

URBAN RHYTHMS

A School of Music and Mixed-Use Project for Washington, DC
by Merrill D. St. Leger-Demian



For Ziad

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for Washington, D. C.

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the Virginia Polytechnic Institute
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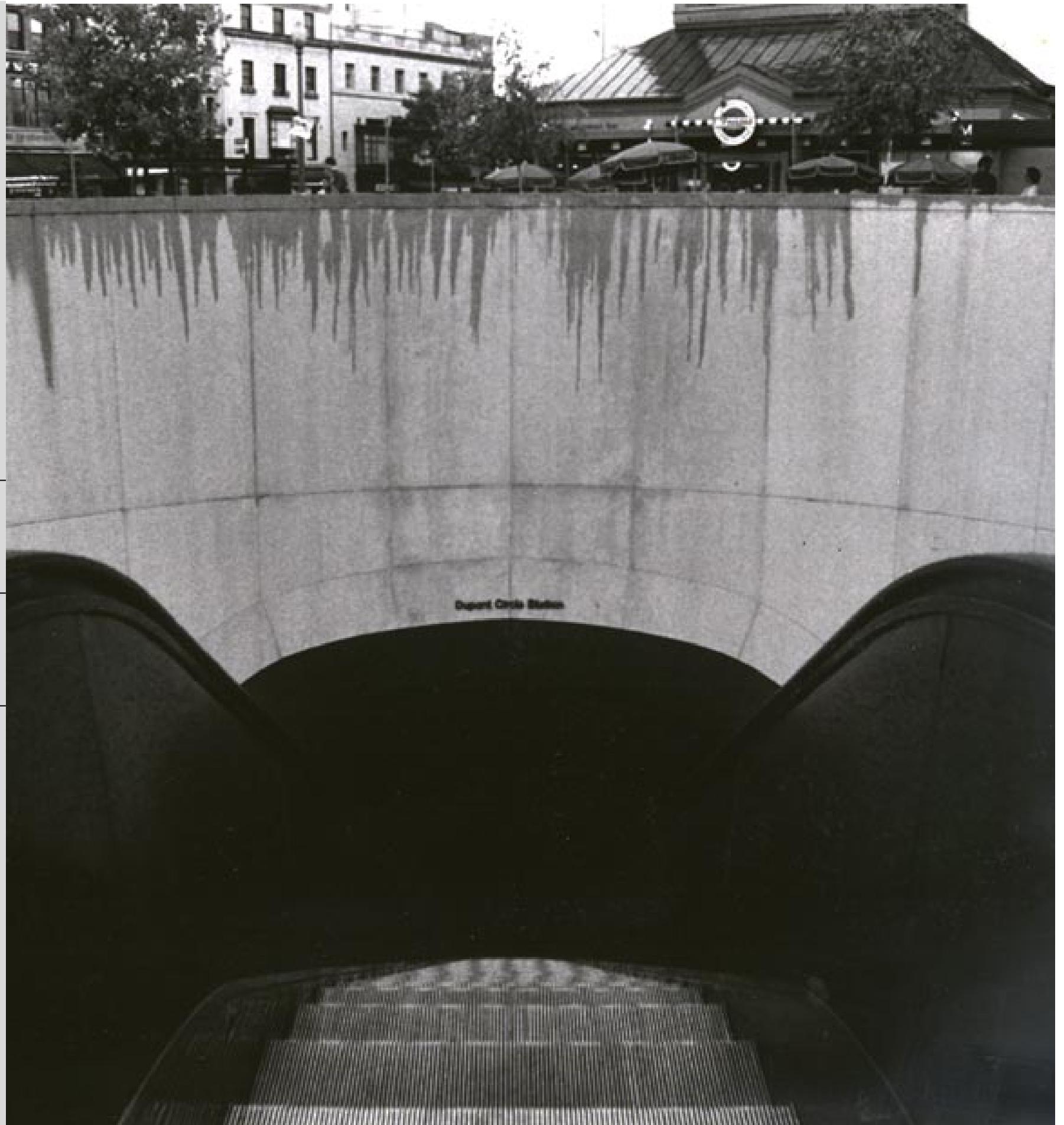


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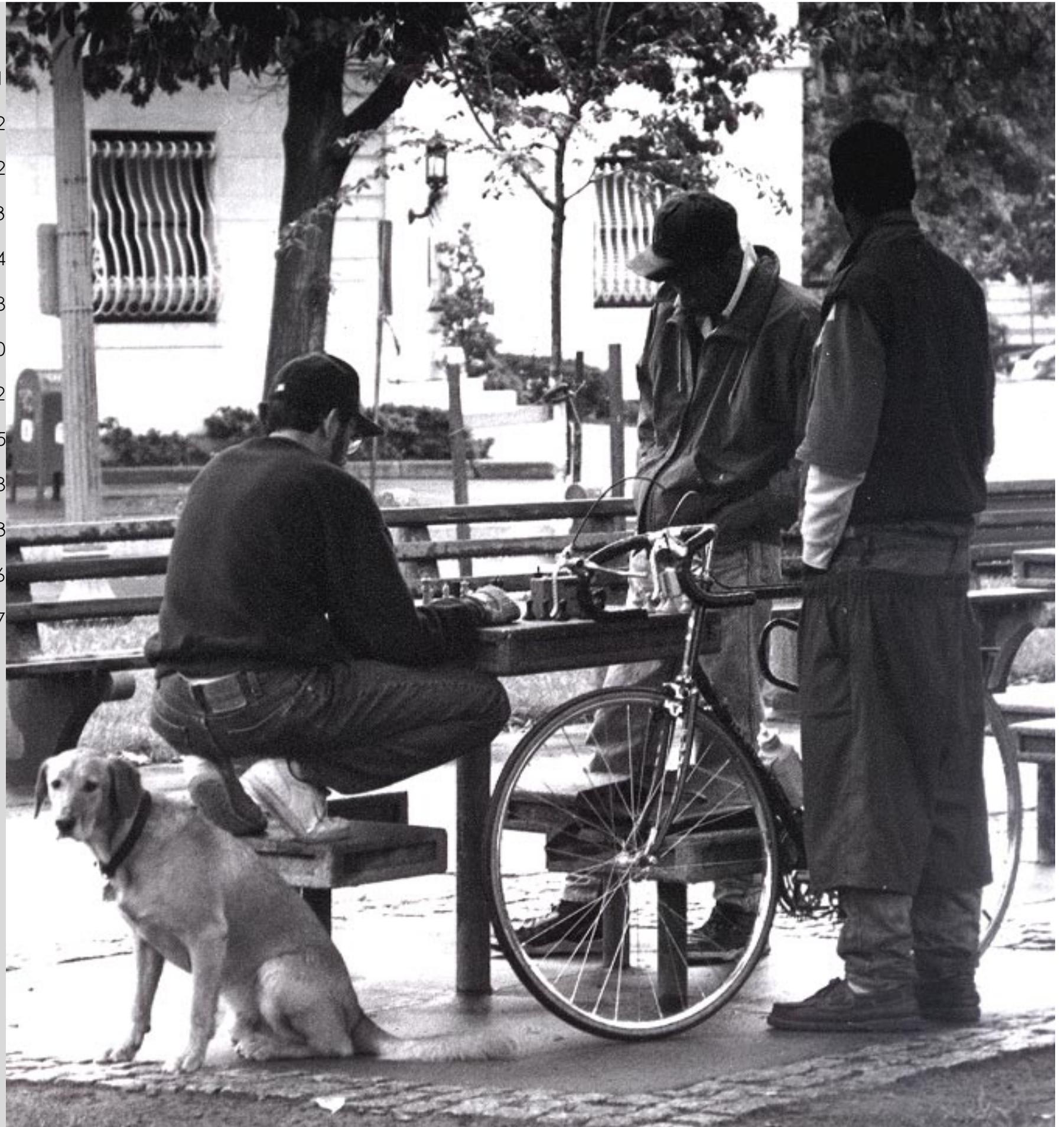
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All photos by Merrill St. Leger-Demian, unless otherwise noted.





Abstract

I believe that there are certain forces, I call them rhythms, which exist in the urban environment. They are rhythms because they are both physically and perceptually dynamic. These rhythms shape the city, and give character to the different neighborhoods in the city. They help organize the sites in those neighborhoods; they influence the designs of the buildings on those sites, the rooms within the buildings and even the buildings' smallest details.

Rhythms are found at every scale of design. They exist regardless of language or articulation of the Architecture. They are independent of style or ornament. They are clues for the architect to discover and act upon. They can be

anything from actual physical elements, to fleeting emotional ones. They allow projects to be tied intimately to the environment around them. They give the city its fabric. These rhythms are in a constant and dynamic evolution, yet they help produce and enhance something seemingly static - the sense of place, because they are already an intimate part of the place.

I believe that architects have the opportunity to capture these rhythms, to manipulate them, and to use them in the creation of places which energize the user's experience. In fact, architects have the responsibility to do so in exchange for the privilege of impacting the development of the city. This project is an exploration of design with these rhythms.



Introduction

“Man defines himself by his project. This material being perpetually goes beyond the condition which is made for him; he reveals and determines his situation by transcending it in order to objectify himself - by work, action or gesture. When the objectification is terminated, the concrete richness of the object produced infinitely surpasses that of the end (taken as a unitary hierarchy of meanings) at the moment of the past at which it is considered. But this is because the object is no longer an end; it is the product “in person” of labor, and it exists in the world, which implies an infinity of new relations.”

Jean-Paul Sartre

This book is written as a way of looking back on, analyzing, summarizing, and sharing the ideas which formed this project. It is also a contribution to the world of ideas about the design process.

This thesis project does not entirely conform to the traditional definition of a thesis. A thesis is, “A proposition...that is maintained by an argument; a dissertation advancing an original point of view as a result of research”. This project does not completely fit this description. It did not begin with a particular pre-determined idea which was then proven or disproved through the design process. Rather, it began with certain intentions and desires which, through an

exploration resulted in the formation and affirmation, of certain design ideas, or instincts.

The vehicle through which this project was explored, and perhaps the closest thing to being considered the “thesis”, was an idea about design with which this project began, and which became much clearer as the project got well underway. I have also since realized that this design idea had been in slow evolution for some time, having found its way into many past projects. It is an idea which, once the project was finished, and the idea affirmed, felt so self-evident, that it seemed a wonder that it took so much time and hard work to realize. This idea is the one stated in the abstract. It is



an idea about the rhythms with which an architect designs, at all scales from the city level down to the detail level. It is the intangible and tangible dynamic flow or forces which exist in the environment, and which influence and are then later influenced by the final product.

The particular skill which the architect needs to use in order to design with these rhythms is that of "synthesis". Architects gather information from a variety of sources - both before and continuously during the design process - and synthesize it into the final design. Part of this process is the ability to recognize clues of various forms which appear at the different scales, ranging from the city scale to the detail scale.

Each of these scales of design has a continuous and evolving effect on the other scales. The whole functions back and forth as an inter-related system.

Beginnings, Program and Site

This project began with the desire to explore the design of a community-oriented project in an urban context. It would be a project which would serve and be served by the community, and one which would enhance the community's sense of place.

This project centered around the design of a



mixed-use building comprised of a School of Music, as well as retail, office and residential uses, in Dupont Circle in Washington, D. C. It was a project designed in two stages. The first stage was an urban design, or intervention into the area in which the project would be located. The second stage was the architectural design of the building itself. The two stages were interdependent. The first would be the creation of the public spaces which would form the immediate context for the building, and allow the public to interact with it. The second would be the design of the building itself whose variety of uses would create activity within itself as well as in the public spaces. The urban design involved an intervention into

the site leading to the integration of disparate parts of the site. This was done by creating public spaces consisting of a plaza at one end of the site, an amphitheater space at the other end, with various pedestrian connections in between including an arcade and a courtyard.

The primary use of the building was as a School of Music. The school's requirements included a formal theater for public performances, classrooms, rehearsal rooms, practice rooms, and a library. The building also contained residential units for students and faculty, office space for the administrations of both the school and the theater, office space for potential outside tenants, and street retail space.



Washington, D. C. has a variety number of large, formal performing arts venues: the Kennedy Center, the Warner Theater, National Theater, Constitution Hall, and so on. There are also many smaller theaters, and small Washington-area orchestras. Some local universities with music programs, such as Catholic University also put on performances. In addition, there are hopeful street musicians who perform all over the city for donations.

What made this proposed venue unique was the combination of an indoor formal performance space with an outdoor, informal one, in the same setting. For instance, the National Sym-

phony Orchestra could perform inside while a Bolivian folk music group could be performing outside, or visa versa.

The site of this project is the block on the Northwestern edge of Dupont Circle. It is bordered by 20th Street to the West, Q Street to the North, Connecticut Avenue to the East, and Massachusetts Avenue to the South. Currently existing on the block are retail shops, and a bank with a small parking lot. It is also the site of a major entrance to the Dupont Circle Metro Station.



Aerial view of the Washington, DC area

Photo from Above Washington, by Robert Cameron



Aerial view of the core of Washington, DC.

Photo from Above Washington, by Robert Cameron

Chapter 1: City

“Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all.”

**Kevin Lynch
Image of the City**

Washington, D. C. was designed not just to be a city, but to be the Nation’s Capital. Its plan was both a working, practical plan for the city, and a symbolic one. Important elements of the plan have physical relationships with one another and echo the country’s Democratic government.

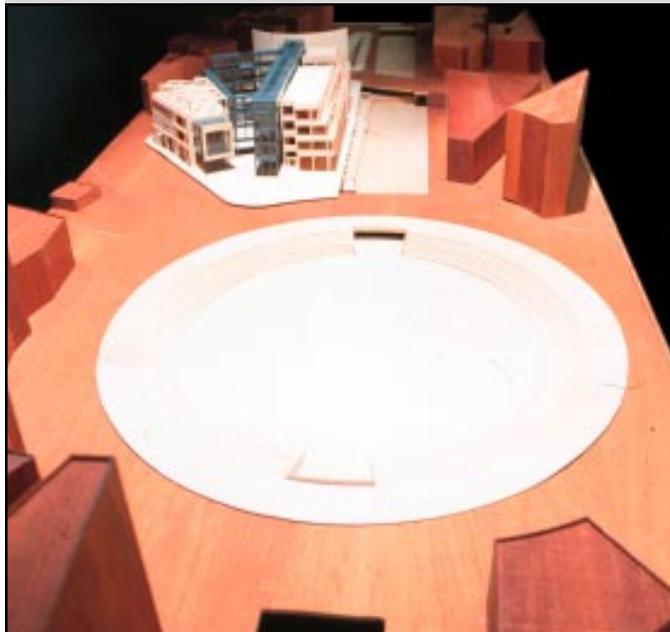
Three basic organizational elements form the city plan and create these relationships. First, the grid: Washington DC’s grid of streets and blocks is the primary system of order. It makes navigation around the city logical. Second, there are diagonal streets and boulevards which give the city street system its hierarchy. These diagonal streets cut across the grid link-

ing important points in the city. They are large, grand and formal, and open up vistas to the points which they link.

