

Whence & Whither: The Processional Element in Architecture

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Architecture is surely *not* the design of space, certainly not the massing or organizing of volumes. These are auxiliary to the main point which is the organization of procession. Architecture exists only in *time*. (That is the modern perversion of photography. It freezes architecture to three dimensions, or some buildings to two.)

It is known to the veriest tourist how much more he enjoys the Parthenon because he has to walk up the Acropolis, how much less he enjoys Chartres Cathedral because he is unceremoniously dumped in front of it. How much better St. Peter's Square used to be before Mussolini ruined (opened up) the approaches. Vincent Scully's temples are sited for approach as well as all the other considerations he has outlined for us.

But approach is only one aspect of processional, one moment of feeling. The next is the experience of entering, the shock of big space, or dark space, as it encloses (in time always) the visitor.

168 The Parthenon itself has no entering experience. Its entire feeling of procession is taken care of by the Propylaeum. The entire feeling of St. Peter's is taken care of, or was, by the filtering in through the barricade of Bernini's columns.

For modern examples take Mies' Seagram Plaza: the visitor crosses usually diagonally (an old Choisy-Beaux-Arts principle). Then he penetrates only glass, slowing slightly, to be faced with the three elevator corridors. But what elevator corridors! It seems simple enough, now that they are there, but compare these with any other. Where else in a modern skyscraper entry is the ceiling twenty-four feet high, or where else are the elevator lobbies in a direct line from the street? The visitor can look back to Park Avenue as he waits for the ride. In every other building there is a corner to be negotiated. The visitor has to wait in the first, second, or third box, has to take the first, second, or third turning to the left or right. In Seagram's it is a straight line.

Unfortunately, the entire experience of Seagram's leads but to the elevator, which, next to the automobile, ranks with the destroyers of architectural glory. That claustrophobic box

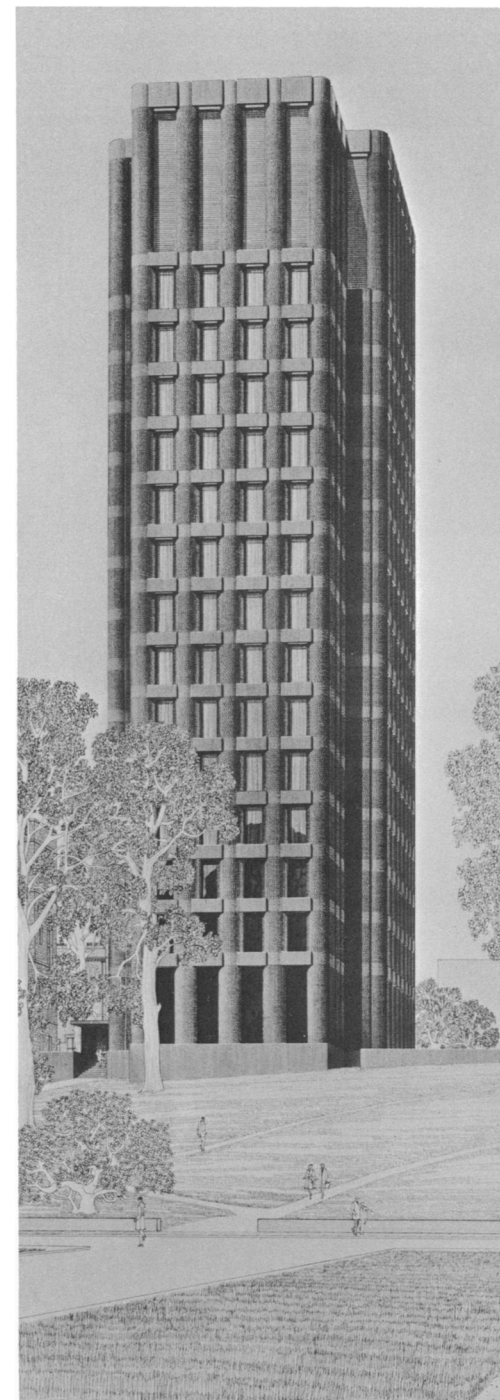
brings visual, processional beauty to a complete dead stop. The visitor can only be restored, if at all, by looking out a high window. Elevators are here to stay, but one is not forced to love them.

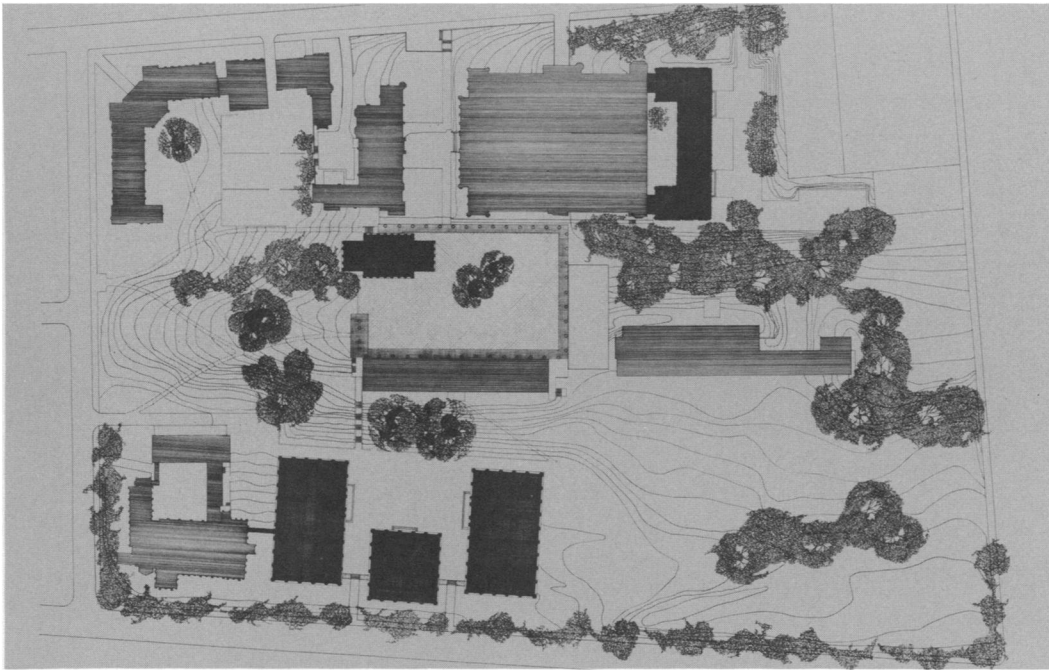
Much better in that regard is the Guggenheim. (Never use the elevator! It murders Wright's great space.) The processional entrance experience is different from Mies'. It is again diagonal, but the jump into the hundred-foot high hall is exactly the opposite kind of feeling from the typical grand axial entry to Seagram's. The visitor comes through a tiny door (too tiny, some feel) and is sprayed into the room. Breathtaking it is.

In both cases, the experiences are not static but temporal. The beauty consists in how you move into the space. There are as many ways of introducing space as there are architects, but it strikes me that clarity is one of the prerequisites. At least in the Guggenheim and in Seagram's the processional is as clean as the Acropolis or St. Peter's. The walker-through-the-space is never lost, never in the slightest doubt as to his orientation, whence he has come or whither he aims. *Whence* and *whither* are positive, not negative, architectural virtues which are basic to the entire discipline of the art.

