

Joyce Stewart-Tambe

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

Approved:

Dennis Kilper, Chair

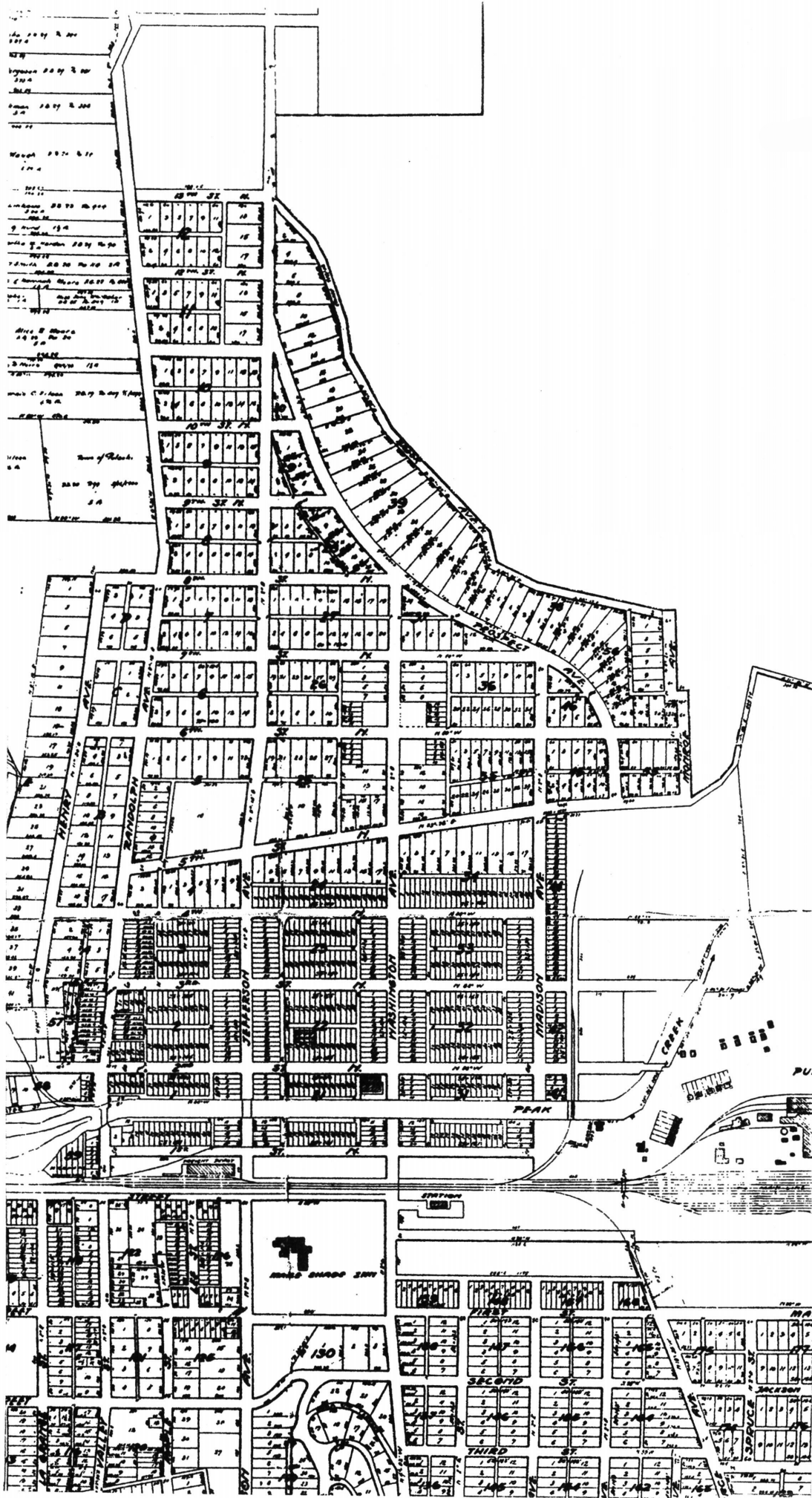
Michael J. O'Brien

Donna Dunay

CARVING MASS:
TO FRAME THE CENTER

In Memorium

She lived the smalltown life and contributed to Nichols, South Carolina as teacher, parent, neighbor, and citizen.



- i. Title Page
- ii. Contents
- iv. Abstract
- 1. Town
- 3. Proposal for the Avenue
- 5. Formative Principles
- 7. Narrative
- 8. Projected Experience
- 15. Notes and Bibliography
- 16. Vita



CARVING MASS: TO FRAME THE CENTER

Architecture frames life. By framing I mean that it gives individual awareness perimeters which shape the habits of the mind while the material frame supports the life of the body. We live in the center of our awareness. Some of Wallace Stevens' poetry explores the habits and the shape of consciousness. Consider these lines: *I measure myself /Against a tall tree/I find that I am much taller/ For I reach right up to the sun /With my eye/And I reach to the shore of the sea/With my ear.*(1)

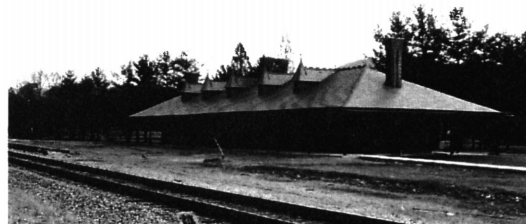
A building is a physical entity which gives us rooms and spaces. A dualism lies in thing and void because it necessarily constricts movement as well as shaping the consciousness as one moves to and fro and as one gazes into the distance. One's desire to do these things may be frustrated by a poor building, while a well-formed building might encourage a choreography of consciousness, a mental dance. More than any other art, architecture presses upon daily life. It reminds us of the duality of mind and body. When we can enjoy the dual nature of architecture, we become more aware of our wonderful creaturehood. A pleasant opposition forms between a sensed object-building and a sensing, willing, walking, inquiring creature. Tactility and other physical qualities which are sensed contribute to vital awareness. I define architecture as the art of building that serves vital feeling over time.

Exterior conditions also frame life. Literal enclosure is not required. For example, a field may form a realm, that is, an ordered place under the sky. We know where we are in a realm. In a city, the parts belong together when most of them are ordered by common elements such as a street or market square. In the United States, most familiar cities and towns are formed by the street. Often the buildings and the street make a canyon-like room for movement and activity. The life that flows through the street creates the city and nourishes it. Commerce, symbolic activities like parades and social activities like teen-age cruising maintain street life in even the smallest and most ordinary towns.

The thesis project proposes a multiuse building to pull people into a downtown center. Pulaski, Virginia is the chosen town which I will describe in the next section. I begin the design with mass conceptually carved out to frame experience. The building I designed gives Pulaski a stronger downtown edge. This makes a boundary and a turning point to reinforce its identity as a place people feel proud to call home, and to renew the firm pattern of density to guide future builders and planners. This is necessary to forestall the common disintegration of the urban edge into a straggly commercial strip with disconcerting gaps and irregularity. Consider now the specific details of one small town.



Left: The Pulaski County Courthouse as seen from Main Street. Below it is the Courthouse as it is seen from a gap on Washington Avenue—a parking lot. *Below, top to bottom:* The restored train station as seen from Washington Avenue. The tracks run parallel to the canal (as you may have noticed in the town map on the second page of this book). *Next,* a recent shot of Main Street showing the typical "wall" of the street. It also indicates the efforts to boost the central retail trade as it resists the call of the malls. The marquee of the former theatre says "Shop downtown." *Far bottom:* Home in the rear of a town building (as seen from the alley). If they have privacy built in, they can be good places.



Consider The Town...

The American small town teaches lessons. How so? Are they not thriving only in the nostalgic fantasies of yuppie tourists?(2). It is true that many towns have emptied onto the highways in the wake of regional malls and chains. It is true that jobs elsewhere lure away many of the young people. If progress is destined to put these towns out of business we must learn what made them work for so long, or progress will ring hollow.(3) But, perhaps, some like Pulaski, Virginia will prove tenacious with most stores occupied, most homes well-kept. Let us study Pulaski. We need not succumb to sentimentality to appreciate the perseverance of its livable civic form.

The civic form I am describing is a commonplace one with a dense core arrayed upon a regular grid of blocks. In Pulaski, the old Lee Highway runs through. It was rerouted to merge with Washington Street north to south. Peak Creek and the westbound railroad gave reason to make this spot the County Seat and an industrial base. Pulaski allowed large and small housing types to mix. Both rented and owner-occupied houses can be found downtown and on the north side of the highway among the trees. Towns like this are still sensible places to live with many advantages for those who prefer peacefulness to big city excitement.

The hot buzzwords of today include "affordable housing", "desire for community", and "diversity", but towns like this one unconsciously permit such things. Studying an existing community reveals that they were provided in the past but that they are valued most when missed.(4) We see in Pulaski that a sense of community sometimes includes nosy neighbors; that affordable housing might be thirty years old; or that it may mean living over a store or in a large old house that has been divided; or that diversity can be had when new houses and old houses are built next to one another. Also, stability and goodwill must be cherished above housing resale value. Without these the residents and their councilmen will exclude all potential threats to that property value.(5)

Observers take for granted the pleasant mix that occurred here because it was built incrementally without glamorous visions. The town established zoning regulations late, after the furniture factories, the stores and the residences had cozied up to one another. The resulting proximity of home and business gives pedestrians easy walking distances to most necessities. The furthest residential street lies 16 short blocks from the grocery store. Drugstores, Post Office, Courthouse, and many workplaces lie much closer.

This town and others like it are built upon optimism, a desire for instant stability and neighborliness. Old photographs of the fledgling settlement reveal commercial buildings on open ground among flocks of chickens. The new buildings look expectant. Their owners expected other buildings to file in side by side with good manners and reasonable haste. An impression of confidence is reinforced by the streets which run strictly North/South and East/West as if certain that the order that describes the Earth is the rational way to make a city. Who today would presume that

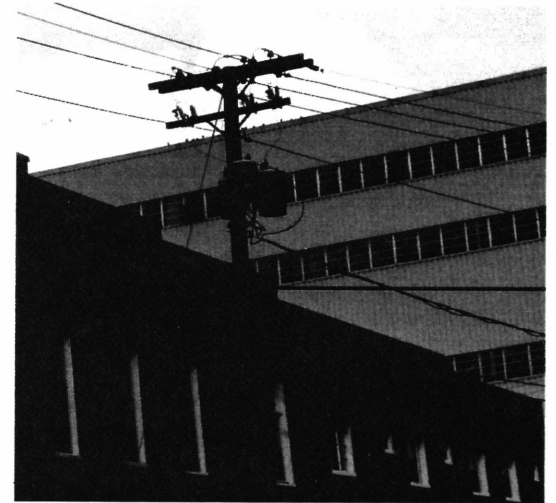
so much desolate space would fill in without guidelines and commitments or that buildings not yet conceived would orderly and dutifully step up in like fashion, sharing the same values? They believed that later buildings would be good neighbors if the proper precedents were set because the conventions benefit all.

