

ELISA VALERO

Preface. Light in architecture. The intangible material. Elisa Valero

PUBLISHED IN

Light in architecture. The intangible material. Elisa Valero Ramos. General de Ediciones de Arquitectura, Valencia, octubre 2019

Varia Architectonica. Ed. Mairera. Madrid. 2016

Preface. Light in architecture. The intangible material. Elisa Valero

This book, starting from its title, hits the nail on the head. Light is the richest of all the architect's materials, and writing about it, while not easy, is highly necessary. To start writing about light with the frank declaration that it is a material, is already an eye-opener. To call it "intangible", untouchable, is not just a description but almost a definition. We can't touch light: it is light that touches us and our architectural designs, to bring about a miracle. I have written so often that "architectura sine luce nulla architectura est", [architecture without light is no architecture] that now it seems like stating the obvious. Without touching light, architects have to control it, direct it, and measure it, so that that light passes through and touches their work, making the building speak, even sing, as Paul Valéry says in *Eupalinos*.

I remember how Juan Navarro Baldeweg, a real master of light, compared a building to a musical instrument which, when traversed by light, was capable of making music. Because if the architectural instrument, the building, is well conceived, well constructed and well tuned, it is capable of producing the miracle of divine harmony. Light passes through the building just as air passes through a wind instrument.

Valero's enthusiastic exploration of the Pantheon [part II, chapter 4], is based on the way light is able to make that particular space come together in a creative tension that summons beauty inside. Light, the intangible material, does not so much touch as caress the inner surface of the Roman dome, and the bright circle runs around its walls as slowly as honey overflowing from a jar. Then is produced the "sibilus aurae tenuis" [the whisper of a gentle breeze] in which Elijah recognized the presence of God, in the *Book of Kings'* magnificent phrase.

In this book, rather than presenting us with technical arguments on the physical qualities of light as established by Newton, compared with Huygens' wave theory, or involving us in the complicated technological pathways of the production of stained glass and other materials connected with light, Valero takes us instead on a walk through history, past and present. Hand-in-hand with her, and with light, we are led here and there as she chooses, not in a straight line but along whichever paths will make our tour most interesting.

Along the way, she lets fall beautifully-worded assertions that produce in us a conviction that light is the most marvellous of all the materials we architects work with. Light is as material and universally available as stone, with the added bonus that it is given away free. Who could disagree with that?

The book contains charming stories such as the version of the invention of painting which is attributed to the Elder Pliny. After all, every work of architecture is ultimately the result of tracing the outlines of plane shapes under the light on the ground.

There are some marvellous quotations such as Benedetto Gravagnuolo's description of the building as "pure Euclidean volumes, as symbolic expression of the arithmetic canons of 'divine proportion,' as a shade of Apollonian beauty." Of course, what is the wise, correct, magnificent play of volumes under light, prescribed by Le Corbusier (and also quoted by Valero), if not that very shade of Apollonian beauty?

Some of the things Valero says are, in my opinion, not only totally truth but accurately expressed; Her words bring before our eyes those Gothic interiors, filled with whitest light before they were covered in colours for love of doctrine. And by means of that absolutely pure light, laced-in with its fretwork of stone, she raises us to the heights. Rightly does she give that chapter the title "Light as an instrument for abstraction". And she adds that its "fine lines seem to work by traction, anchoring the sky to the earth". Valero's reading of light as a quasi-structural mechanism capable of attaching the sky to the earth seems as fascinating as it is convincing.

Valero relates an incident which I find unforgettable. She once asked an expert in artificial lighting for some useful advice for her students, and received the clear response, "Tell them that light is good; but in small quantities." Just like salt – because in some respects the intangible material which is light can be seen as the salt of architecture.

The art of architecture is passed on through the universal quality of the works designed, but the key factors that give rise to it often remain hidden. In this book, Elisa Valero shows us the keys of light, the intangible material, and uncovers the reasons underlying the conception and lighting of many different works of architecture. That includes her own magnificent works, in which this intangible material is used with absolute precision.

This new English version of Light, the Intangible Material is a real gift. The best way to spread any message today is to put it into English. Moreover, the internet will enable these writings to travel across space in a moment of time. I love to imagine Elisa Valero's words in the ether, in the language used so beautifully by Shakespeare, and later by Wren, Paxton and Soane. Later still, by Sullivan, Wright, and Mies van der Rohe himself. I hope that the words and ideas in this wonderful little book may reach as far as his.

Alberto Campo Baeza

Madrid, December 2014