# Then and Now
## The Context of Continuity

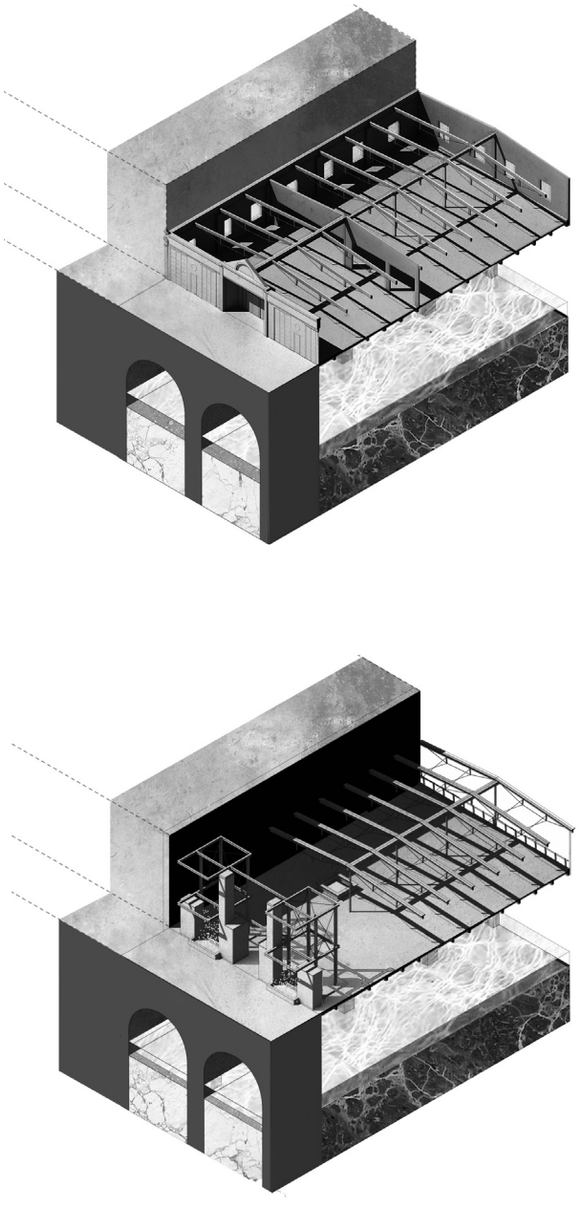
*Joseph Biondo and Dan Silberman*
*Spillman Farmer Architects*

An admiration of a mundane material reality can develop from the recognition that things just are as they are. There is nothing metaphysical beyond the bricks and stones and, as Peter Zumthor suggests, we can admire a tree for its just being there. Yet this common-sense way of looking is often obscured by intellect. Words, originally developed as symbols for the purposes of practical communication, have become a medium for complicated ideas that are layered over reality like a mask through which we perceive the world. While we once were content with just being, observing, and enjoying the world intuitively, we have developed an anxiety for change or difference through the mask's illusions. We see the world as positivists, eager to stay up-to-date with the latest trends and fashions, make progress, or search for answers to our own questions. But perhaps if we were more patient, we'd realize that all of the "change" occurs at the surface level of the conscious and start to appreciate the timeless, or the consistencies of the subconscious. While we once understood buildings as being simple material resources in the background of everyday life, we now perceive them abstractly through society's mask, existing in the form of projects as solutions to contextual problems. While this strategy seems to be derived from a responsible consideration of the project setting, it has actually displaced our design focus from the intuitive experience of the bricks and stones of reality, or the context that is us, with an absent rationale.

