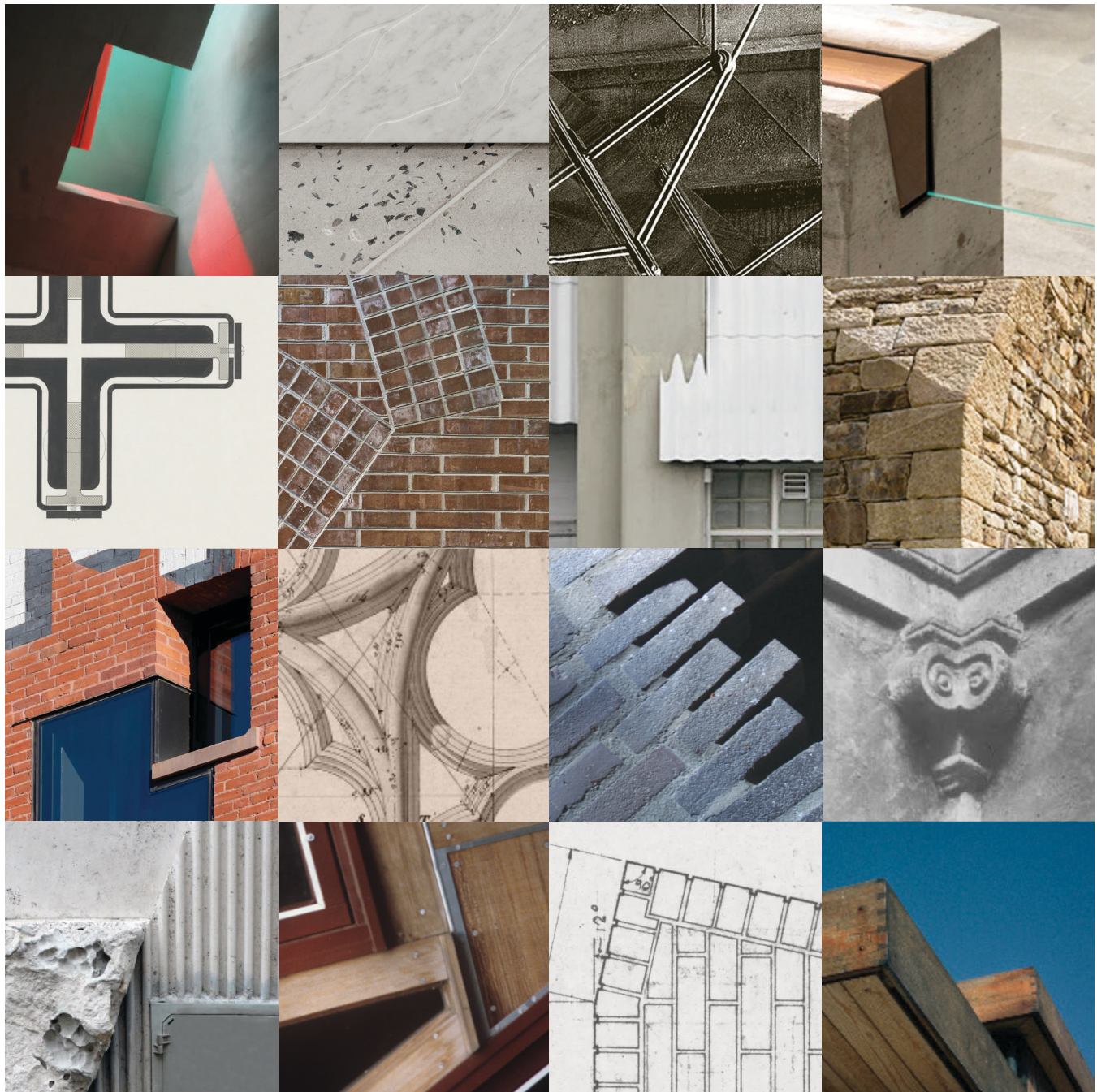


Attention to Detail

4.181 Fall 2026 MIT Architecture
W41-4101 M 2-5pm Mara Jovanović

Detail is tricky. Despite its ubiquity, it remains underappreciated as a site of cultural and political meaning. It is elusive, often strange, and strung between opposites. It may be necessary or excessive, graphic or tectonic, concise or contrived, reverent or irreverent, camp or cool... often both.

