoking a greater sense of dignity and loyalty to it as a civic institution. Functionally, the greenway reserves space to accommodate market growth as well as a variety of ancillary activities. It also encourages an existing pedestrian flow pattern through downtown while improving access to adjacent commercial entrances. Open spaces and greenway connections are considered by Blacksburg to “provide both visual and physical resting points [thereby] enhancing aesthetic experience as well as making the area overall more desirable” (Town of Blacksburg Comprehensive Plan).
Programmatically, each pair of walls circumscribes a bay to be occupied by an individual vendor, his/her merchandise and vehicle at the ground level. While the primary walls serve to separate each stall or vendor, the cadence of these elements visually unites the individual spaces as an institution. To set up for the market, a wooden slatted wall is pulled away from a primary wall, creating a boundary between the vendor’s vehicle and displayed goods. By providing shelving these pull-out walls become the background on which merchandise is displayed. The module spacing of each stall as well as the provision of shelter and tables provides vendors with similar amenities, allowing each to present themselves through their arrangement of goods.
In the case of a full market (when all permanent vendor bays are occupied) independent structures exist across from the permanent stalls to accommodate extra vendors. The placement of these freestanding structures creates the perception of smaller scale urban rooms within the larger open area. However, rather than being regarded as boundaries these structures reach out into the central open area like fingers to enmesh the entire market area, thus promoting the use of the greenway as an extension of the market. The pattern of the market floor plays off this concept by extending the use of permeable pavers into the greenway area at varying distances in order to obscure discernible market boundaries within the larger urban room. These expanses of permeable paving are interrupted by grass strips placed as counter-forms to the primary walls, emphasizing each module of space.
The need for the programmatic addition of residences above the ground level market became apparent through the consideration of the site as part of a growing urban context. The residences are conceptually seen as individual wooden boxes placed within the confines of a pair of primary walls. A concrete flooring slab supports these boxes above the market ground floor while visually separating the civic market from the private residences. The appearance of residences between two walls maintains an emphasis on these signifying walls. Although the module of space between them remains constant the perception of this space changes as the walls rise, gently twisting to encase the residential units.
The apartment entrance can be seen as a series of thresholds, beginning and ending between two primary walls. An open bay reserved at the end of each building allows residents to ascend to an open second floor corridor. Within this corridor darkness is contrasted with the appearance of light signifying an apartment entrance. This entrance consists of a linear passageway visually extending to the greenway. The confines of the entranceway emphasize an awareness of its containing walls through a juxtaposition of raw materials, stone and wood: one horizontal the other vertical; one dark the other light; one absorbing light the other reflecting it; one straight the other curving. Just as light is more perceptible in the presence of shadow, the individual primary wall is better understood as a boundary through this contrast.
The quality of the apartment units is characterized by the prevailing presence of the twisting stone boundary wall, emphasized by the penetration of natural light. The twisting of the primary wall modifies the spatial and lighting qualities of each unit. The spatial changes are dynamically experienced by the movement of the wall away from the edge of the spiral stair as one ascends. Natural lighting promoted through the use of transparent and translucent glass varies within each unit as the primary walls are placed at slight angles from one another. The quality of this penetrating light is altered within each unit through the subtle twisting of its bounding walls. The permeability of the apartments also perceptually expands the apartment space by providing visual connections to the adjacent greenway and physical links to outdoor terraces.
It was my intention to create a building and adjacent open space in which to house and promote the local farmers market. Programmatic requirements of a market assisted in creating a clear and simple form in which main elements become symbols for the building and its use. The elements within this building promote the penetration of natural light while the juxtaposition of these elements to one another allow the lighting to change within each module of space created. The twisting of the walls as they extend upwards further manipulates this light. By employing a broad idea of openness through permeability and spatial continuity, while maintaining a contextual density, the qualities and final forms of these buildings and created spaces become unique to Blacksburg. It is the relationships of these individual forms that allow the whole to be seen as a symbol for the market and subsequently the community.
References


*all images produced by the author*
“The heart has its reasons, which the mind cannot know.”
- Le Corbusier
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