

# The Useful Myth

(The Whatness and the Nothingness of Building)

Stanford Wyatt

(a Myth's) form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full.

-Roland Barthes

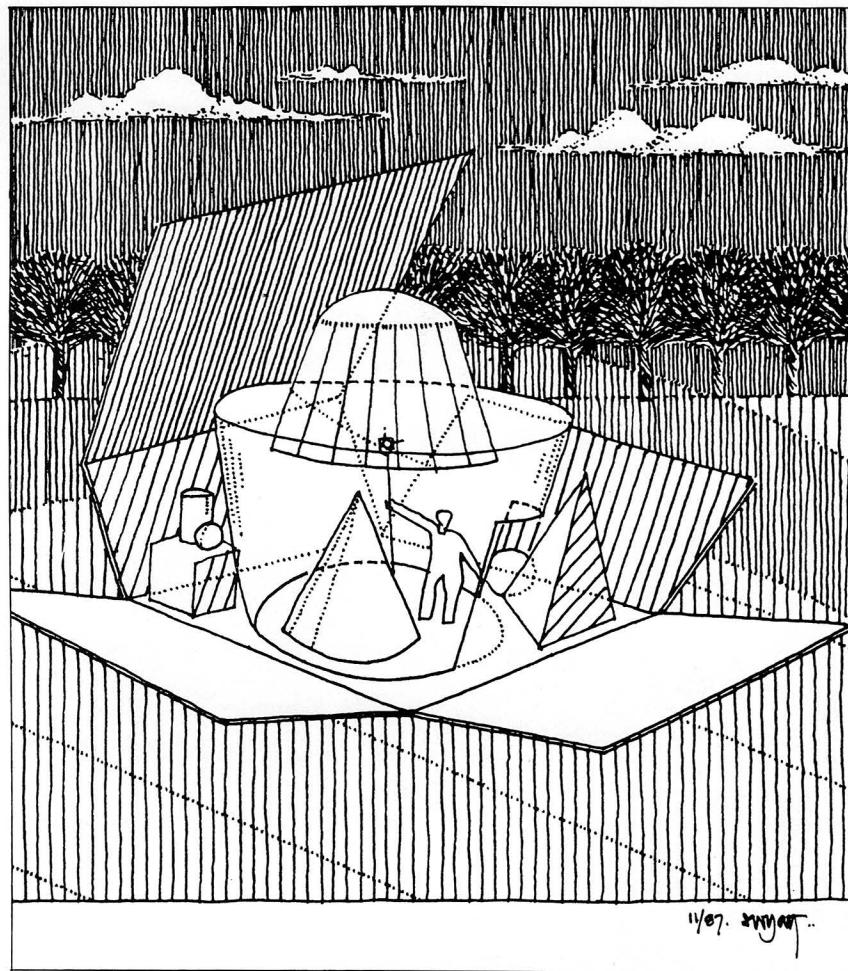
The Useful Myth is a story that in some oblique but suggestive way tells about the design intentions related to a work of architecture. This narrative permits intellectual and emotional access to the architectural ideas of a building and in so doing becomes an essential part of the building's existence. The Myth is a story told, and often retold, about intentions and imagined meanings. If it is a proper myth it will unfold part of the world view of the storyteller. It is verbal — a fictional, and sometimes factual narrative. It becomes particularly useful when it communicates the design intentions of the creator as well as an assessment of the effects of those intentions. In sum The Useful Myth is a verbal representation.

The principal objective of The Useful Myth is the clarification of current cultural ideas about architecture and the illustration of those themes with appropriate verbal imagery. It is the source of inspiration for a work and a tale about its potential meaning. In another way it is inspiration revealed through conversation — a story about an object told from an allegorical stance. It is indeed a story (and thus true) in which people, things and events have symbolic meaning, and in which cultural, social, and historical conceptions are channeled into specific architectural intentions. It can be instruc-

tive, as are fables, and like them it need not be rational nor necessarily realistic; however, it must have an internal logic. Structured in simple, perhaps entertaining language, the Myth is more than a descriptive presentation of the practical, functional or budgetary features of a building.

The Useful Myth and the physical presence of architecture upon which it focuses, are separated by a psychic barrier. A mental threshold, according to Rudolf Arnheim, divides the conceptual skills of the mind into several separate sets, two of which are the verbal and the visual. That is, one conceives with a different faculty of the brain when intentionally aware of visual concerns than when occupied with verbal ones. The creative design endeavor then is to translate the myth which is verbal, into built form which is visual, and to do so as literally as possible. This must be one without losing the essence and nuance of the myth. The challenge lies in the deformation of ideas into physical facts. The ability to abstract and a graphic vehicle of expression are essential to the translation.

