

## **MORE WITH LESS**

**(Idea, Light, and Gravity, well tempered)**

**3 points, 3 reflections, 3 built ideas**

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When the Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov decided to build his own house, that fascinating white cylinder in Moscow, he wrote these rotund words:

*Having made myself the boss, I entreated Her (Architecture) to throw off from herself the shawl of marble, wash, off the powder and rouge and reveal herself, unclothed, as good, graceful and young. And as befits a true beauty, she turned out to be very agreeable and compliant.*

[Konstatin Melnikov. "Na Shchet doma," 1953. Melnikov Archives.]

This is the Beauty that one wants for his architecture. A naked Beauty, intelligent, ESSENTIAL, capable of captivating our minds and hearts.

The mind, with the overwhelming logic of reason; with the precision of the dimensions, the efficacy of the proportions, the clarity of the scale. With a built idea.

The heart, with the warm sentiment of emotion; with the splendor of the light, with the serenity of an ordering of space that accedes control to gravity.

And thus IDEA, LIGHT, and GRAVITY are the three principal components of that Architecture which I call ESSENTIAL. This Architecture that proclaims MORE WITH LESS, a reflection on Mies Van der Rohe's *more is less*. A *more* that places man at the center of the created world, as the center of Architecture. A *less*, that transcends any minimalism, that goes to the center of the question, with *only the precise number of elements* capable of materially translating these ideas:

IDEA, LIGHT, and GRAVITY.  
Nothing more and nothing less.

## IDEA

The Idea is the synthesis of all the elements which compose Architecture -- Context, Function, Construction, Composition. A distillation of multiple elements, a sort of alchemic transformation, to obtain a unique and unitary result: an Idea, capable of being built, of materializing.

And as the forms disappear, are destroyed, the Ideas remain, for they are indestructible. The History of Architecture is a History of Ideas, of built ideas, of forms that materialize and edify these Ideas. For without an Idea forms are empty. Without Ideas, Architecture is VAIN. It is pure empty form.

I re-claim the Idea as the necessary basis for any creative work. As an indispensable basis for Architecture. To think, or not to think. That is the question.

## LIGHT

Light is the essential, indispensable, component in the construction of Architecture. Light is MATTER and MATERIAL, just as stone. Quantifiable and qualifiable. Controllable and able to be measured.

Without Light there is NO Architecture. We would only have lifeless constructions. Light is the only thing capable of tensing space for man. It puts man in relation with the space created for him, tenses it and makes it visible.

It is light that gives reason to TIME, it is LIGHT which BUILDS TIME.

## GRAVITY

From Gravity we fortunately cannot escape. That G, that when small, we studied in Physics formulas. Without Gravity, Architecture, whose History is a long battle to guide, dominate, and conquer it, would disappear. It would be atomized. Without Gravity, Architecture is not possible, its material necessity vanishes.

GRAVITY BUILDS SPACE. The weight of material elements, which make real the forms that create space, in the end transmit GRAVITY, and the weight of their materiality, to the earth. The system which sustains gravity, the structure, orders space; constructs it.

Therefore, I call an essential space that which is formed by only the indispensable number of elements capable of translating an idea with precision.

This Architecture, whose materiality is a BUILT IDEA, whose TIME is built by LIGHT, and whose SPACE is constructed by GRAVITY, is that Architecture called ESSENTIAL.

To continue clarifying this proposition, to continue disrobing it, I note three reflections: How Light is capable of conquering Gravity, How Time's passage wipes from Architecture the superficial, leaving only the Essential, and How Architecture permits a certain quality of imperfection in its materiality...in praise of imperfection.

#### LIGHT AND GRAVITY

(On how Light conquers Gravity)

Light, material yet always, always, in motion, is the only element capable of making space (space created by built forms of gravid materiality) float, levitate. It allows for flight, and Gravity disappears. It is conquered. The unbearable heaviness of matter, inevitable and indispensable, may only be overcome by Light.

