

# Emilio Ambasz, Steven Holl : architecture

Author

Ambasz, Emilio

Date

1989

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

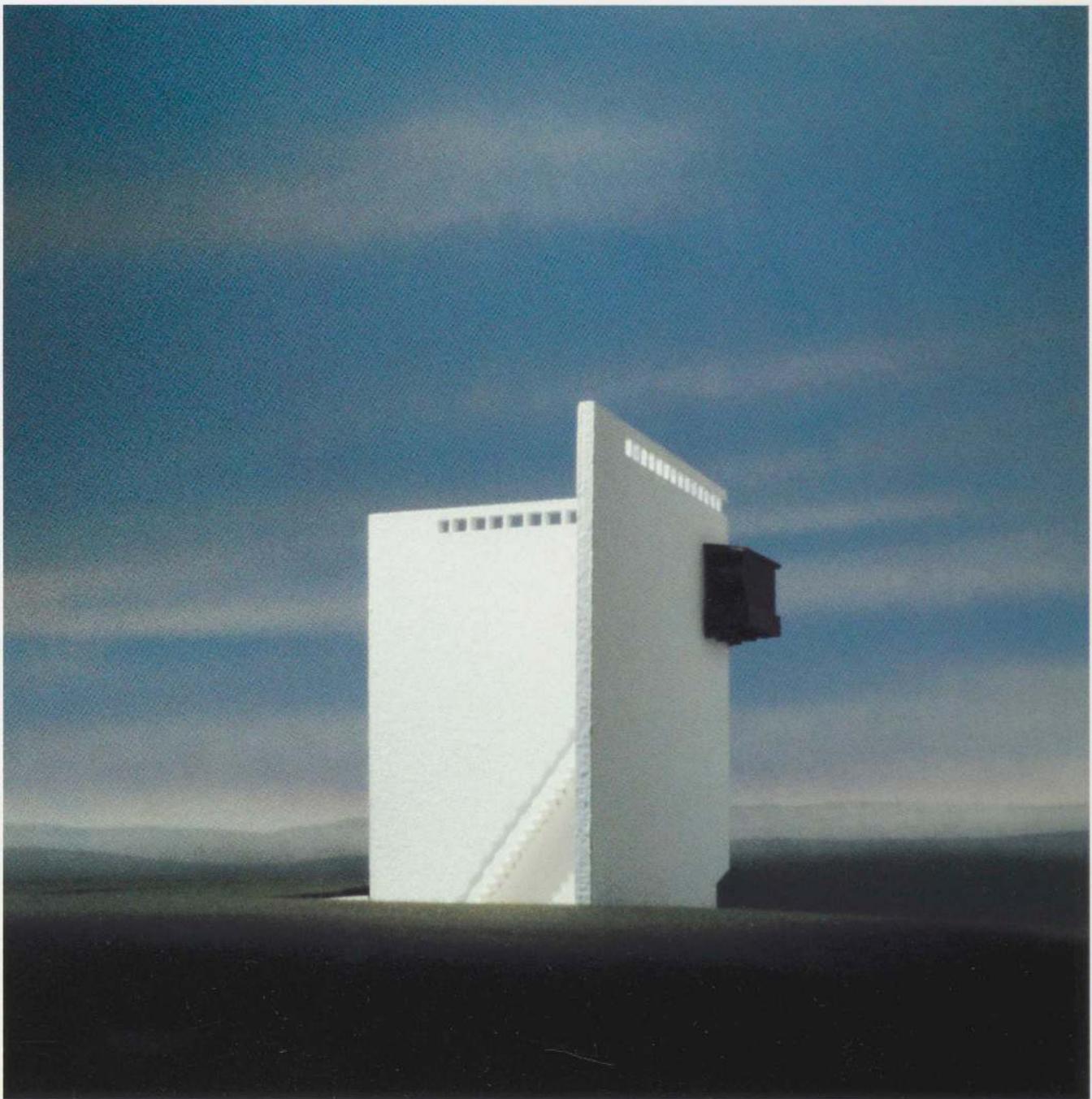
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primary documents, installation views, and an  
index of participating artists.

Emilio Ambasz      Steven Holl

A R C H I T E C T U R E



EMILIO AMBASZ. HOUSE. CORDOBA, SPAIN, 1979. MODEL

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

THE EXHIBITION AND BROCHURE ARE PART OF THE  
GERALD D. HINES INTERESTS ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM  
AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Emilio Ambasz      Steven Holl

A R C H I T E C T U R E

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

# Emilio Ambasz      Steven Holl

## A R C H I T E C T U R E

The fourth exhibition in The Museum of Modern Art's Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program is devoted to the work of Emilio Ambasz and Steven Holl, both of whom practice in the United States. This exhibition focuses on their architecture, ranging from urban design to interiors. Leading members of a new generation coming to maturity, each has produced a distinguished body of work, yet both have as yet built relatively little. While the work of each is quite distinct from that of the other, from a broader perspective they have traits in common.

The two architects represent a generation formed in the aftermath of the collapse of modernist ideology. Unlike the architects who have sought inspiration mainly in the formal language of modernism, or those who sought to recapture meaning and symbol by a return to historic modes of architectural representation, Ambasz and Holl have sought to revitalize the mythopoetic side of modernism. Recognizing that the best modern work grew out of a poetic and allegorical way of thinking, rather than a purely empirical and functional one, and addressed meaning and symbolism in a profound and lyrical manner, they have pursued this path in their own work. Holl speaks of architecture and site as having "an experimental connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link." Ambasz speaks of architecture as a "mythmaking act," and adds: "My work is a search for primal things—being born, being in love, and dying. It has to do with existence on an emotional, passionate, and essential level."

Both architects have been drawn to that modernist tradition that sought inspiration in the anonymous and primitive vernacular, in an effort to get back to a pure and mythical ground-zero of architecture. As a result a certain simplicity, austerity, and abstraction characterize the work of each. But their sources of inspiration have been different. Ambasz has looked to the archaic and primitive, essentially a preurban architecture, while Steven Holl has drawn from the anonymous vernacular of the city and the small town, to whose building types he has devoted considerable research. However, while deeply conscious of history, each architect has retained the modernist interest in invention, seeking innovative conceptual and formal solutions and new forms of architectural and communal order in their work. Both share a strong sense of the need for an architecture rooted to place—Ambasz through a virtual integration of building and earth, Holl by connecting his work with the existing cultural and physical markings of the site, whether the abandoned elevated rails in New York or the old stone walls in the suburbs.

Both also represent a generation formed by the cultural and social concerns of the latter half of the 1960s, and the ensuing disillusionment with the possibility of social change that occurred in the 1970s. But unlike many in the architectural profession in the last thirteen years (the approximate span of their architectural production), both architects have retained a sense of social idealism. How-

ever, gone are the sweeping prototypical proposals of the modern movement that sought all-encompassing social and architectural solutions. Instead both architects focused in their early work on ideal communal projects; often small and removed from the social mainstream, these include Ambasz's Cooperative of Mexican-American Grapegrowers and Holl's Autonomous Artisan Houses or his Gymnasium Bridge in the Bronx. And although unbuilt, posited as ideal communities, these projects will live on as "architectural fables," in Ambasz's words, long after constructed buildings have crumbled.

But both architects' work also reflects the schizophrenic nature of late 1960s attitudes toward engagement and withdrawal. It is probably not a coincidence that each has designed "mythic retreats," placed below the earth's surface: Ambasz's partly sunk in the midst of open wheat fields outside Cordoba, Spain; Holl's floating underwater off the coast of St. Tropez (a retreat from the noise and activity of a couple's vacation house). And while the mood evoked by each project is different, Ambasz's idyllic and arcadian, Holl's gloomy and "Hadian," they both represent an eloquent social statement. In a similar vein, the interior has become a vehicle of architectural expression for both architects. And while the studied minimalism of Ambasz's interiors contrasts with the complexity of Holl's, they share common ground in the surreal.

However, more recently they have been among the few architects who have continued exploring innovative solutions in urban design, addressing in their work issues posed by urban growth at the periphery and exurban settlement.

Emilio Ambasz has proposed, through the example of his architectural projects, a new relationship between nature and architecture and in the process eliminated the clear-cut distinction between the two. They have become integral and inseparable. While architecture integrated with the earth is not totally new within the context of the modern movement (one thinks of, among others, energy-conscious architecture), Ambasz has given it a new formal and aesthetic distinction. He has drawn not only on his own inventive mind, on archaic and primitive architectural sources, but also on the model of the English garden.

While the masters of the modern movement also sought a new and more immediate relationship to nature in their work, they remained preoccupied by buildings that in all cases remained distinct from the landscape—even Frank Lloyd Wright, whose architecture mimicked nature's striated and layered forms. Le Corbusier's great landscape designs of earth works at Chandigarh, while conceived as integral with the total composition of the buildings, remained distinct from them. In contrast, projects such as the house at Cordoba, Spain; the house at Bierges, Belgium; the Schlumberger Research Laborato-

ries in Austin, Texas; or the Botanical Gardens in San Antonio, simply cannot be separated from the landscape: they *are* the landscape. The Schlumberger Research Center, a sculpted landscape with most of the building volume underground, has the rambling yet carefully composed informal layout of an English garden with architectural pavilions (the tips of the programmatic iceberg), like follies, emerging here and there to lend an accent. At the botanical gardens, consisting of sunken courtyards—some open, others covered with great pyramidal skylights set in rolling lawns—the composition becomes more axial and hierarchic, in the manner of an ancient temple.

Ironically, it is a marriage of the archaic and modern technology that has made Ambasz's return to an architecture set in the earth both possible and attractive. The damp, cold, and dark environment of our ancestral cave-dwellers has, with the aid of new waterproofing and mechanical systems, skylights and large expanses of glass, been transformed into a well-tempered environment, both sheltered and open, with rolling vistas of a new arcadian landscape. As the problem of the unprecedented destruction and defacement of nature and the landscape by suburban and exurban sprawl becomes increasingly acute, Ambasz's nonurban projects provide an architectural model for a pastoral ideal, a new harmony between man and nature.

In his urban projects landscape also remains central to Ambasz's architectural work. In a series of projects he has brought the garden to the city, not like the early modernists by destroying it, but rather by taking (in his proposals for Houston and Salamanca) the traditional urban square as a point of departure and providing an architecturally elegant and dignified sense of place and occasion. In the recent Nichii Department Store project for Obihiro, Japan, he has created a multileveled interior garden as an integral element of the architecture. In a variation at the Sanda Cultural and Athletic Center, also in Japan, the architecture becomes the wall around the garden.

On a larger urban scale Ambasz proposed, in his prize-winning master plan for the 1992 Universal Exposition in Seville, Spain, that most of the pavilions be placed on floating barges in three large lagoons surrounded by parks adjacent to the historic city. After the end of the exposition, the pavilions would be remodeled for the use of the university. In this innovative solution, which combines Ambasz's fascination with floating mobile modular units (also used in the early Mexican Computer Center) and his commitment to landscape, Seville gains both a university campus and a park system that complements rather than challenges its historic urban character.

While Ambasz's work on the whole addresses the primal psychological urges in us that have been basic to man since time immemorial, Holl's architecture tends to address the more elusive, complex, and brittle psychological states of modern urban man. His work is a remarkable combination of the simple and straightforward with the complex and enigmatic.

Anonymous vernacular building types have been Holl's point of departure. By abstracting and generalizing, he has sought their underlying principles of form, construction, and psychology in order to reach a neutral architectural base that he can then particularize and elaborate. His sense of materials, detail, and form, as well as his subtle and restrained sense of proportion and his frequent addition of an unexpected element, transform the basic type into something extraordinary. The tension be-

tween ordinary and extraordinary, the general and the particular, give his buildings their power.

In contrast to the general restraint of Holl's exterior architecture, the interiors he has designed for New York apartments and boutiques exhibit a sensuousness of materials and a studied complexity. The work is characterized by the use of rough and polished stucco surfaces, by exquisite detailing in metal and glass, and by fractured and transformable planar elements that exhibit the intricacy of a Chinese puzzle. While this aspect of Holl's work suggests a connection to the brilliant detailing and use of materials of the late Italian architect Carlo Scarpa, the psychological dimension and the enigmatic and subtly surreal quality of Holl's interiors, and their contrast with the restraint of the exterior, actually suggest a deeper affinity to Adolf Loos. Holl's ability to evoke psychological states is expressed over a wide range. They include the cacophonous but ethereal interiors of the Metropolitan Tower apartment, which seek to capture the shrillness of that wedge-shaped building in its urban context as well as the sense of immateriality of living high above the sky; and the sparse and enigmatic interiors for the three distinct apartments at Seaside: facing the sea and the sunrise, they are designed for "melancholy types," whom Holl imagined as a mathematician, a musician, and a poet.

Holl's theoretical and experimental urban design projects represent an important contribution to finding an alternative to both discredited modernist town-planning principles and the currently popular historicist models. Seeking to define a new urban landscape based on the notion of psychological urban space that would allow "the modern soul to emerge," Holl, in the Porta Vittoria project for Milan, set on its head the usual urban design approach, which focuses on an overall plan first, followed by a detailed three-dimensional design. He also freed himself from using any existing urban building types (contrary to his own previous approach as well as standard method) as a point of departure in favor of inventing new urban elements and buildings of an undetermined and open-ended use.

