



# TRANSLUCENCY

**CONTENTS:**

## Translucency

Preprint of article	I
Powerpoint presentation of paper	10

**ABSTRACT:**

Translucency – a current tendency in design seeks to blur what is seen with exquisite precision deployed in a search for vagueness.

This paper came out of indefinite musing in a haze of incomplete speculations entirely appropriate to the subject.

# Translucency

Professor Tom Heneghan (University of Sydney) & Pedro Guedes (University of Queensland).

“To Blur”, wrote Elizabeth Grosz, “is to make indistinct, to dim, to shroud, to cloud, to make vague, to obfuscate. Blur is equated with dubious. A blurry image is typically the fault of a mechanical malfunction in a display or reproduction technology. For our visually obsessed, high-resolution, high-definition culture that measures satisfaction in pixels per inch, blur is understood as a loss. Yet, blur can also be thought positively...”<sup>1</sup>

In Jesper Wachtmeister’s film ‘Kochuu’ which examines the notion of the ‘framed view’ that is fundamental to Japanese architecture, a white-suited Toyo Ito addresses the camera, standing before a translucent ‘Profilit’ glass screen.<sup>2</sup> As a background, this is an eloquent cliché, in which one reads simultaneous references to traditional Japanese *shoji* screens and to the post-modern-ironic use of industrial products out-of-context. But, while Profilit is by now a relatively elderly material, and while this backdrop would have carried much of the same symbolism at any time during recent decades, its use in this film manifestly proclaims ‘*The Contemporary*’. This paper examines the reasons for the above interpretation, and for the contemporary enthusiasm for translucency which characterises the works of Ito, Sejima, Hertzog & de Meuron, among many – their architecture appearing provisional and transient rather than definite and durable, with enormous precision deployed in a search for vagueness.

Greg Lynn has argued that our primal infantile desires, such as the urge to fly, are channelled into our adult professional activities, with architects living out their dreams of flight. But, unlike the pilot, he wrote, they “*took an oath to resist gravity without moving*”. He explained:

...unlike flying professions which involve fantasies of the vector or the moving line, unlike naval fantasies of a two-dimensional space of the

oceanic horizon, and unlike the mountaineer's search for an absolute point, the architect desires to float motionlessly and contemplatively in an abstract space. In this way, every architect is a slow astronaut, a beached sailor, a low altitude mountaineer. They are attached to a more abstract colour of blue – not sky blue, sea blue, the blue of swimming in deep water or the distant blue of the earth's atmosphere when seen from outer space. The blue that architects like is **flat**.

Every architect sits on an abstract mountaintop, bounded by an artificial horizon, contemplating the colour blue, daydreaming about floating. It is the hatred of gravity that gives architects their implacable inertia and their love of flatness.<sup>3</sup>

The ambiguity of the 'flatness' in Lynn's argument – this flat blue – is presciently-expressed in stills from Stanley Kubrick's 1968 Movie '2001, A Space Odyssey' where the future - which we have now overtaken - was imagined as a time in which insecurities and uncertainties are routed by technological achievements, and are replaced by certainty and calmness – as expressed in scenes of flat light – in which the light itself appears 'weightless' – spaces with no shadow, with no sense of depth and no sense of volume. Spaces which are not very different from those now being created by almost all of the most celebrated contemporary Japanese architects, particularly Kazuyo Sejima and Toyo Ito, but also by many Western architects such as Herzog & de Meuron and Peter Zumthor, all of whom were included in the 1995 exhibition 'Light Construction' at New York's MOMA.

In the catalogue for that exhibition, the curator Terence Riley wrote:

In recent years a new architectural sensibility has emerged, one that not only reflects the distance of our culture from the machine aesthetic of the early 20thC but marks a fundamental shift in emphasis after three decades when debate about architecture focussed on issues of form....contemporary designers are investigating the nature and potential of architectural surfaces...(and) the meanings they may convey.<sup>4</sup>

This idea of Riley's, that the focus has shifted from form to surface in contemporary architecture, is challenged, to a degree, by the formalistic extravagance of Gehry's Bilbao, and works such as CCTV by Koolhaas and the Hamburg Philharmonic Hall by Herzog & de Meuron. But, he is correct in identifying a concern, also in the above works, for the creation of surfaces which deny, or confuse the perception of volume through the play of ambiguity, through

translucency, layering, reflection, and other strategies of obfuscation - for example, as at the copper-mesh covered 'Het Oosten' "New Pavilion" in Amsterdam by Steven Holl (2002), as at the 'moiré-pattern-skinned' Louis Vuitton shops of Jun Aoki and as at the mirror-printed glass walls of the Museum of Art in Lille (1997) by Ibos and Vitart. One must ask, though, whether such 'Light Construction', as Riley suggests, has the status of a new and emerging 'architectural sensibility', with the landmark, transformative impact that implies, or whether this is only a passing stylistic preference. And, if the former, one must ask what meanings such a sensibility might be trying to convey by their artifice, since these buildings of apparent fugitive materiality and transient fragility are in fact no less solid and permanent than architecture which is overtly wedded to delight in form.

The Dutch architecture critic Ole Bouman, writing of his design collaborations with Kas Oosterhuis, has denied the relevance of architecture's physicality, arguing that it is a mistake to focus on the constructional aspects of architecture's transition from solidity towards lightness when the social and programmatic issues are more important. With the diminishing power of church, state, and social hierarchy which were its customary patrons, he argues, architecture faces a re-assessment of purpose.

As a cultural carrier, architecture may become superfluous...What does it mean to draw boundaries in a society where entire environments are intermixed by means of sensor and display technology and interface design?... What does the future hold for architecture when any of its buildings can be animated and transformed by projections and electronic displays?...In addition to striving after ever-lighter structures, transparent and translucent walls, and gravity defying curvilinear forms, architecture can now, via film, become truly immaterial...Who will be the first architect to win an Oscar for best director?<sup>5</sup>

A similar notion has been expressed by Kazuyo Sejima:

Young people, especially in Tokyo, don't have any expectations about architects, only of more general activities or events...Physical context is

still very important, but everyday we receive information via mobile phones or e-mail, so the context surrounding us now is really a virtual one.<sup>6</sup>

In Japan, Sejima's architecture is considered to be part of 'Superflat' culture – Superflat being a term, rather than a movement, coined by the painter Takeshi Murakami, to describe the artworks of his studio, in which the lack of depth found in traditional Japanese painting is brought together with a similar lack of depth in early manga, forming a visual product which is simultaneously figurative and abstract, innocent and challenging, provocative and superficial - the quintessence of ambiguity. Paralleling the comments of both Bouman and Sejima, the critic Hiroki Azuma has written of the origins of Superflat in a post-war Japanese society which is:

... little by little losing the value of 'Depth', the value of something behind the visible or perceptible things we are confronted with in our daily lives. It may be God, Truth, Justice, Nation, Ideology or Subject, depending on the cultural context, and all such 'grand' things are now losing credibility.<sup>7</sup>

As Murakami has explained, "Superflat is based in the post-war Asian society which is based on ephemeral values, where the hierarchical structure of society has been destroyed."<sup>8</sup> He intends his works to reflect Japanese society, being disingenuously innocent of perspective and devoid of hierarchy, with everything existing equally and simultaneously. However, unlike Bouman and Oosterhuis, Superflat aims to say little, if anything. It is a movement with, intentionally, no direction, and is intellectually reactive rather than provocative. It is uncommitted to anything much, including overt creativity and authorship, being an art of cut and paste, with its music made by sampling and mixing.

Although the situation of Japan is extreme – having had two cities incinerated by atomic bombs, the Emperor announcing on radio that he is no longer a God, and the collapse of the post-war economic miracle by which the people sought to redeem themselves – a similar de-stabilisation and confusion is sensed internationally. Frederick Jameson expressed a similar understanding to Murakami when he wrote of "significant differences between the high-modernist

and the postmodernist moment [here he is talking about culture, not architectural style]...The first and most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense”.<sup>9</sup> And, Paulo Virilio wrote that in a world connected by jet planes, satellite TV and the internet, “there is no longer any ‘here’, everything is ‘now’.”<sup>10</sup>

It is the conventional proposition that architecture and art are the products and representations of their age, and it is the argument of the above interpretations that the ambiguity of much contemporary architecture is a reflection of the ambiguity and paradoxes of contemporary society - not an issue of preferred appearance or materiality. It is certainly not an exploitation of newly-available building materials since obscured glass pre-dates clear glass and was a feature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century works by Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. It could, however, be seen as simply the stylisation of a pragmatic solutions to the issues of environmental sustainability which have become increasingly fundamental to architecture during the past decades. Norman Foster’s 1989 project at the Stockley Business Park in the UK maximised natural illumination and minimised thermal gain by the application of frit which transformed the windows into diaphanous sheets. In Australia, at Rosebery House (1997) by Andresen & O’Gorman, and Peninsula house by Sean Godsell, the window-walls were shadowed by thin, closely-spaced screens of timber slats which examine the same thin-layered veiled aesthetic as does Kengo Kuma in his Museum of Hiroshige Ando, as do Mecanoo at the University of Utrecht, and as also do Herzog and de Meuron in the metal mesh veils of their de Young Museum, although in the latter example the veiling is stylised beyond climatic response and has become a flamboyant ambiguity of form.

