

A NEW TOWN HALL FOR NORWICH, VERMONT

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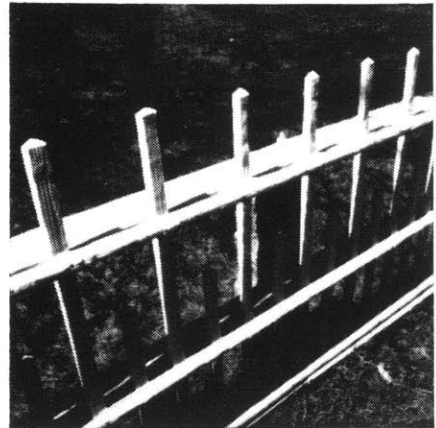
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Submitted to the Department of Architecture
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ABSTRACT

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 15, 1988
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ABSTRACT

*...the public building is not an abstract symbol, but partakes in daily life,
which relates to what is timeless and common.¹*

The objective of this thesis was to design a new town hall for Norwich, Vermont. The design approach was based on the thought that one can successfully design a building for a diverse and changing group of people that embodies some shared conception of what their town is and what it will be. It was developed in a way that tried to reflect Norwich's unique physical characteristics, way of life, and manner of governance, while incorporating the author's desire to make an architectural statement that synthesizes local traditions and modern techniques. The actual form of the building was further influenced by its prominent corner site, the programmatic requirements, and the organizational relationships of the various parts.

Thesis Supervisor: Richard Tremaglio
Title: Adjunct Professor of Architecture

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Special thanks to Janet, John, and Tim for their timely technical assistance.

I would also like to thank faculty members; Professor Zalewski for his structural insights, Professor Hubbard for his enthusiastic encouragement, and especially Professor Tremaglio for helping me find my own way.

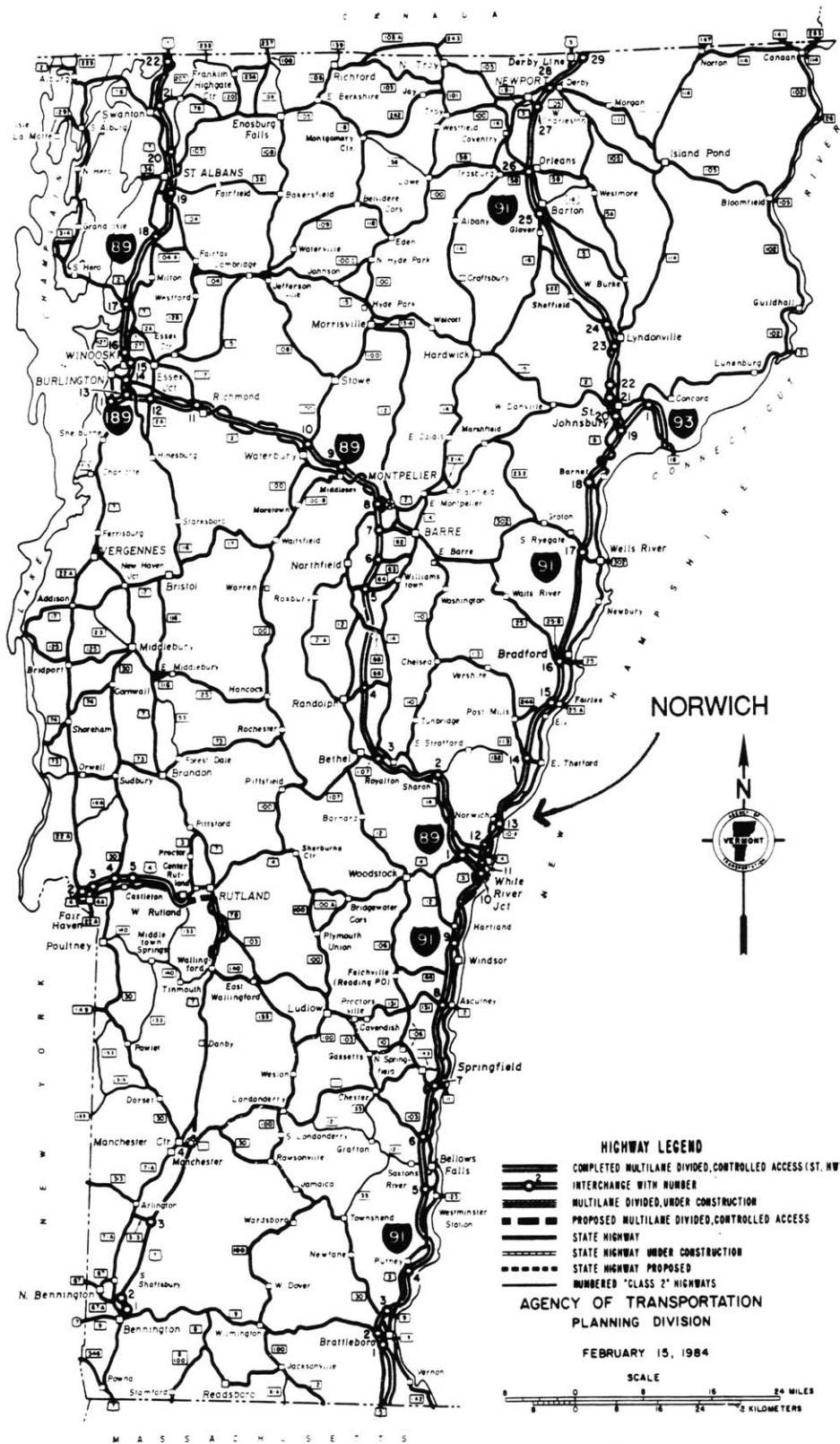
Most of all, I would like to thank Patsy for her continuous support and seemingly endless patience throughout my academic career.



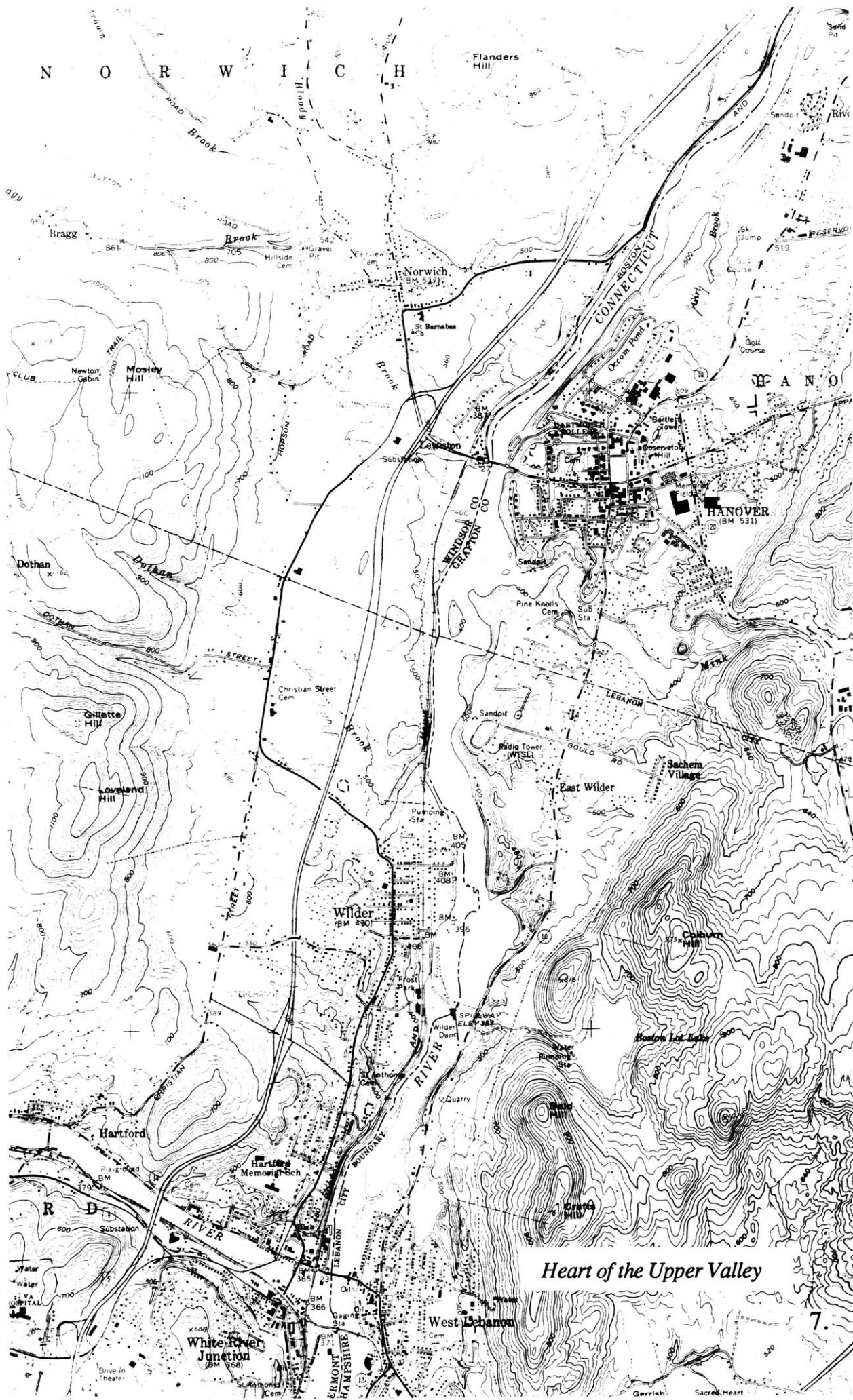
A Norwich Farmhouse

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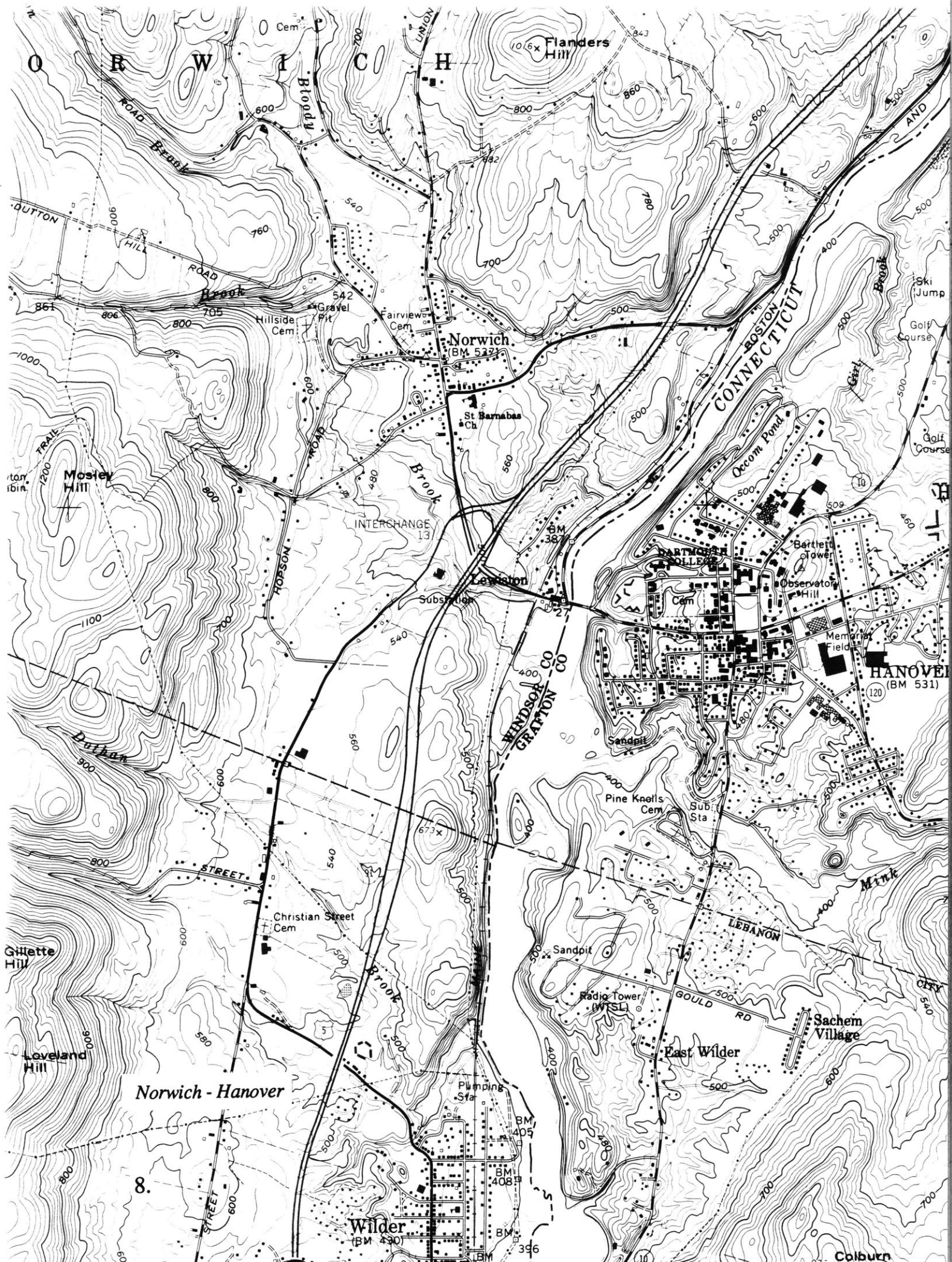
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Vermont's Road System



Heart of the Upper Valley



THE SETTING



Ompompanousic River Valley

Norwich, Vermont lies along the Connecticut River in the heart of what is known as the Upper Valley. The town is directly across the river from Hanover, New Hampshire (the home of Dartmouth College), just six miles north of the intersection of interstate highways 89 and 91 (the latter of which runs right through town).

