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Places in the Architecture of Machado and Silvetti

Machado and Silvetti Associates

Mark Pasknik

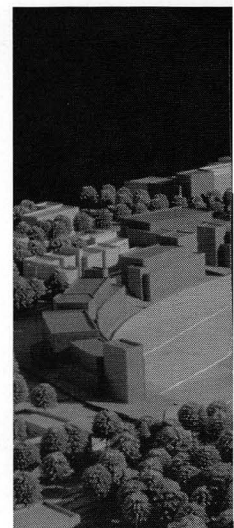
The strategies of placemaking developed during the late seventies and implemented in the early eighties have proven insufficient to grapple with many of the irregularities of the contemporary metropolis. So while contextualism, collage, and other formalist design tools have been viable means for architects to reintegrate the fabric of pedestrian cities, such a fabric simply never existed in many American cities, particularly at their periphery. Ideologically positioned to battle the problems of modernism, many of these correctional formulas passively carpet the city with block after block of the same traditional fabric, destroying the critical potential for architecture to create new places in an evermore complex metropolis. Thus, present development often fashions a trite public sphere, stylistically in keeping with nineteenth-century notions of urbanism, but devoid of the social and spatial activity that makes cities successful. In many cases, the resultant architecture attempts to mask the urban irregularities that have cropped up with the growth of the American metropolis, in favor of creating a more familiar, nostalgic, comfortable, and ultimately generic public realm.

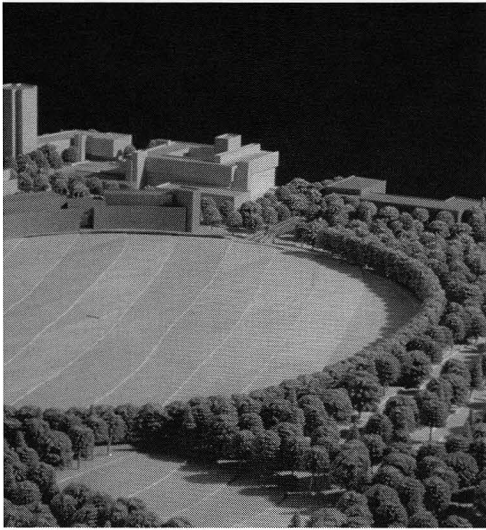
But it is precisely these irregular conditions that can further catalyze public activity, both spatially and socially. However it has been termed in recent years—the “generic city,” “disurbanity,” the “analogous city,” the “exopolis,” etc.—the contemporary city overwhelms designers who believe in transcendent theories of place. Predetermined taxonomies cannot accommodate the diversity of problems arising from modern and postmodern developments in our urban and cultural landscapes. Instead, architects must directly contend with this new type of city spreading outward from our historic downtowns: the New Urbanism that compresses suburbia into a secured townscape; the consumer-driven and automobile-friendly sprawling strips; malls that flatten differences in cultures or regions to mere appliqué; semi-public pedestrian networks in the air or below ground linked together by bridges and gallerias; corporate mega-campuses; highway interchanges, endless oceans of parking, subterranean transport systems, and other infrastructural lifebloods; and finally, the much heralded and equally decried electronic media, with its presumed dissolution of space in favor of communication interfaces. Given this complex terrain, how can place now be established?

Here, a simple response is not possible. Rather, the very act of placemaking must presently evolve from this complex culture. In light of this, several recent projects by Machado and Silvetti display a similar interest in developing architecture by responding to and shaping the specific cultural and physical circumstances of a problem. In short, the designers fabricate architecture from the irregularities of the metropolitan culture we live in. The projects that follow illustrate broad possibilities in responding to certain landscapes that can influence the design process. In essence, they suggest that placemaking is dependent upon specific circumstances, not generic strategies, predetermined vocabularies, or *a priori* philosophies. Just as significantly, placemaking requires developing an image that results as much from the culture of a place as from its physical characteristics, forming a relationship between building and city, between architecture and culture, between planning and image.

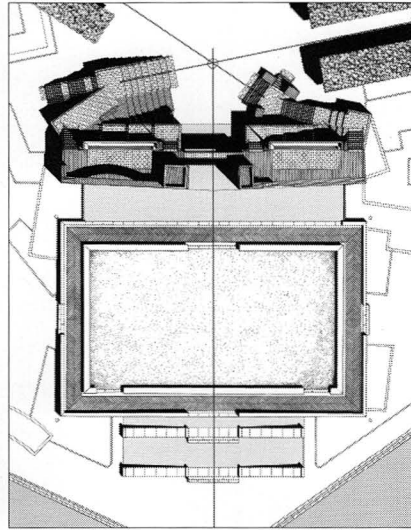
While Machado and Silvetti's architecture is influenced by the changing urban and technological landscapes, it does remain committed to providing the possibility of an active and socially diverse public sphere. As a result of this commitment, the projects here assembled engage contemporary culture and attempt to transform it, rather than to subvert, oppose, or passively accept it. They often offer an alternate vision for the places they occupy, one developed from the context, but not limited to its specific physical characteristics. The results reassert architecture's role in creating and defining the culture of a place.

These projects illustrate only a small fraction of the possibilities for interpreting and transforming the disparate places of the contemporary landscape. Together, they are not meant to form a taxonomy of approaches, given the infinite variety of issues that confront architects practicing in our cities today. Instead, they demonstrate how specific circumstances influence a body of work. In each case, some unique and perhaps unexpected quality of the problem is addressed critically, in order to develop a sense of place that grows out of—but is not limited to—the cultural and physical contexts of a work of architecture.

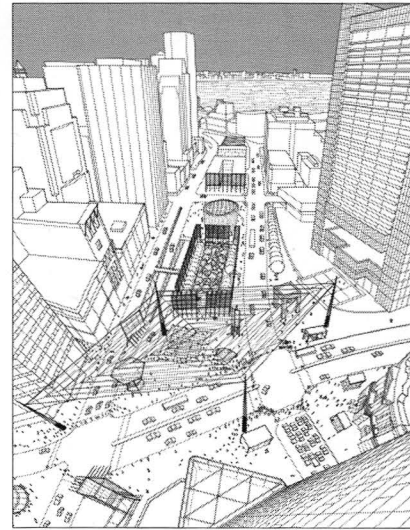




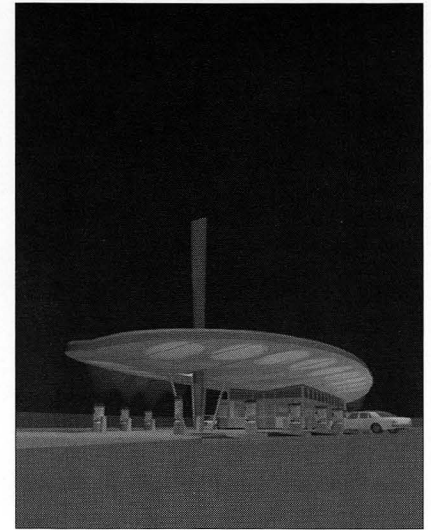
Princeton University Master Plan, model of the Ellipse



