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THE EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURAL COMPOSITION

DOŚWIADCZENIE KOMPOZYCJI ARCHITEKTONICZNEJ

Abstract

This essay examines the way in which architecture experiences itself during the process of architectural composition that generates the form of the work, starting from an initial impulse. This conception of experience is compared with the aesthetics of John Dewey (*Art as Experience*, and the concept of 'learning by doing') and with the theories of Josef Albers and the Bauhaus in general. The return to architecture is illustrated through the example of the stepped pyramid and Adolf Loos's abstract studies (*Baukörperstudie*, 1923) for Mexico City Town Hall and the Grand Hotel Babylon.

Keywords: *Adolf Loos, architectural composition, formativity, Josef Albers*

Streszczenie

Esej analizuje sposób, w jaki architektura doświadcza samej siebie w procesie kompozycji architektonicznej, prowadzącym do powstania formy dzieła, którego punktem wyjścia jest początkowy impuls. Koncepcja ta zostaje zestawiona z estetyką Johna Deweya (ang. *Art as Experience*, *Learning by Doing*, czyli uczenie się przez działanie), a także z teoriami Josefa Albersa i Bauhausu jako nurtu. Powrót do architektury został zilustrowany na przykładzie piramidy schodkowej oraz abstrakcyjnych studiów Adolfa Loosa Ratusza w Meksyku i Grand Hotel Babylon (*Baukörperstudie*, 1923).

Słowa kluczowe: *Adolf Loos, formatywność, Josef Albers, kompozycja architektoniczna*

1. INTRODUCTION

As its title makes clear, the aim of this essay is not so much to address the experience of architecture itself as to address the experience of 'making architecture' and the way this 'making' unfolds within the so-called 'compositional process'; with this in mind, 'experience' here refers to the practice of architectural composition. As regards the meaning of the latter, we could refer to Ernesto Nathan Rogers' concise definition in his essay *The Structure of Architectural Composition*, in which he stated: 'Composing is putting together various things to make just one. But different things, taken all together, can become one precisely because a relationship is established between the components, where they influence one another, establishing a synthesis, through an internal dialectical relationship.'[1] Rogers'

[1] E.N. Rogers, *Struttura della composizione architettonica*, [in:] L. Molinari (ed.), *Esperienza dell'architettura*, Skira, Milan 1997, p. 171.

essay was published in a book commonly translated into English as *The Experience of Architecture*, which brings together architecture's experience of itself – its historical experience,[2] meaning all the architecture produced over time, the works, the drawings, and the theories – as well as that experience of 'making architecture' to which we have alluded and which is more in tune with the book from which Rogers borrowed the title of his own: John Dewey's *Art as Experience*. It was Dewey who first spoke of art as an experience, within which, in his phenomenological aesthetics, he contrasted such static thematic concepts as expression, form, substance and content with operational concepts like resistance, tension, energy, force, balance, harmony, order, incorporation, assimilation and refinement; it is this second type of concept that enables us to better understand Dewey's famous motto, 'Learning by doing'.

2. ALBERS AND DEWEY

In 1933, following the closure of the Bauhaus in Dessau under pressure from the National Socialist Party, many of its leading figures emigrated to the United States. In 1937, Walter Gropius founded the Graduate School of Design at Harvard; in 1938, László Moholy-Nagy established the New Bauhaus in Chicago, which later became the IIT College of Architecture at the Armour Institute and is now the Illinois Institute of Technology; in 1933, Josef and Anni Albers, at the suggestion of Philip Johnson, moved to North Carolina to head the Black Mountain College, a new experimental art school founded by a group of progressive academics on the shores of Lake Eden.

