

RE-CREATING THE CONTEXT  
The Design of a Community Theater

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B.A. Goddard College, 1974

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## Abstract

Herein lies the design of an imaginary building in a very real neighborhood. The building is, among other things, a theater, cafe, childcare facility and guest house. The neighborhood is a 100 year old urban residential neighborhood, a comfortably-scaled place that is well-liked by its inhabitants. The rationale for imagining a building into this context is the following:

In a residential neighborhood, public and commercial buildings must be clearly seen as such, but ought not be so discontinuous as to disrupt the neighborhood. How, then, can the form of a public building reinforce the total form of the neighborhood, while establishing a clear difference in use?

I have developed a method of analysing an existing place in order to make conscious decisions about reinforcing and transforming the existing context, and applied it to the design of this single building.

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on February 9, 1982 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture.

Thesis Supervisor: Shun Kanda, Associate Professor of Architecture.

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Advisor Shun Kanda, for his patience, helpful criticism and encouragement.

My teachers at MIT whose ideas permeate this thesis: Stan Anderson, Kevin Lynch, Maurice Smith, Fernando Domeyko, Jan Wampler and especially John Habraken.

Pablo Molestina, for his almost-always helpful suggestions and commiseration; Hattie Hartman and Dara Youngdale for much help and moral support; Jan Cassin for her assistance and good cheer, and roommates Stuart Troutman and Callie Traynor for putting up with me.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father,  
Franklyn K. Lauden

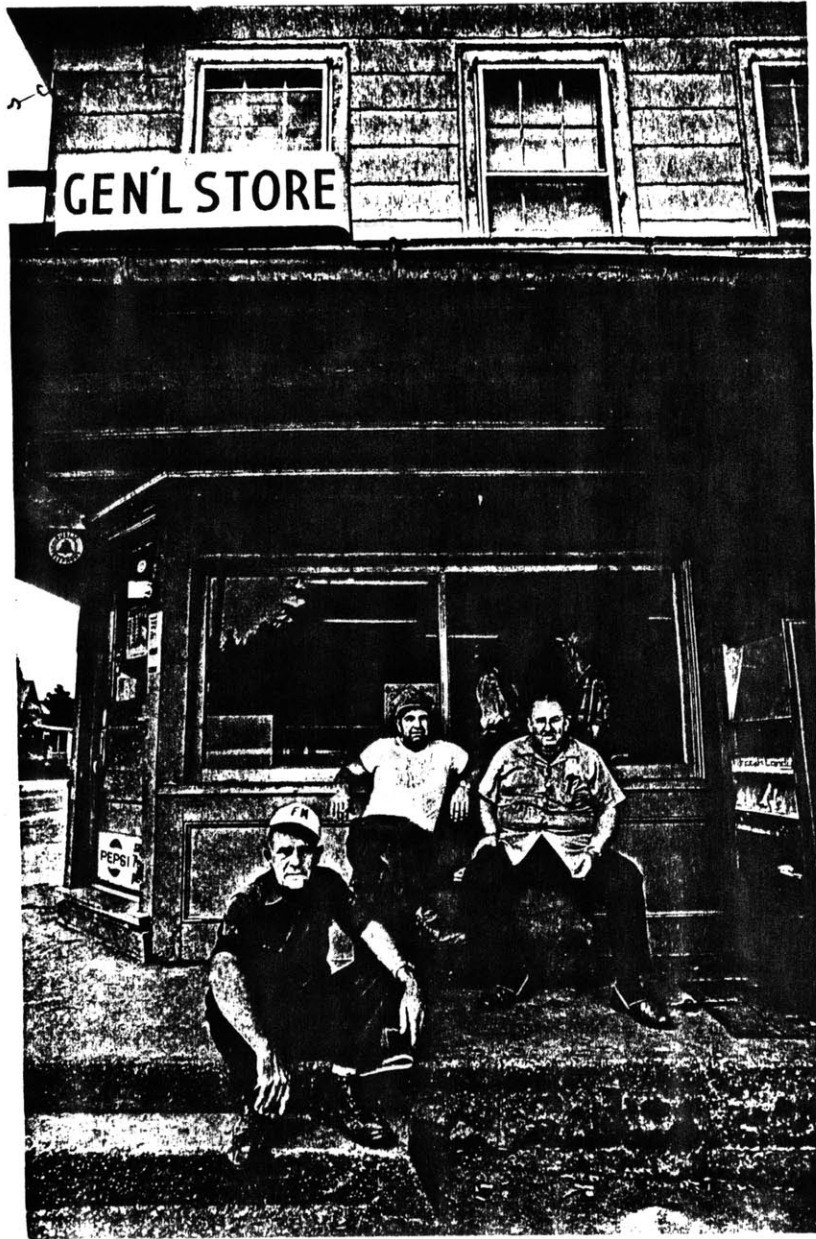


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# INTRODUCTION



## A Few Words on the Task

"Architectural design calls for re-creating or re-adjusting contexts for releasing people's animation, choice, constancy and identity... Each designed environment is always either a retention or an alteration of a pre-existing place."

- Shun Kanda (in "The Design of Topologic Settings", page 13)

I have always been bothered by architecture which seems to have been born in a vacuum, unrelated to its surroundings. Buildings are related to their neighbors, their region, even to the rest of the built world, and the relationship is so profound that a building can be considered part of its neighbor. Insensitive design casts ripples far beyond property lines.

Both modern architecture and the eclectic reaction have been guilty of producing alienating forms, whether intended as "rational" inventions or derivations of historical forms from other times and places. Invention and history-dredging are in no way inherently alienating. The problem only arises when the architect's understanding is not responsive to the immediate circumstances of the people for whom he is designing. When design is a purely personal matter, lost in a cloud of self-interest, it begins to lose its

potential as a medium of collective communication and interaction. It becomes alien "Art" instead of a sharing of personal and collective vision, as is more popular art. Linking the designer's personal world and the collective world requires an understanding of both existing places and cultural/local attitudes and aspirations. It requires a willingness to allow one's own attitudes to be transformed by a real, specific and probably imperfect situation. This is what I mean by "contextual responsiveness": an openness to the idiosyncrasies of people and place.

This project is an attempt to approach a design problem in a contextually responsive way.

Unfortunately, it's not always possible to work on a thesis project with the residents of a community, which limits the scope of the exercise. While I have doubts about the wisdom of working in

such a detached way, it has allowed me to concentrate on the observation and interpretation of the physical context. I must emphasize, however, that I see this as only part of a process that is ultimately more oriented toward the social context.

I have had the advantage of drawing on the work of some groundbreaking designers and theoreticians, several of whom I have had the fortune of working with at MIT, Harvard and in Urbino, Italy. The work of John Habraken and Christopher Alexander has been particularly helpful. In this project, I have tried to use ideas and methods from numerous sources to develop a personally useful method of contextual analysis.

I have chosen a design problem which allows me to explore one particular aspect of the neighborhood context: the relationship between public and private

## A Design Exploration

places. The most basic contextual problem is how to conform with an existing place; instead, I am posing the question of how to differentiate a building while still supporting the larger fabric of the community.

Specifically, I am designing a public building which supports different kinds of social activities. Built around (figuratively and literally) a community theater are places for informal activities, related to the street environment, related to eating, and involving children. For such a public place, the design of the street edge is crucial, in terms of both use and image.

The neighborhood I am designing for, Cambridgeport, in Cambridge, MA is a 100 to 150 year old residential community which is characterized by wood frame houses and tree-lined streets. Although it is considered one of the most pleasant parts of Cambridge, it

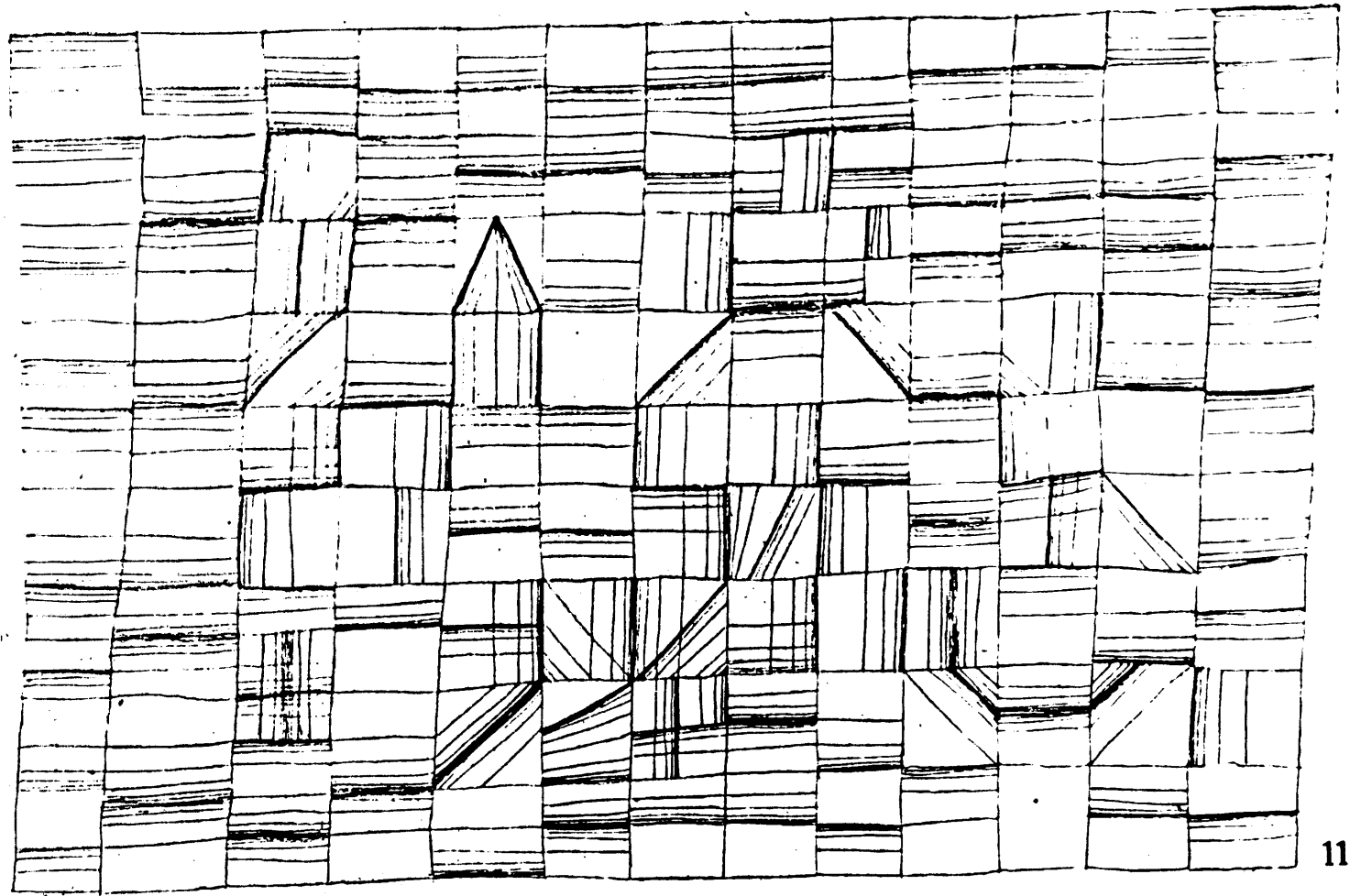
is under pressures of increasing density and possible increased commercial or industrial use. Its residents like it enough to have battled successfully against the construction of a monstrous community-splitting highway; they have shown awareness and concern at hearings regarding everything from housing design reviews to redevelopment planning sessions. Presumably they would be highly involved in the building of a real community building.

The process of applying observations to design is by no means direct, since a multitude of programmatic, building system and aesthetic considerations lie between the site and the finished building. Contextual responsiveness is hardly a way of assuring good design. I have tried to strike a balance between the old and the new, always conscious that intervention requires change, and that changes, no matter how small, are always re-creating the context.

This project was initially conceived as an exploration in both residential and public forms, with the contextual analysis serving as the basis for collaboration between two or more designers. Although this proved too difficult to work out under the circumstances, I nevertheless believe that:

1. Similar observation and interpretation provides an excellent tool for co-operation.
  2. A design thesis would be more interesting and useful, if people worked together on related projects.
- Collaboration is a necessary skill that is usually neglected at MIT.

## RE-CREATING THE CONTEXT



11

Paul Klee, "Architecture from Variations"

# Order and Observation

N. John Habraken (numerous works, particularly Transformations of the Site, unpublished).

Approaching a new place, we form impressions based on our observations as we look around or do things. Some people are able to make accurate descriptions of a place very quickly, while others are never able to explain what they've seen coherently. The skill of observation is not just a matter of memory, but also of finding order in the chaos of a new place.

The order or environmental structure of a place is described by Habraken as "the rules of the game" which describe the interrelationships of various physical elements. Its effects can be seen as sets of patterns, physical definitions which repeat, forming continuities which are recognizable as a whole. Patterns of form represent agreements and conventions which are understood, implicitly or explicitly, by planners, builders or inhabitants. The different ways in which they are executed are the variations within the system.



The ability of an observer to understand a place is related to both the clarity of the order and the observer's familiarity with the place or similar places. Experience in a place is the ultimate source of functional understanding; no amount of map-reading or picture-looking can equal day-to-day contact with a place. Certain kinds of information such as complex urban patterns and physical dimensions, may best be understood by detailed study.

Careful observation is important to functioning in a place, but it is even more important to someone who wants to sensitively change a place. Sometimes a designer is so familiar with a place that complete understanding seems intuitive. This is rare outside of unselfconscious traditional societies. It is more common for a designer to overlook or ignore his surroundings, taking for granted and forgetting many understandings which he might use in day to day life.

The skill of finding order may be conscious or unconscious, but it is a process of finding personal interpretations of physical patterns. As these interpretations are formed, they provide a framework by which new observations are understood, the overall order giving each new item meaning. Of course there are objective relationships around us, dimensions and proximities, but it is the personal ordering that we do that is most useful.

In designing, I feel that it's useful to take the observations and "intuitive" understandings and record them, for elaboration, for scrutiny, and especially for communication to others. Recording also facilitates clarification of the relationships between observations and aids in understanding the order of the physical environment.

## Personal Ordering

## Patterns and Continuity

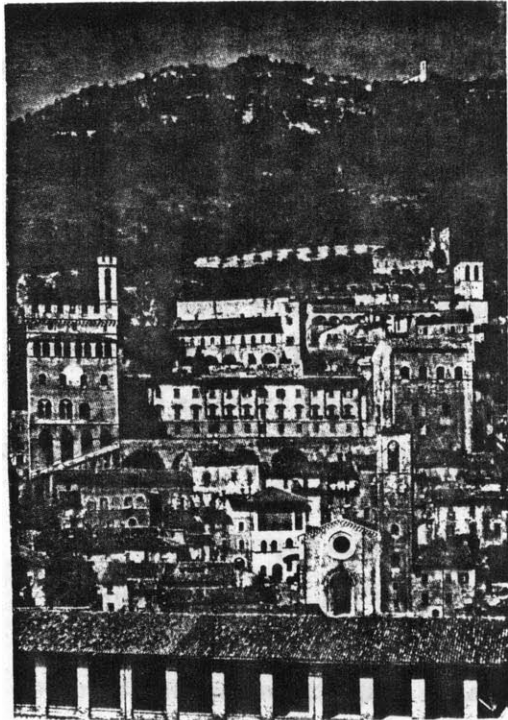
### Continuity/Discontinuity at Different Scales

A neighborhood, recognizable by form patterns (size, direction, materials, texture, openings, etc.) a boundary, and a singular form.



Sometimes patterns reinforce each other, sometimes they contradict, and some patterns play a more important role than others. Most important though, is the understanding that patterns are always interrelated through a range of scales, or levels, that, say, the placement of a door or window is not independent of the form of the street, or even the entire neighborhood street plan.

When, on one level of scale, some element breaks the established patterns, it forms a discontinuity. It may, however, have counterparts elsewhere, in which case it is a local interruption but part of a pattern at a higher level. It may also be unique, without any corresponding patterns elsewhere.



The pattern of boundaries and towers forms continuities which transcend the neighborhood level.

My exploration is primarily about the structure of public territory which, of course, must be defined in relation to private territory. The edge between the two, typically the street edge, is a collective form made up of building facades, landscape, and forms such as fences, walls, even cars. It defines the space of the street (or square, park, path, etc.) as well as the private spaces. The edge, then, separates the two different kinds of zones, and it shapes each, giving the street its distinctive spatial qualities. Simultaneously, the edge has the potential of serving as a habitable zone in its own right, a space whose defining elements also shape the adjacent spaces.

In the case of a public use occurring in a predominantly residential setting, there is a need for some expression of this discontinuity of use in the form of the edge. Sometimes the public territory extends through the edge into the

## **The Street Edge: Public and Private**

Public Territory: Any place which is accessible to all.

Private Territory: Any place which is subject to the control of its inhabitants.

## **Public Discontinuity**



A major interruption in mass and detail, attracting attention and encouraging entrance.

New buildings mimicing the scale of their neighbors: below, a public library masquerades as housing.



building, in which case its form might encourage public inhabitation/penetration or communicate information as to the nature of the use, or both. The building edge might well repeat patterns of other non-residential buildings in the neighborhood. But most importantly, there is reason to expect the public edge to be different, discontinuous in some significant way from the private edge. So too, is there reason for the degree of discontinuity to be appropriate to the role of the building in the community.

It is my contention that in adding to or intervening in an established place, it is important to respect certain patterns, less important to continue others. The criteria for making these decisions is admittedly subjective, but there are two goals which I consider especially important: legibility and social identity.

## Legibility

Legibility is a characteristic of an environment which is functionally understandable in its structure.

"Legibility of the cityscape means the ease with which its parts can be recognized and organized into a coherent pattern. A legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an overall pattern."

Orientation is seldom a problem to the inhabitants of a highly legible place. Even in considerable complexity, there are sufficient clues to allow movement without becoming "lost". These may include a network of paths, reinforced by edge definitions with consistent setbacks, building sizes and types, landscaping, and such. When there are frequent violations of these patterns without apparent logic, a place becomes confusing. False clues or contradictions may lead to disorientation.

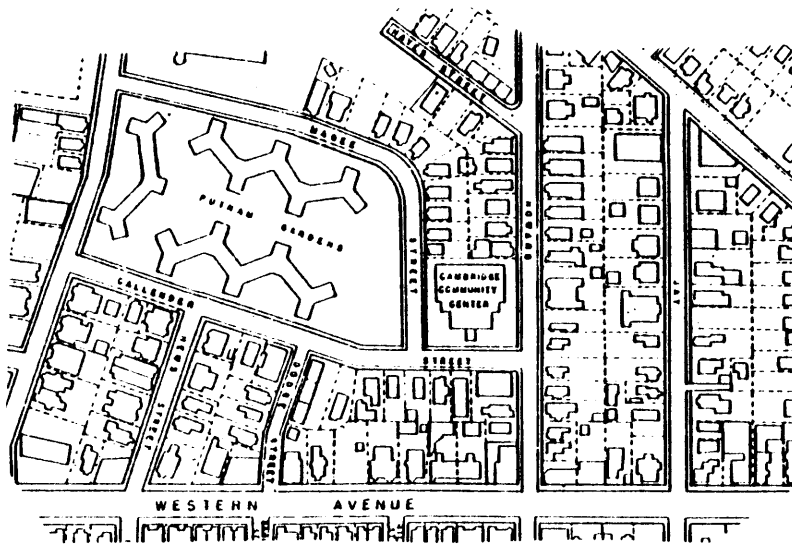
The definition of public and private is one of the most basic forms of legibility. A residential street typically includes many clues about privacy: there tends to be a boundary beyond which a stranger does not proceed. Likewise a public space or building should "read" as more accessible; the space-defining edge must be more "penetrable". If there are not shared, consistent agreements about boundaries, then people are unable to read the clues for behaviour and may develop conflicts over territory.

By "social identity" I refer to the role that form patterns play in the establishment of collective, family or individual place in the community. Social similarities and differences occur at all levels, and it is possible for the physical structure to either reinforce or conflict with the social structure. A few examples:

Kevin Lynch, (The Image of the City, page 2).

## Social Identity

When neighborhood boundaries are unclear, there are often problems between conflicting uses, or between different class or cultural groups over control. The result can be social conflict or physical abandonment. In Cambridgeport, the zone bordering Central Square is ambiguous and poorly used.



A plan foretells the inherent isolation of a public housing project in the Riverside area adjacent to Cambridgeport. The interruption is so obviously inappropriate one must wonder if such a design is malicious or simply stupid.

When a large-scale change of street patterns or building types occurs, there is often a distinct social separation that follows, even when there are no real social differences, and especially when there are. Many examples of public housing and condominium development demonstrate the intensity of this separation.

At the level of the street, significant differences in building type, setback, or surface materials are often prohibited by zoning, which demonstrates the strength of the feeling that "no one should be too

different". At the same time, everyone works "within the rules" to establish their own identity, by painting, landscaping and displaying ornament. This is individualization within the framework of the collective identity.

In the case of public buildings, "identity" refers to both "for whom?" and "for what?". Is it for everyone, like a store? Is it owned by everyone but used by anyone? Form need not provide all the pertinent information, but it should not contradict people's previous understandings: a store, generally, ought not look like a church. It is also important that identity be expressed in a way appropriate to its significance in the community and its place in the physical structure.

For example, the identity of the medieval cathedral, dominating a town, was perhaps appropriate, but was certainly clear as a symbol. It is less

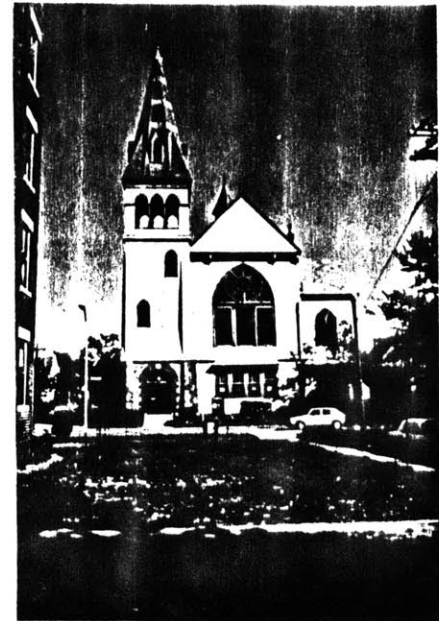
likely that this would be accepted in an American community of mixed religion. Nevertheless, people do feel pride in their churches, and invariably build a clear, distinctive image, be it unique or part of a larger pattern of a denominational type.



Participation in a pattern which transcends the community is a particularly powerful form of identification. The New England white clapboard church or gothic-detailing in masonry are obvious examples. In some places, the image of a single detached building means either "church" or "school", a pattern which is encouraged by law in the form of property tax exemptions. Most building types have some association with larger orders, be they as simple as the pitched roof of a single house, or as obvious as a movie marquee or the plate glass of a storefront.

