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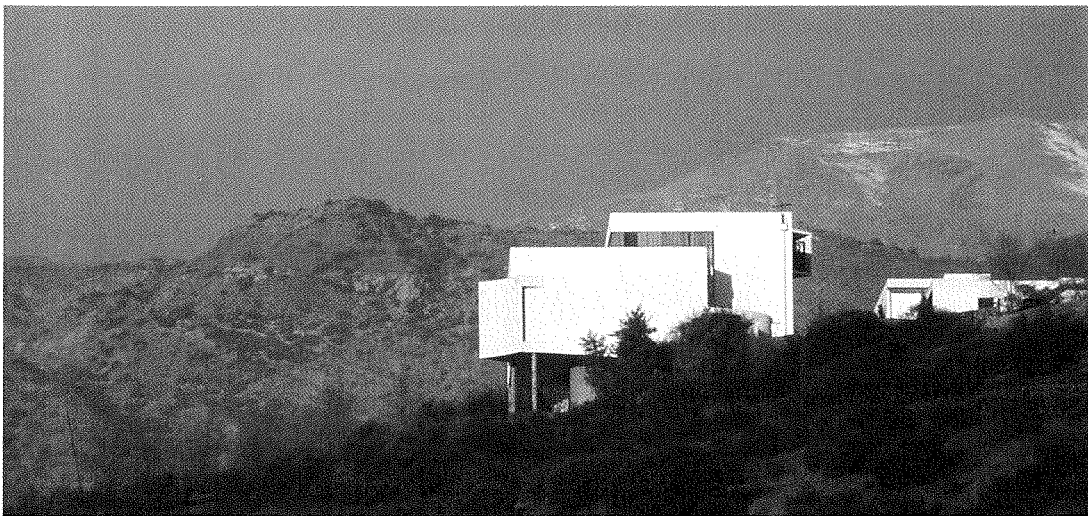
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Light in the Chapel of the Benedictine Monastery of Las Condes

R. Thomas Hille



Approach: The plaza and landscape surrounding the chapel are bathed in sunlight.

Photos by R. Thomas Hille.

Spiritual enlightenment is a process through which we gain insight into the nature of our existence, a way of coming to terms with the world in which we live and the uncertainty of that which is to follow. The place of worship plays an important role in this process, informing, clarifying and potentially embodying the process itself.

The Chapel of the Benedictine Monastery of Las Condes is located in the foothills of the Andes Mountains outside Santiago de Chile. Open to secular as well as monastic use, it is a bridge between a traditional, cloistered monastic community and a

laic congregation. In a spiritual sense, it is an expression of parallel worlds: heaven and earth, sacred and profane.

The experience of moving through the chapel evokes a series of revelations about the nature of these worlds and their relationship to one another. In the Latin tradition, it is an architectural drama played out in light.

