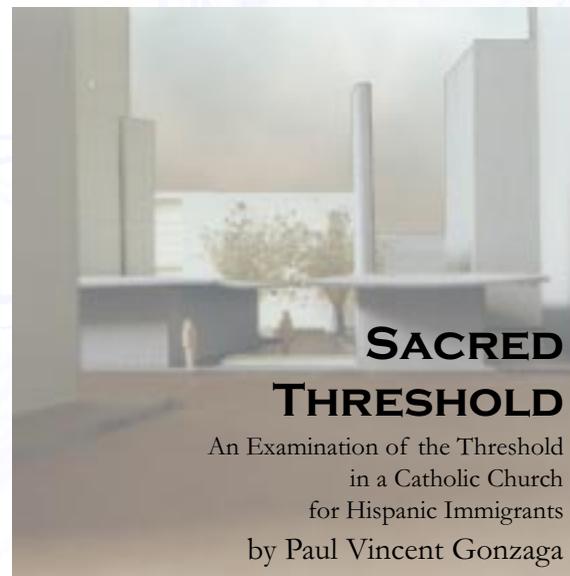




Walls as boundaries bet. levels

lines of sight

visually  
liturgy  
world



Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of

Master of Architecture

approved:

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Susan Piedmont-Palladino, chairperson

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Eric J. Jenkins

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Maria Karvouni

May 1998

*“We enter a church building through the vestibule, we pass into the nave by way of a doorway. Even those of us who know why we come to the church have to pass over the threshold. We do not come to find what we already know, like someone who is entering a department store. We come to bear the word of an Other who remains always beyond what we already know. We come to allow our spontaneous inclinations to be transformed. The threshold is not simply a place for entry. It is the space that opens onto the Other.”*

—Albert Rouet, **Liturgy and the Arts**

*“We will choose an example that is accessible to everyone—a church in a modern city. For a believer, the church shares in a different space from the street in which it stands. The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between the two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.”*

—Mircea Eliade, **The Sacred and the Profane**

## ABSTRACT

The Book of Exodus in the Old Testament recounts the liberation and salvation of an oppressed people and their subsequent journey to and arrival at the Promised Land. In the Christian Church, this journey continues in the lives of believers. The spiritual journey begins with salvation, continues with a repeated process of suffering and redemption, and terminates with an awakening to a better understanding of God.

The spiritual journey made concrete is the concern of this project. The Christian life, grossly simplified, is a passage from one place to another. The believer is constantly passing through the threshold from this life to the next, from an old, limited understanding of the divine to a new understanding.

In the Catholic Church, this process of passage is ritualized in the journey of the believer to the church each Sunday. Upon entering the church building, the believer passes from the secular and mundane to the sacred and holy.

Where does the secular end and the sacred begin? How does one delimit a boundary between the two? How does one cross the threshold from the profane to the sacred? That is the focus of this project.

*“Where is the spirit of man more apparent than in the homes that they build to house their lives? In the same manner, it is the way in which we shall build our churches which will be a manifestation par excellence of the kind of Church life, of common life in the Body of Christ that will be ours.”*

—Louis Bouyer, Liturgy and Architecture

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The true Christian Church is not a building. It is the community of believers, or Body of Christ, gathered to worship. A church building is formed by the beliefs and practices of the community that inhabits it and interacts with it. While there are some requirements for a Catholic worship space, its final form should reflect the community that utilizes it.

Creating a church for a fictitious community is a daunting task. I would like to thank Reverend Andrew Ciferni, O. Praem., former Dean of the Washington Theological Union in Washington, D.C., for acting as my fictitious community. He provided me with gracious criticism and direction, which helped propel my Thesis forward.

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## INTRODUCTION

Is a Threshold simply what the Webster New Riverside dictionary defines as “a piece of wood or stone placed beneath a door”? Or is it something more? How does one enter a building? Does one merely step across a boundary—or can the Threshold be a process or journey? The objective of this project is to address these questions and, hopefully, to arrive at a better understanding of the Threshold. This thesis looks at the Threshold’s simplicity and complexity, its precision and ambiguity. It examines multiple Thresholds and layered Thresholds. It examines the essential elements of the Threshold.

The vehicle for this project is a Catholic Church for Hispanic Immigrants, including a parish hall and other support spaces. A Church was chosen because it requires a special type of Threshold, one involving a transition from the secular world to the sacred world. The recently revised Catechism for the Catholic Church emphasizes this uniqueness:

...the church [building] has an eschatological significance. To enter into the house of God, we must cross a threshold, which symbolizes passing from the world wounded by sin to the world of the new Life to which all men are called. The visible church is a symbol of the Father’s house toward which the People of God is journeying and where the Father ‘will wipe every tear from their eyes.’<sup>1</sup>

The Catholic Church, as an institution, is also on a journey of its own. It is still adapting to changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. As if this weren’t enough, its beliefs and practices continue to be questioned and reevaluated. The Catholic Church is at the Threshold, or is crossing a Threshold, into a new attitude about liturgy and worship spaces. Where there was once a detachment or distance between clergy and laity during the Mass, there is now a call for greater unity and participation. Ideas that remained accepted without question, such as the placement of baptismal fonts within the church sanctuary, are being reevaluated to bring more meaning into the layout of worship spaces. Within the Catholic Church, there is a constant move towards unity and a deeper understanding and clearer communication of the symbols and rites employed in the liturgy.

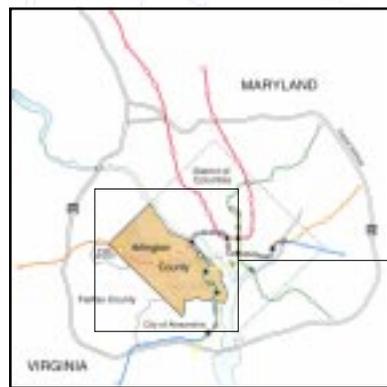
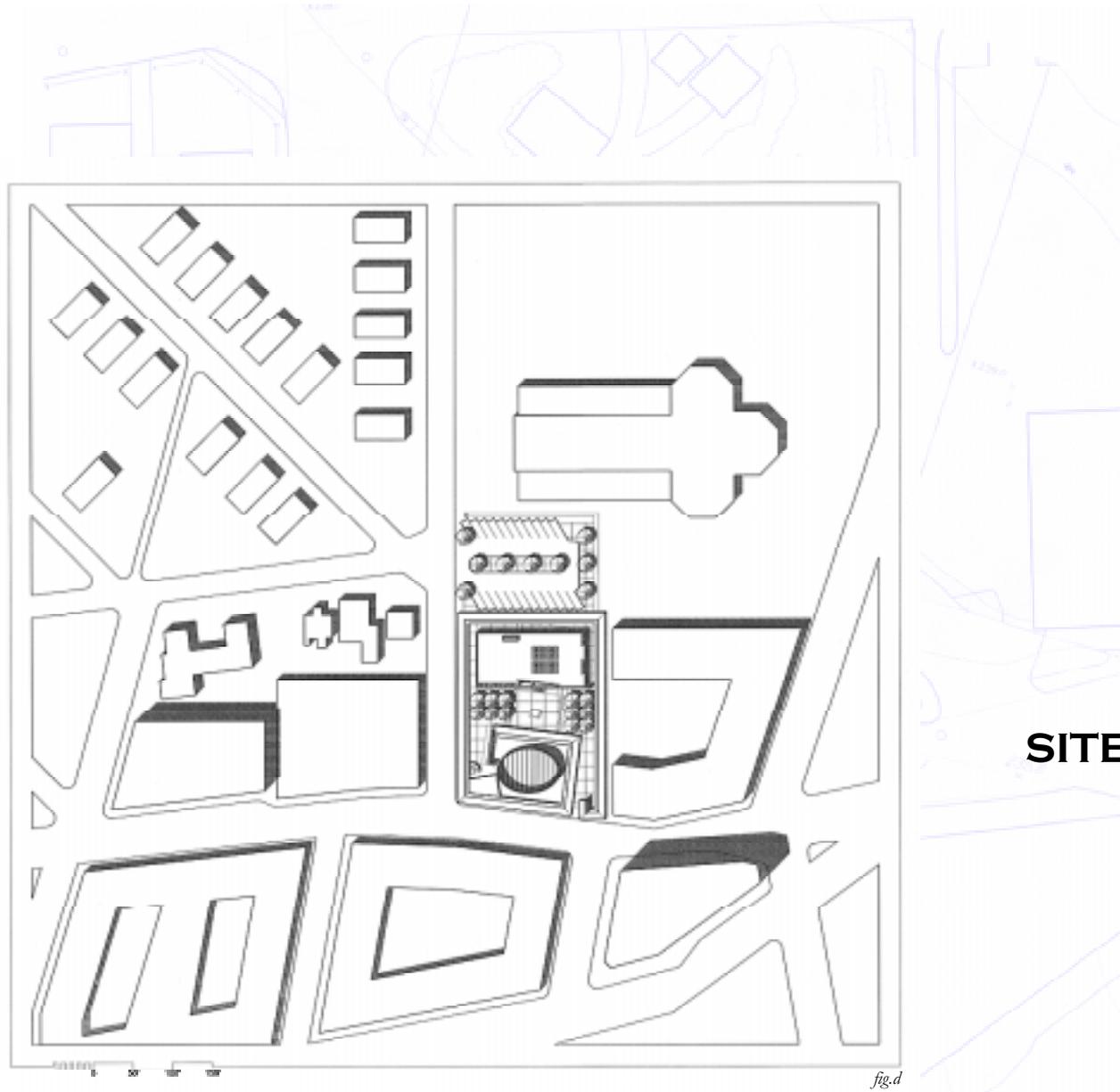
The Catholic Church in the United States is posed with an additional dilemma: an increased influx of Hispanic immigrants. These immigrants, although they are currently a minority, will dominate American Catholic parishes by the year 2010. To Hispanic immigrants, Catholicism is not merely a religion. It is part of their culture and identity. Often, these immigrants are treated as second class citizens within Catholic churches, relegated to inconvenient mass times in gymnasiums or wherever a parish can find space. Many times, there is a lack of space and funding to accommodate a mass in Spanish.

