SYMBOLIC MANIPULATIONS OF ARCHITECTONIC FORM
A Thesis Exploration

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1987

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"I accuse architects of gross misconduct and violent acts against real people. Plans which turn people into units and place them in co-ordinated sections on paper are a denial of life and in that area, efficiency must take second place. Being an architect is not a career, any more than being a satirist or a doctor. Architects should be dreamers, not administrators wielding the unquestioned powers of those who seem to know better."

RALPH STEADMAN
INTRODUCTION

Art, in any form, is an exploration process. Thus, the architectural thesis should not be looked at as a final product, but as the beginning of an exploration. It seems that many architects have ceased exploration and have become content with re-manipulating senseless motifs to produce meaningless architectural products. In an effort to avoid this situation and to provide an additional layer of significance in my work, I have developed several theoretical constructs which are explored symbolically with basic architectural form.

As my experimentation with the constructs evolved, attitudes and ideas shifted drastically. What began as a very pragmatic, community based design problem eventually became an extremely personal study of an individual dwelling. It is very important, however, to present all of the initial concerns of the thesis. Certain ideas remained strong throughout the entire nine month duration and are valid notions to be used for further exploration.

This thesis work represents a personal search for meaning in architecture. If someone looking through this book discovers something of significance or feels any emotion toward anything I've created, then I feel that I have succeeded. As a student that is all I can give society.
BEGINNINGS

One of the initial concerns of this thesis work involved stripping away the meaningless veneers and cliches found in much of today's 'architecture'. It seems that the architect limits his or her creativity to how well he or she can arrange components into some kind of 'functional' package. Little thought is given to the meaning inherent in the original components or how the building affects the individual psychologically. Thus, the primary thrust of the work was meant to be a 'back-to-basics' study of architectonic form, using the natural environment and the community setting as the main stimuli.

The thesis was initially structured around the following diagram and thesis statement:

![Diagram](image)

As a fixed point in nature, the community can become the scoring process necessary to encompass all human growth and expression.

The following diagram, developed by Lawrence Halprin, further expands this notion. It is a creative process that places a major emphasis on the response and communication of people involved in the shaping of our environment. The diagram can be read in any sequence or combination of variables.1
Resources - Human and physical resources and their motivation and aspirations.
Scores - Sequences that describe the process leading to the final performance.
Valuation - A process that analyzes the results of actions and decisions brought forth by the score.
Performance - The resultant of the score.

To operate correctly the cycle must operate on two levels. The first of these is the personal, private level of the self. This level of the cycle refers to one's personal Gestalt: the people who are close to you, your personal environment, attitudes, interests and distinct inner world of motivation. This self RSVP cycle appears graphically at the center of the community which is composed of all the individual self-cycles engaged in the act of scoring. The private, self-oriented inner cycle and the community, group-oriented cycle together make up the RSVP cycles necessary to encompass all human creative processes; the individual and the community.²

The physical project was to involve the development of a small, semi-autonomous 'fishing' community located on a large lake in Minnesota. The community was structured for 175-200 inhabitants, 80% of the population being full-time residents, 20% summer residents. Buildings in the community were to include a market, public boat houses and dock structures, a pub, several utility structures, and dwellings for the inhabitants. This community framework set up a variety of transitions that were to be studied at a more theoretical level. These transitions occurred between:
- water / land
- individual / community
- nature / man
- sacred / profane
- emotional / intellectual perception
Extensive research was conducted in order to identify the 'model' communities still in existence today. The Sea Ranch, a ten mile California coastline development brought into realization in 1964 by Lawrence Halprin and Associates, seemed to have the initial qualities and concerns inherent in this thesis project. The architects of the Sea Ranch shared a respect for the site and an appreciation for the natural environment. They had a vision of trying to live synergistically with natural forms and processes. However, due to economic and governmental pressures, the ecologically based plan for the first 1500 acres of the Sea Ranch has been superceded by denser subdivision planning of the 'city beautiful' persuasion seen in many American suburban developments. Thus, as more and more research was done involving several planned communities, it became apparent that trying to design an almost utopian community was a very naive notion. By the middle of the first thesis quarter efforts shifted to studying the five transitions noted earlier.3

