

An Urban Camp for Boat Building

Exploration of Trust in Architecture

An Urban Camp for Boat Building

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A design thesis submitted to
the Graduate Faculty of
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Masters of Architecture

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Alexandria, Virginia

Abstract

“At the age of eighteen, when I was approaching the end of my apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker, I made my first self designed piece of furniture. The master cabinetmaker or the client determined the form of most of the furniture made in our shop, and I seldom liked it. I did not even like the wood we used for the best pieces: walnut. I chose light colored ash for my bed and cupboard, and I made them so they looked good on all sides, with the same wood and the same careful work back and front. I disregarded the usual practice of expending less time and care on the back because no one ever sees it anyway. At long last I was able to round off the edges only slightly without being corrected, running the sandpaper swiftly and lightly over the edges to soften their sharpness without losing the elegance and fineness of the lines. I barely touched the corners where the three edges met. I fitted the door of the cupboard into the frame at the front with a maximum of precision so that it closed almost hermetically, with a gentle frictional resistance and a barely audible sound of escaping air.

It felt good working on this cupboard. Making the precisely fitting joints and exact shapes to form a whole, a complete object that corresponds to my inner vision, triggering in me a sense of intense concentration, and the finished piece of furniture added freshness to my environment.”

Peter Zumthor

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Forward

Graduating from college in 1985, I had no idea what to expect of my return to Architecture graduate school in 2001. During those 16 years, a lot of things had gone on in my life: an interesting journey had been taken; I had taken a lot of good steps during those years - steps that had defined my life. Yet the step back to school, the step back into the design studio, and the renewed step into architecture was a bit unsettling - but it was a step I chose to make. I had to trust myself that I could do it. This step was to show myself, to show my family, and to show my friends that I wanted to continue my education as a designer and begin my career as an architect. I'm glad that I took this small step back to move forward.

I thank Virginia Tech and the Northern Virginia based Alexandria Architecture Center for making my venture possible. Jaan Holt and his staff provide an academic venue with a beat of its own! A design system as much about learning from within as it is about following the traditional rules of architectural academia and the design studio. A system that encourages one to think through any given design situation using the means and methods they feel appropriate to represent their ideas and tell their story about architecture. I do not feel I had this leverage as an undergraduate architecture student, and my appreciation for The Center was made that much stronger for this creative freedom.

I thank my advisory committee for each contributing to this story. Susan Piedmont-Palladino, Paul Emmons, and Joe Wheeler pushed me in the ways I hoped they would. Each had unique and necessary input that helped shape and enhance the thesis process for me.

I thank the friends I made while at The Center. John White, John Zellweger, TJ Finney, Heather Gruzus, Eric Garcia, and Jamie Cook all contributed and shed light to this effort. I wish them the best in each of their futures as architects.

I thank my family for allowing me do this. Karen, Carter, and Thomas, this achievement is due to you.



Introduction & Thesis

Peter Zumthor's reflection on taking care of the whole through one's inner vision is a subtle yet powerful concept that bears close to my thoughts. Like Zumthor's sensorial pleasure in creating the wooden cabinet, I enjoyed the same satisfaction of personal accomplishment when I designed and built boats. Although I was not trained as a boat builder, I developed an unspoken sense of understanding of the craft which made the process so rewarding. To assemble many components in order to create the unified sense of one faired-out line over a length of water was a wonderful achievement. The challenge and goal for this architectural thesis was to try and connect with such a line.

I wanted to capture the essence of this unspoken with a design question that reflected a piece of my own inner vision and self-understanding. Creating a "*freshness of environment*" was what my instinct was trying to tell me to pursue, but it was the cadence of my committee that made this intuition develop into an architectural quest. Susan made a fall Friday much better for this project when she said, "Draw from your own experience... maybe consider if one can make a place that will allow a future memory to be made."

Could I make this memorable story explore a value? Could I use this value to define a built space?

My fondest memories are based on the concept of trust. Whether in school, in workplace, with family, or with friends, I firmly believe that trust is the foundation from which our lives develop and grow as a meaningful whole. Trust is the foundation of both moral and emotional success. Each step of life depends on the previous step. This is a simple and clear concept, but can be made difficult if trust is not an integral part of the process. Trust and understanding balances the good with the bad and allows one the judgment to deal with both.

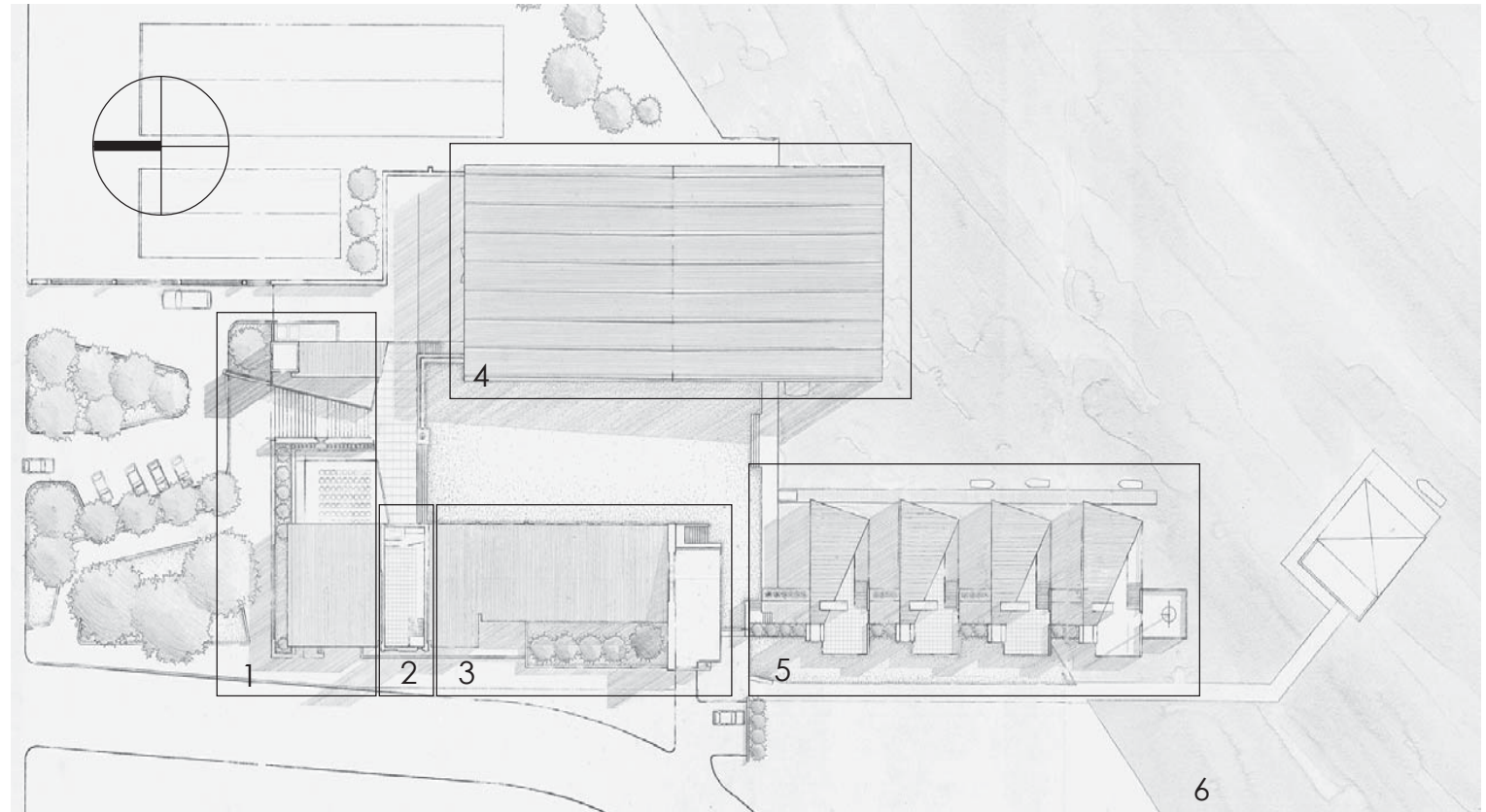
I decide to ask my thesis question for architecture:

Through the built environment we experience, can the ideal condition of trust be explored, materialized, and fostered as a lasting and meaningful part of one's life?



The Program

The camp for boat building would be home to 16 teenage campers and four older counselors. There would also be a master of the camp and its boat shop. Each of the four groups of five would live together in an individual cabin. The community spaces of the open courtyard, the river, the dining hall, the campfire, and the boat building shed would be common to the four groups. While learning the craft of boat building, the student would work as an individual or within a small group to complete a task. However, the boat building project would take the effort of the entire camp family working together over time. The camp would foster the idea that it takes many small pieces to make a whole, and that the process of learning and living is more important than the final craft produced.



- 1 _ Entrance
- 2 _ Campfire
- 3 _ Dining Hall
- 4 _ Shed
- 5 - Cabins (4)
- 6 - River



Studies

The initial questions and studies of this thesis project were about craft and relationships.

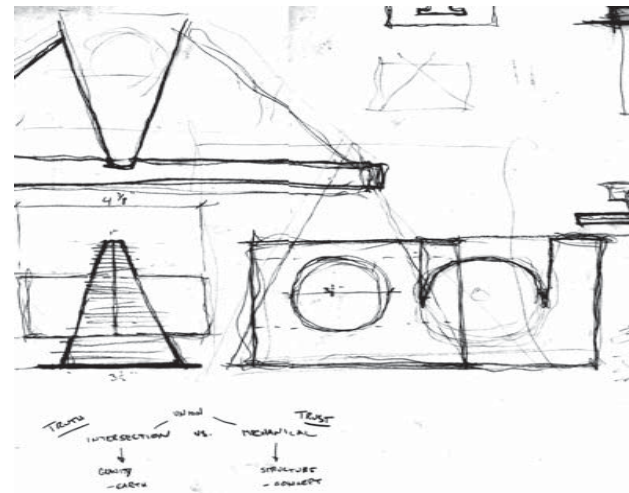
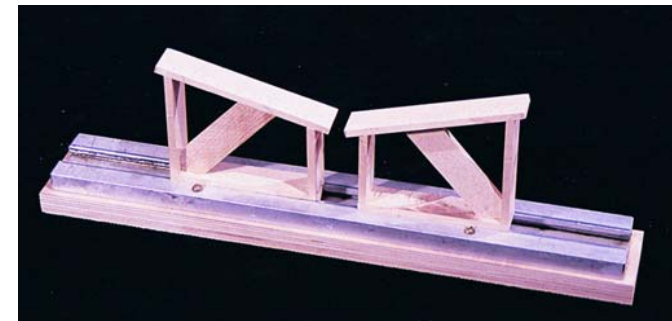
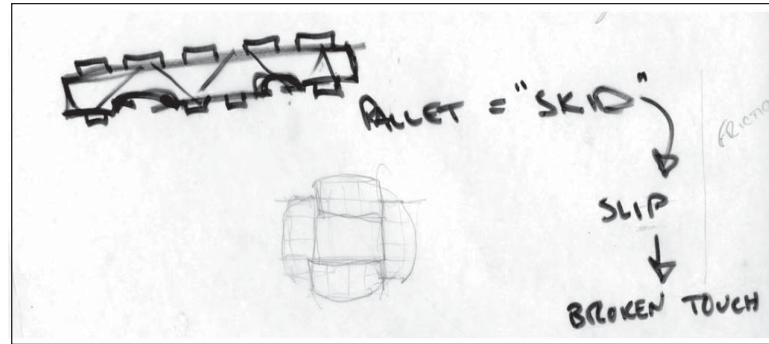
What should be objective vs, what should be subjective to the study?

