

Confidences of A Spec-Writer

Douglas Darden

These two rhetorical projects, "Confessional" and "Hostel," will be published this year by Princeton Architectural Press in a major treatise of Darden's work entitled Condemned Building.

Preface

This article contains the diary letters qua letters left me by a man whom, according to the expression he often used himself, we called the Spec-writer, or with a certain trepidation, the Specter. Whether these letters need any introductory remarks may be open to question. I, however, feel the need of adding a few paragraphs to those of the Specter in which I try to record my recollections of him. What I know of him is meager enough. Indeed, of his past life and family I know virtually nothing at all. He stayed with me a little more than nine months. Yet the impression left by his personality has remained, in spite of all, a profound and sympathetic one.

ARCHITECTURE IS NEVER ITS OWN SUFFICIENT SUBJECT NOR ITS OWN SUFFICIENT END.

Several years ago the Spec-writer, who was then approaching 50, called on me at my studio to inquire for a position. My need for his services was minimal, but so he explained, were his demands. After a rather brief interview, I agreed to take him on as a part-time employee.

My studio adjoined a large, old house where I lived alone. For my business records I required of the Spec-writer a

resume. All seemed to be in order, except that he had no address. He explained quite unashamedly that he lived as a "self-imposed exile" out of his suitcase. I offered to rent for a nominal amount the modest attic room. He lived by himself very quietly, and but for the fact that he lived above me—which occasioned a good many encounters on the grand staircase and its landing—he should have remained practically as invisible within my own house as the accountant who kept my books.

I have never forgotten the very moment when the Spec-writer entered my house for the first time and became my lodger. He came at noon, earlier than our appointed time. The table had not been cleared and I still had half an hour before going back to the studio. I can still picture the odd and very conflicting impressions he made on me at his

first entry. He came through the double-light door, having rung the bell twice in quick succession, and fidgeted in the bright light of the stairway hall. The Spec-writer threw up his keen eyes and rotated his shoulders to and fro like a swinging door.

"Which way to my room?" he asked. "Either stair will take you there," I said slowly, trying to ease my agitation.

"Both the left and right go to the same place?" the Spec writer seemed to ask rhetorically.

I remained silent. At that, he screwed up one side of his face and scowled deeply at me. For my part, I found his manner as a guest and new employee wholly offensive.

At the sight of him when he came into my home, twisting his face like that and questioning the broad symmetry

ARCHITECTURE IS THE EXECUTION OF EXQUISITE BARRIERS.

of the stair, I was at once astonished by something curious about him. I suspected that the man was ailing, ailing in his heart in some way, or in the balance of his disposition or character, and I shrank from him with the instinct of the healthy. This shrinking was in course of time replaced by a sympathy inspired by pity for one who had suffered so long and deeply, who in and out of his military service (he told me in passing that he had been an officer in two wars) had always compelled him to take sides, even if that choice would come to mean painful loss. In course of time I was more and more conscious, too, that this affliction was not due to any defects of nature, but rather to his profusion of gifts and powers which did not seek any quick conception of happiness, but which allowed him to act forthrightly through a vision of the world which, in his most cogent

terms, saw only winners and losers; each person taking a stand at every point in their lives, never sparing themselves by gingerly straddling an issue, by being cautious or politic.

The Spec-writer encouraged me as an architect to do the same, and for that, I have thought of him often while working on "Confessional" and "Hostel." The Specter's letters excerpted here verify the strong influence he had on me. He belongs to those embold-

ened individuals whose will is to live the riddle of human destiny heightened to a pitch of a personal urgency remade every day.

ARCHITECTURE IS CARRIED OUT BY A RESISTANCE TO ITSELF.

Therein, it seems to me, lies the meaning these letters can have for us, and because of this, I decided to publish them. For the rest, I neither approve nor condemn them. Let every architect do as his conscience bids.

A special acknowledgment to HH and his Man-Wolf.

This entry in the Spec-writer's diary was written while I was in the early schematic design of the confessional at San Pancrazio.

—DD

April 25, 1988

Darden works devotedly on his modest confessional. The whole idea boggles me. I was born and raised a Catholic, so I feel I have experiences behind me which allow me to speak with some authority. Darden isn't a devout anything. I believe he was probably carried along in his youth as a diluted Methodist. He has no conception of what it means to confess.

To confess is a wretched practice that for most of my childhood years brought me to near nausea. "Hail Marys" could not recuperate my weekly, and sometimes bi-weekly sense of dread, of my fear and guilt, and of the fact that I was obliged to tell about those things I had done which were wrong and for which I thought my parents, informed by the priest, would punish me. Forget that I made it a habit to lie. That came later as a teenager. I'm speaking of the beginning when the Church ministered to me as a child—as for many it does all of their lives—in the guise of a grander parent.

What confounds me now, as I have made several visits with Darden to the unassuming church in Florence where he has been commissioned to design the confessional (which is virtually nothing more in scale than a phone booth, a piece of hyper-rated furniture), is the sheer public nature of this seemingly private act. The violent contradiction! Imagine telling a priest your most personal secrets, your sins, those acts and thoughts which render to you your most unnatural pain—in public! Within the expanse of the open nave of a church, everyone sees the con-

fessor bent on his knees, humble-hunched at the shoulders,—a spectacle of whispers.

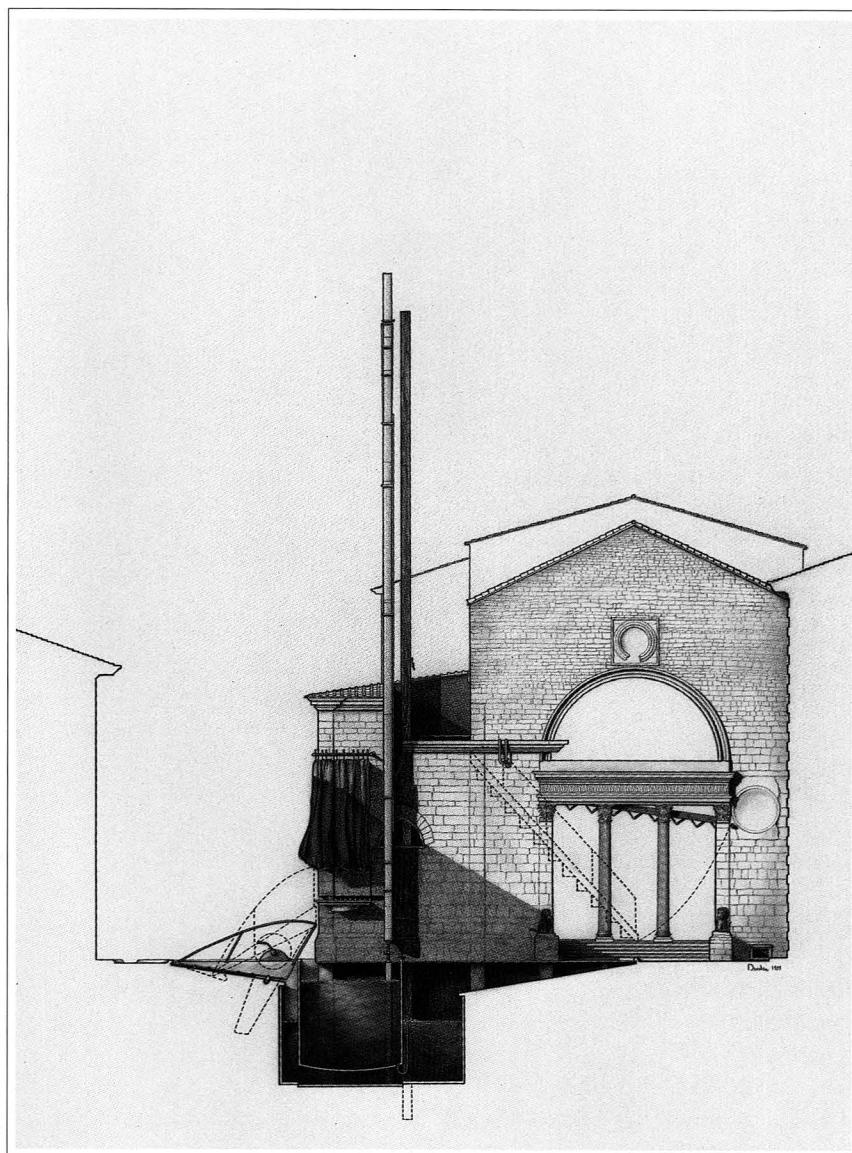
And there is also the priest. The interior of his box may be slightly visible, the heavy curtains not quite closed. Then you can see him, too, pitched slightly off his buttock to the left or the right, catching someone's mortalities through a perforated bronze screen with one of his accustomed ears.

