CONTEXT AND DESIGN IN OLD TOWN ALEXANDRIA

AN ART AND ARCHITECTURE SCHOOL

BY

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MASTER IN ARCHITECTURE

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ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA
USA
LET US TAKE PAUSE TO GIVE A GRATEFUL RING
OF SIMPLE WORDS, IN METERED VERSE TO SING
OF THE OLD TOWN AT THE POTOMAC'S SHORE,
OF ALEXANDRIA'S FAME, HER QUALITIES GALORE

A LITTLE TRADING POST WHERE INDIANS USED TO BARTER
GREW TO A COUNTRY TOWN, GOT LATER ON A CHARTER
THAT GAVE HER STATUS, HOME, RULE, DIGNITY, AND SPACE
TO GROW AND PROSPER IN THE FORWARD RACE.

WITHIN THE CITY'S WALLS GREAT HISTORY WAS MADE;
AND ON THE RIVER'S SHORE GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ESTATE
LIES AS A LANDMARK OF A GLORIOUS PAST,
REMINDER OF THE TIME THE COUNTRY'S DIES WERE CAST.

EACH DECADE AND EACH CENTURY THAT WENT
HAS LEFT DISTINCTIVE MARKS, YET HAS NOT RENT
HER HEART AND SOUL AND, BEING SO DEMURE,
THE OLD TOWN'S CHARM PREVAILED—LONG TO ENDURE.

LET US PRESERVE WHAT WE RECEIVED IN TRUST;
LET PROGRESS HAVE ITS WAY, CHANGE WHERE WE MUST;
BUT LET'S NOT IN THE HASTE FOR CHANGE'S SAKE
RESPECT AND AWE FOR OUR PAST FORSAKE.

FROM THE COLLECTION OF POEMS: AROUND THE POTOMAC
BY WILLIAM J. DICKMAN

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANK YOU, URSULA AND EBERHARD, FOR YOUR TRUST AND FAITH IN ME.

THANK YOU, BARBARA, BEBE, BILL, CAROL, CINDY, CLAIRE, DOUG, ELLEN, GEORGE, GEORGINA, GISELA, GREG, JAAN, JANE, JANICE, JONATHAN, JUDY, KIM, KRIS, LINDA, LISA, LONNIE, MARK, MATT, MIRCO, MOSI, PAM, PATRICIA, PAUL, RUDOLPHO, RUSSELL, SARAH, SCARLETT, SHAWN, SUSIE, TINKA, THOMAS, TOM, WILFRIED, ET. AL., FOR YOUR HELP AND FRIENDSHIP.
LEAVING THE COUNTRY ROAD RICH IN HISTORIC MEMORIES, WE WANDER BACK TO THE TOWN OF ALEXANDRIA, WHERE LINDEN AND SYCAMORE TREES SHADE A LITTLE BROKEN-BACKED STREET, WHICH DROPPING SUDDENLY DOWN A HILL, ENDS IN THE RIVER. TWO LARGE AND SOMBER WAREHOUSES, GRADUALLY going THE WAY OF BRICK AND STONE, LEFT TO CARE FOR ITSELF, GUARD ITS RIVER END. THEIR GREAT DIMENSIONS ARE IMPRESSIVE, AND SUGGEST THE RICH STORES OF TOBACCO AND FLOUR WHICH THEY FORMERLY CONTAINED. HERE, ALONG THE RIVER FRONT, ONE CAN SEE THE HIGH-WATER MARKS OF A GREAT TRADE EBBED FOREVER AWAY.


SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY, FEBRUARY 1881
HISTORY OF ALEXANDRIA AND ITS WATERFRONT

In June of 1806 Captain John Smith and four-teen men left Jamestown to explore the mean-time Chesapeake Bay and to sail up the Potomac River. In July of that year they were the first white men to look upon a site, which was a wilderness occupied by Dog Indians, but which was to become a beacon to commerce. By 1631 the first few settlers gathered around a tobacco storehouse John Alexander built on the banks of the Potomac. He bought a patent for six thousand acres of land above the creek and up the Potomac River to Anacostia Island. In 1732 and 1733 the Virginia assembly passed acts which called for the establishment of tobacco warehouses at "convenient" locations to store the crop. The site in the mouth of the creek was chosen as a site for a tobacco warehouse. Scottish merchants were attracted to West Point and at about 1740 they built houses and a school near the warehouse. By 1748 the Virginia house of burgesses agreed on a petition to establish a town. A patent was obtained, a half-acre lot size. In 1775 the town was completed. The streets were laid out and lots drawn up with sections set aside for the market and public landing. The act also required that buyers of land lots must, within two years after purchase, build a house of brick or stone, well framed, of the dimensions of 20 feet square, and 9 feet pitch. The deed to the owner of any such a lot shall fail to persuade any tenant on payment of the sum of $100. Such lots shall be rescribed, ... then such lots shall be rescribed in the said trustees. (3)

