Gwathmey Siegel

Buildings and Projects 1982–1992

Introduction by Peter Eisenman

RIZZOLI NEW YORK

Gwathmey Siegel

Edited by Brad Collins and Diane Kasprowicz

Buildings and Projects 1982–1992

Introduction by Peter Eisenman

RIZZOLI NEW YORK

In loving memory of Courtney Steel

First published in the United States of America in 1993
by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.
300 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10010

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gwathmey Siegel : buildings and projects, 1982–1992 /
edited by Brad Collins and Diane Kasprowicz;
introduction by Peter Eisenman.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-8478-1675-3. — ISBN 0-8478-1676-1 (pbk.)
1. Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects.
2. Architectural practice, International.
3. Architecture, Postmodern—United States.
I. Collins, Brad. II. Kasprowicz, Diane.
NA737.G948G83 1993 93-10438
720'.92'2—dc20 CIP

front cover: Werner Otto Hall, photo by Paul Warchol; Stadtportalhäuser, plan
back cover: Opel Residence, photo by Richard Bryant/Arcaid

Design and type composition by *Group* C INC / New Haven (BC, RF, DK, FS)

Printed and bound in Japan

Contents

Peter Eisenman

In *Gravity's Rainbow,* Thomas Pynchon uses the V-2 rocket to trace the contours of an emergent world that seeks to free itself from the gravity-bound confines of the earth. It is a world that displaces the priority of ground to figure, launch to launched, and that decenters geocentric perspective altogether. Earth and V-2 become rockets, figures that no longer correspond to any previous idea of figure-ground, which instead trace new trajectories, while the earth itself is seen only as the reversed orbital projection of the rocket. Within this new world, what Pynchon describes as the inexplicable and idiosyncratic return of the V-2 to its launch site can be characterized as neither predictable nor unpredictable. Instead, it is this reversed trajectory or "turning back on itself"—a characteristic, as Pynchon notes, unique to the V-2—that defines a new kind of predictability in an unpredictability, a new kind of order based on disorder. Indeed, the retro-trajectory of the V-2 delimits a new space-and-time typology, a vectorial space and time. Its orbital apogee, that moment of turning back, defines a new temporal singularity that, within this new typology, displaces all forms of identity and essence.

This turning-back trajectory of Pynchon's V-2 rocket can also be used to describe the period of American architecture from 1968 to 1993. Specifically, this new vectorial space-and-time typology provides a useful way to characterize what can only be said to be the dissonant spatial typologies of architects Charles Gwathmey and Robert Siegel, whose orbit, while coinciding with the beginning and end points of this time of American architecture, has attempted a different trajectory.

In his analysis of contemporary architecture, Kurt Forster also uses a rocket analogy to describe the state of American architecture. But in Forster's account it is the rocket assembly, the gantry crane and the scaffolding, that has taken off, leaving the rocket steaming and sputtering on the launch pad. Forster's image of an earth-bound rocket, unwilling to move, illustrates the effects of a hyper-mobile media serving as the launchpad for an unmoving architecture. The rocket analogy thus illustrates the media's transformation of architecture into thousands of self-similar images, each only as good or as bad as the next, and each unique only by virtue of its publication. The moment these images repeat themselves they are used up. Each time a new trajectory must be projected, even though the ostensibly elusive target seems not to have moved.

It is perhaps strange and even ironic to compare American architecture from 1968 to that of 1993 in order to illustrate the idea of a "turning back upon itself." But these two dates correspond to two crucial points in the trajectory of Gwathmey Siegel's work: to their first houses and to their latest rethinking, found here in the publication of their collected work. The point of departure for this present essay is the suggestion that today these two points share a nostalgia for a lost vision and a curious kind of complexity that derives as much from the history of Europe as it does from the opportunism of America. The beginning and end points of this twenty-five-year trajectory, 1968 and 1993, present, in different guises, a similar condition of American architecture: the populist themes of a social relevance of 1968 versus the formless idea of an intellectual banality of 1993. Oddly enough, both of these positions argue against what they perceive to be high art and architecture in any form, against both Howard Roark and the star system created by the media. Both of these anti-architectural positions frame the critical position of the work of Gwathmey Siegel,* and both stand against any kind of formalism, or theory of formalism, understood to be hostile to social program and the texture of built materiality. Each of these positions denies the possibility of an inherent nature of architecture as necessarily formal (as opposed to aesthetic or any other essentialism) and is thus fearful of the ideological energy inherent in such a formulation. This is because theories of architecture were usually formulated as categorical treatises. These treatises concerned themselves with issues of aesthetics, function, and meaning. Formalism attempts to move from form as the idea of category—i.e., of static types—to discussions of a dynamic forming, such as the idea of a vectorial space and time.

To understand the nature of such a critical framing of the Gwathmey Siegel work within what is best described as a kind of pragmatic formalism, it is important to go back to the beginnings of Gwathmey Siegel, to *Five Architects* and their evolution from the CASE group, which dates from 1964 to 1972. Present at the first CASE meeting were Colin Rowe and Vincent Scully: Rowe was a protagonist of a European modernism that can be traced from Palladio to Le Corbusier;

* When I speak of the work of Gwathmey Siegel, it will be seen that I am speaking of their houses. It is interesting, in this context, that they refer to their houses as residences, which for me wrongly situates their formal value in the realm of semantics.

Shore Birds, or the Rocket's Red Glare

Scully was a protagonist of an American fundamentalism that can be traced from Jefferson to Wright. With Scully and Venturi's precipitous departure from that first meeting—their ostensible reason being that they were interested in building, not in theorizing—a critical split in American architecture occurred. Indeed it was this theme of building versus theory commingled with notions of social relevance that in the late 1960s made the appearance of Gwathmey Siegel's houses, first as objects themselves and then in their inclusion in *Five Architects*, all the more polemical. If we are to believe Kenneth Frampton, the work of Gwathmey Siegel is an amalgam of Rowe and Scully—Le Corbusier by day and Wright by night, as Colin Rowe is fond of saying; shingle style in modernist drag. Comfortable neither with the theorizing of Rowe nor with the homilies of Scully, the work of Gwathmey Siegel has always seemed out of place in *Five Architects*. This is because their work derives from neither source. That is to say, any stylistic reading of Le Corbusier that may have found its way into their forms is neither ideological nor nostalgic for a new utopia. The same must be said for the reading of their work as an example of an American stick style, as the expression of individual ruggedness—an attitude which, in any case, quickly disappears after the first few houses. These readings miss the unique critical and formal content of their work, which places it outside of the discourse of *Five Architects*.