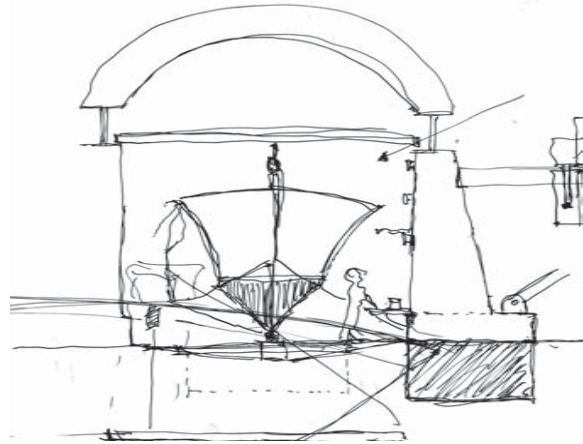
How could simple parts be used to fabricate useful and meaningful components that would relate to the built camp?

What would be a good first thing to build?

How could these components begin to foster a bond between the camper and the unspoken goal of the camp?

Could this bond be created through the material of wood?

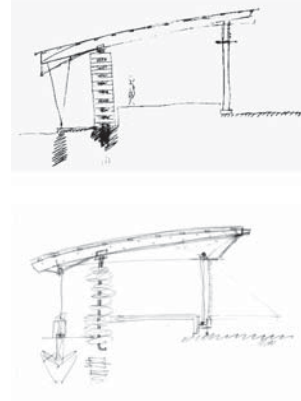




Models

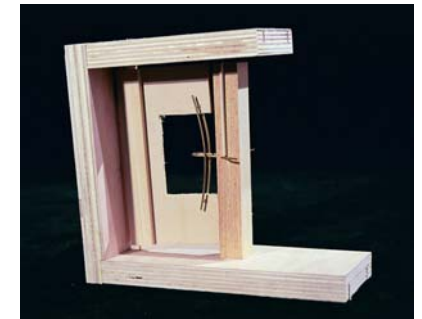
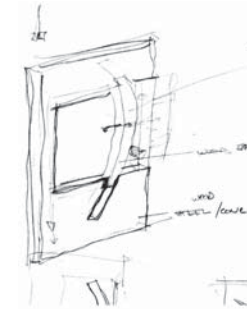
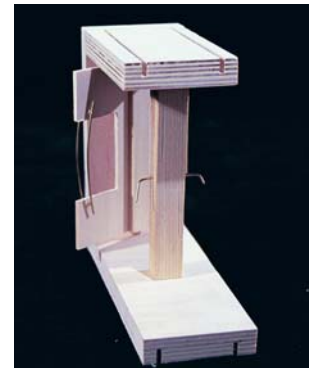
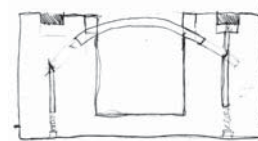
These models explored simple thoughts, ideas, and interesting contradictions that arise in design and building:

Earth for a foundation
Mass of a load
Water as runoff material
Thickness as a transparency
Passage with security

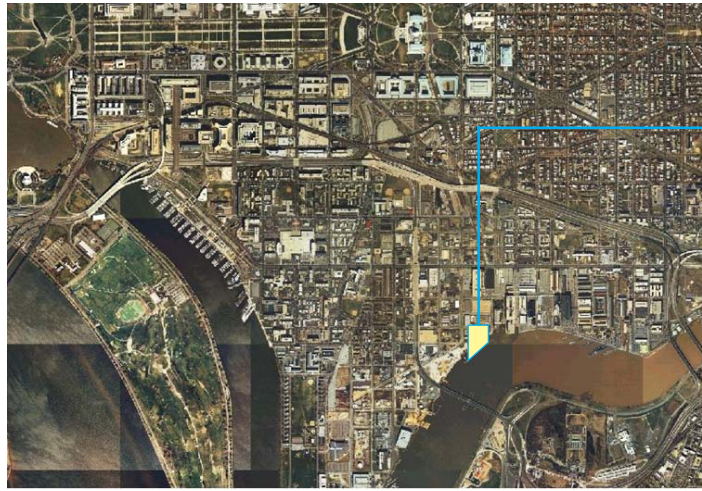


"Designing is not a linear experience, in which you have an idea, put it down on paper, then carry it out and that's that. Rather, it's a circular process, your idea is up, tried out, reconsidered, and reworked, coming back again and again to the same point... Trying over and over again is not just means to correcting mistakes. it is a way to understand the quality of a project, or of material, light, sound."

Renzo Piano



Note Two



The Site

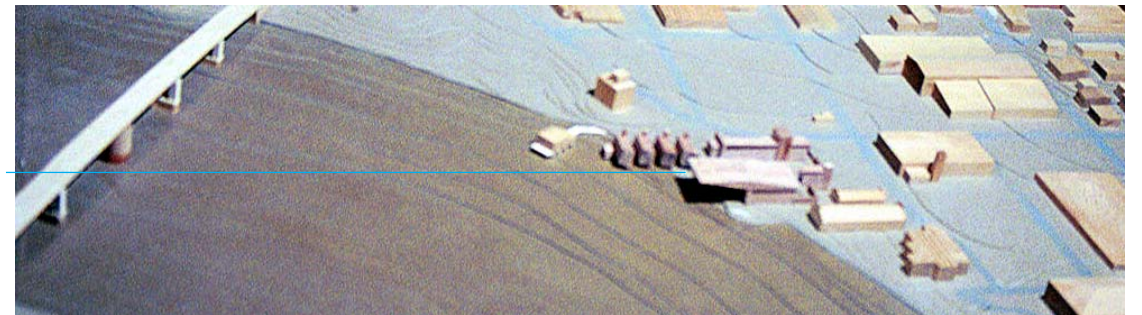
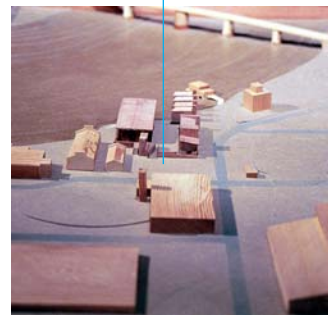
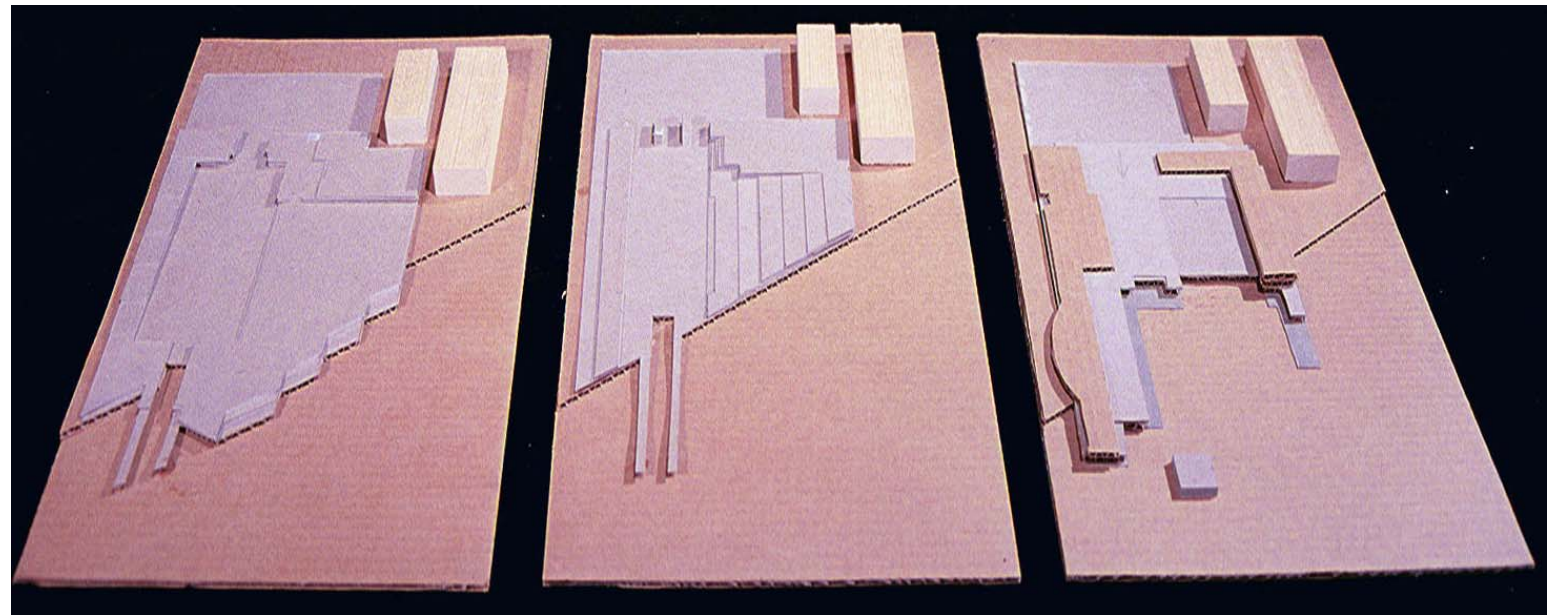
The Anacostia River on the South Eastern bank of Washington DC offered a good place to build boats. Adjacent to the Naval Yard and seemingly forgotten in an industrial corner of DC, the site meets the urban grid of Washington and edges the banks of the flowing river. Moored securely within the context of Washington, the land of Potomac and First Street SE provided a secure place from which a foundation could be set for this urban camp. The challenge was to determine how the camp should transcend the urban grid and meet the river.

