

THE URBAN COMMUNITY CENTER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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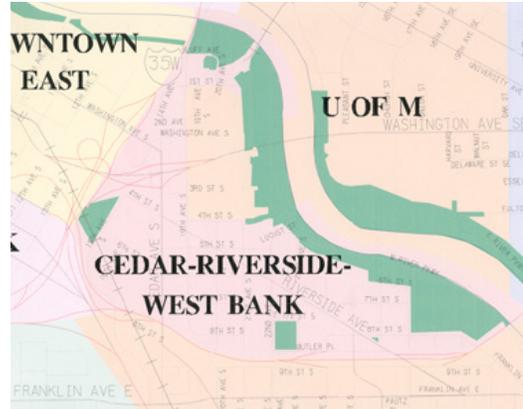
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thesis overview

THESIS OVERVIEW

The Cedar-Riverside-West Bank neighborhood has always been known for its diverse collections of people from all social and cultural walks of life. The neighborhood itself is bordered by the Mississippi River to the north and west, Interstate 94 to the south and Interstate 35W to the east. The majority of this population is located in the western edge of the neighborhood and housed in Cedar-Riverside Plaza, which is the densest concentration of housing in the state of Minnesota. Designed by Ralph Rapson in 1973, Cedar-Riverside Plaza is made up of fifteen buildings of varying heights that contain 1,299 apartments. Behind Riverside Plaza to the west is Currie Park which is the site of my primary investigation.

My thesis project will be to design an urban community center that has a strong educational component. The keyword in that last statement was “urban”, meaning to engage the community on a physical and spiritual level and to evoke a sense of place. The word **urban** is used a contrast to **suburban**. One could argue that the Brian Coyle Community



1



2



3

Center is suburban in that it fails to engage the community by using the suburban model of buffer parking between the sidewalk and the building. The design of the Brian Coyle is such that it has no real connection or reflection of the community. I would even go further to state that one could take this community center and place it in virtually any park in the city and it would “fit”. I am proposing a more urban solution that identifies directly with the community at hand and that resonates the identity and character of the community. An urban community center that is a designator of space and ideals and not merely an object building in the park as is the Brian Community Center. There are many inherent social and transit components associated with this site which will profoundly affect the design of an urban community center. These are some of the propositions that must be addressed in the design:

- An architecture/ building/ program that reflects the composition and character of the community while at the same time being responsive to its urban context.
- Designing an applicable architecture that serves the community, given the community’s social, transit and urban energies.
- Designing an Urban Solution for an Urban Oasis (Currie Park)

In addition to being a designer, I have a vested interest in the project because I am a former resident of Riverside Plaza. As a user of this site I understand patterns of movement in the community and have a strong emotional connection to the immediate community.

site

SITE

The urban context in which the site is housed is one of the many exciting aspects of the project. The site is perched above the intersection of 35W and Washington Avenue

and will be profoundly affected by the LRT. The juxtaposition of this mega-plex to the site offers an interesting design challenge and unique approach to the project. To the west and north of the site are the intersection of 35W and Washington Avenue.



The site is bordered to the south by what will be the new LRT. The only vehicle access to the site is via

4

15th Avenue S. that runs along the east end of the site separating it from Cedar Riverside Plaza. Located directly the east is the Cedar-Riverside housing complex. Existing structures on the site include the Brian Coyle Community Center, parking for the community center, a swimming pool, basketball and tennis courts, a warming house for the pool, and two large earth mounds.

Cedar-Riverside Plaza

Perhaps the most notorious icon of the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood is Cedar-Riverside Plaza, a multi-colored housing mega-plex. With its tallest building at thirty-six stories, it dominates the skyline and can be seen from almost anywhere in the Minneapolis metro.



The area was initially inhabited by German, Scandinavian and Bohemian

5

immigrants who worked in the lumber and flour mills along the Mississippi River. The population peaked at twenty thousand in 1910, but as the milling industry declined so

Washington Avenue

Brian Coyle Community Center

Interstate 35W

Cedar-Riverside Plaza



SITE

Currie Park

Light Rail Transit Line

15th Avenue South



True North

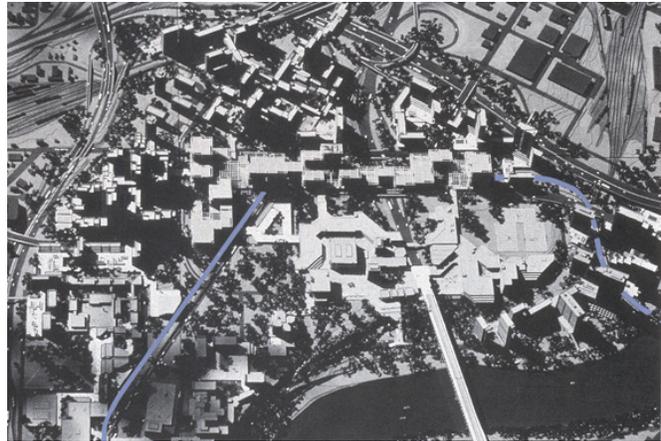


Project North

did the neighborhood. With the construction of I-35W and I-94, the neighborhood was cut off from the rest of the city. In 1934 a city planning department concluded that next to the Sumner Field area, Cedar-Riverside was in worse physical shape than any other neighborhood in Minneapolis.

With Congress passing the 1968 Title IV New Community Legislation which provided funds for the creation of urban

developments called “New Towns”, architect Ralph Rapson along with real estate developers Martin and Gloria Segal saw an opportunity to bring energized, high density housing to the Cedar-Riverside West Bank neighborhood. The goals that Rapson had for the development



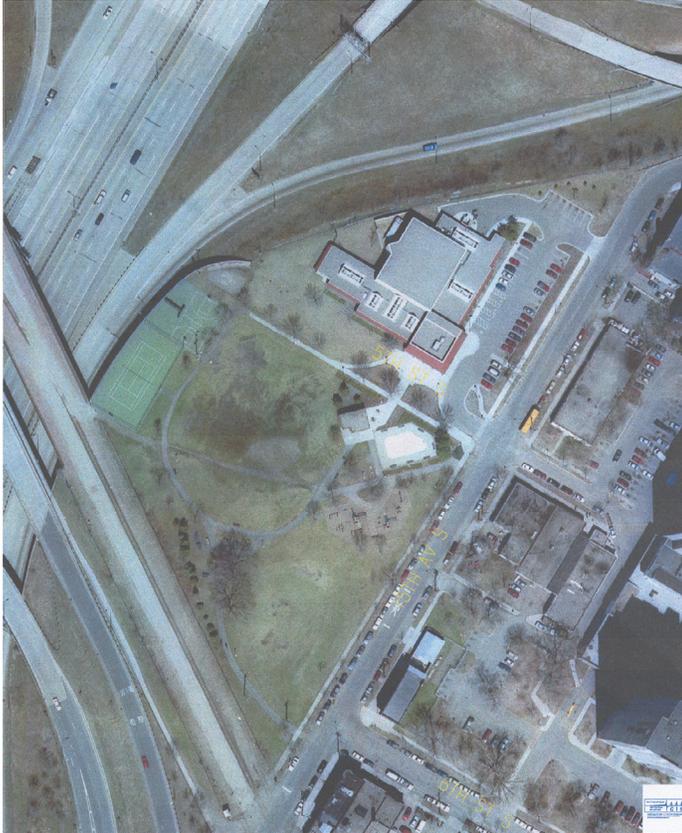
Rapson's original Master Plan

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were optimistic and ambitious reinforced by this statement they released at the time:

“It is the objective of the Cedar-Riverside Associates that people of all income and racial groups will eventually move together and mix in Cedar-Riverside. The imaginative use of the arts and quality human services is a practical demonstration of how rich and poor, young and old, might be brought together. Cedar-Riverside will offer more than shelter, it will offer satisfaction to the individual who contributes to the sense of life and vitality of the community and feels proud that he lives here (Hession 193).”

Rapson's Master Plan was extensive in scope. It was made up of five “neighborhoods” connected by a trolley system and skyways. Four of the five neighborhoods were dedicated to mixed income housing and the fifth was a community service center called “The Community Centrum”. The Centrum was to contain a motor hotel, conference facilities,



Aerial Photo of Site

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Southeast View of Brian Coyle Community Center

9



View of Downtown Looking Northwest 10



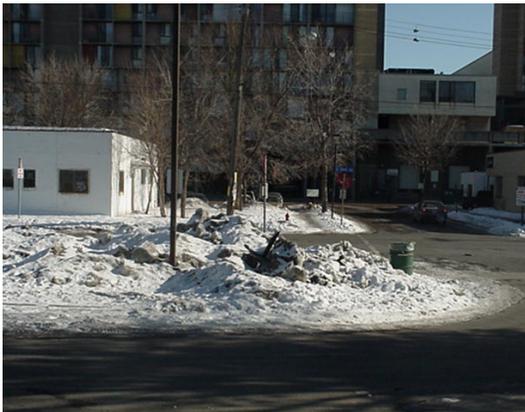
Brian Coyle Center Looking North 11



View of Downtown Looking West 12



View Looking Down Proposed LRT Route 13



View across the street from the Community Center 14



View of Site Looking West 15



Site Looking North

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17 **Right of Way Corridor**



18 **Right of Way Corridor Looking from Site**



Site from LRT Route

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office, retail and commercial space, a community area, a performing arts facility, housing and parking. Had this master plan been constructed it would have contained 12,500 dwelling units, 1,500,000 square feet of commercial space and 56 acres of land designated as recreational/ park spaces. However, due to lack of funding by a moratorium on subsidized housing and termination of the HUD supplementary grants program, only one of the five neighborhoods, Cedar Square West, was actually constructed. The lack of funding also cost Rapson his “Kit of Parts”, “which were meant to foster individual expression and bring animation to the buildings facades (Hession 199).” The kit was comprised of elements such as panels, balcony railings, sunscreens and awnings.



