

Images from a silver screen

There has been no single style to represent modern architecture, and the profession now operates without a coherent design discourse. Yet, groups keep emerging, one of the latest being "The Silvers" of Los Angeles.

On April 20 of this year, as an interlude to normal programs in the UCLA School of Architecture, a group of six architects (Frank Dimster, Paul Kennon, Eugene Kupper, Anthony Lumsden, Cesar Pelli, and Thomas Vreeland) presented a series of their projects and completed works. They identified themselves as a group, and called themselves "The Silvers." On May 15 of this year, a show entitled "The Los Angeles 12" opened at the Pacific Design Center. Two of the 6 Silvers were among the 12 (Lumsden and Pelli). It was also reported at the time that the 12 admit they have nothing in common.

It appears that commonality is one of the most perplexing and frustrating issues in recent years; everyone is looking for it, but nobody seems able to supply it. There is no design discourse to which architects can all adhere, and whenever a "group" is announced, the problem only seems to be compounded. Yet, the formation of these groups, whether it be with apparent academic respectability or purely as a public awareness effort, nevertheless informs the central debates concerning an architectural attitude appropriate to our time. The current dilemma only clarifies the fact that, after all, the Modern movement altogether has been diffuse and divergent. The "first principles" have always been elusive, and close examination reveals as many differing groups during the formative years of the so-called Heroic Period as there have been since World War II. The apparent coherency of the International Style has been shown to be a chimera; can we then expect more at a time when the issues are even of greater complexity and uncertainty than in the 1920s?

Given the unlikely emergence of anything resembling a Ten Commandments of Architecture, architects themselves show

a compulsion for drifting toward a consensus. Recent years in the United States have seen serious debate on the nature of architectural theory and criticism, centering around certain "groups." Robert Venturi admittedly broke things open a decade ago by being the first American architect in recent years to write seriously on the theoretical content of architecture. The appearance of his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* coincided with the emergence of other, slightly younger personalities whose interests were similarly oriented and who eventually came to be known as "The New York Five" (or "The Whites"), and "The Grays." And yet the differences between individuals are more often than not the central item of interest.

So why have groups? It would appear that groups still perform a valuable role for all the misleading unity they seem to present. For one thing, they become a medium by which debate can be formed. For another, they catalyze an identity when identity is evasive, even within the work of a single designer, and provide the focus for this debate. And it would seem that continuing debate on architecture will be our only real consensus.

Being serious in Tinseltown

Architecture in Southern California has existed within a context where coherency of any sort was doomed. A wax museum of imported styles, the Greater Los Angeles environment never allowed a single-minded philosophy to develop, let alone flourish. Architectural education and the profession did not evolve into the sort of relationship enjoyed, for example, in Berkeley and the Bay Region.

One thing is true about L.A. You can't be subtle. And if creating the climate for debate on questions of architectural design is what you want, then it is necessary to have—as they call it in Hollywood—"impact." In recent years, the existence of an architecture school at USC, the formation of one at UCLA, and the creation of SCI-ARC (Southern California Institute of Architecture) in Santa Monica have brought together professionals interested in design

education. Many of these people have likewise been instrumental in rejuvenating the professional society itself, to the extent of bringing in nationally prominent jurors for AIA Chapter design awards, producing the lively newsletter *L.A. Architect* (now a year-and-a-half old) and even playing host to visitors such as James Stirling.

These efforts set the stage (thank you, Hollywood) for California's first "group" to step forward. Confronted by the environmental realities of L.A., it's no wonder that they decided on some sort of united front. The City of Angels is a graveyard of noble men—such as Rudolph Schindler—who tried it on their own and achieved, in a broad sense, no impact on the city.

Remembrance of things past

One factor that has yet to be reckoned with in the history of postwar American architecture is the significance of the office of Eero Saarinen in the production of talented designers. It might even be said that, on a percentage basis, the Saarinen office produced *more* capable architects than any school of architecture. It is from here that half of the Silvers emerge: Paul Kennon, Tony Lumsden, and Cesar Pelli. From this experience they went their ways, only to come into contact again in L.A. Kennon went to Houston's Rice University briefly, and then to Caudill Rowlett Scott, where he was charged to form their L.A. office in 1969. Cesar Pelli had gone to L.A. to become director of design at Daniel, Mann, Johnson, & Mendenhall in 1964, and brought Anthony Lumsden in as the assistant director. In 1968, Pelli left to be partner-in-charge of design at Gruen Associates, while Lumsden became a vice president and director of design at DMJM. During the transition, Frank Dimster worked briefly at DMJM, before becoming director of architectural and urban design at William Pereira Associates. By 1975, Dimster had left Pereira and was on his own; Kennon had become president of CRS and was back in Houston. This year it was announced that Pelli would become dean of the school of architecture at Yale, while continuing a relationship with the

Gruen office. Yale was, in fact, already in the scenario, since Eero Saarinen was a Yale graduate. Tim Vreeland is also a Yale graduate and was responsible for bringing Eugene Kupper to UCLA when he took over in 1970. Kupper was at the time one of the recent graduates from the Serge Chermayeff-Shadrach Woods-James Stirling master's class at Yale.

