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Siebert: A Design for a Chapel for Subiaco Abbey

A DESIGN FOR A CHAPEL FOR SUBIACO ABBEY

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Abstract:

The Benedictine Abbey is a product of medieval thought and society; for centuries its architecture signified the cosmology and spirituality not only of the order but also of a widely accepted Christian worldview. Through the design of a Meditation Chapel for the Benedictine Abbey of Subiaco at Paris, Arkansas, this project explored the cultural meaning and technical execution of contemporary sacred architecture. Nearly a millennium ago, the skin and bones of Gothic structure and stained glass represented a sacred ideal. In the contemporary context, however, this research probed the possibilities of using systems (interior and exterior), particularly the design of the elevation and cladding of the chapel wall, to create a sacred space that could communicate spirituality through phenomenal and sensate qualities of site and materials in lieu of ancient symbol and sign.

The chapel represents the process of architectural design as a research inquiry through a series of interrelated investigations of site as a product of nature and time, of architectural expression as a poetic assemblage, of building skin and structure as biomorphic systems, and of building materials as conveyors of phenomenal qualities of space. These include (1,) generation of the cladding and structural systems through conceptual analog and analysis of an exemplary biological system, the beetle, through drawing exercises; (2,) directed study of Subiaco Abbey through phenomenological investigation documented in drawings; and (3,) comprehensive design of the chapel, including the integration of building systems. This comprehensive design in itself represents the cumulative discoveries of the research; together with the speculative process drawings through which the final design evolved, these design documents constitute the research program.

On a fundamental level this comprehensive project, executed as a capstone experience in the design studios that are integral to the professional program in architecture, demonstrated the mutually reinforcing relationship of technical knowledge, design facility, critical inquiry, and creative insight required of the architectural designer. More particularly, through the exploration of spirituality and sacred space, the research focuses attention on those formal and sensual characteristics of architecture from which it derives its popular meaning.

Premise:

The architecture of religious institutions has developed in parallel with that of all other institutions. Consequently during the past century, it has been shaped by the prevailing architectural ideologies of the modern era; religious architecture shares the same conventions of construction and technology that characterize secular buildings. Further modern architecture is defined largely by the reductive force of functionalism and by diminished economic will. Although there are notable exceptions, including such great works as Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple and E. Fay Jones's Thorncrown Chapel, contemporary churches and chapels are distinguished only by vestigial symbolic elements that denote their use but have little of the tectonic power or the material gravity of historic ecclesiastical architecture.

Founded in the early twentieth century long after the great age of monasticism passed, Subiaco is a unique institution. The traditional design of its original buildings establishes the identity of Subiaco, but my program assumes that great contemporary architecture has the ability to nurture and strengthen the aspirations, ideals, and presence of the monastic community. Therefore, while the architectural program for the new meditation chapel is relatively simple in its functional requirements, the challenge of its design is not simply the creation of space but rather to invest the space created with spiritual meaning. The experience of the space must emphasize quality over quantity and privilege spirit over function. Finally, the design of the chapel explores the potential of architecture to expand beyond the limits of reality, encouraging users, in turn, to expand their perceptions and appreciation of social space beyond traditional expectations of monastic architecture.

Concept:

Subiaco Abbey is the product of years of development within the American Catholic church. Located centrally within

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Arkansas's Ozark Mountains, the campus consists of the main abbey building and a few supporting structures around the perimeter of the site. In addition to traditional monastic buildings, the campus includes housing for Subiaco's clerical brothers and for students who attend the abbey's school. The image of Subiaco, characterized by Neo-Romanesque and Neo-Gothic structures, conveys a traditional sense of place enhanced by the beautiful natural landscape. Along the plateau on the north end of the property there is a grove of pine trees where the abbey was first established. Not far down the path outside the grove of trees, there is a cemetery that borders one end of the site.

This project offered the opportunity to add a new structure to this ensemble; this new building is to be a place of worship designed to satisfy the spiritual needs of both the discrete monastic community and a larger lay community. Thus, the investigation and definition of those sensual qualities and physical features that connote spirituality was central to the design process. The premise of the project assumed that design begins with the understanding of a pure, natural form that can be transformed and elaborated into an architectural expression. In this case, the beetle was presented as a generator for the design process. Through a series of analytical drawings of the beetle, spatial investigations were accomplished that provided departure points for the chapel design. (See figures1 and 2.) In other words, the investigation of the beetle provided a bridge to the invention of an entirely new type of spiritual space.

