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DAR ISLAM MOSQUE, ALBUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

STUDIO DESIGN PROJECT

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Abstract/Problem Statement: Dar Islam Mosque

In historically Muslim countries, mosques take the prescribed form of a large hall with adjacent courtyard, minaret(s), and ornately decorated entrance portal. With Islam's spread to the United States, the mosque no longer takes this form, due to construction and technological conventions, as well as the diminished economic will of the religious community. The design for the Dar Islam Mosque in Albuquerque, New Mexico takes a position of difference in response to the current debate in the Muslim community over historicism versus contextualism of mosques, where the individual's response to the space is primary, with emphasis placed on disconnecting from the every day and forming a spiritual connection.

The mosque brings with it a set of rules, regarding the separation of the sexes, preparation for prayer, and the act of prayer, while the site brings another set of influences, including American culture, the desert climate, and the topographic nuances of the existing site. The challenge lies in mediating the needs of the mosque and the building's performance as shelter, tempering the separation of the sexes with the equality demanded by American culture, and giving to the mosque, which is rooted in certain ideas of faith and spirituality, a sense of the spiritual, where the typical form of a mosque is not mimicked or repeated, but where a visceral response or connection is made between the individual and the sacred.

The process of architectural design constitutes the research program, and the final design documents represent the discoveries of the following research process: (1) intense study and analysis of a cactus as an exemplary biological system; (2) generation of a wall system as interface between interior and exterior, using the cactus as precedent; (3,) intense study of the Islamic faith and historic mosques; (4) field research; including examination and interpretation of the site and exploration of two existing mosques in northeast New Mexico; (5) investigation of site sequence and perception through a series of perspectival drawings; and (6,) comprehensive design of building and site, including intense studies of enclosure, structure, heating, cooling, ventilation, lighting, and surface materials.

This comprehensive project, completed as a pinnacle experience in the design studio sequence, serves as a cohesive finale, integrating the principles presented in the architectural technology courses with the design process, while preparing the graduate for the multifaceted role of intern architect. More particularly, through challenging the use of imagery and symbolism in religious architecture, the research focuses on those things fundamental to the act of worship, where the individual's multisensory perception of the spaces is primary, with perceived visual, spatial, tactile, audible, and relational connections manipulated, challenging one's perception of reality - from tangible to impalpable - eliciting an association to things beyond the physical.

Mosque: a Phenomenological Investigation of Sacred Space

The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. Heidegger¹

The design of a mosque for the mesa overlooking the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, comes about as the penultimate project in the five-year design-studio sequence. The project seeks to integrate principles presented in technology, history, and theory courses with the design process, and the following paper analyzes the outcome of the project created with an understanding of Islamic culture and religion and an appreciation for the methods of phenomenology.

Sacred architecture has developed in unison with that of all other institutions; the role of the building has become one of utility and economy favored over human inhabitation. Contemporary architecture is a product of function and economics; buildings are constructed in an assembly-line fashion, becoming a creation of habit. "Habit dulls the mind so that a man builds with little more awareness of choice than does an animal that constructs instinctively,"² and the human roles in the environment,

human needs for dwelling, are ignored. Many paths have been and are being explored in reply to a need for modern architecture that responds to human needs, particularly the need for sacred spaces to worship, but I will focus on a phenomenological approach, in which an architecture attuned to the human experience is sought, in contrast with current solutions to the problem of habitation.