This project endeavors to create a Catholic worship space and parish hall for Hispanic Immigrants. It would be a place where Hispanics could adjust to the American lifestyle, and where American Catholics could learn more about Hispanic Culture. Spaces are provided for teaching English as a Second Language Classes. And religious and/or cultural festivals could be held in the parish gathering hall or plaza. The Church and parish hall complex could be seen as a cultural Threshold, where passage from Hispanic to American and American to Hispanic is possible.

The project consists of three main elements: the Wall, the Plaza and the Church.

<sup>1</sup>Catechism of the Catholic Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) 306.

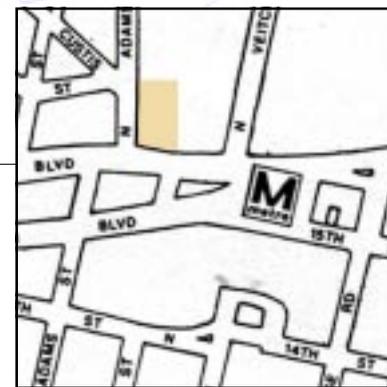
*fig. a:* Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area.  
*fig. b:* Arlington County, Courthouse Metro Station on the Orange line is indicated.  
*fig. c:* Street level map of Courthouse Metro Station vicinity. Site is indicated in orange.  
*fig. d:* Site plan for thesis project, with proposed buildout of areas to the south and west of the project site.



*fig. a*



*fig. b*



*fig. c*

## SITE

The site for this project is in Arlington, Virginia. The site is bound on the South by Wilson Boulevard, and on the West by North Adams Street, near the Courthouse Metro Station. Areas to the South, East and West of the site are slated for dense urban development, while areas to the North and Northwest will remain as suburban neighborhoods.



<sup>1</sup>Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987)

<sup>2</sup>Carlo Borromeo paraphrased by Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory: from Vitruvius to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press) 93-4.

The creation of a sacred space involves careful contemplation of issues that are both simple and complex. One must understand what makes a space sacred, as well as how sacred space is separated from secular space.

Mircea Eliade, in his book *The Sacred and the Profane*, writes that sacred space is non-homogeneity within homogeneity. It is its mere quality of being non-homogeneous—different from its surroundings—that makes it sacred. He writes, "For religious man, this spatial non-homogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred—the only real and really existing space—and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it."<sup>1</sup> This idea of non-homogeneity within homogeneity implies a boundary. Somewhere between the secular and the sacred, one ends and one begins.

Carlo Borromeo, in his *Instructiones fabricae et supellectillis ecclesiasticae*, discussed regulations in church building. He says that, "[i]nterference caused by noise from outside or by profane activity should be avoided. Hence a church should be completely free-standing and separated by a few paces from other buildings."<sup>2</sup> Here, Borromeo emphasizes separation and distance. The church building should not be attached to surrounding buildings. It should not be in very close proximity to other buildings.

These ideas of boundary, separation and distance are the genesis of the Wall in this project. It surrounds the complex of buildings, acting as a boundary between the church complex and the adjoining urban and suburban environments. Objects within the precinct of the Wall do not touch the Wall. They stand at a distance from the Wall.

fig. a: The Wall rises at the entrance on Wilson Boulevard.  
 fig. b: The Wall rises again at the entrance to the precinct of the Church Sanctuary.  
 fig. c: Ground Floor plan of the complex. Scale as noted.

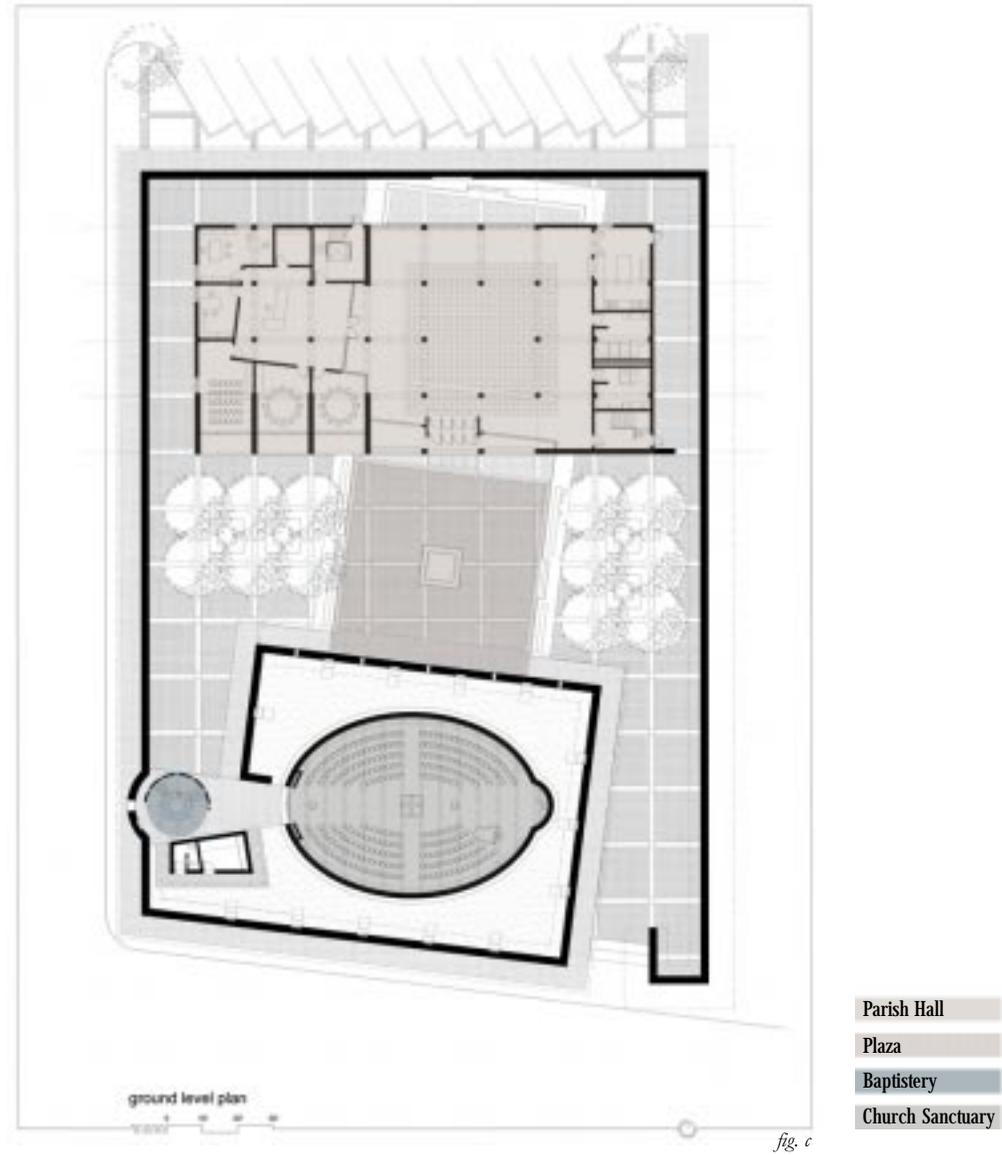


fig. a



fig. b

The Wall is not a closed boundary. It wraps within itself, creating a sacred area, within a space already defined as sacred. It circles around the parish hall, plaza, baptistry and church, and then continues on to encircle the church sanctuary once more. It emphasizes that the church sanctuary as the most important element within this complex. The wall rises as one enters the sacred precinct of the complex, and again as one enters the even more sacred zone of the church sanctuary.

As the Wall begins to wrap within itself, an ambiguity is created between Inside and Outside. If the Wall were a closed boundary, the difference between Inside and Outside would be clearly pronounced. Here, the distinction between Inside and Outside is indeterminate. It is a process; while the state of being Inside increases the state of being Outside decreases, and vice versa. As one follows the line of the Wall, one moves from being Outside to being Inside/Outside to a state of finally being Inside.

