

Reflections On Light

Nader Tehrani
Principal, NADAAA
Juror



Dark After Art, Rolando López
2017, Artspace San Antonio



Into the Light, James Turrell
MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA

What might an architecture without light entail? Rolando López's *Dark After Art* installation posits a response by evacuating a room from any source of light, except for one votive candle that sparingly insinuates a point of light so dim and distant, that it requires the eye some minutes to dilate enough to see the various hues of darkness that make shades of space. Similarly, though inversely, James Turrell's *Into The Light* illuminates a space of depth so obscure that the eye intuitively rejects its flatness, even after we discover the ambiguities of its illusion. In both instances, the extremities of luminance produce architectural conditions that are measured by the most miniscule of units, whether in millimetres or footcandles.

We rarely get to speculate with phenomena so pure through buildings, even if these installations are intrinsically architectural in their manipulation of spatial conditions. In all, light is the protagonist, even if its study is rarely mandated as part of foundational pedagogies in architecture schools. Tom Phifer's studio at Georgia Tech begs to differ. Impeccable as he is in the detailing of his "objects" as an architect, as teacher his pedagogies always evade the physicality of form in the first instance, deferring to the phenomena of light as the conduit through which a plan or section may be conceptualized.



Corning Museum of Glass
2015, Thomas Phifer and Partners



Rock Creek House
2015, NADAAA

And this is what we witnessed as a jury, engaged with the many instantiations of how light may be made present in the formation of an architectural idea. As critics on a jury, the presumption is that we are there for students to share our wisdom, but in fact, the opposite is as much the case: we sit on juries discovering the speculative wisdom of students, opening up new ideas and strategies. And this year's jury was no exception, with a wealth of ideas, projects, and strategies.

Entering into this discussion for the first time, I was prompted to rethink our own work in terms of light: something we have of course considered, but not in the first instance. Our bias stems from an intellectual investment in material operations, the aggregation of construction units, the inevitability of a 'tectonic grain' that is its result, and the production of a 'catalytic' detail that demonstrates its versatility in adapting to many conditions. In thinking of several projects as case studies, I am also reminded that each addresses the question of light in significantly distinct ways. Accordingly, the staircase of the Rock Creek House focuses on the tectonics of wood, taking advantage of the oculus above to draw the light into the laminar crenellations of the stacked plywood.



Northeastern University
Interfaith Center
1998, NADAAA

Located in the core of the Ell Center, where there is no access to natural light, the design of the Northeastern University Interfaith Hall entails the introduction of a glass wall, offset within the existing space to produce a cavity of light. Using artificial lighting, the idea of the project was to produce the illusion of depth, where there was none, shingling sheets of colored glass randomly such that they render a perception of spatial ambiguity beyond the picture plane of the glass.

At the University of Nebraska, access to natural light was not lacking, but the challenge was to mitigate its excess by creating a translucent wall that invites diffused northern light such that it does not challenge work on computer screens. With the adoption of fiber-reinforced polymer panels, we were able to incorporate an insulation cavity within the wall system, all while allowing the glazing to glow in the dark hours. Diaphanous, yet ineffable in its effects, the walls telegraph the movement of people within, with ample restraint and abstraction.



CoARCH Pavilion, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
2025, NADAAA + HDR



Melbourne School of Design
2014, NADAAA + John Wardle
Architects

For the Daniels Faculty, northern light was also targeted as the main vehicle to draw in natural lighting into the main studio space. With a geometry that incorporates a surface-active structural system, natural daylighting, and a series of conduits for the hydrology of the roof drainage, the integration of varied performative criteria gave this system both its economy and effect. Composed of developable geometries, the light grazes the surface of the ceiling, rolling it along the voluptuous curvature of a ruled surface.

Also capping the roof of a collective studio space, the coffering over the MSD Great Hall spans over 120 feet, requiring of it depths of up to ten feet. The sheer girth of the structure offers a structural depth that allows for the suspension of the 'Hanging Studio'. Deformed in accordance with its maximum moment, the depth blocks direct light, while framing the sky above with direct light into the warmth of the wood-clad interior.

Together these projects reveal a pedagogical process, each an experiment on their own, accumulating knowledge through tests, and the development of a culture of exploration within our practice. Drawn from a fascination of materials and their means and methods of assembly, each are asked to extend the terms of their conceptualization to achieve a quality of light that transcends the experience of the everyday.



Daniels Building at One Spadina Crescent
University of Toronto
2018, NADAAA