

Articulated Observance

Project "4685," The Barstow Dental Office

Tom Grondona, Architect
San Diego, California

"And what about me the architect/writer? Am I plagued to champion this device of architecture and apply it to describe a project that was "narrative-free" until I wrote this paper? Must the strength of what a mind can produce in a golden moment fall victim to a pen?"

—Tom Grondona

Never a crutch to start a project but always a useful tool narratives seem to appear at opportune times to solve the rainbow of problems encountered during the process of architecture. I have used them to turn a house into a medieval urban space¹, a sidewalk into a stage², a sushi bar into theatre³ and a house into furniture⁴. Using a disaster narrative, a cinnamon roll store was blown up into a chaotic mess then reordered with falling flour⁵. In a group of current houses influenced by castles, I am recreating a past history that was never there with a narrative⁶, and in the process of building have found that concrete is a temperamental material that writes its own story⁷. However, to write about narratives would be the same as having a painter write about the brushes used in the process of putting paint onto a surface. Instead I would like to introduce a project vacant of pedantic narrative association, "The Barstow Dental Office" also known as "4685."

Problem

On a corner lot of Kensington, an older San Diego neighborhood/commercial district, remodel an existing 1900's Spanish bungalow into a state of the Art

dental office. (The problem was compounded with questions asked by the dental-phobic architect!)

Question

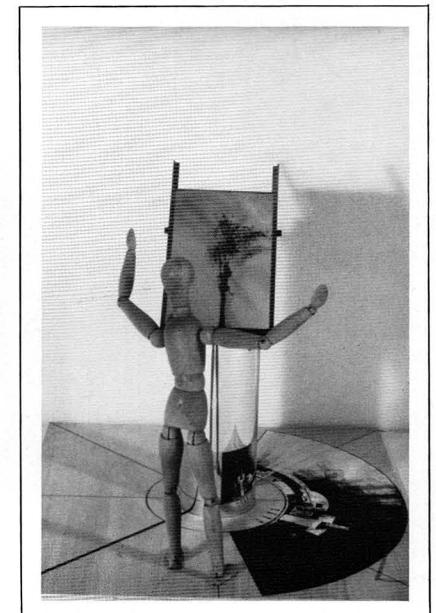
Can a visit to the dentist be anything other than a perspiring experience? (Of the many questions asked, we found this one to be the most important and challenging.)

Hypothesis

The usual kinds of comforts and distraction won't work with patients whose senses have been numbed by anxious anticipation. In order to reach these patients, the comforts and distractions must be positively salient.

Experiment

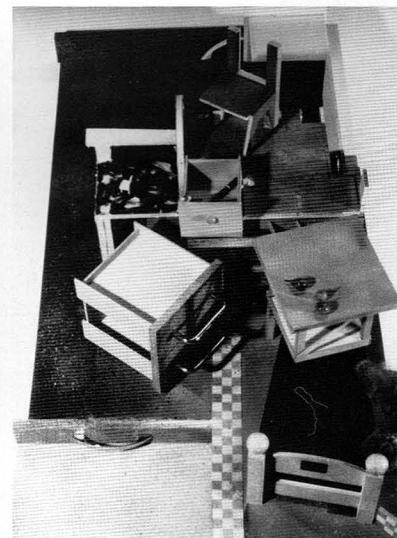
Perhaps the impression of an atypical dental office could encourage a buoyant attitude in patients by simply not reminding them of past bad experiences. To distract and amuse a cylindrical waiting room will contain two art devices: A periscope with a top mirror (6 ft. x 10 ft.) will project to a lower mirror (2 ft. x 2 ft.) the image of an existing palm tree blowing in the breeze. The pedestal of the periscope is an anamorphic art device that will take a distorted floor painting and reflect it on a chrome plated cylinder redistorting the painting back to reality. Finally, the garden view operatories will have angled ceiling mirrors for patients to view the garden while in a reposed position.



