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Beyond Function

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Beyond Function

I've always been fascinated by the idea of a painter confronting a white canvas—I've never done that myself. What does an artist think about? I fantasize about it. Architecture is so cluttered with problems of function, things that the painter confronting the white canvas doesn't have to deal with, that architects hide behind a lot of those things and develop rationales based upon functional issues such as keeping the water out and the sun in or out. All those things are very important; I don't intend to demean them. But, how do we go further?

For me there was the one-room building. It was as close as I could get to that pure problem in which the functional issues are so simple that you are faced with only the formal gesture. It was the closest I could come to that fantasy of the painter's experience. I started doing very simple one room buildings. That led to trying to connect them, to making connections between differentiated objects, and that led to a whole vocabulary of connections.

In a 1964 studio-residence for the graphic designer Lou Danziger, I made two objects that are connected on a busy Los Angeles street. I was interested in the texture of plaster, in getting a texture and a color that never had to be painted. I was also interested in the idea of connection, of putting pieces together, in a way very similar to what I am still doing, twenty years later. I suppose we only have one idea in our lives.

In designing a studio for the artist Ron Davis, I became interested in the paintings in which he used perspective. I tried to use that idea to explore making a single barnlike space that would be like a found building, in the way that artists find old warehouses. The sculptural effect of the building would be a part of his work as well as a part of mine. It would sit on the landscape in an uncompromising way and deal with the terrain. Inside it would be changeable and malleable to respond to his life. We made a big space and then built what he needed inside. There is a great difference in technologies in different parts of the country. In California they



*Danziger Studio-Residence, 1964
Hollywood, California

Ron Davis Studio, 1972
Malibu, California

(opposite)
Norton House, 1983–1984
Venice, California

*All projects on pp. 2–11
by Frank O. Gehry and
Associates Inc.



Familian House, 1978
model
Santa Monica, California



Gunther House, 1978
model
Santa Monica, California

(opposite)
Gehry House, 1977–1978
Santa Monica, California



slap it all together like rough carpentry. In the Davis studio we used rough carpentry as a finish. While we worked on this, we were in some sort of dialogue with his painting and with my building.

I think we all agree that buildings under construction look better than most buildings finished. So I tried to capture that in a house for an art collector. There's an immediacy about it—a kind of presence and a precipitous feeling that one finds in gestural painting—the feeling of having been made just a few minutes ago. I was trying to capture that in this unbuilt house, and in subsequent work.

I became interested in chain-link fencing not because I like it, but because I don't. The culture seems to produce it and absorb it in a mindless way, and when we proposed to use it in a way that was decorative or sculptural, people became very upset. There was a discrepancy: people may have had it around their tennis courts, around their swimming pools, or around their backyards, where it was only chain link. But if I proposed to use it as a screen in front of their houses, they were annoyed and confused.

For a beach house the client was only going to use on weekends, a big point was made about security, about having a house that could safely be unoccupied during the week. So chain link made a great deal of sense. I hung fencing in various ways and played with the shadows one could achieve, growing in part out of the Ron Davis paintings. The owner sold the plans and the lot to someone else and they called me and said they wanted to build the house exactly the way I had designed it, except for one minor change. Yes. So we didn't build that one. I always work on things in sets, like some of my artist friends who work in series. In architecture, though, it takes a longer time.

In my own house, we built a new house around an old one. I was fascinated with seeing an old house inside, keeping it intact and making it seem more important than it really was. In our neighborhood, you can't see into the houses. They have the blinds pulled and everybody is hiding from everybody. I wondered if you could make something that people could see into without losing privacy. With the kitchen window I was interested in



