

1-1-1993

Notes re: constitution

Wes Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/oz>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Jones, Wes (1993) "Notes re: constitution," *Oz*: Vol. 15. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1241>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Oz* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Notes re: constitution

Wes Jones

Form is truly bounded only by the limits of dimension. Why do we invent so narrowly from this infinitude?

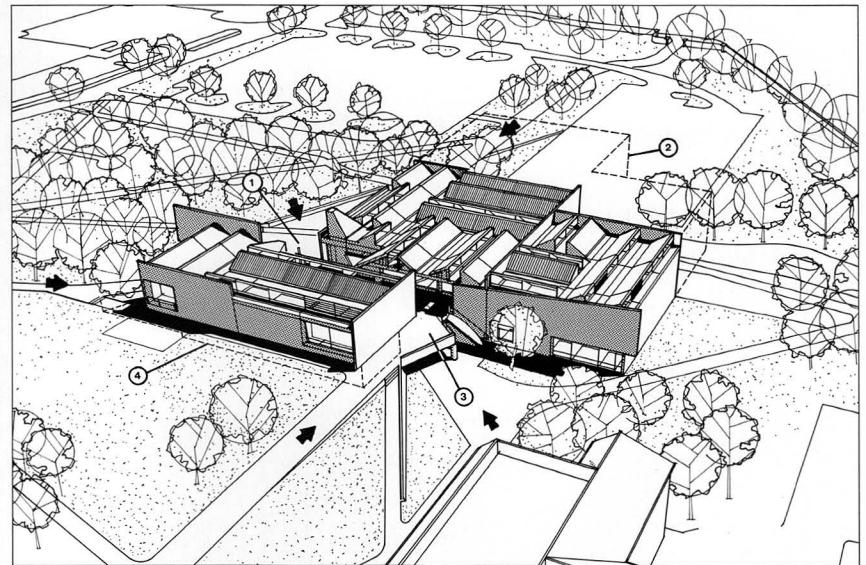
We avoid those forms which, in their alien-ness, point to an infinitude of possibility that contrasts so with our own “limited” condition. They are the un-familiar which witness our mortality. We also avoid those (other) forms which, in their indifference, reflect the infinitude of sameness that too strongly limits our own condition. They are the too familiar which make our mortality interminable. We “are” on the edge between these two—this is where we like our form. Apart from some voyeuristic intrigue which does not sustain us, we are really only interested in what we can know, what we might already suspect, what is an extension of ourselves. It is only here at this edge that we may “find” meaning. Though meaning depends on the difference which it crosses, it can only reach the “other side” if there is another side, and it is somehow not. In this sense the alien is interesting only for the critical contrast it provides which highlights the mechanism of meaning and its necessary constraints. In fact, this constrained world of expectation can be seen as an external mapping of our selves, a record of the inhibitions that define us as what we may know—and as other than the other we fear.

This is the context in which the idea of constitution has the greatest effect: “constitution” is ultimately the estab-

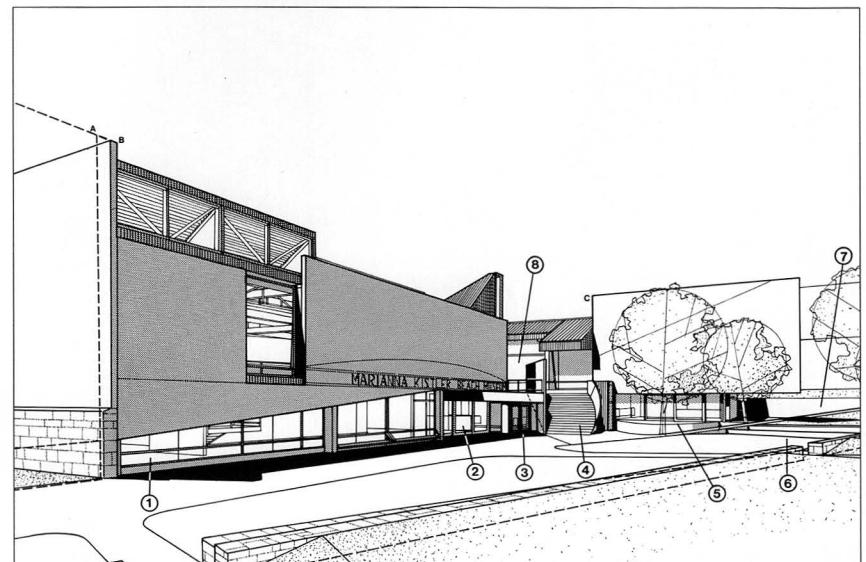
lishment of a bulwark of constraint against otherness. It sets out the frontiers of meaning, it provides difference with a certain resolution. To constitute is to create, out and away from limitless possibility, a position which marginalizes and then eliminates real otherness; to constitute is to set up and maintain a world, here, despite the other, there.