Ralph Rapson 20

Interview with Ralph Rapson, March 1, 2001

Since it welcomed its first guest in April of 1973, the complex has slowly deteriorated due to lack of upkeep and maintenance. I had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Ralph Rapson about Riverside Plaza and the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. Initially, the economic composition of the complex was to be a mix of student housing, market rate housing and subsidized housing. But when the government stepped in, they made it 50% subsidized housing, a move that Mr. Rapson feels contributed to the deterioration of the complex. It isn't that he necessarily believes that subsidized housing is a bad, but it doesn't contribute to the balance of economic diversity he hoped for in the original concept of the project.

The surrounding neighborhood has taken an economic downturn in the last few years. Many specialty shops, restaurants and other businesses have moved out of the neighborhood, and just recently historic Dania Hall burned down. With many of the businesses moving out, the neighborhood funded Cedarfest hasn't happened for the last two years and there is a strong possibility that it might not happen this year as well. Cedarfest was

a festival that the community took pride in and came out in full force to support. The lack of the festival, I feel has left a hole in the character of the community. Along these lines, Mr. Rapson feels that the University of Minnesota's Carlson School and its in-house dining components have hurt and closed many of the local restaurants.

Behind Riverside Plaza (to the west) is a series of one and two story poorly maintained buildings. Mr. Rapson sites that the property in which the buildings are sited are owned by Riverside Plaza. The small buildings and businesses obtained permits in a legal loophole and are engaged with Riverside Plaza and the city of Minneapolis in a legal war. Mr. Rapson hopes that the owners of Riverside Plaza and the city prevail and develop the land into low-rise affordable housing. According to Mr. Rapson, "Riverside Plaza needs active housing around it."

Understanding the Brian Coyle Community Center

The Brian Coyle Community Center is actually the inspiration for the body of work I am embarking on. I've always felt that the community center never fit the community and that it felt out of place in the urban context it is currently housed in.

On January 31, 2001 I conducted an interview with Linda Bryant Director of the Brian Coyle Community Center. Like myself, Linda Bryant has and still does live in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood. She has lived in the community for 17 years and was heavily involved in the planning of the Coyle Community Center. The Community Center is 7 years old and according to Bryant, they outgrew the building after two years.

There are many classes and programs that take place at the Community Center. Forty percent of all programs are for educational purposes. Some of these programs include after school tutoring programs, GED classes, the Food Shelf, computer classes and English As Second Language classes. In addition to these programs there several affiliate programs such as Americor housed in the Brian Coyle Community Center. After school tutoring takes place from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 4 to 6 p.m. The building was initially sponsored by the Pillsbury Corporation and the land and building are rented from the City of

Minneapolis at \$1 a year. There is approximately 31 adjunct staff mostly comprised of people from the Minneapolis Urban League and the Minneapolis Public School District. Sixty percent of the community center's budget is dedicated to staff. In addition to the regular paid staff there are over 70 volunteers that work at the center throughout the year helping with special events. Linda Bryant estimates that nearly 1,000 people per day use the community center and that number naturally increases in the summer.

Bryant and I had an insightful conversation about the needs and issues of the community center and of the community as a whole. The Cedar Riverside neighborhood is an ever changing community both physically and culturally. Always as culturally diverse neighborhood, it has recently within the last couple of years seen a boom in the Somalian population. According to my initial thesis I sought to reflect the composition and culture of the community through the architecture. After discussing the ever changing nature of the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, this reflection of culture might not be so evident in the exterior shell of the building, but rather within the interior components of the building. Space within the community center was a major concern of Bryant's. Many community organizations lease space from the community center and there is not enough space to properly accommodate them. To minimally accommodate some of the organizations, rooms must be shared which means that many of the paid staff of the community centers often share office desk and are even housed in closets turned office space. If she could have it her way Bryant stated that she would like more educational facilities and programs to be added to the center. Her wish list included:

- Art Room
- Dance Studio
- An adequate Computer Room
- 4 Multi-Purpose Rooms
- Library
- Gathering Place for cultural events
- Park Board Community Café

The Park Board Community Café would be owned by the Minneapolis Park Board and they would lease the space from the community center. Bryant thought this would be a nice way to have an informal retail component within the center. The proximity of the basketball courts to the freeway is particularly troubling to her though there is a fence that surrounds the courts.

Bryant is also concerned about the Light Rail Transit and the intrusive nature it will have on the site. She feels that the greenspace is an important component of the community center. Like myself, she questions the basic fundamentals of the LRT and whom it is meant to serve. One question we posed in our conversation was, “How does the LRT benefit the inner city?”

This conversation only reinforced the notions of the community center not fitting physical and spiritual needs of the community and that an urban solution for an urban community center is needed.

program

Program

There are only two parks located in the Cedar-Riverside-West Bank neighborhood, Currie Park (the site) and Murphy Square which is located in the far east corner of the neighborhood. One of the things that make this site so interesting is the way in which it exists in the urban context. It exists as a spatial relief to the density of Riverside Plaza. It is an **urban oasis**. The open greenspace of the site starkly contrast the concrete density of Riverside Plaza and the unrelenting I-35W. It is a physical and mental relief, and the proof is in the number of people that come to the site to gather, recreate, socialize and celebrate. The program for the urban community center is a collection of parts of sorts. It is pragmatic and functional on one hand and on the other it is based off intangibles such as forces, connections to site and gathering nodes.

Program for an Urban Community-Education Center

- Art Room
- Dance Studio
- Small Theater
- Computer Room
- 4-5 Multipurpose Rooms/ Large Classrooms
- Library
- Gym w/ Lockers and Restrooms
- Large Conference Room
- Large Office Workspace
- Staff Conference Room
- Director's Office

- **Common Area/ Reception Area** – This space will be the knuckle or the **fulcrum** of the building. This space should read as a place of arrival, a hub in the journey, the main gathering space, a gallery space and most importantly should be one the most energized spaces in the building.
- **Reflection/ Retreat Room** – Thinking along the lines of **oasis** there should be a room that is not about transition, but of **dormancy, contemplation** and **rest**. This is a community where many people are social and political refugees. This would be a space where the mind and body can be at peace.
- **Café** – This component of the building serves the purpose of energizing the gathering aspect of place. This space is something that can be directly accessible from the exterior of the building as well as from the interior.
- Business Lease Space

*Designing an Urban
Community Center*

Design Overview

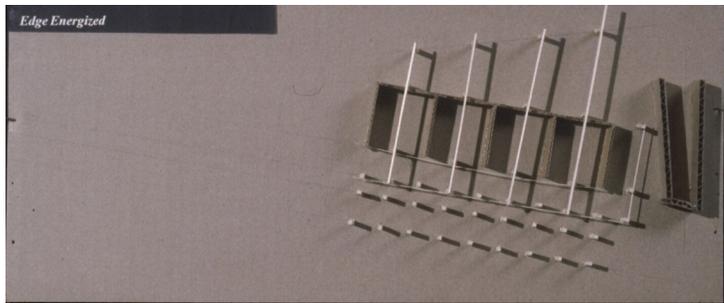
I felt it was important for the building to resonate the identity, character and energy of the community. The character of the neighborhood is a diverse collection of people from countries around the world. When you stand in Currie park on any given summer day, you can feel the energy of the community within the park. There are people gathering, children playing basketball, soccer and football and tennis. It is truly the neighborhood melting pot and a place of welcome retreat and relief.