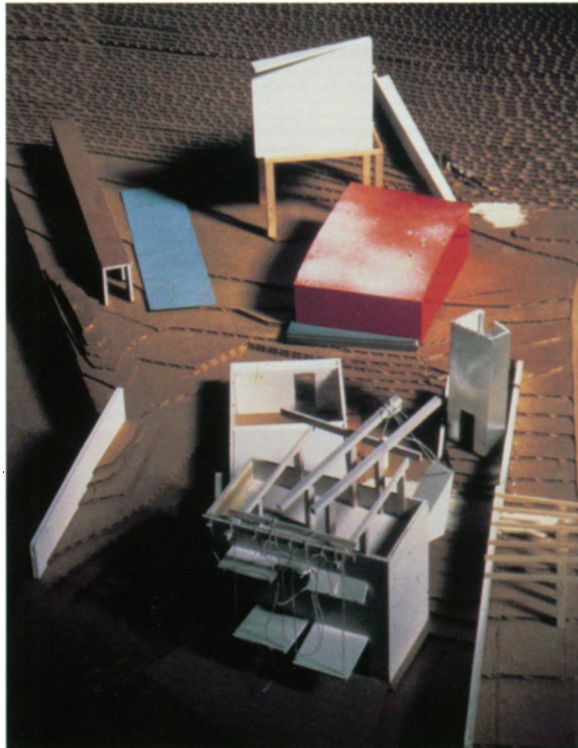
building around the house, trapping the ghost of Cubism inside. The ghost is trying to crawl out—and that's what I intended. I tried to make each window or opening a piece in itself. It all blends together, using the idea of carpentry as a given and then playing with glass in a way that suggests that the piece is turning the corner. There are reflections and pieces that look like reflections.

One window was made by taking a hammer and banging a hole and then gluing a piece of glass on it. It never leaks—all the others do. The skylights feel to me as though the house is submerged in water, in the ocean. The imagery of water and ocean keeps recurring in my work.

In the Spiller house, two separate buildings are connected with ramps and bridges. The two buildings, made of corrugated and rough wood framing, became a studio apartment in front and a tall apartment for the owner in the back. The owner had worked with Charles Eames for a number of years and she was as fastidious as the Eames office about detail. When she started building the house, she insisted on

