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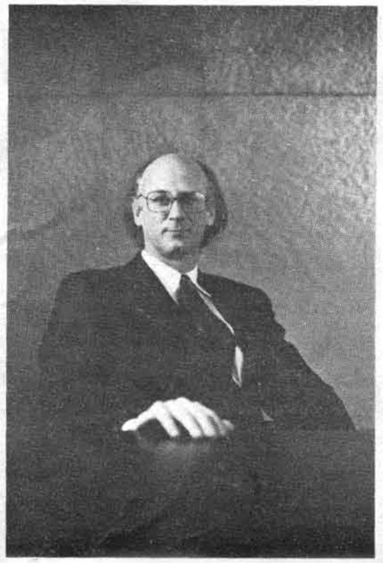
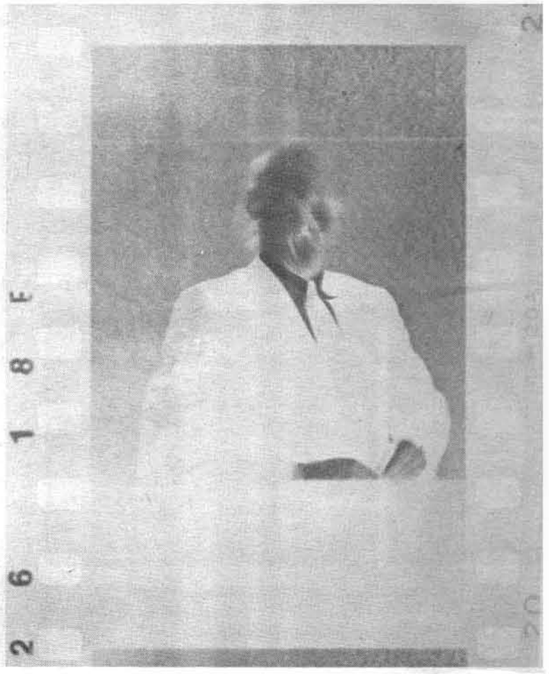
ON ARCHITECTURE





MACK SCOGIN

THE MAKING OF AN INTUITIVE ARCHITECTURE

J.W. Cullum

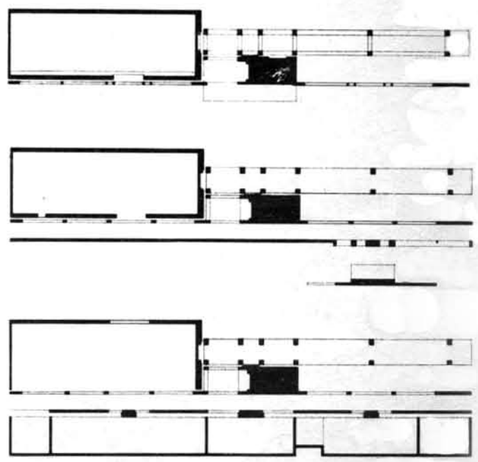
For architecture to have any integrity whatsoever, it must have an intuitive element in which you have personally transformed your observations and your knowledge into personal work.

Mack Scogin

* * *

Mack Scogin is a Southern architect who does not create "Southern architecture." The personal architecture he does create, however, is very much shaped by the subtle forces that accompany being born in the South. (This is an empirical observation totally unrelated to the mythic idea of a Southern mystique, whether of the moonlight-and-magnolias or the good-old-boy variety. It has to do with ways of judging, deciding, and looking at the built environment.)

Scogin was born in Atlanta, educated in architecture at Georgia Tech, and plunged early into the nuts and bolts of mundane architectural practice. He thus has the advantage, in his Atlanta projects, of a familiarity with the city's situation in a way which is not available to most architects now dealing with (or creating) its New South megalopolitan sprawl.



