

Philip Johnson

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JOHNSON

In an intellectual atmosphere of casual heaviness in design, of careful not-design, or at least a look of to-hell-with-it, it is difficult to write of my work. It seems I cannot but be Classically inspired; symmetry, order, clarity above all. I cannot throw around cardboard boxes, or make a pseudo-functional arrangement of air conditioning ducts into a *trouve'd* type of design.

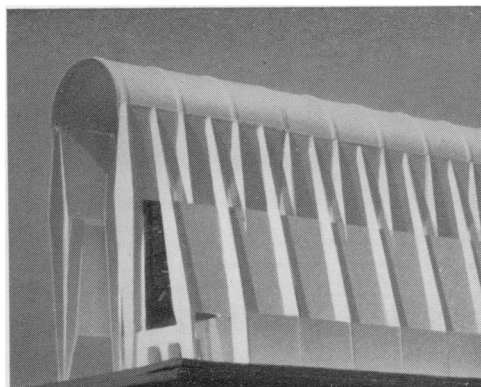
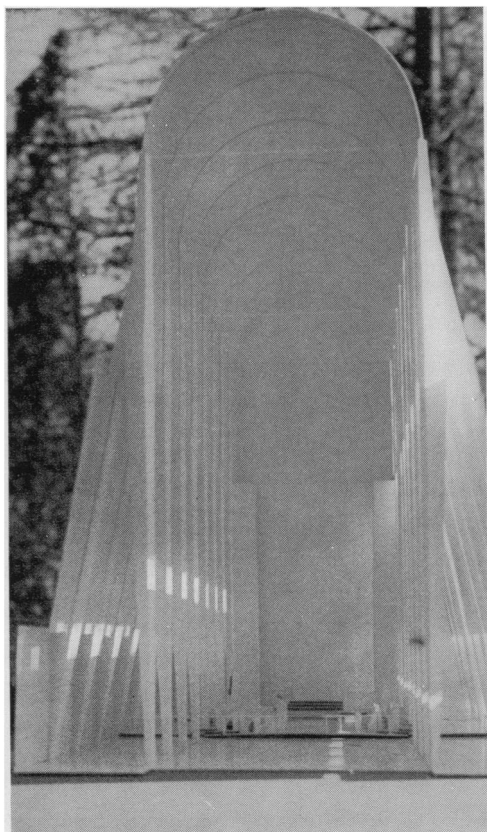