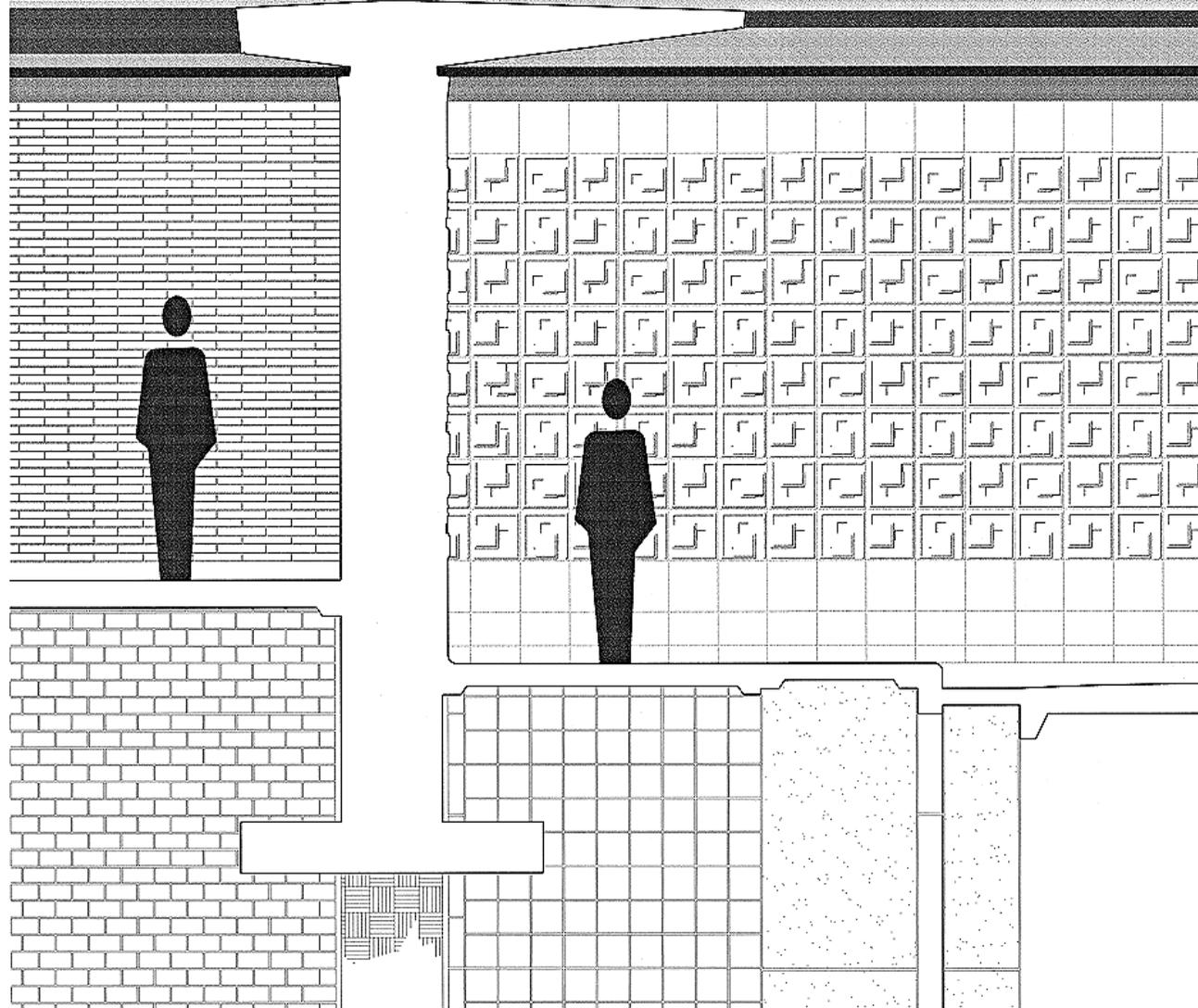


fig. a

fig. a: Section through Wall showing exterior and interior surfaces as well as paving below.  
 fig. b: Enlarged plan of Baptistry, showing opening in the Wall. Note how the Wall curves around the Baptistry.

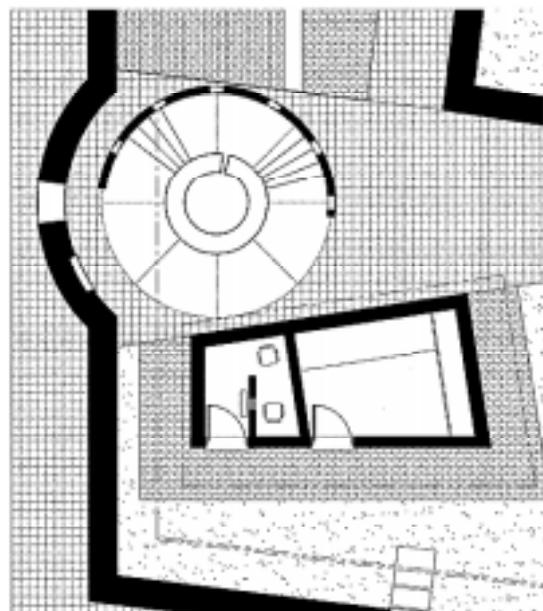


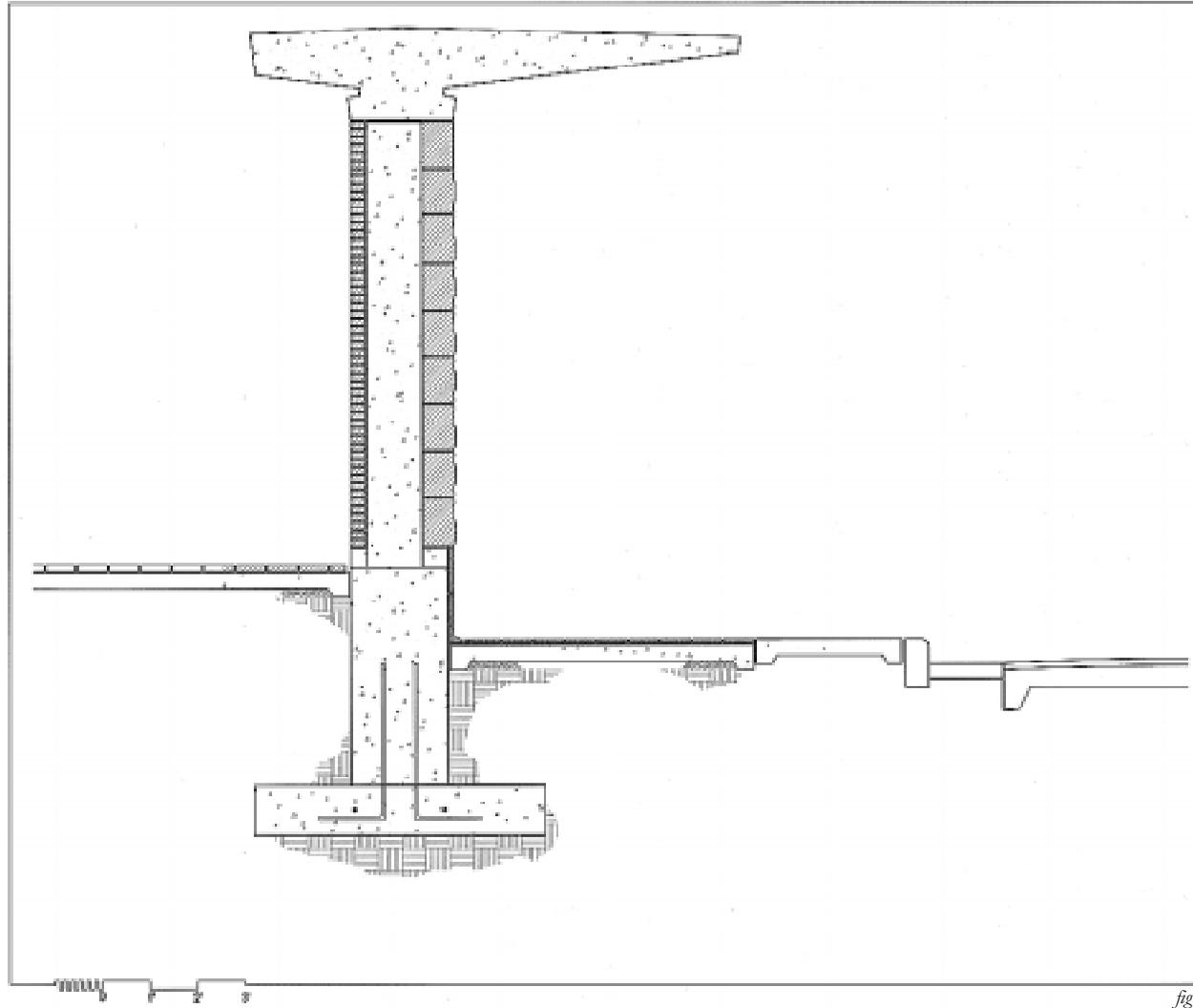
fig. b

The Wall accompanies this transition between Inside and Outside and the Sacred and the Profane. It is a companion and guide as one journeys to the Sacred. The Wall reaches up and extends outward to provide shelter for the traveler. Where the Wall meets the ground, the pavement changes, creating a zone of passage bound on three sides. One can enter and leave this sacred path along any point of the journey.

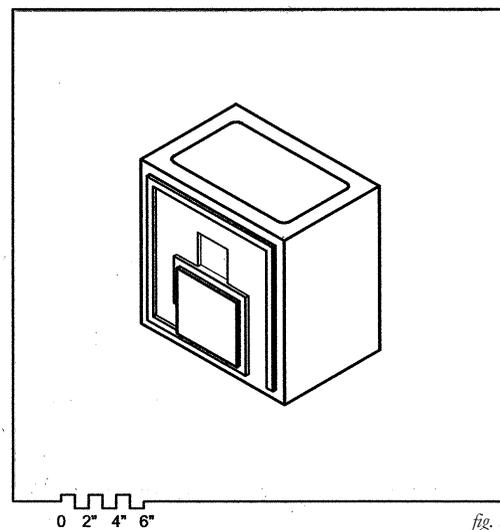
The Wall has only one opening, at the Baptistry. The Wall also gives way here, abandoning its rectilinear language to accommodate the form of the Baptistry. The Wall is a boundary between the sacred and the profane. The opening in the Wall at the Baptistry is a symbolic door, where one symbolically enters the assembly—where one becomes part of the Body of Christ through Baptism. And the rectilinear form of the Wall becoming curved is symbolic of a weakening of this boundary.

