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An architecture for Wichita

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AN ARCHITECTURE FOR WICHITA

by

RALFE DAVID REBER, JR.

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

AN ARCHITECTURE FOR WICHITA

by

RALFE DAVID REBER, JR.

An improbable relationship exists between monumentality, which is called Apollonian—universal and timeless—and regionalism, which is Dionysian—local and time-specific. A city requires an architecture that is both, an architecture that monumentalizes what is unique about itself and its people. Wichita, Kansas, is a city that sits in the middle of the vast grid of the American Midwest. It also suffers from a sort of identity crisis typical of that region. What images for Wichita should be promoted, and how? An urban design scheme which establishes the Arkansas River as a monument for the city and which reinforces the genius loci of the area is proposed, along with a specific project for a hotel to provide a social forum in the center of the city and show how future building might relate to the scheme.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to my professors in the Rice School of Architecture, who during the past four years have shown much concern for, and interest in, my formation as an architect. They have instilled in me the values that I believe to be crucial in the successful practice of architecture: that a building must be beautiful and that it must work. I am particularly grateful to Professor Anderson Todd for taking a chance at the beginning by letting me into architecture school when I had little demonstrable proof of my interest in, or aptitude for, architecture; and for his guidance in the development of this thesis.

My greatest debt and deepest thanks, however, I owe to my parents for their many years of love and support, and for their helping me to start over in a new career.
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Dorothy, Toto, Aunt Em and Uncle Henry from L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* are among the most enduring characters in American fiction. One reason is symbolic, for they encapsulate values and flavor from America's heartland, a paradoxical place known as the Middle West. This region has intrigued writers from its inception. It was a mixing ground for Yankees and Southerners, its experience has been tied closely to that of America in general, and it frequently is proclaimed to be the nation's real birthplace and cultural core. Such powerful associations ought to have produced a clear regional identity, but none exists. To some the Middle West is a place of idealism and democratic temperament, but to others it is bland, materialistic, and conservative. The overall enigmatic and contradictory regional character remains largely unexplored.¹

Every period has the impulse to create symbols in the form of monuments, which according to the Latin meaning are "things that remind," things to be transmitted to later generations. This demand for monumentality cannot, in the long run, be suppressed... Monumentality derives from the eternal need of the people to own symbols which reveal their inner life, their actions and their social conceptions.²

These two statements point out a dilemma: How can a community whose character is described as enigmatic and contradictory create monuments which celebrate its common life? How can a city like Wichita, whose own citizens seem content with anonymity and mediocrity, ever muster enough enthusiasm to create beautiful architecture? How can a city, isolated in the vast, grided expanse of the Great Plains under a violent sky, a former hotbed of frontier rowdiness and Progressive activism, home of entrepreneurial ventures from Mentholatum to Pizza Hut and Learjet, Center City USA and Air Capital of the World, not build monuments to its uniqueness? An architecture which is both monumental and regional seems at first to be at odds with itself, for monumentality reflects that aspect of architecture which is called Apollonian, universal and timeless, while regionalism reflects the aspect of architecture referred to as Dionysian, local and time-specific.

The thesis of this project is that an architecture can be developed for Wichita that is both monumental and regional, despite the improbable relationship that exists between these two qualities.

The first area to be explored here will be monumentality; the second, regionalism; and the third, their synthesis in a specific design project: a grand convention hotel at the foot of Douglas Avenue, with large public areas addressing the riverfront, and which responds to the unique environment and culture of Wichita.

MONUMENTALITY

In their "Nine Points on Monumentality," J. L. Sert, F. Leger, and Sigfried Giedion describe the properties of monuments. Among these are the following:

Monuments are human landmarks which men have created as symbols for their ideals, for their aims, and for their actions. They are intended to outlive the period which originated them, and constitute a heritage for future generations. As such, they form a link between the past and the future...

Every bygone period which shaped a real cultural life had the power and the capacity to create these symbols. Monuments are, therefore, only possible in periods in which a unifying consciousness and unifying culture exists. Periods which exist for the moment have been unable to create lasting monuments...

Today modern architects know that buildings cannot be conceived as isolated units, that they have to be incorporated into the vaster urban schemes. There are no frontiers between architecture and town planning, just as there are no frontiers between the city and the region. Correlation between them is necessary. Monuments should constitute the most powerful accents in these vast schemes...

The people want the buildings that represent their social and community life to give more than functional fulfillment. They want their aspiration for monumentality, joy, pride and excitement to be satisfied... The following conditions are essential for it: A monument being the integration of the work of the planner, architect, painter sculptor, and landscapist demands close collaboration between all of them. This collaboration has failed in the last hundred years. Most modern architects have not been trained for this kind of
integrated work. Monumental tasks have not been entrusted to them...

Sites for monuments must be planned... In [vast] open spaces, monumental architecture will find its appropriate setting which now does not exist. Monumental buildings will then be able to stand in space, for, like trees or plants, monumental buildings cannot be crowded in upon any odd lot in any district.³

Elizabeth Mock, director of the Department of Architecture of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, put the matter precisely in the conclusion of her text for the publication Built in USA: 1932-1944:

'One source of confusion seems to be the shifty word 'monumentality,' which cannot possibly mean the same thing in every country. A totalitarian nation demands buildings which will express the omnipotence of the State and the complete subordination of the individual. When modern architecture tries to express these things, it ceases to be modern, for modern architecture has its roots in democracy. Hitler realized this from the beginning; Mussolini tried to straddle the contradiction, with small success.

'But the problem is not so quickly disposed of, as a democracy needs monuments, even though its requirements are not those of a dictatorship. There must be occasional buildings which raise the everyday casualness of living to a higher and more ceremonial plane, buildings which give dignified and coherent form to that interdependence of the individual and the social group which is of the very nature of our democracy.

'The need is apparent, but the answer is still nebulous. The question of suitable scale is a delicate one, and the old arguments about ornament in modern architecture again become relevant. Can the desired effect be achieved solely through the drama of bold and imaginative structure and the richness of revealed material? More likely it will be through the complete collaboration of architect, city planner, landscape architect, painter and sculptor that the best results will be obtained..."⁴

Summarizing, then, a monumental building should meet the following criteria:

1. It should be a landmark.

2. It should be an expression of the community's cultural identity and of its pride.

3. It should be a collaboration of the architect, planner, landscapist, and artist.

Below are some case studies of monumental buildings in urban environments.

_The Monadnock Building, Chicago:_

Paul Goldberger, in his book, _The Skyscraper_, offers a description of Burnham and Root's Monadnock Building of 1891:

...the Monadnock..., was Root's masterpiece, and it was here that his ideas came together with clarity and strength. The Monadnock, oddly, is not a steel-frame building; it is the last of the great solid-masonry-walled structures, yet it is a skyscraper as surely as any of Sullivan's works. For here the powerful brick walls rise to 16 stories, smooth and clean in a way that must have appeared startling to nineteenth-century eyes. The walls are thick and heavy at the bottom and then, as if to express the diminishing weight they bear as they rise, they taper to thinness. There is no ornament whatsoever—just the gentle curve of the walls, and the shallow billows of rows of bay windows, which serve to emphasize verticality... The overall shape of the building, thanks to the 202-by-68-foot site, is a thin slab, making the Monadnock seem all the more like a much later building. But most important are the walls, monumentally powerful, hand-edged in a way that calls to mind not only much of the industrial brickwork of the later decades of the nineteenth century, but even the abstract minimalism of the twentieth.5

This building, then, represented the new industrial aesthetic of Chicago in its sleek, austere silhouette. Chicago, after all, was the young, dynamic industrial center of the burgeoning Midwest.

_The Woolworth Building, New York:_

Goldberger has much to say about Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building of 1913, comparing it to Gilbert's earlier West Street Building (of 1907):

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...the building that must be considered the masterpiece of [the] eclectic age in New York [was] the Woolworth Building. Cass Gilbert... took on the assignment of designing the world's tallest building as a symbol of one of the world's most successful retail corporations... Woolworth's style was Gothic, a style that Gilbert had begun to explore with a previous attempt at skyscraper design, the West Street Building of 1907. West Street was a massive tower that managed, thanks to Gilbert's delicate detailing, to give an impression of considerable lightness. More important even than physical weight, however, was verticality—the Gothic style's insistent, almost urgent shouts upward seemed particularly appropriate for the skyscraper. And though Gilbert sought no expression of structure, as Sullivan had, he ended up with it anyway—the vertical piers of West Street, designed as imitations of Gothic structural elements, bear a striking resemblance to Sullivan's own verticals, and the building lifts upward with genuine, if fussy, grace.6

West Street was an essay toward the full idea realized in Woolworth, where the excessive ornamental activity of the West Street façade is toned down, subdued into an even, serene vertical expression. It is not literally Gothic—there is obviously no medieval model for it—but it is zealously Gothic in its details, down to terra cotta gargoyles and buttresses. Most important, if it can be separated from the detail, is the massing. This element makes Woolworth one of the most remarkable skyscrapers ever built—a building so well composed that it is at once perceived as a sheer tower, like Metropolitan Life, and as an urban block set among other urban blocks, like Wainwright. The building's base is a 29-story, U-shaped mass... Rising from the center of the front is a square tower, which sets back twice before the top, where it culminates in an ornate pinnacled crown... The slender tower seems... [to be] a natural outgrowth of the base. It is not set back at all from the façade, and the vertical lines of the base shoot upward into the tower, melding the upper and lower masses together. The thin white lines of the terra cotta ornament stream skyward, looking as if they could go on forever.7

