

## Chiaroscuro: A Theoretical Valence

Peter Goché

To cite this article: Peter Goché (2016) Chiaroscuro: A Theoretical Valence, *Architecture and Culture*, 4:3, 499-510, DOI: [10.1080/20507828.2016.1251213](https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2016.1251213)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2016.1251213>



Published online: 11 Nov 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 88



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURE

Peter Goché

Department of Architecture,  
Iowa State University,  
College of Design, Ames,  
IA, USA  
[goche@iastate.edu](mailto:goche@iastate.edu)

**Keywords:** theory, embodied  
cognition, perception,  
chiaroscuro, material  
practice, making

## Chiaroscuro: A Theoretical Valence

Peter Goché

**ABSTRACT** When considering “this thing called theory” from the point of view of *Black Contemporary*, a rural field station dedicated to the study of spatial phenomena and perception, one is confronted with a paradox that simultaneously encourages and resists our tendency to favour a fixed focal length, that of objective distance. This paper proposes theory as a material practice that opposes the objective distance typically associated with research. *Black Contemporary* serves as an experiential laboratory of such material practice for investigating, cultivating and expanding our knowledge specific to the study of atmosphere and place. This is achieved through immersive acts of thinking and making supported by a series of material insertions or stagings with a relative capacity to unite, react or interact with latent dimensions of the inherited landscape. Each staging is driven by nascent desire and possibility to intercourse with the existing material surrounds. Each is pursuant of a philosophical position of *chiaroscuro* that leverages perceptual notions and spatial valence within the material culture of a post-industrial site.

Volume 4/Issue 3  
November 2016  
pp 499–510  
DOI: 10.1080/20507828.  
2016.1251213

No potential conflict of  
interest was reported by the  
author.

Reprints available directly  
from the publishers.

Photocopying permitted  
by licence only.

© 2016 Informa UK Limited,  
trading as Taylor & Francis  
Group

### Introduction

When the world of clear and articulate objects is abolished,  
our perceptual being, cut off from its world, evolves a spatiality

without images. This is what happens in the night. Night is not an object for me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me<sup>1</sup>

500

Chiaroscuro: A Theoretical  
Valence  
Peter Goché

Merleau-Ponty's central thesis in the "primacy of perception" is that we perceive the world through our bodies; we are embodied subjects. While contemporary theory aligns itself with innovation and critical agency, it seems reliant (almost exclusively) on a privileged distance between oneself and the subject in an effort to be objective. Contrary to such tendency, theory is considered in this paper as a haptic practice that opposes the objective distance typically associated with the classic model of research.

The content of this exploration was generated in response and as an addition to David Heymann's essay "Precise, Anonymous, Enigmatic" published in the 1990 winter issue of *Iowa Architect*.<sup>2</sup> Critically and perceptively, Heymann traces the evolution of the Midwestern landscape by examining farm buildings within rural Iowa. Central to the tectonic evolution that Heymann cites is the specific topography caused by wind erosion. Heymann uses this dynamic to illustrate a perceived stability given the tectonic nature of farm building construction and associated spatial configurations. If the centerline of Heymann's thinking is that instability in land morphology (though difficult to optically register) has produced a tectonic and perceptual stability, the conceit of this essay is that such stability no longer exists, and that a shift in the scales of economy has yielded an outwardly visible tectonic instability. Thus, according to Heymann, such transformation of inverse consequence directly links the visual evidence of an extensive stock of unstable (derelict) buildings with the intellectual evidence of an unstable ground plane. This relationship of figure to ground became the basis for staging a series of intensely modulated spatial reconstructions within an antiquated seed-drying facility that, like Iowa's farm buildings and land-use practices, is intrinsically grounded in the spatial and cognitive confines of its surrounds.

### The Iowa Landscape

The space of Iowa has been reinvented in the twenty-first century as a reflection of the modern rationality of capital production. Communities in Iowa have continuously adapted to changes in agricultural production processes. Since the industrialization of farming in the nineteenth century, this production process has been led by family farmers, in a form of farming in which labor was supplied primarily by family members on smallholdings. The family farm became an important social symbol for Iowans. This symbol represents several ideals, the foremost of which is the importance and independence of the family unit. Such ideals have been greatly influenced by the Homestead Acts, which define

rectilinear units of private property ownership with a specific social distance whereby farmsteads are equally spread across the landscape with ample space between farming families. This sense of spatial and symbolic independence has largely defined the quality of life in Iowa. However, this spatial and federally advocated form of independence is associated with an economic dependence on market forces, food industries and federal policies.

