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Scogin Elam and Bray

Mack Scogin, a principal of the Atlanta-based architectural practice Scogin Elam and Bray, and Chairman of the Department of Architecture of the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, gave the thirteenth John Dennys Memorial Lecture at the AA in June 1992.

John Dennys, who trained at the AA, was involved with the School over a period of twenty-seven years, as student, lecturer, member of Council and President. After his death in 1973 a visiting lectureship was established to mark his interest in education.

In the essay which follows, Mark Linder introduces the work of Scogin Elam and Bray.

However ironic it may appear, to admit to being at a loss for words is perhaps the most direct way of introducing the architecture of Scogin Elam and Bray. In an era that will likely be remembered for an extraordinary proliferation of theoretical writing, and a coincident surplus of radical approaches to architectural design, these buildings and their architects are wryly conventional and happily reticent. But such quiescence should not be mistaken as inarticulate or careless. The buildings of Scogin Elam and Bray inhabit a largely overlooked territory of architectural thought which neither sanctifies silence nor insists upon communication. Their work seems to dance in a gap between prevalent theoretical modes. Yet theory is acutely in question here. Operating in a manner vaguely aligned with peculiarly American traditions of philosophy, Scogin Elam and Bray practise what Cornel West has termed an 'evasion' of theory, a 'distinctly American refusal' to adopt prevailing methods and modes of thinking. Instead, their strategies simultaneously exploit and avoid 'the problematic and vocabulary' established in the systems of precursors and contemporaries.[1] Like the non-philosophical philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James, Scogin Elam and Bray display a robust intellectual scepticism, while neither distrusting theory nor formulating expedient, dissimulating vocabularies. Rather than aspiring to comprehensibility or feigning intentions, they draw our attention to absent or latent thoughts which perch at the limits of articulation.

But why should this strategy of evasion be characterized as 'distinctly American'? Numerous examples suggest otherwise. For instance, in the years immediately following the Second World War, two thinkers residing in Britain puzzled over the writings of William James. In an occurrence that can only be described as uncanny, both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Anton Ehrenzweig took an interest in a particular passage of James's by then obsolete *Principles of Psychology*, in which he discusses our inattention to the 'transitive parts' of thought. The troublesome passage occurs in James's famous chapter 'The Stream of Thought': 'Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed-for term.'[2]

Wittgenstein drew upon this part of James's *Principles* in his attempt to give an account of the experience of thinking, and remarks that these thoughtful moments of mental 'vagueness' are not 'experienced' at all, if one understands experience as something manifested in explainable or describable events — writing, speaking, drawing, building. He wants to emphasize the difficulties involved in attempting to reconcile thought and experience, intention and action, or meaning and saying. He maintains that our confidence in theoretical language rests on a mistake: 'We often think as if our thinking were founded on a thought schema: as if we were translating from a more primitive mode of thought into ours.'[3] In other words, our thoughts are remarkably unfounded; therefore, theory and philosophy do not achieve their authority from being based in thought. Wittgenstein seems to think that theory and philosophy are something entirely other than exceptionally articulate modes of thought, and his style in the *Investigations* exemplifies this claim: his most profound thoughts remain puzzlingly vague in spite of the precise form of their articulation.

Ehrenzweig attacks from another direction. He turns to James to support his contention that thinkers are habitually blind — conceptually and visually — to 'evasive inarticulate form elements'.[4] Following James, he insists that our 'tendency to perceive only articulate form [is] a serious epistemological limitation' that proclaims an absence of thought where no recognizable form is exhibited, or anxiously inserts a too definite form into the blurry gap.[5] He further suggests that when we are dumbfounded (unable to articulate a thought) we are not entirely inarticulate. In fact, although 'inarticulate vision is ambiguous' it 'anticipates and comprehends all later attempts at articulation'.[6] As distinct from Wittgenstein, Ehrenzweig believes that theory is a form of thinking, but its initial form ever eludes us.