There were several main guiding principles in the design of the new community center. Of course there was program, but there was also the idea that the new community center should, in spirit represent and reflect “energies” of the animated oasis in which it will sit in. A series of study models were developed to help understand the massing of the program elements and guide design principles. The series of study models reflect the five design principles and how they apply to the development of the new Urban Community Center. Those five principles are as follows:

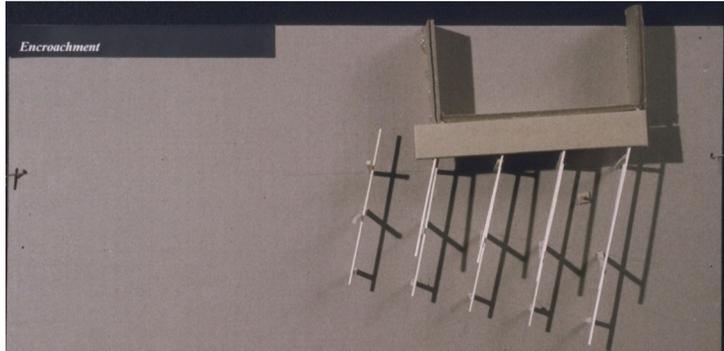
1. Energized Edge
2. Encroachment
3. Relief/ Retreat
4. Animated Space/ Active Components
5. Engaging Activities/ Animated Space

PROCESS MODELS

edge energized



encroachment

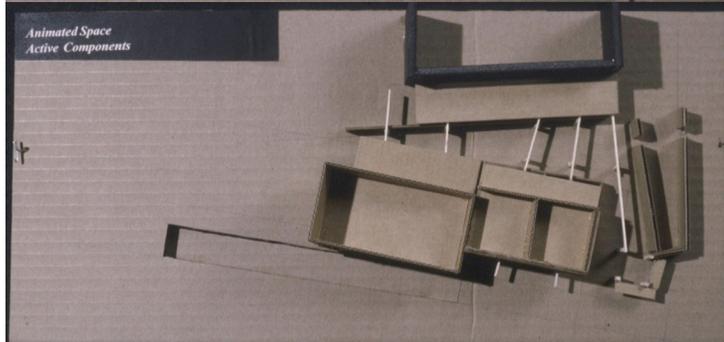


relief/retreat



21

*animated space/
active components*



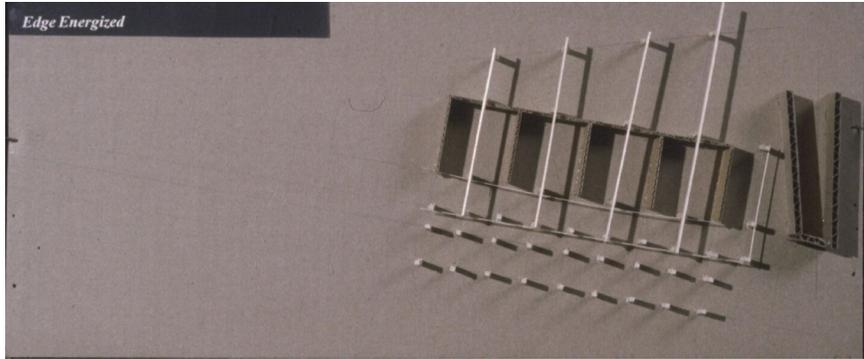
*engaging activities/
animated space*



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Edge Energized

One of the many problems with the existing community center is that it fails to directly engage the park where



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most of the community activity or energy takes place. As the highlighted study model suggest, I am proposing to create an edge or building façade that opens up to the park physically and physiologically. This edge would be transparent in nature so that the people in the park could see activities and events taking place in the community center and vice versa. Along this energized edge would be program components like multi-purpose activity rooms and the community café. Along the exterior is a walkway which is an extension of the pedestrian corridor (formerly 5th street) that runs through Riverside Plaza.

(See site diagram on right) Most pedestrian traffic from the community is through the Cedar-Riverside Plaza right-of-way which



Pedestrian Corridor Connection to Site

was at one time 5th street. I identified this axis as one of significance that could become²³ an armature of the experience of arriving at the site, circulating within the site and building, and engaging building components and spaces.

If a cross section were taken from the park through the building, one would be able to see how the edge of the building becomes blurred with the park and its activities. In the park there would be people gathering and playing. The Seabird Island School is a precedent

I looked to for an energized edge along the exterior of the building. This energy would extend into the building where people would circulate and penetrate along the edges.

I see this transparent edge similar in nature to the Sant Juan Bautista Museum in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Japan. This is a museum for the early ship building trades. One of the man spines of the building is a glass corridor where the edge of the building becomes blurred with the activity/display of the shipyard and the interior of the museum.



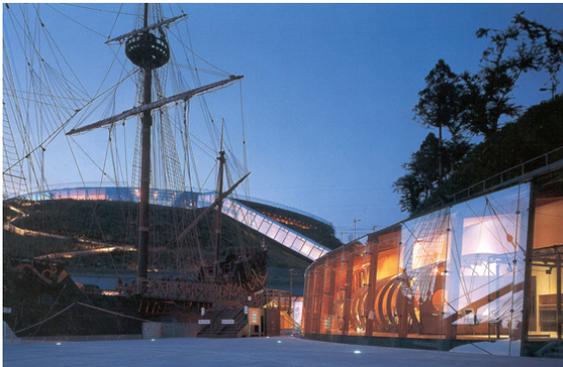
Seabird Island's Energized Edge

24



Seabird Island's Energized Edge

25



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27

Sant Juan Bautista Museum



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Approaching Site from East
through Right-of-Way

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View of Right-of-Way Looking back
East

28



View of Site Looking West after
exiting Right-Of-Way

31

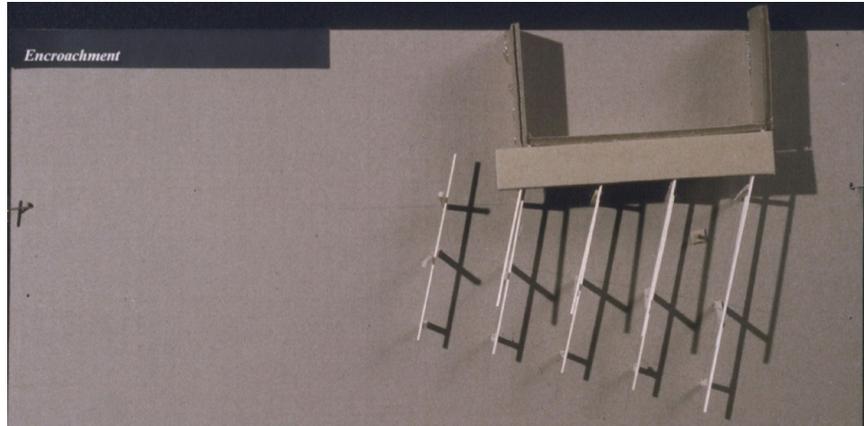


View of Site from Currie Park Look-
ing West

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Encroachment

Encroachment is a term used to describe a certain tectonic expression I'm seeking in the building. There is a theme beginning



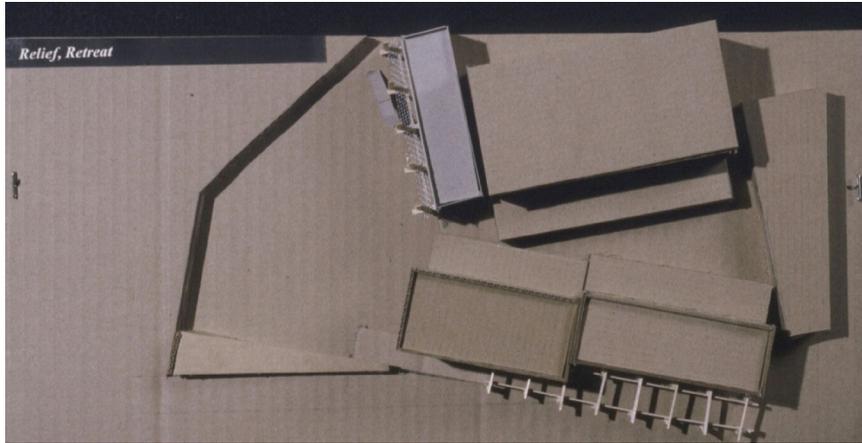
33

to build in the design of the urban community center of blurred lines and interactive elements with park and building. Encroachment is about bringing this theme deeper into the building. Instead of creating a clean layout of columns, I thought it might be a bit more interesting to let the columns be exposed and canted. The idea of canted columns is that while they encroach on internal circulation space, they at the same time energize what might be a rather sterile corridor and also begin to create pockets of gathering between wall and the columns. There is also the idea that the exposed beams are an expression of bringing the outside to the inside. While at this time it is not certain if the building will be a two story space, I am certain that there will be a two story tectonic expression of encroachment.

Encroachment is how the form of the building is beginning to take shape. The energized edge and the more solid aspect of the building (the gym is represented as three walls north of the columns in the model) collide with each other, further blurring delin-

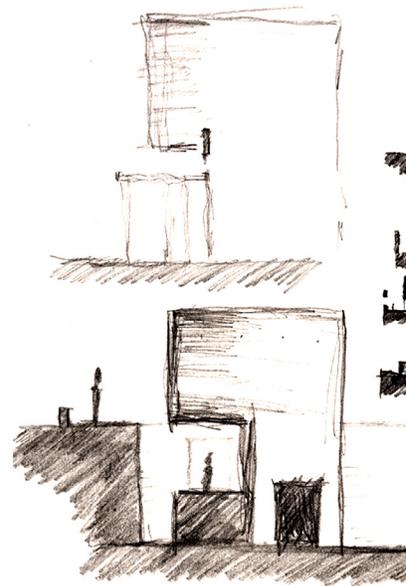
Relief/ Retreat

This is going back to an early program notion of creating a reflection/ retreat room that would be a room or space that



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is not about transition, but dormancy, contemplation and rest. This is a community where many people are social and political refugees. The idea in this working model was to create a place where the mind and body can be at peace. It made sense to put this space behind the building with the building, highway and an earth wall as the walls of this exterior space. This space is also the terminus of what is the exterior corridor that runs along the park façade of the building. I initially had the idea that the retreat area would be an object or room one would inhabit, but as the model was developed, the room became an outdoor room (See initial



Early Retreat/ Relief Room Sketches

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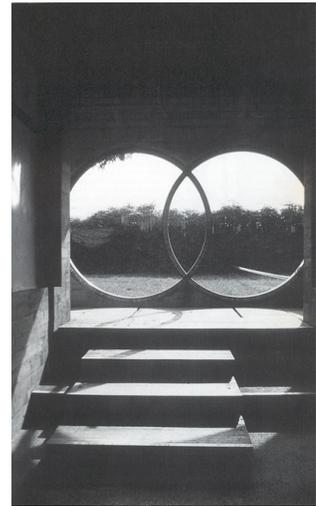
retreat room sketches). And as the concept of an outdoor room evolved, so did the notion of the use of the room itself. This space evolved from an architecturally “ideal” space to something that was a bit more pragmatic and that could actually be something that could be used as a breakout space for community center activities. A recessed space is shown in this model as a working idea. This recessed space however, makes the relief room feel like a plaza or stage where occupants might feel like fish in a fish bowl being leered upon. A valid critique of the recessed space.