I doubt that the people engaged in settling here could have predicted the modern desire to prove one's daring through buildings, clothing, et cetera or to imagine that artists and architects would think it necessary to shock their public to effect a social critique. Perhaps it is time now to re-evaluate the contemporary trends. Architecture critic, Kenneth Frampton, suggests that an architecture of tranquility is much needed now in an extremely disjunctured world. Between the excesses of the earlier era that revered mature dignity and the current era that relishes youthful insouciance there must be an Epicurean balance. Urban centers with a base of polite, confident buildings absorb daring jewel-like architecture wonderfully. But those struggling with their identities as places need density and continuity rather than drama.

Downtown is shaped by the street. Like most American towns the streets take precedence in the making of built forms. Perhaps the only real public life we generally engage in begins here. People-watching means sharing the sense of the city. The biggest windows take in the spectacle of passersby. Side by side buildings form a wall along the sidewalk in the downtown areas, lending a sense of security to shoppers and spectators. Because strange activities in the street are easily noticed, mean behavior is inhibited. Parents feel safe allowing children to walk to playgrounds. This ensures the development of independence. The neighborhood playgrounds and tennis courts do appear well-used here. Also, persons forced to give up driving due to weak eyesight, for example, may find that the proximity of people and destinations helps them to keep some of that lifelong independence. These formal qualities of the small town provide excellent conditions for social stability.

Some folks were tempted to rebuild outside of town when the County Courthouse burned, out of concern for reducing central traffic and plentiful parking. They reasoned that a new one from scratch on a cheap, fresh piece of ground "in the country" would be convenient and cheaper than dealing with a partially burned old structure. They did not consider that this Courthouse made Pulaski a real town in 1896.

A town must have many reasons for people to come in to do their business and to enjoy the hustle and bustle of others. It becomes interdependent like a human ecosystem and must maintain a critical mass of activity. Moving the Courthouse to a new site could have jeopardized the viability of the center. But the old stone Courthouse proved its popularity with residents who paraded its bell and charred beam on a float in the Fourth of July parade that year as a symbol of renewal. Also, Virginia law makes Courthouses difficult to abandon. So, it has been restored to working order and the critical mass of central activity seems to be holding. Well, now we must see what the Lee Hi mall will do.



Building professionals sometimes get more excited about placement on empty lands or by a rather surgical approach to city design. Others mimic the existing context, sometimes slavishly. Here I have chosen to work with improving a rather ordinary place in some way. I believe that civilization represents many centuries of accumulated wisdom which lives as it is transformed. A thoughtful transformation, implemented in an incremental way must have time for absorption. It can eventually make a vital place beautiful.

This way of city-building cannot be forced through law or ordinance without damaging the delicate impulse to give something of oneself, which is a kind of pride that makes citizenship possible and responsibility a satisfaction. Of course, we legislate to prevent abuses, and that usually assures that people give the city the minimum required.

Aesthetic order makes "Being Some-place" possible. Kevin Lynch found that people need edges, focal points and patterns in order to truly see, comprehend and enjoy their hometowns.⁽⁶⁾ Our minds do not comprehend all the information they receive at once. We must edit unconsciously. In other words, formlessness is badly tolerated unless we can find some way to organize the visual experience. However, we do learn new ways of seeing on occasion, as when a great work of art teaches us.

Sometimes an intensely raucous street or district becomes a spectacle in itself. Both Las Vegas and Times Square gained fame from it. The thickness of the disorder becomes lively and whole. Denise Scott-Brown and Robert Venturi have encouraged an appreciation of these kinds of places.

Examples closer to smalltown Pulaski might include Cherokee, North Carolina of the 1940's. It was gaudy and gay. But Williamson Road in Roanoke, Virginia falls short, like a half-hearted festival. The signs and shops aim for bright exuberance but wash out in empty gray space. Moderate people should not imitate Las Vegas. Instead, we should build with an aesthetic idea we can embrace unreservedly, immoderately.

Developers generally succeed at building good places only when they follow well-tested models. That is why developers who built closely grouped commercial buildings in the earlier part of the century were more successful than the majority of developers today. The density of the buildings signified downtown. The repetition and variations of many narrow storefronts and townhouses supplied a rich texture.

This project proposes a building of mass to mark it as the edge of Pulaski's downtown. The building will be described in drawings on later pages. The site is an important corner where Route 11 turns down Washington Avenue. A motorist suddenly leaves behind a tree-lined open road and finds an urban street. The outline of my building is crisp like that turning point. The building's mass and the sense of weight are revealed when some of it is removed as though it has been carved. The abundance of bricks and sculpted surfaces convey an idea of the essence of the downtown texture and density.

Two elements suggested strategies for design. The first is a particularly striking incongruity in Pulaski. As you can see in the drawing on page 3, a large metal-sided building domi-

nates the skyline on the east side. The Pulaski Furniture Company's cube-like office building consumes a whole city block. Its proportions are so different from that of any other building, while giving us no references to the human scale, that it seems to hover on the east side of town like a blimp. The absence of a sense of scale or texture is such a defect that it challenges the architect to try to rediscover truly plastic qualities of building which I believe provide repose for the inhabitant and the town dweller. This suggested experimentation with a subtractive design methodology in order to rebut the domination of the Blimp and its reductionist planes.

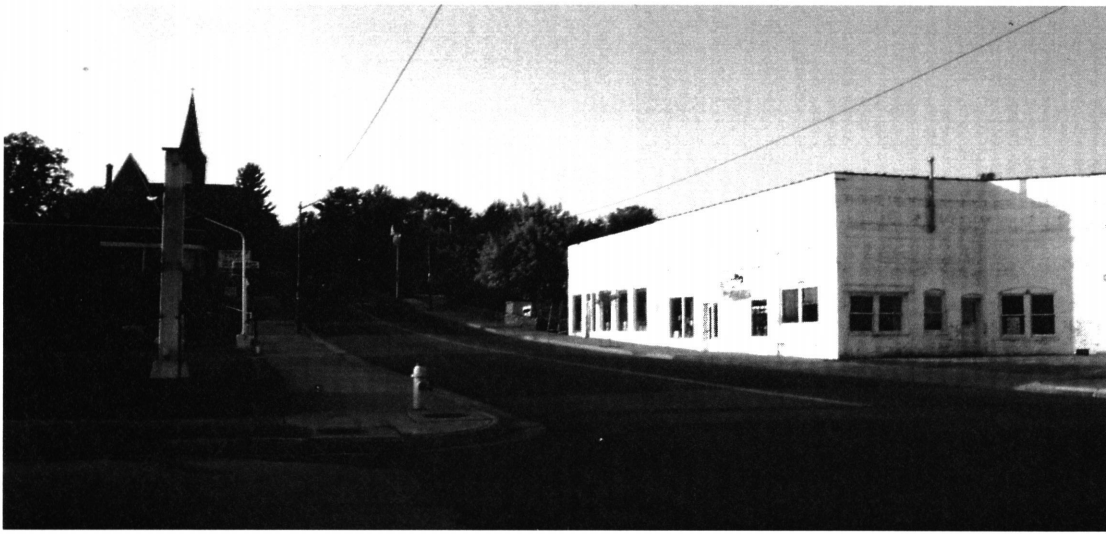
One of the more interesting features of Pulaski is the Canal which runs down the middle of town parallel to Main Street and the railroad but perpendicular to Washington Avenue. It gives us bridges from which to observe another duality. From these bridges the formal, dignified row of buildings may be seen from two sides. In back, the private apartments and porches spill out behind in the direction of the waterway. The irregular line individualizes the waterfront space. Thus, the residential rear has comfortable privacy. The order of the street allows building fronts and backs to have different but complementary conditions.

This duality also informs the design of my thesis project. My building presents a restrained wall with jewel box display windows to the pedestrian street. But it reveals its hollowed middle to the open road on the north. The passerby feels a distinct change. Thus, the walls facing the residential section and a small wood partially screen its inhabitants as a backporch does. The semi-enclosed yard could be ideal for informal music sessions on summer evenings.

By defining the edge of the city street, my hope is to encourage the next builders to fill in the unnecessary gaps on Washington before spreading loosely onto the highway. I wish to forestall by example a ragged dispersal. Reinforced precedent may appeal to their human need for continuity and a stable framework. However, other forces like high commercial property taxes in towns work against this intent.

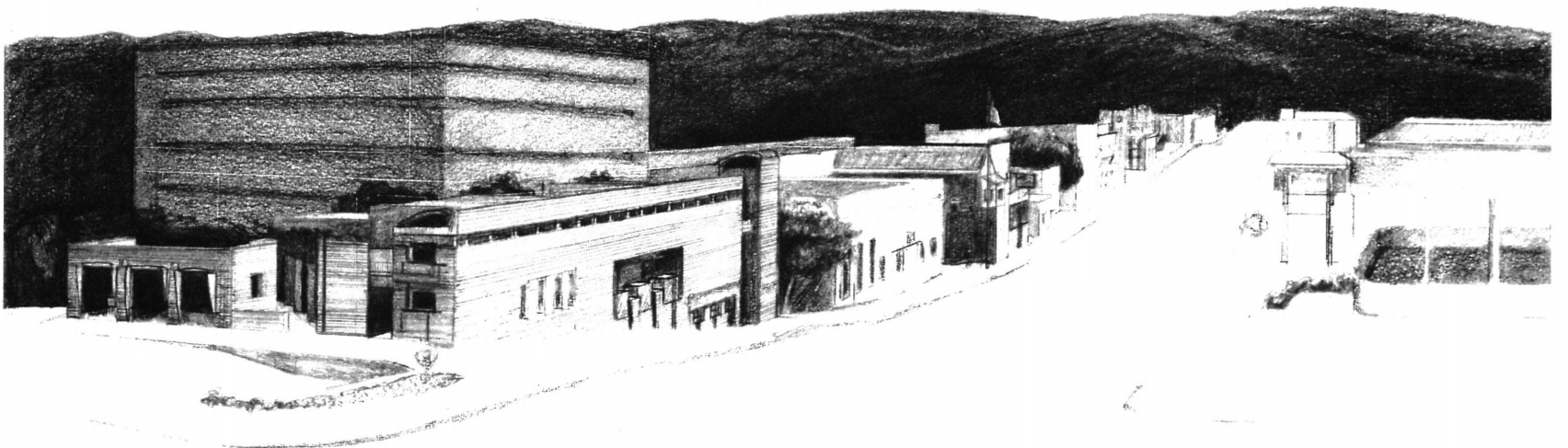
We have discussed conditions in Pulaski that bear upon a building placed here. The next page will describe my design considerations. The narrative, photographs and drawings that follow should help us imagine the experience of the building.

