

A Candy Bar in a Razor Blade

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I - A SURPRISING ANSWER

There is nothing startling about the frequency with which architecture students are today asked to begin design projects with a site only, searching for form and (there through) program. Such are the legacies of: the after-Modern concern for context; the reaction to the types of landscape destructive speculative development which characterized the nineteen-eighties; the impact of environmental concerns; the influence of site-specific sculpture; etc., etc..

Certainly some of my own teachers - those ever concerned with the primary role of program - would be scandalized. The transformation within architectural pedagogy - from an over-riding concern with the relationship of program and form to that of form and landscape - is quite profound. The primary consequence: program has been demoted from dictator to fellow traveller to tolerated guest, while site has been elevated from setting to source.

This has a drawback. By way of example, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston has just hired Rafael Moneo (over Robert Venturi and Tadao Ando) to design a new building for the museum's expansion. The new site is difficult, so normal to Houston: a city block bounded by a Gothic Revival church, a decaying nineteen-fifties office building, an upscale Yamasaki-wannabe residential hotel, and the existing Museum, itself equal parts Neoclassical and late Mies.

I presumed to a curator at the museum that the selection of the architect surely hinged on Moneo's ability to work within such demanding contextual parameters. Her answer stopped me short: "Well, there was that - they all spent a lot of time at the site - but it also came down to this: Moneo was the only architect who asked to *see the collection*. He insisted on seeing the artwork before he saw the site".

On the surface, the lesson here might seem to be about remembering to remember program. But I think the curator meant something more profound. While she respected Moneo's ability with context, and his interest in the collection, she did not distinguish these as separate abilities. That is, she sensed in Moneo an ability to respond to *the role of the collection in its context*.

II - UNDERLYING THE DRAWBACK

Which gets us to the drawback. To speak of the relationship of a building's form to its landscape free of program - as in my presumption to the curator - ignores the probability that program inalienably colors our perception of that relationship. Still, you will often hear architects discussing *museum*, for example, as an essentially hermetic exercise in form making.

But I want to clarify how problematic it is to do so, and I wish to make this clarification by first having you consider objects in the landscape from an *apparently* program-free point of view: as sculpture (in the most generic usage of the word). In order to do this, I am going to use the four categories of sculpture that the artist Robert Irwin (in *Conditional*¹) is able to distinguish based on the types of relationships that objects develop with their landscapes. These four categories are: "site dominant", "site adjusted", "site specific", and "site conditioned/determined".

A *site dominant* sculpture is exactly that. The design of the sculptural object operates on the presumption that its site is a neutral, content-free *setting*. The dialogue between site and sculpture is a monologue on the part of the sculpture, to itself and its internal traditions, with the site in respectful, rapt, but silent attention.

When Irwin names, as an example of site dominant art, a Henry Moore, we know precisely what he means. An architectural equivalent might be Saarinen's arch in St. Louis. It is not that such work exactly ignores its site. In fact, the artwork or architectural object seems to validate the fact of the site - not the other way around - in the manner that a mediocre hotel may be elevated by the presence of a celebrity.

Site adjusted sculpture is similar in content to site dominant work, but some aspect of the object mediates between the desired hermetic perception and the conditions of the site which threaten or strengthen that perception. Still, the works are conceived, in Irwin's terms, "in the studio" (i.e., meaning remains internal to the object's field or artist's oeuvre). If the dialogue between site and sculpture is largely a monologue of the object, at least the site is acknowledged in the opening

remarks, sometimes begrudgingly, sometimes generously.

Irwin suggests a Mark di Suvero as an example. Asplund's Stockholm Library and Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart serve well as formal equivalents in architecture. In each, a portion of the program is used to prepare the site for the presentation of the essentially hermetic idealized type forms - the cylindrical reading room volume, and the U-shaped gallery block (in each, the programmatic split borders on the schizophrenic). These objects, by morphology, reference a history of meaning associated with buildings rather than sites.

Sculpture that Irwin categorizes as *site specific* is "conceived with the site in mind; the site sets the parameters and is, *in part* [author's italics], the reason for the sculpture."² By his example - a Richard Serra - Irwin alludes to that part missing from the sculpture's reason to be. While the object is designed to capture meaningful conditions present in the site, it uses this capture to primarily extend the hermetic concerns of the object's field or the artist's oeuvre. So, Irwin notes, "a Richard Serra is always recognizable as, first and foremost, a Richard Serra."³

The clearest parallel example in Architecture has to be the Kaufmann House - Falling Water - by Frank Lloyd Wright. A dialogue is present between this object and its site, but it is characterized by the gullibility of the site and the hidden intentions of the building, which masks its aggressive desires beneath a veneer of seeming concern, like a horrid seduction. A less site-perjorative example is Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial, or the Villa Mariea by Aalto.

