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Emmanuelle Beaudouin

Laurent Beaudouin

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Natural Abstraction

Laurent and Emmanuelle Beaudouin

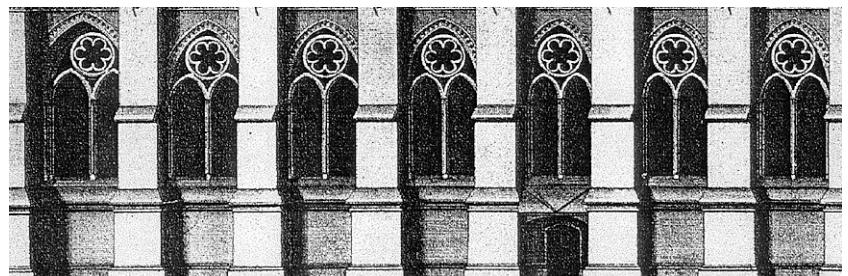
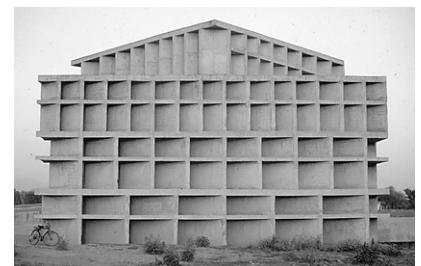
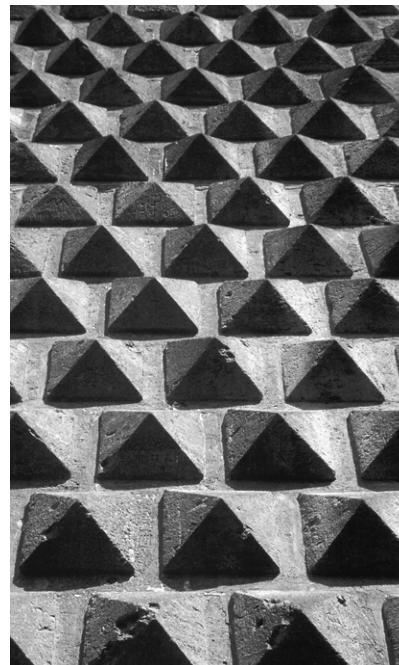
Using nature as a model has provided a basis for architectural history that has oscillated between modeling itself on the example of nature and the opposite notion of modeling nature itself.

Nature's imitation helped resolve the question of form-making by being the source of an important inspiration for our form vocabulary. Among objects in nature, the human body (considered as the perfect result of evolution, or of divine creation) is the frame that permits the weaving of architecture on a canvas of ideal proportions.

In the Western medieval period, the plan was outlined along the proportions of the body while the body invaded the building elevation. The figurative presence of men and women

lined up in narrow ranges along the facade gave an intense humanity to architecture. Architecture became the place where one could spiritually raise oneself. The use of the word "elevation" to signify "facade" contains two meanings: the constructive and the spiritual. To design architecture is also to design oneself into architecture. Here again, the ambiguity of words permits us to understand the notion of a physical projection of humanity onto the building's elements themselves.

One makes this invasion (of humanity onto architecture) within an order knowingly regulated by geometry. The intersection of the body and geometry unifies the abstract and the natural, taking the intimacy of the body to the infinite. Geometry is the frame that



supports this transformation whereby one passes from the human to the divine by means of abstraction.