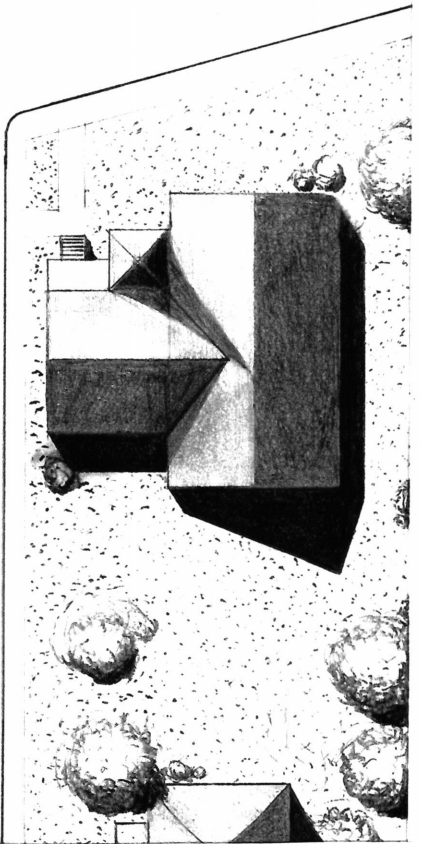
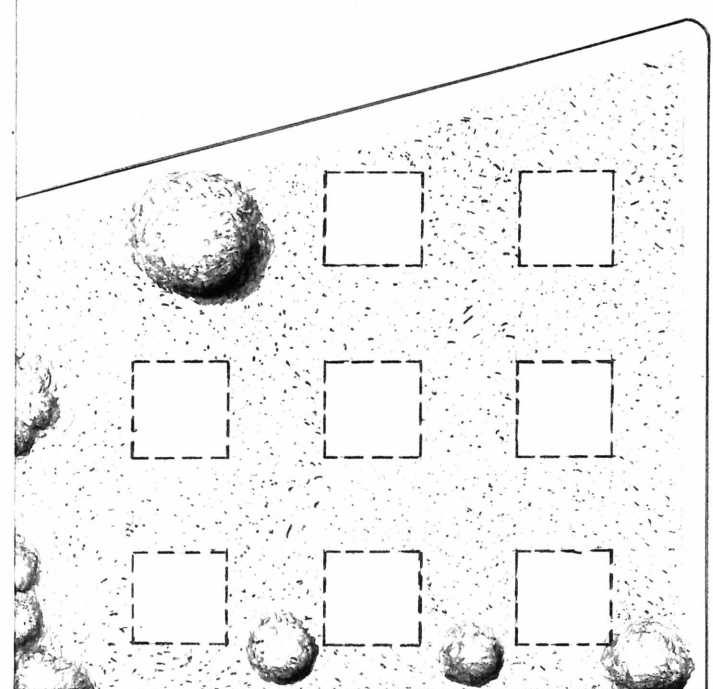
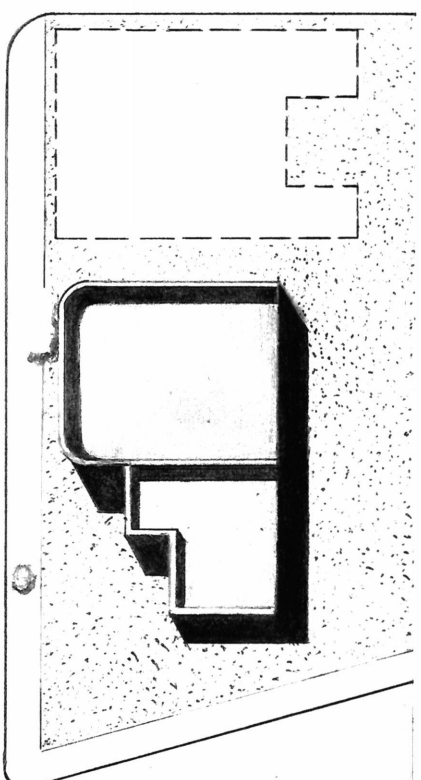
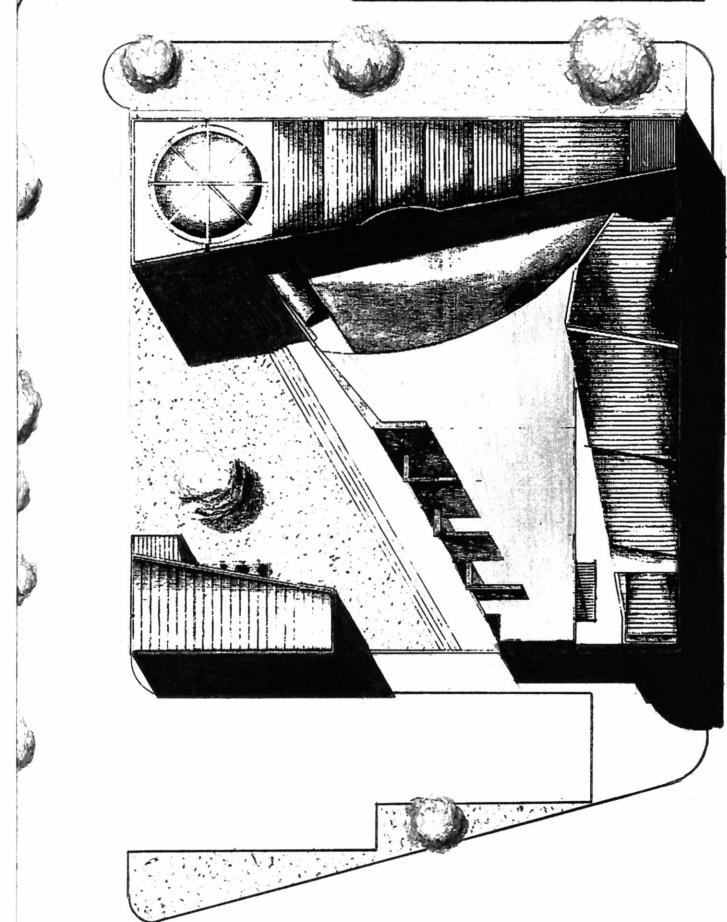
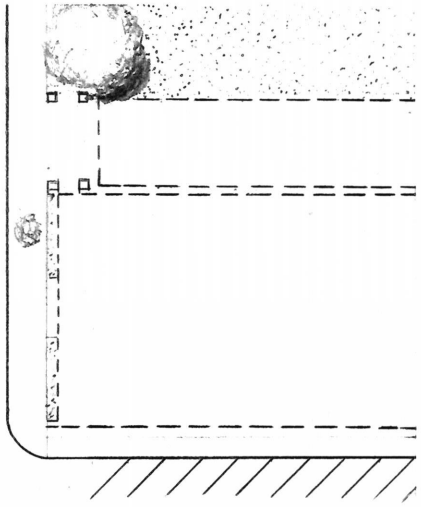
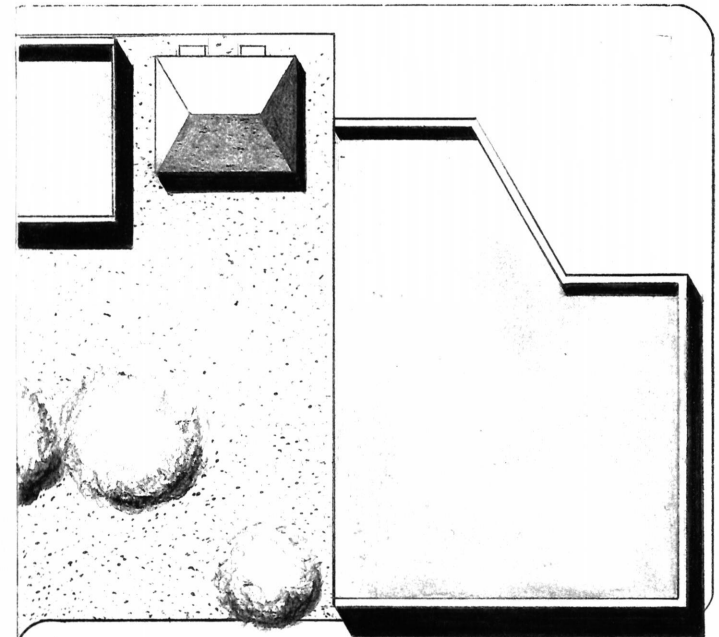


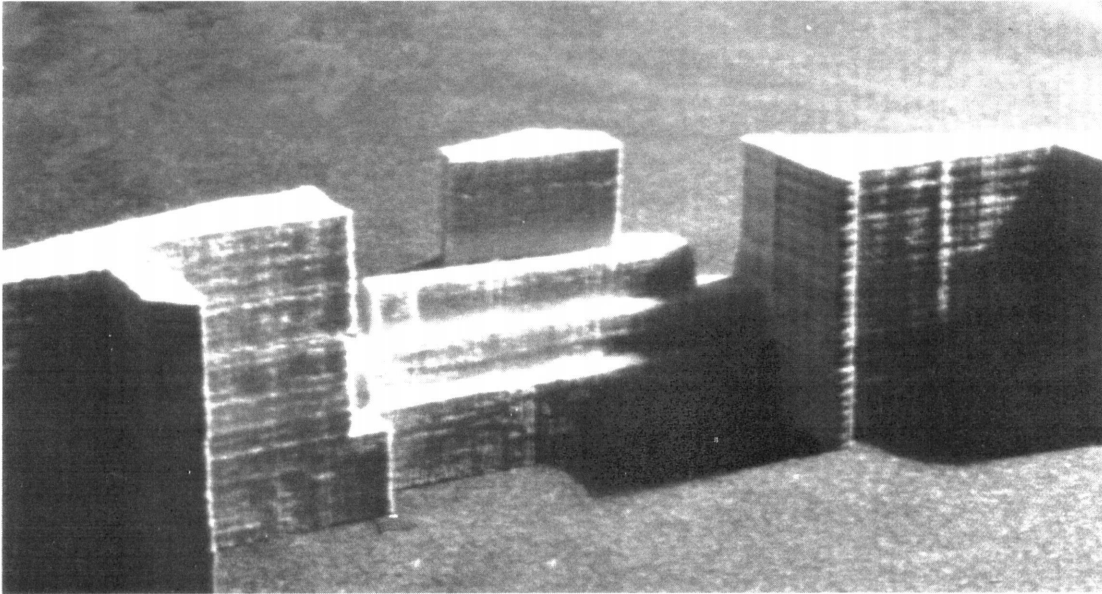


A Proposal for **Washington Avenue**

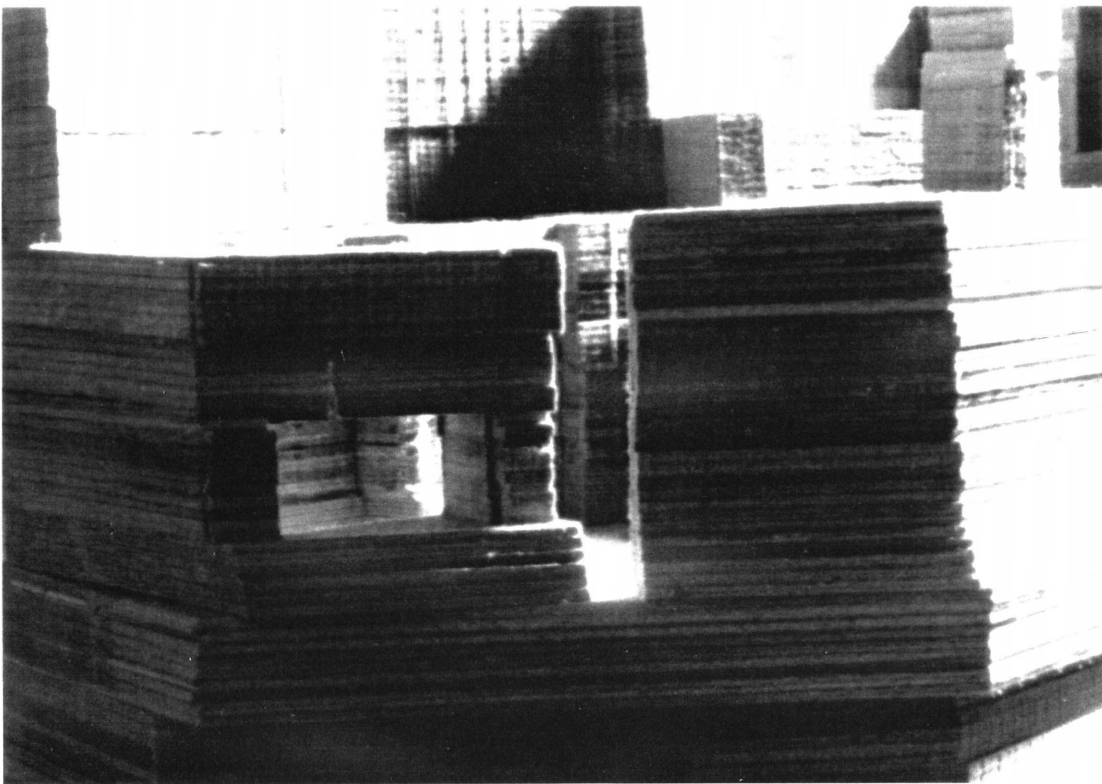
Above Left: A view of Washington Avenue looking north. The north intersection that ends Washington Avenue, begins the green low density section. My building site is on the left in the model and drawing below. Behind it on north Rt. 11, the road becomes a rural highway again.