Thought Drawings permit me to accomplish this transition from myth to shape. They are useful in the generation of ideas and in the end they enrich The Myth itself. In simple terms they are the graphic intermediary between The Useful Myth and the facts of the building.



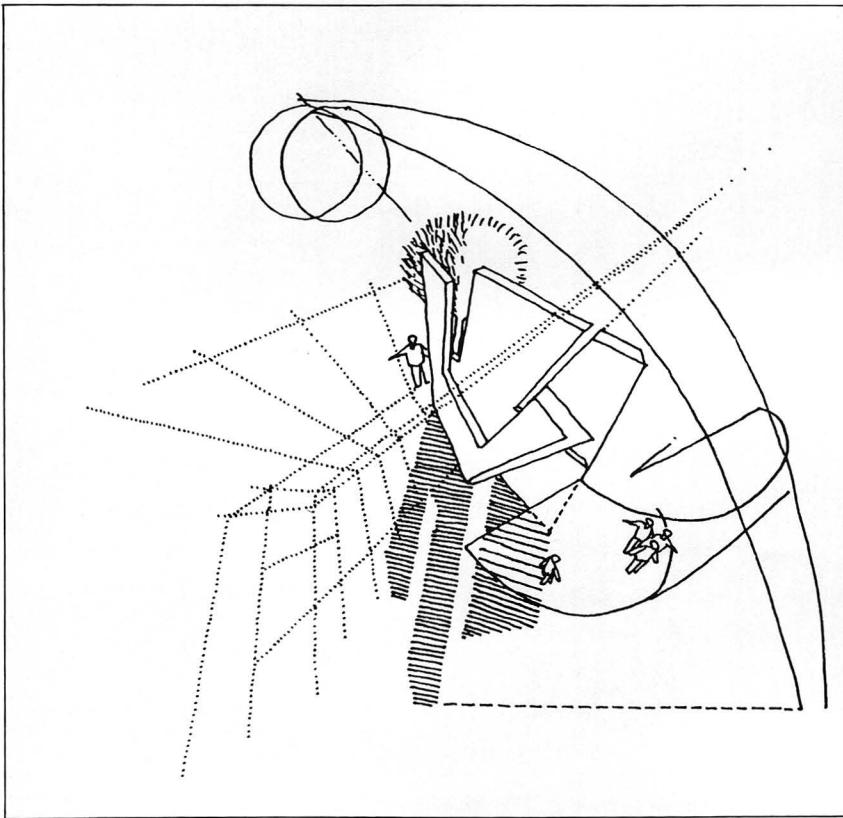
A Dwelling/Work Space

A poem should not mean  
But be.

-Archibald Macleish

The thought-made-drawings, Thought Drawings, are a means to express a

legitimate architectural idea. They are similar to the "thought-built-building" concept Frank Lloyd Wright employed in the design of the Unity Temple. As were Wright's, they are attempts to bring the essence of a conception into the realm of



#### Thought Drawing

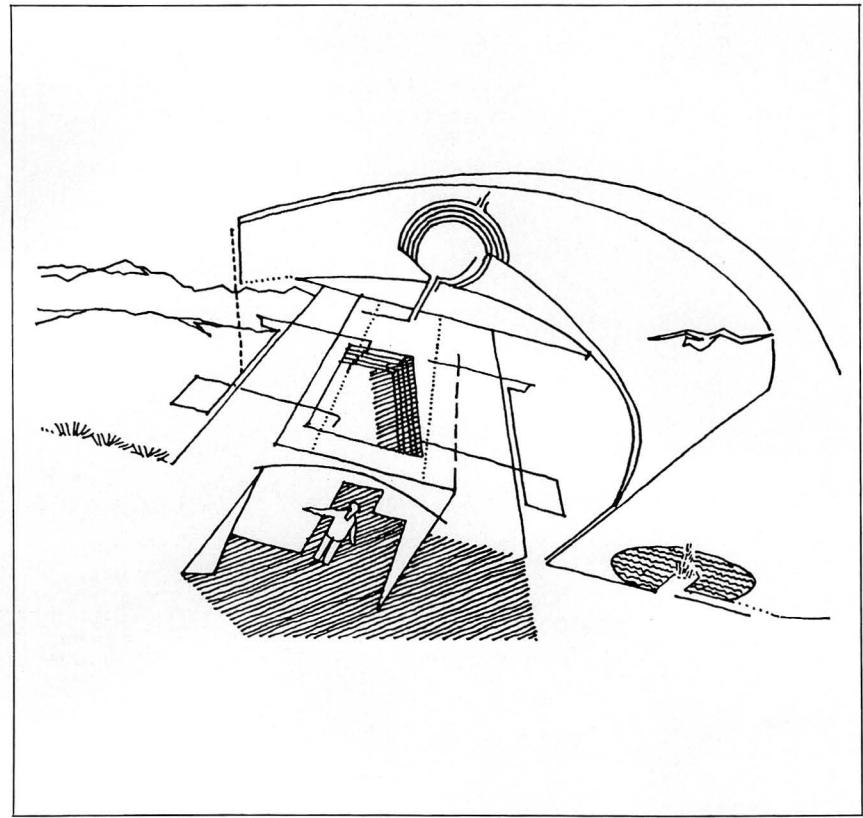
sensate perceptions, and like his they relate to a specific building project. Unlike his attempts, however, they are an unconscious as well as a conscious search — controlled more by will than by reason. They are made during a state of concentration which is not consciously controlled as it might be in the making of a representational drawing. The images are somehow there and must be thoughtfully drawn. They are annotated thoughts.

