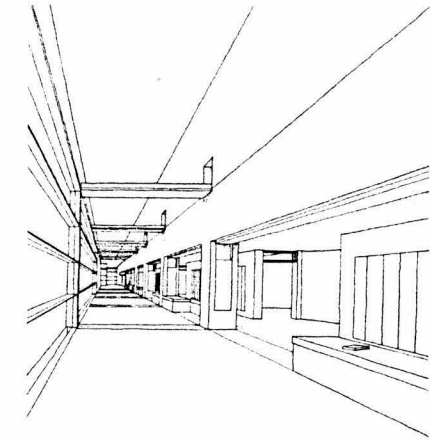


Design within an Urban Frame
A School for Palimpsest Alexandria, Virginia

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Roland Jed Michelman



This thesis is 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

William Brown
Chairman

Mark Blizard

William Galloway

Dan Stuver

Steve Thompson

My Mother, My Father, My Sister

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University:

University of Virginia:

Thomas Jefferson High School:

Ellen Glasgow Intermediate:

Belvedere Elementary:

Parklawn Elementary:

Thank you.

Roland Jed Michelman
Blacksburg, Virginia USA
1994 August

PRETEXT
CONTEXT
BUILDING AS TEXT

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Grounding

It is in man's nature to want to know his place within his environment. This inherent need manifests itself in many ways, often unique to the cultures and societies that husband them. The primacy of man's need for a sense of his place in the world is evident in the collective mythologies that surround every culture's history of its people's origins and of their understanding of the world and their place in it, between earth and sky. This sense of one's groundedness, of one's place, is essential and more than simply a matter of orientation or territoriality, although both these needs are very real. The roots we plant in the soil provide an anchor and give us our bearing. One's connection to the environment is intrinsic to the knowledge of who one is and where, both as an individual and as a part of a larger collective. Our associations with larger contexts, be they physical, social, political, or spiritual, are moorings against the uncertainties of our world. They define our lives and our relationships with one another. It is within this framework that we are bonded to the past, and ultimately, guided into the future.



PRETEXT: DESIGN WITHIN AN URBAN FRAME

For most who crossed the forbidding Atlantic and came to America in the years following establishment of European contact with the “New World”, it was a one-way trip. Those who came did so for a variety of compelling reasons—they had to be, considering the dangerous and costly nature of the voyage itself, and the unknown quantity that America represented. For the vast majority of those who made the passage to America, there was no turning back. The profound implication that such a schism with one’s native soil creates was not lost on those intrepid pioneers. Though they were leaving the land of their forefathers, they did not leave behind the culture and traditions born of that land. These were the only “way” the immigrants knew, and as incompatible as these cultures and traditions often were to prove with the frequently unsympathetic American wilderness, they would provide aid and comfort during the trials of their new lives in this alien and often hostile world. The newcomers, unwilling to abandon their past and their culture, fortified themselves during this period of great uncertainty with the laws, customs, and traditions they brought with them from Europe. This is reflected in the patterns of life that developed in the New World. The towns they founded were market centers, ports for trade, points of rendezvous, sites for the exploitation of natural resources, religious havens, and military encampments, all grounded in European models. The form these settlements took varied both with their purpose and existing conditions, but the root for the New World was essentially that of the Old World, transplanted.

The architectural manifestation of this thesis, a project for a middle school in Alexandria, Virginia, necessitated, first, endeavoring to

comprehend both the identity and the character of the place in question. The attempt to discern truth and meaning in a place and its context lies at the very heart of the design process, for without this, design is unnecessary—for there is no life, no sense of an “other”, and, hence, no creation, in a vacuum. For this reason, when an understanding of an existing framework informs the architect, a meaningful architecture can take form. In this contextual soil, the seed of creativity is sown. The harvest, it can be said, is hardly the whim of the planter.

Innumerable factors shape a place as it matures and Alexandria is a product of myriad such forces. History informs us that Alexandria’s role in emerging America was a significant one and that her story since that time is multifaceted, but how we read this text of time says as much about us as it does the subject of our interest. Ever mindful to balance the historical identity of this place with a concerted attempt to unveil some sense of its character, we must be aware that our own contemporary biases reveal truths about our own place in time as well. The earnestness of our search notwithstanding, the fact of the matter is that the vicissitudes of fortune and the vagaries of life in an already uncertain world are next to impossible to fathom (and more so to relate) even through the 20/20 hindsight of the objective lens. To scientifically fix a position on a society and place, ever in flux, is, happily, an impossible task. What this means is that in this search that provides no concrete answers, there will always be room for us and our questions. Perhaps, in addition to the accumulation of facts, we can discover our own *truths* about Alexandria, this settlement on the Potomac, its place in time, and our own.

What, though, is one’s context? A building’s context, for many, is found in the architectural styles, typologies, and dispositions of its neighbors. During the post-modern 1980s, contextual formalists responded to the literal cues of their neighbors: cornice lines, building materials, fenestration patterns, setbacks, building heights, among others. Their buildings mimicked their neighbors in order to preserve a pre-existing urban “fabric”. Often, though, this contextual skin said less about the life of the building inside than did that of its predecessors. Others acknowledged a place’s built context by flatly rejecting it. By refusing to “play by the rules” they elected to advance other agendas, in effect turning their backs on their neighbors. Whereas the first position threatens to dilute the spirit of an existing building by replicating it, the latter approach can easily result in a cacophony of self-serving buildings, only compounding the fragmentation of society. Both approaches suffer from the failure to fully comprehend the environment in which they exist. Meaningful architecture cannot be understood in isolation.

There is more to a place’s context than merely what meets the eye. It is the product of the unseen as well as the seen, for physical design is inherently the distillation (conscious and otherwise) of a multitude of currents and forces: political, social, cultural, spiritual, natural, and economic being among the most prevalent, and perhaps relevant, of them. These imbue the act of interpretation and design with layers of meaning. The architectural act becomes ontological, bigger than ourselves. As a result, the great work is always greater than its maker and contains far more than what was initially invested in it. It is in the lifting of these layers of



Detail from "A Map of the most inhabited part of Virginia..."
Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson 1775

meaning and interpretation, as if veils, that the nature of the building and its place is revealed. The attitude of a building to its place, social, political, and otherwise, is embodied in the design decisions of its various scales, those of the city, the block, the street, the room, and the detail. This lends a far more potent indication of a building's place within a greater whole than the superficial copying of precedent or the self-absorbed attempt to establish one.

The architectural act is a political one. This cannot be avoided. Making a mark in the landscape establishes a center, or an edge. Such an act distinguishes, differentiates, simultaneously including and excluding. The wall marks a distinction between the public and the private condition. It acts in a dual role, presenting a face to the world while, at the same time, concealing a private world within. For a designer, the formidable nature of the attempt to address or even conceive of all the implications of such an act is inescapable, but therein lies the challenge. One must sift through the phenomena of one's world and filter them through one's own experiences in an attempt to define a place in the world that is personal—for one cannot deny the impact of one's own identity—while attempting to make a connection to the rest of the world.

Innumerable forces indigenous to a place exist before the arrival of the architect. Regardless of the nature of the impact of these forces, real or imagined, they cannot be denied. They are indelible and are of that place. Other, larger constructs, of course, are implied within these, adding to the layers of interpretation and even misinterpretation that any creative endeavor invites. Herein lies the notion of palimpsest,

with its evocation of a parchment or papyrus that is cleared of writing in order to accept the ruminations of a later scribe. The rub, though, is that one can never entirely remove the markings of the previous generation—traces will always persist. Just as past generations were obliged to reuse the precious paper of their forefathers, we too, build on the same land as our fathers, never to wholly eradicate what they accomplished before us, though their buildings may be gone and the memory of them faint.

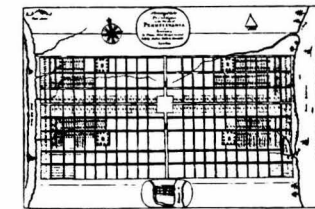
Alexandria is an urban palimpsest. In turn a colonial town in the British Commonwealth of Virginia, a town in the state of Virginia, a town that surrendered to British forces in the War of 1812, a federal enclave within the District of Columbia (later to be receded to Virginia), an occupied city during the Civil War, the capital of Unionist Virginia, and the first capital of West Virginia,¹ Alexandria is a composite of many identities, all of which have left their imprint on the city that has now been absorbed into the metropolitan sprawl of Washington, D.C.

This notion of palimpsest exists within the many lives of the site selected for the project as well. This land, claimed in the 1790s from the Potomac River, has supported wharves, warehouses, coal and lumber processing centers, and military operations, and currently serves as a parking lot. These past lives still live today in the spirit of this place, somewhat neglected in the forgetfulness of time, but alive all the same.

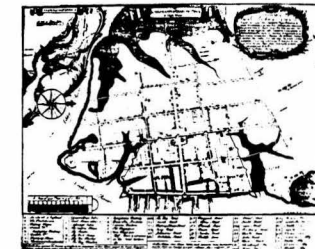
Man leaves traces of his passage in this world, some bold, others modest, but all attesting to his presence here. We can surmise something of the reality of our forebears by studying these lega-

cies. One can see, for example, that the imposition of a Cartesian grid over the landscape presented for them a rational way of ordering their world. Its simple one-to-one ratio suggested freedom and equality in its decidedly ahierarchical organization.² Maximum freedom was allowed the individual unit, the block, a very modern construct. The grid was a projection of the conscious, ordered imprint of man over his environment, at the same time optimizing access to the land. Within the interstices of this intersecting tissue lay the urban block, developed to allow maximum access to the land. Consequently, property lots were narrow and hugged the street edge. The by-product of this urban density is a clear city footprint, which describes the relationships between the public and private sectors of the city as well as between the constituent parts of the block. This footprint is a result of a need to impose a human pattern on the perceived disorder of nature. The city, though, over time, develops a density and an ebb and flow of growth all its own. Buildings age, undergo change, and are torn down over relentless cycles of time, but nevertheless, patterns persist: in the passage into the block, the disposition of open interior spaces, the parceling of the block, the clarity of political boundaries.

Counterpoint emerges in the fact that within the rational construct of this gridded city lies a sensual reality all its own. The blocks, the buildings, the parks, the Potomac, the flight paths above, lend a distinctive character to this city. The architecture has a texture that is approachable; its modest scale invites the touch. The city is a blend of sounds, sights, and smells as well. Trains rumble in the distance, aircraft soar overhead, freighters ply the Potomac, and the



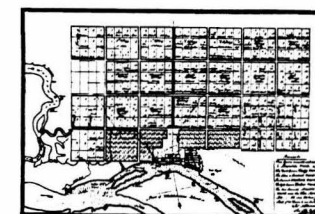
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1683



Charleston, South Carolina 1739



Alexandria, Virginia 1749



Savannah, Georgia 1800

open doors of cafés and restaurants usher olfactory advertisements out onto the sidewalks.

This thesis project attempts, in part, to preserve the simple clarity and integrity of the block in the midst of its modern-day erosion into suburbia and exurbia. With more abundant, and cheaper, land located outside the density of the city proper and the increased access of our automobile society to it, our commerce, housing, and civic institutions are moving to the anonymity of the suburb. The expedience of suburban malls and fast food strips, though, attests to how the life of the street can be eviscerated when the scale of the individual is ignored, substituted with that of the automobile. This project, then, is a proposal for downtown Alexandria rather than its suburban fringes, where buildings are pulled so far from the street that they no longer have a life on it.

To what extent is this exodus to suburbia a rejection of the shared cultural heritage of the city? When children are sent to fenced-in schools surrounded by moats of grass and blacktop and no tangible connection to the community itself, what message is sent them... or society as a whole? Does such isolation from the community subconsciously sow disenfranchisement within the child just beginning to develop an awareness of the world around him? Does this gradual societal disintegration of public life in favor of personal lives bode well for the future significance of the public realm within the city? Can field trips overcome this alienation from what was once the traditional center of one's civic identity, or do such infrequent expeditions into the city reinforce a child's notion of being a tourist in his own town—a stranger in his own land?

One is obliged to ask as well whether the built environment has atrophied with this migration from the city, as it seems, indeed, it must. In the city an overall logic, an order, is assumed. Each object is necessarily subordinate to the whole in order to preserve the sense of the collective—the community. This sensibility is lost, though, once we leave the city behind. There is no collective, no body, and no coherent relation between the part and the whole. When syntax is lost, is intelligible space possible?

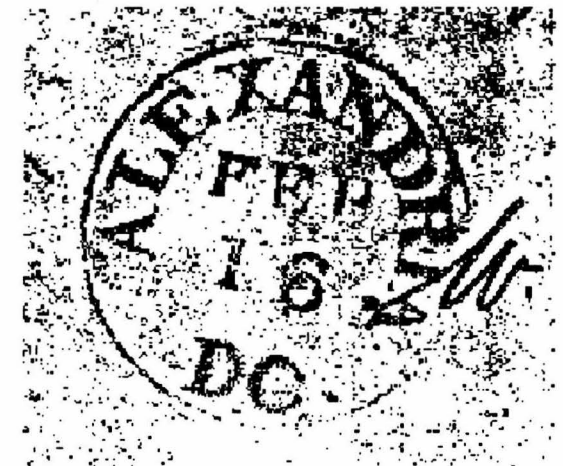
This argument presupposes an innate value for the city—as a cultural repository, as a communal construct, as a house for an extended family. It posits that architecture is more than mere building, but rather an intermediary between man and his culture. It is the most social of arts and a natural product of the dynamic social vitality of the city. Naturally, the city is no idyll—it cannot be, for we are not saints—but the realities and forces that exist within it are a mirror of our existence. The diversity of its inhabitants, and the confluence of culture in one place, amplified all the more by a heightened global awareness, mark the city as a center of our world.

Alexandria's urbanity is manifest within the immediate order of its grid and its orientation to the site of its initial reason for coming into being, the Potomac River. Alexandria's density is a straightforward weave of urban masses and open spaces. Its considered patterns of solid and void, of block and street, allow circulation, orientation, and comprehension. Within these dichotomies lies its complexity, for within the block exists another hierarchy of solid and void, of private and public, and the fundamental nature of the

correspondence between each cell and the organism as a whole. This is visceral to the architecture of the city. The physical make-up of the city is one of rooms nested within larger rooms, which, when taken together, assume an identity as a whole. Richness in a city's construct exists when the room within the city becomes its own city as well, each constituent element possessing its own discrete relationship to the greater whole. A balance is assumed between a city's urban coherence and the complexity of its relationships at the scale of its parts, the canvas within the urban frame.

The school, too, is a cultural repository, especially so in a democracy, where the education of the citizen is central to the preservation of liberty. The shared legacy of mankind resides within the walls of an institution of learning. Introduction of the school into the urban classroom provides myriad social, political, and architectural opportunities for engagement with the city. The continual need for architecture allows the renewed exploration of collective cultural values, and this project proposes such a reconnection to society—in the very place it ironically seems so often to fail, our schools. For Thomas Jefferson, the democratic school was a village, a community of parts, implying a mutual understanding between the constituents, and if this principle still holds today, one must then ask how one builds in such a community.

Looking to Alexandria's model, we see it is a city of walls. The primary walls, the political walls, are the adjacent party walls. The wall of the façade has another role, responding to the social condition of the city. Buried within the building, the party wall can be neither punctured



Alexandria, DC postmark

nor passed through. The façade, however, can, and speaks to the street. The wall is a primary political act; it establishes boundary and edge, territory. It delimits a space, rising to enclose outdoor spaces and to create interior ones.

These lines in the landscape cannot be accidental. Their building must convey a sense of their purpose and make clear what occurs at the point of change they mark between in and out, between included and excluded. These are critical moments in architecture. The thesis project's built form is biased toward the block's perimeter, its figural walls affirmation of the strength of the downtown's urban frame. By preserving the block and championing the court, the project enters into a discourse with the city, for the city is also a larger campus and a classroom as well. The project's slender components are intended to provide maximum connection between student and the world outside, sun and air being psychological necessities. The building also deforms to cradle an outdoor court, in effect, an outdoor room inside the larger room of the school. This conceptualization of the city allows its formal abstraction within the school in terms of its edges, centers, transparencies, modules, axes, and its own grid.

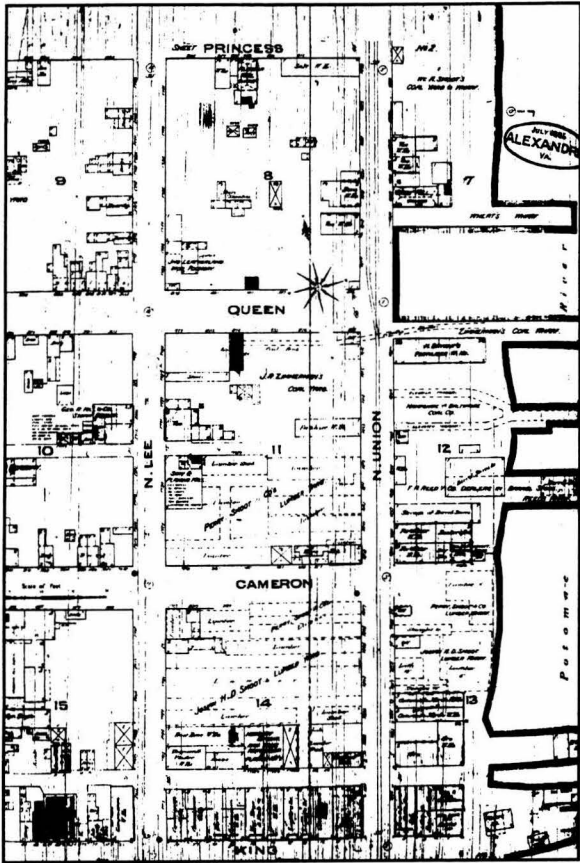
We project ourselves on the world and it on us. The architect lives somewhere in between, mediating between our world and our selves. Within this context, the project attempts to function as an ontological filter of the history and culture of this place. Ironically, the architect cannot work in the medium of the final product, but only in abstractions, in apparent contradiction to the fact that a building cannot exist in abstract space. Architecture, however, does not

emanate from formula, but rather from concepts steeped in a shared human condition. The designer works in two-dimensional and three-dimensional analogs—drawings, scale models, computer models—in order to bring intention, interpretation, to the reality of the existing condition and to reveal some truth of a place and time, re-introducing them to the world in some new form.

Ultimately, though, the architect cannot explain the world, but only interpret it, and in so doing, leaves gaps. Some part is left for the imagination to fill. This is what makes the creative endeavor compelling. To fill something is to leave no room for anything or anyone else. Better to invite others in to complete the experience, to discover their own interpretation of the place, and to find their own place within it.