Irwin's fourth category - *site conditioned/determined* - is reserved for those works which draw their primary meaning from redefining experiential possibilities specific to the site:

Here the sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings... what is the site's relation to applied and implied schemes of organization and systems of order, relation, architecture, uses, distances, senses of scale?... What kinds of natural events affect the site...? What is the physical and people density?... What are the qualities of surface, sound, movement, light, etc?... What are the qualities of detail, levels of finish, craft? What are the histories of prior and current uses, present desires, etc.? A quiet distillation of all of this - while directly experiencing the site - determines all the facets of the 'sculptural response': aesthetic sensibility, levels and kinds of physicality, gesture, dimensions, materials, kinds and level of finish and details, etc; whether the response should be monumental or ephemeral, aggressive or gentle, useful or useless, sculptural, architectural, or simply the planting of a tree, or maybe even doing nothing at all.⁴

A central quality to the sculptural objects in the first three of Irwin's categories is the legible presence of an *artistic intentionality*. This (identifiable) quality allows the viewer to link the meaning of the object to hermetic meanings of

field or oeuvre which exist free of the specifics of the site. But this quality does not exist in any direct way in work considered site conditioned/determined:

[W]ith this fourth category... the process of recognition and understanding breaks with the conventions of abstract referencing of content, historical lineage, oeuvre of the artist, style, etc., implicit in the other three categories, and crosses the conventional boundaries of art vis-a-vis architecture, landscape, city planning, utility, and so forth, reducing such quantitative recognitions... to a secondary importance. We now propose to... [place] the individual observer in context, at the crux of the determining process, insisting that he or she use all the same (immediate) cues the artist used in forming the art-response... What applied to the artist now applies to the observer.⁵

To imagine examples in this fourth category is difficult - although Irwin includes his own sculpture as representing such - since the over-riding parameter is the absence of a perceptible intent to frame meaning beyond the realities of the site, like repositioning furniture without rearranging it.⁶

An architectural example in the site conditioned/determined category is even more improbable, since the mechanisms by which buildings become examples - particularly publication and critical assessment - frequently attach to a building meanings beyond its site. Allan Greenberg's Brant Farmhouse would be a great example if it weren't already so self-consciously a great example; ditto the Villa Malaparte.

Still, the difficulty in naming an example only reflects the state of architecture as an activity - obsessed with elevating the conscious but not the preconscious presence of buildings - rather than as a cultural desire. After all, a site conditioned/determined object/site relationship is still the great PostModern challenge, assaulting entirely the question of authorship - and the validation thereof by means hermetic to Architecture.

III - THE DRAWBACK ITSELF

But we have digressed from the drawback, namely, that program profoundly affects how we perceive the relationship of a building and its landscape, irregardless of form. This issue is disguised in Irwin's writing because of an underlying presumption that the program of 'art-response' is *desirable*. However, the programs of buildings are frequently *not so*. The increasing incidence of the use of sculptural means to mask undesirable program does not exactly vitiate this problem.

For example, a quite serious proposal was put forth several years ago to increase prison space in the MidWest by converting to prisons the empty concrete grain silos central to many small towns. The notion being that no-one would notice the presence of the incarcerated in the midst of the quiet community - the ultimate site conditioned act. But of course we would notice. A candy bar looks sweet until you suspect there might be a razor blade inside.

The problem resides in the probability that we can and do categorize programs, free of form, as - to continue with Irwin's terminology - site dominant, site adjustable, site specific, or site determined. The determination of the nature of most programs along these lines is generally cultural, and hence evolving, as in the evolution of the appropriate role in landscape - at least in the United States - of *monument*. Still, *prison* will probably always perceptually dominate its site, no matter what its form.

Compounding this problem is the probability that we also *categorize sites similarly* (as we in part do in making a zoning map). Hence, there may be sites which allow to be dominated, require adjustment, demand specificity, or insist on determining program. This categorization is also roughly cultural, hence evolving. *Wetlands*, for example, have managed to move through all four categories in the past two decades.

Problems of perception of the candy bar/razor blade variety arise when the characters of program and site, irrespective of their mediation by the architectural object, are too substantially out of sync. Certainly a primary interest in design currently involves the formal methods by which these characters can be aligned. But any such adjustment that involves redefining the character of the program across more than one of Irwin's categories (for example, a site dominant program to a site which demands specificity) is a perverse design task, since such a dilemma should actually raise alarm about the policy which allows for it to be a problem in the first place.

IV A - AN EXAMPLE...

If a program colors the perception of the relationship of a building to its site, the obverse is also true: the site prepares you to alter your perception of itself as a consequence of the presence of program. All buildings mediate these twin realities, either consciously or by default. Arranging this mediation well is quite complex: seeing it done beautifully is rare. I would like to describe by example how it has been done beautifully, and in so doing indicate the shortcomings of Irwin's categories when considering a building in landscape.

My example is another museum in Houston: the Menil Collection (Figs. 1, 2 and 3), designed by Renzo Piano in collaboration with the client, Dominique de Menil. This building is widely admired for the success of its site relationship, although the descriptions of this success tend to dwell on the purely formal - rather than formal *and* programmatic - mechanisms employed. Because the museum is quite well known, let me first describe the problem of the relationship of the museum's program and site.