Vreeland brought another idea to Los Angeles—his membership in the old CASE group. While a teacher at the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1960s, Vreeland had been invited to participate in CASE. The brainchild of Peter Eisenman, CASE was a formative discussion group organized to develop the individuals in it through the medium of critical analysis and the presentation of ideas and projects. CASE #7 eventually was published as the monograph *Five Architects*. In any event, it

is unlikely that Vreeland forgot the idea of CASE, and the impact it had.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Vreeland was instrumental in implementing the event "Four Days in May" (P/A July 1974, p.26), when the "Whites" and "Grays" met to present their ideas before a third party, the UCLA school of architecture. A host group was formed under the aegis of Pelli, and the UCLA students responded by dubbing them (whose membership originally included Craig Hodgetts) "The Silvers." Such a quip combined the hue of gray and brilliance of white with the predilection that a majority of the members had for smooth surfaces generally achieved by an unmodulated glass membrane. After a year and a half of conversation with each other, it was decided by the Silvers to hold another symposium, only this time featuring their own work. John

Hejduk, who had not participated in the original event, was invited to attend the two days of actual discussion, as was a panel including James Stirling, Charles Moore, Esther McCoy, David Gebhard, and Charles Jencks. And so, "Four Days in April" came about to ask the question: is there a Silver architecture?

Mainstream art

The corollary question, whether there is really a White or a Gray architecture had not been answered, except as a "no" when pressed on specifics and a "maybe" when dealing with questions such as public exhibitions, publications, and so forth.

One common factor of the White and Gray architects has been the generally small extent of both practice and size of commissions. Their clients, for the projects which the architects chose to present to-

Wells Fargo Bank, Oakland, Calif., Gruen Associates, Cesar Pelli.



The Silvers

gether, have been individuals with tastes compatible with the more esoteric concerns of the designers.

In contrast, the Silvers have operated in the context of large-scale, generally corporate architecture practices (see, for example, DMJM Profile in P/A, June 1972, p.72). Gruen Associates, Pereira, CRS, and DMJM are offices with an extensive and diverse capability to deliver services for a variety of environmental applications. It is *within* this structure that the designers such as Dimster, Kennon, Lumsden, and Pelli chose to develop their personal approaches. As a result, they evolved attitudes which could work with the realities of highly specialized but ever-changing programs of a generally large scale (frequently approaching urban design rather than single-building requirements), put together by teams of specialists and affecting a large number of unknown users. Even Vreeland and Kupper were operating at this scale, although their firms were small. Vreeland had done a fair amount of development architecture, and Kupper worked on jobs involving large numbers of users, both in the office of Frank O. Gehry and then on his own.

One issue is clearly the extent to which the professional *milieu* has conditioned The Silvers' attitudes. This is a question of whether their attitudes are a product of the conditions under which the projects are realized, or whether their attitudes exist separate from these conditions. There are already scale differences in terms of scope of professional practice: Dimster and Kupper are now one-man offices, Vreeland is part of a "small office," Lumsden and Kennon remain with large offices, while Pelli's future directions, particularly now that he will become dean at Yale, will bear watching. In any event, to a certain extent their attitudes exist apart from this variable. Their problem areas are commercial development, corporations or institutional parameters, or clients with basically middle-class lifestyles. Consequently, their art operates essentially from within the mainstream of American practice.

The Silvers, therefore, belong to a larger framework than that of the Whites or Grays. While they all have some sort of academic connections, their purest work is representative of the mainstream, and their ideals are ones to which many architects could agree. It was the mainstream itself—the question of architecture in support of an admitted *status quo*, the role of the architect as a mirror of society rather than a beacon to it, the acceptance of such value systems, and finally the concern with aesthetics reflecting today's technologies—which formed the debate.

Four days in April, and after.

This willingness to be characterized, both programmatically and aesthetically, with the mainstream of professional practice brought out a variety of criticisms from observers, ranging from misgivings about a

lack of particularity reflective of Southern California, to a questioning of the compatibility between corporate America and modern architecture. Neither their critics nor the Silvers answered the issues fully.

The debate had been preceded by a reception for and speech by James Stirling. Stirling, admired more by architects in America than in his own country, led his fans on an excursion through his past projects. He characterized them as having fallen "into only five categories, which is three more than Mies and five more than Gropius," in terms of their formal organization. This was followed by a presentation of his competition entries for new museums in Cologne and Dusseldorf. These stood in jarring contrast to the work presented by the Silvers.

Cesar Pelli noted that "All of our projects are way below the level of people such as Stirling. We have made architecture out of buildings that had no intention of being such, and for clients that weren't looking for architecture." Lumsden replied to a question from UCLA Professor Thomas Hines about Stirling's influence on his process, saying, "The thing that distinguishes him is that he uses characterful forms in juxtaposition. We can't do that, cannot control it." Dimster also commented on this by characterizing one of his projects, the design of a department store prototype, as "the lowest level of design participation—a skin job." Vreeland, whose own background in Philadelphia at Penn and in the office of Louis I. Kahn was admittedly baggage he wanted to shed, outlined his interest "to find a style appropriate to each job—a task made simpler by virtue of practicing here in Los Angeles where no previous images interfere with the Silver screen upon which we project our imagery." Kupper characterized the consensus approach positively as "a diagrammatic, built form analogous to a landscape or cityscape" where "aesthetic and functional attributes come about through a reciprocity of possible intentions, rather than being unilaterally announced by the form of the building."

Finally, Kennon observed that he was "concerned about a building as a changing, growing process rather than as an object." He said "a positive attitude toward indeterminacy is part of our new reality. I think that we are more a part of the natural evolution in mainstream architecture."

It was the issue of the American mainstream's direction that occupied the discussions between the Silvers and their guests. Stirling began by asking, "What is the thread in Silver?" and eventually concluded that he could only find "a kind of expression of 'chic packaging' . . . stylistic streamline . . . an attitude which comes from the building type (commercial work)." David Gebhard concurred, from a historian's point of view, that the work presents "a series of images related to packaging of objects à la 1930, leaving complexities of structure, use, and so forth out," and that "the strongest images are of the machine," which he was "surprised

to see . . . still here in 1976."

