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Places

Title

The Eye in Place

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9c9844zc>

Journal

Places, 2(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1984-11-01

Peer reviewed

The Eye in Place

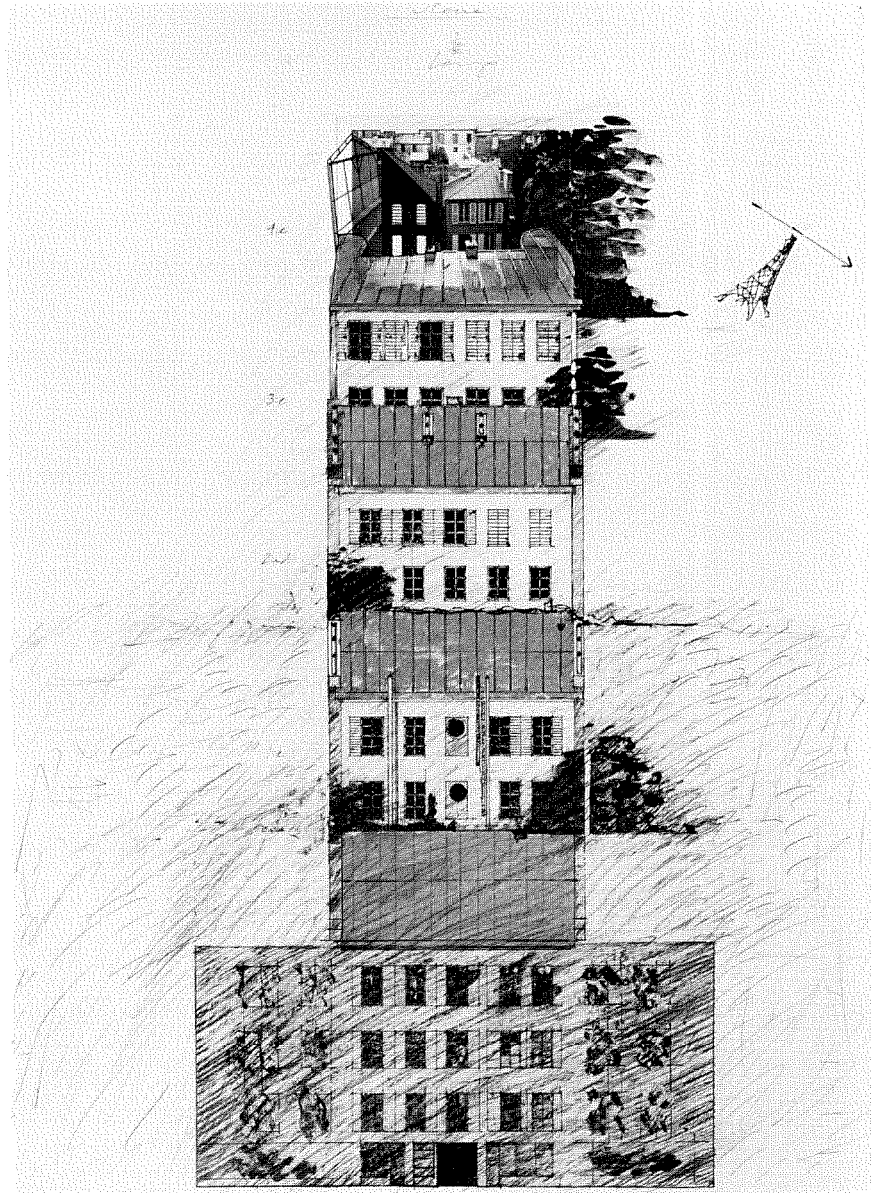
Lars Lerup

Premise

Who is the author of a text? Theorists of literature like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes suggest that the power of language combined with the reader's interpretation takes control of a text out of the hands of its author. Authorship may be claimed by the reader, as well, inasmuch as anyone, writer or reader, can make language his own, and assert his selfhood through its rules and regulations. The world of drawing (and the world of perspective, in particular) harbors demanding constraints that force authorship to be shared among the medium, the renderer, and the observer. This insight leads to the following reflections on the role of the observer in the creation of a place in perspective.