The complementary insights of Ehrenzweig and Wittgenstein begin to explain the incapacity of critics and theorists to engage easily the work of architects such as Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk, Steven Holl, and Scogin Elam and Bray. Their work displays no explicit theory; no substantive argument or oppositional statements generate, justify or explicate the design decisions. In the architecture of Scogin Elam and Bray the 'wraith of the name' is that which is named 'theory'. Is 'theory' there? Unable to answer that question definitely, can we reasonably 'call' their thoughtfulness theory? Even as we formulate the first question, we tend to stifle awareness of the evasive thoughts we suspect are there; to resort to name-calling (the *alter ego* of name-dropping), as proposed by the second question, implies a degradation of both 'theory' and 'Scogin Elam and Bray'. Just as James jests that 'a person whose visual imagination is strong finds it hard to understand how those who are without the faculty can think at all', those who insist on an articulated theory as a prerequisite of architectural thinking will inevitably overlook liminal thoughts and dismiss many intriguing thinkers.[7]

In projects like the Chmar House and the Morrow Library, the apparently excessive form-making, or the idiosyncrasies of idiom and detail, might be interpreted in a positive light, as a displacement of more recognizable, and apparently simpler, strategies. To fixate on the perspicuous elements is to neglect the more subtle manners of the buildings. They are not outwardly articulate, but rather adhere intimately to the conditions of the site. Both projects avoid bald assertion. Instead of seeking coherence, comprehensibility or stability, they do something funny, even uncanny. The cantilevers at Chmar or the ungainly scuppers at Morrow, the pockmarked door of the house or the children's handprints in the stucco of the library, are strangely ordinary evasions. To apprehend them as thoughts is something like teasing out the idea of a 'distinct pleasure', a task which is no more and no less deftly intellectual than tracing the metaphysics of 'presence', or dwelling upon the immanence of 'place'. Scogin Elam and Bray's architecture involves frustrating, hybrid terms that are at once apprehensive and apprehensible. To convey these architects' version of theoretical practice requires something akin to grasping, and embracing, the ethic of serious fun.

Mark Linder

Notes

1. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1989), pp. 36–7.
2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York, 1890), p. 251.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1953), note 597.
4. Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Psycho-Analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (London, 1953), p. xii.
5. Ehrenzweig, p. 3.
6. Ehrenzweig, p. 19.
7. James, vol. 2, p. 57.

HOUSE CHMAR

The site — two-and-a-half acres of woods — is adjacent to a forest three miles from the heart of Atlanta, Georgia. When a tree had fallen, an opening occurred. The house occupies the position of this tree. It also occupies the attitudes of the people who inhabit it.

The interior spaces enclose and protect, but at the same time they imply extensions into the woods. Particular exterior zones are at one with particular interior zones.

The house is narrow but not limited. It is isolated in the woods, yet at its very heart is the goshinden room, where light and companionship are shared.

A simple wooden structure, the house is clad in stucco and glass, with metal roofing. Very few trees were felled during the construction process, which was completed in 1989.