*fig. a:* Typical section through Wall.  
*fig. b:* Axonometric detail of typical textile block used in the construction of the exterior face of the Wall.

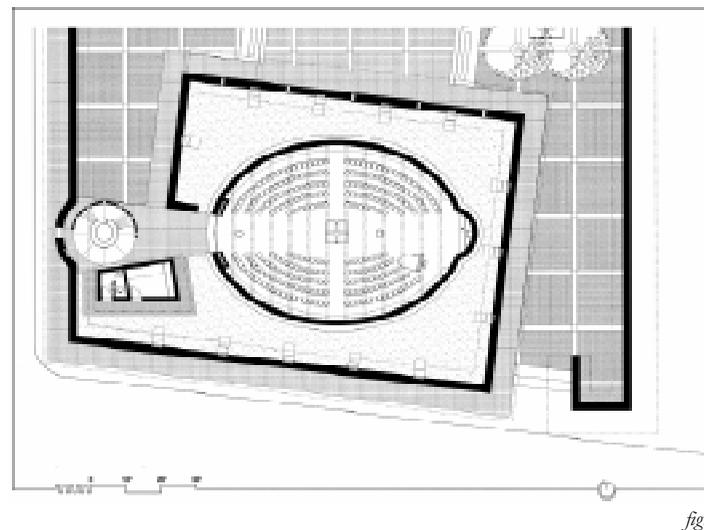
*fig. c:* Plan of Wall surrounding the church sanctuary. Niches for relief sculptures for the fourteen Stations of the Cross line the inner face of the Wall. They begin on the West angled wall, continuing North, East, South, and then ending on the curved portion of the wall which bends around the Baptistry.



*fig. a*



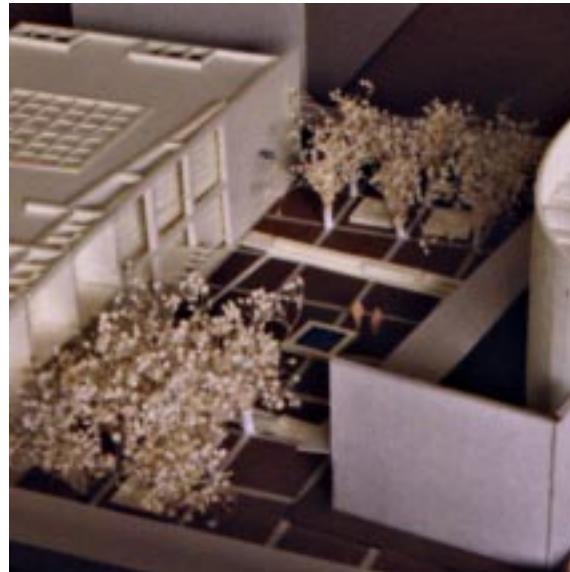
*fig. b*



*fig. c*

Having a twelve foot wall surrounding the complex with only one opening poses a problem. What does this Wall have to offer the city? Should it just be a tall, blank Wall? The outside face of the Wall is constructed of textile blocks. The pattern on the block is an abstracted diagram of the church complex: Wall, Plaza and Sanctuary. The inside of the Wall is faced with roman brick. The texture is refined, emphasizing a difference between the roughness of the exterior of the Wall and the smooth interior.

The interior face of the Wall houses niches. A large niche is located behind the parish hall, where a relief sculpture of the Sacred Family (to whom the Church is dedicated) is found. And fourteen niches are found on the inside of the Wall that surrounds the Sanctuary. These niches contain relief sculptures of the fourteen Stations of the Cross, which follow the Passion and death of Christ. The final station, Christ's burial in the tomb, is located within the Baptistry. Modern Theologians argue that a fifteenth station should be added to the Stations of the Cross: the Resurrection. The baptismal font acts as this fifteenth station, reminding believers of the death and resurrection that they share with Christ.



## THE PLAZA

india Outdoor/Indoor

fig. a: Domus Ecclesia at Dura Europos (Salhiyeh, Syria), A.D. 231.

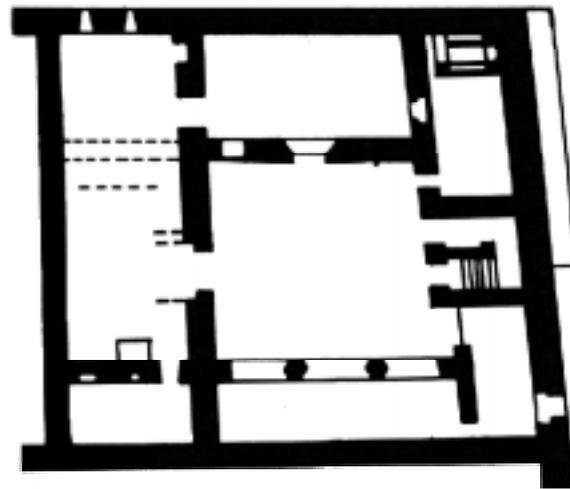


fig. a

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1979) 423.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (New York: Image Books, 1982) 3-8.

<sup>3</sup>Marchita Mauck, *Shaping a House for the Church* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1990) 9.

The Second Vatican Council called for a reexamination of church history and tradition, looking to the early church for inspiration. In his book, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, Thomas Bokenkotter writes:

...the [Second Vatican] Council showed a much greater regard for the historical dimension in the Church's faith and life. In place of the nonhistorical Scholastic theology, with its emphasis on immutable ideas and essences, which since the days of Thomas Aquinas characterized Catholic thought, Vatican II manifested an openness to the totality of Christian and human history and fully recognized the historical conditioning that has affected every aspect of its tradition.<sup>1</sup>

This new attitude of openness towards the church's history allowed for an acceptance of the church as a changing, mutable body. The challenge of the church today is to continue to grow, while taking into account its known history.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Church rigorously examines its own history when changes must be made.

Church history inspired the inclusion of the Plaza as one of the main elements in the design of this church complex. In her book, *Shaping a House for the Church*, Marchita Mauck remarks, "The incorporation of a gathering place in the design of Christian churches is as old as Christian architecture."<sup>3</sup> The plaza in this design was inspired by the Domus Ecclesia, or House Church at Dura Europos. This Domus Ecclesia is the earliest known surviving Christian church building. It is a Roman house, converted into a gathering space. It contains an interior, open air plaza, around which all other rooms are located. The plaza is not directly connected to the street, but is a place that one must

fig. a: Ground Floor Plan of complex with path and plaza highlighted.

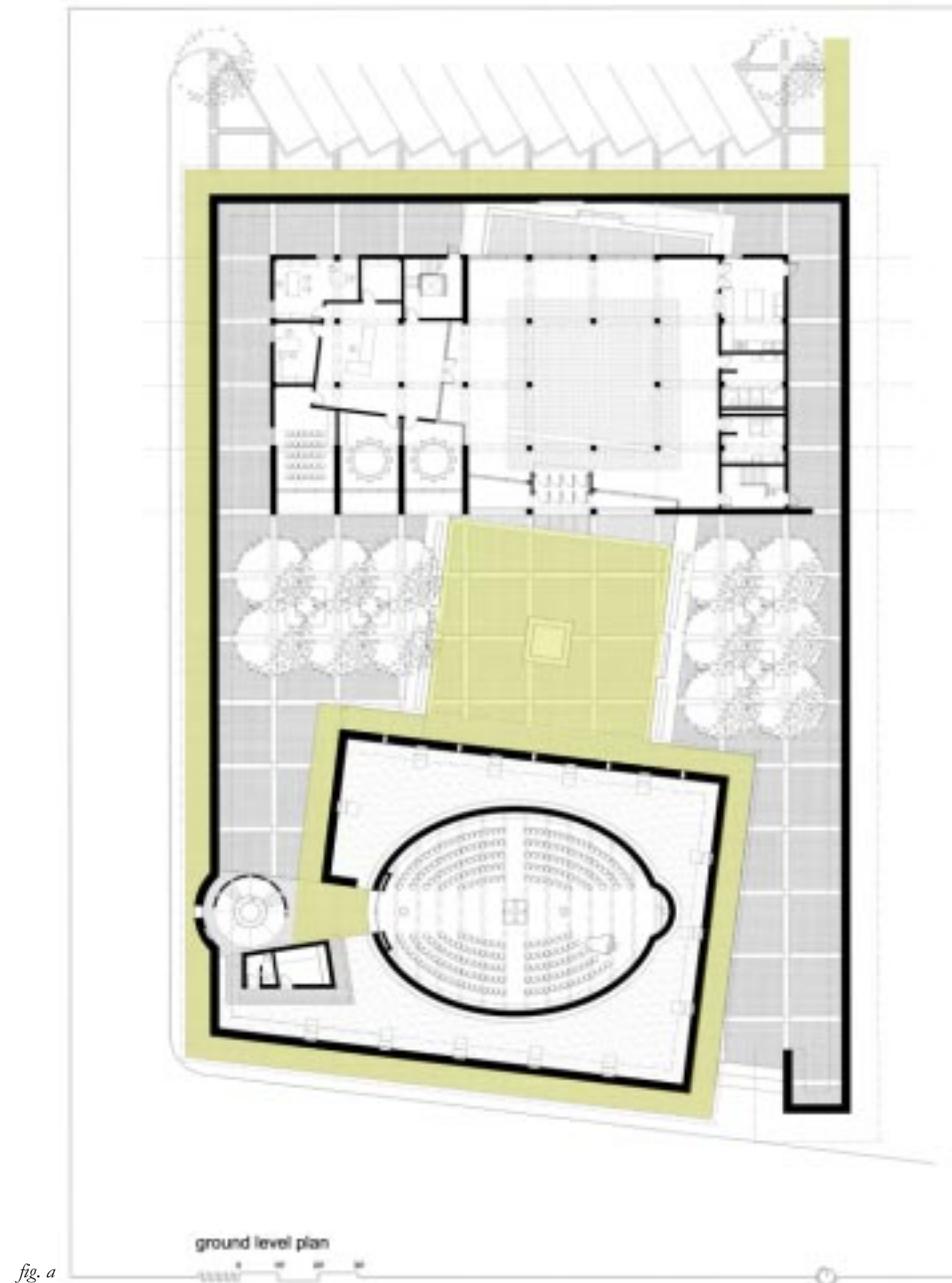


fig. a

enter before entering the sanctuary. It is a gathering space, used both before and after church services.