One possible understanding, therefore, is that architectural response to the increasing ambiguity of society has coincided with techniques of environmental control through layering, with a resulting urge towards the vague, the diaphanous and the translucent which brands an internationally-shared contemporary

sensibility. Or, given the disproportionately large number of Japanese architects represented in the MOMA 'Light Architecture' exhibition, it might plausibly be argued that this is all a stylistic flavour derived from the contemporary Japanese architecture of Ando and Ito, etc, which is itself derived from the spatial ambiguity and translucent Shoji screens of Japan's traditional houses, in which the traditional Japanese sensibility favoured partial disclosure rather than exposition – as seen in artists representations of whole towns and landscapes as glimpses seen through gaps in clouds and mist, and as seen in the framing of views on which Jesper Wachtmeister based his film. This is a continuing sensibility found also in the 'haiku' form of poetry in which the listener or reader is required to piece together the full scene from the meagre three sentences presented. It is a culture in which the full scene is extrapolated from glimpses, and in which hints empower the imagination.

However, in considering the many meanings of architectural translucency, it is essential to note the immense influence of Pierre Chareau's 'Maison de Verre' (1932) - a reference point for all contemporary architects which was neglected by historians from the time of its construction until Kenneth Frampton brought it to notice in 1969. Frampton, however, comments that the house's mix of clear and translucent glass walls were "ambiguous characteristics which would surely have been anathema to the fresh air and hygiene cult of the mainstream Modern Movement"<sup>11</sup> – a curious comment which ignores Le Corbusier's Maisons Clarte of the same year as Maison de Verre, and his later Molitor Apartments which have precisely the same characteristics, and also ignores the strip-windows of Le Corbusier's '5 points' in which it was the evenness of the light, not the view, with which Le Corbusier was concerned. Chareau's interior clearly fulfils the ambitions of Ludwig Hilberseimer, in his essay on glass architecture published 4 years before the completion of Chareau and Le Corbusier's houses, who wrote in admiration of London's Crystal Palace as having "obliterated the old opposition of light and shadow...It made a space of evenly distributed brightness; it created a room of shadowless light".<sup>12</sup>



The walls of the Maison de Verre were of 20cm x 20cm x 4cm glass tiles, flat on the outside surface, with a hollow circular moulding on their inner face to reduce their weight and refract and diffuse daylight. They were based on patents owned by the American Luxfer company which in the 1880's had begun making glass prism walls which distributed light deep into the space they enclosed, and which they presented as a natural, healthier alternative to the lighting technologies of the time:

Prisms, without loss, without any cost of maintenance, displace gas and electric lights, and in their place give pure, healthful light. Heat, noxious vapours, dirt and disease give way before the Creator's pure light of day.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, a research report commissioned at that time by the Luxfer company pointed out that:

The room most easily lighted is one with a high ceiling, with perfectly plain walls unbroken by offsets of any kind, with whitewashed walls and ceiling, and finally, a room devoid of furniture.<sup>14</sup>

– which is an approximate description of the Maison de Verre, and a specification for most of the subsequent enclosures of early Modernist architecture.

In our current era of affordable electricity and advanced lighting technology it is almost impossible to appreciate the revolutionary environmental impact of glass prism and glass block walls at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and consequently the Maison de Verre is understood by most contemporary architects as only a stylistic reference. When Renzo Piano designed his Hermes shop in Tokyo (2000) he did not use glass block walls to reduce his client's electric lighting bill. Quite the reverse – he conceived his building as a lantern from which light glows out. In the case of the Hermes building, and of Sejima's Dior building in the same city – both being for elite fashion manufacturers – it can not plausibly be argued that their translucency represents a non-hierarchical contemporary society. Their translucency is that of

architecture as an illuminated billboard which denies its terrestrial requirements of structure, and construction, and enclosure of the messy possessions and activities of its users. In its denial of signs of its usage, in its purity and its mystique, it seeks only to project an 'aura' of presence as light.

Translucent glass is the most paradoxical of construction materials. Being either opaque or transparent, depending on an object's proximity to it and its percentage of diffusion, it is both a lens through which things are viewed, and the picture-plane on which their image is seen. It gives light to an interior, but unlike transparent glass it itself appears illuminated. It can 'contain' light. If it is sandblasted glass, with no surface reflection, it has solidity but little physical materiality. While clear glass has the ambition to not exist, but reveals itself through surface reflection, translucent glass announces its existence, and consequently is explicit about creating a boundary at its hazy glowing surface. Interiors are emancipated from external context through this serene and muted separation, and the enclosed space surrenders its volume to the softness of the shadows.

One might wonder whether spending, as we all do, more time with a glowing computer screen than with any person, we respond to buildings and surfaces which contain and emanate light as recognisable representations of our contemporaneity. But, one might also consider the possibility that it is not society nor technology which has been setting the translucent/flat agenda in architecture, but the works of the artist James Turrell. Turrell has been creating his extraordinary light works for over three decades, often in spaces designed specifically for them by architects such as Ando and Sejima and Herzog & de Meuron. Turrell's works imply depth, but have none. They have no agenda. They do nothing. But, they require, and get, the solemnity of our complete attention. Reminding us of Greg Lynn's quote, they offer us a flat blue in which to float. If translucence in architecture has any single meaning, it may possibly be that architects really want to be James Turrell.

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- <sup>1</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. 2001. *Anything*. MIT Press. P133.
- <sup>2</sup> Wachtmeister, Jesper. 2003. 'Kochuu: Japanese Architecture, Influence and Origin'. Solaris Filmproduction, Sweden. Brooklyn, NY : First Run/Icarus Films, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> Greg Lyn, *The Architect*, Available online at:  
<http://www.syndicaat.org/sohibook/gl.html>
- <sup>4</sup> Riley, Terence. 1995. *Light Construction*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, P9.
- <sup>5</sup> Bouman, Ole. 'The Cities of Everyday Life'. *Sarai Reader 2002*, P 240.
- <sup>6</sup> Davidson, Cynthia (ed). *Anymore*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000, P139.
- <sup>7</sup> Azuma, Hiroki. 2001. 'Superflat Japanese Postmodernity.' Available online  
[www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat\\_en2.html](http://www.hirokiazuma.com/en/texts/superflat_en2.html)
- <sup>8</sup> Murakami, Takeshi. Lecture at Royal Academy, London. Available online at  
[www.royalacademy.org.uk/?lid=831](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/?lid=831).
- <sup>9</sup> Jameson, Frederic. 1991. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, New York: Verso, P 9
- <sup>10</sup> Virilio, Paul. 1997. *Open Sky*. Translated by Julie Rose. New York: Verso, P 142.
- <sup>11</sup> Frampton, Kenneth. 1985. *Pierre Chareau, Architect and Craftsman 1883 – 1950*. Rizzoli, New York. P242.
- <sup>12</sup> Hilberseimer, Ludwig. 1929. 'Glasarchitektur', *Die Form* 4. Translated by Vera Neukirchen. Quoted in: Riley, Terence. 1995. *Light Construction*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- <sup>13</sup> From 1897 Luxfer advertisement, quoted in: Neuman, Dietrich. 1995. 'The Century's Triumph in Lighting: The Luxfer Prism Companies and their Contribution to Early Modern Architecture'. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 54:1, March 1995, P 25.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*, P 35

## Speculations on Translucency

...The World is Flat!