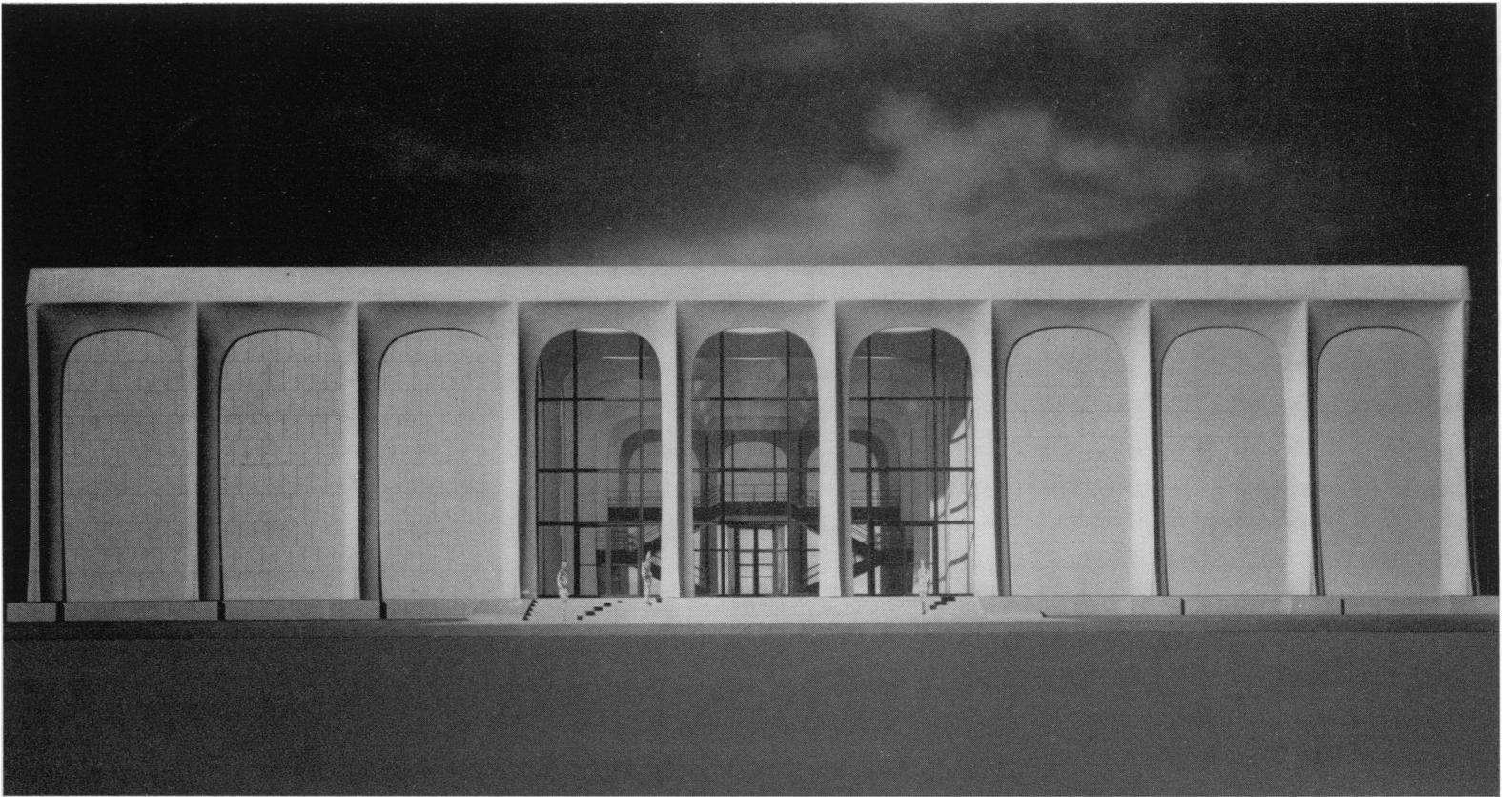
In the opposite direction, I can no longer build glass boxes — the pleasant glass box for all uses! — the general purpose universal box. We live in another era. Like the old Beaux Arts men in my youth, yearning for their *partis* and *entourages*, I now look back with pleasure, and yes, even some nostalgia, on the days in the twenties when the battle line was clear, the modern versus the eclectic, the dreams of universal panaceas, standards, types, norms, that would “solve” architecture.