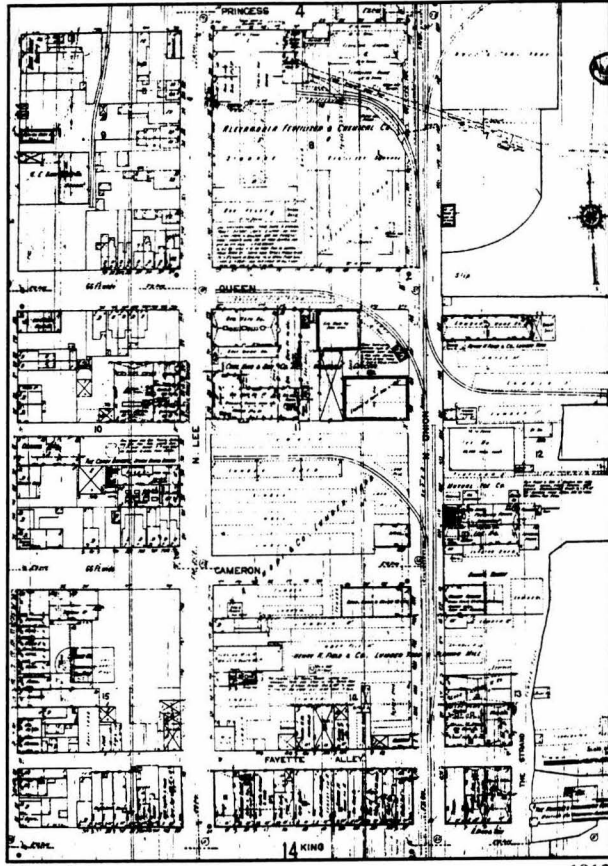


U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey of the Potomac 1896



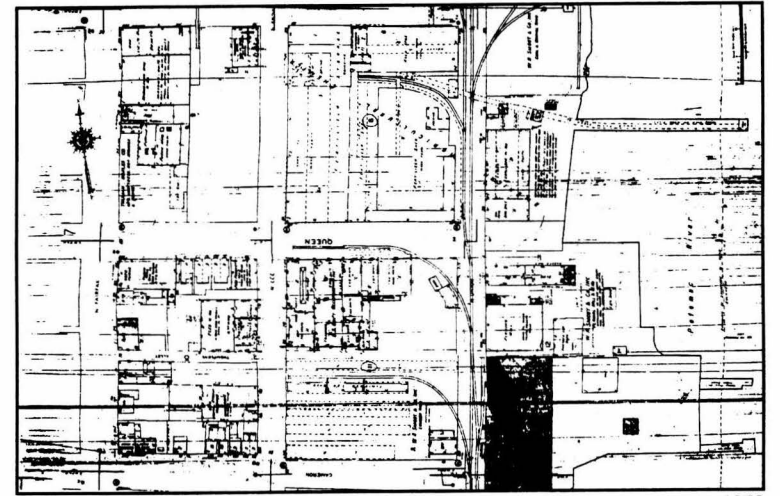
Map of site

1885



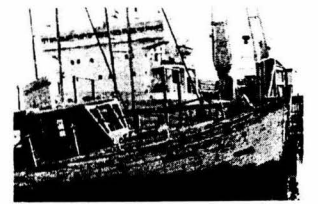
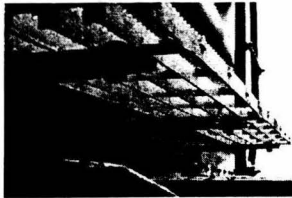
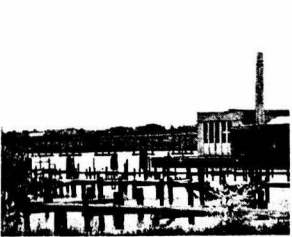
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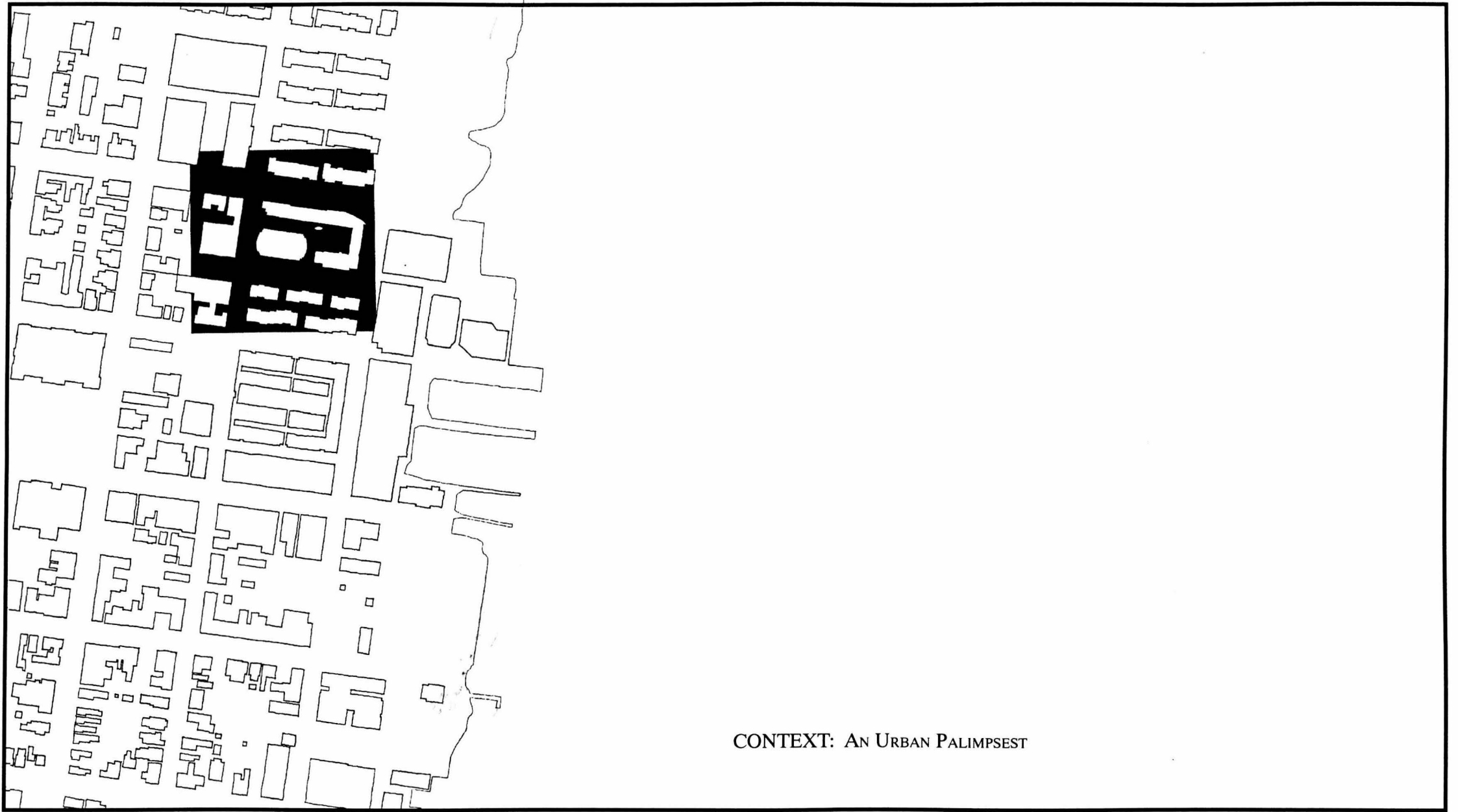
1912



Map of site

1958





CONTEXT: AN URBAN PALIMPSEST

The “New World” tantalized “Old World” Europe for reasons political, economic, and religious. When Europeans made their way to this new frontier—this great unknown territory marked on maps with uncertain lines and vast areas ominously identified as *Terra Incognita*—their forays into the unknown were accompanied with not a little trepidation. A measure of security was derived, though, from the familiarity of the traditions, rituals, and culture they brought across the Atlantic Ocean with them. Vestiges of the worlds they attempted to transplant persist to this day.

The settlements they planned in America, on what they deemed virgin soil, were built only after first drawing upon a conceptual basis of towns and living derived from a shared European legacy. Before the first tree had been felled, before the first post hole had been dug, European constructs had already been cast over the land. The contingencies of building in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment were tempered by the comfort of recalled, established European patterns of mapping, siting, building, clearing land, fixing boundaries, organizing and laying out streets, planning open communal spaces, and providing for the general welfare. For the early settlers, making sense of an unknown quantity meant the application of that which had been tried before in another context and proven true. This practice was reenacted time and again over the life of this new world. Its application was as prevalent in Colonial America as it still is today.

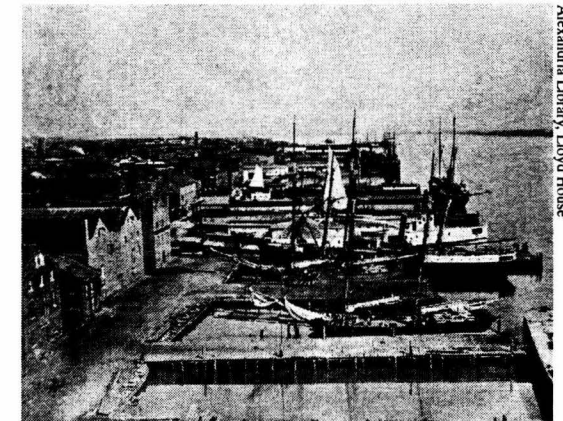
The Potomac River rises in the Appalachian plateau where today the states of West Virginia and Maryland meet. Four hundred miles downriver is its confluence with Chesapeake

Bay, which itself empties directly into the Atlantic Ocean. The region’s indigenous peoples were primarily agriculturists and hunters who occupied semi-permanent cleared sites on either side of the *Patowmack*, as it was first known to European colonials. The derivation for the name of this river is found in *patawomeke*, an Algonquian word meaning “a trading place.”¹ The river was these early inhabitants’ primary waterway. The conspiracy of settlement and disease that the colonial Europeans brought with them proved irresistible, and by 1750 the native population of the area, for all intents and purposes, had vanished.²

Establishment of permanent scattered settlements along the Potomac River valley by British subjects began in 1690.³ Forests were cleared and the fertile soil was planted, primarily with tobacco, but with staple food crops too. Wharves were built near the river to facilitate both the transport of tobacco to foreign ports and the import of the manufactured goods, drygoods, and special items required within a plantation economy. This agrarian economy ingrained the region with a culture and character that persisted for generations to come, whereas, further to the north, the disposition of the land supported a more diversified economy, rather than reliance on the cultivation of one crop. As a result, trades, industries, and farming were more prevalent above the Potomac’s confluence with the Occoquan River. Non-agricultural activity was actively discouraged in the Colonies, however, by the British Parliament in the interest of insuring the Colonies’ continued economic dependence on the mother country.⁴

Alexandria, Virginia, on the Potomac, is situated on land originally granted to the Brents of Maryland in 1654. They received 700 acres, 50 acres for each of the 14 emigrants they provided passage for to the New World.⁵ The land was sold to Scottish merchant John Alexander in 1669 and remained in the family for 80 years, until 1749, when the town of Alexandria was established.

Alexandria’s establishment as a town in Colonial Virginia was an outgrowth of the burgeoning tobacco economy in the colony. Tobacco took such precedence over other crops in Virginia that it became a medium of exchange and legal tender. The culture of tobacco, which required large-scale farming operations to be economical, pervaded the Tidewater region all along Chesapeake Bay.⁶ Scottish settlers headed north, looking to avoid the powerful monopoly of London merchants in the Tidewater region downriver on the Chesapeake, and formed the nucleus of the settlement they named “Belhaven” in honor of John Hamilton (Lord Belhaven).⁷ The first warehouse was established about 1730.⁸ It was the hub of a small trading center (at the foot of present-day Oronoco Street in Alexandria) at the northern extent of a crescent-shaped cove along the west bank of the Potomac River—ideal for a harbor. The location of this warehouse marked the terminus of the tobacco “rolling” road, which connected the tobacco plantations with the trading ships that coursed the Potomac and Chesapeake.⁹ This connection to a navigable waterway was vital to the tobacco farmers, who moved progressively inland in search of fertile land, as the ports provided the critical link between plantations and markets.¹⁰



Alexandria waterfront after Union Occupation 1865

Alexandria Library, Lloyd House

Public warehouses were mandated by Colonial law for the storage of tobacco. These places of storage, weighing, accounting, and inspection facilitated governmental supervision and regulation. As bridges were unreliable (often washing out in high waters), Belhaven was established as a port at a point where the ferry crossing completed the one main road that connected North and South along the Atlantic Seaboard. In Virginia this was originally an Indian trail that the planters came to call the Potomac Path and later the King's Highway (as was customary in the Old Country with post roads).¹¹ It exists today as U.S. Interstate 1.¹²

Rather than allow the continued unregulated dispersion of isolated warehouse and shipping facilities throughout the Colony, which only complicated the task of collecting duties and controlling trade, the British Crown encouraged the development of towns. That such towns could become centers of trade and culture, as well, supplemented this administrative motive, and before long Colonial policy was to actively promote the establishment of river towns and seaports in order to encourage trade and facilitate its regulation.¹³

The settlement of Belhaven prospered to the extent that the Colonial Virginia General Assembly in Williamsburg was "petitioned for a town to be established on the lands surrounding the warehouse."¹⁴ This petition was supported by local planters, who recognized that a riverport town near their plantations would be a market center and an asset to them as well as to the local merchants who comprised the community.¹⁵ In this air of optimism, Alexandria was founded in 1749 by an act of the House of Burgesses.¹⁶ The

town was established on a 60-acre tract owned by the heirs of John Alexander, and 11 trustees were appointed.¹⁷ As partial recompense to the Alexander family, the town was officially renamed Alexandria from Belhaven.¹⁸

Alexandria was founded in the interest of establishing a center that would be "commodious for trade and navigation and tend greatly to the best advantage of frontier inhabitants..."¹⁹ Its founding act included stipulations as to the physical organization of the town and specified minimum building requirements. Its 60 original acres were divided into half-acre lots, four of which would comprise one block.²⁰ The streets (loyally named for their British rulers) would be carved from the land adjoining the property lines of adjacent lots. Purchasers of the parcels of land auctioned July 13-14, 1749, were to "within two years... erect, build and finish on each lot... one house of brick, stone, or wood well framed of the dimensions of twenty feet square, and nine feet pitch."²¹ Houses were to have either brick or stone chimneys as a precaution against fire.²² One additional proviso required that no more than two adjacent lots could be purchased by one individual so as to allow as much access to a variety of investors as possible.²³

Land was apportioned for a public landing and one block was set aside for a market place, the community's center for political and commercial assemblages. "Produce markets, fairs, and horse and cattle trading took place here, and as court was also convened here (in the town hall erected at the north edge of the lot), it was the site of the whipping post and pillory. Both the Virginia militia and General Washington's Revolutionary troops drilled here as well."²⁴

Accepted practice for new towns in Europe was to establish a regulating gridiron plan along which subsequent building could take place. The directives supplied the settlers of Jamestown, Virginia, for example, 143 years earlier, in 1606, specified just such an organization of space: "And seeing order is at the same price with confusion it shall be advisably done to set your houses even and by a line, that your streets may have a good breadth, and be carried square about your marketplace...."²⁵ The gridiron plan for Alexandria, laid down by County Surveyer John West in 1749, paralleled the Potomac River to the east with one four-block stretch interrupted by the inland curve of the river. The grid was extended further to the west in 1762 and 1785. Each of the 84 blocks measured 352 feet, 2 inches (north to south) by 246 feet, 10 inches (east to west). The town plan lacked, though, any attempt to incorporate focal points or a repeated pattern of open spaces found in other tidewater towns such as Williamsburg, Virginia, and Annapolis, Maryland.²⁶ It was, in fact, a rather prosaic gridiron plan.

Alexandria officials determined after the two-year deadline for construction had passed that further steps would be necessary to insure the orderly development of the town. In 1752 a requirement was issued, "... that all dwelling houses from this day not begun or to be built hereafter shall be built on the front and be in a line with the street as chief of the houses now are, and that no gable or end of such house be on or next to the street, except on angle or where two streets cross, otherwise to be pulled down".²⁷ This edict came as a response to the practice of some early homebuilders, who, in a show of personal means, had been building their homes



Alexandria waterfront, U.S. Naval Facilities 1944

Alexandria Library, Lloyd House

back away from the street edge (and not always with the expectation of later extending to it), therein serving to set their homes off from their more protocol-minded neighbors. Alexandria was witness also to a rather unique housing type as a result of several building constraints. Known as the flounder house, due to its characteristic placement of windows on only one primary side of the structure, this house had a roof that sloped in only one direction. Two stories with half a gable roof, it often was built in this manner to satisfy the two-year deadline, with anticipation of adding to the blank side at a later, more prosperous, time.²⁸ Other factors, particularly the tax on windows and the costliness of the glass itself, were of no small concern to new home builders. In addition, these homes were hard to heat to begin with, and, on occasion, windows on north-facing walls were dispensed with in order to help keep heating costs down. In 1753, four years after the auction of the first 41 of the platted 84 lots, the town's courthouse was built.²⁹ Six years later the town hall was built, at the edge of the market square. It also housed the town's first grammar school.³⁰

In 1763, 46 new lots were sold, and the town gridiron was extended in three directions. A street width of 66 feet (the length of the typical surveyor's chain) was maintained until 1785, when Washington Street was added, named in honor of the town's favorite son. Washington Street was 100 feet wide with 18-foot sidewalks.³¹ Graded and paved with large stones, it served the function of the town's "Main Street." Oil lamps were placed at the street corners.³²

Alexandria flourished. By 1776, the town followed only New York and Boston in amount

of trade activity in the Colonies. Due to its prime mid-Atlantic Seaboard location, it also served as a central hub for the overland travel of people, post, and goods along the Boston, Massachusetts/Charleston, South Carolina corridor. This, in turn, allowed Alexandria's secondary and support economies to flourish.³³ 1779 saw the town's incorporation, with provisions for a mayor, Board of Aldermen, and a Common Council.³⁴

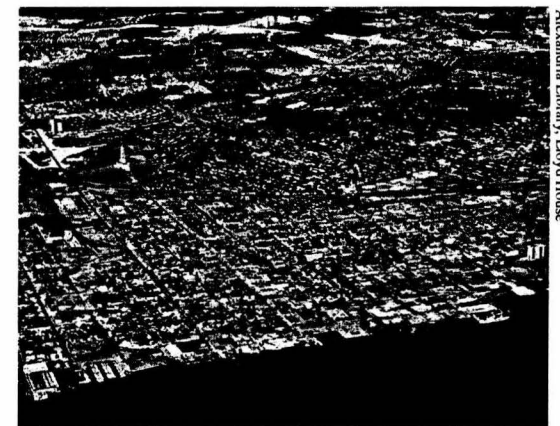
International commerce also did much to expand the field of observation of the city residents, who enjoyed considerable contact with the world outside. Alexandria was granted exposure to the arts, sciences, and cultures of distant, exotic lands that contributed much to the development of a global awareness in the population.³⁵ With the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the city's prospects seemed bright indeed. Flushed with the new nation's independence and its relationship with the neighboring Federal City, Alexandria experienced a boom that swelled through the 1790s and into the 1800s.³⁶

In 1790, the U.S. Congress and President Washington established a 10-mile-square federal district on land to be contributed by Virginia and Maryland. The site for this District of Columbia was chosen partially as a result of its proximity to Washington's estate at Mount Vernon and for the area's significant location, situated roughly equidistant from the northern and southern boundaries of the new United States.³⁷ The federal district was demarcated in 1791, and the southern cornerstone was located at Jones Point, at the southern limit of Alexandria. Both the City of Alexandria, and Alexandria County (now Arlington County), were incorporated into the

new Federal City.³⁸ In 1801, Virginia relinquished responsibility for Alexandria to the U.S. Congress and, until 1846, Alexandria, D.C. (with a population just under 5,000)³⁹ joined Georgetown, D.C., as a precinct of the Federal government.⁴⁰

Alexandria prospered as a central transportation hub, enjoying the good financial fortunes of being both an active sealink and a nodal point to the inland economy. This condition was aided by Virginia's practice of chartering turnpikes to insure a network of both viable roads and navigable waterways that would link inland farms and plantations with merchants and markets both in the nearby port towns and up and down the coast. By commercializing the countryside and bringing the once isolated rural producers into direct contact with the economic forces of the town and city, the flow of goods was assured, and with the recognizable benefits of serviceable roads apparent, land values rose, as did taxable revenue. Fiscal life in the Commonwealth was good.

