Our predecessors . . . considered questions of quality in their treatises; . . . Boulée’s architecture of shadows and Palladio’s search for place or locus are not merely autobiographies. For it is always the idea of place, and hence light and time and imagination, that recurs in the treatise-writers as that which can modify and finally be adapted in architecture. . . . Of course, the quality of . . . things presupposes measurement. Yet how . . . can one measure buildings, if an amphitheater can become a city, and a theater a house?

—Aldo Rossi

“Inmaterial” has several disparate meanings: “spiritual,” “not pertinent to the matter in hand,” and “of no essential consequence.” While most words have many shades, these extreme variations cast a shadow over the significance of immateriality in architecture. Fortunately, this is a productive shadow, one that can illuminate rather than obscure.

It follows that to write about, or explore through design, the immaterial dimension of architectural production is a nettlesome affair. It is a no less thorny matter to explicate the role of the immaterial in what constitutes an architectural moment. Valorizing the place of immateriality was essential, consequential, and pertinent for architects as diverse in time and place as Leon Battista Alberti, Vincenzo Scamozzi, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Etienne-Louie Boulée, Horace Walpole, Sir John Soane, James Wyatt, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, to name but a few.

Alberti begins his De re aedificatoria (1450) with the lineamenta (lineaments) of architecture, which “are derived from the mind.” He argues that the lineaments inherently precede any discussion of materia (material), “deriving from nature.”2 Alberti understood that often the most memorable and meaningful experiences that one takes away from an architectural moment are less an appreciation of the art of building than an ineffable sense of the building-as-art.

The art of architecture, and its immaterial dimension, is a central theme in Le Corbusier’s Vers une architecture (a new translation of which is reviewed in the September issue of the JAE). Paralleling Alberti, Le Corbusier reformulates the dualism of lineamenta and materia. “Almost all periods of architecture have been linked to structural investigations. The conclusion has often been drawn: architecture is construction. . . . It is clear that the architect ought have mastered his construction . . . at his finger’s end . . . ; [yet] he ought not to be brought to a standstill by it.”3 Le Corbusier explains the role of “contour modulation” in the architect’s need to move beyond the instrumental: “Contour modulation . . . is free of all constraint; it is a total invention . . . With contour modulation, one acknowledges the plastic artist; the engineer steps aside and the sculptor works. Contour modulation is the touchstone of the architect: . . . [leaving] the practical man, the bold man, the ingenious man behind; it calls for the plastic artist.”4 Where is this touchstone today? In our applications-based epoch, as “the practical man” increasingly supplants “the plastic artist,” the “how” of building is rapidly erasing from our memories the “why” of architecture.

A substantial core of architects, educators, and an increasingly engaged citizenry desire more. They want to dwell, not simply to be housed. They desire something beyond the entertainment value provided by the rapid proliferation of newly branded buildings that confute architecture and sculpture and that supplant contour modulation with material matters and “structural investigations.” There seems a hole in the center of our discipline that cannot be filled with material matters alone, form for form’s sake, and customers in lieu of citizens. How does one negotiate between the digital fabrication of buildings and the less material matter of building-as-art? These are apposites, not opposites, in the productive task of the architect.

Le Corbusier wrote of an architecture, the contours of which were seen best in the sun’s shadow. Boulée, more than a century earlier, conceived of an architecture best experienced in the sullen shadows of the moon. Boulée argued that through “the architecture of shadows,” it was possible to produce an architecture that not only gathered “the scattered beauties of nature” but also provoked the awe of the sublime. Yet, to construct an architectural otherness that went beyond the quotidian, to create a world in a building, required a particular kind of material—in Boulée’s case, one that absorbed rather than reflected ambient light. Hence, his immaterial “architecture of shadows” had a material dimension and a requisite knowledge of construction. All of which demonstrate that the incredible lightness of building has long been a weighty matter for architects. It continues to be essential to both the design of architecture and its interpretation.

Notes
1. Aldo Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography, Lawrence Venuti, trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 77.
2. Leon Battista Alberti, On the Art of Building in Ten Books, Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor, trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 422–23.
3. Le Corbusier, Towards an Architecture, John Goodman, trans. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Trust, 2007), pp. 244–45.
4. Ibid., pp. 246–47.