High Museum at Georgia Pacific Center, 1986

Mack Scogin's projects spring from the difficult art of disciplined fantasy. Schooled by twenty years of pragmatic architectural projects, he launched his own venture in 1984 as a vehicle for a personal architecture. (The firm, founded as Parker and Scogin, has recently become Scogin, Elam and Bray, Inc. Scogin is careful to point out that his projects are created in close collaboration with his associates, particularly Merrill Elam, whose vision and commitment complement his own significantly.) The firm has attempted to create an emotionally based, intuitive architecture which maintains a rigorous integrity—in the built environment, fantasy is not to be confused with whimsy. Scogin's personal sense of humor is revealed by the architectural fantasies in his sketchbooks, but his designs for actual structures, done with a keen awareness of the limits imposed by financial and physical reality, manage to assert the primacy of personal vision without ignoring the cultural situation that sets the ground rules for vision. This is an architecture of reality that nevertheless gives priority to dreams.

Two projects for diametrically opposed sites, the Buckhead and Clayton County libraries, reveal some of the dynamics behind Scogin's vision of a personal architecture; both are imaginative responses to a whole complex of cultural and physical factors. Buckhead is a fast-growing, historically and currently fashionable area of Atlanta; Clayton County is a still largely rural area on Atlanta's southern fringe. The Buckhead design, oriented to make maximal use

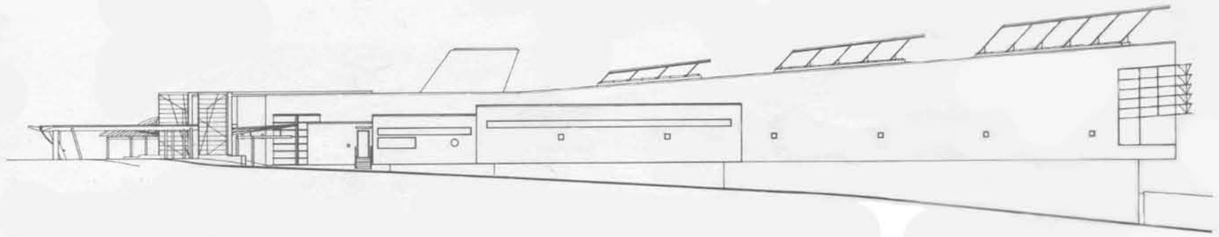
Buckhead Library.

of the site's hilltop location and the surrounding streets, possesses an understated elegance that is more symbolically appropriate for its sociocultural surroundings than are most of the buildings going up around it. The Clayton County design, equally elegant in its juxtapositions of planes and disparate materials, conveys a certain somber earnestness in its dark-gray tones and overlapping acute angles that in turn seems symbolically right for *its* sociocultural surroundings. These are intuitive rather than analytical responses to the sites in question; like so many Southerners over the years, Scogin combines images and implied narratives in responding to a situation. He does not conduct sociological surveys.

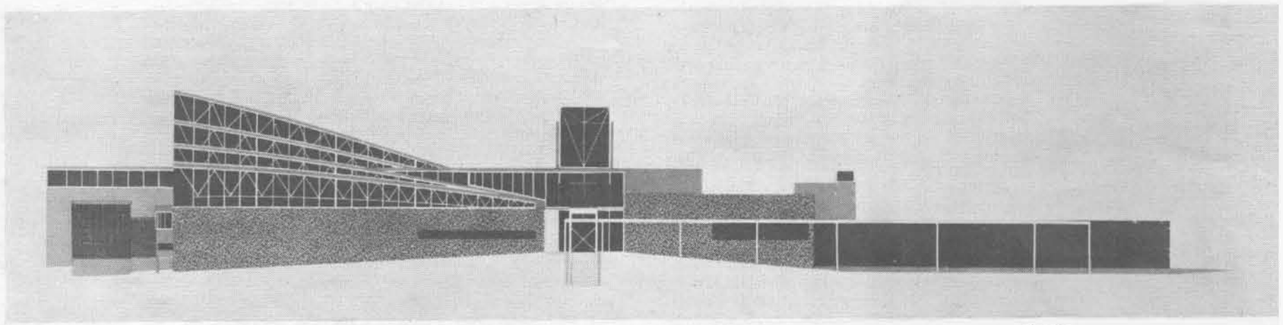
Scogin remarks that the emphasis on the condition of the culture and its fantasies at the present moment mean that these buildings are very present-centered, with no idea of how they may be received by later generations. In saying this, he seems unaware of how sensitive to larger symbolic currents these designs are; the Clayton County library, in its overall form, *looks* right for the rural/primary-industry mix of present-day Clayton, but its sophistication of material, responding to the environment without quoting the environment back to itself, creates a building which could, in due course, blend effortlessly into a greatly changed urban environment. (Scogin has used the metaphor of "polite" to describe these structures—it is this quality of carefully integral, almost reticent design which distinguishes these buildings from much of the postmodernist bluster now asserting itself across the urban landscape.)