Regionalism and uniqueness concerned the panel, as expressed by Charles Moore, who noted that much of this work "is in other places—Lugano, Houston, Colorado, etc.—so how can L.A. contribute to this?" Esther McCoy asked of the work, "How does it describe L.A. in particular, as opposed to any good group anywhere?" While David Gebhard felt that "Few of the buildings addressed this issue of the romantic relationship between the landscape and the building in Southern California." John Hejduk observed that "high-rise is a foreign element in the L.A. context" and that "high technology is generally wrapped up in high romanticism, with the danger that [it could] lead to totalitarianism." Charles Jencks went to the dictionary for his definition of silver and noted that "silver is a) chiefly univalent in compound, b) a commodity, c) silver age is a period of achievement second only to a golden age, d) silver-plate is something added as artifice and, e) eloquently persuasive." Jencks also struck at "silver-plated capitalism" and felt there was a "silver style," although he charged that "If we accept the limitations of having to wrest poetry from a process we should look at the irony (that derives) from the process." For while "L.A. has vulgarity, the Silvers have good taste, but their codes are so restrictive they can't get above minimal art," he said.

With this, the Silvers found themselves defending the mainstream of architectural practice. A student observer saw the group as producing "not a rethinking of concepts and programs, but new images." John Hejduk took exception to a string of remarks emphasizing process; he recognized "a continuous problem to make an image/verbal relationship," and observed that Silvers' buildings "look like *objects*."

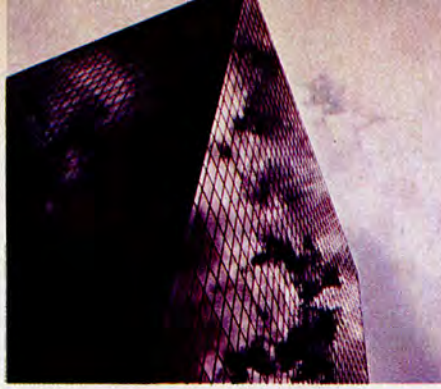
In attempting to evolve some general conclusions on the Silvers' work, David Gehard, as a true art historian, cataloged their features as he saw them and placed their work squarely in the mainstream. "Are these images unique?" he asked, and went on to observe that they were not, but showed both national and international design fashion. Gebhard cited their use of basic forms, and related this to current fashions in art, adding that they "could be going back to 1966 *Artforum* for the verbiage." He added, "I find it perplexing that various architects who have come to L.A. were foreigners, but created something unique to the area. Is there a shift now in the way architects look at California and now respond to it? . . . the Case Studies program came up with suggestions that were specifically Southern Californian . . ." He concluded that the reason the Silvers had generally shown work outside of Los Angeles was because their concerns had little to do with the place; that what the audience had seen, while diverse from individual to individual, and even outstanding in visual features was perhaps, in effect, the symptoms of a New International Style. [Peter Papademetriou]

Pelli

"Our architecture is primarily responsive to specific circumstances, and we mean all the circumstances that condition a project and not only its physical-aesthetical context. The circumstances in the reality of each project are for me, when properly understood, the source of opportunities in design. Seeking opportunities within a well-understood problem is the obverse of functionalism that sees in the same circumstances only a problem to be solved—a deterministic view that reduces options and allows no room for life—and much different from the formalist attitudes that will impose the source, preconceived intentions on any circumstances.

"We understand change as being the natural condition for architecture, and permanence as the exception. Creative compromise is one of the roots of our architecture. This requires flexible goals and a design process with decision-making as its main constituent."

On "Third Generation Architects": "The first generation was that of the masters . . . the second generation is that of those who learned from the masters; their work was continuously measured by the yardsticks set up by the first. . . . Third generation architects are us. We also learned from the masters, but through the second. . . . The second generation is most clearly defined in America (as the first was in Europe).



Century Medical Center, Los Angeles, Calif.

The third appears to be American-oriented, but international in its make-up.

"Some of our characteristics: We don't build for eternity, we build for today. The last vestiges of the temple and the monument have wasted away. We understand change as being the natural condition of things and permanence as the exception. We have a strong preference for synthetic materials (shiny, hard, light, scaleless, colorful, changeable) as against handcrafted ones. We are interested in technology because of its potential for increasing the intensity of our experiences . . . we can claim that almost anything that an architect is interested in doing is architecture. Things are right when they produce correct results, not only when they fit our conception of right and wrong. Our need for personal commitment is very strong, although our causes and allegories are quite diverse. We are not too worried about contradicting ourselves."



City Hall, San Bernardino, Calif. (P/A, Feb. 74)

Lumsden

"We begin with logic. Decisions are made on the basis of reality. However, the design aesthetic does not rise out of logic. The aesthetic is created out of intuition, experience, imagination. The total design cannot rely on these traditional procedures. What is important is that the aesthetic and the logically deduced data are not exclusive.

"Often the result of the design process is an irregular form in section or plan. Some people confuse clean geometry with rational design. Minimal geometry and formal purism remain a curious misinterpretation of the useful part of rational design. We do our best to maximize art without violating the basic data. Logical systems are deductive and will not produce art. By synthesizing the logical with the non-logical—I do not mean illogical—we attempt to accomplish buildings which are aesthetic and realistic to social problems.

"I believe strongly in the influence of architectural images. Images based on unrealistic design systems or elitist aesthetics render architecture less effective and diminish architecture's participation in the built environment.

"I am extremely interested in developing an aesthetic that responds to and does not inhibit design methods. It is senseless to

say or to use aesthetic systems that say, 'Let them eat temples.'

