



GORDON ATKINS
ARCHITECTURE 1960-95

GRAHAM LIVESEY



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GRAHAM LIVESEY
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The descriptions for selected projects were derived from the following sources: the Gordon Atkins fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary; Carol Moore Ede, *Canadian Architecture 1960/70* (Toronto: Burns and MacEachern Ltd., 1971); and Gordon Atkins.

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GORDON ATKINS AND AN EMOTIONAL COMMITMENT TO ARCHITECTURE

Every building takes a piece of me emotionally. I haven't done a single house for which the process of design wasn't excruciating for both parties.¹

Modern architecture in Alberta emerged in the early 1950s with work produced by firms such as Rule, Wynn and Rule (Edmonton and Calgary) and Stevenson and Raines (Calgary).² Despite the disparaging comments made by John C. Parkin in the early 1960s about the state of architecture in Alberta,³ the work by these firms and others was of a high calibre. However, as Parkin also foreshadows, by the mid-1960s, a new generation of Alberta-based architects emerged, including Douglas Cardinal, Peter Hemingway, Jack W. Long, and Gordon Atkins. This group, along with Clifford Wiens in Saskatchewan and Etienne Gaboury in Manitoba, established an informal prairie school whose work was different from that practised on the West Coast, and in Ontario and Quebec. This generation of architects was able to establish itself nationally with provocative and regionally sensitive work. Distinctive approaches to site, form, and materials are particularly reflected in the buildings of these architects. As Peter Hemingway has noted, the prairie architecture of this period was “powerfully original” and “truly Canadian.”⁴ This coincides with a flowering of a distinct Canadian culture in the 1950s and 1960s as the country emerged from the shadows of neo-colonialism. Any culture must constantly question and reinvent itself. This is the ongoing responsibility of cultural figures such as artists, writers, and architects; for example Michael Snow, Margaret Atwood, and Arthur Erickson developed in the 1960s and early 1970s as international figures presenting a Canadian view to the world.

Gordon Atkins was raised in Cardston, Alberta and was educated in architecture at the University of Washington in Seattle. A lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, his upbringing in a small town and his religious commitment have given him a direct, rigorous, and uncompromising approach to architectural practice. Atkins established his office in the early 1960s in Calgary, where he practised until 1999. The generation represented by Gordon Atkins, and others, was really a second wave of architects, after World War II, who were coming to terms with the notion of practising architecture in a young northern country. The work of Gordon Atkins reflects his Albertan and Canadian background, and captures many themes that circulated during the period.

The rolling farmland of southern Alberta, framed by the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains and swept by continuous wind and long, fitful winters, profoundly shaped Atkins' sense of architecture, and a need to provide secure and sheltering buildings. His projects demonstrate that he developed an architecture that carefully responded to site influences, was expressive in both plan and form, and showed an inventive use of materials. Atkins' work responds particularly well to the foothills landscape in and around Calgary. While there are references in his designs to the architecture of the West Coast, and Scandinavian and Brutalist architecture, it does a disservice to his work to overly stress these connections. When viewing his work one is left with an impression that it emerges from the site, and that something unexpected is always revealed. His design process is not overly rational; however, there is a pragmatic directness that strips away the unessential, while striving to achieve the spiritual and the emotional.

The career of Gordon Atkins produced a relatively small number of buildings; however, the outstanding quality of this work makes it among the most significant work built in Canada from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. It is unfortunate that he did not produce more. It says much about Canadian culture, which saw a tremendous period of experimentation during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by a subsequent period of retrenchment or conservatism in the 1980s.

...

The practice of architecture is challenging; it requires the balancing of many forces and the input of many people. The idea of the architect or artist as a creative genius is rejected by Atkins:

Outstanding architecture is the result of honest personal interpretation. Personal interpretation can only come from intuition. Intuition is the sum total of all our personal or individual experiences. Therefore, the individual can be original only through his interpretation. The artist does not create, he interprets.⁵

Atkins understands architectural design as an interpretative act. He does not consciously strive for originality; rather a unique result arises from the interpretation of the program, response to site, and the development of a constructed order. Yet Atkins' position does demand that the architect be given respect by the client and the broader culture. In other words, the architect must be trusted to perform responsibly. This is a demanding position, one shared by the elite of the profession, those award-winning firms featured in architectural journals and publications. Although confident, some might say arrogant, Atkins is not

an elitist. Ultimately, he strives to produce a human architecture, an architecture invested with emotional potential, what he calls the “spirit” of a building.

For Gordon Atkins, the work of the architect is defined largely by how he defines the role of the client. He has always believed that the client is to provide a detailed program (including schedule, cost, and functions) which the architect then interprets. The client allows the architect to develop an appropriate response; notions of style or taste are not to be brought forward by the client. Ultimately, the architect will produce a singular solution.

If only we were less concerned about preconceived stylistic responses and more able to provide a passive environment that would encourage the exploration of spatial modulation by integrating the users’ paraphernalia.... We must become better prepared, better able to create and recognize “happy accidents” and then respond intuitively to the variety of rich possibilities that are as old as time. Thankfully it is an unending, never completed process which develops contradictions, change and challenge.⁶

Atkins admits to having explored a variety of design strategies during the course of his career. Ultimately, his process involves absorbing the problem, relies on intuition (or emotional connection), looks for a solution to the program, and strives to find the spiritual function. He has explored designing from the inside out, and from the outside in, and he has also looked for more ad hoc (or additive) approaches. Once a solution is determined this must be pursued rigorously and uncompromisingly. In essence, there is only one solution for a project. If a client demands changes, then the project is compromised. A work by Gordon Atkins possesses clarity and unity, and it avoids clichés and formulaic responses.

However, as Atkins himself has acknowledged, his approach is one that many potential clients are not prepared to enter into. It demands a relationship of immense trust, and clients prepared to proceed with unconventional projects. On occasion this approach led Atkins’ clients to abandon the relationship; in the best cases the clients trusted his skill and proceeded. Atkins sought challenging clients with high expectations who allowed him to employ all his abilities in developing a project. Unfortunately, architects are often asked by clients to work far below their abilities. The model articulated by Atkins could be interpreted as a variation on the heroic ideal of the role of the architect in a broader culture, a model that descends from the Renaissance. In the case of Gordon Atkins, it reflects his deep and unbending commitment to the discipline of architecture, a quality that is also captured in his own spiritual life and his involvement in the Mormon church.

The question arises as to whether or not this model that Atkins practised is a worthy one. And, what is the role of the architect in contemporary Canadian society? What Atkins has upheld is the notion that architecture plays a powerful role in culture, that architects have a duty to produce provocative work, to design buildings that have a spirit or that are memorable. Architecture should be challenging; it should not be taken for granted. In fact, spirit is the quality that Atkins strives to achieve in his buildings. He wants his work to possess a kind of soul, to resonate with those who encounter or inhabit his buildings at a deep emotional level.

Design can direct thoughts, control movements, and affect attitudes. We like to think that a building must have a “spirit” which is the unseen quality that imposes on and impresses the occupant.⁷

Atkins has recalled that a guest who once stayed at the Drahanchuk house and studio found that living in the house was a haunting experience that took some time to get used to. Once she did, she found it to be a stimulating one.⁸

There is one solution for a project by a given architect. The strength and integrity of the concept determines the spirit of the building:

... every work of art, even in our own increasingly standardized world of mass production, still testifies to that spiritual ordering energy that makes our life what it is. The work of art provides a perfect example of that universal characteristic of human existence – the never-ending process of building a world. In the midst of a world in which everything is dissolving, the work of art stands as a pledge of order.⁹

The “spirit” Atkins is striving for in a work of architecture is, as Hans-Georg Gadamer implies, a kind of animate dimension that a building can possess. While undoubtedly influenced by Atkins’ own Christian spirituality, this dimension is not necessarily religious. It is an animate quality that gives a building life, that allows those that encounter his buildings to find an emotional connection with the architecture. As Gadamer states, architects are involved in the “never-ending process of building a world,” of creating order through the making of artifacts. This invokes a definition of human making by Elaine Scarry when she defines artifacts as metaphorically extending the human body, responding to needs, and providing an animate dimension to our world.¹⁰ In other words, that which we make or construct as humans, including architecture, is not inanimate; it makes the world habitable and makes it alive.

The role of the architect is a complex one, extending from the cultural and political to the technical. How a building relates to a specific site and how an architect interprets the forces that emanate from and impact on that site

are major determining factors in the design. Whether the building attempts to integrate into the site or to stand against it as a foil, the result will reveal something about the site. In the hands of a challenging architect like Gordon Atkins, unexpected aspects of the site, and hence of architecture, will be rendered visible. The choreography of movement, or an emphasis placed on the circulation spaces in a building, is reflected in the work of many prominent twentieth century architects. Together with the siting, functional organization, and tectonics of a building, the approach to circulation is a signature aspect of any architect's work. This is the case in a number of Gordon Atkins' projects, where movement through and around the building is often a surprising experience. Careful siting and unusual movement patterns are reflected in projects such as the Leavitt Residence and the Stoney Tribal Administration Building.

The tectonic assembly and form of a building affirms or undermines an architect's intentions. Daring constructional solutions are inherent in many of the projects of Gordon Atkins. While he engaged a palette of materials that was commonly employed during the 1960s and 1970s, he also strove to develop unique details and was not averse to using ordinary materials in unusual applications. His palette of materials included poured-in-place concrete, cedar siding, quarry tiles, brick, and the like. There is a weight to his work that is satisfying and consistent. He often has used dramatic or expressive forms, and spaces often seemed carved into the earth or shaped by the form of the building in a sheltering manner. His early buildings typically employed sweeping plan arrangements and sculptural vertical elements, and there was often a tension between the horizontal line and the vertical or tall element; a meandering horizontal line of motion leads to an ascending movement. Many of these attributes are reflected in the following buildings: the Drahanchuk Studio, Mayland Heights Elementary School, and the Electrical Training Facility in Grande Prairie.

...

Gordon Atkins, whose clients sometimes felt that he was too emotionally connected to his projects, was uncompromising in his belief in the role of the architect. Part of the emotionally difficult aspect of any architectural practice is seeing how ideas defined on paper are executed during the construction phase. His projects were often technically innovative, which on occasion, either through daring detailing or poor workmanship, led to problems that strained relations with clients. In any project, changes and deficiencies arise that may compromise the project. For Atkins the final result was often flawed; he could see all the mistakes and alterations made to the design. For many architects, as for Atkins, the process of architecture is difficult, complex, and emotionally charged.

Should an architect make the kind of commitment that Atkins has made to his work, often in the face of cultural indifference, and occasionally hostility? Should the inevitable flaws or changes to the work be seen as failures? The burden of cultural responsibility can be a heavy one, but the alternative is that architecture plays no significant role, that buildings become banal and mediocre. The notion, expressed by Anthony Jackson¹¹ and others, that the profession is inherently unbalanced may be correct, but what is the alternative? That the profession breaks down into three basic groups is relatively accurate: a small group of elite firms that win awards and are championed in the press; a large group of very capable and professional firms whose work is often not recognized; and a portion of the profession that produces substandard buildings. Ideally, all firms should produce outstanding works of architecture. But significant architecture in contemporary practice is very difficult to achieve, given all the forces that come to bear on the creation of a building.¹² It takes remarkable determination and skill to realize a provocative work, even with a supportive client.

Gordon Atkins strove to achieve an emotional response in those who encounter or inhabit his architecture. Beyond the site, movement, and constructional aspects of his work is an interest in the expressive power of form, the metaphorical or the poetic. Gordon Atkins is a poetic man, he is a spiritual man, and he is deeply engaged in the fundamentals of architecture. He is a humble, logical, and complex man. He is an uncompromising architect who has challenged many common architectural solutions. The career of Gordon Atkins is one of great commitment to the discipline of architecture, it is a career filled with many successes and disappointments. This could be said of the careers of many architects, and yet in his case it is the clarity with which he has understood the role of the architect that is remarkable. It is the most demanding position to take and yet it is the one that cultures depend upon.

Architecture must mirror the identity of the user. The transformation of tree to structure, soil to cement, weed to sculpture, clay to pot, is part of the site, part of the artist. Therefore, all that touches earth is earth, all that reaches for tree is tree.¹³

Unfortunately, many clients are not prepared to work with a challenging architect. In the case of public sector clients this is a double-edged sword: public clients often do not want to take risks that could be seen as irresponsible, and yet there is the larger cultural obligation to allow architects opportunities to express and confront important cultural ideas. In many countries architecture is understood this way. In Canada there have been periods where this model has functioned, and Atkins was able to take advantage of this during the 1960s and 1970s.

- 1 Gordon Atkins quoted in an exhibition brochure, Edmonton Art Gallery (1970), Gordon Atkins fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary.
- 2 See Trevor Boddy, *Modern Architecture in Alberta* (Regina: University of Regina, 1987).
- 3 John C. Parkin, "Architecture in Canada Since 1945," *RAIC Journal* (March 1962): 36.
- 4 Peter Hemingway quoted in Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture, Volume 2* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994), 818.
- 5 Gordon Atkins, undated statement to a University of Alberta building selection committee, Gordon Atkins fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary.
- 6 Gordon Atkins quoted in "Architects on Post Modernism," *The Canadian Architect* (May 1983): 36.
- 7 Gordon Atkins and Associates Architects Ltd., Firm Brochure, Gordon Atkins fonds, Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary, n.d.
- 8 Conversation with Gordon Atkins, 21 September 2001.
- 9 H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 103–4.
- 10 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 285.
- 11 See Anthony Jackson, *Reconstructing Architecture for the Twenty-First Century: An Inquiry into the Architect's World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).
- 12 See Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
- 13 Gordon Atkins quoted in Carol Moore Ede, *Canadian Architecture 1960/70* (Toronto: Burns and MacEachern, 1971), 168.

INTERVIEW WITH GORDON ATKINS

AUGUST 1, 2001

Conducted by Dr. Michael McMordie and Keir Stuhlmiller
(Edited by Graham Livesey)

Keir Stuhlmiller: The purpose of the interview is to gain an understanding of the ground work for your career; it is important that we explore your approach to and philosophy of architecture.

Dr. Michael McMordie: Tell us a little about from where you were born, grew up, educated, and a little about your family perhaps. What brought you into architecture at the beginning?

Gordon Atkins: My mother and father were from Calgary, I was actually born in Calgary in 1937 (March 5); their marriage was short lived. My mother was the eldest daughter of the H. H. Atkins family from Cardston in southern Alberta. When she separated from my father she moved back to Cardston and worked there for a law firm. I lived with her as an only child, and with my grandparents. My grandparents, Henry and Lola Atkins, had seven children and adopted a couple as well. I lived there under those circumstances until I was six. When I was six years old my mother and my great-grandmother died on the same day, from different causes, and I was brought into the Atkins family. I was actually born Gordon Kearn; however, living with my grandparents all those years I had my name changed and have been going under the Atkins name ever since. My grandfather owned a clothing store in Cardston; it has been in business for well over a hundred years. Being from a small town has been a significant influence on me, particularly since Cardston is a Mormon community. The Temple was built there in 1915; it was the first Mormon temple in the British Commonwealth. It is a substantial structure for a town of three thousand people. Then, the grain elevators were also a main part of the fabric of the town.

My great-grandfather became a convert to the Mormon church in England in the early days; he migrated to Utah as a cobbler. When he got to Utah he found there was a fair amount of persecution of Mormons, partly because of their polygamist

attitudes at that time. Brigham Young sent quite a few people out to different places, one of them was Canada. My great-grandfather came to southern Alberta and immediately became involved in his own business. My grandfather was actually born in the Cardston area. Mormons came up from Utah and settled that whole area. There are at least a dozen towns there with substantially Mormon populations, including: Cardston, Raymond, Magrath, Hillspring, and Glenwood. I grew up in that kind of cultural and religious community.

Most certainly the influence of the Mormon church on a population and community that size is very intense. Obviously both the baggage and the positive influences that come with a religious community shape young people. I guess it is the way in which you perceive it. Because of some of the very strict ideals placed on those who sincerely live the religion there can be a feeling of restriction among the youth. Obviously as the youth mature in such a community and find a group of peers, family, and friends who are dedicated and committed to principles of the gospel, it influences how they discover for themselves whether or not they have belief or not. The tendency is for young people to be pushing the limits all of the time. Mormon beliefs are strong: for example, smoking, drinking alcohol and coffee, and these kinds of things, I believe are harmful to the body. Hence the wisdom to refrain from things that are not good for the body. Those things are obviously very visible and so people kind of anchor on those in deference to things that maybe are more important in terms of personal morality and integrity. Certainly for myself I did go exploring. I had some troubled waters for a while in terms of my own attitudes. On the other hand, I think that my faith was reinforced, having made the decision independently.

More particularly for me it was the freedom one has in a small community. By the time I was five or six I was spending Saturdays with my grandmother working in the store. During my free time my friends and I would follow the rivers and walk the railway lines. The opportunity for danger was constant. As I reflect back now, obviously there is some purpose for my being around, because by the time I was fifteen there were at least ten or twelve times when I should have died.

MM: It would help to have you fill in a little bit about education and your choice of architecture.

GA: The interesting thing is that I ended up at the University of Washington. Just as I arrived in Seattle to go to school, two architects that are well known, Barry Downs from Vancouver and Don Bittorf from Edmonton, were both graduating from the University of Washington. We were all Canadians, we became acquainted and kept up a friendship. As I got closer to graduating Don was encouraging me to come back to Alberta and go into practice with him in Edmonton. Instead, at the end of the university process I was flown to Winnipeg and was interviewed by the firm of Green, Blankstein, Russell. They hired me to go to Winnipeg and spend a year there. I did do that and then went to Edmonton with the idea I would be practising with Don Bittorf. However, I literally could not tolerate Edmonton. While our car was still packed we just headed south on our way to Calgary. I think twenty miles out of Calgary we decided, before we even got there, that this was where we wanted to be. We govern ourselves to a certain degree by our own personal prayers and influences. We came to Calgary and felt really good about it.

MM: When you say we, were you married?

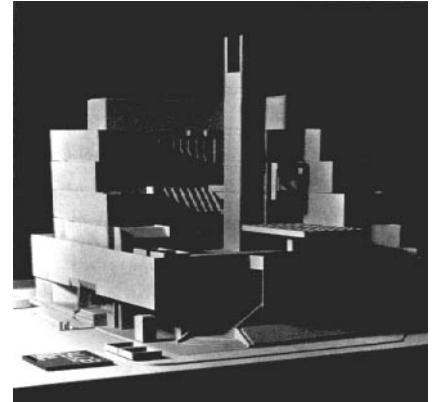
GA: Yes, I was married and had one daughter at the time. When I think about it, every one of my children and I, and all of my work, would have been totally different if we had settled in Edmonton. Who can say whether it would have been better or worse?

It was the same thing with finding a spouse. At a very early age, I think it was as early as grade seven or eight, my future wife moved to Cardston with her family. I spotted her soon after and so from that point on I pursued her. By the time I was sixteen I was ready to settle down. I wasn't thinking of getting married that early, but I was in the mode. In fact my parents often told me later that they were really concerned about me because they thought I was so serious, everything I decided I was going to do was the way it was going to be. I guess that was reaffirmed. I was pursuing this young lady who was a Catholic, she converted and became a member of the Mormon church when she was sixteen or seventeen. Because of the position I held in the church at the time I was able to perform her baptism. She was a very popular girl, I went through some frustrating times with all of the guys that I found on her doorstep every time I went to pick her up. Eventually, love won out. We got married early, I had just turned nineteen and she wasn't quite twenty.

I had never been out of Cardston, really it was a cloistered existence. It is remarkable when you think about it. By the time I left at nineteen I probably had eaten in a restaurant three times in my life. We started off, a friend of mine and I, and we were so anxious to go. By that time I knew exactly where I was going and exactly what I wanted to do. I had gone to Vancouver to see the University of British Columbia, but ultimately I decided on Seattle.

The University of Washington, at the time that I was there, had one of the strongest reputations in the West. The thing that was great for me was that their program was a true five-year program. As I went through that learning process I found the teachers were great because they fought with each other constantly, none of them agreed on anything. The grading was very rigid, there was a lot of intense pressure on the students. It was a fun experience because each teacher had their own personality and was really good at what they were doing. So whether you got the delineator or the philosopher or the engineer or the landscape architect the process was very open. For me it was a building process. I found the university setting, where my main forte was in design, really rewarding in terms of the response of the critics, grading, and all the rest of it. I recall one time that our Dean refused to review my project because it was an underground planetarium and he thought it was below the dignity of man to walk downstairs; he said you should always go upstairs into a building.

I guess the one thing that we all are very sure of with architecture is that there is absolutely no formula for design. The closer you get to one the surer you are of having lost your way. I have always perceived specialization in that regard. A specialist in architecture is simply somebody who has done two schools and all of a sudden is a specialist. All it really means is that you got it in on time and on budget, and have a client that likes you. Now I can go and present myself as being able to do fabulous jobs with schools, I have the experience. I think perhaps one of the really devastating things that is wrong with architecture is the idea that specialized experience is an attribute. I think just the opposite. Those who have not had specialized experience dig deeper and go further and are more honest in their response. Clients never feel this way because they always want somebody who they think knows what the program is. The reality is that most clients do not have the smallest clue as to what their program is. It is only when somebody pursues clients vigorously, to force them to prepare a program that deals with the issues, that the real questions of architecture come about.



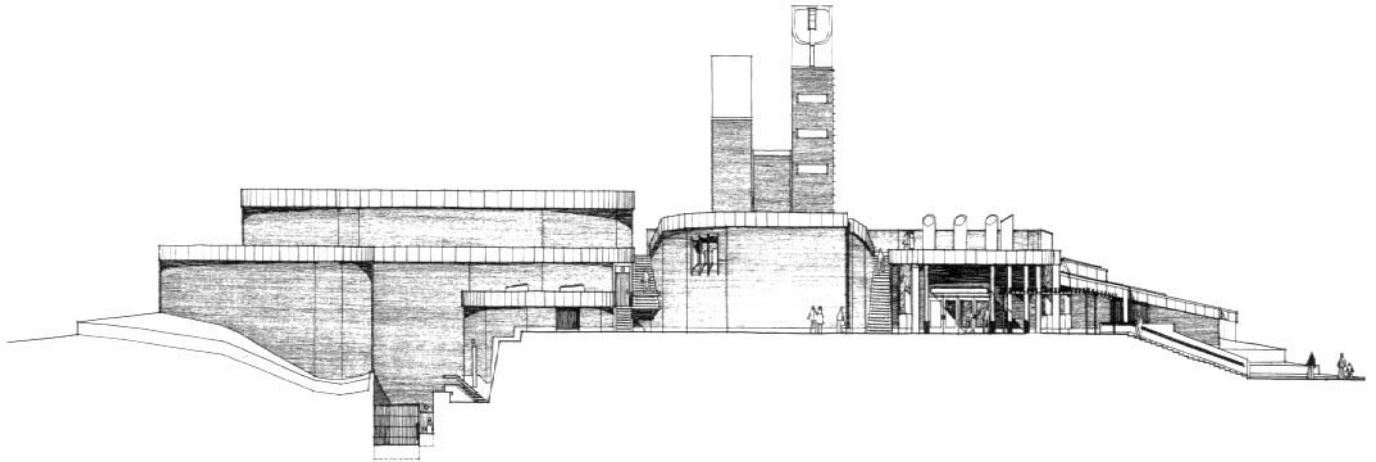


To have a client who is honest enough or confident enough in the architect's ability to allow him to control the architect through the program rather than through the solution. For clients it is almost always impossible.

A corporate client even wants to go so far as to specify the hardware. It doesn't matter how it functions or whether it is appropriate for the situation, it is just the way it is. Most clients impose on the project their personality and personal choices that have nothing to do with the end user. An architect really must have the integrity, the confidence, and the power to be able to really produce a response for the end user rather than the end payer. Then you do get architecture. For me this was always a major problem because quite obviously this approach says that there is no democracy in design. I for one do not believe for one minute that there is any democracy in design. I think there is a lot of democracy in requirements, in programming and in setting the limits. To impose design solutions from any other source is in error. Any architect who allows it really corrupts himself. It has been interesting to me to see the way clients respond to this approach.

Often clients find an aggressive or a confident professional to be a threat because it takes away their ultimate power, which is what they have been working for all of their lives. There are those who truly recognize or have the ability to see beyond themselves and search out the person that they can truly have confidence in. If they have confidence in the architect that is when you really get the good stuff. To find anyone that has high expectations of an architect is rare, because most clients don't have any expectations, just get the job done on time, on budget and make no waves. It is always structural, engineering, or safety requirements that are accepted immediately. Anything that delves into the ethereal, the

3 **Calgary Centennial
Planetarium
Competition
Submission
(Second Place
Entry), Calgary,
Alberta, 1966. South
Elevation.**



artistic, or the three-dimensional environment scares them. In fact, so-called artistic people are not trustworthy in the eyes of the business community. It is unfortunate because if you really truly find a person who is conceptually grounded, who really is serious and capable, you will be rewarded. Those who are most artistic are probably the most trustworthy because they really fight for the integrity of the honest concept. That is when you really do get good architecture, because by definition we are really saying good architecture is that which gives a functional environment for the end user. It does so in an emotionally satisfying way.

The client is really critical, I have always said it to them right up front, which scares a lot of them. That as far as I am concerned the client does not have any say whatsoever in terms of imposing design standards on me. You have the ultimate judgment on everything that I do. I want you to know right up front that I insist that we write a detailed program of your requirements. What I will try to do, as best as I can, is to both force you and help you to reveal your programmatic requirements, because through the program you can control me completely. The program is in fact the design. If you come and say I want this blue, I want this piece of hardware, and I want this out of this magazine we've lost our relationship right up front. Obviously, I eliminated a lot of clients right up front.

I like to reflect on an interview that was done in the late 1960s when the Alberta cultural department interviewed thirty architects and artists in the province and developed one-man shows for a month on each of those people. They sent a photographer and an interviewer around to interview each of those people. That interview was interesting to me, because the interviewer wrote



that her first impression of me was that I was arrogant. And then she went on and said, after being close to me for a better part of a week, that she felt that it wasn't arrogance at all but confidence.

MM: What part of your early environment opened you up to architecture, led you toward architectural studies? Just how did that come about?

GA: When I was very young, I was probably seven or eight, I had an illness. I was at home for two weeks and during that time, which was a pretty boring time, I spent all of my time drawing. Up to that time I didn't recognize that I had any interest or ability, the drawing that I was doing was kind of crazy as well. It literally was almost copy work, drawing the current comics, Bugs Bunny and that kind of stuff. I have always felt comfortable doing things with my hands, whether it was carving, or building, or drawing; certainly I had no real flare for it. In high school I was doing signs of all things, no one else in town did signs, but it was just mechanical work. I was doing well in school and athletics, and in the last three years of high school we had a very unusual thing happen in Cardston.

All of a sudden we had a new principal and he was a Jewish fellow. Of all things, a Jewish fellow in Cardston, and he was an outstanding individual. He was young, with a philosophy degree from back East, and he was so refreshing. One of the other things that was interesting was that across the street from the school were the Temple grounds, and in the grounds was the original tabernacle, the meeting house. It was a wooden structure that had been built back in the 1880s or 1890s. It was a phenomenal structure, it had a three-storey interior space all detailed in wood. The attitude of the Mormon community was, and still is, that anything new is better than anything that is old. It was decided that the church was going to build a new chapel and so the old one

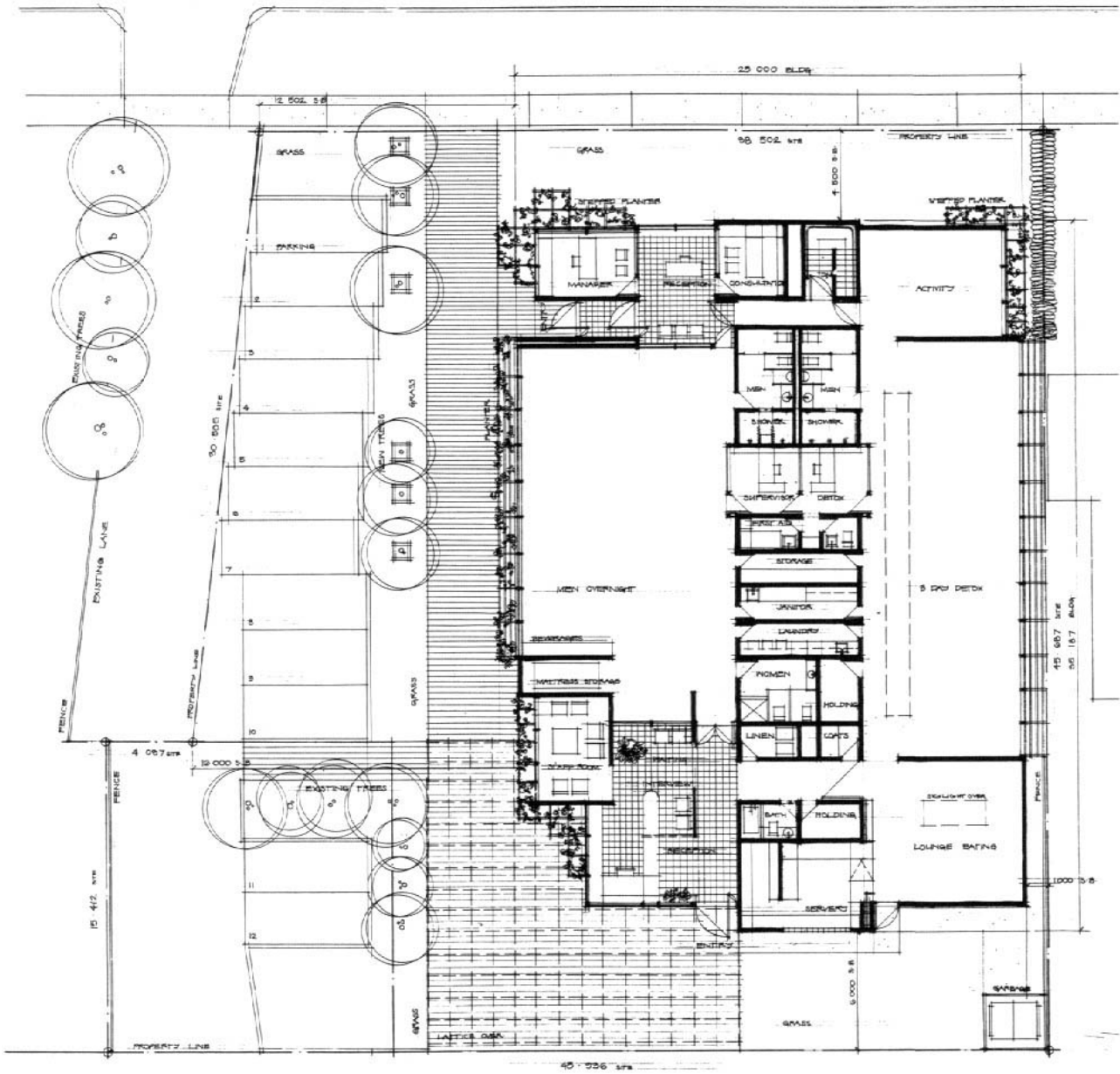
was going to go. The new principal led the fight to try to save it, but he couldn't muster enough support, so they destroyed it.

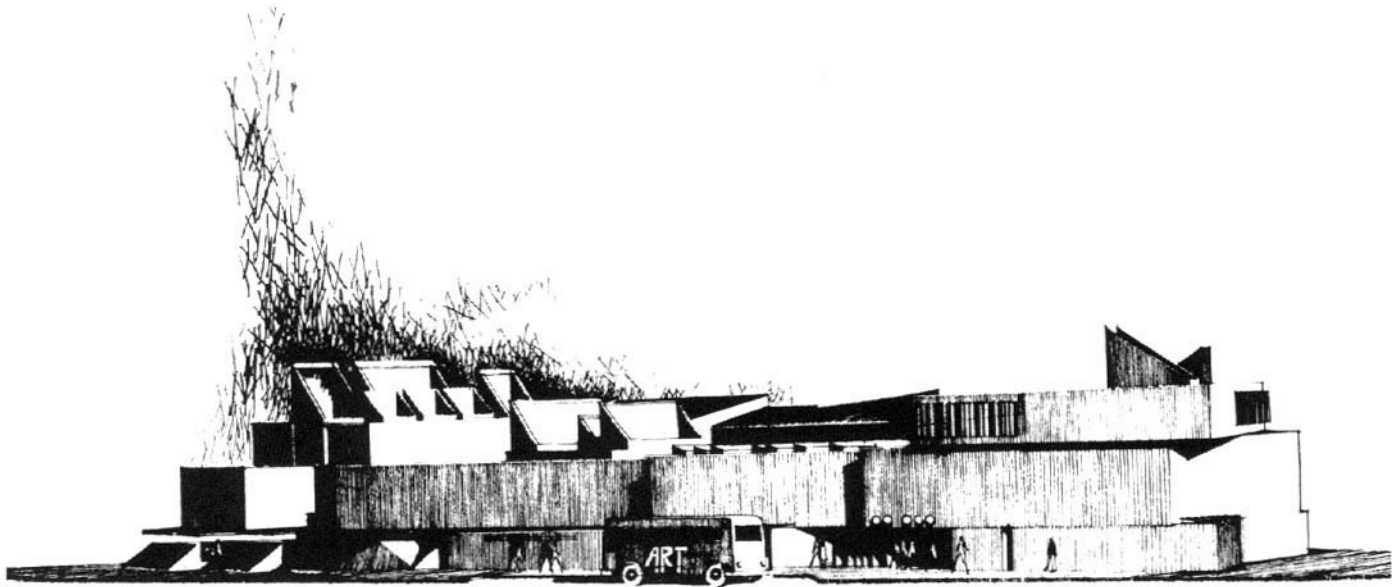
The principal really challenged kids in class, I got to be really good friends with him. He called me into his office one day and said, "What are you going to do when you graduate?" I said, "Well, I am going to university." "But what are you going to do?" "I don't know." I was going to university, and frankly I was like most of the students, most of them had no real direction and they were just going to go to university because education had a religious push as well. We talked about it for a little bit and he said, "Well, I have known you for a couple of years now and what would you think of industrial design? And what about architecture?" In Cardston, where would you have seen or heard of an architect? There were no buildings done by architects, except for the Temple, and there were no architects there. He didn't do anything more than mention the word architecture and it was like a big flashing sign to me, it was simply a matter of him saying the word for me to decide that I could do it. And so, even as I was preparing for university, I accepted in my mind that that's what I wanted to do. I had no idea of what it entailed, did not know the strain or stresses, or what my capabilities were, but it was certainly something I was dedicated to.

In terms of support, my wife certainly supported me all the way through school. They were tough times, because anyone who lives with or close to an architect deals with someone who is extremely critical of everything. At school we had five-week projects and I would be there every day and every night for the five weeks and the last four days you are there twenty-four hours a day, you could not wait for the last four days to finish. Then you get out into practice and the same thing happens. When I moved from Winnipeg to Calgary and started to work it was just constant. My wife picked up all of the slack in terms of relationships with the kids. It was beneficial that during my first years in Calgary we had an office in the home and consequently I interacted with the kids to a greater extent than I might have. From an income point of view it was always feast or famine, and my wife's attitude was always very pragmatic.

