

THE RIGHT WHITE

On the white color in Architecture

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Great painters have utilised white to represent light, to materialise it. The very pure white that adds fury and sarcasm to the eyes of Goya's figures. The dense, dull white that makes the robes of the friars of Zurbaran more real and palpable. The white, masterfully diluted in smoke by Velazquez to make the air concrete in his scenes.

The colour white in architecture, more clearly than in painting, is something more, much more than a mere abstraction. It is a solid, secure, effective base for the resolution of problems of light: to entrap it, to reflect it, to etch with light, to shift it. Once the light is controlled and the white planes which shape it are illuminated, the space is controlled. What is architecture's magic if not that of the creation of this prodigious rapport between man and space through light? But to go beyond the level of anecdote, the use of the colour white, the right white, is the correct instrument with which to dominate the spatial mechanisms of architecture. This was the understanding of the masters who made the history of architecture.

The best of Mies van der Rohe, of Farnsworth, is white. The most paradigmatic Le Corbusier, that of the Villa Savoye, is also white. The Parthenon, with the aide of the passage of time which has consecrated it, is white, as it was when Ictinus and Callicrates saw it before the application of its poor polychrome finish. White is the circle of divine light produced by the sun when it passes through the eye of the Pantheon running across its surfaces, vibrating within the sublime architecture of the Emperor Adrian.

White is the touching Bernini of Sant' Andrea, the serene Terragni of the Casa del Fascio, the luminous Wright of the Guggenheim, the fascinating Melnikov of his cylindrical house in Moscow, the natural, difficult simplicity of Utzon in the white Bagsvaerd church in Copenhagen. The colour white is the symbol of the everlasting, of the universal in space and of the eternal in time. And time always ends up making hair, and architecture, turn white.

White, silent like music in the face of the noisy superficialities that disturb us. Silence after all kinds of deafening cacophony. Nudity after too much senseless ornament. Rectitude after complication. Absence after so much empty presence. White, sincere architecture which seeks to achieve everything with almost nothing: more with less.

As Melnikov explained, speaking of his white Moscow house: "When I could do as I pleased, I begged (the architecture) to remove for once its raiments of marble, to remove its make-up and reveal itself as it is: naked as a young, graceful goddess. And as always happens with true beauty, it would have given up being pleasant and ingratiating".