The high demands that tobacco placed on the soil, though, made it less and less viable for the planters near Alexandria.⁴¹ As the tobacco farms moved south and west, a significant diversification was seen in the goods handled at Alexandria's docks. By the 1770s, wheat and flour had bypassed tobacco as the primary products processed and warehoused in the city. The primary markets for wheat and flour were the British West Indies and, notably, the fleet of the Royal Navy; the chief commodities of exchange were sugar, molasses, and rum. Alexandria prospered as a result of this consistent source of trade and, from 1800 to 1822,



Alexandria waterfront—erosion of the city grid 1960

followed only Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York in the export of flour. By 1823, though, lacking any significant natural resources with which to power large grist mills, she had been overtaken by Richmond as a flour exporter. With the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1833 came a collapse of the sugar industry and a reconfiguration of the Alexandrian trading network.⁴² In 1828, Alexandria had ranked fourth in the nation in tobacco exports, behind Richmond, Baltimore, and New Orleans, but by 1860, her inability to compete and regional overproduction conspired to dissipate the remnants of the trade that had been her economic lifeblood. Wheat—as grain, flour, and bread—supplanted tobacco as Alexandria’s leading export.⁴³

Alexandria’s eminence as a significant seaport was short-lived. A number of factors worked against her. Growth of the cities of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York made it cheaper for suppliers to ship directly to those ports, which would, in turn, serve as distribution points for smaller, more inland ports like Alexandria.⁴⁴ This development was only exacerbated by the pirate activity off the Barbary Coast, which had been preying on U.S. and European shipping for years. This, in tandem with the British impressment of U.S. sailors on the high seas into the Royal Navy, aggravated American commercial interests. President Jefferson eliminated the pirate menace, but war with Britain came during the Madison Administration and, in August 1814, Alexandria was occupied by British naval forces. Her shipbuilding industry permanently disabled, Alexandria witnessed a general decline of her maritime commercial presence both in and out of the port in the years to follow.⁴⁵ Alexandria’s

economic growth was also effectively impaired by Baltimore’s and Richmond’s increasing success in siphoning trade from Northern Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley into their extensive manufacturing and transportation networks.⁴⁶ Both cities had also been spared occupation during the War of 1812, a blow from which Alexandria never fully recovered.

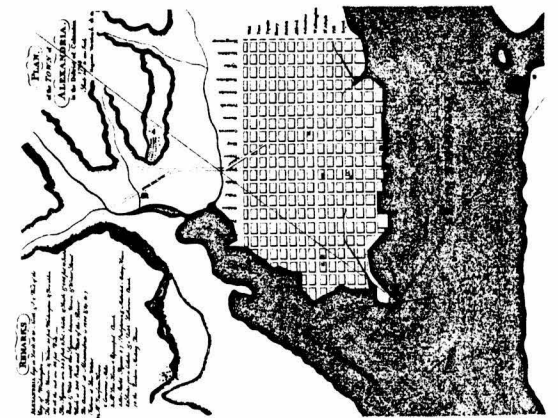
Alexandria yielded first to larger ports and then to the railroad. Steam-powered ships (probably first introduced to the Potomac in 1824) also negated Alexandria’s natural advantages as a seaport.⁴⁷ A proposed canal system was a disappointment and a financial disaster. First conceived by George Washington, its goal was to link the Potomac and Ohio Rivers. Building was undertaken in Georgetown in the 1830s but doomed by both the railroad and the steamship. It was a tremendous financial drain, which later stalled Alexandria’s efforts to embrace the railroad until after Richmond and Baltimore had established rail centers themselves. With the occupation by Union forces from the very onset of the Civil War, Alexandria’s significance as a seaport was effectively finished.⁴⁸

Increasing fiscal ills due to excessive speculation in the already obsolete canals and disaffection over the lack of a voice in the Congress mounted, and the citizens of Alexandria petitioned to free themselves from the Federal City. Alexandria was retroceded to Virginia in 1846, after a 22-year struggle to free itself of congressional rule and the attendant imposition of taxes upon an unrepresented community. Virginia provided a measure of financial relief to the beleaguered residents, absorbing three-quarters of its public debt.⁴⁹

The forest of foreign masts that once populated the docks of Union and Strand Streets was gone. During the years leading up to the Civil War, Alexandria still had an active local and coastal trade, but registry of ships for foreign trade had ceased. Foreign-trade merchants preferred Baltimore, enhanced as it was by the extensive Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and Baltimore and Ohio rail networks.⁵⁰ Baltimore’s clipper-shipbuilding industry also helped put an end to most of Alexandria’s shipbuilding interests.

Shortly before dawn on May 25, 1861, the day after Virginia’s voters ratified the Secession Ordinance by a considerable majority, Alexandria, due to her strategic proximity to the Federal City, was occupied by Union troops and would remain so for the duration of the ensuing Civil War. The city was effectively closed for business for the next four years, compounding her financial doldrums. All citizens were required to take oaths of allegiance to the Federal government, and their Confederate currency was worthless.⁵¹ A military governor executed all essential administrative duties. Banks, businesses, schools, and even churches were closed during the occupation.⁵²

Alexandria was effectively cut off as a commercial entity. The waterfront became a U.S. military quartermaster storehouse for the Army of the Potomac, and both it and the railroad were stockaded against Confederate attack.⁵³ Both the railyards and Alexandria’s port provided a key embarkation point for Union troop deployments into Virginia, where most of the Civil War was fought.⁵⁴



Alexandria, in the District of Columbia 1798

War's end, in 1865, was time to take stock. Though Alexandria, due to her status as an occupied city, had been spared the devastation that befell much of Virginia, it had been economically dormant for four long years. Saddled with a huge debt, without markets or capital, and reattached to a state with four years of Federal taxes to satisfy and in economic shambles, Alexandria languished for a decade during Reconstruction.⁵⁵ Over the next 50 years, Alexandria experienced minimal growth.⁵⁶

Alexandria's early potential as a port city with both commercial and manufacturing clout went largely unrealized. In addition to its financial misadventures, the city suffered a succession of natural disasters that included several devastating epidemics and numerous fires in the warehouse district along the Potomac waterfront. These events, coupled to the constraints of a prodigious public indebtedness, served to handcuff her attempts to develop trade and industrial alternatives more attractive than those of competing Eastern Seaboard ports.⁵⁷ As Alexandria had always been primarily a commercial town, concentrating on shipping and merchandising, she was slow to turn to large-scale manufacturing with its attendant demands for cheap, abundant labor and ready access to inexpensive (or local) raw materials and power. Her market share was quickly overtaken by more resourceful port centers.

Slowly, resolutely, helped primarily by advantageous proximity to the growing Federal City, she regained her local manufacturing activity.⁵⁸ This renewed economic impetus helped encourage additional public amenities. A general water supply was first provided to the downtown area

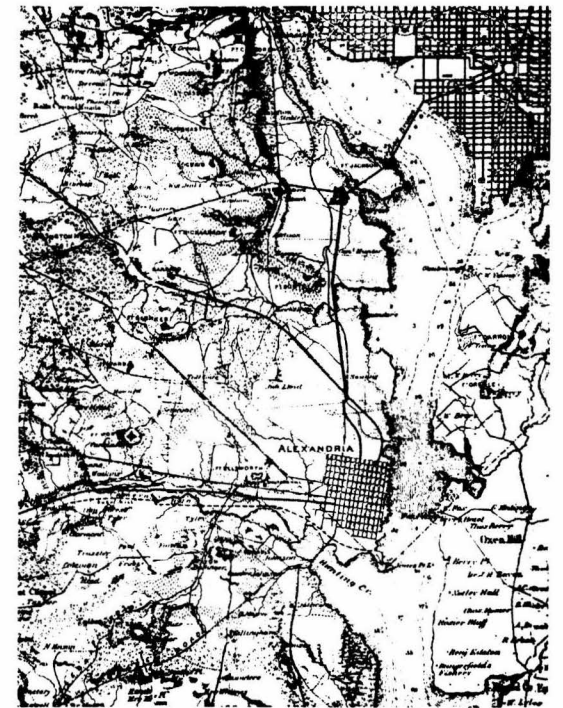
in 1850. A gas company would be chartered the following year. Telephone and telegraph service arrived in 1881 and home mail delivery in 1887. Electric service became available in 1889 and a street car system followed three years later.⁵⁹

Construction of Potomac Yards in 1905 helped re-establish Alexandria economically. These railyards, paralleling the Potomac River west of downtown, stimulated local enterprise, even water-based.⁶⁰ Maritime industry enjoyed a renewal during this period, but by then fishing was the focus of Alexandria waterfront activity rather than shipping.⁶¹ The Potomac was a significant source of fish, and fisheries flourished on the Potomac until World War I, by which time contamination and sedimentation had destroyed their viability.⁶²

The advent of World War I brought considerable boon to Alexandria's fortunes, ushering in a period of increased industrial and commercial activity, most of it linked to a rejuvenated shipbuilding industry and the new U.S. Naval Torpedo Station. The Ford Motor Company also opened a factory on the waterfront, which was adapted for wartime production. Shipbuilding, revived in Alexandria through both World Wars, enjoyed a brief resurgence and the railyards, (with 110 miles of track), handled a peak of 10,000 cars a day. This was due in no small part to Alexandria's designation as a required freight classification point for all north- or southbound rail traffic.⁶³ This was not to last, however, as the significance of the railyards declined with the rapid deployment of the U.S. Interstate network in the 1950s.

By the 1930s the fortunes of Alexandria were closely tied to the U.S. government, and with its growth during the Depression years, so too did Alexandria grow. The expansion of government services and facilities and the need for manpower to operate them triggered a housing shortage in the District of Columbia. Alexandria provided a convenient alternative. At this point, "old town" became "new city". Major commuter bridges linked the banks of the Potomac. National Airport, just north of the Old Town district, opened in 1940, followed by the Pentagon, the nation's largest government facility, in 1942. With the influx of New Dealers in the 1930s, and government employees and defense personnel in the 1940s, as the nation geared for World War II, Alexandria swelled to accommodate the great impetus for housing.⁶⁴

The needs of a nation at war brought rapid development to Alexandria. Dramatic increases in population accompanied the rise in Federal activity. By the 1950s, much of the area within a 12-mile radius of Washington, D.C., was developed, as the postwar baby boom generated an even greater desire for suburban housing.⁶⁵ Since this period, Alexandria has experienced steady growth, most of it westward, away from the Potomac, as part of the greater metropolitan D.C. area. At the same time, renewed interest in reclaiming Alexandria's historic past has resulted in a large-scale effort to recall the heady days of Alexandria's golden era through restrictive zoning, tight land-use regulation, and building design codes. These efforts stem partially from civic pride in the city's rich history, and partially from hopes to translate this history into tourism dollars.



Alexandria, Virginia 1862

Alexandria's urban development is a distinctive blend of indigenous contingencies and the conventions of the day. The town's grid was typical of early town planning. Many Colonial river- and seaport towns such as Charleston, Philadelphia, and Savannah employed the rational grid as a means of organizing and demarking property. Most water-bordered towns dedicated several adjacent lots to public use, with development working its way inland from the water's edge. Alexandria was no exception. Individual lots were subdivided according to the needs of the property owner, with the proviso that all addresses must front the street. Trees were planted along the street to provide shade and a break between the clamor, dirt, and commotion of the street and the privacy of the homes that approached it. Corner lots were valued as commercial addresses and often were the site of small independent grocers, pharmacies, or general stores.

Alexandria's architecture also exhibits a mix of regional and European characteristics. Buildings featured an extensive use of local brick. Fired from local clay, irregularities found in early buildings can be attributed to the practice of hand molding the bricks. This method was utilized until machines took over in the 1840s, producing more uniform results and tighter mortar joints.⁶⁶ Buildings pulled up to the street, with a fringe of growth between the façade and street, to allow room, in the rear, for elegant gardens at the center of the block, a practice imported from Europe. This also allowed dependencies and service buildings to be tucked away from the protocol-minded street. These private gardens were well insulated from the public realm of the street either by brick walls or

passageways that passed from the sidewalk and between adjacent homes to the garden in the rear. Belying the formal pretense the public façades presented to the street, back yards and alleys housed the facilities that accommodated the less presentable realities of life—necessaries, wells and wash houses, service entries and servants' quarters, kitchens, ice and smoke houses, barns, stables, and carriage houses.

The rowhouses themselves were quite narrow and wedged one against another, usually measuring between 17 feet and 21 feet in width. They appear cramped by contemporary standards, but even the scale of Old Town, Alexandria, is distinctively different from that of the modern suburban sprawl that has raced westward; for in the city's formative years, there were but three methods of travel: foot, horseback, and boat. Proximity to the center of business and economy of land use were essential. As a result, land was at a premium, and, especially in the South, the most precious of possessions.

Alexandria's location along a major water mass precluded deep basements in buildings very near the river's edge. Indeed, to accommodate a basement, many dwellings featured a raised ground floor that was entered several feet above the sidewalk by means of stairs or a small stoop. The main floor, or *piano nobile*, occupied the house's second story, allowing the living quarters to be elevated, as was the European custom, above the dirt and din of the street. Commercial buildings were organized so that business was conducted at street level, with residences for the proprietor and family one floor above and a garden or court in either the back or a side yard. Most Alexandria homes featured a space-saving

side-hall plan, another British legacy, but more affluent residents, who owned larger lots, freed themselves of the party walls of their neighbors and built freestanding homes, often featuring a more formal central-hall plan.

The enclaves of neighborhoods comprising uninterrupted rows of pristine Federal-style townhouses are a rather recent development, a product of modern zoning practices. Alexandria traditionally featured a mixture of interspersed industrial, commercial, and residential structures, quite the norm in the pre-twentieth-century United States. The nostalgic Chamber of Commerce-inspired postcard image of elegant vistas is more a product of romance than reality, for the "real" Alexandria featured a lively juxtaposition of a variety of building types and uses. With the sole exception of the creation of Union Street from infill along the waterfront at the end of the eighteenth century, there never was a distinction made between business and residential sections. Often, in fact, both uses were accommodated within the same building, presenting a rather utilitarian approach to land use.

Naturally, as architectural trends waxed and waned in Alexandria, so did building styles, and one finds a potpourri of them in the city: Georgian, Federal, Italianate, Greek Revival, Gothic, and Queen Anne, in particular. These were applied, by and large, to standard frame or bearing wall systems. Later, industry would introduce the structural steel grid when larger spans were desired, but Modernism, not surprisingly, was never allowed much of a foothold in Alexandria. The city still embraces its cherished past, evidenced by the storybook "restored"



Alexandria, Virginia 1945

façades in the high-rent district of Old Town, Alexandria, today and its connection to the riverfront. City planners have been conscientious in making a considerable amount of the waterfront district accessible to the public through either public parks or a variety of mixed-use concerns, some of them commercial and retail-oriented, others recreational and cultural. This is in keeping with a largely Southern tradition to open the trace of land between town and water to the public.

From the beginning, the waterfront property in Alexandria has been the most prized. In the interest of providing additional commercial and warehouse space on the Potomac, the 10- to 14-foot cliffs that interrupted Water (now Lee) Street for three blocks, were plowed and pulled down between 1796 and 1798. This created an additional town block between Water Street and the Potomac, and a new street, Union Street. The merchants who owned these properties agreed in 1796 to lay a 20-foot alley (now known as Thompson's Alley) that extended two blocks inland from Thompson's wharf.

It is on this land, claimed from the Potomac, that the project of this thesis is located. The site is adjacent to the location of the earliest tobacco and grain warehouses in Alexandria. Later, in the nineteenth century, milling, lumber, coal, and fish processing, ice sales and storage, and shipbuilding took place on that same ground now occupied by town homes. The ferry landing that was the main connection to the post and stage road to New York through the early Federal period lies just two blocks to the north of the site and rounds off the northernmost limit of the cove that formed the natural harbor of Alexandria's

port.⁶⁷ Just two blocks to the southwest is where the market square was established in 1749 and where City Hall stands today.⁶⁸

The site selected for the situation of the project is currently a parking lot. It is bordered by upscale town homes (of recent vintage) to the north and south. A mix of retail and residential buildings stands across Lee Street to the west, behind which are 1940s government housing projects. East of the site, on Union Street backing towards the Potomac, are a series of commercial and maritime enterprises, interrupted by the World War-era Torpedo Factory, rehabilitated now as an arts center. Northeast of the site, also on the Potomac, is Founder's Park, which is maintained by the city.

