

In its role as the Canadian Student Journal of Architecture, THE FIFTH COLUMN is pleased to introduce a new regular section featuring work from the Ten Schools in Canada. In future issues our readers can look forward to work from the Rome studios of Carleton, Waterloo, and Nova Scotia as well as to selected works from the other Schools. But this issue offers a special treat: work from Gulzar Haider's studio on Islamic architecture at Carleton University's School of Architecture in Ottawa.

by Gulzar Haider

# ALADDIN'S

A Fifth Year Studio Experience at Carleton

## NEW LAMP

### Issues

**A** LIFE of heterogeneous and occasionally contradictory experiences somehow organized under a fairly unified world-view has led me to declare to my students that **Architecture** is to construct a unity with simultaneously manifest attributes of:

- Life as derived from purposive use and human presence;
- Permanence as desire for timelessness;
- Elegance as "economy of means towards generosity of ends";<sup>1</sup>
- Space as sensorium of *raison d'être*;
- Form as expression of will imposed on matter;
- Meaning as expression of values;
- Beauty as the ultimate value, exalted but elusive.

I believe that design teaching is far more subjective than we care to acknowledge. A studio critic is burdened with the responsibility to raise a variety of issues that encompass the maddeningly wide world of architecture. A critic, however, magically transforms into a teacher the moment he touches upon those issues that resonate with his own declared positions and inner feelings. A good teacher takes care to profess his favourite issues without implying that the others are unnecessary or undesirable. A few design related issues that are special to me at this stage in my life are:

**Order:** Order is essential to the expression of the significant in any phenomenon. "Order is a necessary condition for anything the human mind is to understand."<sup>2</sup>

"Judgements of order are based on the perceptual discrimination of similar differences and different similarities."<sup>3</sup>

Ordering principles and devices therefore are key to the creation of an architecture of purpose and

meaning.

From the microcosmic dance of energy to the macrocosmic constellar carousels, order is essential to all existences. Implicit or explicit, depending on the hierarchical levels of observation, a sense of order spreads through all nature. Geometry is one language of order. Through this language we may not only understand the existing environment but transform, synthesise, or even postulate new ones. An architecture thus created - an architecture sought under the guidance of geometry - should have a simultaneity with the divine schema of all existence.

**Cultural Juxtapositions:** The gross claims and crimes of the 'International Style' notwithstanding, it is a fact repeatedly demonstrated that "human symbols do not merely refer to or describe other things, they also evaluate them and prescribe how to react to them. In brief: Peoples of different cultures see each other darkly through culturally ground, symbolic lenses."<sup>4</sup>

This issue translates itself to the following three problems:

What is the value of culture and tradition in contemporary architecture? Those who do not come to grips with this question in the context of selfhood are doomed to be torn apart among the various suspect camps and pseudo-movements. There is far too much ugly neo-Islamic architecture in the Middle East for the simple reason that architects and their clients have not seriously faced the above question. Unfortunately, even those who did went no further than their images of the Near-Eastern culture and tradition that came from the nineteenth-century Orientalist literature and Romantic painters who postulated an exotic world of silk, incense, magic, harems, and unknown mysteries and pleasures beyond the veils.<sup>5</sup>

Should an architecture transform as it emigrates from its indigenous and symbiotic cultural milieu to an alien

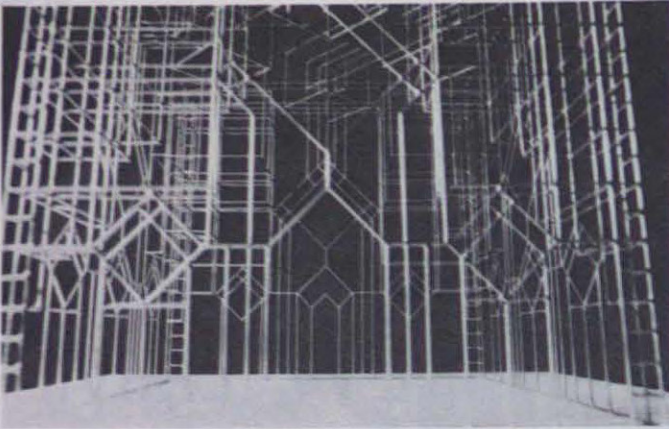
and usually hostile environment? What should distinguish a mosque in Chicago from the one in Cairo without compromising the timeless essentials of a mosque as a phenomenon?