It is a special place where people are more attuned to their environment. They seem to relish its climatic extremes and the varied outdoor activities the changing seasons bring. Vermonters in general are an independent lot who mind their own business but maintain a deep sense of community and never hesitate to help a neighbor in need. They are known for their dry sense of humor and wiley mistrust of strangers.

"Do you know where William Gay lives?"

"Yup."

"Mind telling us where?"

"Nope."

"Well...where does he live?"

"Top of the hill over there."

"You don't happen to know if he is at home or not, do you?"

"Nope. He ain't to home. What did you want with him?"

"We're the people who bought the Ransom place. Somebody told us mister Gay might want to rent our pasture."

Historic Buildings of Norwich



"I be he."²

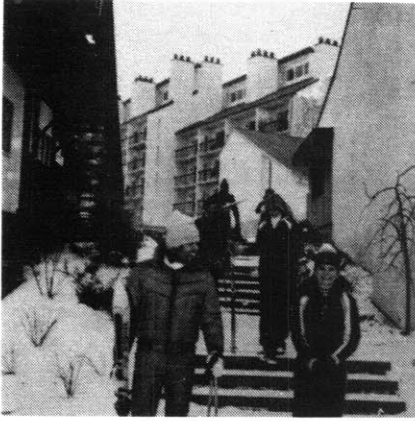


A True Vermonter

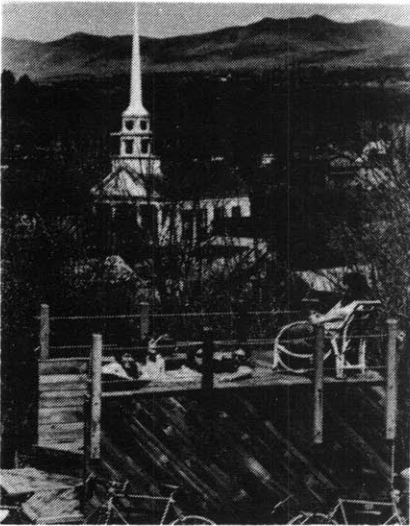
Their mistrust has proven to be well founded. Over the last few years the author has witnessed significant growth in the Upper Valley that has begun to transform the area's physical environment and socio-economic makeup. As the "flat landers" continue to move in, things are starting to change, and the "Vermontness" of the place is beginning to erode. As one old timer, Theron Boyd, commented on the massive development of vacation homes surrounding his 200 year old property near Woodstock, *"T'aint Vermont no more."*

Norwich has not been immune to the effects of this growth. While still a small Vermont town of around 2400 people, with a village green and many historic white clapboard houses, the nature of the town is changing.

Its proximity to Dartmouth College and several hospitals has for many years made it an attractive place for professionals wishing to live in a rural environment. Today, with the revolution in telecommunications,



"Yuppies"



"Hippies"

and the possibility of operating a service-oriented business from almost anywhere (including Norwich), a significant "yuppy" population has migrated to the area.

Although many of these professionals come to Vermont for the very qualities that make it the place it is, they have a different attitude from that of the local people, or from that of the "hippies" who have been finding their way to the Vermont woods since the late 1960s. As a result, each group with its own cultural baggage has begun to impact one another and the social fabric of Norwich as well. Throughout history, this phenomenon has repeated itself uncounted times. Populations have always been on the move, whether it be barefoot, or in a Volvo.

This influx of new people will inevitably change what Norwich is. It is therefore important that the qualities that make Norwich a special place are not entirely lost. What is needed is a newly stated conception of what Norwich has been and what it will be. It is the intent of this design for a new town hall to make such a statement.

THE DESIGN

DESIGN APPROACH



Norwich Fair

The design approach was based on the thought that one can design a building for a diverse and changing group of people that embodies some shared conception of what their town is and what it will be. This was further shaped by a desire to create a building that synthesizes local traditions and modern techniques, along with the real problems of dealing with a prominent corner site, programmatic requirements, and the organizational relationships of the various parts. The interaction of these three areas of concern resulted in the final evolution of the building.

SHARED CONCEPTION

The manner in which the shared conception is manifested in the design is difficult to put into words. Fundamentally an intuitive approach, it is rooted in the author's own perception and understanding of the town (having lived there for several years), and tempered by a general



Norwich Fair

knowledge of Vermont's cultural, social, political, and architectural history. The resulting conceptions are further developed in a way that tries to reflect Norwich's unique physical characteristics, way of life, and manner of governance. This is not to imply that there are no other towns in Vermont or elsewhere, that share some of these elements, but rather that Norwich is a specific place with its own history, socio-economic make-up, and physical layout.

All of these factors and many more play a role in defining what this shared conception is, but any attempt to verbalize specifically what it is, inevitably falls short of accomplishing it. Rather it is in the image of the new building that these notions become manifest. The image of this shared conception is related to the fact that in some small towns like Norwich, the manner of governance still has a direct relationship with the way of life. A town hall can thus be a legitimate vehicle for expressing a community's vision of itself. Christian Norberg-Schulz describes ways this expression can be accomplished.

Within the settlement we find buildings which make the common values of the inhabitants manifest. Choices have been made, and on the basis of agreement, dwelling has become public. ...In the settlement these agreements ought to be fixed and visualized by public buildings. Evidently these buildings allow the actions of common consent to take place, but moreover they have to give concrete presence to the meaning of these actions as a way of life or a mode of being-in-the-world.

When we stand in front of a public building, it should offer the promise of an explanation of how things are by gathering and ordering the multifarious meetings of the urbs into a synthetic image or figure. And when we enter, the promise ought to be fulfilled by a space which appears as a meaningful microcosmos. ...the public building is not an abstract symbol, but partakes in daily life, which it relates to what is timeless and common. ...Public dwelling, however does not imply uniformation. When we face and enter the public building, we always bring with us our personal "somebody" as a contribution to the agreement.

*...As a work of architecture, the building is the result of a poetic understanding of the world. Only the *vita poetica* makes it possible for man to translate his practical and theoretical understanding into a concrete image, and to perceive its meaning. Public dwelling therefore, does not consist in social identification, but in a poetical relationship to the shared world.*

We have already defined the shared world as a gathering of things and a meeting of human beings, some coming from afar and some being already here. We have also pointed out that this gathering is as a rule related to a given natural environment, which through the very process of gathering, becomes an "inhabited landscape". The public building, therefore, is not only "something," but also "somewhere": a church is for instance different here and there although it always remains the "same". The concept of "center" therefore has a double meaning. The settlement is a center to the landscape, as it brings the landscape close to man. The public building is a center in a deeper sense, as it explains the landscape and thus relates it to the world in general.

What, then, are the means which make public dwelling manifest? ...The built form embodies the way something is between earth and sky, whereas organized space admits its actions. In both cases a relationship between outside and inside comes into play, where the exterior acts as preparation for the interior. The built form is facade as well as interior elevation, and spatial organization consists in a path which leads from the outside towards the goal within. Distinct and meaningful figures are thus created, which serve as objects of human identification. As synthetic explanations, these figures ought to possess a high degree of formal precision, at the same time as they comprise the complexities of the gathered world. The public figure therefore stands forth as simultaneously simple and rich; it is easily imageable but invites for contemplation of its comprehensive content. Variety here becomes articulate form and density ordered composition.³



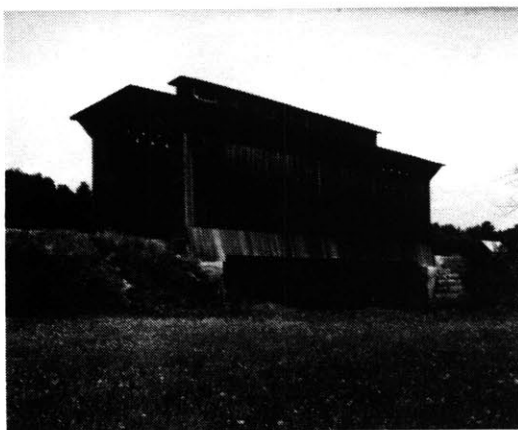
Thetford Hill Meeting House

LOCAL TRADITIONS AND MODERN TECHNIQUES

From the outset there has been a desire to design a building that is a synthesis of local traditions and modern techniques. This was to be done in a way that was not intentionally Neo-vernacular or some other form of Post-Modernism, but rather by using a timeless imagery that evokes the kinds of qualities discussed by Norberg-Schulz. Given the author's background in historic preservation and the very strong historic context of Norwich itself, this was a very difficult task. Rather than try to create something completely alien to a Vermont town like Norwich, the tact was taken to try to use some common or traditional forms and building elements and transform them into a more modern application.

In this way, the traditional two dimensional heavy timbered trusses used in barns, churches, factories, bridges, and other large spanning structures that exist all over Vermont, have been transformed into a three dimensional truss of wood and steel

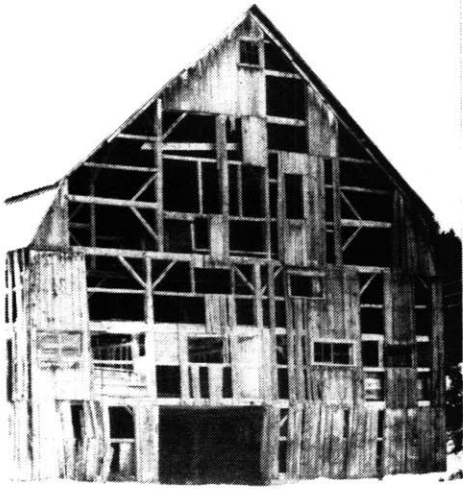
Covered Railroad Bridge



(the wood being used in compression, and the steel in tension). The structure has been openly displayed throughout the building and celebrated in the main lobby. Here, the roof is opened up in the traditional manner of a clerestory monitor which allows the light to filter down through the webs of steel and wood. Attention is further drawn to the screen like quality of the trusses by suspending a platform up in them. This gives a place where people can actually move up through the structure towards the light. Once there, they can look back down on the main lobby, or out over the green.

Wood and Steel Truss System





Old Barn

Expression of the structure on the exterior is more subdued but still apparent. The trusses actually move right out through the gable ends over the main entrances and are silhouetted against a glass curtain wall. During the day, the truss reads as a positive element against the void of the transparent glass and the space behind it. At night, this is reversed, with the truss becoming a screen of shadow against the lighted interior. In this way the gable becomes a sign or symbol to the town residents that there is something happening at the town hall and they are invited to attend.

Other structural members such as posts are emphasised by the placement of windows on either side thereby surrounding the structure with light. They are also expressed by the use of wide trim boards that help reinforce the panel nature of the clapboards.

The trim is also used to demark the connection between the porch roof and the building proper. This is



Vermont Porches

intended to have the porch read as an integral part of the building and not as a piece that has been added on.