Inventions vs. Intentions:

The essence of the project was the creation of the spaces and the manipulation of light, sound, and scenographic effects that contribute to the aesthetic of a sacred space. More specifically, the program required that the chapel include a meditation space for one person, a place for a gathering of 10 people, and a sanctuary for a congregation of 100 people. Equally important, the chapel was intended to engage the site and be modest in form so that it would harmonize with the existing campus without detracting from the primacy of the abbey. These creations of site, space, and form were all informed by the in-depth exploration of the beetle as a creature whose body created space. The form and structure of the beetle suggested strategies for the spatial explorations of the chapel, hence the use of tonal perspective drawings (figures 3, 4, and 5) and the use of newly developed field drawings (figures 9, 10,and 11.) The field drawings allowed the designer to segue to the reality of technology and the challenge of making an abstraction a reality in invention.

Technology:

The processes of transforming design phase concepts to the reality of the final building design involved the expression of the technology developed for the building. Structure, substructure, interior and exterior surface materials, heating and air-conditioning, and lighting are prominent among the technical components that make a building viable, safe, and effective for its occupants. Remarkably, creating these components appropriately is the most important factor in creating a spiritual space. The use of sectional drawings and models (figures 8, 14, and 15) facilitated the in-depth exploration of these building systems. In the final investigative phase of the project, the systems axonometric drawing proved to be useful in the elaboration of the technology, giving the project a coherent transition from preliminary sketch to realistic comprehensive design (figure16.)

Design:

During the middle stages of project development, the chapel became a system of large monolithic elements. Those elements involved a transformation from interior space to exterior surface. The unit, as the system is called, modified itself from one large external element to nine smaller interior elements. This was the architectural tactic used for expressing spirituality. I believe that if a person loses his or her sense of scale within a space, then the space appears to be not of that place. In this way, the space would encompass the transcendental experience of traditional ecclesiastical architecture.

The way the light and sound dance in the chapel is also extremely important. Direct light enters the space only at sunrise at the time the monks have their first service. The use of ambient lighting provides a mysteriously calm mood at any other time of the day. Light reflected off the zinc interior panels creates illumination for those times when only a little light is needed. On the exterior the cold-rolled steel-plate system, allowed to take on a rusted patina, would interact with pre-existing buildings and suggest that the new chapel would stand the test of time in much the same manner as its predecessors, the existing abbey buildings.

Faculty Comments:

Mr. Siebert's mentor, Visiting Professor David Murphree had left before this journal was formatted for publication and was unavailable for comment; however, one of Mr. Siebert's other fifth year design critics, Tim de Noble, was extremely complimentary about the project. He said:

> I had the opportunity to work with Mr. Siebert in my capacities as one of the Comprehensive Studio critics and as one of the faculty teaching the corequisite technology course. The Comprehensive Studio was not divided into separate sections for purposes other than administration, allowing the three faculty members to 'float' to critique all students on a periodic basis. In this capacity I was able to observe Josh's efforts at approaching and developing his design for the project, a chapel at the Academy in Subiaco, Arkansas. At all times throughout the semester Josh exhibited unparalleled intensity, creativity, inventiveness, skill and craft. His work reflects his

individual ability and intuition and is not the result of 'heavy-handedness' on the part of his critics. In fact his work, because of his skill and well-developed intuition, is the most independent of all the students' design solutions for the project. Additionally, I worked with Josh as his professor in the Technology class. This class was organized to advance the application of technological issues in service of the Comprehensive Studio through concurrent and apropos assignments. In these endeavors Josh continually set the standard by his proactive, timely, and inventive efforts. Finally, though not the primary thrust of this award, I wish to recognize Josh for his willingness to help less capable students. Josh possesses a wonderful, selfless nature and subsequently has contributed to the wonderful esprit de core exhibited by this fifth year class.