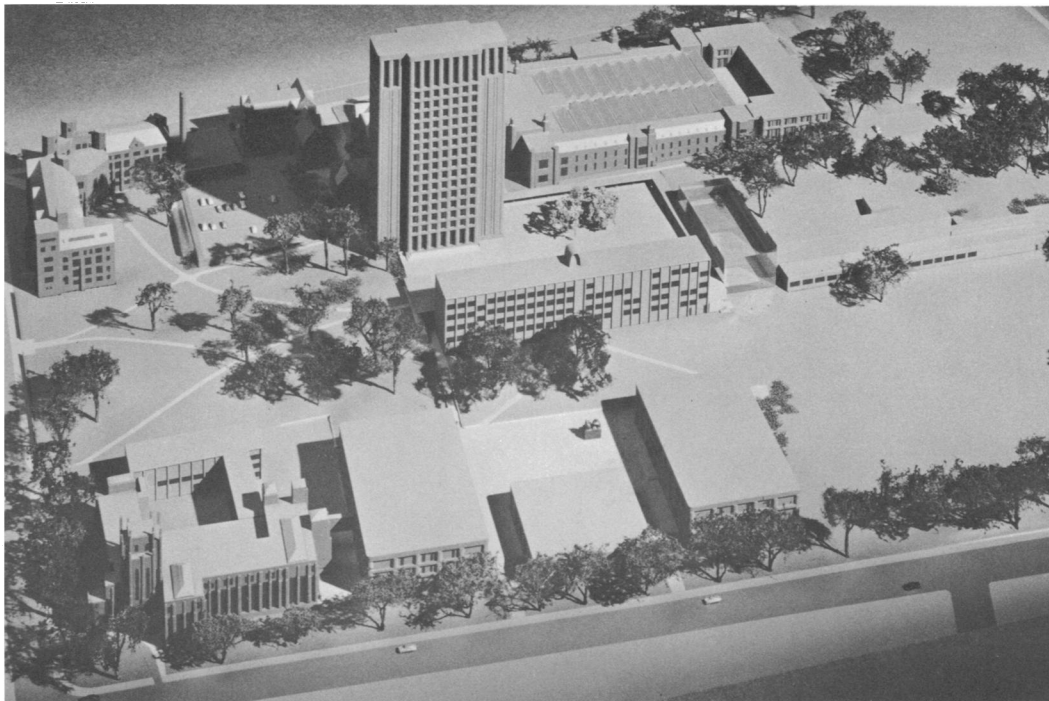
Take an extreme example, Le Corbusier's building for Harvard. Heaven knows it is easy to get lost in the basement. (What a surprise it is to come upon the "front" door with its label "Carpenter Hall.") Yet the building is, as a whole, a beautiful study in processional excitement – even a study in "clarity". It is impossible to miss the effects that Le Corbusier has prepared. The shifting, rising, declining turning path that he forces on us gives varied, solemn, laughable Coney Island experiences that please the stomach. The feeling of "entrance" is certainly lacking, since one enters only to be thrown out into the street in the next block, but what fun! (There is a report that the main entrances in the early studies used to be off the ramps. It would seem more logical than the present arrangement.)

In contrast, take Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale (interestingly enough built to house similar functions to Le





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Corbusier's Harvard building). The approach is, to say the least, off axis. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's Buffalo Larkin Building, the main door does not exist. At Yale, bicycles are kept there. A postern entry only – a side gate. The explosion into space is again like Larkin and, like Larkin, very impressive indeed. There are, however, no further attempts at clarity, but rather a mannerist (do we dare use the word Mannerist?) play of spaces off the main space (Imperial Hotel Lobby?) which baffles and intrigues. I shall probably have to take back what I wrote in the previous page about clarity being of the essence. The House of Architecture has many mansions. There are, I guess, no rules.

But for me there are. So let us take an example from work in progress, my design for the temenos in which is to sit the Kline Science Tower at Yale (1-3). Again the design may or may not succeed, but an artist's intention is at least of direct, though in the end only marginal, importance.

What I intend there is space seen in motion. A walk with change in direction with changing objectives. Also a slipping by of people, like a Giacometti "Place", like the diagonal walkings on the Seagram Plaza. Primary to this is clarity. One cannot, I hope, for a second be confused or, worse, annoyed in the turnings. One is forced to the entry of the Tower.

Walking up the hill at the upper end of Hillhouse, you enter through a propylaeum, a covered, columned portico. To the right the bastion of Gibbs; straight ahead – nothing. Perhaps in the future other buildings will rise above the cincture wall. Before you a paved square section with a colossal statue placed, I hope, inevitably; a point around which movement can circulate. Dominating your view is, however, immediately to your left, the Tower with its 100-foot wide entrance steps. (It is too bad that the great increase in population has made great staircases obsolete. It was contrariwise lucky that the Mayans did not mind steep inclines. Our stair is modest.)

Before you enter the Tower, you note at the north, or right of it, a grove of young trees, shade, green in the summer, twiggy in the winter.

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An alien but relieving element. The temenos is not square but rectangular, and the Tower penetrates one corner far enough to call the remaining space an ell.

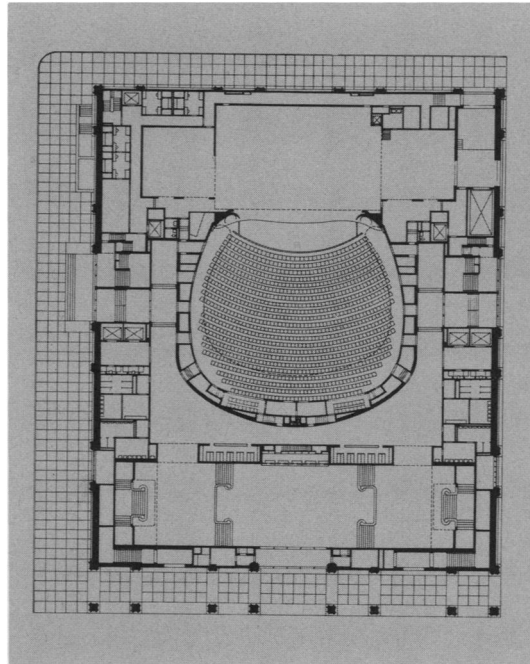
How it is enclosed is a major point. There can be no space without enclosure. West, a brick wall against Sterling (we are ten feet below grade here, which increases enclosedness), vines over the parapet, etc. The north, one brick wall, broken by an entrance from the Kline Chemistry on the left. The east corner, a vista – tightened by Gibbs and the wall – of East Rock, a visual proof that we are high ourselves. The east, Gibbs Laboratories; the south, the propylaeum and a retaining wall, a view down Hillhouse. A wall going down is as enclosing as one going up. Vezelay, Monte Pincio, Villa d'Este. And a going-down containment is a quiet eye relief from too much wall.

The processions through the plaza vary. There is a back stairs in the corner to the Tower. There is the entrance between Sterling and Osborn, one on the north corner, one at the north end of Gibbs, and Gibbs' front door itself. You should be able to get from any door to any door clearly. That is, at any rate, the intention. The means of clarification are porticos at all entrances, walks crossing the green are thin, uninterrupted visually one to the other.