The bridge for the Landmarks Group at Concourse further illustrates the complex interaction between personal fantasy, demands of the site, and financial and physical constraints. The client requested a bridge across an office park lagoon which would be "a jewel" in its environment; the jewel, however, came with a specified budget. Scogin and his associates proposed various ways of creating a structure which would foreground the nature of "bridgeness;" the client liked all of them and asked for a synthesis. Out of this enthusiastic meeting of personal imaginations emerged a structure which is, by design, as much dysfunctional as functional: in this atypical case, the structure was meant from the start to be not so much utilitarian as revelatory. The bridge's imposing truss and cable/abutment structure turns out to be purposeless and illusory; its real support is less outwardly obvious. Combined with difficulty of approach (Scogin's notes state that it is easier to walk around the small lagoon than to cross the bridge), this results in a bridge which approaches the quality of a sculptural installation, a structure instilling a sense of mystery combined with playfulness. (Set in more functionalist environments, this sense of mystery has embroiled Scogin in controversy. The High Museum at Georgia-Pacific Center possesses a main entrance through the Center's auditorium, a feature wanted by the client, and less than immediately apparent entrances to the galleries, a feature dictated by the integrity of the gallery space. These choices, virtually imposed by the limitations of the space allotted, have proven grounds for contention in a quarrel in which critics have typically proven unable to distinguish between an inbuilt constraint and an architectural defect.)

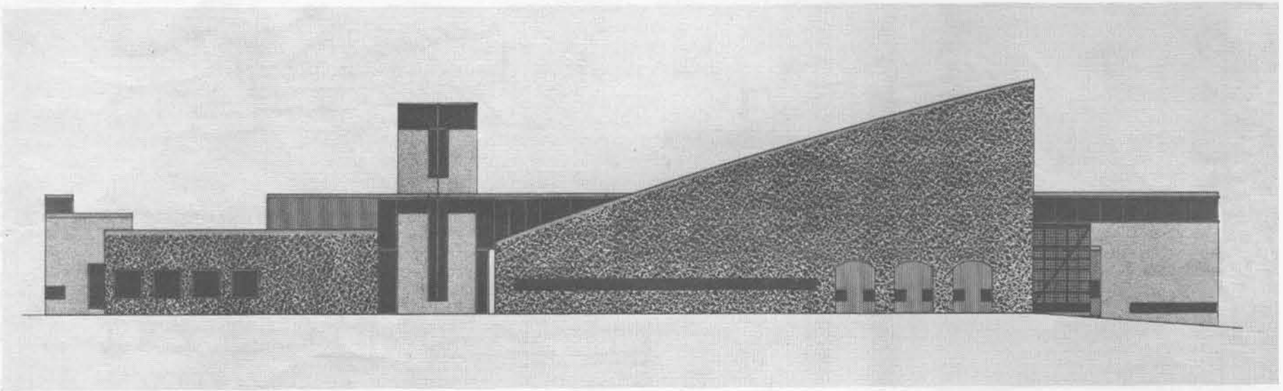
Perhaps because of the provincial connotations of the phrase "Southern architecture," Scogin sometimes downplays regional influences altogether in discussing his work. "The work has something of a non-regional appearance," he commented during an interview, "because we're not regional people." He explained that Merrill Elam and he travel extensively and pay careful attention to the look of the built environment in places of personal significance to them anywhere in the world. He continued, " ...I don't develop prejudices about places and things very easily. Our work is not particularly Southern, though I'd love to say that it is. It *is*, but only because *I'm* Southern." Scogin's work does not possess what outsiders might consider a regional "look," but ways of judging and deciding spring from a region as well as from personality. Mack Scogin creates a humane and imaginative architecture because of a personal nature nurtured in a specific place, a place to which he has responded in the multi-layered fashion characteristic of the majority of sensitive Southerners. He looks with fascination at the built environment of folk dreams and fantasies (his photographs of such environments in Texas appeared in filmstrip form in



