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Place In The Middle Landscape

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Place In The Middle Landscape

Stephen K. Poston

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Master of Architecture

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Abstract

The ideals of a democratic society coupled with the vast expansiveness of the American landscape have led to settlement patterns within the urban environment that are distinctively American and non-traditional. The continual tension between principles of collective majority rule and rights of individual equality has led to an identifiable urban form that is neither city, with its collective characteristics, nor country, with its sense of individual freedom, but a vast middle landscape where the majority of Americans live, work, shop, and recreate. The current middle landscape has developed into a place where accommodation of the automobile, providing its sense of autonomous movement, dictates the form and order of the built environment. While investing great efforts toward the development of means of movement between places - the places themselves have been forgotten. The middle landscape, a legitimate urban form rooted in the history, culture, and natural environment of American city development, has become a place that is vastly scaled and oblivious to human existence. The thesis is an examination of this middle landscape with an attempt at the making of place within an otherwise place-less environment.



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A N o t i

o n o f P l a c e

"These long, perfectly straight lines suddenly gave me the feeling of space. Our cities are constructed to protect us against it; the houses cluster like sheep. But space crosses through New York, quickening and expanding it. The space, the great, empty space of the steppes and pampas, slows through New York's arteries like a draft of cold air, separating one side from the other...."

I learned to like New York's sky. In European cities where roofs are low, the sky crawls close to the earth and seems tamed. The New York sky is beautiful because the skyscrapers push it back, very far over our heads. Pure and lonely as a wild beast, it guards and watches over the city. And it is not only a local protection; one feels that it stretches out into the distance over all America; it is the whole world's sky.

I learned to like Manhattan's avenues. They are not sober little walks closed in between houses, but national

highways. The moment you set foot on one of them, you understand that it has to go on to Boston or Chicago. It fades away outside the city and the eye can almost follow it into the country. A wild sky over parallel rails, that, more than anything else, is New York. When you are at the heart of this city, you are at the heart of Nature."

Jean-Paul Sartre

The above, written by the European philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, is a description of New York highlighting its differences from European cities and the qualities that make it a special place rooted in its own culture and environment. The differences are important to architecture in America because it is the recognition of the essence of the American city as a distinctive urban form unlike any previous in the world that allows an architect to attempt design in this country. However, the importance of this insight is not restricted to simply understanding the American city. It is this "knowing" about any human condition that is essential to development of architecture as an art form that allows for the making of place within a society's built environment.

The making of place is essential to the art of architecture; but what is place? John Brinckerhoff Jackson writes in his essay "A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time" that *"...the average American still associates a sense of place not so much with architecture or a monument or a designed space as with some event, some daily or weekly or seasonal occurrence which we look forward to or remember and which we share with others, and as a result the event becomes more significant than the place itself"* (Jackson, 1994). In a different approach to the meaning of place more directly related to the influences of architecture and the natural world, Christian Norburg-Schulz writes that place becomes that space where man develops an "existential foothold" within his natural environment (Norburg-Schulz, 1984). Norburg-Schulz refers extensively to Martin Heidegger's notion of "dwelling" as being, in Heidegger's words: *"The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth..."* (Heidegger, 1971). Norburg-Schulz writes: *"Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment..."* In reference to dwelling, he continues: *"It implies that the spaces where life occurs are places, in the true sense of the word"* (Norburg-Schulz, 1984).

In the above descriptions, Jackson highlights the event and the universal sense of time as being the determining quality of place, while Norburg-Schulz writes more about place in terms of man's relationship to the natural world. Development of these thoughts brings forth a goal for archi-

tecture as the development of spaces that allow for human experiences, in both the individual existential world and the more pragmatic collective world, that reveal back to the inhabitants the world in which they reside. The sense of place, from the architect's point of view, is the quality that resonates within a space that, as Le Corbusier so eloquently expresses, touches the human heart. When an architect designs to allow for the experience of place, a quality is developed that allows one to experience and perceive the world in relation to themselves which reinforces an understanding of his or her existence within the world. Through built form, an architect can influence the nature of this understanding and allow it to exist and be perceived at many scales. The nature of this understanding may reside in the beauty of a sunset or the raucousness of a public political rally, but what is revealed is the reality of the world in which one is present - the immediate world of spaces and events and the larger existential world of concrete phenomena. It is this revealing of man in his world that is the ultimate purpose of philosophy, poetry, literature, and the arts. It is this goal that provides the guidance for architects who attempt to make places for human habitation having an existence that moves beyond the mere functional aspects of buildings and urban spaces.

As a designer searches for architectural form and the qualities that determine place, the search, while including physical site conditions and programmatic requirements, moves further into the knowing of the inhabitants and the essence of the spaces to be developed. Insight such as Sartre provides concerning the American city is necessary to understand the nature of the environment in which one builds. Insight relating to the people, their culture, the past history, the future concerns, the natural environmental conditions all contribute to design and enable an architect to develop spaces that can become places. Without understanding the American's relationship with the automobile and the autonomous movement it allows within the vast landscape, one cannot design for American spaces. Without understanding the European cultural ties to feelings of protection, one cannot design buildings in European cities. It is

the knowing, then revealing this knowing through built form, which allows for meaningful habitable spaces that are the essence of architecture.

When seeking an understanding of the built world of the American landscape, one looks beyond the physical reality of the built environment to the roots of the American culture that created that environment. Many different factors contribute to the form and order of the American city and any investigation quickly reveals that since the establishment of the initial western world settlements in the New World, the American city has been anything but traditional.

The ideals of a democratic society coupled with the vast expansive American landscape have led to settlement patterns which are distinctive and non-traditional. The American democracy with its principles of collective majority rule and rights of individual equality leads to an ambiguous interpretation when applied to urban form. A continual tension exists between individual prerogatives of development and the collective good of the community oftentimes leading to ill-designed development within the American landscape. A weak reconciliation of this tension appears to be the development of the current "middle landscape" which lies between the urban city, with its collective characteristics, and the open countryside and its sense of individual freedom.

The 20th century has seen dramatic changes in the form of the American city. The United States, which during the past century has emerged as the world economic and industrial leader, developed as a nation during a time that saw industrial production lead to unprecedented quantities of mass produced goods. The means of getting those goods to a consuming public has in turn led to drastic changes in the nature of the development of the urban environment. The automobile, a result of the development of mass production methods, has provided the American public with the ability to move within their vast landscape with an independence not found anywhere else in the world. This power of autonomous movement, in the hands of a consuming public has led to cities being ordered and scaled to automobile movement.

Scaled to a culture of automobile users, the prolif-

eration of commercial retail centers, bringing goods and consumers together, has been, along with the skyscraper, perhaps the most significant type form developed in this century. From their roots in the Main Street of old, the strip retail center and pedestrian mall have become the icons of modern day suburban sprawl development. This phenomenon of low density, fragmented spatial development has now become a significant part of every American's daily life.

American cities continue to evolve led by Americans who continue to individually, and occasionally collectively, reinvent the form of those cities. To compare American architecture and urban form to European models and wish for something in that form is somewhat naive and misguided. A legitimate effort at the making of places within the American landscape must look within itself for understanding and guidance. Surely the qualities of certain European spatial conditions can provide insight to what may be possible when considering the design of habitable spaces, but for an understanding of the inner nature of building in America; a study of America is required. Peter Rowe states in Making a Middle Landscape: *"It is only by recognizing the middle landscape as a real locus of growth and innovation in our society, rather than trying to make it in the manner of somewhere else, that progress will be made"* (Rowe, 1991).

What follows is an investigation into the making of place - the development of an architecture - within the middle landscape of the American built environment.

R o o t s o f

t h e C o n d i t i o n

When attempting to determine the form and order of the American city, one must inevitably look to the American culture and philosophical approach. Its roots, evolution, and aspirations provide insight into the urban conditions of today.

From the beginning of New World civilization established by European emigrants searching for a "City Upon a Hill", to the present day developer in quest of commercial wealth, the American notion of city making has disregarded traditional European urban values and sought its own expression rooted in its own culture.

Alex Krieger, in his article entitled "The American City: Ideal and Mythic Aspects of a Reinvented Urbanism", discusses the American reinterpretation of urban values in terms of a body of Enlightenment ideals and perceptions which include:

- *the pursuit of reason and science in search of a secular*

understanding of the natural world;

- *the pursuit of personal liberty and social egalitarianism;*
- *the admiration of agrarian philosophy;*
- *the pursuit of property as a source of wealth and independence;*
- *the pursuit of individualism and self-sufficiency;*
- *the veneration of nature and of pastoralism;*
- *the belief in progress as providing continuing opportunities for social and geographical mobility;*
- *the pursuits of origins, on the one hand, and of that which is new, on the other, in a New World seen as the setting for the transformation of society based on these enlightenments (Krieger, 1987).*

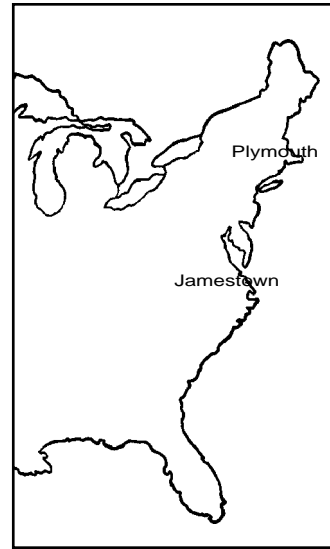
These pursuits are factors giving form to our urban environment and they provide insight into the soul of American culture. Distilling these pursuits further, two distinctive cultural conflicts emerge that have influenced settlement in

America since the first settlements:

- the inherent tension between the democratic values of collective majority rule and protection of individual rights (Rowe, 1991);
- the continual conflict between agrarian and urban lifestyles and their respective relationships to nature.

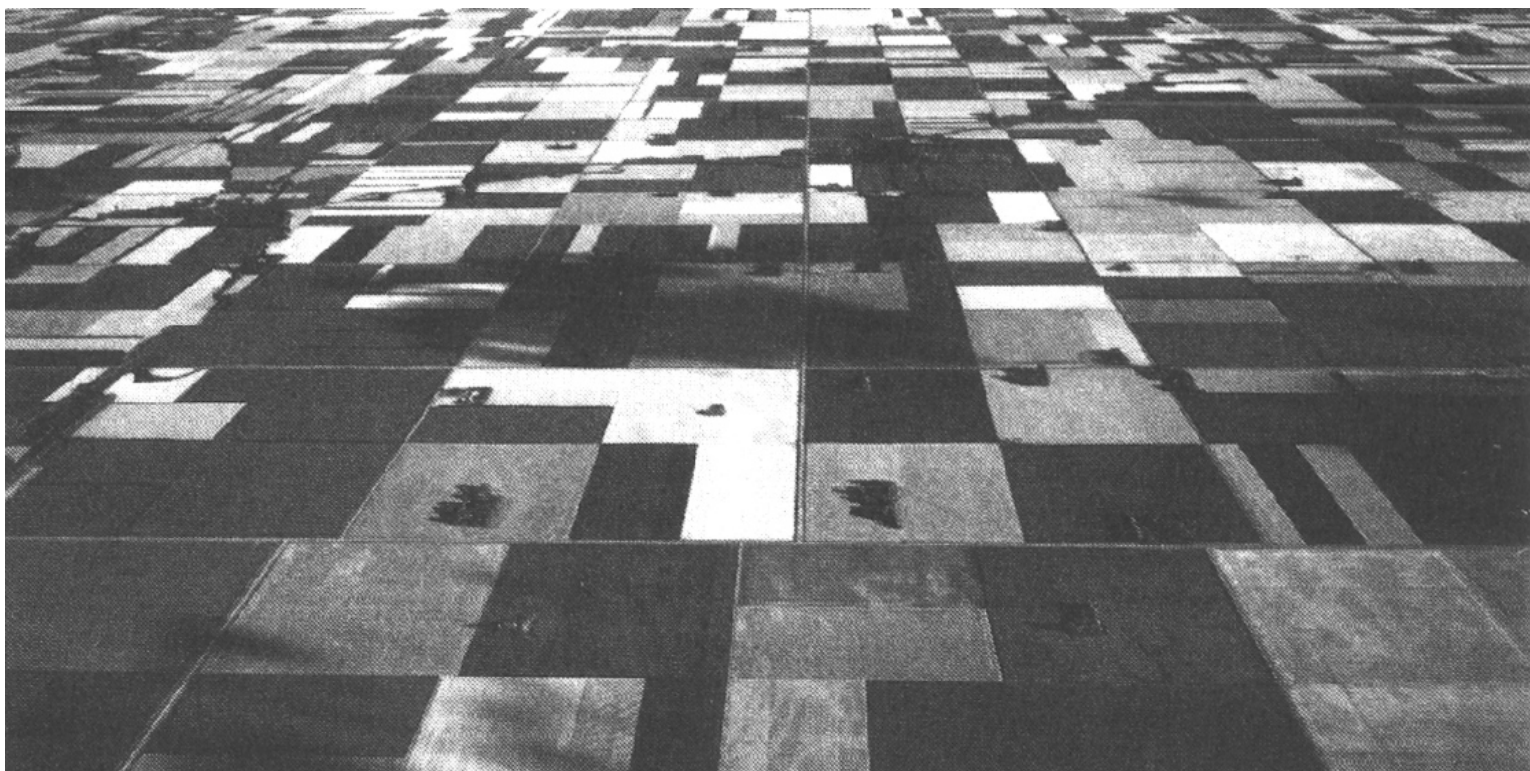
Nature's role in the development of American culture is an important one. From the Native Americans, who found virtue in nature, to the present day environmental movement, the presence of nature as a national issue has persisted. Due to the lack of national history, early Americans determined to develop a culture of their own, turned to nature as a guide for their lives. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most notable of American intellectuals, showed Americans how to relieve themselves of traditional European culture and turn to the ideals of nature for the development of a unique culture. American culture was not to be based upon man's biographical recollections of history, but upon truthful ideas conceived from nature. This sense of removing the past as a source of ideas and reliance upon individual integrity based on the virtues of nature as the guiding force has led to a culture that has produced cities very different from those of its predecessors. These cities have developed with a different relationship to the natural environment and have expressed a different national culture. How settlement patterns have integrated nature have varied, but the issue of man's relation to nature has remained a focal point for design of the American built environment.

The first permanent, English New World settlements, Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 and Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, are examples of the different interpretations of nature's role in the development of American settlements. The Jamestown settlers viewed the surrounding landscape as ground that was waiting to be settled and experienced as a part of daily life. Their settlement moved out of the walled enclosure soon after establishment and a strong agrarian relationship between man and nature was developed. Conversely, the Puritans of Massachusetts did not as easily accept the wilderness as a viable settlement alternative. Their view of the wilderness was that of a satanic evil -



a home to the heathen. A continuation of these different views has carried throughout the development of American culture. Both the urban city and the untouched wilderness have been referred to as savage and refined. Many people have left the corrupted, artificial city to live within virtuous rural settings, while at the same time, people have longed to live in the culturally refined city as opposed to the savage wilderness.

As a reconciliation of this conflict, American settlement has sought an integration of these very different views toward nature's role in city making. One example of this integration of the natural world and man-made settlement is the use of the abstract geometric grid as an ordering tool for the establishment of settlements. In the 18th century, Thomas Jefferson enacted the Land Ordinance Act of 1785 which laid an orthogonal grid across the United States from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. This grid pro-



Mid-West Landscape (Jackson, 1994)

vided for an immediate man/nature relationship different from any previously seen in history. The grid subdued the hostile wilderness into organized farm plots for development and led to a layout of cities based on the expansive, boundless nature of the American landscape. Using this man-made abstract grid, man's presence could be established within any natural condition allowing for the existence of both a human rational order and the laws of nature.

Following this principle use of the gridiron as an organizing element, cities developed with the same boundless spatial qualities as the nation as a whole. Space, or void, as provided by the gridded street layout, became the spatial organizing unit whereas in traditional European cities, the solid building form held that function. Krieger writes: *"...American streets precede their defining edges. Unlike traditional counterparts, defined by adjoining walls and activities, the very void of the street assumes artifactual properties. It becomes tangible, autonomous, three-dimensional, the tool and symbol of the passion for mobility"* (Kreiger, 1987). Referring to the opening passage by Jean-Paul Sartre, the point is made clear. Open space, as characterized by the grandiose proportions of the American landscape, defines the American city.

Within dense urban environments, another reconciliation in the question of agrarian versus urban lifestyles has been the introduction of the urban park into the industrial city. The early proponents of the park system such as Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux sought this notion of nature within the urban city as a way to make the increasingly artificial city more habitable through the presence of the virtues of nature. America has always been identified by its landscape of vast proportions and abundance of fertile land. The presence of this natural setting within the urban environs seems appropriate to American city making and has been seen as America's foremost contribution to nineteenth-century urban design (Krieger, 1987). This introduction of nature into the city fabric led to the public park taking on the functional presence of the traditional town square. By providing order, again using the space or void as the ordering unit, and the presence of nature, considered



New York City (Holl, 1991)



Olmstead and Vaux: Prospect Park, New York City (Alex, 1994)

so important in the American culture, the park proved to be a successful, American solution to the urban planning issues facing a growing nation.

The ultimate means of bringing the agrarian and urban lifestyles into harmony has been the development of the “middle landscape”. This middle landscape, a land between city and country, has maintained as its goal a balance between the extremes of urbanism and wilderness. A place where one could live amidst the virtues of nature while at the same time maintaining access to the benefits of an urban environment. This notion of a middle ground for human settlement has been the ultimate goal for American settlement since its origin. Thomas Jefferson, who David Bell, in his article: “Knowledge and the Middle Landscape: Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia” describes as the inventor of the middle landscape for America, saw his vision of a middle landscape realized in the design and construction of the University of Virginia (Bell, 1983). The concept for the university is the notion that the independent, democratic man of America should live within a landscape



University of Virginia (Trachtenburg, 1986)

that, while structured by man's influences, remains forever tied to nature. The built form of the original university grounds reflects this influence of both man and nature and, again, expresses the sublime spatial openness that is so American. The university was to become a place where man, as an individual or collectively, remained connected to nature while at the same time developing the technology "...to improve it for his individual needs" (Bell,1983). This notion of a landscape influenced by both nature and man's technical progress is the essence of the middle landscape and is the theme of this condition carried through American history.