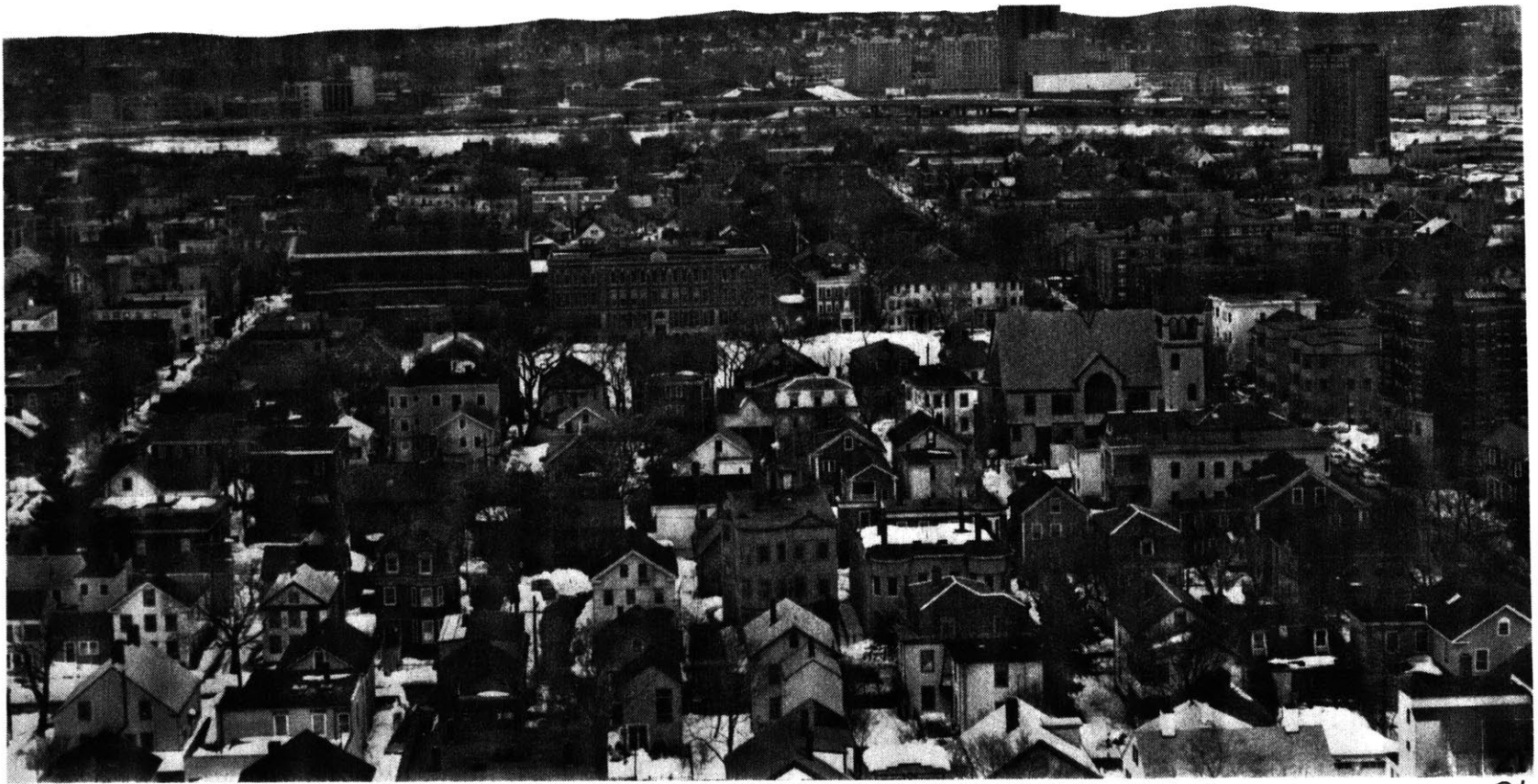
Ultimately, public buildings are a vital part of both the identity and legibility of a residential neighborhood. A street of houses may be made memorable by a single church or corner store: those simultaneously contribute to the identity of the street and serve as landmarks which make orientation easier. Without these the result is an

anonymous, disorienting neighborhood, like many tract subdivisions. When they form regular patterns throughout a neighborhood, public buildings reveal part of the overall order.





## OBSERVATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS



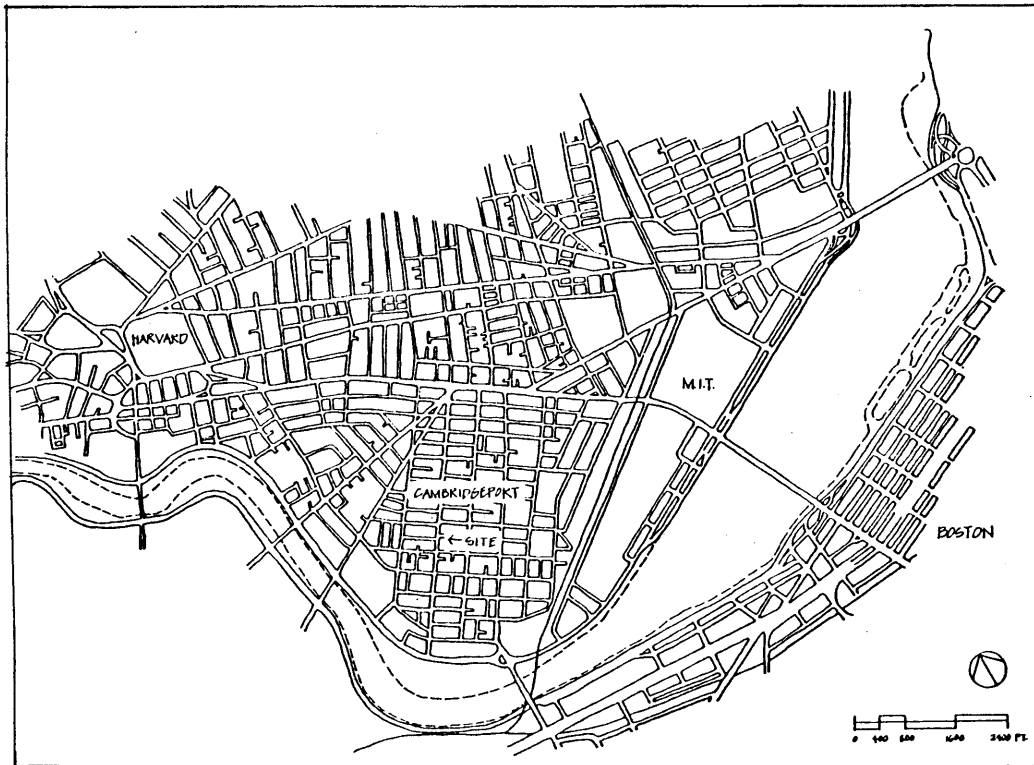
## Cambridgeport:

### Patterns and Change

Cambridgeport is one of at least a half dozen neighborhoods which make up Cambridge, which in turn is one of several cities making up the Boston metropolitan area. Cambridgeport is located near the regional centers of commerce, transportation and culture, and shares numerous business districts,

especially Central Square and Harvard Square. Adjacent, foot accessible areas include Central Square, the Charles River Basin and the MIT campus, including athletic fields.

The neighborhood is particularly interesting because it is remarkably consistent in its street and building types. It presents a balance of built and open space that gives it simultaneously an enclosed urban feeling and a transparent, open suburban sense. Residents include working-class families, students from three nearby universities, and recently-arrived young professionals, living in subdivided houses, triple-deckers, and apartment buildings. While Cambridgeport has not been "gentrified" as heavily as other Cambridge and Boston neighborhoods, its desirable location and pleasant surroundings have led to sharply increased property values and rents.



## Understanding the Context Working With

"Patterns of form", as I have explained, refer to the generally recognized but largely unarticulated agreements which guide the formation of a community which is built piece-by-piece over time.

Cambridgeport was built with such agreements: some were legal, some economic, some cultural, while many were conventions of the building trades. Since the original construction of 50-100 years ago, there have been changes in many of the basic understandings involved in housing/community development. The zoning is more strict; economic pressures promote high density-low cost construction; cars, TV and the economy have changed our culture; and construction practices have changed.

New development which responds only to these pressures, without regard for the results of the original agreements, would seriously transform the neighborhood. In recognition of this, the city has instituted zoning which mandates the continuation of certain patterns like height and setback, while leaving many others to the discretion of the builder.

Since mandated uniformity is often stifling and phony, there is little sense in instituting point-by-point pattern requirements. Nor is transformation to be feared or avoided. In some cases, an existing physical structure may merit complete rejection and wholesale transformation. On the other hand, I have chosen to work with a community that is well-liked by its residents, who agree that major changes are undesirable (a sentiment voiced in numerous zoning hearings). Development will continue in Cambridgeport, and transformations will, of course, occur. Through an

## A Set of Patterns

understanding and sensitive use of the basic patterns, reinforcement of the structure is possible while a process of conscious transformation is undertaken.

For this reason I have tried to articulate some of the patterns which guided the formation of Cambridgeport. Since no architect is privy to the original, often subconscious agreements, I am describing them so that they may be consciously applied, or, if necessary, discarded. As subjective observations, they can be no more than guidelines for the context-minded designer, but I hope that such an architect might use them to balance or resist some of the pressures of economic expedience.

## General Patterns...

I have identified a set of patterns which I feel are most essential to the physical quality and identity of Cambridgeport. They describe the primary patterns of physical form at the level of the neighborhood. The criteria

which they meet is, basically, whether their disturbance would result in a significant transformation of the neighborhood. They are patterns which either describe the total form of the area, or describe a pattern which occurs throughout. None are without exception (these are not "rules"), but I have made a value judgment that their predominance is important. They are:

NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARIES

MAJOR THROUGH STREETS AND  
DISCRETE RESIDENTIAL STREETS

SCREEN-LIKE CONTINUOUS EDGE

DENSE, STREET-ORIENTED  
DETACHED HOUSES

INSTITUTIONAL BUILDINGS  
FACING THROUGH STREETS

GROUND-LEVEL COMMERCIAL  
ON THROUGH STREETS AROUND  
INTERSECTIONS

PUBLIC OPEN SPACE WITHIN THE  
STREET PATTERN

The primary patterns can be thought of as defined by many lower-level patterns. Each of these patterns is an effect which results from configurations of physical or spatial elements. Thus, the same patterns may result from different combinations of elements. The pattern, then, may be described visually, dimensionally or conceptually, as needed to establish the essential relationships.

While each of these patterns is generally present, none are inviolable. They are contributors to the primary pattern, which is the sum of its lower patterns. It is this sum which is most important, not the individual parts. In practice, a critique of these patterns will almost certainly lead to a rejection of some, and the specifics of site, program or economics may necessarily call into question others. By integrating the secondary patterns with new factors, transformations may occur which reinforce the whole.

### **...Defined by Specific Patterns**

In this study, I am particularly interested in the relationship between public and private in the street/building edge. While a primary pattern may apply to both situations (i.e. - both public and private buildings contribute to the screen-quality of the street edge), some of the secondary patterns may be significantly different for each. The similar patterns form continuities, while the dissimilarities provide the distinction between public and private. By articulating these, I hope to provide references for the design of a public building which is distinctly recognizable as such, while remaining a part of the greater whole.

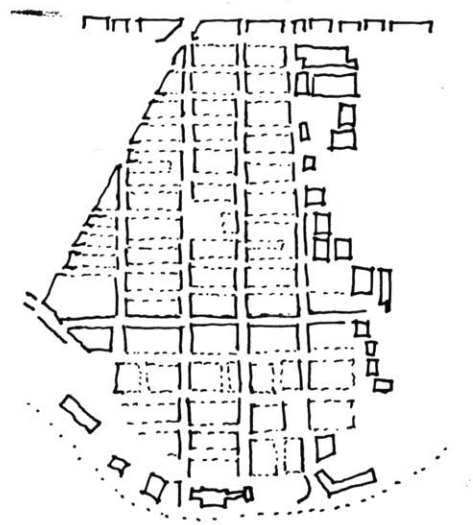
# Patterns

# Comments

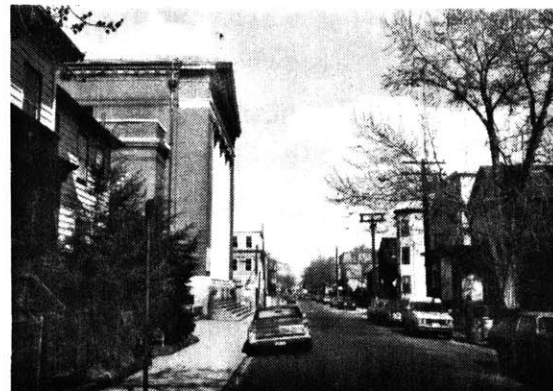
**STREET FORM:** There are two kinds of discrete street space: long, continuous through streets; and short, roomlike residential streets.

## I. Through Streets

1. Through streets cross the neighborhood, serving as a path for vehicles and pedestrians, which need not enter residential streets. Pedestrian use gives them a "promenade" character: they are places for social encounters due to their use as a common route to individual residential streets.
2. Closure: Streets are bounded on their sides, but perceived as open-ended. They terminate at a road or street of regional significance.

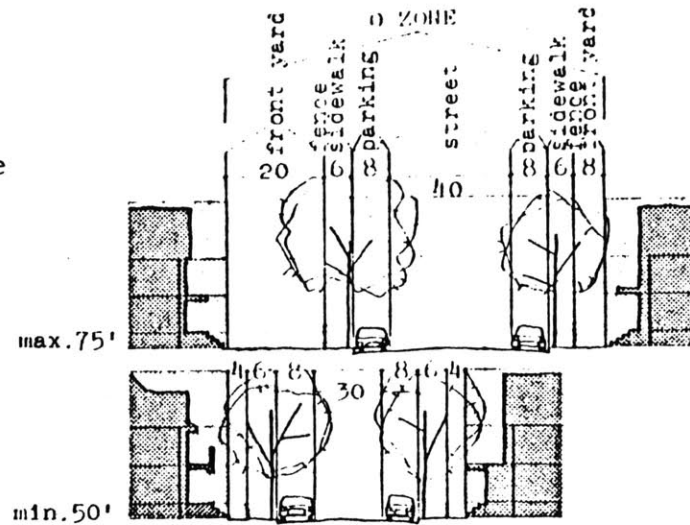


These streets are the most public zone of the neighborhood, which affects the use of public buildings and spaces.



More prominent buildings are seen from a distance of three to five blocks.

- 3. Through streets are wider than residential streets, both vehicle zone and pedestrian zone.

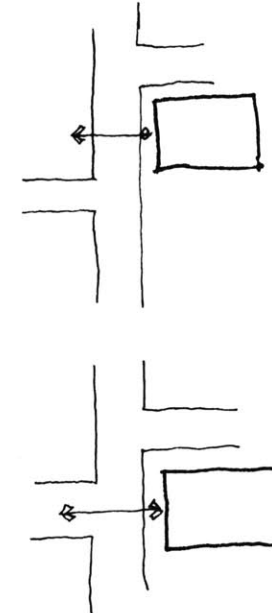


Drawing: MIT Urban Tissue Design Project.

- 4. The majority of interesections are "T" interesections, which limit the flow of traffic perpendicular to the through streets.
- 5. The frequency of interesections (every 200 feet or less) makes a rhythm of open/closed, light/dark.

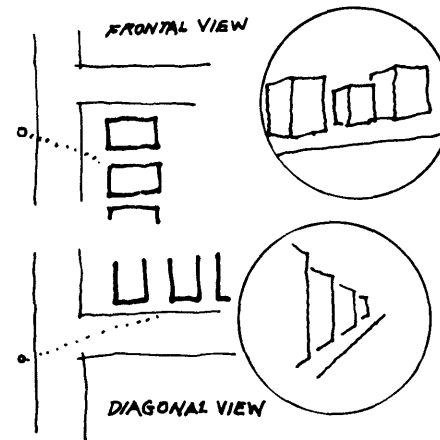


The corner site has two possible configurations:



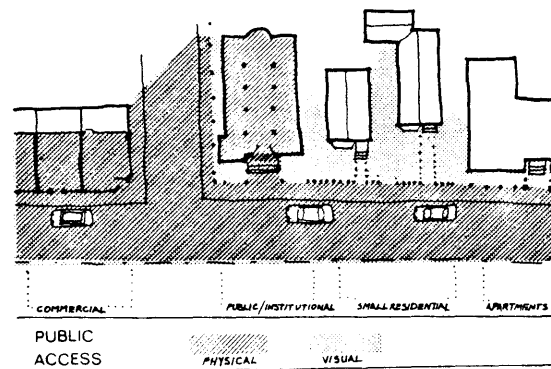
6. There is a constant variety of lighting conditions which correlate to changing uses along the edge.

7. There is a constant variety of views which correlate to different uses along the edge. Variations include type of view and depth of view.



Public buildings tend to be both light/open and visible from the street (though view into the site is often limited).

8. The territories of physical and visual public access vary greatly with type of use.



Public buildings are accessible, but often the insides are hidden, for reasons of function/privacy. In some cases there may be justification for creating a closer territorial correspondence, so that the pedestrian can at least see into, if not wander into, a public place.

9. Larger residences (more than 5 units) tend to be located on through streets.

10. Nonresidential buildings (institutional and commercial) tend to be located on through streets.

In siting a public building, it is essential to recognize the intensity of use that promotes this pattern. It is like an unwritten "zoning" law that logically puts public places on public paths.

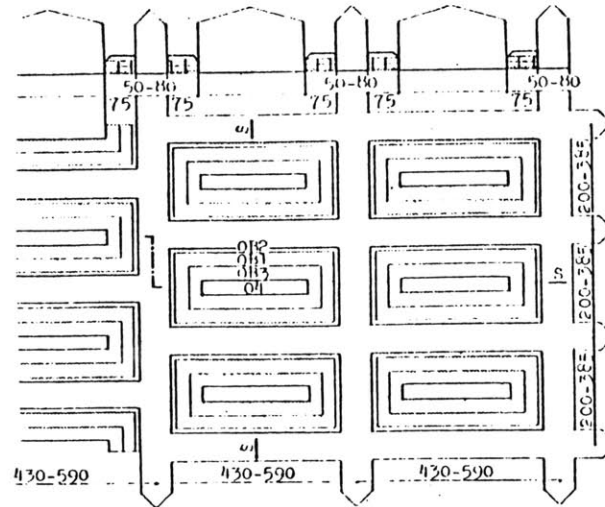


## II. Residential Streets

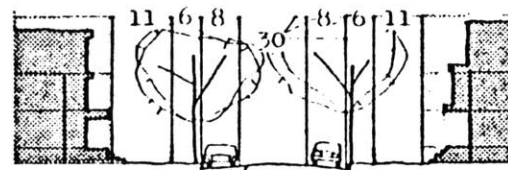
1. Residential streets have an out-of-the-way, "enclave" quality which allows a sense of collective control by the inhabitants.
2. Closure: They are bounded on the sides by a screen of built and landscape forms; most streets are limited to one or two blocks long, where they are bounded by a "T" intersection with a through street.
3. The length of the blocks varies between 430' and 590'. As a result, the entire street is visible from the front of each house.
4. Streets are not much more than three car widths wide; sidewalks are not more than 4'.



The active edges of a public building should not violate this pattern too much. The corner is the resolution of two different situations in which one may overpower the other.

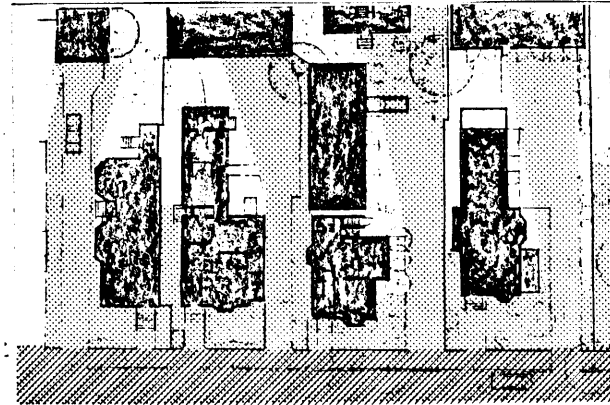


The buildings at the closed end are particularly important; a massive building will reinforce the end. Also, these are the only buildings in the neighborhood seen straight on from a distance.



MIT Urban Tissue Design Project.

5. When residential streets are more than 300' apart, an alley/alcove or one-block through street may be opened off the residential street. These tend to be even more secluded and enclave-like.
  
6. Visually accessible territory is greater than physically accessible (public) territory.



This is one of the most important parts of the neighborhood identity: visual transparency and openness with a sense of physical security and privacy. It is specific to the residential uses, distinguishing them from commercial and institutional (see 18).

SCREEN-LIKE CONTINUOUS EDGE defines the space of the street. It is a three dimensional, layered edge, made up of elements which are both natural and built; permanent and temporary. They are screen-like in that they rarely form solid enclosures, allowing visual and physical penetration. The layers define different degrees of public and private territory. As the relationship of the screen elements varies, so does the character of the street space and the relationships between public and private.

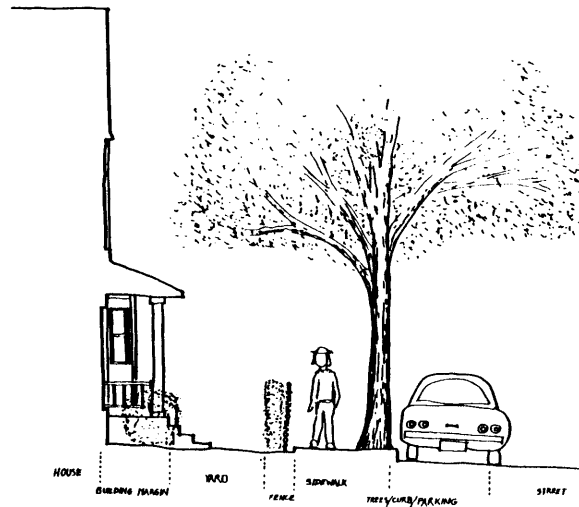


1. The screen/edge is found in the portion of the open space zone from the parking area in the vehicular street to the facade of the buildings, allowing view and access between the facades.

2. Street-sidewalk margin:

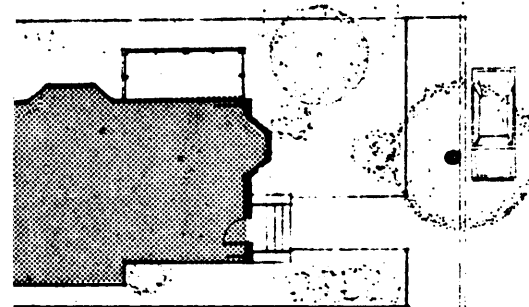
a) Parked cars form a screen which is often virtually continuous, with spaces between varying from a person's width to car-length. Their height is generally less than 5', under shoulder-height, so that (in combination with fences) make a protected-but-not-enclosed "canyon" for the sidewalk.

b) Trees of various sizes and ages, all deciduous, spaced from 20' to 50' apart, form a colonnade between sidewalk and street. Other elements like utility poles and street signs are often located here, with similar effect, and at least one day a week, rows of trashcans reinforce the line of the colonnade.

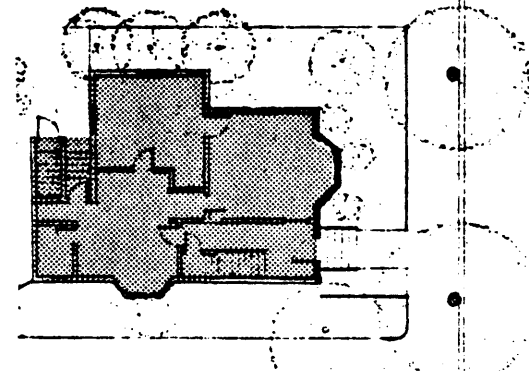


Part of the public zone is included within the screen, so that pedestrians are walking within the edge.

The pedestrian moves along the sidewalk parallel to the screen elements, crossing only to enter more private zones (toward buildings) or to leave the edge (into or across the street).



Parking patterns, while rarely planned, may be used/manipulated to either increase privacy or emphasize a building or space by prohibiting parking. (This often occurs for stores located at bus stops.)



While these are mostly placed haphazardly, they are potential architectural elements to be placed carefully.

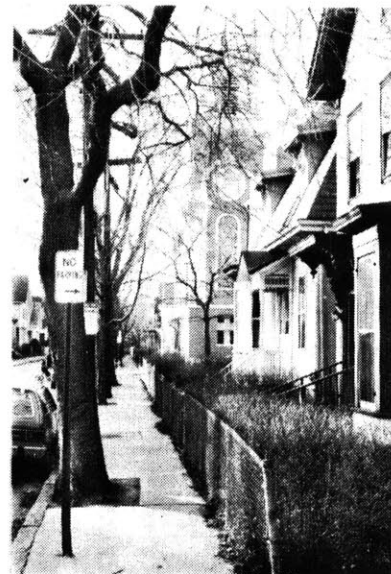
3. The sidewalk, the zone of most pedestrian use, is one step up from the street level, and is of a different paving material (generally brick or concrete with a granite curb), which is interrupted occasionally by asphalt driveways moving from the street to in-between buildings.



This zone varies in width only slightly in Cambridgeport, even at the open spaces. Greater variety is called for, especially at public places.

Surfacing, although horizontal, is an important part of the screen gestalt. Texture and direction are very meaningful here; they should be developed in a less haphazard way.

4. The fence is a physical barrier which separates access according to public and private. They are 2'-4' high, with gates at places of access; sometimes + 15' openings at car-access points. The degree of transparency varies: 2/3 are chain-link, 1/3 wood and about half are backed by hedges which make a solid wall, often 5' high. (Exceptional hedges or fences are more than 5' high, forming a solid visual barrier.)



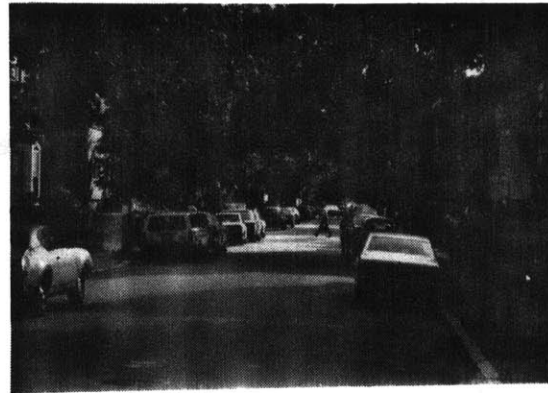
Some fences are symbolic, others are actually physical barriers. Institutions' fences are often simply to focus access.

High opaque fences change the entire relationship of house to street, rejecting the community for privacy.

If the fence is more penetrable or nonexistent, then the street/sidewalk margin defines a more public zone which extends to the building edge.

