A COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL CENTER FOR HILTON HEAD ISLAND

THE THESIS CONCLUSION

Design Thesis
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Gill

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Part I
CONCLUDING REMARKS
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Part II
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A thesis, according to the Oxford American Dictionary, is a 'statement or theory put forward and supported by arguments.' When I began this endeavor, I sought to demonstrate that an architectural intervention could solve the problem of community dispersion and isolationism which I associated with the particular urbanistic (I use that term loosely) form of Hilton Head Island. My statement was the proposal that indeed a built move could provide the answer to a problem, the arguments were to take the form of the design solution.

Hilton Head Island as a site proved to be replete with complicated issues. It is a new town with an old, but forgotten, history. It is unequivocally dependent on the automobile, as most twentieth century cities are. Its urban form consists of a series of ten secure and introverted 'plantations' strung out along a single highway that itself is half suburban parkway and half shopping strip. The Island began as a resort, catering to the needs of part time residents and visitors, but is now home to some 20,000 permanent residents, whose needs are quite different. As a development, there was really no precedent that I know of; Hilton Head has become the model for others to copy. In addition, it is relatively isolated from any city of consequence and thus from any direct source of contextual influence. And finally, it is a place that exists somewhere between the myth of escape and the reality of living.

The program for the proposed architectural intervention was really quite simple, and almost mundane. It consisted of a gathering together of all the civic functions on the Island: the town hall, the county courthouse, a post office, a museum, the library, an auditorium, the chamber of commerce and a visitors center. The total required square footage amounted only to about 100,000 square feet—not much when one's goal is to create a significant urban move. The challenge thus became the making of an exciting place using an unextraordinary program.

For a site I selected the junction of Highway 278 and Matthews Drive. Here was a location that acknowledged the car, equality of access from either end of the Island, a sense of history, and the features of nature and water that serve as the dominating influence in the overall aura of the place. I re-examined the possibility of other sites several times, such as the bridge landing and the circle at the terminus of Highway 278, but always returned to the afore mentioned site for the afore mentioned reasons. There was also the option of exploring a solution that occurred along the fourteen miles of the Highway, but that was deemed impractical early
on due to the sheer magnitude of the site. Thus, rightly or wrongly, I pushed the solution at the crossing of the two roads.

The first scheme I proposed (see the reproductions that follow this essay) set the program on a man-made island in the middle of Broad Creek, out from the old cemetery at the intersection of the two roads. I wanted something that would be antithetical to the typical discreet and woodsy Hilton Head aesthetic, a notion that would henceforth be a part of every solution. I was attempting to create an object in space, something that would be perceived as unique and special from land and sea, and on approach. It wasn't located on the site specified above, but was intended to be a part of that location through access and perception. The criticism I received was threefold: 1) the issue of appropriateness was raised: why would one build in the midst of the carefully protected and preserved marshes? 2) what would be the allure to draw people out to this island? certainly the program was not enough. 3) the idea of creating an island when an abundance of land existed seemed like an overlavish and unrealistic approach to the problem. With these thoughts in mind, I moved back to the land and began my next proposal.

The second approach accepted the original site selection and divided the program into halves, one on the northwest quadrant of 278 and Matthews Drive serving government functions, the other on the southwest quadrant (adjacent to the water and cemetery) serving cultural functions. The logic behind this division was simple: the cultural functions would be best sited next to history and nature, while the more mundane government program could be satisfied with a less rich environment. The lengthy dispersion of the built elements was to encourage a greater opportunity for perception from the automobile along the roadway. The buildings were sited in such a way as to work together within their own groupings, and also to work perceptually from road and water, and from one half to the other. Upon review, the following criticisms were offered: 1) the scheme resembled a strip shopping center too much, and thus created no excitement or engaging solution to the problem. 2) there was too much distance between the two programmatic sites to create a sense of unified cohesiveness; everything was simply too spread out. Suggestions were made that the two halves be combined into one site; that the four corners of the intersection be explored; and that alternate sites, such as the bridge landing or the Sea Pines circle be examined. After some consideration, I opted to explore the possibility of the four corners.
The first move in the third scheme was the introduction of a traffic circle, or ronde pointe, over the intersection of Highway 278 and Matthews Drive. This accomplished several purposes. First, it offered a geometric ordering device for the surrounding program (an ellipse was briefly explored, mainly to enhance the notion of the directionality of 278, but was abandoned due to the configuration problems it induced in the site quadrants). Second, it forced traffic to make a change in pattern and thus created an awareness of the enclosing environment. And third, it made a focal space at the center that could be used more advantageously than a traffic signal. The next move was problematic: how does one enclose a suburban traffic circle with a small program that wants, for sake of contrast, to take on an urban form? The final decision was to wrap the road with a garden-type colonnade behind which the program elements would sit in courtyard groupings. Parking and access would be even further back, in a secondary ring, and pedestrian activity would focus on the individual courtyards and the enclosing colonnade. Vista lines would focus on the center space in the traffic circle. There were problems, however.