Peter Rowe refers to this condition as "Modern Pastoralism" and writes: "*Pastoralism blends the moral benefits of rural life with the technological benefits of civilized life*" (Rowe,1991). Rowe writes extensively on the notion that the truly ideal American landscape is that which combines the untamed wilderness and the technological orientation of an industrial based country into a pastoral middle ground. Early interpretation of this ideal merging of the sublime wilderness with the industrial/technological world can be seen in the works of the nineteenth century painters of the Hudson Valley School such as Thomas Cole. These works were an expression of man's relationship with the vast American landscape illustrating both the savage and the pastoral interpretations and the attempts of man to civilize the landscape into a more humanly habitable space.

The nineteenth century saw many changes in America which intensified this relationship between nature and man. As the nation continued to grow toward the west from its eastern seaboard cites, industrial processes became more prominent. A move from an agrarian society to a more manufacturing based economy resulted. America was developing at a time when technical discoveries were being made simultaneously with civilization's move into the pastoral landscape. Rapid population growth, development of mass production methods, movement into the open landscape, and a political environment emphasizing individual growth all are factors leading to the development of a middle landscape that began to move away from Thomas Jefferson's emphasis on nature and its guiding principles and more to



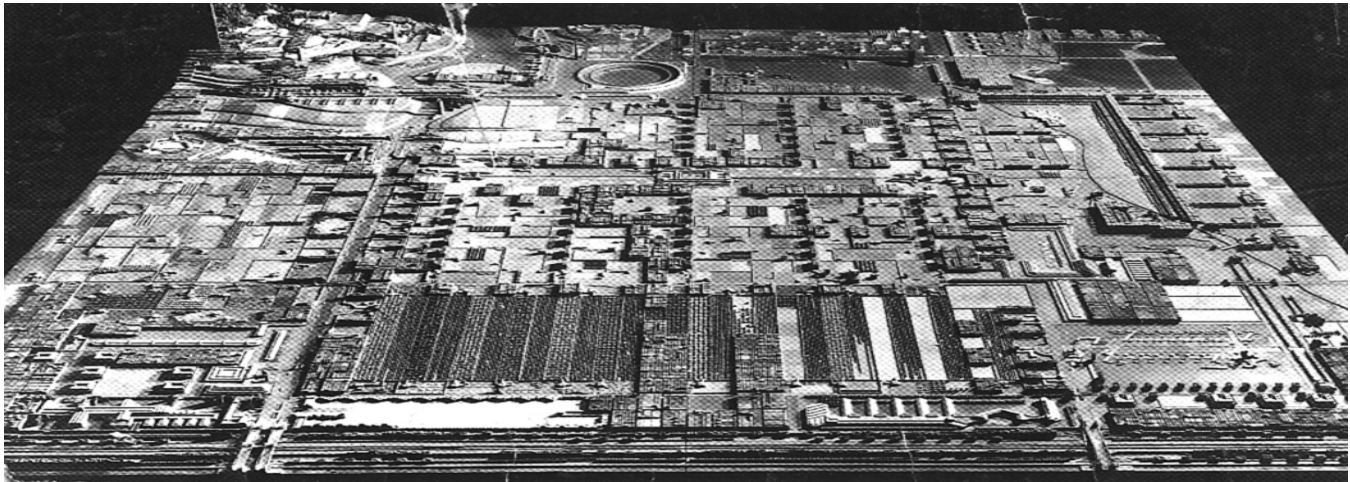
Thomas Cole: The Oxbow, 1836 (Rowe, 1991)



Jasper Francis Cropsey: Starrucca Viaduct, 1865 (Rowe, 1991)

an emphasis on the technological orientation ignoring those principles of nature which were to provide a framework.

One architect whose ideas of urban design sought a balance between the spatial characteristics of the American landscape and the emerging technologies of his day was Frank Lloyd Wright. In his Broadacre City proposal of the 1930's, Wright sought a society where individuals lived amidst the virtues of nature aided by technological advances such as the automobile and aircraft. He envisioned an urban environment that decentralized the dense urban cores into a modern ideal of non-hierarchical space populated by individuals who lived agrarian lifestyles and yet used modern technological means to enhance their man/nature relationship. Although certainly a utopian vision of society, Broadacre City clearly addressed the issues of an evolving American city and sought a balance for the somewhat conflicting ideals upon which American settlements were built. Wright's vision toward design always sought solutions rooted in the American's relationship with nature and the Broadacre City design was a spatial synthesis of the American demo-



Frank Lloyd Wright: Model of Broadacre City (Levine, 1996)

cratic ideals and vast landscape.

In his essay entitled "Nature", Emerson tells us: "*Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result*" (Ziff, 1985). Today's middle landscape seems to have forgotten its roots in nature. The cultural drives that led to the development of this seemingly correct interpretation for the American built environment are present only in the where, while the how no longer appears to be present. The where, a combination of urban and rural landscapes, has been executed largely in conjunction with the positive aspects of technological advancement. Those same advancements have also aided in the denial of a relationship with nature which is critical to a successful integration of nature and city. The current middle landscape exists within the presence of nature, but the virtues of nature are missing. A true middle landscape, as envisioned by Jefferson, must allow nature to inform the use of science and technology if a condition is to exist wherein the common good of the inhabitants is advanced. Technology and nature both inform man and their influences should be kept in balance.

Another equally important balance that must always be considered is that between the collective and the individual. This balance is fundamental to the democracy upon which America was based, however the opposite nature of their conditions makes an interpretation, in terms of urban form, difficult.

Historically, European societies have been hierarchical in nature with individuals belonging to particular groups that are arranged to allow all members of society to know where they belong within the structured society. European cities, following the cultural drives of society, are also hierarchical in nature. The layout of a European city usually is centered upon some religious or public building with spaces hierarchically arranged around that central building or space. The city generally has been arranged to allow for protection from the outside world and therefore is separated from the natural environment within which it resides. In contrast, the American society, based on democratic ideals, is theoretically non-hierarchical and recognizes individuals as equals



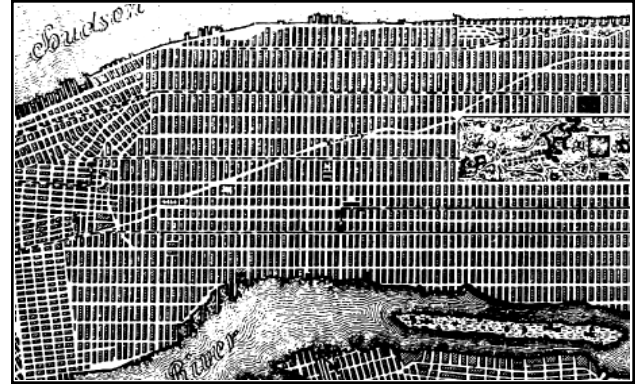
Seina, Italy (Benevolo, 1981)



Paris, France (Benevolo, 1981)



Savannah, Georgia, 1800 (Reps, 1969)



New York, New York (Benevolo, 1981)

rather than placing them into an established societal hierarchy. The American city tends to follow this non-hierarchical nature of society and is generally not centered on a particular building or space, but organized through application of ideals such as the equalizing grid, spatial openness, and individual relation to nature. The individual pieces of the urban fabric, similar to the individuals within society, make up the whole while being recognized as separate and unique. While the equalizing grid relates to urban form, equality of individuals can be seen in America through the political process. Individuals, with constitutional rights ensuring equality, such as the right to vote and protection of minority views, are required to participate in the political process, as individuals, to allow a collective voice to be heard. The freedom of individual mobility, directly related to the spatial openness of America, is only possible through the collective notion of public infrastructure that is supported by individuals partici-

pating in their government. An individual's relationship with nature can only be ensured through collective efforts to respect, preserve, and protect the natural environment that allows that relationship to exist. Individuals cannot exist without the collective society just as a collective society cannot survive without the efforts of individuals. It is this balance and respect of these conditions that allows a democratic society, and hence a democratic city, to survive.

In today's middle landscape, an emphasis on individual rights seems to exist where the collective good has been forgotten. The emphasis upon the individual over the collective is seen most clearly in the notion of private property ownership. It is every American's dream to possess their own private piece of land upon which they can declare their individual freedom. This expression of personal freedom is deeply ingrained in the psyche of the American, however when this freedom is abused, it is detrimental to the

overall good of society. In the development of architecture and urban form, an emphasis on individual with a neglect of concerns toward collective issues can have harmful effects on the city. The current culture of private development tends to deal simply with individual needs without the respect for the collective needs of society. This is seen in the fragmented development patterns, buildings designed and built without respect for each other, and the general lack of overall cohesiveness that successful built environments should possess. Working within the constraints of a society where individual property is developed according to individual prerogative requires that individuals possess respect for others. Individual rights also require a sense of responsibility, and individuals are responsible to the collective society. Rights and responsibilities must work as one for the ideals of democracy to have any relevance.

Working within a built environment made up of in-

dividual property owners, one cannot expect to achieve modernism's notion of total planning and design. In his book Collage City, Colin Rowe discusses modernism's well-intentioned but failed attempts at total design of the built world and seems to recognize the "collage" nature of our urban environments. To work within the American middle landscape, is to face the conflicts which doom to failure any attempts at sweeping, all-encompassing design. Recognizing these restrictions, an attempt at design should be a responsible, well-intentioned act that respects what came before and attempts to enhance the present and future conditions. To make architectural moves that must be respected by conscientious future development is what a designer strives for in this individually dominated environment. Alex Krieger writes: "*...alliances seeking to balance individual prerogative and public good must form*" (Krieger, 1987). An architect's responsibility must be to seek these alliances if

the middle landscape will ever develop its own sense of place unique to its own culture and environment. Recognition of these cultural issues and conflicts, so ingrained in the American way, enables an architect to understand the world within which he designs.

M a k i n g

o f t h e

The most dominant type form within the contemporary commercial middle landscape is the strip shopping center. The urban (sub-urban) condition of strip centers and associated development can be traced back to early 20th century Main Street America with its storefronts lining the roadway allowing for easy access for the selling of goods to the public. Early in the century, after World War I, the American population became urban dwellers for the first time in the history of this country. This signaled a change not only in city form, but in the principles upon which the American economy was based. As the cities grew, and industrial advancements such as streetcars, automobiles, and other advanced means of transportation developed, they began to change. The urban dwellers soon began moving out of the city realm trying to regain touch with the rural landscape while at the same time keeping the ties to the city. This move resulted in a decentralization of urban areas

T y p e

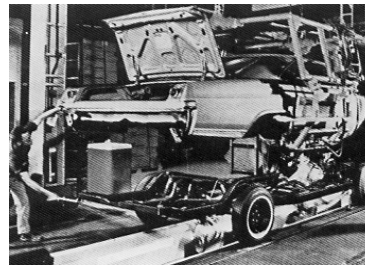
and, after several decades of change, has led to the phenomena commonly referred to as urban sprawl. The Main Street of earlier times was replaced with what Chester Liebs refers to as the "Miracle Mile" (Liebs,1985). This "Miracle Mile" is the result of many factors that are rooted in the American way of life and a strong industrial/commercial society.

The growth of the United States as an industrial power saw advancements in mass production methods providing goods for the public's consumption. Among those "goods" is perhaps most importantly, at least in terms of its effect on urban form, the development and production of the automobile and its transportation predecessor the streetcar. These advanced means of transportation led the way for development outside of the urban core of the cities. After World War I, decentralization became popular because of the increased use of both the streetcar and automobile.

People could now live closer to the rural landscape and still work in the city. Decentralization intensified after World War II and the 1950s saw a city make up that included a majority of suburban dwellers (50% + of the total American population) for the first time (Rowe, 1991). The American urbanization of the early 20th century was soon reversed and now people were back to the “country.” Home ownership increased along with automobile ownership while more and improved transportation systems made accessibility easier and quicker. A new spatial structure to the urban form resulted that was highly determined by the speed and accessibility allowed by use of the automobile.

As residences developed far from the city core, support services followed. The people who lived out of the city still required, or perhaps insisted upon, the same amenities available within the city. At the same time as this migration to the suburbs, the mass production of affordable consumer goods was moving into full swing and places were required to bring together the new suburban consumer and the mass produced goods. Meeting these needs, the shopping center and its associated types such as the roadside franchise and pedestrian mall were developed. From 1950 to 1960, the number of shopping centers in the United States grew from 100 to 3,000. In 1975, 18,500 centers existed providing 25% of all retail sales. 1985 saw 25,000 centers with 50% of all retail sales (Rowe, 1991). A huge change has taken place since World War II in how Americans live in and use their cities.

Initial non-urban commercial and residential development took place, in the middle 1800s, along horse routes leading out of the cities. Later with the appearance of the electric trolley in the 1880s, this development increased and the land area of major cities increased accordingly. The first real strip center developments were built in the 1900s along streetcar lines leading out of the urban centers. The development occurred along long corridors where land was cheap and access easier than in the city. Buildings were built by developers who felt that the land along these corridors would increase in value in future years. They erected buildings known as “Taxpayer Strips” to house small retail



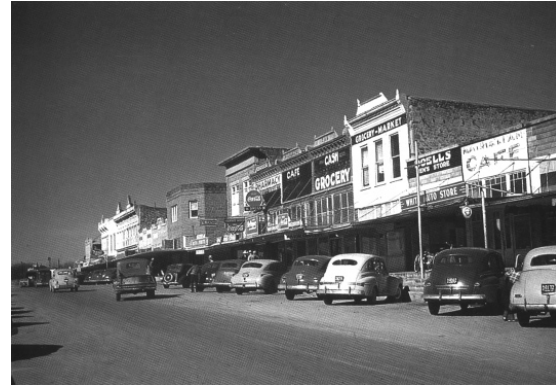
Manufacturing Plant (Rowe, 1991)



Taxpayer Block, 1920s (Rowe, 1991)

businesses and produce revenue to cover land taxes in the interim years before the “real” development took place. These “Taxpayers”, being interim in nature, consisted of cheap materials and methods of construction and took the form of low one or two story strips facing the street with narrow store frontage. Generally, a variety of stores existed within a unified facade with signage provided to alert passers by of the nature of the business. Even before the extensive use of the automobile, signage was an issue. Proper signage could act as a symbol of prosperity and growth by giving the appearance of an active and vibrant business/commercial environment (Liebs, 1985).

The departure from the Taxpayer Strip took place in the 1920s and 1930s with the addition of the parking lot, becoming more and more essential for what was becoming an automobile dominated environment. Merchants, wanting easier access for the passing motorists, insisted that the buildings be set back from the road and a small parking zone be established between the road and the building. With this move, the notion of development involving a dense



Main Street, 1940s (Liebs, 1986)



Neighborhood Strip Center, 1930s (Liebs, 1985)



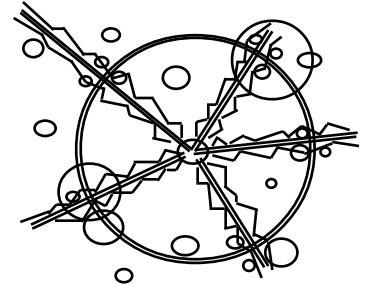
Post-World War II Strip (Liebs, 1985)

relationship between building, sidewalk, and street, as was found on the American Main Street, disappeared. The roads in this new environment now had to provide the necessary infrastructure elements such as wider lanes, traffic lights, and large parking lots required for proper automobile operation. Distinct changes were taking place in the nature of commercial development in and around the American city. The main streets of the previous commercial districts became simply thoroughfares allowing traffic to get from the city to the outer developments. What once consisted of a commercial street mixing both cars and pedestrians in a reasonably scaled environment, became so congested that traffic had to be moved through as quickly as possible. Small Main Street businesses could no longer survive. As a small business owner remarked in 1926: *“Traffic got so congested that the only hope was to keep it moving. Hundreds used to stop; now thousands pass”* (Liebs, 1985). The original Main Street could not survive the rapid increase in automobile usage which now seemed to produce these new commercial environments scaled to the speed and accessibility of the automobile. The American zest for autonomous movement, expansion and convenience through the use of the automobile led to building and city form being radically altered. The scale of construction continued to increase matching the new larger sense of scale brought on by a burgeoning industrial economy in a nation that was emerging as a rich, consumer driven society.

Advancing the building form, developers of the 1940s and 50s now increased the size of the strip centers along with their parking lots by adding large anchor stores, usually a grocery store, and increasing the number of other stores. This building type is most similar to what we see today. The biggest distinction between what was being constructed in 1950 versus what exists today is the presence of civic function. After World War II, most centers, though still relating to the major road, remained connected to the local communities through both form, usually a pedestrian connection was made with the residential communities surrounding the center, and function by incorporating public facilities such as post offices, libraries, and administrative

offices. The strip of the 1950s became a *“community center conveniently serving both pedestrian and automobile access”* (Rowe, 1991).

In the middle 1950s, the interstate highway system was established and its effects led to more changes in the commercial environment. As the highways were built, settlement patterns around the cities changed. The advent of the “loop road” around the city meant that development no longer was restricted to the radiating corridors as the previous conditions had followed. The new roads led to looser, less continuous development by allowing more mobility for the suburban dweller. Now new construction was not limited to the commercial corridors but all locations within reasonable traveling distance, which was increasing with more and better cars, became potential commercial strip sites. These new developments seemed to lose the community attachment that previously existed. Peter Rowe has observed that



Commercial Center (Rowe, 1991)



Freeway Interchange (Rowe, 1991)

"...With continued mobility and wider-ranging shopping patterns, the local character of many centers has diminished. Strip centers have become oriented almost exclusively to the roadway and passing traffic. Public facilities are less common..." (Rowe, 1991). The intersections of major roads became prime development locations allowing for ease of auto access but at the same time a separation of the center from its local community.