This workshop traces various frayed lineages of architectural detail, encouraging students to appreciate the 1:1 as an important scale of intention and invention in our discipline. Lectures will equip students in noticing the attitudes which emanate from the steps, sills, corners and eaves around them. Drawing on this cultivated awareness, the semester project will allow students to experiment with a way of designing buildings that begins at the scale of the hand.



Course Structure

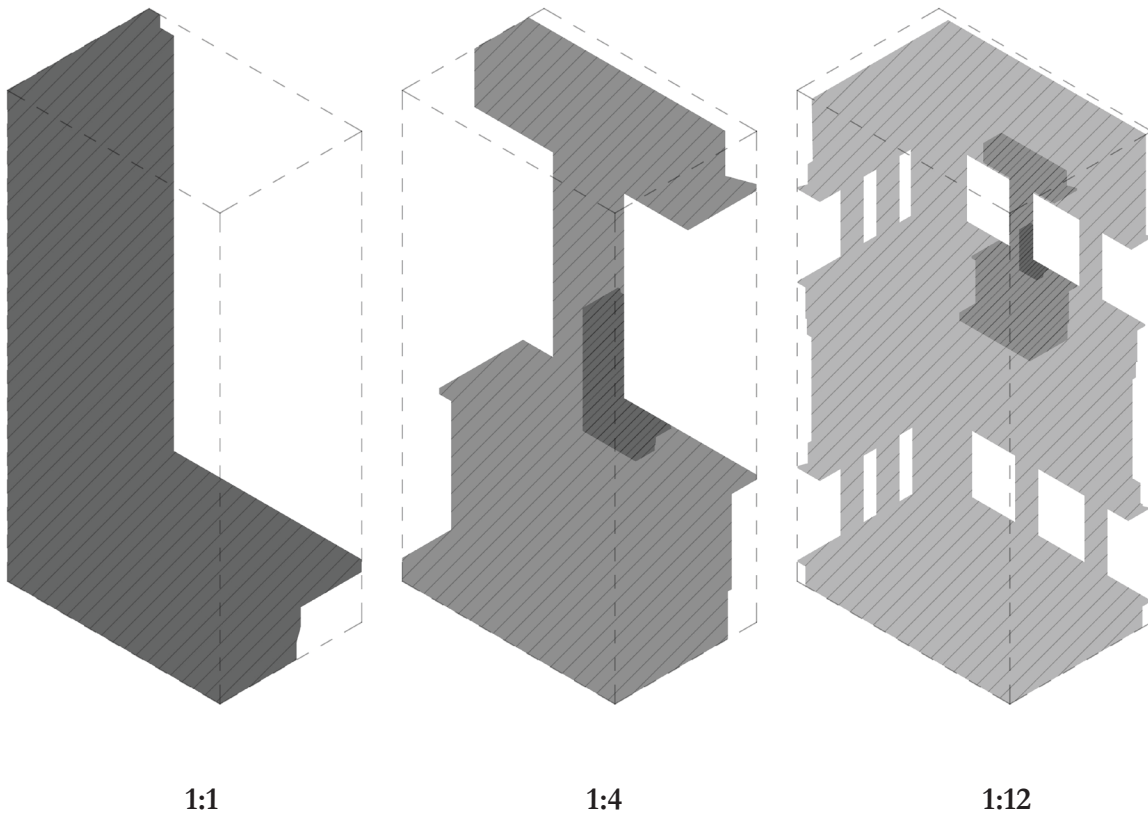
Attention to Detail (4.181) will be conducted as an in-person workshop. All class meetings will take place at W41-4101 on Mondays 2-5pm. The course format will alternate between lectures, museum visits, and discussions of ongoing assigned work.