The circle was intended to be a smooth solution. It wasn't. The first dilemma arose because the intersection did not form a perfect ninety degree cross, but more of a sagging 'x'. And to make matters worse, the road centers, as defined by their medians, did not all meet at one universal point. Thus, the site quadrants were unequal in size and shape, and the circle at the intersection had to be somewhat arbitrarily placed, due to the lack of a specific center point. There were other issues as well. How to cross the roads where the colonnade stopped. How to join orthogonal buildings to a curving colonnade. What forms and definitions to give the individual buildings and courtyards. And what to put in the relatively inaccessible center circle. By review time, these problems had only mildly been addressed.

The critics appreciated the thesis problem, and questioned the validity of the urbanistic form I was using. Uncertain as to whether the solution was correct or not, they offered various comments. One suggested that the built form be reconsidered as an object building in the circle center, not unlike a typical Texas courthouse. Another recommended that the colonnade be moved from the traffic circle to the parking circle to put pedestrians 'where they really wanted to be.' Yet another implied that Venturi's 1000 Oaks Shopping Center might serve as a valuable model. The diminutive nature of the colonnade was criticized as too weak, and it was
recommended that, whatever route I selected, I take special effort to make it convincing. So advised, I moved on.

Between this third and the final scheme, I explored a variety of solutions that addressed the issues of building form, pedestrian movement, vehicular movement, spatial enclosure, connections, and the circle center. I placed parking on grade off the ronde pointe and I placed parking underground adjacent to a sunken circle center. I put pedestrian bridges across the streets and tall facades where once there had been a colonnade. Buildings became anonymous rectangles and then shapes fattened by program. The correct answers were always elusive, and the search went on and on.

The fourth, and last, proposition for a civic and cultural complex on Hilton Head Island took the form of a true synthesis of nature and man-made order. The impulse to create a place that was antithetical to the typical Island aesthetic was satisfied. In basic diagram, the scheme was a circle within a square with two points of focus, the center of the roundabout, and the park and water beyond. The problem of memorable enclosure of the central traffic space was solved through the use of monumental lighting pylons that simultaneously served as a pedestrian colonnade. The program was housed in a series of buildings united by an arcade that, together with a natural berm to their backside, formed the perimeter of the complex. Three courtyards were formed by this move, and placed in the center of each was an architectural 'set piece' that referenced regional vernacular—a reminder, as it were, of the presence of history and local culture. The courtyards themselves were undefined; however, it was intended that they take on individual characters relating to the program theme surrounding them. The berm was designed to serve as a transitional element between the surrounding landscape and the geometry of the interior structure. It was a rigid shape (square) but was to be planted; hence, its mitigating role. Parking was provided outside the berm, and allowed for a pedestrian access that was always focused on the architectural set pieces and the circle center beyond. Once within a courtyard, the pedestrian could move about the building arcade or along the colonnade at the edge of the traffic circle. Passing to the park quadrant, he could move freely into the old cemetery and on to the waters of Broad Creek. It was hoped that this movement along the circle would create an awareness of the special totality of the entire concept.
The void created by the insertion of the roundabout was another challenge. Not only did it have to function on both the pedestrian and vehicular levels, but it occupied a place of great symbolic potential. The solution called for a sunken plaza with a fountain that could be used for occasional special events that celebrated the collective nature of the Island. On a different plane, a temporal duty was assigned to the space to relate to the importance of water and tides to the community. A channel was cut through from Broad Creek to the sunken plaza. The idea here was that as the tide rose, the fountain would be covered and subsequently slowly diminish in height, thus providing a measuring stick as to the level of the water, which level affects both the recreational and commercial activity of the entire town.