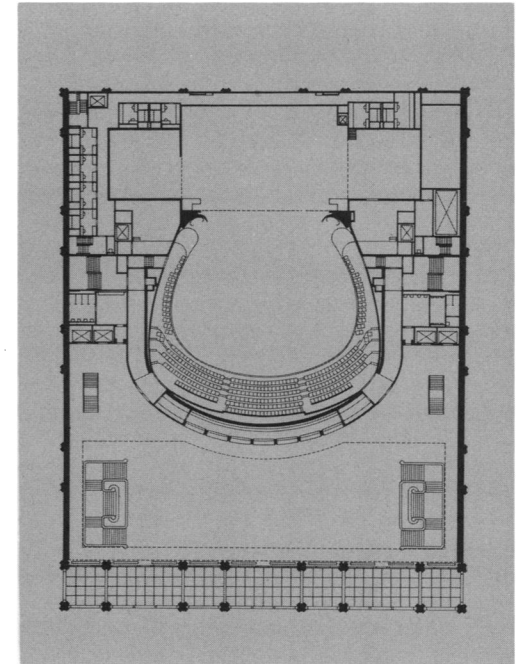
Basically, the position of the Tower itself should clarify since it is strongly axial north and south. The Tower and the base of the Tower are both always visible. (It has always confused me that I still cannot find the bottom of that wholly admirable landmark, Harkness Tower. How many can remember what the ground floors of the Empire State Building look like from the street?)

Inside the building, whether you enter from the front or from the rear, you enter into the foyer facing the plaza, with the plaza on one side of the long hall, the elevators on the other. With the entering of the elevator, all processional is lost; it is the end of a chapter of architecture.

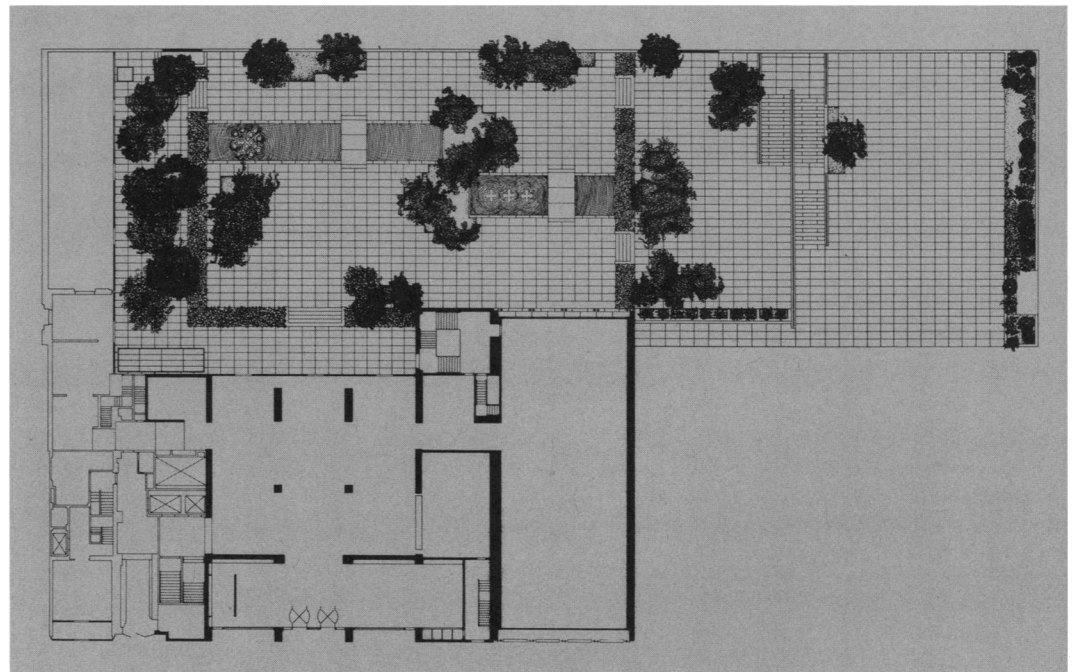
A few of the attempts and results of whither-whence: The New York State Theater



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5



(4, 5), whatever stand one takes on its art works or decorative features, whatever one's views of neoclassicism *vs* concrete, is designed as a procession. The pop up the "baroque" stairs into the Mississippi steamboat Promenade is of the essence. So are the side stairs up to and down from the upper balconies. So are the silhouetted moving people who form the living friezes to the space. This is all a question of procession.

Memory, by the way, plays a much larger part in architectural experience than is acknowledged. One feels better in a theatre seat, I contend, if the spaces traversed getting there are uncrowded *straight*, in other words – clear.

Even a remodeling: the rearranged Museum of Modern Art is a case in point (6, 7). The problem was to make possible bigger crowds than before. It was approached as a problem of procession. Confine the crowds as little as possible. The design result is almost Beaux-Arts axial. A clear main axial view into the garden from the street. A cross axis leading to galleries right and left. As usual, vertical flow stopped by elevators (only the elevators at the New York State Pavilion of the Fair are pleasant). In the garden we had more luck with the vertical. We took space enough for STAIRS in the old sense. We hope people will climb stairs, an experience lost in modern architecture, the ramps of the great Le Corbusier being the noble exception. In our garden about two domestic stories are climbed by many who would never go to the attic of a suburban house without complaining. It is the experience of the change of direction of what one sees as one rises. The speed of ascent (slow in the Museum stairs) is crucial. Time to look around, to feel the change that a rise gives. The curiosity of what is on top, the question: What will I see from up there? The comfort of a slow, obvious, and wide ascent. All of these considerations are more important than the "looks" of the stairway. Architecture is motion.

A final example, an old one. My own New Canaan House was started with the driveway. Such a disturbance is the automobile that its handling is the first consideration in the design of any home. In my house I had to buy the land next door to keep the monster from seeing my



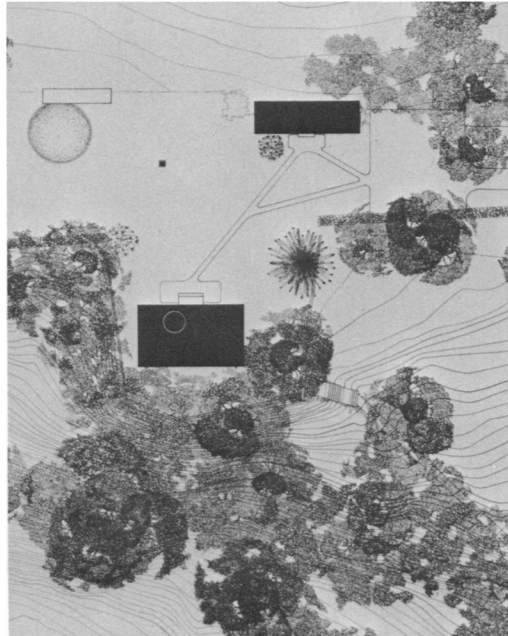
glass home. It now sits lurking behind a six-foot wall. The visitor gets out without seeing the house, rounds a corner (not 90° – about 45° – very important) and sees the house at another 45° (8). Again a Choisy – Greek principle: never approach a building head on; the diagonal gives you a perspective of the depth of the building. To help you round the corner, to enhance the importance of the glass unit, there stands on the right a solid box, urging the visitor to turn away toward the glass house.

