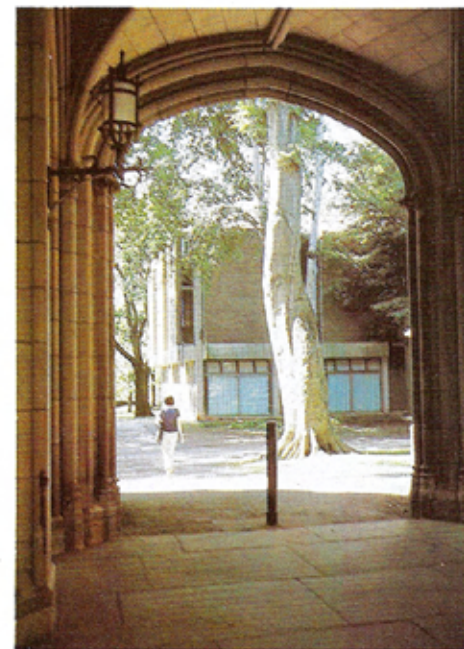


# Princeton: The Exploration Of Ideas

*With a single-minded emphasis  
on architecture itself.*  
By Marguerite Villecco



J. Ullman

Princeton University's school of architecture is one of the nation's smallest, with only about 50 students in its professional degree program. It is also one of the most influential. Historically, through its alumni, and currently, through the design and writing of its faculty and recent graduates, the school has led the profession in examining critical issues. Today, for Princeton, the critical issue is architecture and reinterpreting the nature of things and thinking architectonic.

For many critics, the price of the inquiry has been too high. They see the school dramatically changed from the recent past and abandoning the concern for humane environments, for technological advancement, for professional activism, and for interdisciplinary endeavor consistent with the complexities of societal needs. Instead, the school seems focused on academic formalism, where student and faculty projects too often resemble monuments of the past, engage in surface imagery to the exclusion of all else, or proclaim neorational coldness toward the human condition.

The school is more narrow in focus than others. But its emphasis on history and theory is a *decision* that these, more than social science, programming, or technology, are a route to humanity and quality in the environment. Princeton is probing architecture, its own heritage of form and concept, its own language and critical frameworks, in search of cultural meaning. Students are becoming sophisticated in the theoretical discourse of architecture, albeit somewhat naive about the pragmatics and implications of generating form.

Alan Colquhoun, director of graduate studies, speaks of the school's evolution: "There has always been a formalistic emphasis here. Yet there is also a tolerance for pluralism. There is an implicit, not explicit, philosophy here. Earlier, the modern movement's tenets that function is the rationale for form were taught. These ideas are no longer taught.

"Princeton was among the first to move away from modernism for a number of reasons intrinsic to the school. In the 1960s, there were two strands of thought. One revolved around users, social concerns, and advocacy. The other concerned architecture as a formal and theoretical discourse, with Michael Graves, Peter Eisenman, and Ken Frampton as spokesmen. With the demise of social concern as an ideology in the early 1970s, postmodernism arose as a basically formalistic concern. Graves and Alan Chimacoff changed styles. They became more iconographic.

"Design is still based on program. But program itself is not design—it doesn't replace all else as it did in the 1960s.

"There are two sides to the school today, and they are dia-

lectically related. One looks to architecture as a cultural product, one among many and related to others. The other view is that form, whether modern or historical, is independent of cultural or ideological factors. Michael and Chimacoff teach architecture as a historical discourse, where esthetics override social or historical considerations. Architecture, and architectural form, are eternal. [Anthony] Vidler and I historicize *all* the time; that is, we look to the ideology of history, philosophy, and social history as a basis for form. Therefore, beauty cannot be absolute for us.

"The school also maintains some biases toward modernism. [Dean Robert] Maxwell, Vidler, and I frequently use modernist criteria to evaluate student work. Five years ago, Michael was at his zenith—a great influence. Not all students buy that today. Many explore the relation of modernism and postmodernism, the relation of architecture to modern social and technical conditions. Graves emphasizes the image. Others of us emphasize what generates the image."