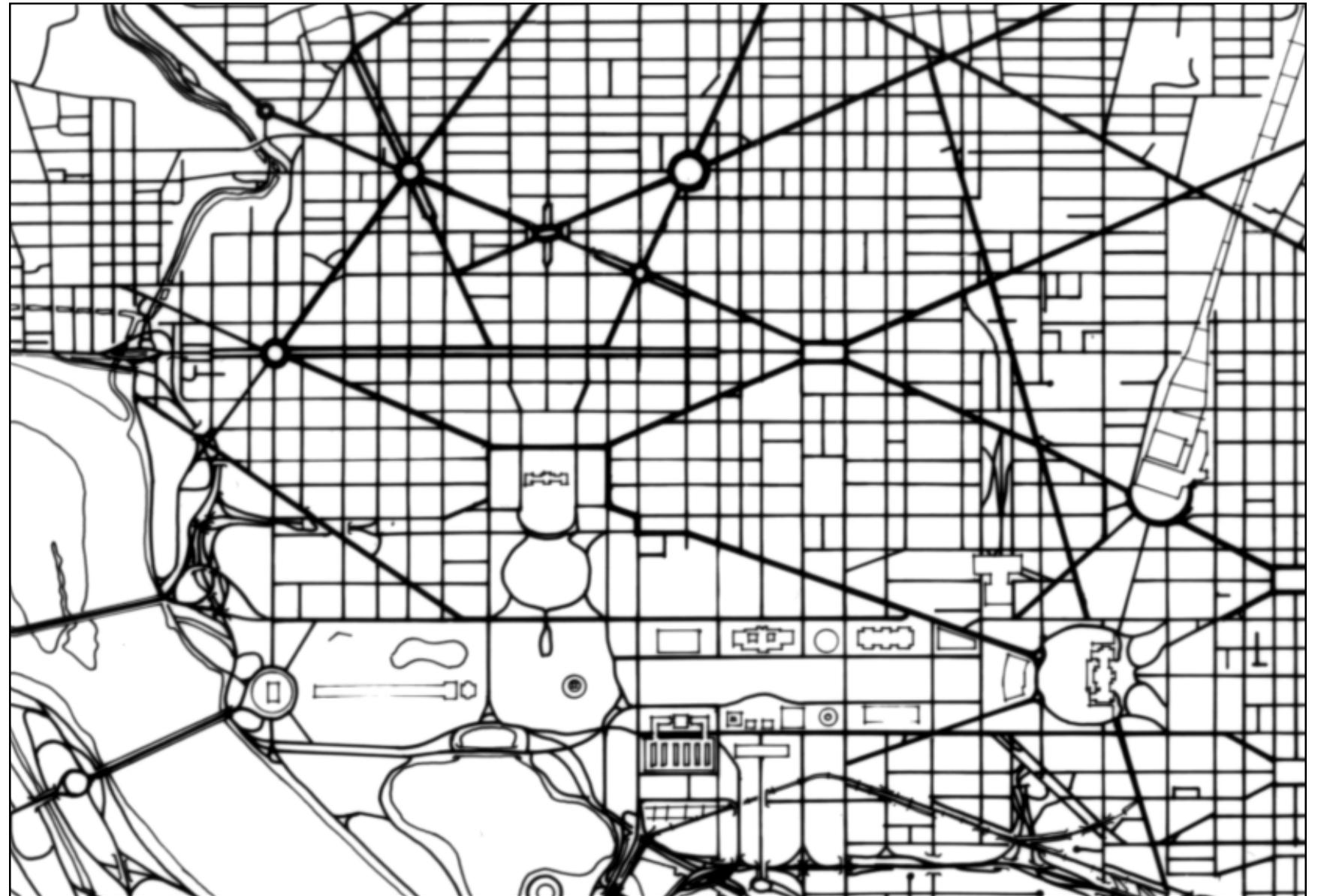
These points are the third element of the plan. At the city’s monumental core, they are the buildings which are situated around the Mall, and represent elements of our democracy - the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. They are the Capitol, the White House, the Lincoln Memorial and the Jefferson Memorial. (The Jefferson Memorial site was originally intended to be the site of the Supreme Court Building. The Lincoln Memorial site was not intended to have a building at all. This only goes to show the flexibility of l’Enfant’s plan as



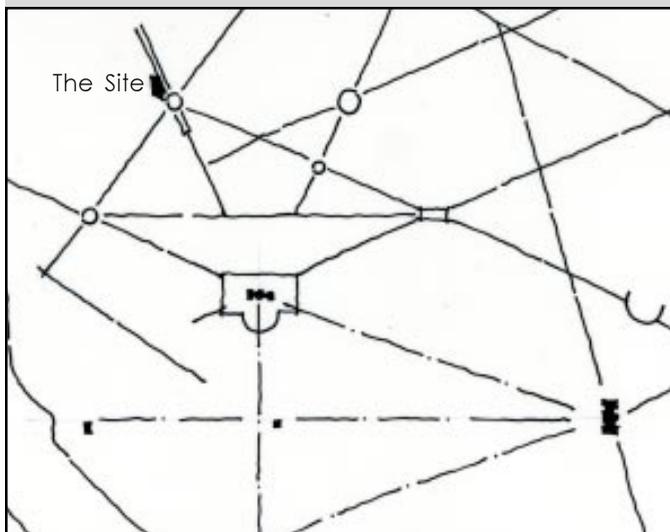
Model of building and context



Model of Dupont Circle and buildings beyond



Plan of the core of Washington, DC.



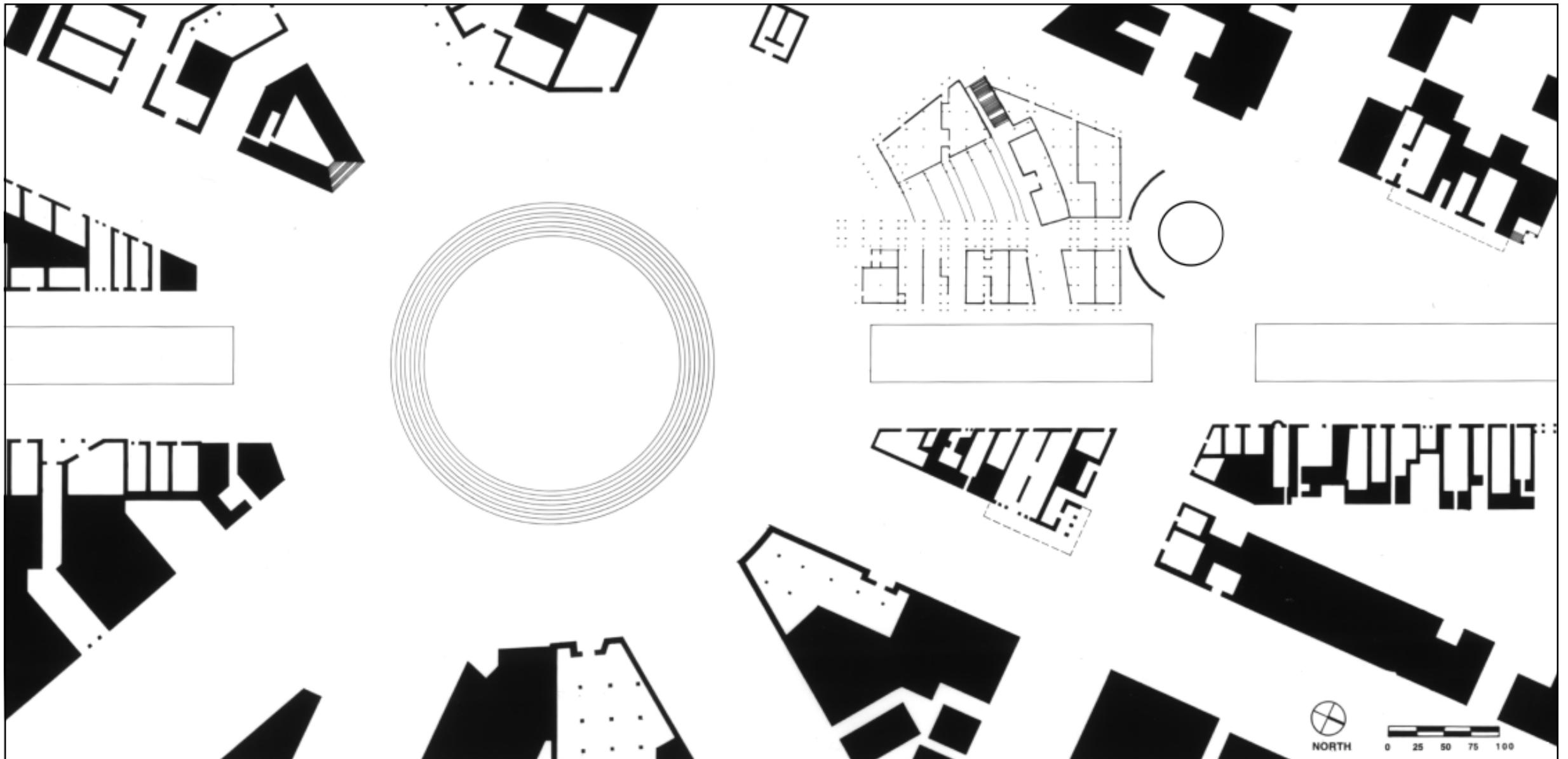
Sketch of Major Axes and Site

the city grew and evolved). Other points elsewhere in the city are the traffic circles. They were placed at the intersections of the boulevards with each other and with the city grid, and were used as a means of changing the direction of travel. These circles became focal points around which certain neighborhoods grew.

Together with other conditions such as its location along the Potomac River, the green of Rock Creek Park running through its heart, its (formerly) exact ten square miles of land donated by the states of Virginia and Maryland, l'Enfant's plan makes Washington D. C. a truly unique and great city. The plan has withstood the test of

time, evolving and adapting when and where necessary. Its essence has remained and has been enriched by its growth and use. It has allowed for the development of a rich variety of neighborhoods all over the city each with its own distinctly different but ultimately Washingtonian character. The relationships of all these elements are "rhythms" at the city scale.

Any project for Washington D. C. must in some way recognize and address l'Enfant's plan. The challenge in this project, on the city level, was to design something which would not only recognize and address the city and its plan but which would really draw from it in order to belong to it.



Public space plan of Dupont Circle neighborhood

Chapter 2: Neighborhood

“Every citizen has had long associations with some part of his city and his image is soaked in memories and meanings.”

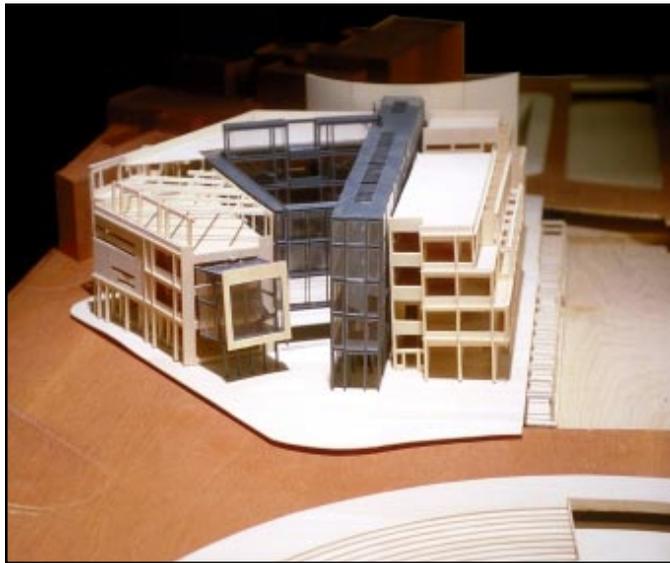
Kevin Lynch
The Image of the City

Neighborhoods are the smaller areas from which the city grows and develops. Certain neighborhoods in Washington DC grew up around the traffic circles. They became smaller cities within the city. From a plan point of view, the Dupont Circle neighborhood looks much like other neighborhoods in the city such as Logan Circle, Washington Circle and Scott Circle - places where the city grid meets intersecting diagonal streets at a traffic circle. What differentiates Dupont Circle from the others is its character.

Dupont Circle is surrounded by the busy downtown area, the upscale residential part of the Georgetown neighborhood, and the artsy, eth-

nic neighborhood of Adams Morgan. It is a living area with Connecticut Avenue as its spine, the circle itself as its heart, and Rock Creek Park as its lungs. The mixture of different uses: residential, office, retail and institutional; and building styles, from Romanesque revival to Modernist, gives charm, variety and character to an otherwise well ordered system of streets, sidewalks and buildings.

Of all the neighborhoods in Washington, D. C., Dupont Circle possibly is the best example of the modern life of the city. It is bustling with social and cultural life, commercial activity, pedestrian, vehicular and subway traffic, private residences, and open public spaces. It is con-



View of South-facing side of building

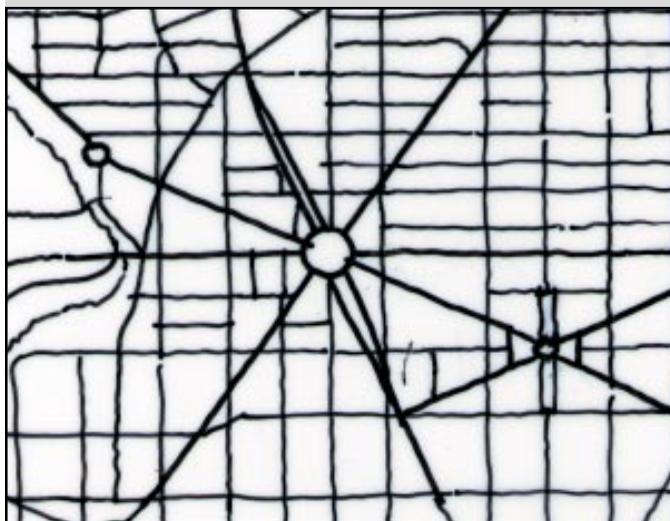


View of North-facing side of building



Aerial view of Dupont Circle neighborhood

Photo from Above Washington, by Robert Cameron



Map of the Dupont Circle neighborhood

sidered artsy and even edgy, and is the least conservative neighborhood in what is considered a very conservative city.

In good weather, one of the most noticeable things is the number of people of all means and ages who use the circle, not just to walk through, but also to gather and spend time in. Also noticeable in Dupont Circle, as well as around the commercial and public parts of the neighborhood, is the number of street musicians which can often be found. There is sometimes a small jazz band performing in front of cafe, or a Bolivian group performing with enchanting wind and string instruments in the circle, or a trombone playing student at the bottom of the

Metro entrance escalators. These are the people for whom this project is of particular importance.

