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The Synthetic and the Real: Notes on Córdoba

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The notes and observations presented in this work attempt to establish and clarify the physical configuration of space, form, and light. The work starts with a careful dismantling or de-constructing of a place that can reveal plural and even contradictory points of view. New issues, forms and, gradually, holistic understandings emerge. By focusing on certain issues the drawings make possible not only these inferences but also transformations that go well beyond them. However, the drawings remain faithful to their origins in the physical realities of the place: to its forms, its qualities, and its tectonic properties.

The drawings derive from direct experience with particular buildings in particular places. For each drawing there is an issue, and its purpose is to deal with that issue, not just to make a drawing! For one, the issue is light and the counterpoint between light and shadow as part of a sequence of movement. For another it is the superposition of different patios in the same directional field, as happens here in Córdoba. By showing changes in time and position it allows the reading of spaces-in-between and the clarification of central open spaces. It turns out that the central spaces are common and general, and it is the edges that are special, particular and local. One drawing was to make the

three-dimensionality of the space understandable through depicting movement through the building. In that drawing it was necessary to add a stair in order to realize the continuity of movement. Later, when I went back to the place I found that the stair was there, in the right position!

These explorations start with sketches from the real place, and they imply each observer's experience of that place with all of the perceived meanings and associations. The sketches, therefore, represent a confrontation with the physical facts of architecture. You have to bring up that experience through drawings and notes. The architectural experience of a building is at once both visual and tactile. Architecture is to be *in*. If the visual aspect becomes too strong or loses touch with the tactile, then the building becomes merely an object, and the sketch becomes only a representation of its sculptural or pictorial values.