KS: When we met previously we discussed the level of detail to which you took your work. I have been through your documentation in the Canadian Architectural Archives and what strikes me is your interest in a very precise level of detail. Was it through the macro level of design that your interest in detail developed or was it the reverse, where your initial fascination would

5 Detoxification Centre,
Edmonton, Alberta,
1981. Plan.





have been focused on the detail and then broadened into a larger sense of architecture?

GA: That's a really good and interesting question because it is one that has troubled me over the years. It is one of the really grey areas in practice, we as individuals tend to preconceive solutions before we even have a problem in our mind. When I say school, or gas station, or church, there is an image right there. Then I say give me five minutes and I will tell you why that image is wrong and see if you agree with me when we are finished. Because none of the responses that created the image were honest, they are repetitious just like the housing industry, there is no real concept, there is no real integrity to the process.

So this question of do you design from the inside out or from the outside in? I have gone in both directions at different times, but it was always my view that literally it was from the outside in. One thing that I really forced myself to do was to actually type up the program and to send it to the client, and go back and forth on it. In the process of discussing it with them you are really writing the program. So then I knew better what the problem was, then I could work on the solution.

As western Canadians, the concept of climate is so critical to our feelings, for myself I found that went to securing location. When I was in a space where my back was against the wall, I was in a space where orientation was mandatory, it wasn't an option. I found it to be a reflection of my old Dean at the University of

Washington when he said that when you put on your galoshes, your overcoat, and your collar you are in a protected environment. I found that my initial designs, both in school and in practice, were rooms that were designed with built-in furniture and designed with all of the functions as described by the client. In other words, the whole concept of flexibility was a dirty word as far as I was concerned because flexibility at that time really meant a lack of decision. I thought, on the other hand, if it was honest flexibility that is in the program then that was different. But most people come to you not wanting to solve the problem, not wanting to define the problem, and therefore wanting flexibility so they can change their minds all the time and I found that I didn't trust that.

Some of my early rooms were so detailed that you couldn't do anything in them other than what I described you were going to do. You had to live in them the way I had defined, I'm sure people found it frustrating. I also found some clients who years later called and said they were lying in a bedroom I designed, and remembering our fights that we had, and now they see what it is I was talking about, those were gratifying moments. If being an architect has any value at all it is that visual, emotional, and spiritual training that says that every movement of the eye and what it falls on, whether it is light, texture, colour, or space, is what affects your emotional well being. So in a work environment, or in a play environment, or in a relaxing environment, or in a religious environment all of those things play on the mind. The concept of going from the outside in is to approach the building, find out what the building is trying to do in the site, and use a bubble diagram (which is just an exercise at university where we compartmentalize the functional relationships and how they were influenced by the wind, the weather, the views, and all of those kinds of things). After that it is just a matter of putting a skin on the bubble diagram.

Getting back to this envelope thing, that is quite different from pre-visualizing the end product as an egg. Later on in life it occurred to me that the earlier approach of going from the outside in, from the bubble diagram forming the shape and all the rest of it, was like designing a structure that was an ad hoc structure, because you were adding on the things that were there and expressing a room shape or a form. An ad hoc structure allows you more flexibility than a preconceived one.

I think you are getting closer to real architectural significance when the simplicity and the quality of a space houses all of these things in a conceptual way so that the entity does everything

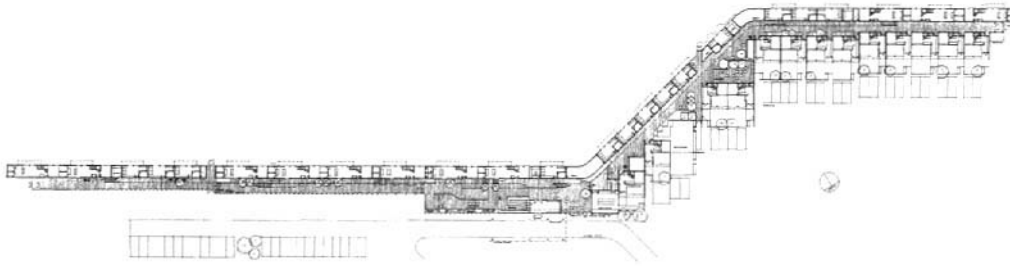
functionally and emotionally, but also has a spiritual presence by itself. It always bothered me that so many people used their ingenuity as architects to come forward with something that was totally unique. To me the uniqueness was simply a response to integrity or honesty in your design. If you actually approached the design truly honestly, and with integrity, you did not have to worry about being unique.

In fact all the bylaws and building codes for me were an enigma, in the sense that we have no control over the building anymore if you allow codes to influence you the way they are supposed to. My approach was to deny the code, I felt that my pragmatic sense, training, and experience were superior to the code. So my decisions were actually more imperative than the City's, and in fact the first house that I did, the City refused it. I convinced them at the time that because I was a responsible professional that they had no jurisdiction over me, that by putting my seal on the drawings was like a seal of purity. Even in later projects I refused to comply with the building codes and when I ran into a problem it was always a matter of convincing the powers to see the sense of what I was saying.

KS: It is an interesting point in that you were talking about the ad hoc approach as a beginning stage. But then you just also described the simplification of this ad hoc approach and the resulting complexity seems to come from the internal relationships. It would seem this is where the interest in detail and the interest in the interior functions and program start to really develop their importance.

GA: There are frustrating things that have come out of that. One is the question of detail. There are obviously, in all of our lives, experiences that affect those things. At Montreal's Expo '67 the Habitat project was a startling solution. So I went to visit it and was really impressed because of the integrity of the overall design, but the detail was absolutely abysmal. It offended me. It is kind of like getting to know a person who on the outside is so perfect and then you see all these little flaws and you want to stand back. Detail did become quite important to me in that respect.

Let me give you an example. One of the offices I had was in an old house in the Bankview area of Calgary. In that old house somebody had constructed an ad hoc washer and dryer room with a bathroom in it, covered by a corrugated plastic roof that was too low. It also had an indoor tree growing out of it. By the time I took it

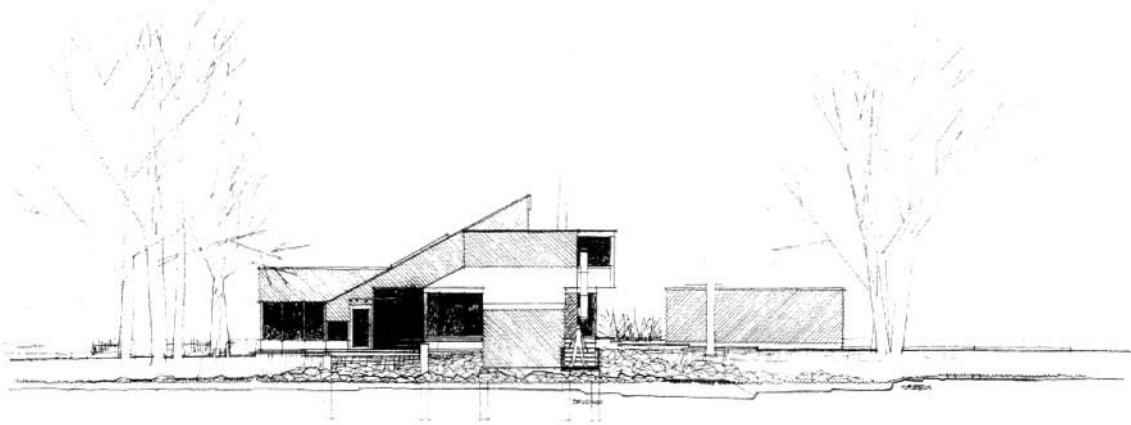


over the tree was quite mature. Anyway, this was the crudest kind of space you could ever come across. We moved in and used it as a transition from the entry space through to the conference room, which was also the kitchen. All we did was to clean up the colours and the paint, and improve the light a little bit. We put a loose tile on the floor, added a couple of blocks to support some bookcases and cleaned up the plant. It was really interesting to me that here was this space that cost nothing. It had nothing in it. It had no great concept. It was just a space of light and movement through it. Yet it was the most important space in the house. On the one hand I felt that the quality of detail was really important, on the other hand it was the concept and the quality of the light in that space that really did the trick.

I think that some of my failures, as well as my successes, were as a result of my interest in detail. First of all, today you don't have enough craftsmen to do the work and to do it in an economical way. The other thing is that the requirement for the careful consideration of all of the details of the space is time consuming. The Derochie house was the first house that I ever did. We custom built everything on site. We made all the doors, all the windows, all the window frames, and all the light fixtures. Even the light switch covers, I had them made up custom because there was nothing available. All of those things were really important to me, the placement of every single thing. Every room, every elevation, everything that imposed on the visual environment was controlled. As you know most buildings don't have that. I found that is what I had to do with my projects. I literally consulted my engineers and told them I will do half their job because I will select and place all the fixtures. Maybe it was an affront to them but they were not capable of the required thinking. Because of this involvement, choices became excruciating for some. In fact, it can actually kill projects.

If you insist on quality, it is going to cost you and your client more than the system allows. That is why so many good guys go bankrupt because they can administrate one end but they can't administrate the other. Certainly detail is critical in my mind because

8 **Gondek Residence,**
Golden, British
Columbia, 1971.
South Elevation.



it really completes the integrity of the space and the concept. The other thing that stuck with me is an interest in small-scale design, the detail of a door handle, or a light fixture, or a piece of furniture. In fairness to what the system imposes on you, to take a major commission, a university building or an institutional building, and putting five or six years of your life into it, is a real challenge. The little control that you actually have is minimal. On the other hand you take a glass, or a spoon, or a chair and it is easy to conceptualize and have the simplicity we have been talking about. From that point of view I always felt that there were two other areas that I would have been just as successful at: photography and industrial design.

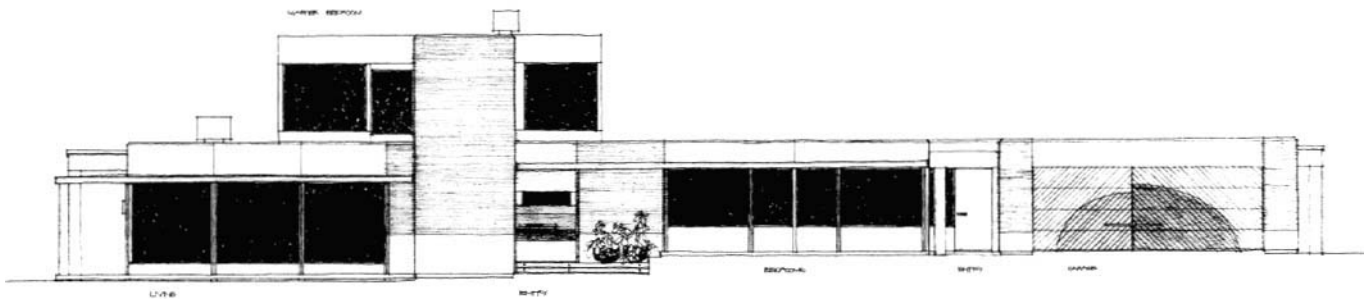
I guess I'd have to confess to two frustrations that every architect must face. One, even though you are working to your limits around the clock, under forced emotional circumstances, to actually have a consistent flow of work to take advantage of whatever skills that you have is only possible if you become the person that you don't want to become. That is the architect who is out flogging himself and getting work, literally obtaining work as opposed to being commissioned to do work. The second is really the same thing, that is when you see great projects come along that really require some capability, whether you get it or not, you are jealous that someone with great capability didn't get it. It is so frustrating to see great projects going to mediocre firms. These are frustrations that I have never gotten over.

If you ever view a client differently, from one to the other, I think you make a serious mistake. If a client comes to me and has outlandish expectations of me I just embrace and love him and want to go the whole way. Someone who comes with low expectations, or no expectations, I don't want to have anything to do with him. So whether it is a house, or whether it is a city, the response is the same. One of the problems I had is that I would not personally differentiate between those, an institutional project got the same amount of attention as a house.

9 Atkins Residence,
Calgary, Alberta,
1970. View of South
Elevation.



10 Merrill Residence,
Hillspring, Alberta,
1974. South
Elevation.



On my very first residence there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that I didn't do myself, the drawings are all simply a reflection of me. After the time that my partner, Robert Weston, came on in the 1970s it was hard to tell the difference between our drawings, for example, our lettering. Neither one of us could really define where one started and the other stopped. Bob, as it turns out, was from Cardston as well. That is not how we got together. It was also his father and uncle who were the contractors that I worked for when I was in school. Bob's whole background was in carpentry and construction, he went on to be the person who did the production end of things. Even though I did every sketch of every detail, he would then transform those into the working drawings and perhaps put a more pragmatic bent to them. Once I mentioned that to one of my clients, who was asking me about the detail, and I told him this is how I did it, giving my rationale. To him it was a real negative because he wanted me to be the guy that he was dealing with from beginning to end. From a pragmatic point of view you couldn't spread yourself that thin. Bob did a great job, he is really good at what he does, and as a cabinet-maker he is superb.

KS: What about with your own residence? I know that you have mentioned before the significance of your house as you have continued to work on it.

GA: I always have a problem with the word 'entitlement' in every aspect, because people feel they are entitled to work, they are entitled to housing, they are entitled to food, they are entitled to love and sex. As soon as you say that you are entitled to something you have lost the most important aspect, and that is gratitude for what you do get. With your own house, you don't answer to anybody except your family and that may be difficult enough. An architect makes a statement about his own attitudes by building his own



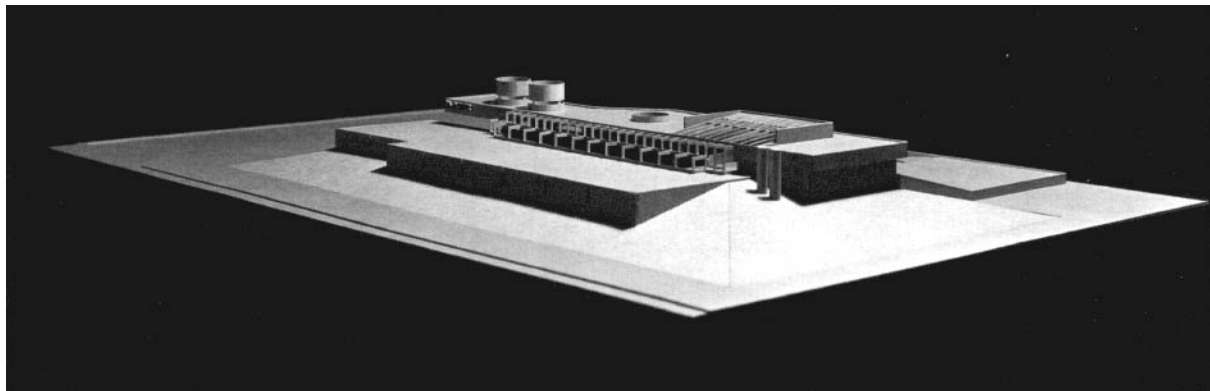
11 AGT Building,
Elbow Park, Calgary,
Alberta, 1966. View of
North Elevation.

house. A lot of architects will go their whole lives without doing it because they don't want to make a public statement. That wasn't my rationale, it was more a matter that I *could not find* a site to build a house on. It never would have occurred to me then, and probably still wouldn't, for me to take down something in a mature setting to build anew, which is what happens all of the time now.

I spent a lot of time looking for a house, I couldn't find anything. Finally I came across this house in Mount Royal in Calgary. Frankly it is a house that probably had some inspiration from the person I would have never wanted inspiration from, Frank Lloyd Wright. Obviously there are a lot of things that I admire about Wright and his work. The Temple in Cardston is by a young guy who designed it when he was twenty-five, just out of the office of Louis Sullivan when Wright was still there. He did some of the temples, the detail is absolutely phenomenal, it is very "Wrightian." In any case our house is based on a square steep-pitched roof, it was very seldom that I have an overhang on a house. So to select this square house with a steep-pitched roof, and all the rest of it, was a bit unusual. The thing that intrigued me was the site and its mature trees. The house was owned by an old couple who had lived there from Day One. He had died thirty years earlier. I didn't know that when I went around and tried to get into the house. For six months I went and knocked on the door, and sat out on the boulevard and ate my lunch and kind of devoured this old place. One day there was a car there, I went and knocked on the door. The old lady had died the night before. The son, who was there, was about ready to throw me off the porch when I asked him to sell the house. The long and short of it was, after quite a period of time, we acquired it. My father, who was very conservative and went through the Depression, said, "Son, you will never pay for that house. Your nose will be to the grindstone your entire life."

It was a pretty big leap for a guy who didn't have any income. We got into this house and began an evolutionary process. The exterior skin mostly stayed the same, we added a few projections and developed the external landscaping. I redid all of the surfaces, all of the mechanical, and all of the electrical. More particularly, all the built-ins and the details were the testing ground for some of the things I was doing in practice. The whole feel of the

12 Rackets Raquetball Facility, Lethbridge, Alberta, 1978. Aerial View of Model.



house, the spaces, the views, and the privacy, provided the transition in my life from a younger person to an older person. There are many things there that still feel really good and comfortable to me. Some frustrations are built into the house. For example, my wife likes change. She likes the opportunity to be more flexible, and as I've said, "My decisions were always long-term decisions. I never bought anything or never wanted anything that wasn't supposed to last me my life." Once the decision was made about the house I never wanted to move again. However, in every life there is a need to do different things at different times.

I have done certain things, and sure I can do more of the same. That is why I made the negative comment about Wright. Wright did some phenomenal things, most of his creativity and most of the work he did was in the first fifteen or twenty years of his career; the repetition of his own ideas got to the point where it made me wonder. In the early days every project I did was so different it was like it came out of a different office, there is that kind of thing for each of us to sort out. I think there are a lot of things I would still be capable of doing. I've done the things that I needed and wanted to do and now it is time to move on into different phases of my life.

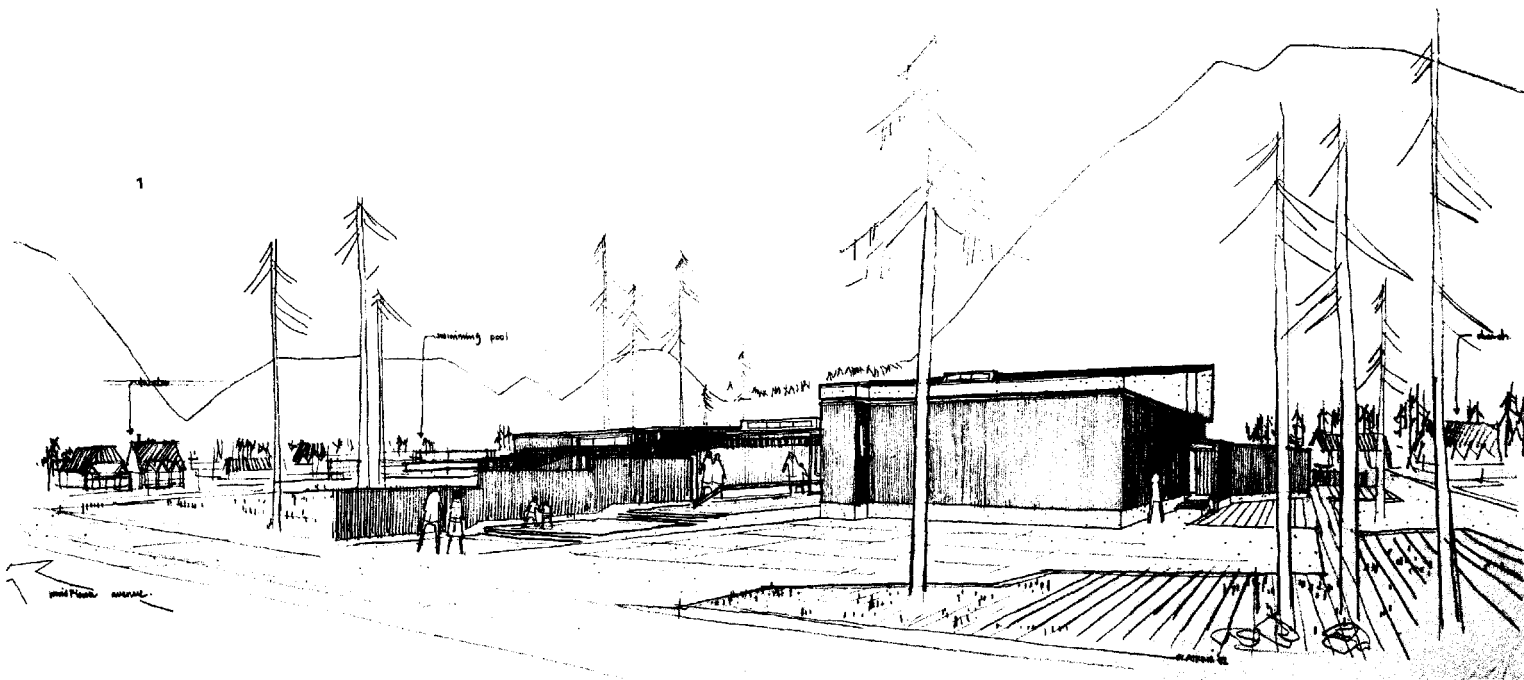
PROJECTS

CHAPEL, CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Waterton, Alberta · 1962

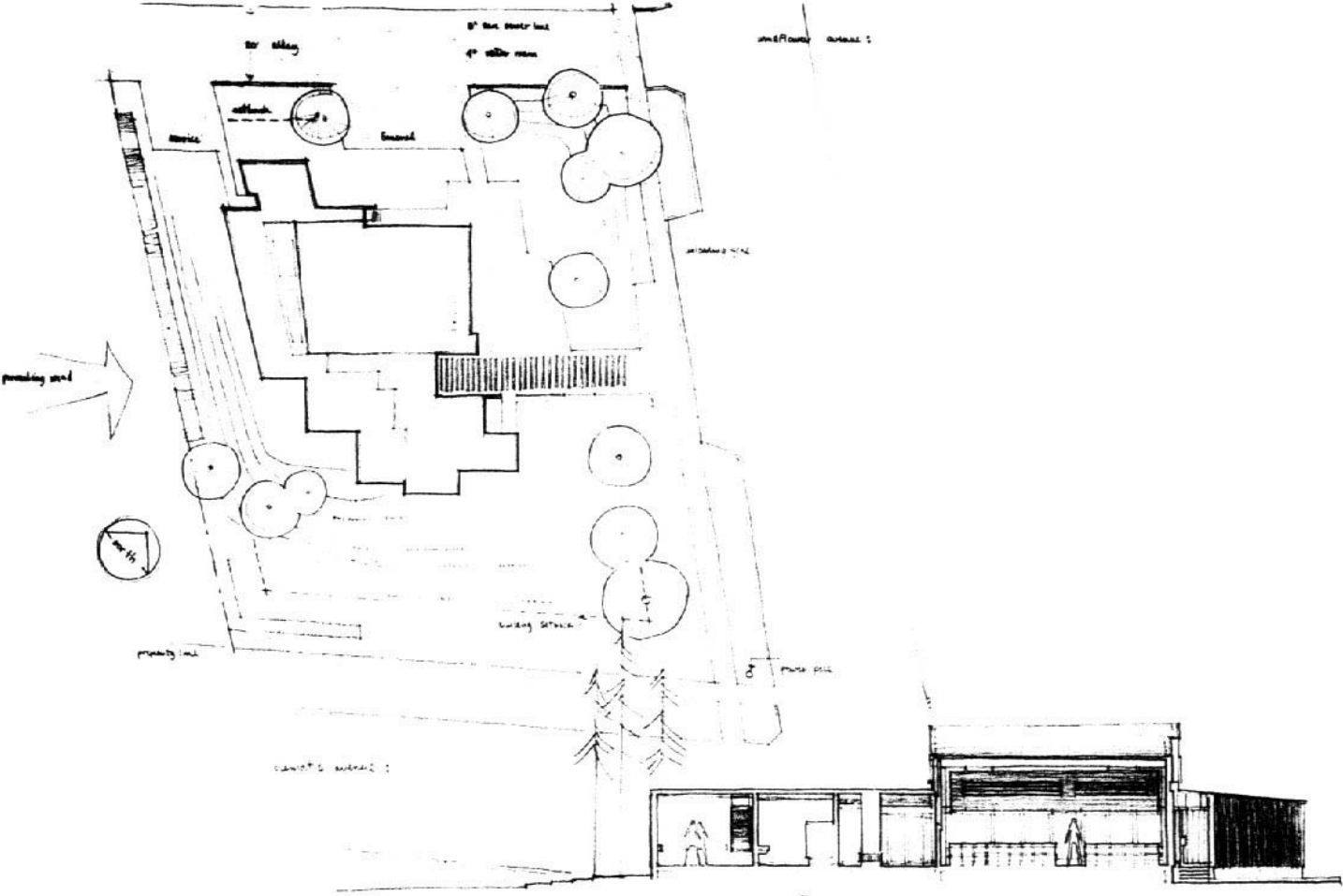
A summer chapel designed for a building committee representing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints located in Salt Lake City, Utah. The building committee included six local group presidents, three bishops, the Park Superintendent, and federal government representatives. The committee was in charge of supervising approximately eight hundred new church buildings a year. These buildings were erected the world over, in the price range of \$50,000 to \$500,000.

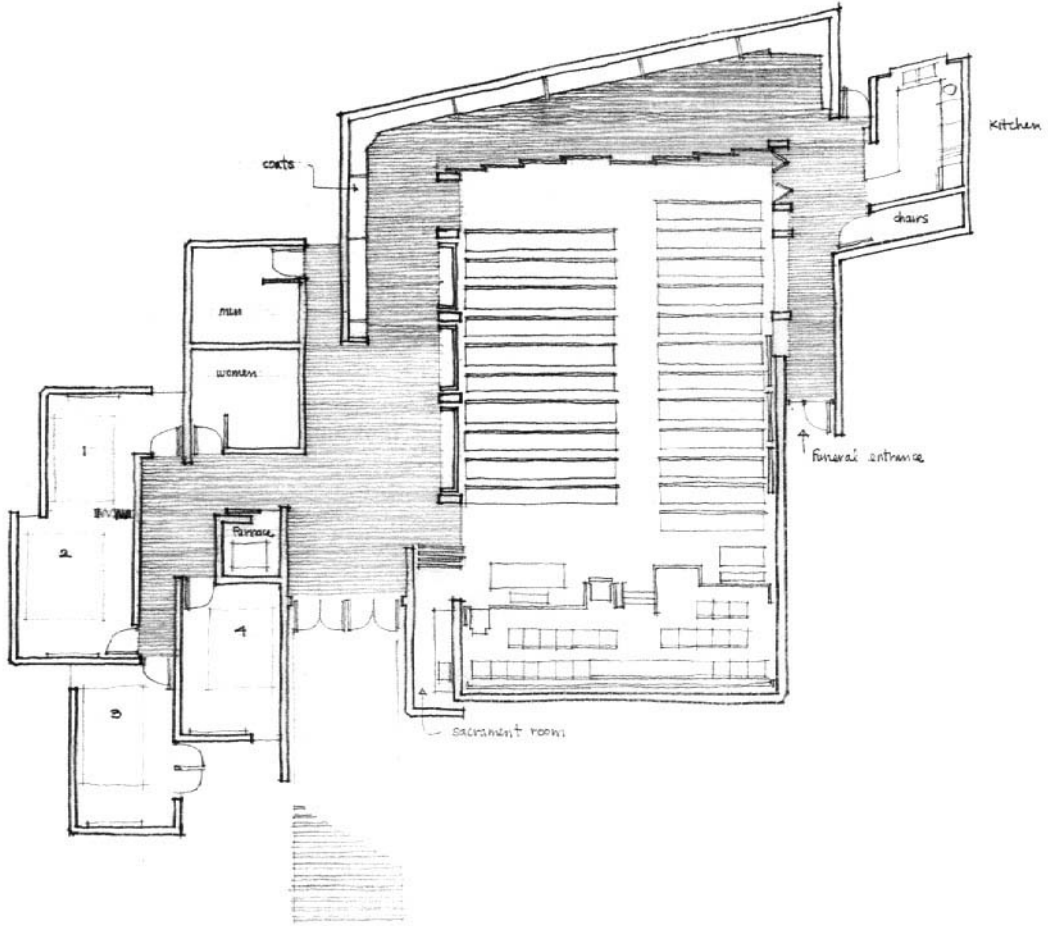
The project had an ideal site, location, and function. Being purely a summer chapel eliminated the need for any heating or extensive insulation, giving an opportunity, so seldom available in the Canadian climate, of having a consistent expression of material on both the inside and the outside. The proposed construction method used a system of notched and laminated board-on-board wall members that formed, framed, and stopped all doors and windows; the rough-sawn three-inch by six-inch timbers were notched to take a one-eighth-inch dry caulking bead. The roof was designed to be of sized, patterned, expressed, and exposed wood joists covered with second grade diagonal sheathing and roofed in metal. On the day of tendering the project was termed "too advanced" and was abandoned.



1 Perspective Drawing
from North
2 Site Plan and
Longitudinal Section

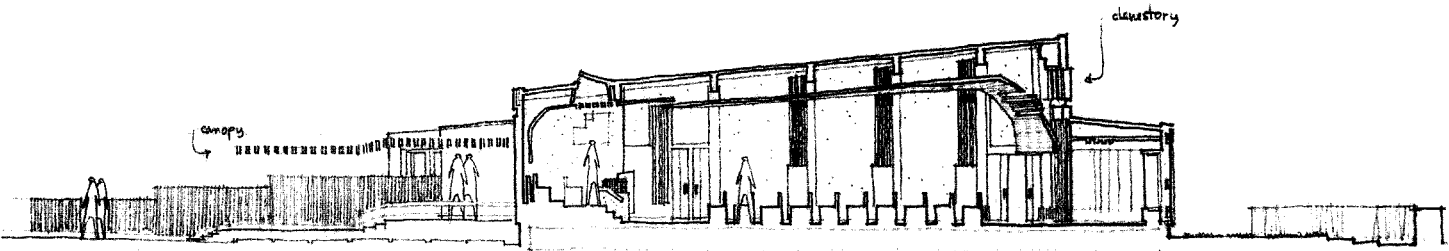
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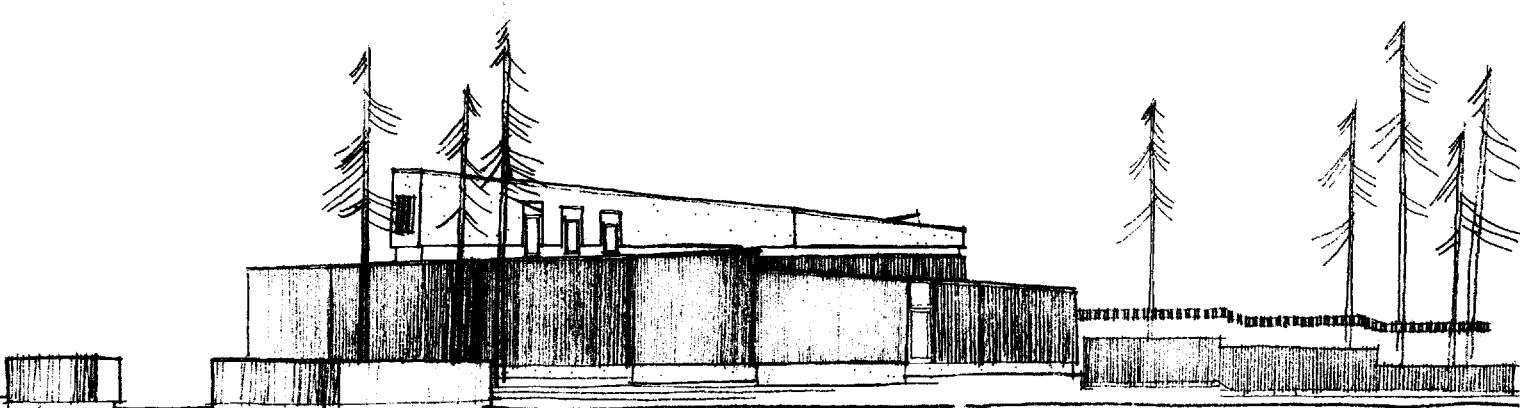


- 3 Floor Plan
- 4 Transverse Section
- 5 Southeast Elevation
- 6 Southwest Elevation

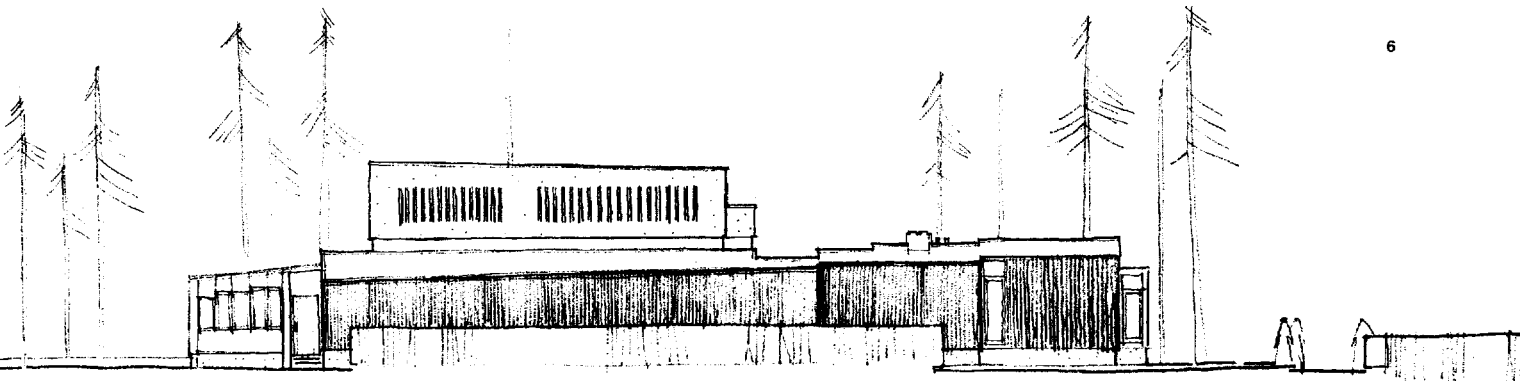
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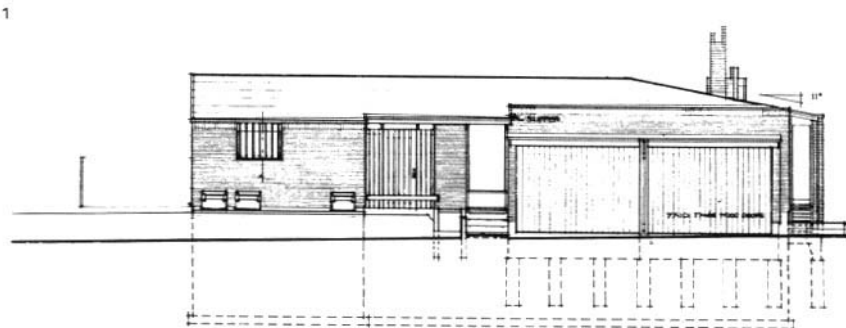
DEROCHIE RESIDENCE

Calgary, Alberta · 1964–65

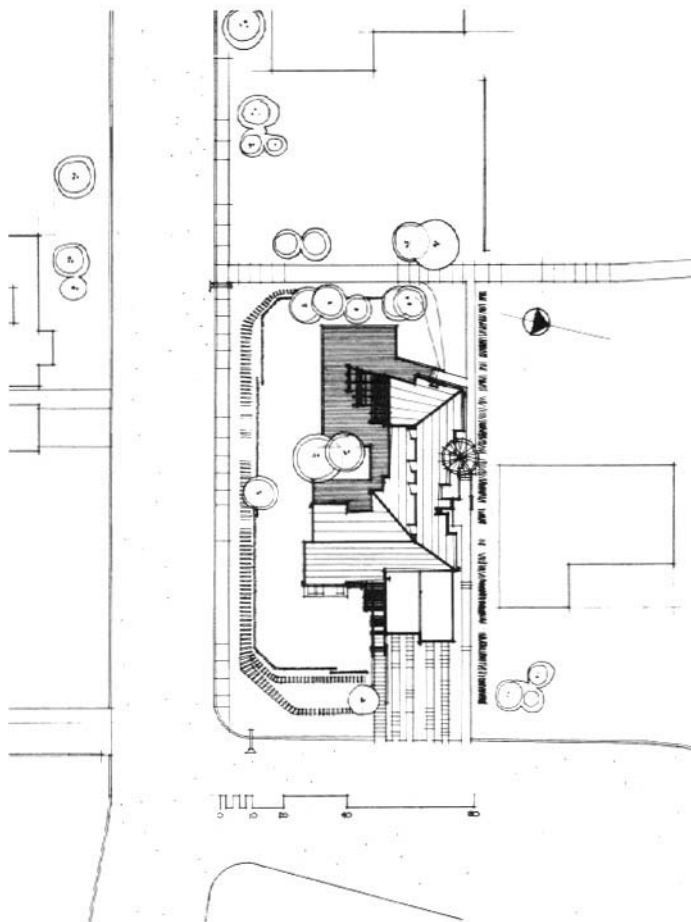
This home, for a young couple with three small children, was designed to allow for casual, unrestricted living. It is situated on a fairly typical, flat lot in a medium- to high-priced subdivision. The house, which is L-shaped in plan, takes advantage of south light, is oriented to south and west views, and is sheltered from cold winds. To provide privacy, the house is surrounded by an earth berm which shelters the brick patio. A fence composed of rough-sawn slats flows in a soft curve around the property and chatters in the wind.