Architects: Scogin Elam and Bray Architects: Mack Scogin with Merrill Elam and Lloyd Bray (principals-in-charge) and with Susan Desko
Structural Engineers: Pruitt Eberly
General Contractor: Welch Tarkington
Photography: Timothy Hursley / The Arkansas Office
Model Photography: Lloyd Bray
Computer Photography: Susan Desko
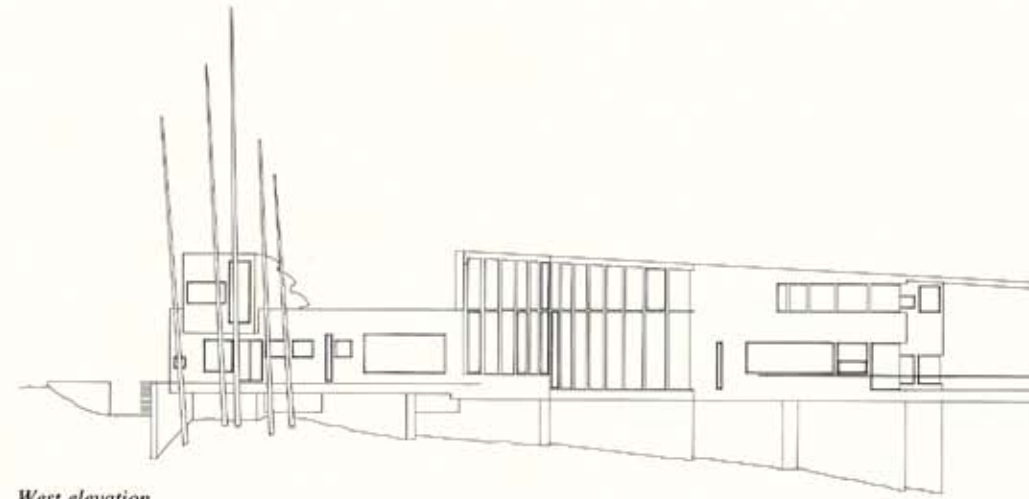
West elevation
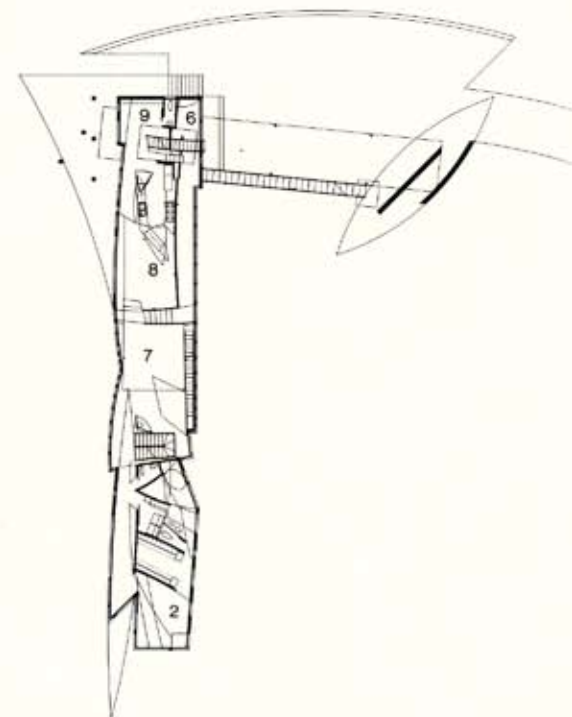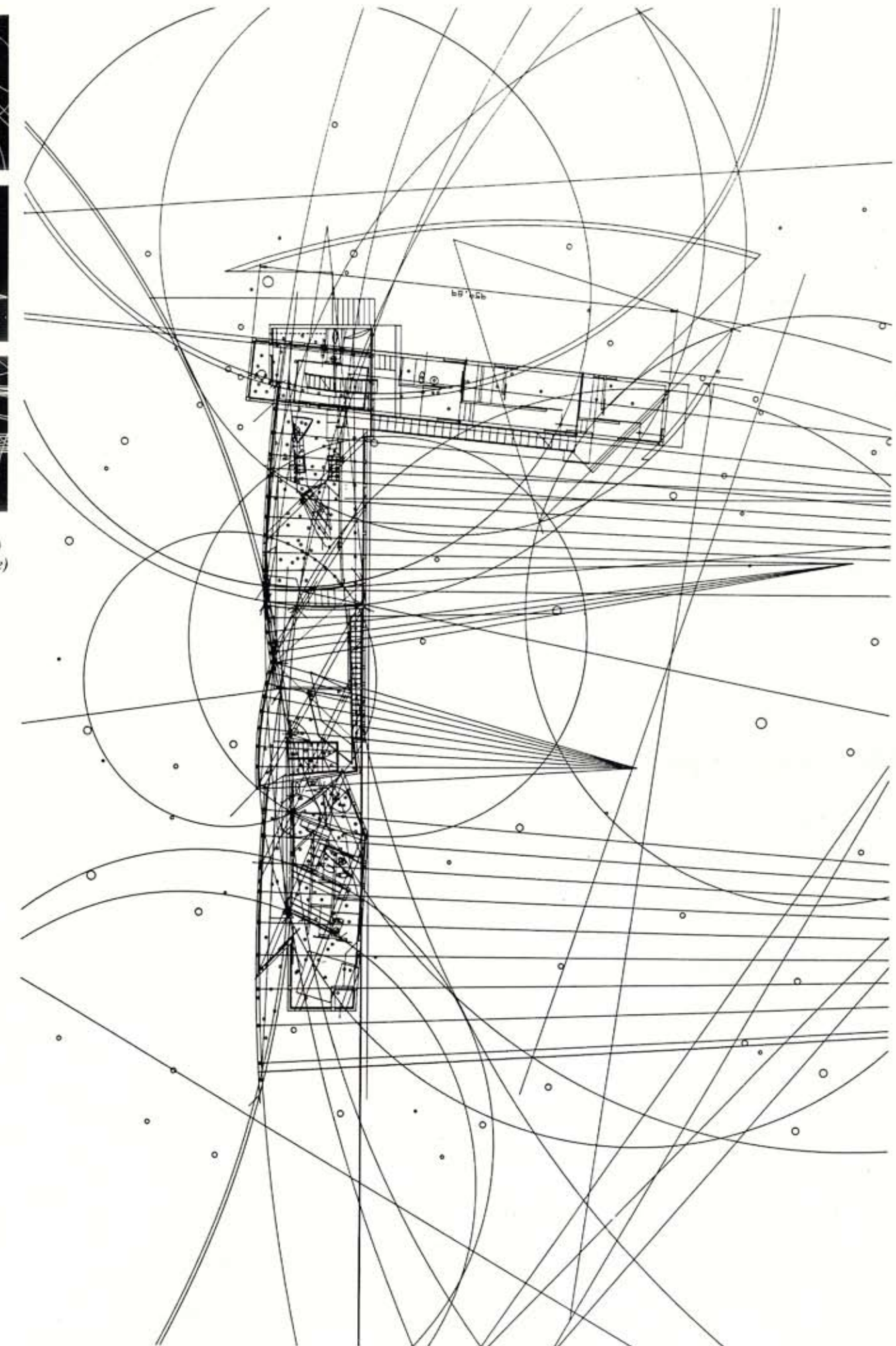
First-floor plan
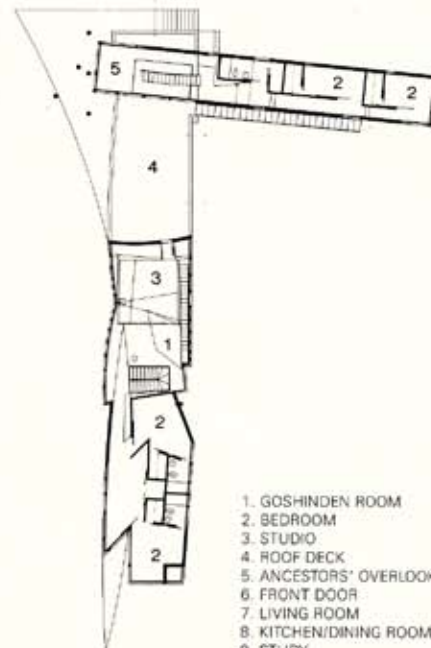
Second-floor plan

