FOR TWO YEARS in the mid-1960s, when I was just out of college and ready to see the world, I lived and worked in various cities in Germany. It was my first time in Europe, and I was impressed by a culture that was steeped in tradition and history in a way that was entirely different from what I had experienced in the United States. In this new environment it became clear to me that architecture could embody changes in thought and belief, bearing witness to both human atrocities and utopian aspirations. Bullet holes were still visible in walls, while new buildings had replaced many that were totally destroyed in WWII.

It was serendipitous when my job moved me to Ulm, where the designer Max Bill had revived Bauhaus ideas as director of the School of Design. I never attended classes there, but I met several American students who introduced me to the ideas of Bauhaus artists and their practices. I began researching the history of the Bauhaus and sought out the work of artists like Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy in museums and exhibitions across Europe. It was an experience that inaugurated a lifelong interest in Constructivist ideas.

At this time, in the 60s, architecture was being recognized as an art form, infused with modernist ideals and visionary impulses. I made a point of visiting innovative buildings, both ancient and modern. Until then I had only read about Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France, which had been completed 10 years earlier. While I had the ability to travel in Europe I wanted to experience Le Corbusier's sculpture-on-a-hill firsthand.

From a distance, the curvilinear roof and concrete structure didn't look like any building I had ever seen before. As I walked into the cool quiet of the interior, swatches of color floated in space, changing shape as they landed on surfaces of different textures. These focused planes of colored light radiated out of the building's irregularly shaped stained-glass apertures, playfully piercing through the soft ambient light that emanated from the clerestory. Thick, whitewashed walls provided the...
backdrop for this otherworldly fantasy. Le Corbusier had carefully illuminated the church to create an ethereal atmosphere. I felt as if I were in an intangible space, at once outside of reality and deeply connected to the physical properties of light.

It was a formative moment, and the interplay of light, color and geometry at Ronchamp was a key inspiration as I developed my own artistic vocabulary. Light is of vital importance to architects, just as it is to photographers and sculptors. My desire to capture a sense of three-dimensional complexity in a two-dimensional image has led me to become a sculptor-cum-architect of sorts, creating unique structures to photograph. Assemblages of materials such as fiberglass screening, plexiglass and plaster have been the primary subjects of my camera for the past 40 years.

Influenced by the thinking of the early avant-gardes, I also looked to books of scenography and stagecraft for models and found the Stenberg Brothers: Russian set designers who utilized the forms of architecture and sculpture for the stage. Their work, and that by others like Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov Popova, incorporated wooden scaffolds and mechanical forms as representations of industrialization.

For my earliest "Constructs," made in the 1970s, I built life-size, trestlelike forms to work in tandem with mirrors. I designed and photographed these structures with the aim of upsetting normal conceptions of how perspective should work. I considered the "Constructs" to be similar to stage sets, and my photographs of them look like impossible landscapes. Central to this work was my own process of building and manipulating the sculptural objects and repositioning the lights. The final images arrest this process, freezing it as art objects in time.

Today, when I turn on the lights to illuminate one of my studio constructions, which now often feature freestanding transparent planes, I still recall the sensation I first experienced in Ronchamp. I’ve never attempted to replicate the architectural forms of Le Corbusier’s masterpiece; instead, I feel the connection in how his structure uses light’s power to transform materiality.

I also share with architects an attention to physical presence and bodily scale. I continually put myself in the middle of my constructions to change or replace the clear acrylic sheets that permit geometric shapes of color to float through and come to rest on an otherwise neutral mise-en-scène. Together, these components become the image. Without light, the physical material appears dormant. Artists working in lens-based mediums often refer to the "magical moment" that comes in the darkroom when an image appears. For me, that moment has always come in the studio when light adds life to the set.

As I continue to work with new combinations of mediums and materials, I have returned to past experiences like the visit to Ronchamp. Video is the most recent addition to my practice. Activating a 30-foot-high corner of the main gallery at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia for my upcoming survey exhibition, a new projection work will take on questions of architectural scale by interacting directly with the corner walls of the space. The video captures a play of light and shadow caused by the overlapping layers of fiberglass screen. The work will allow viewers to disappear in the volume of the corner, or to get lost in the depth of the projected image. My enthusiasm for light as a medium has always been grounded in a search for such transformative experiences.