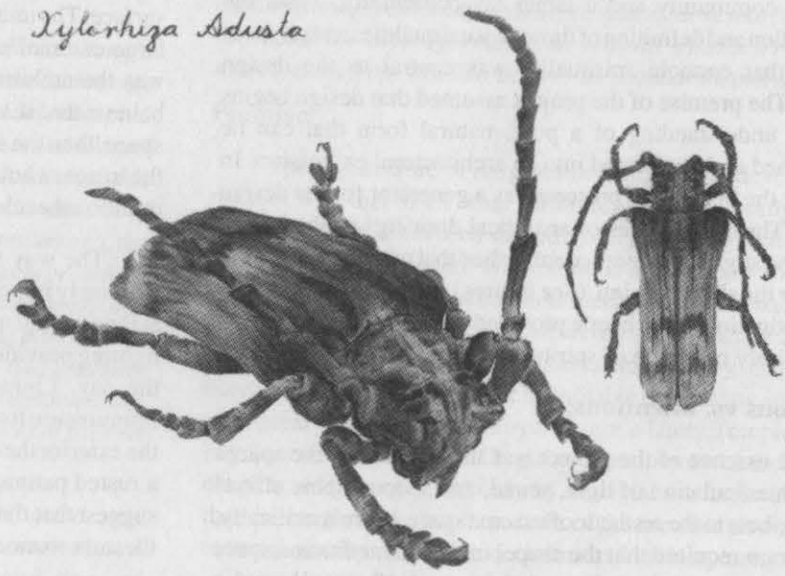


Figure 1

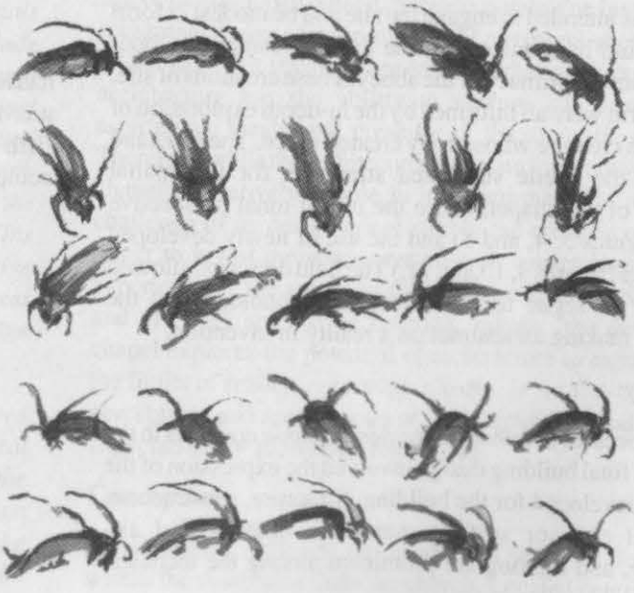
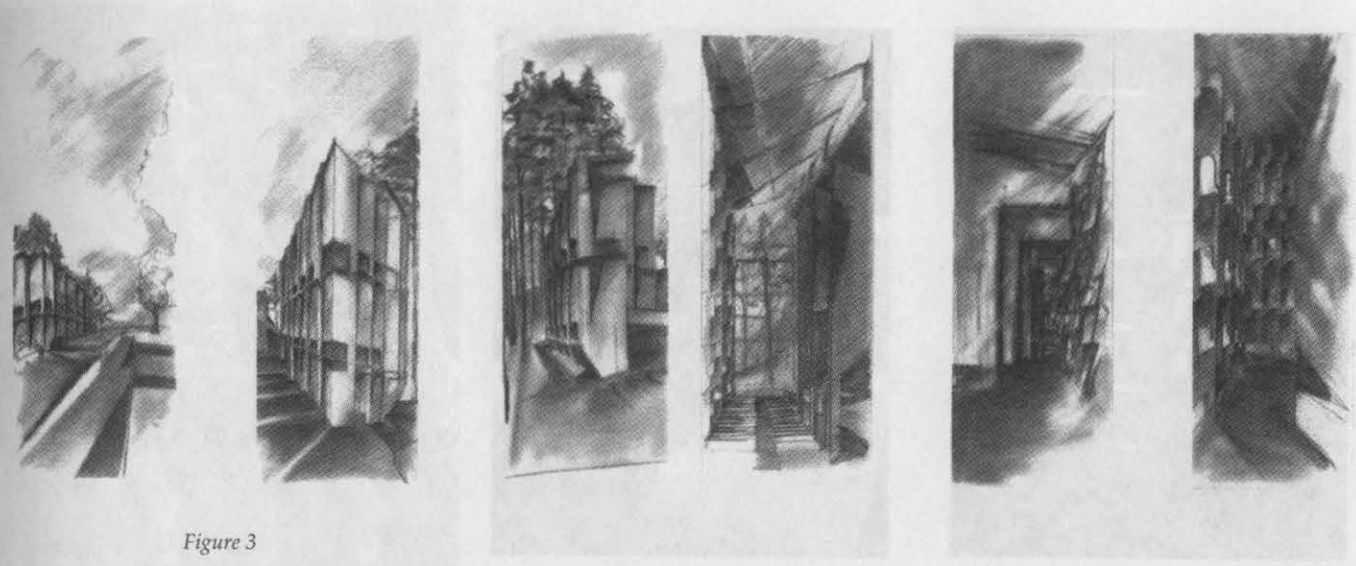