By the middle of July, 1748 John West and the young George Washington completed the land survey and came up with a nearly regular gridiron plan of eighty-four one-half acre lots for individual purchase, interrupted only by the curve along the Potomac River. Two lots were reserved for a courthouse, market place and mastugiating house. The trustees promptly arranged a public sale and twenty-four lots were sold during the first day's auction. By 1750 the eight streets, eighty-four one-half lots, were sold. Soon the larger lots were divided into smaller lots on which townhouses were erected adjacent to each other with gardens to the rear. On the north side, the houses were not allowed to extend beyond the street. All houses not begun or to be built shall be built on the front and to be in line with the street. Lots on the north side were not to be pulled down. (5)

In 1783 the town was the town with white oak posts established at the corner of each lot. (6)

In 1825 Alexandria became the seat of Fairfax County. It grew and flourished economically during the major part of the eighteenth century. The main source of this economic growth was tobacco. By 1775 the wheat and grain trade started to replace tobacco as a crop. In 1776 and 1786 the gridiron was enlarged and after 1786 the trustees granted approval for other lots to be added. The one-half acre lot size in 1785 the act did not direct the city to survey the new streets but permitted existing owners to subdivide the remaining blocks. The dimensions for streets and blocks were not changed. The site of the old Alexandria Street, which was to be made 106 feet wide. On March 9, 1780 a government was set up in spite of an attack on the tobacco warehouse in June of 1781 by British ships. The town continued to prosper until gold. In May, 1782 the Virginia legislature enacted a law for grading and development of water streets, levees, dikes and levees down and the soil had been used as a fill for the street. By 1840, Alexandria was granted additional land for warehouses and shops. In 1798 the town had been added to access to this area. In 1795 the town limits were extended to one mile west of market square, southwards to hunting creek. In 1796 the town had been extended to one mile run, Washington Street was paved with stone, side sidewalks, and oil lamps were put at every street corner. In 1791 Alexandria became part of the district of Columbia. In 1805, it returned to Virginia in 1846. Between 1801 and 1826, ninety-six wharves on which houses were built and materials stored existed. The Pond was crowded with vessels, and in 1836 the first railroad was completed. The Alexandria market street flourished from 1814 to 1815 and the cotton bolls, tobacco, and manufactured goods. Imports were cloth, rum, spices, fruits, sugar tea and furniture from England. The most prominent occupations in the 1790's were watchmakers, jewelers, blacksmiths, copper-smiths, gunsmiths, blacksmiths, ironmongers, confectioners, bakers, brewers, hat makers. There were two hundred and sixty merchants and shopkeepers. Alexandria's income was one hundred and sixty-five drays and carts, ninety-seven pleasure carriages, fifty tobacco warehouses, and four banks. At this time, Alexandria had about eight hundred and forty families and a population of two thousand, six hundred and seventy-six. It became the major port for flour and hemp and the market for the Potomac River. Alexandria was designated as a port of entry for foreign vessels. Over thirty years after its foundation the trade increased itself upon a high plateau extending from the creek and its marsh to the north to the river on the east, and to the Potomac on the south. In 1825 Alexandria had expanded to the limits it would retain until 1852. In 1800 the first canal was opened - the Aqueduct Canal. It was published after this law, all the houses built after 1805 had to correspond with the street lines. In 1840, all the houses not to be pulled down. Also porches, steps and cellars were not to be pulled down. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the growth slowed down. The clay and gray smoke from the chimneys of the many potomac houses were responsible for a serious damage to the commerce. Two streets were extended for Alexandria's decline as a port: a causeway built by George Washington, leading to the Potomac from coming down the river, and secondly, the failure of the Potomac Canal Company, which was started in 1802. The wheat, on which Alexandria's port trade depended, was diverted to other ports. (7)