Robert F. Wagner, Jr. Park, site plan showing the geometry of the park



Dewey Square, aerial perspective of the canopy, glass plaza, garden, and vent



Drive-In Restaurant Prototype, computer rendering from the highway

Master Plans

Creating an effective sense of place necessitates designing at several scales, from the building to the city. Influence on this latter condition is enabled through the politically charged urban device of the master plan. Over a long period of time, a master plan has the potential either to reinforce an existing sense of place or to radically transform it by orchestrating certain aspects of the architecture and landscape. Machado and Silvetti's master plan for Princeton University attempts to accomplish both. While it reinforces the existing quadrangles, pedestrian pathways, building fabrics, and architectural languages of the older campus, it also proposes a new type of outdoor space, a large elliptical figure on the southern edge of campus that contains athletic fields. Thus, the master plan can be a tool for refining an existing place or proposing a new one, for placemaking or placemaking.

Landfill City

Robert F. Wagner, Jr. Park is a public platform that frames a view to the Statue of Liberty and that sits on a larger landfill site at the southern tip of Manhattan. Its history therefore is sudden, rather than progressive; it has no authentic sense of place with which a designer can work because its immediate context has yet to be built. Consequently, the park's design responds to the immense size of the natural and artificial surrounds (including the Hudson River, the Statue of Liberty, and the New York skyline). So where the site offered a clean slate in terms of its character, the architects chose to integrate the project within the culture and physique of the larger urban environment by developing a pair of pavilions large in scale though modest in size. The Y-shaped geometry of the park aligns these pavilions across a lawn terrace with the statue in the harbor. Two alleés extend northward and southward to actively engage the nearby city in the life of the park. Thus the pavilions are a social condenser and a destination for the network of waterfront pathways on New York's West Side.

Urban Structures

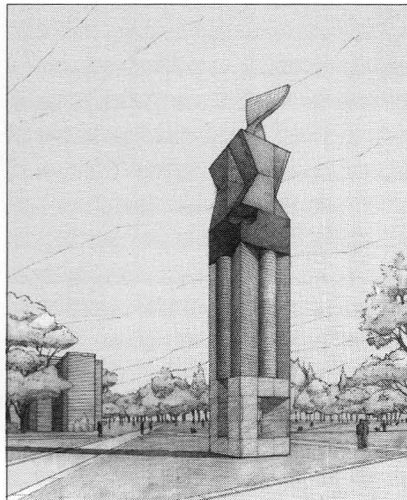
In contrast, Boston's Dewey Square is a site with a very specific, but haphazard history of growth. The guidelines developed by Machado and Silvetti for the square are part of Boston's Central Artery Tunnel, an infrastructure project aimed at submerging highways and, in turn, creating new public spaces. These guidelines propose a contemporary identity for the square by introducing an idealized figure in the form of a canopy above the irregular space. This structure of cables is visible from the surrounding streets, providing a unifying image for what is presently a disorganized square. On the ground, numerous architectural pavilions house amenities for the space. In addition, the project includes a fifty foot square glass-floored plaza designed to reveal the layered urban structure of the site: the submerged highway beneath the square. Ultimately, the project's design both imposes and reveals a formal structure for the place, a structure intended to be understood by pedestrians and drivers alike.

Drive-Thru Architecture

Prototypes have the peculiar problem of being designed without reference to a physical site but with the need for universal applicability. They should be physically generic but culturally specific. In the case of Machado and Silvetti's restaurant prototype (a collaboration with the imaging firm Lippincott and Margulies), the architecture recalls the aerodynamic aesthetics common to highway and automotive culture, particularly from the heroic era of the car in the 1950s. This streamlined aesthetic suits the generic physical conditions of the American highway and engages its specific cultural circumstances, with the highway's long curving off-ramps, its expressive velocity, visual continuity, and infrastructural overtones.



J. Paul Getty Villa, model showing the original villa and new construction



Sigma Sigma Commons Tower, perspective of the landmark tower and commons

Inverse Context

At times, the spirit of a place may be strong enough to preclude most placemaking interventions. This was precisely the problem at the Getty Villa. The existing structure is a reconstruction of a Roman villa, transplanted to the hills of Malibu, California. As a result, new construction conceptually becomes a backdrop to the building itself, which is treated as a found object. This counter-contextualist strategy meant placing new program behind retaining walls which define outdoor public spaces surrounding the villa proper. New elements that are visually independent of this artifice are detailed as garden pavilions rather than as buildings in their own right. An archeological narrative to the project's architecture clarifies the intent: the existing villa is "discovered" within a landscape of walls, gardens, plazas, and pavilions.