Figure 2



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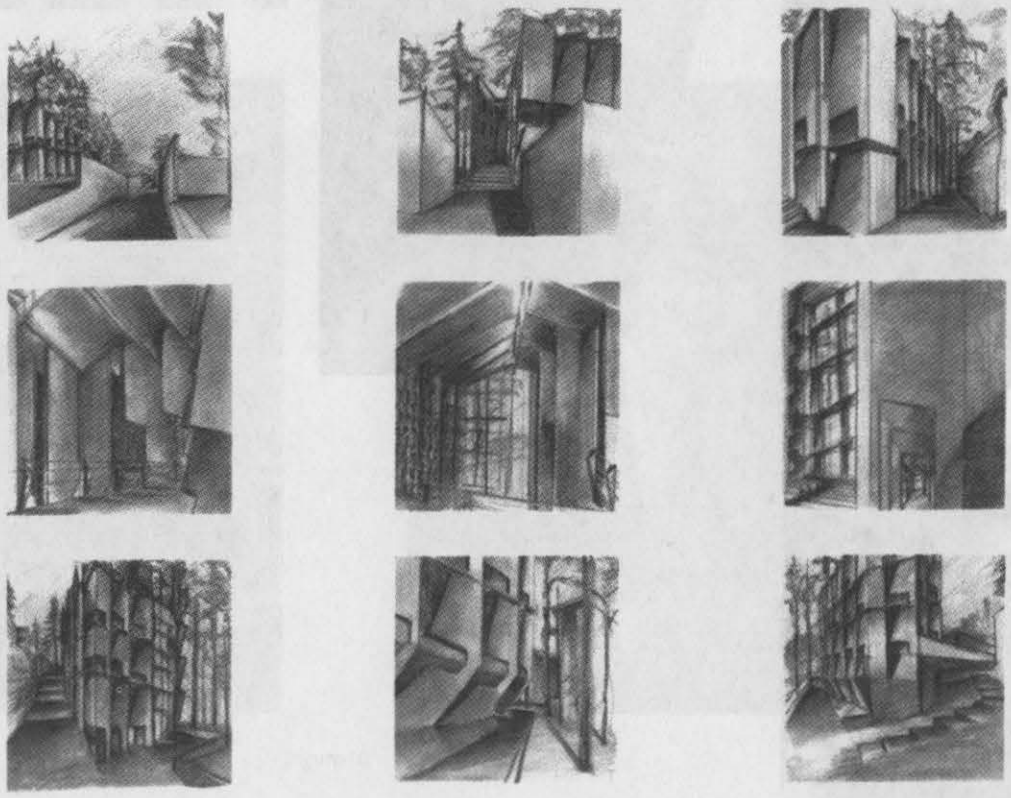


Figure 4
Editor's note: Figures 5, 6, and 7 are omitted due to space restrictions.

