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A Place for Healing the Earth and the Body

Alberto Pérez-Gómez

Architecture today seems to be caught in either irrelevant formal games whose seductive power is invariably inferior to the media, or blatantly affirming the strong, repressive values of technology and political/commercial publicity. My teaching and theoretical work over the years has been concerned with examining the possibilities of an architecture capable of establishing a framework for effective social order and meaning, without resorting to nostalgic formulations or dangerous reductions. At stake is the possibility of an effective, non-repressive public space in a democratic age; a space of active participation, and not one of aesthetic distancing or for the passive reception of information.

Living in a post-foundational, technological world, we have come to accept the impossibility of absolute truths. Yet, as humans, we need a framework of values embodied in our physical world in order to act and be able to embrace our mortality, while affirming the inherent felt purposefulness of life. Traditional myths and values have been questioned by a triumphant reason since the 19th century, yet in our post-modern, posthistorical epoch we must also question science and technology as the holders of Truth, representing the exclusive and absolute destiny of humanity. Architecture and the arts at the “end of progress” must heed the call to demythologize the demythologizing power of positivism, invoking myth through the back door, so to speak, as an act of poetic creation by the person-

al imagination, the faculty that promotes and makes possible our ethical “sense,” and is therefore crucial for the affirmation of life and the perpetuation of humanity and our world.

This project called for ideas to develop quarry sites in Japan; sites that had been decimated by the crushing of mountains to transform them into aggregate for concrete... In view of the specific challenge, three questions from my previous theoretical work appeared to be particularly relevant:

1) *The relationship between architecture and technology.* We cannot simply accept the dehumanizing aspects of technology and “play” with it. Technology is not a matter of innocent, neutral means; it embodies values, i.e., the transformation of lived experience into a “picture,” the transformation of a living nature into “natural resources,” the substitution of ecological coexistence for exploitative behavior and control, etc. Yet, we cannot be naive about escaping technology either. We are often controlled by the forces we have created to master and exploit nature; nevertheless we must be responsible for our actions, today more than ever before in history, or we could well pay for our irresponsibility with the extinction of our species. This dilemma has been elucidated by Martin Heidegger and more recently, by Gianni Vattimo in *The End of Modernity*. Their work has constituted the basis for my interpretation of technology in previous books. In short, our relationship with

technology must recognize its mysterious origins and the possibility of “overcoming” it without leaving it behind, stepping out, as it were, from the hegemony of a progressive History resulting exclusively from humanly generated change. This attitude toward technology destructures its power and reveals its weakness, it is a sort of healing or convalescence, a reconciliation.

2) *The nature of architectural representation.* Design can no longer be seen as the mere production of a coordinated set of projections to constitute a complete “picture” of a potential building. Since the early 19th century the use of projections in descriptive geometry became a vehicle for the technological reduction of architecture. Buildings were designed more efficiently and economically, but the space of our cities became repressive, predictable and devoid of imagery. There is an intimate relationship between the tools of the architect and the resulting work’s power to evoke a “wholeness,” a space of recognition and belonging. While recognizing the insidious and still often unacknowledged relationship between the reductive use of projections, planning, computer graphics, and the dismal state of our cities, we must engage rather than reject the power of abstraction of the modern mind. In this project we employ projections to “discover,” rather than reproduce what is already known and thus may become an absolutely predictable building. Celebrating the distance between design and ex-

ecution and the wisdom of thoughtful making, we seek to reveal poetic truth as the shadow of a fourth dimension, the flutter of a Nietzschean angel... Only the dark space of metaphor, bringing distant images into proximity, may reveal a ground, even if its sense vanishes as soon as the unnamable is named and “becoming” affirms its primacy over **Being**.

3) *The dramatic character of architectural space: the importance of the program.* The space of architecture is not the geometric “void” contained by aesthetic forms. Formal considerations are never sufficient. The “order” of architecture is only revealed to the inhabitant-participant in space-time, the space-time of ritual and life itself. Our perception of architecture as a “guided tour,” in linear time, is profoundly problematic. Architecture is not the material building preserved by museum curators for visitors, rather it is the very disclosure of belonging in a situation, a choreography. Today the architect must be responsible for the appropriateness of the building program. Program is a crucial part of design, yet not in the sense of functionalism. Program is a narrative structure, not a list of parts to be implemented in quantitative planning. As the author of the “scripts” of her/his buildings, the architect must posit ways of living poetically, possibilities that may open reason to the imagination. Understood as a poetic narrative, the program is a vehicle for the setting-into-work of the architect’s *ethos*.