The architecture of the mosque is rooted in tradition. The components of a mosque spring from a prescribed set of forms with a prescribed set of functions. The mosque began as a simple place of worship, as seen in the prophet's house at Medina or in the Great Mosque of Isfahan,³ and evolved into institutions such as the Washington, D.C., Islamic Center. Nowadays, the size of the mosque denotes the number of faithful who come to worship, and the amount and quality of surface adornment attests to the wealth, power, and faithfulness of the patron or ruler. The simple act of worship has melded with political influence, social hierarchy, and control.⁴

The Islamic faith forbids the use of icons⁵; yet certain components of the mosque building and surface adornment become iconographic symbols when removed from the spatial patterns and cultural nuances of traditional or historic settings. For example, the intended function of a minaret is to elevate the muezzin to a great height so that his voice carries a considerable distance when calling the faithful to prayer; yet, with the advent of broadcasting systems, the minaret, which creates "*identity*" in an Islamic building through traditional association, has been diminished to a sign equivalent to the logo of a corporation. The minaret's intended function is again diminished when the mosque is taken out of an urban environment and placed within America's suburban sprawl and when there is no longer a captive audience of like-faith people but rather a complex mix of many faiths. As with the minaret, Arabic inscriptions in the manner of those adorning the Dome of the Rock⁶ lose their potency and meaning when they are used to adorn a mosque whose patrons do not speak Arabic.⁷ When these religious "icons" are applied in the diverse North American landscape, they are reduced to symbolic decoration, void of meaning and function but steeped in history.

The Islamic community is split between historians who believe that the traditional form of the mosque and traditional ornamentation must be used in order to prevent a departure from and possibly opposition to orthodox tradition, and those who believe the form a mosque takes should be determined by the community it serves.⁸ While my project reflects the latter belief structure, it must also confront a greater question: Can a building of completely modern design elicit responses equal to or greater than those of an ancient mosque? Several lines of inquiry arise from such a proposition: Is a phenomenological approach to mosque design an appropriate method for seeking alternative lines of inquiry into design and meaning in religious architecture? What does it mean to inhabit a sacred space, and how does a religious building help one to better understand his or her place

within the religious collective and the world? How does the design for the Dar Islam Mosque address the question? Does the design for the Dar Islam Mosque fulfill both the pragmatic and spiritual needs of the faithful?

Phenomenology is a twentieth-century philosophical movement that studies the complex relationship between person and world, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines.⁹ Pertinent overlaps exist in philosophy, psychology, and architecture that explore the very essence of what it is to be human and to exist in the world. These in turn form a platform through which the ramifications of being and dwelling in architecture and of architecture on being can be investigated. When Heidegger speaks about the Greek temple in "The Origin of the Work of Art," he emphasizes the power of architecture to make the world visible. Architecture has the power to disclose things, to make them appear as what they are. He says, "The temple in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves."¹⁰ This is the point of inquiry, where traditional methods of building and inhabitation are questioned. With a new sense of piece and space-making and awareness of the power of the building to form deeper visceral connections with the inhabitant, the building attains an elevated level of presence. The person may not know why he or she is drawn to that place or why that place evokes the thoughts and feeling it does, but the building has an evocative presence that establishes itself in memory as an image, a feeling, or a relationship.

To design a building within a phenomenological framework means that the architect must think about every surface, every plane, every opening and about how every part of the building enhances one's awareness of his or her being, so that one is more conscious of the surrounding and how he or she relates to it. Nevertheless, even when designing without phenomenology in mind, one can, as Heidegger does with the Greek temple, analyze the project from a phenomenological stance, looking for those instances that connect, that form a dialogue with the inhabitant, heightening his or her awareness of being. Analysis of the formal and experiential aspects of the Dar Islam Mosque reveals the influence of this way of knowing.

As one approaches the mosque, the visitor crosses a threshold formed by a grove of desert apricots. This threshold is the embodiment of difference; it delineates the boundary between everyday routine and sacred reflection, while forming a connection between the tree as a creation of God and man as a similar creation. The skin of the building forms additional but different connections. It captures the presence of the sun; the building reflects the light, and the shadow reacts to the light. The skin is also an indicator of both weather and time. The surface is Corten metal sheet, which, when exposed to the elements, weathers, forming orange rust deposits on its surface. The skin of the building also guides water over its surface, channeling it along a circuitous path, holding the water longer in some places,

and allowing the water to be slowed and directed to specific points. In turn, the water leaves on the skin a remnant of its presence in the form of rust (except where the skin folds inward, protected by the overhanging metal above). The water that rushes over the building's surface is collected in the courtyard and is represented in the ablution chambers, where the water washes over the body, leaving its mark on the individual and suggesting to the psyche its cleansing and life-giving qualities.