The mundane purpose of the building is to house and exhibit the collection of artworks (about 10,000 pieces) amassed by John and Dominique de Menil. While the collection is private, it is, in some senses, *public*. The de Menils have long succeeded in keeping their collection both vulnerable and intimate to the public in Houston, a fascinating history in its own right. Central to their attitude about exhibiting the collection is a fundamental doubt about

ownership. This is evident when Dominique de Menil writes: "...I experience [a painting] as totally mine when I stand in front of it. And I think that in years ahead there will be those, unknown to me, who will take and 'possess' works that I have acquired."⁷

This lovely thought has powerful implications for the program of the building. These include the demand that the space be so arranged as to allow for the experience of each piece in intimate isolation; the decision to rotate the collection from storage, so that only a small percentage is on display at any one time; the decision to not exhibit the works chronologically; and the desire to have the building seem unimposing.

But it has equally powerful implications for the site. Because the collection is public in this curious way, the frame of reference for the building is vast. And indeed the macro site for the museum is Houston itself, since part of Houston's identity is wrapped up in the presence there of the collection. The collection validates the city's identity: hence its form is site-dominant *irregardless of the actual shape that the building takes*.

Houston is known for its sprawl, lack of cohesive order, disparate and conflicting scales and programs (arising from the lack of zoning), general sense of nowhere-ness, and lack of destinations. To this macro site the experience of the artwork in the collection acts as a countermeasure - as an antidote of meaningful engagement - and, consequently, as an experiential landmark.

This experiential condition is spatially supported by the micro-site. The specific plot for the building is an empty groomed grass field (a cleared city block), in a somewhat passed-by middle-class residential neighborhood, half way between Houston's downtown and its museum area. The houses in a one-half to one block deep ring around the museum were purchased by the de Menils well prior to the construction of the museum. Almost all are one or two story post-war bungalows; none are architecturally prominent or obtrusive.

The de Menils have had all of the houses (immediately upon purchase of each successive house) painted grey with white trim, and they exist in isolation as not quite discreet objects, and collectively as a sort of lumpy but cohesive field - supported by continuous grass lawns and large trees - neither fore- nor background. To enter this neighborhood from greater Houston is startling: the sudden presence of order extending beyond perceived property.

The consequence of the site so defined is that the architecture of an antidotal response to the civic spatial condition begins well before you enter the museum. The museum building itself does not therefore have to locate you by any overt creation of place.⁸ Nonetheless, the building *is* quite carefully designed to locate you spatially in regard to site, as I will describe in a moment, *but not as a consequence of site*. The primary source for the building's peculiar topologic mechanisms arise from a problematic spatial consequence of the specific nature of the kinds of artwork found *in the collection itself*.

IV B - ...CONTINUED...

The artworks in the Menil Collection are extraordinary first and foremost for the individual quality of the pieces, each obtained for singular aesthetic value. Nonetheless, the collection is broadly divisible into four primary areas: antiquities, Byzantine art, the arts of tribal cultures, and twentieth-century art.

[Within these areas there are further concentrations. Within antiquities, the collection has concentrations on Paleolithic and pre-Christian artifacts from Europe and Asia Minor; on artwork of pre- and post-Classical cultures from Bronze Age Asia Minor, the Cycladic Islands, Archaic Greece, and Hellenistic and Roman Art from Egypt and Asia Minor. Within the arts of tribal cultures, there are concentrations on works from the cultures of Oceania, the Northwest Coast, and Africa. Within the artwork of the twentieth century, there are concentrations on Cubism, neo-plastic abstraction, and particularly Surrealism (especially the work of Max Ernst and Rene Magritte), in addition to a focus on artists maintaining traditions of abstraction into our own time (Rothko, Marden, Klein, Stella, etc.).⁹

If there has been no attempt to collect panoptically, the collection is not eclectic. A central quality of the Menil Collection is an affinity which exists between the various pieces despite heritage: "...a sensibility in which aesthetic delight may be discovered in an object of any pedigree..."¹⁰. This sensibility is characterized by the artworks generally exhibiting a quality of distillation in search of essential meaning (Figs. 4 and 5). Actually, this quality is one that we project onto many of the pieces, since frequently their original purpose is unknown.¹¹ Our doing so is made probable precisely by that distillation, which removes traces of intent, genetics, reference, etc. from the possible contemplation of the artworks' subject.

Bertrand Davezac, medievalist and curator at the Menil Collection, has written that "...[b]eyond formal reductivism...there is [to the pieces] the dimension of what Malraux calls 'sacred', a type of universalist and transcendental ecumenism..."¹². This neatly describes an underlying agenda to both the nature of the collecting, as well as the nature of how the pieces are exhibited. We are intended to experience the works as individual touchstones to contemplation of the sacred¹³, but also to experience the artworks collectively, as evidence of an absolute human desire for the same, irrespective of the specific time, place, or cultural origin of any piece.

This intention (familiar to us as a desire of the Modern) can immediately be sensed in the programmatic decision to avoid laying the museum out in a linear chronology, in the tendency to display together (as in the entry hall) pieces of radically disparate origin, and in Mrs. de Menil's original plan (not carried out) to mount the pieces without identifying labels. It is also aided by certain consistent physical characteristics of the artwork. Most of the pieces are discreet - that is, *transportable*: there are no site specific works and few

installation pieces. In addition, the majority of the pieces are very carefully, and frequently quite ornately, *framed*: their site is their frame, irregardless of the surface upon which they come to rest.¹⁴

The consequence to the experienced space of the museum - having therefore direct bearing on the architecture - of the art so understood and exhibited is a *blurring of the boundaries of time, place, and culture*. The art itself *conspires and is intended to generate a spatial condition of nowhere-ness*, and this *parallels the larger spatial condition of Houston*.