Over the years, Alexandria has wrestled with shifting dependencies on the sea and on the land. Misfortunes, manmade and natural, brought a resolution to the first heady chapter of Alexandria's existence. War, economic depression, and the superior ability of other port cities to compete for resources, capital, and trade all took their toll. The city suffered fires and floods, and smallpox, yellow fever, and cholera were constant threats to the port town. With its daily contact with vessels from around the world and despite strict regulations for the inspection of incoming ships and crews, Alexandria suffered from numerous epidemics.⁶⁹

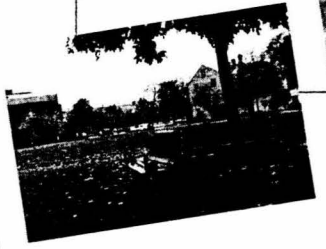
Since those early days two centuries and more ago, Alexandria has time and again had to find its place anew—to determine where to direct the bulk of her energies, her industry, and her resources. Recent developments would suggest that Alexandria's gaze is firmly focused on her

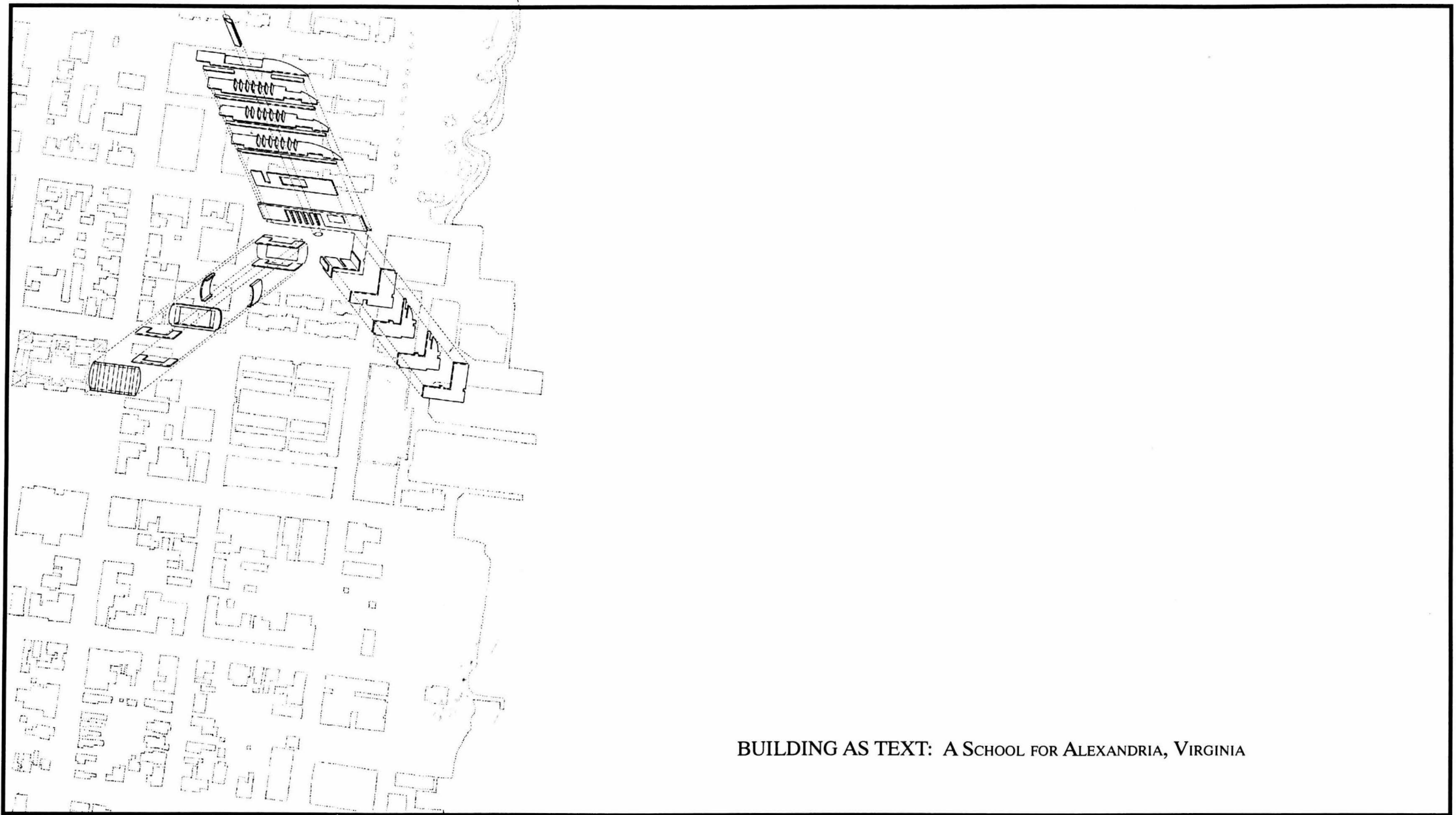
past in a vain attempt to recall past glories. Sometimes, though, it is difficult to sort fact from fiction, such as surround the stories of George Washington's activity in the town and the popular notion that some of the cobblestone streets near the waterfront were laid by captured Hessian soldiers. These and other histories prevail to this day in the popular lore. Their veracity is uncertain, but they are faithfully told and retold, comforting myths perhaps, but myths that often reveal much more about a place's character than a catalog of capricious building styles or a scientific analysis of shifting demographic patterns ever could.

Whether Alexandria's future, indeed, lies in her past or not, one thing is clear. The world that she occupies is no longer a "New World" for Alexandria has a mythology and a history, all her own.



Alexandria, Virginia 1967





BUILDING AS TEXT: A SCHOOL FOR ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

The Constitution of the United States makes no provision for the education of its citizens, but Americans have long believed it incumbent upon themselves to provide such instruction. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to George Washington in 1786, "... liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that, too, of the people with a certain degree of instruction." Jefferson maintained that the education of a nation's citizens was central to the preservation of freedom. He asserted in 1818 that an education advances "... the prosperity, the power, and the happiness of a nation." These were rather novel beliefs for the time. In early America, instruction was available to those of means either in private schools, parochial schools, academies, or by tutor. Churches and charities undertook the instruction of those without, but even this was often restricted to certain segments of the population, generally male and white. For many, vocational training was the extent of their formal education. Though charters were granted by the state, schools usually were privately owned and instructors were licensed by either the church or state. This was a holdover of the system inherited from aristocratic England.¹

In Colonial Virginia, a child's education was the concern of the family. This tradition of private responsibility for the education of one's children was a product of Virginia's aristocratic heritage and maintained by the existence of a largely rural society. The legacy of these social and economic patterns was so firmly entrenched, even by the time of the Revolution, that political independence exerted little impact on it. Virginia's predominantly agrarian society, with its ingrained institutions of slavery and political power through land ownership, was perhaps not

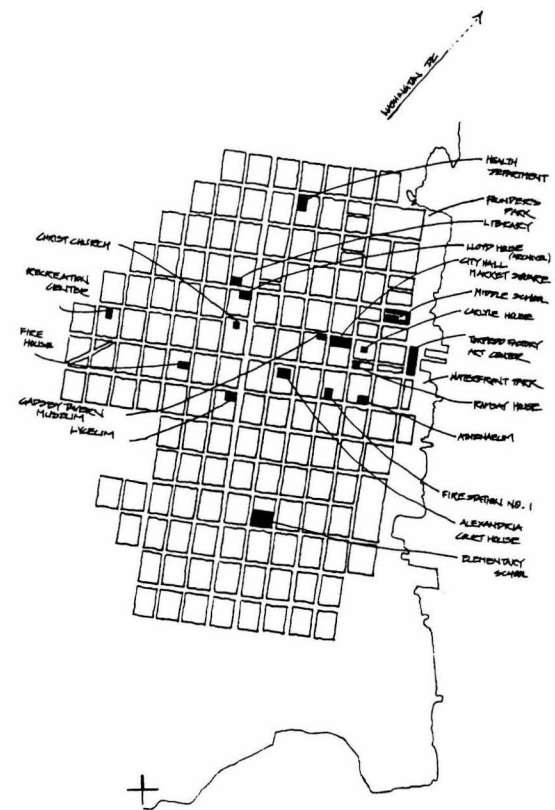
as receptive to unilateral democratic or egalitarian ideals as were the industrialized urban centers of the North. Patterns of living and thinking changed slowly in the South, and the belief in a relationship between a quality education and the general welfare of the community gained currency only with the dissolution of the socioeconomic culture of the plantation system. With Reconstruction, the concept of paying for the education of another's child, theretofore an alien concept save for acts of charity, was introduced in Virginia's state constitution.² This sense of a multilateral social compact emerged in Alexandria as well. One of the most earnest advocates of compulsory education, Richard Carne, was appointed Alexandria's first superintendent of schools in 1870. Carne argued that if in a democratic society, citizens, as jury members or voters, were to extend power over another's property or person, then it was reasonable to demand that they be sufficiently prepared to exercise that responsibility.³

Two primary educational models were inherited from Europe. One, a monastic-based model, relied on scholarly research and formal lecture as the core of its instruction. The other grew from a guild-based system; a master instructed young apprentices in specific skills. This latter system is the more prevalent paradigm in contemporary grammar and secondary schools while the former, liturgical, model, has closer ties to the university. The durability of both paradigms to this day attests to their viability, and room for both models exists in the contemporary school. Formal didactic instruction and the acquisition of tacit knowledge, gained by doing, should complement one another in the contemporary

education process and represent a marriage of canonic knowledge, the legacy of time, and personal observation and experience. Essential, though, is the thoughtful provision of spaces designed to best accommodate the various types of learning that take place in the school, spaces that foster the learning process but strive for more than a mere fulfillment of program. The school needs spaces with which the student can identify, where the relationship between each student and the instructor is clearly defined. The communal spaces and the passages between them need to afford the student a sense of the greater school community and his place in it.

This proposal is for a school for 400 pupils in three grades, a middle school, encompassing the years when a child begins to comprehend the magnitude and scope of the world around him. Eighteen classrooms, art studio, science lab, computer lab, gymnasium, cafeteria, auditorium, library, meeting room, administrative center, and support spaces make up the bulk of the program, configured so as to allow limited access to the Lee Street edge of the campus for after-hours community activities.

The building is a text. It is read, even misread, and in that sense, it too is a part of the educational process. It has a role in the city as well as in the lives of the students, speaking to both worlds. Though a text, its "reading" is never entirely a fixed one, however; much of its sense is contingent on the personal interpretation of the "reader" and his association with it. The school is also a microcosm of the city. A precision of thought and craft can manifest this awareness at several levels: city plan, building plan, section, elevation, and detail. This thesis project attempts



The Urban Classroom

to take advantage of these opportunities by transforming aspects of its context, intrinsic and latent, into definitions of the building and its place in the city. Any building that truly contributes to its environment does so in a way that suggests it has always been in and of that place and that no other reality is conceivable. Its nature must be such that the place it marks would only be diminished without it.

At the same time that the city is a campus for the school, the school is a civic place for the city. Finding the city in the school as much as the school in the city informs many of the architectural decisions. The relationship of building to street, so intrinsic to the reading of Alexandria, suggests parallels between street, porch, and room with, at the scale of school, corridor, threshold, and classroom. To achieve a sense of “place” in architecture, a sense of arrival must be inherent. Threshold is established to define the condition of this in-betweenness, a reconciliation between the simultaneity of departure and arrival, rather than merely to erode a boundary. In this project, a series of parallel walls affords a sequence of discrete events.

How one presents a face to the city is also integral to understanding our attitudes toward the city. Of late, we have turned our backs on the public realm, evidenced by the town homes whose principal entrances are pulled away from the street or off it entirely, entrance being gained from a central passage off a private court. Traditionally, building façades typically shouldered a double burden in terms of a building’s presence on the street, at once presenting a public face and concealing a more private character behind. A consideration of this dual

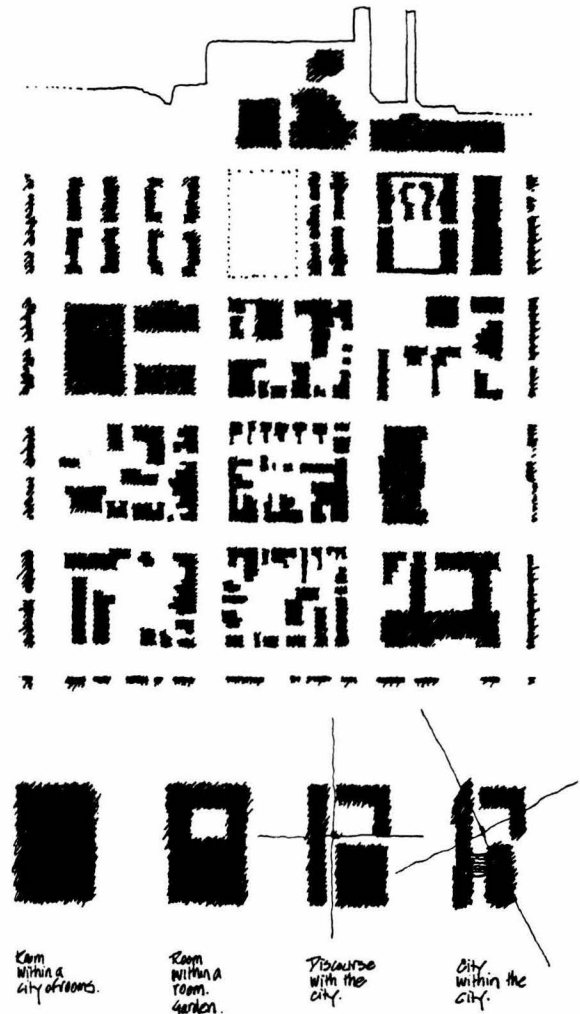
character of the individual’s face in the city presents itself in the manipulation of the transparency and opacity of the project’s façade. Its depth becomes that of the building, thickening to become an inhabited wall that shelters the refuge of the courtyard. This courtyard, a response to man’s very real need to periodically retire from the demands of the public realm, is a place to pause and reflect; such, too, is the nature of the school. It becomes a center, literally for the campus, but also perceptually for the neighborhood. From within the courtyard, a tower, gnomon, rises. Oriented along the cardinal axes, it, too, establishes connection with the city and provides a visual link with Washington, D.C., also aligned on the north-south axis. The tower is an *axis mundi*, a vertical totem, and its presence in the courtyard also enhances it as a measure of the passing of a day, a season, a year—cosmological time.

The city is a text as well. Consider a student sitting quietly in the library, reading. Reflecting on what he has just read, his gaze drifts through the curved glass of the library, through the scattered trees of Founder’s Park, to settle on the somber Potomac River. One moment, focusing on the text before him and the next, wandering freely and pondering the life of the street outside, lost in quiet reverie, attempting to surmise something of the lives of the people he sees, and then returning again to his book. From the fixity of the printed page to the ever-rewritten page of the city street.

The language of the city is metaphorical. Its semantics and syntax strive for the commonality and coherence of one world. Alexandria’s formal structure communicates this through its

grid, its pattern of open spaces, and in the disposition of its built planes. In this city, as in most port cities, vertical planes mark territory and horizontal planes meet the water. The thesis project consists of inhabited vertical planes that approach the water’s edge. These vertical planes pull away from the elevations of the building at corners and intersections to reveal the horizontality of the building’s internal organization. The building is a synthesis of the antithetical natures of these constructs and describes, at once, its own form language and that of the city.

Just as the city presents us initially with its grand vistas and commercial thoroughfares, so, too, must a school have a formal presence. But in the same way the newcomer learns that there is more to a place than the brightly colored boulevards and attractions of the tourist map—that secondary and tertiary routes await the adventurous or inquisitive traveler—the school, too, invites discovery, through more passages into its realm than its propriety-minded front door. The serendipitous discovery of short cuts and alternatives enrich the experiences of arrival, tarrying, and departure. This provision of secondary entries from outdoor rooms assists in the creation of a variety of scales and atmospheres to welcome the many—or the one. Within the grounds, trees present an outdoor canopy; grass, relief from the hard urban floor. Conscious attempts to nurture the nature of a place assist in its re-creation for those who experience it, enhancing both its perception and its recollection. It acquires an identity, unique to each who experiences it. This reaching out to the participant establishes belonging, an ameliorative alternative to the isolation, disconnection of the suburbs.



Within the campus of this school, just as in the city, emphasis is placed on the creation of positive, in-between spaces rather than negative, leftover space. The outdoor amphitheater, which takes its shape from the gymnasium to the south and the corridor screen wall to the north, is an example of a conscious attempt to have two things create a third—the total, as is said, being greater than the sum of its parts. The main courtyard, with its understory of trees and its grassy floor, strives for the same relationship with its own constituent elements. This courtyard helps explain the disposition of the building and its position within the city as much as the building and the city block define this interior outdoor room. To describe these interior courts as the result of the removal of urban *poché* helps explain the sense of urban enclosure that is intended. This approach, with the ideal of the garden in the city always present, results in a controlled inner court and permits greater freedom around the perimeter of the block to accommodate the circumstantial nature of the program and the site. Intermediation occurs at larger scales of the campus as well, emphasizing the multi-fold nature of the architectural act—as much as the city presents itself as a machine in the garden, the school provides a garden within the machine.

The importance of the courtyard lies, not only in its capacity as a place of refuge out of doors, within the confines of protective walls, but in the visual connection to the outside it offers the inhabited spaces within. The distraction of the singing bird, the travel of the tower's shadow over the course of the day, the driving rain as it darkens the masonry wall, the skittering fall leaves on their unpredictable voyage are refresh-

ing counterpoints to the activity inside and are perhaps as vital to our sense of awareness as the lecture with which they may momentarily compete. These reminders of the outside world are essential to man—forever in search of his own place in the world. The connection to the changing quality of daylight and to what is taking place outside one's immediate frame of reference is primary in one's relationship to his environment.

