

*the facade fulfills its true destiny; it is the provider of light*¹⁷
Le Corbusier

¹⁷ Henry Plummer, "The Poetics of Light," Architecture and Urbanism, December (1987, extra edition), p. 188.

transparency

trans·par·ent *adj.* **1.** Capable of transmitting light so that objects on the other side can be seen clearly. **2.** Of such texture that objects can be seen on the other side; sheer. **3.** Easily detected; flimsy: *transparent lies*. **4.** Guileless; candid; open [*<Med. Lat. transparere, to appear through.*]¹⁸

trans·lu·cent *adj.* Transmitting light but diffusing it sufficiently to cause images to become blurred. [*<Lat. translucere, to shine through.*]¹⁹

o·paque *adj.* **1. a.** Impenetrable by light. **b.** Not reflecting light; dull. **2.** Obtuse; dense. [*<Lat. opacus, dark.*]²⁰

¹⁷ Henry Plummer, "The Poetics of Light," *Architecture and Urbanism*, December (1987, extra edition), p. 188.¹⁸ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., (1983), p. 719.

¹⁹ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., (1983), p. 719.

²⁰ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., (1983), p. 481.

When masonry walls were replaced by steel skeletons and reinforced concrete, the old principle of load and support no longer seemed quite so essential. Buildings didn't have to be seen as holding things up from the ground or base. Modern architecture, having set itself free from the inevitability of walls, concentrated on not where and how much light to let in but, *inversely how much and where to keep light out*. In describing the Crystal Palace, London 1850-51, which "for the



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first time showed the possibilities of iron and glass structures; Hilberseimer writes, "*it obliterated the old opposition of light and shadow, which had formed the proportions of past architecture. It made a space of evenly distributed brightness; it created a room of shadowless light*".²¹

This new sense of lightness was at first articulated by glass and other sorts of literal transparency, and so came to be identified with immateriality. There became an architectonic diagram, which Mies attempted, where the glass disappears and one is left with the frame. Leaving the architect as principally the designer of the frame and the glass is a surrogate, a stand-in, a weatherproofing, and not really part of the scheme. Mies was trying to establish a continuum of space between interior and exterior that confounds



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the presence of glass. Real space is thus inside and outside. Leaving glass as a surrogate for nothingness.

These early modernists dreamed of a light and airy space not tied down to traditional heavy materials, ruled instead by the new morality of the clear and transparent. Their light space was free floating, open and unencumbered by traditional earthy materials: but it was also a classical space. It seems static: it can't move; doesn't float or fly. It is obtained in a negative way through a rarification or purification of any unnecessary materiality. It is as if lightness had been immobilized, enclosed in a glass box, where it was required to be pure, clear, clean, without any excessive ornament. Lightness was made optic and geometric. A truth exposed rather than a multiple possibility released.



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1 Farnsworth House, *an expression on the clarity of structure and the transparent wall.*

2 Farnsworth House, *entry frame separating interior from exterior.*

3 Johnson's Glass House, *the complex condition of reflection and transparency.*

²¹ Ludwig Hilberseimer, "*Glasarchitektur*," *Die Form* 4; translated by Vera Neukirchen, (1929), p. 521.



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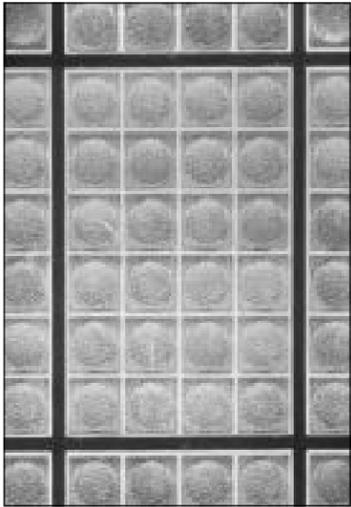


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Architectural historian Colin Rowe and painter Robert Slutzky wrote in 1955-56 the essay "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," which was first published in 1963 and widely read in the 1960's, influencing several generations of American architects. In it they state: "(The observer) may enjoy the sensation of looking through a glass wall and thus be able to see the interior and the exterior of the building simultaneously; but, in doing so, he will be conscious of few of those equivocal emotions which derive from phenomenal transparency."²² They propose "phenomenal transparency" as an abstract, theoretical sense of transparency derived from skillful formal manipulation of the architectural facade, viewed frontally, as opposed to the more straightforward "literal transparency" that they ascribe to the curtain-

wall architecture of the modern rationalists.

