While this may be a useful and relevant measure, it is far from being the sole ground on which to assess structure or a building as a whole. The significant variables go beyond structure; to the relation of structure to space, to environmental services, to possibilities of recycling, to ease of erection and so on. Structural minimalism cannot be considered as an end in itself, however tempting that pursuit may be.

Left
Richard Meier & Partners, the Getty Center Los Angeles 1987–97; travertine facing slabs with a riven surface

When we draw the initial thoughts of a design we make, as a rule, black marks on white paper. Black represents solids, white the space between the solids, between the enclosure. Yet those white areas are not empty, nor are the solids uniformly the same. Light affects both to varying degrees, and both are there to be manipulated by the architect. Strangely, we have no adequate graphic symbols which can record our first intentions as regards light. We can subsequently check what the effects may be by building either physical or electronic models, or both. At the beginning, however, we have to rely on memory and experience.

That light plays a crucial role in our sensation of space has been recognised for centuries. Gothic cathedrals are shrines of light and the Baroque produced some of the most dramatic as well as subtle sculpting of surfaces to direct light. This is not simply a matter of letting in sunlight; it is a question as to which surfaces are lit and reflect back light. Louis Kahn phrased it poetically as 'the sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building' (Johnson, 1975, p.12).

Although light can be described as invisible, its effects are palpable and an inseparable component of architecture. As Richard Meier clearly acknowledged in an interview, '... For me light is the best and most versatile building material'. His Getty Center, on its Belvedere above Los Angeles, shows what that can mean in terms of the special light of Southern California. The Getty also demonstrates the close relationship between light and choice of materials; the group of buildings is hard to imagine constructed, for instance, in the kind of purple-tinged red bricks that Kahn used at The Phillips Exeter Academy Library. Significantly at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, lit by the bright Texan sun, Kahn also clad his building in travertine. At the Getty the travertine slabs have been riven by a special guillotine so that the deep texture of the stone produces light and shade in the oblique sun, becoming less light-reflective and thus less glary, but still maintaining a luminosity of the surface.