

STRUCTURE AND DECONSTRUCTION

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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May 1987

Blacksburg, Virginia

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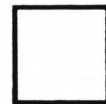
## (ABSTRACT)

My efforts to discover a means of making a more effective sculpture led me to pursue architecture. The problem with sculpture as I saw it was that it had been deformed over time from that which marked a place into a placeless isolate. Just as I worked against that placeless isolate in sculpture, so am I now working against the placeless isolate in architecture.

The aspects of architecture, the site, the plan, elements and materials, although *acting* phenomenally in conjunction with other coexisting elements, are often conceived as isolates. In order to elucidate the interrelation between these aspects at different scales, I turned to the work of the Poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, et al. They outline a deconstructive critical approach to linguistic/literary meaning, which I have used as a model for understanding the language of architecture.

Architecture comes into being at the convergence of orders, when ordered and coherent human actions (institutions) take place in a locus or place which has been made architectonic. I am for an interrelational and interactive architecture, one which maintains a *critical* stance vis a vis its locus, its purposes, and its elements and materials. This is not a disassociated and detached abstract "ideal," but a self-conscious choice, made in conviction and commitment to a coherent and dignified order to human existence.

The design project is an effort to make some of these thoughts operational. The proposal is for a University Museum at the parking lot at the northwest edge of the VPI Campus. The project begins with an analysis and critique of the current placeless condition of the site. The site is restructured with respect to the latent campus structure, which is itself clarified. The Museum building becomes the focal point of a new axis relating the site and the Campus. The site becomes a boundary for the Campus and promotes the growth of a coherent campus plan.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who has given me support and encouragement in the preparation of this thesis, especially my parents, \_\_\_\_\_, my thesis committee and professors, O.C. Ferrari, Dennis Kilper, Gunther Lehmann and Sal Choudhury, H. C. Rott, and Mark Sanders.

Also, I greatly appreciated the insights and comments of Ellen \_\_\_\_\_ and Athena \_\_\_\_\_. Additional thanks to M. H. \_\_\_\_\_, the Oberlin College art department and the Orange Blossom Press for their assistance.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, \_\_\_\_\_, who proofread, offered criticism and suggestions and lent her support during the preparation of this text.

To my wife \_\_\_\_\_ and my daughter \_\_\_\_\_.

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This thesis is in two parts, a written project and a design project. The written portion represents an effort to compile a decade of writing, reflection and insights on architecture, art, and culture.

The design project is an effort to make operational some of the thoughts outlined in the written portion of the thesis. While many of the criteria in force for the design thesis are derived from the text, it is not intended as a precise illustration of every detail of that text. Because it is limited in scale, the design project cannot be seen as an exhaustive application of each of the many concepts contained in the theoretical text.



# Structure and Deconstruction

## Introduction

“What we observe is not nature itself, but nature  
exposed to our method of questioning.”

Werner Heisenberg<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to reckon with the profusion of interrelated factors and issues in architecture. The breakdown of the guiding principles of Modernism has contributed to the confusion, and popular “Postmodernism” offers little substantial sense of direction. As a result, there is a scarcity of coherent and consistent structures available to the architect with which to make sense of the complex concerns of culture, style, technology and environment. In this thesis, I have identified several principal issues from among these, which will be examined as follows:

- 1 The concept of the isolate in modern art and architecture.
- 2 The manifestations and significance for architecture of transformations in culture.
- 3 Physical and historical engagement and reintegration within environmental and cultural frames-of-reference.
- 4 Analysis of the syntax of architecture and the tectonic relation of elements and materials.

This thesis\* investigates some alternatives to the internationalized, siteless conditions of Modern architecture. In addition, some of the current manifestations of art and architecture are assessed. Some new critical approaches and strategies are outlined, designed to assist in clarifying complex interactions, which at first appear rather obscure and opaque. In order to break down more easily the often complicated and confused interrelation between the various aspects of architecture, I refer to the work of the Post-structuralists, such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Gregory Ulmer and Frederick Jameson. They have developed deconstructive critical approaches to semiotics and meaning.

Deconstruction informs much of this discussion, in spirit if

\* While portions of this manuscript refer to a number of writers on architecture and other subjects, my own original writings in journals between the years 1978 and 1986 form the basis of the thesis. This text is a compilation and synthesis of those writings, and is aimed at developing architectural criteria. These are also cross-referenced with the ideas and published texts of other writers who have either influenced my thinking, or whose work I later discovered paralleled my own.

not in a strict Derridian sense. Many of its concepts and methods have been adapted to the special purpose of understanding architecture, sculpture, culture and history. Deconstruction does not propose universal meaning from the isolated conditions of a thing. The deconstructive program does not attempt to read the sign-in-itself; it recognizes no singular signifier-signified relation, nor does it treat either the text or the reader as a singular term in the discourse. It challenges the Modernist concept of the “work” as a unique and independent entity, and proposes instead the relational and contingent “text.”<sup>2</sup>

The sign is examined within the context of complex meaning and what it signifies in relation to other signs. Deconstruction does not seek to arrive at some final or ideal state for the object of analysis; it is not a Modernist “reductive search for single principles that define complex phenomena,” since the search for exclusive and hermetic meaning contradicts the very process. Indeed, it is not even a fixed system with established rules. Its aim is simply to uncover inconsistencies, to bring the contingent to light, so that its relations and the manifold readings of its configuration and underlying ideologies within a given context become apparent.<sup>3</sup>

Even before being introduced to deconstructive theory per se, I arrived at an understanding of some of the principles of deconstruction through observations and reflection on inconsistencies within sculpture, the subject of my initial training. For a number of years as an exhibiting sculptor, I was involved in a critical analysis of the condition of Modern sculpture and the object. Although I initially produced objects in the Modernist “tradition,” my efforts were to discover (or rediscover) a means of creating a more *effective* sculpture as a spatial dynamic much greater in scope than conventional sculptural idioms of form, scale and figure would allow. The problem with Modern sculpture was that it had been deformed over time from a monument, or that which marked a significant place, into a nomadic, placeless isolate: the object. Sculpture had become an inadequate vehicle for spatial definition and the phenomenal involvement of the spectator. This was in part due to the precondition of “distancing” and isolation inherent in object sculpture, which is often magnified by

the inappropriate tectonic use and relation of materials. As a sculptor, I rejected seclusion, self-containment and the object-spectator distinction in favor of the decentered sculpture-field-participant continuum. Likewise, as an architect I reject the siteless, phenomenally detached isolate-building in favor of the decentered and engaged relation of building to site. Yet these goals are not attainable through scientific and empirical research, nor are they embodied by most of what is today called architecture.

The condition of object-sculpture in many ways parallels the condition of building in the late Modern period. While architecture does not function as a detached vehicle for a sign in the same way as sculpture, many of the principles at work in sculpture are also applicable to architecture, although the relation is neither causal nor linear. Architecture is neither simply a complex form of sculpture, nor do the purposes of architecture directly correspond with those of sculpture. Yet the boundaries are rather indistinct, and it is not productive to pursue the question “what is sculpture?” relative to the question “what is architecture?” They have been important to my thinking inasmuch as both are, in general, syntactic spatial orderings, and share the tectonic language of materials.

Both sculpture and architecture (and culture at large as well) are undergoing paradigmatic shifts from Modernity to Postmodernity. As Modernity was not solely a stylistic issue peculiar to architecture, neither are these transformations unrelated and exclusive to each discipline. In fact, these phenomena display many of the features of the Kuhnian model of the scientific crisis of paradigm.<sup>4</sup> Part of the purpose of this discussion is to identify certain common aspects of these crises of paradigm, which can in part be traced to the condition of Modern culture. Let us begin our examination with sculpture, the medium in which I first recognized these phenomena.

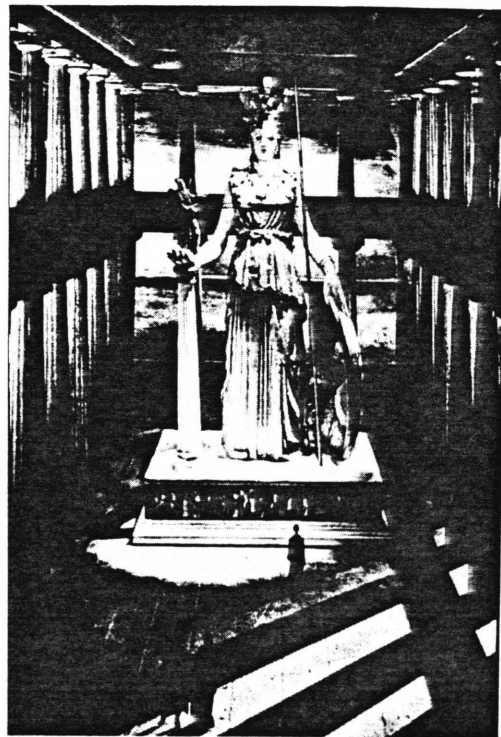
## Sculpture and Space

“A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its essential unfolding.”

Martin Heidegger<sup>5</sup>

The sculpture of antiquity was often an effort to concretely embody some entity, being or event. Although it was singular and concrete, this embodiment was also essentially spatial. The significance of the Greek Kore and Kouros figures was not so much due to any mimetic qualities of portraiture which they might have possessed (indeed, the features are so generalized that they were not likely to have been portraits at all); their importance was rather their commemorative and place-marking role.<sup>6</sup> Since the marked location was not necessarily where the event occurred or where the person lived or was buried, it was the presence of the monument itself in an otherwise undifferentiated spatial matrix which created a significant site or *chōra*: the place of being.<sup>7</sup> Often a niche, shrine or temple was provided for these sculptures, particularly for deities, creating a demarcated space or metaphoric dominion within which the divinity could reside. (fig. 1). The interrelated object and space constituted together a particularly significant place. The two became as one, existing in a reciprocal relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Space is not the setting ... in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all

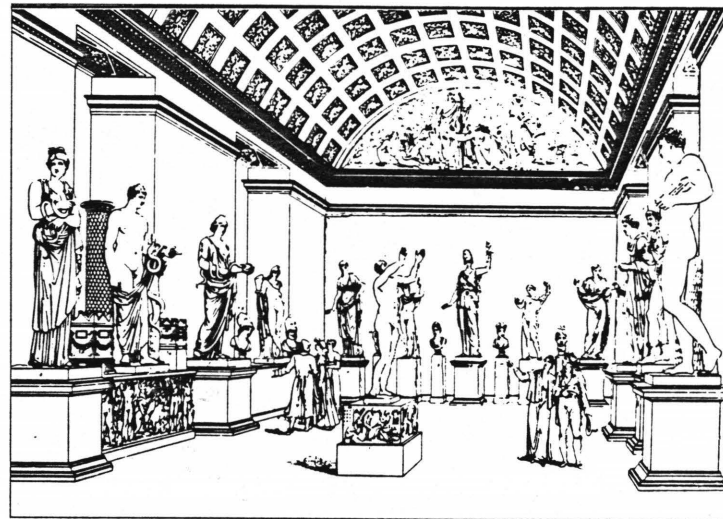


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things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the original intention, the sculptures of antiquity do not exist in such configurations today.<sup>10</sup> Most have long since been removed from their original contexts for “safe-keeping,” “better-viewing” or simply to add to collections



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of imperial plunder (fig. 2). These figures were conceived as integral with a site, without which they have only formal meaning. Another illustration is the difference between a crucifix on the altar of a cathedral, and a crucifix behind glass in a museum.

By the nineteenth-century it was principally the pictorial and statuary aspects of sculpture which prevailed (fig. 3). In his 1846 essay, “Why Sculpture is Boring,” Charles Baudelaire describes sculpture as “painting in the round” which one must trudge about in order to discover a series of essentially flat vignettes: “the spectator, who revolves around the figure, may choose a hundred different points of view, except the right one...” During the Modern era as well, the site-specific nature of sculpture was ignored. Sculpture became the commodified, collectable and transportable “nomadic” object.<sup>11</sup> Modern object-sculpture is founded on a disruption of object-field reciprocity, and until quite recently, the dislocated, siteless object was regarded as the norm.<sup>12</sup> As Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman said, “Sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.”

When sculpture is seen in this way, the entire conceptual framework within which the sculpture object exists is radically altered. Such objects are conceived of as self-contained entities, separated from the time and space of the spectator by artificial boundaries, illusions, and by the use of material without regard to its inherent physical properties. Far from being related to a specific spatial situation, the object must be perceived as detached from its surrounding space. The perceptual environment must be controlled to suspend the spatial modalities of the work. A variety of “insulators” are needed to *divorce* the art object from its environment, to mystify and distance the work from our experiential reality and to disrupt our sense of spatial continuity: its space is not our space. Among these devices are white museum walls, bases, pedestals, spotlighting and difference in scale (miniature or other than 1:1).

- 1 Reconstruction, Interior of Parthenon with statue of Athena Parthenos
- 2 Musée Napoleon, Sculpture Hall
- 3 Sculpture Salon in the Grand Palais, circa 1900.

“The whole environment brings its weight to bear on the place where there is a work of art.”

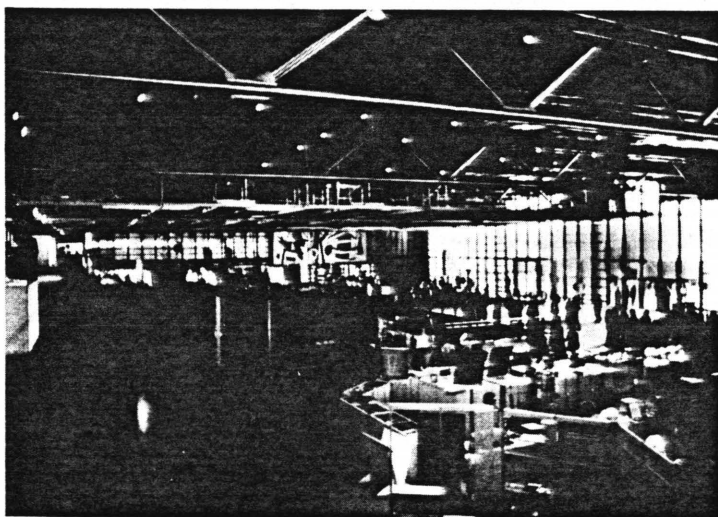
Le Corbusier

The consequence of “distancing” the work to insure that the environment does not interfere with it is the compromising of sculpture’s potential for spatial interaction. Most Modernist sculpture denies us the significant spatial aspect of sculpture, and we are offered instead the compositional or pictorial qualities, the finish of the material, the reputation of the artist, or its commodity value.<sup>13</sup> Sculpture becomes an intellectual or purely aesthetic exercise rather than a spatial experience. Inherently conceived of as spatially *relational*, sculpture is forced into the position of the spatial *isolate*. This is in fact, one of the major principles of Modern art.

“Anytime the object has become specific, singular, dense, articulated and self-contained, it has already succeeded in removing itself from space.”

Robert Morris<sup>14</sup>

Because it exists in *our* space, (rather than the illusory space of painting) it is very difficult to try to see sculpture out of the context of its surroundings. The situation until recently of the Museum of Modern Art in Paris at the Centre Pompidou was a classic example of this. The “walls” of the museum were merely non-structural room dividers, and extended up only about halfway to the ceiling. Overhead was a complex network of exposed structural

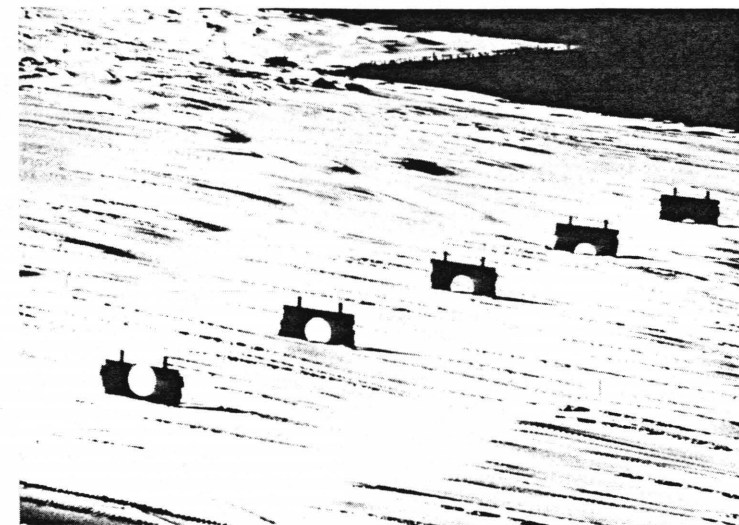


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and mechanical systems; brightly colored pipes, air ducts, vents, cables, wires, tubes. The Modern works on display were conceived in a tradition that demanded an austere and tightly controlled environment in which to best see them. Yet, the “insulators” (pedestals, bases, etc.) were entirely inadequate to offset the structural interferences; together with the building the works merely formed one continuous visual *salade niçoise*. It was very tedious and tiring to see this collection. Half an hour in this environment was enough to bring on the sort of numbing reaction which one may experience in a supermarket, overstuffed with a dizzying assortment of products and advertising. Not surprisingly, the “Pop” works of the 1960’s, such as Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, did not seem at all affected by the place.<sup>15</sup>

Irrespective of the intentions of the artist, the operational modality of sculpture continues to be spatial. The sculptor may choose to conceive of an object without regard to its ultimate environment, but that setting will nonetheless affect how the work is perceived. Similarly, distancing can result from the use of materials in implausible configurations, inconsistent with their inherent properties and characteristics, since, as Merleau-Ponty observes, “a thing is a thing because, whatever it imparts to us, is imparted through the very organization of its sensible aspects.”<sup>16</sup> We suspend our perceptual credulity when, for example, a given use of stone displays no apparent weight, or when plastic is used to simulate wood.<sup>17</sup> An articulation of inherent material properties and the means by which something is assembled only serves to intensify the material and spatial presentness of the work.

An *effective* sculptural experience is one in which the spectator is a total participant, physically and psychologically. This is why some contemporary sculpture avoids the pitfall of distancing by engaging the environment. There are a variety of responses to the dislocation and distortion of the object-field and figure-ground reciprocity. Among the first to bring to light the relation of object-to-space were the Minimalists, such as Robert Smithson, Don Judd and Robert Morris. Site sculpture is a further manifestation of the desire to re-engage the site as integral and not merely incidental to the work. Artists working in this genre



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include Alice Aycock, Mary Miss (fig. 5) and Athena Tacha (fig. 6). Yet the awareness of the disrupted figure-field relation is by no means limited to sculpture. John Cage’s concept of *silence* may be understood as making-manifest the unnoticed “ground” or “field” within and against which musical “figure” is developed.

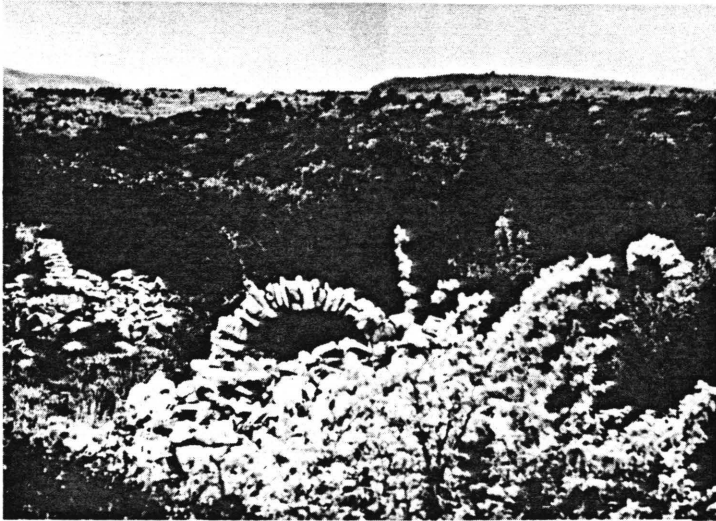
My own sculpture is an effort to diminish the physical and psychological distance between the spectator and the work itself. My interests are to achieve a spatial effectiveness, a

4 Centre Pompidou, Interior, Main Lobby.

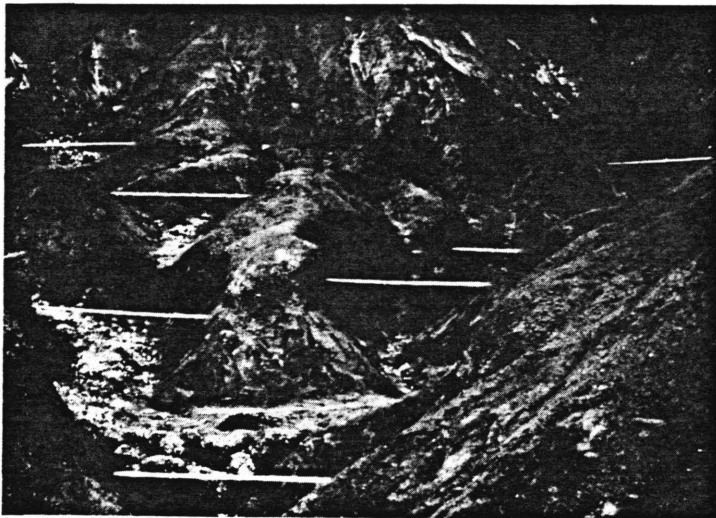
5 Mary Miss, *Untitled*, 1973, Lower Manhattan.

