membrane dissection: the bechtler museum

[abstract] A windowless façade becomes the inspiration for an experimentation of materials. Through the use of terracotta cladding, Mario Botta crafts a local landmark and structural masterpiece in his design of the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. The Bechtler Museum is located in Charlotte, North Carolina, and appears as a giant terracotta-red cube in the downtown cityscape. Instead of including several exterior windows, Botta focuses on the materiality of terracotta to function as an attractive facade and as an effective enclosure system.

[about the architect] Mario Botta, a Swiss architect born in 1943, is widely known for his design of private, public, and sacred spaces. His ideas are influenced by the works of Louis Kahn, Carlo Scarpa, and Le Corbusier. The influence of Scarpa is seen in the meticulous detail given to the terracotta enclosure, similar to Scarpa’s Querinis Stampaia garden. In addition, the curved space and reliance on strong geometries is a motif of all three inspiring architects. By including influences from these foreign, famous architects, Mario Botta argues that Charlotte is a cultural and global city.

[figure 1] Interior galleries are illuminated through the emittance of light. Fourth-floor skylights provide direct exposure, while allowing for an uninterrupted brick detail on the exterior wall.

[figure 2] A central core, positioned at the entrance of the museum, is a source of light for each of the interior galleries. The neutral color palette and materials with smooth texture allow for a stark contrast between the terracotta exterior.

[figure 3] The placement of windows becomes an integral, precise detail. The 4th-floor apartment transoms the gallery as an artwork itself.

[figure 4] The implied cube maintains its form in the carved void that serves as an entrance. The grand foyer is positioned on the exterior, to connect the museum to its cityscape context.

[terracotta] This material is comprised of a type of earthenware, a clay-based unglazed or glazed ceramic, where the fired body is porous. The Bechtler Museum uses a specific type of terracotta known as TerracClad, which is shaped into uniform panels.

[plaster] The plaster used in the Bechtler Museum is in the form of plasterboard. Plasterboard is a commonly used type of dry-wall that is made of a plaster core placed between two sheets of thick paper. This forms the finish of the interior spaces.

material palette:
- terracotta
- gypsum board
- plaster
- concrete
- glass
- aluminum