

AN INCREMENTAL APPROACH  
TO DEVELOPMENT AT  
GESUNDHEIT! INSTITUTE

Martin Daniel Segal

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Mark DeKay, Chairperson  
Scott Gardner  
Bill Green

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**ABSTRACT**

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By

MARTIN SEGAL

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor Mark DeKay

Department of Architecture and Design, University of Tennessee

This thesis is an evaluation and proposal for development for an alternative health care center in West Virginia. The Gesundheit Institute is based on the work of Dr. Hunter "Patch" Adams and his desire to create an alternative to the current model of health care. The Institute would not charge for services and will offer non-traditional as well as traditional methods of healing. By evaluating what is currently happening at the center and what the resources are, I propose to use an incremental approach to growth. The ideas would result in a series of smaller buildings developed over time as opposed to a single larger building. The thesis includes the design for the next major building, a community center/dining hall and a basic design for a series of sleeping quarters. It also includes the reworking of the master plan to better include issues integrating incremental growth and sustainable development.

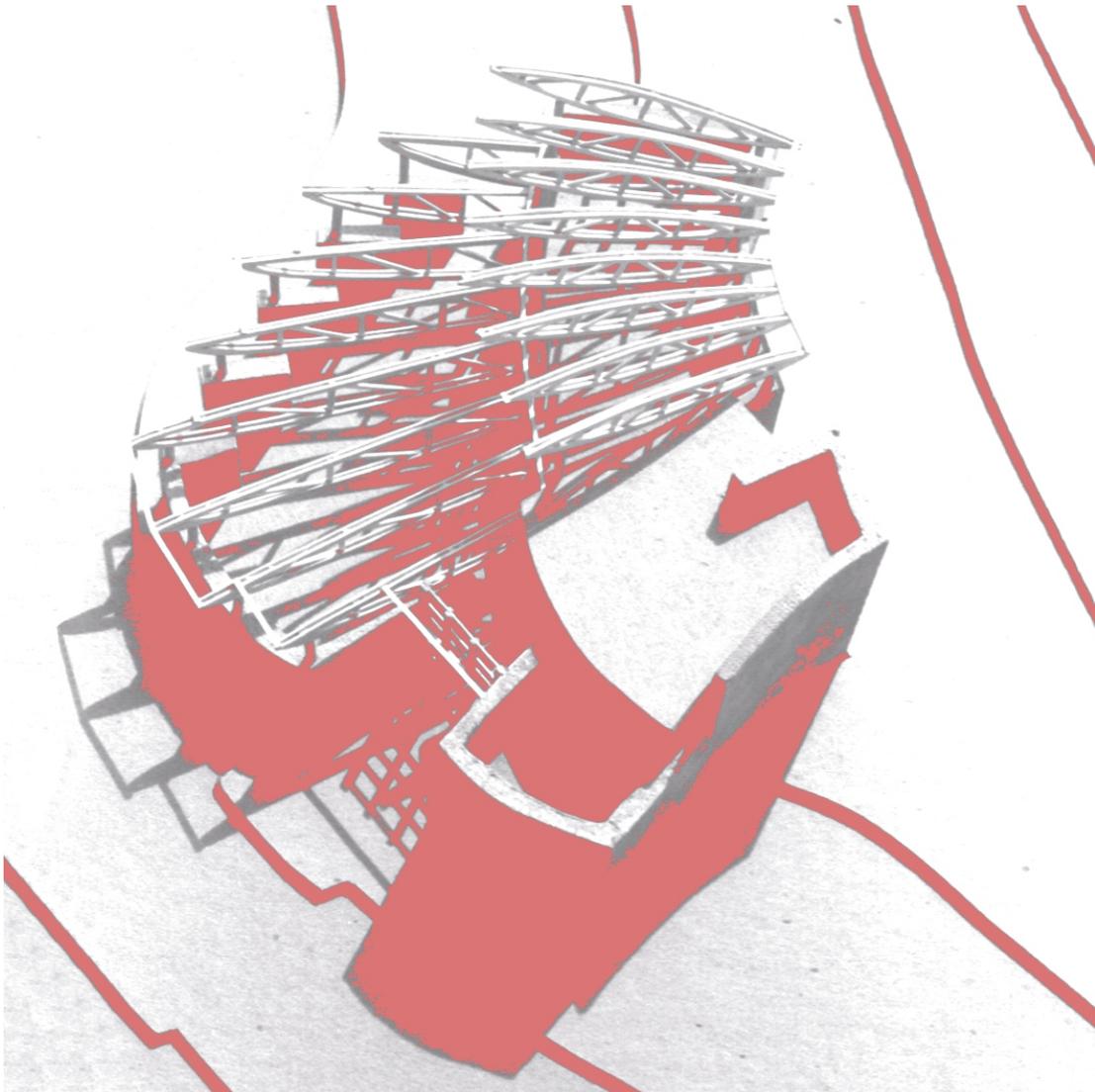
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## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

