

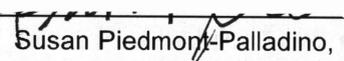
Thesis submitted to the Faculty
of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University
Washington-Alexandria Center
in partial fulfillment of the requirement
of the degree
of
Master of Architecture

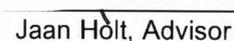
URBAN SPIRITUAL RETREAT

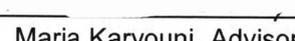
Thesis project by

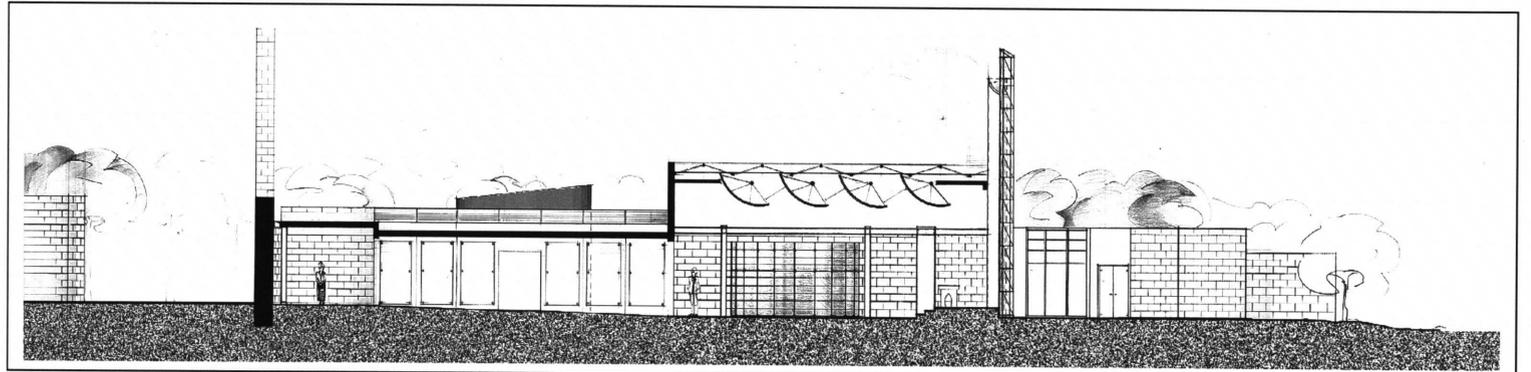
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Summer 1997
Alexandria, Virginia

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Religious Retreat, Rock Creek Park, Washington D.C.

The design of this project - a religious retreat - although based on the form of a traditional monastery differs from it in its basic premise. The idea of monastic life is based on solitary contemplation and restricted social exchange, while a retreat places group interaction at its base. It is a place where a community of persons shares time and thoughts, but also where each individual is given a space of his or her own to which to retreat when needing privacy.

The retreat consists of three separate elements: a church, a dormitory complex and a "Unity House" that includes a library, and meeting and dining spaces. A massive travertine wall that divides public (*profane*) and private (*sacred*) spaces, is the main geometrical, focal and symbolic element to which the three buildings relate.

In the design of this project the questions of what constitutes the necessary qualities of spaces in the structures designated for a religious purpose were explored. The design was approached with the understanding that for a project such as a religious retreat natural and man-made environments must be treated as one. Only then, design resources will allow for creation of harmonious, intimate and poetic spaces and give the retreat participants a chance to quiet themselves and experience the surroundings with all their senses.



View of the Unity house and the church from the parking area.

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Searching for emotional healing Architecture provides a direct experience. An experience of climbing the flight of stairs to the temple or church puts the experience deep into your bones.

Anthony Lawlor, AIA, "The Temple in the House"

In today's Western culture, so dominated by the race to reach material comfort, the number of people for whom it is important to seek spiritual fulfillment is growing. Religious groups reach out beyond traditional activities to attract new followers and reinvigorate the faith of current members. The idea of a religious retreat that is attended for a few days is relatively new, although it can be assumed to be an outgrowth of a centuries old monastic tradition. The design solution presented in this project offers an appropriate environment for individuals in search of solitary concentration of thought. However, it was also intended to stimulate the participants to engage in enriching social relations within the community of the retreat. Exploring solutions to satisfy these seemingly opposite modes of spiritual reinvigoration was a challenge of this project.

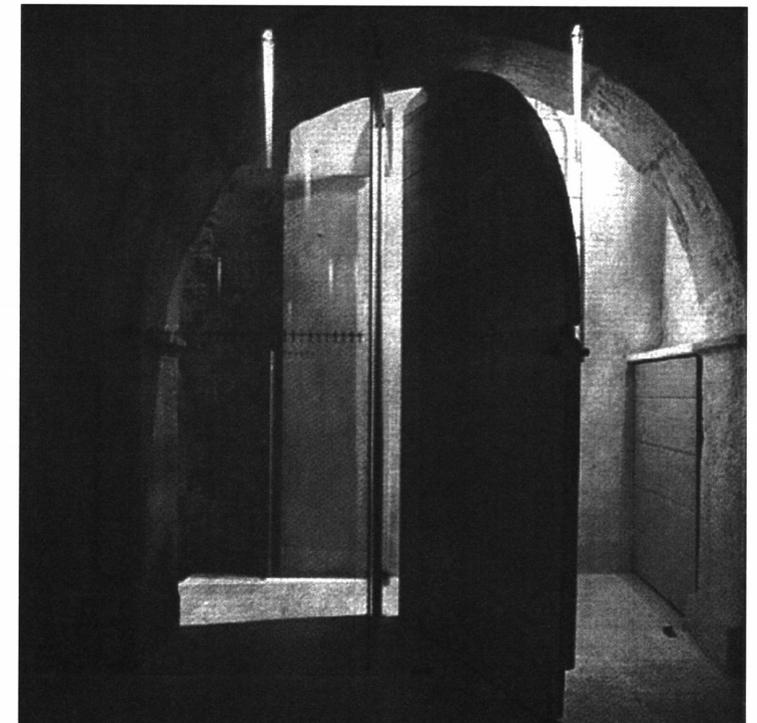
There are few religious retreats in this country. Because they are so rare, the characteristics of such retreats need to be explored. Most of the existing ones are

found in remote locations, probably indicating that a sense of separation is important to the participants. Perhaps, it is because a quiet, secluded environment withdrawn from the pressures of ordinary life facilitates contemplativeness. Also, it seems, that the feeling of community is heightened within the group of isolated individuals who participate in mutual rituals, and that in return, induces sharing, and offers support and a chance of renewal. The powerful beauty of the natural environment in those not easily accessible locations where a majority of existing retreats are located, inspires feelings of awe. It is also worth noting that the group size of these retreats is usually of no more than 30 people. Only in such small gatherings can individuals naturally develop meaningful interactions with each other without dividing into subgroups and compromising the unity of the entire group. The activities offered to the participants range from those shared by an entire group, such as religious rituals or workshops, to those in which time is spent privately on exploration of the self or of the divine.

The current project, a religious retreat set in an urban environment, undertakes the challenge of fulfilling participants' needs using modified characteristics of a remotely located retreat. What tools, then, can an architect use to create, within an urban environment, a space equally peaceful and harmonious? What are the quali-

ties of such an environment to allow a person to find his or her "interior silence"? The monastery seems to be commonly associated with a perfect setting for those who are on the quest for answers to the Ultimate Mystery. Within monastery walls, in solitude and isolation, connecting with our spiritual selves is expected to come naturally. Throughout the project a strong distinction between the concept of monasteries and retreats was made. A monastery, is a place of seclusion, withdrawal from the world, and contemplative solitude. The retreat allows for a choice of meditation in privacy but also encourages social interaction, an exchange of observations and feelings, and the nourishment we get from friendship.

This project presents design elements such as a "Unity House" containing reading and dining rooms, and a common courtyard in the dormitory complex and a shared space on the meadow. These places help to create a feeling of community among participants. The heavily wooded site chosen for the retreat provides seclusion and peacefulness. It offers paths and hidden nooks for participants in need of solitude. Balanced architectural forms, in their scale and choice of building materials, remain in harmony with nature. The use of symbolic elements, architectural metaphors, and a focus on sensory experience help make the retreat an uniquely spiritual place.



Restored Church, Island of Pag, Croatia. Photo: D. Fabijanec

Your sacred space is where you find yourself again and again.

Joseph Campbell

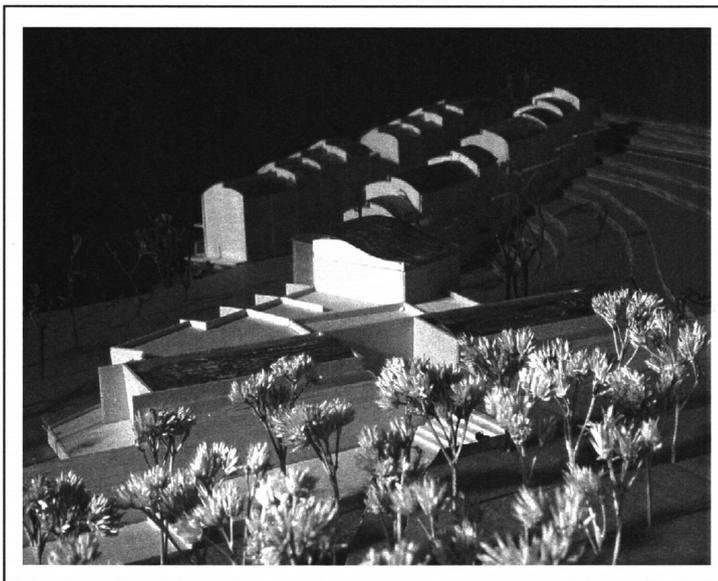
The retreat was designed to provide a feeling of community and seclusion and a full experience of the richness of nature. An isolated, heavily wooded site was chosen in order to provide participants the opportunity to withdraw from the noise of everyday life. Respecting the site's natural environment, the retreat's design seeks to minimize the perceived invasiveness of man-made structures into the natural surroundings.

The scale and form of the buildings and the careful selection of textures and colors of building materials is intended to harmonize the design with the natural environment of the site.

The architecture of the retreat seeks to transmit feelings of quietude and to highlight the sensory experience of the place, such as the sound of gravel crunching underfoot

or of trickling water echoing off the walls of the terraced courtyard. The echoing footsteps on the stone floor of the temple create an awareness of passage and of the presence of others. Through the skylights and large sheets of glass light filters into the building, into the intimate places where only thoughts can be heard.

The quiet of the man made environment created within the walls of the retreat offers a shelter for the mind and attempts to give the participants an opportunity to "find themselves again and again".



CONTEXT

This project began with an analysis of a street map of Washington D.C.. Looking past the grid of streets originated by L' Enfant's plan for the city and concentrating on the location of elements such as monuments, towers and cupolas, the analyses exposed a grid of perpendicular axes. The location of a main wall is based on the direction of one of these axes.

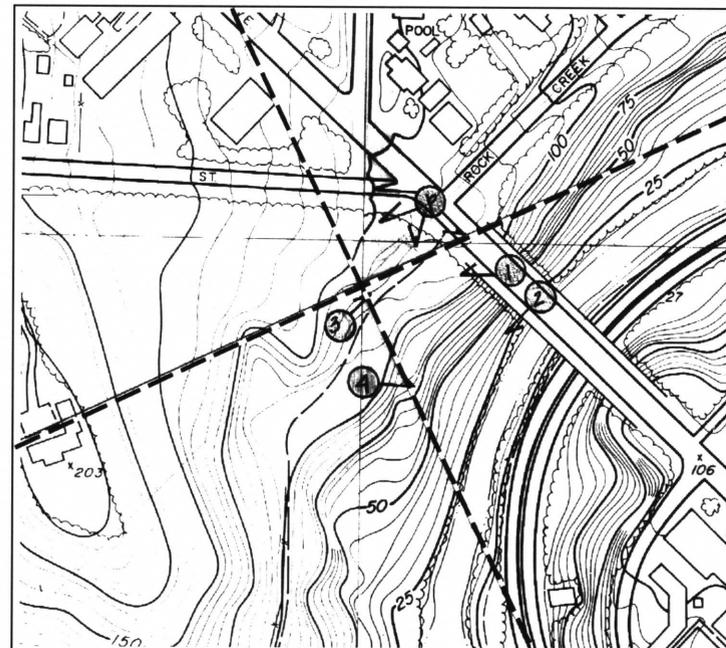
SITE

The location ultimately chosen for the project was chosen because the terrain, although challenging, possesses qualities deemed important to the design goal such as isolation, both in terms of access and visibility, a rich growth of trees and good light and spaciousness that affords the participants privacy. The richly wooded areas of Rock Creek Park insulate the site from the noisy chaos of city life. Located in the vicinity of Massachusetts Avenue, the site offers a view of the beautiful stone arch of the Massachusetts Avenue bridge. A minaret in the distance adds to the unique sense of this place.

