Planning and Elaboration

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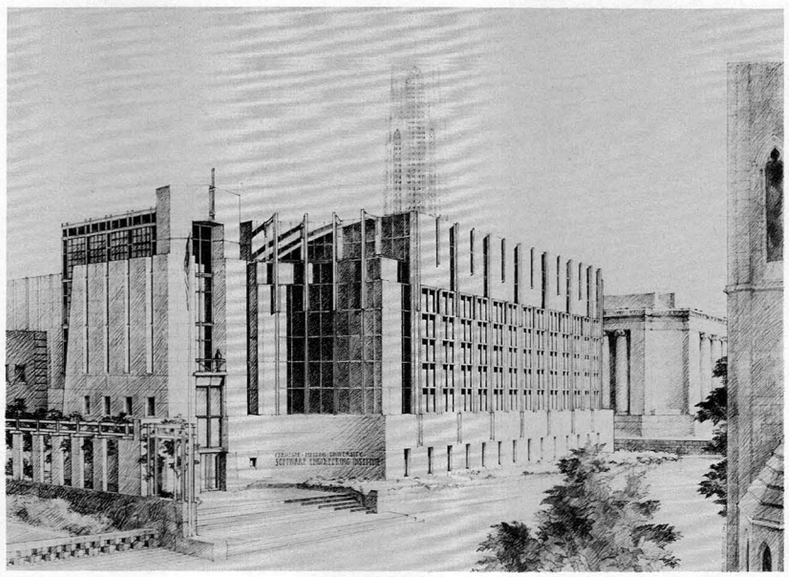
Buildings, like people, need to be a part of something larger than themselves, and to be approachable and understandable. Cities which are organized on the scale of society, and whose creation requires scales of time, effort, and resources far beyond any single project, represent this larger view, while the way individuals relate and fit into them determines whether they are humane and pleasant places. For instance, if you visit the Champs Elysses, you are struck by the grandness of scale and vision that it embodies, but the memories you take away are of the pleasantness of sidewalk cafes and meandering people. Similarly, the Vietnam Memorial in Washington is striking for the simplicity and elegance of its composition and its subtle connection of the Lincoln and Washington Memorials, but its most moving characteristic is the interaction of the visitors with the small incised names, which allows individuals to connect in an immediate and personal way to a vision and an experience much larger than themselves. These two examples of urbanistic gestures illustrate an important aspect of creating successful places, whether they are cities or buildings: first the representation of ideals and scales much larger than any individual, second the provision for individuals to relate in a way that is personal, memorable and meaningful. This is the essential function of mythologies: to make something which is larger and more complex than any individual seem understandable and approachable, and to offer an explanation of how one fits into this larger picture.

