

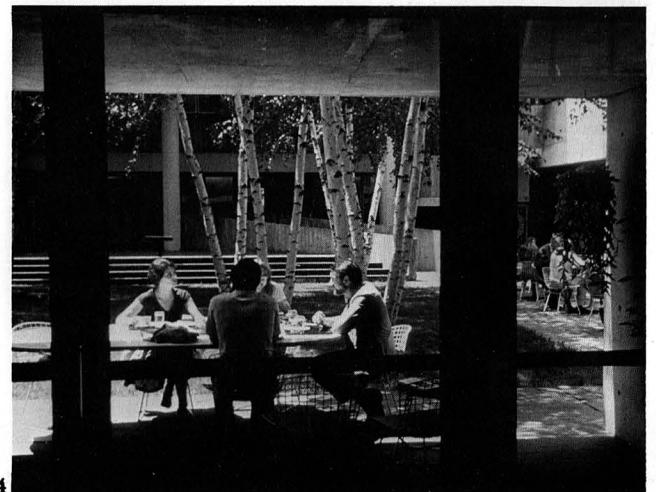
Architecture: Compositions for Living

Robert Geddes

Fifty years ago, architects were confident that their work contributed to the creation of a better society. That confidence has waned, particularly in America. Today people often regard architects as out of touch with society. They point to the failure of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing in St. Louis, abandoned and finally demolished because of a mismatch of housing type to inhabitant, to prove that architects are insufficiently informed about the people and society for whom they build.

Yet architecture and society are, in fact, inseparable. Without the organized forms of human life known as social institutions, which include the family, religion, the many aspects of work, and government, architecture would not exist. An invitation to design a house, a church, an office building, or a civic center is an opportunity to interact in the closest possible way with society and with people.

How does an architect begin to think about such a commission? Some of the answers lie in the history and practice of architecture, others in anthropology. Although individuals ultimately stand alone, they are social and like to be together, as the crowds in neighborhood bars and the Rockefeller Center prove. This need for companionship and the regulations necessary to give order to our daily interactions have given rise over time to our social institutions whose role is, in the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to "put a construction upon the

