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Volume 7 Article 9

1-1-1985

Consciousness, Temporality and Possiblity: Working Away from the Low Mimetic

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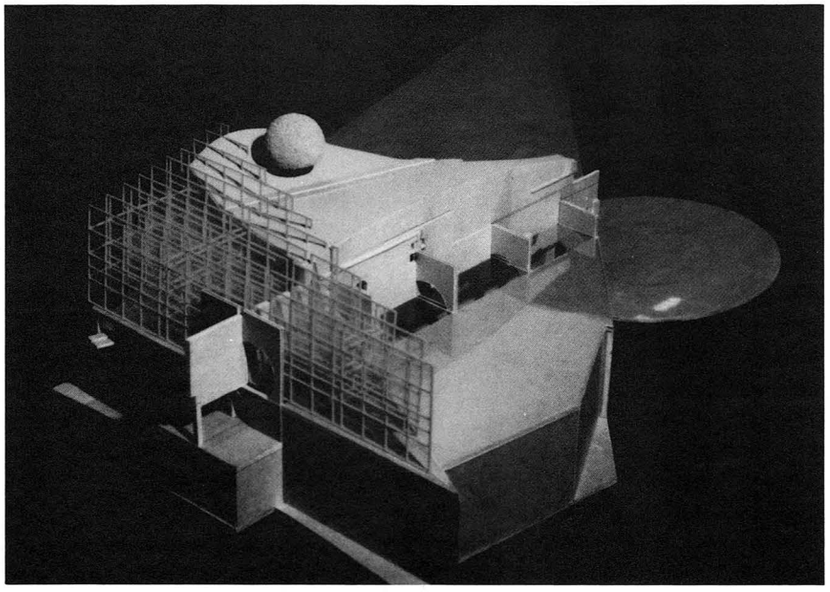
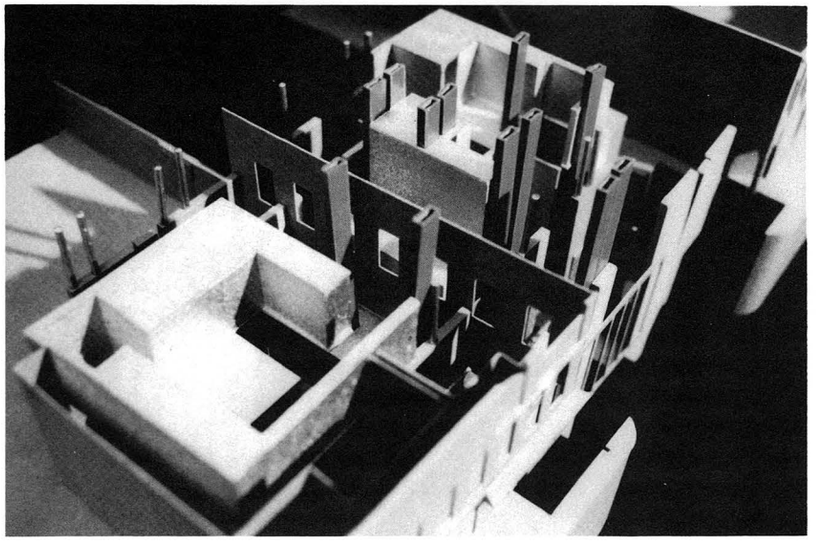
The world in which a work of architecture is created in perishes at the instant of its creation. Architecture can exist within this potentially debilitating paradox only if its generative process (the divine *fiat*) is inclusive of the very movement by which the making of architecture becomes architecture. If we equate this process to a form of consciousness, then it must become, as Heidegger states, "temporalized." We can no longer arrest architecture at each present and define it as "the sum of what (it) has". The nature of architectural process as consciousness implies, on the contrary, that architecture also be allowed to exist in the future. We can understand what architecture is not only through what it has been, but will be. Architecture is determined in its present being by its own possibilities.

A possible heuristic for activating these possibilities is to address the object in architecture no longer as an object but as a process; rather than the process creating the object, the process actualizes the object. It is important to note here that this heuristic does not deny the inevitable physical and material reality of architecture. The attempt, rather, is to signify an object that is always retreating from its own objectification, and in this self-consumption is somehow drawing closer to a higher process for making architecture. This is similar, I think, to Heidegger's "silent force of the possible." It was the sense that this force was missing in my own work that provoked the investigations in two recent projects: a school for the performing arts in Boston's City Hall Plaza (figs. 1, 3-6) and a courthouse in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi (figs. 2, 7-22).



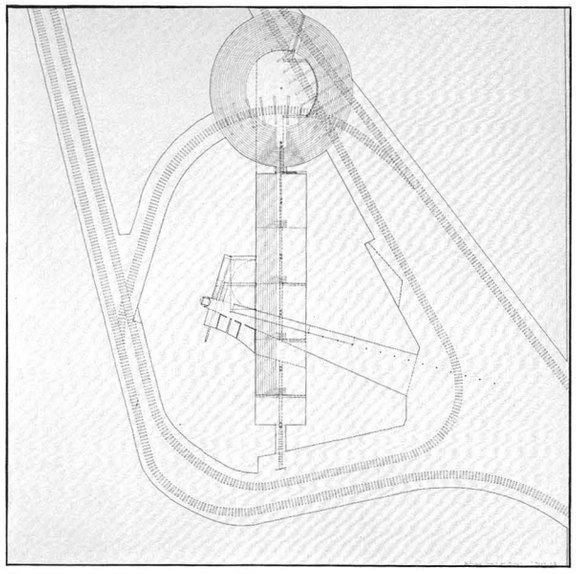
1. School of Performing Arts (from Southwest), Boston City Hall Plaza.