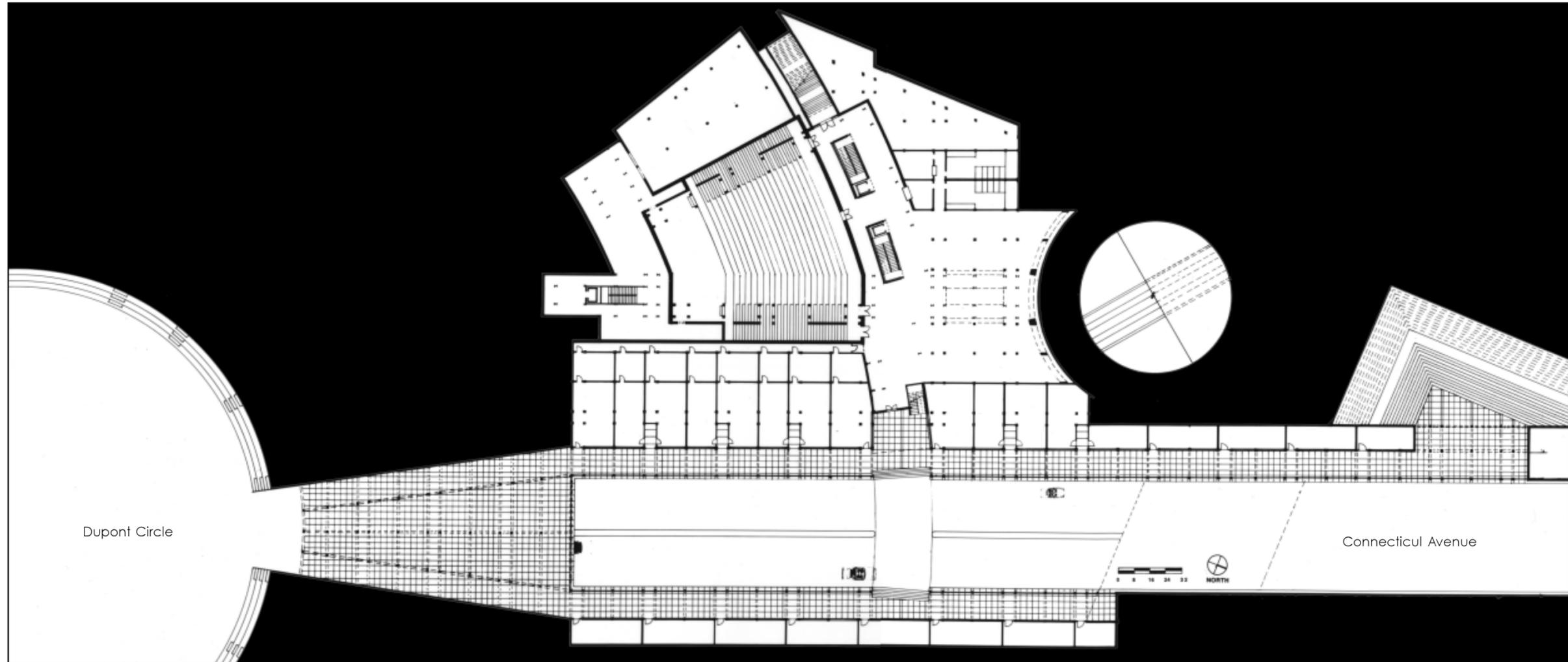
The challenge in designing for this neighborhood was to address the larger city of Washington, D. C. while making the design unique to Dupont Circle. The dynamics of pedestrian and vehicular movement through this neighborhood, the character of existing buildings, the music and chatter in the air - these are the "rhythms" which had to be exploited in the ultimate design. That is what makes a design an intimate part of its neighborhood.



View of site looking northwest



View of site looking southeast



Site plan at lower level

Chapter 3: Site

“Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves part of it, on the stage with other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all.”

Kevin Lynch
The Image of the City

There were two elements which, together, formed the strategy for dealing with the site.

The first was the desire for this project to form a relationship with the community by providing spaces for public interaction. The second was the belief that an intervention into a site, considered carefully with respect to both the site and the building being placed in it, can begin to suggest ways in which the building can grow, by tying the building better to its site. Both of these elements were developed by studying the “rhythms” and needs of the site.

In addition to this strategy, three important existing components of the site needed to be ad-

dressed in the process of developing the site intervention. The attitude toward these components and their relationships to one another created the parti, or primary framework of components for the design of the building.

The first component, was Connecticut Avenue. This large, busy street slopes down gradually at one edge of the site, tunnels under Dupont Circle and rises back up to the surface at the other end of the site. This was created so that vehicular traffic could bypass the site. As a result, a large “slot” is formed along Connecticut Avenue between the start of this sloping area and the circle itself. It separates the two sides of the street, and makes it impossible for pedes-

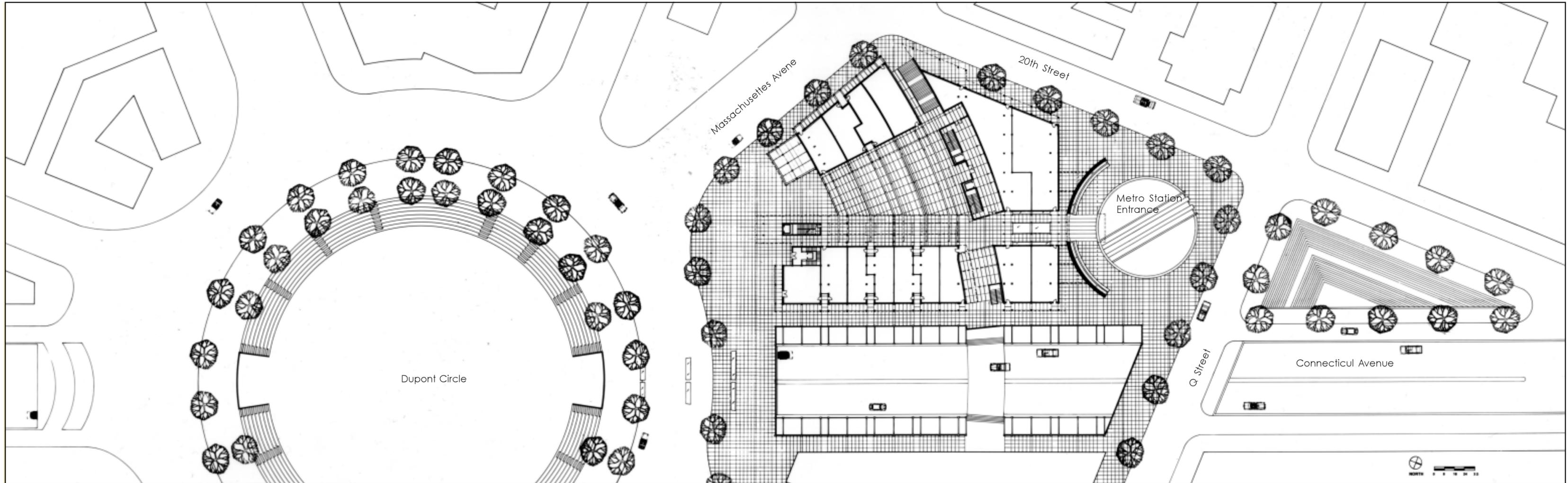
trians to cross over from one side of Connecticut Avenue to the other to take advantage of the site as a whole. Side streets on either edge of the slot allow vehicular and pedestrian access to the circle.

The second component, Dupont Circle, is a great existing public space. It provides a central focus to the neighborhood, and a sense of place, community and orientation to the site. In addition, it is dynamic because it imparts the sense of being in constant motion: cars, buses and cyclists circling its edge and tunneling beneath; pedestrians walking across to get from one place to another, or “hanging out” and interacting in the space; and the vibration of the

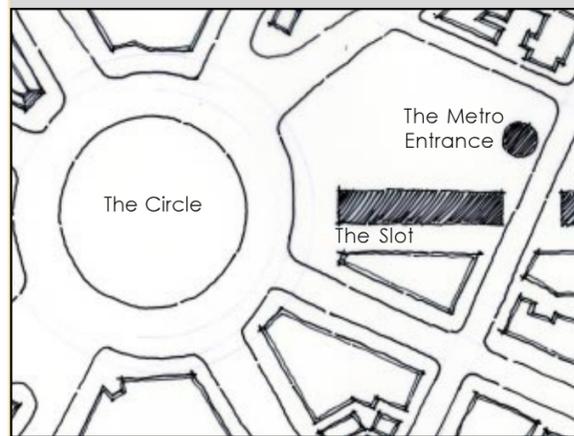
Metro train felt as it crosses the site below ground.

Below the surface of Dupont Circle and above the Metro tracks exists a space which the old trolleys travelling up and down Connecticut Avenue used to turn around. A few years ago, this space was turned into an underground “mini-mall” of shops and eateries, which has since failed and closed.

The third element, on the Northwestern corner of the site, is a large circular opening in the ground which contains stairs and escalators leading down to the Dupont Circle Metro Station. This entrance to the Metro is continuously



Site plan at street level



Sketch of Site Parti Diagram

busy, serving residents and workers of this neighborhood.

These three components - the slot at Connecticut Avenue, Dupont Circle and the space below it, and the Metro Station entrance are the keys to the intervention of the site which help to organize it, help it relate to the larger neighborhood, and even begin to suggest an organization for the building. The relationships of these components to one another in both plan and in section form the three primary organizing elements.

1. Connecticut Avenue & the "Slot":

In plan, the slot at Connecticut Avenue ap-

peared to pose the biggest problem. It was a physical reality of the site. However, when looked at in section, some possibilities arose. A strategy was suggested by a photograph and section drawing of a canal edge in Oude Gracht, Utrecht, in Herman Hertzberger's book, *Lessons for Students in Architecture* (shown on the next page).

The photo shows how although the canal level is far lower than the street level adjacent to it, the edge could be enlivened by having the basements of shops above open up to the canal level. This allowed activity to occur on both levels. An analogy was therefore suggested: that the section of Connecticut Avenue which

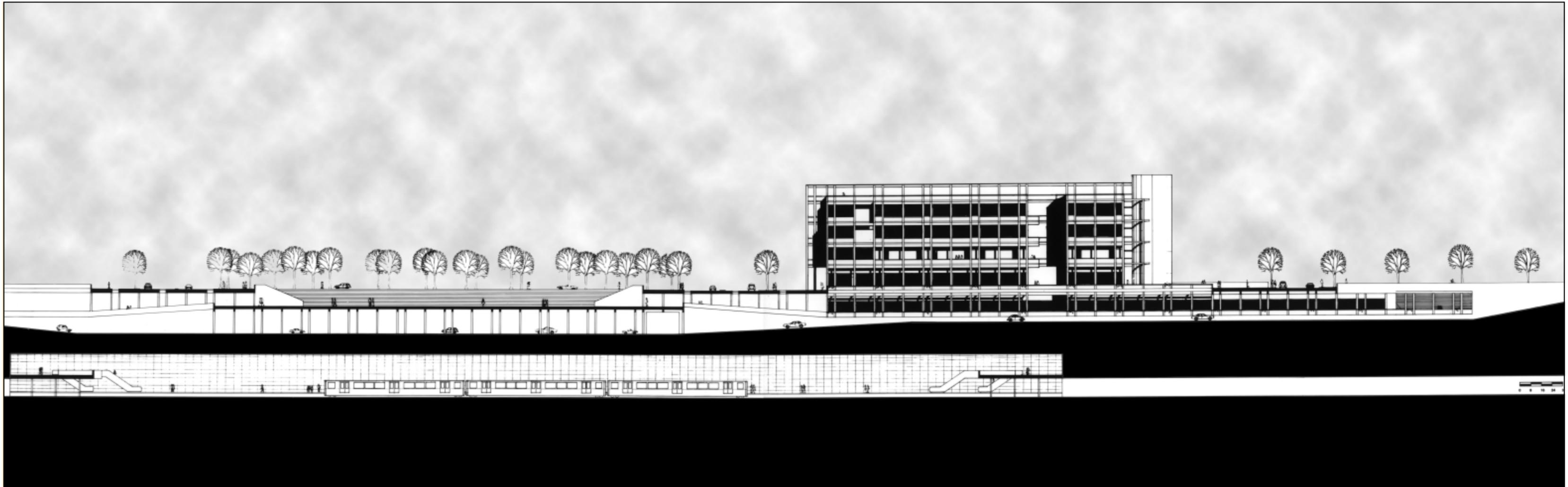
tunnels under the Circle could be thought of as being similar to the canal in the photo. It separates two sides of the site. By creating some kind of activity both above and along the walls of the slot, the street becomes a visual connector, not a separator.

The proposal was to cut off the side streets and to lower them by one level, creating a pedestrian only pathway parallel to Connecticut Avenue. A row of retail spaces could be carved out of the edges of that slot. They could be the lower levels of shops above at street level, or secondary spaces for small retail such as newspaper stands, flower shops, and so on. The pedestrian walkway would be arcaded, shield-

ing it somewhat from the street. Its presence and nature would create the friction necessary to slow traffic down by presenting something interesting to drive by, instead of just the tall stone walls of a foreboding tunnel.

2. The Circle:

Continuing to look at this part of the site in section suggested another site intervention. Lowering the floor of Dupont Circle into the old trolley space below it would turn the Circle physically into a grand outdoor room. Adding steps and a long ramp around the perimeter, would create the access and seating needed to turn the space into a huge circular amphitheater. Musicians could perform for the public in the



Site section looking southwest



Photos from Lessons for Students in Architecture, by Herman Herzberger

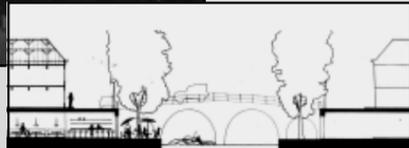


Photo and section diagram of canal edge

center, at certain times. At other times it would function as it does now, as a community gathering space for neighborhood residents, workers and visitors.

A pedestrian connection would be created from the arcade in front of the lower retail spaces along Connecticut Avenue, crossing below the street level into the now also lowered Circle. This short connection would be well lit in the daytime by the use of skylights embedded in the street above, and in the nighttime by electric lighting. This connection would allow one the opportunity to cut across to Dupont Circle without having to dodge the multiple rings of traffic navigating the circle, and driv-

ers would not have to worry as much about daring pedestrians darting between cars.

3. The Metro Entrance:

This entrance to the Metro train system, and sidewalk and space surrounding it is continuously used by Metro riders, by pedestrians, by people stopping to buy newspapers at one of the many newspaper machines, or coffee at the nearby cafes. It is often surrounded by the kiosks of street vendors, occasional musicians, and people generally socializing.