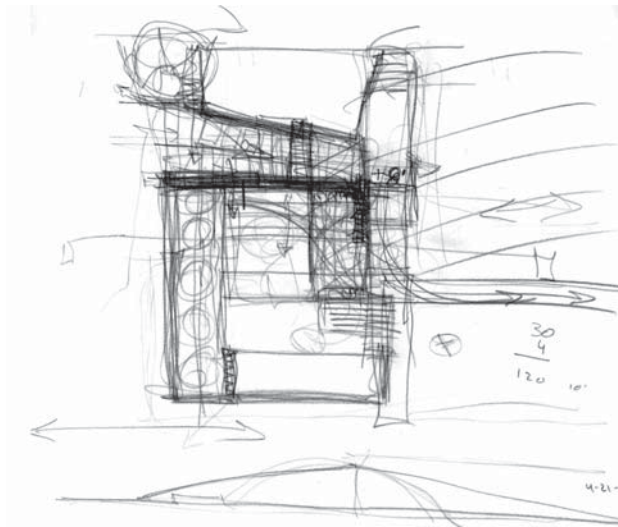




The Site

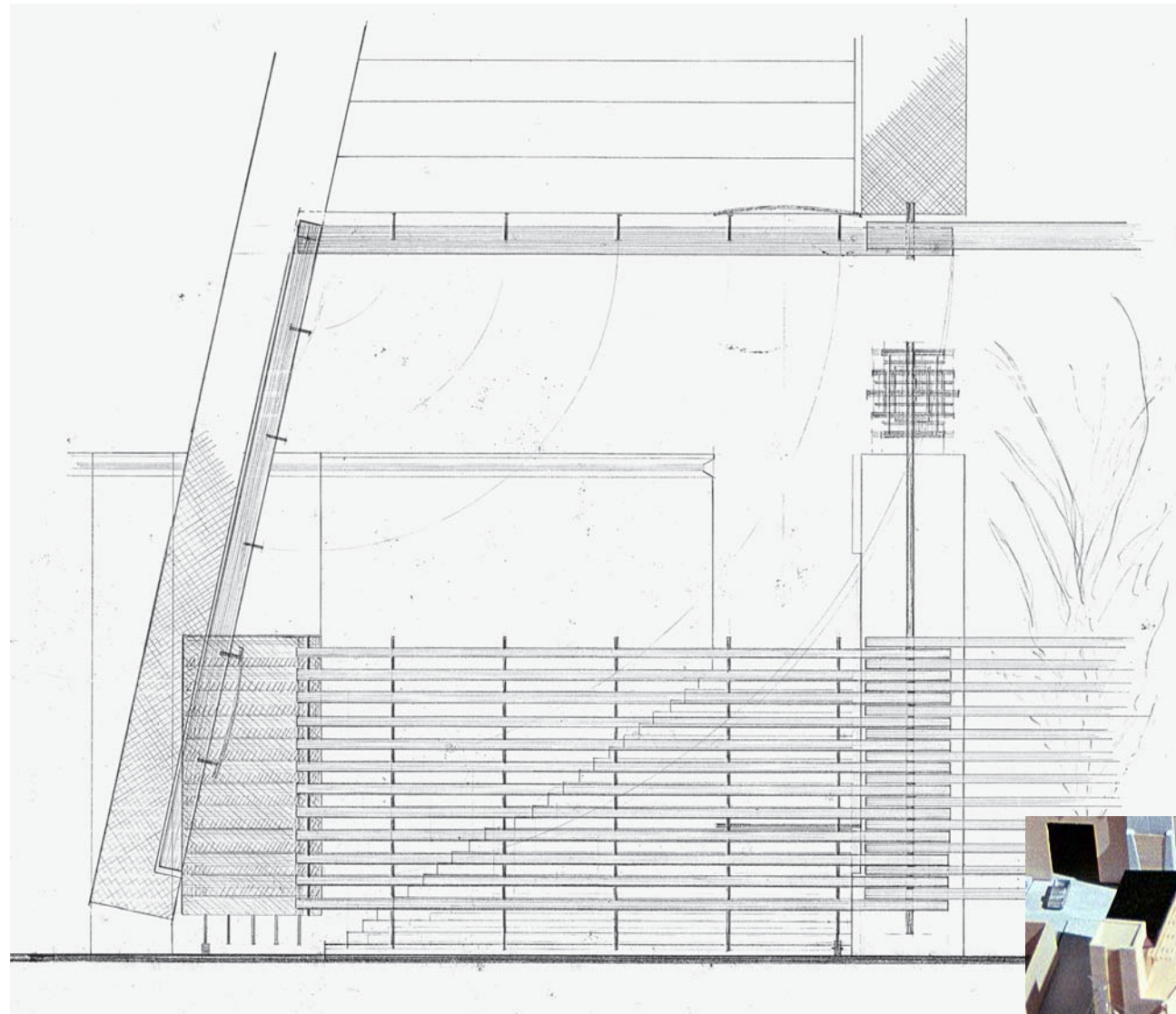
The bend of the Anacostia River turns and pushes the water gently against the bridge of South Capitol Street. The linear alignment of the camp's entry, the central courtyard, and the large boat shed is visually focused on the bridge apex and continues the rigid pattern of the urban grid. Yet the cabins, suspended over the river - loosely enjoy the flow of the water beneath their footings - like toes touching the river water and instilling a sense of freedom.

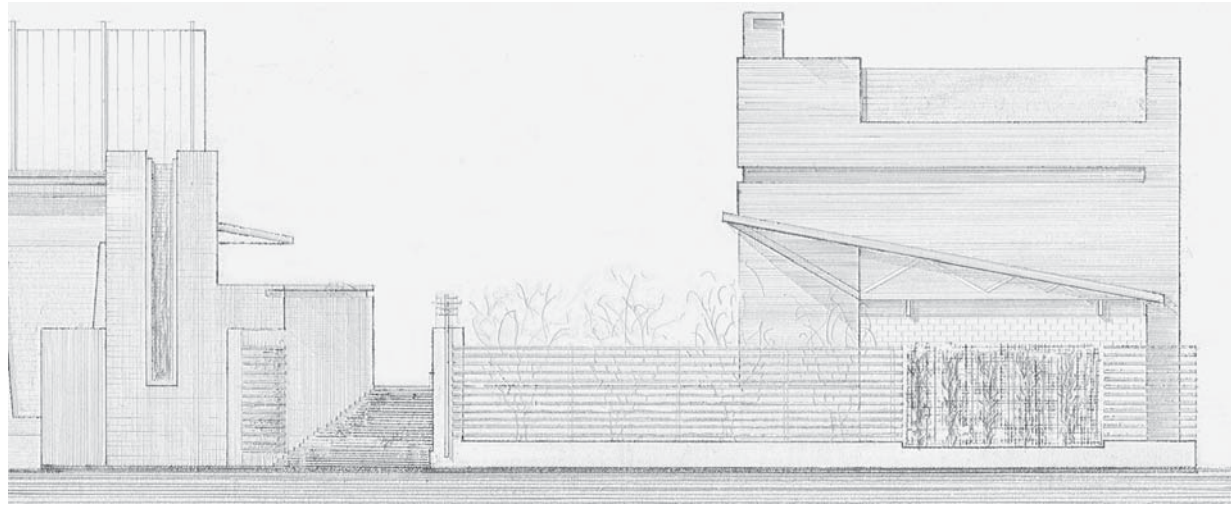




The Entrance

The entrance is designed to establish a sense of balance and integrity between the city and the camp. The gate and stairs, like fingers, converge to make a place that respects the domain of the collective city and the individual camp. Thus establishing a sense of respect and safety within the walls that separate the camp and touch the city.

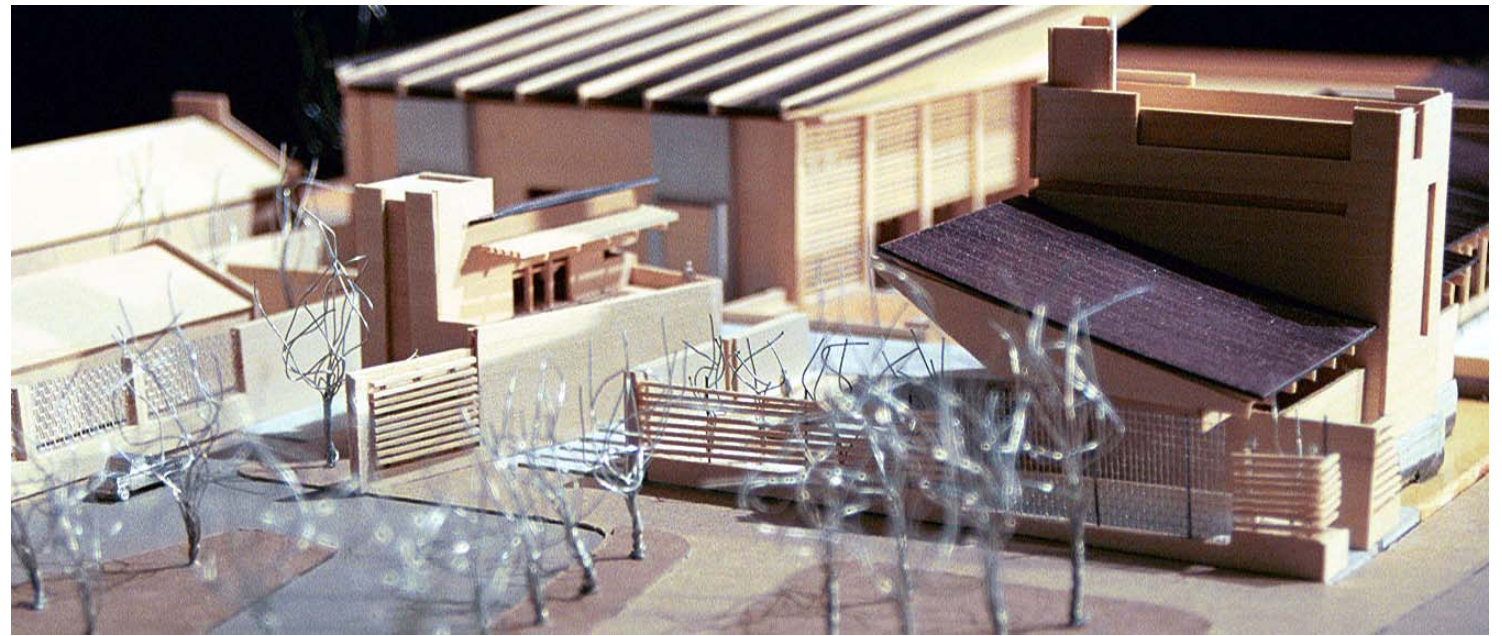


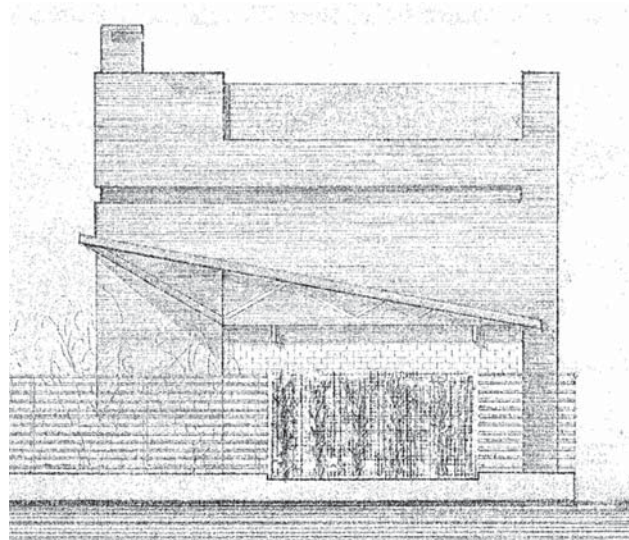


The Entrance

Entering the camp is a big, quiet step intended to be a point of deportation from the public nature of the urban grid to the more private appeal of the river's edge. It is both a point of transition and a point of reception. Transitional in that it provides a separation not only between the city and the river, but between what one knows, and what one does not know. Receptional in that it opens new arms to embrace the sense of trust and community. It is a threshold that bonds the two places together.