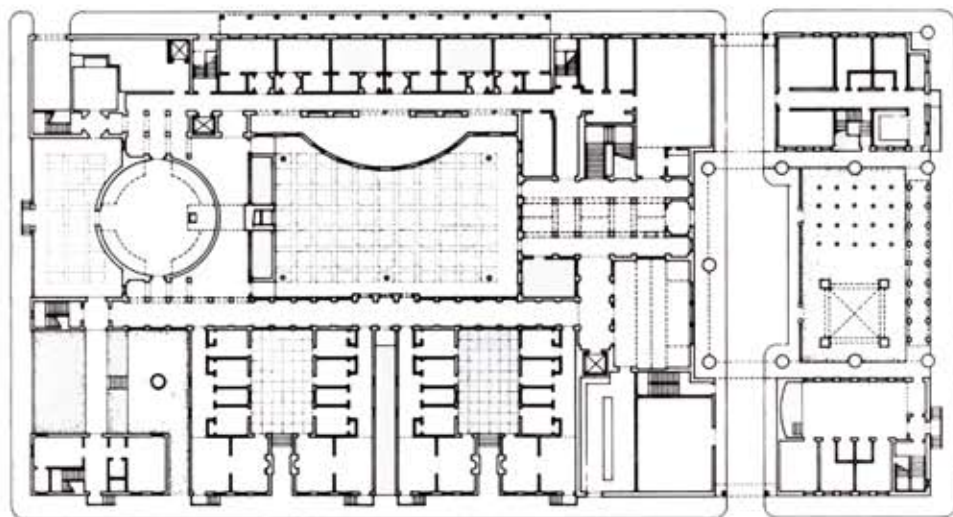
"The overwhelming issue is architecture understanding itself," says Graves. "I emphasize the character of spaces, living rooms versus bedrooms. What are the differences? What is the space like? It's important to try to say it. For example, if one were to design a house for Proust, one would have to describe the swan in the bedroom, the mood, the decoration of the room, the color, texture, detail, etc. We need to be conceptually whole; thinking in terms of plan and elevation is not enough.

"I start with words, which are familiar. Our students tend to be verbal and articulate, but they may be less able to draw conceptually. I try to get the students to think through what *could* be and encourage them to push further and further in their exploration. The students can then start to think in ranges of words as a conceptual device for drawing."

Dean Maxwell refers to Graves as "a great artist. I don't design like that myself. He pushes surface and image to the limit; Portland is almost scandalous in that respect. But I am a great admirer, and we are happy. Michael is, by the way, a living embodiment of the [Jean] Labatut tradition at the school; he works through plan; and he is a wonderful teacher. But the school will continue if he leaves. Graves is not the only influence here."

Chimacoff says outright: "Princeton is not a spawning ground for future Michael Graveses. The faculty, including Michael, give wholehearted criticism to everything. Besides, it's almost irrelevant what things look like in a school. What is important is the *thinking*. Princeton is identified with postmodernism, but the degree of bogus, fake P-M stuff on the wall is lower here





*Hospice in New Orleans, a thesis project by Lee Ledbetter. Organized around a courtyard, with a diversity of residential images, the hospice is contextual with its neighbors in scale, material, and color. Jury comments: Ten years old as a concept, hospices have yet to evolve into a type. They represent the deinstitutionalization of death and dying in favor of homelike, inward-looking surrounds. Not episodic in form or concept. The courtyard needs development as gardens. The chapel imagery is harsh, perhaps inappropriate, suggesting crematoria more than communication with God. The stairs to nowhere are a problem too. Overall, a buildable, thoughtful solution, humane and purposeful.*