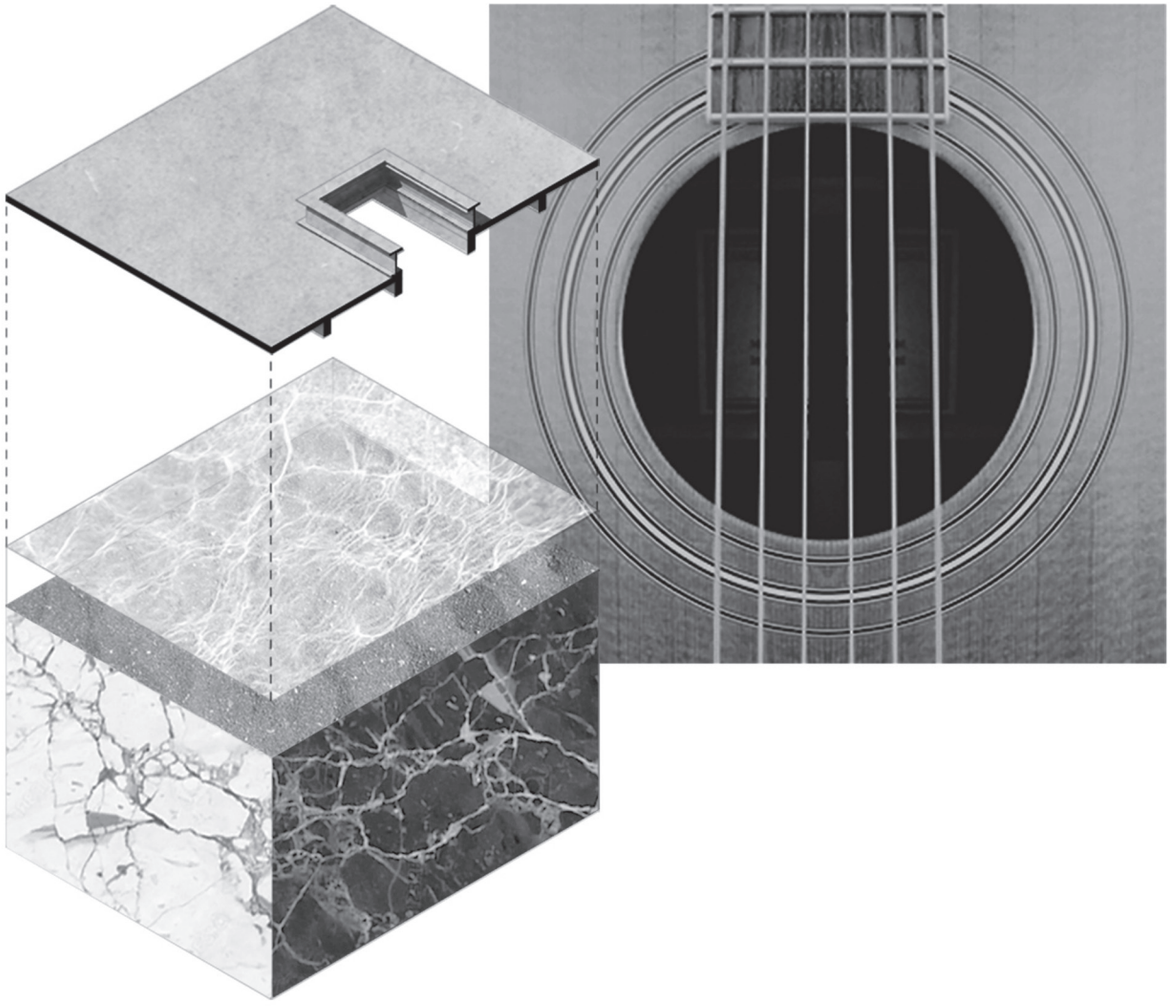
### The Need for a Context

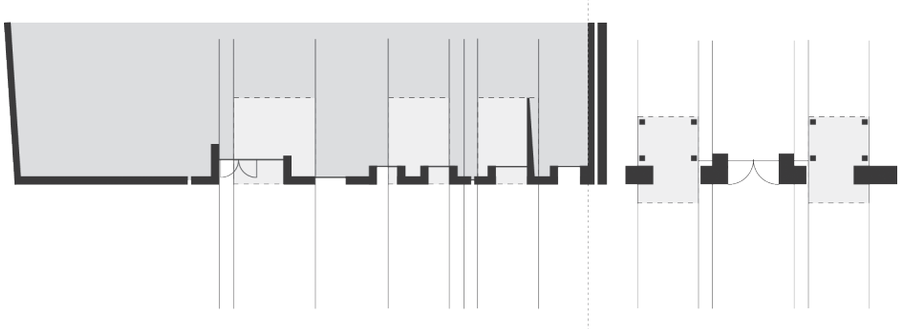
The Renaissance architect, leveraging the philosophical contribution of Immanuel Kant, embraced the role of the creative genius, which was of a higher societal value than the blue-collar work of vernacular craftsmen, the building now interpreted by us as a unique gem or composition of the artist rather than a pile of bricks. But the consequent swimming of the architects to follow in circles of stylistic debate was confronted harshly by the rationalist attitude to follow, which came along with the Newtonian vision of the world as a mechanically-functioning organism. The scientist and engineer of this new age would lead humanity "forward" without the need of a seemingly whimsical artist. Yet in a moment when the architectural discipline was starting to seem irrelevant, architects began to replace the intuition of the artist with a deductive reasoning, "...good architecture was to grow from the objective problem peculiar to building, site, and client, in an organic or mechanical manner."[1]