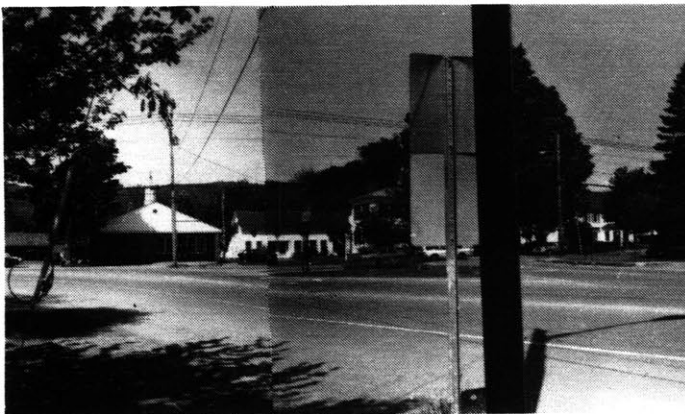
As in most other parts of the world, there is a wide array of porch types found in Vermont. Despite the wide variety of forms, their most important function is protection from rain and snow. The summer sun can be hot, but it is seldom as oppressive as in the south. By contrast, in the winter, any extra sunlight that can be gained is greatly appreciated. For these reasons, a porch with a roof of glass, steel and wood not only sheds rain and snow, and allows the free flow of light and air, but also gives a modern expression to this traditional building element. The summer sun problem is mediated by the placement of a number of large deciduous trees along the front of the building.



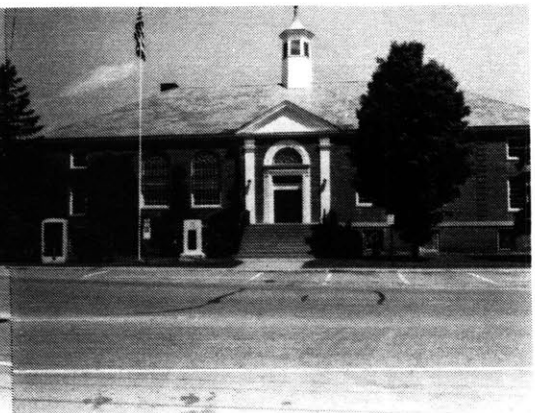
Further response to the harsh winter weather in a traditional way is found in the enclosed glass vestibules at all the entrances. Architecturally they serve as transition zones, or territories of exchange, between inside and outside spaces. Functionally they act not only as air locks for the entrances, but also as sheltered places to wait for the bus (Church St. side) or some other rendezvous.

The Site

Post Office



Town Hall



THE SITE

EXISTING

The site for the new building is the one now occupied by the existing town hall. It is the most prominent corner in town, at the intersection of Church St. and Main St. Being located on that corner, it is both the main focus of the most public part of town, and a gateway to the central business district on Main St. It sits just west of the Norwich Congregational Church, diagonally across from the post office, and directly opposite the village green.

Norwich's green is quite large and is loosely enclosed by the grammar school to the east, and St. Barnabas Episcopal Church to the south. A harder definition is given by Main St. and Church St. which meet at the corner opposite the town hall and the post office. This creates a very closed corner right where there should be an opening to give easy access to the green. The fact that there is no sidewalk on that side of the street only exacerbates the situation.

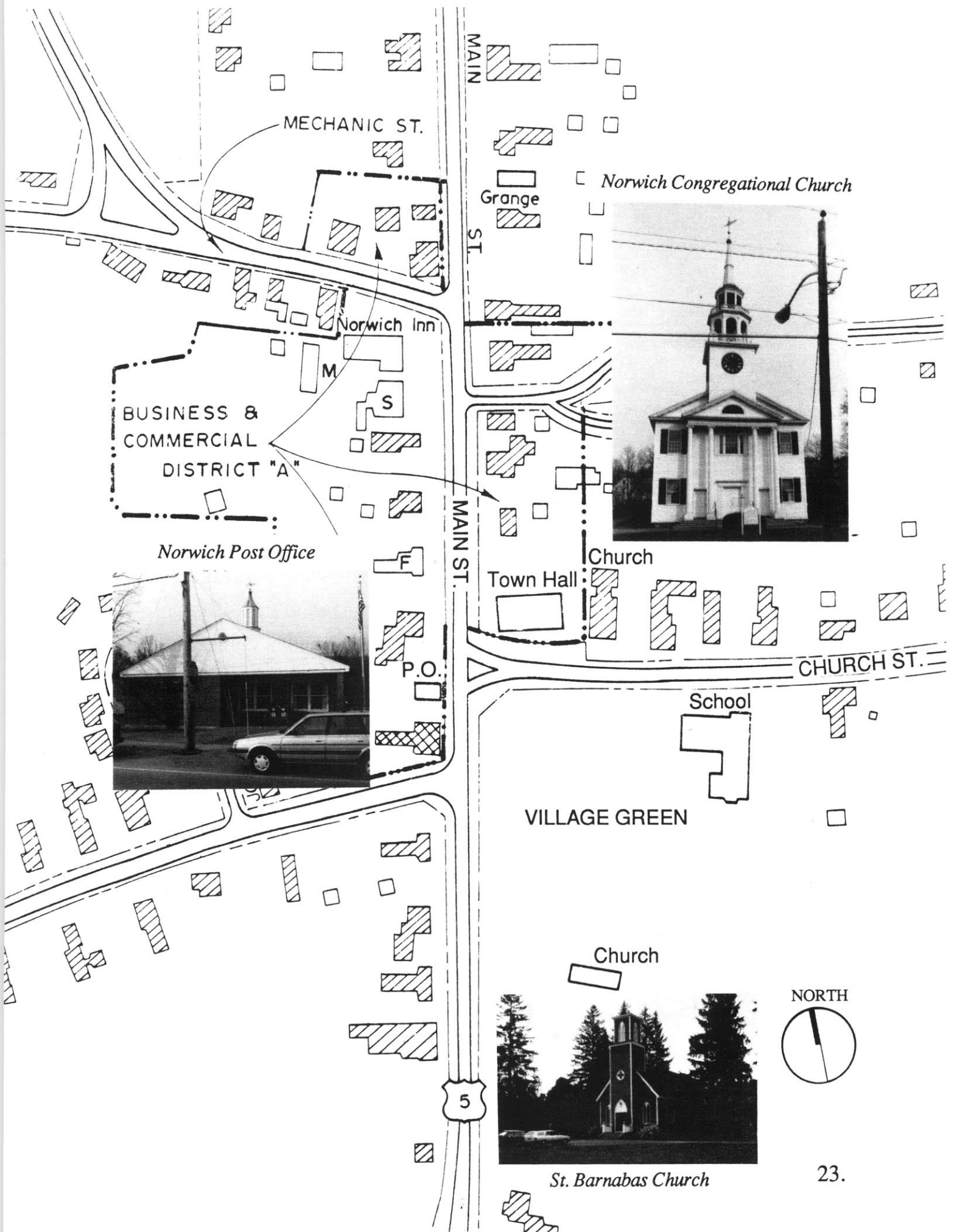
Norwich Congragational Church



As it exists today, the intersection itself is awkward and poorly resolved. Although there is always considerable pedestrian traffic in this busy public place, the whole area is dominated by vehicular concerns only. Church St. is forked into a Y which cuts off the corners in front of the town hall and the green, leaving a residual triangle of no man's land in the middle which is barely capable of growing grass. There is one crosswalk in front of the Main St. entrance to the town hall and another one down Church St. between the church and the school.

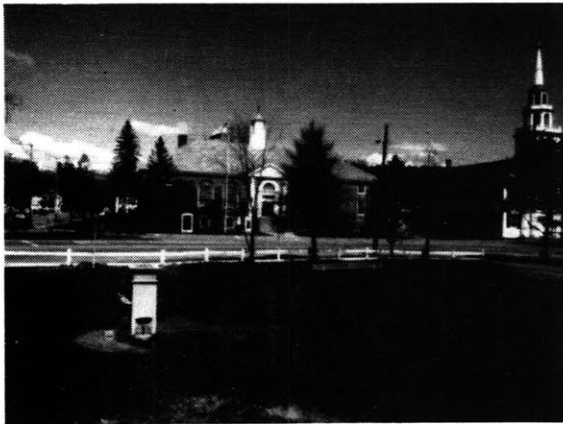


Intersection of Church St. and Main St.



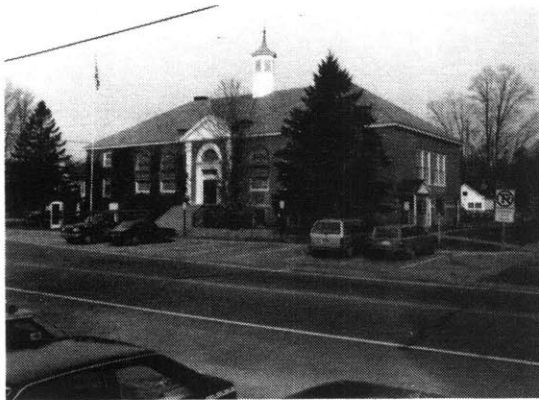
PROPOSED

In the design for the new town hall, this entire corner is changed. Church St. is straightened out and the Y intersection removed which creates a typical three-way stop T intersection. The heavy truck traffic that normally travels via Church St. (Rt. 5) is forced to take an alternate route along the river. This is a minor inconvenience for truckers and a great benefit to everyone else.

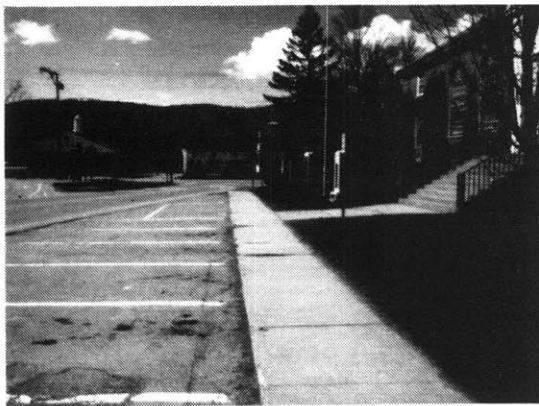


Corner of the Green

The new three-way stop allows for regular crosswalks connecting the three sides of the intersection. It also allows the corner to be opened up and made more of a gathering place with shade trees and park benches. A new sidewalk continues along the green side of Main St. and hooks up with the existing sidewalk by the Rt. 91 interchange. Another sidewalk extends from the corner of the green to the school, resulting in improved safety for the children walking to and from school.



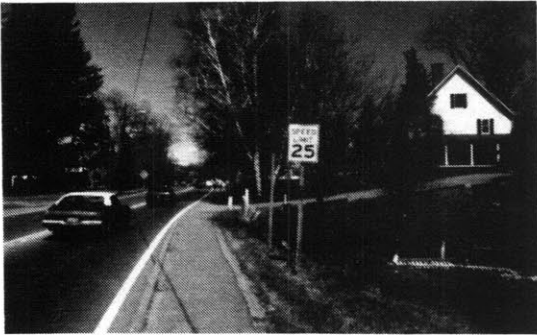
Present Parking on Church St.



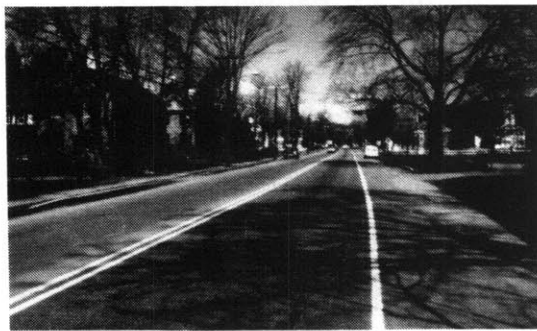
Entering Norwich From Rt. 91 Interchange

Parking is an ever worsening problem all over town. The new design basically retains the parking areas on both sides of Church St., the east side of Main St., and behind the town hall, but these areas are better organized to allow for more cars to be parked. The visual quality that is so poor now is improved through the use of plantings and curbs that give clearer definition to all the edge conditions and keep the cars from encroaching on pedestrian areas.

