

TOO (2): OFFERINGS OF SMALL ENVIRONMENTS

by

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Forward

This thesis should not be read at the desk during the course of a working day, with the periodic bursts of typewriters in the distance and the phone threatening to sound the alarm at any moment. It would be much more beneficial if it were experienced in conjunction with a glass of wine before dinner or outside in the evening light as the day slips slowly into night. This work is meant to be consumed although it is not a feast, it is more subtle, more reserved. Its impact is not one of immediacy, but one which lingers for some time after the original taste is encountered. Like a sip of wine swished under the tongue, the enjoyment lasts long after the substance is removed.

There is no particular challenge aimed at the reader here. This is not a scientific dissertation nor any sort of discursive research project. Rather than appeal to the

rational aspects of the being, the author tries to enlist those qualities of the character which can only be ambiguously defined as the beautiful and the sublime. The effort expended in the production of this work is obviously intended not so much to inform us as it is to move us.

Seymore Rhapsody

Blacksburg 1975

Preface

The projects exhibited and discussed in this thesis were executed primarily during the course of one year. The writing was done some time later and is somewhat of a re-enactment of that experience. As a result, this is less of a polemic or manifesto aimed against something as it is a simple discourse on what seems true for me concerning design.

My most fundamental objective is to urge a deeper awareness in the perception of the familiar environment, to provoke a demand for those things which have a true worth, and a recognition of that which is superficial. It is essential that we must look past the surface to the substance. I do not believe this can be accomplished by words alone. These writings are merely a supplement to the three dimensional manifestations of my work. They have value in a personal

sense, for as I write the words about the design, I relive the actual experience of the design. Being one's own critic is an important part of being creative, and by re-experiencing my design within a new context, that of the verbal medium, I learn more of what I did as well as did not. But the true value of this work lies in the experience of the viewer, for given the right climate and conditions, quality and its awareness has the tendency to spread.

". . . it does not matter so much what the understanding comprehends, but what the feeling senses." ¹

Introduction

I place these words on this paper not so much as a writer who chooses design, but as a designer who has little recourse but to write. This is not a clear work. Clarity is the function of journalism. Goals are not precisely defined, boundaries of role are obscure and the concept only has meaning in a subjective sense. There is no rigid hypothesis or proof to fulfill, nor is this an attempt to add more new information to the mass of knowledge already categorized, computed and stored. I seek constraints for the ability to make strong judgements, not reasonable arguments. ² I have a preference for integration as opposed to addition; limitations instead of limitless freedom. Rather than the new, I search to look at the old in a new way. The potential is in rediscovery and in the identification of operational constraints which will lead to meaningful design programs.

The projects exhibited here do not stake any claim towards a heroic mission. Neither are they proposals for alternative visions to the existing social order nor direct attempts to offer solutions to problems on the scale of a socio-cultural environment. The explorations are much more gentle, more subtle. Although the emphasis that is placed on the investigation of aesthetic qualities of single objects is somewhat individual in scale, the goal is more universal. It is the struggle for order, a commitment against the void.³ The intent is to address the gap between art and daily life. The messages manifest in the objects I make attempt to contend with both the utilitarian and spiritual needs of the individual, a coalescence of pragmatic and symbolic concerns which bring a more pleasurable and meaningful set of experiences.

Intention and Awakening

The organization of this paper is twofold: first, the visual documentation of my work executed over the past year, and second, a verbal demonstration of the relative value of the work and a description of the range of concerns which were involved and the problems which were addressed. I had originally hoped that the latter could be accomplished through the former. This delusion is one to which I no longer subscribe, for as much as there are those who are only capable of seeing with their eyes, there are others only capable of listening with their ears. However, if the reader is one who possesses the ability to listen with his eyes, I propose that he skip the rhetoric and proceed to the visual section at the back of this paper, where thesis regulations succinctly suggested it be placed.

The above statement is issued with 'tounge in cheek', for

while as a designer I feel in command of the means to bring others to the direction which seems true for me now, I am under somewhat of a handicap to map such paths solely through the word. Therefore, my words do not stand alone. Their aim is basically a complement, a support mechanism, to the series of impressions gained from the things I have produced.

The original intention of this work was the clarification and isolation of a constant which manifests itself in my projects; in other words, the elucidation of a link which would bring an easily understood coherency to the number of seemingly diverse artifacts I have managed to create. Although I still uphold the validity of this search, the existence of a single universal design principle which can be applied to all man-made creations no longer appears to be a tenable idea. The

types of limitations and decisions involved in the design of an industrial object are inherently different from those which are involved with the design of a building. Any physical similarities of the projects shown here are purely fortuitous, for if any sort of meaningful tool which can be applied to a range of problems and scales is to be evolved from my work, it must come from a "level of structure, and not a level of manifest fact."⁴ The constant lies in the process. It is not so much a part of the operation of solving problems as it is a way of looking at and formulating problems. The idea is based on the concept of always dealing with two. Although the simplicity of the title may set it apart from other theses, this is not a superficial attempt to render the work singular. The form of the title is an extension and an application of the central concept. The first word,

too, meaning "in addition, besides, also, something else"⁵, is juxtaposed with the identically sounding though visually different number. The understanding of the parody requires the activation and interplay of two faculties of perception. With most titles, it is enough to read, this one has to be seen. In terms of sound the elements of the title are the same, in terms of meaning the elements are supportive, and in terms of a visual level they are totally different. This may seem trivial upon first examination, but it is exactly this type of content, this type of operation which is lacking in design and is a major reason for the disappointment of modern architecture. It is what Venturi calls "richness of meaning"⁶, what Jenks labels "multivalence"⁷, and what Vitruvius titles delight. It is a quality purposely instilled in a work which allows the viewer to become an active

participant rather than just a disinterested observer. It is the obligation to present the possibility of seeing a work in different ways in addition to its intended use. It is the attempt to create objects which are thought provocative as well as utilitarian. It is the belief that "every object must enrich the portion of life it occupies, it must not just justify itself as merely a tasteful but barren means to some worthwhile end."⁸

The possibilities and potentials of dealing with more than one, more than merely the surface aspects of a problem or design are found everywhere in literature, music, sculpture and art, but rarely in modern architecture or in the objects of everyday use. It is clear that in any literary work of substance, there is the interplay of various levels of significance which allow for various levels of interpretation.

The integration and overlapping of different ideas packaged into one demonstrate the power of the writer's mind and the richness of the work. The nature of two is exhibited in the paradoxical duality of visual perception which is the basis of art. "The discrepancy between physical fact and physic effect"⁹, between the lines, planes, textures and colors on a surface and what they evoke, is that which allows for a painting to become a communicative instrument, potentially complex as a transmitter of information and meaning. And the very essence of mathematics as a problem solving tool is based primarily on the ability to look at the same quantity in two different ways.

With the acknowledgement of the level of complexity and success of these models, the 'oneness' of our physical environment becomes quite apparent. The objects we make

the buildings we inhabit are mostly one dimensional, devoid of meaning, reduced to the minimal pragmatic elements. Superficial values and misdirected goals operate on the principle, "we don't want it good, we want it Tuesday."¹⁰ Expediency is the virtue, banality replaces spirituality. Perhaps the problem lies in the effect of affluence upon our society. With affluence comes a tremendous number of choices, a freedom without restraints. Problems are solved only on a superficial level because limitations are neither apparent nor sought. In order to be successful choice must be minimized within any given problem. "We have to rediscover limitations."¹¹

Or perhaps the problem lies in the way man understands the things around him. "The mind divides the continuity of the world around us into discrete units."¹² "We cut up the

continua of space and time with which we are surrounded into segments, so that we are disposed to think of the environment as consisting of vast numbers of separate things belonging to named classes."¹³ As we break the world down into smaller and smaller parts, we categorize and label individual things. Their names, once fixed, set up boundaries and determine the way we look at and perceive the environment. A label implies a meaning, and a meaning almost always provides only one way to view the thing described.

I am sure the roots of the problem are much more complex and far reaching than I have indicated. I leave the task of explanation to others more adept in literary skills. This is not the task of a designer, for words are already two steps removed from reality. We must be more direct. One of

the primary goals must be to offer a much richer and varied experience in everyday life by proposing alternative ways of seeing. Through this a symbolic content representative of a meaning of existence can be established which gives those fixed points to which we can attach hopes, dreams, aspirations and past experiences.

It is the difference between one and two; sign and symbol. The former deals with a single set of coded information, obvious and immediate. The latter acts as a trigger, leading the mind to explore ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.

a cup

The design of a cup is not so much of a problem as it is a statement of intent.

The context is the exploration of slip casting as a form giving medium and its potential as a tool for mass production.

The actual problem stems from the recognition of the failure of all existing cups to successfully deal with the handle.

The problem is approached with an eye focused on an integrative process as opposed to an additive operation. Emphasis is shifted; the question asked is not what can be added to solve the handle problem, but what can be taken away. The search is directed not towards finding a new form, but towards deforming an existing form which is quite old, quite basic.

The cup is simultaneously a utilitarian implement and a three

dimensional composition. It is at once struggling to meet the demands of a controlled geometry, while at the same time, responding to a number of physiological limitations. It is here at the interface of an abstract construction, clear, rational, and free of incongruities, and the obscure, multifaceted, adaptive physiognomy of the hand that the imprint of the designer is planted and the involvement of the user begins.

The cup is an exercise of the interplay of duality; it is symmetrical yet asymmetrical. Its parts are clearly defined yet they are interrelated and multifunctional. The primary elemental form employed in the exercise is the cylinder, one large positive tube and two smaller negative volumes. The bilateral symmetry of the bottom of the cup is determined by the placement of the negative cylinders and reinforced by the

raised rim inset slightly from the form perimeter. The rim also serves as the joint to the table, raising the cup off the surface, and it is the mechanism by which one cup relates to another for stacking purposes. The bottom organization is set slightly off balance through the introduction of the semi circular insignia. This element establishes a degree of tension drawing emphasis to the more powerful symmetrical nature of the base. The negative cylinders continue the duality by the way they are terminated. The first is ended as a quarter sphere thereby defining the position of the thumb. The second is allowed to pass through the entire length of the form establishing the place for the fingers and giving the top its asymmetrical nature, as a circle impregnated by a semi circle. The duality is resolved as a unity through the form as a whole. All operations are manipulations

on the original cylinder which is deformed but neither destroyed nor overpowered. Independent of its function of holding a liquid, the object is a study of the play of light on solid and void, a sculptural element with no particular scale.

a chess set

a classical framework within a twentieth century context

The idea was to deal with the conventional form language of a chess set within the context of a modern technology and limitations imposed by mass production. The pieces are literally what the title implies, all parts of a greater whole based on the common denominator of the cylindrical form. Careful emphasis was placed on both historical and symbolic content in order to generate meaningful forms which would not be merely a stylized version of the classical vernacular.

The pawn, most insignificant except in number, is the smallest in stature and simply defined as a cylinder. The king is treated in a similar fashion, blind, lifeless, devoid of character, his form as a non-differentiated cylinder

conveys his limited power. The fact that he is the pivotal point of the game is brought out in his size and massive quality. The queen is the same size but she is differentiated by an opening passing horizontally through her upper section. The hole, a timeless symbol of the female, can also be interpreted as an all seeing eye, the protector of the king. The morphology of the three remaining pieces is derived from an abstraction of the classical embodiment. In each instance a dominant visual aspect of the piece is emphasized and the superfluous elements of the traditional configuration are eliminated. The result is a clear, precise, unambiguous, and simple yet easily recognizable translation of the form into the vocabulary of the cylinder.

The other determinant in the design is the concern for the process of production. Three different diameters of rod

were chosen from stock material to define the three groups of pieces, the pawns, the major pieces and the king and queen. The constant lies in the self-imposed limitation of keeping the differentiation of each chessman to one and only one operation; i.e., one cut on the lathe, one pass on the milling machine, or one hole from the drill press. In this manner, the energy and time required to produce each piece would be kept to a minimum thereby generating a product conducive to mass production. The materials of the armies, brass and stainless steel, were not only selected because of their distinguishable color contrast, but also because their weights are almost identical. This is important. The experience of holding a piece is critical. The heaviness of the material is echoed in the bold but simple forms. The feel of the chessman in the hand imparts a sense of power, a

sense of dignity, a sense of control. To attempt the same form in a material like aluminium would be a catastrophe.

Wood was selected for the board as a natural complement to the metallic pieces. Although molded to close tolerances itself, the nature of the wood sets in contrast to the chessmen and lets one know exactly how sharp, clean, precise and hard the metal forms actually are.

The chess board is a study of visual ambiguity in that its parts connote different meanings and uses. The rigid symmetrical quality of the playing surface is asymmetrically balanced by the position of the storage component at one end where the (cylindrical) dowels housing the armies are kept. The random organization of its light and dark elements indicates its dual function as a place to put the fallen pieces.

The sliding joint, reintroducing the metals of the pieces, is the boundary between the two components and the point to which a stand may be attached.

The playing field as a two dimensional grid made up of light and dark squares is supported by the alternating direction of the wood grain of adjacent squares. However, the chess board as a three dimensional entity implies, through the continuation of the grid on the vertical sides, that the squares are not only squares but faces of cubes. The demanding composition of the storage module as an aggregation of cubes would seem to support this observation. But the existence of a hole, a window which is simultaneously a handle, in the opposite end of the board, allows the viewer to see that the actual construction is laminated square sections of walnut and maple on particle board. This playing of one force against

another, the duality of the romantic craftsman and the rational pragmatist, sets up a tension which gives the board an independent life and character. The duality is resolved in terms of the whole, the process of the construction of the playing board being balanced by its blatant honesty and the precise but difficult manipulation of cubes which make up the storage compartment.

Conclusion

To catch an idea is relatively a simple task, they often come easy, independent of commitment. It is in the implementation that the difficult role of a designer lies. Words, idle rhetoric or profound prophesy, whether spoken by the procrastinator, critic, historian or philosopher, mostly remain intangible concepts. The designer must be not of one but of two worlds. He has to be able to deal with the conceptual and the real. "There is no surrogate for being on the job."¹⁴ The designer must acknowledge the obligation not only to generate new ideas, but to translate them into three dimensional realities.

