Strategies from the Architectural Subconscious

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> ...In all the places I've been to I have felt or understood that somewhere round about someone was there designing houses, someone who desperately wanted to design and maybe also to build a house...
>
> I naturally understood that these designers of houses were there hidden from the fact that there were houses and from the fact that the houses which I found were — in fact — designed and not just any house; they were not undesigned houses like the ones sometimes done by architects who are specialists and who sometimes don't design houses but design specialty, in other words architecture...
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> — Ettore Sottsass, Travel Notes[1]

INTRODUCTION

An architectural continuum exists, separate from the vagaries of fashion, economics, and current power structures that links the pyramids of Egypt to our current built reality. This is the realm of timeless architecture, an architecture not about newness and unfocused reinvention, but about contemporaneity with clear connection to history and the future. This is an architecture that endures, that is continually appreciated by an undefined audience, "reinterpreted anew by every generation."[2]

In an effort to develop an understanding of this continuum, there is something to be learned from the ageless and common architectures that fill our landscapes. These have developed incrementally over time to become lasting structures and spaces rooted in their environments. They have a perceivable history or story that a long succession of owners and caretakers have adapted and refined over time into a finished yet continually fluctuating condition.

The process of development that produces a cumulative architecture is an important part of its instructional value. When a layperson builds, the siting, geometry, configuration and use of buildings in the immediate environment are examined. The builder adapts these solutions of others in the work, making small refinements and adjustments due to particularities of site, program, and available material. The builder relies on past knowledge of construction and space at progressive steps, building on work already in place. This process requires full confidence, determination and trust in one's abilities to move the work forward. In later phases the builder will make alterations and additions to this primary construction, again borrowing from previous work of neighbors as well as personal projects, adding and connecting as seen fit. This is primarily how the vernacular field of our landscape is produced. It is possible for such incremental development to lead to magnificent works of refinement; producing unique experiments in adaptation, resolution, and mutation.

Fig. 1. A La Fontana, Vico Morcote, CH.

These buildings have a logical root in history; they are imbued with the continual developments and refinements afforded by time and a thousand previous builders. Their specific purpose and their particular relationship to context is refined over and over, successes and innovations retained and failures eliminated in the development of a purposeful, balanced, and comfortable architecture.

architecture is:
Part of a continuity of time and history
Open and accommodating
Additive and developmental (evolutionary)
Context specific

Fig. 2. Manufacturing facility.

Fig. 3. Storefronts.

We undertake the study of buildings in the popular landscape in an effort to achieve these qualities in contemporary architectural work.

STRATEGIES FROM THE ARCHITECTURAL SUBCONSCIOUS: COURSEWORKS

How often on our travels through the urban, suburban or rural landscape is our attention arrested by a particular building or construction? Accidental in its composition yet seemingly perfect in its resolution, it appears comfortable in its environment, appropriate to its particular time and place. This investigation begins by examining exceptional constructions in the landscape that command the attention of architects and non-architects alike. What is it about these "low" architectures that invites reflection and activates our aesthetic sensibilities?

Our challenge is to look at these common yet exceptional buildings critically in an attempt to understand their capacity to engage us. I believe they contain specific qualities, certain similarities or strategies. The intention of this investigation is to isolate certain constructs for study, identify specific characteristics that captivate us, and attempt to determine how we can apply an understanding of these characteristics to our own work, in the development of a likewise informed and timeless architecture.

BUILDINGS THAT SUBCONSCIOUSLY FEEL BETTER

What exactly are these buildings and constructions we discuss, and how can they be more precisely defined? They are buildings that we are attracted to visually and aesthetically more readily than others, buildings that intuitively "feel" better. Some examples are illustrated in the pages that accompany this essay. Most are produced by non-architects, laypeople, or engineers, thus not designed in the conventional architectural sense. Yet barns, houses, sheds and industrial constructions all have a hidden intentionality in their design and construction; many also have an underlying design strength. What are the common attributes of these simple buildings that contribute to this strength?