They further clarify literal transparency as a material condition, that of being pervious to light and air. The effect of a translucent object in a deep naturalistic space. Phenomenal transparency as described by Rowe and Slutzky relates primarily to examples of cubist paintings and seeks the articulated presentation of frontally aligned objects in a shallow abstracted space. This conception of space is emphatically two dimensional. For them time, like the viewer, effectively stood still. To be more precise, time was consumed in a movement internal to the eye, for the eye's oscillation between layered planes was thought to generate a thick spatiality. This phenomenal space was considered to be purely optical.



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1 Pierre Chareau, Maison de Verre, the translucent box at night, expressing the clarity of structure and infill.

2 Pierre Chareau, Maison de Verre, the human scale of the translucent box.

3 Pierre Chareau, Maison de Verre, elevation of translucent glass block panel.

4 Luis Barragan, mass and the transparent opening.

²² Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," in Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and other Essays*, Cambridge: MIT Press, (1976), p. 171.



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Today there is a fascination with new possibilities of non literal transparency. The extensive use, in contemporary architecture, of semi-transparent glazing materials (such as frosted or mottled glass), translucent plastic sheathings, double layers of glass (which, even if clear, produce enough reflections to function as screens), and an apparently infinite number of perforated materials, results in spaces very different from Hilberseimer's "room of shadowless light."

By introducing a translucent layer around the building the facade becomes an imposed veil, triggering a subjective relationship by distancing the viewer of the building from the space or forms within and isolating the viewer within from the outside world. These properties entrap our desires and attract

us by keeping us at a distance. This tension between viewer and object implied by the use of the architectural facade as a veiling membrane indicates a departure from past attitudes and a need to reexamine the word transparency as it relates to architecture.

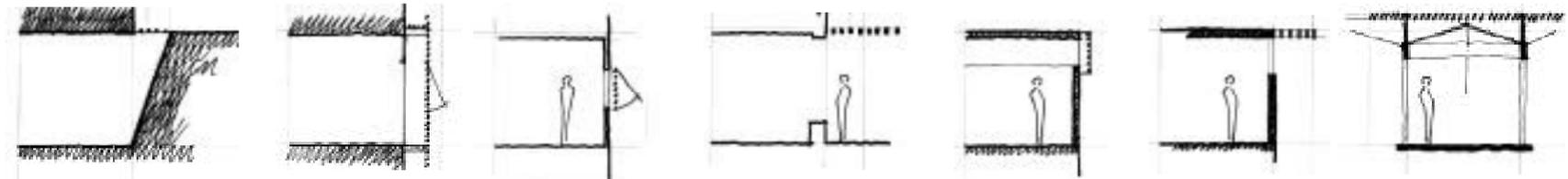


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1 Herzog & de Meuron, Art Gallery Goetz, *ambiguity of structure; leaving mass of the second level supported by glass, and the third level cantilevered over its base.*

2 Herzog & de Meuron, Switchbox, *copper louvers protect and screen the building from its industrial context.*

3 Acom Office Building, *the existing building is wrapped in a translucent box that allows a simultaneous reading of both the past and the present.*



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We must always look for the right balance between view and seclusion, in other words for a spatial organization that will enable every one in every situation to choose his or her degree of privacy. By using simple principles of spatial organization and by altering the position of any one of a number of transparent screens it is possible to introduce a great many gradations of seclusion or openness and therefore allow it to change as the situation mandates.

The degree of seclusion, like the degree of openness, must be very carefully dosed, so that the conditions are created for a great variety of contacts ranging from ignoring those around you to wanting to be together. Also the individuality of all must of course be respected as much as possible, and we must indeed see to it that the constructed environment never forces unwanted visual and social contact, but at the same time we must never forget the importance of this contact either.

The architect is not only a builder of walls (that

protect and seclude), he is also and equally a builder of openings that provide a transition and offer views of other things. Both - walls and openings- are crucial elements of architecture..

Since the inside is different from the outside, the wall -the point of change- becomes an architectural event. Architecture occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior forces, of use and space. These interior and environmental forces are both general and particular, generic and circumstantial. Architecture as the wall between the inside and the outside becomes the spatial record of this resolution and its drama.²³

Robert Venturi

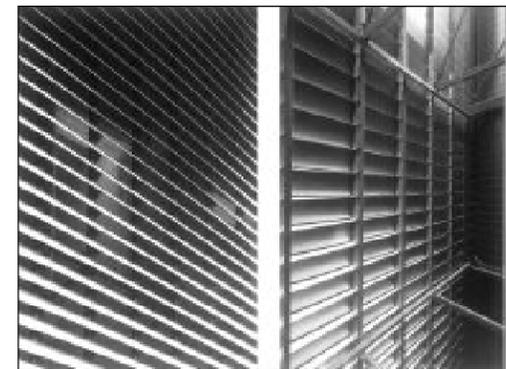
1 Series of Screen Studies, *an investigation on the various functions of the screen (sun protection, rain protection, sub terranean light slot, privacy, etc.) and the degree of privacy as determined by screen position and screen density.*