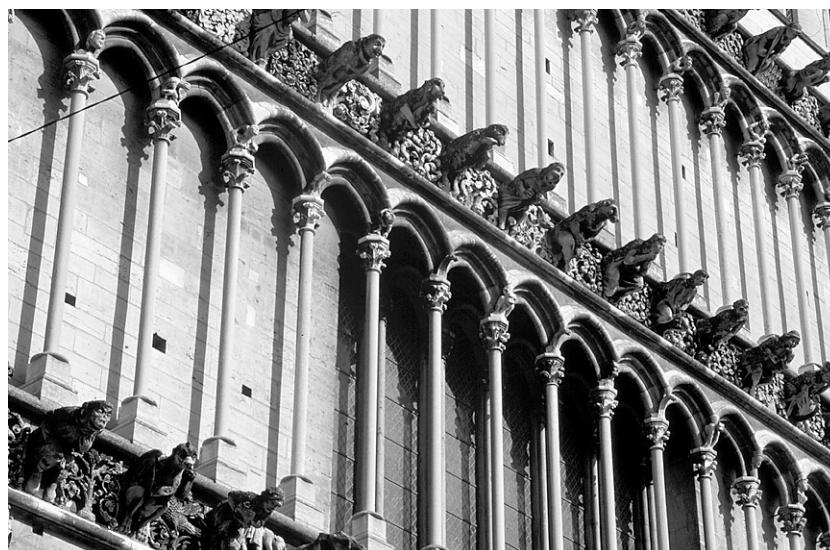
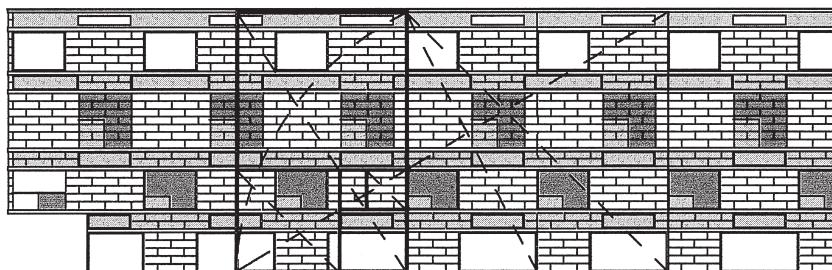
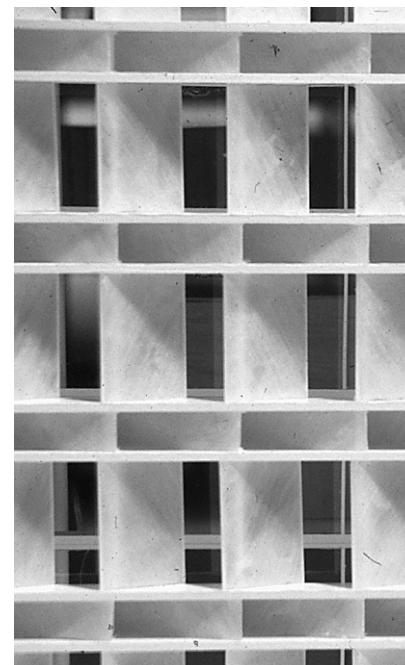
The abstraction of geometry is a purely mental creation. It is not on the order of reproduction. It is invention. Abstraction does not separate man from nature, it is the nature of man. The ability to abstract is what singularizes us among the natural phenomena of which we are a part. These two polarities—abstract and natural—are not contradictory and the attempt to balance one with the other is not antinomic.

Humanity itself is a part of the recyclable elements of nature. We are in a state of fragile stability; the smallest tear in our fabric can destroy us. The

projection of the body onto architecture allows us to glimpse a possibility of eternity. It modifies the notion of duration, transferring us from a scale of human time into one which, through stone, brings us closer to nature's.

Thus, architecture serves to attain two apparently mutually irresolvable objectives: to allow us to glimpse a purely spiritual state (a state of abstract thought) and to transform us into bits of stone, into a natural fragment.

Architecture dilates space in making us cross the barrier of gravity, installing the body in the elevation of the facade. It dilates temporality by allowing the passage of human time to natural time. Architecture is a machine to slow down time.