A call for re-constitution suggests that the constraining limits are wearing out and that otherness is seeping through. To some this possibility is to be celebrated as a means to greater freedom. They seek only (de-con)stitution. Others see this as anarchy and bemoan the loss of meaning in the world, proposing re-constitution. Still others mourn this loss, but distrust attempts to rehydrate versions of the original and prefer to imagine that a new constitution could be written.

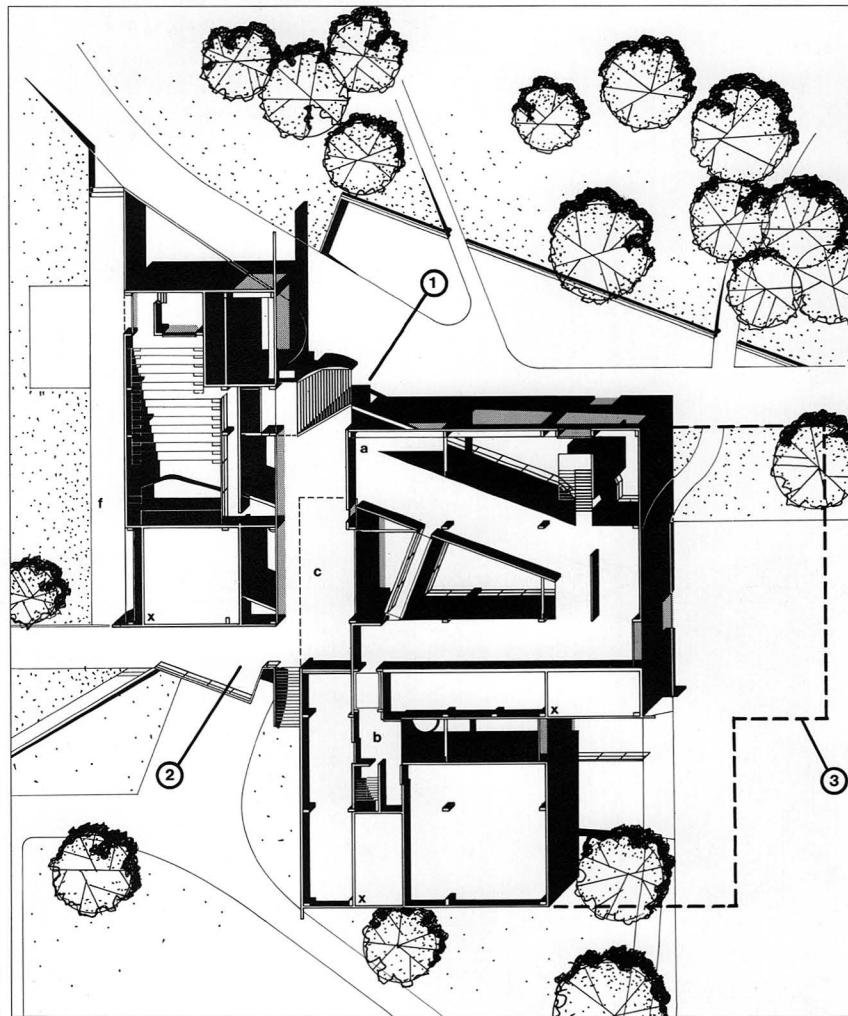
By setting up and maintaining a distinct, knowable world the constitutional act provides the comfort and certainty of familiarity. The constitutional act carries, or manufactures, a sense of inevitability. We speak of it as natural. It gives us conviction about the order of things that might have given rise to it. The reference to naturalness is not accidental or casual. The “naturalness” of that act is the sign of its connection to the ultimate authority, nature. Ironically, of course, nature is itself the other. It is the entire reservoir of possibility. Yet, it becomes foundational because it must:



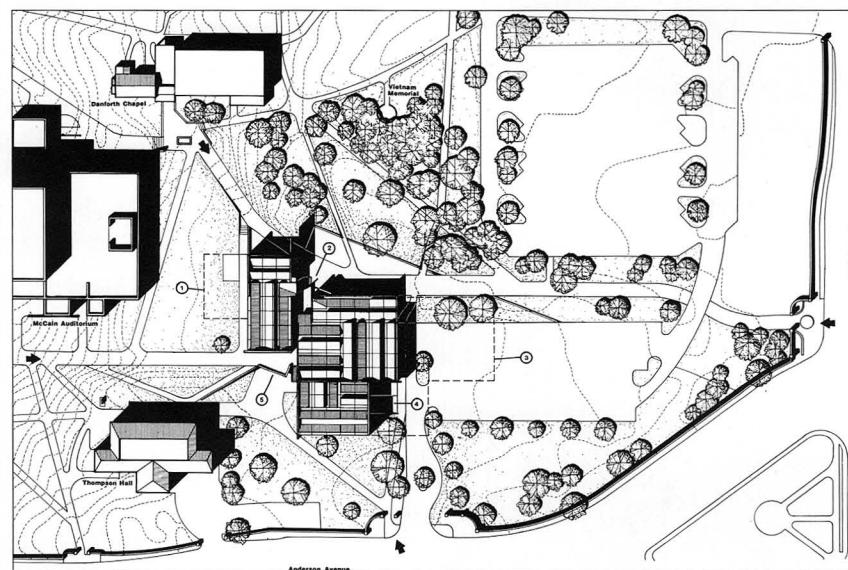
Mariana Kistler Beach Museum Proposal, Kansas State University



Entry



First Floor Plan



Site Plan

unlike everything else to which possibility, Nature could not be otherwise. It simply is what is. It always provides a backstop to meaning, an answer to difference. In a final desperate act to defeat otherness we give ourselves over to this larger inevitability, Nature. We find comfort in this inevitability; it is our only recourse to certainty. Architecture in particular has followed this principle and drawn its form from this source—since ultimately it is the only source. The constitutional act particularizes this general inevitability, giving it a human face.

As an assurance of “uniqueness,” and “priority,” inevitability gives value to originality. The idea of Origin is the means by which we approximate Nature’s inevitability. Nature is first of all: prior to all meaning. Priority confers legitimacy to the constitutional activity which generates first meaning, rendering that meaning inevitable. When originality is established, inevitability follows; when the inevitability is sensed, origin is expected. Yet, to “set-up or establish” supposes “in the first place” a prior lack. If the authority of this establishment depends on its irreducibility, then awareness of this former lack only serves to undermine the inevitability of that authority. Those who celebrate de-constitution revel in the provisionality of this initial establishment, and its axiomatic nature.

The idea of the axiom answers the dilemma of beginning: if *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, then there must already be a something with which to begin. The axiomatic beginning is found in “self-evidence”: the chain of reduction that arrives at the axiom compels the axiom to be the limit, and thus the beginning, because it hasn’t the perspective to question the questioning—leaving the axiom as so basic within the system that it must be “beyond proof.” The standard of proof, legislated by the pre-existing system that the axiom is created to found,

thus negatively defines its relationship to its most basic element. From the provisional origin then proceeds a post-rationalized evolution which miraculously explains the context that legislated the axiom. Given that context, the intention behind these efforts disappears into “nature,” and with it the “post-” which undermines the rationalization by remembering its provisionality. Like the sand in the oyster or Laugier’s primitive hut, the axiom is necessary to begin the process, but, if the process succeeds, it is swallowed during its course and disappears into the inevitability of the product. (*Pamphlet Architecture 12, Building; Machines*)

The axiom intends to convince us that before the beginning is nothing, nothing that need concern us, but the de-constitutionists spoil it to remind us that after the end is forever. If the authority that seems inevitable is shown to be motivated, or if the anchors we depend on for security are shown to be restraints founded on nothing more substantial than whatever first came to mind, then we should be free to invent or dismiss either, forever. While beginning may seem to be as far away from the End as possible, and as free from infinitude as could be imagined—and while an obsession with its clarity would seem to be proof against fear and uncertainty, it is also the beginning which gives to time its sinister direction.