In 1814 two British frigates sailed up the Potomac River and took the town. The invaders looted the town, carried off quantities of tobacco and grain, and Alexandria's port trade was ruined. The commercial activities suffered a blow of which she never fully recovered. Her rival towns took advantage of the situation and gained commercial supremacy by building the Baltimore and Ohio railroad to divert the coal trade from Alexandria. (13) By 1835, railways had become more important than the canal. The little port of Alexandria, although coal than canals, but Alexandria did not begin building railroads until the late 1840's. In 1846 a Scottish merchant became a pioneer town again after the Virginia petition of the town. By 1870 Alexandria's site of hunting in 1800 Abraham Lincoln and the Republican party won the election and by February, 1861, seven slave states had ceased from the union. On May 23, Virginia's voters ratified the secession ordinance and on May 25, federal troops occupied Alexandria, the city stayed in federal hands throughout the Civil War and was center of supplies, transportation and hospitals. Most of the major and commerce were suspended. The city grew and flourished in 1840 and 1842. Alexandria's population of twelve thousand, six hundred and twenty-five in 1870 expanded to forty-two thousand and six hundred and sixteen by 1880 and the area was impoverished. (14) Stabbings, murders, and other incidents of war and political decay overwhelmed the city. What had once been the seventh largest seaport in the United States and the third largest exporter of flour, lay rotting in the memory of what was the great port of Alexandria. Although Alexandrians hoped trade might increase again and rebuild many of the old wharves with iron sheds, Alexandria's decline continued and the collapse of its economic and commercial situation was inevitable. In 1869 the first railroad was constructed from Washington through Alexandria six miles south of Mount Vernon. By 1910 approximately 1,400 railroads were in operation in the state. (15) The most important industries at that time were chemicals, fertilizers, local industries, and railroads. The federal government in the Washington metropolitan area began just before World War I. Washington Office buildings were constructed as the city grew and discovered in Alexandria a delightful location for federal government buildings. The city was rebuilt and restored in its original design. Alexandria became a shipbuilding center and was the site of the United States naval yard. During World War II, in 1941, the first annexation from 1879 from Fairfax and Arlington counties. The annexation from the first to the second world war, and other installations, caused a great influx of housing and services for the federal city expanded. Local shipping became almost nonexistent. In 1837, railway transportation systems to Washington were improved, including Shirley Highways in 1841 and the Mount Vernon Expressway. In 1939 the national airport opened and in 1942 the Pentagon was built. Light industries and transportation establishments increased along Highway One (16) in 1938. The independent town of Alexandria, from its origins to 1942, was a thriving community. Alexandria was from two thousand, seven hundred and forty-eight in 1790, the population increased to approximately thirty-five thousand persons in 1938. In 1938, World War II had a major impact on the city, with the development of public and privately sponsored wartime housing for employees of military establishments. The extremely rapid growth of the
Government employment and the interruption of normal economical growth during World War II caused major problems in the infrastructure of the area. In 1946 Shirley Highway was extended to Alexandria.

A population explosion occurred between the 1950's and the 1960's in the Washington metropolitan area. As a result of the World War II baby boom and the expanding of Federal civilian employment, the region grew from 1.5 million to 2.9 million people. Related to that, the tourism increased, and trade associations, professional societies, and the proliferation of research and development organizations increased. The area became a center of retail, wholesale, service and recreational and cultural activities.

The annexation from Fairfax County in 1962 doubled the size of Alexandria and brought it to its present size.

The general land use plan in 1962 was designed for a population of about one hundred and sixty-five thousand and recommended townhouse residential development as well as industrial activities along the waterfront. In the 1960's the properties along the Potomac River were utilized for a mixture of land uses, including a fertilizer plant, power plant, chemical company, shipping facilities, offices, warehouses and townhouses. The general plan in 1967 concluded several earlier studies and made proposals for the land use of the waterfront area as well as the preservation of the old and historic district.

In 1970 the torpedo plant was purchased from the Federal Government as one step towards a redevelopment of the waterfront area.

Another consolidated master plan in 1974 repealed all previous waterfront planning efforts and rezoned the entire area.

The report of the committee on potential growth areas, published in August 1975, includes the following discussion of the waterfront: "The waterfront is an area of critical importance to the future of Alexandria. Located adjacent to two of the city's greatest assets—the Potomac River and Old Town—the area has become extremely attractive to private developers impressed by its proximity to Washington. Development in this area must respect its location near the nation's capital through use of dignified design and the provision of the open space. It must be compatible with and not detract from the carefully preserved quality of Old Town. There must be free access to the river...the overall development should contain a mixed use."