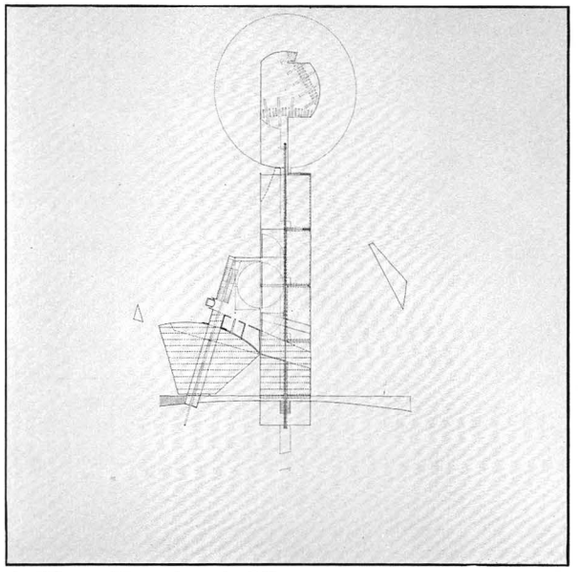
2. Courthouse (from Northeast), Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi.

As my work has turned on this inward invective, I have been inevitably aware of the ever deepening withdrawal from architectural consciousness in the work of my coevals. During the last twenty years architectural academia has taken on a cast that has little use for any realities other than the kind that imitate and reproduce, for what Northrop Frye has called "the low mimetic". Architecture by imitation, bereft of possibilities and explicable only in terms of what it has been, in its affront to consciousness offers a possible foil for moving toward consciousness.

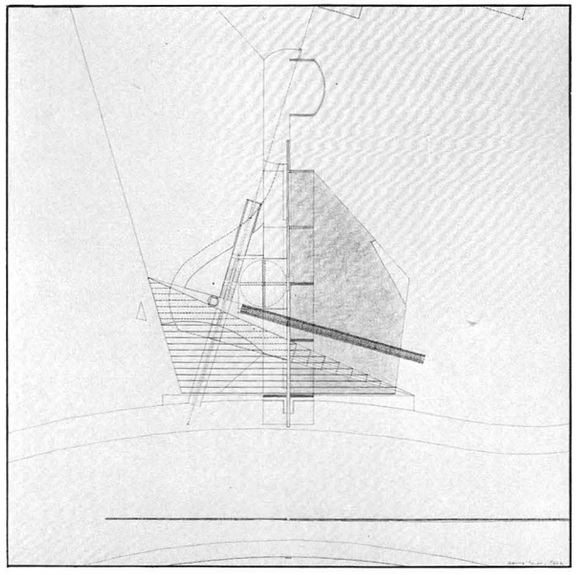
Imitation is a surrender, a belief that architecture can deal only in models of experiential reality — that architects can never signify reality itself and should be under no delusion about fully comprehending and containing actuality. Imitative architects make the mistake of insisting that their models or the categories that these models deal with are the reality. They expect fixed objects and rigid codes to offer a stay against temporality, saving man from the present and condemning him to a futureless past. Imitation is employed either as a barrier against actuality to block it out or as an inscription upon actuality to coerse it in-



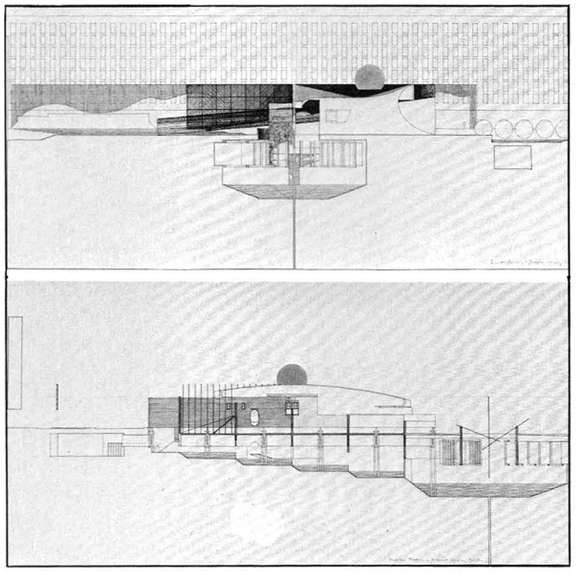
3. Plan — Subway Level.



4. Plan — Department of Drama.



5. Plan — Department of Dance.



6. East Elevation (from Boston City Hall). South Elevation.

to apparent congruence. The processes of the two projects shown here set about to undo those barriers and inscriptions and in the undoing to move toward actuality, temporality, and Heidegger's "force". The first project (the school) was conceived as such an invective, and the second (the courthouse) was conceived as a critique of the first.

