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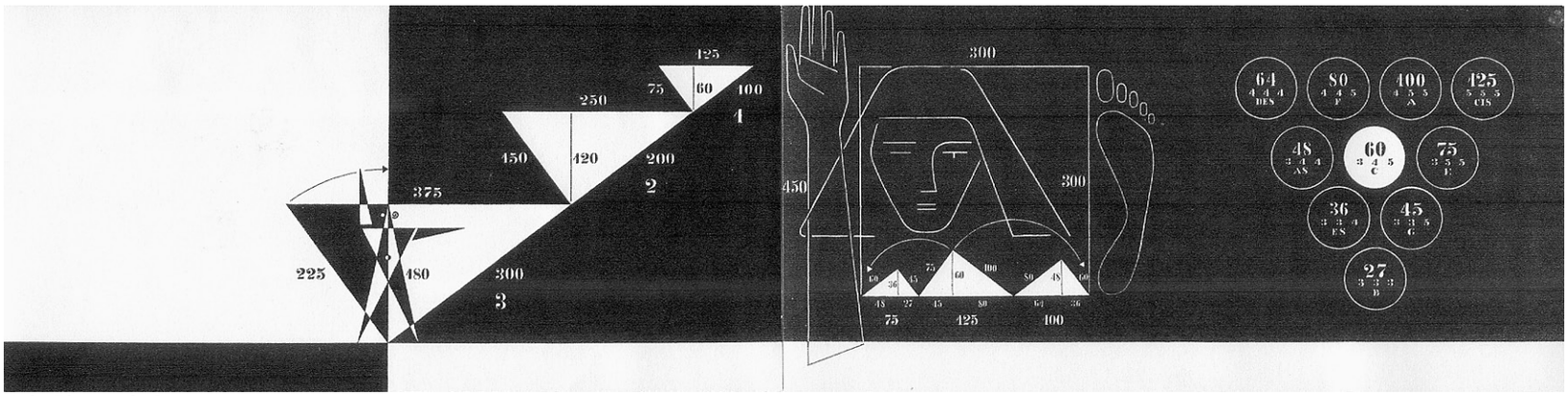
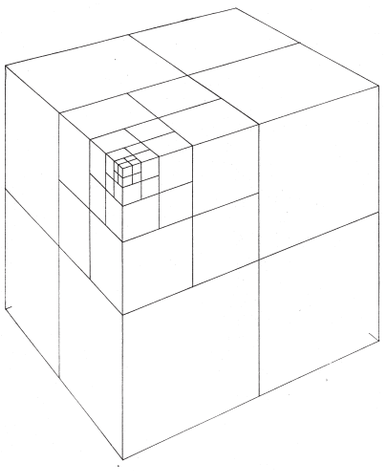
*Juhani Pallasmaa*




*Aulis Blomstedt:* Canon 60

A constructivist[1] aesthetic, emphasizing clear articulation of the structural frame, became the architectural ideal for young Finnish architects of my generation in the early 1960s. This architecture developed as an intellectual opposition to the prevailing post-war tradition of neo-functionalist architecture, which had turned excessively pragmatic and unclear in its philosophical foundation. The aesthetic of rationality was also motivated as a deliberate opposition to the idiosyncratic architecture of the aging Alvar Aalto. An oscillation between mental polarities, such as romantic and rational, expressive and classical, regional and universal tendencies is characteristic to cultural development. Consequently, the post-war romantic, expressive and regionalist ideals served as the ground for the rise of the constructivist classicism of the 1960s. The generation of the 60s regarded the structural frame and its precise articulation as the most essential element of architectural expression, even more constitutive than the molding of space or articulation of light. This architectural ideal was inspired by two distant sources, the structural classicism of Mies van der Rohe and traditional Japanese architecture. Especially the imposingly classical pavilions of the Katsura Detached Palace, raised on wood columns, were admired for their noble proportions. More unexpected inspiration came from the elegant Case Study Houses commissioned by John Entenza for the Art & Architecture magazine in Los Angeles from mid-1940s onwards. This momentary connection between California and Finland is an interesting example of the intricacies of cultural influences in the realm of the arts. While Finnish constructivism was inspired by traditional Japanese aesthetics, Tadao Ando has confessed having been stimulated by the minimalist architecture in Finland, to give another example of the unexpectedness of cultural interchange. The elegant and precise steel frame architecture of Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig, Raphael Soriano, the Killingworth, Brady and Smith team, Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen was