The audacity of it all! The hypocritical seduction!

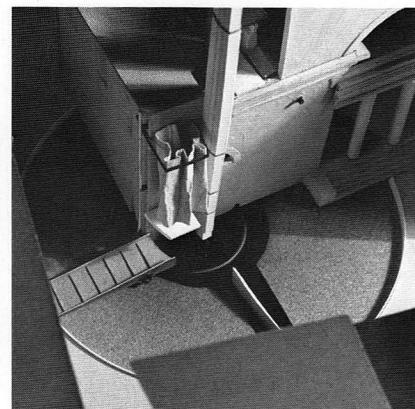
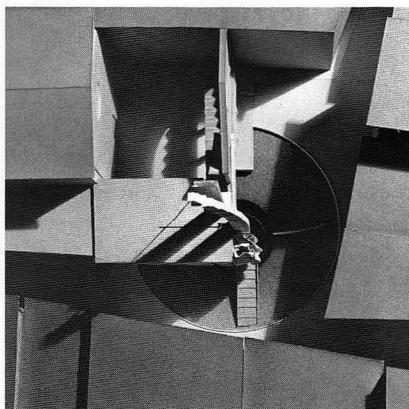
Were I to design a confessional (rather than dullishly write its specifications), I would hold up for all to see a frank, public structure that at the moment of a confession, would manifest two gods: one would be the inert, fixed god, the established yet tarnished god of the Church; the other would be the fragile and febrile god which would speak for the complex, searching impulse which draws us to religion in the first place and which we can only seek on our own terms. The confessional, in other words, would have one figure, one god, which would stand as a foil to the priest; the other would be a herald for the confessor. I would challenge monotheism itself, and by having two gods, the confessional would show that there are very possibly many; it would demonstrate that seeking judgment of our own actions is a complex trembling; that "to confess" is to have an ache which constantly inflects us around an off-center, manifold source.

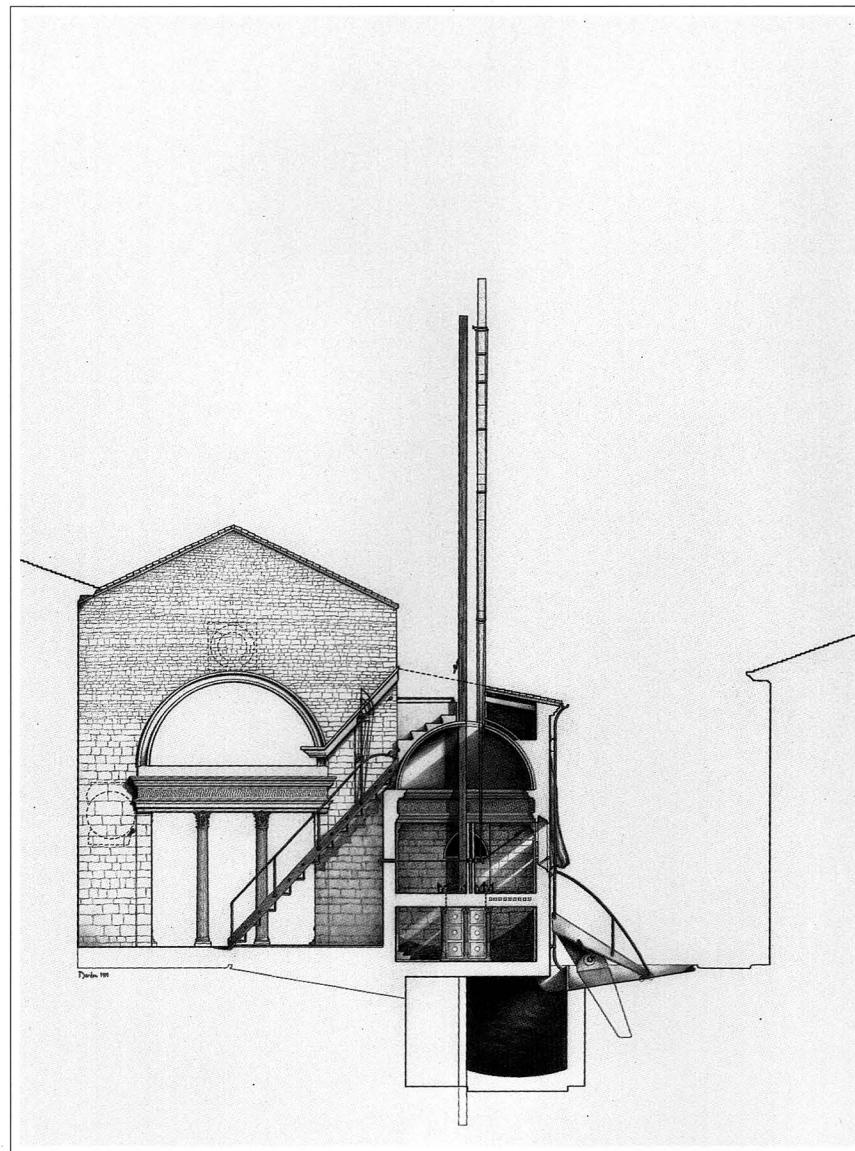
—SW

**ARCHITECTURE IS AN
ADMISSION OF
RHETORIC NOT
KNOWLEDGE.**



Front Elevation





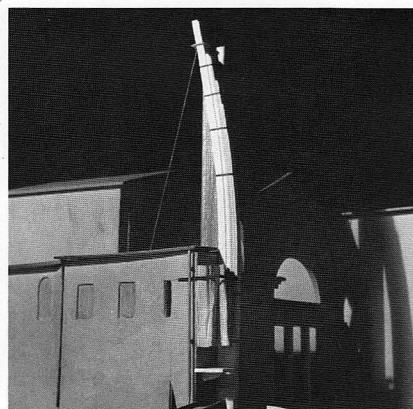
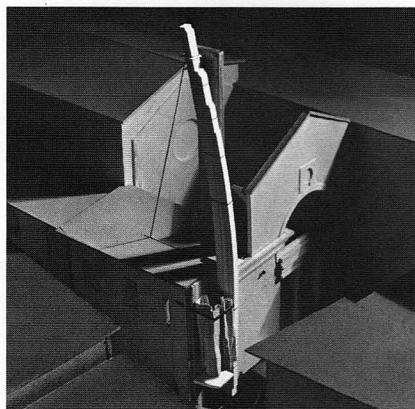
Cross Section