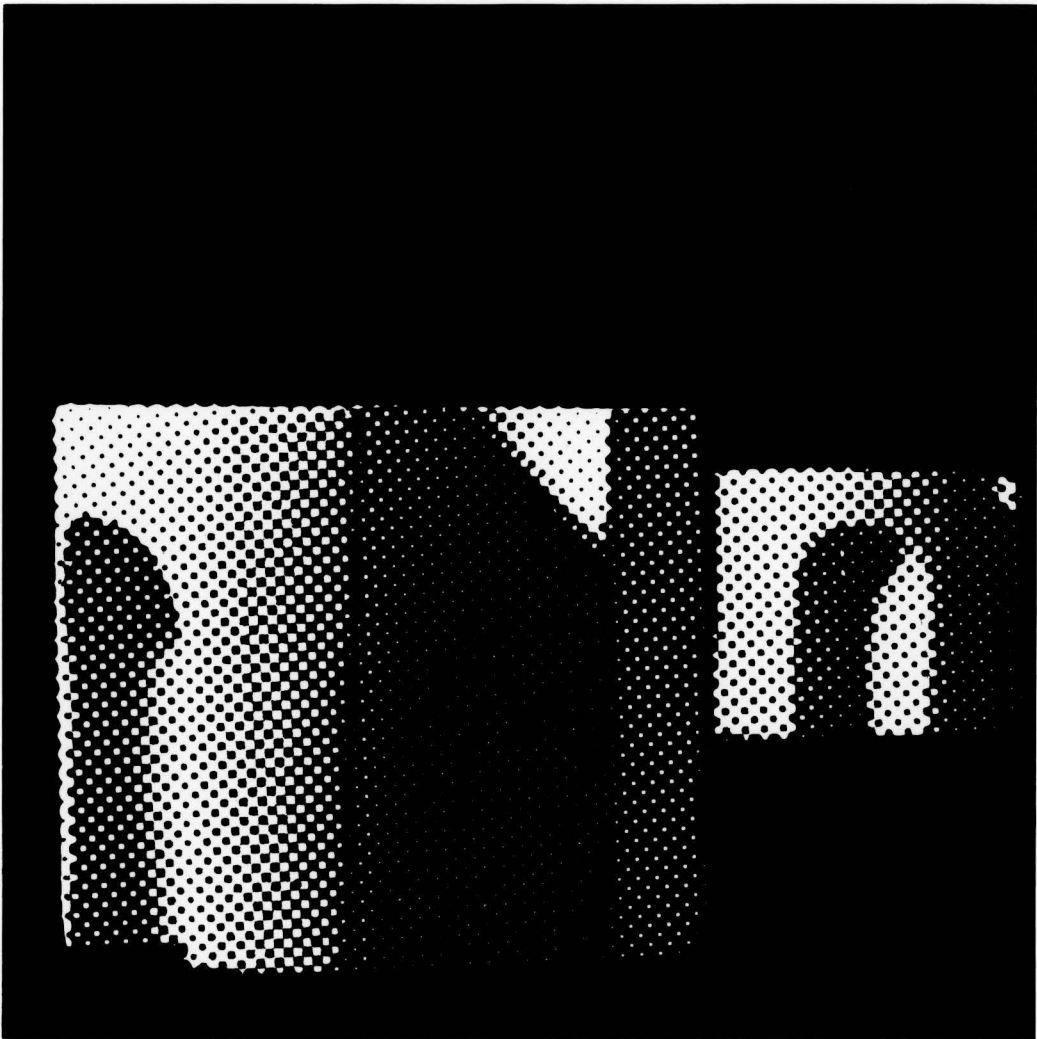
Footnotes

1. Immanuel Kant, Observations On the Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p. 72
2. This idea was brought out in a conversation with Robert Dunay concerning the qualities a designer should possess.
3. The word void is employed to carry two different meanings during the course of this paper. Here it is used in the metaphysical sense of nothingness or lack of meaning. Later it is used in its more familiar context as the absence of physical substance.
4. Edmund Leach, Claude Levi-Strauss, (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 22
5. David B. Quarlnik and Joseph H. Friend, editors, Webster's New World Dictionary, (New York: World Publishing Company, 1964), p. 1535
6. Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, (New York: Museum of Modern art, 1966), p. 23
7. Charles Jenks, Modern Movements in Architecture, (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), p. 13

8. John Dewey, Art As Experience, (New York: Minton Balch and Company, 1934), p. 26
9. Joseph Albers, Interaction of Color, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 2
10. J. Christopher Jones, in a letter titled "Habitability Criteria" written for the United States Army Construction Engineering Research Laboratory
11. Charles Eames, in Interiors, November, 1965, p. 130
12. Edward De Bono, New Think, (New York: Avon Books, 1968), p. 111
13. Edmund Leach, op. cit., p. 15
14. David Jones, Epoch and Artist, (New York: Chilmark Press Inc., 1959), p. 12

Appendix

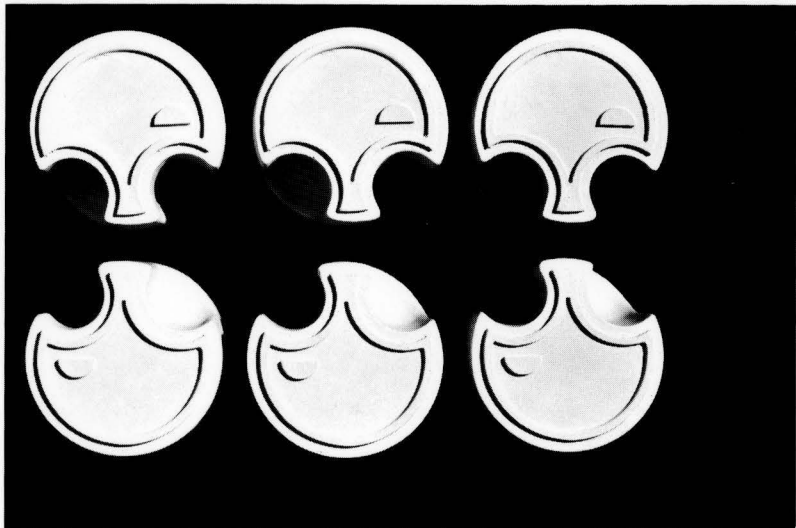
1 ■



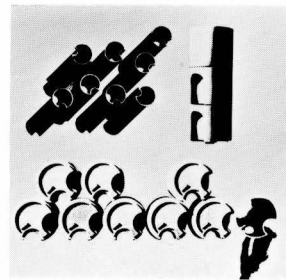
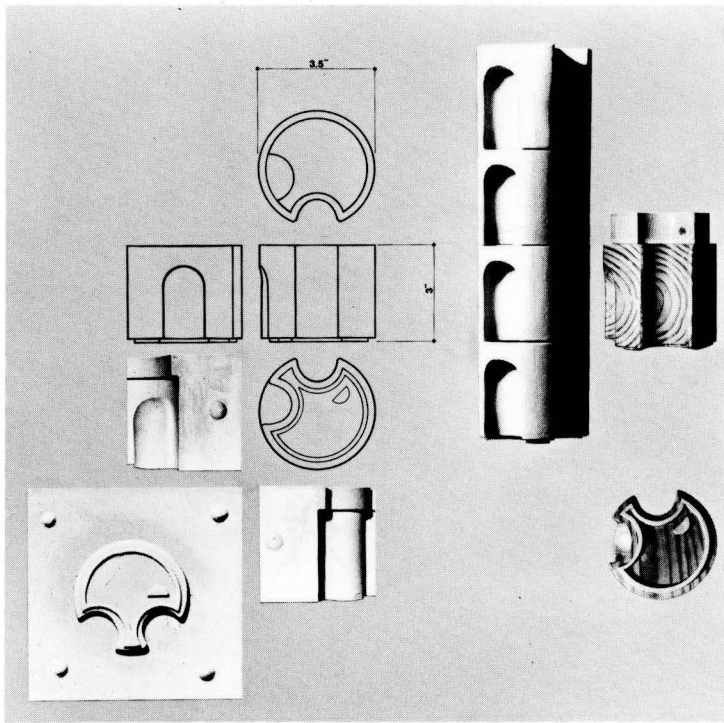
1974: a cup, 3" x 3.5", ceramic slip cast.

1

■2



two groupings.

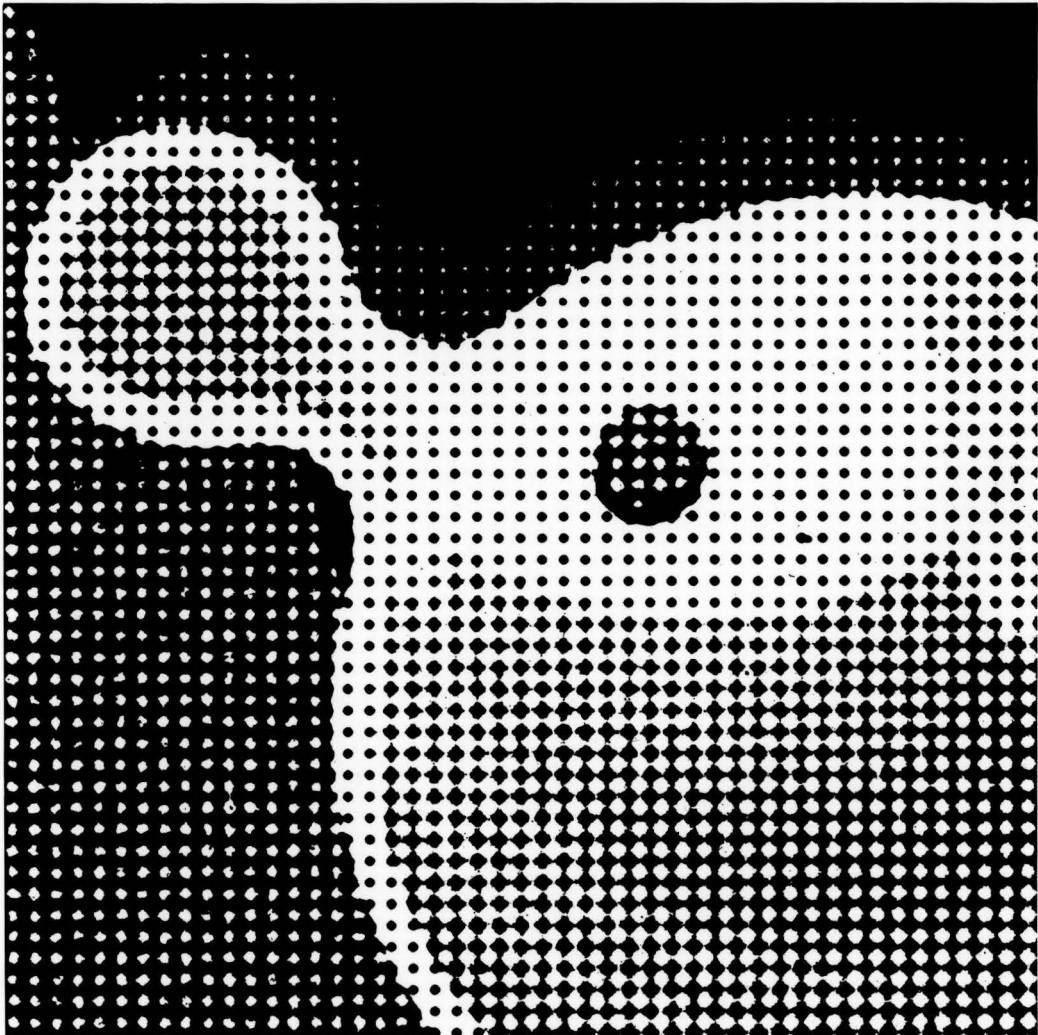


1

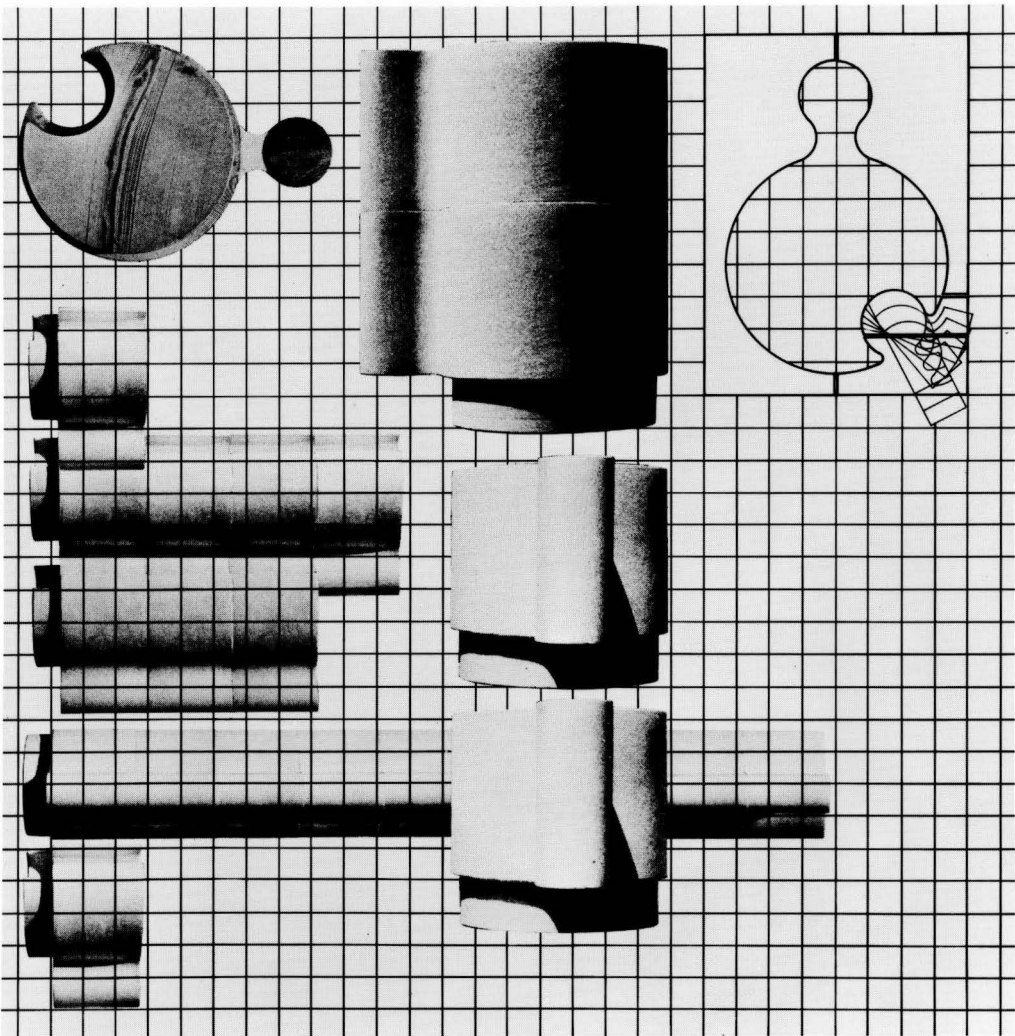
■3

exhibition boards.

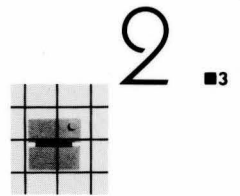
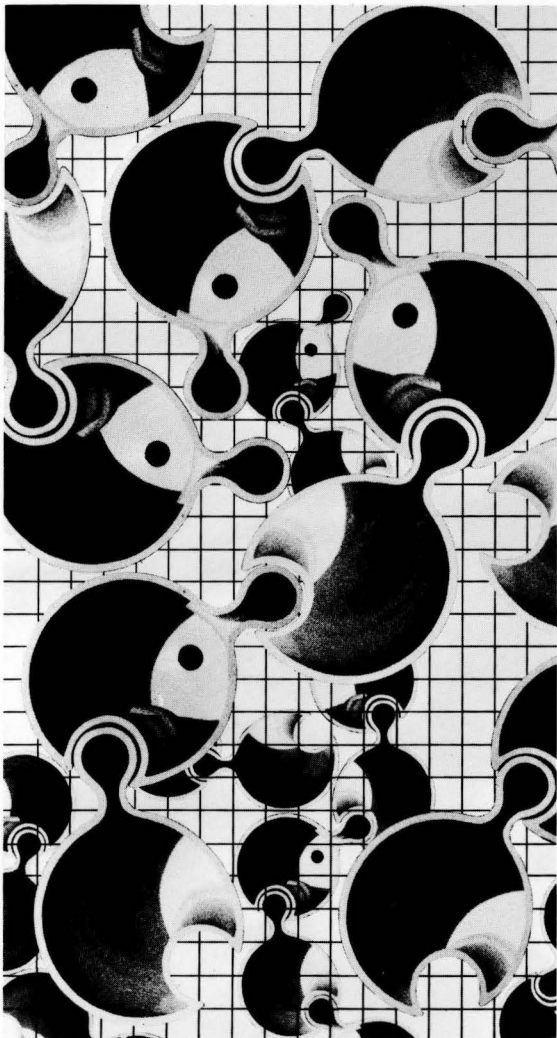
2 ■



1974: a flower pot, 7" x 10", ceramic slip cast.