These drawings present imaginings and latent architectural impressions. I consider them illustrated daydreams. — and like all dreams they render a surprising amount of exacting detail when studied carefully. They are my attempts to generate visual poems. Poems rich enough in imagery to articulate the essence of the architectural form for which I am searching, and specific enough in graphic content to suggest the properties of a meaning-filled physical structure.

Enigmatic in nature, these sketches document the intuitive underpinnings of a

prospective design. They are interpretive drawings of my will to find an appropriate order for the form of a structure before the particularity of shape making begins. In a real sense they allow me to take possession of my insights about the work of architecture at hand — its history, theory and contest as well as its emerging shape. As Anton Ehrenzweig writes in *The Hidden Order of Art*, “The diagrammatic representation of an architectural structure can serve two purposes. It can serve as the exposition of a finished design or as a visual aid in search of a not yet existing solution. If used as a creative tool for invention it ought to remain vague and open-ended, so as not to pre-empt the solution at too early a stage. In other words, the uncreative use of diagrams for exposition must not be confused with its creative use in visualizing vague and tentative attempts at new solutions of a problem.”

This personal iconography represents a set of unique symbols which encompass formal concerns, and at the same time initiate a logic in the search for shape.



#### Thought Drawing

Materially the drawings are about location in space and events in time first, and then about physical structures. They are not really about substance so much as they are about opportunities for spatial definition and human occupation. Their precision is directed in much the same way the Zen archer assures the destination of his arrow.

The material substance or whatness of form is realized and made perceivable through fixed physical states. The appearance of buildings depends on two such states in particular; one is a mass to volume relationship which I call Prismatic Clarity and the other is about surface modifications, generally referred to as Decoration.

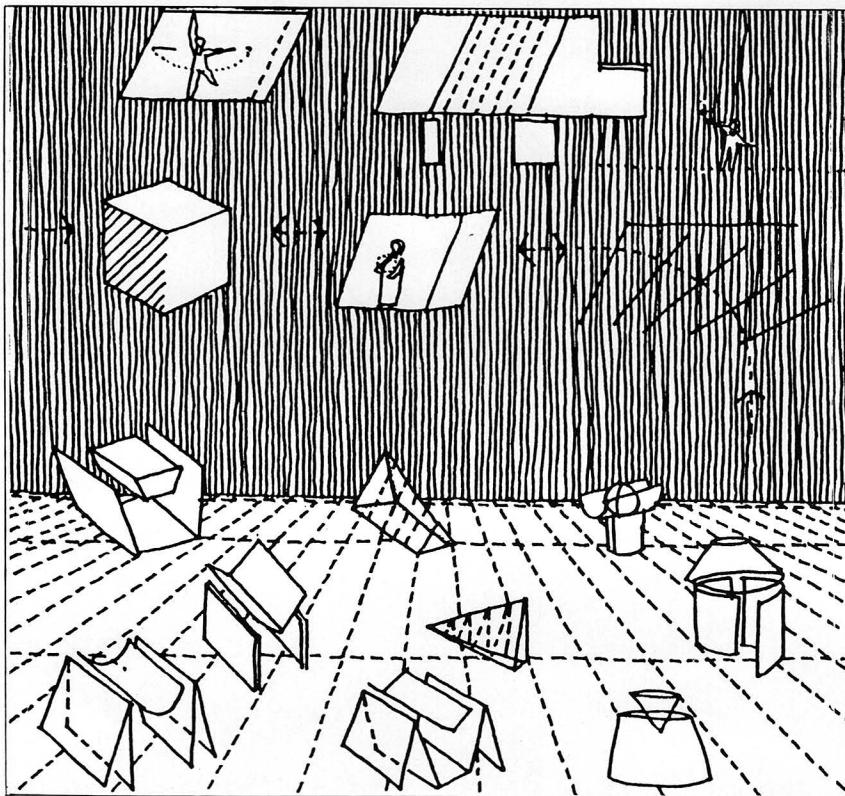
Rationalists, wearing square hats,  
Think, in square rooms,  
Looking at the floor,  
Looking at the ceiling.  
They confine themselves  
To right-angled triangles.  
If they tried rhomboids,  
Cones, waving lines, ellipses