CONFSSIONAL *A Station at Cross Purposes*

Confessional corners the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre designed by Leon Battista Alberti in 1467 for the Vallombrosan monks of the Church of San Pancrazio in Florence, Italy. Through the 19th century the chapel was accessible from inside the church, but it was walled-off at the time of the Napoleonic suppression in 1808. Subsequently, San Pancrazio was deconsecrated. The church was used for the Grand Ducal lottery before being turned into a leather tanning factory, and finally, a military depot for ammunition.

Although today there are no religious services in San Pancrazio, the Catholic Church maintains Alberti's chapel with its ceremonial altar and sepulchre. A priest accepts confessions twice a week.

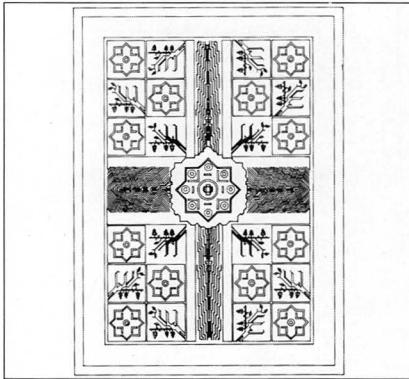
	Confessor's Lot (outside corner)	Priest's Lot (inside corner)
Path:	7 folded steps, hand-cranked	12 spring-released fire stairs
Path Support:	self-draining public piazza	displaced cornice and industrial spring
Station:	heavy drawn curtain	private roof niche
Transmitter:	composite pine mast, bound by leather straps	monolithic re-cast aluminum upright, scratched in-place
Amplifier:	state-of-the-art microphone in protective marine shell	army surplus one-way receiver fitted into aluminum upright
Reflector:	baptistry-shaped babbling pond	baptistry-shaped babelring pond



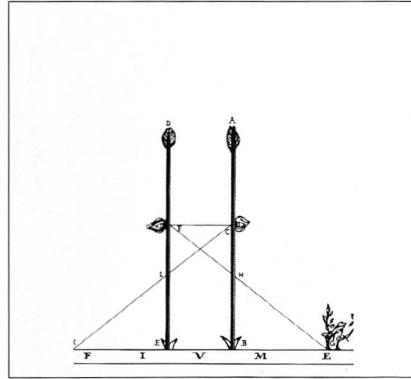
LITURGY *(performed on Cardinal Points)*

- I. Confessor raises 7-folded path with manual crank; raising of path activates bubbler in pond, priest pulls down fire stair
- II. Confessor and priest ascend respective stairs to assume ceremonial positions
- III. Confessor draws curtain, pine mast bends to approach aluminum upright for aural transmission
- IV. Confessor pulls down amplifier and takes confession (option of bypassing priest)
- V. Confessor rolls aside wall section of chapel, pine mast retracts to upright position
- VI. Confessor crosses over pond onto chapel floor to proceed past screen all and exposed crown of sepulchre
- VII. Confessor descends stone and steel stair to sepulchre, exits under station of priest

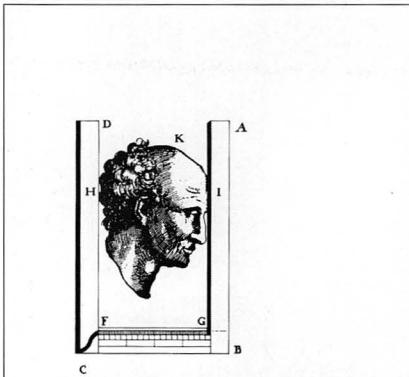
ARCHITECTURE IS THE FICTION OF THE AGE CRITIQUED IN SPACE.