Spiller House, 1980
Venice, California

House for a Filmmaker,
1981 model
Los Angeles, California



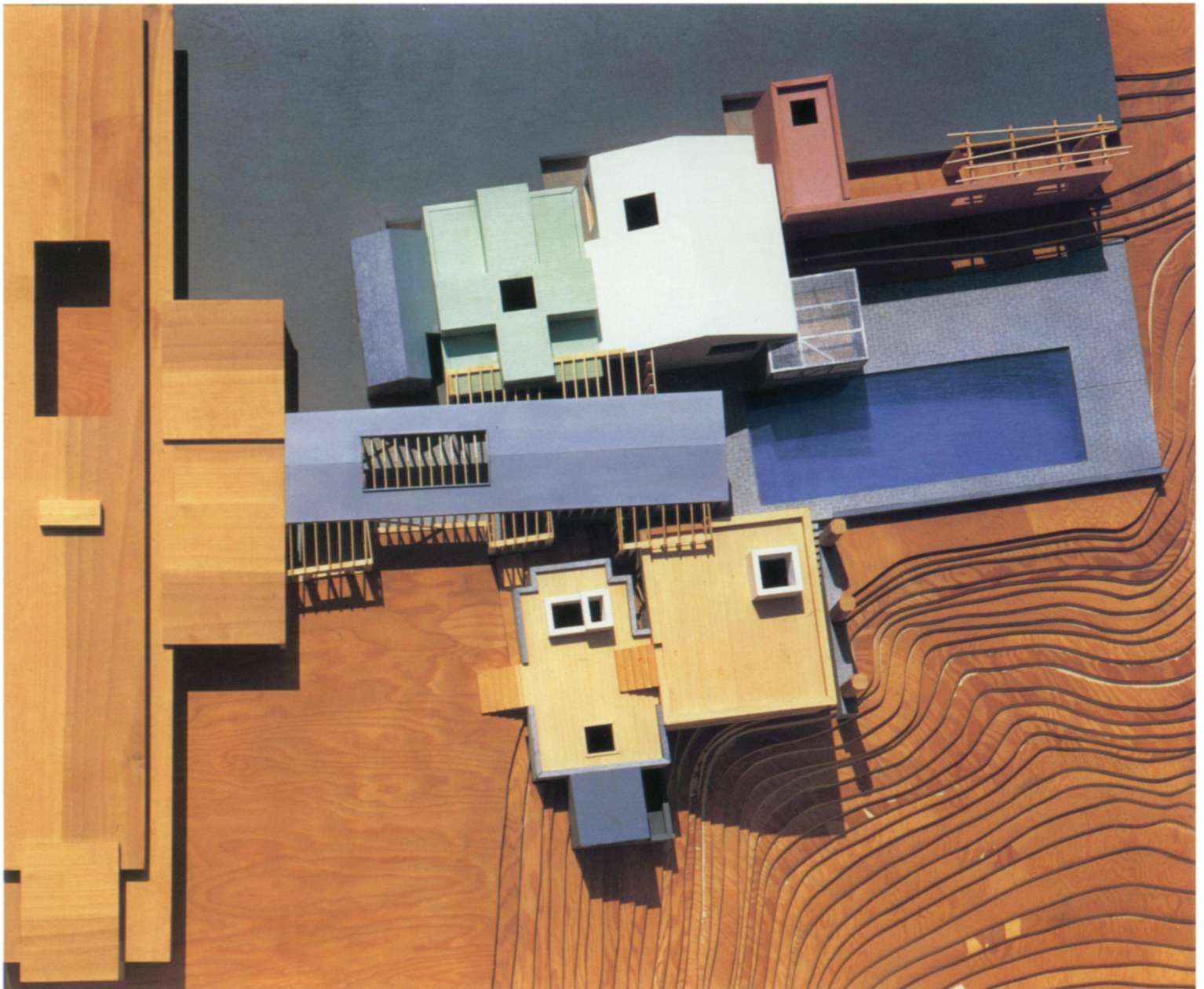
selecting all the lumber and supervising the carpenters very carefully. Some of the carpenters had worked on my other projects and knew that the framing was going to be exposed, but here we got a hybrid of finished rough framing and absolutely impeccable lumber selection.

In a project for a bachelor filmmaker, a number of separate structures made the house. It was only partially built. There is a bedroom building that has all the framework on top and a stairway. When he came home at night, he could pull up the stairway and project his movies on the screen, which is a wall of the guesthouse. The red building is a garage. Next to the pool we made a long hall. I guess this might have something to do with the painter Morandi, the idea of placing dissimilar objects next to each other. The owner asked for a house in which he would go between the rooms by going outdoors, in the spirit of a Spanish courtyard house, but of course we transformed that. It sits in a canyon with trees around it. The building in the middle is the living room; it has a glass roof and you can see all the trees. The bedroom building was made with plywood panels, like a piece of furniture.

Twenty years after I built my first house for the Steeves family it was bought by new people, the Smiths, who looked up the original architect, and after some deliberation hired us. They wanted to double its size. The neighborhood had changed considerably over time. Being an ardent contextualist, I took that idea and proposed to build separate rooms. The green cross is the kitchen and the white is a family room and there's a service porch and a bathroom and then a garden room done with wood framing. To the left of the garden room is a master bedroom and bath. It was the collision or putting together of those images that I thought of as contextual. This house was turned down by the neighborhood association because they said it didn't look like a house.