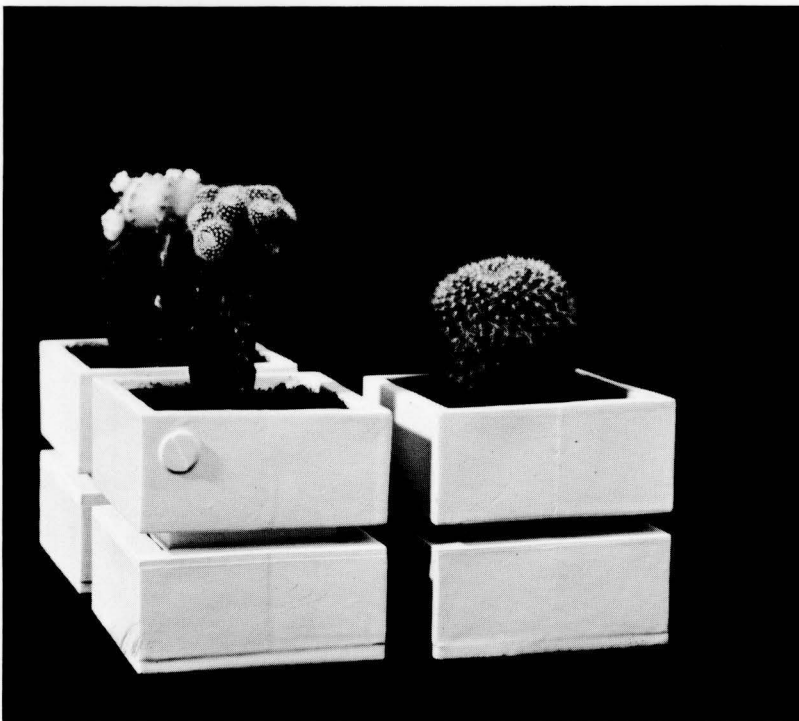
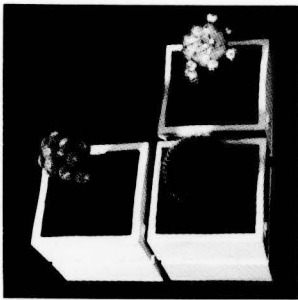


exhibition board: stacking configuration.



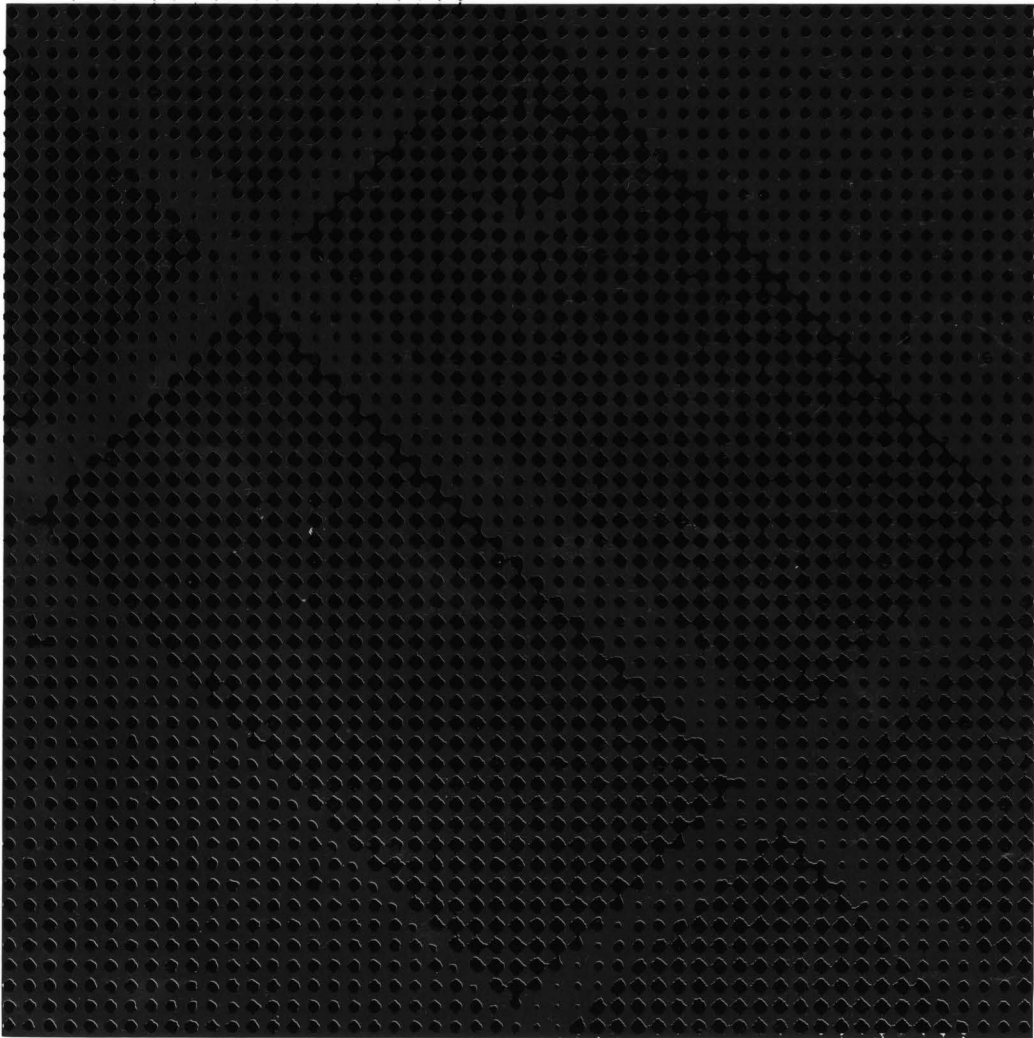
interlocking series, horizontal configuration.

3.

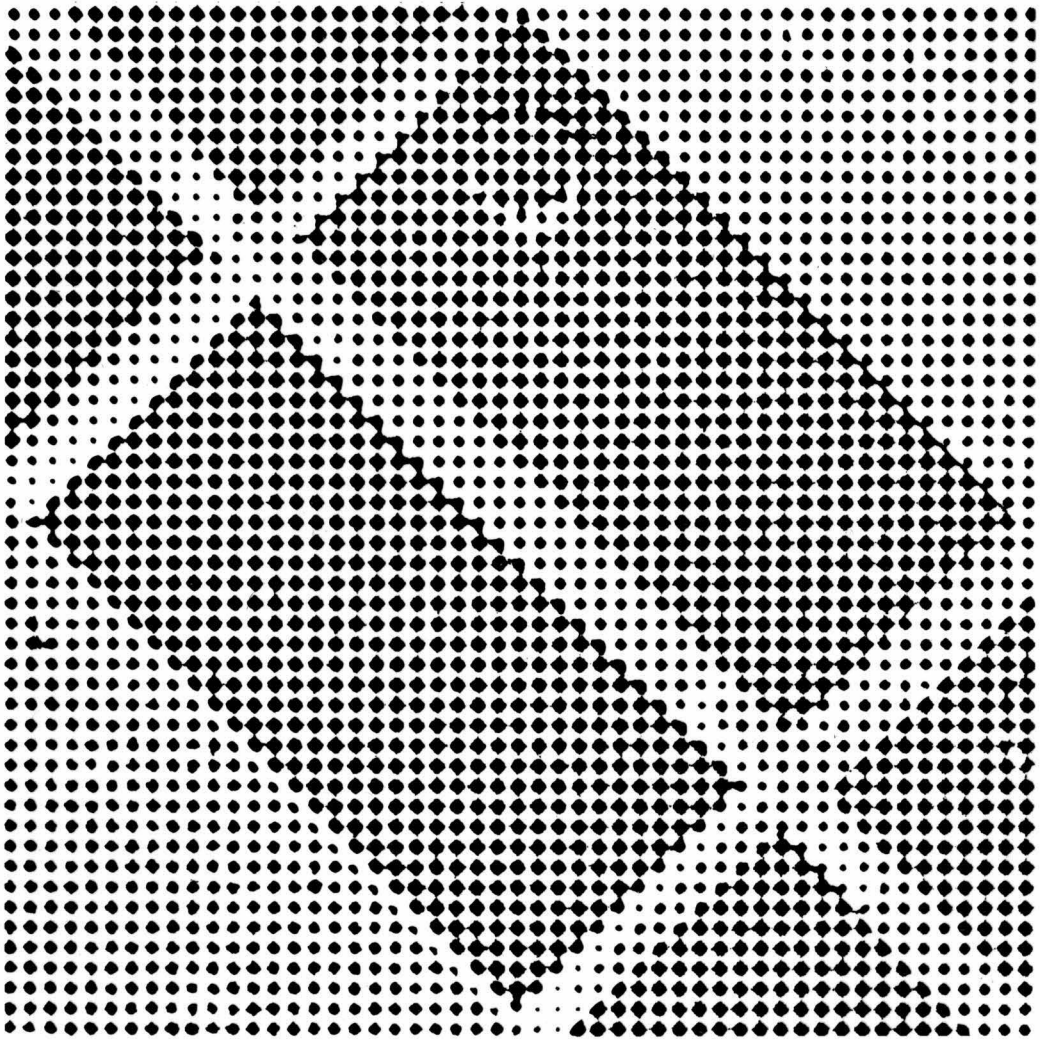


1974: the square pot, 3.5" x 3.5" x 3.5", ceramic slip cast.

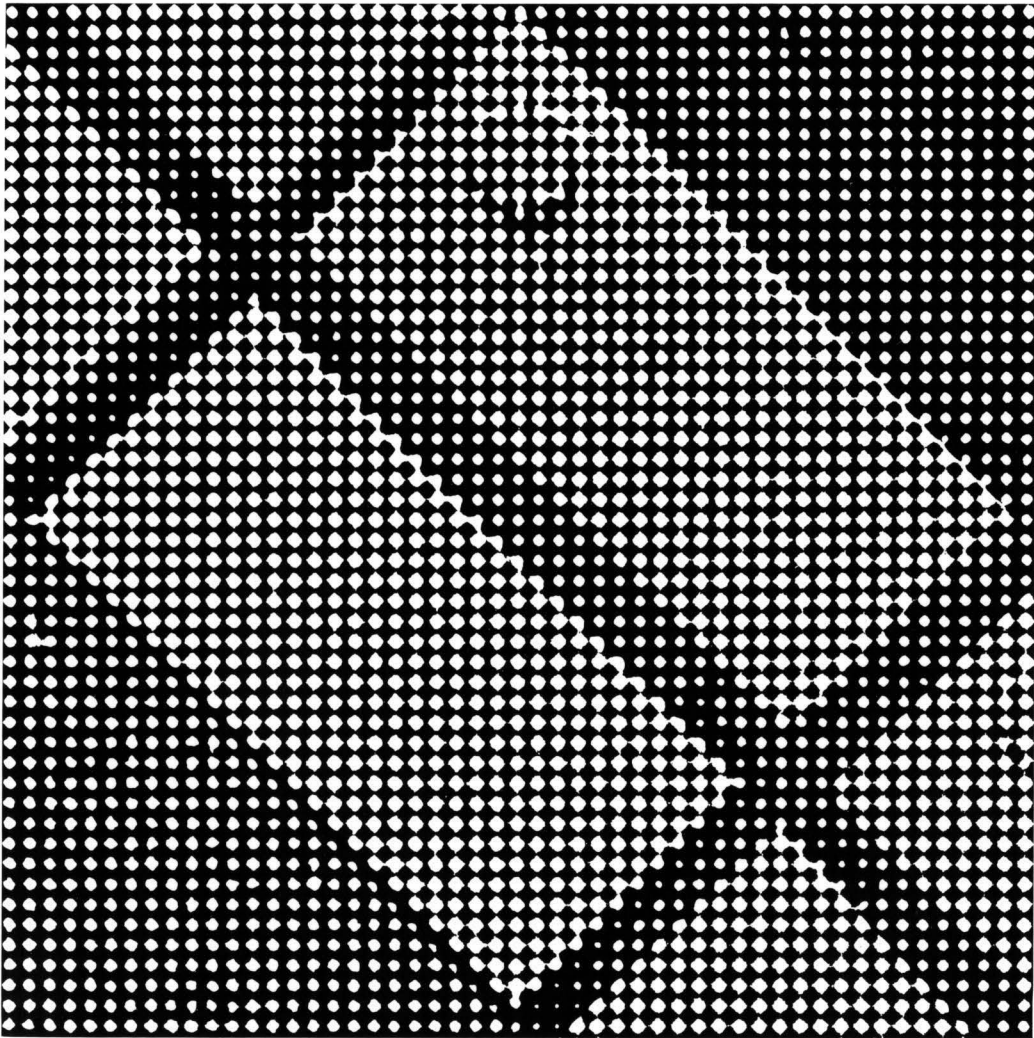
3 ■2



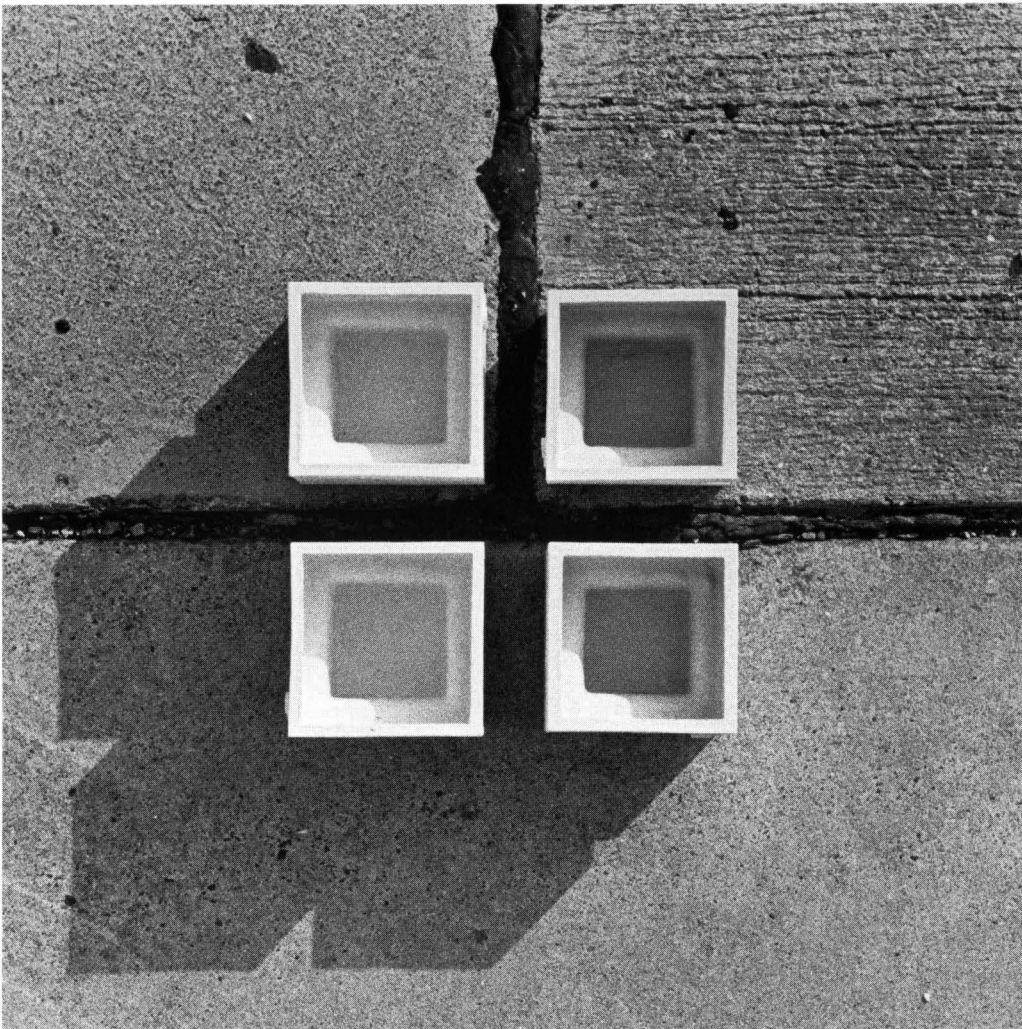
translation: three dimensional form to two dimensional media.



