

Architecture: Corpus Vivus

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PRECIS

The first semester, first year studio of a Bachelor of Architecture program is the topic of this paper. This initial studio positions the beginning student at the inaugural moment of an ideal city, engaging in the mapping of the city and its constituent elements, in order to "*reveal those primary ideas from which a true understanding of architectural forms would spring*" (Rykwert 1984, 28).

Alberti tells us "that the security, dignity, and honor of the republic depend greatly on the architect." (1988, 5) Alberti begins his treatise with a discussion on the appropriate siting of the city, a tradition traced back through Vitruvius to Hippocrates. Once the city site is established, architecture brings the city to life. The introduction of architecture, therefore, as a living medium begins with the city. Subsequent documentation of sites; locally significant buildings; and the development of proposals for the fundamental buildings, public and private, guide the student toward an intimate understanding of the living body of architecture.

The introduction of architecture through the city attempts to reveal architecture in its living state. Many kinds of knowing depend on the anatomical section in order to reveal internal works. Most first year studios take a similar approach to the body of architecture, introducing compositional canon or building elements through slices of the body, abstracted and represented independently. Marco Frascari describes Giulio Camillo's effort to assemble an encyclopedia of human knowledge believing that "anatomical cutting was the original way of discovering wisdom." (1991, 26)

The power of using the human body as a central means of understanding the world comes directly from our own intimate knowledge of the active, living being. When the medical student studies human tissue, she is already familiar with the living body. The body of architecture presented through anatomical slices suffers from this dissection.

Architecture is largely unfamiliar to beginning students, and its presentation through the dissections represented in drawings and photographs can not introduce the totality of the living body. The experience of architecture itself is the most powerful means of bringing the subject to life. Once

made vital, the body can be studied through dissection to reveal its connections. Since few students have experienced architecture in its potency, the task of breathing life into the body is the instructor's.

Through the city, architecture comes to life. The city is the most explicit manifestation of architecture's link to culture. Architecture is both the expressive device and the manifestation of culture. In this arena, the life of architecture is most evident. The city then informs all subsequent efforts; the relationship of the architect to the city as well as to the intellectual legacy of architecture theory gives the beginning designer a point of origin to which all ideas return and can be measured.

PROJECTS

The city is introduced through site visits and the analysis of historical cities accomplished through mapping. The first project draws upon the colonial cities of the Caribbean because those cities exemplify the most essential encounter of an idea with reality, as the colonists built communities, often conceived and drawn in Europe, in the wilderness of the New World. The learning which took place historically is keenly felt and is reflected in a design method in which abstract concepts confront the reality of building- gravity, force, materials, and the physical world.

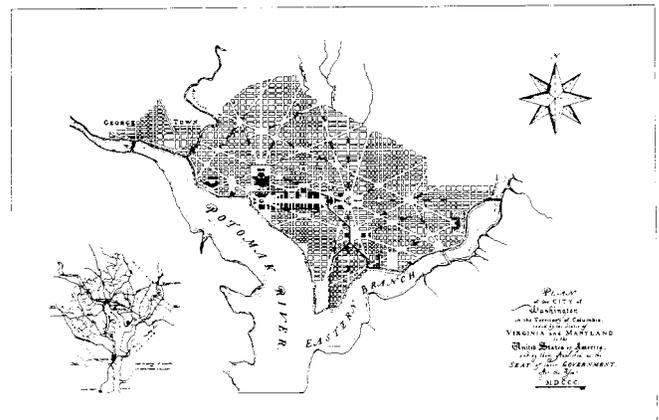


Fig. 1. Washington D.C., Mark Rupp

The responsibility of the architect to the culture, then, is tangibly demonstrated to the students through the relationship of buildings to the city, and the city to nature. The understanding of a region's history, geography and architecture through the paradigm of its foundation establishes an intellectual context for architecture as civic art. The interplay of the ideal and the real, the local and the universal, generates a challenging set of questions which can guide the development of a lifelong individual enterprise and subsequently enrich the profession at large.

