



HENRY PLUMMER

THE  
ARCHITECTURE  
OF  
NATURAL  
LIGHT

Thames & Hudson

## TO PATTY, WITH LOVE

Henry Plummer is Professor Emeritus of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He received his M.Arch. from MIT, studied light-art with György Kepes, and was a photographic apprentice to Minor White. He is the author of numerous books on the art of light in architecture, including *Nordic Light* (2012).

On the cover: *Front/back* Richard Meier,  
Barcelona Museum of Contemporary  
Art, Spain.

Page 2: Tadao Ando, Church of Light, Japan.

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filters in as if by spiritual osmosis. A smooth skin of white paint coats every bare surface, presenting little to the eye but an empty glow. While calming to nerves, the whiteness is aflutter with the gentle modulations produced by an overlap of planes in rhythmical sequences. As with echoing sounds that occur only in vacant space, this fluttering light heightens the void by its rise and fall of whispering sequences, which float through space and die away like a Gregorian chant. The atmosphere is varied by illumination floating down over some walls, while cloaking others in faint blue shadow, veiling planes in a graduated haze that is completely surrounding and suspending. The scanty means and gentle iterations of Leiviskä's light bear close analogy to the minimalist music of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. Just as a mystical spell is created in chants and hymns, by emphasizing the empty void in which faint, lingering sounds resonate, so it is in Pärt's 'tintinnabuli style'.<sup>60</sup> The stark instrumental work *Für Alina* (1976), for instance, is built up from the quiet, haunting, and thoroughly hypnotizing sounds of piano, violin and cello, which mirror one another with notes added to the scale on each iteration. As Pärt comments: 'I could compare my music to white light which contains all the colours. Only a prism can divide the colours and make them appear: this prism could be the spirit of the listener.'<sup>61</sup>

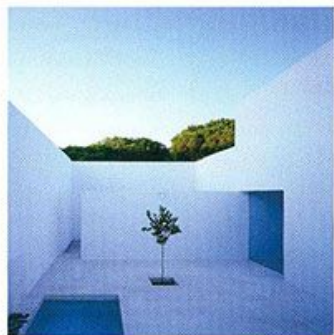
Whiteness stirred by fluttery shadows is often used by architects to satisfy another contemplative need: a mood conducive to heightened perception and thoughtful reflection in museums of art. It is not vacancy that is sought in the rhythmic white glow of museums such as Richard Meier's at Barcelona (1995; p. 172), but a serenity capable of invoking reverie. With similar intent, Gigon & Guyer strive for what they call an 'all-over' conception, resulting from a continuous coat of white plaster on every surface above a

pale grey concrete floor. Light pours through directional monitors into the bare white voids of their Winterthur Art Museum addition (1995; below, left) in such a way as to open up 'a richness of perception . . . comparable to what a picture from Robert Ryman can communicate with white as a carrier of light and shadow of varying form-giving structures'.<sup>62</sup> As in Ryman's silent, all-white abstract paintings, the monochromatic reductiveness at Winterthur is recomplicated by shadows. Rows of sheds over each gallery emit a series of tonal waves, their pure white light tinged with violet, casting on walls the faintest shadows that melt away in the counterlight of neighbouring sheds. These gentle emissions bring to rooms a breath-like calm, broken only by colourful art and pictorial views framed by windows.

The most remarkable trait of the whiteness developed in Iberian architecture, exemplified in the work of Alberto Campo Baeza (below, centre), is the severe austerity with which it makes a presence. Another leading proponent of light displayed on mute, almost benumbing walls is Álvaro Siza, whose atmosphere tends to evoke gravitas rather than joy (below, right). Interrupting Siza's stillness are liquid episodes in which the pale illumination wavers and drains into shadow, often around transitional elements of entry or window, parapet or stair. Such is the case at his Galician Centre of Contemporary Art (1993; p. 208), whose secret glow is hidden inside a granite crust, as well as at his Santa Maria Church (1996; p. 212), in Marco de Canavezes, whose proportion of wall to fenestration and detail, not to mention human size, is so exaggerated that visitors are made acutely aware that they are entering a place of utter emptiness. But it should be remembered that it is precisely this emphatic sense of desolation amidst radiance which can give buildings a sense of blissful poverty – widely considered the essence of spirituality.



Winterthur Art Museum Addition  
by Gigon & Guyer.




Gasper House by Alberto Campo Baeza.



Serralves Museum by Álvaro Siza.

Allmann Sattler Wappner  
Tadao Ando  
BAAS  
Edward Larrabee Barnes  
Brückner & Brückner  
Alberto Campo Baeza  
James Carpenter  
Cheret & Bozic  
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