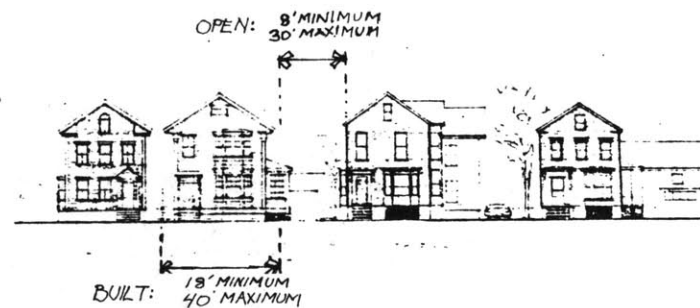
5. The yard, from 4' to 20', is an unbuilt territory which can include paths, grass, shrubs, trees, cars, ornaments, religious symbols or yard-furniture.

6. The tree canopy provides a ceiling which extends over the street and yard, often spatially linking the entire edge zone. It's bottom is at about second floor level, screening, audially and visually the upper floors while including the groundfloor in the edge/open space.



Residential yards are inhabited very little. The yard of an institutional building may be occasionally used intensively as a gathering place.

7. The residential building facades:  
a) Fall within a limited range of sizes.

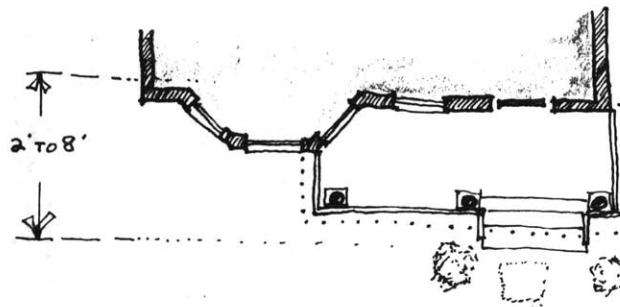


b) The built area of the facades is between 50% and 80% of the edge, which visually links them into a screen. (A higher percentage approaches a row-house effect; a lower percentage leaves buildings as detached objects.)

c) Facades are from 2' to 8' "deep": stoops, porches and bay windows form layers which, taken as a whole, provide variety in the edge.

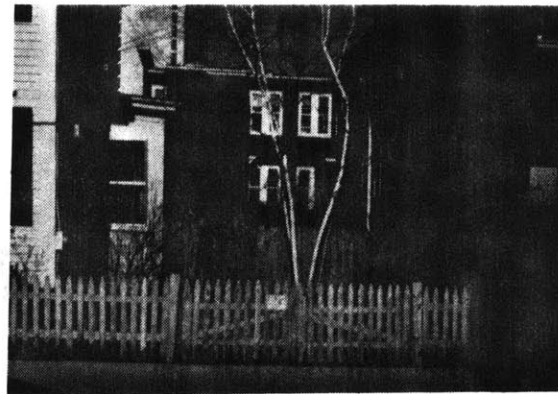


This is a strictly residential pattern. Commercial buildings tend to be denser, as are some institutions. Nevertheless, very few buildings are below 50% built.



This is often a zone of active inhabitation, where people may easily socialize with their neighbors. Sitting space, opening windows, and height relationships are important. Some public buildings exaggerate this pattern.

8. Sideyards allow view to trees, fences, or buildings between or behind houses, but never to the next street.



While these are crucial to the "transparency" of the residential fabric, they are also under-utilized and sometimes function as little more than lightwells. Building closer to property lines, thus consolidating yards, might allow better use while maintaining the pattern.

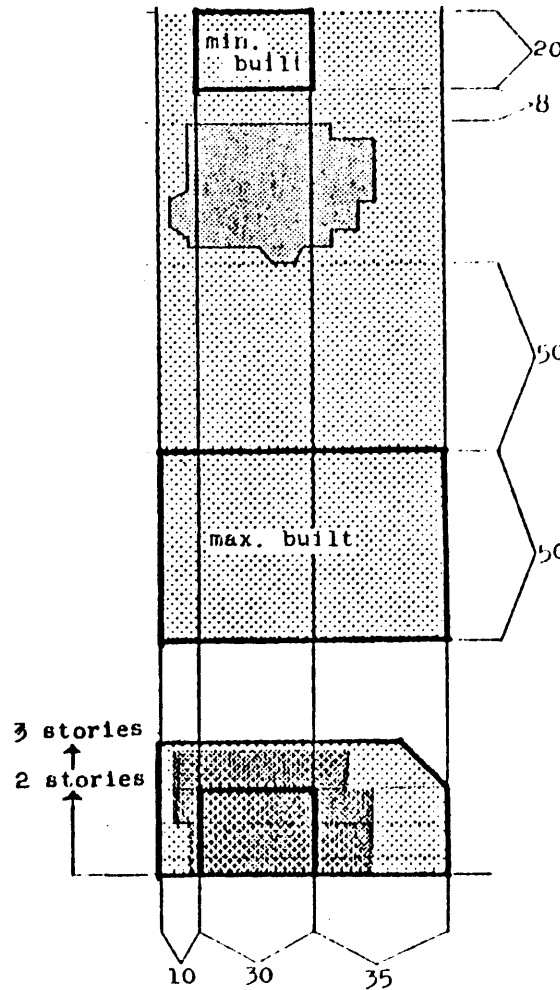
DENSE, DETACHED RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS, oriented toward the street. This includes one to four-family houses and larger apartment buildings.

I. Houses

1. Houses are freestanding, with dimensions and siting as diagrammed.

2. Buildings cover no more than 60% of their lot.

3. Setback from sidewalk to building varies from 4' to 20'. (This zone is generally claimed by the occupants of the first floor. Use is strongly affected by proximity of entrance.)



Depth: min. 30', max. 75'

Width: min. 20', max. 50'

. Diagram: MIT Urban Tissue Design Project.

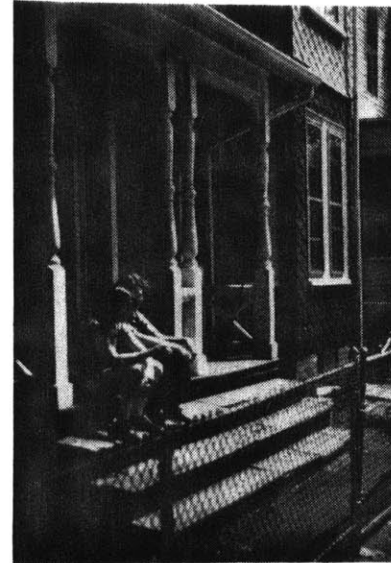
A freestanding building often includes more than one dwelling unit, sometimes subdivided from a large house, sometimes built separately in the image of a large house. Connected-but-articulated units such as row houses are few, and tend to seem out of place.

Each house has its own identity, regardless of the number of units inside.

Since there is always open space between building edge and the lot line, and side yards are often split by fences, defined open spaces tend to be the smallest possible size.

Regardless of width, this space is used only for access and landscape "ornament". Actual width is perceived in relation to neighbors, not by real dimension.

4. Entries are oriented toward the street (though sometimes located on the side), and are raised several steps to a platform at the door. The platform is often large enough for several people to sit on, and is usually covered.



5. Bay windows help to define the outside entry area and allow a good view (nearly 180 ) from inside to out, but not the reverse.



This porch/door area sometimes serves as an outdoor room. While it is always controlled by the resident, it is often a place for sitting with visitors.

6. Ground floor is 2' to 5' above sidewalk level.



This is almost without exception. It not only lets light into basements; it creates a significant privacy separation for street-facing rooms.



- Residents often establish a de facto territorial claim on the street in front of their house by regular parking of a car there.



Parking spaces can be taken seriously enough to be cause of serious, even violent, contention.

- Each house has similar-but-distinguishing architectural elements, like wood trims, bay windows, entry roofs, columns, window details, light fixtures, etc.



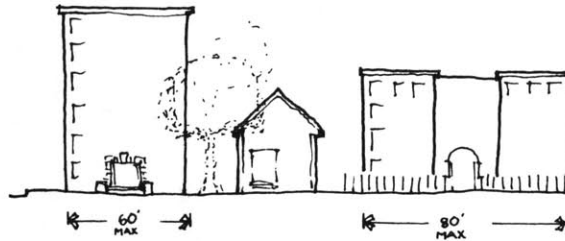
These are the elements which both link all the houses as a common type, and simultaneously give them individuality.

## II. Apartment Buildings

1. Apartment buildings are located primarily on through streets, and are oriented toward them.
2. Buildings are up to 80' wide and 6 stories tall. When wider than 60', they are often divided into two house sized masses at the street, with an entrance court in between.
3. Individual apartment buildings never cover more than half of the  $\pm 200'$  block frontage.
4. Toward the residential streets, the lateral sides of the apartment houses present a "hard edge", with a small (under 6') setback and no access points. This results in a less-used area around intersections.



The buildings which exceed these dimensions seem uncomfortably out-of-place. It might be that many bigger buildings would be tolerable, but individually they are too singular.



These are sometimes neglected or vandalized, a sign of what happens to streets with insufficient edge-use.

5. Building entrances:

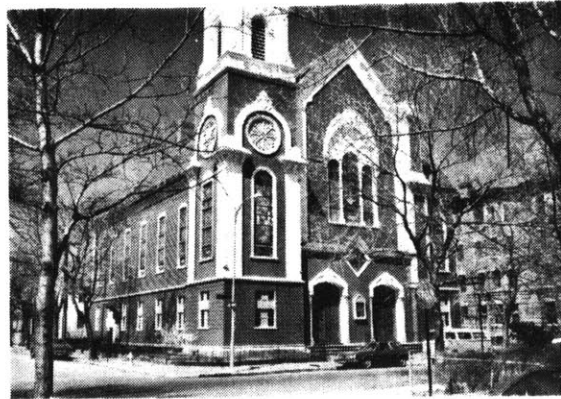
- a) Are through one or two access points.
- b) Are reached by a single path, marked by elements like gateways, shrubbery, lamps, and steps.
- c) Are often articulated by formal elements like arches or columns, but rarely by the larger porches found on the houses.



These entries are shared by numerous residents, who can exert little individual control over them. Maintenance and landscaping is generally undertaken by management.

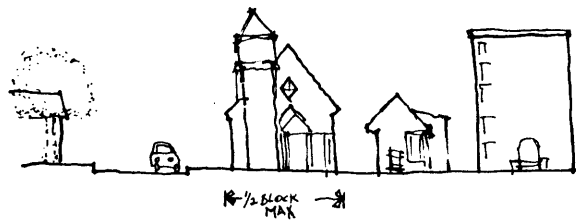
INSTITUTIONAL BUILDINGS are located on corners, facing through streets or parks. These include schools, churches, and libraries, larger than about 3000 square feet. (Smaller institutions, like daycare centers or small churches, may be located on residential streets.)

- 1. Orientation: While a building may have two or more sides visible to the street, the edge toward the through street is given emphasis while the residential street side is less usable, without a major entrance, often fenced off.



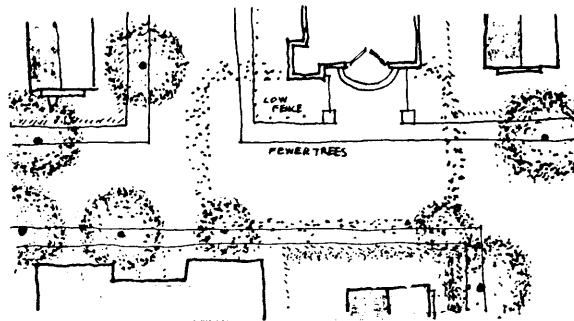
While this reinforces the differences between the two kinds of streets, it often fails to utilize the potential of the corner site.

2. Relative size: Institutions are larger than houses, but not more than half the block dimension wide and no higher than the highest apartment buildings. They maintain the built/open rhythm. (Larger schools and a library are located at the neighborhood edge.



Actual size is less important than perceived size, which may be manipulated through street-edge massing. A larger building would be perceived as particularly important, perhaps the most important. If it was not, in fact, important, it might seem inappropriate.

3. Screen elements in front of the building tend to thin out, emphasizing:  
 a) the space in front of the building, like a claimed square  
 b) the surface of the building.



This is an almost-accidental effect resulting largely from the desire for an unobstructed view of public buildings, as opposed to the desire for privacy for residential. It does, however, potentially support #4 and #5, by linking the use-areas around the building edge to the immediately-surrounding public domain. The pattern could be either developed considerably more, or instead disregarded by adding more trees to screen the sidewalk away from the street and link it with the yard.

4. The zone between the sidewalk and entrance includes:  
 a) an access path, wider than for residential buildings, or an open space  
 b) vegetation, thinner and lower than residential  
 c) wide steps to the raised level of the door.

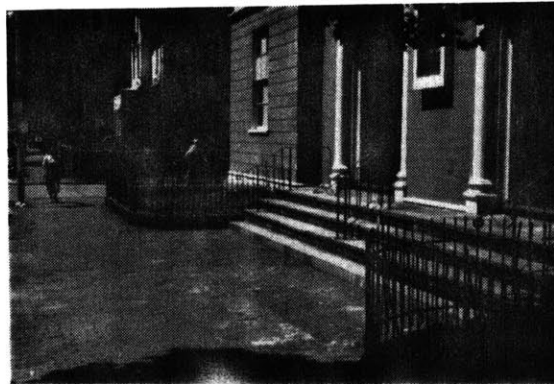
These are exaggerated versions of residential patterns, adapting them to public uses. Transformation of these into less-literally residential imagery should be considered.

These patterns may take numerous configurations which may accommodate variations on the themes of arriving, congregating, and entering.

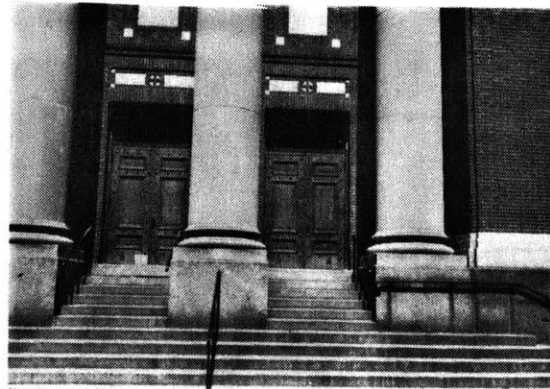
Vegetation is not necessarily functional; rather it is an important part of the image of the building and the neighborhood.

5. The "formal edge" or primary facade includes/responds to the following patterns:

- a) Gathering space, an outdoor place where people may stand or sit without obstructing the sidewalk or access.
- b) An entrance space, between inside and outside.



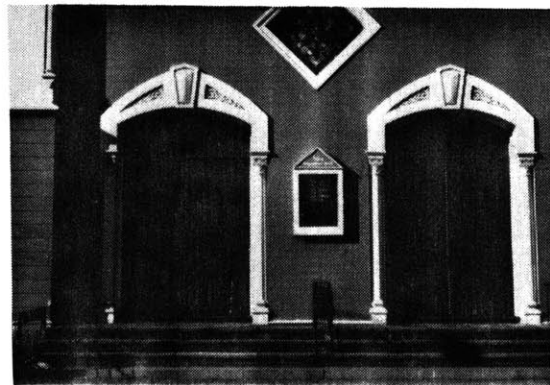
Facade elements often focus activity into one area, especially at an entrance, or form a linear space parallel to the facade. However, articulation of smaller elements may allow more complexity in terms of depth and scale.



These patterns should be developed beyond the modest current examples. For buildings which are to be truly public, these zones should be well-connected to the sidewalk zone, as an elaboration or extension, forming an overlapping sequence.

6. Institutions follow several patterns which are common outside the neighborhood:

- a) Entrances are clearly marked, often exaggerated by decoration and elaborate doors. Massing of the building often focuses on the entry area.



The number and emphasis of doors reflects function and meaning:  
Singular: one function, unity  
Multiple-but-equal: one function, less control  
Separate, different: multiple function, diversity.

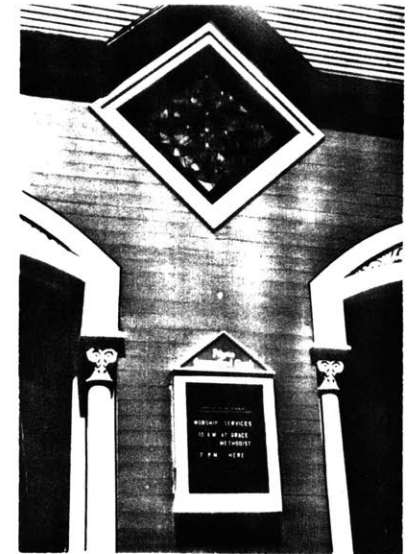
b) Fenestration is often either singular and centrally focused, or repetitive, responding to large or repetitious use spaces.

c) Tall elements, like towers and steeples, are common on churches and public buildings. They can serve as landmark/reference points, or as actual symbols (i.e., a steeple with cross).

d) Symbols and signs which may be easily recognizable.

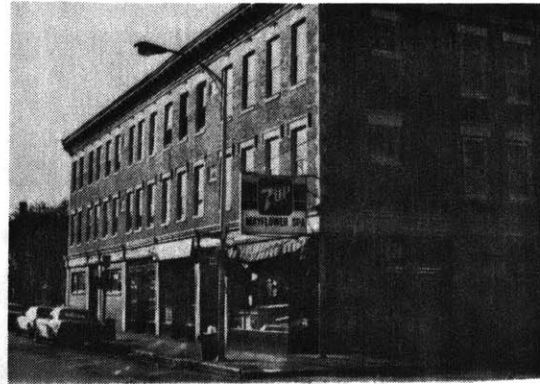


While number and differentiation may reflect use, actual shape of windows may also carry meaning.

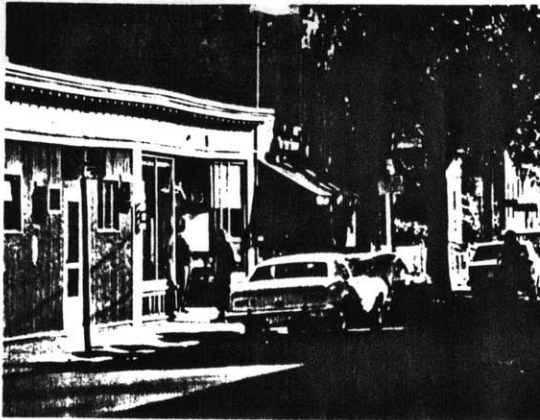


COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS ON THROUGH STREETS are individual or grouped retail stores, restaurants, laundramats, etc. Their uses are related to the community rather than the city-at-large.

1. Commercial buildings tend to be clustered together on through streets, often around intersections. Corner stores are most visible.
2. Commercial buildings are built close to or at the sidewalk, with little or no intermediate/setback zone. The space up to the built edge is publicly accessible.
3. the building edge often includes and is sometimes dominated by plate glass windows which simultaneously:
  - a) allow visibility of internal space and activity
  - b) reflect the view of the street, mirroring activity, personal images, and hiding internal features.

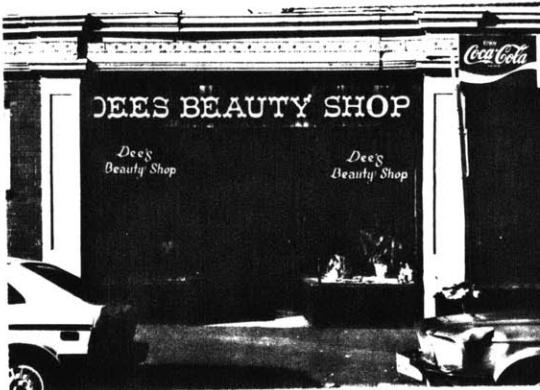


Activity is more intense here: people often congregate or "hang out" around stores.



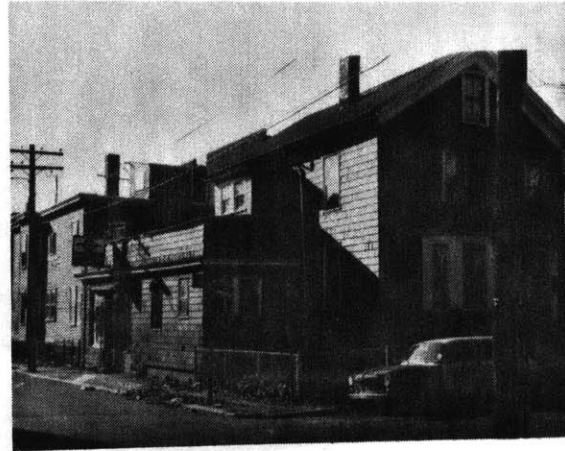
Since the clustered buildings often abut each other, and sometimes they face each other across the street, they create the feeling of a large room within the street space.

This facilitates visual contact, but often leaves insufficient transition between inside and out.



Big windows are the key to the image of a store. The display factor is often secondary.

4. Commercial uses take place on the first floor only, so stores are either:
  - a) one story, often with flat roofs
  - b) extensions of residential buildings, built in the yard zone
  - c) glassed first floors of massive buildings with residential or office space above.
  
5. Entries are glass doors often recessed into the facade, sometimes one step up.



The effect is always strongly horizontal, which reinforces the direction of the street/sidewalk.

Glass doors are a symbol of accessibility; publicness.

PUBLIC OPEN SPACE (in addition to streets) is space which is visually and physically accessible and available for use by anyone. Open spaces range in size from the steps of a church to a full-block park, yet there are several frequent patterns.

1. Open spaces are bounded on at least two sides by street/sidewalk. The edge definition of the open space on these sides is the combination of two street edges, a doubling of the edge layering. Other sides are enclosed **44** by buildings or fences and vegetation.

Any open space with closure on three sides is perceived as "claimed"; inaccessible.



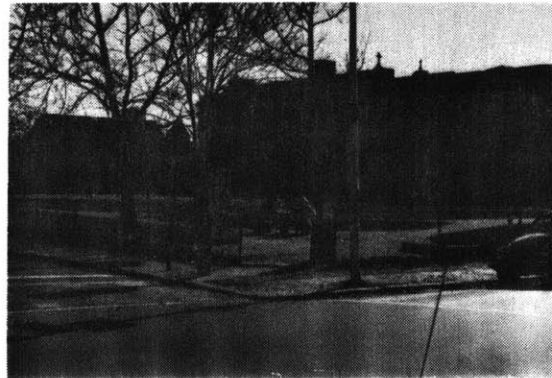
2. The sidewalk/open space edge is defined by some continuation of the screen-edge: either vegetation or fence, or both, at or within 15' of the sidewalk.

3. Where access is partially restricted at the edge, the corners are always open.

4. Open spaces encourage diagonal movement, which is reflected in the placement of trees, built elements (especially fences) and paving.

5. Open spaces may include built elements and partial enclosures, which may define territory and direct movement.

6. Open spaces allow the only long-diagonal and wide-angle views in the neighborhood.



This screen is an important definition of the spatial boundary, and provides separation from the activity of the street.

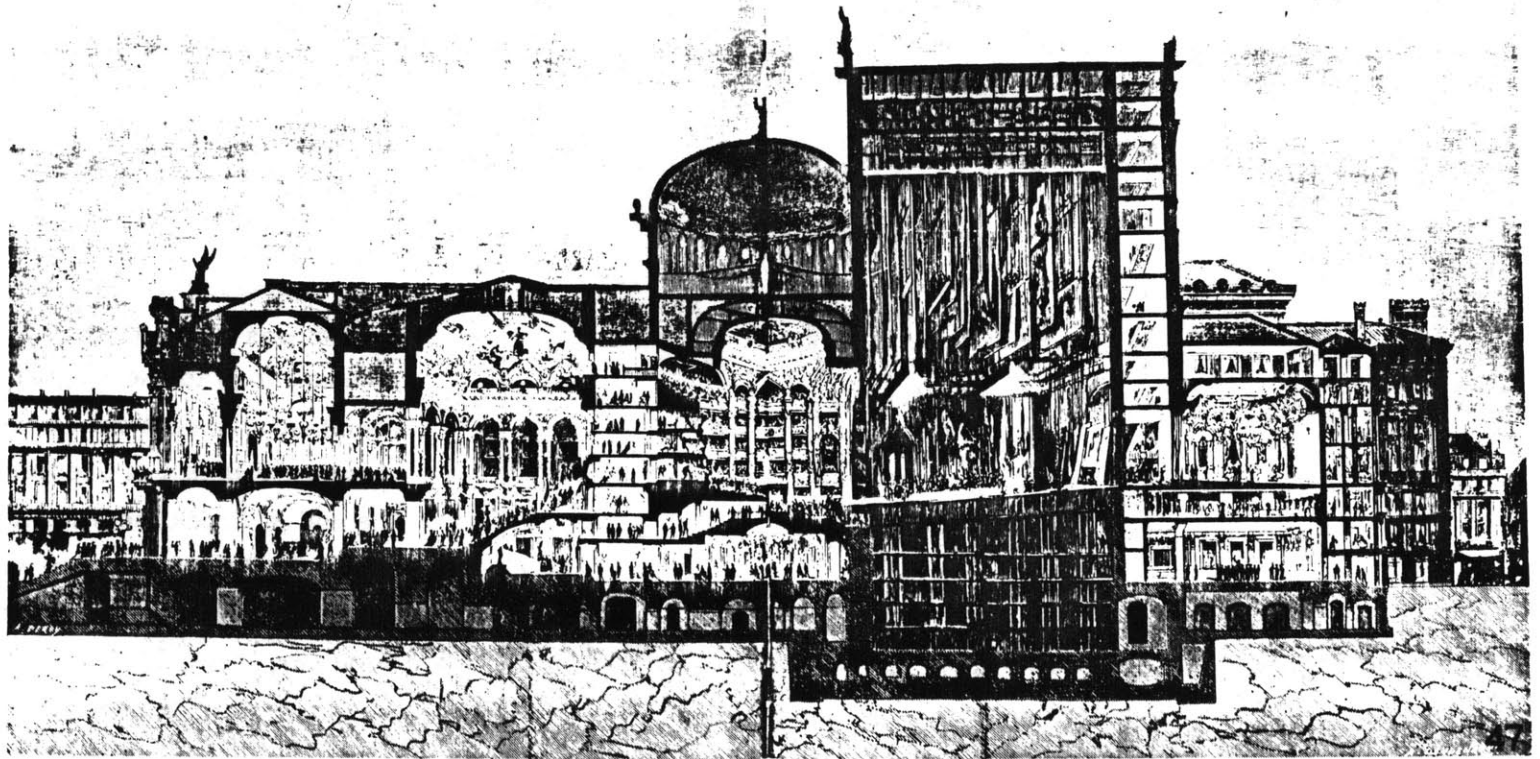
Open space is a natural "short cut" in a grid plan, and if not recognized, people will wear diagonal paths in the grass and walk through hedges.

