

Epard / Porsch House

Dan Rockhill

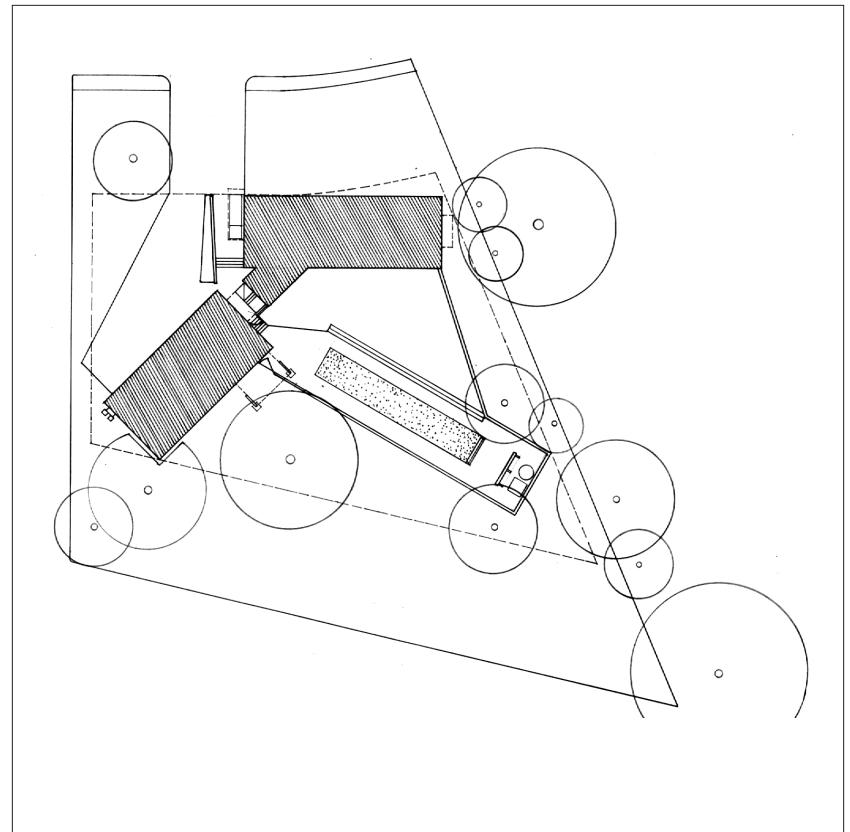


The *Compagnons du Devoir*, a traditional French Guild, sets goals for its members of professional, moral, and spiritual perfection “through manual work and the simultaneous nurturing of the conscious.” Jean Bernard, a present day leader has written: We think that true communication, love perhaps, cannot arise except through an exchange, and that the mind and hand, united at the source of movement and its search for completion and reunited at the moment of highest achievement in the great vocations, are complementary in the deep workings of the whole.

The theory behind our work follows this belief in the synergetic relationship between the hand and mind. The progressive aloofness of architectural thinking and the separation of the profession from manual and intellectual labor has caused a major shift from realism in our built environment. Buildings are assembled but rarely built. As architects we design and as craftsman we build. We are custodians of this long process through which ideas manifest themselves as buildings. This allows the art of making and doing to become an integral part of the design process. The initial design drawings are more a sculptor’s sketches than the beginning of paper trail of change orders. We enjoy the traditional craft based skills such as stone masonry

and cabinet-making as well as the more technical skills required of welding steel and forming concrete. We search out interesting materials from salvage yards and demolition sites to recycle for future use. These materials and skills are unified by our constant desire for a “presence of the hand” allowing the act of building to express itself in the visible strokes of a trowel or the clear coated grinding marks on a welded joint. This presence speaks of the passion of human involvement at all stages of the building process from the overall design, to the surfaces and fixtures we live with daily. This constant experimentation, skill development, and collection of unique materials awards us an expanding base of knowledge for design as every project informs and strengthens the next.

All of our designs are fueled by the place we live and practice. The homogeneity of the design profession is eroding a rich and colorful source of design inspiration that lies quietly around us. We like regional references, grain elevators, indigenous materials, farm machinery, trains, army posts, cattle sheds, and water towers. The artifacts that have made our “place” for the last century and a half are used by us to mediate the universal construction that dilutes our built environment. Sometimes the references are overt, other times hidden and mysterious.