The mix of delicacy and strength has an almost Mozartian quality to it, a sense of light, graceful detail applied to a firm and self-assured structure... There was a general sense among architects and critics of the period that at last an architect had done it—had found a way to express height, to create a work that was stylistically appropriate to the new forms.8

6 Goldberger, ibid., p. 42.
7 Goldberger, ibid., p. 42-43.
8 Goldberger, ibid., p. 44.
The skyscraper in the early twentieth century came to represent the aspirations and greatness of American business (and, by association, American culture). Cass Gilbert said,

"To me a skyscraper, by its height which makes its upper parts appear lost in the clouds, is a monument whose masses must become more and more inspired the higher it rises. The Gothic style gave us the possibility of expressing the greatest degree of aspiration... the ultimate note of the mass gradually gaining in spirituality the higher it mounts."\(^9\)

Rockefeller Center, New York:

Rockefeller Center, built in the mid-1930's, represented a new step in urban planning, the nation's first large-scale, privately-financed mixed-use urban renewal project. It was a straightforward plan calling for a tall central tower surrounded by lower buildings with an open plaza in the center. It was a formal, axial plan, symmetrical in its layout and rather Beaux-Arts in feeling, despite the skyscraper that had become the centerpiece.\(^10\)

What emerged was a brilliant blend of Beaux-Arts and modern leanings, a set of towers and plazas and theaters and shops that seem at once to possess a strong, classicizing order and a sense of lively, almost spontaneous urban vitality...\(^11\)

The centerpiece... is the 70-story RCA Building. Its massing was largely the work of Hood, who took the simple slab Reinhard and Hofmeister had projected for the central location and sculpted it into an enormously graceful form. What Hood did was add a series of thin, cascading setbacks to each of the long sides of the slab as well as to its eastern front, setbacks that seemed almost to turn the building into a series of floating planes. It was a purely visual gesture... From the slender east front, the RCA Building appears almost too narrow to make sense at its great height. But here... the setbacks help, by offering a sense of depth and perspective that a purely abstract slab would not have. Equally important to this building's appearance... was the sheathing the architects devised, a skin of vertical strips of Indian

\(^9\) Ditto.
\(^10\) Goldberger, \textit{ibid.}, p. 98.
limestone with dark metal recessed spandrels... the effect [is]
...sleek verticality.12

_The Seagram Building, New York:_

Goldberger calls Mies's Seagram building the high point of the 1950's: a 38-story tower of bronze and glass, set back from Park Avenue on a deep plaza, with green Italian marble rails as benches along its sides and two great fountains in its foreground...

The tower rises sheer, without setbacks. There is a 2-story lobby of travertine, glass-enclosed like the bases of Mies's apartment buildings; ordinary storefronts are banned, and those commercial uses that do exist... are tucked discreetly into the rear...13

Seagram is as refined a glass tower as has ever been built, a temple to reason—a tower built to elucidate the Miesian principles of order, logic, and clarity in all things... Seagram... [stands] as one of the great buildings of the twentieth century. The bronze curtain wall is serene, the proportions are exquisite, and the detailing is as perfect as that of any postwar skyscraper anywhere.14

Phyllis Lambert, who had the building commissioned, characterized the reaction to Mies's monument to modernity with these words:

"Mies forces you in. You have to go deeper. You might think this austere strength, this ugly beauty, is terribly severe. It is, and yet all the more beauty in it."15

_REGIONALISM_

The phenomenon of universalization, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, which might not be an irreparable wrong, but also of what I shall call for the time being the creative nucleus of great

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13 Goldberger, _ibid._, p. 112.
14 Goldberger, _ibid._, p. 112-113.
15 Goldberger, _ibid._, p. 112.
civilizations and great cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life, what I shall call in advance the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind. The conflict springs up from there. We have the feeling that this single world civilization at the same time exerts a sort of attrition or wearing away at the expense of the cultural resources which have made the great civilizations of the past. This threat is expressed, among other disturbing effects, by the spreading before our eyes of a mediocre civilization which is the absurd counterpart of what I was just calling elementary culture. Everywhere throughout the world, one finds the same bad movie, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc. It seems as if mankind, by approaching en masse a basic consumer culture, were also stopped en masse at a subcultural level. Thus we come to the crucial problem confronting nations just rising from underdevelopment. In order to get on to the road toward modernization, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the raison d'être of a nation?... Whence the paradox: on the one hand, it has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revindication before the colonialist's personality. But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past. It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization...


Paul Ricoeur was talking about the subjugation of local national cultures to international modern culture, but he might just as well have been referring to the subjection of regional American cultures to the influence of modern American national culture, for certainly the phenomenon can be illustrated using the example of Wichita. Where once there was optimism, there now exists complacency; where once people were proud of their history, they now are largely ignorant of it; where once people strove for excellence, they now are satisfied with mediocrity. The latter

point is strongly evident in the city's architecture, as a tradition of masterful building has yielded to the most banal, low-budget designs.

In his description of modern cities, Christian Norberg-Schulz could be describing Wichita:

The *character* of the present day environment is usually distinguished by monotony. If any variety is found, it is usually due to elements left over from the past. The "presence" of the majority of new buildings is very weak. Very often "curtain-walls" are used which have an unsubstantial and abstract character, or rather, a lack of character. Lack of character implies poverty of stimuli. The modern environment in fact offers very little of the surprises and discoveries which make the experience of old towns so fascinating [sic]. When attempts to break the general monotony are made, they mostly appear as arbitrary fancies.17

An alternative to this scenario is being proposed: an approach to design that considers a city's environment, history, and culture.

Frank Lloyd Wright, in his book, *An American Architecture*, says,

...Architecture which is really architecture proceeds from the ground[,] and somehow the terrain, the native industrial conditions, the nature of materials and the purpose of the building, must inevitably determine the form and character of any good building...18

Architecture is the triumph of human imagination over materials, methods and men, to put man into possession of his own earth...19

No really Italian building seems ill at ease in Italy. All are happily content with what ornament and color they carry naturally. The native rocks and trees and garden slopes are at one with them. Wherever the cypress rises, there, like the touch of a magician's hand, all resolves into composition harmonious and complete.20

...The true basis for any serious study of the art of Architecture still lies in those indigenous, more humble

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19 Wright, *ibid.*, p. 44.
buildings everywhere that are to architecture what folklore is to literature or folk song to music and with which academic architects were seldom concerned. In the aggregate of these simple buildings lie traits which make them characteristically Italian, French, Dutch, German, Spanish, or English as the case may be. These many folk structures are of the soil, natural. Though often slight, their virtue is intimately related to environment and to the heart-life of the people. Functions are usually truthfully conceived and rendered invariably with natural feeling. Results are often beautiful and always instructive.21

Christian Norberg-Schulz, in his book, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, explores the relationship that exists between man and place, and what it is that makes one locale different from another:

Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment, or, in short, when he experiences the environment as meaningful. Dwelling therefore implies something more than "shelter". It implies that the spaces where life occurs are places, in the true sense of the word. A place is a space which has a distinct character. Since ancient times the genius loci, or "spirit of place", has been recognized as the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life. Architecture means to visualize the genius loci, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man to dwell...22

The place is the concrete manifestation of man's dwelling, and his identity depends on his belonging to places...23

Our discussion of the identity of a place has already brought us close to the problem of constancy and change. How does a place preserve its identity under the pressure of historical forces? How can a place adapt to the changing needs of public and private life? The common laissez faire attitude of today implies a rejection of the first question and a blind acceptance of adaptation to change. We have tried to show, however, that human identity presupposes the identity of place, and that stabilitas loci therefore is a basic human need...24

To respect the genius loci does not mean to copy old models. It means to determine the identity of the place and to interpret it in ever new ways. Only then we may talk about a living tradition which makes change meaningful by relating it to a

21 Wright, *ibid.*, p. 41.
22 Norberg-Schulz, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
set of locally founded parameters. We may again remind of Alfred North Whitehead's dictum: "The art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and change amid order". A living tradition serves life because it satisfies these words. It does not understand "freedom" as an arbitrary play, but as creative participation.25

Below is an example of architecture which is related to a particular place, or regionalist:

Wright in Wisconsin:

Frank Lloyd Wright has come to be the architect most identified with the Midwest. In An American Architecture, he relates his impressions of the Midwestern prairie:

I loved the prairie by instinct as, itself, a great simplicity; the trees, flowers, and sky were thrilling by contrast. And I saw that a little of height on the prairie was enough to look like much more. Notice how every detail as to height becomes intensely significant and how breadths all fall short.26

...the gently rolling or level prairies of our great Middle West; the great rolling prairies where every detail of elevation becomes exaggerated; every tree towers above the great calm plains of flowered surfaces as the plain lies serene beneath a wonderful unlimited sweep of sky. The natural tendency of every ill-considered thing on the prairie is to detach itself and stick out like a sore thumb in surroundings by nature perfectly quiet...27

In our vast country alternate violent extremes of heat and cold, of sun and storm, have to be considered. In the North frost goes four feet into the ground in winter while in summer the sun beats fiercely on the roofs with almost tropical heat. Umbrageous architecture is therefore desirable—almost a necessity both to shade the building from the sun and protect the walls from alternate freezing and thawing. Changes of temperature are more rapidly destructive to buildings than almost all other natural causes. Overhanging eaves, however, leave the house in winter without necessary sun, and this is overcome by the way in which the window groups in certain rooms and exposures are pushed out to the gutter line or eaves perforated to allow sunlight to penetrate.