Now we know that we cannot “solve” anything. The only principle that I can conceive of believing in is the Principle of Uncertainty. It is a brave architect that can possess convictions and beliefs, and keep his tongue out of his cheek. Personally, my desire for order and clarity will have to suffice. I cannot find any shapes to copy,

and forms like the good old Malevitch or Mondrian 1920 ones to fit in. Nor do my contemporaries give me a clear lead. The very best known of my own generation do one building in one day and the very opposite the next. It has got so that a critic can hardly say “This must be a Zilch building; it has the earmarks of his style or manner.” We seem, even more than ever in that much maligned 19th century, to be making a new architecture every day. Where are we at?

My own answer is in these three buildings. It seems an architect is only inarticulate about his own work. It is much easier to write about Saarinen and Rudolph than about Johnson. I really don't know why I designed these the way I did. Others will tell me.

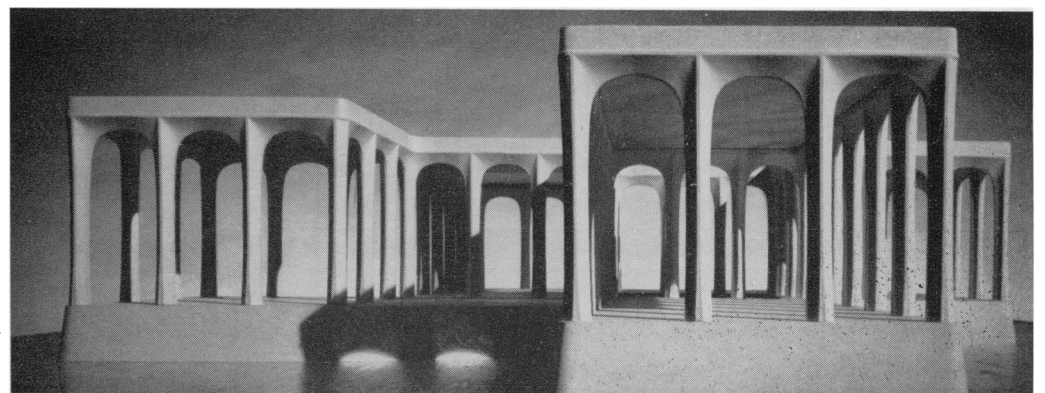
The three projects represent two poles of my present tendencies. The clearest and furthest developed (the Pavilion is under way) is the direction of the Pavilion and the Sheldon Art Gallery. It is clear from the pictures that the grammar is the same, the buildings only are different; one is symmetrical with infill — making pilasters out of the columns. (How long ago it was that Goethe said the pilaster is a lie! One would answer him today — “yes, but what a delightfully useful

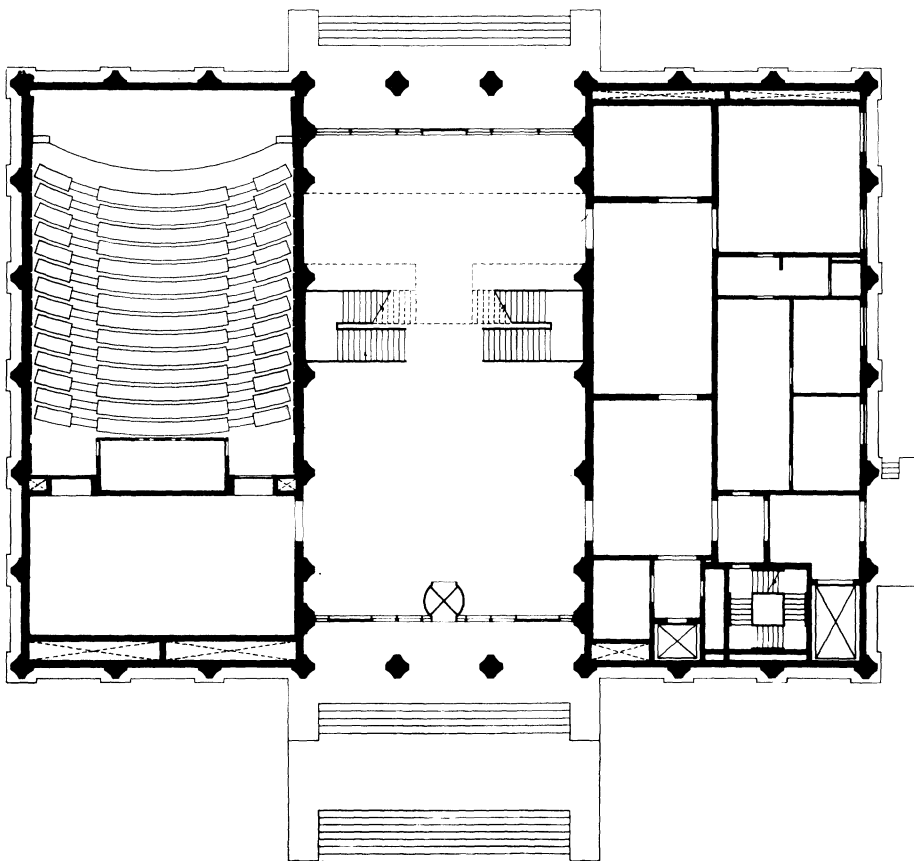


Above: Philip Johnson; SHELDON ART GALLERY, University of Nebraska; Lincoln, Nebraska

Center: BENEDICTINE PRIORY; Washington, D.C.