2 Norton Residence Screen, *a cedar screen veils the side elevation and adds an extra layer, an in-between space, to reinforce the privacy of the residence.*

3 Herzog & de Meuron Switchbox, *copper louvers of varying angles produce an in-between space that helps to insulate the building while allowing natural light to enter.*



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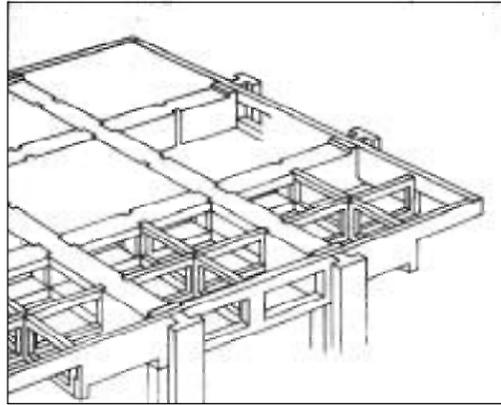


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²³ Marietta S. Millet, *Light Revealing Architecture*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, (1996), p. 94.



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The open corner offers a unique condition, it allows for a transition space, an in-between space. This in-between space is both within the boundary of the building and open to the outside world.

The open condition is based on the absence of load-bearing construction elements in the periphery of the building. It is in the principle of the overhang, which was made possible by the application of reinforced concrete, that produces this new unprecedented experience of space. But however airy the construction of a building may be, and however the opposition between inside and outside is reconciled by instance recesses in the facade, that extraordinary new sensation of **transparency and lightness can only exist when the constructive corner-column is absent, and when the facade is so thinly**

constructed that it apparently has only itself to support.



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- 1 Richards Medical Bld'g, *entry and the open corner.*
- 2 Richards Medical Bld'g, *the structural system and the open corner.*
- 3 Open Air School, *the open corner allows for a more transparent connection between the building and the site.*

project

proj•ect *n.* **1.** A plan or proposal; scheme. **2.** An undertaking requiring concerted effort. *v.* **1.** To thrust outward or forward; protrude or cause to protrude. **2.** To form a plan or intention for. **3.** To cause (an image) to appear upon a surface. [*<Lat. projectus, p.p. of proicere, to throw out.*]²⁴

²⁴ *The American Heritage Dictionary*,
Dell Publishing Co., Inc., (1983), p.
548.

Position Statement

Too often contextualism has led to simplistic dogma, timidity of design and confusion. Some buildings merely fit in unnoticeably, like the eponymous character in Woody Allen's film *Zelig* who blended into situations so well that nobody noticed him. And sometimes a single work presents several different faces to its surroundings, reflecting the contrasts and confusions in these as a more finely fragmented collage. In both cases the resulting buildings tend to lack a sufficiently independent identity, and thus fail to hold their own in, and enter into dialogue with, their surroundings.

Challenges facing the contemporary city involve not only reintegrating its fabric, and new buildings into that fabric, and reusing existing building stock, but also helping it evolve into a new form better suited to current needs, technology and life-styles. This forces one to avoid constrictive dogma and approach each context and how to respond to it afresh, as guided by instinctual responses - hence giving one the freedom to respond to context in various ways. **This results in a better integration of the old core of the city and the newer monofunctional tracts that sprawl around it into an upgraded whole, updating the former with new uses and bringing the latter to life with a better mix of uses.**