Higher start-up and maintenance costs associated with the mechanization of farming, coupled with the falling price of produce, required farmers to expand their holdings to maintain profitability. This resulted in “successful” farmers purchasing production ground from other less successful farmers. Thus the family farmer’s space becomes unstable as it is constantly under pressure from market competition and turbulent federal policies. This economic condition produces spatial and communal instability because it causes frequent reconfigurations of the living space. For instance, some farmers rent out their production grounds and continue to live on their farmsteads away from the public services and employment opportunities on which they depend. The developmental impact is apparent; vacant farm sites are common along many roads.<sup>3</sup>

### The Site

Black’s Seed Farm is one such dormant site in which a temporary body of work is being developed as part of an ongoing examination of the past character and future shape of Iowa’s inherited landscape. The facility serves as a field station focused on the study of spatial phenomena – a way of knowing that seeks to describe the essential qualities of human experience and the context in which that experience happens. *Black Contemporary* (see Figure 1) serves as an experiential laboratory for ongoing investigations intended to provoke a temporal-spatial encounter of the simultaneous and complex cerebral and corporeal experiences within the Midwestern realm of labor and its associated landscape. Based on a series of modulated experimental actions, each research assembly is driven by the persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surrounds. This series is pursuant to a philosophical position that leverages perceptual notions of *chiaroscuro*. Proposed in the 1680s by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *chiaroscuro* referred to the disposition of light and dark in a picture, or literally “bright-dark,” from Italian *chiaro* “clear, bright” (from Latin *clarus*, meaning “clear”) and *ascuro* (from Latin *obscurus*, meaning “obscure”). The experiments of *Black Contemporary* extend this etymological dichotomy by positing themselves between consciousness and the unconscious, seen and unseen, focused and out-of-focus awareness, made and re-made in the understanding and production of space. The methodology involves a full-scale, three-dimensional process followed by pictorial representations, inverting the traditional process of the architectural practice. This generates a differentiated understanding



**Figure 1**  
Peter Goché, *Black Contemporary*, 2014.

of spatial valence within the material culture of a post-industrial seed-drying site. This exercise began by reconsidering the nature of a set of internal spaces within the seed dryer formerly referred to as the plenum. The loss of its mechanical function and the subsequent lack of human association leave the (often naïve) visitor unable to understand the seed dryer's former utility.

In the context of spatial assignment and cultural practices, Sigmund Freud explains his theory of the unconscious as follows:

Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall there is a second, narrower, room – a kind of drawing room – in which consciousness too, resides. But on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his function.<sup>4</sup>

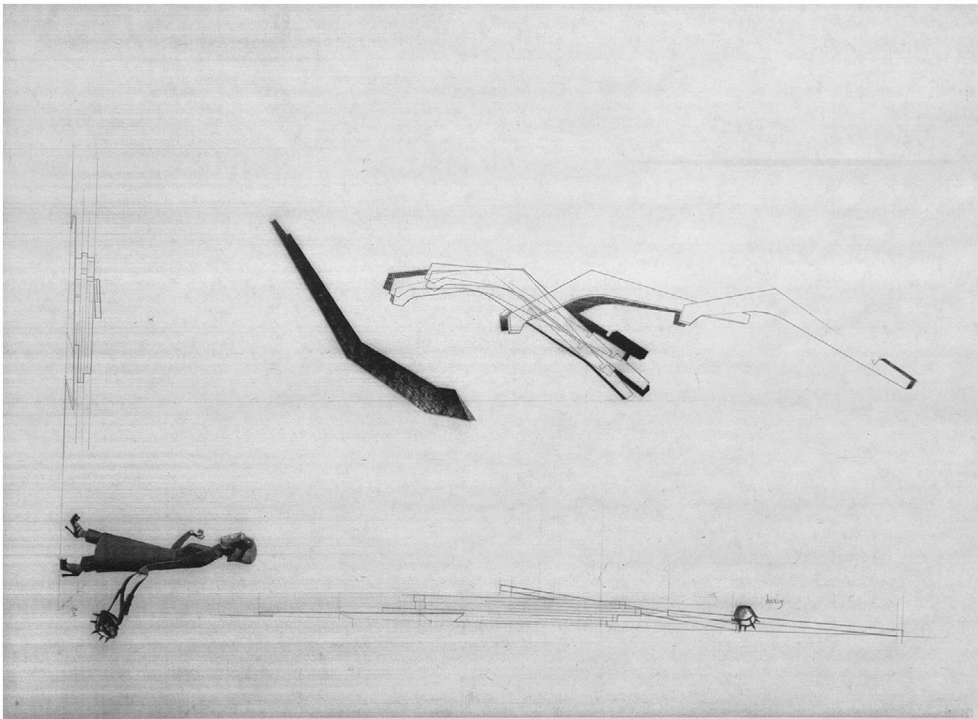
This notion is the conceptual basis for the reoccupation of a dormant configuration within Iowa's landscape where a set of buildings and associated spaces (rooms) have been left vacant for decades. According to Freud, by naming the "rooms," the difference between the *real* space and the space of the mind would be made clear.<sup>5</sup> With reference to this notion, the spaces at *Black Contemporary*, considered as entrance hall and drawing room, conjure internal mental pictures of associated uses and social activities in reflection of their new, albeit archaic, syntax. This intellectual linkage coupled with the instability of the cultural context