1. GOSHINDEN ROOM
2. BEDROOM
3. STUDIO
4. ROOF DECK
5. ANCESTORS' OVERLOOK
6. FRONT DOOR
7. LIVING ROOM
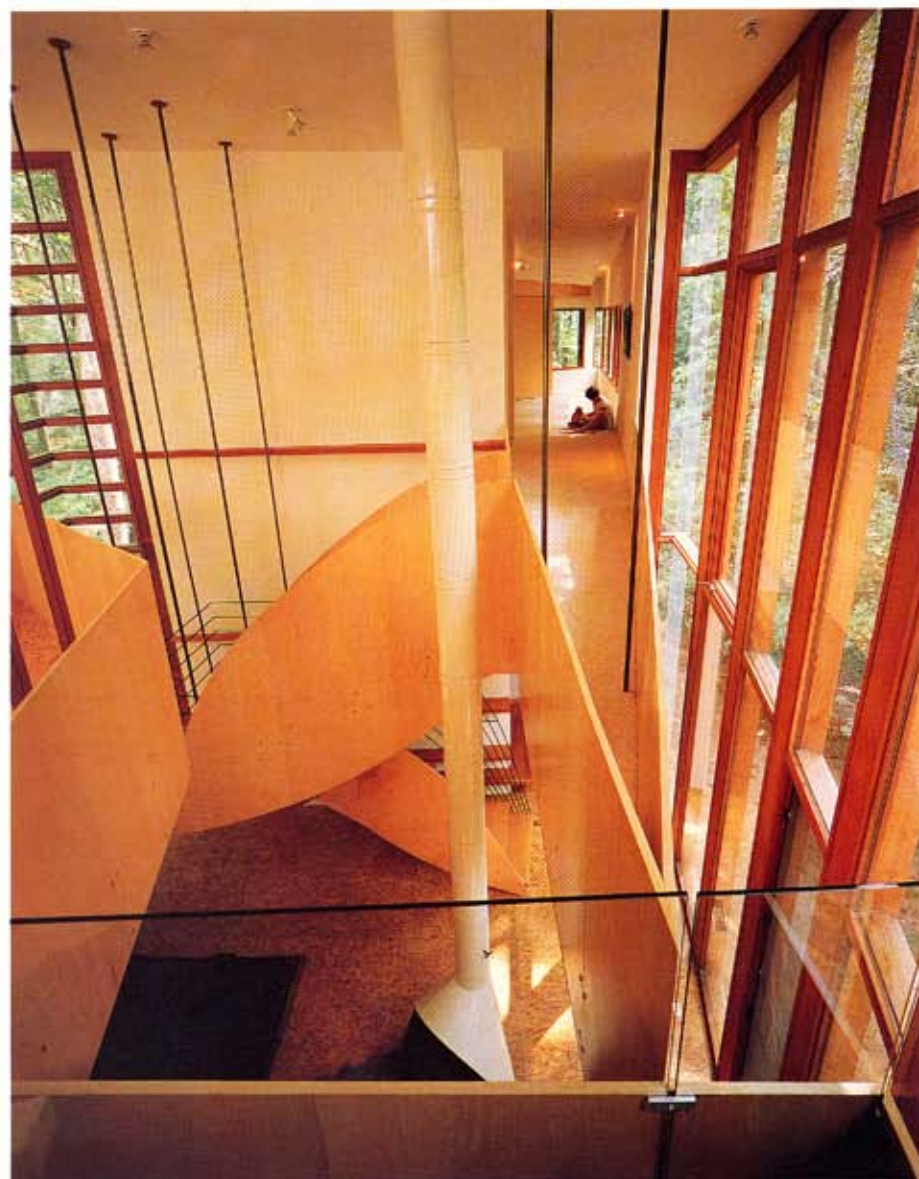8. KITCHEN/DINING ROOM
9. STUDY