Five Architects was a stylistic, not a critical, context. To read the work of Gwathmey Siegel as a variation on the sophisticated collages of Richard Meier or Michael Graves, collages which at that time reinscribed a reading of European modernism into contemporary American thought, diffuses the possible reading of a critical formal content of their work. Rather, it is more appropriate to locate their work between the above-mentioned split in American architecture. For it is in this seam, between gratuitous imagery on the one hand and pandering historicism on the other, that their work becomes of critical interest. It is only when one discards the literal programmatic readings and metaphoric analogies, when the "isms" of architecture have been exhausted, that another possible interpretation emerges—that of a mute, unforgiving formalism.

In the end, it can be argued that all architecture of substance must come to rest in the bedrock of such a discourse. And it is only there that one can locate the critical content of the Gwathmey Siegel projects. But if this is the case, if formalism can be of critical value, then why does the mere mention of formalism create such hostility when compared to any other ism? Why is it that formalism is always a pejorative description of architecture that seems to deny social program and site? Can this only be explained as uninformed prejudice? Perhaps not. At first reading, wrongly or rightly the term suggests only a narrowly defined understanding of formalism as a doctrinaire approach that supposedly privileges aesthetic form to the exclusion of function and content. Even the words trans*form*ation and *form*alization, which begin to speak of process, do not carry the edge that formalism does. But formalism can have many different incarnations, which, rather than excluding program, meaning, and even process, issue from them.

To cite formalism as a condition of the Gwathmey Siegel work one must first understand what would constitute such an American or pragmatic formalism. As it has been traditionally understood, American architecture was forged on the anvil of pragmatism and nurtured in the soil of a primitive naturalism. This understanding helped to produce an environment hostile to theory (as opposed to history) and particularly to any idea of a formal theory. Theory was thought to be an abstract, elitist idea, and thus thought to inhibit the natural right of individual expression. However, from Jefferson's gridding of America, which was the ultimate pragmatic and totalizing gesture in all of Western planning, to Wright's Prairie houses, the concept of a fundamental individualism was always thought to be the foundation for American architecture. This was as much true in 1968 when America's supposed answer to modernism, Louis Kahn, held sway, as it was twenty-five years earlier in 1943, when modernism was dying on the battlefields of Europe.

By 1943 the influence of European modernism—the architectural manifestation of a political ideology founded on an idea of the good society—had been neutralized politically if not aesthetically in American architecture. The symbols of the good life proffered by European modernism were transformed into the images of American corporate identity and the American suburban house. In 1968 the architectural battlefield saw the return of a theoretical and formal consciousness originally spawned in European modernism, which was opposed to an American vernacular seen as a neo-Romantic concern about the form of the single-family house. For the latter, European modernism was too cold, too austere, too collective, and too theoretical; for the former, American individualism was too sentimental, too pragmatic, too anti-intellectual, and, most of all, had nothing to do with the spirit of the age. What is interesting is that the formalism of Gwathmey Siegel has little to do with either ideology. Rather, it is located in what can be called a pragmatic formalism. Pragmatic formalism is defined when the conceptual mechanisms that inform what can be called in this particular case a formal ordering—i.e., hollowing, rotation, extension, etc.—at the same time inform the vectoring of movement in the building. Thus, in the early

houses the hollowing mechanism is often figured as a spiral stair, while in later houses the extending mechanism is also the ramped circulation element. In both cases the results of the process are not static but dynamic, and thus the experience of the human body in motion conforms to the formal organization; the body and the mind understand space simultaneously. This type of conceptualization has little to do with function, program, or meaning qua house, rather it has to do with the mechanics of a body in space and a dynamic form. Thus the formalisms reside ultimately in those integers of circulation, the interstitial or contingent spaces, that now figure the organization.

It is precisely this different view of what constitutes a formal spatial organization that differentiates Gwathmey Siegel's work from other more recent formalisms such as neo-high-tech and retro-neoclassicism, each of which in its own way attempts to produce the objective gloss that ostensibly characterizes all formalism. It is important to note that Gwathmey Siegel's formalism, in the ways the term will be used here, refers to the adherence to an internal consistency that derives from its own logic—an intra- as opposed to an inter-textuality. The studious avoidance of these latter-day high jinks allows Gwathmey Siegel to maintain a mute silence with respect not only to their closest contemporaries but also with respect to their own work. Some have argued, in fact, that this silence epitomizes an almost dumb obstinacy in the face of the need for change. And yet it is precisely this stubbornness and its unchanging quality that allows this work to be read and, at the same time, makes such reading not a simple task.

Gwathmey Siegel's formalism has remained constant in the face of enormous stylistic changes in American architecture during the period of time considered in this essay. What ultimately defines the Gwathmey Siegel practice as both critical and formal is that the houses are not examples of individual expression, of formal integers employed stylistically to create a meaningful image. In fact, their work eschews image for other concerns, which, it will be argued here, are only appropriate to the domain of formalism. Equally, their work has little to do with the problematic concept of dwelling and the ideology of the nucleated family that occupies the single-family house. Although their work focuses on the single-family house, the style, imagery, and configuration of these houses can be understood only with reference to an evolving concern for the idea of formal type as formal process, with form seen as a dynamic, as opposed to a static, entity. While the forms are no less literally static than those of any architecture, they contain a dynamic energy similar to that of the vectored line segment. Thus any idea of type used here is to initiate a working process and is neither a justification of the traditional type nor has the idea of the reworking of typology as a goal. Rather this process attempts to empty architecture of the associations generated by the traditional categorical types. It is enough to say here that these traditional categories demanded a dialectical reading of type—i.e., figure-ground, linear-centroidal, etc.—which, in turn, suppresses other readings of the formal. While the house is the instrumentality, the institutional frame within which any architectural formalism exists, in some cases this instrumentality becomes dominant; in Gwathmey Siegel's work it becomes secondary. What makes their formalism pragmatic is that while they eschew the ideology and metaphoricity of instrumentality, their work does not seek to deny its inevitable existence.