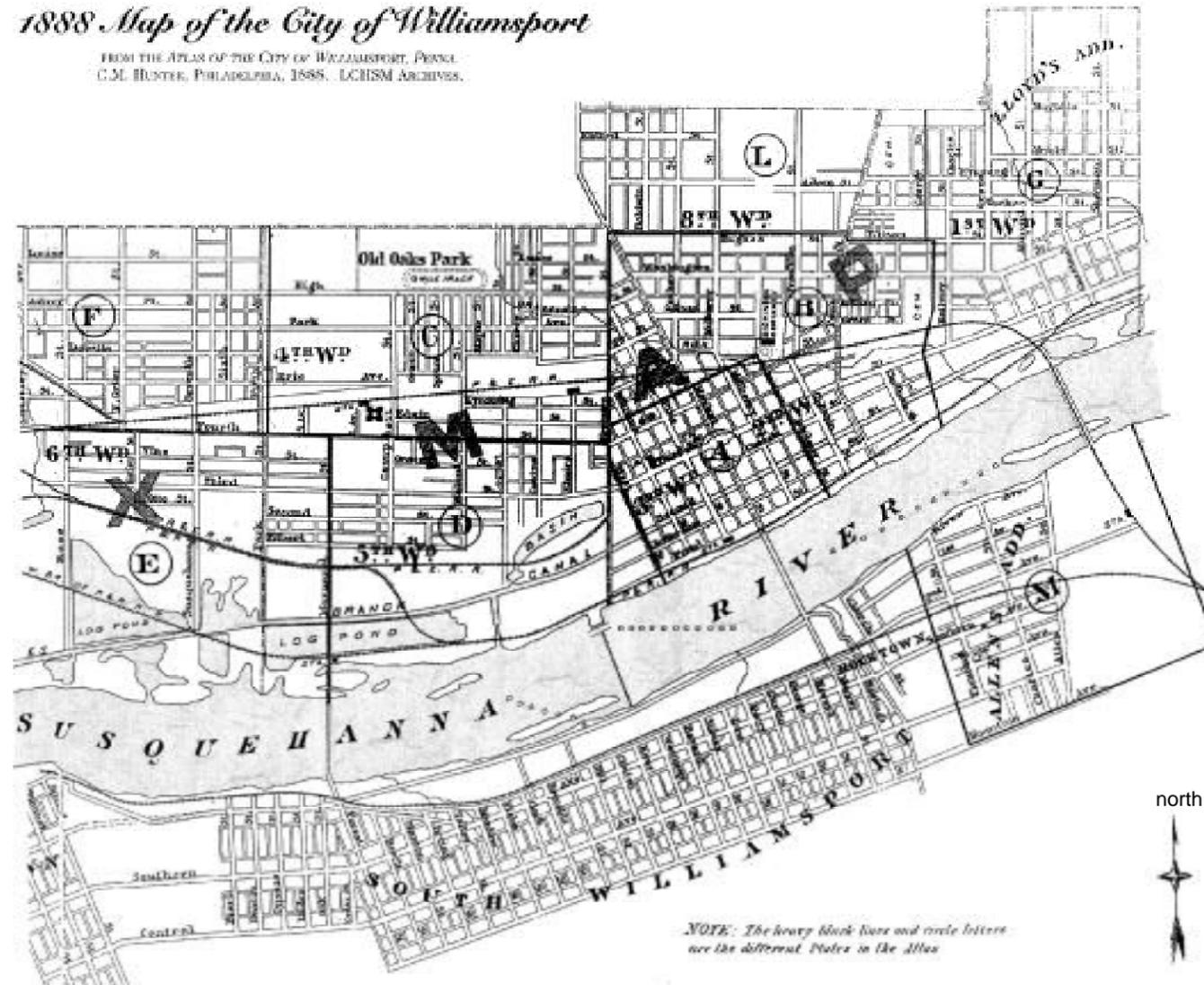
²⁵ Richard Ingersoll, "Piano Takes Pritzker," *Architecture*, May, (1998), p. 39.

My mission at all scales is to achieve transparency. The unexpected, the unfinished, the transparent processes are needed to recuperate the complexity of an urban place.²⁵

Renzo Piano

1888 Map of the City of Williamsport

FROM THE ATLAS OF THE CITY OF WILLIAMSPORT, PENNA.
C.M. HUNTER, PHILADELPHIA, 1888. LCHISM ARCHIVES.



1888 Map of Williamsport

Michael Ross bought a tract of land (in 1796) and laid out a town which was to become Williamsport. The town was incorporated as a borough in 1806 and became a city in 1866. The origin of the name Williamsport has been disputed but many people believe the name was in honor of William Russell, owner of the wharf or "port" on the bank of the Susquehanna River.

Williamsport's downtown area is primarily in section A of the map with the project site at the north/western corner of 3rd and Pine Street.

introduction to Williamsport

27

Located in central Pennsylvania along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River, the Williamsport area is home to some 90,000 inhabitants. And within 300 miles of more than 70 million people. Cities within this radius include: Harrisburg, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Erie, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Washington D.C..