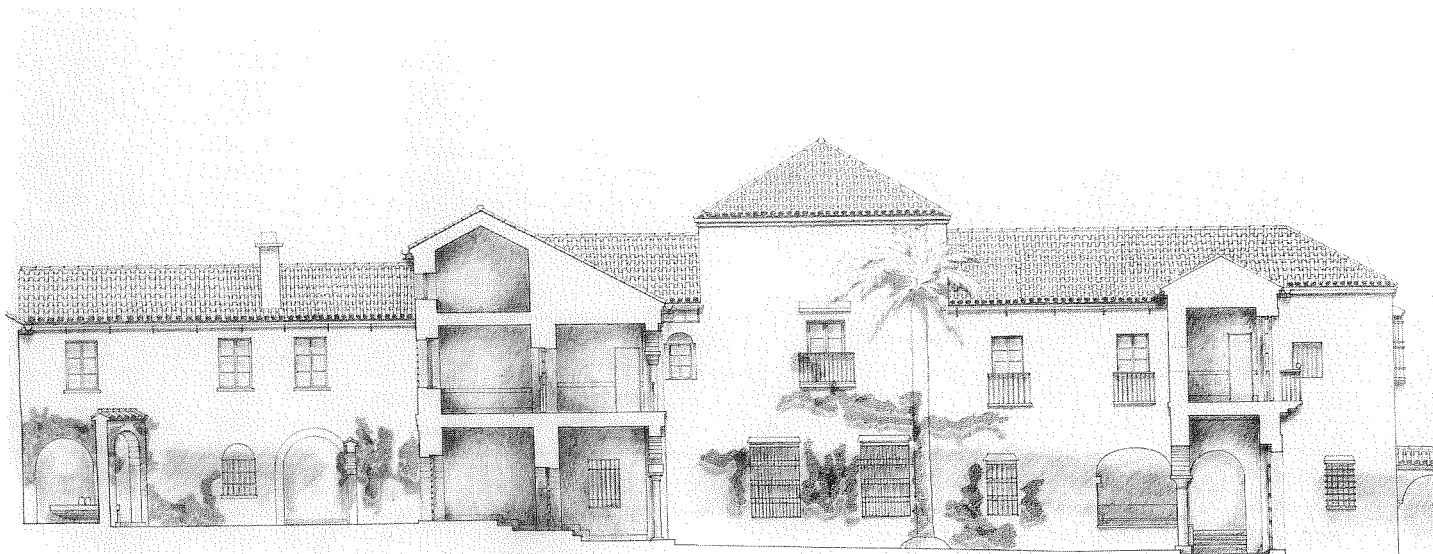
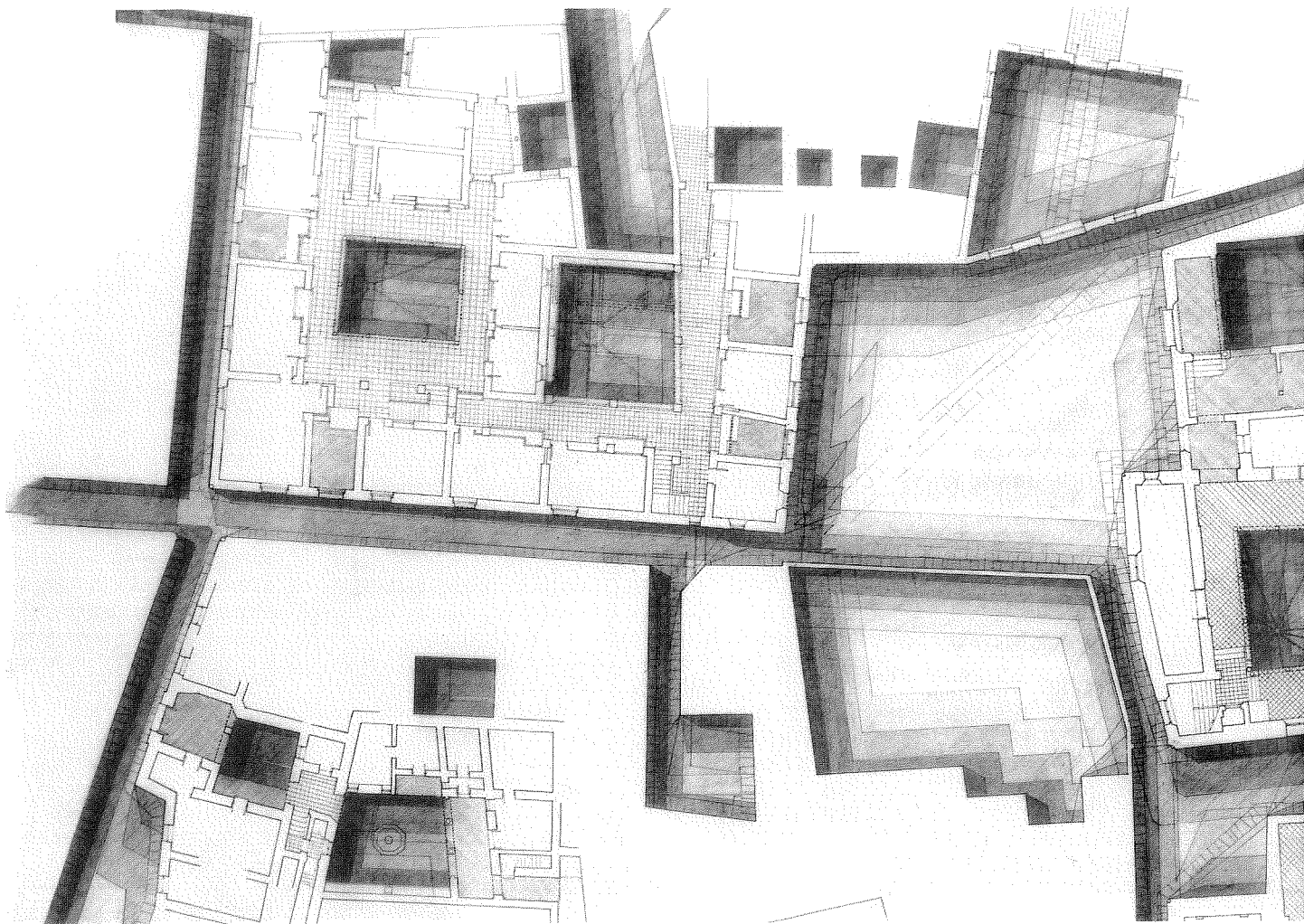
There are different lines to enter the material. One is the organization of light; one is the organization of forms in terms of solid and volume implying reciprocity and reversibility; another is the organization and position of elements and all the movements that are in the space that have specific connotations. I enter as well through dimensions and