The gathering space is still fundamental to Catholic worship. Marchita Mauck is a liturgical specialist and art historian. She wrote a book titled *Shaping a House for the Church*. Her book deals with how to build a Catholic church after Second Vatican Council reforms. Mauck sees the gathering space as an essential precursor to worship. The gathering area is a place where people can meet informally, to discuss both church and non-church related matters. She argues that plazas in front of churches have been historically used as market and festival places. In this project, the Plaza serves all of these functions.

The Plaza exists within the Sacred realm, but is still located outside of the more sacred zone of the church sanctuary. It is located along the sacred path provided by the Wall (see figure). It acts as a resting place along the journey or a place of pausing. It contains a fountain that foreshadows the more sacred fountain that one encounters at the Baptistry.

Within the Plaza, one is surrounded by the Wall on four sides. To the North, East and West, one sees the interior of the Wall. (As one looks to the North, the interior of the Wall, and the relief sculpture of the Holy Family, can be seen through the parish hall.) To the South, the Wall has openings covered in alabaster, allowing for passage of light between the sanctuary space and the Plaza while still maintaining the solid language of the Wall.

The Plaza is a space that exists between the Parish Hall and the precinct of the Sanctuary. It defines its own space, not allowing itself to be shaped by surrounding structures. Its orientation, however springs from the Wall which separates it from the Sanctuary. And its pavement patterns

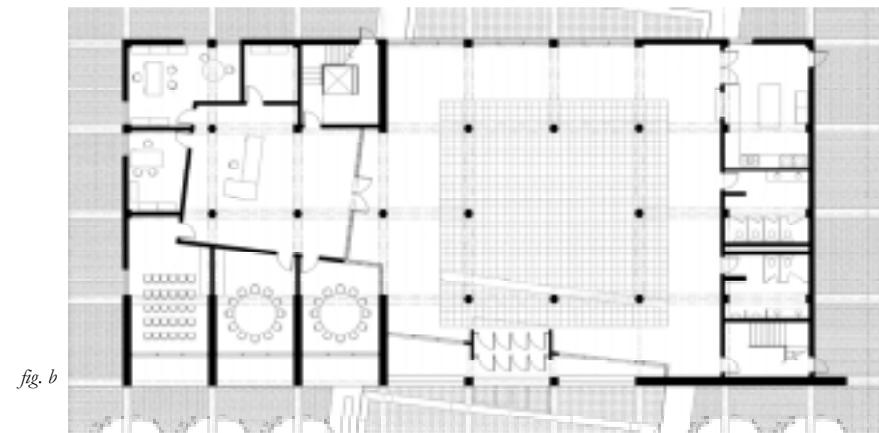
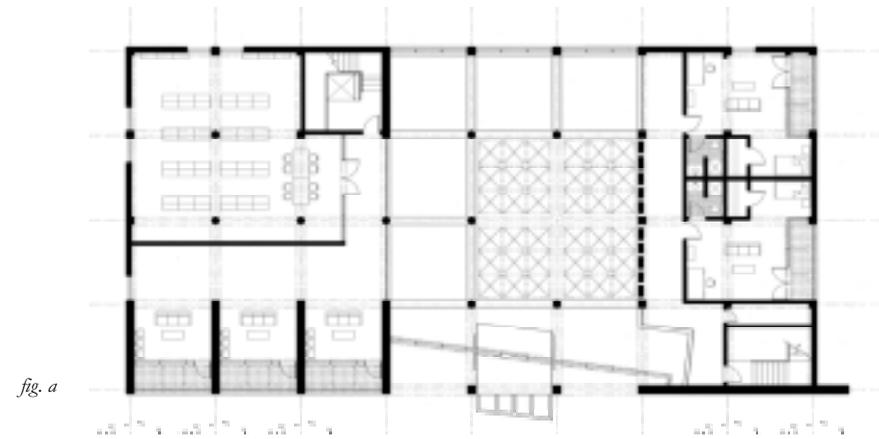
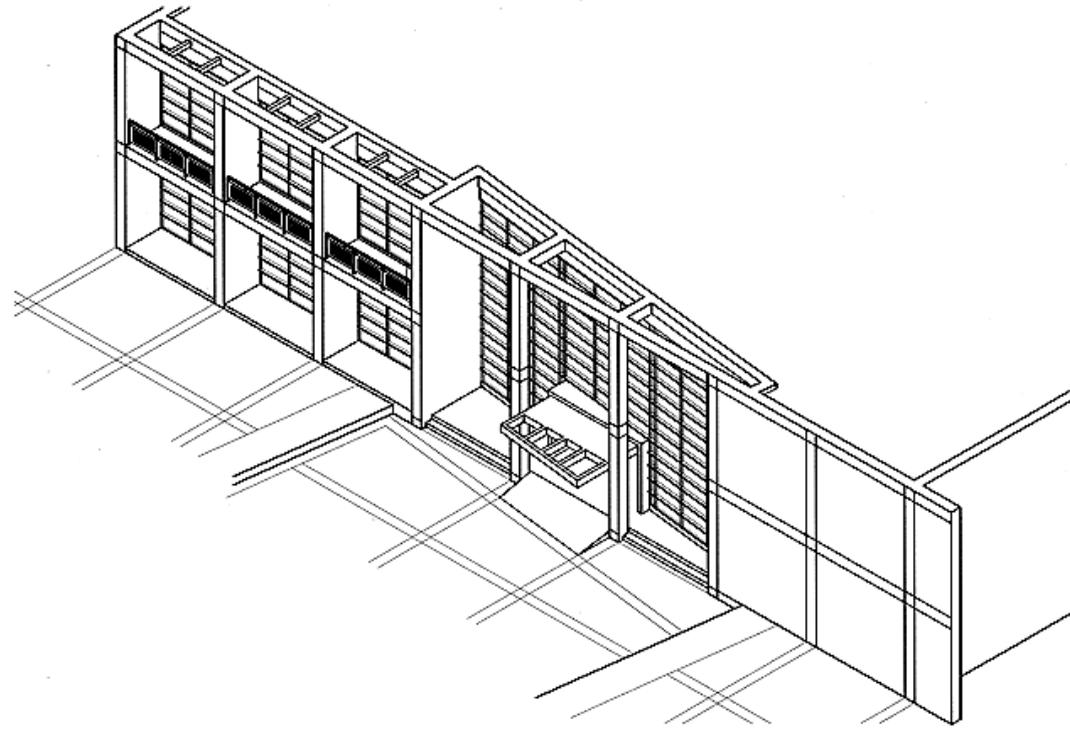


fig. a: Parish Hall, second level plan.  
 fig. b: Parish Hall, ground level plan.  
 fig. c: Section through plaza facing North. (South elevation of the Par-



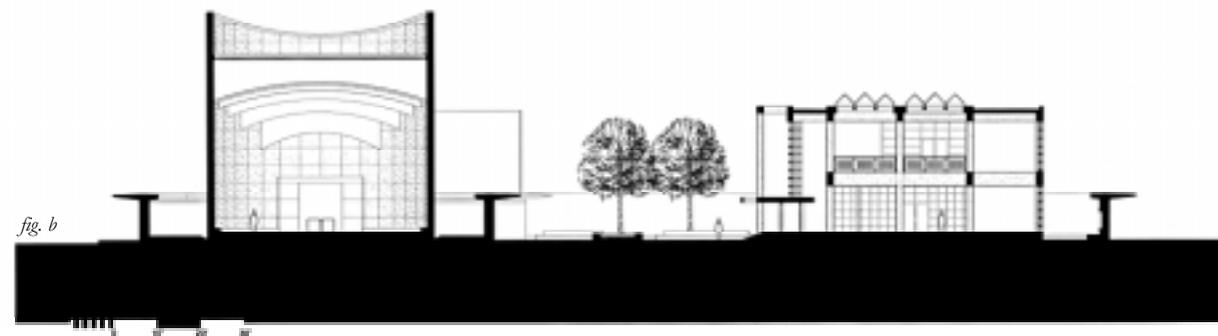
are derived from both the pavement of the path which accompanies the Wall and the grid which defines the structure of the parish hall.

The south façade of the parish hall is made up of a series of columns and planes which accentuate movement along the sacred path, while announcing an entrance to the parish hall. The vertical plane that stretches East and West along the right side of the façade stops movement northward, and redirects movement to the West, as one is entering. And the left portion of the façade contains planes oriented North and South, indicating a change of direction towards the South. Columns in three central bays of the south façade denote an entrance into the parish gathering hall, of which the exterior plaza is an extension. Within the parish hall, the interior gathering space rises two stories, and acts as an interior plaza similar to the plaza in the Domus Ecclesia at Dura Europus. It is a space through which one must pass before entering the parish offices, classrooms, kitchen, library, and apartments for resident priests.