Although the 'fishing village' aspect of the project was abandoned, a considerable amount of the research involving Halprin proved valuable to the continuation of the project. Much of Halprin's design process revolved around what he labeled a scoring process. The essential quality of a score is that it can convey, guide or control the interactions between elements such as space, time, rhythm, sequences, and people and their activities. The characteristics of the type of score as a potential controlling or communicative device is a function of the particular art form and its limitations. Scores have been a means of recording the past, predicting the future, and influencing the present. They involve many myths, rituals and religions. Scores have been used for centuries to record folklore, communicate music, plan cities, build buildings, write plays and diagram procedures.

Architectural plans, as scores, originally guided and communicated an image of what the building was to be, but the participating craftsmen exercised considerable latitude in their own choices and contributions to earlier buildings. Today building workers
are merely technicians. Not only are form and proportion prefixed and precise, but performance standards and prefabricated units are also joined together according to preordained scoring devices. The score controls absolutely, with assembly line logic.\textsuperscript{4}

The remainder of the first thesis quarter was spent developing a conceptual score that would hopefully generate further ideas relating to the transitions between water and land, individual and community, nature and man, sacred and profane, and emotional versus intellectual perception. This score was meant to convey images and provoke emotional responses to be used for further interpretation as opposed to setting strict guidelines for immediate architectural products. The entire goal of the thesis became oriented toward finding an emotional and personal process to design that would also produce some level of intellectual stimulation.
SACRED ENCOUNTER

Water is a very emotional element because it can stimulate all of our senses. Water's varied responses to weather and climatic conditions can produce feelings of tranquility, relaxation, exhilaration, terror, coldness, and, when frozen, it can become an impermeable barrier. Ever-yielding, so it seems, it has a force that surpasses understanding. It carves mountains into canyons, wears stone to sand and works its way through anything man has known. Water possesses spiritual qualities, symbolizing rebirth and purification in many religions. Above all, water is vital to sustaining the life of all living entities.

For all of these reasons the transition between the active force of water and the passive nature of land was important to the study. The constantly changing line that separates the two distinct worlds of water and land seems to have a sacred quality. Throughout the remainder of the project various movements and transitions between built forms and this sacred line are developed in an attempt to understand this important relationship.
INTRUSION

This model represents a deliberate manipulation of the 'sacred' line between water and land. Instead of bringing a dock structure from land into water, an intrusion of water has been carved out of the land. The intrusion was intended to suggest feelings of permanence and unity between the water and the land and was thought to be a more powerful transition than the typical dock structure. At a practical level, this type of carved-away dock would resist the forces of ice that constantly play upon the lake during the winter months.
ONE PLACE

As one approaches the stone wall of this model he is forced to climb out on the rocks, thus experiencing the water, before he will discover the space that the wall defines. The space is designed for one person and is seen as a place of refuge. The isolation theme becomes very important throughout the thesis. Isolation is seen as something that is desirable and is meant to build upon the strength of the individual. Once isolated, the connection back to human interaction always remains accessible.
NATURAL DEFINITION OF SPACE

This model was conceived with the intent of illustrating ways that natural elements, in this case trees, can define space. When standing on the back side of the wall, looking through the window toward the water, four trees act as columns in defining a semicircular space. When looking through the window from the near side of the wall, numerous trees become a wall that encloses a second semicircular space. As the project evolved, actual walls and columns were used in places where the trees had initially defined space. This was primarily due to an inability to manipulate the various medias used for presentation.
CONTROLLED ISOLATION