25 Norberg-Schulz, ibid., p. 182.
26 Wright, op. cit., p. 193.
27 Ditto.
Gently sloping roofs on most of these houses are grateful to the prairie on which they stand as well as to the hills and valleys. They also leave insulating air spaces above the rooms. The chimney has grown and is still growing in dimensions and importance. The kitchen also. In hot weather both features ventilate the whole edifice, being high. Circulating air spaces beneath the roofs are also included, fresh air entering beneath the eaves through openings easily closed in winter.\textsuperscript{28}

Then, specifically regarding his "Wingspread" House of 1937, in Wind Point, Wisconsin, Wright explains:

This structure is of the common prairie type of earlier years; a type proving itself good for a home in the climate around the Great Lakes. The construction is popularly known as brick veneer. Upper surfaces are wide cypress plank, roofs are tiled, floors, concrete with four-foot-square tiles over floor heating, here as in the Administration Building itself...

At the center of four zones forming a cross, stands a spacious wigwam of a living room... Extending from this great, dignified central wigwam are the four wings. This extended plan lies, very much at home, quiet and integral with the prairie landscape which is, through it, made more significant and beautiful. In this case, especially, green growth will eventually claim its own; wild grapevines pendent from the generously spreading trellises, extensive gardens in bloom, extending beneath them, great masses of evergreens on two sides and one taller, dense, dark-green mass set on a low mound in the middle of the entrance court—the single tall associate of the spreading wigwam on the prairie.\textsuperscript{29}

Kenneth Frampton, in his article, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," has set forth some guidelines for designing regional buildings according to the principles of "critical regionalism":

The term critical regionalism is not intended to denote the vernacular, as this was once spontaneously produced by the combined interaction of climate, culture, myth and craft, but rather to identify those recent regional "schools" whose aim has been to represent and serve, in a critical sense, the limited constituencies in which they are grounded...

Such a regionalism depends, by definition, on a connection between the political consciousness of a society and the profession. Among the pre-conditions for the emergence of critical regional expression is not only sufficient prosperity.

\textsuperscript{28} Wright, \textit{ibid.}, p. 194.

\textsuperscript{29} Wright, \textit{ibid.}, p. 167-169.
but also a strong desire for realising an identity. One of the mainsprings of regionalist culture is an anti-centrist sentiment—an aspiration for some kind of cultural, economic and political independence.\textsuperscript{30}

...Critical Regionalism is a dialectical expression. It self-consciously seeks to deconstruct universal modernism in terms of values and images which are locally cultivated, while at the same time adulterating these autochthonous elements with paradigms drawn from alien sources. After the disjunctive cultural approach practised by Adolf Loos, Critical Regionalism recognizes that no living tradition remains available to modern man other than the subtle procedures of synthetic contradiction. Any attempt to circumvent the dialectics of this creative process through the eclectic procedures of historicism can only result in consumerist iconography masquerading as culture...\textsuperscript{31}

If any central principle of critical regionalism can be isolated, then it is surely a commitment to place rather than space, or, in Heideggerian terminology, to the nearness of Raum, rather than the distance of Spatium.\textsuperscript{32}

In specific reference to the work of Alvaro Siza in Portugal, Frampton cites Siza’s "extraordinary sensitivity towards local materials, craft work, and above all, to the subtleties of local light—his sense for a particular kind of filtration and penetration."\textsuperscript{33}

Summarizing, Frampton remarks,

The strength of provincial culture surely resides in its capacity to condense the artistic potential of the region while reinterpreting cultural influences coming from the outside.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{Wichita:}

The next step is to analyze the particular case of Wichita. That the city seems to suffer from a sort of "identity crisis" can apparently be credited to the fact that it is in the Midwest, a topic that has been thoroughly studied by James R.

\textsuperscript{30} Frampton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 148.
\textsuperscript{31} Frampton, \textit{ibid.}, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{32} Frampton, \textit{ibid.}, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{33} Frampton, \textit{ibid.}, p. 150-151.
\textsuperscript{34} Frampton, \textit{ibid.}, p. 156.
Shortridge. In his book, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*, he offers much insight into the "idea" of the Midwest and analyzes its personality and various images, arguing that the identity of the Midwest is virtually inseparable from that of American pastoralism. He goes on to describe the problems that this persistent image creates:

The region has come to stand as a symbol for this important aspect of American culture and thereby has derived a measure of prestige. Concurrently, however, the fitting of a simplified, anachronistic image to an increasingly complex region has produced a host of contradictions, distortions, and misunderstandings... 35

Much has been written about the values attached to this rural image. For most observers it has suggested wholesomeness and self-sufficiency, but others have seen in it a narrow conservatism and a dependency on outside business and governmental interests. Fertile land can reward or even encourage hard work, and seasonal variability may foster planning and resiliency. On the other hand, a harsh environment and isolation on the farm might lead to an embittered, parochial society. Contradictory images of this sort have plagued the Middle West throughout much of its history. They create an uncertain identity, and uncertainty, in turn, inhibits the development of regional pride. Natives of the South, New York, and the Pacific Northwest are said to defend their regions over all objection, whereas Middle-western folk tend to waver between neutrality and outright defensiveness... 36

[There is an] inherent contradiction in a region that is said to be the nation's heartland and yet is afflicted with insecurity... Equally intriguing, and possibly related, is the apparent lack of a historical core for Middle-western culture. Most major American regions have obvious roots. New England owes much of its temperament even today to its puritan heritage; the Southwest, to its Spanish-Catholic and Indian traditions; and the South, to its ruralism and period of independence. The Middle West is more complex. Its early settlers came from Yankee, Middle Atlantic, and Southern cultural traditions on the eastern seaboard, as well as from Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, and Eastern Europe. The agriculture of the region is divided among corn, wheat, and

dairy farming, ranching, and other traditions. Some sections are highly urbanized; others are very rural.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 2-3.}

Over time, this pastoralist face of the United States has become regionalized... [T]he term Middle West initially was coined to describe a particular pastoral setting but... this regional name then quickly came to symbolize Arcadian idealism in a more general sense. This identification is the unwavering fact of Middle-western existence—a root identity equivalent to New England's puritanism. It has failed to produce a simple unified regional image, however, because values associated with pastoralism have changed, the rural character of the Middle West itself has lessened, and the physical area said to be Middle Western has been modified. The basic pattern is thus something of a paradox—continuity yet change; and this melange is a key to the cultural confusion that has characterized the region throughout much of its history.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 6-7}

Shortridge's historical analysis of the Midwest is particularly revealing:

The initial cluster of cultural traits associated with the new Middle West in the central plains [Kansas and Nebraska in the 1880's] was long and varied, but it was remarkably consistent from writer to writer. People there were self-reliant and independent, kind, open, and thrifty. They were pragmatic, and industrious, and they took pride in their work; yet they were also idealistic, moral, and humble. Other traits, particularly extravagance and exploitiveness, were mentioned regularly, too, but as being no longer characteristic of the region.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 17.}

...[T]he Middle West reached a pinnacle of self-confidence in the 1910's. Americans at that time placed a high value on the pastoral traits of morality, independence, and egalitarianism; and they saw the Middle West as a symbol for these ideals. Moreover, people all across the nation thought of the Middle West as the favored region in an analogy that linked sections of the country with stages in the human life cycle. Whereas the West was seen as brash and youthful, and the East was viewed as stodgy and old, the Middle West escaped the problems of both extremes. It was still young enough to have ideals and energy, yet it was not so old as to be ossified by decay, class stratification, and overcrowding. Agriculture there was stable, which guaranteed prosperity, while the development of industry and culture seemed to ensure a glorious future. Writers both in and outside the region agreed that the Middle West had replaced the East as the standard by which to gauge other
sections of the nation. It was the heartland, the vital core, and as such, it was almost beyond criticism.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 8.}

[The Middle West is but one of three major regional labels that have been popularly linked to specific traits of national culture. [The East is associated with America's technological might and the West with its youthful vigor and freedom. This compartmentalism of values has provided a tangible symbol for each trait, an identity for each region, and a means to avoid contradictions among the three cultural myths.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 11.}

As Americans placed increasing emphasis on their role as the world's technology leader after World War I, the importance accorded to pastoralism and the Middle West necessarily declined.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 12.}