*Aulis Blomstedt: Modular study based on continuous halving*

unexpectedly transferred to wood construction in Finland.[2] The expression of the structural frame both outside and inside was an essential aspiration for the constructivist aesthetics, and wood—being a structural and insulation material at the same time—is the only material which enables this transparency, or absoluteness of structural expression in the severe Nordic climate. Similar architectural development occurred in Denmark although the Danes did not go as far in the orthodox expression of the structural frame. The Danish ideal of combined frame and planar structure was closer to R.M. Schindler's house of 1922 in West Hollywood than the pure frame of the Case Study Houses and the Finnish constructivism.

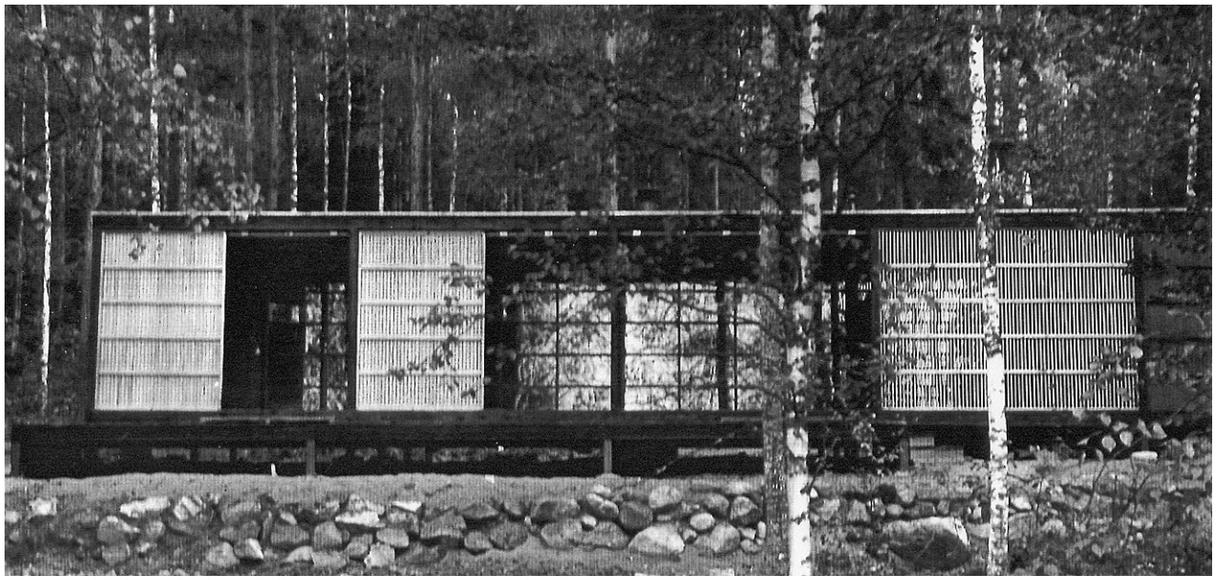
The Dutch De Stijl and Russian Constructivism also served as sources of inspiration regardless of the more planar and non-structural nature of the aesthetics of these movements. The former was admired because of the spatial flow, abstraction and equalization of the horizontal and vertical directions, the latter because of the passionate structural and volumetric expression and strong sense of social mission. The planar paintings of Piet Mondrian, Ben Nicholson and Victor Vasarely were also admired.