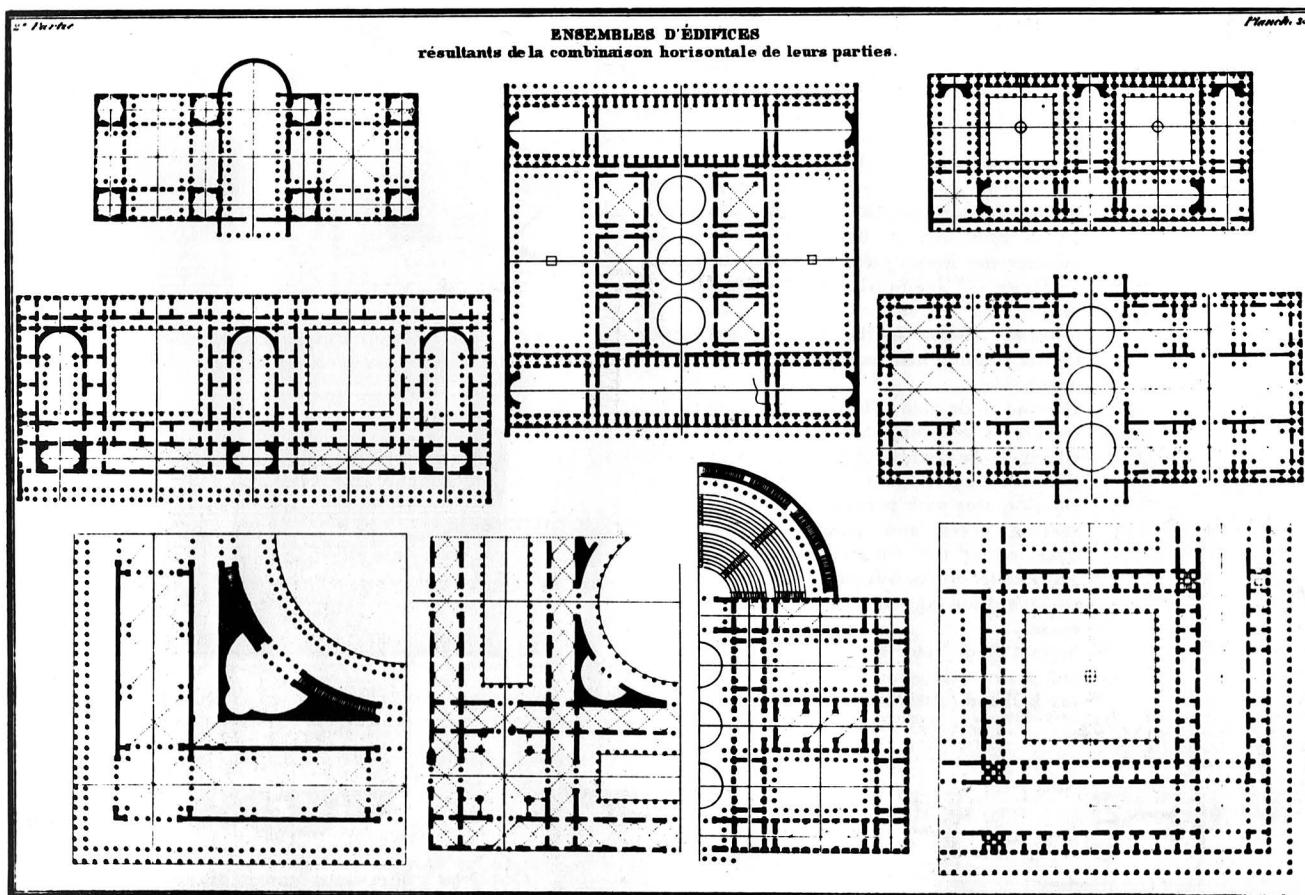


events" through which we live, making sense out of them and giving our lives form. By participating in the rituals, customs, and codes of behavior of institutions, we find it possible to live and interact with our fellow human beings in responsible and responsive ways.

1. **The Exchange, Amsterdam**, by Hendrik de Keyser, 1609-11. The open courtyard and cloister reflect monastic antecedents and prefigure later banking halls. (Print by C. Jz. Visscher)
2. **Girard Trust Bank, Philadelphia**, by McKim, Mead & White, 1905-8. The bank embodies the qualities of solidity and permanence expected in turn-of-the-century banks.
3. **Manufacturer's Trust Company, New York**, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill,

1954. The glass walls allow passersby to see the huge doors of the vault, expressing both the accessibility of the bank and the security it offers. (Photo by Ezra Stoller)

4. **The Dining Hall, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey**, by Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham, 1971. The setting encourages the interchange of ideas during the ritual of communal dining.



5. Plate from Jean Nicolas Louis Durand's *Précis des leçons d'architecture*, first

published in 1802. Durand suggested many ways in which to compose a

building from the elements of architecture.

But an institution not only provides the psychological and physical setting for actions; it also embodies certain values. A bank, for instance, functions as an abstract instrument of economic activity. To do so successfully it must convince potential clients of its security and solidity. Over the years, banks have done this through their buildings. The architecture of banks has changed in ways that clearly show the close relationship between the evolution of banking and of the buildings that shelter and express it. In the Middle Ages, when banking was a matter of face to face contact between two people, business was conducted in the banker's home. Later, it moved to the open courtyards of the exchanges such as those at Amsterdam and London (Figure 1). In the eighteenth century, as banking moved into separate premises, the new bank buildings characteristically contained a large central hall reminiscent of the open spaces of the

exchange — a feature that has persisted until very recently.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, when banks assumed a central role in industrial prosperity, they were housed in solid buildings that were the very embodiment of stability, such as McKim Mead & White's Girard Trust Bank in Philadelphia (Figure 2). On the other hand, the service aspect of modern banking is illustrated in the transparency of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Manufacturer's Trust Company in New York, built in 1954 (Figure 3). Its glass walls and clearly-visible vault inspire confidence in a new way. The advent of banking machines poses new challenges for architects. However, the personal touch of old-fashioned banking, conducted in reassuringly solid surroundings, is gone, leaving only an echo in the names, such as Harvey Wallbanger, given to the new machines.