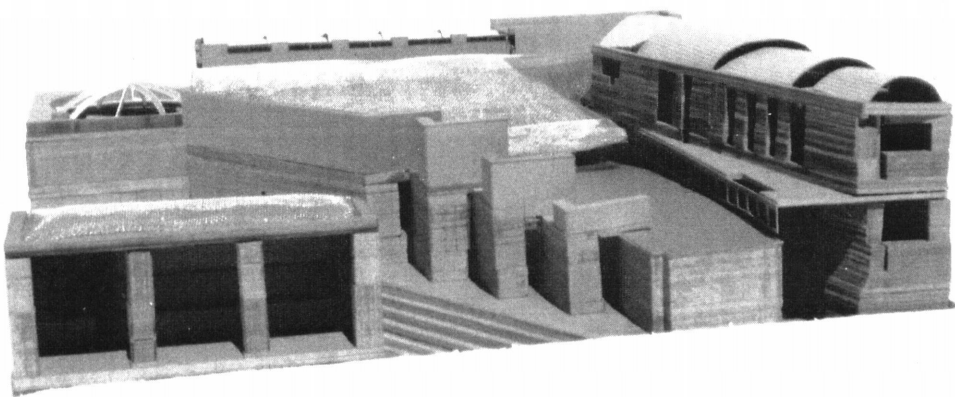




These photographs attempt to reveal the duality of the wall: even the exterior contains an interior space for the body or for the mind or both.



The desires for the building proposed for this thesis are described on this page. They are set into a hierarchy which has as its goal the attainment of architecture as defined in the abstract on page ii.



The building proposed for the corner

of Washington Avenue and Old Lee Highway and Fifth Street will house a small fictional furniture design firm called Peppers/Ferry with offices, a workshop for building prototypes and rentable spaces. It brings together the residential, commercial and industrial zones which meet on this corner.(7) It has a rooftop apartment with a large terrace, a dining room which could become a cafe looking onto a small lawn, a produce market on the north, and rentable office space. Its mixture of uses draws people to the downtown throughout the day and evening.

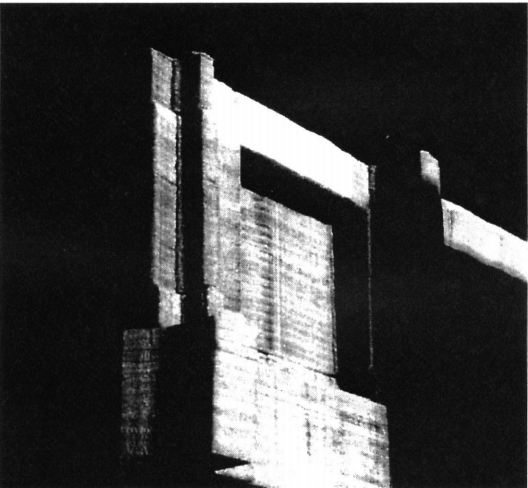
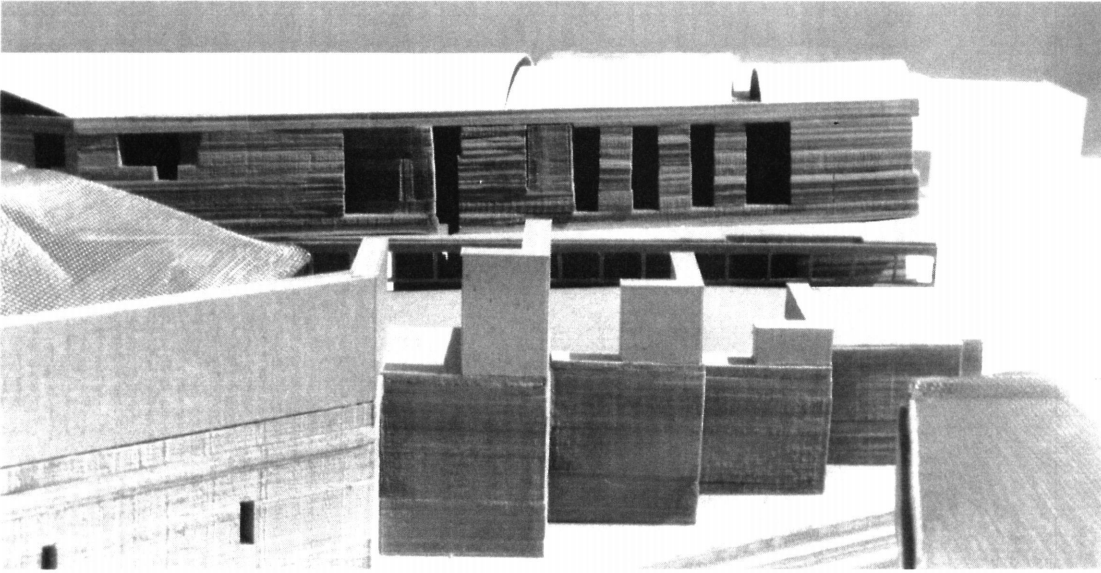
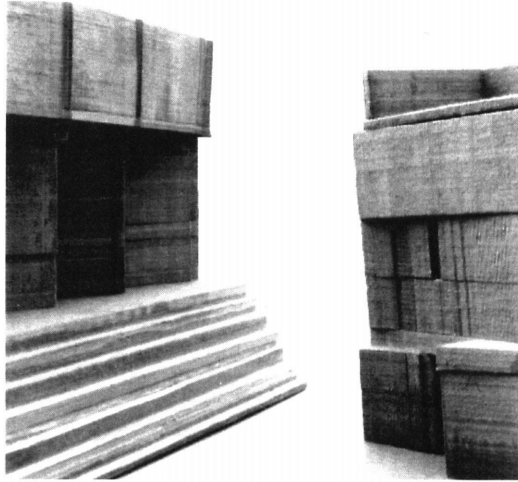
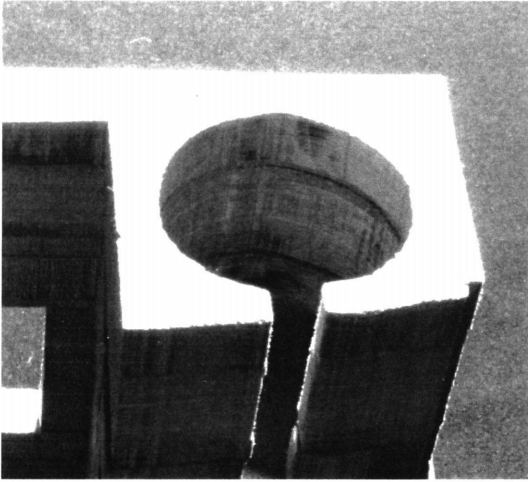
The building's order derives from an assumed cube which is carved out to frame experience. That is, voids in the mass are shaped into rooms which impress upon the visitor a strong sense of being within. Those with the geometry of square and circle particularly remind the visitor of his/her physical presence in the center of them. In contrast, spaces with ambiguous perimeters loosen the focus, so to speak, so that the mind can wander. If the latter kind of space is controlled well, and seems engaged with the mass, it becomes palpable, ineffable, an intriguing thing in itself. Hence, the spaces and rooms bring us back to dual awareness.

I design by setting the priorities in a hierarchy. The walls take first priority. Four distinct walls are left by the carving away of two central spaces—one interior and one exterior. These four walls then respond differently to the sun, and to the different kind of street or alley they face. They are made by brick formwork with rubble and concrete poured between to build a few feet of height at a time. The technique follows that used by Rafael Moneo in Merida, Spain. They retain coolness in their great mass.

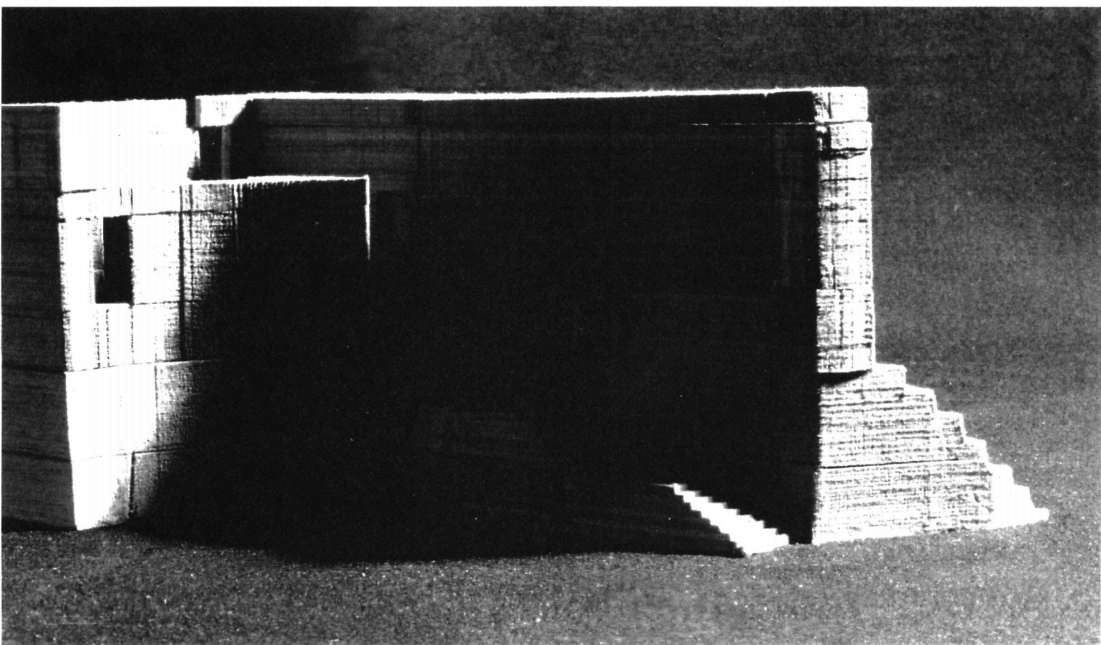
The walls are further carved into rooms for the contained humans who are working, chatting, taking coffee breaks, living. The spaces thus made are usually geometric figures in order to reinforce the sense of enclosure and one's place within the wall. The exception is the central interior space which serves to display the furniture designed here. This space also provides cool air movement in the summer. The walls record a desire for protective semi-privacy so every exterior has an interior. This means that every element has at least some indication of convexity, some possibility for engaging the sojourner. In some places s/he may enjoy the presence of others even while being partially protected from view or from harsh weather.