They have a dynamic quality; they are buildings that appear in motion, in flux; buildings in a frozen state of change. They have a strong sense of having been somewhere and also of going somewhere, of developing, yet of existing in a state of completeness; complete in the sense of resolution and balance, yet always open to and prepared for further change and addition.

There is a strong feeling of authenticity to these buildings; they are real. They have a presence that makes them unequivocally "there;" they have a clearly legible personality; a sense of being, participating actively and directly in their given context. They are tied to and part of the landscape, having a comfortable connection with surrounding physical and natural environments.

These buildings have a quiet sense of power. This is not necessarily about scale or weight, but stems from their innate longevity. They are inextricably tied to a notion of history and the future. They are not about a particular era but are closer to being a part of a continuous flow of time and architectural energy.

WHAT MAKES THESE BUILDINGS DIFFERENT?

While anonymous buildings share many qualities and characteristics, three emerge at the forefront. They are 1) "field" constructions built by non-architects, belonging to the general architectural background and exhibiting a seemingly unplanned and humble nature, 2) primarily made up of a diversity of parts, and therefore encourage a multiplicity of readings, and 3) whole and resolved in appearance; exhibiting a strong sense of coherency that I believe we naturally yearn for in the built environment. It is these three aspects that we will pursue as the focus of this study.

BUILDINGS BY NON-ARCHITECTS

Non-formal buildings are realized by non-architects, anonymous architectures of the domestic, industrial, and agricultural vernacular, the rural landscape, the ancient and modern city. They have an unpretentious, direct quality that is difficult to reproduce. Separated from the complexity of theoretical and stylistic architectural discourse, anonymous architectures present a wide variety of similarly executed individual buildings, a field from which to select "those that somehow rise through a genius of accident to serve our discipline" (Robert Mangurian).[3] Beginning with a wide and seemingly inexhaustible supply of buildings, we can compare, contrast, and select particular examples that best embody sought-after qualities.

MULTIPLICITY IN THE ARCHITECTURAL OBJECT

These buildings primarily consist of a quantity of pieces that range from specific hardware to elements of the surrounding context and every scale in between. They are buildings that are composed as a series of pieces, collages of diverse materials and forms that celebrate the richness of these parts. An array and variety of forms tell a strange and sinuous story. Like an architectural poem, each piece triggers a different thought or idea as it conveys content and history.

Charles Jencks, in the introduction to his history of modern architecture, describes the idea of multivalence in the architectural object:

> Certain buildings have a richness and density of meaning which make them more enjoyable to inhabit, view and visit

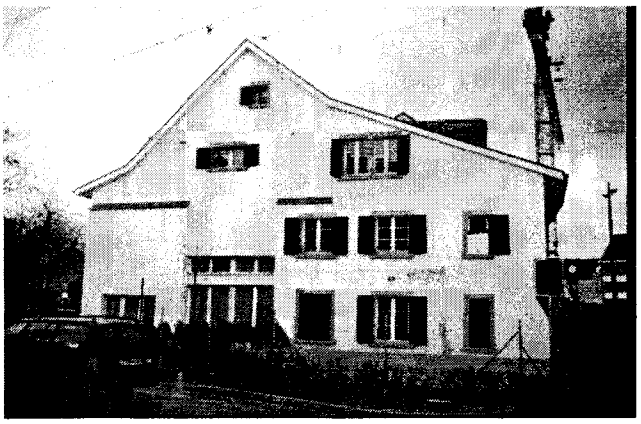

Fig. 4. House.

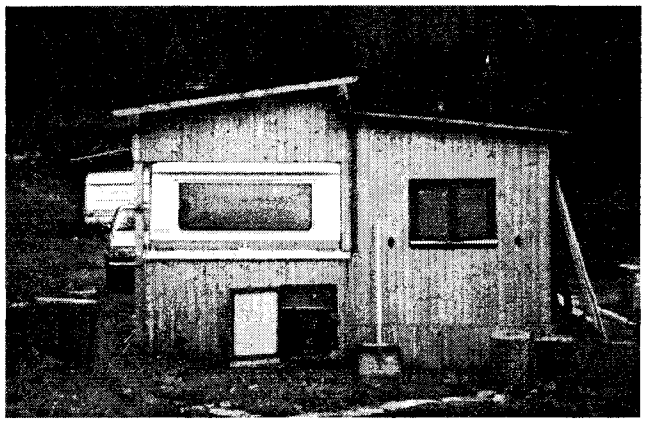

Fig. 5. Trailer camp.