The case of the bank clearly shows the architect's role in communicating the purpose of an institution as well as sheltering it. Like Pruitt-Igoe, it also demonstrates how important it is for the architect to observe and understand the institution in all its aspects — social, economic, political, and architectural — before attempting to design a building for it. The task is simplified because there is a clear connecting link between architecture and social institutions. That link is the concept of form. Form is, in this sense, the product of a set of components related to each other according to certain rules. The form of social institutions is determined by their organizing patterns which bring individuals into groups and foster certain types of interaction among them (Figure 4). The structure of operations in business and industry, the liturgical rituals of a church, and the family relations of a household are all different kinds of social form.

To create architectural form, an architect composes a building from a number of elements assembled according to the rules, customs, and styles evolved by our culture (Figure 5). These elements include rooms and corridors; doors and windows; walls, floors, and roofs; columns and beams; courtyards and walkways; domes and towers. The resulting compositions create the setting for everyday living.

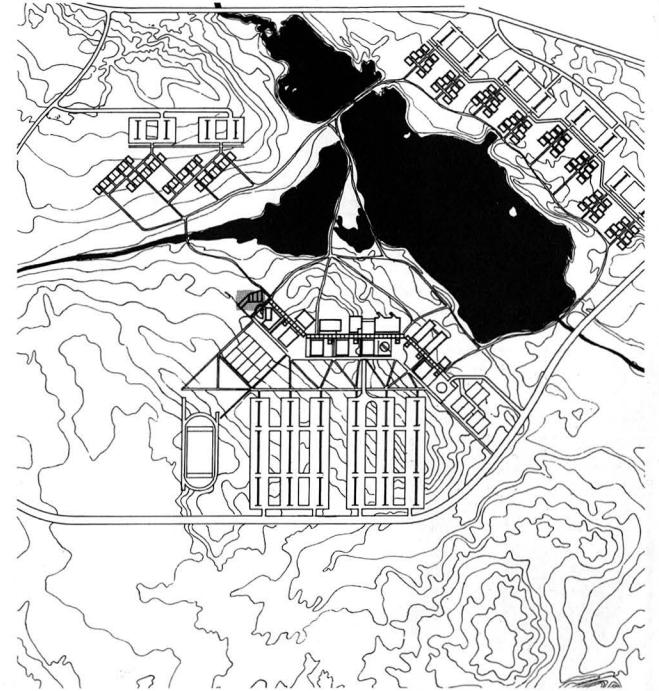
Form — a composition created by a number of elements related to each other by comprehensible rules — is, therefore, the same in both its social and physical manifestations. The architect who identifies an institution's components and their relationship to each other — as in the hierarchy within an office — better understands the task of creating a building that, in the organization of its own elements and materials, will shelter and express those functions and that relationship. Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia is a superb example of a successful match of the institution known as a college — an organized body of persons with common interests — and its physical setting. The library dominates two parallel rows of structures containing classrooms and housing for students and professors. The grouping of the buildings symbolizes both the primacy of learning and the fellowship of teachers and students in the shared pursuit of knowledge, while the architecture and pastoral setting recall the democratic ideals and intellectual fire of classical antiquity.

Yet the changes that have inevitably overtaken the University of Virginia serve to show that the architect should also be aware that the form of social life is not itself static. When either of its constituent parts — a set of components or the relationship between them — undergoes significant change, its form, too, will eventually change. When the evolution of the concept of privacy that began in the seventeenth century led to a transformation in the nature of the family, fundamental changes in the