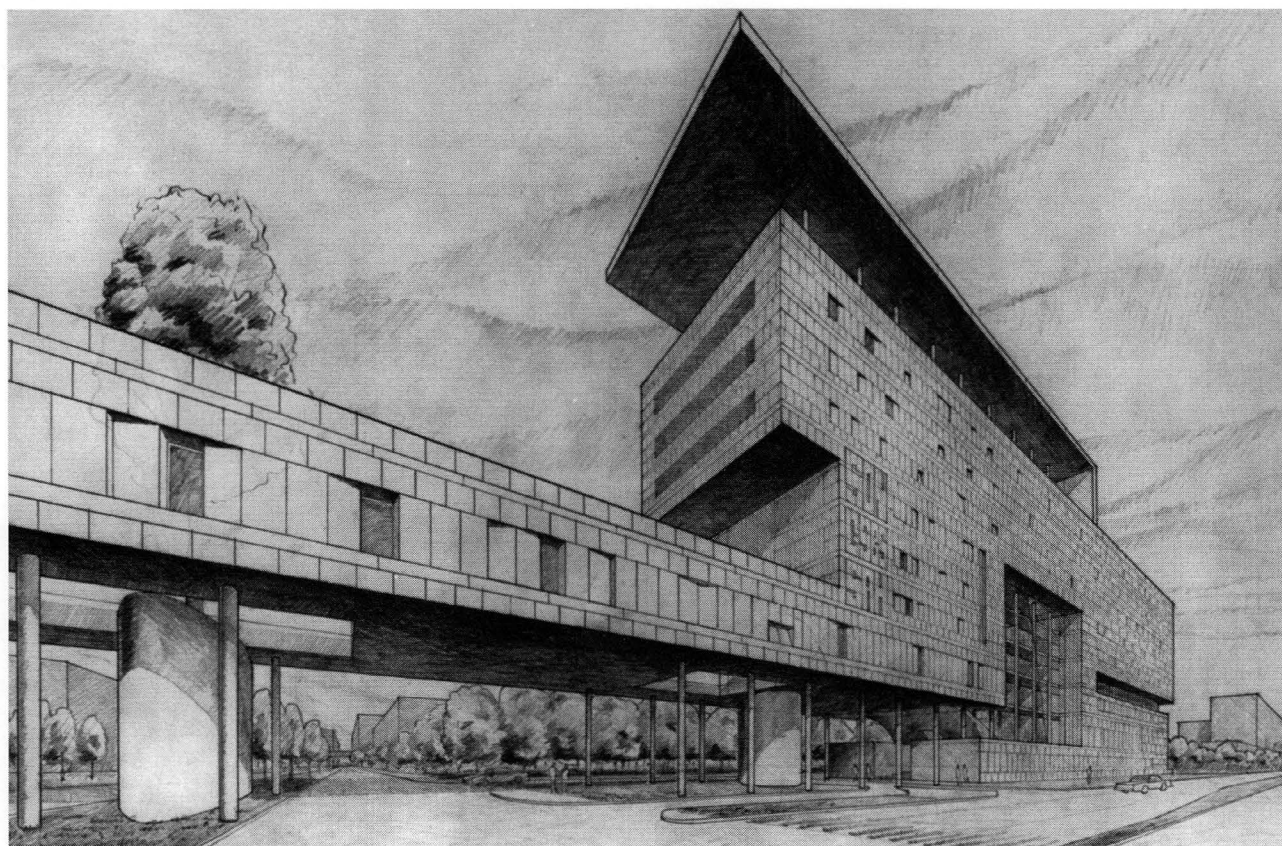
Icons of Place

The University of Cincinnati underwent dramatic growth in the fifties and sixties, leaving the central campus cluttered and formless. At its heart is a site to be transformed from parking lot to campus park, forming a new quadrangle, the Sigma Sigma Commons. In an effort to provide an identifying symbol for this space, the Sigma Sigma Commons Tower is designed to act as a landmark, a gathering point, and an icon specific to the university; it stabilizes and gives graphic recognition to a place that previously had no particular identity. The design stacks varied elements that symbolize the university and donor: its base forms the letters "UC"; above, abstracted volumes convey a hammer and torch. As such, the project's legible meanings relate it to the university. But more important, the tower itself will participate

in the iconography of the school, particularly with its presence at night, where the illuminated lantern can be adjusted in color according to campus events.

These projects represent the varied circumstances in which architects practice today. They are not so much didactic in their specific resolution as they are in the recognition that the many problems of contemporary urbanism require equally disparate resolutions. An architect's body of work may no longer exhibit the types of homogenous and continuous explorations seen with Mies van der Rohe or the late work of Michael Graves, whose languages are developed independent of context or place. Instead, the contemporary metropolis can present architects with a limitless palette to approach problems in ways not yet considered. Sud-

denly, programmatic overlaps, spatial solutions, cultural parallels, architectural vocabularies never before possible are now viable and desirable ways to shape our cities. In this manner, the competition proposal shown on the following pages explores specifically these emerging metropolitan conditions as they appear in Houston's Texas Medical Center. The attempt is to define a contemporary place that contains the types of public space often absent from this new form of global urbanism. And finally, as the metropolis eventually expands into the megalopolis, architects must be prepared to consider anew these very concerns.



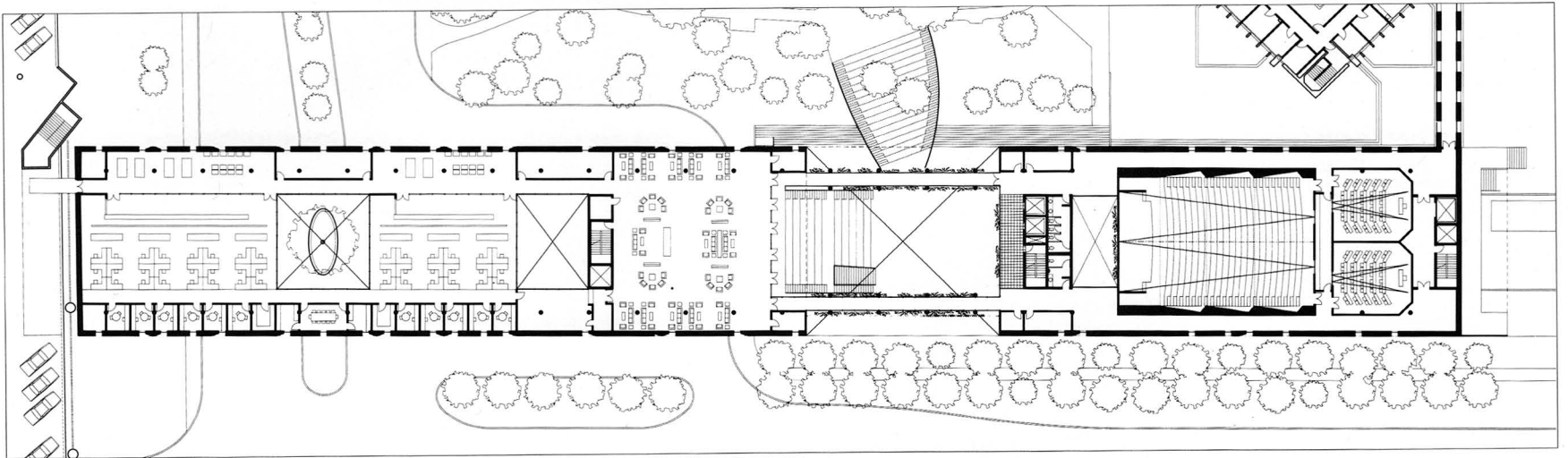
View of building from the corner of Holcombe and Bertner

Health Sciences Center—University of Texas at Houston

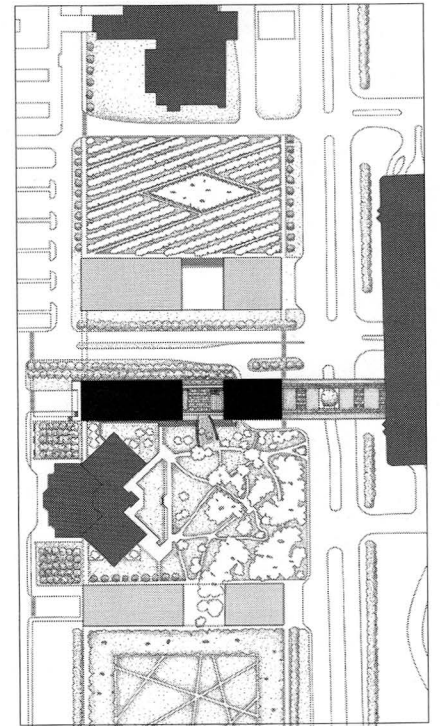
In its present state, the urbanism of Houston has replaced traditional pedestrian streets and plazas with a network of high-speed boulevards, freeways, air-conditioned atriums, above-ground pedestrian passages, cavernous parking structures, and an expansive canopy of trees and gardens that protect from the heat. As such, the city takes on a distinct vitality, one related to the automobile, to a sprawling “exopolis” of peripheral development, tied together by a vast flat ground plane that offers distant views of the skyline from all edges of the city.