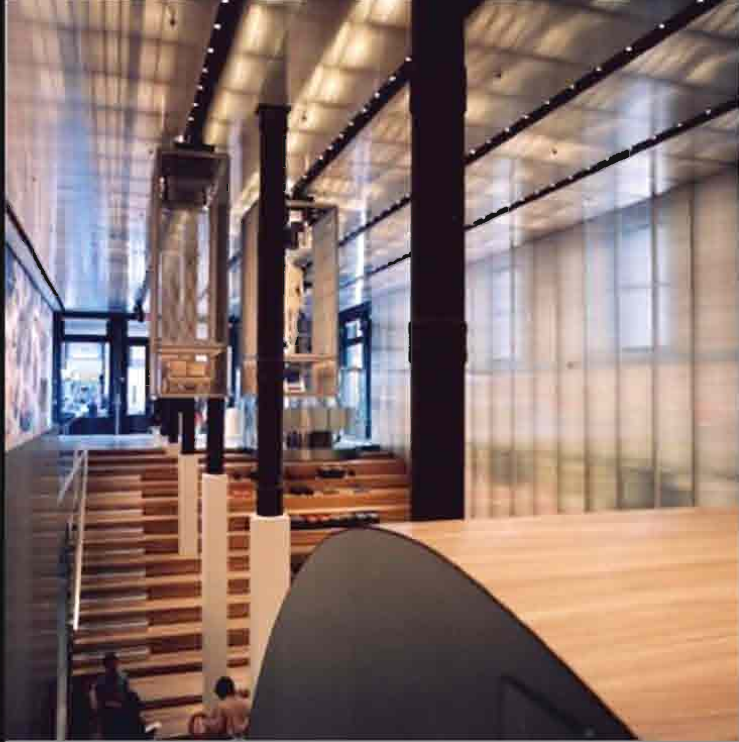




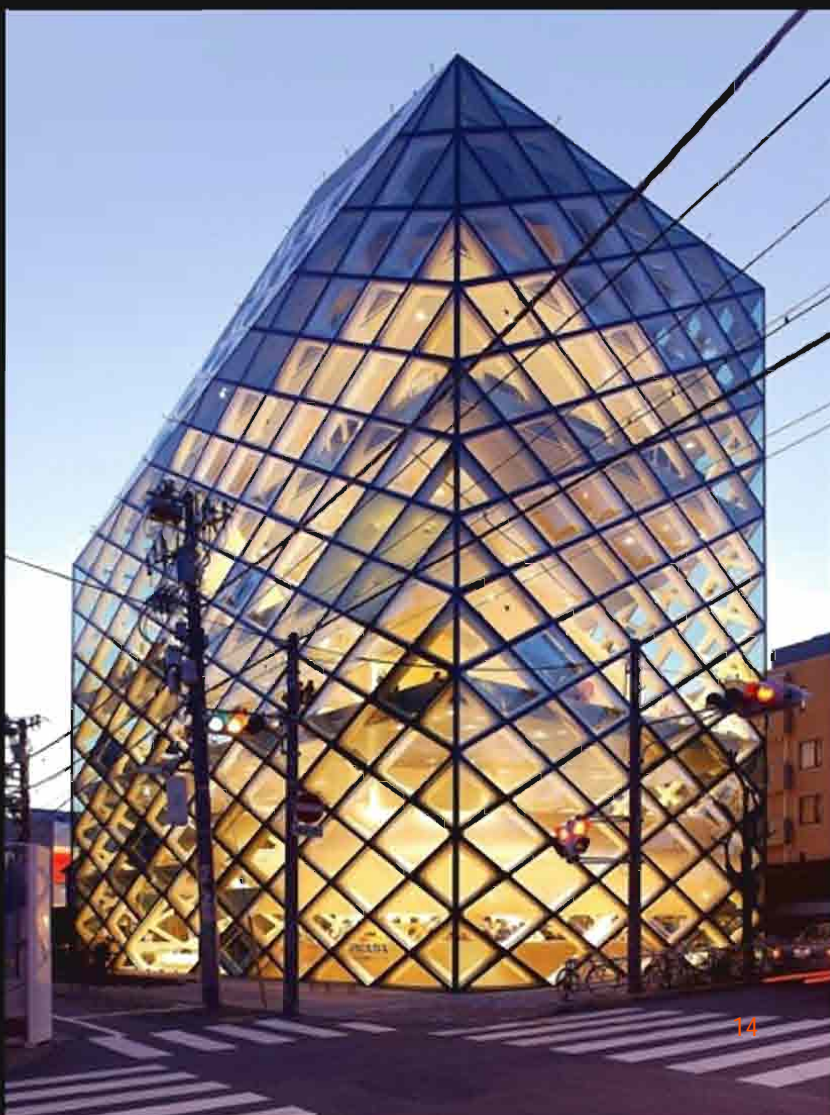
Louis Vuitton Nagoya Aoki



Louis Vuitton Tokyo Aoki

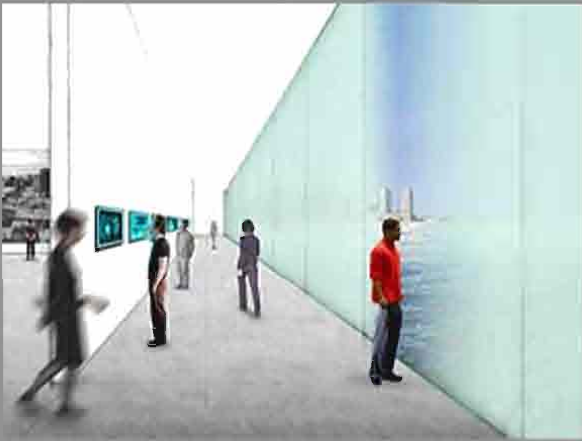


Prada NY Rem Koolhaas



Prada Tokyo Herzog + de Meuron

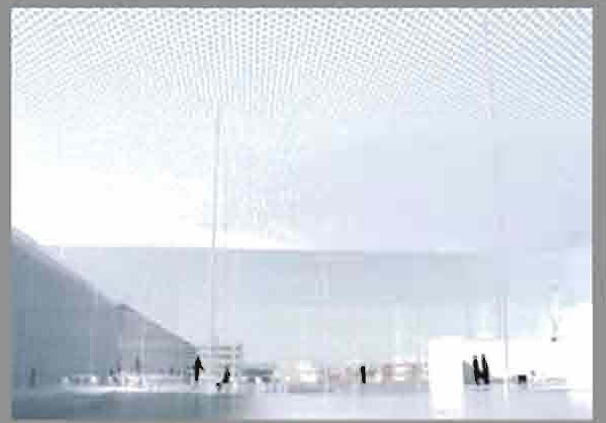