The semester end jury focused immediately on the level of completion of the project, an unfortunate but understandable occurrence. The primary criticism of the work presented was that it was developed only to the point of being a diagram. Once this objection was discussed, critical conversation moved to the idea of the thesis itself. Can, one critic asked, architecture provide the solution to the problem of civic unification? He concluded that it probably cannot, and even if it could, it would be almost impossible to prove. The issue of choice was also raised; people chose to live in this insular, introverted environment. Why, then, would they want to have this place of extroverted community? Is this indeed, the jury queried, a valid notion for a thesis?

My response to the critical evaluation of my thesis statement is that yes, an architectural intervention can provide a sense of place, unity and symbol for a new town on the order of Hilton Head Island, and that yes, it is a desirable notion for this particular community. To address the latter before the former, why do I say that this is a desirable inclusion in the developed fabric? As I pointed out earlier, the Island is no longer solely a place of escape for the vacation minded. It has a permanent population that is steadily growing. There is a movement under way to create a museum, and to build an auditorium to attract arts troupes. There is a need, therefore, perceived by the residents for some sort of hint of community recognition and collective gathering. The Island, to be a town, needs some of the basic elements that constitute a town, and one of those elements is a place of collective pride and activity. At the beginning of this paper I stated that my design solution would provide the argument to support my thesis. Unfortunately, the level of completion of the project left an argument that was as yet unclear and unsubstantiated, and thus called to question the validity of the thesis. Were the design executed
to the depth initially intended, I think my statement would be well defended

A thesis is about the proof of an idea of one's own making. But it is also about a process of investigation, a process of learning whereby one comes to some sort of conclusion. What would my conclusion be? On the twelfth of January I set out a series of personal and design objectives. They read as such:

1. To pursue from start to finish a project of my own program.
2. To use the thesis as a means of testing my preconceived perceptions of Hilton Head.
3. To challenge my ability for self discipline and initiative in a project.
4. To investigate freely various means of approach, representation, and presentation.
5. To challenge, expand, and investigate my analytical, architectural, and representational skills.

The degree to which I met these objectives is regrettably not high. But the project offered an invaluable lesson in design approach and thought process. Any idea can be rationalized out of existence; only rigorous testing through design pursuit can answer the questions and doubts posed. The thesis, then, provided me not with a superb final design investigation but with a new found knowledge about architecture and the way it is created. It was time well spent.
THE FIRST SCHEME
THE THIRD SCHEME
HILTON HEAD ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA
BEFORE 1861

THE FINAL SCHEME: DIAGRAMS
THE FINAL SCHEME: DIAGRAMS
THE FINAL SCHEME: DIAGRAMS
THE FINAL SCHEME: DIAGRAMS
THE FINAL SCHEME: DIAGRAMS
THE SITE AND PROGRAM
FOR
A COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL CENTER FOR HILTON HEAD ISLAND
The Fourth Thesis Submission

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This paper constitutes the fourth of a series of efforts to define the topic, program, and site for a Thesis. These goals have now been accomplished. What follows is an explanation of the logic and thought processes I followed in order to reach my conclusions. I believe the program provided at the end of this proposal is rich, reasonable, and entirely plausible. I also believe that the resultant project would greatly enhance both the livability and urbanistic quality of Hilton Head Island. So, with my expressions of satisfaction now stated, let me proceed to convince you, the reader, of the validity of my proposal.

I initiated this thesis intention with the hypothesis that Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, was a new town lacking a sense of community and a sense of permanence, or history. I further contended that, while this individualistic, ephemeral quality was fine for a place developed primarily with tourism in mind, it was no longer valid for an island that had developed a substantial, and increasing, permanent population. In addition, I complained that the development pattern of amenity redundant, introverted plantations was detrimental to a sense of Island unity and identity. My conclusion, therefore, was that some sort of urban intervention of a collective nature was necessary to provide a cohesive bond for the population, and a public symbol for the community as a whole. That conclusion was previously termed my "bias"; it was accepted without an intensive challenge or test. It remains that way today.

In beginning my quest for a program and site, I first looked at the existing situation. Where are the community areas now, and what are they? The second part of the question was quite evident: all the major collective spots are commercial spots. They include Harbour Town in Sea Pines, Shelter Cove across from Palmetto Dunes, various spots along Pope Avenue by Sea Pines, the Sea Pines Circle (at Highway 278) area, and North Forrest Beach at the terminus of Pope Avenue. I further questioned why the concentration of activity around the north end of Sea Pines. The answer, quite simply, lies in the fact that Sea Pines was the first plantation to be developed, and subsequent developments created a retail core out of Pope Avenue and environs. My next query: Is this area the only truly valid place for communal interaction? Of course not. The Island has filled out from toe to ankle, and therefore the possibilities have extended also.