A partial curved wall, the radius of which would be taken from the center of the circular Metro entrance circle, would form a physical edge

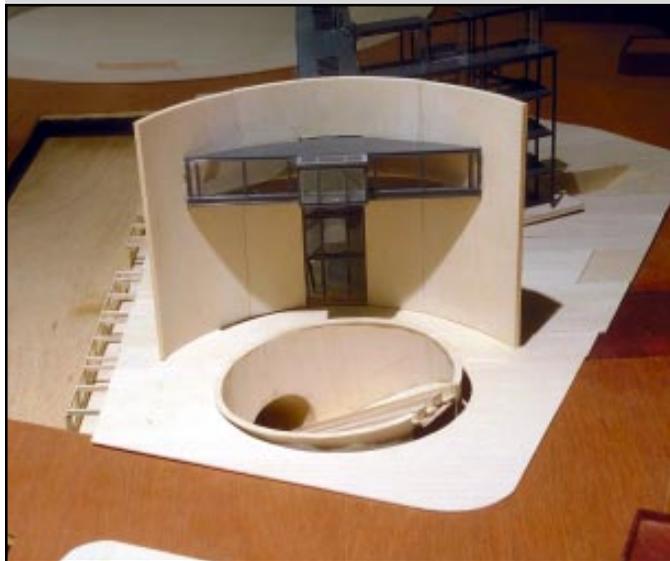
to the space, turning it into a plaza. The hodgepodge of vendors could be moved to the lower retail spaces along Connecticut Avenue, which would open up the plaza. The wall would give the Metro entrance plaza definition. It would become one edge of and entrance to the building designed for the site.

In this way, physical conditions, traffic considerations, and the patterns of pedestrian activity became the rhythms or clues which began to suggest ways of organizing the site. These site interventions created a series of connected public spaces across the site. The challenge was to recognize and utilize these clues in ways

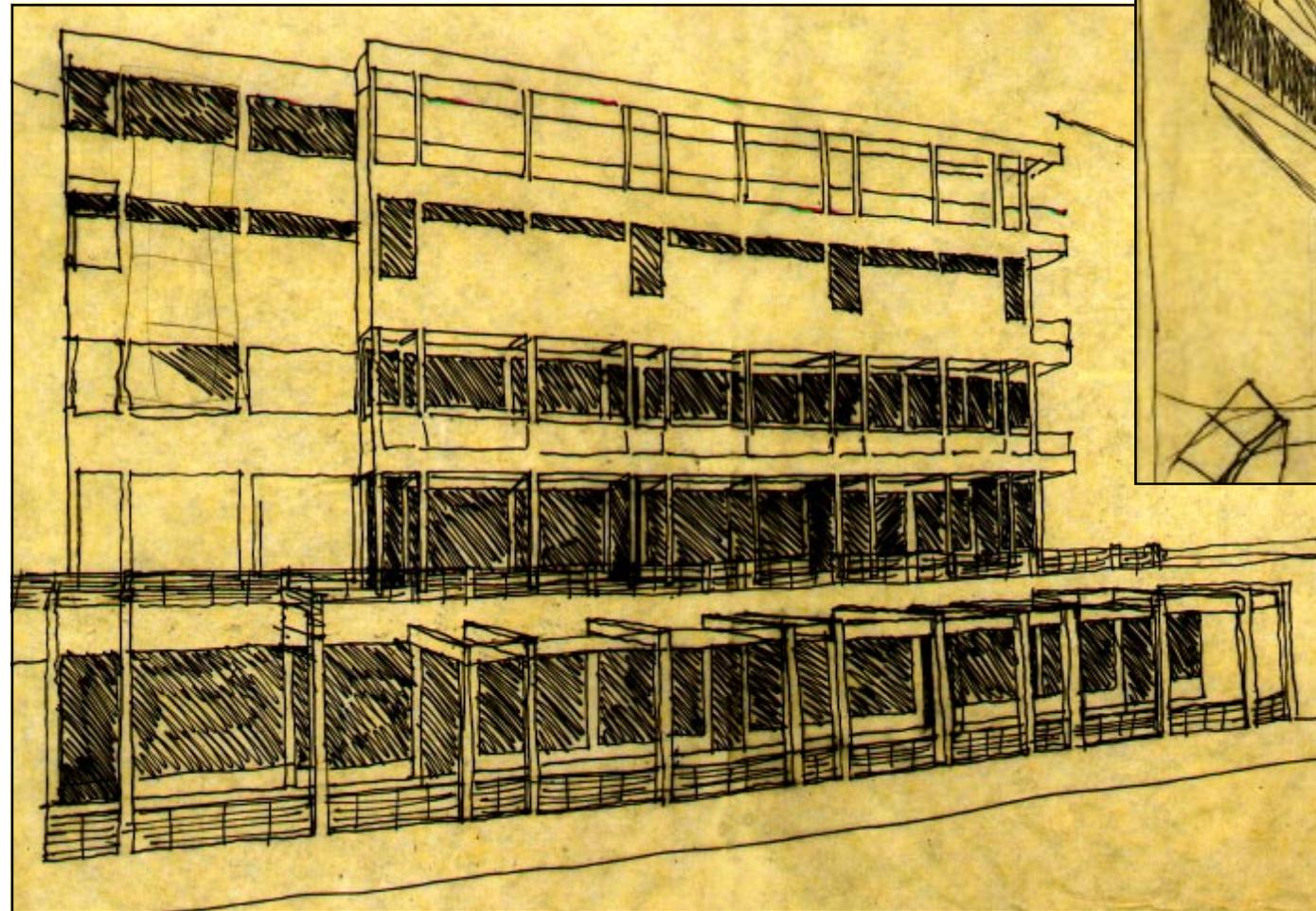
that gave the site a greater sense of place, enhanced the user's experience, and began to reveal a way of looking at and forming a strategy for designing the building on the site.



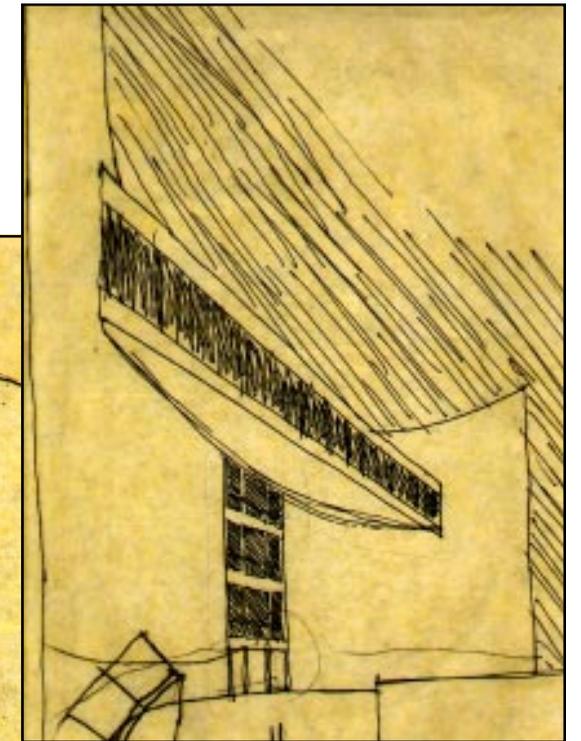
View of Connecticut Avenue elevation



View of curved wall at Metro station entrance



Sketch of Connecticut Avenue elevation



Sketch of Entrance at Curved Wall & Observation Room

Chapter 4: Building

“We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us.”

Winston Churchill

Just as the design of the neighborhood recognized and utilized clues from the city, and the site design recognized and utilized clues from the neighborhood, so does the building recognize and utilize clues from the site. These clues are the “rhythms”. Five elements of the building’s organization, came out of the analysis of the primary components of the site:

1. Physical Organization:

The lower retail spaces carved from the sides of the slot along Connecticut Avenue formed a series, or rhythm of spaces along the street. This suggested the need for a functional and structural bay system for the building. Functionally, the bay system had two large bays,

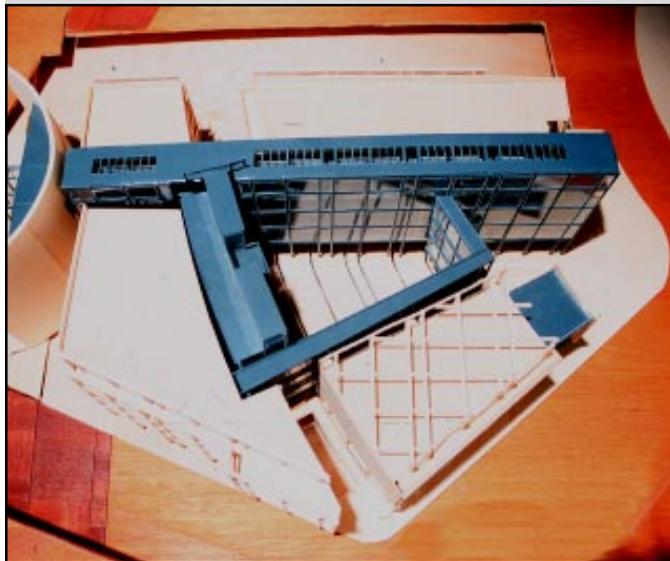
containing the served spaces, followed by one small bay containing the service spaces. This functional rhythm, carried further, suggested an aabaabaa structural grid system for the entire building, with two fifteen foot bays for the served spaces, followed by a six foot bay for the service spaces.

2. Entrance:

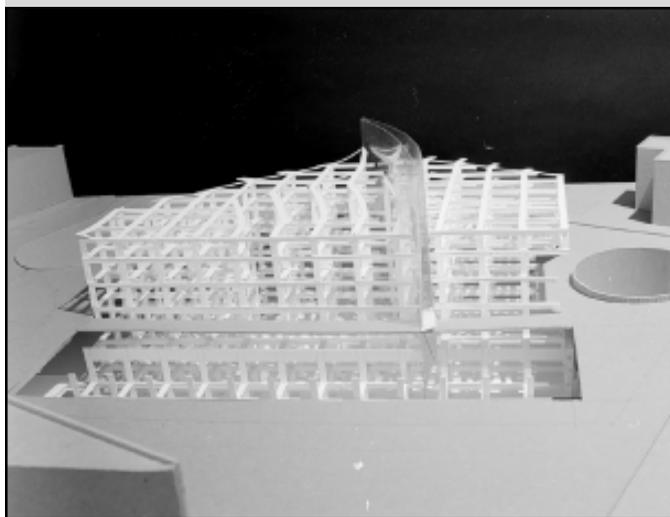
The curved wall forming the plaza around the Metro station entrance suggested an ideal place for the location of one of the primary entrances to the building. This wall would also be one of the enclosing walls, forming one side of the building.



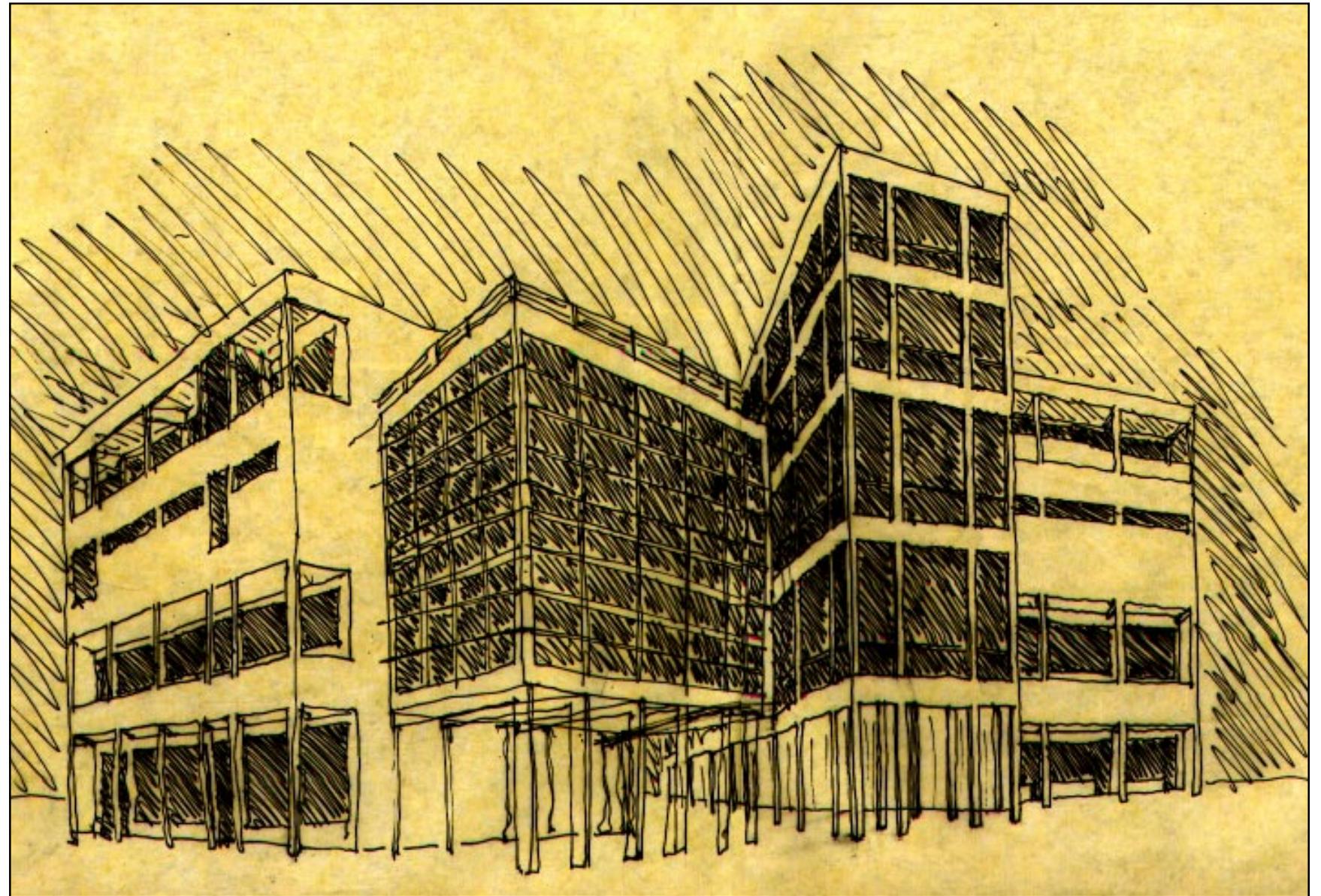
View of circulation spine of building



Plan view of building and courtyard



Study model of structural grid & bay system



Sketch of End of Circulation Spine, and Courtyard Entrance at Library

3. Primary Circulation

An axial line taken from the center of the circular Metro Station entrance, running across the site, parallel to and behind the retail spaces along Connecticut Avenue, became the primary circulation spine for the building.