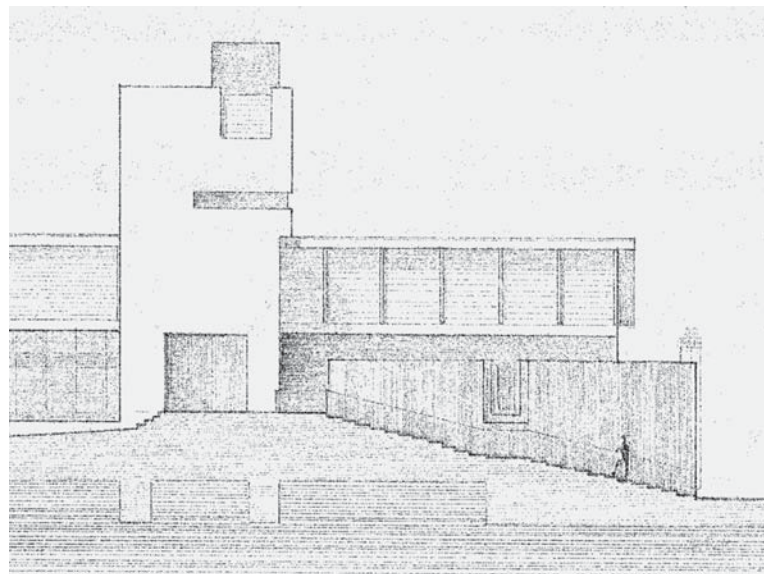
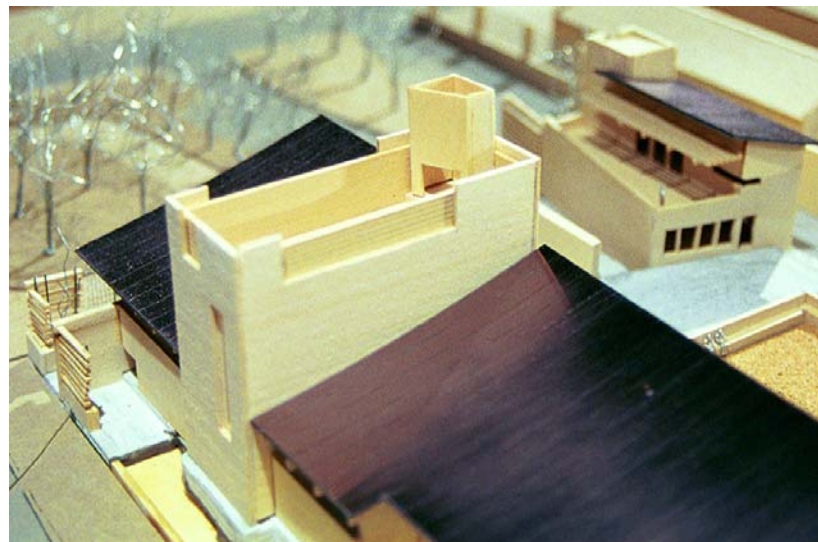
Note Three

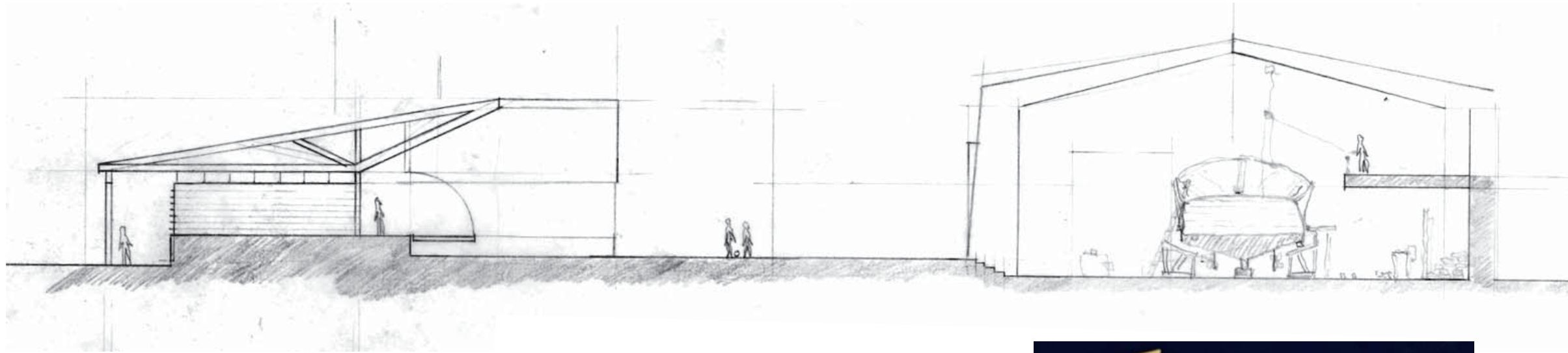




The Campfire

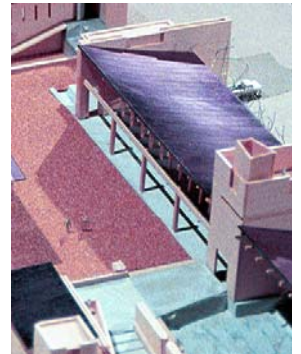
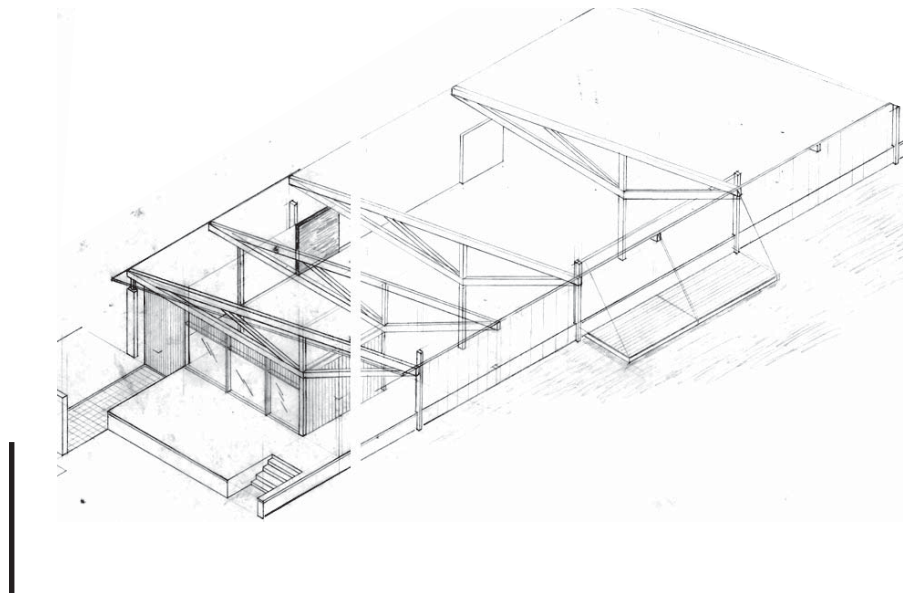
Like any camp, the Campfire is a place for making memories. It is the emotional center for gathering where stories, laughs, and music could be shared. A special place marked by its chimney and securely placed above the daily activities of the camp and shielded from the urban context by its high walls. The campfire is the tallest design feature of the camp, it is also a sanctuary for watching the night sky or celebrating the light, warmth, and friendship of the fire.

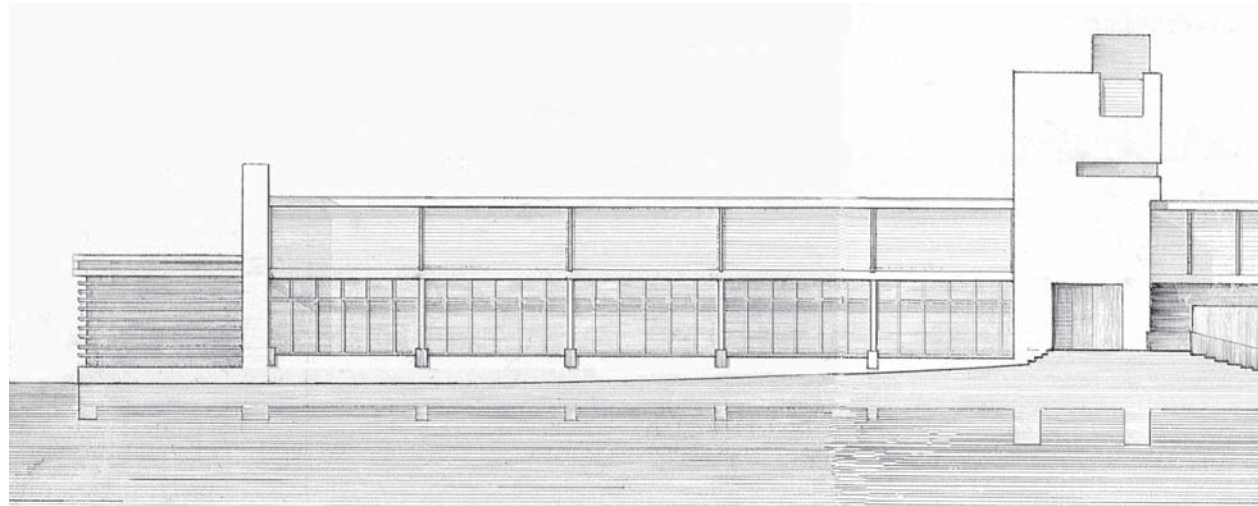




The Dining Hall

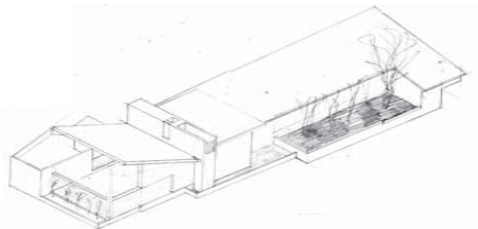
The Dining Hall is the covered space meant to feel open and is located centrally between the cabins and entrance. Its large doors open to the central courtyard and overlook the daily activities that happen within the shed. It is the stage from which the camp watches its own show. The open atmosphere and the linear hallway make it the synergetic spine of the camp by linking all components together.

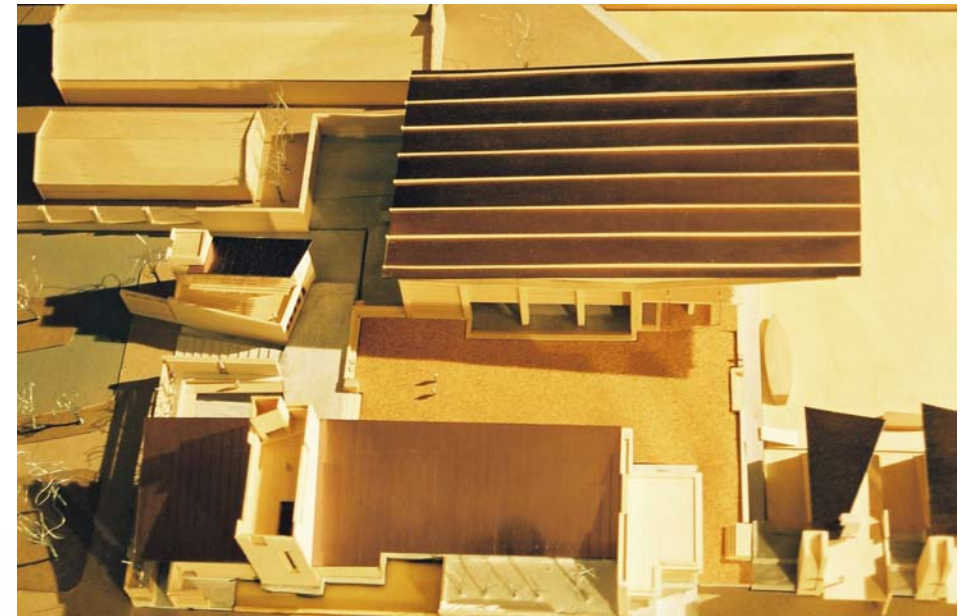
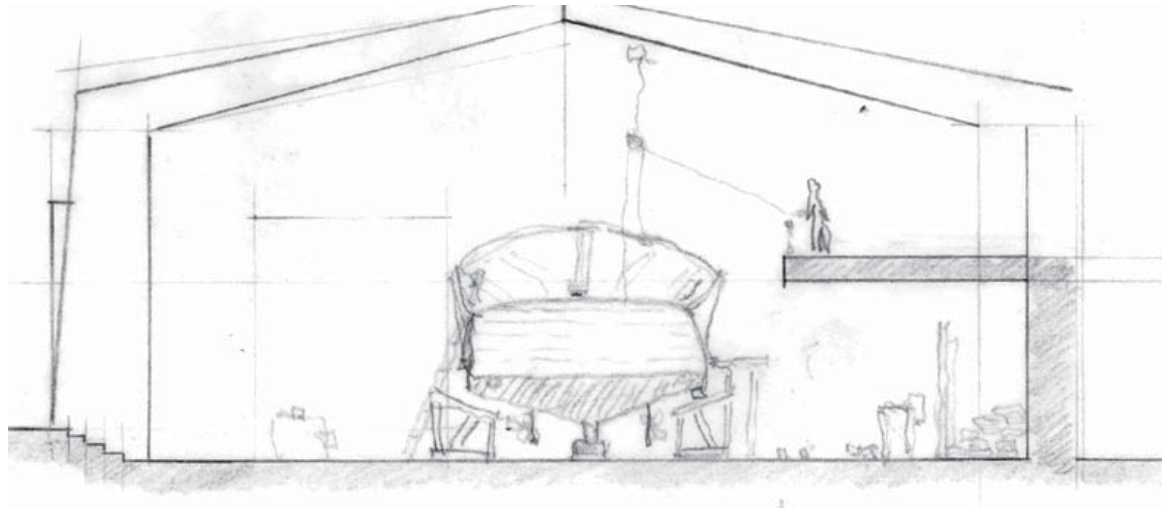