How is an architect of one culture to respond to the challenge of designing for another culture? Architectural education as well as practice has an international character. AD, AA, AAQ, AR, P/A, JA, even **Oppositions** and **Lotus** are read and admired by students and, however secretly, by practitioners all over. The attractions and resulting suggestive powers of this medium are impressive. While architectural thought travels fast and wide, cultural sensitivities don't. Cultures do not change easily and if at all, at a much slower rate. So how does an architect rooted in Texas design a university campus in Kuwait? The question is rarely that of whether he **should** but rather that of how and on what basis?

**Space-Form and Meaning:** Whether one takes a rational linguistic, or structuralist, model or a phenomenological, experiential, and intuitive view of architecture, it can be agreed upon that Space-Form simultaneity is the bearer of architectural intentions and ultimately the medium for and lasting and consistent meaning emanating from architecture. There is a consciously intended or subconsciously operative meaning in what the architect creates. Of course, one has to realize that the memory, associations, and intentions of those who experience architecture can transform the architect's intended meaning beyond recognition. "Each form conjures up a thousand memories and after-images. No sooner is an image presented... that a new frame of reference is created which it cannot escape."<sup>6</sup>

One has to deal with the complexity of the current situation. Unlike Renaissance architecture which "was based on simple, absolute forms which were believed to carry intrinsic meaning (such as a circle which





signified harmony and repose),<sup>7</sup> the architecture of today has to deal with an audience whose frames of reference are not simple and pure but rather complex and amalgamated. So the question is how does one signify a meaning without being primitively literal in form and composition? Should one become a traveller on an architectural time-machine and start designing mosques and monasteries of the Middle Ages on the faith that these buildings signified profound meaning? One of my earlier students expressed both his wish as well as a hope in the following words:

Called for is a new perception and understanding of architectural forms as expressions communicating an appropriate feeling or mood enhancing perception and emotion. Architectural forms can be created and grouped by a series of calculated concepts such as metaphor, inversion, ambiguity, opposition, and juxtaposition to create meaning. The approach can be essentially rhetorical (poetic - expressive - emotive) and/or geometrical (intellectual - logical/highly structured - abstract) and produce a rich interplay of forms and multiple meanings.<sup>8</sup>

**Climate:** This is the original reason of architecture. Even in our present age of highly energized and mechanically manipulated buildings, we still cherish the architecture that respects climate, draws from it the life-giving benefits, and excludes with characteristic human will its disadvantages.

#### Studio

A commitment to the above issues in design education and a recent agonizing experience of designing the headquarter mosque-library-office building complex for the Islamic Society of North America led me to the thought of challenging the final year students at Carleton University with a similar, smaller but more

complex problem.<sup>9</sup>

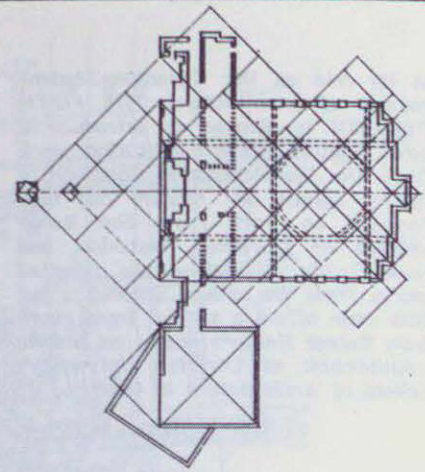
I believed at that time and with hindsight feel even more convinced that this problem served as an excellent vehicle to address the four issues discussed above.

The problem is to design a Centre for Islamic Students at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. The users are of heterogeneous linguistic and national backgrounds but are bound together by a common religion. An international Muslim faculty as well as the local residents of Coral Gables and the Greater Miami area will also use the building. The programme includes a mosque, a small library, a dining-lecture hall open to all of the university community, a Sunday school facility, offices, and the Imam's residence. The site is two-hundred foot by one-hundred fifty foot piece of land surrounded by roads on three sides. Red Road (running north-south on the west side of the site) is a major traffic artery, forms the boundary of the campus, and is a bus route. On the east side of the site are mature trees whose leaves spread as much as fifty feet into the site. The city by-laws would not allow the cutting of these mature trees. The Makka direction is at thirty three and a half degrees North of East.

#### Observations

I found that the students could respond quite imaginatively to the issues of essential order and the potential of geometric beginnings and transformations as an ordering device. For good students, this approach opened up possibilities that they would hardly have otherwise thought of. They later departed from their ordered beginnings at discrete locations of special significance. Weak students seemed limited and constrained by the notions of order and geometric explorations.

