

assemblage

A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture

7



Mack Scogin **Merrill Elam** Projects for Two Libraries

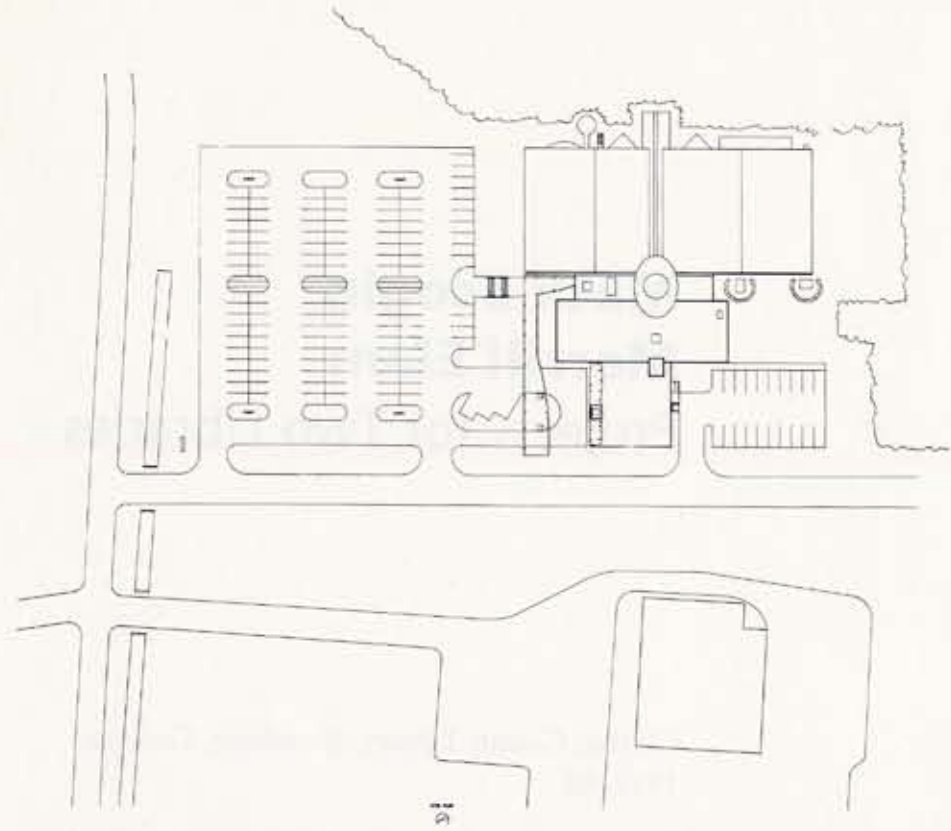
Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam are principals in the firm of Scogin, Elam, and Bray, Atlanta.

Clayton County Library, Jonesboro, Georgia,
1985-88

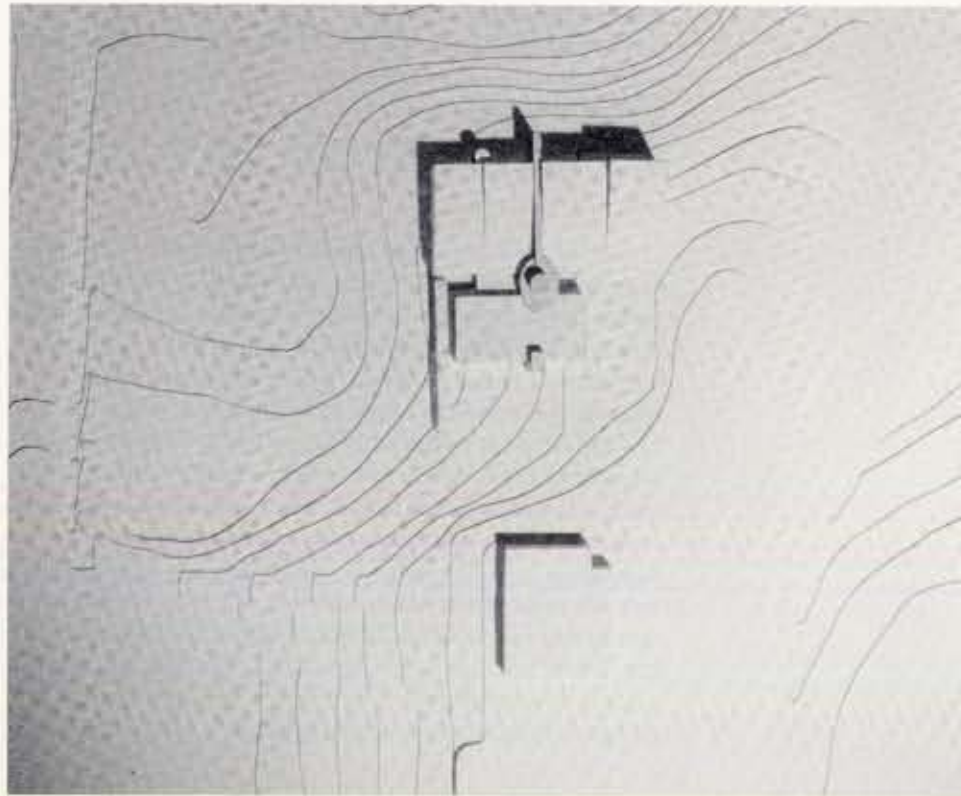
The project is a 33,000-square-foot administrative headquarters and main branch facility for a countywide library system. Set back from the road at the high end of a suburban sloping site, along a strip that runs between the Hartsfield International Airport and Tara, the mythical home of Scarlet, the library serves a population where, according to Scogin, "information is sought for practical reasons and history is personal."

The building is organized around two major axes that serve to tie it to the site functionally and visually. The first draws patrons from the parking lot to the central circulation desk. Here the orientation shifts ninety degrees to the primary internal axis of the building. This orientation is toward views of the woods and the creek to the east of the site. The public areas of the building occupy a large open room oriented to these views, with a light monitor dividing the space, emphasizing the line of travel toward the genealogy collection. Shed roofs that spring to the east are also stepped up from the south to admit northern light and to vary the scale of the room, allowing the accommodation of appropriate functions at different heights. The structure is steel frame on a concrete foundation with long-span truss joists of wood and steel. The exterior skin combines metal siding of disparate textures and patterns.