enables us to enter each room fully as a space of imagination. The goal of this effort is to examine, on the threshold between the two rooms and the broader agricultural context, the potential of a set of empty spaces whose original purposes are no longer served yet stand as social symbols of labor.

**Entrance Hall – Research Assembly One**

The dimensions of Iowa’s agricultural landscape, physical and cultural, are not immediately discernible. Perhaps this is because of the absence of an outline of objects against the line where the sky and earth meet, often used as a means of physical dimensioning. Perhaps it is because the intrinsic relationship, both ethical and symbolic, between the family farm unit and the expansive ground plane in which it operates, is unclear. Its extent, both physical and cultural, becomes present and knowable only through the first-person dimension, measured by an experiential unit commonly referred to as time.

The first research assembly (see Figure 2) has been developed based on this logic. It is situated within the ground-floor plenum space of the seed dryer. Access is provided through a small vestibule at the south end of this “entrance hall.” With the door left ajar and ambient light emanating from an existing opening in the floor assembly above, the viewer is confronted with the installment of a series of identical wood elements and a tilted, steel plate. The arrangement



**Figure 2**  
Peter Goché, *Research Assembly One* (graphite on oak tag paper – 28 x 38 cm), 2013.



and extent of this componentry is undeterminable, given gradient light levels of the plenum's hyper-extended condition and geometry. As the occupant slowly recalibrates the ocular effect of having moved almost instantaneously from daylight to dark, the remainder of the componentry, and ultimately the dimensional and material boundaries of the host space, become evident.

