

e VALU(E) ation + The Urban Relief

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ABSTRACT

Defining the current urban condition as lacking a definitive set of values and recognizing that present systems of authorities have marginalized both spatial quality and collective interests in the city, one finds the role of architects and urban designers in the act of building to be increasingly dominated. The premise that architectural knowledge has the potential to guide the process of building, and specifically that evaluation is central to the process of design, lends promise to restoring formal and cultural values in the urban environment. In response, the **urban relief model** is examined as the visual tool by which the stated problem may be addressed and the process of evaluation may advance a more responsible interpretation through design.

PROBLEM

The current urban condition may be defined as lacking an expression of definitive, common, or recognizable system of values which have the potential to render cities with a sense of order and degree of sophistication. Specifically, the structure or *formal content* of the contemporary city is marked by the proliferation of objects and neglect of fabric while the meaning or *cultural significance* of the city is increasingly characterized by transitory happenings which have perhaps eclipsed a more stable existence.

Present systems of authorities that control design and the construction industry have tendencies to position immediate and special interests above long term collective considerations. Furthermore, the demands of the present, disregard the importance of the past and ignore the qualities necessary for a sustainable future.

While the ability to operate in a multidisciplinary setting is acknowledged as an inevitable aspect of architectural academia and professional practice, the role of architects and urban designers within this milieu is yet ill defined and generally addressed in isolation.

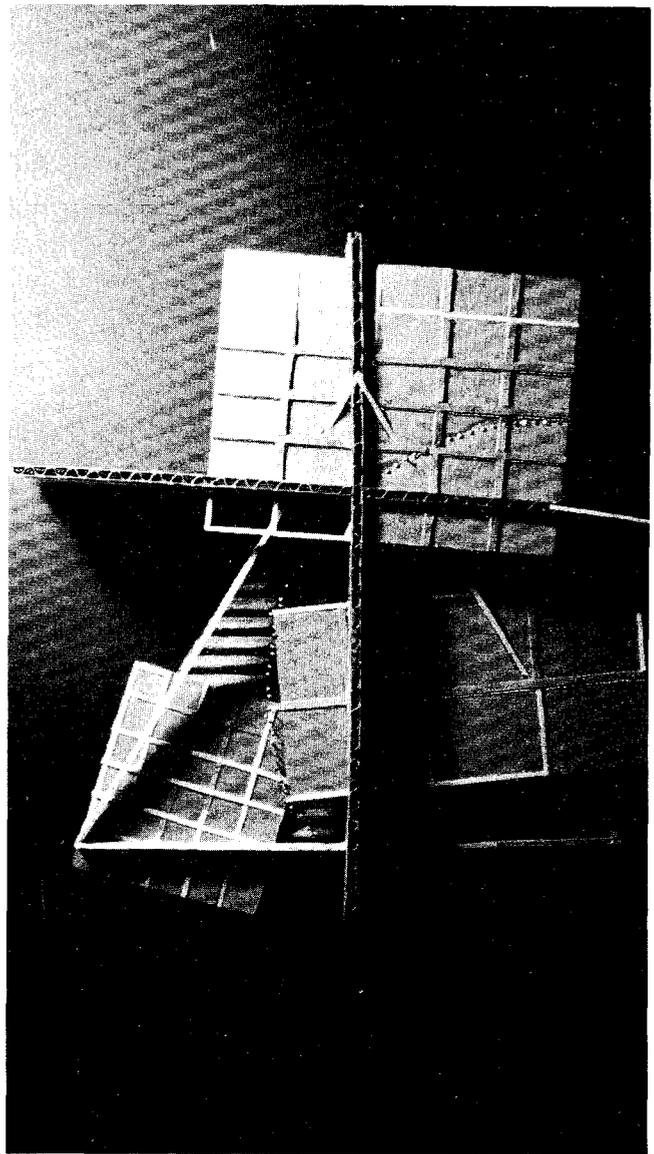


Figure 1. Urban relief model of Bologna, Italy, by pre-college architecture student Orlando Rockwell.