The main floor consists of two levels, one of which is raised to form the entry, living, and sleeping areas. The lower portion is a concrete slab covered entirely with Norway pine blocks, a material that offers warmth, scale, and resiliency. Under the raised circulation there is a storage area comprised of seven wooden toy drawers on wheels that can be linked like a train and towed into the family room. A studio, gallery, bedroom, and mechanical space are located under the living room-entry portion. The studio is lighted by three skylights. The kitchen and dining areas face onto the protected court, all other openings are carefully controlled. The north elevation is comprised of staggered planes which prevent visual access while allowing internal privacy as well as light.

The house is constructed of wood treated in a variety of ways (the entire ceiling of the home is formed of clear cedar), brick and exposed vertical board-formed concrete walls. Much of the furniture is built-in and was constructed of hand-waxed wood with exposed bolts, screws, and round-headed nails for fastening. All doors are made of grooved and laminated tongue-and-grooved cedar or pine slats.



- 1 East Elevation
- 2 View of East Elevation
- 3 Site Plan



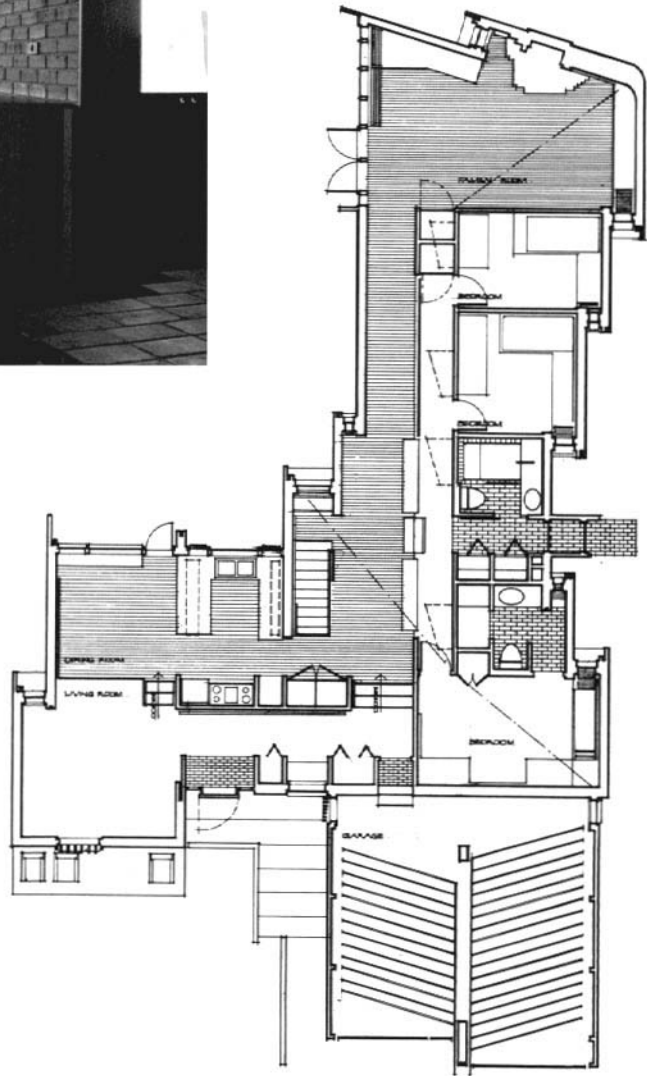
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- 4 Interior View of Hallway
- 5 Interior View of Family Room (Matthews Photo Lab)
- 6 Ground Floor Plan

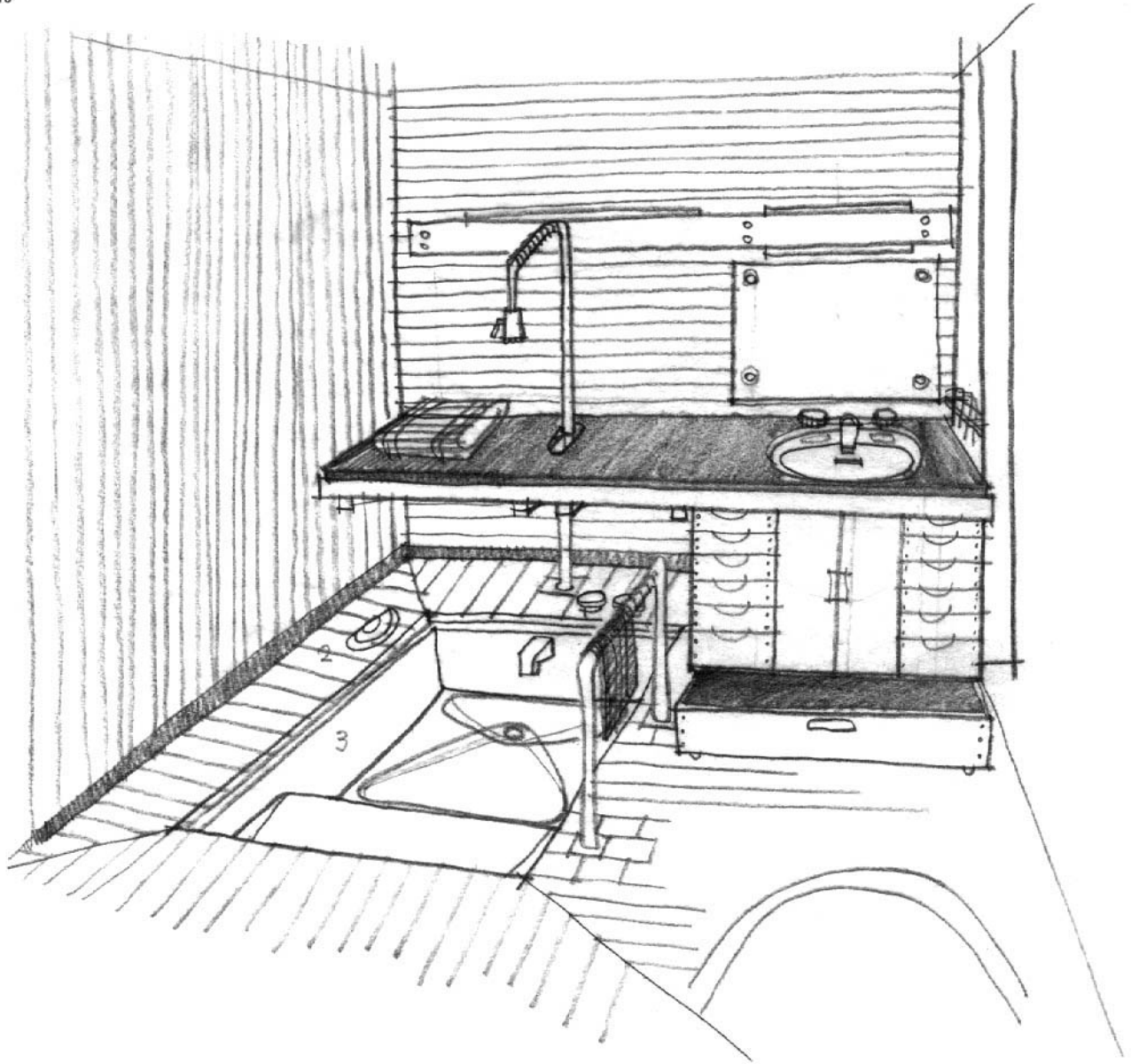
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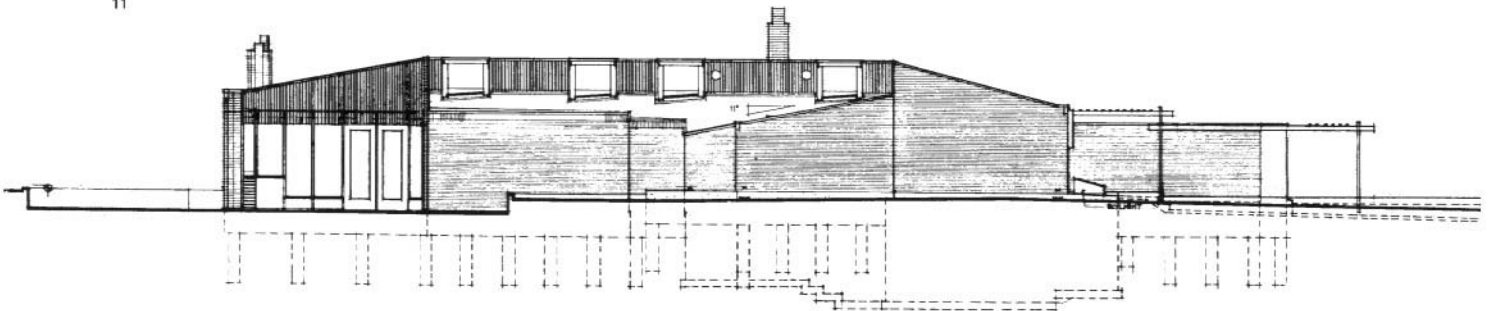
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- 10 Study Sketch of Bathroom
- 11 South Elevation
- 12 Interior View of Kitchen and Dining Area (Matthews Photo Lab)



MELCHIN SUMMER HOMES

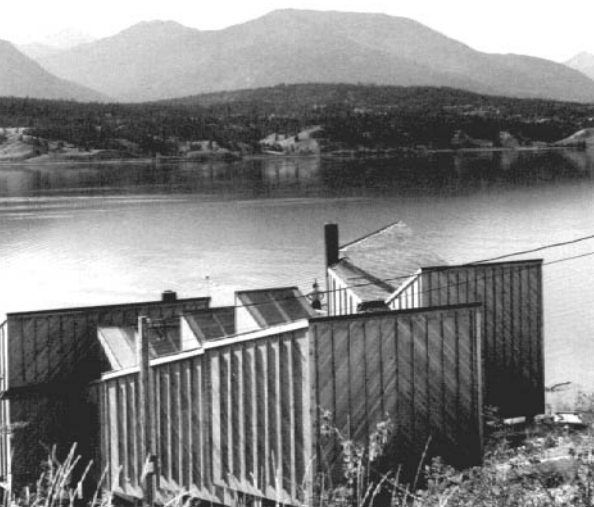
Windermere, British Columbia · 1964–66

Awards: Massey Medal, 1967

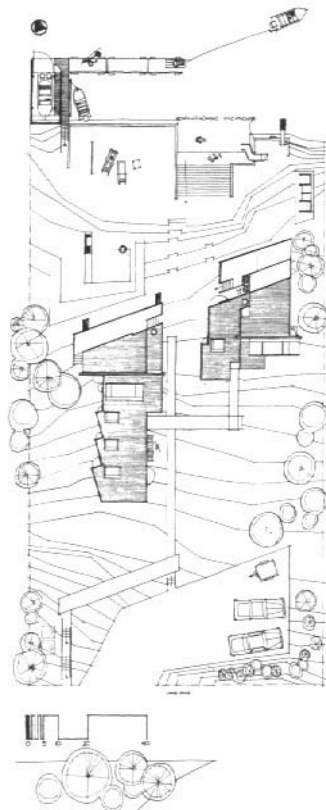
This design combines two vacation residences on a sloping site facing a lake. The site, in a mountain setting, is very steep and almost devoid of trees. All the property to the south is well treed and the design, therefore, attempted to provide orientation with a limited western exposure, taking full advantage of the neighbour's trees. Wind and road privacy were influential to the massing of the two buildings. A study in contrasts, one house is vertically organized while the other is a single-storey house that follows the slope. Both are raised above the site on concrete piers. The houses are built entirely of wood and are an essay in wood frame construction.

The two summer homes were designed to meet specific personality and program needs. Detailing and materials are the same for each home, but the space functions vary according to the needs of each family. The buildings are built entirely of wood with the exception of the exposed aggregate concrete fireplaces and concrete piles. The framework is an alternating pattern of exposed rough-sawn two-by-four studs. To the framing is nailed one-by-four horizontal cedar boards, then one inch of rigid insulation and finally one-by-four alternating diagonal siding. A vertical batten covers joints and provides vertical emphasis to the unbroken surface. Flooring throughout is stained one-by-six lodgepole pine screwed and dowelled to a diagonal sub floor sheathing. Storage units, beds, bunks, and tables are all built-in. This precisely describes the assembly of the exterior walls, the studs that are normally sheathed on both sides are here exposed in an alternating pattern of single and double studs, with corresponding single and double rafters. This solution moves the interior sheathing to the outside, inverting the typical wood frame system.

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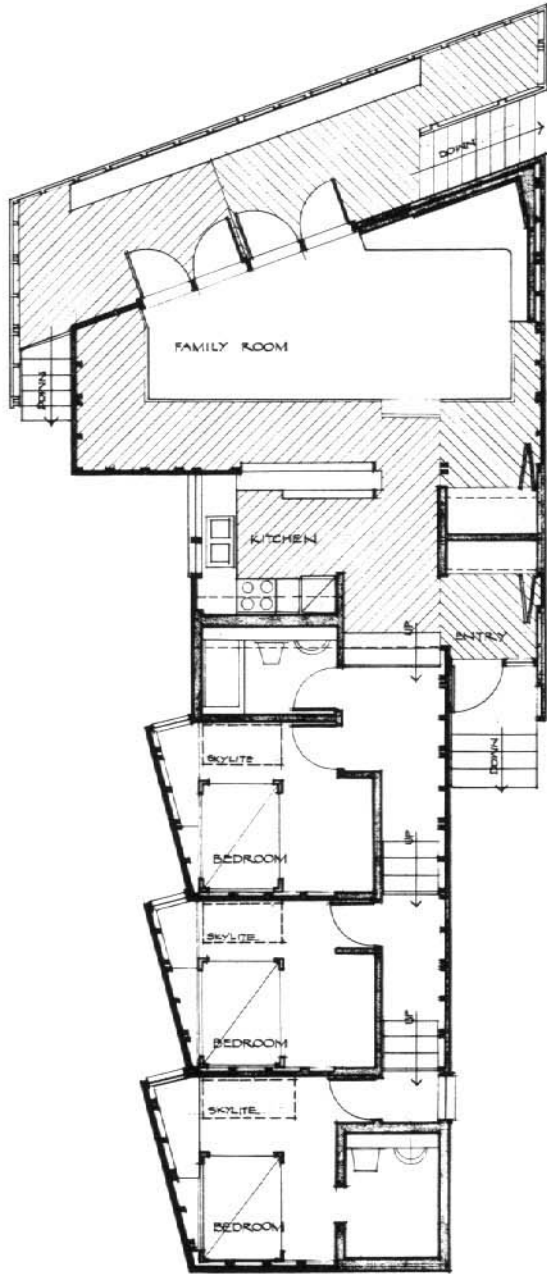
- 1 View Looking Northwest (Matthews Photo Lab)
- 2 View of West Elevation (Matthews Photo Lab)
- 3 Site Plan



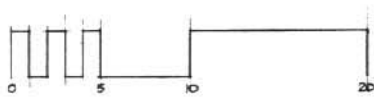
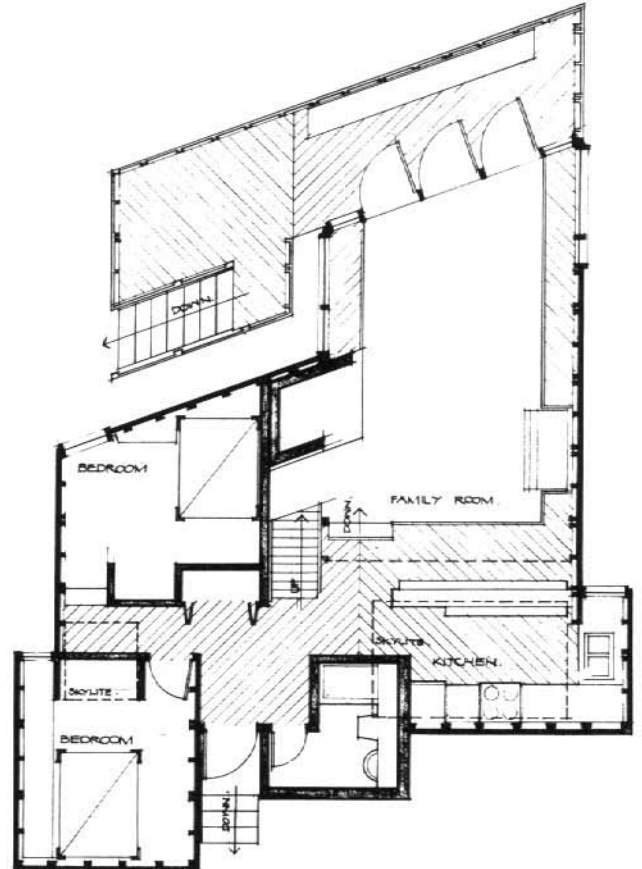
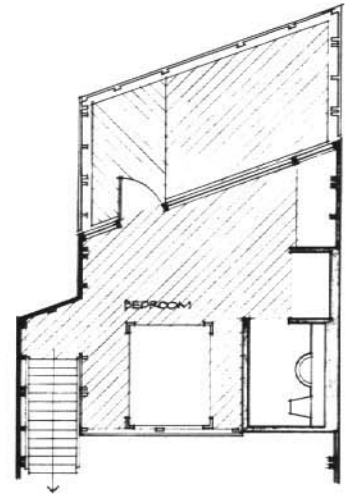
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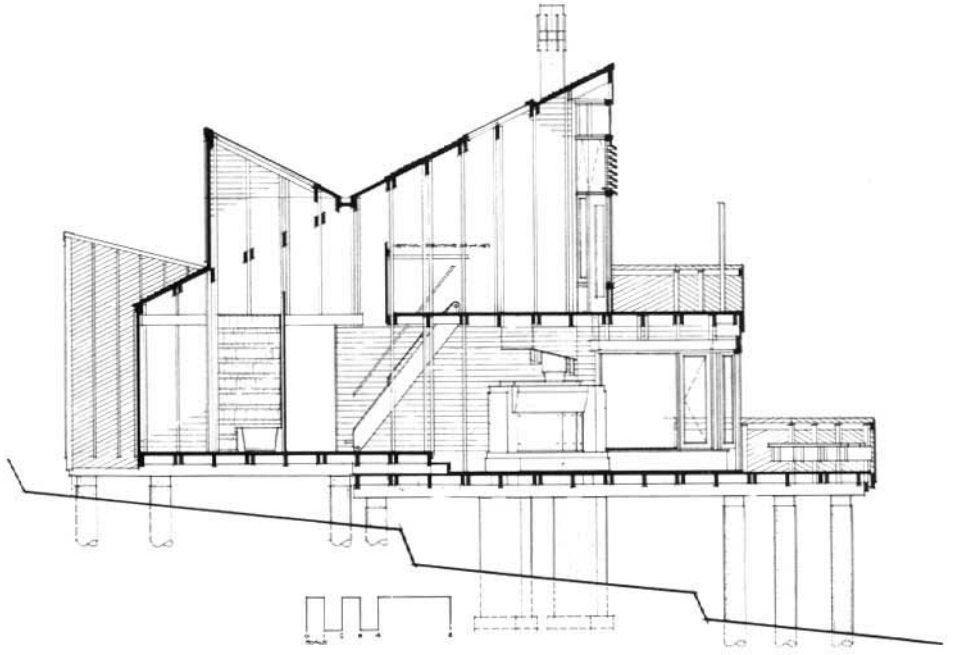


4 Floor Plan Unit A
5 Ground Floor Plan and
Upper Floor Plan Unit B
6 View of Roof

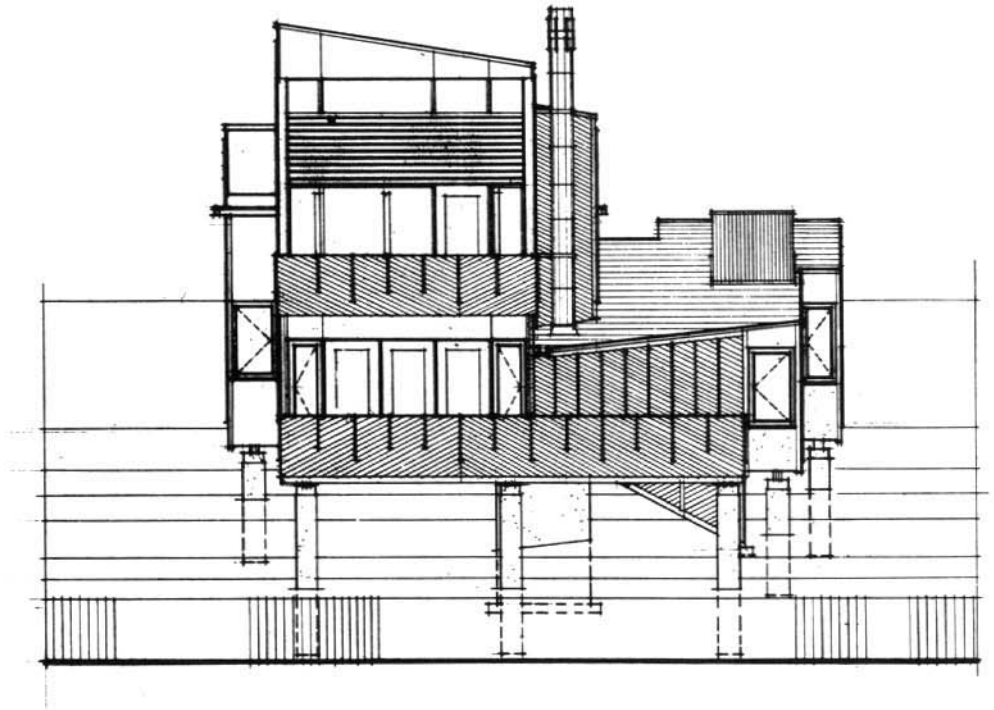
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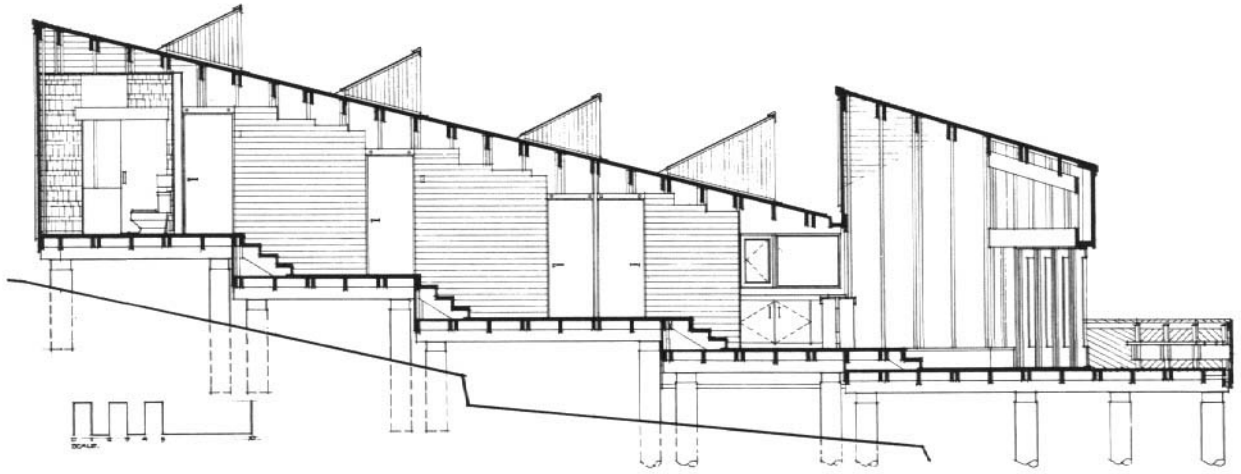
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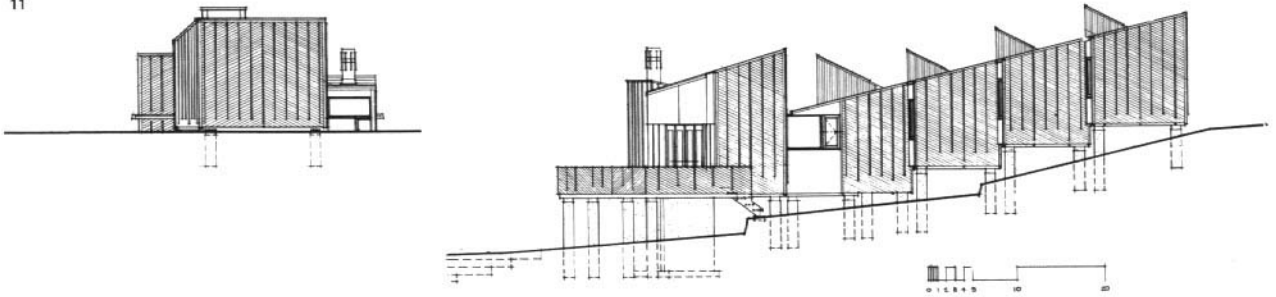
7 Section Unit B
8 West Elevation Unit B
9 Interior View of
Kitchen Unit A (John
Fulker, Photographer)



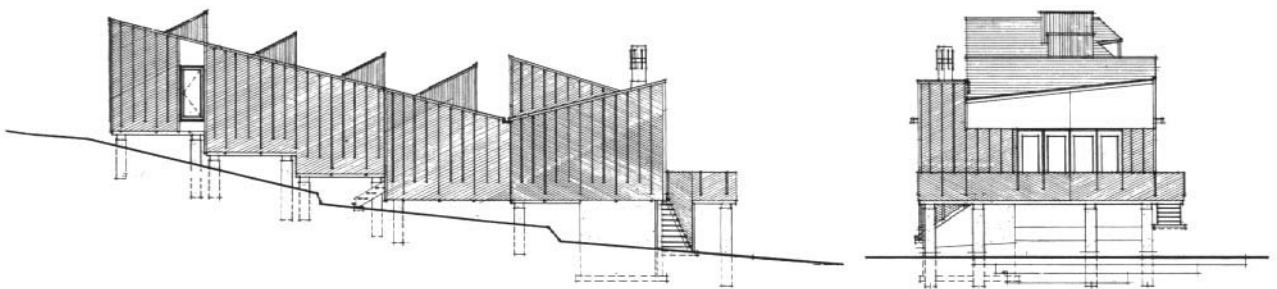
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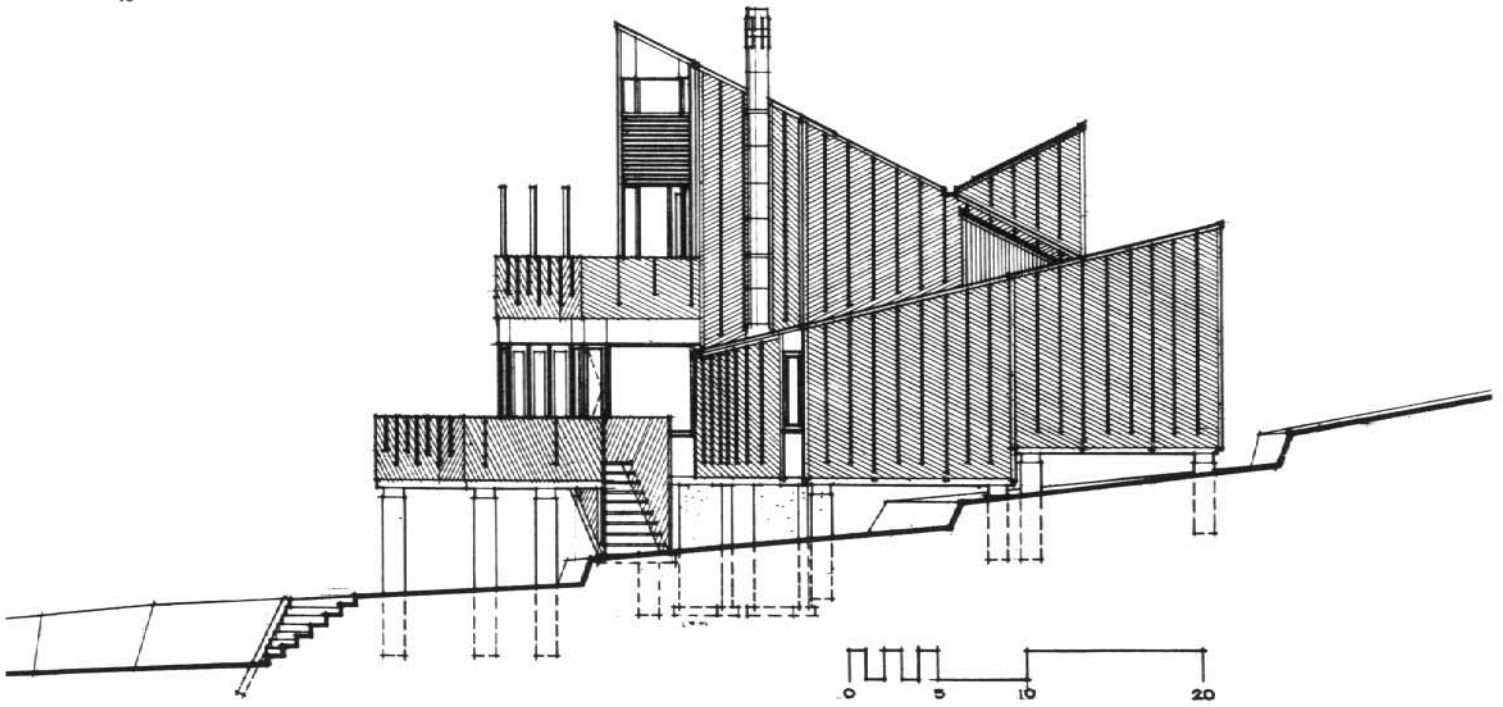
- 10 Section Unit A
- 11 East and South Elevation Unit A
- 12 North and West Elevation Unit A
- 13 View of East Elevation
- 14 View of North Elevation

13

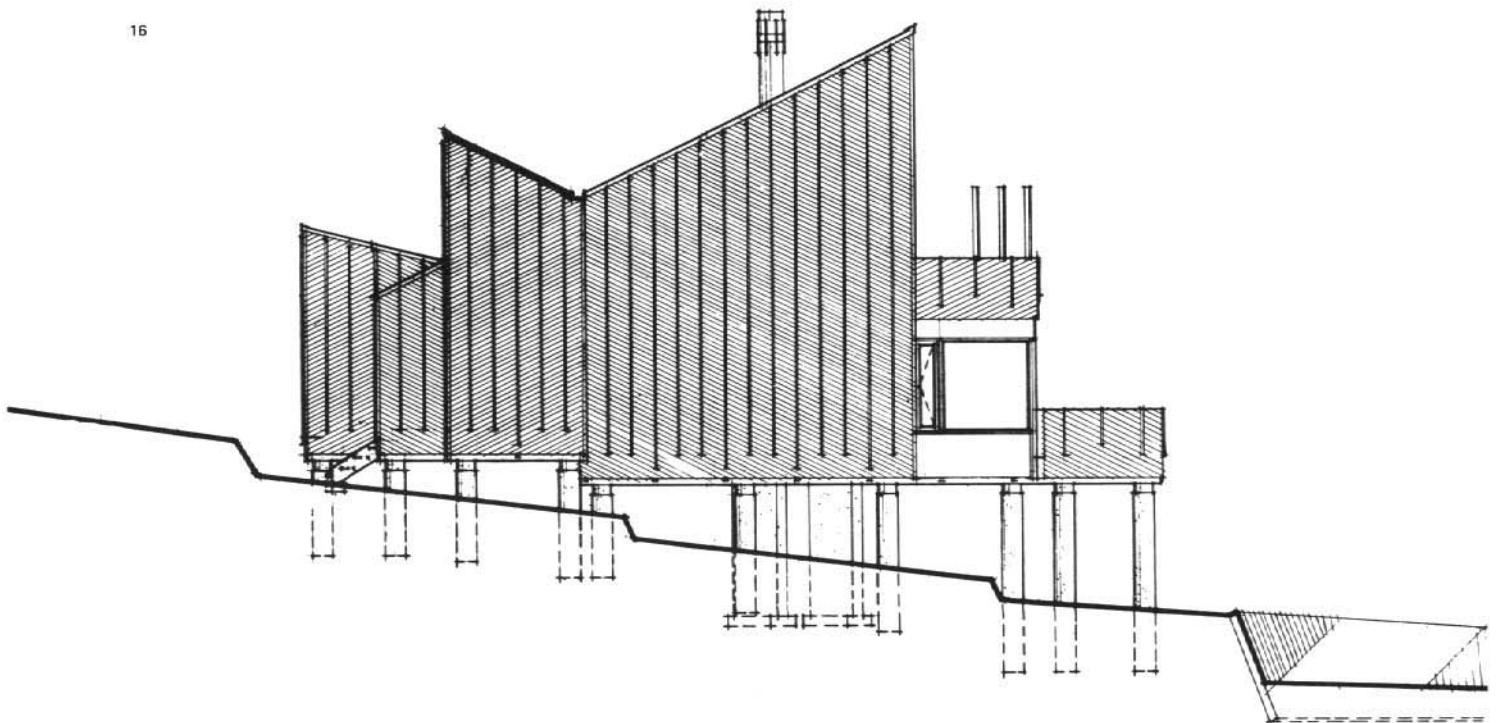


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EUGENE COSTE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ADDITION

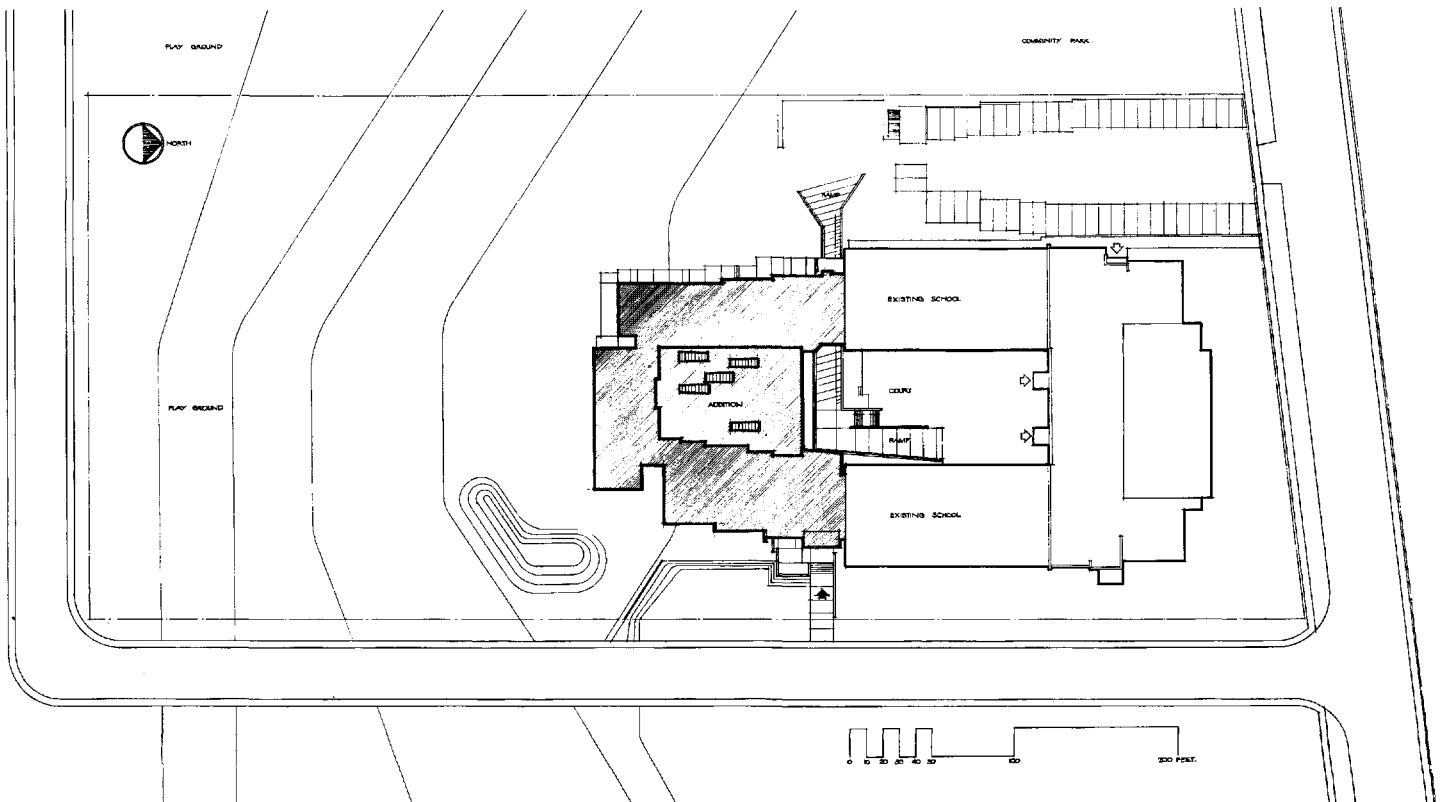
Calgary, Alberta · 1966

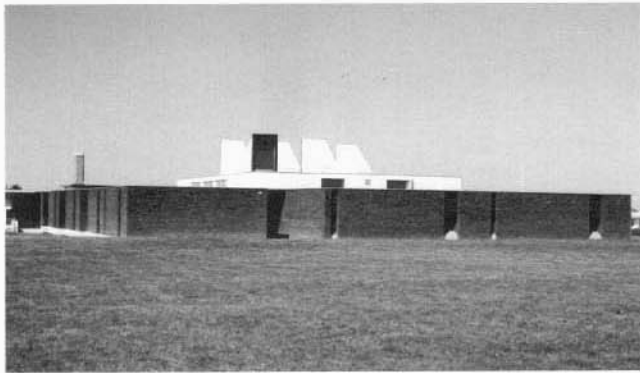
This project involves an addition of ten classrooms, a library, and an administrative centre to an existing elementary school in southwest Calgary. The addition extends the courtyard of the existing U-shaped facility. To access the enlarged court, a play tunnel, which also could be used for truck and service access, was developed. The courtyard is oriented to the south and protected from north and northwest winds.