4. Light and Air

An imaginary radial line taken from the center of Dupont Circle, sweeping across the middle of the building site created a courtyard at the center of the mass of the building. This courtyard broke down the building, which covered the entire site, into three main sections. It also created the opportunity to bring light and air into the center of the building.

In addition, the courtyard suggested the ideal location for one of the primary program elements of the building, the indoor theater. The theater, being a function requiring quite a lot of area, and auditory privacy was located underground, directly below the courtyard.

5. Public Accessibility

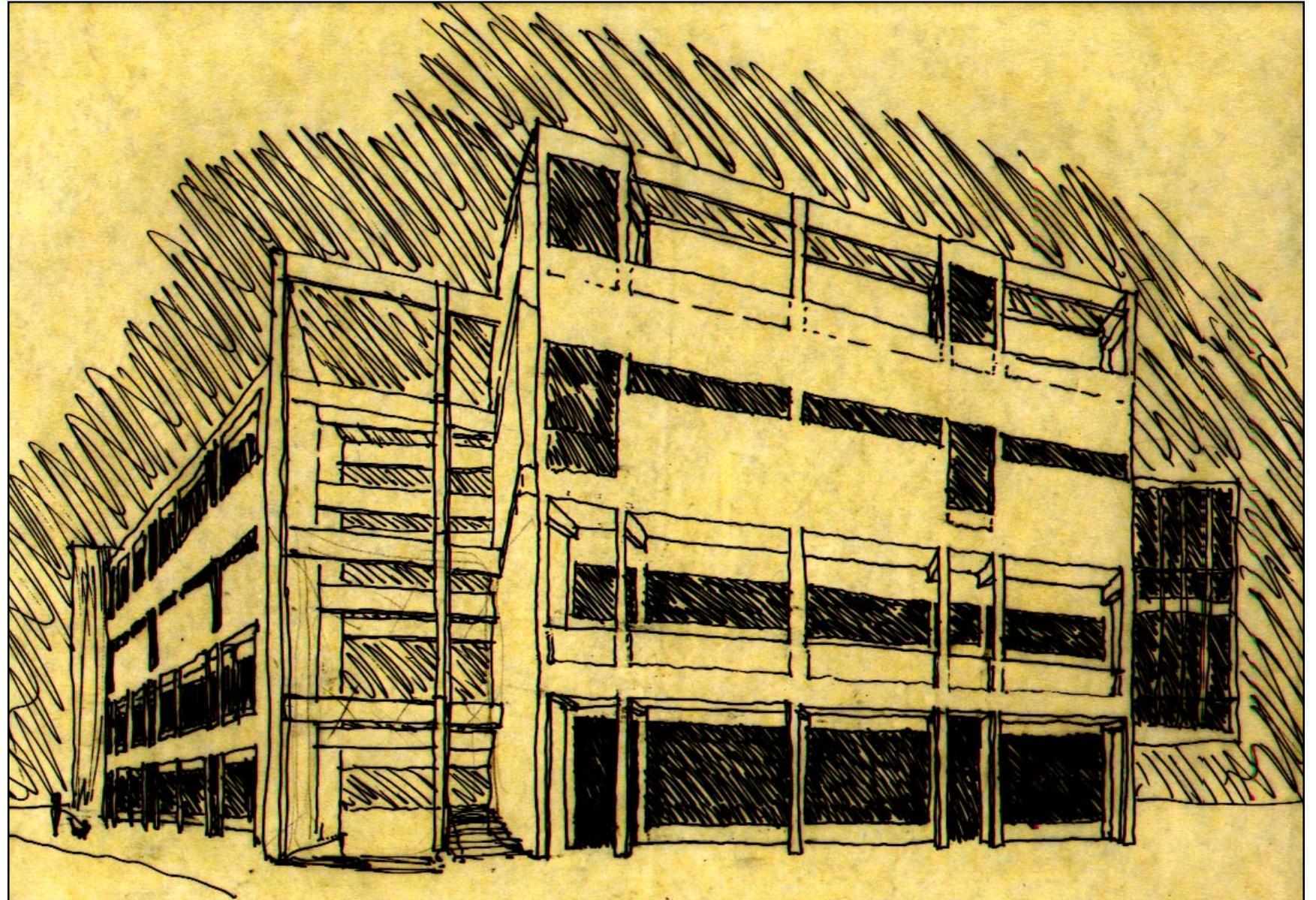
The courtyard, which was open at the side facing Dupont Circle, also created an opportunity to bring the public in to the center of the building. An "alley" or passage through the building, created along the sweep of that radius, allowed pedestrians to cross the site from Connecticut Avenue to 20th Street and Massachusetts Avenue, without having to



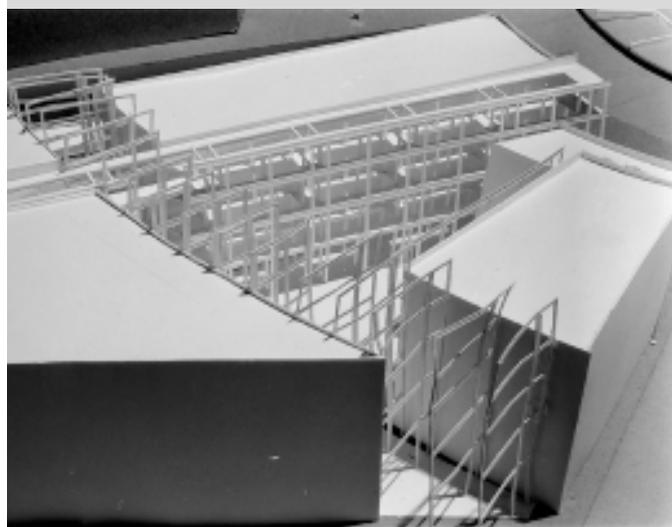
View of courtyard and circulation spine



View of Connecticut Avenue entrance to "Alley"



Sketch of entrance to "Alley" passage through building from Massachusetts Avenue



Study Model of "Alley" and circulation spine

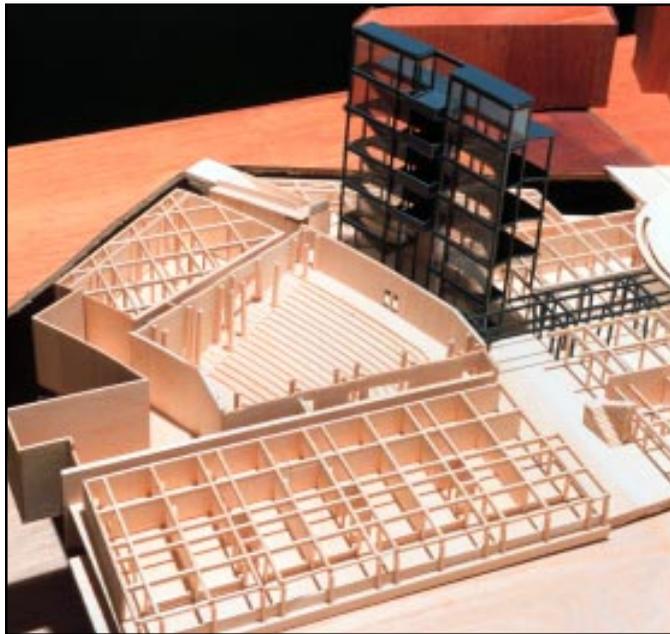
physically enter the building. It also became the access point for the main lobby of the building from either the Connecticut Avenue or 20th and Massachusetts Avenue sides.

These five elements were the main organizers of the building in relationship to its site. The *parti* was generated by responding to the "rhythms" present on the site and by manipulating them in order to break the building down into section, create public spaces, points of access, and a circulation system which tie the building intimately to its site.

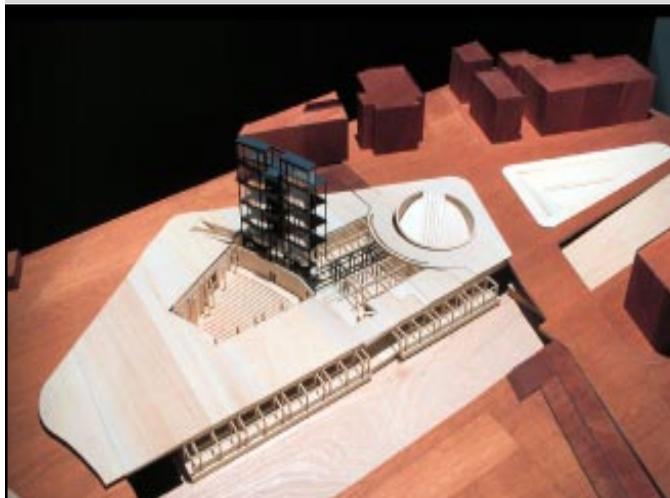
This *parti* effectively divided the building into

four areas: the section along Connecticut Avenue; the section along 20th Street/Massachusetts Avenue; the part of the building along the plaza at the Metro entrance, and the internal courtyard.

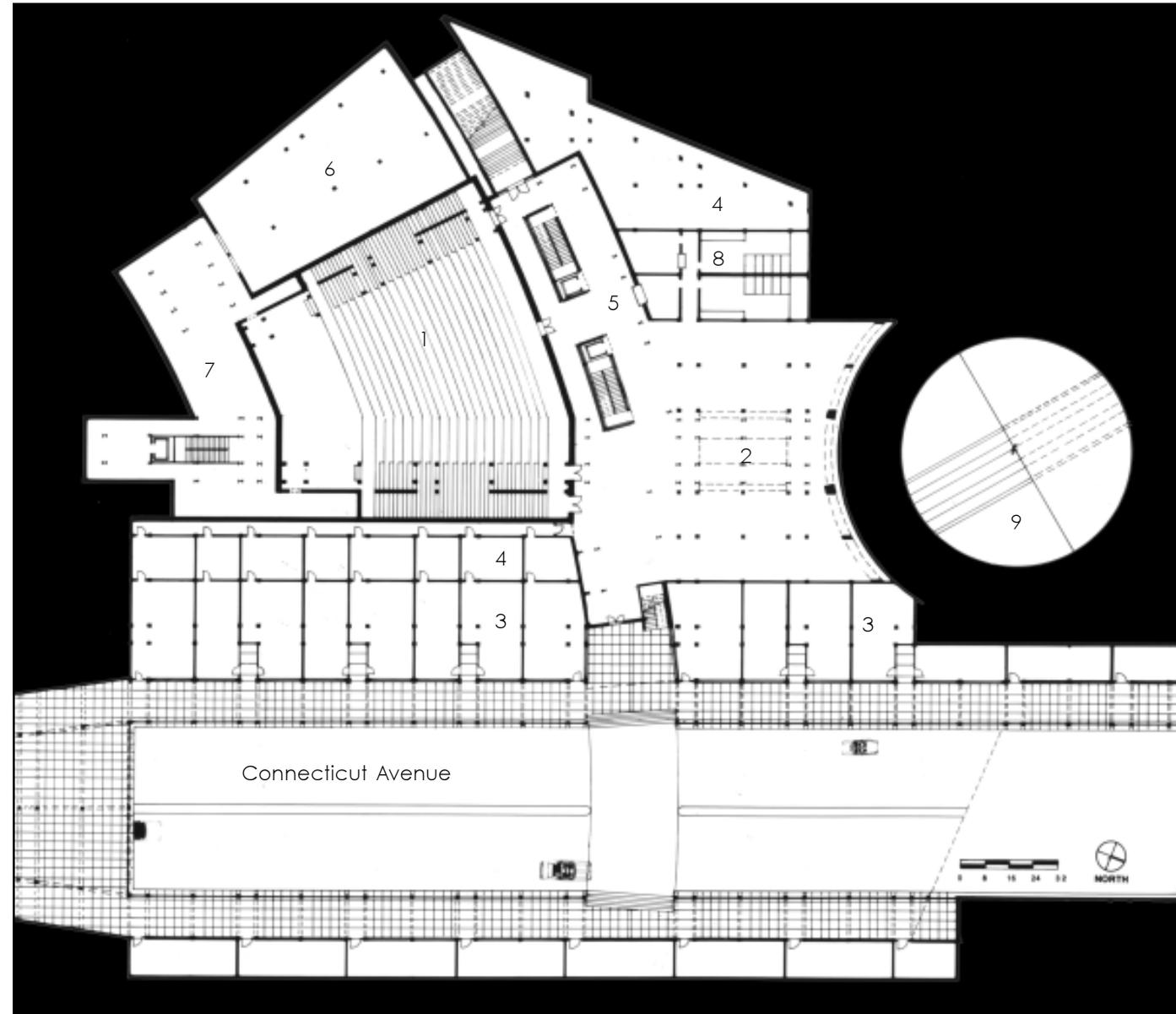
This building would never work on any other site. Organizationally, it is a uniquely Washington, D.C. and Dupont Circle neighborhood building.



View of underground theater, let-out space and retail



Theater, let-out space and lobby elevator/stair tower



Lower level plan

Lower Level

1. Theater
2. Let-out space
3. Lower level retail
4. Storage
5. Lobby
6. Dressing rooms
7. Backstage
8. Restrooms
9. Metro entrance

Chapter 5: Room

“The plan is a society of rooms. The rooms relate to each other to strengthen their own unique nature. The auditorium wants to be a violin. Its envelope is the violin case. The society of rooms is the place where it is good to learn, good to work, good to be alive.”

Louis Kahn

While the primary rooms in this building are knitted together by its overall organization, they each have their own unique nature. They have different functions but are not independent of the whole. They share certain elements, as a result of the parti. They share an idea about spatial organization - served and service space; about threshold - the relationship of those rooms to the circulation system of the building; and about edge - the relationship of those rooms to the outside. A number of rooms will be discussed here in more detail.

Theater

The theater is a focus of the building even though it is seemingly separate from it. It epitomizes

the relationship of the building to its site and to the city. This relationship can be seen in the plan on this page and in the building sections on pages 23 and 24. The theater is the nucleus of building. It has entrances making it accessible from both the upper and lower level street retail areas along Connecticut Avenue. This makes it a real part of the activity of the site.