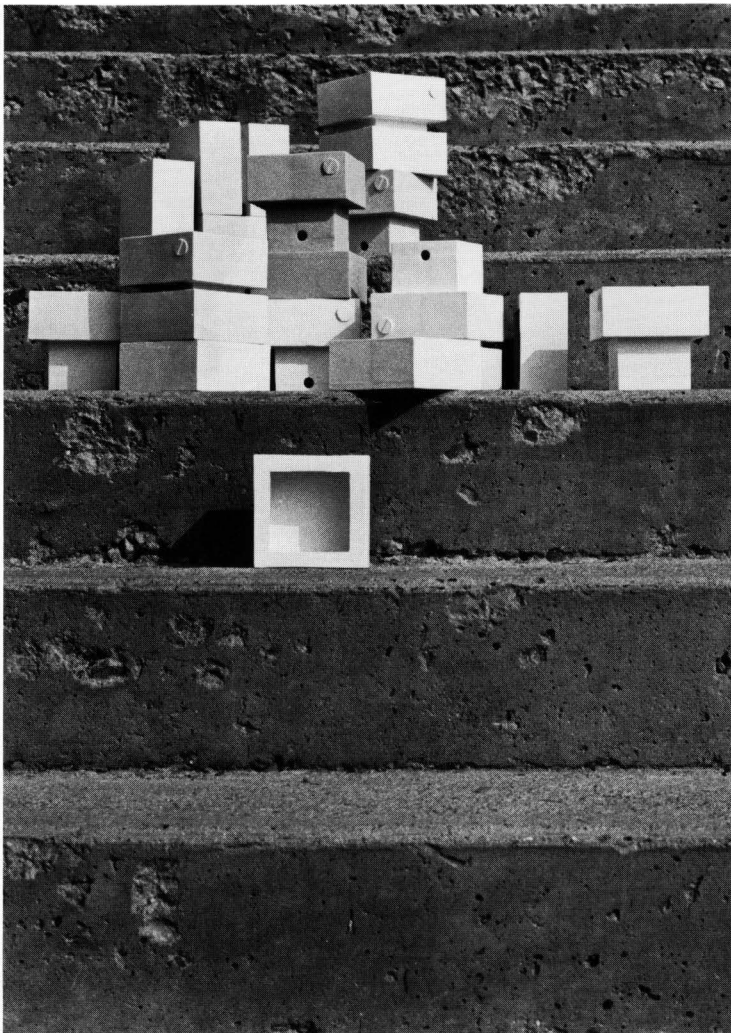
3 ■2



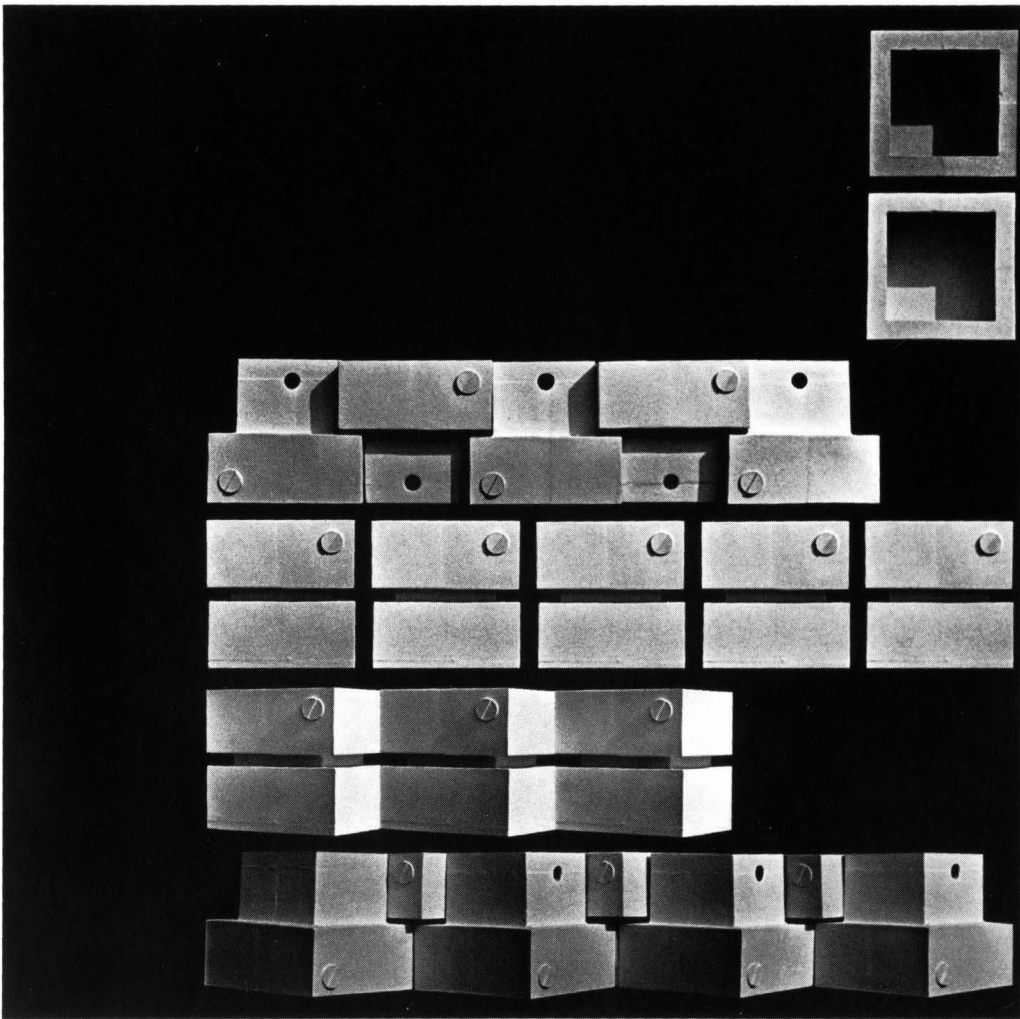
translation: three dimensional form to two dimensional media.



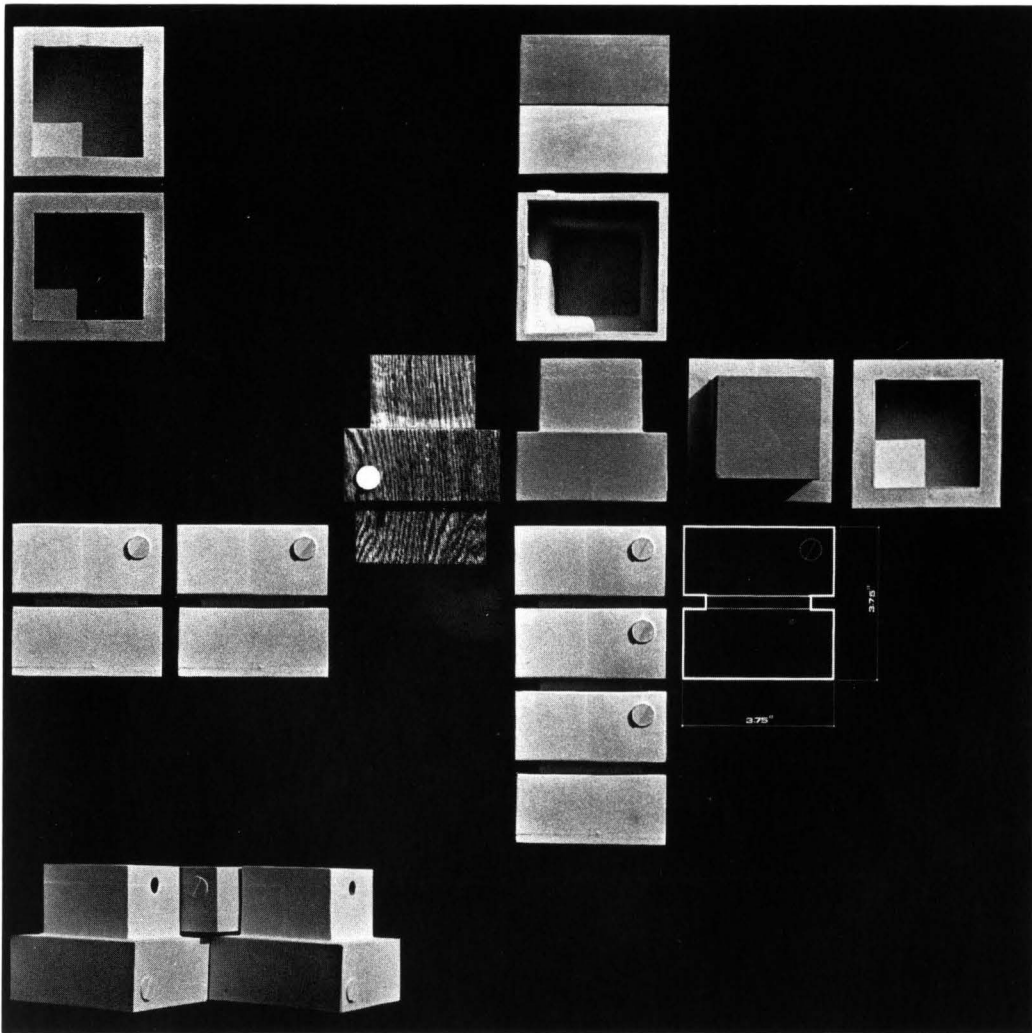
composition no 1.. sidewalk and shadow.



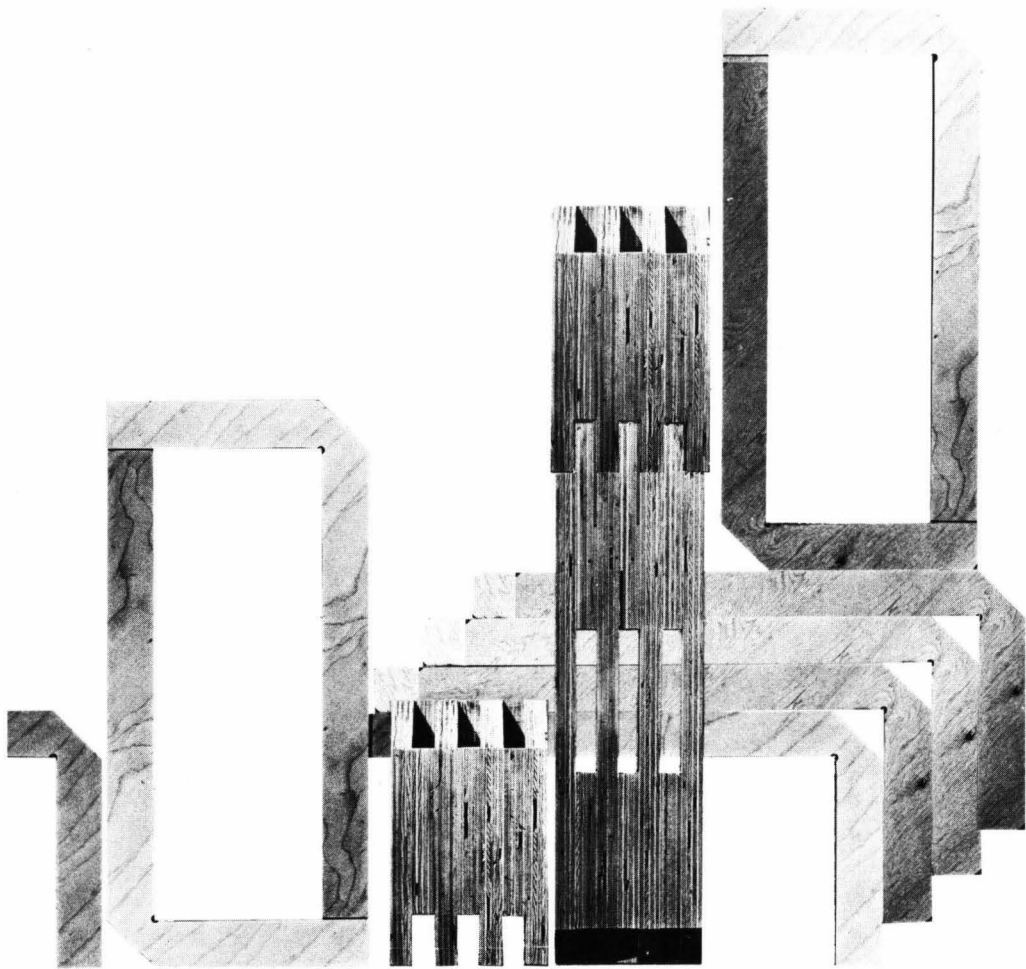
composition no 2., elements and stairs.



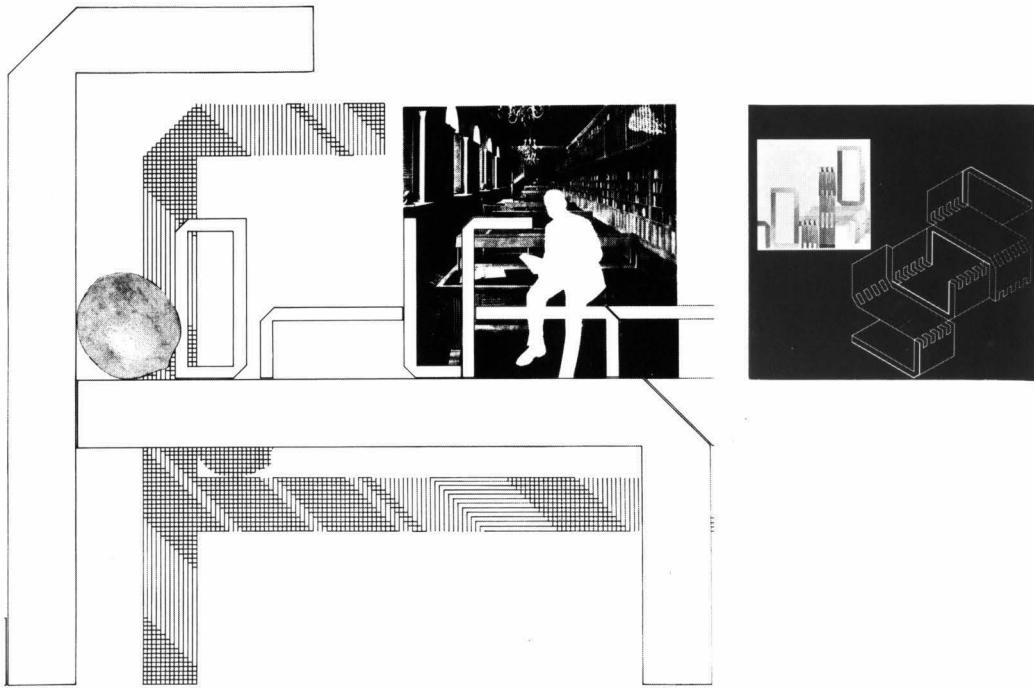
exhibition board.



exhibition board.



1973: interlocking room modulator, 12" x 18" x 36", laminated plywood.