It was there that the educational principles of the Bauhaus came into contact with John Dewey's phenomenological aesthetics: Albers's first essay in North Carolina would be entitled *Art as Experience*. In an interview given to Sevim Fesci for the Archives of American Art in 1968, Albers stated: 'Thus art is not an object, it is an experience'. In fact, the encounter between Albers and Dewey took place at Black Mountain College during the 1934–1935 academic year, when Albers had adopted Dewey's motto of 'Learning by doing', which, in truth, had long been part of his teaching practice at the Bauhaus even though he had never heard of it: the part of the preparatory course entrusted to him by Gropius in 1923 was, in fact, called *Werklehre*, which means 'learning through practice'; in 1928, Albers described his teaching methods in an article entitled *Werklicher Formunterricht*, which means 'Teaching Form Through Practice'.

Among the exercises that Albers set for both his Bauhaus students after 1930 and those at Black Mountain College was the so-called 'serpentine' or 'Greek' pattern, which involved drawing a pattern of lines spaced at regular intervals, both vertically and horizontally. The exercise focused fundamentally on understanding the relationship between figure and background, where the interpretation of the space between the lines is shaped by our mind's perception, so that, as Albers wrote, this 'double meaning and multiple reading of visual form points at artistic potentiality by recommending ambiguity in performance'.[3] Metzger too had

[2] See: E.N. Rogers, L. Semerani, *The Sense of History*, C*ontinuity and Discontinuity*, Unicopli, Milan 1999.

[3] M. Beggs, *Engaging with the Master: A Hands-on Introduction to the Methods of Josef Albers's Teaching*, [in:] S. Boncompagni (ed.), *Josef Albers: Art as Experience: The Teaching Methods of a Bauhaus Master*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2013, p. 85.

already discussed the ambiguity of the relationship between figure and background in relation to the problem of psychic reality – that is, the significance of being faced with 'something' or 'nothing', a 'fullness' or a 'void'. Metzger explained that 'a wall is 'empty' as long as it is painted in a single colour, and only when it is decorated with designs does 'something' appear on it. From such examples it follows that this 'something' generally possesses the character of a 'figure' separated from the rest, or of a thing with internal cohesion that is surrounded by surfaces not homogeneous with it'.[4] This led him, on the following page, to address that ambiguity we have already discussed: 'It is therefore no surprise that, under certain conditions, whilst the distribution of stimuli remains unchanged, the same part of the perceptual field may be seen alternately as an "object" or as a "void"'.[5]

It seems, then, as though it were a sign of destiny that, right from the early years of their teaching at Black Mountain College, Josef and Anni Albers should encounter Mexico. Their discovery of the serpentine decorative motifs at the archaeological sites of Mitla, Uxmal and Chichen Itza would forever change their understanding of the relationship between figure and background. In *Truthfulness in Art*, Josef Albers stated: 'We will have difficulties with its patterns in finding out what is figure and what is background. As we see them here reproduced in black and white and when we follow the white form, we see a complete composition but soon the black leftovers tell us just as intensively "we are not background, we have the same right to tell you a composition"; that they have the same activity'.[6] The ambiguity of the relationship between figure and background characterised all his paintings from the early period of his numerous trips to Mexico (which he made repeatedly from 1935 to 1967 and during which he amassed an extraordinary collection of pre-Columbian art)[7] – the paintings known as the 'Adobe' series; soon, however, this contrast (or fundamental opposition, according to Panofsky)[8] would be replaced by the implementation of a formative process that would leave no room for any 'full' figure to be placed on the surface of an 'empty' field, nor for any *a priori* notion of form or 'prefabricated representation'.[9] In 1948, in the notes of the committee for the new Design course programme at Harvard's Graduate School, he wrote: '[The student] would develop his own procedures and judgements from direct experience and learn to think in situations, not by predigested theory'.[10] This bears a strong resemblance to the way in which Ernesto Nathan Rogers explained BBPR's working method in the pages of *Casabella-Continuità* in 1959: 'For us, everything unfolds, instead, from its inner vital core and leads us, step by step,

[4] W. Metzger, *I fondamenti della psicologia della Gestalt*, Giunti, Firenze 1971, p. 35.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 36.