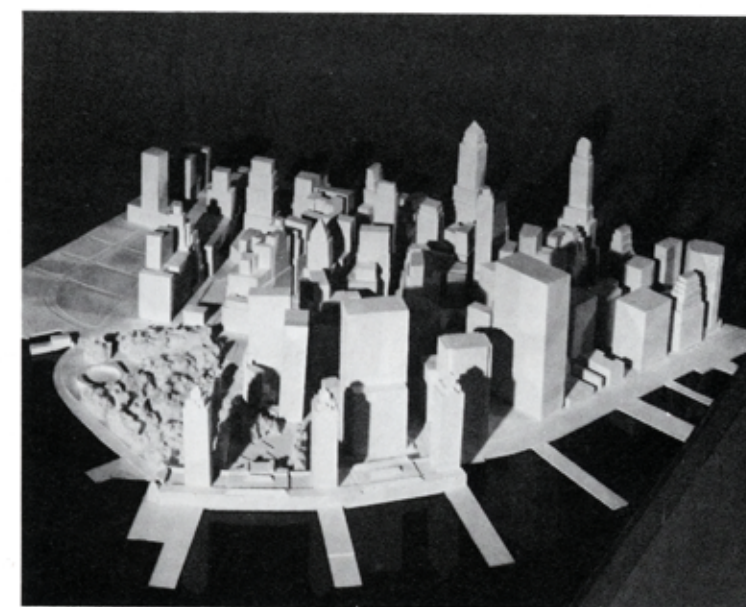


than in other places. It gets criticized harder too. There is rampant and appropriative eclecticism, interpreting and reinterpreting and taking wholesale, but this is the inquiry in design. It's the ideas, not appearance, that matter."

In fact, there is less Michael Mimiery here than in many other schools, where Xeroxes, not ideas, convey images. Many of the students at Princeton seem to realize that what Graves does is not replicable and, while they admire the man and his work, they seek their own basis for form. Graves is a model for design exploration more than solution.

Chimacoff continues, "Those who see the school in stylistic terms miss the point. Style doesn't matter, and the image of the school in those terms is based on wrong assumptions and platitudes that people get as architects and teachers: the belief that the design studio coordinates *all* things is bullshit. That technical, social, and formal issues come together in the studio—no! The assumption that schools should mirror practice—that's wrong!"

"Five years ago, a Princeton alumnus wrote a letter to the president of the university saying that the school of architec-



*South Ferry Plaza in New York, a thesis project by Penny Yates, consists of a base and three towers (two offices and one hotel) at the base of Manhattan. Each of the towers terminates a north-south street, bounding the island in deliberate opposition to prevailing codes that protect water views. Jury comments: Provocative in its challenge to zoning mores. The towers are small in square footage, raising issues about rentability and program. Their slenderness is more convincing in perspective than elevation or model; scale is an issue. The progression from street to tower to pier is clear, signifying the presence and importance of the ferries.*

ture was a *sham*, that it was a fashion, or decorator's school. [Then-Dean Robert] Geddes replied that we work hard to be the things you say we should be and invited him to join in a design review. He came. His presence stimulated the whole process; it was extraordinary! In a chat afterward, Geddes said, 'How are we doing?' The man replied, 'You'll have my apology in writing.'

The school is clear about its strengths and weaknesses. Michael Graves volunteers: "We are strong on history and theory; we are weak on technology and the pragmatics of building."

The clarity does not suggest discomfort. There is a broad sense within the school, among faculty and students alike, that the current emphasis on theory, or the conceptual frameworks for doing and understanding architecture, is essential if architecture is to transcend the eclecticism and stylistic novelties of the day. But there is also conviction that the conceptual frameworks must extend to the materiality and technology of buildings.