The carving away of the earth and the placing of the building within it rather than on it evoke a sense of its being of the earth yet other than the earth. The earthen wall, juxtaposed against and facing the man-made wall, frames the earth, the sky, and, in the distance, a volcano now dormant but once a raging fire within the earth which forced up the mesa on which one now stands. Basic elements—earth, air, fire, and water—are brought together in this place, interacting and enhancing one's self-awareness. A specialized space of transition, anticipation, and preparation is carved into the earthen wall, adjacent to the prayer hall, where one sits in a slick, clean, dark room, lit from above by a thin shaft of light, which cleanses the mind while it cleanses the skin as a part of the ritual of prayer. The thin strip of light that washes the concrete wall dances across the water as it flows over the skin and falls to the floor. The light makes the darkness appear, evoking a somber mood, as it emphasizes the cleansing, life-giving water. The hard surfaces of the chamber increase the resonance of the water as it drips or flows, focusing the attention away from competing sounds of vehicles or conversation, clearing the mind, and preparing one both mentally and symbolically to enter the prayer hall.

Inside the prayer hall, the temperature is much warmer.¹¹ Both light and materials influence the temperature. The warmth of light, reflecting off the warm, rusted Corten, imbues the space with a transcendental feeling, much like the light in a church or cathedral. The light is not static, but the openness of the wall changes from floor to ceiling. The wall contains no apertures at the floor, and the number of openings increases as one's eye moves up the wall to the roof. This draws the eye upward away from the immediate, increasing one's awareness, while shifting the focus from the individual to the spiritual.

The design for the mosque in Albuquerque explores alternate methods for design. Typically, the plan generates the design process; here, it was considered last. The use of vignettes took precedence and drove the process. The feeling of the place or space was recorded through perspective drawings and sketches before the place was realized in traditional forms of architectural expression—i.e., plan, section, and elevation. This design process allowed for innovation both in a way of working and in a finished design. The existing site, the ritual, the procession, and the feeling of the spaces created became primary over the programming of space. This design does not try to emulate the past and is not dictated by the lack of economic will or technological and construction conventions seen in many religious

structures being built today. Moreover, the mosque seeks to form visceral connections, not through icons or signifiers, but through consideration, manipulation, and amplification of human consciousness and self-awareness.

End notes:

¹Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Architecture: Meaning and Place*, Christian Norberg Schultz (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) p. 39.

²Oleg Grabar, *The Great Mosque of Isfahan*, (New York: NYU Press, 1990)

³Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space, and Place*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) p.

⁴Salim A. Elwazani, "Sacral Qualities of Form in Mosque Architecture: Transformation of the Arts at the Qur'an into the Arts of the Mosque" on IslamOnline.net

⁵Qur'anic passage, 5.92: "O Believers, wine and arrow shuffling, idols and divining arrows are an abomination, some of Satan's work, so avoid it; so haply you will prosper."

⁶Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996)

⁷Akel Ismail Kahera, *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002) p. 65,

⁸Martin Frishman, Hasan-Uddin Khan, Mohammad Al-Asad, *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, and Religious Diversity*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994) p.41.

⁹Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Architecture: Meaning and Place*, Christian Norberg Schultz (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) p. 39. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962) p, 110-114. Christian Norberg Schultz, *Architecture: Meaning and Place*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) p. 39-48.