The notion of dwelling gradually became the dominant focus of the thesis work and allowed the greatest magnitude of personal exploration. The dwelling above is simply a spiral that has increasing areas of wall surface as it revolves inward around a completely enclosed space. The openings created by the wall masses represent various levels of interaction possible between the dwelling's inhabitant and the community. The inhabitant, if threatened, can crawl into total isolation. This spiral form eventually evolves into a linear progression of spaces with an emphasis placed on movement from public to private nodes of the total composition.
SENSORY CHAMBER

The concept investigated in this model is in creating a chamber that heightens one's sensory perception of water. The circular volume allows water to enter near its base and momentarily traps the water's motion. An individual entering this chamber could experience wave patterns, sound, light reflections, smells, and a micro-atmosphere that would intensify the original qualities of water. Upon exiting the chamber, now directly above the lake surface, the water would again assume its natural state. This idea resurfaces, largely modified, in the final model of the dwelling.
EXPECTATION

This device intended to play on one's sense of the unknown. As an individual begins his journey on the dock he sees the large wall structure with its ominous closed door. Expectations build as he begins to generate visions of what will be on the other side of the door. Upon opening the door he finds that the wall is simply a wall that separates the rest of the dock from a five foot by five foot area suspended above the water. The power of the large body of water is heightened; the lake becomes an overwhelming element. This model can be seen as yet another device for attaining isolation.
INDIVIDUAL VERSUS COMMUNITY

The above composition can be read as either a single building or as a group of structures that define one public space. As one building it is meant to express a structure that relies heavily on the natural environment for definition of space. It develops a certain equality of importance between natural elements and artifacts in creating the built environment. As a group of artifacts importance is drawn from the similar relationship of each piece to the central space. This symbolizes the importance of community interface to the individual.
WATER SPACES

Although it represents the most complex of the 'scoring elements', this model was evolved from the simple notion of creating water spaces through placement of built forms. It became a means of studying various levels of interaction between water and architectural elements. An important aspect of this exploration was that movement through spaces became more important than the actual quality of each space. This trend becomes most evident in the final stages of the thesis.
AN ASIDE

As mentioned earlier, water possesses certain spiritual qualities, especially from a Christian point of reference. This model attempts to show a personal view of this significance. The stone wall represents the separation of life from death. The wrenches depict the living, constantly trying to destroy this wall in order to understand the other side. The wrenches can only perceive physical representations of death, the grave mounds, through openings in the wall. Once on the other side, the dead are allowed to experience divine interaction, the red pole, with the 'water of life'. All of this represents pure garbage for the non-religious individual. Although this study had little, if any, relevance to the thesis work, it served its purpose as a tool for personal expression.
THE PAINTINGS

At this point in the thesis the original framework and statement concerning the individual and the community was sacrificed for a more personal investigation of the individual dwelling. It became essential to discover more about my individual mode of expression. I found it impossible to design for someone else if I could not yet grasp any way to surface personal emotions and attitudes. Painting became this outlet and represents what I feel are the most significant studies of the thesis.

The paint media is one that allows the individual to break from the 'bubble-diagram school of design' that always has and always will produce meaningless architecture. Painting allows one to study composition, color, relationships, and emotion in a semi-automatic manner. Things tend to 'happen' when painting that rarely develop with a more pragmatic process.

Painting develops an attitude that recognizes architecture as an art. The definition between 'art' and 'architecture' has become too severe; most people see no connection between the two entities. This is not saying that a good painting or sculpture will produce great architecture. It implies that this attitude will produce another level of thought that will enable the designer to examine the problem in a more meaningful, introspective manner.
DWELLING - MOVEMENT THROUGH ARTIFACTS (30"x 40")

The first painting is a study of movement through a sequence of artifacts placed at the water's edge. The composition walks you through an entry wall and sets up a formal rhythm through the artifacts with a series of columns. The second wall that juts into the water separates the public area of the dwelling from the private. The undulating, less formal volume at the top of the painting represents the most personal node of the dwelling. The other elements in the composition simply occurred as a result of the initial pencil study of the painting. This painting is important because it begins to explore a linear composition of the spiral dwelling construct. At this point the possibilities for working with the paint media were being explored.
DWELLING - MOVEMENT THROUGH ARTIFACTS
DWELLING - ENTRY AND MOVEMENT (52" x 56")