Since the 1950s, and the start of the interstate highway system, the nature of shopping developments, and new suburban construction in general, has continued to deteriorate. Development has taken on a very fragmented and anti-urban nature. Because of the overwhelming cultural reliance upon the automobile for autonomous movement, development is determined more by the planning and construction of highway systems than by the needs of local communities or an overall urban order. So much so that at times, road construction and shopping center development have actually preceded the residential and community development that used to take precedence. New urban



Suburban Standardized Building Forms (Author)

centers have now evolved that have effectively replaced the traditional downtown commercial districts in terms of both shopping availability and employment opportunities not to mention the supply of adequate middle class housing.

This new sub-urban environment is where most Americans live, work, and recreate. It is a place that has evolved into what is now the American city. A new spatial arrangement exists where the speed and accessibility of the automobile and modern zoning regulations leading to separation of functions appear to have determined its form. The world of retail construction in the sub-urban environment exemplifies many of the general characteristics of all development in this environment.

The strip centers are characterized by discontinuous development within their given districts. The open spaces that exist are not the spatial defining units that have given identity to the American city, but are either left-

over undeveloped lots or wide open undefined parking areas. The connection to community, so important to the previously developed commercial centers of the first half of this century, has been lost due to priority being placed on individual economic factors without consideration to collective community impact. The ties to the natural landscape, an important design consideration for architectural place-making, have been forgotten in favor of the standardized building forms that may be found in any natural environment.

These characteristics reveal themselves in the built forms we see every day. The form of the large chain stores and franchises have become standardized in layout, signage, and building envelope in order to allow for easy national and international recognition. This leads to the homogeneity found in today's suburban retail world. *"Gradually whole streets, dominated by chain stores, began to look alike, regardless of other regional differences or potential local*



Suburban Strip Environment (Author)

restrictions" (Rowe,1991). Location and form are now determined only by transportation and accessibility issues rather than by community or regional needs which leads to a disconnectedness between the places being constructed and the people they are constructed for and creates a separation that eliminates the ability of portions of society to actually use the places as intended. The fragmented development of land leads to wasteful land uses with its harmful effects on the natural environment and duplication of infrastructure services so costly in today's world.

The architecture of the suburban retail realm has lost touch with the fundamental issues necessary for the making of places for human habitation. A recognition of this loss and, perhaps more importantly, the development of ways to address these issues can lead to a better built environment that can also be economically successful by providing places where people wish to be. An architectural proposal within

this realm must recognize its place within this environment and must address the inherent problematic issues presenting themselves to the designer. One must address both the place-making principles and the economic feasibility issues in order to be successful for both the community and the private developer.

R e a l i t

y o f T o d a y

The characteristics of modern day commercial development in the middle landscape can be seen in and around any city in the United States. The fragmented spatial arrangements, vast parking lots in front of long, low, non-descript buildings, vehicles moving in all directions, and signage of all shapes and sizes all together create a chaotic condition that can be visually overwhelming and frustrating to negotiate by car or on foot.

The Market Place and related commercial development located in Montgomery County, Virginia is just such a place. All access to the area is by motorized vehicle - usually the privately owned automobile - and thus the area is completely auto dominated. Every aspect of design is related to people traveling in the car. Traveling on Route 460, the main traffic artery through the district, the area seems surprisingly dense for a place that is relatively sparse in plan, with most of the field of vision filled with either cars, low one-story buildings, signs, light poles, power poles with power

lines, traffic lights and the ever present dull black asphalt parking lots. The developed landscape is flat while the surrounding mountains of the region stand in contrast providing an undulating backdrop that continually reminds you of where you are.

One of the more conspicuous characteristics in this particular landscape is the collision of two very different worlds. The developed commercial environment violently crashes into the serene rural environment with no transition or warning. One certainly has a sense that man, in this instance, is in control of nature and feels that it is his prerogative to do as he wishes. But, perhaps this is not the case and man is not in control, for things seem to happen without human thought. The development emanates from its center - the highway intersection - and seems somehow to have a life of its own. Buildings appear seemingly overnight with a randomness that certainly does not appear to be influenced by any rational human thought.





The Region

The region within which the Market Place lies is a unique plateau located in the Allegheny Mountains of Southwest Virginia near the Eastern Continental Divide. The picturesque surroundings of mountain ranges and beautiful valleys is mostly green woodlands with farm lands rolling over the hills tying the geography together. The region, known as the New River Valley for the presence of the New River which curves its way through the mountains, is home to two towns, the county seat of Christiansburg and the university town of Blacksburg, and the city of Radford which also contains a university. The majority of the local residents reside within these towns, however other smaller collections of residents in the surrounding region travel to these towns to meet their work and shopping needs.

The three small urban enclaves are situated in a triangular relationship connected by the main state highways that carry the majority of the automotive and truck traffic between the cities and along which travelers move through the region on the east-west routes through southwest Virginia. These towns, established in the late 18th Century, grew slowly over time as independent enclaves surrounded and separated by the rolling hills and mountains. Each town retains a character that is distinct from the others but which has been eroded of late by the homogeneous modern strip development taking place on the fringes and at the remotely located Market Place.

Located, not at the geographic center, but at the transportation center of the region is the intersection of the main state routes within the area. At this intersection, as happens with so many commercially developed areas, is the greatest concentration of new construction within the New River Valley. This is an intersection, where less than ten years ago only one commercial establishment stood, that now has approximately 1,500,000 square feet of retail and office space under roof, with another 250,000 square feet of space currently under construction. An intersection through which The Virginia Department of Transportation estimates 68,000 cars pass each day with projected numbers to increase to 162,000 each day within fifteen years and where



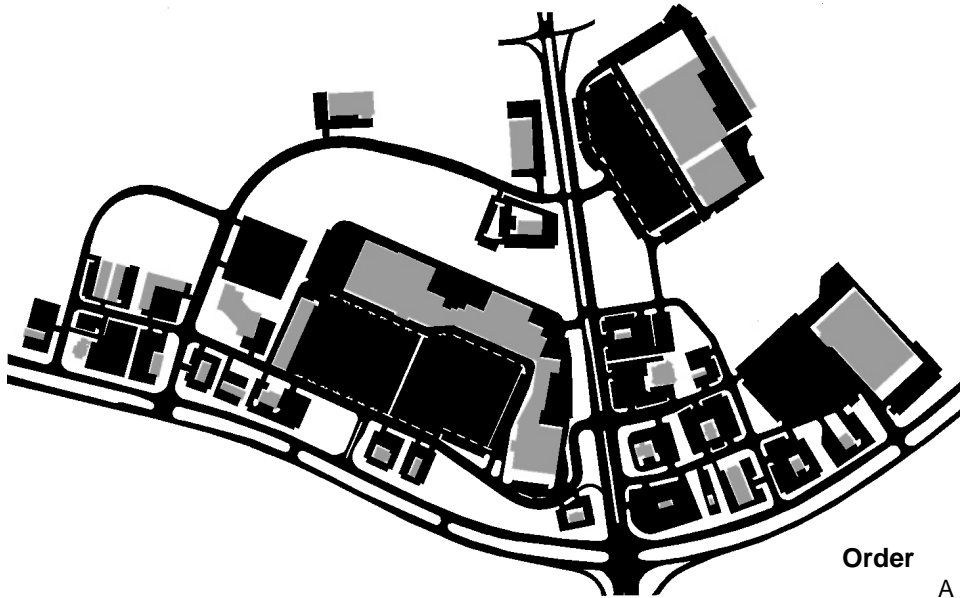




\$15 million dollars worth of road improvements are planned including a four lane limited access bypass highway. An intersection that has developed into an area that is six times the size of the downtown core of the Town of Blacksburg; has five times more commercial space than downtown Christiansburg; and sees fifteen times more cars in a day than Main Street in the City of Radford. It is an area that has been designated as "...the regional downtown for the New River Valley..." by the latest edition of the Town of Christiansburg Comprehensive Town Plan.

This is an intersection that in spite of the rapid development and chaotic visual noise remains connected to the ever-present mountains and valleys that surround it and remains a place where one can witness the most spectacular sunsets on the east coast. This is an area steeped in natural beauty within which man-made objects are beginning to cloud but not diminish its presence.





Order

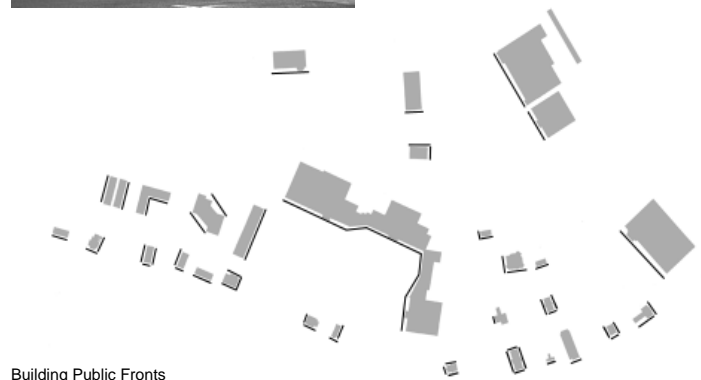
A study of the plan of the area reveals many factors that help determine the spatial experience of the place. Initially, the two most recognizable features are the apparent lack of order and lack of density.

The lack of order can be attributed to the independent nature of development in the area. The site has been broken down into separate distinct building lots which have been and are being developed independently of each other. This independent nature of development without design consideration for the surrounding area has led to buildings and spaces being built without any of the unity that can result when places are thought of as whole made up of parts which contribute to that whole. The building lots were not laid out in any ordered or hierarchical fashion and the building designs have ignored each other regarding spatial considerations. No overall planning has been done to establish any meaningful relationships between the buildings themselves, between buildings and open space, or between buildings

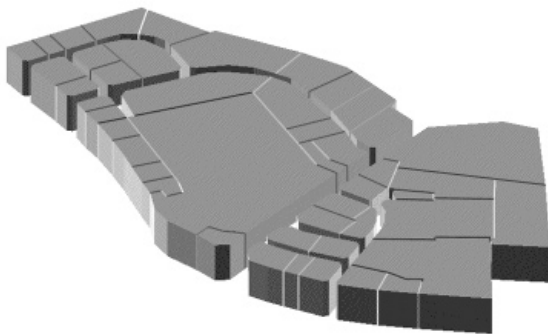
and the public thoroughfares. This independent approach to development is common and reflects the previously discussed issues concerning individual property rights and execution of private development.

The existing ordering is a kind of struggle between the individual property/business owners and the public infrastructure. In his book Learning From Las Vegas, Robert Venturi describes two types of order on the commercial strip: The obvious visual order of street elements and the difficult visual order of buildings and signs. The zone *of* the highway is a shared order. The zone *off* the highway is an individual order. (Venturi, 1972) In this site, even the "obvious" visual order of the highway appears to be missing since the main highway (Route 460) was never developed as a commercial district thoroughway and therefore lacks any space defining street elements. The highway, in its present four lane layout, originated as the means of quickly moving through the Valley from Interstate Route I-81 to West Virginia and beyond and has never adapted to the role of providing order to a dense commercial district. The small network of secondary roads, which were developed for commercial use, have done little to enhance order while appearing randomly placed without thought for coherent development. The individual order seems to merely consist of separate buildings and signs competing for the attention of the passing motorist. The design of each separate site is developed considering only what happens within the site boundaries and not to the area as a whole. The open spaces and roads lack the sense of spatial definition that seems to characterize ordering of the American city. In that respect, this area seems to have lost touch with its roots and the true nature of American building.

All of the buildings seem to put forth a public front toward Route 460 while ignoring any other aspects of the site. From this point of view, it seems ironic that the newly approved 460 Bypass, needed because of the rapid increase in traffic and which will soon provide a new main entrance into the commercial district, will bring visitors into the area from the opposite direction and therefore into the rear of many of the buildings. Perhaps this means of building orientation



Building Public Fronts



toward the main highway is a loose ordering system inherent in this urban condition. However, if the design of the area did not continually relate to the highway, but to the other buildings, spaces, topography, etc. of the area, perhaps an ordering could be established that included both the highway and the habitable spaces. As the condition exists, the only ordering that can be discerned relates to commercialism - How can an establishment make a visual connection with the motorist on the highway in order to get them off the road and into the store or restaurant to spend their money?

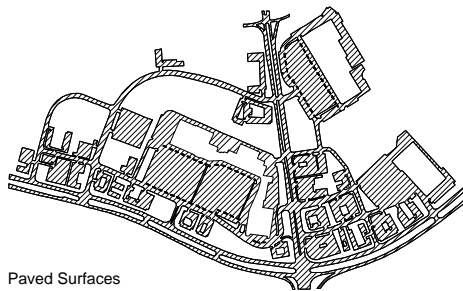
Density

The lack of density can be experienced both outside and inside the buildings. The issue can be discussed by referring to the lot arrangement drawing at the left. The separation of building lots, demanded by local zoning codes and desired by the land developer for ease of marketing and construction, leads to a lack of cohesion that characterizes this kind of development. This separation of building lots means great distances between buildings, separation and inefficiency of parking areas, no overall plan of development and perhaps most importantly, the separation of land uses. Initial modern day zoning codes, which sought this separation of uses in order to keep heavy industrial complexes removed from other aspects of daily life, have now led to a separation of many aspects of living which should not necessarily be separated. This has resulted in an environment where access, for even the most simple of tasks, requires

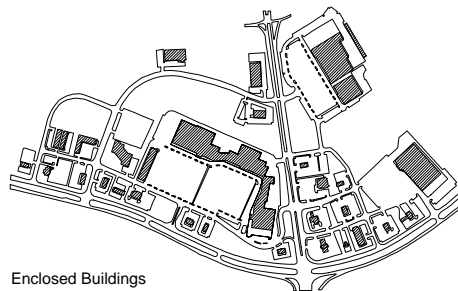
the use of an automobile. The pedestrian realm is now mostly limited to areas developed before these codes were enacted.

This overwhelming use and accommodation of the automobile leads to a spatial separation and fragmentation that significantly impacts how the land is used. So much so that 70 percent of the developed land in this area is paved versus only 15 percent enclosed building, leaving only 15 percent left for other uses. Other uses, in this development, usually entails unused/unplanned waste land without thoughts of enhancing the conditions and making the place more people oriented. This separation leads to a lack of spatial definition necessary for the creation of good pedestrian places. The current experience of walking through the Market Place parking lot is that of being lost in a flat, hard surfaced desert. The only articulation of the space takes place at the two-dimensional level of painting parking space lines on the flat pavement, while no spatial determinants are provided to allow a person walking around to feel welcome. The parking lot only becomes three-dimensional when enough cars are parked to allow definition of mass (the cars) and void (the aisles), but this still does not allow for a comfortable pedestrian experience when no provisions are made for humanly scaled spaces that allow safe comfortable movement through the lots.

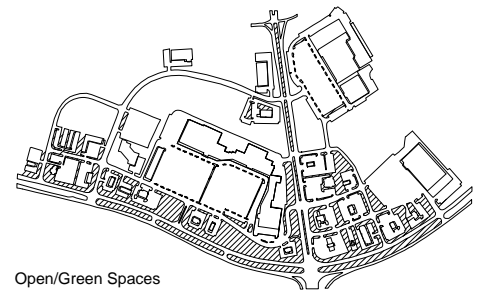
The overall amount of parking could be significantly reduced if consideration was given to the cycles of automo-



Paved Surfaces



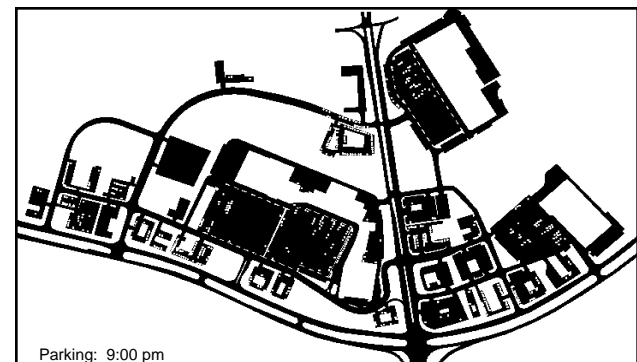
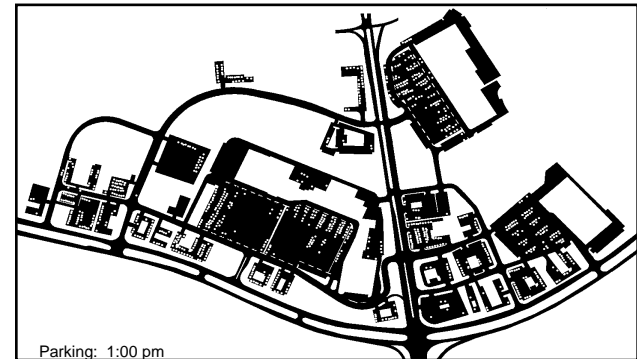
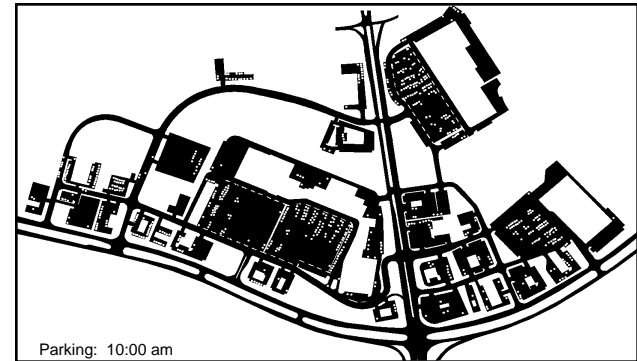
Enclosed Buildings



Open/Green Spaces

bile parking within the development. Restaurants generally have parking demands only during peak lunch and dinner hours, while the shopping areas maintain a small number of cars throughout the day with an increase during evening hours and on weekends. The business offices generally maintain consistent parking demands throughout the day-time hours except for maybe during the lunch hour when workers drive to the nearby restaurants.