While the architectural "problem" began as a minimal set of tangible criteria to satisfy, in regards to climate, size, durability, construction, or site, it eventually transitioned into the vague notion that we refer to as context: a project setting fabricated by our need to design in response to some unique prompt, providing an intellectual armature for organizing design decisions and validating or justifying them to ourselves and others. The architect uses practical



*Existing garage prior to deconstruction, top, and current Arts Plaza, bottom.*





*Amplification of creek, top, and plan of facade "graft," below.*

references invented for descriptive purposes such as cultures (who), programs (what), places (where), and eras (when) of the project as objective categories, which, when combined, create the holistic setting or context.

This basic idea of an ideal context has provided the inspiration for many of the twentieth-century architectural movements, even ones seemingly oppositional or unrelated such as the appropriation of the project to nowness, or Zeitgest, that was the focus of the nineteenth-century stylistic debates—the Futurists, the Modernists, the architects of the second Machine Age, and High Tech, and a portion of the Digital Movement. The idea of an ideal context also inspired the appropriation of the project to its program and user by the Functionalists, and the appropriation of the project to its place and culture by the Regionalists.

It may seem responsible to design in response to specific aspects of a site or specific behaviors of people, but to suppose that projects can be designed in reaction to an idea that is as general or intangible as a "place," "epoch," or "ideology" is naive. How can a design, conceived within a time or location, be anything but a product realized within that time or location? And how can a "program" or "function" that we have invented have any predefined or best-fit architectural container? As suggested by Tschumi, "...enough programs managed to function in buildings conceived for entirely different purposes to prove the simple point that there was no necessary causal relationship between function and subsequent form, or between a given building type and a given use." [2]

As a way to legitimize our working process, we have conceptually divided the world into distinct surrogate settings or contexts, through the project commission as a lens, which only ever exist as hypothetical ideas. The stacking of bricks is only ever a symbolic or interpretational response to a context. This context is equally symbolic, and commonly expressed through statements intended to describe a project in relation to it, usually in the form of poetic statements that imply the building to be affective and rely on metaphors, personifications, or interpretations. This is clear in an attempt by Norberg-Schulz to measure a project's relation to place. "The general outline of the building repeats the movement of Finland's lakes and rocks, whereas the subdivision of the windows echoes the rhythm of the surrounding tree trunks. Exterior space enters the buildings and gradually becomes interior, and in the main rooms the image of a 'cave of wood' is realized. Here an elementary sense of belonging and protection is experienced, together with the excitement of mystery and discovery offered by the continuous spatial variation." [3]

What is the goal of a designer if the human experience is not the direct focus of their contextual strategy? The fact that projects are designed as rational responses to contextual prompts suggests that bricks are