The Dining Hall

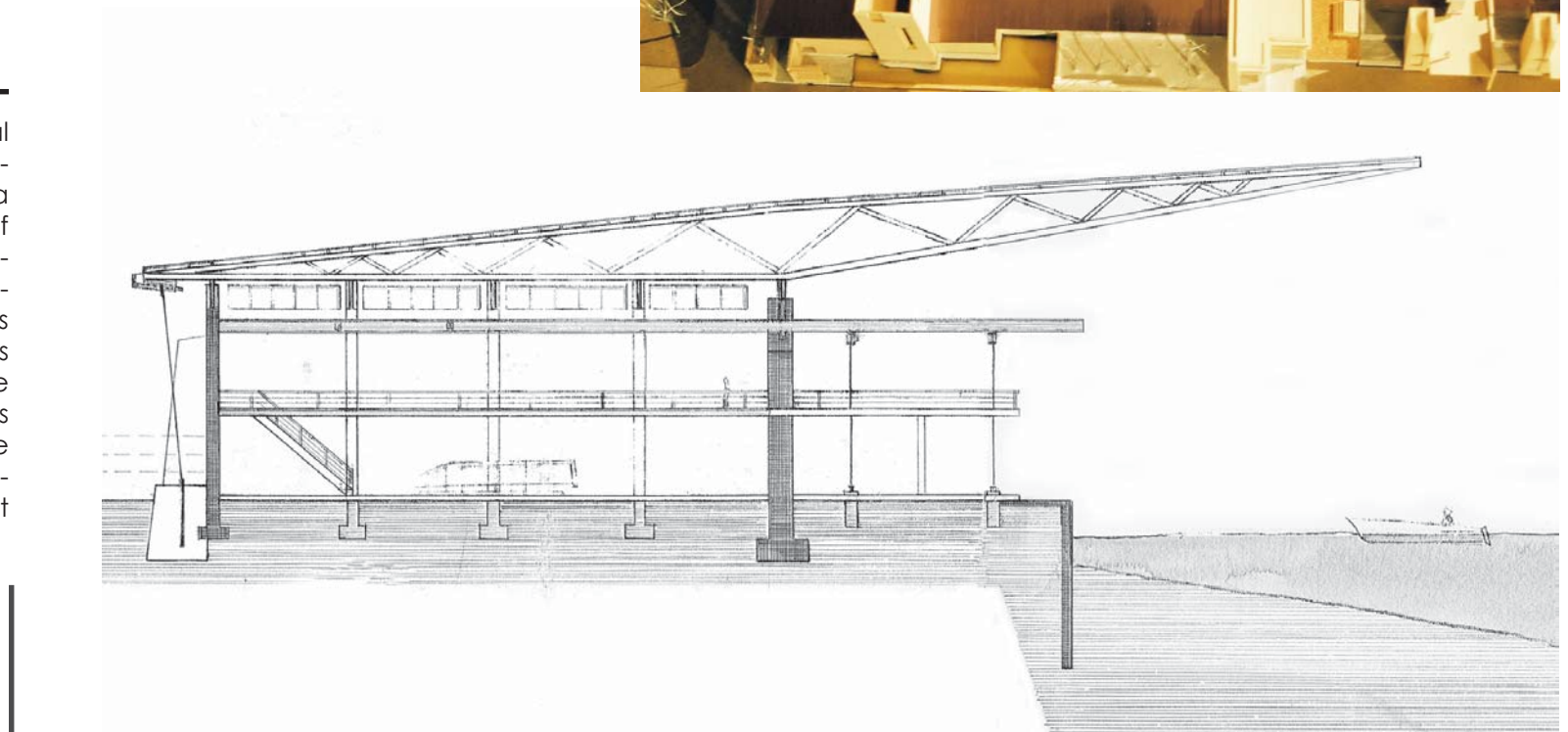
Firmly bracketed by the heavy campfire chimney and kitchen firewall, the Dining Hall's western edge is edged by water and landscaping which allows it a translucent relationship to the city's edge. While watching the process of boat building and growing a new life on the inside, the dining camper is reminded of his relationship and eventual return to the future experiences that lay ahead of him.

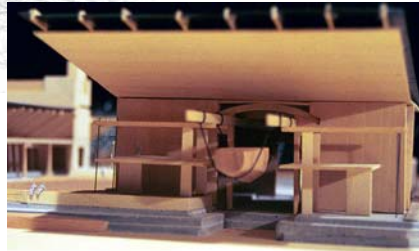
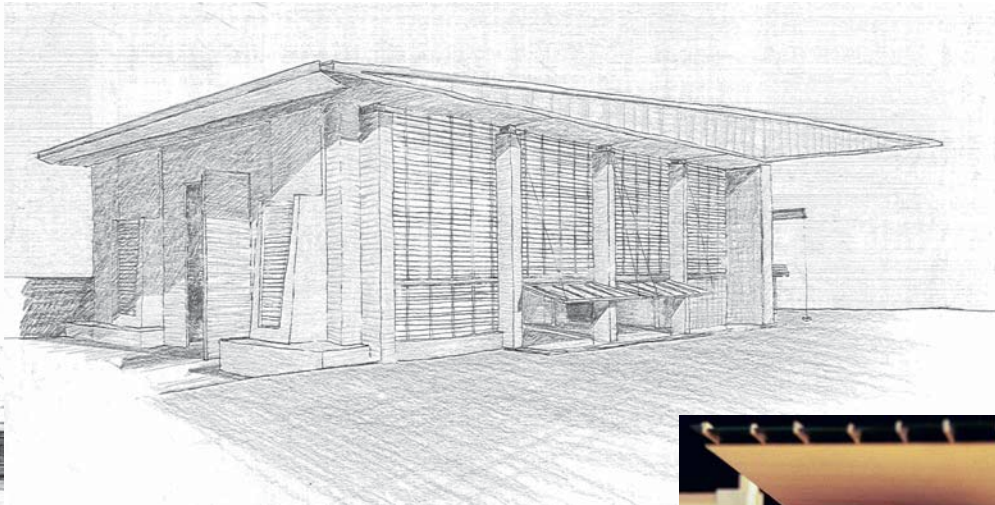
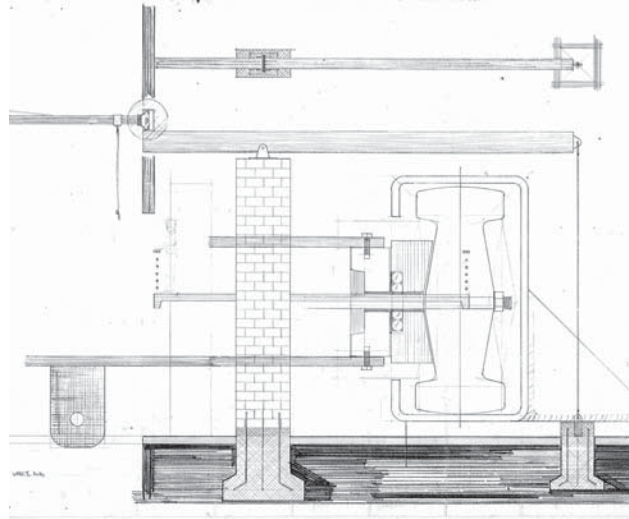




The Shed

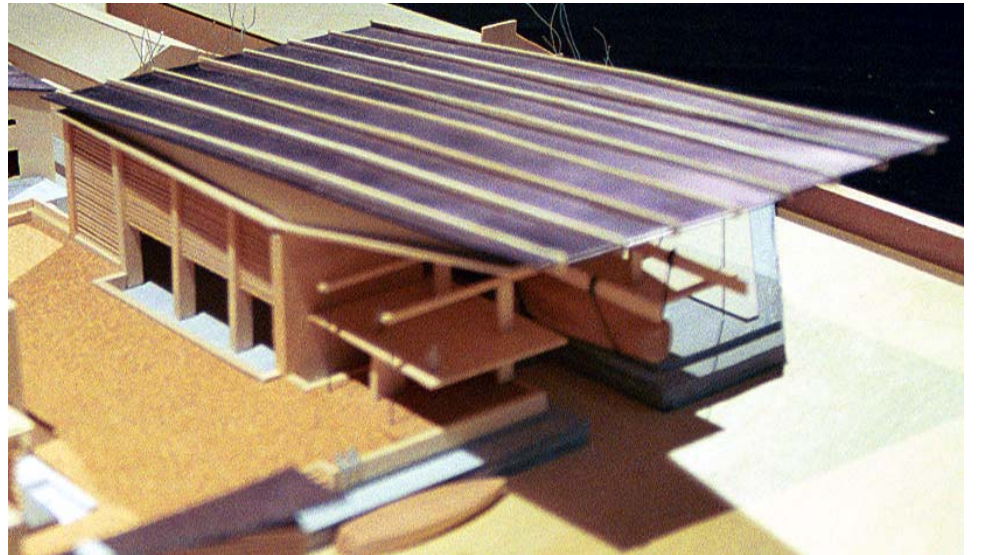
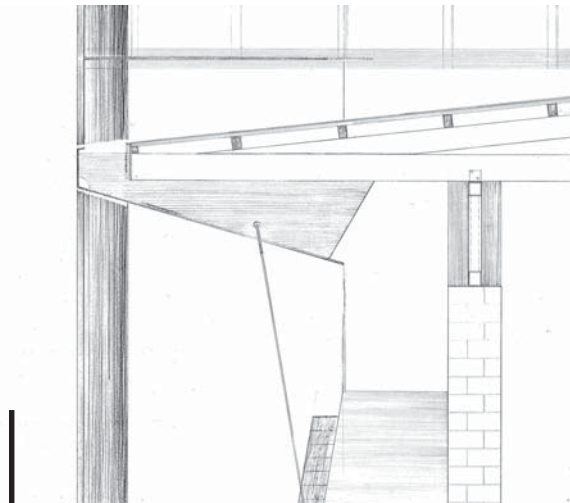
On the eastern edge of the site is the monumental shed that houses the physical nature of the community. The key to the boat shed is the fact that it is a place to make things - allowing a fluent motion of construction of raw materials to a finished product - from dry land to the wet river. It creates a transitional rhythm of learning that transcends the walls and roof of the building. The cantilevered roof instills a sense of command over the river and excites the mind as to wonder about the gravitational forces against it. These natural forces are balanced by the man-made heavy walls and connections that anchors the roof. Thus, an unspoken equilibrium of trust between two forces is articulated through design.