Perspective
Buckhead Library



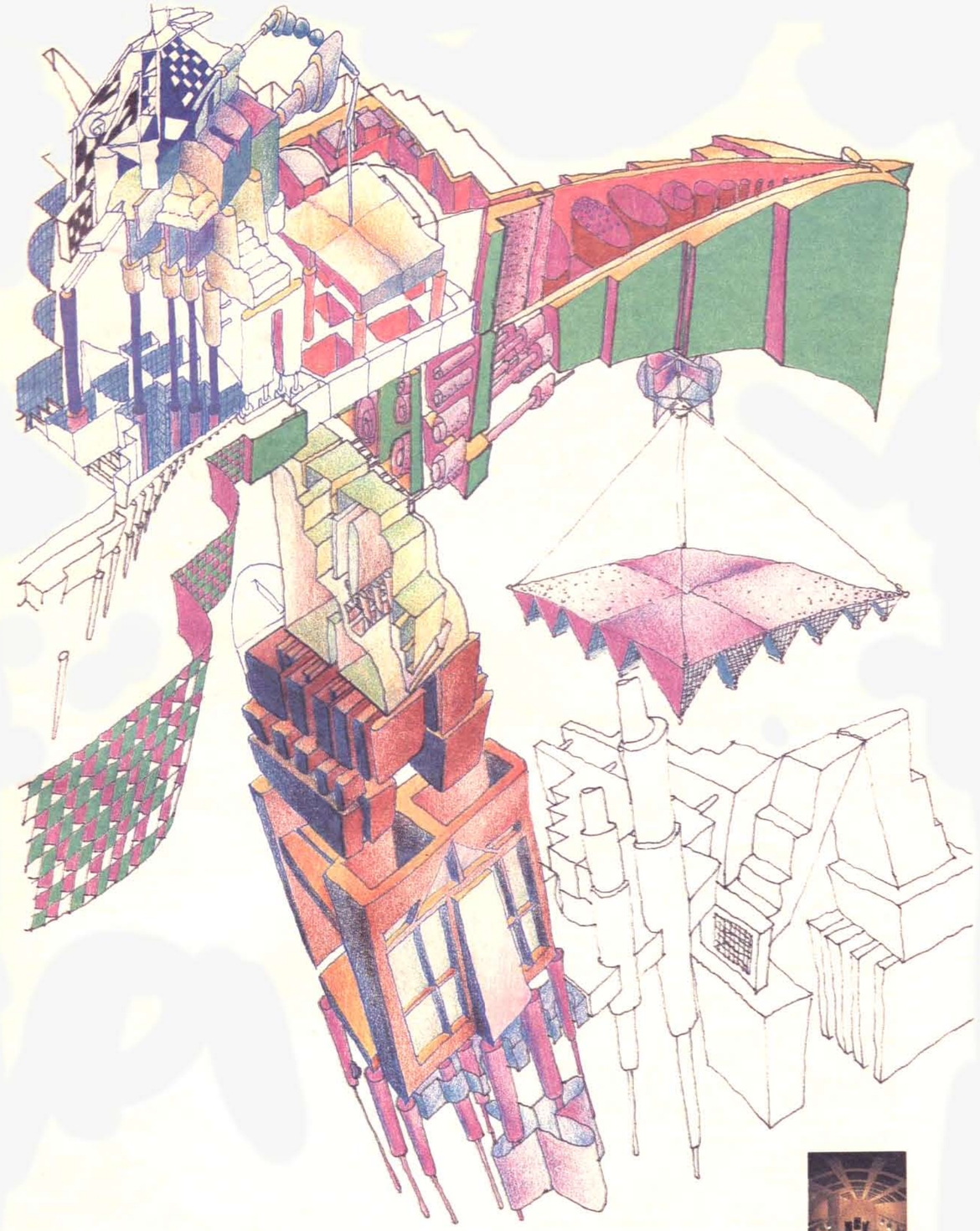
Elevation
Clayton County Library



Elevation
Clayton County Library

Art Papers' 1986 architecture issue, "Architecture in the Land of the Secret Formula"). In an effort to communicate to students the way in which personal vision becomes translated into actual buildings, Scogin titled his Harvard studio "Brother Dick and the Jesus People in the Land of the Secret Formula," alluding to a roadside commune of transformed buses built by a Christian-witness group in Houston, a work of invention which he found intriguing and evocative. His assignment for the students was the design of a truck stop, a structure and social environment totally alien to their personal world, and one testing and expanding their own personal architectural vision. Scogin is almost certainly unaware of just how much this sort of deliberate disjuncture resembles the strategies of contemporary Southern novelists.