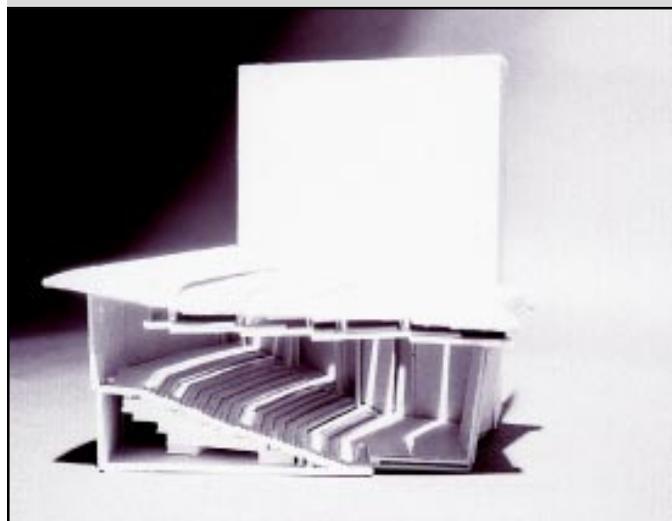
The theater's physical and conceptual relationship to the building as a whole embody the essence of the project. It engages other parts of the building in ways that can be experienced at many levels. Situated directly below the courtyard, its ceiling structure is also the floor of



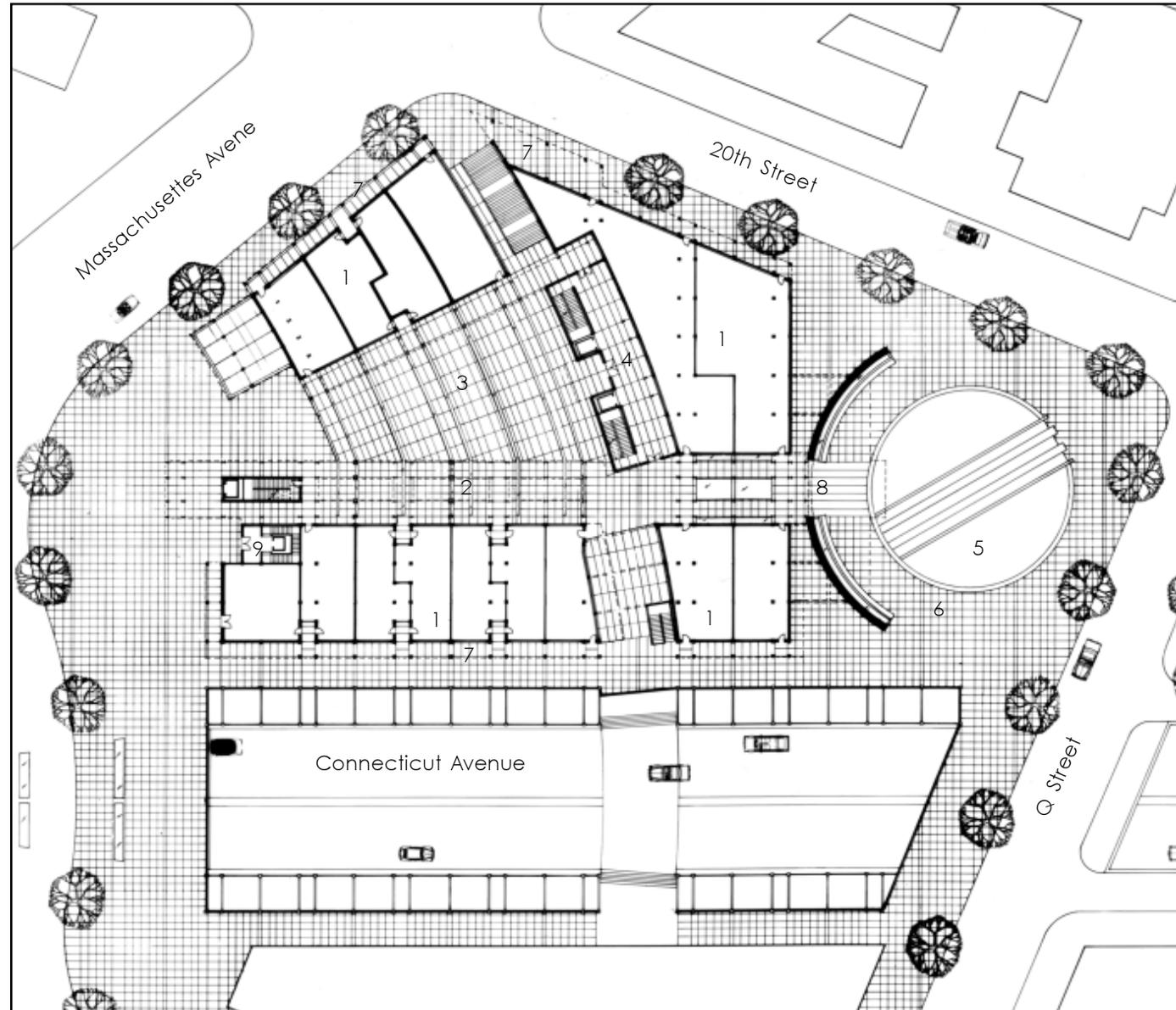
Elevation view of lower level and street level retail



Elevation view of Office spaces along 20th Street



Sectional study model of Theater and courtyard above



Street Level plan

Street Level

1. Retail
2. Main building circulation
3. Courtyard
4. Lobby
5. Metro entrance
6. Metro plaza
7. Arcade
8. Curved wall & entrance
9. Residential lobby

the courtyard. As the courtyard steps down, because of a slight slope to the site, the glass block treads of the steps allow light down into the theater during the day, and light from the theater out into the courtyard during the night. The theater's let-out space, extending to the edge of the curved wall, is also served by a skylight along the edge of that wall.

The shape and directionality of the theater, as one sits inside facing the stage, is the result the meeting of the building's structural grid with the radial geometry of the courtyard. One is therefore continually aware of one's orientation within the building, within the site, and within the city.

Retail Spaces

Arcaded retail spaces exist at street level along the entire perimeter of the building, and at the lower level, along Connecticut Avenue. They help make this building a truly mixed-use building, by providing the community's residents, workers and visitors with necessary small shops, restaurants, and services. They are entered along the 6 foot service bay spaces, and their main space is within the areas of one or more of the larger bays. The structural column grid allows some flexibility in sizing the space appropriately to the tenant.

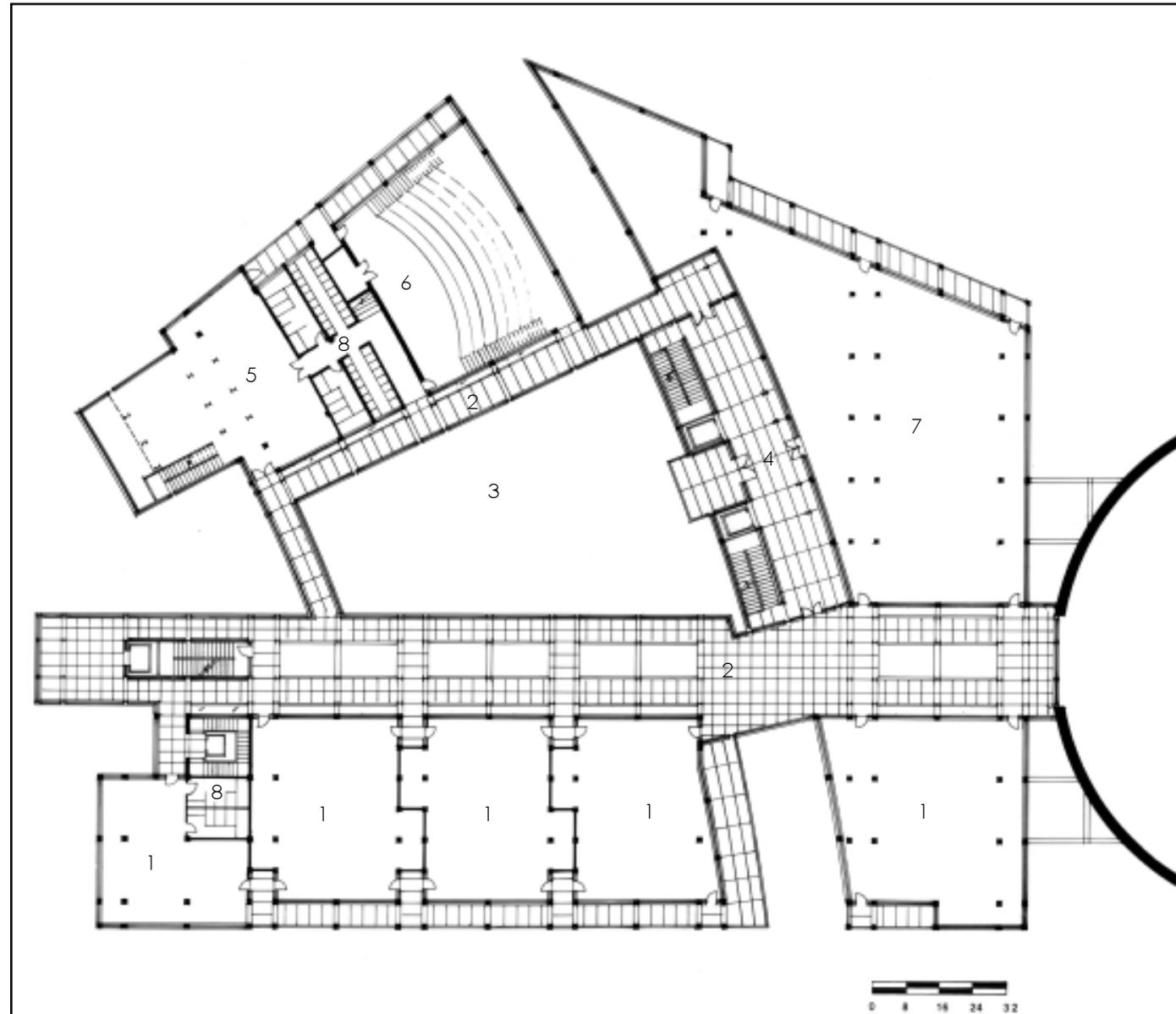
Office Spaces



Close-up of second-floor classrooms



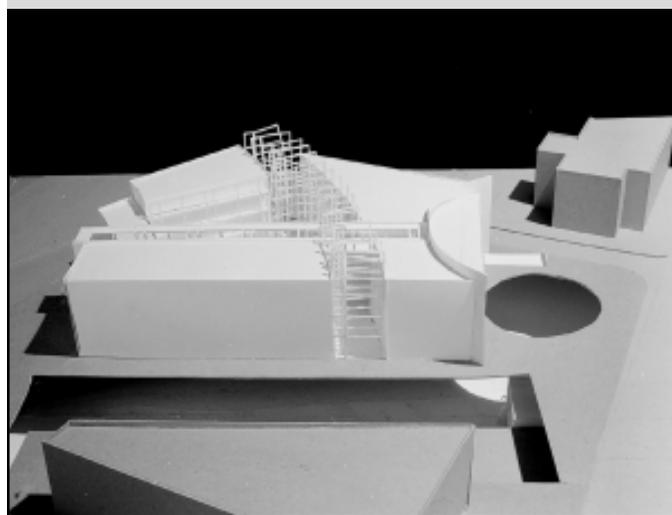
Elevation of retail, rehearsal room, and practice rooms



Second Floor Plan

Second Floor

1. Classrooms
2. Main building circulation
3. Courtyard
4. Lobby
5. Library
6. Rehearsal room
7. Office spaces
8. Restrooms/Lockers



Study Model of building mass & circulation areas

Office space is provided at the second, third and fourth floors of the building, along the section of the building closest to the curved wall. These spaces are intended for the administrative needs of the school, as well as for use by outside tenants. They are easily accessed, independently of the school, by the elevators and stairs at the main lobby.

Classrooms

Classroom spaces, located on the second floor, facing Connecticut Avenue, are also divided into zones of service and served space. The six-foot service zone is the entrance to the classroom as well as the exit to an exterior balcony facing the street. There is also space, in that

zone, for general storage. The adjacent served space of the classroom is therefore completely open. The classroom wall along the street side is punctuated only by windows at the top and sides, allowing light to come in, but minimizing noise and distraction from the outside

Rehearsal Room

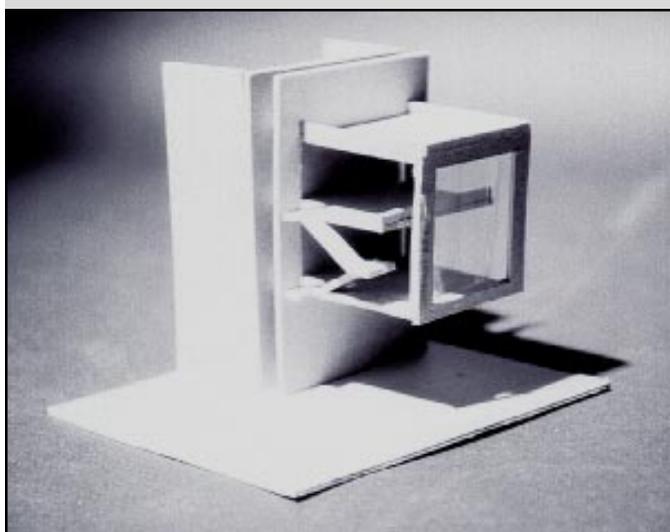
The double-height rehearsal room is essentially a large practice room for groups of students. While requiring visual and auditory privacy for practice, it allows for limited viewing of performers from either side: informally at the third floor threshold along the circulation corridor, or formally along the thick outside edge of the building where a seated viewing zone is pro-