The semester will proceed in three parts, each corresponding to a scale — **1:1, 1:4, 1:12**.

Each part will begin with an engagement with the **MIT Museum's collection** of detail drawings and objects, arranged for us by Jon Duval, the assistant curator for architecture. Following a pair of lectures and a series of discussions on the questions particular to the given scale, students will articulate their answers to these questions in the form of a detail model.

Detail Models

Students will spend the semester designing and fabricating three models within the same bounding box but at three different scales, beginning at 1:1.



The rules defining the models are kept simple:

- Each model must touch all six sides of the 8" x 12" x 24" bounding box.
- Each model must be able to stand unsupported in the vertical orientation.
- The extents of each new model must contain those of the previous one.

Each model will be accompanied by a drawing at the same scale, which will serve to support and representationally expand the concerns of the model. Conceptual motivation, material choices, and precedent reference for each project will be arrived at in discussion with the instructor and classmates. Students are welcome to use this project to support or expand ongoing studio work.

Detail Journal

On the first day of class, students will each be given a 3.5 x 5.5 pocket notebook and will spend the semester using it to document relevant precedents, drawn from books and their environment alike. Students are asked to fill the 30 pages of the sketchbook by the end of the semester, uploading scans of their progress (about 2 drawings per week) to a shared folder every Monday before class. There will be three sessions during the semester dedicated to discussing the journals.

Detail Book Club

In place of weekly readings, students will form a book club. One physical copy of each text, provided during the second week of class, will be passed between students throughout the semester according to an agreed-upon schedule. Each week, students are expected to read and annotate their copy before passing it along during next class. The next student will respond both to the text and the previous students' annotations they encounter, and so on.

By the end of the semester, every student will have read and annotated every text. The final result will be a collection of texts swamped by accumulated semi-anonymous marginalia. The number of texts circulated will depend on the number of students enrolled. They will be excerpted from the list below, which includes technical textbooks, historical essays, and discussions of problems of detail in kindred disciplines.

Allen, Edward. "Architectural Detailing: Function, Constructibility, Aesthetics." John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1993.

Alexander, Zeynep Çelik, and John May, eds. "Design Technics: Archaeologies of Architectural Practice." Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

Carpentier, Alejo. "Baroque and the Marvelous Real." New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1995.

Cadwell, Mike. "Strange Details." MIT Press, 2007.

Chuong, Jennifer Y. "The Nature of American Veneer Furniture, circa 1790-1810." *Journal18: a journal of eighteenth-century art and culture* 9 (2020).

Deamer, Peggy. "Detail Deliberations." New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010.

Evans, Robin. "Mies van der Rohe's paradoxical symmetries." *AA files* 19 (1990).

Ford, Edward R. "The Grand Work of Fiction: The Detail as Narrative." *Archit Design*, 2014.

Frasconi, Marco. "The Tell-Tale Detail." In *Semiotics 1981*. Boston, MA: Springer US, 1981.

Frampton, Kenneth. "Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction." edited by John Cava, 299–334. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.

Gell, Alfred. "The Technology of Enchantment." *Anthropology, art and aesthetics*, 1992.

Hickey, Dave. "The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty." Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Neumann, Dietrich. "Complicated Simplicity. The Corners of Mies van der Rohe" *Architectura* 52 (no.1,2 2022); (appeared in 2025): 202-223;

Noordzij, Gerrit. "The Stroke: Theory of Writing." Translated by Peter Enneson. London: Hyphen Press, 2005.

Smith, Cyril Stanley. "A Search for Structure. Selected Essays on Science, Art and History." MIT Press, 1984.

Stokes, Adrian. "Smooth and Rough" (1951), excerpted in Richard Wollheim, "The Image in Form." Icon Editions, 1972.