With the new administrative complex it was decided to also relocate the main entry to the addition. This occurs at the connection of the new and old, and employs a series of intersecting planes. Prominent skylights are used as features of the design. These provide north light to the spaces, except for the skylight over the staff room, which faces south.

The classrooms are separately grouped to create visual and spatial interest. This also helps in creating a varied circulation system. All materials and spaces are scaled to young children. This influences the height of modulated ceilings, the colour selection, and the design of teaching and display systems.

1





- 1 Site Plan
- 2 View of East Elevation
- 3 View Looking North
- 4 View of Court Looking South

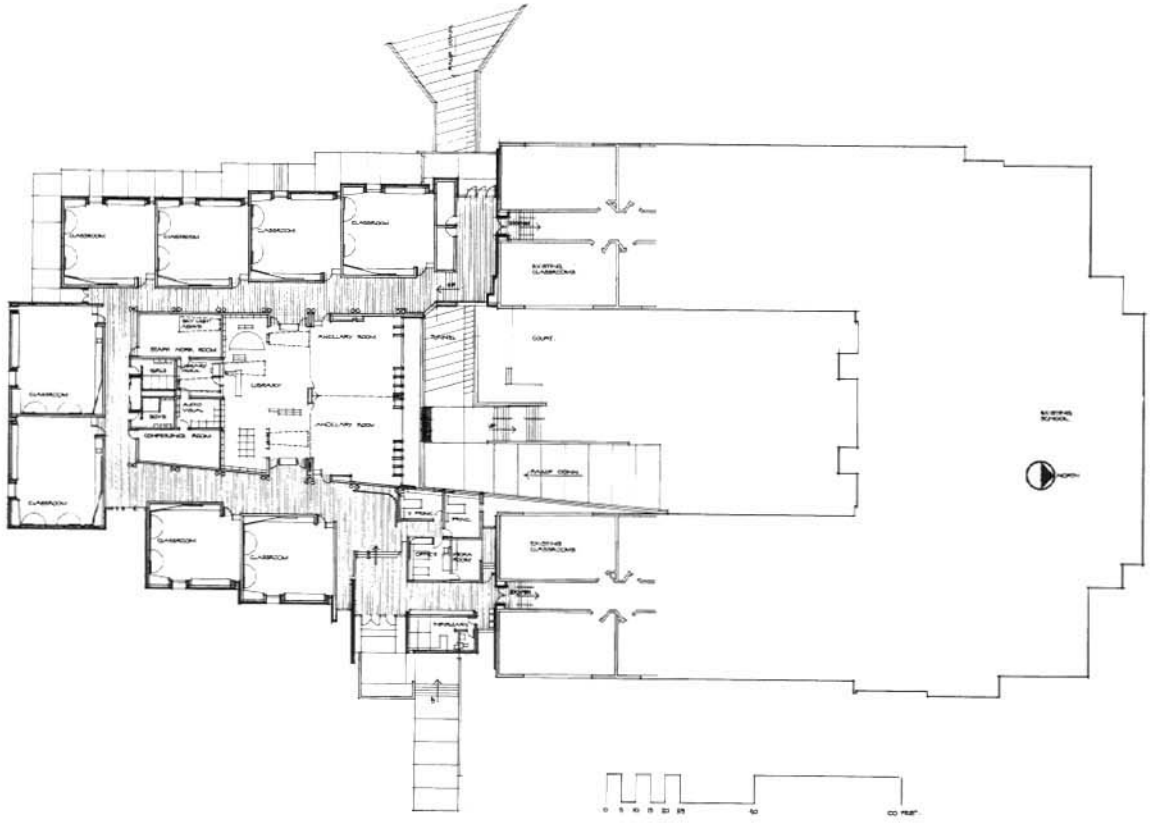
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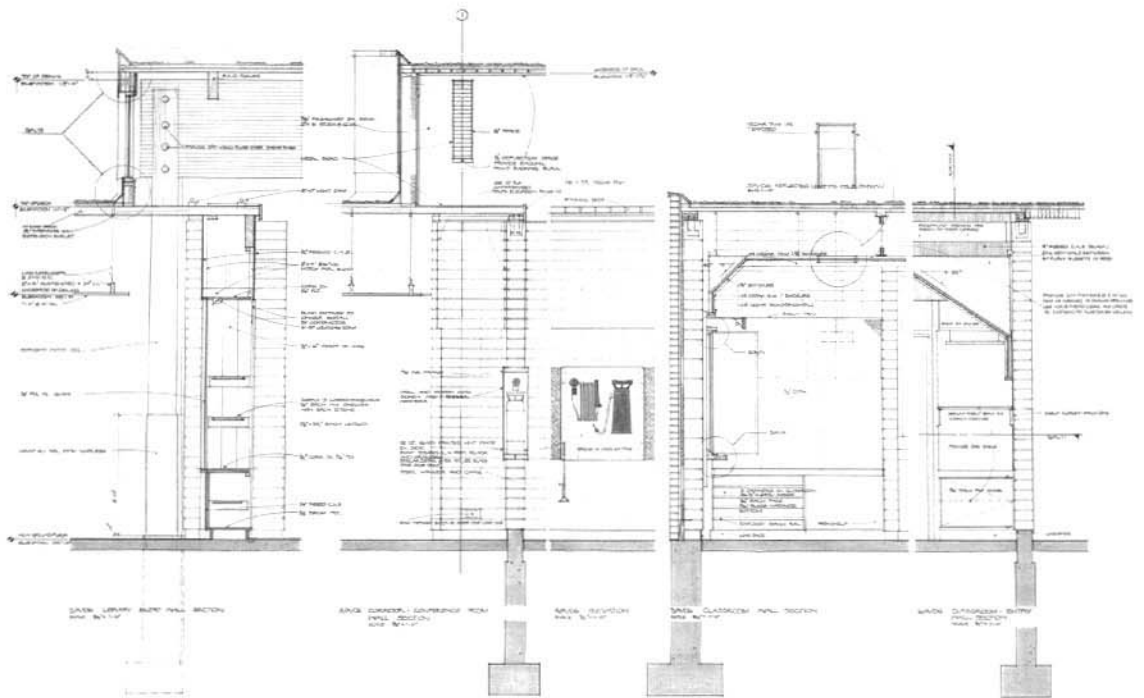


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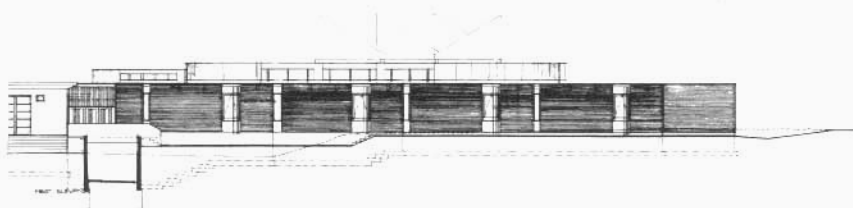
- 5 Main Floor Plan
- 6 Wall Sections
- 7 Interior View of Entry
- 8 Section and North Elevation

7



8



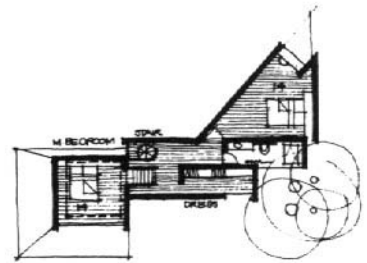
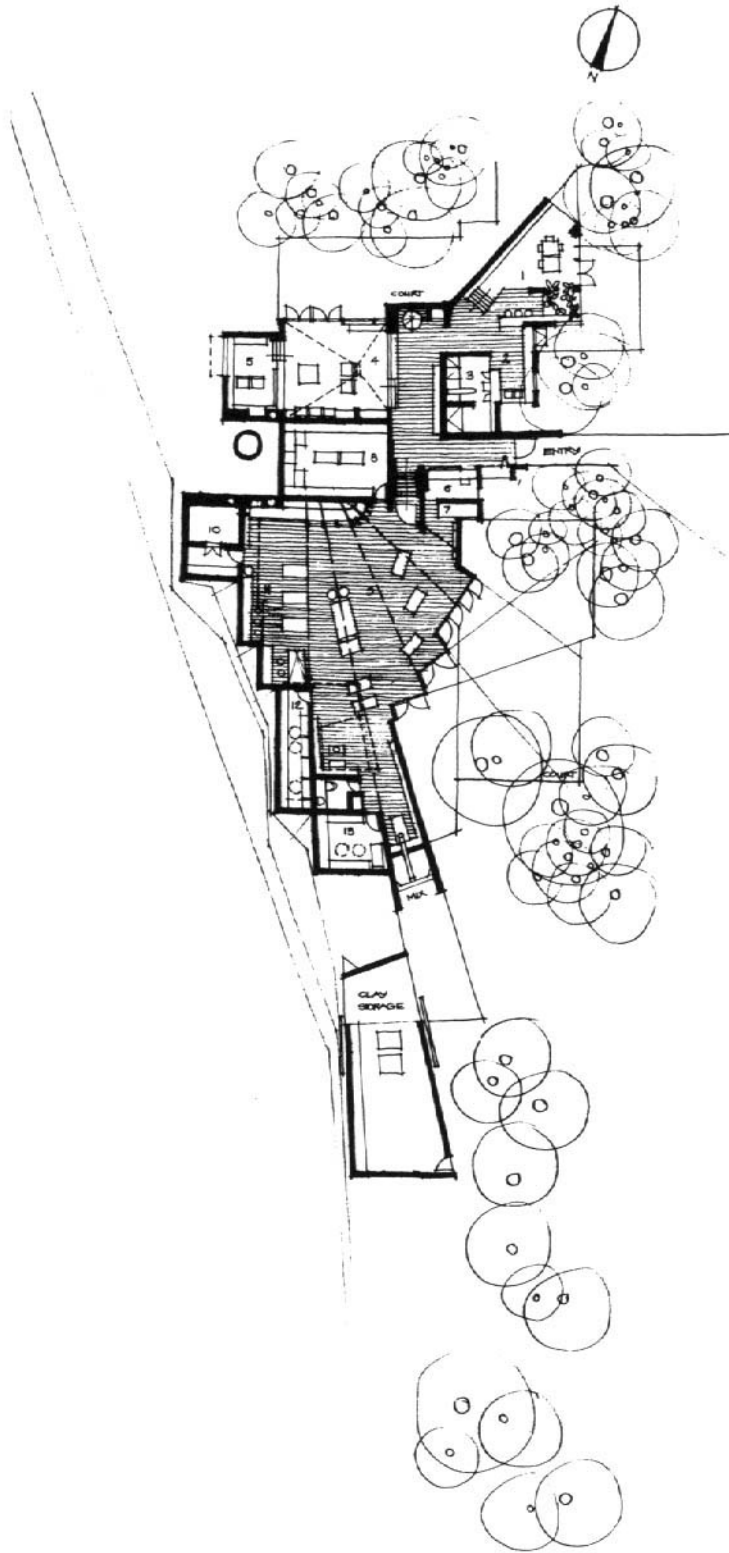


- 9 View of Tunnel
Looking West
- 10 West Elevation
- 11 Interior View of
Library (Matthews
Photo Lab)

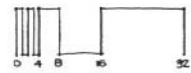
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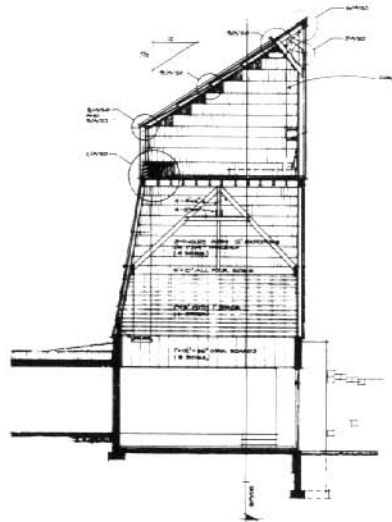


- 1 DRIVING ROOM
- 2 KITCHEN
- 3 BATH
- 4 LIVING ROOM
- 5 LOBBY
- 6 OFFICE
- 7 SHED
- 8 POOL STORAGE
- 9 STAIR
- 10 KILN
- 11 GLAZING
- 12 GREEN ROOM
- 13 CLAY STORAGE
- 14 BEDROOM

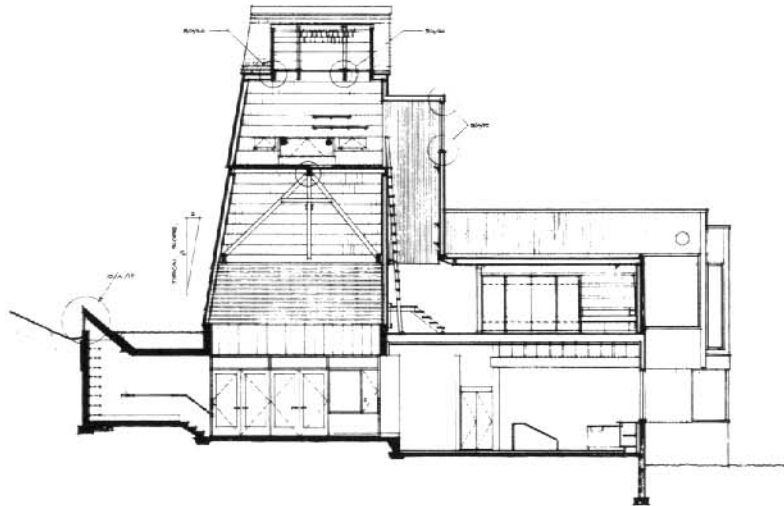




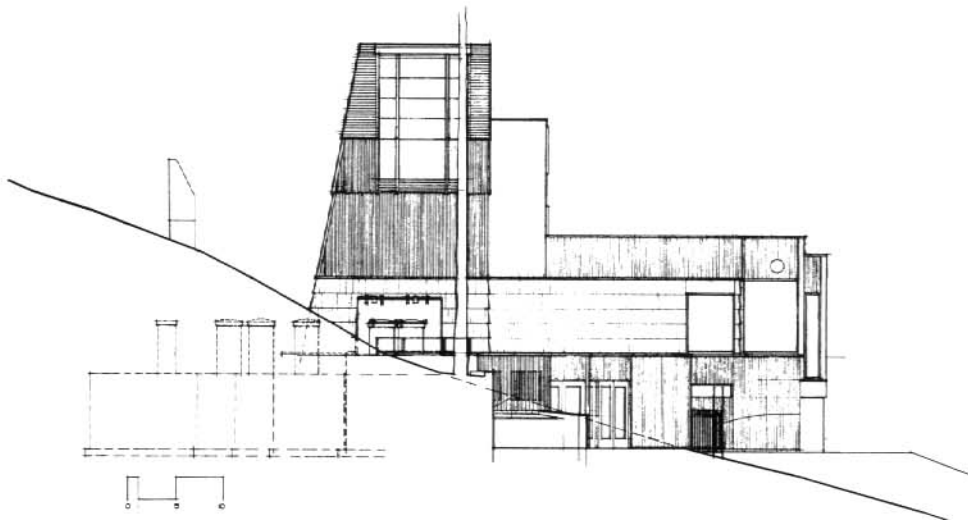
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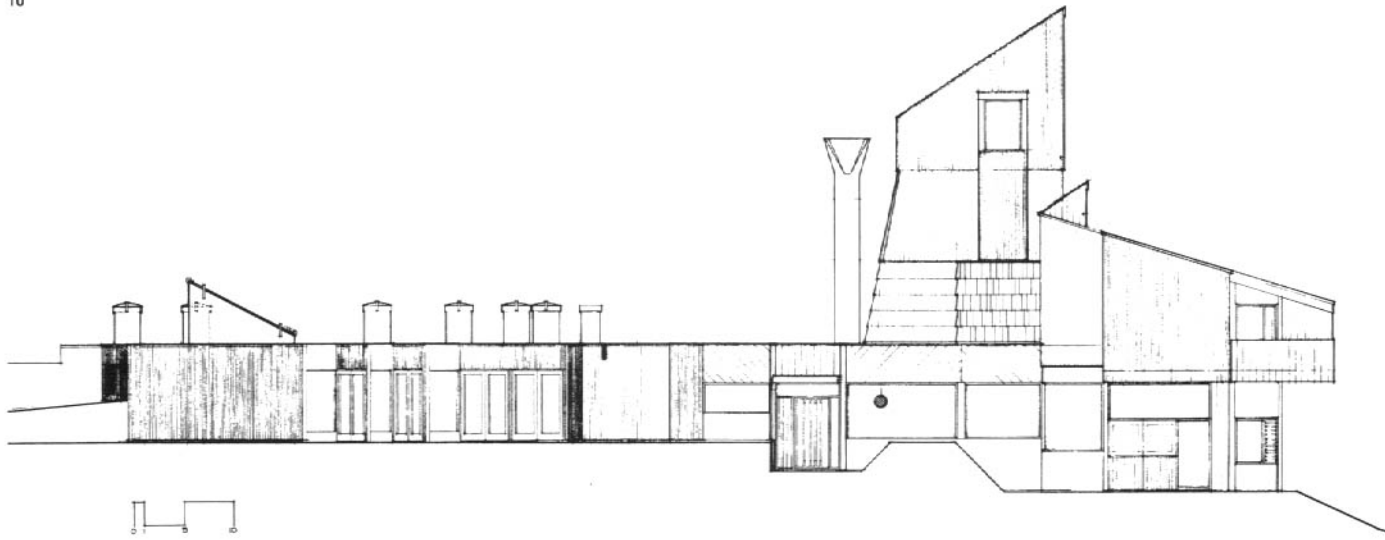


- 5 Section Through Master Bedroom and Living Room
- 6 Building Section
- 7 South Elevation
- 8 Interior View of Stair

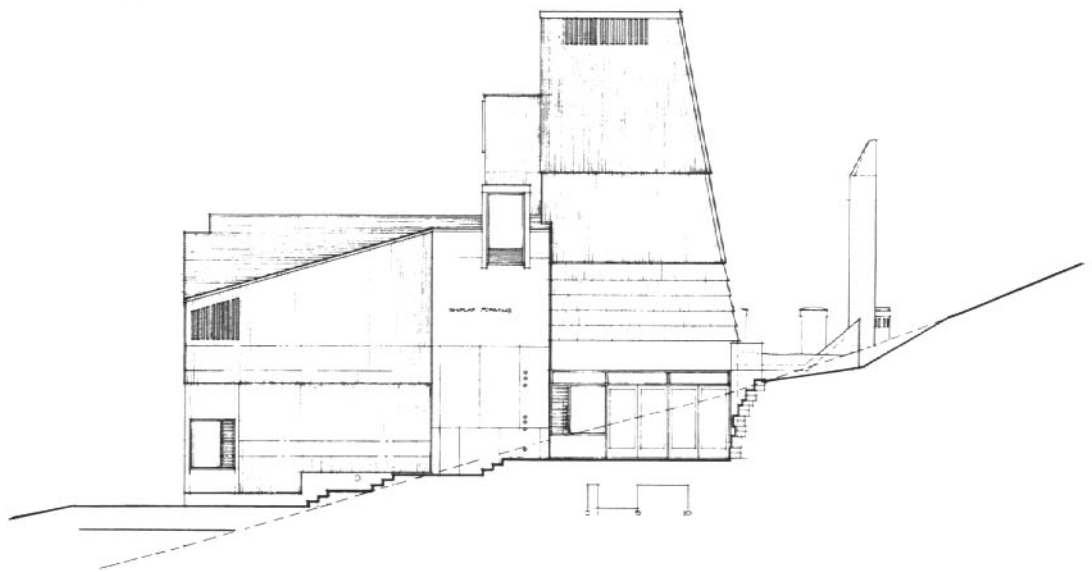
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- 10 East Elevation
- 11 North Elevation
- 12 Interior View of Kitchen
- 13 Interior View of Studio

12

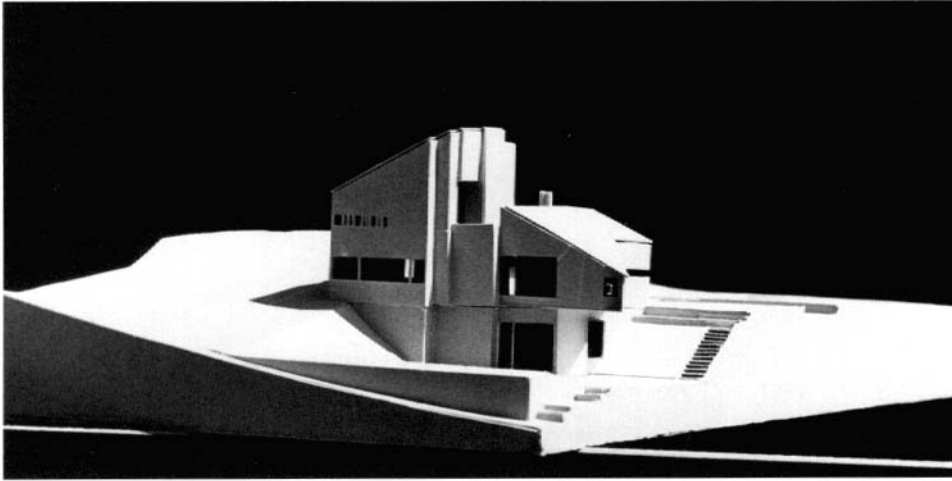


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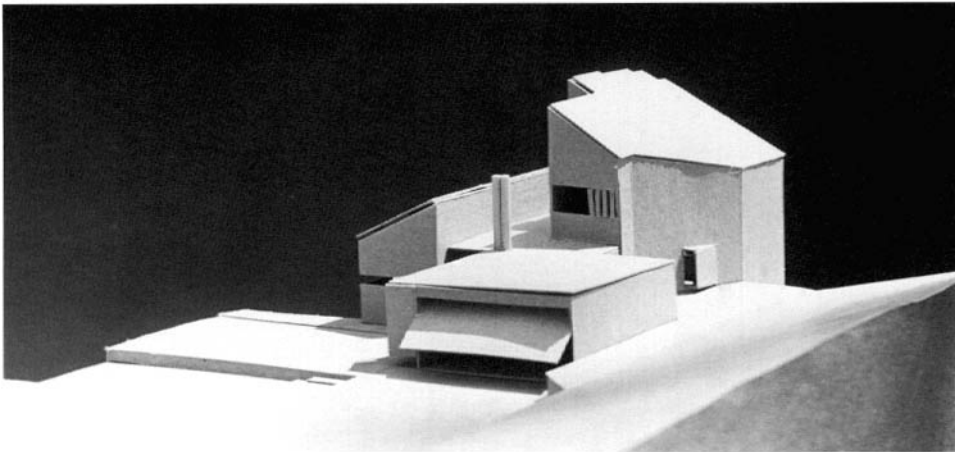


- 1 Site Plan
- 2 View of Model
Looking Northeast
- 3 View of Model
Looking Southwest
- 4 View of Model
Looking North

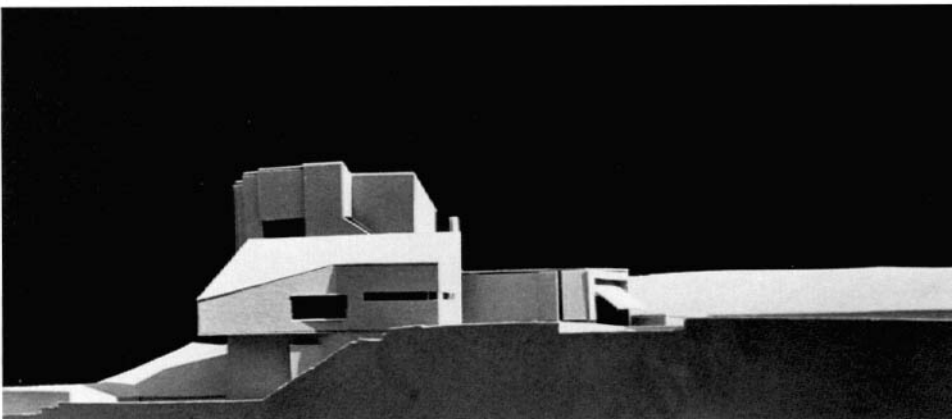
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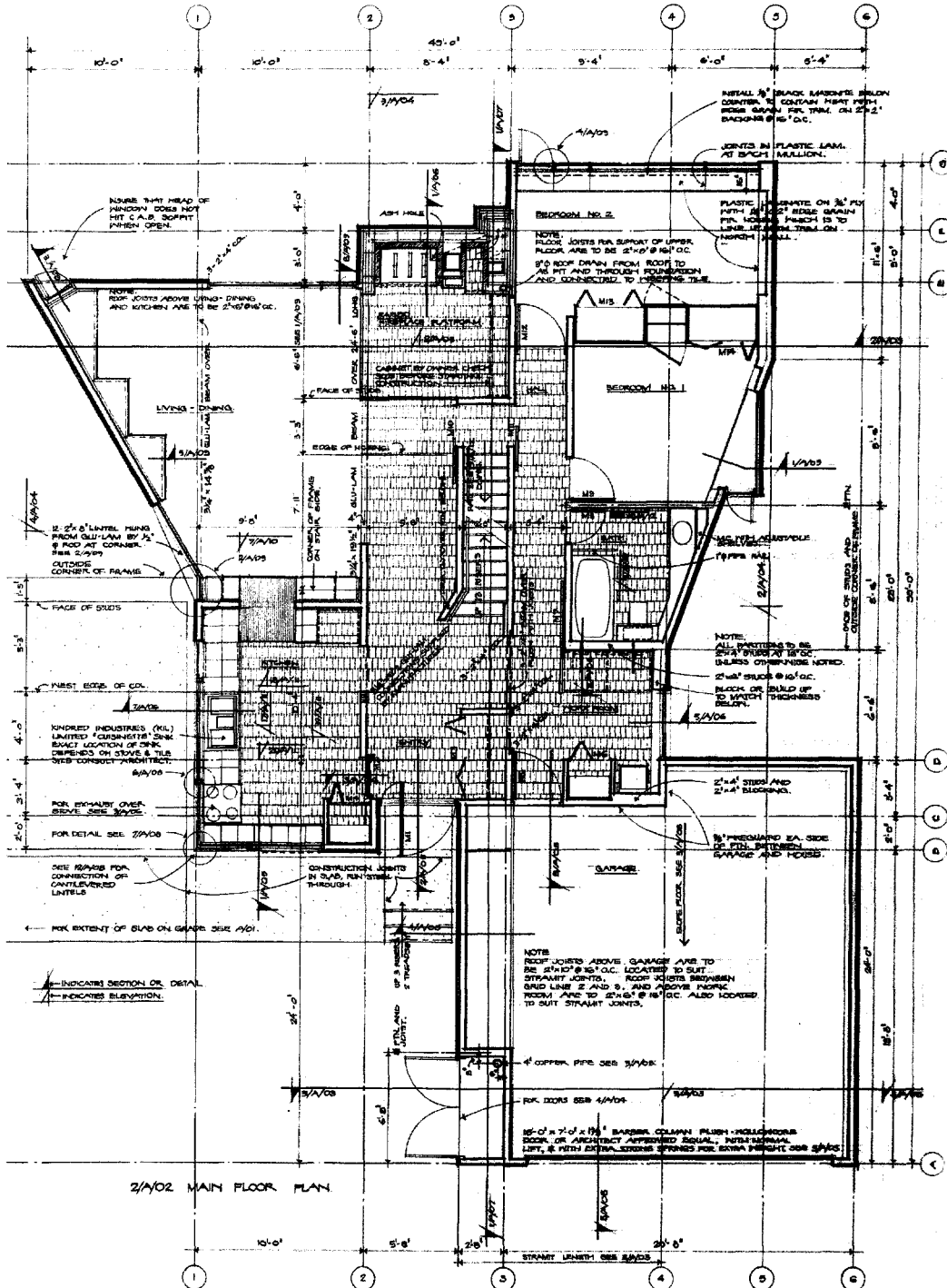


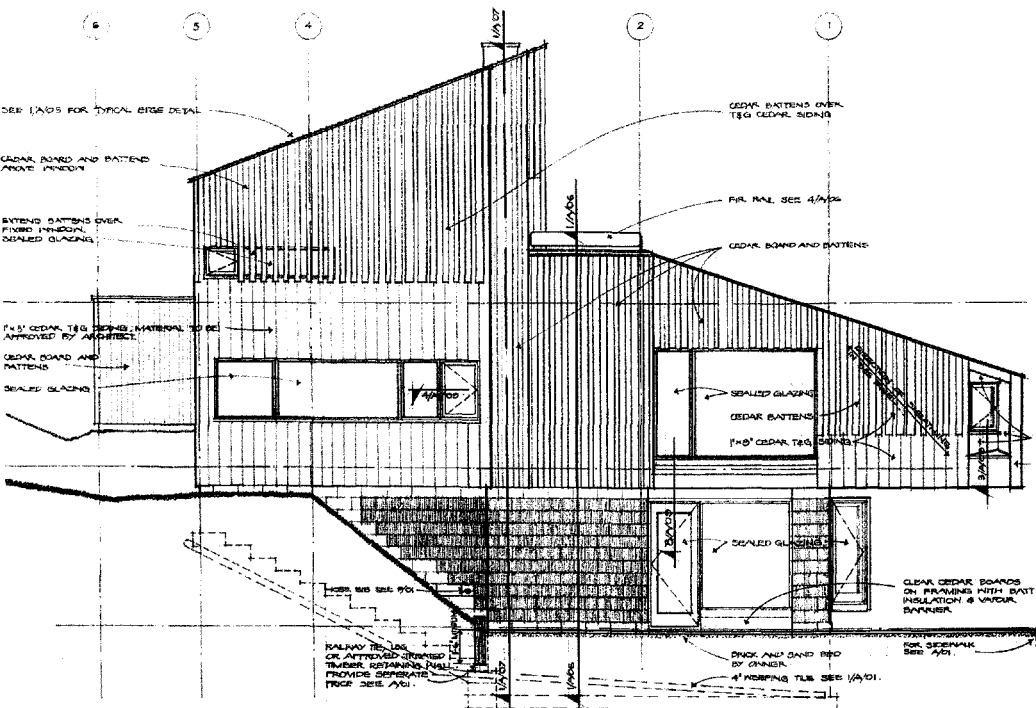
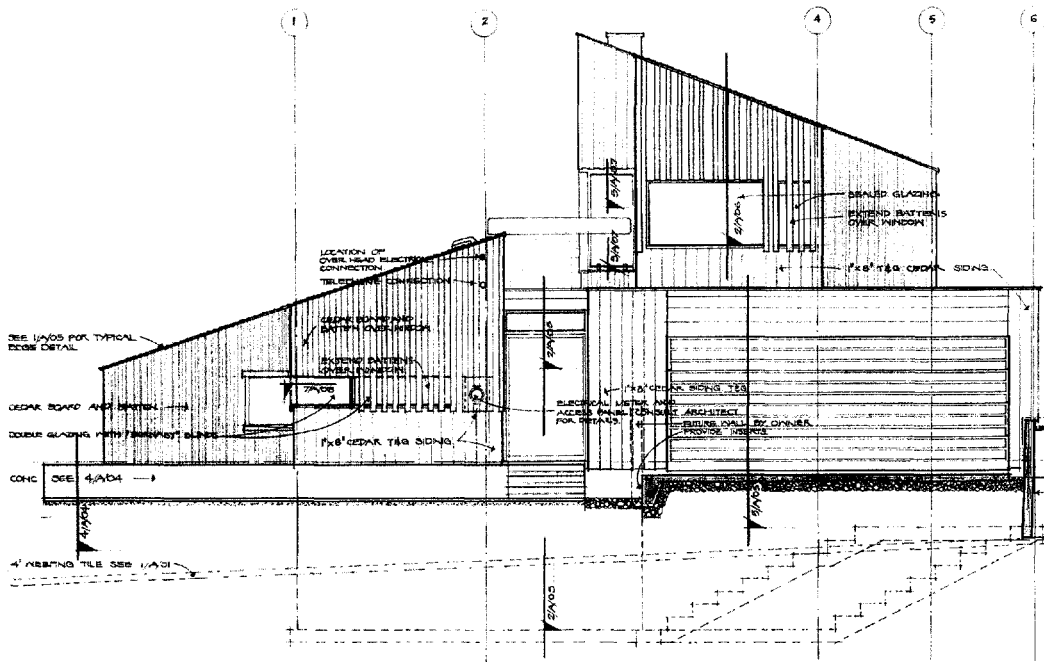
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MAYLAND HEIGHTS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

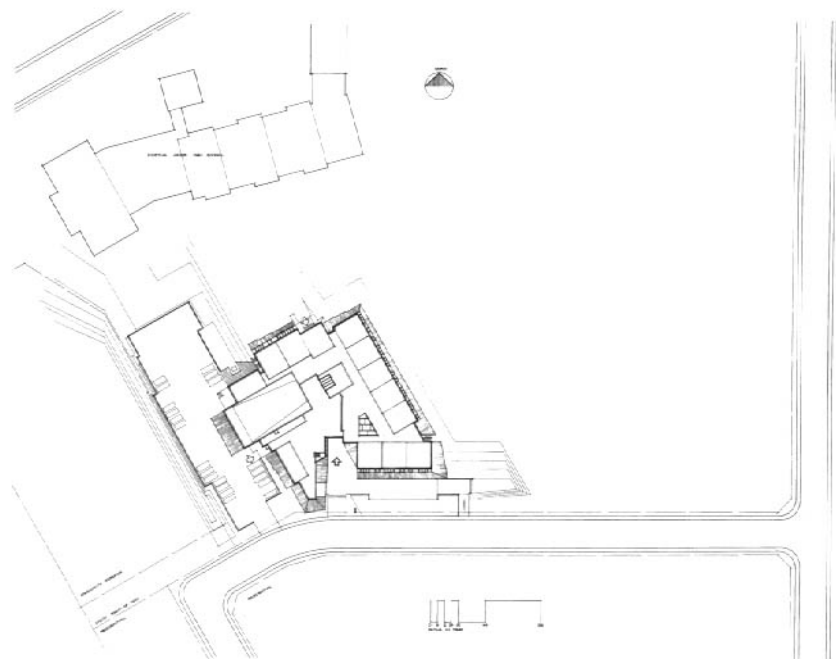
Calgary, Alberta · 1967–69

According to Gordon Atkins, the design of this elementary school attempted to “integrate and involve children, to provide both an atmosphere of reality and imagination, to stimulate the learning process, to allow the children to explore, to retain honest naiveté and above all to have fun in their work. In some ways this means the exclusion of adults.”