That is the spatial problem that forms the basis of the architectural relationship of the program and the landscape, and it is problematic to say the least. The building, which by default must mediate program and landscape, is so designed to counteract the peculiar symbiosis of the art and its city. Let me try to explain how it does so.

IV C - ...AND CONCLUDED

The museum building (a 106,000 square foot structure, 408 feet long, 165 feet deep, and 3 1/2 stories tall) is sited along the southwestern edge of the field described above. The museum, though immense, in part maintains the smaller scale of the surrounding houses by intelligently stepping its massing hard to the street at the southern edge of the site, where its size is most difficult to perceive. The building is *site adjusted* in order to be perceived as diminutive.

In appearance the museum shares with the houses something of the quality of neither being fore- or background. A simple and nondescript box, it is given an unvarying rhythm by the expression of its 20 x 40 foot trabeated steel frame, painted white. The frame, while present in the exterior wall, also extends beyond the volume of the building to make a portico which wraps the building evenly, without variation to explain, for example, entry.

The roof of the portico consists of an extension of a plane of ferro-cement leaves which filter natural light into the interior galleries. The building is readily identifiable by this singular physical feature, which acts like a ruffled collar in a Velazquez portrait. The exterior wall between columns is panel filled with horizontal cedar siding stained the same grey as the houses. Because this grayness acts as a field, it is a *spatial* quality of the site which the building captures. The museum is *site specific* by this perversely simple mechanism.

The building cannot be said to have an apparently conscious elevation. On the contrary, its overall external appearance is systematic - the product of a hermetic rule invariably adhered to without *apparent* adjustment to image. This quality is compounded by the general opacity of the exterior wall, which seems, on approach, to be primarily bent on shielding something important inside. The occasional replacement of paneling with modular window units that admit light and view to various light desiring rooms imparts a sort of naive vulnerability. All in all, in effect, the exterior character is large but shy, a little uptight but not insecure, without aberrations.

In strictly formal terms, the museum building as sculptural object has qualities of site dominant, site adjusted, and site specific artifacts. But these qualities do not alone account for the successful presence of the program in the landscape: *they only indicate that a hermetic meaning is present, and that the formal condition is preparatory to the perception of that meaning.* Since the building, by its location, is most often seen by those who are there to visit (the boundary streets are local: you would probably not find the site by accident), the experience of the interior must be considered in the resolution of its identity.

In plan the museum is organized with an unflinching directness. On the public, ground floor level, a short north/south passage organizes entry from the site, and divides the building into two galleries each on either side. A longer east/west passage divides the galleries from the support spaces. This hallway, while accessing the galleries tangentially, leads nowhere in particular: full windows at its ends look out through gardens planted in an unisistent manner to unparticular slice views of the site.

There is no intended sequence to the galleries as a whole: the hallway allows you to sample. Despite the placement of two exterior but enclosed gardens interior to one of the galleries, the building makes no overt gesture to the visitor. If it seems mute or muted, it does not cloy by artificially trumping up an invented or referential landscape. On the contrary, the general disposition of plan reinforces a sense of anywhere-ness, counteracted only by the presence of the individual artworks.

In section the museum is organized in three horizontal bands. The basement houses support spaces (HVAC, fabricating shops, and staff facilities). The ground floor contains the public exhibition galleries and large support spaces requiring natural light (the library, frame shop, preservation lab, staff lounge) or ground floor access (loading dock, receiving area, and exhibition layout). The second floor, known as the *treasure house*, is a thin band that serves as the storage area for the bulk of the collection, and is organized into a series of private study galleries and curatorial offices.

The plane of ferro-cement light filters occur between the ground floor and the treasure house. While no direct light strikes the artworks in the galleries, changes in the sky - the passage of clouds, the change of light intensity, etc. - are registered inside the galleries, but in a secondary manner, as an adjustment of loudness, since the artworks are lit by a mix of this natural, and additional artificial, light.

The three dimensional experience of the interior is qualified by the relationship of the floor, walls, and ceiling. The ceiling consists of the underside of the ferro-cement leaves, which, as explained, allow natural light to register its varying presence in the galleries. The floor is made of wide pine planks, stained dark brown, but not sealed. This has allowed for the stain to be slowly scuffed away, indicating patterns of use as well as implicating the visitor in a history of the museum. The walls, in contrast to the floor and ceiling - which, by their distinctive properties, register some mean-

ingfulness - are absolutely neutral. Constructed of sheetrock and painted white, the walls are the immaterial and dimensionless backing for the primary client: the individual framed works of art.

In addition, the walls are *spatially* secondary. A deep and narrow reveal at their lower edge (which facilitates repainting) allows the viewer to perceive the floor plate as extending entirely through the museum: no change in floor patterning indicates a favored wall position. A similar reveal at the underside of the juncture of the walls and ceiling support frame allow a similar perception of the ferro-cement leaves: these too extend evenly across the museum.