Disjuncture and an emphasis on the personal and intuitive are both distinctively "Southern" traits (though, as I argued in my essay in last year's architecture issue, certainly not *only* Southern). If we look at the work of the current generation of Southern self-trained artists, at the self-conscious (sometimes self-promoting) installation art coming out of such places as Athens, Georgia, and at Mack Scogin's photographs of Southern vernacular architecture (he prefers the term "folk" and resists the use of the term "architecture" to describe these structures)—if we do that, it seems to be almost self-evident truth that Southerners are bricoleurs, in-

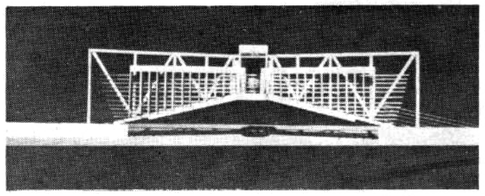


Mack Scogin, Untitled Sketchbook Drawing.

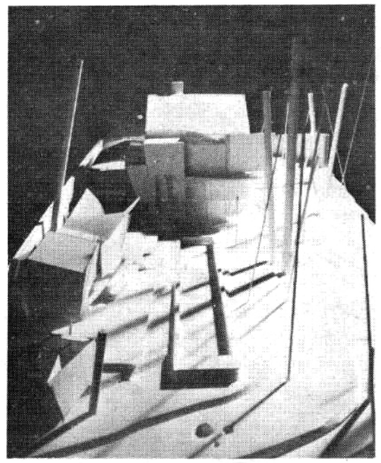
High Museum at Georgia Pacific Center.

veterate constructors of meaningful structures out of other people's rubbish mingled with meaningful natural shapes; a ready-to-hand aesthetic which has nothing to do with the randomized clutter exemplified by the Las Vegas Strip so beloved of Robert Venturi and associates.[1]