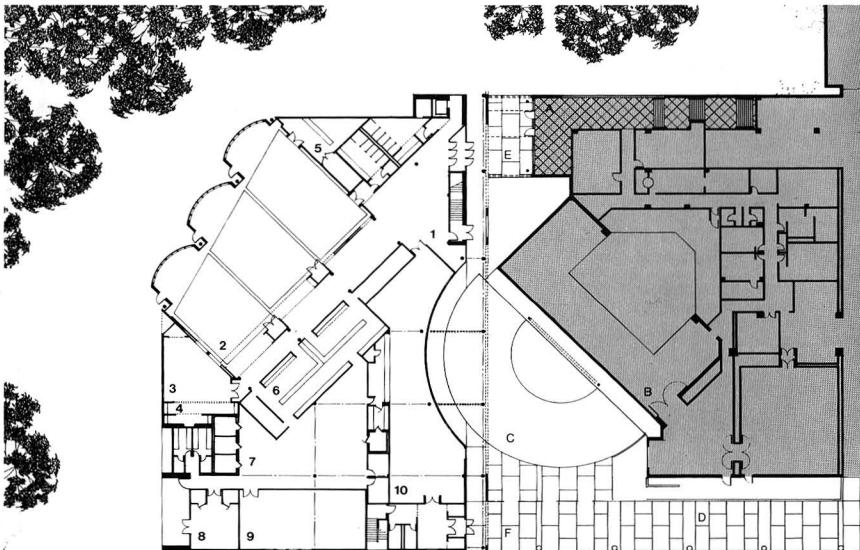


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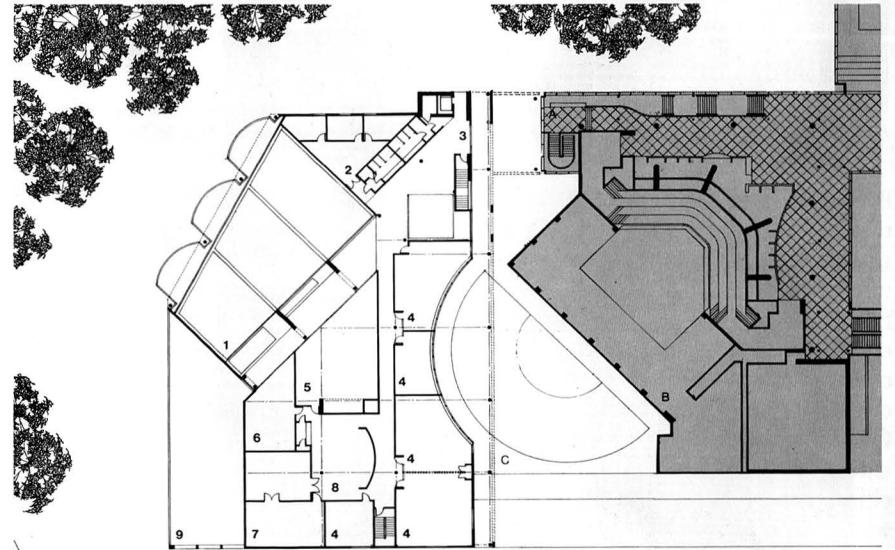
6. Doorways in the Bishop's Palace, Würzburg, by Balthasar Neumann, begun 1719. The interconnecting rooms illustrate the lack of privacy that prevailed before the adoption of the corridor.
7. Site plan. The Student Center's boundaries are dictated by the need to preserve the ecologically fragile Pine Barrens in which it is located. The Center terminates the linear gallery linking the College's academic buildings, establishing a transition to new dormitories to the south. The Student Center's dining hall faces a lake on the north side.
8. Ground floor plan. The Center's main feature is a dining hall serving 800 which can be readily subdivided. It has a two-story central lobby, seating, and circulation area with peripheral one-story seating areas and large windows overlooking the woods and lake. A Rathskeller looks out on a landscaped courtyard for musical and other college events.
9. Second floor plan. Lounges for active and passive recreation overlook the dining hall and courtyard.



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plan of houses followed (Figure 6).