[6] J. Barriendos, *Devouring Squares: Josef Albers in the Center of the Pyramid*, [in:] L. Hinkson (ed.), *Josef Albers in Mexico*, Guggenheim Foundation, New York 2020, p. 39.

[7] See: K.A. Taube, *The Albers Collection of Pre-Columbian Art*, Hudson Hill Press, 1988.

[8] In *Significato nelle arti visive* (Einaudi, Turin 1955, p. 24), Erwin Panofsky defined the choice between 'volumetric unity (bodies) and unlimited extension (space)' as 'the primary alternatives of the artistic intention'. For the relationship between figure and background in architecture, see also: L. Amistadi, *Notes on Space in Architecture*, [in:] *La città ordinata*, LetteraVentidue, Syracuse 2024.

[9] A concept used by Roman Jakobson to refer to the figurative recognition that underlies communication and intersubjectivity. See also: L. Amistadi, *The Architectural Transfiguration of History*, [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Designing the Architectural Space, Architecture and History*, Vol. 1, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław 2025, p. 19.

[10] B. Danilowitz, *Teaching Design: A Short History of Josef Albers*, [in:] Josef Albers (ed.), *Art as Experience*, *op. cit*., p. 23.

towards the final conclusions. Of course, we do not rule out the possibility of a decisive intuition, which already contains a certain sensibility, a personal choice, regarding the expressive language; but whilst we are designing, we try to keep any preconceptions about form in abeyance as far as possible'.[11] Thinking 'in situations' and renouncing, as far as possible, any preconceptions about form also meant remaining open and receptive to the unpredictable and unexpected. Bearing this in mind, we can better understand the reasons why Albers spoke of art as 'revelation and evocation' and Klee's famous phrase: 'Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible.' In other words, dismantling the relationship between figure and background means breaking free from the situation in which the artist stands before a blank canvas that must be filled with figurative content – the 'prefabricated representation'. It means renouncing a preconceived notion of form and opening oneself up to the surprise of the formal outcome of a generative process, where the result is known as it is produced, and is produced as it is known.

Albers' graphic works, inspired by Mesoamerican pyramids and entitled *Tectonics*, as well as his *Homages to the Square* series, can be interpreted as exemplifications of the processes that Klee referred to as 'Progressive growth (two-dimensional)' or 'Two-dimensionally square movement on a pictorial basis'.[12] Starting from the corners or the centre of the canvas, this meant a progressive movement of continuous growth that left no room for any distinction between solid and void, black and white, something and nothing.

3. THE PYRAMID

Emanuele Severino has convinced us that the same result, achieved by different means, cannot be considered the same.[13] This bears a strong resemblance to Apollinaire's observation regarding avant-garde art: 'in which the world is represented not as it is seen but as it is known'.[14] In this sense, the plan view of a step pyramid can indeed be understood as a (prefabricated) representation of the pyramids that Albers saw on his travels in Mexico, but also as a progressive two-dimensional movement emanating from the centre or the edges of the square canvas.

For Max Bill, 'the ultimate consequence of Concrete Art is the expression of a harmonic measurement and law'.[15] Here, the spiritual dimension of art consists in perceiving and revealing the universal laws hidden behind apparent forms; in other words, 'in which art is considered the place of revelation of unchanging realities behind the ever-changing forms of subjective appearances'.[16] John Hejduk, too, took the idea of the staircase to its utmost universal dimension; the staircase at Casa Malaparte was described as the result of the alternating succession of vertical and horizontal lines, which, starting from the

[11] L.B. Belgiojoso, E. Peressutti, E.N. Rogers, *Tre problemi di ambientamento, La Torre Velasca a Milano. Un edificio per uffici e appartamenti a Torino. Casa Lurani a Milano*, "Casabella-Continuità" 1959, no. 232.

[12] P. Klee, *Notebooks, Vol. 2: The Nature of Nature*, J. Spiller (ed.), Georg Wittenborn, New York 1970, pp. 129, 136.