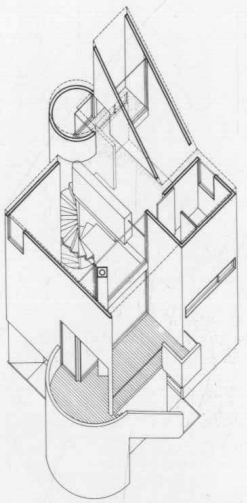
Formal type as formal process appears over and over again in their rhetoric and is crucial to a discussion of their work. First, while this is never explicitly stated, it must be pointed out that their reference to process is linked more to the dynamic manipulation of type—to the knotting of space or the carving out of space, for example—than to the static organization of program; and second, their repeated reference to type concerns less the organization of functioning space and more the organization of these dynamic processes of form. These concerns illustrate both the strength and the limits of their work, confining it in a real way to the scale of the single-family dwelling in which both aspects operate. To discuss the formalism of their work is to discuss the question of process as type.

But what is process for Gwathmey Siegel? It is certainly not the processes of science or those analogous to linguistic phenomena. Nor is it a clearly defined transformational process, such as in the development of a cube into an extruded rectangle. Process here concerns a formal idea of space as the addition or subtraction of solid from a preexistent or ideal spatial frame. But it is particularly in the process of subtraction that a hollowing or a carving out occurs, which in itself provides the space for another kind of figural reintegration, one which deals with the problematic concepts of vector. It is this idea, in itself so anachronistic to modern architecture, that is the most interesting aspect of the Gwathmey Siegel project and that stamps with poignancy much of their early work.

In formal terms, the idea of carving usually implies a residual static form, a *poché*, which is the result of a carving out or carving away in plan and section to reveal an articulated mass. Alternatively, *modenatura*, as opposed to *poché*, was the resultant form of a type of carving in profile that traditionally provided architecture with the chiaroscuro articulation of light

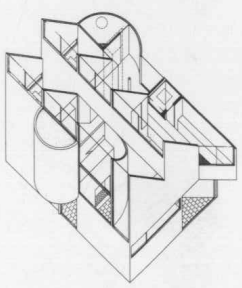
and shadow: *poché* was the articulation of figural form in plan; *modenatura* was the blurring of volume in section.

In American modern architecture, the closest approximations of *poché* are the plans of Wright and Kahn. But instead of a carving away one finds the concept of addition by extrusion, where the plan forms solids that can be infinitely extended vertically. There is little if no section in extruded buildings, which is why extrusion lends itself to the vertical extension of the plan into the high-rise type. It follows then that the scale of the house, as opposed to the high-rise, lends itself to the idea of hollowing out. To understand the evolution of this idea of hollowing out or carving as a vectorial process, it is not necessary to analyze systematically each building of Gwathmey Siegel in chronological sequence, but rather to focus on the houses as they begin to elaborate an alternative understanding of type.



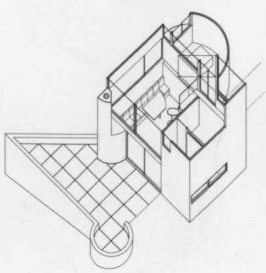
1

Here the rocket analogy becomes useful again to point to this other formalism, one which eludes conventional types. An initial way to use what can be called a vectorial model is to suggest two distinct categories of process. One category acts on form; the other acts on the relationship between forms and thus the position of the forms. In the former category it is possible to distinguish the following processes: aggregating, hollowing, intersecting, linear torsion, centroidal torsion, and more complex hybrids of these. In the latter category, each of these processes has a second characteristic that is either a centrifugal or a centripetal vector. Thus each of the houses will be seen to have at least one of these vectors from each category present, but often there will be two or more of these vectors present. The vector designations, as will be seen below, fall somewhere between type and process, but they do not fall into a specific physical form type, i.e., the courtyard or the eroded cube. While all of the houses may also be seen as eliciting certain of these formal types, such form categories do not adequately explain the complex activity in them. Thus these vectorial designations either fall between types or are hybrids, composites of several types.



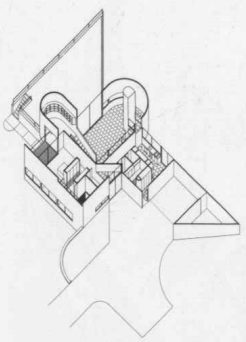
2

Many of the early houses involve two of the vectorial processes. The first is a series of intersecting or interpenetrating figural volumes that have no particular concern for the form or regularity of the cubic periphery. The second of these processes implies an explosion of figural elements from an implied, originary cubic frame. These intersecting figural volumes usually have a dominant, rectilinear cubic form as the originary spatial frame with quarter- and semi-circular secondary figural volumes sometimes as circulation elements projecting from what seems to be this volumetric or vertebrate core. Sometimes other figural volumetric elements in the form of freestanding fireplaces or garage elements also project from this core. The figural elements in these projects are usually deployed on the periphery as if driven there by some centrifugal vectoring energy. The idea of this energy is common to many of the early projects.



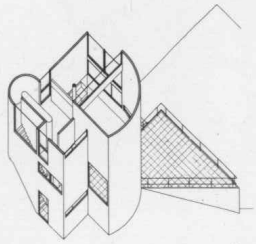
3

The precedent for this kind of vectoring buildup is different from most standard forms of European modernism, which derive instead from an analytic cubism that in principle relies on the subtraction of volume from or the superposition on an a priori cubic perimeter. Volumes of this European type are usually related to some form of frontal datum or vertical picture plane which places volumes in tension (extension) or compression with this planar referent. Such a layered or planar architecture is not a characteristic of Gwathmey Siegel's work. Their volumes are more akin to the haptic, non-axial volumes of van Doesburg's massing or even some of Malevich's constructivist compositions. However, even the interpenetrations of van Doesburg or Malevich produce a superposition in the internal space, where both the voided-out section and the original volume are maintained. In the Gwathmey Siegel houses these intersections become the armature for the hollowing out but do not maintain the superposition. These early houses are also different from many of their European predecessors, which were concerned with the extension and connection to other houses in rows or in siedlungs. Equally, the simple centrifugal vector is understood to have limited use in later Gwathmey Siegel projects, where multiple and repetitive functional requirements do not allow for the action of such a vector.