Issues of Islamic architecture in an alien environment and concerns of appropriate forms and symbols to



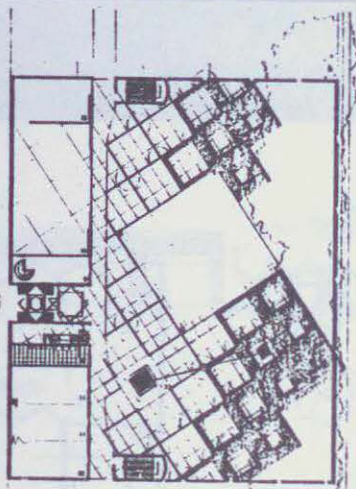
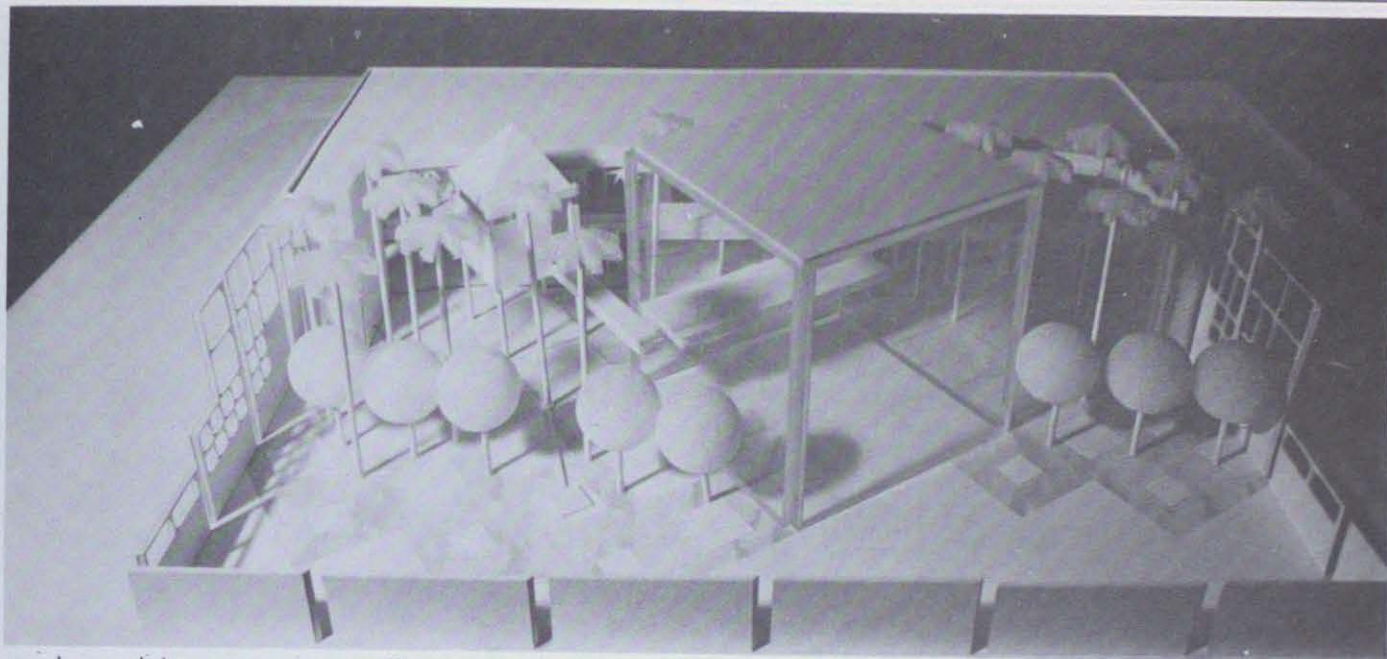
Lesley Watson-Seguin

signify the special nature of a religious space caused considerable debate. There was a total diversity in the architectural response ranging from the mosque as a pavilion or a glass jewel box in the garden to the mosque as a pearl in a fairly anonymous institutional oyster. There were no traditional minarets and only two solutions had a clearly expressed dome. A variety of formal solutions suggested interior convergent heavenward spaces. Almost all students struggled a great deal with the notion of Islamic gardens and the use of water as paradisaical illusion. Materials, colours, textures, and detailed patterns were talked about, but their actual choice remained an unfulfilled wish. For me, seeing this intense process of design by Canadian students for a building in Florida for Muslim students from all corners of the world suggested that the fabled Lamp of Aladdin is even more magical than we ever thought before. What emerges from the thick smoke depends upon who possesses the lamp, where it is rubbed, what intentions are invoked at that instant, and who sees the emergent reality. I like this new lamp. □