Tehrani, Nader. "The Tectonic Grain", NADAA Blog, 2017.

Course Schedule

Below, *italic indicates a deliverable in progress*, and **bold indicates a final deliverable**. Progress means printed and scaled drawings or physical model tests which will be the basis of a discussion on conceptual and representational approaches.

The models and drawings at each scale will be reviewed with guest critics, where discussion will weave technical critique with analysis of students' aesthetic propositions.

Schedule is subject to change. Any amendments will be communicated in a timely way. Reviews are scheduled with major studio deadlines in mind.

Scale:	Week:	Agenda:	Due:
1 : 1	9/14	2:00 Course Introduction	
	9/21	2:00pm Joint and Ornament 3:00pm MITM Warehouse visit	
	9/28	2:00pm Cut and Grain 3:00pm Desk crits	<i>Detail Journal (10 pages)</i> <i>1:1 Drawing</i>
	10/5	2:00pm Book club 3:00pm Desk crits	1:1 Drawing <i>1:1 Model</i>
	10/13*	1:1 Review	1:1 Model
1 : 4	10/19	2:00pm Abstraction & Articulation 3:30pm MIT Museum visit	
	10/26	2:00pm Gesture and Operation 3:00pm Desk crits	<i>Detail Journal (20 pages)</i> <i>1:4 Drawing progress</i>
	11/2	2:00pm Book club 3:00pm Desk crits	1:4 Drawing <i>1:4 Model</i>
	11/9	1:4 Review	1:4 Model
1 : 12	11/16	2:00pm Load and Labor 3:30pm MIT Museum visit	
	11/23	2:00pm Lineage and Style 3:00pm Desk Crits	Detail Journal <i>1:12 Drawing</i>
	11/30	2:00pm Book club 3:00pm Desk crits	1:12 Drawing <i>1:12 Model</i>
	12/7	Final Review	1:12 Model

* MIT Monday schedule shifted to Tuesday 10/13.

Grading

Grades will be assigned based on growth and engagement throughout the semester.

Detail Models and Drawings 50% Detail Journal 20% Book Club 20% Discussion: 10%

A: Excellent. Rigorous and daring in concept and craft. Consistently exceeds expectations.

B: Above average. Thoughtful and successful work. Meets most expectations.

C: Average. Work meets minimum expectations. Some engagement shown.

D: Acceptable. Incomplete work, lacking engagement with course content.

F: Insufficient. Minimum expectations are not met. Excessive absence.

Attendance and Participation

The success of this course depends on students' consistent engagement and collective participation. Attendance for the full duration of each class is mandatory. Students must provide 24 hours notice in order to obtain an excused absence. Lateness or early departure without approval is considered partial absence. Each unexcused absence will lower the final grade by a half letter grade.

Support Services

If you are dealing with a personal or medical issue that is impacting your ability to attend class, complete work, or take an exam, undergraduate students should contact a dean in Student Support Services (S3) and graduate students should contact a dean in GradSupport. These offices are here to help you. The deans will verify your situation, provide you with support, and help you work with your professor to determine next steps. In most circumstances, undergraduate students will not be excused from coursework without verification from a dean. For graduate students, no verification is needed if arrangements are made between instructor advisor and students. Please visit the S3 and GradSupport websites for contact information and more ways that they can provide support.

Academic Honesty

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently: <http://integrity.mit.edu/>

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

MIT is committed to the principle of equal access and an inclusionary environment. Students who need any form of accommodation are encouraged to speak with the instructor as early as possible. Students who need disability accommodations are encouraged to speak with Disability and Access Services (studentlife.mit.edu/das), prior to or early in the semester so that accommodation requests can be evaluated and addressed in a timely fashion.

If you have a disability and are not planning to use accommodations, it is still recommended that you meet with DAS staff to familiarize yourself with their services and resources. Contact Disability and Access Services with any questions at 617-253-1674 or via email