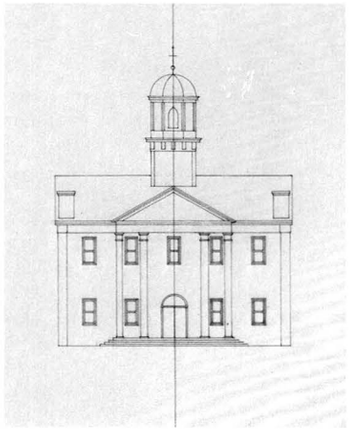
The refutation of the two primary operating principles of imitation was the motivation for the two processes, each process beginning with one of the two principles:

The School: A separation between plastic representation (which implies resemblance) and linguistic reference (which excludes resemblance), and the two systems can neither merge nor intersect;

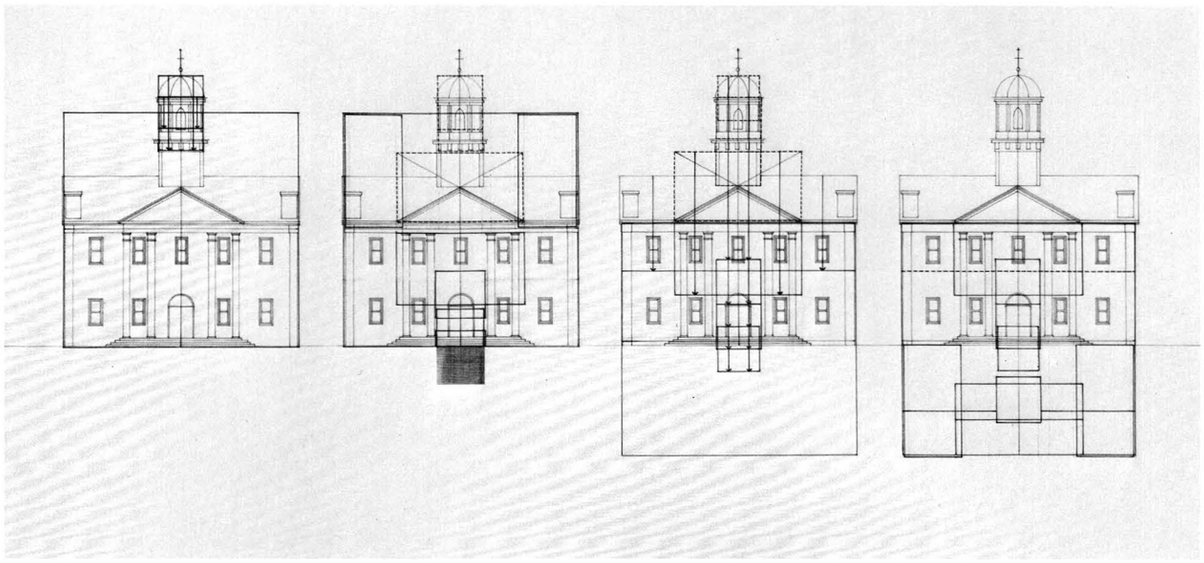
The Courthouse: An equivalence between the fact of resemblance and the affirmation of a representative bond (the image of the historical reference is the reference), and the two cannot be dissociated.

The school attempts to subvert the first principle, in order to find a place where image (the architecture of an earlier Boston) and text (the destruction of that architecture and the nihilism that pervaded the loss) could meet — a vision of things which could not longer be remembered but which could not, nonetheless, be invented. The process effaces the old oppositions of process: to imitate and to signify. Through resemblance, the process guarantees the memory that pure discourse might not be able to do alone. The visible form of referents is brought together by the text, their meeting differing from simple imitation by the dissolution of the essences of a process of slippages, reversals, and transferences: the hill that was pushed to the sea to allow the previous architecture to be sited is seen from one approach, but becomes a building from another approach. The process creates an architectural calligram — a mixed artifact springing at once from discourse, the image evoking an archaeologically ambiguous being.

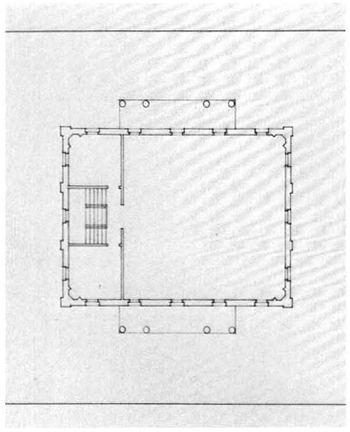
The object escapes. But is the process the object or a mere facilitator of its disappearance?