The walls defer to the artwork, the ceiling, and the floor, engaging the three in a dialogue. And what a critical dialogue it is: all of the museum's success beyond is engaged in it. The artwork - by its particular nature, which is its program - argues with your definition of time, space, place, and culture. But the ceiling and the floor counteract this argument. Together these act as a double-faced clock. The varying natural light entering through the ceiling locates you with respect to time of day, and the greater vertical orientation to sky and ground. The scuffed floor - you too are changing it - marks with incontrovertible evidence the exact spot where you are right now. In so doing the building allows you to engage the artwork from a position of opposite but equal strength: somewhere, in the face of nowhere-ness.

It turns out that the hermetic meaning suspected from the formal condition of the building is not at all hermetic, but returns to the subject of orientation and location in the world. The building translates the horizontal nowhere-ness of Houston to a sudden rich somewhere-ness *in the face of the challenge of the artwork.* The entire sequence of experiencing the Museum - from travelling through Houston to standing in front of the artwork - is a careful framing of the of the relationship of the artwork you are looking at - the program, after all - to your landscape. Amazingly the experience seems entirely controlled - even the circumstances over which the architect has no control.

Ultimately, then, the experience of the program in the site effects your understanding of the sculptural presence of the building: it is *site conditional*. Despite its much commented on technological aspects, the building melts away: it is a candy bar in a razor blade. That we perceive the museum across all four of Irwin's categories of object / site relationships indicates the extent to which the inclusion of program in the perception of form in landscape essentially distinguishes architectural from sculptural concerns.

NOTES

¹ Robert Irwin, "Conditional", in Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance / Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (San Francisco and Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1985). Includes information in all of Section II.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