This painting evolved from a pencil study of entry into the dwelling. As one approaches the dwelling through what would actually be a heavily wooded site, he would first walk through a pristine wall element. At this point the individual's line of sight would still be limited by tree cover. He could sense the water but would not see it. Trees do not appear in the painting for compositional reasons (actually, it was due to an inability to paint trees). The individual then proceeds through a natural stone wall structure that runs out into the water. This powerful wall is meant to symbolize nature's dominance over the pristine built forms. Upon walking through this natural wall the lake becomes a visual element. The following wall marks actual entry into the dwelling.

Upon entry, as in the previous painting, a rhythm of movement is established by columns. It is interesting to note that I did not realize the columns were placed in groups of three as they move through the dwelling until after they had been painted red. This might suggest a personal desire for things with a sense of organized structure.

The first two spaces that these red columns define represent the public zone of the dwelling. The dominating landform that separates these two spaces becomes a monument to the natural elements that define the spaces. The dock structure that punctures the second space is meant to be a public means of access from the water into the dwelling. The private continuation of the dwelling does not appear in this painting.

This painting began to investigate a theory of composition developed by Louis Kahn. He stated that form was not the shape of things but was instead the inseparable quality of a group of related elements. In other words, if one element of the composition would be altered, the statement of the overall painting would change.⁵
ENTRY AND MOVEMENT continued

Although this painting represents the most important work of my thesis to this point, it was a process that had to be altered due to the time element involved. Thus, it was decided that the next two paintings should be done spontaneously, with little concern for composition. Instead of trying to combine various ideas, as in this painting, a single idea was examined.
BEDROOM - STUDIO RELATIONSHIP (24" x 36")

This part of the composition, the bedroom and studio, had always been seen as having direct contact with the water. The entire element would be supported over the water and would use the lake to isolate itself from the rest of the dwelling. The solid rectangular form is the actual bedroom chamber that overlooks the studio area. The following pencil drawing denotes a stairway access between the two entities. The bedroom maintains strong elements of mystery and refuge while the studio expresses a need for external stimulation.

As mentioned before, this painting was done in a more spontaneous manner than the two previous paintings. This method did not weaken the validity of the painting. If anything, spontaneity produced a more efficient and purer interpretation of an idea.
BEDROOM / STUDIO RELATIONSHIP
BEDROOM - EXTERIOR IMAGERY

The final painting envisions the bedroom as a mysterious lighthouse element connected to land by a bridge or dock structure. The bedroom is seen as the most important element of the dwelling. A blinding light that pours out of the window suggests some internal energy that acts as a guiding element for others. The following model was built by combining elements from both bedroom - studio paintings.
BEDROOM - EXTERIOR IMAGERY
THE DWELLING AS A RUIN

This model represents the culmination of all thoughts relating to the dwelling. At the time it was being conceived I had been reading, BEGINNINGS: Louis I. Kahn's Philosophy of Architecture. His notion that the spirit of a building is again free to emerge when it becomes a ruin intrigued me. Kahn linked the ruin with silence - the word he used to describe the eternal quality in a great work of art that is recognized by all human beings. Kahn was saying that the significance of the ruin is not its age, but the sense of silence that it evokes. Thus I chose to present the dwelling in its 'state of ruination' as opposed to creating an actual building.

The ruin is also a result of an attitude that I developed over the course of the thesis concerning overdeveloping initial ideas. All too often we feel that every theoretical construct has to have a workable solution. What usually occurs is a clouding of the initially strong idea by irrelevant material.
THE DWELLING AS A RUIN continued

Sometimes the initial idea vanishes completely due to pragmatic concerns. All architecture that one creates as a student is simply paper --- it will never be realized as it was conceived. Therefore, the ideas in the model are presented as notions left for further interpretation.