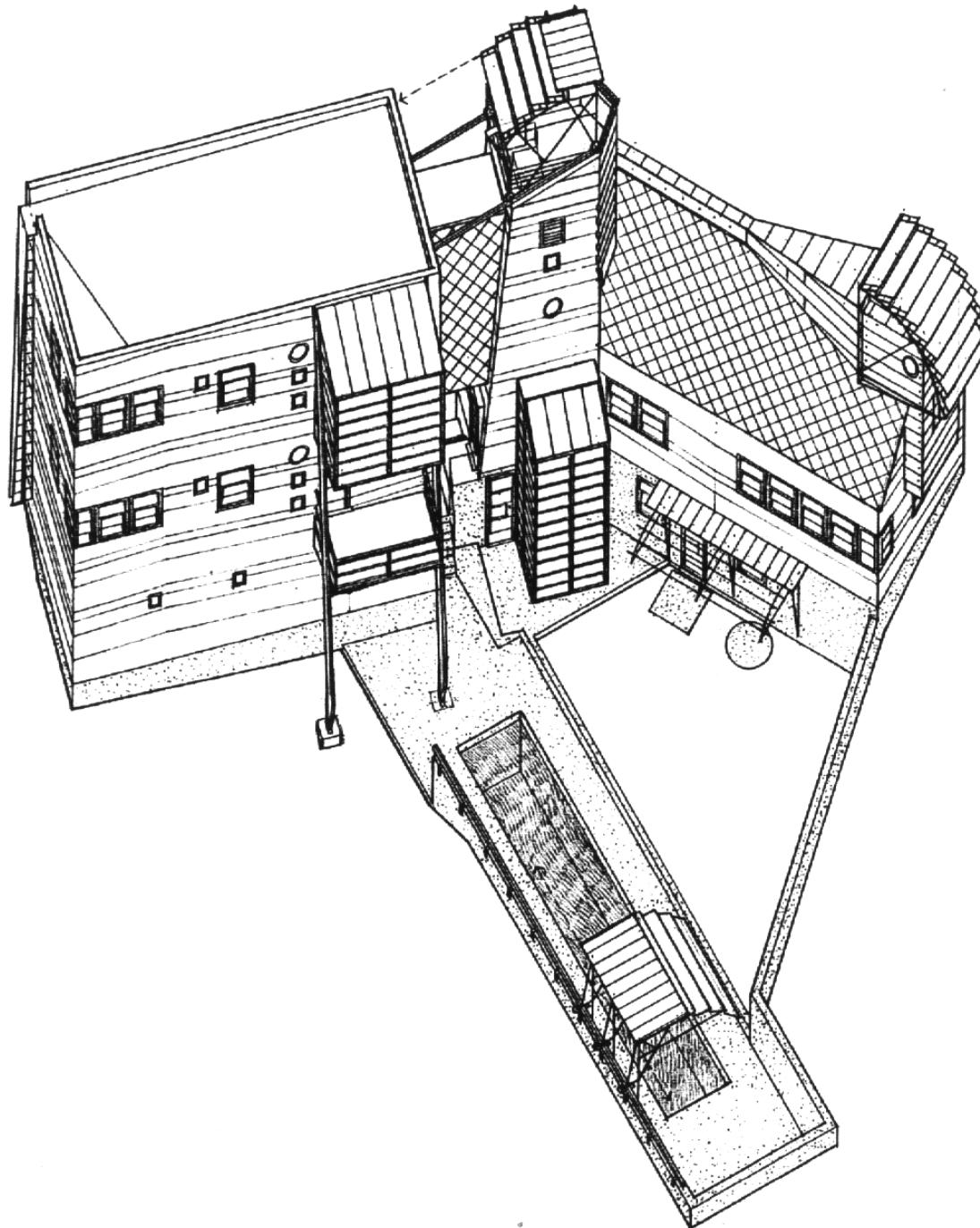
Our work is highly tectonic. Because we make our own buildings, we are able to maintain a high level of craft. We do the welding, place the concrete, cut and lay the stone, run the plaster, and make our own doors and windows. The poetics of construction are as much a part of our process as the vernacular is to our design.

Near the University of Kansas campus, the Marc Epard and Kathy Porsch house rises from an established neighborhood on a lot that held a typical 1950's ranch-style house the client sold and had moved. The house expresses the interests and lives of our clients as well as our continuing experimentation in form, order, and materials inspired by Kansas vernacular building, science, industrial age contraptions, and the richness of history, philosophy, and mythology.

The clients are a young couple: one a writer, and the other a software engineer. They share our interest through their stargazing, collecting of scientific instruments, and extensive reading. They wanted a tall house with multiple layers of upstairs-downstairs and inside-outside spaces, reflecting similarities to the farm houses they had both grown up in on the plains of western Kansas. They also wanted the house to be environmentally sensible, with thick north walls, strategic openings, and natural help in cooling and heating.