> than others. These are the buildings which are reinterpreted anew by every generation. We return to them again and again, not necessarily because of any particular meaning which they may convey, but more because of the exciting and deep way in which the meanings are interrelated or fused together into a powerful pattern. For this quality I have adopted the general term multivalence because it points to the presence of multi-valued levels of meaning. To be more precise, multivalence consists of four distinct qualities: imaginative creation, or the putting together of parts in a new way, the amount of parts so transformed, the linkage between the parts which is the cause of this creation and which allows the parts to modify each other.[4]

Investigations of non-formal buildings reveal this condition. These constructions develop over time, and are composed of a variety of found or available materials and observed forms which allow the building to be perceived in a variety of ways, each angle or view offering a new interpretation.

WHOLENESS IN ARCHITECTURE

The concept of wholeness is another important perceived quality in the buildings of study. While many buildings possess the quantity and variety of parts discussed by Jencks, what makes certain buildings complete, whole, and balanced within themselves and their context? These constructs have a perceived resolution, a sense of wholeness. This resolution of the whole encompasses all levels and scales of elements, leading to a balanced, finished piece that is always open to further manipulations. These are buildings that resolve a series of pieces into a whole, buildings that reveal diversity yet have an overall coherency.

Henri Bortoft, in his article "Counterfeit and authentic wholes, Finding a means for dwelling in nature" states that wholeness relies on the following conditions;

> pervasiveness of the whole throughout,
> the properties of one part are determined by the properties of the others,
> the whole cannot be perceived in overview, but by getting closer,
> the whole is irreducible, "bearing all within itself,"
> the parts are nested, not linear.[5]

While this becomes a kind of list of requirements for wholeness to occur, the question becomes how do parts actually add up to a whole, and how is the whole contained within the individual parts? Robert Venturi discusses the importance of linkages in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* in the chapter "The Obligation Towards the Difficult Whole." He describes a number of linking strategies, such as complex rhythms, inflection, distortion, interlocking, and continuity.[6] These strategies have been identified in his research of 'high' architectures, and are intended to support the creation of wholeness.

COURSEWORK

In the Spring of 1997 a group of students studying with me at the Southern California Institute of Architecture's European satellite in Vico Morcote, Switzerland, analyzed anonymous buildings. We saw Jenck's "multiplicity" as an important characteristic of compelling architectures. We were acutely aware in our initial observations of buildings of "imaginative creation among large numbers of parts;" what we were most interested in and what was key to making these observations useful was defining the linkages and modifications within these parts in a concise way. We reviewed and discussed Venturi's linking systems, adapted them, and moved beyond his findings. We were intent on looking closely at the documentation we were to produce to determine our own linking strategies in a spontaneous way. We endeavored to uncover our instinctive knowledge of building, and trust that to point us to a more basic methodology. With our list of requirements:1) buildings that are realized by non-architects;2) buildings that are composed of a series of diverse pieces; and 3) buildings that resolve this series of pieces into a whole.

We proceeded to search out and record a large variety of buildings or constructs through field observation and documentation. We hoped to identify underlying consistencies within these representative buildings and determine specific strategies that contribute to their quality of wholeness.

WHERE TO LOOK?

Investigations were centered in the Swiss canton of Ticino, location for SCI-Arc Vico. Ticino is made up of an impressive string of narrow valleys in Southern Switzerland lying between the San Gotardo Pass (which separates Northern and Mediterranean Europe) and the Lakes District of Northern Italy. Ticino's long history of construction is represented in buildings that are specific and integral to the environment, often constructed of local stone and other indigenous materials, nestled into hillsides or alongside lakes. Ticino is also an industrious area of agricultural endeavors, gravel quarries, and light manufacturing. Quick, light buildings for small industry and storage programs comprise areas designated *zone industriale* (industrial zones).