As, for example, the ellipse of the  
half-moon  
Rationalists would wear  
sombrosos.

-Wallace Stevens

Prismatic Clarity is represented by plastic shapes in three dimensions. Shapes that the eye sees distinctly, the conscious mind proportions and the unconscious mind records. In this sequence of perception, conception, measurement and remembrance, the primary physical orders of a building are understood. Prismatic Clarity first of all allows physical substance to be evaluated, but it also simultaneously defines the unique spaces of a structure. By the precise modeling of mass through the notion of Prismatic Clarity, space is defined, centered and contained; outside and inside — the nothingness of a building is revealed.

Prismatic Clarity is not, as the term might suggest, the simple reuse or recombination of the five Platonic solids. It does however, depend upon the physical and



Thought Drawing

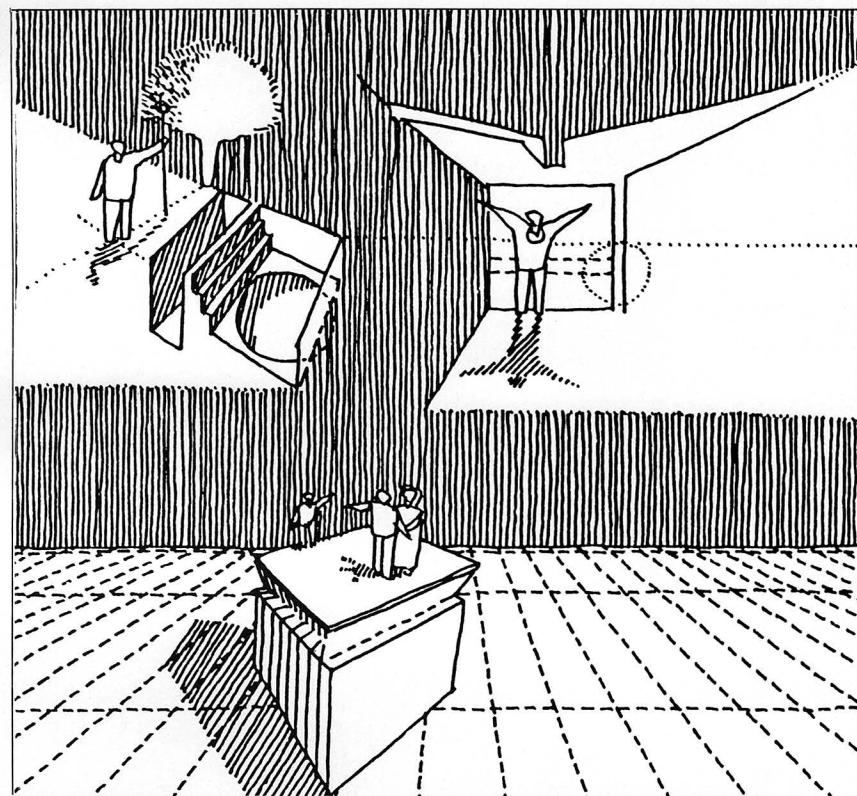
cultural associations that can be made through reference to them.

Prismatic Clarity is an extension of the Platonic solids. Through Prismatic Clarity new geometries are invented to extend the meanings of the original prisms and to create at the same time, the expression of a socially relevant architecture. The new shapes that are generated have their own intrinsic value; they provide dynamic ways of dealing with the sculptural obligations of architecture; they maintain an historical and cultural continuity by advancing volumetric themes set down by the Modern Movement; and they express contemporary compositional and spatial values.