6 Athena Tacha, *Streams*, 1976, Oberlin, Ohio.

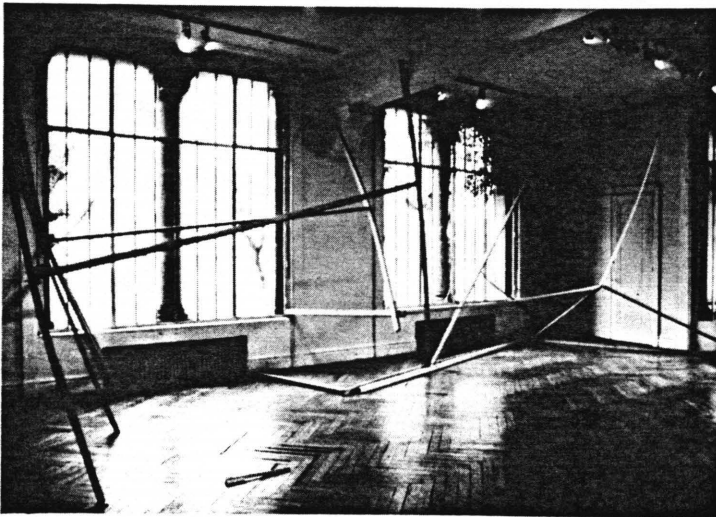




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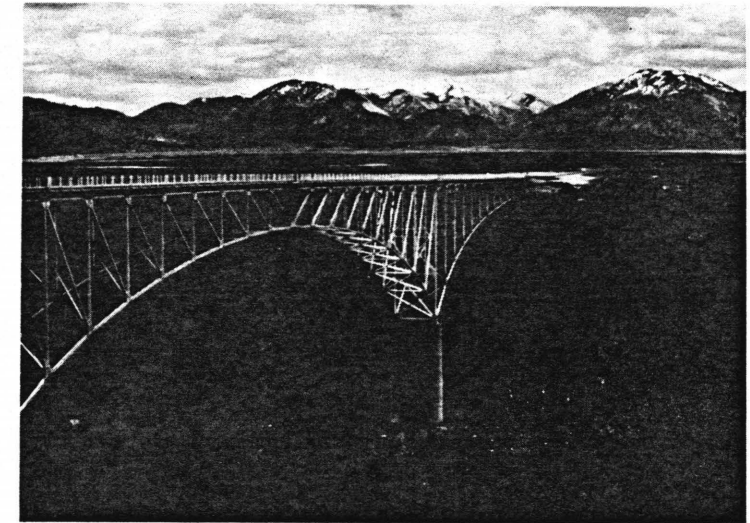
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sculptural “occupation” of space. Using “ambient,” impoverished materials, the sculpture is a matter of the making of a site rather than the making of a thing. Some examples are the simple stone arches, built without mortar from the stones as they lay, on the ruins of troglodyte dwellings; nothing is added or removed, an intervention simply took place. In the case of the interior installations, common lumber is bent into complex constructions which are held together by pressure and friction alone; no nails or glue is used. The elements push and strain against the boundaries of the confining space.

I am for a sculpture that addresses and depends on, reacts to and complements the salient features of the place in which it is installed, that takes possession of that place, catalyzes that place and with it creates a symbiotic sculptural context. Since context is variable, sculpture cannot be a function of some fixed, singular or universal style, but must be an adaptable strategy. In these works there is no attempt to discover an universal order; there is only the desire to intensify the awareness of what is present before us.



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“The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream.”

Martin Heidegger<sup>18</sup>

- 7 Stanley Mathews, Arches, 1981, Vauvenarges, France.
- 8 Stanley Mathews, Canyon Installation, 1981, Aix-en-Provence, France.
- 9 Stanley Mathews, Installation, 1982, American Center, Paris, France.
- 10 Bridge over the Rio Grande gorge near Taos, New Mexico.

## Dislocation and Reintegration in Postmodern Culture.

The phenomenon of universalization, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction... In order to get on the road toward modernization, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the *raison d'être* of a nation?

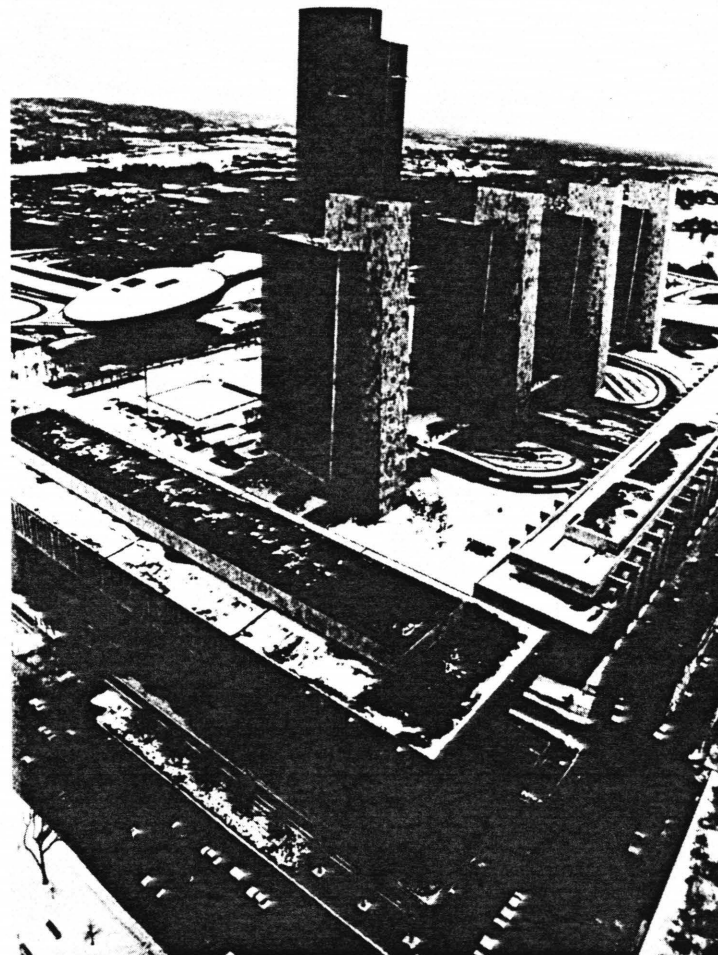
Paul Ricoeur<sup>19</sup>

If the object/field dislocation was an inadvertent feature of Modern sculpture, it was the *sine qua non* of Modernist architecture. The “nomadic” Modern sculpture object in its museum is the analogue of the isolated, self-referential, cube-for-anywhere building, withdrawn from the clutter of the city in its open greenspace; it can support no interferences impinging on its seclusion. Considerations of site and culture were disregarded in favor of universal and ideal principles of design and utopian social visions which aspired to transcend the “realities” of context. The alienated condition of architecture has in part been the result of reductive and positivistic attitudes towards use, which tend to reduce institutions to normative, functional necessity.<sup>20</sup> Driven by the Modernist “reductive search for single principles that define complex phenomena,” formalist approaches to architecture arbitrarily isolate, delimit and quantify complex and interrelative phenomena as a self-contained set of functional variables.<sup>21</sup> Supposedly, architecture might then be solved virtually algebraically as a “problem.”<sup>22</sup> But architecture is not a science and it is far too simplistic to address architectural questions as logically solvable “problems.”

Despite the noble intentions of the Modernists, their vision has largely filtered down to us in the now ubiquitous, uninviting windswept malls and plazas of our cities. The internationalized sameness coopted by technocratic expediency has all but obliterated global diversity, and regional variations and references become trite, impotent and encapsu-



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lated. Human scale and the specifics of place and local identity are disregarded in favor of statistics and standardized planning. Such approaches have engendered a Holiday Inn aesthetic of universal placelessness.

“Everywhere throughout the world, one finds the same bad movie, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities...”

Paul Ricoeur<sup>23</sup>

In recent years, Postmodernism has surfaced as the major attempt to dismantle the Modernist agendas on which all of this is blamed. Postmodernism in architecture is often



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criticized relative to Modernism on the basis of formal characteristics and style. However, Postmodernism is not “just a style,” neither is it exclusively an architectural phenomenon, nor is it so consistent and monolithic a thing as the simple rubric “Postmodern” would have us believe. Postmodernism is, rather, a general cultural condition of postindustrial society, elements of which may be found in all aspects of culture. When this condition is treated as a “text” and subjected to deconstructive scrutiny, we may elucidate some of its underlying ideological codes. This is not an easy task because, as Roland Barthes states, “the reluctance to declare its codes characterises bourgeois society and the culture issuing from it: both demand signs which do not look like signs.”<sup>24</sup>

- 11 Hotel, Anywhere USA.
- 12 Albany Mall, New York.
- 13 L.A. Strip.

In any culture, social order is established and maintained by culture-defining codes, the system of legitimizing codes or myths or *meta-narratives*, on which the society and its ideals are founded. In a time when these codes are effectively unchallenged, images and artifacts consistent with that cultural narrative are created and diffused within the society to continuously reinforce and to legitimize the system. (Some very simplistic examples are “The White Man’s Burden,” “Blondes have more fun...,” etc.) In the Modernist era, widespread applications of the machine metaphor (in art, architecture, politics, and so forth) underscored the vision of hope and promise of mechanized society. At present, the available Meta-narratives are no longer universally perceived as valid and lack the unanimity of consensus needed for even basic legitimation and cultural cohesion.<sup>25</sup> Yet the crisis tends to be perceived symptomatically as a series of isolated phenomena (questioning of “traditional” roles, etc.) rather than as a general crisis of meta-narrative, partly because the hidden codes pervading all aspects of bourgeois and capitalist society are made to appear immutable.<sup>26</sup>

While Modernism was itself far from monolithic, its diverse manifestations in art, architecture and indeed throughout culture, generally encompassed a rejection of historical continuum and traditional models. The vision was, after all, of a “new” society, and “tradition” would be of little use where new cultural, economic and technological models were required. In light of the resulting sense of historical disorientation, much of the activity of the Postmodern Condition involves a confrontation with that dislocation and the re-orienting of culture.

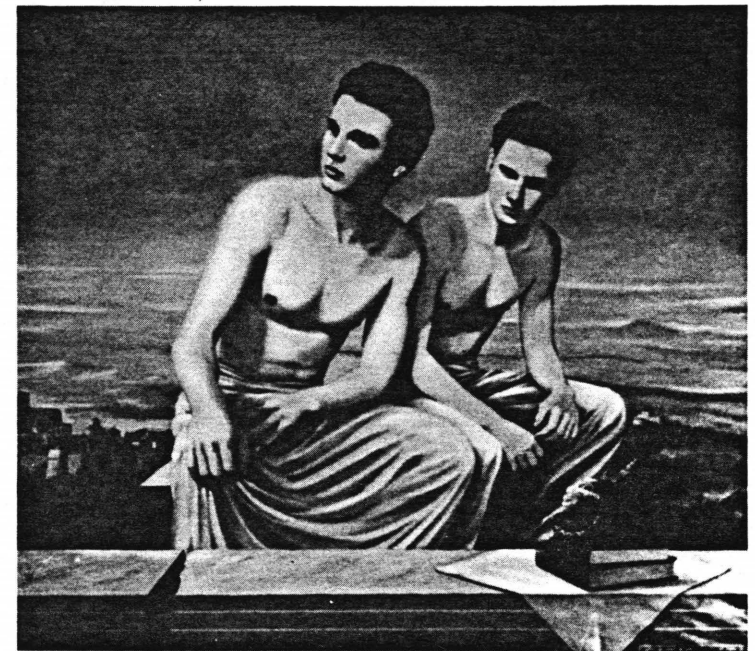
“...during epochs of historical dislocation...we are without place...”

Jacques Derrida<sup>27</sup>

Postmodern confrontation with historical dislocation occurs in several ways. We may now begin to draw some distinctions between the general tendencies commonly subsumed under the term “Postmodern.” In practical terms there is by no means a clear black and white polarity between these tendencies (there are of course infinite shades of grey), it is nonetheless worth establishing them as points on a cultural spectrum. Although the individual

architect (or artist, or writer) may blend a variety of “colors” from this spectrum, the work may betray a bias towards one tendency or the other. I would like to outline some observations on these tendencies (which are themselves more significant than the label “Postmodern”) but I would also like to extrapolate from them, and examine some of the implications and possibilities they offer. In the extreme, these are the Reactionary Postmodern and the Critical Postmodern.

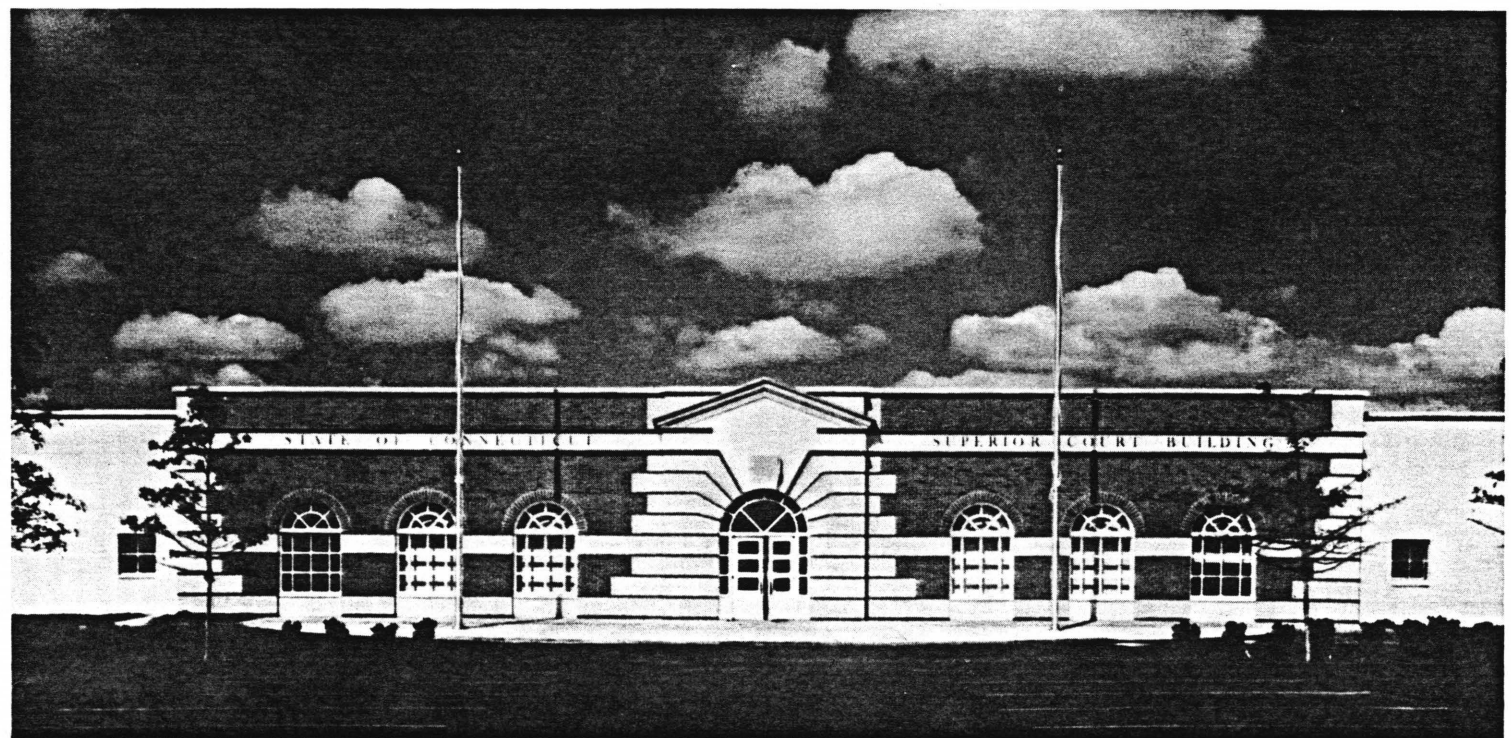
The Reactionary tendencies are characterized by a romantic preoccupation with the past and a nostalgic effort to reclaim and reintegrate with what is considered a “lost history.” Examples are films like *Chinatown* and *Star Wars* which refer to 1930’s serials, the classical revival in painting (Bertocci, fig. 14), and in architecture (Alan Greenberg, fig. 15). The most extreme cultural manifestations of this tendency are non-critical attempts to quote from and revive past culture-defining codes which are associated with periods of strong cultural identity. These include political conservatism, nationalism, xenophobia, militarism (“Rambo” diplomacy), religious fundamentalism, “traditional” family values, a sentimental deference to women,



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14 Carlo Bertocci, *Tympanum*, 1984.

15 Alan Greenberg, *Manchester Courthouse*, 1978-80, Connecticut.

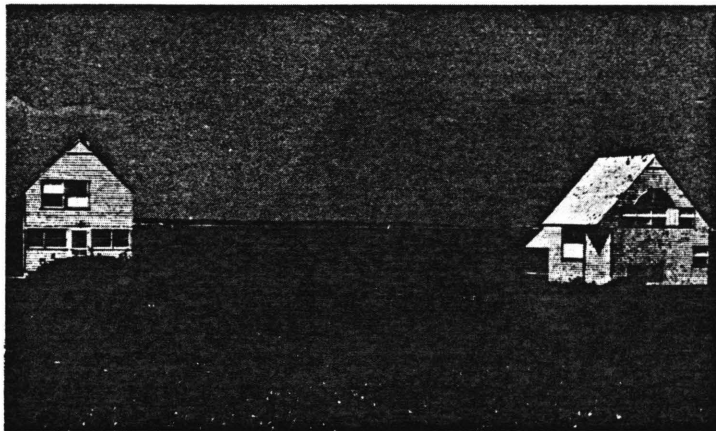


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and so forth.<sup>28</sup> The effort is to re-locate and re-legitimize society by re-tracing the steps “back” to a past which is, as often as not, idealized. This is a way of avoiding meta-narrative crisis and the challenge of progressive cultural re-definition.

By contrast, the sense of cultural and historical disorientation may become in itself a kind of nihilistic fetish (I believe this is at the root of Punk). Or again, a critical stance might be taken, acknowledging and accepting the dislocation, and reevaluating the present and the past from revisionist perspectives. The Critical tendencies confront the breakdown of culture-defining codes, utopian vision and the phenomenon of dislocation, engaging at the same time in critiques of tradition and history. In architecture, Robert Venturi offers one example of this tendency. The Trubeck and Wislocki houses (fig. 16) maintain the vernacular character of Nantucket architecture, without being revivalist or sentimentally romantic. The desire is to expose alternatives which provide diversity and freedom of action, instead of mere instrumental legitimation of an ineffective status-quo.

Thus, the diverse architectural manifestations of the Post-modern condition characteristically involve efforts to reconsider architecture in relation to *contexts*: physical, cultural and historical. Some forms of Reactionary architecture attempt through *symbol* to refer to the historical context. Yet the result is often a pastiche of dislocated symbols applied to that which is nonetheless often conceived of as a Modernist isolate (Plus ça change, plus



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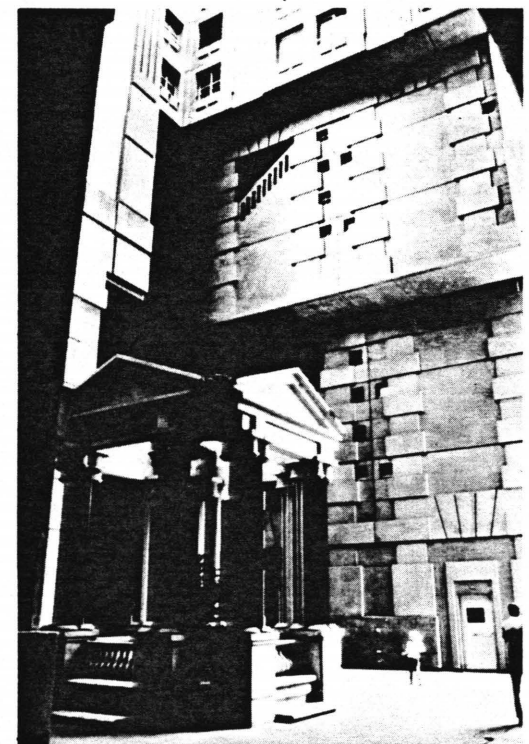
c'est la même chose!) The dislocated past, including that of recent Modernism, becomes a neutral pool of free floating sources which may be borrowed at will. “History” here is seen not so much as a vibrant ongoing entity, like a lake, to which the new building is a feeding stream, but as a kind of Dead Sea. It is not a question of a revival, since it is not the specific model which is important; it is, rather, the generalized reference, simply recognized as “historical.” It is a way of making the new appear “not new” and comfortably familiar. What is referenced is simply the apparent monolithic *pastness* of history, of which, it would seem, legitimation is part and parcel. “History” becomes a collectively imagined frame of reference within which the architect locates the architecture. This is particularly suspect in the instances of corporate or governmental architecture where symbolic reference is made to imperial or obliquely totalitarian epochs, invoking an *a priori* legitimation of the power and authority of that institution. Ricardo Bofill does this in his *Abraxas* project in Marne-La-Vallée (figs. 17 and 18). A Felliniesque Roman Imperial colossal order is employed in this government subsidized housing project for low income families. Given the fact that the tenants are largely from former French colonies, the imperial content is hard to ignore. These patterns are consistent with the crisis-of-paradigm described by Thomas Kuhn, where an old paradigm tries to accommodate and absorb the rise of the new by a “pulling and stretching of terms in the name of vanguard aesthetics [which is] actually historicism...”<sup>29</sup>

Some alternative means of re-positioning and re-locating architecture within a context are suggested by the Critical tendencies. Where Reactionary architecture employs “historical” symbols and superficial context, the Critical is concerned with *signs*, place-making and a critical re-evaluation of history and context. Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Mario Botta and Luigi Snozzi have, in different ways, examined some of these possibilities, with varying degrees of success.

