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A Study Within

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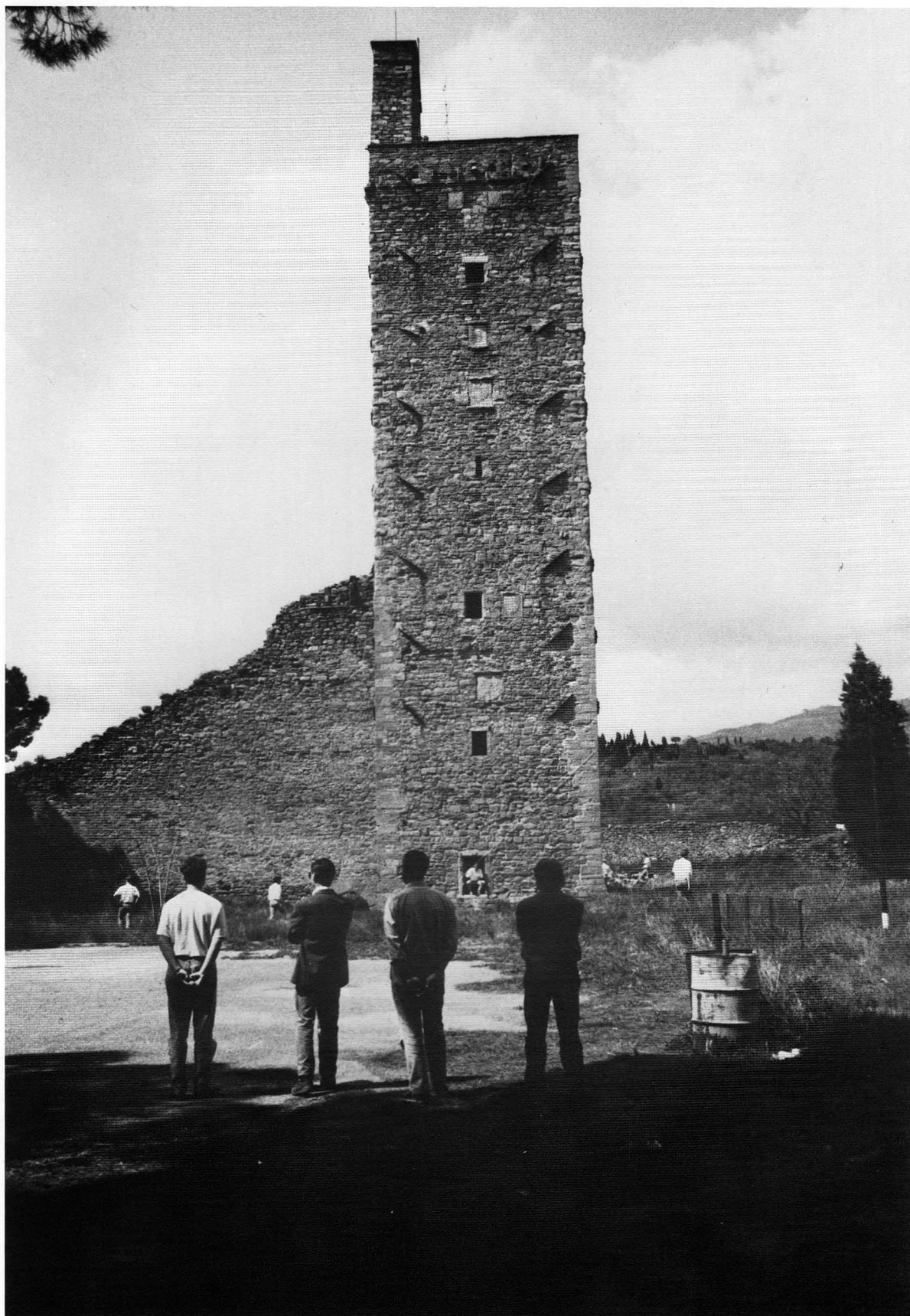


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A Study Within

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Richard Hansen



Castiglion Fiorentino, Italy

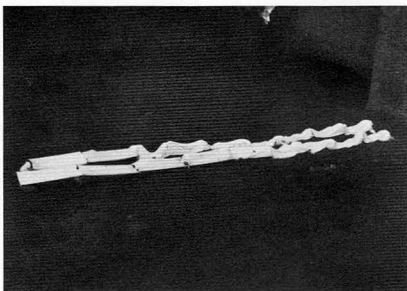
Process

We became designers and archeologists, we touched and tasted texture, and we sketched to record our sensory experiences. Conversations informed our observations, and culture penetrated our existence in Castiglion Fiorentino. Four years of architectural education formed a grid for us to dig as archeologists into the buildings, history, and routines of the community.

Castiglion Fiorentino now tightly encompasses the Cassero, the original city, which contains a tower and a keep enclosed by stone walls. Once securing the homes and commerce of the town, the keep was the final retreat during at-

tack. The Cassero is now vacated; iron gates and its hilltop location exclude it from the community's circulation; the tower is unsafe to climb. The remains of an asphalt-covered basketball court remind us of recent attempts to inhabit the Cassero. Our final project sought proposals for an active engagement of this space.

We proposed community parks, museums of excavations, and ritual grounds; six days before submission, we dismissed three weeks of design work to explore an exercise which would allow us to physically experience our own theories and procedures. Individual bodies would engage the Cassero, not only responding to legends and me-



dieval textures, but also expressing the community in its and our modern state.