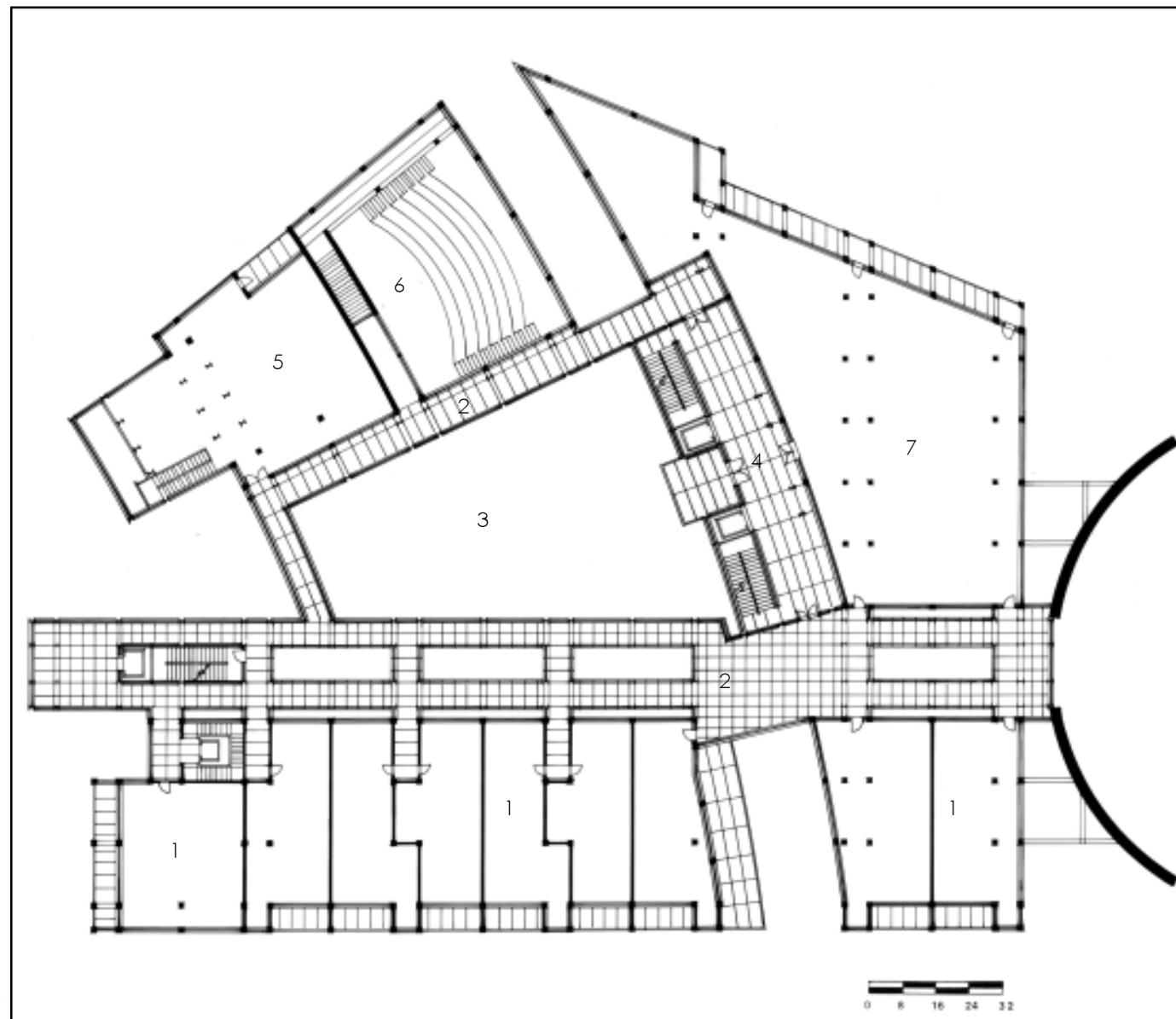
Close-up of Library



Elevation detail of rehearsal room



Study model of Library



Third floor plan

Third Floor

1. Residential units
2. Main building circulation
3. Courtyard
4. Lobby
5. Library
6. Rehearsal room
7. Office spaces

vided. Light enters the room from slits along the wall, in a controlled manner, so as not to create distraction.

Library

The library is a double volume space with an upper level looking down upon the lower level. It is circulated from within by a set of stairs. While being a quieter, introverted part of the building in function, it is still an active part of the city. Its transparency allows the user to sit along the window, becoming a passive participant to the activities in the Circle, while still being in a quiet, protected environment.

In contrast to the theater, sitting nestled within

the building, it sits almost independent of the rest of the building, facing Dupont Circle. The building itself is a ring, and the library is the precious jewel set into the ring.

Practice Rooms

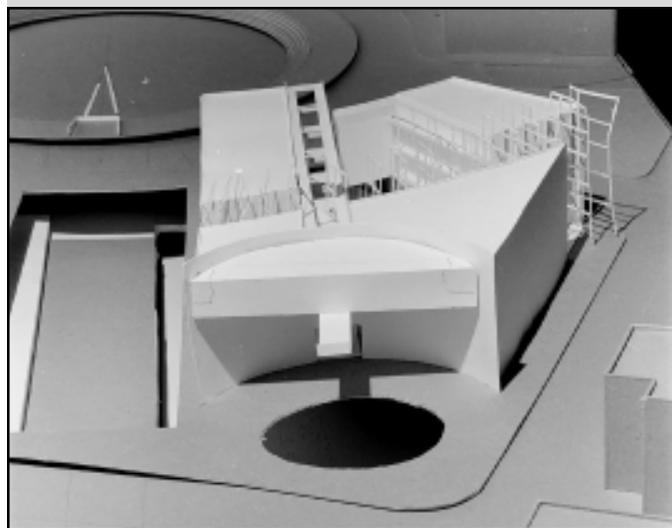
The practice rooms each consist of a small room with a door, non-parallel walls, and a large skylight above. Visual and auditory distraction is kept out, while natural light is allowed in. Because of the radial geometry of the site intersecting with the structural organization of the building, each room carries a sense of individuality. They also vary in size depending on their location, or in order to accommodate different sizes of instruments, or the different prac-



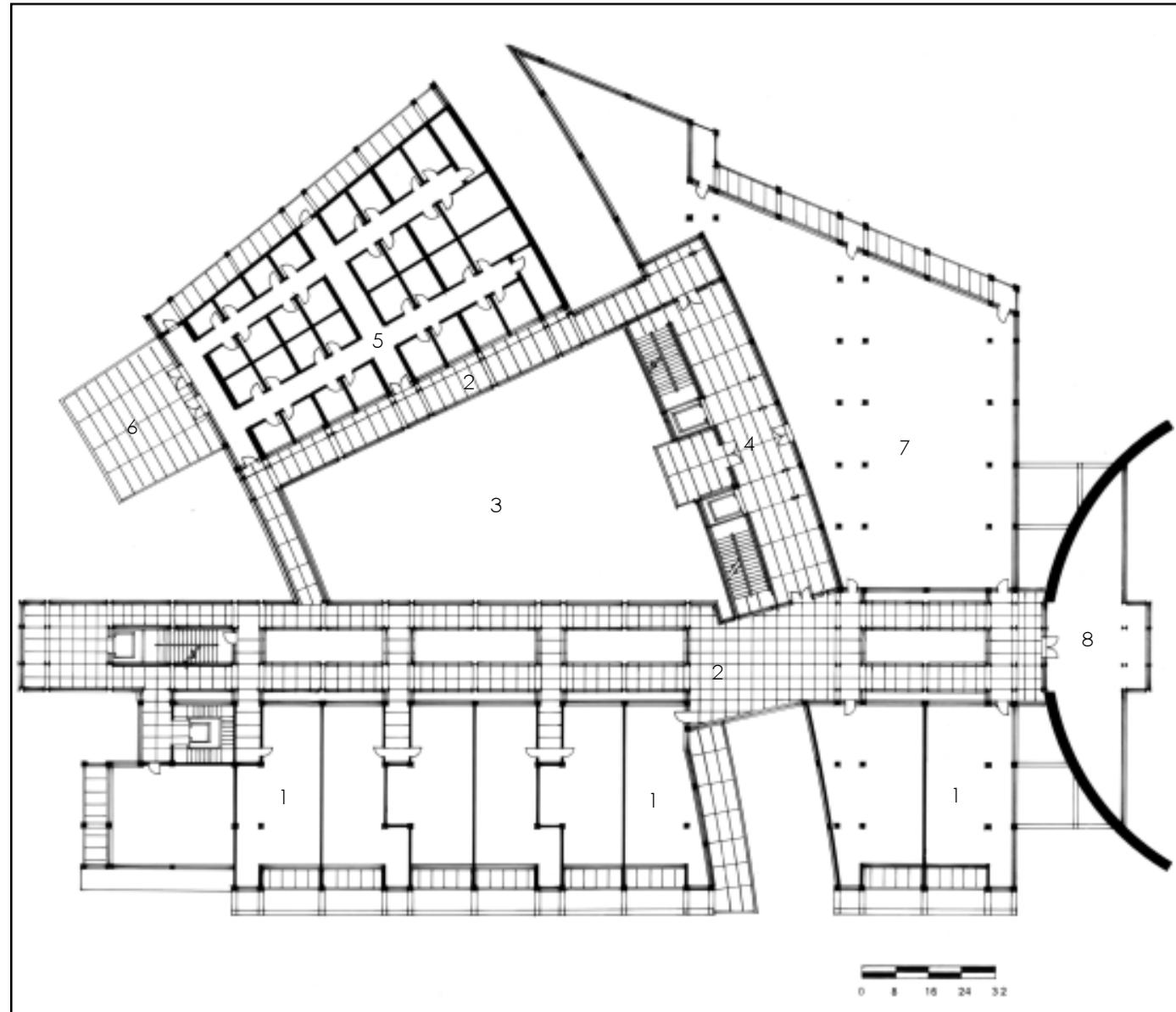
Elevation detail of student housing units



Detail of curved wall and observation room



Study Model view of Observation Room



Fourth Floor plan

Fourth Floor

1. Residential units
2. Main building circulation
3. Courtyard
4. Lobby
5. Practice rooms
6. Terrace
7. Office spaces
8. Observation room

tice preferences of the students. One can imagine a student having a favorite room, in which the space, light, and sound are special to him.

As a collection, the practice rooms form a little village within the building with their own system of streets and shared open spaces. They sit on the top floor of the building, with a sense of directionality towards the sky, like the lofty aspirations of the students who will use them.

Student Housing

Student housing is provided along the Connecticut Avenue side of the building, on the third and fourth floors. Units are accessed from the inside of the building, and have an exit to an ex-

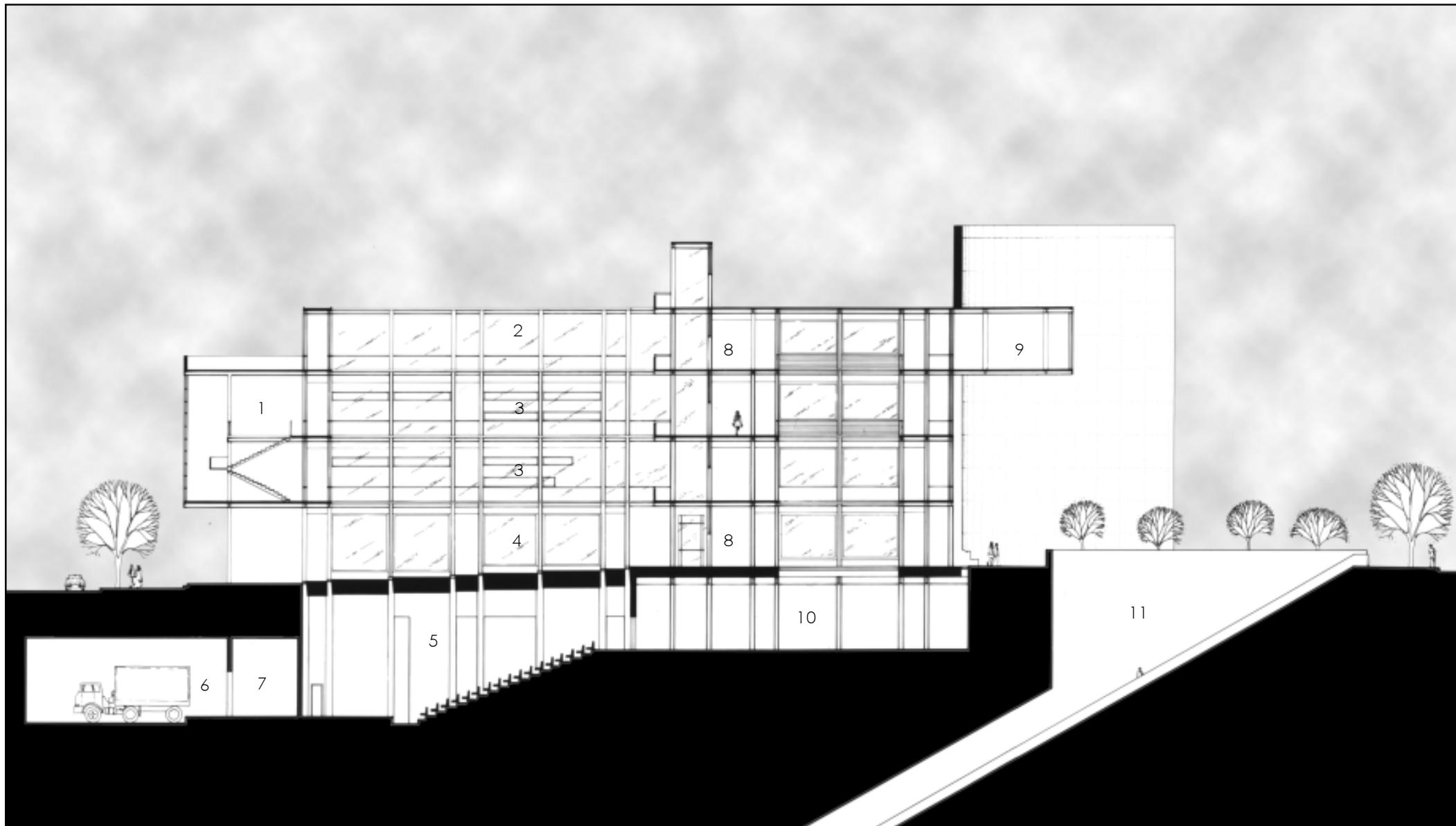
terior balcony along the service bay. The fourth floor units step back the depth of the balcony allowing more light to enter the third floor units.

Observation Room

Although the curved wall at the plaza is one edge of the building, it only actually touches the building at the end of the main circulation spine. At each floor, the spine comes to a stop, forming a glazed central window in the wall, and an entrance at the first floor of the building. On the fourth floor, however, the circulation spine penetrates the wall, forming a special observation room poised over the Metro Station entrance. It has views up Connecticut Avenue, and can be used for special occasions, or casual gatherings.

Section

1. Library
2. Practice rooms beyond
3. Rehearsal room beyond
4. Retail spaces beyond
5. Theater
6. Loading
7. Backstage
8. Lobby/Elevators
9. Observation room
10. Let-out area
11. Metro entrance



Building section looking southwest

Chapter 6: Details

The details of this building are generated from an attitude about materials and structure, light and air. The attitude is that these elements can shape the building, but that they can also be suggested by the building design.

Materials and Structure

The main materials in this building are concrete, steel and glass. The choice of these materials and how they are used is not only practical and structural, but also architectural. They are signals. They convey information to the user about the public and private areas in the building.

Concrete is the primary material, and the structure is concrete frame. The concrete portions

of the building are the more private, interior spaces, as far as their function in relationship to the building as a whole. The thickness, solidity, and opaqueness of this material allow this message to be conveyed.

Steel and glass are the two secondary building materials. They are used in the more public parts of the building - the circulation areas, both vertical and horizontal. The steel and glass structure conveys a sense of lightness and transparency and openness, which help send the message that those are the public, or common parts of the building.