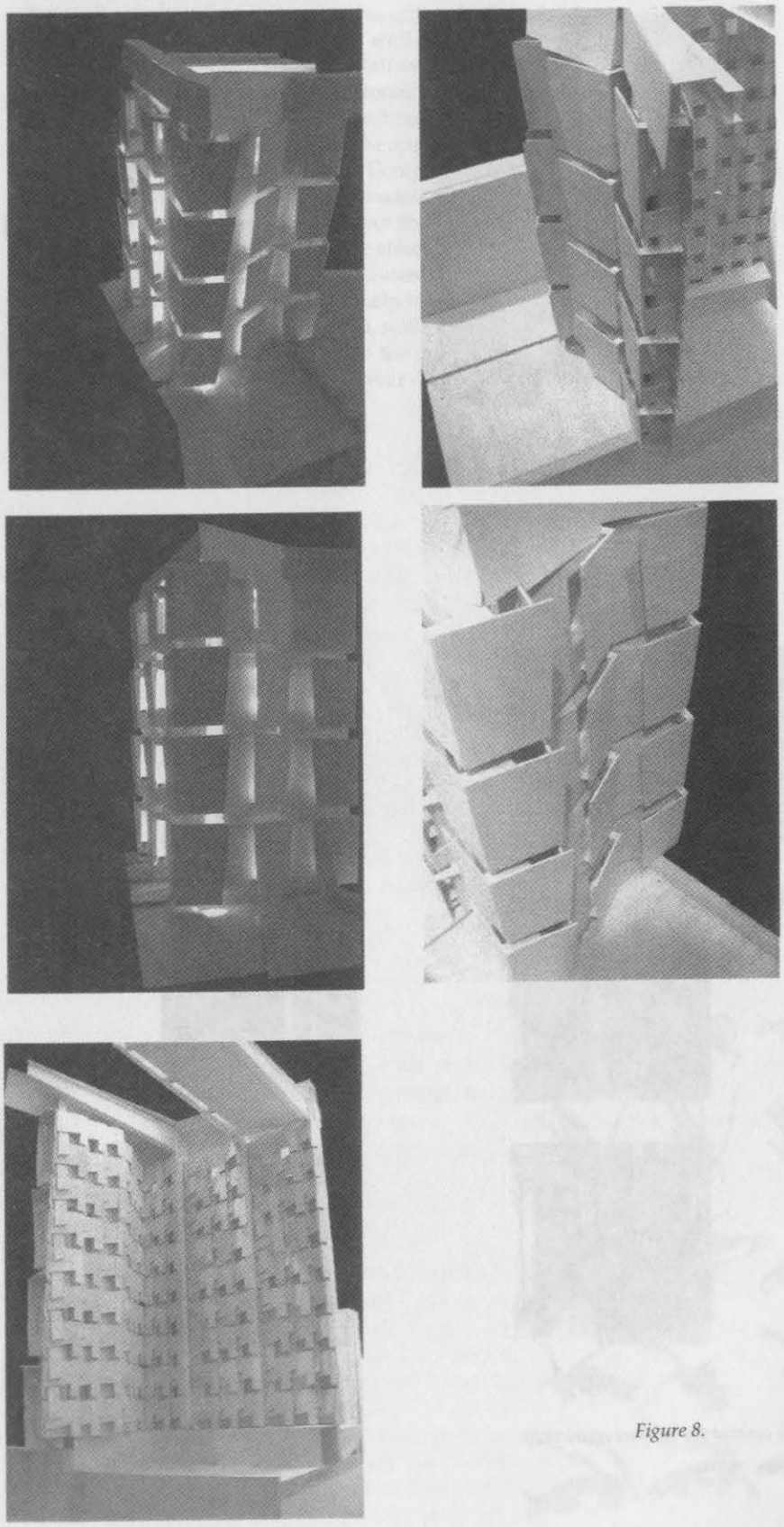


Figure 8.

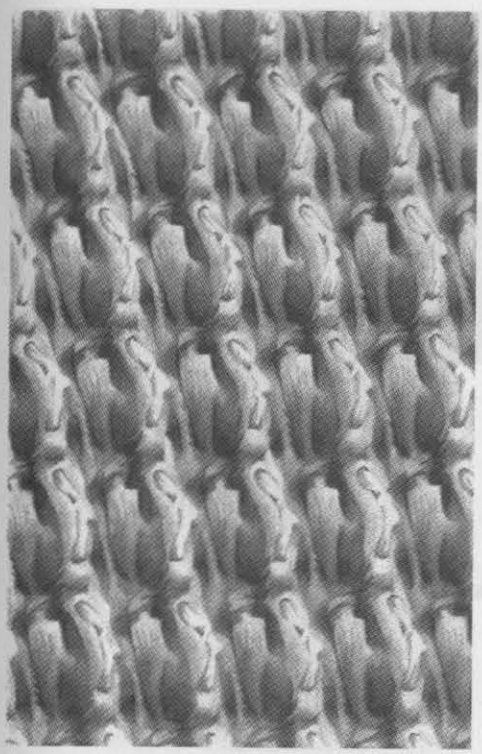


Figure 9.

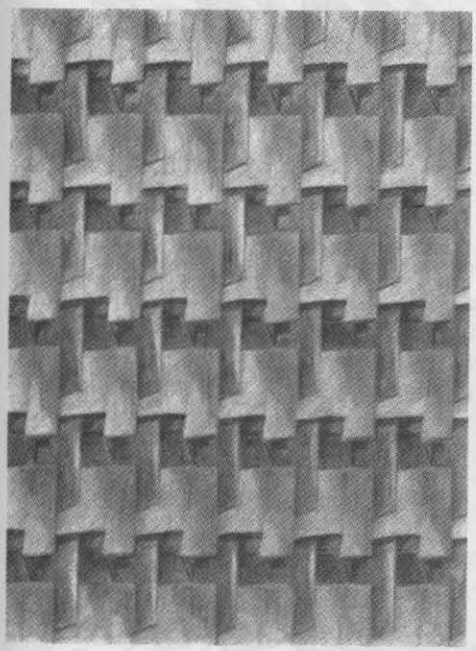


Figure 10.