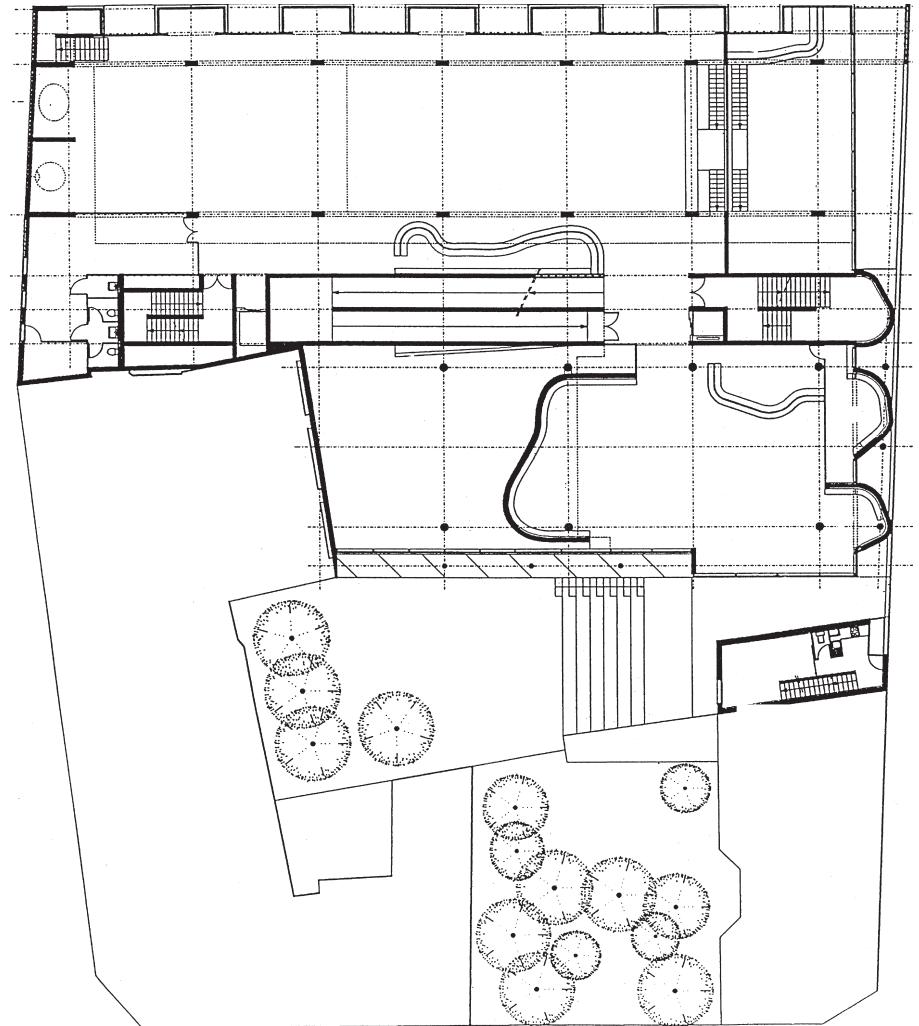
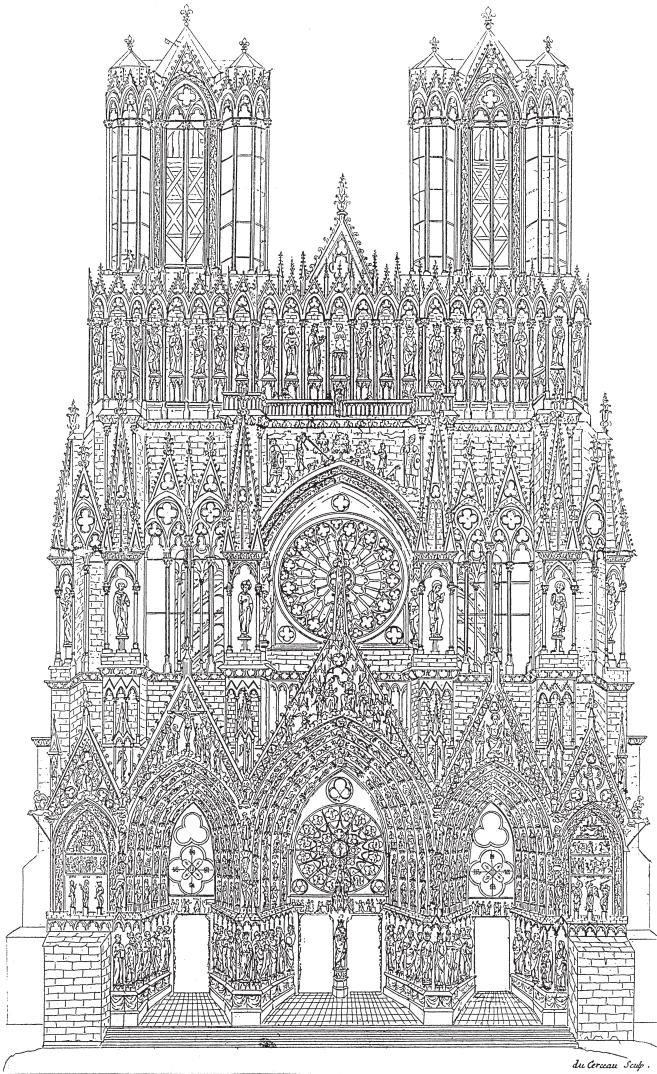
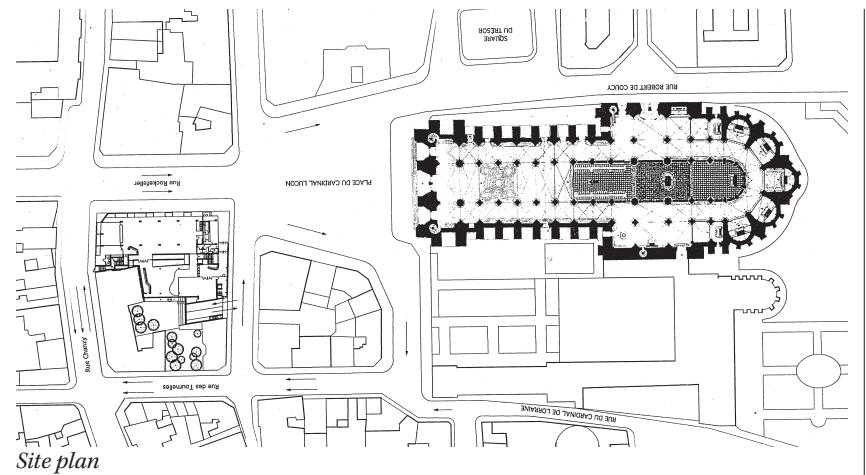