The model primarily becomes a study of movement through a sequence of spaces. The composition is largely based on ideas that culminated in the paintings. Several constructs from the initial score created during the first quarter could be substituted for the entire ruin, the most obvious of these being the spiral of 'controlled isolation'. The ruin simply represents the idea of the spiral in a linear composition.

As in the second painting, one first walks through a pristine wall element and then proceeds through a stone wall that runs out into the water. The stone wall, in this case, also acts as a structural element in creating a dock that is used for access to the dwelling from the water. A bridge continues movement from the stone wall through a carved-away water space that is seen as a modified 'water chamber', an idea earlier developed in the initial score. A spring-fed well pours water into the lake and defines the north wall of the space. The well water, constantly changing the face of this wall, symbolizes water's active presence within the land. The following wall defines actual entry into the public node of the dwelling.

The 'living room' and 'dining room' comprise the totally public node of the dwelling. These two spaces are actually one space visually separated by a stone fireplace. This natural element, the fireplace, acts as a monument to the land that was disrupted to create this space. Two benches, placed facing each other in the 'living room', are meant to accommodate initial interpersonal relationships. A single table and two chairs have been placed in the 'dining room'. In both spaces the activity that the
THE DWELLING AS A RUIN continued

space is designed to accommodate, conversation and eating, has been given importance by being placed directly on the axis that runs through the entire dwelling.

The bathroom and kitchen spaces continue movement along this axis and terminate the land-based elements of the dwelling. These two spaces are seen as transitional elements that are needed by both public and private segments of the dwelling. The bathroom maintains a fortress-like quality and thus becomes an important visual element in the total composition. As in the living and dining areas, the activity (toilet) of the bathroom has been placed in the center of the space. The bathroom has been shifted off of the main axis of the dwelling due to the level of personal activity that occurs in the space. The kitchen, however, maintains open contact with the axis.

A dock or bridge structure continues axial movement from the kitchen, out across the water, and into the private node of the dwelling. A sequence of punched openings in the north wall of the dock structure provide periodic visual references to land as the axis increases its distance from the shore line. The terminating bedroom/studio element of the dwelling maintains the same 'lighthouse' imagery explored in the final paintings. The studio space, on the lower level, opens up to an exterior space that is visually secluded from land. A two story fireplace serves as a structural wall element for the stair access to the bedroom. This stair maintains total visual contact with the water and terminates below the water's surface. The bedroom is totally enclosed with the exception of a single window in the south wall.

Overall movement through the dwelling spaces can be seen as increasingly intimate levels of interaction that occur between the dwelling's inhabitant and another person. Only those people with a very intrinsic understanding of the dwelling's inhabitant
are allowed into his private world. This private bedroom/studio element experiences the water at an intense emotional and physical level, just as the person who is allowed to enter this element experiences the dwelling's inhabitant.
CONCLUSION

As is evident, this thesis study deviated greatly from its initial framework. What began as a pragmatic design problem, the fishing community, evolved into an extremely personal exploration devoted to finding an emotional design process. It was important for me to find a way to release personal attitudes and ideas concerning architecture that had never been allowed to surface in previous years. At the time this thesis began, I was in a state of extreme frustration due to an inability to unlock my potential. Although this self-exploration has had its share of difficulties, I feel that I have succeeded in finding a process to unlock my potential.

Several aspects of the initial thesis were abandoned to make this self-exploration possible. Many of the thoughts concerning the community were never developed. This was done for a reason. It would have been senseless to involve the community in the last few weeks of my final thesis quarter because the painting process evolved around the notion of a single dwelling. If I had wanted to design for a community structure, the entire painting process would have been implemented specifically for a community structure. If not, then I would have contradicted an essential part of the process that I had worked hard to develop. This thesis represents an evolution of thought regarding a dwelling and is complete as it now stands.

The work that I have done is not meant to show the right way to design or give a definition of 'good' architecture. It marks the beginning of an exploration that will never be without question. Simply take this thesis for what it is --- an architecture student's fantasy.
ENDNOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