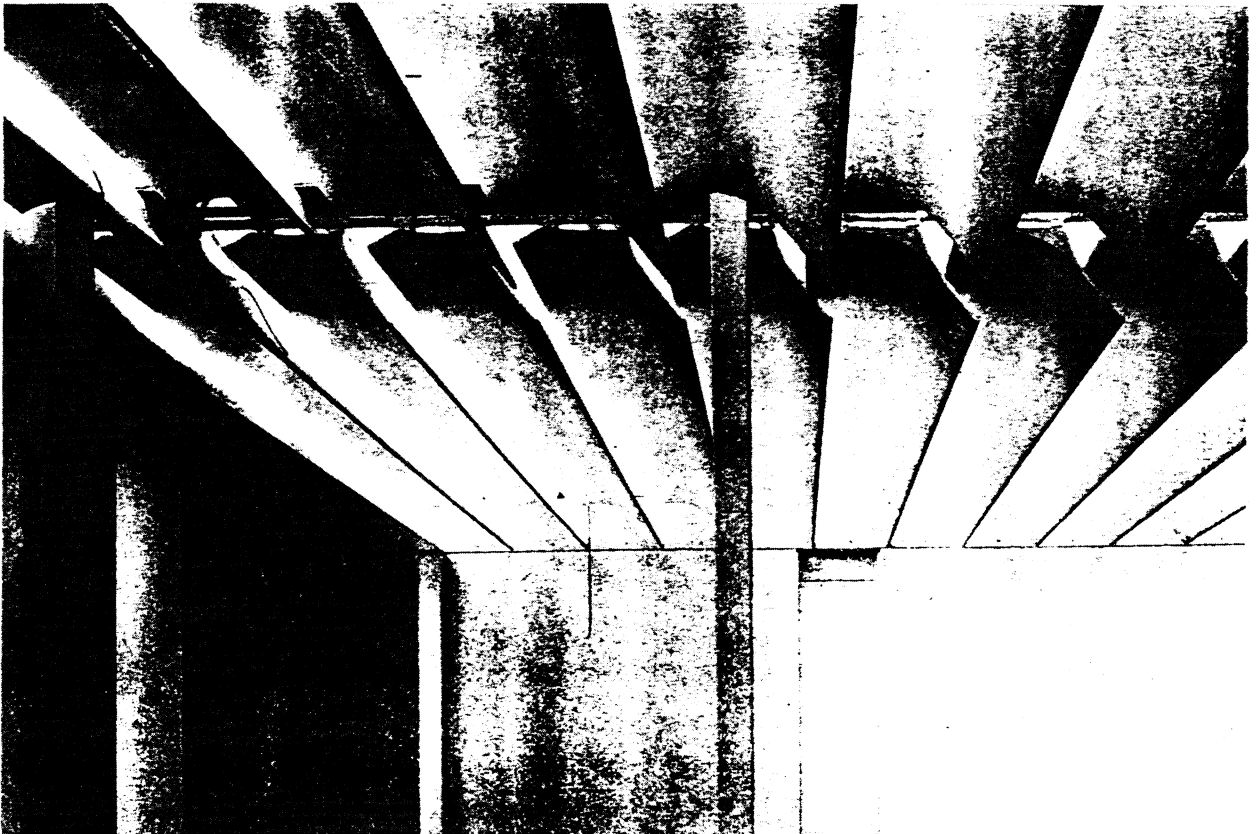
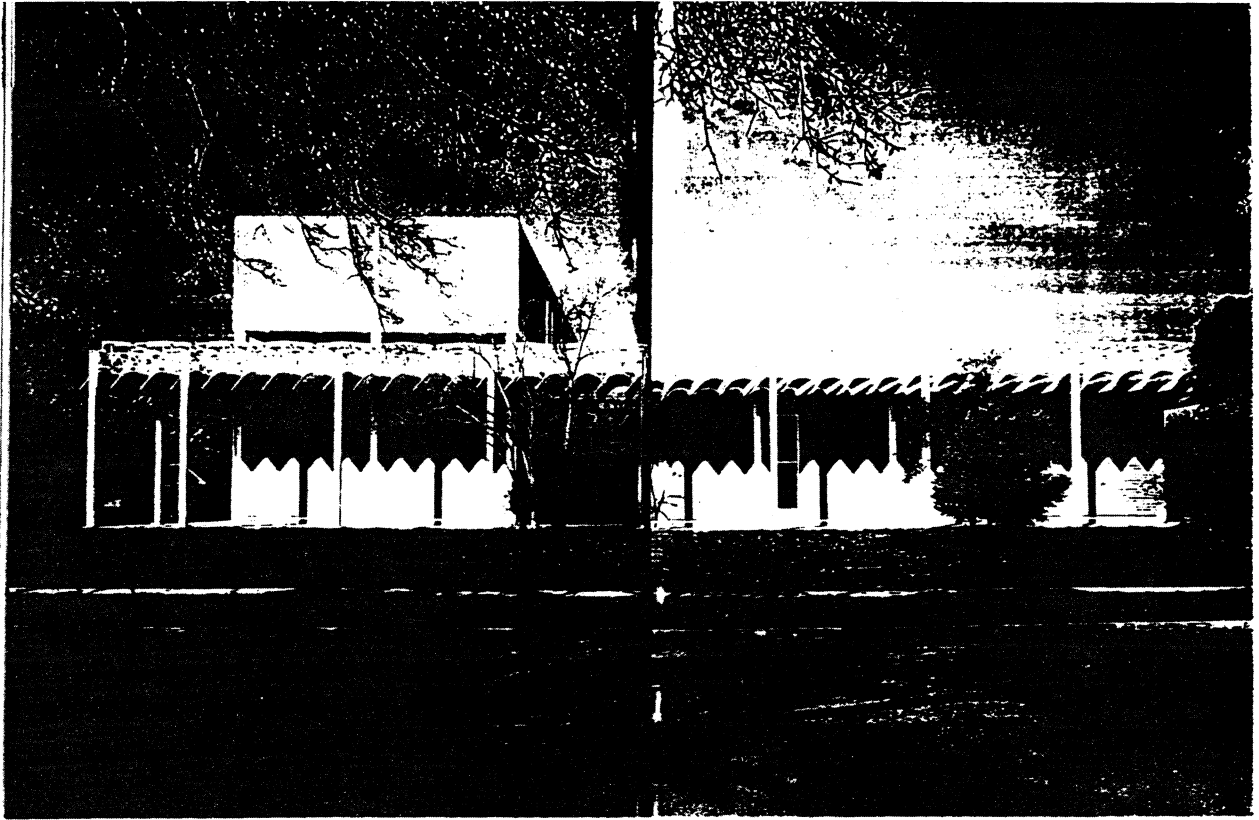
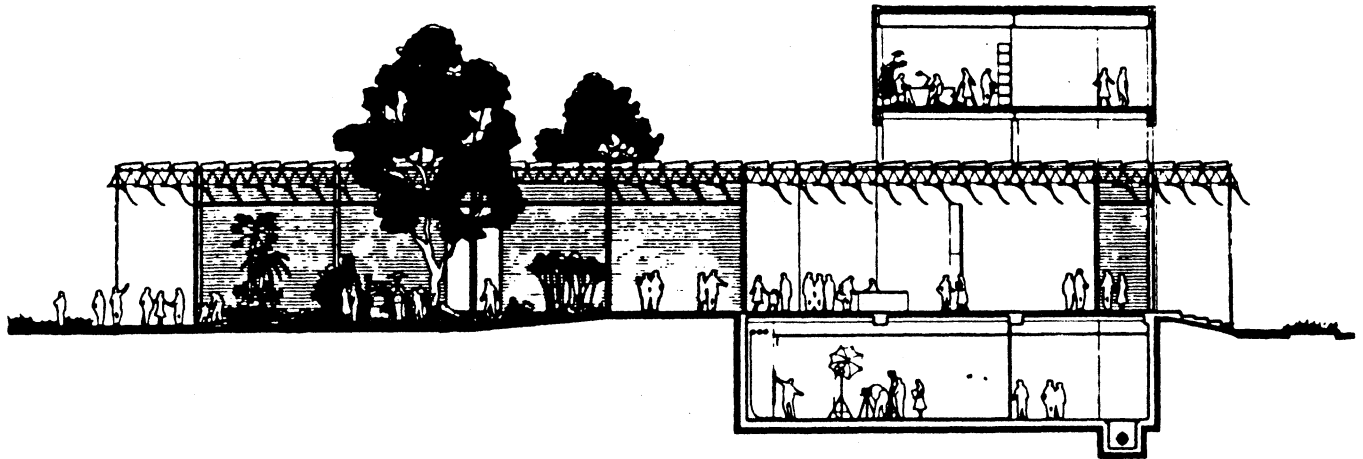