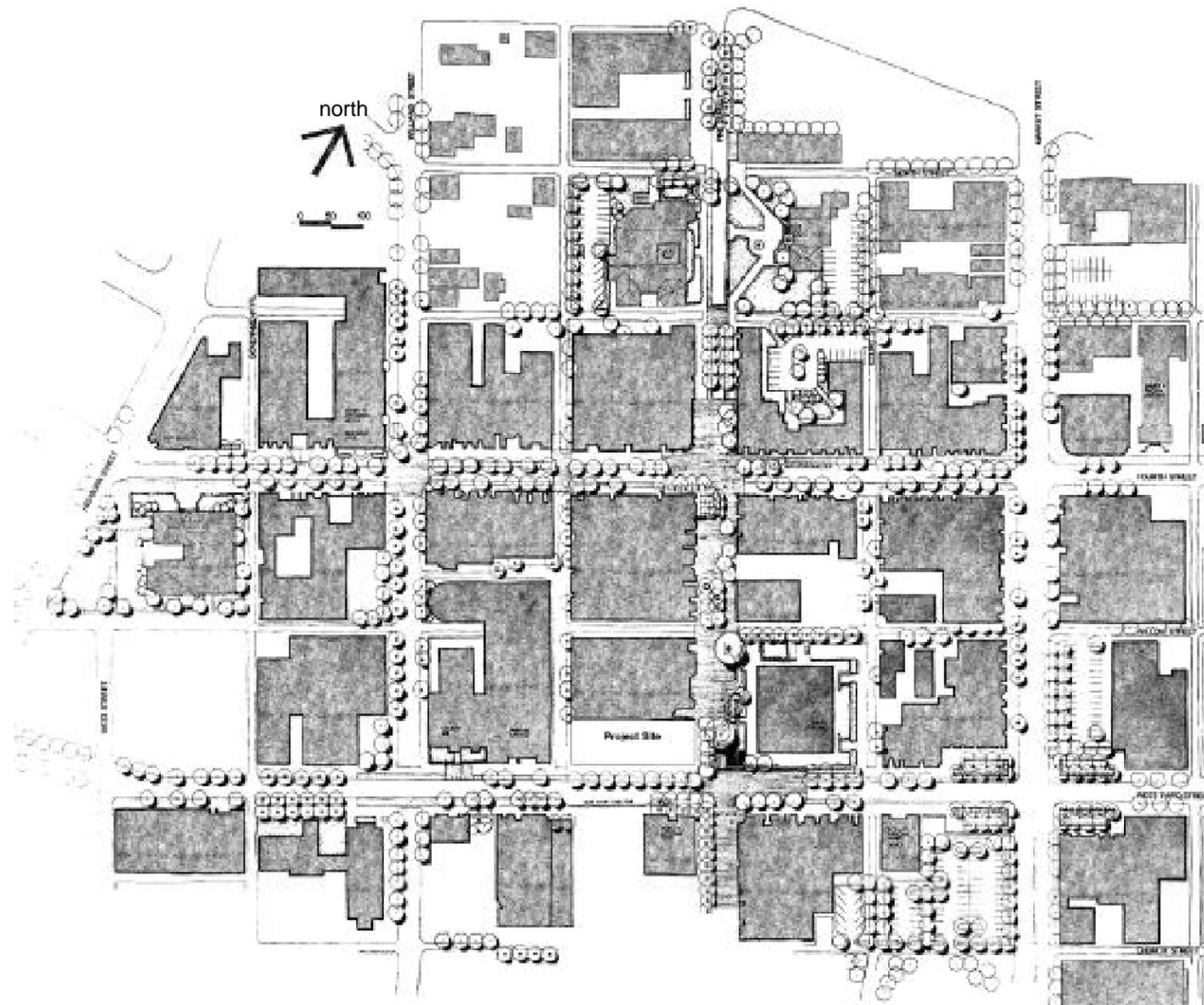
From humble beginnings as a frontier community isolated from the population centers of the east coast, the Williamsport/Lycoming County area exploded on the map in the late 1800's claiming the distinction as the "Lumber Capital of the World." Dozens of lumber barons became rich men, claiming their wealth through the harvesting of a seemingly endless supply of timber from the hillsides of the Allegheny Mountains and transporting it to awaiting saw mills by the branches of the Susquehanna River. By the turn of the twentieth century the boom of the lumber era had ended. Left behind was a lasting legacy of luxurious homes located in the historic district of Williamsport on West Fourth Street.

In 1939, Williamsport native Carl Stoltz founded Little League Baseball so his nephew and other neighborhood children could learn the game of baseball. Today, Little League Baseball is played by 2.9 million participants in 85 countries, all hoping to play in the annual Little League World Series played each August at Lamade Stadium in South Williamsport.