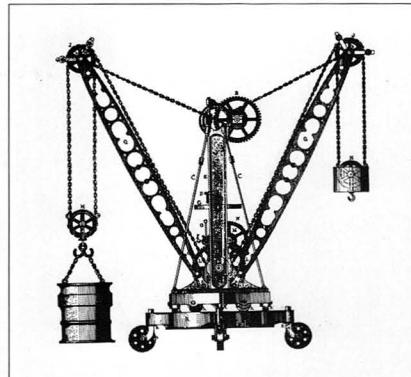
Persian Carpet with four Rivers of Eden



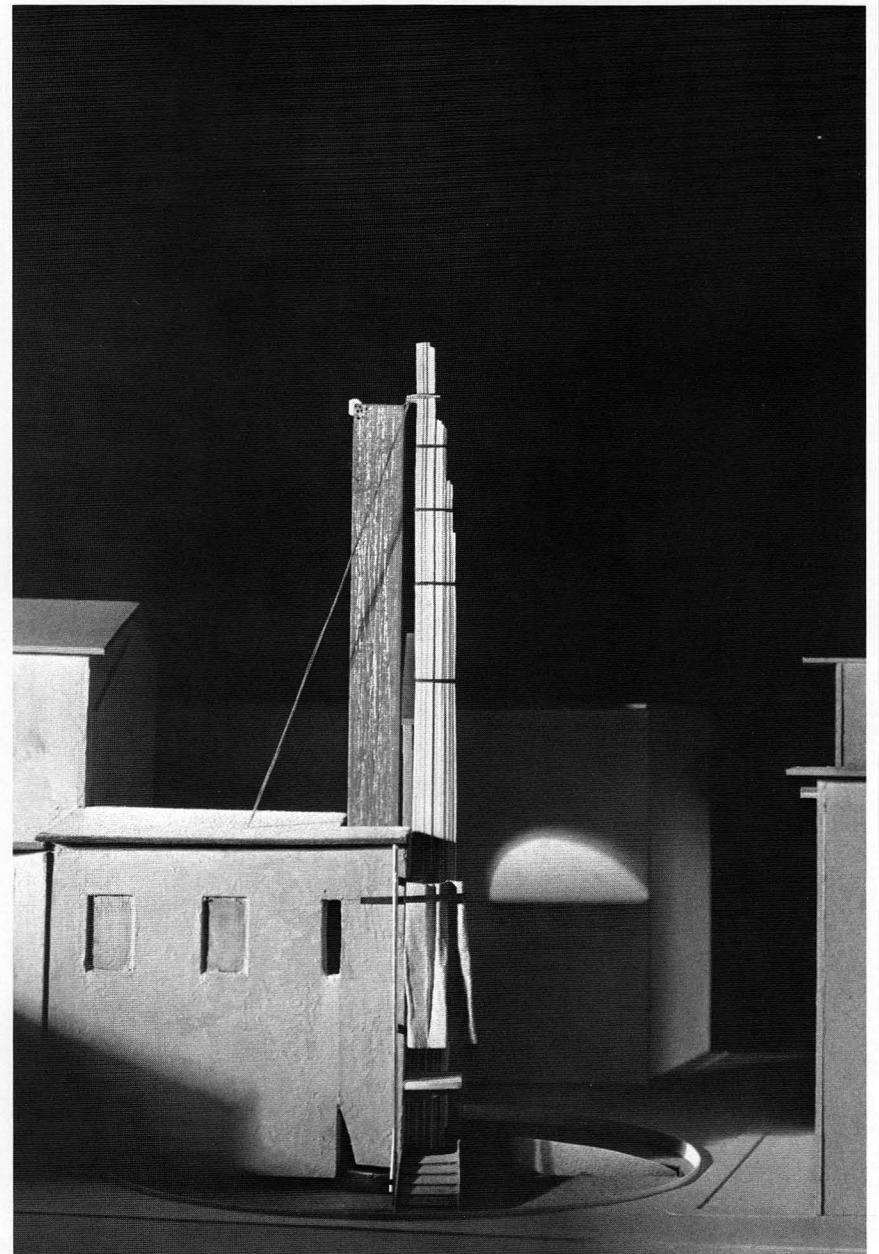
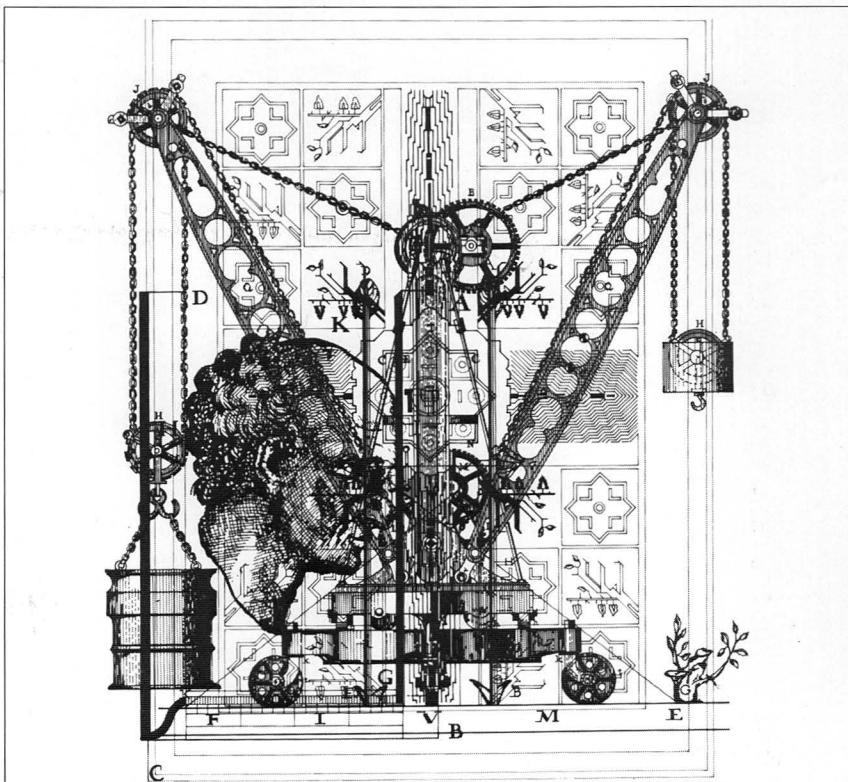
Alberti's Misura

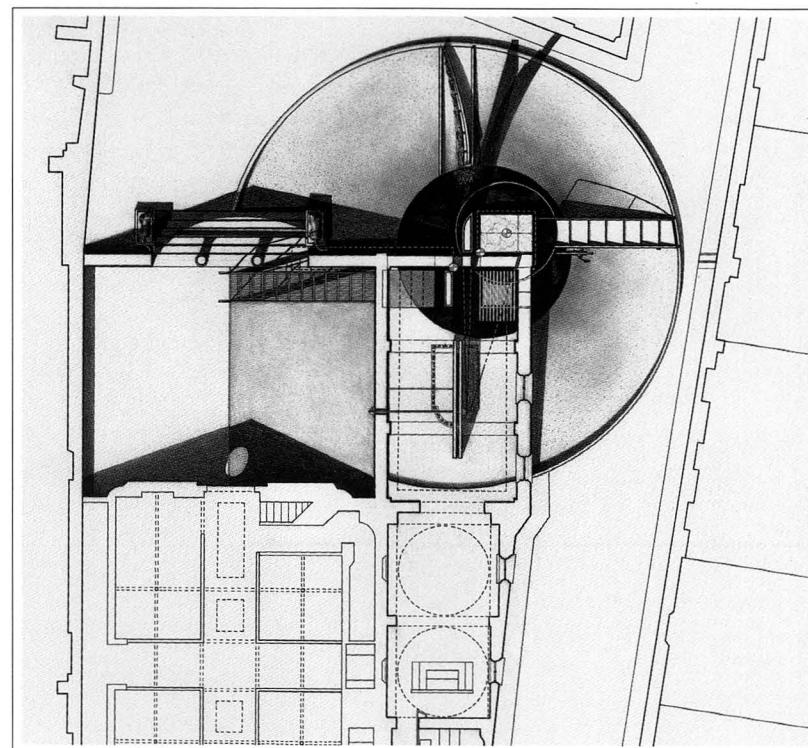
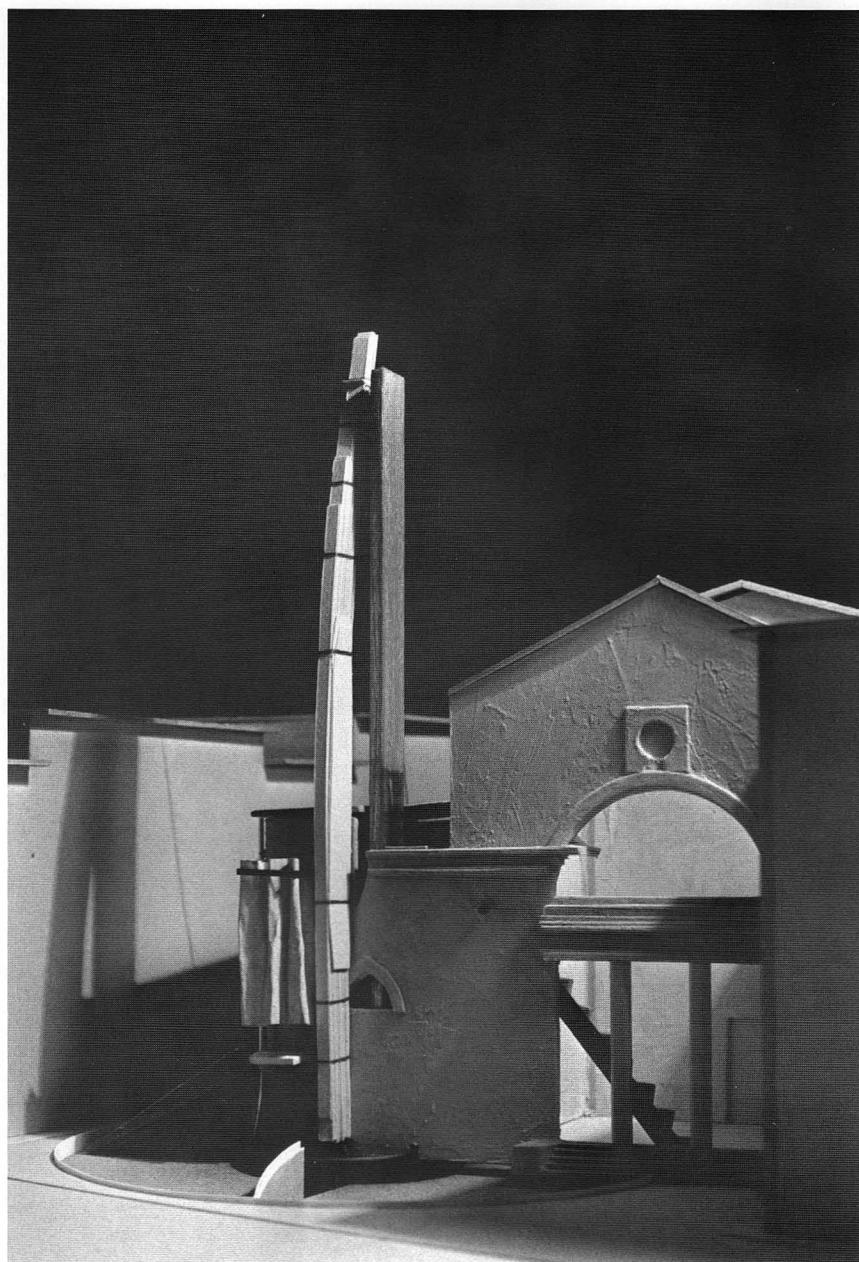


