

Figure 1.1 Office of James Stirling, The Wallraf Richartz Museum Competition, Cologne, 1975. James Stirling/Michael Wilford Archive © Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

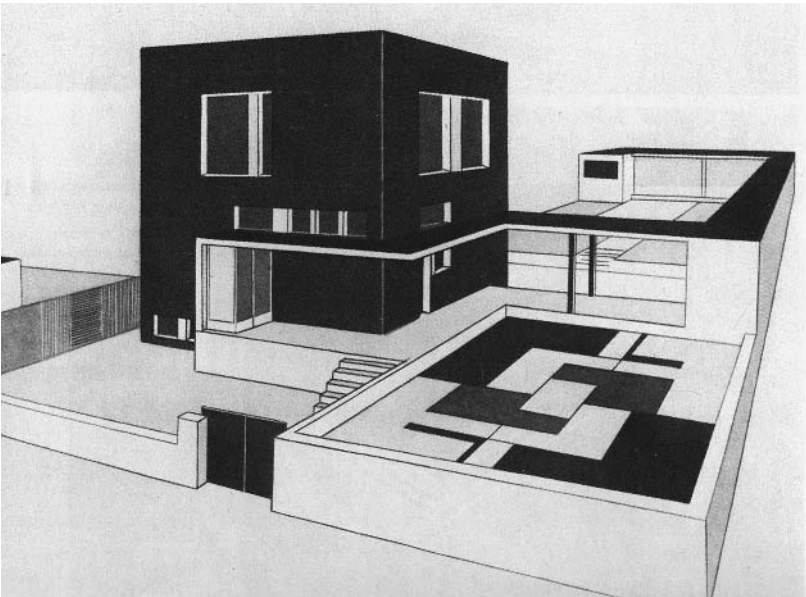


Figure 1.2 Farkas Molnár, The Red Cube, 1923. Courtesy Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.

p. 255). Seeking to reconcile the mind and the body, he offered an alternative epistemology: “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’” (*ibid.*, p. 235). To become more familiar with this modern subject, whose body inhabits the objective world (“the world is made of the same stuff as the body” (Merleau-Ponty 1954, p. 163)), who is the “instrument of [my] comprehension” in the nearly forsaken ground of the perceived world, the words of Merleau-Ponty will be our guide.

If, as Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier have posited, the embodied observer has been systematically eliminated from architectural representations, by what means might the presence of the subject in a representation be revealed? To begin to differentiate between the objective and the subjective in architectural representation, the idea of “distance” will be distinguished from that of “depth.” The term “distance” will be used as an agent of objectivity capable of describing the measurable properties of an object and its location. The term “depth” will be used to describe the experience of the embodied subject locating oneself in a world of objects in relationship to these objects. It suggests that architectural form can be conceived and described in perceptual terms, in relationship to the viewer. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, depth “is not impressed on the object itself”; rather, it “announces a certain indissoluble link between things and myself by which I am placed in front of them” (1996, p. 256).

In their seminal essay “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal” (1963), Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky discuss the perception of depth in architecture. The authors’ point of departure is Siegfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* (1967) in which he proposed an epochal commonality between early Cubist vision and transparency in architecture – the latter being the rather unambiguous ability to see from one location through a transparent membrane to another. Rowe and Slutzky (1976) compare this definition to Gyorgy Kepes’ description (Kepes 1944, p. 77) of two-dimensional spatial ambiguity that they refer to as phenomenal transparency:

If one sees two or more figures overlapping one another, and each of them claims for itself the common overlapped part, then one is confronted with a contradiction of spatial dimensions. To resolve this contradiction one must assume the presence of a new optical quality. The figures are endowed with transparency; that is, they are able to interpenetrate without an optical destruction of each other. Transparency, however, implies more than an optical characteristic; it implies a broader spatial order. Transparency means a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations. Space not only recedes but fluctuates in a continuous activity. The position of the transparent figures has equivocal meaning as one sees each figure now as the closer, now as the further one.

(*ibid.*, pp. 160–161)

Phenomenal transparency shares with its literal cousin the “simultaneous perception of different spatial locations” but, instead of a seeing through to what is beyond, there are both equivocal and terminated readings of depth. In architecture the ambiguous and fluctuating spatial order is produced by physical surfaces in varying three-dimensional relationships to the viewer – i.e., Merleau-Ponty’s “certain indissoluble link between things and myself by which I am placed in front of them.” Actual or numerically defined, distances between these surfaces are irrelevant to the perception of their locations and relationships. Perhaps the most important distinction is that Giedion’s Cubist