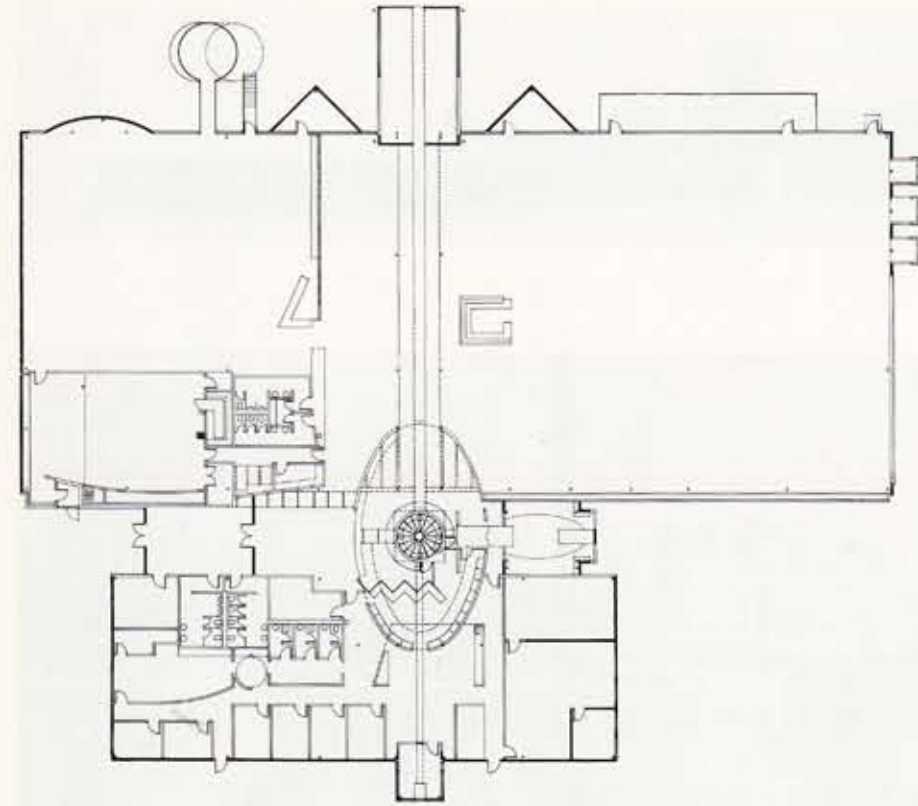
1. Clayton County Library



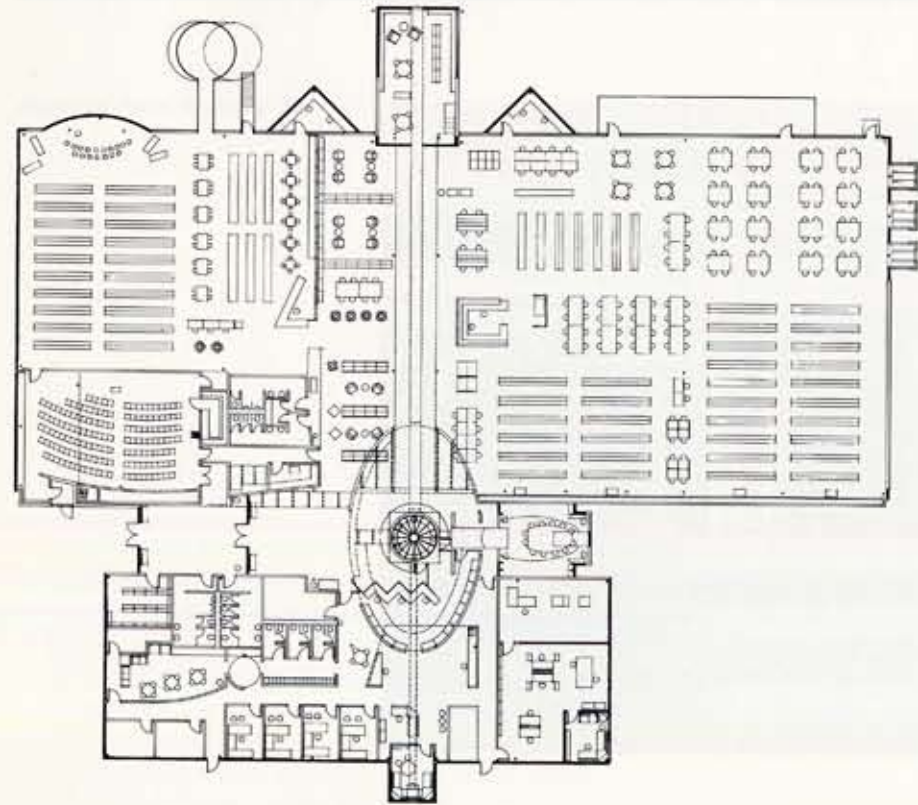
2. Site plan



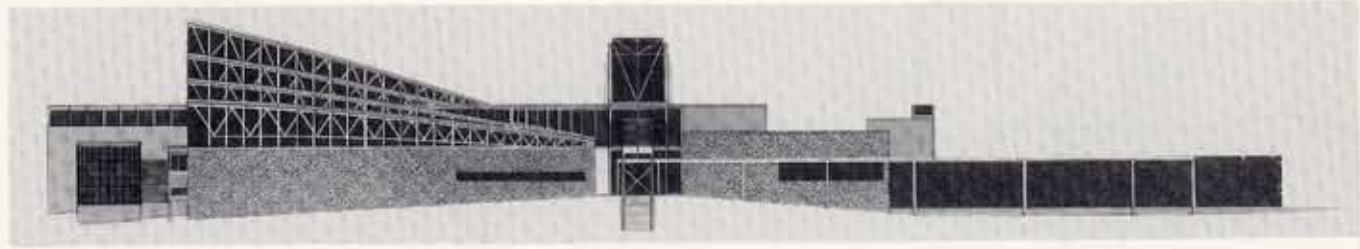
3. Plan view of site model



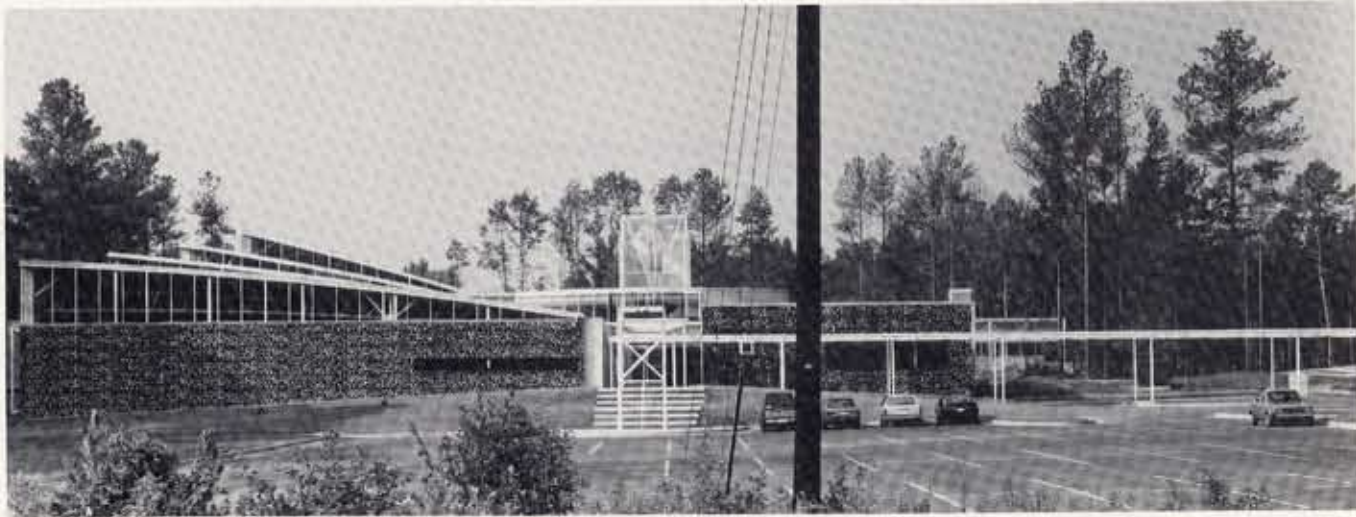
4. Plan



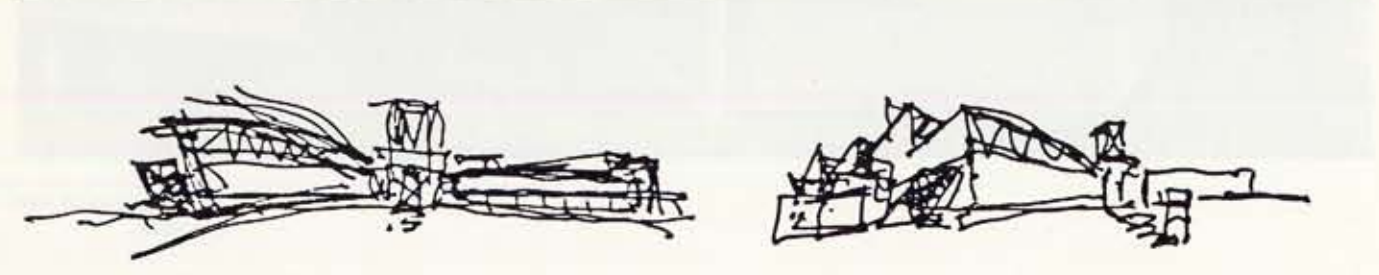
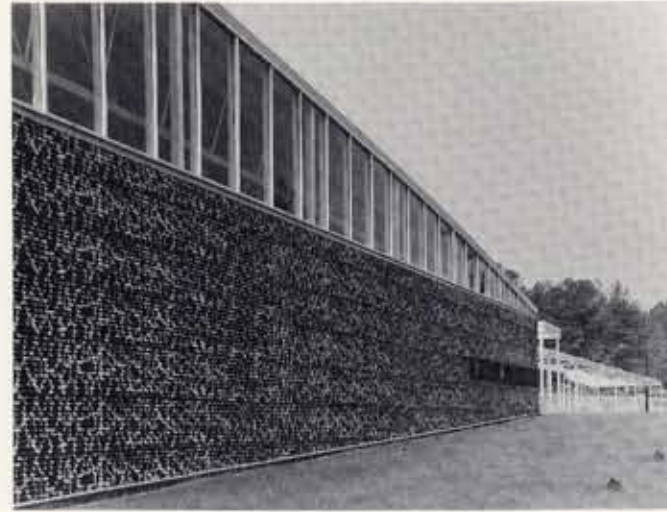
5. Plan with furnishings



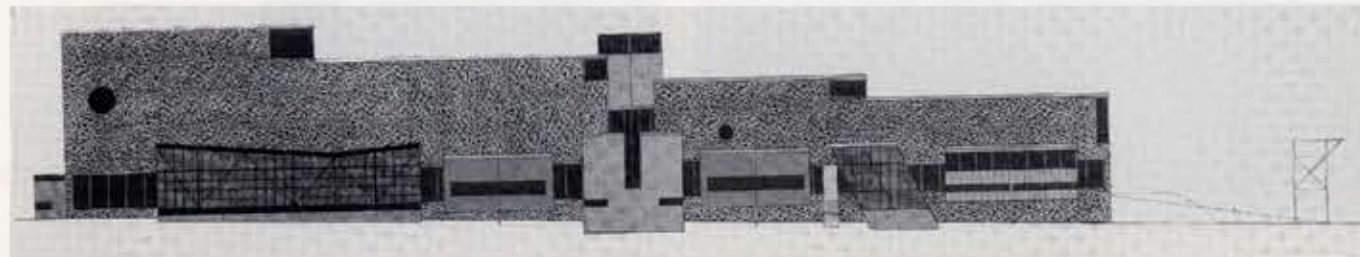
6. North elevation



7-10. Views of north elevation



11. Sketches of north elevation

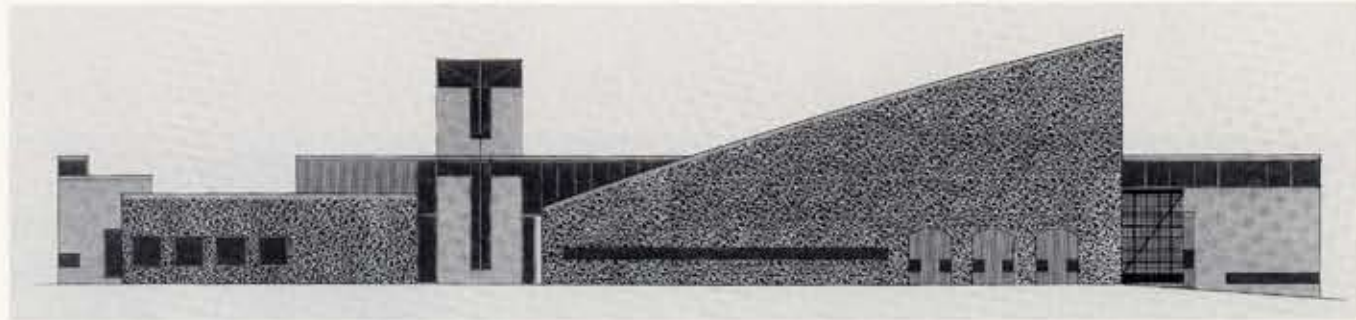


12. East elevation



13, 14. Views of east elevation

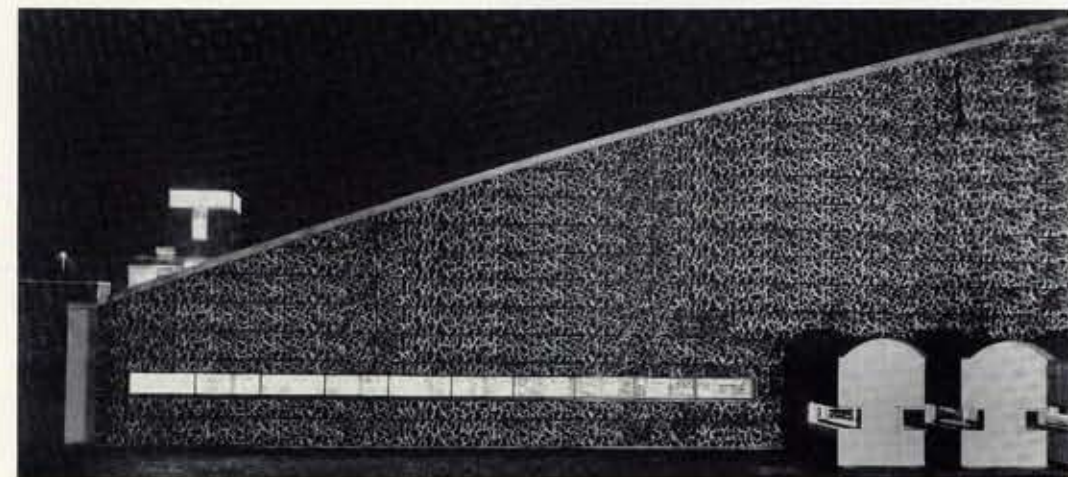
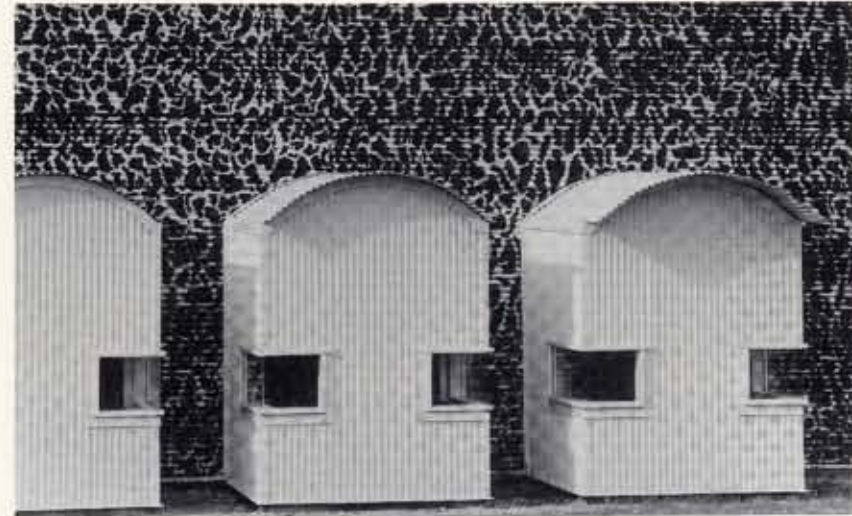