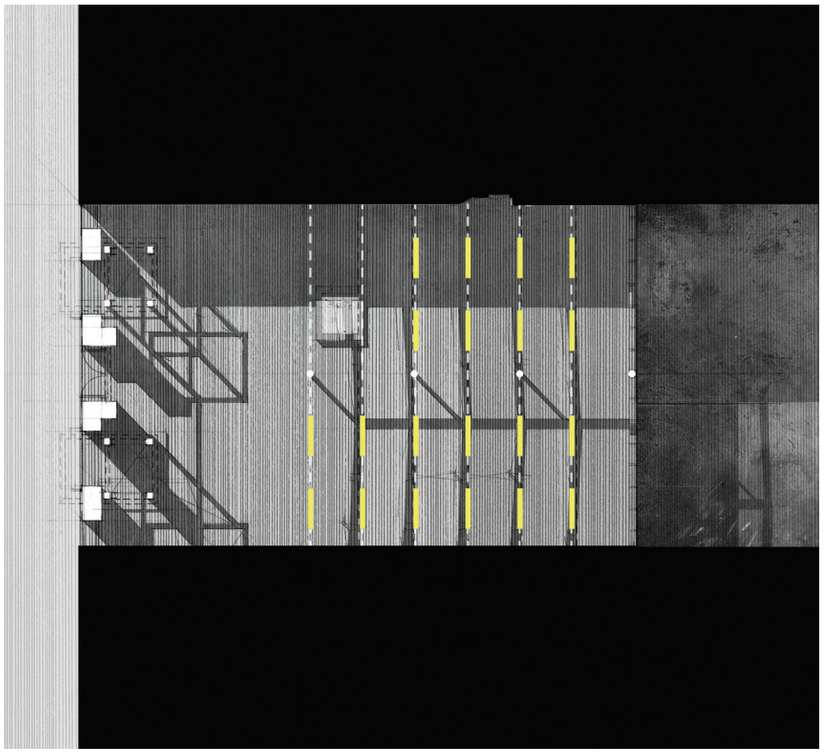
*Detail of doorway addition in party wall of WVAB. Image: Vicki Liantonio.*

*The junction with nature (looking north). Image: Vicki Liantonio.*

stacked and arranged to counter or react to a contextual situation, which implies that they are affective, or that they are prescriptions meant to medicate some contextual issue. Of course, we may not believe in this abstracted implication; we may use poetic statements to cover up intuitive decisions or to make buildings seem more important through poetic ideas. However, it is widely visible that buildings have become the by-product of ideas, fashions, and interpretations, the products of words that remain absent from the experience of them. We no longer see an environment of constructive resources, but instead an ad hoc collage of frozen intellectual interpretations in the form of architectural objects that are intended for imagined contexts of the designer.

## Sticks and Stones

In contrast to the choppy way we divide the world into contexts is the consistent way we subconsciously perceive, without shifting our process of thinking or acting based on the labels, disciplinary categories, or interpretive metaphors of an intellectual conscious. Our attention typically lies on details, qualities, and experiences that are conceived secondarily to abstracted diagrams of program blocks at the birds-eye scale and, because architecturally differentiated spaces are only labels used for convenient reference of speech, there are no actual spaces, places, or programs; therefore, they can't be expected to have attributes in adjective form, whether private, public, or of one genus loci, or another. We can feel as though we are in public or private, or perceive a condition as being dark or light in the moment, but these feelings are not affected by the space, and often shift in differing situations. A "spacing" or "placing" can be understood as our act of sorting and relating ourselves with our surroundings by organizing geometrical patterns into an understanding of spatial volumes, or referencing material motifs, smells, and sounds to stereotypes in our memory



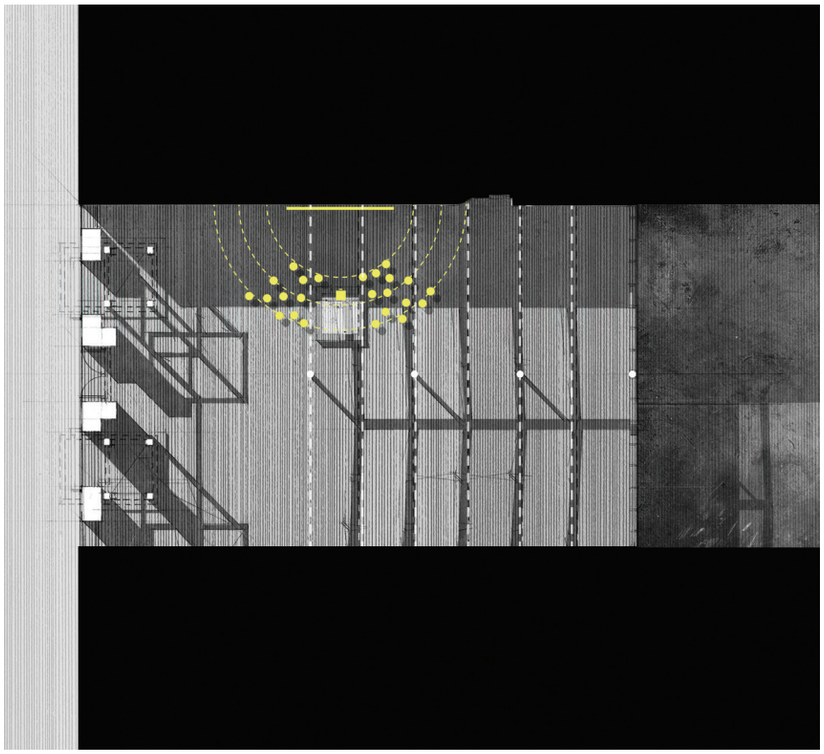
*Potential spatial configuration A—gallery.*