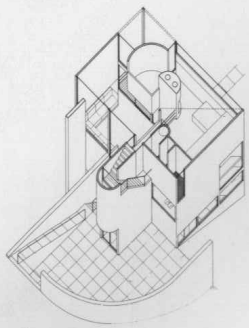
4

The most characteristic and seminal of the centrifugal vector houses is the Gwathmey Studio and House (*1965–67; fig. 1*). Here there is an amalgam of Le Corbusier's cubes with the sharp, angular roof forms reminiscent of the Aalsmeer House of the Dutch architects Bijvoet and Duiker and clad in the American vernacular—the vertical, untreated siding found along the New England coast. It is precisely in this juxtaposition that the denial of precedent and its concomitant ideology give way to a new vectoring of form. And with this emptying of the instrumental content comes the appearance of a formalism, a category of centrifugal vectoring.



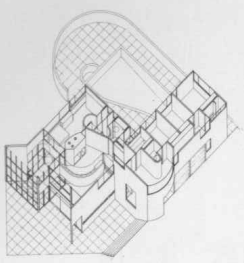
5

The Gwathmey House emerges from a cubic volumetric frame and explodes outward with a series of figural elements. The houses that follow from this initial model are neither as clear in their overlaying of reference nor in their purpose, but they continue to doggedly pursue variations of this vectoring process. The Straus House (*1968; fig. 2*) is an example of the kind of thematic plan variation played off the Gwathmey House. However, the sawtooth roof pieces that were fragments



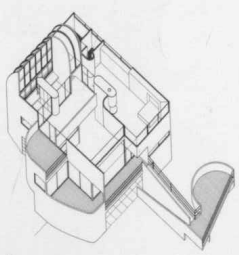
6

in the former house now become horizontal vectors, precursors of the later and important parabolic vectors. There is also here, for the first time, the appearance of an internal hollowing out, an arcing form, which is a precursor of the Steel Houses. The Sedacca House (*1968; fig. 3*) and the Cooper House (*1969*) are again variations of the explosion out from the originary frame of the Gwathmey House. The Sedacca House is interesting because it marks the first appearance of a figural element pinned in the center of the space. The stairway element, here treated without a volumetric wrapping, will become the corkscrew-like element that prefigures later work. While a variation of the Gwathmey House, the Goldberg House (*1969; fig. 4*) adds two new features. One is a raised, plinth-like terrace that becomes an extension of the sculptural massing of the central core, and the second, a volumetric extension at right angles to the core volume.



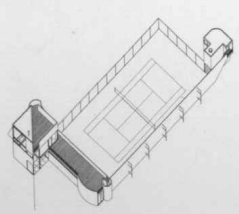
7

The Elia-Bash House (*1971–73; fig. 5*) is another of the houses evolving from the Gwathmey Studio. While it has formal elements from Richard Meier's Saltzman House and also from John Hejduk's Half House, here they are used in a conceptually, and thus formally, different manner. The house is the volumetric intersection of a quarter-circle volume with a cube and a rectangle with a half-round end. The bull-nose, quarter-round southwest corner rises above the cubic volume in section but attaches to it in plan. On the northeast corner a similar set of contrapositions occurs. What is significant about Elia-Bash is that unlike Sedacca, where the rotation is pinned off and thus carved out of a stair, or the Gwathmey Studio, where there is no internal pinning, Elia-Bash pins internally off a single column, which is simultaneously the fulcrum of the quarter-round internal volume and the horizontal wedge-shaped volume.



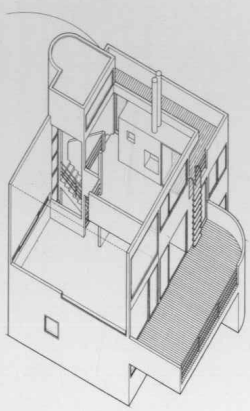
8

The Eskilson House (*1970; fig. 6*) derives from an initial cubic frame, however it is different from most centrifugal vector houses. First, in most of the early houses the torsional, figural elements are on the periphery. Here they are on the interior, the result of perhaps a centripetal action. Second, these elements are solids, as opposed to the earlier Steel Houses where they are void. Third, for the first time there is an entry portico, a freestanding, planar frontispiece that is a precursor of a theme of aggregation and then mutation and fracturing in the figural elements of the later projects. This freestanding frontispiece (which Gwathmey Siegel refer to as a *brise-soleil*) also appears in the Crowley House (*1977; fig. 7*), where it is more integrated into the main body of the house. It is important to note here that formal elements, like many of the Gwathmey Siegel icons, are usually misread as stylistic gestures rather than as formal counters in an elaborate buildup of formal energies. While style and metaphoric content can never be totally removed from any institutional setting, it is precisely their lack of development in the Gwathmey Siegel work that allows for this formal interpretation.



9

With two notable exceptions, the Sagner House (*1973; fig. 8*) is in many respects a return to the cubic-frame of the Gwathmey House. There is again a frontispiece element, which instead of being a frame or a plane, as it would have been in the case of Le Corbusier, takes the form of what only can be called an extruded volume with a quarter-round, barrel-vault roof. This sits adjacent to a half-round stairway element, which is no longer half-round in plan but only in its roof section. Second, there are internal figural elements, which are volumetric. These derive from both the Eskilson and Cogan houses, but in the context of the centrifugal vectors these elements seem anomalous.



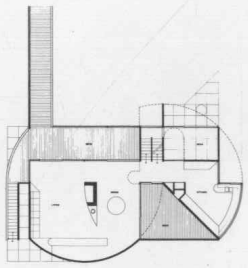
10

While fundamentally a variation of the Gwathmey House (in fact, it is on the same site), the Tolan House (*1970; fig. 9*) adds two further components. One is the linear extension at right angles to the main volume of the house, which will evolve in later projects into a torsional vector, and the other is the walled extension of a tennis court, which is a precursor of the centripetal vectors.

The Viereck House (*1979; fig. 10*) is a variation of the Gwathmey Studio with a three-story volume. The central pivot of the house is a line that connects a projecting half-round, three-story, solid stair volume in the front with a single-story, quarter-round projection in the rear. The section of this volume is sheared by the two-story volume of the porch, which intersects and carves out the primary volume. This quarter-round projection not only supports the extension of a balcony to the southeast on the middle level, but is another instance of sheared or incomplete form when compared with the half-round projection to the front. These shearing projections animate what would otherwise be a rather static three-story volume. The windows here are used to define this play of volume, both present and absent. The large square window on the upper left of the east facade plays with a similar square void underneath the projecting balcony on the lower right rear of the side facade. This, in turn, causes the void above the porch to be read as a "framed volume" even though no actual frame is present.