Gesundheit Institute located in a rural part of West Virginia is the focus of this study. The Institute is currently planning on building a hospital combining both conventional and alternative care. My proposal is to change the current approach of one big building to one of incremental growth. With this new approach I have designed a new meeting/dining house and given the framework for a new sleeping/healing unit along with an outline for the site development.

My thesis work was originally done during my 3rd year of Graduate School, 1993-1994. The work done in 1994 is the basis of this work, and the drawings, photographs and sketches are the result of that work. The work was presented at my thesis defense in May of

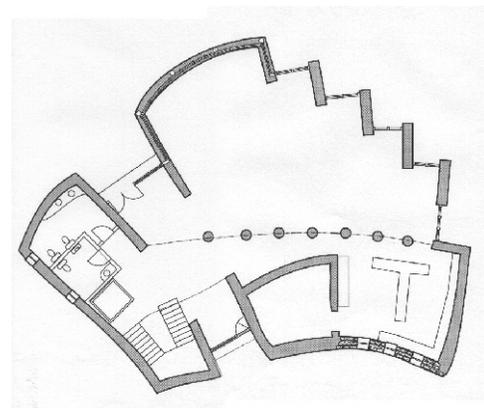
1994. Basically, the whole of the written part is being compiled late summer of 2001. The written work is fully based on the verbal thesis defense of 1994.

In determining the prerequisites for a thesis study, I began to think of several criteria:

1. That the project is to be real, with actual users to talk with and a site to study. That the project deals with issues of community. That the project is urban in nature.

While the Gesundheit Institute was not the type of project I had in mind when I started to think about my thesis (I originally had planned to use a cohousing project), it seemed quite a natural selection after I began to evaluate the possibilities:

1. The project is real as the group is planning construction soon on a building budgeted at



one million dollars, and there is staff on the site (located approximately 2.5 hours from Blacksburg) quite willing to discuss the plans.

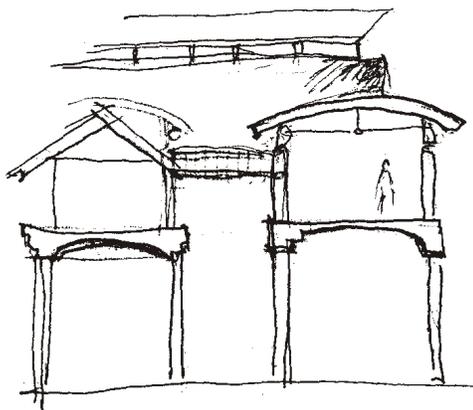
2. From the beginning Gesundheit has had a focus on the ideas and ideals of intentional communities. The concept of a healing environment with many different medical models available and a supportive environment could make for rich architecture.

3. While its location is the antithesis of urban, the clustering of multi use buildings and community structure bring a certain urban quality to this setting. It will be a village for healing.