Prismatic Clarity comes about by certain carefully controlled abbreviations and alterations to the Platonic solids. These operations are of a mathematical nature and consist of addition, subtraction and insertion. The original prisms become "imperfect" by these operations, but they maintain enough of their original shape to suggest an intellectual and formal lineage. This imperfect state active-

ly engages the viewer in the formal aspects of the building by requiring the completion of the form in the viewer's mind. It also thereby helps form mental associations. Arbitrary distortion of the original stereometries does not produce these effects because the degree of incompleteness is too great and the imagination cannot therefore operate in a constructive fashion — the intellectual potential of association and the opportunities for meaning are lost.

Experienced from the inside or the outside, one of the characteristics of Prismatic Clarity is that it gives distinctive definition to the spaces it outlines. Several physical properties can enhance these definitions. One is that the inside and the outside of the prism need not be defined by the same plane or even the same geometry. In fact the spaces generated are more dynamic if they are not. An approximation of this idea can be found in the thick wall construction of Medieval castles. Another property is that the mass characteristics of Prismatic Clarity become more evident when contrasted with planar and linear elements.



Thought Drawing

The complete nature of such "outline" elements are most completely realized when both sides of them can be seen at the same time and when the contrast to the mass with which they are associated is apparent. This condition exists in some of Alexander Calder's mobiles and in late Cubist sculpture. As evident in Calder's work, curved planes and planes radiating from a single datum create the strongest contrast to mass. And in terms of linear elements open screens and trellises can provide "translucent" foils to the prisms. Traditional Japanese architecture serves as a good example of this effect.

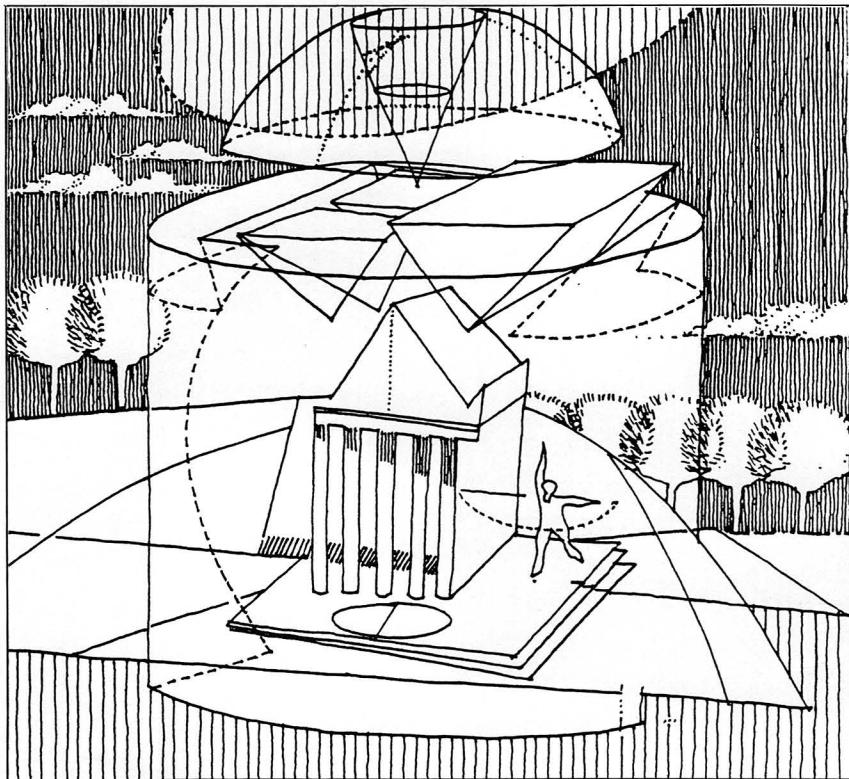
Planes by definition have surfaces, and it is in consideration of these surfaces that Decoration becomes important.

decorum (di-kor'em)n...3. In art and literature, something that is proper to the harmony, essence or unity of a composition...

-The American Heritage Dictionary

Surface is the contour of plastic shape that animates the eminent volume which

surrounds it. This contour is an edge between what is and what is not. It is an active mediator of mass and volume. In the vertical, a surface is the dimension of perceived meaning and so, the container of presence. The way of making, or constructing, this surface creates ornamentation and the representational enhancement of it produces decoration. Neither ornament nor decoation is simply applied, both must be interpreted and filtered into a coherent vision to affect the Prismatic Clarity of the building. Ornament reinforces the physical characteristics of the prisms, planes and outline elements — reducing their abstract qualities but strengthening their plastic features. Decoration, on the other hand, is intentionally emblematic, and where possible representational; expressing the cultural and social significance of the work. This emblematic overlay is applied not to further clarity the mass but rather to call into doubt the perceptual exactitude of the surfaces upon which it appears. It thus throws into question the location, meaning and intention of the surface and at the same time enriches its presence.