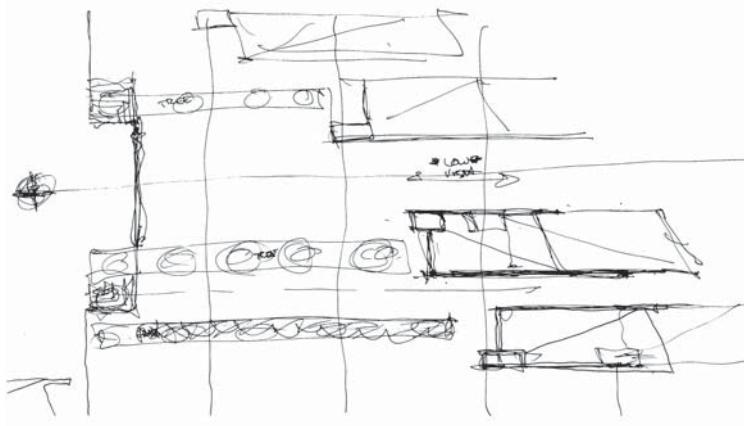




The Shed

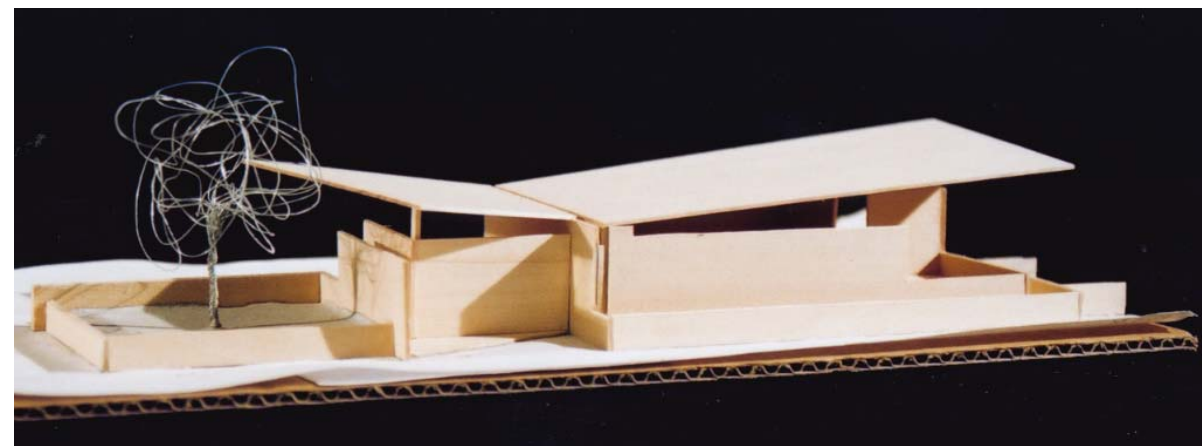
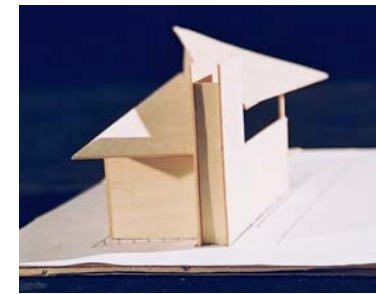
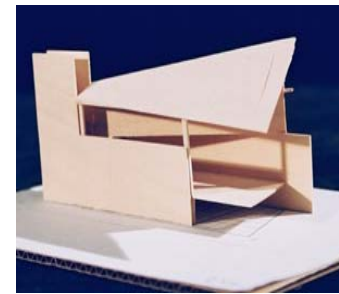
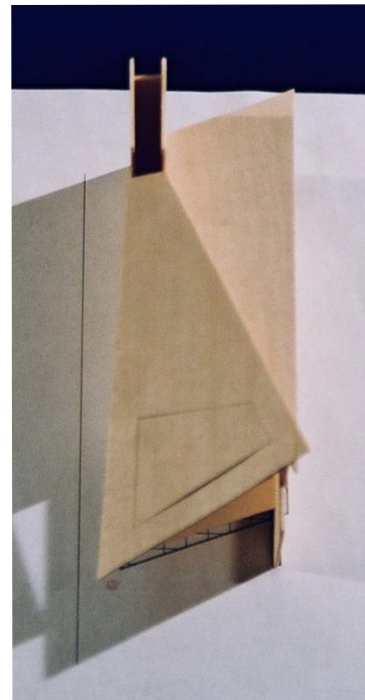
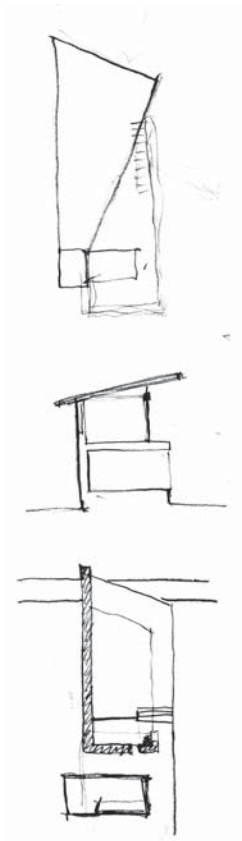
As the river is held back from the building by the concrete bulkhead, the steel roof is cast over the water. This provides a vast functional workspace from which raw materials and emotional spirits craft a boat. It is the setting for both successful accomplishments and frustration of failure. From here both boats and memories are launched - and a sense of cooperative efforts and teamwork is formatted through memories.

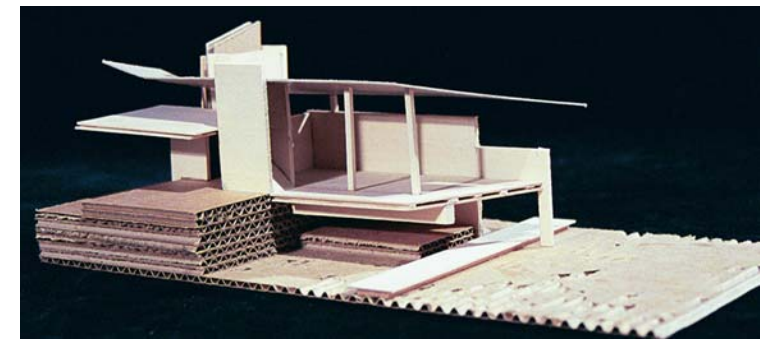
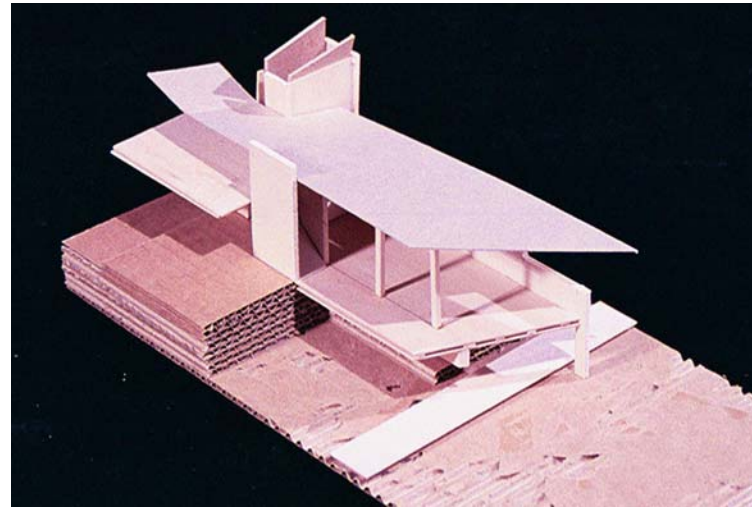
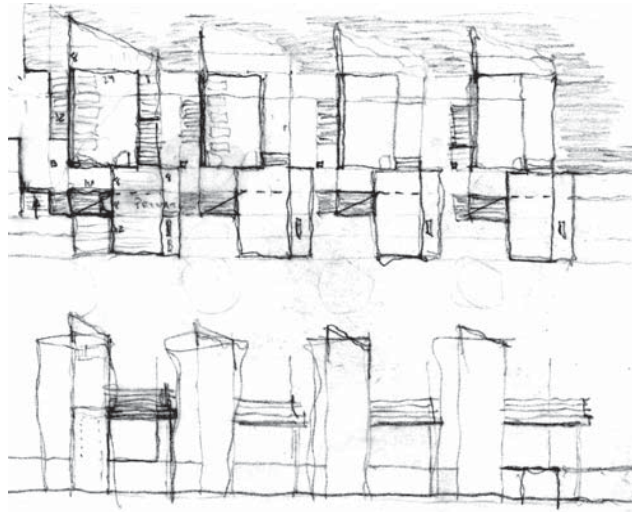




The Cabins

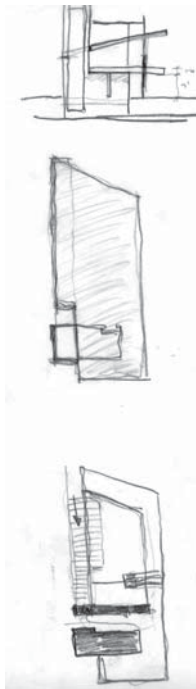
Within the camp, the most individual and private space is the cabin. Each student has a space that they share with others. It is meant to be a place where one can reflect upon their time at the camp and what they have learned as well as a place that excites their mind and instills a sense of confidence in what their future may hold for them. Simple planes of space, broad expansive views of the river, and pure materiality of construction express this freedom.

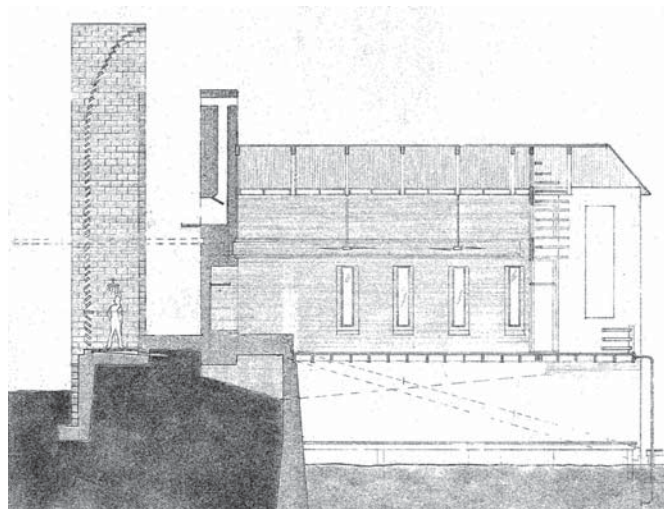




The Cabins

Fronting the east, the campers will be woken by the morning sun reflecting off the river's surface. The four cabins are cantilevered over the Anacostia and articulated by zones for sleeping, bathing, and socializing. Each cabin is individual within their walls, but very closely linked to the cabin next door via the open base corridor that ties the beds to the baths and anchors the structure to the shore. Stairs ascend and descend to the two social levels of decking. The upper deck with fireplace for storytelling and the pier below edging the rivers edge for recreation. At all levels, the cabin is a place for the imagination to roam, and a place to comfort oneself.