¹⁰Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Architecture: Meaning and Place*, Christian Norberg Schultz (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) p. 39,

¹¹When referring to temperature, I am using the fourth definition given by Merriam Webster: relative state of emotional warmth

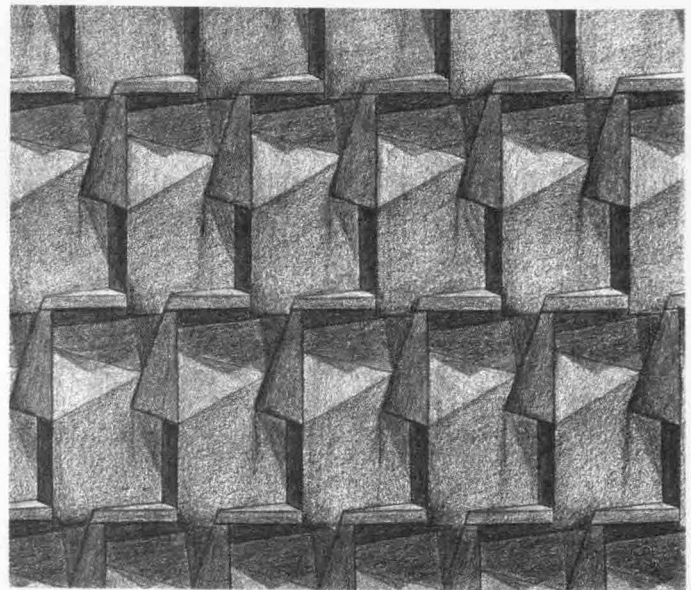


Figure 1. Detail. Building

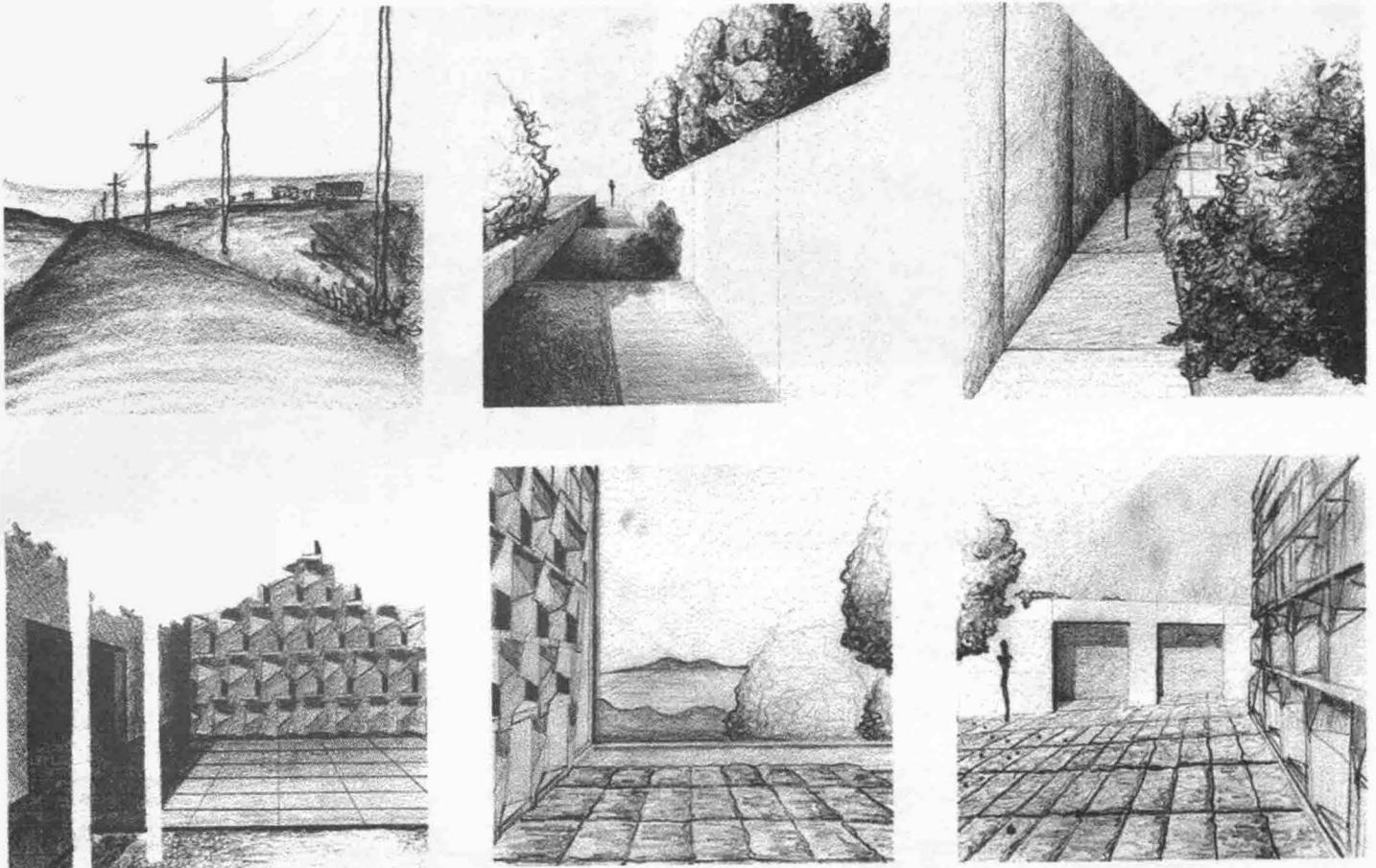


Figure 2. Study vignettes.

Faculty Comment:

Ms. Harlan's faculty mentor, Professor Marlon Blackwell, was lavish in his praise of her project. He said:

Melissa's proposition for the vertical surface is an intelligent tectonic system that accepts anomalies and eccentricities as it synthesizes structure, environmental

systems, and lighting, and yet, simultaneously has the capacity for allowing exquisite spatial qualities to emerge in the project at a variety of scales - the scale of the site, the scale of the mosque and the scale of the individual. It is a project deeply engaged with its time and place; richly articulated in sequence, material, and joinery, she has devised a well-crafted and philosophically coherent structure.

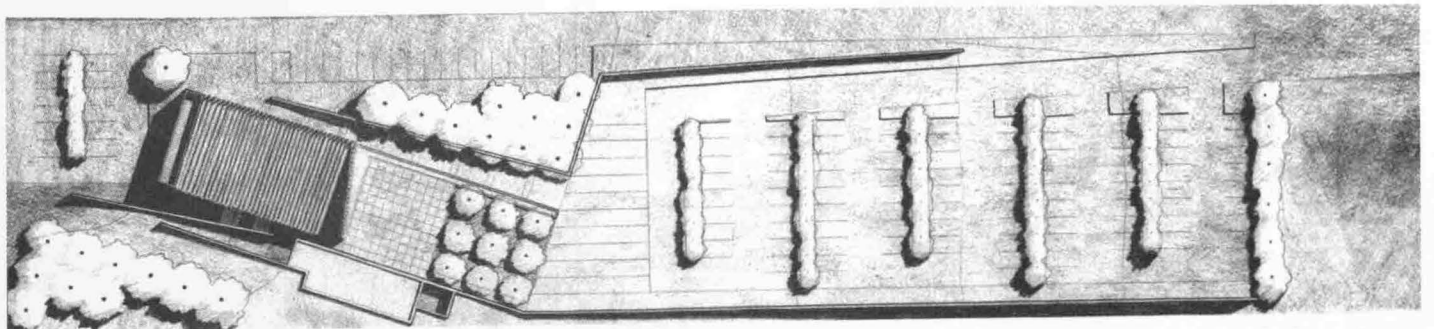


Figure 3. Site plan.