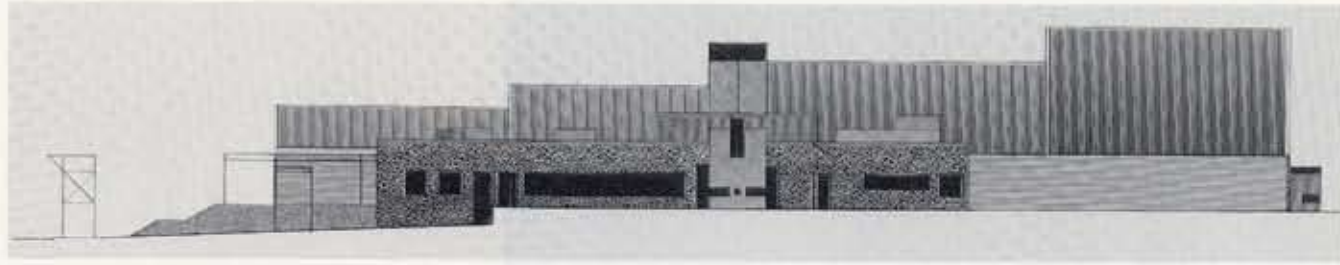


15. South elevation



16-19. Views of south elevation



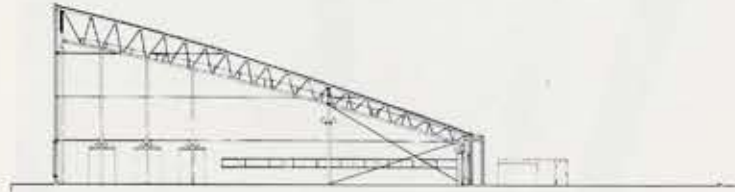


20. West elevation



21-23. Views of west elevation

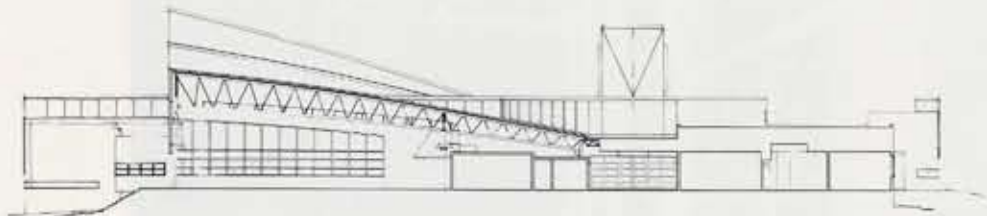




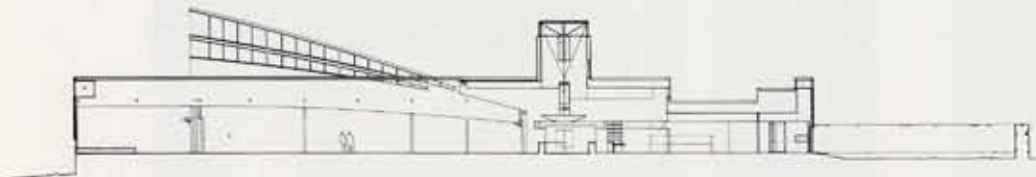
24. Transverse section at general reading room, looking south



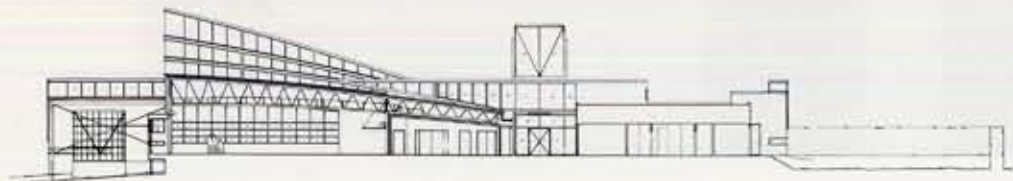
25. Transverse section at reference services, looking south



26. Transverse section at browsing services, looking south



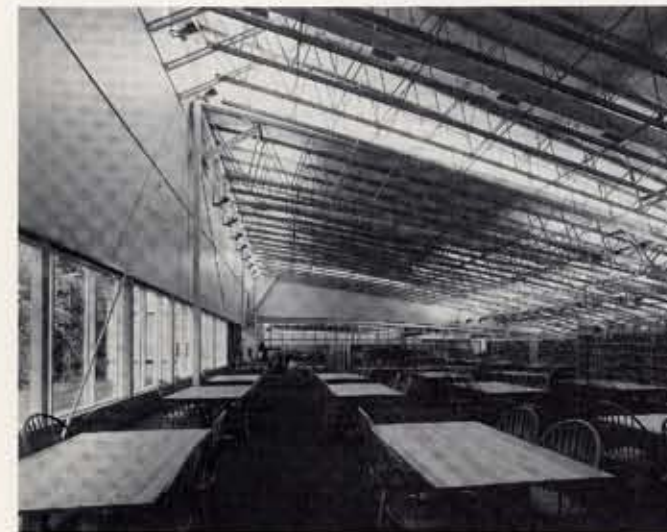
27. Transverse section through light monitor, looking south

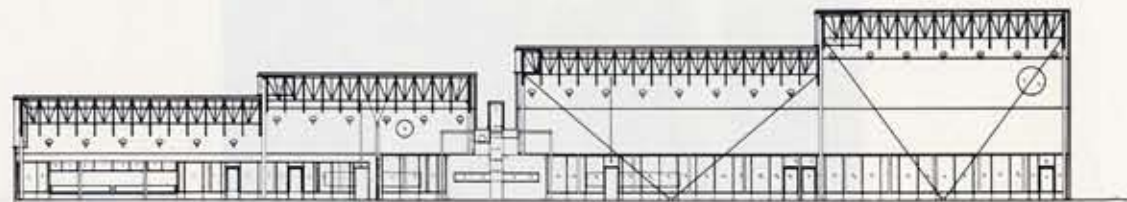


28. Transverse section at children's services, looking south

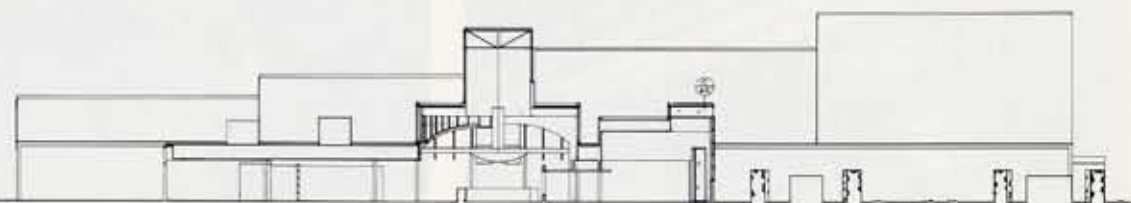


29-32. Interior views

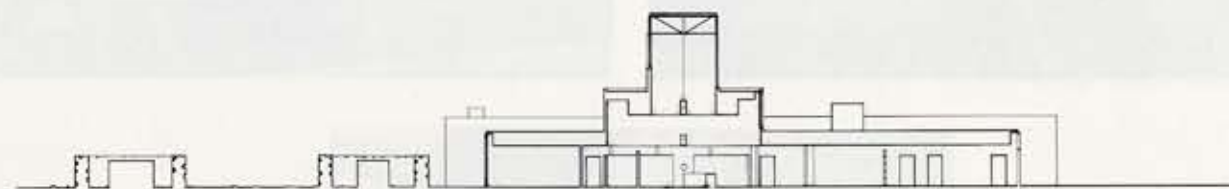




33. Longitudinal section through public room, looking east



34. Longitudinal section through circulation desk area, looking east



35. Longitudinal section through circulation desk area, looking west



36. Longitudinal section through public room, looking west



Project Credits

Merrill Elam and Mack Scogin

Project director: Lloyd Bray

With Tom Crosby, Isabelle Millet, David Murphree, Ennis Parker, Rick Sellers, and Dick Spangler

Structural, mechanical, and electrical engineer: Gann Pruitt Womack Davenport & Associates

Lighting consultant: Williamson & Associates

37-39. Interior views



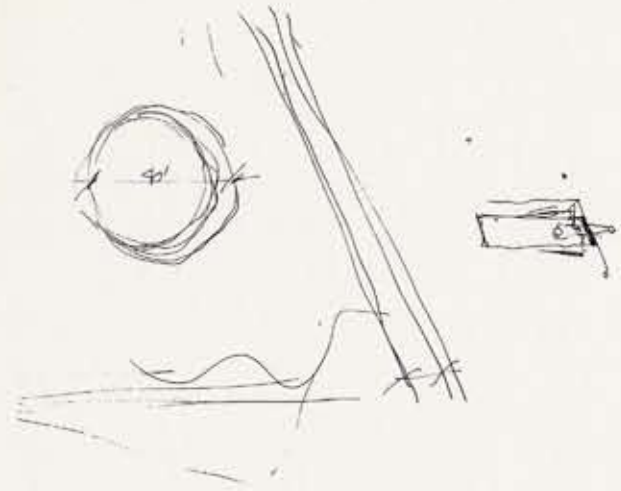


1. View of model, front elevation, looking east

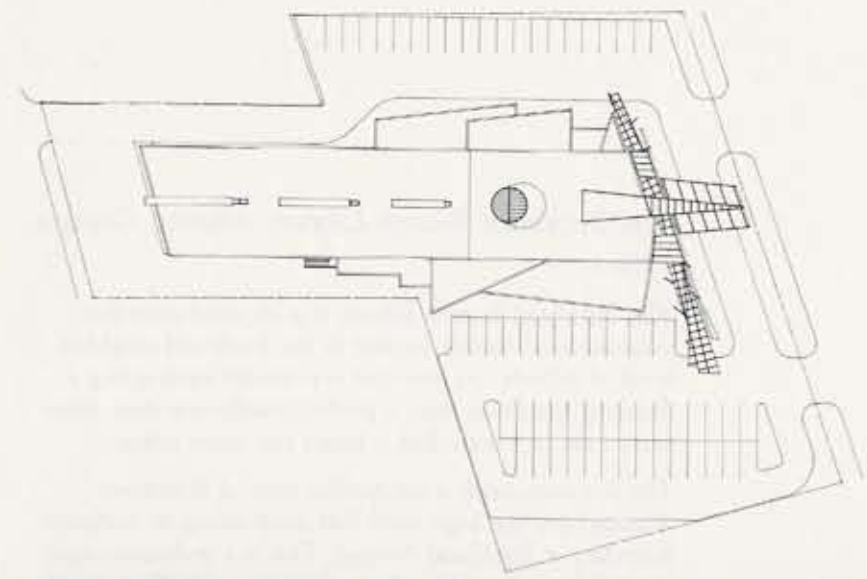
The Buckhead Branch Library, Atlanta, Georgia, 1986—

The Buckhead Branch Library is a 20,000-square-foot neighborhood facility located in the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta, an area that is currently undergoing a dramatic transition from a predominantly one-story storefront scale to a scale that is larger and more urban.

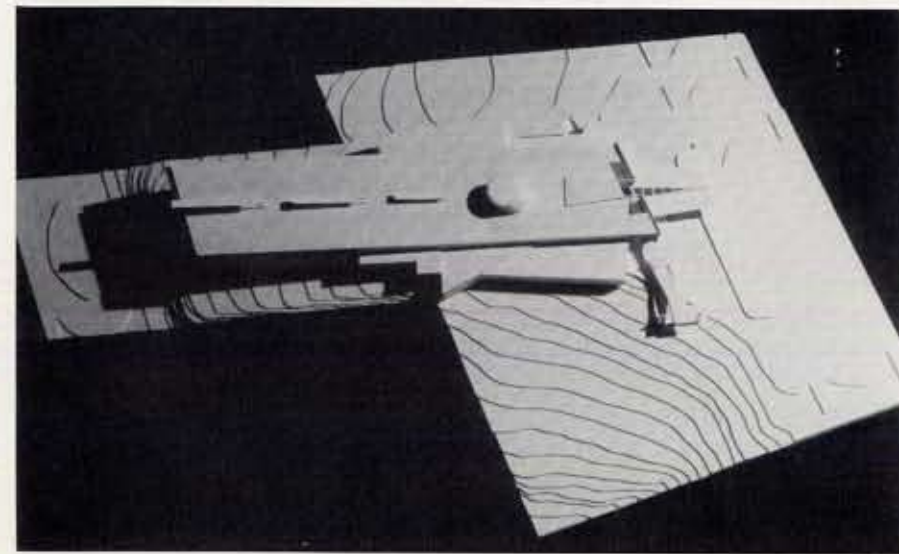
The site commands a spectacular view of downtown Atlanta from the high knoll that crests along its northern boundary at Buckhead Avenue. This is a pedestrian-scale street that contrasts sharply in character with Pharr Road, a primary artery along the southern boundary of the site. The new building is situated on the long, narrow portion of the T-shaped site, oriented along a north-south axis, to maximize exposure to these two street frontages and to take full advantage of the view of the city. Buckhead Avenue is retained as the "front door" for the new branch, with a system of canopies that extend to pedestrians approaching from the street as well as to the two parking lots to the east and west of the building.