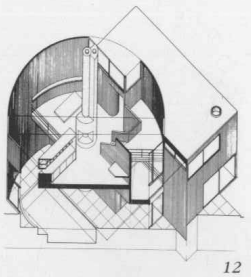
The Garey House (*1988; pp. 228–235*) is the last of the intersecting centrifugal vectors of the first category. The pool, instead of being inboard, is not an extension of the linear bedroom block. There are two intersecting rectilinear volumes with a three-quarter-round circular volume superposed onto the shorter rectangle.

The two Steel Houses (*1971; figs. 11, 12*) are important in the Gwathmey Siegel oeuvre because they introduce a second process, that of centripetal hollowing. Now instead of a single originary frame within an implied core, there are two frames that are seemingly rotated out of one another. The rotation suggests a knuckle or vectorial knotting in space, and thus the Steel Houses produce a series of incomplete and fragmentary arched forms. Gone is the hierarchy of an original cubic form with pendant figural accessories, and in its place emerges an irregular periphery in which the volumes are superposed and intersected, creating for the first time a plastic hollowing out of the interior. The forms are now vectors—containing the energy of a non-static, narrative record of their process of centripetal hollowing. The corkscrew-like hollowing out of the form will become the armature for the knotting of internal figural volumes that will follow. It is interesting that while in the second Steel House a cubic volume is found in a more or less secondary position in terms of the overall massing of the house, the cube is actually being cut away by the rotation of the arcing vector.



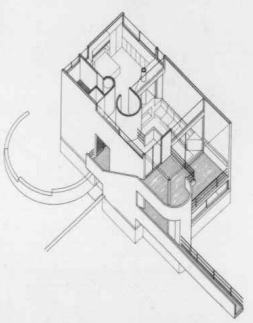
11

The Cohn House (*1973; fig. 13*) and the Buettner House (*1974*) are each variations of the eroded or hollowed out, as opposed to the aggregated cubic, form. What seems to define this difference is the effect of the main staircase being pulled to the center as opposed to remaining on the periphery in the aggregated cubes. The Cohn House entry is situated along a linear slot, parallel to the grain of the building. This slot is in the form of a raised bridge that penetrates a half-round circulation solid pulled forward from the main volume. This pulling forward reveals the entire front end of the cube as hollowed out. What is interesting about the Cohn House is that it marks the first appearance of a series of longitudinal striations that run parallel to the grain of the building. Three of these striations create an asymmetry, a dynamic tension, almost a torsional pull with respect to the solid perimeter: The first layer is defined by the half-round solid; the second by the extent of the second-floor balcony, which penetrates the hollowed out front; and the third is defined by the symmetrical location of the fireplace.

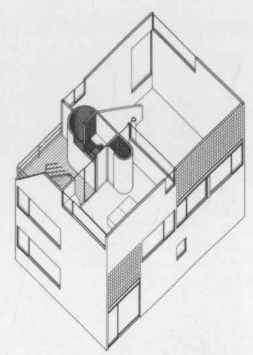


12

The Buettner House (*1974; fig. 14*) is typical of the centripetal process: it is a single cubic volume that is hollowed from within rather than added to from without. Here, however, the eroding energy is not from the interior stair (which is not treated as an object), but rather from the figural rotation of the double bathrooms. The house is almost Garches-like in its massing and its internal disposition. However, both cars and pedestrians enter with the grain rather than across the grain as at Garches. With the Buettner House this is not a formal problem: the volumetric graining is not an issue, save for the single frontal slot that is located by the placement of the entry stair and the freestanding object element characteristic of these early houses. However, the move to a more complex geometry and the intersection of volumes of the later houses is prefigured in this house. The cutout upper corner, reminiscent of Garches again, is done in a way that Le Corbusier would not have envisioned. The triangular, diagonally cut plane, which is resolved only by its alignment with the two horizontal windows on the south facade, prefigures the intersecting volumes of the hybrid projects of the later period. The exterior siding is now white, and there remains the ubiquitous freestanding fireplace and double-height living space opening off the kitchen area, which are formal counters of the Gwathmey Siegel houses. In fact, it might be possible to analyze the development of the centrifugal and centripetal vectoring with reference only to the formal evolution of the fireplace element. It is enough here to say that it mostly plays no role as a figural element, but rather is consistently used as a trace of some originary frame.

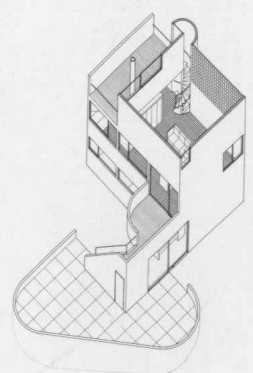


13



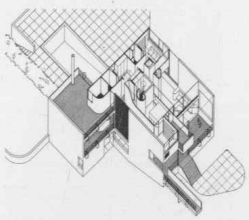
14

The Charof House (*1974; fig. 15*), like the Buettner House, is also Garches-like in its massing, particularly from the rear where there is a volumetric cutout and a stair volume extension from the main floor to the ground. The formal difference between this and Garches lies in Le Corbusier's layering of space and Gwathmey Siegel's knotting of space. Here the projecting stair element is not tied to the main volume of the house, but rather to another figural element that projects from the main cubic volume of the house. This figural projection is also tied through the volume of space to a half-round figural projection on the front of the house. Whereas in the Steel Houses the figural projections are dispersed and fragmented, here they are knotted through the main cubic volume, which acts as an armature for their deployment.



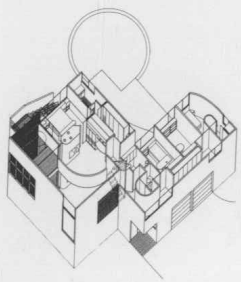
15

The Weitz and Benenson houses are seen by Gwathmey Siegel themselves as a summary of these early formal studies. The Weitz House (*1976; fig. 16*) represents the sheared and overlapped intersection of two cubic volumes, pinned by two linear extensions, front and back, which create a shearing axis. This is one of the clearest examples of the bow-tie or knot-in-space parti. The Benenson House (*1976; fig. 17*) seems from its volumetric massing to be like the Weitz House. From the exterior it has two intersecting volumes, similar to Weitz; however, on the interior these volumes are not tied together. Rather, the figural elements splay and rotate, and are centrifugal, as in the Steel Houses. It is clear that the Benenson House will lead to the Taft House by the addition of a third volume.