Like a modern Camillo Sitte, Holl proposed carefully composed urban spaces and ensembles in perspective (the way they would be perceived by the city-dweller) before projecting his three-dimensional creation into a two-dimensional plan fragment. At the end the various designed fragments were brought together in an overall master plan. While experimental, Holl's method provides a fertile approach for generating vital new urban models and images to move us beyond the current moribund state of urban design.

In his recent *Edge of a City* study, Holl has proposed multi-use projects for three American cities—Cleveland, Phoenix, and Rochester—that addresses the issue of urban sprawl by seeking to establish for each well-defined edges between city and nature. Recognizing that the problem of urban and suburban sprawl and the lack of a sense of place that it entails is not solvable by traditional zoning, Holl has proposed architectural solutions. Concerned about anchoring his projects to existing physical landscape features, he has used the Erie Barge Canal in Rochester, or in Phoenix (a city that is all sprawl), the more obscure traces of the mysterious canals built long ago by the Hohokum Indians.

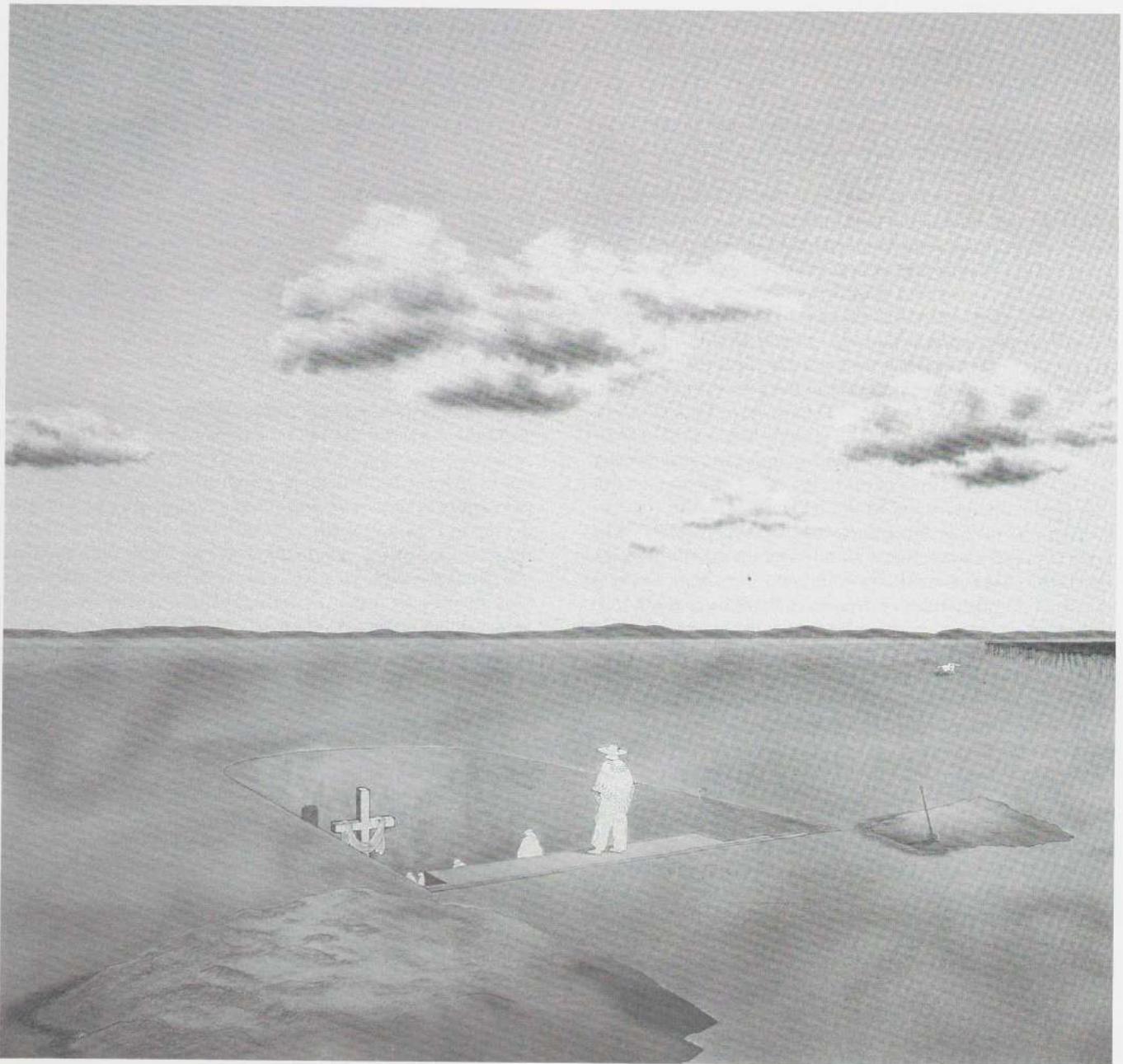
STUART WREDE  
Director  
Department of Architecture and Design

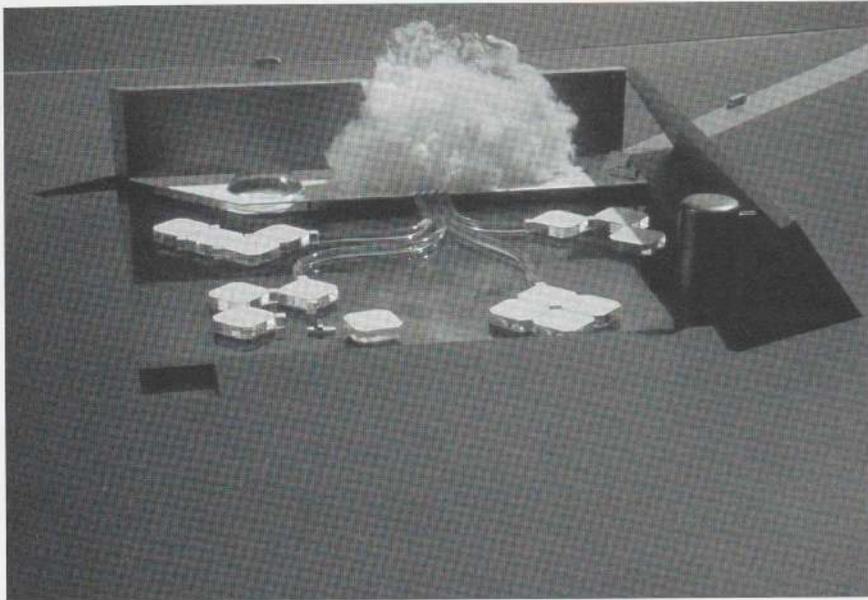
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# Emilio Ambasz

## P R O J E C T S

Born in 1943 in Resistencia, Argentina, Emilio Ambasz attended Princeton University, where between 1964 and 1966 he completed the undergraduate program and received a Master of Architecture degree. From 1970 to 1976 he served as curator of design at The Museum of Modern Art, where he directed a number of influential exhibitions. Also a well-known industrial and graphic designer, he has had his own practice in New York and Bologna, Italy, since 1976.





Center for Applied Computer Research

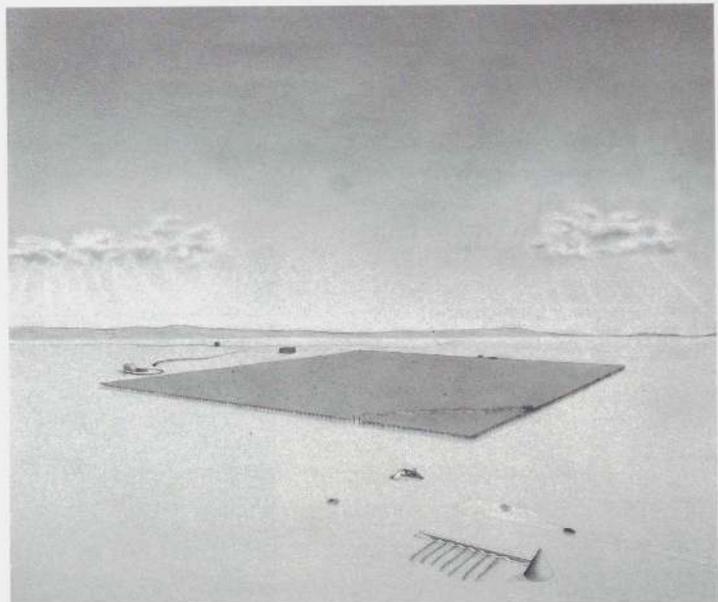
Mexico City, Mexico  
1975

*Model*

Cooperative of Mexican-American Grapegrowers

Borrego Springs, California  
1976

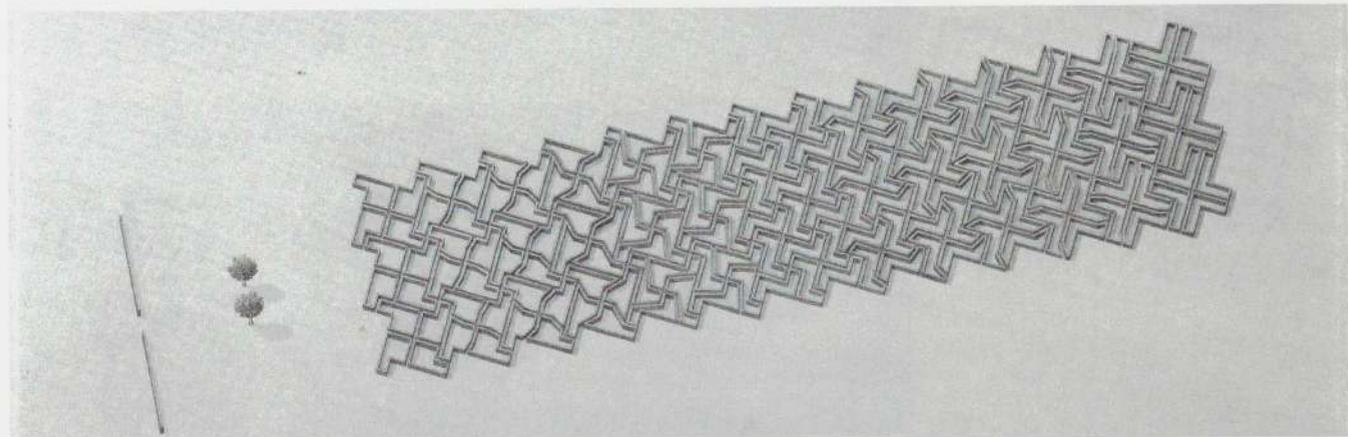
*Aerial perspective*



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Cooperative of Mexican-American Grapegrowers

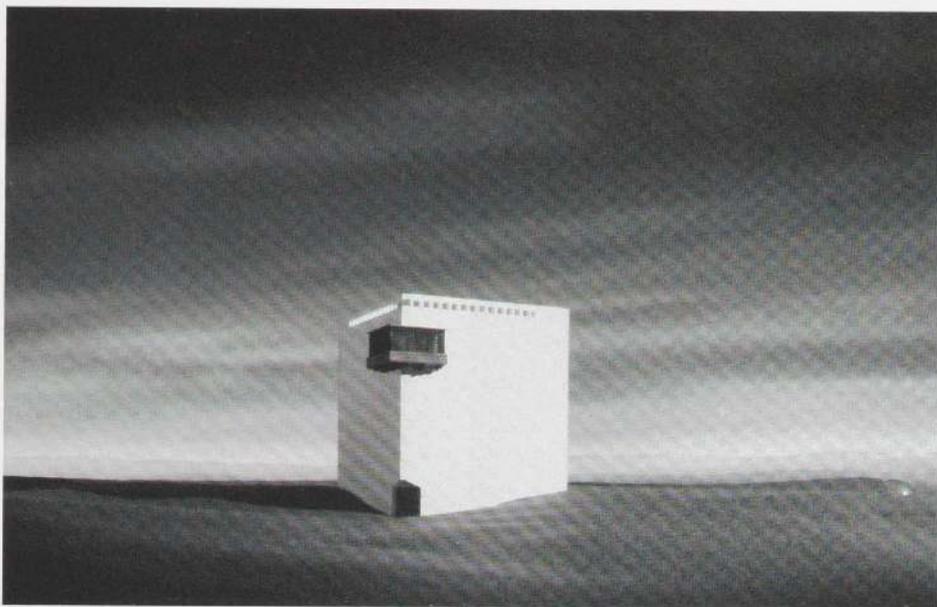
*Perspective of chapel*



Pro Memoria Garden

Ludenhausen, West Germany  
1978

*Axonometric*



House  
Cordoba, Spain  
1979

*Model*

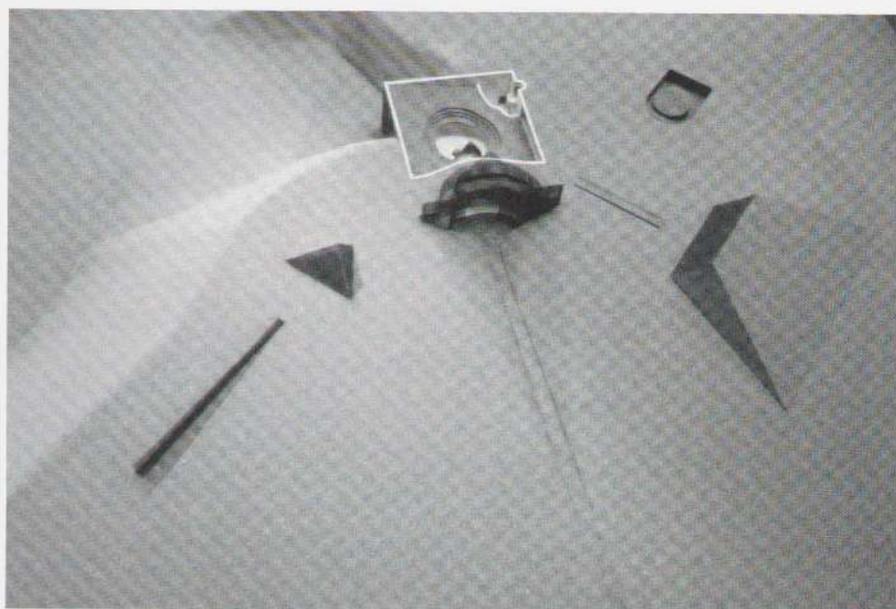
>  
House, Cordoba  
*Model*

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House for Baron and  
Madame Philippe Lambert