The imposing mass of the Pantheon, whose ideal spherical form is evidence of the overwhelming power of its space, rises in indescribable movement, as if it were levitating, when the sun casts its spell, piercing the magnificent oculus. Light overcoming Gravity invokes a sublime Beauty.

Curiously, or not so curiously, the two technological inventions which have made possible a revolution in Architecture are directly related to both Light and Gravity: plate glass, in large dimensions, and steel, alone or in reinforced concrete.

Plate glass has made possible the Copernican rotation of vertical Light to strike the horizontal plane above man's head; allowing for the transparency of the upper horizontal plane.

Steel, alone or in reinforced concrete, allows for another Copernican rotation, the ability to separate enclosure from structure. The skin from the bones. These bones, these columns, where gravity flows inescapably to reach the earth.

### TIME'S CLARIFYING PASSAGE

Time, built by Light, slowly and patiently erases the superficial elements which so often ornament the coquettish face of Architecture. Like a doctor attempting to resuscitate it, Time strips Architecture to its most essential. Dimension, proportion, and scale give life to the materials which contain in their interior the invisible tension of Gravity. All of these are washed by Light -builder of time-- which produces a visible tension capable of moving man to silence. What paradigmatically appears at times in a ruin, which, wiped clean of all superfluous decoration, rises radiantly before us with all the splendor of naked Beauty.

When Heidegger, in precise terms, speaks of the "temple's solid growth which makes visible the invisible space of the air," he invokes before us the *ruin* of the Parthenon, in all of its splendor, as an Essential Architecture which seems to heed his words: "the temple, in surviving, causes things to be present and that men take into account their presence."

### IN PRAISE OF IMPERFECTION

Before my first visit to Finland, my admiration for Alvar Aalto was enormous. Ever since I was a student I have been drawn to the fluidity of his plans, the sectional richness, and the incredible light of his spaces that stand out in images that always dazzle. This admiration applies to Aalto, and by extension to all Finns, a degree of perfection unattainable by other mortals. And here, now, I discover in the projects of the master more than one imperfection that I find familiar: leaks, cracks, elements badly weathered. Seeing this "human" side of Aalto's works, far from diluting the strength of that admiration, has increased it. This "imperfection" in the finish of certain details, accentuates even more, if possible, the "perfection" of Alvar Aalto's ideas, that which is essential to the Architecture of Alvar Aalto, the essence of his Architecture.

Architecture, in spite of details and design, perfection or imperfection, is ESTABLISHED by its most essential components. The details and designs are only valid when they serve to underline the central issues.

Nowadays we are inundated, and in this the press collaborates, with a multitude of repugnant architectures (architectures?): seasoned, adorned, topped with details and designs perfectly finished with the most sophisticated technology.

When Alvar Aalto wants, and is able, he knows how to wield both design and perfection adequately, and he does it. The unforgettable Villa Mairea is a

convincing example of this. When Aalto, in other moments, goes only to the heart of the matter, he is unconcerned with being "imperfect," gloriously imperfect.

How well the master understood these three points of support, IDEA, LIGHT, and GRAVITY, that are like the three legs of the table of Architecture.

And so, with the three guides of IDEA, LIGHT, and GRAVITY, I am now going to present three projects that are, or attempt to be, three built ideas: a small house, a public school, and the central offices of a bank. Or better said: a "*hortus conclusus*,"<sup>1</sup> an architecture "staring at the sea," and an "*impluvium* of light."<sup>2</sup>

### HORTUS CONCLUSUS

An isolated villa in the fields of Andalucia, with the client's desire for absolute privacy. A space looking inwards, enclosed within four walls. Four walls form this "walled garden," suggestive of biblical imagery. Within, a freed space; a proposal for continuous space. Courtyard, room, courtyard, composed of a clear double axiality. Built of heavy retaining walls, carved, broken in the precise locations so that Light and Space flow.

A horizontal space which is pierced by horizontal light with an east-west orientation. Four lemon trees dot in counterpoint, in reference to the four corners. And finally, the water, which appears to have come from within to fill the hole carved into the stone.