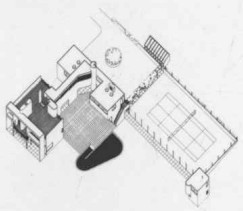
16

The last of the houses to begin from an irregular perimeter is the Taft House (*1977; fig. 18*). It is, in essence, three separate cubic volumes that can be read as aggregating to form a single, irregular volume. It is also possible, however, to read the parti as a single volume that is eroded to reveal either two, three, or even four parts. What is interesting about the house is a series of seeming conflicts which must be seen as intentional to this double idea of aggregating and hollowing. Thus, rather than three arbitrary, floating elements, they can be seen as a suspension, hovering between these two types of vectors.



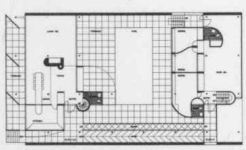
17

While the earliest houses were both aggregating, intersecting, and hollowing, a later group of houses can be seen as predominantly hollowing. Unlike the earlier houses, which have an irregular perimeter, these houses begin from an idea of a fixed, enclosing, rectilinear perimeter, which is then eroded or eaten away by a centripetal, internalizing vector to create an enclosed, exterior volume. In traditional, formal typological terms, these would be seen as courtyard houses. However, here again the centripetal action inherent in these houses is not accounted for in such a static classification. The first of these—the Geffen House (*1973; fig. 19*) is the model—is linear in its site plan, with two lateral volumes closing the front and back of the site with a hollowed out open volume, or "court," of space in the center. This type has its historical precedents in Le Corbusier's houses for Dr. Currutchet in La Plata, Argentina, and the Sarabhai House in Ahmedabad, India. Both the Geffen House and the Block House follow this essential parti type.

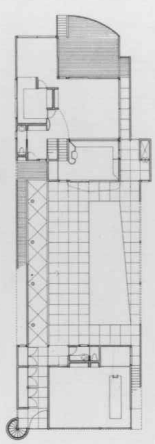


18

It is interesting that these enclosed perimeter houses do not follow the volumetric massing of the first category of a volumetric aggregation, but instead begin to introduce a plaid striation of layered space. In this they still bear little relationship to their modern precursors, Mies van der Rohe's court houses, which are more about pinwheeling, articulate volumes than they are about layered space. In the Geffen House there is the first articulated, two-story frontal screen in Gwathmey Siegel's work. This, along with the ramped courtyard parti, clearly resonates with Le Corbusier's Currutchet House. However, here the entry is not through the screen itself but rather through a slot on the southeast corner. In fact, the section through the ramp is more reminiscent of Le Corbusier's villa at Poissy than it is of La Plata. A regular grid of round columns provides a field for the curvilinear figural forms of the bath, storage, fireplace, and stairs, confirming this reminiscence of Poissy. While Gwathmey Siegel say that this house is a hybrid between a courtyard and the row-house type of Garches, there is too much of the figural object qualities of Poissy in section and plan for the latter reading to be sustained. Yet it is just the idea of the hybrid, the heterogeneous mixing of formal types, that will become central to Gwathmey Siegel's work.



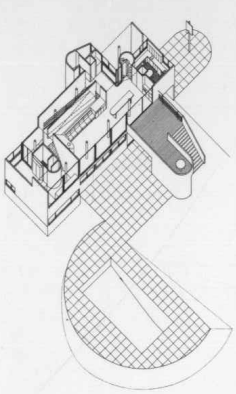
19



20

The Block House project (*1979; fig. 20*) is another of the enclosed perimeter houses with two volumes connected by a long, linear volume. Again, it is an elongated version of the Dr. Currutchet project in La Plata. It presents a garage frontispiece and a long, enclosing ramp on its eastern side. Here the idea of carving out is clearly articulated. At the northeast corner a circular stair articulated as a solid cylinder is let into the corner, fracturing it and creating not so much a series of planes (because the volume is still visually attached to the frontispiece) as an intersection of volumes. There exists within and without a series of symmetries both partial and whole.

In several of these fixed perimeter schemes there is a central or dominant axis that is subjected to linear torsional forces on the interior. In many cases the single bar becomes either a series of volumetric spatial slices deployed parallel to the longitudinal axis or a series of volumetric pavilions. In either case, what distinguishes them is that they are no longer hollowing even though there is a centripetal action. This centripetal action of the stair acts mainly to produce torsion along a central spine, which then fractures the formal elements themselves.

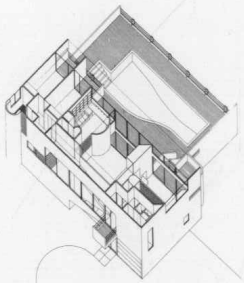


21

The clearest of these houses is the Cogan House (*1977; fig. 21*). Here, three major landforms are shaped: the pool, the terrace, and the lawn. None are treated volumetrically. Thus, the house itself is a single, longitudinal volume spanning the short dimension of the site. This volume is penetrated across its grain (and along the grain of the site) by a second, lower volume that marks the entry in front and defines the outside terrace in the rear. This linear crossing is imploded by a bull-nosed bathroom element on the lowest level and exploded by a circular stair that continues through all three levels. Together, these two pieces act to hollow out the space of the crossing at the lower level. However, this crossing is twisted on the second and third levels by a double-height volume that extends this vector along the main axis of the space. A second torsional element, characteristic of many of these enclosed partis, is the internal ramp extending parallel along the front plane of the volume and providing access to the public living space on the upper level.

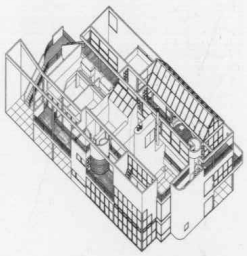
The Haupt House (*1976; fig. 22*) also has a curious parti. In many respects it could easily be seen as either aggregated from an elongated cube or as hollowed out from an enclosing perimeter. This latter reading is possible since the pool,

which is in a raised platform, creates a court-like enclosure covalent with the main periphery of the house. However, it is against such a literalist interpretation of static massing that this essay is directed; such readings deny the fundamental validity of the Gwathmey Siegel work. It is only when their formalism is read as formal processes that the projects take on their full value. Thus the Haupt House must be seen as a torsional line deriving from its major circulation element, which is a linear ramp.



22

The deMenil House (*1979; fig. 23*) in East Hampton also has an enclosing frame, but the vectorial energy is aggregating rather than hollowing. Made of three linear volumes or striations, the house, because of the dominance of the two enclosing bars, has qualities of compressive centrifugal energy. In fact, the central segment is composed of figural elements that are linked like beads on a string from the second-level balcony to the left of the glass screen on the front facade, to the stair that penetrates out and down from the central zone into the rear *brise-soleil* area.

