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The Exuviae of Visions: Architecture as a Subject for Art
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The Exuviae of Visions: Architecture as a Subject for Art Editors

Although architecture is not a preeminent subject for art, the editors of *Perspecta* are intrigued by a growing tendency for artists to create works that explore architectural concerns. *Perspecta* interviewed several artists whose work focuses on architecture. The sculptors, painters, and photographers whose work caught our interest are not those who render architecture as a purely pictorial image. Rather, they investigate architecture as a topic for study, as a metaphor for an internal quest, or as a means of commenting on contemporary life.

In our talks with various artists, we were not surprised to find that their understanding of architectural issues was more profound than the recent, and largely superficial, spate of art/architecture shows and seminars would tend to suggest. It may well be that artists are more aware of the concerns, processes, and history of architecture than are architects of corresponding aspects in art.

All of the artists we questioned acknowledge that they are either influenced by some aspect of architecture, or that they are working on problems traditionally addressed by architects. When queried about drawings and art by architects, most artists felt that such work fell short of artistic criteria. This did not, however, diminish their confidence in their own abilities to create as architects. All save Niki Logis and Robert Guillot responded positively to the question of whether they were willing to accept a commission to design a building. Most of the artists were excited by the possibility of collaborating with architects, even though some expressed reservations about whether the attitudes and processes of contemporary architects would permit a true integration of art and building.

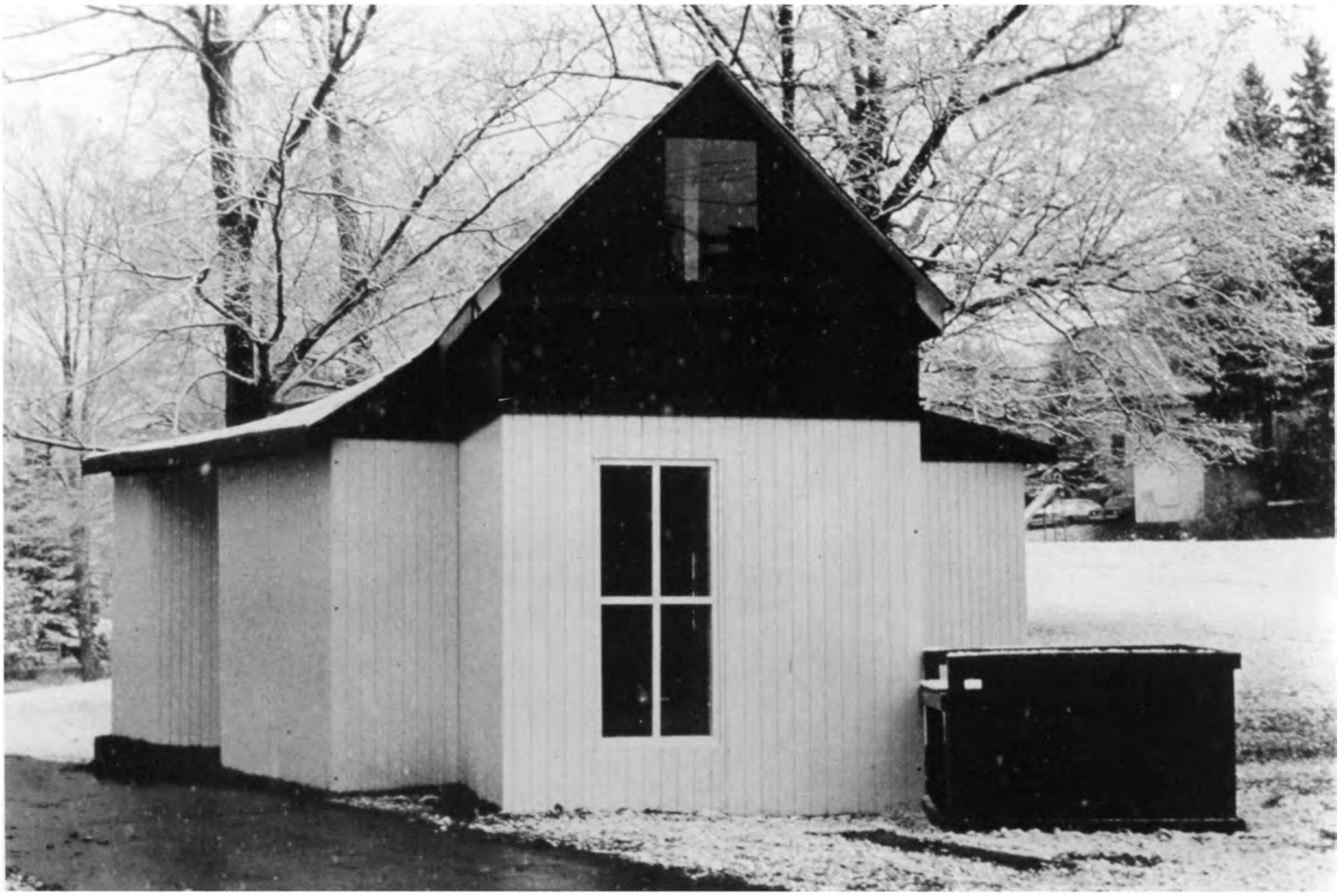
Concern for the viewers' experience of the work sometimes took precedence over the artists' concern with self-expression. As a means of engaging the viewer, their pieces tended toward a large, even environmental scale. Because of this increase, the artists felt a conflict between their belief in contextural and, therefore, site-specific pieces and their desire for mobile pieces. They negated this tension, however, by working at a variety of scales and in a variety of media.

The limitations of minimalist art were frequently cited as something artists were seeking to correct. In contrast to many architects who tend to defend or reject modernity, the artists with whom we conversed expressed the notion that their work had evolved almost organically from art of the recent past. Robert Guillot responded to minimalism by introducing subject matter into his sculpture. Vito Acconci and Siah Armajani sought to rectify some of the deficiencies they saw in minimalism by inviting human participation in their sculpture. Niki Logis and Christopher Sproat posited alternatives to the sterile tradition of monolithic sculpture, which is usually overwhelmed by its placement in a vast plaza or against the bare walls of a gallery. Nathaniel Lieberman's work expanded the role of photography by making people aware of their surrounds.

The artists who were interviewed by *Perspecta* are no longer content merely to embellish walls and space. They envision their role as active participants in the creation of the environment.

Perspecta asked each artist roughly the same questions; in order to avoid repetition, their responses have been condensed and presented here as a series of brief essays.

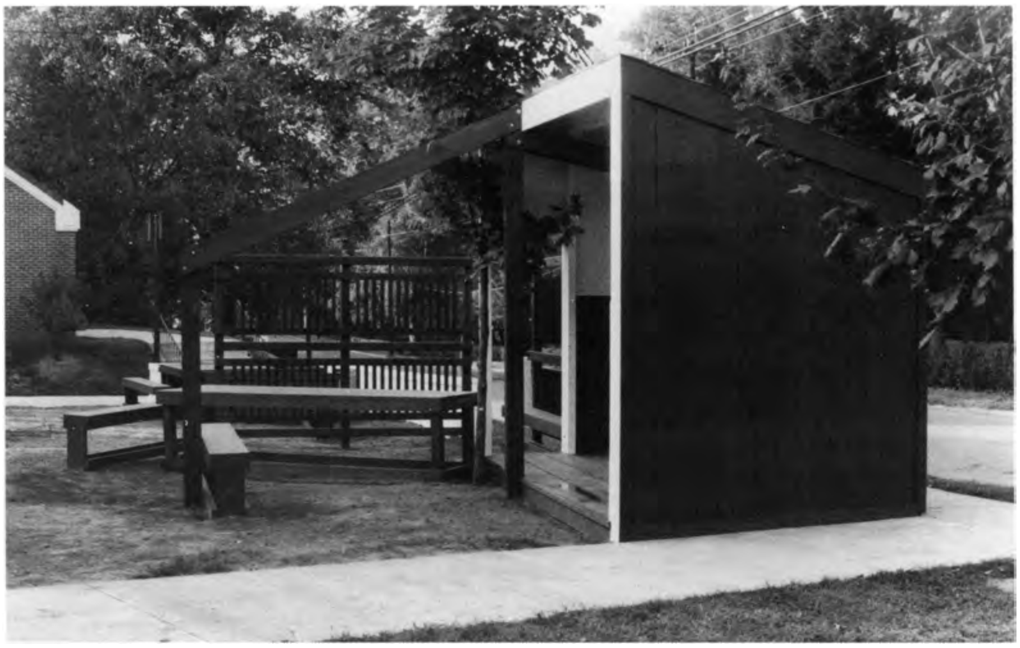
1 *Reading House*. Lake Placid, New York, 1980, Siah Armajani.

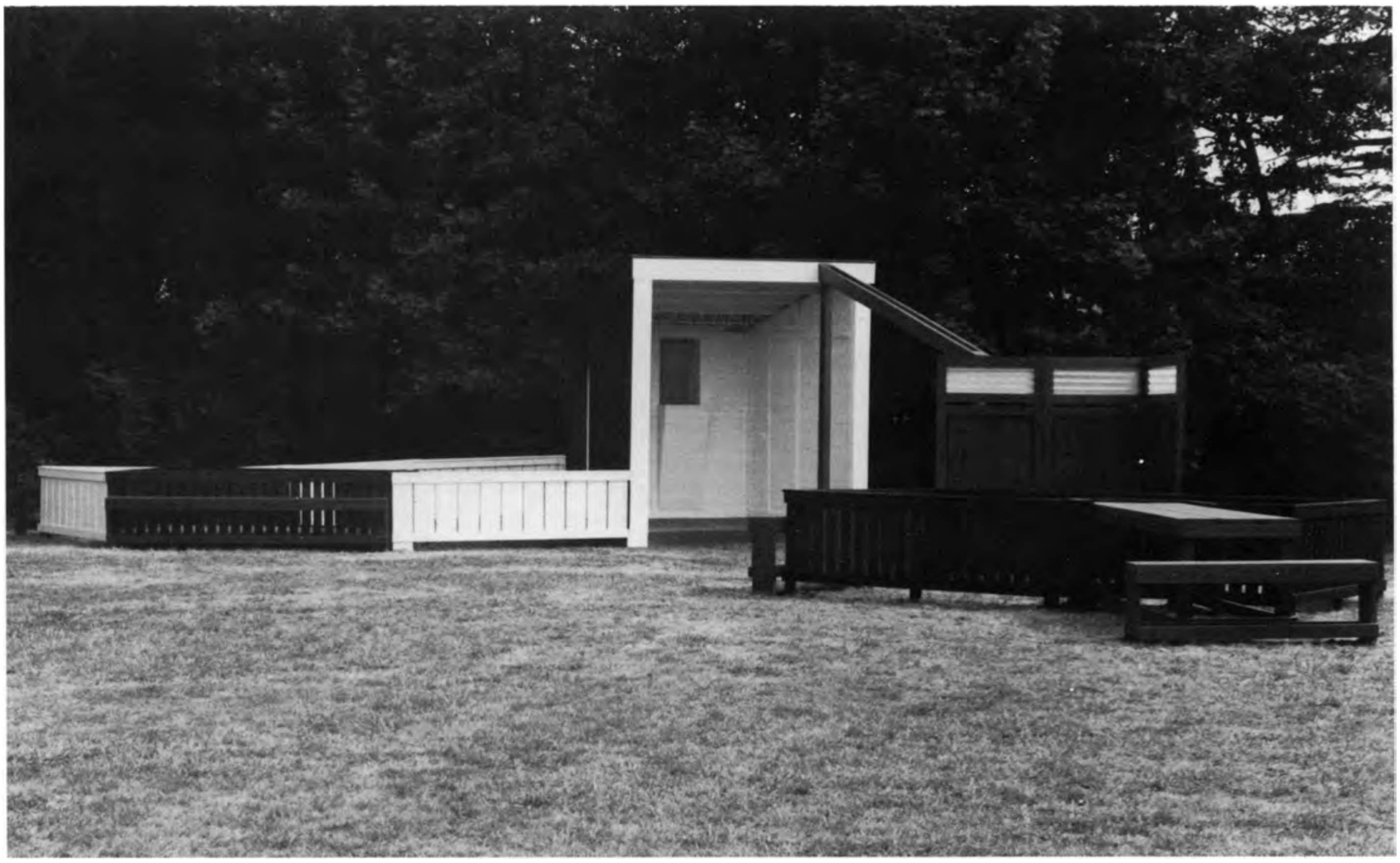


0079–0958/82/180066–42$3.00/0 © 1982 Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal, Inc. and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

2 *Reading Garden No. 1*. Roanoke College, Virginia, 1980.

3 *Reading Garden No. 3*. State University of New York at Purchase, 1980.





Siah Armajani

My work and architecture share the same properties. Architecture does not exist to house my work nor is my work made to enhance architecture. The use of words such as architectural (in sculpture) and sculptural (in architecture) for the purpose of establishing analogy, dichotomy, contrast or comparison between the two is no longer descriptive.

The relationship between architecture and my work exists because both contribute to the creation of public places. For example, there is a relationship between a bench and a room if both are in a house. During the mid-sixties, I, as well as other artists, was searching for a new form for content. I turned to the social sciences as a model for a compatible methodology that would incorporate political, social, and economic considerations. It became evident that possibilities in art were many and that some decisions were necessary on my part. One of my first decisions was to cast my lot with architecture because architecture by its very nature is social. It is a mass culture and could and should manifest a social system that is fair and just.

The intensity of the social problems that encouraged some artists to become artist/architects has also offered an invitation to become civic rather than in-studio artists and to build public rather than private works. As a civic artist, I am interested in architecture where the architectural object is encountered in an understandable context. Similarly, I am interested in artifacts that reveal the nobility of their usefulness. My intention is to build open, available, useful, common, public gathering places. Gathering places that are neighborly. They are not conceived in terms of wood and steel but in terms of their nature as places at hand, ready to be used. My intention is to build structures that are not merely problematic or accidental but that relate to human purposes, structures that apply to being with things and belonging to a place.

Reading House in Lake Placid, New York, is on a residential village street (Illus. 1). *Reading House* is not meant to alter or enhance its site but rather to be neighborly to the other houses around it. As with my other work, in *Reading House* my preoccupation with site was kept to a minimum. *Reading House* simply fills the site in a vacant city lot. Like other houses around it, *Reading House* is not self-sufficient and is not quite independent. Folks buy old houses and move them right onto vacant lots in their own neighborhoods. *Reading House* has that quality.

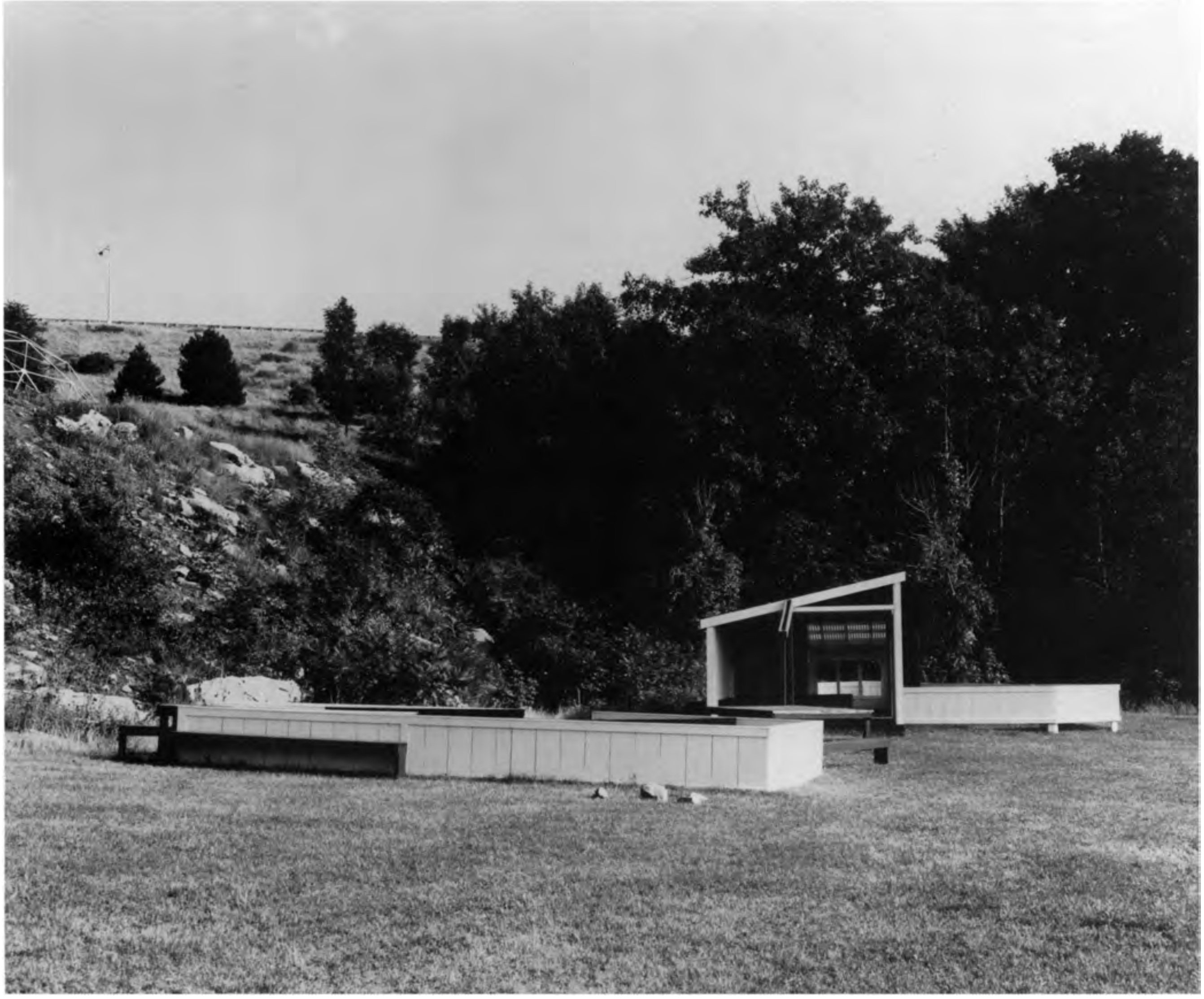
Reading House is meaningful only because it is useful. Everything in the structure of *Reading House* persists to make it a useful place, a reachable place. In a similar way, *Reading Garden* is entered not as a thing between four walls, in a geometric spatial sense, but as a tool for reading (Illus. 2 & 3). Each structure and part is in a line of reference that goes from one to another; from shed to arch, arch to bench, bench to table, table to fence, fence to location, and location to places near and far from *Reading Garden*. Each one implies the other one. Hammer implies the nail, the board, the *Reading Garden*, the builder, the user.

My work is influenced by early common sense, pragmatic log cabins, wooden houses, and bridges. Common sense structures are conceived in terms of the practical activities that they house, creating a synthesis between structural and ideological concerns. As Heidegger said, "practical activities have their own sort of vision."

My work is also influenced by the everydayness of everyday things, but a door here, a chimney there, are not subjective things for which one has a feeling. Only when they direct us into a place for living do everyday things become entities which are accessible—structures for concern, always ready to be occupied.

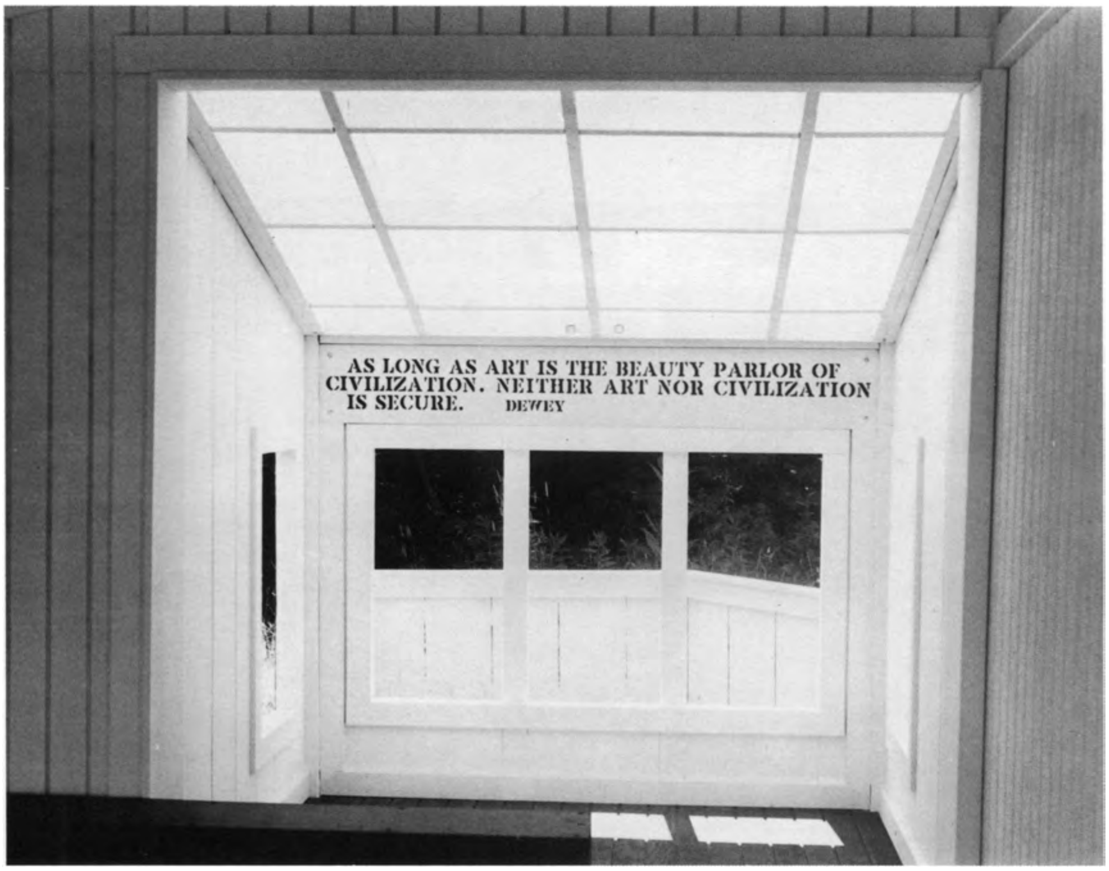
I'm interested in understanding the structure of American folklife—its lore, traditions, contents, and modes of existence—and in discovering the basis of the traditional materials and crafts of folk architecture. It seems that we have lost the trace of how and why things are put together. There is a rupture of reference, a loss of memory, an absence of know-how.

Public art provides a means of repairing the rupture between contemporary life and the things that we have lost. In view of the important implications of public art, I often contemplate its predicament, exploring my assumptions about its nature in order to formulate a synthesis. The predicament of public art emanates from problems of categories of content, systems of reference, and conditions of events. The assumptions I hold about public art emanate from my belief that a work of art should be grounded in the structure of its political, social, and economic context because that context gives a work of art its meaning. The synthesis of public art calls for a search for a populist cultural history to support a structural unity between built objects and their public setting.

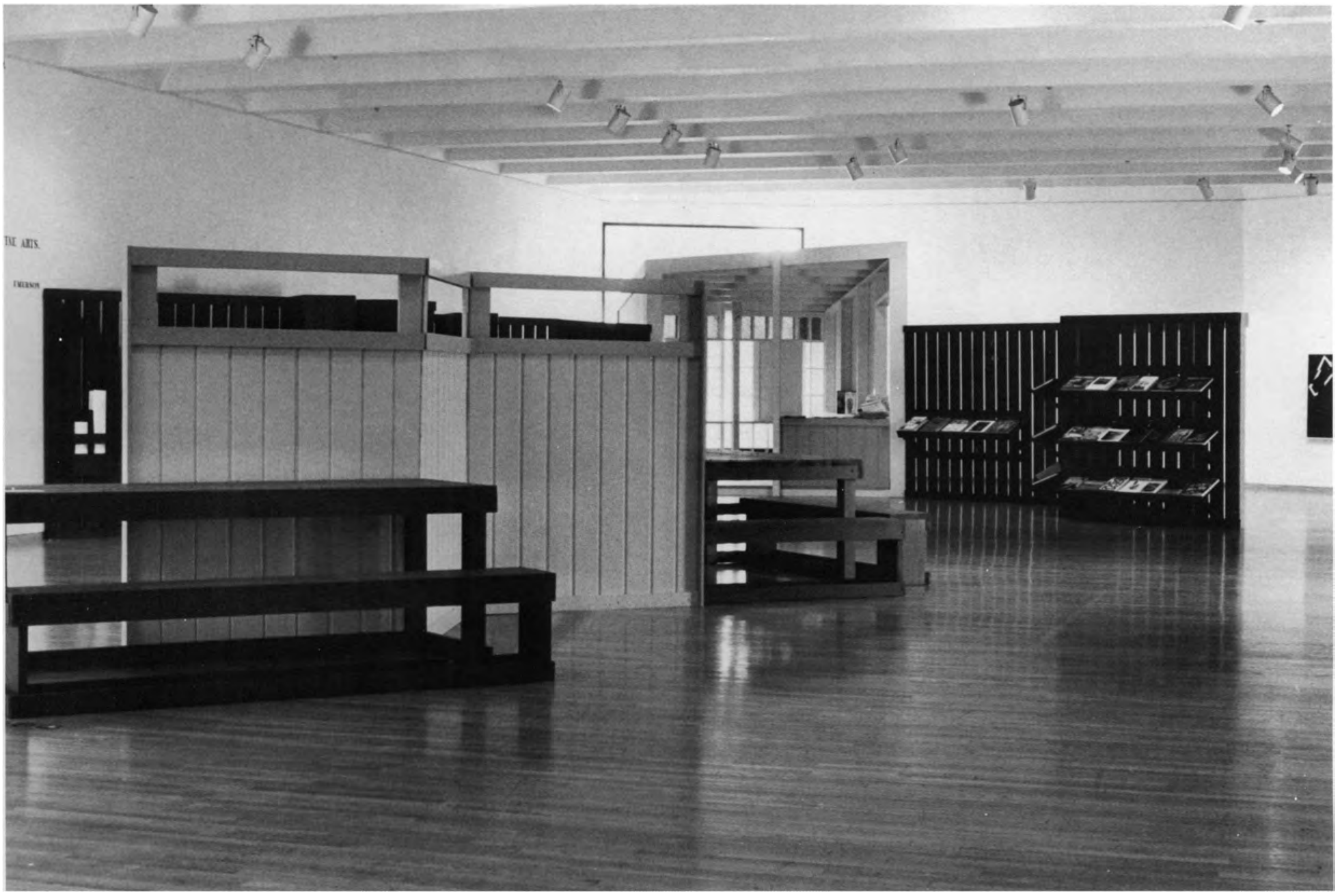


4 *Meeting Garden*. Art Park, Lewiston, New York, 1980.

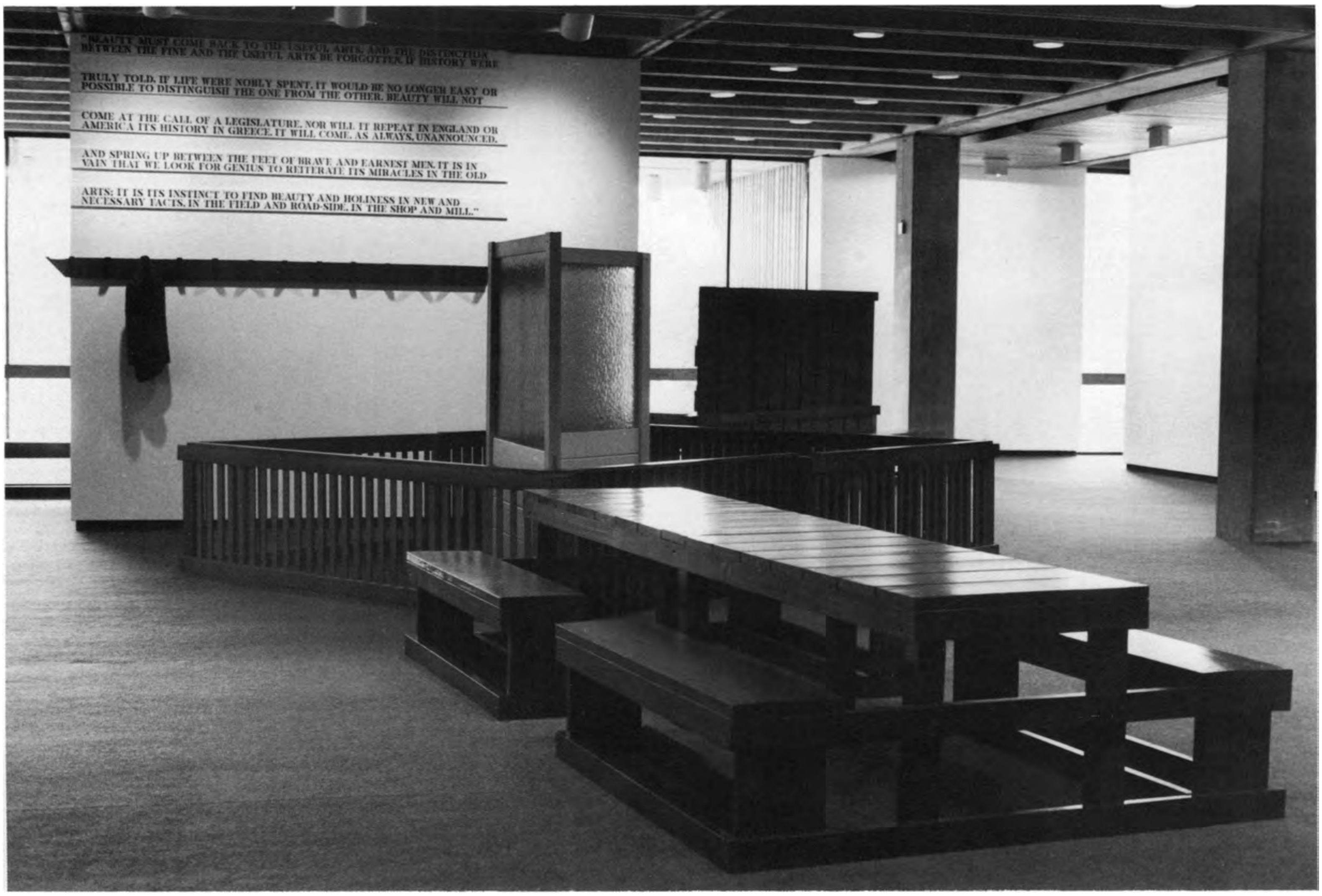
5 *Meeting Garden*. Detail.


AS LONG AS ART IS THE BEAUTY PARLOR OF
CIVILIZATION. NEITHER ART NOR CIVILIZATION
IS SECURE. DEWEY

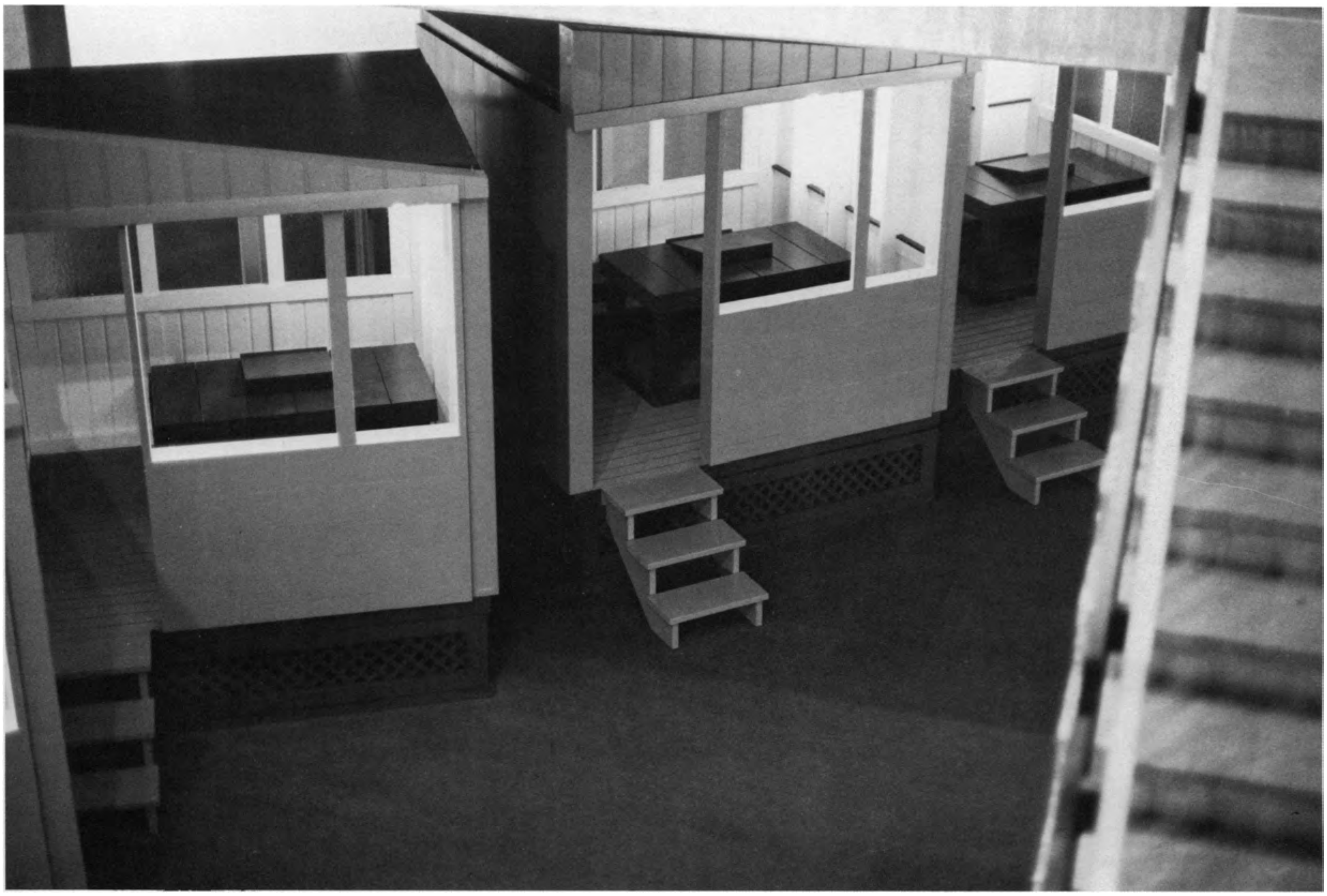
6 *Newsstand.* Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 1980.



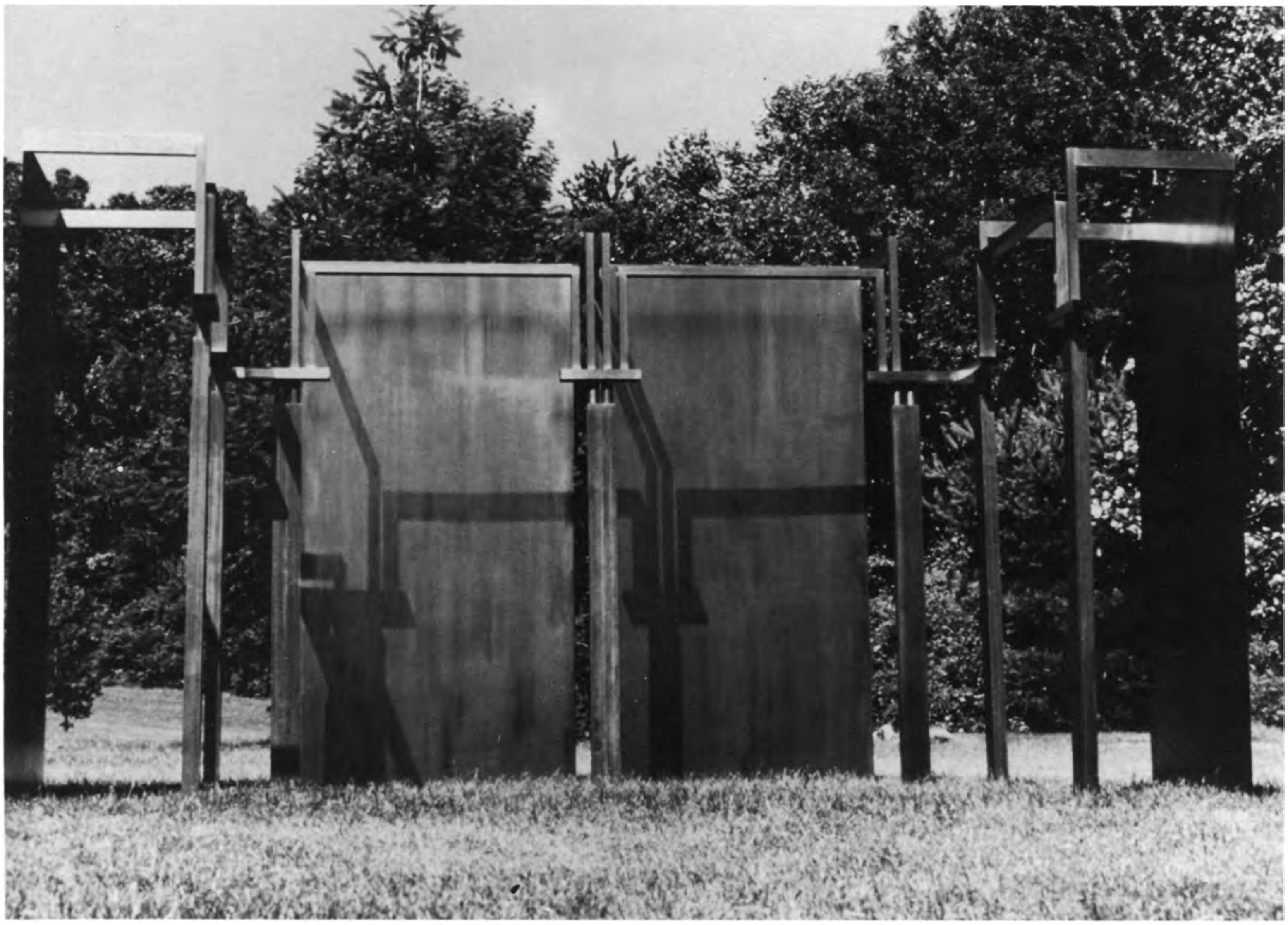
7 *Office for Four*. Hudson County River Museum, Yonkers, New York, 1981.


"BEAUTY MUST COME BACK TO THE USEFUL ARTS, AND THE DISTINCTION
BETWEEN THE FINE AND THE USEFUL ARTS BE FORGOTTEN. IF HISTORY WERE
TRULY TOLD, IF LIFE WERE NOBLY SPENT, IT WOULD BE NO LONGER EASY OR
POSSIBLE TO DISTINGUISH THE ONE FROM THE OTHER. BEAUTY WILL NOT
COME AT THE CALL OF A LEGISLATURE, NOR WILL IT REPEAT IN ENGLAND OR
AMERICA ITS HISTORY IN GREECE. IT WILL COME, AS ALWAYS, UNANNOUNCED,
AND SPRING UP BETWEEN THE FEET OF BRAVE AND EARNEST MEN. IT IS IN
VAIN THAT WE LOOK FOR GENIUS TO REITERATE ITS MIRACLES IN THE OLD
ARTS; IT IS ITS INSTINCT TO FIND BEAUTY AND HOLINESS IN NEW AND
NECESSARY FACTS, IN THE FIELD AND ROAD-SIDE, IN THE SHOP AND MILL."

8 *Office for Four*. Detail.



1 Untitled Installation. New York Institute of Technology, brass and copper, 5 x 8 x 5 feet, 1978.



Niki Logis

As a child, I traveled in Greece visiting various archaeological sites with my parents. I remember being particularly struck by the ruins at Sounion. They were monumental yet simultaneously they were quite small, small enough for one person to construct without benefit of an army of laborers. I was easily persuaded that I too could make three-dimensional pictures, framing views and arranging vertical forms against the horizon line.

Archaeological and architectural sites have always moved me more than painting or nature. It is not building per se that turns the moment for me but the evidence that human beings have been in a given place and left their mark so that their time is arrested for as long as their materials endure.

My work is not often influenced by contemporary architecture, but I do choose to respond to places like Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Knossos, the Campidoglio, and the colonnade at St. Peter's. The colonnade is almost a piece of sculpture for me. There, the measurement of space is an incredibly touching experience. Sculptors have rarely treated space itself with such finesse and abstract power.

The experience of such spaces has led me to work in a relatively large size and in the out of doors, despite the formidable problems of materials, engineering, and money. For twenty years I have learned to work with every material that came my way so that one day I would be able to walk into a shop and build anything I had drawn or imagined. For a while, I worked exclusively in direct metal, but as my pieces became larger I saw that they would have to be fabricated in a factory at great expense (Illus. 1 & 2). To continue building, I recently worked out a system using hardwood and hardwood plywoods, which allows the construction of lightweight, weatherproof, and durable forms (Illus. 3). Ultimately I would like to make much larger pieces to be cast in concrete—a material whose inherent lack of value allows the primacy of the forms to be perceived (Illus. 4).

One of my objectives in making outdoor sculpture is to take the isolated monolithic character out of sculpture and replace it with an aptitude for space. The superfluous quality of "statues" offends me. I take an adversary position to the contemporary convention of placing a piece of sculpture in front of a building instead of on a site for which it is intended: a practice that demeans both object and exemplifies the philistinism of municipalities and corporations.

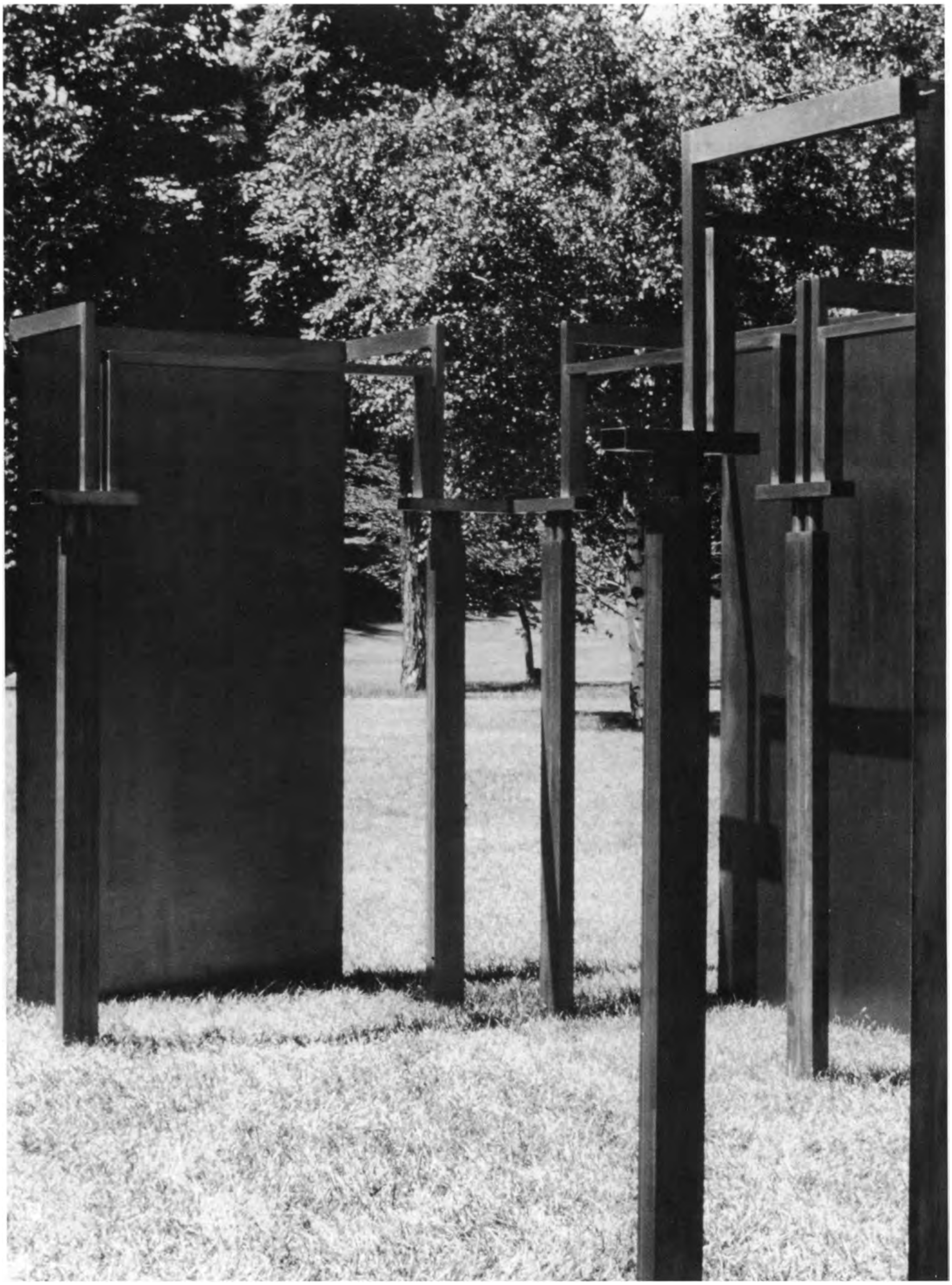
Rather than decorating or enhancing space with sculpture, I am interested in sculpture that modifies space and provides new sensations. As I site pieces, like the one at Wave Hill, I consider vistas that can be framed, shadows that will be cast on the ground, and how to play off the scale, character, and color of the surroundings (Illus. 5 & 6). I want to engage the viewers' bodies as well as their sight and make them feel that a place is different because of the sculpture. When sculpture relates to the landscape and the environment beyond it, the relationship makes a metaphorical image that is more fundamental and immediate than the egocentric metaphor of self-contained work.

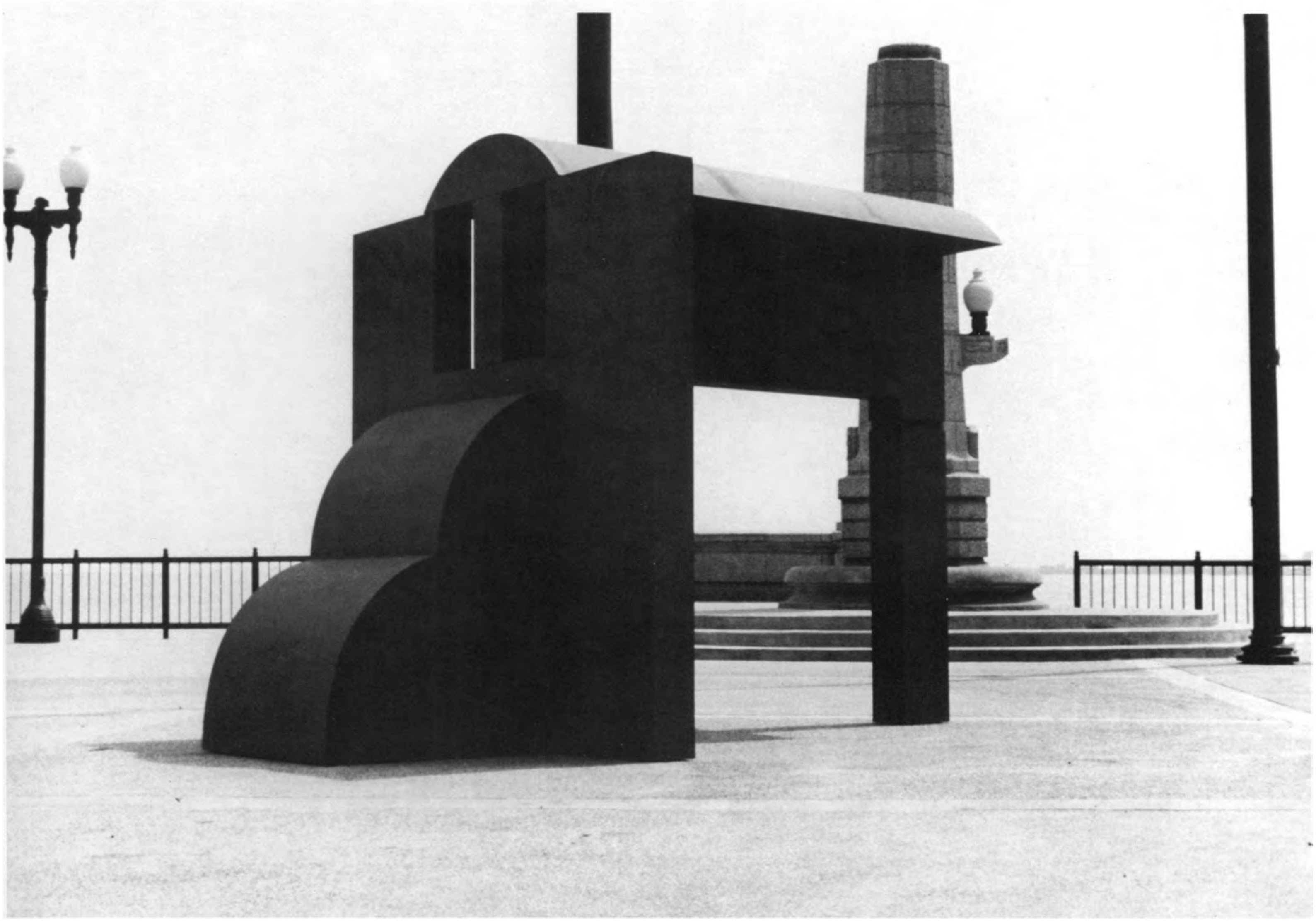
Although my sculpture involves spatial structures, I don't see any need to confuse what I do with architecture. Architecture is similar to sculpture in that it involves a three-dimensional object, that is external to the viewer, but architecture is different in that it also involves a volumetric situation that can encompass the viewer. Architecture encloses space, and people circulate through it according to an established sequence. It has a function, regardless of how little emphasis may be placed on that function. Sculpture, for me, exists as an object in space with neither inside nor outside, only the thing itself. My structures have openings but they don't have doors and they never have stairs. The scale of the openings in my work insures that a person cannot easily walk through them; they are openings to look through and to contemplate.

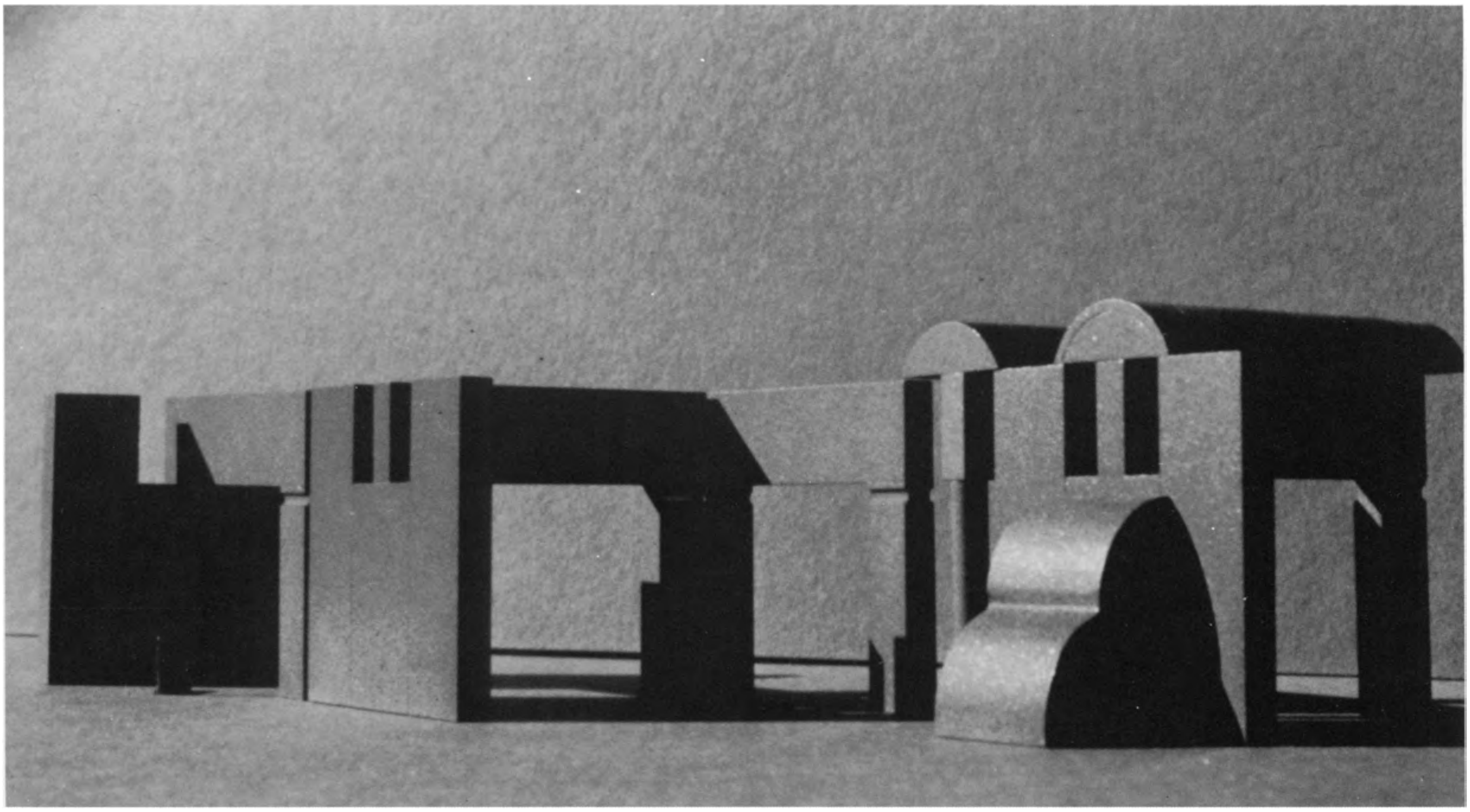
2 Untitled Installation. Detail.

3 *Square Cut*. Aviation and marine plywood and paint, 10 x 14 x 8 feet, 1981.

4 *Square Cut*. Maquette of extensive outdoor project to be executed in concrete, 1980.

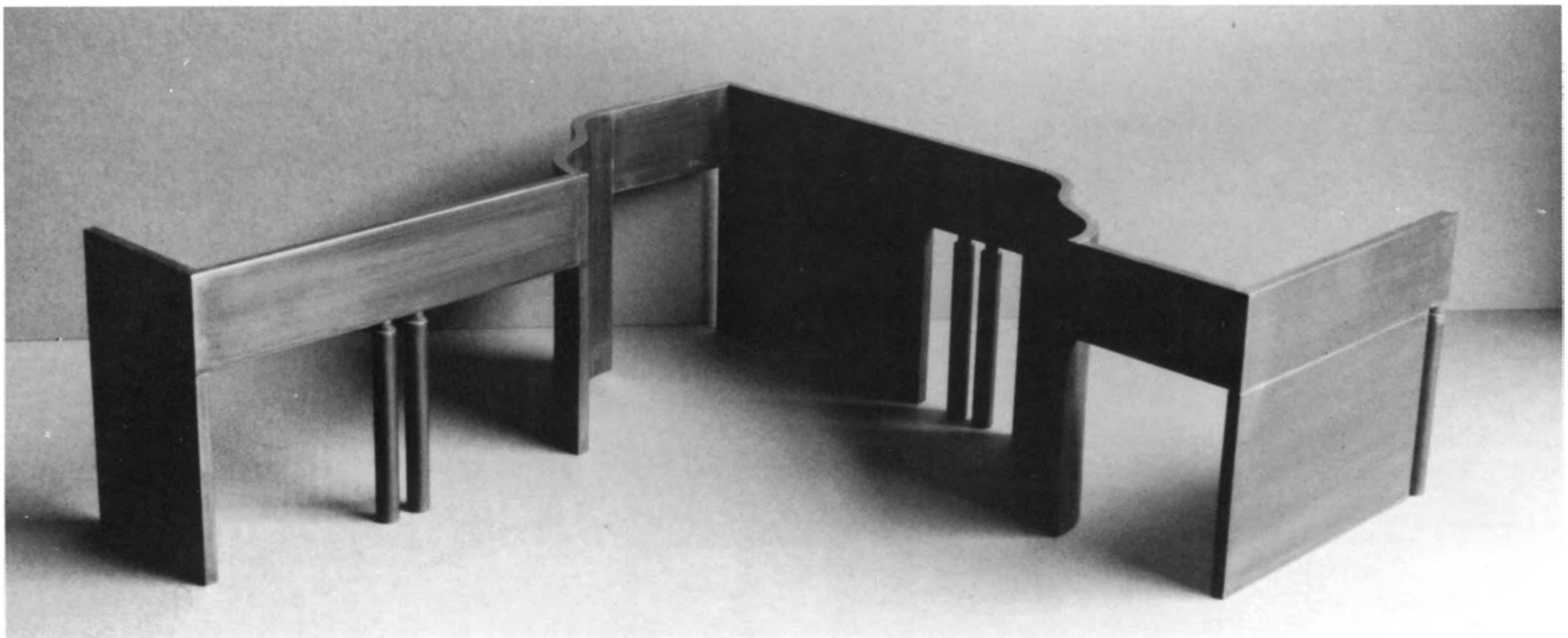


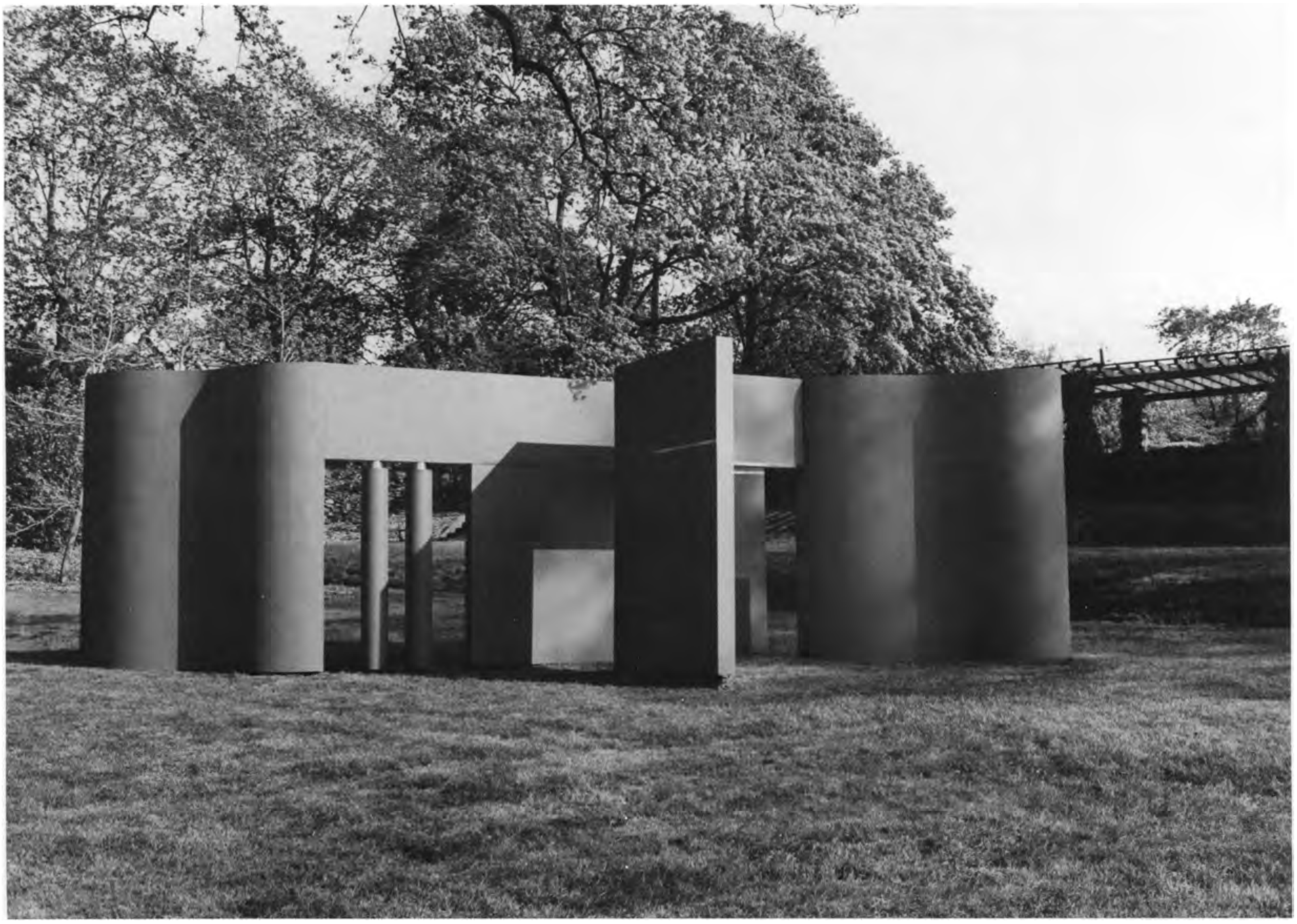


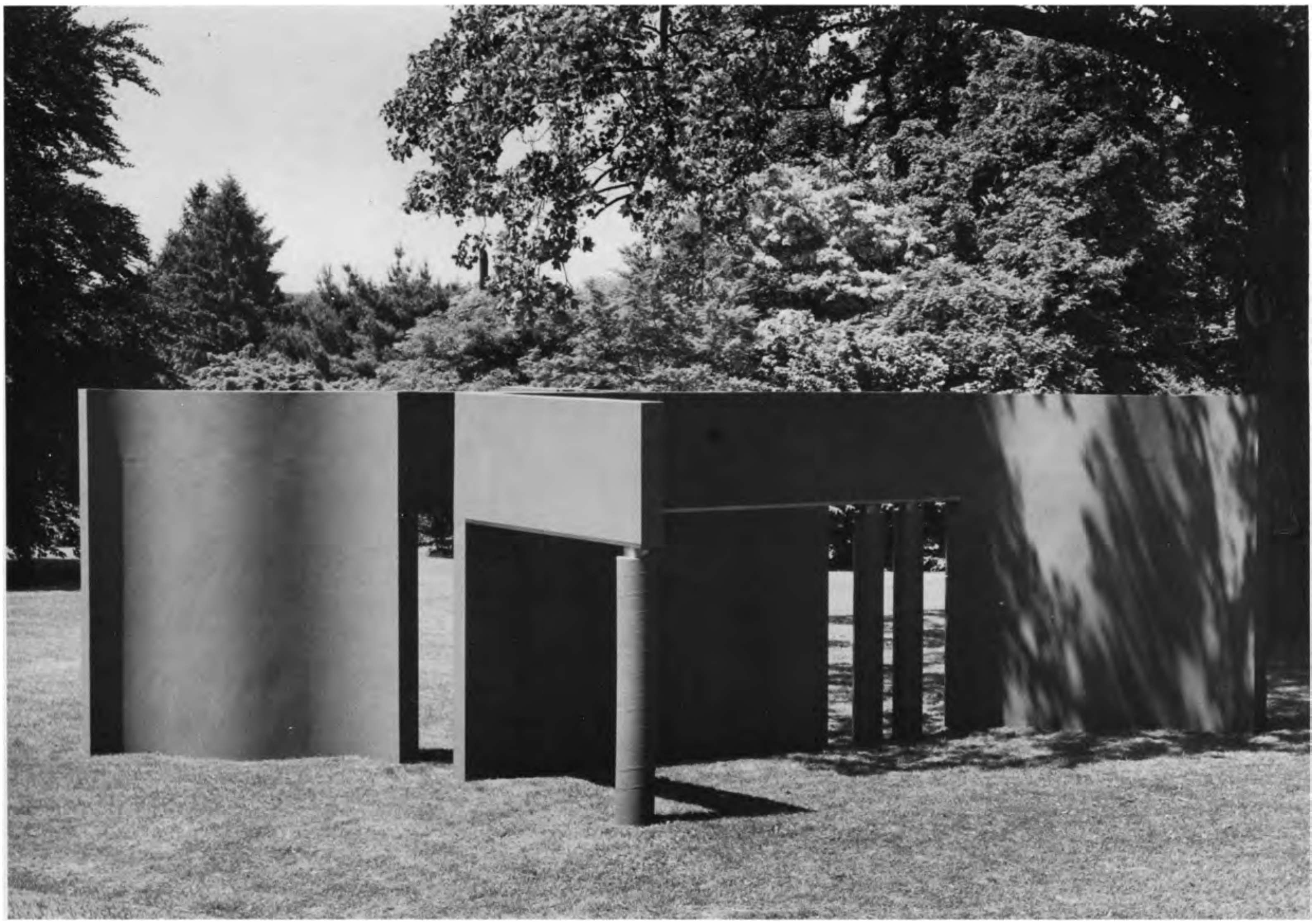


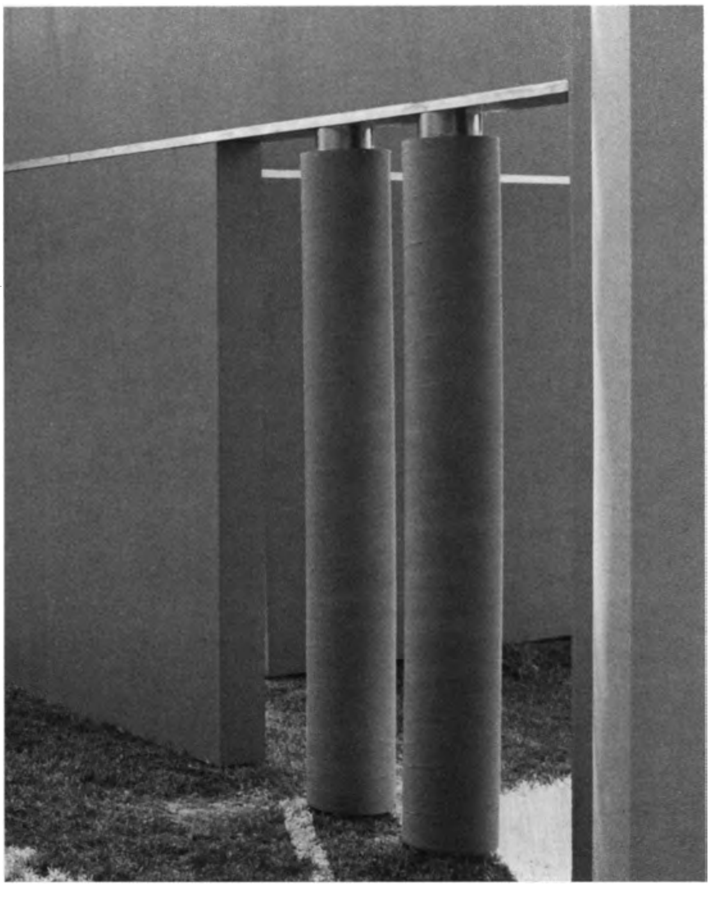
5 *Bay of Angels*. Maquette, bronze and limestone 5½ x 18 x 18 inches, 1979.

6 *Bay of Angels*. Wood, copper and paint, 10 x 32 x 16 feet, 1980.





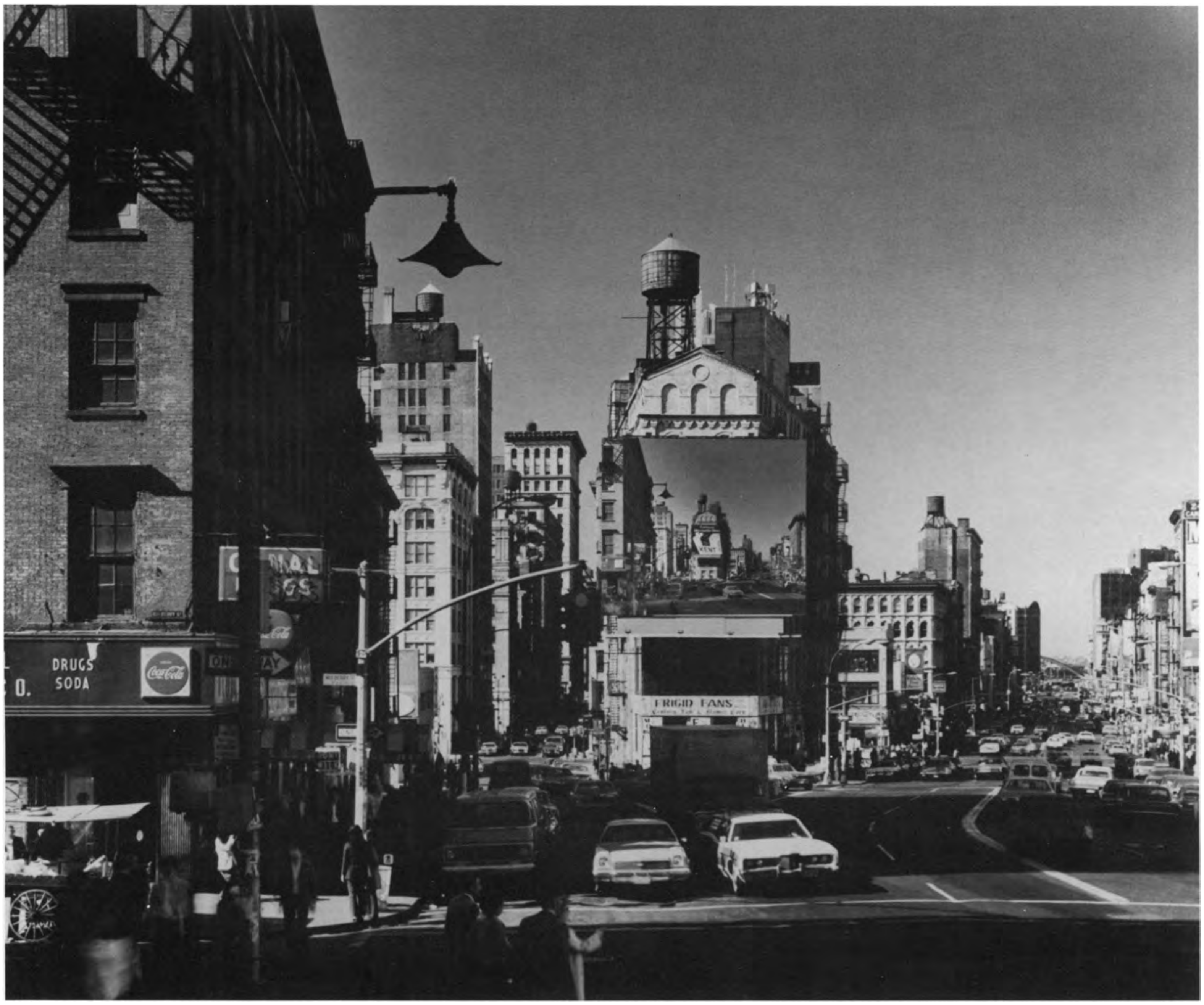




7 *Bay of Angels.*

8 *Bay of Angels.* Detail.

1 *Broadway*. Photo montage, 1980.


DRUGS
SODA
Coca-Cola
FRIGID FANS

Nathaniel Lieberman

My aim is to confront the viewer with a photographic reality that is believable though it cannot be true, thereby questioning the space usually depicted in photography. I like suggesting spaces that would be impossible for an architect to create; illusions like walls made of water. I hope to suggest space that is inappropriate and see what it feels like; is it unnerving, or light and magical?

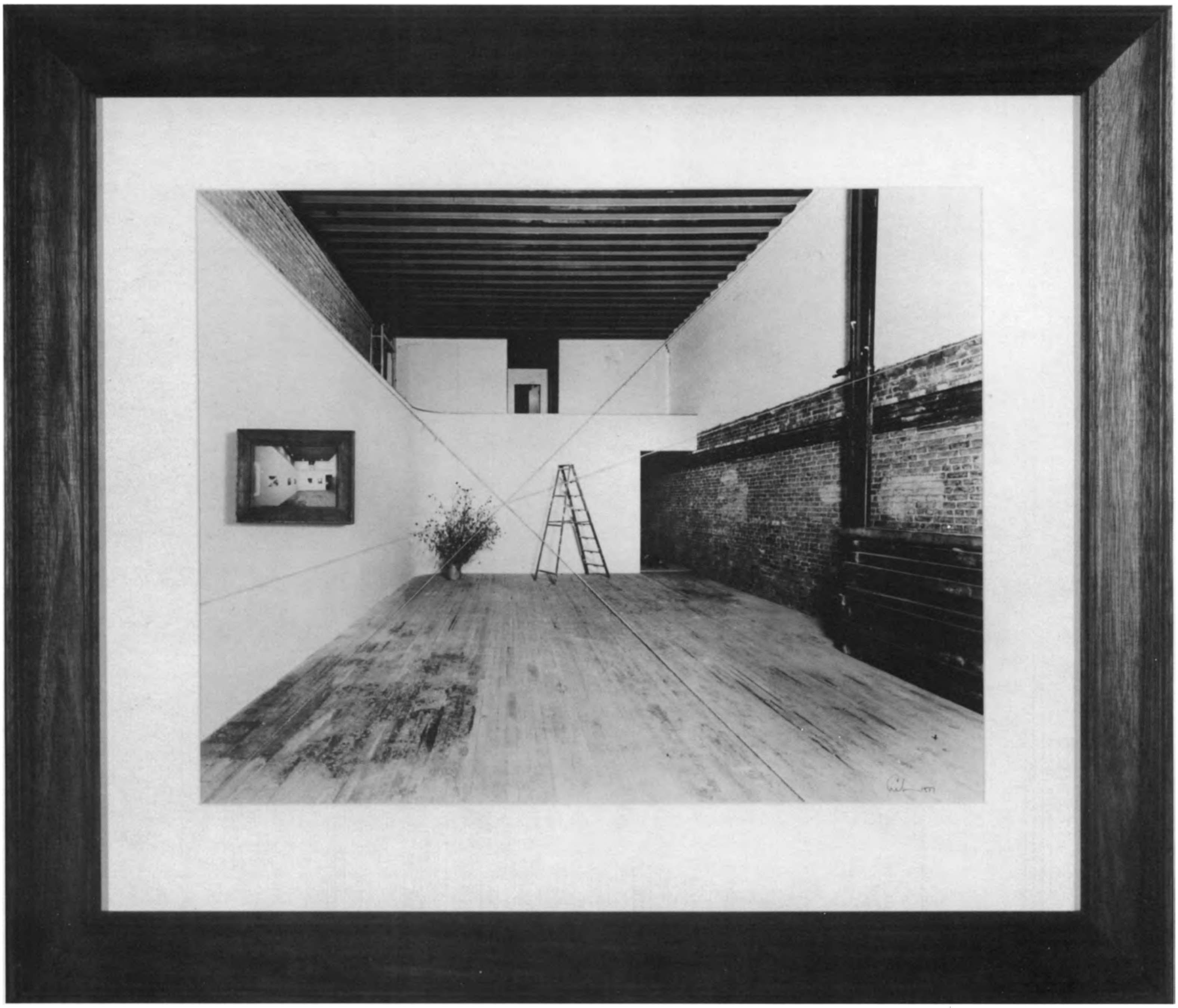
I try to make people see, in the sense of being aware, the world that they look at. When I take a photograph of a street scene that contains a billboard and then place that photograph in black and white on the billboard, my aim is to make people more aware of the scene in which they are standing by showing them my vision of that scene (Illus. 1). The billboard is black and white in order to make it stand out from reality and also to catch people's eye.

In my collages I work backwards, using two-dimensional abstract elements to create an illusion of space. Photography and drawing have conventions to represent three dimensions in two-dimensional media, such as the convention of linear perspective. You do not see things in perspective if you stand in a three-dimensional space because there, the brain takes the converging lines of things receding into the distance and makes them appear parallel again. My work overrides these artistic conventions and so throws off your expectations. My training in Gestalt theory subconsciously operates—I'm very aware of the perceptual process. I strongly believe that the most unsophisticated viewer is very sensitive because the brain is a very subtle perceiving machine.

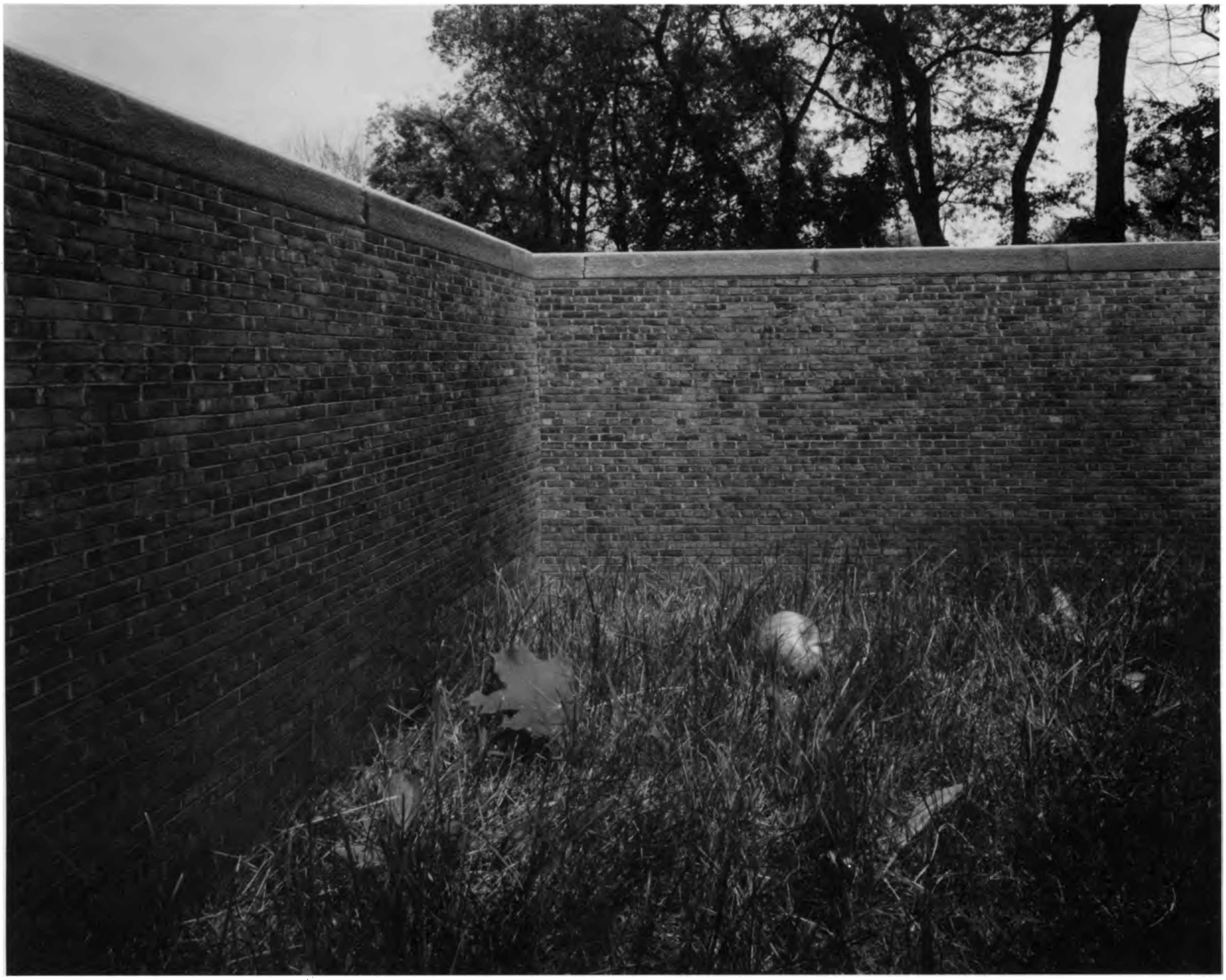
In *Vanishing Self Portrait* I take a plane that is diminishing and on that plane I place a picture which is rectangular rather than diminishing (Illus. 2). Suddenly that plane is wrenched around and becomes parallel to the picture plane rather than receding. The original reason for decreasing the vanishing point was so that the final picture was taken from the same point of view as the original. If you take three-dimensional and two-dimensional objects and try to measure them, photographing them from the same position is essential, so that in this case the picture looks like it's sitting on the wall. On the simplest level, conventions are not how we actually perceive things.

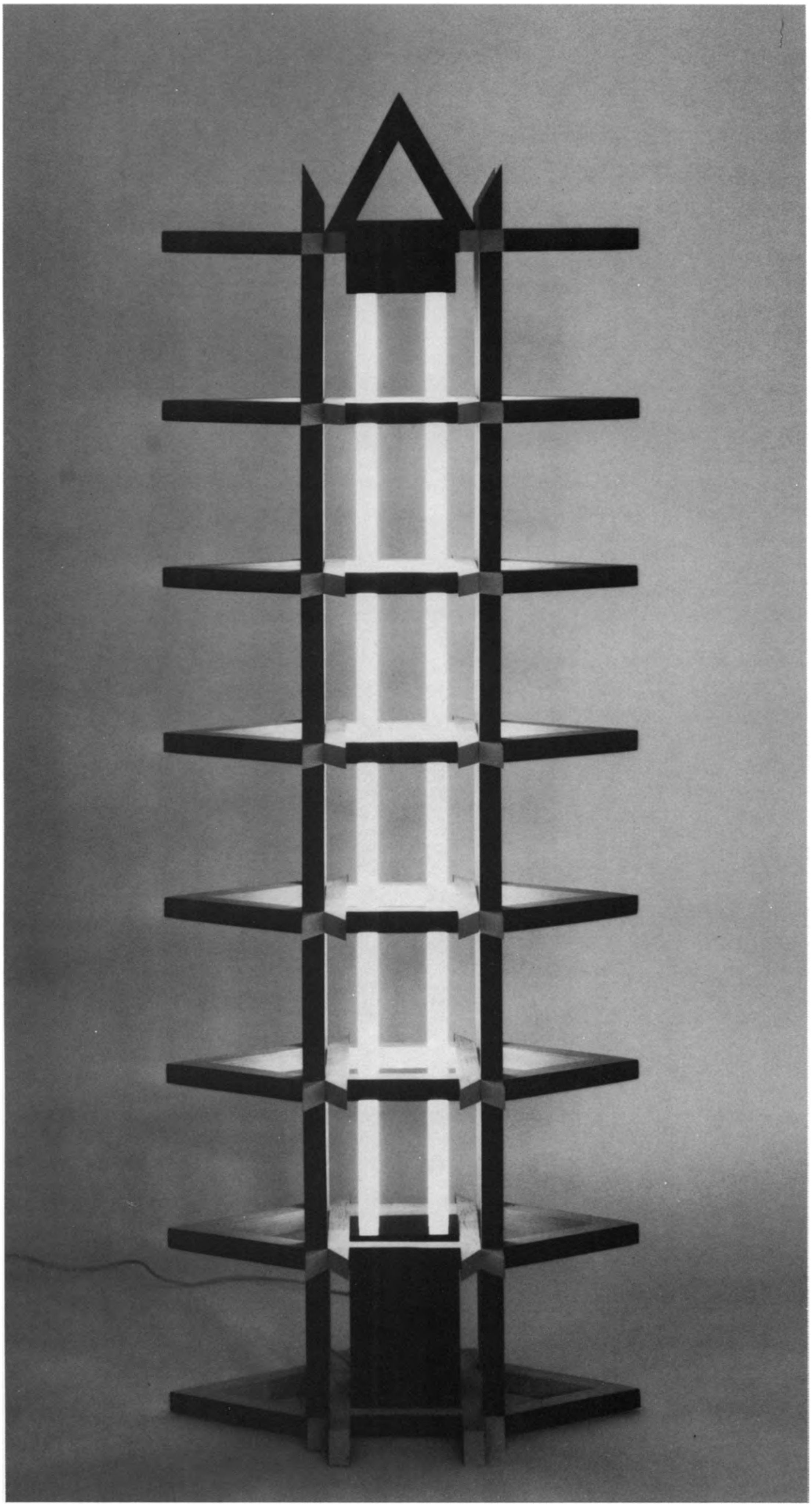
Edges make things seem undeniably real. A conflict is created in my photograph of bricks and grass because the bricks are out of scale and yet you're looking at something that has photographic truth (which it wouldn't have if the grass had a straight cropped edge) (Illus. 3). In photography, as in all of life, I think that the interfaces between things are the most crucial areas, the most charged areas, for they are the place where relationships and transitions occur.

2 *Vanishing Self Portrait*. Photograph, 1980.



3 Untitled photographic study, 1980.





1 *Woolworth Lamp.* Pine, paint, plastic and neon, 1981.

Christopher Sproat

I'm interested in the direction architecture is going—the hybridization of past styles and the expression of something beyond function. I think that similar things are happening in art and that it's a good time for art and architecture to remarry. Art should be used as a necessary element in architecture, as integral as glass or concrete. Then there will be a chance for art and architecture to succeed in an architectural setting again.

Before I began to make furniture and lamps, much of my sculpture was made specifically for the place it was going to occupy. I didn't see my pieces as mobile, salable, or applicable to more than one situation. Furniture offers an alternative to specificity and I like the mobility of furniture because it can go to unforeseen places.

My work often straddles the line between sculpture and utilitarian object. Even when I design completely utilitarian objects, I approach them differently from the way an architect would. After all, the sensibility that makes someone an artist is completely different from the sensibility that makes someone an architect. Architects usually design furniture with fabrication in mind. They try to exploit the possibilities of the materials that they're using.

In comparison, when I create furniture, I am interested in evoking an existence beyond function. I approach pieces such as *Woolworth Lamp* in terms of personal issues and as a means of expressing my personal vision (Illus. 1). I am not interested in hitting an existing market, so in that sense I belong on the periphery of commerce. To me, productivity means realizing a number of different ideas. Rather than spending a great deal of time getting a few pieces mass-produced, I would prefer to execute a greater number of pieces in wood.

Whereas most architects approach lighting design by using stock fixtures, artists might add a unique or idiosyncratic configuration to lighting design. Pieces like the *Torf Installation* provide a functional level of illumination while delineating space and dramatizing their architectural settings (Illus. 5).

I am involved with the creation of a new cultural vision, the development of a consistent aesthetic which encompasses all aspects of art and environment. A shortcoming of Post-Modernism is that it often glibly pastiches past styles; the imaginative frontier is not developed forward. Our task is to parallel Egyptian, Persian and Assyrian cultures. The aesthetic which I envision is a synthesis of historical aesthetics, but it has to have its own character, reflecting our concept of present and future.

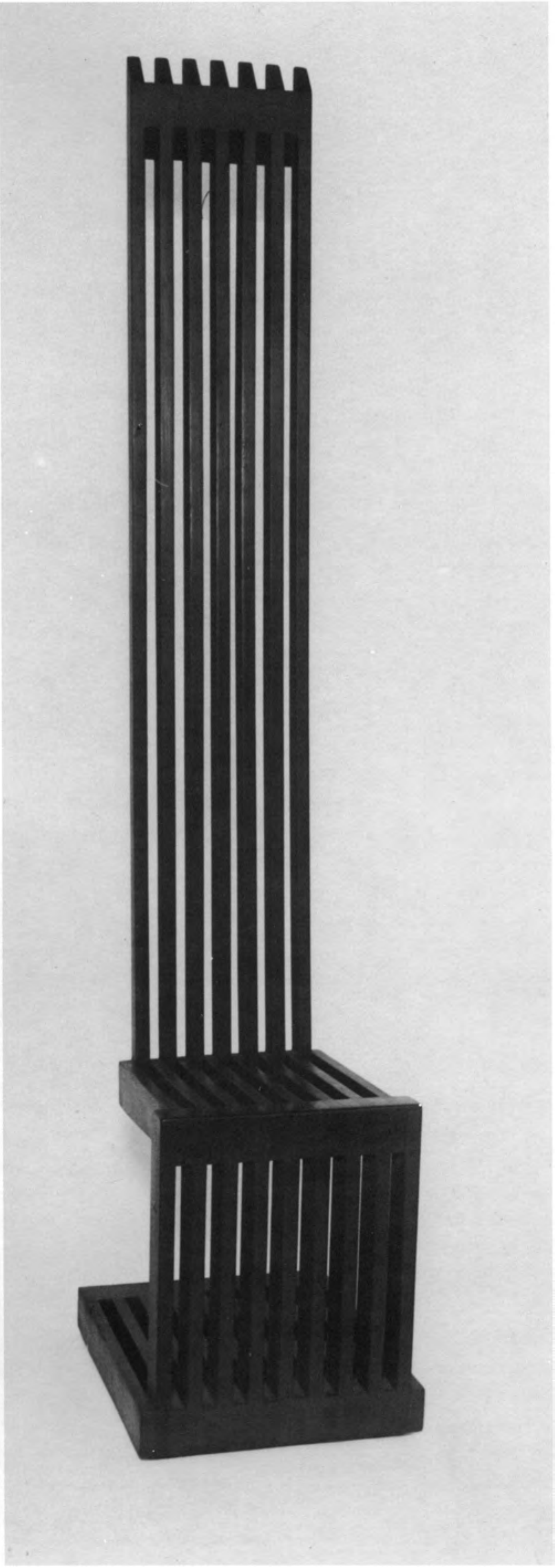
My aesthetic is moonlit rather than sunlit; it has been described by some as "electromythic". It applies to gallery installations, drawings, furniture and light sculptures. If it has analogues in literature, they would be Kafka, C. S. Lewis and Sartre.

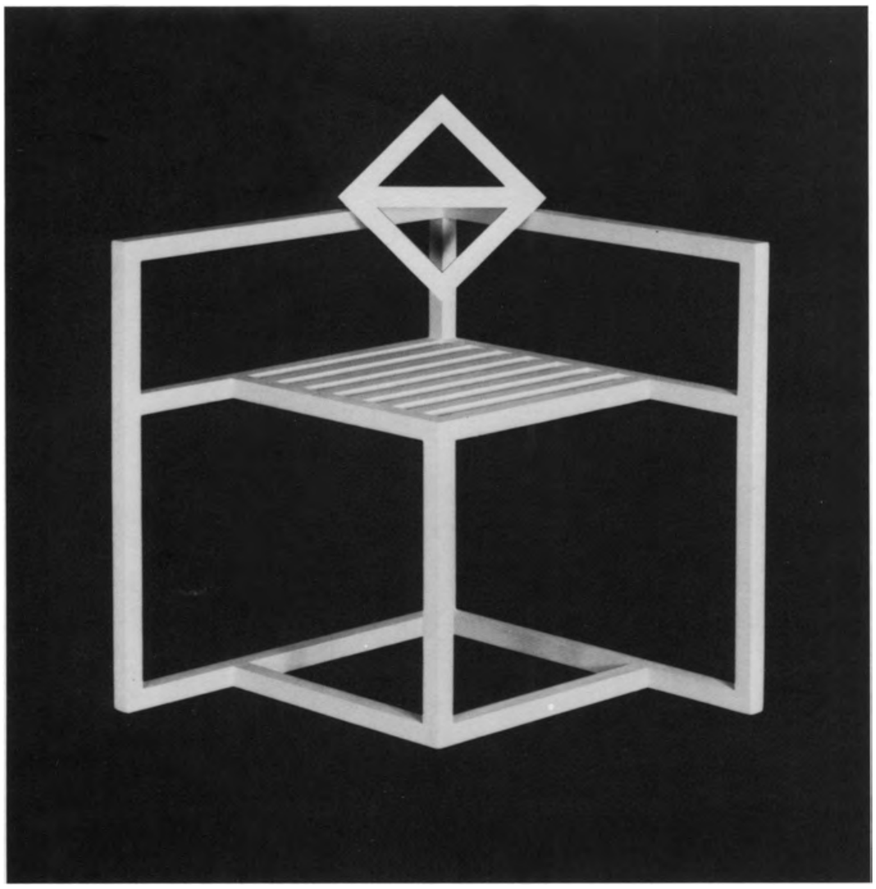
Installations allow total control of a gallery situation. *Palace at Mantis* is one example of how I fuse walls, lighting, furniture and sculpture into one coherent aesthetic (Illus. 6). I like the poetic injustice of installations because it is similar to the temporality of life, but I ideally would like to create a permanent contained environment, possibly as a room or small wing of a museum that would embody values and provide coherent aesthetic experience.

One influence which led me to apply a cohesive vision to my work was the Maight Museum in Nice. I saw a Miro show there and the grounds, the quality of light and the entire environment meshed so perfectly that it made an indelible impression. Similarly, various special environments in museums, such as the Egyptian section at the Boston Museum, have a strong emotional impact on me. The aesthetic experience provided by such environments is the modern person's equivalent of religious experience.

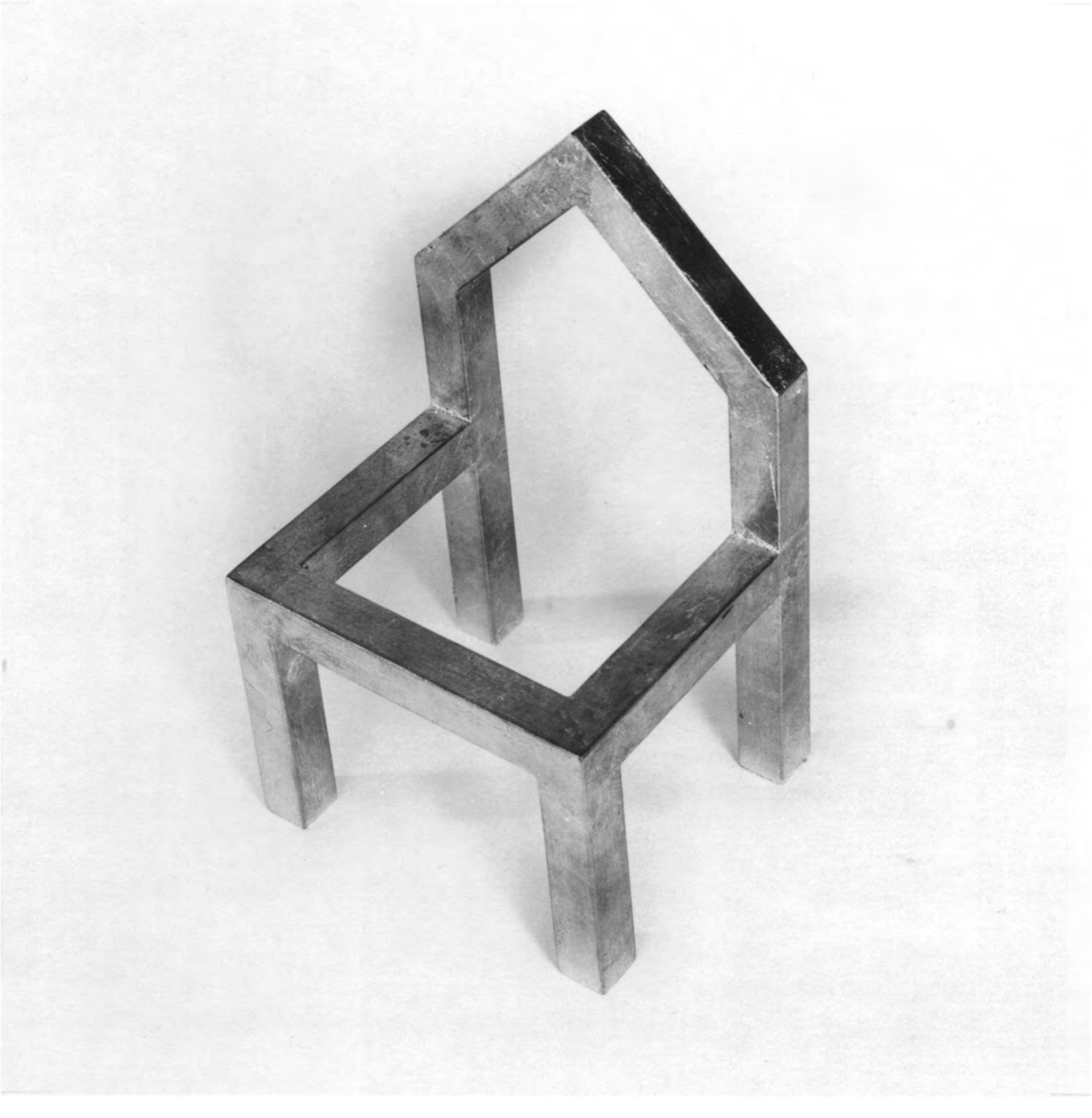
2 *Tone Chair.* Enameled wood and pivot pin back, 24 x 24 x 30 inches, 1980.

3 *Cantilevered Slat Chair.* Enameled wood, 6 x 13 x 22 inches, 1980.

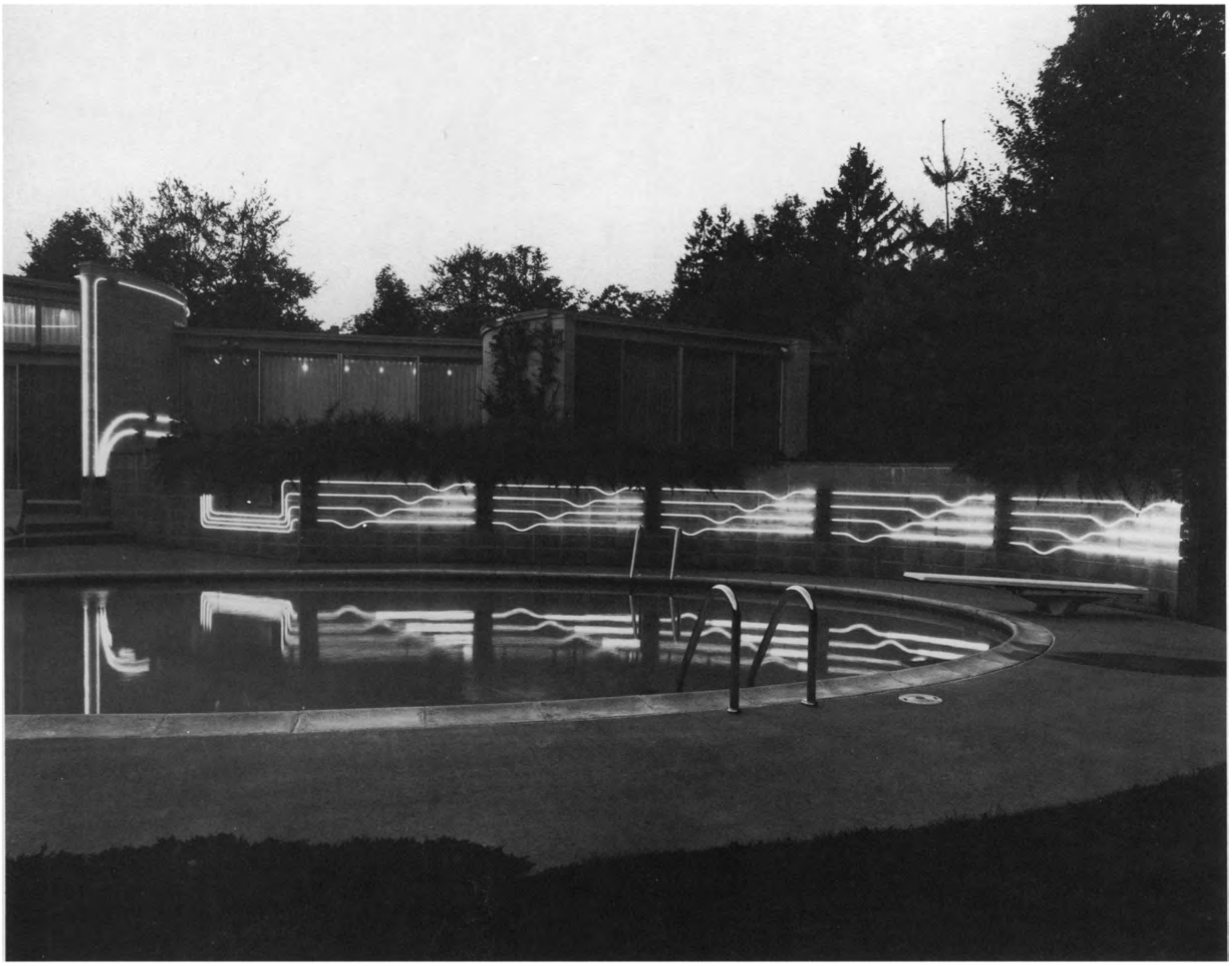




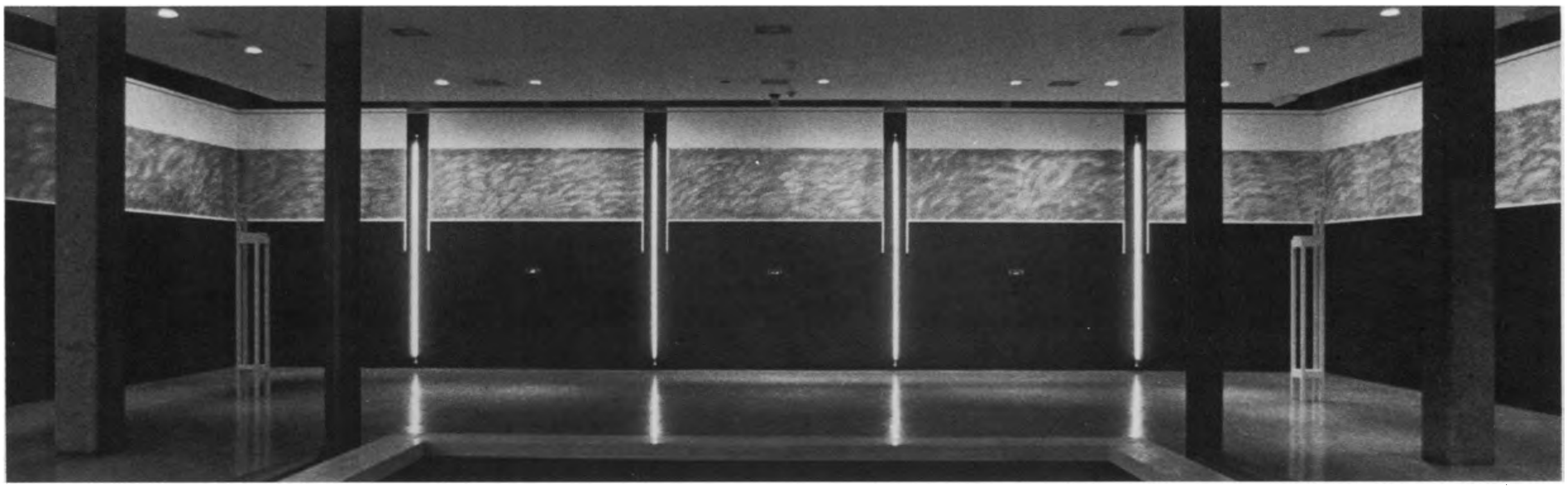
4 *Skeletal Chair*. Wood and metal leaf,
3¾ x 7½ x 14¾ inches, 1979.



5 *Torf Installation.* Two parts: "Ripple," 42 x 4 feet, "Sprout," 19 x 14 feet, blue and white neon and plastic, 1977.



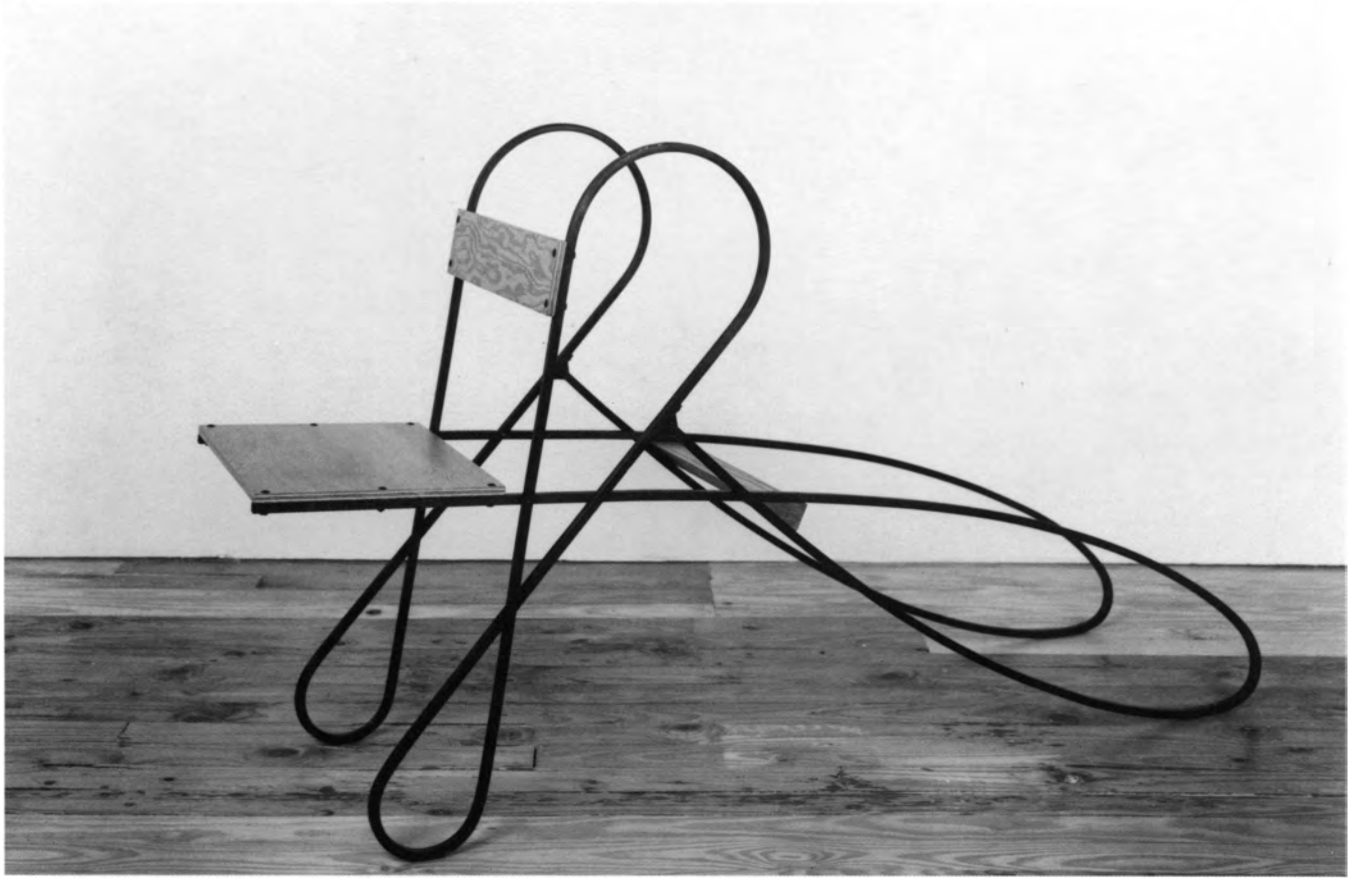
6 *Palace at Mantis*. Installation, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, neon, wood, paint, chalk, plastic and bones, 8 x 70 feet, 1977.



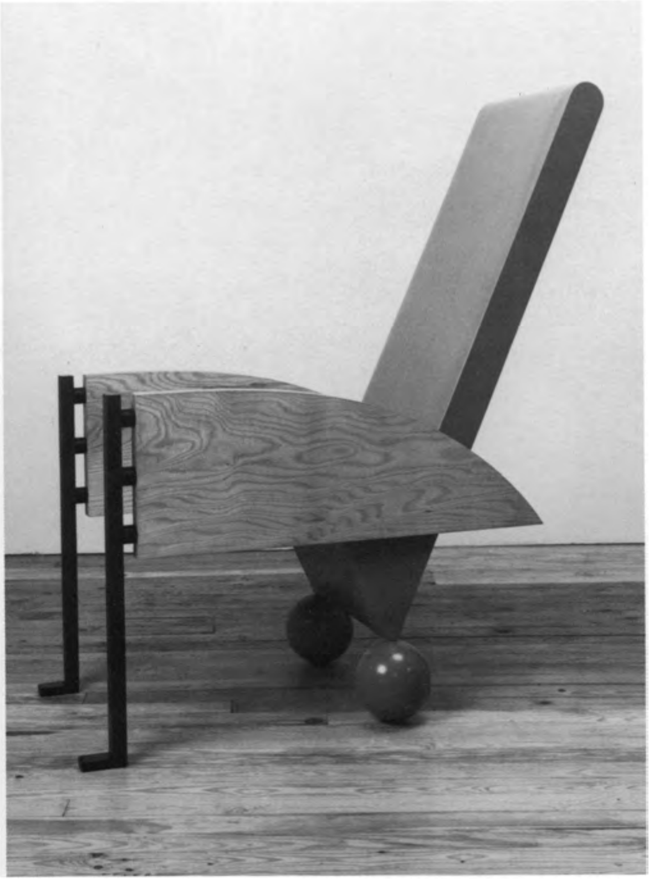
1 *Loop Chair*. 1980.

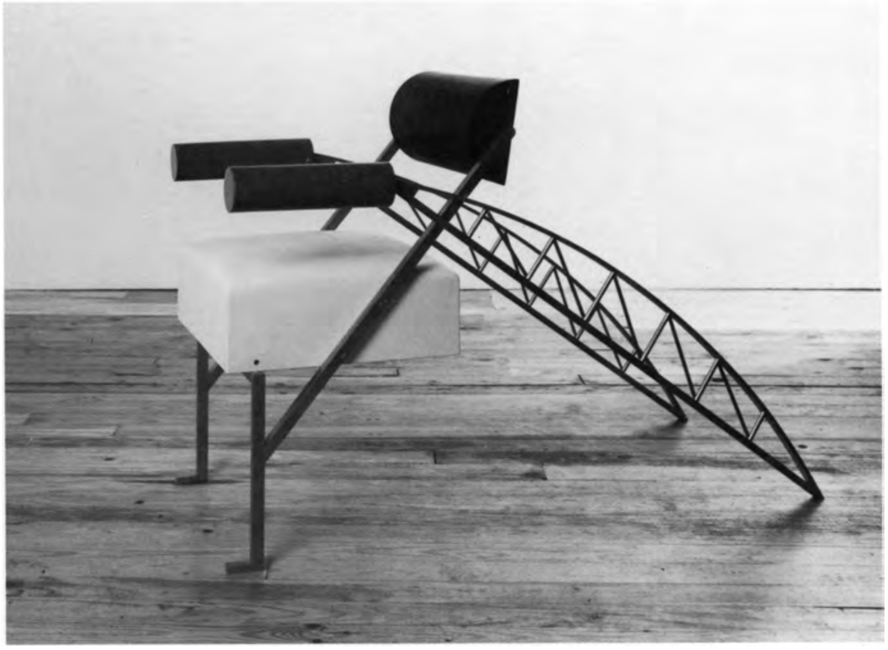
2 *Green Chair*. 1980.

3 *Black, White and Red Chair*. 1980.



Robert Guillot





Drawing provides the core of my work. All of my furniture and lamps are conceived as silhouettes that are compilations of shapes and symbols. For me, drawing is the mysterious process of receiving ideas from my subconscious. When I get absorbed in drawing there is something going on directly between hand and eye. It is not unconscious or spontaneous because I am thinking and making decisions. Somewhere between thinking and doing, I became engaged in a process that is simultaneously reflexive and reflective. Like one in a trance, but more like one in a stupor, I find myself drawing the same thing over and over. A simple cone or a sphere or a figure eight can take on a mysterious significance, and become the kernel of an idea. Then I am unconcerned with materials or the scale of things. It is here that I can escape the baggage of ideas.

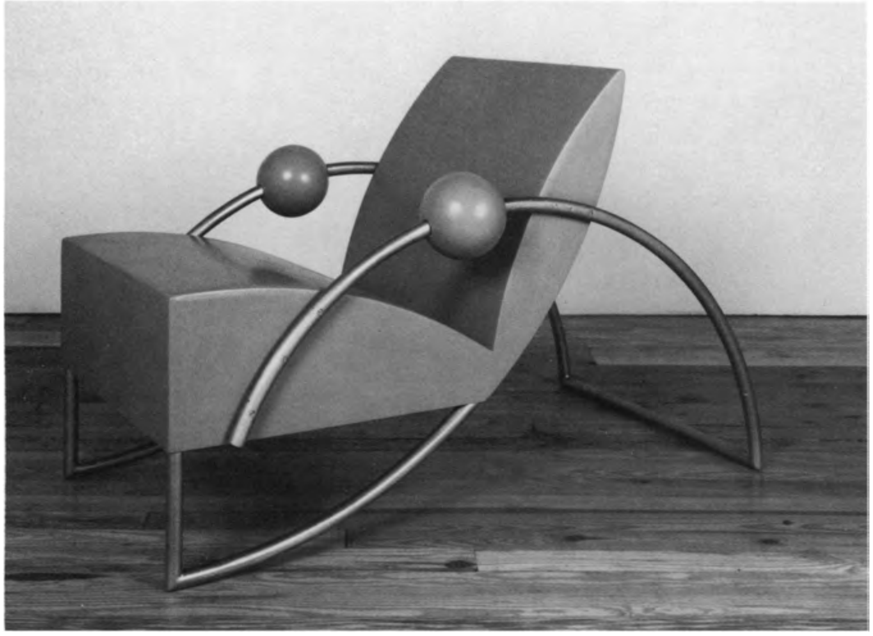
The idea for *Loop Chair* came directly from drawing (Illus. 1). I was interested in how drawing—specifically doodling—could generate ideas. For most people, doodling is something you do when you're on the telephone with someone who is doing all the talking. The definition is "to draw or scribble idly," so the word carries connotations of laziness, worthlessness, and insignificance. What I was interested in was the archetypal doodle—a looping, continuous line. When I began *Loop Chair*, I realized that everything I had been doing was rooted in a kind of right-angled, vertical/horizontal thinking. The right angle itself had become too much of a constant, an armature for my ideas. I discovered there was a ruler inside my hand. Doodling was simply a reaction against the constructivist approach, a way out. Ironically, the whole structure of *Loop Chair* seems to be an excuse for a right angle, looking like the frivolous flourish known as the doodle.

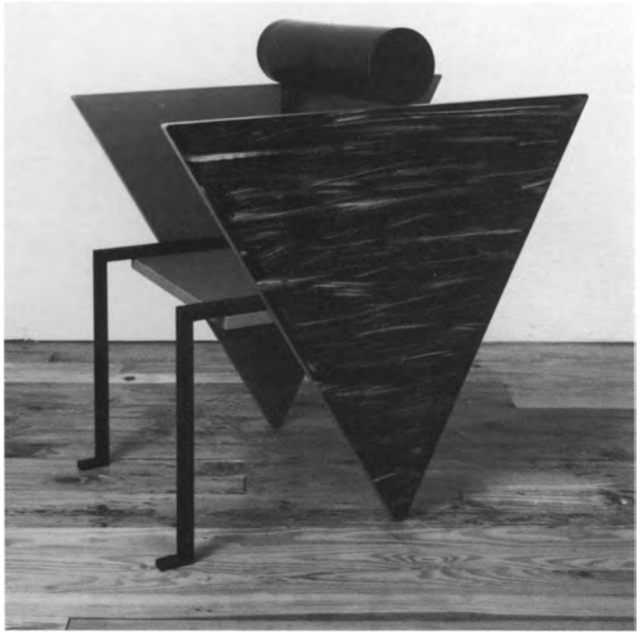
I think that the tendency for myself and other artists to make furniture is, at least in part, a reaction against the dead-end forms of minimalism. It is interesting, and perhaps ironic, that so much minimal sculpture resembles a kind of abstract furniture. It is existence in the horizontal world of the floor-bound object is shared with furniture. The suggestion of a similarity between minimal sculpture and furniture would seem to undermine one of the basic tenets of the minimalist doctrine—it's non-referentiality—and yet one of the latest offerings in the art market is a "table" by Sol Lewitt. The writings of the minimalists are abundant. Their rigorous investigations into the nature of the object have had a more profound effect on artists of my generation than most of them would care to admit. Of course, minimalism denies art a subject, other than itself. It is literally "art-about-art." For me, furniture allows art to have a subject again.

I was interested in furniture even before I knew

4 *Pink Chair*. 1980.

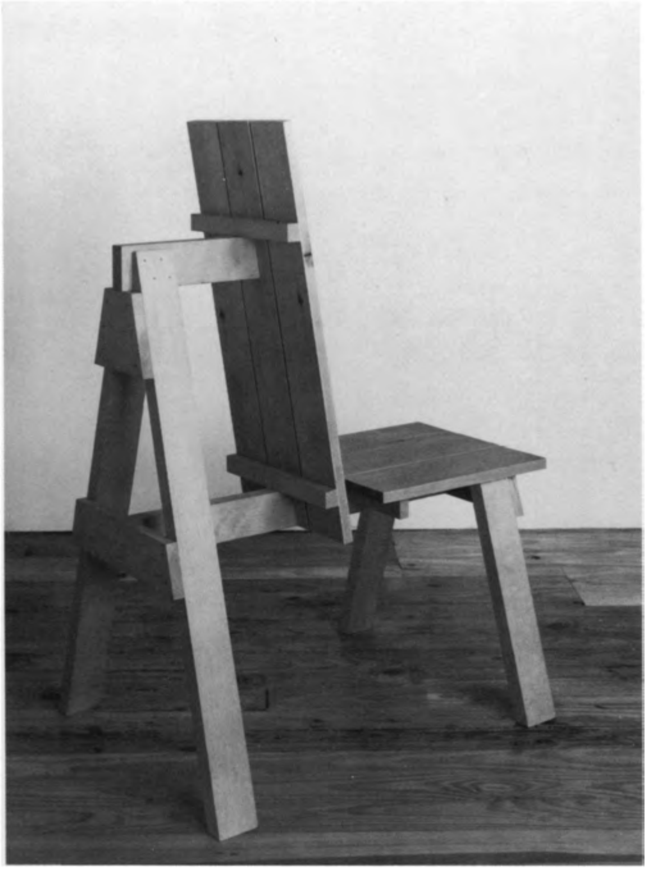
5 *Triangle Chair*. 1980.

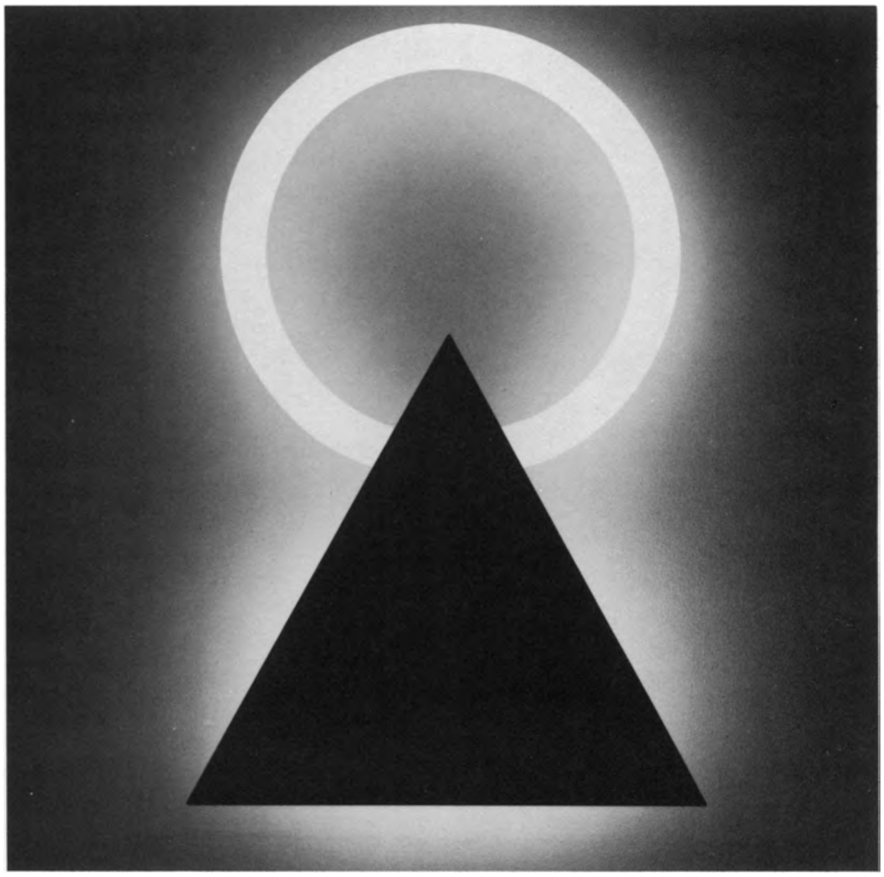




6 *Sawhorse Chair*. 1980.

7 *Triangle Circle Lamp*. 1980.





much about art. One of my earliest aspirations was to become a designer or architect. I went to art school with the specific intention of becoming a designer, but as I learned more and more about art, I realized that my temperament was that of an artist, and I gradually developed a distaste for commercial design. Eventually, furniture sources began to creep back into my work and I made sculpture that looked vaguely like furniture. When I realized that I was making merely metaphorical sculpture rather than sculpture that was something in itself, I decided to make furniture.

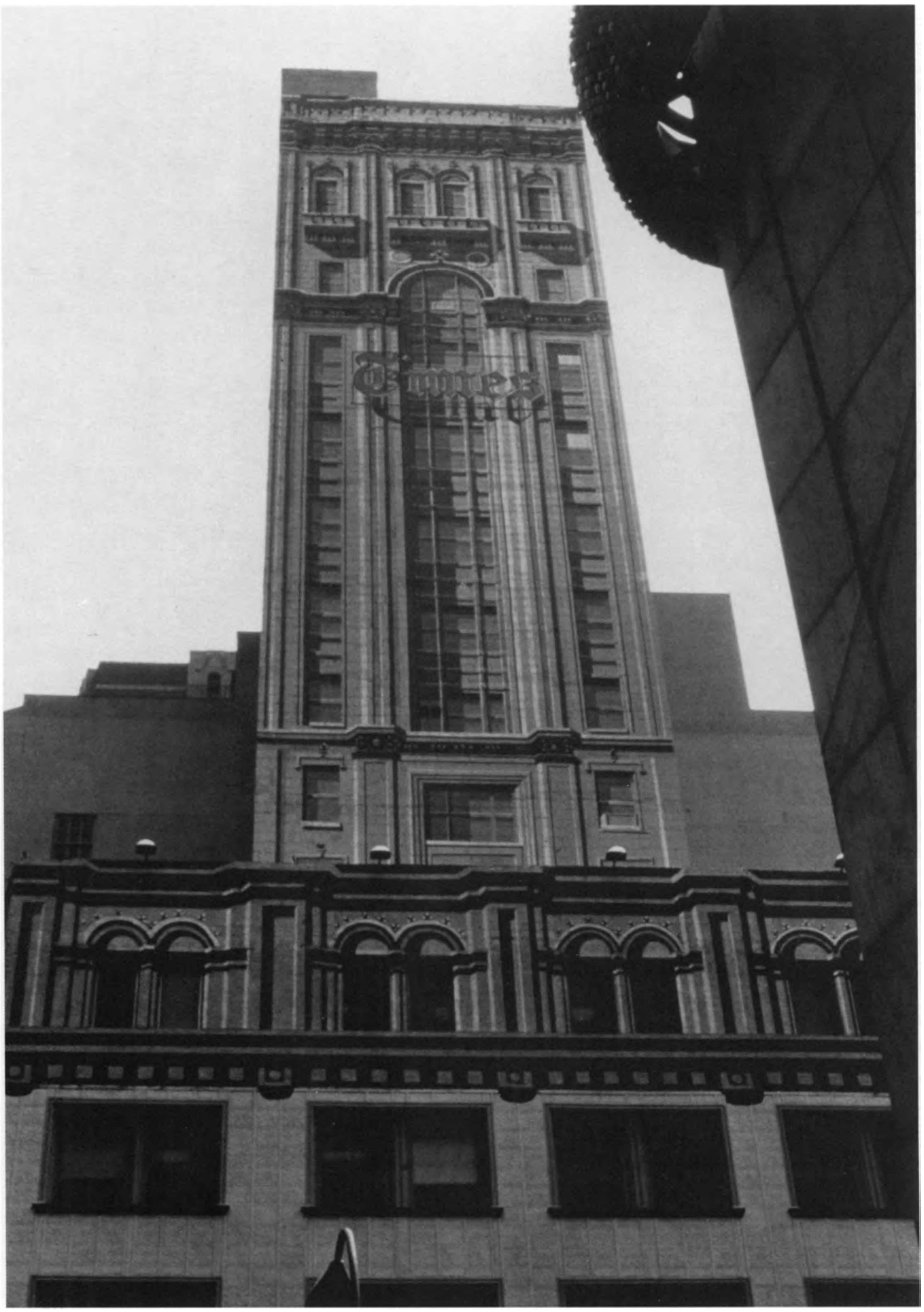
I think it is the anthropomorphic quality that evokes the typically humorous response to my work. I believe that wit and humor are important aspects of art, but I don't intentionally seek them. Virtually any chair is anthropomorphic because it is composed, more or less, of the same parts as the human body. I have a weakness for emphasizing this point. Utilitarian chairs tend to look empty and unimportant until somebody sits in them. If a chair is to function as sculpture, it must have a presence and a sense of completeness when it is unoccupied.

While *Green Chair* is somewhat self-sufficient and interesting in sculptural terms, I think its meaning is enriched by its utility and the observation of it in use (Illus. 2). I elongated the back, and stretched the armrests—to which the cast-iron legs are attached—beyond the front edge of the seat. As a result, when a person sitting in this chair is viewed in profile, an unsettling misalignment occurs. The body appears to be lopped off at the waist by the sweep of the armrest because the human legs become visually confused with the chairlegs and seem too far from the torso to be connected to it. Once this is perceived, you tend to read the torso as completed by the triangle/sphere, the rear support of the chair.

In the past, with few exceptions, artists have not made furniture as art. Furniture was the exclusive domain of the craftsman and designer, and this distinction remained firm through most of the nineteenth century. With the Arts and Crafts Movement, and later the Bauhaus, a new parity was sought between artist and craftsman or designer. While certain pieces of furniture from the modern period have achieved the status of art, this identity was clearly not consciously sought.

I am a self-conscious artist only because I went to art school. But I was a craftsman before I became interested in design, which was before I had any notion of art. The battle between art and utility and the division of my labor into artist/craftsman/designer are constant sources of anxiety. I feel that to place distinct values on these roles, as separate activities, would be counter-productive. I like to think these distinctions hold no meaning for me, and yet I brood over them. Despite a long history of independence, I'm convinced that art and utility need each other, though I think they'll never be happily married.

1 *Times Building*. Full size wall painting, Times Square, New York, 1978.



Richard Haas

My work often involves, among other things, bringing back an aspect of a place that was somehow lost. I recall things that were wonderful. I deal with improbabilities. I put things in places where they can't be built in three dimensions.

One basis for my work is the reinvention or bringing back of a tradition that has almost disappeared. My work comes out of the tradition of outdoor wall paintings of Italy, which in turn goes back through the decorative wall paints of Pompeii and before.

The project that I did for Times Square, in New York, involved painting the blank walls of a tower located behind the place where the former Times Building had been (Illus. 1). As I thought about the project, I considered memorable objects that had once been in Times Square and that could come back if I painted them on the tower walls. I considered signs and billboards such as the cigarette advertisement that blew smoke rings into the air, and Bugsby Berkley's *Stairway to the Stars*. But, for me, the new tower wall had to involve the old Times Building.

The original Times Building was "improved" in 1964 to become the Allied Chemical Building. Nonetheless, many people still remembered the Times Building. It was unbelievable that such an important building didn't still exist somewhere in our minds. So, the notion of bringing back the Times Building became the focal point of the piece.

One of my main concerns was to make the Times Square piece work all by itself, regardless of its allusions. My rendering of the Times Building is not entirely faithful to the original. As with my other work, I wanted the wall mural to be in keeping with its present context, but different enough to allow it to succeed on its own terms.

Another of my projects, at MIT, was a perspective piece that commented on its setting (Illus. 2). Like the unfinished Beaux Arts buildings near where it was installed, the piece was of classical Beaux Arts style. Seemingly unfinished, it faded from a drawing into a labeled diagram. Its didactic quality commented on the fact that the architecture school at MIT was once the American Equivalent of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, in Paris, where nomenclature of the classical language was pounded into the heads of the students. Additionally, it was a pantheon of honor, a hall of fame with the names of Noam Chomsky, I. M. Pei, William James Killian, and other MIT personalities and professors inscribed on its entabulature. Finally, if one looked through the occulus of the dome, an SST could be seen flying overhead.

I find temporary installations such as the one at MIT to be, in some ways, frustrating. I feel that many contemporary installations don't mean anything. The installations come and go and are documented. The documentation doesn't mean much because it's the experience of the piece that counts. What if we didn't have a single Palladio building to walk through?

In a similar way, I wonder about the current phenomena of buildings that are extensively criticized, before they are built, on the basis of presentation drawings and models. This is especially true of post modernism. Post modernism is the most highly criticized unbuilt tradition of our time.

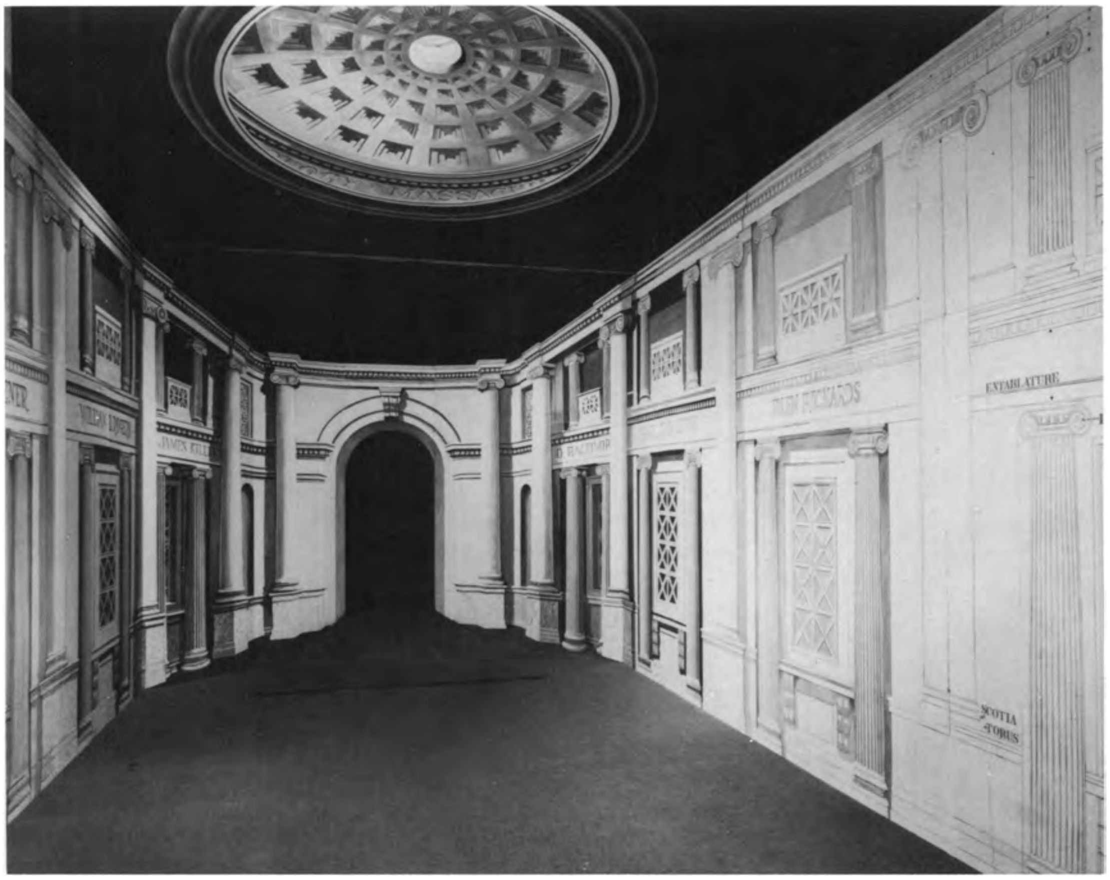
My work dovetails with architecture in that I go through a process of thinking about what will work in a given situation. My solutions are unique to particular places, spaces, and their inherent problems. The difference betwen my work and architecture is that I deal with flatness, plaster, paint, and illusion.

In addition to taking an "odd duck" of an old building and doing something to it, I'm interested in new construction. My work can interface with the work of architects, being, in effect, part of the process of building. In or on a building with large prescribed blank surfaces, I can add to or relate to whatever occurs within the built structure. I can represent in two dimensions those ideas for forms and ornament that, for some reason, cannot be realized in three dimensions.

I feel that I have a potential input into architecture. At times my work has even explored issues that later become important to architects. For instance, I've had dozens of ideas for tops for buildings and now architects are also investigating tops and cornices. Architects are one of the groups with whom I feel a rapport, and I would like to touch them with my work.

2 Installation at MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980.

3 Full size wall painting, Boston Architectural Center, Boston, 1976.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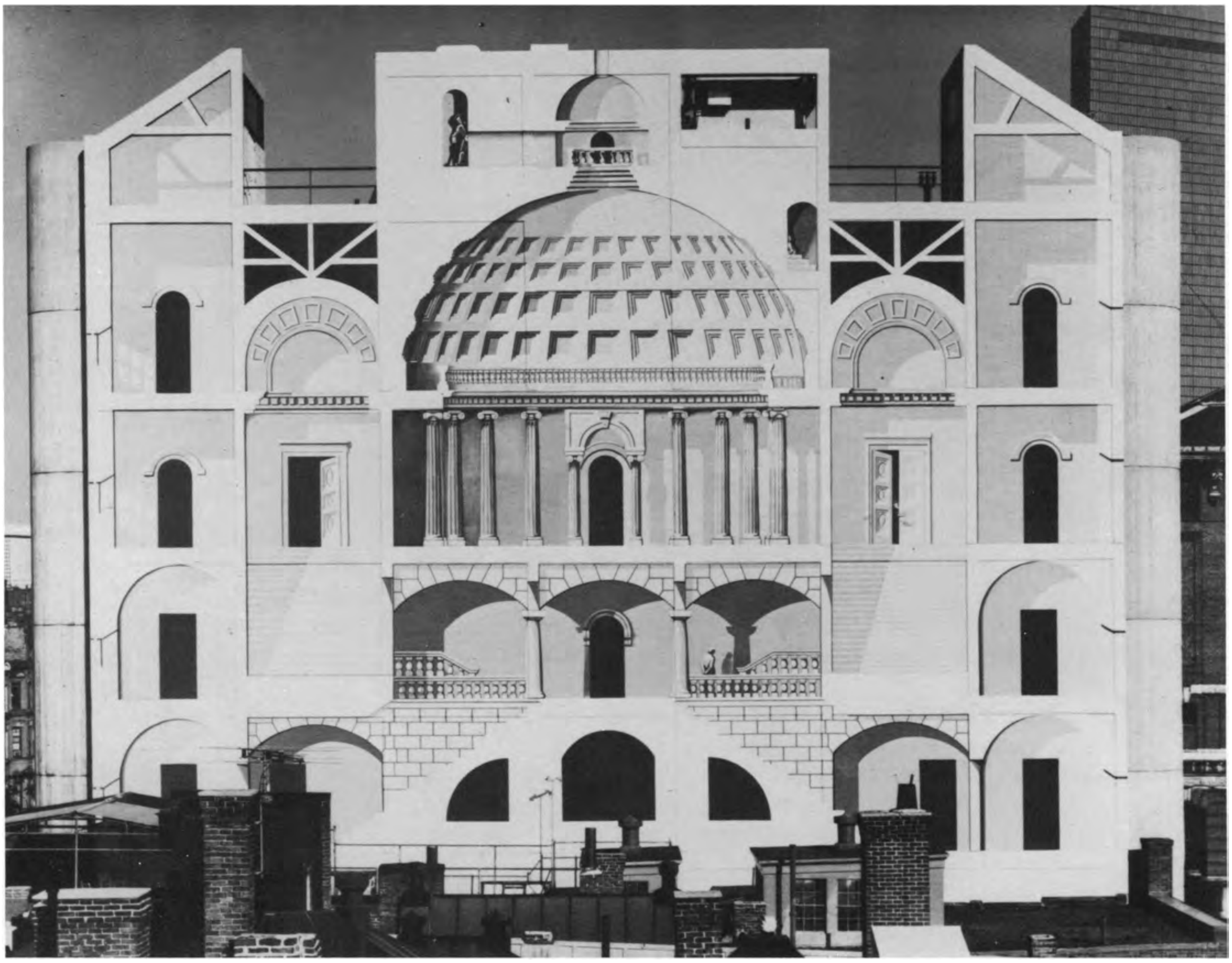
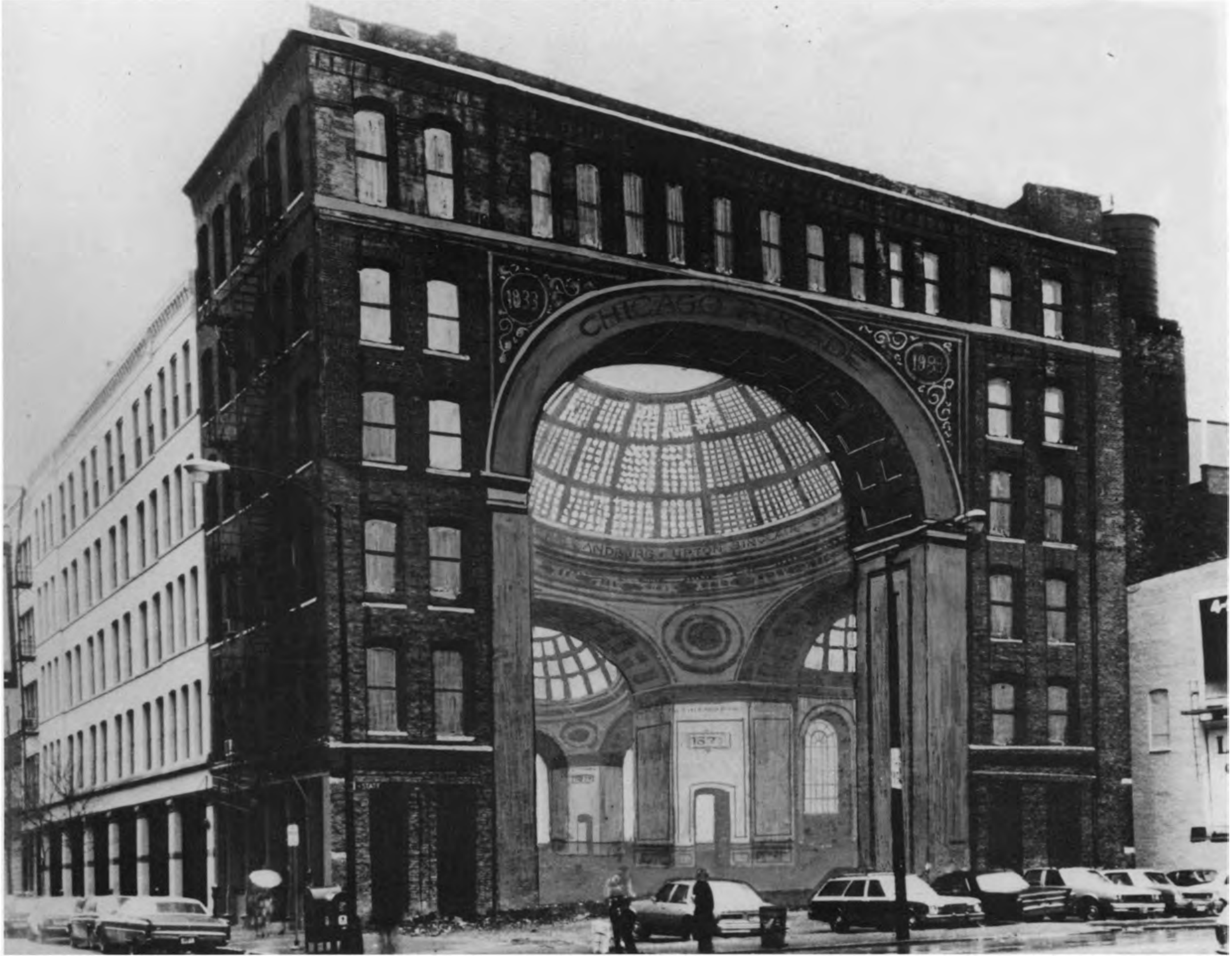
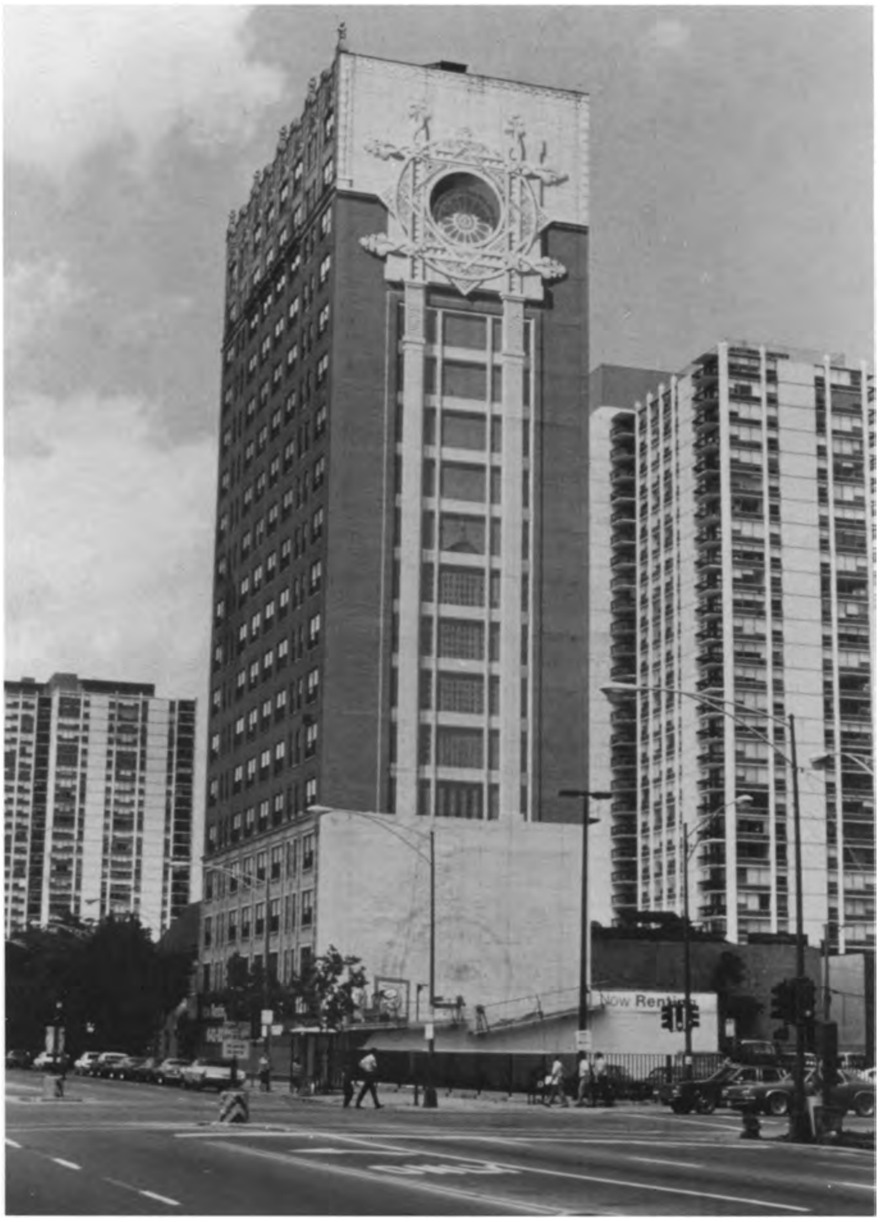


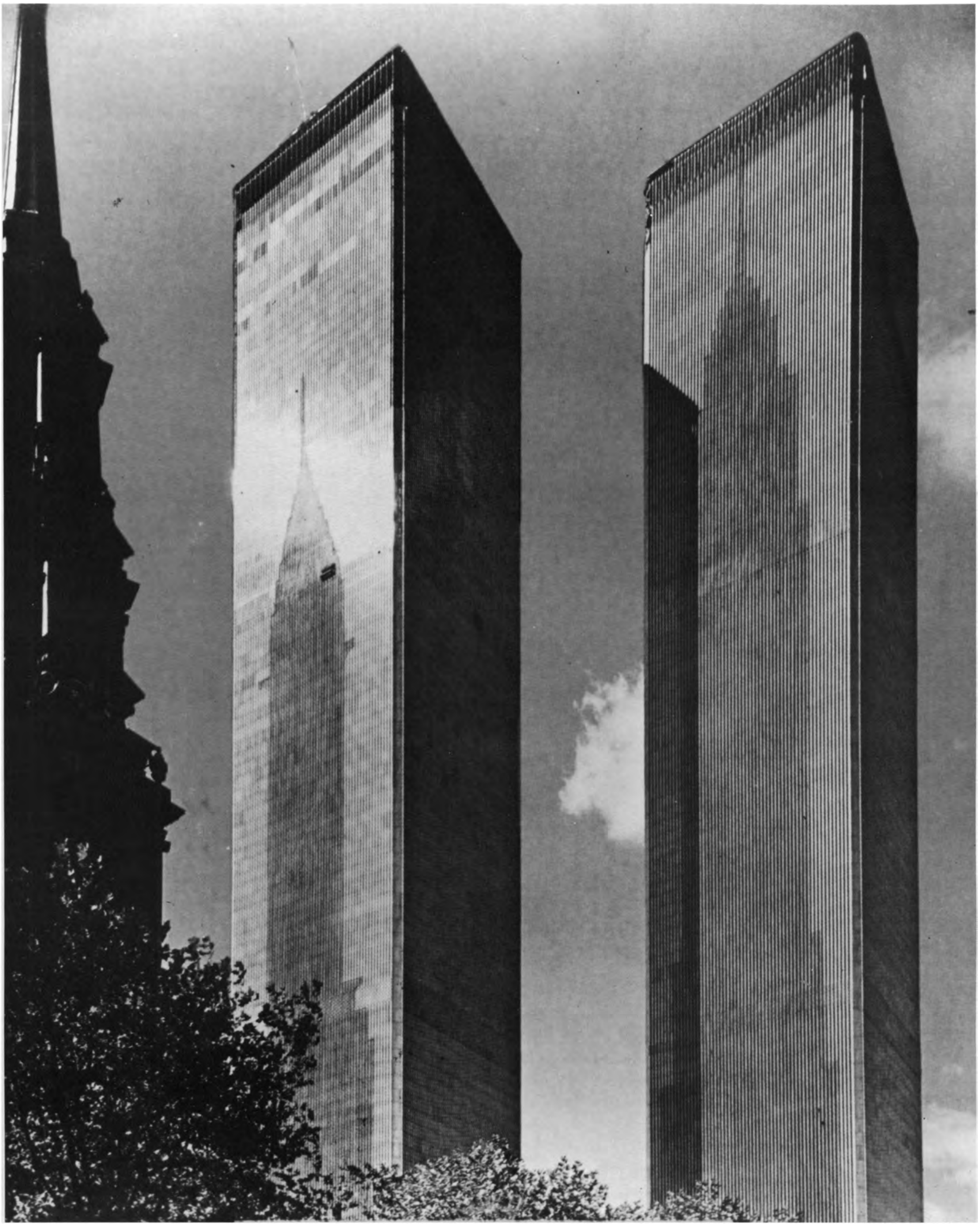
4 *Chicago Arcade*, Proposal for Hubbard and Center Streets, Chicago, 1978.


CHICAGO ARCADE
1833

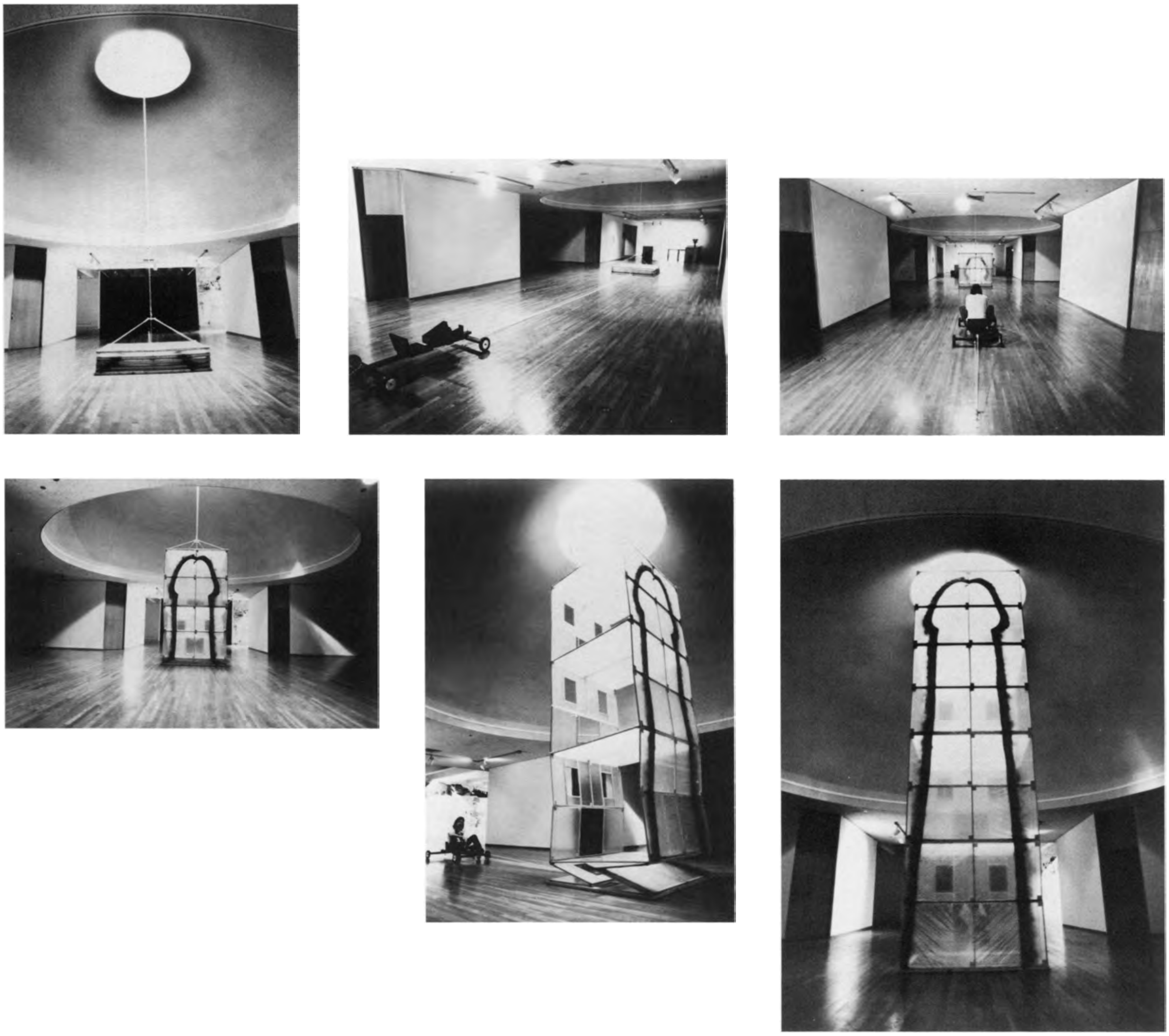
5 Hommage to the Chicago School, La Salle Street, Chicago, 1980.

6 Proposal to paint the shadows of the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building on the World Trade Towers 1:1, 1975.





1 *High Rise* Sequence, Mobile architectural unit. Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, April 1980.



Vito Acconci

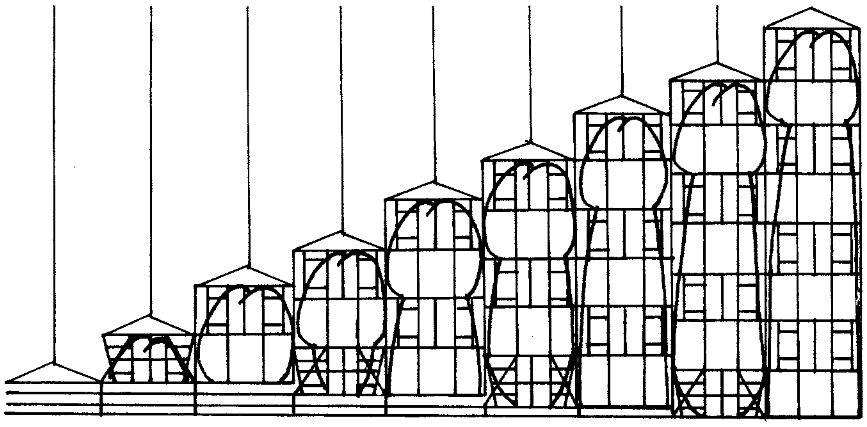
I like the idea of art not existing until human behavior brings it into being. In my piece entitled *Highrise*, the viewer is forced to act like a child by getting into a cart and struggling to raise a twenty five foot penis (Illus. 1). A person has to be childish in order to make that sort of a grandiose monument. I like the fact that once the struggle ends, the monument deflates and comes to nothing.

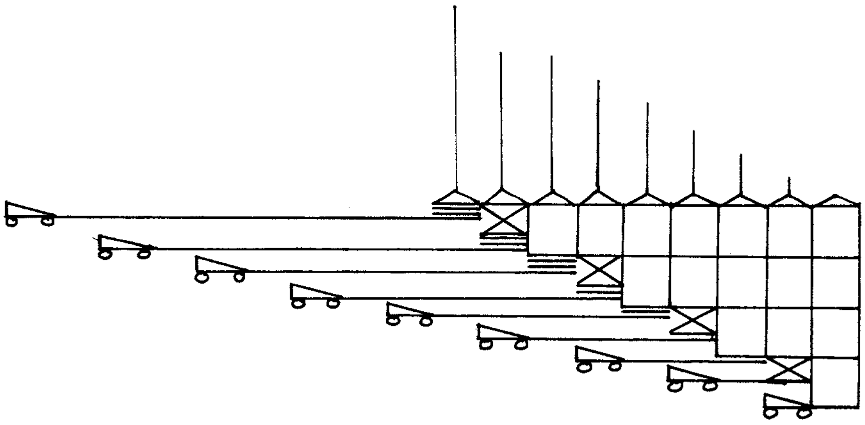
The door and two windows that are repeated on the front of *Highrise* are intended to be recognized as basic house shapes, and they in turn are like faces. My pieces are reassuring and familiar at first sight, but as the viewer becomes more involved with them, he will find himself on shaky ground. The viewer may be disconcerted by the mechanical movement of the pieces, some of which envelop and enclose the viewer, or the viewer may struggle with the possible meanings of the pieces. I see that kind of confusion as good because the viewer is in an alive, alert, thinking state.

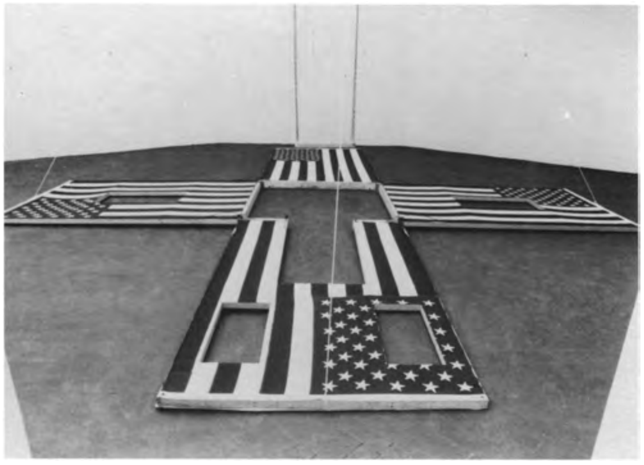
When I first began to work as an artist, in the sixties, I saw art as a system, a container or nonfield into which the artist could put anything from outside fields. My work grew out of minimalist art. Among other things, I like the fact that there were so few internal relationships that a minimalist piece forced a person to be aware of the entire room it occupied. The mystification of minimalism disturbed me; pieces seemed as if they had appeared out of nowhere; their origin was never made clear. In my work, I sought to bring back the presence of the agent, the person who made the work.

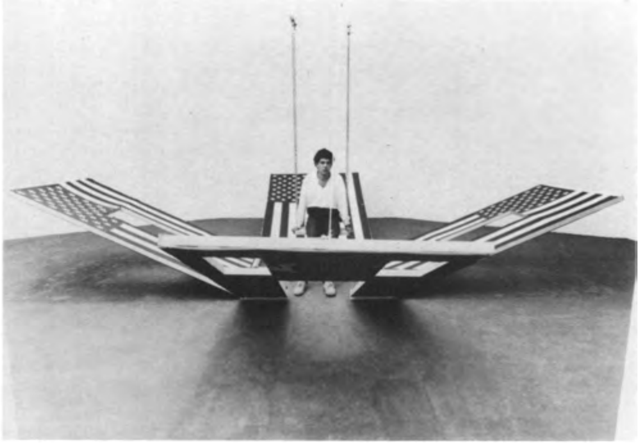
As a way of bringing human behavior back in to art, my first pieces involved myself in a variety of situations. By using my body, I was, in essence, making an enclosure around myself, a kind of implied meditation space. I later came to feel that my presence was an intrusion, preventing the creation of an intimate psychological space for the viewer. I then began to do pieces that did not involve my presence, but which sought to make a cultural space. Eventually, I began to make installations that enabled the viewer to be enclosed within actual physical spaces.

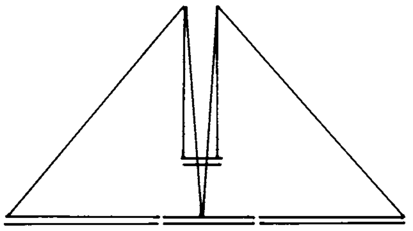
My earlier pieces involved working with a specific place; this was a way of making a statement against universal art. I became concerned, however, because the places to which my work was adapted were always galleries and institutional spaces. I didn't want my work to



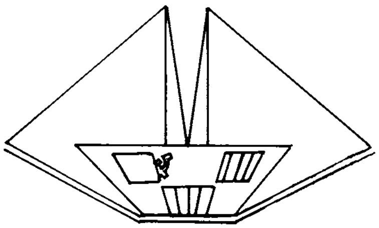




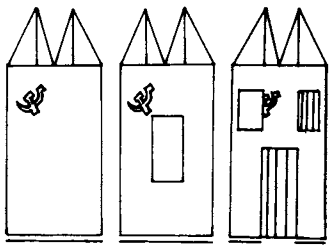




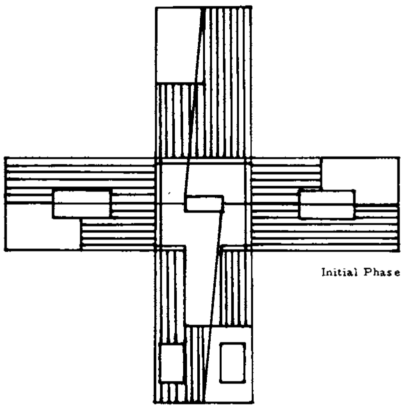
Initial Phase



Middle Phase



Back Side Front



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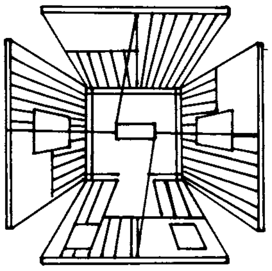
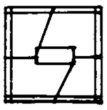
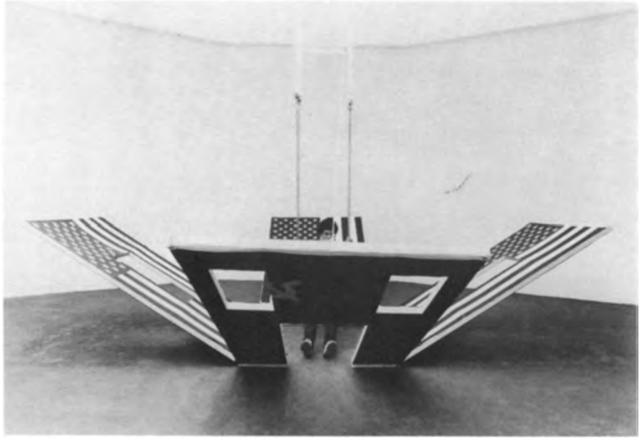
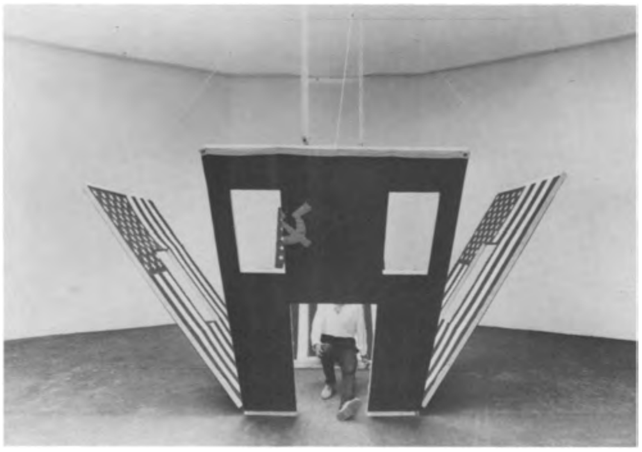


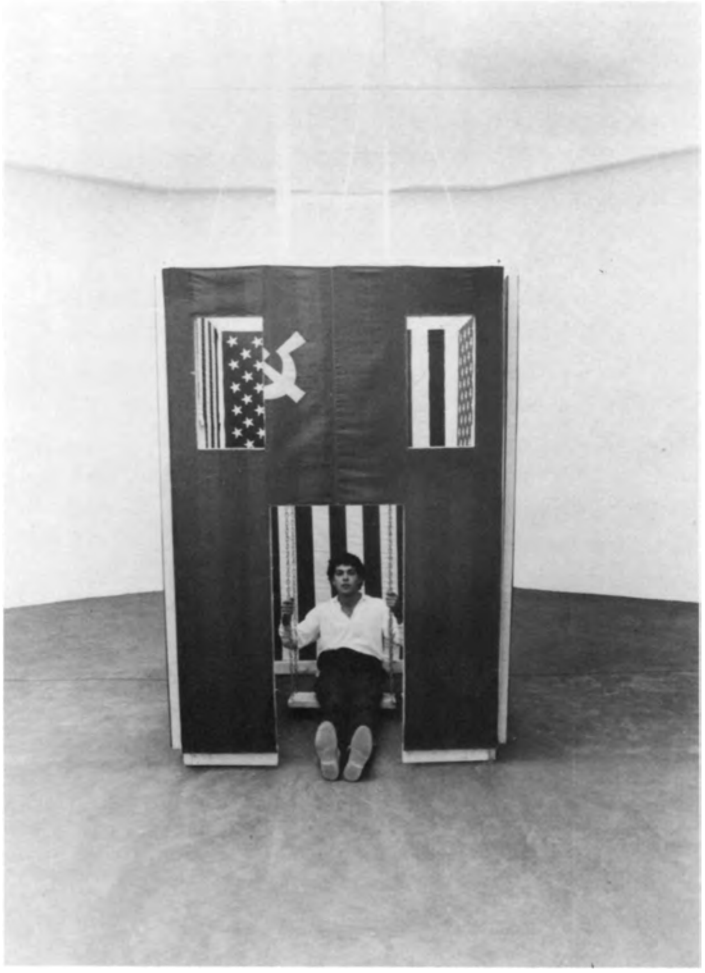
Middle Phase



End Phase







2 *Instant House* Sequence. Mobile architectural unit, The Kitchen, New York, February 1980.

become limited or stunted by these settings so I started considering ways that pieces could be non-site specific without reverting to the negative characteristics of conventional studio art. I came up with the idea of treating art as a vehicle that moves from place to place, bringing its own space with it.

I didn't want these pieces to impose a new space on a previously existing space, so I used a vehicle activated by a viewer to create a space. The physical involvement of the viewer was a way of getting around the preciousness of traditional art objects. It was also a way of having the art reside in the experience of the piece rather than in its documentation.

A notion that interests me, perhaps due to the influence of Robert Venturi, is that once a space is made it can carry a symbol or sign that bears messages or propaganda. In my recent works, as a viewer uses a piece, the viewer makes some sort of propaganda. When the viewer leaves the piece, both the shelter and the propaganda it bears collapse.

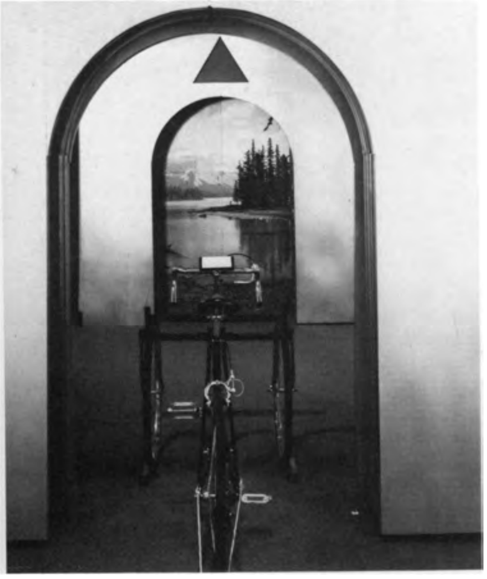
Critics have objected to my use of propaganda because they feel I am merely playing with politics. *Highrise,* on the one hand, is intended as to comment on the childishness of monumentality, sexism, and hypermaleness. On the other hand, I really don't take sides in *Instant House.* I don't want to be apolitical or ammoral. I simply believe that it is the role of the artist to put a clinker into existing political systems (Illus. 2).

When a political system becomes overriding and authoritarian, I think it should be nudged a little bit. I want to pull the existing systems apart, at least to a small extent. Still, I don't have a utopian vision or alternative system. Perhaps that's irresponsible. But I am not committed to a particular political system because they ultimately become power symbols, and I distrust the imposition of power, even in my own work.

I believe the work of artists and architects should be expressed in contemporary terms. Of course one's own time always includes a history and a person's work can refer to that history, but I think history has to be analyzed rather than simply revived.

The pursuit of beauty has always seemed, to me, unnecessary. In art, especially decorative art, the pursuit of beauty can be a way of avoiding issues by hiding behind decoration. I like beauty and decoration when they are a part of something that is conventionally accessible, but I would find it difficult to have the pursuit of a certain standard of beauty as the objective of my work.

My work is changing. The signs in my most recent pieces are softer than they once were and they don't have the clearly defined signification that they had before. There are many more images in these recent pieces. Whereas the flag signs in *Instant House* are very clear, the signs in *Sliding Doorway* include leopardskin, butterflies, and landscape murals which are not clearly connected to one another (Illus. 3). The parts seem more suspended; like floating signs, they collide with one another.



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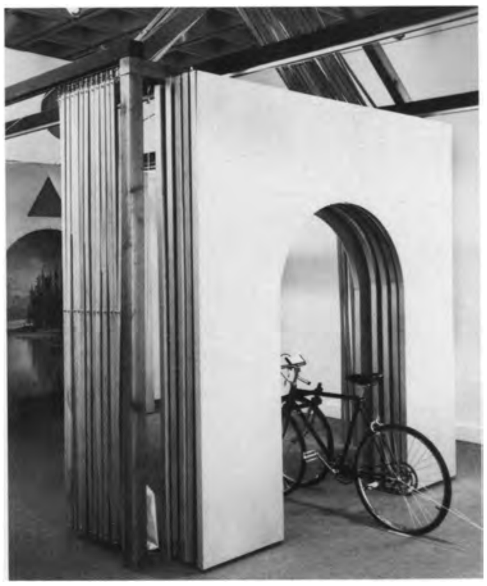

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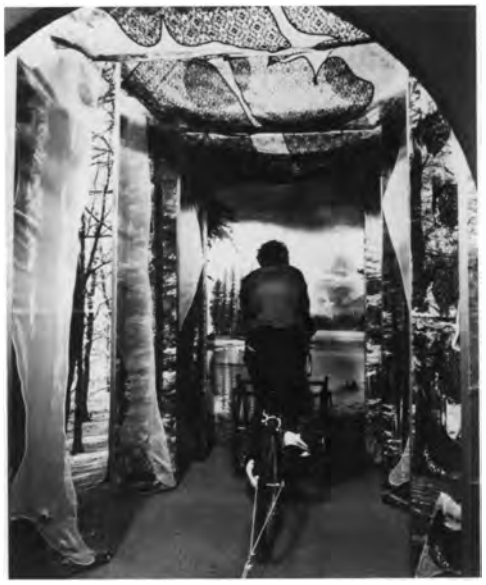

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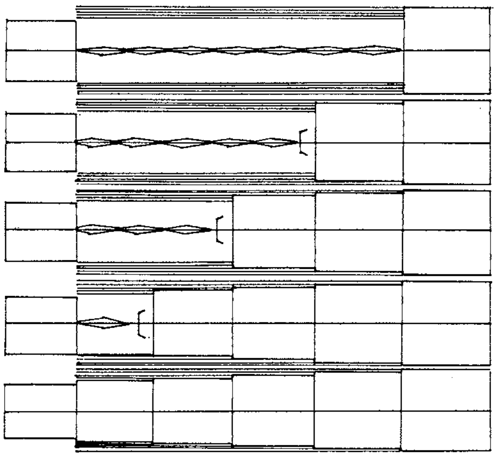

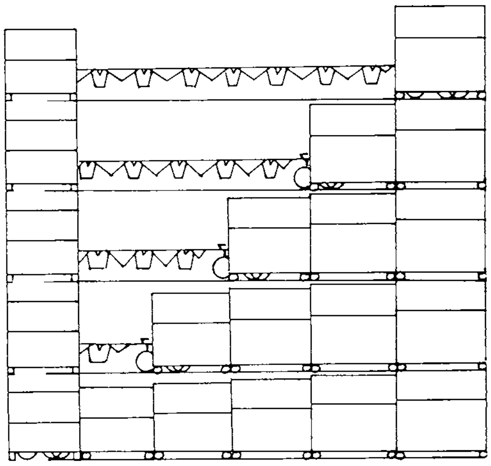

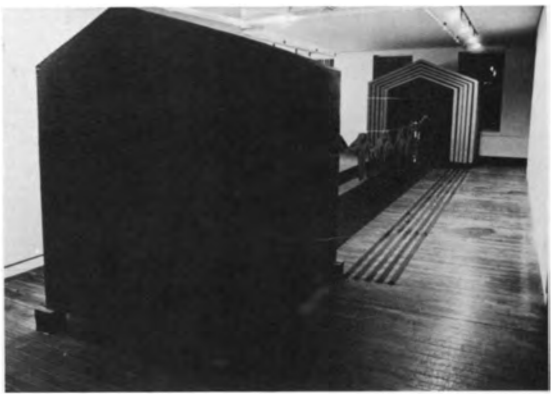

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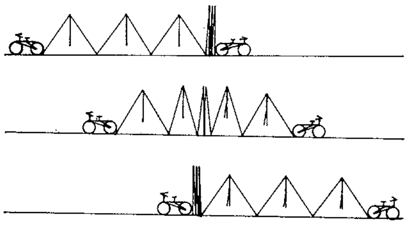

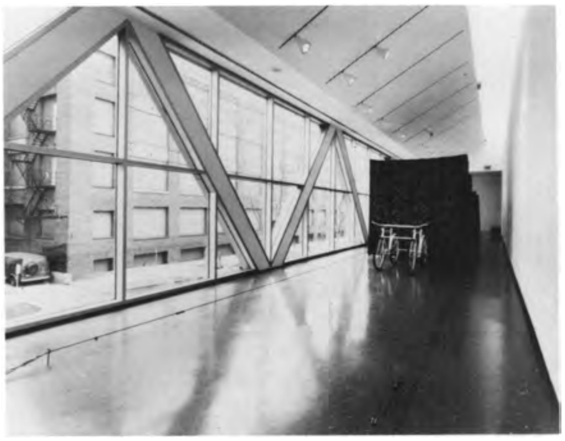

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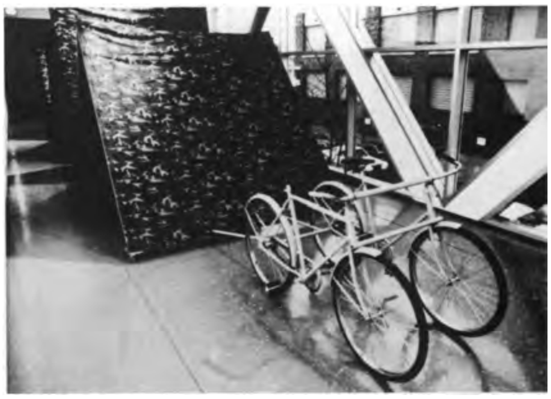

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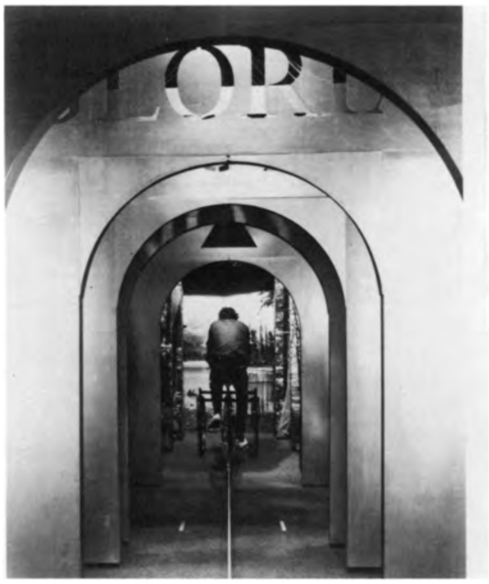

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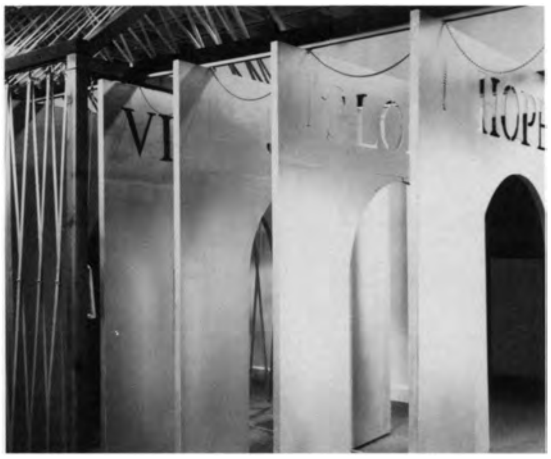

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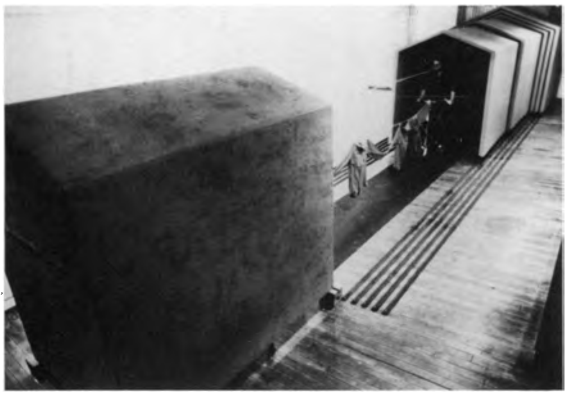
3 *Sliding Doorway* Sequence. Mobile architectural unit, Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum, New York, 1981.



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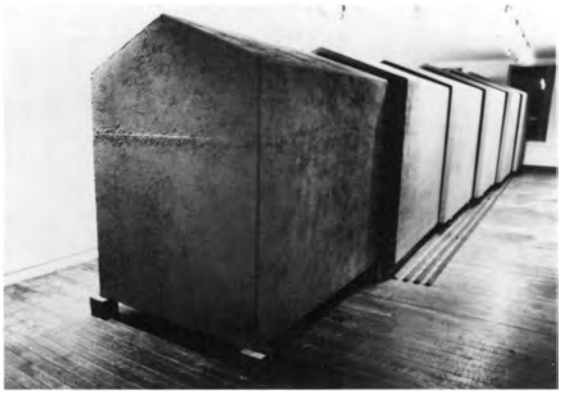

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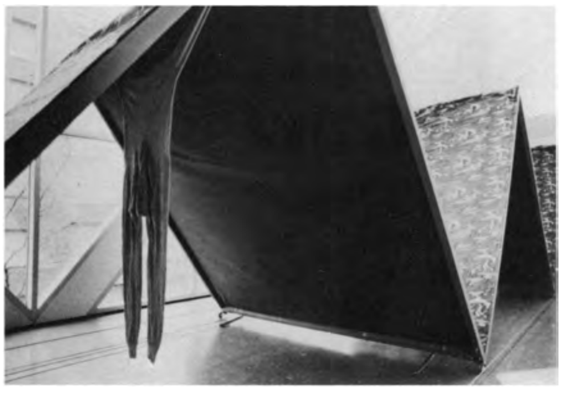
4 *Mobile Home* Sequence. Mobile architectural unit, Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1980.



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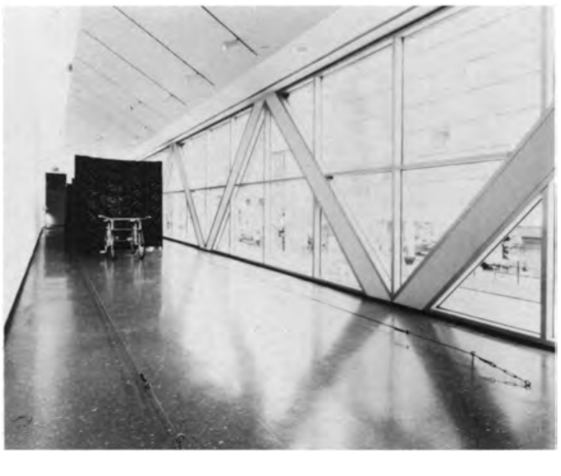

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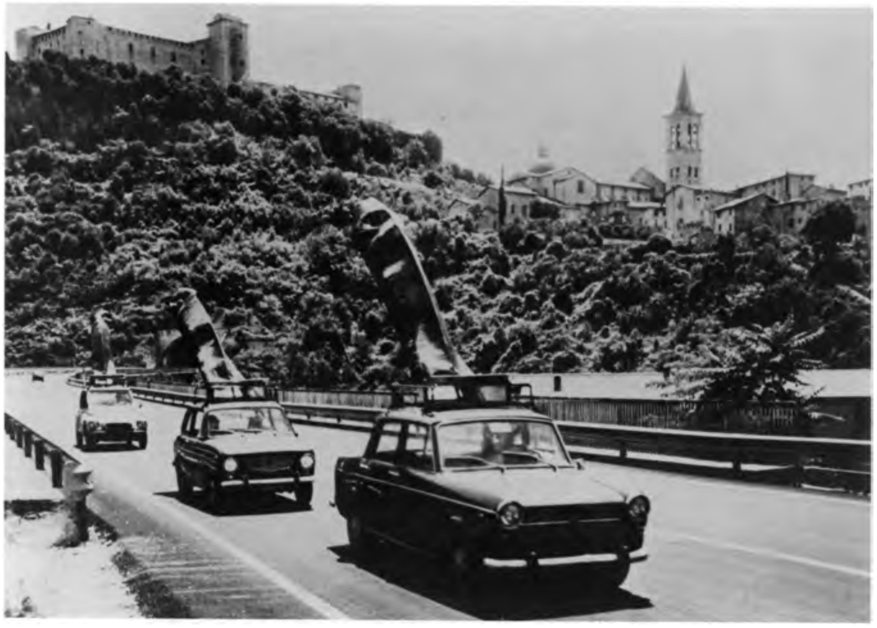
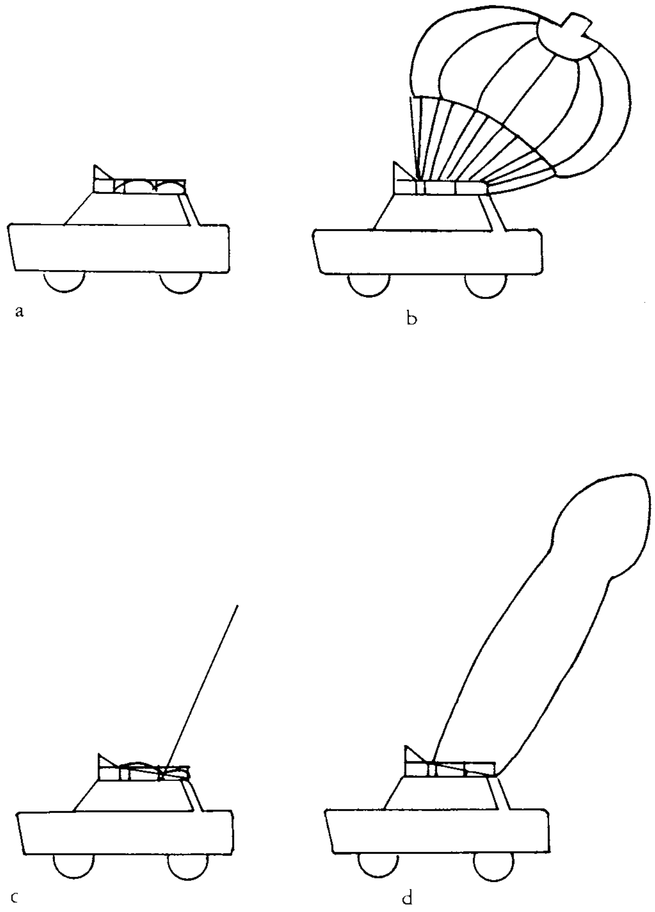
5 *Trailer Camp* Sequence. Mobile architectural unit, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1980.

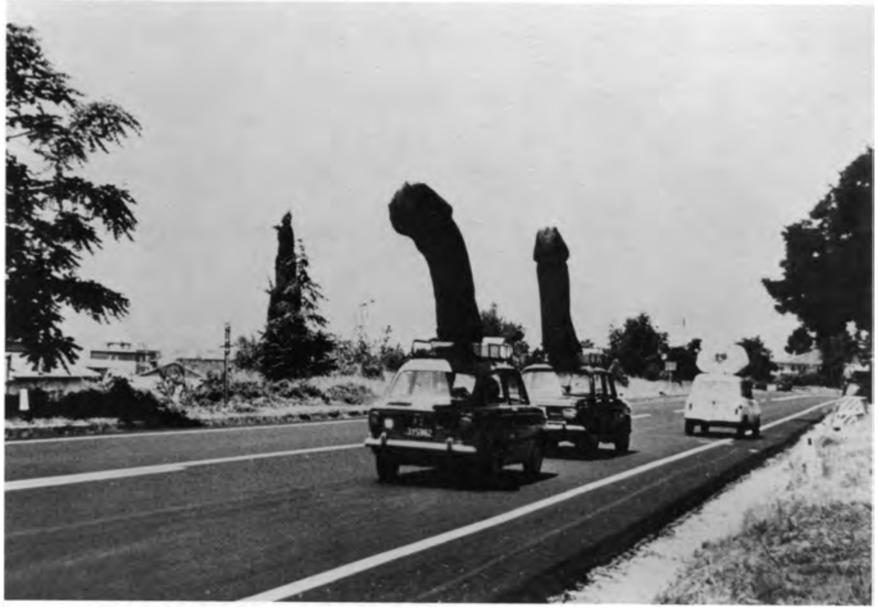
6 *Gang Bang* Sequence. Mobile architectural unit, Spoleto Festival, Italy, 1980.

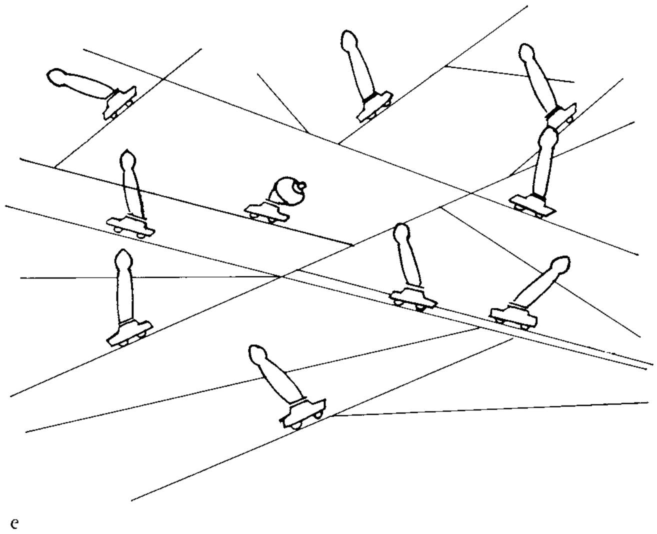
6 à,b,c,d Appendage for nine cars; Unactivated phase (still car) Activated phase (moving car) Elevations (side)

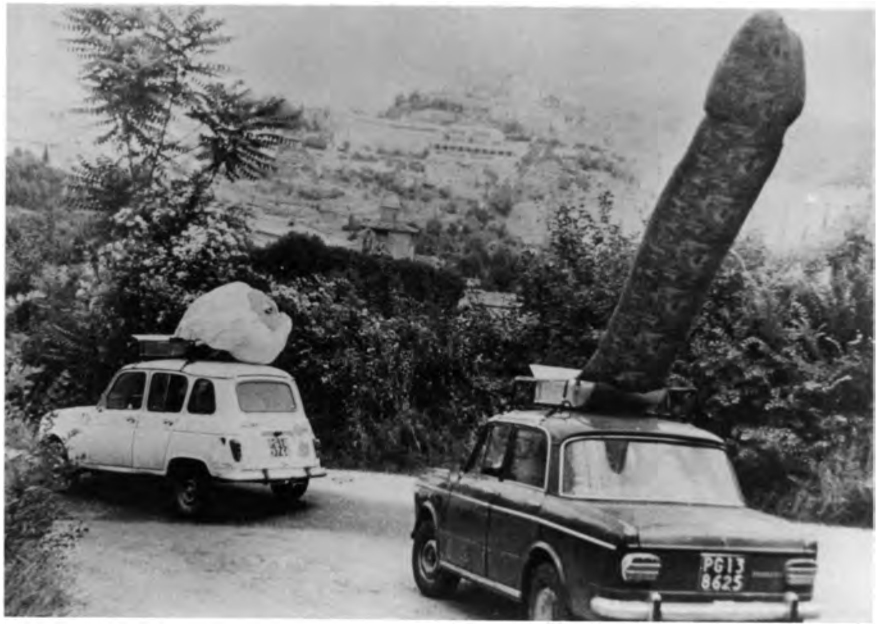
6 e Simulated city map (Elevation)

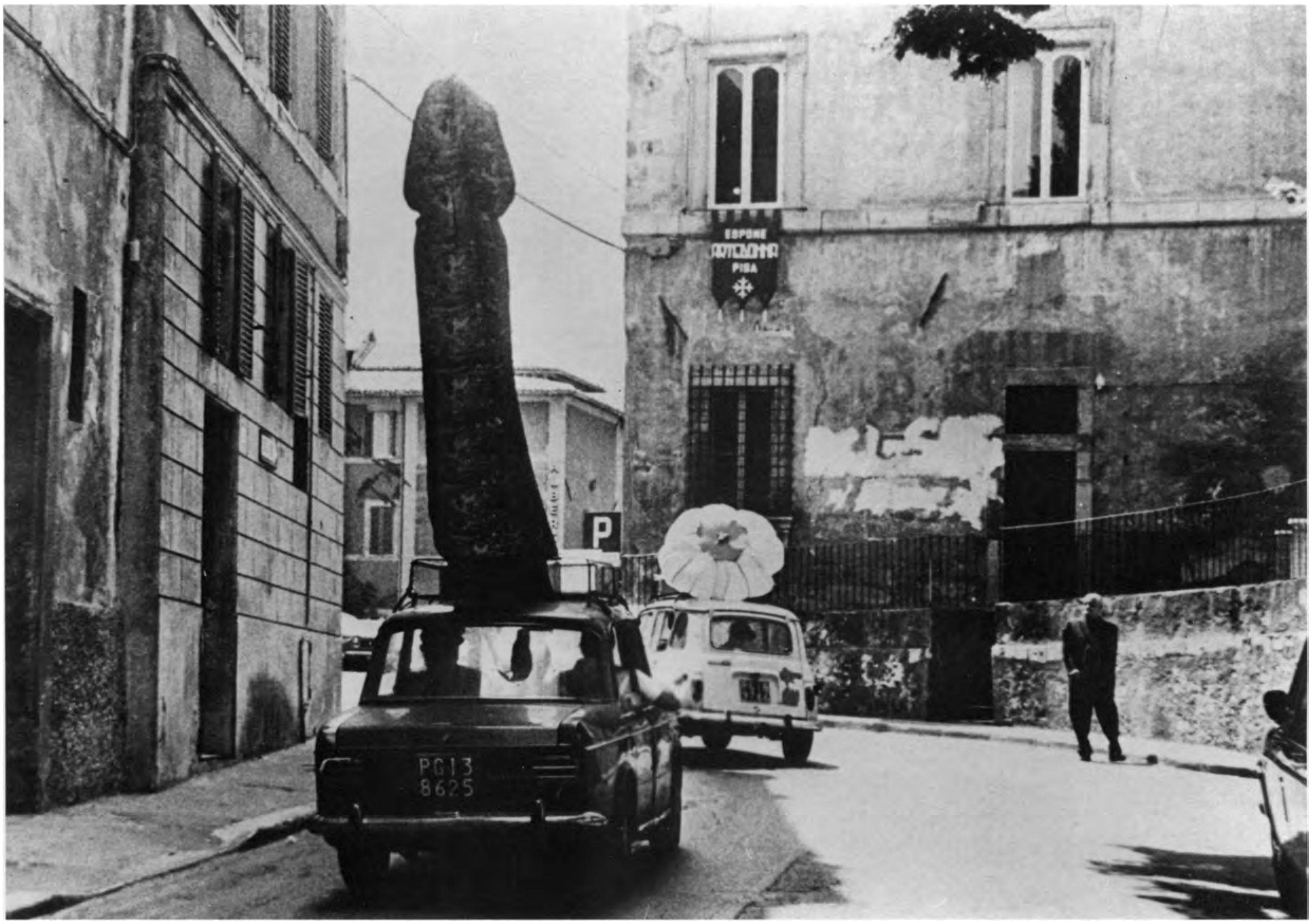








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