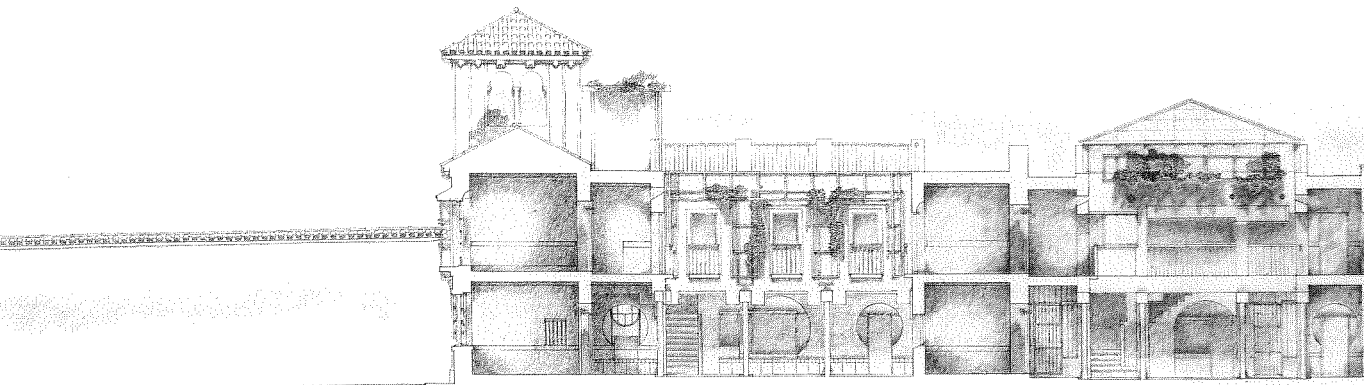
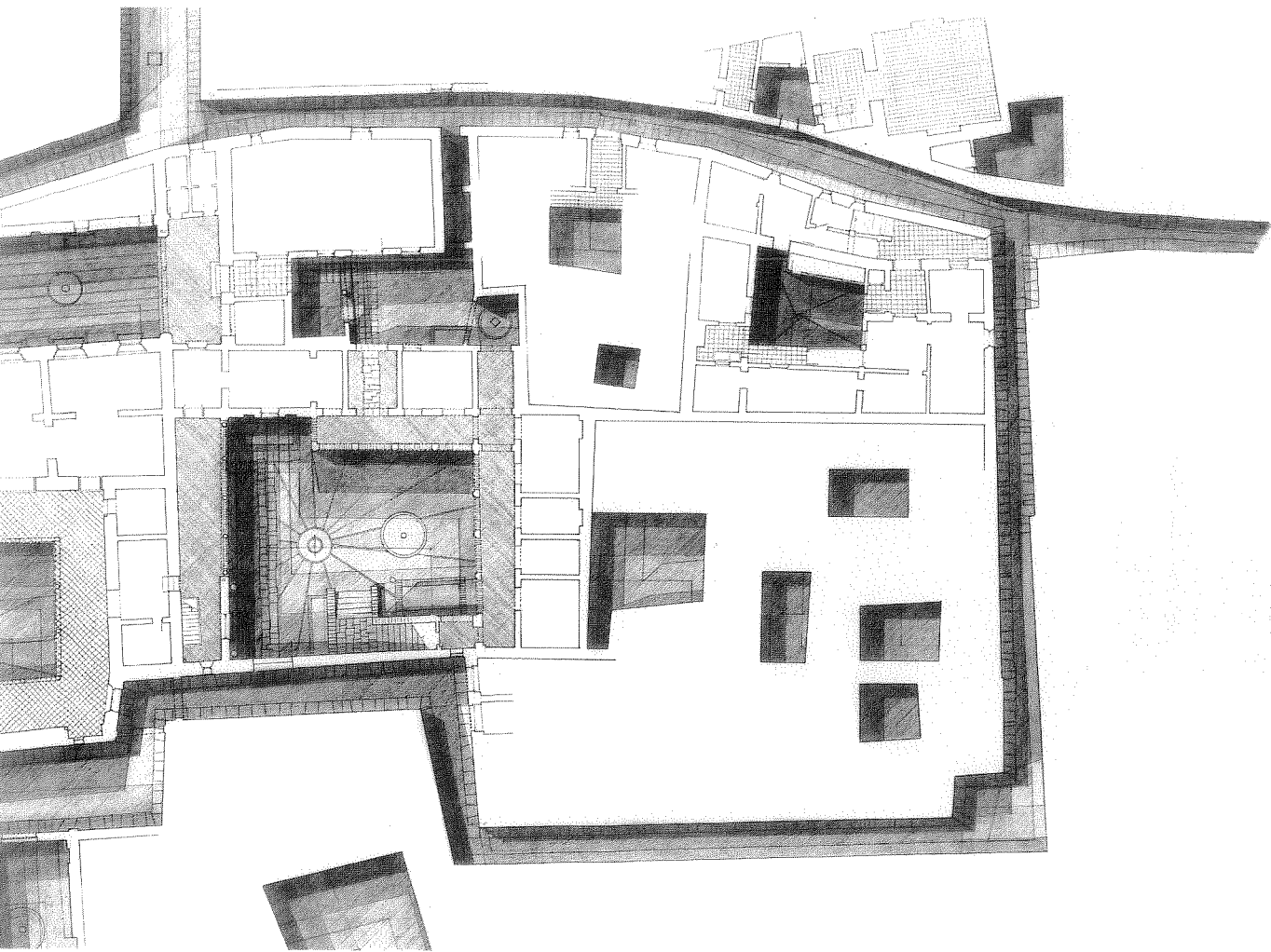
relations between dimensions: specific dimensions that are simply true, some that are related to cultural experience and construction techniques, and others that are independent of associations for now. The relations between dimensions and dimensional patterns create the possibility of making places.