One such site of peripheral growth (considered central to Houston by those who calculate distance at a rate of 60 miles per hour) is the Texas Medical Center (TMC), five miles from the downtown. It has developed into one of the densest places in the United States between the hours of nine and five: its daytime population exceeds 100,000, mostly within a 150-acre central campus. At night, the population drops by a factor of four. Beyond automotive traffic, this urban formula for peripheral density has nearly eliminated street life in the TMC. Superhighways lead to four-lane boulevards that lead to parking garages, connected via pedestrian bridges to the buildings they serve, in effect creating a hermetic public sphere.

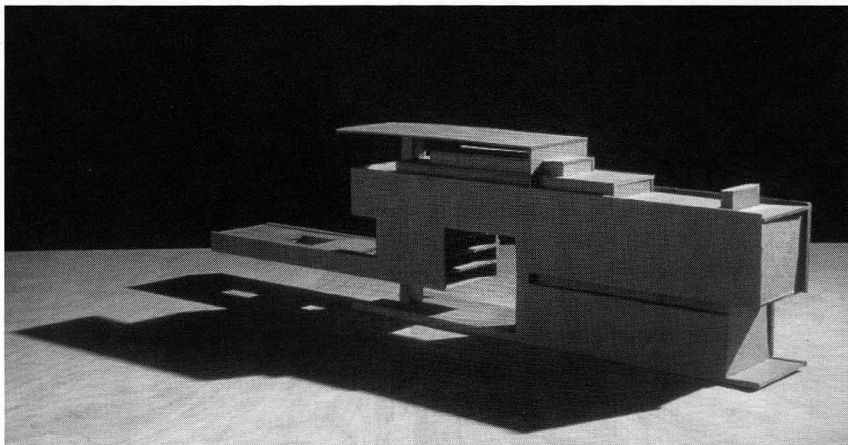
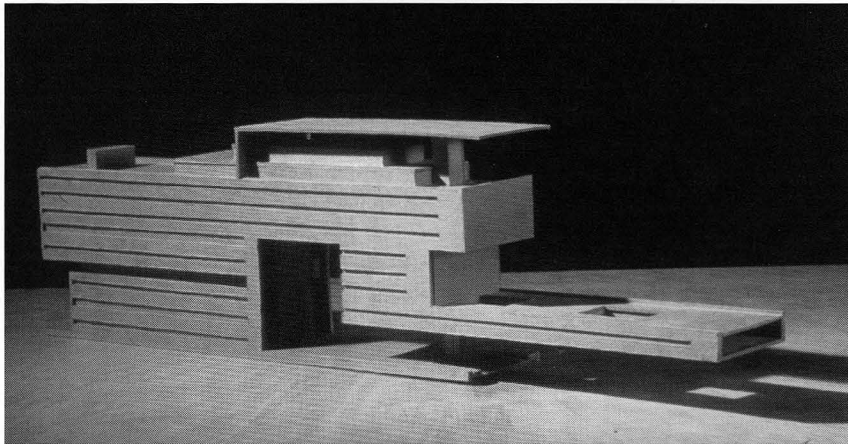
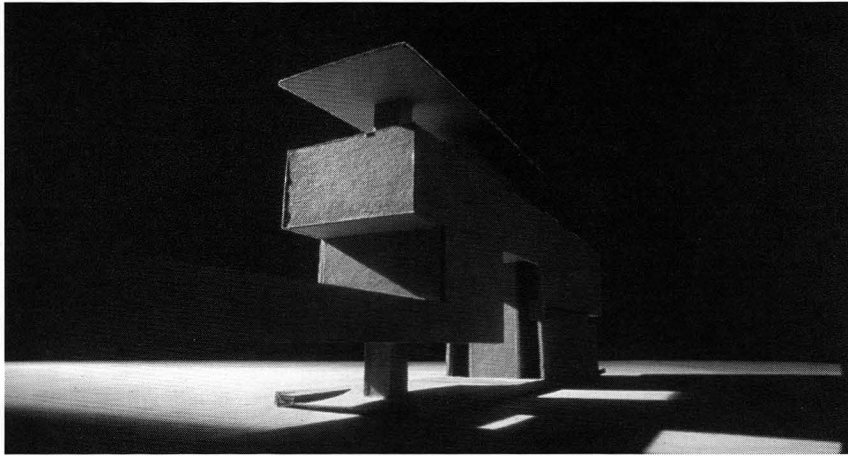
Machado and Silveti’s entry for the health sciences center competition sponsored by the University of Texas, Houston, stands at the heart of this urban anomaly. The proposal seeks to create a sense of public place—one now absent from the TMC—over a long-term process: by initiating immediate development and a longer-term master plan directing future growth for the area. The site itself is located at the corner of a major and a minor boulevard (Holcombe and Bertner) and adjacent to Grant Fay Park, a heavily planted public enclave, shaded by its canopy of trees. The proposed master plan shapes a larger urban field to better define the park and to create two new garden quadrangles, one to the east of Grant Fay Park, the other to the west of Bertner. This series of three linked garden spaces—each with a distinct character—is defined by two additional buildings similar in scale to the health sciences center. Together, the three buildings share a generous carving of their mass, producing aligned openings in an elaborate east-west sequence of shaded green rooms. A line of pedestrian bridges augment this visual continuity, in essence forming a structured connective tissue of outdoor and indoor public spaces.



Third floor plan (bridge level)