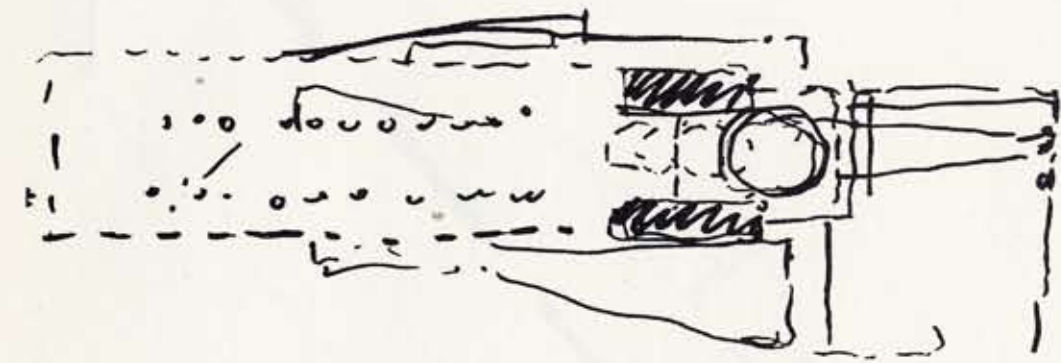
2. Plan study



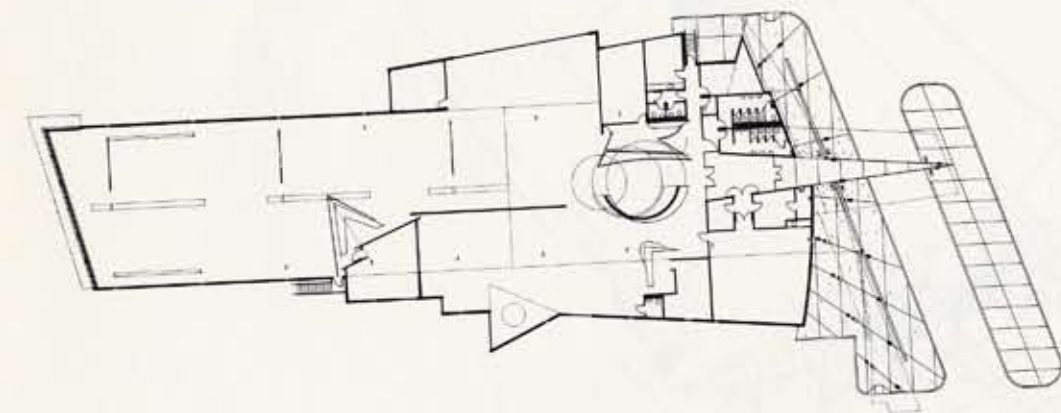
3. Site plan



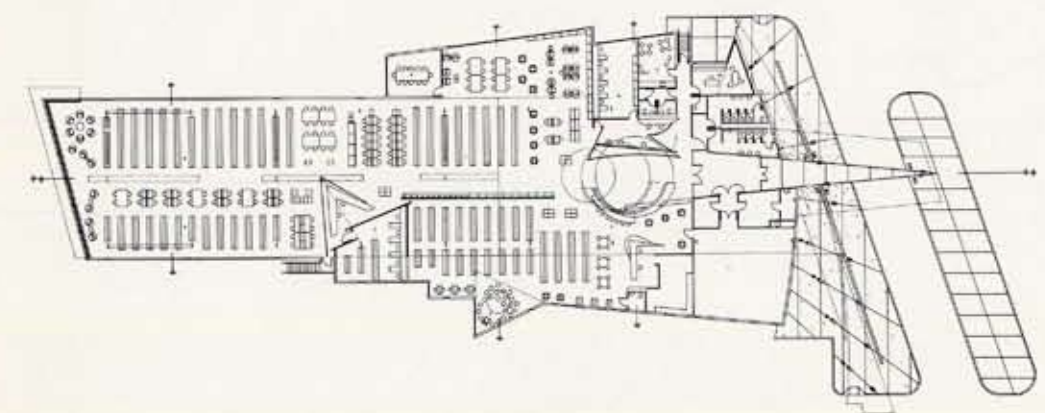
4. Plan view of site model



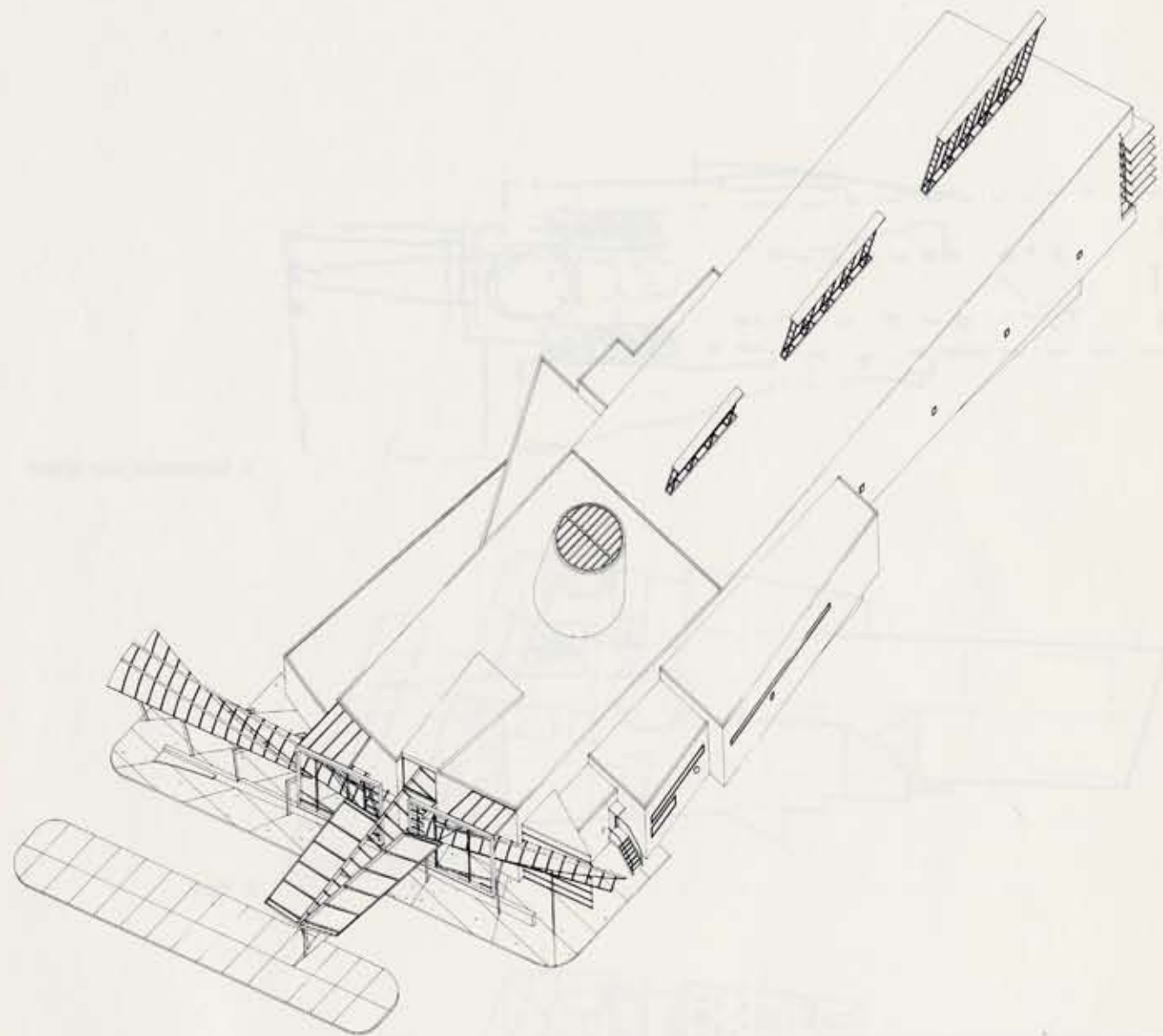
5. Conceptual plan sketch



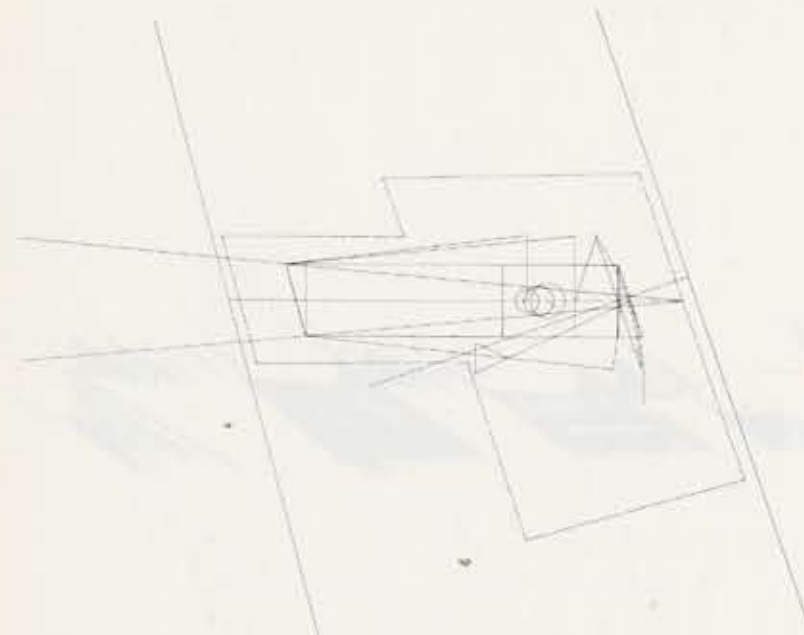
6. Plan



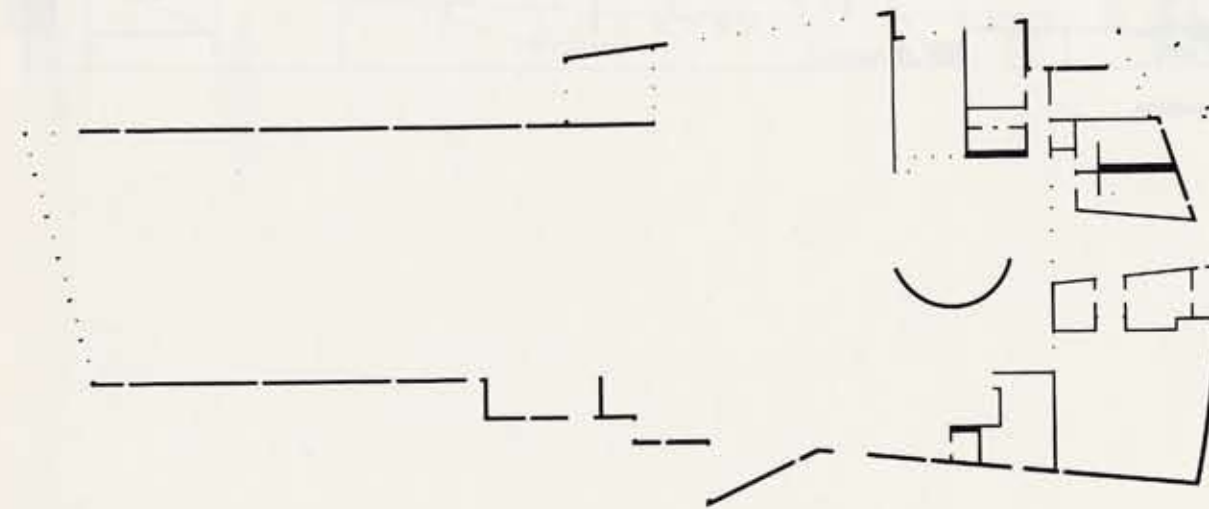
7. Plan with furnishings



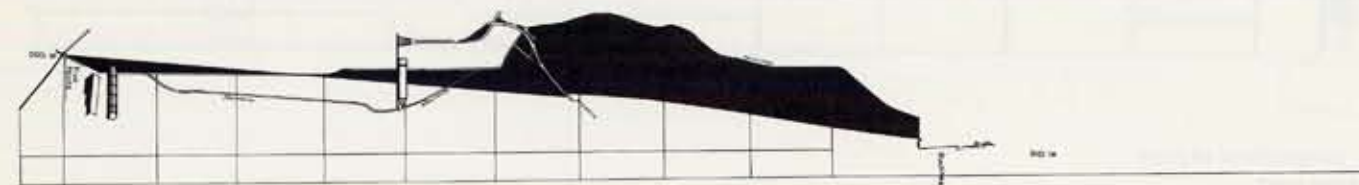
8. Axonometric



9. Ordering geometry



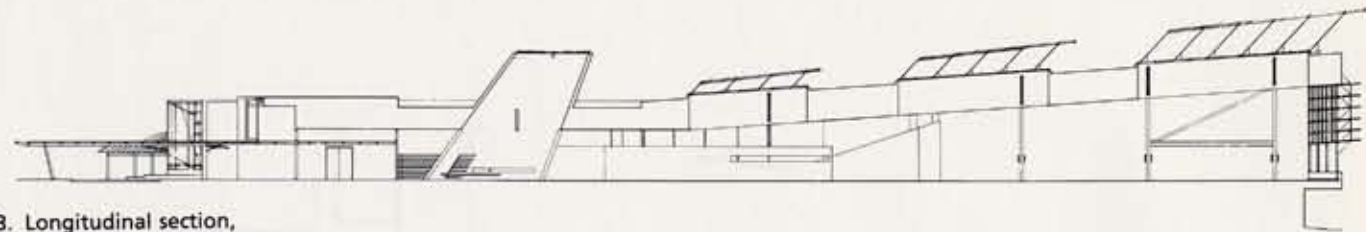
10. Plan study



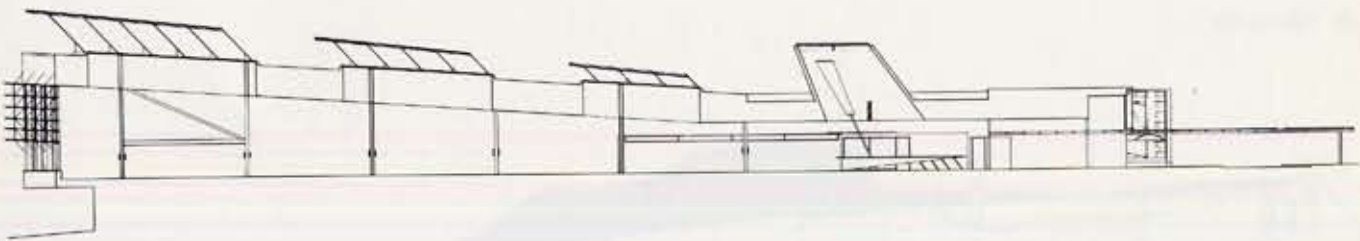
11. Section showing relationship to downtown Atlanta



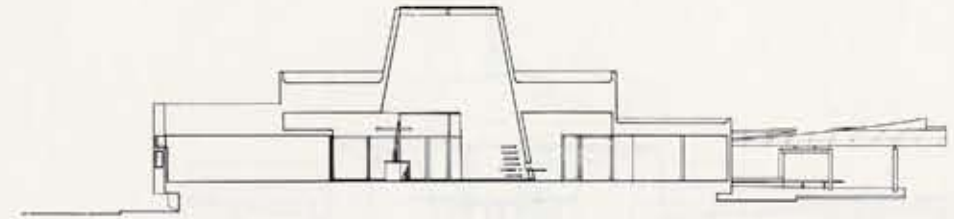
12. Light/shadow study



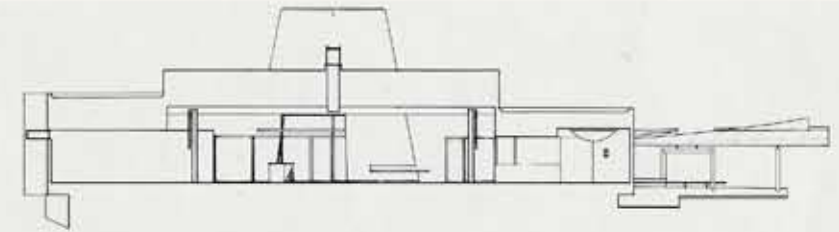
13. Longitudinal section, looking east



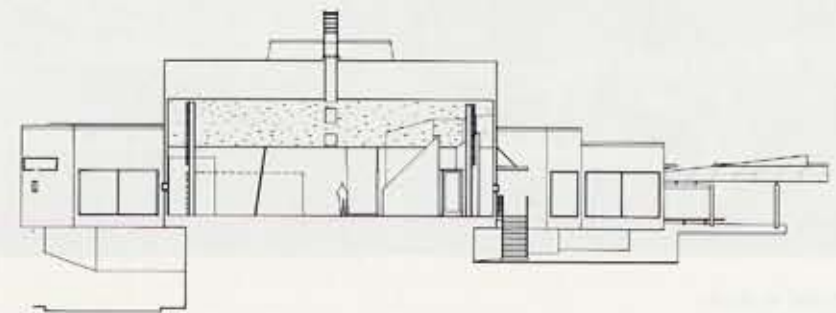
14. Longitudinal section, looking west



15. Transverse section at cone



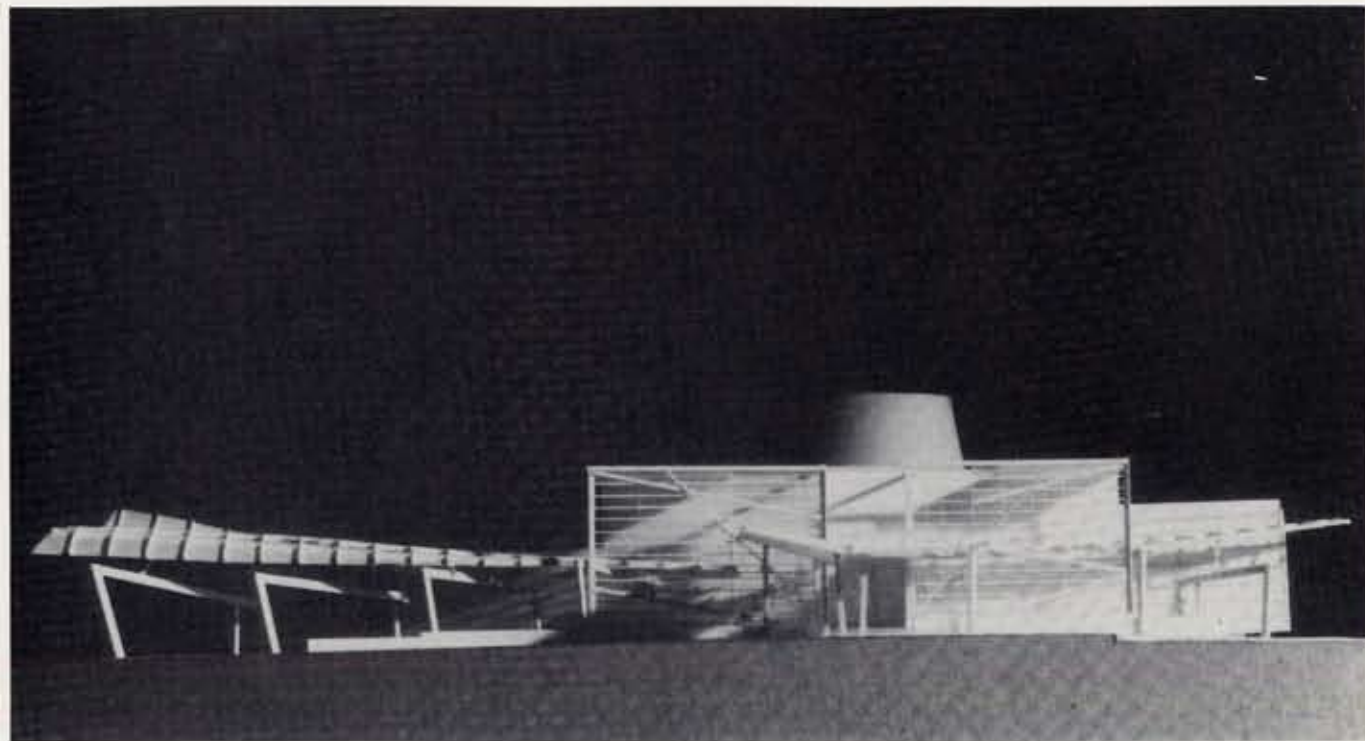
16. Transverse section at children's area