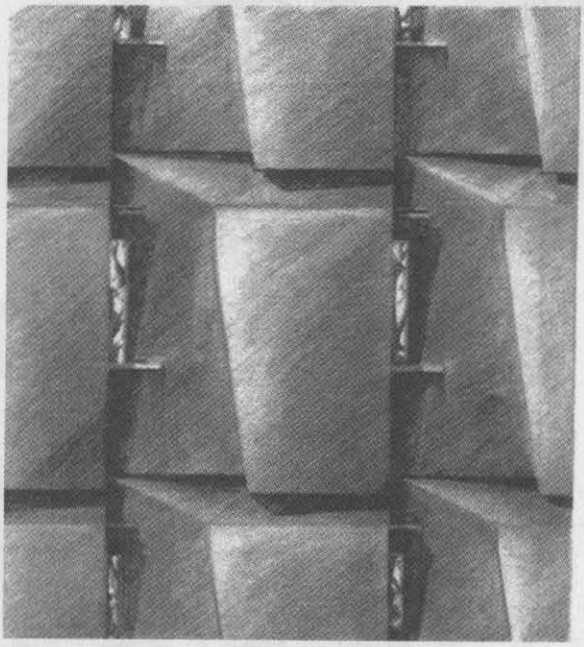
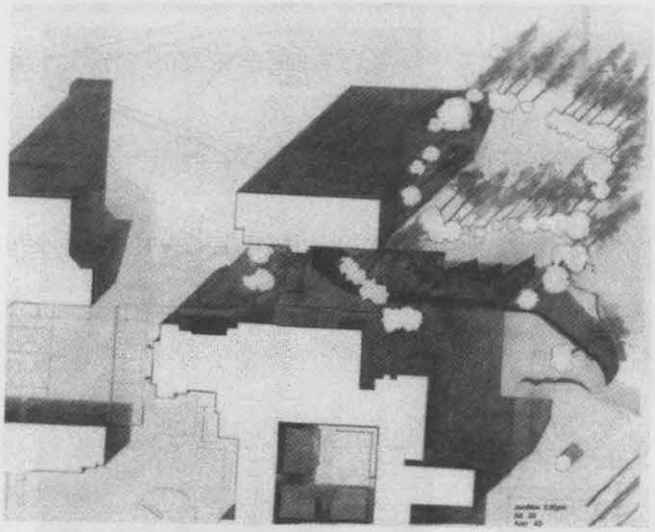
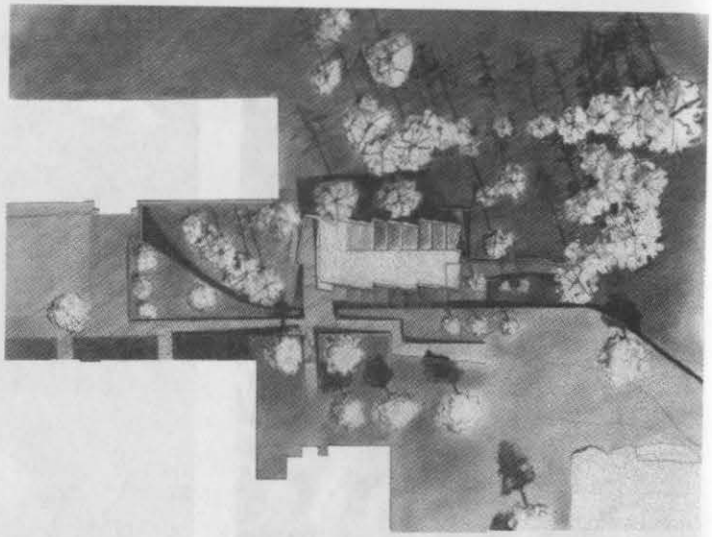


Figure 11.