The plan is a shifted square organized around the library, which, as the core function, becomes the “symbolic fountain of learning.” The pinwheel arrangement of the building is very compact and efficient. The internal spaces are largely lit by skylights and clerestory windows. The large volume of the gymnasium has been sunk in order to reduce its impact. A wide range of child-oriented features were incorporated into the building.

The school employs heavy cast-in-place concrete construction, popular during the time. The school is located at the bottom of a gently sloping site in suburban northeast Calgary, directly under the flight path into Calgary’s airport. The design, which is pushed into the ground, uses berms around the perimeter in an effort to provide a link to the earth, to reduce the scale of a two-storied structure, and to take advantage of considerable mechanical savings. The orientation and profile of the school and its principal spaces are carefully modulated to protect from cold westerly and northerly winds and to capture sunlight. An environment for children, the design is inward looking and yet fluidly related to the surrounding playing fields. It is a bunker-like design, and it is a sheltering structure.

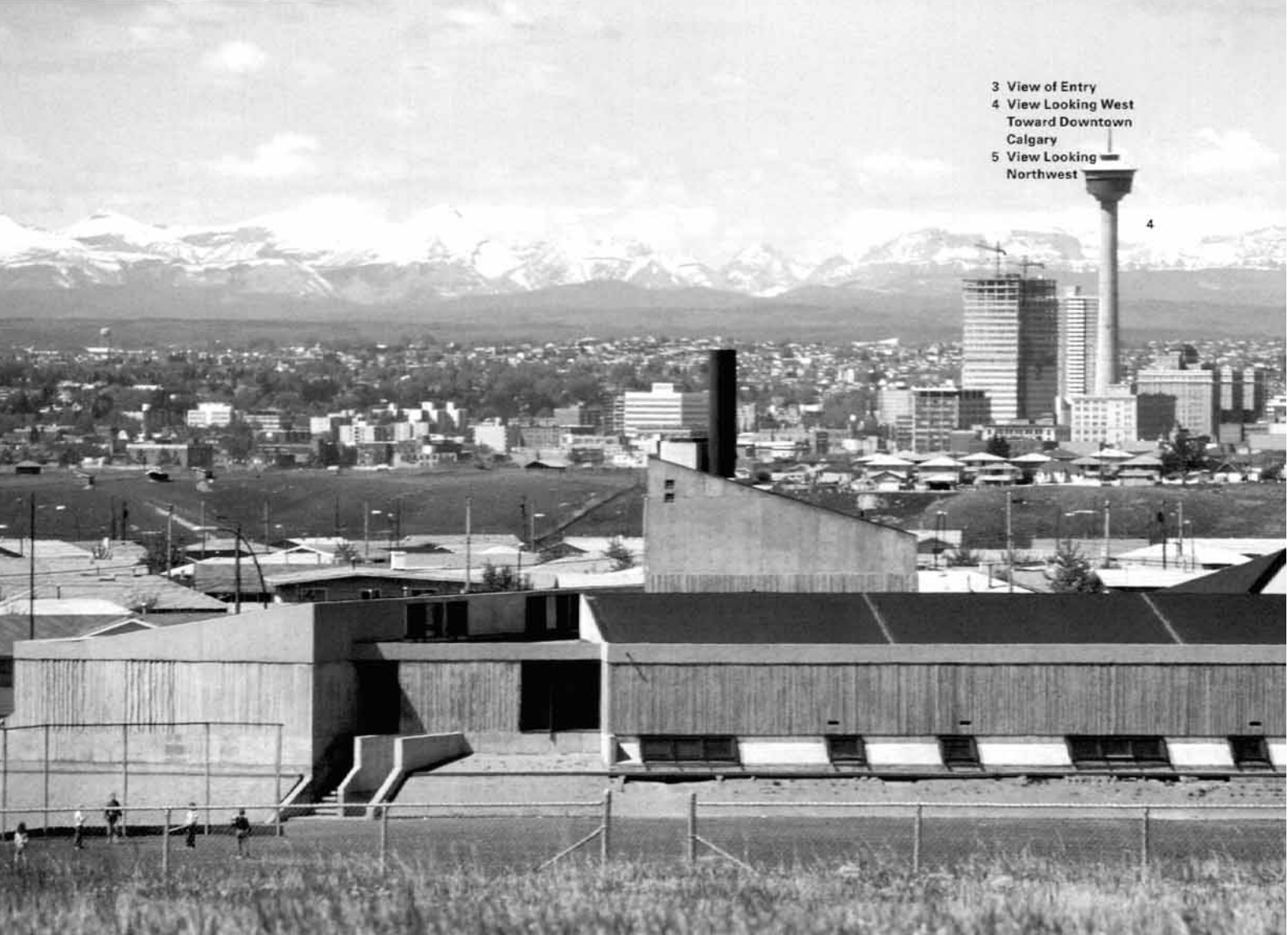
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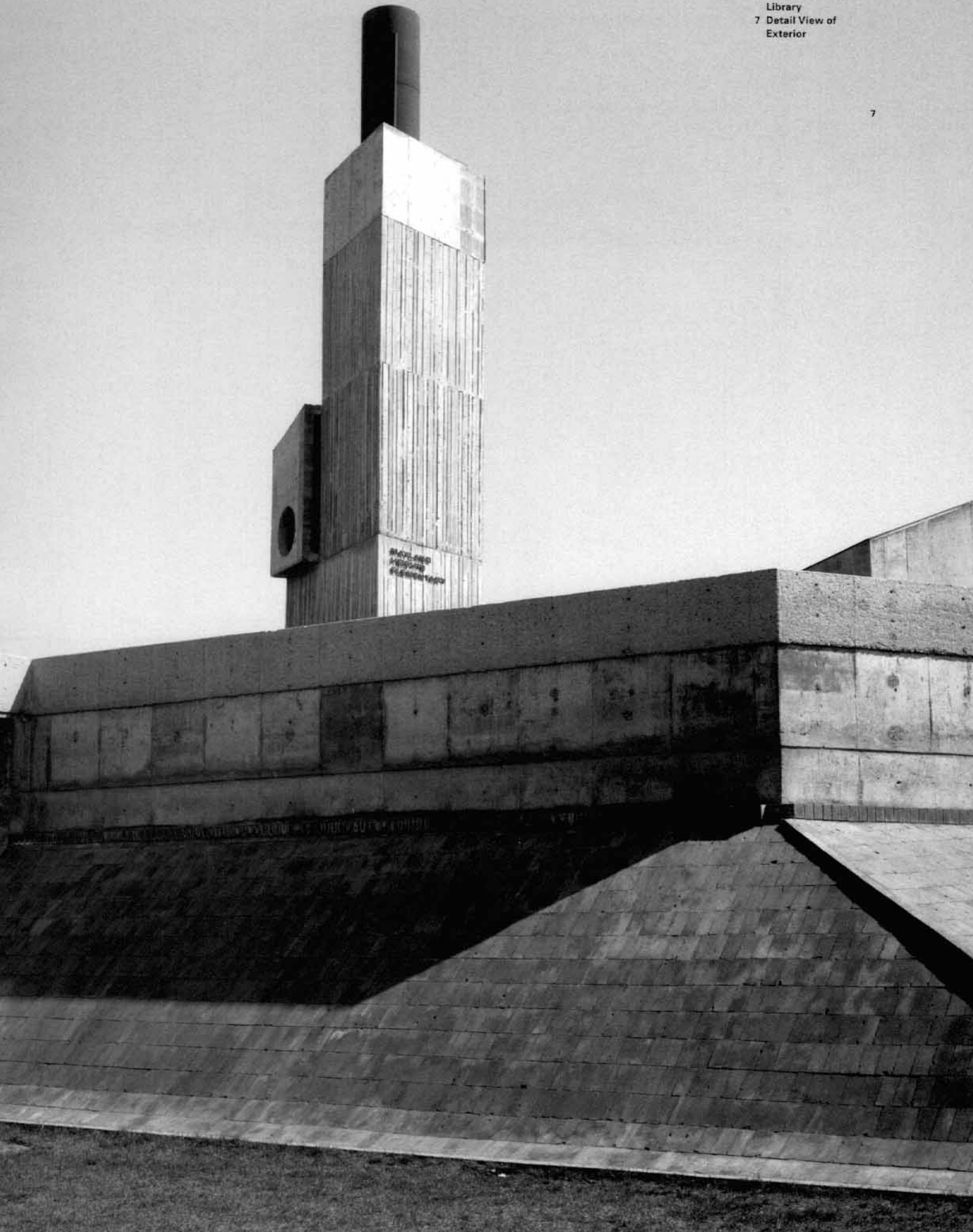
- 3 View of Entry
- 4 View Looking West
Toward Downtown
Calgary
- 5 View Looking
Northwest





6 Interior View of
Library
7 Detail View of
Exterior

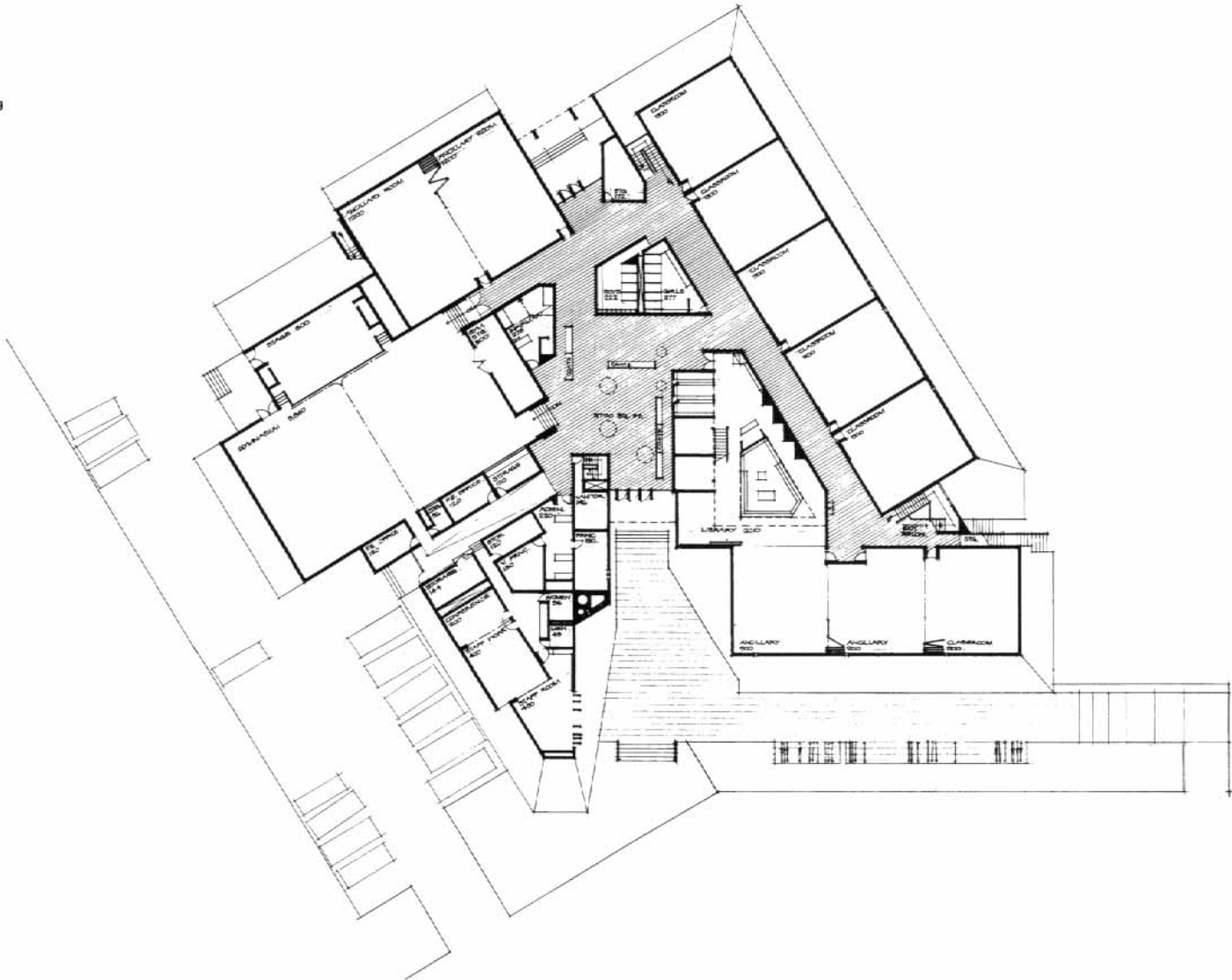
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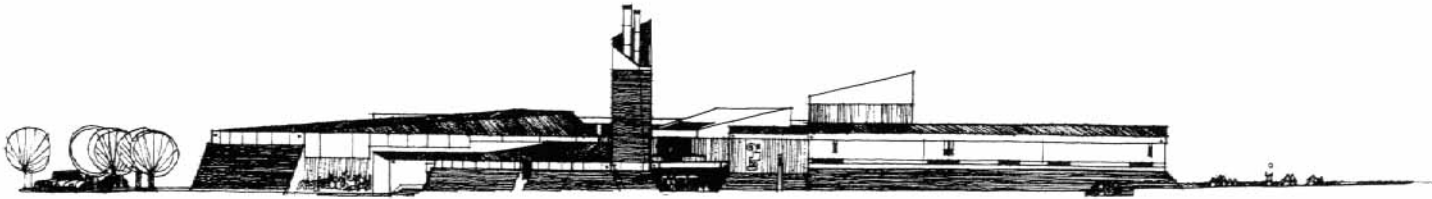


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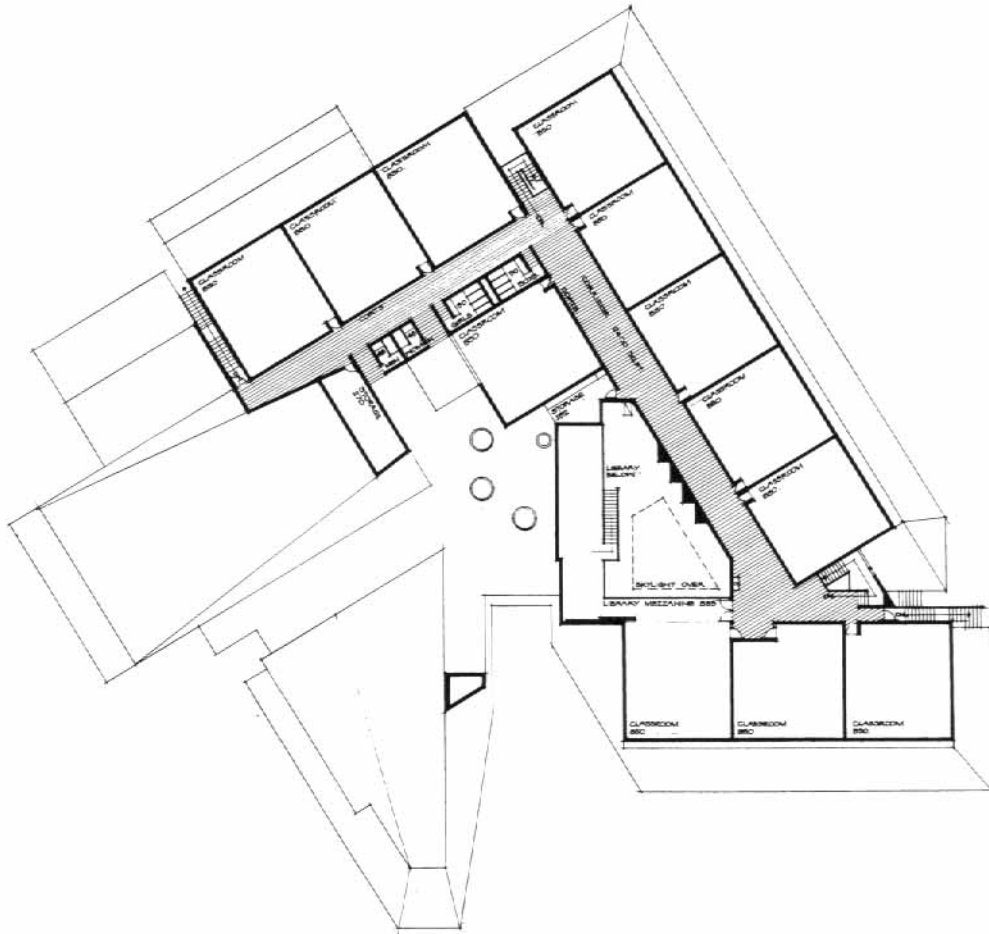


- 8 Southwest Elevation
- 9 Main Floor Plan
- 10 South Elevation
- 11 Second Floor Plan
- 12 Building Section

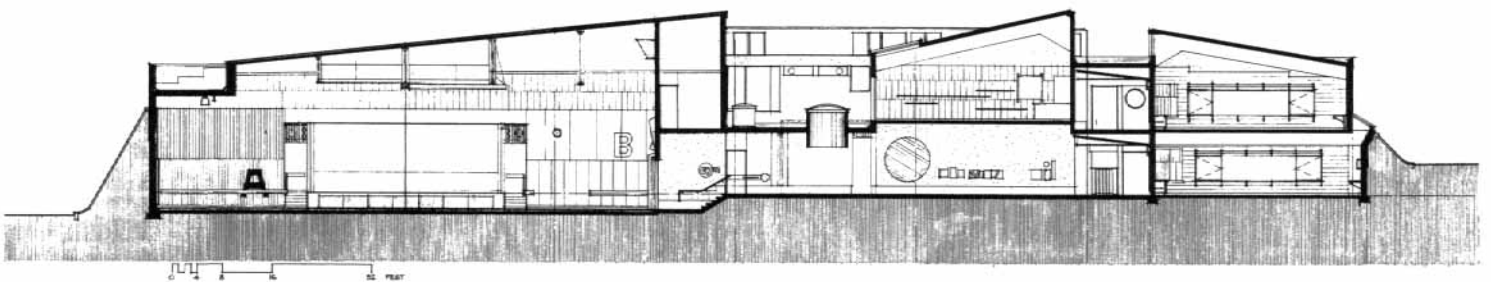
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EIGHTH AVENUE MALL

Calgary, Alberta · 1968–69

Awards: Canadian Architect Yearbook Award, 1969



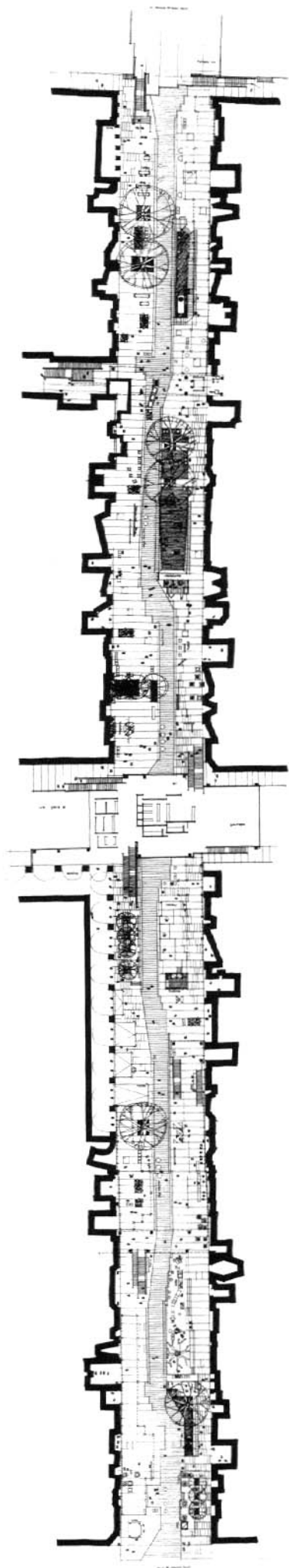
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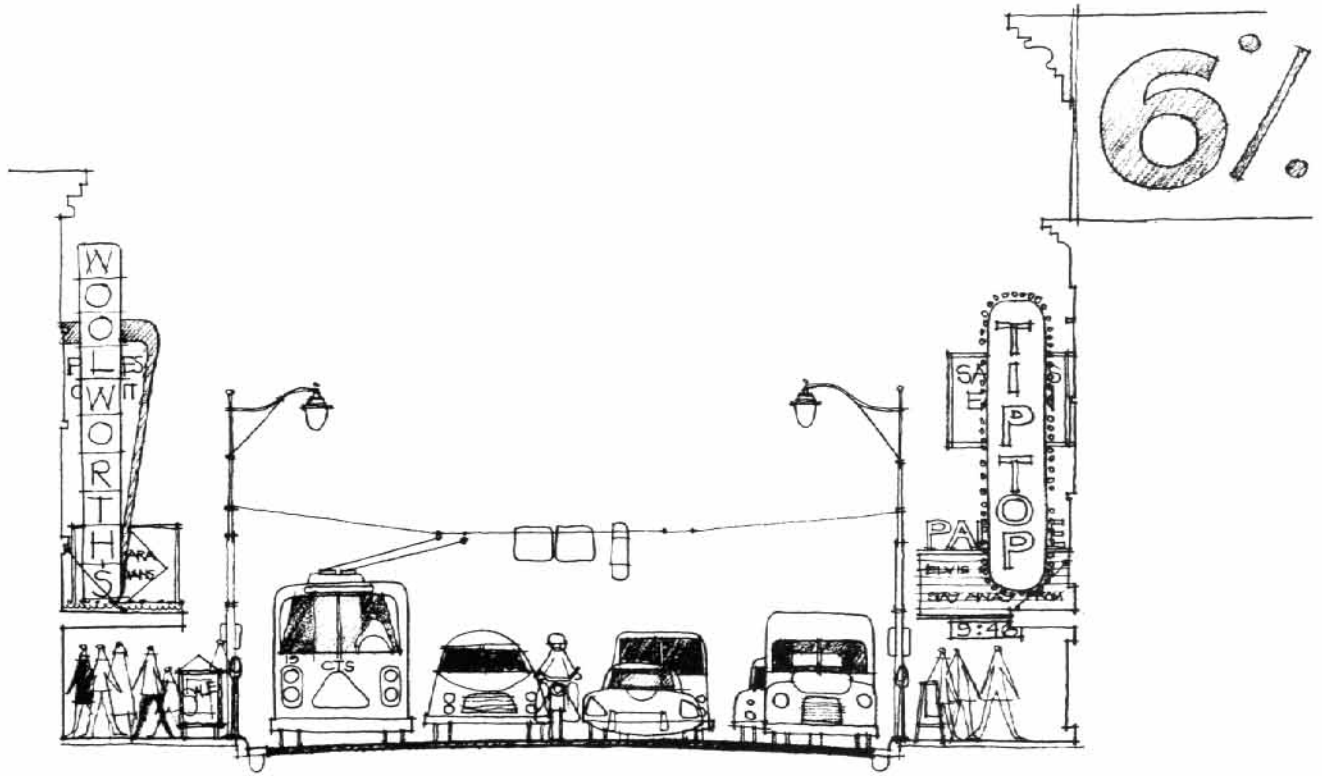
The project was designed according to the Master Plan for Downtown Calgary, which called for Eighth Avenue to be a pedestrian mall. The concept excluded the automobile and worked with a planned rapid transit system to be located under the avenue. The design was intended to be open-ended, with a series of horizontal and vertical spaces. Precast concrete panels provided the surface of the mall and accommodated drainage, and incorporated warm air for snow removal and lighting. A comprehensive set of street furniture was developed as part of the scheme. During the first phase the mall was intended to be two blocks in length and included mini-malls, walkways, a restaurant, and an arts centre over the intersection. Underground rapid transit, parking and enclosure were also planned for. A pedestrian promenade wove through the space that also allowed access for mini-buses and emergency vehicles. The materials (concrete, brick pavers, graphic elements, planters, and canopy supports) were designed to be rearranged into new configurations. The project was partially built. The scheme generated a great deal of public debate and controversy; it was eventually removed in the late 1980s.



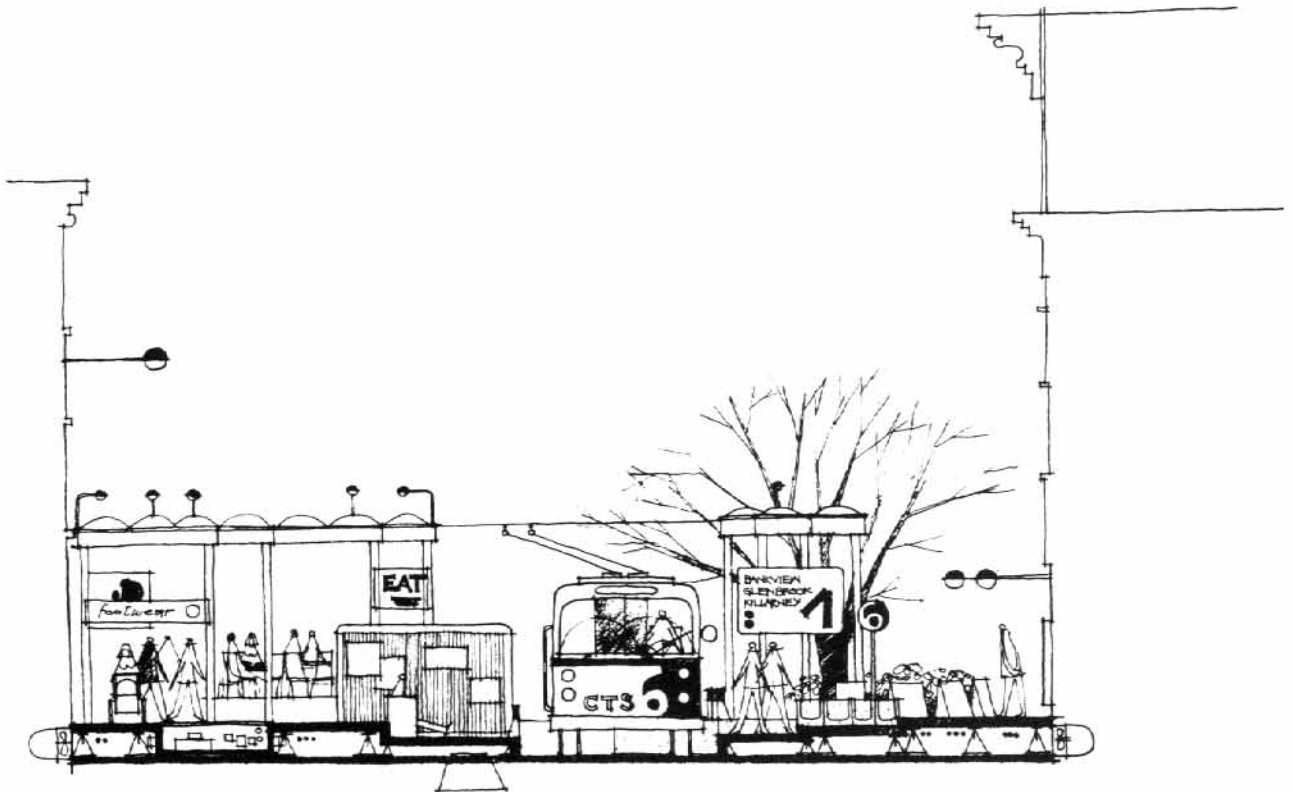
- 1 View of Northeast Elevation
- 2 Aerial View Looking East
- 3 View Looking East
- 4 View Looking West
- 5 Plan



6

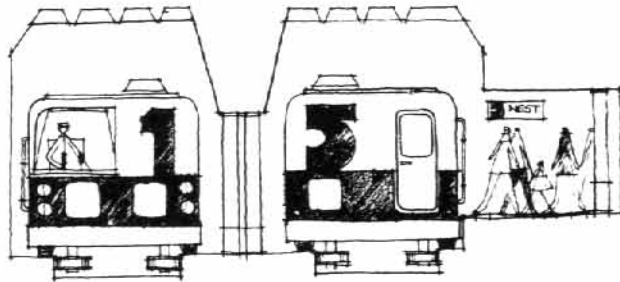
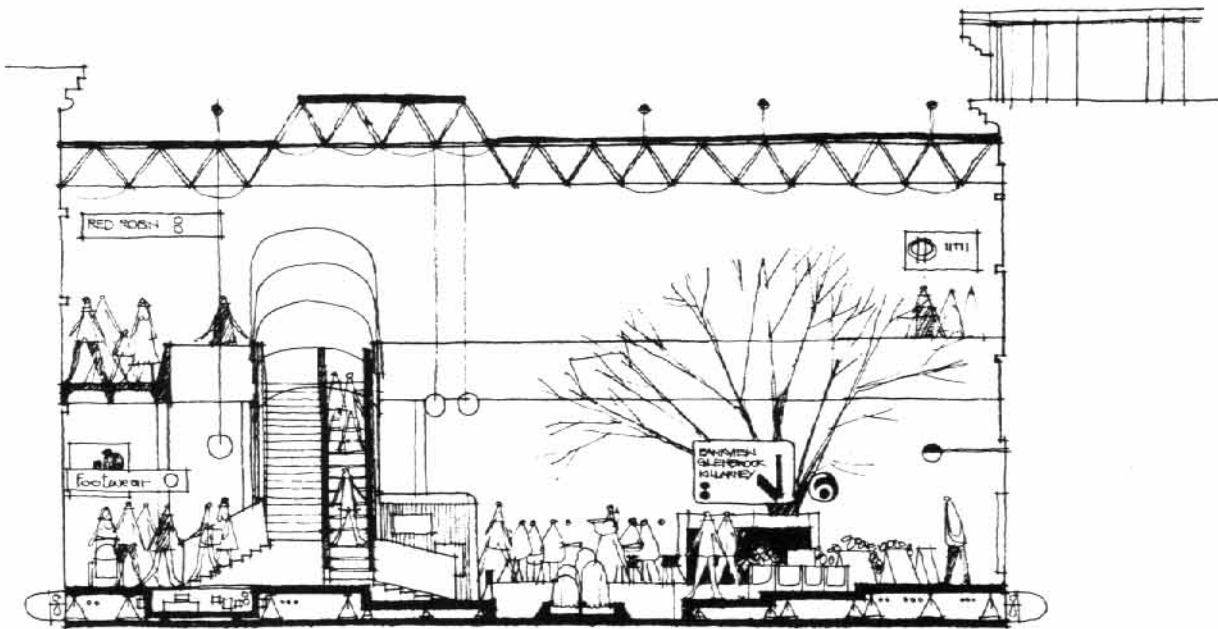


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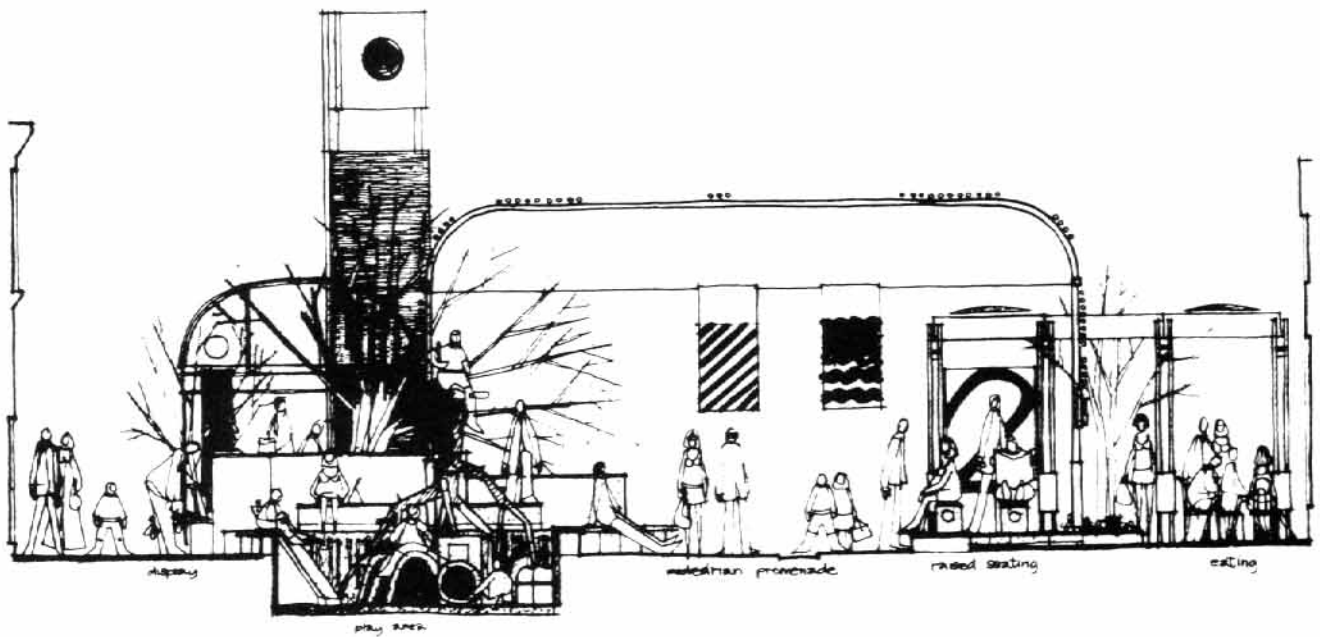


- 6 Section 1
- 7 Section 2
- 8 Section 3
- 9 Section 4

8



9



LEAVITT RESIDENCE

Calgary, Alberta · 1969–70

Awards: City of Calgary Urban Design Award, Honourable Mention, 1971

This residence was designed for a historically significant and unusually shaped sloping site in the older Mount Royal district of Calgary. Built for a young doctor and his family, the house is located well back on the lot and is accessed by a bridge. The siting of the house breaks from the formal conventions of the neighbourhood, creating a private setting nestled in a group of trees. The sheltered nature of the house, and its inventive exploitation of the site for views and sun, allows the house to subtly commandeer the adjoining properties. The design reinterprets the normal frontyard/backyard relationship and activates the narrow sideyards.