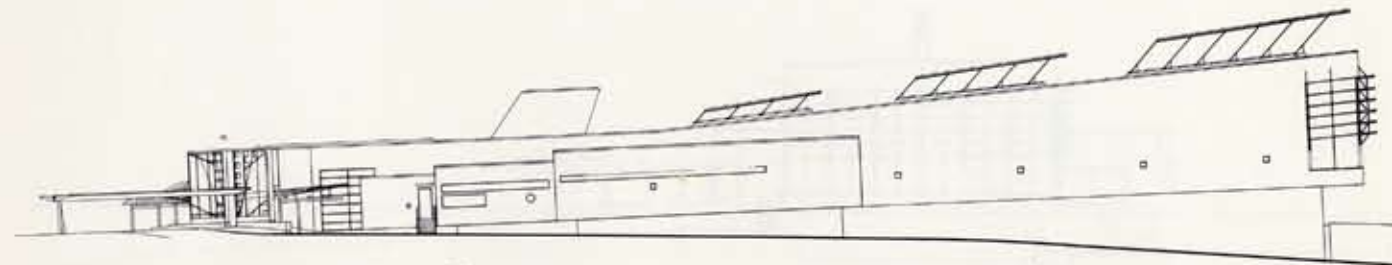
17. Transverse section at reading room



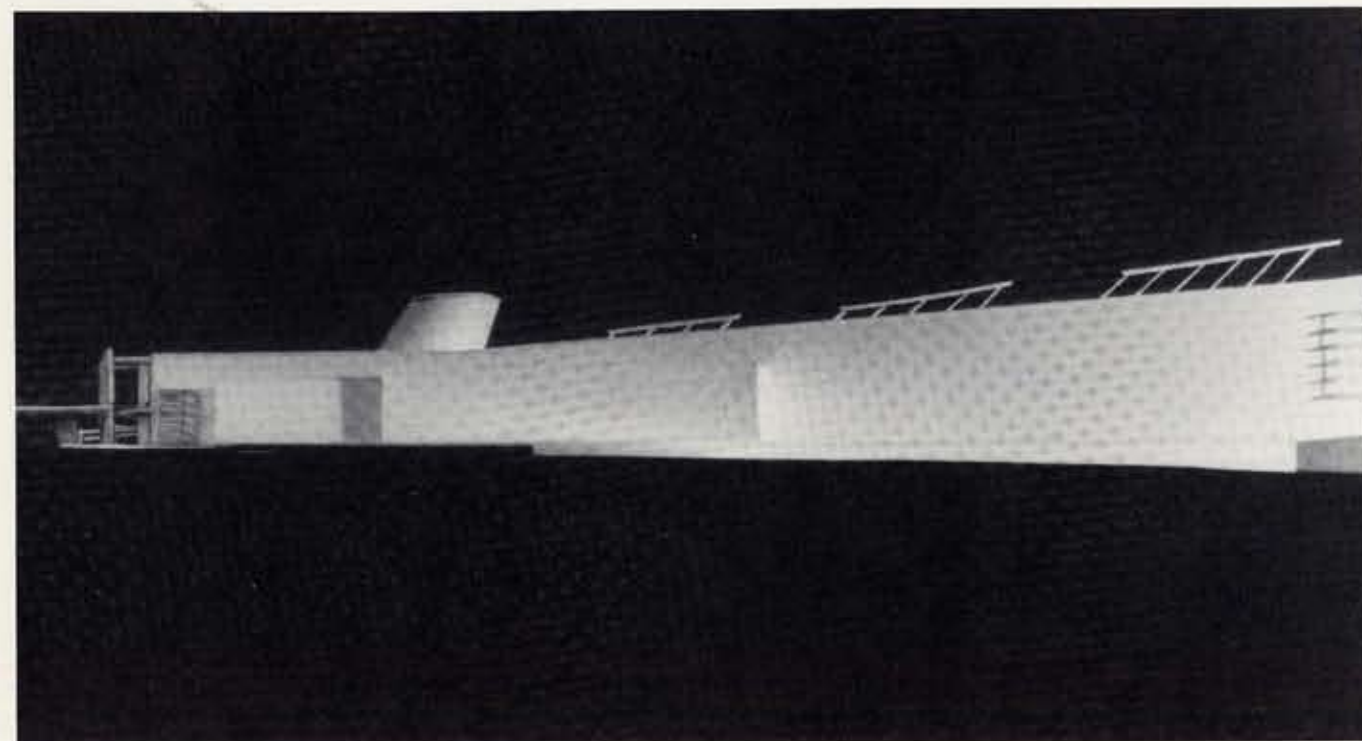
18. North elevation



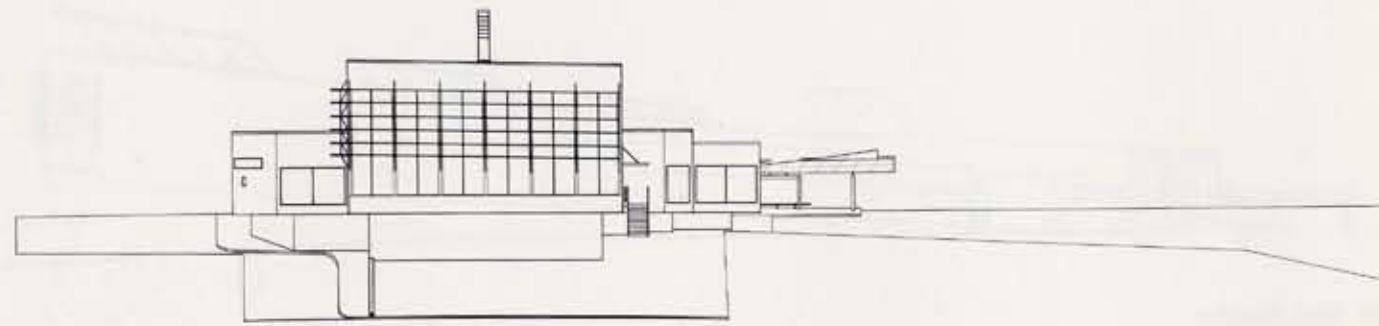
19. View of model at Buckhead Avenue, front elevation