Williamsport's downtown, like most other cities began to die in the late 70's with the malling of America. The downtown attempted to offset this trend with a popular idea of the time "townscaping" (brick pavers and urban furniture as a means to revitalizing the older urban core) "a build it and they will come attitude"- it failed. And, the downtown area has declined to the point that it is at now.

The downtown has two remaining strongholds, a federal and county courthouse along with the profusion of lawyer's offices. There remains a number of mom and pop stores and several secondhand stores. But, parking lots and multistory office buildings dominate this urban landscape. As a result, the downtown revolves around a 9-5 work week.

Within a 5 minute walk of the downtown area the character of the city dramatically changes. Development along the Route 15 and I-180 corridor, becomes a mono-functional tract that caters solely to the passing motorist. The City of Williamsport is collaborating in this development by building a trade and transit center (a bus station with retail spaces) in the downtown area. Giving individuals without a car access to the downtown area and its sprawling perimeter.



Map of the Downtown Area

The older urban core remains, but many of its older buildings have been torn down only to become parking lots. The newer sprawling part of town is located along Route 15 and I-180 corridor just off the map to the bottom of the page.



Project Site Photo

Looking north/west on the corner of Third and Pine Street, with the L.L. Sterns building torn down a large hole in the downtown area remains for development. A parking deck is in the distance with the adjacent existing building shown in the middle.

The Importance of the Project Site

This site is important to the City of Williamsport for several reasons.

- it has had an urban history that extends almost 200 years.
- it is located in the downtown area of Williamsport.
- it fronts onto the Pine Street pedestrian mall and Third Street (a major street in the downtown area).
- it is directly across the mall from the Lycoming County Court House.
- it is a large site and has street frontage on three sides.
- it is adjacent to the newer sprawling development along Route 15 and I-180 corridor.

Mandates for the Site

The project has imposed several mandates on building upon the site.

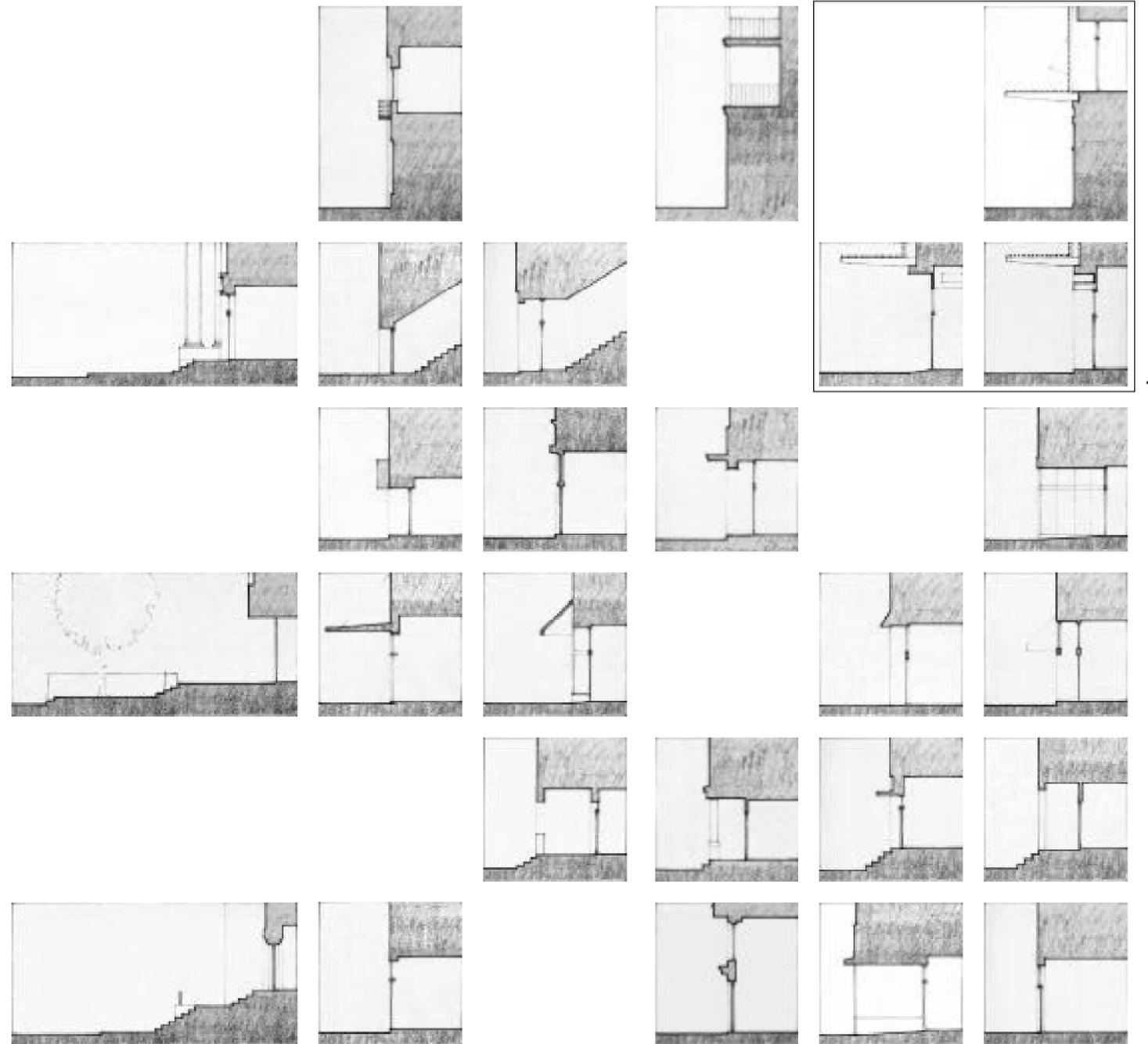
- the building must act as a generator for the downtown area.
- infill the site so as to redefine a street edge on the Third and Pine Street edges.
- the building should promote diversity of building use types and unit types.
- the building should benefit from and promote an active street environment.
- service parking access and private exterior spaces should be provided by an alleyway.
- the building should acknowledge the local building context and building scale.