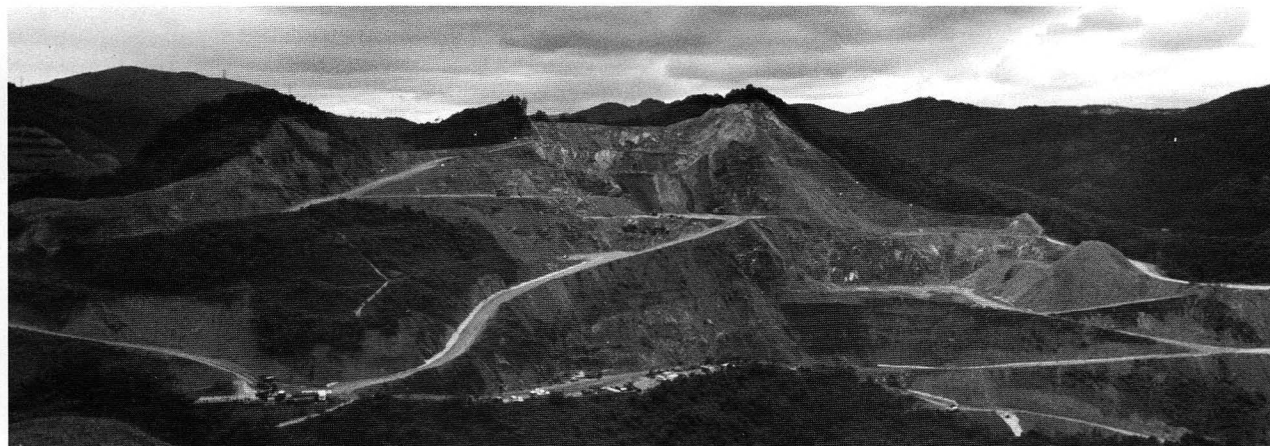
PROGRAM/SCRIPT

June 21st., at sunrise. An explosion at the horizon makes the sun lose its glow. An airplane disappears from the radar screens at 34° 43' N., 135° 15' E., the approximate coordinates of Osaka, Japan.

Technology makes our lives easier but fails to make us immortal. We often fall under the control of the mechanisms that we have devised to dominate the world. In order to feed these mechanisms we have raped the earth and made it sick, and while technology can sometimes cure our physical and mental ailments, it often simply prolongs our agony. Architecture's traditional task to create places for humans to come to terms with the conditions of existence, to *heal* in a profound, spiritual sense, is called for, in a mode appropriate to the late twentieth century. Our reconciliation with technology demands constant sacrifice.

A site where the earth has been ravaged is designated *a place for healing*. The earth, a live graft of human flesh and machinery, must heal; as should her caretakers, the men and women, children of a technological era.

Translating the intention of healing reflected in sites of many traditional cultures, our project treats the individual as an indivisible intertwining of mind and body, resulting in a psychosomatic understanding of healing



Generic quarry site after exploitation

that gives equal emphasis to physical and intellectual activities. We develop the theatrical potential of the terraced quarry site, proposing facilities that may contribute to the healing of the earth, while leading to a recentering of individuals alienated by modern life. These facilities, not far from densely populated areas, would serve the community (daily visitors), and provide accommodation for short and long term dwelling.

Care of the earth and respect for the ultimate mystery of the orders of existence and the inscrutability of destiny led to a minimum palate of constructional strategies to realize the program:

- 1) Traces of fragmented airplane structures, fused with the earth; machines that become *humus*, attached to the surface.

- 2) Traces of the process of quarrying the

mountain, *humus* that becomes space, carved into the surface.

MAIN CHARACTERS

EARTH GATE or lower gate. Past two ominous Gate Keepers, obviously male and female, we enter into vacuity through a V-shaped slit in the granite. Visitors may leave their identities here and choose a mask. Information about activities, orientation, registration and allocation of rooms takes place.

SKY GATE or upper gate. Suddenly, after a sharp curve in the climbing road, the sky opens up. In the distance, sunk into the plateau, is a pulsating egg-shaped sanctuary. We enter into a dematerialized space, hovering over the ground. It could be *anywhere*, like an airport waiting room. Visitors may leave their masks here and decide to find a

new identity. Besides orientation, information and room allocation, this area contains major services and the administrative offices of the complex.

TOWER OF WINGS. Placed at the lower corner of the site, overlooking the large amphitheater, this delicate structure detects vibrations through the piercing tips of its wings. It registers and amplifies the moaning of the earth and would signal any further violent exploitation. Vibrations are also translated into a motion of wings that transmute into a flower. A retired mine-worker lives in the tower as the appointed caretaker.

TEMPLE OF LOVE or cockpit. Placed within a circular basin in the highest plateau of the site, this structure is both a carved granite egg symbolizing rebirth and a technological cenotaph. It

reminds us that love is dissolution and thus the “cause” of death. The architecture of the temple contradicts its appearance from the distance and does not conform to a single geometry or scale. Its reality is an ambiguous montage of frames, while its center is a sanctuary of technology with its systems for commemoration, bodily fusion, and observation. It is accessed through a dark, labyrinthine tunnel. Inside, a flight simulator contains a radar for tracking the trajectory of airplanes over the sky of Osaka. Its computer memory can recreate the accidental disappearance of airplanes anywhere in the world since the beginning of aviation and simulate their explosive dissolution. The structure contains a crypt for the bright orange “black boxes” found in accidents.

TRANSPORTATION STATIONS AND VEHICLES...*beyond a certain speed, motion becomes still and appears like an empty ballooning.*

a) Horizontal, self-propelled mobile lounges that raise to the level of the funicular stations.

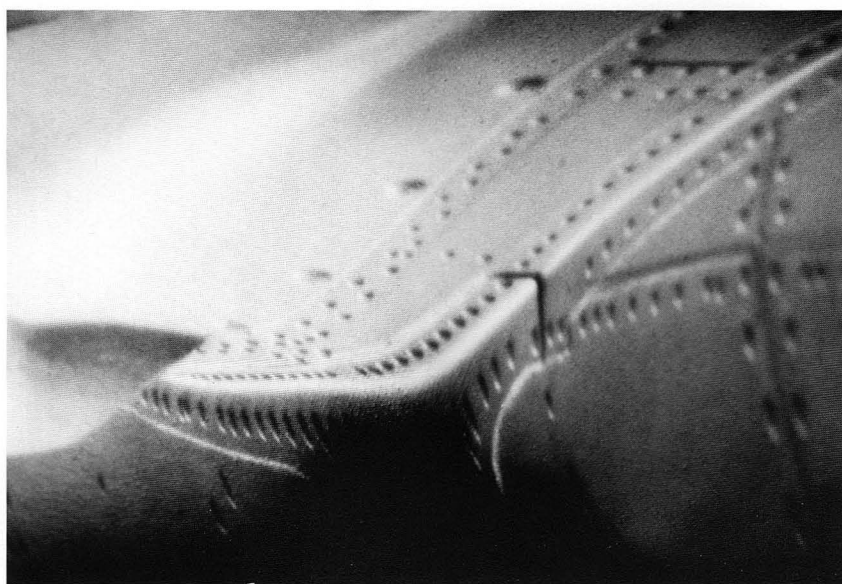
b) Funicular boarding towers. The

tower at the junction between the mountain and the plain opens up diagonally into the space of the absent black box...