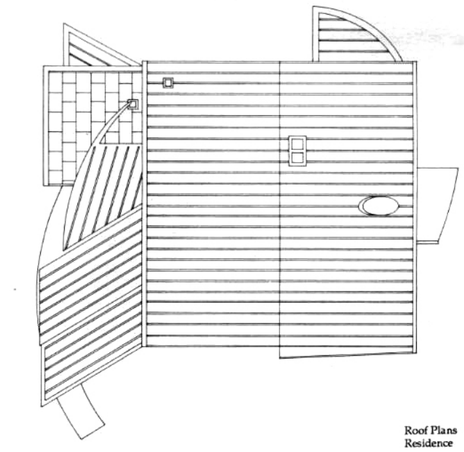
Mack Scogin's architecture is obviously not bricolage; it works around unified themes drawn from the immediate cultural surroundings, and it includes some of the sense of wittily improvised form that characterizes the Southern vernacular aesthetic; but what Scogin is doing is an intuitive but quite sophisticated architecture involving a sensitive response to the interpreted worlds of clients and users of the built environment. If, as Kenneth Frampton would have it, architecture responds either to space or to place, Scogin's is an architecture of place, appropriate for a region which has always thought in terms of situated environments (albeit sometimes ramshackle ones) rather than in terms of abstracted spatial relations. Whether his intentions work out or not, Scogin tries to make his buildings *belong*—to fulfill specific functions in terms of the needs of users while at the same time situating the buildings in a symbolic order which is responsive to the felt experience of the user. This is one way of achieving a sense of intuitive "rightness." The messy problem for the latter-day seeker after symbolic rightness is reconciling this goal with the cherished late-capitalist value of cost effectiveness; the compromises and tensions this entails form part of the fascinating story of how architects in the late 20th century go about defending a meaningful symbolic order against market forces which tend to create a uniform surface. The larger tendency towards abstracted spaces, a characteristic shared by late-capitalist and socialist economies, is virtually the dominant theme of the unified culture which now exists in capitalist and socialist inflections. Against this unified culture, Paul Ricoeur proposed once, human beings in regional cultures ought to devise strategies of defense which would involve subverting the codes of the unified culture by making use of local themes in a new way, a regionality aware of universality. And without resorting to the sometimes wearisomely highfalutin language of theory, this is precisely what Mack Scogin has been doing for some time.[2]