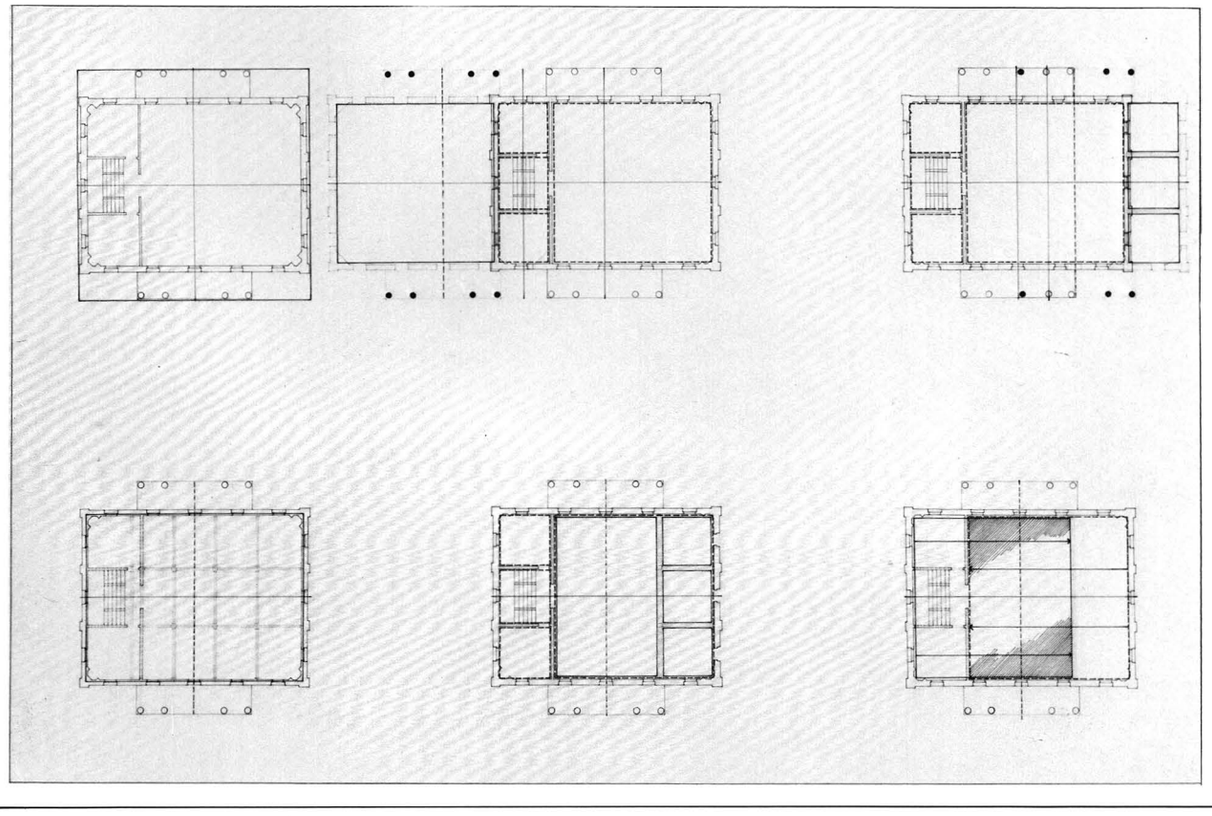
7. Yoknapatawpha County Courthouse (Elevation).