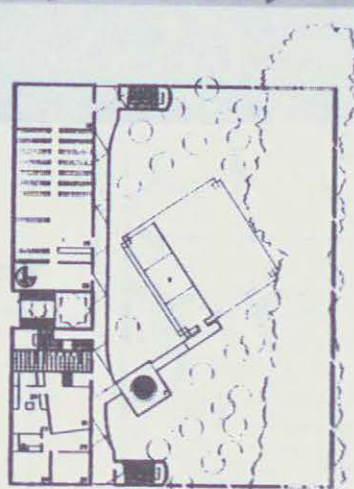
#### Notes

1. Carmen Corneil heard saying this at a reception in Toronto, 1979.
2. R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 1974, n.p.
3. D. Bohm, "On Creativity," *Structures Implicit and Explicit*, Vol. 2, 1973, pp. 195-196.
4. O.L. Reiser, *Cosmic Humanism and World Unity*, 1975, p. 12.
5. P. Jullian, *The Orientalists*, 1977, n.p.
6. E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, 1979, n.p.
7. C. Jencks and G. Baird (ed.), *Meaning in Architecture*, 1969, p. 17.
8. T. Zimmerman, "Towards a Higher Consciousness of Form", Independent Study at Carleton University, 1976, p. 13.
9. This problem was also done in a studio I offered at the final year level at Carnegie-Mellon University

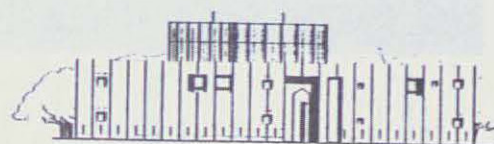




MAIN LEVEL PLAN



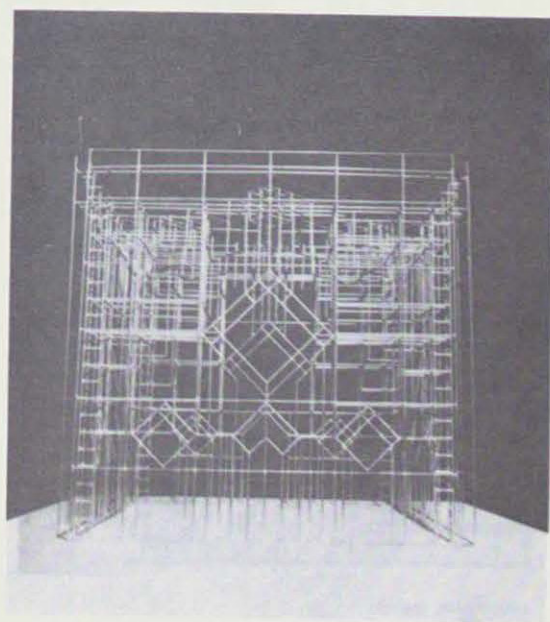
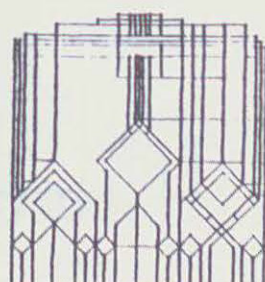
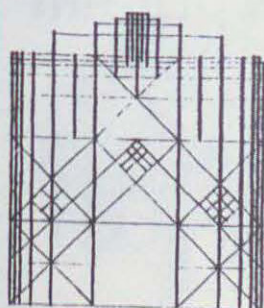
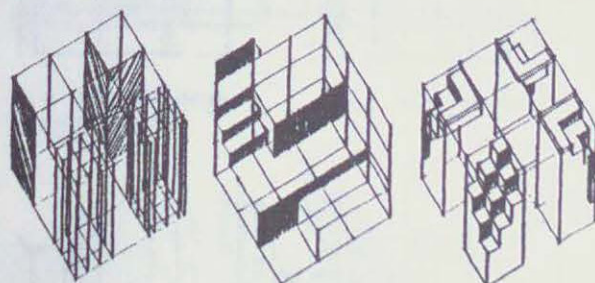
SECOND LEVEL PLAN