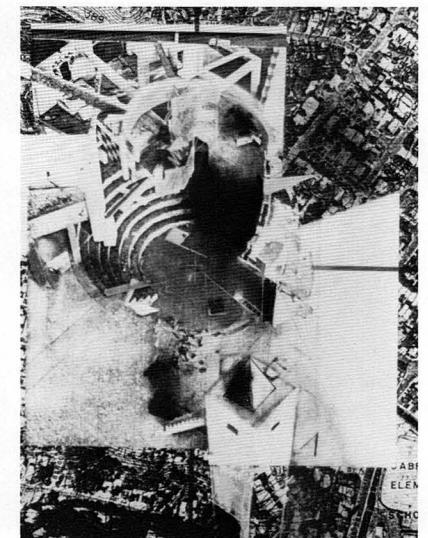
Anamorphic Art Device



Wonder Sushi³



Morgan's House of Furniture⁴



Castle Overlay Plan⁶

“The Exoneration of Project 4685”

Viewing and perceiving “4685” in its present form of drywall and stucco could be described best as pure unbridled articulated turning device. Recently I drove a seemingly cumbersome Caterpillar 916 front end loader with such a mechanism. Instead of having the front wheels turn like cars, they remain stationary to the chassis. To turn, the tractor literally breaks in half under the driver’s seat allowing the vehicle to navigate around objects in a pure axial radius (instead of the back tires trailing the front). The sensation as you sit 6 feet

up on the 16 ton machine is a delicate observance of all obstacles. If you now take motion away from the tractor and let it be “4685,” give the objects motion and let them be people, the same delicate observance occurs. Another level of perception appears; this effect can be termed “articulate observance.” Now what may be described as a group of chaotic, randomly placed shapes and planes masquerading as a dental office are in fact very precisely placed parts that align themselves with the viewer at different perceptual times and actually set the building in motion. Not fast movement,

but the kind that when you blink an eye something about what you’re looking at seems changed. The shapes, like acrobats covered in a snow of Spanish stucco, appear to strike a different pose each time the viewer glances at them. However the acrobats are still. The audience is merely seeing a new acrobat at a different time, creating the illusion of movement and the effect of articulated observance.