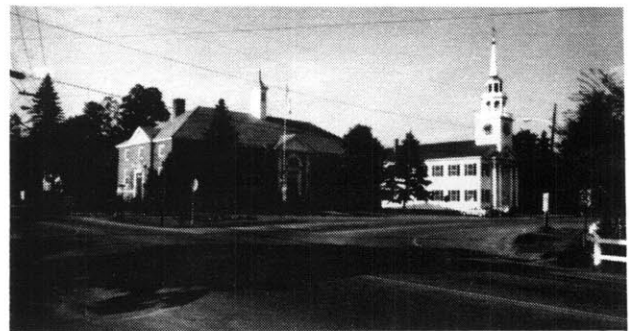
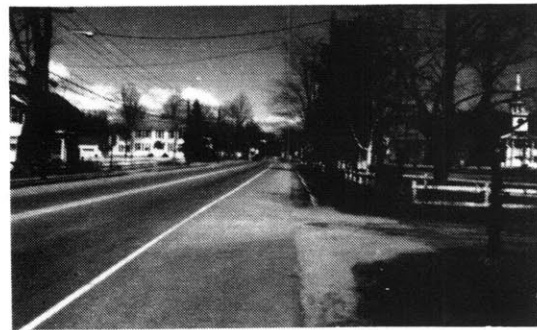
The new intersection's configuration allows for a strong corner statement to be made by the building itself. Placement of the tower on the corner serves several different functions. Visible from some distance in all directions, it acts as a landmark that indicates the center of town. Approached from the east, and especially the south, it reinforces the quality of the whole building as a gateway to the central business district. The fact that the tower is open at the top and intended to be used as a lookout, invites people to enter and explore the inside of the



Entering Norwich from Rt. 91 Interchange



building and move up through it. Once on top, a wonderful view of the green and the rest of the town may be enjoyed. Although the church next door has a spire of similar height it serves a much different function and rather than compete, the two form a dialogue that is complementary.



PROGRAMATIC REQUIREMENTS

The programatic requirements of the building are rather straight forward and are derived from the current uses. While some thought has been given to the fact that the projected growth will require certain changes, these are mostly related to increased office space and do not really effect the day to day running of town government.

Like most other Vermont towns, the governmental functions are primarily concerned with the collection of taxes to support the school system and keep the roads in repair. There are of course a number of local ordinances regulating various concerns shared by the townspeople. There is even some attempt to try and control the growing pressures of development, however, the town plan needs to be strengthened, and is currently being reworked.

The actual system of government is quite simple. There is a board of selectmen consisting of five members who are elected for either a two or three year term. They in turn appoint

the members of the other committees and commissions which make recommendations back to the board. In the event of an important issue, there is usually a vote conducted at town meeting which occurs once a year in the first week of March. The daily administration of the government is carried out by the clerk, lister (tax assessor), zoning administrator, and a number of other lesser officers who are all elected by the town.

What follows is a list of the programatic requirements and the spaces that have been allocated to them in the new building.

OFFICE HOLDERS

Town Clerk's Office : 720 sf

2 full time people - Conduct all the clerical work for the town. Keeper of records such as birth, death, and marriage, as well as all land records (Vermont is one of three states that keep all land records on a town level instead of county). Also dog, hunting and fishing licences. Needs work area for people who want to do research using the records.

Vault : 310sf

Holds all town records.

Zoning Administrator : 550sf

1 Full time person - Keeps tract of various zoning laws and handles paperwork for variances etc. Needs work area large enough for big maps. Also needs access to land records in the vault.

Lister's Office : 320sf

3 people half time (mornings - Tax assessment and collection.

Police Department : 450sf

Cheif and 2 officers plus 1/2 time clerk - No Jail. When on duty they are usually out on patrol. Patrol cars are parked on the street and driven to the officer's homes at night.

Road Commissioner : 96sf

1 person part time

COMMITTEES

Hearing Room : 1125sf	75 to 100 people - Used for public hearings, lectures, or any function anticipating a large turnout.
Committee Room : 425sf	Up to 20 people - Used for smaller meetings.
Board of Selectmen : 260sf	5 members - Standard office equipment such as file cabinets and desks.
Planning Board : 240sf	10 members - Standard office equipment, may be shared. Monthly meetings.
Zoning Board of Adjustments : 185sf	5 members - Standard office equipment, may be shared. Meet as needed to hear applications for variances.
Prudential Committee : 132sf	3 members - Standard office equipment, may be shared.
Other offices : 610sf	4 offices of varying sizes, to be used as needed.

OTHER

Bathrooms : 70sf each	1 Mens and 1 womens, handicap accessible.
Lobby : 850sf	1st and 2nd floors
Meeting Hall : 4700sf	Up to 800 people - Used for town meeting, dances, flea markets, stage productions, and other large gatherings.
Balcony : 1900sf	
<u>Stage : 800sf</u>	

TOTAL : approx. 15000sf (not including the basement)

BUILDING ORGANIZATION

Although the governmental functions of the town are simple and straight forward, the uses of the building are quite varied. They are roughly divided into daily uses, regular uses, and special or occasional uses. Layered over the frequency of uses, are the organizational relationships of the various pieces to each other, and the symbolic meaning of certain parts.

The daily uses are of primary importance and are organized by the external porch which wraps around the building. It acts as a street from which the various administrative offices may be entered much in the same way one enters a store. Decentralizing the functions, makes for a more direct relationship of a specific office with the person who needs to use it. This is more in line with the type of Vermont sensibility that is part of the shared conception discussed earlier.

The clerk's and zoning administrator's offices get the most use, and are therefore situated on

Main St. They are adjacent to one another to allow them both easy access to the vault. Use of the lister's office is regular, but less frequent than the others and is therefore located on Church St. Although the police station does not get the same level of public use the other offices do, it too needs to be easily accessible to the street. Placing it on the corner also makes it the symbolic point of control. There is not much crime in Norwich except for speeding (25mph in town, strictly-enforced!), so there is no need for a jail. Anyone needing to be locked up is taken to Woodstock 20 miles away.

Meetings of all kinds are held at the town hall. All of the various committees and commissions hold their regular meetings there which are open to the public. There are also public hearings concerning zoning and planning related issues. Because Norwich is experiencing so much growth, there is a lot of public interest in these types of meetings. Norwich is also the kind of place where people enjoy hearing talks or lectures on a wide range of topics.

To satisfy the different requirements of these types of events, there is a hearing room which holds 75-100 people and a committee room for from 15-20 people located on the second floor on the Main St. side. They are both entered off a small lobby at the top of the stair. There is also part of the lobby which comes back over the entrance and overlooks Main St.

The lobby is the focal point of the interior of the building. While the administrative offices are treated in a decentralized manner, the more communal and public nature of the events occurring in the committee and hearing rooms calls for a place with a more civic quality. This is achieved through the spacial quality of the lobby. Here one can sense the full three story space from the suspended platform in the roof trusses, down through the second floor lobby to the grand stair below. There is also a visual connection through the glass curtain walls to the meeting rooms, and the world outside.

Offices on both the first and second floors are to serve the numerous committees and commissions and the various minor administrators who need space for their files and a place to work. There is a range of sizes to accommodate the changing needs of the users. Most are big enough for a number of people to share. They are organized on secondary circulation paths that allows them to be private yet easily accessible.

As previously discussed, the tower's main purpose is symbolic, but it has functional aspects too. It is the vertical access that connects all levels of the lobby space and encourages people to climb up for a commanding view of the town. The elevator, which gives handicap access to the second floor and the suspended platform above, is wrapped by an auxiliary stair. The elevator shaft and stairs are made of steel and glass so that one can maintain visual continuity while moving through the space.

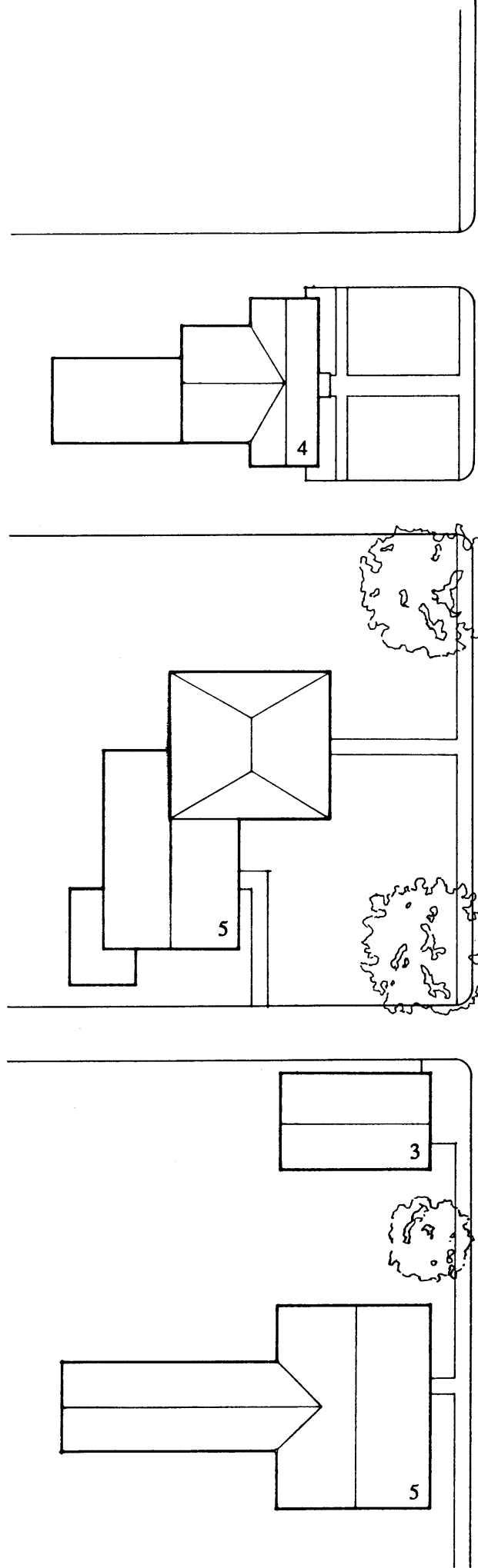
The last major piece is the large meeting hall. It is large enough to accommodate around 800 people and

is used for many different types of events ranging from auctions and flea markets, to dances and plays. However, its most important function is to hold town meeting. Once a year, during the first week in March, all the people of the town gather to decide the coming year's business. It is an event that has been going on since the town was first settled and has its roots in medieval times. It is about as close to a true democracy as there is. Anyone who attends has the right to speak their mind on the issue at hand, and there is often a lively debate. Vermonters can be very opinionated.

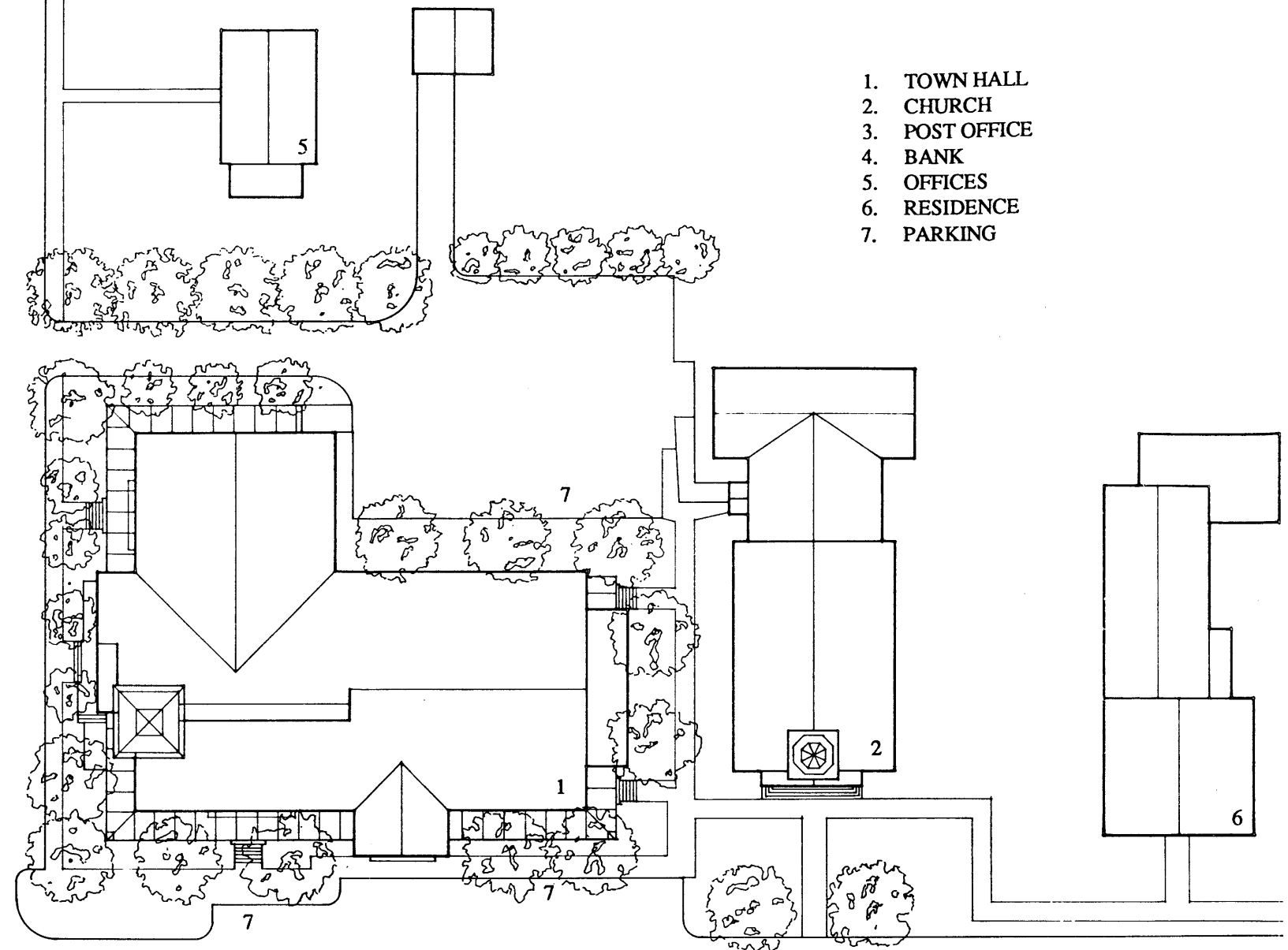
Such an important event demands a space to match. A hall that is big enough to hold so many people must be boxy by nature. Such is the case in all large meeting halls. It is in the articulation of the space that the desired quality is achieved. The web-like trusses and suspended balcony break up the box and allow the eye to wander. Having the people gathered on two levels allows for a greater sense of association both