"Our buildings may look like [they are] high technology and primarily aesthetic. This is a superficial evaluation. However, I don't consider certain buildings inhuman because they are technical visually, any more than I would consider an operating theater inhuman because it is visually technical.

"I became very interested in the aesthetic of windows appearing as part of the surface of the building rather than as holes. In this way it is possible to place windows where they are required rather than where an aesthetic system compositionally dictates.

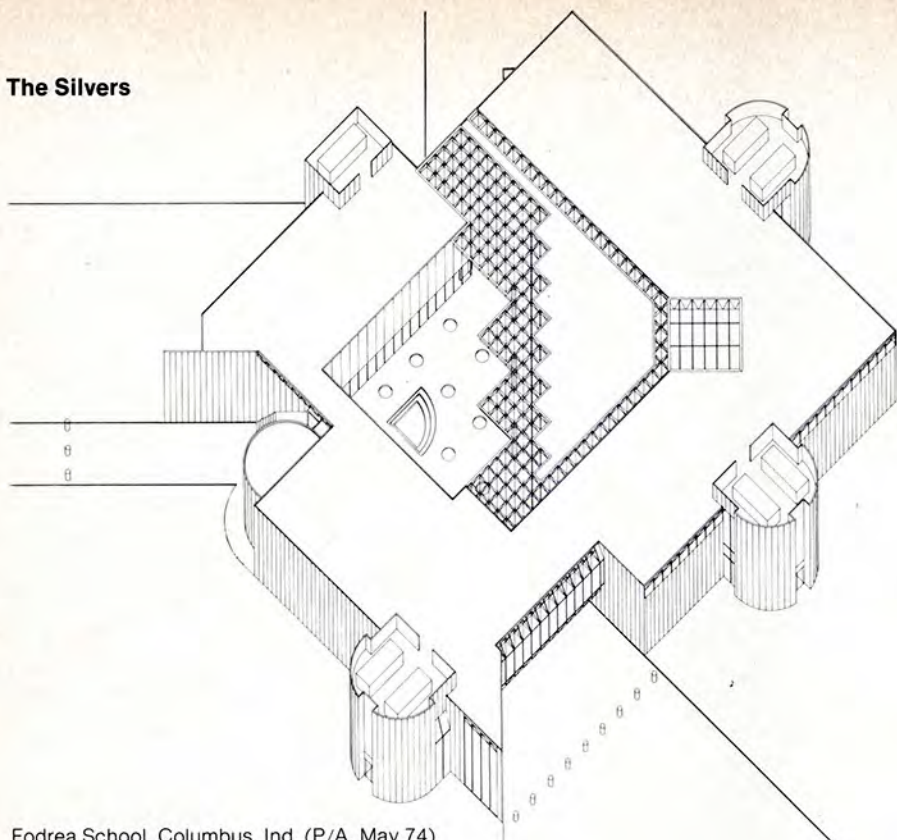
"Minimizing the mullion projection in the enclosure wall allows the membrane to become non-gravitational, non-directional, and non-structural. It tends towards non-articulated, non-monumental expression as an ideal. In this respect I believe it has the potential to be useful in building design when positioning and functional relationships are not formal.

"The continuity of different sections along a multiple axis is apart from an interest in the expression of intrusion. The section is expressed in the end elevation. The end elevation is not composed about an axis related to principal façades. Formally, the extension aesthetic is more dynamic and flexible, it suggests and allows extension and change."



Manufacturers Bank, Los Angeles, Calif.

The Silvers



Fodrea School, Columbus, Ind. (P/A, May 74)

Kenyon

"We are concerned about a building as a changing, growing process rather than as an object—a positive attitude toward indeterminateness, that events are not and cannot be determined in a preemptory manner, but that there is the possibility or tendency for an event to occur. We think in terms of open-ended systems, internal flexibility, versatility and expansiveness.

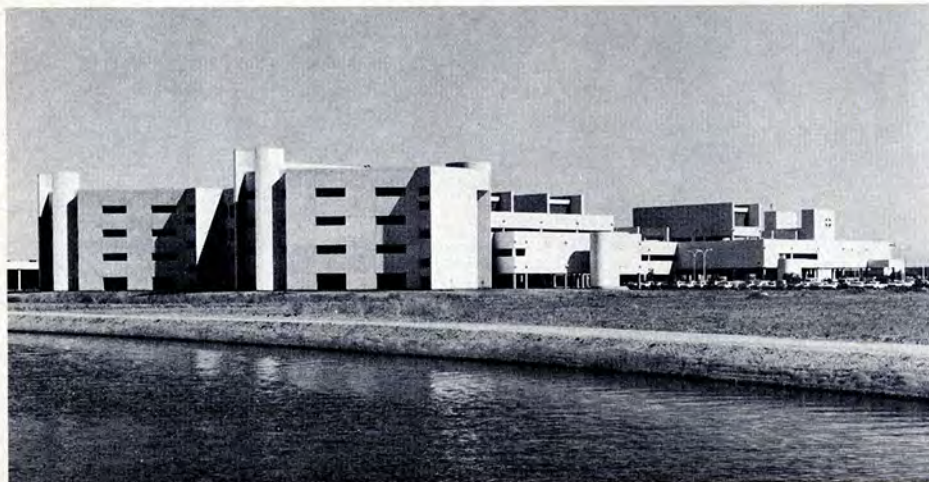
"Technology is the means by which we go from the intangible to the tangible, and form becomes the complete expression that arises when systems are connected to reach an intended result. We place great emphasis upon the circulation system of each project, as it becomes the linking agent for events. Circulation becomes the syntax or connected system of order."