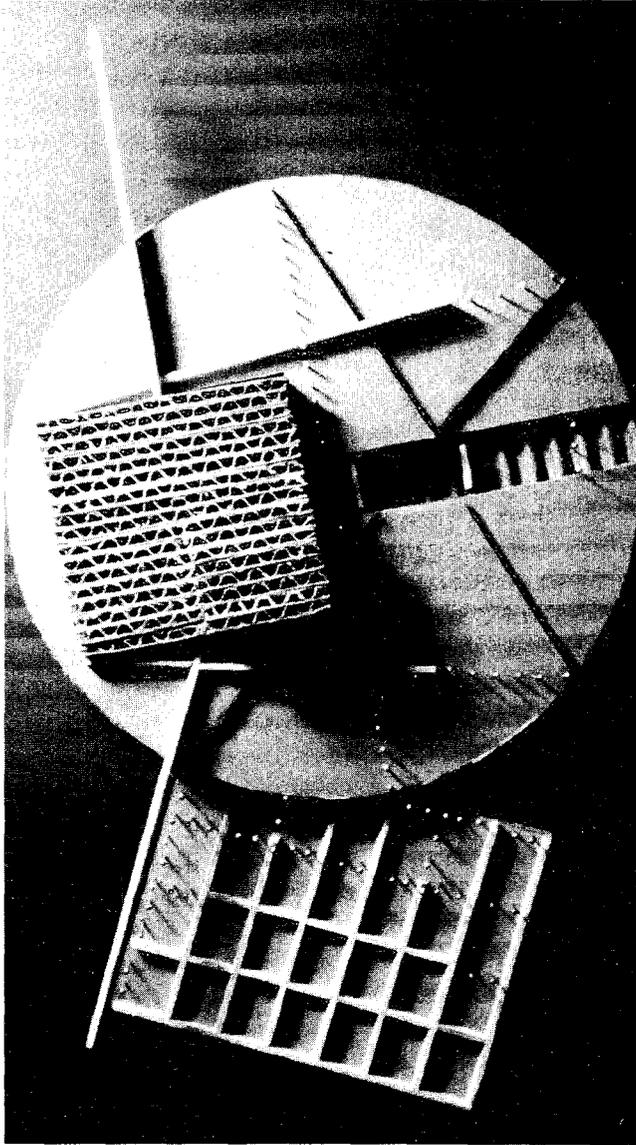


Figure 2. Urban relief model of Berlin, Germany, by pre-college architecture student Garrick Lim.

PREMISE

Among the complex assemblage of participants in the building process, architects and urban designers maintain an expertise in form making which may be regarded as their only remaining and unique domain. As such, the architects' and urban designers' task becomes to create a critical awareness of the fundamental importance of architectural knowledge in synthesizing other problems of social, political, and economic character. Asserting that successful design embodies issues and reflects consequences of other disciplines, re-centers the authority of architects and urban designers within the current professional context and acts as the foundation for complex problem solving.

The architect as a peripheral participant in the contemporary process of building denies the potential of formal arguments to be pivotal in the successful production of space.

The restrictive role of the architect as design consultant in the future process of building also denies the potential of design problem solving techniques to direct other professions and avenues of inquiry. Architectural knowledge and representation must therefore, emerge as the basis from which other systems of thought are registered.

More specifically, within the body of architectural knowledge, the process of evaluation must be encouraged that focuses on establishing a system of values to define collective goals for the built environment. Maintaining values (both formal and cultural) becomes a central concern to which design and supporting issues must respond.