to predict and respond to our immediate setting. While Heidegger argues that the bridge gathers the banks and the sky and establishes a place, we are the ones subconsciously organizing the arrangement of iron and wood (that we call "bridge") in relation to our knowledge, memory, orientation, state of mind, physical makeup, particular situation, and even to the rest of the pixels in our visual field. Everything, whether it is labeled architecture or not, is a collection of sensory data in our perceptual field, sorted resourcefully and effortlessly as we orient to a particular situation. A more relevant use of the word "context" would be to refer to the memory and physical being, in relation to which our perceptual field is understood.

**Material Wax**

Because of the excessive nature of the act of building, there is no wrong or bad construction; although, there is construction in which we cannot subconsciously perceive significance. Of course, we also relate to the project through conscious intellectual ideas, or symbolic references, but the practice of designing facades as referential wallpaper is a dull and limited means of communicating ideas; their interpretive manifestation is fabricated and changes over time as constructs of society shift, as proven by Post-Modernism's limitations as a symbol system.

We experience by intuitively detecting primitive relationships, between ourselves and material arrangement, in which meaning can be perceived. In contrast to the vision of building as problem solving, the vernacular architect understood the built environment as a constructed set of material resources for us to relate to in various ways. The buildings and the rooms inside them were used as references for people to orient with and sort themselves and their things, the envelope was a form of insulation like a coat, a shield from the rain, and barrier of security, and like a symbol

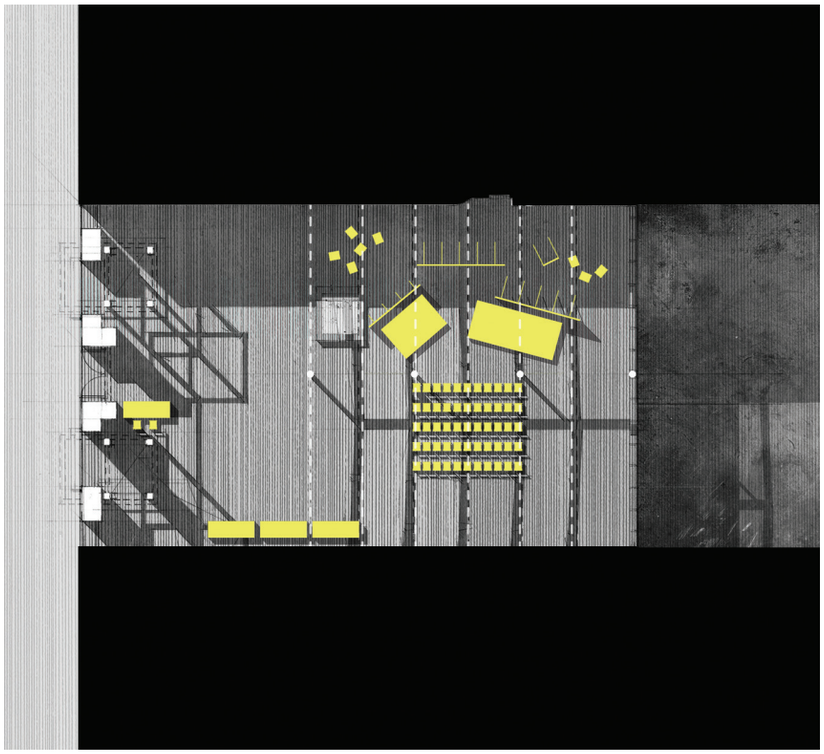


*Potential spatial configuration B—movie.*

grammar, the building form and facade was a reference to the use of the building. Material arrangement does not necessarily have an objective or explicit one-off purpose like a tool. We can easily adapt our operations to buildings, rooms, and objects never intended for certain uses, as seen by many adaptive re-uses, and we reference much of the material environment and its spaces, for sorting ourselves, inhabiting, and utilizing unrecognizable material arrangement or repurposed objects. Many operations are also fairly flexible to spatial and material containers, as long as the designer satisfies conditions of a minimum sizing, material hardness, and acoustic control.