These may include park benches, playground equipment, low walls or gazebos.

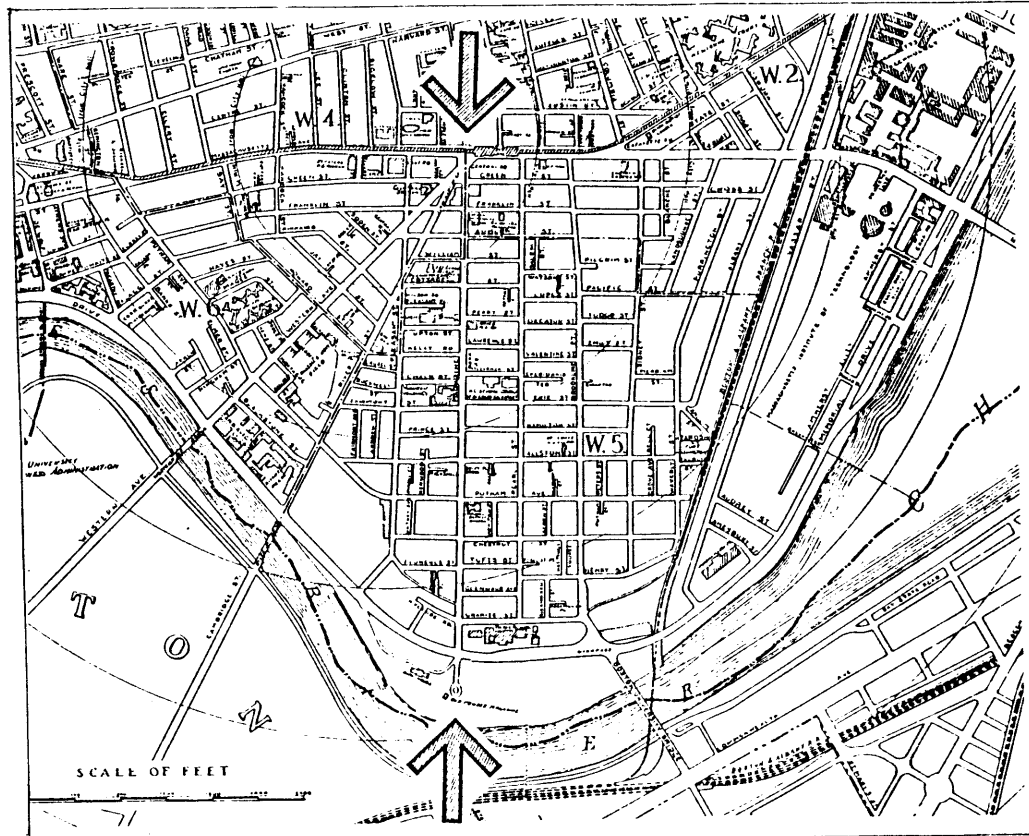
The visual relief of a long view is, I believe, a significant psychological benefit, and the view of numerous buildings at once strengthens the sense of the neighborhood image/identity. **45**



# A COMMUNITY THEATER



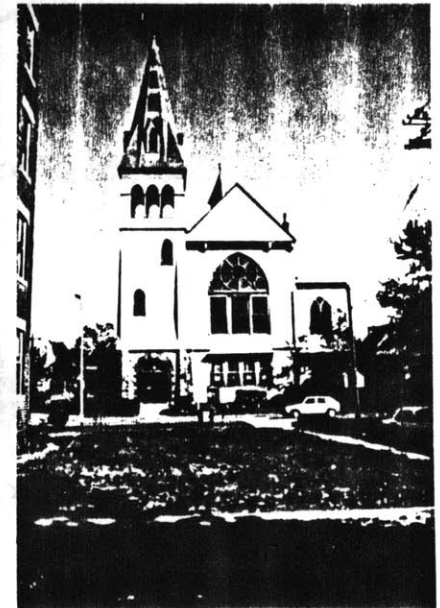
## A Very Public Site



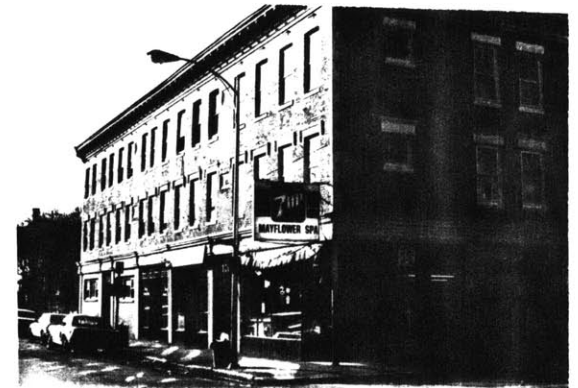
The importance of Magazine Street to Cambridgeport dates to the earliest settlements, around 1800, while the area was still a swamp. When a gunpowder magazine was built on an island at the end of the beach access road, the road was renamed Magazine Street. As the swamp was filled, first to Putnam Avenue, then to the magazine, the street remained the most-used access, even though a bridge was eventually built at the end of Brookline Street. Today, because of its association with Central Square, its churches and commercial buildings, and its two-way traffic (unlike the other through streets), it is the most "public" street in the neighborhood.

With two exceptions, Magazine Street is lined by houses, apartment buildings and churches. One exception is Dana Square, a grassy park covering the Magazine Street half of a block, one of only two parks in Cambridgeport. The other exception is a short stretch of storefronts between Prince Street and Putnam Avenue. These stores, such as a grocery, laundry, beauty shop and thrift store, are all locally-oriented operations, clustered into a shopping district that services a radius of perhaps three to six blocks.

This shopping cluster is the area of most intense activity on the street: social encounters occur constantly in and around the stores. Diagonally across from the corner store is a vacant lot, one of the few "missing teeth" on Magazine Street. Locating a public building on this corner would increase the activity here, while continuing the pattern of singular institutions interspersed with the houses.



Magazine Street architecture.



# Program: Possibilities for Use

## Theater as a Gathering Place



## Community as a Stage

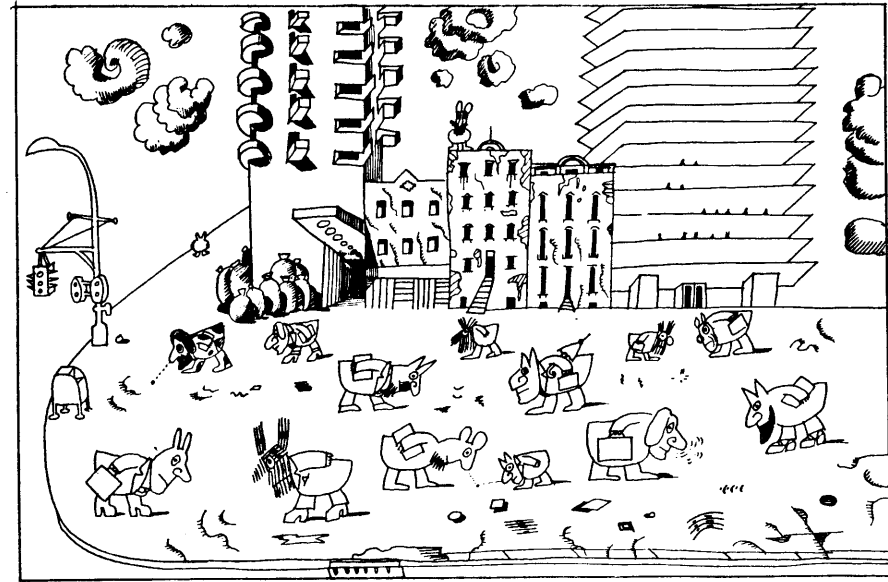
## Isolation and Alienation

A community gathering place might be called a theater, a church, a dance hall, a beer hall, a clubhouse or a "town room". It might serve one of these functions, or all, perhaps changing over time. I will call it a theater, because it will be designed to accommodate performances and audiences, but it will be conceived more in Shakespearean terms as a place where the community is a stage, and the men, women and children are the players. Thus, a theater might be built also as a church or beer hall. The problem is not one of specific use, but rather a more general shortcoming which many of us face: the ebbing of community-based social and cultural life.

With the rise of TV, auto-culture and suburbia, the level of group activity in our society has plummeted. Since the 1950's, a web of consumption-based culture has encouraged an isolating, individual-oriented way of life that has dissolved many of the community and

organizational ties that once bound a less "advanced" society. The resulting alienation has left many people living with interpersonal connections which are tenuous at best, and with a level of political naivete that is perhaps unique in the developed world.

Public gatherings too often are highly-structured mass-spectator events, especially in big cities, and rarely reinforce local ties. Theaters and restaurants become anonymous franchises; concerts and dances take place at the regional scale encouraged by the mass-entertainment industry. Commercialized "town centers" like shopping malls exist only for the purpose of channelling people into consumptive activity; there are few alternatives for non-commercial public activity. Such places that do exist tend to be identified with private institutions, and are therefore often exclusive, be they schools, clubs or churches.



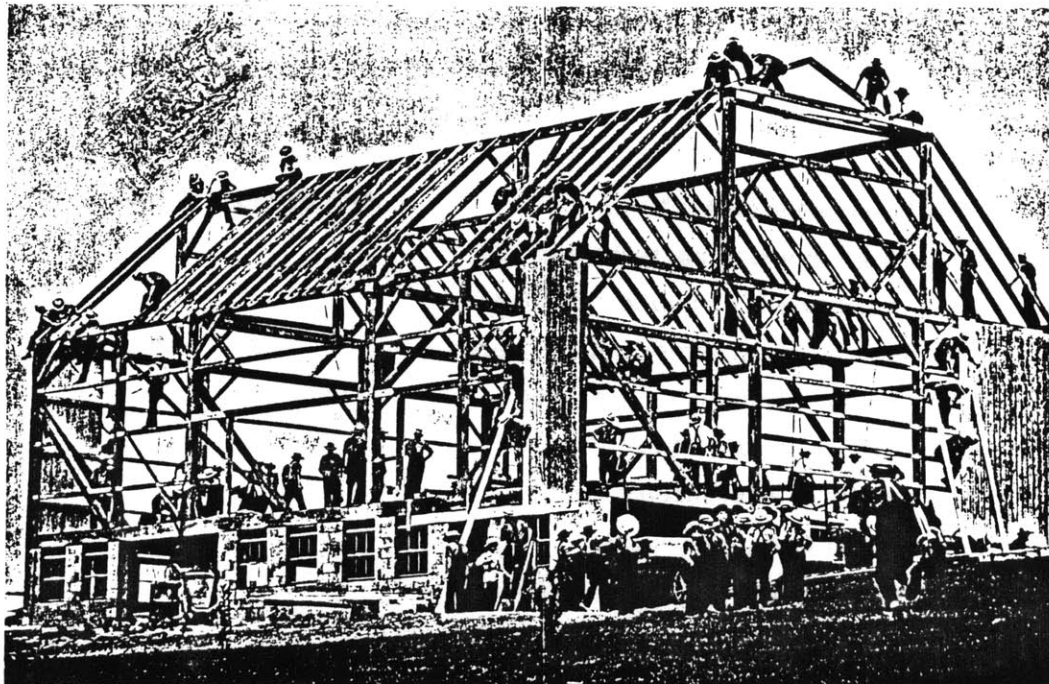
Urban alienation (Steinberg, in the New Yorker).

This is not an architectural problem. While housing patterns and the lack or misplacement of public facilities are architectural/environmental, they are symptoms of our economy's misplaced priorities. There should be no illusion that architectural alternatives, when possible, are, at best, band-aids. Nevertheless, the need to work towards alternatives remains, both to demonstrate

## Architect as Provocateur

that the collective/public can be better than the private/commercial, and to promote opportunities for the kind of collective interaction (work, play, struggle...) that must precede collective organization. This is less a matter of design than of provocation, in which a designer may work to articulate needs which are perhaps unspoken as well as unmet.

Opportunities for collective activity can be found in planning a building, using it, or, here, in building it.



### **Client as Idealist...**

Recently I met with a group from a small but rapidly growing church who were interested in moving into a larger facility. Their resources were very limited, since their congregation was largely poor, and their goals were ambitious: to build more than a church, to make a facility that would be of use to the entire neighborhood. Their concept of a church, organizationally, went far beyond a weekly gathering of people; beyond, also, a social group. They wanted to provide services to their non-member neighbors, and to be a progressive force in organizing for political and economic change.

It was clear that idealism was only part of their motivation. They were well aware of the realities of both construction and operating costs, and the prospect of sharing these costs with other users was attractive. Pragmatically, the more people with whom they could share



their facility, the bigger and/or better it could be. They were willing to be, in effect, custodians and sharers of a building which would be primarily identified as a community building. They were quite willing to see this role as an opportunity for new contacts with their neighbors, with the understanding that many would never actually join the church.

The economic advantages of this situation are obvious, and they apply to both new and old buildings. Space-sharing is nothing new, but as energy and maintenance costs climb, the benefits become decisive. The once-a-week church is becoming a dinosaur for congregations of limited means, thus religious buildings are being increasingly used for daycare, private schools, adult education, lectures, social groups, political meetings, fundraising events, dances and so on. To encourage this, many denominations are willing to consider their worship place a multi-use space, despite its ritual associations.

### **...and Pragmatist**

Churches are hardly the only institutions to face such situations. The Grange in Plainfield, Vermont, a victim of shrinking membership and unable to maintain its Grange Hall, sold the building to a local food co-operative, with the provision that its meetings and the yearly town meeting could continue there. The Co-op renovated the building, turning part into a food store, keeping the meeting hall, which was then rented or loaned out at every opportunity for concerts, banquets and meetings. The Grange quickly became a social center, used by a majority of the population at one time or another.

### **Economics and Use**

**Program:  
Possibilities for Use**

The project at hand is intended to be this kind of shared facility. A range of activities is to be accommodated, indoor and out, small group and large. The possibilities are perhaps more important than the proscribed uses. Thus:

The Cambridgeport theater is conceived as a modest-budget, low-overhead (maintenance and energy costs) facility which would accommodate a range of activities such as:

- performances
- church services
- meetings
- film showings
- lectures
- banquets
- dances

Associated with this facility would be a cafe, food preparation facilities, and a child-care center. A guest house with six bedrooms and a shared kitchen/eating facility would be provided for the use of staff and visitors. The sponsors would be a co-operative formed by a community theatrical group, a film society, a church congregation, and a small daycare center. Their goal is to build a resource which would be used almost constantly by local residents of all ages. Sufficient use would produce revenue to pay for the building and pay several staff to maintain and manage the facility.



## Attitudes and Associations

A community theater has numerous direct precedents; but a public building intended for multiple uses has other, less direct precedents. Rather than looking at any one as a form reference, I have tried to mix and shuffle three approaches - the big house, the theater, and the market place - into a more complex personal attitude toward the problem.

Public gathering places have, throughout history and in very different cultures, been characterized by an image that implies a "big house". In western culture, it is a sense that is buried in the roots of classical architecture recalling the Temple, which in turn was seen as a monumental descendent of the "primitive hut". Collective meeting places often evoke the image of the "Big House" in their object-like siting, large welcoming entrance, and pitched sheltering roofs. Throughout history, temples, churches and town halls have taken forms based on residential prototypes, exaggerated,

formalized and otherwise transformed, to be sure, but symbolic of the "family of families" which a religious or community building "houses".

### Big House



The primitive hut as the classical model.  
(Abbe Laugier, 18<sup>th</sup> Century.)

## Theater

The institutional buildings of Cambridgeport are no exception. In fact, many of the residential patterns, like setback dimensions, height-to-width ratios, and fence/planting qualities, are repeated at a grander scale. Even the most monumental churches, like the Catholic church on Pearl Street, an oversized "classical temple", are caricatures of monumental houses. The churches are further overlaid with specific identifying references, such as crosses, arched windows, a Greek dome, and so on. Thus they go beyond the simple "Big House" and are more clearly identified.

Theaters have developed in this same tradition, since they have often been a kind of community focus. In various times and places, theaters have been located in churches, inn courtyards, and barns, and while specialized theater building can be found in all sizes and shapes, the "collective house" is not an

uncommon root. But since the theater plays other roles, especially as a commercial enterprise, the theatrical "identity" has been correspondingly transformed.

In particular, the American cinema has taken on an especially recognizable form, which can be found on Main Street of any small American town. The old movie theater, which was often adapted from a playhouse or opera house, (which could be found in most small towns before the arrival of the cinema) borrowed the no-setback siting and glass-doored entrance from the neighboring stores. However, it often maintained an object-like presence, houselike, by conspicuous massing or detailing.

The marquee, the most essential element of all, is a relative of the front porch, the most typically American part of the house facade. A theater marquee, far from being just a sign, creates a

public sheltered zone in between the sidewalk and lobby, where people may read posters, buy tickets, converse or just take shelter from the sun or rain. It is an inherently houselike form which has become, by custom, thoroughly "theaterlike". In fact, as the cinema has moved into new car-dominated settings, like the strip or mall, the image of the marquee is retained, but it is detached into the parking lot, serving only as a billboard, while the identity of the theater itself is further transformed by the commercial demands of the mall environment.

In Cambridgeport, there is ample precedent for public building as the Big House, yet several factors call for further transformation. If a building is not to be simply a church, but more public, then there needs to be a distinction from the very houselike churches nearby. Since there is to be a cafe in the building, there might be a commercial association,



A small-town theater is still clearly just that, even though the sign says otherwise.

just as the theater image itself draws on commercial forms. Cambridgeport commercial buildings are small, corner stores, not intensely developed retail areas, and this scale might well be respected.



A marketplace, with a large public form, open edges, and partially sheltered activity in the middle.

## Marketplace

If the new building is to be used daily, then somehow openness and a high activity level must be expressed. The constant communication and exchange of ideas/culture that might go on brings to mind romanticized visions of the town marketplace, the center of both commerce and social interaction. It also happens that theaters have traditionally been associated with European squares and plazas, through both open-air performing and theater-plaza adjacency. This sense of openness, penetrability and multiple focus may be instructive as a tempering influence on the theatrical identity.

These three associations are sometimes complimentary, sometimes contradictory. Together, I find them a good source for a collage of attitudes, although they sometimes seem to have a life of their own, defying amalgamation.

Specific references to form have their place too, sometimes taken literally, sometimes reworked into new forms. This is a different kind of collage, the combining of form or images. I have tried to avoid the hazards of iconic paste-together, attempting instead a more complete transformation.

There is a fine line between referencing and indulging in clichés, be they neoclassicist, picturesquely romantic, or simply mundane, and there is a danger in separating image and use to the detriment of each. At best, new and old may be combined to produce integrated forms which are both novel and familiar. The process is one of collage, and there can be no formula for a good collage. Neither, though, does a collagist invent all his parts: they must be gathered and sorted with great care.



A collage of images: this is not the point.

I once worked on an addition to a small, recently-built church in New England. Since the site was just outside an old, well preserved village, the congregation was concerned with the image their church would carry. The clients had asked their original architect for "traditional" architecture, and their architect responded with an elaborately-detailed, imitation Georgian design, badly sited, but otherwise straight

from 1820. After the smaller portion was built, the client decided that the image of revived revival architecture was not "forward-looking" enough and decided to commission a more up-to-date version, still traditional, but not a slavish copy of an old style.

issue never arose, because the transformation of building type and building image allowed them to see what they wanted to see. It provided clues that were familiar, but allowed personal interpretation of the clues.

## Regional References

Our solution, which was never fully explained to the clients, was to base the new building on the form of a New England barn: massive and externally very simple. When a very "churchlike" arched window and a high, skyward pointing clerestory were added, the image of the building read both "church" and "New England". Although the idea that it was barnlike seemed not to occur to them, several members of the congregation remarked how "familiar" and "informal" it was, and how naturally it fit into a New England town. Some of them, I believe, would have been appalled at the thought of worshipping in a barn, while others would have been delighted. The

A sense of reference may be regional or local in both form and material. The barn-massing of a church is one example of a loosely-used source, transformed by the overlaying of elements with different associations. Sensitive combination of familiar forms is a useful way of establishing links to traditional building types without slavishly copying them.



## Form and Building Method

Only rarely can a public building be built with the kind of lavish material and detail that were common a century ago. Generally, budgets are tight and construction costs high, leading to the use of increasingly simple building systems. Commercial buildings, both retail and office, have led the way into the use of standardized-part box-structures; now it is not uncommon to find institutional buildings built the same way.

Retail buildings, especially on "the strip", are often built with the "decorated shed" approach; the most basic box with ornament overlaid for identification. Not that this is a new idea -- classical temples and Renaissance churches were sometimes built the same way -- but now it is proving an efficient way to build eye-catching buildings with mass-produced structural and closure elements.

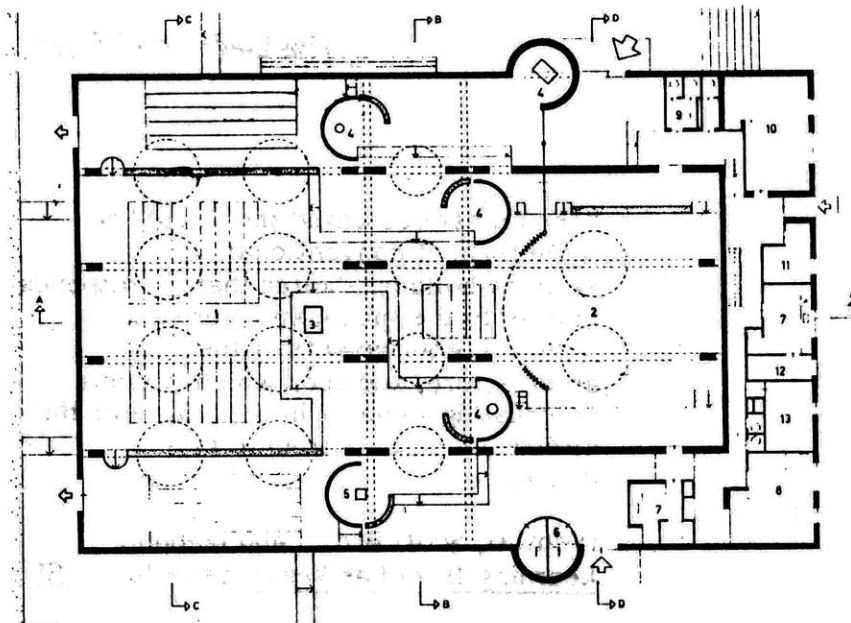
### The Decorated Shed

"The purest decorated shed would be some form of conventional systems-building shelter that corresponds closely to the space, structure and program requirements of the architecture, and upon which is laid a contrasting - and, if in the nature of the circumstances, contradictory - decoration".

(Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, page 100.) **61**

## The Stripped-Down Box

A highly-articulated church within a simple, boxlike container. (Aldo Van Eyck)



62

Office buildings, on the other hand, tend to utilize a second-hand modernism resulting in stripped-down, tediously unimaginative glass and steel/aluminum/stucco/whatever boxes. Like the decorated shed, these are basically "shell" buildings, but here the identifying "ornament" is the surface of the shell itself.