Re-constitution calls into question the absoluteness of time as a datum. When the beginning recedes too far in the memory—perhaps when the end is more palpable—we consider reviving the beginning. Not a new, or different beginning, which can only evolve as a response to otherness, but the same beginning, again, re-hydrated. In an attempt to re-invigorate its “present,” re-constitution risks trivializing the passage of time which otherwise gives to Architecture its most basic role as conservator. It strips the

object of the history that ensnares it and determines the greatest part of its meaning. In *re*-constitution, the clock is *re*-set-up. History is emptied of the relationships and meaning that distinguish it from time.

The call for re-constitution responds to the desire to feel that particular “rightness” that marks artifacts of an authentic constitutional period. The temporal portability of those objects which survive from some such a beginning, confuses our understanding of that datum dividing them from now. We value the surviving artifacts as evidence of that history and presume that the rightness they communicate to us now is what they communicated then in their original, “natural context.” They become fetishes, focusing our longing for the optimism or certainty we feel attends constitutional activity. Eventually they come to substitute for the period they recall, and we attempt to regain those feelings by replicating those objects.

Yet, such work can really have authentic meaning only in its own, no longer extent, context. “The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves, to be sure, that we encounter..., but they themselves are gone by... Henceforth they remain merely such objects.” (M. Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art”). We can neither know for sure whether our present reactions reflect those originally inspired by such objects, nor if the original reactions themselves are what we assume.

To recover is to re-COVER—the original condition which is sought is irretrievably lost in time. The survival of objects, whether through their intrinsic merit, or for their “historical” value, does not in itself enable a passage across time or a resetting of the clock.

In attempting to rekindle the spark of authenticity from the best stuff of even the recent past, we fail to realize that

an authentic constitutional effort today must arise out of its contemporary context: it cannot be *recovered* from any past and be authentic in the present.

Authentic means “genuine.” This suggests a “presentness” or being “in the moment,” yet almost paradoxically, authenticity is only retroactively understood or credited. Because of this presentness the truly authentic act never has the perspective or self-consciousness to be aware of its own authenticity, and certainly not as something to direct its efforts nor can it be concerned about what might constitute the later determination of that authenticity. In this respect, authenticity is innocent of its own historicity. If we covet this authenticity we violate its innocence. Consequently, authenticity more often comes to mind in being questioned: the “genuine” is valued precisely because of its originality—encouraging the imitations

from which it must distinguish itself as genuine. Yet, it is precisely when something is identified as genuine or “authentic” that suspicions are raised. Something celebrated as authentic is almost certainly not, really. It becomes a challenge to the discriminating reader, rather than an assurance.

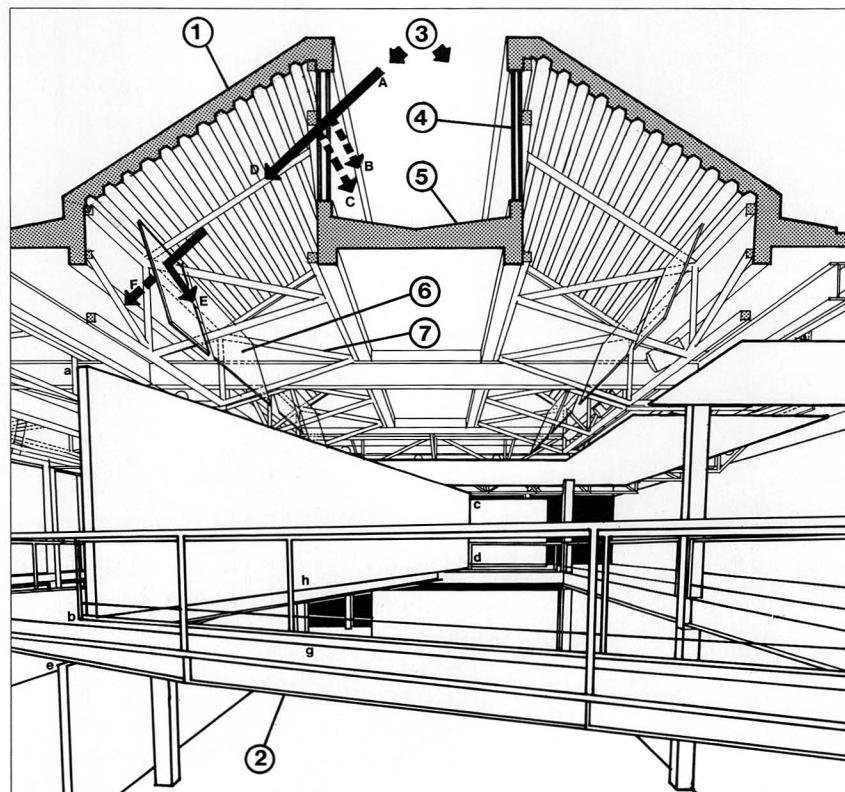
The clear intentionality of constitutional effort would seem to mitigate its opportunities for “authenticity.” Either innocence or inevitability are foreign to either a heroic or critical conception of constitution. Yet it is to periods of constitutional activity that we most often appeal for examples of authenticity—and it is authenticity that is sought in the call for re-constitution.