Alberti-Measuring the Width of a River

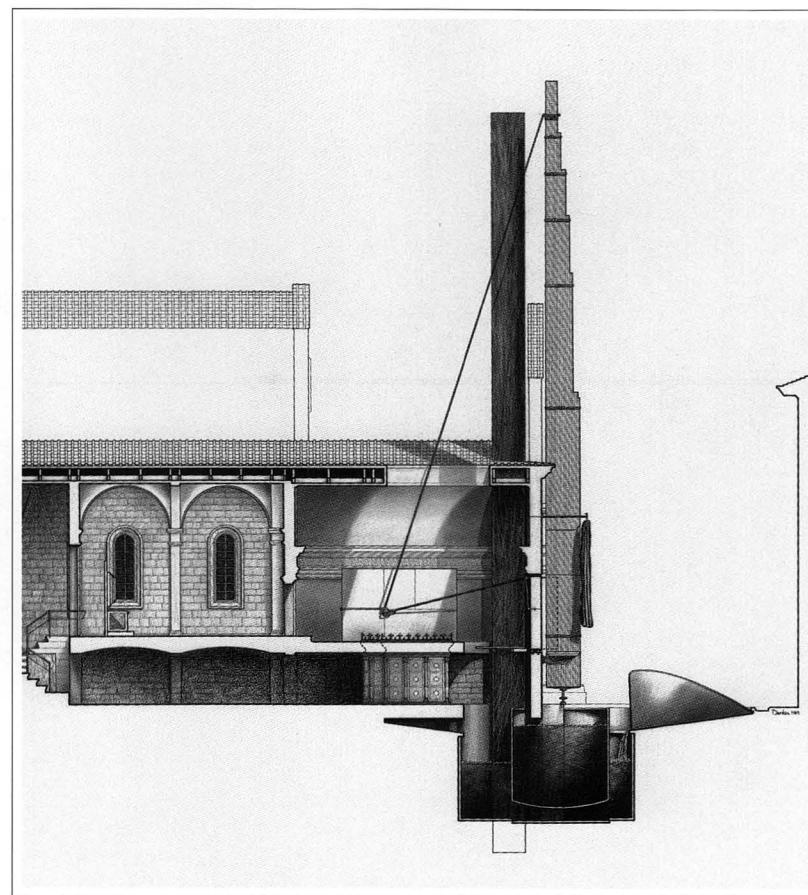


Balancing Crane





Plan



Cross Section 57

This second diary letter of the Spec-writer was recorded after his first visit to the Aswan High Dam, Egypt. I had sent the Specter ahead of me to document the site and to research its history. By the time I myself visited the Dam, the climate in Egypt had become much hotter and oppressive.

—DD

December 21, 1988

There is no way I can adequately convey my sense of dismay, the mortal loss I feel standing on top of the Aswan Dam. What is wrong with me? The dam has brought Egypt into the twentieth century. It now controls the epic Nile floods. Yet for all that the dam has produced for Egypt, something else was taken away,—the entire country of Lower Nubia. A whole nation has been drowned by this dam and replaced by a lake.

ARCHITECTURE IS THE MEDITATION ON FINITUDE AND FAILURE.

For every act of construction there is an allied act of destruction. One action cannot take place without the other. This is the only true symmetry in the world, and it is a fearful one. Steel doesn't "arrive" at a site; it comes from somewhere, a mountain where ore is extracted. Meat doesn't "come" from the supermarket; it comes from an animal who has been slaughtered. Our gain is tied to that loss. This principle is so fundamental, yet architects and engineers, as two types of makers among others, forget this. When will they see? John Ruskin was correct:

We the living, occupy a space of too large importance and interest in our own eyes; we look upon the world too much as our own, too much as if we had possessed it and should possess it forever, and forget that it is a mere hostelry, which we occupy the apartments for a time.

Nubia is a barren, poor country with few assets, limited resources, and hemmed

in by deserts. The extreme climate and the geo-physical characteristics of the land make Nubia an unproductive country, difficult to live in and capable of supporting only a small population. The Nubians' grasp on the land has never been strong and what little of themselves they imposed on the harsh landscape was impermanent and fast vanishing. Yet the Nubians' love of their home, their land, is unexcelled by any other people. Even under water, Nubia remains for them the most desirable land in the world. This is not the same as Nubians believing, as Ruskin admonishes, that they possess the land. The Nubians knew the land was not theirs well before the High Dam and the resultant Lake Nasser made them exiles. They are simply, humbly grateful for their land. Despite Egypt's resettlement efforts, home for the Nubians is now confirmed as provisional and tenuous.

Darden has been commissioned to design a building for Nubian laborers, who in this state of exile, must work in Aswan. Can a work of architecture recover such magnitude of loss? Can he possibly put back a country? Could any architect? Of course not. To even think in such terms—of architecture as remedy—is ridiculous.

ARCHITECTURE OFFERS ALLEGORIES NOT SOLUTIONS.