I believe that there is more to be understood from history than the isolated symbol, the static, preserved images, the detached pediments, like fragments in a Museum. Architecture can re-engage the signs and structures of a



17



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- 16 Robert Venturi, Trubeck and Wislocki houses, 1970.
- 17 Ricardo Bofill, Les Espaces d’Abraxas Housing, Marne-Le-Vallée, 1983.
- 18 Ricardo Bofill, Les Espaces d’Abraxas Housing, Marne-Le-Vallée, 1983.

vibrant and ongoing history and become part of the living “textile” of the site, *chōra* or *locus*.<sup>30</sup>

“A locus is a place easily grasped by the memory...”  
*Rhetorica ad Herennium* (86-82 B.C.)<sup>31</sup>

In my understanding, there are three approaches to the way architecture may be relative to the locus. The first is *Dislocation*: In this case the building is a self-referential and unique compositional whole, aloof from its surroundings, or the addition of some new and spectacular feature to ornament the locus. The cumulative result of dislocation is the chaotic landscape. The second approach is *Contextual Accommodation*, or the non-critical contextual co-opting of superficial features of the visual landscape.<sup>32</sup> This means the preservation of some artificial, static or picturesque image of the context. The locus is trivialized and treated as a kind of dead animal which is stuffed and mounted. The third and most challenging approach is that of *Critical Engagement*. A building might actively engage the locus as a living matrix, not merely passively respond to some static “context.” It may provide enhanced parameters or a clarification for the ongoing development of the locus.<sup>33</sup> This implies a “site-specific” relationship between building and context<sup>34</sup> analogous to that of site-specific sculpture.<sup>35</sup>

In the natural landscape, an architectonic mediation might be introduced to allow a more intimate engagement of building to site.<sup>36</sup>

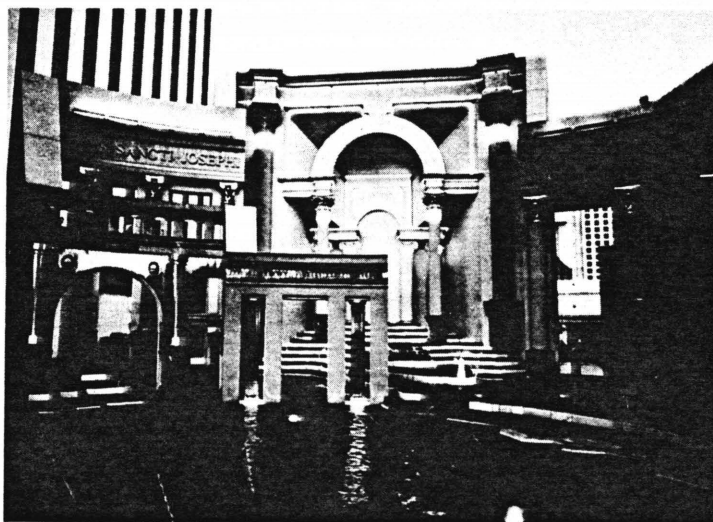
The bulldozing of an irregular topography into a flat site is clearly a technocratic gesture which aspires to a condition of absolute *placelessness*, whereas the terracing of the same site to receive the stepped form of a building is an engagement in the act of “cultivating” the site.

Kenneth Frampton<sup>37</sup>

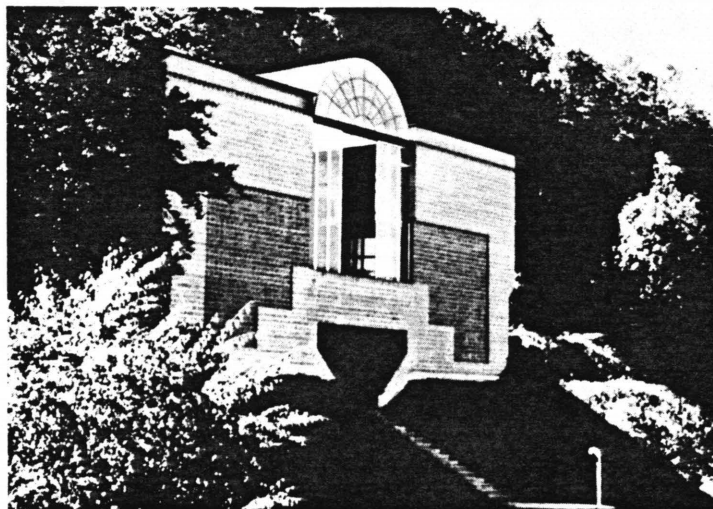
The difficulty with the dislocated building is not isolation *per se* (indeed, it may be part of a dense development), but that it does not belong to any prevailing order of the landscape. A simple example of this is the building which is arbitrarily skewed to the prevailing grid orientation of the street. An accumulation of individually dislocated buildings collectively comprises a chaotic landscape. The



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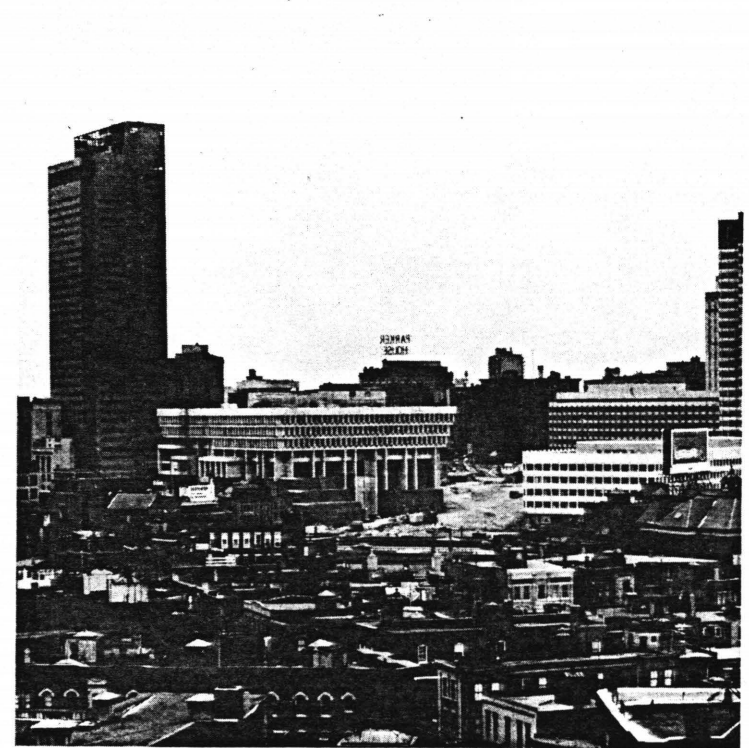
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- 19 Apartment Block, near Cleveland.
- 20 Charles Moore, Piazza d'Italia, 1975-80.
- 21 Mario Botta, House, 1981-82, Viganello, Switzerland.
- 22 Suburban Housing near Baltimore, Md.
- 23 Boston City Hall, circa 1967.

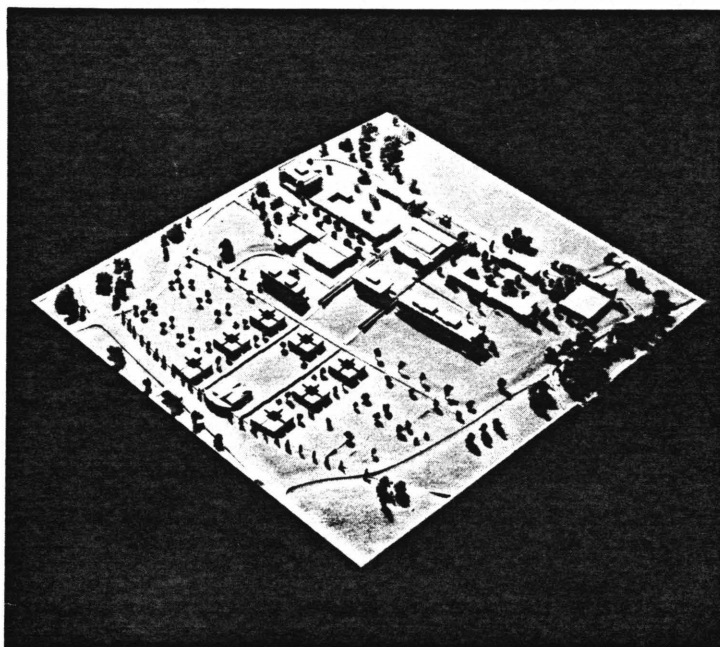
architectonic order and character of the natural and man-made landscape must be revealed and developed.<sup>38</sup> The building may then be developed out of an understanding and apprehension of that rationally-considered landscape. The possibility arises of the building not as an aggressive imposition on the site, but as a collaging within the matrix of the locus or *chōra*. The coherent landscape, in this sense, is that locus which has been reckoned with and may be apprehended and grasped by consciousness. That reckoning may be a physical intervention in the landscape or simply a conceptual system. In the western United States, the national survey grid made it possible to conceive of and orient oneself within vast undifferentiated open spaces.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, the extant fabric of context and landscape, particularly urban, is in many instances in total disarray. For the disordered and chaotic locus to be made apprehensible, architects must intervene to reveal or synthesize the order of the landscape. This necessitates a critique of the extant order and character of the site relative to the realities and structure of the locus, in order to distinguish between the surface appearances and underlying structures.<sup>40</sup> Yet, there is no objective litmus-test, no scientific solution to assist the architect in this. Criteria for judgement cannot be a matter of arbitrarily delimiting inconsistencies as though they were quasi-algebraic functions. These only perpetuate the reduction of architecture to universalized problem-solving.

The "Sense of Place," the *genius loci* (if one may still use these tired phrases), is not a function of some spectacular architectural event. It is created through habitual action and memory in a distinct place which has its own order and character.<sup>41</sup> What is the source of order in architecture if we reject abstract geometric and mechanistic ideals? Architectural order originates in an architectonic understanding of the institution.<sup>42</sup> Without an order and significance to human actions, there is no reason for architecture. Without family there is no home and no house; without a celebration of death, no tomb or cemetery. Architecture is then the embodiment of an institution within a locus.

Architecture begins where structured human activity (institution) *takes place* in a locus which has been reckoned with as a coherent landscape and made into an architectonic site. It is by rebuilding the site, the context, with dignity that the isolated condition of Architecture may be ended at long last.

The Architect must consider the institutions of human activity and the nature of spatial perception, not the abstractions of complex plan geometries or image-making. The plan ideally should be diagrammatic of these institutions. Yet the relations here are distinctly non-causal and resist scientific method. A coherent, rational approach does not mean a logical positivist approach. In the end, functionalist reductions and behaviorist prescriptions merely impose arbitrary and confining parameters on human activities and institutions.



24 Stanley Mathews, Restructured Site on the Campus of Virginia Tech.

## The Deconstruction of Things Disimpaction and Tectonic Syntax

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.

“But which is the stone that supports the bridge?”

Kublai Khan asks.

“The bridge is not supported by one stone or another,”

Marco answers, “but by the line of the arch that they form.”

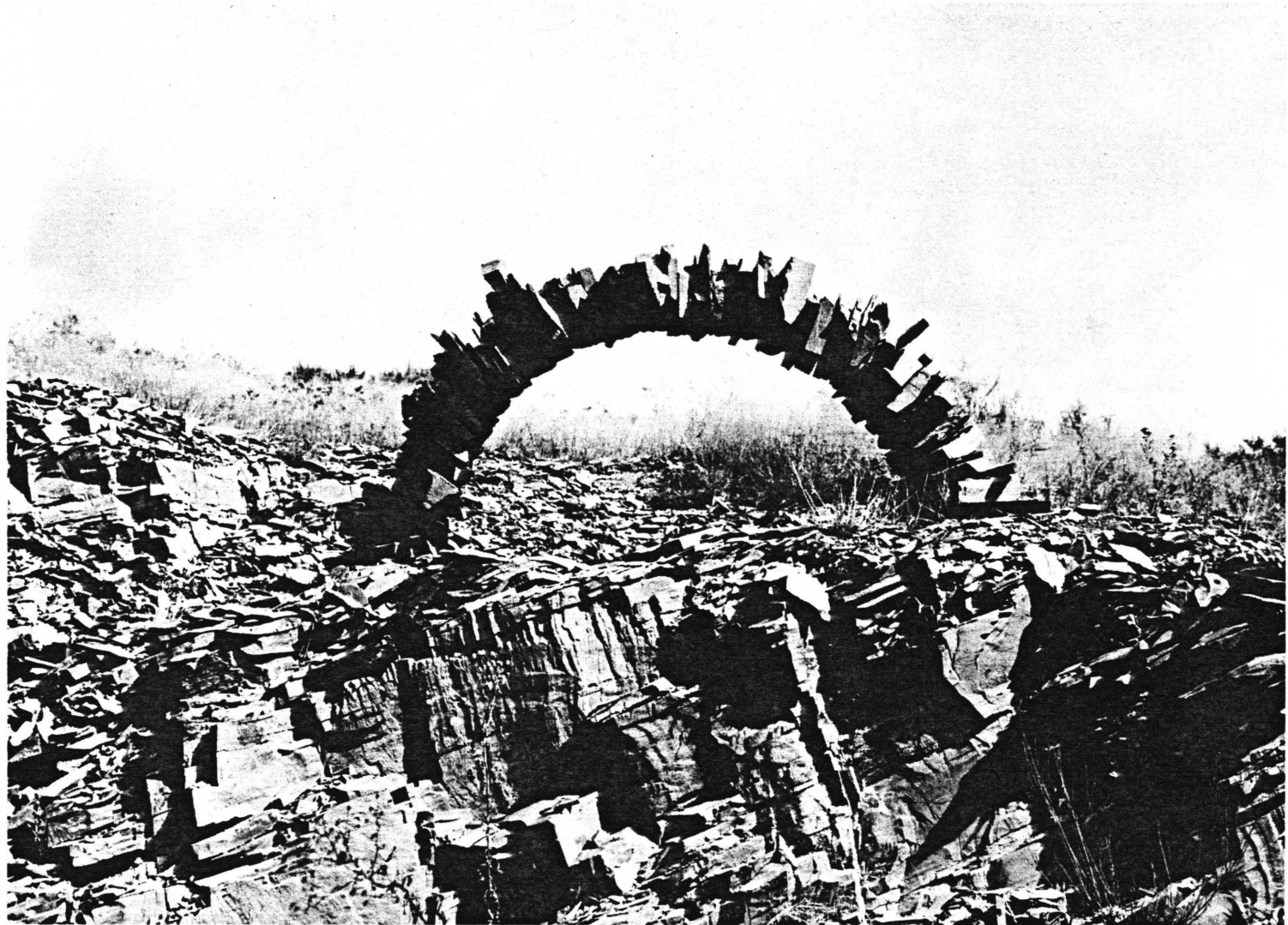
Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds:

“Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.”

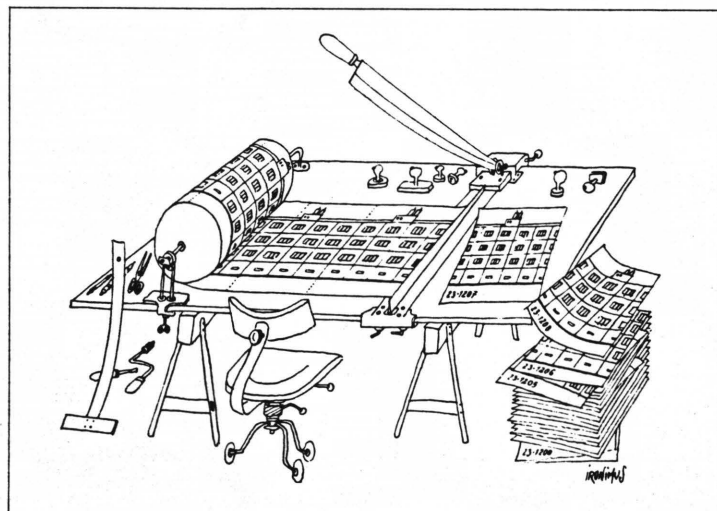
Polo answers: “Without stones there is no arch.”

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

The technocratic tendency to reduce complex phenomena to a set of simple variables has, as we have seen, aggravated the dislocation of architecture from all aspects of its environment. Land- and city- scapes have become collections of isolated buildings, like sculpture-objects displayed in a museum, since the building-as-object and not its situation *vis-à-vis* the locus has preoccupied the architect. Yet the difficulties which arise from such a narrow consideration of architectural issues are not limited to the building and context. Although interacting phenomenally, site, plan, and elements and materials as well, are often considered as functional isolates and no longer have any distinctive identity in themselves. Much of contemporary architecture bears witness to the dual reductions of architectural *elements* (stairs, columns, etc.) to anonymous, standardized clichés, and of building (as tectonics) to mere expedient assembly. Buildings are conceived as solutions to standard problems and architectural elements have been subordinated to overall composition and image, and normative generalized function. Elements are often simply specified from a catalogue of standardized and predetermined parts, ignoring the manifold particular conditions of use and configuration within a given building. We are left with the general



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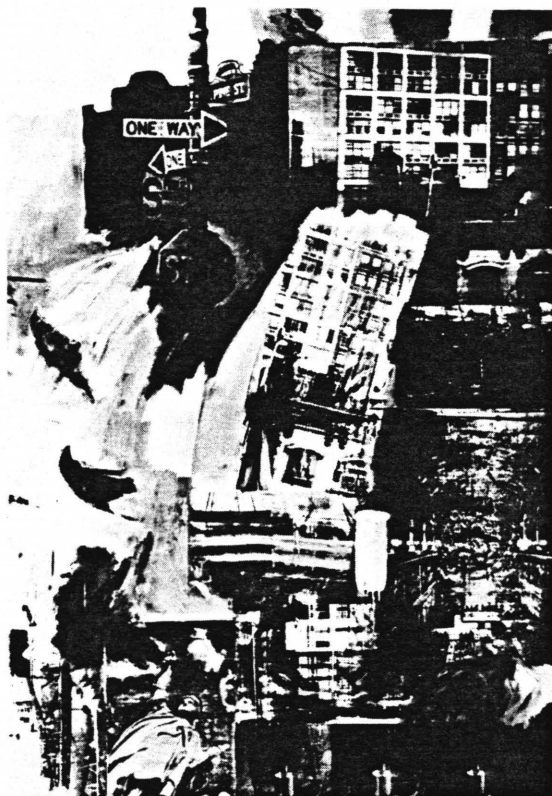
25 Stanley Mathews, Arch in a Stone Quarry, 1982  
Bourgogne, France.

26 From GruneHelden Gravemonster, by Ironimus.

case, not that particular, peculiar thing which may be “grasped by memory.”<sup>43</sup> Little thought is given to the play of light on the stair, or how the train of the evening gown flows against the treads, or the sound of the child’s step. A window becomes a light-admitting-aperture, a column is a vertical-support-element, a stair is but part of the vertical-circulation-system.

Preconceived constructions are employed as a shorthand way of avoiding confrontation with the complexity of an idea. This is analogous to the use of clichés in writing. No thought is required, but expression is lost. The element in such a state becomes concealed, un-revealed or “invisible.”

In architecture (and art as well, as we have seen) these difficulties in part result from the isolation of elements as quasi-algebraic terms. By extending the analogy of writing, elements and their interrelation may be clarified if considered instead as quasi-linguistic terms, graphemes or phonemes, in a contingent text-of-relation.<sup>44</sup>



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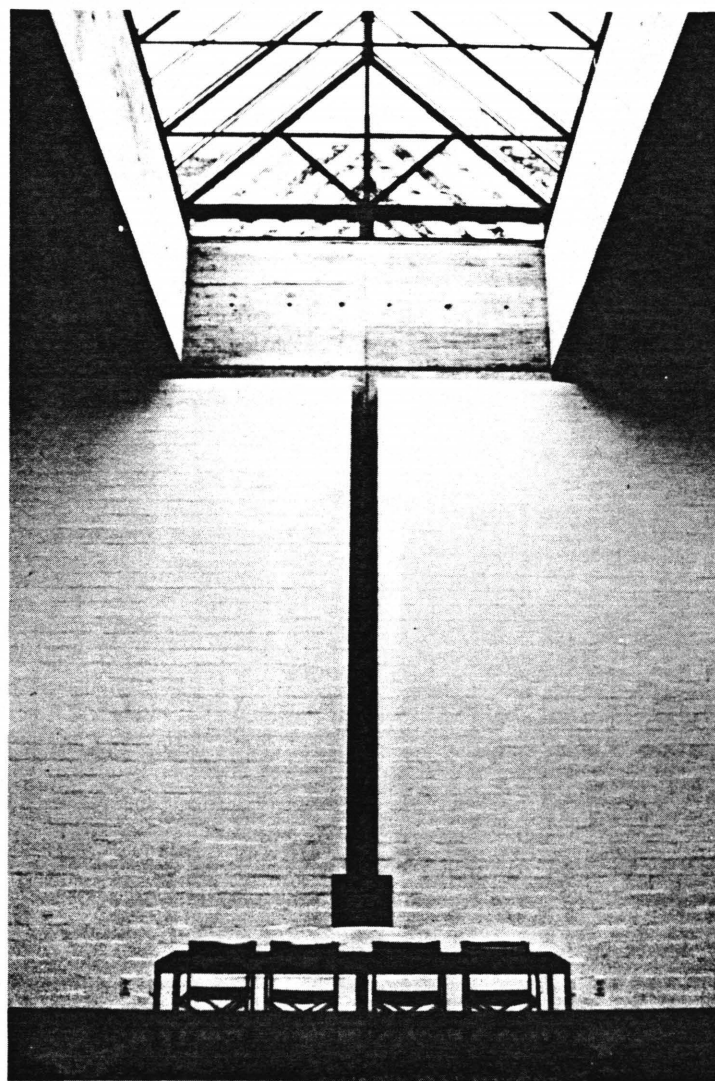
...no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element"—phoneme or grapheme—being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system... This interweaving, the textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent.