8. Negative Characteristics of North/South Elevations.

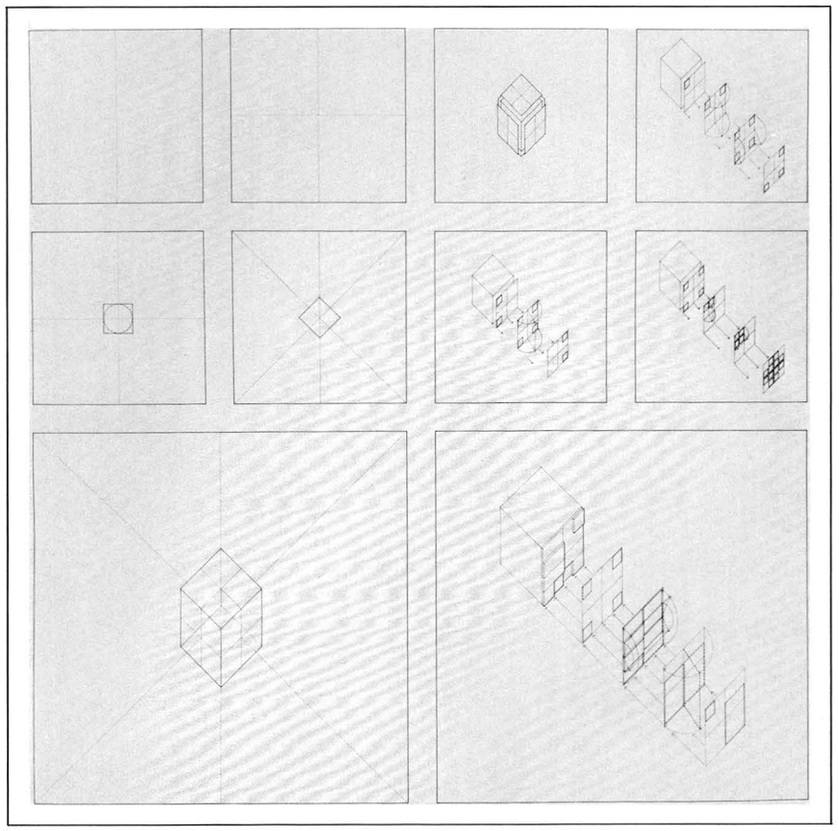


9. Courthouse Plan.

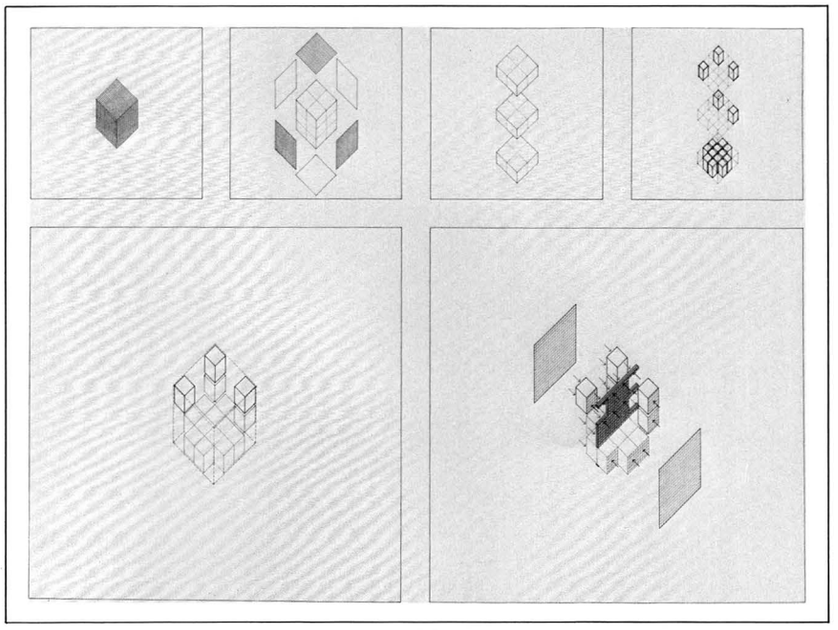


10. Negative Characteristics of Upper Plan.

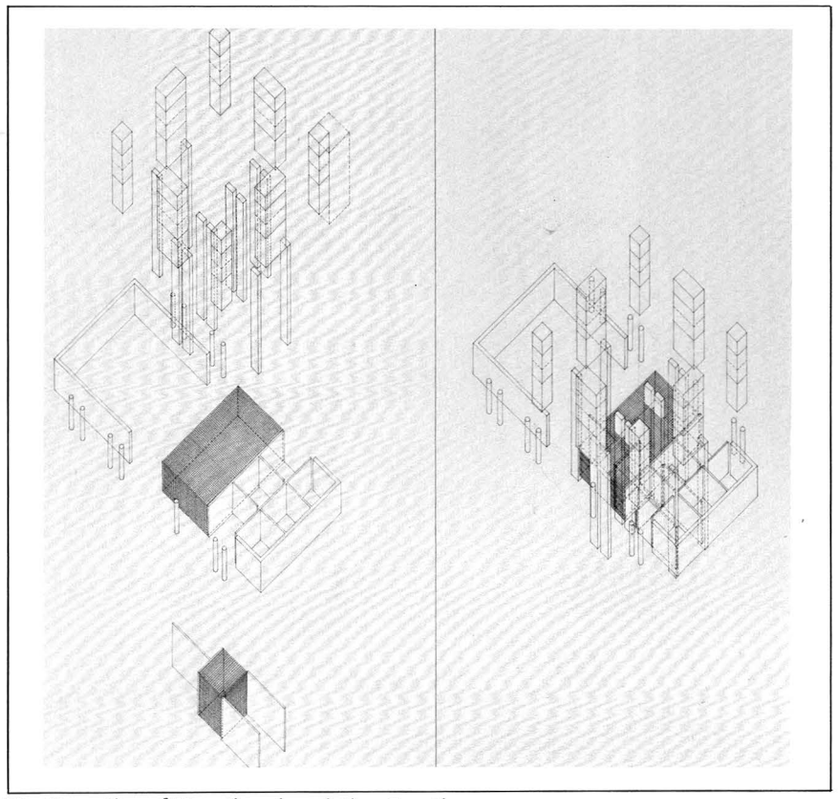
The process for the courthouse confronts and elaborates that question directly through a refutation of the second imitative principle — a simultaneious effacement of resemblance and of the communicative possibilities of the image. Imitation evokes architecture to speak entirely through resemblance, whose affirmation can occur only through visual reference. Imitation excludes linguistics entirely, constituting itself outside of language. If the school project is an attempt to invert or at least scramble an inscription equating resemblance to linguistic congruence, the courthouse project, by denying the bond between imitation and that actuality, seeks to disassemble and analyze the barrier between the static imagery of the mimetic and the actuality of life as motion. After identifying negative compositional characteristics of the closed, limited constructs of an existing neoclassical courthouse and its antecendents (figs. 11-12), the characteristics in line and number are multiplied through a structural narrative of the building's own history (figs. 14-15). An open ended system of ordering inexplicable



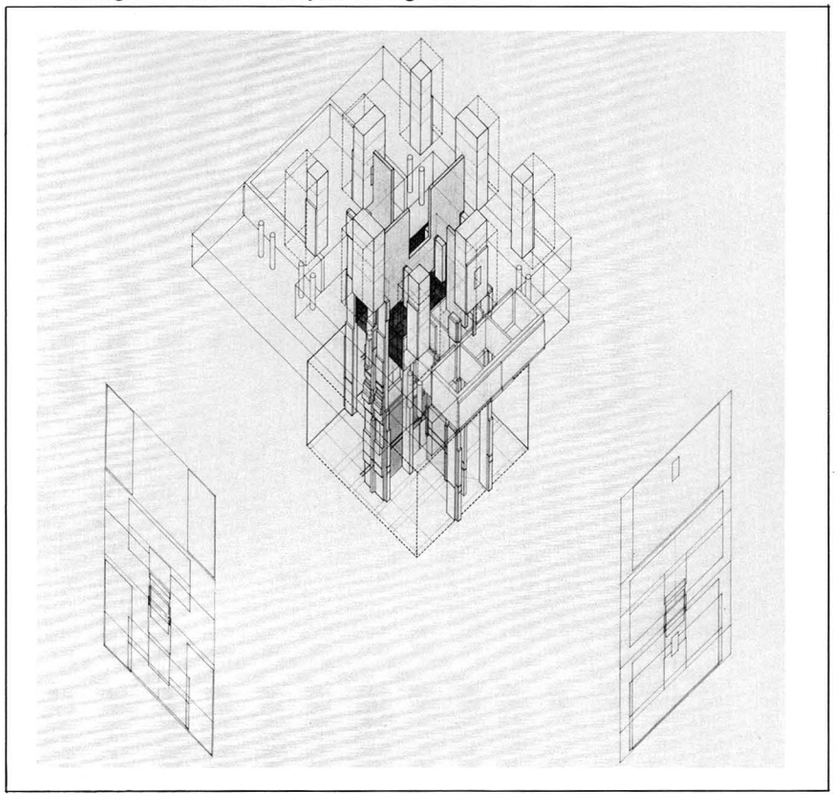
11. Existing Courthouse: Negatives of the Ideal.