Next, I attempted to define a "collective element," that term I have always applied to my proposed urban intervention. I determined the following:
1. It is an identifying element
2. It gives unity to a place
3. It becomes over time a source of civic pride
4. It creates a sense of place
5. It can help to establish a sense of permanence or history
6. It becomes a civic symbol
7. It is a happening for everyone in the community

With these qualities in mind, I sought to identify what a collective element could be. I came up with a triumvirate:

1. A place, such as Rockefeller Center
2. A thing, such as the Arc de Triomphe
3. A series of things, such as the Christmas trees on Post Oak

Now I asked if there were any collective elements currently on Hilton Head. I investigated the possibilities—Harbour Town, Shelter Cove, the beaches, etc.—and determined that there really were none. The closest construct to a collective element is the red and white striped lighthouse in Harbour Town, but that is a symbol for Sea Pines, and a commercial draw for Harbour Town. Besides, if one is not a resident of Sea Pines, the ability to visit Harbour Town and its lighthouse is subject to a $2.00 fee, the price of a visitor's day pass.

Before continuing, I decided to question one last time my hypothesis: Why does Hilton Head need a collective element? I concluded the following:

1. It lacks a sense of identity. It is palmetto trees, golf courses, beaches, plantations, etc. What makes it different from other similar resorts?
2. It lacks a sense of history and permanence. Visitors and residents alike tend to have no awareness of the rich and active past of the place.
3. It lacks a distinctive place or element, one that is out of the ordinary. This relates to no.1 above.
4. There is no sense of unity. The different plantations compete with one another, and have security arrangements that keep residents of one plantation from venturing uninvited to another. The current great
unifying factor is Highway 278.
5. There is nothing that caters to the civic needs of the growing permanent population, as well as to the visitors.

Having satisfied myself that this is indeed a valid hypothesis, I then moved to an examination of the possible constraints one might encounter when making an urban intervention. They included land availability, transportation (road) logistics, and land use restrictions. Also, issues of importance included the question of the relationship to the car, the pedestrian, or both; and the need to avoid replicating (and thereby rendering the move somewhat useless) what has already been built. With these thoughts in mind, I raised the next logical question: What could the collective element for Hilton Head be?

Collective elements can, depending on the needs of the community, be visual, participatory, active, passive, multiple or singular. The list of possibilities for Hilton Head reads as follows:

1. A series of somethings lining Highway 278, such as flagpoles
2. A less regular series of somethings, like Ledoux tollhouses
3. A singular monument, such as the Arc de Triomphe
4. A park, such as Central Park
5. A multiplicity of things in the urban fabric, like Rome
6. A civic center of multiple functions

I proceeded to then evaluate each one for its value on the Island: What would the appropriate collective element (s) be?

1. "A series of somethings lining Highway 278" would not work. The highway is too long, and the repetitive objects would tend to become monotonous. Besides, they would be to the benefit of those in cars only, and would be too obvious of a knitting piece.
2. The Ledoux tollhouses would not be correct either. In essence, they already exist in the form of the security gates at the various plantation entrances. While they would in and of them selves be activity centers, they would not serve as a collective unifier.
3. A monument, by itself, would be too passive.

4. A park is not necessary. The beaches serve the collective need of a park, while the golf courses meet the visual need.

5. A multiplicity of different elements can work in an urban fabric that is enriched by other community elements, but Hilton Head is too small and too suburban in organization. Multiple elements would be lost on the community whole.

6. That leaves a civic center of multiple functions. And this was my choice.

My reasons for selecting a civic center were more than just the result of a process of elimination. They are enumerated as follows:

1. There is no such construct in Hilton Head at this time. Civic and commercial elements are scattered all about the Island.
2. A civic center could serve as both a community gathering place and a symbol.
3. By its multiple nature of different functions and uses, it could offer the Island a heretofore unknown richness in meaning and program, uniting the real and the mythological into one.
4. By bringing together the now scattered civic functions, it would immediately serve as a community collective, a place of unity.

Now, what possible elements could the program for such a civic center include?