So, too, is the need for boundaries and to establish territory. Walls speak of the nature of the city. It is the wall that is the primary delineator of space in the city, and it is a wall that creates a primary longitudinal axis through the project's site, organizing the architectural elements of the campus: the main academic building and the arts and sciences arm, the gymnasium, the amphitheater, and the tower. It establishes a datum for the placement of the primary learning spaces in the school. On one side are located cellular learning spaces, the more didactic classrooms, with their emphasis on text and speech. More social learning spaces, which require a more tactile, sensory-oriented learning experience, are on the other. This datum wall also creates a unifying backdrop to the school's two courtyards. The main courtyard then becomes a stage, the wall behind it a screen. The wall, then, provides both an edge and a path. In addition to the wall, the spatial-ordering elements of the court—tower, gymnasium, trees, and benches—help define the path, which parallels the corridor inside, and creates a literal, phenomenal link to the city, a passage from street to court.

The school has many dimensions: those of the site... the block... the street... the city.... All are the result of an intrinsic need of man to associate with something larger than himself in an effort to establish his place: spirituality, family, the state, political bodies, social organizations. It is the reason man builds. This search for identity, a measuring of one's self against a greater whole, is impossible within the assumption of complete autonomy, for one cannot truly build exclusively for oneself. Why would one bother? Why put anything on paper, for that matter—to whom would it be shown? It is in this light that this thesis project was undertaken, considered from the largest scale of the city to the smallest, the detail; and finding that the detail was not something small, blown up, but rather something big, reduced, distilled from a greater context. It became clear that it is not the object of design that is important, but one's relationship to it. One's associations with architecture, when it becomes subject rather than mere object, are what give it meaning.

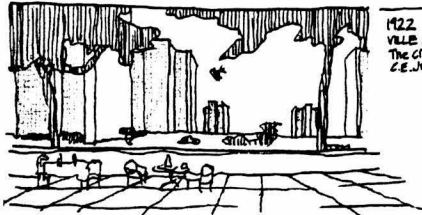
Inherent in architecture's political nature is the act of mediation. It is called on to strike a balance between charged polarities, held apart, but undeniably, fundamentally, inextricably linked. This arbitration requires the acknowledgement of issues, or models, that present oppositions to one's intention. One cannot ignore, for example, the mechanization of our society. Mechanical constructs pervade the life of the student: academic levels, class periods, schedules, school calendars, and evaluations are all accepted as necessary conditions. At the same time that we allow these constructs, though, we can enrich them by introducing others that allow their measure.

The gnomon, windows, skylights, and the courtyards introduce another aspect of time, cosmological time, in the passage of sunlight, shadows, and the seasons. In architecture, these two cycles are allowed to complement one another. There must be room in architecture for such convergences. They can provide moments for thoughtful design.

It is an increasingly mechanized world that we live in. Nonetheless, designing within a modern context—with its emphasis on flexibility and economy—should not neglect the user in developing a humane realm of space that reflects the subtlety and complexity of the educational process, as well as of the world we inhabit.



1170
IDEAL CITY SCENE
FRANCESCO & GIOCO (?)
LUCIANO OR LAURENZA (?)



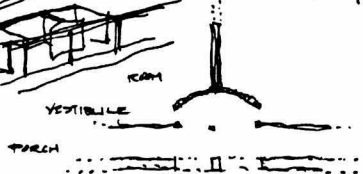
1122
VILLE CONTEMPORANEE
THE CITY CENTER
C.E. JEANNECET-GUY

CONNECTION TO THE CITY - ALEXANDRIA
How are these related? on the street, within building itself. Originally - what is connection to the city?

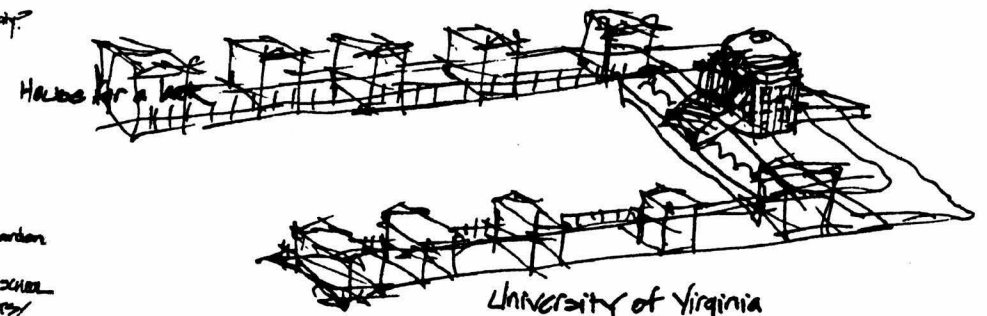


WHAT IS BUILDING IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA?
Academy of Walls. But which walls contain the political/
economic boundaries? Party walls.
They are the ones buried within the
building. They cannot be perceived/appraised.
The facades are. They speak.

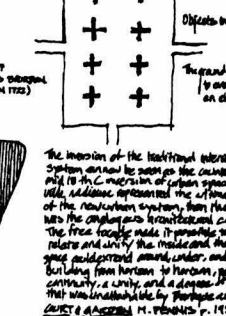
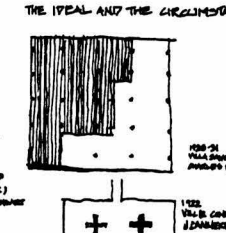
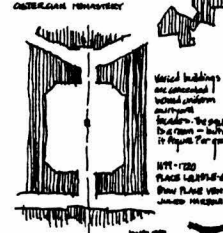
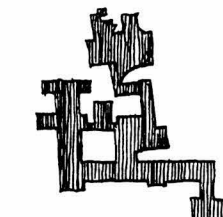
CONSIDER THE OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE CITY.
WHAT IS ESSENTIAL?
STREET -> PORCH/STAIR -> VESTIBULE -> HOUSE -> GARDEN



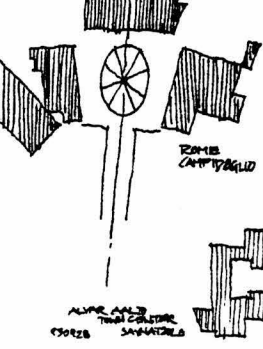
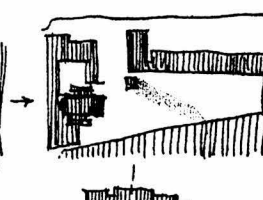
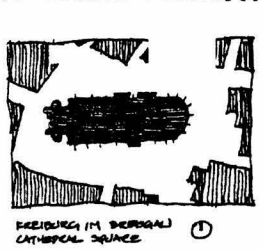
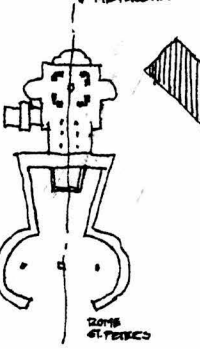
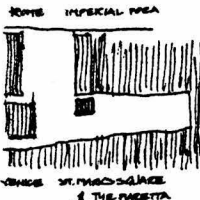
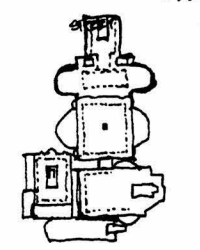
THIS IS THE CITY IN THE SCHOOL
AS MUCH AS THE STREETS/
OVERLAPping ARE UNUSUAL AND
THE ROOMS/BUILDINGS
ARE.



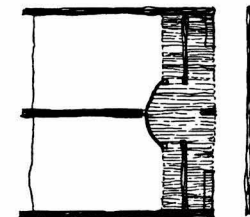
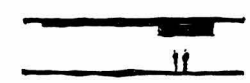
University of Virginia
Library as the head
of Knowledge in the head
of the University.



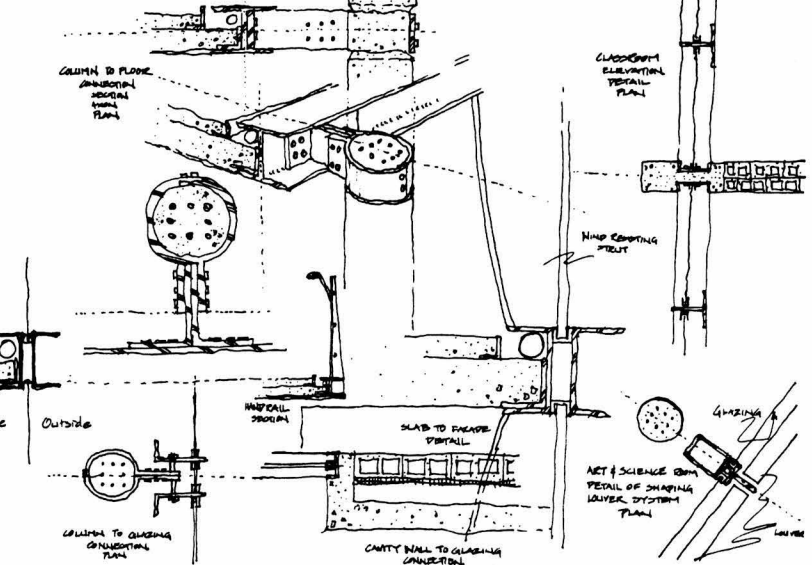
300000



REALM OF THE IN-BETWEEN
The introduction of a third element
(even light) allows a negotiation
between two, often dissimilar, conditions.
This third element also serves as a
measure of the first two.



Many such mediations exist here:
City - Waterfront - Potomac River
Home - Porch/Step - Street
Room - Threshold - Corridor
North - South
Child - Adult
Past - Present - Future
Earth - Sky
Private Garden - Building - Public Realm



The invasion of the traditional interior spatial
system around the courtyard to the
mid 19th C. was a result of urban space, and of the
new, additive representation of the urban development
of the reconstruction era. From this time on
the courtyard is a traditional completion.
The free facade made it possible to directly
relate and unify the middle and the outside;
space could extend inward, outward, and through the
building from horizon to horizon, providing a
continuity, a unity, and a sense of total spatial
that was unattainable by the facade with its
GUSTAV GOSWAMI, M. PH.D., P. 145 1986

The Argument to that of ideal road versus ideal solid. Consider the models: The Acropolis, The Forum.

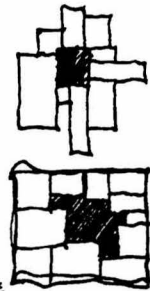
THE COURTYARD

INTENT

- Create an outdoor positive space that dictates surrounding form. Court as object.
- Residual space resulting from close juxtaposition of adjacent buildings. Compulsional shared space.

COMPARE TRADITIONS OF GREECE AND CRETE

CONSIDER TRADITION OF THE FRENCH HÔTEL



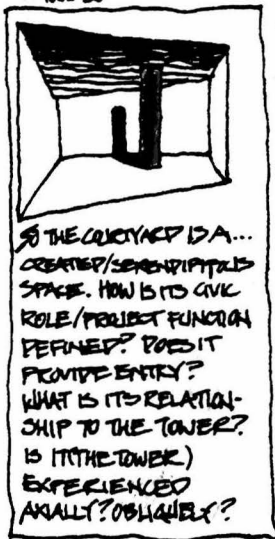
(URBAN INFILL)

Mignon (Rococo Hotel)
Hôtel de Villetranche
c. 1740

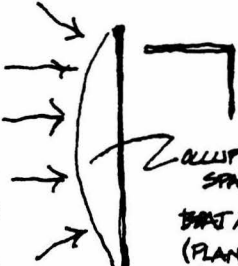
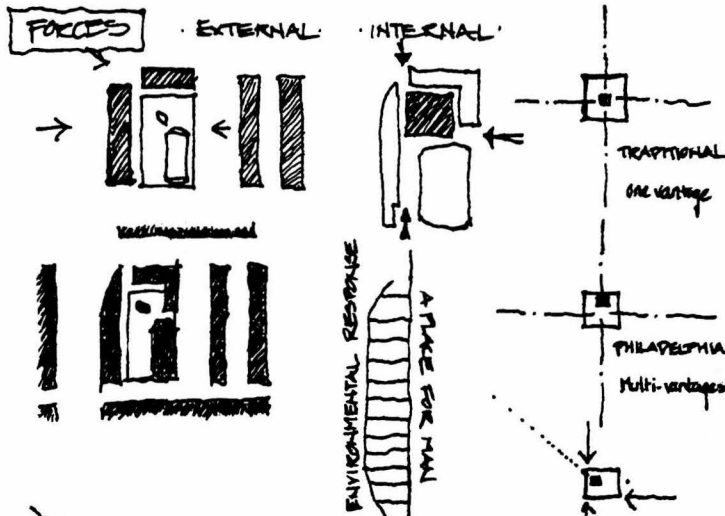
Hôtel de Beauvais
c. 1652-55

DOES THE DESIRE FOR A COURTYARD INFORM THE CREATION OF THE SPACES THAT SURROUND IT? THAT OCCUPY IT?

OR DOES THE URBAN CONTEXT CERTAIN RESPONSES BEG, (BUILDING AT THE PERIMETER FIRST, PLACING 'OBJECT' BUILDINGS TO THE INTERIOR, CREATION OF SECONDARY OUTDOOR ROOMS ETC.) LEAVING THE COURTYARD STILL A DESIRED SPACE BUT A DISCOVERED ONE RATHER THAN A CREATED ONE?



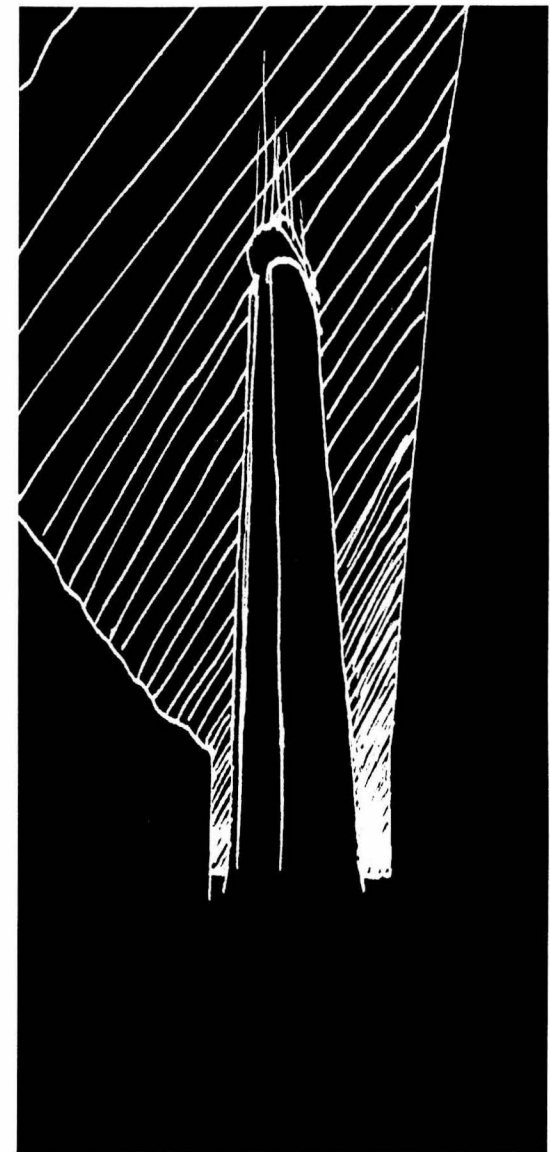
SO THE COURTYARD IS A... CREATED/SEMI-PUBLIC SPACE. HOW IS ITS CIVIC ROLE/PROJECT FUNCTION DEFINED? DOES IT PROVIDE ENTRY? WHAT IS ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE TOWER? IS IT (THE TOWER) EXPERIENCED AXIALLY? OBLIQUELY?