On the Desert Samaritan Hospital: "Desert Samaritan was built for the optimum in

patient care and comfort. The modular facility is designed to expand easily, economically, and without disruption of services from the initial 275 beds to an ultimate 1100 by 1990. Its horizontal form permits a separation of traffic. Outpatient and inpatient areas are located at opposite ends of the complex with support facilities in between. Space has been left between departments to permit horizontal growth in more than one direction. Furthermore, the structure allows for the addition of an entire floor to be built above medical services."

On Fodrea Community School: "The organizing element of the design is the community concourse which invites people to come in and interact, to exchange ideas, to read, and to play. The design emphasizes a variety of spaces for learning and recreational options. Flexibility of space is a major design premise . . . to permit active, reactive, and interactive learning."

Desert Samaritan Hospital, Mesa, Ariz. (P/A, July 74)



Kupper

"Our plans bear a stronger relationship to integrated circuits than to cubist or expressionist compositions. A range of possible actions and an open attitude toward a range of possible form-complements leads to a diagrammatic built form analogous to a landscape or cityscape. The generality of image also derives from acknowledging the building as a constructed object, and therefore subject to the rule of human craft and mechanical performance. Technology is a matter of pragmatic selection from standard forms of production. Therefore, our buildings are not fixed-purpose machines or compositional exercises. They provide diagrams within which experience continues to reprocess itself, seeking behavioral complements to initial structure.

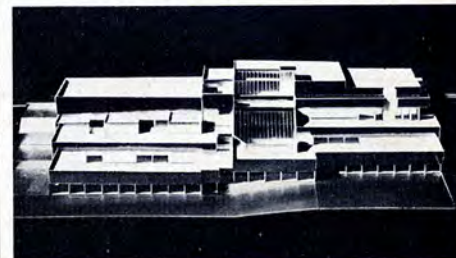
On the Conference and Continuing Education Facility/UCLA Extension: "It contains the beginnings of a vocabulary and a philosophy of architecture that will eventually materialize in a whole series of buildings. More than 100 meetings, from 6 to 800 persons, can be held simultaneously in this building. The sloping site generated a terrain building, a landscape/cityscape on the four lower floors, with large halls carved into the hillside, between which flow terraced lounges and a central garden, overlooked by lobbies and dining rooms. The terrain building is of reinforced concrete and masonry bearing wall construction. The sky superstructure contains flexible classrooms and conference rooms, the dining rooms, and an auditorium. Its construction is steel frame and metal/glass enclosure.

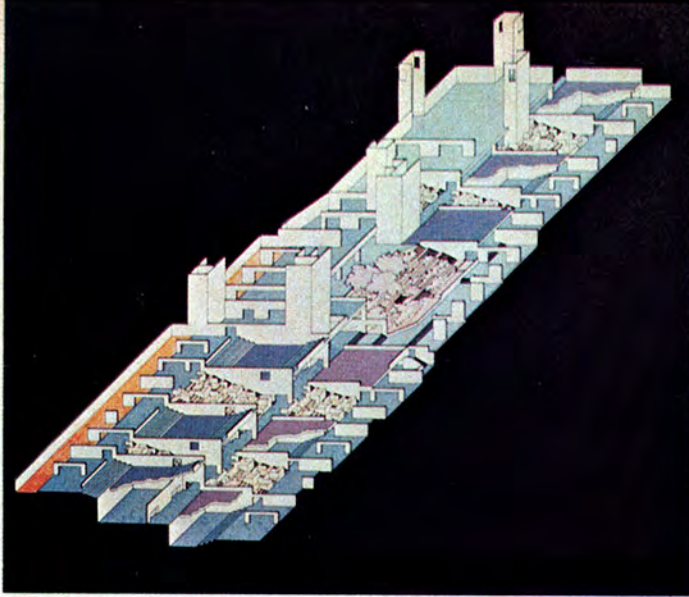
"The vertical layering of the plan organization creates a series of connected volumes throughout the building. As the floors stack above one another, they shift register and are perforated for motion and light. Levels consecutively change function so as to permit the reciprocal movement from contained formal spaces to open reprogrammable space.

"I believe architectural values arise from the dialectic of forces of immediate factual environment, the suggestion of virtual places of metaphor or imagination."

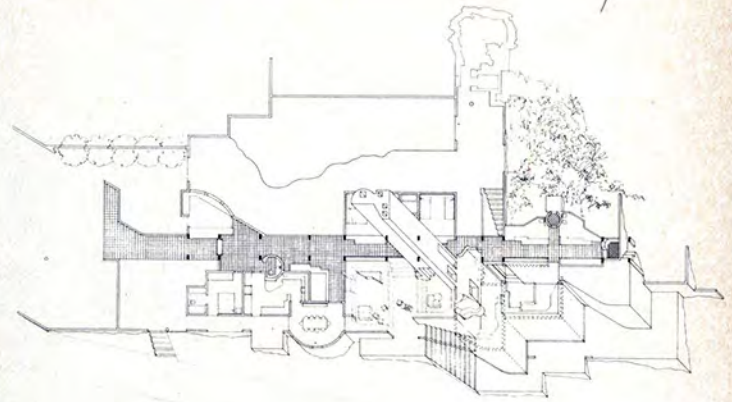
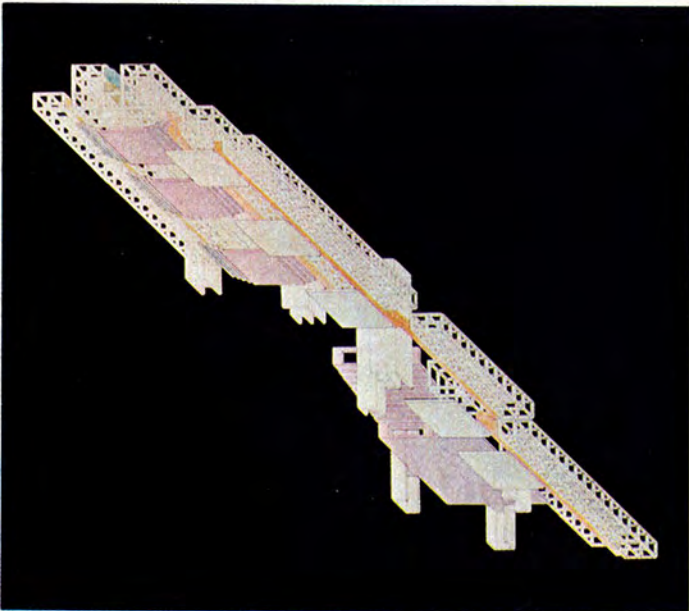
On the Nilsson House: "It has a 'long-building' (not linear) organization, some perpendicular and parallel layering given by perforated walls, some of which make outdoor rooms, bracketing a collection of metaphorical and actual places; the initial diagram has been completed by a variety of semantically active elements."