ICA Boston, Diller + Scofidio



Dior, Tokyo. SANAA



IVAM, Valencia, SANAA



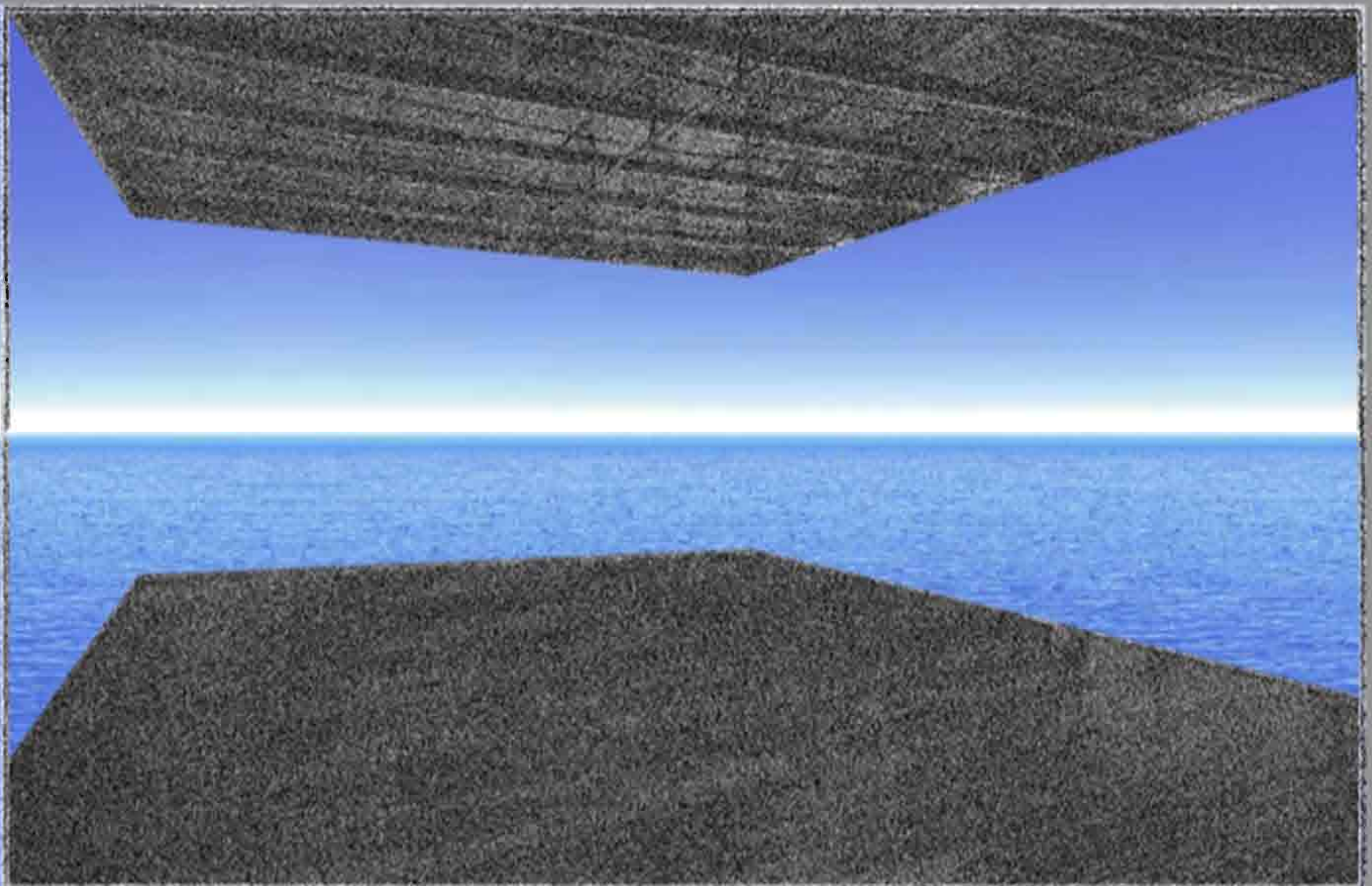
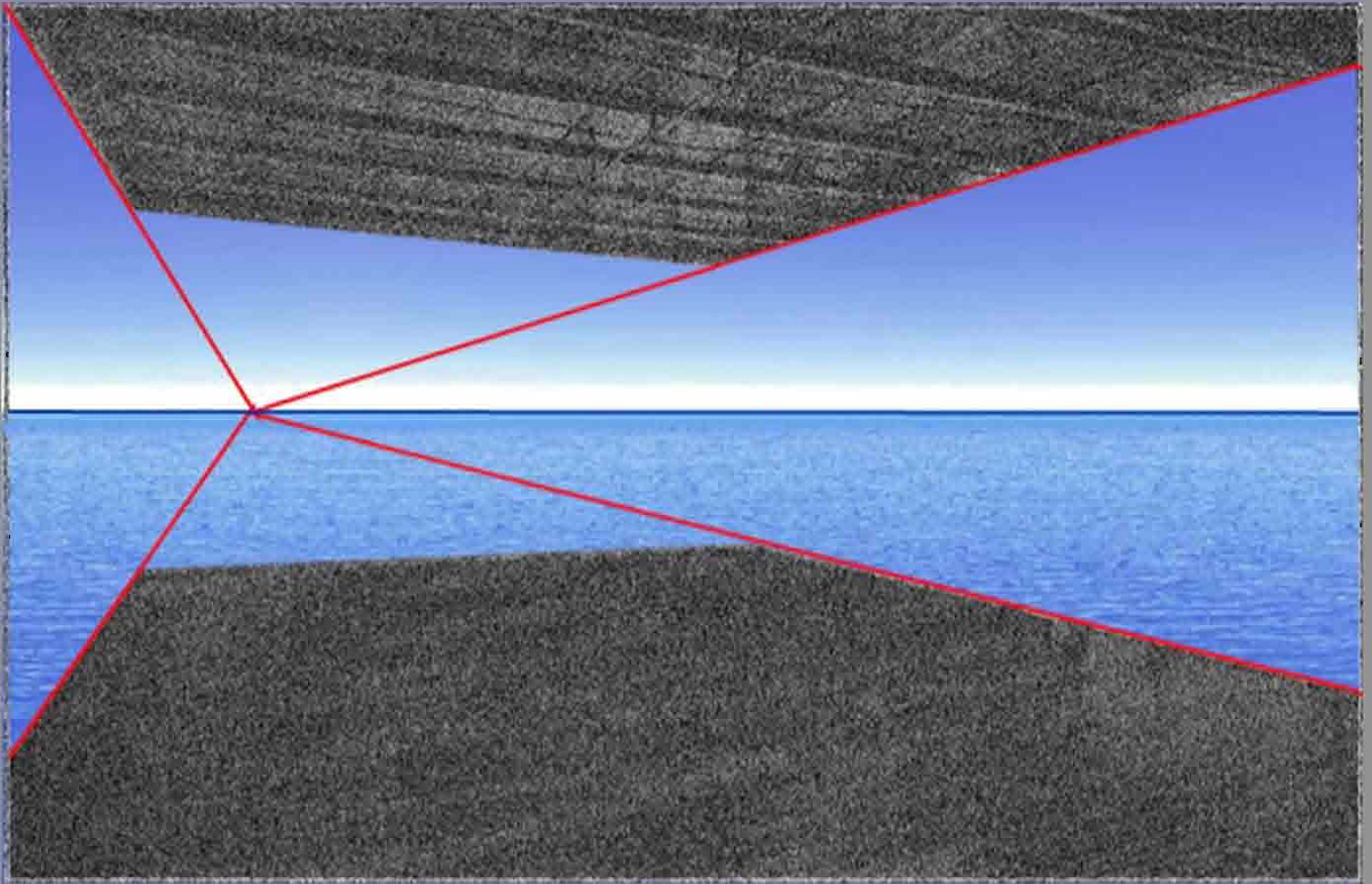
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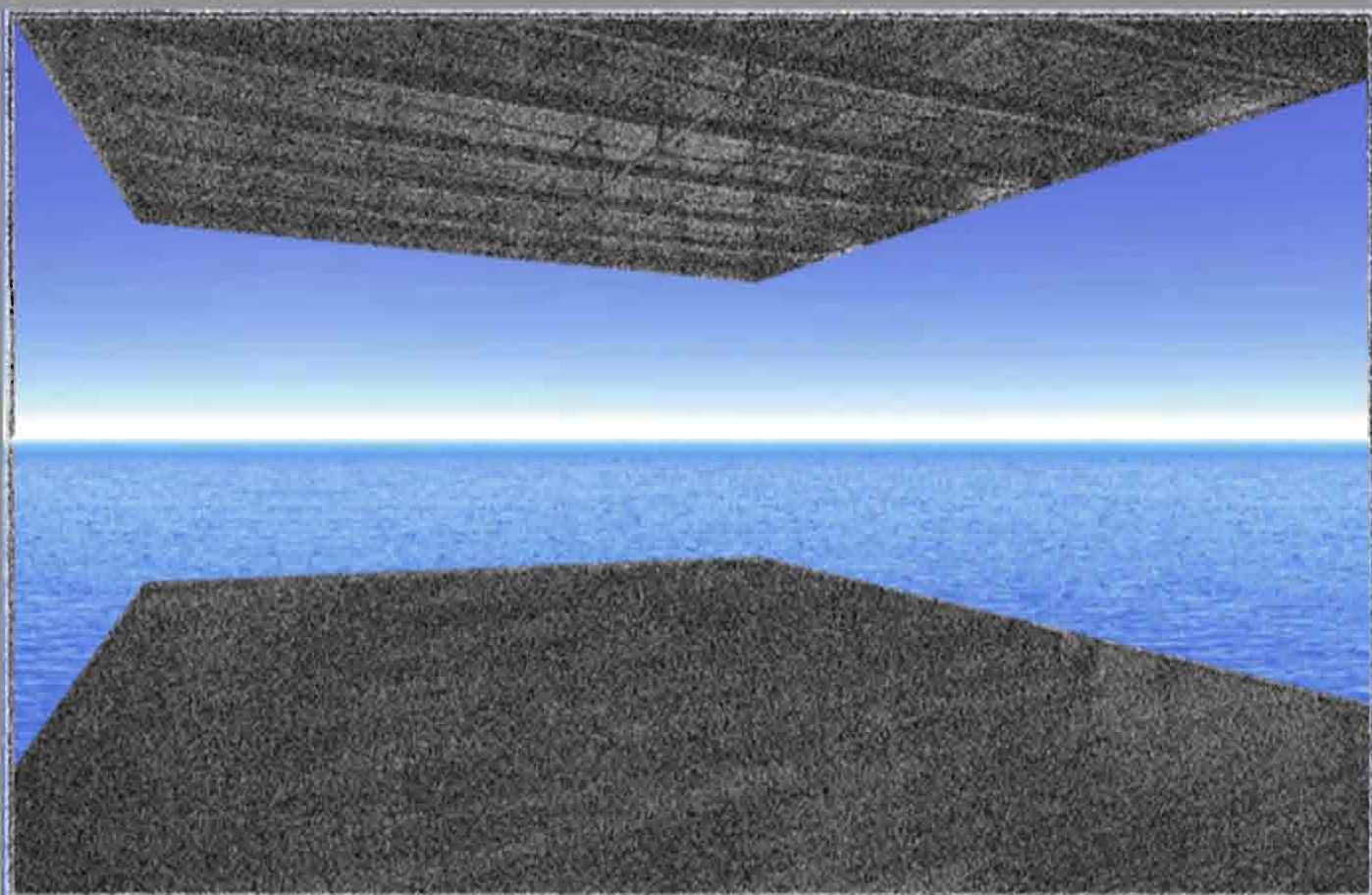
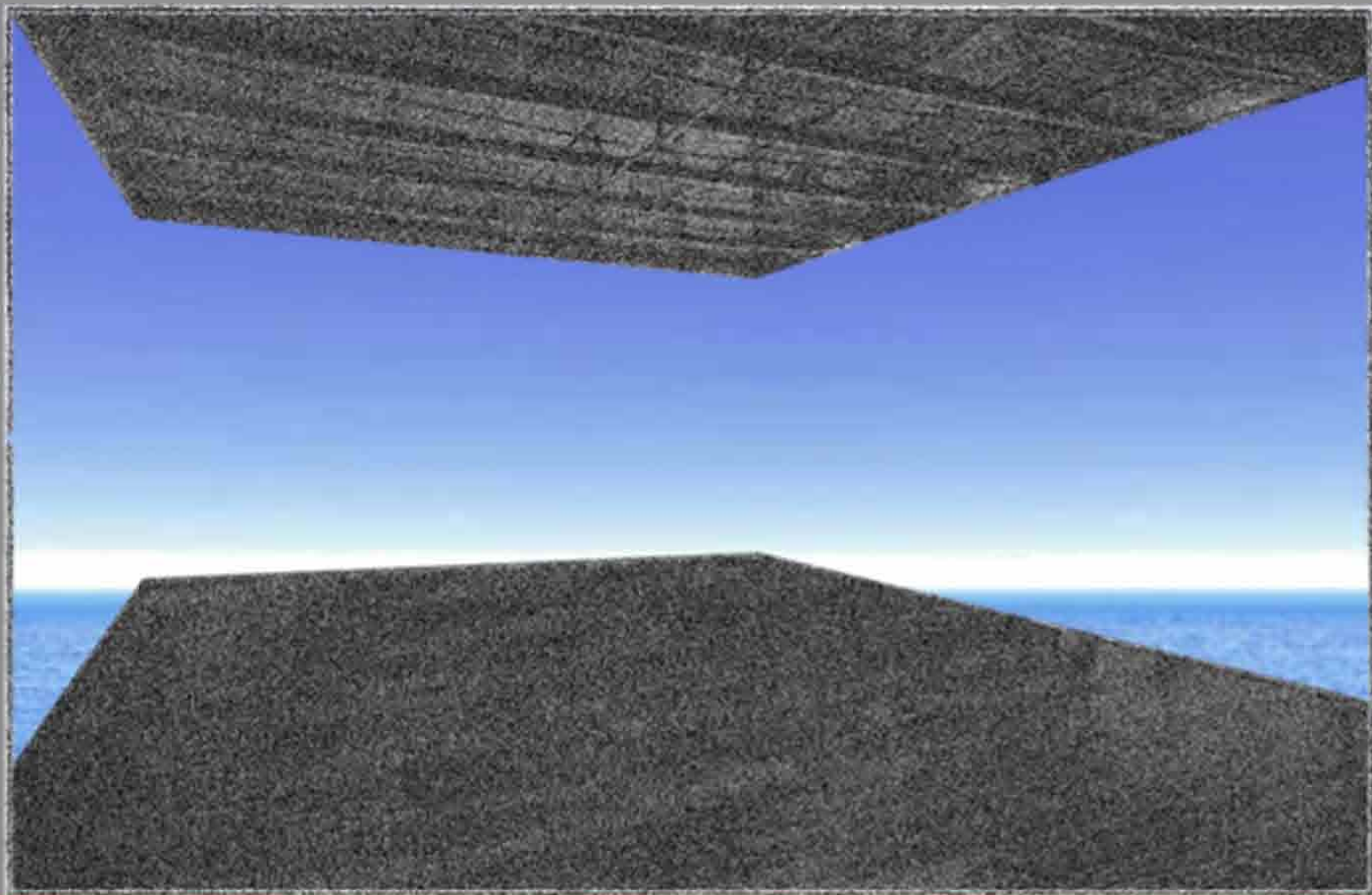


