

Architecture

Light adds value to architecture when shed. But light emitted by architecture may add value to life as well; some remarks about the illuminating power of architecture.

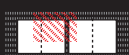
Imagine some of the works of Le Corbusier. The Villa Savoie, the Unité d'habitation, the Chapel of Ronchamp. See them in front of you, surrounded by manicured lawns, against the background of a flawless sky. Sculptures of perfection, singled out as objects of pure delight in a universe known for its messiness. This is how we learned to appreciate this great architecture, as a modeled image, something bigger than the objects themselves. The buildings suggest deliverance and progress, vehicles for intense contemplation. They are symbols of a historical mission that mankind should adopt – Instruments of Enlightenment.

Think again. There is one thing that does not come from the hands of the architect, a thing which is essential to the quality of the work. Or rather, not one thing but one energy, a condition that makes it all work. It is the light.

However gifted the designer, he or she could not achieve anything without the free gift of sunlight. The genius of the work may reside in simply acknowledging this gift, subtly playing with it and translating it into architectural excellence. Le Corbusier realized just how important it was, this precious energy that is just a given: 'Architecture is the intelligent, correct and magnificent play of volumes brought unto light'. The architect may be clever, he may deliver sound work, the work may be even stunning, but it can only be truly appreciated through the external contribution of light.

Ole Bouman

Pantheon, Rome



Emitting Light





The Hole Issue, Hrvoje Zuparic, Dean Niskota, Ivan Starcevic

Thinking of the work of Le Corbusier is perhaps a bit too obvious when acknowledging the quality of light. It has become canonical of a modernist attitude that through architecture we could save the world. In all its superiority it exploits and profits from the reflection of light for its message of hope. But for works of lesser fame, the same analysis can be useful. Having been made sensitive to light as an essential pre-condition, one begins to appreciate its qualities wherever one finds architecture. Nameless, modest architecture everywhere can reveal sudden moments of delight, once light touches its details. Not just outside, on the surfaces of the built object, but also while entering that object, slicing through withering shades onto interior walls, doors, and furniture. Once aware, it becomes visible how light not just helps to single out architecture, but also helps us to orientate in space, to experience time and to qualify our activities. Light helps architecture to transcend from sculpture to a living world, transforming icons into habitats.

Moreover, sometimes light is used not only to enhance the object, but to rescue the object when design intelligence fails. This is when light, standing beyond the reach of the discipline, compensates the

underperformance of that discipline. Light can be a cruel mistress pointing out every blemish or a generous lover, forgiving of our mistakes; in a way it sanctions reality day-after-day. If a building sucks, you can fall back upon the light to live around it.

Now, let's focus on more ambitious aspirations to benefit from light. It is one thing to qualify ~~architecture~~ through light; it is all together different to qualify light through ~~architecture~~. The point is that once ~~archi-
tecture~~ starts revealing cultural meanings within a certain degree of sophistication, light no longer just touches the object, it starts to be radiated. ~~Architecture~~, not only accepts light, it emits light. By doing so, it starts to tell stories and contributes to the dynamics of our social life. Light seen in this way, is not just reflected by preconceived buildings, but becomes an essential element in the cultural narrative that the building wants to convey. In this sense Le Corbusier's work, as well as that of many other great architects, falls short. They use the light captured by their objects, to highlight the iconic value of their shapes. The building remains basically lifeless. However, if light is part of the process of storytelling, if it is interwoven with all other kinds of architectural details – blurring the boundary between form and life, then Corbu's 'volumes brought unto light' transforms to 'situations coming into existence'. Light then becomes the timbre of a tonality, the drama in a story, the passion in a feeling; it spices functionality to the level of profound experience. Light should not merely be allowed as a necessity, but welcomed with vitality.