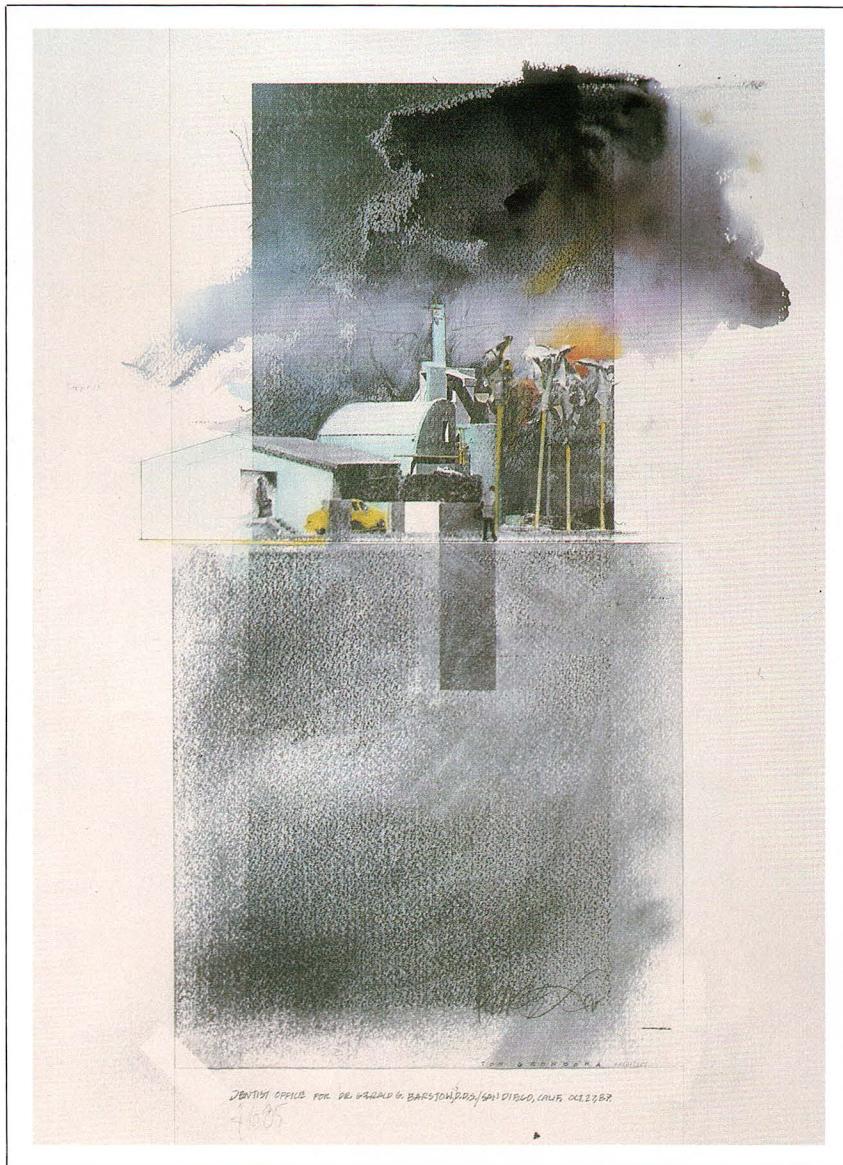
Prologue

And now at a very opportune time, the narrative of a play seems to be emerging. Shapes and forms that were once created

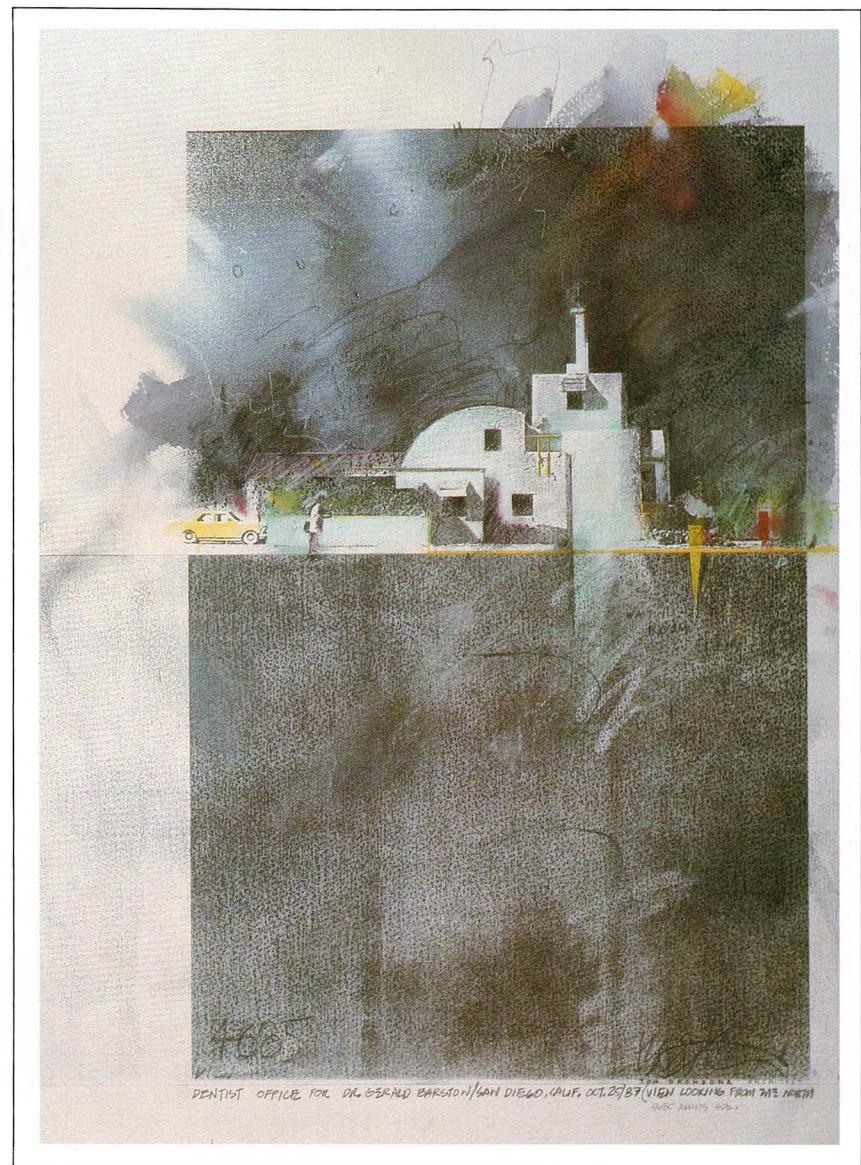
in a fit of hot-glue-gun-rage have become acrobats, actors and actresses. The corner lot is no longer earth to build upon but a stage on which to perform. Everyone passing the stage will somehow participate in writing their own narratives. Is there no end?