Bierges, Belgium  
1979

*Model*

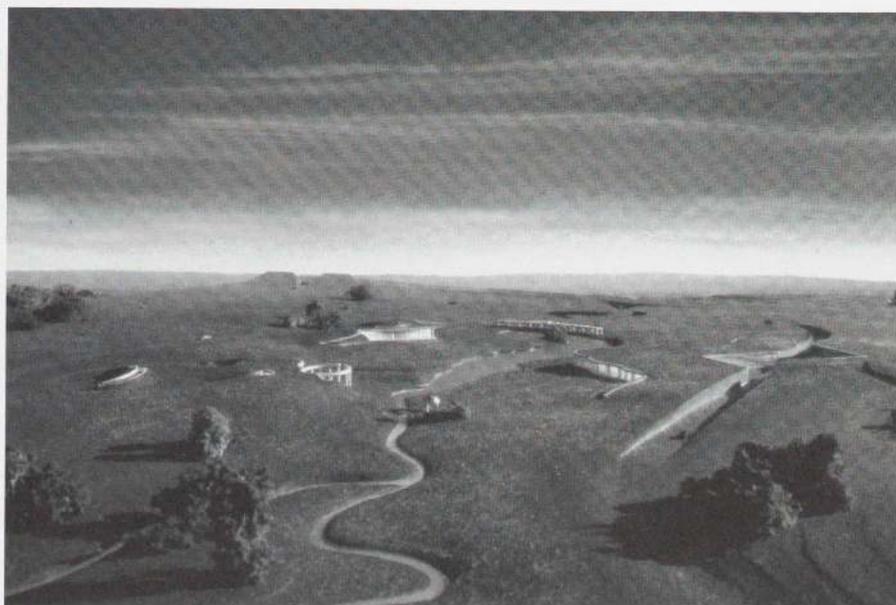


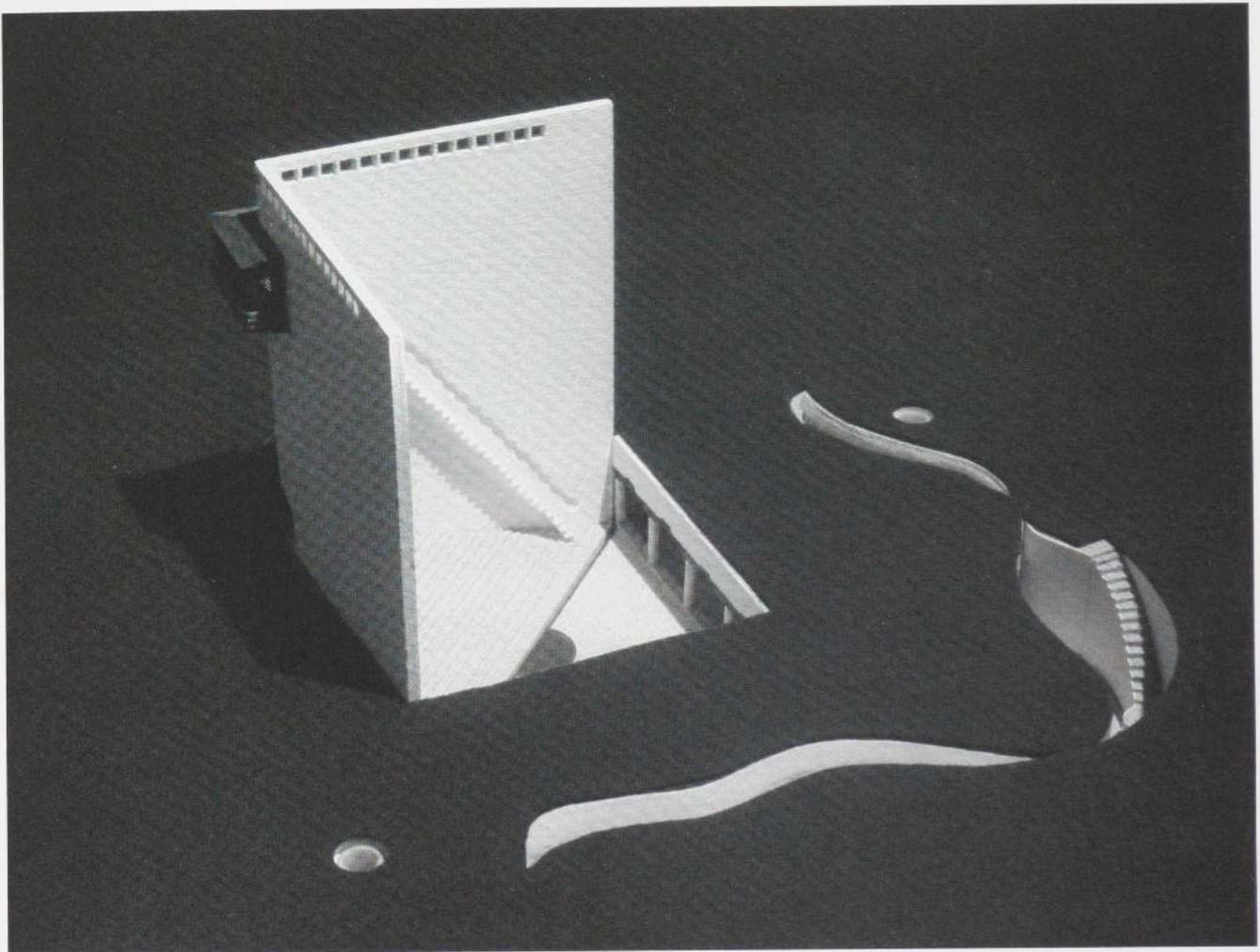
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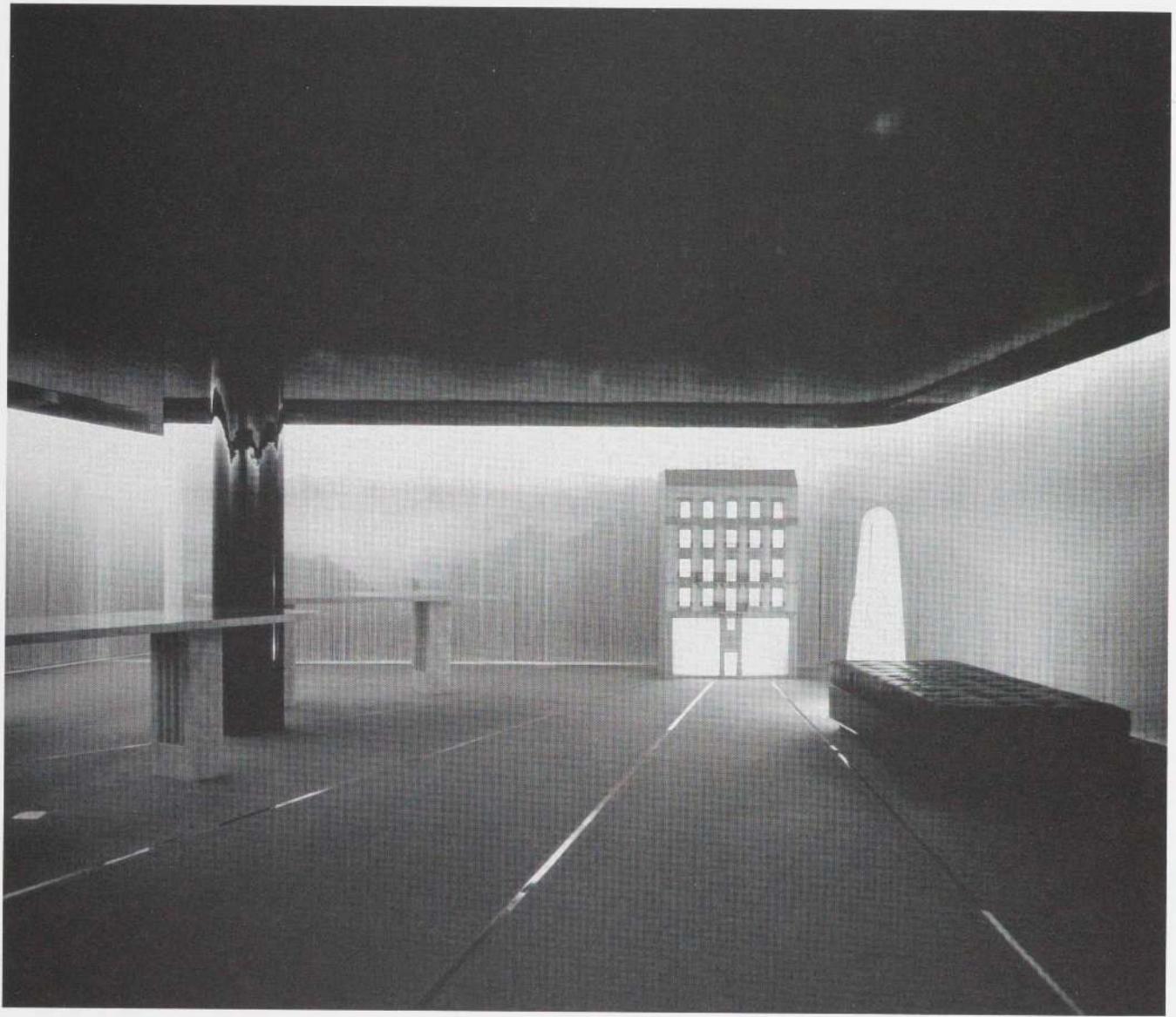
Schlumberger Research Laboratories

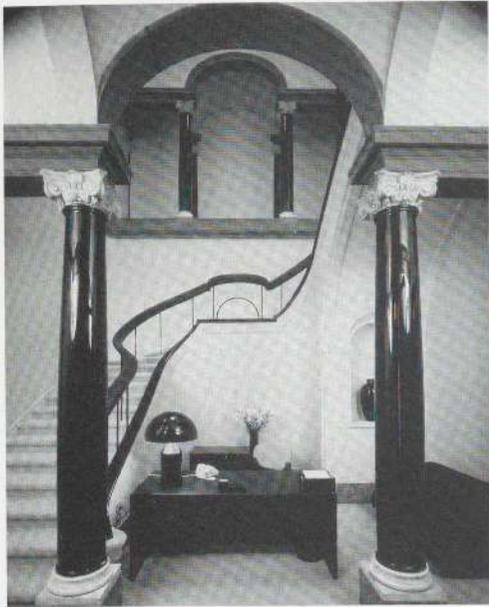
Austin, Texas  
1982

*Model*









Banque Bruxelles Lambert

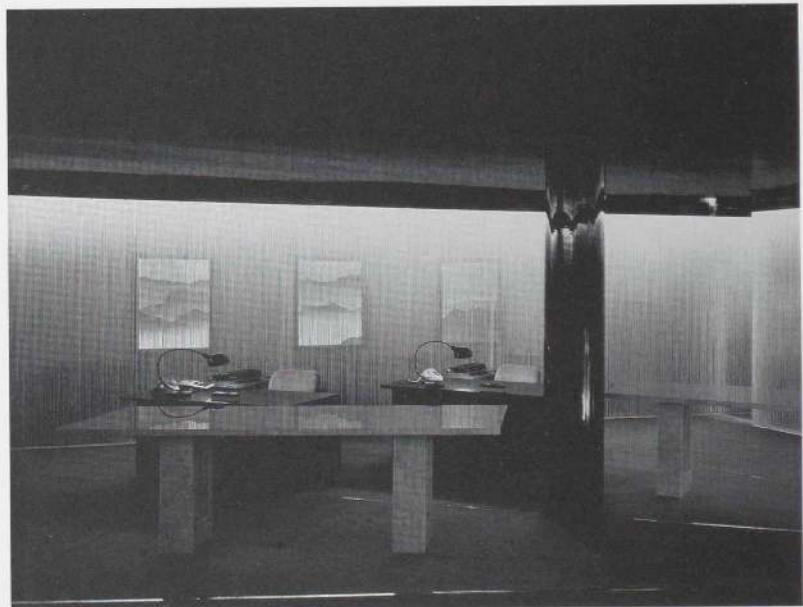
Milan, Italy  
1979

*Interior view*

Banque Bruxelles Lambert

Lausanne, Switzerland  
1981

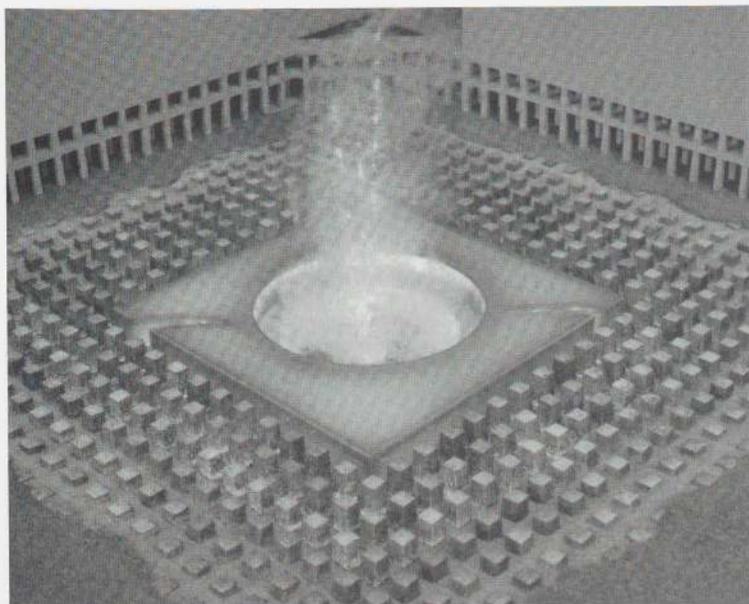
*Interior view*



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Banque Bruxelles Lambert, Lausanne