This idea became an important one for me and I kept working with it. The connections between the different parts and the way they connect—the awkwardness of it—was something important to me in this study. It was actually on this house that the fish started. [The fish has become an iconic image in Gehry's oeuvre.] I had designed a colonnade against the brick piece. I wanted to continue the colonnade in front of the green kitchen. I

Smith House, 1981 model
Brentwood, California



had fantasized building a big eagle to immortalize a drawing I had made for the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition; I was going to build a 12-foot maquette of that. Then the idea of having a fish standing upright started and led me down the fish path. Combining these different objects and creating a courtyard tract house was an

exciting possibility. The pieces were very simple, fitted together around a court, barely touching or joining, and creating a village or compound. This idea is one I've explored for tract housing and haven't had a chance to build. If I had a lot right now, this is the house I'd build for myself.

Benson House, 1981
Calabasas, California

(opposite)
Wosk Residence,
1982–1984
Beverly Hills, California



A small house I did build for the Benson family was based on that idea. The brown tower is the bedroom building; the parents are on the top and the children's rooms are below. In the blue building are the living room, dining room and kitchen. The children are to have a sort of fantasy on the roof that is a playhouse. The carports and the roof structure are still to be done. This house has a moat, a 6-foot separation between the living room and the bedrooms. You have to walk outside, which allows for great privacy and is a pleasant passage in a mild climate. There are a lot of benefits to this idea in a small house. When the grandparents come to visit, they are given the living room building, which is like a hotel. You walk up on top of the roof and back down to the entrance. It is a processional entry, and I became fascinated with the asphalt shingles . . . of course, they're fishlike. When you're in the rooms, you see parts of the other buildings as part of your own composition, and it makes the house feel larger and more private.

In 1982 I was asked to make a penthouse apartment in Beverly Hills. We proposed to tear off the top floor and rebuild it, because we would be able to add four or five more feet in height if we held back from the sides. It

seemed that doing this would take a building that was really out of context and start to change the scale to make it more compatible with the two-story buildings around it. When I presented it to the Beverly Hills arts jury, they said they liked it better the way it was.

I carried the image of village and rooftop from Chambord, and pretended they were in the city. I think the image of that great French chateau has stayed in my mind over the years. The fireplace was made in sympathy with the high-rise buildings in Century City. My client, who is an artist, became very interested in tile and she started to make a lot of Art Deco-like tile. I was going to pretend that I was Gaudi too, and I made the tile fireplace. In the living room, the forms all come together creating the feeling of layering in this complex.

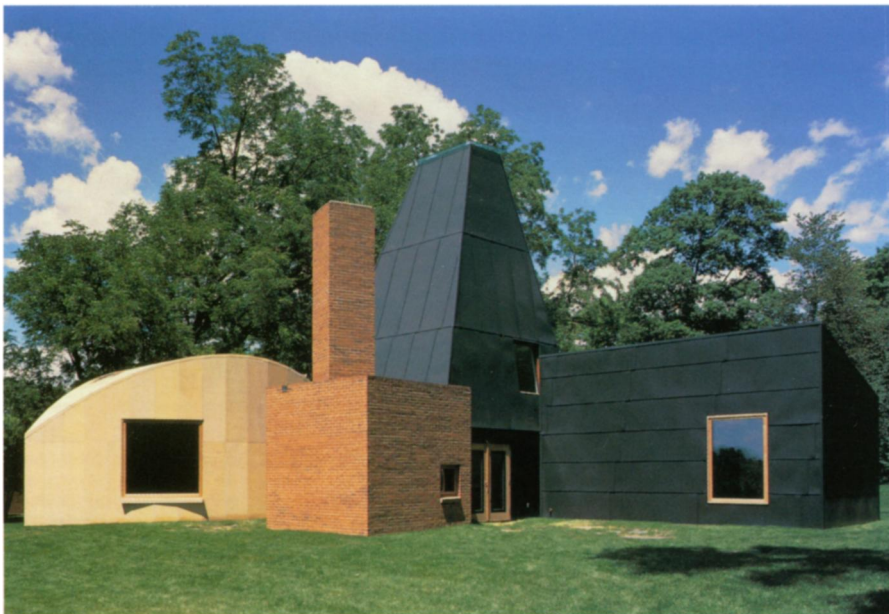
Another client, with another kind of fantasy, was a screenwriter who was a lifeguard when he was young. I picked up on that and gave him a lifeguard tower where he could write his screenplays. His wife is also an artist. She is Japanese, and I made a little shrine over her studio. I tried very hard to take in the context of Venice and deal with it, and I think my client is in the tower looking at the beach traffic (p. 2). In the house, I used the view of the roof of the building next door and incorporated it into the room. The idea was to weave the building into the texture of Venice and to utilize that texture internally as part of the house instead of trying to dismiss it, which is impossible anyway. I wanted to make a positive kind of connection. The decks are designed to be private, yet open to the ocean.