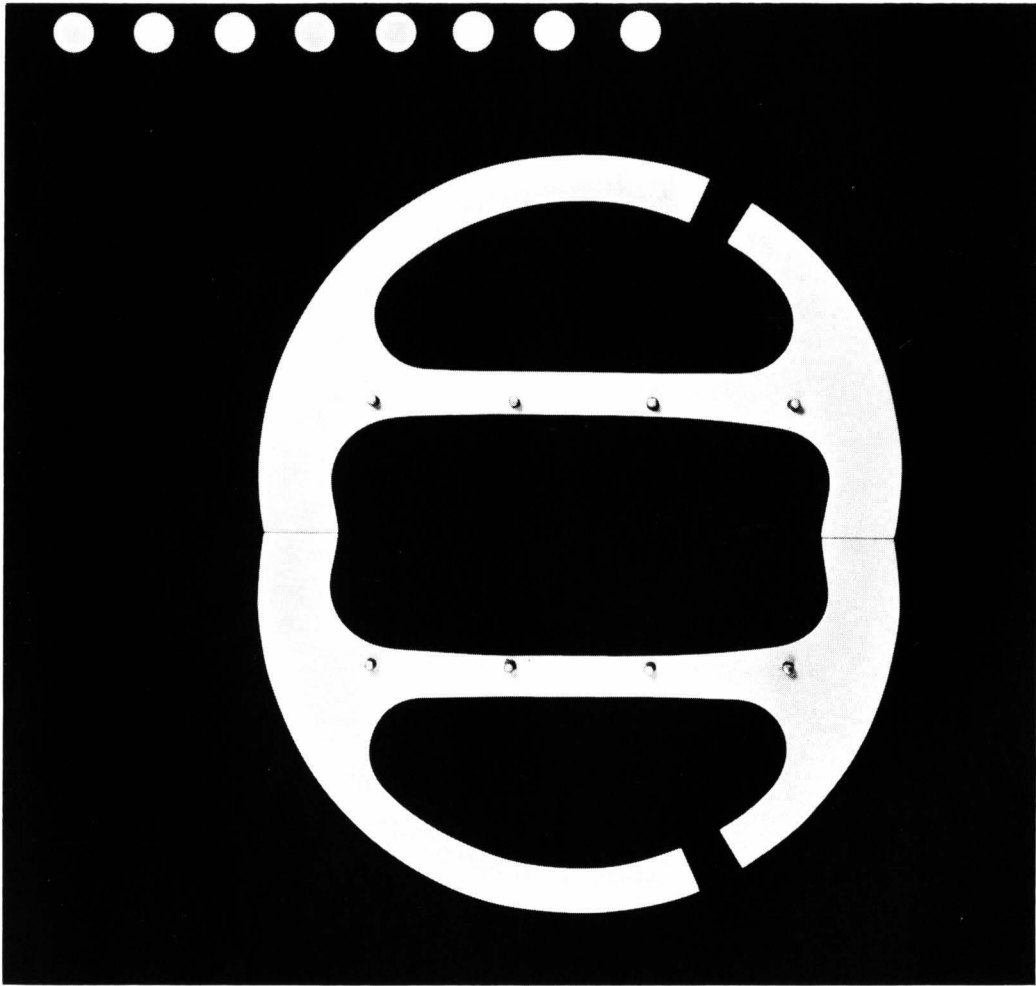


exhibition boards.

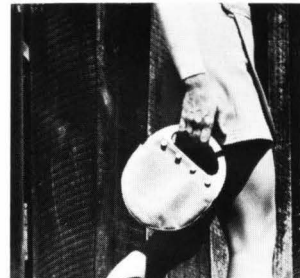


1973: purses, anodized aluminum, wood, fabric.

5 ■

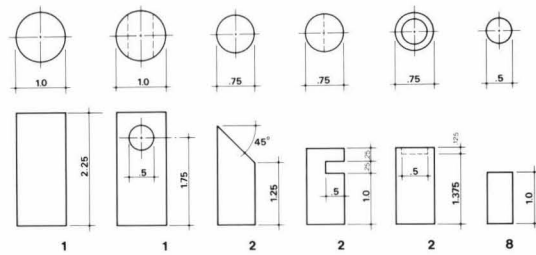
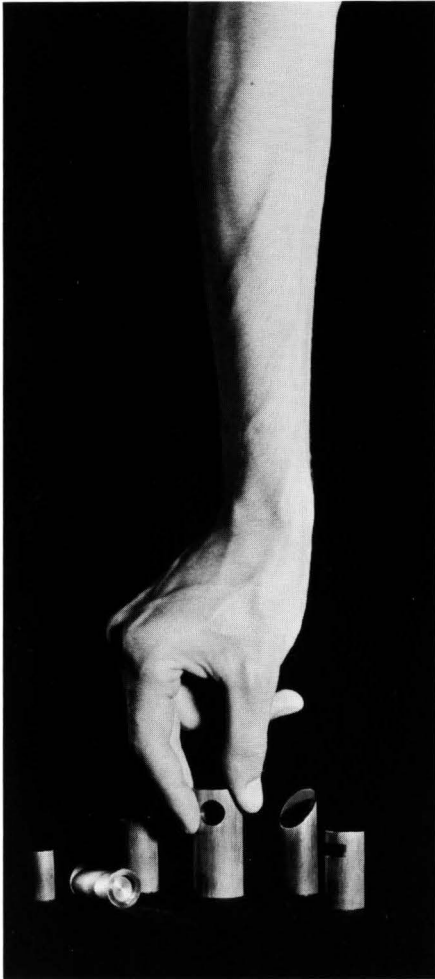


handle components.

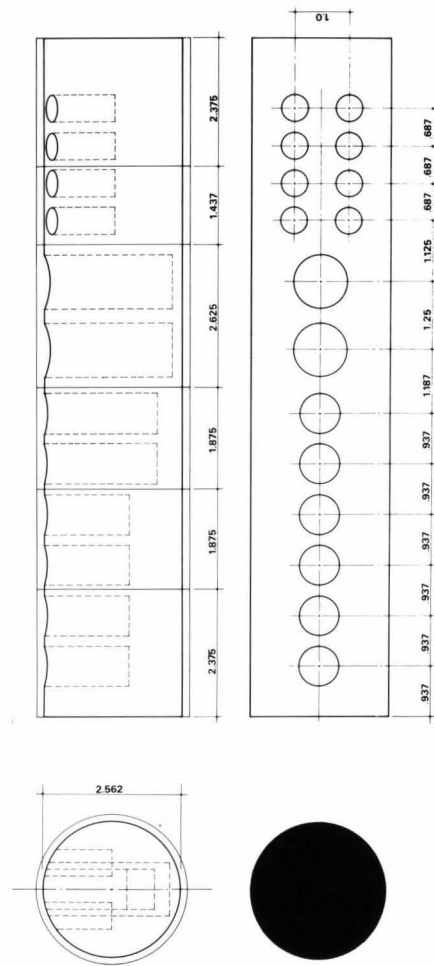
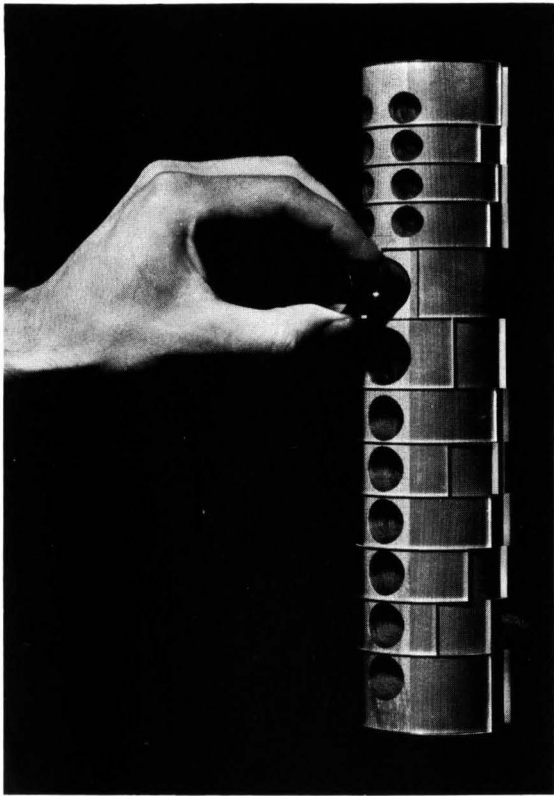


exhibition boards.

6 ■

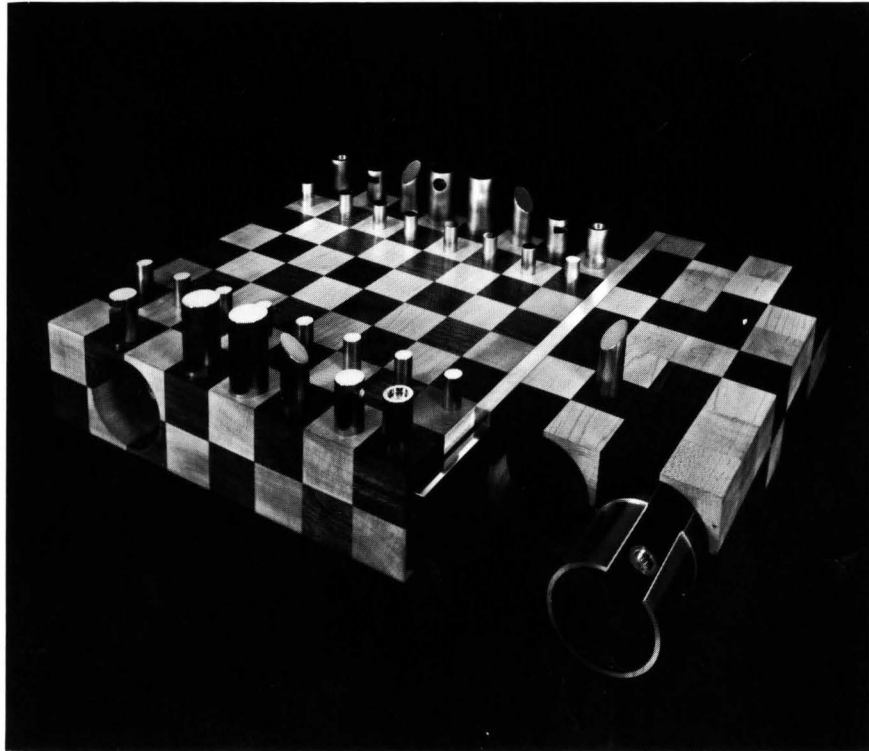
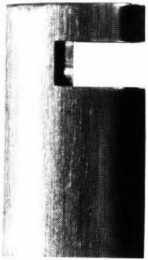


1974: chess pieces, stainless steel and brass.



6 ■ 2

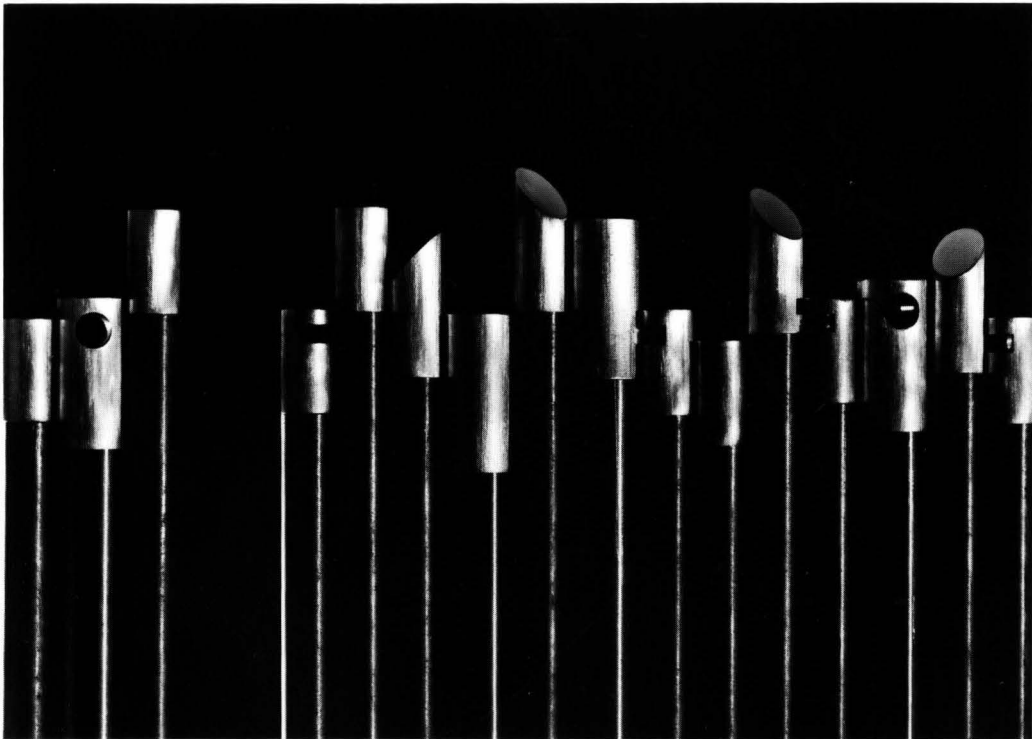
cylindrical containers, walnut and plexiglas .



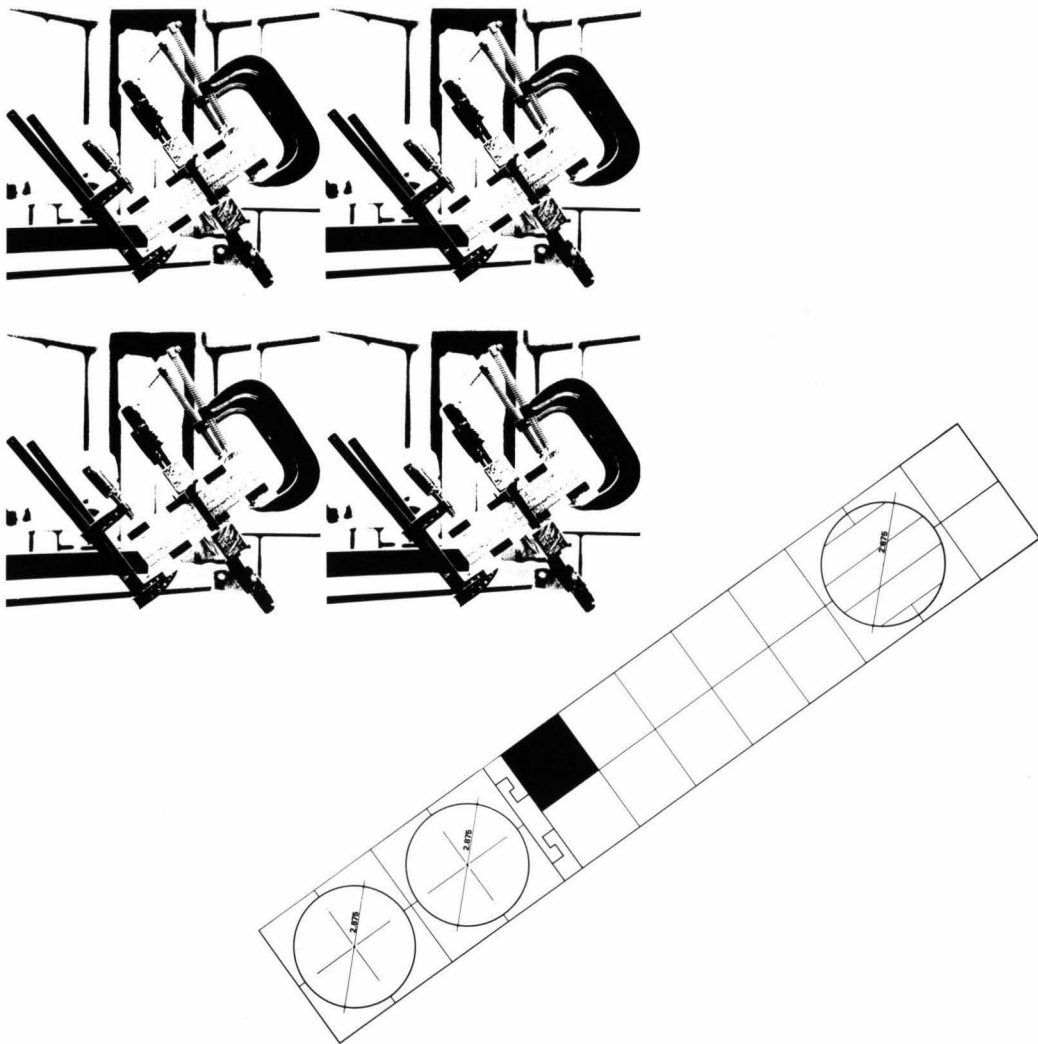
the knight, the board.