The act of evaluation follows a thorough analysis of existing conditions where critical urban issues are identified and examined as separate entities. Evaluation determines the hierarchical structure and relationship between and among

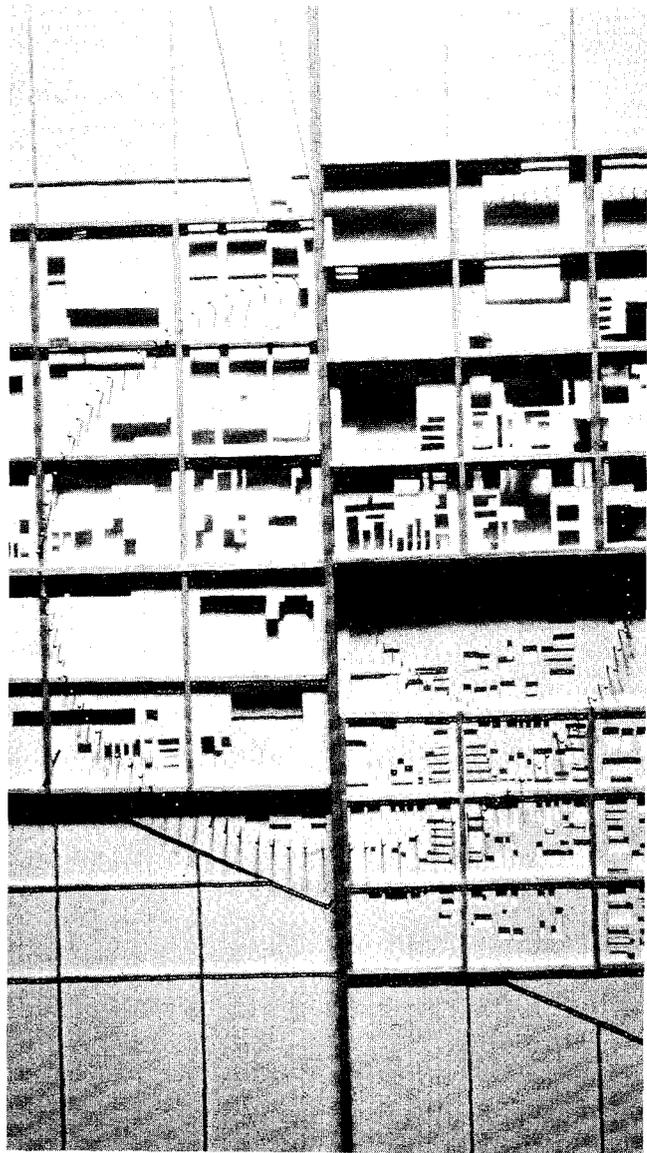


Figure 3. Urban relief model of Pittsburgh's southside by second year architecture students Vince Bahk, Paul Miller, and Nobu Nakaguchi.