The second and third projects are composed of three aspects. First, students engage in documentary drawings of the site which include immediate conditions of landscape, topography and architectural context as well urban and regional conditions, through which aspects of the city, such as the towers of Miami might enter the frame of the site drawing to demonstrate their larger impact. Next, where possible, students visit, measure and draw buildings of significance to the life of the community and city. Finally, each student develops a building proposal for the site.

The topics of the design proposals consider the two Vitruvian divisions of building, "public buildings on public sites" and "the setting out of private buildings," (1983, 33). The first project is a house which includes extended family in order to re-focus the role of architecture in the city on the small city which is the extended family. The final project is an assembly hall which is composed of interior and exterior meeting space. The public life of architecture is then brought full circle as the final project returns to the issues of architecture in the civic realm.

THE FOUNDING OF THE CITY

Strategically, the mythical accounts of origins of buildings and cities provide the foundation for critical analysis and theoretical proposals. Joseph Rykwert explains in his book, *On Adam's House in Paradise*, that the "*return to the preconscious' state of building, or . . . the dawn of consciousness*," is designed to reveal fundamental truths which will guide architectural principles. (28)

The return to the inaugural moment of the city places architecture within a larger ordering of the world, an order which ultimately relates human and cosmological history. The treatises studied in the coordinated theory course offer interpretations of the principal relationships between humans and culture, and correspondingly, the role of human effort in nature. The accounts of the origins of cities, mythical and actual, reveal civic identity. The role of Romulus and Remus in the founding of Rome, for example, is integral to Vergil's invention of Roman history. Filarete invented the inaugural moment for *Sforzinda* and supplied the legends and symbols which established its importance.

In the founding of American cities, William Penn's hopes for the ideal town are laid forth in his squares and avenues for Philadelphia and Pierre L'Enfant represented his vision of the new Republic in his plan for Washington, DC (figure 1)

The *consecratio* of a city opens to examination the prospect of architecture as the means by which a particular civilization is promoted. The engagement of the pre-existing culture, the new imported culture, and nature itself presents a certain purity of model which reveals architecture in its ideal state- alive, dynamic and expressive.

The condition of the evolving city, beginning either as wilderness or initially settled by natives and then eventually re-settled as a colonial city, as it attempts to reconcile European intention and the American condition, presents important models. Each student selects a city through which to study the relationship between the intention of the city's founders and its physical form. In order to guide the students through the search for, and study of primary materials, faculty review students' working files of all research materials. An accompanying workshop on research methods provides a structure to assist students with this effort. The rewards of scholarly discovery are demonstrated in the final presentation drawing.

Each student selects a view to represent which reveals their own understanding of the relationship of the organization of the city, its founding principles, its landscape and architecture. The drawing of Caracas (figure 2), for example, considers the conditions of the rivers, mountains, sea and the quadrant of the city laid out like the encampment of a Roman legion. The map of St. Augustine (figure 3) looks beyond the city's inception as a military outpost which protected Spanish trade routes to the development of the civilian community and its town center. The role of architecture as a dynamic force which reveals history, culture and place establishes the groundwork for the act of building.

THE HOUSE

The first project of urban documentation and subsequent discussion on the relationship between the design of the city and the disposition of its architecture provides the foundation for the design of a community for an extended family which includes a middle-aged couple, their three young children, elderly parents, and guest quarters. The project consists of three distinct phases of design.

First, teams of students study the site and then engage in broader research on regional, historical examples. Finally, the work is coordinated into a proposal for a design studied and represented through a bass wood model and ink drawings. The second workshop teaches basic model building skills to assist in design development and presentation.

The first project of the city influences the documentation of the site as site plans extend to include the civic landmarks. Elevations also extend to represent urban conditions (figure 4). The understandings of the relationship between a private dwelling and its larger community remains a central issue.