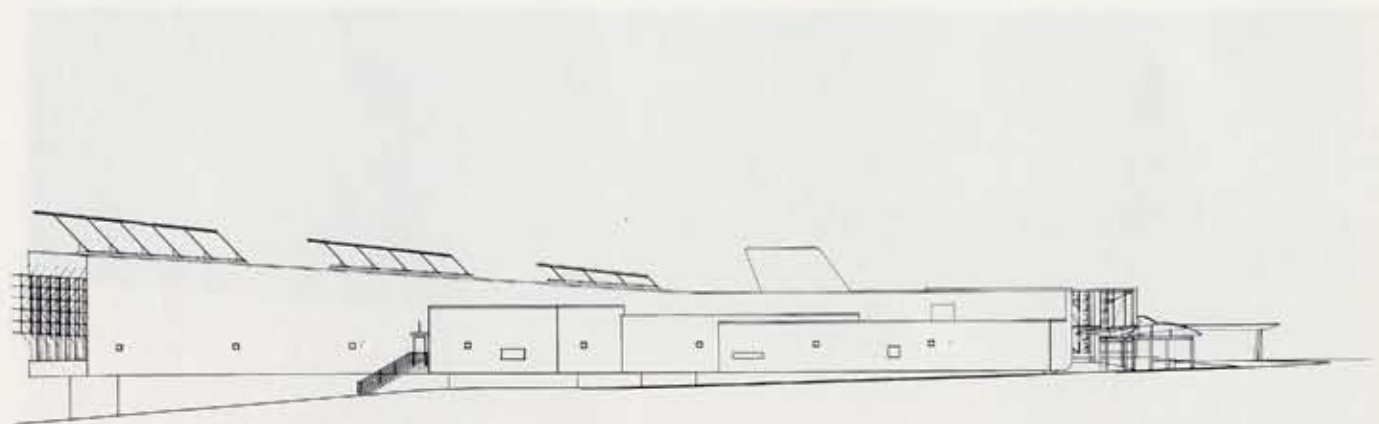
20. West elevation



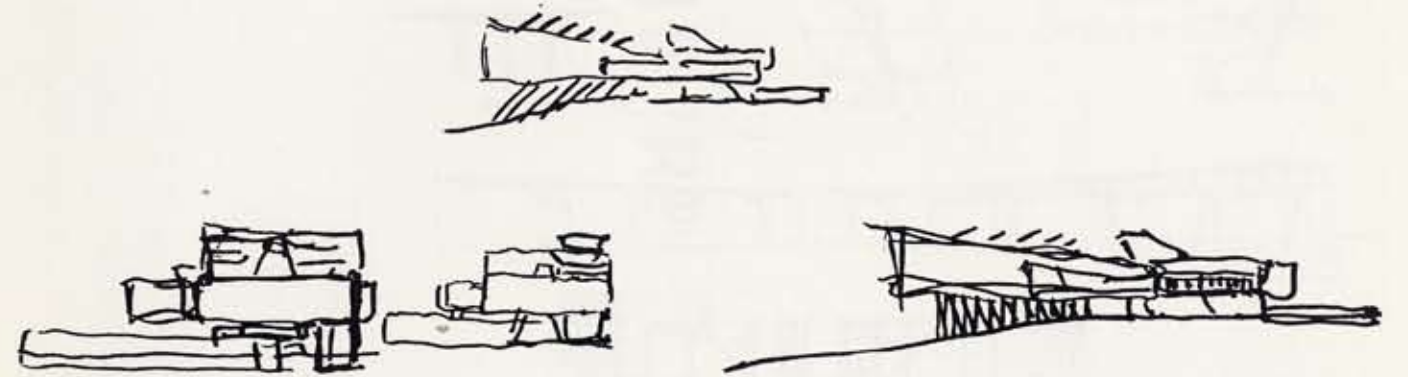
21. View of model, west elevation



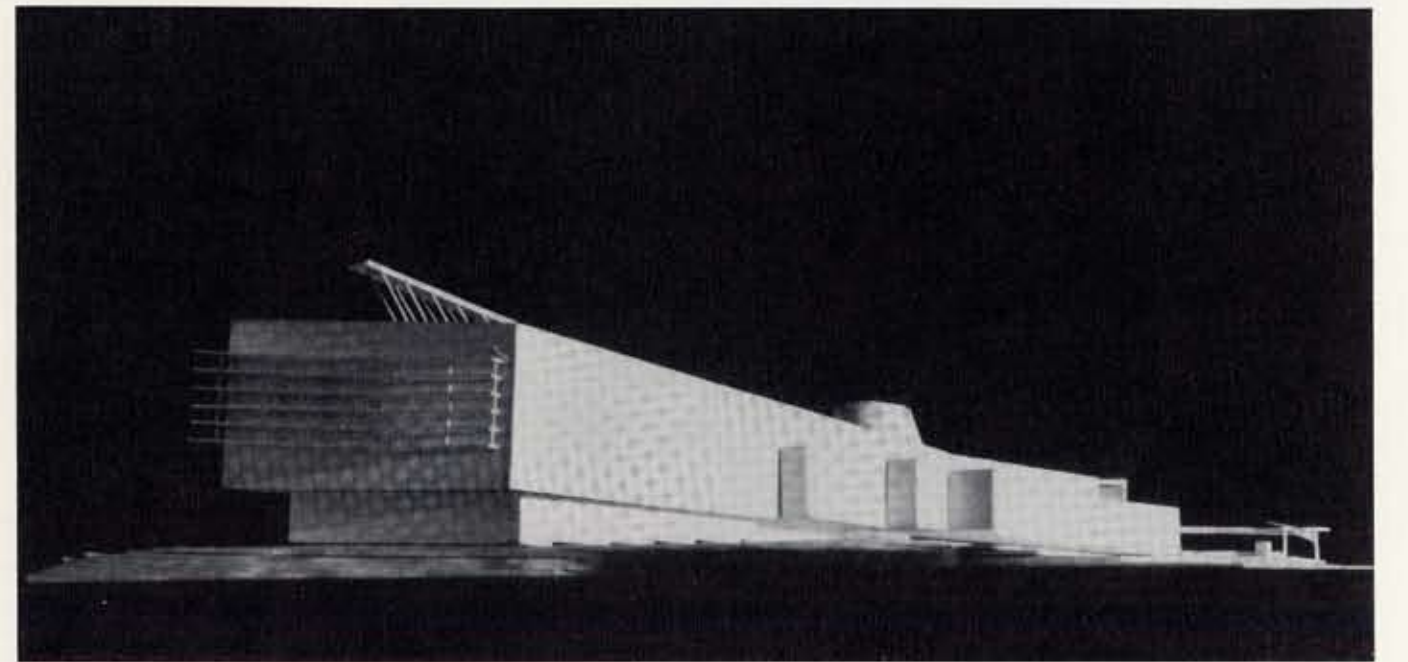
22. South elevation



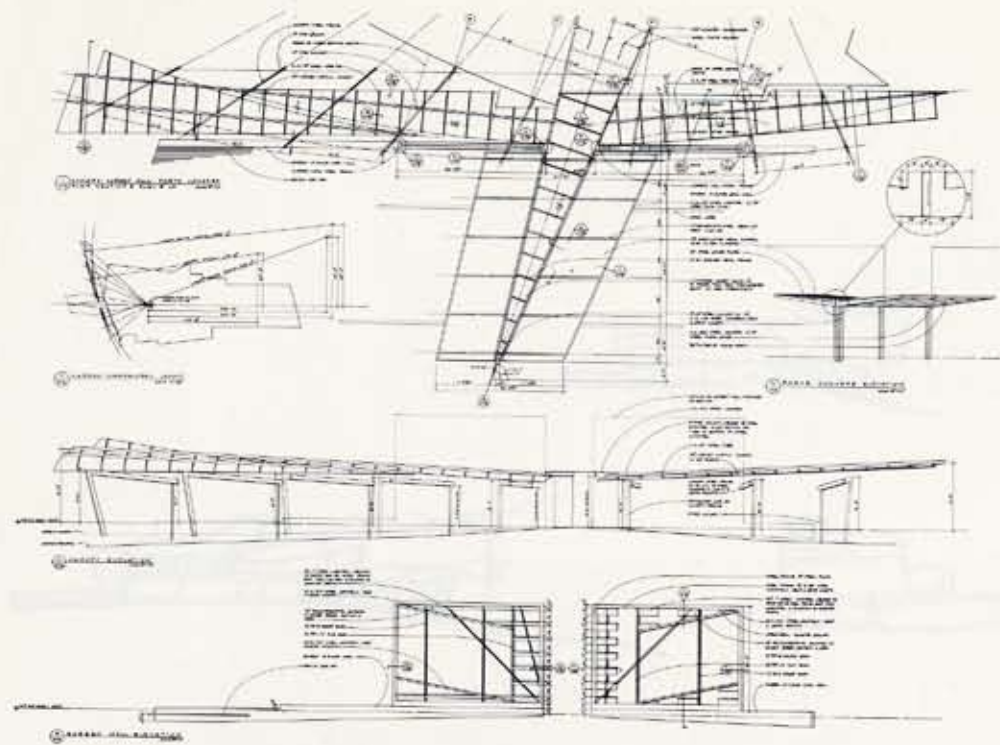
23. East elevation



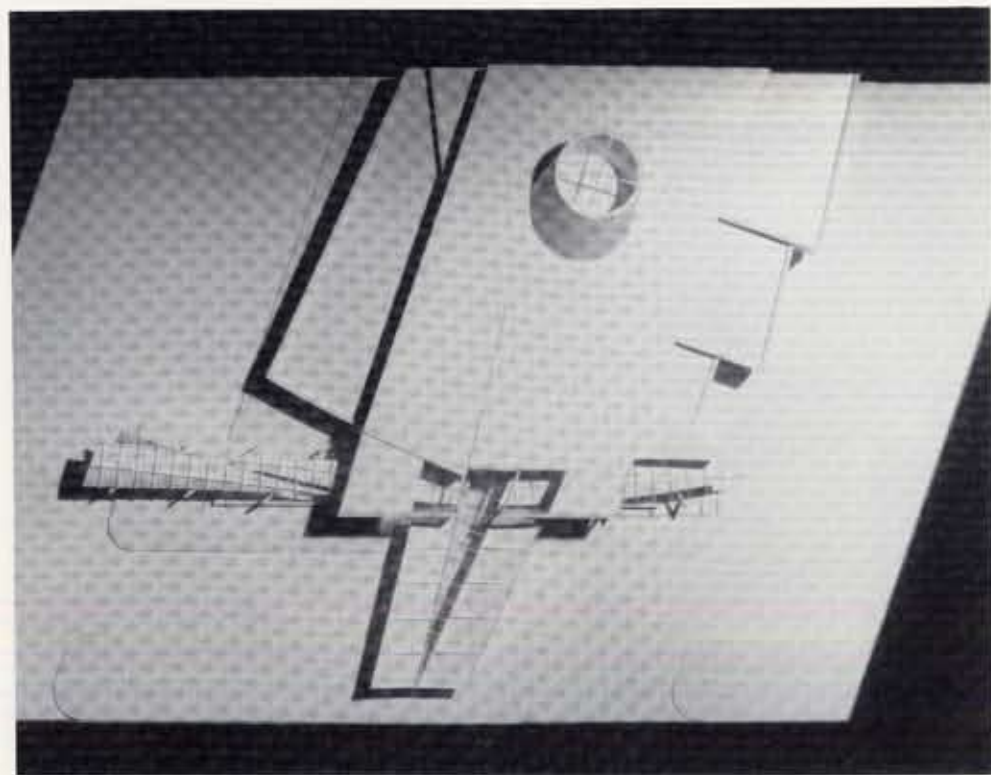
24. Sketches



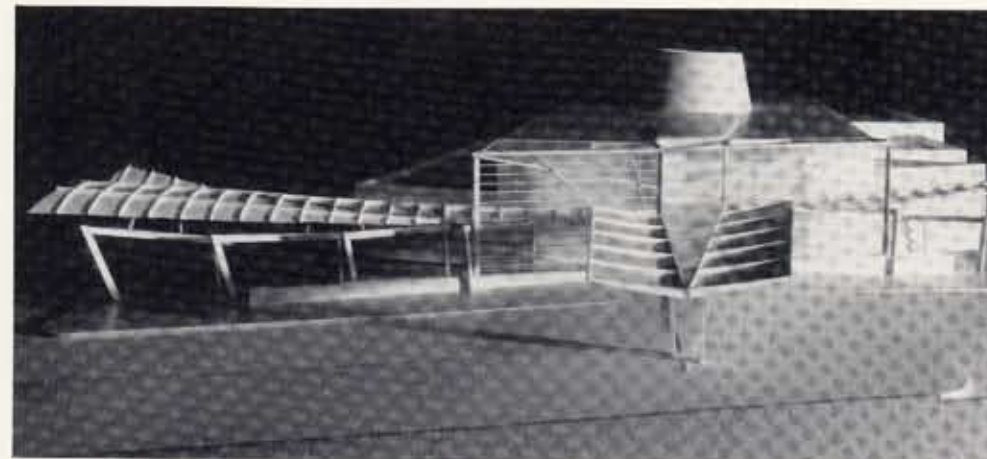
25. View of model, south elevation



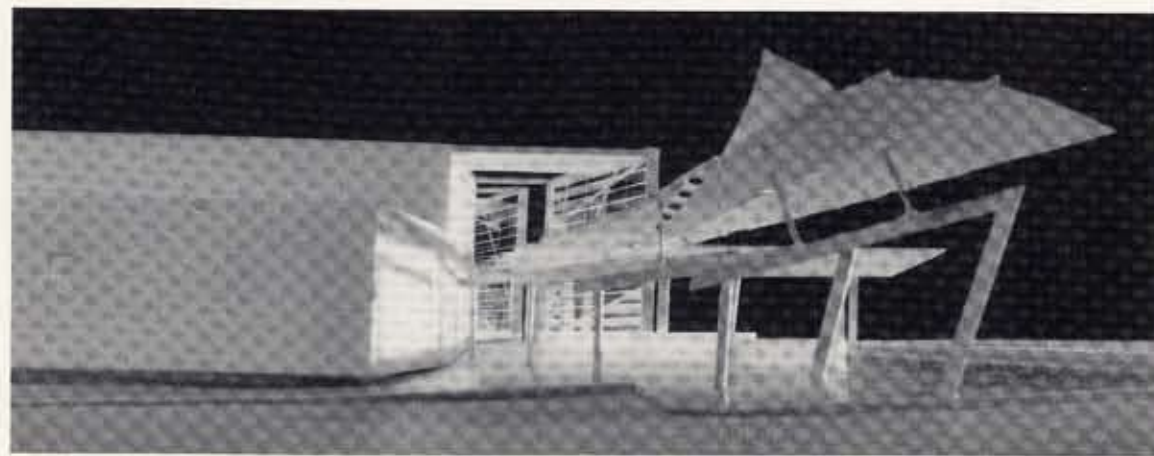
26. Details of canopy, screen wall, and porte cochere



27. Plan view of model showing entry canopy and porte cochere



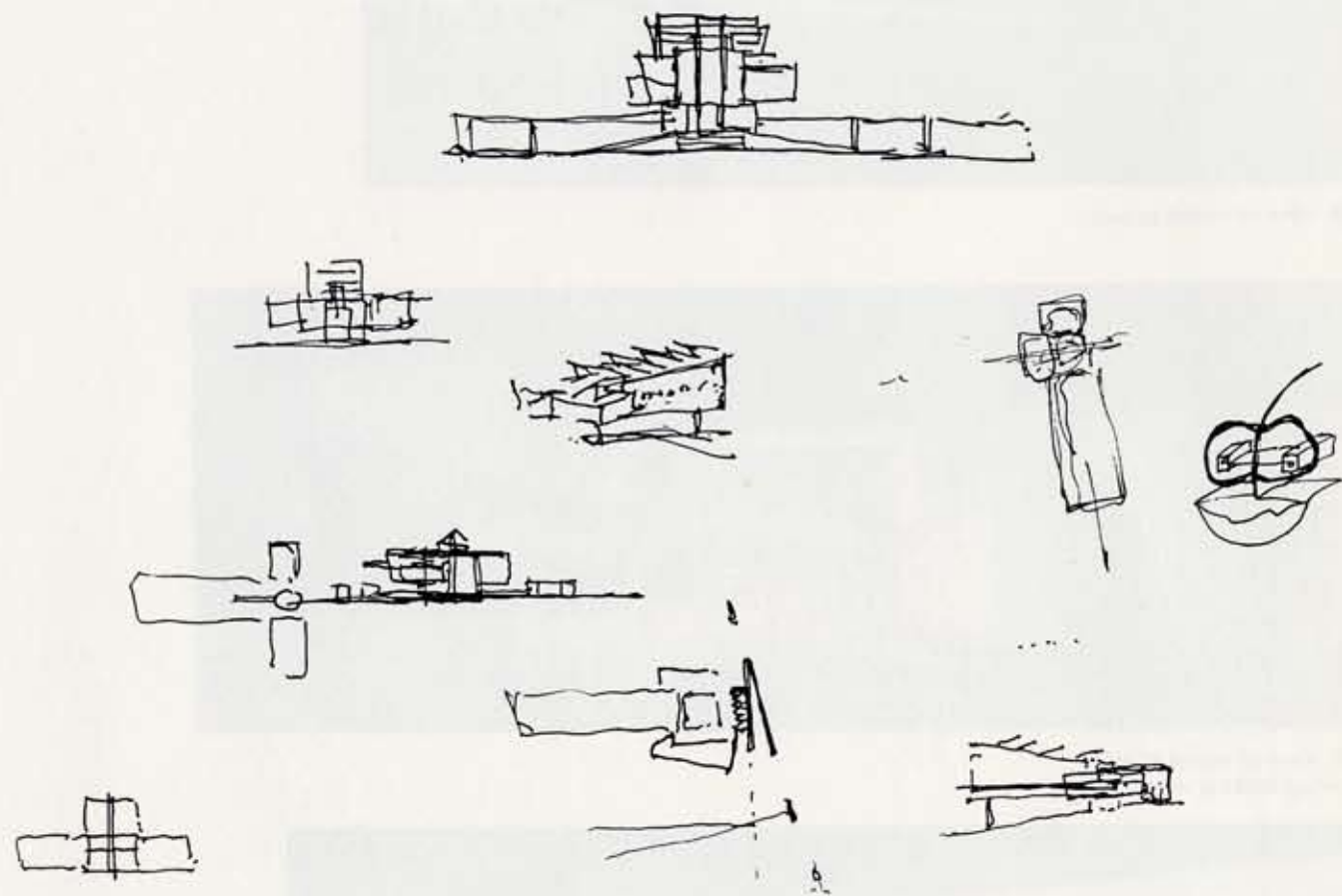
28. View of model at entry



29. View of model at entry canopy, looking west



30. View of model at entry canopy, from parking area



31. Conceptual sketches

Project Credits

Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam

Project director: Lloyd Bray

With Jeff Atwood, Susan Desko, Ellen Hooker, Patricia Kerlin, John Lauer, Isabelle Millet, and Ron Mitchell

Structural engineer: Harrington, George and Dunn, P.C.

Mechanical and electrical engineer: Jones, Nall & Davis, Inc.

Lighting consultant: Ramon Luminance Design

Expected construction completion: Summer 1989

J. W. Cullum

On Southern Identities and Difference: Marginal Notes for Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam

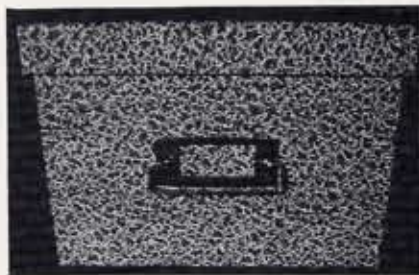
J. W. Cullum is an associate editor of *Art Papers*, where he published an earlier version of part one of this essay.

Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam's collaborative architectural work might be called less a conventional collaboration than an ongoing, immensely productive creative disagreement in which one or the other's choices predominate at different moments. In the Scogin, Elam and Bray description of the two library projects published here, the Clayton County Library is by "Merrill Elam with Mack Scogin" while the Buckhead Library is by "Mack Scogin with Merrill Elam." Though Scogin and Elam possess distinctly different sensibilities, their respective angles of vision are ultimately convergent. The significant differences lie in details of personal style and adjectival subtleties: as in so many other cultural situations, complex dynamics of divergence and harmony spring from small beginnings.