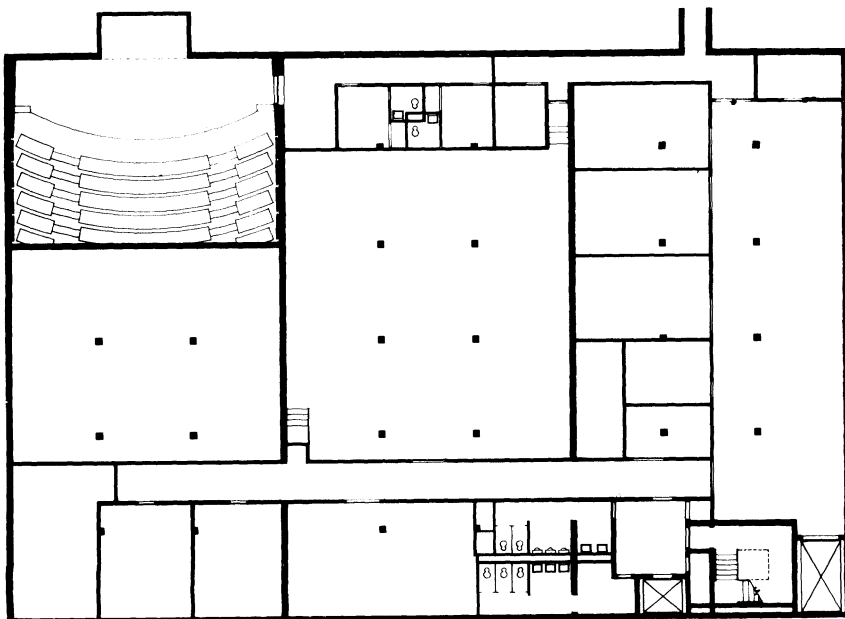
Below: PAVILION (Proposed), Johnson property; New Canaan, Connecticut





SHELDON ART GALLERY

Above: main floor. Below: basement



one."'). The other is sporty, open and only hiddenly symmetrical. One is hand-carved travertine, the other precast concrete.

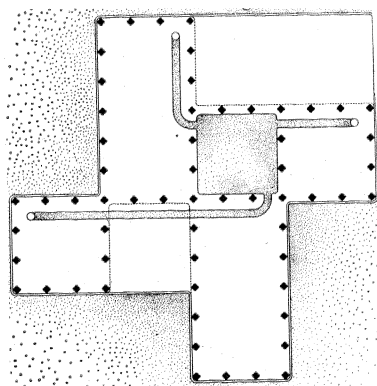
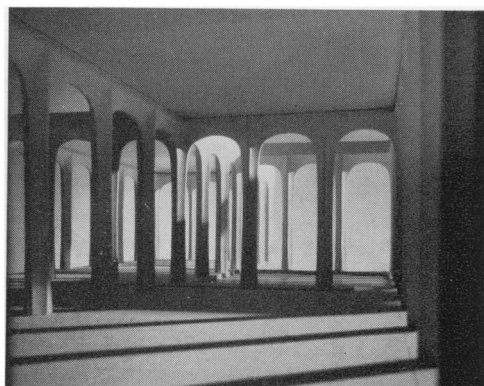
The grammar is rather Classical and yet the idea of it came from looking at the Delaunay St. Severin series. His toed-in Gothic arcade suggested the widened bases. The concave sides of the columns came from the wish to vault in four directions without the use of imposts or soffits. Also a High Gothic wish. The problem, as usual, was the corner column. A concave curve at the cornice was unthinkable, so it is convex, warping toward the typical concave base. The arch itself is a hit or miss ellipse, created freehand, and calculated afterward. The modularity, so un-Baroque, is probably modern. (Greek revival modularity is usually strengthened at the corners, this is not.)