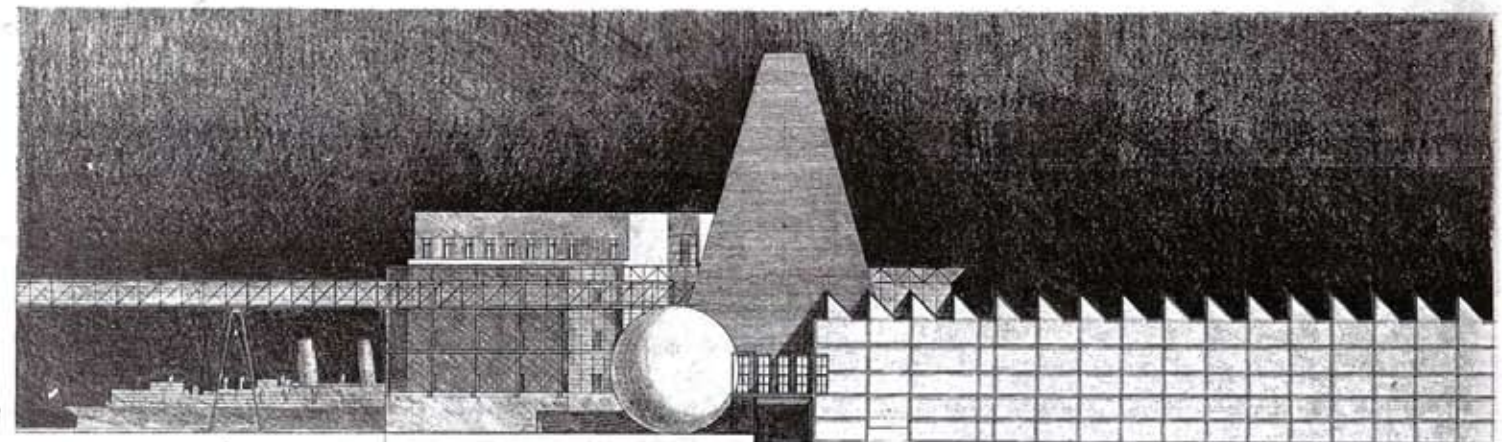
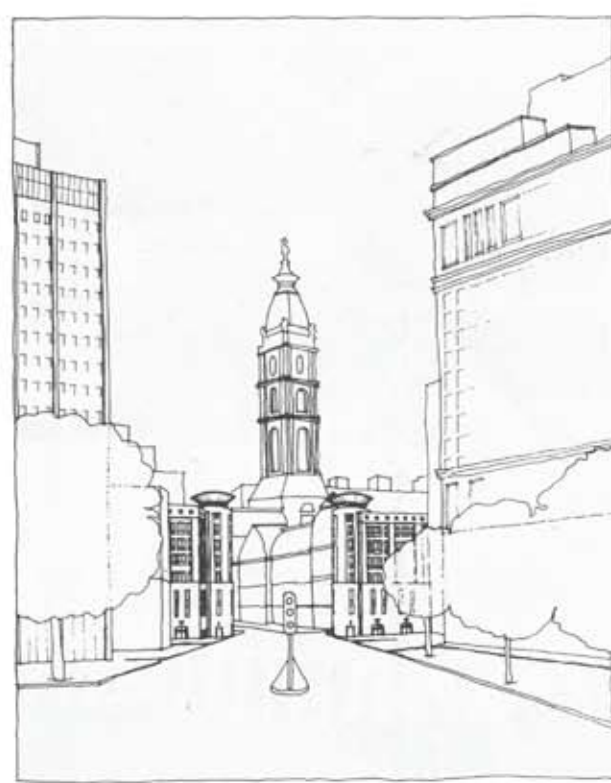
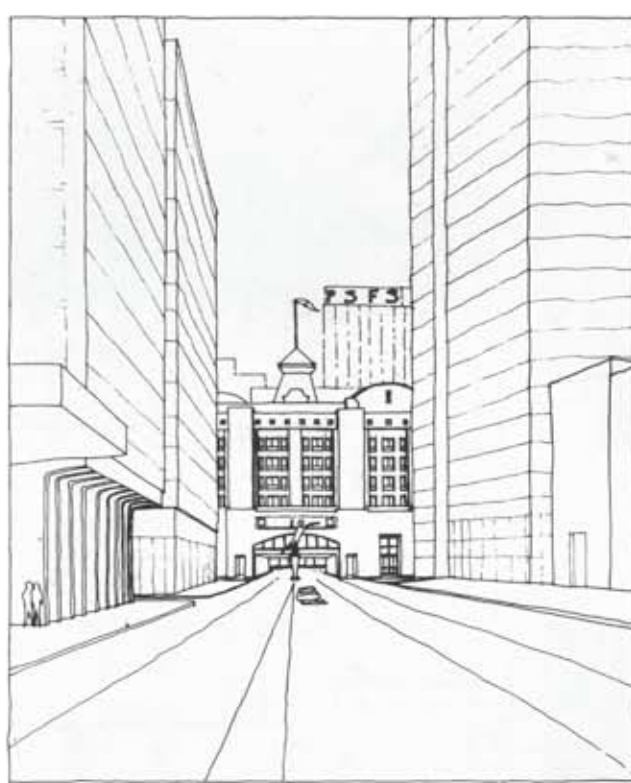
Dean Maxwell is eager to move into the neglected areas and to explore computers "so that technical subjects can be taught by machine. I would like to streamline and make more efficient the teaching of technical subjects so they're not spread over the whole and therefore not internalized until the end of the formal educational process. Then it's too late."

Chimacoff is described as the faculty member most concerned with technology. "As a design person, it's acceptable for me to talk about technology. It's a quirk of my personality. I like to think about how buildings are *made*. At Princeton, it's amazing how we get away with so little emphasis on technology and not have it harm students. And it *doesn't* harm them. We need to keep thinking about technology and how to address it in the current framework of the school. It's not an issue of courses on building construction. Construction is the servant of ideas; we need a broader basis than a course.