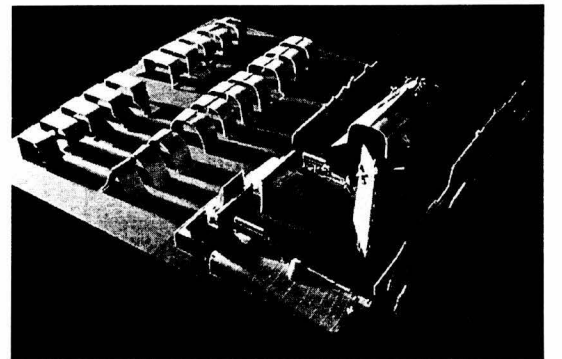


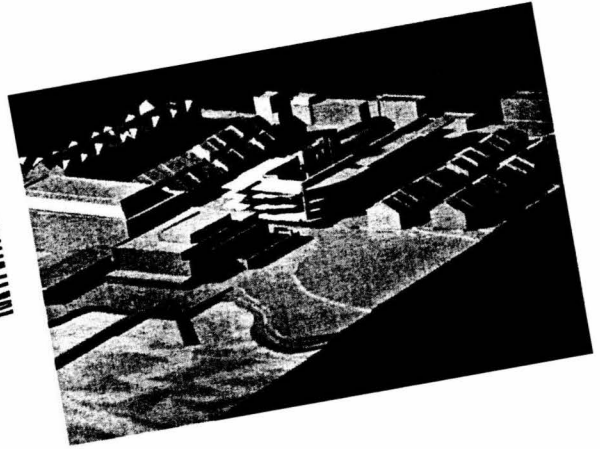
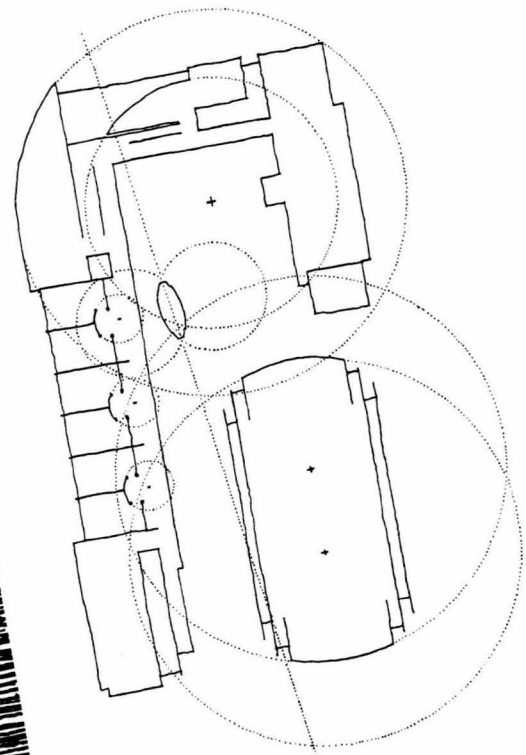
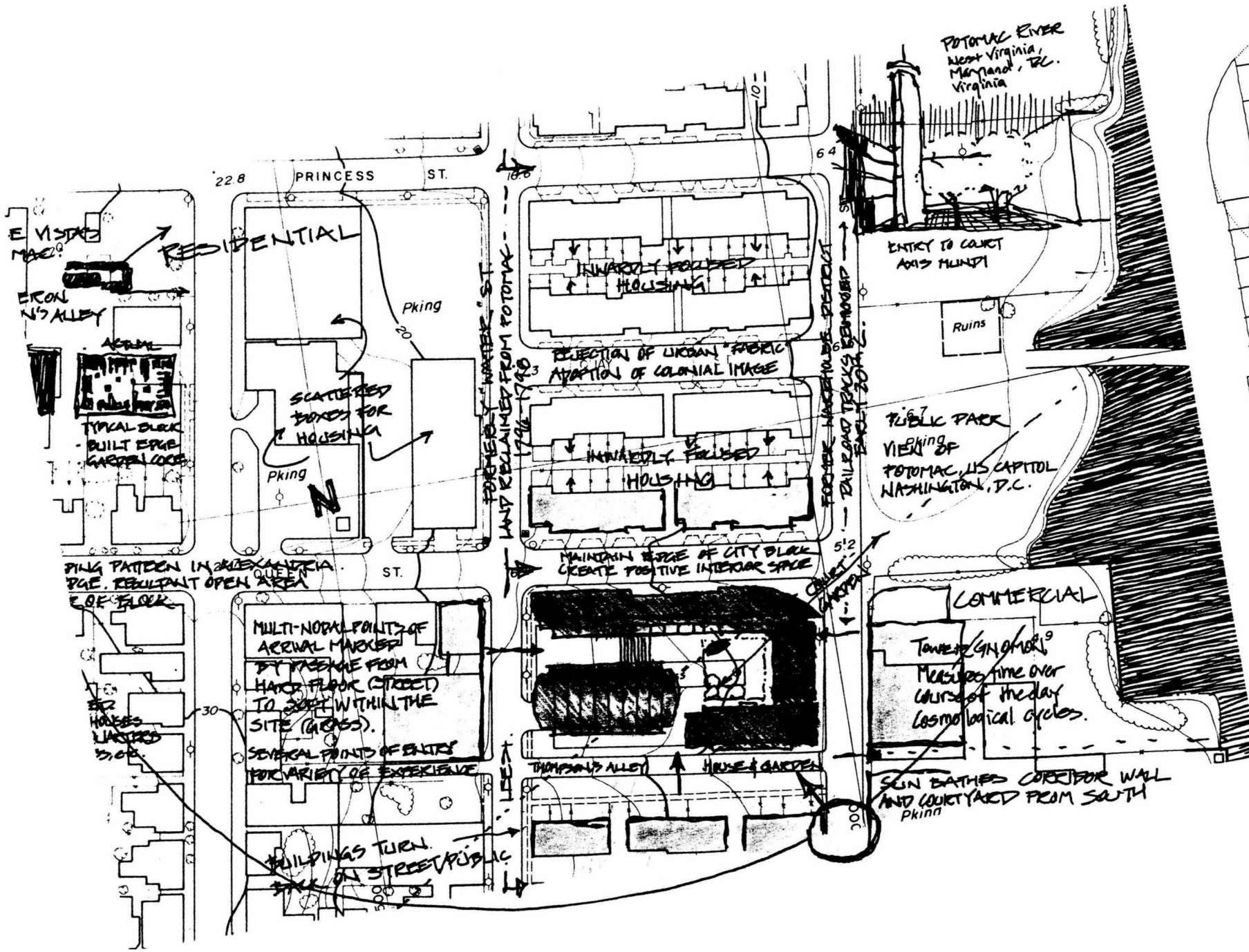
Which precedes... Peck? Hull?
- In necessity ?
- In construction ?
Does the deck/wall necessitate the hull/edge?
Does the reality of extant external forces invoke the form of the hull (purely a functional response) which enables the formal act of the wall?

HULL: Withstands external forces (Sea/City). Form derived from necessity/environment. Prerequisite of nature.
PECK: Man's intervention. Enables his presence. A construct of man

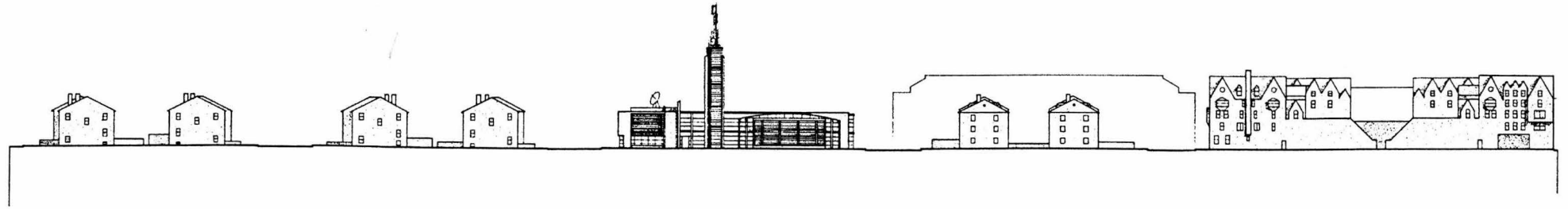
Does man's desire to erect a wall create a need to acknowledge his situation? In order to navigate the sea, deck needs a hull - does a wall need an edge?



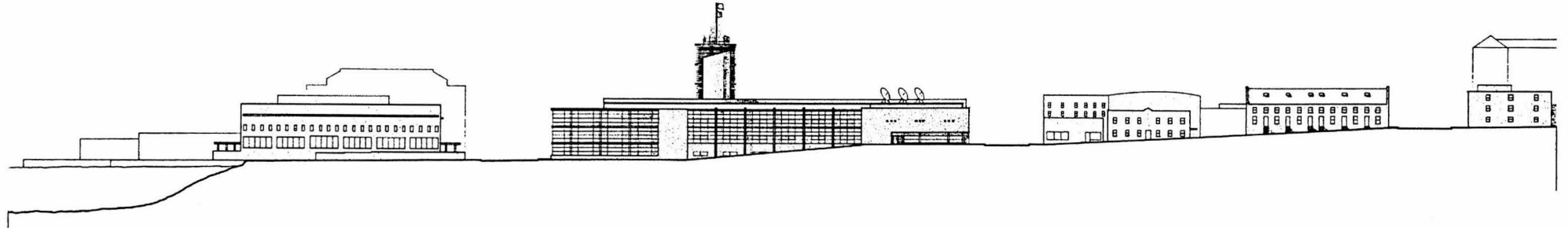




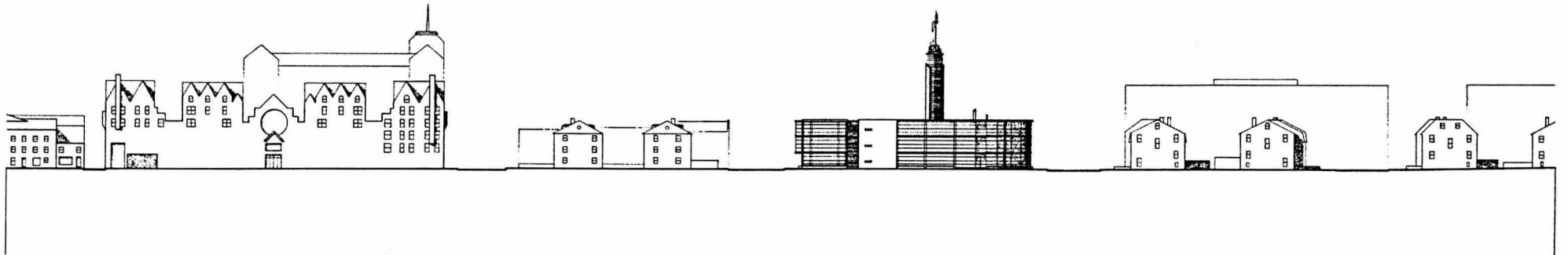
LEE STREET



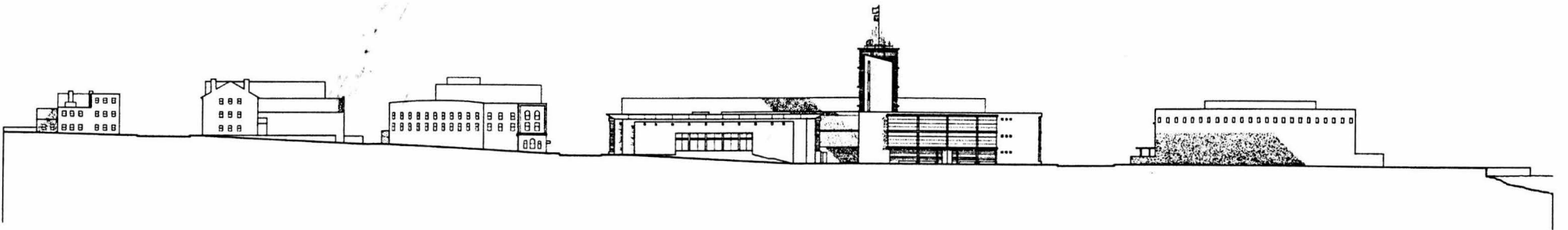
QUEEN STREET

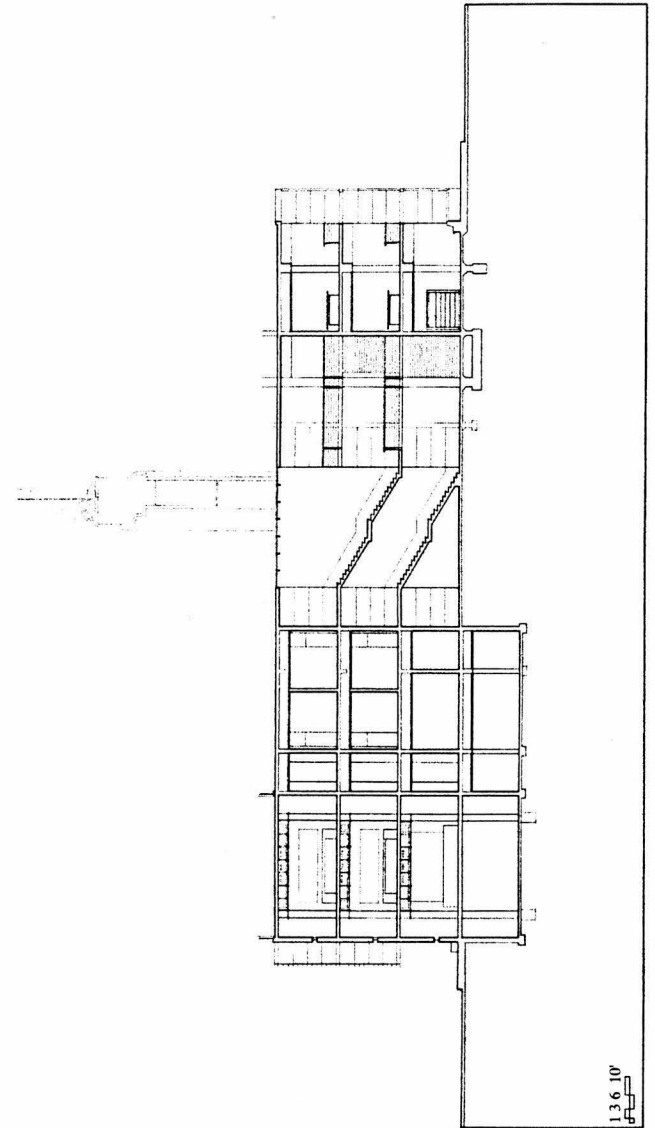
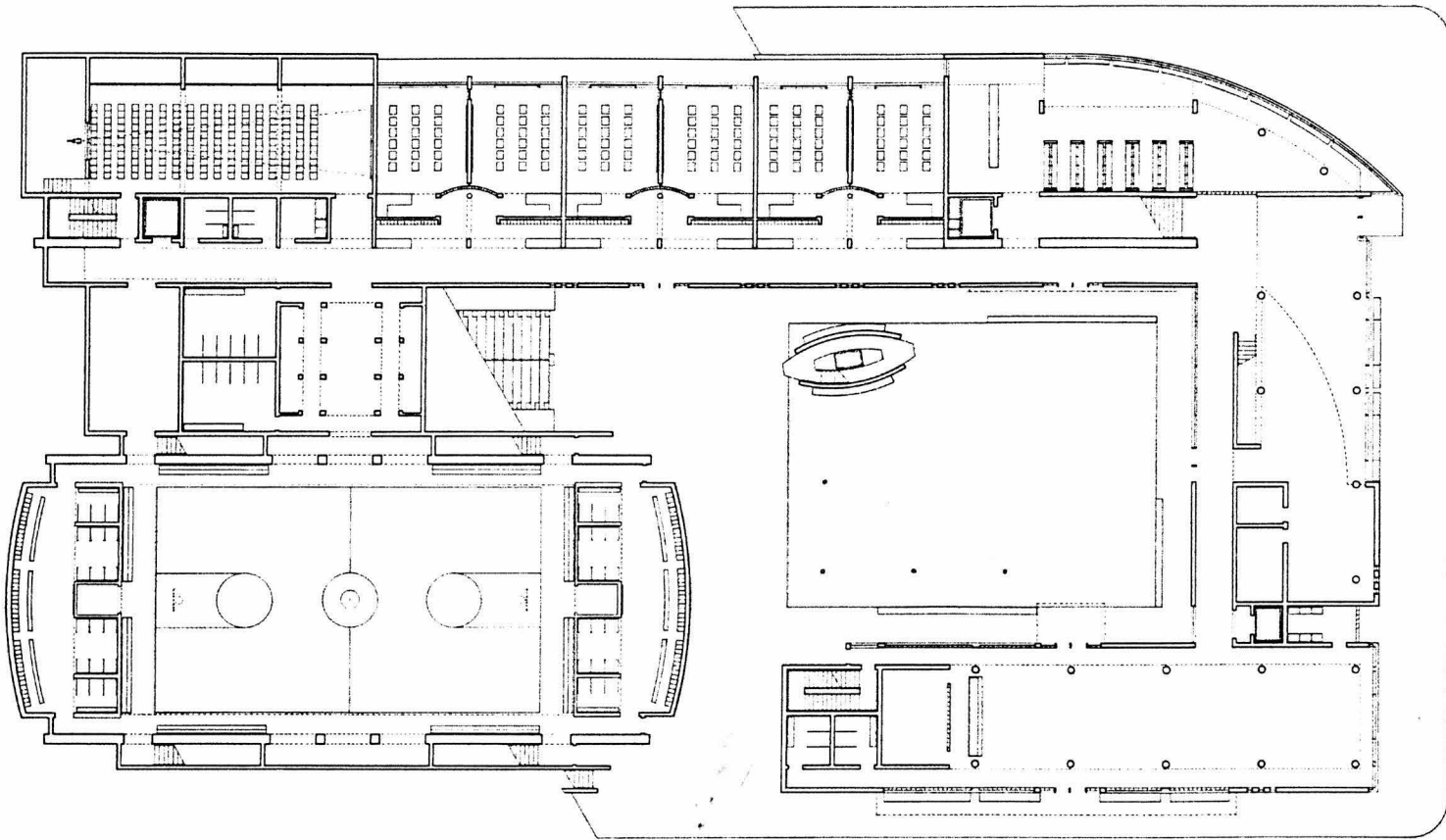


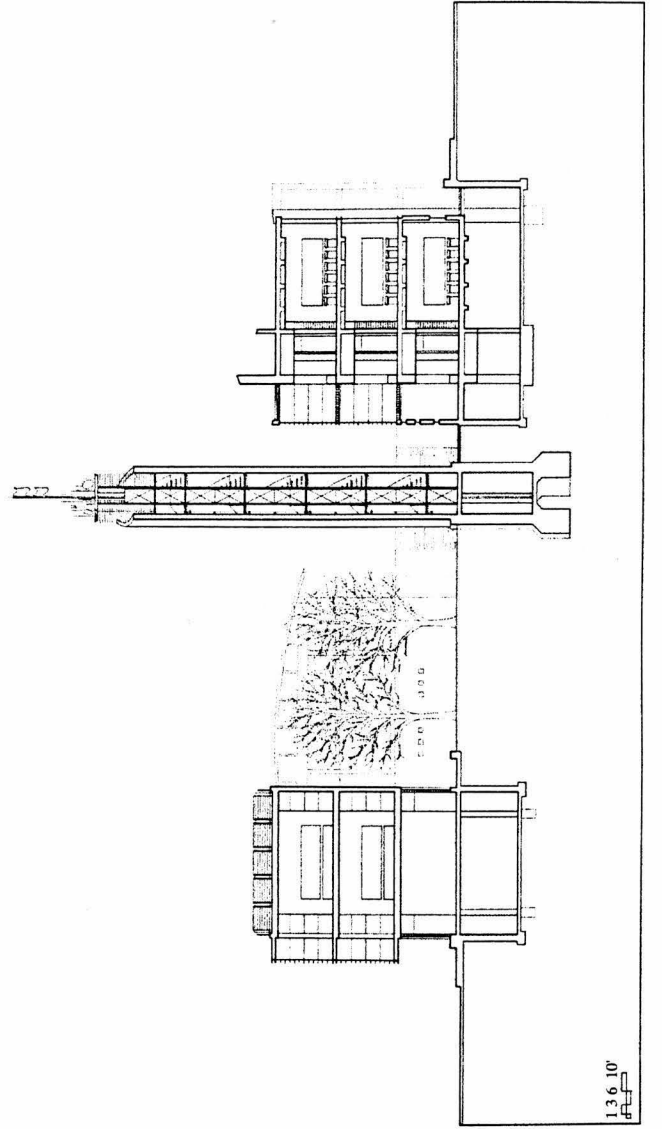
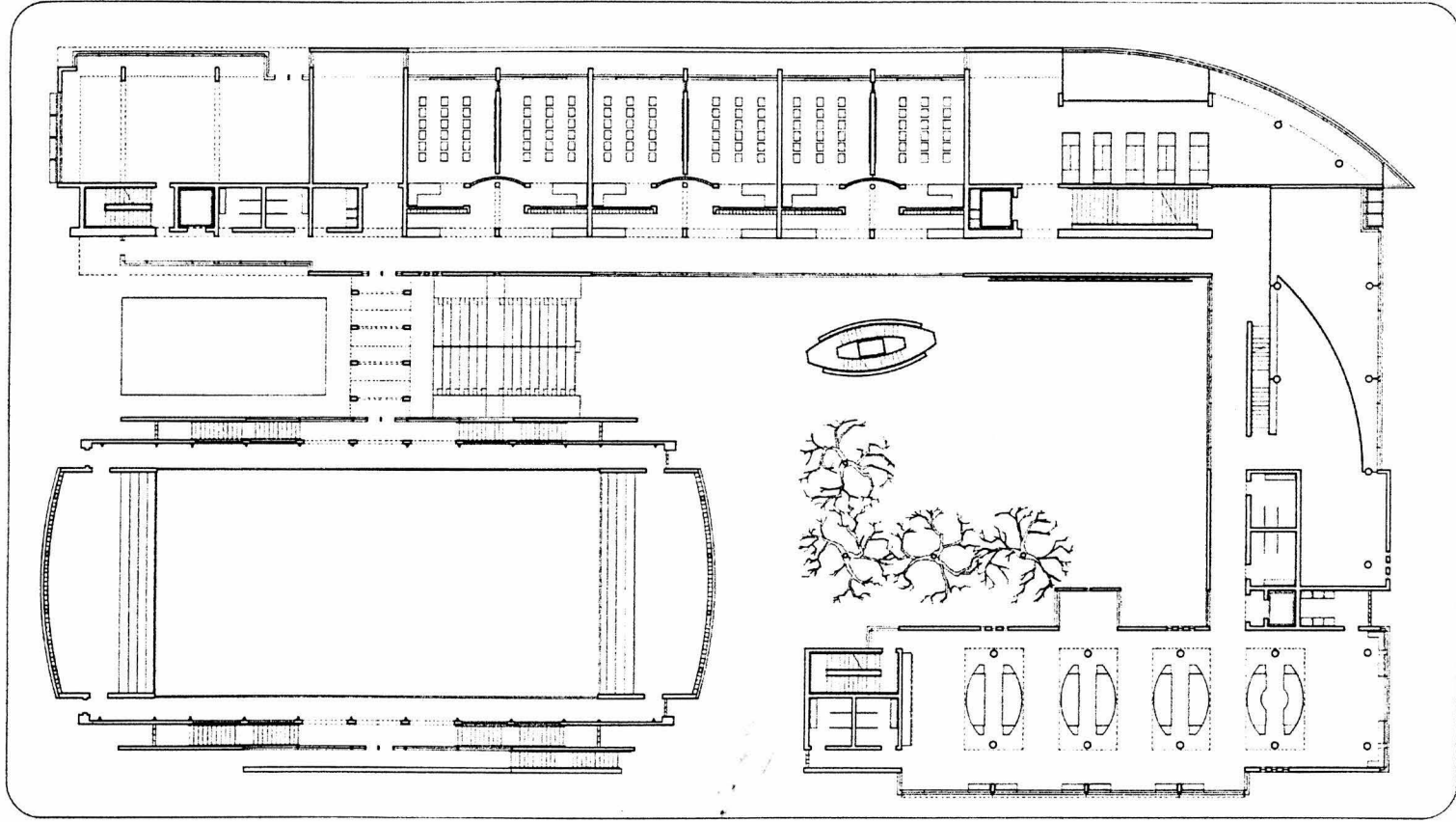
UNION STREET