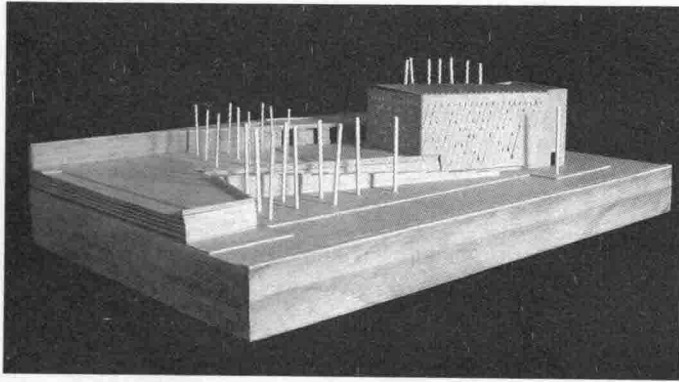


Figure 4. Model

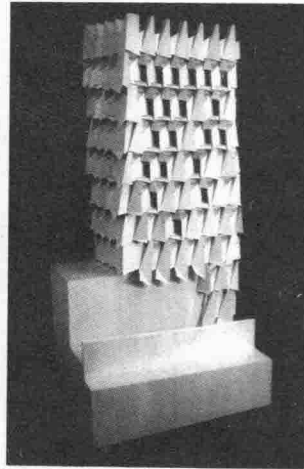


Figure 5. Model. Detail of building corner