The glass house is on a promontory, a peninsula, to make a “cup” of the experience of entering. A dead end, so you know you have arrived; there is no further to go. Within the house there is more procession, however (9). The “entrance hall” (the pushing together of the chimney and kitchen cabinet) forces you (gently, to be sure) between them into the “living room,” where you climb on to the “raft” of white rug which is the ultimate arrival point, the sitting group which floats in its separate sea of dark brick.

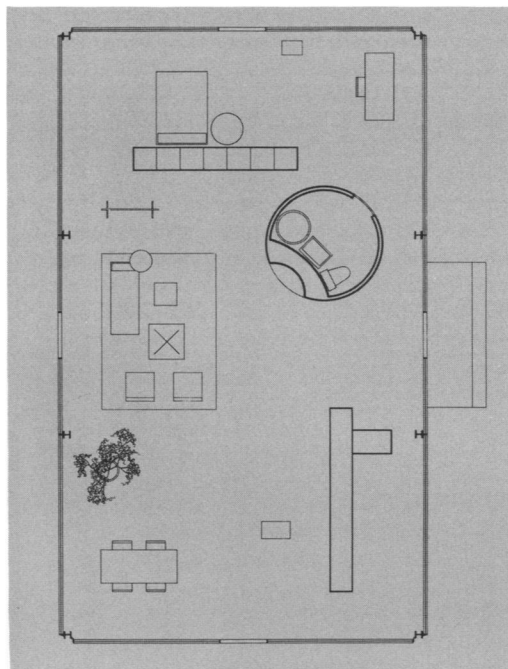
172 I purposely exaggerate the processional aspects, which in reality are not obvious to the casual visitor. But then what is obvious to a visitor about the qualities of architecture? I am supposed to be an architect, but I cannot tell you, nor can any historian, why the Parthenon is the masterpiece it is. We can but grasp bits and pieces.

The whence and whither is primary. Now almost secondary is all our ordinary work, our work on forms, our plans, our elevations. What we should do is to proceed on foot again and again through our imagined buildings. Then after months of approaching and reapproaching, and looking and turning, then only draw them up for the builder.

We should constantly ask ourselves: Am I lost? Did I enjoy that corner I just took? What is overhead? How long to get to the end? What if I turn my eyes back? Will opening and closing, vertical and horizontal, depress me or inspire me? (It is hard, because at the same time we have to see that our building does not cost too much, that it serves its purpose, that its materials hold up.) And, maybe, is it beautiful?



8-9



1-3 *Kline Science Center*, Pierson Sage Square
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
(under construction.)

4, 5
New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center
New York City, 1964.

6, 7
Museum of Modern Art, New York City
Expansion program. 1964

8, 9
Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut. 1949
10, 11

Swimming Pool and Pavilion, Westchester County,
New York. Project. 1951

12
Pavilion for Mr. & Mrs. Thomas B. Hess

Overlooking East River, New York. Project. 1954
This pavilion was intended to be built on a roof
overlooking the river with a connection to an
existing living room.

13
Court of Peace. The U.N., We Believe
New York World's Fair. Project. 1964

This is a design for an open court with a very
complicated narrow, enclosed entrance procession.
The long entrance is a design to calm the visitor
down before he has the experience of a memorial
court. The idea is obviously inspired by the Sultan
Hassan Mosque in Cairo.

14, 15
Chapel, Project. 1953

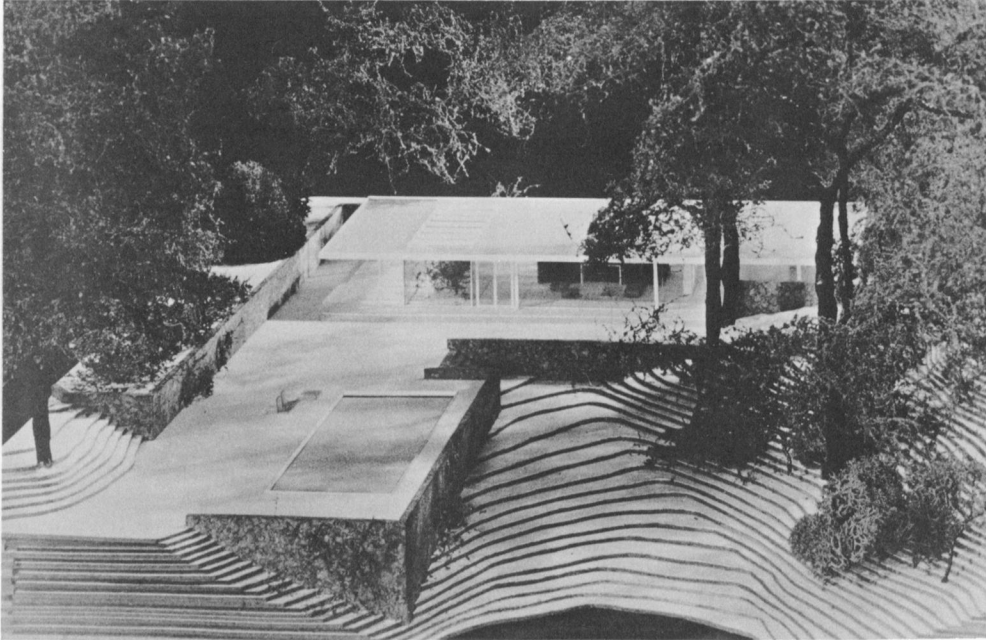
16, 17
House for Mrs. John P. Lucas
Nantucket, Massachusetts. Project. 1953

18, 19
Town of Hirschorn, Ontario, Canada. Project. 1954
20, 21

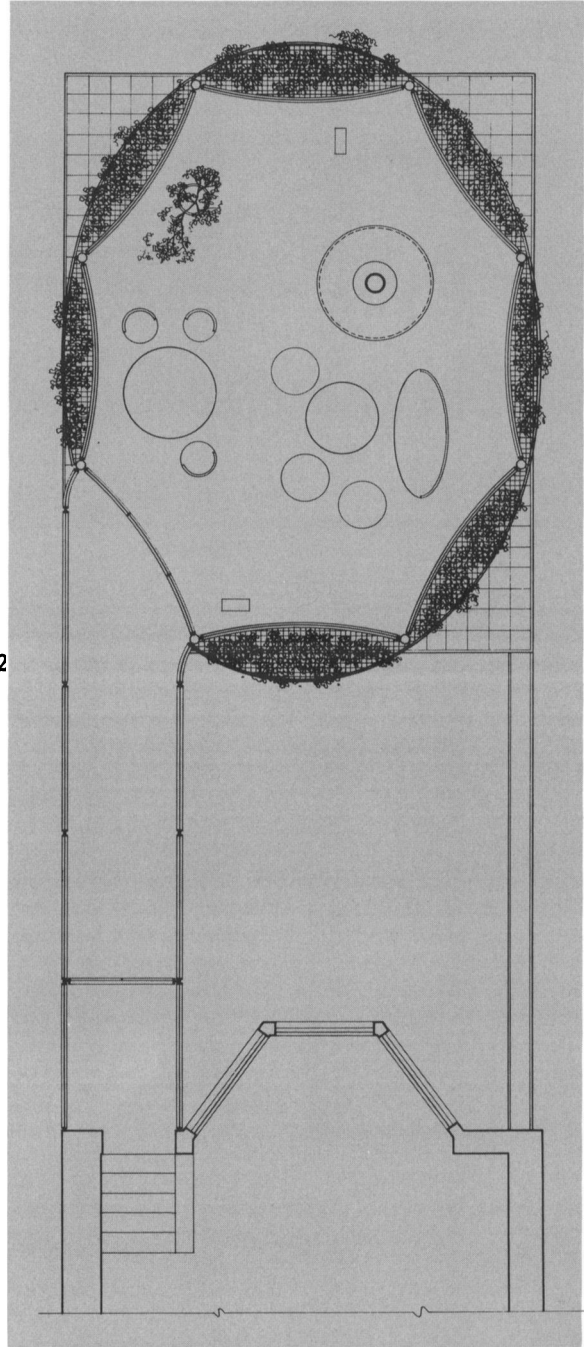
Amon Carter Museum of Western Art
Fort Worth, Texas. 1961