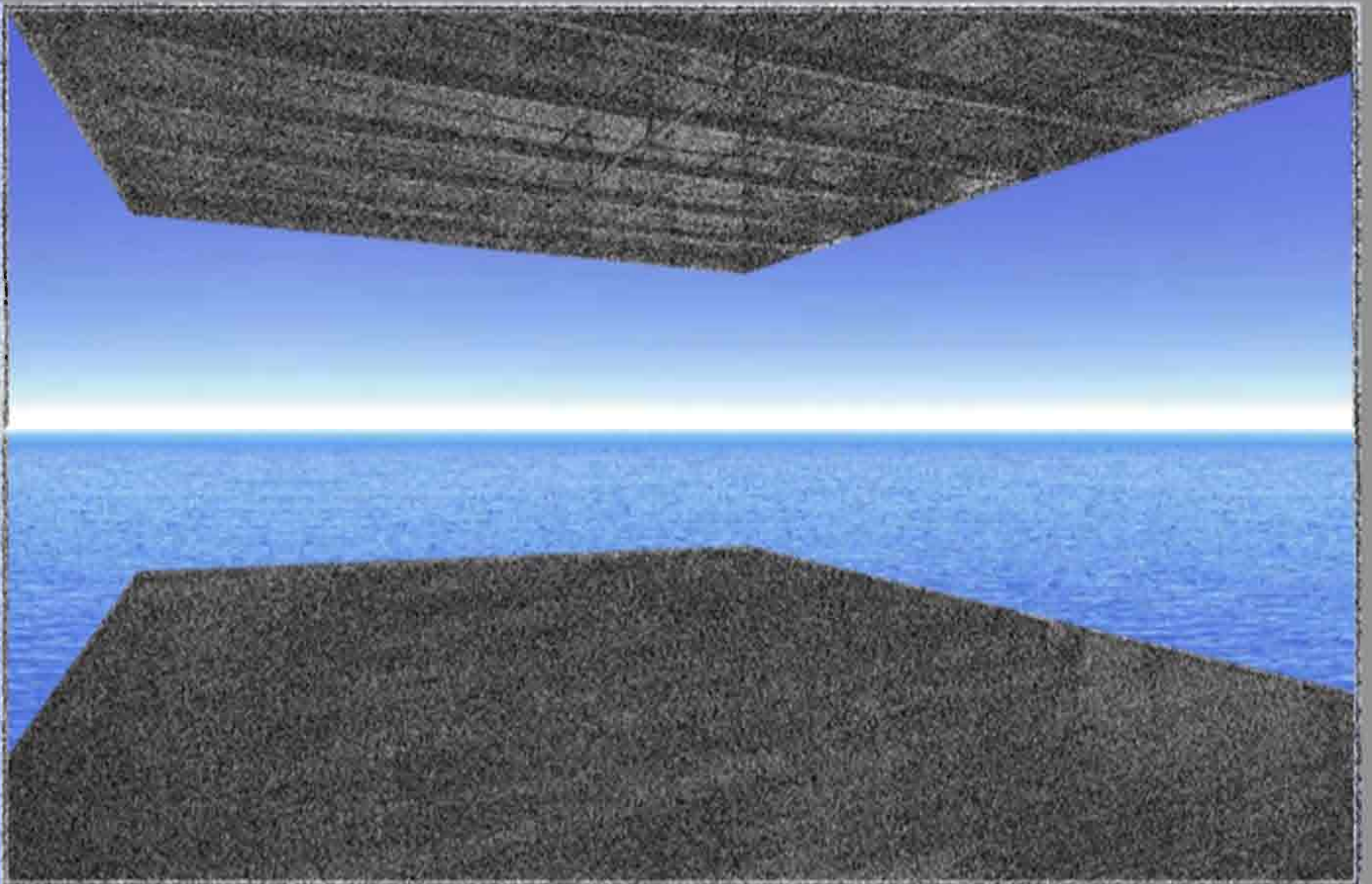
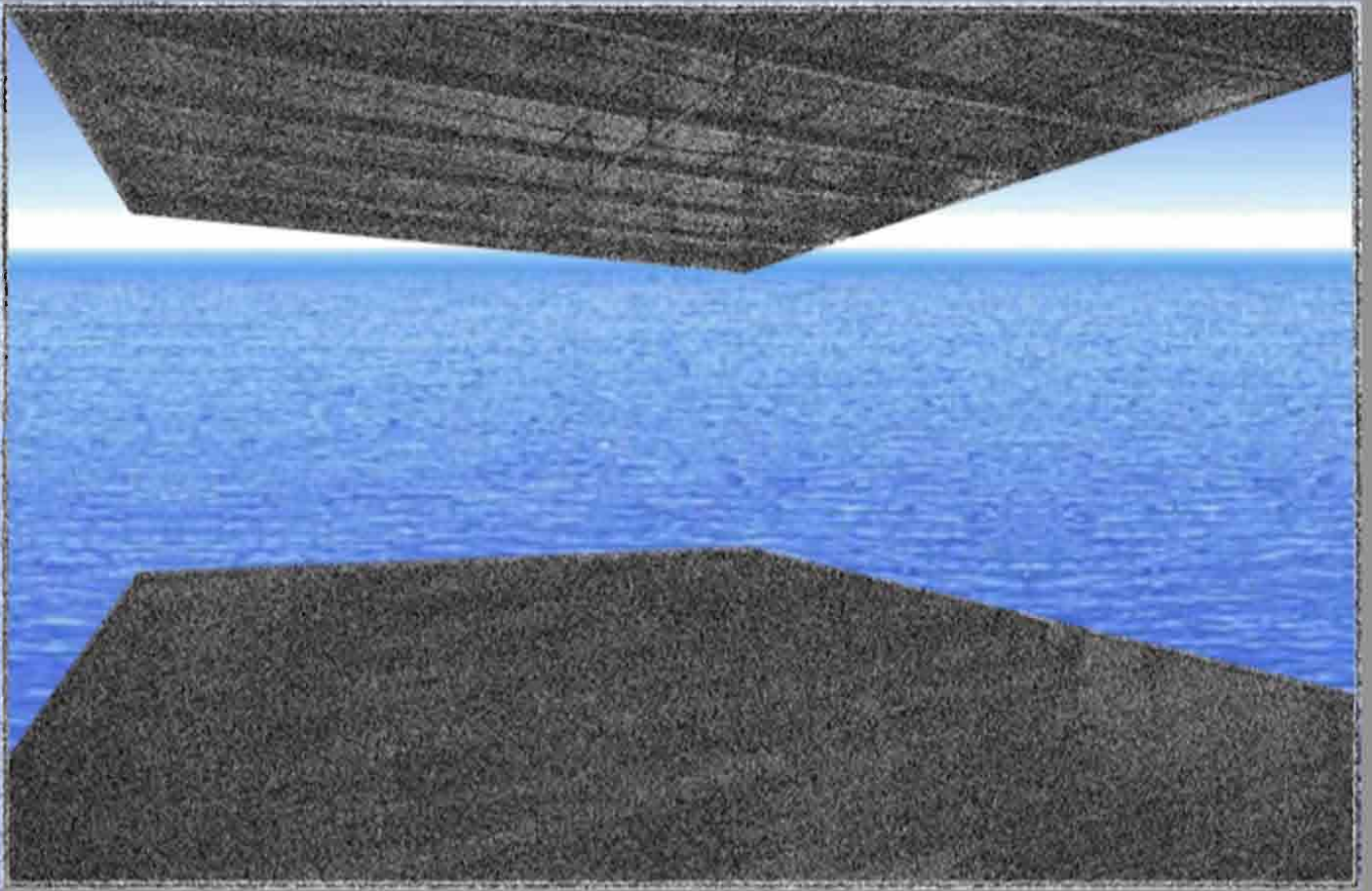