The importance of the Sheldon Art Gallery lies in the central court which divides the functions into four clear spaces and itself forming the fifth; the Grand Salon, the stairwell within, focuses all the subsidiary spaces. This focus is intended to destroy museum fatigue at the same time giving a lift to the spirits. The coffered ceiling "vaulting," again carved travertine, should make a monumental room. (Classical or neo-Gothic?)

The Pavilion is a sport. First, it is underscaled. Each square unit which appears first to be scaled at 12 x 12 feet is in actuality only 8 x 8. The idea is to make giants of the visitor (an idea borrowed from the dwarfs' chambers in Mantua.) The intention is to place underscaled concrete furniture within some units. The central little pool (higher than the surrounding pond) with its radiating canals, is a barrier from unit to unit and at the same time an accented feature. The water from the canals falls on thin metal, to tinkle gently. The ceilings which look 9 feet high are 6 feet, very unsettling. A hundred foot high *jet d'eau* will play in the pond in full view.

The design is aimed at the amusement we all feel of the miniature and the complicated; the pleasure of hiding among a forest of columns (Cordoba?); the sense that one of us is in one pavilion and can't reach the other except by a long circumbulation; the feeling of an island and the little pool on the little island.

The composition itself is a casual assembly of squares, roofed, open, or water, the roofed elements being symmetrically laid out. Again there is no Baroque accent, hence quite "modern,"