[13] Severino's lecture at the Modena Philosophy Festival.

[14] Cit. in: M. Pierini (ed.), *Josef Albers: Anatomy of Homage to the Square*, Magonza, Arezzo 2019, p. 98.

[15] Max Bill, 1947. Cit. in: M. Pierini (editor), *Josef Albers*, *op. cit*., p. 96.

[16] C. Haensler, *Against All Appearances*, [in:] M. Pierini (ed.), *Josef Albers*, *op. cit*., p. 96.

ground, ultimately gave rise to the wall: 'Have you ever read the article on the Malaparte House? […] This is the beginning of it all. It's a wall. From the horizontal to the vertical. Abstract'.[17]

When Adolf Loos entered the competition for the new City Hall in Mexico City in 1923, he did not simply replicate the form of the Mesoamerican stepped pyramid as such, but designed an abstract spatial form (*Baukörperstudie*) based on its generative principles. The form envisaged by Loos consisted, to begin with, of four stepped pyramids arranged in pairs. Each pyramid was the result of a composition of four solids generated by a 'three-dimensional ascending progression' – to use Klee's terminology – where the elevations were equal to the steps and the pyramid therefore rose at an angle of 45°. In the centre, Loos superimposed a fifth pyramid, whose volume descended to fill the empty space between the four pyramids below it. The solid that filled the space between the pyramids had, in turn, a shape produced by the composition of four solids generated by a descending three-dimensional progression.

The design for the Mexico City Town Hall reproduced the 'spatial form' study (*Baukörperstudie*) almost in its entirety, apart from a few minor adjustments, the most obvious of which was the removal of the top five courses of steps from the upper central pyramid – that is, half of the ten in total. Furthermore, the height of the first step had been doubled, and the space between the second steps of the four pyramids was filled by a cross-shaped structure with arms two treads wide. The same scheme, albeit with greater variations, was used by Loos for the design of the Grand Hotel Babylon, which also dates from 1923. This comprised two pyramids of nine steps, with the top two steps removed. The alignment of the second step with the third along one side, combined with a doubling of the corresponding height, gave the pyramids a distinct orientation, distinguishing the front from the back – one of the fundamental topological differences. At the rear of the two aligned pyramids, Loos placed a long parallelepiped volume, divided into three transverse bays, which was to house a long row of rooms on the storeys above the first two; it acted as a theatrical backdrop against which the bodies of the pyramids stood out. The void between the pyramids was filled up to the second level, just as the space between the rear of the pyramids and the long transverse volume was also occupied. As a finishing touch, Loos placed two porticoes in front of the pyramids; their figurative autonomy was emphasised by raising the first step – against which the porticoes themselves rested – by half a storey.

4. CONCLUSION

The examples given here aim to highlight the difference between a chronological timeframe within which the historian categorises works and architects, and a much shorter and almost never linear timeframe in which architecture manifests as it takes shape, during the process of architectural composition. As Luciano Semerani wrote: 'Although many years have passed since Moholy-Nagy and Colin Rowe, there are few studies on "architectural composition". Architectural design is thought to construct the future. Composition works rather in the

[17] J. Hejduk, *Mask of Medusa*, Rizzoli International, New York 1985, p. 134; see L. Amistadi, *Architecture as a Game*, [in:] E. Mucelli, S. Rössl (eds.), *Experiences of Architecture*, LetteraVentidue, Syracuse 2026.

non-topical. The non-topical is a categorical imperative. It derives from the permanent obligation to *go inside, towards the interior* of architecture, not towards its future, not towards its past'.[18] In our examples, moving 'inwards' means carrying out compositional actions in which the form is not given *a priori*, but is generated within a process that begins at an initial moment and, step by step, reaches a final moment or result. The brief and special moment (*kairos*)[19] in which this progression takes place resembles a rhythmic impulse stretched between the extremes of a downbeat and an upbeat, which Le Corbusier had already identified as the fundamental moment of every compositional action: 'Rhythm is an equation: equality (symmetry, repetition); compensation (movement of opposites); modulation (development of an initial plastic invention)'.[20] For Semper, too, the rhythmic factor had lain at the heart of human aesthetic enjoyment since the dawn of humanity, as well as of such cosmic disciplines as architecture, dance, and music:

> The former [artistic enjoyment] is in fact undeveloped in simple, primitive human beings, who already delight in nature's creative law as it gleams through the real world in the rhythmical sequence of space and time movements, in wreaths, a string of pearls, scrolls, round dances, the rhythmic tones attending them, the beat of the oar, and so on. These are the beginnings out of which music and architecture grew, the two highest purely cosmic (non-imitative) arts, whose legislative support no other art can do without.[21]

Frampton spoke of this concept as an erotic-ludic impulse: 'Semper regarded the performing arts as cosmic not only because they were symbolic but also because they embodied man's underlying erotic-ludic urge, that is to say, the impulse to decorate according to a rhythmic urge, which is to say the impulse to decorate according to a rhythmic law'.[22] Rhythm is therefore based on a repetition of the same (compositional) action, starting from an initial plastic invention. In the case of Hejduk's staircase, the opposing movements of the riser and the tread alternate with and balance each other through repetition, to generate the 'abstract' wall. For this reason, Semper regarded the cosmic arts as non-imitative – that is, non-figurative – in that the final form of the work is the result of the application of universal laws whose outcome is never wholly predictable. This is why Frampton correctly emphasised that the reference to rhythm is not merely symbolic, but operational and concrete, as in the art of Albers and Loos's *Baukörperstudie*.

Looking even more closely at the rhythmic alternation through which form takes shape, we might draw on the words Hubert Damisch used to describe Jackson Pollock's painting. He described Pollock's process of giving shape to the work on the canvas as a 'chronology, or rather a technical logic, of invention'. The genesis of the work unfolds through a mechanism of rapid exchanges and rhythmic movements of opposites, beginning from

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[18] L. Semerani, *Introduction to Colin Rowe and Architecture as Text*, [in:] M. Marzo (ed.), *L'architettura come testo e la figura di Colin Rowe*, Marsilio, Venice 2010, p. 218.

[19] See: L. Amistadi, *Time in History and Time in Architecture*, [in:] L. Amistadi, E. Prandi (ed.), *Architettura e Città*, *Saggi*, Festival Architettura Edizioni, Parma 2016.

[20] Le Corbusier, *Verso un'architettura*, Longanesi, Milan 1999 (1st ed. 1921), pp. 37, 38.

[21] G. Semper, *Style, Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. H.F. Mallgrave, M. Robinson , Getty Publications, Los Angeles 2004, p. 82.

[22] K. Frampton, *Bötticher, Semper and the Tectonic: Core Form and Art Form*, in *What is Architecture?*, A. Ballantyne (ed.), Routledge, London–New York 2002, p. 148.