Conference/Continuing Education Center, UCLA.

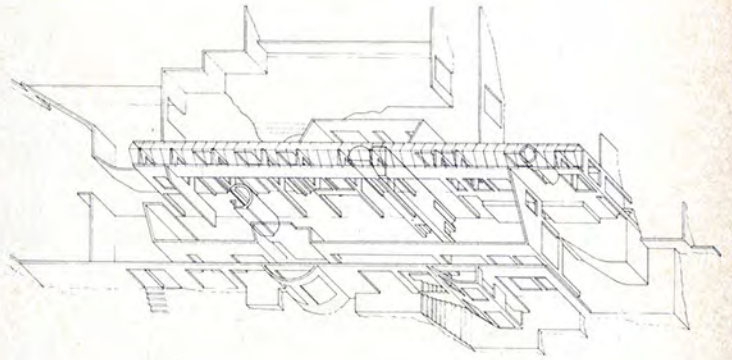




Conference/Continuing Education Center, UCLA;
sky superstructure (above), terrain bldg. (below).

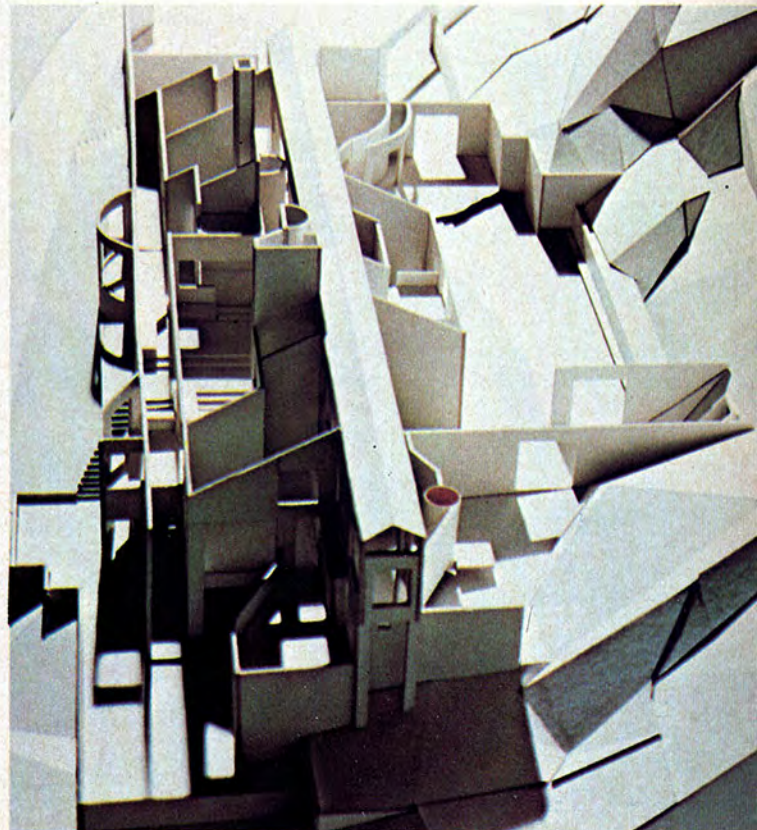
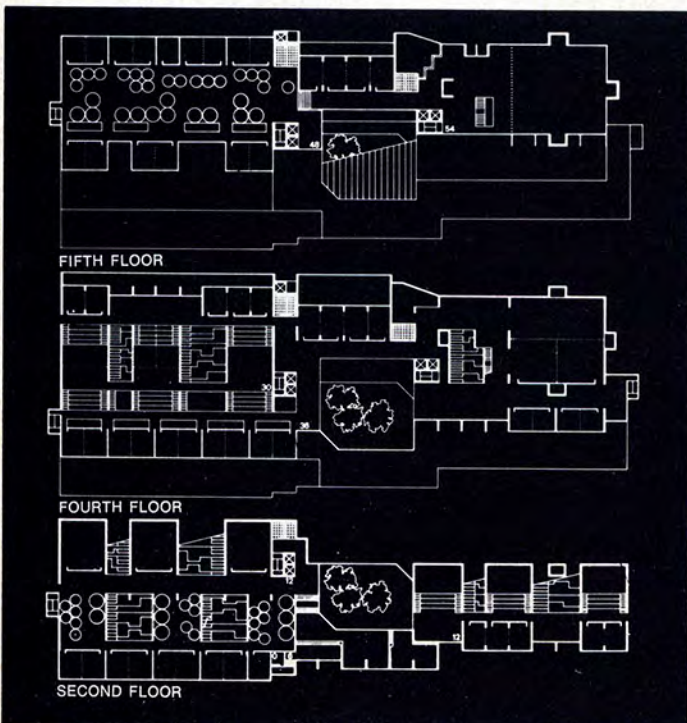


Nilsson House, worm's eye view.