Jacques Derrida<sup>45</sup>

To reveal this interplay, it is first necessary to dismantle the tangled textile of cliché and perfunctory supposition which renders the element invisible. Yet elements become so encumbered with preconceptions and assumptions that they not only lose any distinctive identity, but they are also no longer capable of rising to any poetic potential neces-

sary to create that identity. Such elements may be considered as impacted with preconceptions. Impaction means the state of being closely fixed or tightly wedged. At times it is therefore necessary to deconstruct or dis-impact the obscure and complicated condition of elements into the component terms of the "text" where relationships may be more clearly seen. What the element "says" and how it is configured must be scrutinized in light of what it actually "shows" or reveals about its condition. This allows us to re-create or construct-in-seeing for ourselves the element and the coming-into-being of the complex whole.

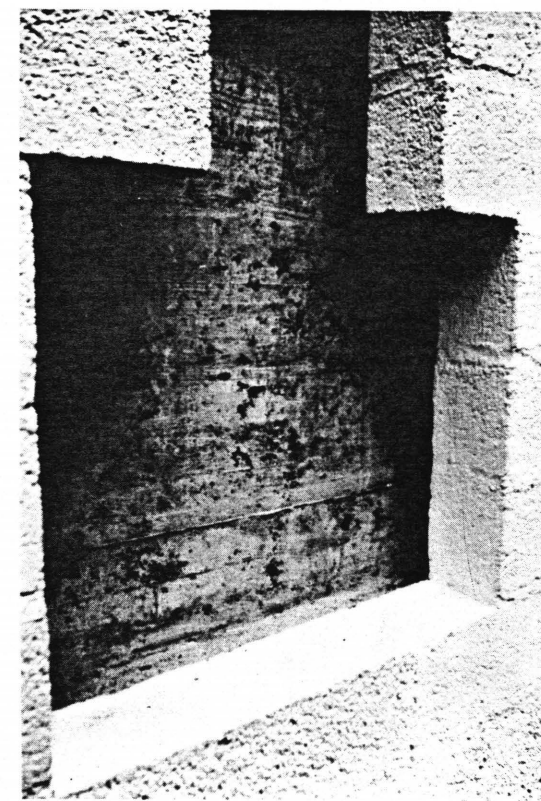
In Mario Botta's Capuchine Library there is an eloquent example of this in the dialogue of surface and structure.



28

On the west side of the reading room, the wall surface is articulated and differentiated from the supporting wall behind. This structural wall is an uninterrupted concrete mass. The surface wall of white-painted concrete block, does not touch any other surface; the corners are cut away to reveal the structure beneath. The cut and reveal down the middle extends the discourse into one of source and hierarchy.<sup>46</sup>

Architecture may thus be considered as the re-creation and *revealing* of the complex interactions of multiple and diverse elements, rather than as the *transparent* presentation of a simple whole. While the purpose of the present inquiry is a *clarification*, this is not to say an informational



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- 27 A Robert Rauschenberg "text", Estate, 1963.
- 28 Mario Botta, Library, Capuchin Monastery, 1976-79, Lugano, Switzerland.
- 29 Mario Botta, Library, Capuchin Monastery, detail.



*clarity.* The goal is the complex and often ambiguous poetic potential, the reduction of obscurity and lack of identity. To achieve a poetic potential, the architect must avoid both the simple presentation of illustrative transparency and the overcomplication of obscurity. Here, the poetic does not mean a return to some romantic ideal, but a redemption of the richness of the tectonic discourse of architectural elements.<sup>47</sup>

“*Tektonik*” referred not just to the activity of making the materially requisite construction...but rather to the activity that raises this construction to an art form....The functionally adequate form must be adapted so as to give expression to function. The sense of bearing provided by the entasis of Greek columns became the touchstone of this concept of *Tektonic*.  
Stanford Anderson<sup>48</sup>

The difficulties to be overcome are twofold. First is the question of the obscured identity of elements, and second is the question of confused tectonic syntax and inappropriate relation between those elements. Disimpaction may allow us to distinguish and examine the architectonic identity and the tectonic relation of architectural elements. In order to clarify tectonic relation I use the analogues of the *text* and the *collage*, and for identity, the analogue of *poetic* strangeness.<sup>49</sup>

...the function of poetic art is that of “making strange” the object depicted. People living at the seashore grow so accustomed to the murmur of the waves that they never hear it...Our perception of the world has withered away; what has remained is mere recognition.

Noam Chomsky<sup>50</sup>

The poetic “making strange” is the calling into awareness (of the object) from the common configuration in which it remains impacted and concealed.<sup>51</sup> This revelation can be seen also in the work of Vincent van Gogh. His paintings depict a world which has lost its “ordinary” intelligibility and becomes unfamiliar, without presuppositions, and uncanny.

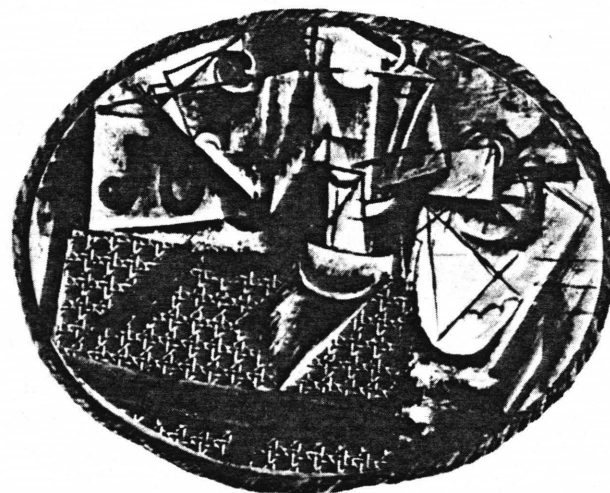
This necessitates a self-conscious questioning or critical dialectic of the element and its “condition” relative to other components and materials. The whole might be perceived not as the mish-mash of impacted elements:

*housedoorwallwindowroom*, but as a textile within which each element is at once distinct and in a complex interaction with other elements. To be sure, a thing itself cannot criticize, but the architect can configure it in such a way as to bring about a critical dialectic, to cause the element to be perceived as it is, yet also as it in itself “comments” on its condition, relation or configuration: squareness, roundness, thinness, materiality, assembledness, attachedness, or even historical or archetypal relation.

Since it is within the assemblage that the relations between elements are established, and their identity defined, it is especially the mediating, connecting, boundary conditions which are of particular interest. In light of the intertextual relation of the term to the whole, let us now consider the concept of the collage: (fig. 30).

In a collage, each element breaks the continuity of the discourse and leads to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin and that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality.

*Collages*<sup>52</sup>



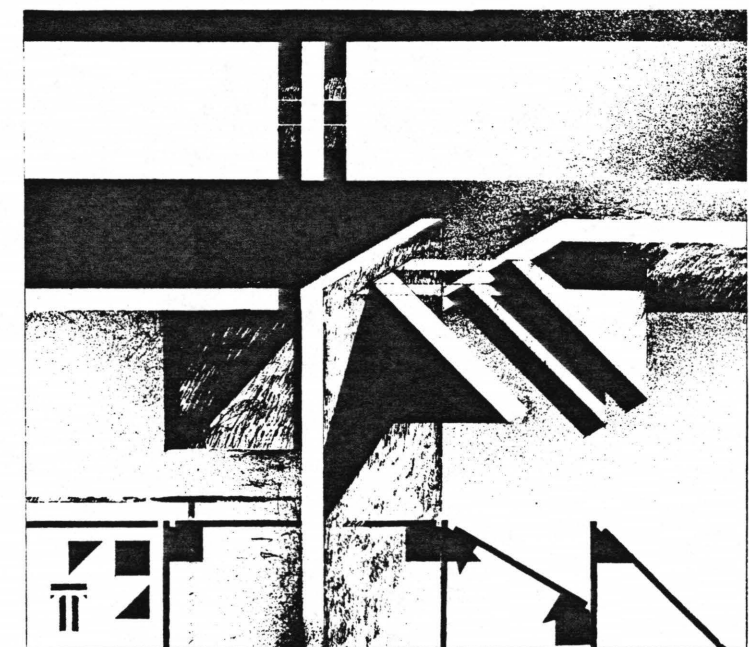
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30 Pablo Picasso, Still Life with Chair Caning, 1912.

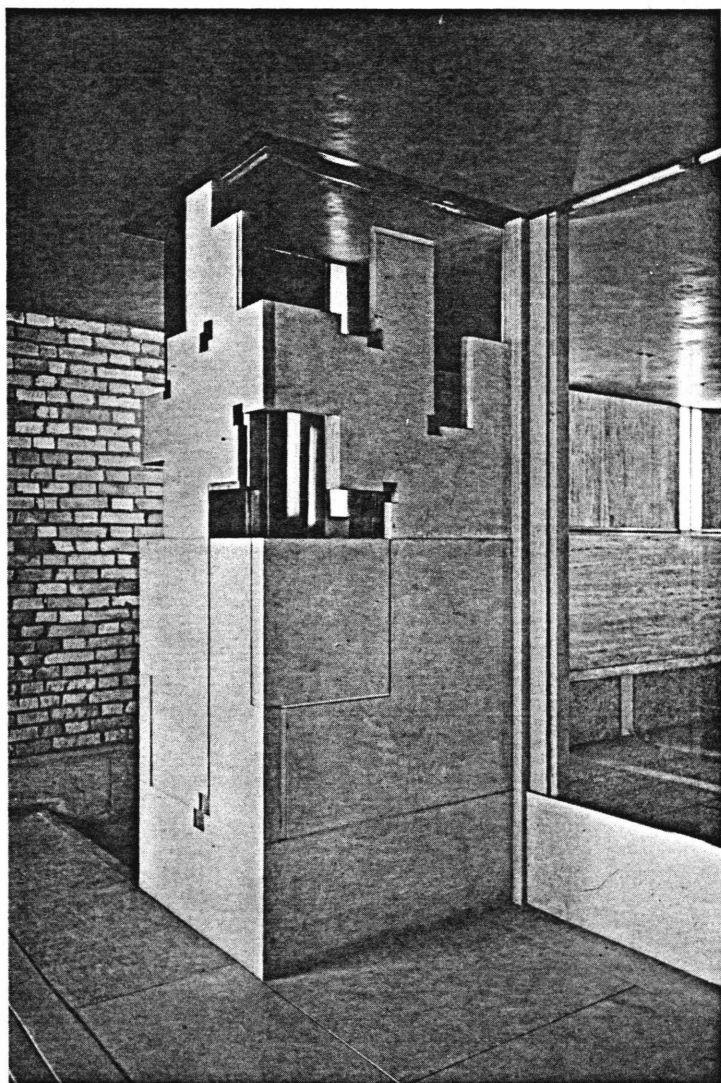
31 Stanley Mathews, Deconstructed Handrail, drawing.

An architectural element must be capable of existing *both* as a thing in itself *and* as a double-reading, double-functioning element. Thus the element is at once neither wholly isolated, nor entirely subsumed into the whole. While the field of inquiry in the present discussion is focused on architectural elements and the relation between them, this kind of critical dialectic can also be applied to any mediation between architectural term and contingent “field”: roof and wall, building and site, site and landscape, and so on.

Let us attempt to use the method outlined in order to see how a specific element might be deconstructed or “disimpacted.” Consider the window: To say that it is an opening in the wall, a light-admitting-aperture, is to leave it in the impacted state, establishing neither its architectonic identity nor its tectonic potential. One must first consider the manifold conditions constituting the window. Since the window cannot exist without the wall, where and how does the wall end and where and how does the window begin? Such an investigation may reveal inconsistencies or impactions on a larger or smaller scale, and may continue until the relations are satisfactorily revealed without inconsistency. Thus: *The wall is*, and then the wall must end to allow the *window* to be. These two are mediated by a boundary.



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32 Carlo Scarpa, Querini-Stampalia Foundation, Venice.

Within this, the *window is* (of course, we have assumed that the *wall* has no inconsistencies.) If the window has an operable component, that too might be mediated. If we now add that the wall is of concrete and the pane is of glass, then the dialectic reveals that the not-window/not-wall boundary is really a matter of mediating between two dissimilar materials. The boundary is the frame which must attach to the wall (which must in turn receive it) and it must also receive the glass. For each to function within the collage of parts it must in itself have tectonic integrity.

The use of stone veneer also has the potential to engage more fully in a tectonic discourse, if it is revealed to be a veneer instead of an apparent solid. It can be configured

such that its thinness, delicacy and attachedness are contrasted with the massiveness of the support behind, thus engendering the dialogue of surface and structure (fig.32). One must approach architectural drawing with similar scrutiny. The juncture between *two* materials may be designated by a *single* line, but how is this to be understood? There are in reality *two* surfaces and a boundary between, small though it may be.

“...the boundary of a body is neither a part of the enclosed body nor a part of the surrounding atmosphere.”

Jasper Johns (citing Leonardo da Vinci).<sup>53</sup>

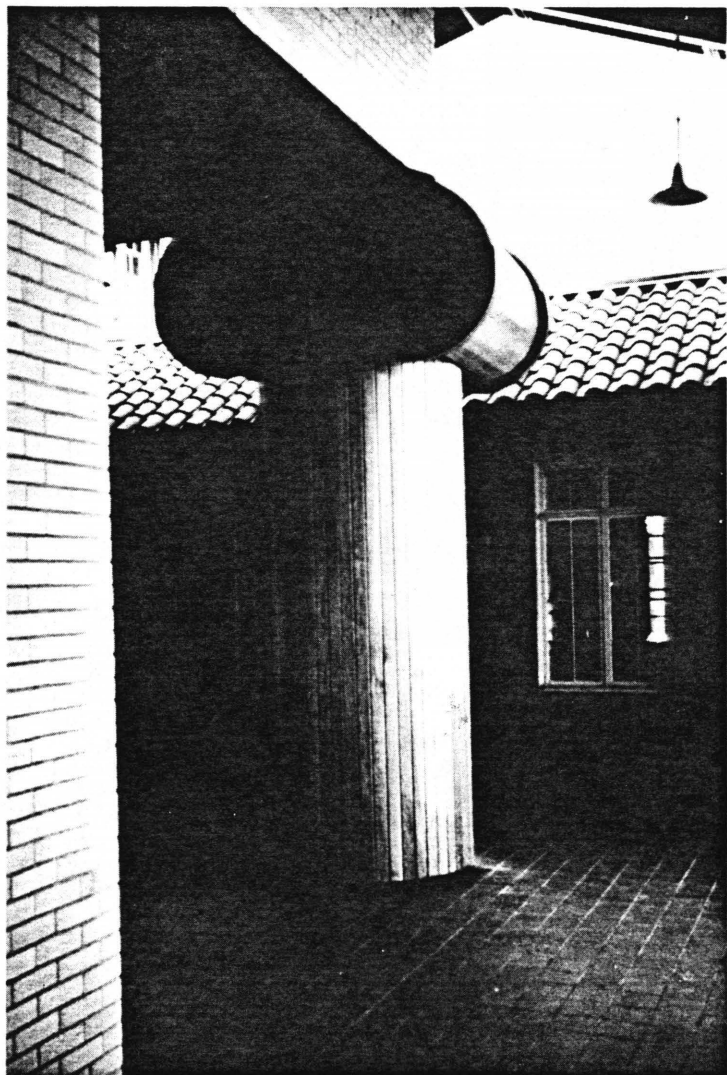
Thus, the text of architecture may be constructed or “written” with disimpacted, “revealed” terms, with care taken



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33 Stanley Mathews, Arch, detail.

at those instances where different terms may potentially overlap and appear coincidental and form new clichés. What is difficult is that we have come to recognize things not in the complex interaction of these manifold terms, but in the shorthand of their impacted states, the overlaps, the apparent coincidences. When we think of “window,” it is extremely difficult to avoid considering the impacted state of window instead of the various constituent architectural elements and tectonic relations which may be disimpacted and revealed. Yet this “revealing” which underlies constructing is itself the essence of *technē*.<sup>54</sup> In his analysis of technology and *technē*, Martin Heidegger points out that “*Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, (*revealing*, not *manufacturing*), to *poiēsis*; it is something poetic.”<sup>55</sup>



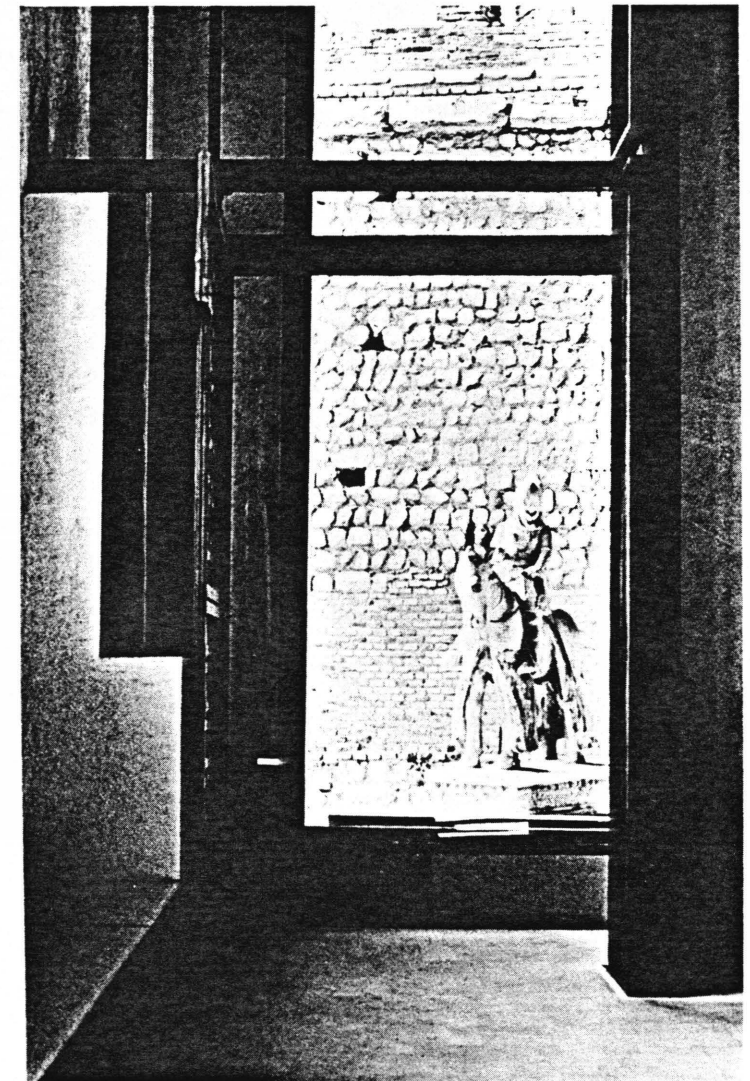
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Herein lies the difference between considering construction as the technocratic management of preconceived parts and codes, and building as the tectonic joining of elements. The wanderer in the forest might construct a dwelling, selecting and assembling branches, grasses, leaves and logs, not according to some standard method but according to a particular language of assembly which must be realized and grasped. How different is the puppet, the kit-of-parts, with a specialized and invariable function encoded within each part.<sup>56</sup> This does not at all mean to deny pre-fabrication. Pre-fabrication has tremendous potential, since it is by nature a matter of the joining of discrete elements. The difficulties arise because the prefabrication is often concealed and made to appear not-prefabricated.

A few diverse examples of deconstructed elements may be found in the work of Robert Venturi, Carlo Scarpa and Mario Botta. In Venturi/Scott-Brown's addition to the Allen Art Museum at Oberlin College we find one example (fig. 35). Here, the exaggerated Ionic column is not only disimpacted as Column, but engages in a complex historical and tectonic discourse. The deconstructed, double-reading column proclaims its identity not only functionally as vertical-support-element, but as *column*, as sign.

The pivoting door in Carlo Scarpa's Castelvechio Museum differentiates the identity of the door itself from the wall (fig. 36). The door does not swing from hinges; it pivots eccentrically, simultaneously revealing two openings, large on one side and small on the other. The major opening is for passage, the minor opening is to reveal that the wall has ended to allow the door to be.

The deconstruction of impacted elements is not only a means of reclaiming some of the richness of architecture, it is also structurally and functionally rational (these two are combined in *technē*). It is also a means of reducing the distance between architect and engineer. Many of the difficulties discussed in this paper stem from specialization and a compartmentalization of thinking. Under the positivist mandate, the architect has had license to ignore all else but a limited set of issues. However, this has not



35

- 34 Robert Venturi/Scott-Brown, Additions to the Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1975, detail, Oberlin, Ohio.  
 35 Carlo Scarpa, Castelvechio Museum, Verona.

always been the case historically. It is the relatively recent result of the split between architect and engineer originating with the division between the Ecole des Beaux Arts (making architecture a matter of aesthetics and image) and the Ecole Polytechnique (making construction a problem for the engineer to solve).<sup>57</sup> Incredible as it may seem, the current practice in France today is for the architect to produce only a perspective and a model of the building: what it looks like. This is then given over to the engineer who decides how and of what it will be built. The architect has no idea (or interest) whether the building will be of steel or concrete, since it will all be dressed in some veneer anyway to make it look like the model.

Only by breaking down this artificial distinction can tectonic expression become an integral part of architecture, without resorting to irrelevant hi-tech *tours-de-force* of engineering. It is only through a critical engagement with the wider range of issues truly relevant to architecture that it can rise to the poetic.