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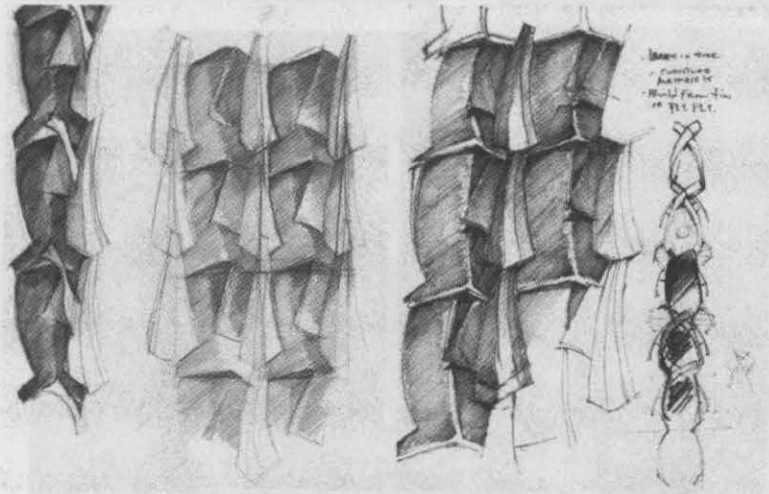

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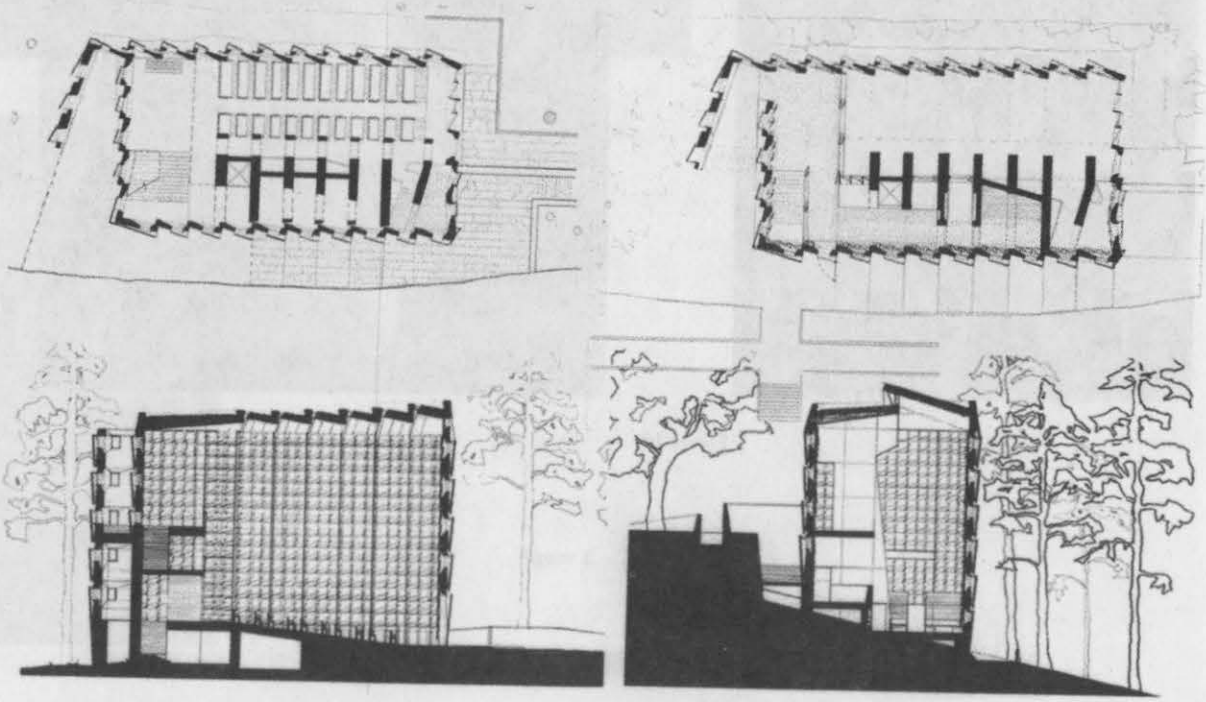