We extended our investigations into many other areas of Europe as well: upper regions of Switzerland including the Engadine, Northern Italy, including Torino and the Valle d'Aosta, as well as the Massif Central of France and Galicia, Spain. Wherever our travels

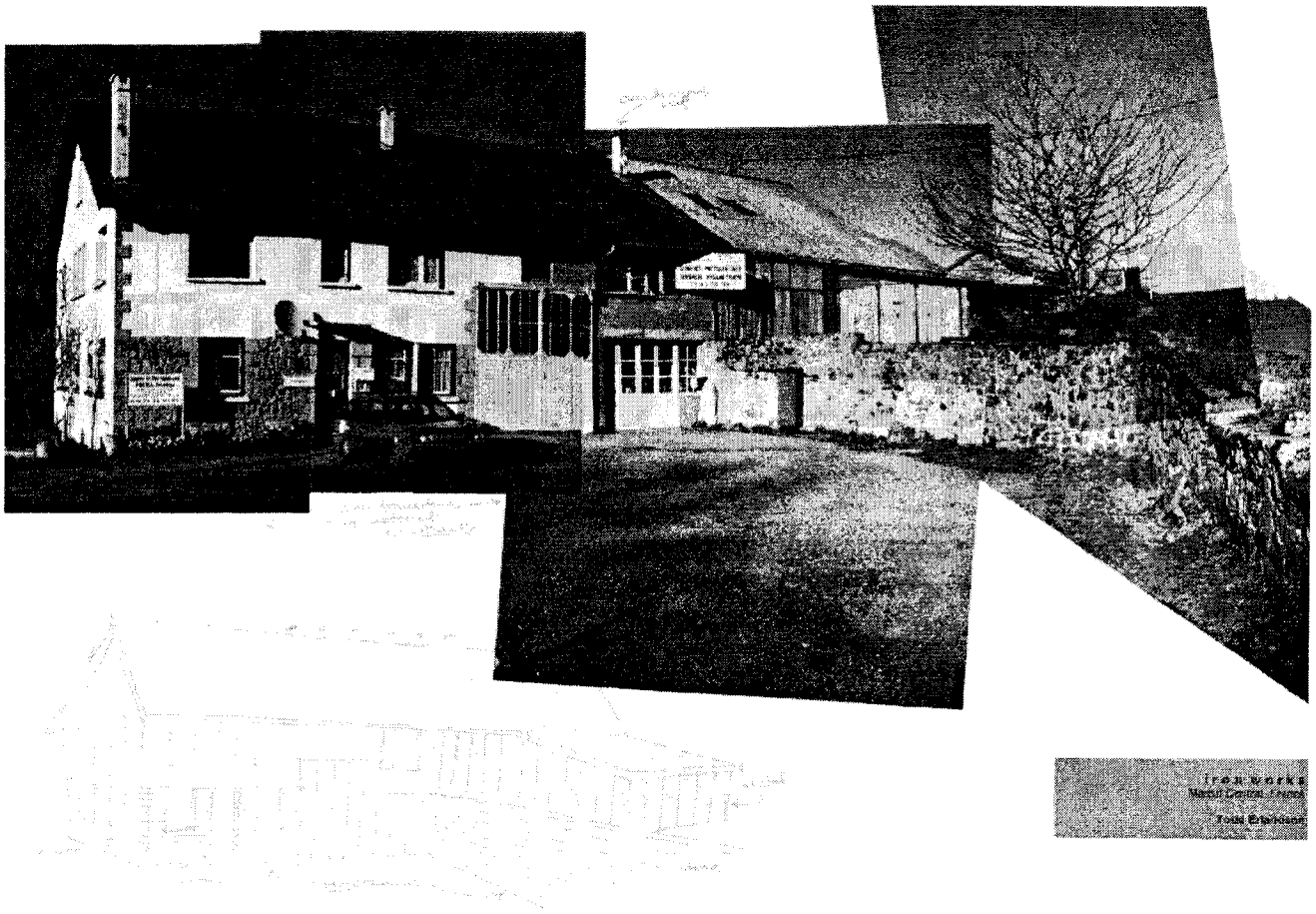

Fig. 6. Descriptive plate, iron works.

took us, we kept an eye out for buildings that stopped us in our tracks, buildings that fit our guidelines.