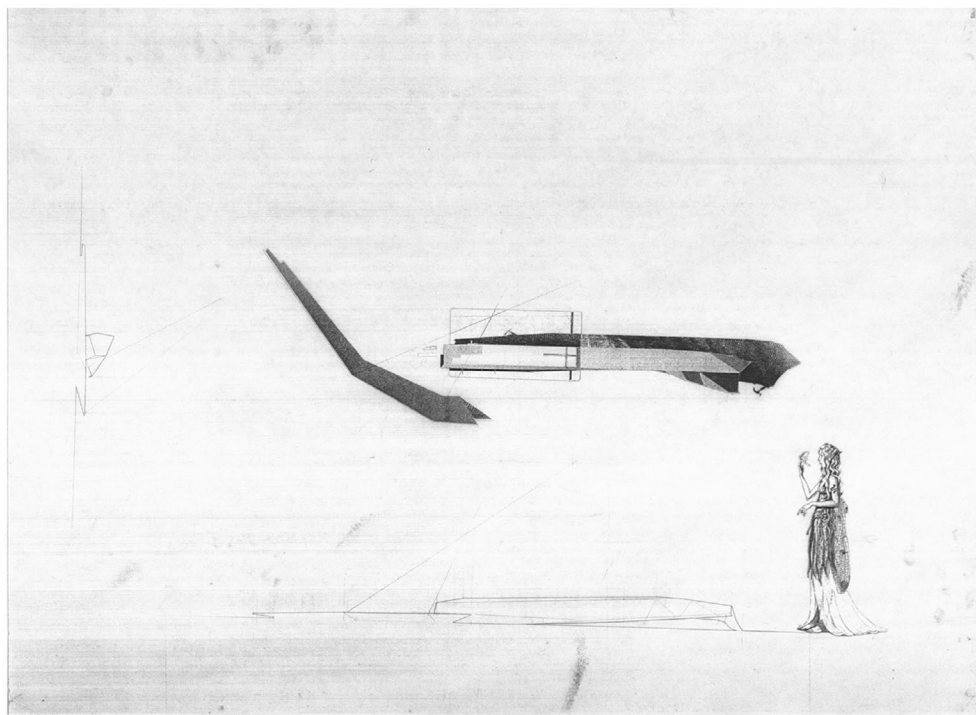
504

Chiaroscuro: A Theoretical  
Valence  
Peter Goché

### Entrance Hall – Research Assembly Two

For most of us, our comprehension of the inscribed landscape of Iowa is the aggregate of various momentary engagements with rural America. Awareness is developed through finite experiences of passing through, or attending a farm event. The rural configuration is thus the setting for the experience rather than the practice of co-existence with the family farm unit. The contemporary experience, unlike the traditional, is not solitary, nor contemplative; it is less concerned with the awareness of the environment.<sup>6</sup> What eventually replaces the ethical perception of this landscape typology is the restricted vision of our global, rather than local, scale of exchange. However, recently there has been a conservationist revival of community-supported agriculture whereby the farmer is directly linked once again to the consumer. Fragmentary and pragmatic changes such as these have informed and been illuminated by the production of the second research assembly.

This assembly (see Figure 3) employs a derelict metal conveyor lid placed on the floor with respect to the tilted steel plate. The conveyor



**Figure 3**

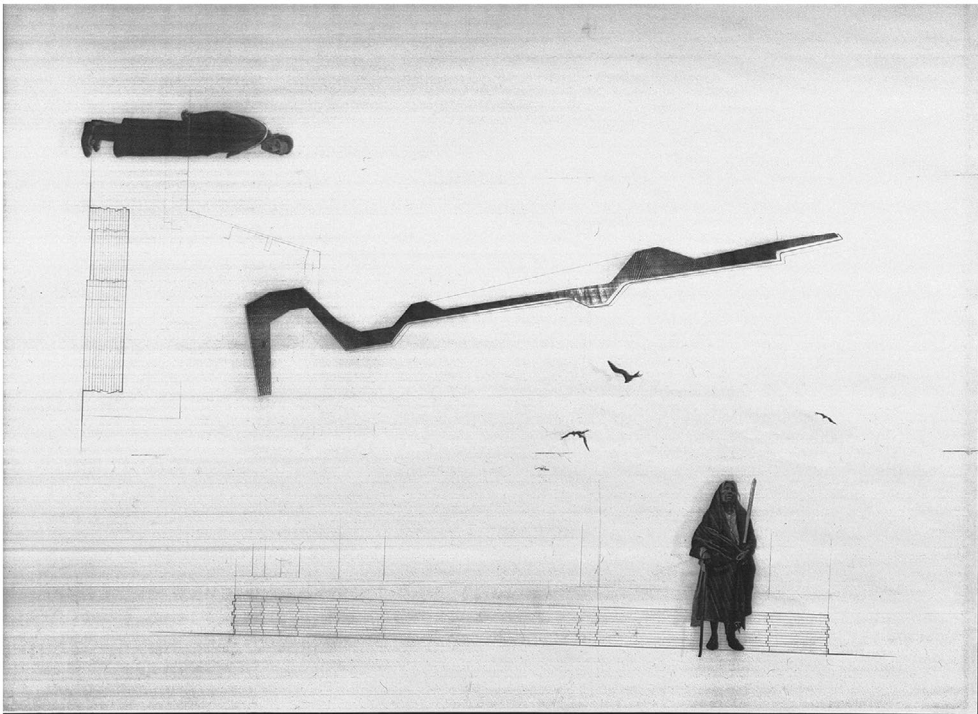
Peter Goché, *Research Assembly Two* (graphite on oak tag paper – 28 x 38 cm), 2014.

lid, worn and distorted by weather, is host to a series of thorns that have been attached to its leading edge. Incident light, emanating from the entrance door left ajar and the light source overhead, frames the resultant intercourse between each of the elements and their host space.