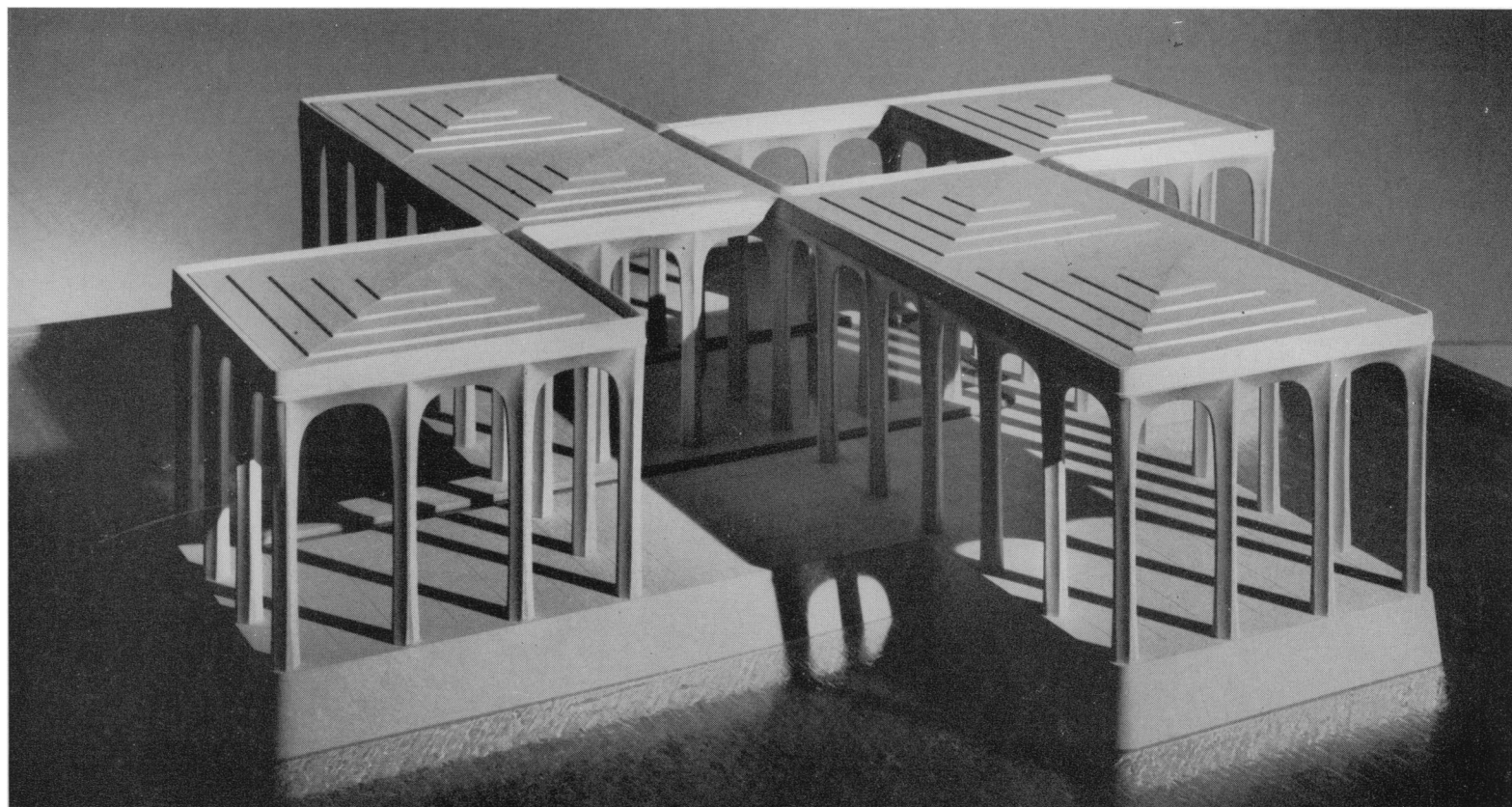


PAVILION

Above left: interior view

Above right: plan

Below: model



but certainly not Chinese in spite of the moon viewing implications. It merely seemed to me as I was working on the design that architecture has room for pleasure domes, even if somewhat reduced in scale.

The Benedictine Priory is something else again. It is certainly historical in plan — a narrow, long and high (90 foot) barrel vaulted basilica, sans transept. But it is also purely functional since the shape was developed originally for conventual liturgy. Why change? This is the very tradition (along with the Gregorian chant) that must be

preserved in the architecture. But the preservation of the shape — the processional length, the height need not interfere with contemporary forms and materials. It is to be concrete — *beton brut* throughout, columns, buttresses, infill and vault. The walls are partly vertical, partly canted, depending on whether they follow the column or the buttress. Both column and buttress are *plissé*; that is, V's of thin concrete, and the buttresses *alternate with* rather than support the columns. The cross section is rather like a Gantry crane. The indescribable (and unpictured) terminations

of the nave and apse are flat and should be stained glass, but only dimly translucent, since the main light source comes from skylights on the side aisles, which wash the walls. There is no light directly into the chancel.

