

Architects' Sketches

Dialogue and Design

Kendra Schank Smith

Another purpose for which architects utilize sketches is to record, since the sketch often acts as a memory device. Architects may use sketches as visual notes, to act as travel companions to bring the trip home. This preserving may not necessarily be of the journey's events but could include recording precedent, concepts or associative configurations. The sketches may document likeness of an object or thought, or could capture a monetary idea that may become easily forgotten. Like poetic drawings, the sketch may preserve an emotion or feeling that may not be easily recreated. Such sketches might also be diagrammatic studies, where the thinking through a process or the analysis of an event might be lost without a reminder. These sketches, as memoranda, may act to reserve specific concepts but are not necessarily a visual narrative with symbolic relationships. Since architectural sketches are distinctly individual very few architects use a consistent system of symbols. The two-dimensional images contain a more complex relationship: they hold multiple dimensions of communication.

The last primary function of architectural sketches also involves communication, but in this form it mediates between the architect and the sketch, since architects often use sketches for evaluation. The visual image can be a proposal to be criticized; thus, it can be used for decision-making. Once the sketch is on paper the architect can compare, by a process of perception, its consistency with the mind's eye. Ernst Gombrich describes this as a process of matching and correction (Gombrich, 1984).

The purpose of testing, or visualizing, these designs on paper may be to match a mental likeness, but it can also make a judgment concerning a preconceived notion. An architect may sketch not knowing where the action of sketching will lead, but in reviewing the combination of lines he or she can evaluate the possible solutions. One common description of the design process as problem, solution and critique illustrates this procedure (Broadbent, 1973). As architects criticize their sketches, concepts may become more defined. More specifically, sketches support opportunities for analysis and assist understanding of complex constructs. When sketching to test, architects might make pages of sketches, each with slight variations. It is also possible for the sketch to communicate an impossible solution, which can be quickly seen and subsequently rejected in favor of a whole new assemblage. With the disposable and immediate aspects of sketches, a decision can be made with minimal investment of time.

These four sketches by Merrill Elam (Figures 1.6–1.9), principal in the firm Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects, explore a method of visualization. Having worked together for over thirty years, the team's practice has focused primarily on libraries and academic buildings. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, they have been widely published in journals and are also the subject of two monographs. Their buildings have received many honors such as National American Institute of Architects Awards for Excellence, Georgia American Institute of Architects Design of Excellence Awards and several *Architectural Record* House Awards. Their projects include the William C. Blakley Law Library, Arizona State University; the Turner Village at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University; Berkeley Music Library and most recently a United States Courthouse in Austin, Texas, to be completed in 2008.

This series of sketches describes elevations for the Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library. A practice that employs digital technology for conceptual design besides production, this sketch shows tremendous energy and articulation. Each treated slightly differently, the elevations have been outlined in ink and shades of blue and green have been applied. Each has been drawn freehand with remarkably accurate proportion.

The north elevation (Figure 1.6) is distinctive with its strong horizontal lines. It appears that the lines, the horizontal ones in particular, have been reinforced in an effort to either emphasize the connection of the glass or to ensure an accurate and straight representation. Another reason for reinforcing lines could be the result of choosing a pen with a fine nib. It is possible that Elam was expecting to view a heavier articulation of the connector and was repeating the lines to compensate. If this was the case, the visual testing shows a process of immediate evaluation. She may have been imagining a heavier line or could have, in the instant of seeing the sketch emerge, decided a heavier horizontal was more appropriate. Once viewed, decisions could be made.

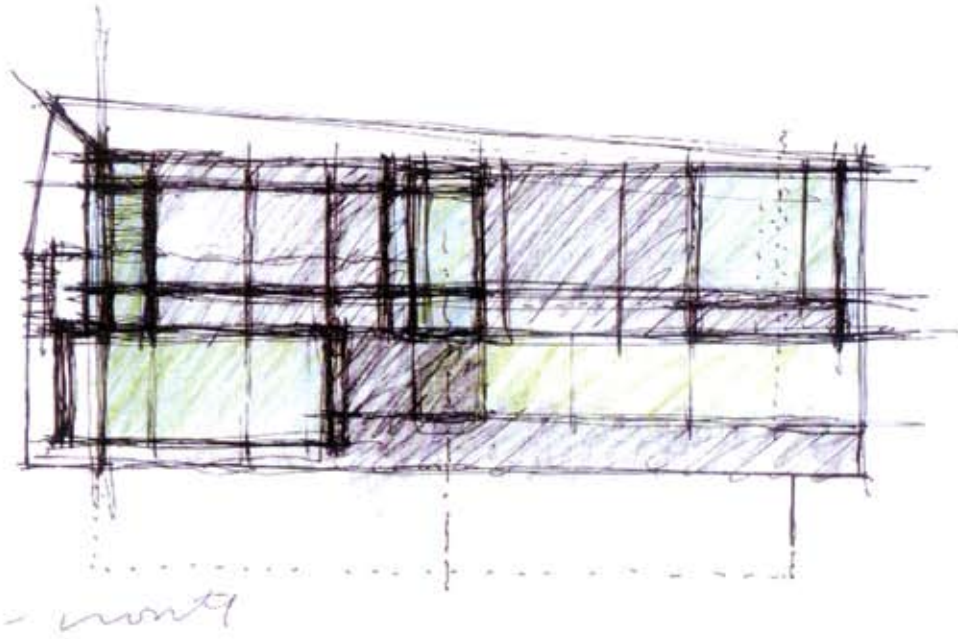


FIGURE 1.6 Merrill Elam; Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, University of California, Berkeley, North Elevation.