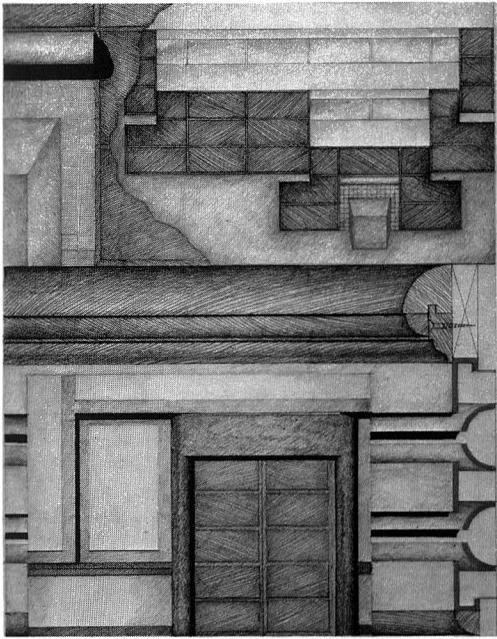
This adaptability of architectural and social forms to each other is crucial because it bears on the use and re-use of our buildings and cities as well as on the proper relationship of buildings and social institutions to each other over time. It is not enough for the architect to build for an institution as it exists to-

day. An understanding of its potential evolution is essential so that future alterations in its form, such as changes in the organization of the workplace or in the composition of the family, will not be hampered.

Buildings designed by architects for our institutions have been in the past, are now, and will be for some time to come, the stages on which

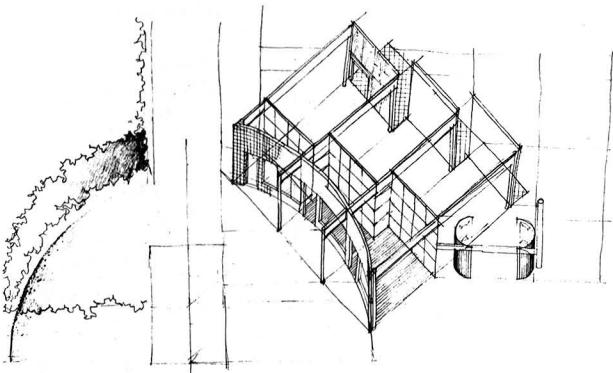
we act out our everyday lives. As a result, although architecture is not a powerful agent of change on the large issues of politics, social justice, economics, and the overall community structure, architects can make society a better place to live in through their discerning spatial organization of the social constructions we call institutions.

This scheme for the Stockton State College Student Center by Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham is presented as a case study embodying these intentions.