Between the innocence and timeliness that is retrospectively seen in an authentic object, shines the willfulness which grounds the object in its own time and context. The fervor of this

will ensures a certain innocence, its directedness ensures a certain timeliness. While this prevents the significant translation of this work, itself, to other times, it ensures the continuing emergence of new constitutional acts. This should be cause for hope. It should mean that the coveted sense of rightness can be invented or set-up again. It should mean, then, that we are not completely prisoners of circumstance, that we can again achieve that authenticity, willfully, without having to wait around for it to just happen, or trying to recover or re-animate it from historical artifacts.

The work done during the revolutionary phase of the Modern movement bootstrapped itself into existence as a socially aware, formal reaction to the nostalgia of the nineteenth century. In this sense, it was hardly innocent or timely, defining itself directly in terms of this opposition. It was the product of the first generation to consciously express authenticity’s embarrassment by nostalgia. This awareness, however, did not prevent their participation in the dynamic and in this lies the real innocence and topicality that is only evident in retrospect. Its expressed neo-constitutive program avoided the nostalgic trivialization of time by maintaining the abstraction of any qualities it attempted to recover from its past: it sought ideas, not objects; stories, not forms. Corbu claimed to be re-covering the *clarity* of the past—the *elemental* nature of certain forms (Phileban solids) of Roman architecture, and the “terrible” *refinement* of the Greek—not the imagery itself. The modernist formal preoccupation was unmistakably contemporary.

What today can be authentic? What today might be a source of innocent timeliness? Paradoxically, it is the contemporary (hyper) awareness asking this question which seems to prevent a satisfying answer. The present estrangement for Architecture’s larger public responsibility is both a result of



Section through Gallery Space

this awareness (the false modesty of avoiding the repressiveness of authority) and the chief impediment to its evolution. Today's visions, though they may be adopted generally, as "the fashion," are for the most part *personal*. To again "achieve" authenticity, Architecture's essential publicness must turn "innocence" away from the "personal," and "timeliness" away from narrow topicality. It must again fix what is natural for us and what is *other*. It must show us the edge where authentic meaning can be produced.

A concern for what might be the natural thing to do seems lost today within the greater interest in critique. The gaze is focussed over the edge, outward, rather than along it. Interest in this frontier is taken by and as critique to be a license to doubt, rather than assure. The limits are seen as barriers to *us*, rather than to otherness, and the cry is out to destroy them. The architect is expected to go over the top and "take a position."

Unfortunately, the position so taken demonstrates only the plurality which is anarchitecture. Necessarily a cri-

tique, it generally assumes the unlikelihood of a larger, continuous vision that might be expressed by *Architecture*; instead, by its own example it implies this vision must be posed anew at every site, as a unique, and most often highly personal, statement.

In a narrow sense to constitute is itself to "set-up or establish" a position. And in a still narrower sense Architecture itself is a "position": architecture has been *established* as an area staked out between Art and utility. Objectively only a statement of intent, the label "Architecture" covers the a collection of practices filling the space framed between these two. It intends, however, much more: to constitute whatever (necessarily axiomatic) bulwark of certainty that man can find or declare in the face of Otherness.