The characteristics of the immediate site are then defined more specifically in both plan and elevation. The drawings selected come from different teams of students in order to

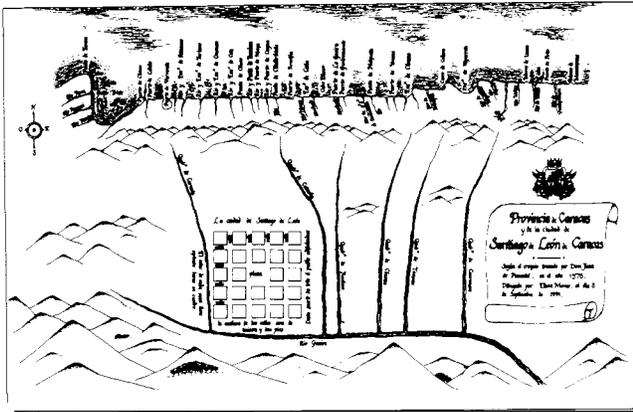


Fig. 2. Caracas 1578, Eileen Morreo

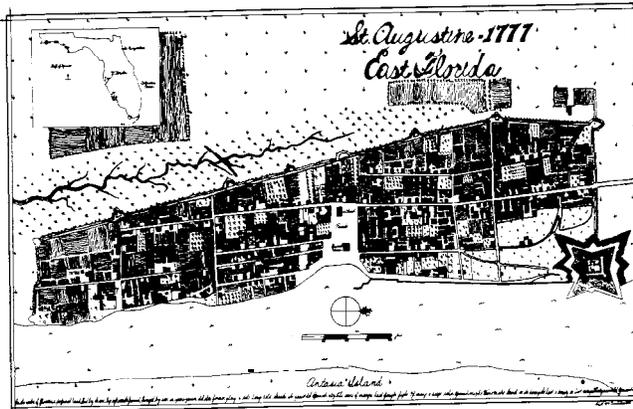


Fig. 3. St. Augustine 1777, Rose Compaigne

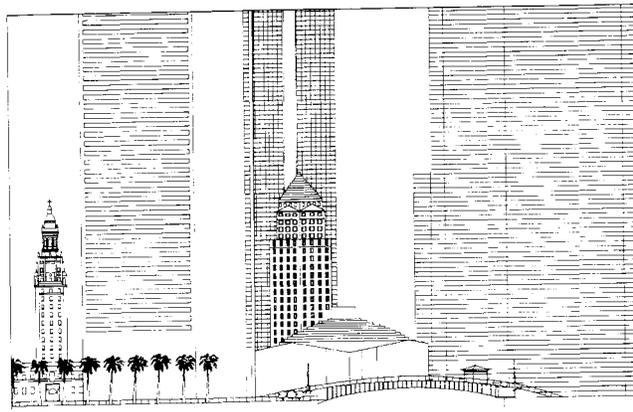


Fig. 4. Site Section/City, Candace Ritacco, Sean Beasley, Chris Groves, Eric Jassin

give a full range of what is accomplished through the process of documenting the project site.

Students first come to understand the relationship of city and site in which each affects the other. Further, the process of mapping makes tangible the specifics of plant material and delineation of property boundaries as well as topography (figure 5). Once considered and drawn, the elements are engaged through design. Architecture in its immediate and urban context reinforces the understanding of architecture as a dynamic force in the building of the city.