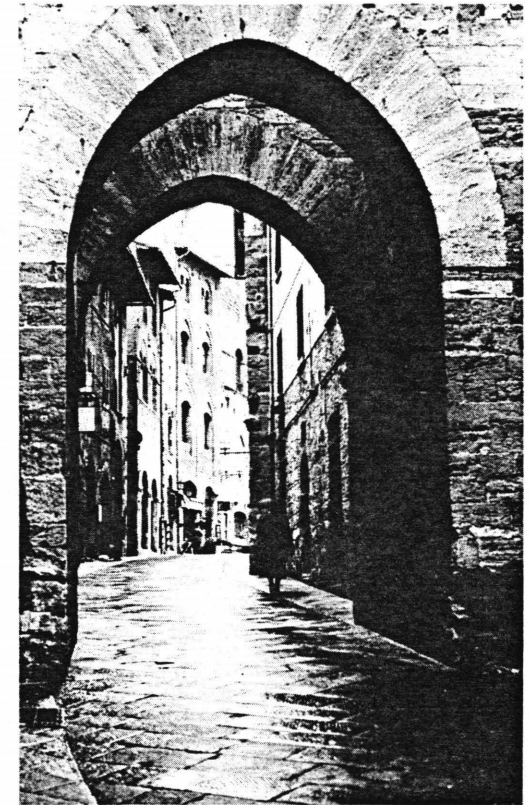
...Sind wir vielleicht hier, um zu sagen: Haus,  
Brücke, Brunnen, Tor, Krug, Obstbaum, Fenster,  
-höchstens: Säule, Turm ... aber zu sagen, versteht,  
oh zu sagen so, wie selber die Dinge niemals  
innig meinten zu sein.

...Are we, perhaps, *here* only to say: House,  
Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit Tree, Window,  
-at most: Column, Tower?...but to *say*, you understand,  
oh to *say*, with an intensity the things themselves  
never hoped to achieve...

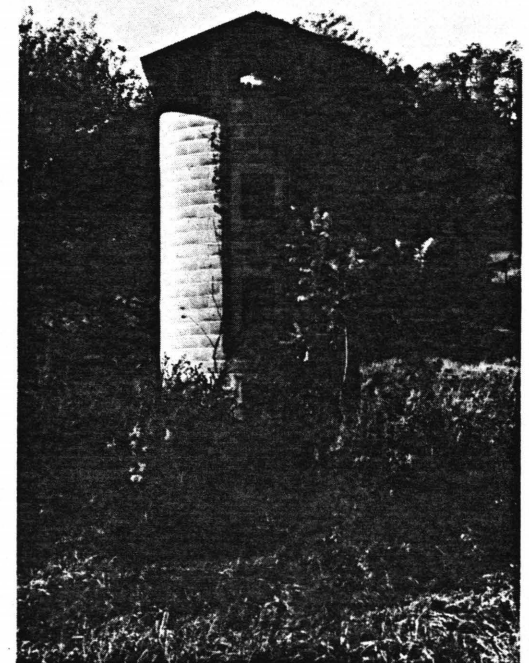
Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Ninth Elegy*



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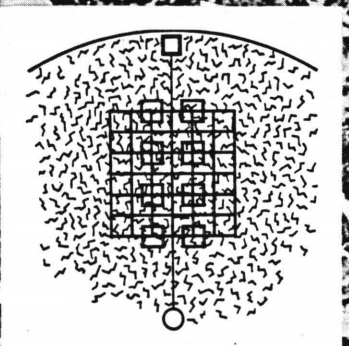
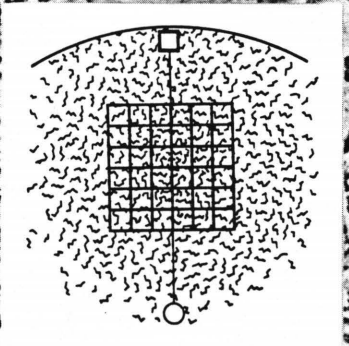
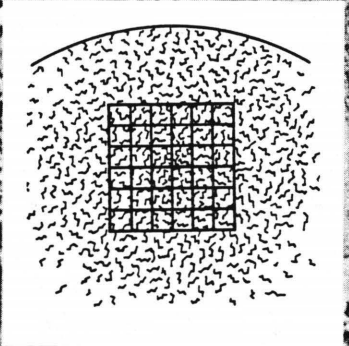
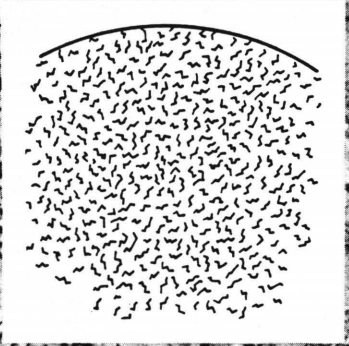
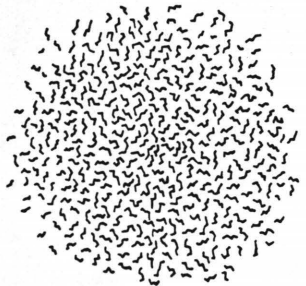
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- 36 San Gimignano, General view.
- 37 San Gimignano.
- 38 Silo, Blacksburg, Virginia.

Developing the Coherent Landscape  
A Design Study



## The Project

The Project began as a design for an art gallery and museum for the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. This museum is intended to serve several purposes:

- 1 To house a permanent collection of art for the university. The University currently has neither a significant collection of artworks nor adequate facilities for one.
- 2 To provide facilities for temporary and travelling exhibitions.
- 3 To serve as a cultural link between the university and town communities. The proposed site is along the periphery of the campus, between the town and the university.



The campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia.

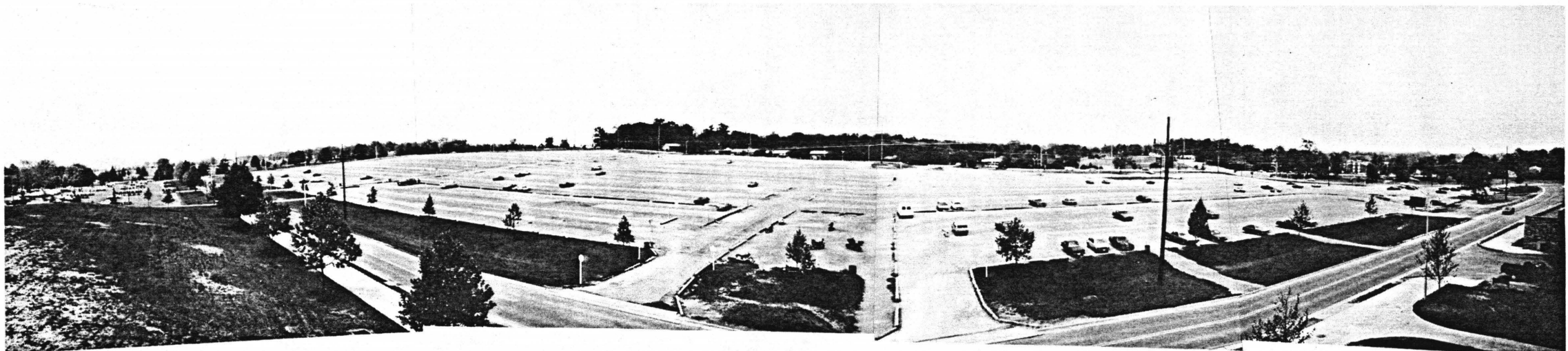
## The Site

The proposed location is not without problems. The site is the large and undifferentiated parking lot on the North edge of campus (at the top of the aerial photograph opposite), the effective commuter entrance for much of the faculty, student body and many visitors (the project includes a plan for the renewal of the parking area).

If the University's formal entrance along the tree-lined Mall towards the East is seen as the "front-door" to the campus, the site chosen for the museum is definitely the well-travelled "back door." Although it occupies a significant location as a campus boundary and serves as a principal gate and a transition between the campus and the town, it is currently a placeless wasteland, having no significant character.

In considering building here, it became clear that the issues relevant to this site were much greater than could be addressed by the simple addition of one element. The question became, not "what building is right?" but "in what ways is the site wrong?" Given the extant conditions of the site and its marginal relation to the campus, could *any* building belong to that place?

Aerial photograph of the Virginia Tech campus.  
The site from the south.



However, the chaotic condition is not exclusive to this site. The difficulty stems from the plan of the campus as a whole. The original campus plan grew out of the basic grid structure of the town plan. By the 1970's, new construction began to violate that original order. Newer buildings to the south side of campus were sited more or less at random, apparently to provide the "green space" popular at the time.

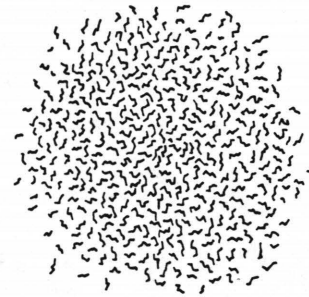


Far from confronting these difficulties, the current 'Campus Infill Plan' simply ignores and compounds the problems. This plan avoids the questions of growth and building within a matrix lacking in definition, and merely proposes filling-in the available space between existing buildings. As it is "silted-in" like some disused canal, the campus-structure is systematically destroyed.

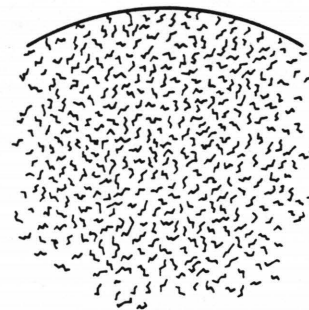
It was clear that for this site, the design of any building must be predicated on an extensive deconstruction and clarification of the issues of that ill-defined and chaotic locus. Thus the design process became more of a planning process in terms of reestablishing the definition and character of the microcosm of the site itself and the macrocosm of the campus as a whole.



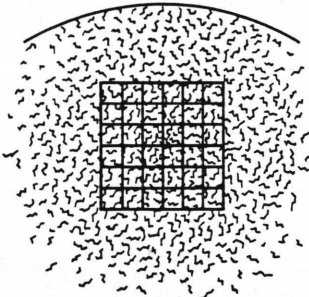
How may a site be deconstructed and clarified?  
Let us examine some of the issues and strategies:



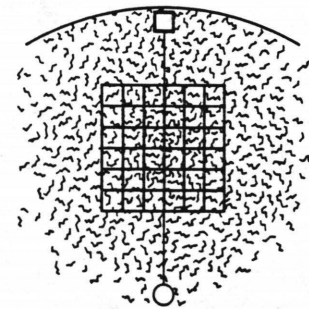
With the loss of structure and definition, a locus degenerates into the chaos of a random field. Further building is of no consequence; no one building or location is any better than another. It makes little difference where any new structure is added until the locus is clarified.



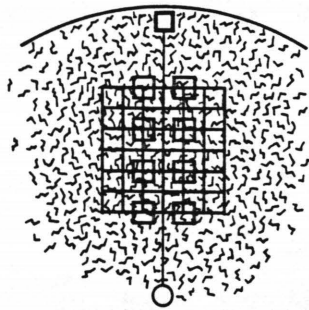
The first step to clarifying the disorganized and chaotic locus is to identify the edges. Once the limit and boundary conditions are established, the questions of density, of inside and outside, and hierarchy can become meaningful.



Once the boundary conditions are clarified, the inherent order, pattern or structure of the site may be identified and revealed. This may be the clarification or extension of some latent pattern or the revealing of an underlying "geology." Lacking these, an ordering pattern derived from the surroundings may be synthesized and imposed.



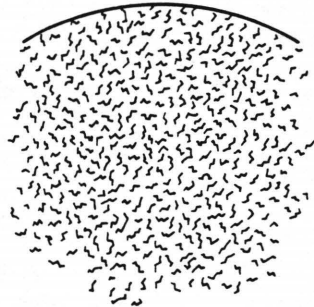
With the establishment of the boundary conditions and an ordering pattern, a bias may now be set up to address the issues of hierarchy and focus. Directional elements establish a relation between outlying or boundary elements, and central or focal elements.



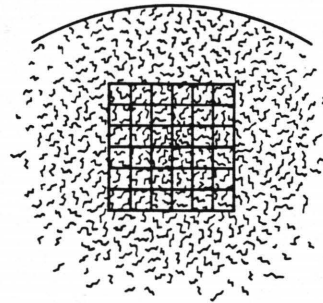
The outlying elements may in turn become nodes for secondary growth. A new pattern emerges against which future growth can occur.

**Interventions:**  
**Reconstructing the Site**

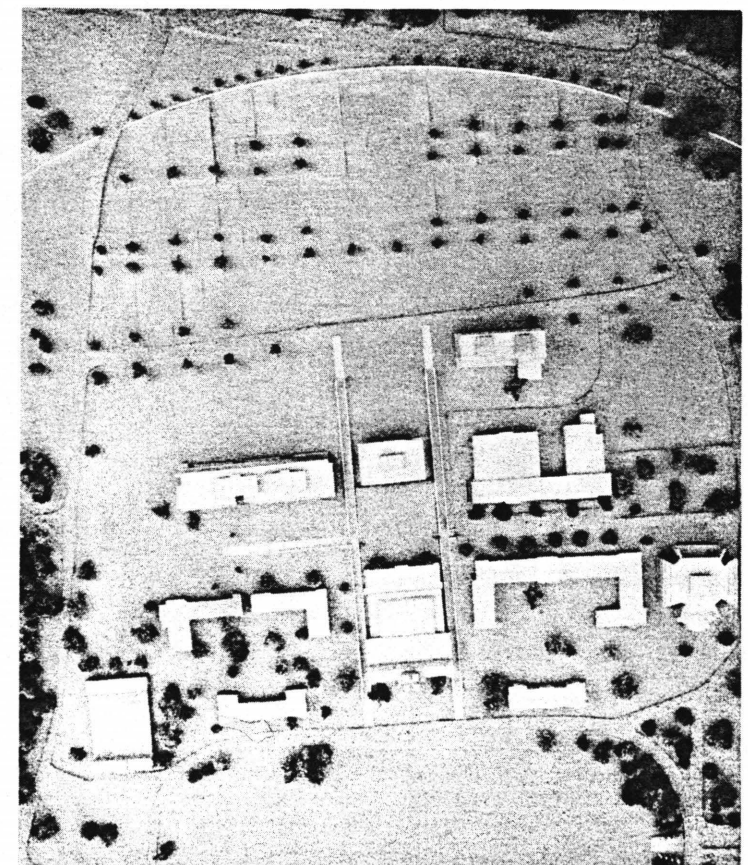
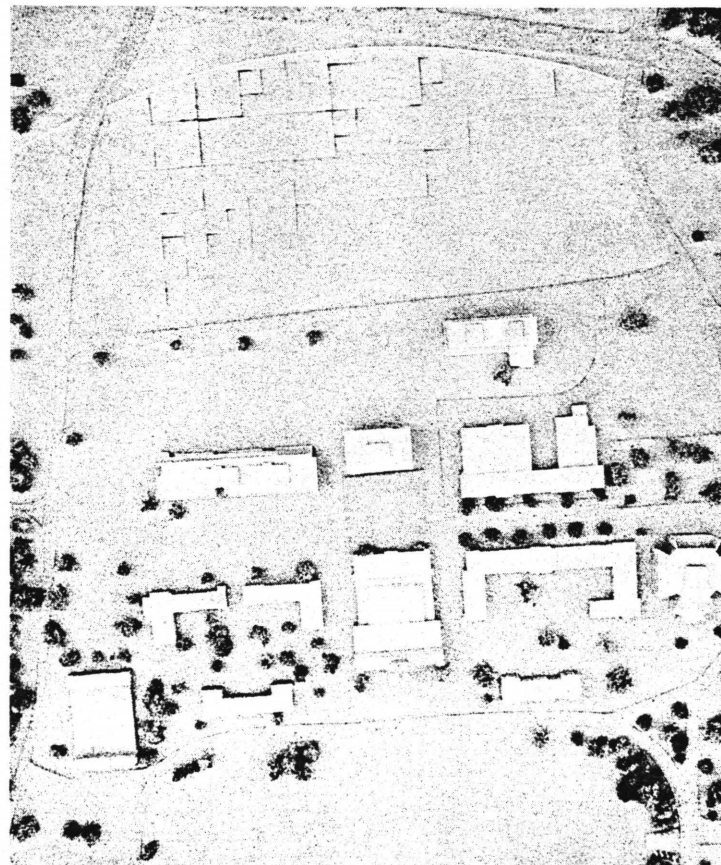
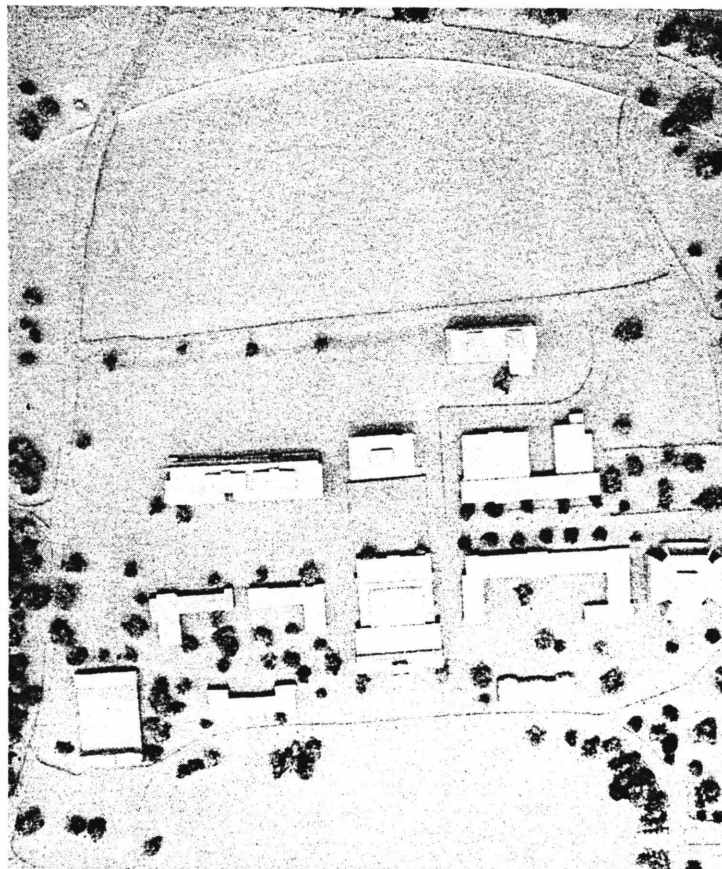
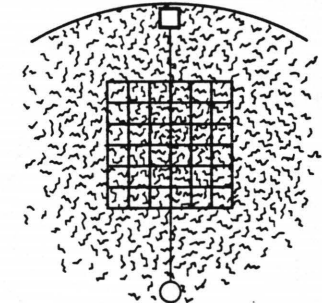
The site is first cut by a wall, which establishes the limit to the campus at a one-half mile radius from the center of the campus, at the drillfield. The curve of this boundary sets up the distinction between "outside" and "inside," demarcating the boundary at which the site "begins its presencing." In addition, this one-mile circle could provide enhanced boundary conditions to other parts of the campus.



The ordering pattern is revealed by extending, synthesizing and clarifying the salient rectilinear order underlying the original pattern of the town and campus. The gradual slope of the site is terraced and planted according to this pattern. This provides an ordered establishment of building and parking sites.