*Interior view*



Houston Center Plaza

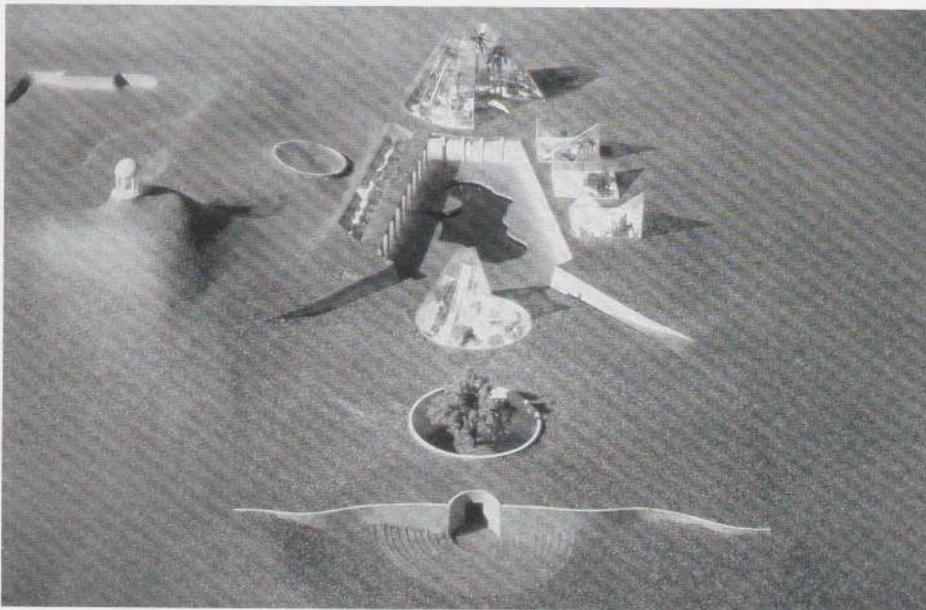
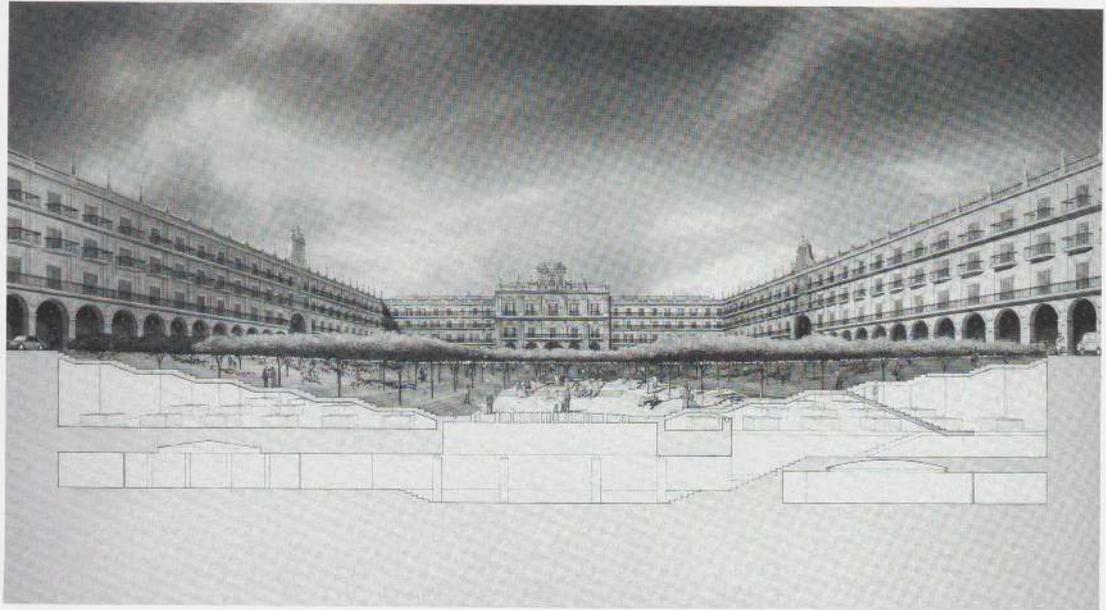
Houston, Texas  
1982

*Model*

Plaza Mayor

Salamanca, Spain  
1982

*Section perspective*



Lucille Halsell Conservatory

San Antonio, Texas  
1984

*Model*

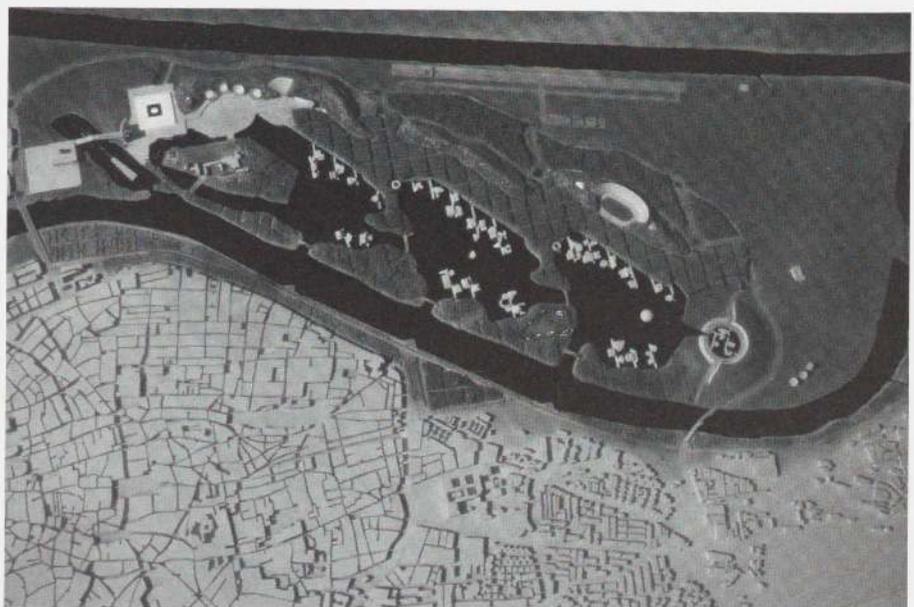
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Lucille Halsell Conservatory