The building weaves its way between the existing trees on a kite-shaped site forming a hinge that opens to the south. Inside the hinge, protected from the noise of the street, is a sunken garden and a lap pool that extends along the north-south axis and anchors the building to the overlaying grid of the Midwest. Large blocks shaped buildings made of native limestone and offset by the lighter steel of grain conveying systems are often seen in juxtaposition to one an-

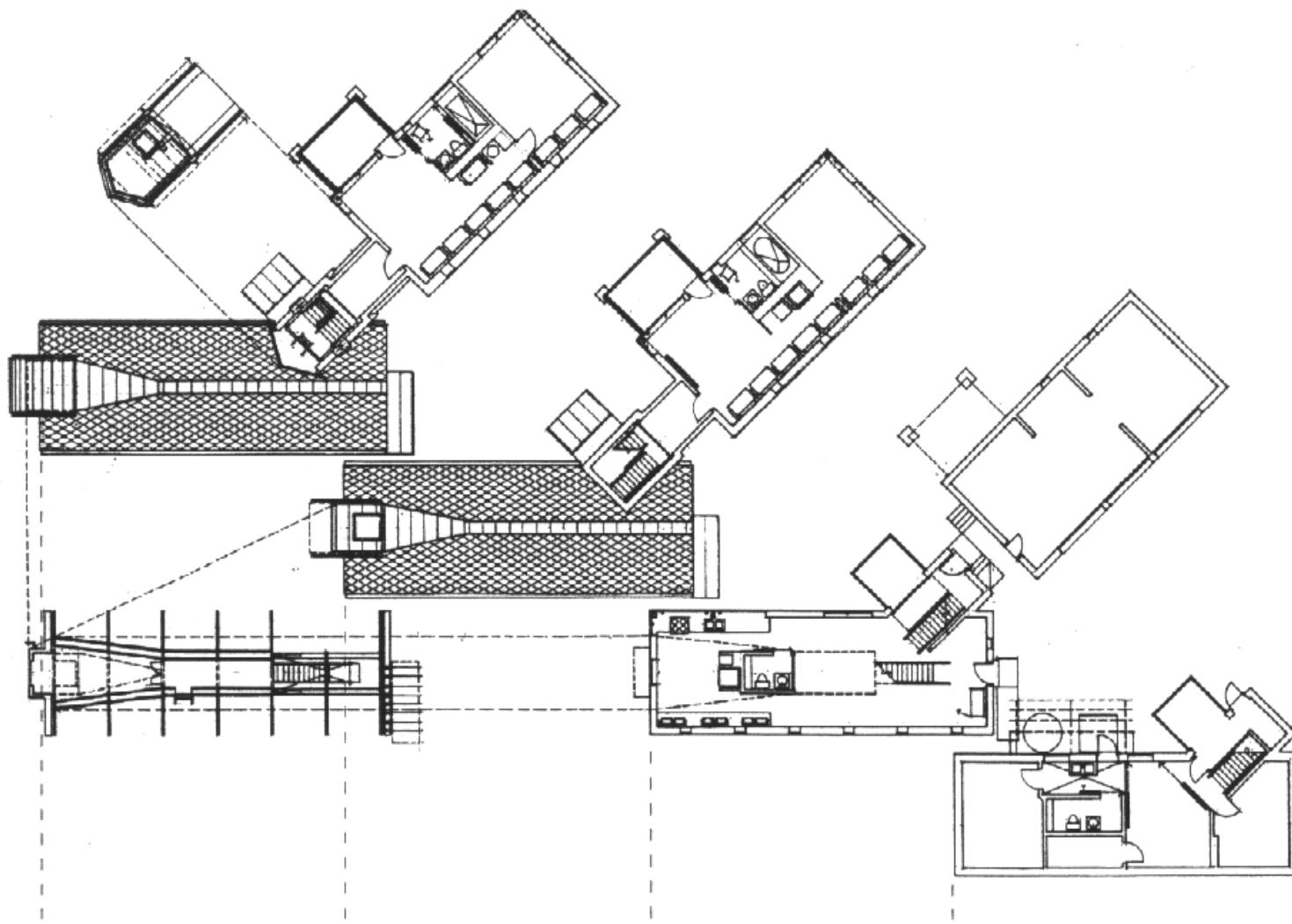


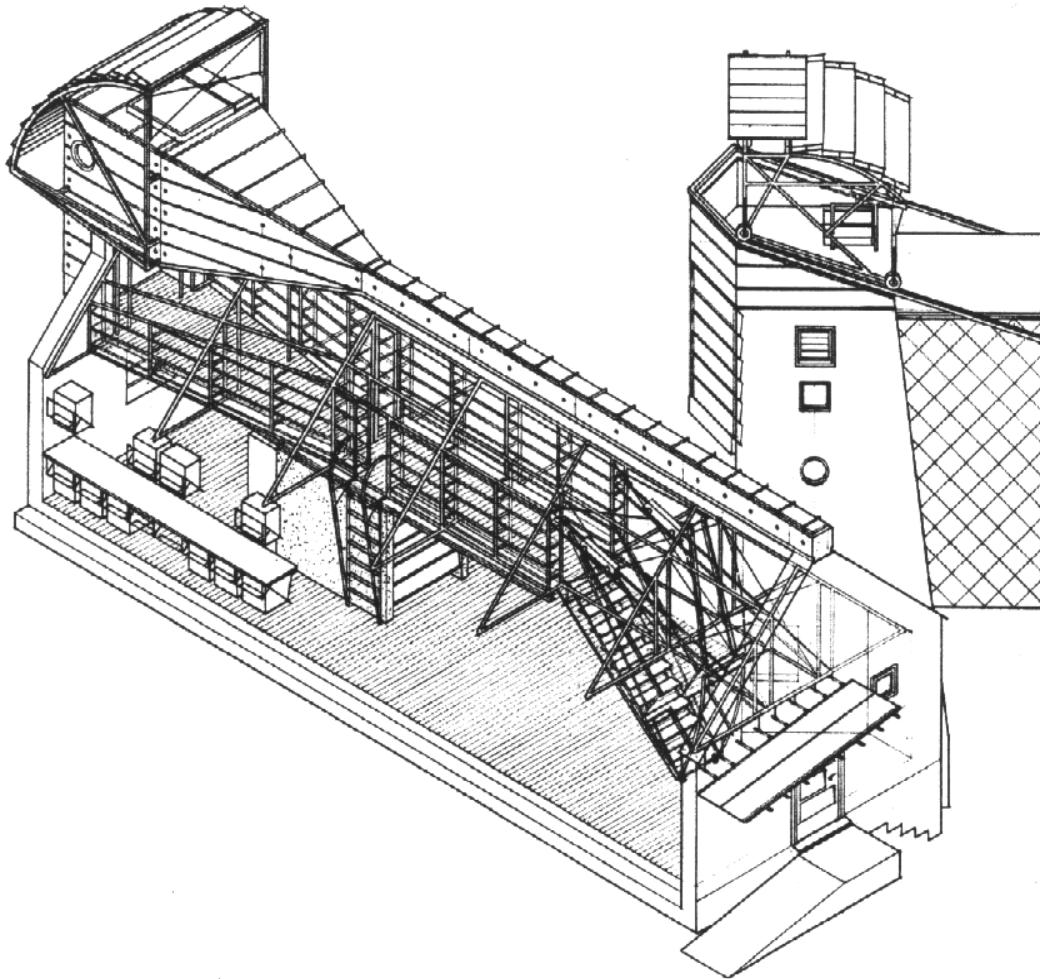


other in the small towns in Kansas. In the character of many great regional vernacular buildings, the house is two simple forms of native limestone juxtaposed with a rich tapestry of steel bridges, awnings, stairs, and decks. The front block is long and low with a gabled roof of Norwegian slate that continues the typical form and scale of the houses to each side. This space contains the public areas for living, visiting, cooking, and dining. A guest bedroom is in the basement and protruding from the roof above is a zinc-clad library. The back block is much taller and basic—a simple rectangular box. It holds the private spaces for sleeping and exercise. Their individual work is done in the offices at the far end of the second and third floors. A three-car garage forms the base of this block.

The exterior materials with the colors of the buff stone, light green slate, and the soft gray zinc blend well with the built and natural colors of the neighborhood. The “casual” coursing of the stone reflects the early masonry of the area, and separates the house from the strictly coursed stone buildings on campus. The interior finishes are the time tested materials of plaster walls, slate counter tops, birch plywood cabinets and