6

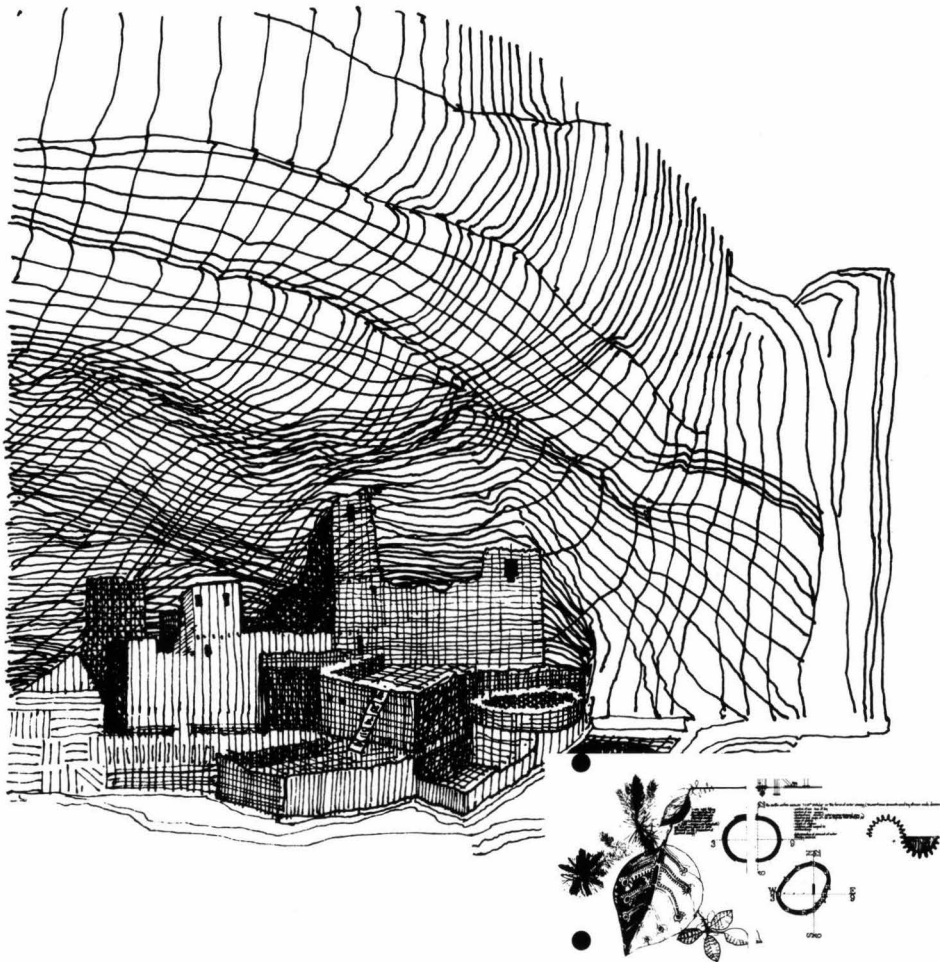
■4



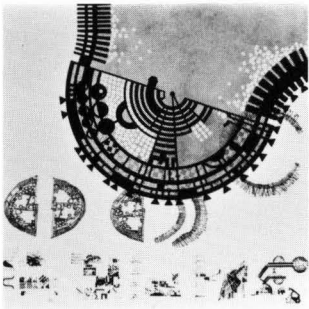
a classical framework within a twentieth century context.



board under construction: maple, walnut and particle board.

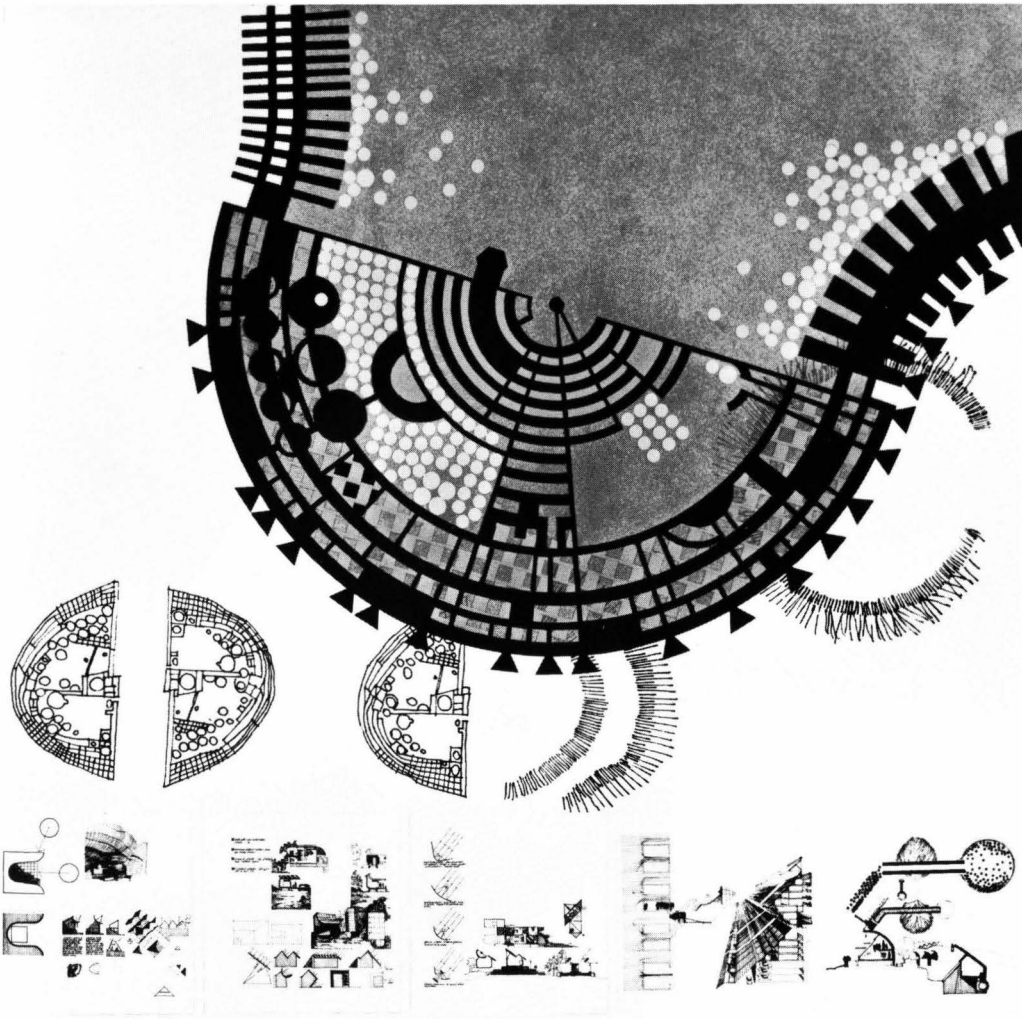


1973: solar energy study, sketch, mesa verde, colorado.

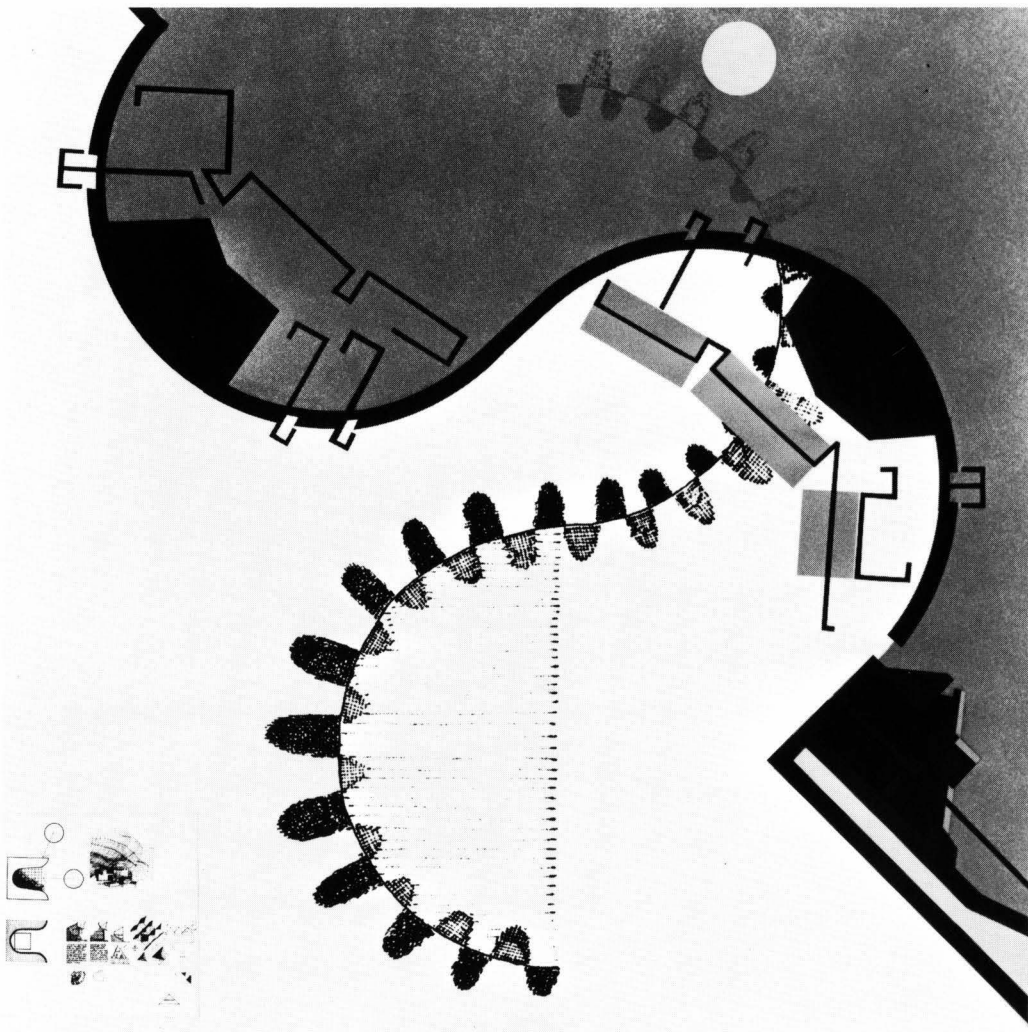


7 ■ 2

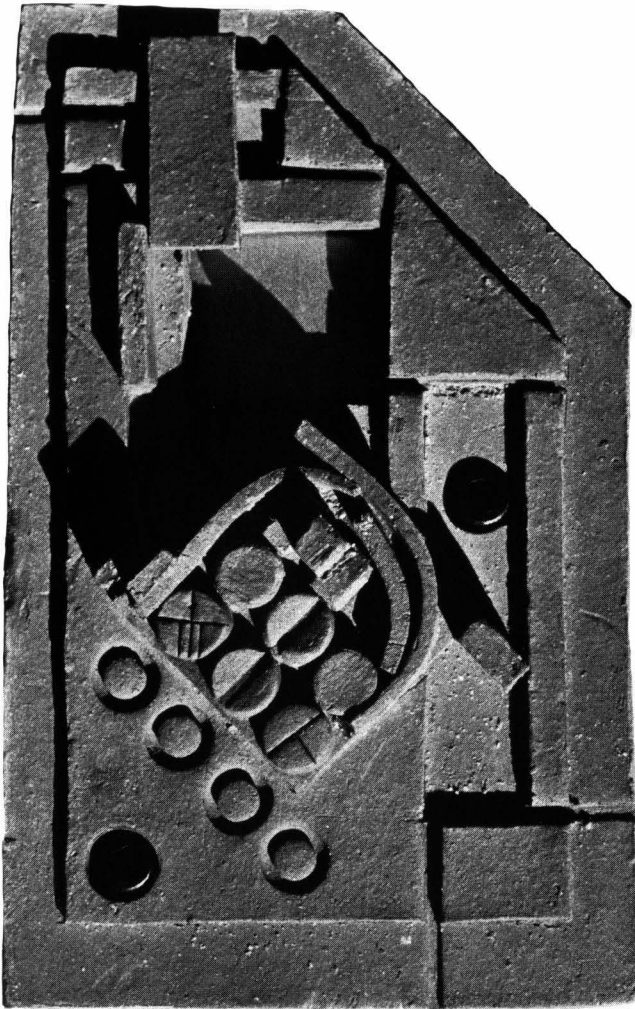
diagram, pueblo bonito, new mexico.



exhibition board.

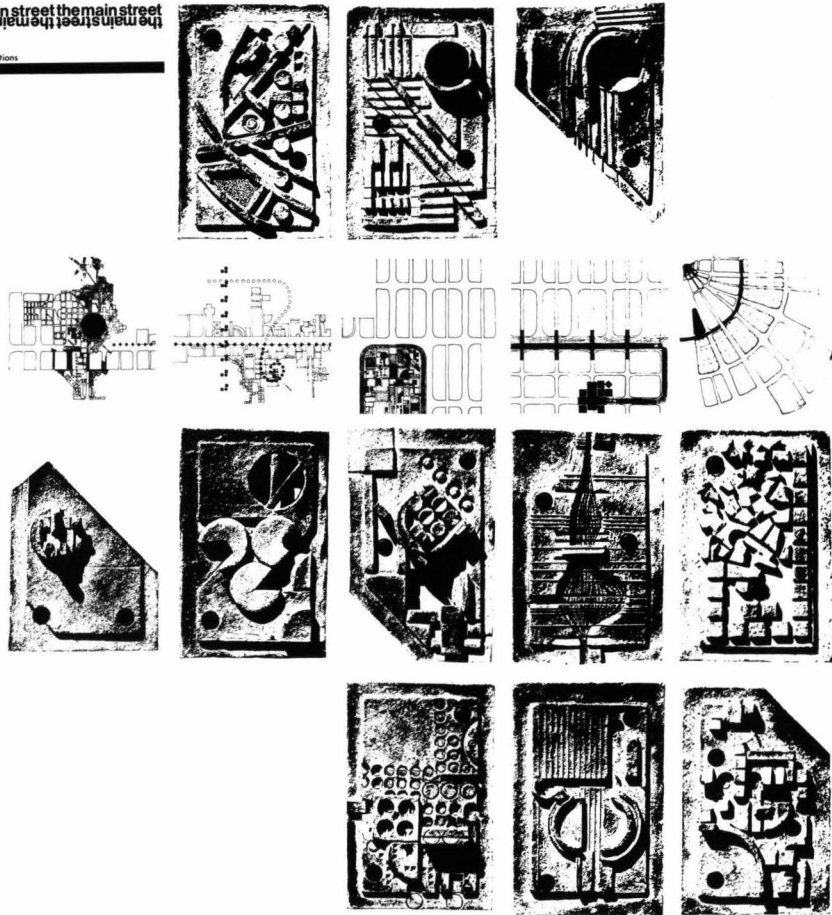


diagram, solar energy house, paint bank, west virginia.