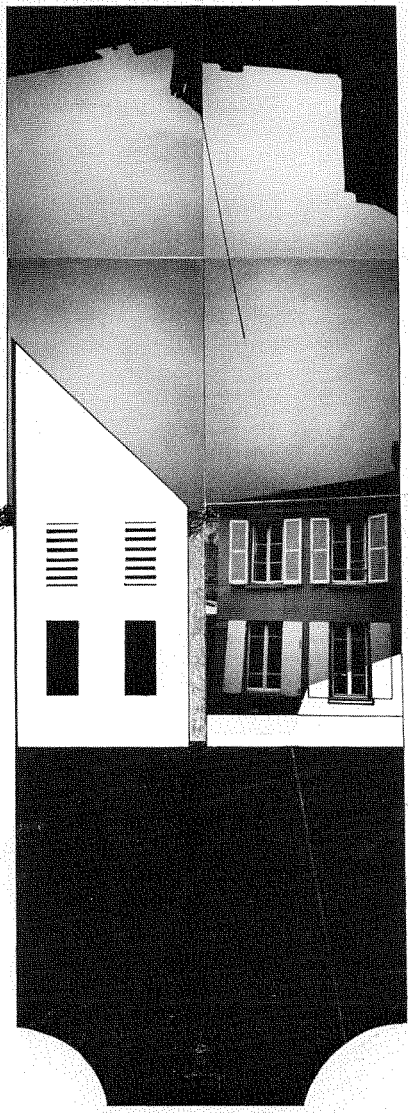
Ever since the Renaissance, perspective has been the dominant tool for describing the scene of buildings; a particular eyepoint has been assumed. That eye is a monocular geometric construction, an artificial position in space. An observer of a drawing must, therefore, look across this impassable barrier between himself and the scene that has been depicted. All illustrations of place have been channeled through this cyclopean gateway that renders them all fundamentally the same—inaccessible, distant, and cool.

Various attempts by a renderer to inscribe a subject in the form of full-fledged replicas of people or mere scale figures, or to mark the scene with human tracks—a half-empty wine glass and an open book on a table in a drawing by Le



I The Stage

"How Blue the Sky Was" from
the madman's point
of view



Corbusier—only make the distance between the observer and the scene more obvious.

My effort to include the perspectival eye *inside* the scene in the drawings and their captions suggests that the autonomy of the scene cannot be challenged, but the way we looked at it can—the way we include ourselves inside the parameters of the perspectival scene. In other words, the issue is not only how well we render that which is forever uninhabitable but also how, via intersubjectivity, we may give the geometric eye its proper bias. Consequently, place cannot be ascribed solely to the scene depicted, but to both the technique of the perspective drawing and the subjective point of view of the observer.

The Project and the Drawings

The perspectives shown are from the project *Love/House*, a setting designed to house two lovers, which consists of one existing house for her and an imaginary house where he waits for her. The two houses are in a real place, in a real city, the fourth innermost court away from a busy street in a neighborhood in Paris.

Her house is a typical “pavilion,” patterned on the perimeter block building visible from the street, with a cellar, a piano nobile, an upper story, and an attic that has been turned into a bedroom. His house is derived from hers via a series of condensations and displacements; a mere shadow of a house, a paper house, an imaginary scaffold for his waiting. The project

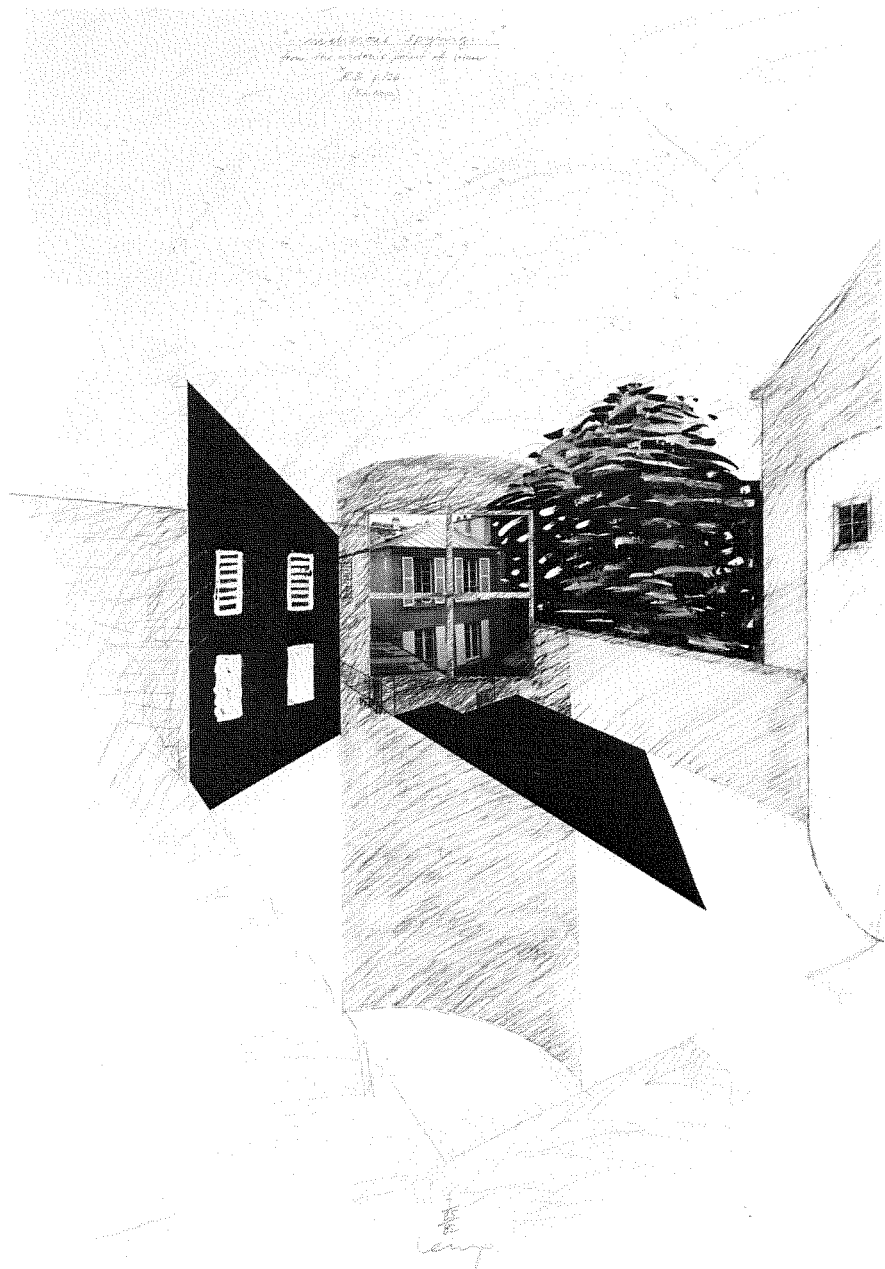
consists of about 50 drawings, some analytic, others speculative and/or illustrative of the houses and their context. The drawings shown here describe the houses and their immediate setting, and two perspectival views. It is these two perspectives that form the kernel of this discussion.