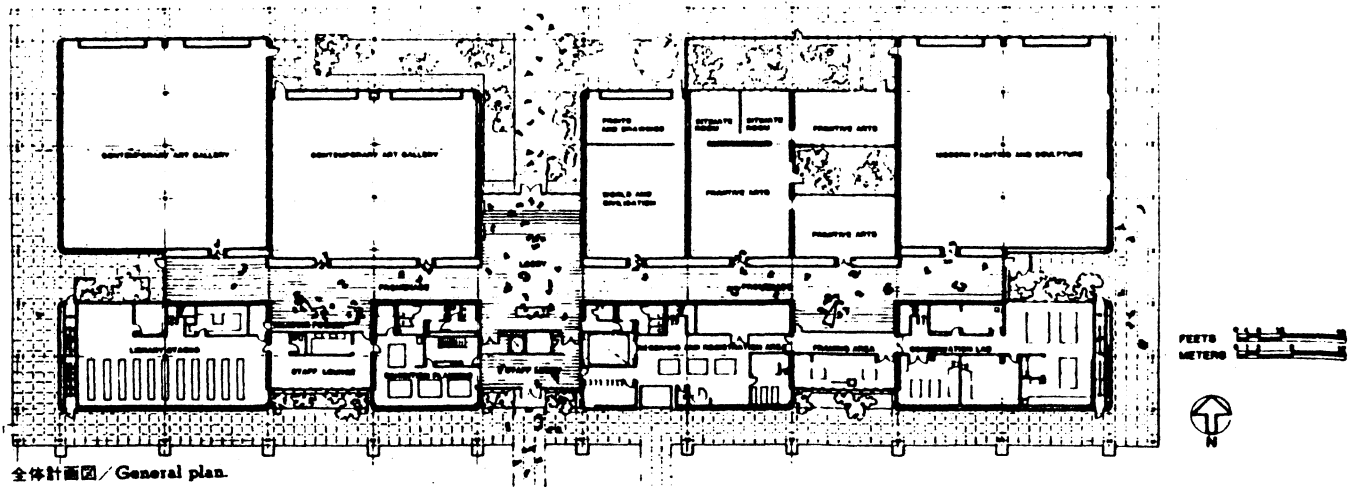
Fig. 1. *Menil Collection*, Houston, Texas. Renzo Piano. photos: exterior, Hickey-Roberts, from *Renzo Piano, Buildings and Projects 1971-89* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).; interior, from *Renzo Piano The Process of Architecture* (9H Gallery).

- ⁶ This reminds me that J.B. Jackson does yardwork for people in his neighborhood in Santa Fe, just as a friendly neighbor. His minor alterations to those yards must come close to embodying site conditioned/determined intervention.
- ⁷ Dominique de Menil, "Forward", to Walter Hopps, ed., *The Menil Collection* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1987), p. 7. Includes information in the following paragraph.
- ⁸ As compared to, for example, Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie (although the difference in these two buildings also reflects, in part, the difference between public and private funding).
- ⁹ Walter Hopps, "Introduction", to Hopps, op. cit., p. 9. Includes following paragraph.

- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹¹ The de Menils "delighted in the formal invention and stylization in tribal art, while the mystery of these objects' ...uses engaged them intellectually." *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹³ "[the de Menils] always believed in the meaning and power of the work of art to generate for the viewer an individual communion..." *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ The peculiar concern for framing expresses itself on the outside of the building as well: the framing shop being one of the two interior spaces you can see into from the street and sidewalk.



断面図 / Section.



全体計画図 / General plan.

Fig. 3. Ground floor plan, North-South section, Menil Collection. from Renzo Piano, *Buildings and Projects 1971-89* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).