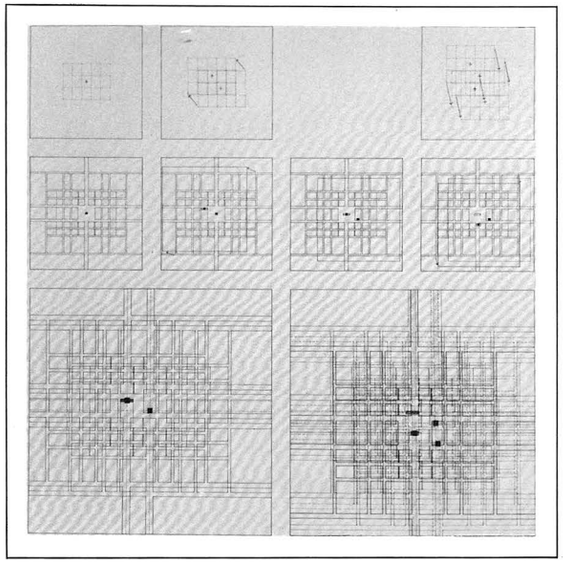
12. Existing Courthouse: Analysis of Negatives.



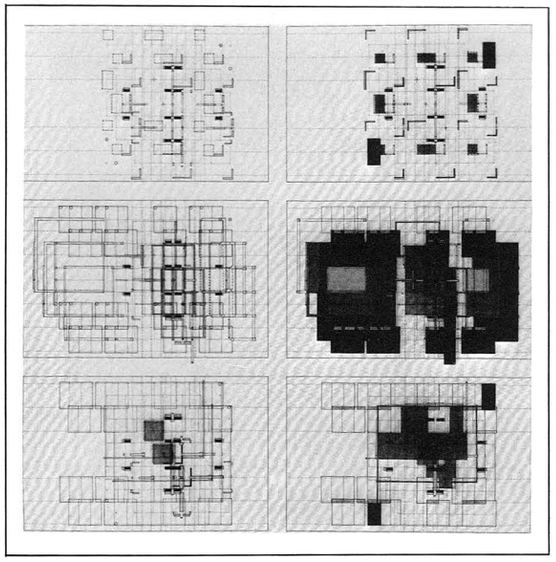
13. Narrative of Negatives in existing Courthouse.



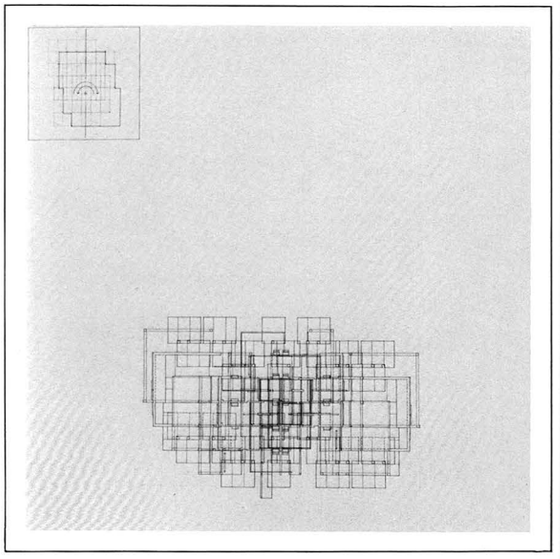
14. The Non-Courthouse.