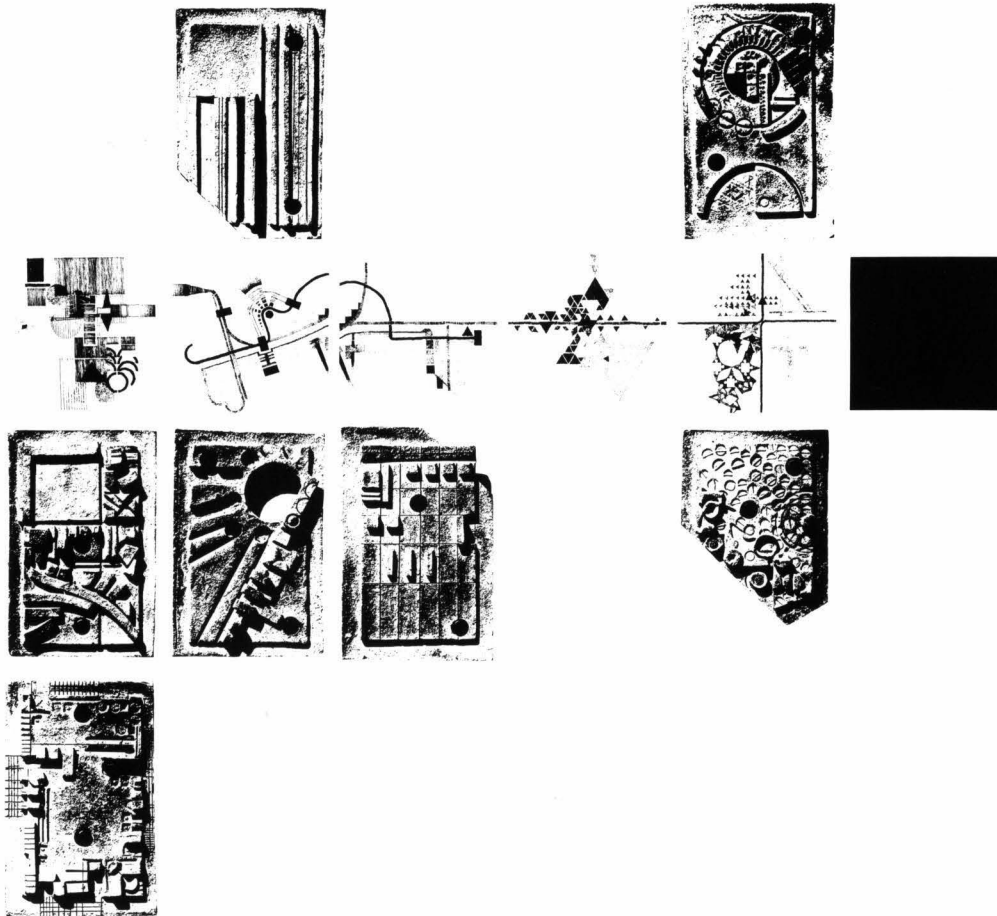


1974: main street study, ceramic tiles 3.5" x 5.5", hand built.

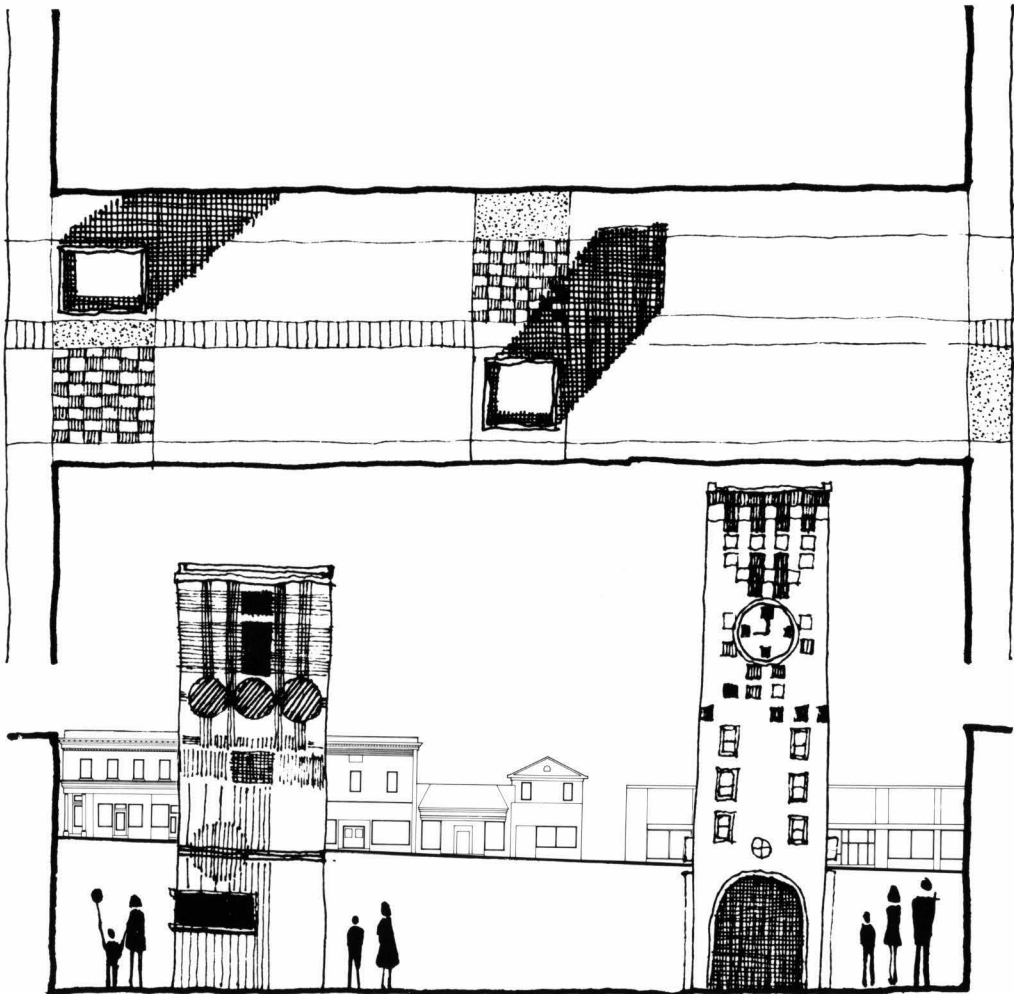
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 qualities • interrelations



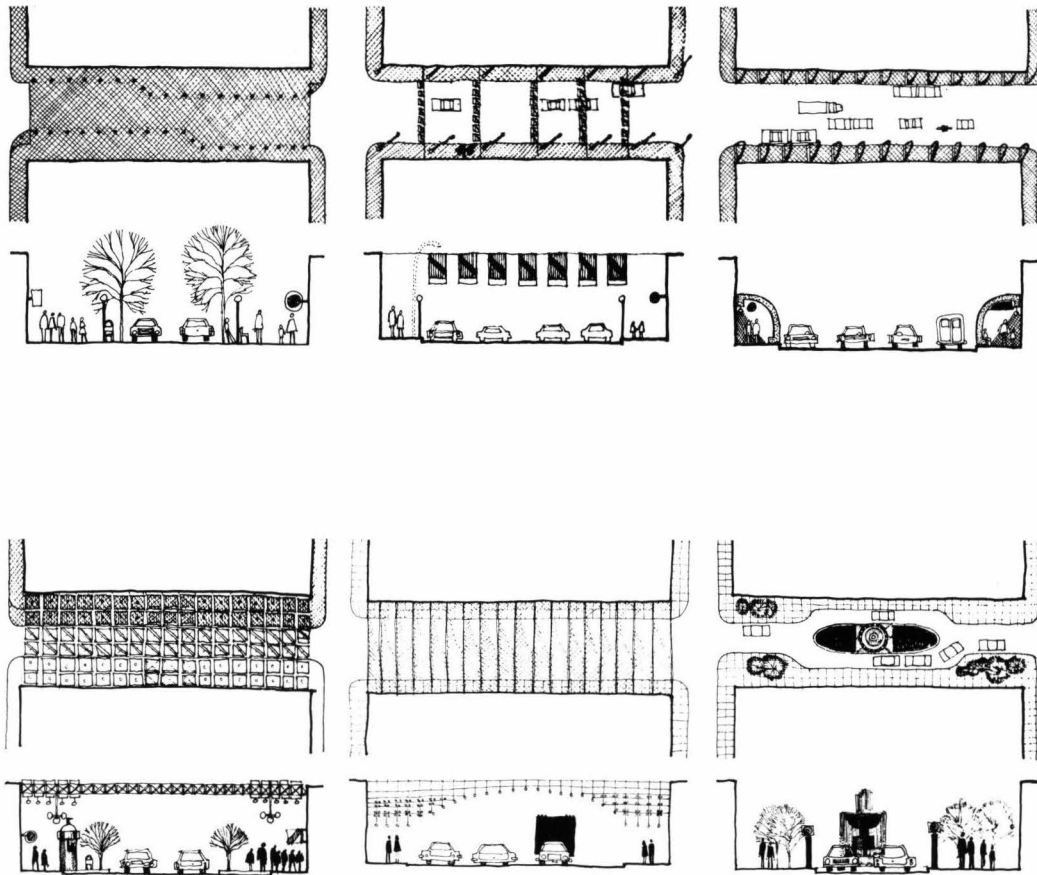
study tiles: singularity, continuity, dominance, joint clarity, directional differentiation.



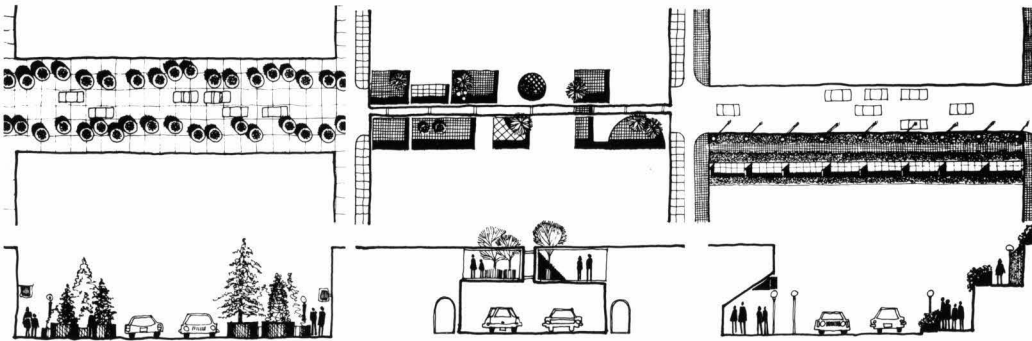
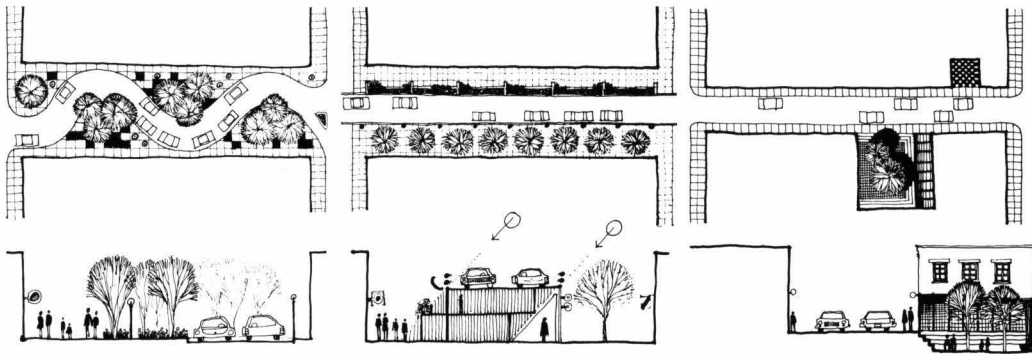
study tiles: visual scope, motion awareness, series, meanings.



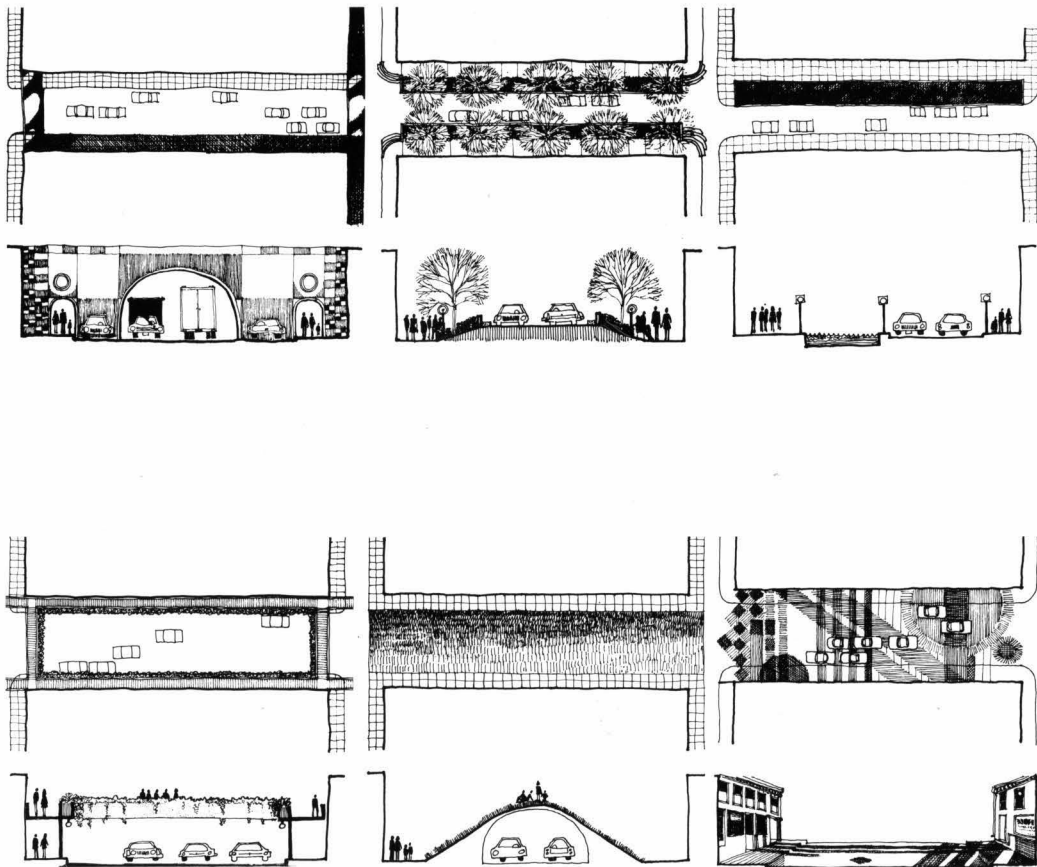
1974: main street study, sketch.



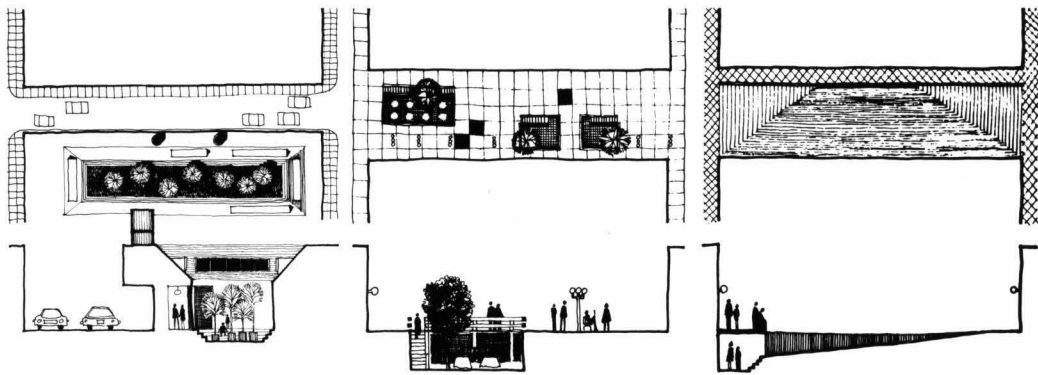
main street study, sketches, plan and section.



main street study, sketches, plan and section.