22
New York State Exhibit
New York World's Fair. First study. 1962

23-25
New York State Exhibit
New York World's Fair. 1964

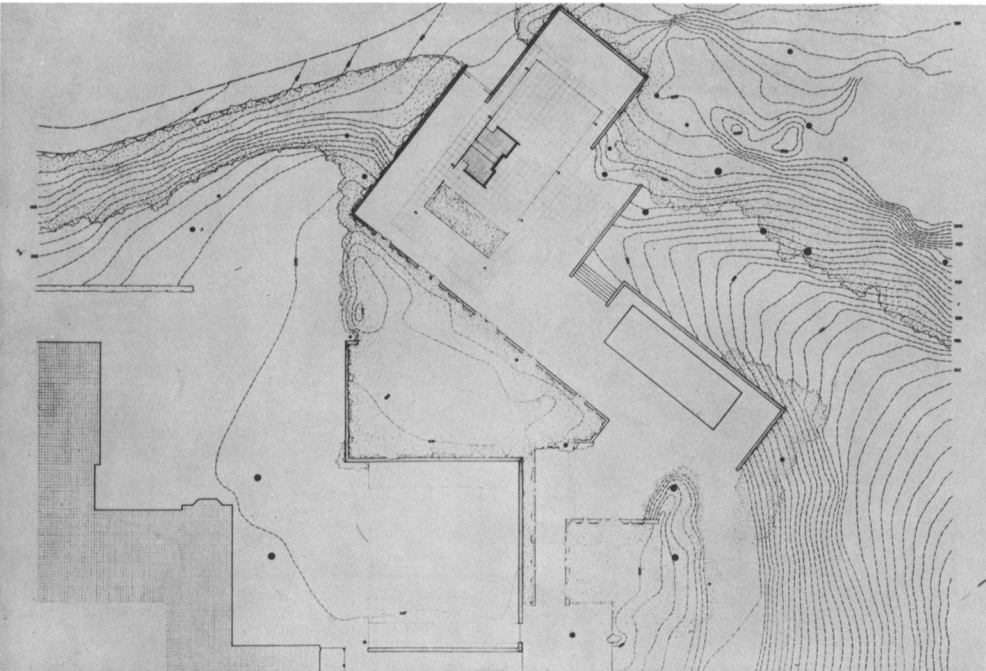


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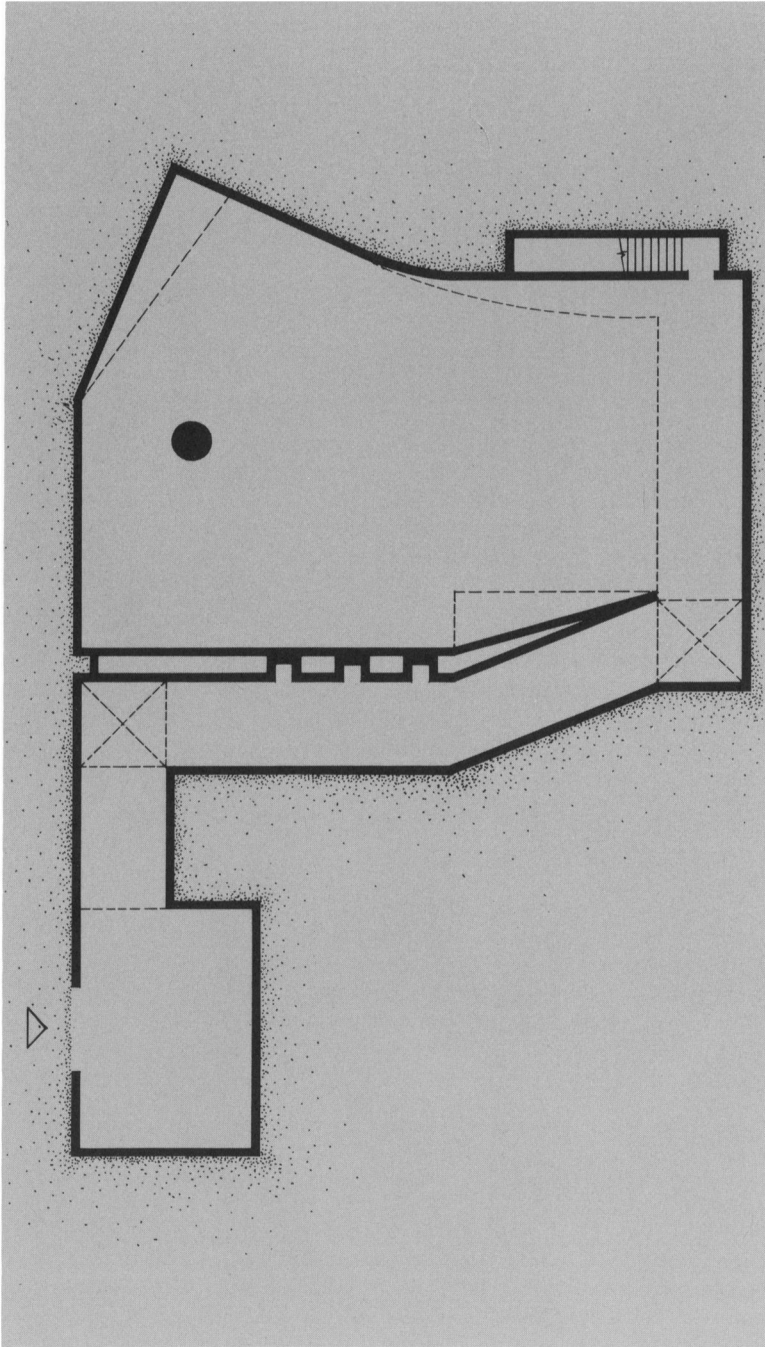
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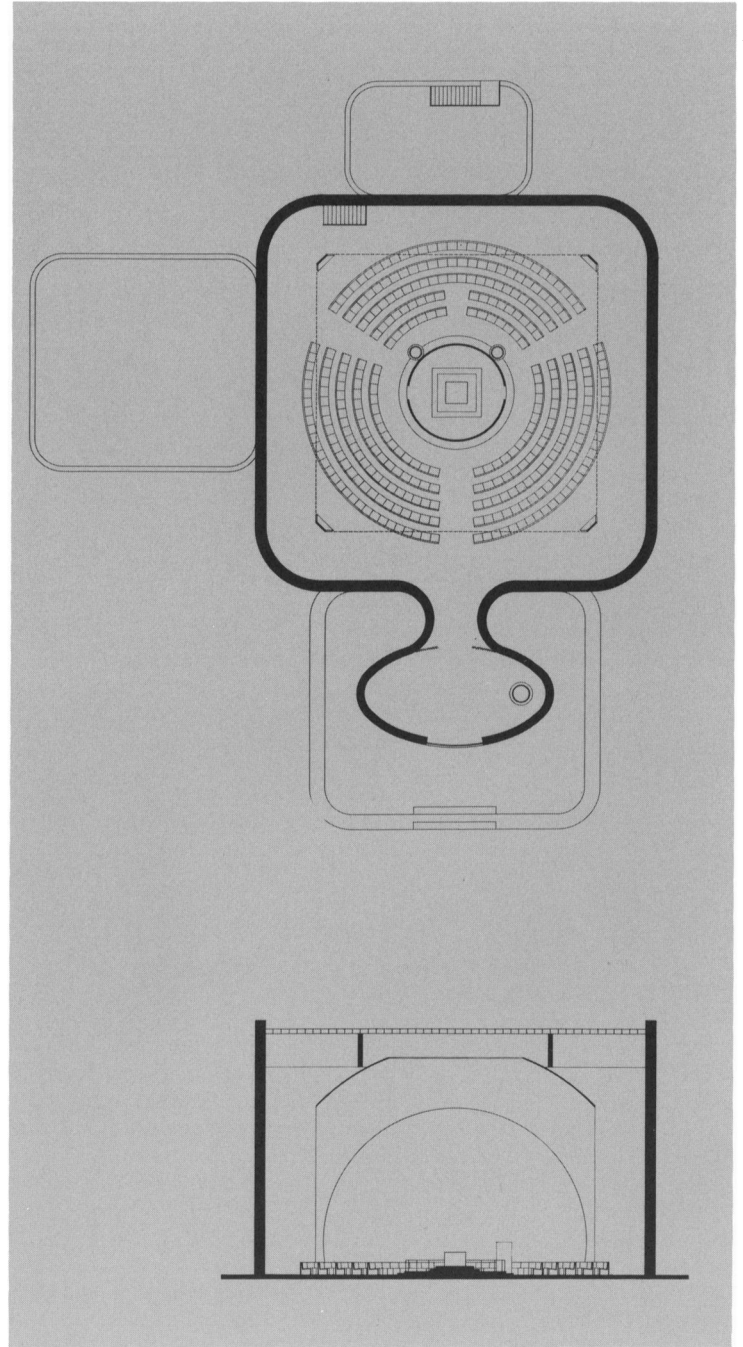