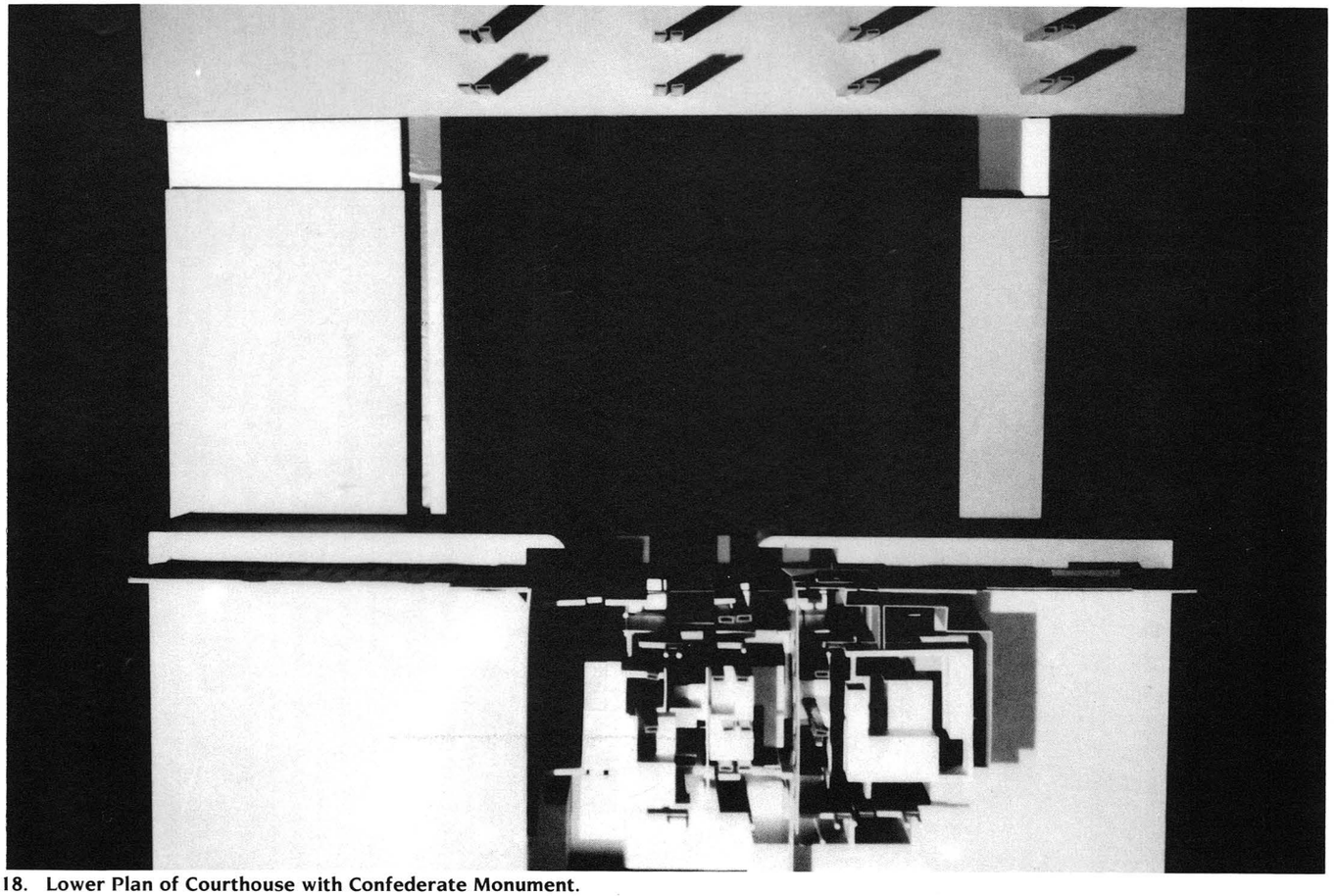
15. Courthouse/Town Analogies: First and Second Detachment.