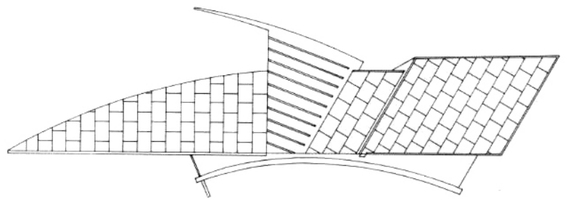
Model
Concourse Bridge



Model
Residence



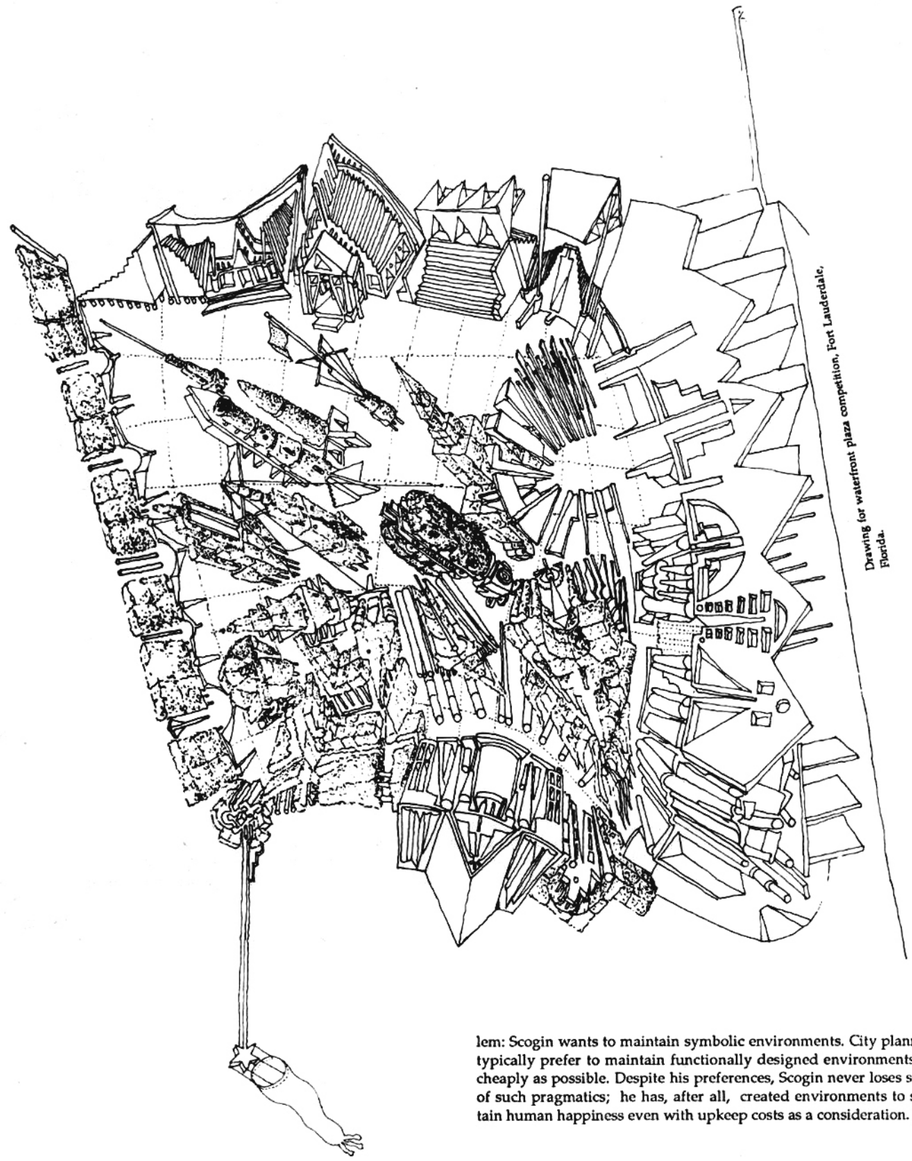
Roof Plans
Residence



Notes

[1] A Short Guide for the Perplexed: Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour wrote *Learning from Las Vegas*, following from Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in American Architecture*, wherein Venturi et al. celebrate the chaos of the Las Vegas Strip as populist architecture. Kenneth Frampton, in *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present* and elsewhere, attacks Venturi's concept as a specious defense of an ugliness imposed by market forces. Frampton then defends the concept of regionalism as resistance, and gives examples of architecture which he considers significant responses to local environments (physical and social). Frampton does not consider the American South in his arguments. I do. I think that both Mack Scogin and I would agree that Southern vernacular architecture has its immense share of uglification to own up to. I also think that both of us are fascinated by the way in which Southern rural poverty kept vernacular architecture free from the kinds of uniformity more recently imposed by market forces. (Scogin, however, wouldn't verbalize it this way.) The sameness of the South's crummy little bait shacks is a different sort of thing from the sameness of the mass-produced little shopping centers now springing up at rural crossroads in the less prosperous but still profit-creating sectors of the New South's suburban sprawl. Scogin is designing for the New South while asking larger questions about the dreams embodied even in crummy little bait shacks (he would never use that particular example, which is entirely mine).

Frampton uses "place" as a translation of Martin Heidegger's notion of *Raum*, an experienced environment rather than abstract space. Scogin's designs distinctly evoke the specificity of "place," to the point, as in the Fort Lauderdale project, of using the natural environment to complete key sections of the work. (The maintenance of topiary in the American tropics, a modest but ongoing expense, reveals a problem: Scogin wants to maintain symbolic environments. City planners typically prefer to maintain functionally designed environments, as cheaply as possible. Despite his preferences, Scogin never loses sight of such pragmatics; he has, after all, created environments to sustain human happiness even with upkeep costs as a consideration.)



Drawing for waterfront plaza competition, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

[2] It may be necessary to remind some readers that the inapposite use of the regional vernacular is a conscious defamiliarization technique beloved of serious essay writers as well as humorists.

J. W. Cullum's essay "Secret Formulas in the Lands of Architecture: Notes on Southern Identities and Difference" appeared in the July/August 1986 Art Papers, *"Architecture in the Land of the Secret Formula: Ideas, Attitudes, Observations."*