"We need to reinterpret technology to get thinking better about it. We don't need to 'do tech stuff' at the expense of more important things. What is absent and needs to be addressed is a way of *thinking* about all the complicated programmatic and material aspects of building. We need to accelerate the processes of people's minds about what happens after school. It usually takes longer than three years to get a license to kill."

Graves tells of using "war stories" in studio crits, drawing increasingly on experience in the field. In one review, when a





student presented a design for a tower atop a landmark library. Graves asked about her plans for phasing the project to assure that the use of the existing library could continue through construction. Graves is also concerned about buildings deteriorating by design: "We want buildings to look better with time. Too often we are a-tectonic and work against the elements needlessly."

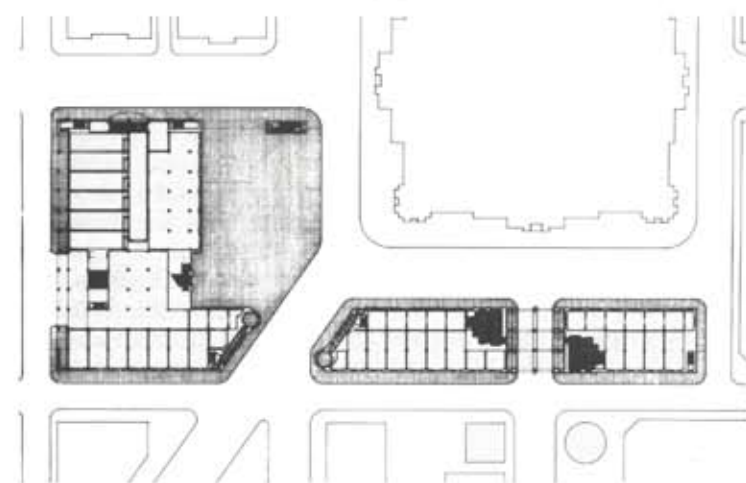
Chimacoff notes that the spirit of Labatut continues to imbue the school. "The questions have changed, but not the questioning. There remains an unwillingness to accept things at face value." Jean Labatut was critic, heart, and head of the school for nearly four decades and guided it from the Beaux-Arts to modernism. The school was then programmatically and physically linked to the department of art and archaeology.

In 1963, two years before Robert Geddes became dean, the school moved to a modern new building. The move was both physical and symbolic. Geddes was then the only "working architect" on the faculty, and, while many architectural schools have difficulty gaining academic recognition for design, at Princeton it was the opposite. Geddes had to gain university recognition for architecture as a *profession*. He did this, in part, by establishing new links between architecture and the allied professions, such as urban planning, the social sciences, and building technology. The school was renamed the school of architecture and planning.