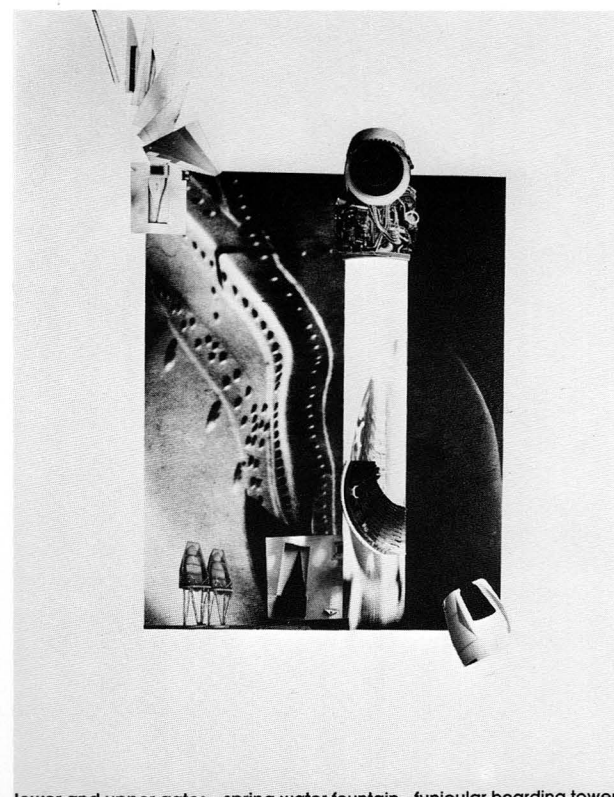
NOURISHMENT

SPECTACLE is a crucial dimension of our project. The site is read as a theatrical space operating at many scales and with different degrees of specificity. Visitors and inhabitants are both actors and active spectators, nourishing their spirit in the process of coming to terms with destiny. *Chora*, the space of drama, a gap which is not nothing (chaos), is the space of architecture, given concrete reality by Japanese culture and its specific plots. The space at the crossing between being and becoming is, literally, the flesh of the world, the first **element** that cannot be reduced to the concrete or the universal, to the purely spiritual or purely material. The main theatrical space occupies the fissure in the plain at the bottom of the pyramidal mountains caused by the catastrophic event. There are also two other differentiated theatrical spaces:

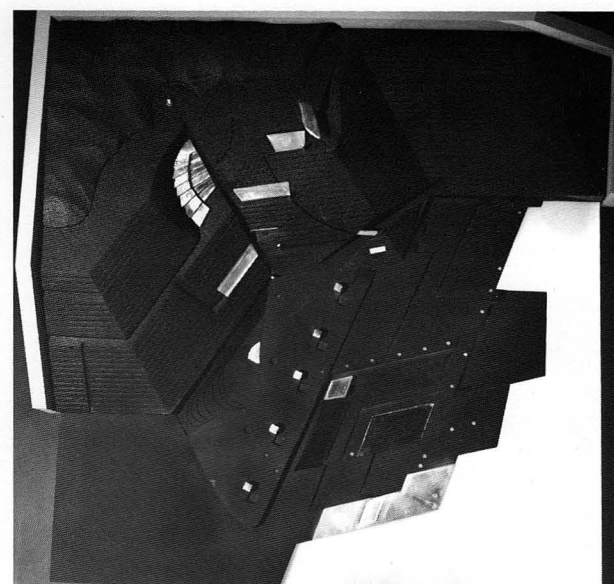
1) *Formal theatre* for chamber music, tragedy and comedy. The stage build-



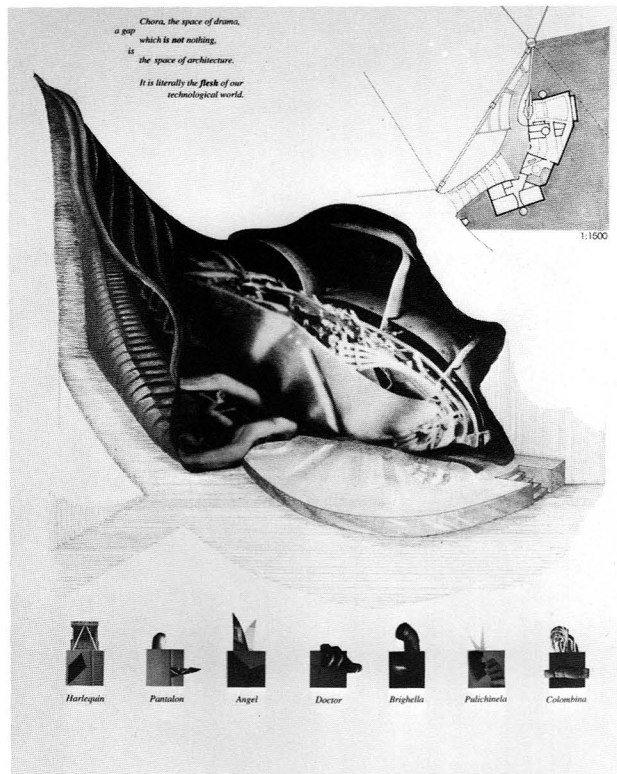
The “Crash” Site as projective graft of flesh and technology.
The “earth” and matter of architecture.