This paints a contrasting picture to the collage of prescriptive solutions, which are not understood as just containers or resources, but rather as specialized projects of architecture that transcend practicality or intuition. But in the building of the vernacular environment, there was a consistent logic to the design because the relation between people and the components of buildings were understood as being consistent over time and location. Buildings were varied in size, loads, and toughness of material, in relation to the amount of people and the acts of the subject predicted to be within, but the logic of making remained a holistic system. The vernacular environment, at differing scales, was a spatial-geometric armature invented to promote variety in public lifestyle and designed with a flexibility of inhabitation, the act of building driven by intuition, common sense, and both formal and constructive systems.

Perhaps it is ironic that the context, which was intended to relieve one of excessive personal design decisions through rational responses, provides the perfect prompt to generate unique compositions through a subjective verbal justification. But maybe the contextual method, which promotes the rational arrival or find-

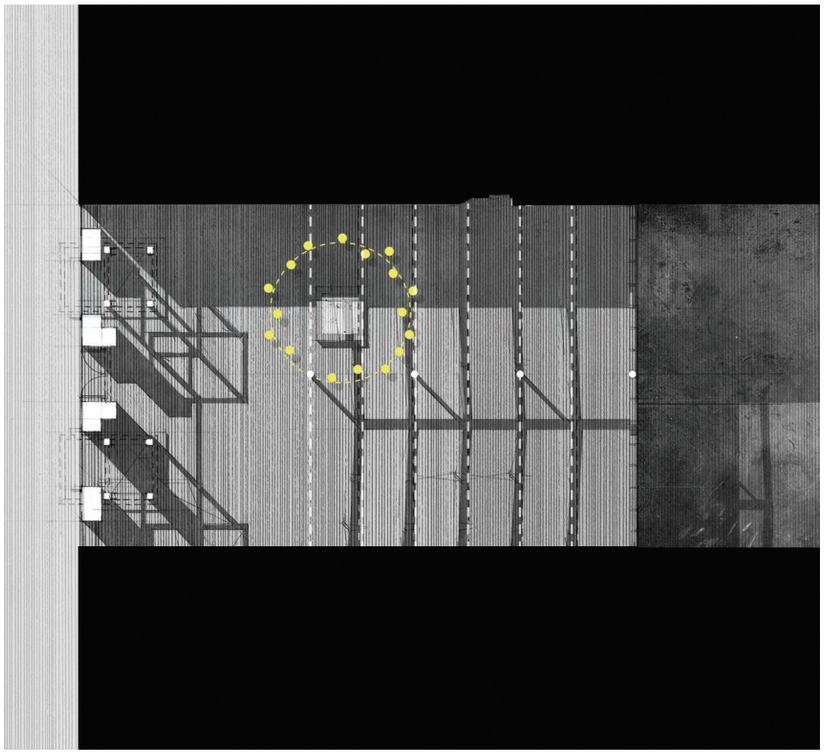


*Potential spatial configuration C—theater.*

ing of a unique and particular project response, has subconsciously become a tool for justifying reactions to the bleak productions of the utilitarian attitude of the mid-twentieth-century, during which freedom was substituted with regularity, a consequence of the sudden diminishing of constraints that resulted in the uniquely varied environments of the past. The context seems to be comprised of the most interesting features of a site, beliefs of an organization, or behaviors of people, rather than any objective record, and conveniently does not typically include the mundane, ugly, or uninteresting. Yet, if one sets out to produce an environment of experiential variety through the contextual method and in opposition to the mundane, they will realize that the homogenous environment they seek to oppose is absent of cues for producing unique projects. In this case, one who works through a contextual method defaults to digging through the past, online, in hopes of finding a unique prompt, consequently forcing the process. Globalization, the suburb, freedom from construction constraints, white-collar program, or the ordinary have become the enemies of contextual methods. Yet if we recognized building as being excessive or constructive in its very nature, as material earth shaped as an armature through which we experience life, we could again intentionally produce environments guided by subconscious desires or experiences, rather than symbolic objects.