Site plan, including master plan for new growth and garden quadrangles



Study Models—photos courtesy of Anton Grassl

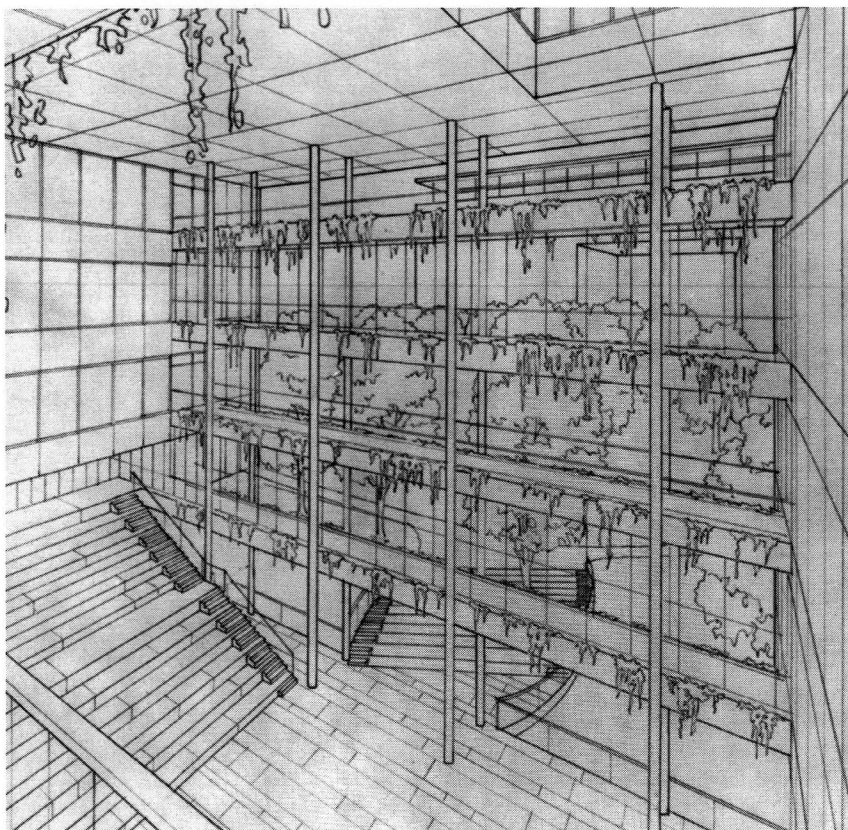
While the master plan and building do not undermine the TMC's existing urbanism, nor provide a nostalgically derived streetscape, they do expose the nature of Houston's urban culture and attempt to strengthen it, transform it, make it more public through a series of unprecedented spaces. Consequently, the design of the building takes as its object of study the very consumer-driven devices that have led to Houston's postmodern predicament of public space: the bridge and the atrium (unfortunately meant to be socially cleansed analogues to the urban street). Both elements were required as a part of the university's program. How, then, to transform these into public spaces appropriate to the city and academic institution?

Fully aware of the social implications of bridges, the architects created instead a building that bridges the street. In other words, the bridge is a programmed component of the building, extended 200 feet across Holcombe to the parking garage opposite. It houses the most public functions of the building—those typically found at ground level on other campuses—in an effort to enrich the experience of traversing the street thirty feet in the air. Furthermore, the bridge self-consciously reveals its allegiances to the urban structure of Houston by means of vertical perforations through it. These expose a hybrid of three prominent types of public space that are visibly stacked: the street below, the bridge as building, and a garden above. At street level, the bridge shades a drop-off area influenced by the scale of automotive infrastructure. A massive streamlined planter punctures the bridge and mediates these seemingly

opposed worlds: the high-speed traffic, the repose of the garden.

At the terminus of the bridge, pedestrians descend into a large outdoor void cut horizontally through the mass of the building. This "patio" space is a transformation of Houston's atrium model as well as the type of cloisters or courtyards common to other academic institutions. While it is the central volume around which activity occurs, it is also extroverted, offering views to Grant Fay Park and (following implementation of the master plan) into the two new garden quadrangles through similar punctures in the proposed adjacent buildings. Thus it acts as a point of connection for the campus and as a theater of activity. Three monumental stairs double as seating and provide access from this patio to the park, to the bridge, and to the street-level drop-off. The patio is a breezeway, cooled by the movement of air from the park in order to create an interstitial space between indoor and outdoor climates. It is to be heavily planted and surrounded by open and enclosed bridges. A retractable metallic scrim protects its western face, veiling the space from light and the activity of Bertner Avenue when necessary.

The proposal contributes to the culture of the place in several other ways. The architects introduced new types of public space to the site in an effort to intensify the visual activity of daily interaction that is absent or under-architecturalized on the campus. For example, a parkside loggia allows events inside to spill into the park from the café, auditorium, conference center, and



View of outdoor patio space looking towards Grant Fay Park

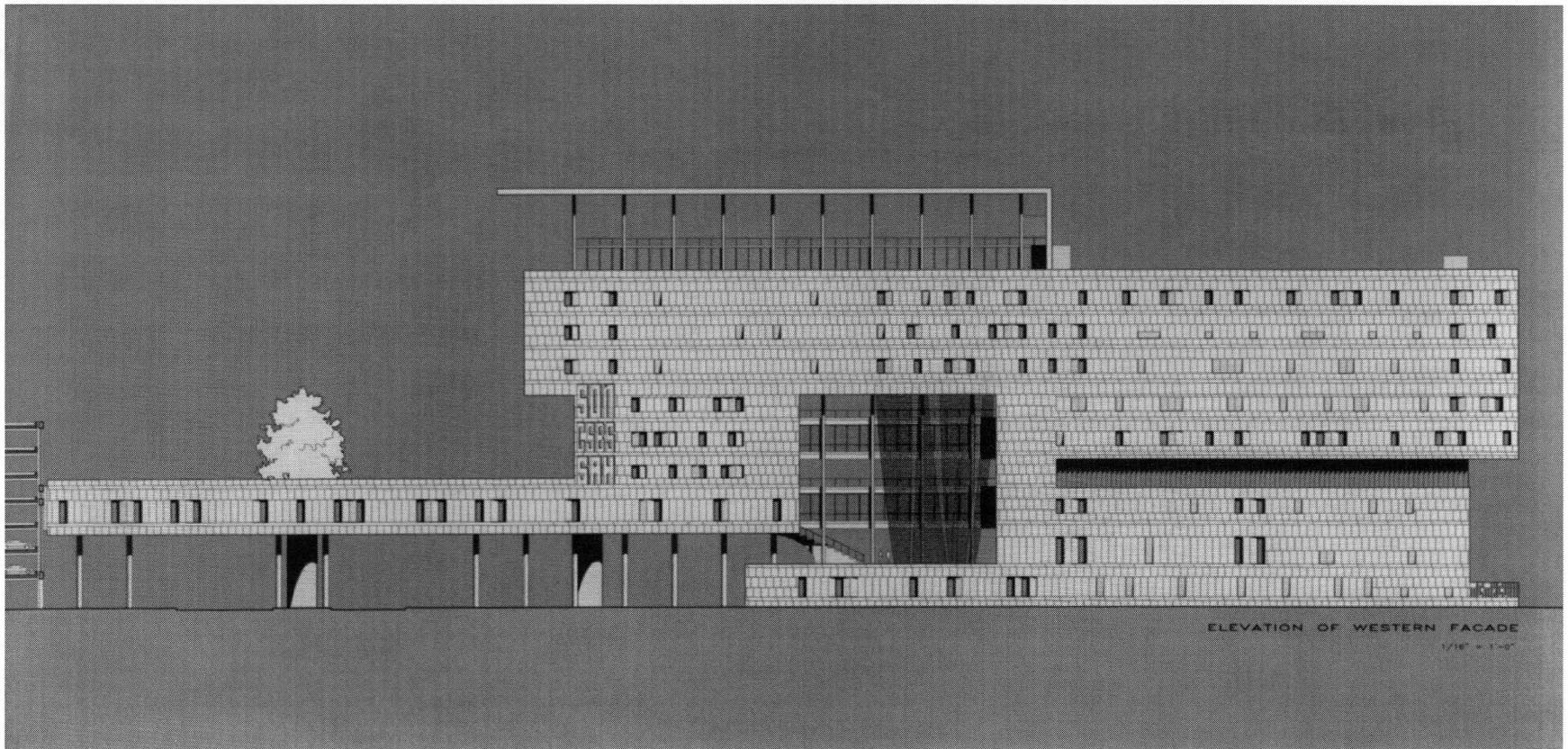
daycare facility. A sculptural stair, constructed like a basket to allow breezes and views through it, encourages movement between the park and patio and provides a place for observing the park. A canopy roof above the building shades terraces that are dedicated to social functions and that grant views back across the flat plain to the skyline of Houston, reaffirming the relationship of this exopolis to the downtown.