Focusing on the structural frame emphasizes the tectonic essence of construction as well as the importance of dimensional coordination and proportional modulation. The Finnish constructivists preferred the Pythagorean tradition based on even numbers and simple arithmetical operations instead of Le Corbusier's Modulor and the Golden Section which were regarded occult in their philosophical foundation and awkward in actual design application. The most influential mentor of the emerging constructivist movement was Aulis Blomstedt, a devoted Pythagorean and an architect and educator of peasant like simplicity combined with an exceptionally refined sense of proportion. During the 1950s Blomstedt had carried out extensive studies in the harmonic principles of architecture, comparable with R.M. Schindler's earlier studies begun in the 1920s. The conclusion of Blomstedt's passionate research was a proportional system based on the musical subdivision of figure/number/digit 60, based on Pythagorean harmonics, which he called Canon 60. In my personal design practice since the 1960s Blomstedt's Canon 60 has proven a practical numerical and proportional system for the articulation of the architectural ensemble from the dimensioning of the structural frame down to the measure of details. I have used Pythagorean proportions also in product and graphic designs, more as a practical attitude and quest for clarity, however, than a philosophical orthodoxy.

Besides its aesthetic intentions, the framed architecture of the 60s also

*Pierre Koenig, Case Study House 21, Los Angeles, California, 1958*

*Katsura Detached Palace*



*Kirmo Mikkola and Juhani Pallasmaa, Summer House Relander, Muurame, 1965*

had philosophical, ethical and social motives. Architecture conceived as a modulated and articulated frame clearly foregrounds the rational, logical and abstract qualities of construction. The aspiration for a true expression of the structural and tectonic realities also tends to bring forth an ethical argument. Auguste Perret's famous ethical credo became the moral attitude of the constructivists: "Construction is the mother tongue of the architect. The architect is a poet who thinks and speaks in terms of construction. The larger buildings of our time presuppose a framework…The framework is to a building what a skeleton is to an animal...He who hides any part of the framework not only deprives architecture of its sole legitimacy but also deprives from it its most beautiful ornament. He who hides a column makes a blunder, he who makes a false column commits a crime."[4]

The constructivist movement of the 1960s was a utopian ideal reminiscent of the aestheticized socialist utopia of the Russian Constructivism four decades earlier. In the perspective of half a century, the Californian Case Study Houses also appear as an optimistic and refreshing utopia in comparison with the regressive architectural conservatism of subsequent decades. The Eames House in Santa Monica, in particular, appears more radical and promising than any of the residential designs of today's avant-garde, which seem narcissistic in comparison and devoid of an optimistic perspective into the future.

An awareness of the social and political implications of architecture arose in Finland during the 60s and this was reflected in the values of the architectural profession; instead of the traditionally impartial role of the architect as a trusted expert, he/she was seen as an active participant in the allocation of collective resources. In addition to its potential as a medium of industrialized mass production, framed architecture was considered to possess aesthetic neutrality, an appropriate reflection of the democratic values of equality. Excessive personal expression was viewed critically and judged regressive.

Somewhat later, the idea of the architectural frame was expanded to urban context by Yona Friedman in France and the Metabolists in Japan, for instance. Herman Hertzberger studied the delicacies of human behavior and developed the idea of the repetitiously modulated spatial frame towards structuralist anthropological applications.