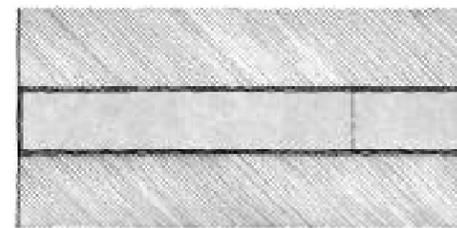
Site Description

The project site can be described as an 80' x 210' lot in the heart of Williamsport's downtown business district. The site and subsequent building has been important to the community life of Williamsport since the early 1800's, first as the West Branch Bank, then as the Parker Hotel, and by 1888 it became the L.L. Sterns & Sons Department Store. In 1984, the operations of the L.L. Sterns Company relocated to another location within the region. At that time the building became vacant and began to deteriorate. In 1994, it was bought by the City of Williamsport and the existing building torn down during the summer of 1998. With the anticipation of building a trade and transit center on what is now a vacant lot.

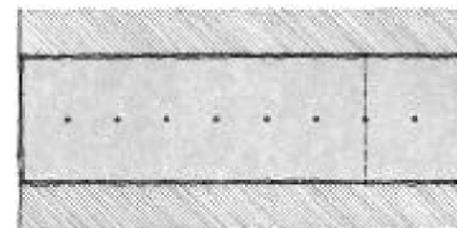
Openings in the wall are a celebration of the “in between” they allow the edge to be thick enough to stand on, or subtle enough to blur the edge of the most private to public. This point of transition is defined by a threshold, the point where vertical forces of the building meet with the horizontal forces of the ground. The threshold can be as thin as a glass door or as thick as processional stairs.

1 Elements that are typical to the urban threshold (street canopy, balcony, transparent storefront, raised building plane and dropped beam at building edge) are repeated and reinterpreted into the skin of a new urban structure.