interpersonally and spatially. It creates a heightened sense of community and a feeling of belonging to a group. No matter where they have come from, they are all Vermonters now.

DRAWINGS

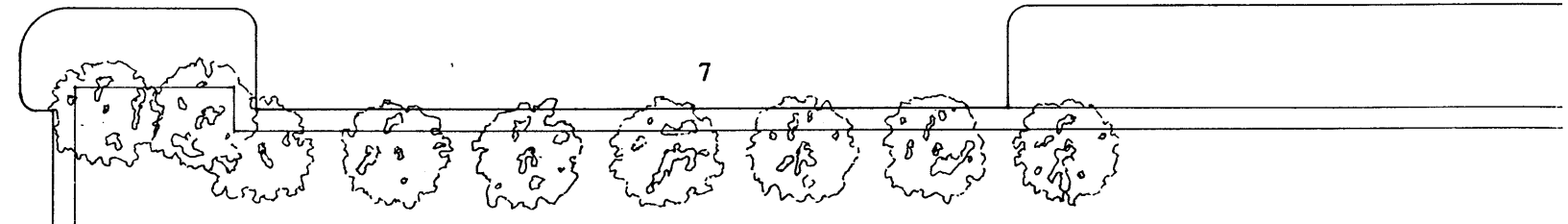


MAIN ST.



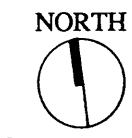
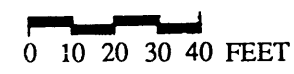
- 1. TOWN HALL
- 2. CHURCH
- 3. POST OFFICE
- 4. BANK
- 5. OFFICES
- 6. RESIDENCE
- 7. PARKING

CHURCH ST.