Combining different land uses into more densely developed lots with overall planning for infrastructure, movement by car and foot, use patterns, and appropriately scaled spaces would lead to consolidation of parking requirements, provide a density of uses and closeness of proximity which would reduce distances to be traveled allowing people to walk to different establishments and allow for a richer spatial experience. Concerning commercial density, Joel Garreau explains that once densities reach a high enough level, people begin to walk from place to place. A quality of space can be developed where distances are no longer perceived as being impossible to travel by foot. Once this happens, it becomes economically feasible for new, varied, and specialized businesses to move in and set up shop, because now there are enough people that have easy access to allow them to survive. (Garreau, 1991) Higher spatial and use densities are necessary for a successful commercial venture. A designer must be careful, however, not to eliminate or ignore this condition's relation to the automobile. Since the public usually takes the path of least resistance, a reason for the success of the strip environment is its accommodation of the automobile and abundance of parking. Generally, downtown districts are not so accommodating to automobile usage. Parking is usually difficult and can be costly. When faced with a decision of where to shop, many will choose the most easily accessible place. However, complete reliance upon automobile usage for even the most minimal distance of movement is detrimental to the urban environment. Conscientious planning and design could significantly reduce its impact on the spatial environment as well as lead to a reduction in fuel consumption, pollution, and the consumption of land that characterizes development in the suburban realm.



203'-3 1/2" (HOLD)



FLOOR CONSTRUCTION

4" CONCRETE SLAB WITH 6x6-W1.4xW1.4 WWF
OVER VAPOR BARRIER ON 4" MIN. GRANULAR
FILL.



Building Form

The question of density and spatial experience does not only reside in a discussion of the outside world of the Market Place. Upon moving from the vast open exterior space and through the thin building facade, one is generally faced with another vast open environment - the box-like functional environment of the present day Mega-Store.

The buildings have been reduced to the mere essentials needed for the selling of merchandise within an enclosed environment. The space within is defined quite simply by merchandising considerations such as signage - usually overpowering in scale but necessary due to the vastness of the place - and display of goods - often times overwhelming in its abundance and display. The essentials of architecture such as structure and materiality are virtually non-existent. Eight inch steel pipe columns at forty feet on center and block walls located 350 feet from each other do not make for a rich spatial experience which allows for human interaction with the building's elements and spaces. Even while ignoring structural and material considerations,

architectural spaces can be designed if consideration is given to the most simple elements such as the quality of lighting (be it fixtures or natural lighting), layout of spaces, and creative signage and display. These buildings, while economically feasible for the developer's short term needs, give only minimal consideration to the user. The user in this environment as it exists has been reduced to simply a consumer. All other aspects of life are nullified.

As highlighted in Close Up: How to Read the American City, Grady Clay points out that the building form of the strip shopping center is derived from four clear objectives:

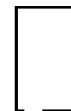
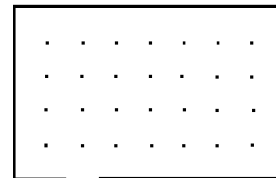
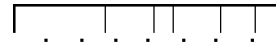
- Set up shop quickly and cheaply - which leads to simple forms, materials, and methods.
- Allow the customer to move in and out quickly and easily - leading to parking lots located for direct access to the store entrance.
- Exposure to many buyers - leading to location on the high volume roadways and the important use of prominent distinct signage.
- Ease of transaction - leading to an interior building layout that is simple and without variation. (Clay, 1980)

These factors, as applied to the Market Place, have resulted in three basic building forms.

- The open-front three-sided strip which leaves the facade as glass to allow for display of merchandise and/or activity.
- The big-box store which is constructed of masonry exterior walls spanned by lightweight steel open-web roof joists with a grid of six to eight inch steel pipe columns usually at forty feet on center for intermediate support.
- The individual out-parcel building, usually a restaurant, which is a plain small box of simple steel or wood construction with decorative attachments or finishes to give a desired look.

These buildings, while inexpensive in cost and functional in use, lack the essential qualities of architecture. No thoughts to the making of place and its relation to the human condition exist while the human is reduced to a one-dimensional consumer and nothing more.

Perhaps if more architectural thought were given





to the projects, a different more multi-dimensional form could result. Examples of the inherent rhythms and composition of parts can be found throughout the site. The nature of building, especially in this economically aggressive environment, is such that rhythms, repetitions, and symmetrical relationships, all important aspects of architectural design, inherently exist. If these aspects of building could be highlighted and brought forth as legitimate design considerations, rather than afterthoughts, perhaps architecture and its concerns could be addressed. The opportunities for architecture in this commercial world of building exist and should be pursued.

Signage

Within this environment, signage is perhaps the most significant form-giver to building design. Upon entering into this realm, the visual chaos is immediately apparent. Day or night, signs declare for a business: "HERE I AM!" and beckon you to stop in and spend a few dollars. The signage, being the most designed of all the architectural elements in the strip environment, is indicative of the commercial nature of the place. The businesses all strive to get consumers into their place by capturing their attention while driving by at 50 miles per hour. The signs exist in several forms but three types, along with different combinations of these types, seem to be prevalent.

The aerial sign is detached from the building, placed near the roadside, perpendicular to the path of the motorist, and high enough to grab attention of the auto passenger as soon as possible upon entering the area. If the building site is not next to the highway, the sign is built even higher to allow it to compete with those at the roadside edge. This sign, elevated on plain steel poles, is the most simple in form and elaboration and usually just clearly states the name of the business in easily recognizable letters or symbols.

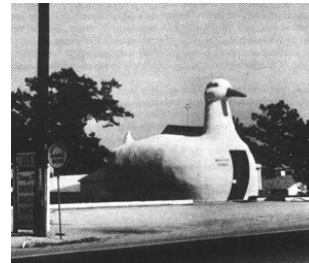
The sign attached to the building is usually larger than the aerial sign due to use of the building facade as support. The building form, in this case, is not affected by the sign which is simply attached onto the face of the build-





ing which remains a simple box behind the sign. This signage is used mostly on the strip centers and big-box stores which are reduced to the minimum of form articulation to keep costs down and provide a plain background to the sign. It often times carries some symbolic meaning through its figural form and display. It always marks the entrance to the building. Robert Venturi refers to this condition as the decorated shed, where the sign, independently attached to the building, functions to announce the business and provide decoration while the building form is reduced to the essentials of space and structure necessary to meet the programmatic needs.(Venturi, 1972)

The building as sign exists to provide a certain symbolic image for the business within. In this case, the building becomes what Venturi refers to as a “Duck” after the famed Long Island Duckling building in New York, where the building exterior becomes a symbolic form independent of the space and structure within. This form becomes the sign for the building rather than applying a separate sign entity to the building. The Duck is designed to provoke symbolic images desired by the proprietor to get people into his business. See Venturi’s Learning From Las Vegas for a thorough discussion of symbolism on the commercial strip. Although not found in its purest form in this development, this method of signage is most prevalent with the out-parcel restaurants who attempt to put forth a domestic image in keeping with the theme of the restaurant.



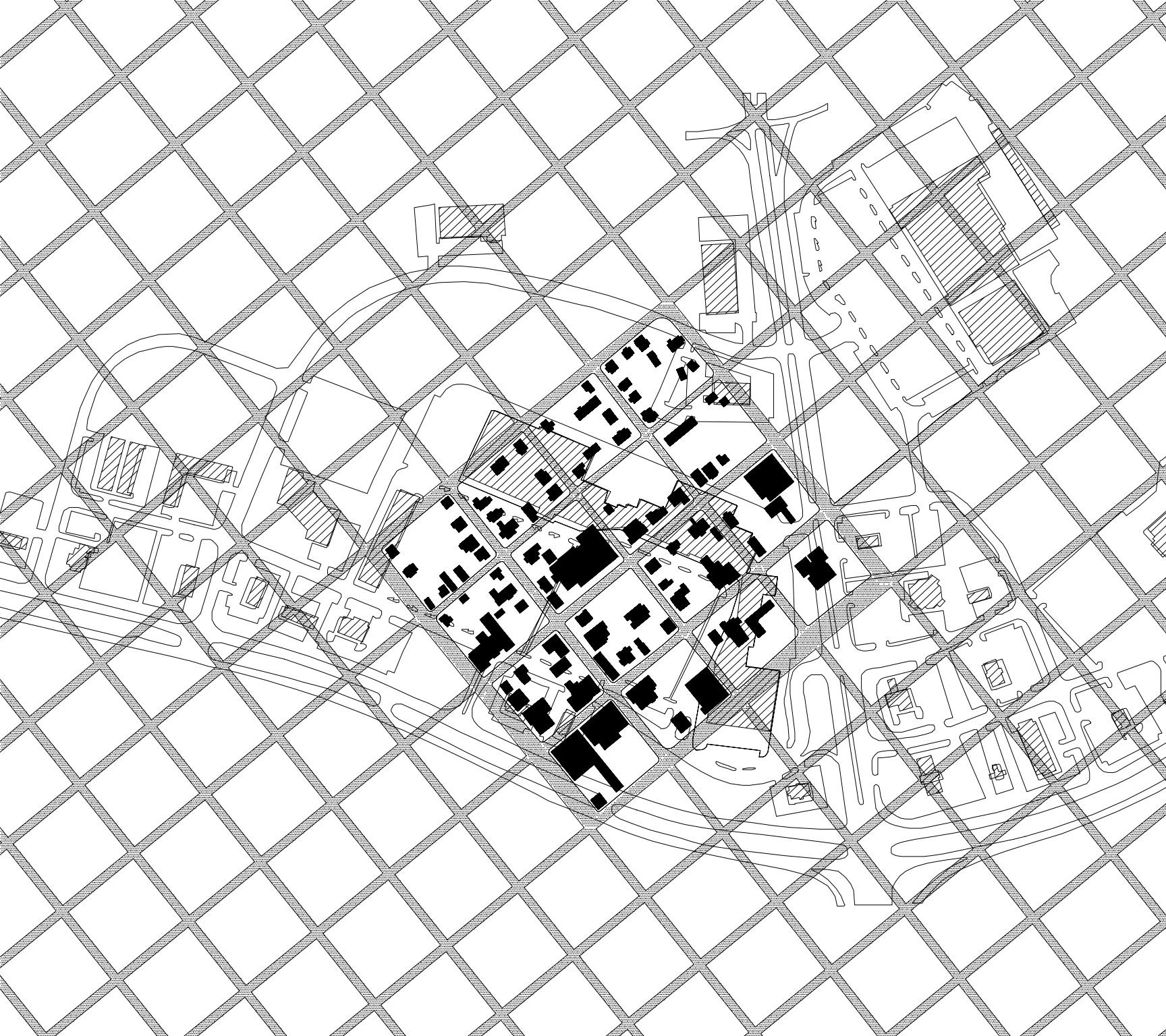
Long Island Duckling (Venturi, 1972)



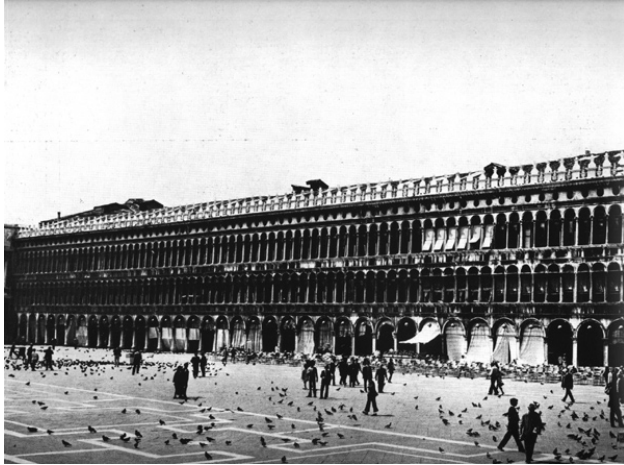
Scale

The issue of scale is perhaps the most significant issue to be addressed in this suburban retail realm. By comparing the spatial qualities of the Market Place to the qualities of other urban environments, a better sense of the scale of this development can be perceived. The introduction of other urban conditions into this plan provides a measuring stick to what exists in this environment.

When compared to the size and scale of the local established towns, the immensity of the Market Place development is revealed. Shown is a layover of the Blacksburg town grid on the plan of the Market Place. Differences in size, density, order, and spatial definition are clearly indicated. The town is an easily negotiated comfortable place, either on foot or by car, because its scale is such that one knows and understands his or her place in the world. A quality exists in the town that allows you to relate to the buildings and spaces in a meaningful way whether large or small. The scale problem at the Market Place exists in its act of ignoring the human influences. Michael Benedikt writes that “...*human scale is not a matter of sheer size of things relative to ourselves, but of the effect we can have upon them. Whereas inhuman scale is a quality of places and systems that are oblivious to our existence...*” The parking lot is just such an







Piazza San Marco (Samona, 1970)



inhuman place. Benedikt continues: *"Whereas we may or may not have an effect on our environment, we always expect to have an effect on ourselves through a sensed changed relation to a fixed and real world. ...One senses oneself through the environment"* (Benedikt, 1982). This "effectualness" of built form is what enables one to interact with an environment in a real and meaningful way and what is desperately lacking in the buildings and spaces of the Market Place.

An even more telling example of these characteristics can be observed in the figure at the left which shows the Market Place layered over a plan of the city of Venice with Piazza San Marco centered on the parking lot. Amidst the experience of the dense fabric of the city, the space of Piazza San Marco seems large. Seen against the parking lot of the Market Place shopping center, the piazza appears somewhat insignificant. A walk from San Marco to the Grand Canal is filled with a variety of spatial experiences and building engagement and therefore never seems to be a great burden. A walk across the parking lot, although perhaps shorter in distance in places, would never be attempted. The perception of the size and "oblivious" nature of the space is simply too overwhelming because of the lack of scaled architectural elements providing spatial definition and safe convenient pedestrian space to move within. Perhaps an attempt to reduce the size perception of the space could be achieved by paying attention to the existing items in the parking lot landscape such as trees, signage and light poles and organizing and designing them to articulate the space and give it a human scale.

Scale, as Benedikt points out, is not about size but about our senses and how we relate to spaces. One perceives different spaces relative to each other. A large open space, such as Piazza San Marco, is not overwhelming because we can measure ourselves against it through the experience of the surrounding spaces. A variation of experiences heightens our awareness of all the conditions whereas in the open parking lot located in the open strip environment, nothing exists to allow for those variable experiences. The open spaces of the American city are only successful if

they can be experienced as a part of an overall sensual experience that reveals varied spatial conditions. These variable conditions provide that “effect on ourselves” Benedikt discusses and allows for experiences where one can understand the built world and sense their existence within it.

In addition to the urban space scale issues, the hand-to-object scale issue must also be addressed. The strip center generally ignores this scale in favor of design focused on the moving auto. The buildings never seem to step down to the personal level to allow for one to interact in any way with what is built. The abstract box, scaled to the passing auto, never seems to be anything more than an abstract construction dropped onto its site. There seems to be little, outside of the automobile itself, that is sized to the human touch and feel. The sparseness of materiality and textures is almost inevitable in this type of construction where the least expensive, least expressive materials are used by designers who negate their design possibilities and ignore the use of any design details which might heighten their usefulness for spatial definition and expression. These details, if conscientiously considered and designed could allow simple materials to become more. To make the built environment more user-friendly and humanly scaled.