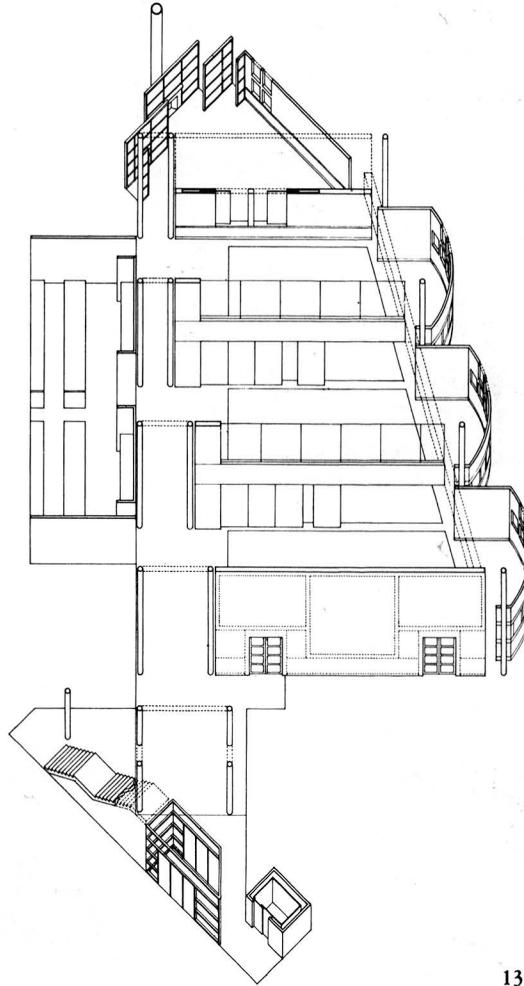


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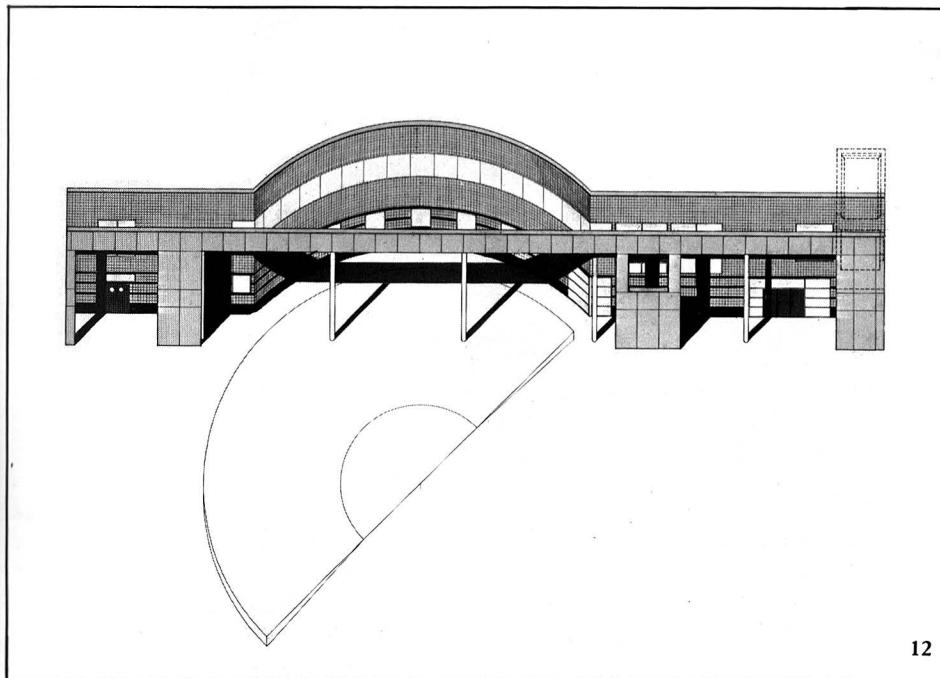
10. Details. The exterior wall surfaces of the Center are polychrome tile to relate to the tile and stucco of the dormitories.
11. Early Sketch. Early sketches established the volumes of the dining hall in relation to the curve of the courtyard facade.
12. Facade with screen. A metal screen wall continues the materials of the college gallery and theater into the Student Center.
13. Spatial study of Dining Hall.
14. Spatial study of Dining Hall ceiling.



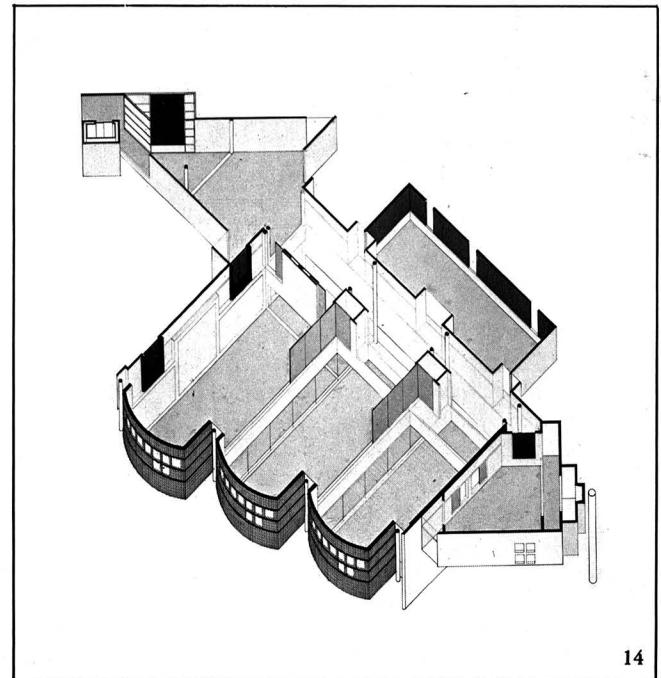
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