**Institute for the Experimental Arts**

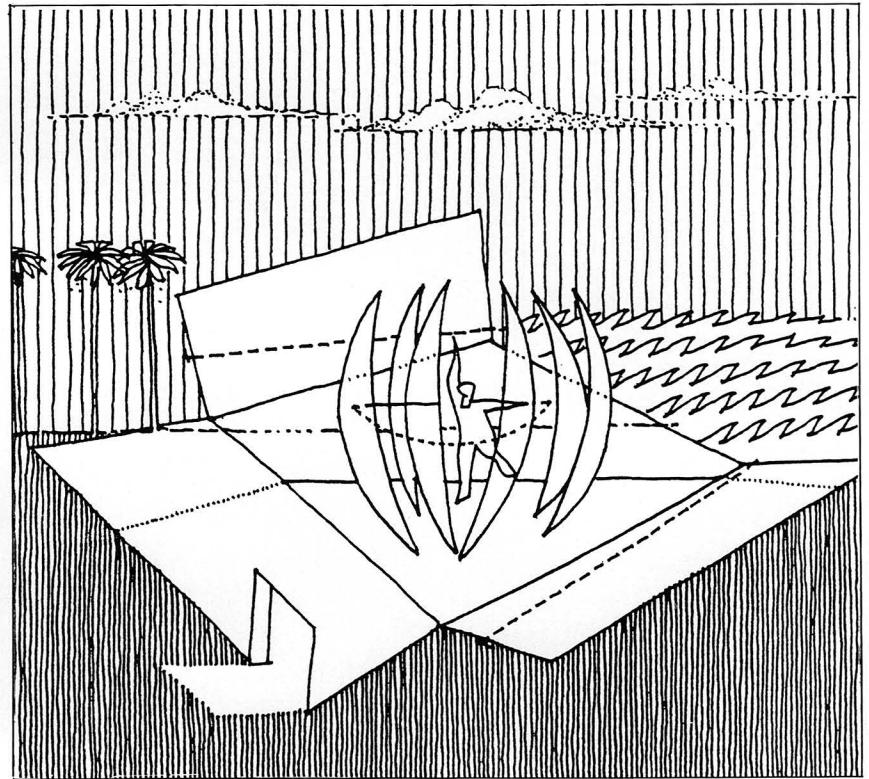
Ornament is OF the surface while decoration is ON the surface. Ornament is built integrally with the wall; decoration is an adjunct. Together they function by describing surfaces — surfaces which are simultaneously figure and boundary.

Ornament reflects the technology available at the time the building is constructed. It is this reference to function that primarily distinguishes ornament from decoration. It transcends the occasional aspects of decoration because it is bound to contemporary construction techniques, but, like decoration, it finds expression in the nature of materials and in the way they are put together. It is as Frank Lloyd Wright wrote in 1906: "Ornament (means) not only surface qualified by human imagination but imagination giving natural pattern to structure."

Decoration, on the other hand, allows man to maintain his identity, to express himself, to impress others (with friendship or fear), to signify social status, and to reduce the increasingly abstract nature of earthly reality.

Simply, decoration can be considered for its structure, texture, pattern, color, proportion and scale. In its fullest expression however, it represents a combination of mythography, stylistic characterization and shape making. It relies for its content on historical mythologies (particularly architectural ones) as well as current interpretation of emerging ones. It is emblematic in presenting appropriate representations of fauna (including mankind) and flora. Through these emblems it expresses cultural and formal aspirations.

The intrinsic value of decoration was expressed by the Modern Movement by delimitating the representational characteristics of a building and by exposing parts of its construction. This effort to demonstrate the essential nature of decoration should certainly be maintained, but the accessory and associative characteristics, the extrinsic values, must also be expressed. By triggering memory through association, decoration can focus our attention on ideas that are not about the building they are on, as it indicates how the building as a whole might