Through Le Corbusier, the Modern period gives us a new interpretation of this direct transplantation of the human body onto the building's elements.

The alignment of human figures sculpted onto cathedrals finds an echo in the ordering of brise-soleil employed by Le Corbusier. The application of the Modulor, tuned to human stature, permits the brise-soleil to transfigure itself from a human into an abstract body. The figure is transposed in a simple game of light and shadow, moving and exciting.

Light thus recovers its role as a metronome regulating the rhythm of time. Time becomes tectonic, it materializes itself.

Our office has explored this manifestation of time and light numerous times through the use of brise-soleil and repetitive cells.



In our design for a médiathèque to be built facing the cathedral at Reims, we framed the building using the rhythm of the cathedral's aisles. We created an echo between the depth of the church's buttresses and the repetitive honeycombs of the new lecture halls.

The dimensional outlines were made from a trace of the regulating lines emanating from the rhythm of the cathedral. The use of the Modulor binds all measurements to the human body. The honeycombs are made up of shifted stone partitions giving, in lateral perspective, a transparency to the interior spaces. The stone face panels are like books ranged on the shelves of a book-case. The word "bibliothèque" thus metaphorically designates the furniture and the building. Light, falling across the building's brise-soleil, transforms the aspect of the building, seeming to slow the passage of time on the facade. The architecture thus recovers the slowness of natural time.