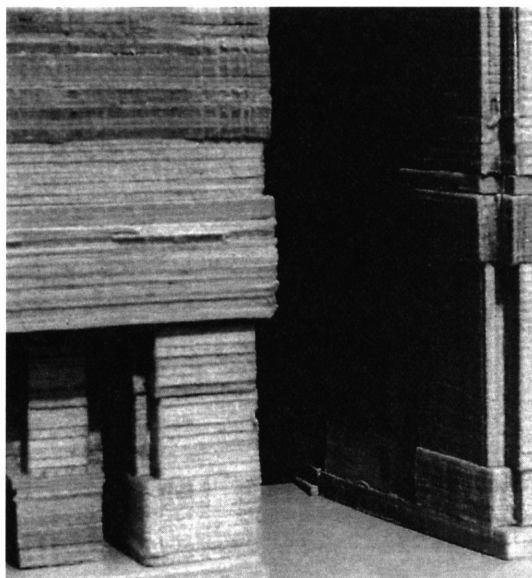
The west wall faces Washington Avenue, so it bears responsibility for framing the room of the street by making a nice edge while inviting passersby to see the displays in the windows and to linger. It must deflect the hot western sun. But the south wall invites the south sun and breezes on the alley side, conditioned by adjustable awnings and vents designed into the window frames. The brightness and temperature are controlled this way by the office workers. The east wall becomes the backporch with cafe-like social possibilities. The north wall partially encloses the lawn. It provides a small fresh produce market. Deciduous vines and trees shade it on the south side. Vines or moss and lichens are welcome to pit the walls with the mellowness of age.

The finished building should attain a truly palpable three-dimensional quality that invites touch or an idea of touch conveyed by sight and so provide the existential pleasures of being within.



The method of making a model of this project involved laminating many layers of chipboard to make blocks that I could cut on the power bandsaw. There was some flexibility in that the layers could be separated to change a piece, to give it increasing convexity as it nears the top. However, the small pieces could get drawn down into the hole below the bandsaw blade and decimated. Working with very small pieces was dangerous because the hands must be very close to the blade—even with pushers made to hold the piece. But the result was satisfyingly tactile and weighty. They have a quality that photographs cannot have. As this project is about experience rather than an object, I would ask you to imagine that pleasure.





She walks up Washington Avenue on her way home. She carries an opened package with just a bit of pink sweater sleeve showing. Every day this week she has been going by the Pulaski Post office hoping for its arrival. When she crosses the street, she's a little out of breath so she leans against the nearest building. It is painted white so little blisters of white paint crunch and stick to her palm. She sighs, shoves away from a rim of brick and wipes her hand on her skirt. "Maybe I'll go in this next one and see what's on display," she thinks, "and get out of the sun a minute."

The sidewalk rises past an alleyway which is bordered by a row of little trees. Behind them is a large brick wall and then another one that doesn't quite meet the first. They are separated by glass and a door with a wiry iron sign over it.

She steps onto the concrete apron that leads to the door and hesitates before pulling the heavy door open. It is cool and dark enough to make her eyes blink. She thinks maybe no one is here and tugs at her slip which has started to droop. Collecting herself, she goes around a corner to the stairs. As she puts her foot on the step, she looks back over her shoulder. Some light shows through over the top of the wall and something else that she can't make out. Her hand catches the cool marble balluster and notices that it is wide but curved enough to grip.

At the landing it makes a ledge along some windows. "I'd have wanted to sit in that window when I was a little girl," she says. The only shiny thing in the stairwell is a row of colored tile set in the wall. She feels herself rising above it and steps a little lighter.

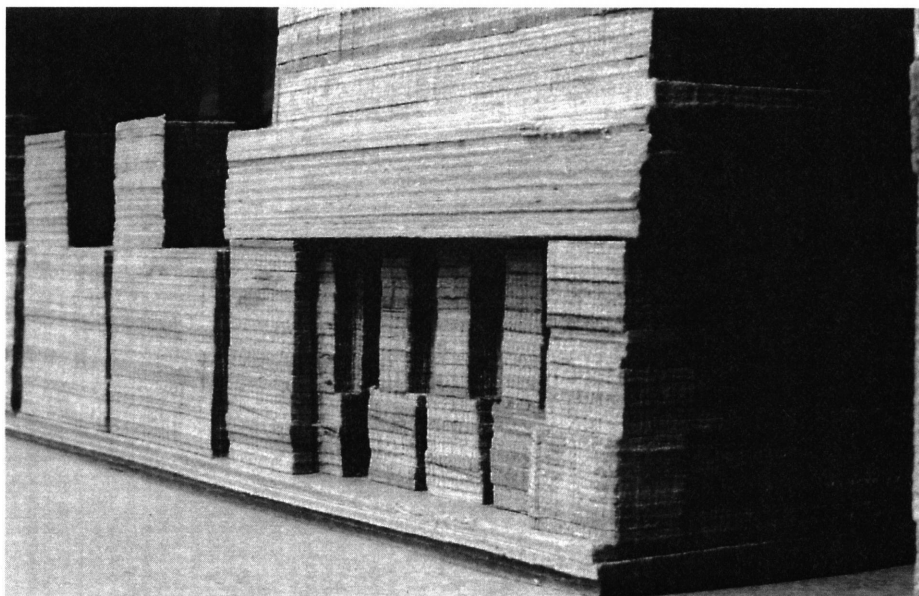
Emerging from the stairwell, the visitor looks out into a great amorphous space. A preoccupied receptionist is framed by the opening in the wall to the left. She walks out a little way noting that the floor drops off. Before her is a circular depression with a purplish light sharply ringing it. It is almost like a firepit with some gleaming chairs stacked in a pyramid in the middle. She steps down to that level to circle them, bemused that they have

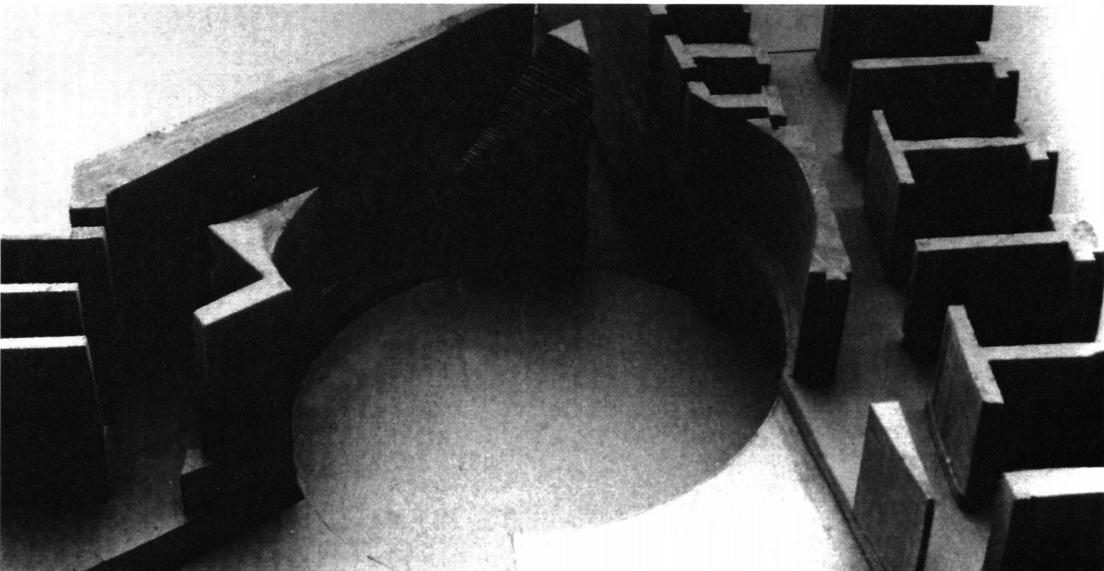
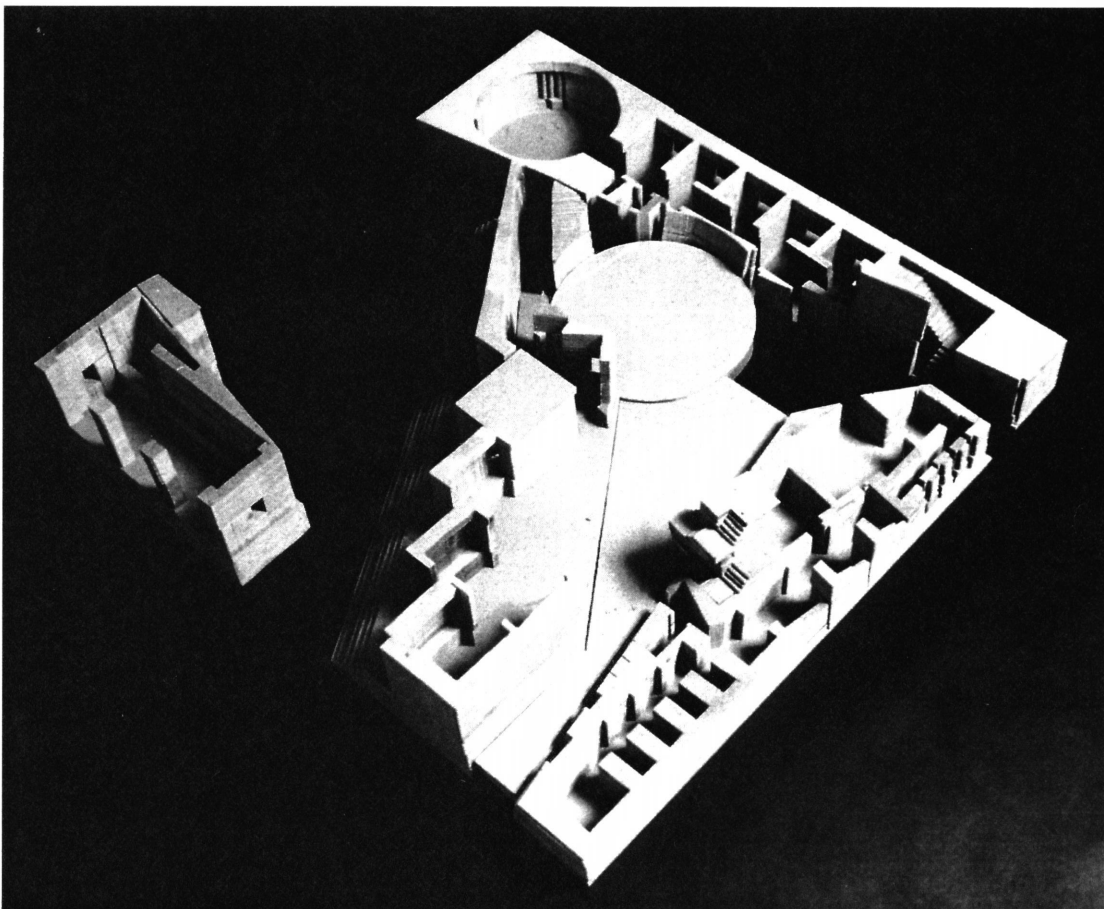
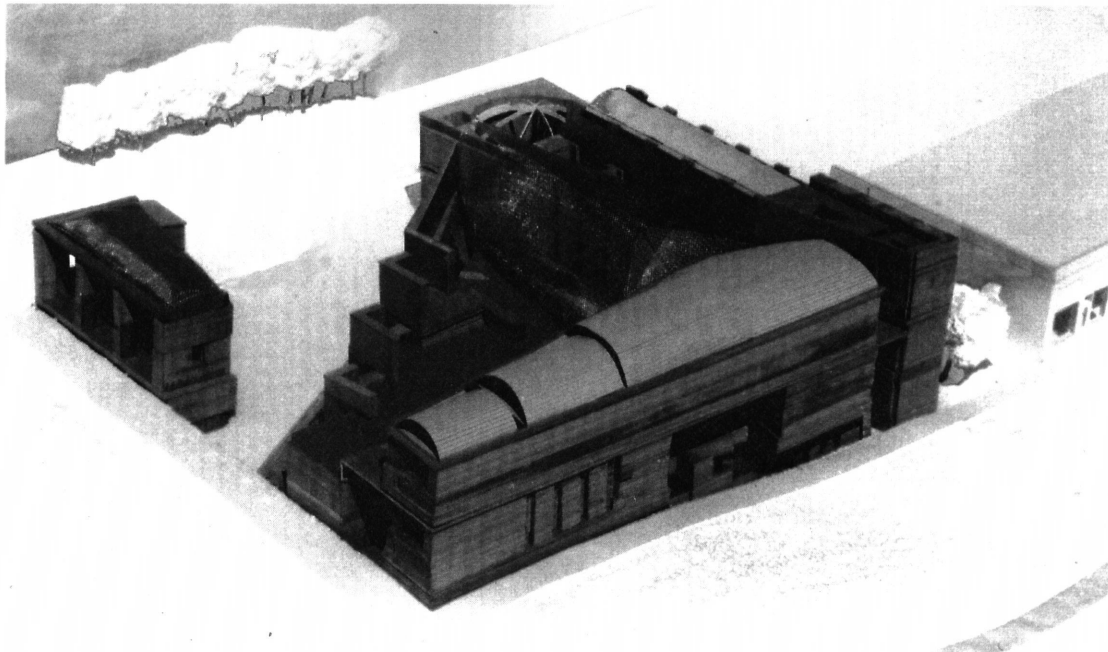
curves like tractor seats. After reflecting awhile she notices that the purplish light shines on her bare arms and a stripe of sunlight passes her head.