**A Construction in the Valley**

The Plaza, belonging to Lafayette College's arts district, was conceived as an opportunity to provide the arts program with an associated outdoor platform by deconstructing a vacated garage adjacent to the Williams Visual Arts Building (WVAB), which spans the Bushkill Creek. Rather than being designed appropriately or rationally for a particular place, program, or culture, the Plaza was designed as a material resource for the subject to inhabit flexibly, and was



*Potential spatial configuration D—figure drawing.*

detailed to influence one's intuitive experience of the material arrangement and the surrounding city. It exists as a minimal set of primitive elements with which we can establish meaningful relationships and it is derived from formal constructive systems. These elements comprise a small environment, a fragment of the larger provisional environment experienced intuitively, instead of a frozen sculpture of interpretive rationale, designed as an isolated prescription to an abstracted contextual collage.

The Plaza is an empty container or black box for the imagination of the artist, occupied for a wide array of planned and spontaneous artistic endeavors including performance art, visual art exhibits, and small-group musical performances; one could interpret it as an unconventional stage, theater, gallery, classroom, veranda, and porch. Almost completely void, it is comprised of the wood-joist ceiling frame of the vacated garage, structurally braced with new steel members, a single railing on the east facade, an added gate on the west facade, and the party walls of the two adjacent buildings.

Through an absence of built-in recognizable features, any perception of seeming intentionally limiting or dictative in the way that one could inhabit the space is avoided. The elements that do happen to comprise the space are also detailed so that a flexibility of inhabitation seems encouraged. A bit of authorship is placed back in the hands of the subject, who is trusted to design the way they occupy the Plaza. The floor is a bare concrete slab, smooth for the rolling of stage elements. The wall of the WVAB is clad consistently with the brick of its other facades to provide a blank backdrop for art or performance, and the ceiling frame is a potential armature from which lighting, props, artwork, or backdrops could be suspended. The columns that support this ceiling can be interpreted as suggestive, yet vague, prompts of flexible divisions of temporary boundaries or dividers.