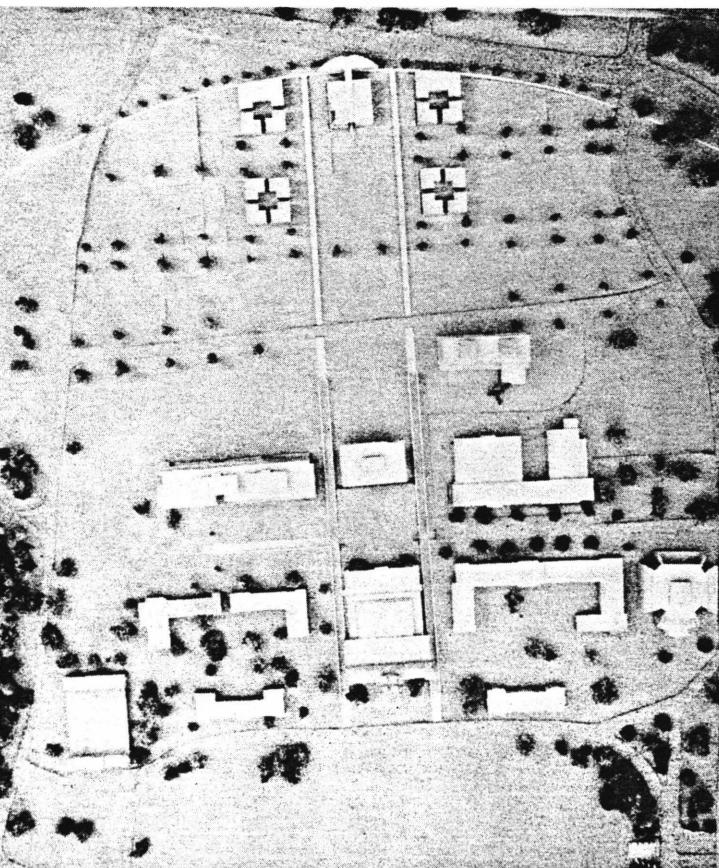
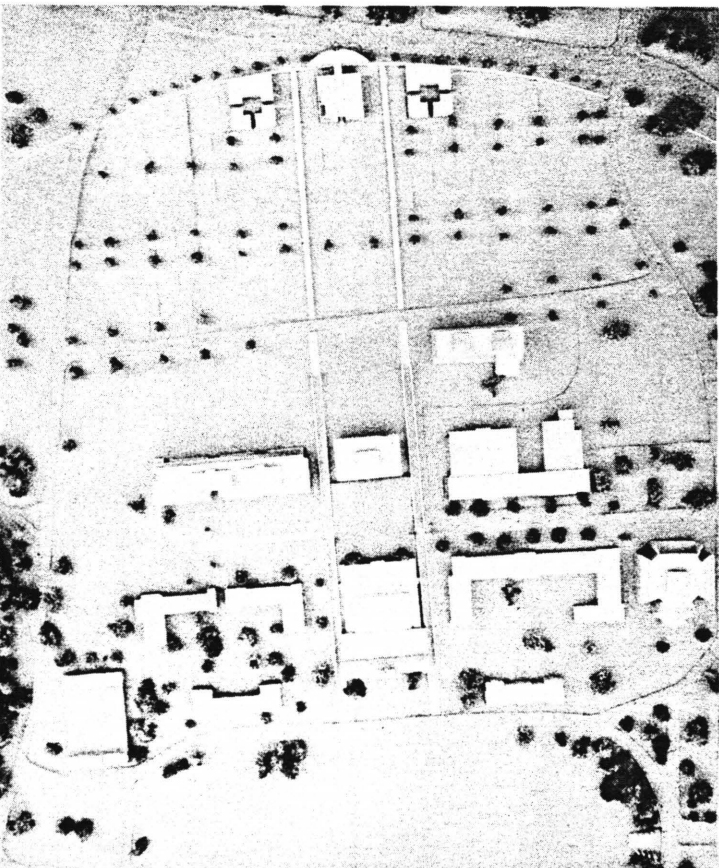
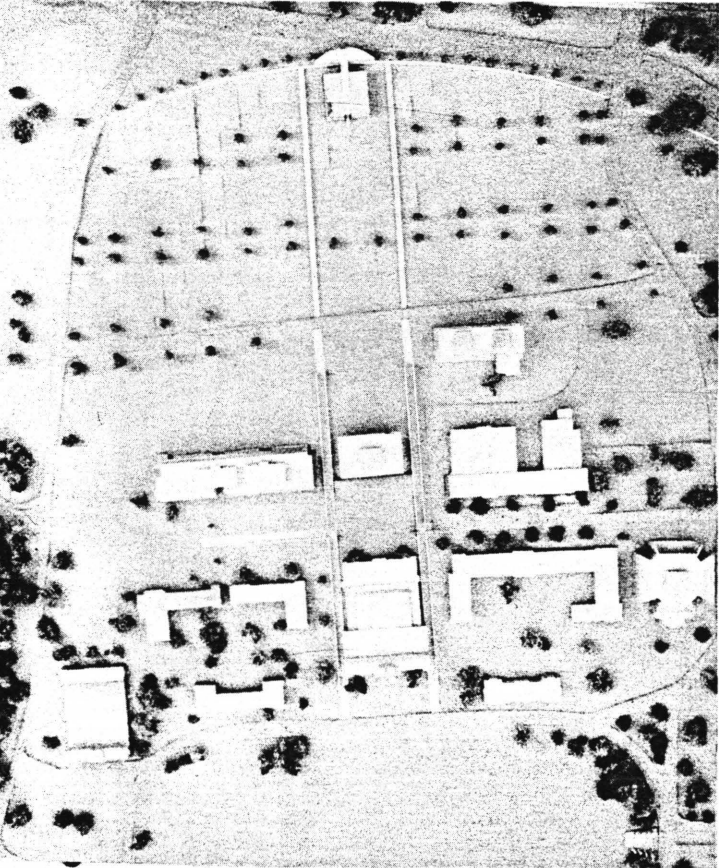
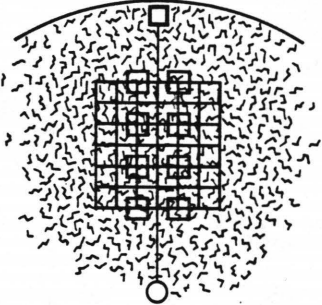


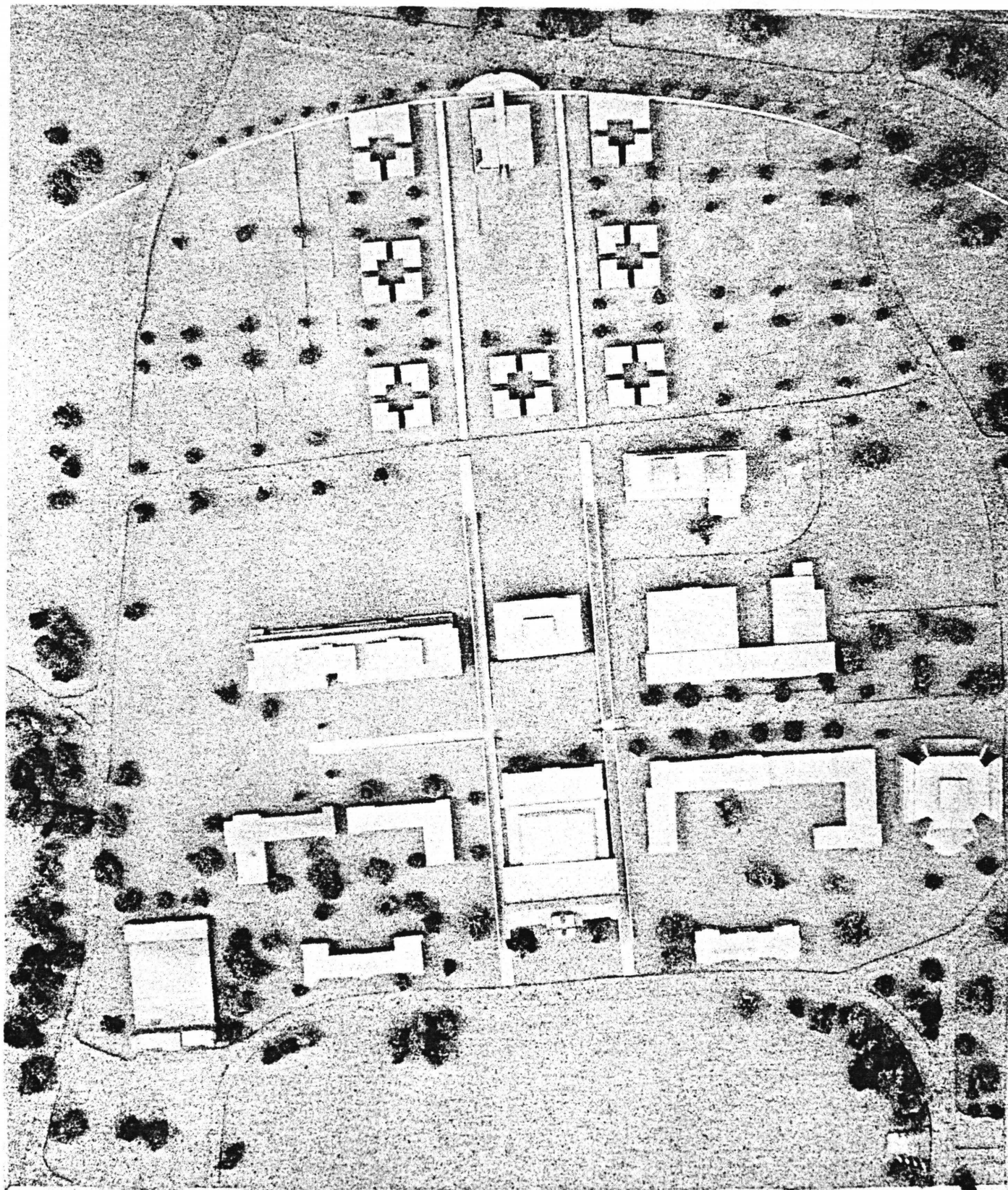
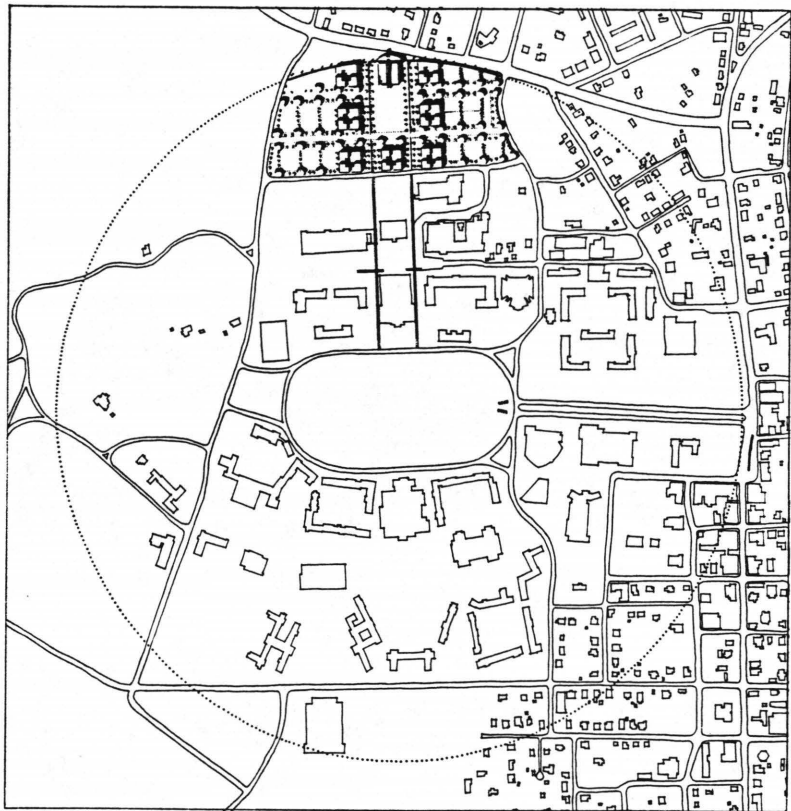
Directional elements are added, establishing a bias and reference to the hierarchical center. Walkways step down from the extremities of the site inwards towards the drillfield. These passages cut through the rise of the campus, linking the level of the drillfield with the level of the terraced site.



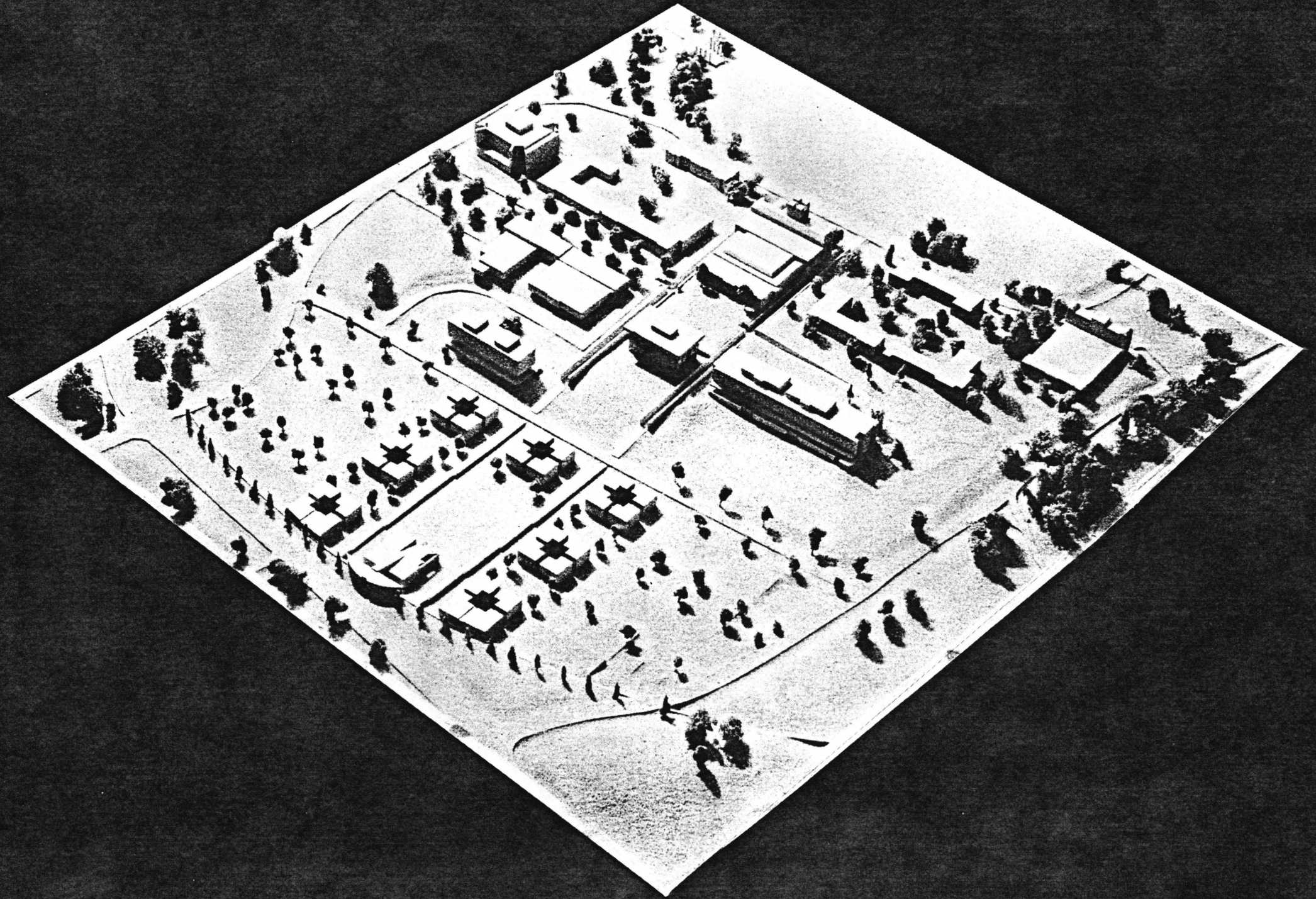
# A Pattern For Coherent Growth

As an alternative to the random "Infill Plan," a new pattern is established for coherent growth, against and within which growth can occur. The focal point is the museum building, which reiterates the curving boundary and bridges the intra- and the extra- mural. The museum is envisioned as the focal point for the future expansion of campus buildings, here schematically laid out to form new campus spaces. This new campus space is to be flanked by parking areas, arranged like the buildings, within the ordering pattern of the site.





The reconstructed site gives a renewed order to the campus. Like a tessera in a mosaic, the proposed building derives from the new structure of the revised site.



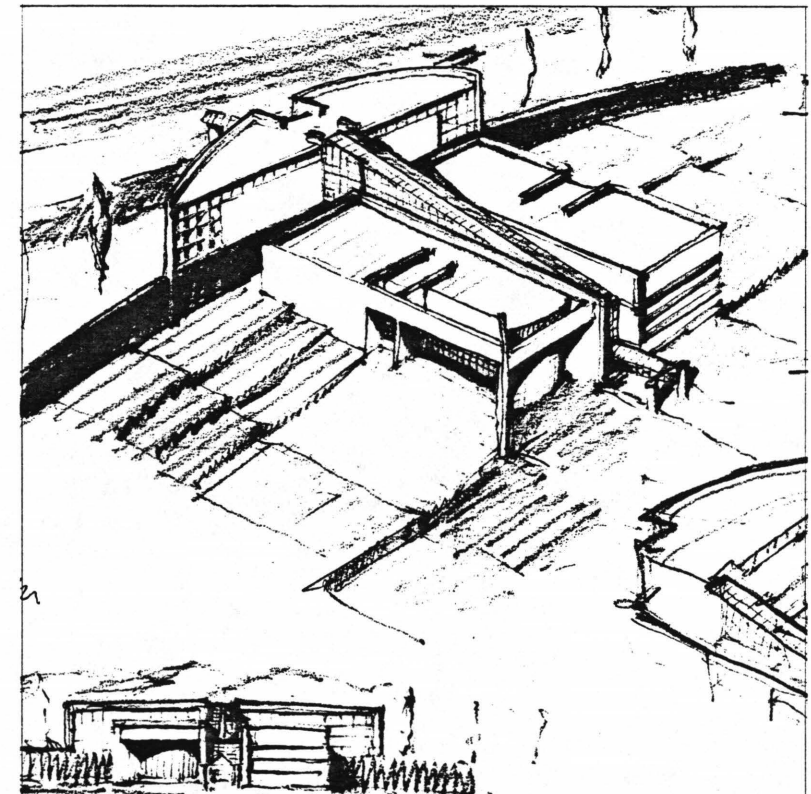
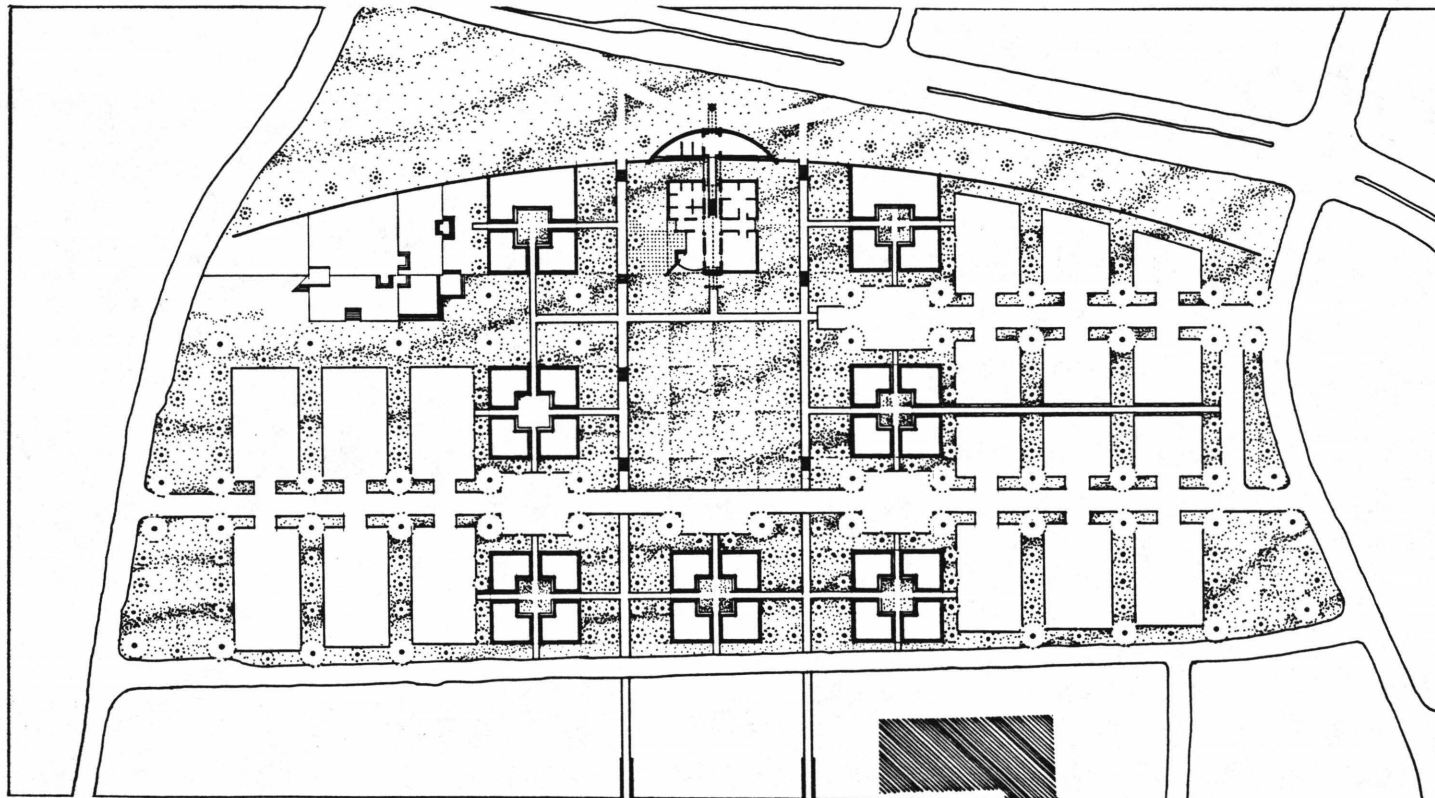
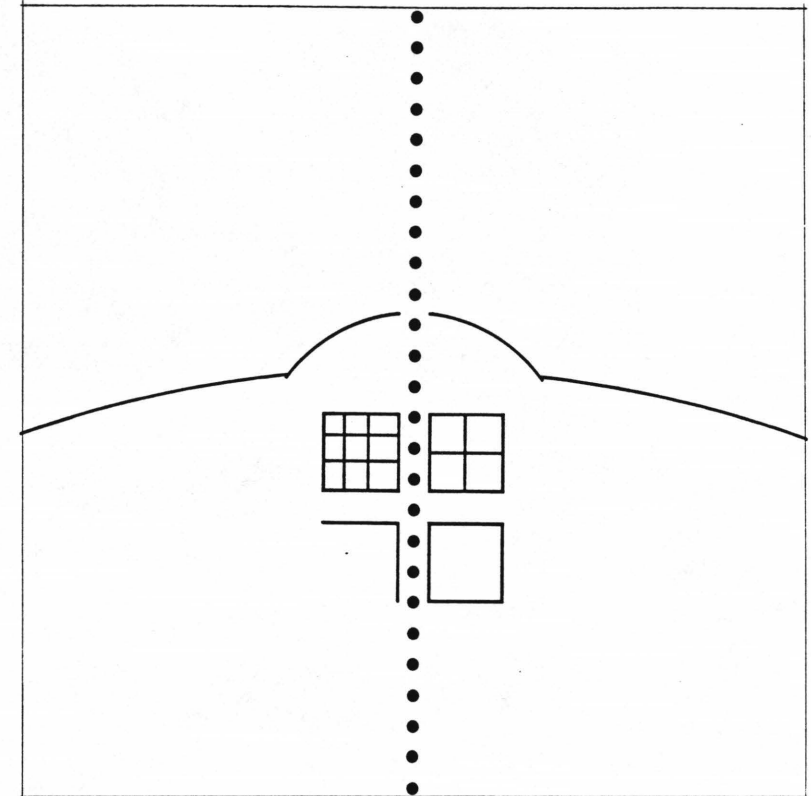
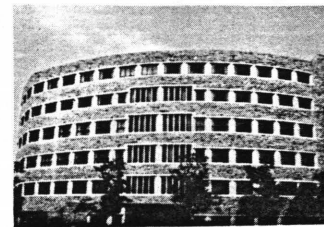
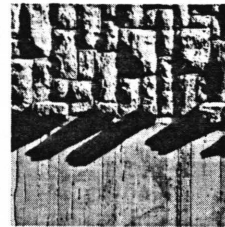
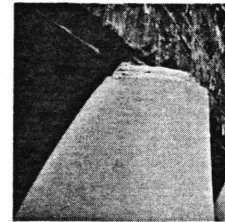
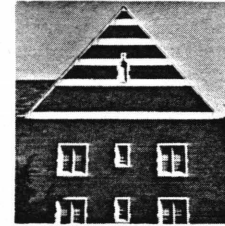
The Museum  
Between Town and University

The museum plan recapitulates the site plan, as an internal and external focal point of the campus-boundary. The central passage connects the inside to the outside of the campus, further reiterating the elements of limit and boundary, transition and passage.