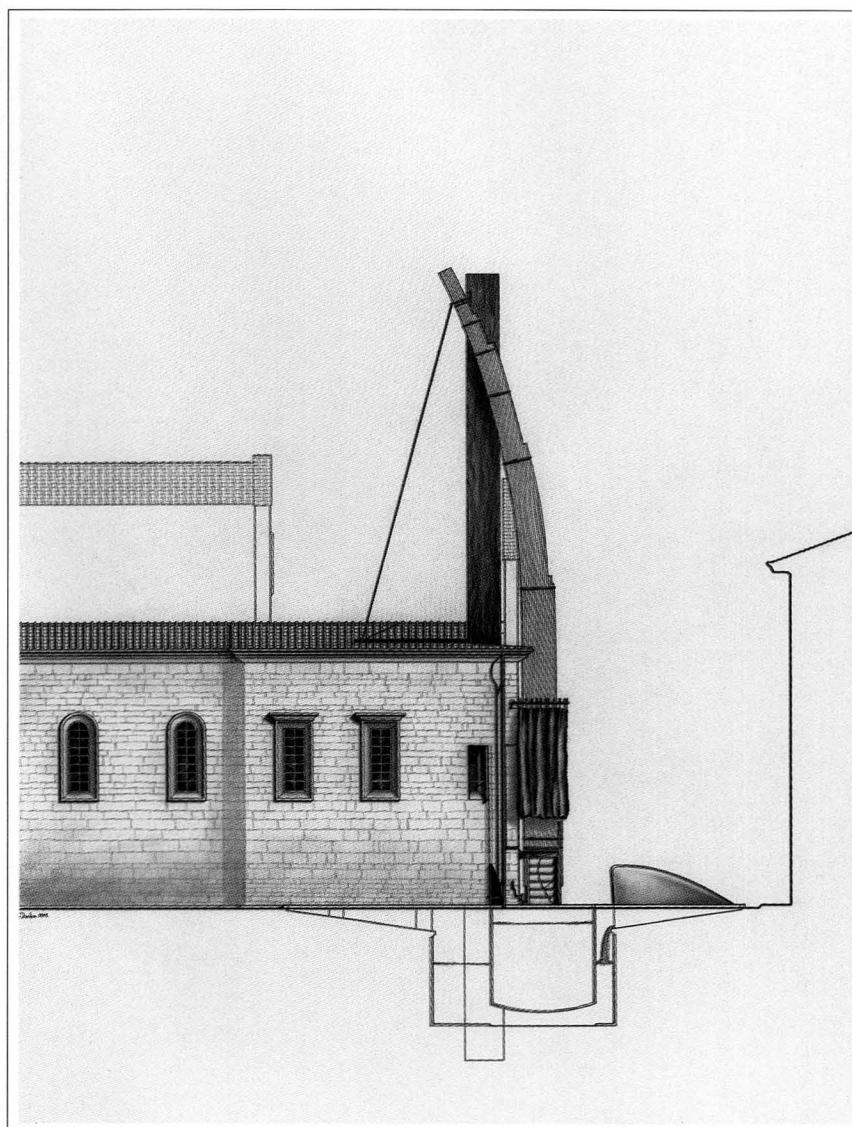
So the question arises, "What to build?" Can there be anything else real enough to construct but this desire to return to a home, even when that home no longer exists? The object of the Nubians' desire, their country, has been flooded. It is gone forever. All that is left to build is the desire itself. That desire—forever unfulfilled—is the Nubians' only ground. The building must be about that *utility of desire*.

ARCHITECTURE IS THE SYMBOLIC REDISTRIBUTION OF DESIRE.

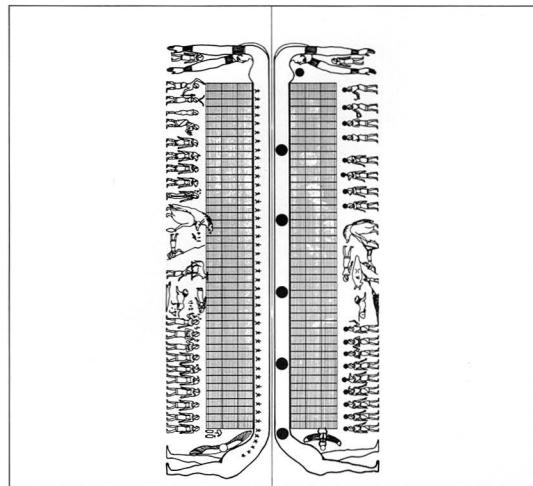
As I take in slowly with my eyes the long arc of the crest of the Aswan Dam, my last disappointment is a vain one: why is there no built form at the dam which serves as a symbol of this reciprocal construction and destruction? The dam is mute, if not seeming to speak uncritically of "progress" alone. Beyond the dam, the lost country of Nubia says nothing.

Again, what to build? Nubia's plight multiplies the problem of making architecture itself. Can architecture be sustained without acknowledging its own fictions; its fictions of safety, of shelter, of permanent place, and home? Not to acknowledge here these fictions would be to make the most empty architecture, a theatre for numb men only. More important than seeking a solution for Nubia, the task is to build this problematic tome.

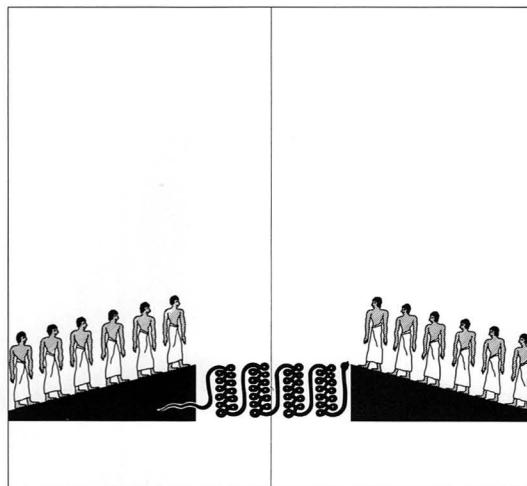
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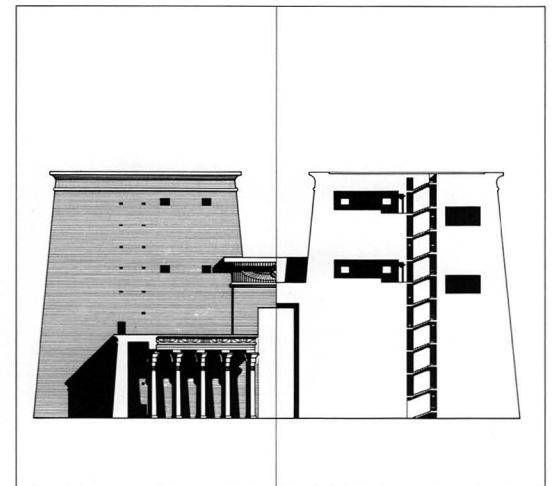
Side Elevation