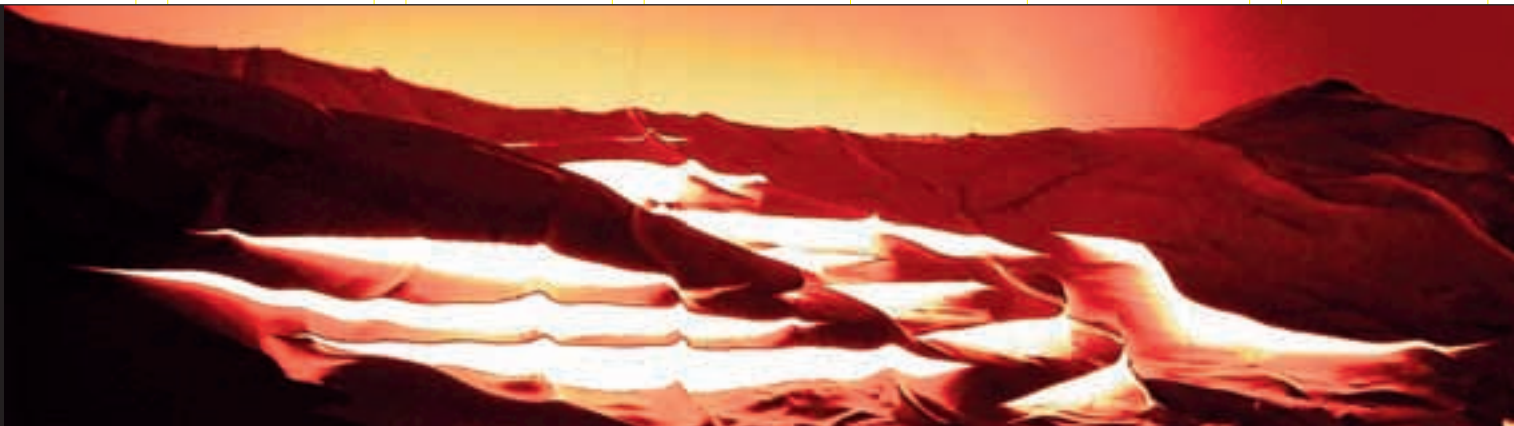
Light emission through ~~architecture~~ equals the emission of culture. If buildings can tell stories, then light is the natural means by which to broadcast these stories.

For most designers this may imply a mental leap. Normally they conceive of buildings as light absorbers, qualifying their shapes and interiors. But if we think of buildings as

light emitters, as the sources of stories told through light, a completely new dimension for design intelligence emerges. Then the building as projector comes into play, sending a marathon of images and other visual effects and contributing to our cultural vibrancy. The moment we begin to appreciate and understand how buildings can be storytellers, is when we can start to interplay with daylight and artificial light, extending the stories, making them multi-layered and changeable. And that's when designers become film directors, of sorts, carefully monitoring experiences through visual dramatic effects.

During the day buildings use light to enhance their cultural expressions. At night, through various new media, they may 'air' an assorted mix of stories through different projection devices. When the sun shines ~~architecture~~ is the domain of durability and permanence, at night it becomes the broadcaster of ephemeral, time-based stories. In between, in the twilight zone, ~~architecture~~ may reach its daily zenith of power as a strong cultural protagonist with interchanging effects of moving images and steady materiality. In this respect, the prizewinners at the Velux Design Competition 2004, for which I happened to be on the jury, were very promising. Where the work of the Norwegian team (Claes Heske Ekornås with 'Light as Matter...'), a museum for the work of video artist Nam June Paik) focused heavily on the reflexive power of daylight, the Croatians (Zuparic/Niskota/Starcevic with 'The Hole Issue', a study on intelligent window 'holes') showed how ~~architecture~~ could shift from receiving light to emitting light in an ongoing play.

Architects need to think twice: sometimes as the good old materialist and constructivist, sometimes as the storyteller and idealist. A deep understanding and appreciation of the power of light may help them to expand their horizon. ||



Light as Matter..., Claes Heske Ekornås