floors, and welded steel frames that create stairs, shelves, and various walls that hold shingled sheets of glass. This glass remains clear at the library and stair tower and is frosted at the bedrooms and bathrooms. A gauge steel frame supports all walls and floors. Hand fabrication of the 50,000 lbs of raw steel used throughout the project was performed in our own shop.

Since Galileo, the telescope has been integral to our understanding of the universe and has always helped separate myth from scientific knowledge. For this reason we used the telescope as a metaphor for the library, the house's focus of worldly knowledge.





It is a steel and glass structure that spans the trusses and rests on a concrete mount that encloses a bathroom and organizes the first floor space. The library is accessed by a rotating stair that pulls down from the trusses above, balanced by stone counterweights. The lines of the glass shelves angle through the long volume of the house mimicking the path of light through the shaft of a telescope and eventually focus on the reading chair (or focal point).

The hinge between the two main forms is the stair tower. The design of this important center of the house's universe was influenced by Empedocles, the 5th century B.C. Greek philosopher who described the interplay of the four basic substances of earth, wind, air, and fire. At the base of the tower is a plant conservatory that opens to the pool and garden that combines earth and water. The body of the tower acts as a cooling shaft with two fans at the top pulling warm air up and out. At the top of the tower is an observatory with a movable cover that offers protection from the fire of the sun during the day and at night it can be lowered by a hand winch to offer a view of the heavenly fires above.