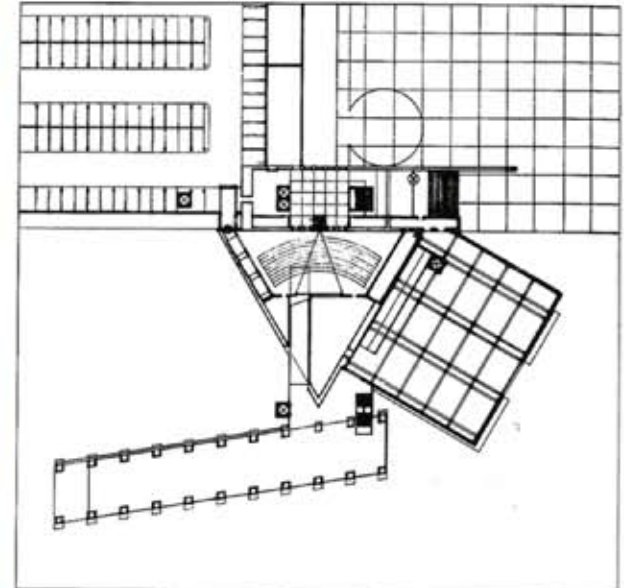
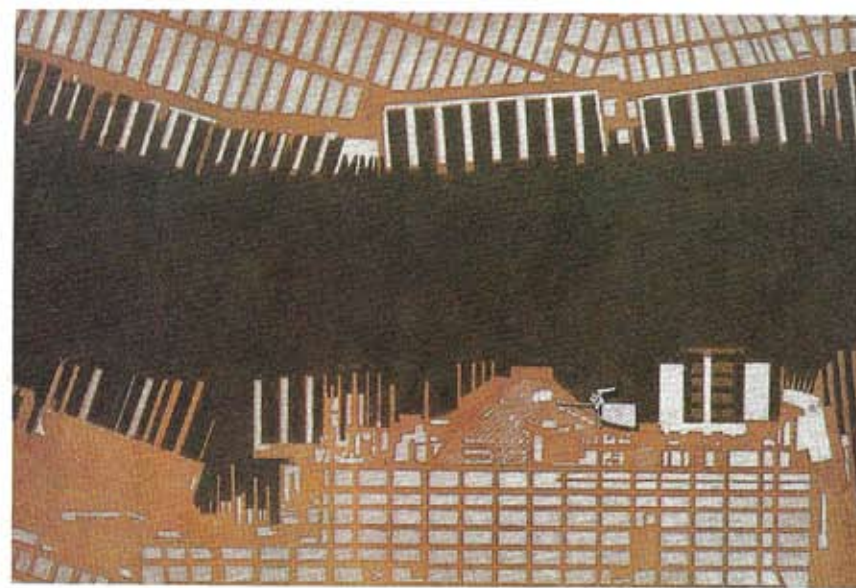
Today, it is once again the school of architecture, following the model of many other schools as planning became more and more concerned with economics and policy than with physical form. Chester Rapkin, who teaches planning and urban development, calls himself "a remnant, what's left of the planning school."

"The school of architecture is more design oriented than I would like. I like to see the needs of a city reflected in the city's appearance; I like the flow of cities. And my urban design course reflects this." But planning students, not architecture students, attend.

Another of those Geddes brought to Princeton is Robert Gutman, Hon. AIA, who holds joint appointments at Rutgers, where he teaches "straight sociology," and at Princeton, where it is said he has adopted architects as his primitive tribe. Interested in designers as well as design, Gutman teaches and writes about professional practice, its evolution and prospects. He was also involved with much of the school's community design work of the 1970s.



*Mixed-use project for Philadelphia: second-year graduate project by James Wallace. The project creates a wall and enclosure on Central Square and signals entry from the diagonal Ben Franklin Parkway. A symbolic and critical exploration of the city's urban planning, the project also combines civic and commercial uses, with shops and restaurants on lower levels, municipal offices above.*



Gutman has seen his own interests move to and from the center of intellectual excitement at the school. With the perspective of a scholar, he uses these changes as fodder and is now looking at the relationship between theory and practice. He is concerned, however, that students find little support for relating their formal inquiries to human conditions.

The focus today is clearly history and theory. Geddes also brought in the faculty schooled in the theoretical perspectives of Colin Rowe and their agenda for reconstituting architecture as an independent discipline. These included Alan Colquhoun, Anthony Vidler, and Alan Chimacoff, as well as Peter Eisenman, FAIA, and Kenneth Frampton, who are no longer at the school.

This tradition, strengthened by the stardom of Michael Graves in recent years, is the core of the school today. For a while, in fact, it seemed as though the popular image of the school was Michael Graves. Although he has taught at the school since 1962, he and his buildings have become the symbol of disaffection with modernism in the 1980s. And with them, Princeton itself.

Selection of the current dean, Robert Maxwell, was thus a surprise for many who expected a man in Graves' image. Maxwell is a former student of Colin Rowe and known to Princeton as a visiting critic under Geddes. An intellectual more than a practitioner, Maxwell has been called an educationalist.

At the Bartlett School in London, Maxwell was among those seeking an integrative model of architecture, bringing technology and the social sciences into design education and practice. "We were trying to develop a scientific model of architecture," Maxwell recalls. "I still think it can be done, but it's far more complex than we realized at the time."