WEST ELEVATION

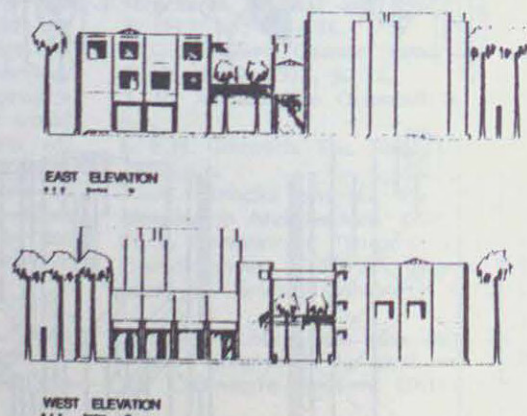
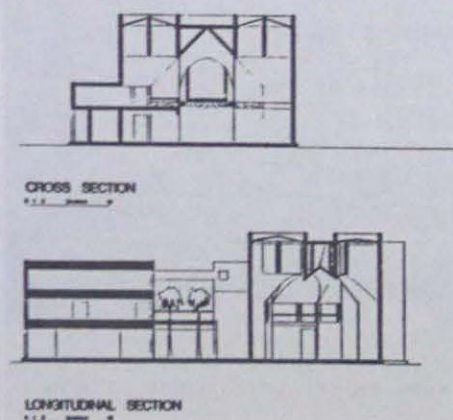