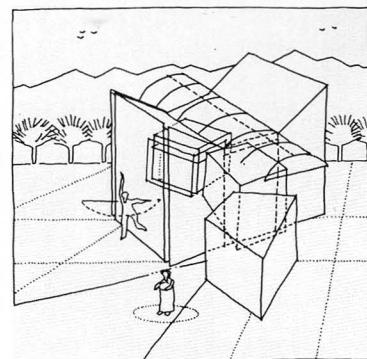
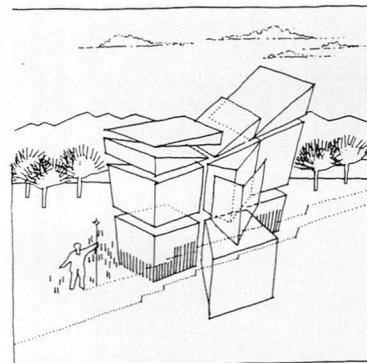
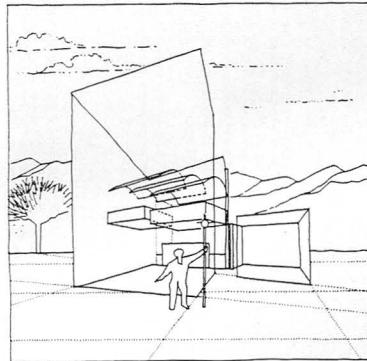
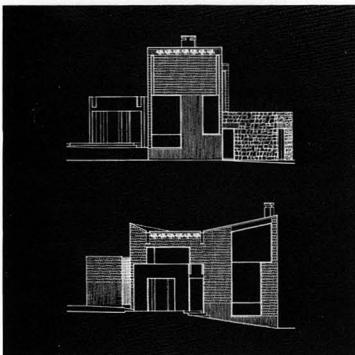
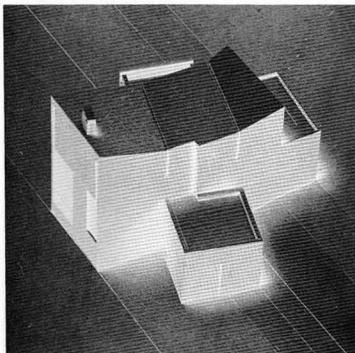
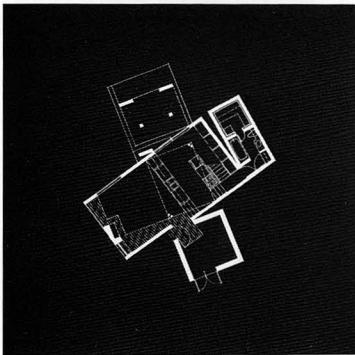
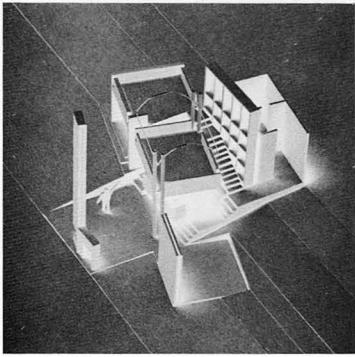
**A One-Room Environment for a Cellist**  
be interpreted.

Decoration, then, should be viewed as a surrogate, an intermediary, used to bring physical reality into the realm of comprehension. It, like the literary metaphor should be used to make the physical aspects of a building more whole as a concept, more known as an object, and more familiar as an idea. In doing this it transcends any merely functional purpose and establishes an interaction between the object of which it is a part and the surroundings. It thus serves to make the inanimate more tangible. It makes the thingness of which James Joyce wrote more apparent, more familiar and more real. Through decoration the abstract qualities of Prismatic Clarity become less so as surfaces of the building assume representational features. Here again, as with Prismatic Clarity, likenesses establish understandings.

The "Argument" presented here is a call to return to the basic definition of the medium of architecture, a call for the substantial reconstruction of the meaning of architectural form, and a call for the

creation of new plastic geometries that are expressive of current American social and cultural values. The contentions of the "Argument" are that specific intellectual and architectural ideas are available for the attainment of these ends and that through their attainment it is possible to once again take intellectual and emotional possession of the idea and fact of a building — to understand its form.

The following texts and illustrations demonstrate the connection between the three basic parts of the above "Argument." They show how "The Useful Myth," the "Thought Drawings" and the attitudes expressed about volume, mass and surface modification are interrelated. They show how concept and method support ideas about building and how those ideas are ultimately represented in architecture.



### The Useful Myth Owings Residence, 1977

This second residence of approximately one thousand square feet is situated on a well sloped, five acre site near Ennis, Montana.

This small house aspires to "sanctify the cosmological ritual" of dwelling about which Mircea Eliade wrote, and at the same time to express an appropriate imagery for rural American architecture.

The physical structure of the house is composed with stacked cubic prisms that are torqued and stepped to accommodate the site contours and to gain the best views. Further, some of the cubes are triangulated to create an exterior profile for the building not unlike that of the surrounding mountains and valleys. This profile is the building's face to the sky and at the same time a vertical presence in the landscape.