When you start to make a drawing to explore an issue, you don't know exactly what the result will be. But you have a rough sense because you have the experience of a place and because you have done pictorial as well as diagnostic sketches. The pictorial sketches help a lot to understand the essences of the issues because they are more intuitive. At the same time the diagnostic plans and sections help to achieve a three-dimensional understanding. They are not direct transcriptions. Each drawing becomes an "instrument of detection." The memory of the recorded experience helps to establish the issues and the ways to represent them. To clarify and to establish the values of the issues it is necessary to accept the description of the drawing as an instrument in the framework of the approach outlined here. The drawings of light and shadow, for example, reveal spatial continuity and order as well as the relevance of the shadow in that particular place. In Córdoba the order of form and spaces is gen-

erated from the order of shadow. In other locations, as in Boston, it is the light which generates that order. Another drawing was done that showed bands of movement through the buildings displaying the direction and rate of slope of the hill. This system of movement is defined to permit walking permanently in shadow. It is divided into very consistent dimensions relating to how the different plateaus are defined. These are not universal dimensions; every hill has its own subdivisions. It is from this association with its context that the movement system takes on added meaning.

Furthermore, you can start to see some notions of the organization of place in relation to the system of movement. Every time that there is a lateral extension of the horizontal plane coupled with an increase in size, the diagonal of that plane appears and makes possible the notion of place. The ground plane, by defining magnitudes and dimensions, is what establishes the primary orientational and spatial reference. Without it there is no possibility of place. If these lateral movements are accentuated by a vertical displacement up or down, the perception of place becomes spatial. The changes in natural light reinforce its definition. You realize all this in the plazas and in the patios where you can cross on the diagonal.





These imply a more public realm, and that is true in any culture.

There is always the light in these places of arrival through entrances that are in shadow. It is sequence of light and dark which establishes the reading of the movement through the city or through the buildings. The definition of the pavement defines movement in a tactile as well as a visual way because both sides of the sidewalk differ from the texture of the center even when it is very narrow, and presents the alternative of through movement or of repose. Both sides are also differentiated by the positions of entrances. You can be blind, and you don't make mistakes!