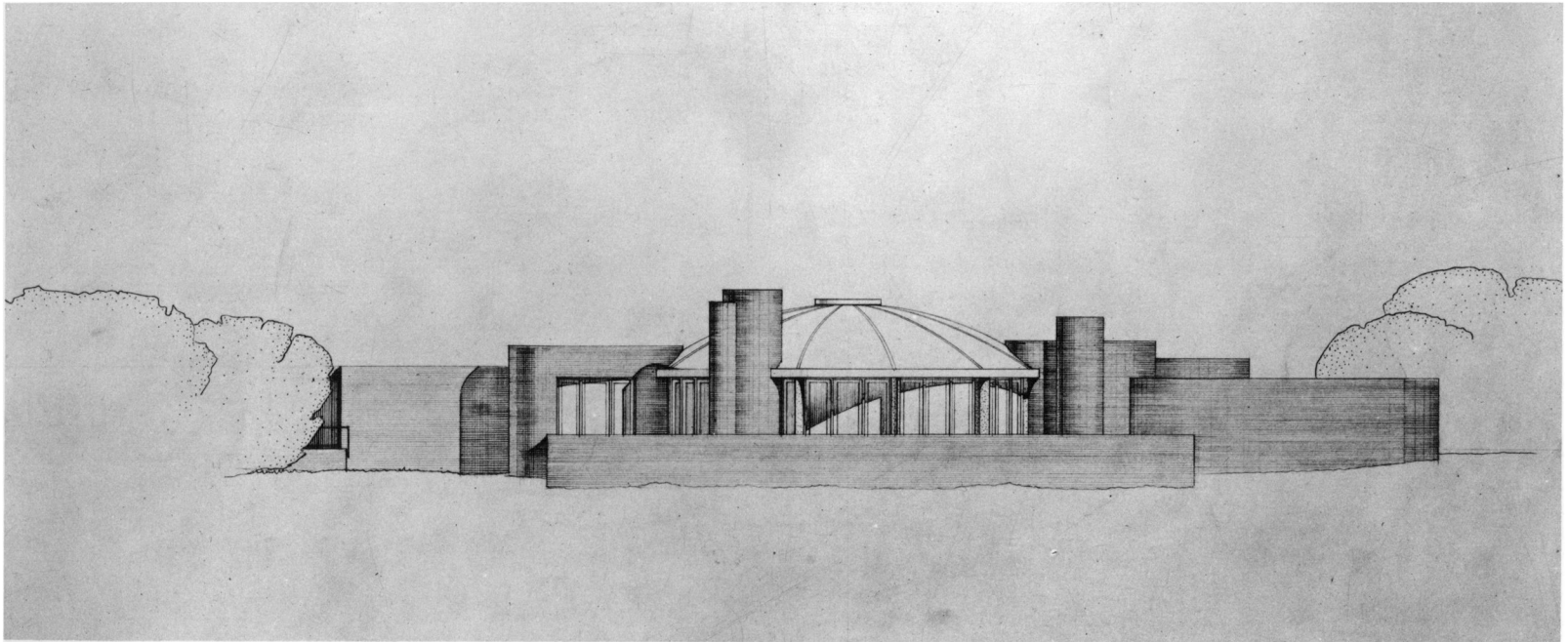
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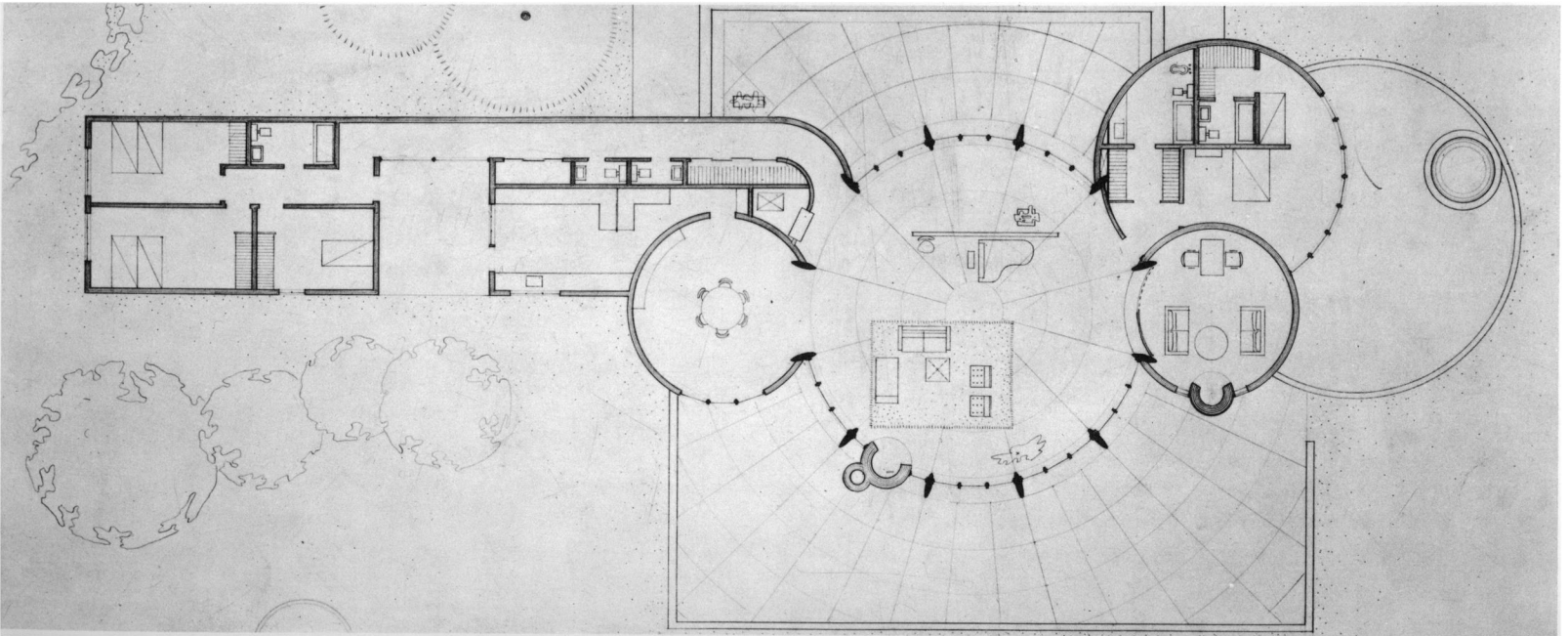