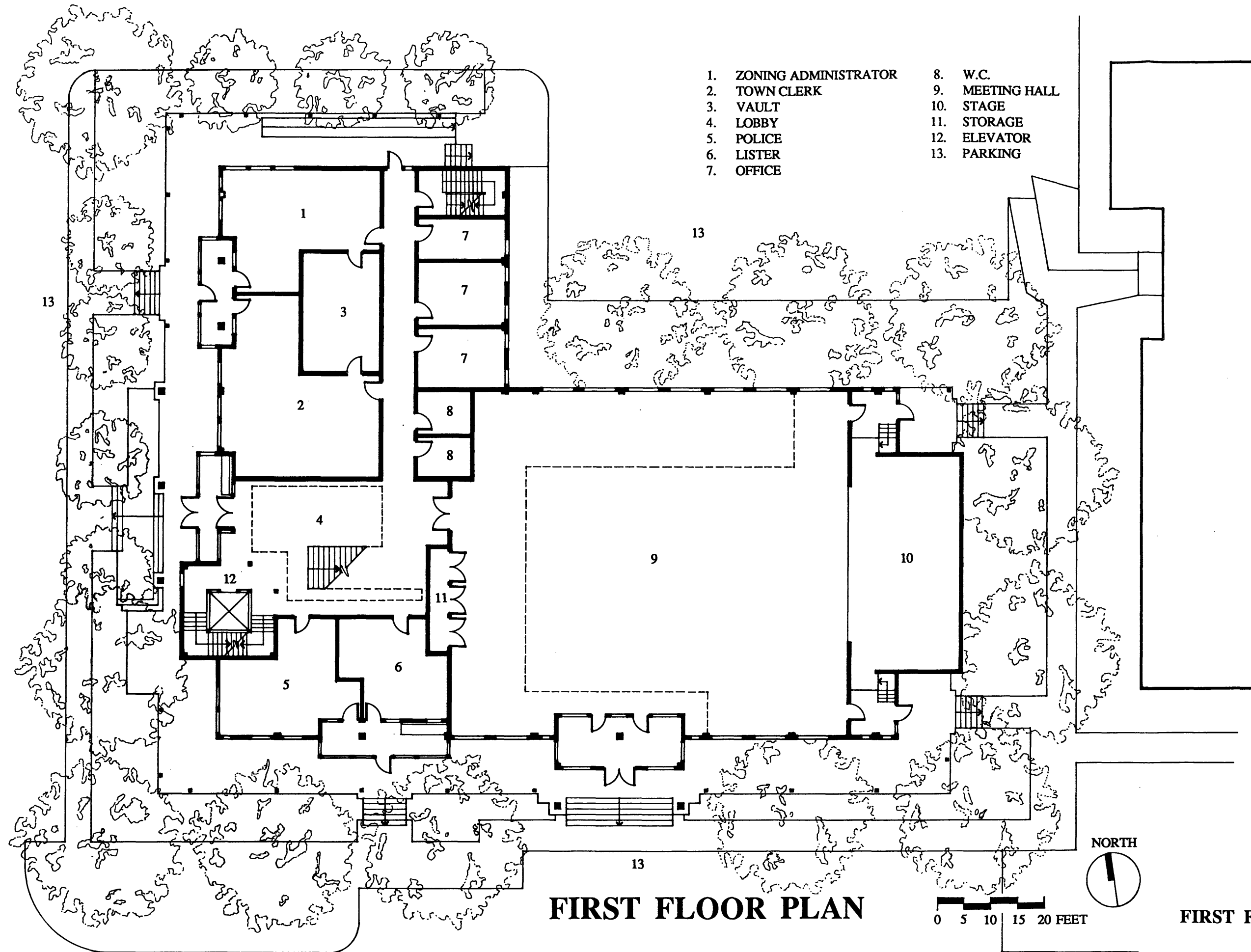


VILLAGE GREEN

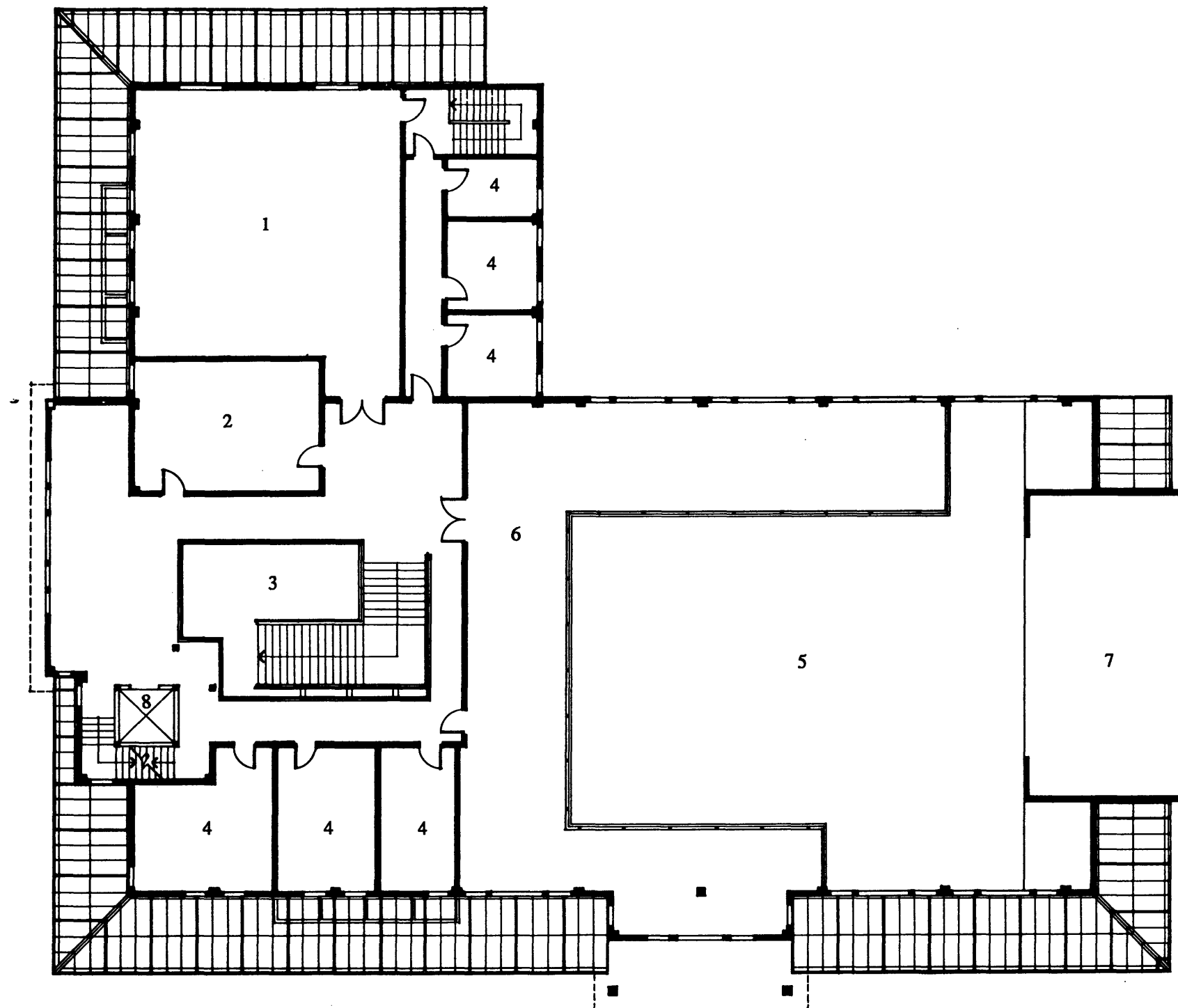
SITE PLAN



SITE PLAN



1. HEARING ROOM
2. COMMITTEE ROOM
3. LOBBY
4. OFFICE
5. MEETING HALL
6. BALCONY
7. STAGE
8. ELEVATOR

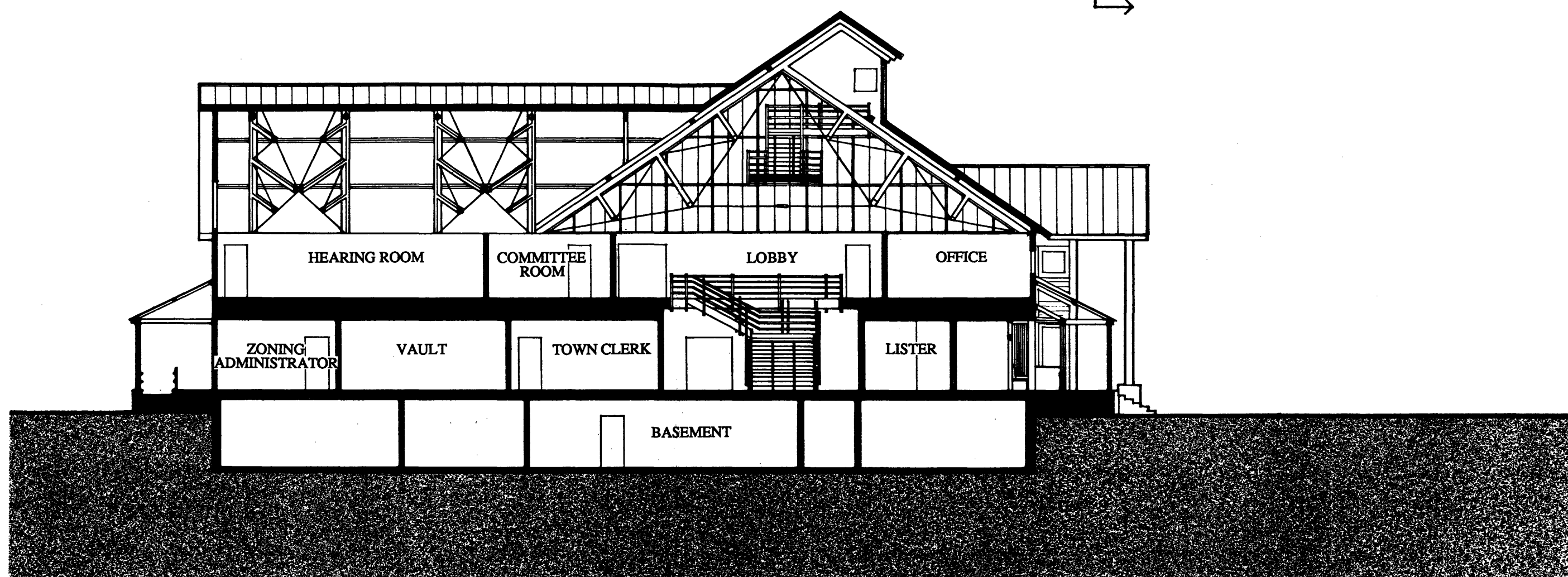
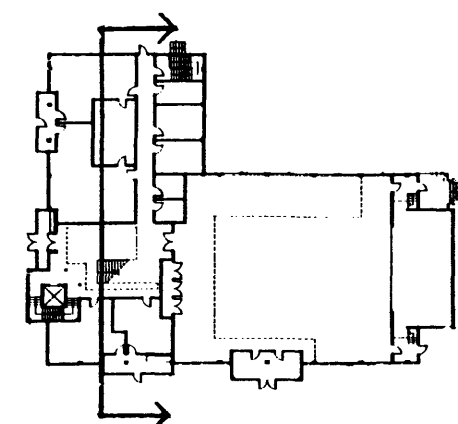


SECOND FLOOR PLAN

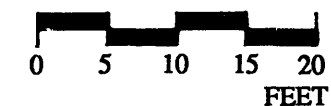
0 5 10 15 20 FEET



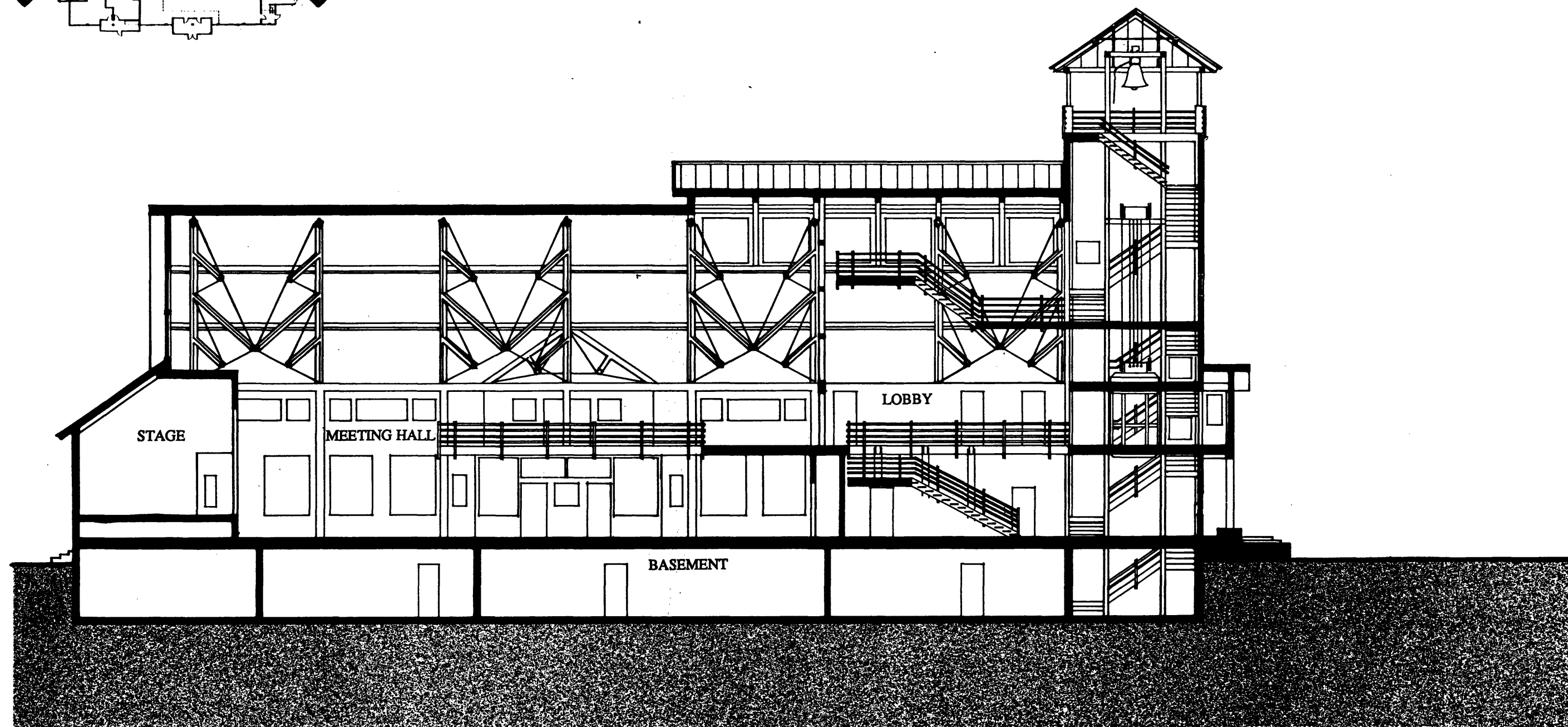
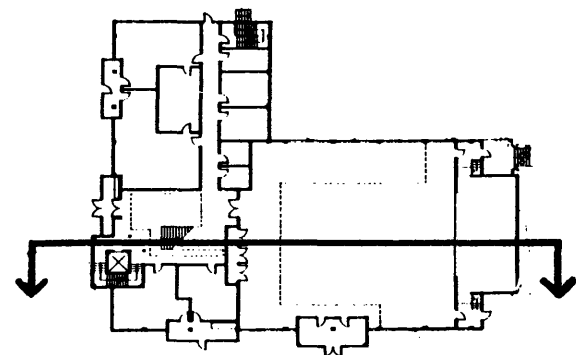
SECOND FLOOR PLAN