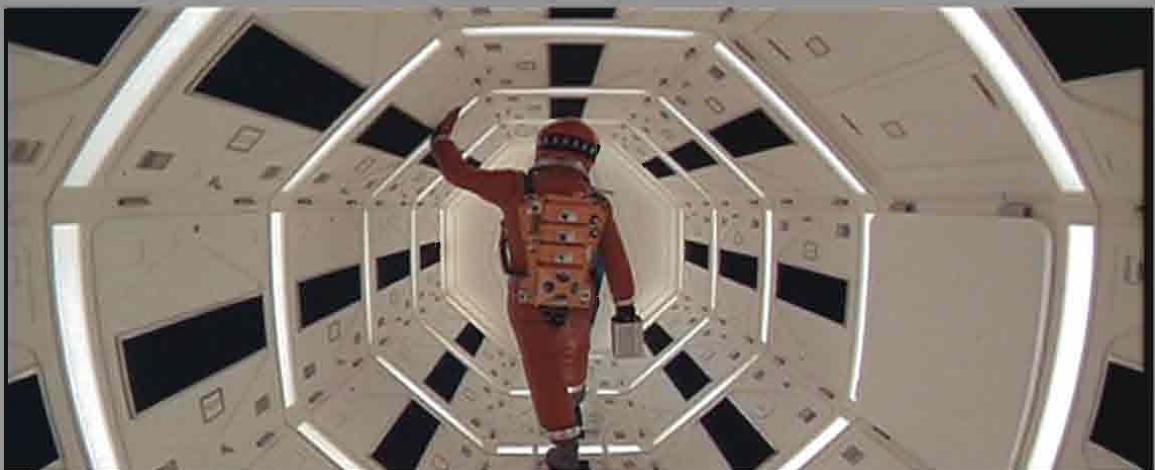
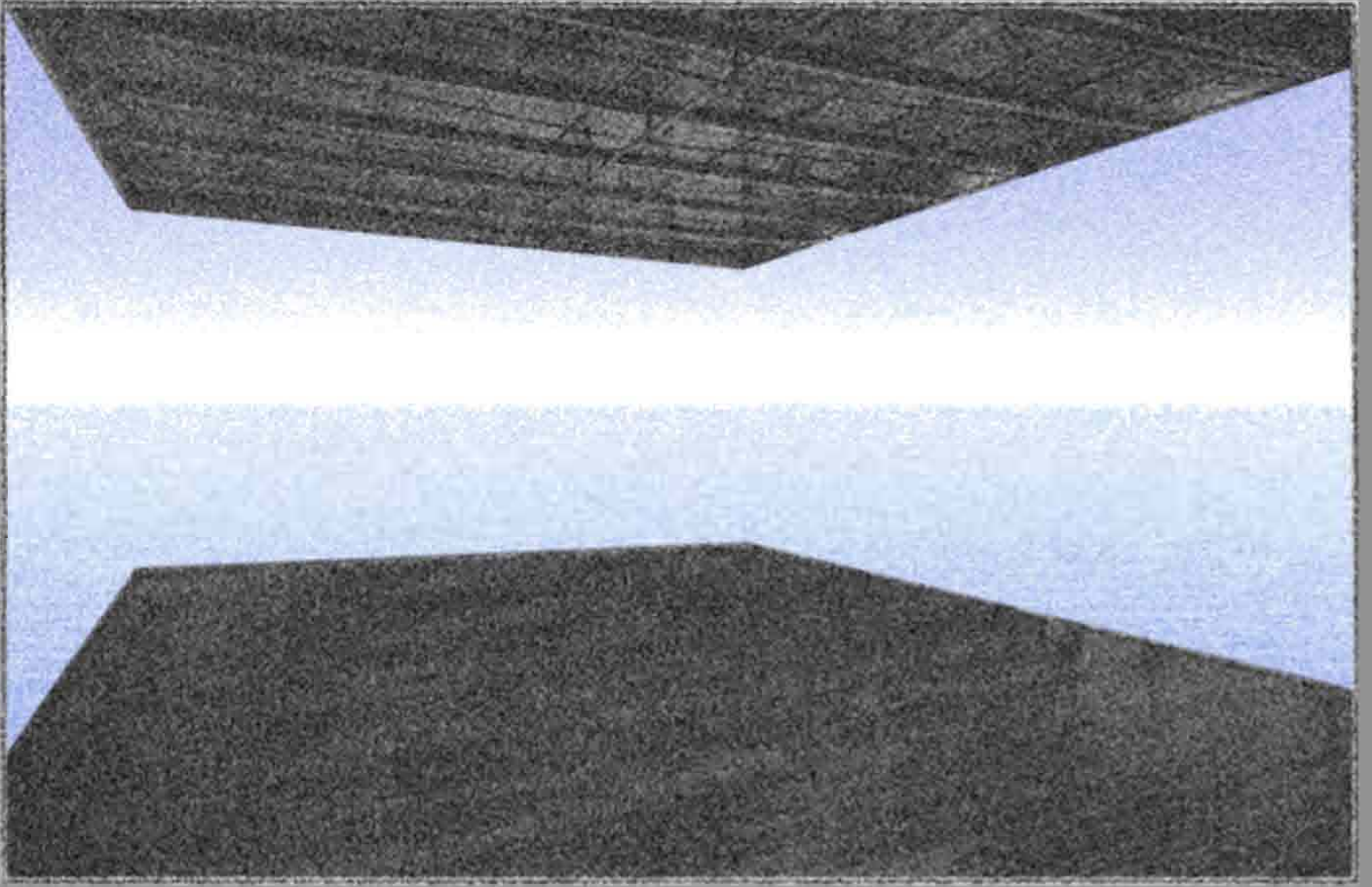
Shopping centre Graz