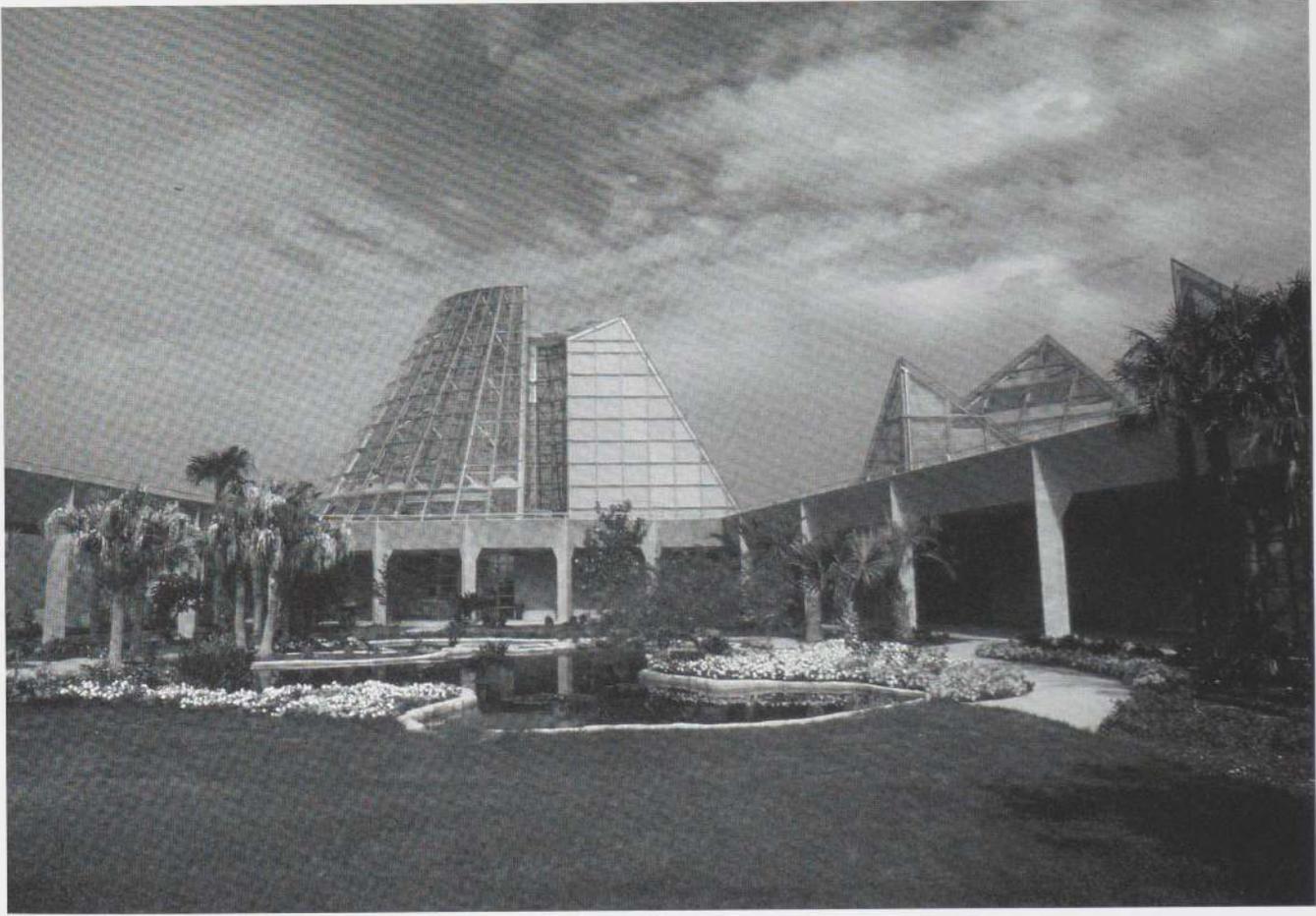
*View from central courtyard*

1992 Universal Exposition  
Competition entry, first prize

Seville, Spain  
1986

*Model*

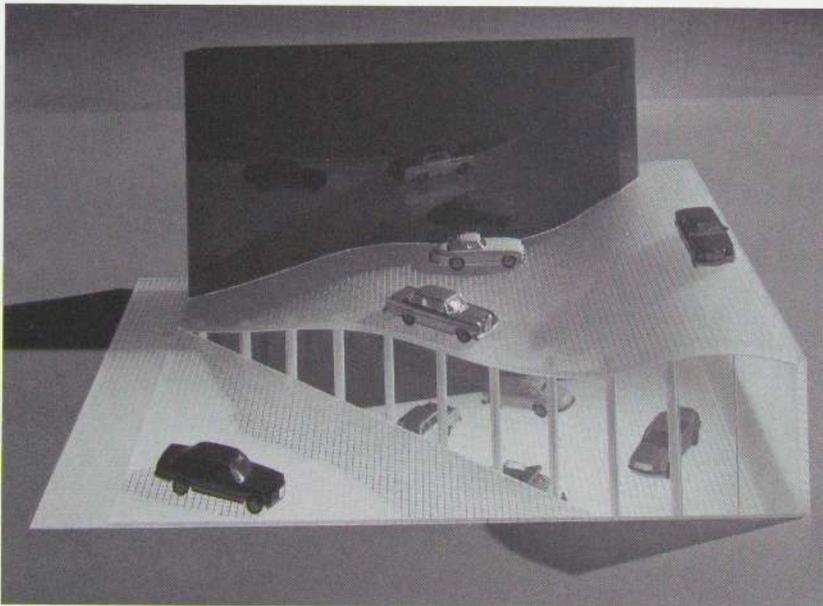
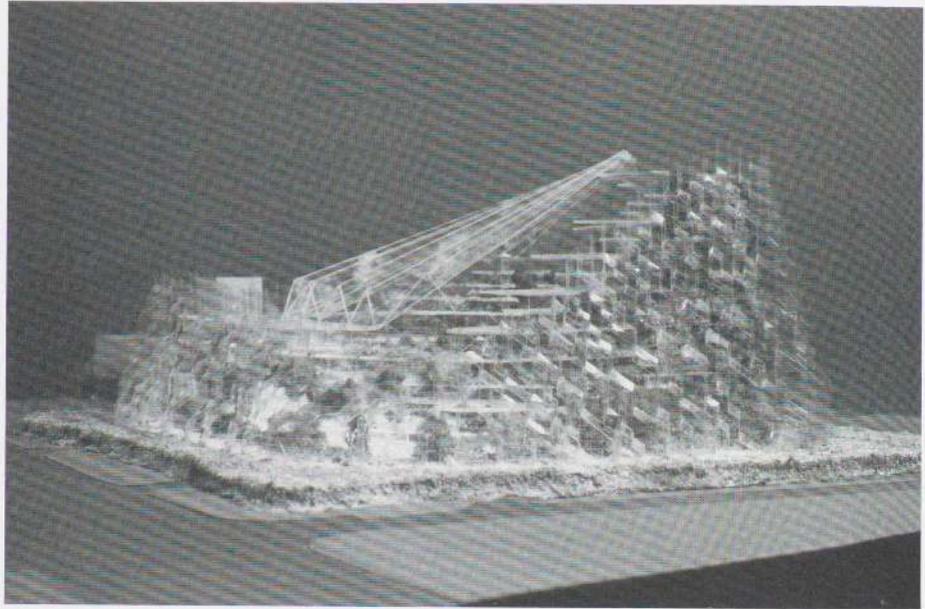




Nichii Obihiro Department Store

Obihiro, Japan  
1987

*Model*



Mercedes-Benz Showroom

Englewood, New Jersey  
1986

*Model*

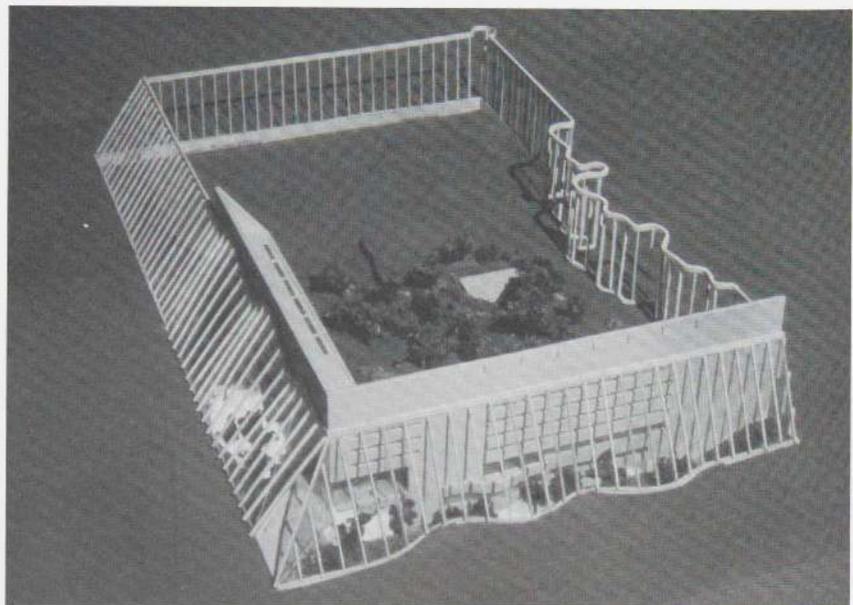
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Mercedes-Benz Showroom

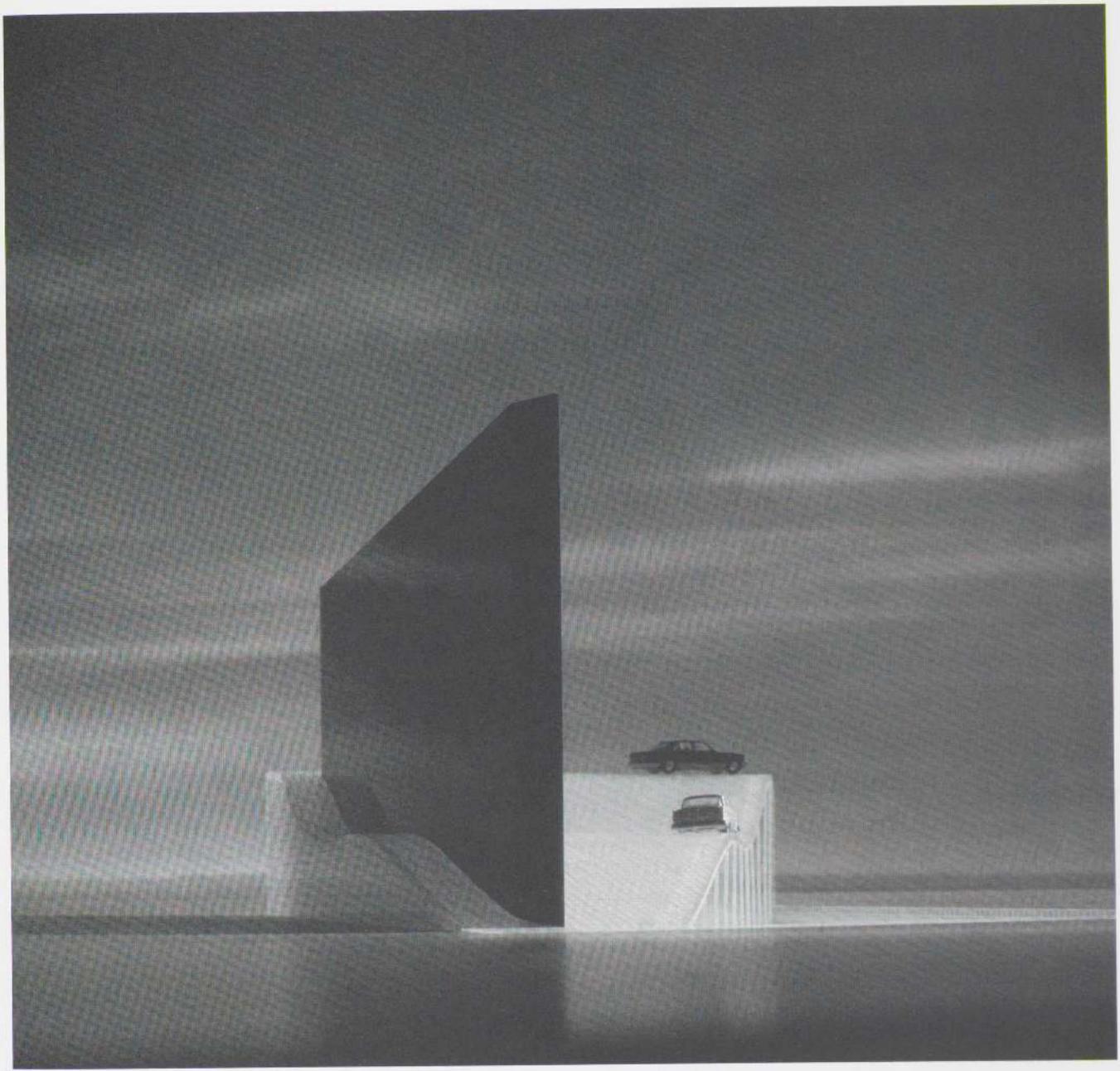
*Model*

Sanda Cultural Center  
and Athletic Facility

Sanda, Japan  
1988

*Model*



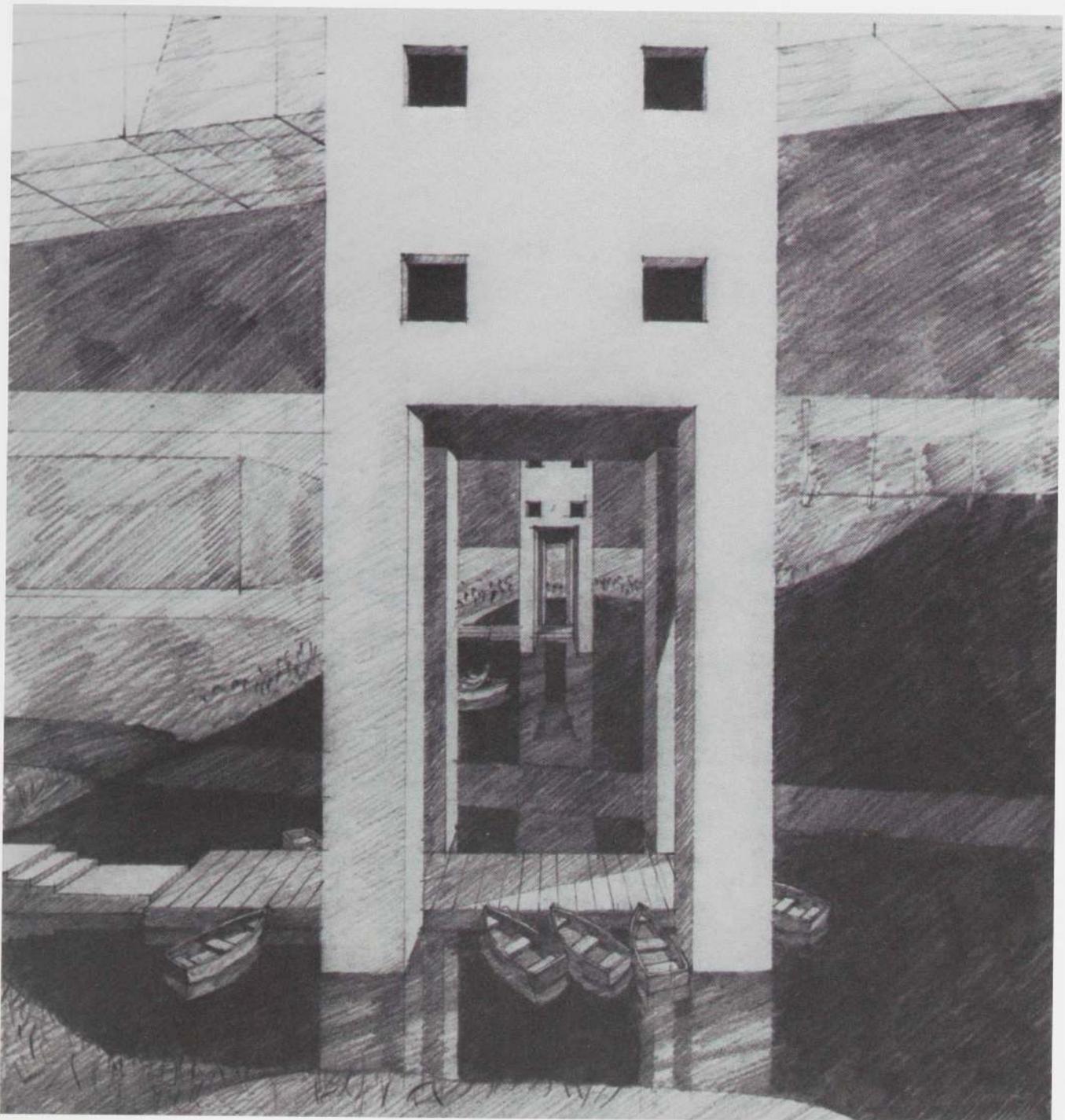


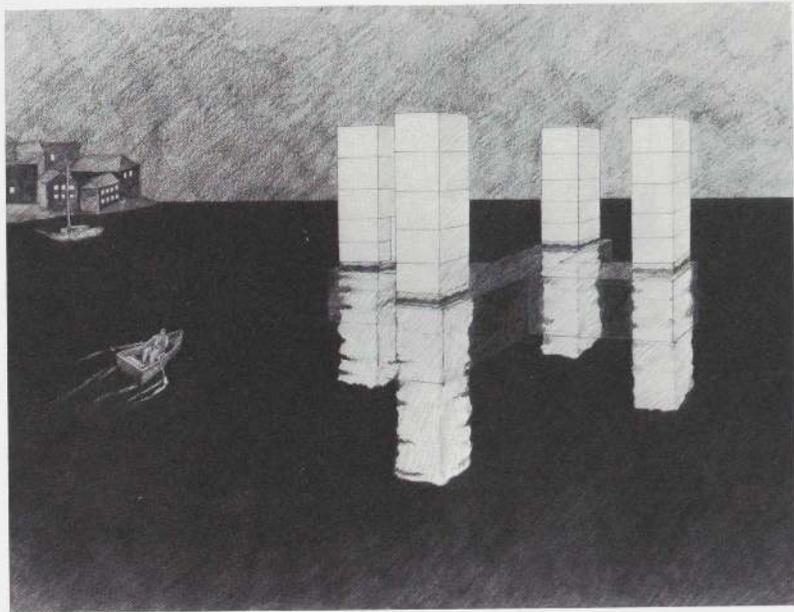
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# Steven Holl

## P R O J E C T S

Born in 1947 in Bremerton, Washington, Steven Holl studied architecture at the University of Washington in Seattle and in Rome. In 1976 he spent a year in London doing graduate study at the Architectural Association. Since 1978 he has practiced in New York. He is Associate Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, where he is Director of the First Year.