Brion Cemetery in San Vito d'Alitvole, Treviso by Carlos Scarpa happens to be one of my favorite architectural compositions. There is a deliberate composition of interrelated parts that lead and bring you to various points of resolution and symbolism. I used this as a precedent for the relief/retreat aspect of the design because like the Brion Cemetery the Urban Community Center is set up as a procession of emotions that terminates in a space of architectural and physiological resolution.



Brion Cemetery 36

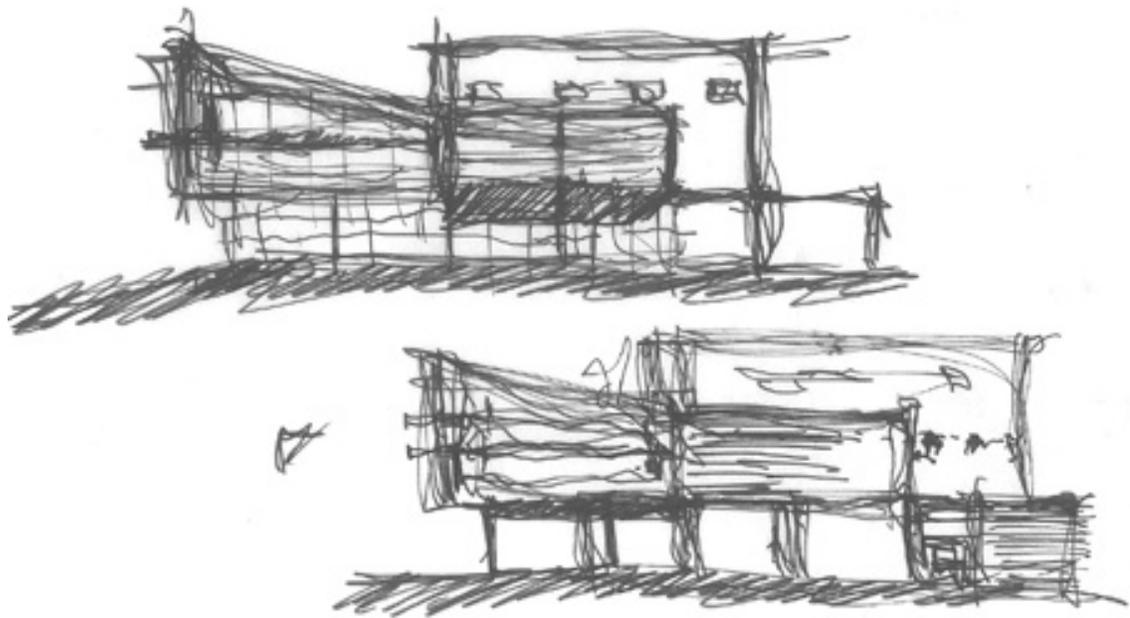
In addition to exploring the notion of relief/retreat, this model was an exploration of massing and adjacencies. The gym is located on the north end of the building and the administration offices face 15th Avenue South. The gym and the office are the “solids” composed of C.M.U. and red brick respectively. On the south side of the building is the grouping of the café which directly face the park and the multi-purpose rooms. The spaces are glass and transparent and run along the entire south side/park façade. The second floor of the south side is the library to the west and classrooms to the east. The exterior skin of these spaces want to be metallic and light to compliment the open-



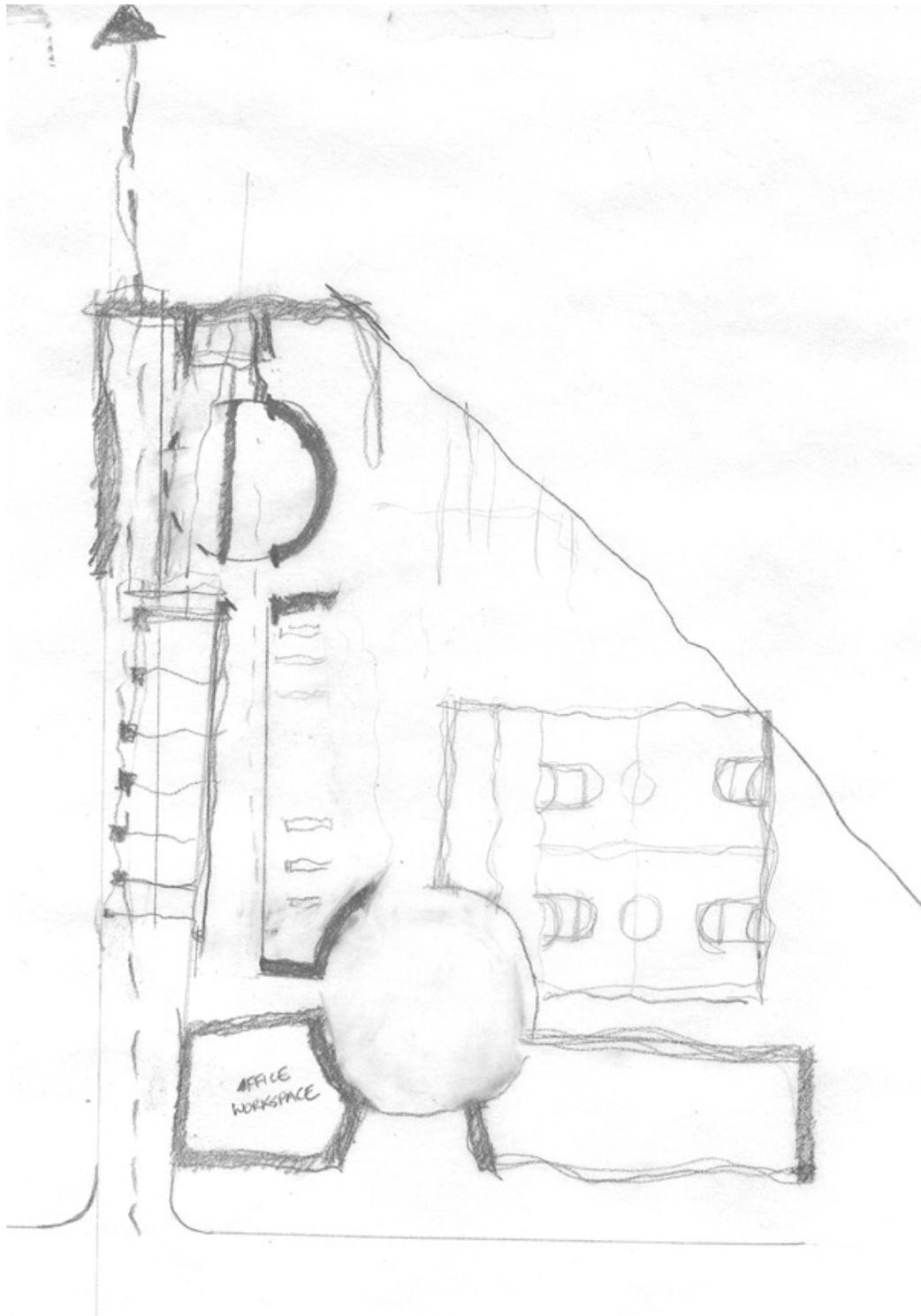
Brion Cemetery 37

ness of the south façade and also contrast the solids of the gym and one story office space to the north and east respectively. The wedge shaped earth wall at the west end of the site is a space delineator that separates the park from the retreat/relief space. It is a deliberate shift in philosophy and materials from the glassy/transparent south façade of the building. The earth wall reinforces two things:

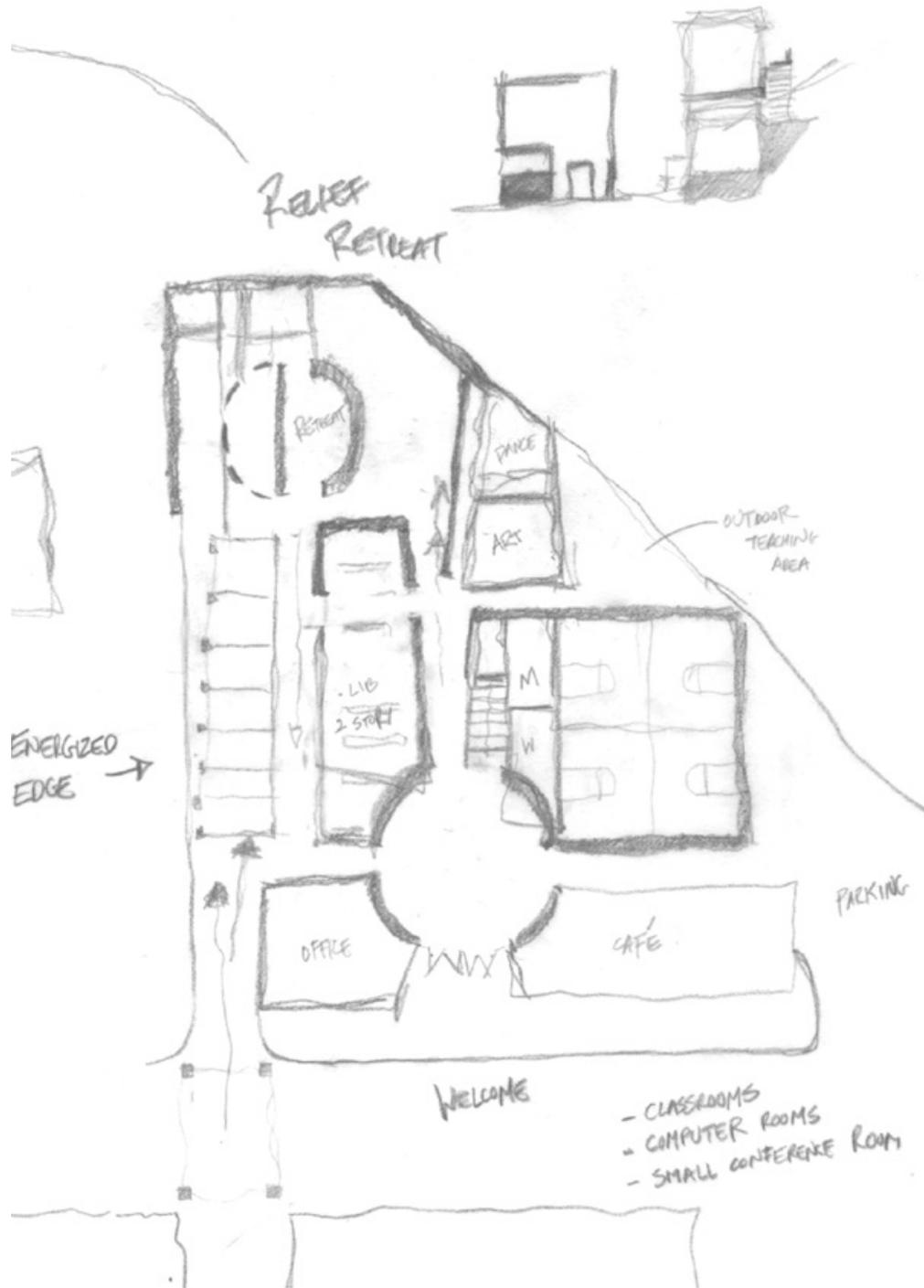
1. The axis of the right-of-way through Riverside Plaza
2. Picks up on the axis of procession to the relief/retreat space.



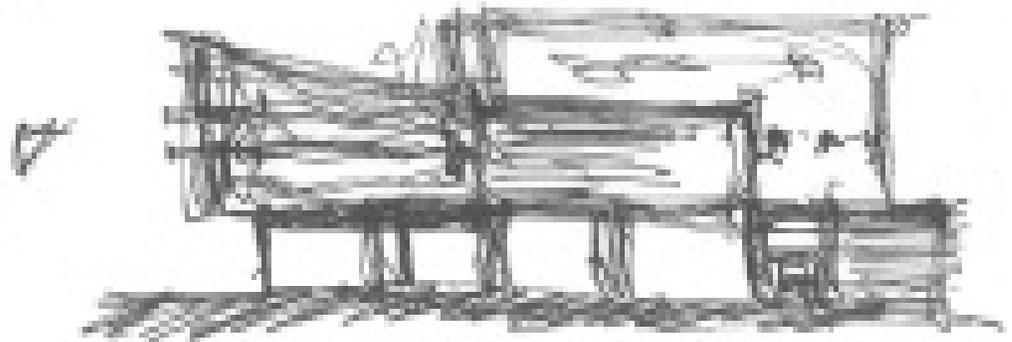
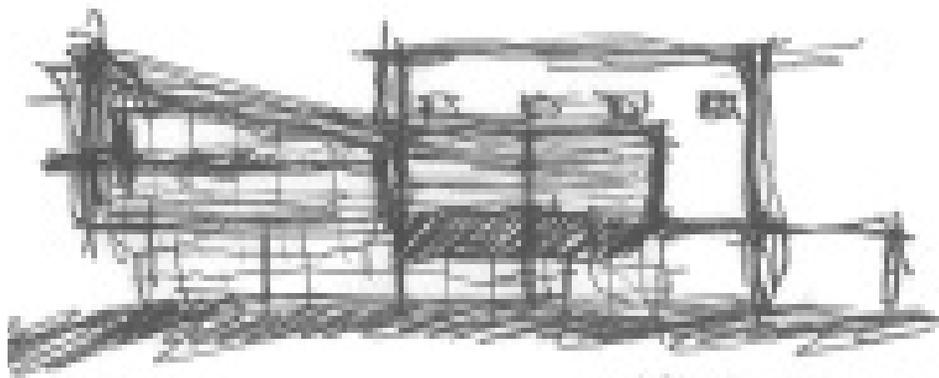
Earth Wedge Space Delineation



Early Plan Scheme - Arriving at Relief/ Retreat Space



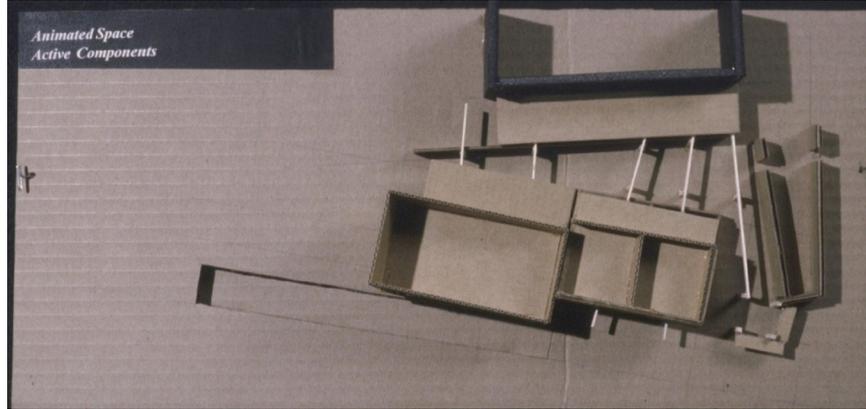
Early Plan Scheme - Relationships and Adjacencies



Elevation Study Sketches

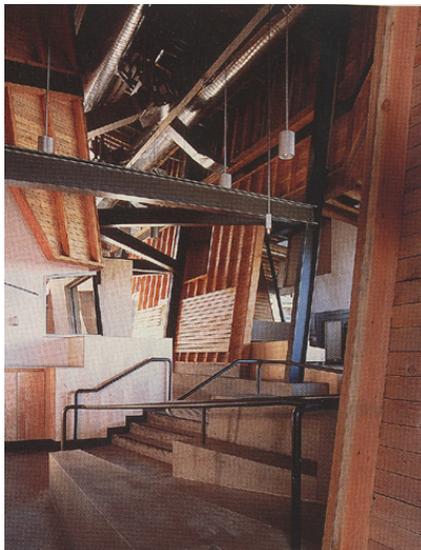
Animated Space/ Active Components

I have been in many community centers, urban and suburban and one issue I had with



many of these spaces was the contradiction between the essence of the program of a community center with the actual design of the building. Community centers are extraordinary hubs of energy and program. When you walk through the doors of most community centers you hear and see the program. Children talking and laughing, people gathering, classes in session, teaching, learning, growing, etc. I wanted to bring the passion of the program into the actual architecture of the spaces. This model of Animated Space/ Active Components began to incorporate the concepts of energized edge and encroachment to make a program and architecture that was tectonic in nature. Canted

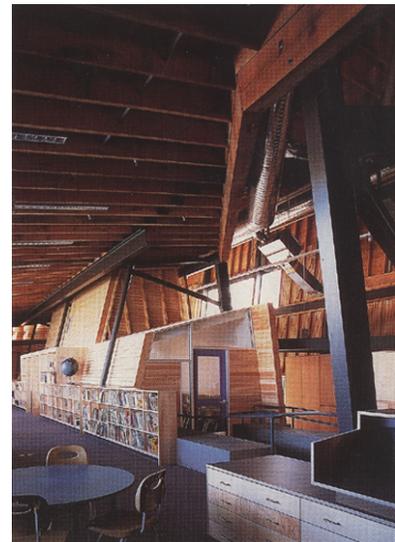
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Strawberry Vale Interior Image

columns support unparallel structure that animates and brings a spatial intensity to the main spine of the building. The two-story spine of the building now



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Strawberry Vale Interior Image

has columns and beams flying everywhere. Children play, light dances and bounces through and off the unbalanced off-rhythmic unbalanced structure. Animated space is about letting the playful nature of the program of the urban community center guide the design of the space. Animation isn't static, it isn't regulated to a linear system. Animation is playful, it's fun, it's dramatic and sometimes over the top and unjustified! When I walk in an animated space, I don't want to see white hallways and systematic lighting, I want to see, hear and feel the space. Strawberry Vale school by Patkau Architects is the definition of spatial intensity. Canted structure breaks down corridors and in turn creates secondary pockets of gathering spaces. These intrusive approaches to Strawberry Vale are some of the very principles I look to implement into my building.