THE PLATES

To describe our findings, "plates" were devised that would contain photographs and descriptive diagrams of particular buildings.

Photographs: Because we identified buildings that engaged us and attracted our attention on a somewhat subliminal level, we had to be able to record them in photographs quickly and spontaneously, wherever we traveled. The camera became our tool for identifying and selecting, and the composite photograph our method.

It was a difficult and much discussed decision to use the composite photograph as a documentation tool. Made famous through the work of artist David Hockney and others, the composite today is often overused and poorly understood in architectural and educational circles, even appearing dangerously trendy. Yet there were a number of reasons for its eventual selection. First, as we have mentioned, we needed to be quick and spontaneous in our documentation. These photos could be taken "on the run" with a relatively unsophisticated camera, without aid of a tripod or other tools, and in most lighting conditions. Second, the immediacy (and affordability) of acquiring film and having it processed for review in a few days was extremely attractive. This was a great advantage over black and white photography and darkroom development, and it also allowed us to deal with the effect of color. Finally, the composite photographs were large images that could be reviewed by a group in a communal setting, easy to view and critique collectively.

But these issues were minor when compared to the most important one of looking closely at the parts of the whole. As Bortoft has said, the whole is found within the parts; the whole cannot be perceived in overview, but by getting closer.[7] By building the composition from a variety of smaller, more specific images, we focused on the parts and how they support and embody the whole. We hoped that the act of "constructing" the photograph would help us to understand the actual documented construction and how it in turn was structured.

A preliminary reading of Lawrence Weschler's essay "True to Life," from the book Cameraworks by David Hockney, uncovered the following passage:

> In ordinary photographs, a whole is presented from which details can be elicited. Hockney seems to suggest that this is the opposite of how we actually see the world. For Hockney, vision consists of a continuous accumulation of details perceived across time and synthesized into a larger, continuously metamorphosing whole.[8]

We saw our photographs as being about parts; they are built compositions of documented pieces.

Diagrams: As the course progressed, the composite photographic images were mocked up on European A3 sheets, copied, and reviewed by the group. We analyzed them collectively and identified and quantified particular strategies for making up "wholes." The diagrams represent a documentation of this inquiry into the subjects. As analyses of the photographs, the diagrams made specific strategies more apparent. They are designed to exist somewhere between the actual building image and the more abstracted, essential model, which would be constructed later. Initially we sketched directly over

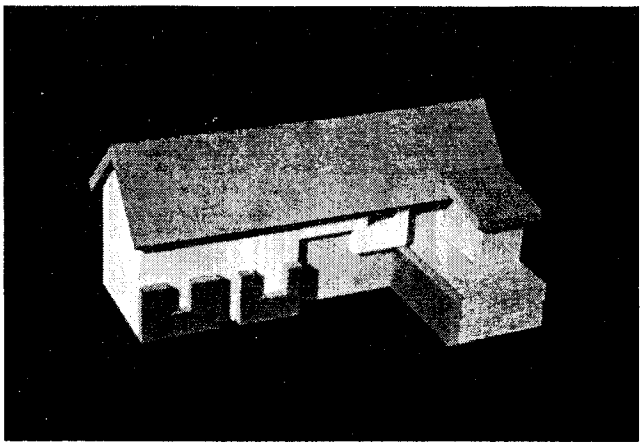

Fig. 7. 3-D diagram, iron works.