The assembly as a whole – the ambient configuration – is now not what occupies the entrance hall, but what is completely enveloped by the pool of light and surrounding shadows. The restricted view of the associated componentry yields what David Leatherbarrow refers to as “a topographical inscription, a single cultural framework occupied by our collective imagination.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, the perceptual experience of the work forges a return to the solitary, contemplative experience; it provokes a self-awareness with respect to what is known, consciously and subconsciously, regarding farm culture and inherited landscape.

**Entrance Hall – Research Assembly Three**

The third research assembly (see Figure 4) considers the generative role of site adjustment in a post-industrial landscape. Iowa consists of a broad range of diverse agricultural systems and approaches that have been rigorously modulated over decades. If addressed only superficially, differentiation in the rural configuration may appear to be simply a space of absence. To form an understanding of the rural site, or more



**Figure 4**  
Peter Goché, *Research Assembly Three* (graphite on oak tag paper – 28 x 38 cm), 2015.



anecdotally, “the interior,” necessitates the need for a point within; it is a point from which one is allowed to perceive, for an uncertain duration.

Located along the thrust of the entrance hall, the new set of parts serves as a measure by which people may situate themselves. Within a recessed mantel of this set of parts is the arrangement of rotary hoe replacement spoons on a building felt runner. Intrinsic qualities of the existing space are revealed through the intercourse with the referent assembly, yielding the notion of a monadic dimension proposed by Gilles Deleuze in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*:

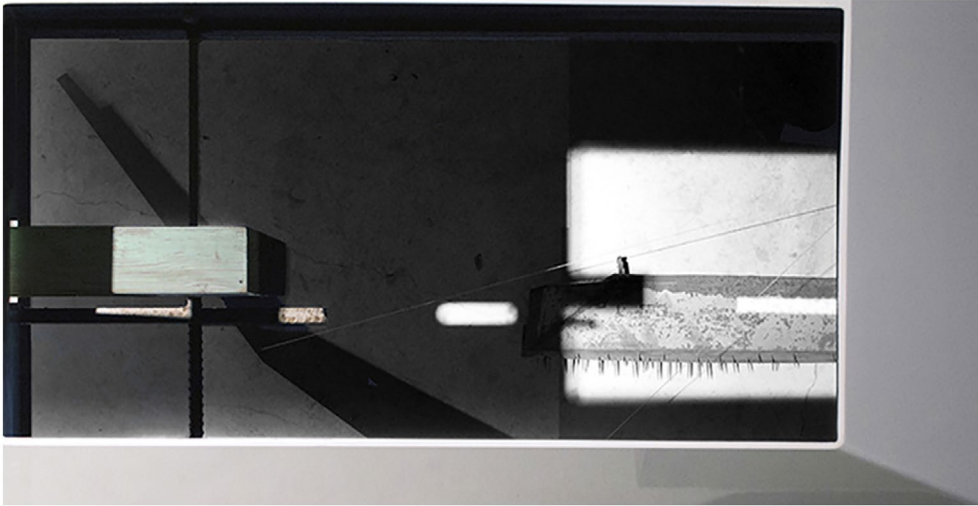
Chiaroscuro fills the monad according to a series which can be followed in both directions: at one end the dark background, at the other sealed light; the latter, when it lights up, produces white in the section set aside for it, but the light grows dimmer and dimmer, yields to darkness and deepening shadow as it spreads out towards the dark background throughout the monad.<sup>8</sup>

The occupant, by reciprocal examination, becomes aware of his or her personal presence and its coincidence with relation to the referent material and the attendant culture outside. Deleuze states that “the monad is the autonomy of the interior, an interior without exterior.”<sup>9</sup> It may be argued that the culminating assembly results in a field of occupation that discloses (rather than delimits) the ethical relevance of the latent site, knowable only by the accumulation of routine and diverse experiences of labour and reflection.