1. Government facilities and offices
2. A meeting hall
3. A performing arts accommodation
4. Restaurant and retail space
5. References to the imagery of Hilton Head
6. A marina
7. A park
8. A museum
9. A library
10. An exhibition center
From this menu, I selected those elements that I felt were non-site specific, and necessary for the program. They were:

1. Government facilities and offices. Currently, they are spread out and difficult to find. In addition, they are improperly housed. The Town Hall, for instance, is sandwiched behind the Denny's-like Huddle House restaurant.

2. A meeting hall. Currently there is no such place. When meetings of the town citizens are held (which, being a new and small town, they frequently are) they usually take place in a school.

3. A performing arts accommodation. Short of a warehouse by the Sea Pines Circle, no sort of stage theater exists. By providing a facility, participation (both in act and in attendance) in the arts should be improved, providing a richer cultural factor in a place almost void of one.

4. A museum. Currently, the closest thing to a museum on the Island is housed in a private home. The existence of a museum would be an instrument whereby the populace, permanent and visiting alike, could gain an insight into the history of Hilton Head.

5. A library. There is a public library currently. Moving it to a civic center would simply be part of the scheme to gather up the town's disparate elements and put them together.

6. References to the imagery of Hilton Head. This involves working with the existing perceptions of the place, or creating new ones. This quality becomes important in establishing identity and symbolism.

The other elements have been dismissed as unnecessary for the essence of the project. Various ones will surface again in the final program.

Moving ahead, I began the quest for a site. What would be the qualifications? The land must be available, or at least reasonably so; the location must be very accessible from all parts of the island; it should preferably be near some sort of historic site or be somehow imbued with a sense of historical meaning; it should preferably be a site that is rich with positive natural qualities; and it must be readily visible.
Based on these considerations, I then attempted to locate a set of suitable sites. The finds were few: the area north of Sea Pines Circle (where the stage theater now is), the site of the Chamber of Commerce, the area where Matthews Drive meets 278 at Folly Field Road, the area of 278 and Union Cemetery Road, and the area on 278 near the Beaufort County Courthouse Annex. All had possibilities, but only one seemed appropriate.

The site I selected was that area where Matthews Drive meets Highway 278 at Folly Field Road. The reasons for my selection were as follows:

1. The land is currently vacant
2. The site is in the middle of the Island
3. It is on Highway 278 with a short cut access by Matthews Drive
4. It has two historic sites: the Zion cemetery and the location of Two Oaks (two ancient trees that appear in Hilton Head lore)
5. The site is part of a pre-Civil War plantation

In addition, the location is near:

1. Broad Creek (the major inlet used by Shelter Cove)
2. The public beaches
3. The major resort hotels
4. Many of the Island churches
5. Many of the significant shopping sites

NOTE: The specific site within this realm will be selected during a visit to the Island before 8 January 1987.

Now, the Program.

PROGRAM FOR A COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL CENTER FOR HILTON HEAD ISLAND

The problem calls for the design of a Community and Cultural Center for Hilton Head Island. The functions to be incorporated, either together or in multiple constructs, are as follows:
1. A Government Center, to include:
   - A Town Hall
   - A Post Office
   - The Beaufort County Courthouse Annex
   - The Chamber of Commerce

2. Cultural Facilities
   - A Museum of Local and Regional History
   - A Public Library
   - An Auditorium for Arts Performances and Town Meetings

3. An Office of Tourism

In addition, the Complex will address these requirements:

1. It will pay due reference to the water, historical sites, and local history
2. It will either:
   - Serve as a Collective Symbol of the Island
   - Contain a Collective Symbol of the Island
3. It will be sympathetic to the past as well as to the way the Island has developed in the last thirty years
4. It will appeal to tourists as well as residents
5. It may, if deemed necessary, have a degree of commercial activity

So, in conclusion, where do I go from here? Site documentation (and specific selection) is of the essence. As previously stated, that work will be accomplished before class resumes on 8 January 1987. Simultaneously, context and historical data will continue to be gathered (some is included in this submission) to use in aiding the design process. General Island analyses have been completed in map form, and data pertaining to population, housing, traffic density, etc. has been collected and is also included herein. Once the specific site is selected, then additional appropriate analyses can be undertaken.
I think the project is a good one. It provides the opportunity to introduce an element into the built fabric that does not exist. It provides the opportunity to enrich that fabric and provide for a better urban life. It provides the opportunity to work with a varied site, a mixed context, past and present, suburban development, symbolism, reality, and perception. And, finally, it provides the opportunity to test an element of traditional cities in the environment of a totally unique and new one. It should be an excellent challenge.