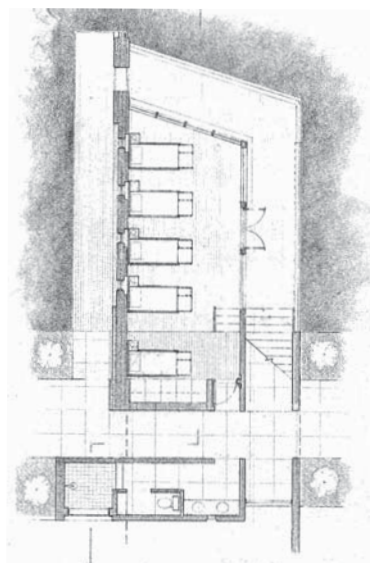
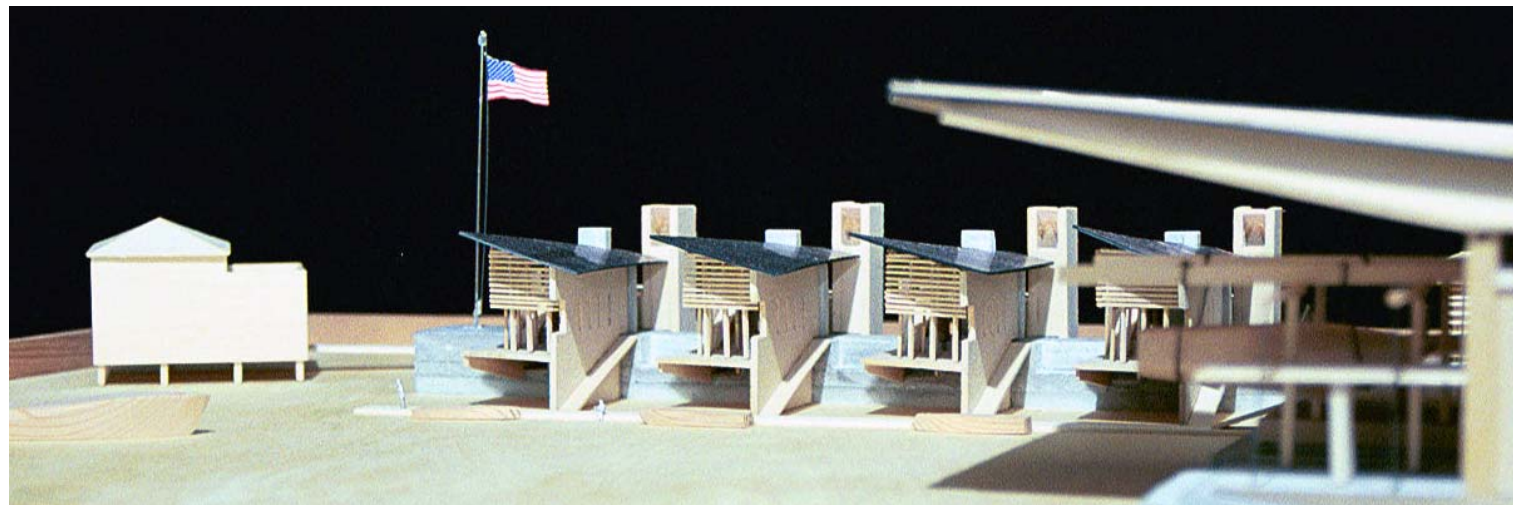
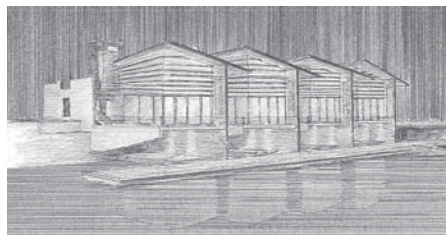


The Camp

"We must always look for the right balance between view and seclusion, in other words for a spacial organization that will enable every situation to take the position of his choice vis a vis the others... the openness of a place is just as fundamental as their seperateness, indeed the two are complementary, so that the enclosedness and openness can each exist only by the grace of the other..."