And just as the distant skyline serves as an icon of Houston, the health sciences building similarly contributes to the image of the TMC. The project pays particular attention to the symbolics of program, creating a hierarchy of elements related to the series of schools housed within. Thus the deans' offices are stacked prominently along the northern face of the building between Holcombe and the patio; as the major programmatic component, the School of Nursing is collected into three floors that protrude above the bridge. Mate-

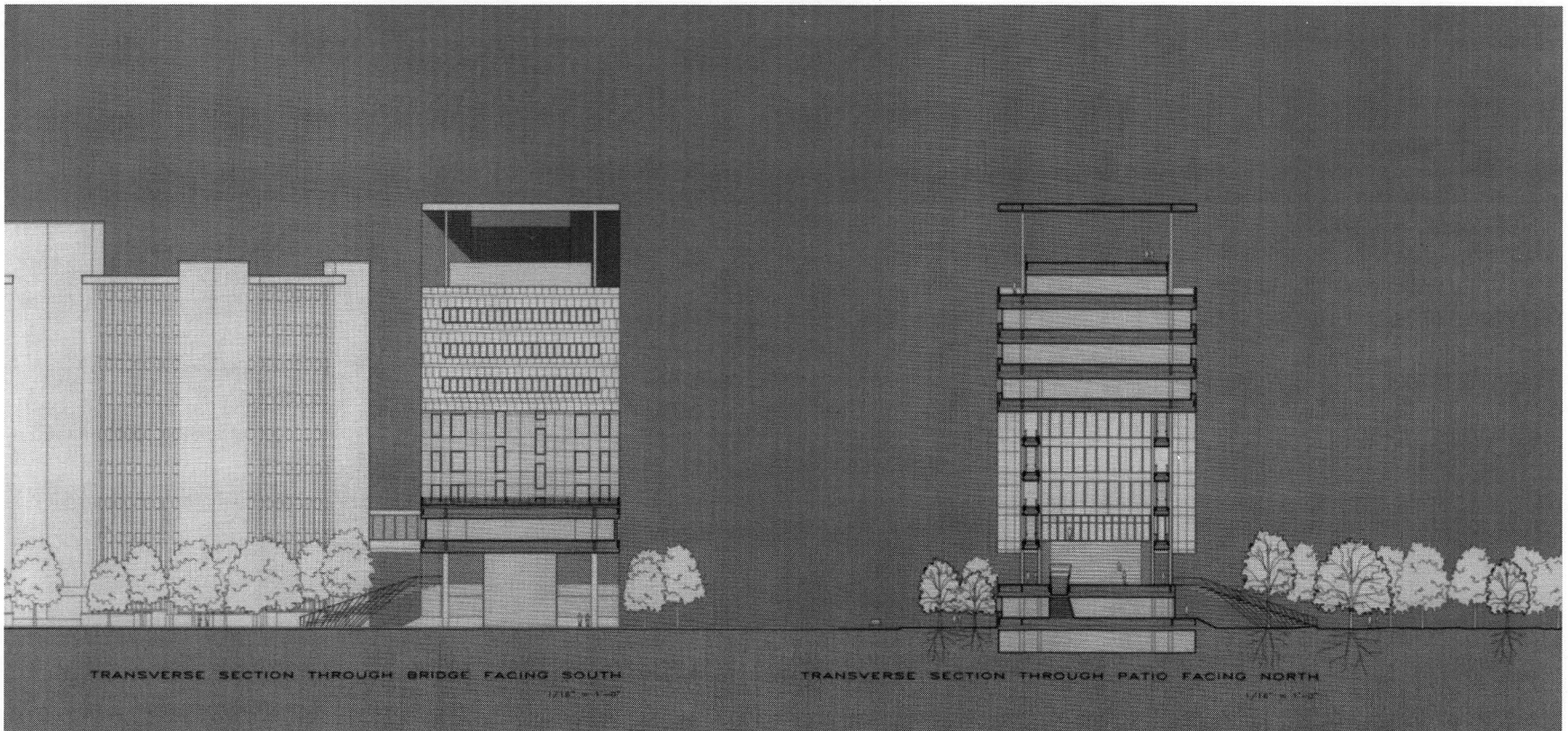
rials also reinforce the conceptual hierarchy of the building. Its overall exterior mass is clad in a stone skin, into which symbols and lettering are carved. The individual stone panels slant and pull back to reveal recessed windows. In contrast, where spaces are conceptually cut away from the blocklike mass, surfaces are instead clad in steel panels with flush windows. This two-fold surface treatment distinguishes a type of three-dimensional mass that is subservient to the carved moments within it.

More important, the building's image is developed at three levels: local to the site, as a symbol for the institution, and relative to the larger metropolis. Its image precisely relates to the carved voids and to the major public components of the program. Thus the patio and loggia intimately tie the structure to Grant Fay Park; the hybrid bridge acts as an introduction to the building when arriving to campus on Holcombe Boulevard, from a distance; the canopy