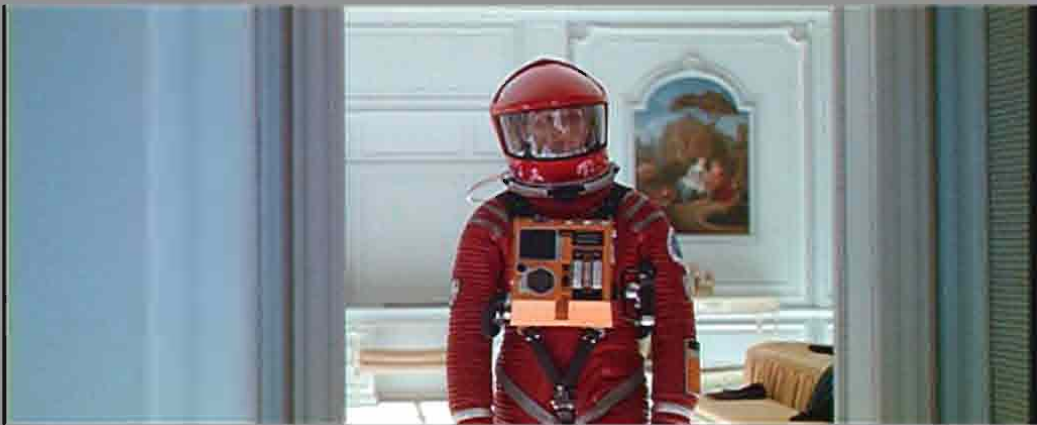




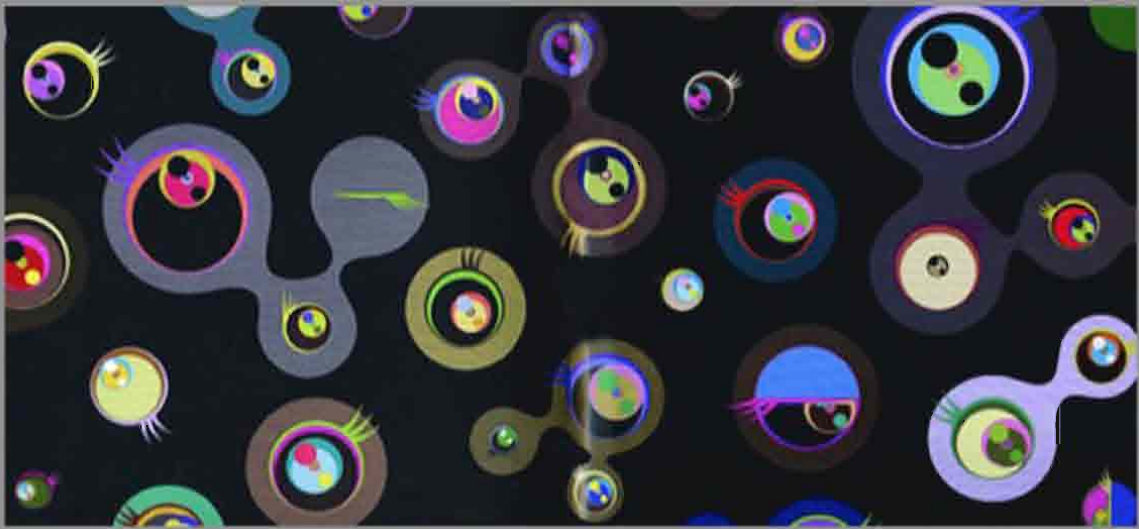


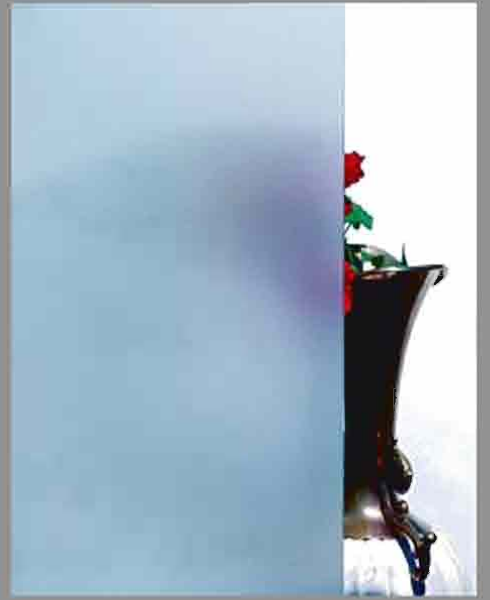
















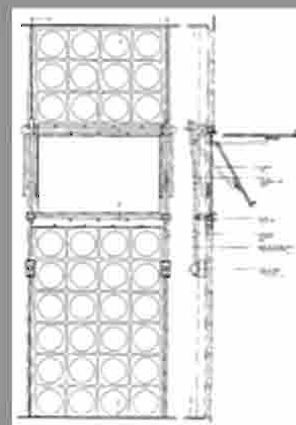


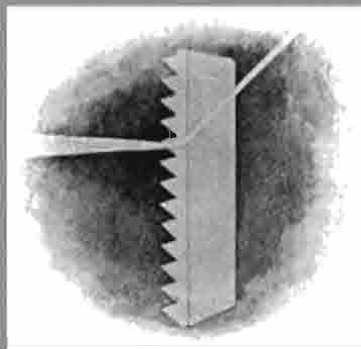




Akari, Isamu Noguchi







Use daylight in dark rooms by means of



# Luxfer Prisms



Without the Luxfer Prisms.

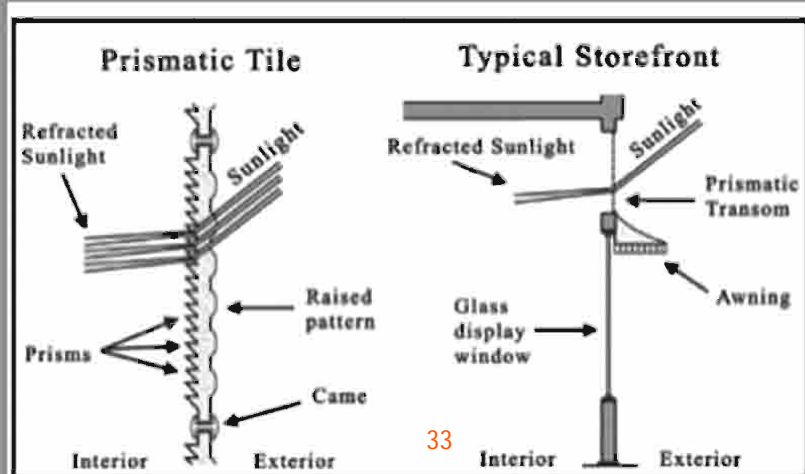
For all buildings from cottages to office structures at prices to correspond. Basements, long dark passages and all dark places made as light as day. Have your architect specify **Luxfer Prisms**.

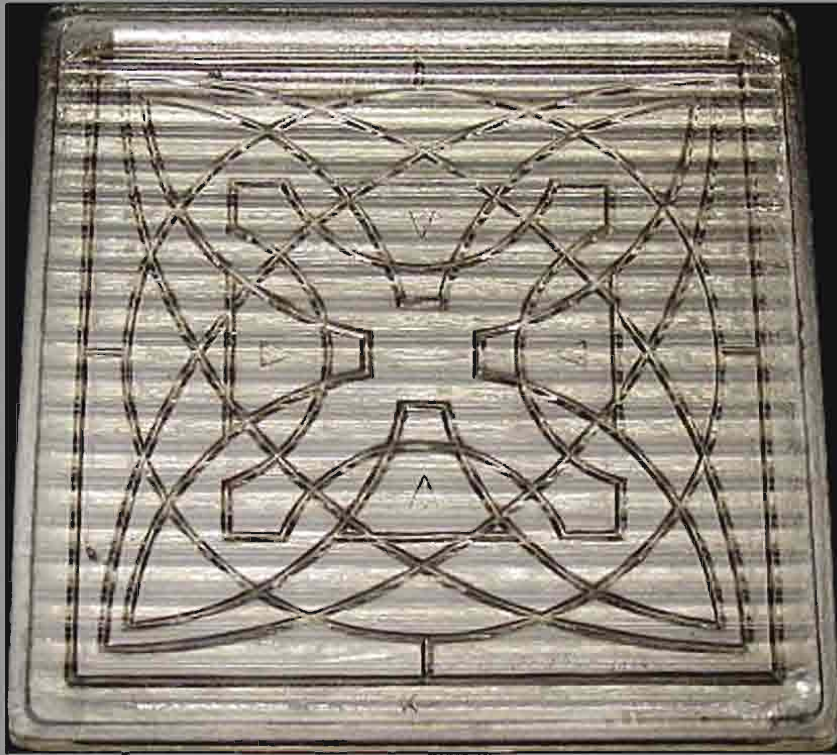
Write Chicago office for booklet giving all practical uses of the Luxfer Prisms.