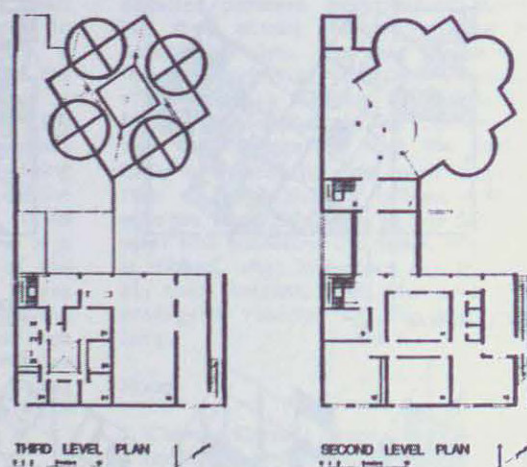
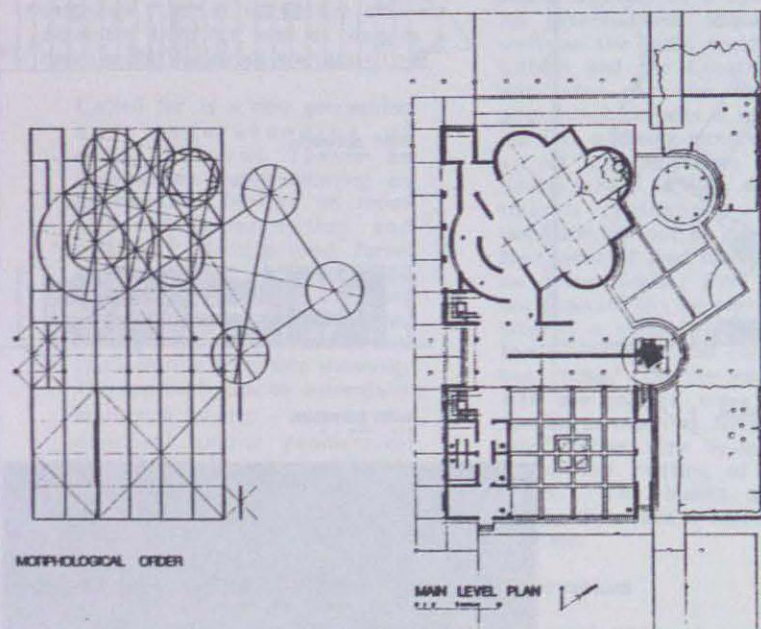
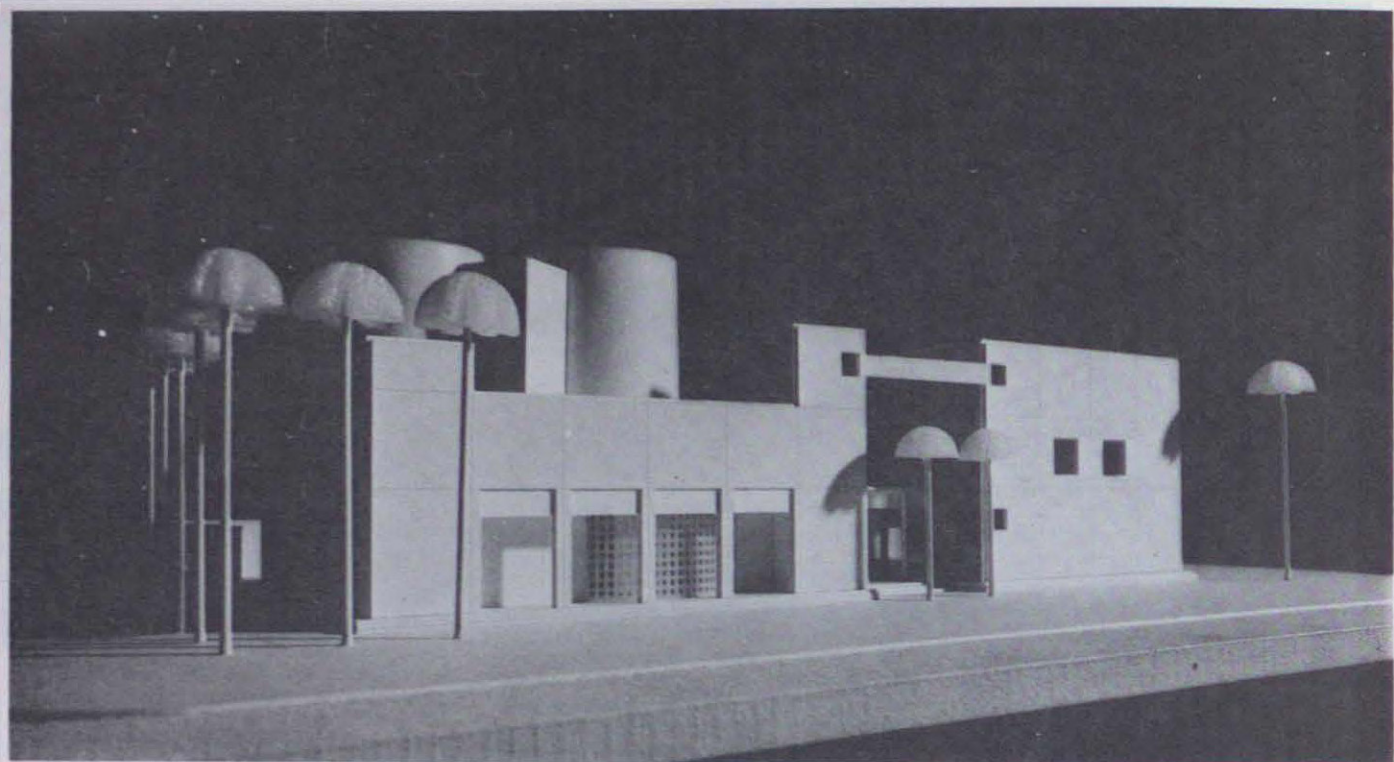