The Exterior (Act I)

Approaching from the west audience first sees the highest acrobat (the backside of the clock tower). By the overexaggerated height to width ratio, she balances precariously upon the view frame of the periscope below, providing



View from the East



North Elevation

Kensington with an eastern bookend for the commercial district. Moving still closer from the east the audience comes into perpendicular alignment with the window to the periscope. Then finally at a forty-five degree angle to the stage (corner of Adams Avenue and Vista Street) one sees through another over-scaled window to the revealing gymnastics of the structure.

Coming from the east, the first prop to appear is the renovated bungalow aligning itself not with the audience but with the existing grid and scale of the neighborhood. What may seem as just the "existing building" is the sole reason the acrobats don't spin out of control and come crashing to the ground. At the next stop three acrobats come into view simultaneously with the clock tower dancing on top while the back wall of the hygiene room tries in vain to get attention from the westerly audience. Proceeding west, the fat, round shape comes closer providing a pivot point for the audience and a strong base for the acrobats. A ramp leads the audience into the entrance patio where they are transformed from observer to participant.

The Interior (Act II)

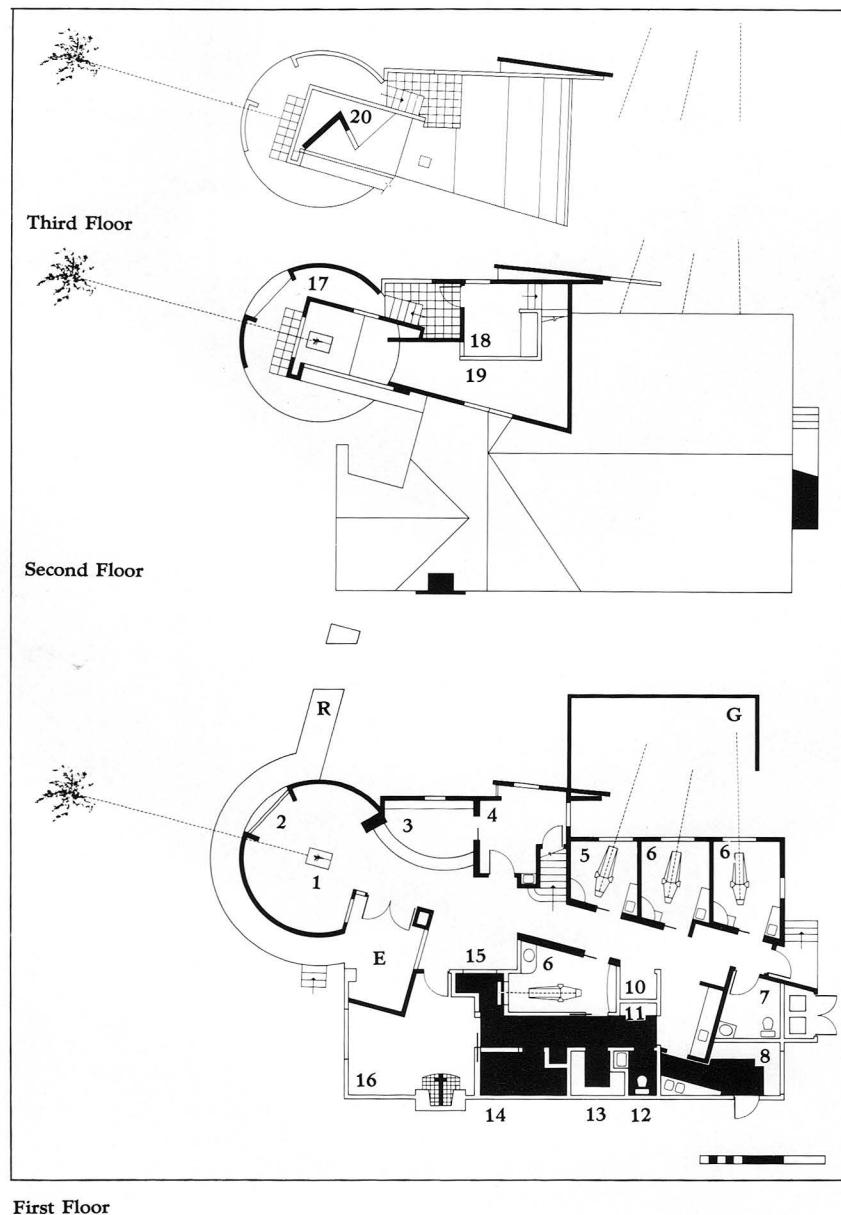
The participant next notices that instead of solid volumes stacked upon each other, the acrobats are actually thin exterior shells. While maintaining their pose they have created a space which seems to be pulling away from the earth.

The Wait (Act III)

Next, after checking in with the receptionist for role assignment, the participant enters the round waiting room and comes upon the lower inclined mirror of the periscope reflecting a palm tree swaying with the breeze and the movement of the neighborhood in the background. Through this device the world is both observed and removed simultaneously. All the windows being above eye level the connection to the sky grows stronger.



Discovering the Articulated Observance Effect

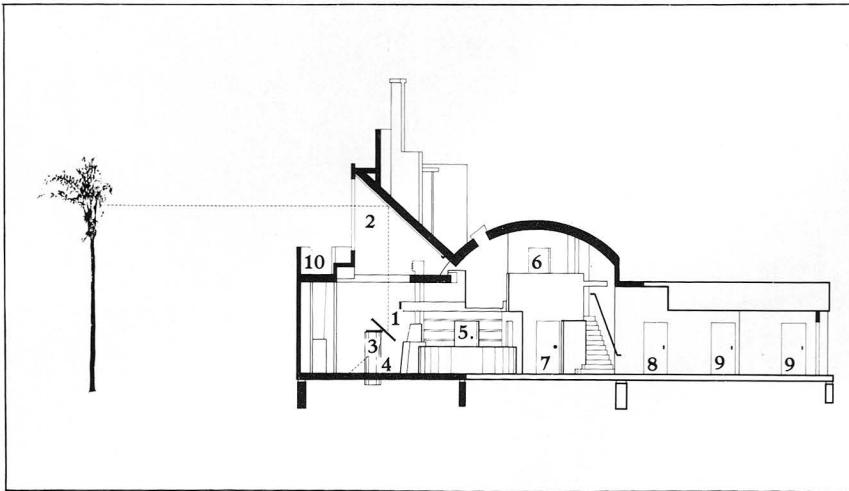


Bored with the "world on view" the participant then proceeds around the periscope to find a grouping of friendly, overstuffed chairs to sink into. However, as the participant/discoverer begins to sit down, a strange image appears in the chorme plated, cylindrical base of the periscope. The anamorphic art device is now offering its amusement. The distorted floor painting is redistorted into reality and actually seems to follow the audience. Being over 6 feet tall it divides the waiting room into pie shaped pieces sheltering the individuals of the audience from each other's fear wrenched faces.