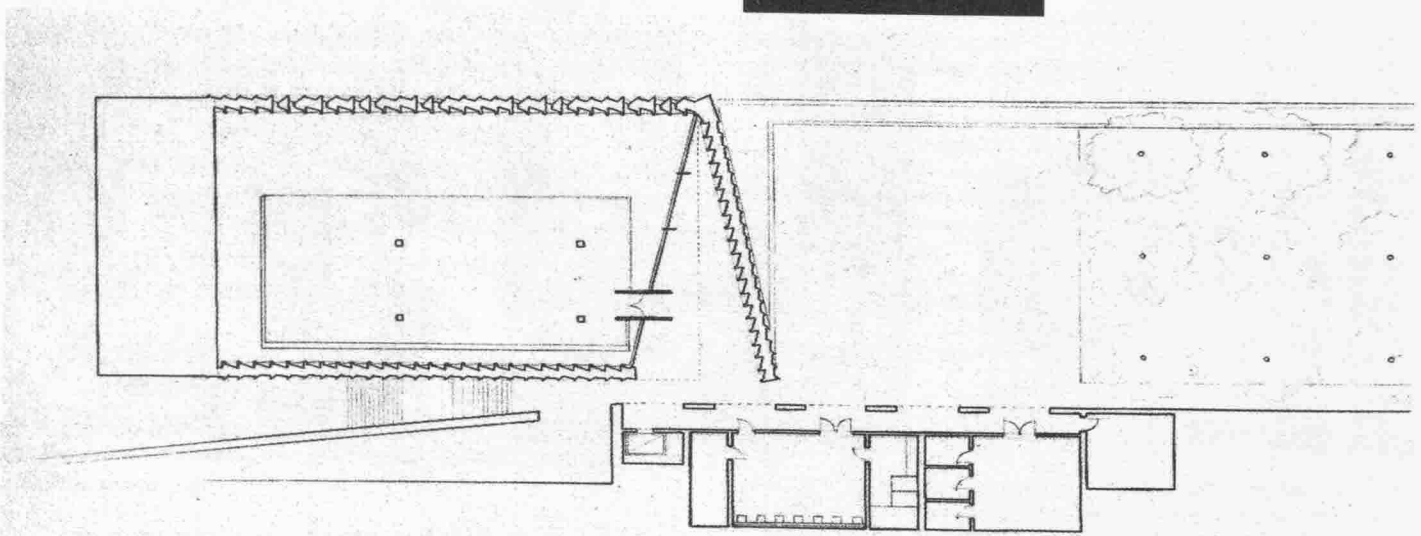


Figure 6. Upper level plan

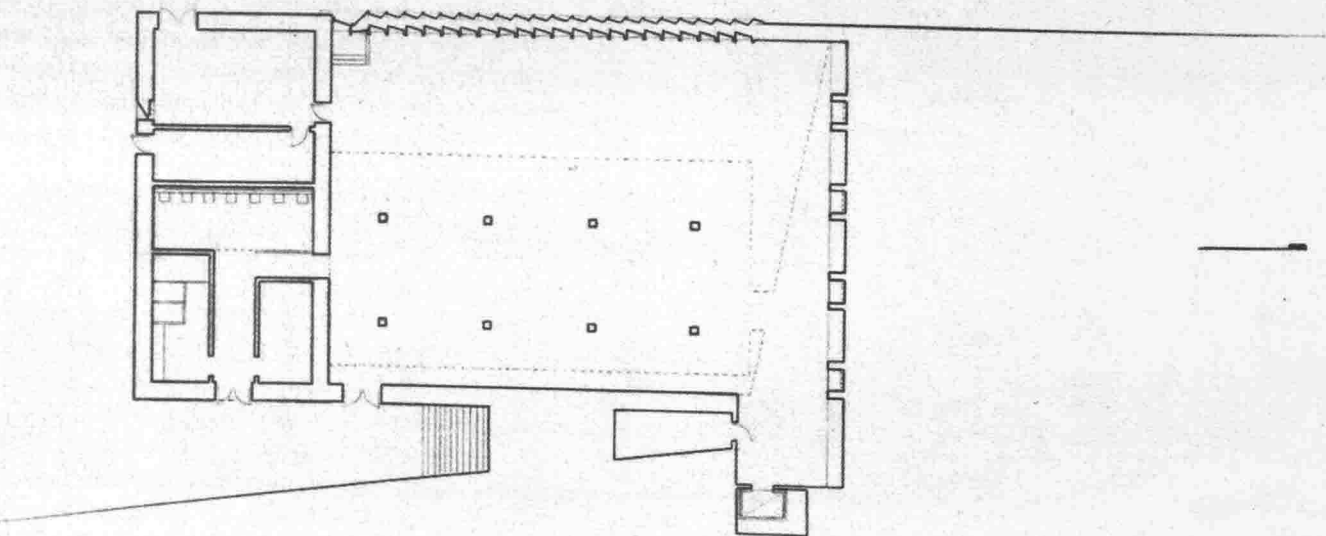


Figure 7. Lower level plan

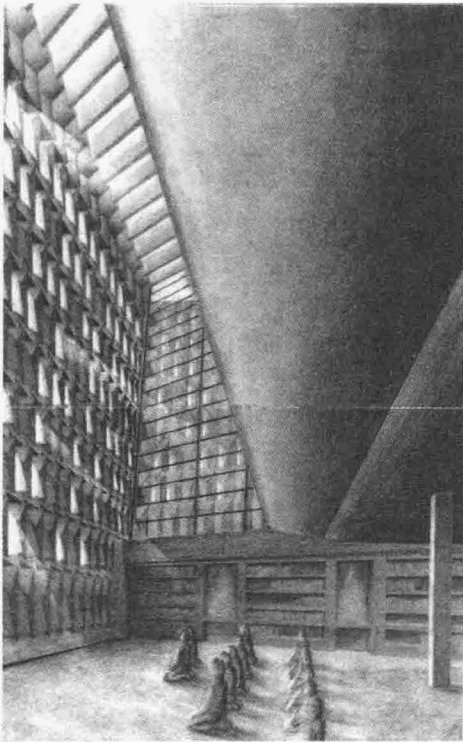