Shortridge asserts that the shift from a positive image for the Midwest to a negative one occurred with the publication in 1920 of Sinclair Lewis's \textit{Main Street}:

Accusations that the Middle West had lost its idealism, that it was becoming smug and self-satisfied, were voiced occasionally during the early 1910's... \footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 42.} In 1920, Sinclair Lewis published \textit{Main Street} and thereby put the debate in a form that no one could ignore. According to one authority [James D. Hart], readers accepted Lewis's fiction as a sociological survey. The book immediately became a best seller and had profound impact on the Middle-western psyche. Lewis exposed cultural flaws that the public knew were there but had not wanted to admit. He struck at the heart of traditional values, brought these issues into the open, and thereby set the agenda for a decade of discussion. In popular literature the phrases Main Street and Gopher Prairie (Lewis's fictional Minnesota town) quickly became synonyms for Middle-western America, and writers on the region felt an obligation to address the indictments made in the book.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 46.}

\textit{Main Street}'s revelations shook the twin pillars of Middle-western cultural identity. Was pastoral idealism dead? Was the young region only a pale imitation of the East in things urban, cultural, and technological? As these issues began to be debated in the popular literature, agricultural depression descended upon the nation's midsection. This depression... affected the outcome of the Main Street debates and hastened the change in the region's image.\footnote{Shortridge, \textit{ibid.}, p. 46.}
Several changes that were set in motion at this time produced, over the next decade or so, a radical reform of the Middle-western image. Three interrelated themes stand out, one initiated outside the region and two within. Much of the Middle West, particularly its more rural sections, stuck firmly to the traditional pastoral view of their society and considered Eastern laughter as a sign of a decadent Atlantic civilization. The Middle-western business community, in contrast, turned away from any rural identification, as deftly described in *Main Street*, and tried to imitate the material and technological success they associated with Eastern cities. Easterners held a third perspective. They gradually came to ignore the urban side of the Middle West and also reinterpreted its rural world. The Middle West was synonymous with agriculture in this view, but it was occupied more by yokels that by noble yeomen...45

The simplification and narrowing of the image of the Middle West might have been countered, or at least delayed, had the business communities of Chicago and similar cities fought the process; but they raised no objection. In fact, the popular literature strongly suggests that these cities were embarrassed by any association with the 1920's farming world. City folk wanted to see themselves as sophisticated, like their cohorts in the East. Thinly disguised envy of New York appears in many articles, sometimes accompanied by disdain for the local farming community. Farmers had become backward, wrong-thinking peasants in their minds, with the radical rural politics in the mid 1920's causing special discomfiture. If Eastern writers wished to restrict the definition of Middle West to rural regions, so much the better from the perspective of Main Street. No regional name was better than one that was perceived negatively by New Yorkers and by others whom you were emulating.46

Certainly, the problem of Midwestern identity described by Shortridge applies to Wichita, a city that began as a trading post on the Chisholm Trail in 1869, but which today comprises a metropolitan population of over 400,000. While some people tout the city's colorful "Wild West" past, others find it embarrassing, promoting instead its importance as a regional trade and manufacturing center and praising the city's "cultural" activities, such as the symphony. The city is also afflicted by the outsiders' image of it as a small, boring, unsophisticated, cowtown.

45 Shortridge, *ibid.*, p. 49.
The city, quite simply, lacks a coherent identity, and that fact shows up in the architecture.

More confident and optimistic periods in Wichita's past have produced some remarkable buildings, particularly the Richardsonian Romanesque buildings of the 1880's, the Neo-Classical public buildings of the 1910's, and the "Kansas Regional Style" public works of the 1920's and 1930's. More recently, however, there appears to be a complete lack of concern for architecture in the city. The utilitarian building patterns that accompanied the city's expansion during World War II seem to have remained operative through the present era. New office buildings going up downtown and in the suburbs are generally glass and stucco boxes of amazing banality, the more imaginative ones often being low-budget versions of buildings in Kansas City or Dallas. In 1966, one developer completely stripped the former 9-story York Rite Temple Building, constructed in the 1920's, down to the concrete columns, elevator shafts, and stairwells; adding two intermediate floors in the former double-height lodge rooms and painting the building white.47 The renamed "Sutton Place" was such a commercial success that it set a trend for a long line of similarly "renovated" downtown buildings. Today, the skyline of downtown Wichita is an amalgamation of horizontally and vertically white-striped boxes which give the impression of a jumble of parking garages.

The architecture of Wichita clearly lacks direction. Not only do the people of Wichita not know what to build, but they do not recognize the good architecture that they already have. The purpose of this project is to show the citizens of Wichita that there is something better than what they are getting now; that

modern building need not mean destruction of place; that, in fact, there is something to which they can aspire.

SYNTHESIS

The proposal: A convention hotel

The project being proposed is a grand convention hotel at the foot of Douglas Avenue, a site currently occupied by the old Broadview Hotel. Several characteristics of the site and program relate to the issues explored in this paper. First of all, it is hypothesized that one way to set up a monumental condition in a gridded landscape is to actually break the grid. In Wichita, as in virtually every other Midwestern city, the Jeffersonian grid has influenced the layout of city streets so that most streets run unbroken from east to west or from north to south. Along the Arkansas River, however, the grid is broken by streets which follow the riverbank instead of the compass directions and by the fact that many streets are not connected to the other side of the river by bridges. The site at the foot of Douglas Avenue, however, is unique because, while the street continues to the other side of the river, it jogs to the southwest, setting up the condition that whatever building sits on the site terminates the long view westward down Douglas Avenue. Whatever building is on the site also figures prominently in the city's skyline as viewed from the west bank of the river. In fact, one of the most frequently experienced views of the city's skyline is had from the Kellogg Avenue bridge, which crosses the Arkansas River one-half mile south of downtown.

The site is also important in a historical sense because of its adjacency to the Douglas Avenue bridge, which was originally built in 1871 as a river crossing for the Chisholm Trail. It was across this bridge that millions of cattle were herded on
their way from Waco, Texas, to the railhead in Abilene, Kansas, in the 1870's and 1880's. This cattle trail was, in fact, Wichita's raison d'être, and the cowboy culture of that period figured prominently in the city's development and character. Douglas Avenue was not only the route of the trail, but the "strip" for the saloons and boarding houses that catered to the cowboy trade.

A hotel has been proposed on this site for several reasons. First, a first-rate hotel on the site with public facilities adjacent to the river presents a forum in the downtown area for the citizens of Wichita to experience public life in a way that is not currently available. Entertainment in the downtown area is sadly lacking, and the small public parks are mostly unused. Second, the Douglas Avenue bridge is the focus every May of a city-wide celebration, the Wichita River Festival, which began as the city's centennial celebration in 1970. The event climaxes in a symphony concert in the middle of Douglas Avenue and a giant fireworks display over the Arkansas River. A hotel on this site would become the best observation platform for the two-week long festival and would probably become a staging area for many important events. Third, the site is across Douglas Avenue from the city's convention center, offering the opportunity to develop a program for a large convention hotel without having to provide large exhibition spaces. Fourth, the downtown area is currently bereft of any first-class hotel accommodation, a fact that has hurt the city's attractiveness as a convention center and deprived the city of much-desired tourist dollars. The 1920's-vintage hotel that currently exists on this site, besides being too small to accommodate large conventions, offers no public views or pedestrian connections to the river and, in fact, is regarded by most Wichitans as an eyesore on the city's skyline.

A hotel on a historically significant site also offers an opportunity to design a building that expresses the unique cultural heritage of the city through
iconographical or other, less representational, means. The usual tactic used by hotels to recall local culture, i.e., calling the meeting spaces things like the "River Ballroom" or naming the restaurant "Wyatt Earp's," clearly would not be an adequate expression of the local character.

Some images which are or may become important in the scheme are listed below:

the Great Plains
the Jeffersonian grid
the Arkansas River
the Chisholm Trail
cattle
wheatfields
Osage orange hedgerows
Buffalo grass
Bluestem grass
sod houses
limestone
sunflowers
marigolds
zinnias
sand plum thickets
cottonwood trees
redbuds
locusts
mulberries
meadowlarks
buffalo
the Kansas Indians ("People of the South Wind")
the Wichita Indians ("Scattered Lodges")
sky
thunderstorms
blizzards
tornadoes
heat
cold
wind
cowboys
Wyatt Earp
Widow McCarty and Billy the Kid
Carrie Nation
the Dust Bowl
Mennonites and Turkey Red Hard Winter Wheat
grain elevators
aircraft manufacturing
missile silos
oil production
Metholatum
Coleman camping equipment
White Castle hamburgers
The project: An urban design for Wichita

Once the actual design process was begun on this project, it became obvious that a solution to the problem of creating a lasting monument for Wichita would not be found in the design of a single monumental, regional building or object; rather, a comprehensive urban design proposal might be considered to be more appropriate to the scale of the problem: creating a permanent symbol for the city that would convey the uniqueness of the place to those who live there and to those who visit.

Although, at first glance, Wichita looks like any other city in the Midwest, the people there represent a unique community set in the middle of the vast Jeffersonian grid, and a monument to them should convey the particularity of that condition. How can something be placed in the ubiquitous grid so that it asserts its own importance against this bland, neutral continuity? The “something” that does this is the Arkansas River; for where it flows through the city, the “mile-roads” of the grid—shifted, bent, and interrupted—and the river—winding and flowing—work together to create a unique situation. This is the condition that can be monumentalized. The warping of the universal, "eternal" order at this spot can become the symbol, the organizing image, a monument for the people who live there.

This situation involving the river and the grid can, if one more element is added, take on the attributes of a true monument. Webster's New World Dictionary defines a monument as "something set up to keep alive the memory of a person or event." The event, and the original cause of what was to become the city of Wichita, was the Chisholm Trail river-crossing. Together, the conjunction of grid, river, and event can become a new kind of monument.
A monument should also convey permanence by being static, contained, frozen, unchanging. Although it is not readily apparent, the river is, in fact, actually static, owing to its being maintained at a constant level with a series of dams and by-passing floodways. What remains is to frame it in a way that reflects the grid and locates the crossing, to create a space which is then a monument. Here, the intersection of river and trail is overlaid by the grid, represented by the dedication of a clearly defined district, one mile square [Figure 3], the piece of the grid at the center of the city.

Just as the monumental buildings examined in this paper require an enclave—a certain amount of space around them to set them apart from their context—the river needs to be clearly separated from the congestion of buildings that obscure it from view and limit access to it. A zone of parks and other public spaces should, therefore, be established along its banks. This zone would extend along the river for its entire length through the city, and the buildings allowed to be built in it should be limited to those of a public nature, such as the civic center, museums, and sports facilities. A river walk would be constructed along its banks. The mile-square that encompasses the river at the city's core would serve as the primary locus of public activity in the city; with the river becoming associated not only with public life, but with life in Wichita in general; and the central district becoming the Wichita monument.

The edge of this zone needs to be well defined to enable it to be easily identified. As Kevin Lynch observes,

Edges as well as paths call for a certain continuity of form throughout their length. The edge of a business district, for example, may be an important concept, but be difficult to discover in the field because it has no recognizable continuity of form. The edge also gains strength if it is laterally visible for some distance, marks a sharp gradient of area character, and clearly joins the two bounded regions. Thus the abrupt cessation of a medieval city at its wall, the fronting of
skyscraper apartments on Central Park, the clear transition from water to land at a sea-front, all are powerful visual impressions. When two strongly contrasting regions are set in close juxtaposition, and their meeting edge is laid open to view, then visual attention is easily concentrated.\(^{48}\)

Thus it is desirable to create edges to this district that are continuous and easily recognized, such as could be accomplished by some rerouting of streets, acquisition of private property for parkland, and outlining of the district with particular plantings. Figure 3, when compared with Figure 2, shows how these lines might be drawn in the central part of the city.

To reinforce the concept of the grid's order being disturbed by the river, it is proposed to mark the mile roads in the city with hedgerows, which would help people to realize which major streets in the city are part of the one-mile grid and to see the offset in the grid which occurs at the river. (This latter aberration is due to different benchmarks having been used to survey the different sides of the river during the nineteenth century.) The hedgerows are proposed, too, as a manifestation of the \textit{genius loci} of the Wichita area. The countryside surrounding the city is a flat expanse of wheatfields, subdivided into squares by the mile roads and by almost unbroken lines of Osage orange trees, which were planted as windbreaks during the Dust Bowl days of the 1930's. To drive through the countryside is to experience passing from one outdoor room into another as one crosses each line of trees perpendicular to one's path. The hedgerows are unique to the Wichita area because it is only there that the right combination of climatic and geographical conditions meet to require them: farther to the east, it is less windy; farther to the west, the drier climate means that ranching rather than farming is the dominant land use. The replanting of the hedgerows along the mile streets in the city, where they have

been torn down to provide space for sidewalks and telephone poles as the city expanded, would recreate a feeling of the local landscape in the city and create a unifying character for the city as a whole.

The concept of identifying different routes in the city with trees should be expanded to include other major routes, such as Douglas Avenue, the main east-west street of the city, which could be lined with locusts. McLean Boulevard and other routes along the course of the river could be lined with redbuds, which are the first tree to blossom in the spring and which would provide scenic drives. In any case, the varieties of trees used should be native species to educate Wichitans in what is unique to the area. Figure 3 shows a plan for marking streets in the central part of the city with hedgerows of various kinds of trees.

In accordance with the above intentions and guidelines, the area to the south and west of the convention center has been redesigned to make it a public plaza, and a hotel is proposed not for the site at the end of Douglas Avenue next to the Chisholm Trail river crossing, which would put it in the designated public riverside district, but across Waco Street from that site—to act as an element which reinforces the edge of that district (Figure 4). Because the drop from street level to river water level is only twenty-two feet, it is proposed to create a series of terraces which drop in increments of three feet as one goes from Main Street toward the river. This would allow views of the river all the way back to Main Street, which is the building edge along the river district. Rows of Osage orange trees are planted in this area to create outdoor rooms reminiscent of the countryside and break down the large scale of the vast pedestrian plaza. The loading dock facilities of the convention center, which are currently a physical and psychological barrier between the convention center and the riverfront, would be moved underground to allow the building to open directly onto a view of the river walk.
This east side of the river, which is very formal and structured, is in contrast to the west side, which is maintained as a more random park-like setting. This contrast is set up as an analogy between the "Eastern" and "civilized" landscape of modern Kansas and the "Western" and "original" landscape of the days when buffalo roamed the plains. McLean Boulevard, however, which follows the route of the river along its west bank, would be widened to allow planting between the carriageways, and a promenade at street level between the street and the river would allow views across the river to the built-up skyline of downtown and down a small slope to a river-side jogging trail.

The block directly west of the hotel, across Waco Street, would be a public square at river level, which is one story below street level (Figures 4 and 5). The square is sunk to river level to tie it directly to the river walk and to set it off as a unique plaza space in the downtown area. This sunken garden, measuring approximately three hundred feet by six hundred feet, would provide a large forum for public events, with space for sitting and strolling not only at river level, but with overhead views from the sidewalks above. The entire plaza would be planted with cottonwoods, mulberries, and other local trees in a grid pattern to recall the outdoor rooms of the countryside. Each "room" would possess a different character owing to the different combination of trees and flowers, grasses and paving within it.

The garden is connected to the hotel under Waco Street by the hotel's café and restaurant, which are under the street and which spill out into the garden during the warm months. On this garden level is a main entrance to the hotel that leads directly to the hotel's escalator, which ascends to the main lobby at street level. A series of terraces, each dropping three feet, leads from the hotel's garden level entrance to the river and the river walk. A water wall on the south edge of the garden displays water falling from a large fountain at street level which terminates
the axis of Douglas Avenue. An existing railroad tressel remains as a pedestrian link between the garden and the west bank of the river. A stair tower at the end of the bridge brings people down to the river level.

The hotel is situated on its site in such a way as to provide an anchor to the axis of Douglas Avenue by sticking out past the building line of that street a distance of about thirty feet. This provides the "prominence of location" described by Kevin Lynch as useful for making a landmark:

Since the use of landmarks involves the singling out of one element from a host of possibilities, the key physical characteristic of this class is singularity, some aspect that is unique or memorable in the context. Landmarks become more easily identifiable, more likely to be chosen as significant, if they have a clear form; if they contrast with their background; and if there is some prominence of spatial location.49

The hotel itself (Figure 6) is inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's design of 1895 for the Luxfer Prism Skyscraper (Figure 7). The monumental nature of this Sullivanesque design is particularly appropriate here, it is asserted, because an architecture expressive of monumentality is expressive of the Kansas landscape: the relentless grid, the relentless flatness, the relentless flow of a river across the plains, the relentless weather, all demand an architecture that is bold and solid. The building is constructed of concrete and clad in brick and native limestone, both local materials. The west façade of the hotel provides a large surface onto which, during the Wichita River Festival, would be projected images of famous Wichitans. This would be done to educate Wichitans in their local history, and, seen against the downtown skyline, this giant screen would be like a billboard advertising Wichita to the inhabitants of the Western plains.

True enough, we need an environment which is not simply well organized, but poetic and symbolic as well. It should

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speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations and their historical tradition, of the natural setting, and of the complicated functions and movement of the city world. But clarity of structure and vividness of identity are first steps to the development of strong symbols. By appearing as a remarkable and well-knit place, the city could provide a ground for the clustering and organization of these meanings and associations. Such a sense of place in itself enhances every human activity that occurs there, and encourages the deposit of a memory trace.\textsuperscript{50}

CONCLUSION: THE FINAL REVIEW

The following is an edited transcript of the final review of this project which was held on April 20, 1991. The jury consisted of visiting critics Judith Wolin of the Rhode Island School of Design, James Williamson and Mark Linder of the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Mark Wamble of the Cooper Union; Rice School of Architecture professors William T. Cannady, Anderson Todd, and Gordon Wittenberg; and Alan Balfour, Dean of the Rice School of Architecture.

Reber: My name is R. D. Reber, and I am from Wichita, Kansas, which is the departure point for my exploration into the improbable relationship that exists between monumentality, which is Apollonian—universal and timeless—and regionalism, which is Dionysian—local and time-specific. Wichita seems to be a good place to explore this because the city seems to be neither monumental nor regional. It needs those qualities because there currently is no focus for the life of the city, no public forum for public life in the city. As you can see from looking at these photographs, the building downtown is sort of generic modern of the 1970's variety. Most of the

\textsuperscript{50}Lynch, \textit{ibid.}, p. 119.
historic center of the city has been torn down in the development schemes of the 1960's and 70's, and it seems that there is a general "character" lacking in downtown. One writer has characterized this lack of character or culture as characteristic of the Midwestern psyche. There is a problem that exists because the Midwest in most people's mind connotes an agrarian society, and that is at odds with life in the city, and Wichitans consider it a city, not a farm community. It seems that in the past, however, in the 1880's, for instance, there was a population boom that produced the Richardsonian Romanesque style. These buildings constructed in 1888 [pointing to Figure 13] are of native limestone and brick. Then again in the '30's, there was a regional revival. These buildings [pointing to Figure 14] were decorated with Indians and buffalo and farmers plowing their fields.

The city was founded in 1870 at the confluence of the Big and Little Arkansas Rivers in southcentral Kansas. This was the point at which the Chisholm Trail crossed the Arkansas River. The Chisholm Trail went from Kingsville, Texas, to the railhead at Abilene, Kansas. It was named after Jesse Chisholm, who led the first cattle drive up the trail. The river crossing is actually marked by a bridge which is here [pointing to Figure 3] in this drawing and this bridge, here, in my model, which was constructed in 1872, and was a toll bridge for cattle crossing the river; although, as you can see in this photograph, cowboys and Indians usually just rode across the river on their horses because it was so shallow. The first people in the area besides the Wichita Indians were the surveyors sent out
in 1865 from Washington to set the benchmarks which would be used for surveying all the land in the area. As you can see from this map of Sedgwick County [pointing to Figure 0], the grid that these people laid out has been transformed over the years into a road network that is almost unbroken, at least in this part of Kansas. Every line on this map is an actual road that exists, all a mile apart. These two photographs [pointing to Figures 8 and 9] that were taken here [pointing to a spot on the map northeast of the city] represent a typical intersection outside the city.

This condition of the ubiquitous grid creates a dilemma about how to go about creating a monument. The classical way to do that would be to take a square out of the grid and put a foursquare building in the center of it, like this courthouse of 1888, but another way to create a monument is to break the grid. This photograph [Figure 10] shows that any building that you set down along the river becomes a sort of monument as you look down the river. In this drawing [Figure 1], I'm trying to show where the grid is broken by watercourses. The only other blips on this plan are caused by the air force base and the airport.

I thought, well, what does Wichita have going for it that would help in designing a monument? The river is actually a very nice attribute, because while most cities have warehouses and railroad tracks all along their rivers, Wichita benefits from having a nice riverfront that is uncluttered by that. Also, once a year is a big, two-week Wichita River Festival. During those two weeks, there are boat races, food festivals, and all that sort of thing,
culminating in a symphony concert with cannons and fireworks. This was initiated in 1970 for Wichita's Centennial Celebration, and everyone said, "This is so fun, let's do it again next year," and it's been going on ever since, and getting bigger every year.

I began to realize that creating a building or a monument in the classical sense wasn't really going to do the trick for me. In fact, the river itself is the actual monument—the place where things happen—at least, they happen there two weeks out of the year. I wanted to create a new environment downtown that people would enjoy the river more. In this drawing [Figure 3], I'm showing a new district that I want to create along the river as it flows through the city. If you compare this drawing with this map [Figure 2], you can see that I want to take out some of the junk that exists around here [pointing to the small building on the west bank of the river along Douglas Avenue and the buildings south of the civic center], and clarify the edge of this district, making it the zone for public activity. Also, I'm showing what I propose doing to make people more aware of the unique condition that exists with this grid that the city is built on. While the grid itself cannot exactly be called unique because it exists throughout the whole Midwest... This is the dilemma: How is Wichita different from Des Moines or Omaha or Tulsa or any of about a dozen other similarly sized cities in the Midwest? Well, the thing is that these hedgerows [pointing to Figures 8 and 9] that are made of Osage orange trees that are the outline of all the wheatfields that surround Wichita are unique to this area. If you go a little bit east of here, like to Kansas City, or
north to Nebraska or Iowa because it's not as windy in those areas. Wichita gets very, very hot in the summertime and very, very cold in the winter, and it's windy all the time. These hedgerows were planted in the '30's as WPA projects. In corn country, they don't need these. Similarly, if you go west of Wichita, you get into a more arid climate, where the land is used mostly for grazing, rather than farming, so there wasn't the need to plant these hedgerows. Actually, when you're driving around in the countryside and each one of the fields is outlined with these trees, it's as though you were going from room to room as you cross a line of trees and go into the next field... I would venture to say that most people in Wichita don't know that these roads are a mile apart. They just know that it's a certain distance to the next traffic light.

I propose putting hedgerows back on all of the mile streets. They've all been torn down, of course, as the city expanded and the city engineers said they needed thirty feet for sidewalks and telephone poles. In this drawing [Figure 3], in orange, I've shown where I would plant Osage orange trees. I would continue this network of trees all over the city. The square in the middle I would mark with little parks at the four corners to let people know that they were entering the central square, where all this is generated.

[Pointing the area in Figure 4 south of the civic center] I'm proposing creating a public plaza that is reminiscent of what goes on in the countryside—outdoor rooms outlined by hedgerows—and also a garden which sits right here [pointing to the area shown in Figure 3] at the end of Douglas Avenue, which is the main drag through town.
and also fronts a hotel which I propose for this site [pointing to the site]. Right now that site (of the garden) is occupied by this hotel [Figure 11]. This is the side which fronts the river now—with employee parking and dumpsters. I feel that this site could be the focus for all riverfront activity, except that it has no connection to the river. Because you can see whatever building sits on this site (this [Figure 11] is a photograph taken from three miles away), it is set up as a pivotal point, a node, in the city. It is a landmark visible from everywhere, and when you get down there, it’s just this awful eight-story thing.

Instead, at that point, I would put this garden. It’s connected to the hotel underneath the street as I’ve shown in this section [Figure 5]. The hotel has restaurants and cafés that open out into the garden which is sunk one level below the street. I imagine this space as becoming the focal point for the River Festival, a good place for people to come downtown and watch the fireworks. I’ve created lots of spaces in here so people can recognize different spots. I imagine different plantings with native Kansas plants, like redbuds and sand plums and zinnias and things like that that grow well in the climate. I have an elevated platform here for the symphony; piers for paddleboats and other boating activities on the river.

Wolin: Is that bridge already there?

Reber: The bridge is an existing train trellis [Figure 11]. I would keep that as a pedestrian link to the west bank of the river.

As far as the building itself goes, I was inspired by a skyscraper design by Frank Lloyd Wright, the Luxfer Prism Building
of 1895 [Figure 7]. It seems to me that the Wrightian/Sullivanesque style is Midwestern in character and very much relates to a regional style for this part of the country, because I'd say the relentless nature of the environment in Wichita, the relentless grid, the relentless flow of a river across the plains, the relentless weather, all these things demand an architecture that embodies this—something that is monumental. I think that's why the monumental style looks right in the Midwest and why it's associated with the Midwest.

During the River Festival, I would project images of famous Wichitans, like Carrie Nation, up on the side of the building to educate people about their history, most of which has been erased.

Balfour: Is that on the model?

Reber: Yes. [Places model of proposed building on site and clears away small buildings from west bank of river.]

I might just add that I realized that in the planting the trees along the grid, you can turn something that is universal into something regional.

Balfour: It's my impression... that you can tell us that everyone in Wichita wears ties just like that!

Reber: Well, actually Pizza Hut is headquartered in Wichita. They'd be very popular.

Wolin: I think I miss very much the absence of process drawings of some kind... what looks to me like the drawing, that if it's good, it's because it's a reductive, it's the end of a reductive process; and if it's bad, it's because it's uncooked and unnurtured. I can't tell which end of the process I'm looking at. I have really no fault with your
analysis of the situation, and I'm certainly very sympathetic with the idea of basically solving the problem with the trees. But I, for instance, was there a point at which the trees were there south of the convention center but not in the garden?

Reber: This is how the site exists now [holding Figure 12].

Wolin: No, no. Your design process.

Reber: Oh, I see.

Wolin: I'm really trying to understand more about the choices you considered and the process of coming to a judgment about it. I don't have any problem with your idea of taking the site, any problem with the idea of dealing with it principally as a landscape problem, but I wonder where the difficulty for you was. What fought back

Reber: I think the difficulty for me was to figure out what to do after I had put the grid back on the mile roads. I mean, you can't take the same trees, then, and put the grid...

Wolin: But you never doubted for an instant that once you put the trees in the parking lot of the convention center, you might not want them up where you have your symphony? It never bothered you that if your symphony were sort of frames in trees it might cut it off from the people it's performing for?