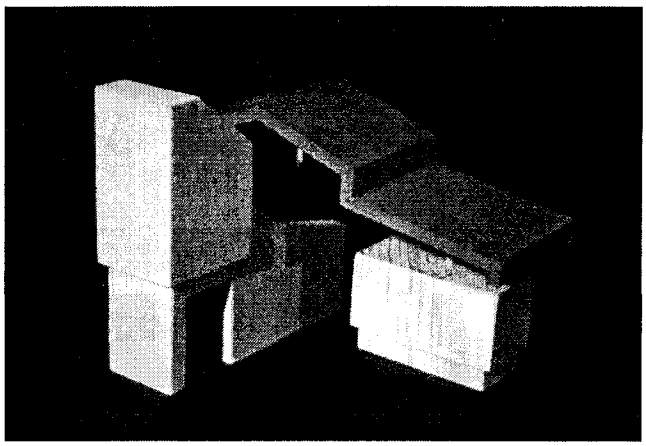

Fig. 8. 3-D diagram, gravel quarry.

the images with tracing paper to reveal more clearly the individual parts and the strategies for linking them. These diagrams allowed us to separate and decipher our observations. Each final plate represents the many analytical permutations of that particular example.

Models: Models were also developed to describe the buildings. They were required to be no larger than 10 x 10 x 20 cm and to incorporate mass, form, color, and texture, as appropriate. The models were to represent the essential aspects of the described strategy or strategies, as "boiled-down," 3-dimensional building diagrams. Viewed in conjunction with the composite photographs and diagrams, they provide a total view of the selected construction.

IDENTIFIED STRATEGIES

What has come out of this work, this investigation into the "architectural background," this documentation of the everyday? We perceive these buildings as important in some way, as compelling and possibly worthy of emulation. We maintain that specific strategies exist that allow for differences, that incorporate divergence within unity, that permit a Concordia Discorso or a "friendship among things that are different" (Stefano Pujatti).[9]

In discussion and review of work and documentation we identified ten strategies or specific relationships for incorporating and combining diverse parts, materials, and forms into resolved wholes. While their number is not definitive, we feel they represent the most important commonalties between buildings in the study. The titles for these strategies were chosen spontaneously based on immediate readings of the specific buildings, a way of cataloging and describing the strategies.

Accommodation: *a yielding or compromise to affect a correspondence; a deviation of parts due to proximity of others* Accommodation describes a way of giving in. It describes how relationships are formed through locality. Usually a mutual accommodation occurs, although it can also describe the strength with which one part can affect another or many. It describes a piece's physical change because of its relationship and nearness to another piece.

Binding: *a tying together of parts, lacing; to make secure by tying* Parts are often strung together, tied and bound by tendrils that extend from one into another. These elements can be long boards, fences; they can also be ramps, strips of fenestration, a structural base. Like a seam or suture across a gap, pieces are literally woven through the mingling of their specific components.

Cover: *to lie over, envelop; a part that covers, encloses, or wraps one or a group of other parts* A unifying cap, this strategy is a strong move in holding together a group of disparate parts. Usually taking the form of a roof or a wrapping skin, it acts as a "dominant binder" (Venturi) placed over or around to enclose a number of elements in composition.

Equality: *connected appearance due to consistent scale, quality or number of parts or characteristics* The use of a unifying pattern in grouping. Venturi says that the simplest "unity" is achieved by reducing parts to a similar scale "to be perceived as an overall pattern or texture," much like a pointillist painting. If one hundred windows are different in every way except they are the same size and are organized in a consistent manner, they will read as a continuous equalizing pattern.

Layering: *overlapping of planes; one thickness, course or fold laid or lying over or under another* A way of joining parts through overlap, particularly in the merging of their planes/skins. It is a simple way of relating elements, slipping one over or past another to blur the definition of where one piece ends and the other begins. One part arranged on top of, in front of, or over another.

Mold: *interlock; to be or become mutually interconnected through positive and negative forms, either in the same plane or three dimensionally* This refers to the reflection of one piece's shape as a negative in another, a male/female relationship between parts. This allows the parts to appear engaged, locked together in mutual dependence. A very tight and strong form of relationship, it is difficult to separate. This often appears in figure/ground association, or in the nesting of pieces one inside the other. One part clearly engages another and they are read as making a literal impression on one another.