After an initial visit to the site in late August 1993, I began to formulate my approach to the project. Before visiting, I had assumed that my project would be a reworking of the existing site

plan and design of the hospital building. Upon viewing the site a rethinking of this approach became clear. First, because only one new building had been constructed to date, the whole plan needs to be carefully reviewed and reworked. Second, the next building planned, a "bunkhouse-outpatient clinic" is scheduled to be built when the funds are available. Although plans exist for this building, it is seriously flawed. It does not do Gesundheit justice. It seems to be a quick response to the first building, a slowly constructed (over several years) materially expensive structure. It was also not a part of the original master plan.

During my early work on this project I was exposed to a short animated film (The Man Who Planted Trees) which had an impact on my way of thinking



about the project. I have included images from a the film as a way of introduction to the power of consistent small acts. The film helped to bring clarity on where and how I should focus my energy on the project. I used the film as an introduction to my verbal thesis defense in 1994 and I still recommend the film. It is exceptional, on many levels!

My proposal is focused on three areas:  
A new village plan centering on a pedestrian scale and tuned for sustainability. A building system that makes use of the high levels of the volunteer labor that is available.  
A new meeting hall as a first new systems building.

### Village Plan

My ideas for the village plan center on careful use and treatment of resources. The orientation is pedestrian. Most people come to visit for a week or two and cars simply are not needed, except for deliveries and maintenance. The 300-plus acre site is of an open meadow at the base of steeply rising wooded hills. There are several springs on the site and a pond. This land has not supported this concentration of people before, it will be important to plan carefully for water resources and biological water treatment, not to mention solar access and energy use. Aside from the basic buildings (medical, sleeping, food and crafts) there are several additional considerations. Because of the emphasis at Gesundheit on fun there is the need for playing fields and other



outdoor gathering areas. There will also be extensive gardens, greenhouses, trails and meditation areas.

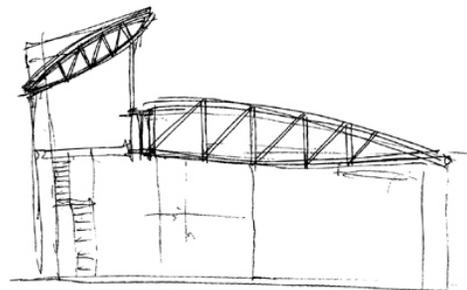
### Building System

Gesundheit has a volunteer system in place with from 5 to 30 people working every week. This is a nice opportunity to develop a building system that is lo-tech labor intensive. By this I mean a system that is site-built, such as trusses or built up beams and columns, or hand poured concrete blocks. This system would have to be designed for non-skilled labor with good supervision. Because cost is a factor, the building could be built in steps with adjustments made as units are completed and more funds available. The architecture will come from the detail and care of the small

building unit.

### Meeting/Dining Hall

I am introducing a new building to the plan and propose to build it first using the newly developed building system of low-tech sustainable methods. The building would be a general meeting hall for meals and offices above. The two level building is oriented to take advantage of the sun and natural ventilation of the site. It will be located as a central meeting place. Thick masonry will anchor lightweight hand made wood frame trusses and glass. This building will be followed by a larger sleeping unit built adjacent to it using the same techniques.



## *The Man Who Planted Trees*

An "environmental story"??

I learned about the film (and book) from my brother Steve, who is an animator, when he mentioned a film to me. He said that I would like it, that it was an environmental film. I tried to find the film at the library but it was not available locally. I eventually saw it on public television almost by accident. I was taken aback. Sure, it had a basic environmental theme, but there was something much more basic, much more critical to me.

The story of the solitary man, who does the seemingly impossible, but does it in a methodical, consistent way. This is a story that applies to so many situations. It even pointed me in the way to approach a thesis. To start on the thesis project, not by trying to develop a single solution for a big project, but by slowly developing a series of architectural steps.