Site plan
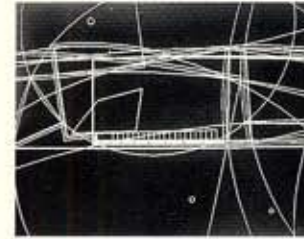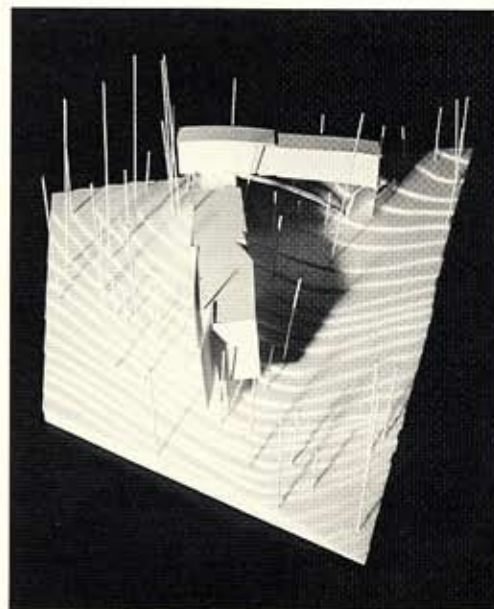
Plan with regulating lines and lines of influence (right) and computer images (above)

CAROL COBB TURNER BRANCH LIBRARY

The Morrow Branch Library, located in Morrow, Georgia, is an institutional loner in a horse pasture bounded by a strip shopping centre, a busy county road, and subdivision houses that face sideways, refusing to acknowledge the road's existence.

The flat one-acre site is filled with yellow-topped bitter-weeds, loblolly pines and june-bug beetles. Its most extraordinary feature is a ceiling of blue sky. The programme of the building and parking consumes the whole area. The best view is upward, and the scheme reflects this. Other influences are more abstract or distant, such as the headquarters library, the county courthouse, the nearby neighbourhoods of Rex and Ellenwood, the cardinal points of the compass. Along with the property lines, the lines of connection with these entities give form to the building.