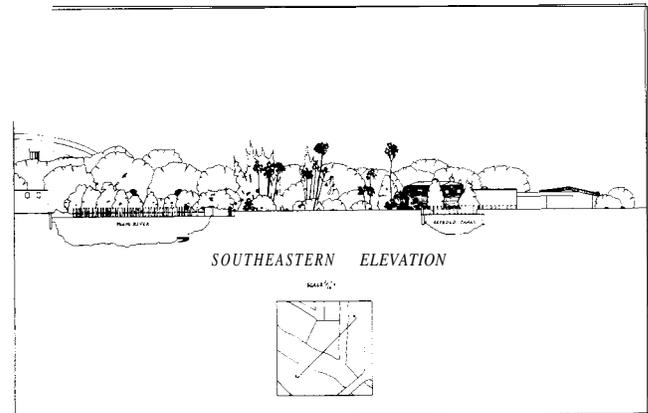


Fig. 5. Site Section, Amy Garland, Ale Hijazi, Anthony Koehler, Laura Ennering

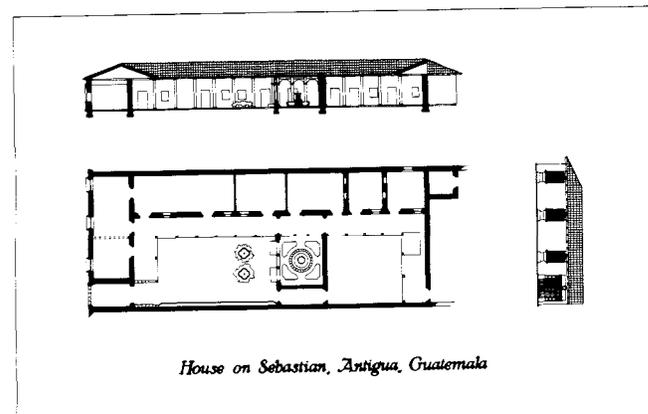
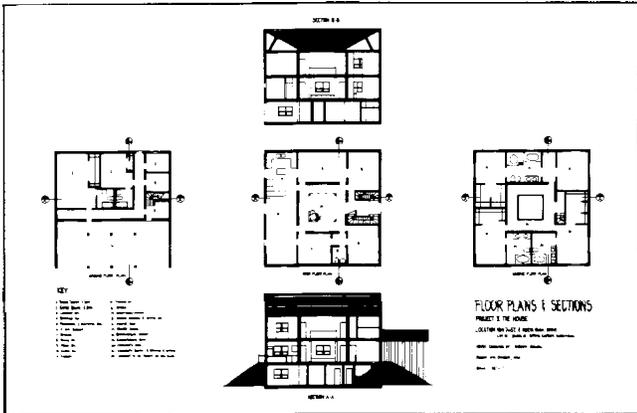


Fig. 6. House, Antigua, Haydee Fernandez

The second exercise involves a study of dwellings whose origins relate to the conditions of the site. The colonial cities continue to be studied for examples and local examples expand the experience of analysis to direct physical experience. The example included, the house on San Sebastian Street in Antigua, Guatemala (figure 6) represents the encounter of a previously held model with a colonial landscape. The relationship of an individual house to the larger city and landscape carries the study of architecture in the city to a defining moment through which the student engages issues of material and form.

Having seen the body alive and active, and proffered a proposal to contribute to that body, the student is prepared and motivated to examine analytically and anatomically. The project shown represents one student's vision of the house set amidst a quadrant of orange trees, intersected by a quadrant of key lime trees and offering a series of interior and exterior spaces which assemble the diverse members of the family. (figures 7,8)

The issues of building elements and compositional canon emerge through the engagement with the material of architecture. The larger vision which links every architectural act to the community, if not the city, is present in the disposition of parts. The building itself has credibility as a material figure as well as in its life in the city.



Figs. 7-8. Student Proposal, Stefan Russell

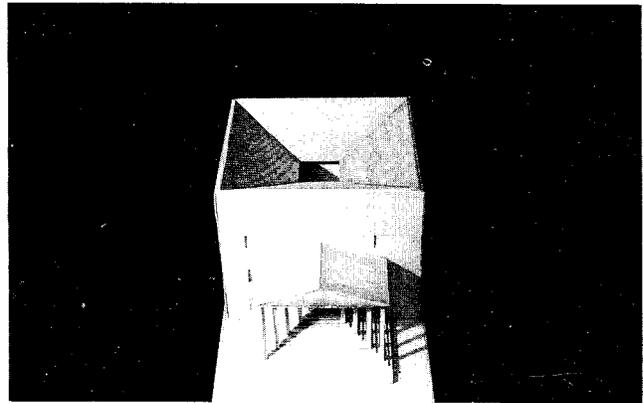
THE PUBLIC BUILDING

The last project is structured through a series of encounters which parallel the project of the house. Students begin as a team exploring the site and setting out a series of views on the role of the site in the city as represented in plans and elevations (figure 9). The analysis of a related building focuses more specifically on locally significant public buildings.