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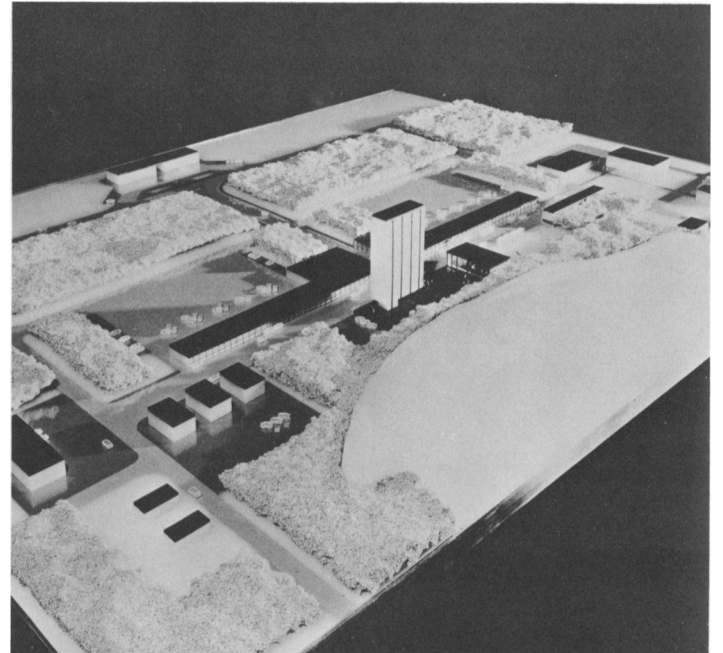
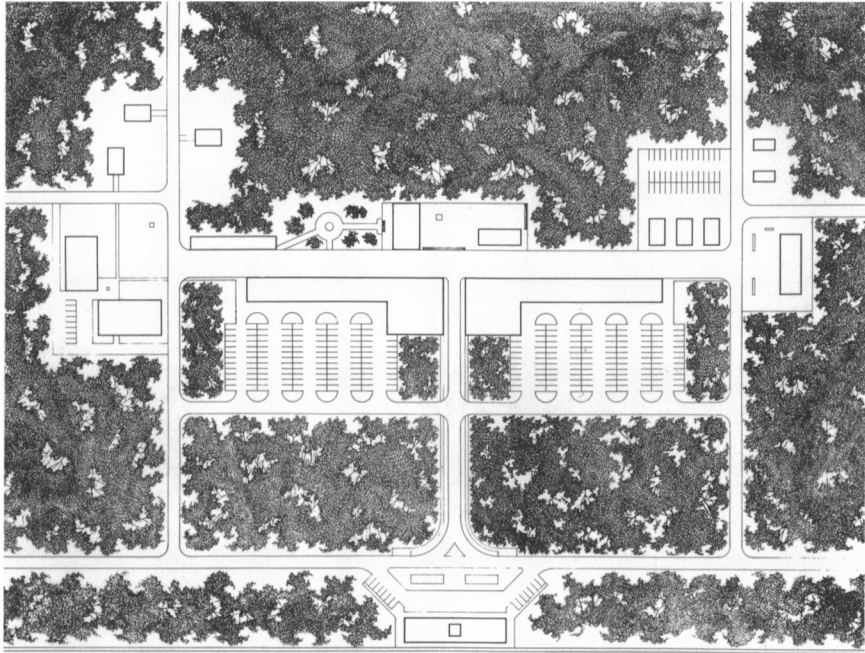