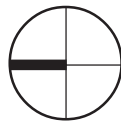
Herman Hertzberger

Note Four



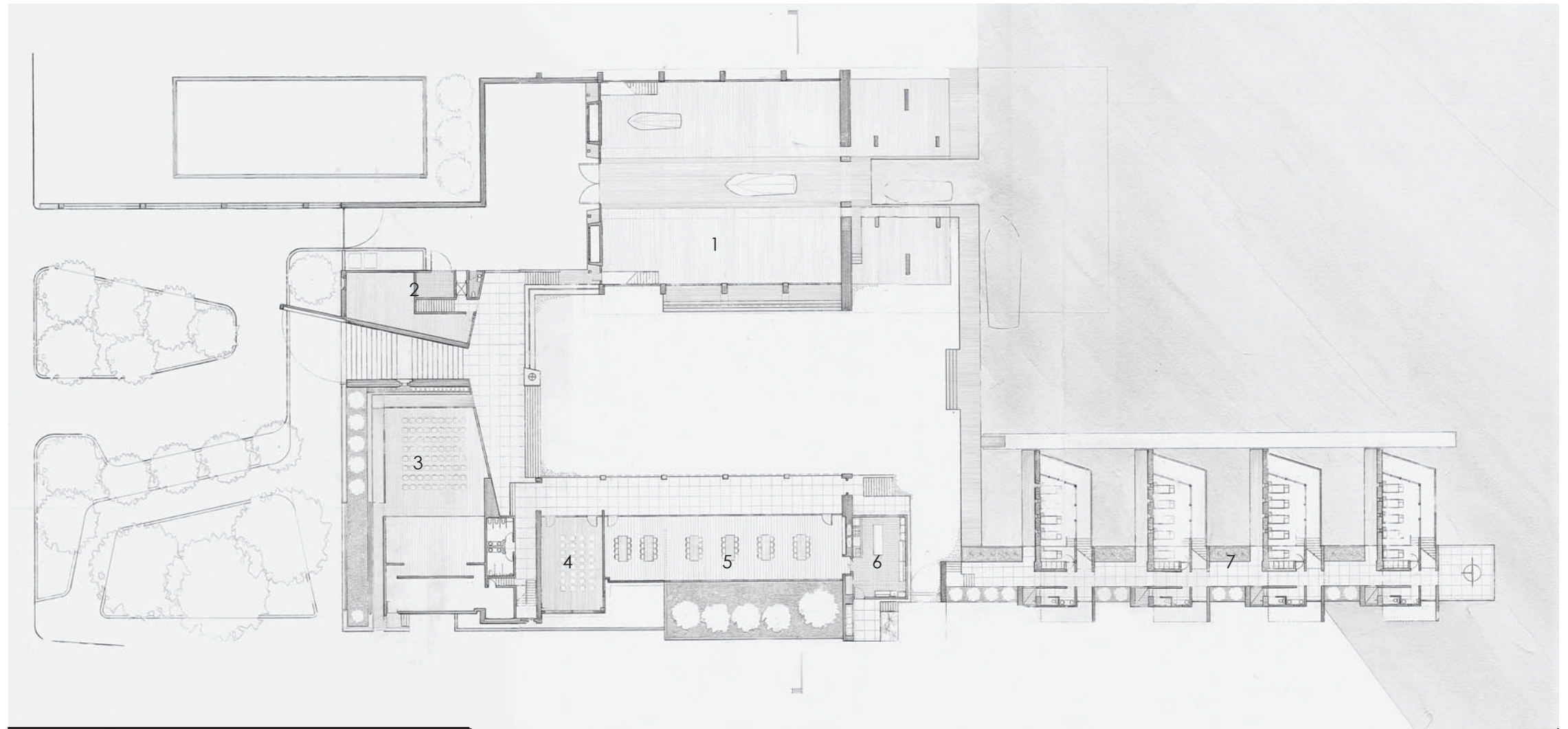


Site Plan



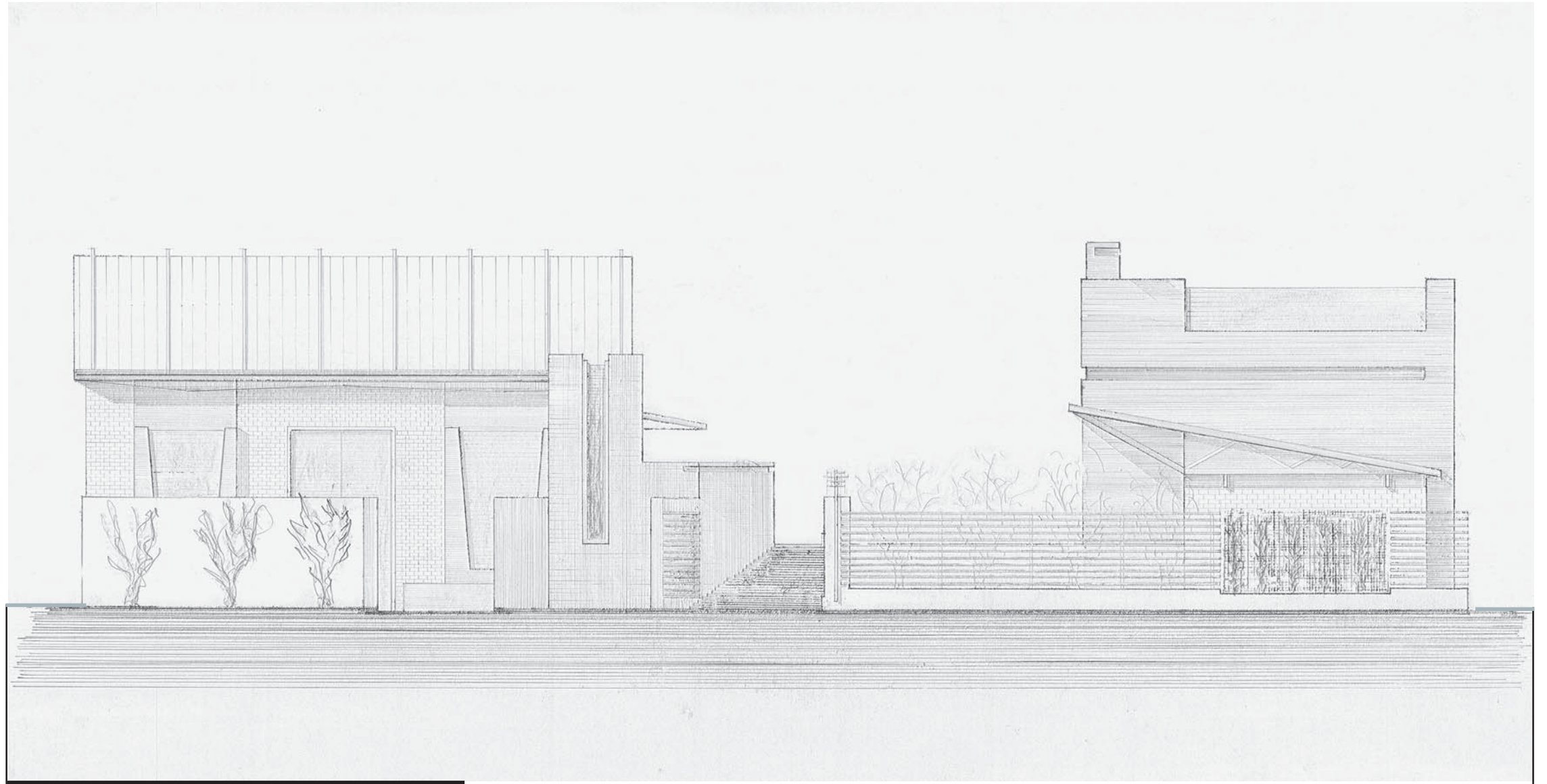
21

The Camp Whole

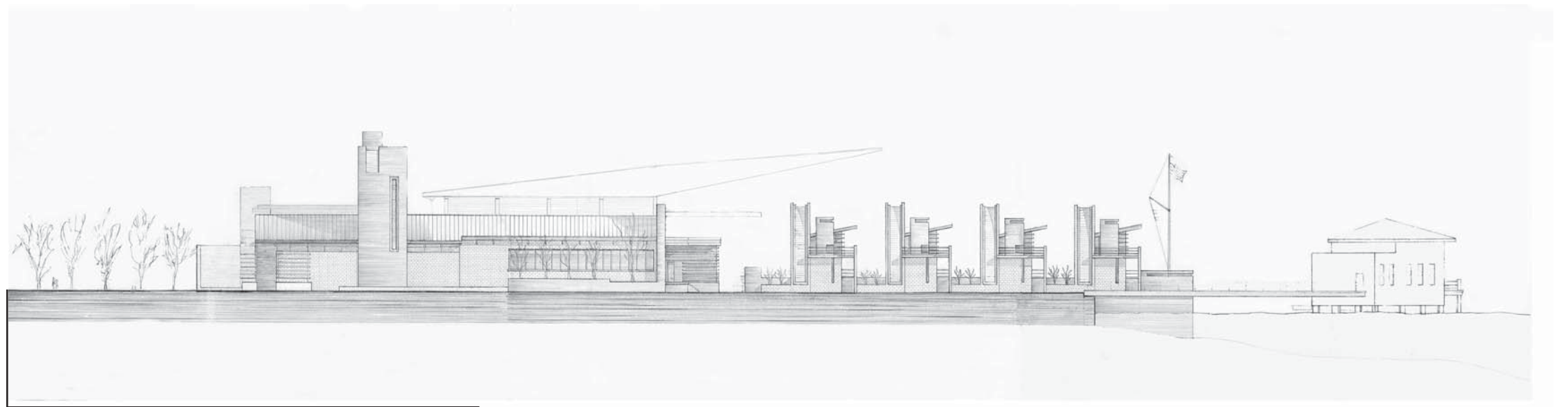


Camp Plan

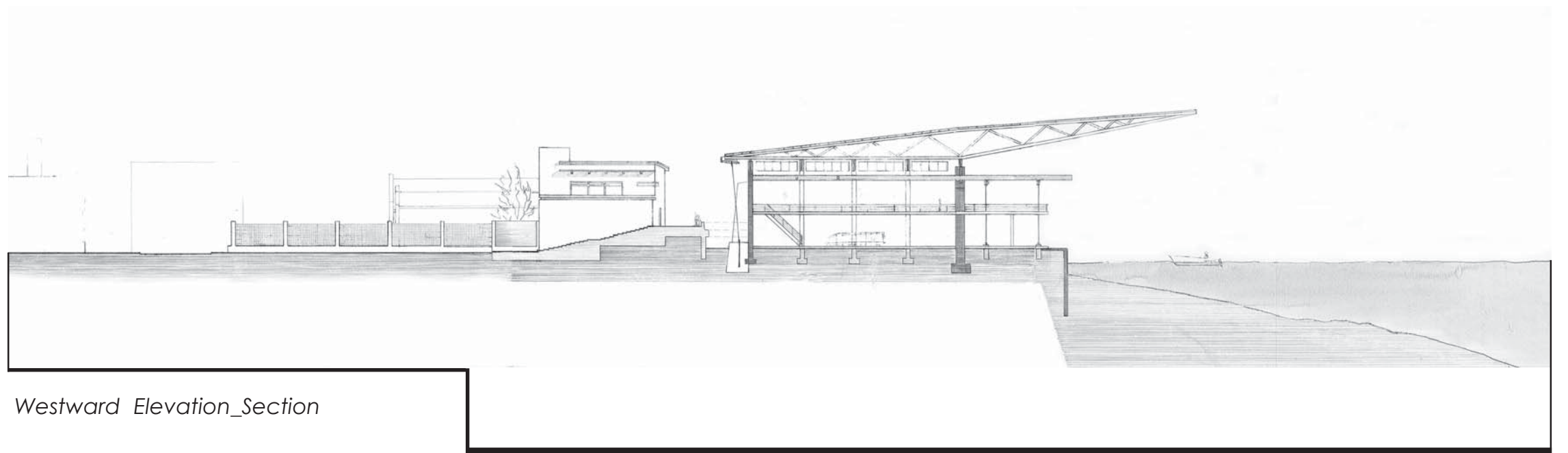
- 1 - Boat Shed
- 2 - Master's House
- 3 - Theatre
- 4 - Classroom
- 5 - Dining Hall
- 6 - Kitchen
- 7 - Cabins



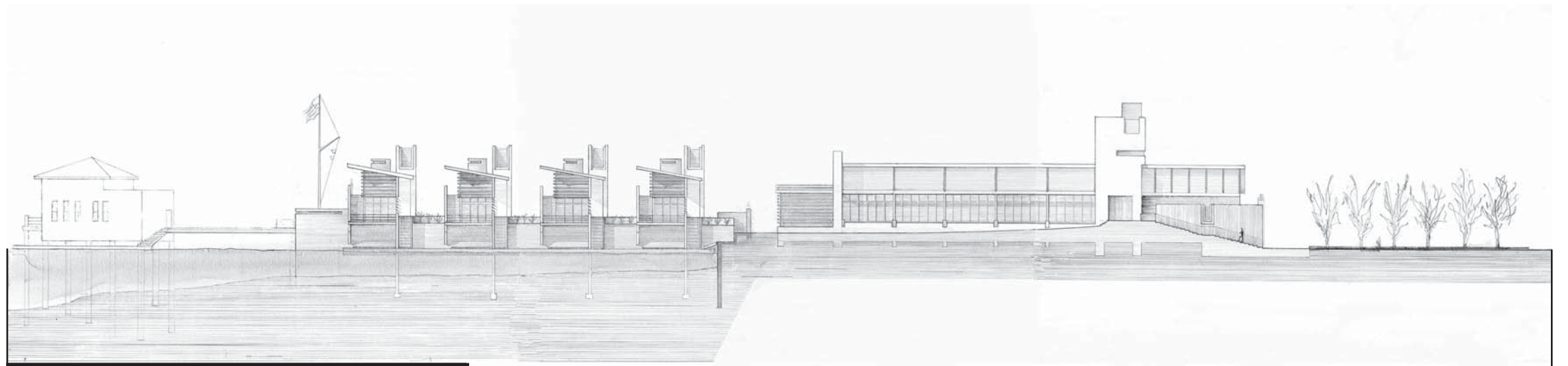
Entrance Elevation



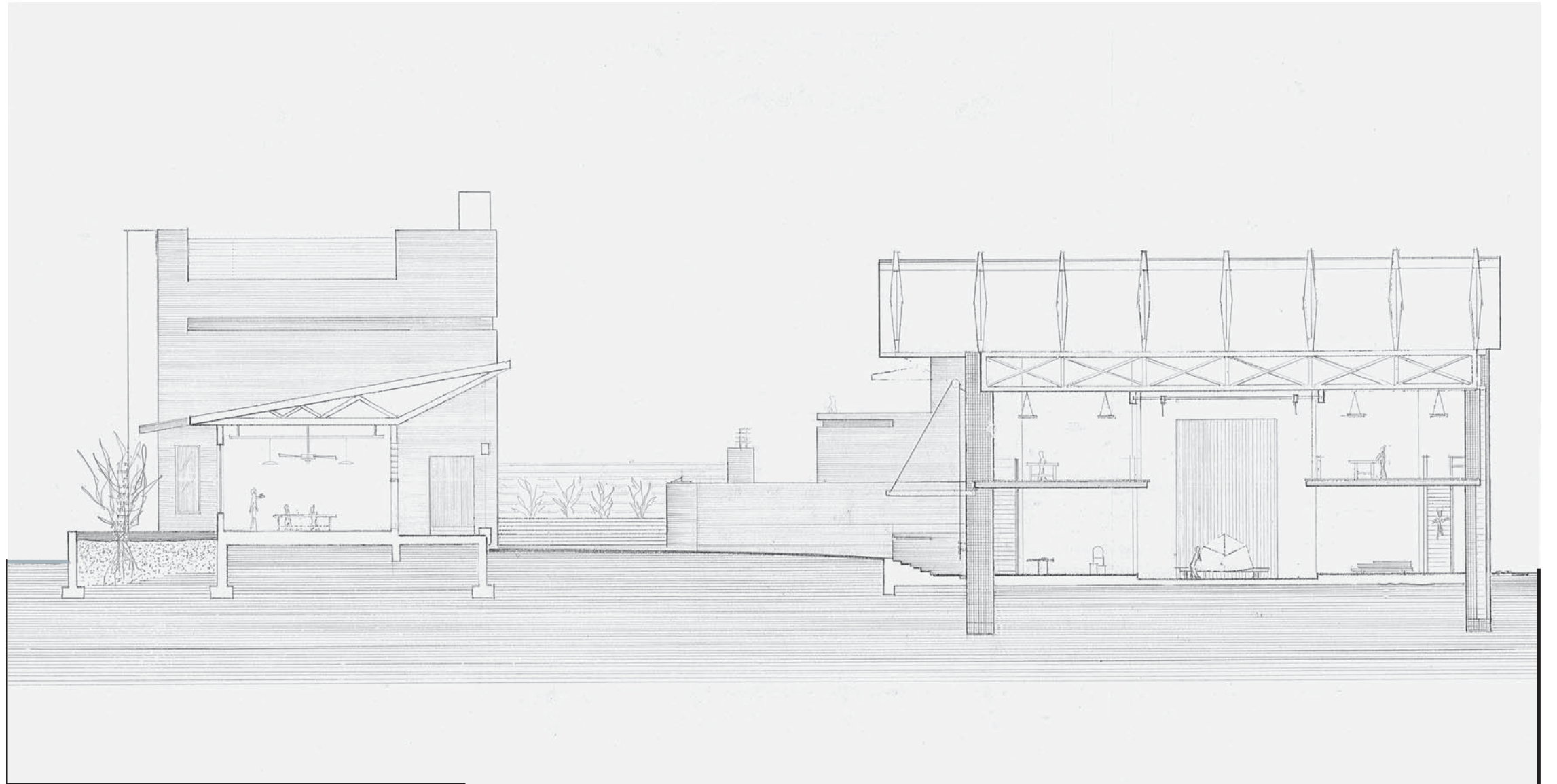
West Elevation



Westward Elevation_Section



Eastward Elevation_Section



Site Section

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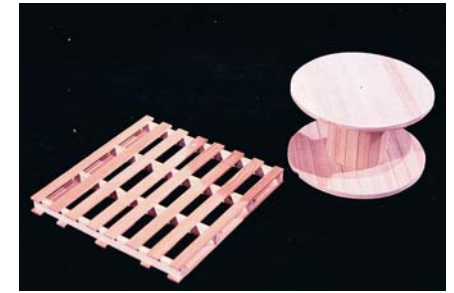
One: Peter Zumthor, Thinking Architecture,
pp 42-43.

Two: Renzo Piano, Logbook, p. 18.

Three: Herman Hertzberger,
Lessons For Students In Architecture,
p. 32.

Four: Hertzberger, p. 202.

Endnotes



Scott McDonald Stephens

Education

2004, Virginia Tech, Alexandria - Masters of Architecture
1985, University of Virginia - B.S., Architecture
1981, Woodberry Forest School

Academic Awards

2003- W.A.A.C. Leadership Award, Tinner Hill Foundation Competition: 1st
2002- *Inform*: Student Award for product design
W.A.A.C. United States Air Force Memorial Competition: Finalist

Work

2003 - Present, Glave and Holmes Associates, Richmond, VA
2001- 2003, McAllister Architects, Alexandria, VA
1987-2000, Tides Boat Works, Irvington, VA