The curved outer portion of the museum outside the walls is the "public" part of the museum, containing galleries for temporary exhibitions by area artists. A glassed-in passage acts as a bridge from the outer to the "inner" building, which houses a permanent university collection.

The materials of the project, concrete, concrete block and stone, are employed in ways characteristic of regional applications in and around the campus. The "hokeystone" veneer which characterizes the campus is used in a way that clearly delineates the veneer from the support.

Site Plan  
Diagram: The museum as a passage  
Sketch of the Museum

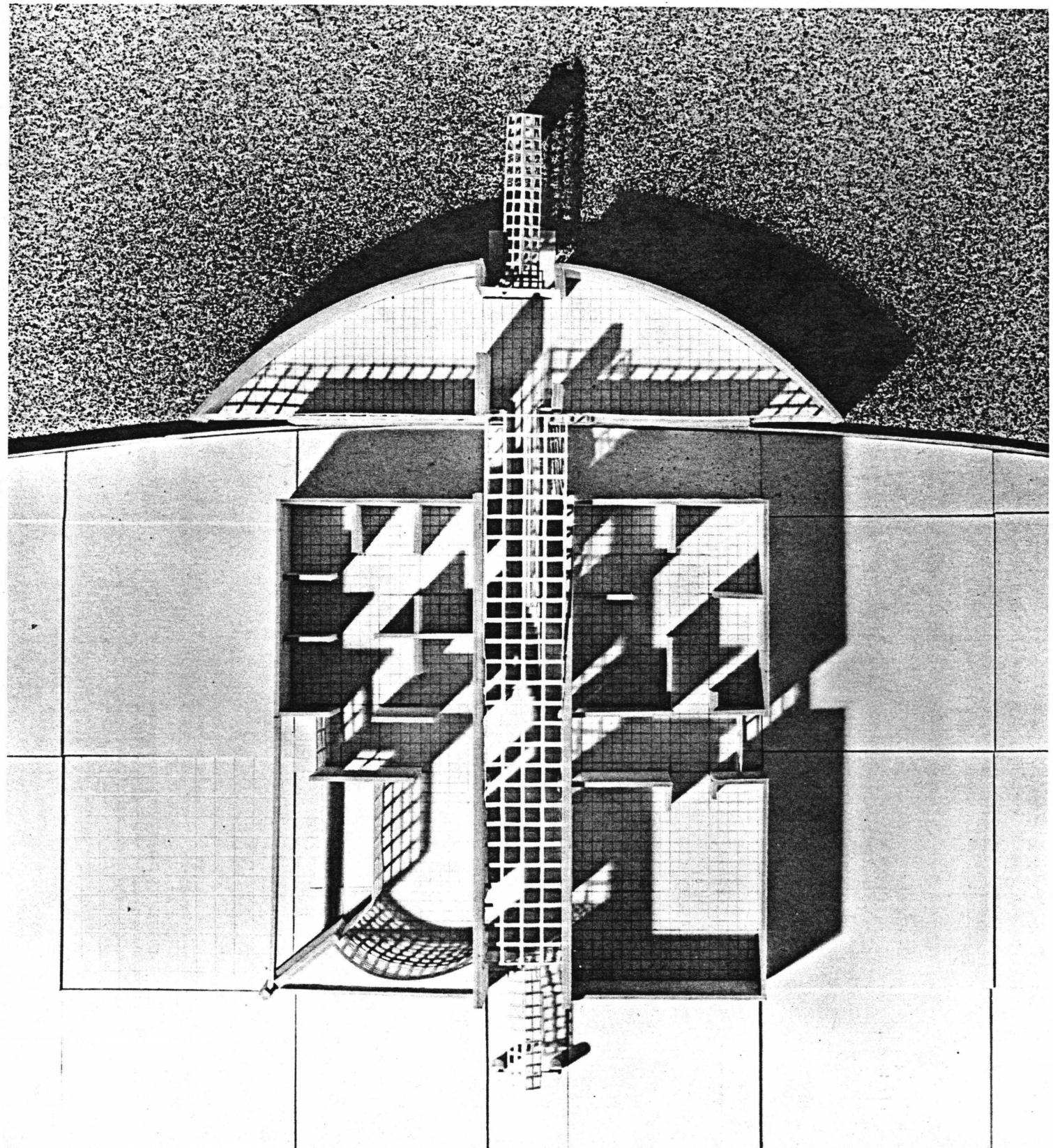
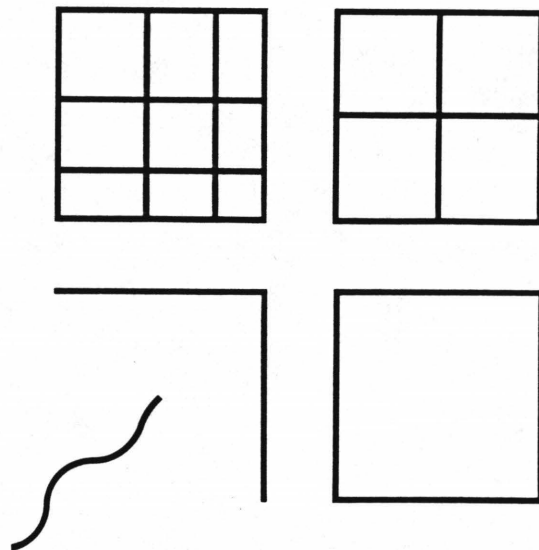


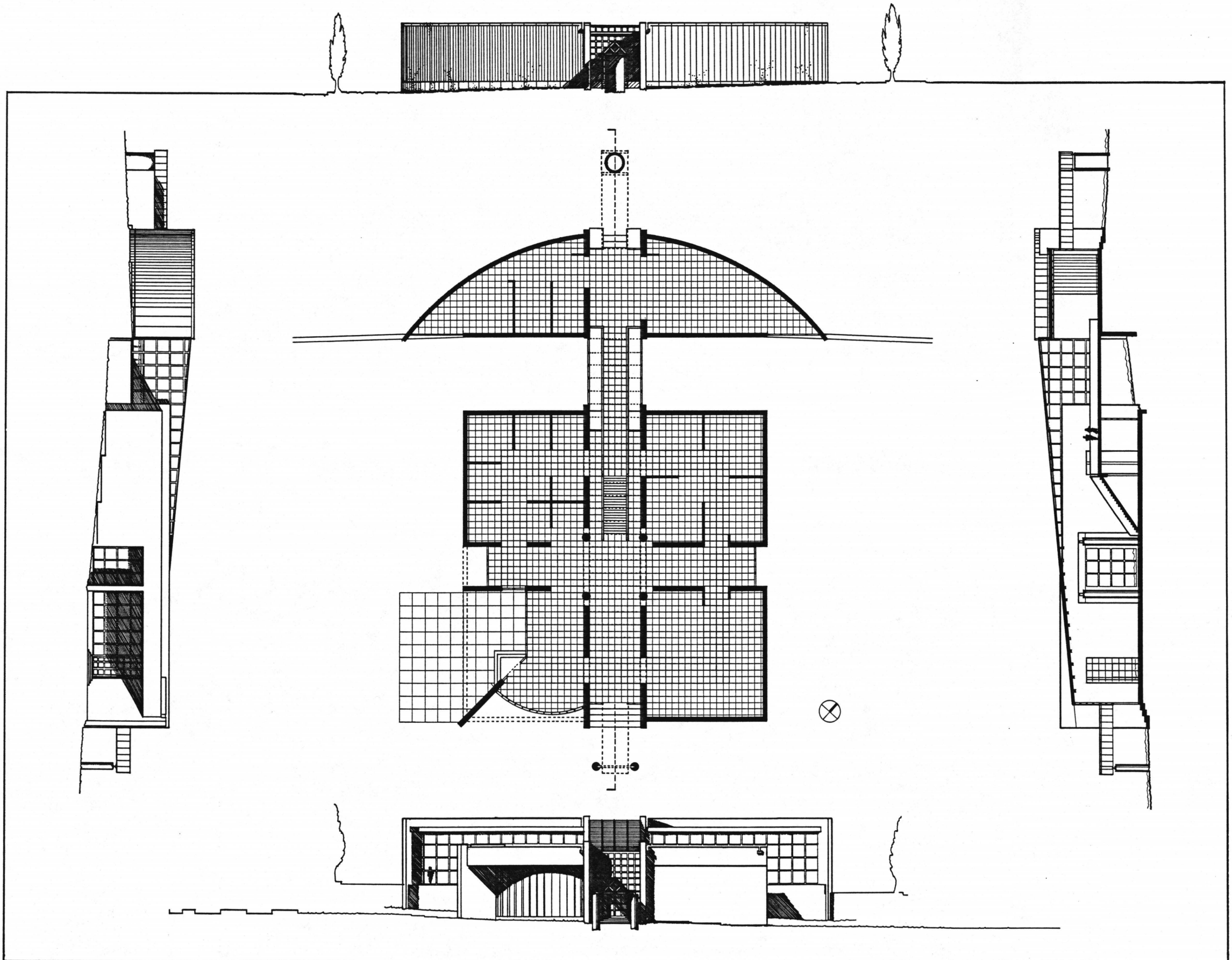
## A Place for Artwork.

What do artworks require? Simply, they require rooms; neutral and integral spaces appropriate to the scale and spatial needs of the artwork. Standard practice for the design of galleries and museums is to provide "flexibility," in the form of moveable partitions and so forth. Yet this is a design approach more to accommodate the needs of the gallery administrators than the requirements of artworks. Therefore, this museum is not organized to accommodate a "flexible" chronological grouping of artworks, but a synchronic grouping, according to their spatial requirements. The plan of the building thus derives from a diagrammatic analysis of this alternate taxonomy of artwork. The Museum building inside the walls, containing the university collection, represents a conjugation of these spaces: big-small, open-closed. Thus, there are small spaces for small things; big spaces for big things, and a transitional space to the outdoor works.

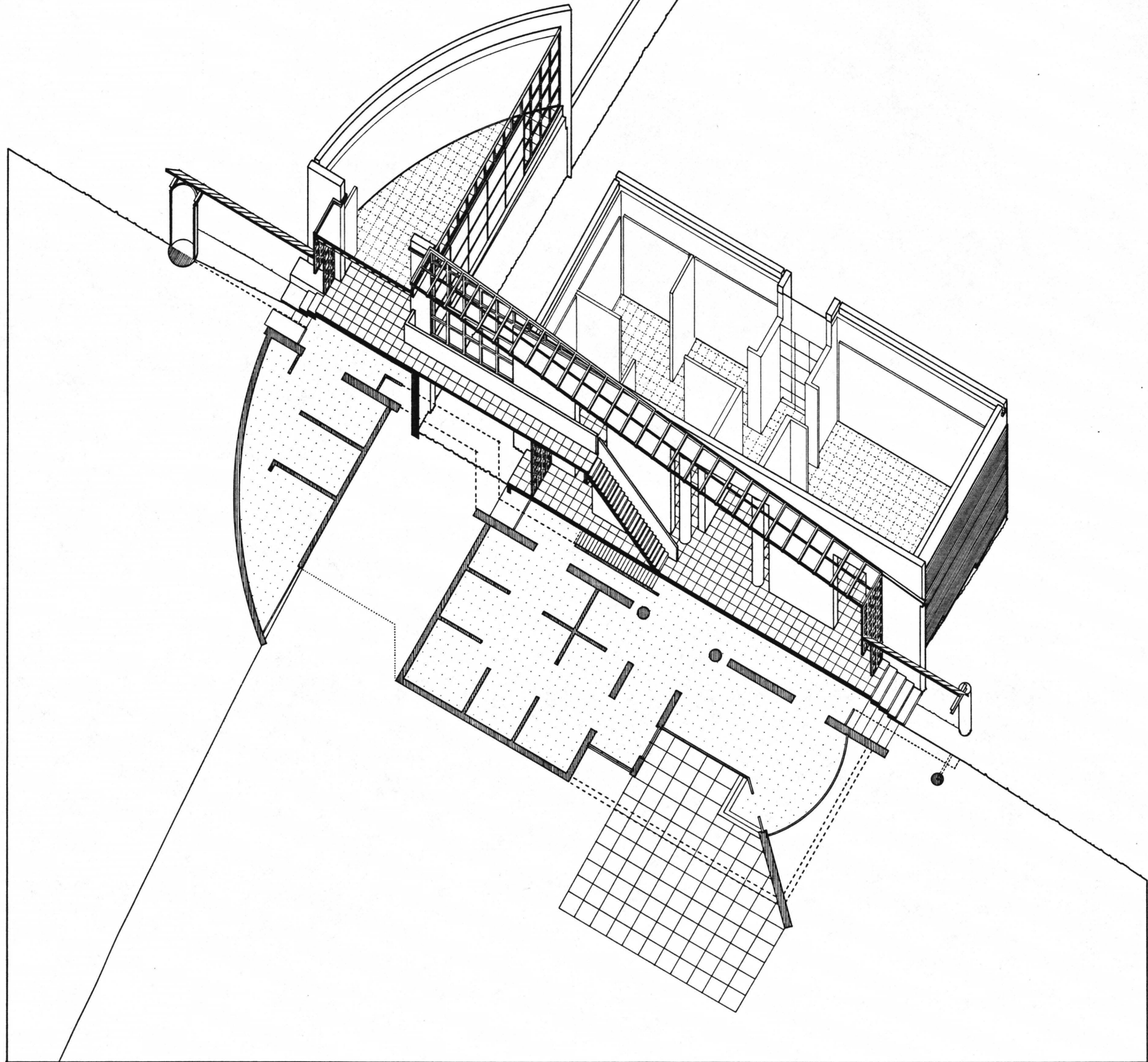
Artworks require settings which do not interfere with them. Therefore the building is like a neutral shell, and becomes activated as a place only with the addition of artwork.

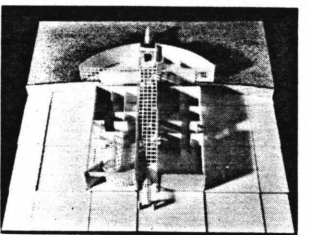
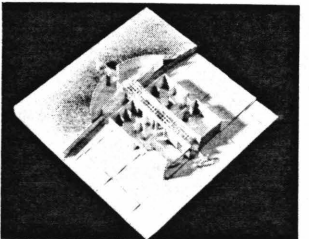
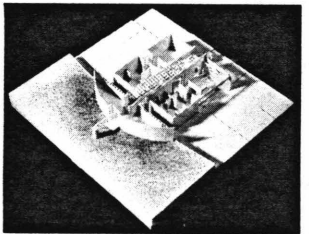
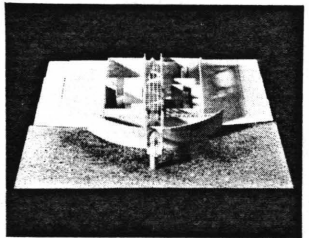
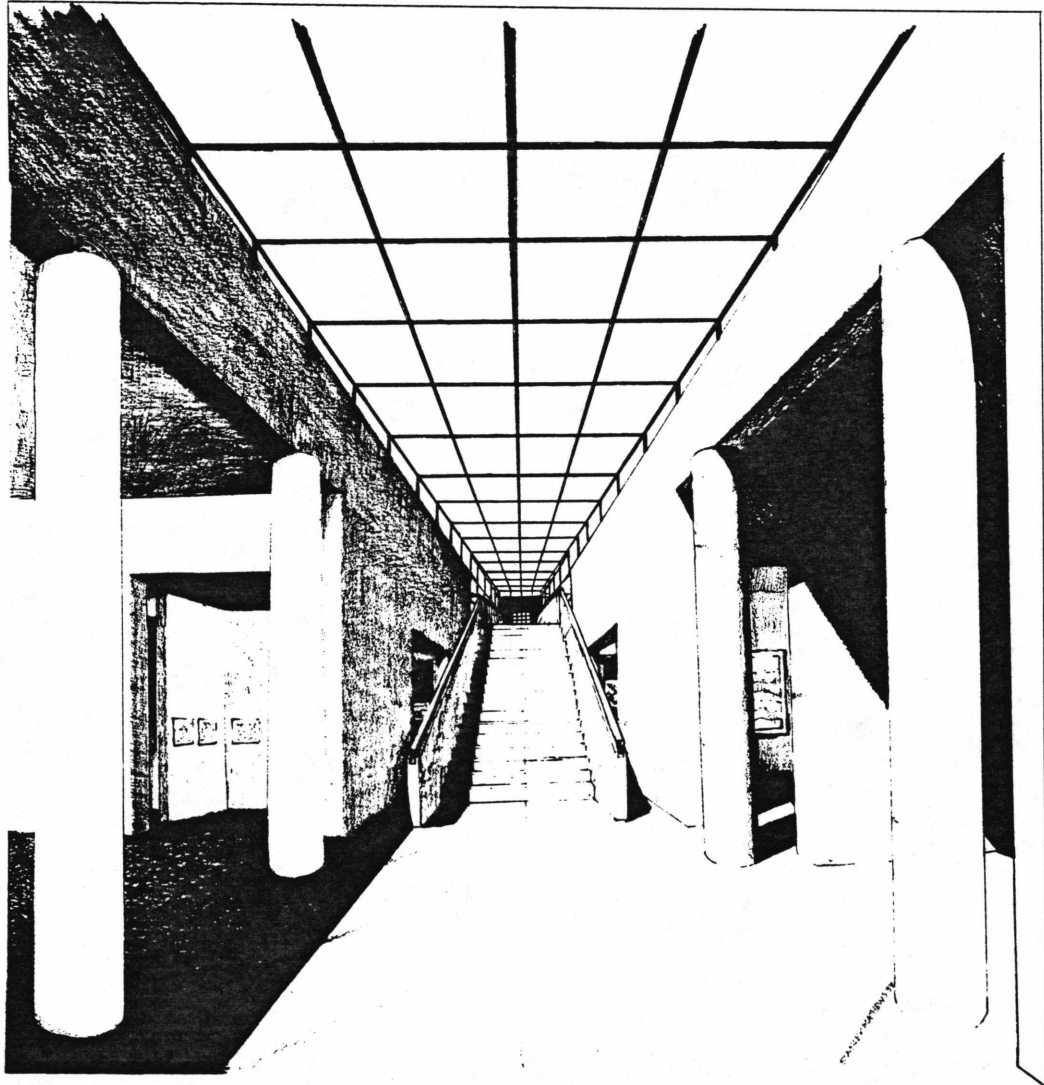
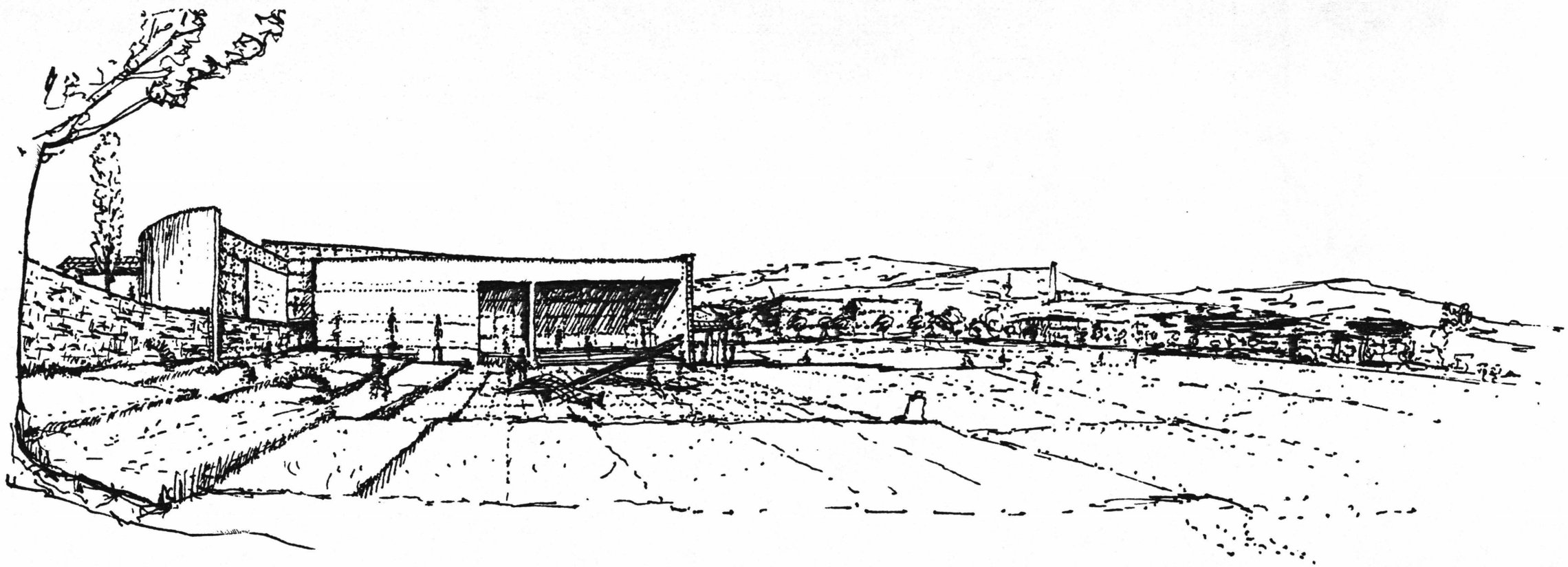
Spaces: open/closed, big/small

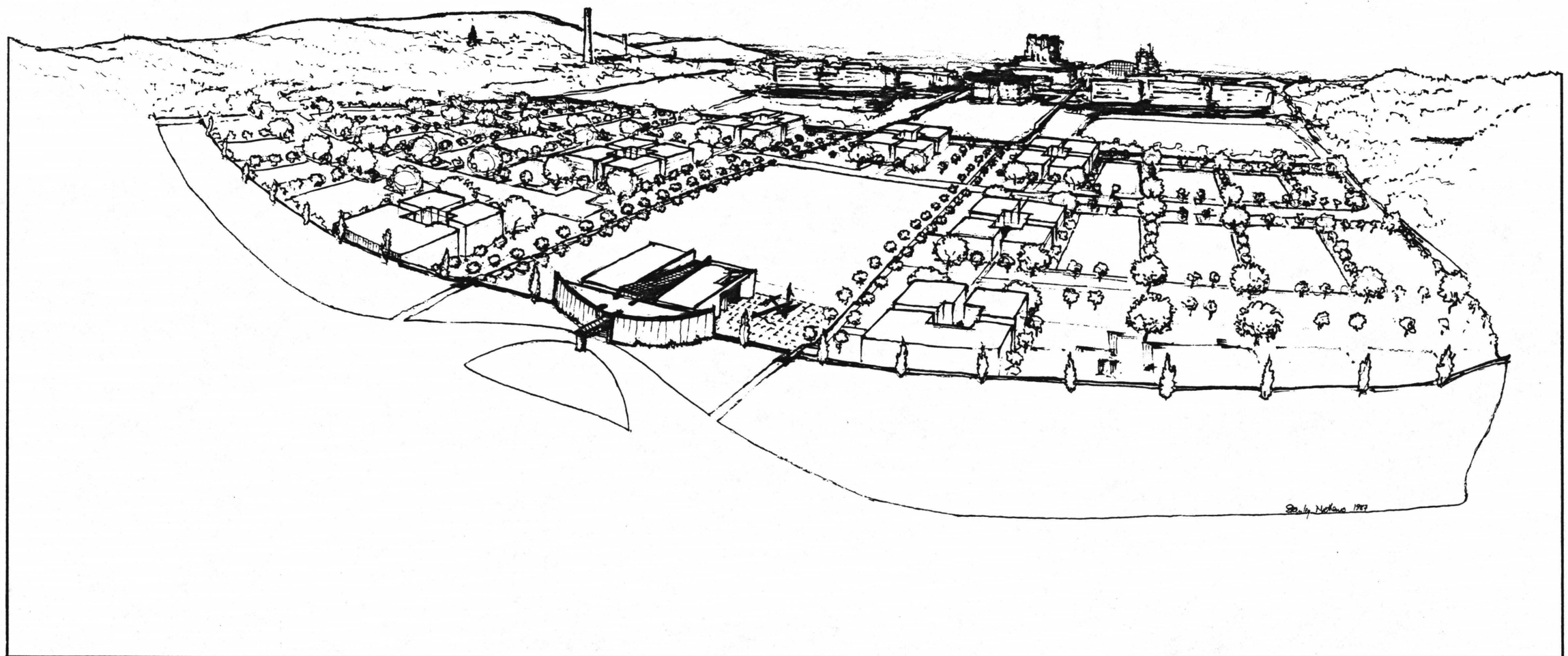




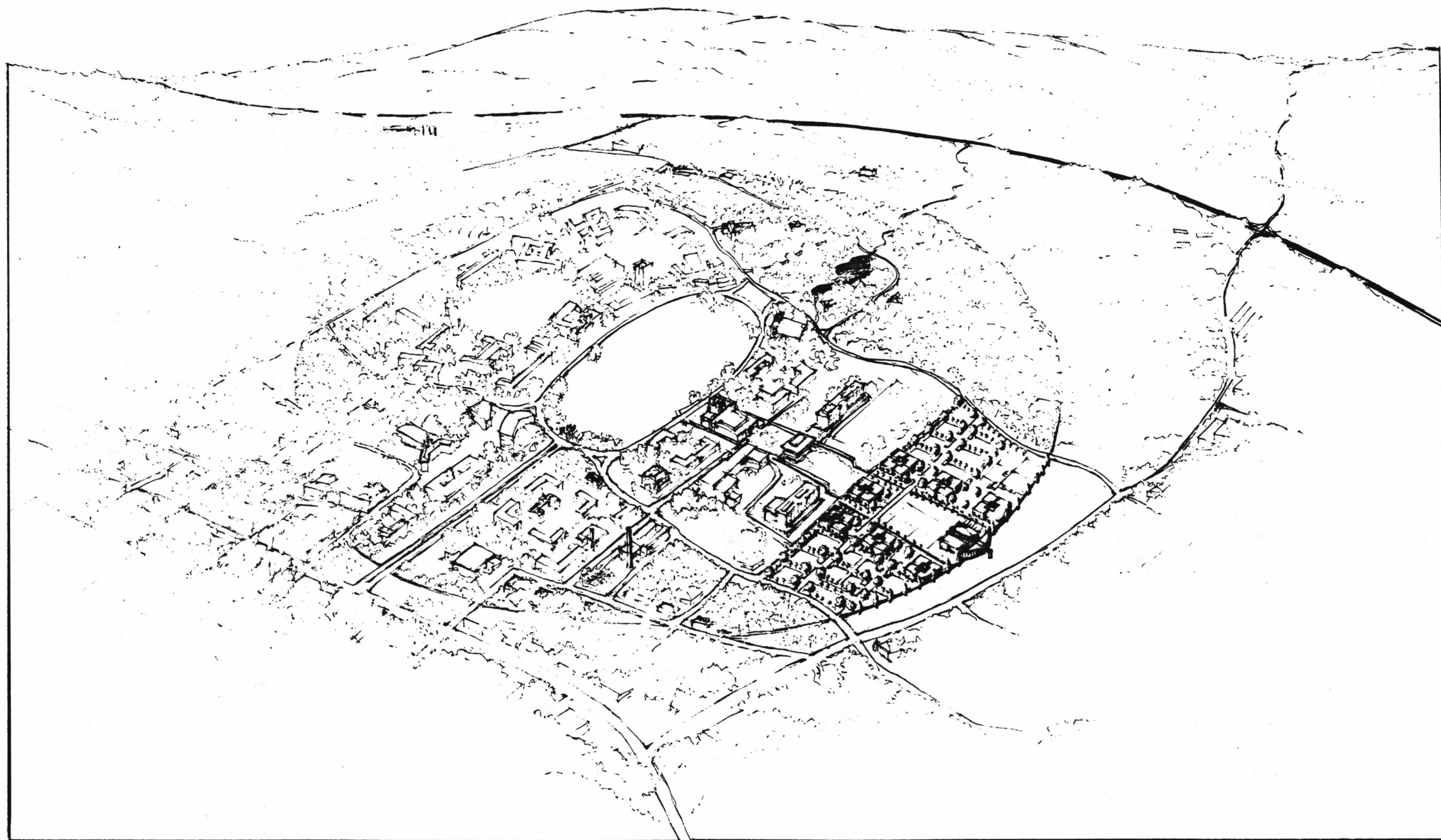


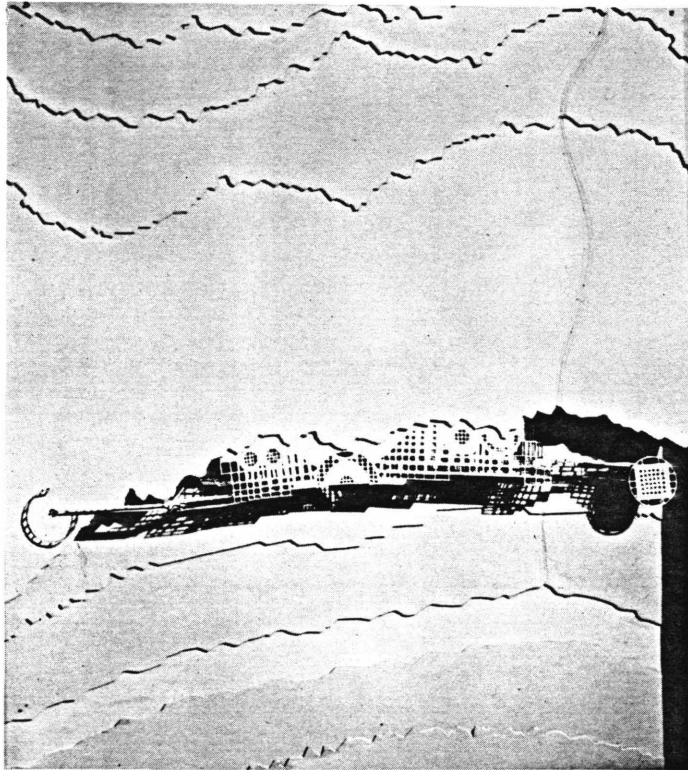






© by Nelson 1993

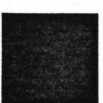




39 Stanley Mathews, Study for a city within a cliff, between two desert ecosystems.

An architect must address the needs and actions of humanity, not on the superficial level of established codes and iconography, but on the level of the experiential. It is from this position that the architect can develop coherent structures to deal with emergent meta-narratives and even contribute to their formation. Culture may require narratives, perhaps even some sort of consensus, but it can no longer be one of monolithic sameness.

I am for an interrelational and interactive architecture, one which maintains a critical stance vis à vis its locus, its purposes and its elements and materials. This is not a disassociated and detached abstract “ideal,” but a self-conscious choice, conviction and commitment to a coherent and dignified order to human existence.



- 1 Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York, 1958), p. 58.
- 2 Latin, *textus*: fabric or structure, *texere*: to weave. "Text" refers to the complex enframing constructions and interactions of signifier and signified. Besides being readable as a whole, the text can also be decoded. "Text" means more than literary writing, including artistic, architectural, musical and filmic constructions (See also footnote 44).
- 3 There is an interesting parallel with particle physics and especially Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. There are several aspects to this principle: One may determine either the velocity or the location of an electron, but not both. The electron cannot be understood as an isolated entity exterior to the context of the system of contingent relation to other particles. The instruments and conditions of experimentation and observation are in themselves interferences on the action of the particle, thus objective analysis of discrete and isolated phenomena is impossible. See: Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics* (New York, 1980).
- 4 Paradigm refers to a set of axioms or presuppositions on which values and belief systems are founded, within which one works (Eg: The geocentric model of the universe). A paradigmatic crisis occurs when these basic values lose their validity. However, even if contradictions and discrepancies result from a set of accepted paradigms, elaborate measures will be taken to amend and maintain them until another paradigm arises which better accounts for phenomena. See: Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1970).
- 5 Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," *Basic Writings* (New York, 1977), p. 332.
- 6 Dr. Jerri Brooklyn-Pike on Greek funerary monuments.
- 7 *Chōra*: Space or room in which a thing is.  
Country, place, spot.  
Position, proper place of a person or thing.  
Land, country town. (Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 2015.)  
Special thanks to Dr. Susan Kane, Oberlin College.  
Jacques Derrida enlarges on the concept of *chōra*, as the matrix or field of beingness, the place of origin or of being (*lieu de l'être*) or the inseparable unity of being and place. From my notes taken at a lecture delivered by Derrida, at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, November, 1985.
- 8 "By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct." Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," op. cit., p. 168.
- 9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York, 1962), p. 243.
- 10 ...placing (the works of antiquity) in a collection has withdrawn them from their own world. But even when we...visit the temple at Paestum at its own site...the world of the work that stands there has perished... Henceforth they remain merely such objects...The whole art industry...extends only to the object-being of the works. But this does not constitute their work-being....  
Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," op. cit., pp. 167- 168.
- 11 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA, 1983).
- 12 The tendency to break up phenomena into isolated elements is fundamental in our very language:  
We cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do largely because, through our mother tongue, we are parties to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way. Languages differ not only in how they build their sentences, but in how they break down nature into the elements to put into those statements. By the terms we use we attribute a semi-fictitious isolation to segments of experience in order to deal with them.  
For example, English terms, like "sky," "hill," "swamp," persuade us to regard some elusive aspect of nature's endless variety as a distinct thing, almost like a table or a chair. Thus English and similar tongues lead us to think of the universe as a collection of rather distinct objects and events corresponding to words. Indeed this is the implicit picture of classical physics and astronomy — that the universe is essentially a collection of detached objects of different sizes... Thus as goes our segmentation of the face of nature, so goes our physics of the cosmos...  
Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Space, Time, Language," *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, 1956).
- 13 To be sure, there are exceptions. Although still spatially confined, Anthony Caro's work certainly tends to engage its space and break down the centralized, isolated aspects of sculpture.
- 14 Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," *Art in America* (Jan/Feb 1978), p. 73.
- 15 Within the past year, the entire museum has been completely redesigned to create enclosed spaces, with false ceilings to block off the activity overhead.
- 16 Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., p. 323.
- 17 Of course, some artists make conscious and ironic use of this to disconcert the spectator.
- 18 Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," op. cit., p. 330.
- 19 Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston, IL, 1965).

- 20 “[Modern architecture]...substituted for the classical trinity of commodity, firmness and delight, a dialectic of means and ends joined by the criteria of economy.” A. Vidler, “The Third Typology,” *Rational Architecture* (1978), p. 30.
- 21 “The individual habitable unit,...the Existenzminimum presupposed a static relationship between a certain style of life-hypothetical even if statistically verifiable and a certain type of lodging.” Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 76.
- 22 ...Semper clearly attempted to make the process of design analogous to the resolution of an algebraic equation. The “variable” represented the manifold aspect of reality that architecture had to take into account; the solution was simply a “function” of these variables. This reductionist strategy has since become the fundamental framework of architectural theory and practice, whether one examines the forms of structural determinism or the more subtle attempts to utilize psychological, sociological or even aesthetic variables. More recently, various sophisticated methodologies and even computers have been applied to design, always failing, however, to come to terms with the essential question of meaning in architecture.  
Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 7.
- 23 Paul Ricoeur, op. cit.
- 24 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London, 1977), p. 116.
- 25 The supporting Meta-narratives of political and intellectual freedom are no longer viable because, according to François Lyotard, “technology, particularly information and communications technology, has irreversibly taken over all the positions of power.” Colquhoun, *Art Criticism*, v.2, no. 1 (1985), p. 34. Lyotard outlines three measures for resisting technocratic coopting:  
—Narrative knowledge as opposed to scientific knowledge.(See footnote 26)  
—Language games, resisting of universalized meaning.  
—Paralogy of Science; diversity and complexity versus technocratic performative efficiency.  
See: François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Bennington and Massumi, (Minneapolis, 1984).
- 26 In a time of Meta-narrative stability, architectural education might well be a matter of training. But in a time of change, architectural education cannot be a matter of learning architecture informationally, but of experiencing it as a dialogue of narratives; as story, not as science. Knowledge is gained through experience, as one applies ideas to the resistant structures of language, or any other coherent syntax. An example is Walter Benjamin’s distinction between novel and story. What is important is not the “hearing” of the story, but the retelling of it.  
For the wanderer doesn’t bring from the mountain slope a handful of earth to the valley, untellable earth, but only some word he has won...  
Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Ninth Elegy*

The discourse becomes a way of orienting oneself within a narrative system as an integral part of that narrative, as distinct from mere subscription to the pre-formed recitations of instrumentality. That is also the function of poetry and “strangeness”, (see page 13 of the text) not to tell how a thing is significant, but to provide to the individual the means to re-create and experience through the interior discourse for himself and on his own terms how it is significant.

Architecture can be seen as an oral tradition, and it is the multiple dialogues that are important, those which involve transformations of essentially linguistic syntactic structures through discussion, material manipulation, poetry, music and so on. The purpose of these dialogues is to develop a critical understanding and the ability to maintain a dialogue amidst changing narratives and attendant styles. The danger is that that which has served well as a fluid and dynamic pedagogic strategy can rapidly calcify into a stylistic dogma and academic rigidity. To create, one must establish a critical narrative dialectic, one must teach, if not students, then oneself; but the narrative dialogue must continue. When this ceases, one works within a vacuum and creation ceases as well.

- 27 “...dans les époques de dislocation historiques, ... nous sommes chassés du lieu...” Jacques Derrida, *L’Ecriture et La Différence* (Paris, 1967), p. 14.
- 28 These conditions are by no means exclusive to the United States, nor even to western culture. This becomes obvious if one compares the characters of the politico-religious fundamentalist movements in the United States and in Iran.
- 29 Rosalind Krauss, op. cit., p. 31.
- 30 Locus here means more than just site or “context.” It implies a fabric, composed of a convergence of cultural, historical, geographical and geological contexts, memory, city, “expanded site” or phenomenal field, or the chōra.
- 31 Attributed to Cornificus. From Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology* (Baltimore, 1985), p. 71.
- 32 Context...has nothing to do with the architecture of the city, but rather with the making of a scene...whose very presence serves to preserve forms as they are and to immobilize life, saddening us like would-be tourists of a vanished world,  
Aldo Rossi, op. cit., p. 123.
- 33 Some of these considerations are variously described in the work and thought of Aldo Rossi, Luigi Snozzi and Robert Venturi.
- 34 The site-specificity of architecture also extends to regional and vernacular variations. See: Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism,” *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA, 1983).

- 35 By extension of the argument, the sculptural tendencies we have examined are themselves manifestations of a Postmodern condition in sculpture.
- 36 "The architectonic process as [Adolf] Hildebrand conceives it, is the construction and ordering of forms in space in such a way that they define and organize the space." Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), p. 73-4.
- 37 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism," *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA, 1983), p. 26.
- 38 See: Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (London, 1980).
- 39 The "national grid," or the rectilinear subdivision of the American continent was adopted as a national policy in 1785 by the Continental Congress. See: J. B. Jackson, *American Space* (New York, 1972).
- 40 "...the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized, somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city..." Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 13.
- 41 The use of Genius Loci is based on J.B. Jackson's definition:
1. It is of a place which has its own order and laws.
  2. It is at once embedded in the world and distant from it.
  3. It is connected to human activity through ritual and habitual actions.
- From my notes taken at a lecture by J. B. Jackson at Oberlin College, October, 1986.
- 42 Louis Kahn pointed out that architecture is preceded by institutions, cultural/social agreement and accord. (See: John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light* (Boulder, 1979).
- 43 "The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting place for daydreaming. And often the resting-place particularized the daydream." Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, 1969), p. 15.
- 44 ...we say "writing" for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural "writing."  
Jacques Derrida, *De La Grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), p. 19.
- 45 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1981), p.26.
- 46 The cut also relates to verticality, bringing into the picture Heidegger's fourfold of dwelling: earth, sky, mortals and divinities. ("Building, Dwelling, Thinking," op. cit.).
- 47 To understand the distinctions between transparency, obscurity and ambiguity, we may use the analogue of art. Transparent art simply portrays from within its own closed set of singularly defined terms. (My use of transparent here is not to be confused with Colin Rowe's *transparenz*). It is illustrative and transparent inasmuch as it establishes clear and limited purposes and programs at the outset, and illustrates them with cliched signs and symbols. Nothing is really revealed. This includes not only the realism of the Norman Rockwell print, but the abstraction of simplistic formalism as well. No questions are raised that are not immediately answered; no poetic potential engaged. Art which is obscure is that which frustrates our understanding with a false profundity. Lacking the ability to address real significance, the artist constructs the smokescreen of complicating and conflicting signs which mystify the work. It is a gratuitous "making strange." We are left feeling foolish and cheated. Dali's late paintings vacillate between clarity and obscurity. Ambiguous (or complex) art, however, rewards our efforts to understand with insights, with a certain satisfaction, but with the knowledge that there is more to be discovered. Each time we return to the work, we discover some new thing. Insight is continuously revealed, building on previous insights. Since the locus of meaning shifts within the text, meaning is not static or absolute. Therefore it permits an ongoing discourse of insight. There are no single meanings, rather the complex interactions of our thoughts as we re-create for ourselves the intensity of feeling of the artist. Works which have "survived the test of time" and appear continually fresh are works which address the complexity of ambiguity.
- 48 Stanford Anderson. "Modern Architecture and Industry: Peter Behrens, the AEG and Industrial Design," *Oppositions*, no. 21 (Summer 1980), p. 83.
- 49 Some of the most extreme examples of these strategies are the structures of Zaha Hadid and the Coop Himmelblau, where strangeness and collaging are quite literal and often bizarre.
- 50 Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York, 1972).p. 24.
- 51 Heidegger, op. cit., p. 164.
- 52 *Group Mu*, eds. *Collages*, from *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA, 1983), p. 88. Ulmer cites this passage in his explanation of Derrida's concept of the "gram."
- 53 Cited by John Cage, "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas," *The New Art*, Gregory Battcock, ed. (New York, 1966) p. 219.
- 54 Heidegger, op. cit., p. 180.
- 55 Heidegger, "The Question of Technology," op. cit., p. 294.
- 56 This analogy is adapted from professor Tom Regan. See also: Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966).
- 57 See: Perez-Gomez, op. cit.



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