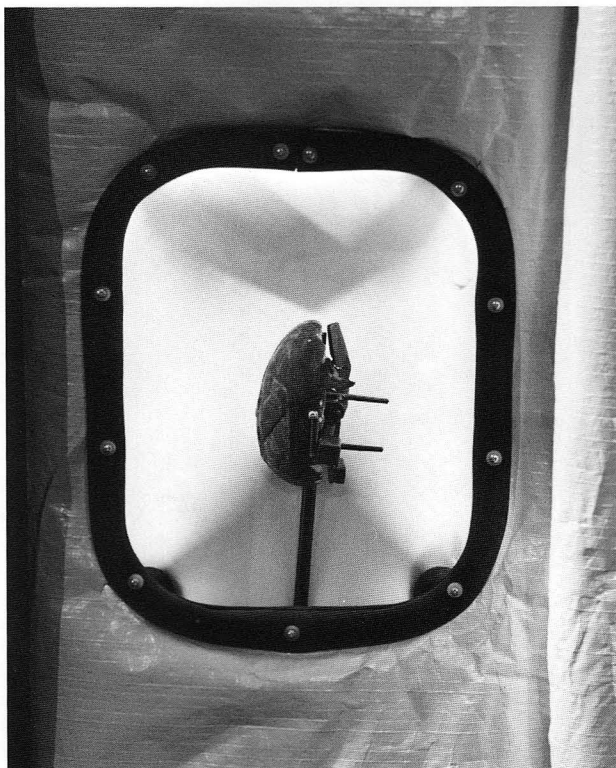
lower and upper gates, spring water fountain, funicular boarding towers



Site Model



spectacle to nourish the body's spirit and come to terms with destiny



Cockpit or Temple of Love

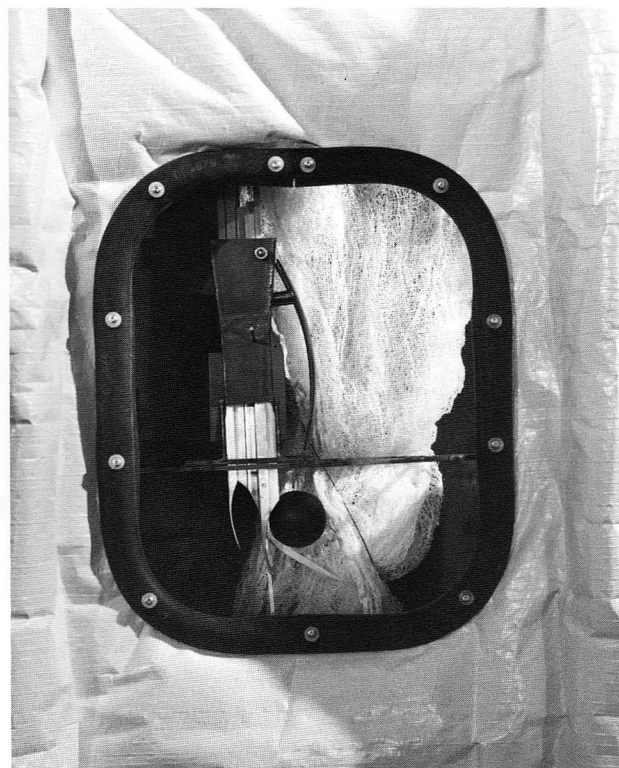
ing, for both an outdoors and indoors amphitheater, is a monstrous, insect-like graft of flesh and aircraft debris, product of an intense explosion. While the outside regions have been decimated by the exploitation of Prometheus, on-stage the narrow space contracts as the man dies. When his entrails grow no longer, the space will converge to a point and the eternal void will set in. But suffering is, indeed, still possible, shared by the compassionate spectators. The *orchestra* or gap is paved with one very large black stone of unknown nature, probably indestructible, totally flat and polished. This is the "dance floor," a receptacle that awaits the new performance. The new ritual consists of assembling an image of the world from the fragments that every individual spectator bears in their imagination...

2) *Large amphitheater* for outdoor concerts and sporting events, ranging from remote control boat racing, to

exhibition skiing, baseball and fireworks. The large, movable stage floor is surrounded by water, holding the spectators close to the horizon. The Tower of Winds may react violently at times of dissonance or heavy metal.

3) *Theatre for Meditation*. This small cubic space of translucent paper is enclosed by the carved granite space of spiritual purification (a bath for the six senses, see below under *caretaking*). The stage for visualization can also be used for traditional Japanese theatre.

READING the most precious stories in world literature is the best food for our mind, the best way to further our ethic and imaginative potential. A *library* collecting selected literature and poetry is proposed, organized linearly and classified according to the memories of the site, embodied in objects that give character to twenty-four reading areas carved in the mountain:



Tower of Wings

1)a window reflecting flat blue, reflecting the rising sun over the enigmatic space

2)sharp metallic stylets

3)a looking glass

4)a thin white starched veil over the vacant picture frame

5)crystalline cubes engraved with poetry

6)intestinal coils and bat's wings, grafted

7)manifold canes or talking sticks, magic wands, instruments for extended and double touch

8)an empty goblet

9)a pulsating sphere and other electronic devices for assorted simulation

10)a cylindrical mirror

11)dancing gloves

12)a reduction of the Large Glass or cockpit window that is gradually becoming opaque... and twelve reciprocal symbols that complete the image of the world.