The owner of a recent house in Brentwood, California is the current ambassador to Finland. His wife is trained in architecture. She worked for me once at the period of time when I was doing a little tract house that I liked and wanted to build for myself. She came to us with the idea that we would build that tract house for her, so we began with that model. It seemed very crowded to me. The Schnabels have become very involved with the business methods of Finland and use of the sauna. I reflected on



Schnabel House,
1986 model
Brentwood, California

Winton Guest House,
1983–1986
Wayzata, Minnesota

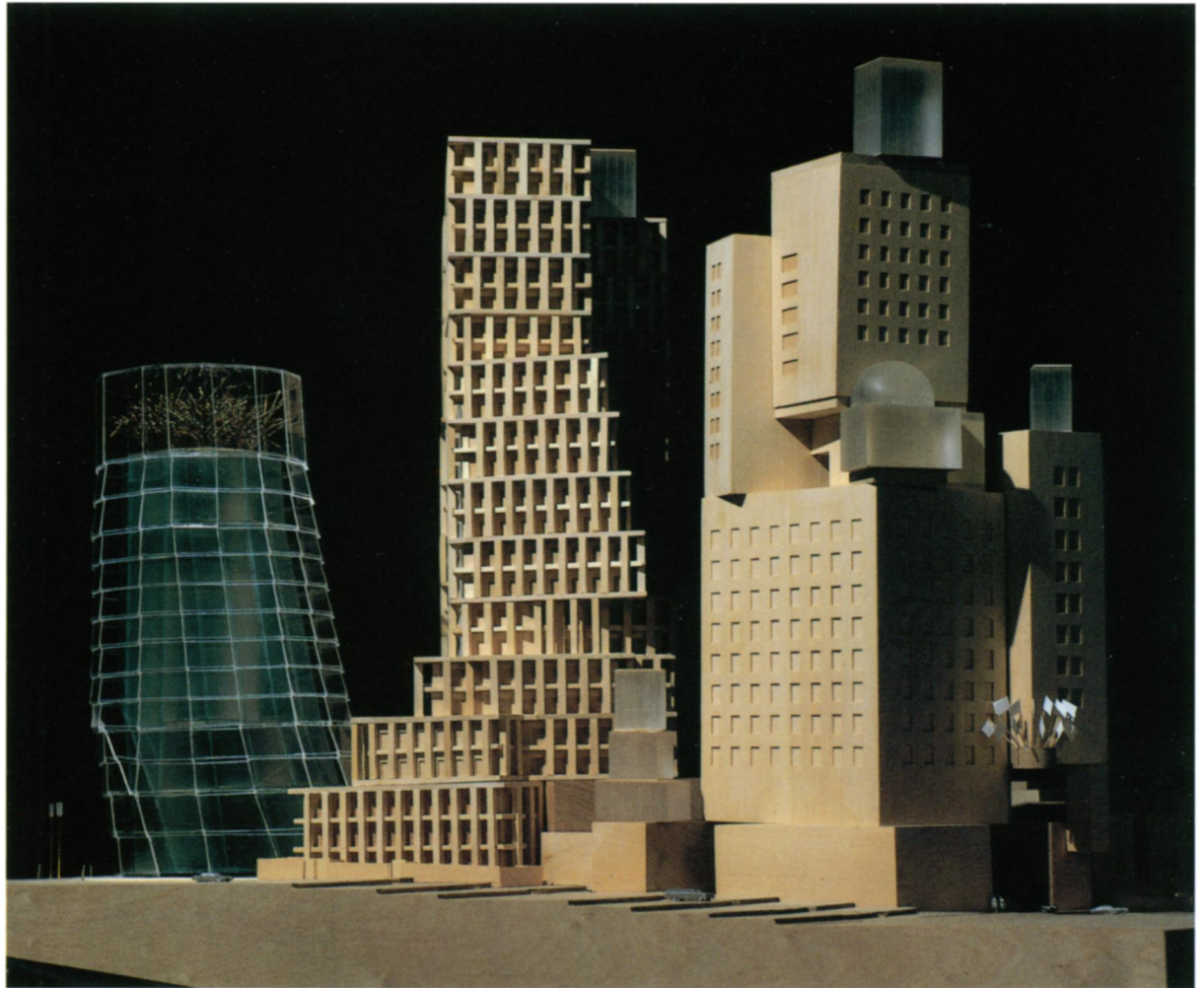


that and tried to make a place for them that would incorporate a sauna and a lake, like the one we experienced when we visited them in Finland.

The front building will be the garage and on top is the servants' quarters. The domed building is a guesthouse; Mrs. Schnabel requested a dome somewhere in this house. You enter the living room and off to the left is the kitchen, which looks out to the view, and there are bedrooms above. The main house is up on top, the master bedroom and private areas relate to the small lake. Behind it are the exercise rooms, the sauna and the bathrooms. The idea is that all these pieces will just sit in the lawn, like pavilions.

A recent guest house in Wayzata, Minnesota relates to an existing house by Philip Johnson. When first confronted with this project, I was nervous about what Mr. Johnson might think of my intrusion into his work. A long hedge divided the property and I decided to build on the other side of the hedge, to avoid intruding on the house. So we started on the east side of the hedge with a group of small rooms. Since this is a house involving children and grandchildren coming to visit, the idea of having some fantasy associated with it was interesting to the clients and to myself. Although we started with a log cabin, we wanted to try to make the buildings a little abstract so that there was something to look at from the main house. As we started making the forms more