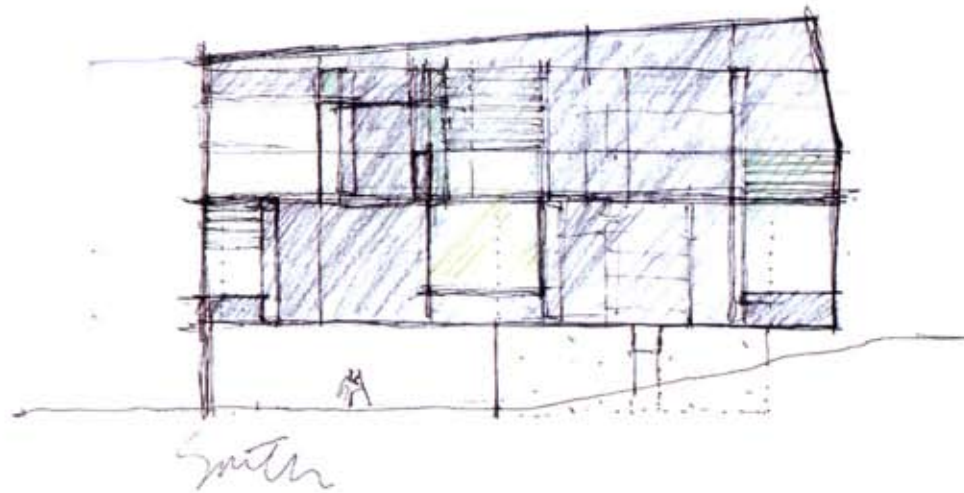


FIGURE 1.7 Merrill Elam; Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, University of California, Berkeley, South Elevation.

The south elevation (Figure 1.7) is rendered one hue of blue, either more dense or less dense depending upon a level of desired transparency. The ability to layer the colored pencil means Elam could reinforce areas through comparison. Viewing the entire façade provided this opportunity for judgment. The west elevation (Figure 1.8) demonstrates relatively slow lines that wobble only slightly. The ends of many of these lines fold back on themselves where they intersect perpendicular

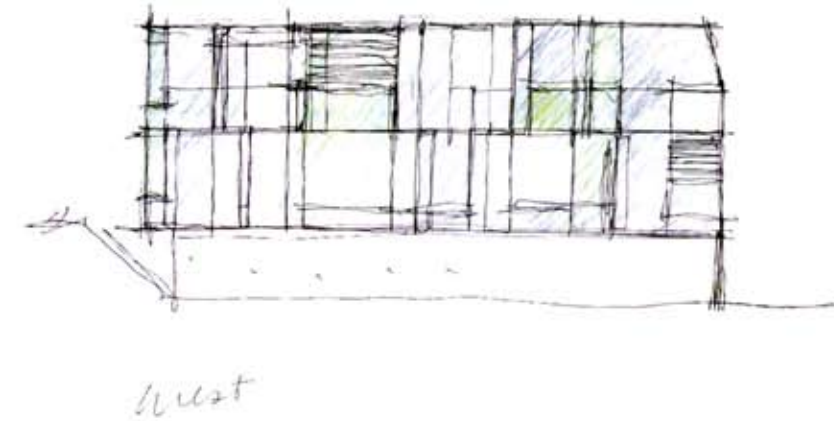


FIGURE 1.8 Merrill Elam; Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, University of California, Berkeley, West Elevation.

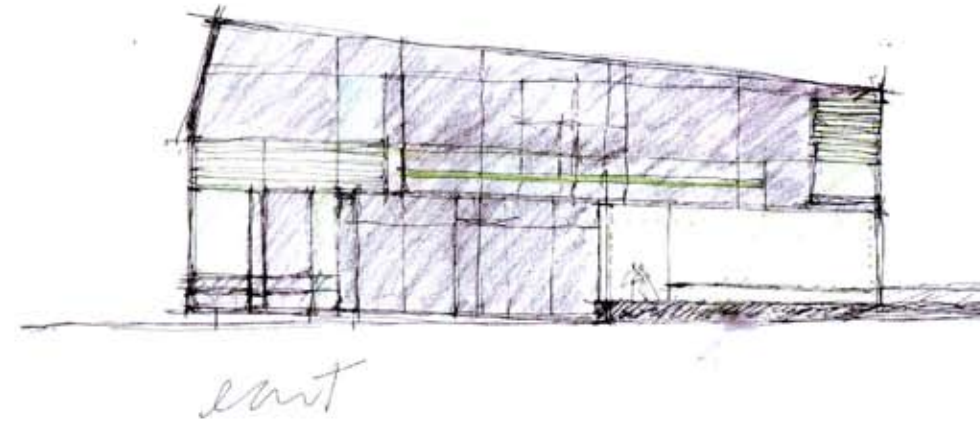


FIGURE 1.9 Merrill Elam; Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, University of California, Berkeley, East Elevation.

lines. This may be an effort to end the line definitively or it could be an instance where their intersection was important. In the past, drafts people were taught to cross perpendicular lines rather than stop short of their connection. This may be use of body memory, or habit, on the part of Elam.

Each sketch, although using precise ink lines, has strong diagonals to fill in larger areas of color. Appearing to be partially a study of the transparency, translucency, and opaqueness of the façade (Figure 1.9), the various densities create a modeled effect. In these four sketches, Merrill Elam utilizes the sketch to visually evaluate an impression.

To summarize, architects use sketches in many individual ways, but formulating a few general functions can reveal how architects employ them in the design process. Sketches may be a method for discovery, and they also facilitate communication both with colleagues and with the architects themselves. Sketches can assist memory as a visual record of places, emotions, or concepts. The quick sketch may help the architect to make decisions either to test a concept or to match a form