The building plan is, in effect, a skewed, asymmetrical dog-trot. Off both sides of a dividing breezeway/corridor there are rooms — to the north the public meeting room, lavatories and administrative services, to the south the children's collection and the general collection. Intruding into the corridor is the circulation desk. Along the south property line, just outside the children's and general collections, there is a small garden with a concave area that will hold water and act as a reflecting dish.

A steel and glass tower marks the centre of the site and of the building, and signifies the centre of a new reality for the library. Resting on a simple post-and-beam steel structure, it is a negative central support from which the mushroom-like ceiling/roof forms emerge and rise towards the perimeter.

The exterior walls are of glass and Georgia red-clay-coloured synthetic stucco. The roof is of tire-tread rubber.

Construction was completed in summer of 1991.

Architects: Scogin Elam and Bray Architects: Merrill Elam with Mack Scogin and Lloyd Bray, and with Carlos Tardio, Richard Ashworth, Julie Sanford, Jeff Atwood, Susan Desko, Criss Mills
Structural Engineers: Pruitt Eberly
General Contractor: Lusk & Associates
Photography: Timothy Hursley / The Arkansas Office
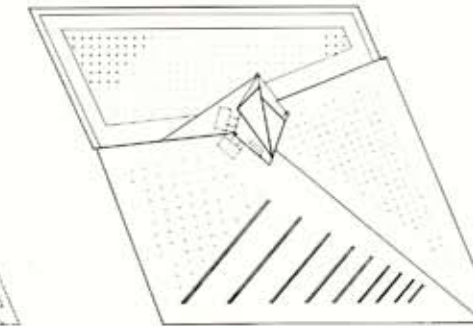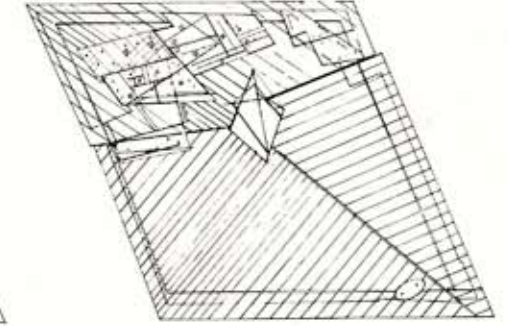*Model Photography:* Lloyd Bray
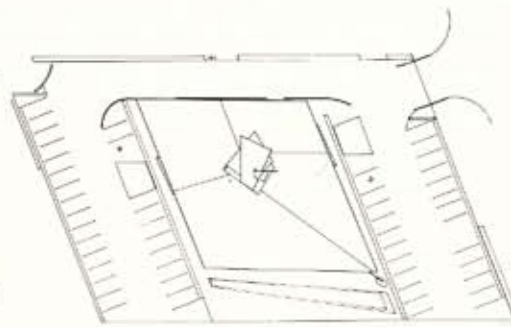
Site plan
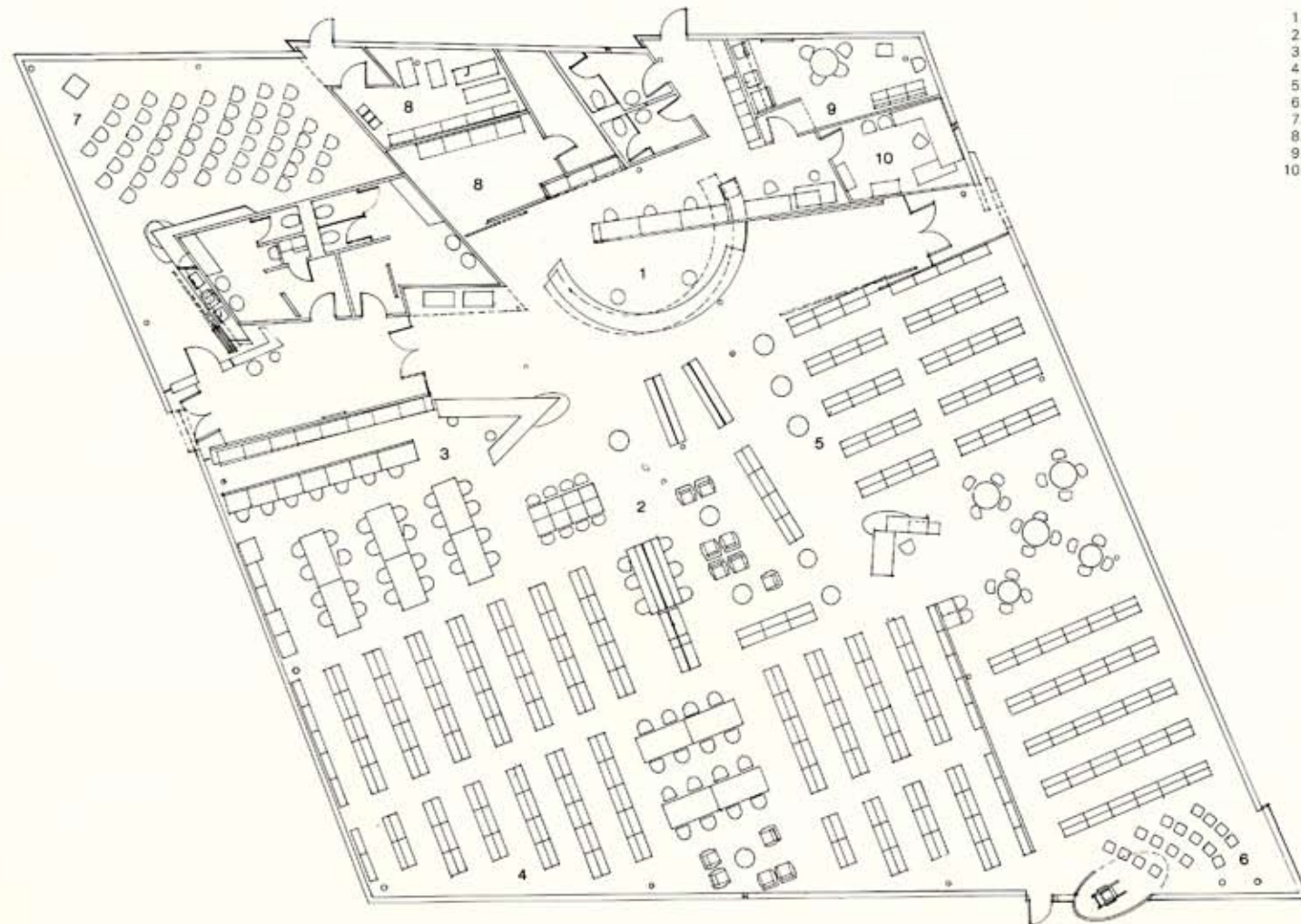
1. CIRCULATION DESK
2. PERIODICALS
3. REFERENCE
4. ADULT COLLECTION
5. CHILDREN'S COLLECTION
6. STORY AREA
7. PUBLIC MEETING ROOM
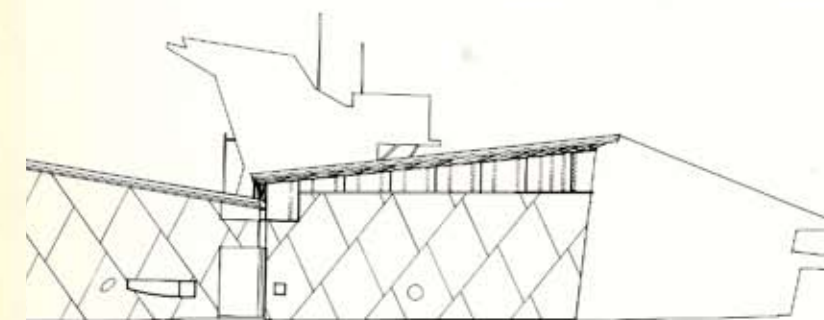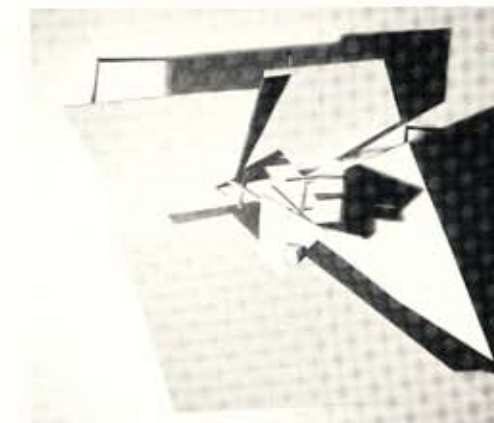8. STORAGE
9. STAFF BREAKDOWN
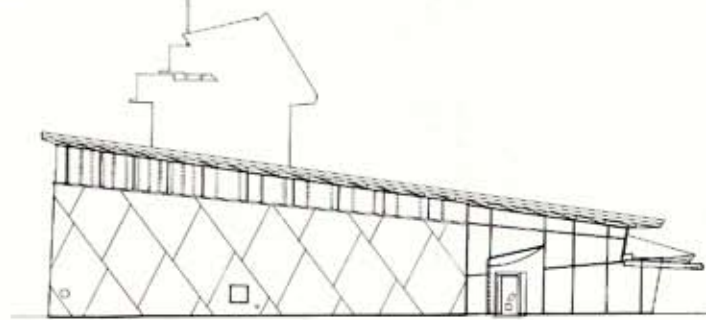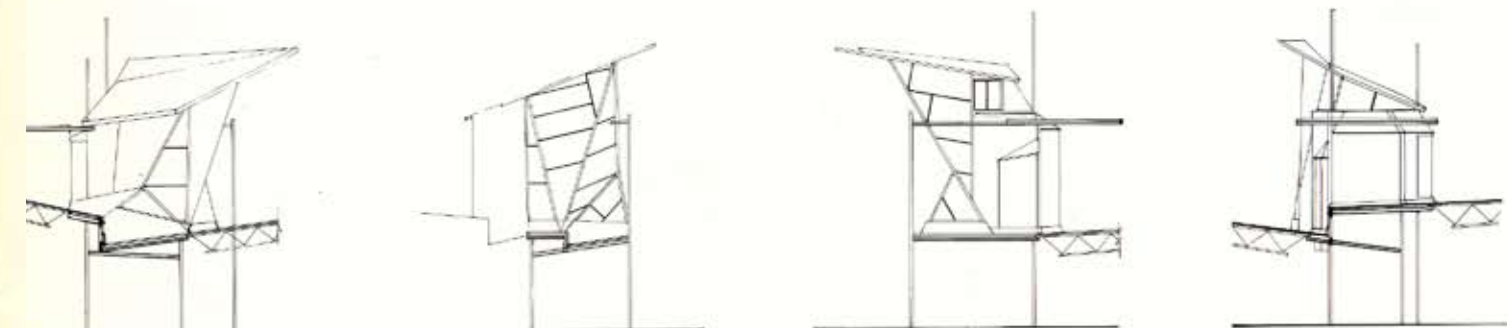10. LIBRARIAN'S OFFICE
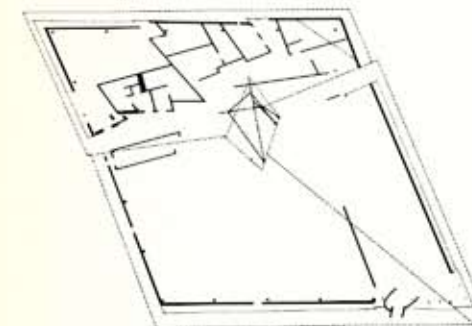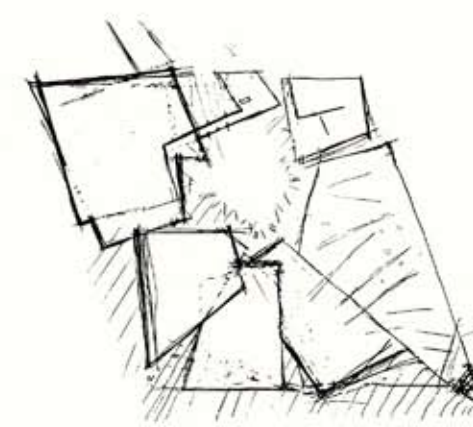
Floor plan

Roof plan with skylights

Reflected ceiling plan

... evation

South elevation

... wer elevations