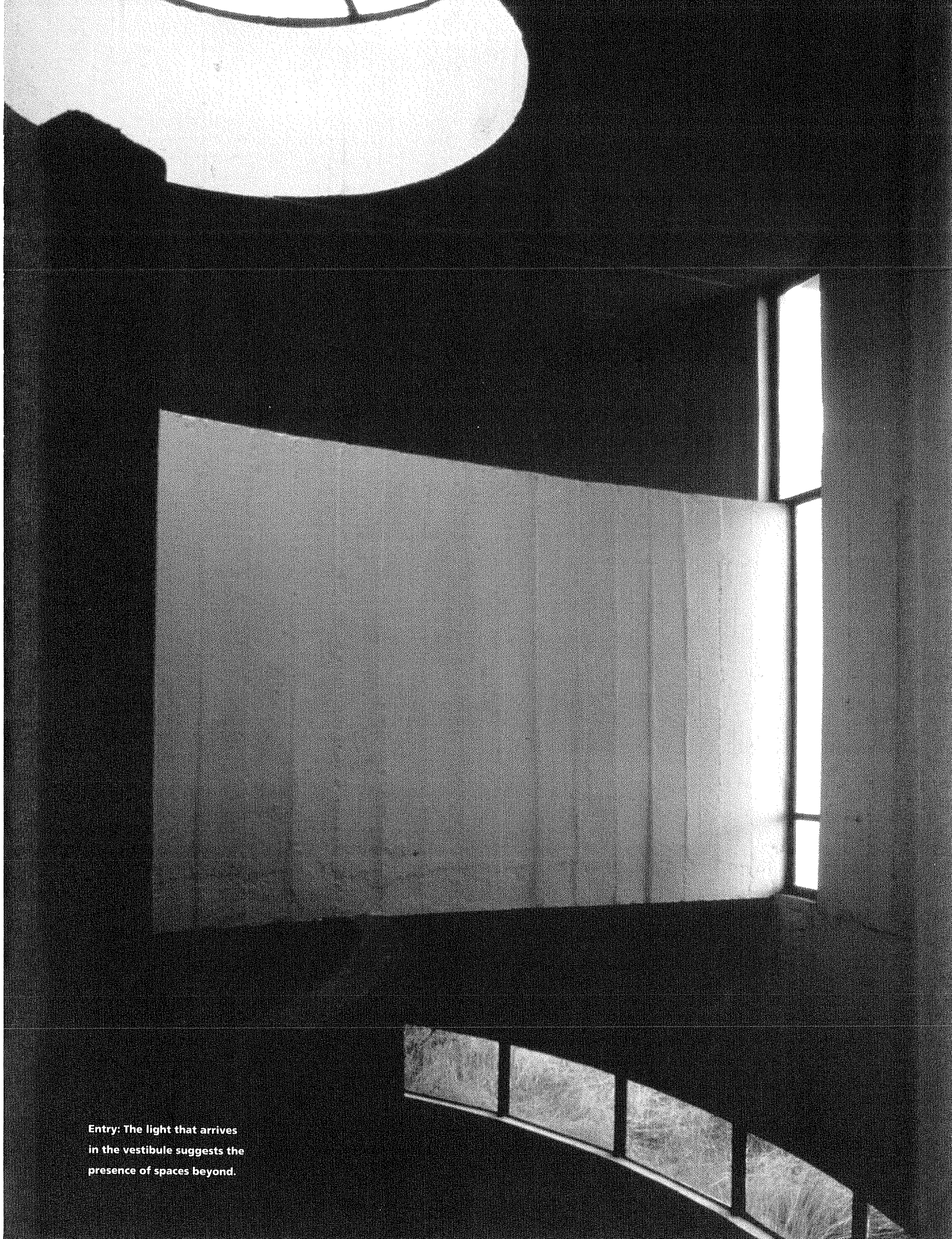
Approach

The monastery sits atop a prominent hill, visible from a distance in all directions. The path to the monastery directs visitors around the hill in an up-

ward spiral, diverting one's views out to the surrounding landscape and offering the anticipation of a pilgrimage. At the top, one arrives at the foot of a plaza that serves as a forecourt for the chapel.

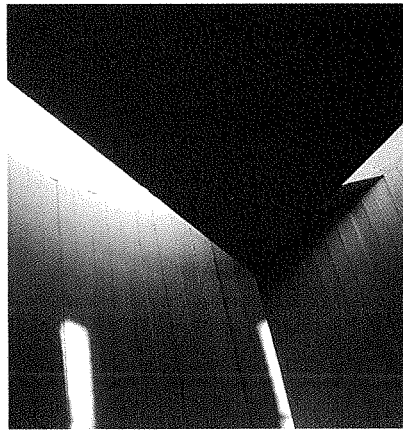
During morning services, the western facade of the chapel is in shade and is dominated by the plaza and surrounding landscape, which are bathed in sunlight. The chapel defers to its surroundings, momentarily directing attention back to the profane world from which one has come.

From this vantage, the only part of the chapel that catches morning light is the bell tower; its position foreshadows the termination of the spatial sequence that is about to begin. As one enters the chapel, one is afforded a final view of the mountains beyond, a reminder of the awesome severity of the natural world — a world that is about to be left behind.



**Entry: The light that arrives
in the vestibule suggests the
presence of spaces beyond.**

Arrival: The magical, mysterious realm of the clergy.



down onto the walking surface, a reminder of our own grounding on earth. Directly ahead, the silhouetted image of the Virgin Mary and Christ child hovers mysteriously between heaven and earth, acknowledging an affinity to both worlds and anticipating the transformation that is about to occur. Together they face towards the sanctuary, which is spotlighted by a diagonal shaft of light from above.