EAST ELEVATION



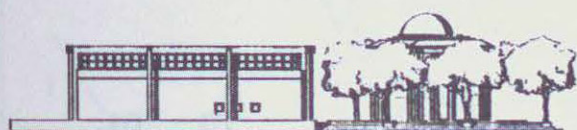
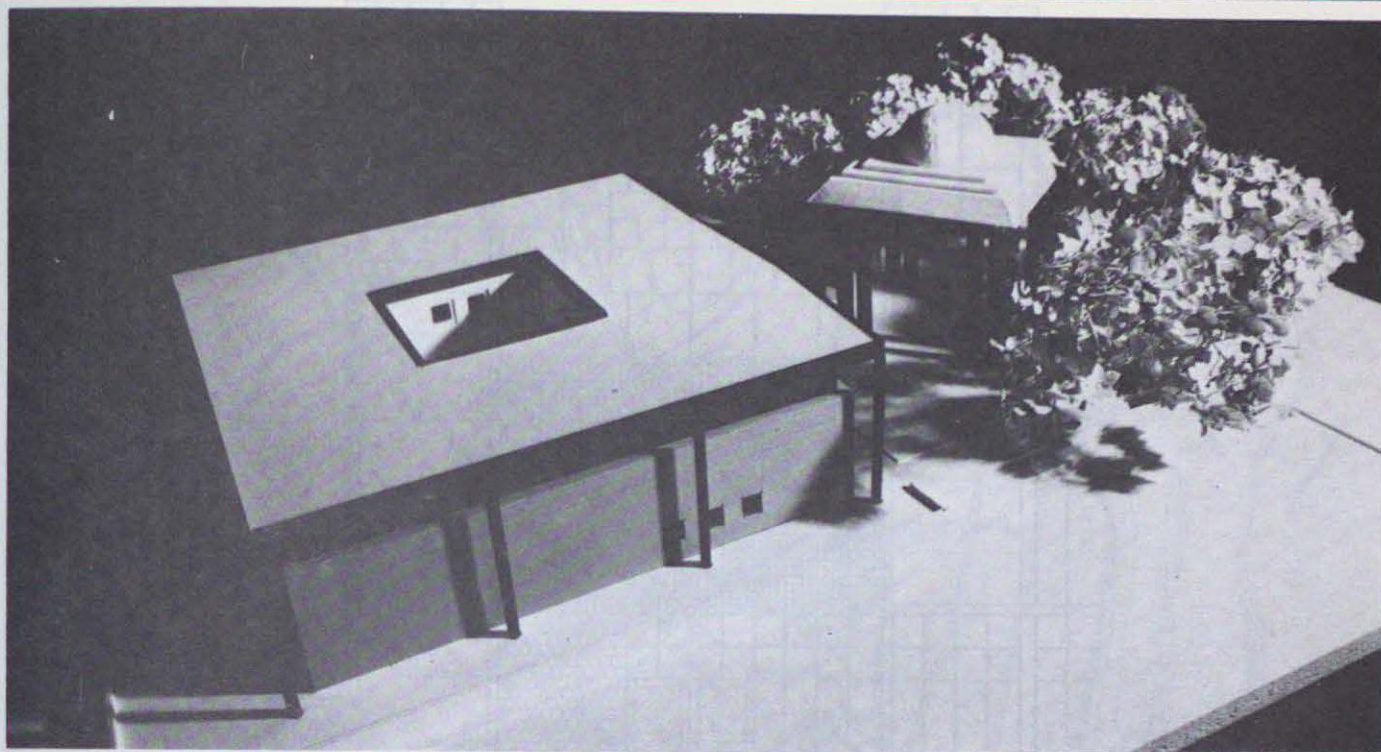
Greg Sather





Cal Smith

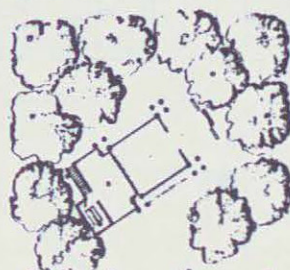




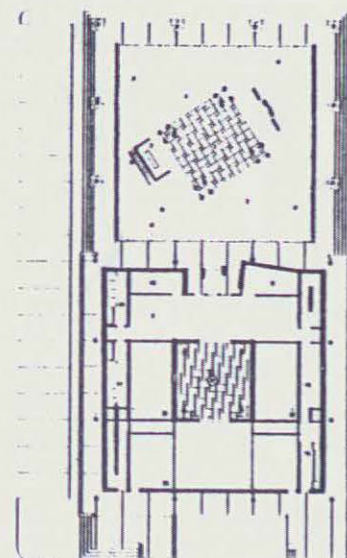
WEST ELEVATION  
1/8" = 1'-0"



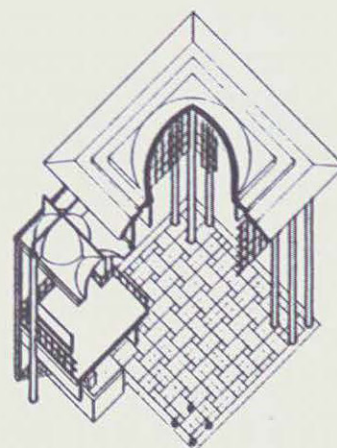
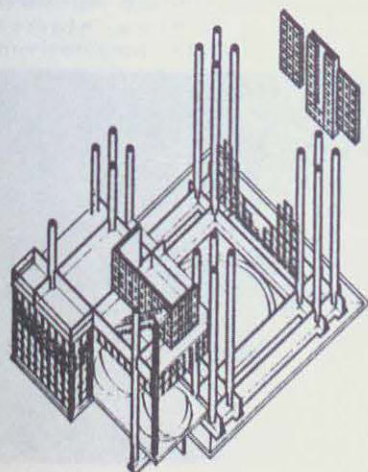
LONGITUDINAL SECTION  
1/8" = 1'-0"