Nilsson House, bird's eye view.

Nilsson House



Vreeland

"None of these men is a true Southern Californian—12 years is the longest any of them has been in this city—so there is not a trace of the regionalism in their work that characterizes most Southern California architects. Their view of architecture is much more international; their sources and influences are world architecture, and usually from first-hand contacts.

"If they have any cultural allegiance to the region it is to the *Arts and Architecture* Los Angeles of 20 years ago—the Case Study houses and the lightweight steel architecture of Richard Neutra, Charles Eames, and Raphael Soriano; and much earlier, to the architecture of Irving Gill, for its directness, simplicity and understanding of the technology of its days.

"In fact, what has attracted the Silver architects to Los Angeles is precisely the lack of cultural restraint, the freedom from a particular commitment that this place seems to promise, an escape from the orthodoxies such as cities like Chicago, New York, or San Francisco demand.

"By the time I got here I discovered to my chagrin that the historical tradition was all over, already passed into history. *Arts and Architecture* had folded; speculators' stud and stucco accounted for most of the building, and the rest were imitations of Sea Ranch; I had to begin all over again.

"But the absence of a prevailing tradition in architecture can be an asset. It provides the searching architect with a blank screen upon which to project his innermost images without interference. Los Angeles has always essentially played this role for the culture it has nurtured. It has encouraged fantasy—quick, easy fantasy, fantasy in a bean field like Beverly Hills—and instant tradition. Make believe is our chief product and export.

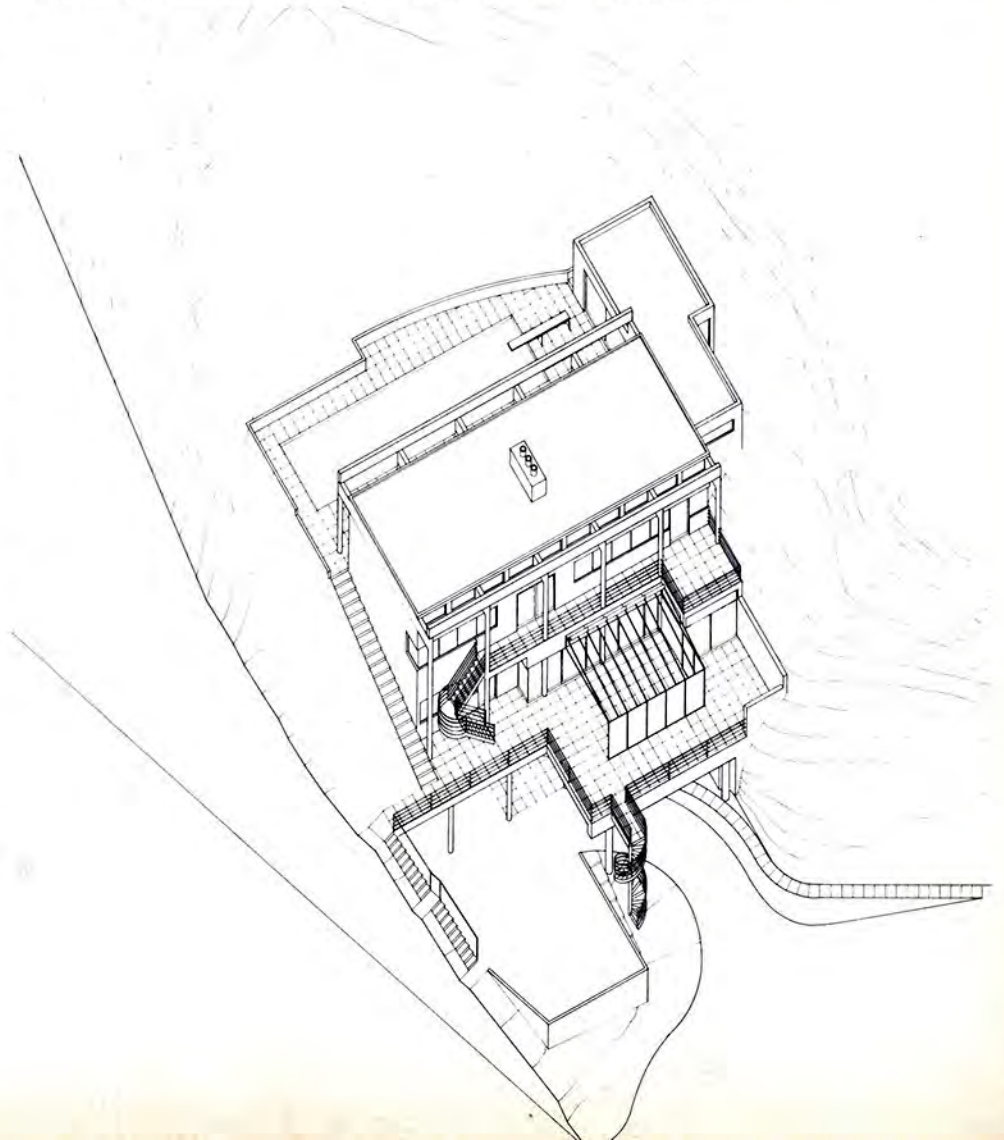
On the regional shopping center: "Discipline and fantasy; is it possible to achieve both in an architectural project? The discipline is exerted from the repetitive and undifferentiated steel bay system with air conditioning units punctuating the roof that shopping center economics requires. The fantasy is in response to the waterfront site and the colorful activity associated with shopping. . . . Once the controlling geometric pattern had been determined, all other design decisions could be made easily. Fantasy within discipline."