The scale of the house and the students' own diverse backgrounds assured that most students had direct experience either in the present or the past with the historic house they studied. The role of the public building extends beyond many student's own experience thus requiring first hand, direct experience. The need to understand how a specific building becomes important to the community is met through the experience of field research and the preparation of measured drawings taken from life. The scale of the local building subjects varies, from the Coral Gables Water Tower (figure 10) which offered citizens of the 1920's the opportunity to view the city from a lofty perch and remains a landmark today, to the diminutive first schoolhouse (figure 11) of Coconut Grove in which the city's first citizens met and educated their children.

Each student then continues individually to develop a proposal for a new meeting house for a site next to the "Freedom Tower" of downtown Miami to be represented through ink drawings, as well as a bass wood model and a succinct project statement. A final workshop on writing about architecture, conducted by a resident architecture journalist completes the workshop series which parallels the studio with related skill development.

The proposal shown (figures 12-15) establishes an urban garden, a public plaza and an assembly hall which reiterates the importance of the building in the expression of the city. The proposal offers an architectural solution which can now be subjected to the critical and anatomical dissection of its parts, but it is evident in the solidity of structure and interplay of interior and exterior space in plan and section that its first year author has an understanding of the power and life of architecture.



CONCLUSION

A paleontologist builds a proposal for a living creature from the imprints the creature has left in the world of its feet, skin, bones, teeth, and its eggs. The bones themselves when discovered yield further information through their shape,