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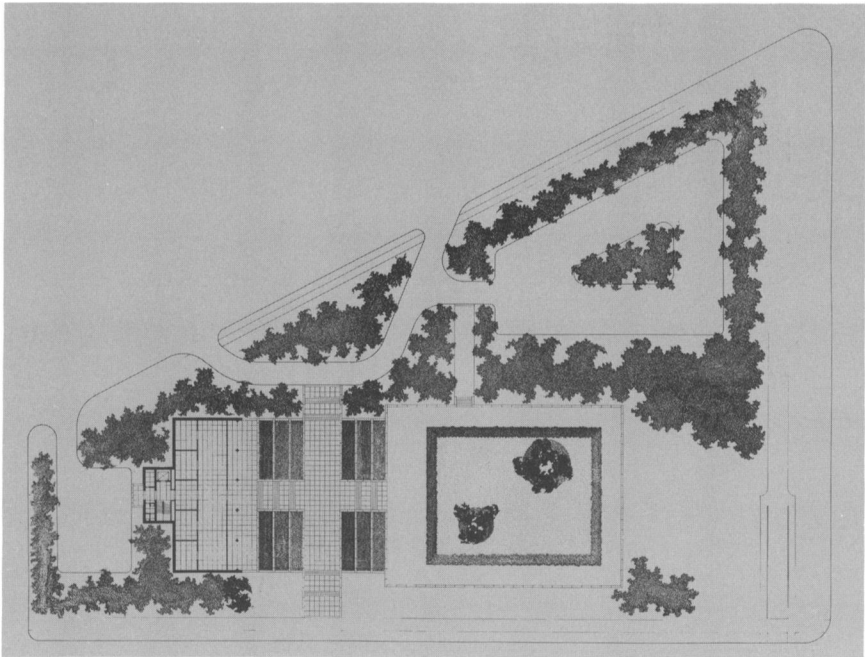
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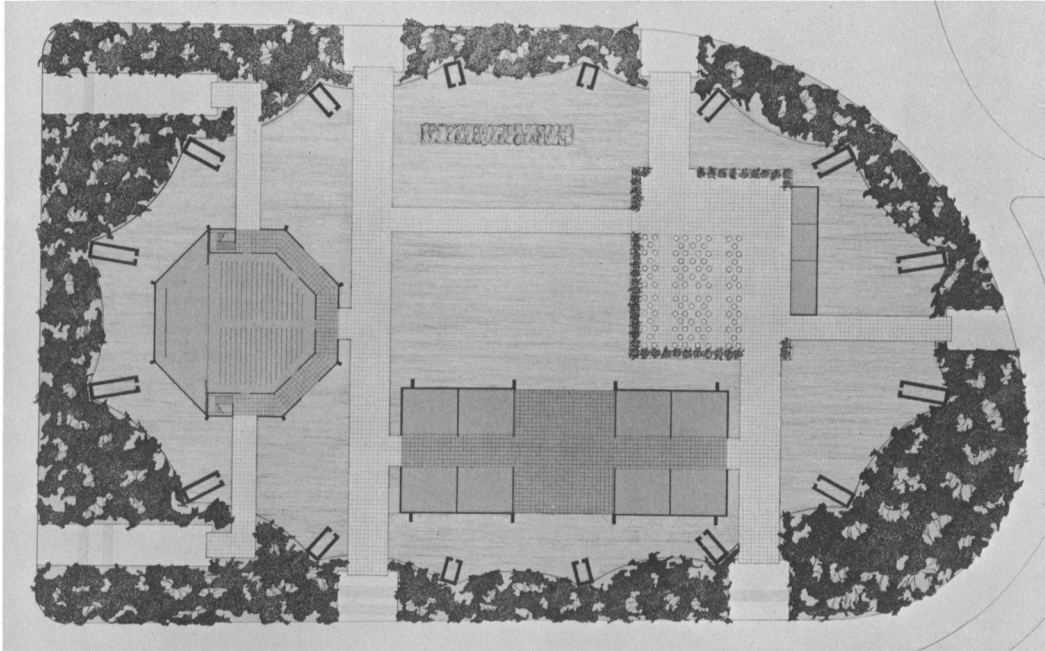


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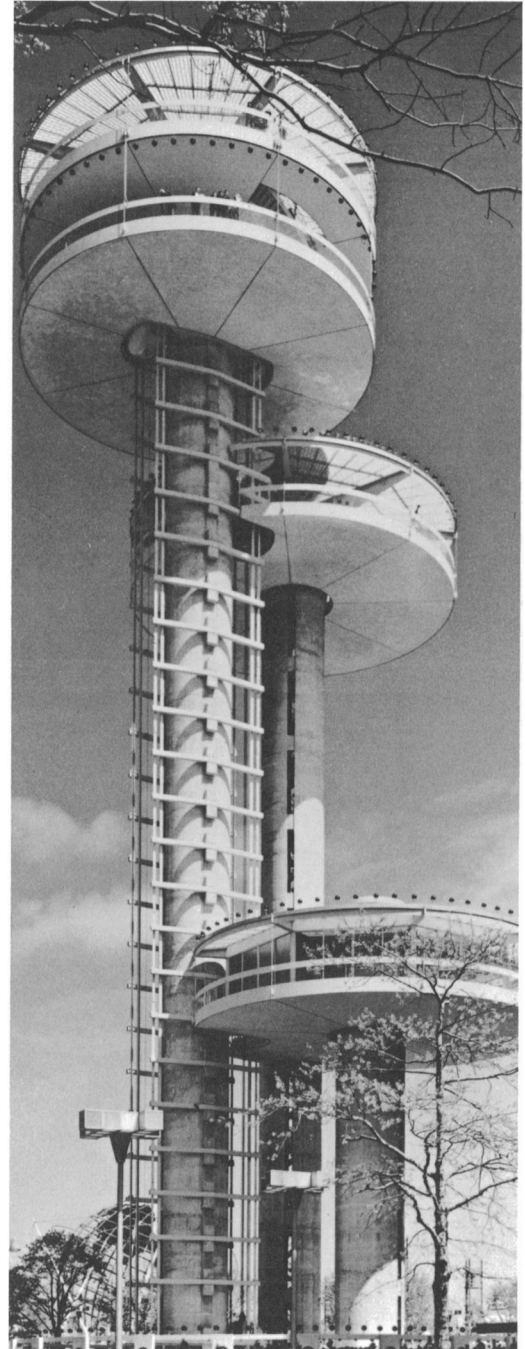
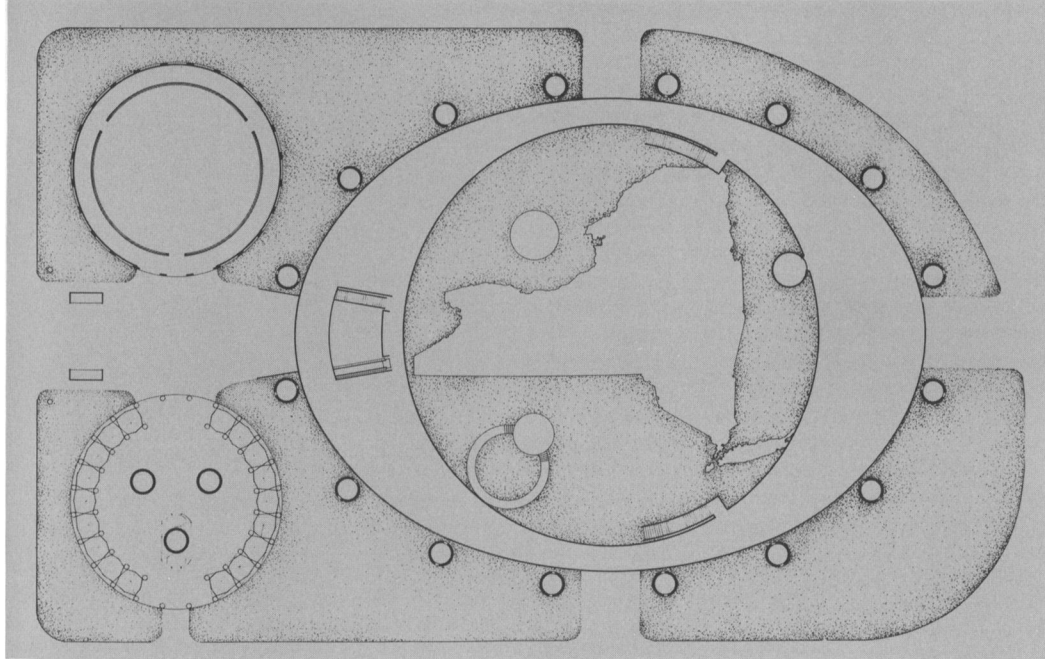
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