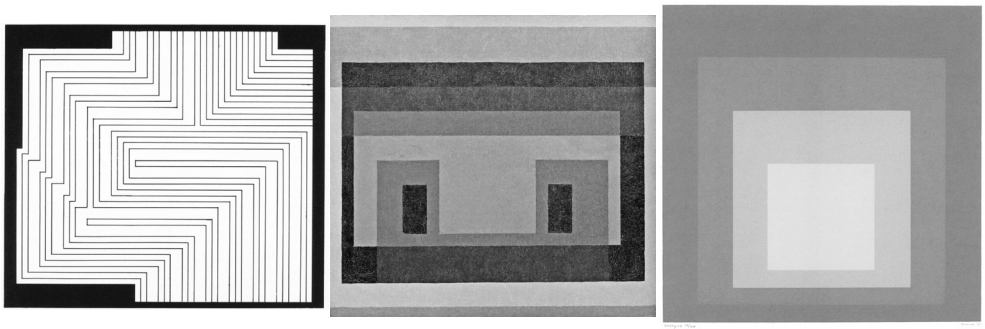
the first stroke, which is suggested by the shape of the canvas 'just as the organization of the Romanesque tympanum would be for the frame of the arch and the lintel'.[23] The outline of the first arabesque is met by a second outline that engages with the organisation of the field, either contradicting or complementing it. The 'progressive growth (two-dimensional)' that generates the stepped pyramid, or the 'two-dimensionally square movement on a pictorial basis' in the case of the canvas, corresponds to a series of movements and counter-movements through which the body of the architecture establishes itself and, in so doing, generates the space it occupies. In the competition entry for the Mexico City Town Hall and in the Grand Hotel Babylon design, as well as in the design for the base of the Chicago Tribune skyscraper[24] or the Mausoleum for Max Dvořák – all created between 1921 and 1923 – the concrete architectural form is generated by the application of universal rhythmic laws starting from a square. This may be why the contrast and sense of estrangement evoked by the superimposition of the figure – this one, at least – of the Doric column upon the volume of the stepped structure are all the more striking.



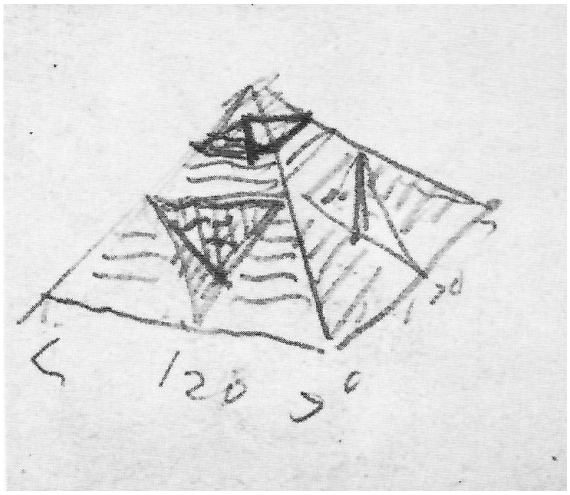
Ill. 1. Josef Albers, Photograph of the Kukulkan pyramid, 'The Castillo', Chichén Itzá, 1952 (The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Connecticut)

[23] H. Damisch, *Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture*, Paris 1984, p. 85. My translation: 'Since his pictorial discourse unfolds at the level of perception rather than that of the imagination, the act of drawing the first arabesque determines the perception of an organisation of the field to which the second stroke responds, either to complete it or to contradict it – and so on: the "bringing to light" and the "exchanges" of which the painter speaks have no other meaning.'

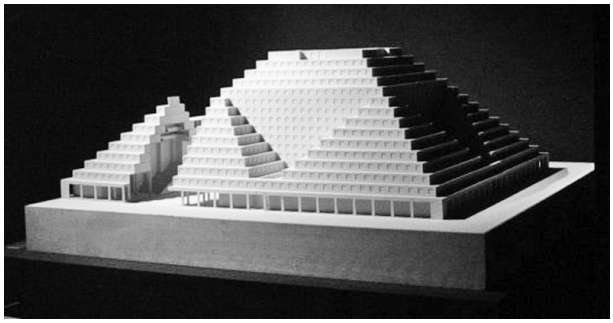
[24] Regarding the stepped plinth of the competition entry for the new Chicago Tribune headquarters designed by Loos in 1922, see: L. Amistadi, *Ornament and Play*, [in:] L. Amistadi, I. Clemente (eds.), *Adolf Loos*, Soundings 2/III, Aión, Florence 2022.