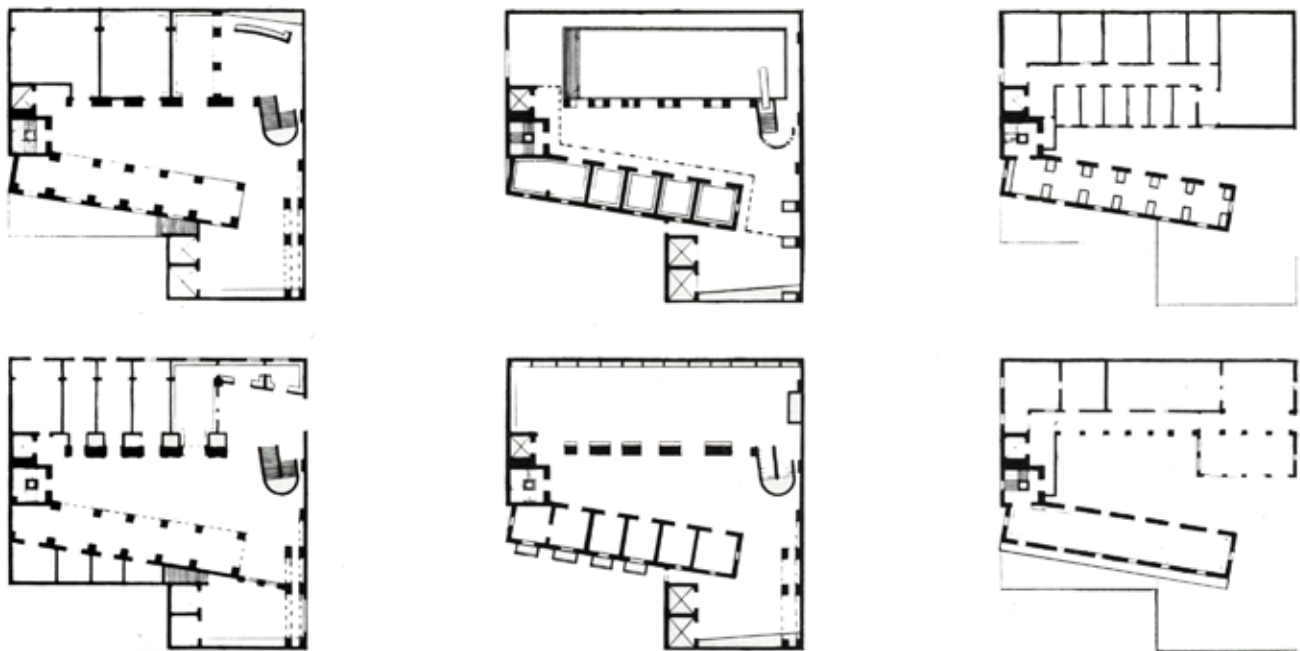
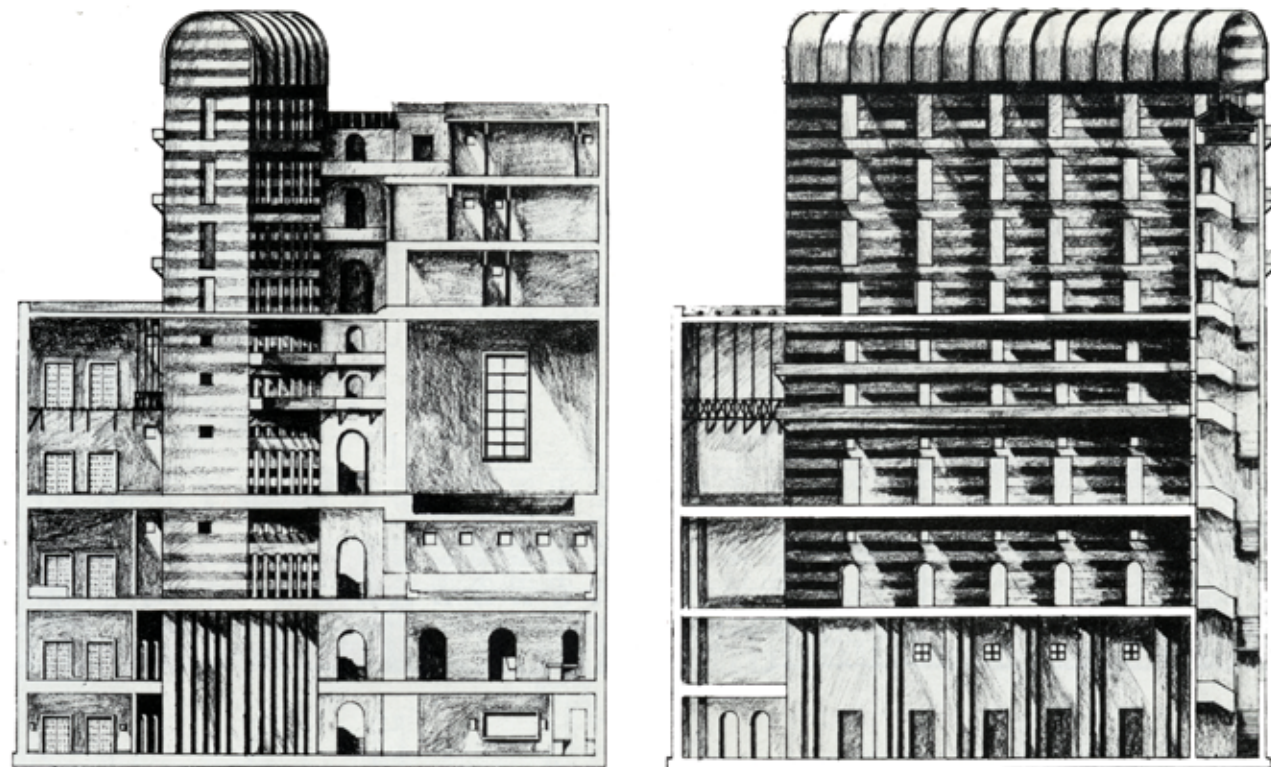
*Museum of science and technology in New Jersey (above), thesis project by Peter Matthews. Designed for Hoboken's industrial waterfront, the museum houses its exhibits and artifacts in what the jury cited as a collision of geometry, both celebratory and ominous. Health Club in lower Manhattan (right), first-year graduate studio project by Mary Ann Ray. Located on a public waterfront square, the project has shops at ground level, a club above. Citing ancient public baths as spiritual model, the program includes exercise and bathing facilities, a library and restaurant, and overnight accommodations.*