Underwater House

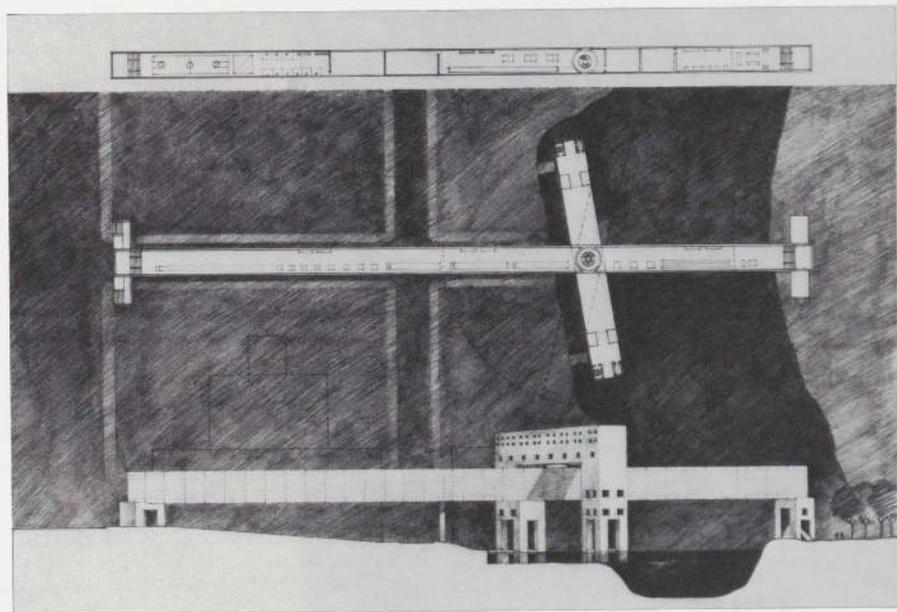
St. Tropez, France  
1976

*Perspective*

Gymnasium-Bridge

South Bronx, New York  
1977

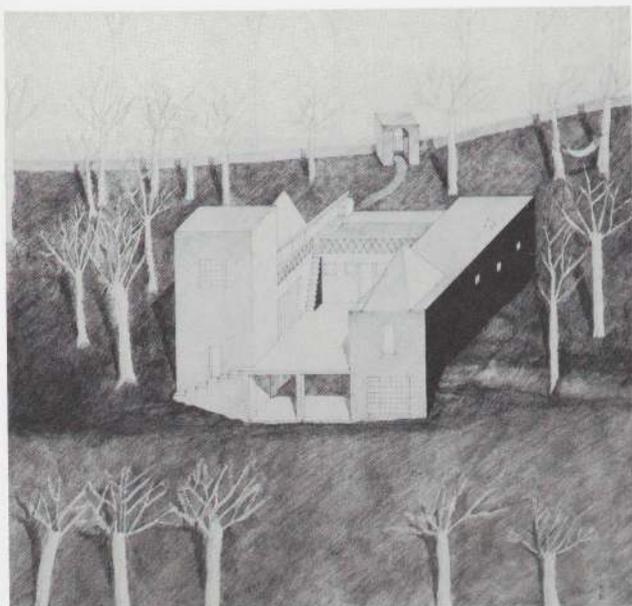
*Plans and perspective*



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Gymnasium-Bridge

*Perspective*



House

Staten Island, New York  
1980

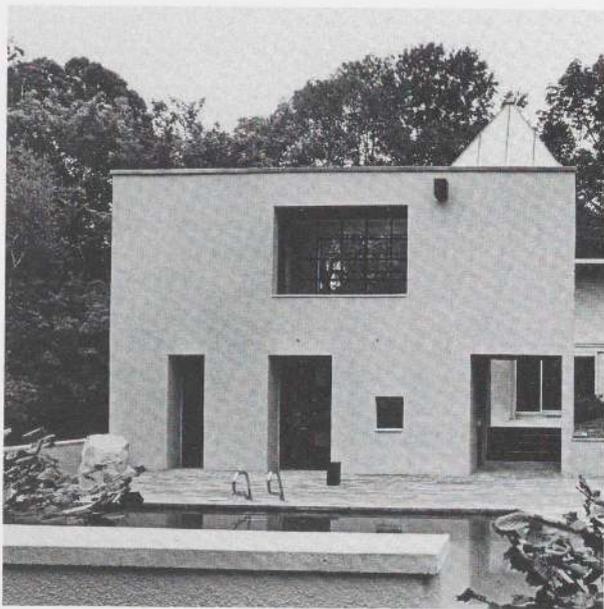
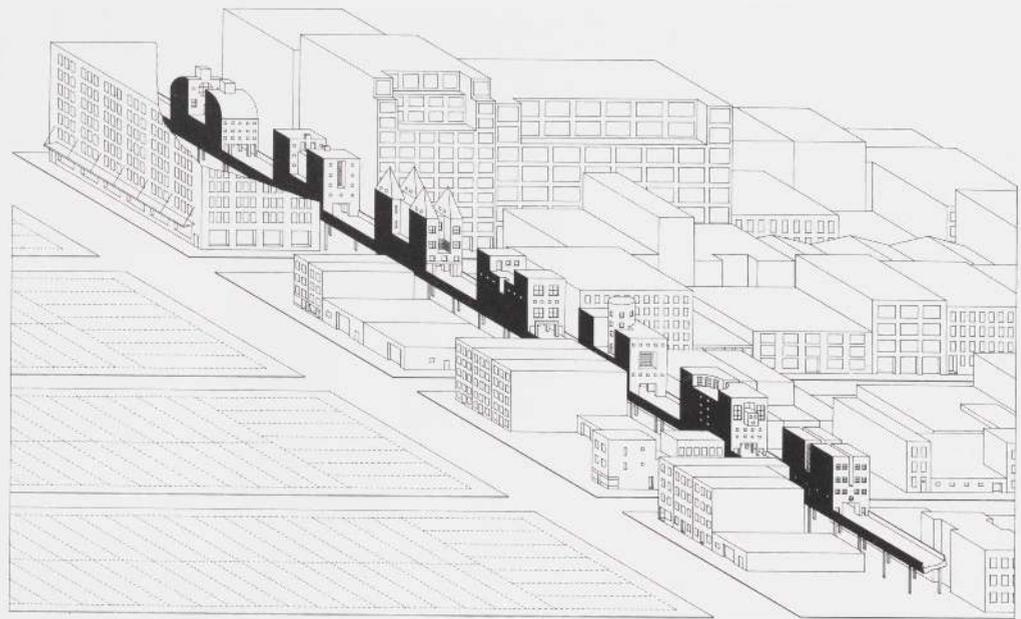
*Perspective*

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Bridge of Houses

New York, New York  
1981

*Site axonometric*



Pool House and Sculpture Studio

Scarsdale, New York  
1981

*Exterior view*

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Pool House and Sculpture Studio

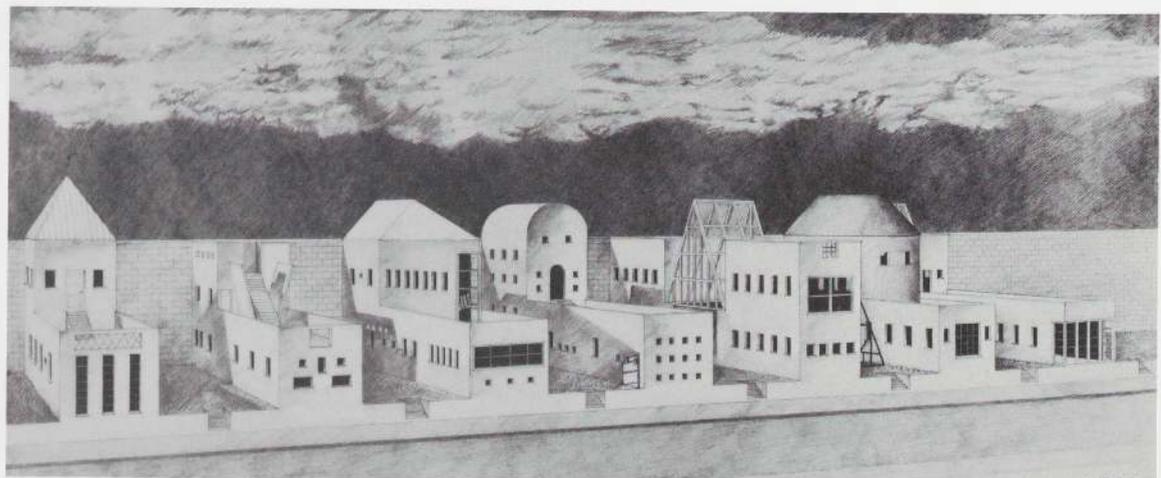
*Axonometric: walls within walls*

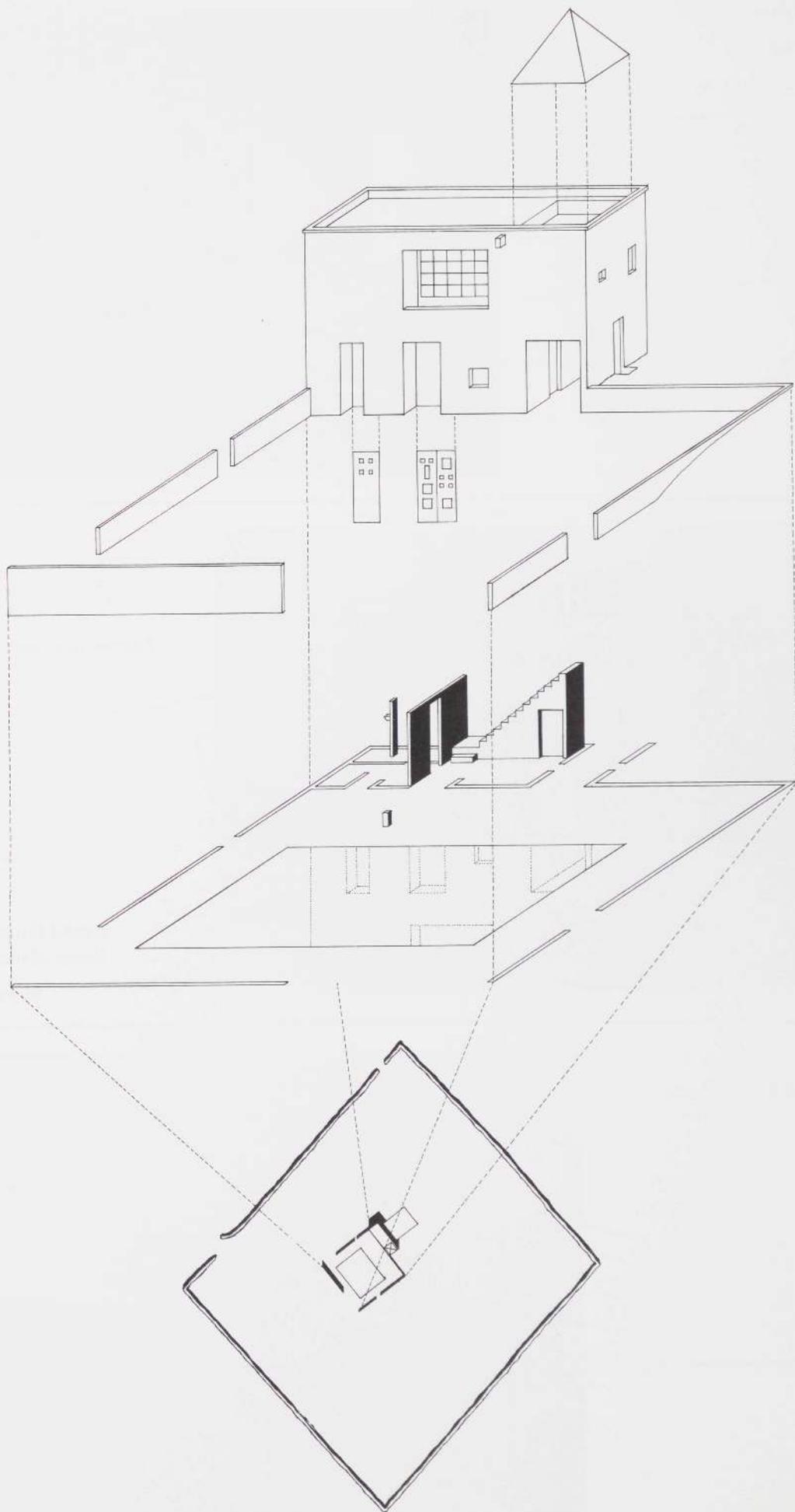
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Autonomous Artisans' Houses

