

The Roger T. Sermon Community Center

Kansas City, Missouri

Midgley Shaughnessy Fickel and Scott Architects Inc.

Background

The Sermon Center has a long history of change. The original building was erected as the Dodgion Street Power Plant in 1902. Extensive changes were made in the 1920's, with new west and south facades graced by tall arched windows and pilasters. Subsequently, several new sections were built to the east, resulting in a hodgepodge of asbestos-clad masses. With construction of a new central facility in 1958, the plant was relegated to a source of standby power. Later it became a municipal storage building. Located on the eastern periphery of downtown Independence, this once-proud symbol of public service was transformed into a community eyesore, subject to neglect and vandalism.

Program

In 1975, the City was granted \$3 million in federal Community Development funds for citizen participation projects. Citizens overwhelmingly voted to convert the old plant for use as a long-needed community center, restoring its symbolic function as a civic landmark. After two years of studies, Midgley Shaughnessy Fickel and Scott was hired to develop the new center.

The interior volumes and spatial divisions of the existing structure suggested possible uses which helped shape the program. The building contained several large open areas with high ceilings and windows. The spaces became the theatre, meeting rooms, and gym-

nasium. Only the northeast corner of the building, where the most substantial additions were located, was extensively modified. This new section contains offices, restrooms, multi-use rooms, and the entrance lobby. A parking lot and tennis courts lie to the north. Future site development includes a swimming pool and amphitheatre. The facilities are open to individual or group use, day and evening, and, with the exception of certain theatrical events, are free of charge.

Apart from normal programmatic requirements for a building of this type, only one stipulation was made: the character of the 1920's facades should be emphasized and the power plant imagery should be preserved. Thus, imagery became the primary issue to be addressed in the design. Expressing change through contrast was identified as a central objective. The mere combination of the past and present elements was not as important as the points of juncture — the spark that results from this proximity. The intent, then, was to preserve the memory of that spark, which, of course, has no physical presence, but can only be suggested.

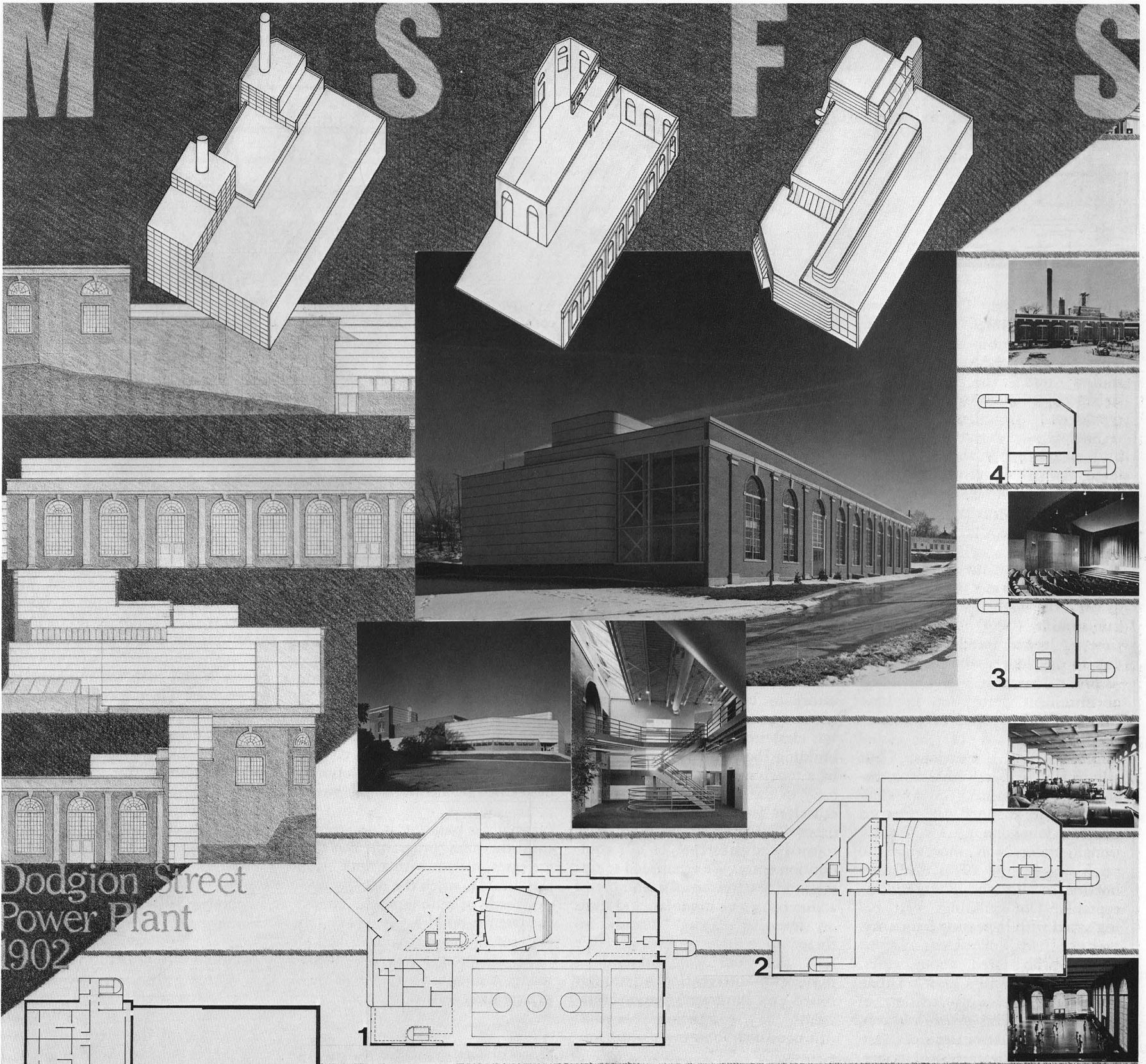
Solution

To follow these intentions and fulfill the programmatic requirements, the distinctive brick walls were preserved and cleaned, windows replaced, and holes patched. This allowed the west wall and southeast corner to continue the original, simple scale and rhythm along the busy street and

maintain its historical associations. The large glazed openings also illuminate the street corner at night. The only window introduced by the new design is actually a glass wall on the north elevation, which resolves the connection of old and new and picks up the scale of the existing arched windows. The only other new glazing is comprised of skylights and the long horizontal greenhouse. Thus competition with the rhythm and scale of the 1920's fenestration is minimized. Today metal panels are as cost-effective, common, and simple a sheathing material as brick once was. The metal panels are employed on the north and east elevations in a non-descript manner to focus attention on the older brick surfaces. The panels are applied horizontally and have linear trim to acknowledge the entablature around the corner, while they contrast with the old section's vertical emphasis. The reversal of colors on old and new surfaces (red brick with limestone trim versus tan panels with red trim) underscores their differences while tying the two together. The center's interior spaces frankly reflect a modern industrial vocabulary with exposed steel structure, pipe rails, cat walks, and isolated elements placed in open spaces. The use of these elements is intended to evoke the utilitarian character of the original facility.

The design respects the existing fabric by preserving its prominent external features and accommodating the program to its structure. As an intervention, it expresses

both dichotomy and integration. The new work, which would become anonymous if removed from its context, offers strong contrast. The dialogue is energetic. The city landmark continues to change.



Dodgion Street
Power Plant
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