*fig. a*

*fig. a:* Axonometric view of the Parish Hall facade facing the Plaza.  
*fig. b:* Section through complex, facing West.

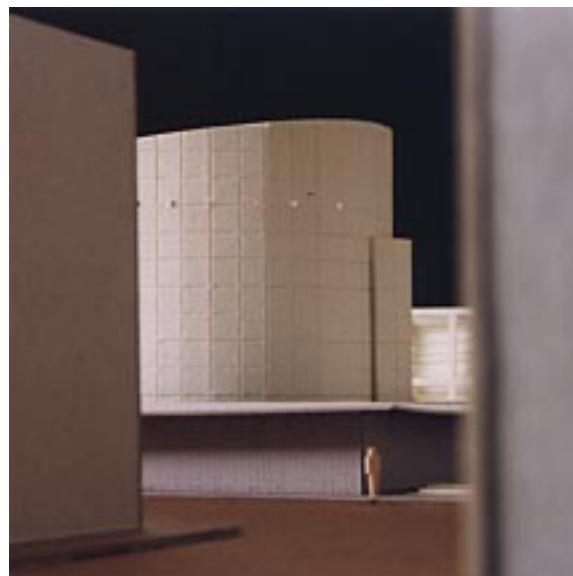


*fig. b*

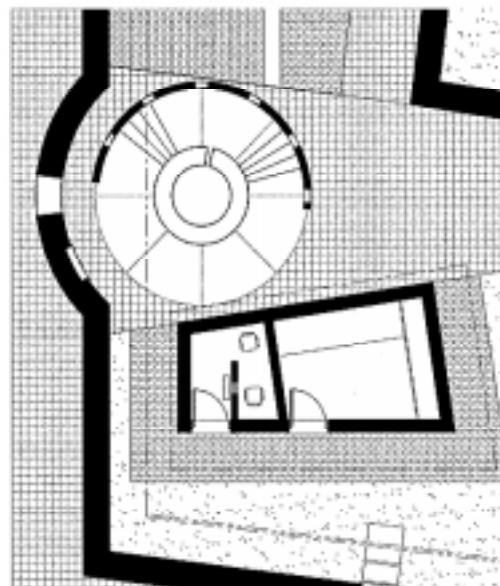
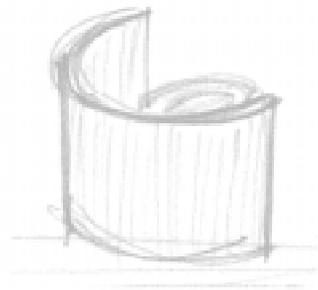
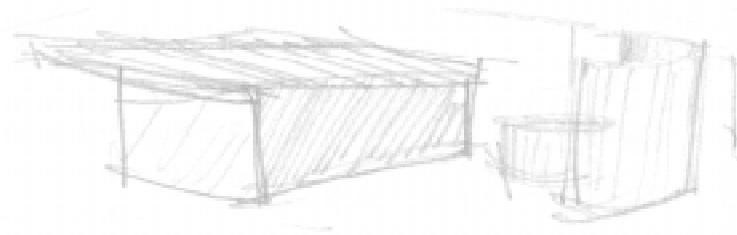
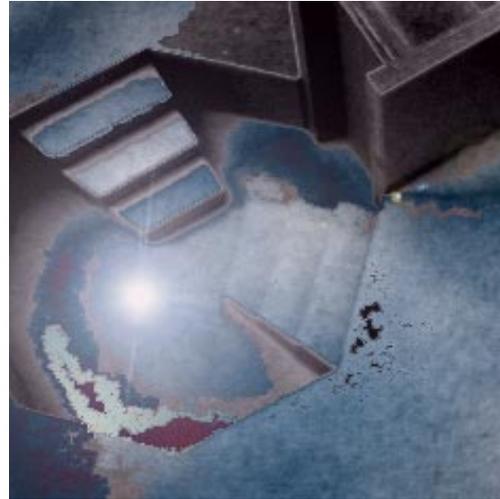
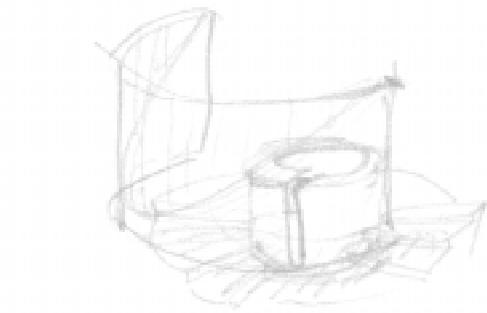


## THE CHURCH

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1 is create a



figures: Enlarged plan at Baptistry, sketches of baptistry, model/photographic study of baptistry.



One encounters the Baptistry before entering the church. It is both hidden and revealed by a curved, brick screen. Historically, baptisteries were separated from the church; they were separate buildings. Recently, however, baptismal fonts began to appear within the church as part of the worship space—a practice now being questioned. Many theologians believe that the Catholic Church should return to previous traditions of separate baptisteries, while others argue that the Church should continue placing baptismal fonts within the sanctuary. Some theologians and liturgists believe that baptism is a private sacrament, celebrated and practiced with a small group of people, including immediate family and close friends. Others believe that baptism is a sacrament that should be shared with the whole community.

Within this design, the Baptistry is placed outside of the sanctuary. Its placement is important, not only with regard to its history, but also in view of its meaning. It recalls the early historical separation of the baptismal font from the church sanctuary. And it is located near the entrance of the Church as a reminder of the believer's death and resurrection in Christ. Mauck comments in *Shaping a House for the Church*:

The experience of baptism as entry into the life of God imposes an additional layer of meaning for the architectural entry space. The entryway is not only the focus for the gathering of the assembly, The literal entry into the building ideally provides the ritual experiences of entry and reentry into the life of the community—baptism and reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

The baptismal font is also a foreshadowing of the basin within the sanctuary that the believer encounters immediately upon entering, to invoke the Sign of the Cross.

<sup>1</sup>Mauck, 42.

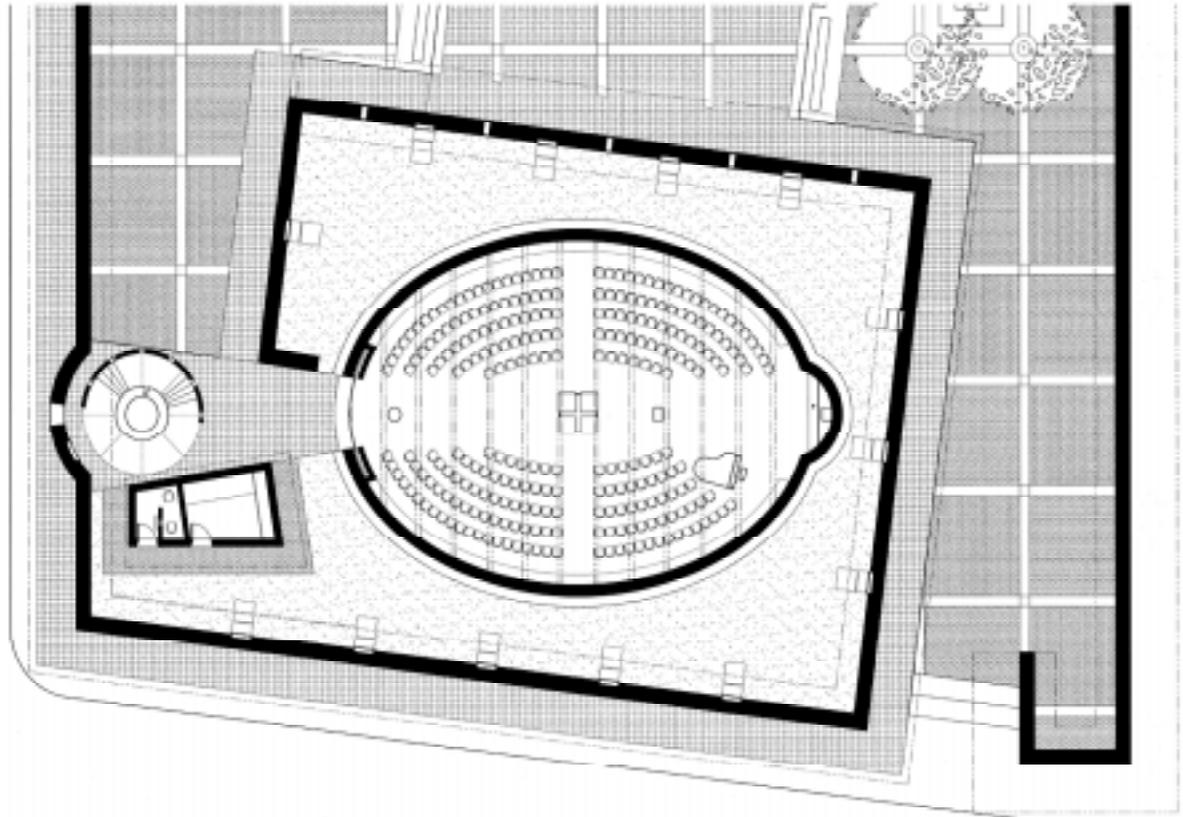


fig. b

fig. a: Detail of moat at the bottom of the Church's walls.  
 fig. b: Enlarged plan of the precinct of the Church Sanctuary.