UNION AIR TERMINAL BUILDING—IDLEWILD

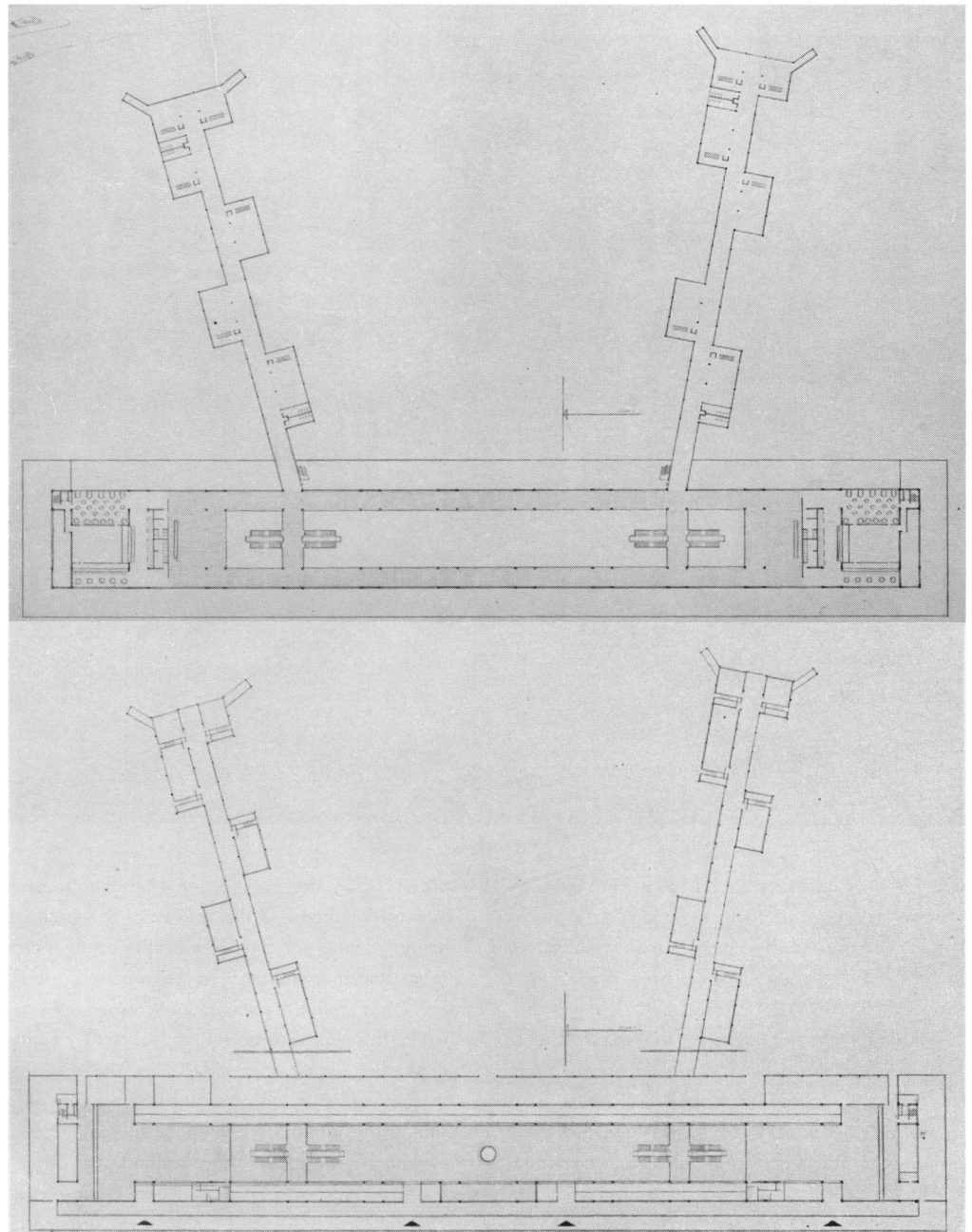
(Shortly after the above was received, the Idlewild Terminal project was made available by Mr. Johnson and is included at his request.)

The Competition for the Idlewild Union Air Terminal, which I lost to I. M. Pei, is more or less in line with the Benedictine Priory. Like the column sequences there, the column clusters are the main point of the design, making humanly apprehendable spaces out of a building, which, because of the program, was very, very long — 1,100 feet. The main problem was the very low ceiling

necessary for so large a room — 47 feet. To make it seem higher, rather than using a 12 foot deep truss lowering the ceiling to 35 feet, we (Lev Zetlin, Engineer) developed a sine curve, double waving roof, emphasizing, like the column clusters, the eleven bays. The design of the facade of each bay is symmetrical and classically or Classically mounted: The ground floor, solid stone, with the door in the middle; a glazed *piano nobile*; small panes of glass with heavy mullions turning at 45° at the cornice line where the roof dips. The feature of the exterior (impos-

Top: second floor

Bottom: ground floor



sible to draw) is the 35 foot overhang.