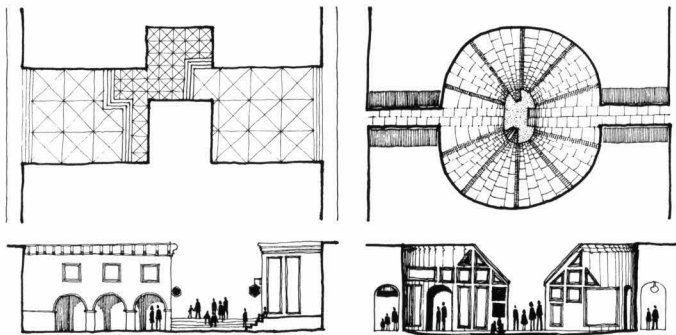


main street study, sketches, plan and section.

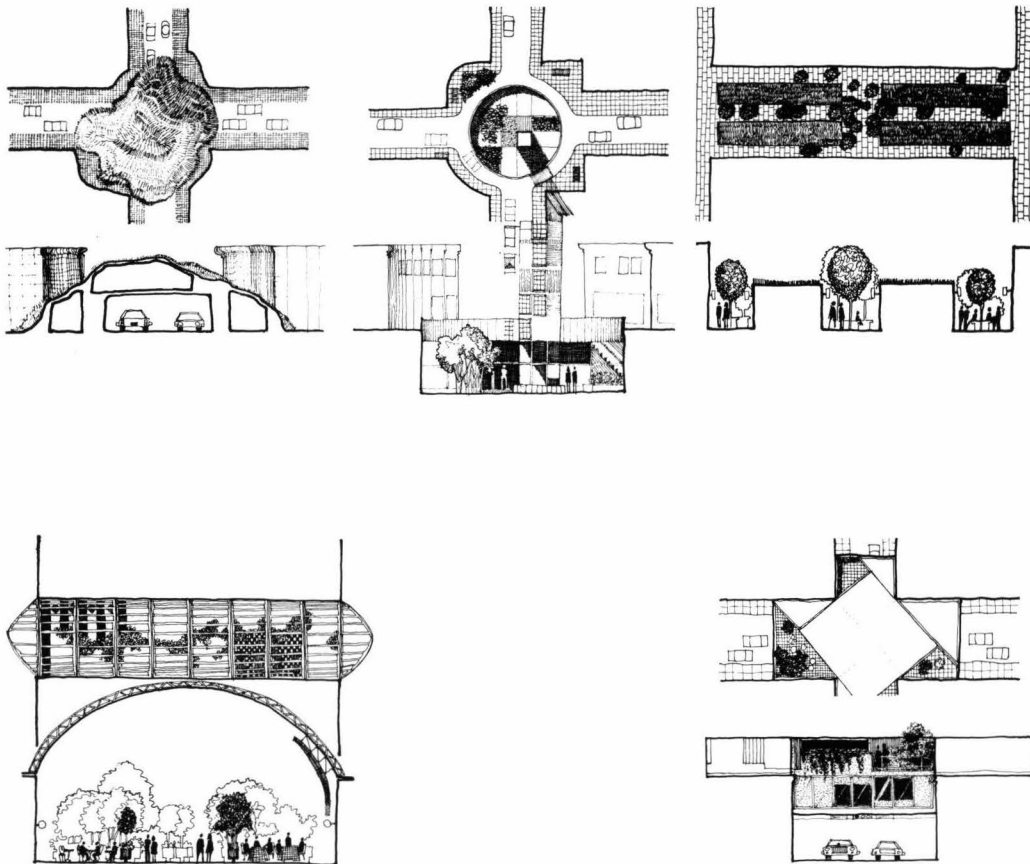


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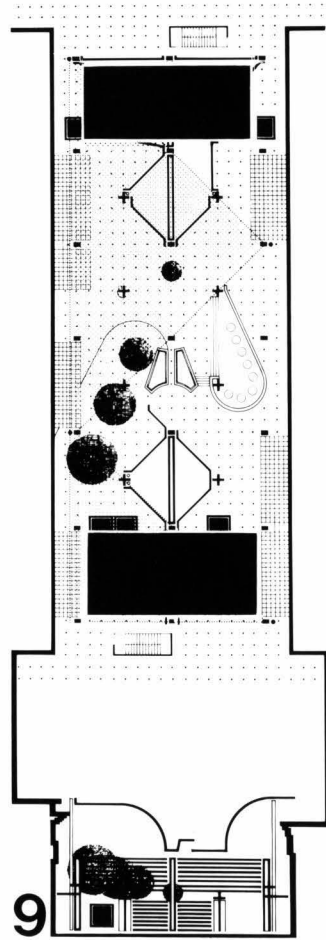
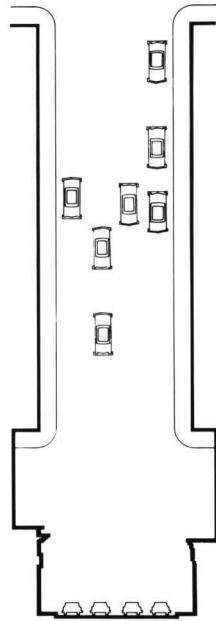
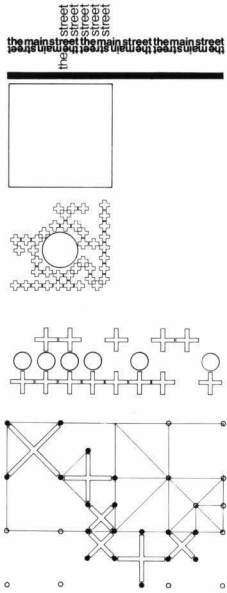
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main street study, sketches, plan and section.

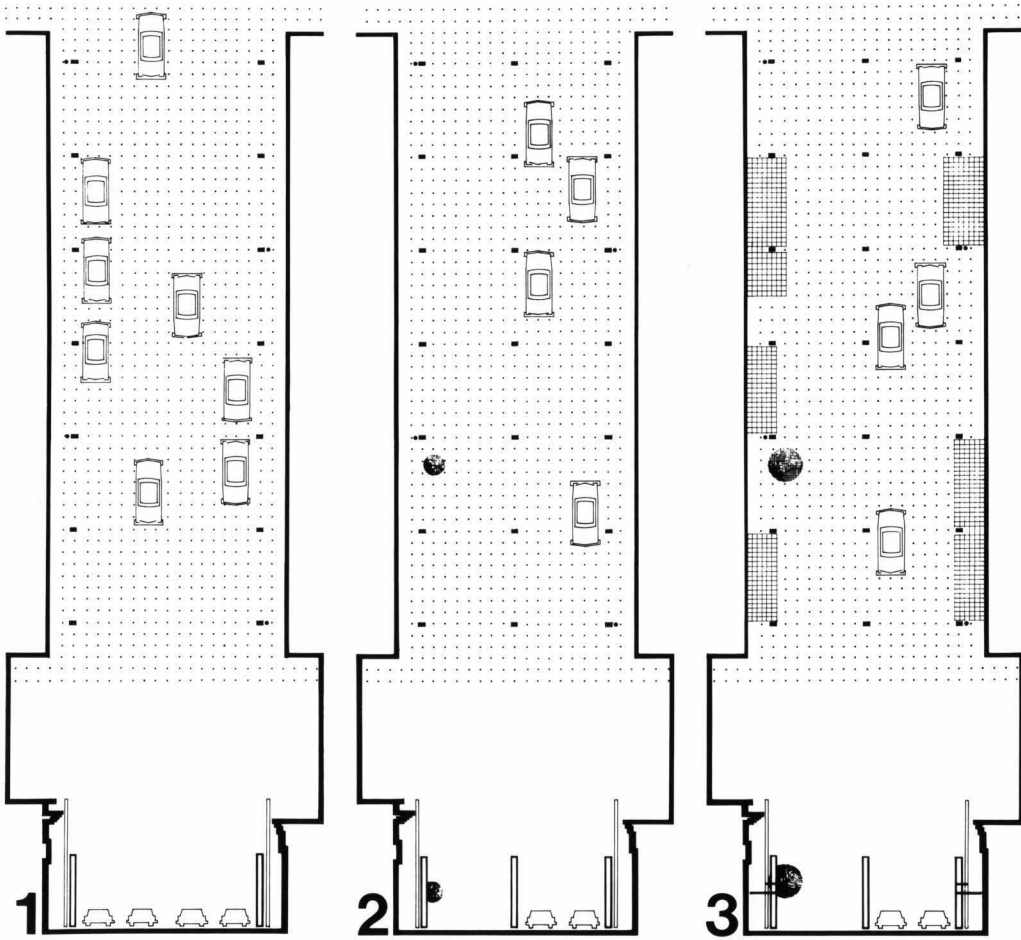


main street study, sketches, plan and section.

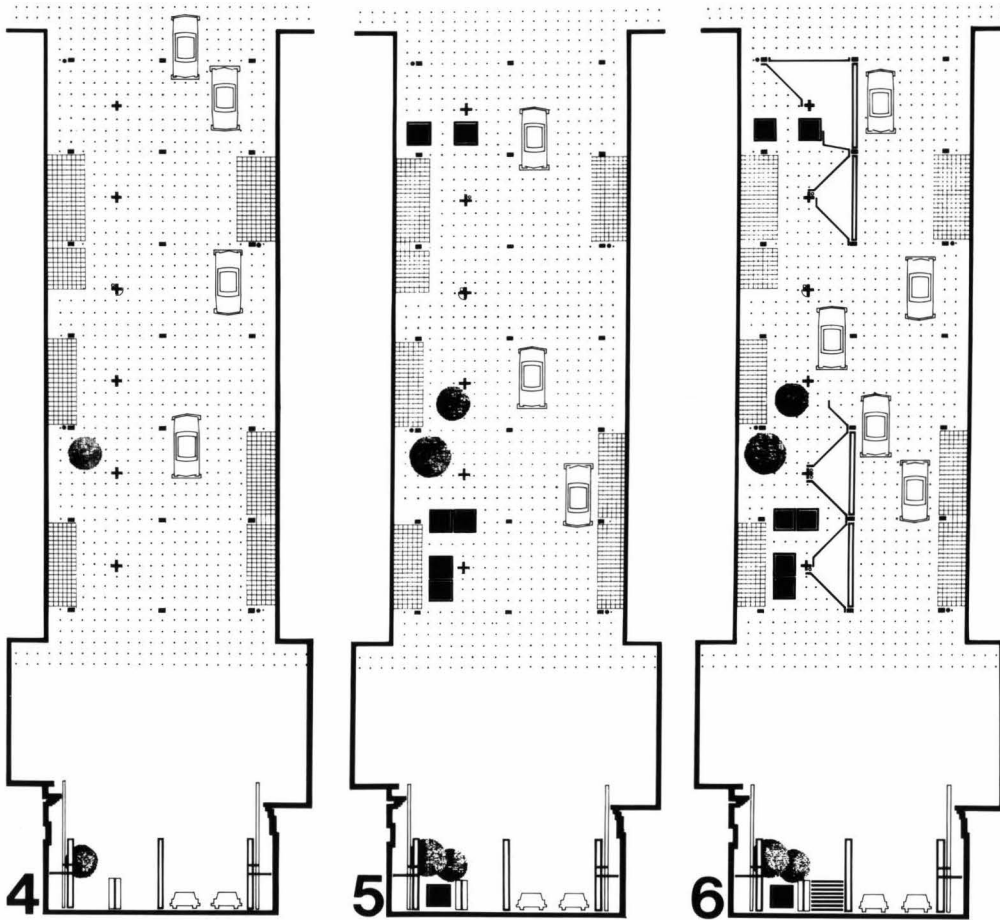


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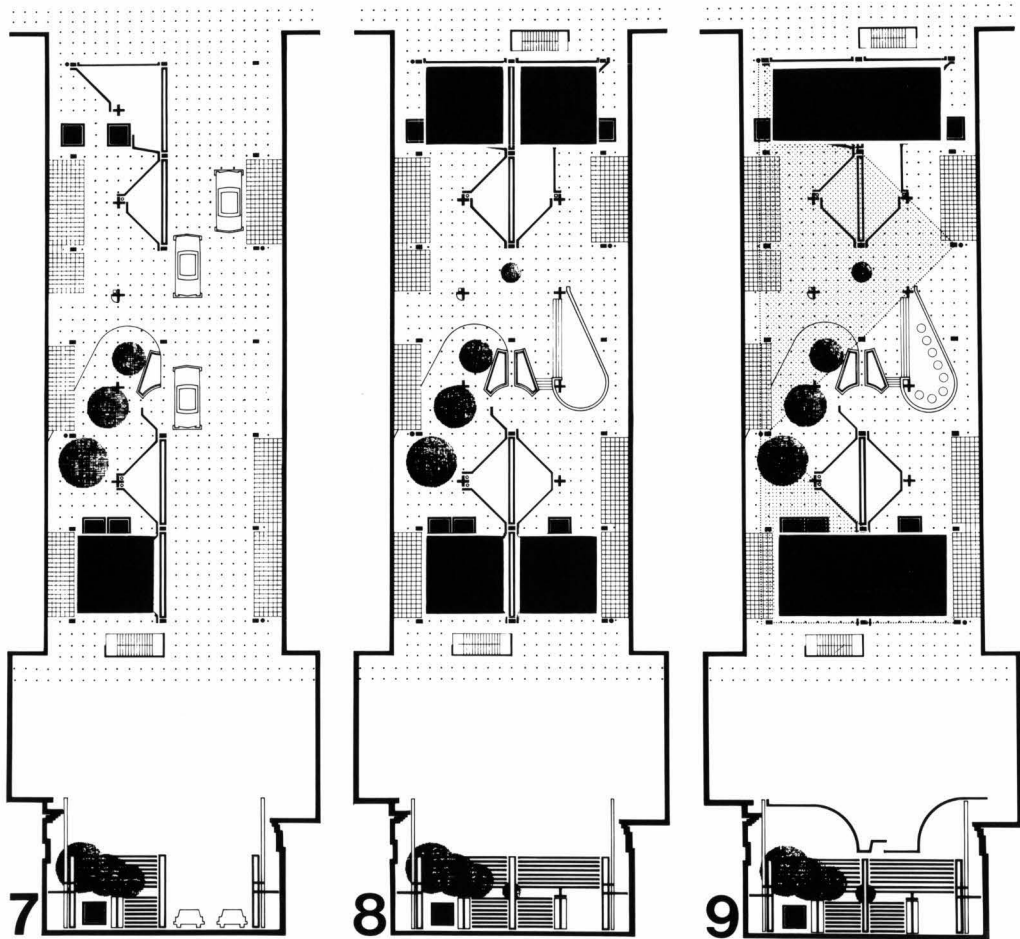
the main street: change from automobile to pedestrian environment.



1. continuous plane, 2. motorway constricted, 3. increased building volume.



4. street furniture, 5. kiosk pavilions, 6. enclosure panels.



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7. second level, 8. elimination of traffic, 9. large scale space defined.

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TOO (2): OFFERINGS OF SMALL ENVIRONMENTS

by

Donna Woodrum Dunay

Abstract

a dualistic approach to design

The work is divided into two parts, a verbal section and a visual section. The former is supportive, the latter is the main body of the work. Described, this thesis would be closer to a philosophy of design rather than a polemic or manifesto about design. Although it is concerned with the investigation of aesthetic qualities of single objects, within each project lies a universal concern, the struggle for order. The intent is to address the gap between art and daily life and through the design of the immediate environment bring about a more pleasurable and meaningful set of experiences.

The role of a designer is briefly discussed and the concept of always dealing with two as an approach to design is

elaborated. But the important meaning of the work is succinctly expressed in a statement by David Jones, "There is no surrogate for being on the job." The designer must acknowledge the obligation not only to generate new ideas, but translate them into three dimensional realities.