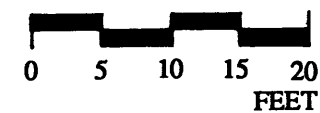
SECTION LOOKING EAST



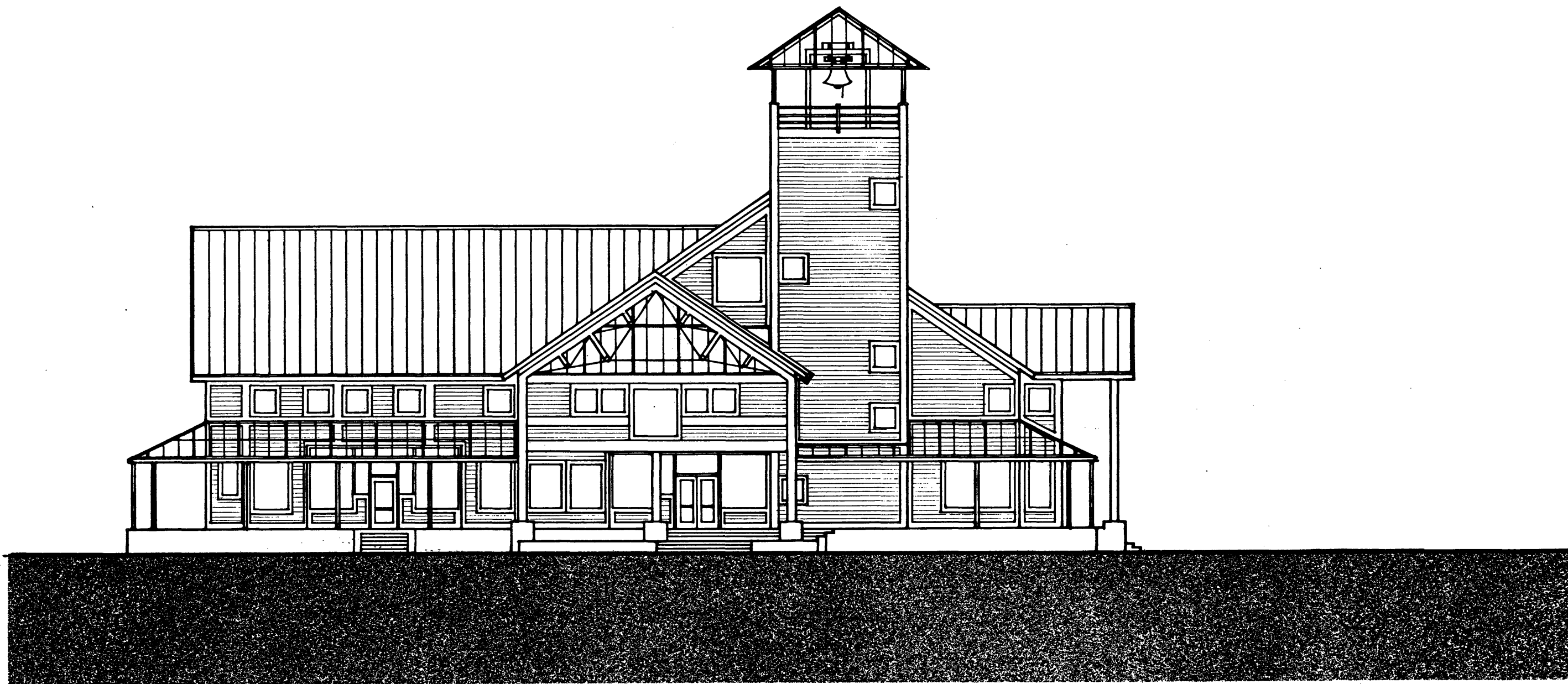
**SECTION
LOOKING EAST**



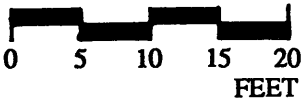
SECTION LOOKING SOUTH



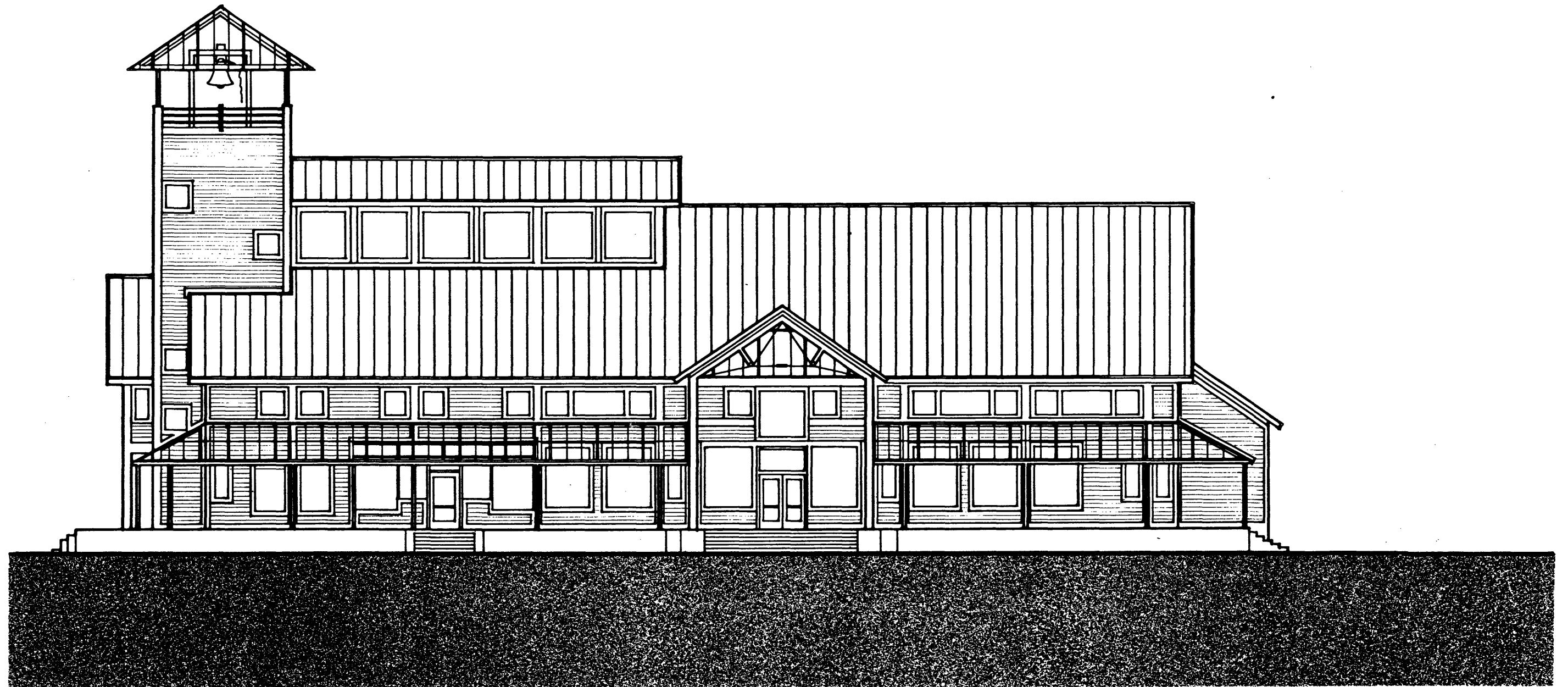
SECTION
LOOKING SOUTH



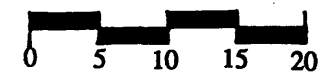
MAIN ST. ELEVATION



MAIN ST. ELEVATION



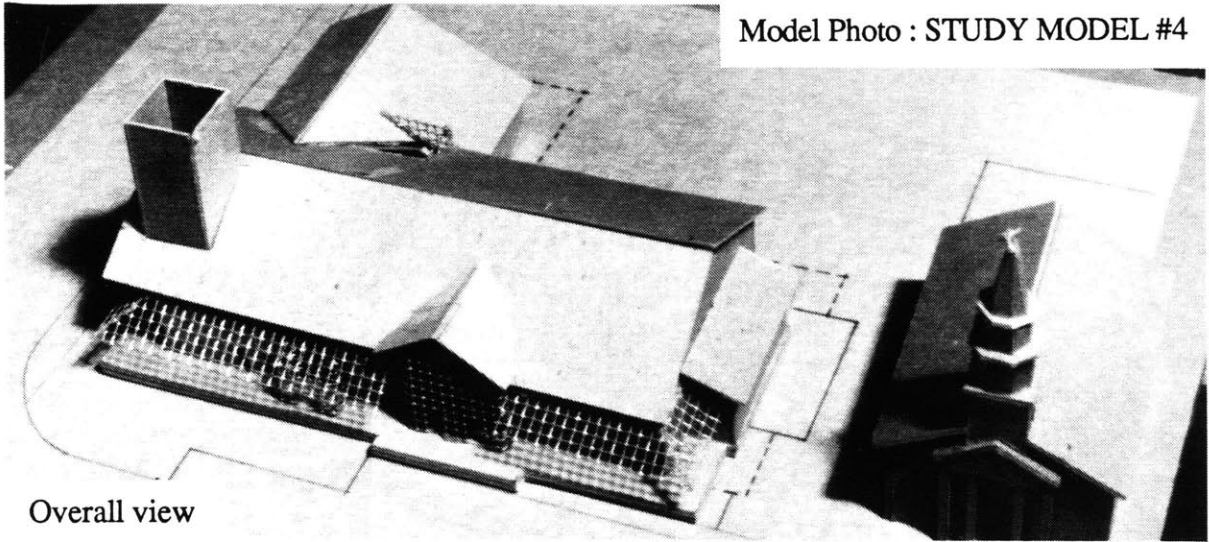
CHURCH ST. ELEVATION



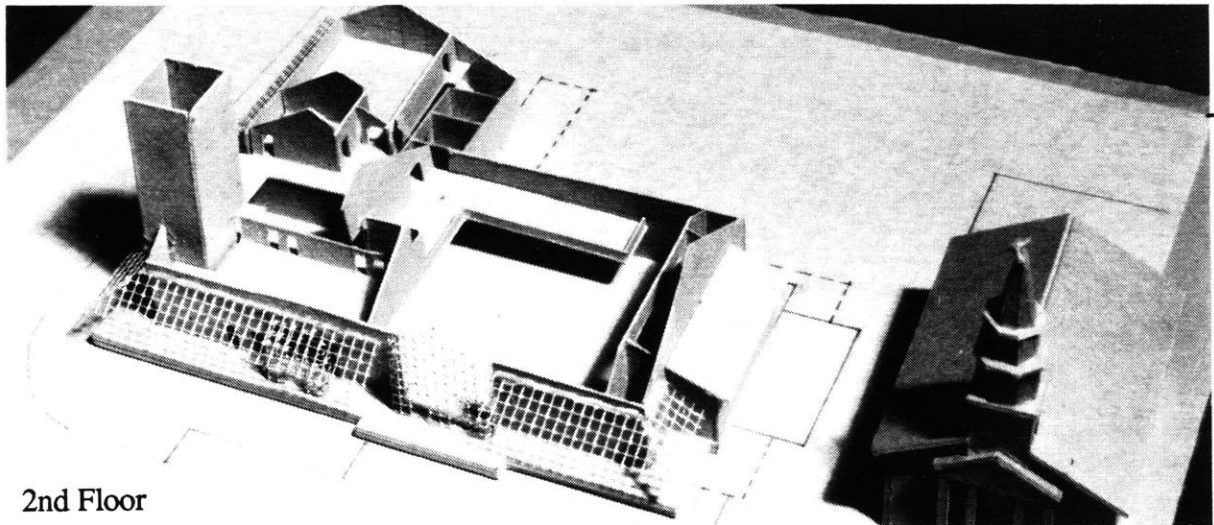
CHURCH ST.
ELEVATION

MODEL PHOTOS

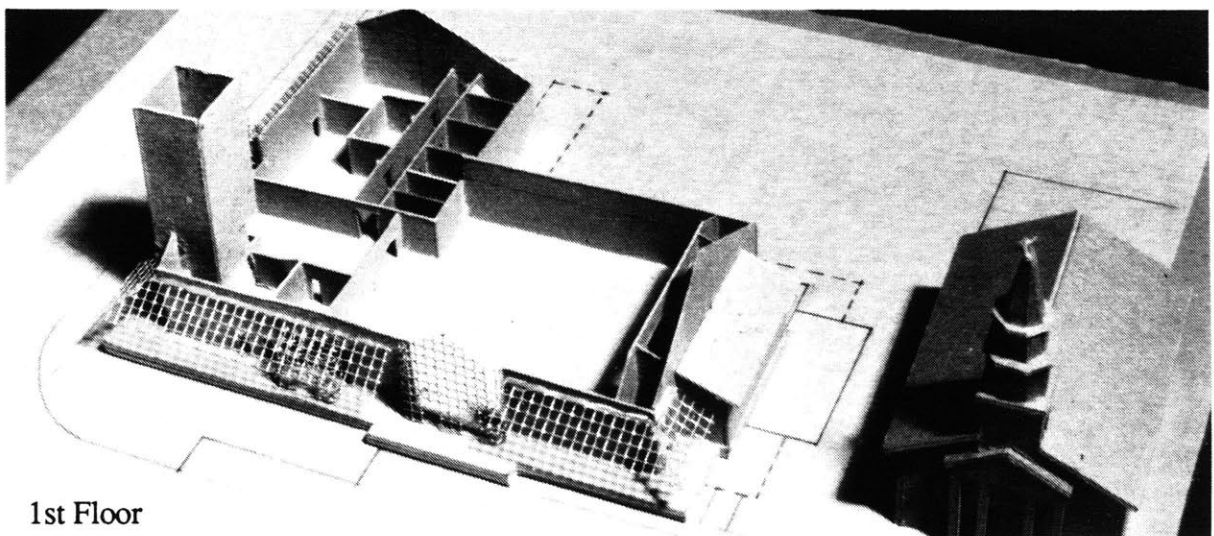
Model Photo : STUDY MODEL #4



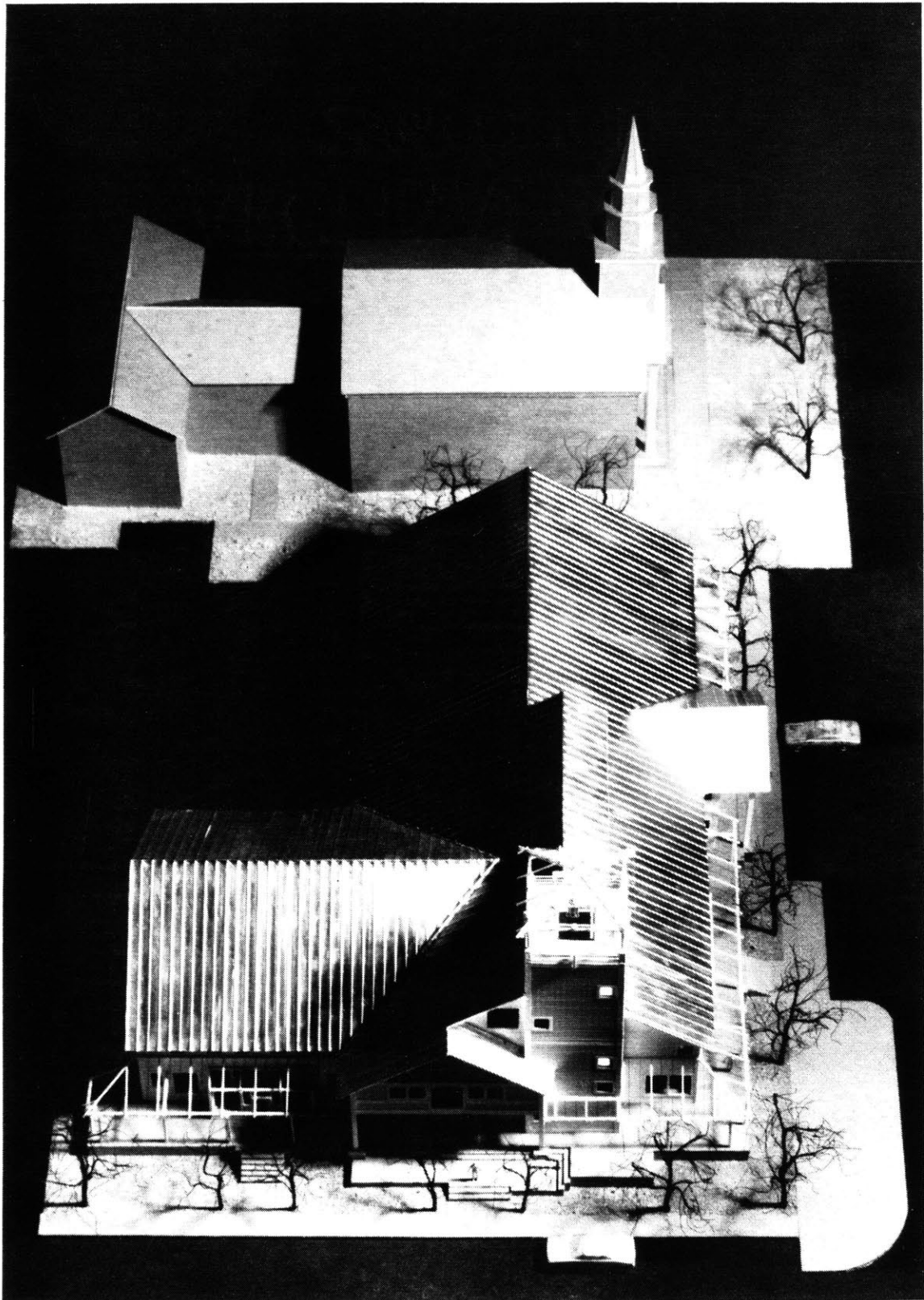