EATING takes place in a terraced refectory on the side of the mountain. The kitchen and services are on top, and the multiple levels can be given different uses. Music is always played, one musician per terrace, and the meals are carefully and beautifully choreographed. Moving stairs link the levels that encompass the wholeness of knowledge through collages intertwining the orders of nature:

Level one) The texture and color of lead and onyx. Reference to the right foot and the right ear as transmutations of moles and cuttlefish.

Level two) Crystallizations of tin and sapphire. The head and the left ear. Sections of eagles, dolphins, and deer.

Level three) Iron and diamonds. The right hand and right nostril. Plans and rayographs of vultures, pike, and wolves.

Level four) Laminated gold and carbuncle. The heart and right ear. Oblique sections of geese, lions, and seals.

Level five) Solidified copper and emeralds. The genitals and left nostril. X-ray sections of pigeons and male goats in relief.

Level six) Fluid mercury and agate. The left hand and the mouth. Electronic sonar transubstantiations of storks and monkeys.

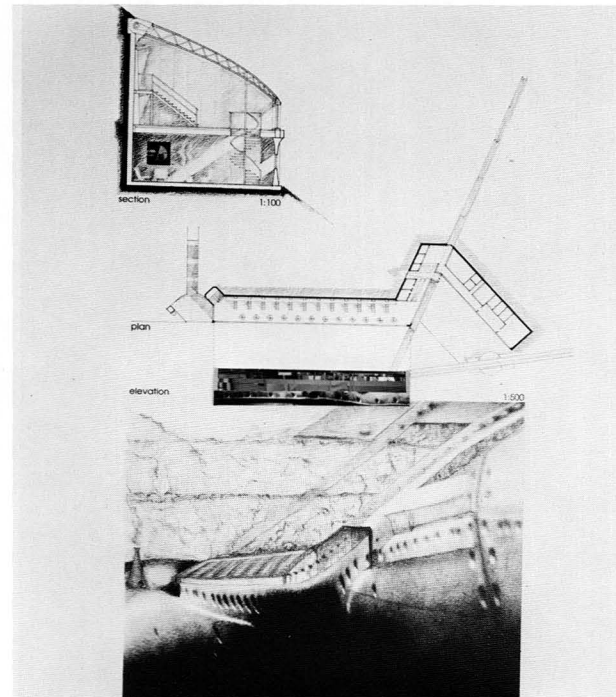
Level seven) Fluid mercury and agate. The left foot and left eye. Rubbings of fragments of owls and cats.

EXERCISE

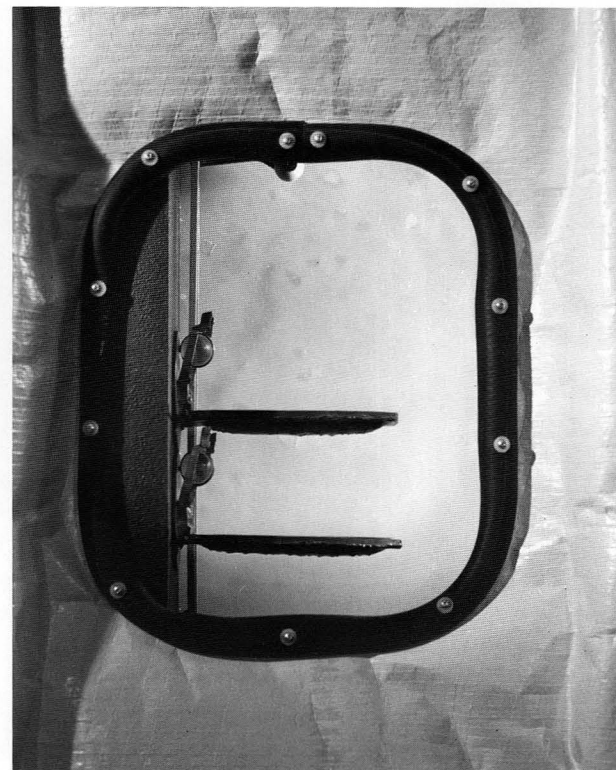
SWIMMING in fresh water allows one to believe in the possibility of absolute detachment and perennial spiritual virginity. Suspended, free from gravity, we learn to fly as we swim, we navigate in the sky. The swimming amphitheater is a geomantic map of the universe surveyed by the Tower of Wings. Sharp steps descend into the water while geological formations become water slides and other recreational facilities.

CONCENTRATION demands a recognition of one's limited capacities in order to succeed. Rhythm does not originate in our individual bodies but rather in the flesh of the world. *Golf drive practice ranges*, into the vowels of the earth, *putting greens, tennis and other racket sports* on and under her epidermis, make her glow with sweat.