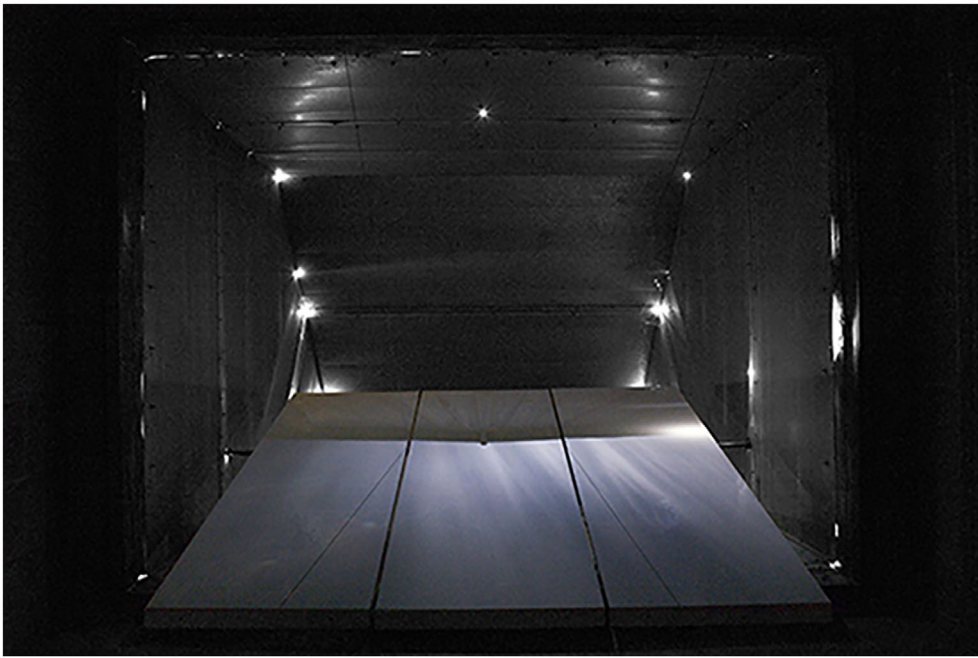
### Drawing Room

Within the logic of landscape studies is an indoctrinated manner of observation. Contemporary culture comprehends and navigates geographical realms via maps, which tend to rely on an aerial relationship between readers and subjects. Contrary to this intellectual configuration is the study of its other: the atmosphere and outer space. The upper story of the seed dryer – the “drawing room” – operates as an instrument with which such readings can be performed. It places the viewer between heaven and earth, consciousness and the subconscious, certainty and uncertainty.

Located in the drawing room is an aerial viewing station (see Figure 5) and a ground-viewing station. The former consists of an offset viewing monitor made of 10-gauge steel and wood bracketing through which the world below is seen. The latter is located at the far end of the drawing room just in front of the duct opening. This work consists of a *camera obscura* (see Figure 6) and a stacked, wooden area of repose. The *camera obscura* consists of a set of three painted metal panels which act as the picture plane, and a 2mm diameter hole in the top of the existing duct, the aperture. Light from the external (celestial) scene



**Figure 5**  
Peter Goché, *Aerial Viewing Station*, 2015.



**Figure 6**  
Peter Goché, *Ground Viewing Station*, 2015.

passes through the hole and strikes the picture plane inside. As stated by Jonathan Crary in his 1992 publication, *Techniques of the Observer*:

The camera obscura performs an operation of individuation; that is, it defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous

within its dark confines. It impels a kind of withdrawal from the world in order to regulate and purify one's relation to the manifold contents of the now "exterior" world.<sup>10</sup>

508

Chiaroscuro: A Theoretical  
Valence  
Peter Goché

This world is precisely that thing from which perceptions are formed, not as personal beliefs or imperatives, but in so far as all are governed by a universal source of light and its consequent shadows. This optic disclosure, the layering of light and shadows, absolves us of our flesh and bone and allows the body to enter time, deep time, and, as pointed out by Mircea Eliade, our collective transcendent reality.<sup>11</sup> This is the inscribed spatial history of a particular setting developed between human beings and the environments they occupy.

## Conclusion

Materiality can be understood in a variety of ways, from visual to auditory, tactile and olfactory systems. Each has its own range. For instance, the material and formal presence of sound tends to be recognized in relation to the equally material presence of silence. The anthropological effort to discern the magnitude of such a range of mediums enables the appreciation of the vast corpus of material cultures routinely occupied. As the individual experience varies with respect to its context, so such variation in phenomena responds to our interpretation of the environment and the material arrangement.