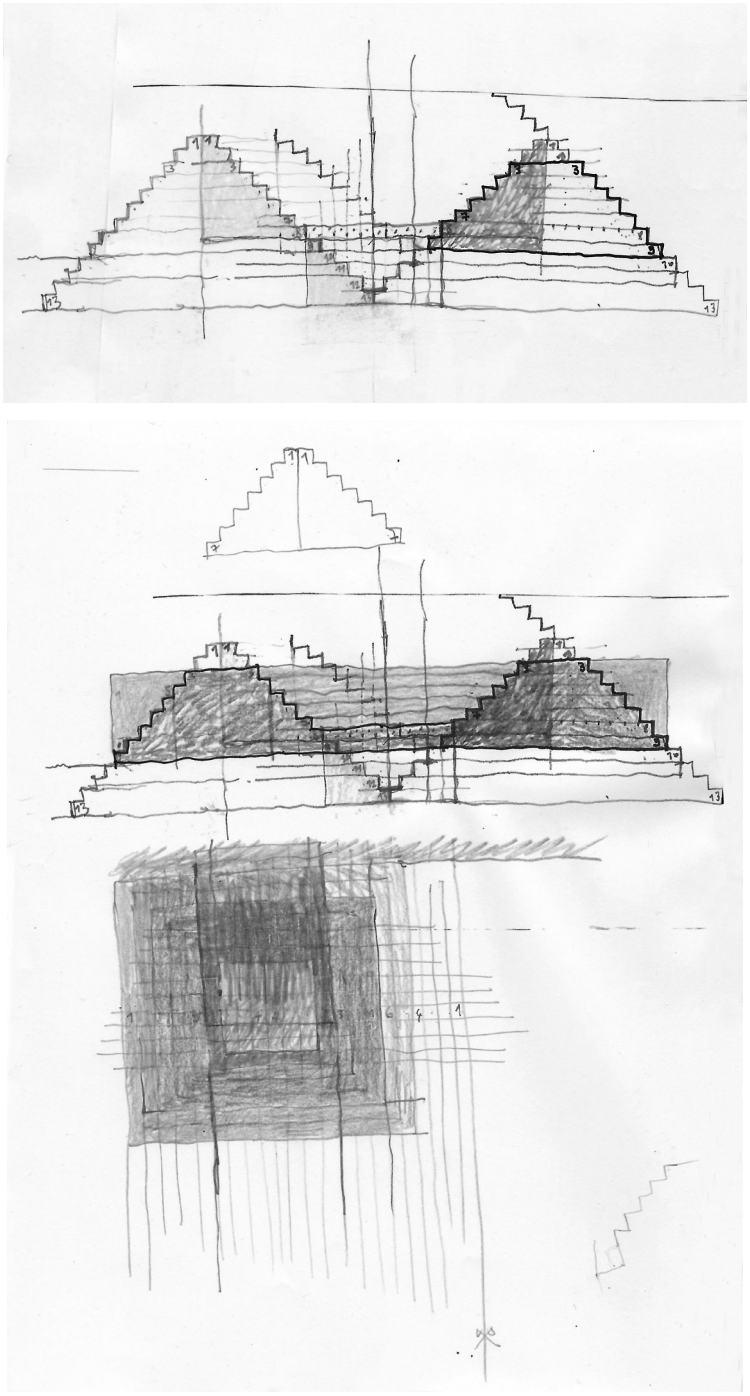
Ill. 2–4. Josef Albers, Study for a *Graphic Tectonic*, ca. 1941–1942 (The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Connecticut); *Variant/Adobe*, *4 Greens*, *2 Grays*, 1948–1955; Study for *Homage to the Square: Starting*, 1969 (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York)



