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St. Sulpice in Lights and Shadows

St. Sulpice is the second largest church in Paris after the Notre Dame; however, this is not the reason for its fame. The peculiarity of this church, built over the course of more than one hundred years (it was finished in 1784), is due to the unique play of light and shadow that continually changes its facade, porch and loggia. Observing a full day's display of this light show, one comes to realize how creatively light and shadow participate in the design of a building.

Dawn

Standing in front of the church in Place St. Sulpice, looking toward the church's west-facing facade in the first glimmer of dawn, one can see only the silhouette of the church, which hides the rising sun. The image of the church is indistinct; architectural details seem blurred or invisible. The scene is painted in monochromatic tones that are hard to differentiate: the graying blue sky, the church's pale yellow walls and the dark shadow of the contours on the concrete of the square. Because of its indistinct appearance, the church has a mystical presence.

Morning

The sun slides out transversely from behind the church. As the morning progresses, it angles around the side of the church and reaches higher and higher positions, as if it were sitting upon, then next to, the building.

One can now read the articulation of the facade: Columns stand out against the wall; the hollows of the upper loggia can be perceived. The profile, basic features and proportions define the sight. Horizontal lines prevail. The body is heavy: The massive, robust edifice leans on the place.

1:45 p.m.

The sun casts its first direct light on the facade of St. Sulpice and continues on, dragging parallel rays of sunlight across the facade. Suddenly, the whole building starts vibrating. The smallest protuberances glare and the tiniest edges cast shadows; together the light and shadow animate a rich, saturated facade, as if the architectonic elements suddenly stepped out in front of the building in order to introduce themselves to the spectators.

Even the smallest progression of the sun instigates a significant change on the facade. New details rapidly come to the fore; the sun delineates then obliterates one after another the ideas of the designers. The church is trying on its scenery.

As sunlight climbs up the columns, the edifice appears increasingly elongated. With one decent gesture the sunlight has dissolved the bulky form. Vertical lines take command. Time is performing the role of an architect.

Photos by Attila Batar.





3 p.m.

The process of change is slowing down. The sun is moving behind us, shedding a golden light over the entire facade, which leisurely contemplates one last spectacle. The sun is playing her last card; her gestures have calmed; the facade has been appeased. Sunlight is no longer the plaything of the facade. It reaches into every crevice, if only indirectly, being capriciously reflected in even the interior of the loggia.

The afternoon presents a new gift: Four facades appear one after another in the hollows of the loggias. One can observe three-dimensional space, not just a flat surface, as if on the stage of the church several

sets had been installed at once. The outermost layer is the line of columns with the architraves. Beyond a breach comes the next layer: a line of pillars with arches. The light penetrates these niches, too; thus, the hollow is not empty. Another line of pillars is revealed before the wall; this is the third layer. Finally, even the rear wall does not prove flat. Buttresses divide this fourth facade and the sunlight illuminates its shape.

With life breathed into the loggia, St. Sulpice changes proportions. The newly revealed dimension of depth gives the facade the appearance of extending along its other dimensions; the church seems lighter as one's eye is drawn into the loggia.

6 p.m.

The setting sun approaches the eye-level view of an observer on the square. At sunset the sunlight confronts the facade of the church head-on and strikes against the wall. Where the light hits the stone it sparks and where obstructions block it from reaching the wall there are dark shadows. The gleaming is over; the facade is no longer evenly lit but composed of starkly contrasting bright and dark areas.

Before leaving for good, the sun paints a last scene on the deepest layer of the facade. The shadows of the architraves and columns out front become a faux-facade, a fifth coulisse. The dark, shady spots on gold glittering stone wall seem

to create a deeper layer. St. Sulpice has become stage for shadows. If clouds cross the sky, the shadows disappear then push through again, continuously drawing new shapes.

The loggia is exceptional because it is not common that within one distinct architectural space the same architectonic elements perform two functions at once, absorbing light and casting shadows. While the columns, pillars and statues intercept the light, they also cast their shadows on the rear wall and on each other.

9 p.m.

When the sun sets, the lights of the square are turned on and the arcades of the church are lighted as well. The loggia is illuminated from the inside. The surfaces that were dark during the day — the ceiling, for instance — now glimmer in light. In the loggias, the upward-turned light elevates the edifice.

Following this performance to its completion, an observer realizes that the church of St. Sulpice is not one and carries away a thousand different images of the building. The facade is unfinished; it is still on the drawing table and the manifold, creative powers of light continually redesign it. Light and time continually recreate the space. ●