AURÉLIEN.   – So the picture can put an idea to the test?

BENJAMIN.   – Yes, the picture tests an idea, totally. Some architects argue that we're not computer programmers, that we should be making architecture, not graphic images. Which means that a project would be presented in a raw, basic way. Working like that is ok, it's very noble, but it invites risk through simplification. When eliminating some of the overly problematic aspects of a plan, you can easily create stupid mistakes through the use of images that don't take all aspects of a project into account.

  Of course, some projects aren't designed to be built. Boullé's proposed Cenotaph for Newton was totally unrealistic and unbuildable – it was 'design for design's sake', and it's marvellous. A lot of architects relate to imagery that way.

AURÉLIEN.   – I'd like to know whether producing the image can change the nature of a project.

BENJAMIN.   – Sometimes I come up with things at the sketch stage that will work very well as a plan or model yet turn out to be very difficult to depict in a picture. That recently happened with a design for a house in the Tours area, made of a stone called tufa. In the perspective view, the blocks of stone looked like ordinary roughcast plaster. It was really not photogenic, and gave no sense of the stone's quality. Therefore I introduced a different texture via Photoshop so that people understood they were looking at stone and not rough plaster. I was immediately pulled up for that alteration by the supervisory architect from Bâtiments de France. The mistake I made is fairly typical – the image you construct can sometimes get the better of the plan and modify it. My biggest fear, though, is the opposite: designing something very handsome which turns out to be a catastrophe once it's built. So sometimes a picture can hinder a project, sometimes it helps it move forward, but it always allows you to check a project's relationship to the site and to its own internal organization.

Seeing through the façade