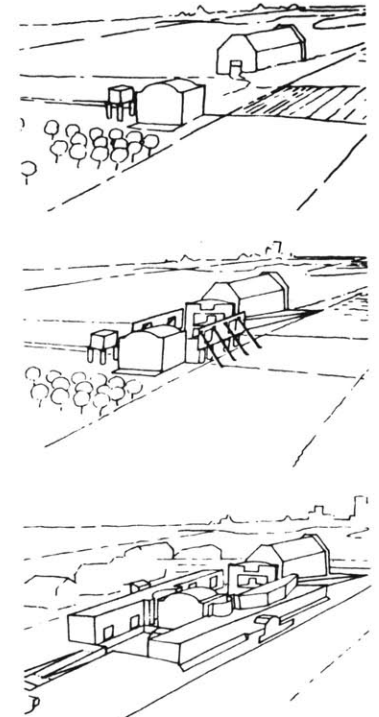
"Basic box" construction, so often banal or worse, should not be dismissed too off-handedly. It is, after all the most common current construction approach, and the results do not have to be so terrible. A "neutral" shell can be filled with useful, pleasant secondary elements, and clever glazing can allow satisfactory lighting. Directing a limited budget toward the intensification of key elements, such as columns, flooring, or key surfaces may turn a neutral background into an advantage.

I am taking a different approach. Starting with the same standardized building elements, it is possible to assemble them in a manner which responds to both use-requirements and formal intentions. Instead of a box, the result is an assemblage of related parts which may add up either by means of composition or aggregation. Likewise, the total form may be a result of functional decisions or of image imposition, or (preferably) a combination of the two.

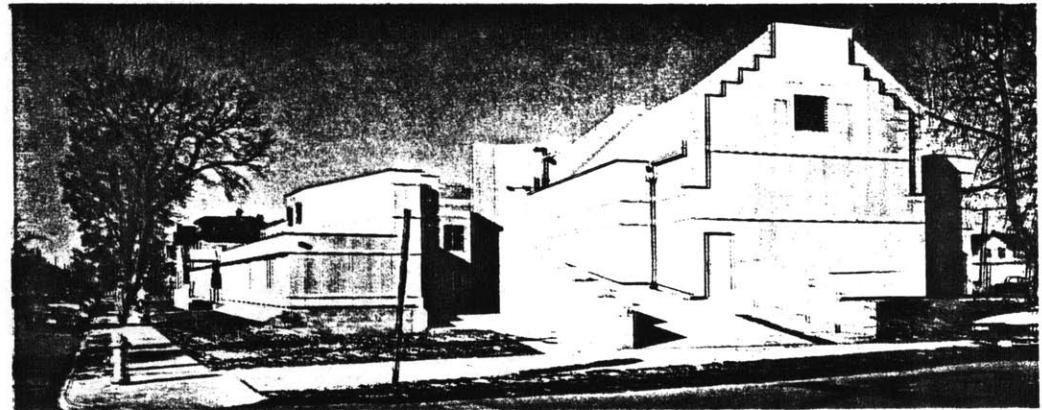
This "assemblage" rejects the notion of "neutral space". Spaces are instead formed purposefully, considering shape, direction and sequence. These positive spaces may be defined by walls/surfaces or by screen elements; they are at least partly shaped by the arrangement of the primary building elements.

Building elements themselves may become meaningful when used as more than simply elements in a shell. Each may act in more than one way, simultaneously supporting and directing movement or enclosing and providing use-surfaces. Secondary construction may still be very important, but it must reinforce the effects of the primary elements and spaces.

## Assemblage



Assembled materials and spaces. A neighborhood service facility which reserves its formal facade for the interior courtyard. (Studio Works, published in Progressive Architecture, Feb. 1981.)



## Materials

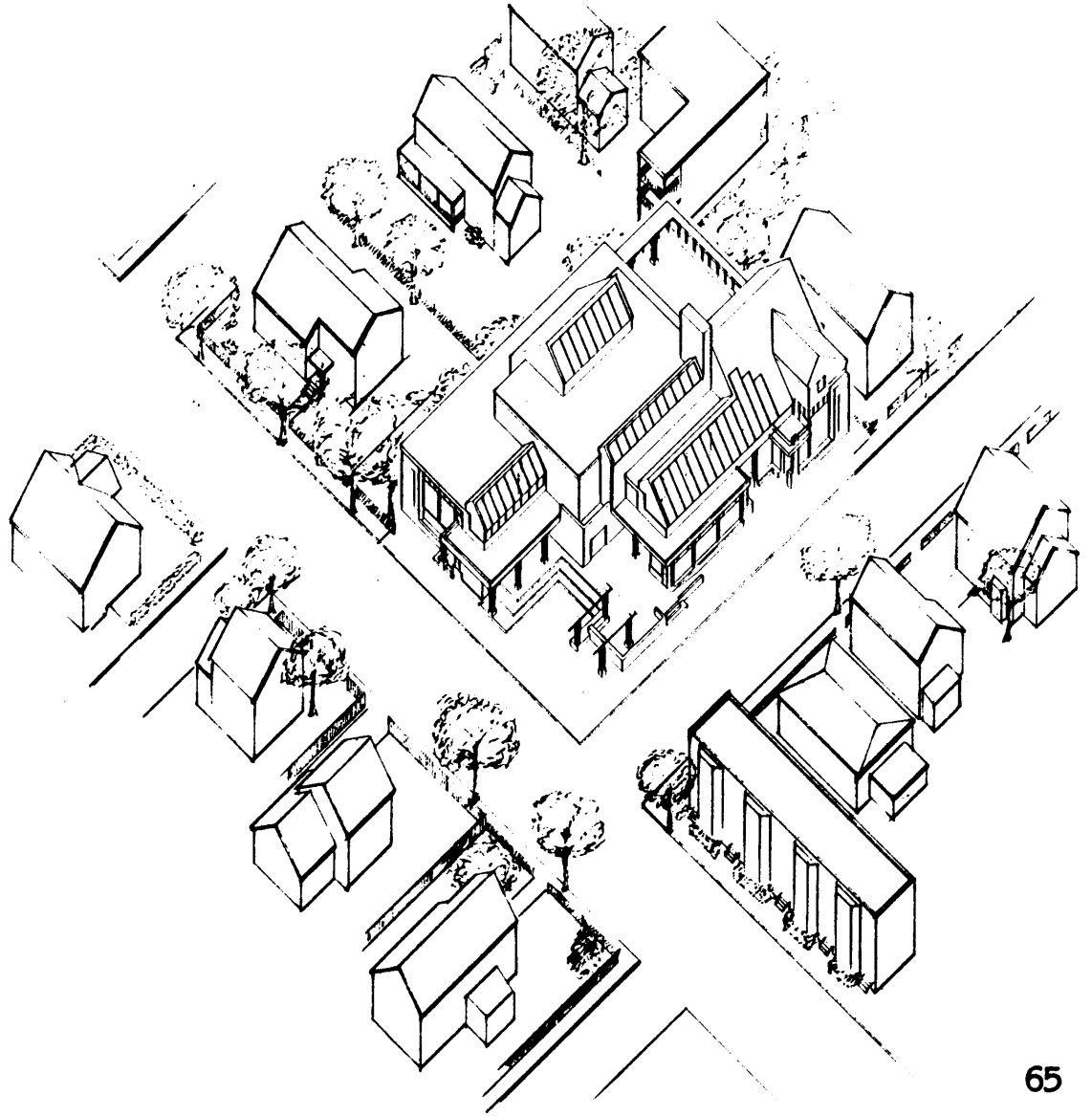
For this project I have picked a building system of concrete block and steel joists, elaborated by several custom elements. To the block is added occasional brick, used economically but in such a way as to give scale and color to the otherwise bland block. Custom steel columns of a four-posted design, which is structurally efficient and allows easy support/connection into horizontal members, support mezzanines and roofs.

Since the site has an excellent southern exposure, I have employed much south facing glass, especially on roof surfaces. The entire building is thus able to act as a passive solar heat collector, using the thermal mass of the masonry and perhaps an auxiliary system for heat storage. Such a system is, of course, dependent on excellent internal air circulation in the winter and reflective blinds, slats or shades and exhaust fans in the summer. For the theater space, blackout shades are required for the skylights as well.



Skylights with reflective louvers allow winter sun to enter and block the summer sun. (Cambridge School in Weston, MA, Skylite concept by Norman Saunders, P.E.)

# SYNTHESIS: A DESIGN



## Site Relationships: Diagramming

By isolating a series of individual design factors, I have tried to demonstrate alternatives which might be used. Some are "contextual", reflecting patterns/approaches found throughout the neighborhood, others are specific only to certain building types, while others are completely alien to the community. Once they are clear, they become a source to be sifted through in trying to find appropriate building forms.

Exploring, first in plan, section, and then in axonometric study, different attitudes toward edge, massing and facade, provided a quick understanding of their implications. My initial sketches are cartoonlike, ignoring matters of internal organization and building method; they provide useful information about how the building fits into the context. Issues of dimension, relative size and built/open relationships are apparent.

Associations evoked by massing or detail begin to appear; in fact I have recognized specific edge relationships which are typical of, say, residential or commercial patterns, whose associations could well be transferred into a new building.

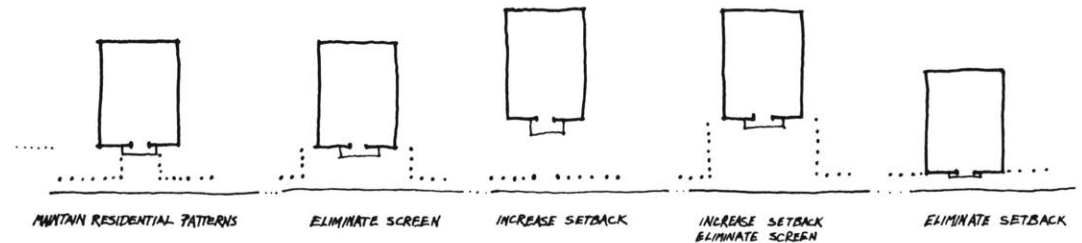
## Setback

The distance from the street determines the amount of usable space associated with the building, but the location of fences or other screen elements determines how accessible it is.

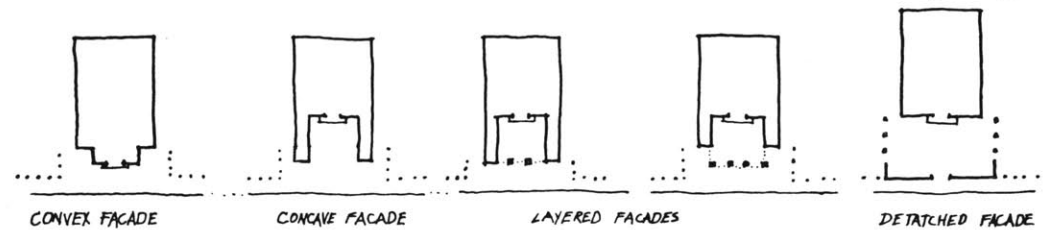
Setback or lack of it, also affects the "object" quality of the building. If it conforms to neighborhood standards, it is perceived as a continuation of the total form; if it is noticeably closer or further, a building seems like a separate object.

A facade may, in effect, "reach" toward the street, or, alternatively, allow the street space to penetrate into the building. Layered or false facades may claim the open space as part of the building.

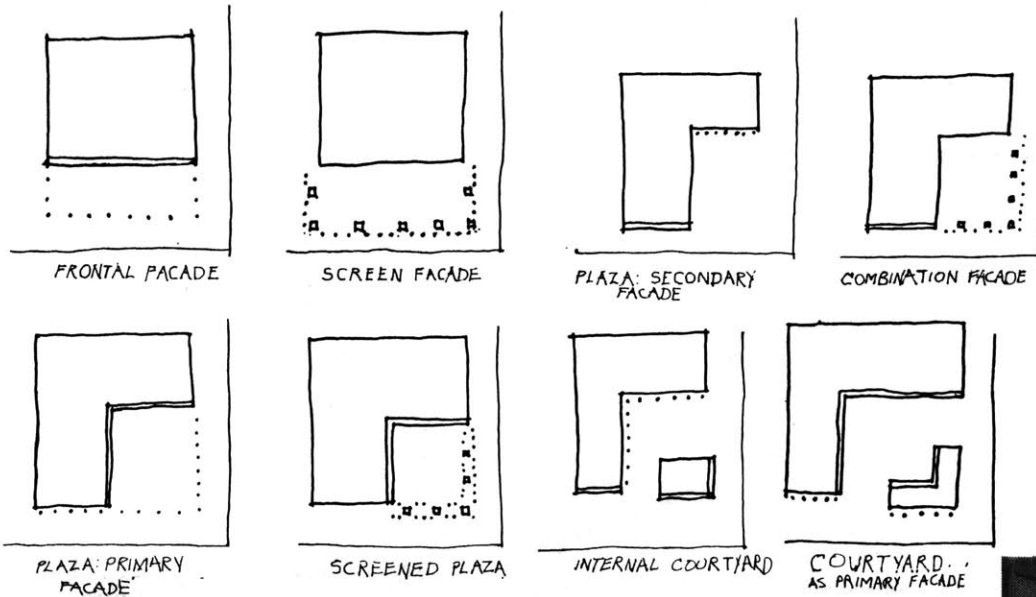
The low facade on this Roman church brings the building edge forward to reinforce the shape of the piazza, creating an entry zone (unfortunately often fenced off). The presence of the original Romanesque facade is transformed into a hovering marker of the church interior.



## Facade Layering



## Corner: Formal Emphasis



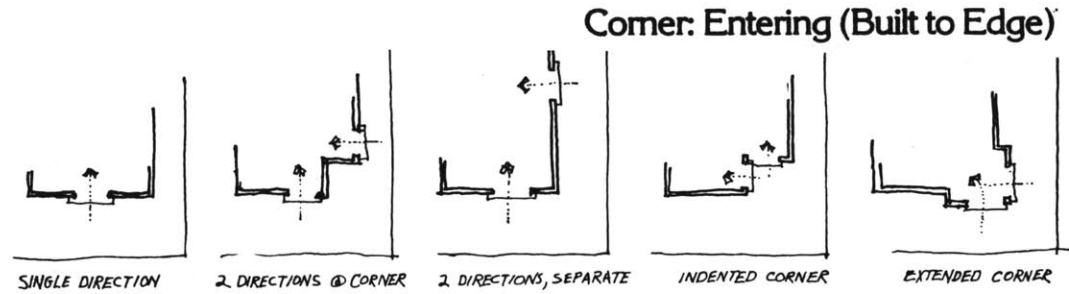
The facade may be perceived as either the actual building edge or the screen elements in front of it. The corner situation allows an open space, between screen and the building closure, to act as a facade zone: the space itself becomes the building face.



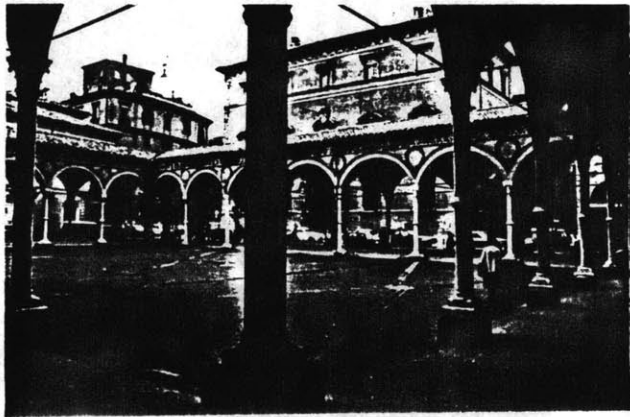
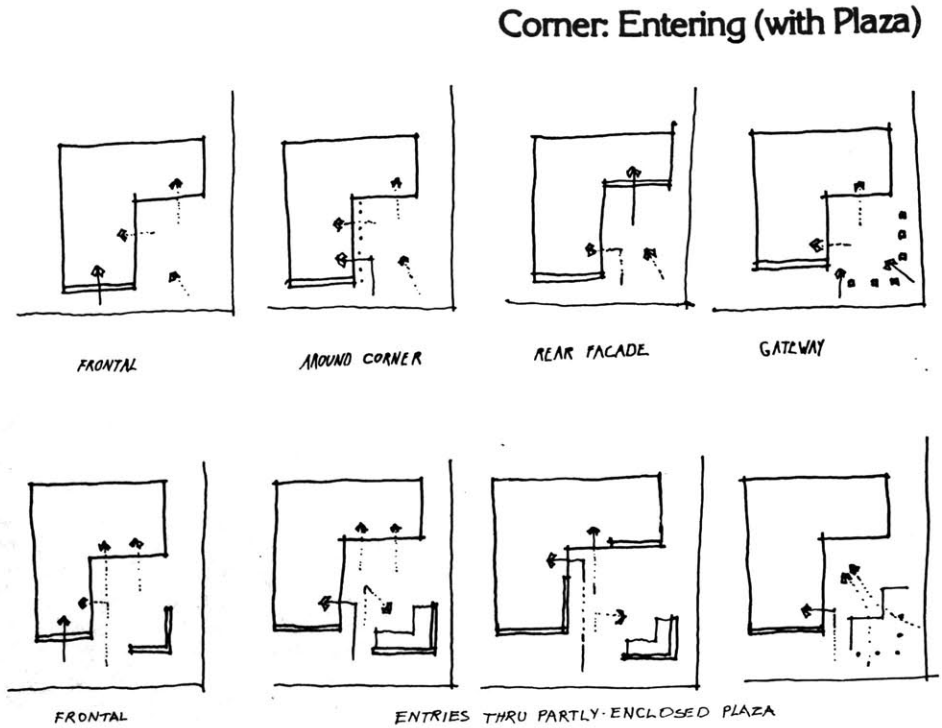
A small corner plaza.



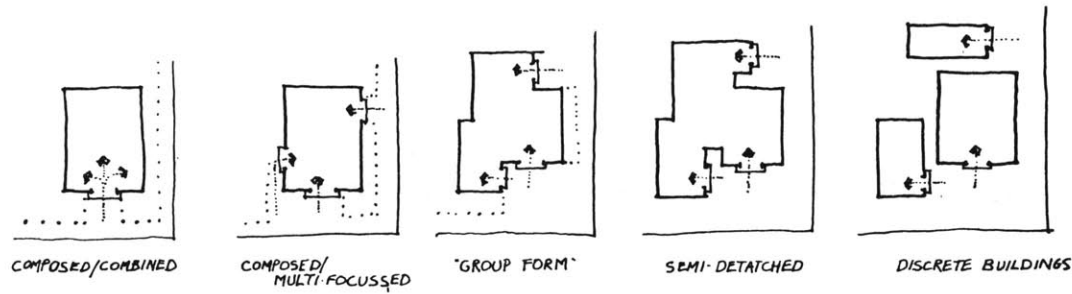
Entrances on a built corner may be singular or from both directions.



Entrances with a corner plaza may be entirely plaza-associated or also frontal. If the plaza has a strong outside edge, then entering the plaza becomes the primary act of entering.



## Massing Articulation



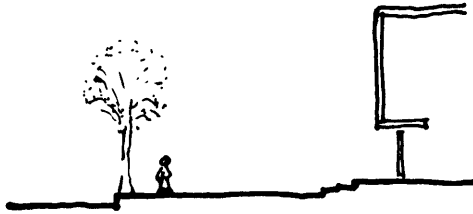
The unity or multiplicity of the building may be expressed or disguised by its massing. The possibilities range from the entirely singular composition to the actual separation of buildings, providing multiple identity with a linking common form vocabulary.

An Amsterdam library uses articulation to mimic the scale of surrounding houses. Does this deny its actual singular, public identity?



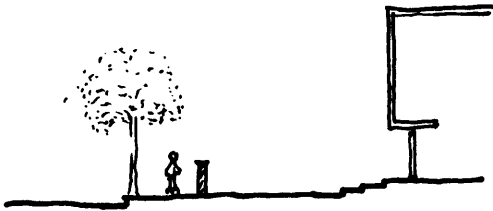
## Street-edge Section: Screens and Levels

The degree to which open space is claimed is a matter of level changes and closure. Various combinations produce different effects.



### PUBLIC SPACE

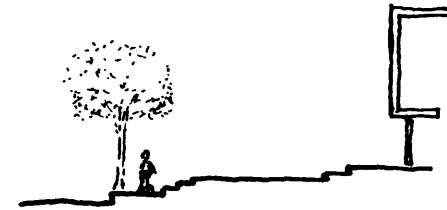
Extension of sidewalk,  
definition possible in  
paving



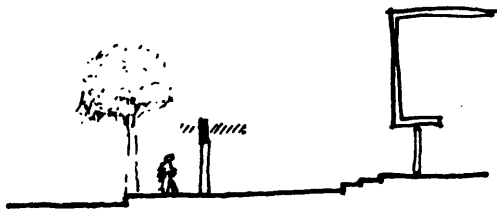
### CLAIMED

Low definition:

curb  
bollards  
hedge  
planters  
fence  
low wall



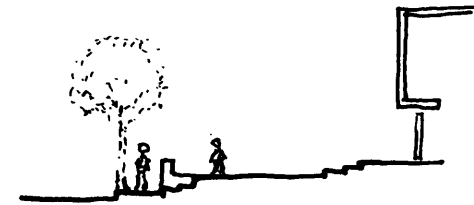
RAISED



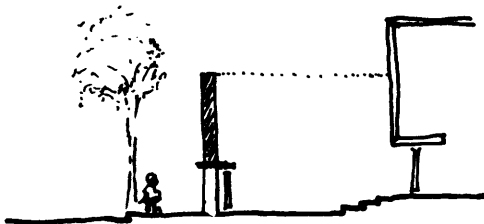
### SPATIALLY DISTINCT

Overhead definition:

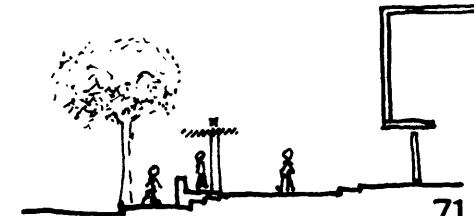
trees  
gateway  
colonnade  
trellis  
covered zone



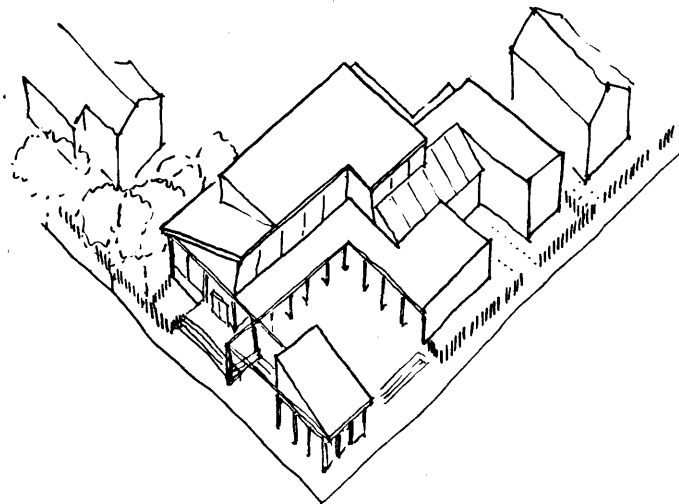
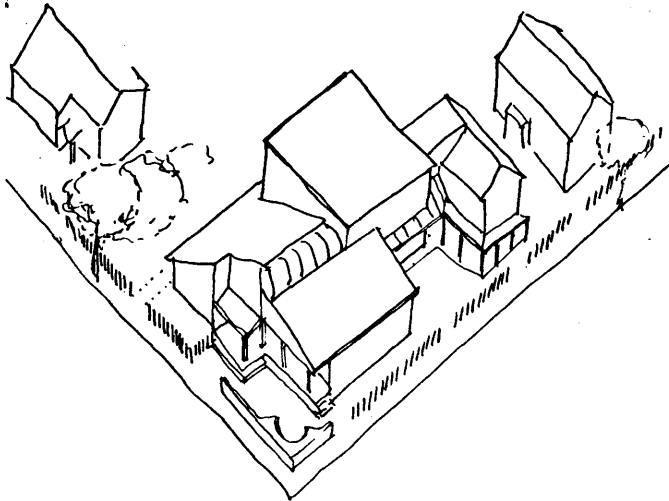
CLAIMED AND RAISED



BEHIND WALL



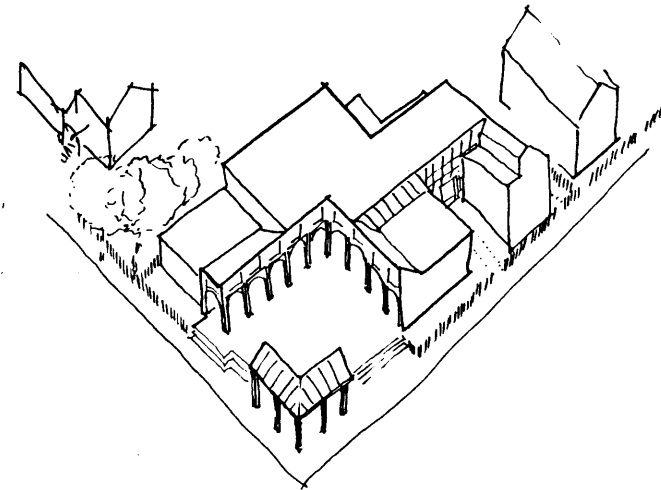
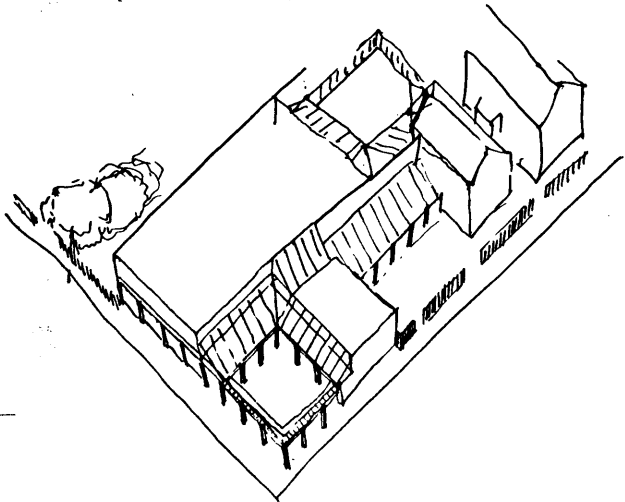
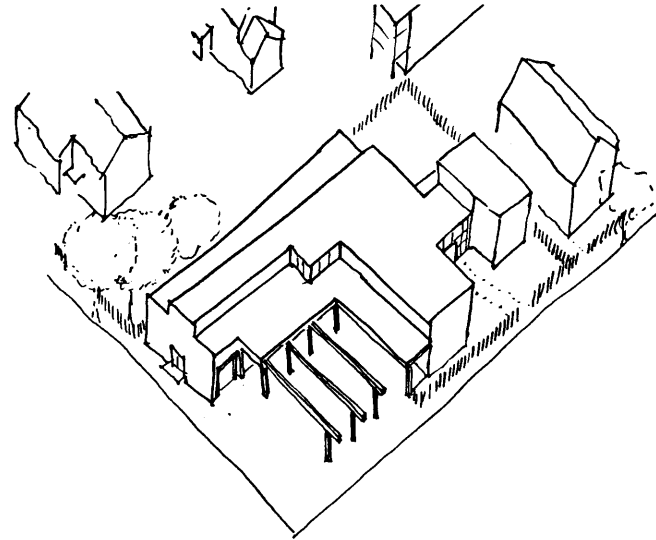
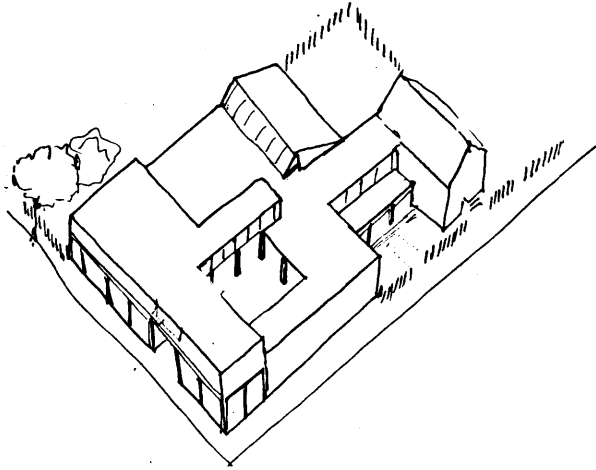
## Collective Massing



A series of studies were done as an early exploration of possible edge/massing configurations. These, and numerous others including sketch plans, were drawn into plans and axonometrics of the site. While they only reflect a first pass at programmatic organization, they proved very helpful in sorting out numerous possibilities.