Maxwell has now turned to what he calls "The Second Theory of Architecture," a look at architecture as a critical enterprise, a more theoretical discourse. Maxwell, then, was the dean candidate to whom everyone could speak. Intellectual rigor, more than ideology, became touchstone for consensus.

"Princeton is very conservative in image," he says, "but we allow innovation in a didactic framework. My philosophy is radical conservatism; it helps us to understand the complexity of the present as a basis for change in the future."

The next five years promise important changes for the school. A number of senior faculty will retire, including Maxwell and Colquhoun. And new faculty are coming in with their own ideas. Steve Kieran is an example; he comes to Princeton with a background at Yale and at the Venturi office, a Rome Prize, and a fascination for the commercial side of architecture. Some of his students are following and/or stimulating his pursuits. Kieran was thesis adviser to a student designing a hotel and gambling casino in Atlantic City; the result bore more resemblance to





Arquitectonica's Miami extravaganzas than Graves' work. Kieran is himself exploring such nonacademic forms of architecture as highway car dealerships, topics only Venturi and accomplices have approached with any conceptual rigor.

Kieran and Alan Plattus, another of the younger faculty, have proposed a study of first-year curricula for three-year architectural programs. They use a four-part hypothesis to bring structure to studio problems: analysis, design, representation, and technology. There are exercises for each of the four elements, and the goal is to design the studio sequence more coherently. A typical sequence might be to design a house, then a town; analysis would focus on spatial, functional issues; technology of framing; representation on three-dimensional as well as two-dimensional drawing; and design on overall compositional strategies for facades and building elements. Most studios go straight to building design now.

Kieran and Plattus are not the only faculty exploring change. There is, in fact, an air of exploration at the school consistent

with its traditions, but also new. The school has matured in certain areas; the core of architecture has been maintained. And now there is a slight looking outward again, signifying intellectual unrest.

Despite this unrest, many alumni look to the quality of the students and the intellectual vitality of the faculty as assurance in uncertain times. George Hartman Jr., FAIA, was among those serving on this year's thesis jury. Chairman of the advisory committee, Hartman voiced some regret about the issues *not* addressed—the technical, the material, the social—but concluded there are no other recent graduates he would rather hire.

"These students are learning to think; Princeton educates people more than it trains them. And this is fine. Give me a year in an office with them, and I'll make them architects. That's *my* job. Educating them is Princeton's job. Training ends with skill development. Education begins lifelong learning, and *that's* what makes excellence in architecture."