Staten Island, New York  
1981-84

*Perspective*





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Fifth Avenue Apartment

New York, New York  
1985

*Interior view*



Hybrid Building

Seaside, Florida  
1985-88

*Exterior view (under construction)*

>  
Hybrid Building, Seaside  
House of the Tragic Poet

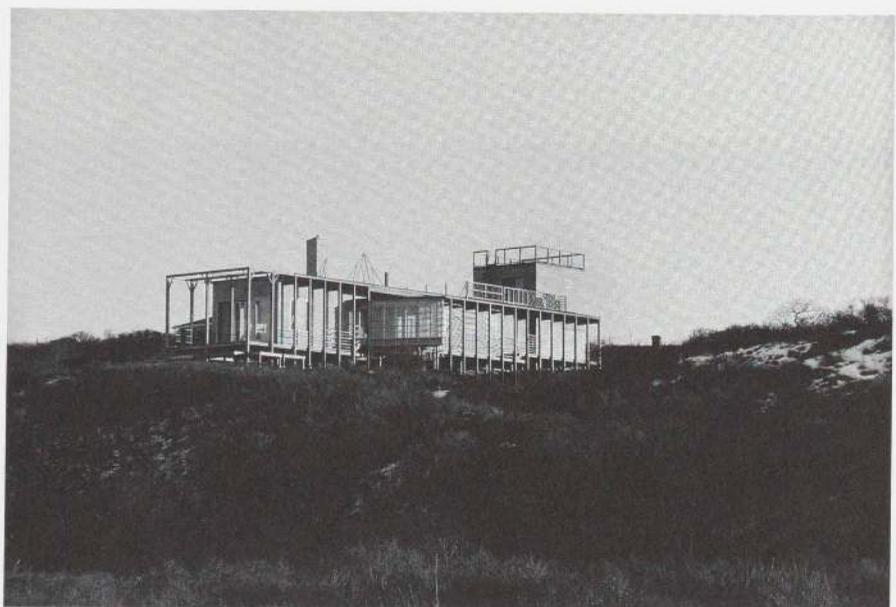
*Interior perspective*

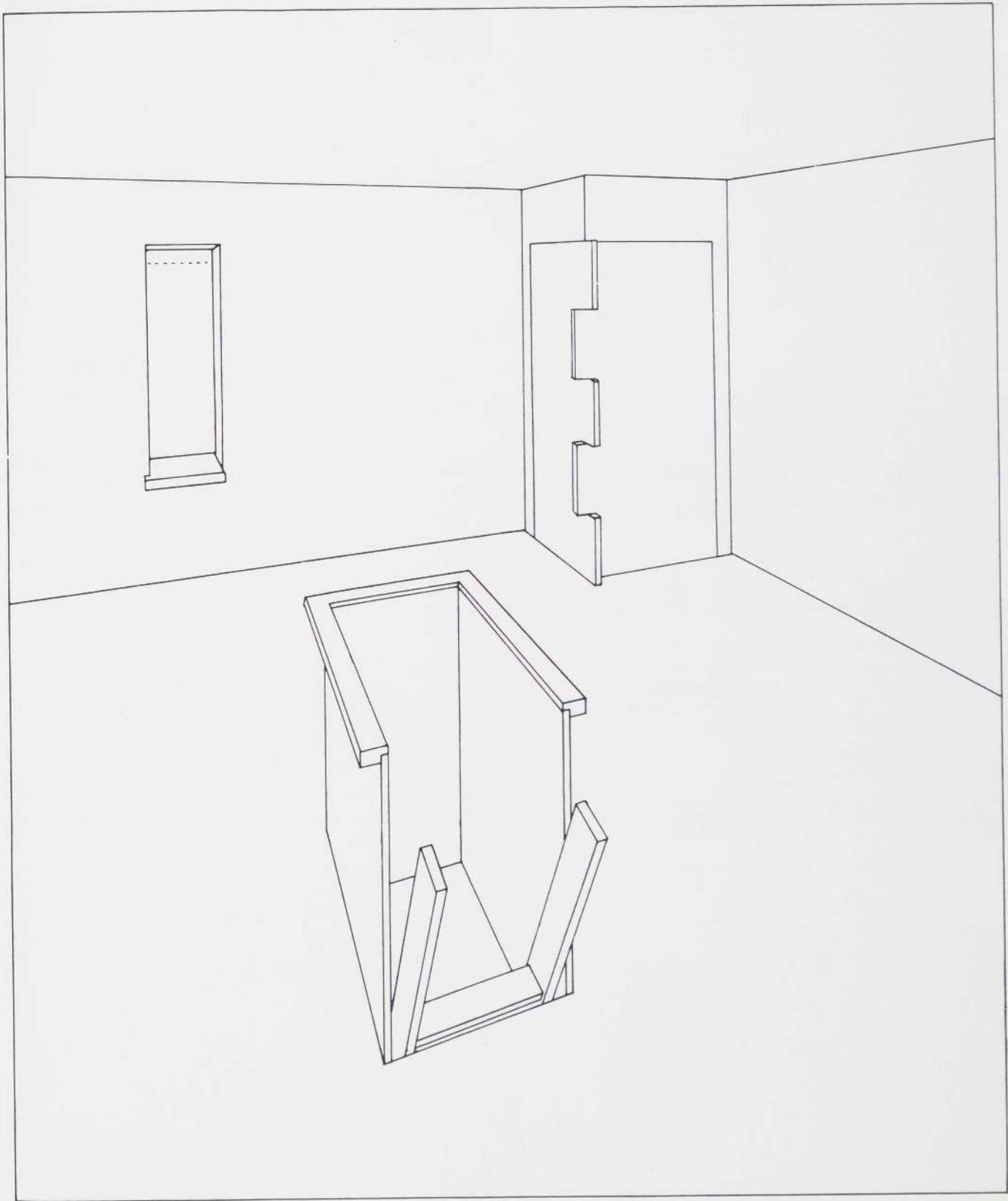
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House

Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts  
1984-87

*Exterior view*









Metropolitan Tower Apartment

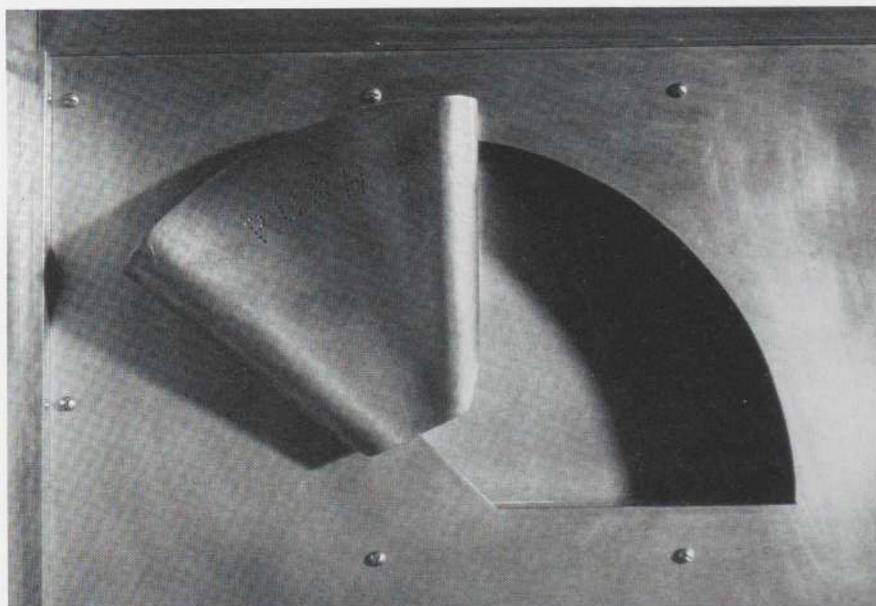
New York, New York  
1987

*Interior view*

Madison Avenue Shop

New York, New York  
1987

*Door detail*



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Madison Avenue Shop

*Interior view*



Milan Project—Porta Vittoria

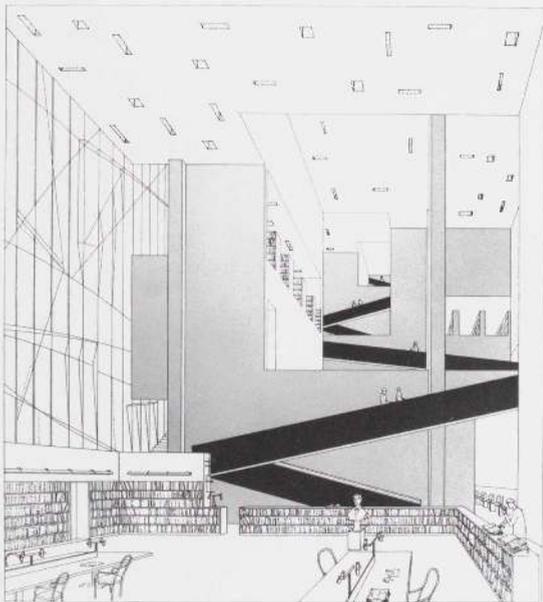
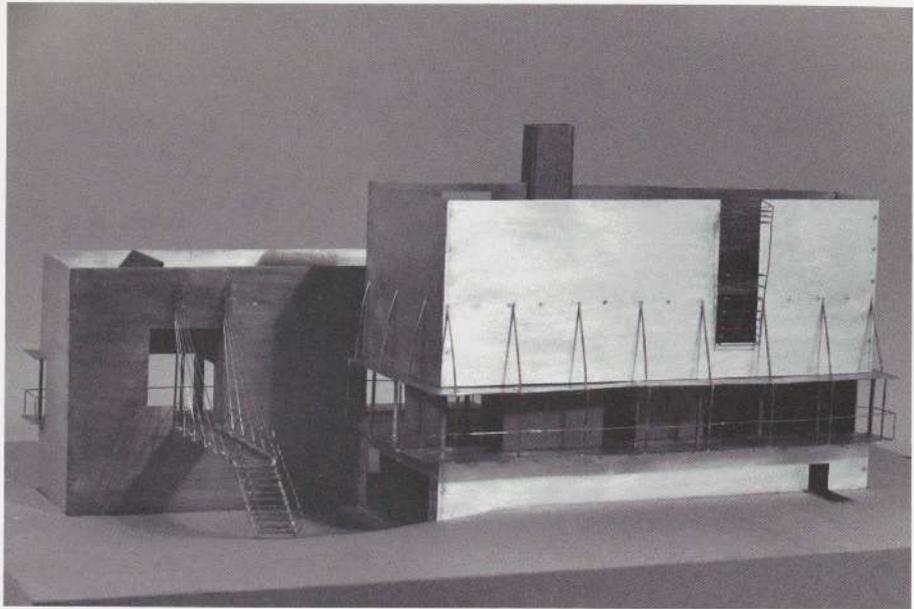
Milan, Italy  
1986-87

*Perspective of water-basin, amphitheater, and jack-up rig*

House (Non-dialectic Double House)

Cleveland, Ohio  
1988

*Model*



Addition to Berlin Library  
(Gedenkbibliothek/Berliner Zentralbibliothek)  
Competition entry, first prize

Berlin, West Germany  
1988

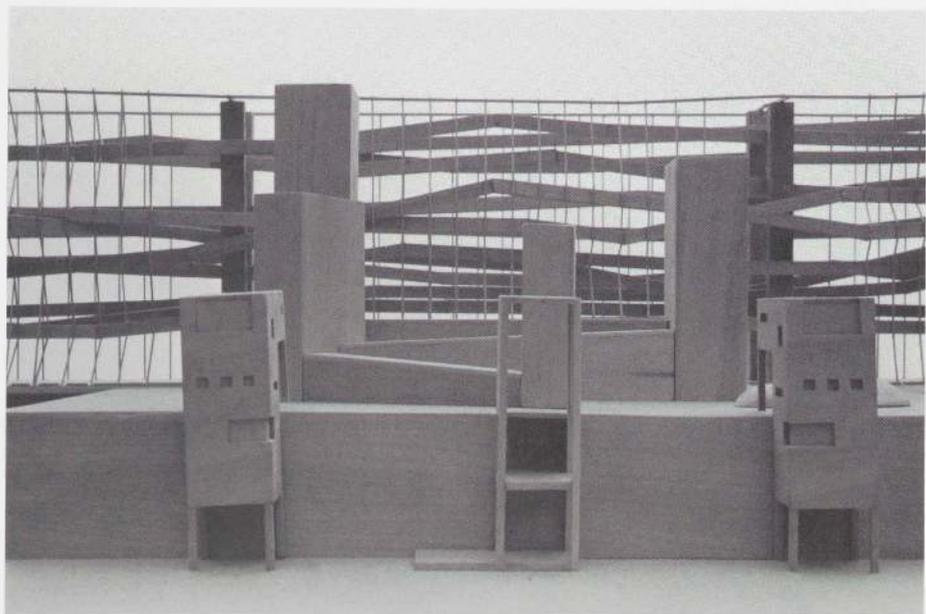
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Addition to Berlin Library