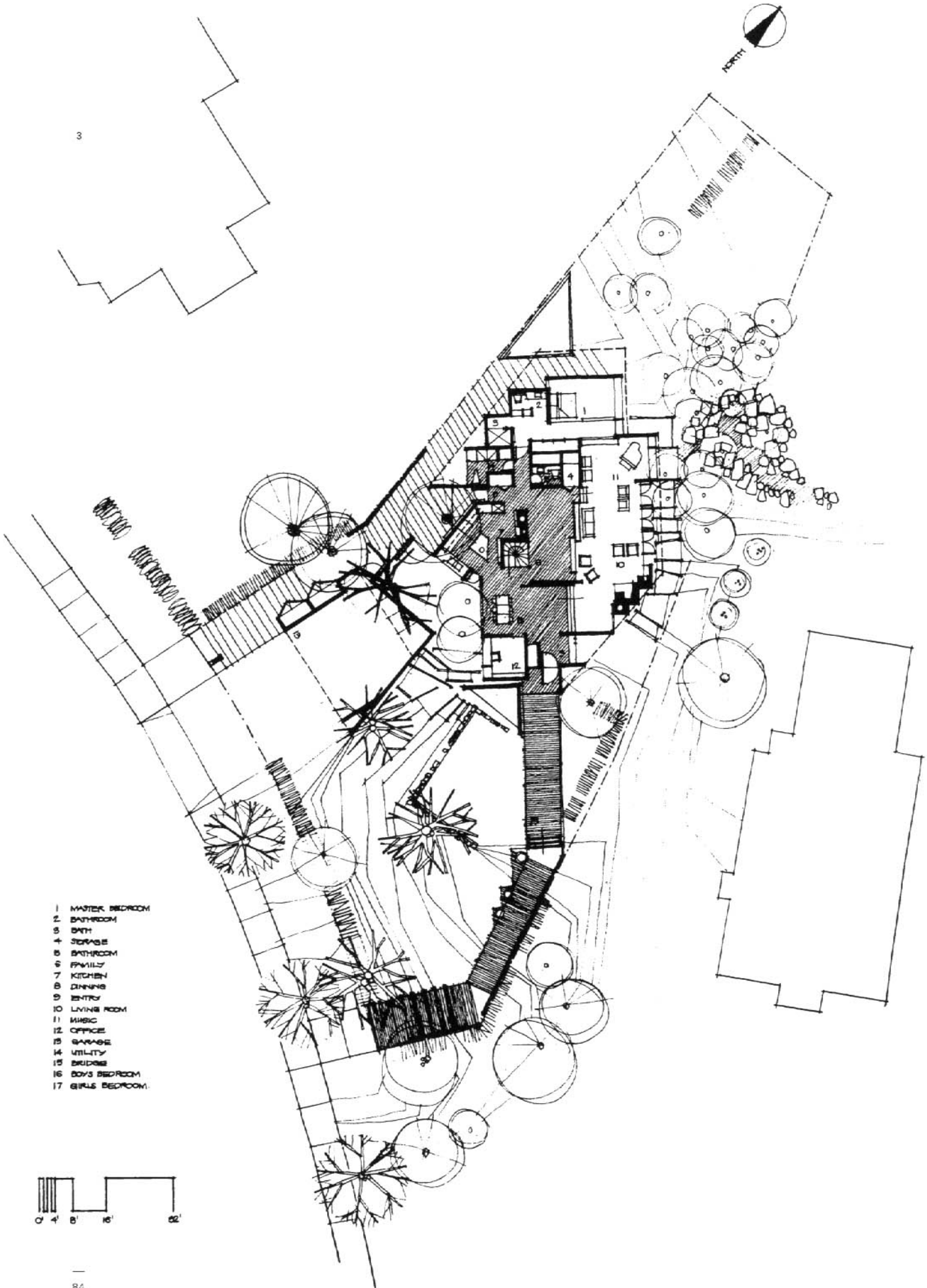
The specific needs of the family required the housing of five young children, providing very large open areas for gatherings of guests, and designing a feeling of grandeur in the Mount Royal manner. The living spaces and master bedroom suite face the rear yard and sideyard. A rockery and pool are nestled into a cluster of pine trees providing the immediate view from the master bedroom. An office is to be used only on a very casual basis. The entire lower structure is placed into the existing contours of the site and is constructed of exposed sandblasted concrete. The concrete continues up into the completely wood-covered residence to form the fireplace and structural wall (housing all of the mechanical chimneys and a barbecue) adjacent to the kitchen.

The entrance, heavy traffic areas, and wet areas all have an angular quarry tile surface that pulls the viewer into the space. All living spaces are carpeted, with the living room extending into the master bedroom divided only by two risers and a sliding bookshelf. The master bedroom has an open bathroom, dressing and shower room. The shower-bath is sunken and tiled with mirror tiles and has a clear plastic skylight overhead. All exterior wall cladding is comprised of custom milled four-inch clear cedar siding and trim. The bridge is fabricated completely, including bolted beams, of rough-sawn four-by-fours.

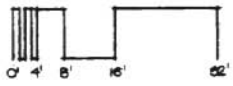


- 1 Interior View of Living Area
- 2 View of Entry (under construction)



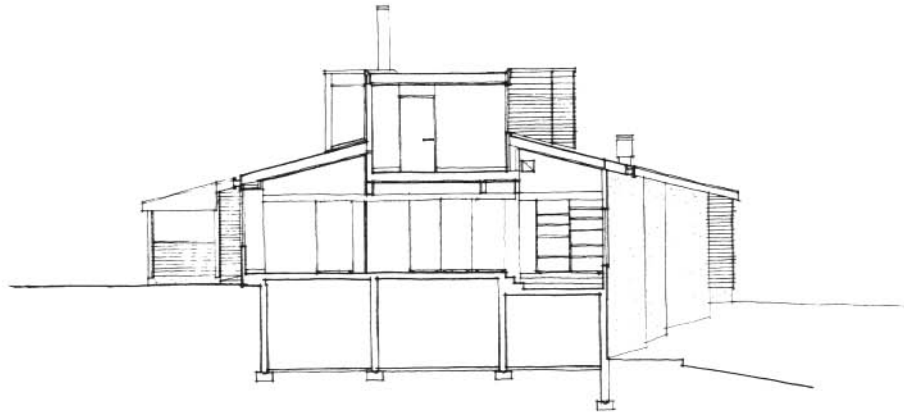


- 1 MASTER BEDROOM
- 2 BATHROOM
- 3 BATH
- 4 STORAGE
- 5 BATHROOM
- 6 FAMILY
- 7 KITCHEN
- 8 DINING
- 9 ENTRY
- 10 LIVING ROOM
- 11 MUSIC
- 12 OFFICE
- 13 GARAGE
- 14 UTILITY
- 15 BRIDGE
- 16 BOYS BEDROOM
- 17 GIRLS BEDROOM

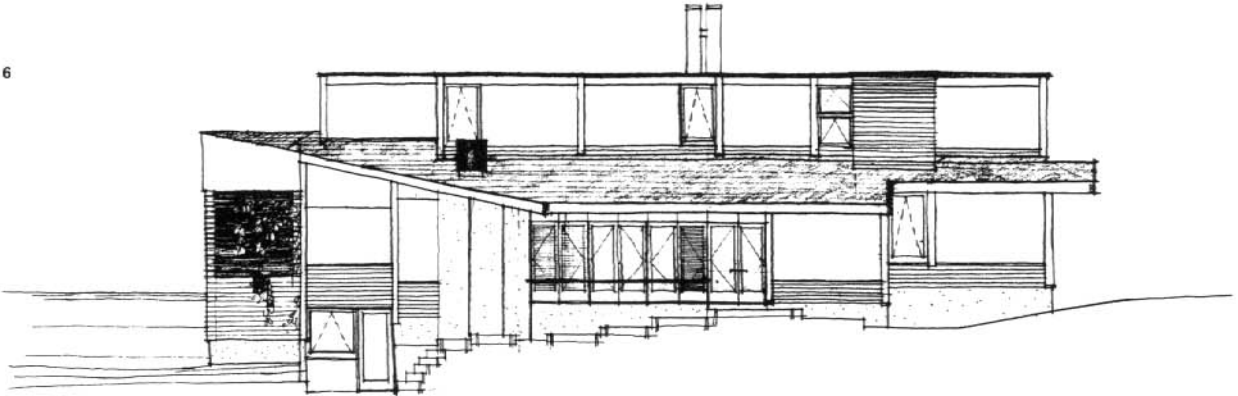




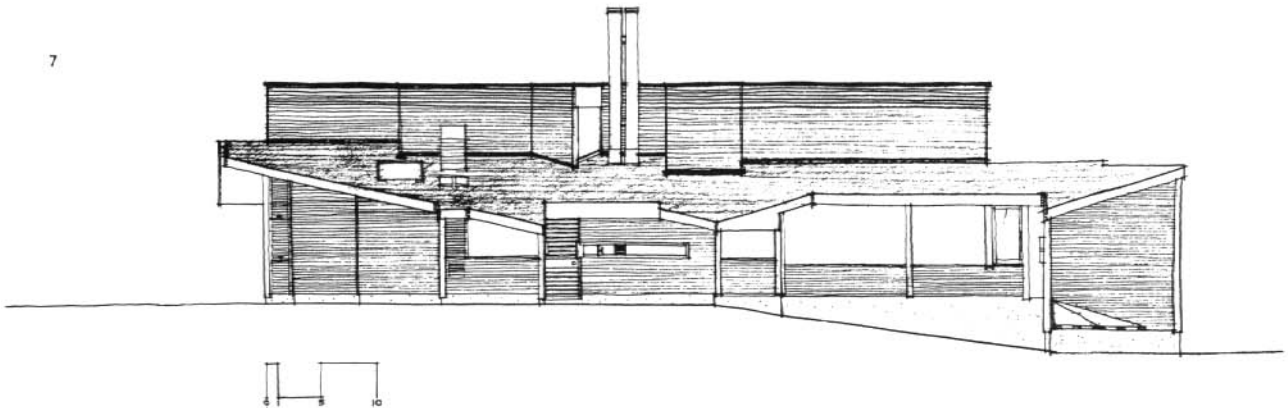
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5 Section
6 Northeast Elevation
7 Southwest Elevation
8 Interior View of
Kitchen

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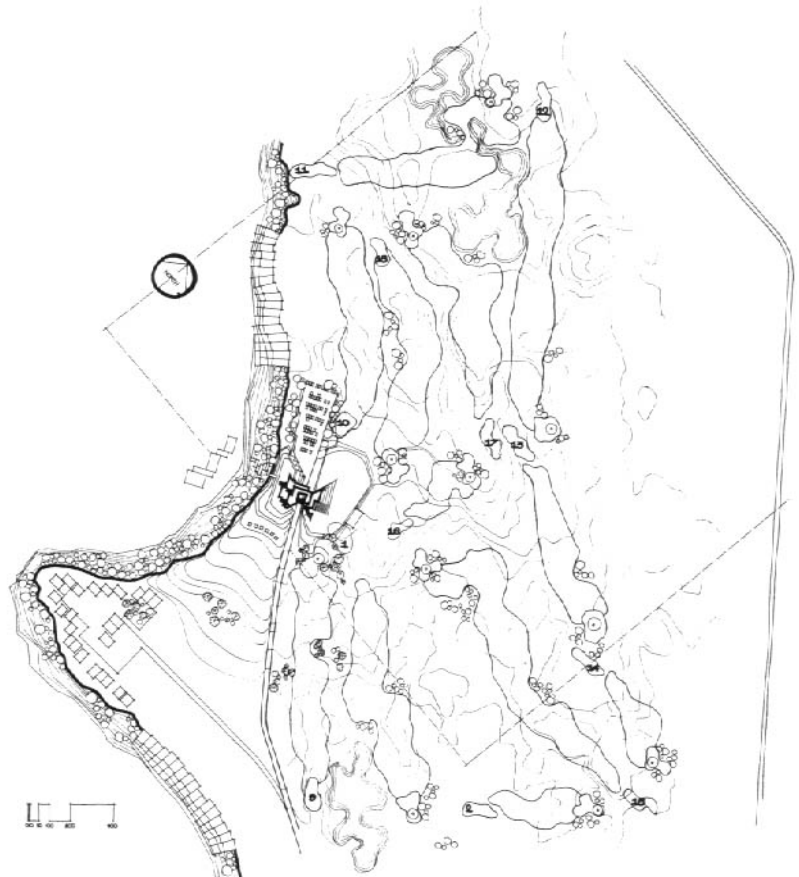
PINEBROOK GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB

Calgary, Alberta · 1971-73

Located west of Calgary, the site for the golf course and clubhouse is a natural platform above the Elbow River valley and has an unobstructed and elevated view of the Banff corridor from the river to the Rocky Mountains. The soft, rolling landscape set against the angularity of the mountains suggested the basic form of the design of the building, which involves a series of roof terraces that step back to form a pyramid. Externally, the flat roofs accommodate putting, lawn bowling, tournament observation, and opportunities for television coverage, viewing the surrounding landscape, and dining. The terraces offer a sculptural transition from the natural rolling course to the harder edges of the structure and repeat the grass terraces that surround the building.

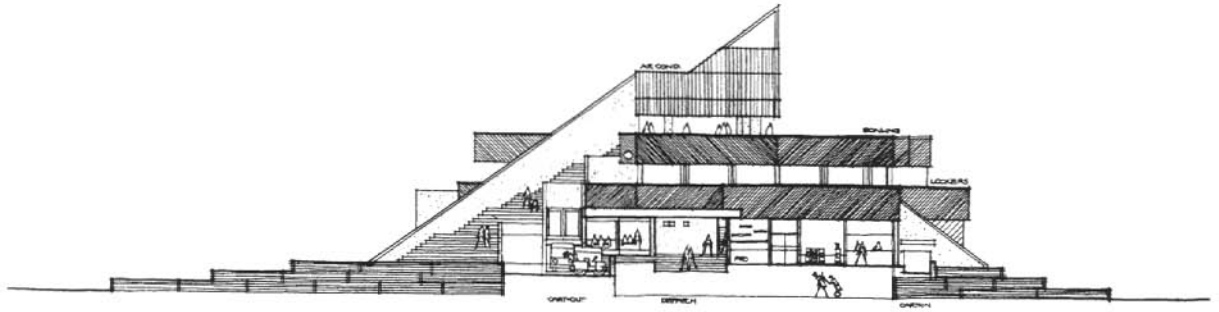
Functionally the structure is divided by the undercover automobile entry drop-off that leads into the social activity areas and playing facilities. The horizontal layering comprises of services at semi-sub-grade; formal dining, social, and administration at grade; and informal eating and locker room facilities above. Players' services are controlled by the club professional at the playing end of the building. This disposition, along with the building entry, eliminated automobile cross circulation into the area of play. Formal social functions can also operate without conflict with playing functions.

1

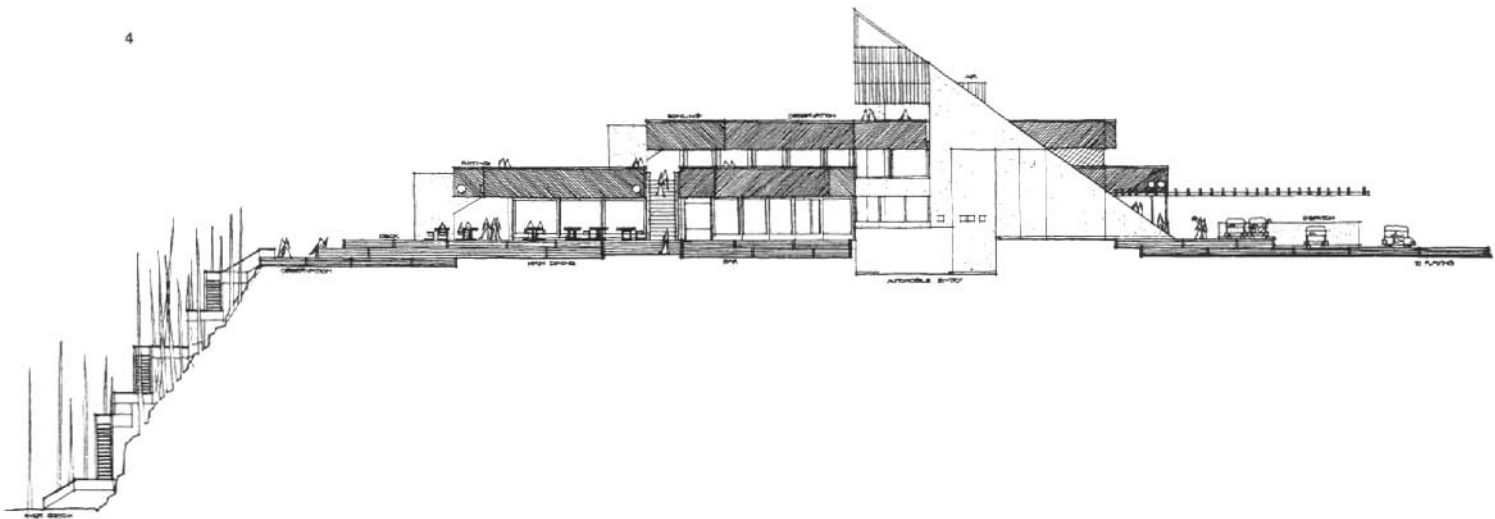




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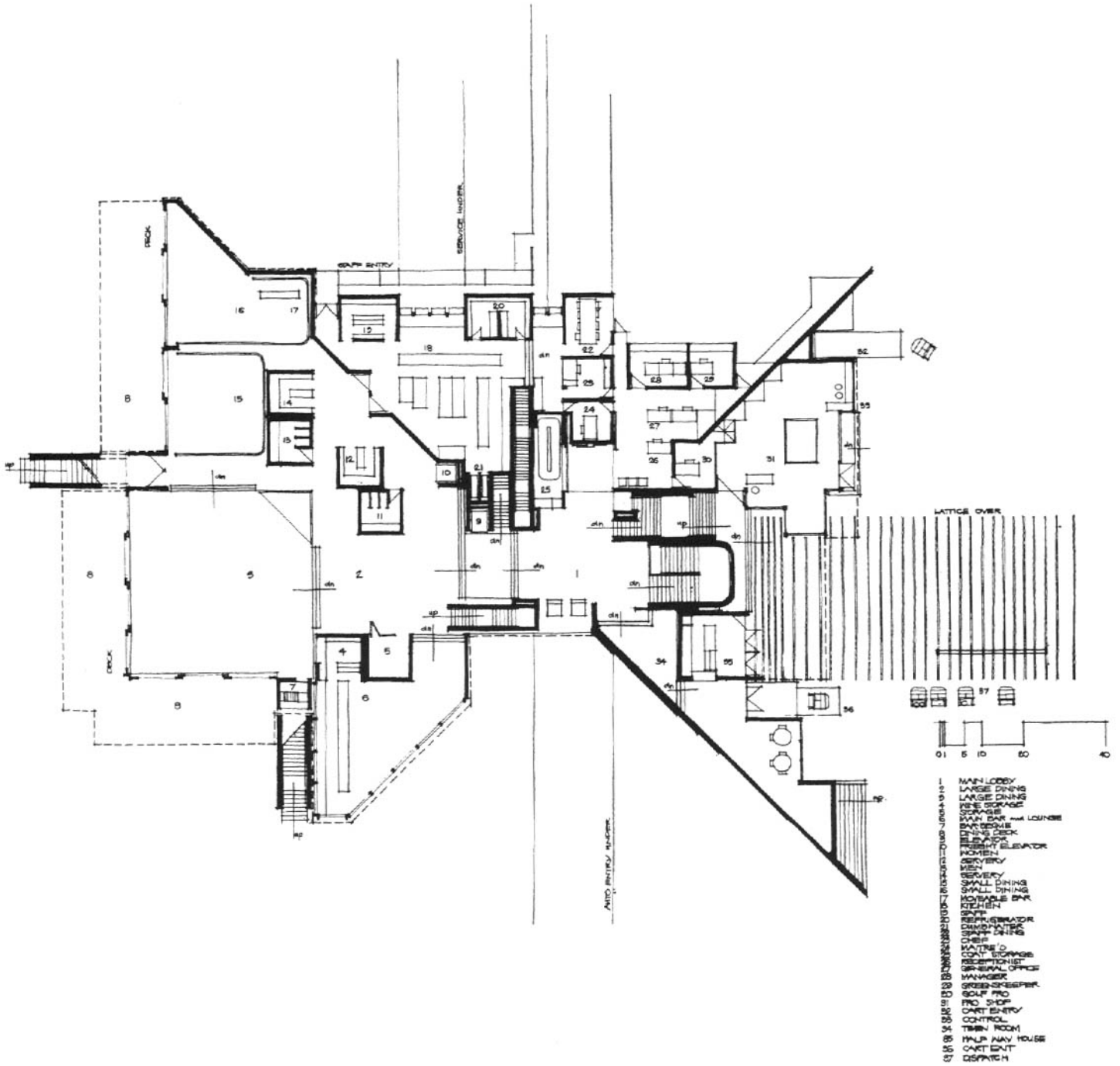
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- 3 East Elevation
- 4 South Elevation
- 5 View Looking Northwest
- 6 Main Floor Plan

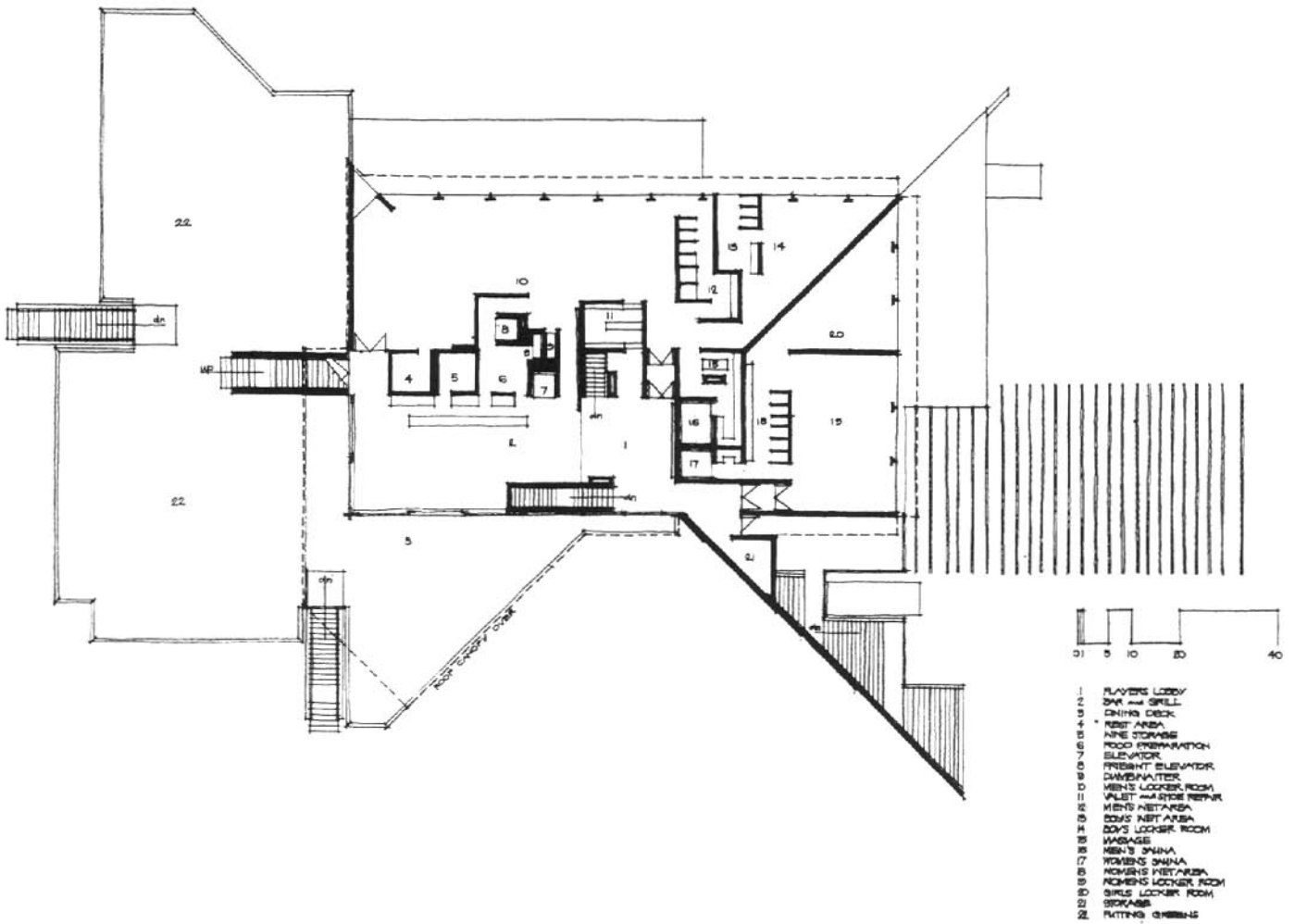




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11





STONEY TRIBAL ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

Morley, Alberta · 1976–80

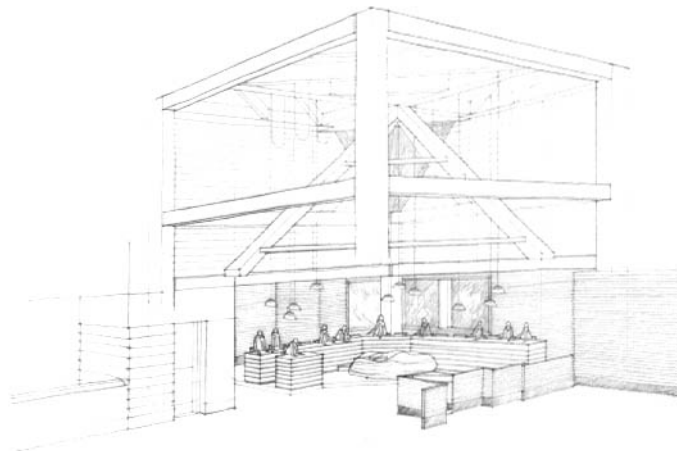
Awards: Governor General's Award, 1982

Canadian Architect Yearbook Award, 1977

The Stoney Tribal Administration Building at Morley, Alberta, west of Calgary, is located on a protected hillside facing the Bow River and the surrounding hills. The site was selected because it provides a dramatic view toward the river and hills, which was far more important to the client than the nearby mountains. The structure is in a prominent position for those entering or passing by the main townsite. The siting of the complex is intended to help shape a community centre for the Native band.

The building is a long, low concrete structure with a wooden structure housing the council chamber mounted prominently above. The design accommodates administrative and community functions along with the council chamber and supporting facilities. The major functions are organized as a series of terraces that work with the topography. There is a major entrance facing the river and north, with minor entrances located to the west and southeast. The building is well sited to pick up movement through it and has a playful quality that is unexpected when viewing the formally organized structure from the exterior. The core of the main floor is designed to be a spontaneous gathering space. Access to the council chamber is either by an elevator or by a hidden stair.

The council chamber performs both an administrative and a sacred role and is structured by large timbers and wood siding. The council chamber needed special status, circulation control, and the sacred atmosphere appropriate to Christian and traditional ceremonies, while reflecting contemporary administrative practices. The council chamber creates a dark, voluminous interior space that recalls some of the forms and materials of traditional Native structures without replicating literally the form of a teepee.



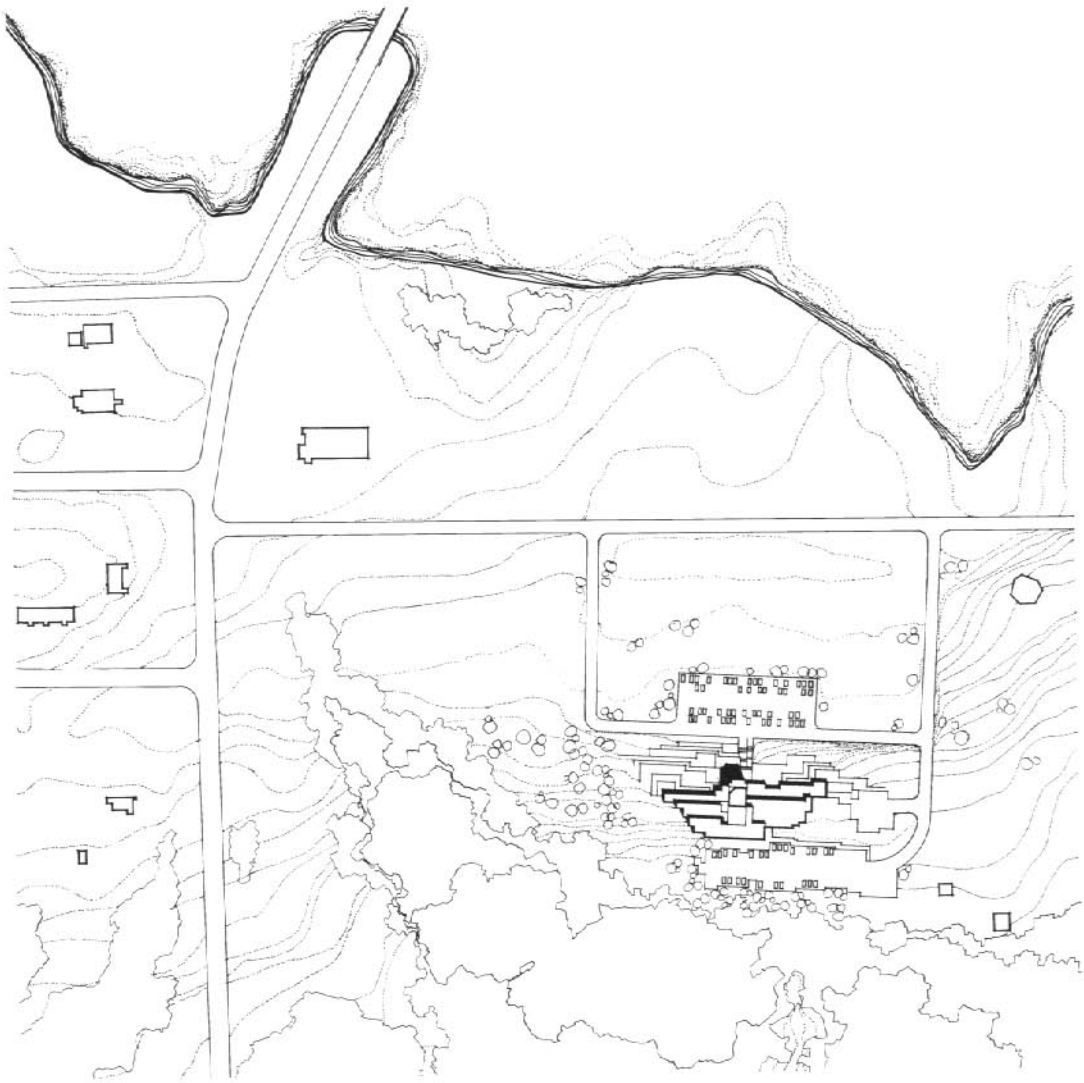
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- 1 Perspective Sketch of Council Chamber
- 2 View Looking Southeast

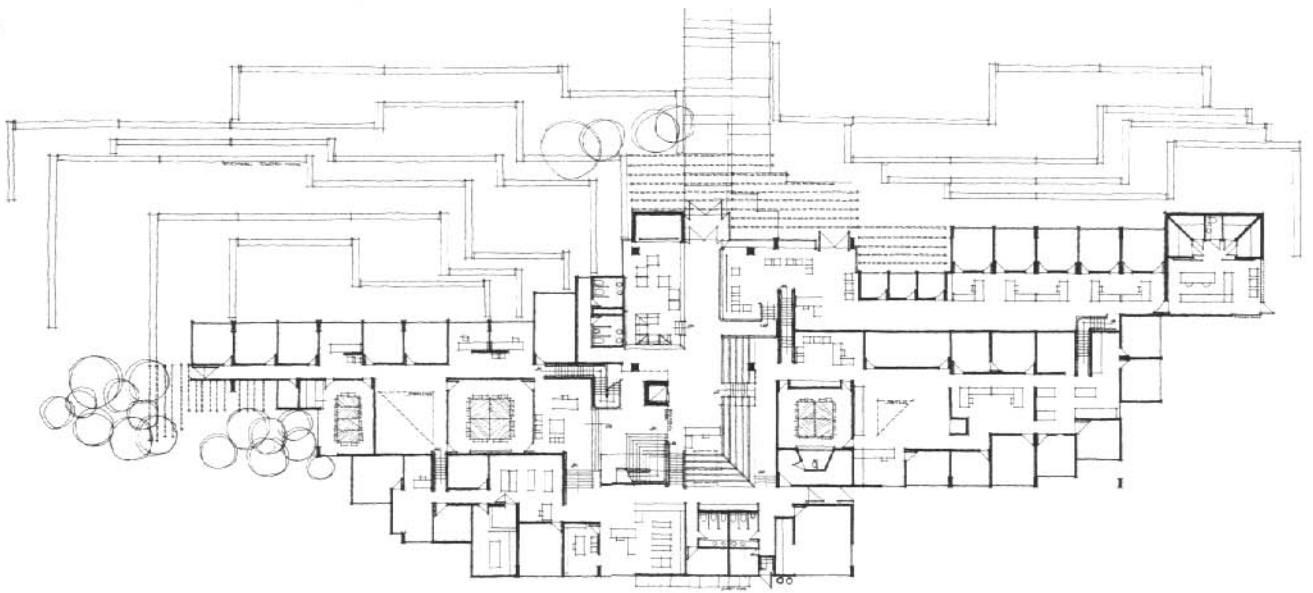
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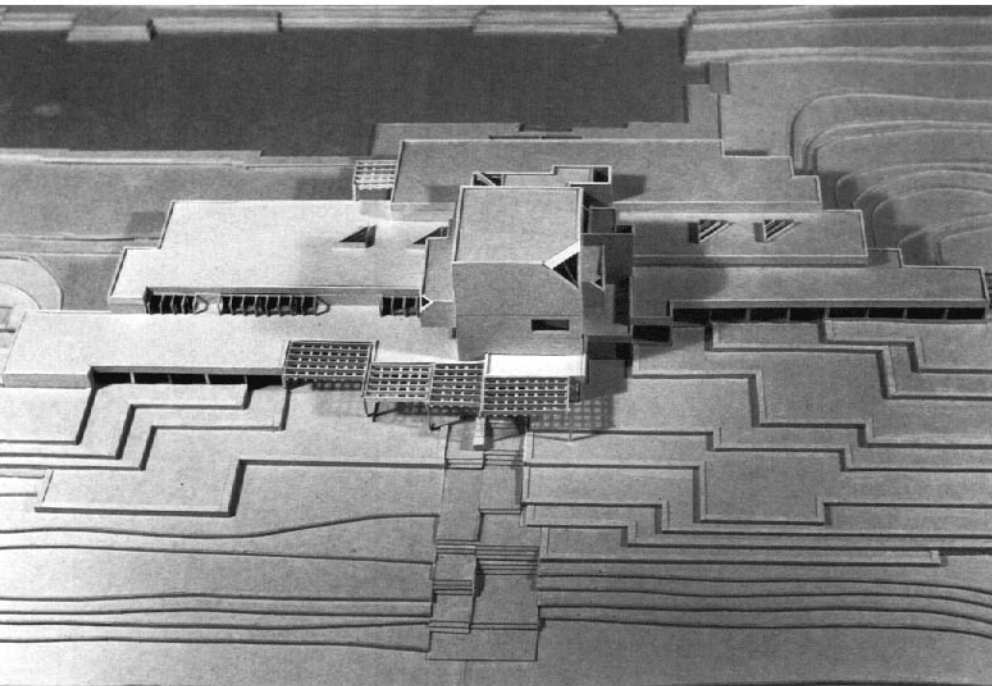
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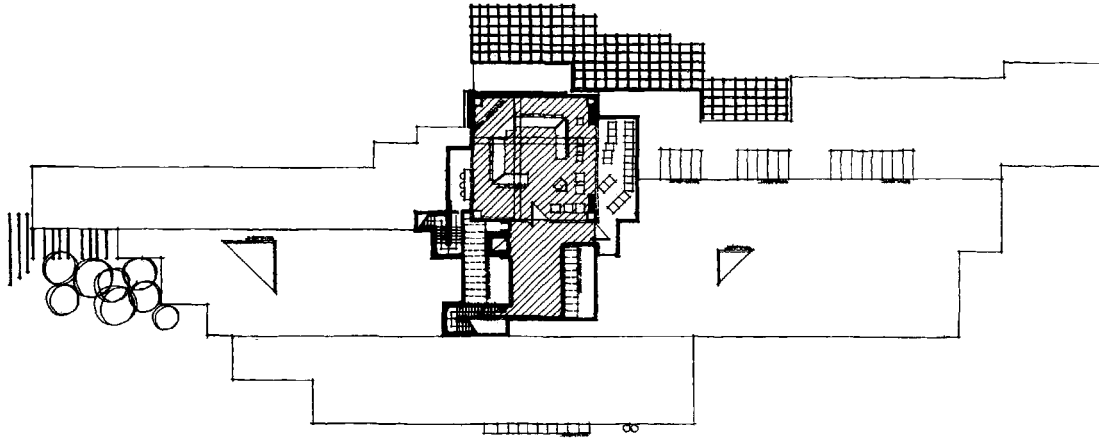
- 3 Site Plan
- 4 Main Floor Plan
- 5 Aerial View Looking Northeast
- 6 Aerial View of Model Looking South

5

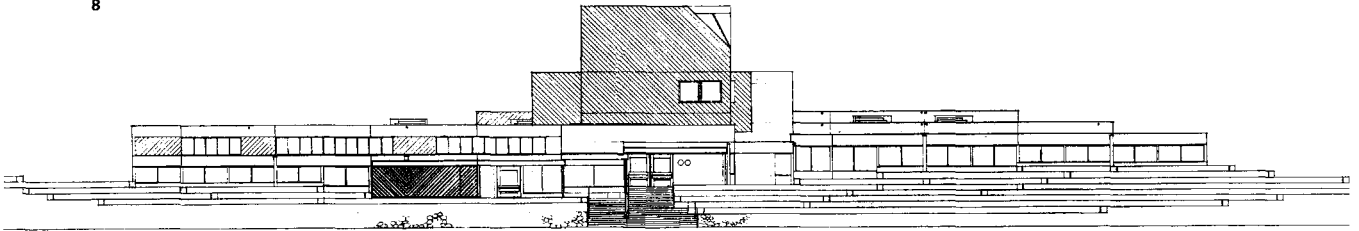


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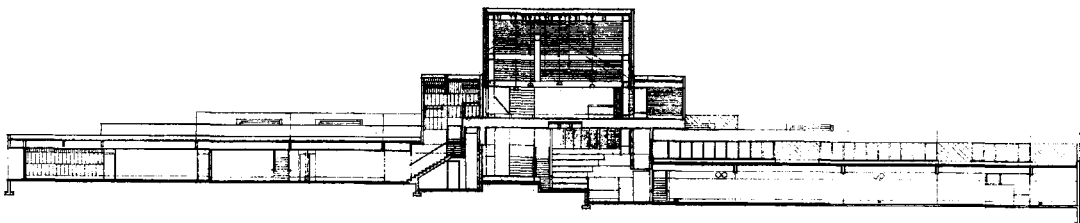
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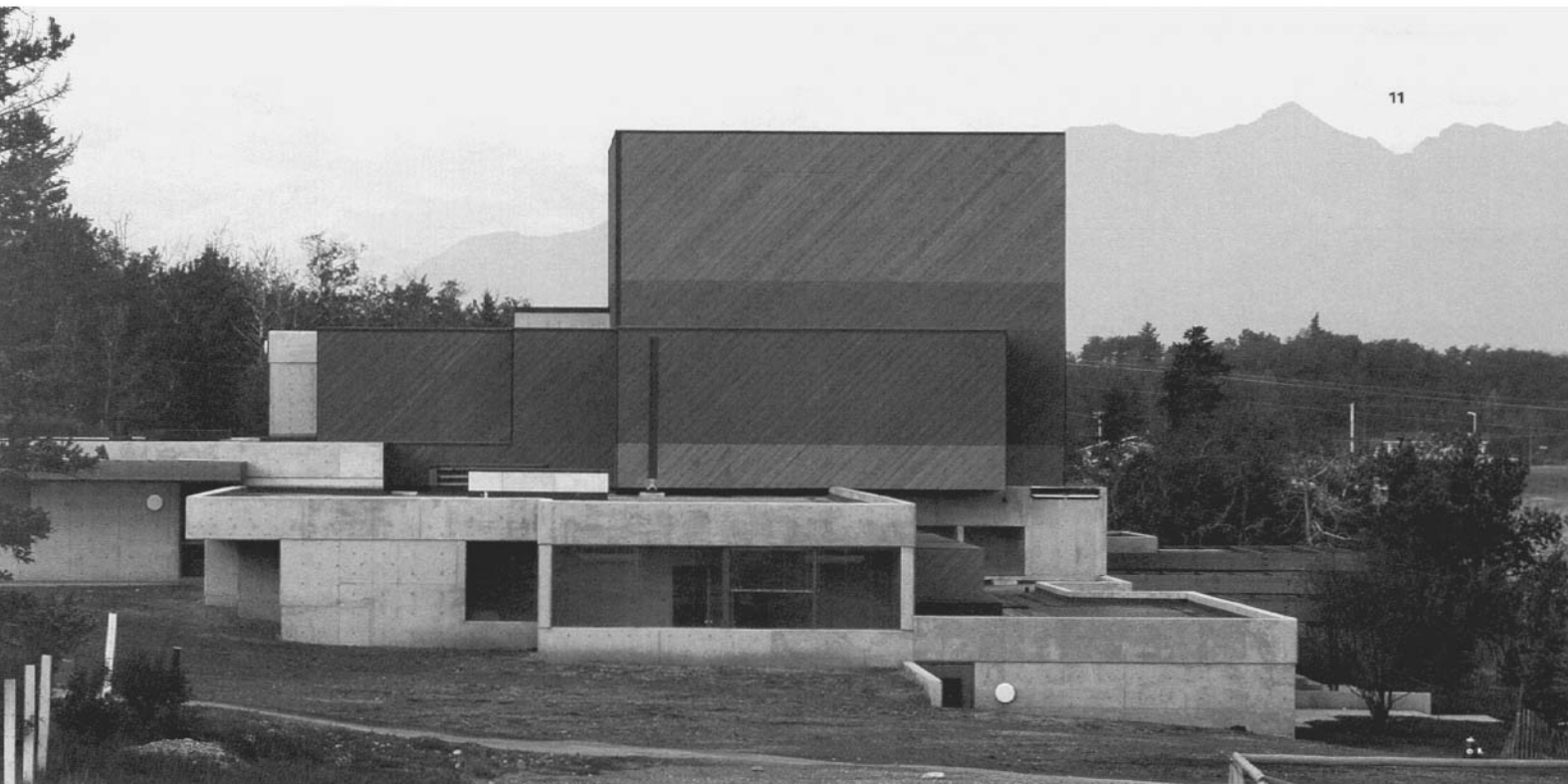


- 7 Council Chamber
Floor Plan
- 8 North Elevation
- 9 Longitudinal Section
- 10 View Looking South
- 11 View Looking West

10



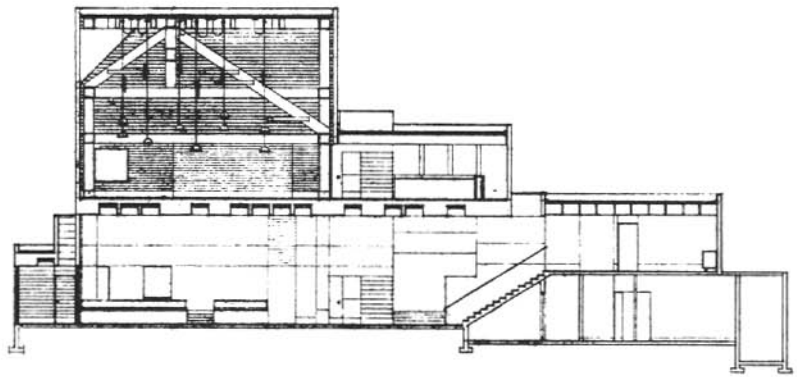
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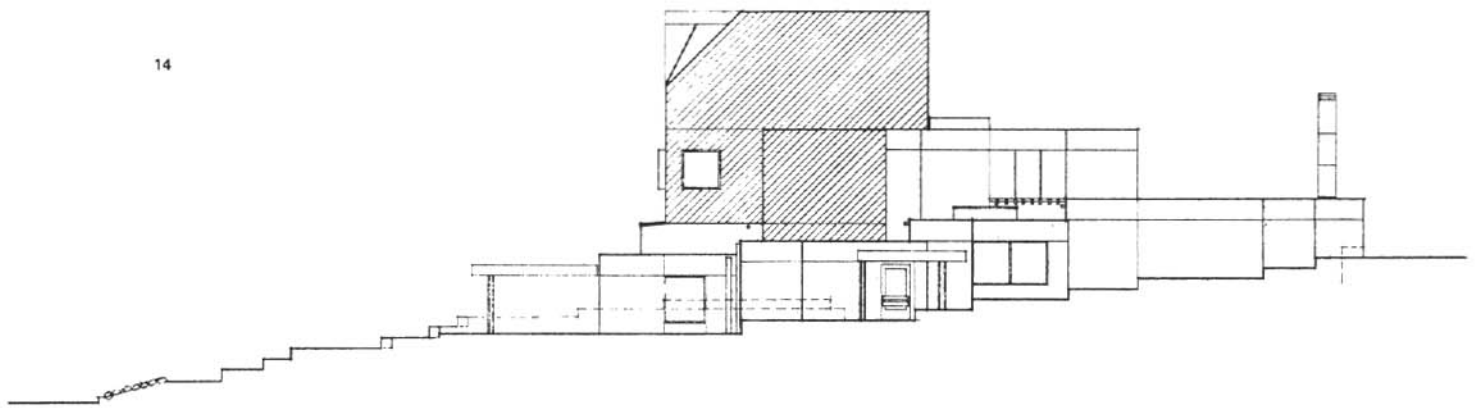
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- 12 View of Entry
- 13 Cross Section
- 14 West Elevation
- 15 Interior View of Entry and Forum

15



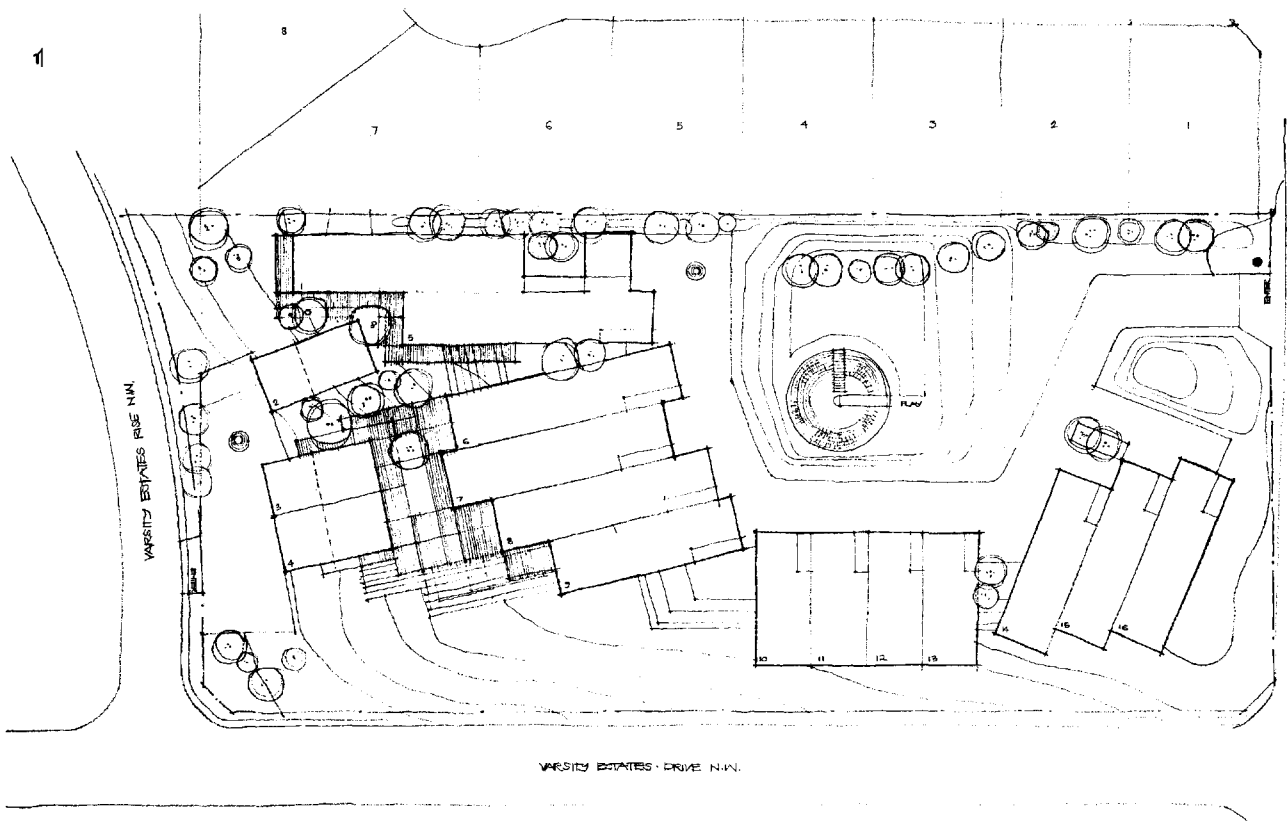
FALCONRIDGE CONDOMINIUMS

Calgary, Alberta · 1977-78

Awards: City of Calgary Urban Design Award, Honorable Mention, 1979

The client had a steeply sloped site located in northwest Calgary, facing the mountains and the surrounding valley and golf course. The group of condominium residences was to serve the client's family and a group of friends. As a response to the site, views, and sun the units were scattered around the edge of the hill to preserve the slope and profile. The site is left in its natural state as far as possible, and a pronounced hill, created from excavated material, provides a screen to the north and a play area for children.

Each residence was to include a private pedestrian/auto entry with a master bedroom suite above the living spaces. Each unit is a terraced tube with a sloped roof. The circulation spine maintains privacy and also supports greenhouse, library, and display functions throughout. All internal walls are non-bearing to achieve flexibility within the tube of space.



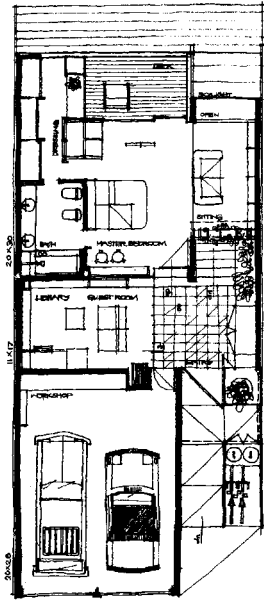
- 1 Site Plan
- 2 View Looking Northeast
- 3 Site Elevation Looking North

2

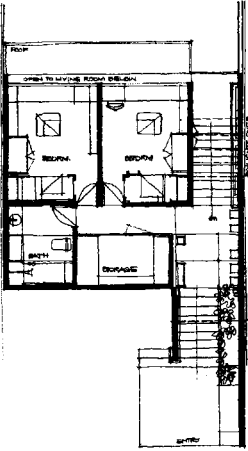
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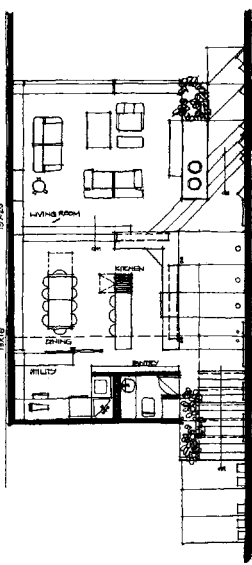
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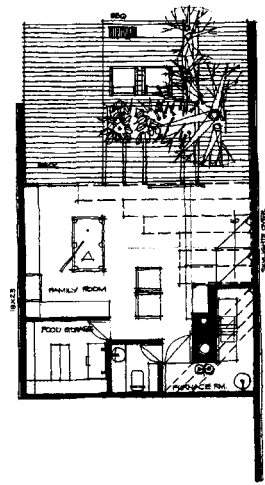
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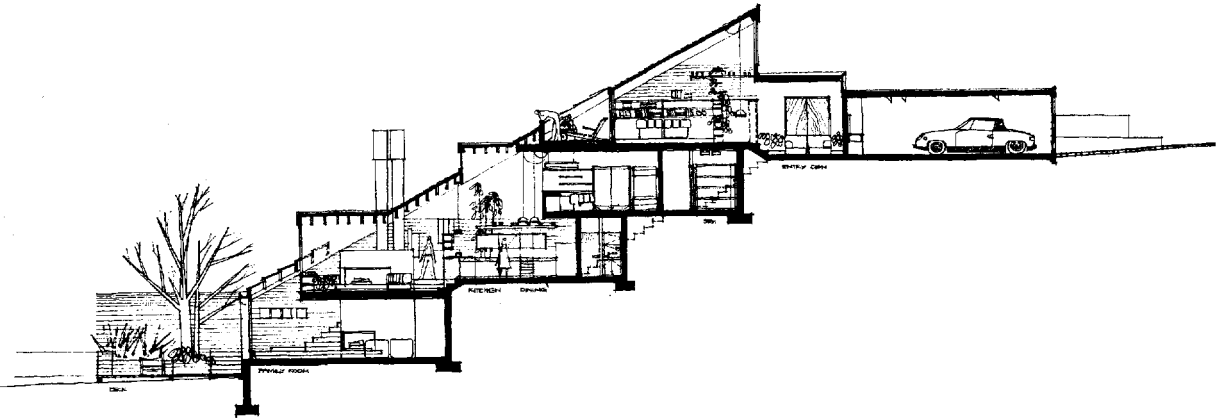
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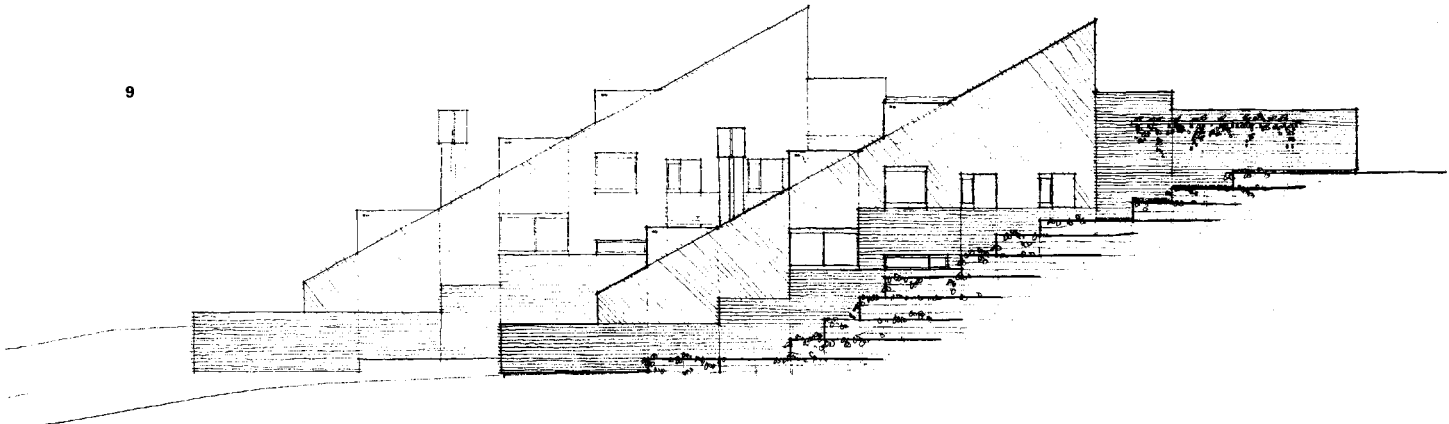
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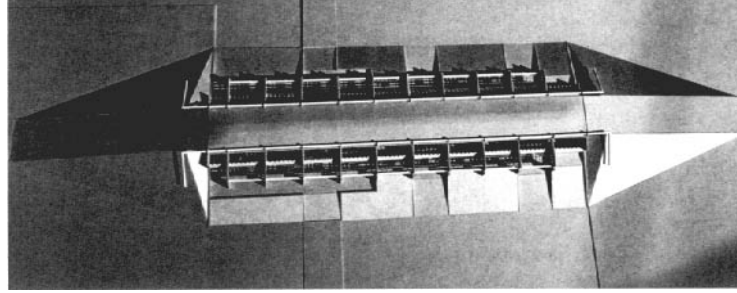


- 4 Entry Level Floor Plan
- 5 Bedroom Level Floor Plan
- 6 Living Level Floor Plan
- 7 Family Level Floor Plan
- 8 Section
- 9 South Elevation
- 10 Detail View









SHOULDICE ATHLETIC CHANGE PAVILION ¹

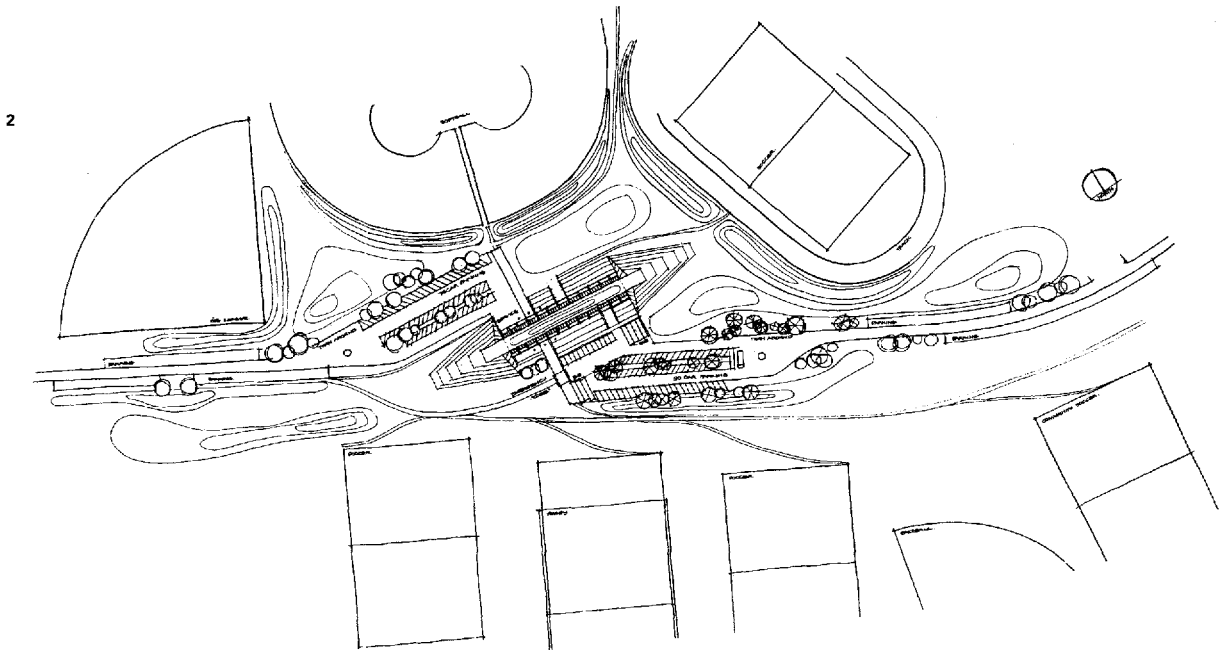
Calgary, Alberta · 1979–82

Awards: Canadian Architect Award of Excellence, 1981

The Shouldice Athletic Change Pavilion is an award-winning design for locker rooms and supporting facilities for a flat athletic park site in northwest Calgary adjacent to the Bow River. The park can be viewed from the Trans-Canada Highway nearby and from the escarpment above. The use of a sculptural form employing earth berms creates a long linear earth bridge that clearly demarcates the parking and receiving areas of the site from the playing fields. Gordon Atkins has described it as a “negative structure.”

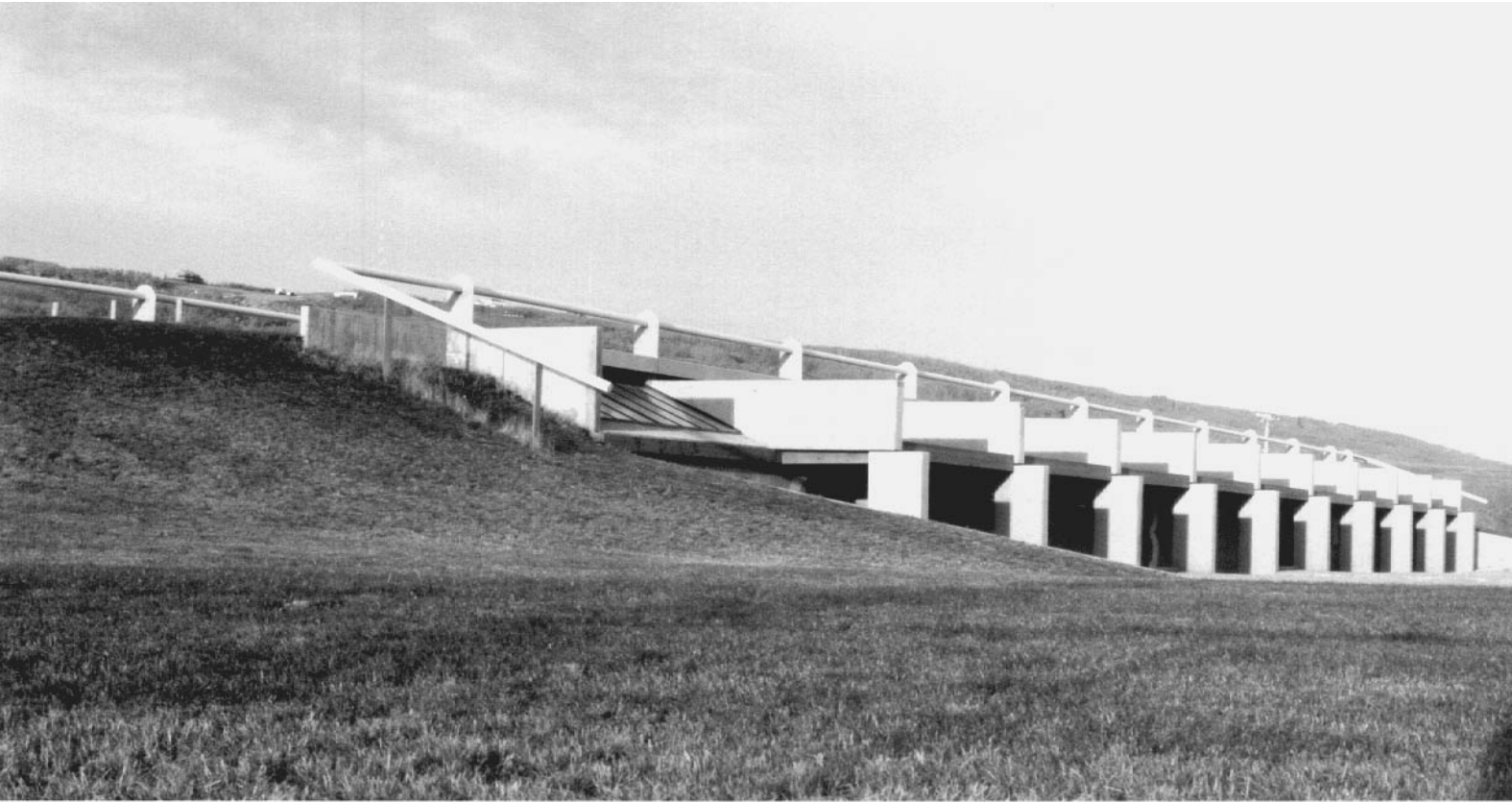
Although the activities of the structure are mundane, the facility is important inasmuch as the functions serve every user of the park. Players, officials, and spectators use the lockers, public washrooms, food concessions, first aid room, and administration. Park staff use the maintenance depot, staff washrooms, and lunch room. It is intended that the structure rely on its passive expression to quietly underline its important central purpose.

Use of the building is during the summer only, and the building has been sited to allow for maximum southern and northern exposure. A row of operable skylights is provided along the entire length of the building on both sides to allow solar energy to passively heat the structure. The building is lowered into the ground by the use of sodded earth berms which surround the building and continue over the roof. This effectively integrates the building into the park. Pedestrian traffic freely flows over the building and can view events from that vantage. Circulation is all external, and the circulation arcade is enhanced and protected by berms and wooden lattice.



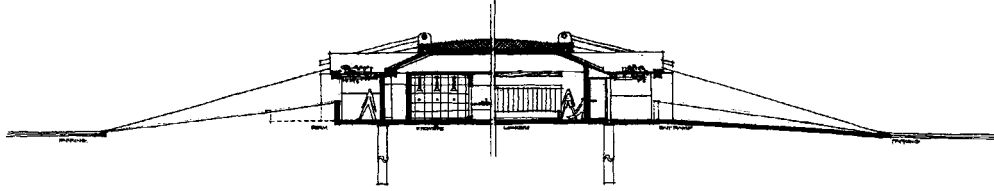
- 1 Aerial View of Model
- 2 Site Plan
- 3 View Looking
Northeast
- 4 Aerial View Looking
North

3

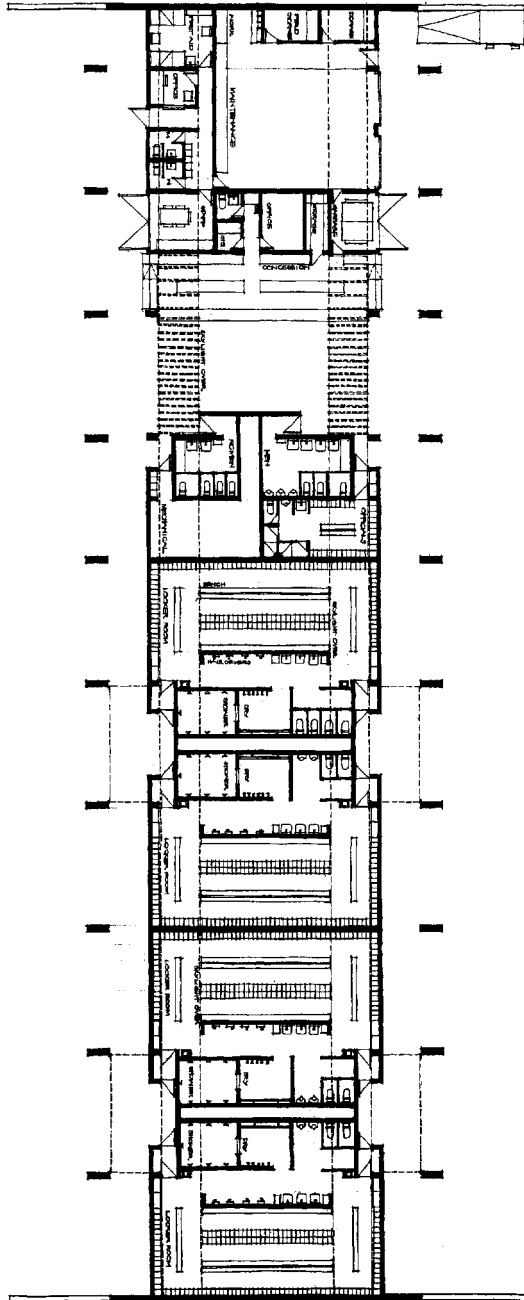


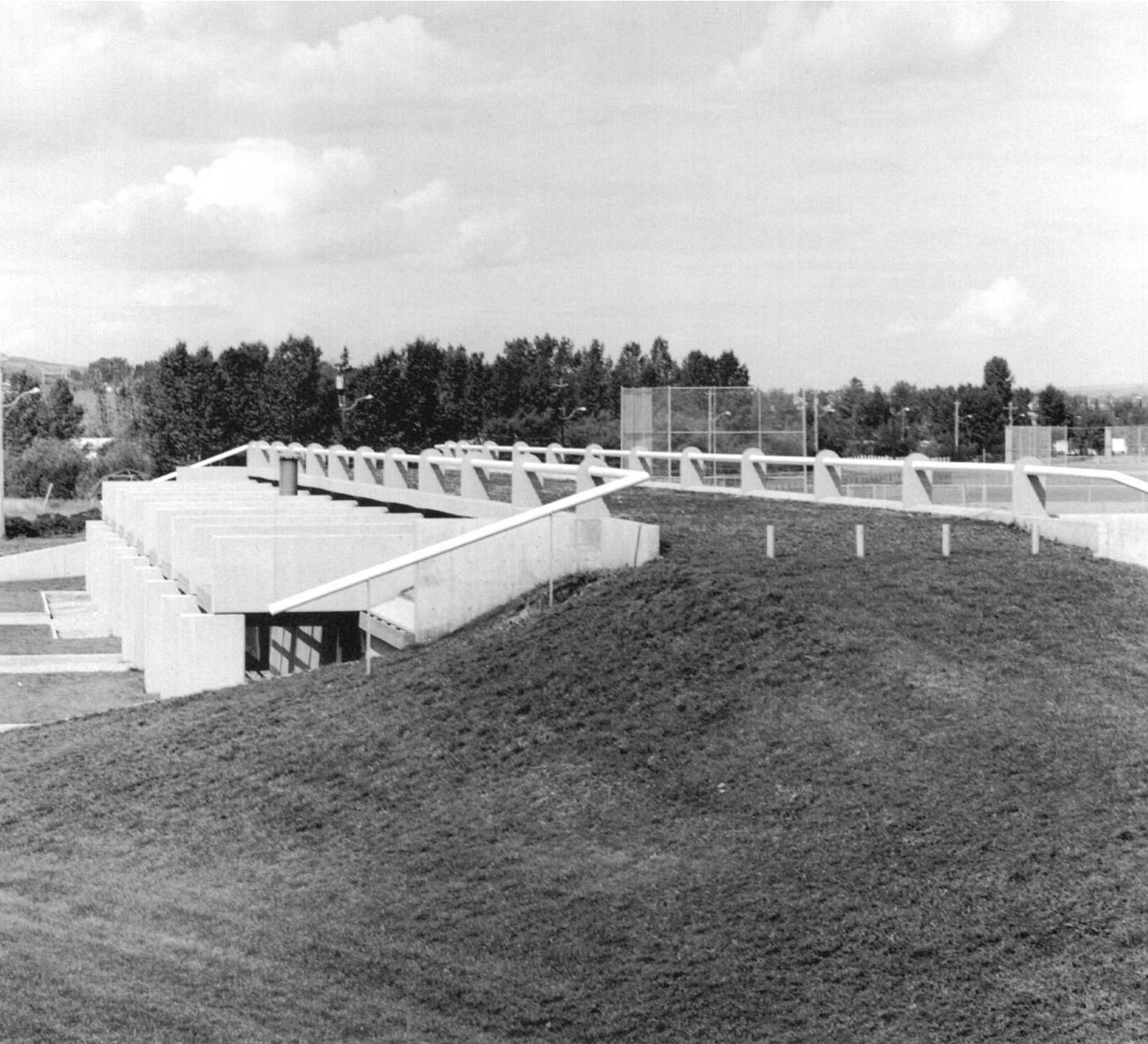
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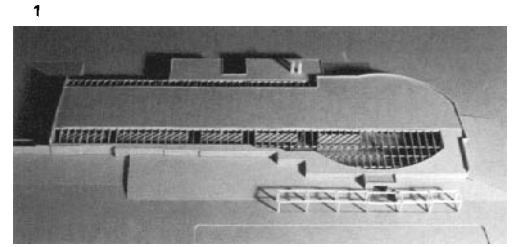






GRANDE PRAIRIE REGIONAL COLLEGE ELECTRICAL TRAINING FACILITY

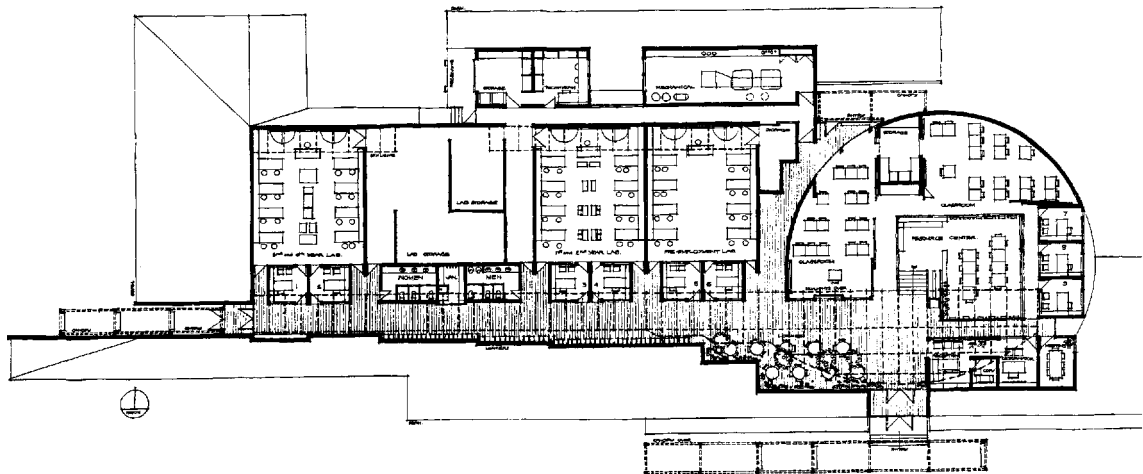
Grand Prairie, Alberta · 1980–82



The Electrical Training Facility is comprised of three labs, electrical equipment storage, an open computer-based resource centre, administrative offices, and ancillary spaces. Access to the building is multi-directional, the various entry points make connections to the Grande Prairie Regional College campus. Each entry is announced by an open arcade stepping gradually down to the partially submerged main floor level. The design is organized around a skylit street, oriented to receive the south light; lockers and cafeteria are integrated into the circulation. A long, low earth berm visually leads to a curved dip in the skylight that announces the main entry leading directly into the large open resource centre with administration immediately adjacent.

The low profile of the building reduces the physical impact of this structure in favour of the very organic and prominent main building by Douglas Cardinal nearby. Circulation and mechanical systems are placed so as to enhance and allow easy growth in subsequent phases. Staff offices were required to be circulation accessible while directly supervising lab activity. Natural light is received through overhead skylights and from north-oriented skylights over classroom chalkboards.

2

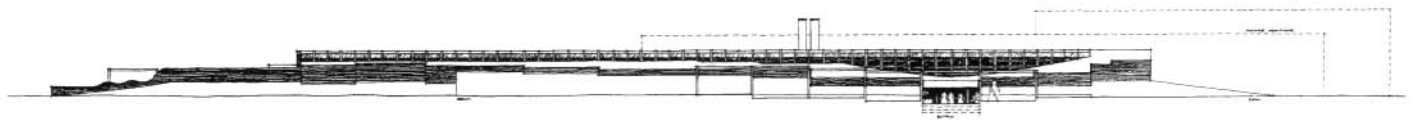


- 1 Aerial View of Model
- 2 Floor Plan
- 3 View of South Elevation
- 4 South Elevation
- 5 North Elevation
- 6 East Elevation

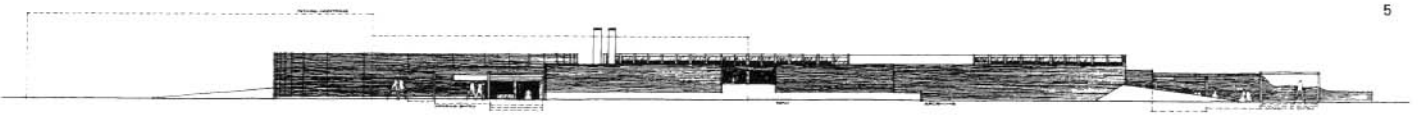
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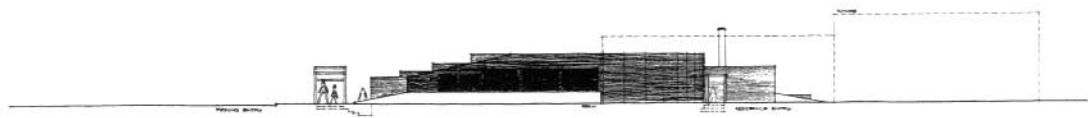
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- 7 View of Interior
Street Looking East
- 8 View of Interior
Street Looking West

8



SOUTHERN ALBERTA YOUTH DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

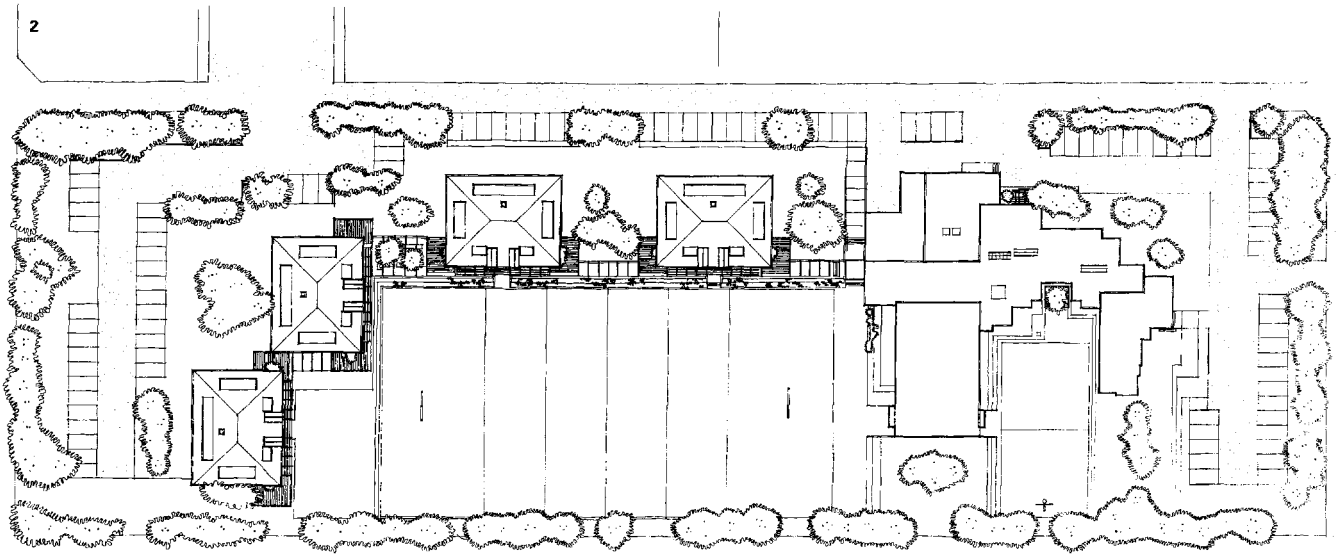
Strathmore, Alberta · 1980–83

The facility is a youth detention centre for delinquent teenagers, who are under compulsory care in a “physically secure and structured residential setting.” The centre was originally designed with forty-eight beds for fourteen- and fifteen-year-old youths. Designed with self-contained residential units and attached, but separate, educational and recreational facilities, the complex is arranged around a large secure open area. The individual structures provide a low-security enclosure with graduating degrees of protection. The residences were designed to provide a warm, home-like atmosphere using durable materials, particularly wood. This approach recognizes that the residents have generally been deprived of family interaction, support, and respect. Often, institutional environments encourage the residents to act out; here, a degree of luxury was provided to offset this tendency. Changes to the handling of delinquent youth have been accommodated in the flexibility of the design.

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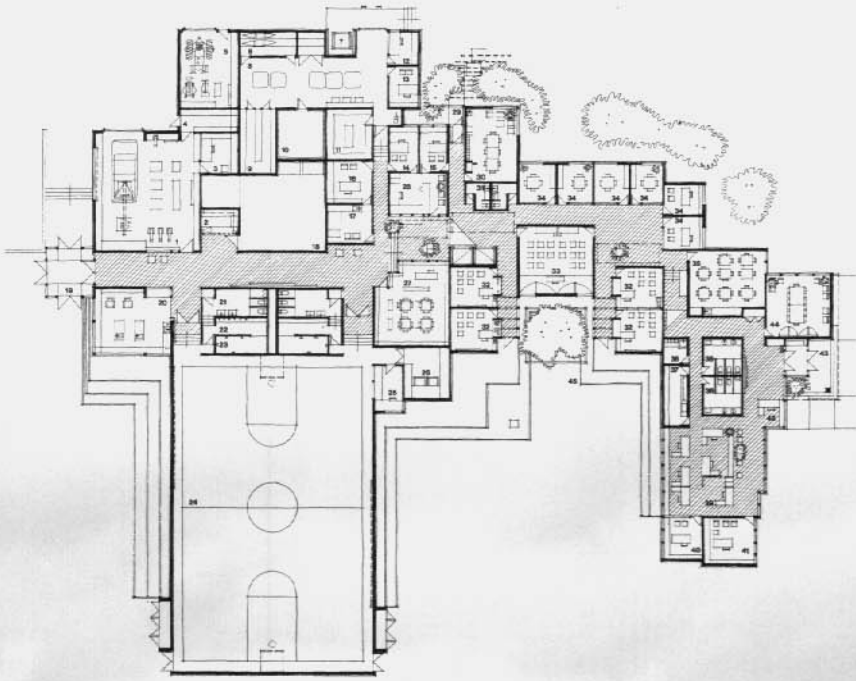


3



- 1 Aerial View of Model
Looking West
- 2 Site Plan
- 3 South Elevation
- 4 View of Residential
Units
- 5 Administration and
Program Support
Floor Plan

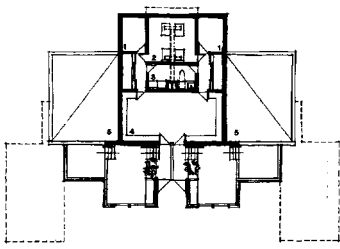
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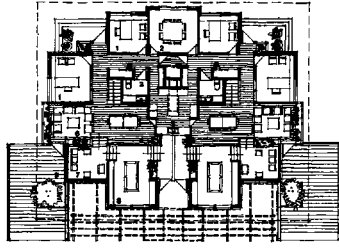
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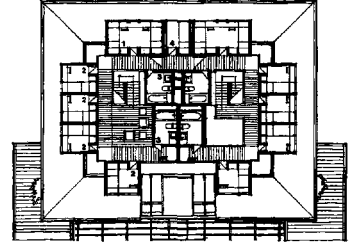
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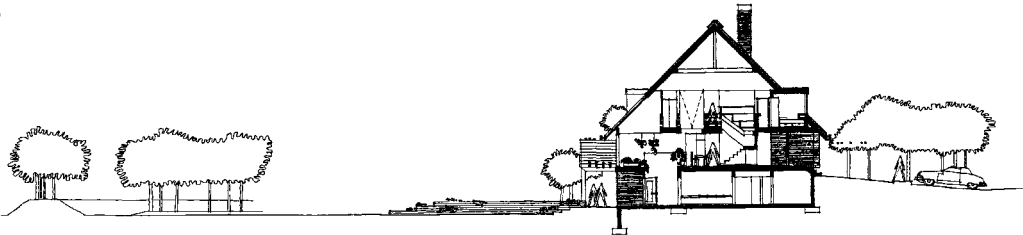
- 1 STORAGE
- 2 MELOPHICAL
- 3 LAUNDRY
- 4 BATH
- 5 CRAWL SPACE



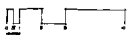
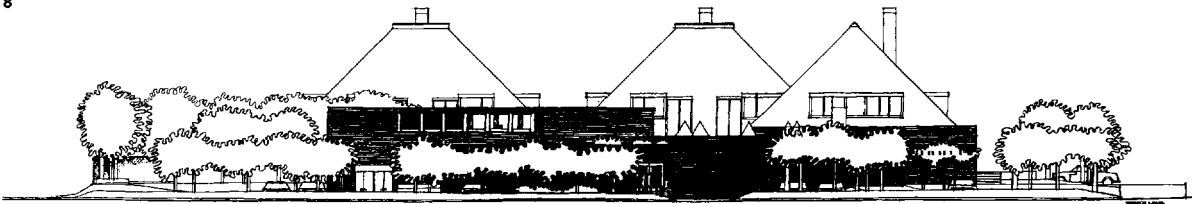
- 1 OFFICE
- 2 OFFICE ROOM
- 3 OFFICE ROOM
- 4 OFFICE
- 5 OFFICE ROOM
- 6 OFFICE ROOM
- 7 OFFICE ROOM
- 8 OFFICE



7



8



6 Residential Unit Floor
Plans
7 Residential Unit
Section
8 East Elevation
9 View of Residential
Units





- 10 View of Administration Building Looking North
- 11 Detail View of Residential Unit
- 12 Interior View of Residential Unit

12

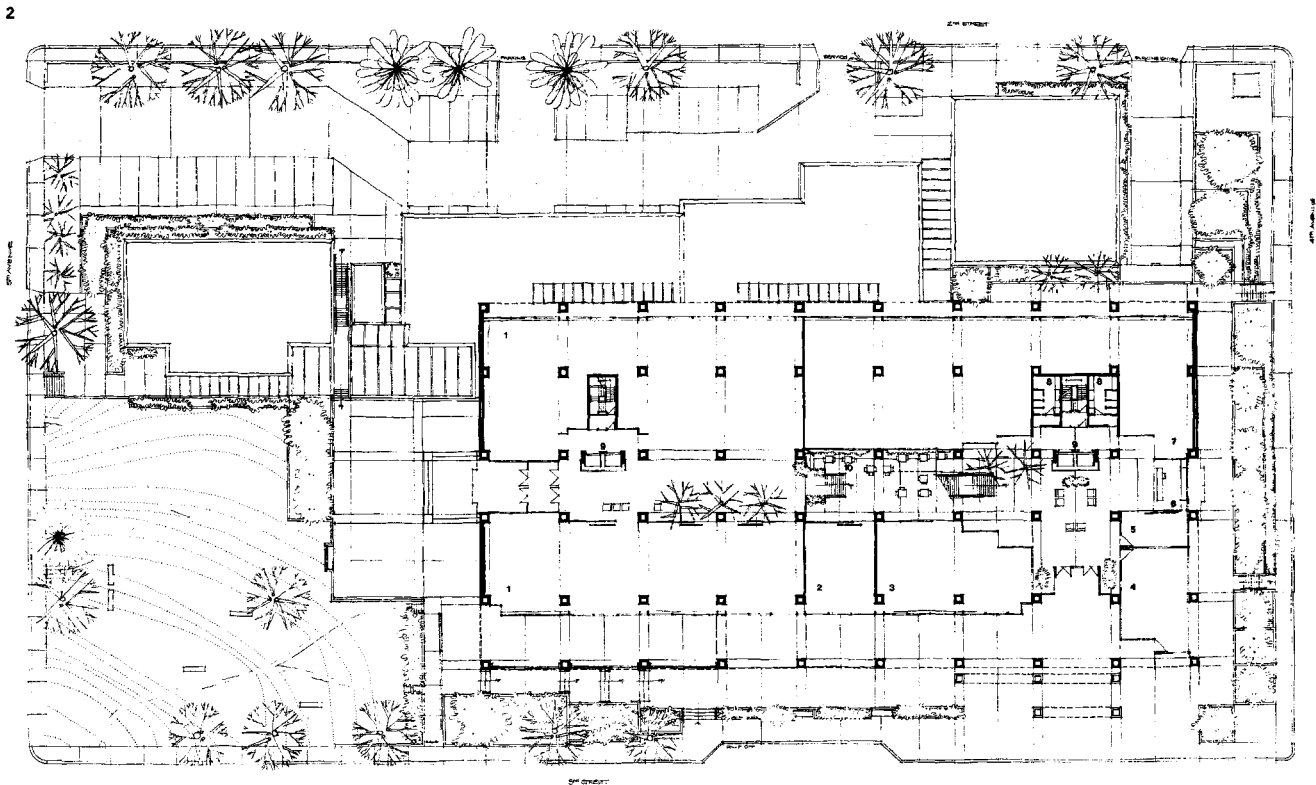
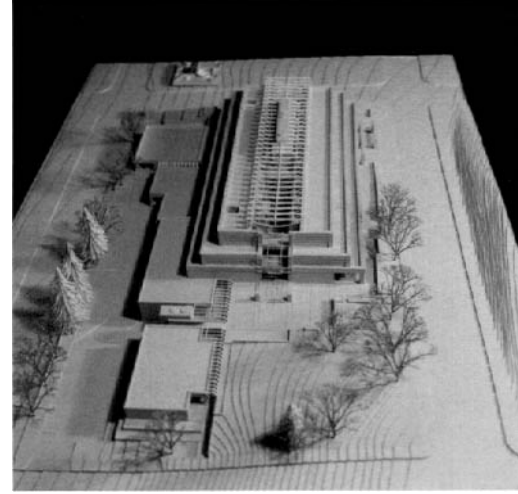


MEDICINE HAT PROVINCIAL BUILDING

Medicine Hat, Alberta · 1981–93

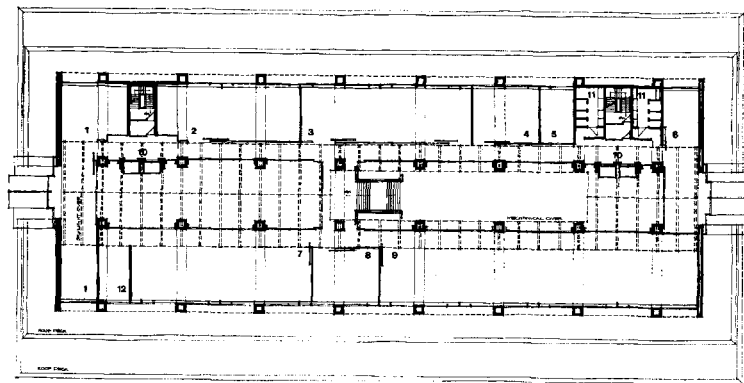
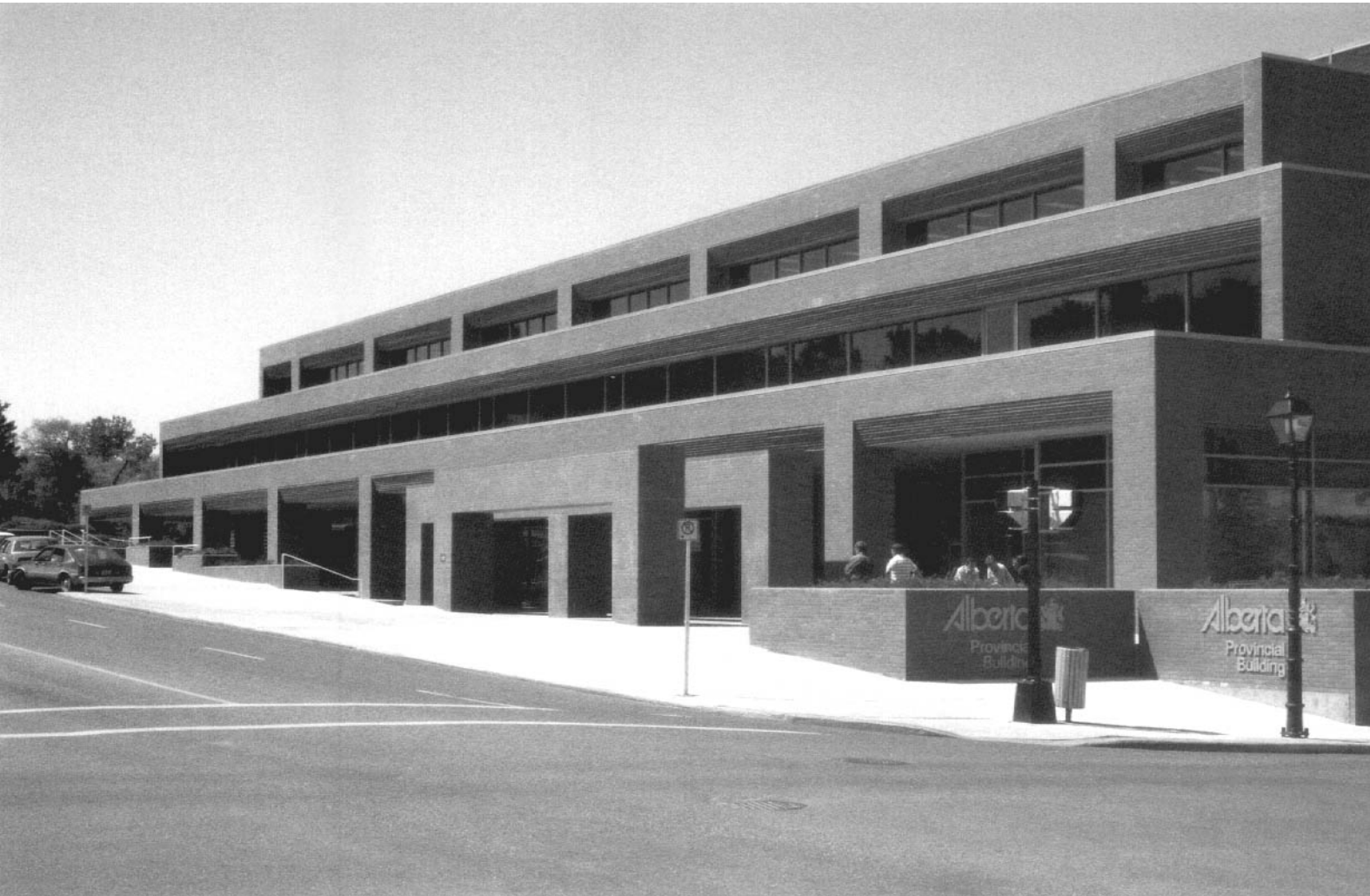
This government building was designed to respect the adjacent residential neighbourhood, respond to the slope, and accommodate the varying needs of individual tenants. A central light court/atrium provides an open and visually accessible space that is functional and directive. It also provides circulation through the core of the building to all spaces, as well as an identifiable focus between floors and for the length of the building. The north side features a 'storefront' type area that is one storey in height and provides a stepped transition from the street to the main building and direct entry to tenants that have high traffic use and privacy requirements. Terracing and retaining walls integrate the building into the sloped site.

The building is clad with locally produced brick with corbelled details over the window heads and massive brick columns that carry throughout the building and extend to the full height in the atrium as mechanical risers to the suspended mechanical room. The sculptural form of the building adds to its presence in views of the downtown from the escarpment to the south and from across the river. At night, the skylight acts like a beacon from a variety of approach routes.



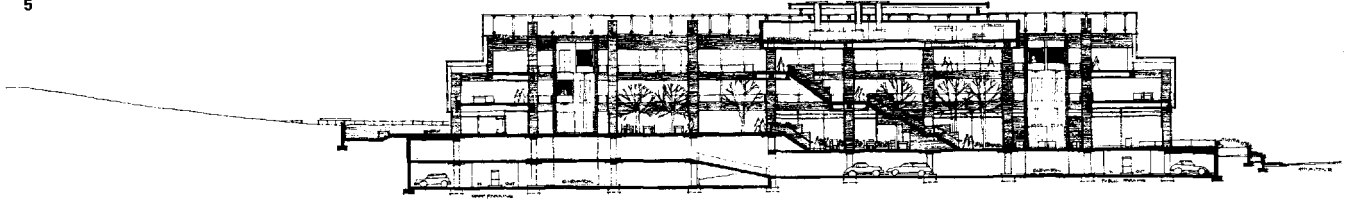
- 1 Aerial View of Model
Looking East
- 2 Site Plan and Main
Floor
- 3 View Looking
Northwest
- 4 Third Floor Plan

3

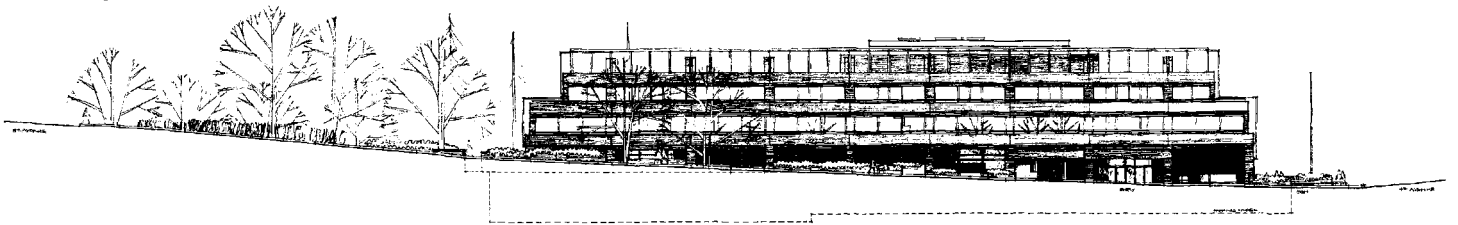


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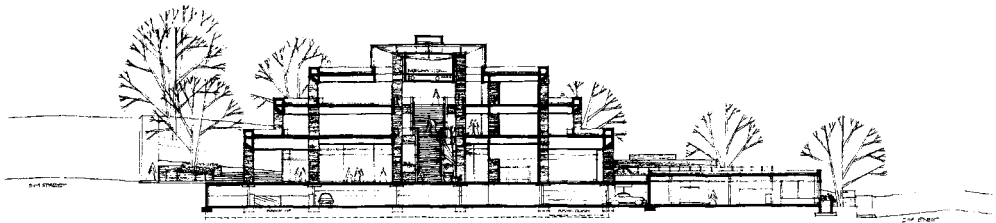
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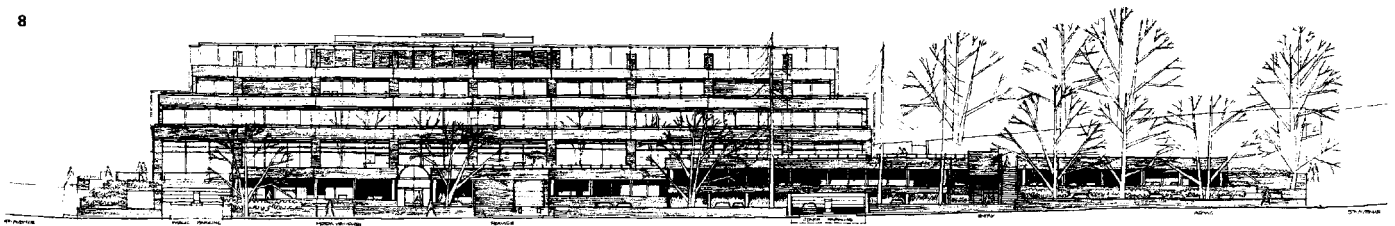
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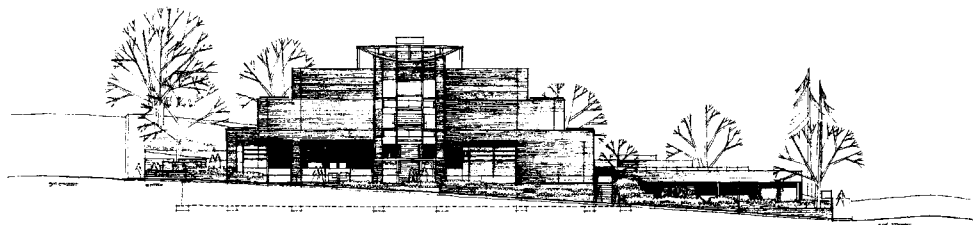
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5 Longitudinal Section
6 South Elevation
7 Cross Section
8 North Elevation
9 Detail View of Brick
Corbelling

9





- 10 View of West Elevation
- 11 East Elevation
- 12 Interior View of Atrium
- 13 Interior View of Atrium

12



13

BIOGRAPHY

Gordon Lee Atkins (born at Calgary, Alberta, 5 March 1937) was raised in Cardston, Alberta and educated at the University of Washington in Seattle, from 1955-60, where he graduated with the Faculty



Medal for Excellence in Design. After brief stints in offices in Winnipeg, Seattle, and Calgary, he started his own firm, in partnership, in 1961 as Alton McCaul Bowers; in 1963 he established a practice as a sole proprietor as Gordon L. Atkins, Architect. He quickly established himself as one of the brightest young architects in Canada with a number of award-winning projects. His early career also involved him directly in teaching, and participating in several professional and community organizations. In 1977 he established Gordon Atkins and Associates Architects Ltd. in partnership with Robert E. Weston; he closed his practice in 1999. A lifelong Mormon, Gordon Atkins has also served as a bishop in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. He is married to Joan (née Lecoq) and has six children.

Gordon Atkins was the first Alberta architect to win a Massey Medal, which he did so for an early commission, the Melchin Summer Homes (1964–66) on Lake Windemere in British Columbia. By the end of the 1960s Atkins' reputation was consolidated with a series of highly developed buildings in Calgary and the surrounding vicinity, including: the Derochie Residence (1964–65), the Drahanchuk Studio (1966–67), the Mayland Heights Elementary School (1967–69), and the Leavitt Residence (1969–70). These projects demonstrated an attentiveness to site influences, showed an inventive use of materials, and were expressive in both plan and form. Mr. Atkins' work has responded particularly well to the foothills landscape in and around Calgary.

Towards the end of the 1970s a second series of projects showed a reinforcement of earlier themes and a new rectangularity in his work. Notable projects from this period include: the Stoney Tribal Administration Building (1976–80), the Falconridge Condominiums (1977–78), and the Shouldice Athletic Change Pavilion (1979–82). Gordon Atkins belongs to a generation of prairie-born architects who established themselves at the forefront of Canadian architecture during the 1960s and 1970s.

Gordon Atkins' work has been widely published and exhibited, and has won numerous awards. Among his awards is a 1967 Massey Medal for the Melchin Summer Houses, and a 1982 Governor General's Award for the Stoney Tribal Administration Building. He received Canadian Architect Awards for the Eighth Avenue Mall design, the Stoney Tribal Administration Building, and the Shouldice Athletic Change Pavilion. In 1970 Gordon Atkins was the first Alberta architect elected to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. The Alberta Association of Architects awarded him a Practice Profile Award in 1981.

Gordon Atkins in
Office, Calgary,
Alberta, c. 1979



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