Entry

The vestibule space inside is dark and compressed. To one side, light from a skylight marks the vertical axis of a spiral stair that leads down to the crypt; the diffuse light emanating from below is cool and lifeless. On the other side, warm and inviting light emanates from the direction of the sanctuary.

The ramp leading from the vestibule to the sanctuary is illuminated by a hidden source, a horizontal band of light that undercuts the massive concrete wall and releases it from the floor. Light is directed

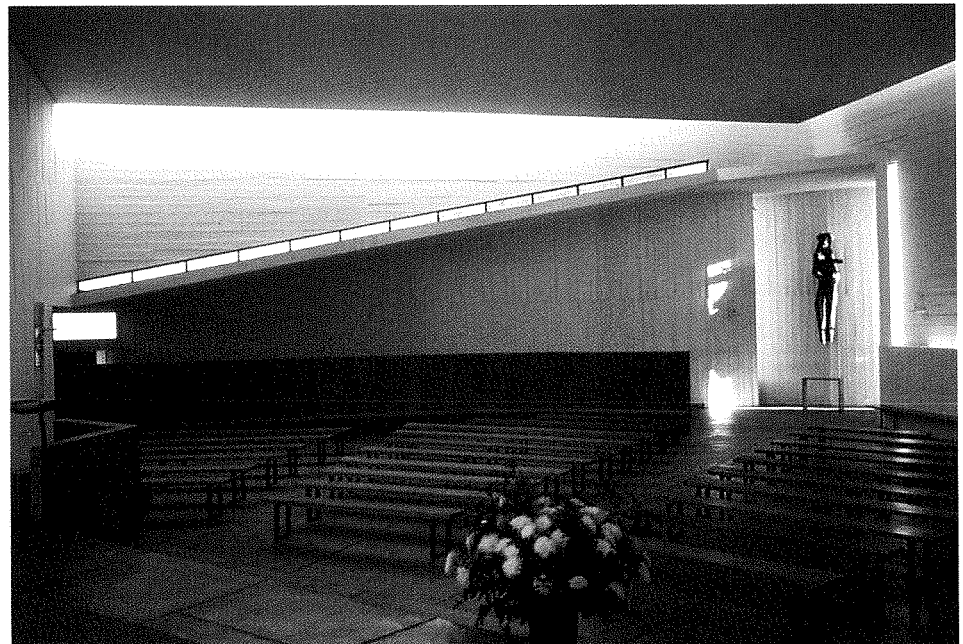
Arrival

As one turns to face the sanctuary, light along the outer wall is now thrust upward toward the heavens. The ceiling is released from the wall by a band of light, which negates the massiveness of the concrete enclosure and imbues the space with a potential expansiveness.

At the far end of this wall is a small side chapel, a tiny room that glows with a mysterious, unearthly light emanating from above.



Entry: Ramp from the vestibule to the sanctuary.



Exit: Looking back from the sanctuary, the sources of light are revealed.

Inside, a brighter wedge of light directed down along the floor of the room refers again to the grounded condition, a reminder of the profane origins of the sacraments blessed here.

As one faces forward in the sanctuary, the dark, low ceiling in the foreground compresses and accelerates one's movement toward the altar. The altar forms a line of separation between the congregation and the clergy; the crucifix above, half in shadow and half in direct light, marks the end of one world and the beginning of another.

Just as the domain of the clergy is magical and mysterious, so is the space it occupies — a brilliantly lit geometric volume that appears to oscillate, one moment receding behind the altar and another moment projecting itself into the congregation. It is a centered, idealized world, atectonic, of apparently limitless spatial expansiveness. It is a perfect world, attainable only through prayer.

Exit

As one turns around to leave the sanctuary, the source of illumination in the space is revealed. A narrow band of light from a clerestory window points the way back down the ramp to the entry.

Windows open directly to the outside, quickly dissipating the aura of mystery about the space. Natural light is, after all, the medium that has enabled the creation of this extraordinary place.

The chapel is thus an embodiment of a vision of an ideal world in relation to the real world. Their juxtaposition through the experience of architecture is what gives the place meaning; it is a source of enlightenment. That is why, as one leaves the sanctuary and passes back through the doors into the dazzling plaza beyond, you see the world in a new light. ●

Arrival: The dark, low ceiling accelerates one's movement toward the altar.