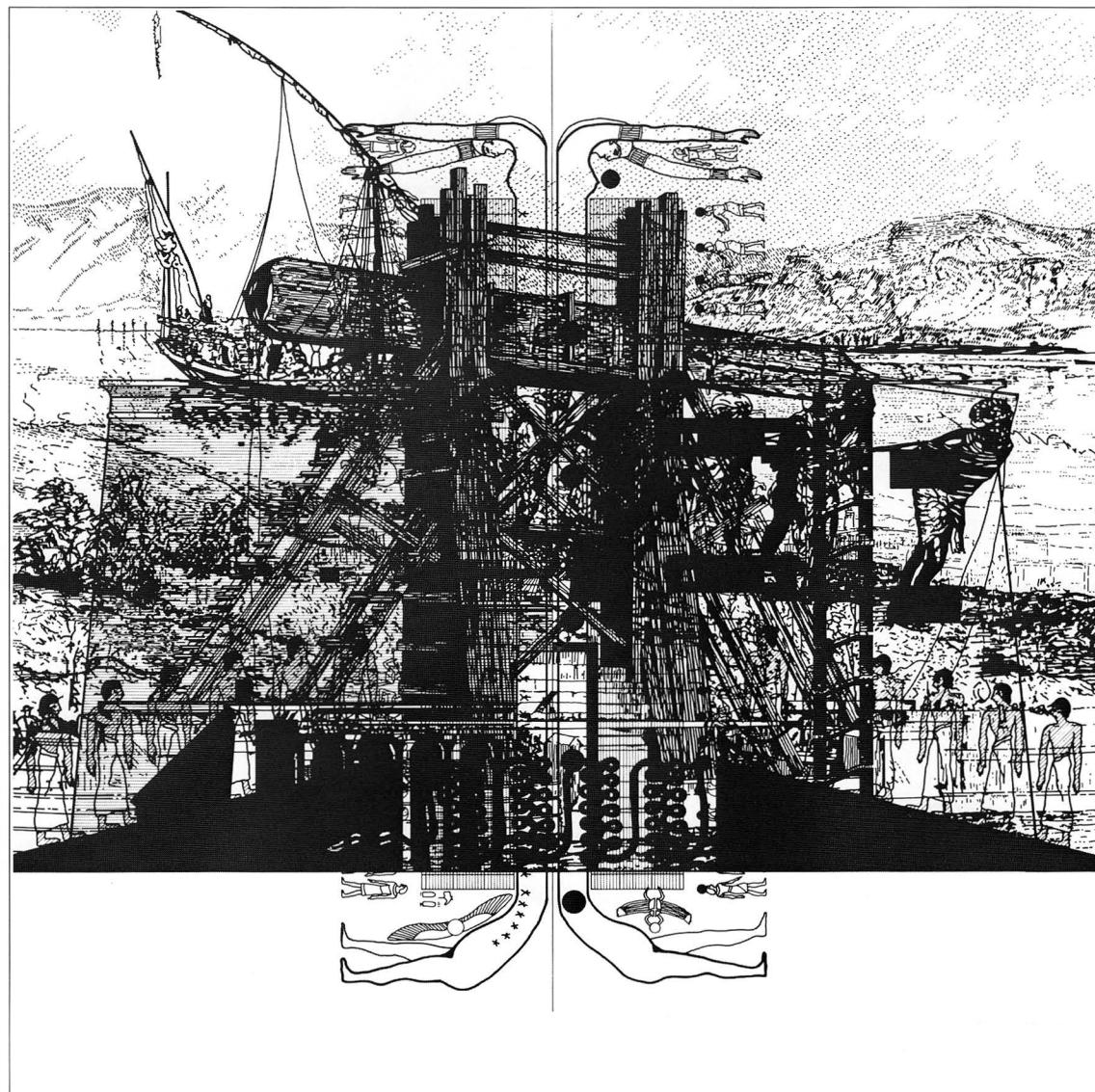
Division of Night and Day



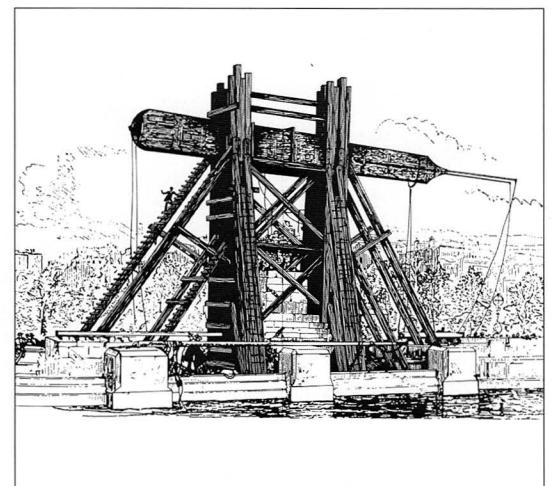
Division of The People



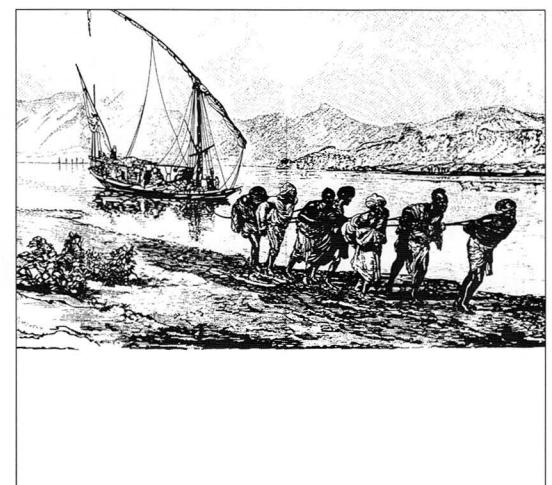
Pylons at Edfu



Discontinuous Genealogy, Composite Ideogram



Cleopatra's Needle, London



Nubians Towing Dehabeah



Site Plan



60 Northwest Elevation

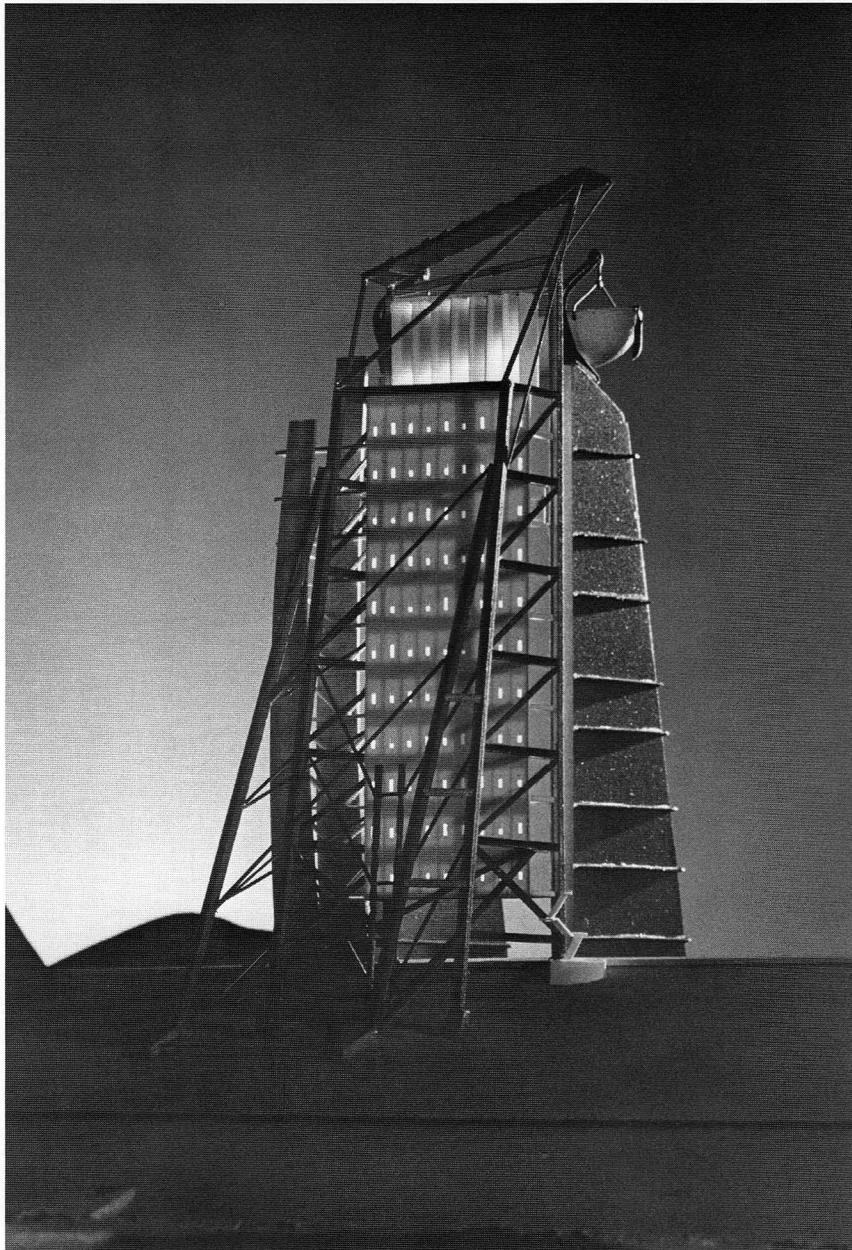


HOSTEL
A Sliding Scale for Habitation

HOSTEL is posed on either side of the crest of ElSadd el-Aali, the High Dam at Aswan, Egypt. The two-faced structure marks a point of stasis and exchange along the two-mile arc of the dam. HOSTEL provides single accommodations and river transportation to and from Aswan for ninety-nine Nubian night workers who were displaced from their homes by the con-

struction of the dam and the flooding of Nubia by Lake Nasser.

The Ninety-nine workers are from the most recent generation of Nubians who have been forced to migrate this century. Nubians were first dispossessed of their homes by the building of the British Aswan Dam in 1902. In 1912 the dam was heightened and Nubians were compelled to move again. In 1933 they moved once more to avoid the rising waters. In 1940 the Egyptian gov-