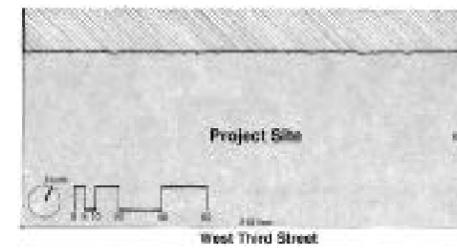




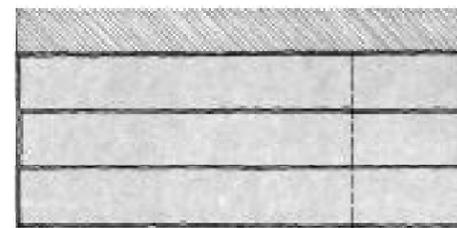
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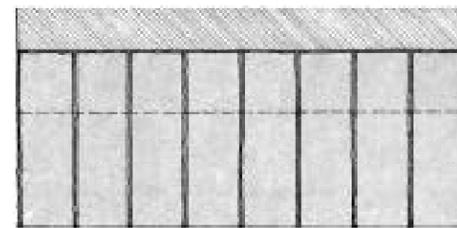
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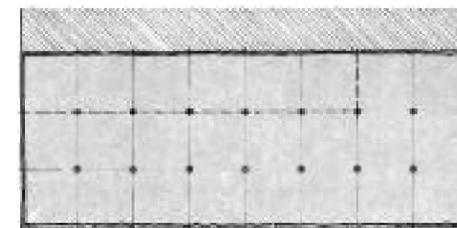
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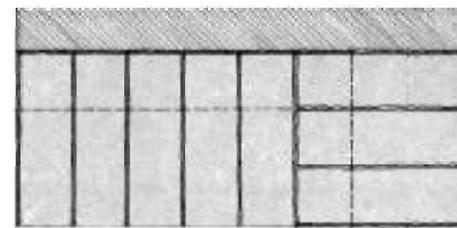
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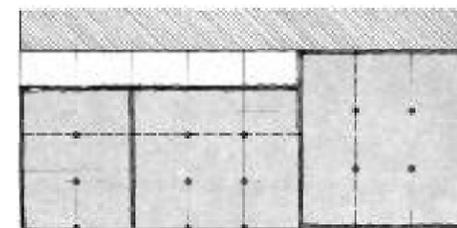
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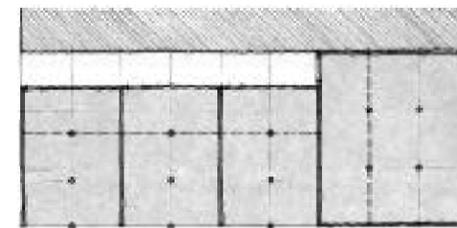
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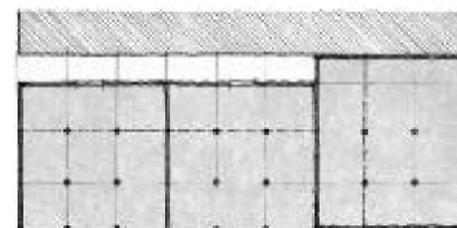
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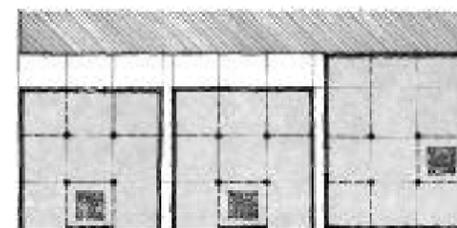
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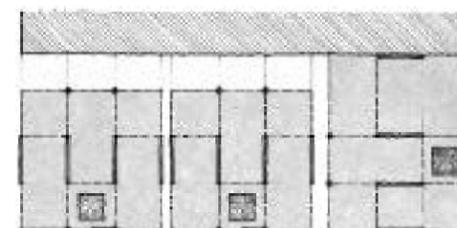
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- 1 Traditional retail building in Williamsport's downtown, lots typically have 20' to 30' of street frontage and are dependent on a rear service alley. Structure is provided by 2 parallel bearing walls, this allows the facade to open onto the street. The 2nd and 3rd floors are residential units with a decreased depth to permit natural light to enter the unit.
- 2 Retail units having a wider street frontage simply require a row of columns.
- 3 The project site, an 80' x 210' lot with street frontage on 3 sides.
- 4 The project site as subdivided into 3 traditional retail units with frontage to Pine Street. Residential units remain on the 2nd and 3rd floor (shown with a dashed line)
- 5 The site as subdivided by 8 smaller units fronting 3rd Street.
- 6 A separate scheme that allows one large retail space that is supported by a grid of columns.
- 7 A combination scheme with 3 units fronting Pine Street and 5 units fronting 3rd Street.
- 8 The subtraction for a service alley and introduction of a column layout, to permit a more flexible retail layout.
- 9 The reworking of the column grid to allow for 3 equal units along the 3rd Street side with 1 large unit fronting Pine Street.
- 10 A redistribution of bearing walls, produces 2 large retail units fronting 3rd Street and 1 similarly sized unit fronting Pine Street.
- 11 The break down of a singular building mass into 3 buildings, and the introduction of central stair towers.
- 12 The current building diagram, columns replace bearing walls at the perimeter of building and the corner is opened to strengthen a connection with the street and to allow more natural light to enter the unit.

The raised cavity floor system is intended to give the inhabitant the freedom to change the electrical and plumbing layouts possible within his/her unit. It is a simple idea of ownership of one's utilities.

The elevation is comprised of a repeated screen panel. The screen has several variables built into it so as to lend itself to the changing will of the inhabitant. One can be isolated from the noise and activity of an urban environment or can enjoy the light and smells of the street, as well as a multitude of levels in-between.