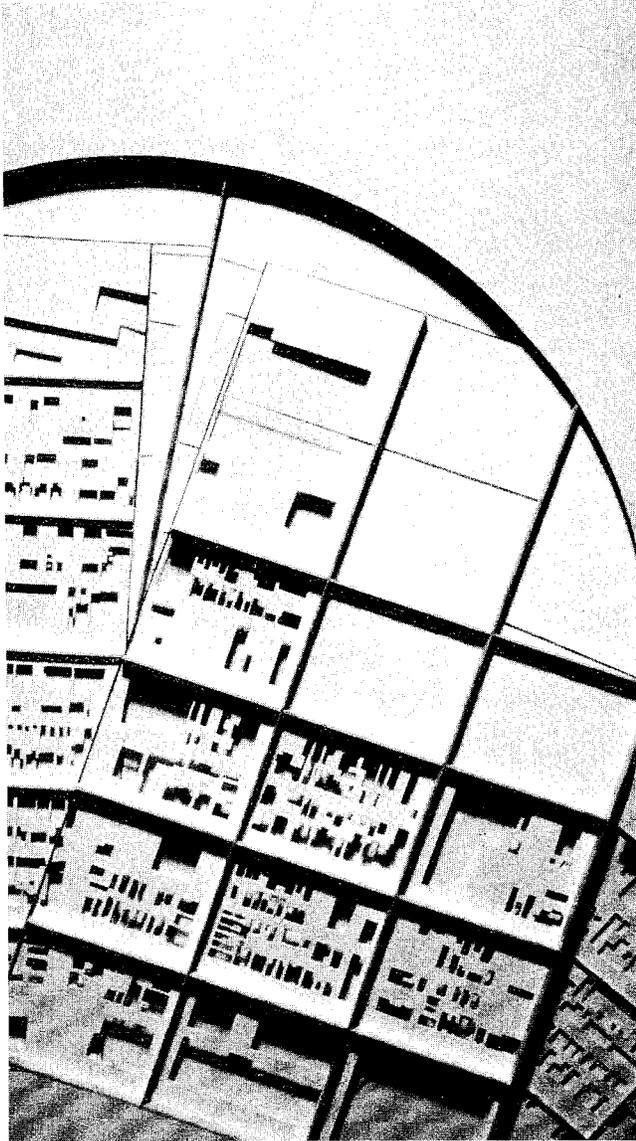


Figure 4. Urban relief model of Pittsburgh's southside by second year architecture students Jeff Anglada, Kelly Doctor, and Jonathan Kline.

the various issues. From this, conceptualization develops where improvements may be prescribed through the building program.

RESPONSE

While present systems of zoning codes are deterministic for the urban environment and protect the value of space in terms of use, the adoption of a formal (or compositional) code could ensure the spatial value of urban space. The generation of the code through analyzing the existing condition of the city serves to identify unique properties of a given place. Employed as an ordering device, the code aims at substantiating a respect for the existing space and suggests appropriate extensions or continuity, without compromising the necessity for growth and change.

A visual tool that 're-configures' information from the code - the **urban relief model** - positions the process of evaluation between the *abstraction* of a two dimensional analytic drawing and the *interpretation* of a three dimensional formal solution. While the relief is clearly a formal mechanism of evaluation it makes evident the extant layers of social, political, and economic structures within the city and, as such, assists in defining the appropriateness of proposed urban projects.

Conceptualization using the relief model evolves through selective editing, as the process of evaluation forces the choice of urban unity or perpetual disparity.