### STARING AT THE SEA

The Atlantic Ocean in front and to the west; an incredible reference to which the building --a school-- opens its eyes. The eyes, large openings through which the most public interior spaces look to the sea, and appropriate it. The entire volume tightly fits into the existing urban fabric. The irregular form of the site is ordered through the simple mechanism of a square patio with palm trees. The main hall, where the various circulation patterns converge, is resolved in a great space of triple height, crossed by diagonal light that comes from above. As the day progresses the sun's light moves through, and tenses, this space which opens to the sea through one of the eyes. The

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<sup>1</sup> closed orchard

<sup>2</sup> The uncovered portion in the center of the atrium of a roman house, where the rainwater enters.

other eye is an opening of a double order, manifesting its public nature to the city, while revealing its gravid construction in its chiseled form. The building, as if it were a sphinx, stares eternally to the sea.

### IMPLUVIUM OF LIGHT

An attempt to make a Bank using the most luxurious material ever dreamed of...the sun's light... which we will obtain, and why not?, free of charge. A bank, a headquarters of wealth, to be built of the most economic of materials within the means of all. How can one resist such a grand enchantment?

Lacking any distinguishing features, the site in the suburbs of Granada, exacts a building capable of creating a strong reference in that disperse zone. First a base is formed that resolves with a single gesture the inclined ground plane, which therein houses diverse uses. Upon this podium rises ponderously a "stereotomic" box, with walls of reinforced concrete, of cubic proportions. This box, formed of a grid of 3 x 3 x 3 meters of thick concrete panes, creates a trap for Light. Within, in order to reduce the large structural dimensions, four impressive columns appear.

The diagonal orientation of the box locates two facades to the south and two to the north. The south-facing facades function as a "brise-soleil" and the glass enclosure is placed at the extreme interior of the concrete grid. The two northern facades are organized into horizontal bands of stone-glass-stone, smoothly joined at the exterior. In the ceiling, skylights open above each of the columns, following the diagonal order of Light. Direct sun is thus calmed in the south-facing facades by shade and the continuity of northern Light enters through two smooth facades. The solid Light that enters the skylights materializes its movement as it strikes the columns, filling with Light this interior, this "impluvium of light."

In the interior, a second "tectonic" layer of steel, glass, and alabaster, contains the varying uses which are organized by a simple ring scheme with four vertical communication cores at the corners. The private offices receive light from the north, and the open offices --of double depth-- receive light from the southern facades. Because these communal offices need more Light, given their greater dimension, a great wall of alabaster is articulated around the passageway linking the individual offices. This white "interior facade" transforms as it reflects the solid Light which it receives from above, projecting it unerringly over the open offices.

A great diagonal space is finally defined, crossed by a diagonal Light.

And to finish the rigorous exercise of Light this project attempts to be, I add three references:

1. A fascinating image of the Daily Mirror in London by Sir Owen Williams while under construction. Still without closure, the Light establishes a marvelous relationship with the structure. This image was above my worktable for a long time, for as long as I worked on this project for Granada.

2. The painting "The Interior Navigator" by Guillermo Perez Villalta, one of Spain's best contemporary painters, represented Granada at the Universal Exposition in Sevilla. It was conceived and painted in Granada. I discovered it after doing the project, imagine my surprise. The relationship, more than mysterious, is an incredible coincidence.

3. The Cathedral of Granada, which I encouraged the Bank directors to visit in order to see something similar to what we are going to build. When we asked for plans of the Cathedral with exact dimensions, astonishing coincidences re-occurred. This time they were profoundly architectonic: the same height, the same thickness of the columns, and the identical distance between them. The same material, as the golden toned concrete will greatly approximate the stone. And, of course, the same Light.

The Cathedral in Granada is one of the loveliest built spaces in Spain, and perhaps the most beautiful of Renaissance cathedrals in Andalusia. That of the "snowy whiteness," as a poet wrote.

And if the dimensions, and the proportions, and the materials, and the Light! are the same, there is hope that the Bank building in Granada may be able to reach, once built, that longed-for Beauty.