Our experience as occupants of a particular setting begins with the impulse to scrutinize it. This impulse is sustained through a precisely choreographed threshold. For the architect and the artist, the goal is to maintain the initial impulse of scrutiny of the occupant via the staged, often temporary, assemblies within a host space, thereby extending the sequence of passage. In the words of Alberto Pérez-Gómez in *Built upon Love*:

The discovery of architectural order necessitates the same sort of critical de-structuring that is familiar to other arts, engaging dimensions of consciousness usually stifled by technical education. Yet for architecture this is not an intuitive operation or unreflective action, but rather the continuation of a practical philosophy and a meditative practice ... Thus a work of architecture may engage the primary geometry of human bodily orientation as the base line of a significant melody aimed at revealing the enigma of depth, the dimension of space.<sup>12</sup>

To this end, the act of reconstructing our engagement with forgotten space assists in cultivating theory as a practice of making and thinking. The stagings at Black's seed farm yield, as Grant Wood showed in his mural *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow* (1934), the foundation for subsequent forms of human civilization specific to labor and an intensely modulated means of production. The cumulative effort

indicates the potential use of this facility, and all of Iowa's derelict agricultural facilities, as laboratory, inasmuch as it provides a dormant environment anticipating a series of sustained observations. It is a subconscious engagement that immerses us; it does not allow the tendency of "objective" distancing between our experience and the world. This immersive act of experiential scrutiny supports a set of site-adjusted research assemblies with a relative capacity to unite, react or interact with the latent dimensions of the inherited landscape. It is an embodiment of *chiaroscuro*: the practice of arranging light (consciousness) and shadow (the subconscious) to reveal the emptiness of fragmented time.

Using site-adjusted installations as the primary mode of practice, these activities deploy an integrated and focused approach to both theoretical and practical questions pertaining to the nature and impact of materiality specific to the re-occupation of post-industrial spaces. Each inquiry utilizes a range of domains including art, architecture and anthropology as a means of exploring not only what material cultivations can be, but also what they, in fact, do. Based on a series of modulated experimental actions (material modalities), each installation is driven by a persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surrounds. It is a full-scale, three-dimensional methodology that is followed by exploratory drawings and photography as a means to express its affects (immaterial harmonics).

---

**Peter Goché** is a practicing architect, artist and educator. He is founder and executive curator of *Black Contemporary*, a rural field station dedicated to the study of spatial phenomena and perception. He is co-investigator/author of *Guidelines for Spatial Regeneration in Iowa* funded by the 2007 AIA Board of Knowledge Committee. Goché has exhibited and lectured on his creative practice at many conferences and cultural institutions throughout North America and Western Europe. He taught in the Department of Art at Drake University before joining the faculty at Iowa State University, where he coordinates and teaches design studios in the Department of Architecture and foundational design. His understanding and sensibilities regarding spatial experience and ethno-specific design stem from an agrarian upbringing and ongoing research in art, architecture and anthropology.

## Notes

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 283.
- 2 David Heymann, "Precise, Anonymous, Enigmatic," *Iowa Architect* (winter 1990): 28–35.
- 3 Marwan Ghandour and Peter Goché, *Guidelines for Spatial Regeneration in Iowa* (AIA Board of Knowledge Committee, 2007), 186–205.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," in *The Standard*

- Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, col. 16, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), 296. Quoted in Georgina Downey, *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians and Modernists* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), xiii.
- 5 Georgina Downey, *Domestic Interiors*, xiii.
  - 6 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 63.
  - 7 David Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories: Studies in Landscape and Architecture* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 13.
  - 8 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006 [1988]), 5.
  - 9 Ibid.
  - 10 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 38–39.
  - 11 Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 5.
  - 12 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, “The Ethical Image of an Architecture,” in *Built upon Love* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 210–11.

## References

- Crary, Jonathan. 1992. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. [1988] 2006. *The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Downey, Georgina. 2013. *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians and Modernists*. London: Bloomsbury Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1974. “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey, vol. 16, 296. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Ghandour, Marwan, and Peter Goché. 2007. *Guidelines for Spatial Regeneration in Iowa*. 2007 AIA Board of Knowledge Committee, Washington, DC, 186–205.
- Heymann, David. 1990. “Precise, Anonymous, Enigmatic.” in *Iowa Architect*, 1990 winter issue: 28–35.
- Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. 1984. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Leatherbarrow, David. 2004. *Topographical Stories: Studies in Landscape and Architecture*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1945] 1978. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Pérez-Gómez, Alberto 2008. *Built upon Love*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.