**AMERICAN LUXFER PRISM CO.**  
 Main Office and Factory, 377 Fulton Street, CHICAGO.  
 142 Fifth Avenue, NEW YORK. 17 Federal Street, BOSTON.



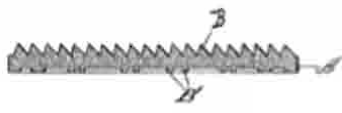
With the Luxfer Prisms.

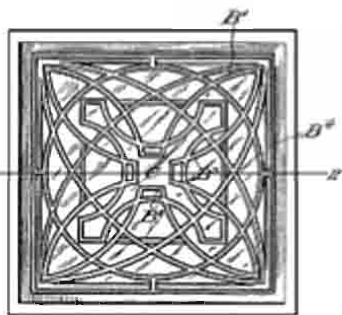




**DESIGN.**  
**F. L. WRIGHT.**  
**PRISM LIGHT.**

No. 27,977. Patented Dec. 7, 1897.

*Fig. 2.* 

*Fig. 1.* 

*Witnesses:*  
*H. Roy Chapman*  
*Charles Basque*

*Inventor:*  
*Frank L. Wright*  
*by Francis W. [unclear]*

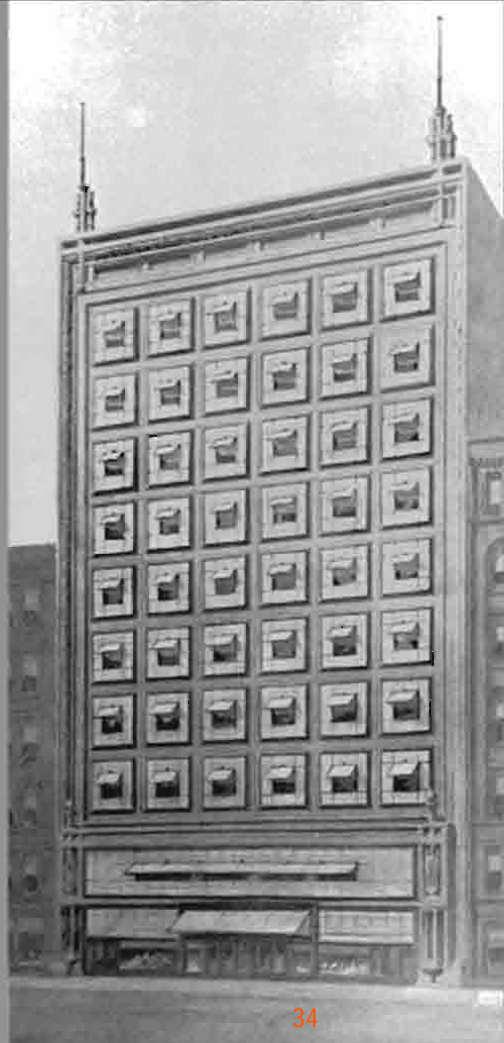
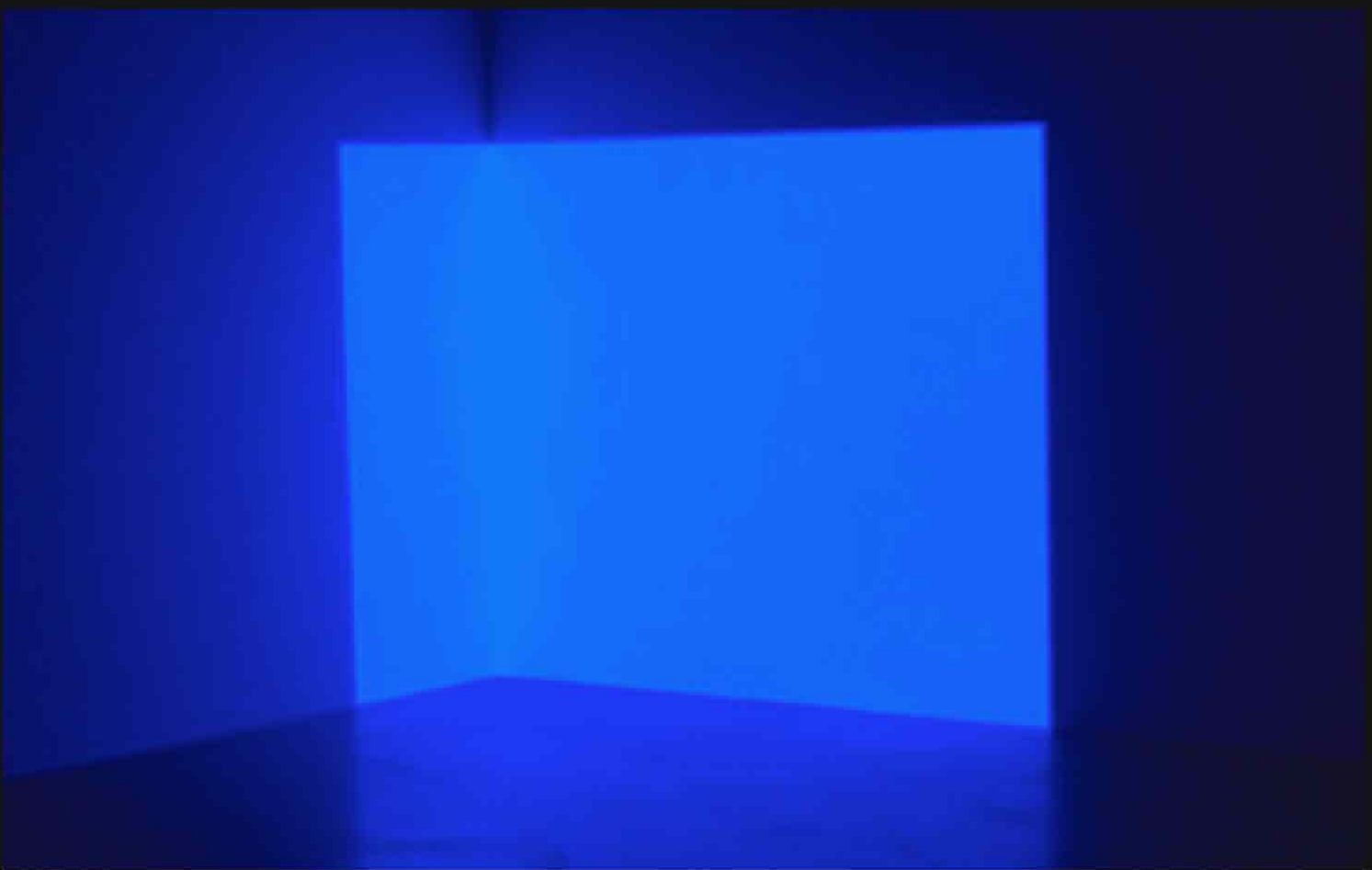


FIG. 10: Frank Lloyd Wright, Luxfer Prism Skyscraper, Design No. 1, 1897, from *The Island News and Architect Record* (January 1898).



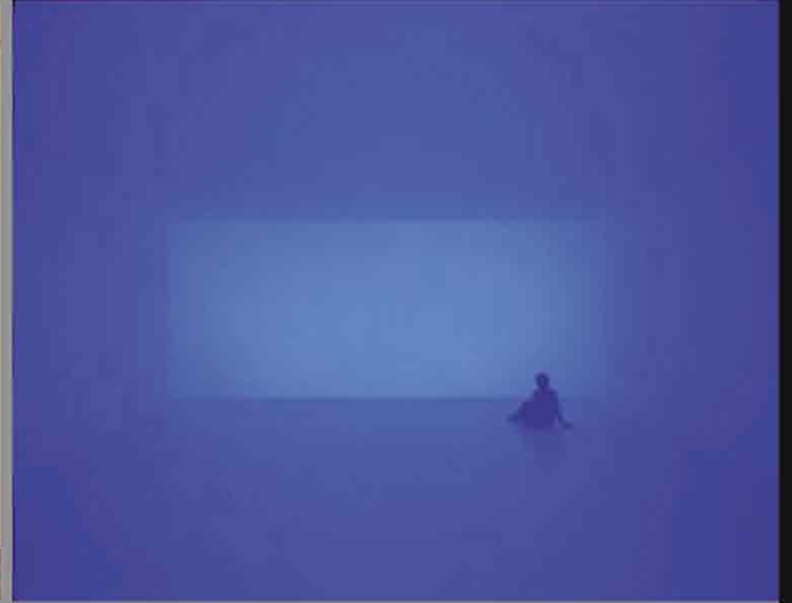




Turrell night passage 1987



Turrell Wideout 1998



Turrell Spread-2003



BLURRED, FUZZY, OBSCURE, GLOWING, IRRIDESCENT,  
OBFUSCATED, DISSOLVING ETC ETC.