minimal, the log cabin we started with finally got drummed out of the place, appropriately. The final scheme is very small, just two bedrooms, a living room in the center and a large space with a fireplace alcove, a very tiny kitchen and a long bar and stairway to a children's loft. Originally that little roost had an observatory which also became an intrusion and we took that away. We pared it way down more and more so that in the views from the existing house you wouldn't see windows. All of the windows are on the other side, looking out into the landscape. The curved shape is covered with a local stone. We tried to get the brick of the Johnson house for the fireplace, or come close

Turtle Creek Housing,
Hotel, Office Building, 1986
model
Dallas, Texas



to it. The garage building is covered with Finnply, which is a plywood I used on Loyola Law School. It's a plywood that's not very fancy, but it's a beautiful color and it holds up for at least five or six years outside.

The small loft is covered in galvanized metal and the central tower is painted black metal. There's an uncanny, inadvertent relationship between the central tower and the fireplace to the Philip Johnson studio, the little stovepipelike thing he did in New Canaan. The new Philip Johnson was creeping into my house for the Wintons, and as I was doing this, he was building a small chain-link pavilion out in New Canaan.

House extends into housing in an unbuilt project that shows where the fish and scales have gone, the indeterminate structures and all the things I've been playing with. It's housing and a hotel and office building in Turtle Creek, Dallas, for the developer Vincent Carrozza. You enter an oval courtyard for the housing. The office building is way in the back behind the housing mass, and the hotel is on the right. The study of fish scales and glass has at least crept into the fantasy of this project. Then the skin of the large building has an indeterminate quality. I don't know if it will be realized this way, but I like the idea of that form and the movement and feeling of it.