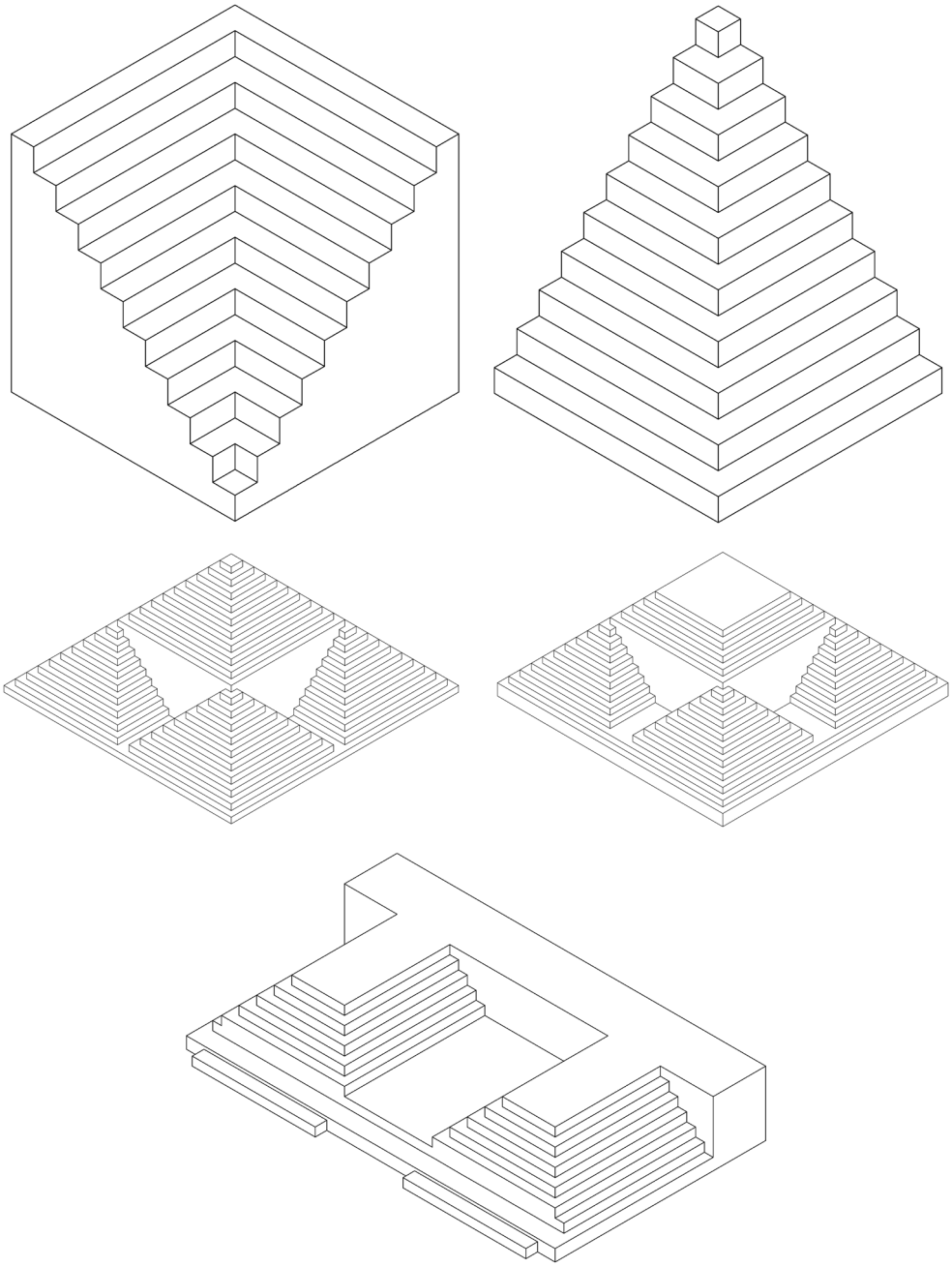
Ill. 5. Adolf Loos, Study for a spatial structure (*Baukörperstudie*), 1923



Ill. 6. Adolf Loos, Project model for the Mexico City Town Hall, 1923



Ill. 7–8. Lamberto Amistadi, Conceptual drawings for Loos's design for the Mexico City Town Hall and the Grand Hotel Babylon



Ill. 9–13. Lamberto Amistadi, Axonometric drawings of the basic pyramidal elements based on progressive three-dimensional concave and convex growth; Loos's study of a spatial structure (*Baukörperstudie*); the Mexico City Town Hall, 1923; the Grand Hotel Babylon (1923)

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