Figure 8. Prayer hall interior

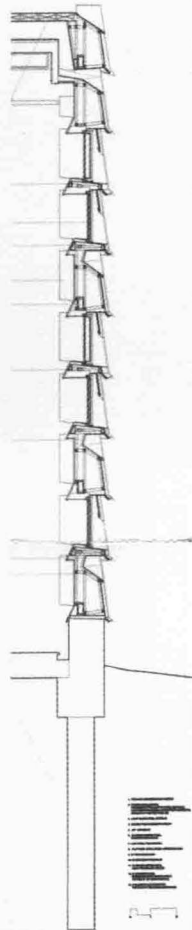


Figure 9. Exterior wall section

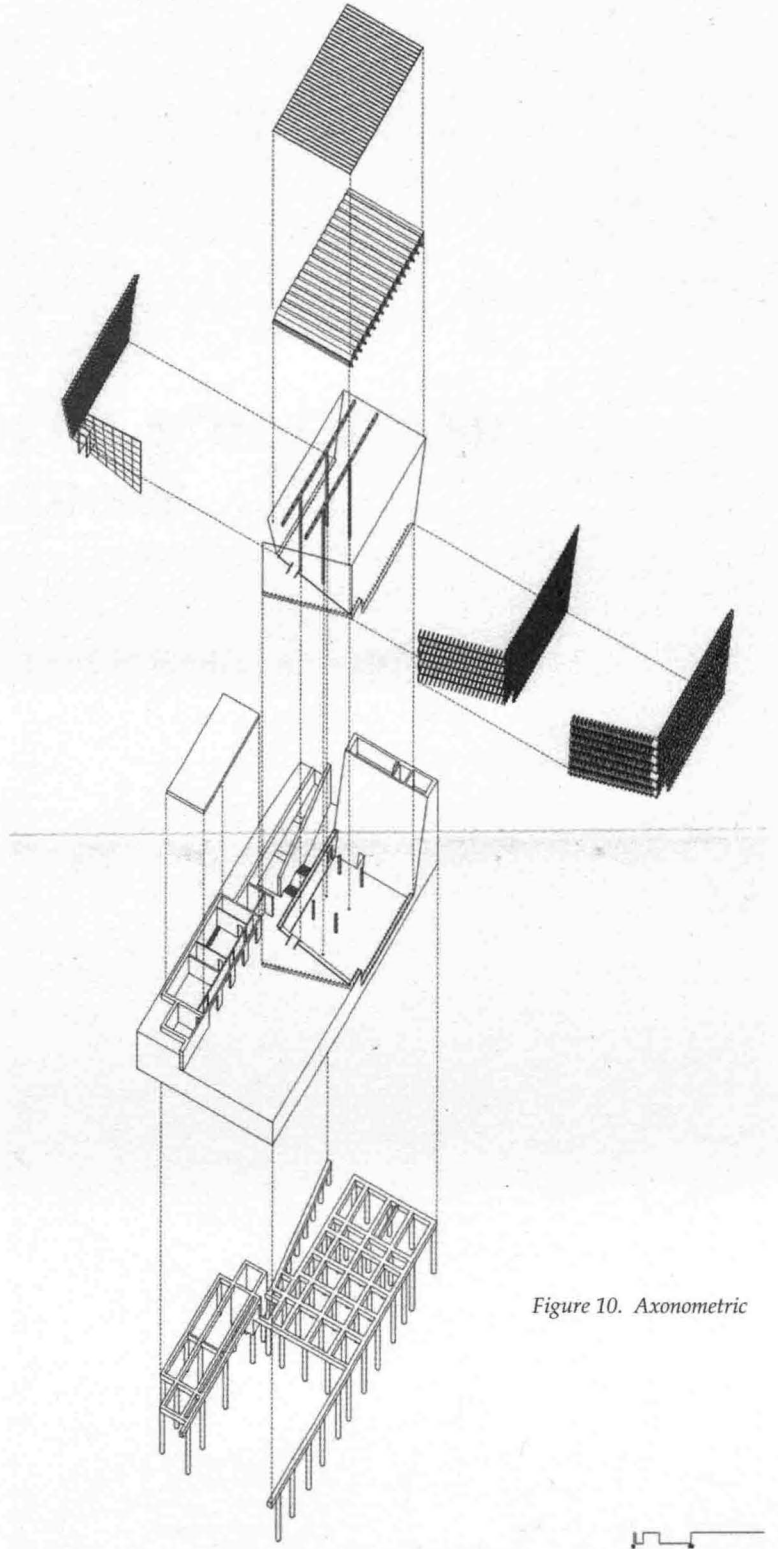


Figure 10. Axonometric