The 1978 draft Alexandria waterfront plan recommends: "Residential, recreation, and open spaces, commercial, industrial, and waterfront mixed land uses...King Street with specialty shopping and restaurants...redevelopment of the torpedo plant...development of the South Strand area into the focal point for a waterfront commercial node involving such activities as restaurants, ship, boat repairs and sales, and specialty shopping. Since the adoption of the consolidated master plan of 1974 the waterfront has markedly shifted away from industrial uses toward open spaces and commercial uses. In May 1979 the city council designated a developer to consider the use of the torpedo plant. In May 1981 the Alexandria waterfront draft joint land use plan was issued with a comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance for the waterfront. Today Alexandria seems to be entering a new era of opportunity and prosperity toward the realization of the economic potential as..."
ARCHITECTURE IN OLD TOWN ALEXANDRIA


DORMERS ARE GABLED, EITHER WITH A SQUARE OR CIRCULAR APERTURE SUPPORTED BY PILASTERS Duplicating the Treatment of the Main Envelope. The fenestration is Carefully arranged and Windows are Usually of Twelve Lights with Six Panels, Rails, and Mullions and Surrounding Moldings in Typical Georgian Style with BOLD, THOUGH SIMPLIFIED, AND BECOME MORE SELF-ASSURING AS THE PERIOD PROGRESSES.


THE CONCEPT

CRITERIA

In the late 18th century, the Virginia House of Burgesses agreed on establishing a town at the Hunt- ing Creek Warehouse. The site was surveyed and a gridiron pattern plan was drawn up. It showed eighty-four one-half acre lots for the town's use. These lots were then split into smaller parcels on which townhouses were erected, with the gridiron pattern being used to connect them with the public streets.

Most of the buildings in the area were for commercial activities while the families occupied the upper floors. Along the sides of these warehouses were sidewalks which were larger in size than the residential dwellings.

The building materials were brick and the ornamentation was made of wood.

SITE

The site did not exist before 1798. After that time the bay below water street was filled in and Union Street was added to provide access to the area. It was used for warehouses to store grain and other goods.

Today a double parking lot, situated between South Union Street and the Potomac waterfront park, is a place for leisure and serves as a landing place for smaller vessels.

PROJECT

The project is an art and architecture school. After experiencing several architectural schools, the concept of the ideal school as a place for education as well as an expression of architecture, seemed to be an environment that reflected the environment and the history of old town Alexandria. It would have to be included in the conceptual thoughts. The new architecture has to deal with the old in a way that reflects a balance between the modern and historic architecture not only in building form, but also in even reinforcing their common and opposed individualities in harmony and balance.

The old site has to fit into a building complex which understands, but does not compete with the much information that remains in the old architectural language.

Finally, the architecture has to express the natural site conditions along the Potomac River and with the built environment of old town Alexandria.

PROGRAM

The following activities are part of the school:

- Ceramics and Pottery
- Photography
- Jewelry and Enamels
- Wood and Metal Sculpture
- Painting and Drawing

The building complex is divided into small units which form a complex of towers around an inner courtyard. Corridors and individual staircases allows access to different units. The principal types of towers can be differentiated by height and design: the tower (one), the administration tower (two) with stores on the ground floor; the entrance, reception, and living areas; (one) and the apartment tower (two), a more open space sheltered by a greenhouse contains the theatre, library, and drafting studios.

IDEA

The building complex consists of five lots, each containing a different height and design. The blocks are divided into smaller units which can be differentiated by height and design. The principal types of towers can be differentiated by height and design. The tower (one), the administration tower (two) with stores on the ground floor; the entrance, reception, and living areas; (one) and the apartment tower (two), a more open space sheltered by a greenhouse contains the theatre, library, and drafting studios.

RULES

The original site was divided into five lots, each containing a different height and design. The blocks are divided into smaller units which can be differentiated by height and design. The principal types of towers can be differentiated by height and design. The tower (one), the administration tower (two) with stores on the ground floor; the entrance, reception, and living areas; (one) and the apartment tower (two), a more open space sheltered by a greenhouse contains the theatre, library, and drafting studios.

ELEMENTS

The building complex changes the presentation of the building and its dimensions of the immediate surroundings. A modest flat brick facade with punched windows is divided into small units which can be differentiated by height and design. The entrance, reception, and living areas; (one) and the apartment tower (two), a more open space sheltered by a greenhouse contains the theatre, library, and drafting studios.

STREET CONFIGURATION
"... IN 1748 THE VIRGINIA HOUSE OF BURGESSE AGREED ON ESTABLISHING A TOWN AT THE HUNTING CREEK WAREHOUSE. A REGULAR GRIDIRON PATTERN PLAN OF EIGHTY-FOUR HALF AN ACRE LOTS WAS DRAWN UP. SOON THE LOTS WERE DIVIDED INTO SMALLER PARCELS ON WHICH TOWNHOUSES WERE ERECTED ADJACENT TO EACH OTHER WITH GARDENS IN THE REAR. ... THE ORIGINAL SITE WAS SPLIT INTO FIVE LOTS, ONE TOWER WAS ERECTED ON EACH LOT AND TWO OR THREE, RESPECTIVELY, WERE ADDED TOWARD THE POTOMAC..."
GATEWAYS
WINDOWS
DORMERS