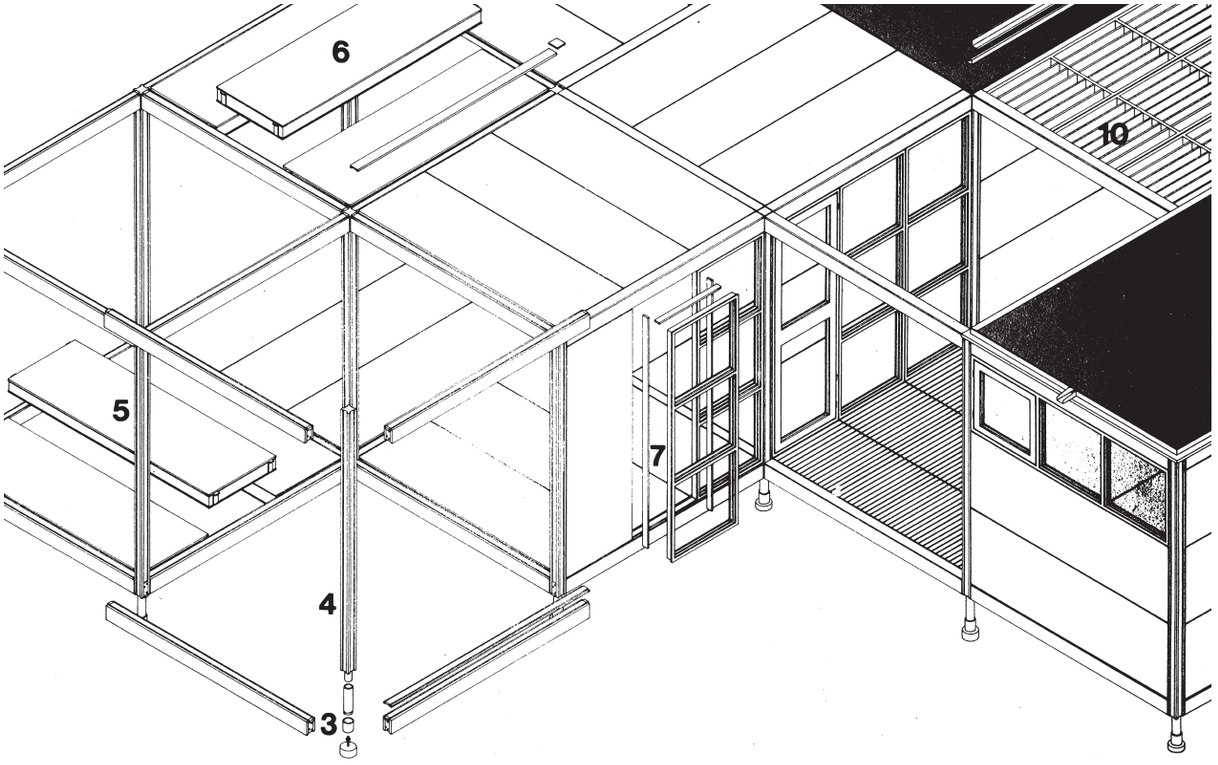
The fragility of the utopian contents of this architectural ideology became evident a few years later when construction companies vulgarized and exploited the idea of industrially manufactured frame construction through their countless buildings for production and commerce. The spiritualising aspirations for proportional harmony, human scale and sensuous detailing were forgotten, and frame construction was used merely for purposes of efficiency, flexibility and economy. During the following decade, it became painfully clear that no architectural approach or system can guarantee architectural quality; aesthetic quality is a result of deliberate intentions and choices. An optimistic air gives rise to an architecture of hope whereas cynicism produces cynical architecture.

The ideal of the spatial frame made its new return into the world of art and architecture thirty years later through minimalism. In the minimalist sculpture of Sol Lewitt and Donald Judd, for instance, as well as in the current architecture of Gigon & Guyer and Hertzog & de Meuron, the frame has obtained a metaphysical air. The minimalist frame aspires for a mesmer-ising stasis and repetitiousness, a sense of presence and being instead of the dynamism and movement characteristic to early modernism. This visual repetitious-

ness is parallel to the artistic strategy of contemporary minimalist music.

The frustrations of the politicised intellectual discussion at the turn of the decade 1960–70 made me seek a teaching position in Africa in 1972. Two years of exposure to the realities of the Third World and traditional African cultures alienated me from rationalist Western values and my confidence in the industrial utopia, which had inspired the entire modern age. Instead of seeing architecture as the production of aestheticized artifacts, I became interested in the mental essence of construction and began to see the essential interaction and correlation between the external space of the human domicile and the internal space of the mind. My view changed from regarding architecture as an intellectualized structural and spatial construction into seeing it primarily as a mental framing device. My focus shifted from technological and aesthetic considerations to the mythical and metaphysical realm, and from the futurological prospect of architecture to its archaic origins.

While my constructivist ideals were supported by an interest in visual perception and Gestalt psychology, my African experiences familiarized me with structuralist anthropology and its application to architecture as exemplified by the seminal writings and projects of Aldo van Eyck. A couple of years later, I also became interested in the psychoanalytic view of the importance of the human unconscious and the role of archetypes and collective memory in human mental life. My interest in the theoretical grounding of architecture gradually led to existentialist and phenomenological philosophies, and I began to comprehend the ways in which the art of architecture is fundamentally grounded in the human existential condition; architecture articulates and mediates the human existential experience, the encounter of the self and the world. This view turned architecture into a framing device, a metaphysical instrument; in Gaston Bachelard's words, "(A house) is an instrument with which to confront the cosmos."[5] Architectural structures frame human existential experience in specific ways providing thus horizons of experiencing and understanding. In my constructivist period I understood architecture primarily as an exercise in geometry, but the existentialist understanding implies that architecture takes place in lived existential space; architectural structures mediate between the existential experience of the architect and the person who happens to confront the constructed building. Architecture concretizes cultural and metaphysical structures and by framing collective acts and institutions it makes them operative and conceivable. Cultural and societal realities became transformed into spatial and material metaphors and they are fundamental constituents of human identities both on individual and collective levels. We know and remember who we are by means of the cultural messages written in stone.