The exterior surfaces are decorated with local flora and fauna to fit the building to its location and use. Surrounding tall grass is mimicked in green ribbed masonry at the base of the building and images of local water fowl in flight are etched into the masonry near the shiny metallic roof line.

The interior of the house is one principal volume with minor functional attachments and with a cross-axis inserted through it. The cross-axis is an homage to Frank Lloyd Wright. The various attachments are in reference to Marcel Duchamp. The deliberate collision of the

simple singular volume and the complex masses of the cross-axis is an expression of change and simultaneity as outlined by the Principles of Indeterminancy.

There is an intentional spatial complexity on the interior of the house, only hinted at by the exterior massing. For instance, locations are created on the interior which permit one to be in the space of more than one room at a time. This is particularly the case at the juncture of the principal volume/snow room/entry. Objects too, serve to reinforce this complexity as evidenced by the fireplace mass which is pulled away from the exterior wall and made distinct in its own volume. But it is in the cross-axis that the clearest expression of simultaneity and change occurs. The elements which comprise it vary in material, composition and horizontal location. Masses become planes, square are transformed into rectangles and then irregular polygons, and the general placement of visual emphasis varies from down to up. These ideas become clear through a careful examination of the cross-axis from one of its ends to the other. The gravity bound, thick-walled cubic mass of the field stone snow room leads into the post-supported wood frame rectangular sleeping loft which in turn leads into the yet higher colonnade-supported stucco and polygonal shaped Belvedere.

The composition of stacked cubic prisms, the cross-axis ordered against the simple enclosure of the principal volume, and the comparisons and contrasts made between planes, volumes and masses are used to generate the shapes of the building. Expressive sculptural shapes and the application of appropriate decoration over those shapes have been used to generate its image.

**The Useful Myth  
The Architecture and Children Exhibition, 1987**

This freestanding pavilion is part of a museum exhibition focused on educating children between the ages of seven and twelve about architecture. The design of the pavilion is tied directly to curriculum development and teacher training programs in the Seattle Public Schools system. The exhibition is scheduled for installation at The Seattle Center in December of 1988.

The structure is intended to be the exhibit. It does not house content in the conventional sense of a museum. It is itself an instrument for learnings, and through an active interaction with it, one should sense the possibilities and the importance of spatial modification.

Physically the pavilion is composed with altered Platonic geometries and a variety of other abbreviated, but still recognizable, shapes. The main body of the building is conceived as a cubed cone — the symmetrical insertion of one geometry into another. The porch-like element is conceived as a pyramided cube — again something within, but this time asymmetrical. A more conventional description would be that the truncated mass has a volumetric interior that is cubic and rather room like. The group of linear sticks is ordered in such a way so as to enclose a particular space and at the same time to define a different enclosed space. All of the elements that make up the pavilion suggest by their plastic shape associations with a variety of historical architectural styles and building types.

Movement to the interior space is up and around the curving asymmetrical step-ramp toward the protruding lattice structures and masses which interact in very particular ways to suggest cultural and formal values.

ture. It is only upon arrival under the stick-built porch that one discovers the cubic interior space — a space with adjustable ceiling planes, changeable walls, and controllable artificial lighting.

The vinyl coated polyester fabric that covers the cone is translucent and backlit, subtly revealing the physical structure of the cone. Various images that comment on the content and purpose of the pavilion are silk-screened onto the fabric. The pattern at the base of the cone creates a field for the images further up, but due to its geometry, it optically denies the conical shape. This pattern is thereby expressly on the surface. Above the base is a band of figures modeled on P.B. Medawar's, "Essays on Growth and Form" (Oxford University Press, 1945). This band is applied continuously around the drum. The frieze at the top of the cone is populated with figures of children. The children are in postures which indicate they are testing their motor skills against the physical world. The surface of the ramp has a "spatial" pattern on it as well — a gray scale which progresses from white at its lowest point to dark gray at the point of entry to the interior room. The four sides of the sticks that make up the porch are each painted a different hue of a secondary color. This again is a spatial expression — animating volume with linear complexity.

The overall objective of the pavilion is to effectively demonstrate various configurations as well as qualities of space, and to address the deceptively simple sounding questions of what is interior space and what is exterior space? In answering these questions, the pavilion shows the characteristics of space perceived as well as those of space experienced. Further, it presents the notion that the alteration of a space, by size and shape as well as by its surfaces and lighting, affects human mood. As a structure it is made up of recognizable