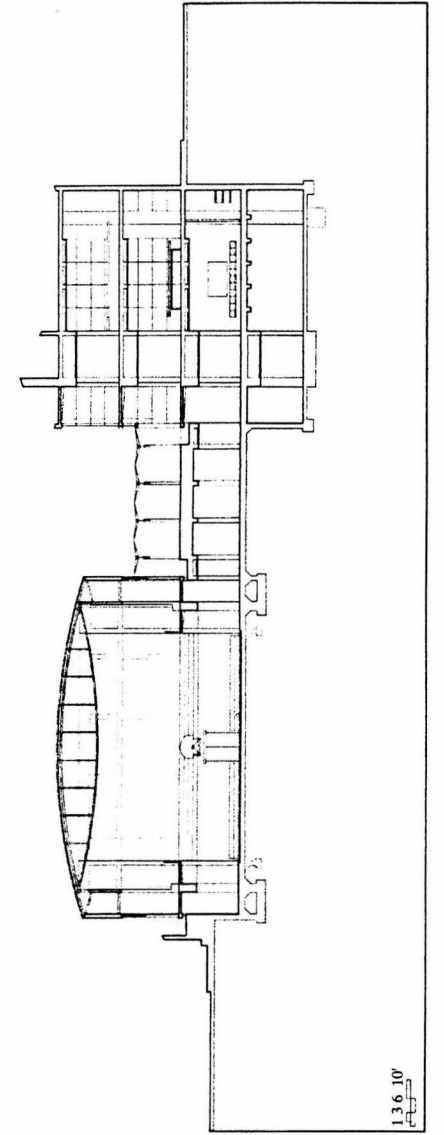
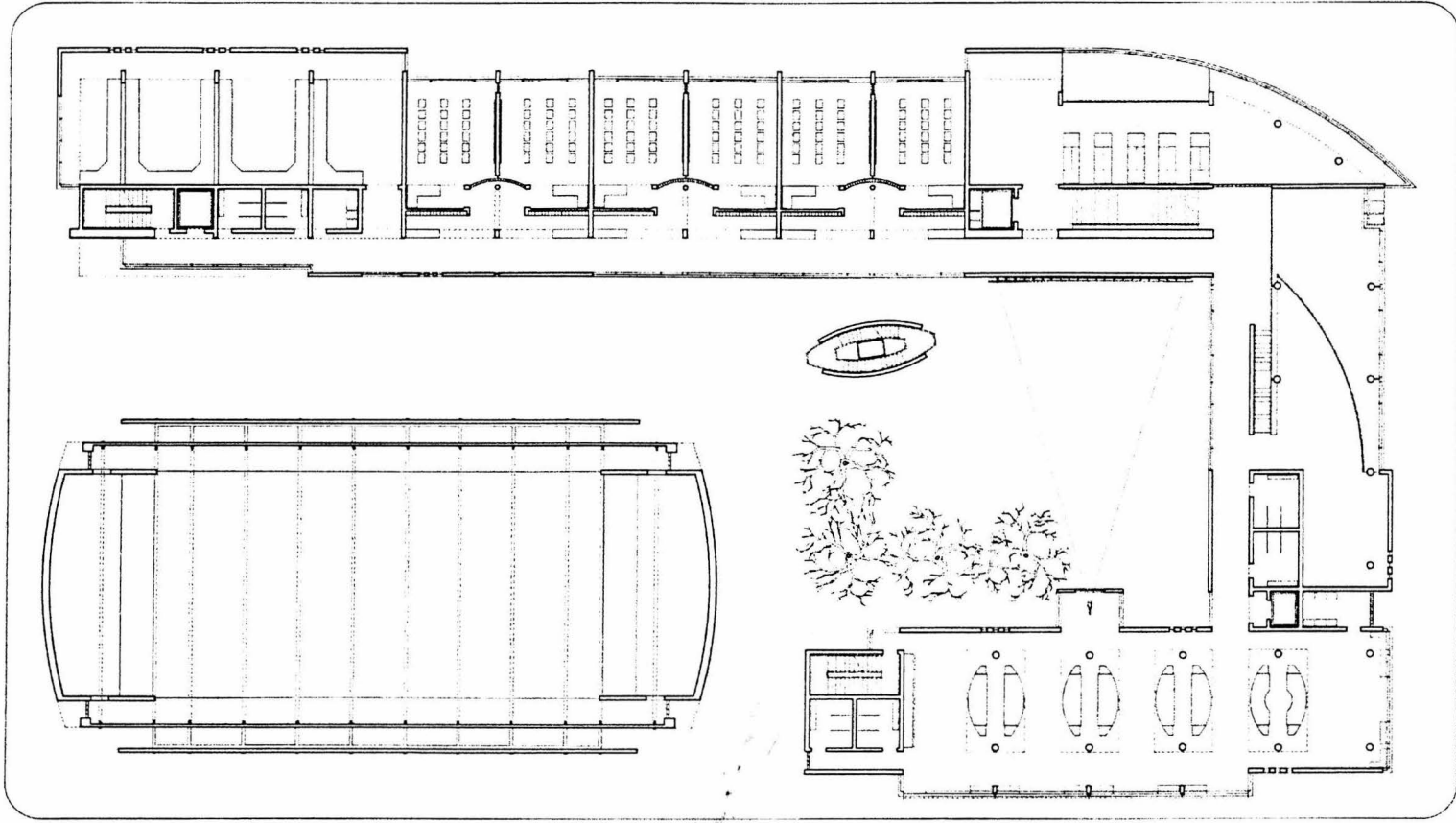
THOMPSON'S ALLEY



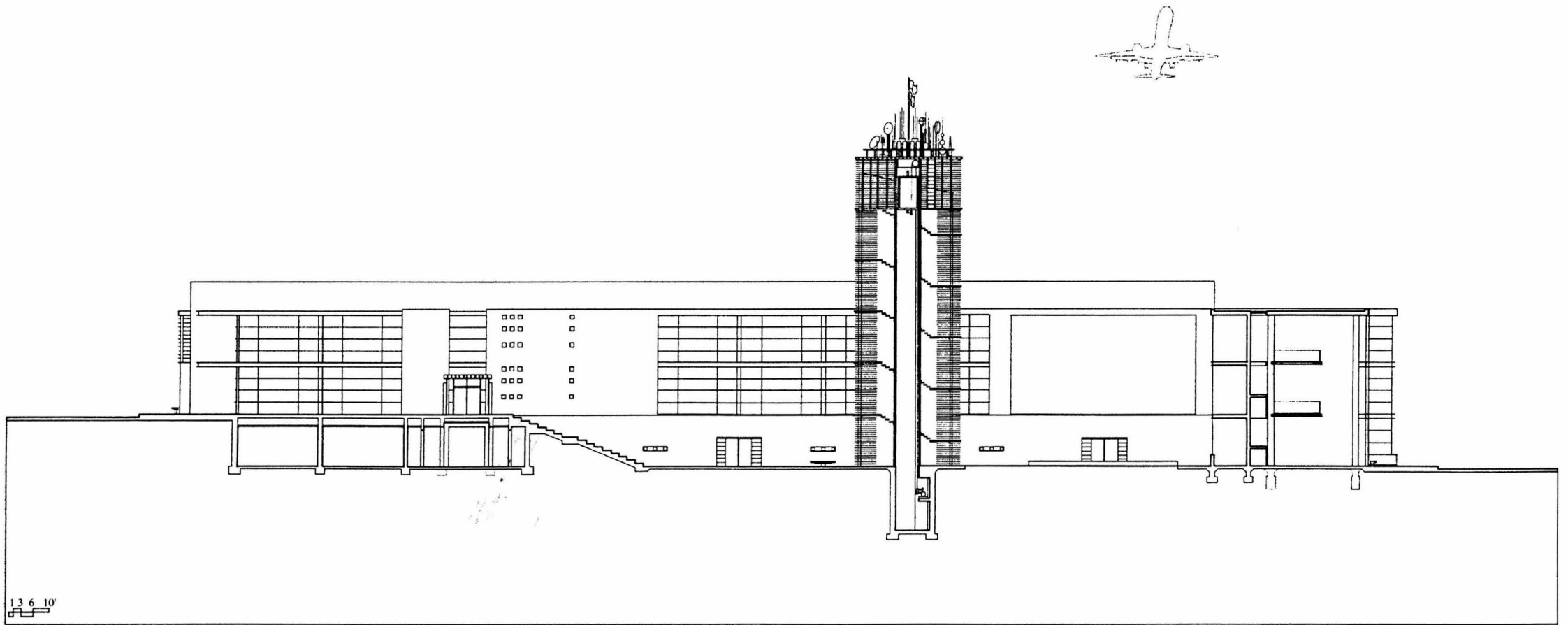


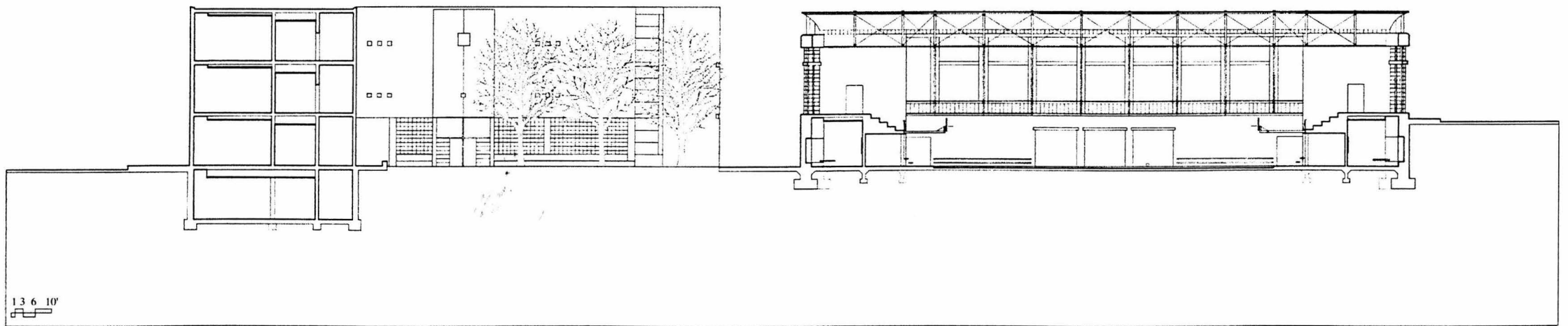


1:36.10'

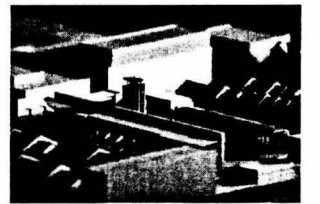
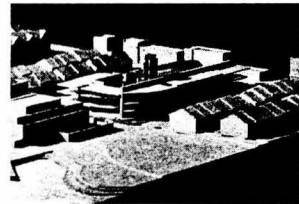
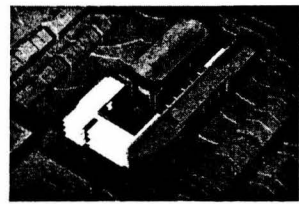
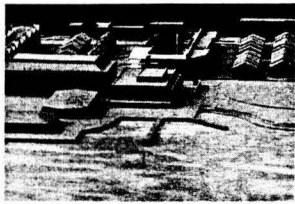
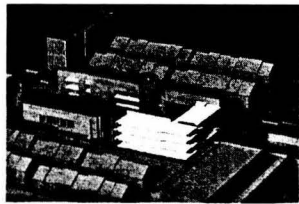
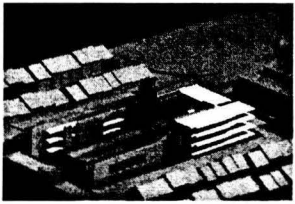
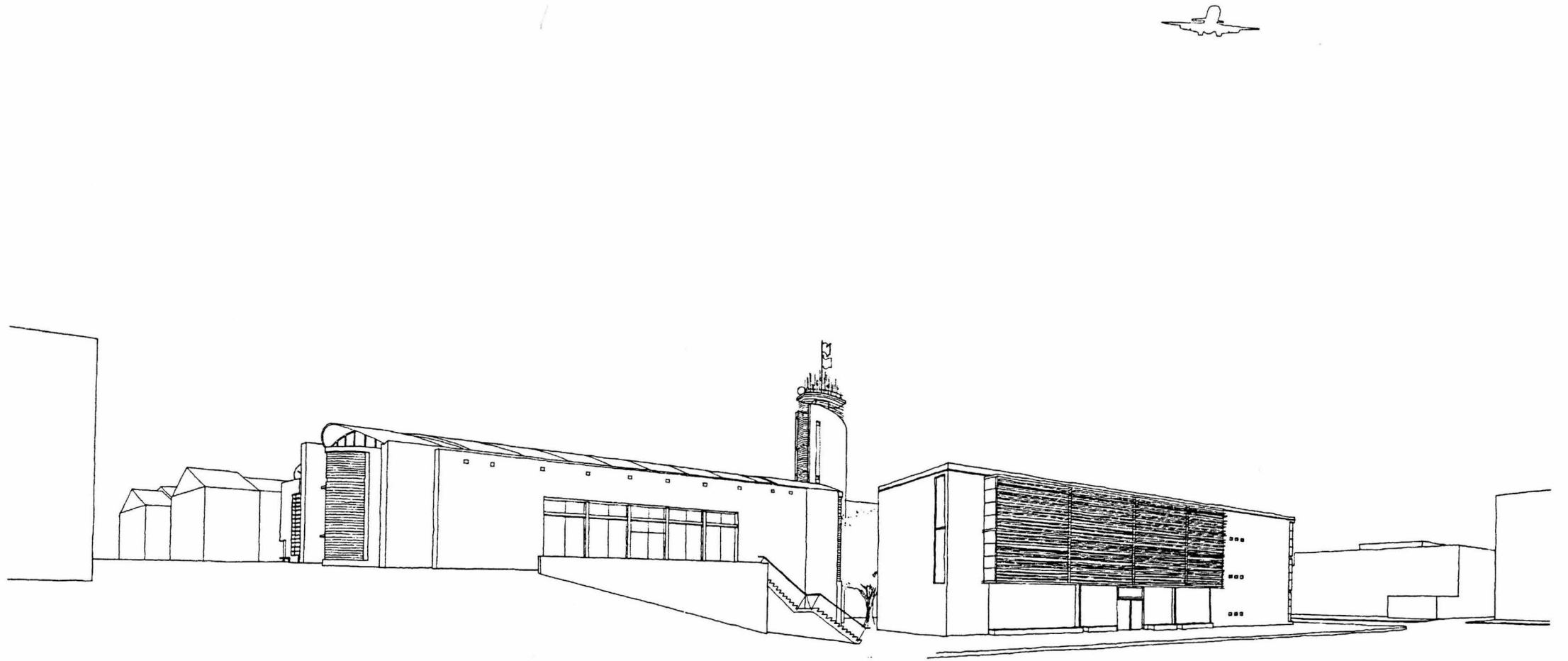


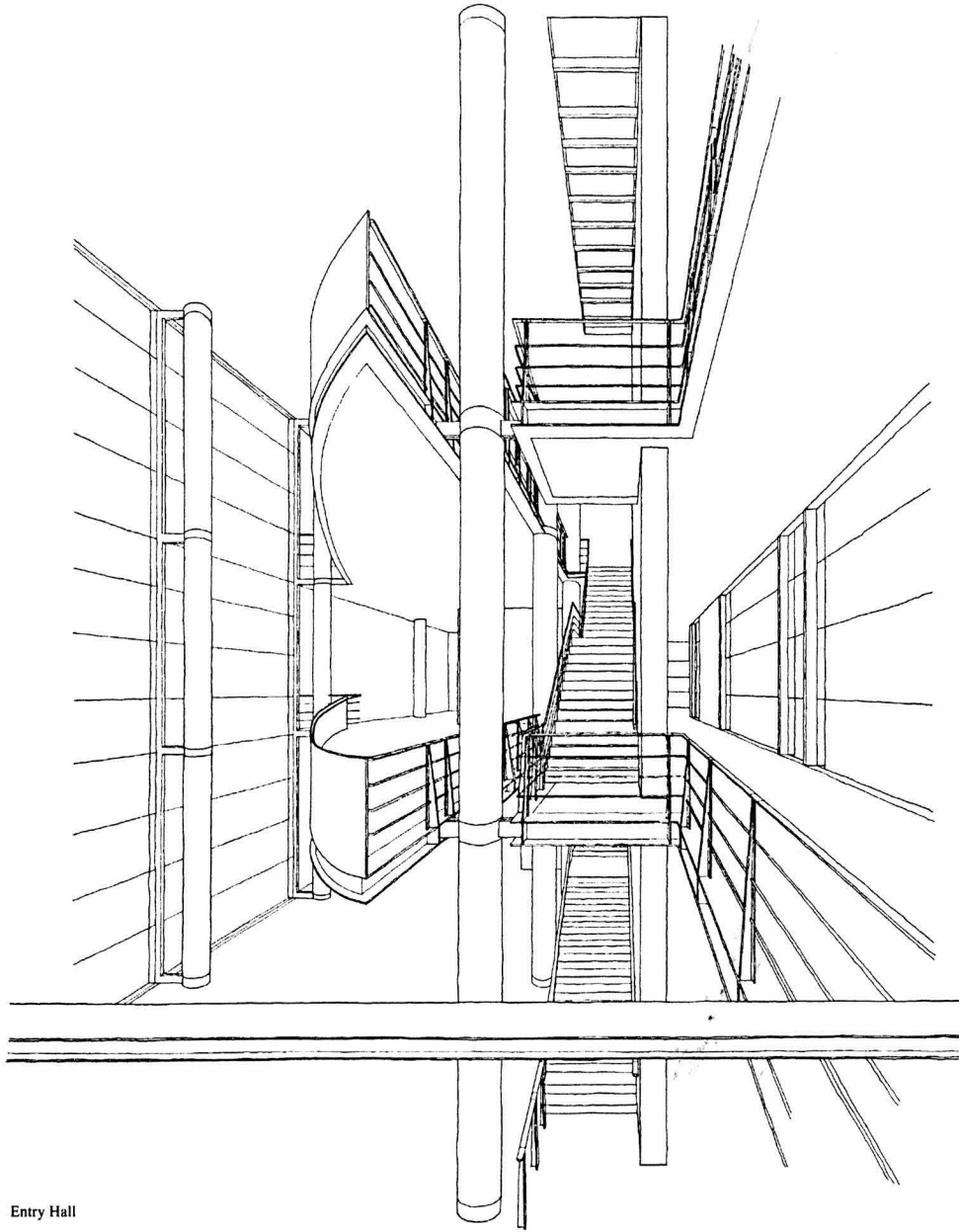
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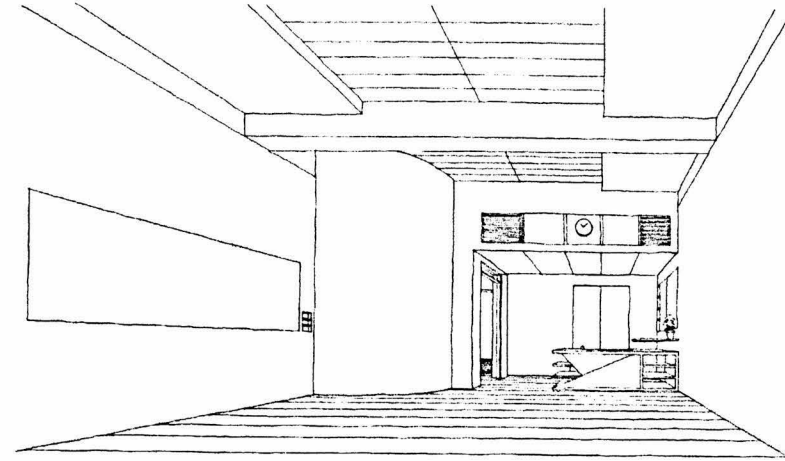


1 3 6 10'

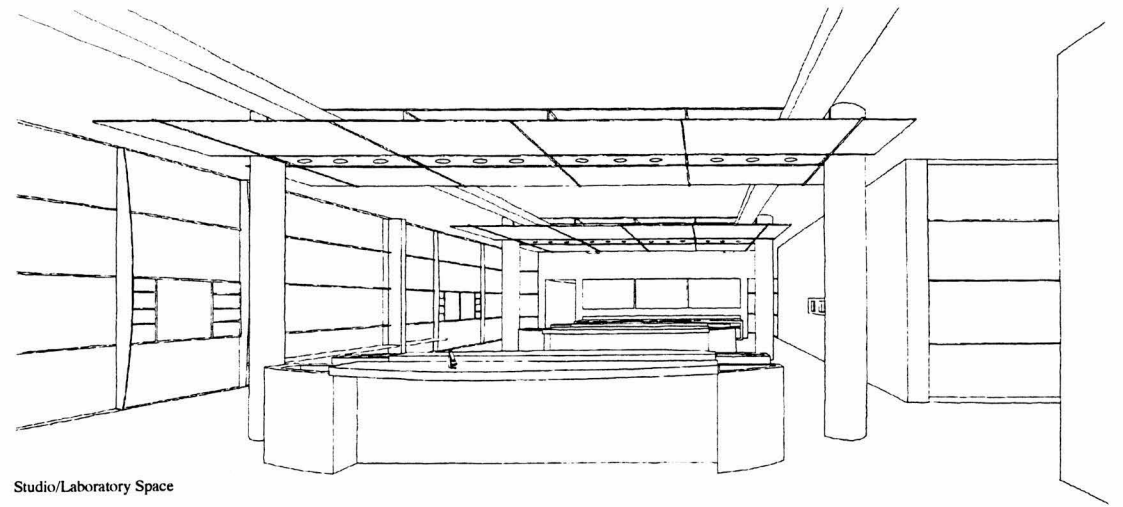




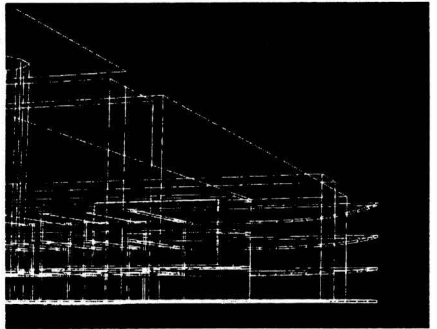
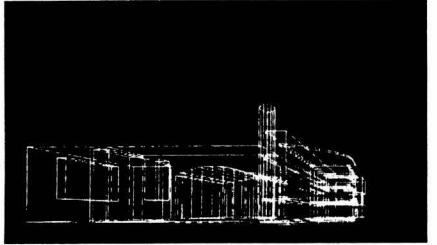
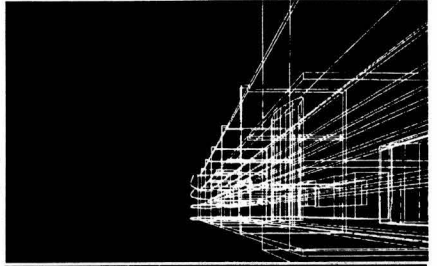
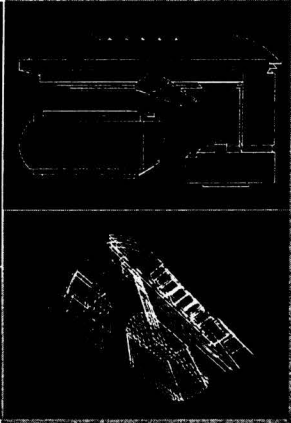
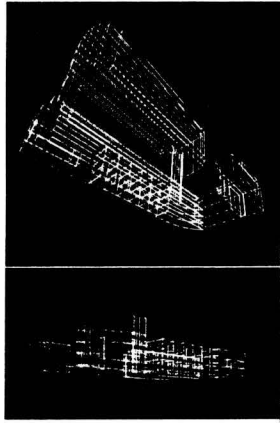
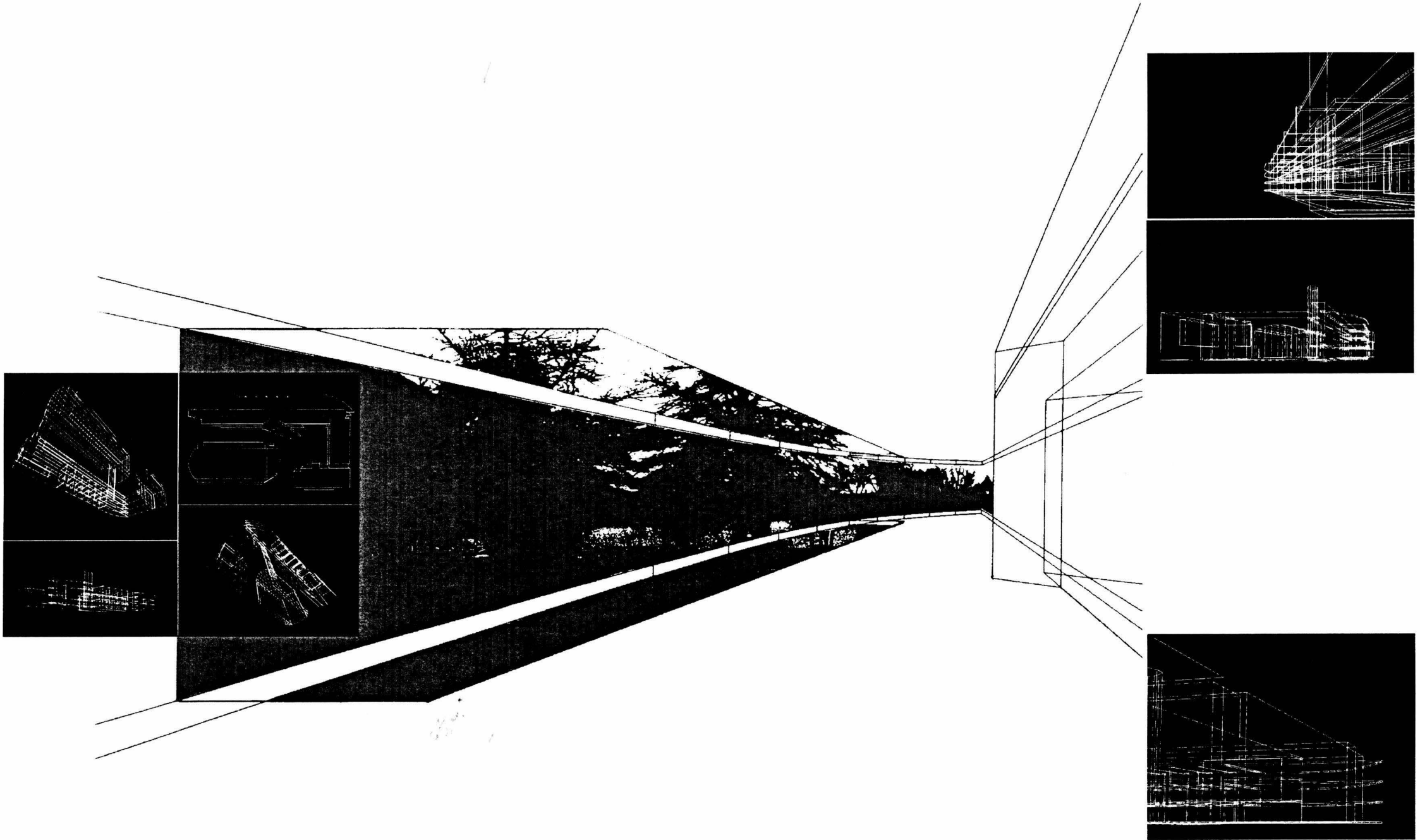
Entry Hall



Typical Classroom



Studio/Laboratory Space



Totems of Hope

The design of a school provides numerous challenges in terms of its relationship to the world, its community, and its occupants—students and staff. The search for a common ground on which to build presented an interesting parallel between the nature of the school and of architecture. The primary mission of academe, naturally, is to educate, but to what end? Both art and science, like architecture, which is essentially a marriage of the two, are fundamentally engaged in the same pursuit, a search for origins. The manifestations of this search allow us to re-present the world around us through our continual inquiry. Man will forever find himself asking *Why?* and *How?*, and these questions, naturally, cannot be asked in isolation, for they are inconceivable to the autonomous mind. Whom would one ask? This is critical to our understanding of architecture because we build, not for ourselves, but for others, literally and figuratively. What this signifies is that this intrinsic commonality, the need to know more about the human condition, is a shared one.

Architecture is a product of a world view. By its very nature, it is an act of optimism—one sustained by hope. We build with dignity because we see promise in tomorrow. Perhaps just as important, though, architecture provides continuity, linking us both to our roots in the past and the hopes we sow for the future.

PRETEXT

¹John Macoll, *Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900*.

²Steven Holl, *The Alphabet City*.

CONTEXT

¹Mollie Somerville, *Washington Walked Here*.

²Herman Friis, *Geographical Reconnaissance of the Potomac River Tidewater Fringe of Virginia*.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Somerville.

⁶Mary Powell, *The History of Old Alexandria*.

⁷John Macoll, *Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900*.

⁸Karen Harvey and Ross Stansfield, *Alexandria: A Pictorial History*.

⁹Powell.

¹⁰John Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America*.

¹¹Powell.

¹²Somerville.

¹³Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America*.

¹⁴Harvey and Stansfield.

¹⁵Somerville.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Harvey and Stansfield.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Friis.

²⁰Somerville.

²¹Harvey and Stansfield.

²²Somerville.

²³Harvey and Stansfield.

²⁴Powell.

²⁵Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America*.

²⁶John Reps, *Tidewater Towns*.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Friis.

²⁹Harvey and Stansfield.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Reps, *Tidewater Towns*

³²Powell.

³³Friis.

³⁴Powell.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Friis.

³⁷Harvey and Stansfield.

³⁸Macoll.

³⁹Friis.

⁴⁰Harvey and Stansfield.

⁴¹Somerville.

⁴²Macoll.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Harvey and Stansfield.

⁴⁶Macoll.

⁴⁷Friis.

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⁵⁰Friis.

⁵¹Somerville.

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⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Powell.

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⁵⁶Friis.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Macoll.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²Friis.

⁶³Harvey and Stansfield.

⁶⁴Somerville.

⁶⁵Friis.

⁶⁶Macoll.

⁶⁷Friis.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Harvey and Stansfield.

TEXT

¹John Macoll, *Alexandria: A Towne in Transition, 1800-1900*.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

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4. Laying out the terrain, to the effect of forming a... (text continues)

edging (edj'ing) n. [from ed + -ing] That moves by imperceptible degrees. Hence edifically ad-

edgy (edj'i) adj. [from ed + -y] Having an edge or edge, sharp, cutting. (text continues)

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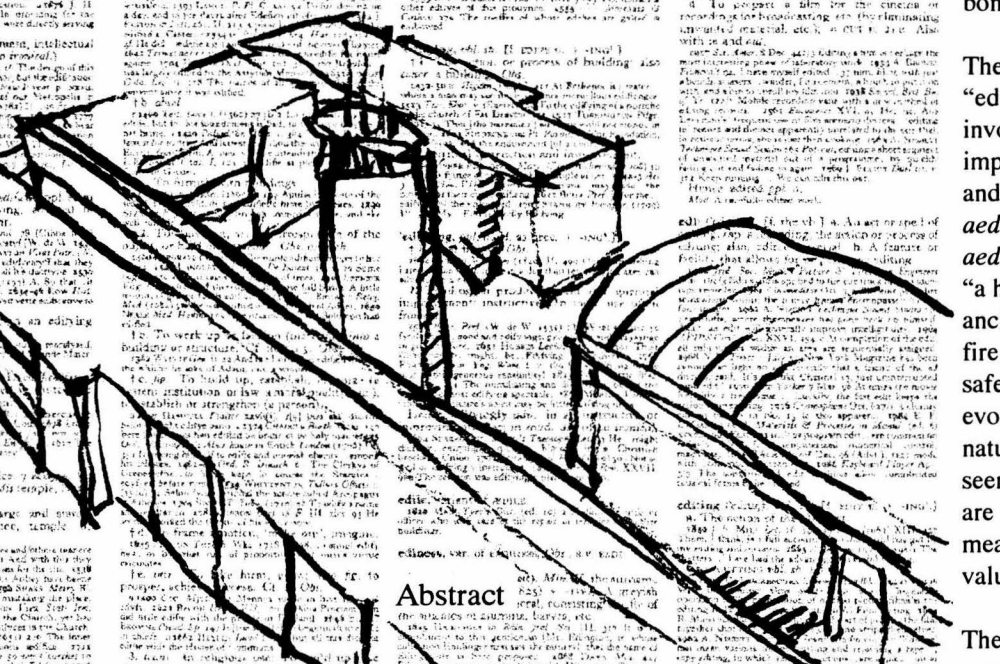
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Abstract

Building is a primary act. It is, at once, an act of politics, a product of how man comes together, and an act of creation, an effort to re-present the world. Architecture is steeped in man's need to make sense of his world and the need to share what he discovers. His ideals and values are given three-dimensional form in his physical culture. The act of edifying is at once a spatial and a chronological act. When man makes a mark upon the landscape, he attempts to fix his place in time and space and to say something of his world. The edifice, then, satisfies more than the utilitarian desire to communicate. These marks announce his presence, but even more, they ensure his place, for man builds for the same reason he holds onto ritual: to provide a bond between his past and his future.

The word "edifice" shares a common origin with "edify" when traced back to its Latin roots, invoking several nuances of meaning: "to improve spiritually", "to instruct or enlighten", and "to strengthen". The verb's Latin root, aedificare, is a marriage of two other words, aedes, "a building, temple, or house" (or earlier, "a hearth"), and ficare, "to construct". This ancient union of words into that of a building for fire conjures images of warmth, shelter, and safety, but also stirs the imagination in its evocation of the storyteller and of the spiritual nature of fire. Edifice and edify, then, their seeming present-day autonomy notwithstanding, are forever bound. Simply put, the edifice is a measure of our need to express what we find of value in our world.

The edifice edifices. It speaks after our own mortal lips have long fallen still.

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