GLASS "WAVE"
STRUCTURE
ROOF ELEMENTS
APARTMENT TOWERS


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VIRGINIA FROM ARLINGTON MEMORIAL BRIDGE TO
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1968 — p 22

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P. STEPHEN, COLE, C. RALPH — p 7

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALEXANDRIA'S WATERFRONT
LLOYD HOUSE
ALEXANDRIA, 1982 — p 8

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A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA
FROM 1669 TO 1863
GAZETTE BOOK
ALEXANDRIA, 1883 — p 54

(15) FRIIS, R. HERMAN — p 25-26

(16) FRIIS, R. HERMAN — p 26-30

(17) FRIIS, R. HERMAN — p 24

(18) CROTTY, R. ANNE
HOUSE TYPES IN OLD ALEXANDRIA
DISSERTATION OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON 1971 — p 44

(19) DAVIS, DEERING, DORSEY,
P. STEPHEN, COLE, C. RALPH — p 17

(20) MYERS, P. DENYS
A TOWNE IN TRANSITION 1800-1900
ARCHITECTURE 1977 — p 161

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P. STEPHEN, COLE, C. RALPH — p 17-18

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P. STEPHEN, COLE, C. RALPH — p 16

(24) MYERS, P. DENYS — p 165-167

(25) MYERS, P. DENYS — p 170
PHOTO INDEX

MAGNUS, H. CHARLES
BIRD’S EYE VIEW, 1863 P I

GREEN-ARMYTAGE, STEPHEN
TEMPLE OF ISIS AT DELOS (ABSTRACT) P II

STANSFIELD, ROSS
FACE OF THE CONFEDERAL SOLDIER
ALEXANDRIA—A PICTORIAL HISTORY P III

PEALE, W. CHARLES
GEORGE WASHINGTON 1776 P IV
VIEW OF WASHINGTON STREET LOOKING SOUTH
LLOYD HOUSE AROUND 1850 P 1
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
1635 P 2
A PLAN OF ALEXANDRIA—NOW BELHAVEN CIRCA
1749 P 2
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS 1749 P 2
RAMSEY HOUSE ON KING STREET
LLOYD HOUSE 1920 P 3
LOWER KING STREET
LLOYD HOUSE 1917 P 3
LOWER KING STREET
LLOYD HOUSE 1917 P 3
WATERFRONT LOOKING NORTH FROM PIONEER
MILL LLOYD HOUSE 1865 P 3
WATERFRONT AND LEE STREET
REARDON, O. ASHBY
OLD ALEXANDRIA—WHERE AMERICA’S PAST IS
PRESENT P 3
TIDE LOCK ON THE ALEXANDRIA CANAL
LLOYD HOUSE CIRCA 1864 P 3
WATERFRONT
LLOYD HOUSE 1933 P 3
DOCK WORKERS ON THE WATERFRONT
LLOYD HOUSE 1864 P 4
SAILORS ON RUSSIAN FRIGATE "OSLIABA"
WATERFRONT CIRCA 1890 P 4
ALEXANDRIA BICYCLE CLUB AROUND 1905 P 4

PICKERING, ERNEST
THE HOUSE OF AMERICA
THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY
NEW YORK 1951 P 4

RICH, LINDA
PEOPLE
A STATE OF MIND P 5

ADAMS, ANSEL
NATURE
MOUNT WILLIAMSON, SIERRA NEVADA P 5

UELSMANN, N. JERRY
CULTURE
FLYING HAMBURGER P 5

SALMIERI, STEVE
TECHNIC
LA SALLE 1939 P 5

WESTON, EDWARD
ARCHITECTURE
WOOLAWN, LOUISIANA P 5

CITY OF ALEXANDRIA
ALEXANDRIA
PLANNING THE FUTURE P 8

MICARG, L. IAN
NEW YORK
DESIGN WITH NATURE P 8

KNOWLES, KATHARINE
BOSTON
PORTRAIT OF A CITY P 8

CONRAD, BARBABY
SAN FRANCISCO
GOLDEN GATE P 8

KING AND WASHINGTON STREET
LLOYD HOUSE 1925 P 9

KING STREET
LLOYD HOUSE P 9

STANSFIELD, ROSS
KING STREET
ALEXANDRIA—A PICTORIAL HISTORY P 10

BIRD’S EYE VIEW
LLOYD HOUSE 1920 P 11

DOCKS BETWEEN DUKE AND PRINCE STREET
LLOYD HOUSE P 11

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PHOTO INDEX
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