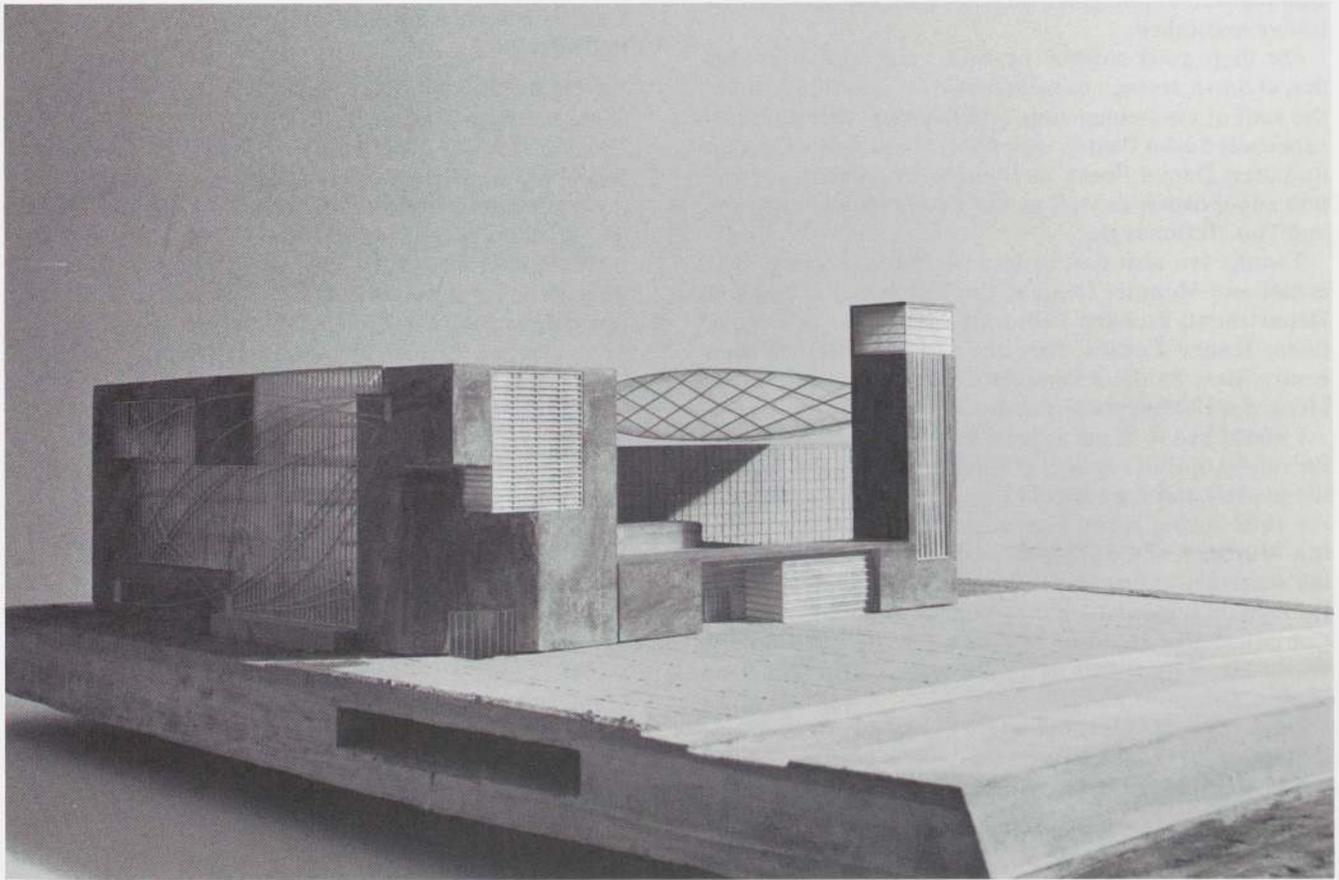
*Model*

Edge of a City

Rochester, New York  
1988-ongoing

*Model*





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On behalf of The Museum of Modern Art I wish to thank Emilio Ambasz and Steven Holl for their major commitment of time and effort to this exhibition. Both prepared new drawings and models specially for the exhibition. I also wish to thank the architects' associates, Amy Reichert in Emilio Ambasz's office, and Stephen Cassell and Marsha Imhof Davis in Steven Holl's office, for their help in gathering the necessary materials. Charles Yurick and Nina Currimbhoy provided invaluable assistance in preparing the audio-visual presentation of Emilio Ambasz's work.

In my own department I would like to express my gratitude to Matilda McQuaid for her indispensable and tireless efforts in helping me organize the exhibition, Robert Coates and Christopher Mount for their valuable help with exhibition production, and Marie-Anne Evans and Ona Nowina-Sapinski for their usual unfailing administrative assistance.

For their good-natured perseverance and efforts under, at times, trying circumstances, I would like to thank the staff of the Publications and Graphics Departments, especially Susan Weiley, the editor; Michael Hentges, the designer; Daniel Frank and Susan Schoenfeld, production supervisors; as well as Bill Edwards, Nancy Kranz, and Tim McDonough.

Thanks are also due to Jerome Neuner, Karen Meyerhoff and Mehmet Doğu of the Exhibition Production Department; Richard Palmer, Coordinator of Exhibitions; Jeanne Collins, Director of Public Information; Emily Kies, Public Programs Coordinator; and Ashby Meek, Special Events Senior Assistant.

I would like to thank Joann Casullo for kindly lending the model of Holl's Bridge of Houses project. For lending the models and drawings of Emilio Ambasz's project for the 1992 Seville World Exposition I am most grateful to the Ministry of Court Relations and to the office of the secretary of Provincial Government and its director, Don Rafael López Palanco, as well as to the Office of the Commissioner General of Spain for the 1992 Seville World Exposition and its Commissioner General Don Manuel Olivencia Ruiz.

Finally I would like once again to extend our gratitude to the Gerald D. Hines Interests for their support of this series of exhibitions.

STUART WREDE

Steven Holl wishes to thank the following collaborators for their dedicated efforts in recent years:

Peter Lynch, Stephen Cassell, Pier Copat, Bryan Bell, and the organizational talent of Marsha Imhof Davis;

and over the past years:

James Tanner, John Cropper, William Zimmerman, Joseph Fenton, Ron Stiener, Mark Janson, James Rosen, Suzanne Powadiuk, Melita Prieto, Paola Iaccuci, David Kesler, Peter Shinoda, Ralph Nelson, Lorcan O'Herlihy, Richard Warner, Phillip Tefft, Laurie Beckerman, Donna Seftel, Tom Van Den Bout, Darius Sollohub,

Jacob Allerdice, Gisue Hariri, Mojgan Hariri, Lynnette Widder, Meta Brunzema, Ron Peterson, James Leet, Atsushi Aiba, Lawrence Davis, Kent Hikida, and Friederike Grosspietsch.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the assistance of Thomas Gardner, Bernard Frombgen, and Anne Marx.

Steven Holl gratefully acknowledges the following grants received in support of the "Edge of a City" project:

The Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts

The New York State Council on the Arts  
The National Endowment for the Arts

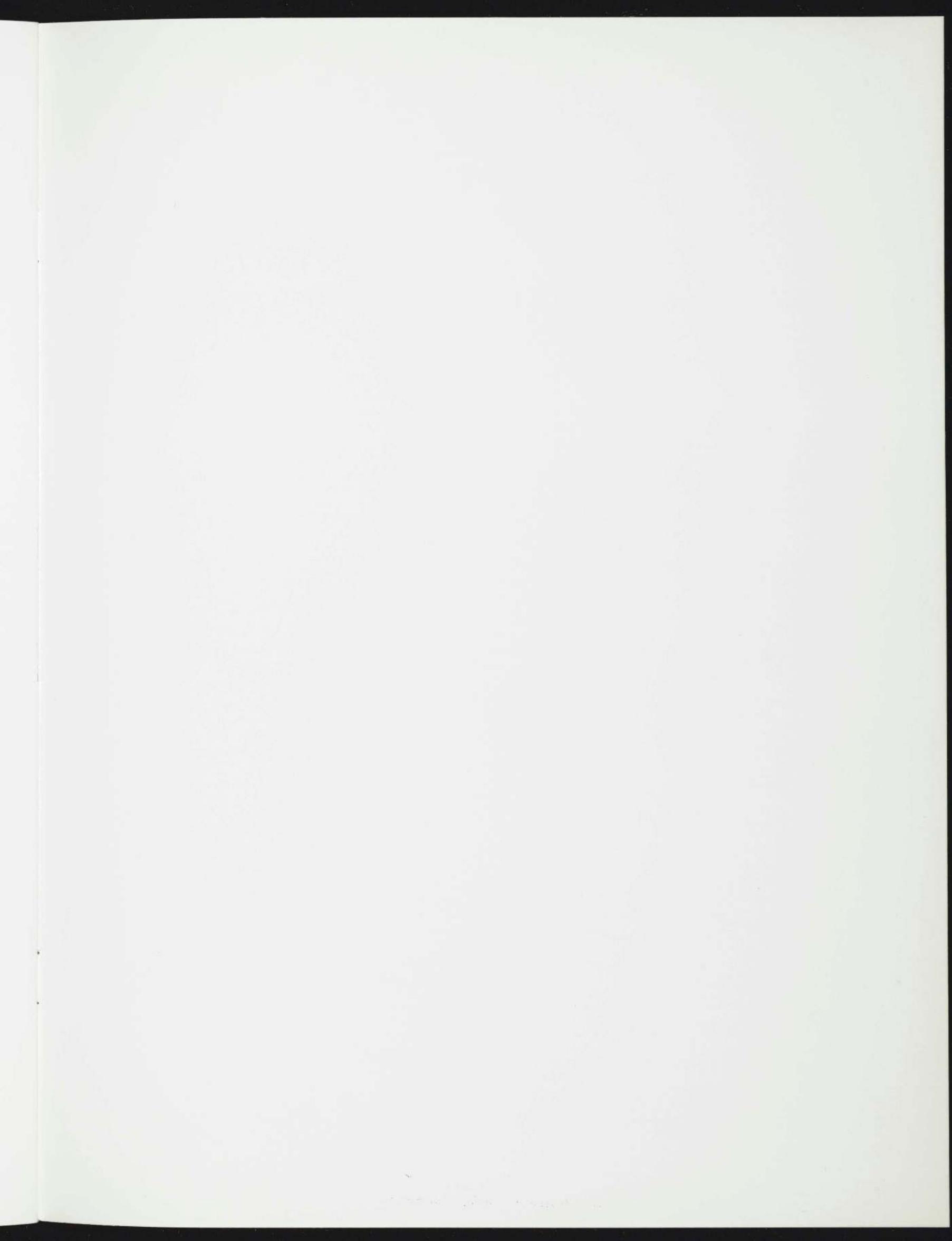
Emilio Ambasz would like to credit the following individuals:

CENTER FOR APPLIED COMPUTER RESEARCH: Robert Hart, Laretta Vinciarelli, L. Borda; COOPERATIVE OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN GRAPE GROWERS: Mark Mack, Joel Naprstik; PRO MEMORIA GARDENS: L. Mattei, Bradley Whitermore; HOUSE, CORDOBA: Robert Hart, L. Mattei, N. Salvarani, Bradley Whitermore; HOUSE FOR BARON AND MADAME PHILIPPE LAMBERT: Donald Cherefkin, Umit Koroglu; SCHLUMBERGER RESEARCH LABORATORIES: Dwight Ashdown, Richard Rudman, Ann Cederna, Daniel Trupiano; BANQUE BRUXELLES LAMBERT, MILAN: G. Cicorella; BANQUE BRUXELLES LAMBERT, LAUSANNE: Andrea Penzo; HOUSTON CENTER PLAZA: Dwight Ashdown, Richard Rudman, Ann Cederna, Toshio Okamura, Jonathan Marvel, Daniel Trupiano; PLAZA MAYOR: Dwight Ashdown, Faye Schultz, Suns Hung; LUCILLE HALSELL CONSERVATORY: Dwight Ashdown, Alan Henschell, Erik Hansell, Frank Venning, Mark Yoes, Suns Hung; Architect of record: Joneskell; 1992 UNIVERSAL EXPOSITION: Dwight Ashdown, Guillermo de la Calzada, Katherine Keane, Jonathan Marvel, Dominique Nerfin, Peter Robson, Gary Chan, Evan Douglis, Suns Hung, Daniel Gallagher, Andreas Gruber; NICHII OBIHIRO DEPARTMENT STORE: Dwight Ashdown, Chung Nguyen, Ira Frazin, Katherine Liu, Suns Hung, Umit Koroglu, Brad Whitermore, Stanely Stinnett; MERCEDES-BENZ: Evan Douglis, Gary Chan, Erik Hansell, George Rastiala; SANDA CULTURAL CENTER AND ATHLETIC FACILITY: Chung Nguyen, Umit Koroglu, Donald Keppler.

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This brochure serves as a visual documentation of the exhibition. Monographs on each of the architects have recently been published: Emilio Ambasz's *The Poetics of the Pragmatic* (Rizzoli, 1989) and Steven Holl's *Anchoring* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1989).



Emilio Ambasz      Steven Holl

A R C H I T E C T U R E



STEVEN HOLL. MILAN PROJECT - PORTA VITTORIA. MODEL.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK