Empty and Sacred Architecture;
a small parochial school for Houston, Texas

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"I felt that the disorder of things - if limited and somehow honest, might best correspond to our state of mind.

But I detested the arbitrary disorder that is an indifference to order, a kind of moral obtuseness, complacent well-being, forgetfulness.

To what then could I have aspired in my craft?

Certainly to small things, having seen that the possibility of great ones was historically precluded."

There is not much direction here. In its place, only a numbness which may be called collective absence. That is to say the absence of the collective sentiments which have so often been the impetus for architecture.

The events of the last generations seem to have eclipsed the ordered patterns of cities, buildings, and monuments; and to have jumbled, inverted, and devalued the language of the systems which create them. This change has brought with it the demythification of human intentions; and a dissolution of the centered urban patterns of decorum which clarify and order the life of cities, and of societies.

Within this disorder; smaller, privatized and autonomous orders have arisen - often simulating the scale and purpose of those collective institutions they have replaced. They represent, ostensibly and essentially, the privatized hegemony which has eclipsed the collective.

In the decay of traditional institutions, the representational and associative systems, which have often clarified or defined their primacy within the city, become devalued. When these representational systems are applied to the multiplicity of privatized institutions, their relative significance - their primacy as the language of collective expression - is questioned.

The trajectory of this associative devaluation is not unlike the physical law of entropy, wherein all entities, by their unstructured interaction, equalize one another. In cultural terms, this is the end of the center. All points have been declared equal, and infinitely juxtaposable.

"It is no longer possible to do anything about it: to modify the misery of modern culture, a great popular movement is necessary, and the misery of architecture is the reflection of this knowledge"  

The entropic devaluation of representational systems is rooted in the fundamental shift of culture in the 20th century. It is unlikely that architecture can offer a mitigation to this fundamental alienation - so attenuated by the collective absence, and the apparent discontinuity of the cultural continuum.

Relevance in architecture may come in the slips of memory, distilled and abstracted, which establish the few remaining primary links to the cultural continuum. These are not simulations of the architectural past to satisfy a nostalgia for the myth of lost days; rather they are mnemonic gestures.
to primary typological systems and elements of culturally transcendent significance. Such gestures recall the collective memory to these protosystems and elements, without annexing them outright - least they suffer a similar devaluation.

If these gestures succeed, they do so as fragments. Previous ideological or formal systems are inaccessible in their entirety, precluded by the progression of history. But as fragments, they possess the greater ability of complete expression, simultaneously revealing and confounding their original purpose. They are the memory of a whole, and also of its dissolution.

They are the critical reflection of culture.

And within this critical reflection, lies architecture's teleology. The idealism of architectures diachronic age, hidden in fragmentary memory rifts and fundamental typological associations, persists. This may be the unexpected optimism of an architecture cognizant of the blurring devaluation so intrinsic to consumer culture.

In the collective absence, there may yet be forms which stand between the impossibility of monuments and the false comfort of myths. They may still, perhaps, persist in the mechanisms of memory. The task, it would seem, is to preserve the memory of order, within the omnipresent disorder. And to test those simple forms which satisfy the expedient against architectures blurring and necessarily unspoken teleology.

Historicity

"Schizophrenia and the logic of the simulacrum have had an effect on historical time. The meaning of history is changed, and changed too is the representation in which history, forever unattainable, merely exists." 4

Photographs do not capture moments in time, as we are often persuaded. They are merely detached images, flattened and abstracted; intrinsically valueless, but for their associative power.

There is a tension, a fear, which exists between loss and desire. It is this fear which binds us to our photographs; to isolated images, and two dimensional models of an arrested past. We may, perhaps, inhabit a time which alludes more to what will become our own past than to the present which seems arrested by a photograph. In the vague alienation of the young American city, it has perhaps become necessary to manufacture history.

In the collective absence the smaller, autonomous orders retrace history, deconstructing its order, its chronology, and its ideological circumstance. As the diachrony of history is disturbed, models are slipped from the many layers of zeitgeist. And as dissassociated entities, they visit the 20th century, compounding the disorder of our culture, and by their unstructured interaction with the expedient, contributing to the entropy of representational systems.

"In this phase it is necessary to persuade the public that the contradiction, imbalance, and chaos typical of the contemporary city are inevitable. Indeed the public must be convinced that this chaos contains an unexplored richness, unlimited utilizable possibilities, and qualities of the "game" now made into fetishes for society." 5
Accepting "photographic history" is perhaps part of the indifference to order - the key to complacency in the collective absence. Whether it is a ruse perpetrated by the capitalist hegemony (as Tafuri is at pains to suggest), or actually, the truly inevitable condition of a complex societal structure, we seem no longer to live in the extension of our own history, but rather, to exist outside it.

* * *

Teleology

"A critical theory of society requires reference to utopian possibilities. The link between Utopia and critique in Marx's work was part of the logic of explanation. Insofar as a critical social science attempts systematically to uncover the empirical conditions that sustain domination, it must simultaneously formulate the conditions for overcoming that domination. The practical intent is inscribed in the core of critical analysis, if not always explicitly or coherently. A purely "negative critique" is ultimately groundless: a critical theory must justify its normative basis and attempt to elaborate the social possibilities of the human species if it is to have either explanatory or emancipatory power." 6

The critical reflection of culture must carry within it some measure of diachrony, and of teleology; even if such a study is fraught with the exaggerations of personal intention and experience. Among the private orders and depleted cultural norms of the late 20th century, it is quite likely that overt and explicit utopian projections will meet with a seemingly merited cynicism. The rise and fall of "redemptive architecture" is just in our wake. It would then, perhaps, be wise to leave such projections implicit in the work - and to leave our teleology unspoken.

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Project:

"Forgetting Architecture comes to mind as a more appropriate title for this book, since while I may be talking about a school, a cemetery, a theater; it is more correct to say that I talk about life, death, imagination." 3

The crisis of representation in the Roman Catholic Church may be, in some ways, analogous to similar difficulties in architectural language. Both Architecture and the Church, as institutions, have suffered a tremendous demythification since the Enlightenment, and both seek relevance in the 20th century with an urgent tenor.

As types, Schools and Monasteries have often been explored as Urban analogs, and it is to this end that I have chosen the design of a small parochial school and adjacent convent to serve as the vehicle for my explorations. Such a program, set within a semi-urban zone of a large Southwestern city should touch on each of the concerns enumerated in the above essay.

I have found a site which begins to touch on the entropy of Houston. It is a few acres of unoccupied land between the corporate towers and shotgun shacks which border the dividing freeway. There are few urban juxtapositions quite as jarring as those found on the edge of Houston's corporate citadel. The pair of photographs which begin this paper are taken from the selected site, looking in opposite directions, at what is, ostensibly, the same city. I would like to replace the camera with architecture.

For children, those casual and quite literally transient inhabitants of a school, suspension of disbelief is an easy task. They are often quite disposed to see a private order within a general disorder, like dinosaurs among clouds. This willingness to see what may no longer exist is a large part of the hopefulness of the program I have selected - though I do not intend the lessons of urban analog as instruction for children.

The Monastic component of the project evolved as a reaction to the "seige mentality" often latent in current criticism. The urgent tenor with which ideas of capitalist closure are foretold, and a certain fashionable propensity to speak of the apocalypse close at hand, seem somehow reminiscent of those institutions which were once the safeguards of knowledge and high culture during a barbarous epic. Though this sort of high melodrama is by no means at the core of my intentions; these are notions which form the undercurrent of the project.

The persistence of charitable gestures in the current age of suspicion is, perhaps, one of the few remaining vestiges of collective endeavor in our time. This, also, is part of the optimism of the project.

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Program

School for 310 elementary students:

- 28 Classrooms @ 600 sq ft ................................................................. 16,500
- Library .............................................................................................. 4500
- Gymnasium .................................................................................... 4500
- Cafeteria ........................................................................................... 600
- Administration .................................................................................. 2500
- Storage ............................................................................................. 2000

Convent (Residence for 12):

- 12 Single Cells @ 300 sq ft ............................................................... 3600
- Additional ......................................................................................... 1400

Rectory (Residence for 9):

- 12 Single Cells @ 400 sq ft ............................................................... 4800
- Additional ......................................................................................... 2700

Sanctuary:

- Nave (?) ........................................................................................... 5000
- Additional ......................................................................................... 3000

Net Total ............................................................................................. 50,000

*Based on St. Anne's Catholic Church & School, Houston, Texas - Marion Spiers, Architect. (see fig. a)
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Notes


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Analysis

Not long ago, while trying to discover and describe the critical relation of architecture to culture, the example of two schools conceived as urban analogies presented itself. The following analysis of those schools, by Architects Aldo Rossi and Leon Krier, explores the difficulties and differences of their critical method.

The dream of timeless building, of distilling through typological study and reduction, an architecture which refers only to its own specific history, thus offering a transcendent cultural significance, contains within it a difficult paradox: If architecture is an aspect of culture, and the representitive relationship to cultural values that this implies remains consistent, then the historical continuity of architecture must be interrupted by the relative discontinuity of culture - thus denying the ideological potency of intrinsic cultural significance in architecture.

More succinctly stated: how can architecture be a cultural phenomenon, holding within itself a vocabulary of intrinsically communicating forms, while simultaneously transcending shifting cultural values and readings? It is at this point that the most significant division in Rationalist philosophy occurs.

For Aldo Rossi, the resolution lies in the collective memory - a social common-ground which, though fraught with the exaggerations of personal experience, is the repository of the cultural continuum in each human being. It is this bank of semi-intuitive knowledge that Rossi attempts to reach with evocative forms (types) so stripped and distilled that they may communicate nothing at an immediate and thus transient cultural level, but offer only silent gestures which are the fundamental necessities of their type.

For Leon Krier, the attempted mitigation of the paradox lies in an unyielding adherence to a highly reactionary stance - desirous of a "return" to a pre-industrial and thus intrinsically pure sensibility where buildings are true expressions of their type, constructed with simple (comprehensible) artisanal technologies in true, traditional materials. Such buildings would be terribly conscious of their place on the restored continuum as well as their place and role in the streets and squares of the restored city. Such buildings, in their renewed urbanity, would not reference or acknowledge the continuum interrupted by modernism - but would be that continuum.

Both Krier and Rossi seek a deep vein of the cultural continuum, below the surface of shifting cultural values and readings, a trail which, though all but lost in industrial society, can be found in our past. The difference, the shades of the Rationalist polemic, lies in the access to this deep vein of culture; for Leon Krier: a return to the breaking point of sensibility (an idealized pre-industrial age); for Aldo Rossi: the rich and mystical collective memory.

The Baptistry and the Gas Chamber

"The accusations of Fascism hurled at Rossi mean little, since his attempts at the recovery of an historicizing form exclude verbalizations of it's content and any compromise with the real"[^1]
"Do not the school children of Fagnano Olona look like inhabitants of a world not their own? The children inhabit a time that already alludes more to what will become their own past than to the present that seems arrested by the photograph, thus advancing the idea of the atemporality of the construction, the indifference of architecture toward those who inhabit it."\(^2\)

The lonely urban analogy which is Rossi's elementry school in Fagnano Olona easily reveals his faith in a reduced and distilled architecture transcending shifting cultural norms; and though becoming an amenity in the lives of it's inhabitants the building remains in a pre-linguistic universe unencumbered by history. Not being burdened by the expedient of the day, the school, like all of Rossi's work, attempts to suggest the presence of an atemporal universe of architecture - one which is outside man.

For children, those casual and quite literally transient inhabitants of the school, suspension of disbelief is an easy task. Not having developed a depth of "collective memory", they are none the less able to conceive of the classrooms, courtyard, hallways, library, and smokestack as the fragments of their own small city. At childhood's end, however, these fragments must evoke deeply held memories before a hallway may be called a street, a courtyard a piazza, or a reading room a public monument. This evocation is achieved in abstraction. The lost significance of an idealized Renaissance piazza, dormant in the collective memory, may be subconsciously recalled in the distilled formal analogy of the courtyard (see fig.1); but the recolection must remain an abstraction lest the analogy become literal and thus rooted in a specific time and in the transient cultural readings of that time.

With recollections of an unspecific past and the omnipresent forshadow of an uncertain future, the reduced, abstracted and distilled type realized by the school transcends its current inhabitants and their temporary readings, appealing only to what is consistent in human culture, much like the De Chirico paintings which are so much a part of the Rationalist rhetoric (see fig.2).

Rossi's reduction to architypal forms cannot, however, succeed in escaping the forboding quality that an unspecific past and uncertain future lend to the form stripped of its transient cultural significance. Hence, Peter Eisenman's reading of the Library in the Fagnano Olona project as both the "Baptistry and the Gas Chamber" or Charles Jencks reading of forms "sacred and all too real, of Heaven and the concentration camp, both sublime and prison-like"\(^3\). This melancholy is the unmistakable reflection of the alienation so prevalent in an industrial consumer society.

Rejecting the acceptance of custom as norm and embracing simple manipulations of the institutional type (see fig.3), Rossi's school becomes a backdrop for the activity of the day - thus lending the architecture a slightly theatrical quality. The image and impression is not only that a flight of steps facing a courtyard subtly evokes a theater (see fig.4) - but that the entire building watches its inhabitants with the casual regard of an impartial observer. This, too, places the building outside the encumberances of the day.

All of this distilling and abstracting reduction of recurrent typologies in the architectural proto-language results, unquestionably, in a sense of timeless desolation. The terrible loneliness of Rossi's architecture may be an unavoidable condition in any reductive architecture - though one suspects that it may be Aldo Rossi's own predilection, perhaps subconscious, but none the less pervasive for that. If notions of the "Collective Death" (Peter Eisenman's term) are not intrensically encoded in a type, or in the idea of typology, perhaps the melancholy occurs in the mechanisms of memory, responding to the reduction and consiquent purity of the forms.
Rossi says "There is no art which is not autobiographical", admitting and embracing the personal component of design, allowing it to slip into the rigorous typological distillation which is his espoused intention. Eisenman postulates that though Rossi attempts to step outside the temporal universe, into a primary atemporal one, to "escape the inconsequential hermeticism of individual intellectual work" (a strange turn of phrase for Peter Eisenman) - the images of collective death, which are a result, belie Rossi's own "anxiety about his reality". They add to his work the melancholy dimension of unspecific fear of the future. Witness the hollow, windowless drum of the library in the tight (almost claustrophobic) brick paved courtyard, adorned with only a clock; and the tall silent smokestack, rendered in brick, freestanding and emphatically industrial - its shadow falling on children at play (see figures 5-9). Even the site, though perhaps beyond the control of the architect, is a most desolate representative of the Italian countryside.

Away form the seemingly inescapable "disenchanted realism" Rossi offers one small and possibly ironic consolation. "He wants to distill to the point where all historic association is drained away and what remains is a framework of pure potential, waiting to be overlaid and elaborated by future history". In these sad poetic spaces, it is the human "hour and event" that Rossi offers as optimism. The occupants and their fragments of transient human culture may adorn this architecture as they pass through it. The seriousness of the distilled and reduced form will host any festival with the same truthful backdrop; and though it is only through these chance occurrences, the lives of the unheeded inhabitants, that the architecture lives. For Aldo Rossi, the pure and reduced archetype is responsible only for a clear and dissassociated rhythm; all melody is the result of the hour and the event.

Thus we are reminded that the potency of type is in its psychological dimension. Type resides in that mythical domain of the collective unconscious from whence it may excavate deep memories and meanings provided its expression speaks only of the quiet, timeless undercurrent of culture - leaving all expression of current and expedient meaning (and of joy) to the passing occupants.

Swallowing Rome Whole

"But within Neo-Rationalism there is another tendency, which is illustrated by the work of Leon and Rob Krier. In this case we are presented with a synthetic typology of urban spaces which provides a set of "design rules" within which all design could take place. These design rules are based entirely on Neoclassical models both for buildings and cities. Unlike Rossi, therefore, Leon Krier proposes and absolutely closed model that implicitly denies the possibility of change within an overall structure." 7

"Things are no more like what they used to be than they ever were before." 8

Leon Krier believes there to be an inherent incompatibility between an architecture which transcends cultural norms and the consumer culture of an industrial age. Thus in order to resolve the paradox of an architecture which is at once derived from culture and not simultaneously subject to its transient interpretations, Krier must espouse the rejection of industrial society and a "return" to an idyllic (though mythical) pre-industrial era. The unravelling of the urban fabric wrought by the automobile conscious doctrines of "modernism" provokes, in Krier, an absolute rejection of
modernism and an unyielding call for its reversal.

To Krier, the city is a simple artifact. It must be broken into quarters whose size is determined by their walkability (no more than 20 minutes in any direction). These quarters are then to be constructed of a continuous urban fabric, composed of a few fundamental types, forming streets and squares in a simple hierarchy of public and private space. The automobile is relegated to a decidedly subservient position. The simple building types, extracted intact from early historical origins (somewhat simplified), are to be constructed according to the building technology from which the axioms of classical architecture were developed - using only the most fundamental and historically proven materials. Such orthodox methods and plans would reawaken the artisan class, returning human craftsmanship to the long neglected building trade. Such smooth and romantic rhetoric quickly evokes images of a harmonious, hyper-aesthetic existence and the supression of a degrading consumer culture.

Krier, like Rossi, has prepared a design for a school, and though somewhat larger than Rossi's school in Fagnano Olona, it too is a rural building with urban pretentions. Herin lies a significant variance from Rossi's use of typology, for the school at St. Quentin-en-Yvelines is not the abstracted image of a city - believable to children and evocative to the collective memory - but a true model of the city, a microcosm of the envisioned reconstruction. St. Quentin is the closed model to which Colquhoun refers. It would exist (at 500% over budget it does not actually exist) outside the bounds of transient culture, reaching back to connect, in-tact, to the "broken" cultural continuum. The intervening years of destruction and alienation would be ignored and it is this naivete' which lends the project (like all of Kriers work) the suspicious air of the artificial.

But Leon is dogmatic in his optimism for the reawakening. His vision cannot be compromised by transient cultural norms. St. Quentin is comprised of a simple catalogue of urban types (see fig.10) assembled according to the neoclassical models he espouses. As drawn, the buildings appear to be lifted right from their classical models, and enough pieces have been contrived to represent most of the types required to create a pre-industrial city (see fig.11). Krier justifies this compartmentalized programming with a typically insulting diagram (see fig.12). Lest a building be a forboding monster, it must not be comprised of only one large multifunctional building, but broken into smaller comprehensible pieces. This point is well taken, though rather beligerently offered.

Offering rural projects as small models of the city is a standard preoccupation for Leon Krier. His reconstruction of Pliny's Villa displays the same desire to represent buildings in ensemble. Again the program is compartmentalized into separate buildings generating the required fabric for the creation of figural exterior space (see fig.13). Additionally, as at St. Quentin, arcades and pergolas define other larger spaces. These spatial containers also serve as connective devices to bind a mildly dispersed series of separate buildings together (especially in inclement weather). Though perhaps more justifiably in the case of a reconstruction, the building types are again lifted almost directly from a pre-industrial era and aesthetic.

Yet this is not ecclectism, for Krier is careful to assert that he is not in love with ruins of ancient civilizations, and that he does not worship the fragments of past eras, venerating them as if they were the whole. Rather, such ruins as exist in the 20th century are only the inspirations of his reconstruction. Having no intresinsic value, our cultural heritage must serve only as model to the recreation of, and reconnection to the broken cultural continuum. "During epocs of reconstruction a field of ruins has no value proper, because it is only one of many building sites which demands an even more splendid reconstruction. To the spirit, it inspires the image, and this image will guide the reconstruction."
The extraordinary and unabashed similarity of the approach and appearance to the reconstruction of a Roman Villa and a 20th century school reveal the romantic commitment to reconnecting the present to the architectural continuum in a completely unsophisticated manner. In this mindset the answers are simple. No effort at a disguised or distilled reference need be made. The expedient of the day, the degrading cultural norms, need not be transcended through subtle evocations of the collective memory - such compromising factors are transcended by the promise of a return to paradise. If such a dream can be believed, if its outcome can be trusted, surely no obstacles could stand in the way of our highly educated and industrious society. But though Leon offers continual reference to the mystical properties of democratic socialism, his rhetoric does not reveal the path through the dense jungle of consumer society to his promised land - it merely assures us, with beautiful images and seductive fantasies, that it might be made to exist.

In the school of St. Quentin, as in the Villa, the recollection of a romantic era is clear. But how such totally encapsulated (closed) models may be constructed and made to ring true (and surely this cannot be accomplished by "pure materials" alone, for fantasies rendered in stone still remain fantasies), and made to appear relevant in light of all that has occurred in the last several generations is unexplained - though insisted upon.

Paranoia of the Real

"There is no doubt that the group of architects that I have chosen to exemplify through the work of Rossi and Krier do in general look on the type as representing a deep cultural continuity. Their attitude is very similar to that of 18th century Neo-Classicism, according to which architecture, in constantly referring to its own origins and to its most elementary forms, reflects the timeless principles of human reason and the foundations of human society"\(^\text{11}\)

Dispite the beauty of Leon Krier’s fantasy, it seems that if we are to believe in the reality of fundamental cultural continuity, our relation to the architectural tradition must be an indirect one. The alienation from history caused by modernism’s break with it seem to have forced a greatly exaggerated and reactionary polemic from Krier and one may say that the work is more affected by what it is trying to negate than what it is trying to recover.\(^\text{12}\)

The distancing from the cultural past wrought by modernism seems to have not only fragmented the formerly connected nature of cities, but to have denied to architecture its formerly intrinsic relation to fundamental cultural expression. Having smashed, like any good Luddite, the industrial machinery which severed this continuity, Krier believes that the connection to culture can be re-established. But the gap in history which is modernism can no more be ignored than could any age prior to it; for though modernism may in fact represent, with its mass production techniques and devalued cultural norms, a break in the cultural continuum - it is never the less part of our cultural legacy. If it is a break, it seems to throw the past beyond our reach, relegating the language and types of the past, as Rossi believes, to the collective memory.

The abstraction of memory, then, seems a more reasonable course than that of swallowing Rome whole. Much that is outside the proto-language of architecture must be assimilated with it to adopt the closed models offered by Leon Krier. The "past made real" cannot be believed; fragments of past culture cannot slide intact into the present. But we may be able to distill their fundamental qualities from our memory - and activate their nutral shells with the current hour and event.
The resonance of personal memory may, though restrained and distilled, possess the required potency to make traditional urbanism and culturally derived architecture again possible. In this way, the paranoia for false representations of the past (such as Disneyland and the Shopping Mall) may not prevent our rediscovering the faint trail of deep cultural ties to relevant architecture.

Notes

1. Manfredo Tafuri


3. Charles Jencks, Late Modern Architecture, Ch.2.5,

4. Peter Eisenman, "The House of the Dead as the City of Survival", in Aldo Rossi in America, IAUS, 1982


6. ibid


8. Mamie Eisenhower

9. Leon Krier "The Love of Ruins or The Ruins of Love", in Modulus 16

10. ibid

11. Calquhoun.

12. ibid
These three paintings may be understood to represent the dissolution of the center. They seem also to foreshadow the advent of an omnipresent disorder, and to convey the numbness of collective absence.

The progression begins with an Ideal City painting of the 15th century. The artist is unknown, and this anonymity seems to render the painting the product of an era rather than of an individual.

The second image depicts a lifeless parachutist who drops, like the 20th Century, into the House of Montango, superimposing one age upon another. His coming scatters members of an institution which is questioned by his very presence. Strangely, it seems his parachute will form - for an instant - the missing dome of this drum before collapsing inside. Gianfilippo Usellini - 1936

And one final drum, La tour rouge - 1913. Perhaps, this De Chirico painting, like much of his work, is the coming of winter; of cold and numbing days which privatize our actions, and which turn our thoughts inward to the immediacy of our shelter, and to our personal comfort and pleasure. In the introspection of such days, we might contemplate the memory of shared places, and even grow nostalgic for the collective quality of the outside in summer.
Final Jury

The Thesis Committee and Guest Critic, Robert Mangurian, reviewed the thesis projects on the 22nd of April, 1988.

The jury was extremely brief and the comments can be summarized in four main points:

Robert Mangurian felt it was a good project, liked the pieces separately and together and was only slightly concerned about the connection of sacred and profane architectural Icons. This was a "fine line" comment, and I was uncertain of its correctness.

Peter Waldman felt it was a good project but was disappointed that the refectory did not express itself in section. I agreed, and later corrected this error.

Anderson Todd was concerned that the "Empty Building" idea of the chapel might allow too much light into the space - and felt that that light should be controlled in some way. I agreed, and later studied the lighting in a larger model.

Albert Pope, my Advisor, felt that the project had come a long way in a short period of time, and that I had brought my several ideas to fruition near the end of the thesis semester. And that I had produced a good project.