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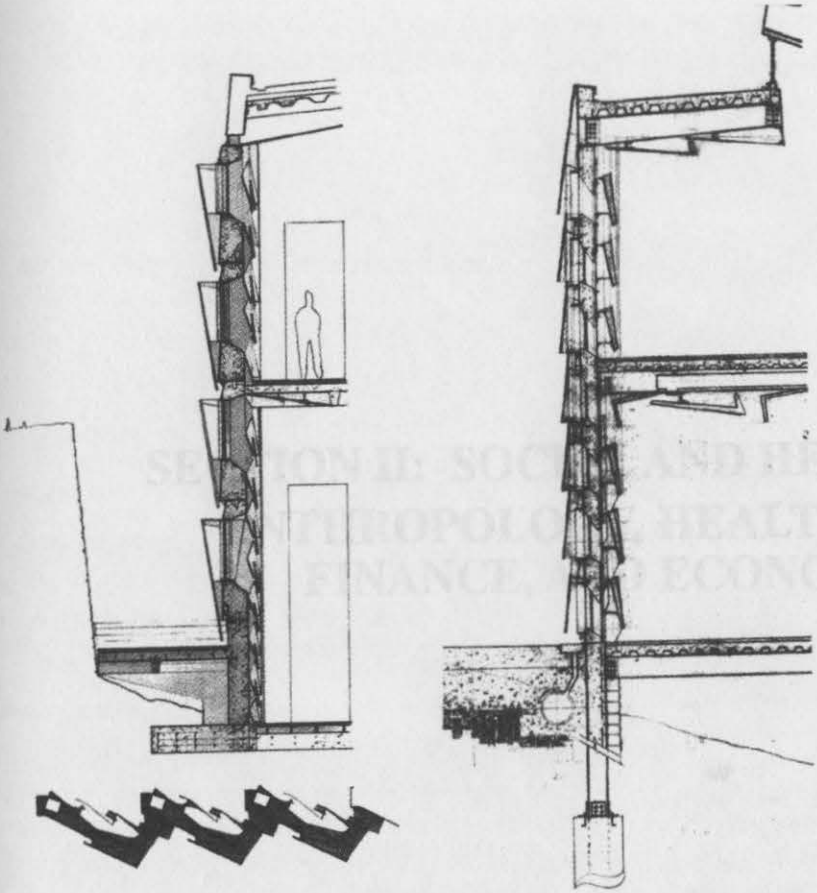

Figure 15.

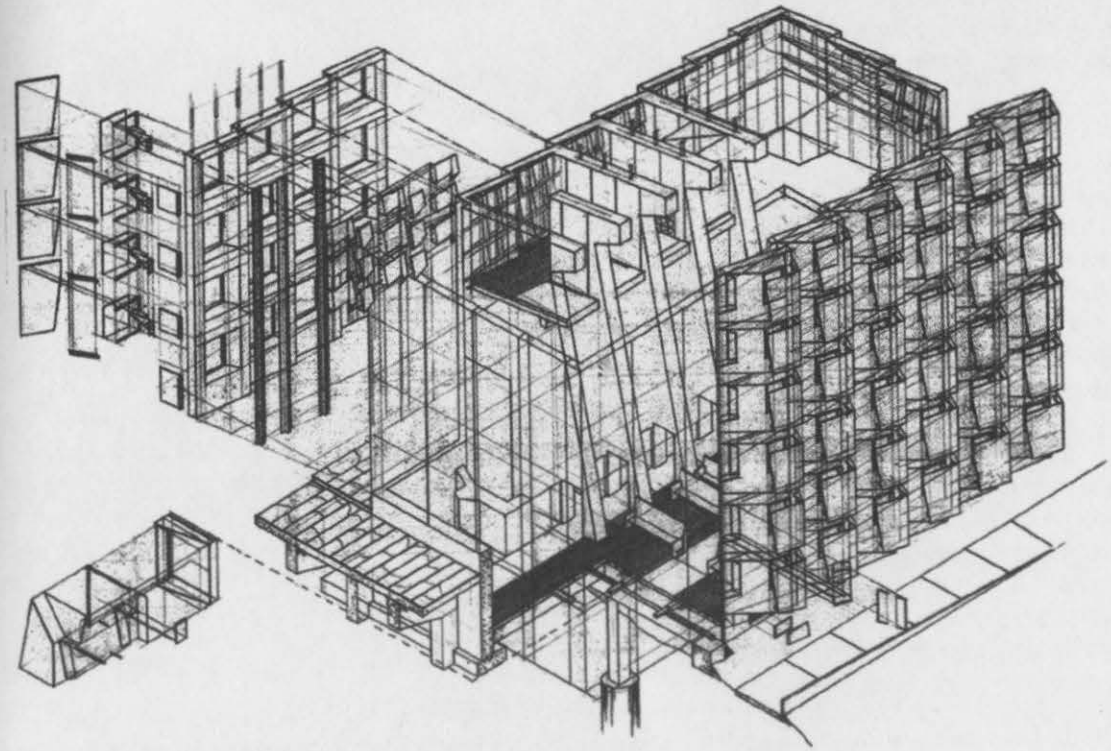

Figure 16.