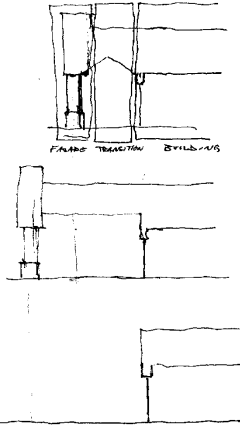


- | FACADE | TRANSITION | BUILDING |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCALED TO PARKING AUTO • PROVIDES SPACE FOR SIGNAGE • COLUMNS HOLLOW-BUILT UP TO SCALE OF SIGNAGE • SIGNAGE LARGER THAN AUTO • SHIELDS STOREFRONTS FROM DIRECT SUNLIGHT • ATTACHED TO Bldg - NOT PART OF IT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TOO SHALLOW TO ALLOW FOR LENGTHWISE MOVEMENT ALONG FRONT OF BUILDING • TOO SHALLOW TO ALLOW FOR ANY "TRANSITION" (APPROX. 1.2 SECONDS TO WALK FROM OUTSIDE TO INSIDE) • NOTHING TO PROMOTE INTERACTION B/WN PEOPLE • EVERY MOVE Caters TO IDEA OF SPEED - QUICK IN/OUT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FRONT OF BUILDING REDUCED TO SINGLE PLANE OF GLASS. • 4'-5" PARTS THE ENTIRE LENGTH WITH NO DIFFERENTIATION • BUILDING PURELY FUNCTIONAL w/o SPATIAL CONSIDERATIONS • COLUMNS TO DEFINE SPACES • CHANGE IN FLOOR : CEILING HGTs • SCULPTING SPACES • LIFTING • ENTRANCES NO DIFFERENT THAN STOREFRONT - ONE WALL |

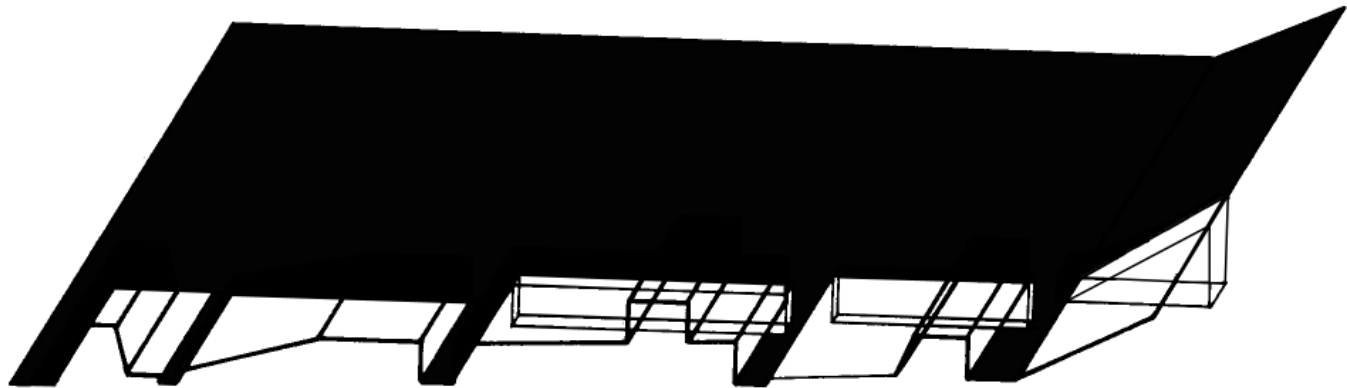
NOT A PLACE TO BE; JUST IN/OUT



Field Observations



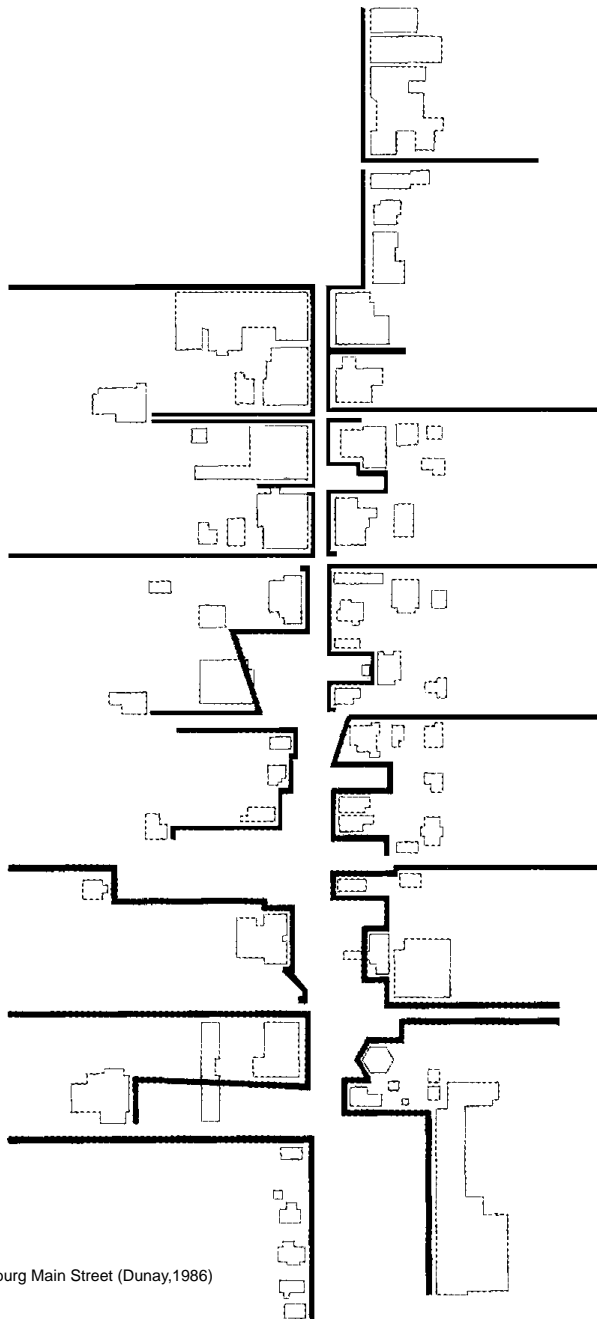
The lack of consideration to the reduction in scale from automobile to pedestrian is made clear by a look at the entrance conditions shown. The transition space from outside to inside, and consequently from inside to outside, has been reduced to approximately eight feet from parked car to store interior. For this strip center, the arcade area lacks any spatial definition. The storefront is a flat continuous wall of glass without any recesses or entrance considerations. The columns, placed forty feet apart, are too distantly spaced to provide any definition. The space itself is not wide enough to allow a door to open while a person passes by without forcing the passerby out from under cover.



Blacksburg Storefronts (Dunay, 1986)

A look at the entrances on Main Street in Blacksburg reveals a much more human consideration to the movement in and out of an establishment. The entrances, rather than being placed at the outermost facade line, are stepped back into the volume of the building allowing for cover and spatial compression before entering the building. This space becomes a place that belongs both to the street and to the business and allows one to pause out of the movement of people and cars before moving into the building. It also provides spatial articulation for the street and sidewalk as well as the building itself. Conversely, the arcade space of the strip center seems to exist as an item attached to the front of the building simply to allow a place for signage rather than acting as a transitional element within the building composition that may allow for multiple uses and spatial conditions. This same variety of sidewalk experiences at the building entrance scale is also evidenced at the street scale where variable sized openings exist giving different spatial experiences during the trip down Main Street.



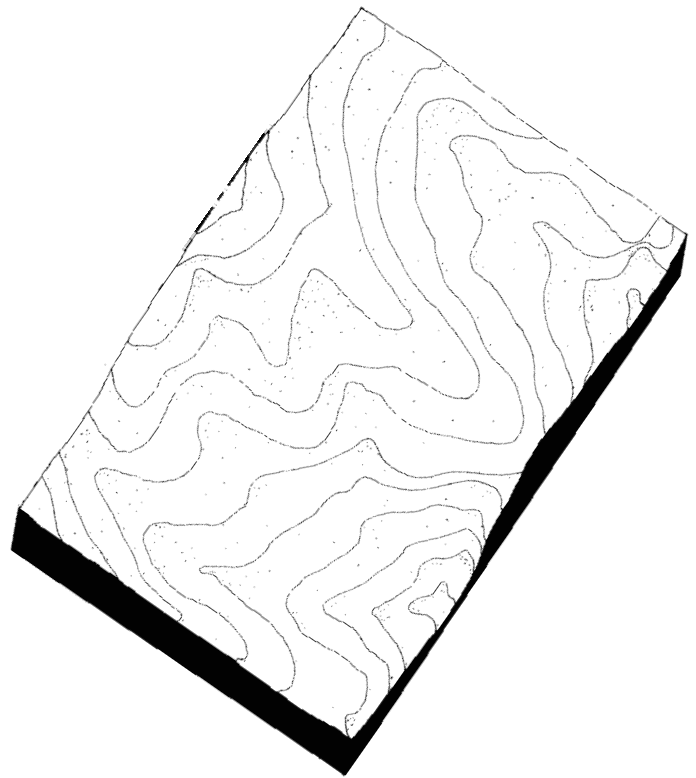


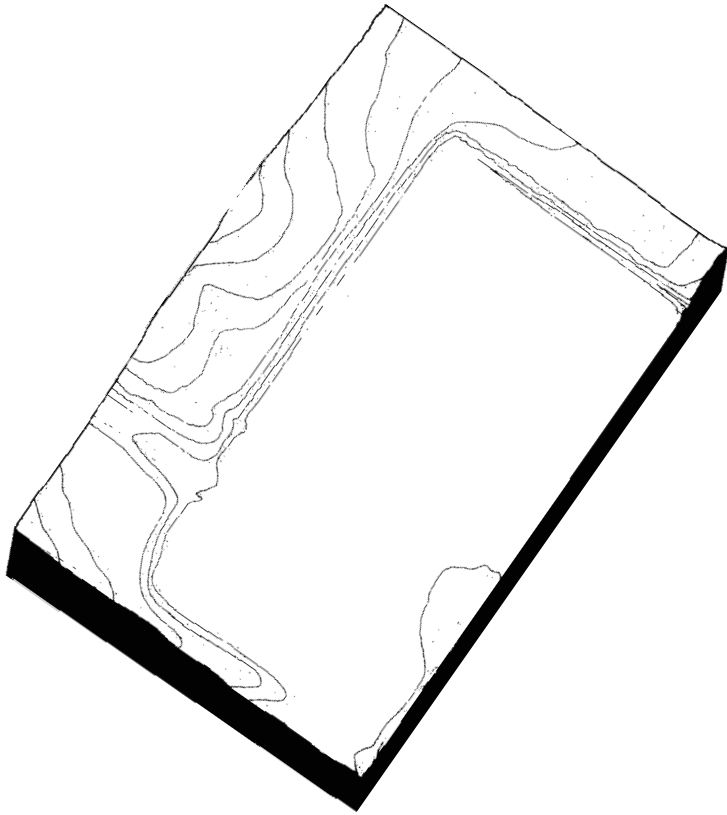
Blacksburg Main Street (Dunay,1986)



Land

Before development took place for the New River Valley Mall and the Market Place Shopping Center, the area existed as the Arboretum for Virginia Tech and consisted of rolling hills covered with different forms of planned and unplanned vegetation. The photos give an indication of the shape of the land before development took place. The rolling hills fit the nature of the existing undeveloped topography throughout the region. Once construction started, the land was forever altered. The topographic cut-aways show how the “cut and fill” process of site development removed the existing hills and filled the existing valleys to allow for a flat site for building. The natural bowl shape of the topography still exists around the outer rim of the development, however the undulations of the site within this bowl have been removed. Each site has been individually flattened to allow construction of buildings which sit on separate flat slabs without relation to the land or the site in general. Whether for economic reasons or perhaps simply poor design, this method of building is repeated over and over again in this built environment. The complete disregard for the existing natural conditions is perhaps the biggest design opportunity lost. By building to reveal or enhance the existing terrain and/or environmental conditions, an architecture could have been conceived that would have a relationship to the place in which it resides. A spatial experience of the place could have been achieved. Now, with removal of any local or immediate environmental conditions, the place becomes any-place or perhaps no place. This strip center could be sitting in Nebraska, Florida, or Utah. The existing design shows no relation to any site specific factors and therefore has no chance of developing a sense of place that comes with an architecture that reveals the site in its world.





It is this revealing of the natural site in its world, the development of humanly scaled meaningful spaces and the recognition of a locally based culture that are fundamental to the making of the art of architecture and are what is so severely lacking in these placeless, characterless developments found in our present day commercial districts. For man to dwell within his environment, many important issues must be addressed. The retail realm of the current middle landscape, as seen through this site investigation, ignores those issues and reduces the multi-dimensional human being to a one-dimensional consumer. With a new approach to the middle landscape, recognizing it as a viable, evolving settlement pattern and addressing the issues of place, a certain poetic can and should be conceived.

A n A r c h i t e

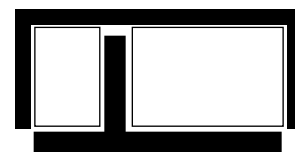
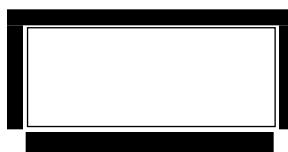
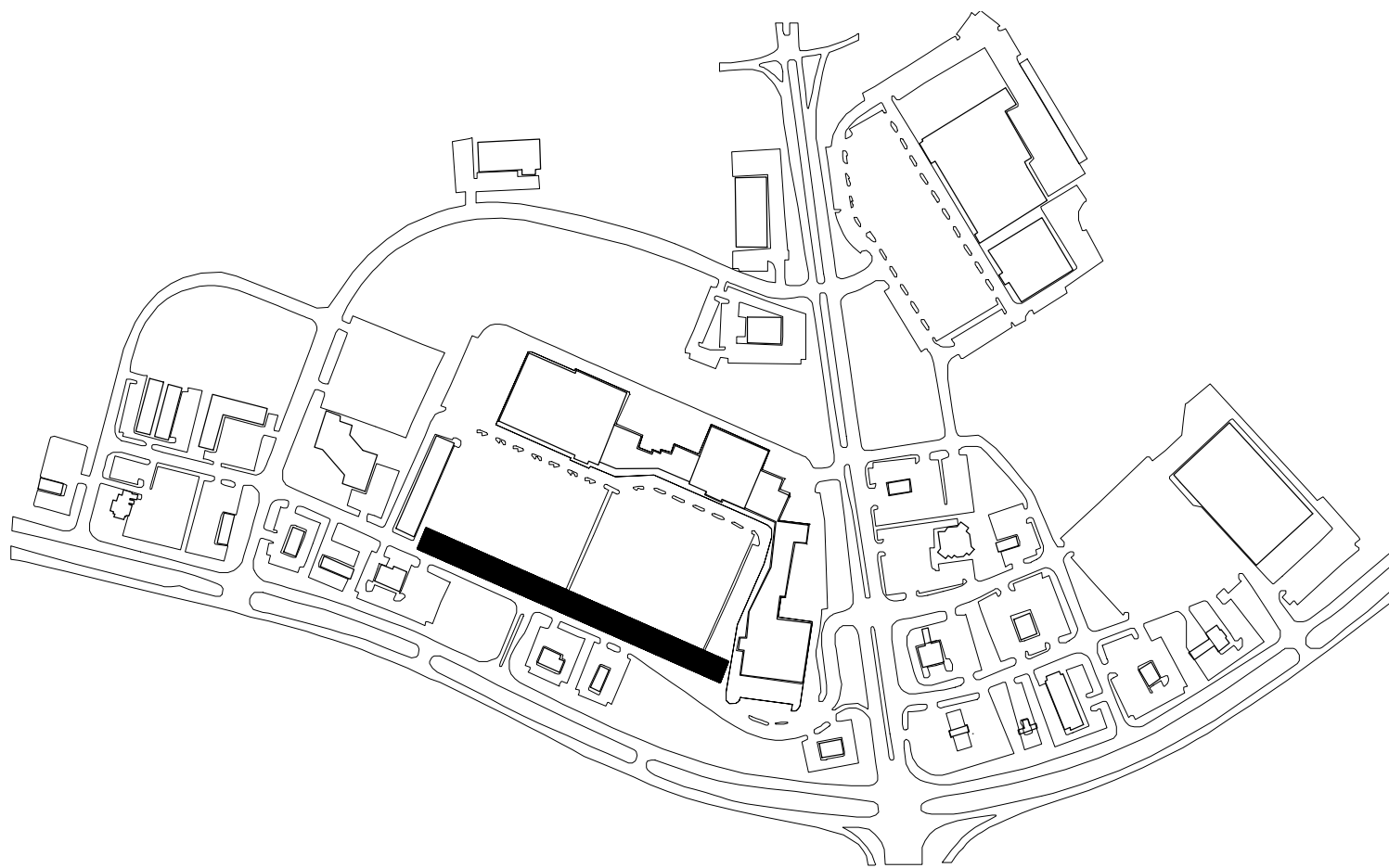
c t u r a l i n t e r v e n t i o n

"Today, questioning past habits and exploring new ways of thinking and making is fundamental. The nature of being, the order of our cultural reality and the nature of our institutions is open to inquiry. This questioning at all scales should involve the individual as well as the institution. An ontology of institutions as a fundamental reconsideration is being written by our society in the dreams and proposals for new public programs. As yet unformulated, new ideas and new technologies may lead to new institutions. The self-assured certainty of monumental classical expression is giving way to tentative expressions of openness, uncertainty and new freedoms."

Steven Holl

The above paragraph, written by the architect Steven Holl in the GA Architect issue covering his work, reveals a modern day architect addressing modern day issues with a modern day approach.

The current American middle landscape is rooted in the history and culture of this country and, in that sense, is a legitimate form of settlement. The problems that have arisen within that landscape exist because designers, developers, government officials, and the public in general have not attempted to hold on to the principles of place while developing new ways of dealing with the rapidly changing world in which they live. To deal with this environment, new ways of thinking and doing must be explored as a means of reaching a poetic for this middle landscape. New institutions may be required - they may not - but what is fundamental to solving the issues faced in the new American city is the evolution of thought. The fundamental approaches to architecture when applied to the modern day city can perhaps achieve success that will allow the buildings and spaces to become more. Inherent difficulties exist, but fresh thoughts, or perhaps more importantly new applications of age-old principles, along with strong actions can make a difference.



The New River Valley, as a developed region, is without a focus. Certainly the natural beauty of the region provides a focus for its inhabitants, but the built environment, in its current state of expansion, appears to lack any organizing principle and no hub of activity and vitality seems to exist for the people of the region. Blacksburg seems to center its attention on its large university and its inhabitants appear to have little in common with the rest of the region. Christiansburg, although it is a county seat, lacks any of the civic presence that should accompany that prominent function. Radford, another university town, is geographically removed from the other towns and its ties seem to be more to the outlying areas of the region.

To provide the focus that is lacking in the region, organizationally and functionally, the proposal attempts to develop the Market Place/New River Valley Mall area as a regional center. With the current intensity of commercial

construction in this area, the addition of civic function coupled with a development strategy of densification of the developed land would make this area a distinctive part of the region and bring the region together as a whole. The proposal concentrates on the design of a mixed-use development that provides increased spatial and functional densities while at the same time attempting to give the area a focus and an ordering not previously in existence. Recognizing the issues innate to this built condition such as individual property rights and dominance of automobile usage, the proposal applies the principles of design to the architectural project in an attempt to achieve built form that is the essence of architecture - the making of place.

The initial architectural concept determined that a civic presence must be given to the area to make it more than a commercial district. Development of this concept leads to the proposal of a large civic hall to allow for a variety of functions such as community meetings or other regionally based events and to bring the different groups within the region together in a central hub of activity. The associated functions within the development would include: business offices, both public and private, to provide day time activity; retail establishments, some already present - new ones proposed; a recreational center, located in an existing empty building, providing day and evening activity; and new movie theatres, also located in an existing empty shell on the project site.