The drawings depict the two houses, his and hers, side-by-side, the court and its immediate context, each from a different point of view. These different points of view are formed by two inhabitants living across the court from the lovers, a madman and a widow. It is through their eyes that you, the observer, will see the *Love/House*. Momentarily you will slip inside the scene through madness and widowhood. Flooded thus, the depicted scenes may acquire a supplementary placeness.

“How Blue the Sky Was,”¹ from the Madman’s Point of View

Miraculously he lived among us, and by all standards he was quite mad. An immigrant stone worker from Italy, he had come to help build Paris. Somehow in the process he had gone mad, and his lunacy had been treated at Sainte Anne’s Psychiatric Hospital. In a moment of sanity he was let out to live in the court. Like the legendary village fool, he reminded us of the precarious limits of sanity.

His foes came at night and he attempted to fend them off by screaming at the top of his lungs, often for hours on end, and it kept us all up. During the day he would function almost normally; it was



3 “. . . malicious spying . . .” from the Widow’s Point of View

only his somewhat bizarre dress that gave him away. Half man, half woman, he wore a woman's hat and a man's suit. He was an obsessive collector of old shoes, umbrellas, and various other garments. He was very lively. Meeting you, he would stop, offer a broad, warm smile, and show off his colorful socks. Frequently "Le Fou" would toss large bundles of crumpled paper down into the court from the window facing the *Love/House*, then come downstairs, pick up the paper, and looking upwards, he would twirl in a full circle holding the bundle in his arms, like a mother would a child. He would repeat the complete procedure time and again.

The drawing is a composite of photographs and rendering, and depicts the court as it would appear in a twirl. Le Fou's madness is only in the projected eye, not in the depicted scene, which remains autonomous and cool.

"Malicious Spying,"² from the Widow's Point of View

Across from the madman lived a widow. She came from the provinces. Her husband died a long time ago. She never spoke about him. She had retired, and she spent her days shopping, cooking, reading, and tending her flowers when the season permitted.

Every summer relatives came, young and old, and stayed for a week or two. Then she would leave for a month while the house sat empty. She walked with a slight limp and had a very prominent nose. She was known simply as "The Nose." From our point of view her life was steady, unchangeable, repetitious, and cast in an eternal calm. She would gossip with her neighbors and smile and laugh, then in due time she would retire, cook, eat, read, maybe take a nap, and shop for the next meal. Coming back from her

shopping rounds she would set her bags down, take out the key, and while opening her door peek into the court. If she didn't notice us watching, her eyes would dart around rapidly like an animal's and take in the scene. Later she would be seen parting the curtain in the upstairs window overlooking the court.

The drawing is a composite of a photograph and a rendering and depicts the court from the widow's upstairs window. Only a slight flutter of the curtain would reveal her presence to those in the court. Her secret speculations about the lovers are in the projected eye; again, the scene remains autonomous and cool.

NOTES

- 1 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 197.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

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