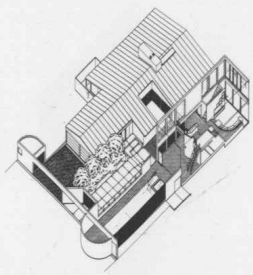


23

The Opel House (*1985; pp. 244–253*) is articulated differently than any of the Gwathmey Siegel houses. It is neither an enclosed frame nor an aggregated parti, but rather contains elements of both along a torsional spine. The house derives from the Row House project (*1979*) submitted to the IAUS "Idea as Model" exhibition in 1979. It also has roots in the Hines House project of the same year. This is a crucial house because it marks a significant departure from any vector as defined by a circulation element, whether it be a stair or a ramp. Instead, the vector is defined by the roof element. In fact, the most significant element in this project is the parabolic roof form. While the authors themselves would acknowledge this as a clever way to overcome local codes that did not allow flat roofs, without capitulating to the pitched-roof syndrome, there is much more at work in this idea. The parabolic roof form implies a new category of hollowed out space, one which is not merely centripetal in plan, but simultaneously torsionally extruded in section. This category of extrusion derives from Arata Isozaki's prefiguration of a new spatial typology that emerges with his first use of the barrel vault in his museum projects in the early 1970s—the horizontal linear extrusion that could bend and turn, and thus deny both the free-plan space of early modernism and its latter incarnation in the development of parallel, cross-wall partis.

The Steinberg House (*1986–89; pp. 254–263*) is a house in transition. In a sense it begins an idea of a composite house. Even though many of the houses exhibit multiple characteristics, the composite house is one in which the formal elements themselves no longer define the object; the composite is made up of disparate formal elements. While much of the Steinberg House is defined by the single dominant and linear barrel vault, which creates a torsional vector, other pieces fall outside its enclosure. As different from the aggregating and hollowing vectors, the torsional vector comes from vaulted forms that do not derive their formal energy from the plans but rather from the section. And since most of Gwathmey Siegel's volumetric development comes from the plan, these roof forms become somewhat anomalous. In the Steinberg House there is a series of three linear volumetric layers, extruded longitudinally, that follow from the deMenil parti of Long Island. There are two narrow circulation layers on either side of a central volume, which is partially covered over its length by an extruded, half-round vault. This causes the central volume to be read as a linear spine with a series of figural volumes projecting from it. The plan organization is a series of cross-wall divisions that compartmentalize the central space into a sequence of utilitarian divisions bearing little relationship to the barrel-vaulted section. That there are clearly formal energies at work can be seen from the exterior massing. From the west end the tripartite, horizontally extruded parti is clearly dominant, although there are two figural projections, a half-round balcony on the southwest and a two-story curved volumetric expansion on the northwest, confounding this reading. To the east there is no sectional reading at all. It is as if there had been a collision or a rupture somewhere along the central axis. Thus, only when these formal energies become intentional, when they lead to some *other,* third condition, can a house truly be said to be a composite that has few precedents in the formal history of residential architecture. However, these hybrids will be seen to be the most original and thus significant in the Gwathmey Siegel oeuvre. They occur in the later houses because, as the projects become larger (as is the case with most successful practices), the partis become, of necessity, more elaborated. Now, instead of juxtaposing formal elements in a single parti, the parti itself becomes a transformational element, a counter in a continual internalization of the formal development. These hybrids cannot be defined by merely noting aggregating or hollowing vectors, for they pose more complex formal issues. They are the most successful when they remain close to the original Gwathmey Siegel parti strategies, that is, when they are seen as a formal development in plan and when there are no iconic elements, such as gratuitous oculi windows, to confuse their intention.

The first deMenil House (*1979; fig. 24*), in Houston, Texas, is one of the earliest of the composite houses. This is partly due to the circumstances that required the incorporation of an existing structure. What Gwathmey Siegel did was to create



24

25

a frontispiece, essentially made up of a dropped, deep beam supported on a series of volumes that extend from the front of this plane and simultaneously seem to be pulled to the rear. Thus, the open space between the two volumes is interstitial rather than residual. It can be seen to be created both by aggregation and by erosion of the volume by a pool that cuts into the space. This bivalent vectoring is one characteristic of these hybrid houses.

The second of these composite houses is the Gimelstob House (*1982; fig. 25*). Initially the parti would seem to be a hollowed center, particularly when seen from the inside. However, the northwest corner is eroded away, revealing a series of three blocks that are aggregated together. The first of these volumes, a north-facing block, is horizontal with a parabolic extruded roof section that again suggests a linear torsional energy. A second rectilinear block is articulated slightly lower than the first, yet intersecting its corner. The third block is a thickened wall plane rendered in red terra-cotta to create a ground or plinth. This is the first time a plinth is so articulated in a Gwathmey Siegel project. It acts both as a ground datum and as a volumetric element because of its coloring, which is different from that of the lateral volumes. However, the idea of a plinth as a formal type is denied by an erosion of its southeast corner by a two-story block. In the main volume there is a curious play in plan between a Palladian villa with two wings set about an axial fireplace and an asymmetric entry reminiscent of the binuclear house plans of Gropius and Breuer. Is this irresolution or purposeful ambiguity? Because of the strength of the parabolic roof, which spans continuously over both possible readings, one is forced to conclude that neither of these formalist-type readings is intended. But this is not a persuasive explanation. It becomes so only when an assumed modernism understood as a homogeneous formal vocabulary is proposed for the work. This assumption is made all the more plausible because of the overriding modern vocabulary that seems to link the early work with the later. But it would seem that the movement from plan generation to horizontal sectional development is more than just a movement away from modernism. Indeed, it suggests a radically different view of composition. The idea of a holistic order, or an inside-outside integration, of a "plan generator," is denied. Instead, there is a movement to aggregational and torsional vectors, not as compositional elements, as in the earlier schemes, but as displaced by a more casual, haptic compositional attitude that is guided neither by programmatic necessity nor by an overriding aesthetic ideal. Now composition is more like a juxtaposition of ready-made parts that say nothing to each other or to the idea of the whole. This silence now illuminates the mute formalism of these fragments qua fragments as their only condition of being.