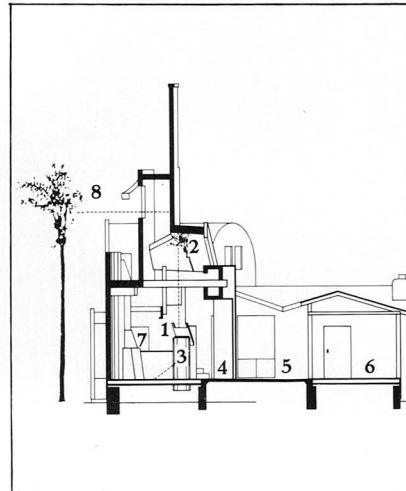
The Appointment (Act IV)

The discoverer/patient is called and taken down the gallery to the operatory. After leaving the waiting room, the patient proceeds through the puffed, vaulted hall viewing an open window at the end of the path and is gently condensed as he travels to a secure eight feet tall operatory hall. Stepping into the operatory the patient/star finds himself surrounded by pristine white walls, a black mottled floor and a garden window.

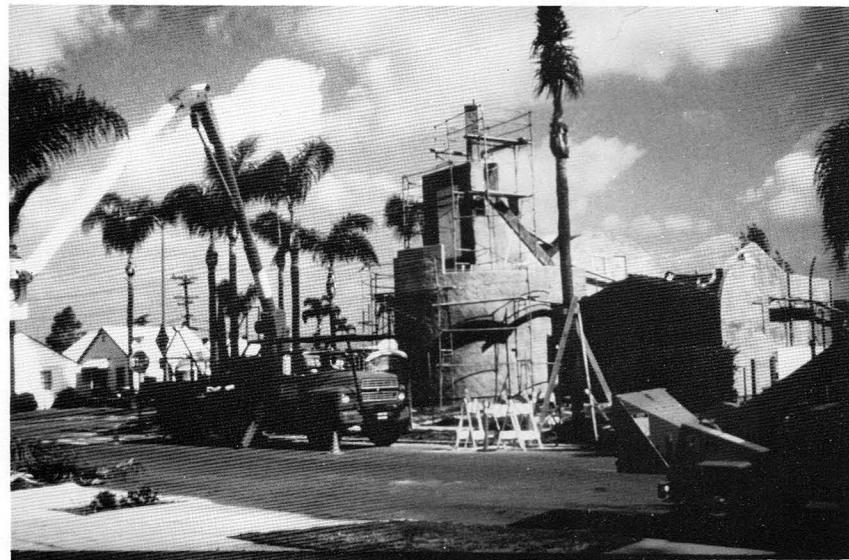
- G Garden
- R Entrance Ramp
- E Entrance Patio
- 1. Periscope/Anamorphic Art Device
- 2. Waiting Room
- 3. Receptionist
- 4. Files
- 5. Hygenist
- 6. Operatory
- 7. Patient's Bathroom
- 8. Laboratory
- 9. Sterile Alcove
- 10. Panarex X-Rays
- 11. Charting
- 12. Employee Bathroom
- 13. Darkroom
- 14. Office Cubicle
- 15. Projection Booth
- 16. Doctors' Office
- 17. Tower Walk
- 18. Office Manager
- 19. Open to Below
- 20. Clock Tower