Reber: No, that didn't bother me because I didn't really think I'd be cutting them off. In this section [Figure 5], I show where I have the space stepping down as it goes toward the river away from the street edge. And I've done the same thing here, where, now, as you drive along this street [pointing to Main Street on Figure 4], which is the building edge of the downtown business district, you look across the
parking lots and you can't see the river because there's only a twenty-two-foot drop from ground level to water level. As a matter of fact, now, you have to go right up to the river before you even see the water. But in stepping this down as you go away from the street, I'm actually hoping to bring the connection of the river closer.

Wolin: Maybe there's something that's troubling me in the presentation is if this section... for instance was the key aspect of the overall idea, we would really expect that a very large, very convincing section would be drawn and shown, rather than this kind of one-slice, very schematized section. That's an idea, but if it's an important idea, it deserves an important drawing.

Wamble: What is it that you would like to say about grain, trees, ...the lost agricultural history of Wichita into the urban context? It seems to be a very potent symbol that has a sort of regime, a science about it, that when brought into the urban environment could say a lot about it that if those signs were analyzed more. Or, even if you don't want to talk about it in those terms, some other terms...

Reber: Well, I think it's kind of odd that for some reason I don't associate the trees with farming as much as I do just the local landscape. That's what the land looks like. Ever since I read the article by Christian Norberg-Schulz on the _genius loci_ of Rome, I've wondered what is the _genius loci_ of Wichita?

Balfour: A difficult question! [laughter]

Reber: One that's nagged me for a long time, and I honestly think that I have discovered an aspect of it, and that is these outdoor rooms that
are the countryside around Wichita. And by bringing them into the city, I just want to create and enhance that atmosphere.

I sort of... I was just reminded of something that happened to me just recently—I went home where my folk live to this place called Middletown, Ohio... I went for Labor Day, and we had this big Labor Day festival, and it was, I think, the 150th anniversary of the city, and they had the the same thing—the Middletown Symphony—play, and they set them up right by the tennis courts down at Sunset Park. And we all sat up on the sledding hill. And back behind the sledding hill is a playground. Kids were playing in the playground while the parents were watching the symphony, and they played Tchaikovsky or the 1812 Overture or whatever it was. And down over here there was the basketball courts, and I noticed a bunch of kids playing basketball and the symphony's going and the other kids are up there playing in the playground, and the teenagers are all flirting with each other. All of this stuff was going on. It was amazing. And, then, about halfway through the 1812 Overture, this one kid down on the basketball court—we never even noticed—but broke his leg. So, now it's getting toward the end of the 1812 Overture, and an ambulance, lights flashing, comes driving up to the basketball court; so all the kids that are over at the playground take off across the sledding hill on bicycles and on foot... and they all rush down and everyone's crowded around the basketball court, and the parents are all sitting there saying, "What do we do now?" You know, what's really exciting is that this kid broke his leg and there's an ambulance down there. It was this whole event. You
know? And there was no architecture at all—it was just Sunset Park where we played baseball when we were kids. And, you know, the Frank Lloyd Wright thing, it's sort of like this futile monument. You don't need it. You know, I had a wonderful time—there was no monument there.

Reber: Well, my point in putting a monumental building there is not so much to create a monumental building as it is to reinforce the edge of this district. With all the parking lots and other vacant spaces that exist in a modern downtown I think it's important to help define edges, to give people that sense of a place.

Wamble: Do you think the same kind of event would have taken place in Middletown, Ohio, had it become so contained and marked as such—the kind of place where you go and act in a specific way? I guess the question that I had is, I mean, these buildings are "Richardsonesque"—right? They're not Richardson. This is "monumentalesque." It's not monumental. The trees have become monumental, perhaps, in a way. You've monumentalized them. But, I mean, I would imagine the people who had such a great time at the Wichita River Festival were the ones who were a little bit, maybe, afraid of going and hanging out down by the river. I mean, when you have so many people... I understand it's probably relatively beautiful compared to most urban rivers, but, still, it's not the kind of place that you inhabit, and, sort of, everyone doesn't go down there every day for lunch. It's the kind of a place that's unusual when it's used.

Reber: Exactly.
Wamble: But whenever it becomes domesticated, it loses its edge, in a way. And it's sort of a question of development. At what point do you take part in development whenever you might lose some of the horror or unfamiliarity or discomfort that makes these sort of events memorable, in a way? I mean, it's like TriBeCa used to be great ten years ago, but now that Aldo ( ) maybe added a couple of stucco townhomes on top and marbled the lobbies, it's just a horrible place. And it's the same with a... of the East Coast cities like Baltimore and Boston who have recelebrated their waterfront. At what point, I mean—this is a pretty difficult question—I would imagine that that is where the difficulty in a thesis like would come from, but, how do you intervene? In what form does the intervention take place and in what aspect is it architectural?

Reber: I think that the river presents opportunities along its bank through the whole city as, you know, a place to go exploring that's relatively unexplored because there's certainly lots of neighborhoods that this river passes through, and the atmosphere changes in every one. But right now, I'm just saying, that, even downtown, people don't go to the river because they're so cut off from it. They sit in these office buildings and unless they're on a high floor, they can't even see the water.

Wolin: Look, I'm sorry. I'm losing patience. You had a semester to work on something. You spent obviously a fair amount of time trying to represent it to us. It was probably very important to represent this to us. But, it's also very important to work on it, and what I see here—if, you know, what I read from the drawings as a teacher, is
something which has not been worked. It has not been interrogated. It has not been worried over the way a dog worries over a bone, nor has it been in a sense resolved—it's only been stated. And I actually like very much the strategy of planting the tree group, both at the bigger scale and in the convention center lot. That does not mean it's good enough to go across the street, to where you're going to have the symphony and which is going to be the focus of the festival and do it again in dumb little... hunks, you know, where there's no way that assembly can take place in a sort of way that's even framed, even if you just emptied it, so that this edge is left, and that edge has something has something to do with that, and then place the symphony where somehow in the field that you've cleared you can have some kind of interaction between the events and people in that space. Now, you know, we're in a corner of Versailles. I mean, we're in some place Le Nôtre never got to. And that seems to me inadequate to the framework. I mean, you've put this incredible sort of framing here of narrative about what we're going to find about the space that we never could see before. And, then, it's like, so neat, and so wrong to be so set up by that much consideration. There's a point in your narrative where I just want to take the pencil out of your hand and start to work. It's a very interesting problem. There's no question about that, and you made it seem very interesting. But that is not a resolved response to the terms of the problem that you've set up. It's not a way to put a symphony in a space. It's not a way to receive a bridge into a space. It's not enough to document the existence of the bridge; that bridge has a new meaning, ... presumed to
take on some new characteristics. I don’t want to talk about the
countryside anymore. I want to know what the design process was
about.

Reber: I guess all I can say is that I proposed a hotel rather than an office
building or a cathedral...

Wolin: That’s a programmatic issue, not...

Reber: It’s a program, though, that brings people to the river. A hotel gives
people a place to go, something to do, besides just go to the river and
look at it.

Williamson: Who would go to the hotel?

Reber: It would be a convention hotel serving the convention center across
the street. The restaurants, cafés, the outdoor spaces would, I think,
attract people to the river, because everyone in town knows that it’s
a nice river; it’s just that there’s nothing to do if you go down there.

Williamson: Yeah, but what happens then—this is a problem that I have—is
that the people who would come to this river are not people who are
actually going to be experiencing, or know, that this grid that you’re
re-establishing is this genius loci of the space. They’re tourists.
They’re going to be looking at postcards. Perhaps I can tie this to
the comments. The fact that the photographs are the same size as
postcards and your so many postcards to describe this place I find a
little problematic. It’s like sort of setting myself at a distance to
what’s really there. The most telling documents that you’ve
presented to me are the two color Xerox images of the hedgerows and
this one drawing here [pointing to Figure 1] of the grid, the grid that
speaks about how the regular grid is interrupted by various events.
To me, how that grid is interrupted, how it is sometimes forced to shift, so that there is a kind of imaginary grid line which comes across here, may suggest a possibility of locating this park there rather than there, which then creates a kind of interesting architectural condition relative to the grid. The possibility inherent in this, in the shifts, the kind of missing pieces are not suddenly—they're going, "Oh, well, I just reinstate the grid." I don't interrupt it and I don't shift it; I don't do anything like that. Or, I'll put a monument there—a monument that sort of has to do with these things. I find those kinds of things a little problematic. I'll put it this way, and this will sound really crazy, but I've flown over places like this. And Judy [Wolin] and I were talking about how incredible this grid is—so, you know, I think that's why she is saying this is so fascinating a problem. Now, I'll tell you, when I was eight years old—do you remember who Joel McRae was? He's the man who sang in the movie Oklahoma and stuff like that.

Balfour: Gordon!

Wolin: Gordon!