*Kristian Gullichsen and Juhani Pallasmaa, Moduli 225 industrial vacation house system, 1968–72. Structural and dimensional modulation of the frame*

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The understanding of buildings as means of existential framing turns them from objects to confrontations. Genuine architectural experiences do not arise from visual images but physical and mental encounters. Instead of

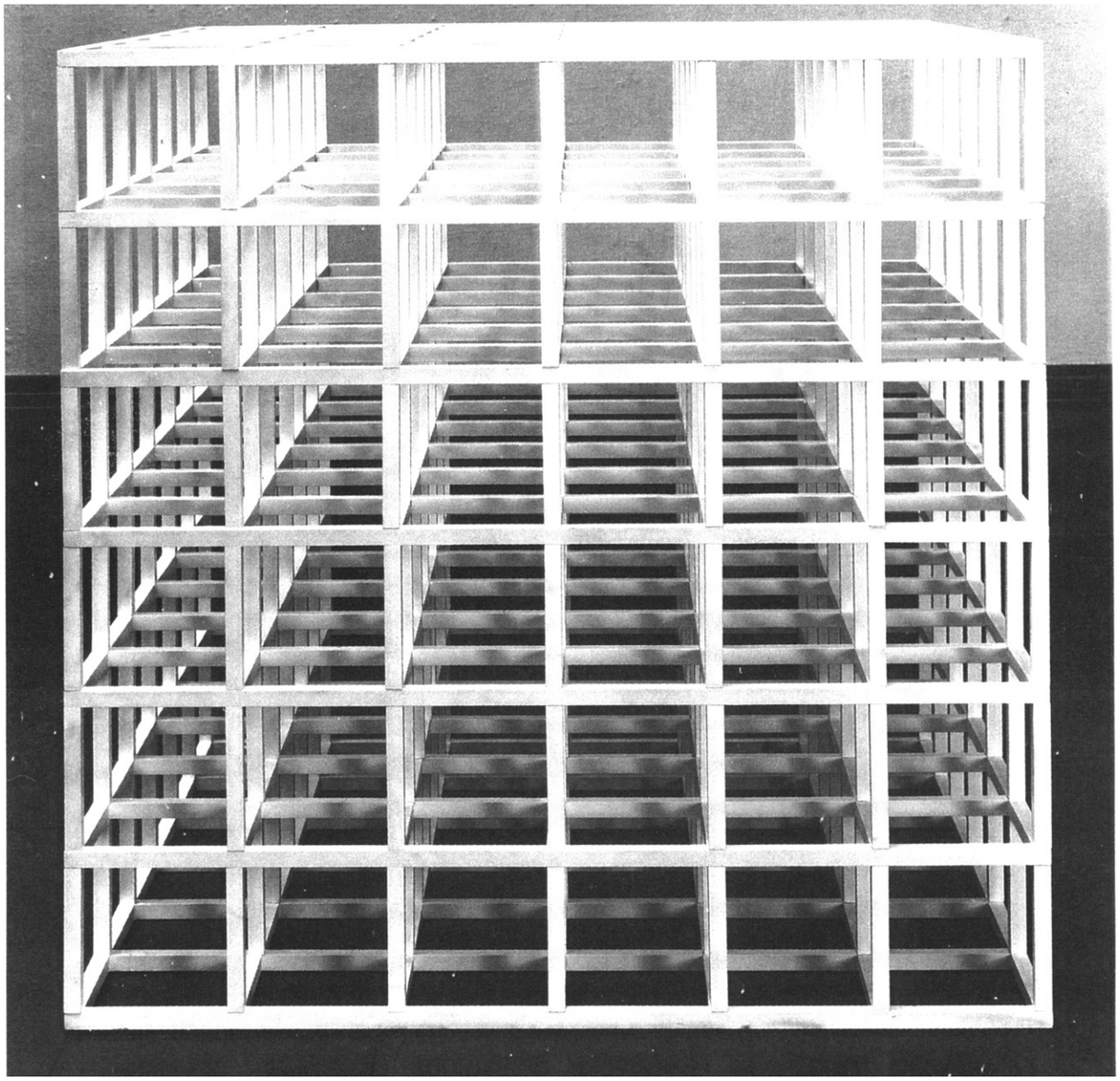
regarding architectural experiences as passive nouns they can be viewed in the active role of verbs. The act of passing through a door is an authentic architectural experience, not the door itself. Looking through the window is an authentic architectural experience, not the window itself as a visual unit. The anticipated warmth of the hearth creates the center of the home, not the visual design of this artefact. Consequently, architecture points to something beyond its material essence and outside of the realm of construction. Architecture evokes microcosmic images of the world and modes of idealized life. Significant architecture makes us confront our very human condition, and finally ourselves, at a heightened intensity.