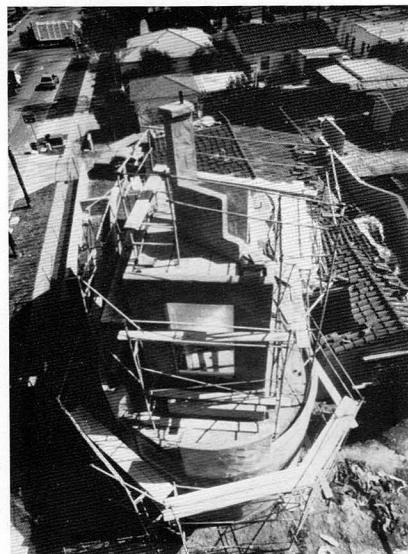
Longitudinal Section



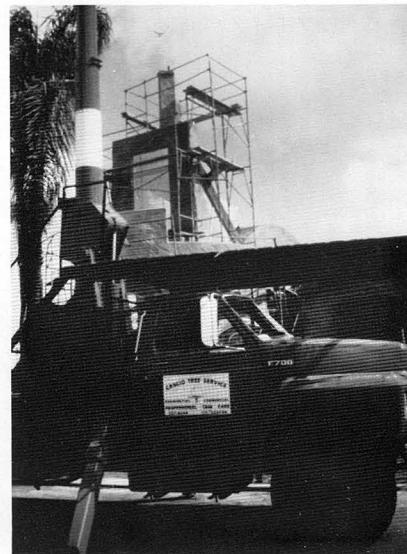
Cross Section



Building Under Construction



The Dancing Acrobat



Actors on Stage



Curtain Call

- LONGITUDINAL SECTION**
1. Periscope Viewing Mirror
 2. Periscope Reflector Mirror
 3. Anamorphic Art Device
(Mirrored Cylinder/Painting on Floor)
 4. Waiting Room
 5. Receptionist
 6. Office Manager
 7. Files
 8. Hygenist
 9. Operatory
 10. Tower Walk
- CROSS-SECTION**
1. Periscope Viewing Mirror
 2. Periscope Reflector Mirror
 3. Anamorphic Art Device
(Mirrored Cylinder/Painting on Floor)
 4. Waiting Room
 5. Entrance Patio
 6. Doctor's Office
 7. Receptionist
 8. View to Palmtree and Kensington

The Examination (Act V)

Settling into the black, reclining chair, at what seems to be a point of no hope, the patient lays his head back and finds a last minute reprieve. The garden seems to be on the ceiling! Once again mirror acts as an illusionary-distraction device, funneling the star's attention to the garden.

The Exit (Act VI)

With Act V completed the patient/star now proceeds back through the vaulted space to the front appointment desk. Here the condensing effect reverses itself as the hall quickly opens up into a bright sunlit space. Exhilarated by the flood of light, spirits rise.

The Departure (The Final Act)

As the now participant/discoverer/patient/star reverts into former auto-pedestrian, the epilogue is a departing glance into the rear view mirror. The last reflection captures the acrobats taking a final curtain call, waving a fond farewell and throwing "baccis"⁸ to the audience.

FOOTNOTES

1. The VICOLO; 807 Barr Avenue; San Diego, CA; 1985 (under construction)
2. Saska's Restaurant, THE STAR OF THE SIDEWALK; 3768 Mission Boulevard; Mission Beach, San Diego, CA; 1981 (80% complete)
3. WONDER SUSHI; Horton Plaza, San Diego, CA; 1986
4. MORGAN'S HOUSE OF FURNITURE; 1373 Gertrude Street; San Diego, CA; 1986 (On hold)
5. CLAUDIA'S; Horton Plaza, San Diego, CA; 1986
6. CASTLE OVERLAY PLAN; San Diego, CA; 1986 (Began) This open ended, urban installation project so far includes: TOWER TO THE STARS, VICOLO, CASTELLETO, KINDIG CONSTRUCTION, and TINTAGEL-A 21ST CENTURY CASTLE
7. TINTAGEL; The library and wine cellar's cold joint in the poured concrete wall
8. "Baccis" is the English pluralization of the Italian word kiss