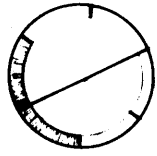
No single scheme was chosen and followed; instead, elements of several were combined. These are ideas which might be considered initial assumptions, such as the corner plaza, for better or worse. Individual details arose in these sketches which found their way into the formal design.

The first two sketches are variations of the notion of the "big house". The second two utilize the tight street edge of the storefront building type, the second with a courtyard behind the edge. The third pair are variations on an open plaza; in the second the plaza itself is the public face.

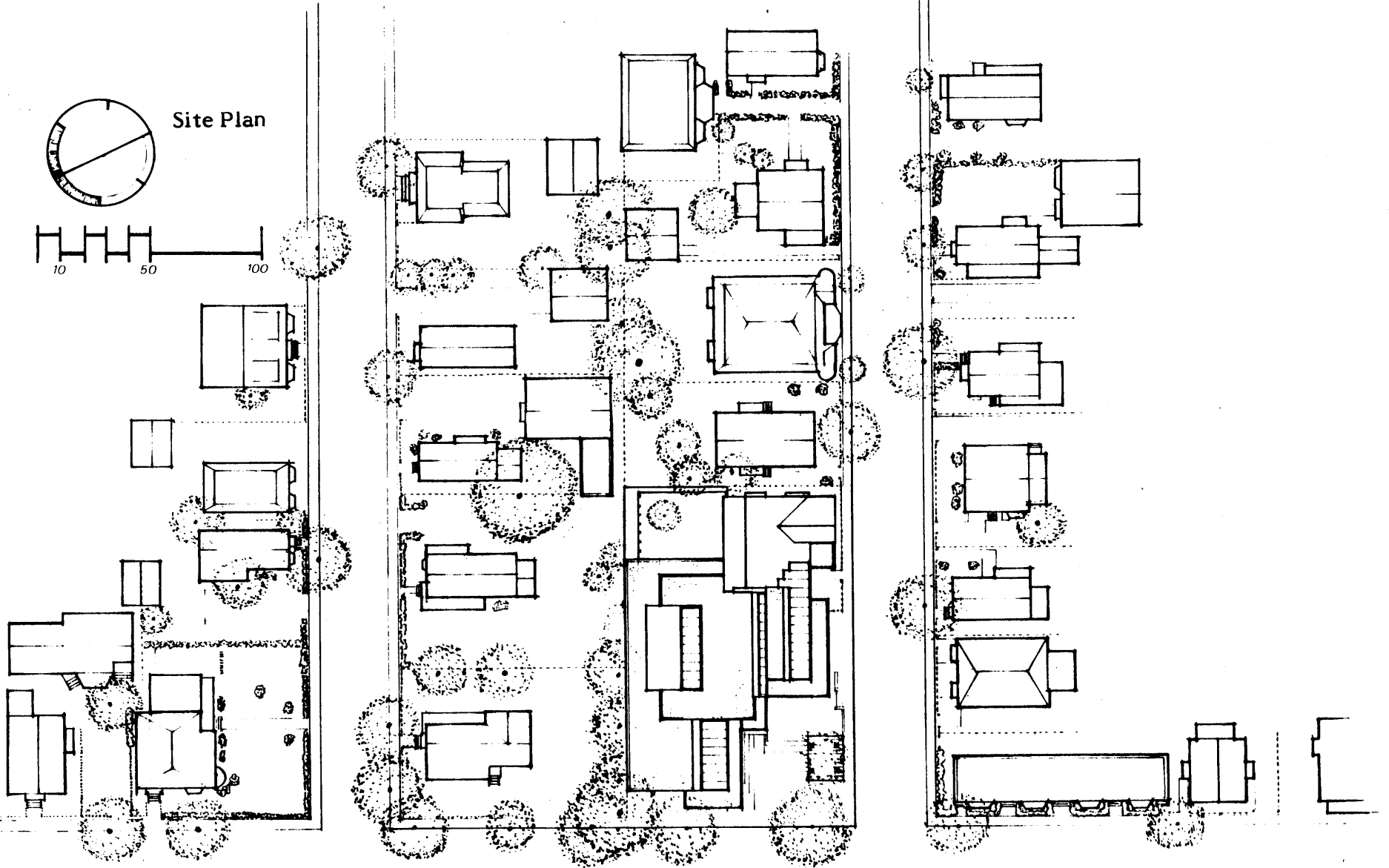
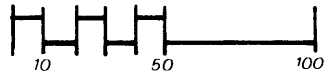


Storefront.

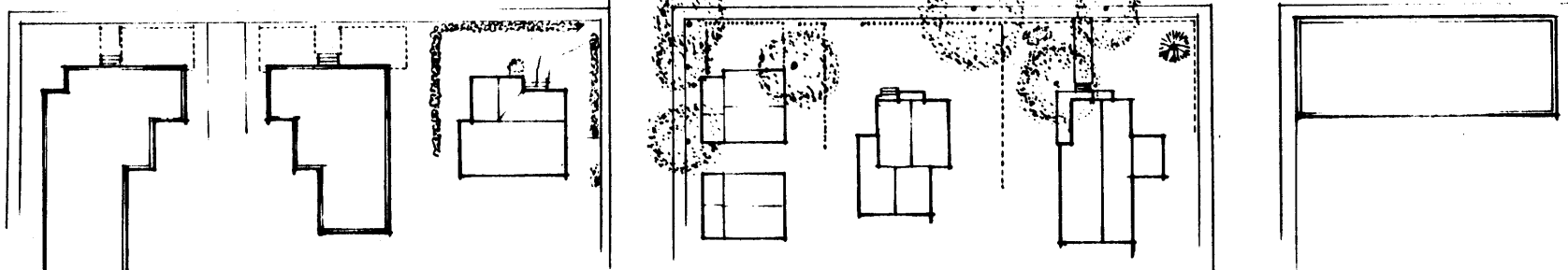
Open plaza.



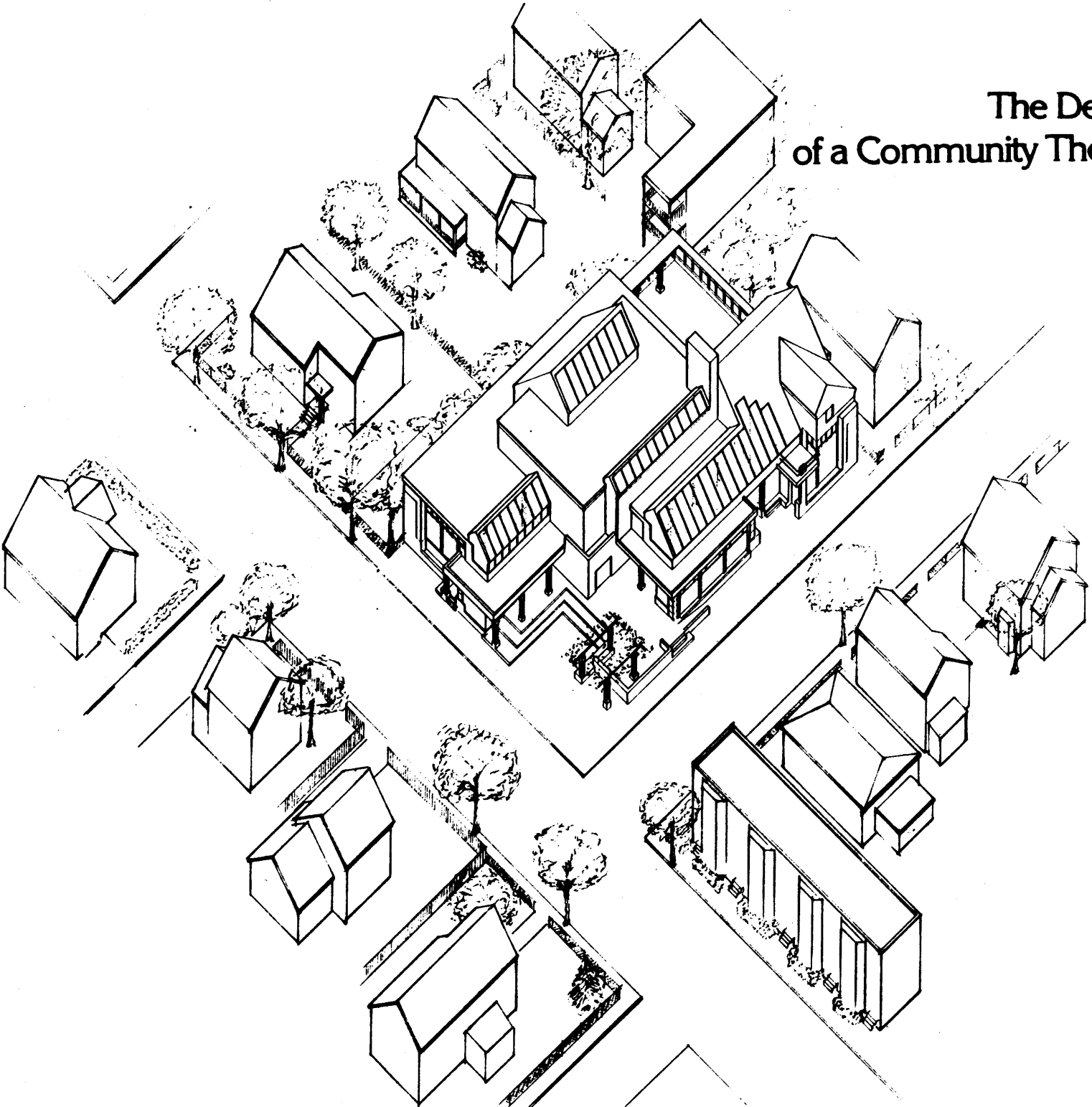
Site Plan



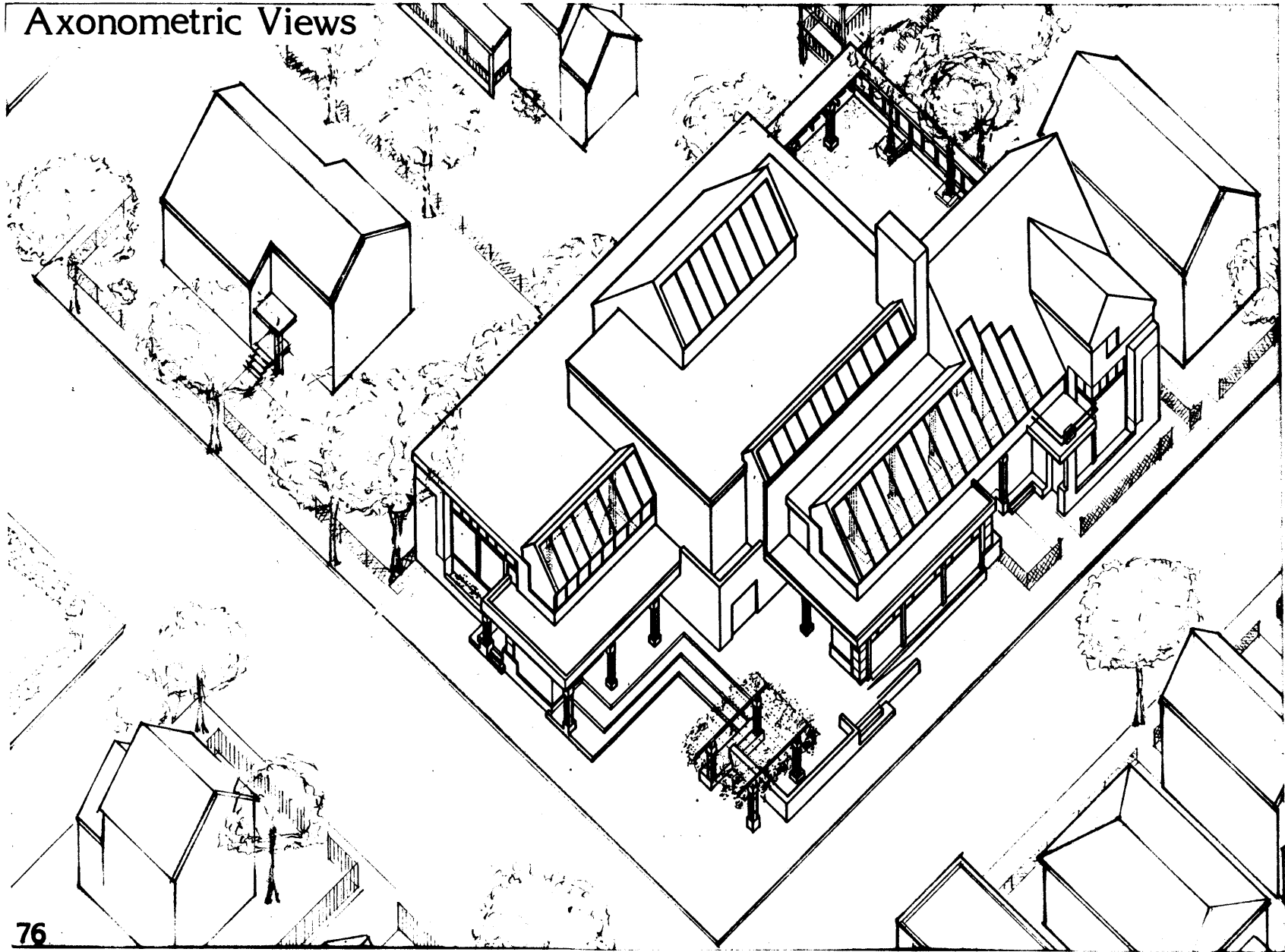
74



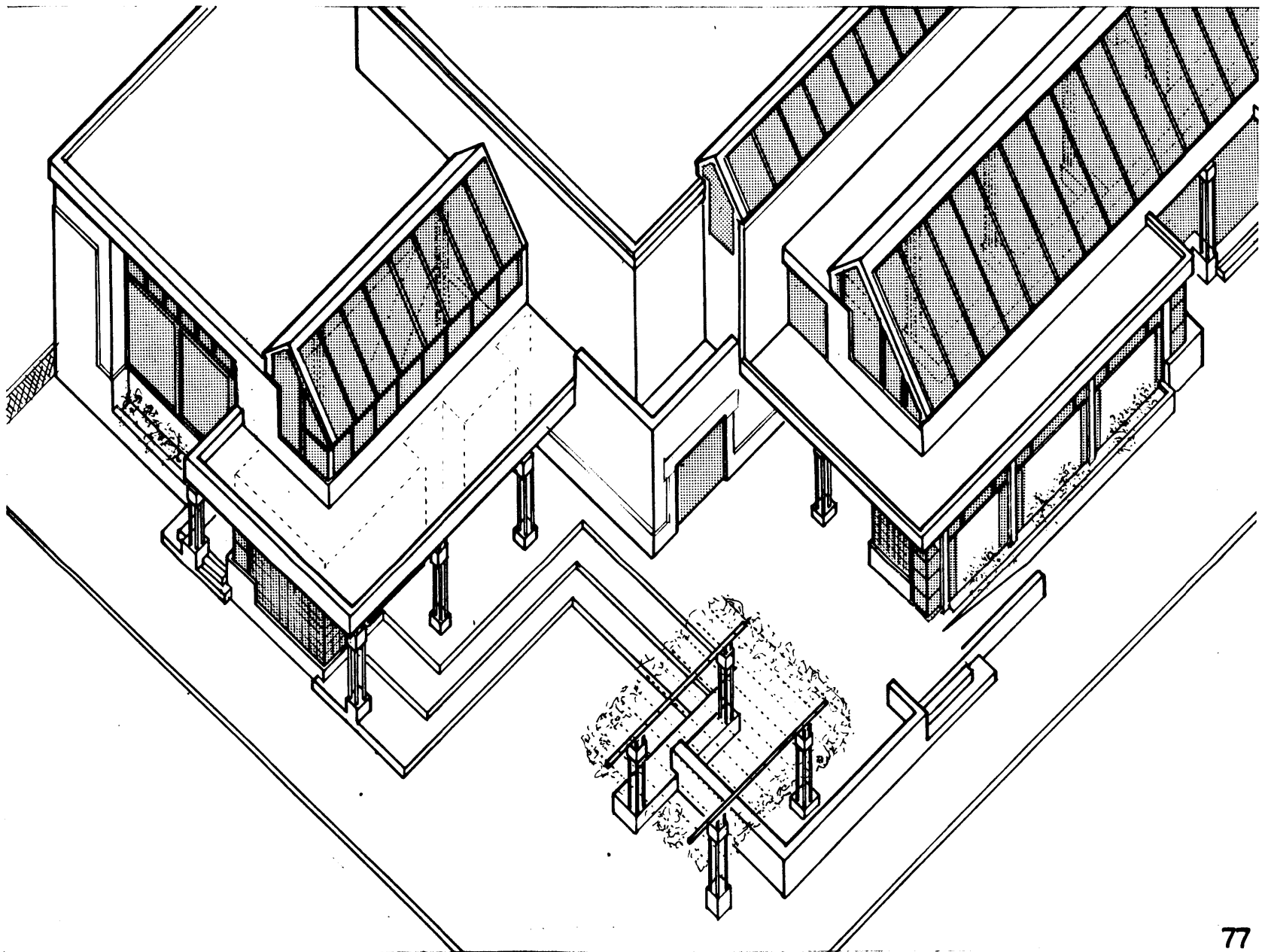
# The Design of a Community Theater



# Axonometric Views





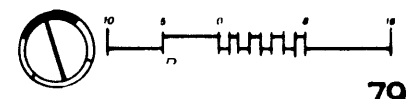
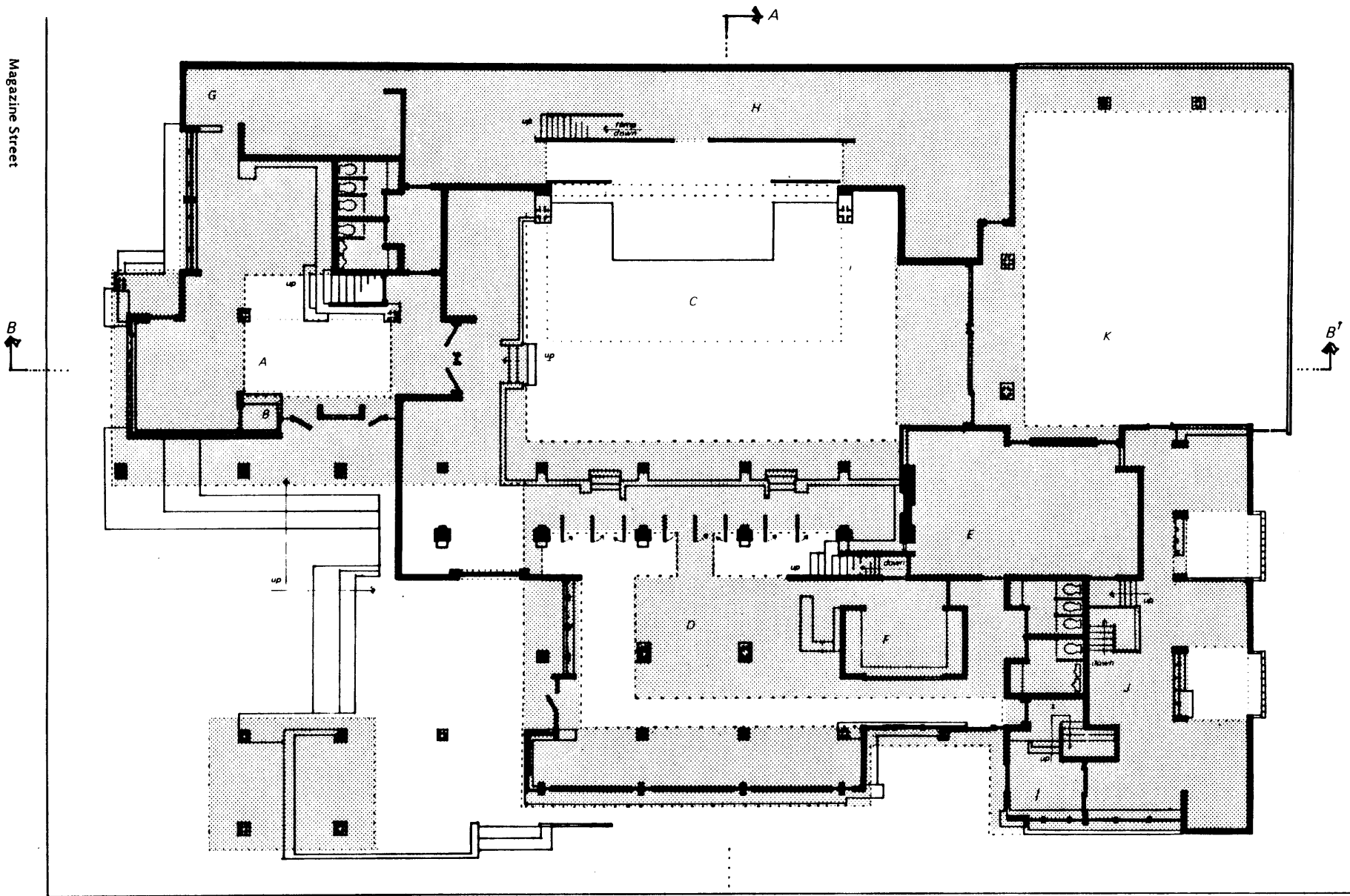


# Building Plans

## Ground Floor Plan (Overhead Definition Shaded)

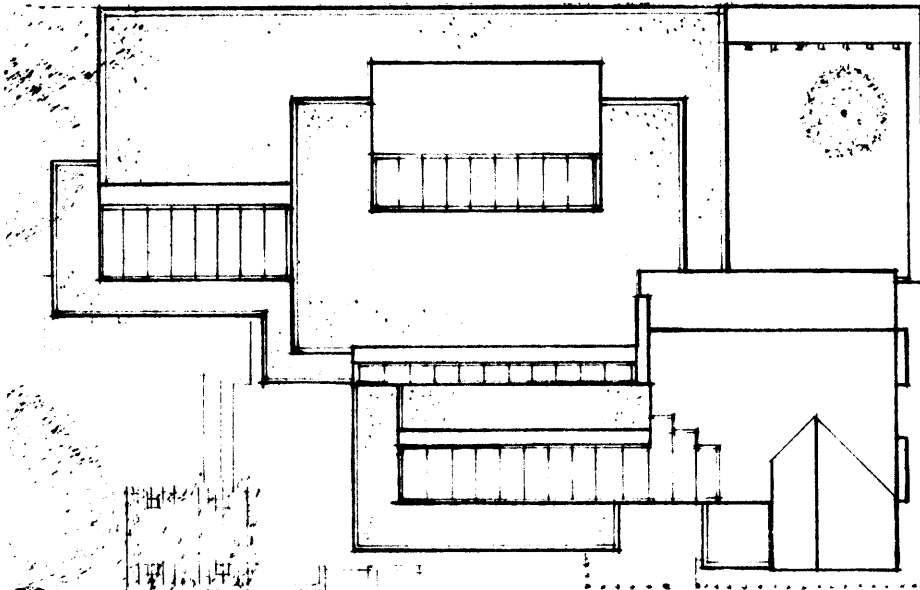
- A. Theater entrance hall.
- B. Ticket window.
- C. Theater.
- D. Cafe.
- E. Dining/Meeting Room.
- F. Kitchen (support and storage below).
- G. Coatroom and storage.
- H. Backstage area.
- I. Entry to Childcare and Guest House.
- J. Childcare center (continues down one-half level).
- K. Courtyard.