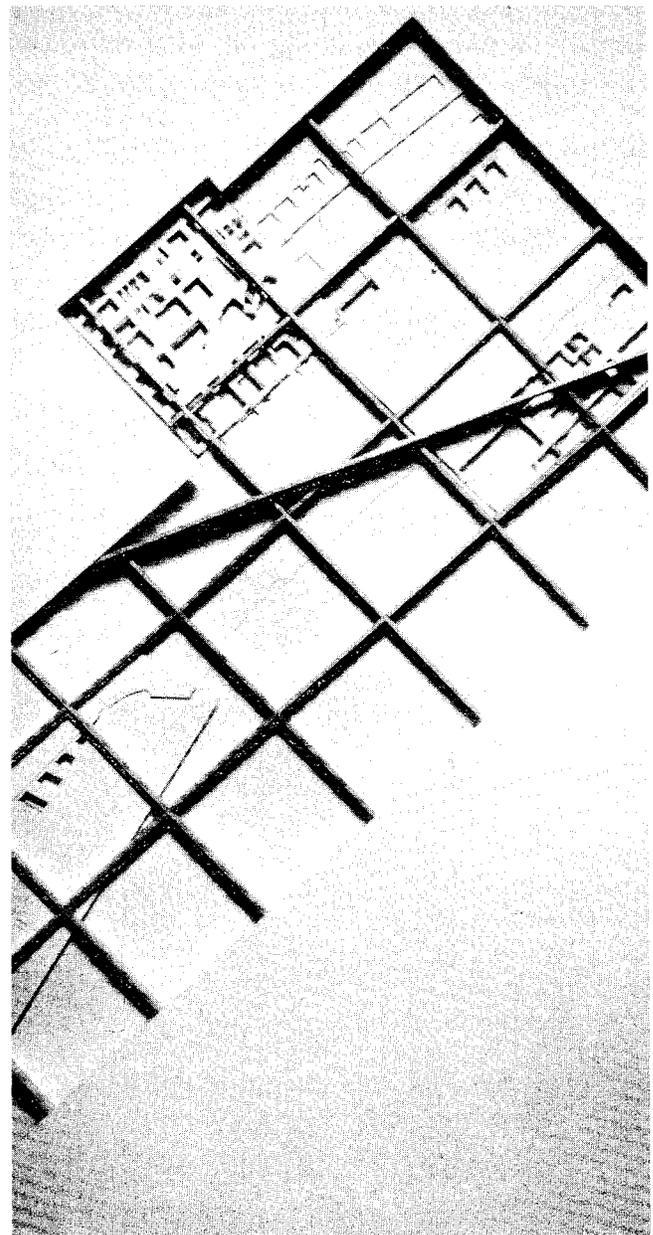


Figure 5. Urban relief model of Pittsburgh from the exhibition "Uncovering Pittsburgh: Architectural Dialogues" by Jacek Dominiczak and Laura Lee.

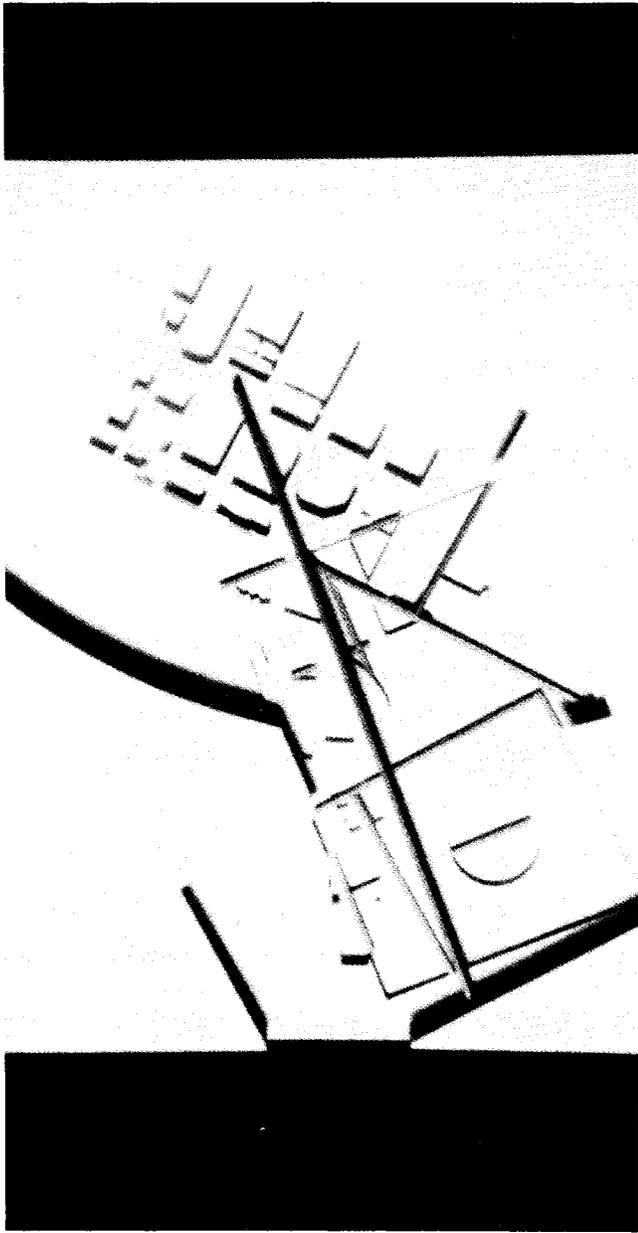


Figure 6. Urban relief model of Pittsburgh from the exhibition "Uncovering Pittsburgh: Architectural Dialogues" by Jacek Dominiczak and Laura Lee.