16. Plans of Courthouse in Second Displacement.

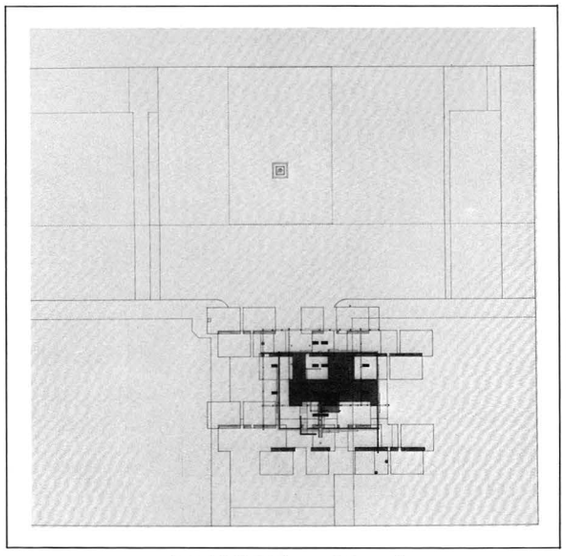


17. Diagrams of Third (Current) Displacement of Middle Level of Courthouse.

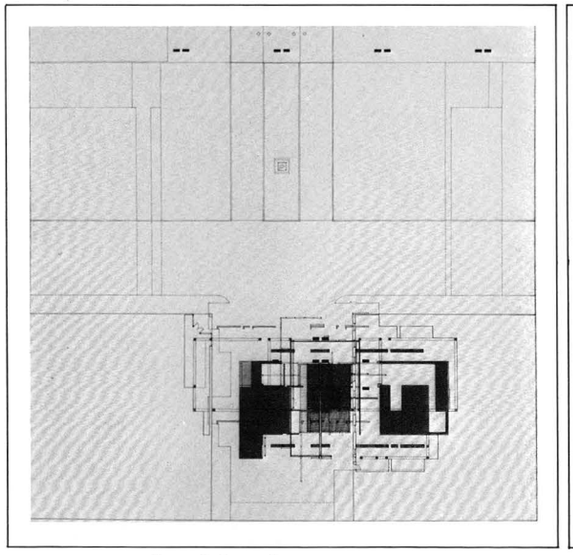


18. Lower Plan of Courthouse with Confederate Monument.

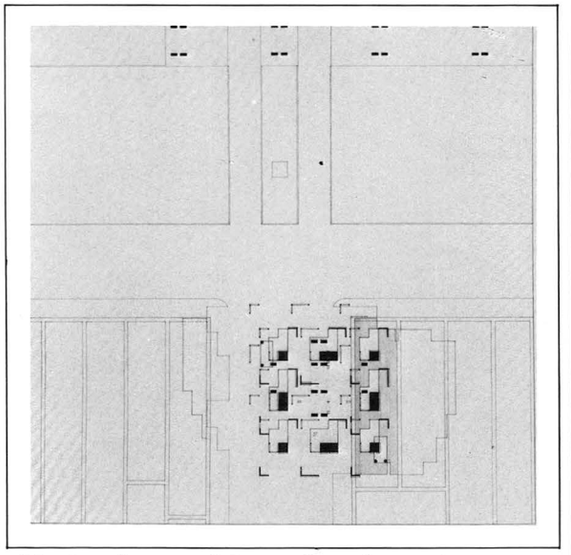
other than in its own terms would remain (fig. 16). By 'writing' this history, through a matrix of architectural structure made analagous to the structure of the town through which the courthouse in its various periods moved, the text is revealed (fig. 17). Hierarchy is suppressed between building and context; thus, while the relocation of the building in the town square signals a corresponding internal movement, internal changes allow the building to 'track' through the matrix and to separate it forever from any one locus (figs. 18-22). Image and reference become dissociated through a process that anticipates the history of the courthouse and also, the next courthouse, to the extent that the process resembles time.



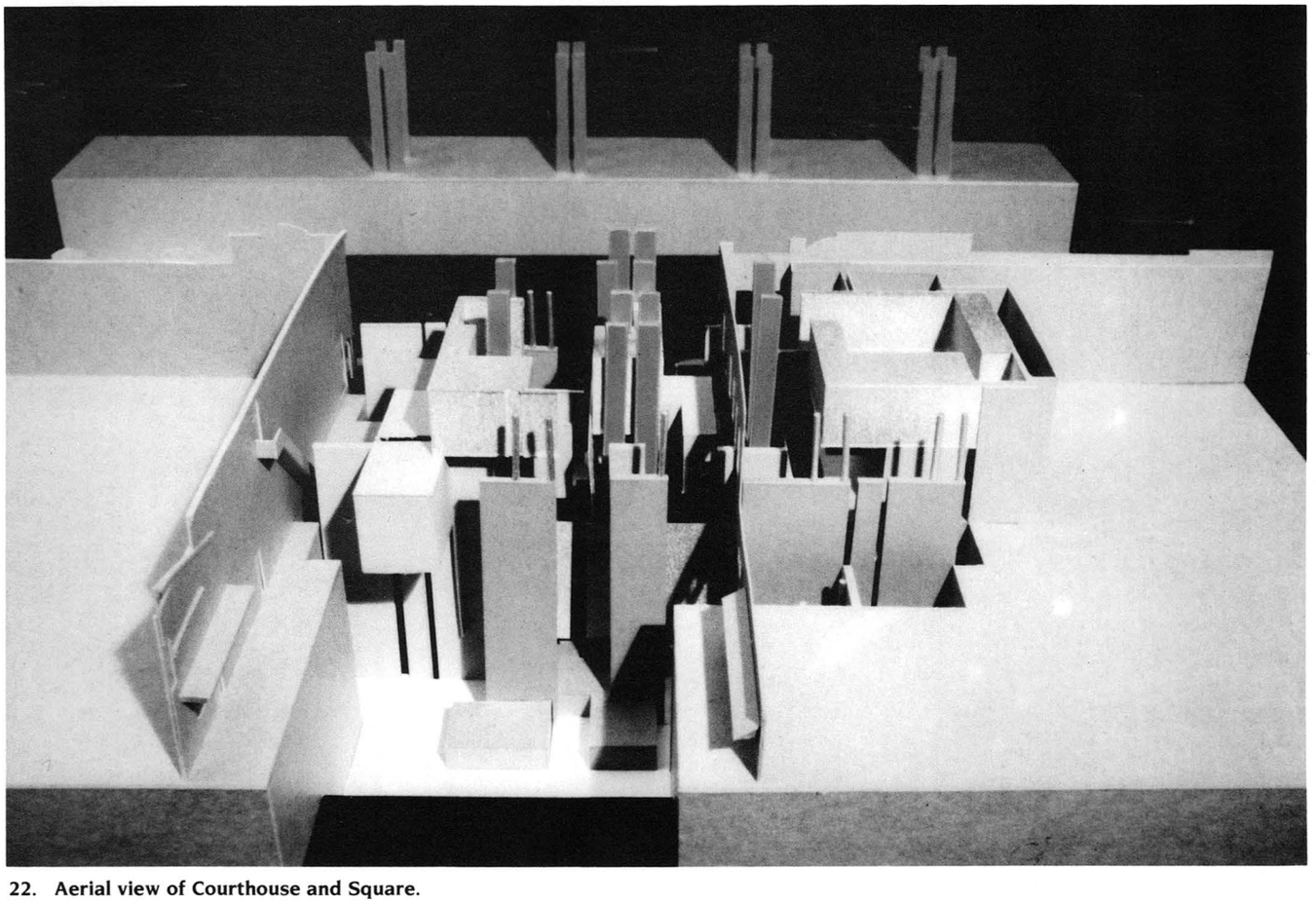
19. Street Level (Middle) Plan of Courthouse



20. Upper Plan of Courthouse.



21. Courthouse and Square from the South.



22. Aerial view of Courthouse and Square.

Architecture as consciousness cannot exist through imitations and reproductions. The hill is gone in Boston, in rural Mississippi neoclassicism portrays nothing. The life which imitative architects seek to resurrect in their well-intended contrivances is literally meaningless and dead. Rene Margritte called for consciousness to actuality, noting that "only thought can resemble. It resembles by being what the world offers it." What the world offers cannot be reduce to frames of reference totally autonomous from reality. Architecture approaches poetry not when disposed to submissive imitations but when encouraged to show its many sides.