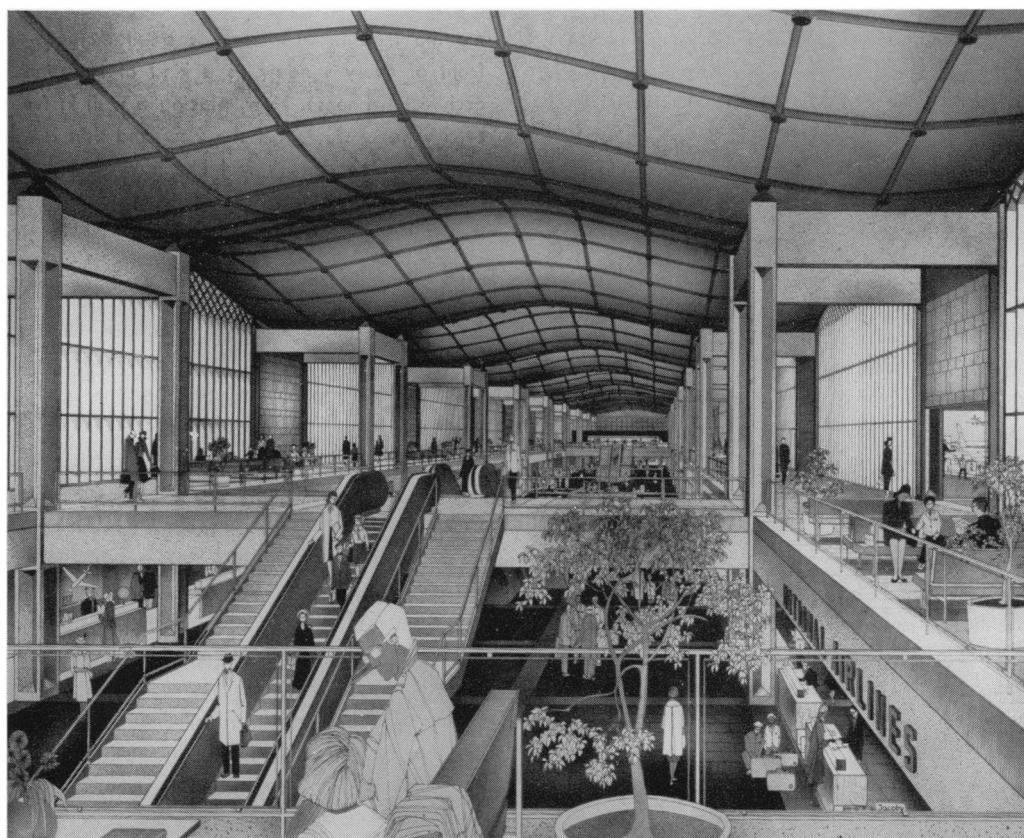
The plan is different from most new airports in that the de-planing passenger proceeds through the Great Room to busses or taxis. It is the fashion today not to allow de-planing and en-planing passengers to mix. I am glad the genius who designed the Grand Central Station lets me come from the train into the same Great Room where others are about to en-train. What good is a great gateway room if the visitor is not to see it?

The great airport of our age has yet to be designed. Forty-seven feet high is the limit at

Idlewild. In the cause of sacred monumentality, we should get up a public subscription to raise the height of the Idlewild central tower, which controls the height of all the buildings of the group. Why should the air age not have the glow of the Renaissance Age? The Grand Central and the Pennsylvania Station, before they fell on evil days, were spaces that made the heart sing, spaces that never got too small as traffic expanded, as do our airports. What we have lost is a public passion for greatness. No cathedrals? Not even any great public nuclear plants? What

is our generation going vicariously to enjoy as in old days, the palace, the church or the Acropolis? We cannot all of us enjoy slum clearance and parking lots.

The questions are rhetorical. There are no answers. A culture gets the monuments it desires.



Left: interior

Center right: partial elevation

Below: front view