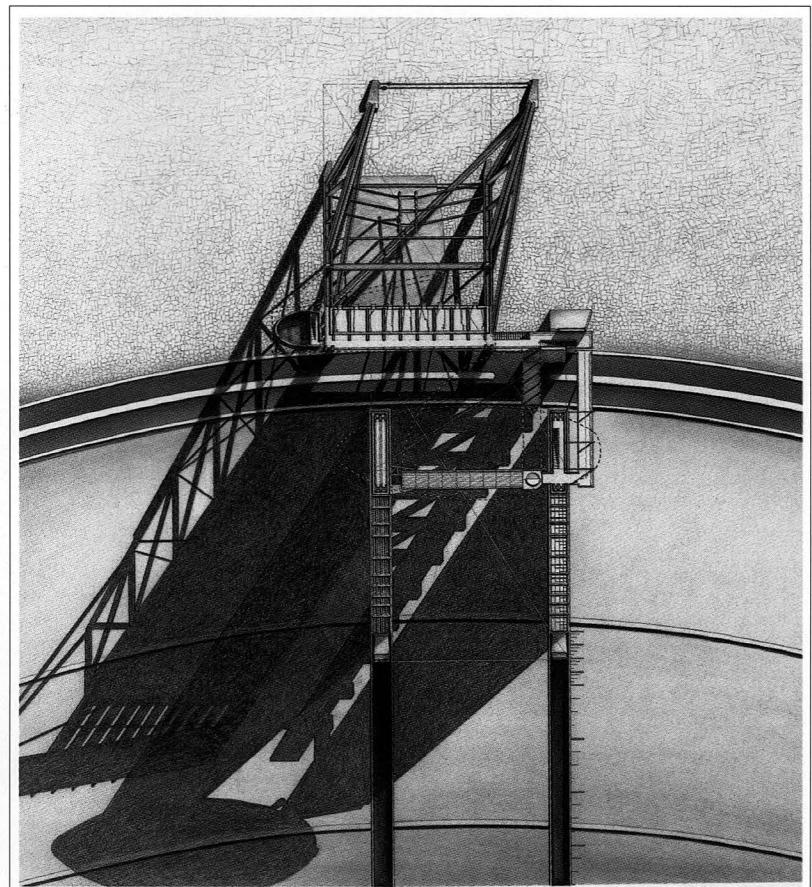
ernment offered them fertile land in Egypt, but the Nubians preferred their own country and proceeded to build other villages higher in the desert.

With the construction of the High Dam in 1963 Nubians were not able to relocate above the rising waters. Every town in Lower Nubia was flooded and over 120,000 people were forced to leave their land. The great majority of able-bodied men have sought to make a living to the North in Egypt.

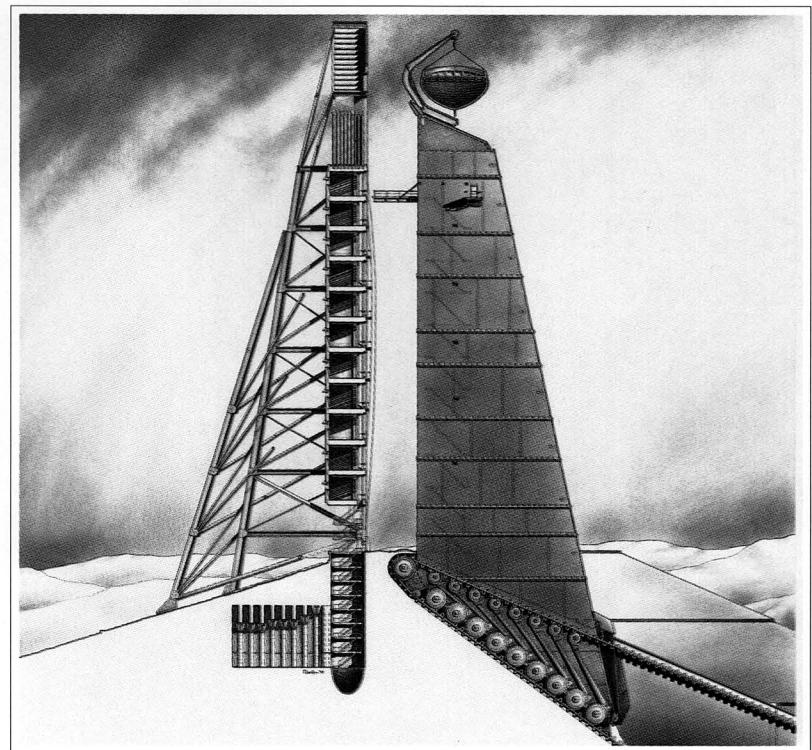
Hosts

South Pylon: Gold-painted skeletal steel with concrete accommodations for 99 Nubian night workers. At the foot of the Pylon is a bath/well and a concealed meeting hall.

North Pylon: Lead-plated travelling davit with flying porch and cedar bark (salvaged during flooding of Nubia). The 120-ton pylon descends every evening at sundown to deposit the workers on the Nile River for their jobs in Aswan.



Plan



Cross Section 61

ARCHITECTURE
CAN NEVER TOUCH
BOTTOM.