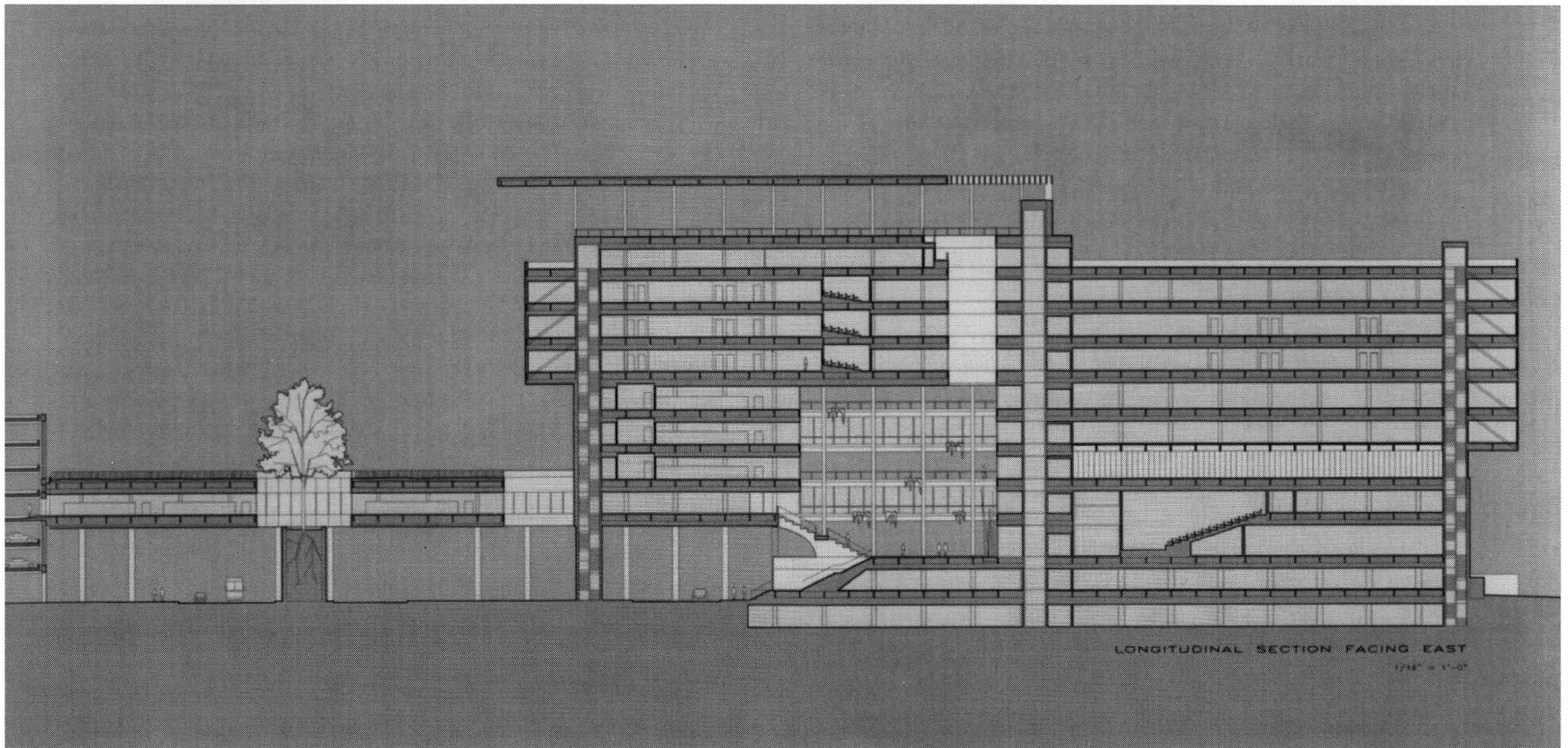
presents a distinct image on the TMC skyline. These are the identifiable elements that express the university's interest in a bold, stabilizing icon for the campus. They serve to define a place linked to the larger structure of the city—a place linked physically, visually, and iconographically.



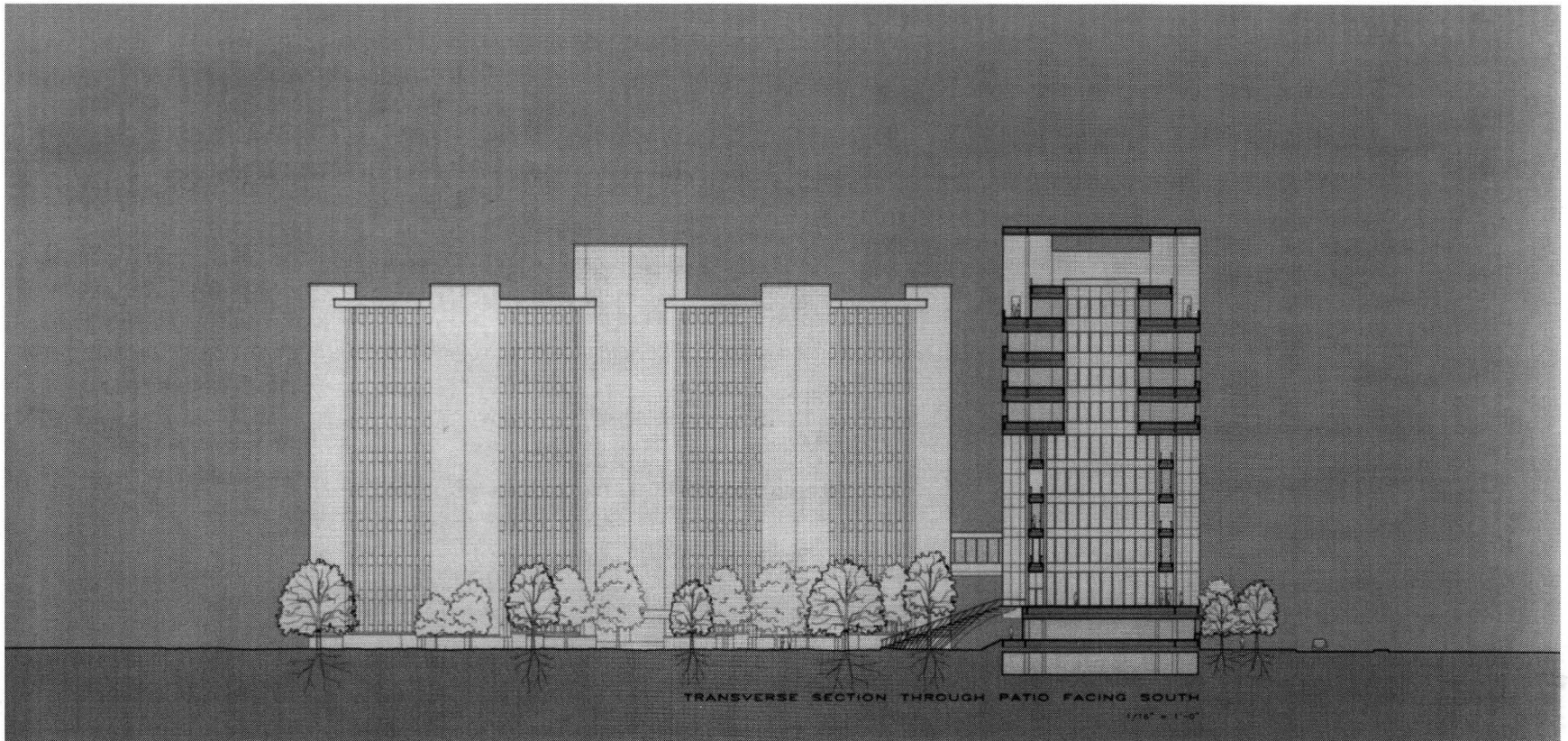
West elevation showing the patio with scrim curtain and the iconography carved into the stone skin