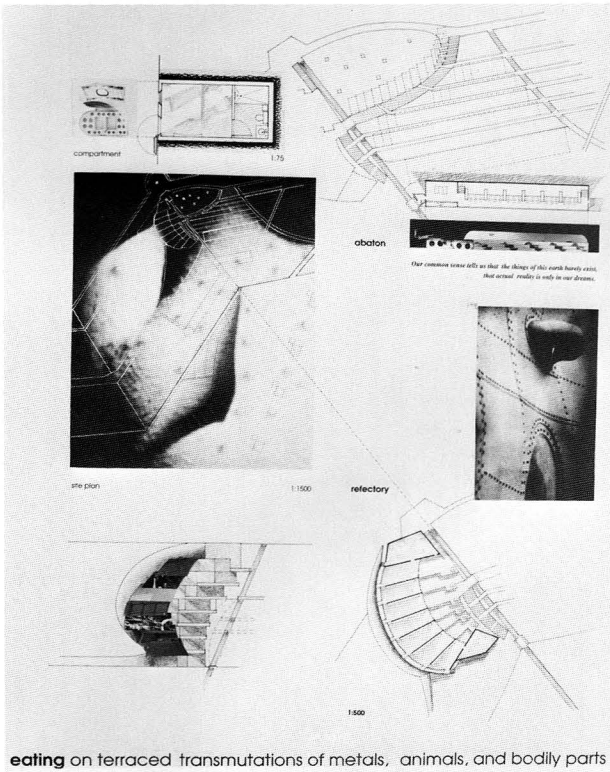
DANCING and running we take the measure of the earth, a dimension embodied in a classical *stadium*. When we meditatively adopt a vertical posture we hear the song of the earth, as well as the poet's question "Why do we no longer rejoice in Holy Dance?" *Athletics and gymnastics* make a healthy body,



reading the most precious stories in world literature to nourish the mind



Abation—space for sleeping/dreaming



shapely and perpendicular, that speaks purely of the meaning of the earth.

WALKING and hiking we remember to breathe and live in the present, a thickness of time that is not simply consumed between past and future. On the face of the terraced mountains facilities will be provided for free sporting activities, including *bicycle riding and roller skating*.

CONVERSATION and face to face communication is a crucial exercise toward self-knowledge. We only know ourselves through the *other*. A suite of *conference rooms* of different sizes, starting with a dark, padded cubicle, are perfectly appointed, and not far from the Sky Gate. In the middle of the larger rooms, mechanical fountains transmute polluted water into tasty liquors. The rooms' environment is technologically controlled. They are decorated with ergonomic furniture, austere car-

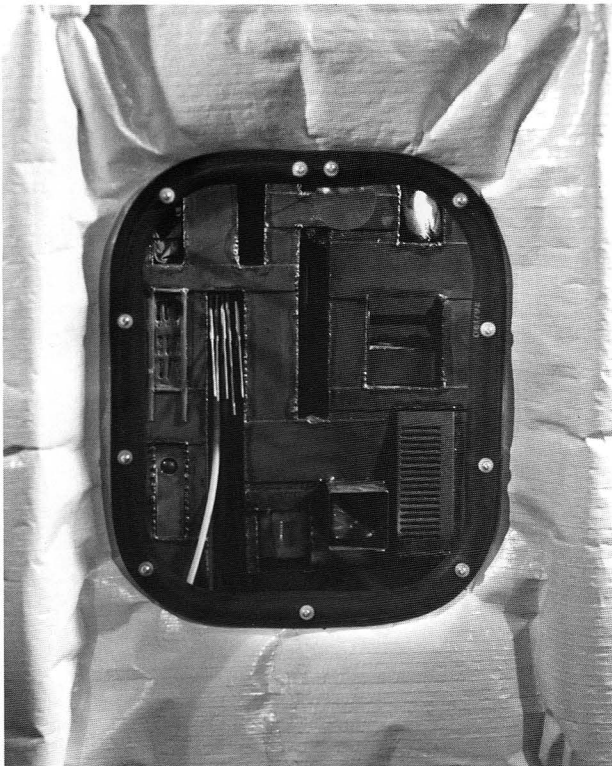
pets, and indestructible laminated paintings. A collection of electronic gadgets for telecommunication are distributed throughout. Television monitors are placed at the head of conference tables. The structure of the aircraft and its assembly systems are discernible in these spaces, though they appear to play no functional role...

CARETAKING

SLEEPING and retreat. Individual rooms and family accommodation. Simple compartments, minimally furnished and austere decorated, appointed as for a trip.

DREAMING... "Our common sense tells us that the things of this earth barely exist, that actual reality is only in our dreams."

We propose a space for collective dreaming, an *abatón* or therapeutic



Library—spaces for reading



Dramatic space

dormitory where we may dismiss the spectacle of a dying world beyond the windows and televisions, while we might acknowledge the analogy between sleep and death. A water stream traverses the *abaton*. Frightful steel beds embedded in the granite wall are cantilevered into the longitudinal space articulated by inscriptions about generation and seven rectangular niches with compartments containing objects to propitiate dreams:

1) Colored pebbles, humid clay, the skull of a reptile, a cube of onyx.

2) Realistic statuettes of copulating men and women, a black and white checkerboard, a pentagonal bell tower with a pyramidal spire and a red triangular flag flying from the mast, a simple rectangular chapel with a curved apse and a sloped roof, a cooper triangular wedge of chastity.

3) A ninety-centimeter modular grid on tracing paper, a half-egg of scintil-

lating mercury on a sheet of reflecting mylar under pink and blue neon light, a gold ingot.

4) A crystal that reflects images and generates rainbows, a computer chip, a sharp silver pyramid.

5) A realistic model of the double pyramid of the Temple Mayor in Tenochtitlan, a mound of earth for childhood flight, a hollow cube of lead.

6) A porcelain cup, an electric light switch, two identical tetrahedrons of diamond and iron.

7) A single laser beam, an amorphous heap of greenish crystals of plastic, substantial empty space.