Reference: *relation between parts; a transfer of elements or characteristics from one piece to another* Venturi describes this as a kind of inflection, "a dependency on something outside of itself."10 When one piece makes reference to another, a relationship is made across the whole. This can be a similarity of expression, form, fenestration, material, but within two or more elements they are linked.

Replication: *the process of reproduction of parts within a composition, not necessarily at the same scale* Parts often appear as offshoots, growths or progeny of other parts, having similar attributes as the primary part but realized in a different place or at a different scale. Multiple pieces and repetition of a part or parts is related to this strategy. By repeating a part once or many times throughout a composition, one can read a relationship between these parts and within the whole.

Smoothness: *continuity between parts due to even and uninterrupted transitions; subtle change from one piece to another* This strategy is about movement across or through an object; how parts meet yet transform smoothly from one to another. The question of where one situation ends and the next begins is constantly asked; pieces merge or blend. This relates to the notion of morphing; attributes of one piece are taken on in increasing volume as the pieces become closer to one another and more engaged. We recognize a continuous flow through the whole, encompassing all parts comfortably and easily.

Structure: *arrangement in definite patterns of constructional organization* This strategy occurs when a formal ordering system, often related to the structural system of the construction, becomes the dominant organizer of the whole. Parts fall into place within this structure, and relate to one another across this organizational pattern. This can be a simple pattern, with everything tucked into its place, or very complex, with a variety of systems relating to each other.

CONCLUSIONS

Buildings that strike us in the environment, that command our attention. Our task was to identify buildings inextricably tied to their surroundings, comfortable in their context and resolved within themselves, and to determine how we can apply an understanding of these buildings' primary characteristics. The above strategies provide a set of tools or guidelines to support our goal of similar resolution and appropriateness in our own work. The plates show examples of how constructions may use many of the strategies simultaneously, as well as how strategies interact with each other within one building. The plates also point to the many possibilities to use the strategies in contemporary work.

Multivalence is achieved through "imaginative creation, or the putting together of parts in a new way, the amount of parts so transformed, the linkage between the parts which is the cause of this creation and which allows the parts to modify each other.[11] The strategies we have identified define these linkages. While a multitude and variety of parts define the dynamism and life of the building, the interaction, overlay and interweaving of linking strategies account for their strong coherency and wholeness. The strategies become irreplaceable tools for the architect that complete and resolve work, and allow for methods of future addition and growth.

Identifying and developing an ability to access innate understandings of buildings and architecture. These strategies support us in developing buildings from our fundamental instincts. While we may have a chosen direction for our projects, we don't need to maintain the "whole" in our heads as we work, but can define and develop parts through experience and memory that can later be linked by defined strategies. We can go back and bind, tie, layer, etc.; we can focus on the "joints" and resolve and smooth at multiple instances in the design or construction process.

To achieve an informed and timeless architecture, our work must be open and accommodating, additive and developmental and specific to site and context. Through these strategies from the architectural subconscious we can resolve this diversity of requirements into a whole and complete architecture.

NOTES

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[1] Ettore Sottsass, *Travel Notes*
[2] Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (Penguin USA, 1987), p. 14.
[3] This quote came from architect Robert Mangurian in a letter to the author received in Vico Morcote, Switzerland, Fall 1996
[4] Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, p. 14.
[5] Henri Bortoft, "Counterfeit and authentic wholes, Finding a means for dwelling in nature,"
[6] Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York,: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), pp. 88-105.
[7] Bortoft, "Counterfeit and authentic wholes,"
[8] Lawrence Weschler, "True to Life," in *David Hockney, Cameraworks*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 6.
[9] The term "Concordia Discorso' and it's description were related to the author by architect Stefano Pujatti in a discussion in Torino, Italy, Fall 1996
[10] Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, pp. 88-105.
[11] Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, p. 14.