Williamson: That's right! Gordon McRae! So, I met Gordon McRae in Wichita, Kansas, at the Holiday Inn. So, I'm sort of sitting here juxtaposing this flying over places like this with this very, kind of personal, event, which has to do with, I guess, that drawing. You know, this grid which was interrupted by... events or interspersed with memories and other things that kind of layer on top of it. And that's where I think its seems to kind of fall off. I think you know this. You and I talked about memory last fall, right? The memory of this
landscape that used to be there, that you're bringing back the traces of, the interruptions within a kind of ideal order, which force certain compromises to be made—the individual against this sort of collective. So, all of those are the issues. It's the kind of ordinariness of the hotel and the garden which doesn't take advantage of any of the possibilities of this study here.

Wolin: It's actually that it hasn't brought together the confrontation of the ordinary and its... It's predictable, but it's not the kind of ordinary that Mark [Linder] was invoking with the open field.

Balfour: I must say in looking back at these exercises you did last fall, where you did a wonderful job of sort inventing a history of these crazy Indians who were so unpleasantly smelly...

[Change tape.]

Williamson: I mean, Carrie Nation's there, but back in the background. So, it's the eccentricities.

Balfour: Which you clearly demonstrated recently you enjoy.

Reber: Um, I guess it's rather subtle, but...

Balfour: And so are you, I might say!

Reber: There are some eccentricities here that I was working with, and I'll just point out that the grid on each side of the river is different. This happened because different benchmarks were used when these two sides of the river were surveyed. That means that when you're standing on one side of the river, if you could see the grid on the other side, you would realize that the grids miss.

Williamson: But they're both supposed to be a mile.
Reber: Yes. I guess a problem I had is I had to come up with a scheme that had enough clarity in it that people realize that there was a grid. I mean, if I started doing something other than a grid here, I think it would start to look like just the jumble of stuff that already exists downtown, and people wouldn't get the point at all.

Williamson: But the point is that within that grid there is a jumble of stuff.

Reber: Well, I was hoping that people would see the sort of missed grids by the way things like these stairs wouldn't line up with the grid across the river. And at one point, I did have watercourse that went through this grid [pointing to the garden] and broke it, but I thought it doesn't really make to have a watercourse here, say from this waterwall here that flows through here and empties into the river and create a different condition on each side because, you know, here's the river here. This is different from that [pointing at the west bank and the east bank of the river]. It's not about one of these squares being different from another one.

Wolin: Did you, for instance, draw any perspective drawings that would allow you to see from one bank of the river so one could test this idea of those staircases in there as an eccentricity? I mean, why are we presented with that as a tick mark in plan?

Williamson: Yeah, I agree.

Reber: It was a relatively late development in the scheme, and I didn't have time to draw one.

Wolin: You see, I think there's a tremendous problem when ideas reside in the landscape. One can't use the same drawings one would use to describe a building, can't use the same techniques, because they don't
register in plan as anything, and they could be optically very significant. So you have to design the drawings and the photo montages very well—that will register the breadth of vision that is involved in seeing backdrop and seeing foreground and seeing a small object, but light against the dark green field. Those are things that require a different means of representation and study. That reflection, for instance, one the most important things about a river and how you can play special events against a river is that you can see it as a mirror—when you see a thing, you see its mirror. You begin to pick it up a little bit in some of the site photographs, but it's clearly something that, if one is using the registration of the grid that's going to miss, one would perhaps simply try to make something on one edge that had a strong enough reflection to almost reach to the other side. But it's about optics. I mean, some of the things that you're trying to say about your eccentricities are about optic... And you know, this way of looking at it leaves the impression that those haven't been controlled.

Cannady: That's a good point. The more you get toward the eye-level perspective, the more the grid vanishes, which would imply that if you're trying to make a pedestrian environment, you're going to have to be very aggressive if you're going to push that scheme all the way and try to establish a conflict of grids... that come across that space and don't connect.

Wolin: One might very successfully register the presence of the end of that grid by two different kinds of light fixtures because presumably the night condition is one of the big ceremonial...
Balfour: Final comments?

Wamble: Yeah. It seems to me at every point that the eccentricities or peculiarities or points at which the idealistic idea or the possibility of the U. S. public survey somehow encapsulating the mentality of this part of the world—it fell apart and was revealed specifically at this site, just as you show in the diagram. And that instead of suppressing it, it could have been accentuated. I like the trees being brought in. I just don't see what it gives you aside from this sort of caricature of...

Wolin: Well, it generally makes for a hell of a lot better parking lot if you can grid it with trees.

Wittenberg: I would say, R. D., that relative to the last time I saw this project that you made a good move in concentrating on the landscape and getting the building out of—he was trying to accomplish the landscape result with a building earlier... moved the building out of the principal site area, although I do think there are some problems with the building orientation—you know, the terrific problem of the sun... It's not dealt with as it could be. I think the basic move was the correct move. I think Judy's comments and the other comments have been right on—that it's just not "cooked." The difficulty of the subtlety of the grid and expressing that importance of the grid are such that it just requires a lot more work... But the basic strategy is a good one and represents progress.

Todd: R. D., I've followed this problem, and I've a few things that I'd like to say that—guess it might be late in understanding it, but I'm reading Edwin Clark's Rome and the Villa last night, talking about
the brutalization of the Baroque Church of destroying Classical Rome, dragging all sorts of stones... big piles... with no conscience whatsoever, and how brutal it was. I think to make your point, you should be less tender about Wichita. I don't think there's much here to keep. I think for one little town in the whole United States, you have made a demonstration of a certain boldness which may be... lie in your convictions. Clean the whole place out. The river's still there. And then start back—you're heading[?] us up on hotels, convention centers, and the best thing about the whole thing maybe is that little place—that poor little railroad tressel. You know, if people could stand and watch the... I would like to see what happens to a modern city like Wichita if some really bold, brutal action—and we're here to learn ideas—we're not being paid by the Wichita city fathers to come up with a workable scheme. You're here to get angry. You should've started tearing things down. I don't care whether these buildings are wiped out tomorrow! I'm down here in Houston! I think really what bothers me more than anything else, and I've told you this, and it doesn't have anything to do with regionalism or monumentality... is a damn convention hotel. I can accept the dome, because it's got a certain sort of aspect of...

Wolin: Never mind. We got it.

Todd: And it's so big. I wouldn't necessarily swing my ideas onto it. And I think this is really were I missed it. You made too many small, accommodating gestures. What do I care whether you keep this, for instance? That all should go [pointing to buildings on model]. Why not?
Wolin: Around the convention center dome, are those windows?
Reber: That's a balcony.
Wolin: It's out of doors?
Reber: Yes. There's a corridor that goes around the whole perimeter of the building, and every once in a while there are doors where you can step out.
Wolin: I just had a wonderful free association to the implicit earth-mother thing that Anderson wanted to say, which is to make a mountain around that dome and to grade the landscape downward away from that and then run the grid through the earthworks of that.
Reber: I have a real problem with people who move to Wichita and try and landscape their property by hauling in loads of dirt to make little mountains.
Wolin: It would be a big mountain!
Todd: It's a big mountain, though.
Reber: It's flat there, and I just don't you can do to change that.
Williamson: Perhaps if you wanted to continue, I could make a suggestion, and that would be to "cook" it, like was talked about before. Start with this sort of imaginary grid, and then they impose the grid, and then as the grid is imposed and things get built, certain pieces of the grid disappear, get adjusted, and change. And you might actually sort of have to invent a kind of history for this particular place that would, actually, in the end, do the same thing.
Wolin: I have to say about the earth-moving thing, you know, in the desert people built ziggurats because they needed them.
Balfour: Thank you all very much.
Reber: Thank you.
Balfour: You stood it very well, I must say.

Notes:

The jury was very helpful in pointing out areas of weakness in the presentation: the lack of perspective drawings, the lack of detailed cross-sections. The comments about the need for more, and bolder, expressions of eccentricity within the grid, possibly by introducing local historical anecdotes, suggest a strategy for developing the scheme further. Also, a bolder approach to development around the riverfront zone would help define the district more clearly.
Figure 0. Road map of Sedgwick County, Kansas. Kansas Blue Print Company, 1989.
Figure 1. Plan of the city of Wichita. The one-mile grid is distorted by the Arkansas River.
Figure 2. Plan of downtown area as it currently exists. Law/Kingdon, Inc. Architects and Engineers.
Figure 3. Plan of central Wichita showing proposed public zone along the river and scheme for planting trees along mile-grid streets and other major routes.
Figure 4. Plan of central downtown area as proposed.
Figure 5. Site plan and cross section of proposed hotel and riverfront garden.
Figure 8. View north on road northeast of Wichita.

Figure 9. View south on road northeast of Wichita.
Figure 10. View of downtown Wichita looking northwards up Arkansas River. Avery Postcards, 1990.
Figure 11. Panoramic views of downtown Wichita; views westward on Douglas Avenue towards Broadview Hotel.
Figure 12. Aerial view of downtown Wichita. Dunlap Post Card Company.

Wichita!
Figure 13. Old City Hall, Wichita, by Proudfoot and Bird. Avery Postcards. Garfield (now Friends) University, by Proudfoot and Bird. Avery Postcards.
Figure 14.  North High School, 1927.
Minisa Bridge, 1933.
Figure 15. Site model.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


