

Story Telling as Design Method:

The use of scenario modeling to design a Seniors Center

Angela Balmer
Leonard Clark
Diana Dame
Kerry Gaffney
Efrem Rivers
Russell Hamlet
David Herlocker
Glenn Illert
Antoine Karam
Critic: Gary Coates

Why is it that so many student designs look like squared-up bubble diagrams for solving functional problems rather than visions of an architecture capable of supporting the rituals of everyday life? Why is it that so many contemporary buildings also lack a sense of aliveness and a capacity to nurture the life they contain? Could it be that how we design unconsciously shapes the nature and possibilities of what we design? Is it possible that new ways of designing could produce an architecture that is whole and alive?

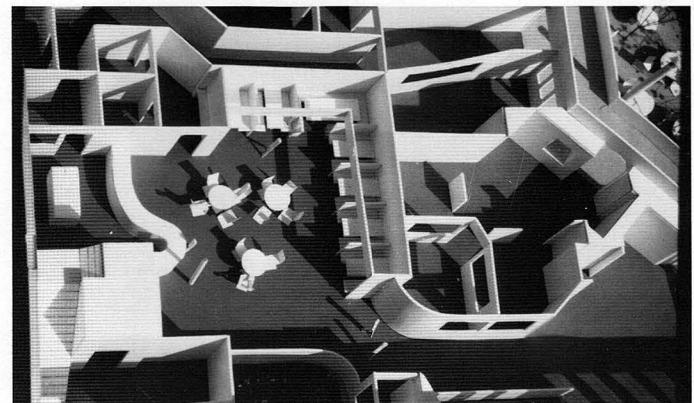
These questions guided our exploration of the relationships between process and form in the design of a new Seniors Center for Manhattan and Riley County, Kansas. Our proposal for the adaptive re-use of a historic downtown building is the result of a process in which written and oral stories were used to guide design decisions.

Our work began with library and field research on the phenomenology of aging. Then we wrote very concrete stories about a Seniors Center that would be life enhancing and beautiful. As one team member recalls, "When writing the scenario I had to capture the image in words and be highly descriptive in my writing so that others could read my work and have the same image that I did. To convey this image I had to concentrate on the details of construction and the finishes of materials and write them down. This intense concentration helped me organize and visualize the design of

a fairly complicated building in my mind."

Each story was written from the perspective of an older person engaging in a specific sequence of activities to occur at the Center. The qualities and forms of the building came into existence as scenarios were being written. Another team member commented, "The scenarios gave life to the building even before I touched a sheet of drawing paper. The research we had done prior to the scenario writing came out in the scenarios. In writing the scenario about a Seniors Center bake shop I sensed the smells of freshly baked breads and cakes. I could hear the mixing of ingredients, closing of oven doors and people talking and laughing. I saw the smiles, breathed the comfortable relaxed atmosphere, and felt the shop come alive. I could not help smiling as I wrote."

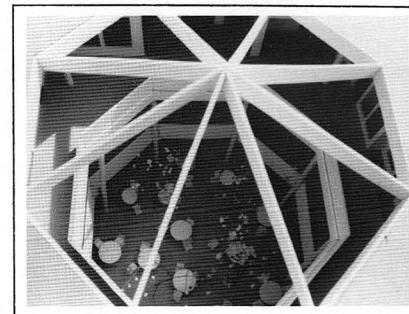
We met the seniors to share our experience with scenarios and asked them to join us in writing their own scenarios. The meeting was inspirational and produced new images and visions as well as some practical ideas. When we had integrated their scenarios into our own story we began the final phase of design utilizing working models. Our process of design involved sketching quick schematic plans on trace and immediately transferring them to the model. We were aided during this phase of the project by a thorough activity/space program developed from our previous research.



Seniors' Bake Shop



Private Dining Area

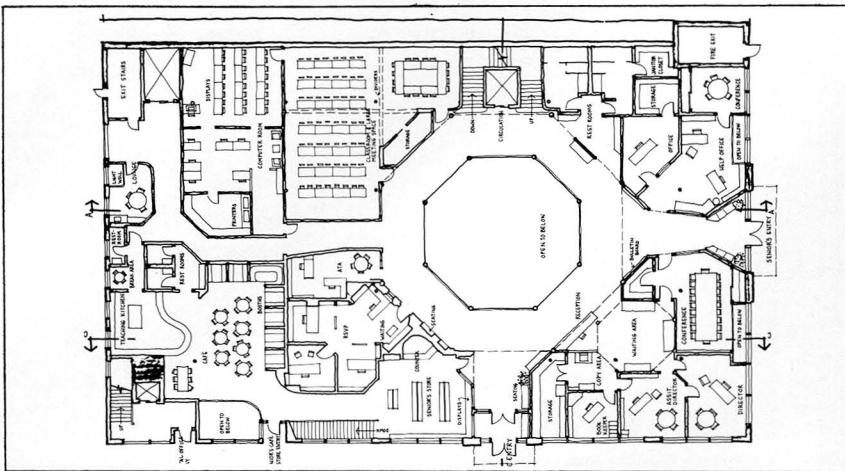


Skylight Over Atrium

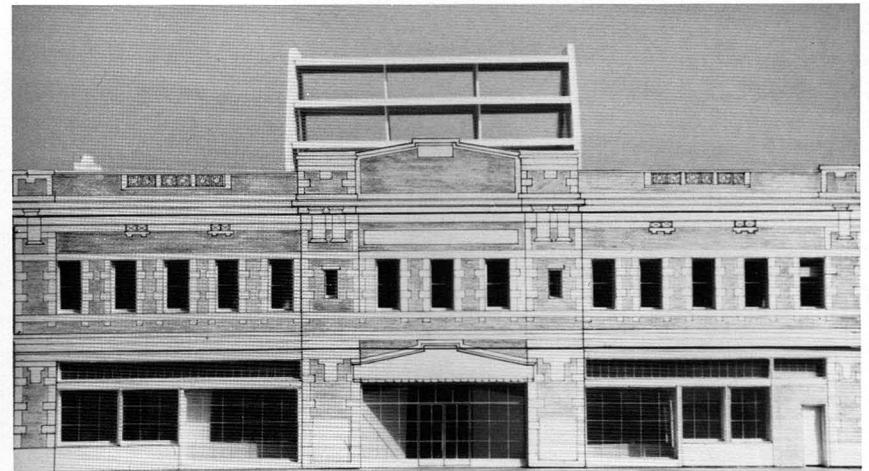
The scenarios provided a living vision while the more conventional program provided key figures and relationships.