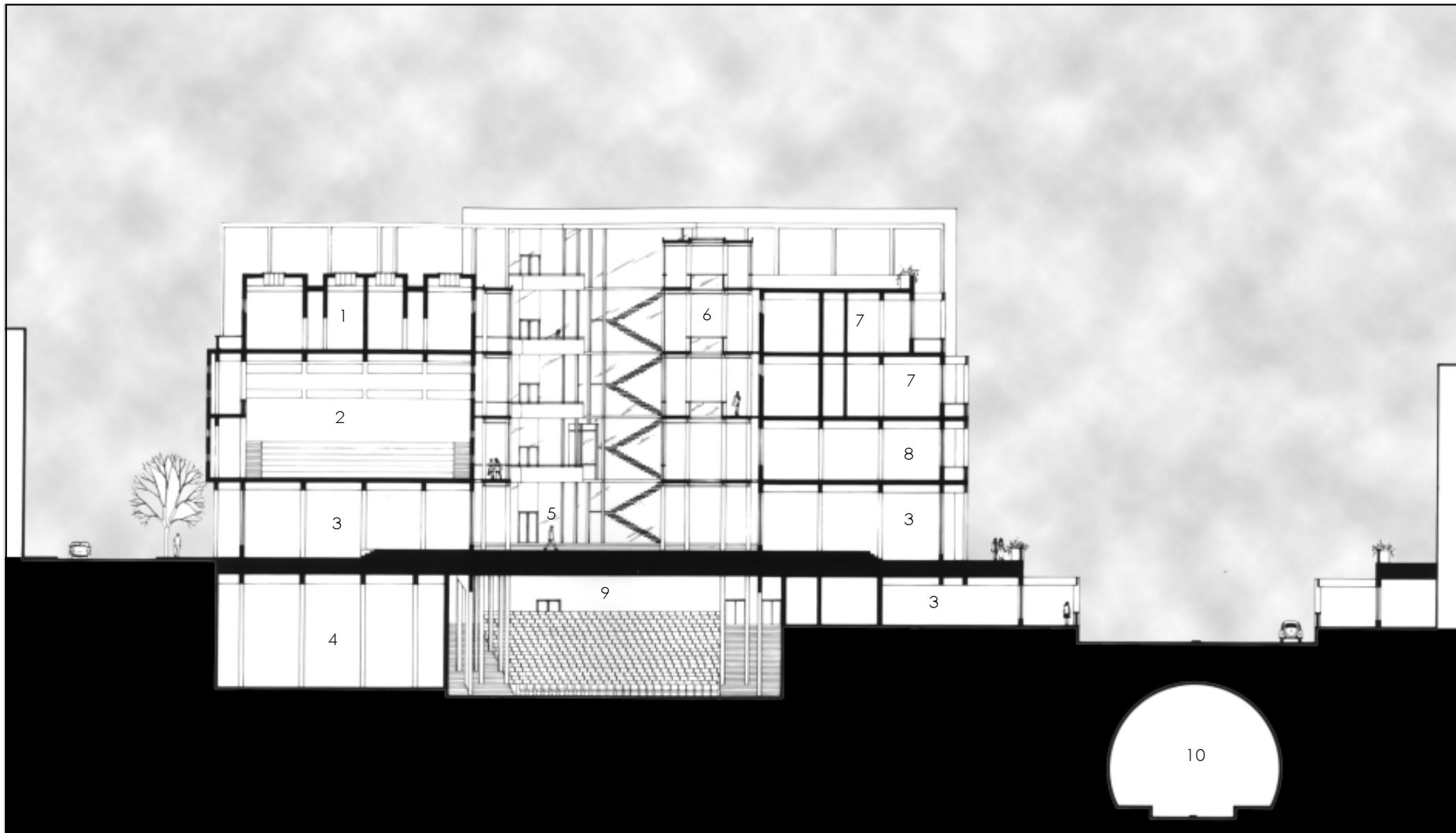
These materials meet at the thresholds of public

“God is in the details.”

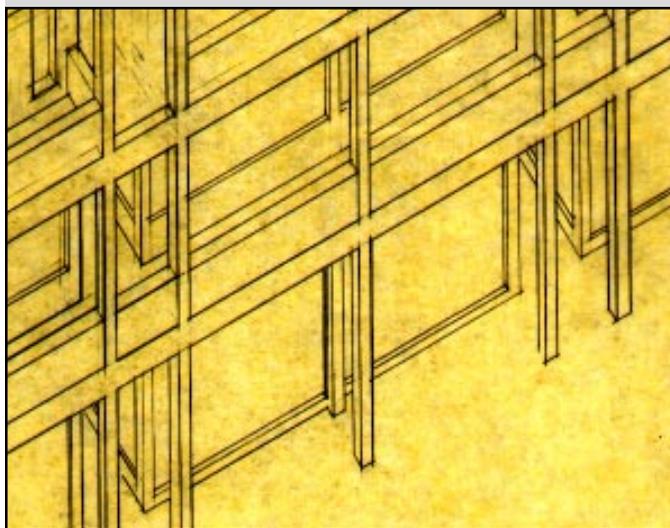
Ludvig Mies Van der Rohe

Section

1. Practice rooms
2. Rehearsal room
3. Retail
4. Dressing rooms/
storage
5. Lobby/Elevators
6. Main building
circulation
7. Residential units
8. Classrooms
9. Theater
10. Metro tunnel



Building section looking northwest



Detail sketch of retail level

and private spaces within the building. At these junctures there is a small, but actual physical separation of the materials, across which the user transitions.

Light and Air

Although they are virtually intangible elements, light and air are a gracious form-givers. The desire or lack of desire for light, ventilation and view from particular parts of the building was essential to the design of the elevations, and the refinement of the details. The reason for this is that these elements have different effects on the users at different parts of the building.

For instance, though the overall strategy for the

elevations was in place from the structure and organization of the building, the actual detail of how a portion of the facade was treated varied depending on the room behind it. The part of the facade at the classrooms was designed to allow a very limited amount of light and sound and in, blocking most of it in order not to create distractions from the outside.

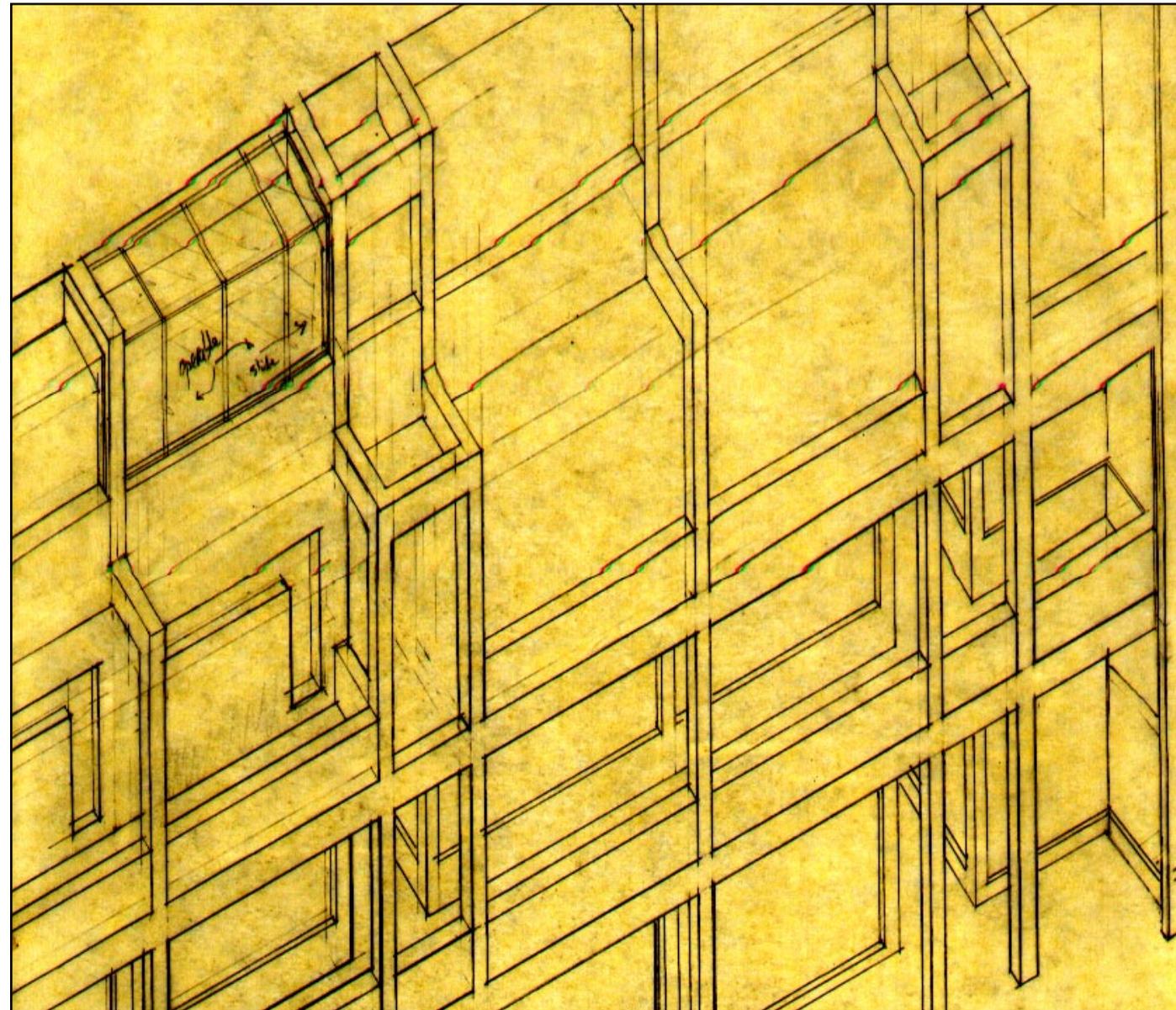
Similarly, at the rehearsal room, the light comes only through small slits, and there is no balcony at the building's edge as there is everywhere else. There, it becomes an enclosed viewing area. The practice rooms are treated with a similar attitude, but the location of the source of light changes because of the one-person



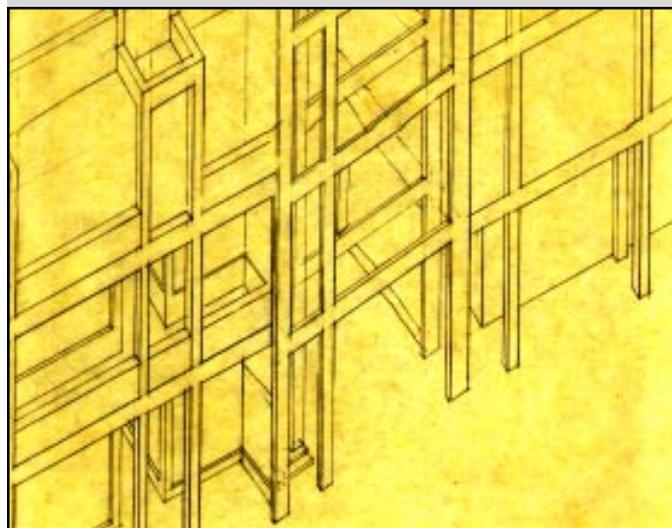
Elevation view of steel & glass circulation spine meeting concrete building mass



Elevation detail view of material adjacencies



Facade detail



Detail sketch of "alley" structure

nature of those rooms.

On the inside elevations, that is, the thresholds between the circulation and the main spaces of the building, light is also limited according to the use at that point. Light comes in to the housing units from a slot high above one's line of sight, but low enough to still allow a glow of illumination. At the rehearsal rooms, enough of an area for lighting and viewing students is allowed, but it is far above the sightlines of the students practicing, so that they cannot be easily distracted .

By contrast, at the housing units on the third and fourth floors, the facade is treated with far more

openness. There is no covering over the balcony, at either level, and the fourth level steps back from the third in order to allow that to happen on both housing levels.

The library, though a quiet place, has much light coming in where it faces Dupont Circle, gradually diminishing as it recesses into the building. There is therefore a very public open side, as well as a quiet, private side to it.

Light links parts of the building with each other and with the site. Examples already discussed include the courtyard/theater link, and the curved skylight at the plaza wall edge letting light into the theater let-out space.



Conclusion

Design, spanning all scales from the city scale to the detail scale, is a continuous process. It begins in a linear way - a systematic gathering of pieces of information at each scale, examined logically one after the other. Soon, however, discoveries and decisions made at one particular scale or another are found to affect the rest. They may cause either a reexamination or a reinforcement of a decision or move made previously. It is, conceivably, a never-ending process.

So what is it, then, that draws the line, or sets the limits, to such an exercise? In the "real world", that is, in the world beyond academic exercises, it is the set of limitations created for

a particular project: The client's desires, material availability, the budget, time constraints, zoning and code considerations, and so on. These are so often considered negative elements. They should be looked at as positive, additional clues that regulate the rhythms on which the design is built.

Limitations set up a framework within which the greatest creativity can take place. They help focus and prioritize. Often the creativity is a result of working carefully within limitations. Sometimes, it is a result of breaking out of the limitations and deciding on a new, untried course of action.

"Draw from others the lesson that may profit yourself."

Terence



WAAC, 1991-92



WAAC, 1992-93

“You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth. For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life’s procession, that marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite.

When you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music. Which of you would be a reed, dumb and silent, when all else sings together in unison?

Always you have been told that work is a curse and labor a misfortune. But I say to you that when you work you fulfill a part of the earth’s furthest dream, assigned to you when that dream was born,

And in keeping yourself with labour you are in truth loving life, and to love life through labour is to be intimate with life’s inmost secret.

But if you in your pain call birth an affliction and the support of the flesh a curse written upon your brow, then I answer that naught but the sweat of your brow shall wash away that which is written.

You have been told also that life is darkness, and in your weariness you echo what was said by the weary. And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge,

And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge and all knowledge is vain save when there is work, and all work is empty save when there is love;

And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God.

And what is it to work with love?

It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.

It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house.

It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit.

It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit,

And to know that all the blessed dead are standing about you and watching.

Often I have heard you say, as if speaking in sleep, “He who works in marble, and finds the shape of his own soul in the stone, is nobler than he who plows the soil.

And he who seizes the rainbow to lay it on a cloth in the likeness of man, is more than he who makes the sandals for our feet.

But I say, not in sleep but in the overwakefulness of noontide, that the wind speaks not more sweetly to the giant oaks than to the least of all the blades of grass;

And he alone is great who turns the voice of the wind into a song made sweeter by his own loving.

Work is love made visible.

And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms for those who work with joy.

For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man’s hunger.

And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes, your grudge distils a poison in the wine.

And if you sing though as angels, and love not the singing, you muffle man’s ears to the voices of the day and the voices of the night.”

Kahlil Gibran
The Prophet

Vita

“We love to discover beauty. All else is a form of waiting.”

Kahlil Gibran

Merrill St. Leger-Demian was born on October 6, 1967 in Beirut, Lebanon. She and her family moved to the United States in 1976. She grew up in Alexandria, Virginia, where she attended St. Mary’s Academy. She graduated from Catholic University in 1989 with a Bachelor of Science in Architecture. She worked for two years before beginning her graduate studies at the Washington-Alexandria Architecture Consortium. She defended her Master’s thesis in the Spring of 1994. She has worked for the firm of Cooper Carry & Associates as an architect and master planner since the summer of 1994. Merrill is married to Ziad Demian and together, they have a son, Elias. His arrival got her to finally finish her book!