Engaging Activities/ Animated Space

The final study model in this series deals with engaging activities in conjunction with animated space.

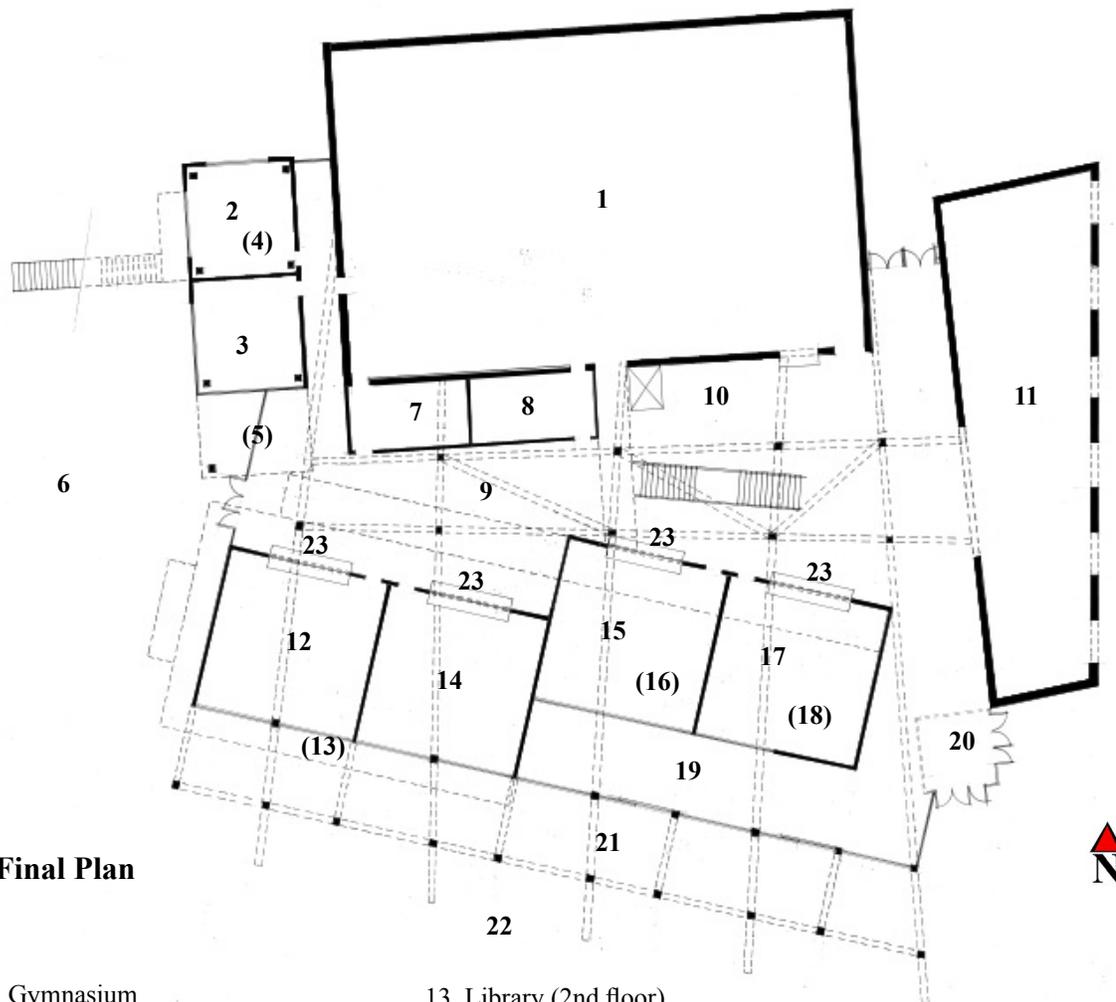


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This model takes the notions of gathering and spatial animation and allows these ideas to encroach into the design of the program spaces. The animated structure erodes away the skin of the walls and creates pockets of gathering spaces throughout the building. Catwalks connect the library on the second floor at the end of the building to the gym across the animated corridor. There is really no programmed space in the building that is not visually or acoustically separated from anyone. This study brings all of the previous studies together in what eventually becomes the design and layout of the building.

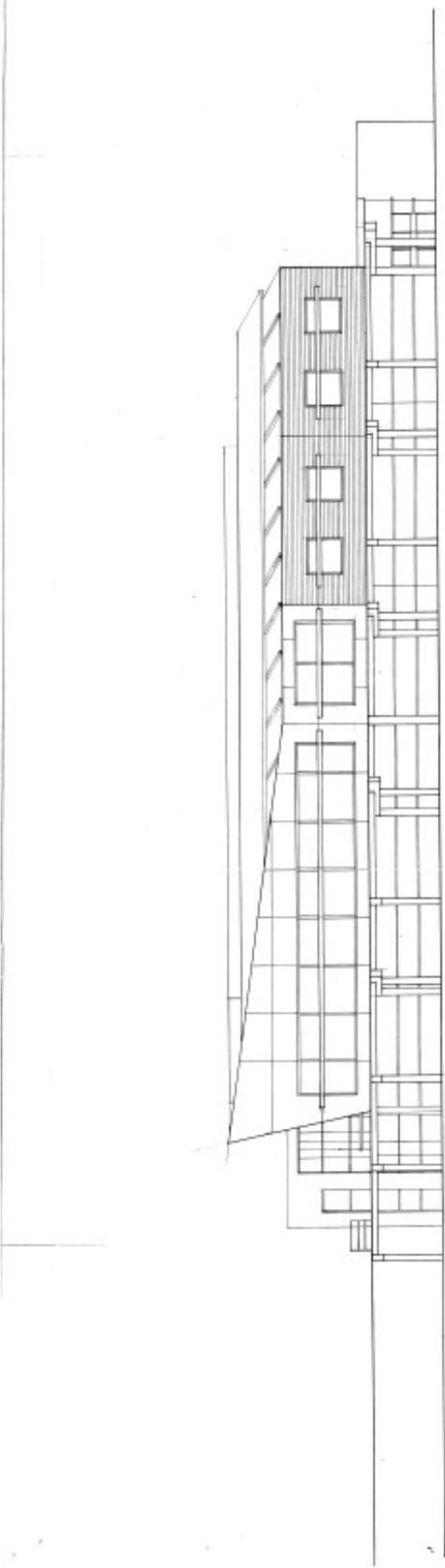
Plan

The final plan drawing of the building is a combination of the first floor and the second floor plan. It is combined because I see the building as one place of active components and interactive spaces. The second floor is only a name sake because the experience of the building isn't regulated to a floor by floor experience; it is a total spatial experience. If you enter the building via the front entrance, you will see canted off-rythmic columns, catwalks, a solid to the north in the gym, a glass dance studio at the western end of the building and half height/ partial walls of the multipurpose rooms to the south with a glimpses of Currie Park through the multipurpose rooms.