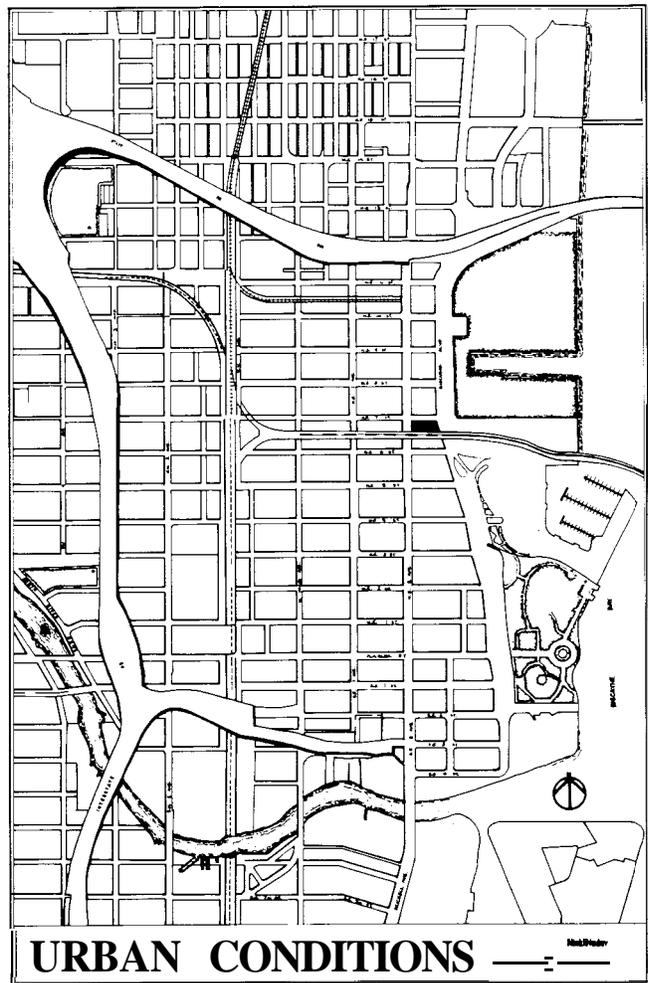


Fig. 9. Urban Conditions, Joel Evans, Nick Nedev, Alex Silva, Pierre Francillon

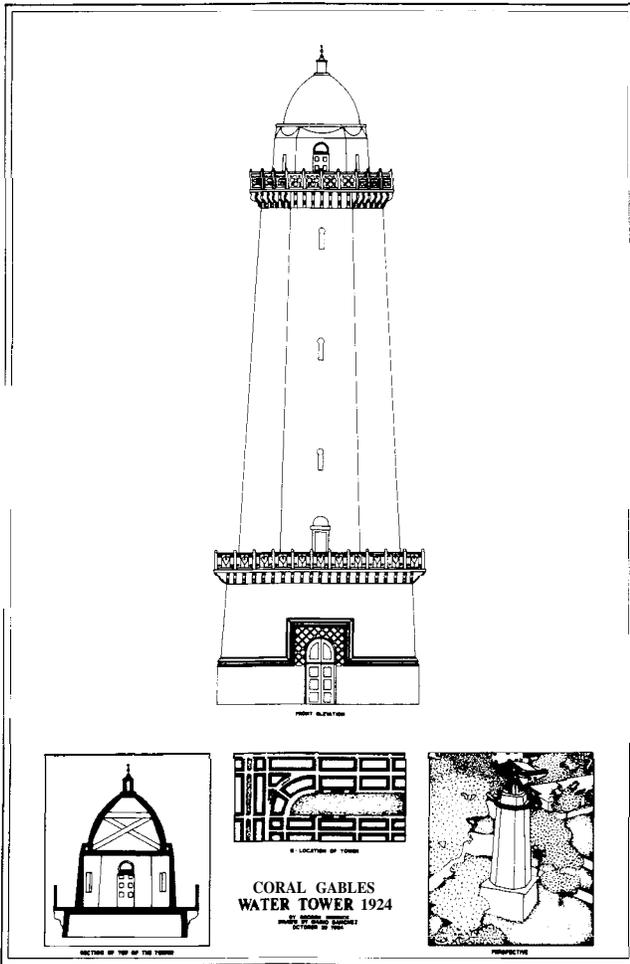


Fig. 10. Coral Gables Water Tower, Mario Sanchez

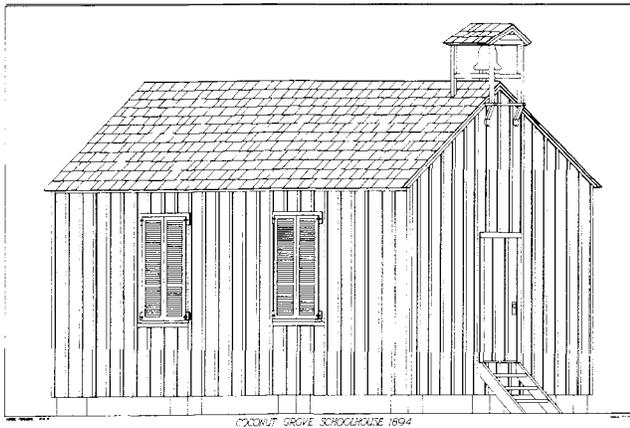
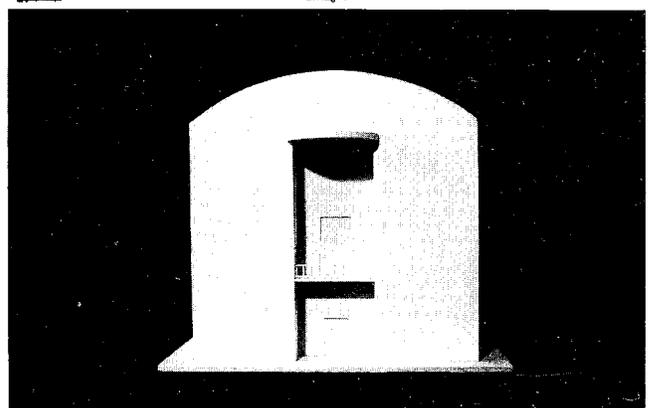
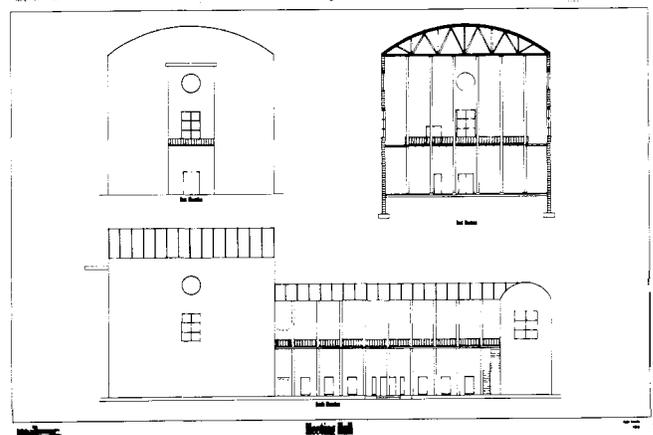
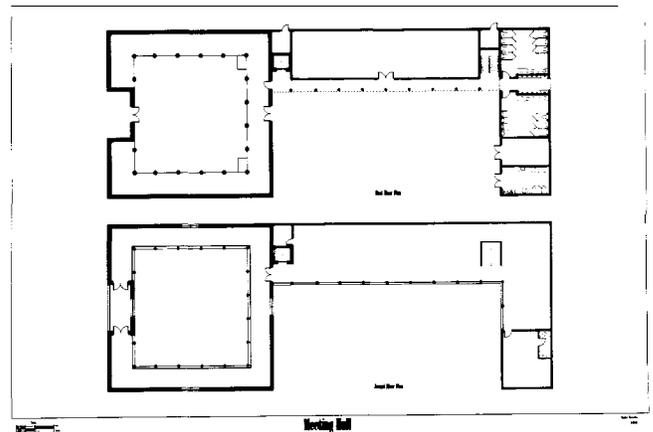
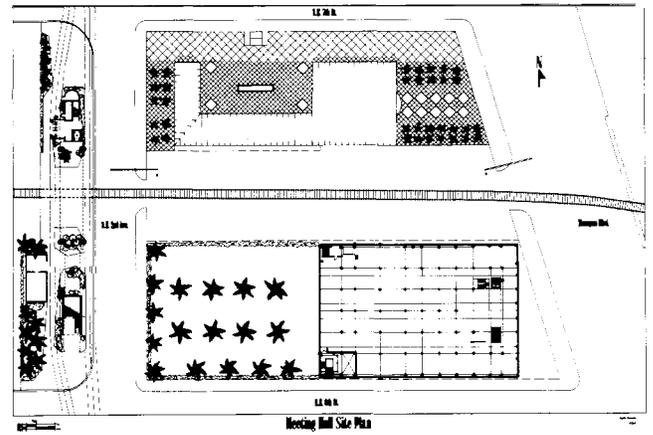