An incredible story

This beautifully animated film (winner of 1987 academy award for animation) was written by Jean Giono and animated by Frederic Back. It is the story of a young man who comes upon a solitary middle-aged man in a desolate area of Europe. He stays with him and learns of his methodical tree planting, slowly planting one oak tree at a time. The man visits again after the horror of WW1, and sees a minor transformation as trees are growing everywhere. He continues to visit regularly over the years, and sees the incredible reclaiming of the land. People return to the "new" forests, and the land is reborn. The man dies years later, the land forever impacted by his slow and steady work.

On a simple level it is the just the story of a man slowly planting trees and transforming a

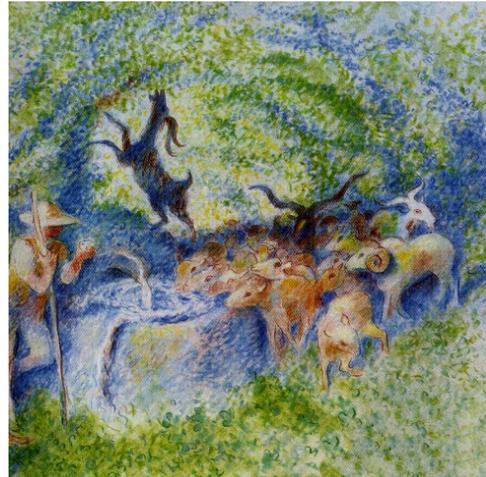
landscape, but there is more to it. The revelation of the story is that a solitary person working slowly could do the unbelievable. If one sets out with an incredible task as the goal, the work will weigh down the person and make it impossible. It is focus on the day-to-day work, not the overall goal that makes the impossible possible. Focus on the details makes the whole possible.

An environment disabled by man can be brought back with the help of man. The idea that the environment is repairable bears directly on architecture inasmuch as building without regard for the impact on the environment does a tremendous amount of damage and that architecture can also be the basis for change and repair. Building the right buildings is like planting trees.



After viewing the film, I had an understanding that a series of small steps is necessary to make a larger step. This basic understanding allows the largest goals to be broken down into smaller "doable" tasks. The work on my thesis felt like the "impossible" task, but trying to

find the small steps seemed realistic. Then the idea seemed to coalesce into a thought process that applied to the whole of the project. It applied to how I approached the thesis work itself and it applied to how I see Gesundheit growing for the future.



“When I reflect that one man, armed only with his own physical and moral resources, was able to cause this land of Canaan to spring from the wasteland, I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable. But when I compute the unfailing greatness of spirit and the tenacity of benevolence that it must have taken to achieve this result, I am taken with an immense respect for that old and unlearned peasant who was able to complete a work worthy of God.”

## Gesundheit Institute

It is important to take a look at what Gesundheit Institute is. Prior to designing any projects for the site, a brief overview of Gesundheit and the some of the ideas behind it will lead to a clearer understanding of the final project and the pathway to the solutions proposed.

### Patch Adams

No discussion of Gesundheit could be started without mentioning Patch Adams, clown doctor, whose approach to medicine is to not take medicine too seriously and to use humor as a healing tool. He has toured the world spreading his vision of cooperative healing, of alternative and traditional methods working together. He is a tireless worker, who has worked for almost 30 years on his goal of an intentional healing



community, (step by step, as a way to deal with "nay-sayers"). He is an Inspirational leader of the community. A visionary who must at some time let go of the "leader role" and allow the vision and community to grow with input from all.

The movie with Robin Williams was really based on him (and his book "Gesundheit!"). And yes, the West Virginia land is mentioned and shown (not the actual land, just a reasonable facsimile).

The film did add fuel to the fire that donations would flow in and allow a single major hospital building to be undertaken. Currently as of 2001 no major "hospital" building is built, and fund-raising continues. The Gesundheit website currently mentions ongoing planning for the building and requests that no volunteers on site are needed at this time.