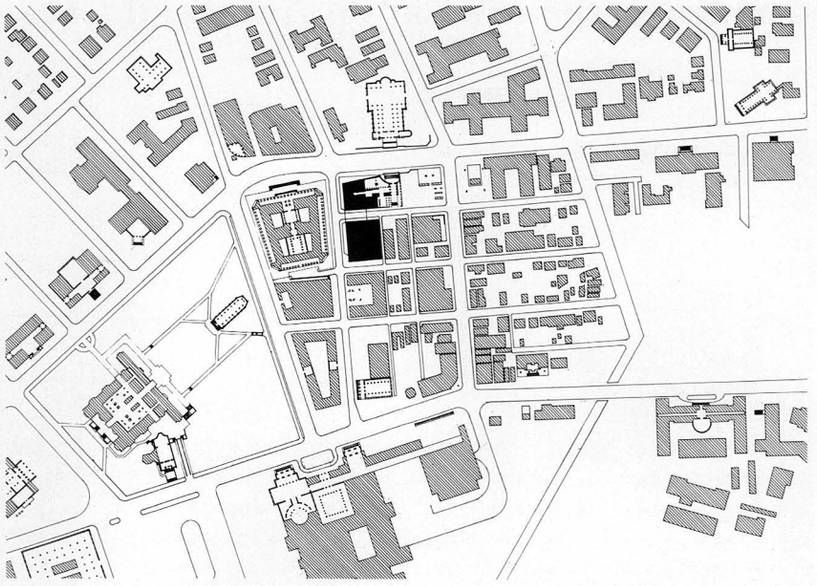


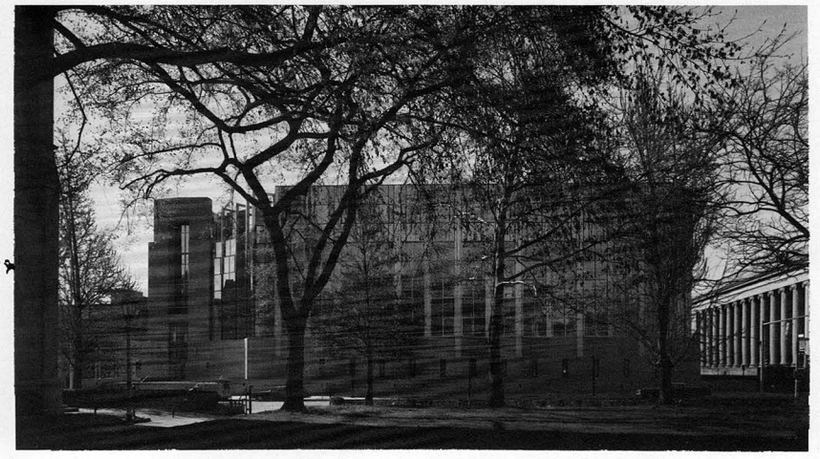
The Software Engineering Institute addresses this dual approach. The issue represented by the building is the combination of large scale planning and small scale articulation of details and materials. At the urban level, the building takes cues from its site, which it organizes and relates through the abstract principles of axes and alignments. At the level at which individuals interact with the building, materials and details are elaborated to provide scale, texture, and commentary on the large scale issues embodied in the planning principles.

The setting for this building is the historic Oakland district of Pittsburgh, in an area populated by important civic buildings from the early part of this century. Immediately adjacent to SEI is the neoclassical Mellon Institute, with its giant order or Doris columns, and opposite is the neo-gothic cathedral of St. Paul. These major structures provide opportunities for shaping the building to capitalize on and reinforce the site, in a setting which calls for a monumentality corresponding to that of its neighbors. Here, the need for monumentality is met in the mass of the building, and the scale and relationships of its organization. The scale and details are then elaborated with a concern for the way the space and the composition are experienced and revealed.

To discuss the mythology of urbanism invites a level of arcana or abstraction, which is more a task of representation than of making. The classical example is the temple and the stoa: one represents a societal ideal of perfection, more large and pure than an individual, the other provides a setting for people to interact in commerce and conversation, and they summarize what we imagine the Greek mind to be. The creation of cities and buildings is an exercise in making places that are suitable for myths, a suitable stage for people to enliven with their own memories, but it can also be described the more pragmatic task of organizing and relating spaces, activities and activities. The description of how it is done is analogous to describing thought: it is either a magical process that occurs in the mind or the self, or a mechanical process resulting from organelles and neural transmitters: both are applicable paradigms, but neither adequately explains the other. The point is that there are both global and microscopic models for describing phenomena, and the description of what makes cities and spaces requires both the abstraction of planning principles and sensitivity to the details and the experience which an individual relates to. It requires the intellectual activity of making and organizing, and the intuitive sensitivity to the humane gestures of scale, materials and detail.

The planning principles that shape the building can be seen in the carefully structured site plan. The angle of the





Mellon Institute is picked up by the north wall, which is articulated in stone and aluminum curtainwall to respond to the Institute's colonnaded facade. The entrance is set in a semicircular plaza on Fifth Avenue, and is articulated as a pavilion set on axis with the cathedral, and matching is vertical thrust. At the level of detail, the building is articulated both to reinforce the planning ideas, and with thought to the experience and character of the place. The articulated north wall matches the Mellon building in scale and in vertical divisions, restating the classical rhythm in aluminum. Similarly, the gothic character of the cathedral is also echoed in the aluminum flying buttresses that cap the arc of wall connecting the entrance to the street facade. The edges, and the places where people meet the building, are given special attention and humanizing detail. The base is stone, which aligns with the Mellon Institute, and then curves back along the plaza to the entrance pavilion, with the incised name of the Institute. The east edge of the plaza is bounded by a stone, aluminum and wistaria trellis. These details give an echo of the well proven concepts of urban buildings, such as emphasis on important points and junctions, with attention to alignments which fit an edifice into the life and context of the city, while making it approachable.

The dialogue which is established between the abstract principles of planning and the human concerns for experience is the key to the richness of SEI, and to the richness of the urban experience. It is not that a project makes myths, but that it recognizes the function of myths: to explain ideas that are larger than an individual or an individual act, and provide a place for individuals to understand and be part of the larger scene.

Project Summary

Owner: Carnegie Mellon University

Architects: Bohlin Powell Larkin Cywinski, with Burt Hill Kosar Rittelman Associates

Project Team: Peter Q. Bohlin, P. Richard Rittelman, David L. Henderson, Principals in charge; Jon C. Jackson, associate; Robert S. Pfaffman, Richard H. Forsythe, Peter A. Matthews, D. Joe Wendling, Jeffrey T. Davis, Paula R. Maynes, Mike Rajchel

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