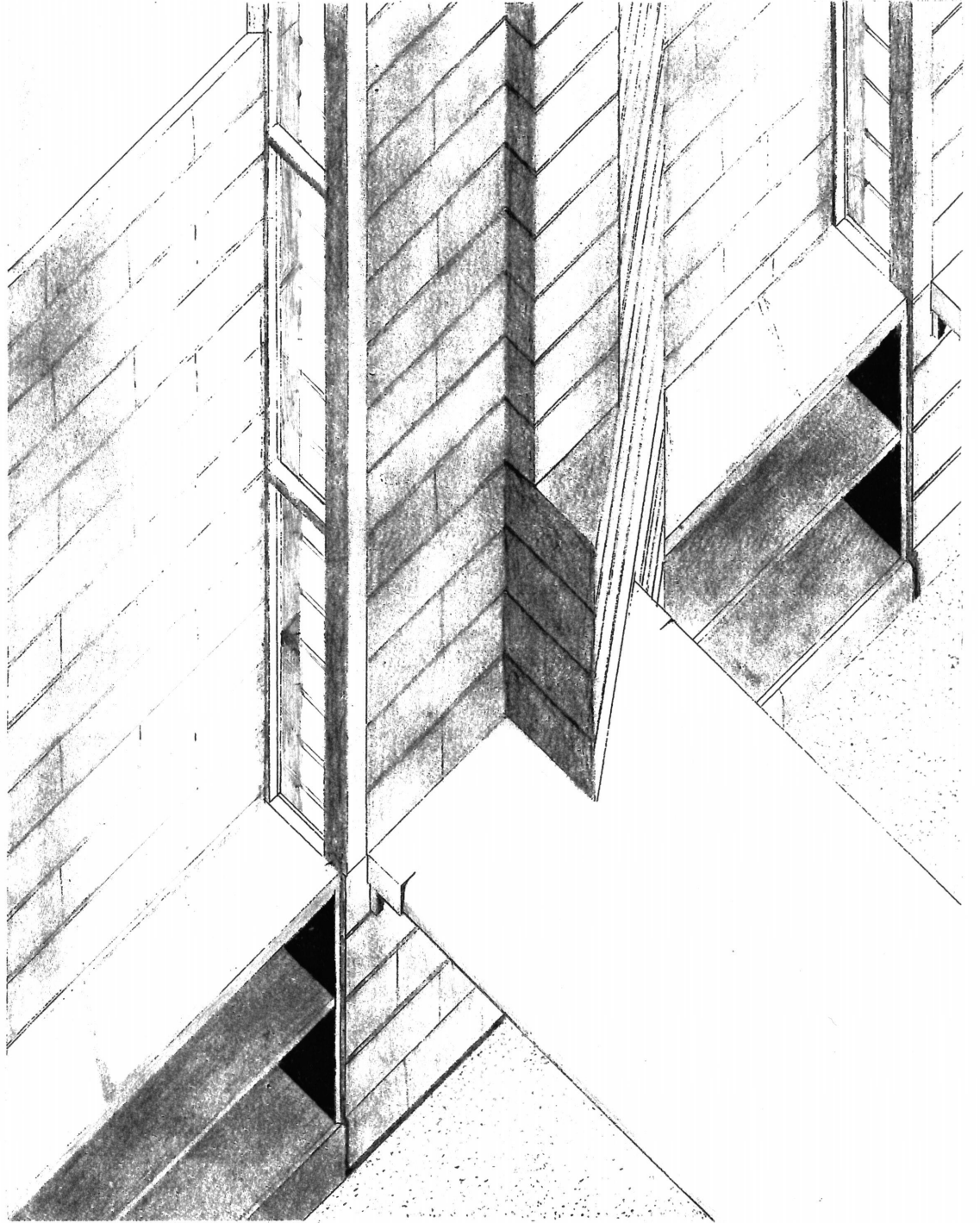
The visitor goes back to sit on the step. She feels some air movement and relishes the coolness. Some traffic noises drift in through a window. At a distance, at the furthest points in her visual range, are some glass doors. The one down to the right now opens and two chattering women come in with the familiarity of employees. They turn up the stairs, the emphatic vocal notes trailing and the sounds of stepping, picking things up, putting things down. They pay her no attention as they traverse the floor to their offices. Behind the brick walls again she can hear them greeting a man who earnestly joins the conversation. They move between rooms further then closer (confering all the while) and then go down to the end and shut the door.

Her eyes sweep down again to the opening in a far wall where a man spreads what looks like his lunch on a table. After he pours something from a pitcher to a cup and settles himself, he notices her, too. It is too far to speak civilly, so they nod to one another. She notes a patch of morning sun behind him and decides he chose a table just out of its reach. "Better get on home," she murmurs to herself while rising into a stretch. She slips out the heavy front door and climbs the sidewalk up the hill and around the corner.

Just here is a truck that is backing up to a loading dock almost level with her sidewalk. She is almost at the same eyelevel as the driver. His bumper taps the concrete edge. On her other side a pick-up swoops past with a boy in the back—heading out of town. Just here the edge of the building drops back, revealing some fellows sunning themselves on some angled steps, moving now and then to breathe smoke. One of them tosses bits of straw at the grass. She thinks they see her walking by the trees until she reaches the little market building with flapping sunshades. Her neighbor works here. Maybe she should stop and say hello.

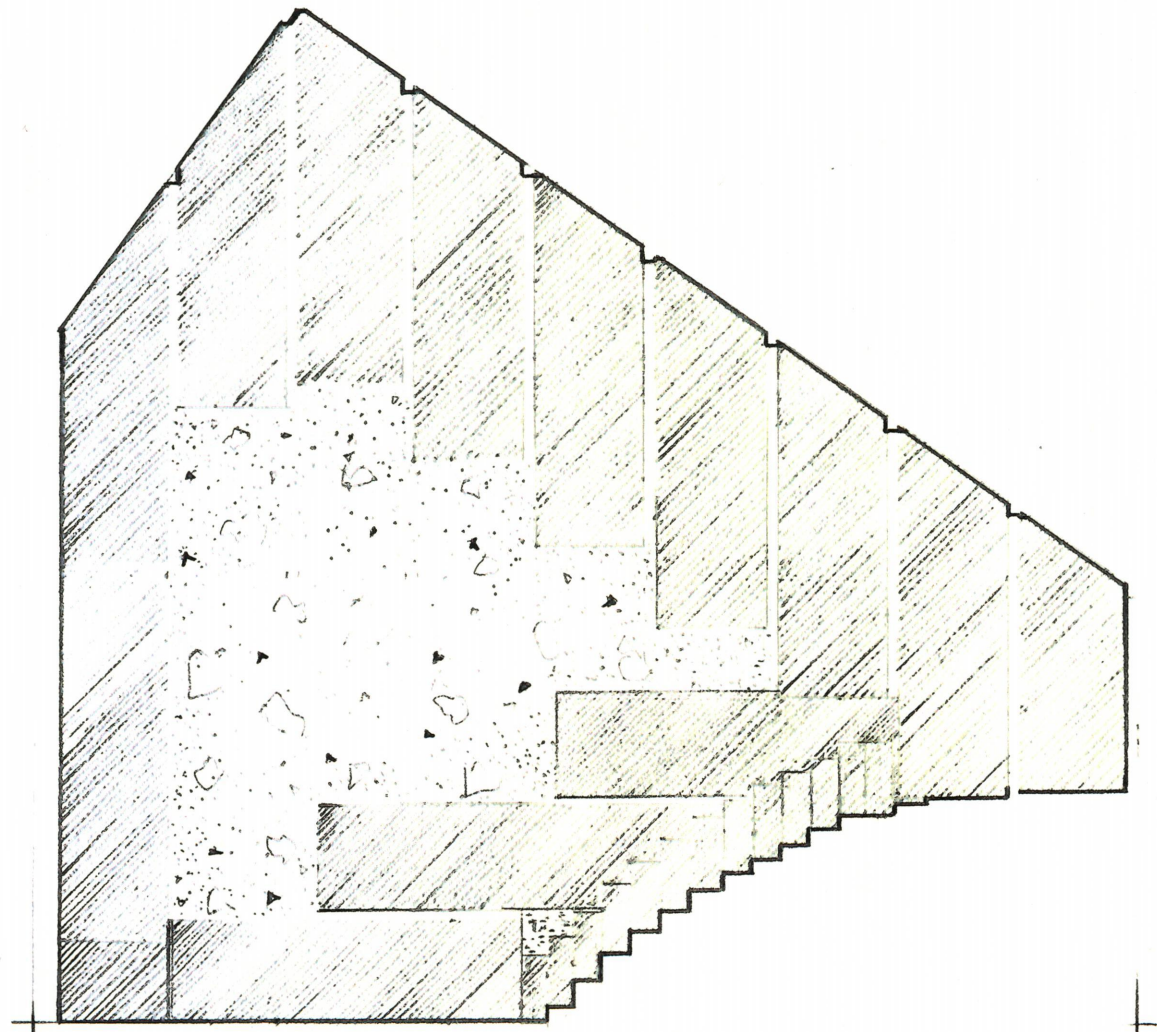
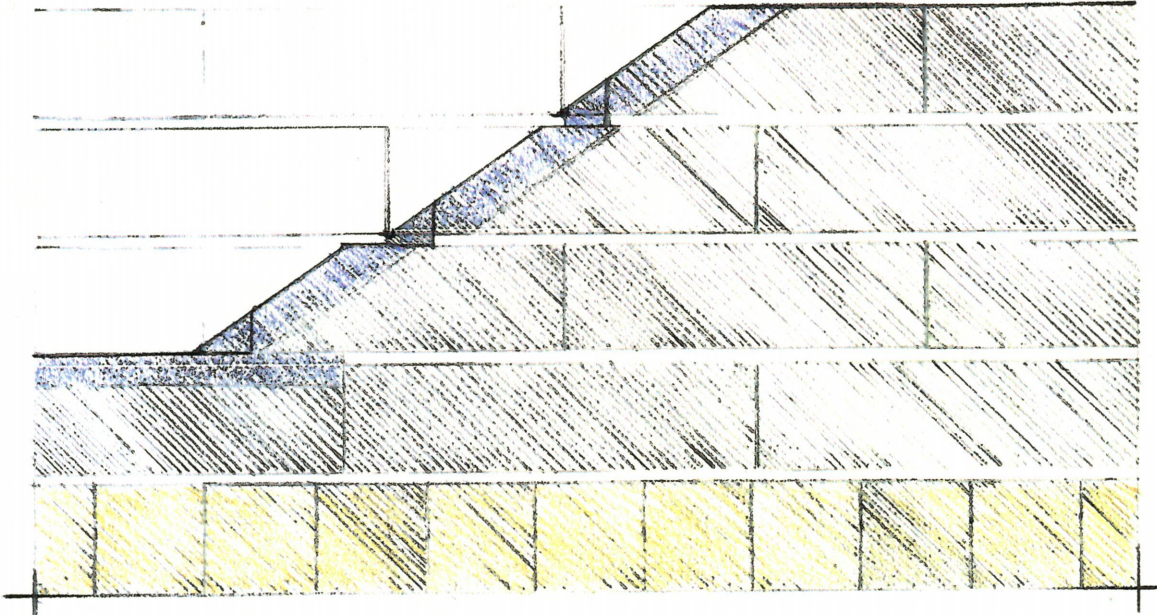
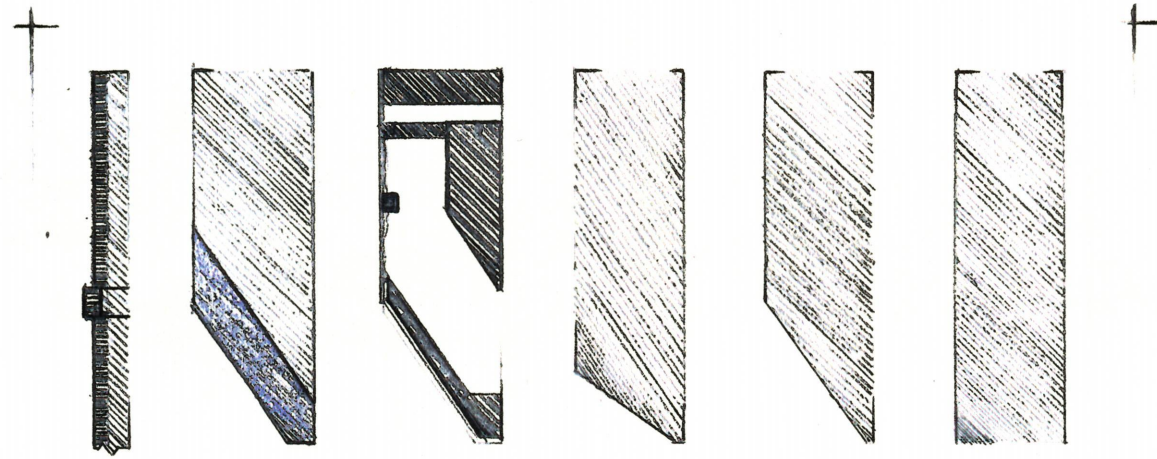


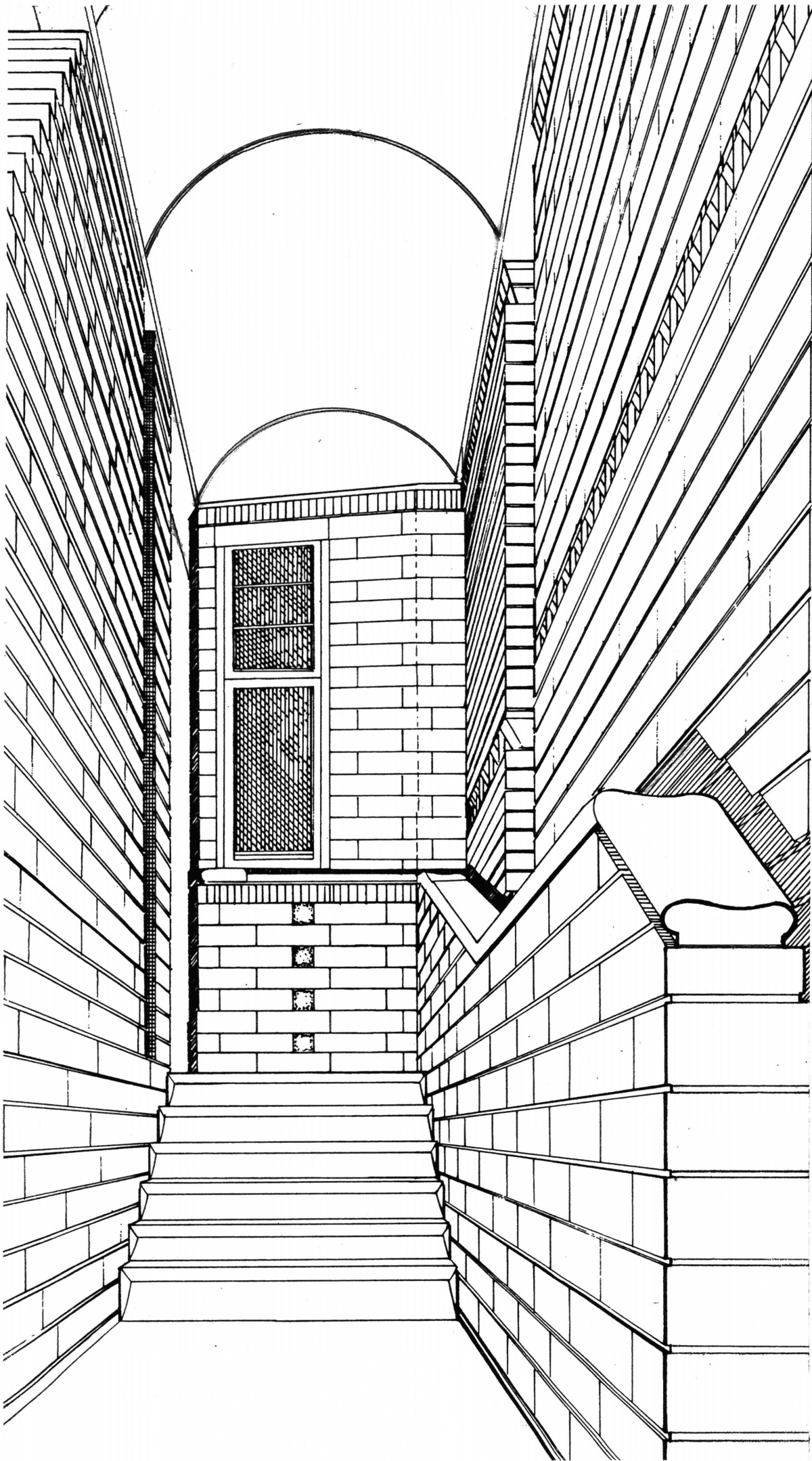


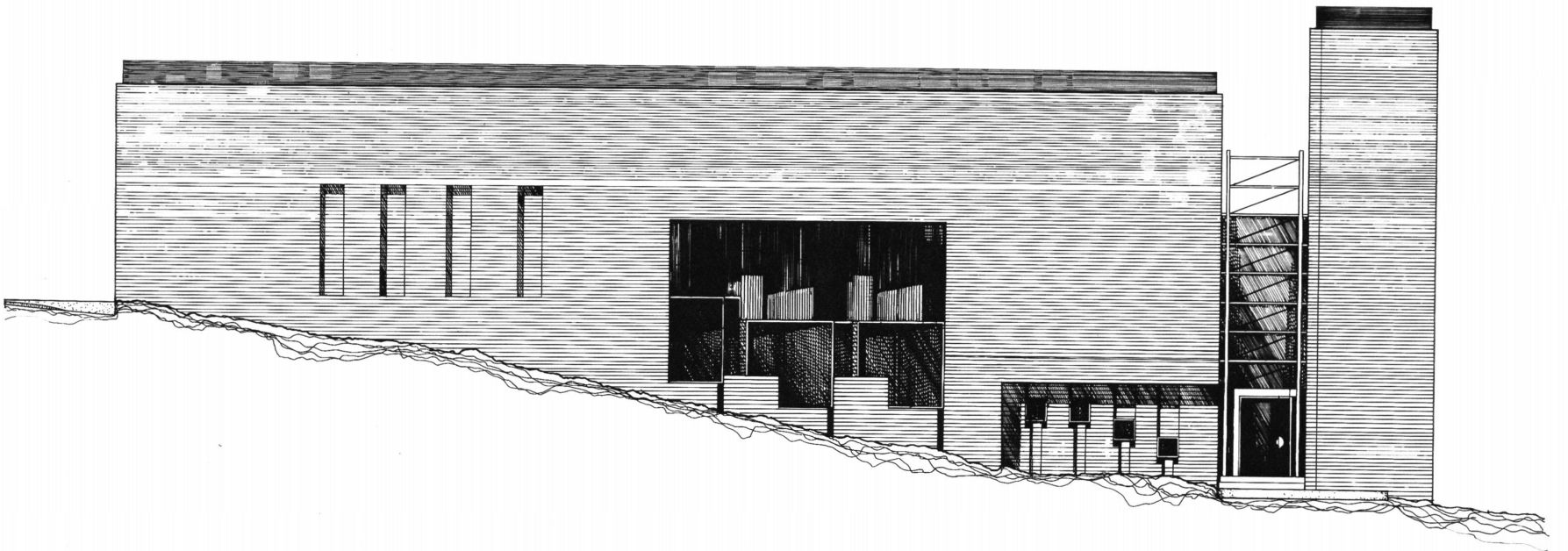
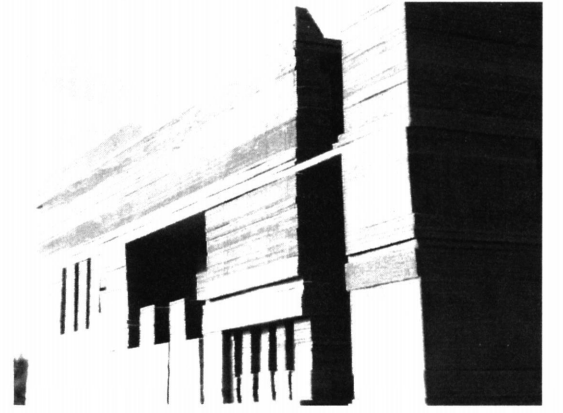