1. To be Southern is to be in many ways already "decentered," to grow up with an acute awareness of plurality and difference, to possess almost by instinct an ironic consciousness. None of this is inherent to all Southerners, of course; but the facts of birth and geography do sometimes make for interesting and unexpected resonances with habits of mind bred independently elsewhere. They make for a sensitivity to "gaps," to the unsaid, to what is *not* apparent. Or for a

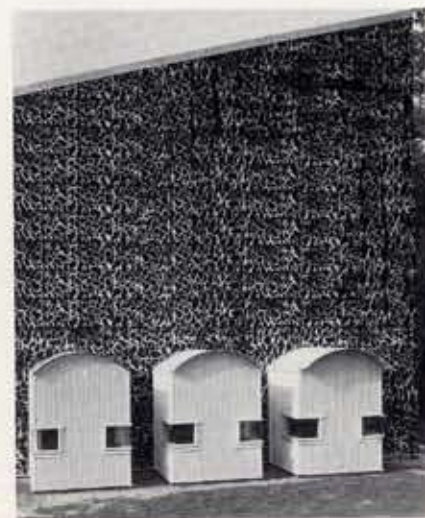
concern with the ways in which surface environment is anything but superficial; with how the *look* of a place is bound up with what is *done* there; with subtle social codes (Wittgenstein's relation between ethics and aesthetics).

The South — a society full of social and racial paradoxes, a society lacking both an economic center and a cultural capital, set in a region that long fitted the economic model of a Third World country — breeds a distinct sort of artist and intellectual, whose mind often responds to rhythms born of different (albeit diminishingly so) cultural circumstances. In this, the least postmodern of regions, the facts of Southern biography may yield an unexpected intuitive ground for grasping the many forms of postmodernism from recuperationist architecture to deconstructionist paradoxes. Repeatedly, notions specific to the postmodern era can be found in the Southern historical experience (or "experiences," the details differing according to one's place in the shifting social order): the notion that nothing possesses a center or else that everything possesses a multiplicity of semi-illusory centers (for example, the sense in which institutions today function as webs of power in which physical headquarters are virtually fictional addresses



for real yet amorphous entities whose actions are spread over vast, indeterminate areas of the planet); or, on a philosophical level, the notion that every effort to define a single organizing center for any system fails simply because all systems are complex networks of interrelations, in which one idea pursued far enough is likely to yield paradoxical or ironic results.

The South, or "Souths" (there have always been many), is in the midst of dizzying change. This is one reason why it is currently the meeting place of radical and reactionary political tendencies. As well, in some respects (most notably through politically inclined television evangelism), the South has become an improbable media center from which lines of force radiate to the rest of the nation. Attentive readers of latter-day sociology might have expected this: in a world where boundaries have ceased to matter except to those who happen to live within them, regional strategies are designed to grapple for influence (in the case of the 1988 "megaprimaries," the ironic outcome of this effort delighted Southern liberals). Historically an aggregate of (conflicting) communities, the South is increasingly regarded as an abstract commodity by transnational investment consortiums. Fragile, impoverished Afro-Atlantic cultures are threatened by the potential Miamification of coastal islands; and while the poor have always been displaced, today's development also uproots somewhat more affluent communities, and displaces the power relations of those communities that remain physically in place. The South changes in ways very familiar to the ironic strain of Southern consciousness: Southerners of all races have possessed, along with the stubborn optimism that has appeared, at times, in their fiction and Nobel Prize

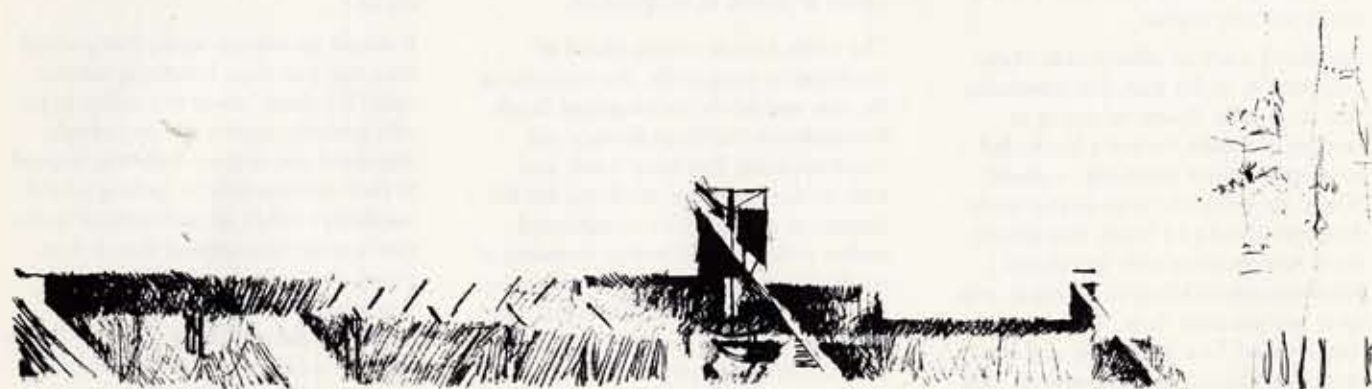
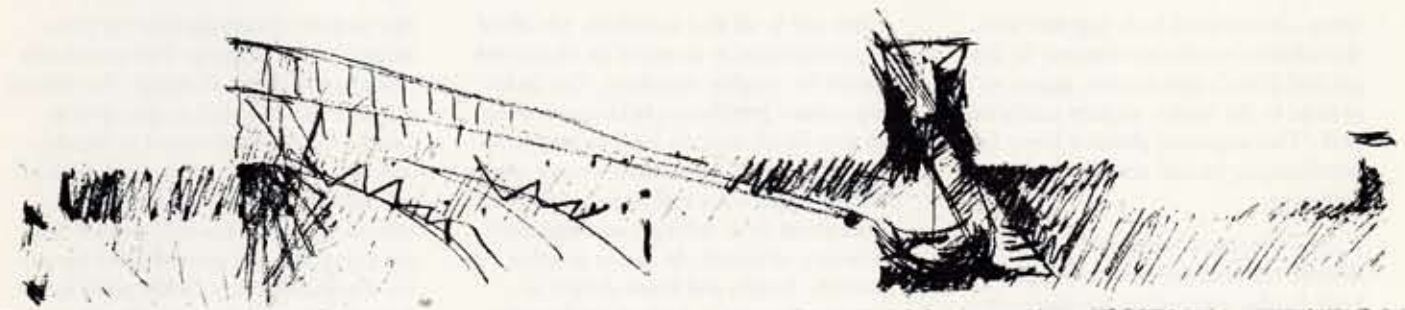


speeches, a skeptical pessimism about human motivations.

The South, like regions everywhere with respect to hegemonic cultures, has been as apologetic about its strengths as about its weaknesses; it has also often been confused about which is which. "Regionalism," as Kenneth Frampton and Paul Ricoeur should have taught us long ago, need not be only an excuse for some stylistic failure. Real regional influences are something other than belligerent provincialism: artists or architects are drawn to certain styles, perhaps, for much the same reason that intellectuals are drawn to certain types of thought. Regional experience affects *the way* that one absorbs a larger tradition, *which part* of it one finds most useful, not the fact of absorption or use. Even vernacular craftsmen quote, however naïvely, styles whose origins can be traced to archaic Greece or Africa. We all live in a web of inheritance to which we react, and that inheritance is never confined within regional borders.

For all of that, there are clearly regional impulses (not necessarily styles) in art and in architecture. Environment is obviously not destiny; Robert Rauschenberg does not make tropical art in his south Florida studio. Physical distance from the center (or what masquerades as the center) does not preclude concern with issues of the center. It does, however, make possible a regional angle of vision, including what Frampton has called an architecture of resistance (to the totalizing imperatives of a unified culture).

Mack Scogin has stated explicitly that though he himself is Southern, his is not a Southern architecture; but ways of judging and deciding can spring from a region without participating in some aggressive regional identification. All of the



issues I have raised here, together with the intuitive vocabulary intrinsic to Scogin and Elam's architecture, appear to be at stake in the library projects published here. They represent physical forms for a fast-changing mental and physical landscape.

2. The Clayton County and Buckhead Branch Libraries are two architectural types for the postmodern Southern city: constructions and deconstructions of old myths and new myths.

Jonesboro, south of Atlanta near Hartsfield Airport, is the least, last transformation of an older South: its strip is as random as Robert Venturi's Vegas, but intimately, almost resistantly, regional. (There are still fewer mass-market malls than specialized gun shops, tiny grocery stores, and crummy little bait shops.) Jonesboro adores Margaret Mitchell, who spent her summers there. The shopping strip is called Tara Boulevard, and businesses from beauty shops to realtors wear names like Twelve Oaks and Scarlett's. Apart from its small Confederate cemetery, the town bears no physical resemblance to anything in Mitchell's novel, much less to the grandiose Hollywood vision of a mythologized Clayton County.

The Clayton County Library project speaks more to the town's physical and social reality than to the dreams of Tara. Set in the midst of rapidly developing, painfully random surroundings, it presents symbolic permanence by exploiting the elements of transience: its mottled-grey metal outer walls resemble stone from a distance. It exploits the off-the-shelf building materials of the area to produce subtle effects of proportion, light, and shadow, thus suggesting what could be achieved by the builders of cheap apartments and storage sheds if they looked at their world a little differently. The library may well be, as Merrill

Elam put it, all that Jonesboro can afford of permanence in an era of its history not meant for weighty structures. The building mirrors Jonesboro's lightness of being in very literal ways: its interior braces, far from being wall decorations, insure structural integrity for a building characterized throughout by a strikingly accomplished economy of means. In this as in other projects, Scogin and Elam delight in quoting the culture back to itself in ways meant to stretch its imagination.

The north Atlanta neighborhood of Buckhead is, supposedly, the exemplar of the new and newly multinational South. Postmodernist buildings displace old structures along Peachtree Road, and their random presence reinforces the felt absence of any literal or metaphorical center: unlike the old-money mansions of nearby Paces Ferry, the new buildings respond not to the surrounding social order but to the dispersed centers of economic power. (Those centers are, in significant measure, competing with or displacing the personal networks of social power for which "Buckhead" was once an implicit shorthand.)

The Buckhead Branch Library design, by contrast, tries to offer a creative response to the changing form of a traditionally fashionable neighborhood in which old webs of social relations are being relentlessly severed by late capitalism at its most spectacular. Oriented along the physical line of a ridge, on the site of the previous library, which had been built for less frenetic times, the new library forms a focal point of symbolic order that nothing else in the immediate environment begins to provide. At the same time, as Scogin has remarked in an interview, the building is as present-centered as the Clayton County Library; both buildings respond functionally and symbolically to the way life is lived today in their respec-

tive sections of metropolitan (or proto-megalopolitan) Atlanta. This necessarily includes the factor of change; the reticent elegance that Scogin has described as "politeness" seems designed to blend in with an environment that, by definition, will be substantially different within a very short time. (However, despite Scogin's assertion, the stylistic subtleties of the Buckhead library finally point less to present dilemmas than to a hoped-for future.)

It should go without saying (but perhaps does not) that there is nothing intrinsically "Southern" about this ability to provide symbolic centers for increasingly abstracted spaces; these buildings respond to their environment by quoting a local vocabulary within an architectural syntax that is more international than it is regional. It may be the most appropriate response to the South's incipient postmodern situation. Part of Clayton County may still dream of a restored Tara (the county's voters recently rejected a proposal to build one as a tourist attraction), but the Jonesboro library addresses the real condition of the county far better than the county's self-chosen literary visions will ever do. Scogin has remarked that he and Elam typically begin a project by considering the client's personal symbols; it is a tribute to their own vision and also, perhaps, one of the small, proper ironies of Southern history that an architecture so deliberately attentive to the dimension of dreams should be, as well, so imaginatively attuned to the region's problematic realities.