The Bechtler House (*1993; pp. 278–283*) in Switzerland again can be seen initially to have a European parti evolving from the binuclear houses of Walter Gropius and ultimately the parti of the Bauhaus in Dessau. This parti is then overlaid in the main block with a striated version of Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House grid. The parti is thus initially compositional, but in a composite manner combines aspects of both courtyard and binuclear houses at its entry level. The plan presents a single Palladian volume with two seemingly symmetrical entries in slots flanking the central volume. One slot is indeed an entry, while the other slot is for through circulation. As in all of the later projects, there is a disjunction between plan and section that precludes any vertical extrusion from the plan. Rather, a barrel- or parabolic-vaulted roof section is present. But here it is also fragmented, split in two, running across and counter to the grain of the plan striations. The barrel vaults themselves are split and sheared into two parabolic segments over the main volume of the house and a third parabolic segment over the service volume. Unlike most Gwathmey Siegel projects the house is cut into a sloping site. Thus the entry is at an upper mid-level.

There are two wings parallel to the slope of the ground and one wing perpendicular to these wings, which connects to them in such a way as to act as a fulcrum for the pair of seemingly sheared bars moving in opposite directions. There is an asymmetrical play in the composite imbalance on the front facade; the fenestration of the side block is centered, while the fenestration of the central block is asymmetrical. These are clearly compositional gestures. And one of the problems that gradually becomes evident in these larger houses is that the impulse to control the often haptic nature of the vectorial movements often devolves into a desire for compositional control.

The Chen House in Taipei (*1989; pp. 284–291*) is also an anachronism among Gwathmey Siegel houses; it is vertically massed and reminiscent of Richard Meier's Smith or Douglas houses. Here, as in most Gwathmey Siegel houses, there is an internal formal referencing. The section is the most significant; rising out of a subterranean, three-story drum, it is a conning tower–like series of volumes, cantilevering from a central stair core. The house is thus difficult to classify because its torsional energy is uniquely vertical, rising out of the ground like a corkscrew out of a bottle. The house is bounded on four sides by built walls that extend up from a plinth containing four underground levels of service and ancillary functions.

The above-grade plan is a four-level vertical block, one end of which has a series of sculpted forms and the other end a series of volumes that step out and away from the main block. In fact, from the rear corner the house is reminiscent of Adolf Loos's Steiner House in Vienna. In elevation and in plan the house is striated from left to right by a solid stair volume, an entry slot that reads as a void, and a second slot. Each of these parts forms a very delicate subtext of symmetrical and asymmetrical rhythms. For example, the right-most living room bay is divided into a symmetrical "ABA" tripartite scheme in the middle two floors of the facade. It is split into two asymmetrical solid-void parts, echoing a similar split that occurs in the rear of the plan with the stepped back (in section) projections, which again split the living room volume in two. But the living room volume is also sheared by the axis of symmetry about the two freestanding circular columns. Another axis, this time from above, created by the symmetry of the children's bedrooms, again cleaves the living room in a second axis of symmetry. These dissonant axes demand to be read as what they are—formal fragments with no single meaning. Here the house clearly empties out response to historic precedent, functional program, structure, aesthetics, and meaning. One is left a response that can only be to the formal.

The Oceanfront House (*1988; pp. 268–277*) is another example of a large house whose compositional strategies are consistently denied on both the exterior and interior volumes. Here there is a hollowing within a hollowing. First, the containing enclosure is broken in the front by three different-sized striations that course against the grain of the site from front to back, and east to west. These striations also shear the plane of a frontal volume as they move through it. There is a frontal interior court that is, in turn, crossed by an asymmetric vector from the entry. This vector sets up a series of asymmetric volumetric plays. The front, or inboard, side of the house is articulated subtly by three almost unpunctuated volumetric planes that seem to slide loosely in front of each other, from right to left. The presence of two alternating raised plinths further divides these volumes into four. The corner of the left-most edge is undercut by the presence of two garage doors, while the right-most edge is slightly beveled. Each of these registers of form countermands any single idea. Rather they suggest a multiple order that is enfolded centripetally on the interior. On the outboard side a screen fence and a raised plinth are the only indications of a unifying court. Once inside this perimeter, the house becomes a series of articulated pavilions, seemingly aggregated and thus appearing to contradict the centripetal vector.

Architecture, unlike any other discourse, is prisoner of its institutional frame, and it is this that defines its instrumentality. This is most clearly the case in the individual dwelling, which has defined more than any other building category the social structure of its inhabitants. It can be argued that the gable-roofed, single-family, detached house of the American suburb has contributed more to the social and political institution of the nucleated family than any other comparable institution. It was this institutional frame that was attacked, with very little success, by the flat-roofed, machine-image ideology of the modern houses of Le Corbusier. Within these structures the program of bourgeois life remained virtually intact. While its symbolism of shelter, comfort, and enclosure may have been altered, the structure of the institution of middle-class life remained. This is because the institutional frame of architecture, unlike most other discourses, cannot be dislodged by style or ideology. This is also true for architectural formalism; except for several moments in its history, architectural formalism has been difficult to displace. In fact, formalism, it can be argued, is the only condition of architecture that can displace its own disciplinary frame. What is so interesting about the work of Gwathmey Siegel is that it neither challenges nor denies this institutional frame.

The trajectory of the architectural rocket, no matter how much the launchers may wish it to be otherwise, always falls back into the same place, that is, to its own metaphysic: construction, walls, doors, openings, and the like. To their credit, Gwathmey and Siegel have never claimed otherwise. Their work merely says that architecture will always be within the home and proceeds from there. Quite simply, the iconography of their housing has nothing to do with the home. In its tacit acceptance of home (it makes no claims on either side of the argument of habitation versus occupation) it reuses both European modernism and New England puritanism, both morals and manners. This is the crucial distinction in their work that animates the entire house-project oeuvre. They have managed to launch their work into a trajectory, no matter how grand or how modest, that has inevitably fallen close to the site of a formalism derived from the philosophical tenets of American pragmatism. It is a consistent restrategizing of formalism, which has its roots in the very pragmatism of their work, that allows us to read their work not as style or ideology, but simply as architecture.

New York, 1993

earlier work, from top: 1969 Dormitory, Dining, and Student Union Building, SUNY Purchase; 1970 Whig Hall, Princeton University; 1976 East Campus Student Housing and Academic Center, Columbia University; 1979 Library and Science Building, Westover School

Educational/Arts Buildings and Projects

detail of west and north facades showing intersection of addition and monitor building