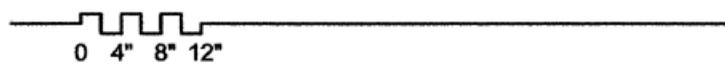
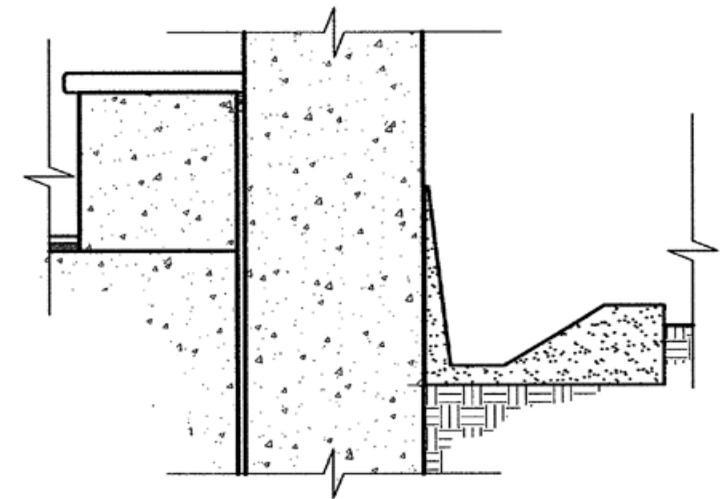


fig. a

The church building is separated from its surrounding structures. It stands at a distance from the Wall, the Baptistry and the vestry and confessional. The church building is surrounded by a garden. Where the walls of the Church meet the ground, a granite moat receives runoff from the roof of the building, acting as a boundary between the surrounding garden and the Church building.

The Church is elliptical in plan. Its shape is dictated by a Catholic attitude towards liturgical space. The Catholic Church believes that a worship space should be shaped around the liturgy. The manner in which believers use a space should define the form of that space. The ellipse is a marriage of two types of plans typical throughout church history: longitudinal and centralized. In the early history of the Church, longitudinal churches were used for mass while centralized churches were associated more with martyria, or burial sites of saints. During the late Renaissance and Baroque periods in Italy, the centralized plan was criticized as having its roots in paganism. Theorists, such as Carlo Borromeo, believed that centralized buildings, such as the Tomb of Hadrian or the Pantheon, evoked

<sup>2</sup>Kruft, 94.

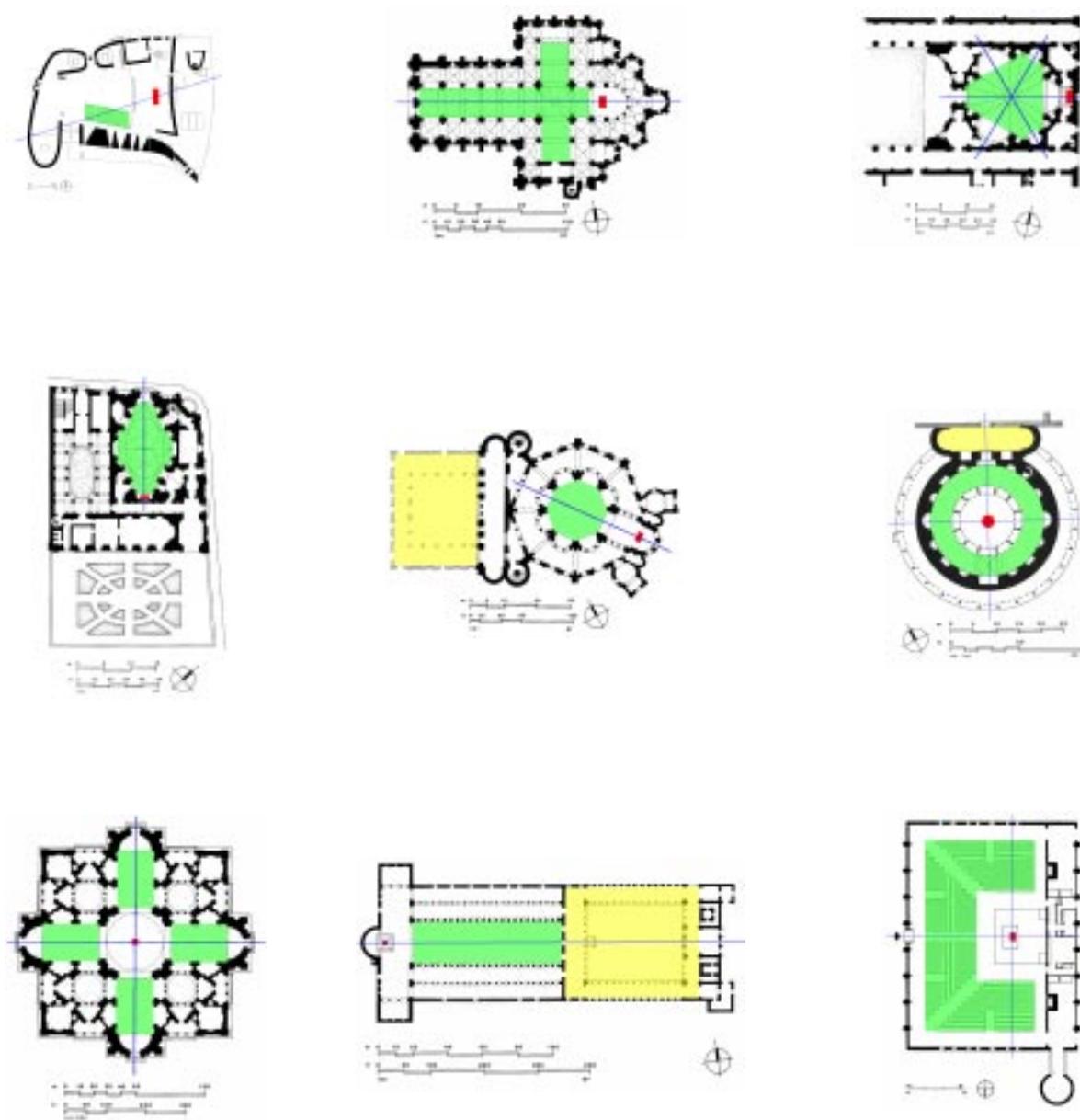
figures: A study of church plans. Gathering spaces are highlighted in yellow, Worship spaces in green. The focus (altar) is indicated in red. Major and minor axes are indicated with blue lines.

top figures, left to right: Notre-Dame-du-Haut, Le Corbusier, Ronchamp, France, 1950-55; Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, France, 1040-1130; Collegiate Church of Sant' Ivo della Sapienza, Francesco Borromini, Rome, 1642-60.

middle figures, left to right: Church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Francesco Borromini, Rome, 1634-37; San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, 532-548; Mausoleum of Constantina (Santa Costanza), Rome, circa A.D. 350.

lower figures, left to right: Bramante's plan for Saint Peter's, Rome, 1504-14; Old Saint Peter's, Rome, A.D. 319-329; St. Mark at Venlo, Netherlands.

Note: All figures adapted from images from Leland M. Roth, *Understanding Architecture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).



idolatrousness.<sup>2</sup> And before the Second Vatican Council, Catholic Church buildings resembled school buses, where both the priest and assembly would face the altar.

Neither a centralized nor a longitudinal plan are appropriate for Catholic worship today, but both forms are necessary. The Second Vatican council calls for greater participation of the laity in the mass. It calls for a dynamic interaction, where parishioners can see, not only the Eucharist, but other believers as well. The community is emphasized. A centralized space would be an appropriate expression for this idea of communal interaction. The Church, however, still includes processions in its liturgy. Longitudinal plans allow for processions. The ellipse is a union of these two forms of church design, allowing for a central focus while still maintaining a major axis for processions.

The seating within the sanctuary is not permanent, except for a bench which lines the interior of the wall of the sanctuary. Pews were not present in Catholic worship spaces until after the Counter Reformation. Having impermanent seating allows for the possibility of the Catholic Church moving back to not having seating. This would allow for a more active and less passive encounter during the mass.

*figs. a-e:* Light studies of Church interior.  
*fig. f:* Detail of skylight at Church roof.



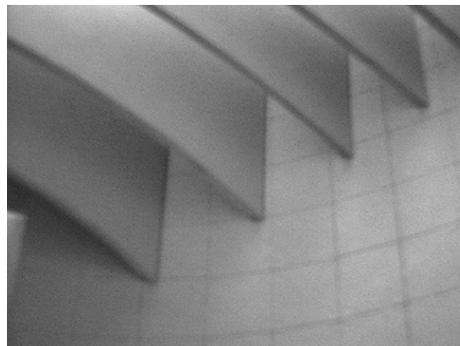
*fig. d*



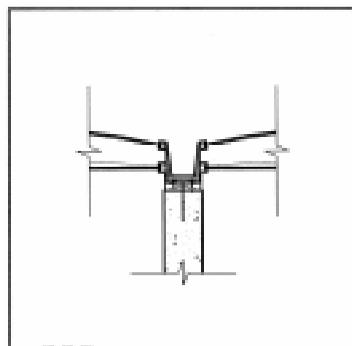
*fig. a*



*fig. e*



*fig. b*



*fig. f*



*fig. c*

The ceiling of a church building historically has been a symbol of heaven. Domes and vaults were painted with images of the sky and the heavenly host of angels and saints surrounding Christ. In this space, the ceiling offers a view to the sky itself. Light which enters through the glass filters through fins which curve and cross the space North and South. Light softly illuminates the sanctuary space, not separating the space harshly into zones. From the outside of the church, the sanctuary wall rises towards the tabernacle, located at the East end of the church, where the consecrated Eucharist or Body of Christ resides.