BATHING for the five senses... *Liquids are sold, ranging from pure spring water, perfume and wine, to acid, gasoline and mirrors. Water for the five senses.* Six baths are proposed, the five addressing

the senses have a pavilion which contains a special facility for one or two people, and collective bathing facilities.

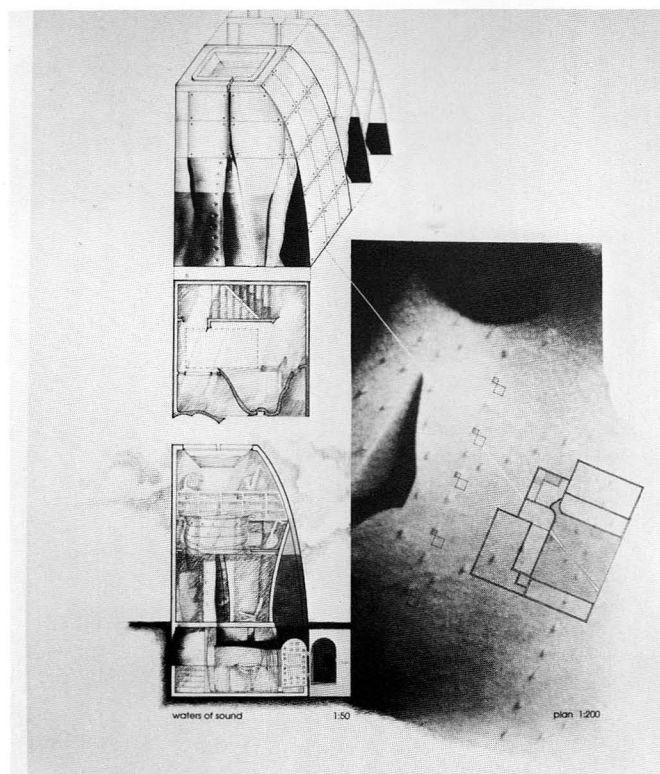
1) *Waters of vision.* Spring waters from many places around the world are sold here. This is a typical Japanese collective bath with pools of fresh water at various temperatures, from ice cold to very hot. There is also a pool in the courtyard. The bath pavilion is a cubicle with Plexiglas corners and polished mirrors. Water is here the eye of the earth, an eye that sees all by virtue of the light that it emits. A water for sensuous and luminous reflections.

2) *Waters of sound.* A stream in the courtyard is constantly heard. Musical objects, instruments and recordings are sold. The collective baths have tubs with salt water at diverse temperatures, ovarium isolation chamber and electric baths. The pavilion is a pitch-black acoustic chamber where first a

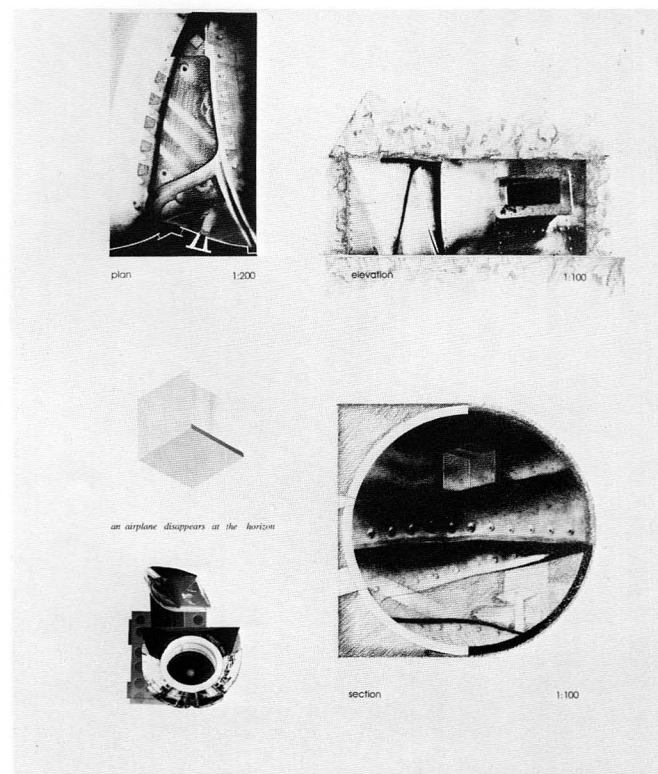
deafening silence is heard. Then a symphony of liquid music springs forth, carving a refreshing and unexpected space.

3) *Waters of fragrance.* Here perfumes are sold. The baths offer herbal and aromatic waters at different temperatures, as well as whirlpools with salts. The pavilion is a space distinctly without smell. An octahedral tank in a pyramidal space. The deep liquid seems heavy and oily, a fusion of water and night, like humid shadows. Wading in the heavy fluid it feels as the most limpid of waters, removing every speck of dirt, and yet also revealing one's personal scent of decay.