### Health Care Model

Gesundheit proposes the use of a health care model based on cooperation between conventional and alternative models of medicine. Within this framework are several basic ideas including humor as treatment and charging no fees for the treatment. The idea of humor is an ideal that must show up in the architecture, buildings that inspire fun and cause a smile.



THE GESUNDHEIT CLOWN WORK FORCE

### Site in West Virginia:

The site is an idyllic setting in rural mildly mountainous terrain in West Virginia. A gently sloping meadow meets a more steeply sloped wooded hillside. One major year round stream and man-made pond swimming hole. It is a special environment that must be protected from the impact of building and continuing use. T



IN THE TIME SINCE I STARTED WORK ON THIS THESIS WORK HAS CONTINUED AT THE SITE. THE WORK IS NOT WHAT WAS PLANNED FOR, MAINLY, A BIG HOSPITAL BUILDING, BUT A SERIES OF SMALLER BUILDINGS LIKE THIS "COB HOUSE".

### Existing buildings

The first Gesundheit built building, a cubic multi-use structure of hip roof and solid timber frame construction, meeting rooms and shop, kitchen and natural materials near small pond. There is a farmhouse converted to a main kitchen and dining area with gardens adjacent. Greenhouse added on. Rainbow bridges with a comfortable hand made hippie feel. Fabric yurts used as temporary sleeping quarters for summer visitors. Situated above

the dining hall amongst the trees in a small field. Since my initial visits to the site there has been one major new building, the dacha, which is a Russian inspired housing structure with a playful tower. Additional building has continued on a small scale including the construction of a corn cob based structure which is very much in keeping with the ideas presented here, inexpensive materials coupled with lo-tech construction techniques.

**CORN COBB  
CONSTRUCTION CREW**



**VIEW OF LAND OVER POND**



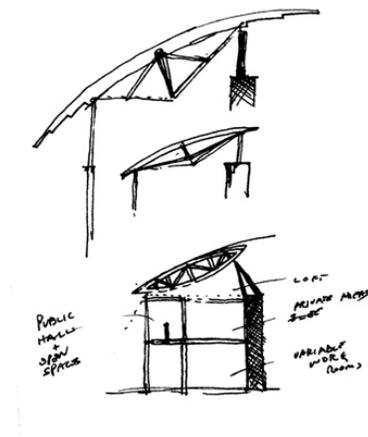
## Incremental Growth

It is the architect's role to challenge the conventional thinking on how a project is developed. Our society has allowed the role of the architect to become one of decorator and permit expediter. This project is a perfect example of how by bringing in architecture at an earlier point the whole project may benefit. Instead of defining the scope of the project as an individual building, i.e.: "hospital" the architect can help to devise a methodology for growth and development and develop a series of tools to allow future growth to follow. A project like this is in more need of planning than of individual building design, but by developing planning tools it will make for more dynamic designs.

An incremental growth model is ideally suited for Gesundheit. Make use of the

volunteers, low skill, low cost. Minimize the need to import skills and materials. Be wary of high skill projects and high cost materials. Make use of evolutionary development. Buildings and systems change and become more dynamic over time. This is already in evidence at Gesundheit in the several existing buildings. Although there is no overall design concept, there is a linkage running through the different buildings. Sustainable development is well suited to incremental growth. It is in its very nature an incremental path.

Flexibility over the long haul should be maintained. An alternative health care model may slowly change over time, with new treatments and approaches to health care. A single building with all capital gone does not lend itself to change. A series of flexible buildings will evolve over time to



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SKETCH DURING DESIGN DEVELOPMENT IS IN ITSELF AN EXAMPLE OF AN INCREMENTAL APPROACH. THE SERIES OF CONTINUING SKETCHES IS NON-LINEAR IN NATURE. THE SKETCH IS A WAY OF EXPLORING AN INCREMENTAL STEP ON THE WAY TO THE NEXT LEVEL. THE ACT OF SKETCHING LEADS TO DISCOVERY AND THE PATH WILL BE ALTERED GENTLY.