DIALOGUE BETWEEN OPPOSITES

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University for the degree of Master of Architecture

[Signatures]

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To my mother and father
I would like to thank my sister, Kerrie, for her love and support.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee:
Bill Brown, Mike O’Brien, Pia Sarpaneva, and Frank Weiner
for their helpful insight, criticism, and support.

A special thank you goes out to
Vivek Anand, Sharon Brown, Dale Davis, Glenn Isenmann,
Wendy Mingin, Tony Spetsaris, and Brad Stallings
for their support, shared knowledge, helpful discussions, and friendship.
The value of architecture lies in our sensory perception, our experience of the space. If the space creates an awareness of the present through the sensory exchange between our body, mind, and the architecture, then it is committed to memory as a place. The perception of a space cannot be controlled by the architect, it is subjective. The architect can control the idea or philosophy of the design as well as the formal aspects such as structure, materiality, spatial organization and proportion. Through these formal aspects the architect strives to make the intention physical. Successful architecture should facilitate this sensory exchange or communication on many scales. It should speak directly to us through its immediate physical manifestation and spatial experience as well as through its ability to make a grander connection to its situation. As stated in Questions of Perception-Phenomenology of Architecture, "Architecture, more fully than other art forms, engages the immediacy of our sensory perceptions. The passage of time; light, shadow, and transparency; color phenomena, texture, material, and detail all participate in the complete experience of architecture."¹

The essence of a library is a place for introspection and study or even meditation. Therefore silence is a significant aspect of this project in regard to producing a structure that is quiet and subtle in its forms and spaces.
The project is an archival, research library for the history of Virginia, a division of the Virginia archives. The potential of the site for future development and its strong connection with the history of the Commonwealth made it particularly appropriate for an intervention of this sort. The chosen site is a joint between a city and a river, between the manmade and the natural and even between present and past. It exists in downtown Richmond Virginia on the edge of the city grid. Specifically, the site is on the edge of the Kanawha canal and looks over Browns Island and the James River to the South and the city to the North. This piece of land maintains a rich historical heritage. First of all it is adjacent to the Falls of the James, the point where the river becomes too rough for boats. Hence the Kanawha canal was constructed to mediate around these impassable segments of the James. This section of the canals was the first of a series of canals built reaching inland as far as the Shenandoah valley. The canals allowed for significant expansion west and led to the development of the James as a flourishing trade route. Richmond then became the industrial capital of the south, and a port through which all goods had to pass in order to be imported or exported. The present condition of the site is a parking lot. However in the past it has been home to many different structures, most significantly it was the site of the confederate arsenal. This structure as well as many parts of the city were burned to the ground during the Union siege and Civil War victory in June 1865. The neighboring Tredegar Ironworks factory
was saved from destruction by a barricade of owners and workers. This series of structures now exists as a branch of the Valentine museum. It displays artifacts and photographs of the industrial history of Richmond and the significant role the Tredegar Ironworks played in the growth of the city. Tadao Ando claims, “The architectural pursuit implies a responsibility to find and draw out a site’s formal characteristics, along with its cultural traditions, climate, and natural environmental feature, the city structure that forms its backdrop, and the living patterns and age-old customs that people will carry into the future.” It was important in the project to try to understand the preexisting language of the surrounding structures in order to begin to think of how to make an intervention. The historic structures that are still existing in close proximity to the site are red brick containers. Red brick is the major building material or cladding used in Richmond. These structures are abandoned warehouses or industrial buildings that maintain a connection to the river, either directly through their use of water as power or through their situation along the river bank. The project acknowledges this language through it’s form as container, use of brick as material, and relationship to the water. According to Pierre von Meiss in his book *Elements of Architecture*, “The site as a place is always linked to human history. The site which we choose or which is assigned to us to erect a building is perhaps already a place in the country or in the town. This place will be destroyed, reinforced or transformed by our intervention.”
Contrasting or opposing architectural elements articulate the spaces throughout the project. There are five sets of these opposing spatial constructs that have been explored: wall and column, static and continuous, horizontal and vertical, public and private, and light and dark. One element is clearly presented as subordinate to the other. Opposites are by definition, equal, however, in this project they are not.
The building is formed by a solid piece surrounding an intermittent piece. The solid piece is the masonry bearing wall that partially encloses the columns. The two structures interlock in section as well as in plan. The masonry is subordinate, metaphorically supporting the lighter column structure, which is spacially and experientially the primary structure of the building.
The two floors above ground house the book room or public room. This is a place of gathering and group study as well as browsing of the stacks. In this space the views are more expansive, one can see across the James River and along the edge of the city. The private realm is below ground level, in the earth. It lends to a more intimate spatial experience. The private study carrels in the tunnel to the main reading room allow only natural light from above creating a visually quiet environment for study. The main reading room is on the edge of the canal three feet above water level maintaining an intimate visual connection with the water.
The dialogue between the bookstacks and the ramp defines the spatial constructs of the book room. The stacks exist as static elements creating a steady rhythm. This emphasizes the strong, directional continuity of the ramp that slices down through the building and leads to the main reading room. The ramp is an invitation for introspection. The only place to linger on the ramp is almost at its head, at the point where it divides into two paths. It is a direct and solitary route to the lower private areas of the building.
Directly in front of the entrance is a tall slender vertical volume that houses the primary information desk. The two volumes on either side are service spaces. At the end of the building, is the ultimate destination, the reading room. It is a strong, horizontally structured space contrasting with the strong vertical, public entry. This space presents the view of the canal and Browns Island. It is a quiet, intimate view, limited only to the canal and the edge of the island.
HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL SPACE
Two important elements throughout the project are light and shadow. There are two ways in which light and shadow are used in the library: to present a place or an element, and to frame a view. In the public spaces there is less direct, natural light in contrast to the more private, intimate spaces with directed views to the outside. Christopher Alexander states, “The building needs to be a tapestry of light and dark.”
Room
Special collections reading room
Section perspective through bookroom
Transverse section perspective through reading room
West Elevation
“The taste of the apple...lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way... poetry lies in the meeting of the poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading.”

- Jorge Luis Borges, forward to Obra Poética
ENDNOTES


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