Places are defined by the topography of the site, and the organization of forms in this architecture is directly related to their positions in that site. In this sense building can be thought of as the story of the topography. Buildings in Córdoba are made in a way that, as you go through them, you come to know the site as a place. Architecture does not exist outside place. It is not a flying object, and it is not an item in a catalogue of diagrams. It must be in a specific place and extend the experience of that place. Every good building is *in* a specific site.

The first architectural definitions here had to do

with agriculture, and the ways to bring the water throughout. These definitions remain and give different values to the different directions in the plateau. There is not equal value to direction in any real physical pattern. Every place inside of the houses is related to that basic movement. Private open spaces have the same formal definition as public open spaces, and can shift from public to private or *vice versa* depending on how they are accessed by the system of movement. The public realm here is not as strongly defined as in other cultures.

There is a continuum of walls (or zones between walls) that establishes a physical continuity of material and the relation and definition of spaces. They define zones that can become corridors, patios, or rooms. At times these walls become colonnades that form edges of places that alternatively are off to one side and then the other of the main line, of the material. It happens that the main line of the material falls on the central axis of the organization of building, as is the case, among others, in the Gothic cathedral placed inside the Mosque at Córdoba. The resulting order of volumes and spaces, in strong counterpoint with the rhythm of the land, can be read as an autonomous organization, with options open as to how it is used in both plan and section.

Dimensions are similar between walls in rooms and corridors opening up the possibility of spaces being defined in either way. These dimensions become repetitive and consistent having their own specificity and meaning in the built and the unbuilt—rooms, paths, patios, entrances, plazas—establishing a strong order. Building materials, roofs, and light and shadow do the same.

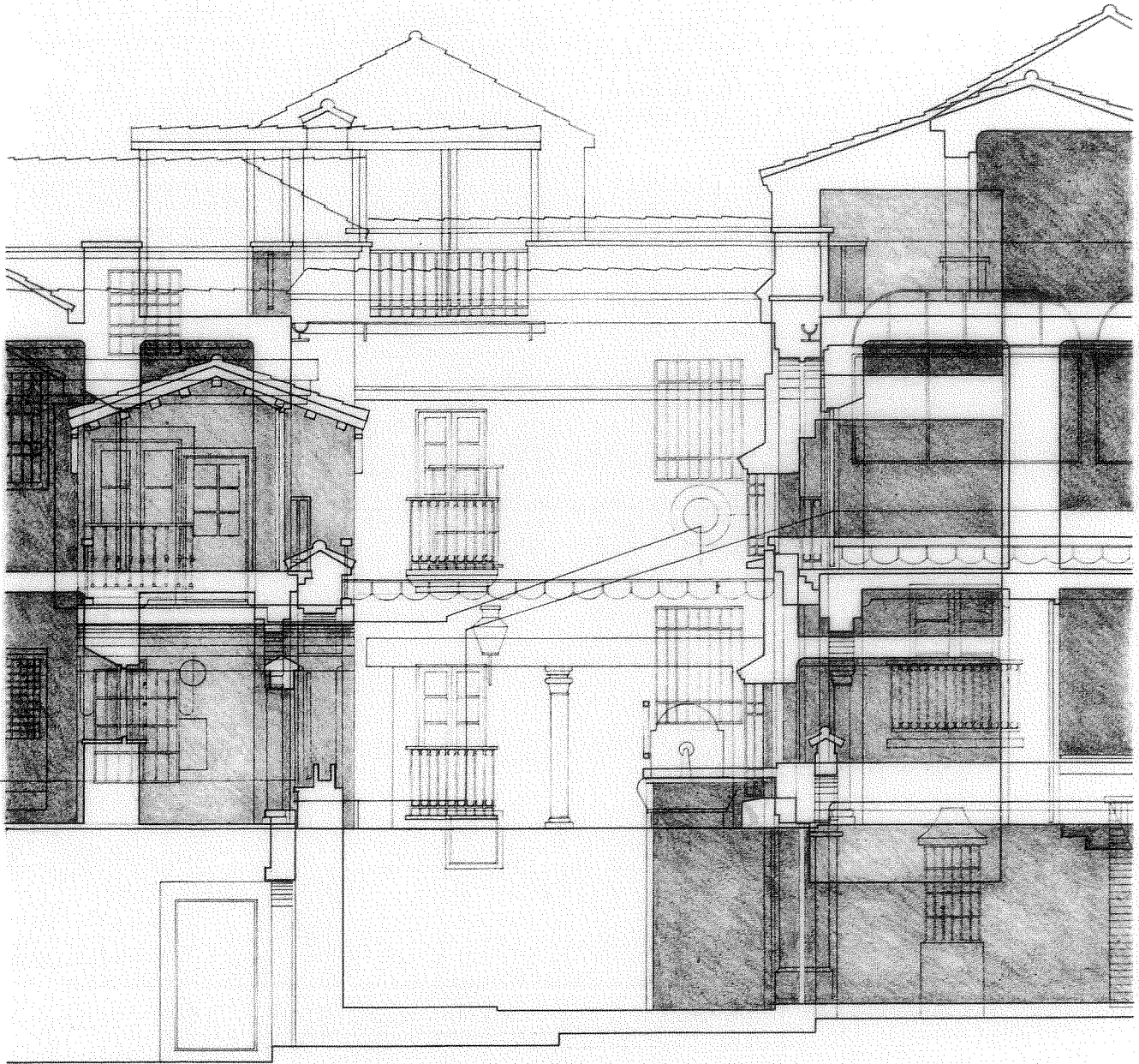
This drawing represents an assumption of the summer solstice and the two equinoxes at the same time of day. It does not represent the reality, and it doesn't reflect the light in its totality. In one part of the section the light is introduced directly from the sky, and in another a screen was added at the roof in order to liberate the walls from direct light. The resulting transformations are completely different. In both, the attitudes toward the light are still the same. The understanding and use of the light is one of the strongest continuities across cultures, and, with understanding, it can endure changes in times and technologies. The earth under the sun won't change, at least for a while!