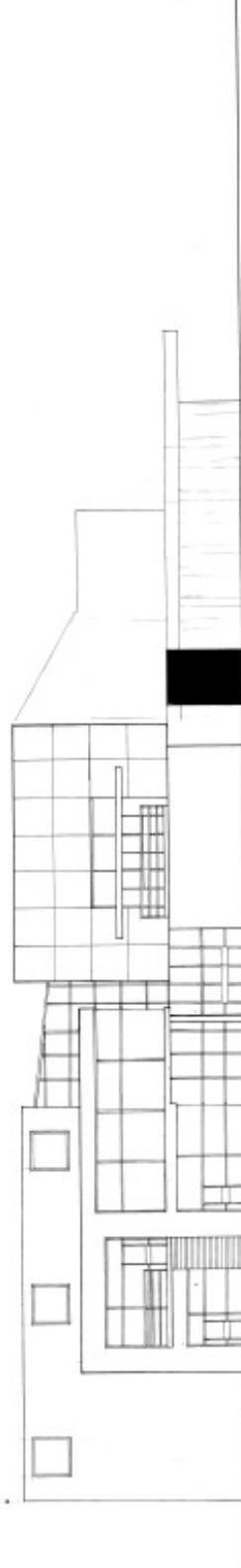


Final Plan

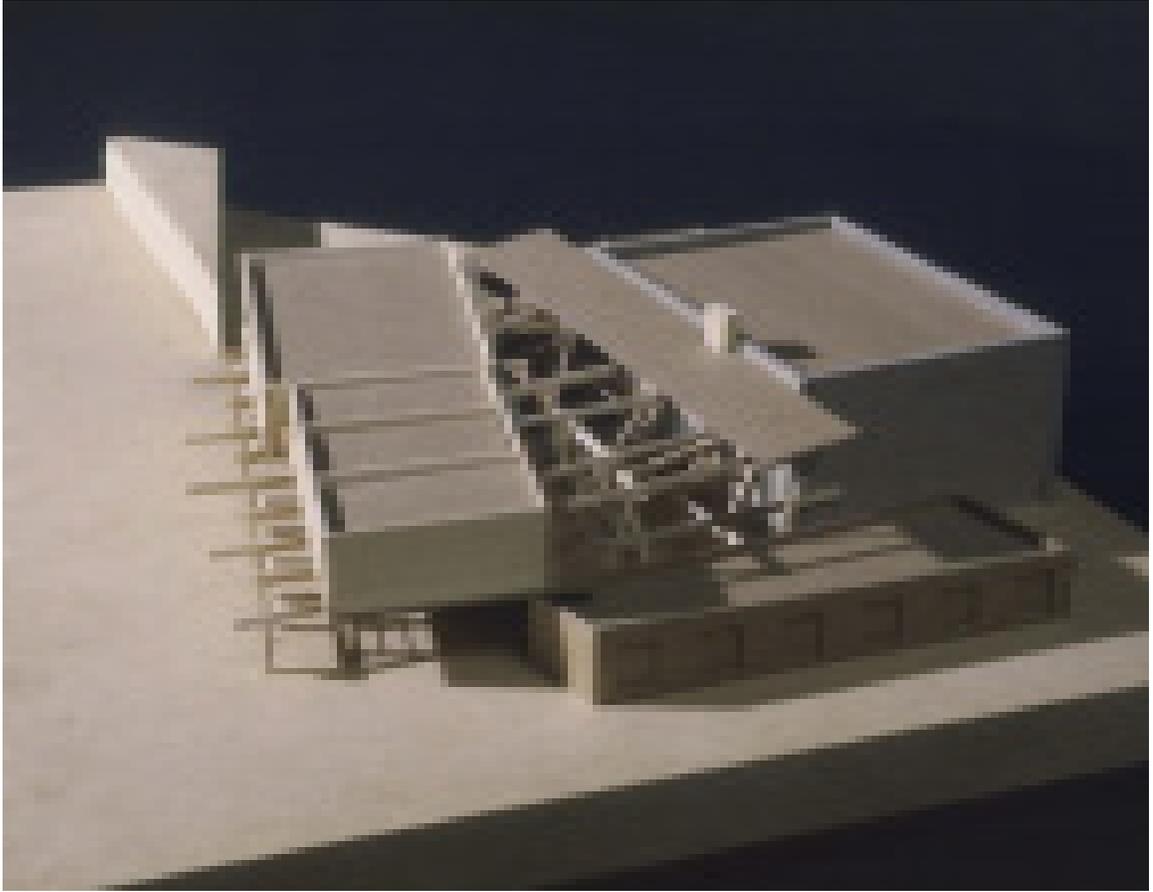
- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Gymnasium | 13. Library (2nd floor) |
| 2. Computer Room | 14. Multi-purpose Room |
| 3. Art Room | 15. Multi-purpose Room |
| 4. Small Theater (2nd floor) | 16. Classroom (2nd floor) |
| 5. Glass Dance Studio (2nd floor) | 17. Multi-purpose Room |
| 6. Retreat/ Relief Area | 18. Classroom (2nd floor) |
| 7. Restroom/ Showers | 19. Community Cafe |
| 8. Restrooms/ Showers | 20. Entrance |
| 9. Active Corridor/ Spine | 21. Relief/ Retreat Processional |
| 10. Pocket of Gathering | 22. Currie Park |
| 11. Administrative Offices | 23. Workstations |
| 12. Multi-purpose Room | |



South Elevation - View From Park

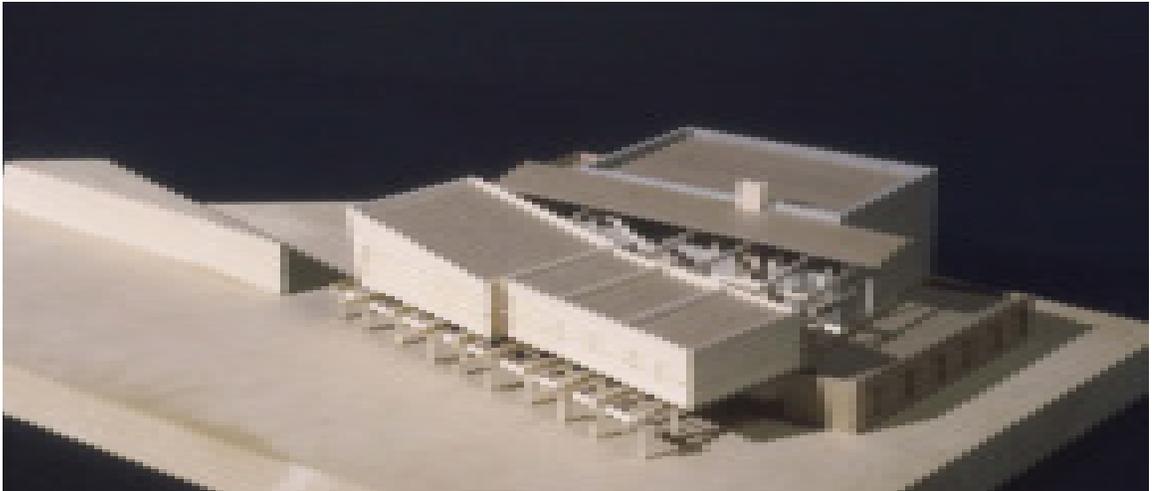


West Elevation

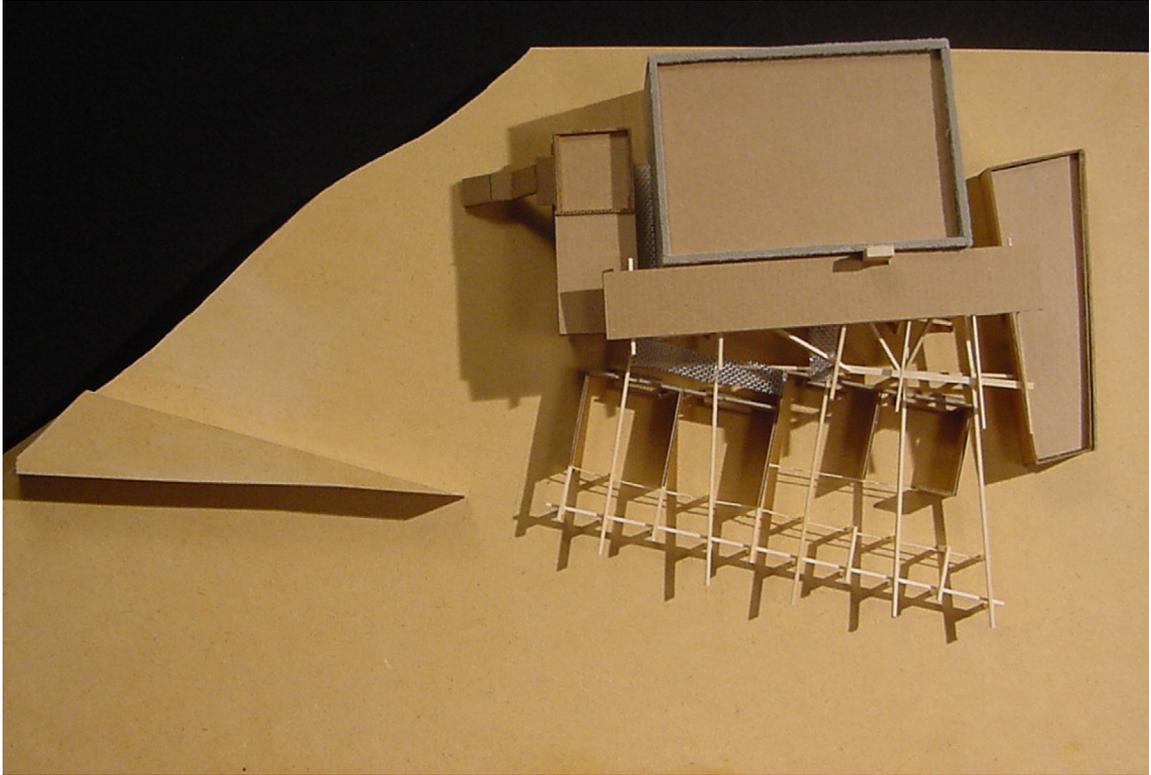


Final Model

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Final Model Aerial Shot - Integration of the five design principles