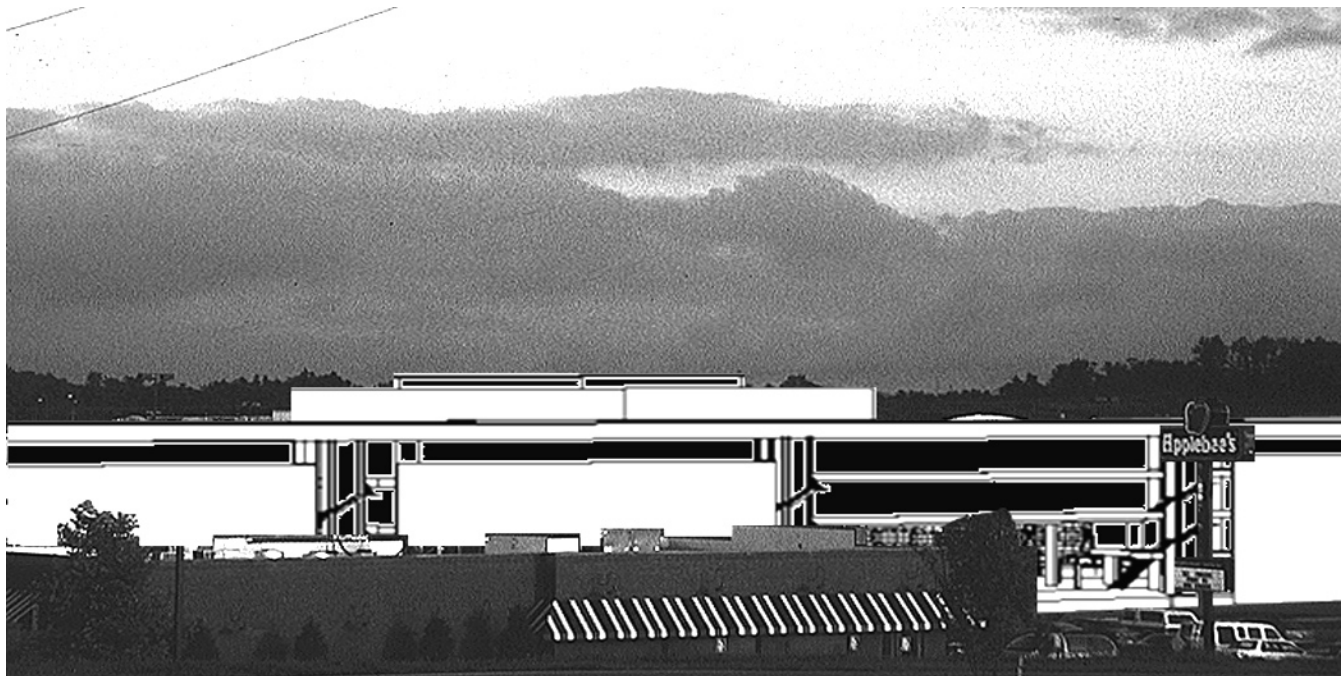
The issue of scale, as seen in the site analysis, is perhaps the most important design consideration for work in this realm. An initial strategy of relating the building to both the automobile world and the pedestrian world with spaces of various size and scale became an important determinant in development of the design concept. The building's form evolved from this basic idea and the final design reflects these concerns.



The overall arrangement of the building takes on a linear form, similar to the existing nature of buildings in this condition, except that this building performs more than a retail function. It defines a precinct within which the civic hall sits and activities take place. The continuous wall stands in juxtaposition to the natural environment and the disparate arrangement of existing buildings and is a form that brings them together, ordering the landscape and increasing the awareness of both the natural and built environments. This move, while a strong broad stroke insertion into the landscape, maintains a constant silent rhythm, through the use of architectural elements, that assists in the ordering of the built landscape. The wall, made up of individual units grouped into a collective whole, acts as a “backdrop” to the active landscape of cars and commercial establishments and also becomes the key piece in the composition that allows the building to effectively relate to the scale of the passing motorist heading to West Virginia and the pedestrian shopping for shoes. The building relates, functionally and formally, to the entire region while at the same time allowing individuals to feel comfortable going about their daily lives.







The building, inserted as it is into the existing landscape, provides an important missing layer. The current visual experience is confusing in the sense that a comfortable reading of the environment cannot take place. A clarity is provided and a new space/time relationship is established between people and their environment that allows for a sense of awareness of where you are relative to other things and spaces in the landscape.





The new inserted layer can provide an edge that defines the spaces of the environment. The arrangement of building elements provides a backdrop rhythm and order that is presently lacking and allows one to experience the building's presence even without moving off the highway and coming in direct contact with the immediate building spaces.

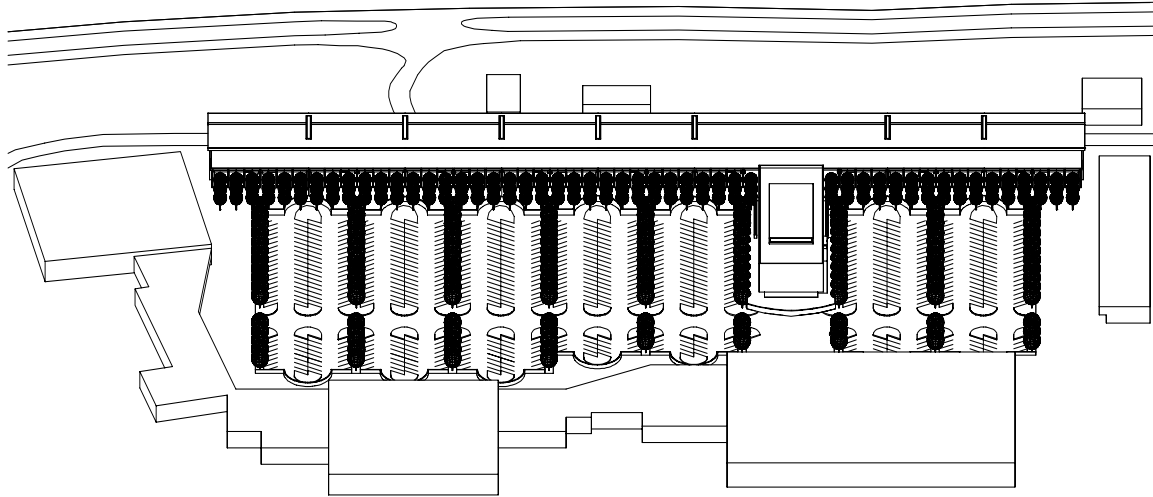


As seen from the direction of the new main entrance into the area, the built form relates to the scale of the natural environment while also providing an order to the existing built world. The long straight roof line supported by the office block fuses together the two different worlds into one reading.



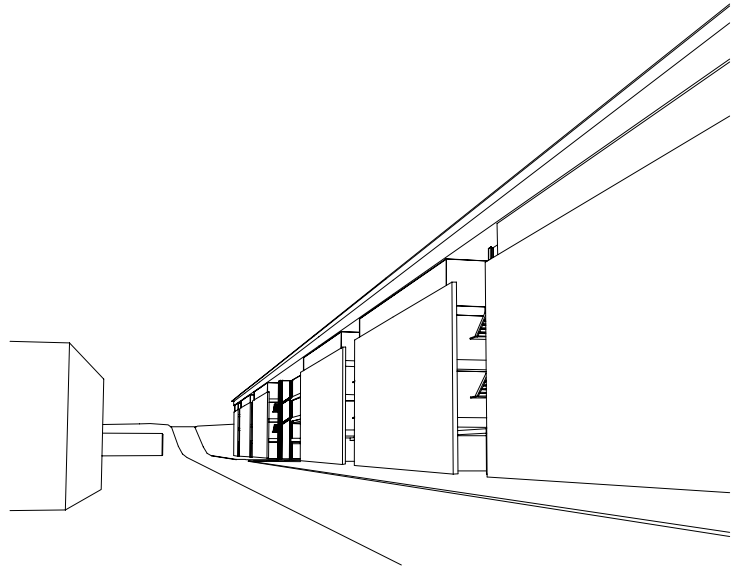
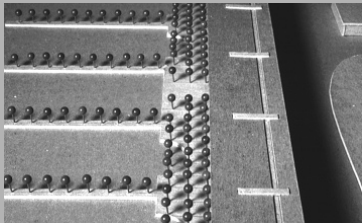
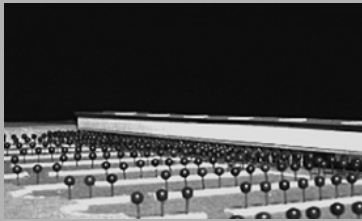
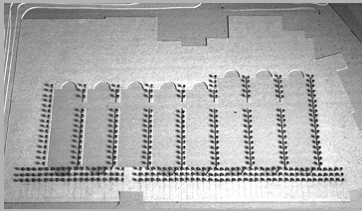
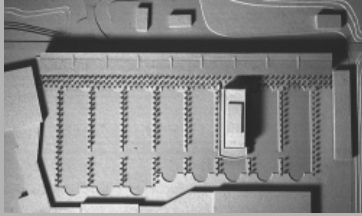


The building provides spatial definition and order to the immediate site and the area as a whole. It is placed into an existing condition without replacing or disrupting any of the existing businesses or roadways working completely within the limits of existing private property boundaries.

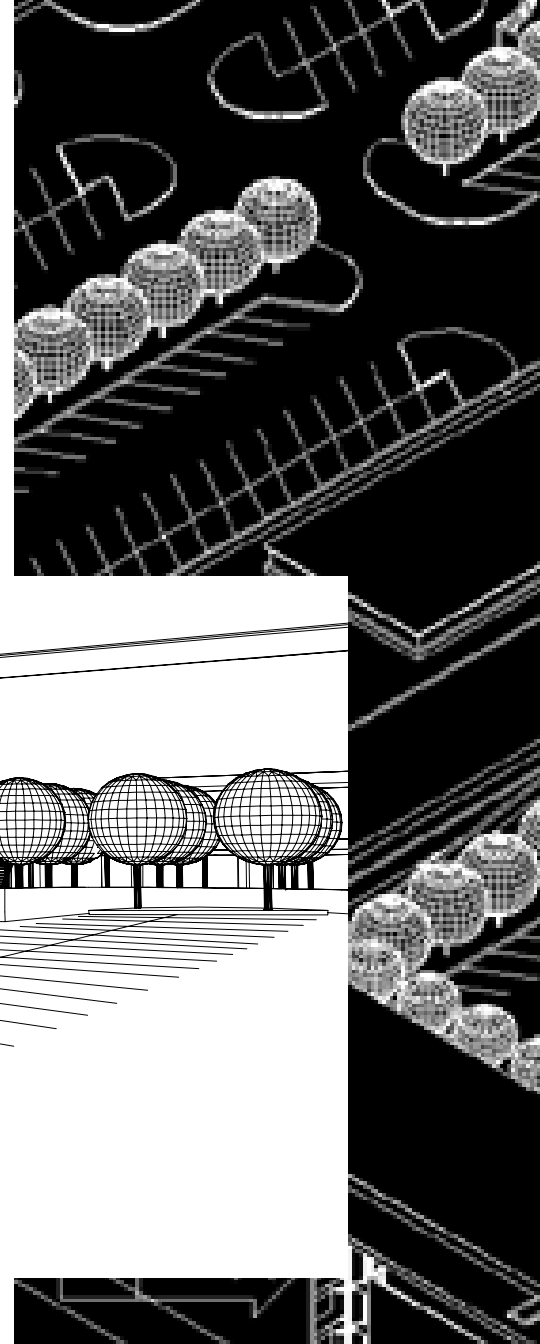
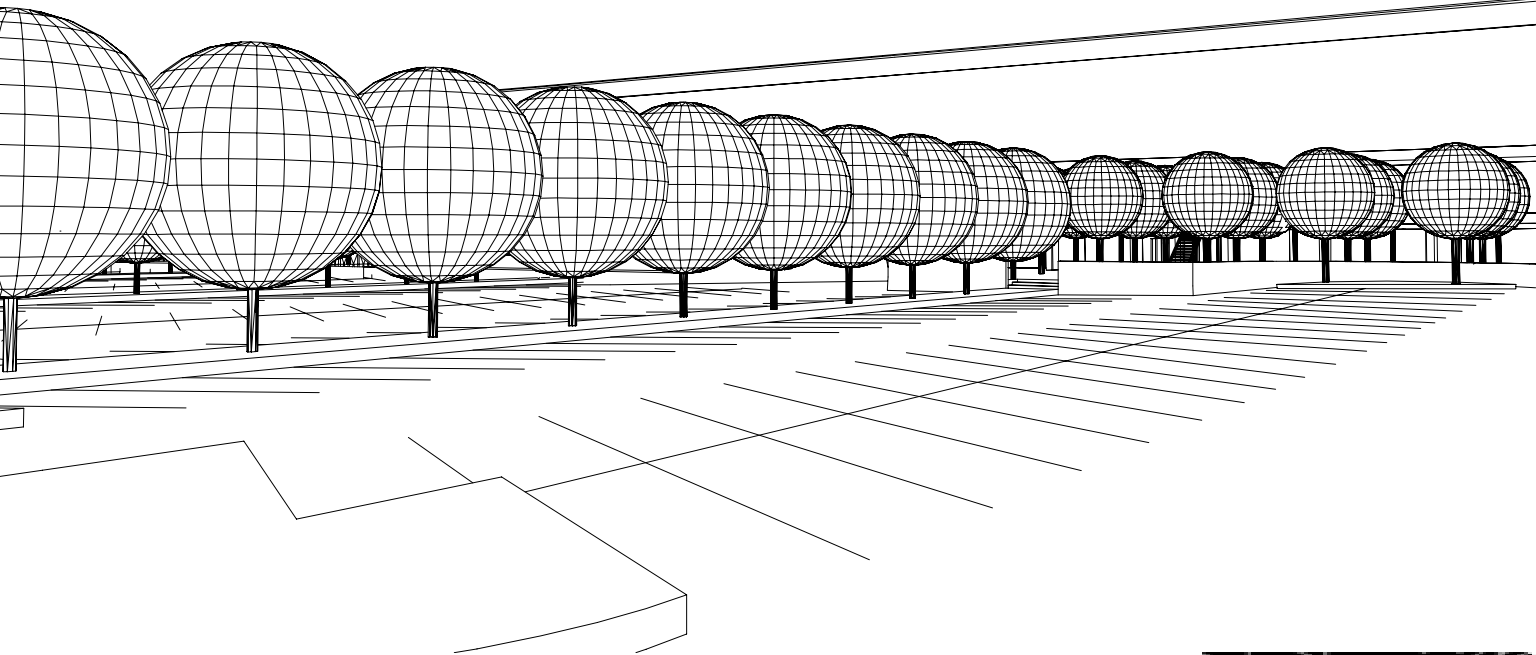


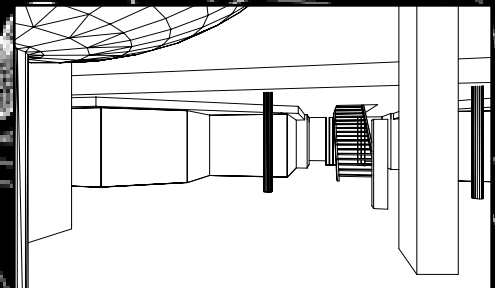
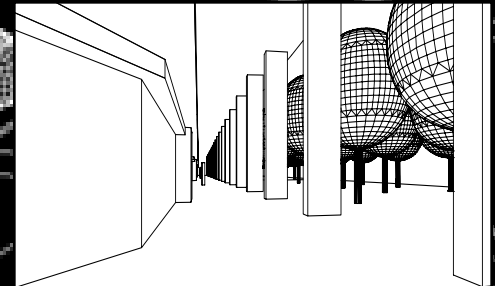
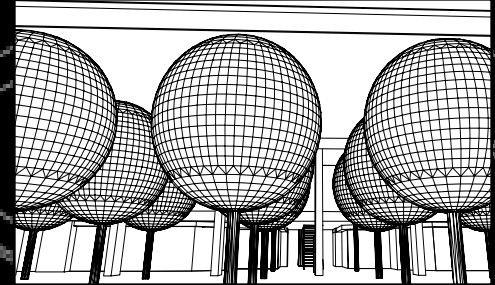
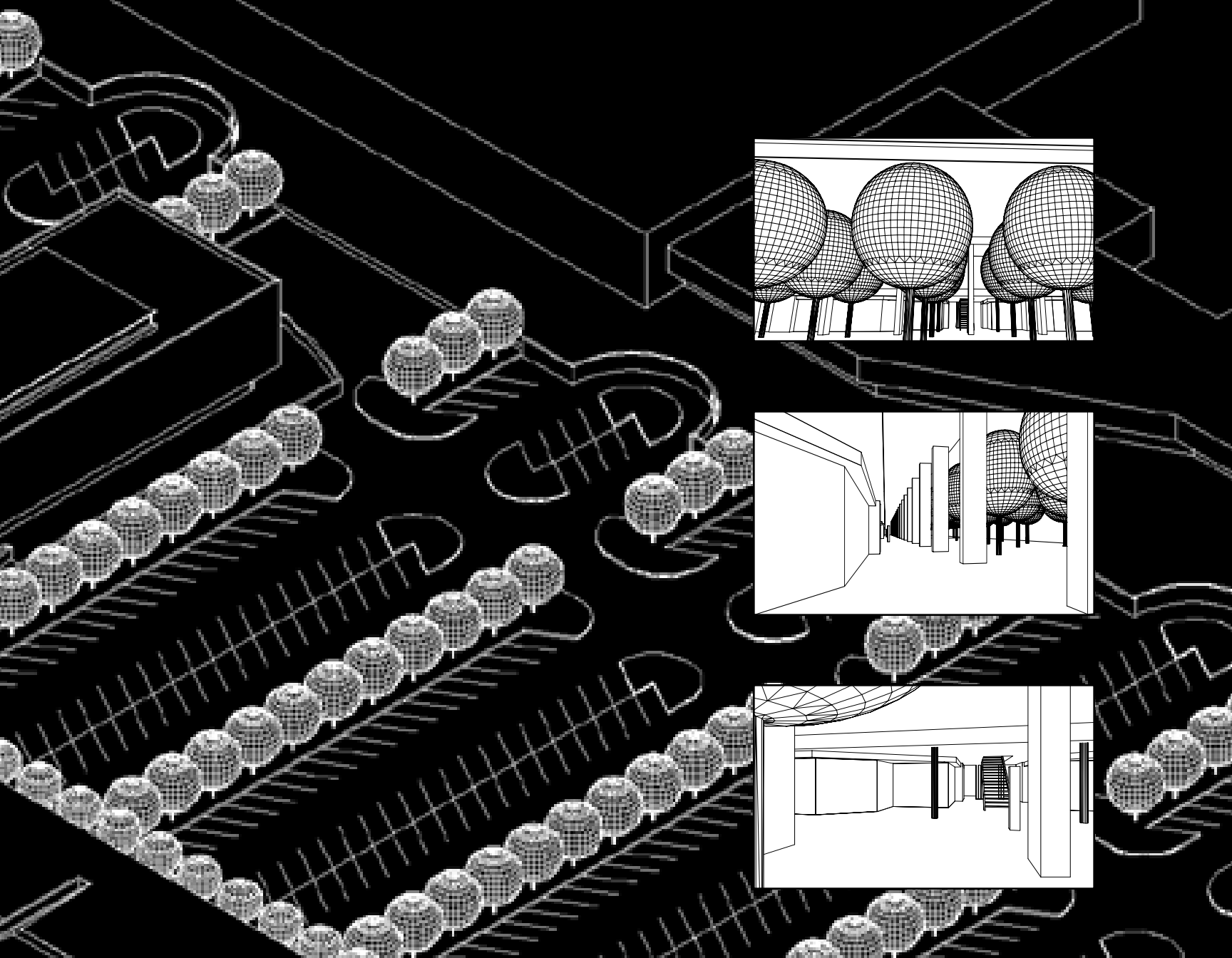
The parking lot, a most important piece to any design within this built environment, becomes more than simply open parking spaces. It becomes a part of the sequence of moving from the highway into the building. The parking lot participates in the reduction of scale by being arranged to provide intermediately sized spaces mediating between the wide open highway and the building's smaller more intimate spaces. The layout of the parking lot is tied directly into the form of the building to allow the participation in the two different modes of movement to be experienced as one whole experience. The automobile has not been removed from the composition, but has been actively engaged as an important form-giver to the development. Harvey Rubenstein tells us in his book Pedestrian Malls, Streetscapes, and Urban Spaces, that the presence of the automobile creates a certain vitality that is important for the success of small businesses and that allowing the auto into the pedestrian mall

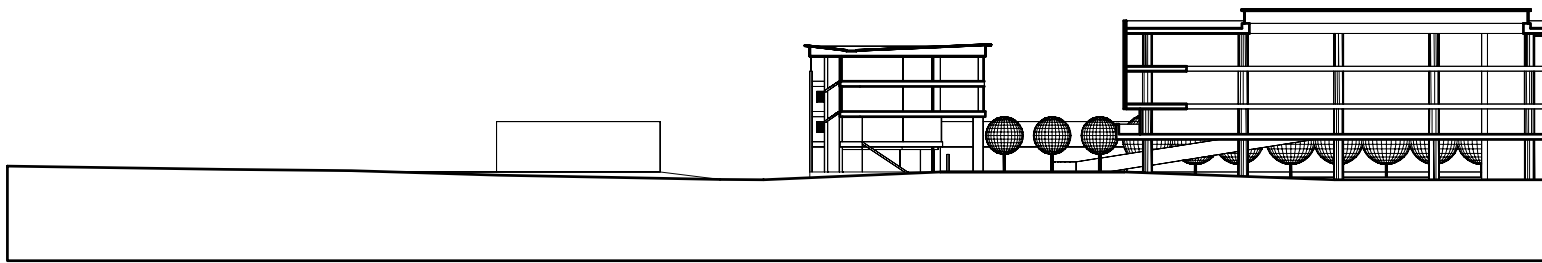
space actually increases pedestrian volume (Rubenstein, 1992). This inclusion of the automobile in the design of modern day spaces helps avoid the difficulties that are experienced by a designer when it is forgotten, and leads to a more complete realistic design concept.

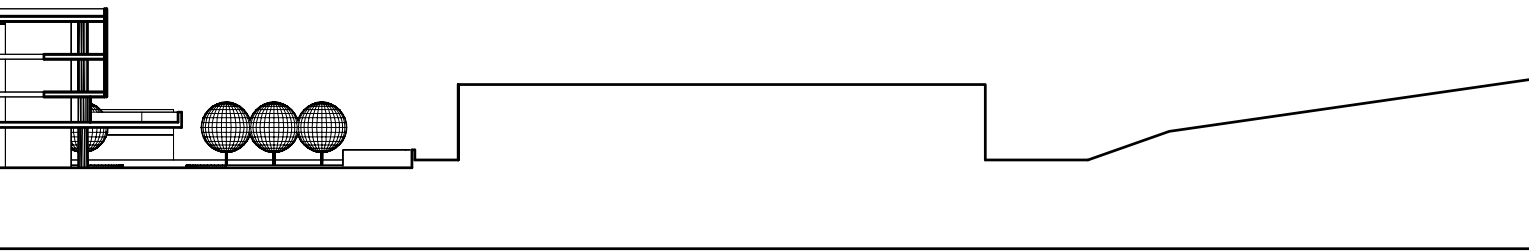


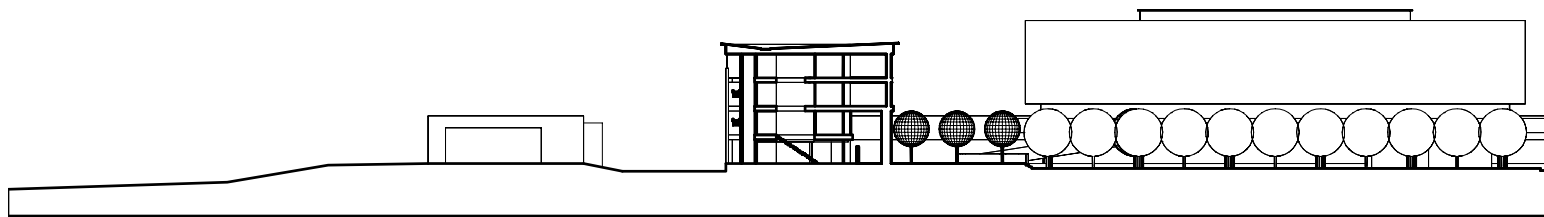
The spatial experience of moving from highway to building entrance is the main consideration for the building's design. The spatial defining elements are active participants in the reduction of scale necessary for an active engagement between people and the built environment.

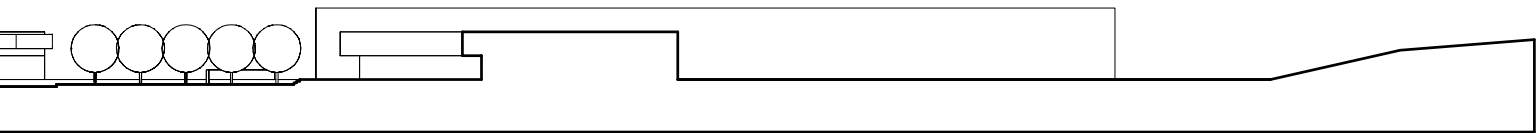




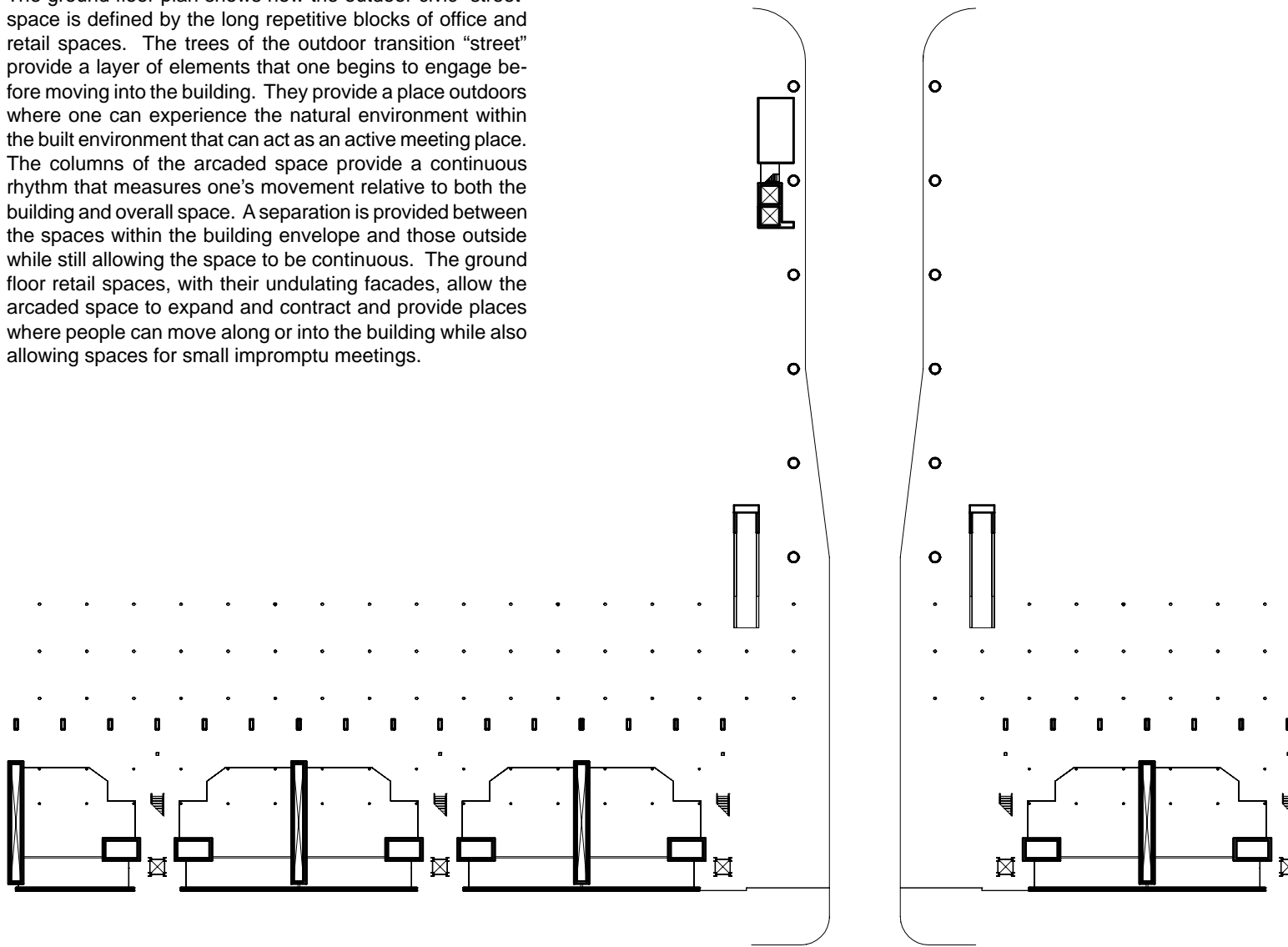


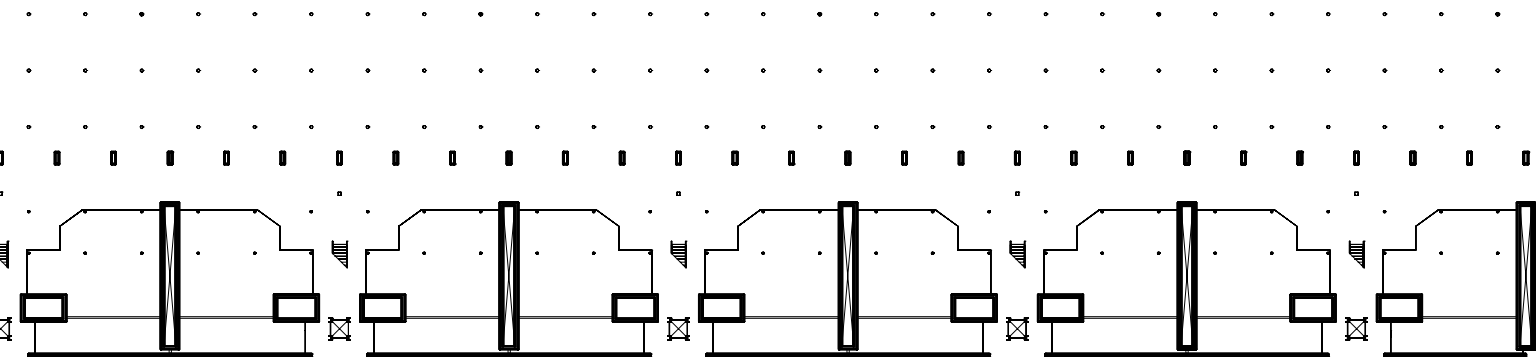
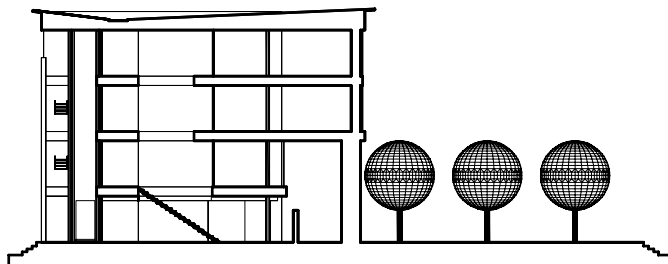
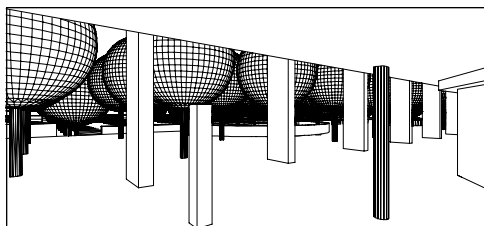




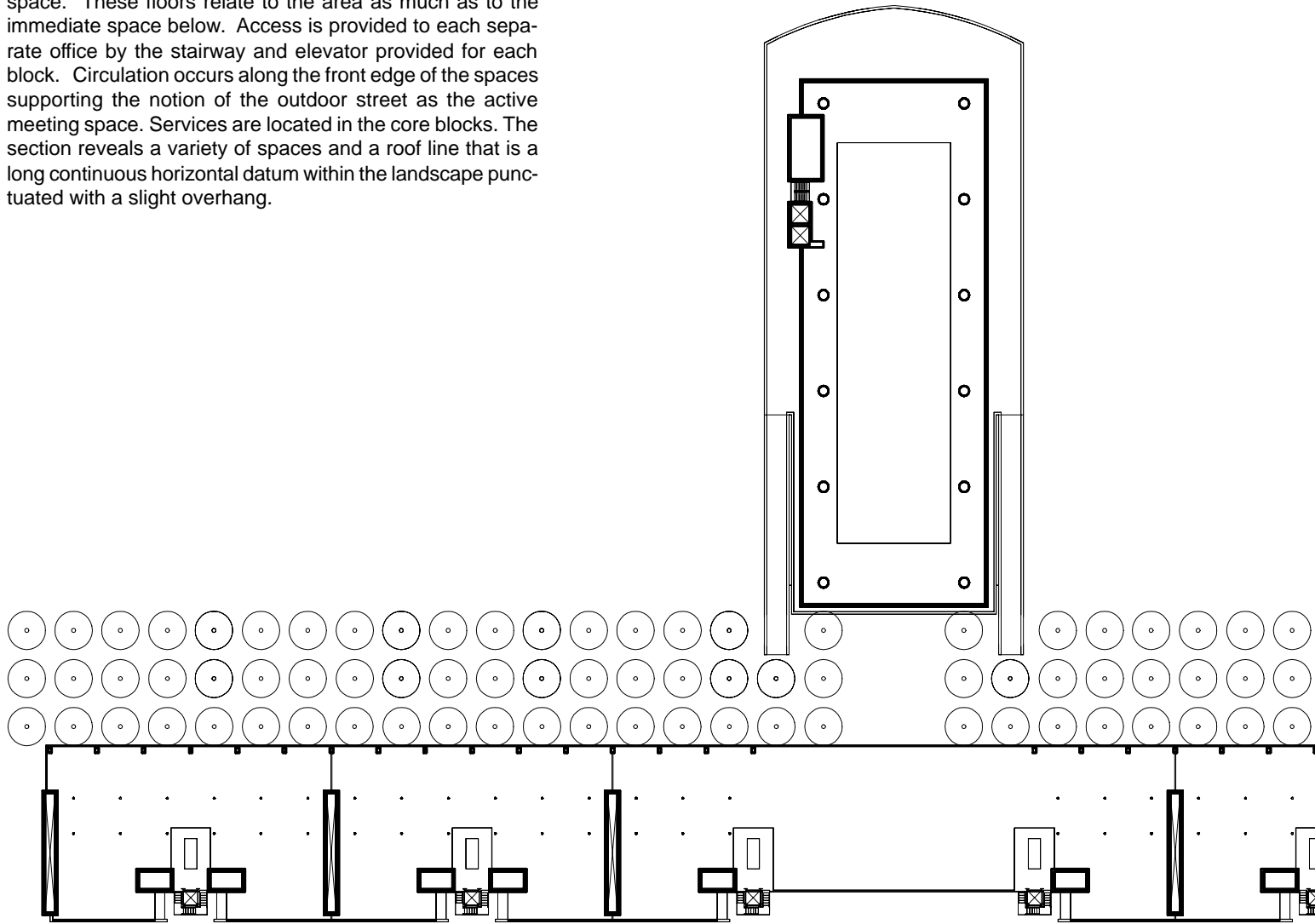


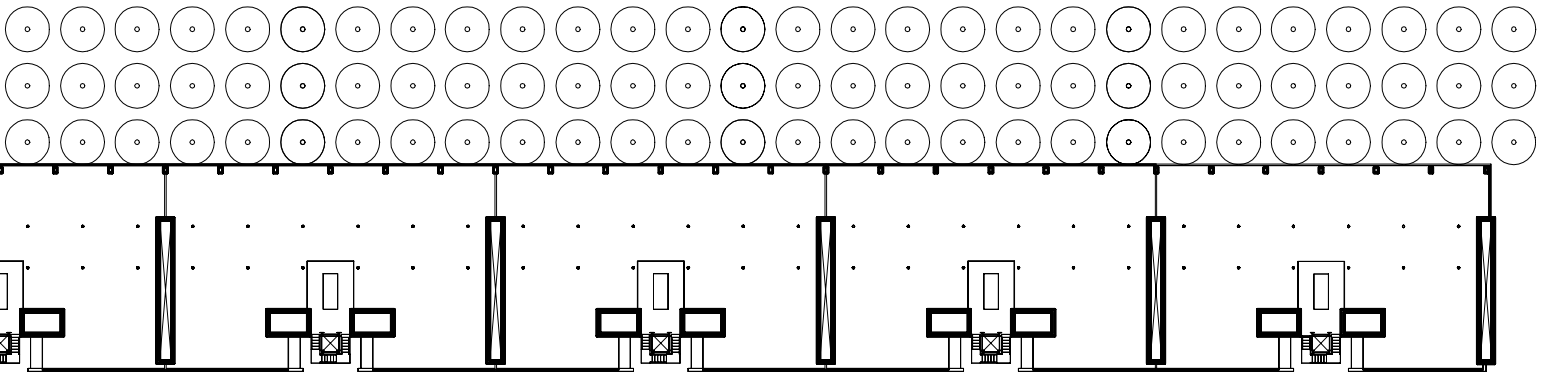
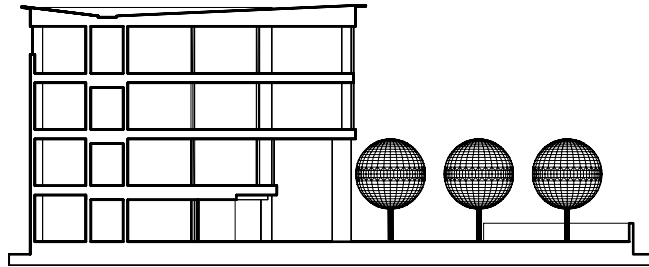
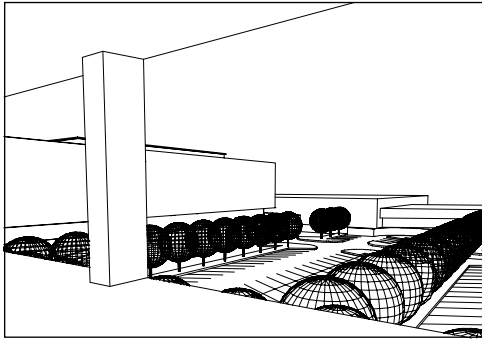
The ground floor plan shows how the outdoor civic “street” space is defined by the long repetitive blocks of office and retail spaces. The trees of the outdoor transition “street” provide a layer of elements that one begins to engage before moving into the building. They provide a place outdoors where one can experience the natural environment within the built environment that can act as an active meeting place. The columns of the arcaded space provide a continuous rhythm that measures one’s movement relative to both the building and overall space. A separation is provided between the spaces within the building envelope and those outside while still allowing the space to be continuous. The ground floor retail spaces, with their undulating facades, allow the arcaded space to expand and contract and provide places where people can move along or into the building while also allowing spaces for small impromptu meetings.





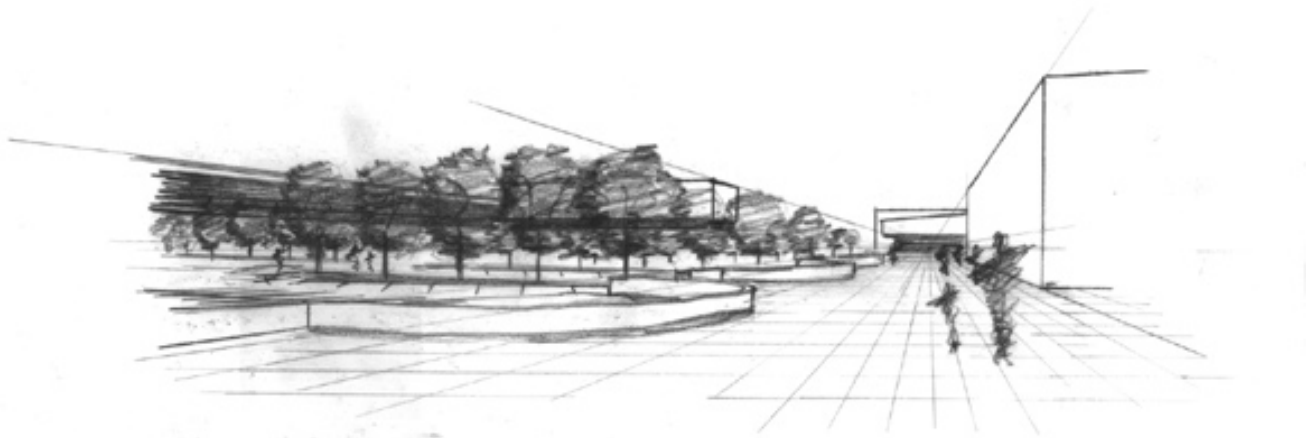
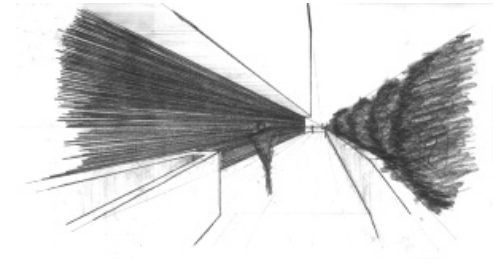
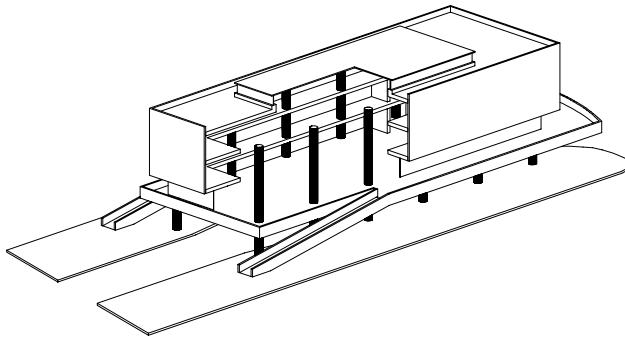
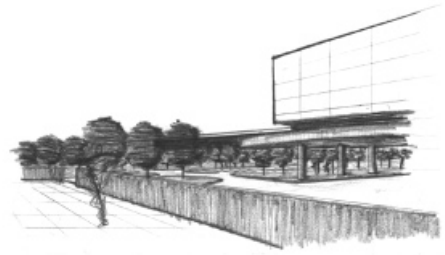
The upper floors of the building are designed as a long row of individual office spaces facing and defining the public space. These floors relate to the area as much as to the immediate space below. Access is provided to each separate office by the stairway and elevator provided for each block. Circulation occurs along the front edge of the spaces supporting the notion of the outdoor street as the active meeting space. Services are located in the core blocks. The section reveals a variety of spaces and a roof line that is a long continuous horizontal datum within the landscape punctuated with a slight overhang.

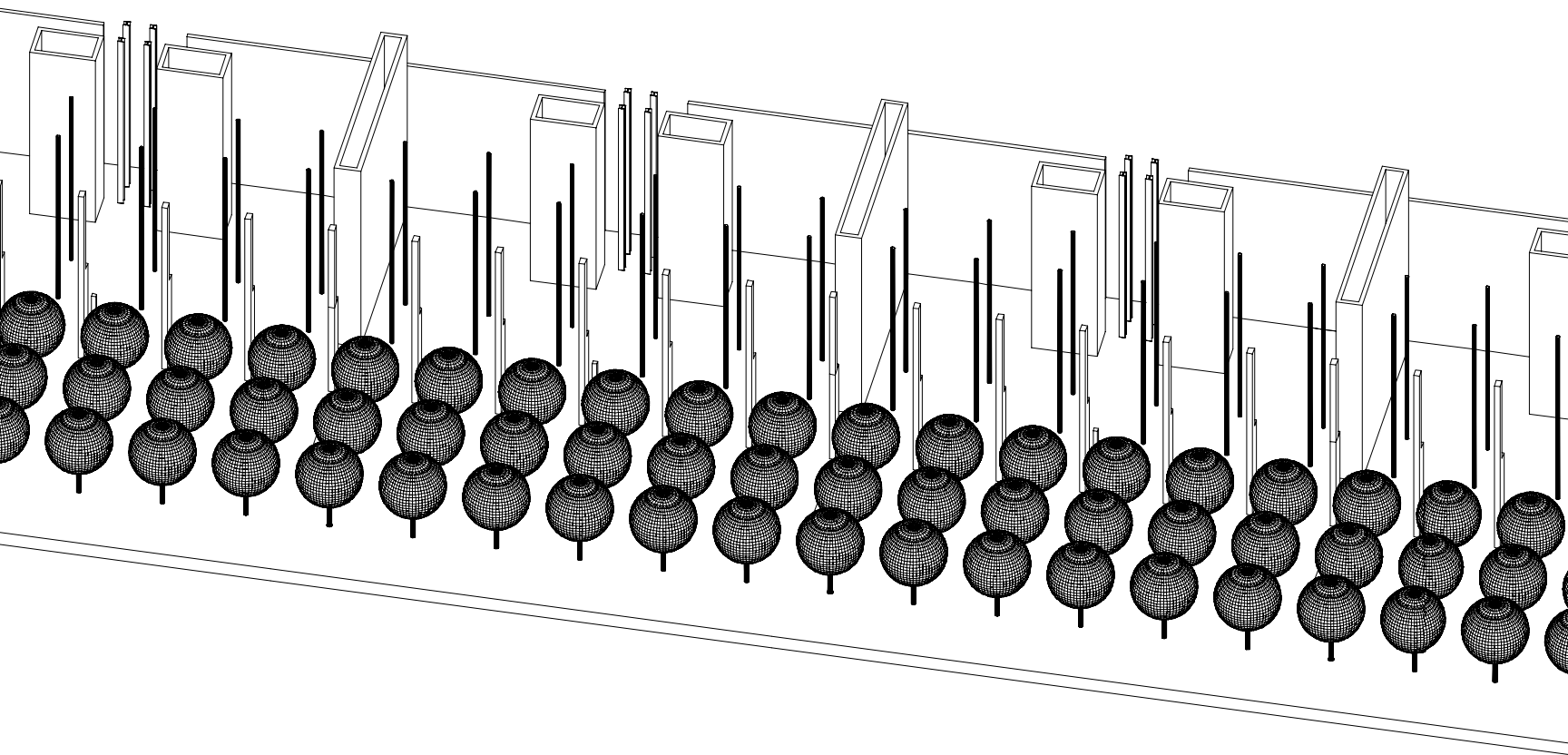


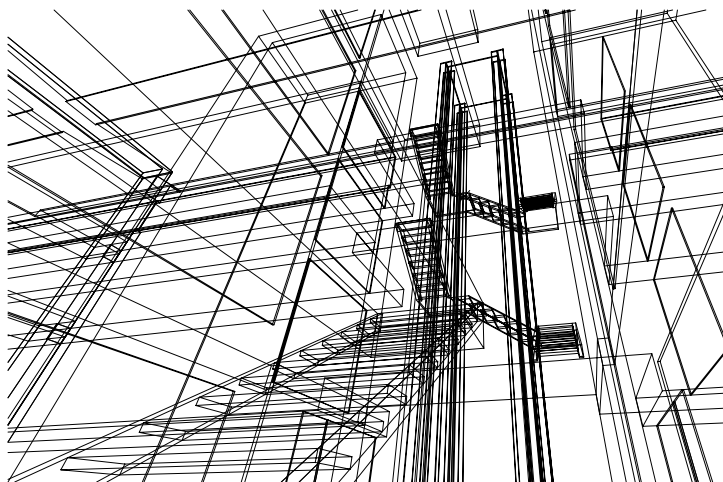
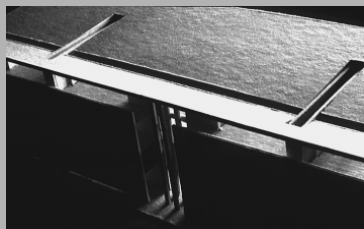


The civic hall functionally provides a place for the region to come together for any variety of activities. Formally, the mass of the large hall provides spatial definition to the parking lot by separating the spaces into two different large scale spaces. With the automobile entrance located beneath, the hall participates in the experience of moving from highway to building while allowing the pedestrian realm to be elevated above to the ramped "plaza".



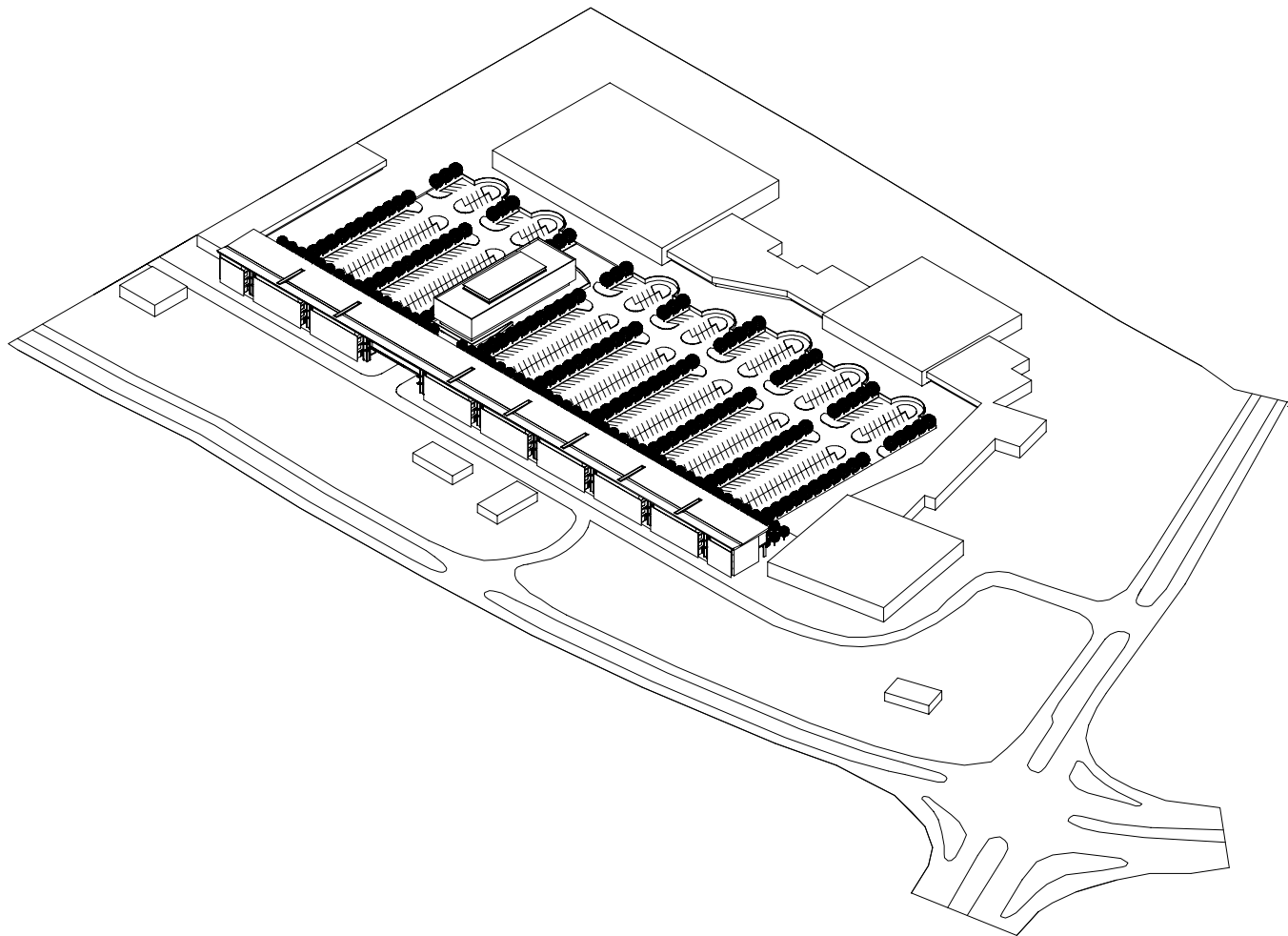






The building's vertical elements are the critical spatial defining pieces. Supporting the simplicity of the overall nature of the design, a clear structural hierarchy exists that allows for a simple reading of the building. Following this concept, assembly of the elements as well as the materials and methods of construction should be kept as straight forward and simple as possible. Steel and concrete block structure assembled using common detailing would be the appropriate choices in this economically aggressive environment.

The proposal's concept and design ideas are rooted in the investigations into the cultural, historical and environmental aspects of the place. Through these investigations, a meaningful understanding evolved that guided the design decisions throughout the design process. As with any architectural endeavor, many solutions are possible. The goal of this proposal, and the goal of any true earnest attempt at architecture, is the development of a sense of place. This sense of place results from architectural form that reveals an understanding of man within his world and gives dignity to his existence within that world. The American philosopher John Dewey wrote: "*Concepts and ideas are thin and ineffectual unless related to things which specifically enter into our lives...*" Most Americans of today live within an environment characterized by the conditions of the current middle landscape. The concept of place and the ideas proposed to achieve that sense of place are relevant to how we live our daily lives within this landscape - they are relevant to life in any landscape.



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