## CONCLUSION

The threshold is not merely an event that exists between two states. It can be both a precise point and an ambiguous gray area. It can be a moment or a process. The threshold does not exist for itself. It belongs to both the state that one is leaving and that state that one is journeying towards. The threshold can be merely a step, an abrupt visual change experienced by the body. It can be a passage that directs the traveler into increasing or decreasing levels of enclosure.

The threshold, defined simply, marks an entrance. It, however, is more than that. As one passes through a threshold, one must depart from something else. One must separate oneself from similitude in order to arrive at a place of difference. A threshold that exists between two similar states is not a threshold. It would merely be an object in a field. The threshold involves change.

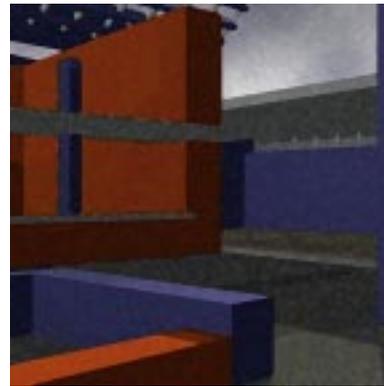
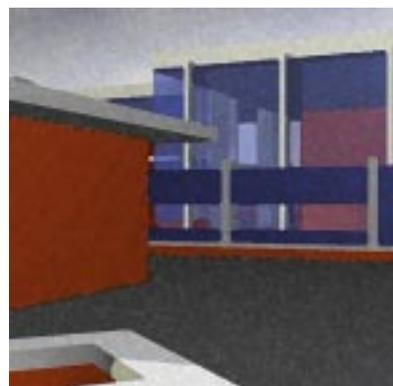
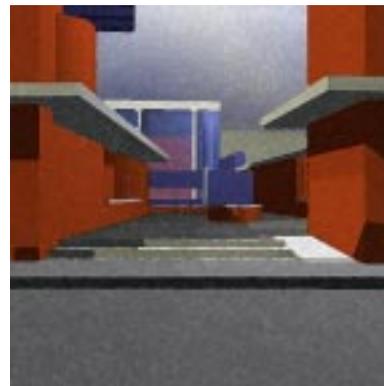
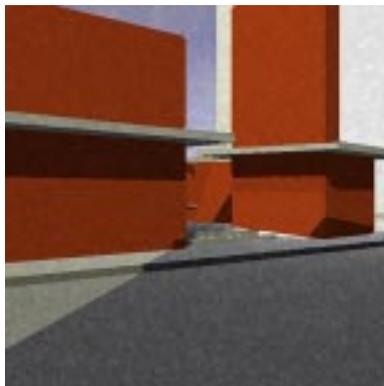
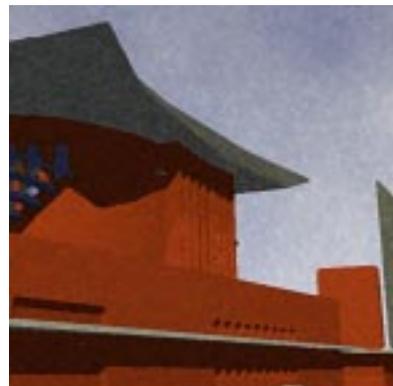
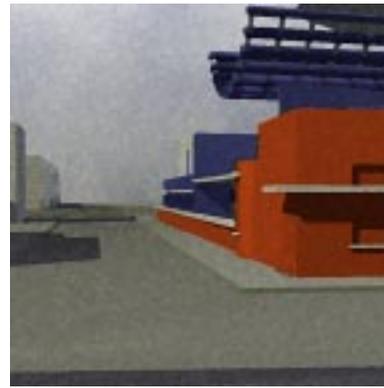
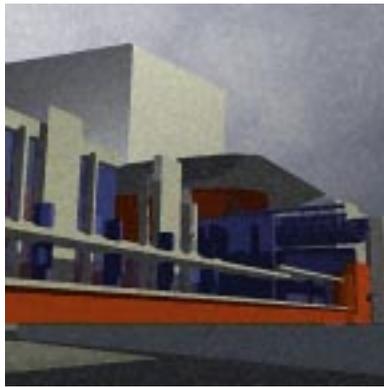
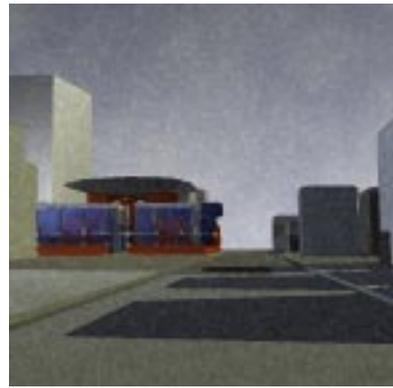
The threshold is biased. It prefers one state to the other, whether it is inside or outside, enclosed or open. It points and directs. As in the story of Exodus, the journey consists of a passage from one place to another: from Egypt to the Promised Land. One state of being is assumed to be preferred more than the other. This is where the threshold guides us.

*"In books one seldom finds what one is looking for. And when one has found it, it is often wrong."*

—Antoni Gaudí

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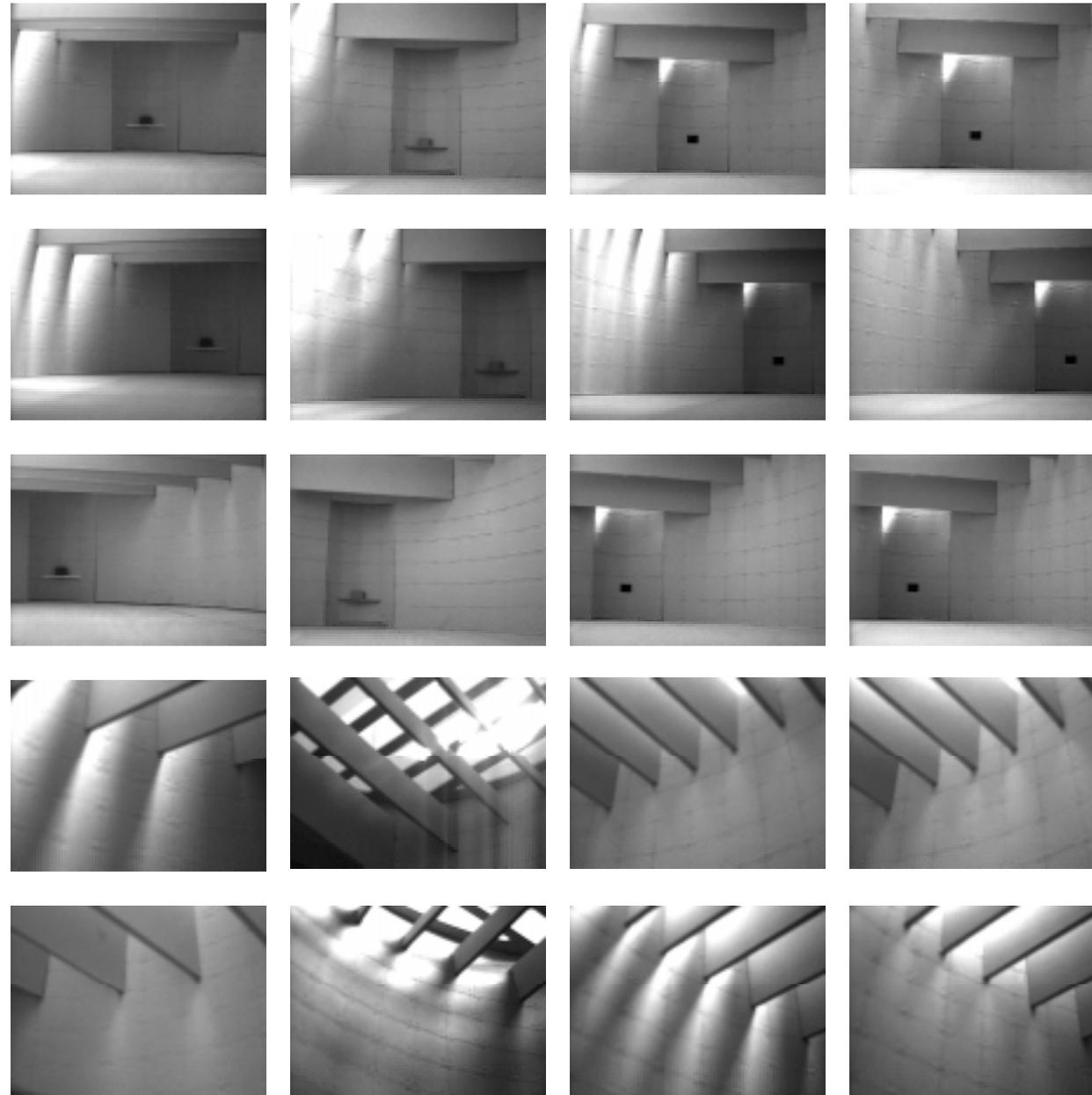
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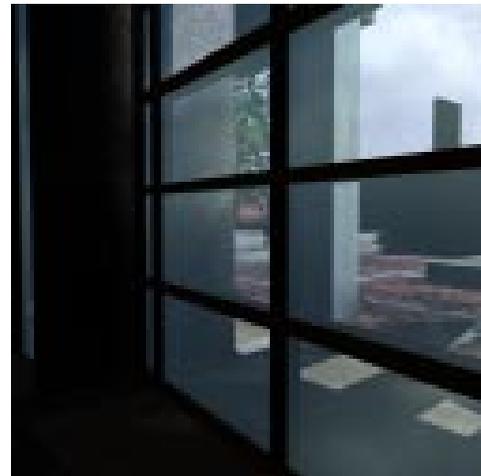


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