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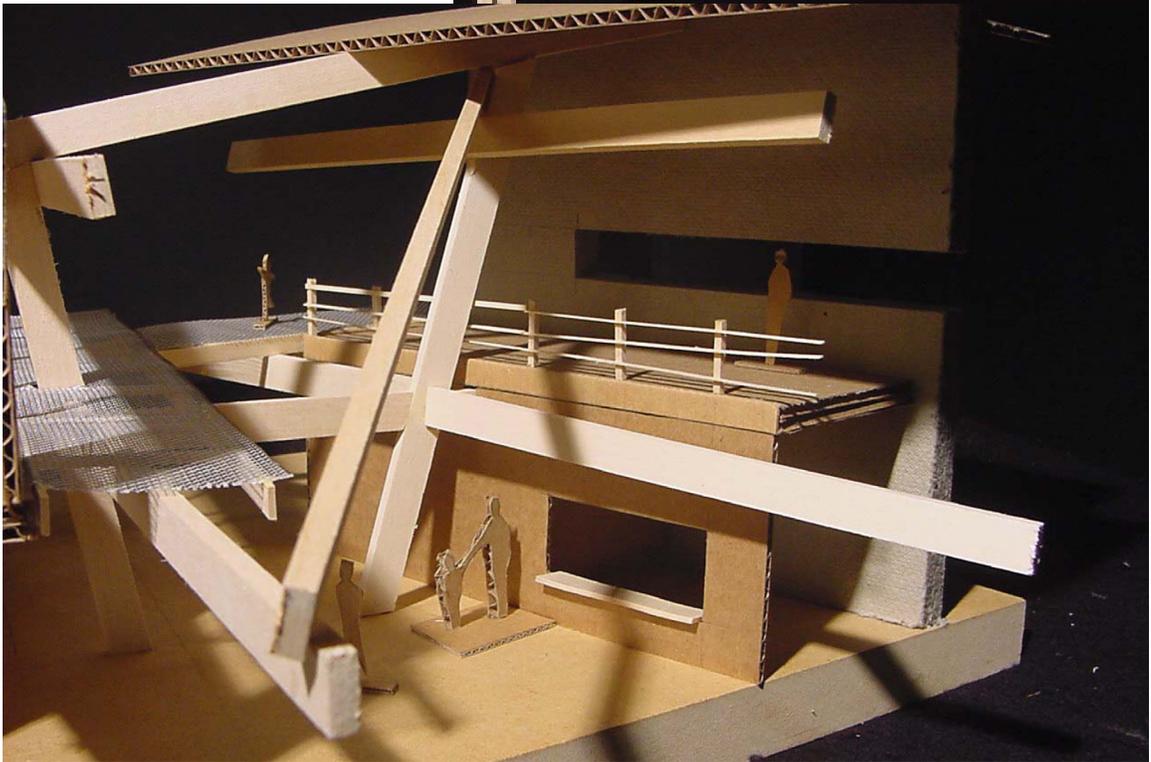
Final Model View From Currie Park

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Spatial Intensity

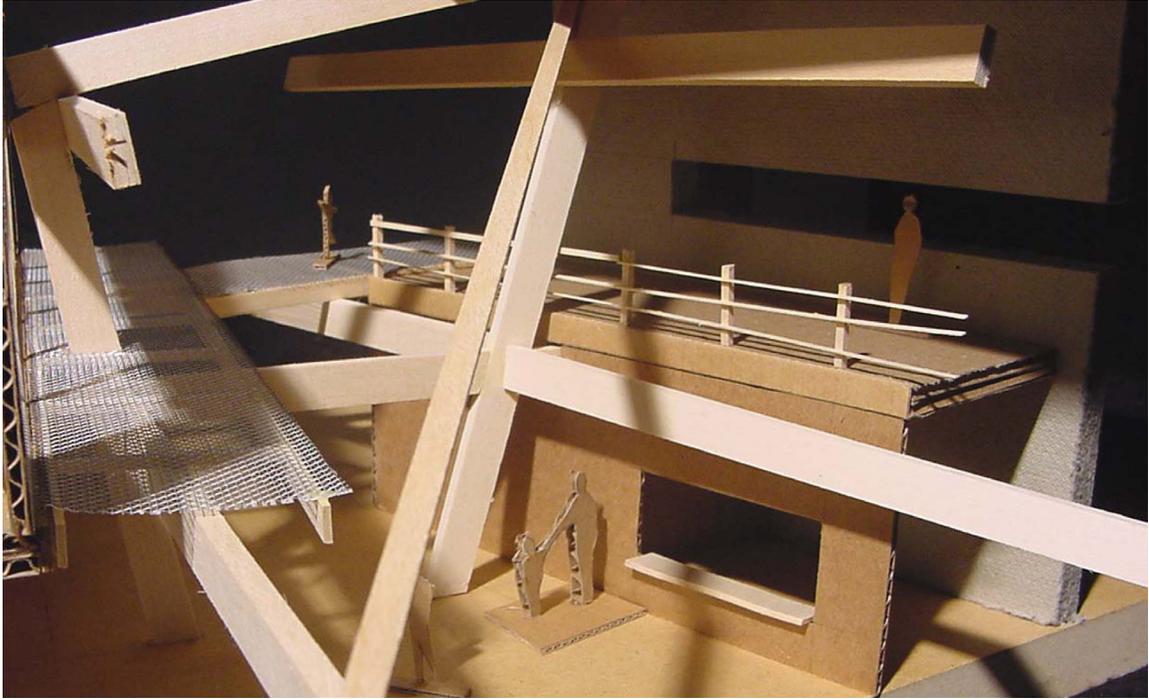
Part of what made this process, in my opinion, successful was building what I felt and actually getting inside the spaces through the use of models. This section model was key to allowing people to see the space and obtain an understanding of the spatial intensity I sought to create. The sectional model is a cut at the western end of the building and shows the spatial relationship between the gym, the active corridor, columns, the library and the catwalk that is the primary means of circulation

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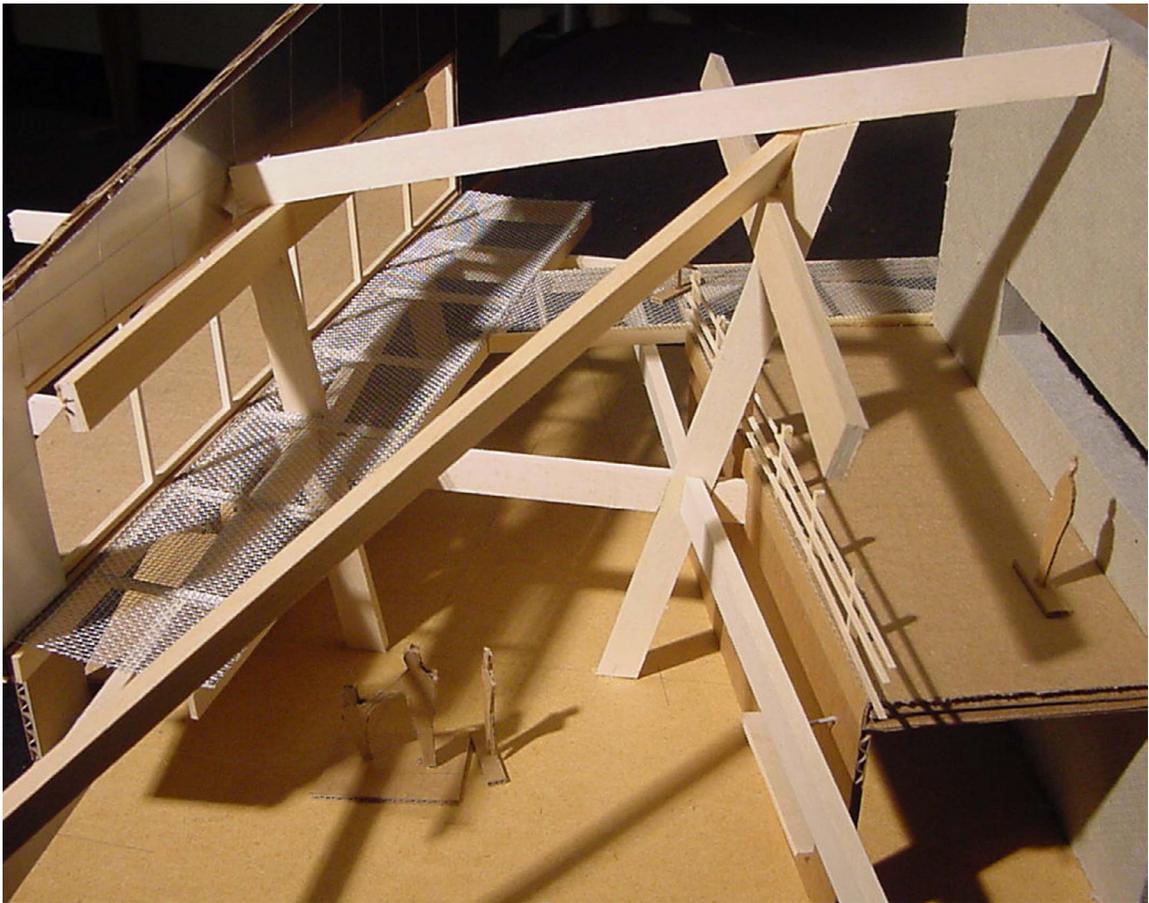
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Section Model - Spatial Intensity

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Section Model - Spatial Intensity

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Conclusion

Community is a special thing. Many people live in neighborhoods but are not a part of a community. This is what makes this neighborhood so special. A strong urban community deserves a community center that has a strong presence and evokes the identity of the community. I feel my design of an urban community center identifies directly with the community at and resonates the identity and character of the community. This community will continue to evolve and change as it has over the years as will the space I designed to accommodate the community.

Notes

1. An interview with Linda Bryant director of the Brian Coyle Community Center was conducted on January 31, 2001
2. An interview with Ralph Rapson was conducted on March 1, 2001

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