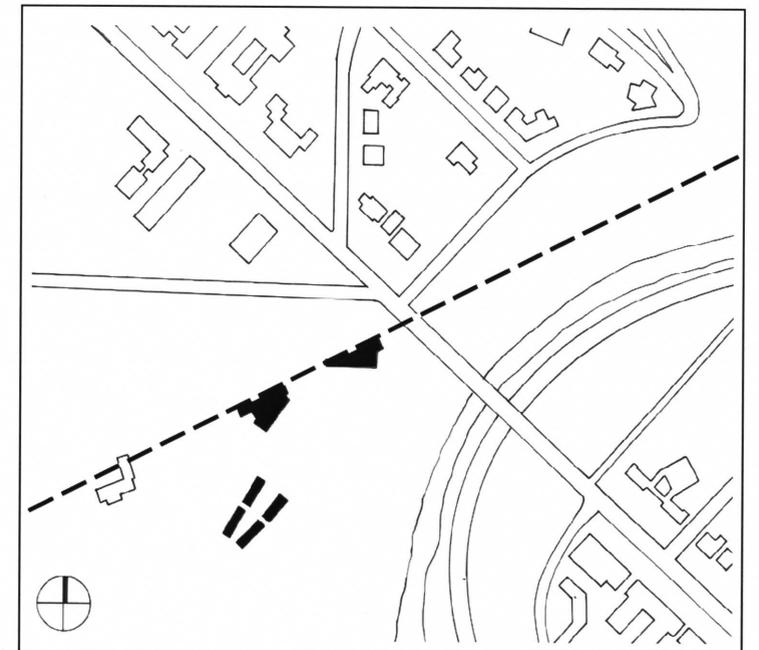
1. Schematic plan of the Washington D.C. region.



2. Topographic map showing Massachusetts Avenue at Rock Creek Park. The marked axes reflect the result of the city plan analysis.



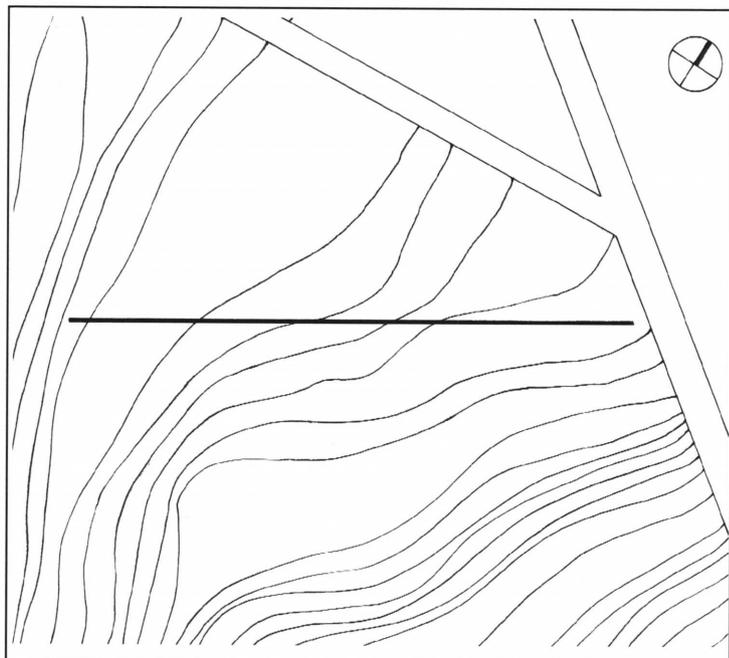
3. Site plan showing the proposed buildings of the retreat.



The development of the concept of the retreat can be divided into stages. The resulting composition of three walls divides the site into quadrants distinctive in use and accessibility (i.e. public, semiprivate, private areas, and areas of natural and structured landscaping).

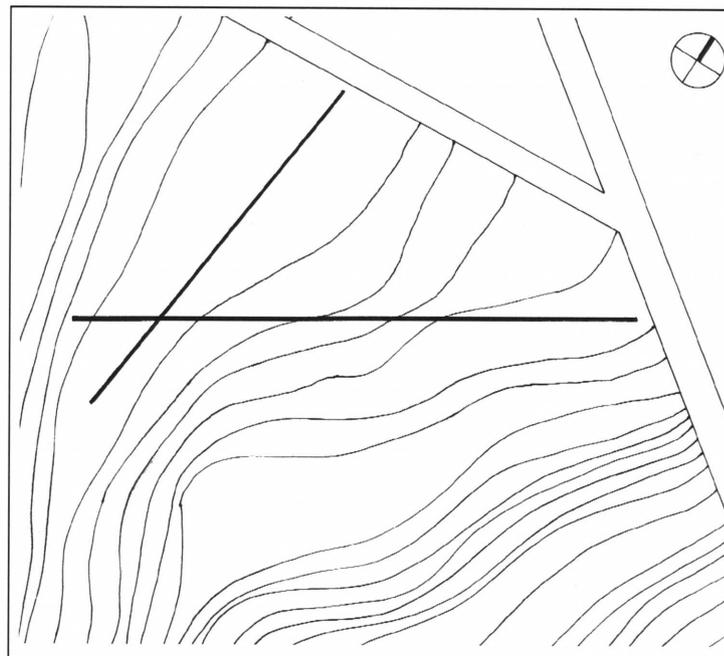
*Stage 1:
Creating a marker: Travertine wall*

The travertine wall is the first intrusion into the texture of the site. It divides the available space and is an initial step towards a definition of sacred and profane spaces: area north of the wall remains a public or profane space and the area south of the wall, towards the Rock Creek Valley, is a private or sacred space. The placement and direction of the travertine wall derives from an initial analysis of the city plan described in the previous section.



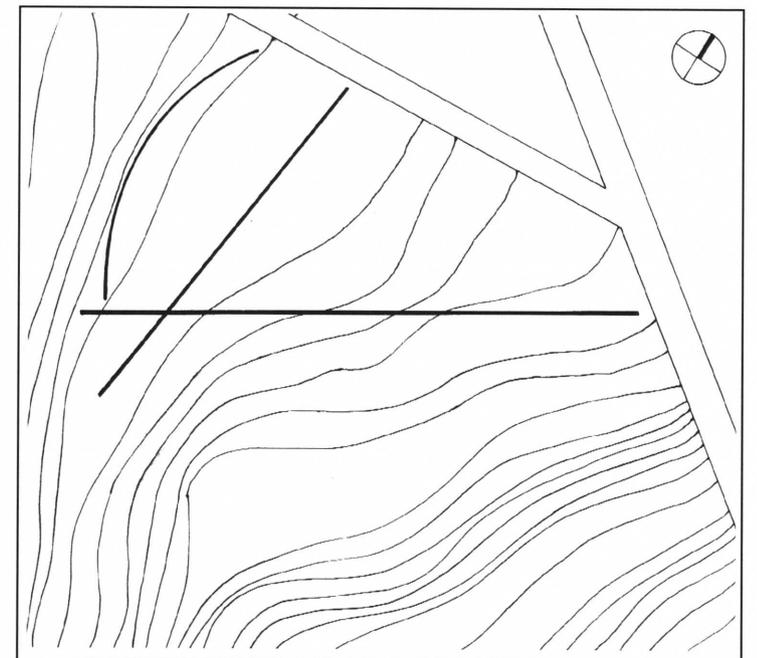
*Stage 2:
Defining a boundary: The secondary wall*

A secondary wall designates the boundary of the site. It crosses with the travertine wall, further dividing the site. Quadrants defining levels of restriction of public access are created.



*Stage 3:
Creating a closure: The curve*

The curve is a closing element in the composition of the site plan. The space contained between the secondary wall and the curve is designated for a parking lot. This space does not belong in the realm of the world of the actual retreat and, therefore, is distinguished by a different geometrical form.



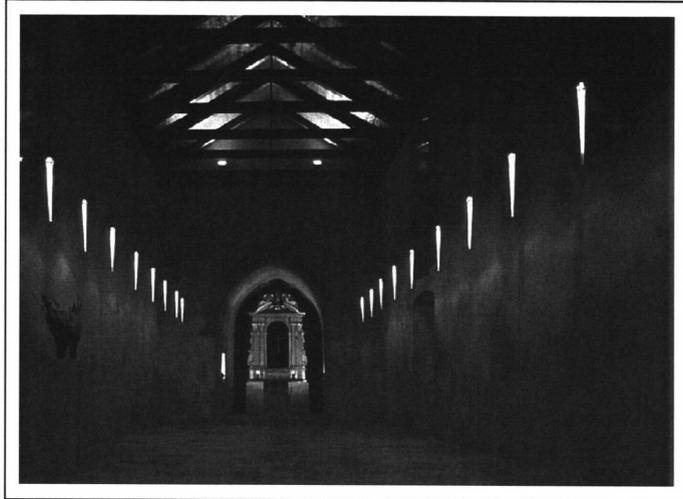


Photo. 1

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDIT AND DESCRIPTION:

Photo. 1 by Damir Fabijanic, project by Nenand Fabijanic, Restored Church, Island of Pag, Croatia
Photo. 2 by Robert Wharton, project by Louis Khan, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Photo. 3 by Damir Fabijanic, project by Nenand Fabijanic, Restored Church, Island of Pag, Croatia
Photo. 4 by Timothy Hursley, project by Antoine Predock, Heller House, Arizona
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Photo. 2

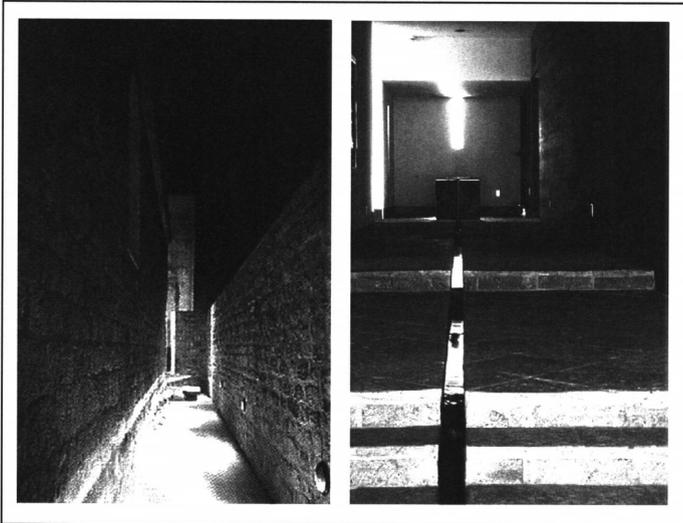


Photo. 4 (right)

Photo. 3 (left)

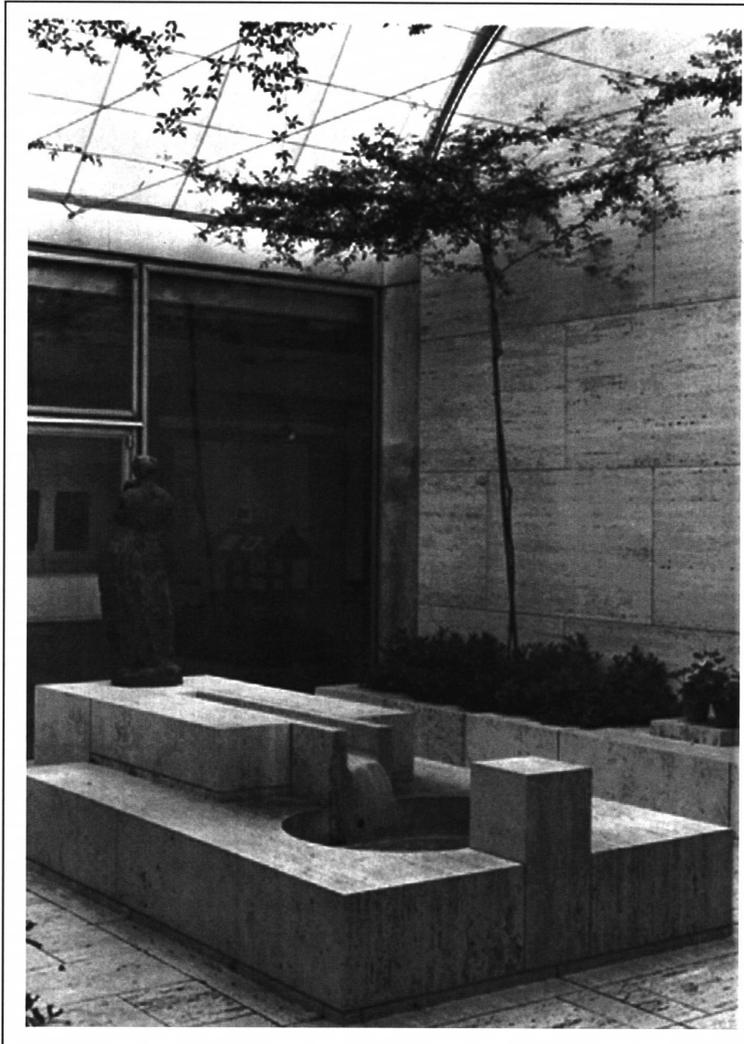


Photo. 5

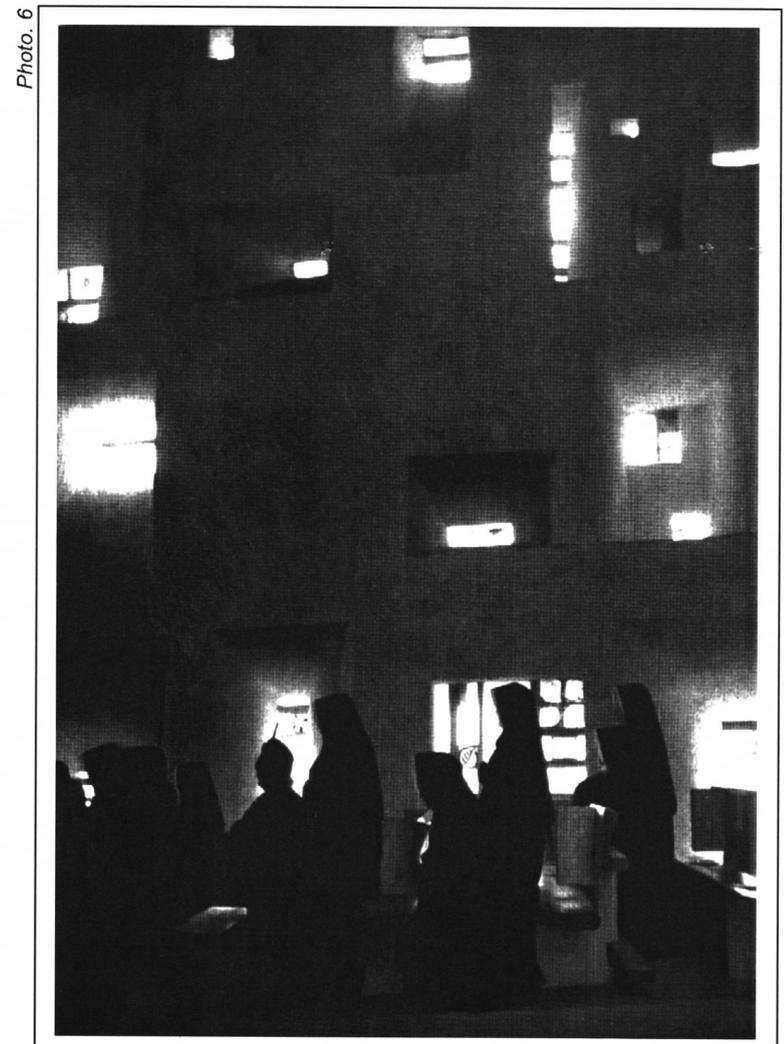


Photo. 6

Site plan:

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Park | 6. Retreat Entrance |
| 2. Church Entrance | 7. Parking |
| 3. Church Square | 8. Dormitory |
| 4. Church | 9. Courtyard |
| 5. Unity House | 10. Meadow |

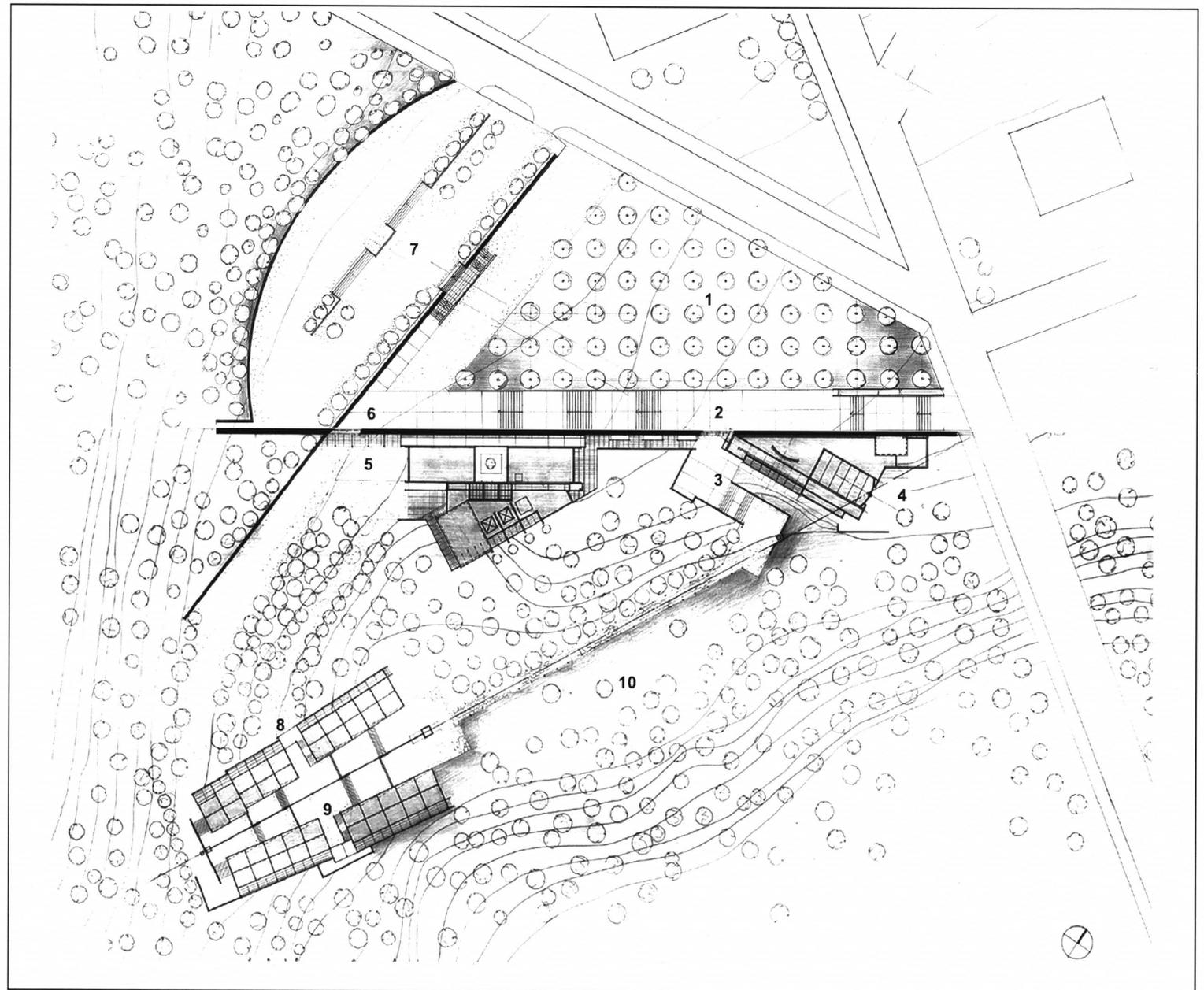
The large size, rich vegetation, and view of Rock Creek make the site particularly attractive. The preservation of the natural environment of the site was a priority in design and, therefore, clutter of the site was kept to a minimum. The buildings were placed at a distance from each other with the goal of encouraging the participants to explore the natural environment of the site, to stroll and to find peacefulness within it. The site provides sufficient space for everyone to find a quiet corner. Participants can find a solitary spot on benches along the wooded path or on the grass of the sunlit meadow.

A massive travertine wall marks the boundaries of the retreat and organizes the design. In metaphor, it separates the sacred world of the retreat from the profane world outside.

The Unity House, a building designated for community gatherings, faces south and is open towards the valley of Rock Creek and the lush landscape of the park. An indirect connection between the Church and Unity House, through a staircase along the inside of the travertine wall, allows for the occasional use of Unity House by the public attending church services.

The four wings of the dormitory create a terraced courtyard which steps down to the grassy meadow. The courtyard's main axis continues along the meadow and opens towards the church, crossing its east-west axis precisely at the altar, highlighting an underlying connection between the dormitory and the house of worship.

A pedestrian walkway from the parking lot aligns with the east-west axis of the church, which becomes a focal point and destination for arriving worshipers and retreat participants. A quadrant of the site, bounded by the parking lot and the retreat complex, is designated green space and is planted with a structured grid of slow growing decorative trees.



The Dormitory



The Unity House

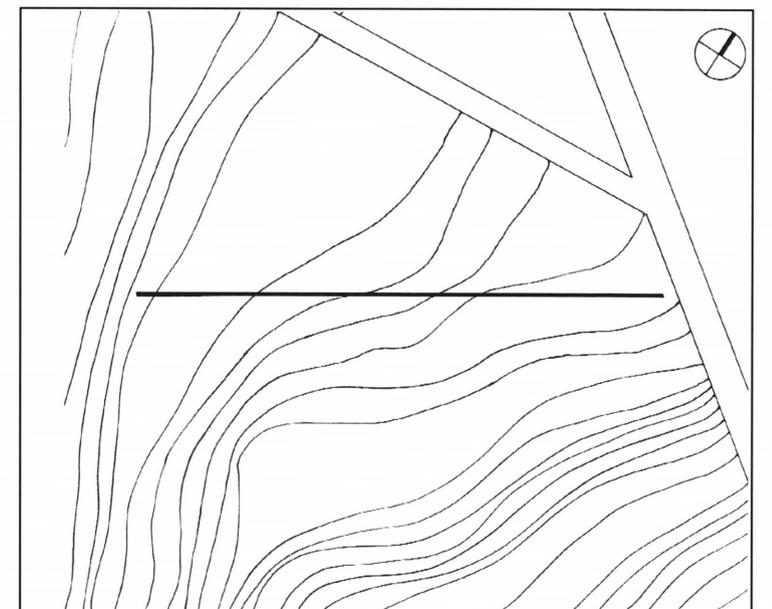
The Wall

The Church





The travertine wall runs through the entire length of the site. It combines in its meaning two contradicting functions : it unifies and separates. As important symbolic element of the project, in metaphor, the travertine wall is a boundary of *sacred* and *secular* worlds. However, it is also a constant element of the project and the three buildings constituting the retreat relate to it. This relationship varies from a direct presence of the wall in the building's design to a distant, sheltering presence of the wall - an element of the landscape.



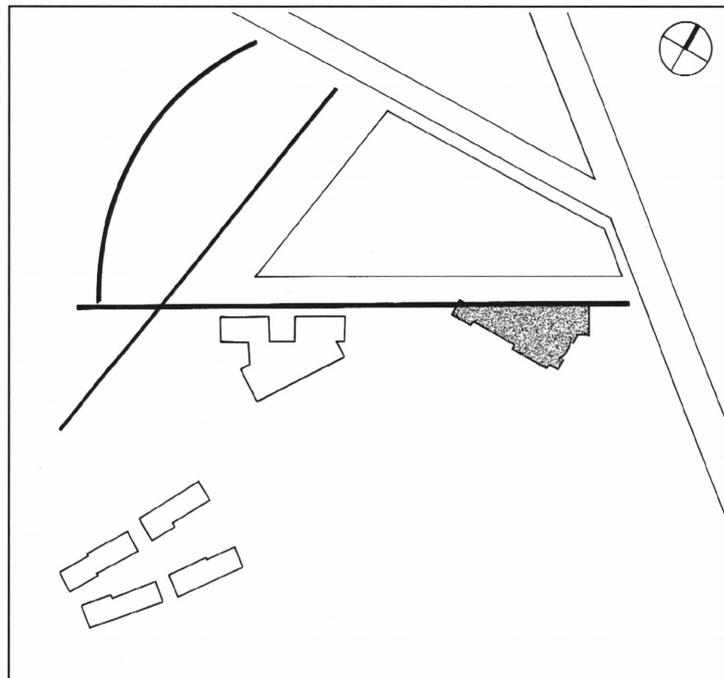
At the entrances to the church and the complex this massive travertine wall vanishes physically but does not cease to exist: it remains present in the horizontal plane in the form of a travertine threshold. Therefore, the act of entering into the sanctity of the complex and the church square can be experienced visually. The mass of stone can be experienced yielding to the people upon entry, emphasizing the act of passage into the sacred world of the temple and the retreat. As a means of further emphasis on the symbolic qualities of the wall, different textures of travertine were used. The public-secular face of the wall is honed, while the private-sacred face is smooth.

Although at points the travertine wall becomes an element of the building, it retains its strictly symbolic character.

In both the church and the Unity House the design does not allow the wall to bear a load. In the church, for instance, where the wall takes the role of a perimeter, a row of columns carries the load of the roof. The wall is physically separated from the main body of the church by a narrow strip of glass.

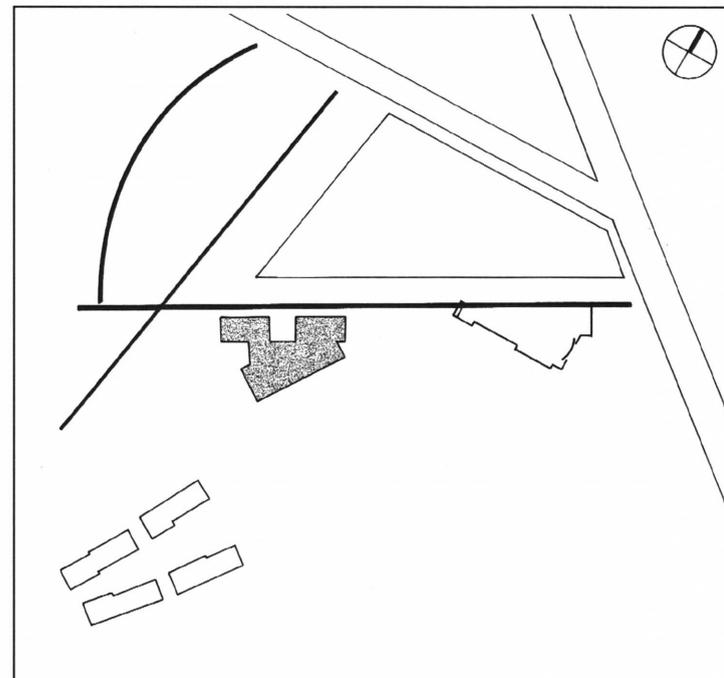
1. Travertine Wall/Church

In the church the wall is directly present, it becomes a perimeter wall of the temple although a non-bearing one.



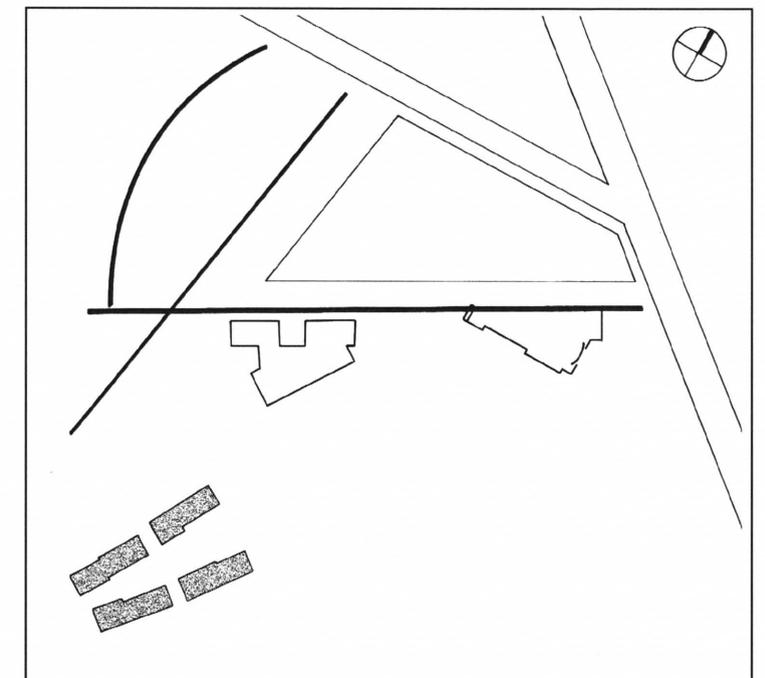
2. Travertine Wall/Unity House

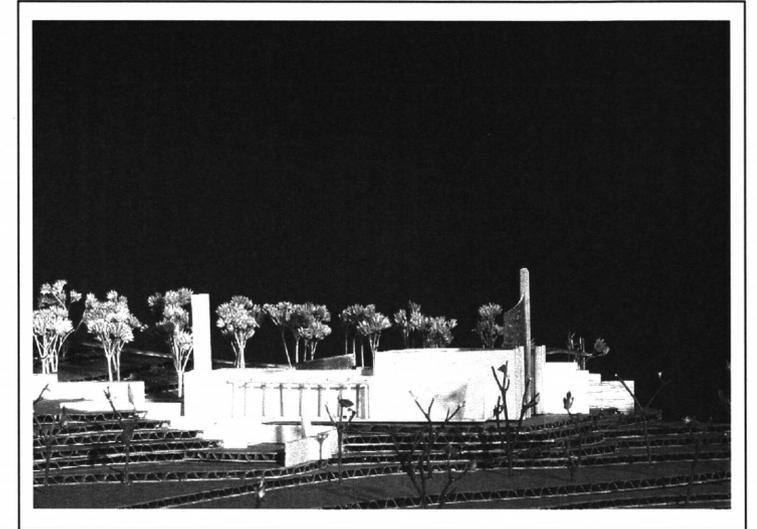
In the Unity House the wall "steps" aside. The space created becomes an outside walkway along the two structures.



3. Travertine Wall/Dormitory

In the dormitory the wall is distant: present only as a sheltering wall.

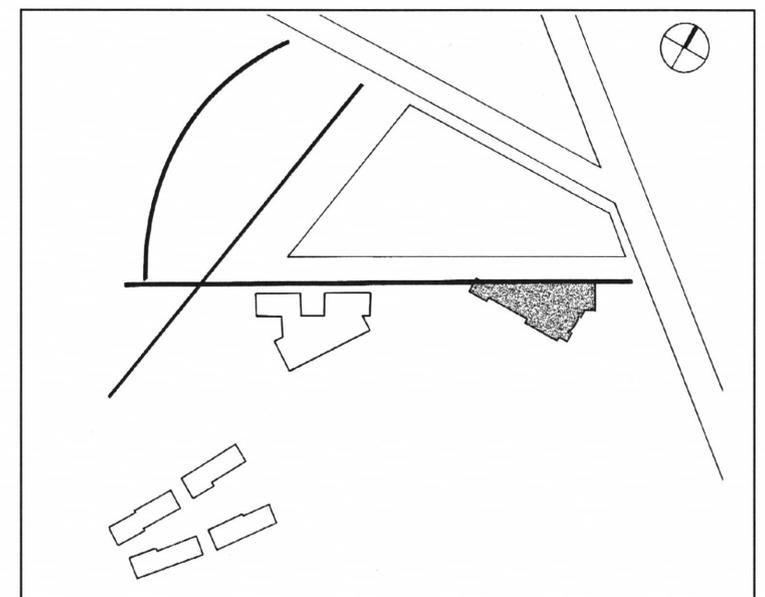


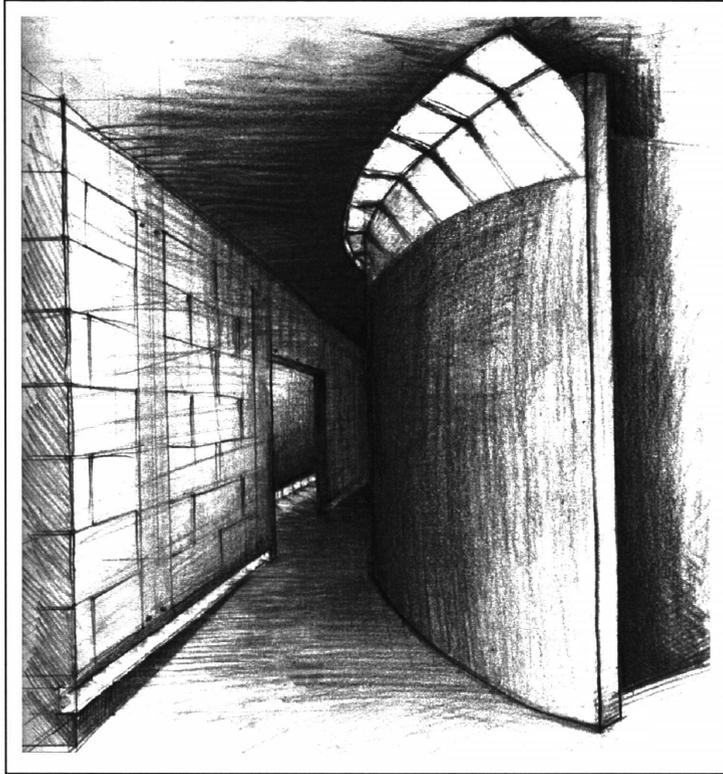


Upon entering the church a narrow ribbon of light leads worshipers' gazes through a narrow corridor towards the main sanctuary. The worshipers pass by seven steel panels dedicated to seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (e.g., the gift of wisdom, courage, piety, etc.). Entering the main sanctuary, worshipers' attention is drawn by light towards the altar.

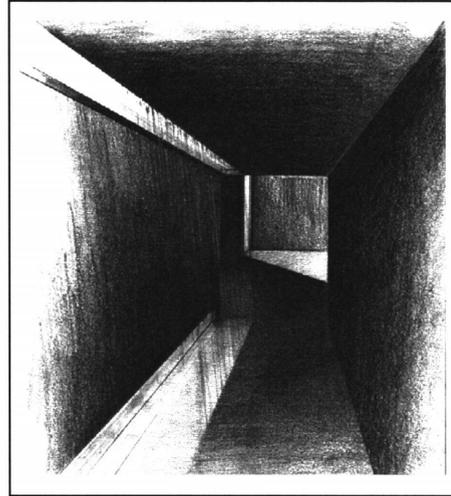
The basic compositional elements of the church are flat surfaces. However, three areas in the church are distinguished by curved surfaces. These three areas are the

most important places of ritual in the Catholic Church. The first of the curved walls encircles the confessionals, the second one, a translucent glass structure, defines the baptistry, and the third and most prominent one, is the wall of the altar. The Reconciliation Chapel is distinguished by a curved surface, although one in a different plane - a curved roof surface.

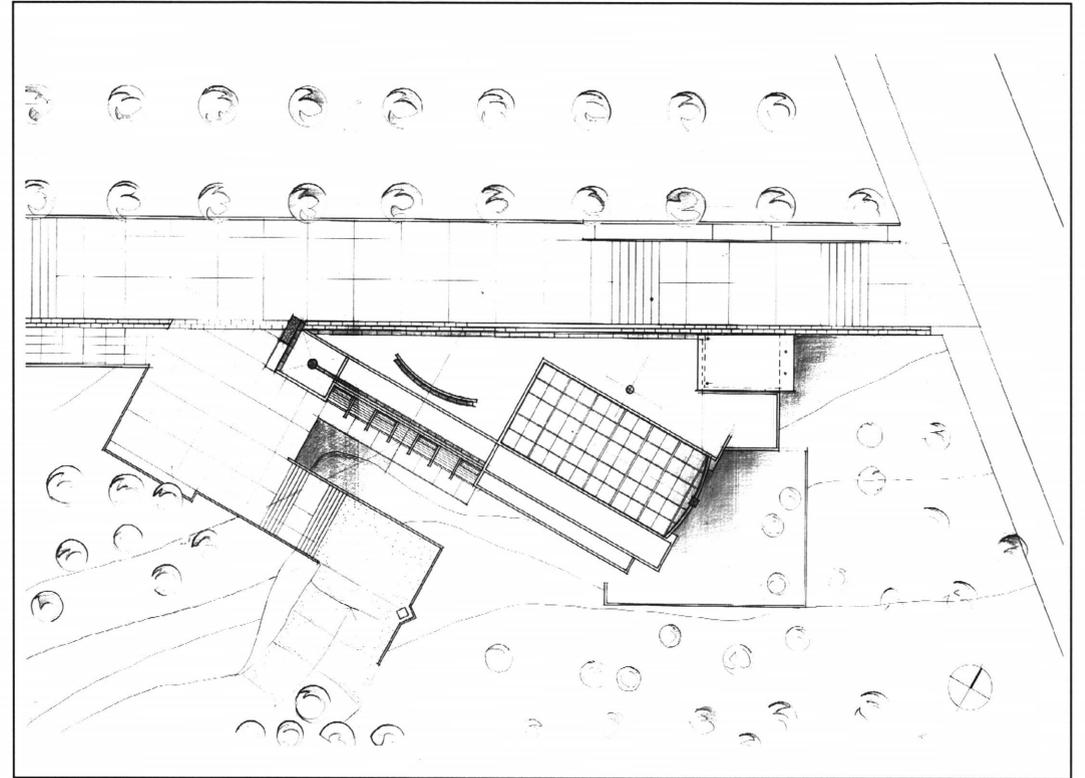




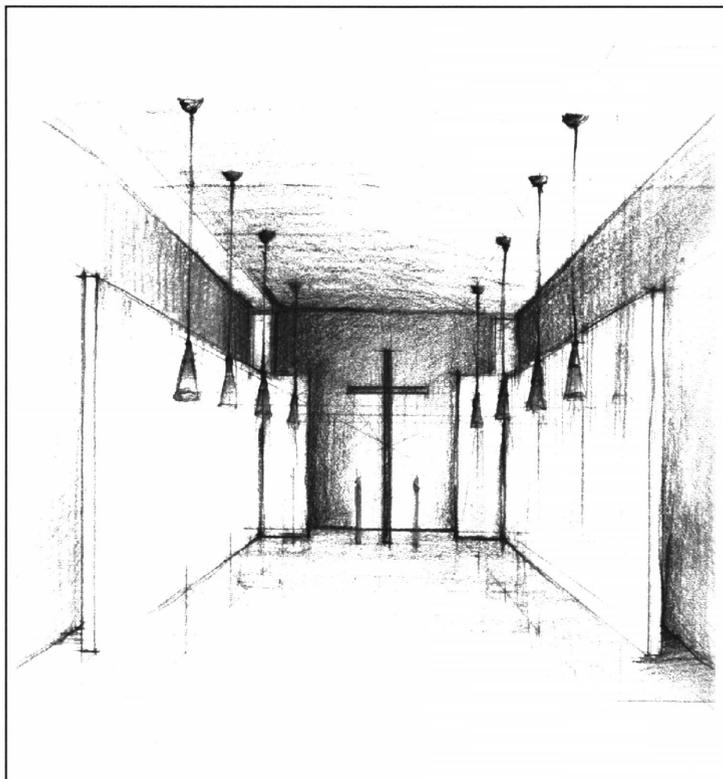
Reconciliation Chapel - Entry: sketch



Procession: sketch



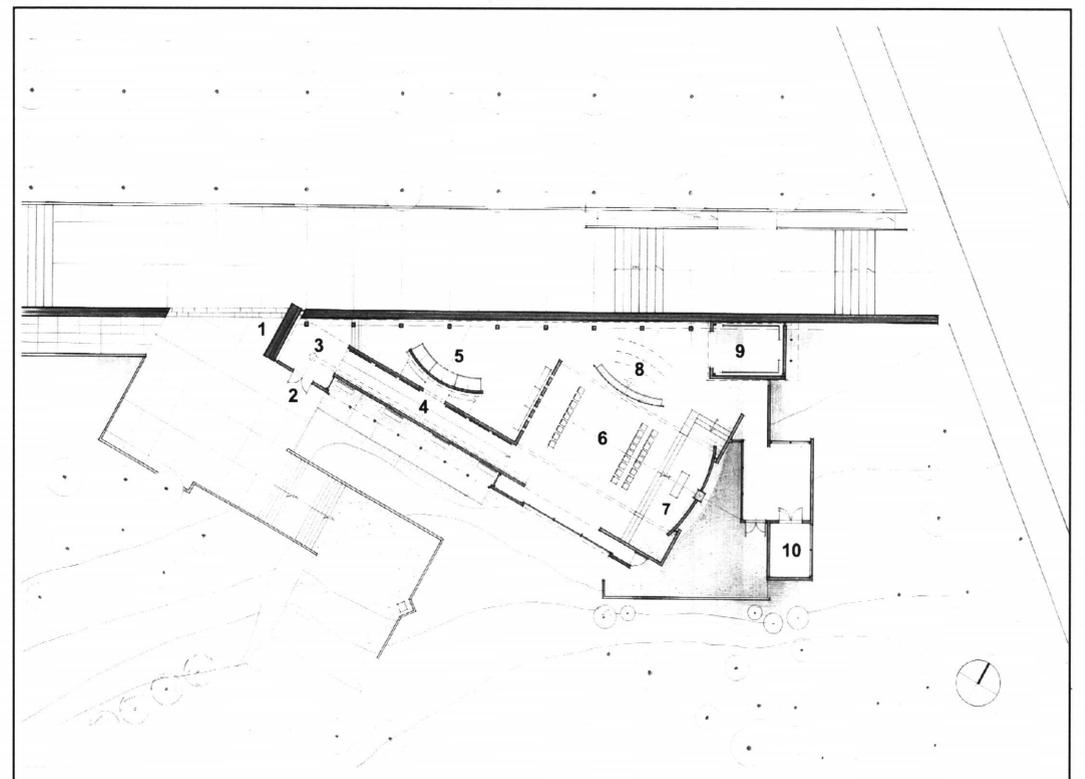
Church: Roof Plan



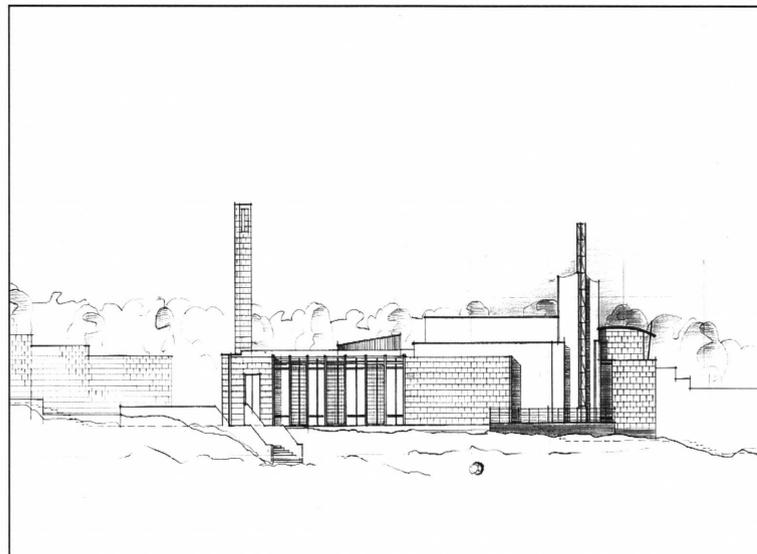
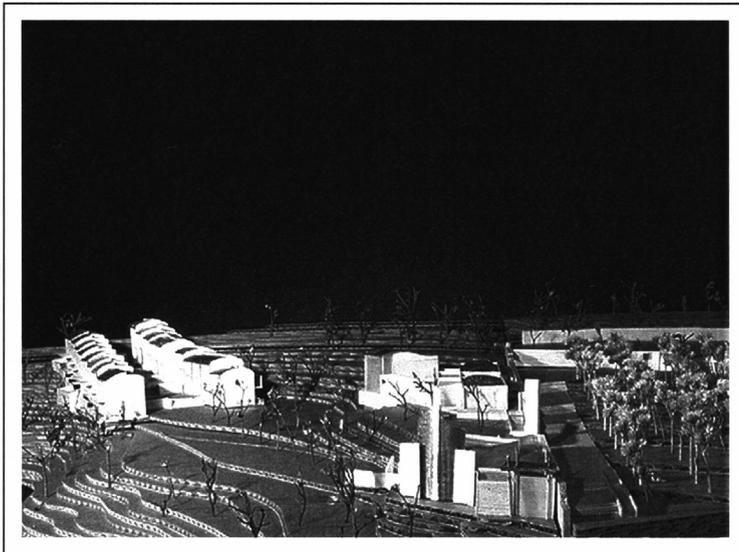
Contemplation Chapel: sketch

Program:

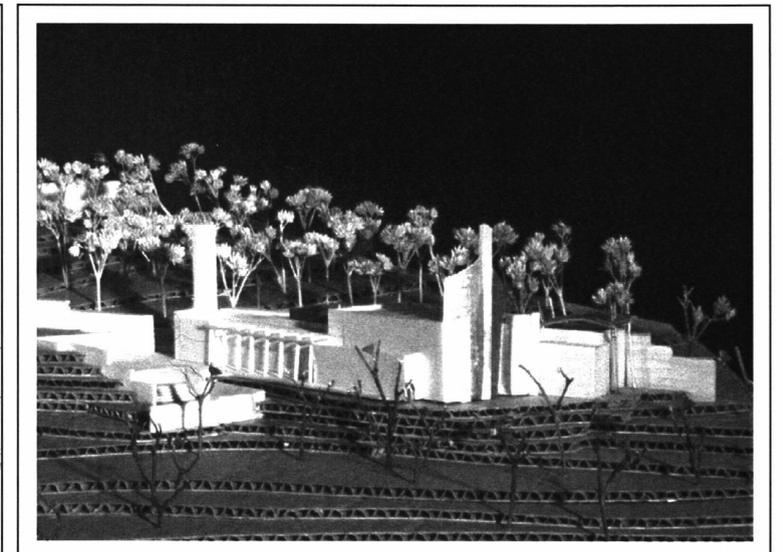
1. Bell Tower
2. Main Entrance
3. Narthex
4. Procession
5. Reconciliation Chapel
6. Sanctuary
7. Altar
8. Baptistry
9. Contemplation Chapel
10. Vesting Sacristy

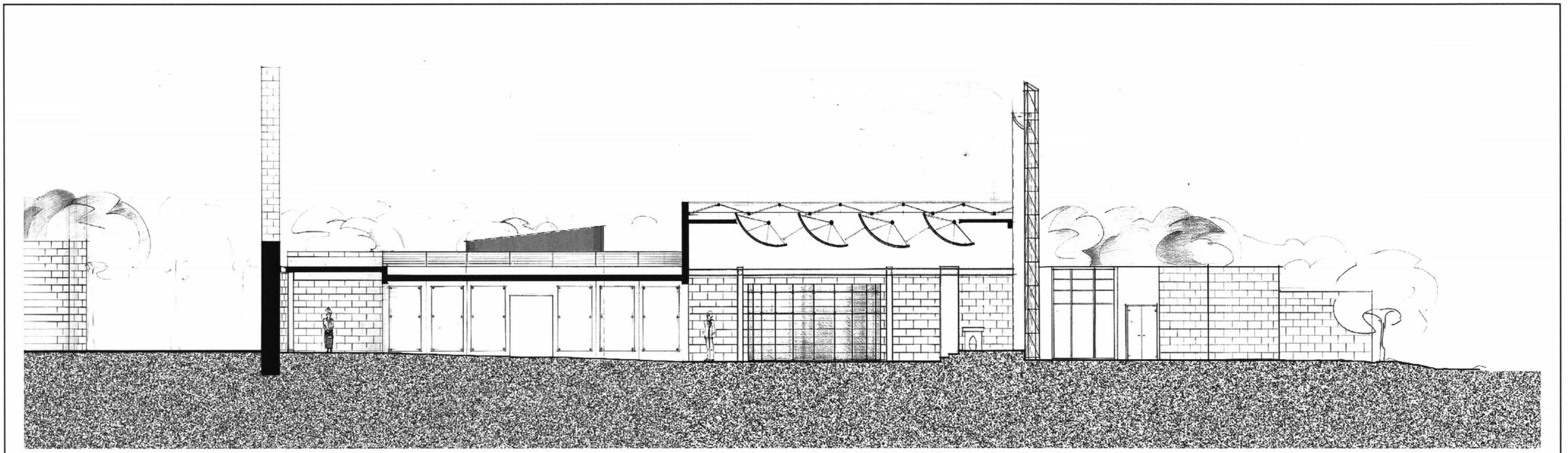


Church: Plan

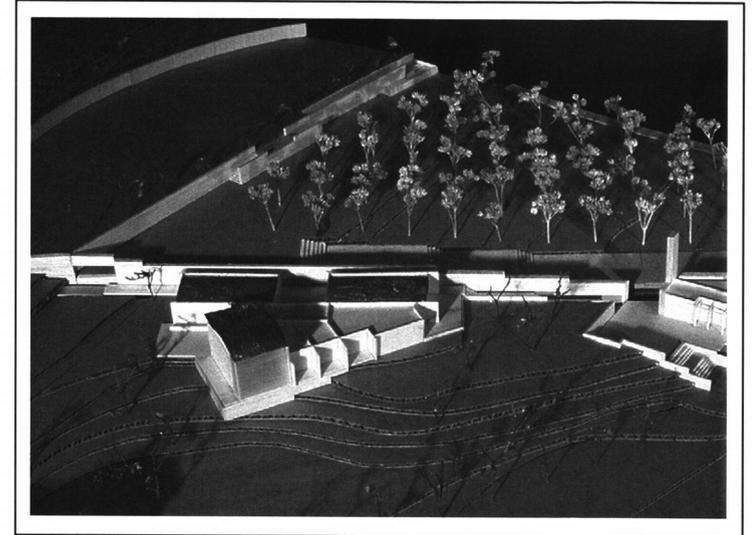


South Elevation

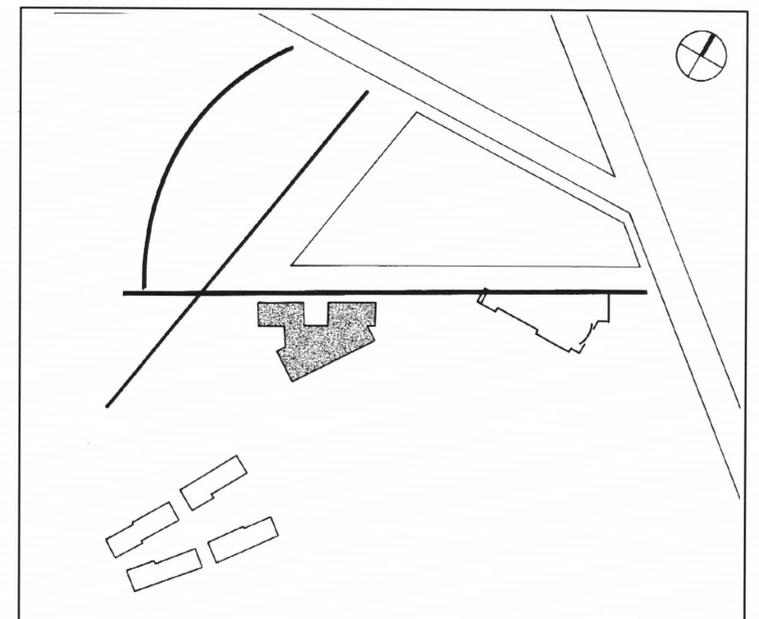




Longitudinal Church Section



The Unity House was created to be the heart of the retreat. Situated between dormitories and the church, it is a place where retreat participants meet to share meals, attend workshops and meetings, and to find space for reading or studying. It fulfills one of the most significant goals of the project: it facilitates the feeling of community.



The Unity House is located in close proximity to the travertine wall. Participants coming to the retreat are allowed to experience the presence of the wall as they approach the patio and officially enter into the privacy of the retreat. The small courtyard of the Unity House was inspired by the idea of the cloister as found in traditional monasteries, that is of a pristine, quiet room open to the sky. The solitary tree reminiscent of the structured landscape outside.

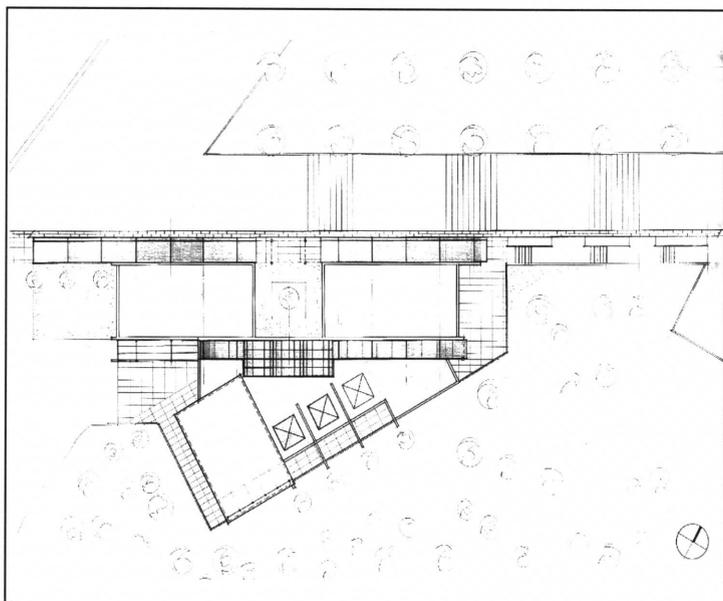
continuous appreciation of the landscape.

The formal connection of the Unity House and the church, through the staircase abutting the travertine wall, allows for the occasional use of the Unity House's meeting spaces by the outsiders. In this way the retreat can establish its place in the community.

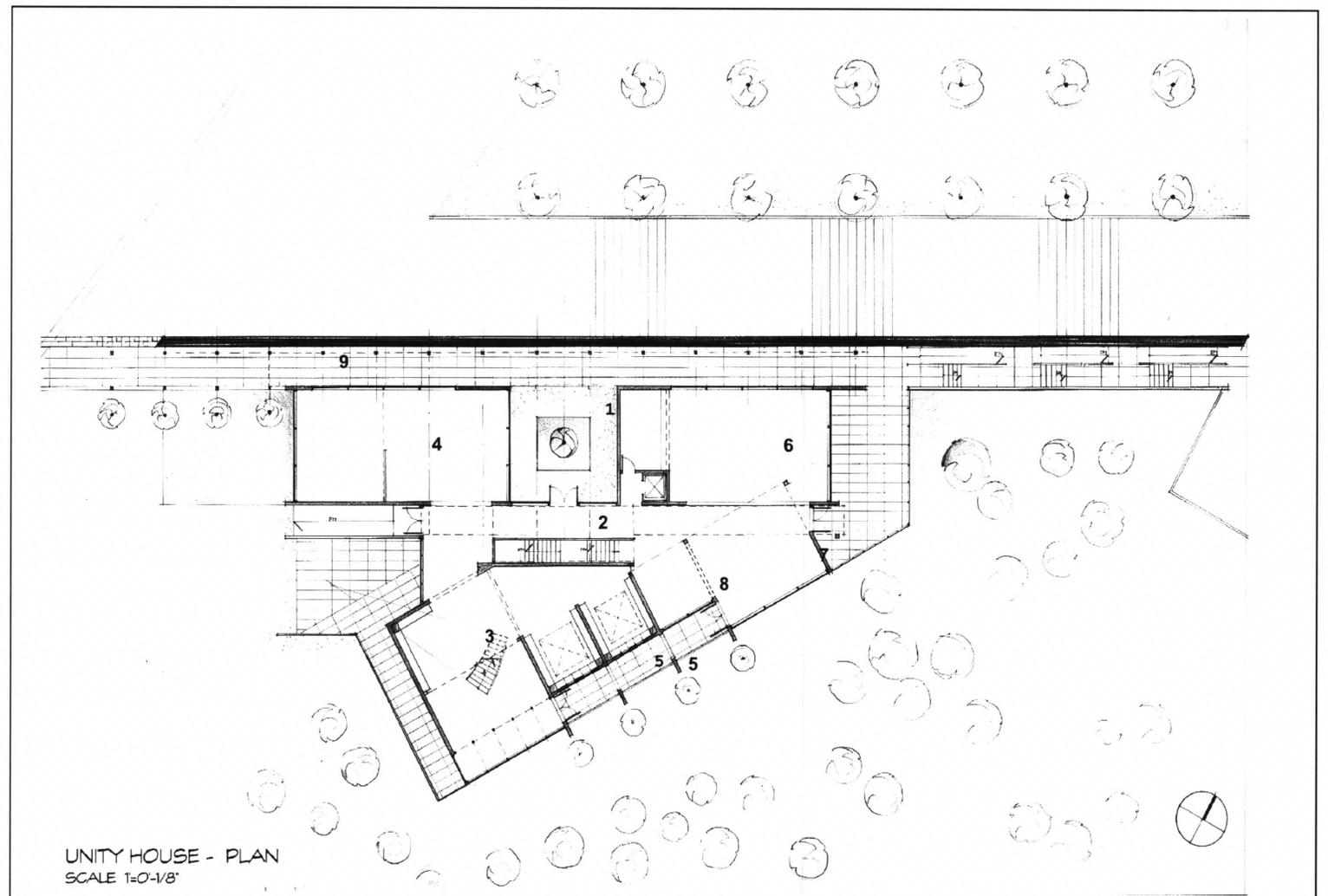
The Unity House is open to the south side of the site which, even though the retreat is surrounded by urban development, offers views of almost pristine, heavily wooded landscape with minimal awareness of the city. Unlike the church, which is isolated from the views outside, large openings in the perimeter walls of the Unity House allow for the

Program:

1. Cloister
2. Vestibule
3. Library/Study Room
4. Meeting/Workshop Room
5. Gallery
6. Dining Room
7. Multi-use Space
8. Office
9. Walkway

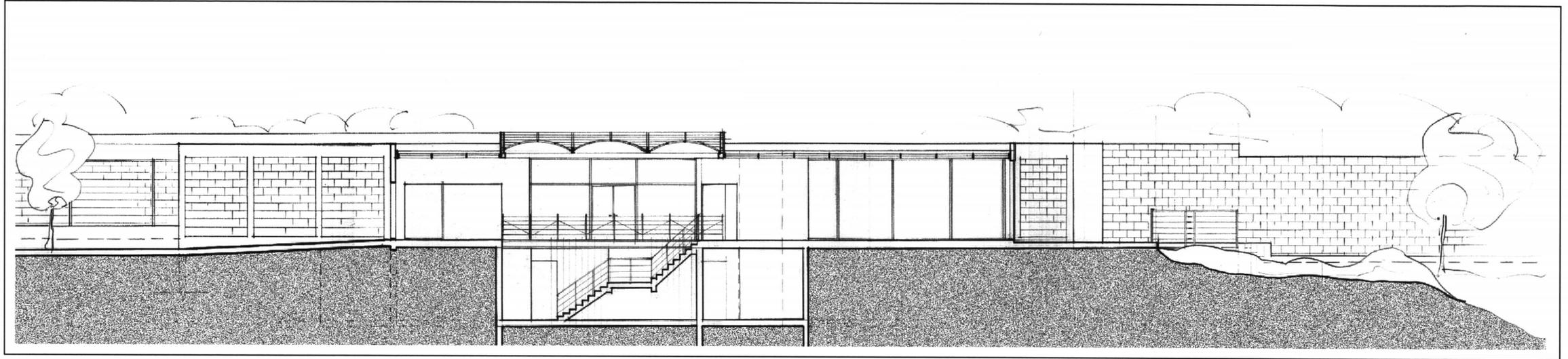


Unity House - Roof plan



UNITY HOUSE - PLAN
SCALE 1/8"=1'-0"

Unity House - Plan

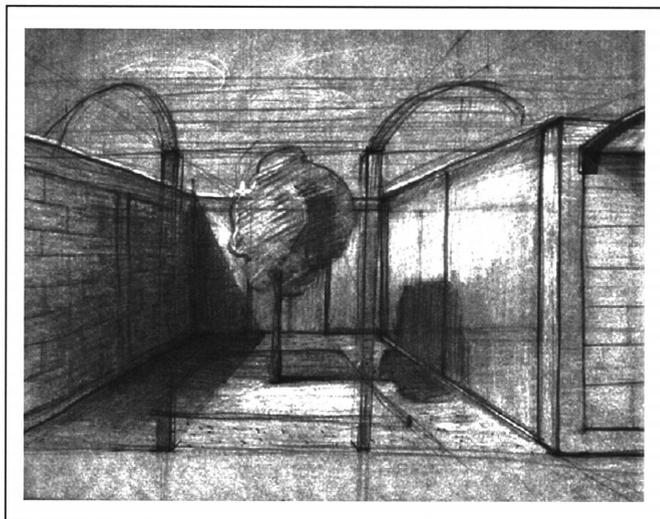


Unity House - Section A - A: vestibule, meeting room, dining area

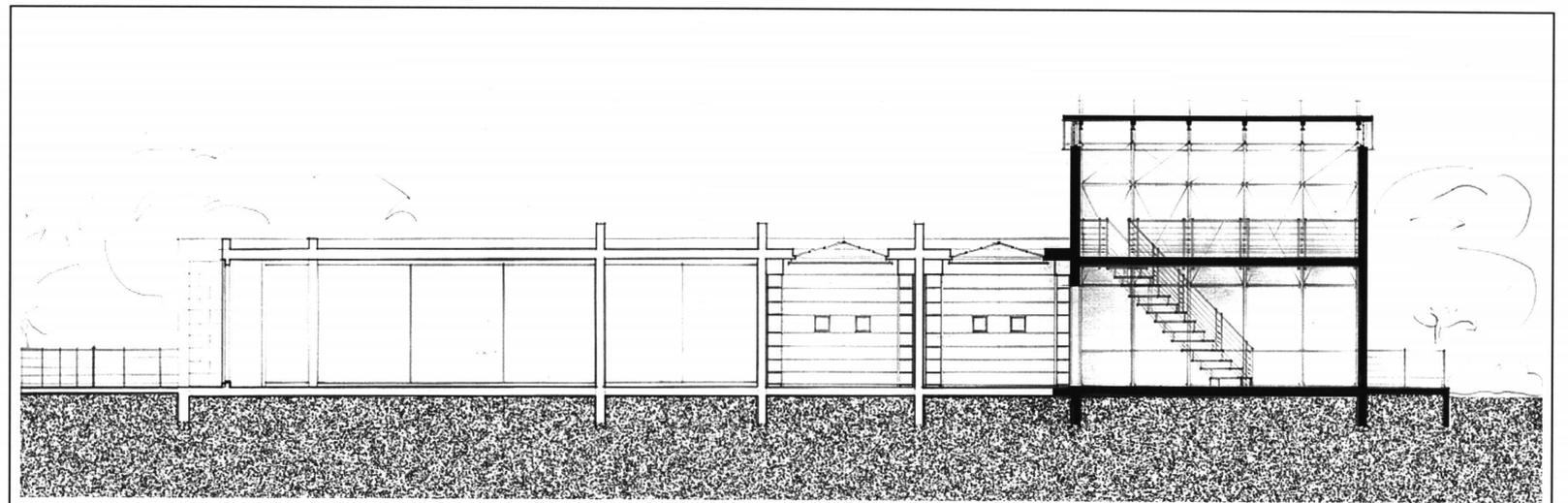
The program of the Unity House includes a spacious dining area where retreat participants share meals as if they would in a traditional monastery. Also, there are spaces designated for meetings, lectures or workshops. One of the more prominent spaces of the Unity House is a library. This spacious two level room, furnished with small reading tables and comfortable chairs, offers enough space on the main floor and the gallery for undisturbed private reading. A glass curtain wall opens the two story room to the beautiful views of Rock Creek Park.

an outdoor gallery, connects the library with a dining room at the western end of the Unity House, an ideal place to pause and admire the landscape and the setting sun.

Designed as an alternative to the indoor hallways,



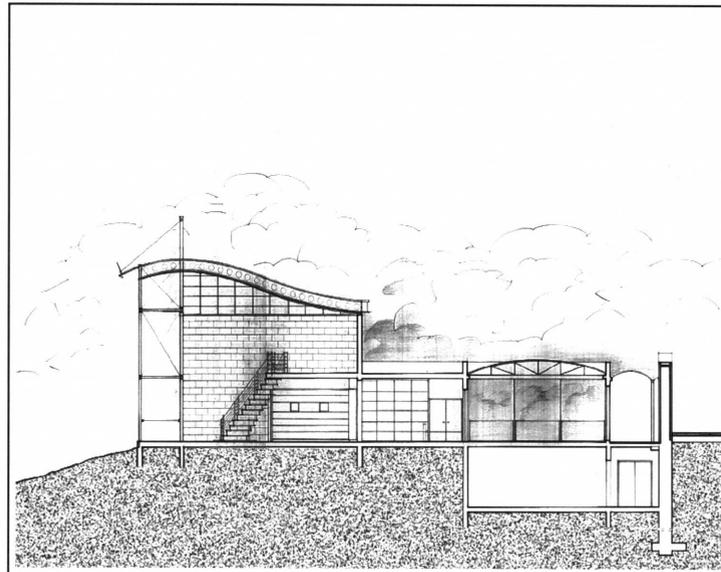
Cloister, sketch



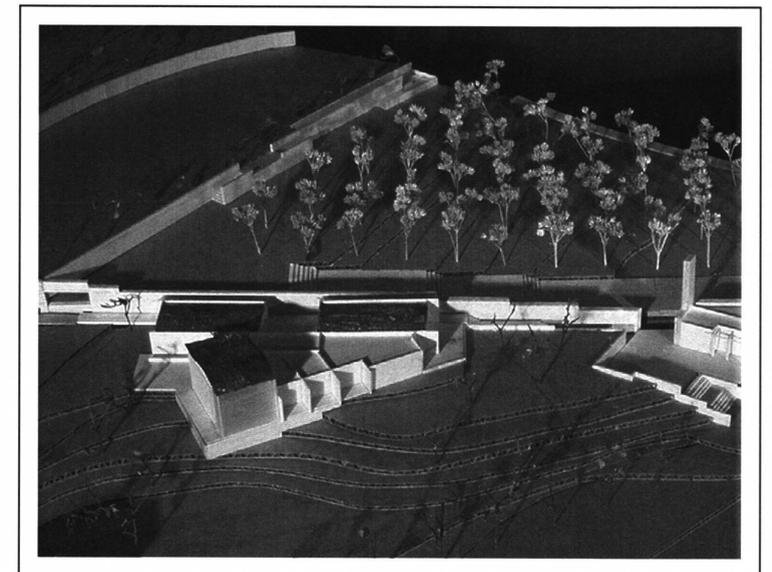
Unity House - Section B-B: library, dining area



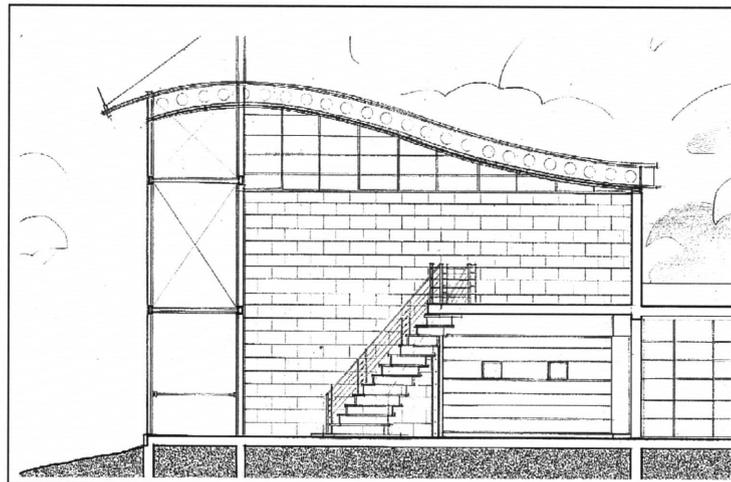
Unity House as seen from the Massachusetts Avenue



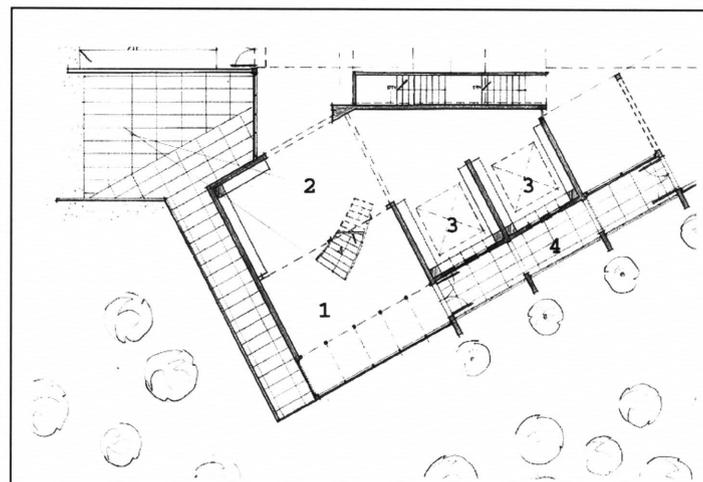
Unity House - Section C - C: library, meeting room, walkway



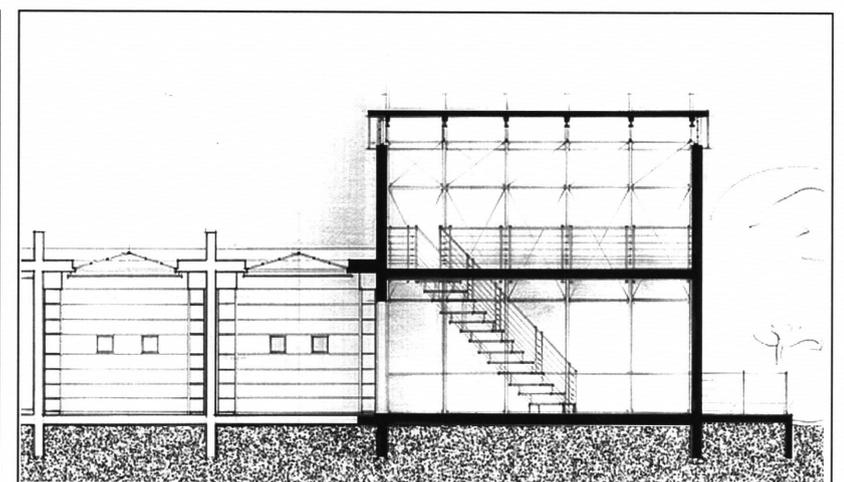
Unity House - View: south elevation



Unity House - Library - Section A-A



Unity House - Library - Plan



Unity House - Library - Section B-B

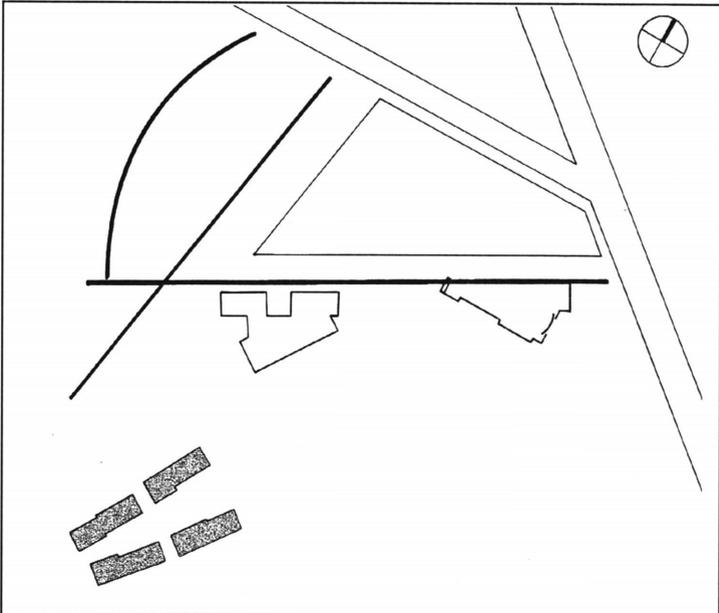
Library

Program:

- 1. Reading area
- 2. Second level reading area
- 3. Stacks
- 4. Gallery



The dormitory is the most removed element of the site and it provides the most privacy to participants. It is designed as a complex of four two-story semi-detached wings. The space created between them is designed as a gravel-filled terraced courtyard. It is an area where the retreat participants can choose solitude in their own units or spend time outside in the courtyard which, therefore, plays the role of an open community room accessible to all within the retreat.

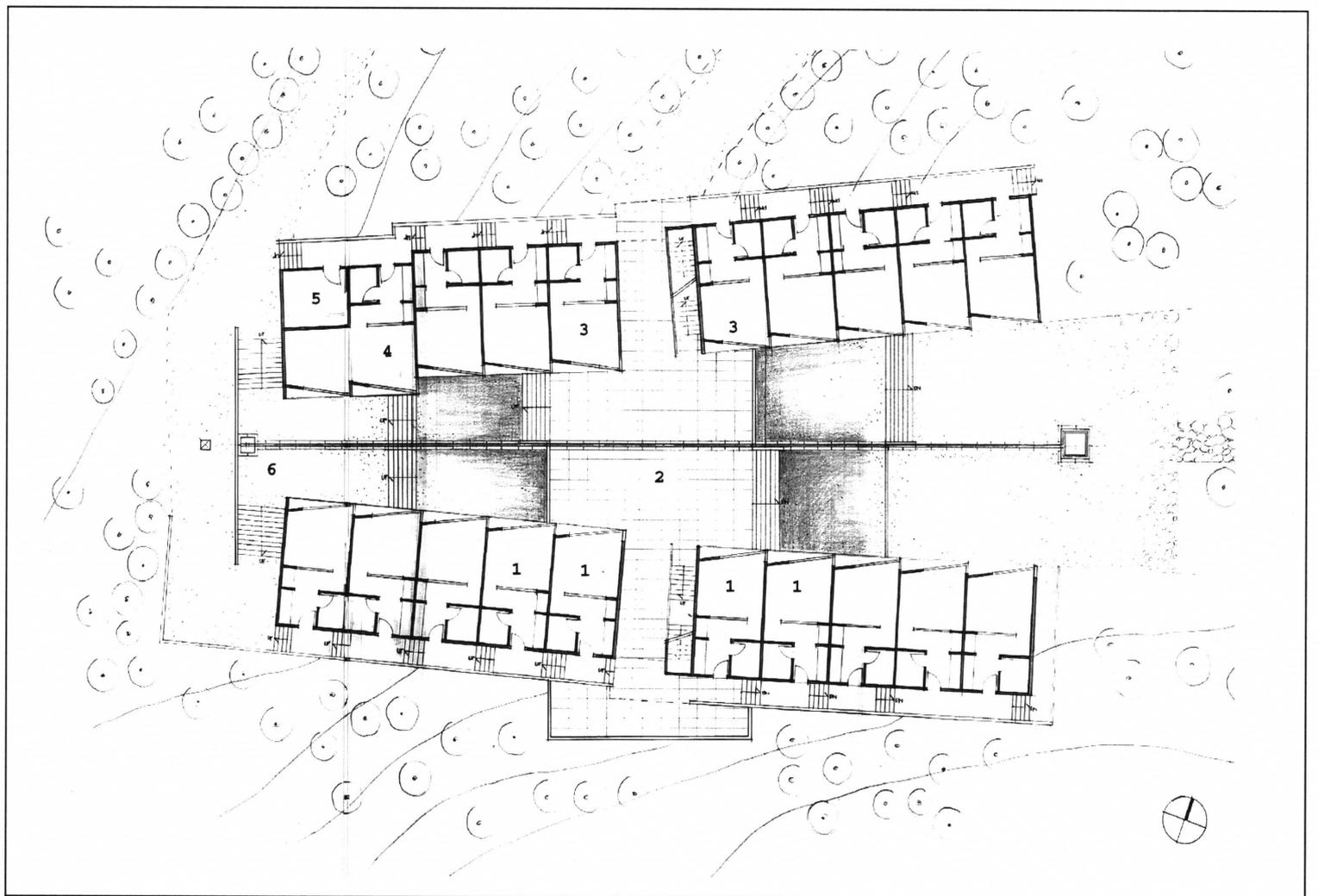
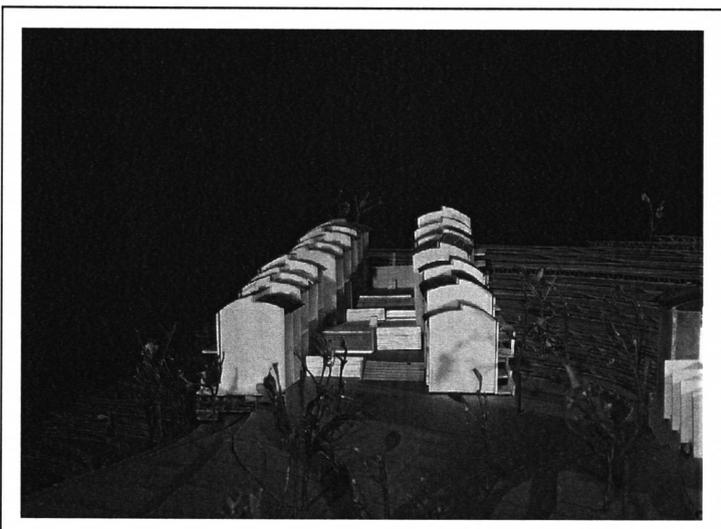




Dormitory - Section A - A: section through the center of the courtyard

Program:

- 1. Dormitory Unit (Single/Double)
- 2. Courtyard
- 3. Handicapped Access Unit
- 4. Permanent Residency Unit/Office
- 5. Storage/Janitorial Equipment
- 6. Water Fountain



Dormitory: First floor plan

Every one of the four dormitory wings contains ten single occupancy units complete with bathroom and kitchenette to provide independence to occupants. The central axis of the dormitory, which leads to the church, is highlighted by a shallow water channel. Water is an entity rich in symbolism in many cultures: in Christianity, it is a symbol of rebirth, purity, and spiritual renewal. Additionally, throughout the centuries, a water well situated in the center of town squares was a gathering place for the community.

The windows of the units face a terraced courtyard created between the four sections of the complex. The courtyard is a central unifying space within the dormitory. It is an outside room that belongs to all participants. However, to protect the privacy of the units a combination of frosted glass,

clear glass and outside shutters is provided. Through the frosted sheet soft light can filter into the rooms, whereas an assembly of outside shutters permits control of the view into the courtyard. Without a direct view into the rooms, a corner window offers views towards the meadow and the church at the western end of the site.

The dormitory courtyard can be compared to an outside room enjoyed during warm seasons. The shimmer of water falling down the terraces or the sound of steps on the gravel-filled courtyard enriches the sensory experience of the space, and brings out the intended feelings of quietude in participants.

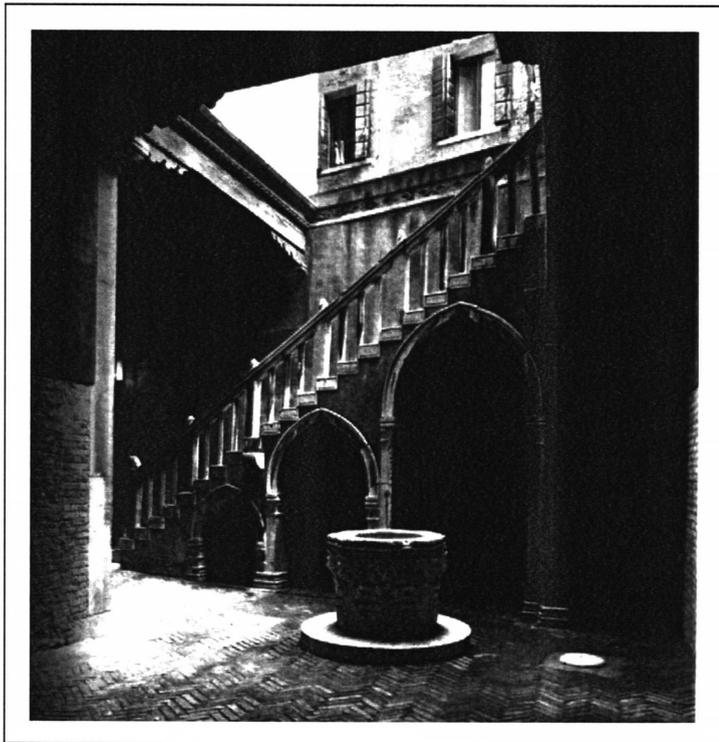
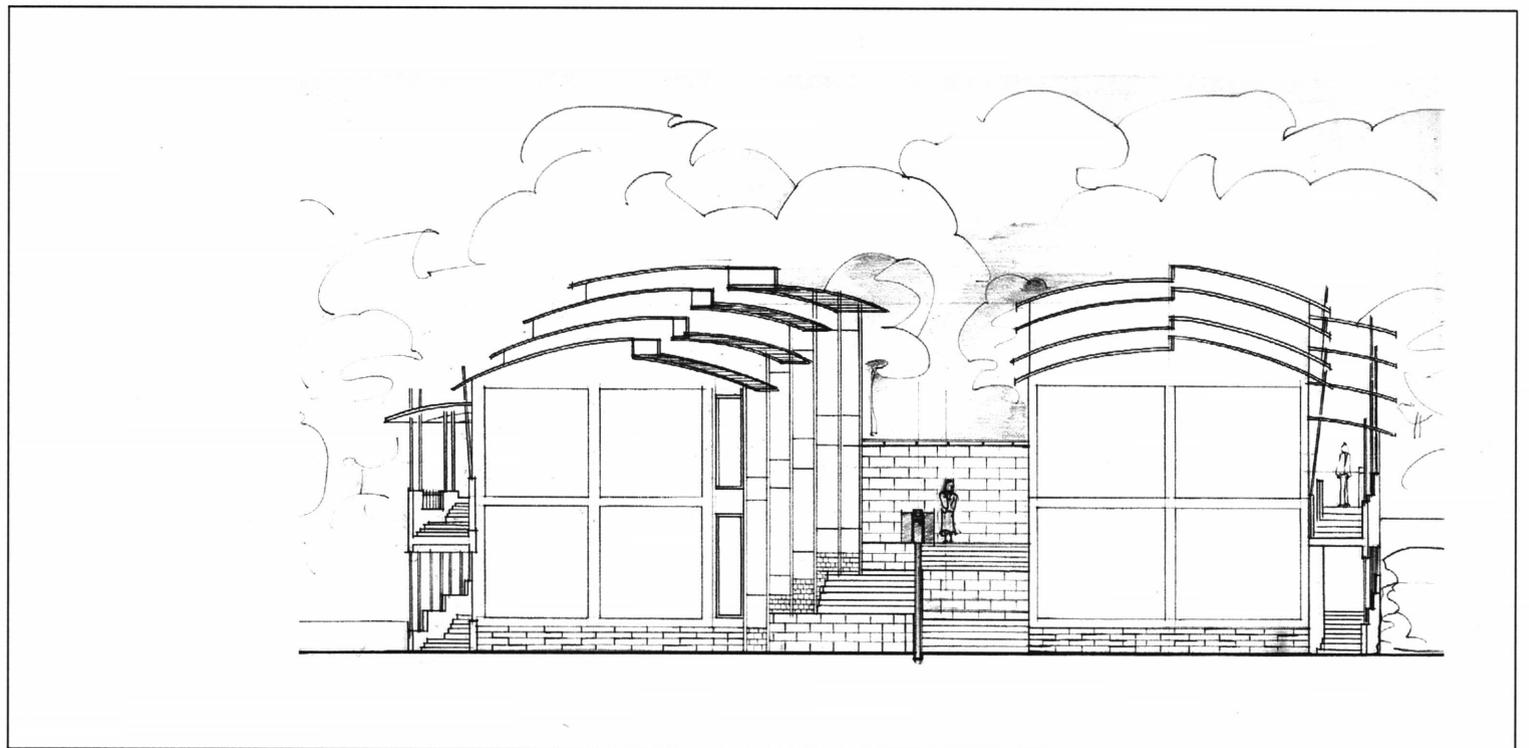
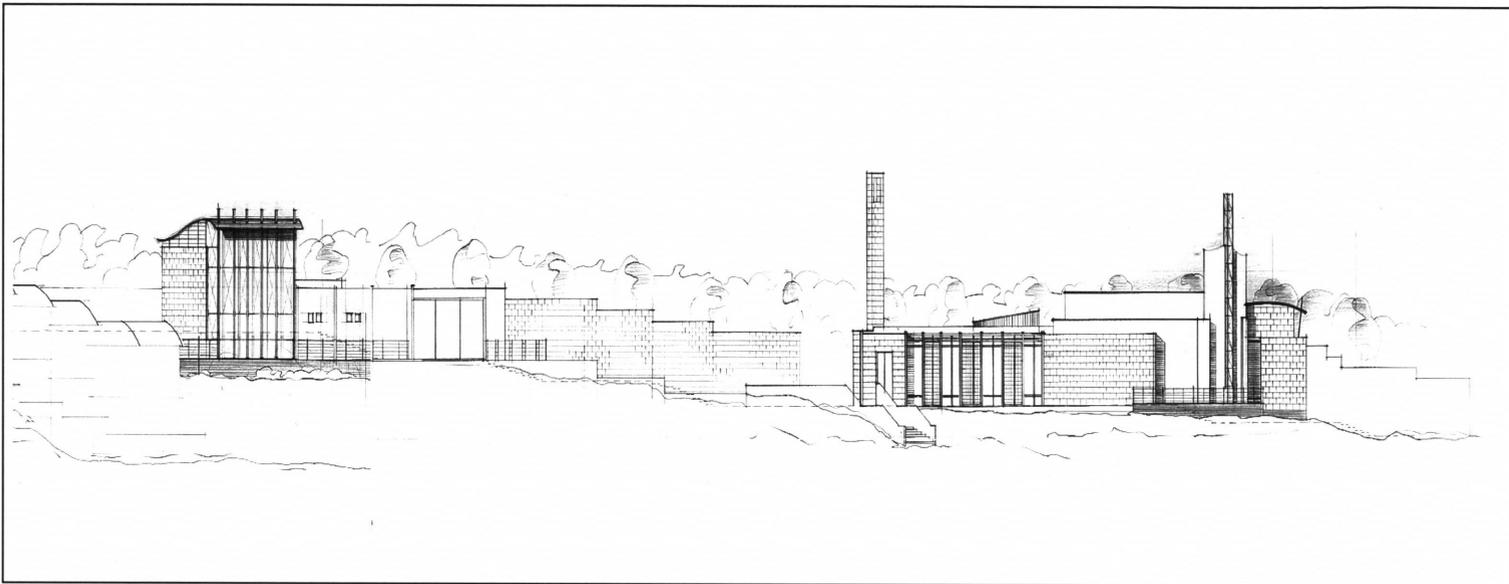


Photo: A.F. Kersting

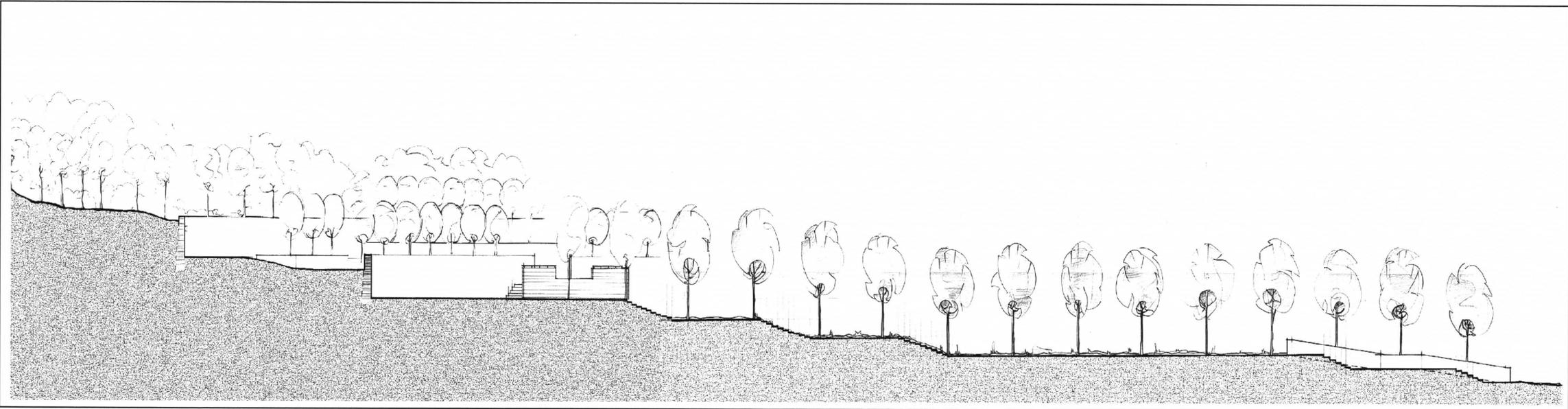


Dormitory - Section B - B: view from the center of the courtyard



Southern elevation of the site

Site section



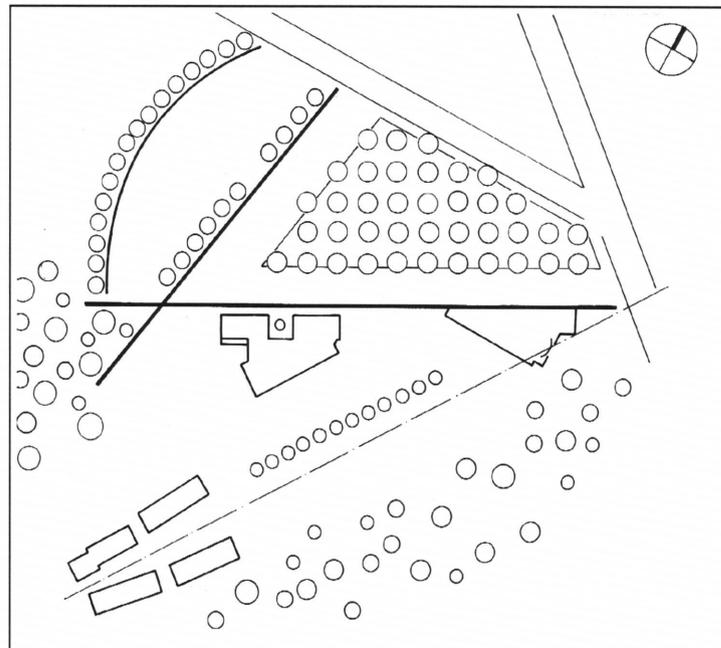
The parking area was designed with the intention of making it the least visible in the appearance of the site. It is located distant from the main area of the retreat on the public side of the travertine wall, hidden behind a secondary wall. The parking lot is left unpaved. Instead, a fine gravel is used and parking spaces are demarcated with pieces of timber. Rows of trees provide necessary shade on sunny days. Such a solution will take away the harshness of the traditional paved parking area. Materials used to create the parking area, such as timber and gravel, correspond to materials used throughout the retreat.

One of the main goals of the project is to incorporate the rich natural environment of the site into the project. Heavily wooded slopes provide the feeling of remoteness and seclusion from the urban environment, so important in the successful design of retreats. Wherever possible the vegetation of the site was preserved.

Landscape and landscape design enhances the symbolic and practical dimension of the retreat. A structured grid of trees creating a park on the public/profane side of the travertine wall symbolizes the ordered, structured world of our lives. Behind the travertine wall, the alteration of natural vegetation of the site was kept to a minimum.

Where required by the design, distinctive trees were planted highlighting the underlying structure and purpose of the design: in the parking area, to visually isolate it from the rest of the site, on the meadow to accentuate the paths leading to the church or the Unity House.

The design invites participants to take advantage of the natural surroundings. Meandering paths lead away from the structures into the more remote areas of the site. The paths are designed subtly to blend with the landscape. At specific points along their length, where they function to unify the design, such as by indicating axis lines, the paths are made of stones or are bordered by pieces of timber. At ground level, exterior lighting accomplishes the purpose after dark.



The esthetic value of the building materials used for this project should be emphasized. Selection of these materials was significant in creating the harmonious co-existence of the natural environment and the man-made structures located on the site.

The outside shells of the church, the Unity House and the dormitories are made of warm-toned beige concrete. Window openings are filled with a thick clear or sandblasted glass depending on the degree of privacy, light and visual disconnection required. Copper, copper clad, etched and stainless steel are used for structural elements and finishes. The colors of these materials can be found in the natural surroundings, such as browns, greens and rusty colors of the trees changing with the seasons. The floors of the church are finished with stone tile which is used to create awareness of one's steps in the house of worship. Floors of the dormitory and the Unity House are finished with wood, adding warmth to the interiors. The symbolism of the travertine wall is emphasized by different textures of stone (as discussed in The Travertine Wall section of Results on page no. 9.)

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