Magazine Street

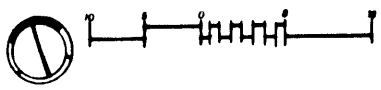
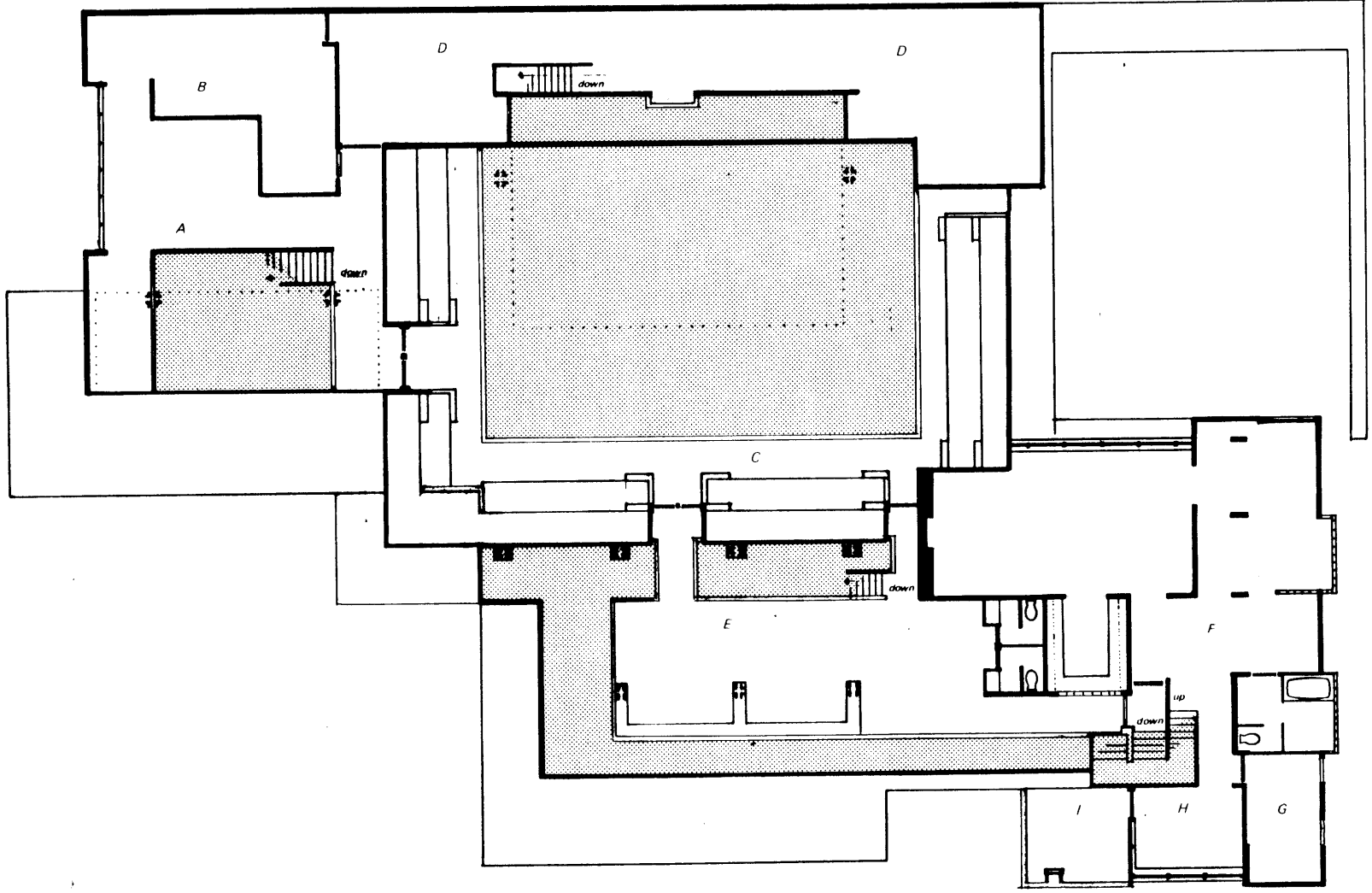


**Second Floor Plan (right)  
(Openings to Ground Shaded)**

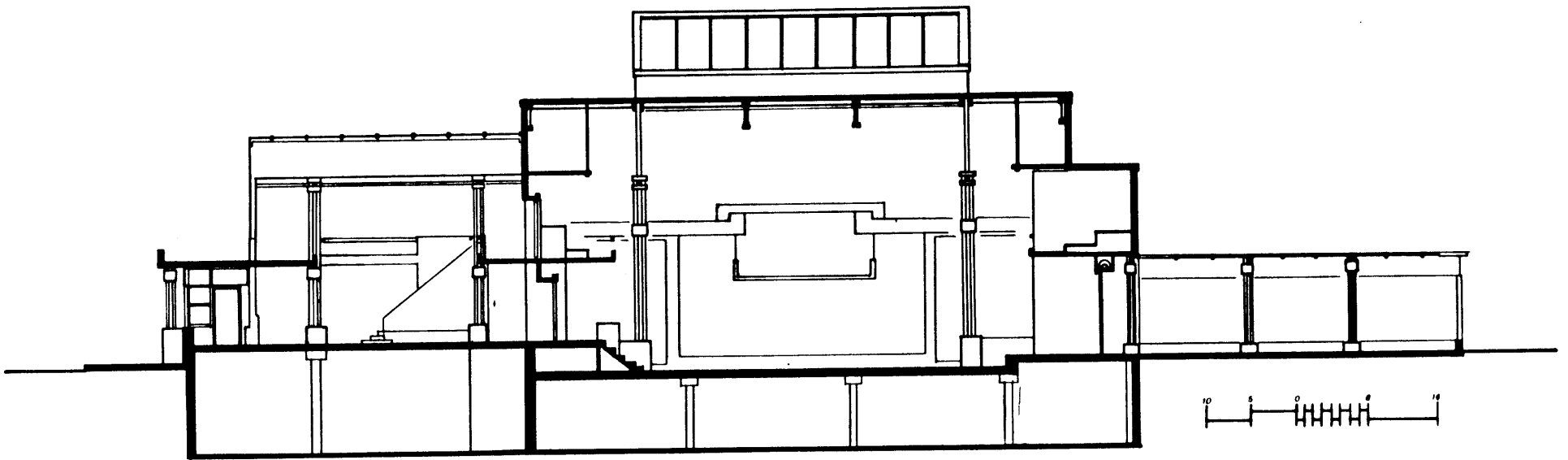
- A. Entry mezzanine.
- B. Office.
- C. Theater Balcony.
- D. Upper backstage, storage.
- E. Cafe mezzanine.
- F. Guest house entry, common rooms.  
(Bedrooms and lofts on third level.)
- G. Bedroom.
- H. Sunroom.
- I. Porch.



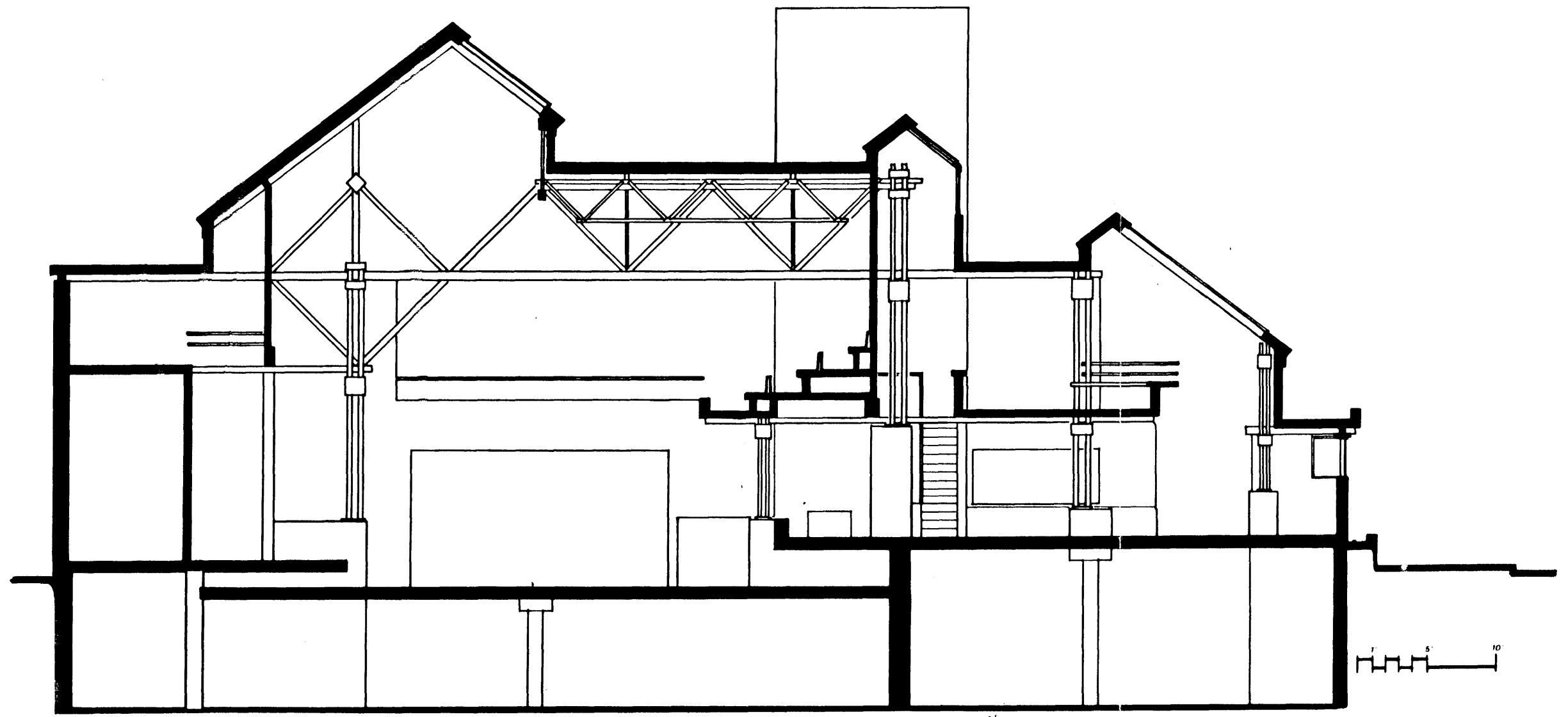
**Roof Plan left**



# Building Sections



Section B-B, through the theater entrance, the theater space, and the courtyard.



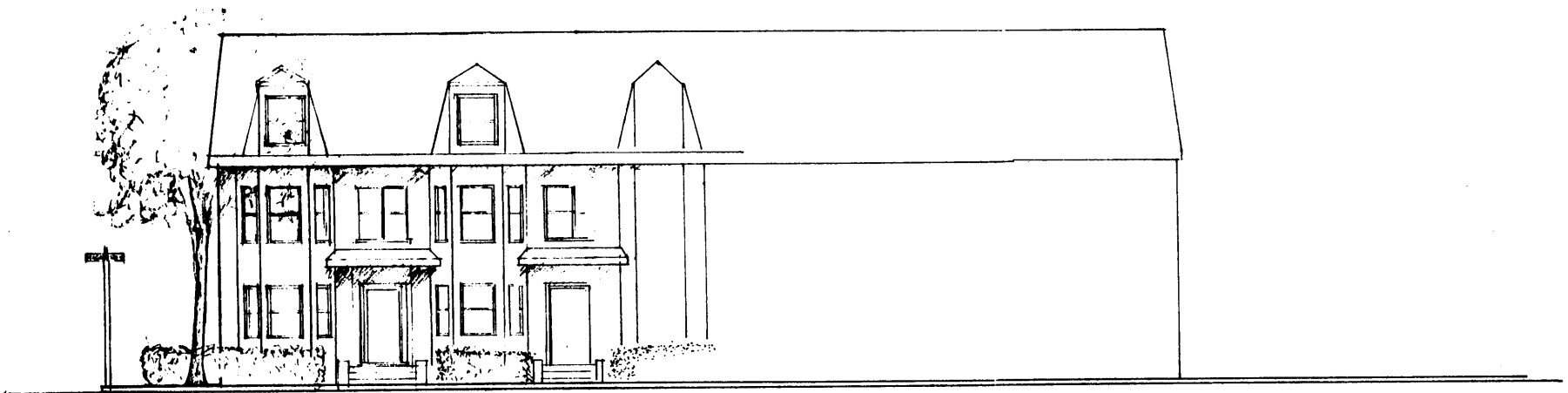
Section A-A, through the theater space, cafe, and the residential street.

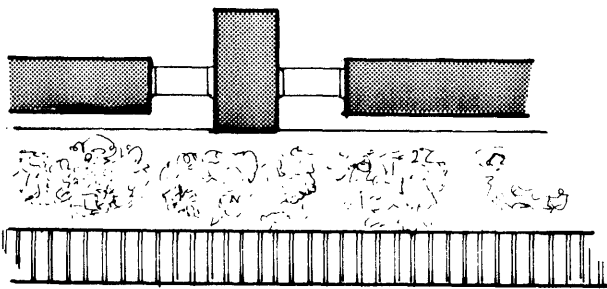
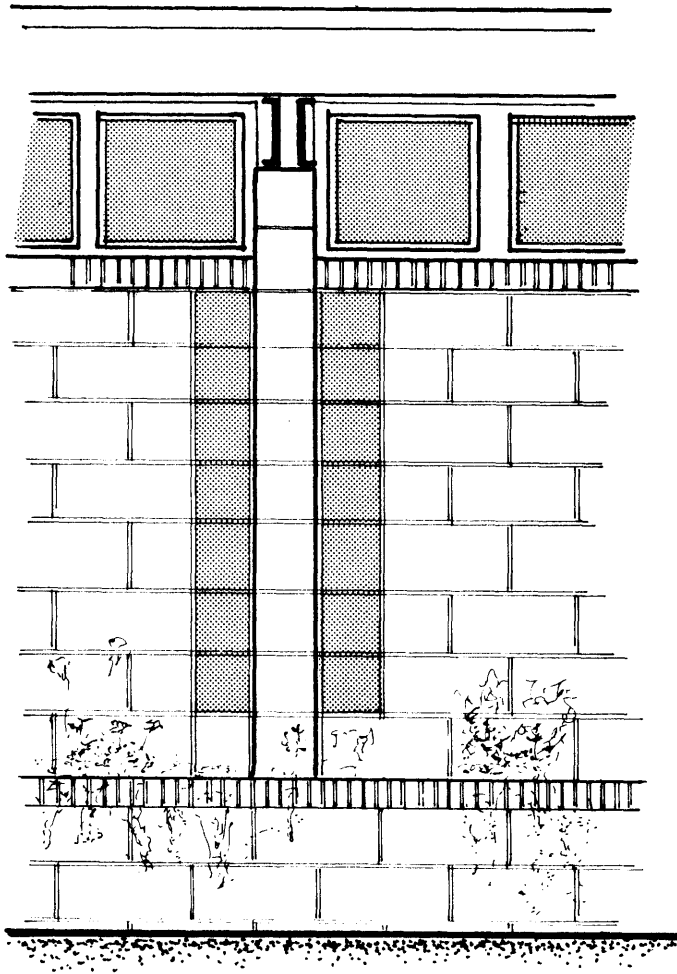
# Elevations



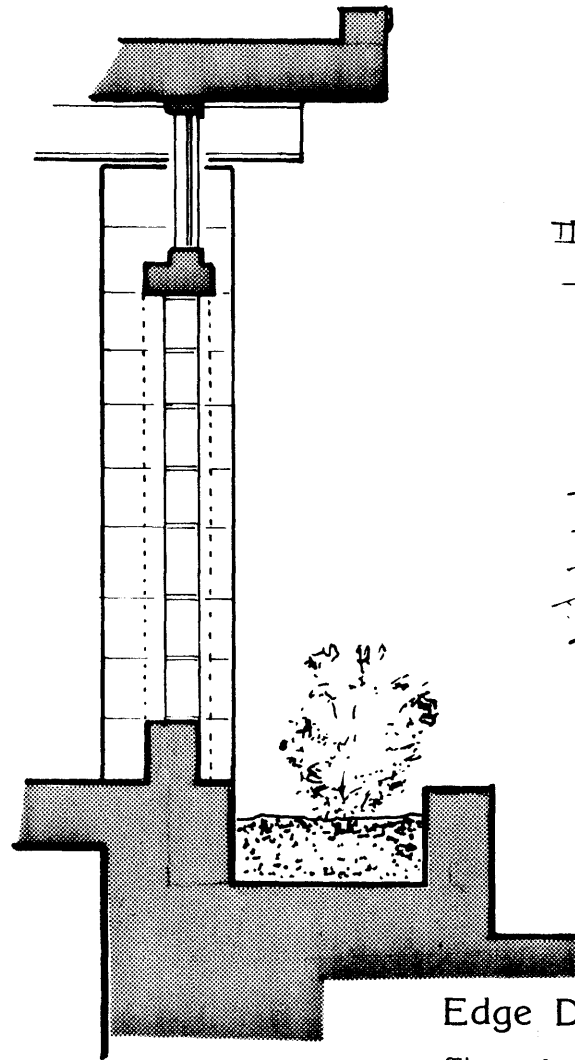


West Elevation in Context.

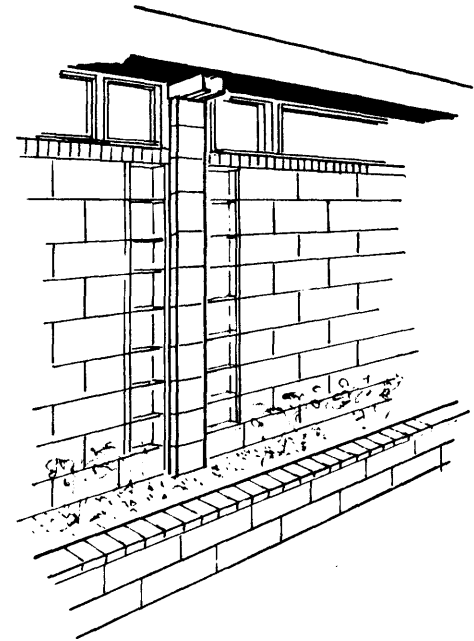




PLAN-CUT



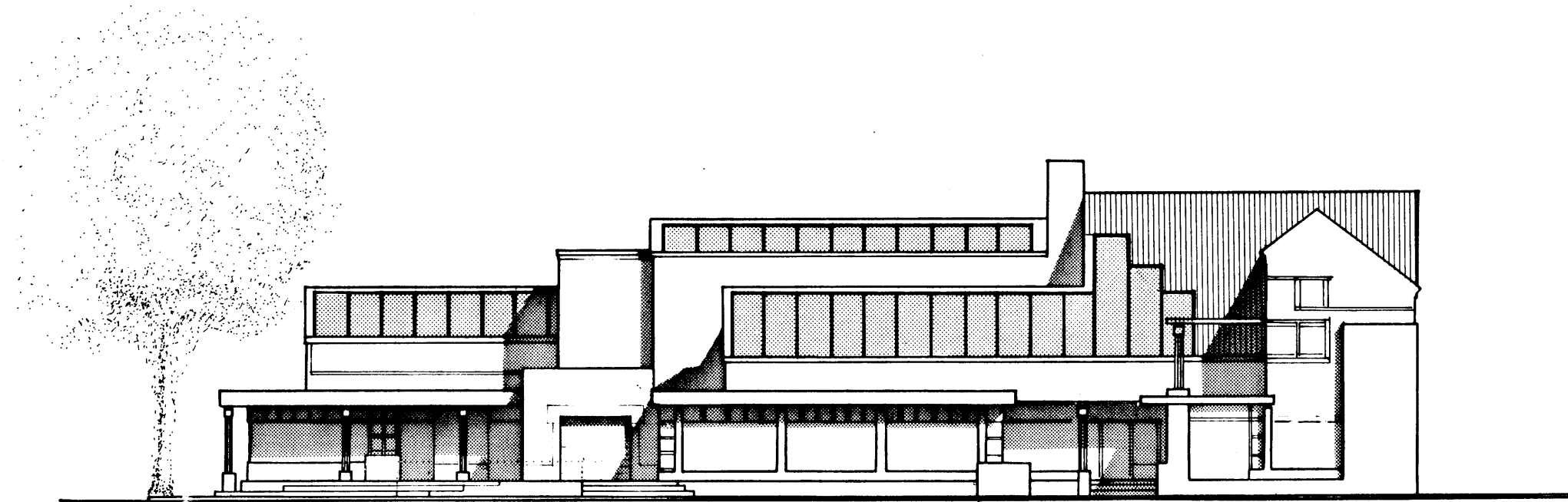
SECTION THRU  
GLASS BLOCK

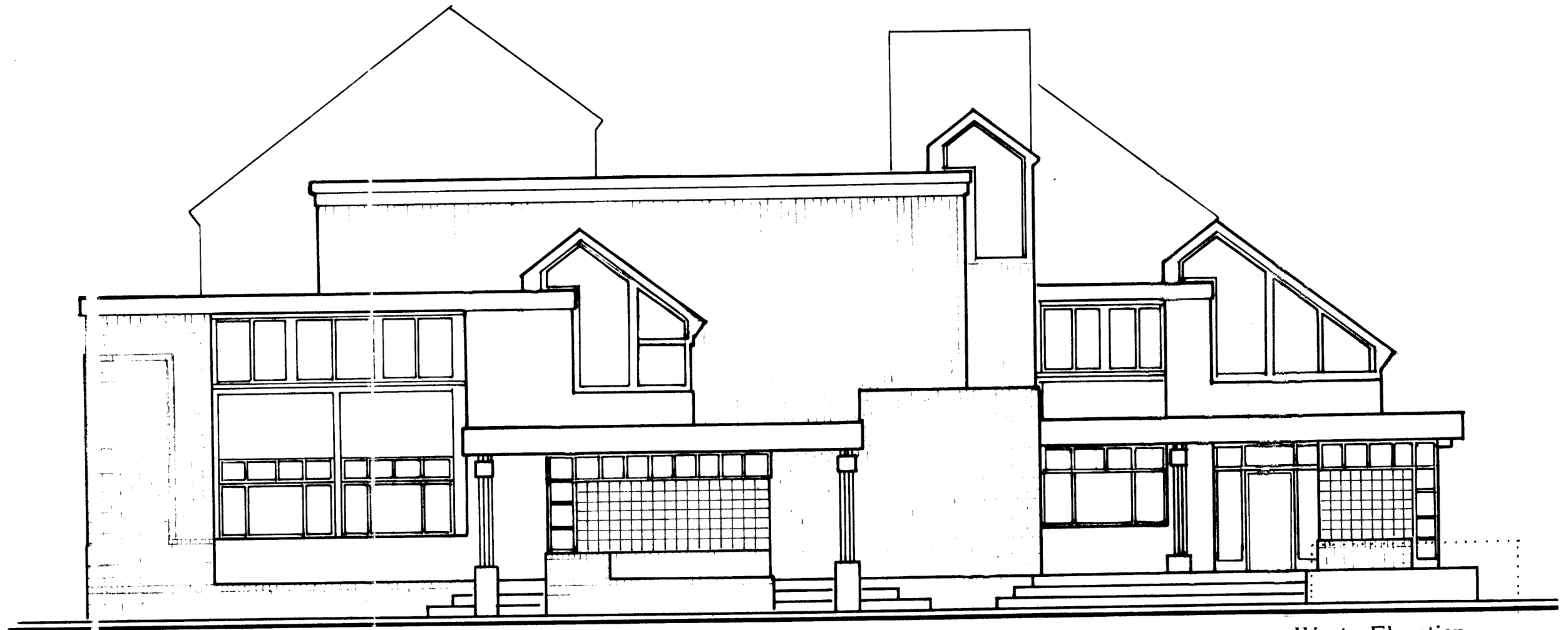


Edge Details

The cafe south wall.