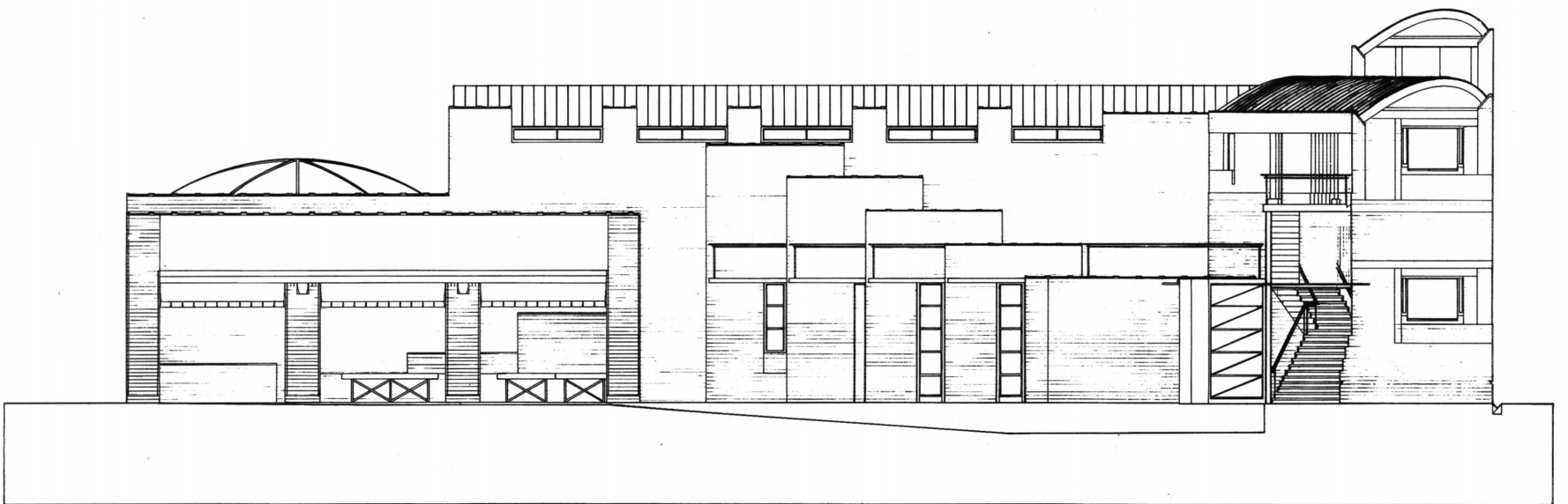
The first condition for such an intelligent use of reason in the ordering of human affairs is that we learn to understand what role it does in fact play and can play in the working of any society based on the cooperation of many separate minds....

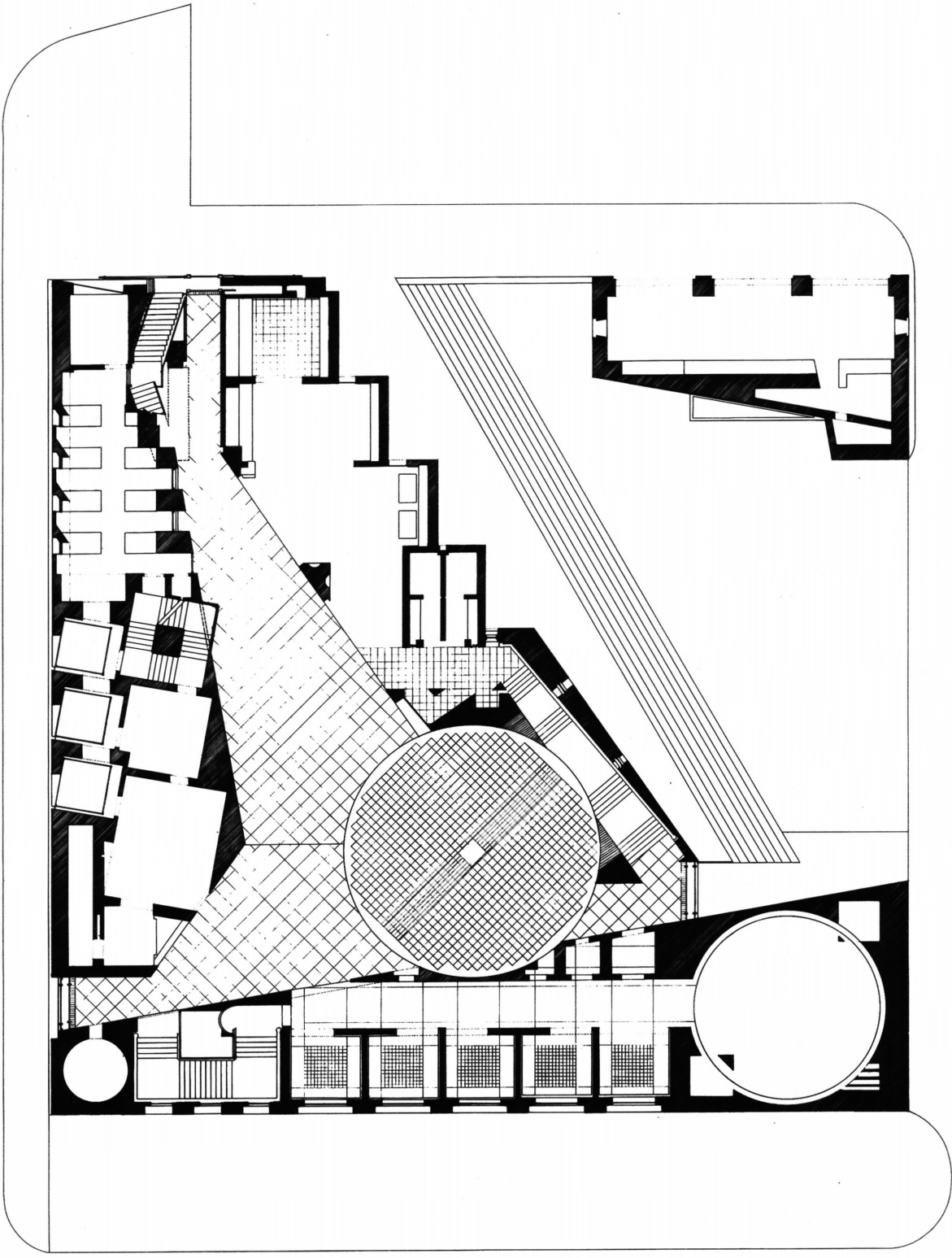
What we must learn to understand is that human civilization has a life of its own, that all our efforts to improve things must operate within a working whole which we cannot entirely control, and the operation of those forces we can hope merely to facilitate and assist so far as we understand them. Our attitude ought to be similar to that of the physician toward a living organism: like him, we have to deal with a self-maintaining whole which is kept going by forces which we cannot replace and which we must therefore use in all that we try to achieve.(8)











Notes

1. Stevens, Wallace. From "Six Significant Landscapes". *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*. Page 16.

2. Baldwin, Deborah. "Creating Community: A Fast Food Generation Looks For A Home-Cooked Meal", *Common Cause*, July/August 1990.

3. Hayek, F. A. *The Constitution of Liberty*. See page 83. Hayek observes the importance of small communities in the following excerpt:

No longer is the individual generally the member of some small community with which he is intimately concerned and closely acquainted. While this has brought him some increase in independence, it has also deprived him of the security which the personal ties and the friendly interest of the neighbors provided. The increased demand for protection and security from the impersonal power of the state is no doubt largely the result of the disappearance of these smaller communities of interest and of the feeling of isolation of the individual who can no longer count on the personal interest and assistance of the other members of the local group.

4. Tucker, William. See Chapter 7, on the exclusivity of most suburban development since the interpretation of a city's police powers was expanded in a 1925 court ruling to allow the specification of certain kinds of houses, lot sizes, et cetera in a given district. This type of code has been adopted by most areas of the country.

4a. Gratz, Roberta Brandes. *The Living City*. Gives case studies of upscale housing projects placed in poor neighborhoods. They seem to work if stability existed there prior to the project and if the addition is small enough not to upset the balance. Apartments built over freestanding garages were once a common supplement to the affordable housing supply. But today the building of low-income projects in upscale neighborhoods is usually resisted vehemently.

5. Sitte, Camillo. On page 81 of *The Art of Building Cities*, Sitte states that "A work of art can only be created by an individual. An artfully effective city is truly a work of art, and not a matter of administrative routine. That is the essence of the entire problem."

5a. Gratz, Roberta Brandes. See Page 315. Gratz seems to concur with Sitte by showing in case studies that only small scale changes keep the district or town vital.

6. Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. See page 43, for example.

7. Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. She explains in detail why cities and districts must have mixtures of uses. I suggest that her analysis also applies to small towns except for the minimum density of residents.

8. Hayek, F.A. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Page 69 to 70.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Duany, Andres. "Traditional Towns". *Architectural Design*. Vol.59, Number 9/10 1989. Pages 60 to 64.

Frampton, Kenneth. See page 18 in "Reflections on the Autonomy of Architecture: A Critique of Contemporary Production". *Out of Site, A Social Criticism of Architecture*. Seattle, WA: Bay Press 1991.

Gratz, Roberta Brandes. *The Living City*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989.

Harper's. "Whatever Became of the Public Square?" A transcript of a panel discussion with Jack Hitt, Ronald Lee Fleming, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Richard Sennett, James Wines and Elyn Zimmerman. July 1990.

Hayek, F. A. *The Constitution of Liberty*. See Chapter 2 on the nature of civilization and Chapter 22 "Housing and Town Planning". Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1960.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, NY: Vintage Books 1961.

Langer, Suzanne. *Feeling and Form*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1953.

Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press 1960.

Sitte, Camillo. *The Art of Building Cities*. Translated by Charles T. Stewart. New York, NY: Reinhold Pub. 1945.

Stevens, Wallace. *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems*. New York. Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1971.

Tucker, William. *The Excluded Americans: Homelessness and Housing Policies*. Lanham, MD.: Regnery Gateway 1990.

**The vita has been removed from
the scanned document**