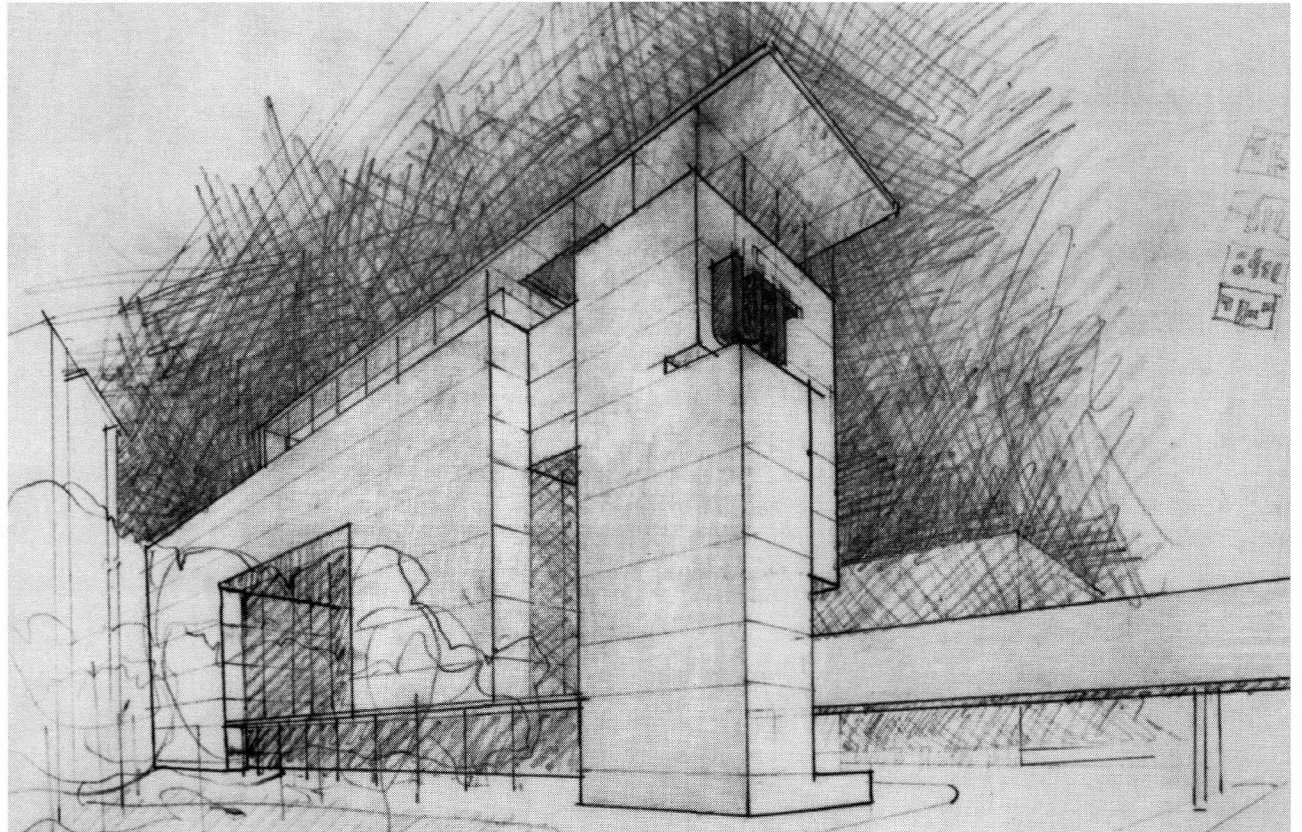
Transverse sections through the bridge facing south and north



Longitudinal section through the entry stair, patio, chimney, bridge, and canopy facing east



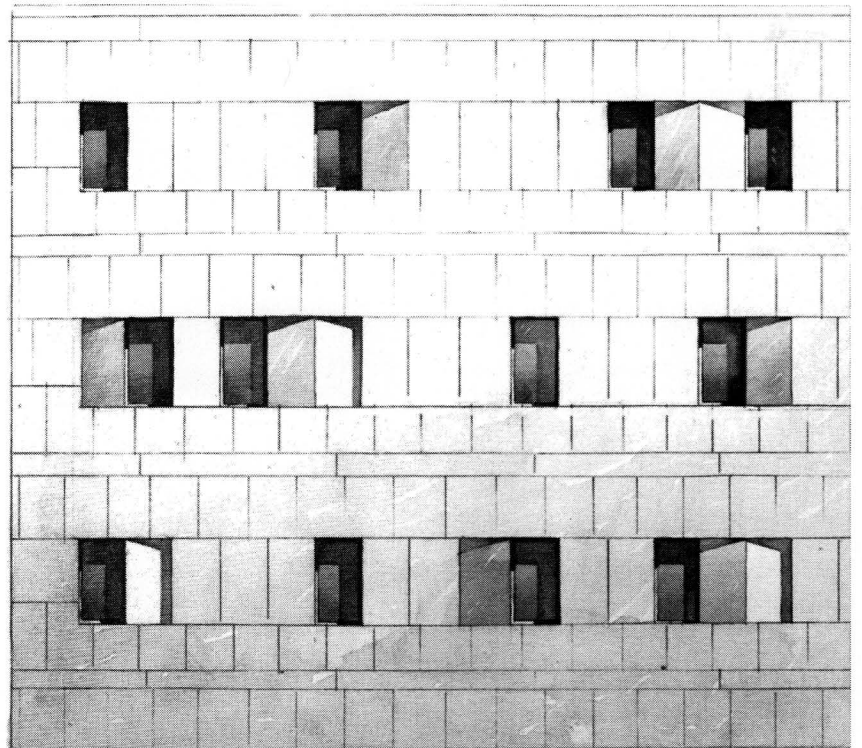
24 *Transverse section through the patio facing south*



Study sketch

Credits

The University of Texas at Houston invited six architecture firms to submit proposals for the new health sciences center in the fall of 1997. The competition participants were Steven Holl, Lake/Flato Architects, Machado and Silvetti, Enrique Norren, Patkau Architects, and Tod Williams + Billie Tsien. The jury selected Patkau Architects as the designers for the new center. Machado and Silvetti's project team included: Rodolfo Machado with Jorge Silvetti (designer-in-charge); Stephen Atkinson, Mark Pasnik, Francisco Rodríguez (design team); Kayoko Ohtsuki, Craig Roberts, Aaron Follett, Andrew Ku, David S. Lee, Richard Lee (model); Philip Chen, Ben Karty (computer); Maksim Drivin (watercolors).



Study of elevation detail showing stone panel system