4) *Waters of touch.* Crystalline and coagulated objects fascinating to fondle are sold here. There are Turkish collective baths, all made of granite, as well as wooden saunas and cold water pools. Small tubs can also be filled with different substances such as milk

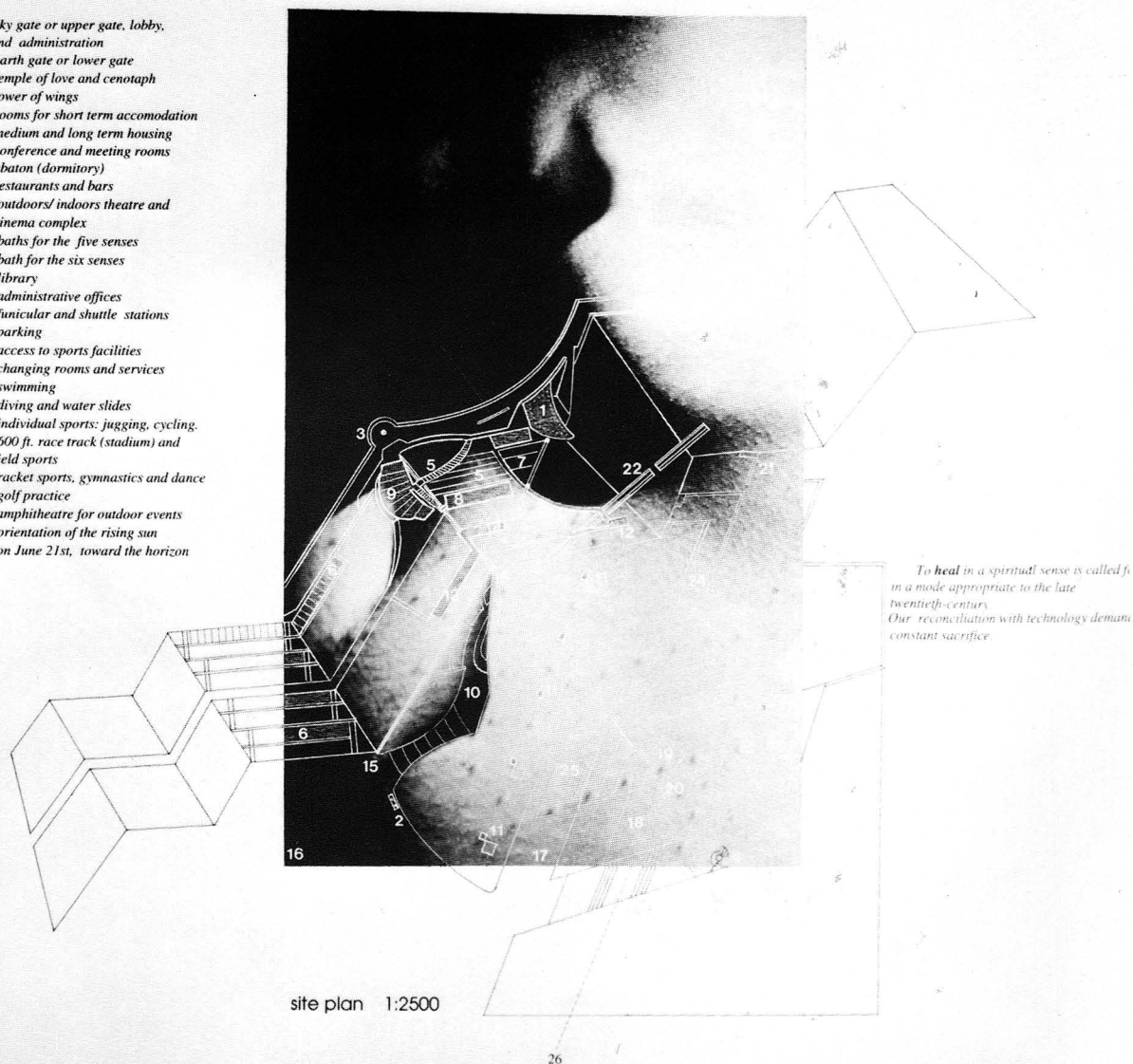


bathing for the five senses: water, perfume and wine; acid and mirrors



cleansing for the breath and imagination: dark winds and water trickles

1. sky gate or upper gate, lobby, and administration
2. earth gate or lower gate
3. temple of love and cenotaph
4. tower of wings
5. rooms for short term accomodation
6. medium and long term housing
7. conference and meeting rooms
8. abaton (dormitory)
9. restaurants and bars
10. outdoors/ indoors theatre and cinema complex
11. baths for the five senses
12. bath for the six senses
13. library
14. administrative offices
15. funicular and shuttle stations
16. parking
17. access to sports facilities
18. changing rooms and services
19. swimming
20. diving and water slides
21. individual sports: juggling, cycling,
22. 600 ft. race track (stadium) and field sports
23. racket sports, gymnastics and dance
24. golf practice
25. amphitheatre for outdoor events
26. orientation of the rising sun on June 21st, toward the horizon



or sand. The pavilion is a visceral, formless place, mostly filled with mud, a tepid, slimy substance that dissolves the flesh.

5) *Waters of taste.* Liquors of all sorts are sold here, alcoholic and non-alcoholic. These are collective steam baths (Russian baths), with high pressure showers. The pavilion is a salty room surrounded by an aquarium with lazy fish and hydraulic equipment. A machine provides a dense, sweet liquid that trickles into a pear-shaped, deep blue goblet. Each drop drenches with pleasure every fold of one's mouth...

BATH FOR THE SIX SENSES or pavilion of purification. In the shadow of the Temple of Love, this underground bath for the inside of the body, for the breath or *spiritus*, is a place for meditation that contains a cubic space for dramatic visualization and a high tech toilet. The windpipes of the sky move with the wind, sand accumulates, and underground water trickles. From a fissure in the floor emerges an insubstantial flaming matter, a *chimera*. Vapors of odorous substances like incense fill and purify the air. A sensuous, impossibly low rhythmic music pervades all. The space is filled with shadows and opens into the ravine. Slivers of light remind us of our limits: darkness may finally set in.

a place for healing the earth and the body at 34° 43' N.; 135° 15' E

Acknowledgement

Collaborating with Alberto Pérez-Gómez as a co-author on this project was Louise Pelletier, a Research Associate at McGill University.