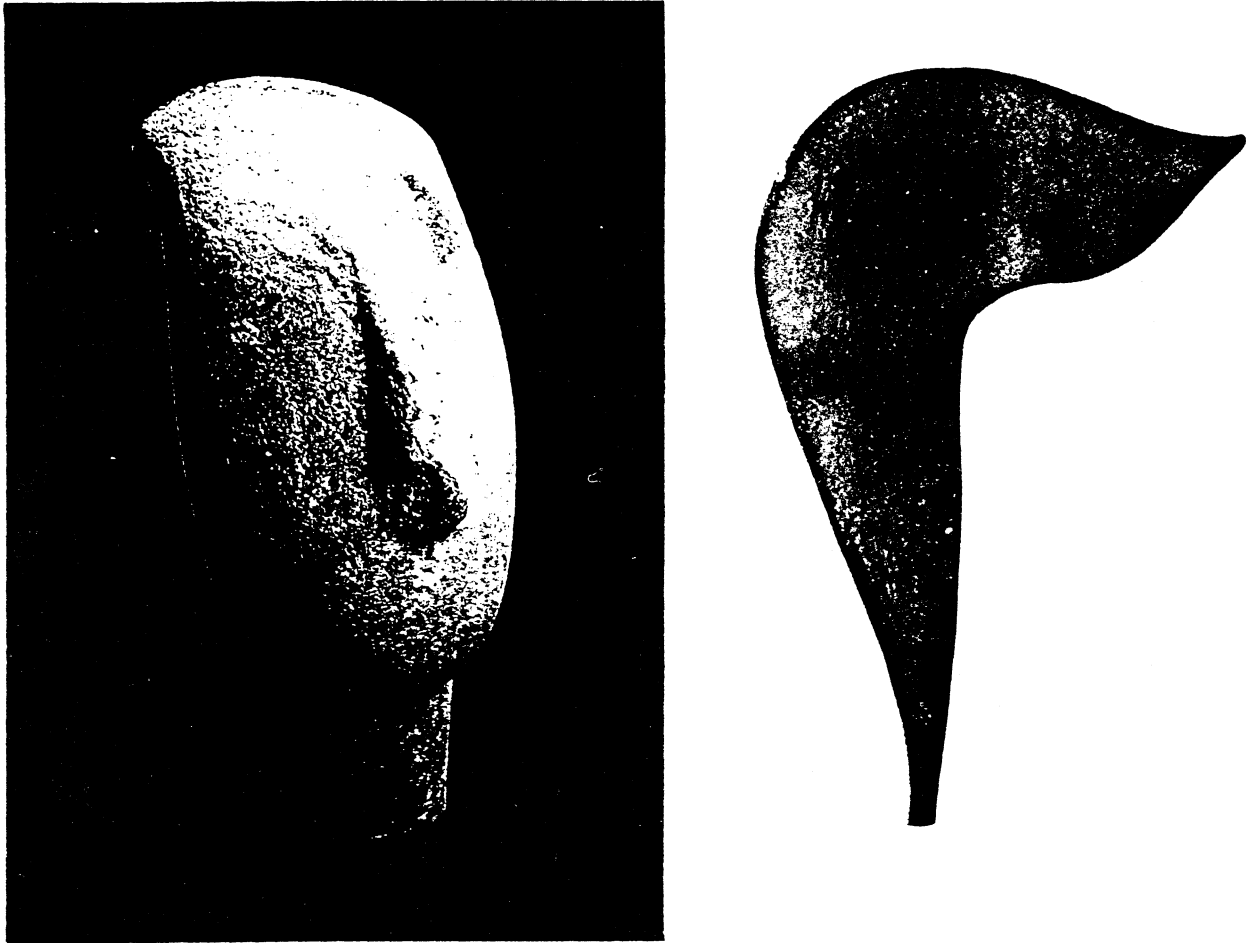


Fig. 4. left: *Head of a Canonical Idol*. Greece, Cycladic Islands, 2700-2400 B.C., marble, 5 5/16 x 2 5/8 x 2 1/2 in.
 right: *Ceremonial Weapon*. Northern Ivory Coast and Southern Mali, Late 19th - early 20th century, wood, 38 3/4 x 25 1/2 x 3/4 in.
 from Walter Hopps, ed., *The Menil Collection* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1987).

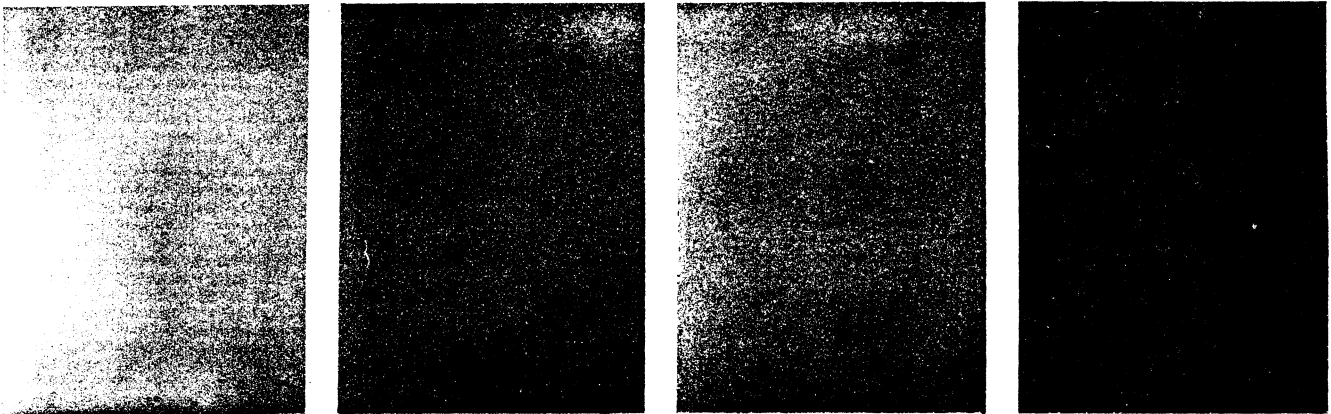


Fig. 5. Brice Marden, *Seasons - Small Version*, 1974-1975. Oil and wax on paper mounted on four separate canvases, 29 1/4 x 22 1/4 in. each. from Walter Hopps, ed., *The Menil Collection* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1987).