To "take a position" regarding this "position," which any critical or nostalgic Architectural statement implies, exposes the axiomatic, "positional" nature of Architecture *itself*, undermining its usefulness as a constitutional presence. The axiomatic reality of the constitutional enterprise re-

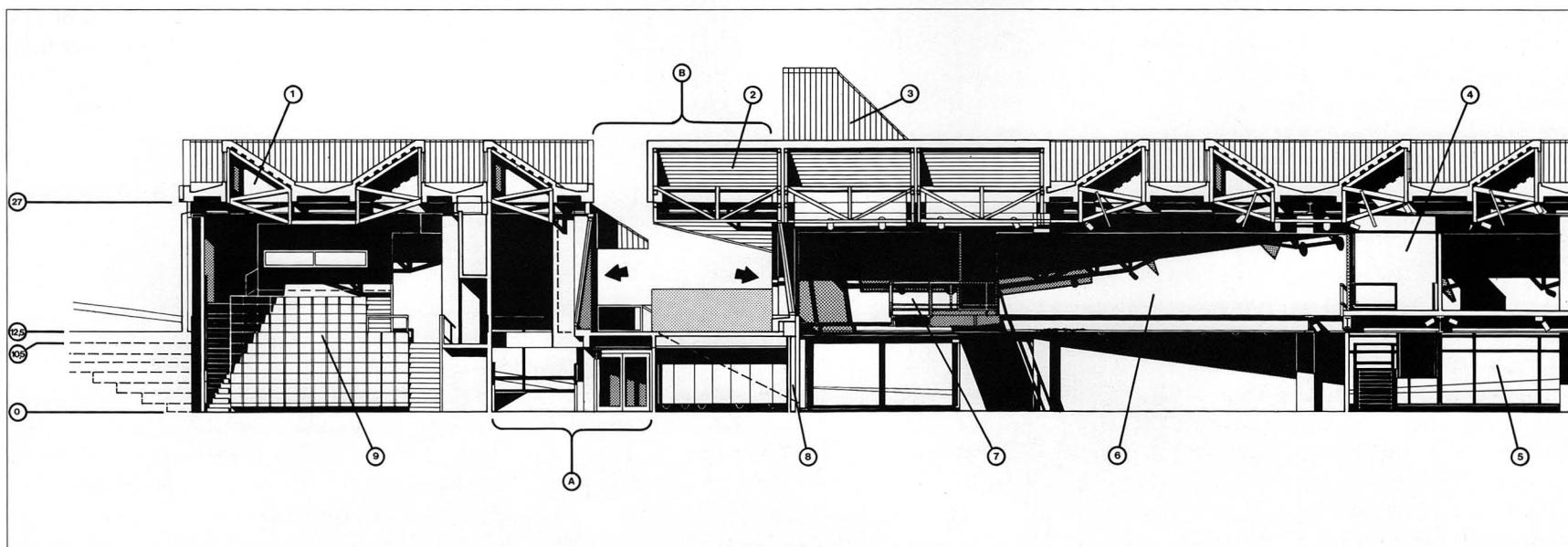
quires that the position become invisible *as* a position—if the system that it builds is to foster any sense of confidence. Neither the nostalgic replication, as unintentional dissimulation, nor the critical pose, as a purposeful un-masking activity, ever recede into the systems they sponsor. Such activity cannot pretend to the sort of universal validity that constitutional efforts assume for themselves. When its genesis is so obviously "questionable," the object must always appear sheepish. Such activity says "look at me"—it asks the viewer to see the building as an expression of the Architect's will. Architecture, on the other hand, says "see yourselves, writ large, in me"—throughout the building it expresses society's will and the nature of things.

This is not to say that Architects cannot be strong willed. When the will is linked to that of the larger public, it becomes magnified: the utopian visions of Le Corbusier and Wright amplified the willfulness of their Architecture without compromising its originality or authorship. Indeed, it was by attending to a larger vision of

society that they were given the drive to find the new forms which forced back the limiting otherness.

Architecture is never truly innocent, otherwise it would be building. It is never timely or it would not endure. Yet, Architecture's proper goal is still authenticity, but understood as the ever-frustrated dream of these, predicted in the present to be read in the future. Because Architecture seeks authenticity, it has often been a site of nostalgia. If Architecture's proper goal is the authentic, the timeliness of our own understanding of this term must include the modesty which realizes that it is achievable only in retrospect.

Illustrated is Holt Hinshaw Jones' competition entry for the Mariana Kistler Beach Art Museum at Kansas State University. The Project team was Tony Duncan, Michael Gough, Jean Young Jones, Wes Jones, and Bob Shepherd.



Longitudinal Section