1 Distance and Depth

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> Thus the eye which was previously directed towards the left of the church facade, towards the point of entrance, is now violently dragged away towards the right. The movement of the site has changed. The visual magnet is no longer a wall. Now it has become a horizon. And the wall, which previously acted as backdrop to one field of vision, as a perspective transversal, now operates as a side screen to another, as a major orthogonal which directs attention into the emptiness of the far distance but which, by foiling the foreground incident – the three entrails – [*canons à lumière*] all serves to instigate an insupportable tension between the local and the remote. In other words, as the church is approached, the site which had initially seemed so innocent in its behaviour becomes a space rifted and ploughed up into almost unbridgable chasms. . . . It is possible, but it is not probable, that all this is uncontrived. . . .
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> *Colin Rowe on Le Corbusier's La Tourette*
> (Rowe 1976)

In 1961 Colin Rowe wrote about the perceptions of a visitor to Le Corbusier's recently completed monastery, La Tourette. Rather than describing the objective properties of the work, he portrayed it through the perceptions of the peripatetic viewer, revealing that meaning unfolds itself as the relationship between the viewer and the object in view changes. That he wrote this description in the third person suggests that it was not simply a personal experience but one that was available to anyone with some affection for architecture and a willingness to engage the visual experience.

As the "precession of simulacra" observed by Jean Baudrillard (1988) becomes less a cultural criticism and more an accepted reality, the focus of most architectural publications is on the image; indeed, the representations become the reality of the object. Fredric Jameson (1983)

has further remarked on the transformation of reality into images with the result that "our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun . . . to live in a perpetual present" represented by these images (ibid., p. 125). Pierre-Alain Croset (1988), writing in his capacity as editor of *Casabella*, expressed a concern that "in these images what disappears is a fundamental dimension of architecture: its temporal experience, which by definition *is not reproducible*" (ibid., p. 201). The result is a "fall of the value of experience [which] clearly manifests itself in the present tendency of architects to underrate the problems tied to the spatial experience of the building while paying excessive attention to the *external* visual character of the object" (ibid., p. 205). He goes on to say that what is needed and rarely supplied is "the support of a narration – that is, of the only instrument that can evoke what photographs cannot reproduce" (ibid., p. 204). Yet it is rare to find a narration as purposefully based on perceptual experience as Colin Rowe's essay on La Tourette. Rarer still is Rowe's inference that the architect may have contrived a significant and cerebral perceptual experience for the viewer.

Design, including architectural design, is the intellectual conception of a manufactured or constructed object prior to its production. Any discussion about how a designer arrives at this conception generally focuses on the relative importance of process versus goal – a corollary to the scientific dialogue about the relative virtues of the inductive and deductive methods. Some believe that the correct process or method will produce the ideal object; others believe that the designer must somehow know in advance the ideal properties of this object and then seek the means of achieving that ideal. Both the positivist and the idealist positions concern themselves principally with the qualities that inhere in the object, properties that are quantifiable and verifiable. Neither places significant emphasis on the more incommensurable responses of the perceiving subject.

> Mathematicians measure the shapes and forms of things in the mind alone and divorced entirely from matter. We [painters], on the other hand, who wish to talk of things that are visible, will express ourselves in cruder terms.
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> *Leon Battista Alberti,* On Painting

Representation in the design process is a visual testing of the results of this conceptual process. The necessity of such a test will lie with the designer's goals, but most architects still rely on (and most clients still demand) some visual verification of the concept, especially considering the enormous cost of materializing the concept. But the design representation can be more than a test; it can provide an insight into the designer's process, whether it is a sketch, diagram, model or photograph, or a full-blown rendering, whether it is prior to the execution or a memory. A designer's representation of his or her work, whether it is executed before or after the physical manifestation of that work, can provide an insight into the individual's design process. This chapter will interrogate selected examples of architects' drawings and photographs to identify possible ways in which acknowledgement of subjective perception may inform design thinking. Architectural design is the specific vehicle for this enquiry. Nowhere is it intended to suggest that these approaches to design are mutually exclusive, or that pragmatic and purpose-made properties of objects are dispensable or even secondary to perceptual considerations, but rather that, in the architect's extraordinarily difficult task of integrating a multitude of requirements, each has a potential role.