The existential and phenomenological view of architecture gives the structural and tectonic reality of a building a distinct significance. Buildings address us as embodied acts of constructing. A building speaks to us through its intentional layers and the very act of its making.

Architecture does not only articulate spatial situations, scale and interaction of nature and the man-made world, it also frames our experience of time. The time conceived through architecture is a moderated and transformed time; it is a humanized time. Architectural structures and cities slow down and halt time. They make the passage of time and its depth conceivable.[6] Essentially, the architectural framing of human existence gives it its very meaning and its comforting sense of cultural continuity. In accordance with the words of the French poet Noël Arnaud: "I am the space where I am."[7]

*Juhani Pallasmaa, The Finnish Institute, Paris, 1991, (in collaboration with Roland Schweitzer and Sami Tabet, Paris)*

*Junhani Pallasmaa, Siida, The Sámi Lapp Museum and Northern Finland Visitors Center, Inari, 1998 (photo Gerald Dufresne)*



*Sol Lewitt, Open Modular Cube, 1996. Painted aluminum, 60 x 60 x 60 inches*

## Notes

1. The movement emphasizing the structural frame developed among a group of students and young graduates of the Helsinki University of Technology from 1960 onwards. The two important mentors of the group were professors Aulis Blomstedt and Aarno Ruusuvuori. The group was closely associated with the Museum of Finnish Architecture founded in 1956, and was widely seen as the counterpole of Alvar Aalto's overpowering influence. This architectural ideology has been retrospectively named Constructivism by later critics and historians. Opponents of the group called it "Miesianism," which was misleading considering the multiple sources of the movement. The members of the group used the notion "rationalism" more often than constructivism.
2. In the early 60s the costructivists designed a number of wooden summer houses based on the concept of a modulated structural frame. These experiments led to the development of framed industrial housing systems a few years later. Aulis Blomstedt's entries in the competition for summer houses (1943), and its further development entitled "Kenno" (honeycomb) (1947–48), and in the international competition for the Canadian One Family House (1954) pioneered the concept of a variable housing system based on a repetitious frame.
3. For Blomstedt's studies in harmony and Canon 60, see Juhani Pallasmaa, Thought and Form: Studies in Harmony, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, 1980, and Juhani Pallasmaa, "Man, Measure and Proportion: Aulis Blomstedt and the tradition of Pythagorean harmonics," Acanthus 1992, The Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1992, pp. 6–31.
4. Auguste Perret, "Contribution à une théorie de l'architecture." First published in Das Werk 34-35 (February 1947). As quoted in Kenneth Frampton, Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1995, pp. 153–154.
5. Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space. Beacon Press, Boston, 1964, p. 46.
6. For a discussion of time as an ingredient of architectural images and experiences see, Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Space of Time," Oz, Volume 20, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 1998, pp. 54–57.
7. Noël Arnaud, L'état d'ébauche, as quoted in The Poetics of Space, p. 137.