SECOND LEVEL PLAN  
1/8" = 1'-0"

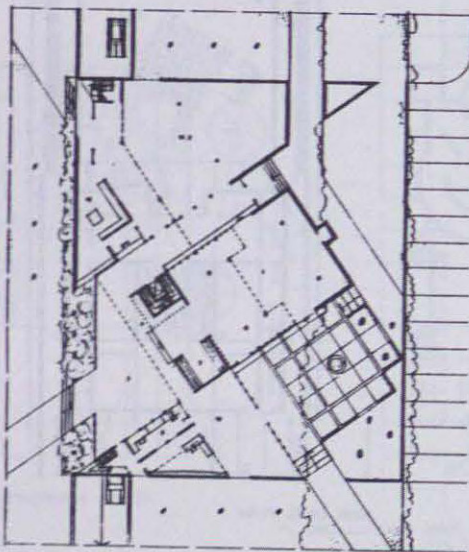
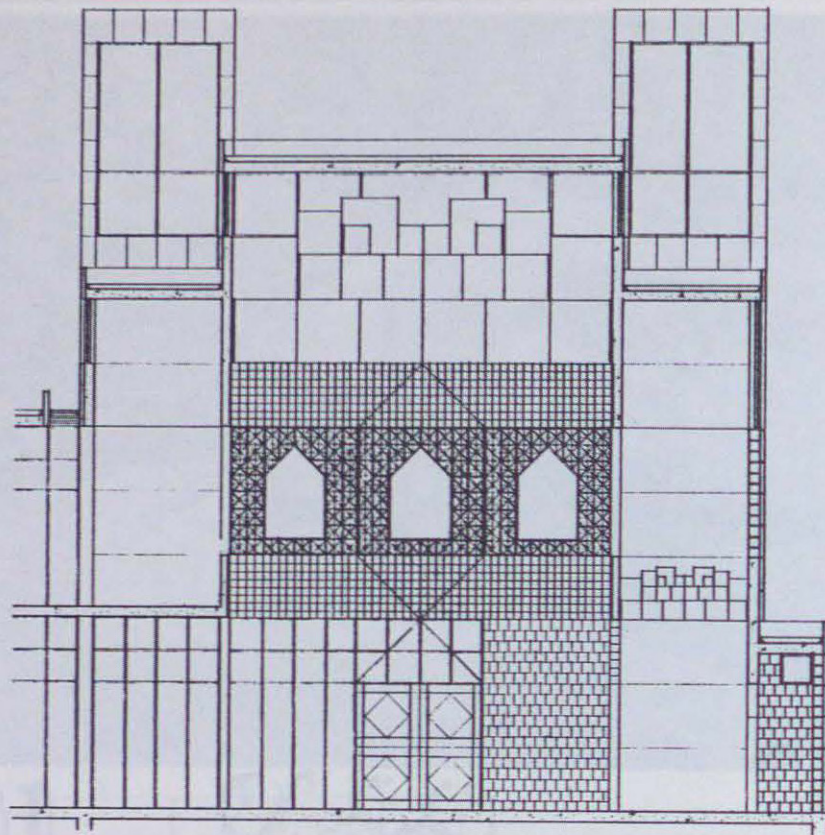


MAIN LEVEL PLAN  
1/8" = 1'-0"

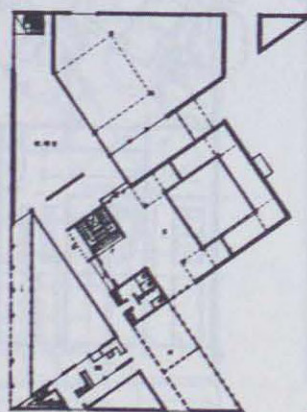


Mary Jo Hind

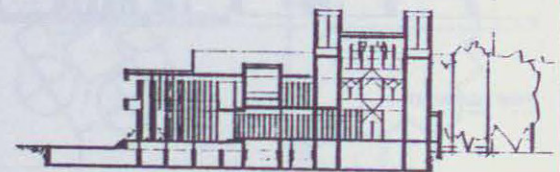




MAIN LEVEL PLAN  
1/8" = 1'-0"



SECOND LEVEL PLAN  
1/8" = 1'-0"



CROSS SECTION  
1/8" = 1'-0"



THIRD LEVEL PLAN  
1/8" = 1'-0"

Glen Wilcox