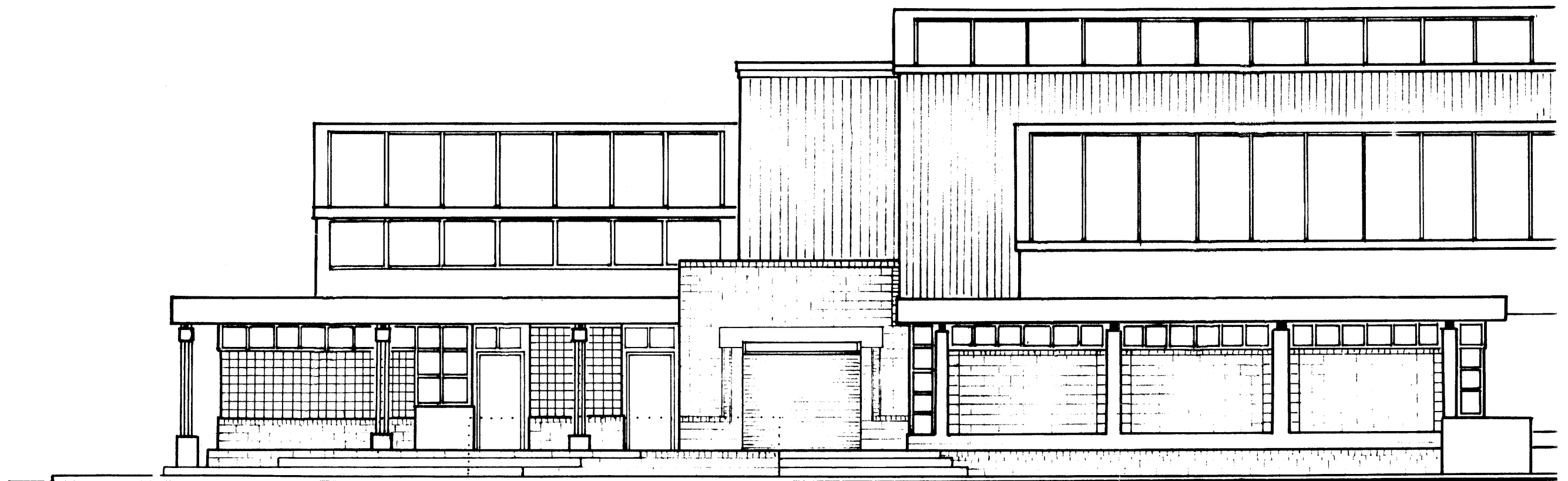
South Elevation, facing the residential street. (right)



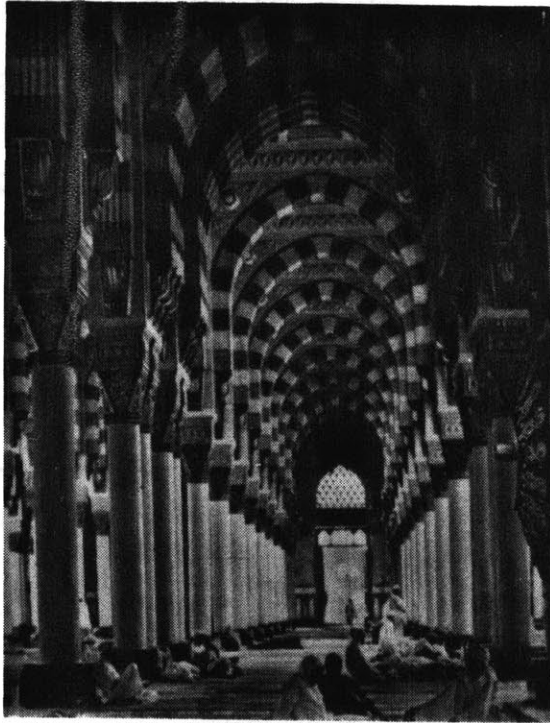


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West Elevation



South Elevation

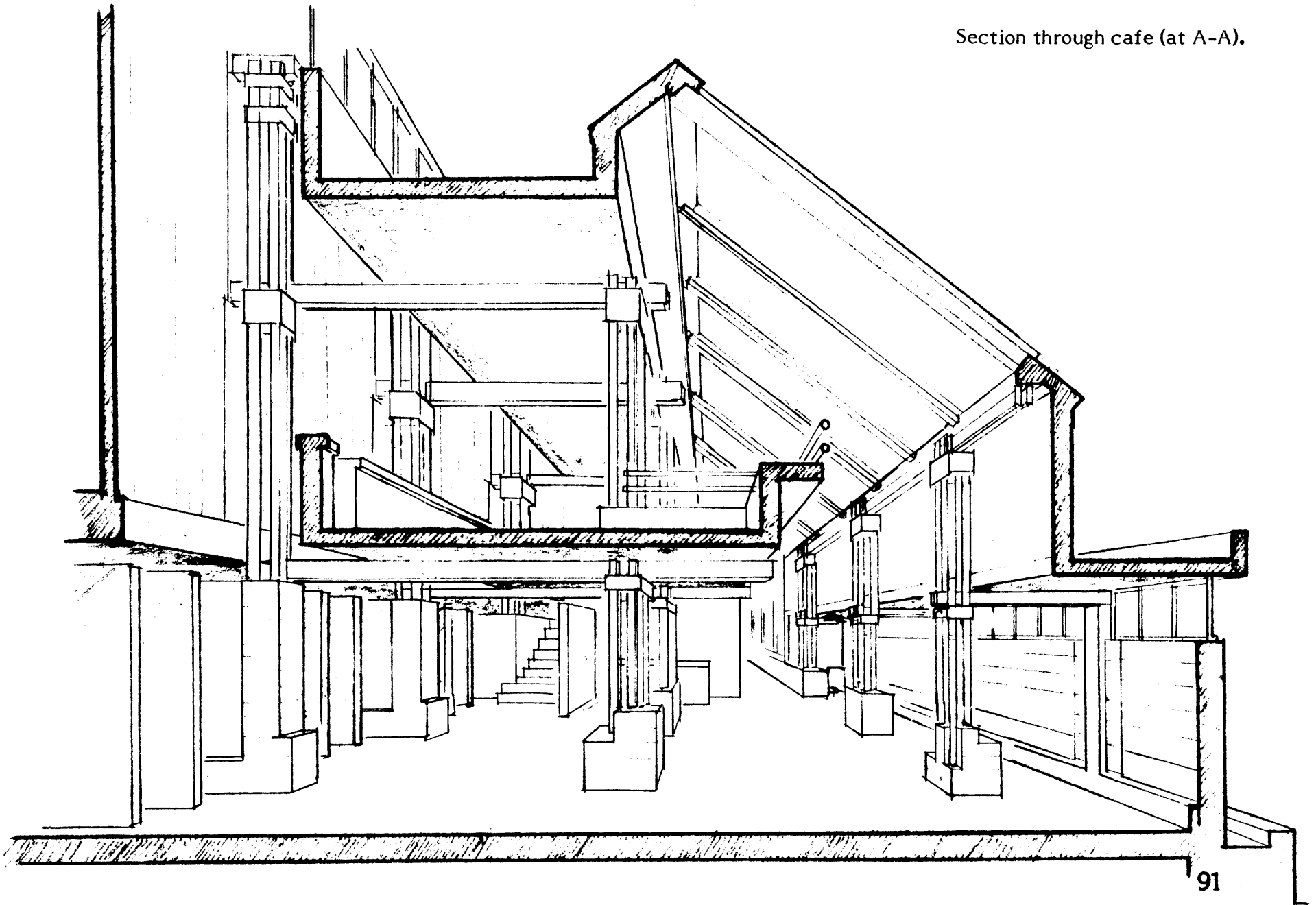


90

In a large public building, columns provide a directional space definition, filter the light and provide seats.

Section-perspective of the cafe, from the entrance. (right)

Section through cafe (at A-A).



## A Summary

During the design process, the context analysis has been a source of both inspiration and restraint. However useful this may be, I am aware of the more subtle hazard of becoming bound by preconceptions, to the point where real innovation is strangled. The lines between inspiration and imitation, restraint and limitation, can be very fine.

This summary of my use of the analysis is best seen as a retrospective look at the work. In reality, much of the use of patterns was subconscious, made possible by the process of recording and interpreting, but not methodical. Many intentional references to patterns came and went as seemed appropriate. What follows is the result, not the "criteria".

I have tried to be selective in the patterns I have conformed to, while sometimes violating other selected patterns, sometimes rather flagrantly. One of my initial assumptions, reflected

in my choice of building systems, was that there is always room for innovation and introduction of forms without precedent. The success of such innovations depends on the strength of the existing patterns to anchor the new form into the context.

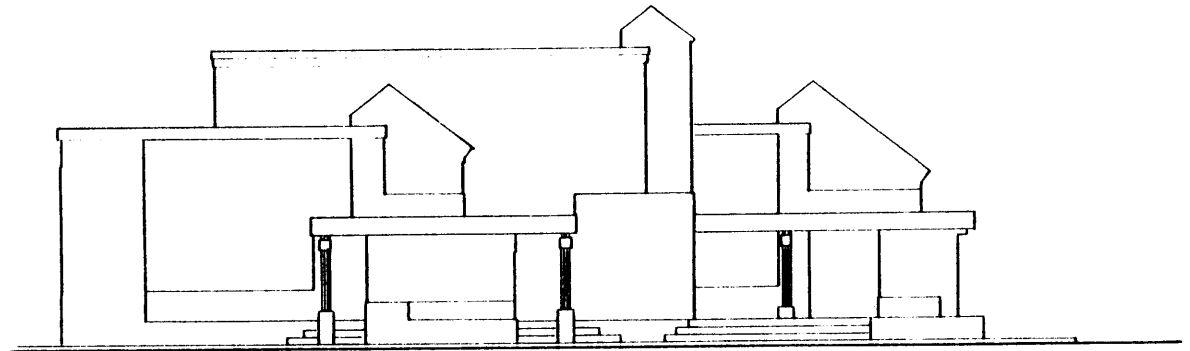
In terms of the form of the existing street patterns, the choice of a site was a crucial decision. The decision to locate the building on the corner of a through street conforms with the precedent of most of the neighborhood's public buildings. Magazine Street, because of its use as a pedestrian thoroughfare/promenade, is particularly suitable for a community building; furthermore the site is next to one of Cambridgeport's most intensely developed commercial areas. The building is, then, oriented toward the through street, with a secondary orientation toward the residential street.

Conforming  
with the Context



The Magazine Street lot frontage is intentionally smaller than the 200 foot block front (a siting decision) and larger than that of a single house; however, elements of the facade are individually scaled to houselike dimensions, reinforcing the built rhythm. The massing of small increments around a larger volume is reminiscent of the low stores which are often wrapped around houses, and reach toward the street. The open space at the corner is larger than most local public buildings provide, but serves the same, expanded function as both a gathering place and a buffer zone between street and building. It maintains the open space patterns of streets on at least two sides, some continuation of the street-edge screen (trellis, trees, partial walls), and the facilitation of diagonal views and movement.

On the residential street, the daycare facility and guest house are articulated as a house size mass, and the



roof direction turns its gable to the street, the dominant house pattern in the neighborhood. This not only brings the larger building to the scale of the street, but gives a sense of identity to these facilities, which have their own entrance.

Some of the building elements refer to local precedents in type if not form. The vertical elements and articulated entrances are related to the steeples and classicized entries on most local public buildings. The large amount of glass in windows and doors proclaims nonresidential use. The formal theater entrance at the sidewalk looks like a

commercial front, and serves as a "sign" for the building. Turning the corner as a loggia, it invites use as a front porch.

The relationships between the larger street edge and the theater include several important rejections of the observed patterns. The formal entry mass extends to the sidewalk, making the building edge accessible to the public zone, providing potential shelter and seating, and leading around into the plaza/entry court. This eliminates the typical "yard" zone, which is replaced by the plaza, a more "public", accessible spatial form. However, even this open space is somewhat unique to the neighborhood, since it is located on a building lot and defined by a building.

Unlike most commercial buildings, the cafe is set back away from the through street. While it is still very visible, it is thus identified, via adjacency, with the mass of the theater.

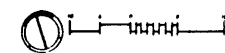
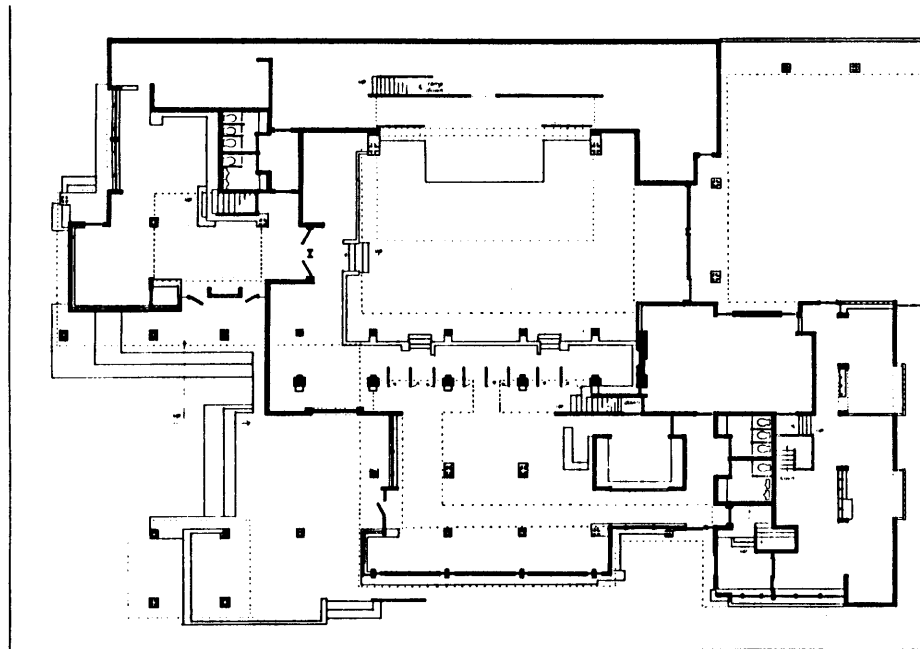
The setback defines the open space, which allows outdoor eating, hopefully a pleasant contribution to Magazine Street. In a way, this "outdoor room" brings the facade of the cafe right back to the street.

The theater is built to the rear lot line, rather than leaving an unbuilt strip on the north side of the site. While I feel this would be useful throughout the neighborhood, allowing better utilization of sideyards, it is appropriate here, since there is a thirty-foot open space on the adjacent lot. Even if a future building abbutted (a possibility allowed by the windowless north wall), it would be consistent with the higher density already found in the commercial area on the next block. Even eventual transformation of much of Magazine Street into commercial buildings, institutions and apartment houses would not necessarily affect the whole neighborhood adversely.

The building has multiple entrances, instead of the more common single focused entry. This allows different parts of the building to function somewhat independently, and it expresses this diversity externally.

As assumed from the outset, the materials used are alien to the context. Nevertheless, concrete block, metal siding and large glazed surfaces may all be used in a way which reflects the horizontality, containment and detail scale of more traditional materials. In some cases I have tried to emphasize these similarities, in others I have looked for detail solutions that have more remote sources or may be inventions. The final building form is a mix of local references and individual, even idiosyncratic design. This, I would say, is appropriate; the community theater is, after all, a singular facility in a uniform setting.

Quality, beyond that, is in the eye of the beholder.



# THE PLEASURES OF FORM

POSTSCRIPT

**AND THE REALITIES OF LIFE**

## In Retrospect

After many months of working on an imaginary building for a very real, very likeable neighborhood, I offer these observations:

Evaluating my own work, I have mixed feelings. In terms of the edge form, I believe the community theater is successful in presenting a habitable, welcoming announcement of a public building. There is, however, much local decision-making which has left the whole less coherent than it might be. The processes of contextual analysis and building assemblage have encouraged an extreme articulation of the parts; perhaps the "synthesis" could have been more complete. Certainly a building approach like the "decorated shed" would have produced different results, a comparison of the two would be an interesting next step.

My feeling for the importance of careful contextual analysis remains undiminished, but I have become increasingly conscious of the need to consider people/residents/clients, which is virtually impossible in the school setting.

Understanding the way that people live/inhabit a place is as important as observing the place itself. But people aren't buildings, and they cannot be observed so objectively. Behavior can not be as neatly categorized into patterns nor should it be. If we can speak of a "social context" interacting with the physical context, then this too is subject to both reinforcement and transformation. But by whom?

This raises the question about the role of the architect, which involves both working method and political power (are they that different?). The modern-day architect is usually only superficially acquainted with the context (thus this

thesis) and even less acquainted with the future inhabitants. The "absentee architect", foreign to the community or even the region or country for which he designs, is often an unwitting carpetbagger, compared to the locally-based designer.

In the end, the matter of reinforcing the context is ultimately subjective. While one person may insist that doublehung windows or real wood clapboards are the essence of the neighborhood, another might insist as vehemently that lot dimensions and setbacks are the most important consideration. Neither would be right or wrong if a web of other patterns lay behind their favorites. For example, setbacks are irrelevant if you don't first have streets. But the sorting and emphasis of patterns is very personal.

Bruno Taut once wrote:

"To make the world mean something for oneself, one seeks to transfigure all that is perceived as real, that is, to interpret it and give it a form. The form is first the anchoring element and then becomes an all-embracing crystal, the ""world structure"".

- Bruno Taut (quoted in Peter Blundell Jones's Scharroun, page 60.)

Each of us has our own perception of the world; those of us who are designers work according to these perceptions. We try, with varying degrees of success, to build the world as we understand its structure, attempting to make things more consistent and coherent, to make things as they "should be".

Understanding a site and its relationship to the larger world of form and people does not guarantee a fitting response to the site for two reasons. First, design skills do not necessarily (in fact, rarely) coincide with perceptual/analytical skills. Design may be dependent on these skills, but it must

be learned separately. Second, there is no such thing as a "fitting" response to a site on any but a personal level. At best, we can hope that a large number of people share the designer's sense of "fittingness". It is in this sense that I presume that concerted local observation is useful.

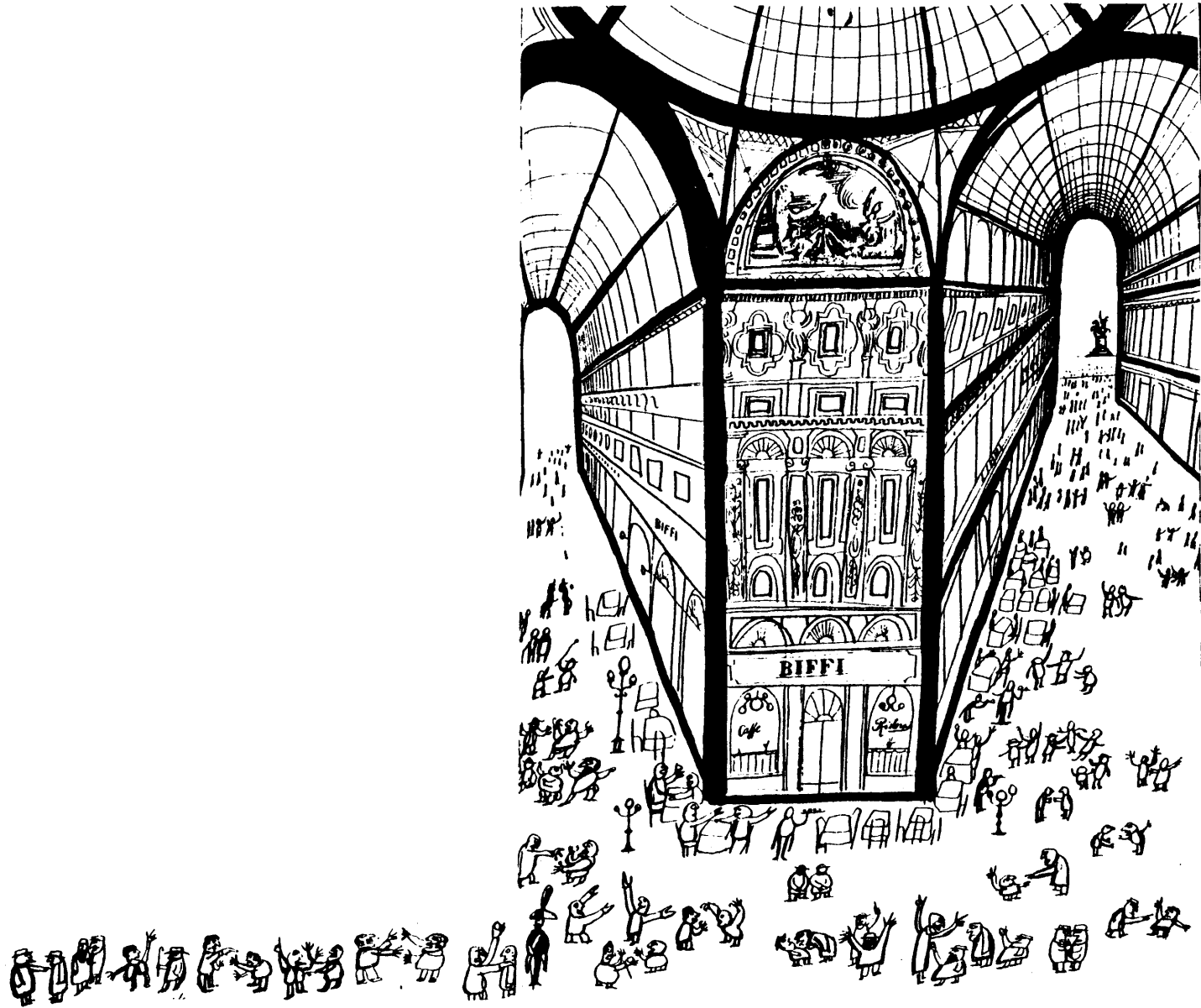
In a roundabout way, I am criticising the detachment of the "objective" observations in this thesis. While I have found the format useful, I would prefer to use it as a basis for interaction between the designer and the inhabitants. I feel that this kind of point-by-point study, if presented in a clear, interesting way, could provoke a much more subjective, meaningful analysis of the way people perceive, use, and would transform their community.

The most exciting potential lies in taking the contextual statement/critique one step further and using it as a political tool. Whether the project at hand is a building, house complex or urban plan, a neighborhood-generated set of design guidelines, based on a pattern/tissue study approach, could be a useful tool for organizing and acting. Such a statement, in hand, gives non-professionals a means to articulate their needs in terms of preservation, reinforcement and transformation.

The role of the architect in this scenario is up for speculation, but not in the format of a thesis. The profession is moving away from small, community-oriented offices into corporate firms, making it even more difficult to work in a responsive, sensitive way. More difficult, perhaps, but more necessary, too. The time for the semi-professional architect-as-provocateur may be coming.



# THE PROGRAM



Main Space:

Circulation and seating  
max 300  
.....2200 square feet  
normal 200  
Stage Area.....400  
Backstage.....1000

Total 3600 square feet

Entry, Circulation and Lobby....1200

Small Gatherings/Cafe.....1200

Dining Room.....500

Kitchen.....200

Bathrooms.....200

Coatroom, storage.....200

Offices (2).....300

Kitchen support, storage, mechanicals  
(As available in basement).

Child Care:

Playroom.....1000  
Classroom.....300  
Quiet room.....200  
Office.....100

Total.....1600 square feet

Guest House:

Common rooms.....600  
Kitchen.....200  
Bedrooms, Bathrooms, Misc..1400

Total.....2200 square feet

TOTAL BUILT SPACE.....11,300  
square feet

Outdoor Space (Minimum Area)

Street/Entry related.....1000  
Theater/Cafe.....800  
Child Care related.....1200

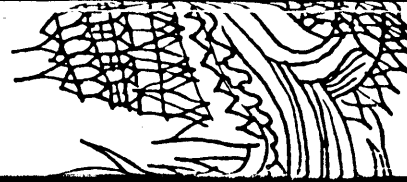
Minimum Total..3000 square feet

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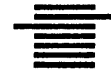
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Lynch: The Image of the City



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YOUR HOUSE-the outside view  John Prizeman

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