Fig. 11. Coconut Grove School House, Haydee Fernandez

dimension and markings. Stephen Spielberg portrayed the attraction these ancient creatures hold and imagined the risks one might concede in order to study the living creatures.

Architecture is not a dinosaur, yet students are routinely asked to conjure creatures from small bits of evidence as if its life had long since ceased. The harm that results from this process of beginning with fragments is that the student may never reach the wholeness or beauty of life. Marco Frascari



Figs. 12-15. Student Proposal, Haydee Fernandez

in a footnote to his work, *Monsters of Architecture*, comments that the "architecture produced within the institutional setting is also monstrous because it originates from uncertain unions" (1991, 124). Extrapolating from Filarete's notion of the architect as mother, Frascari believes it is the uncertain paternity, the "unknown vagrants, perhaps picked up from fashionable architectural magazines," which make it "very difficult for students to become successful in developing nontrivial designs" (1991, 125).

The prospect of introducing architecture through the city establishes a context which has provided a site for understanding and expression since the writings of Vitruvius. Architecture at work in the city reveals its life as well as its inner structure. The restoration of architecture's ancient base as an urban life form opens the possibilities for students to know architecture as an expressive medium.

This studio began with the inaugural moment of a colonial city because of the analogous condition to Miami which is in the continual process of reinventing itself and which has forgotten the disposition of its original settlement. The city recurs throughout as students examine urban conditions for private and public buildings. The architecture which emerges from this process addresses the immediate context of the project and the larger context of the city, its geography and its history. Each project speaks not only of itself but the world from which it has come and the world it seeks to create.

It is important for the youngest students to understand the legacy of architecture's past, not as a collection of styles and

types but as a living whole which created the places of human history. The building programs, the private dwelling and the public place of assembly, from which these students work are also elemental. The lessons that emerge come not from fantastic programs with literary aspirations but from the every day experience of living in shelter and meeting one's colleagues. These fundamental endeavors come as close as the modern world offers to truth and offer the student the veracity of actions well taken, places well built, dreams yet to be realized.

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