Overall view



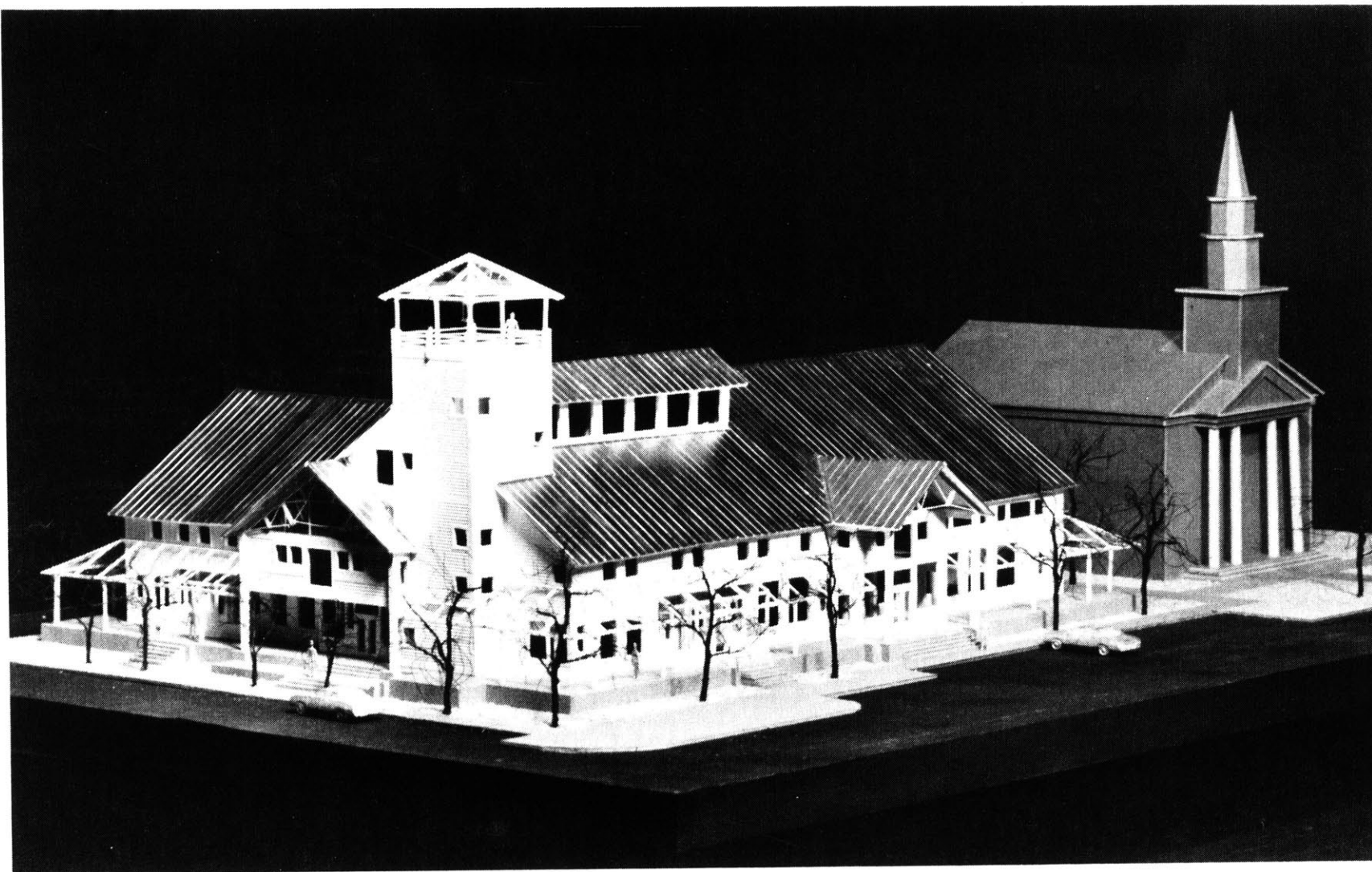
2nd Floor



1st Floor



Model Photo : 3/4 BIRDS EYE VIEW OF ROOF

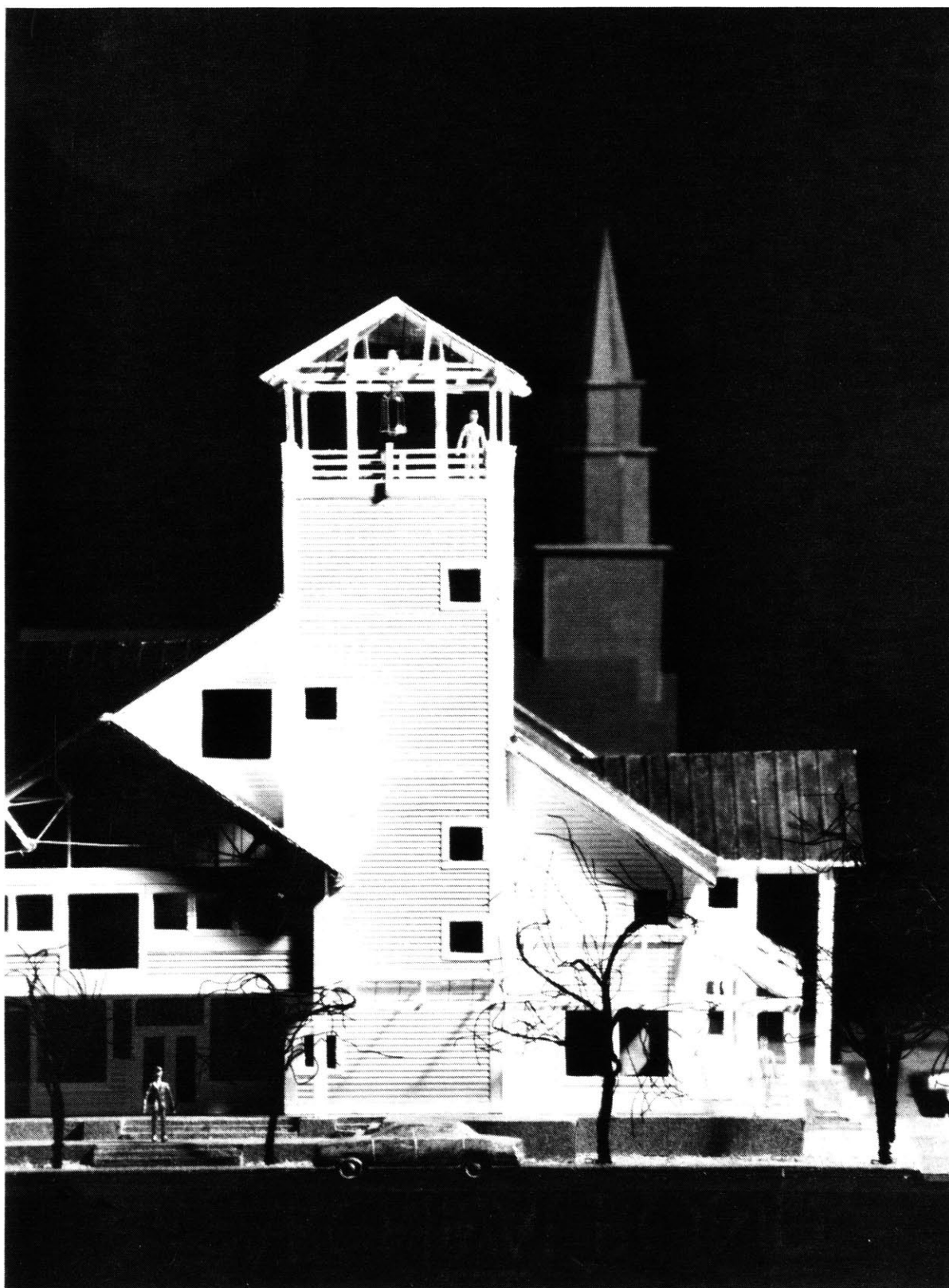


Model Photo : CORNER OF MAIN ST. AND CHURCH ST.



Model Photo : CHURCH ST. ELEVATION

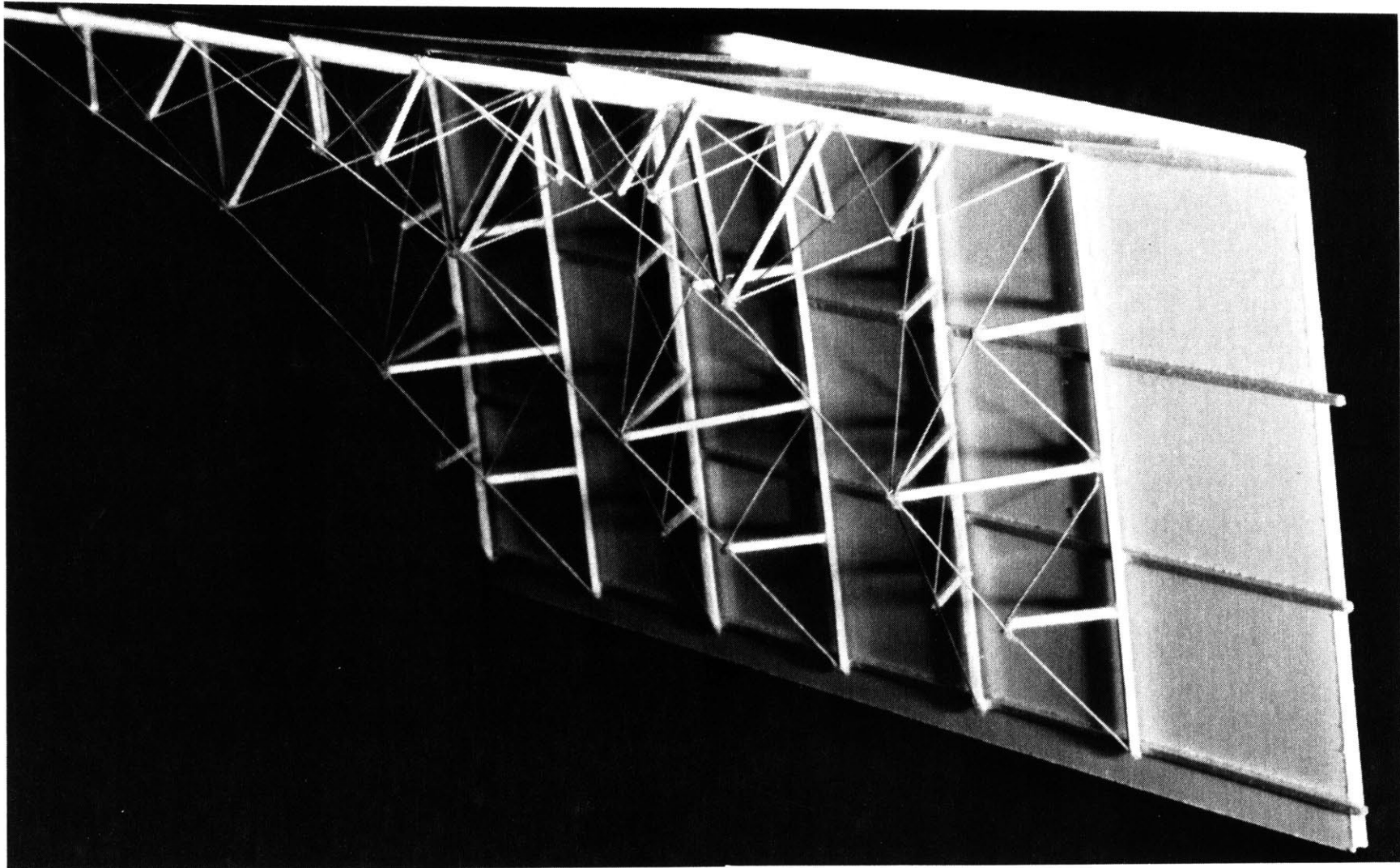




Model Photo : TOWER VIEWED FROM MAIN ST.



Model Photo : MAIN ST. ENTRANCE



Model Photo : DETAIL OF STRUCTURAL TRUSS SYSTEM

ENDNOTES

¹ Norberg-Schulz, Christian. The Concept of Dwelling, p. 71.

² Jennison, Keith. "Yup....Nope", p. 10.

³ Norberg-Schulz, p. 71.

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