
4 Ways of perceiving space

It is a very inconvenient habit of kittens (Alice had once made the remark) that, whatever you say to them, they always purr. "If only they would purr for 'yes' and mew for 'no' or any rules of that sort" she had said, "so that one could keep up a conversation! But how can you talk with a person if they always say the same thing?"

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

It is the common wonder of all men, how among so many millions of faces, there should be none alike.

Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*

The classical rulebook

Look at the illustration of Blenheim Palace just outside Oxford, designed by Sir John Vanbrugh and constructed between the years 1705 and 1720 (Fig. 4.1). The building is just packed full of geometrical rules. In fact it is a very sophisticated visual essay in the making, respecting, twisting and even breaking of these rules. Of course a scholar of the Baroque period would know about these rules in a very formal way, and could explain how his style was influenced by other architecture of the time. We might discuss how Vanbrugh's use of this visual formal language developed at Blenheim compared with his earlier, equally well-known palace at Castle Howard in Yorkshire, and how his style changed further as he worked on other buildings. We could also study how the ideas behind this style depended on the precedents created by the Renaissance, which in turn depended on the classical language of Greece further developed by the Romans. Next we could examine how the Baroque deliberately twisted and distorted the visual grammar of classical architecture. So rich is this very formal material that there can be endless debate on it. I remember the great Nicolas Pevsner coming to Oxford when I was a student and giving a most erudite lecture in which he asked whether there really was an English Baroque, or whether such a style could only truly be said to exist in mainland European countries. The argument of course was