This drawing has in mind a sense of ruins, of overlapping ruins. A place is defined in the time therefore we are in that process of time. Tomorrow will be defined in a new way. We will add

a new reading over that reading, but it will remain a place and become even more a place. Chartres, Paestum, the Acropolis, or Machu Picchu are so strong and powerful because they have that quality. It is not that you define a place forever and it stays static and unchangeable.

The choice you make to build a drawing is connected both to the experience of the site and building and to assumptions made about that reality. The drawing is a poetical definition of something that is not exactly there, but becomes true of what is there. It is synthetic and not descriptive. It conveys aspects of the reality of the place better than the direct experience of the place itself.

These drawings are similar in some respects to those that resulted from the French Academy of the 19th century. Labrouste's of Paestum are layered, showing first just what they saw as a record of the reality, and overlaid with what they excavated. Other drawings show imaginary reconstructions in which they transformed what they found into new organizations of form. In this highly disciplined process there does appear a kind of ontological drawing that proceeds from building the ruin in the drawing and, through that, discovering and defining the essence of the place. The drawings in this article are more



selective. They are monographs of a specific site, trying to understand the forms, qualities, and the principles of organization rather than just the external characteristics.

They reflect qualities of vernacular architecture in which the principles that underlie it are evident in its organization and in its particularization in buildings. Identity in building is achieved through the confrontation of the principles with the realities of the site rather than through making buildings that are exceptions to rules—exceptional buildings. The mosque, the cathedral and other palaces are defined and transformed by the same issues that we have discovered elsewhere in the town. In the mosque, the

attitude toward light is the same, but it is obtained with different dimensions, and the resulting quality of light is dissimilar but related. Through consistent attention to the same issues but with carefully considered changes, important public buildings establish a continuity with the rest of the urban fabric, but also establish their own distinctive identity. Thus, there is a permanent dialectical relation between the monumental and the vernacular.

The drawings included in this article attempt to make these principles clear without commitment to specific transformations. Notions of design are, however, implied. The drawing becomes a project with its issues and values.

The position of a stair in the plan, or the transformations in section only come to mind after these experiences. Knowing the order of the place, you become able to transform it into a new reality by means of different technologies and in response to different social and physical conditions.

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