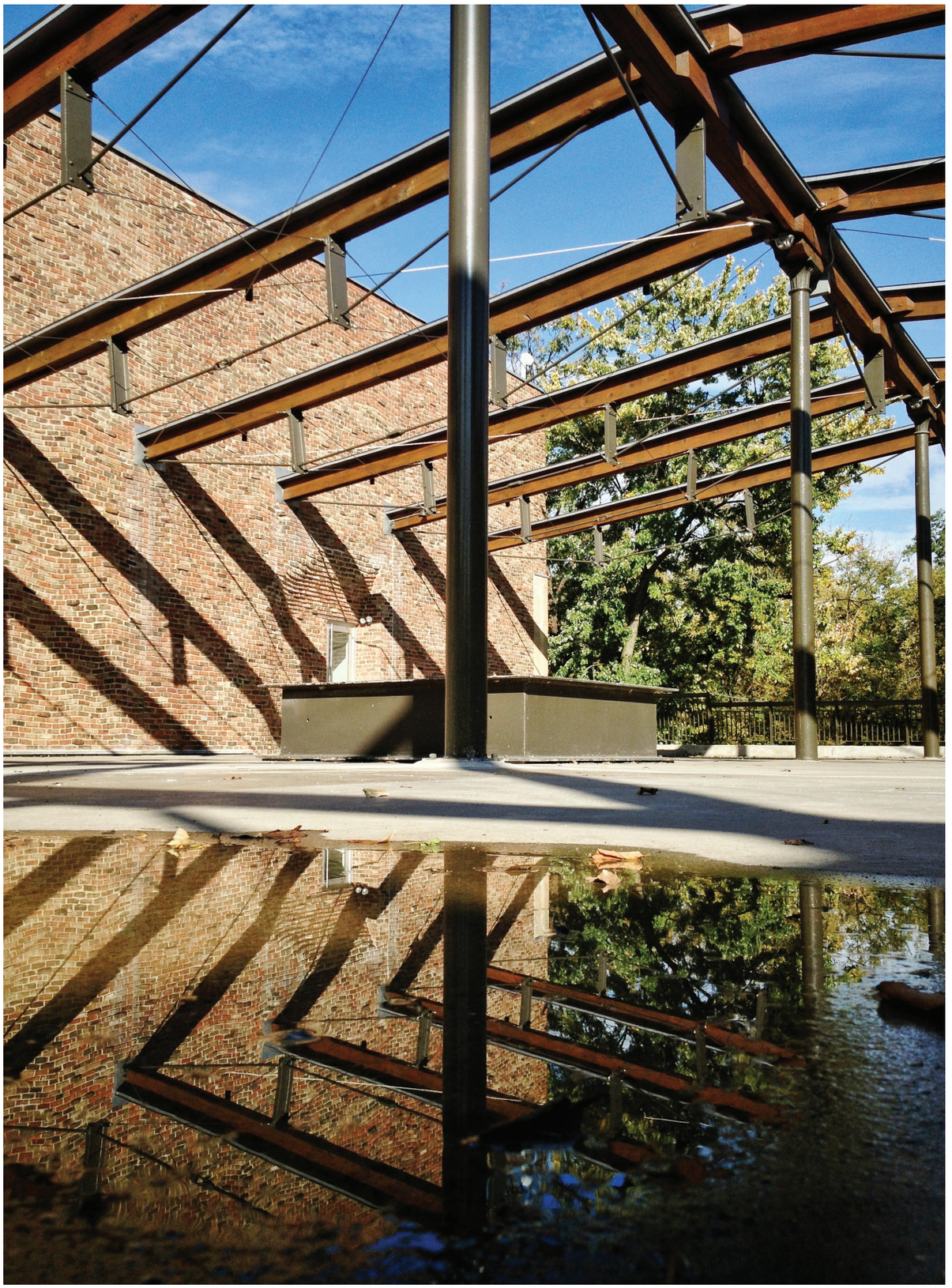
Besides providing an occupiable outdoor space for the arts, one of the critical benefits of deconstructing the garage was the addition of an accessible room within the urban surroundings. One is able to relieve themselves from the surrounding man-made environment through the Plaza's adjacency to the creek. The east face of the lot is spanned only by a single steel tube, in place of a balcony, so that one can see as much of the woods as possible from the sidewalk. The tube is thick enough so that one, leaning over to scan the water, does not suffer a sore rib cage from a thin rail. Similarly, a clear view is maintained through the west gate, which consists of a rigid frame and a transparent mesh plane for after-hours security. To complement the sights of nature, a void was cut into the floor plate, and enclosed with an existing beam left from the garage to amplify the flow of the creek and partially mute the sound of the street. The amplifier also doubles as an improvised seat, podium, or prompt for organizing space uses.

The Arts Plaza's lot, on the edge of the city and campus centers, is in a prime location to remove oneself from the busy rhythms of the city and the campus core. While accessible from a door in the adjacent WVAB,

*Plaza facade with WVAB to the left (looking east). Image: Halkin Mason Photography.*

the site is kept private by avoiding any adjacencies to classrooms. Additionally the wood-joist ceiling frame of the vacated garage and the frame of the gateway, while seemingly meaningless, prevent the feeling of being in the midst of a large empty lot. One's subconscious gestalt recognizes a series of spatial volumes and planes leading to the imagination of their experience within a perceived set of outdoor rooms, simply cozier.
Yet even with the frames, the designed elements of the Plaza are purposely few, and detailed minimally without material wax veneer; consequently there was a possibility for one to interpret the lot as being abandoned. To prevent this, a partial facade was constructed on the street face, with an entry gate. Through being grafted of a form and construction consistent with the facade of the WVAB, the entry is a reference of association to Lafayette College's arts program.

This concludes the examination of the few objects that comprise the environment of the Plaza. While purposeful, these elements are also blatantly ordinary, crafted earth. While we can admire the objects, they are only secondary as frames for our experience. The Plaza is a multilayered reference of history and an unbiased canvas for living; a background of designed relationships to hold a consistent significance to our timeless being.



*The layers of history, nature. The joists and floor of the garage. The bracing, amplifier, party wall of the Plaza (looking northeast). Image: Vicki Liantonio.*

**Notes**

1. Bernard Tschumi, "Architecture and Limits III" in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995,* ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 165.

2. Ibid., 165.

3. Norberg-Schulz, C. *Roots of Modern Architecture,* (Tokyo: A.D.A. Edita Tokyo, 1988), 141.