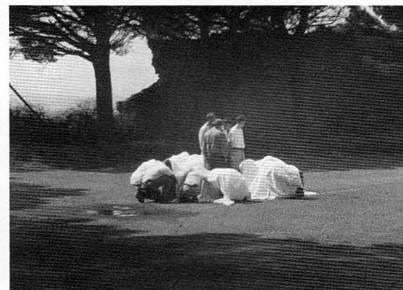
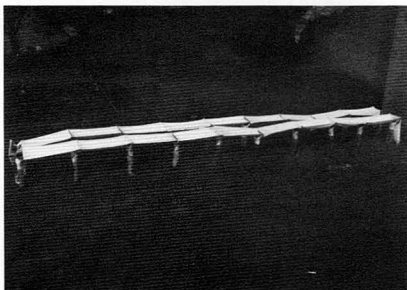
We questioned the need for this experience to exist outside of our minds and our movements. An unbroken roll of buff trace paper recorded each person's theories and background design studies of the Cassero. A video camera collected bits of our dialogue and dance. The grounds of the Cassero staged each student choreographer, and our bodies and sheets were elements of design.

Result

We respected the sacredness of the Cassero, its layers of history literally revealed through the Etruscan ruins in the archeological dig. This pit be-



came a beginning from which we extracted a white sheet. In the morning we broke a still layer of fog, individually we explored through all senses. The sheets became vehicles through which we penetrated the site. The dig, sheets, and toll of the bell initiated the uncovering of our layer in the history of the Cassero.



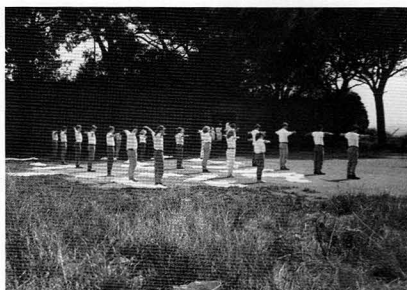
The physical presence of the tower focused not only the movements in our ritual, but also in everyday lives (the tower signalled the approach of our stop when we arrived by train). Throughout our performances the tower became the object of emulation, alignment and meditation. The decaying basketball court, like the Etruscan ruins spoke of yet one more chapter of history in the



Cassero and Castiglion Fiorentino. The geometry of the courts staged several movements; its edges reinforced our rhythm.

Our final act occurred in the keep; historically the final retreat of the citizens of the town, the keep hid the observers and participants from outsiders. The ritual became private and religious; our movement traced the topology of the keep—a mound like an Etruscan tomb pushed the observers to the center high point as we circled, concealing our bodies behind the sheets.

We left the observers and collected at the archeological dig. As the bell tolled, our sheets were returned to the pit, hence concluding our chapter. Unified,



we turned our backs and proceeded to the city. Three professors sought to understand our private emotions and interpretations. Outsiders watched from the perimeters. One video camera recorded our systematic movements and simultaneously led three observers through our procession. Black and white 35 millimeter film recorded before and after images. Each participant owned each movement and its meaning and its emotions. We extracted history from the Cassero and left our impressions in the damp grass.

Text by Ann Shadle, photographs by Ron Kirkham and video documentation by Rough Cut Video.

The performance at the Cassero, which the students from Kansas State University created for our instruction and pleasure, remains a peak of imaginative endeavor in the life of Santa Chiara. We were captured by the unique concept and its timeless import. The presentation served as a catalyst to the recollection and manifestation of architectural space constructed through human dimension. With the transcendence of time and space, we took part in a ritual of communal unification: past with present, culture with culture. Clearly, the students from Kansas reminded us that knowledge is the fruit of inquiry and exploration.

—Paolo Barruchieri

No building is sacred. No ground consecrated. No place hallowed except as transient human actions recurrently make them so. More meaningful, more lasting, more cohesive than the mortar that joins two bricks is that elusive bond that holds so tight just one human spirit to another across limitless fields of space and time.



Our learning, too, knows no limits; it is not bounded by walls. It spills out into halls and along city streets in this town that sits on a narrow hill.

Voices calling from the past will not be silenced; they want to teach us even more. But cynicism and sloth are thrown across our path; neglected iron gates hold fast to discourage our way. unremitting metal chains lock out the present and imprison the past. But still the voices we hear beckon us to transgress.

All at once there stands just one momentary chance to fulfill a communion with the souls of our past; and forgiveness surely will not find a home in the hearts of those who break faith with this fateful reunion. We owe it to the genius of history, more importantly we owe it to ourselves, at the very least to spin another shining thread in that larger gossamer web we call human history no matter how frail it may be. Thus, in the end, yet one more brief but treasured human moment will join with the others before it and will live on nowhere else but in a score or more human hearts.

It is no matter that others are oblivious; what matters is that we know. No matter that others will never fully understand; that we comprehend is enough.

Something special once happened on the Cassero one delicate springtime day. It enlarged forever more the dimensions of this fortified place; it strengthened immeasurably these stolid protective walls.

Sacrilege then is it, not to revere from across respectable distances these architectural antiquities? No, to the contrary, betrayal it is of a sacred covenant we hold so dear with the brethren souls of our past not to enter into this cherished place, an unredeemable sin not to breach these inviolate walls.

—Mick Charney

Structuring a series of movements in response to this powerful place illuminated its nature and added to its history.

—Richard Hansen