Regional shopping center, Hallendale, Fla.



Beatty House, garden room, screening room (above); Lowell House (below).



Gerald Ratto for KMLV

Dimster

"A major and common motivation in the group's efforts appears to be wide range . . . in a willingness to experiment, particularly in the traditional areas of architectural expression. The area of focus might change from one member to the next but everyone has shown in the past or is demonstrating now a pronounced willingness to participate in a capacity which allows him only limited areas of intervention.

"This optimism or naivete, which allows us to find expression through incremental improvements in a situation, allows participation in team efforts of large-scale projects. Regardless if the areas of aesthetic discretion are limited or comprehensive, they indicate roots in technological vocabularies tempered by a historic awareness and reinforced by a larger-than-regional concern.

On Johns-Manville Competition: "A spine running in an east-west direction up the slight incline of the hill connects the support facilities and office space provisions. The latter faces north and all spaces have views. It was our intention to demonstrate a way to build on the side of a hill or substantial incline without leveling the site totally or in part to simulate building in the flat areas."

On Houston Center (a 32-city-block area of Houston's CBD being developed by Texas Eastern Corporation as a multi-purpose megastructure): "This (plan diagram) shows our earlier version of the first increment . . . black areas are the public areas above the present street level, which would still be attainable and, in my opinion, desirable without super-security. . . . There was a serious effort, on my part at least, to sneak in a participatory process which, if successful, could have been the most important contribution. The collage here is meant to give imagery to the idea of having a transportation node interchange in the project area on property owned by the client but not fully utilized."

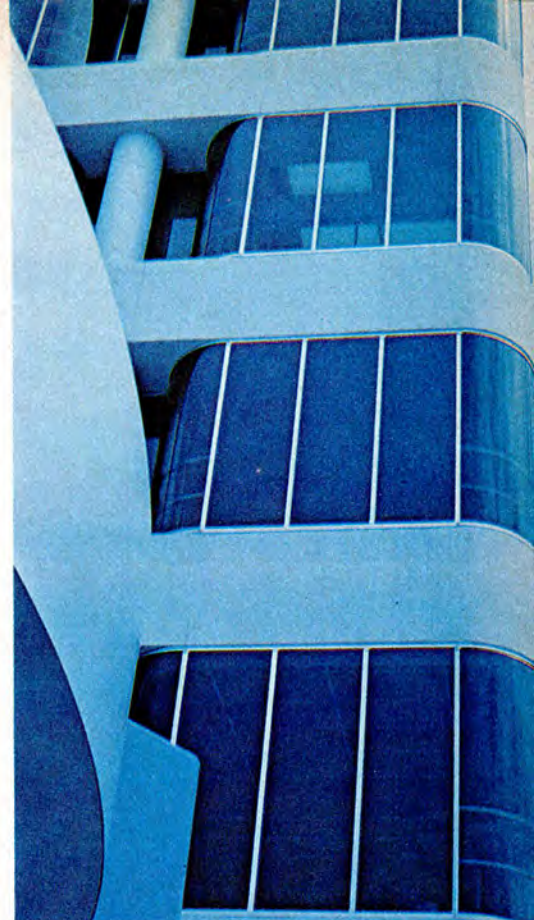
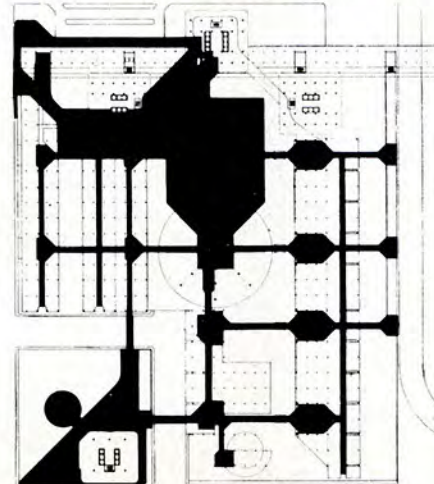
On recent residential designs: "I found that the 'two by' stud system is very flexible. . . . I must agree with Wachsman who said that 'there is nothing wrong with the 2 x 4; the problem is the nail!' I am trying to organize and design these houses so that they retain the maximum amount of flexibility in organization and the maximum amount of identity for all the users, and an extended life span (one should know what to do with the extra space when the kids are in school)."



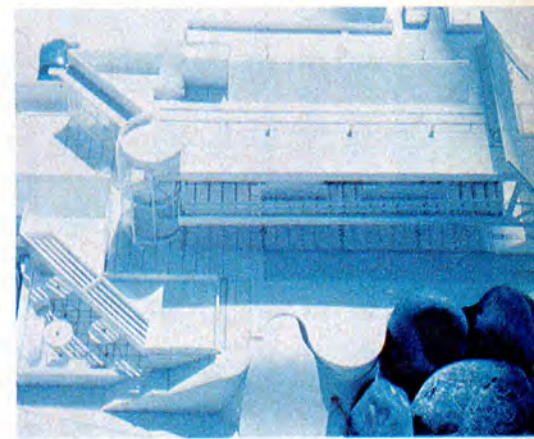
Houston Center, Houston, Tex. (above and below).



Houston Center, proposed pedestrian network.



Great Western Bank, Newport Beach, Calif. (Frank Dimster for Wm. L. Pereira Assocs.).



Hux House (above). Johns-Manville competition (below).