This process of combining modeling and scenario writing is described by a member of the team: "The scenarios became a part of my whole thinking process. Once we were working with the model and 3-D spaces were being created, I found that new scenarios were constantly evolving."

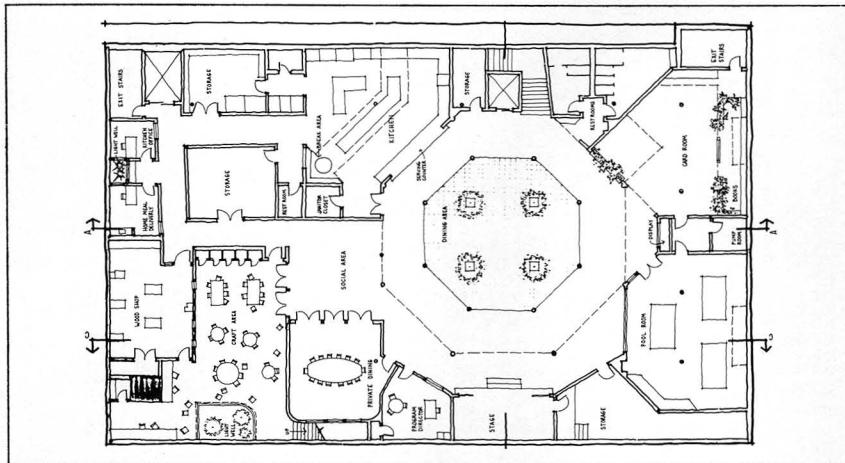
As a group we would talk, build, dismantle, and build again until the stories and model grew together and the qualities we had envisioned in the scenarios were fully present in the design. Design became play as we used our hand, heads, and hearts to bring life into our building. "We even made people for the model, gave them names and walked them through the spaces. This helped us refine the scenarios we were creating."



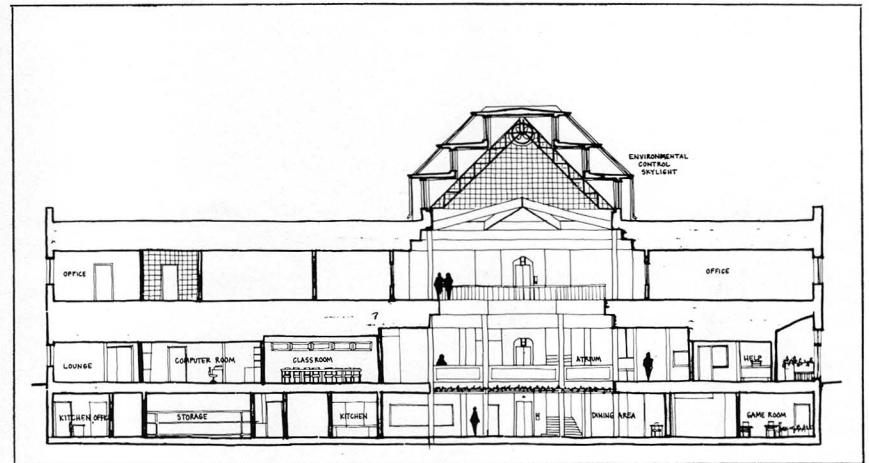
First Floor Plan



South Elevation



Basement Floor Plan



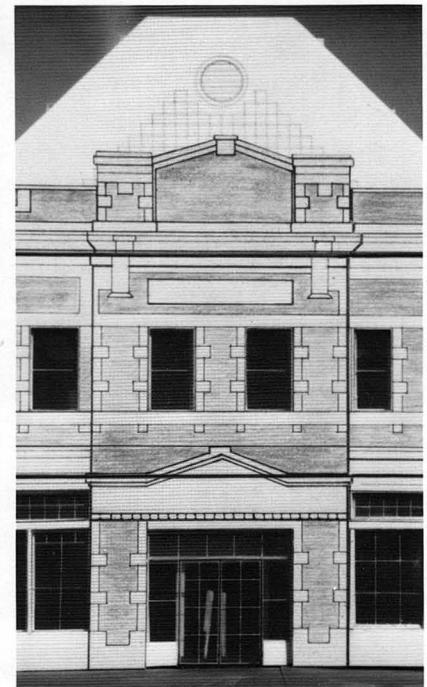
Section

The working models were more effective when large and rough. If a model ever became too detailed and finished, it inhibited us from making further design changes and we would tear out areas to get ourselves unstuck. By keeping the model loose and crude, we were always able to change any part in order to improve the whole. The use of working models enabled us to discover the essence of what a senior center could be.

The combination of scenario writing and designing with models made a participatory group process possible involving both students and seniors which was exciting and productive. This approach to design gave us a sense of freedom and the ability to trust our instincts. We used our intuition and listened to what our hearts were telling us so that a design full of life, excitement, and sensitivity towards people could be produced.



Central Atrium Space



West Elevation