

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Ramona's Terrace: Epilogue [Two Place Tales]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1tq7t7rc>

Journal

Places, 1(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Fernau, Richard

Publication Date

1984-04-01

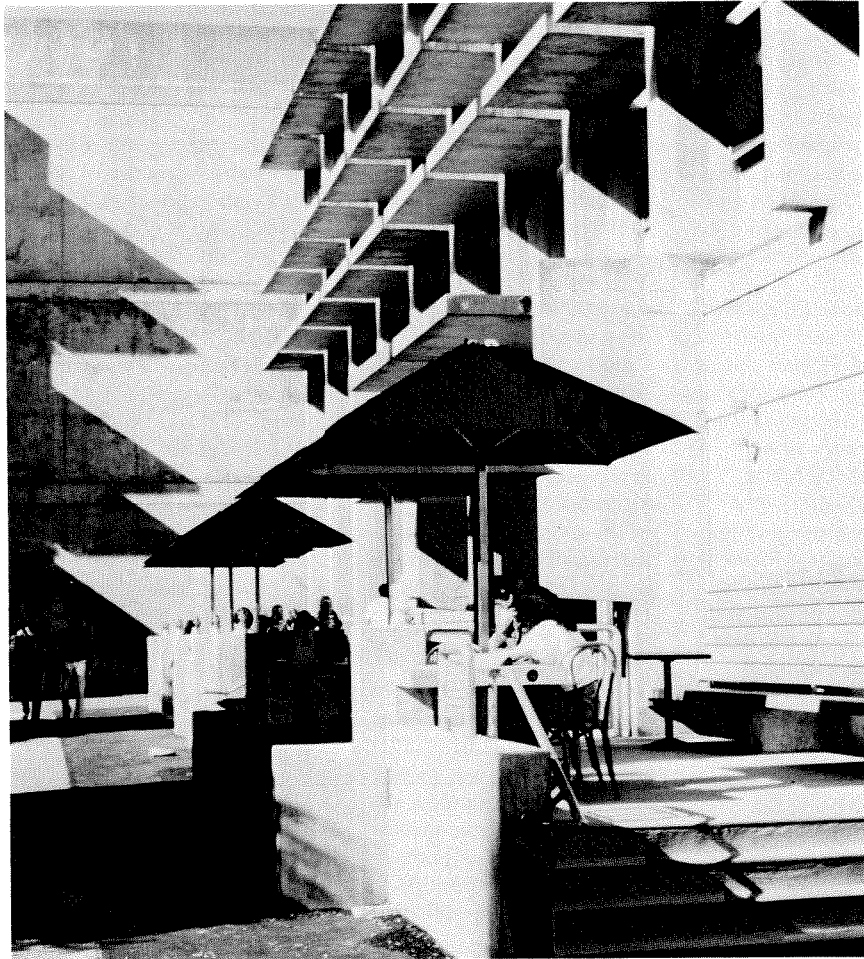
Peer reviewed

Epilogue

There must be something telling about the fact that in 1984 both the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT and the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley, have installed espresso machines. Whether this signals the full-blown endorsement of a society that has given itself over to small snacks and quick fixes, or whether it indicates the imminent demise of the coffeehouse, or whether it represents the slow triumph of the persistent sense that tables to lean over in discussion are essential elements in college life, the phenomenon exists. So we end our story of institutional beginnings with an update on the coffee places in each school.

In the novel, Ramona, feudal Californians drift about in the sun-drenched landscape being sentimental and vaguely Hispanic. That image, cast across the continent in the nineteenth century, rattles around still in the collective understanding of California and comes to rest occasionally in place names, usually those of restaurants.

It is not surprising, then, that the effort to infuse a little romance into Wurster Hall—by providing space for food and drink—carries the banner: “Ramona’s.” Surprising is the way in which Fernau and Hartman have teased the hard, tough materials and blunt forms of Wurster into shapes that are



Ramona's Terrace

remarkably accommodating and pleasant. The space inside Wurster that is now used for Ramona's was initially designated for exhibition and jury space, then given over some years ago to a dim sandwich and coffee place that served largely as a last resort.

The new Ramona's, spiffed up inside with stainless steel, graphics, and Thonet chairs, breaks through the wall to a splendid terrace on the west. Here the suitably sunny disposition of the place comes into its own—not with lavish materials or the rhetoric of classical forms—but with materials akin to those of the larger building. Concrete terrace walls and bench bases are indistinguishable from the wall to which they have been added. They are lined with sturdy, blonde wood surfaces and sheltered by pyramidal canopies of black and green canvas—unlikely, but mysteriously satisfying colors. The porchlike terrace sits alongside the main stream of traffic into the building, its highbacked benches gathering Ramona's sun. Everything affirms—for those who break off sunning to notice—that attention to things that frame and touch people, not opulence, contrived imagery, or even espresso, makes dwelling possible.

Donlyn Lyndon

Wurster Hall is a difficult building—difficult because of the weight of its presence and difficult because of the weight of two decades of public opinion. Perhaps in a somewhat ironic way, the building's strongest allies are often those sympathetic to the Bay Region's tradition. There is a difference between oppressiveness and toughness; in working on Ramona's Café I came to appreciate Wurster's toughness. This toughness escapes the oppressive and succeeds best in transmitting certain attitudes of the Bay Region in the industrial materials, in the simple detailing, and in its peculiar manipulations of scale.

Our solution had to be as straightforward as the tight budget and schedule of the program would allow. The existing servery was to be torn out and expanded, the dining area redone, and the possibility of boring through to the outside to provide seating was to be explored.

On both the inside and the outside we accepted the major materials and hardware as given, and, in a somewhat modified spirit, the building's notorious pedagogic device of revealing its parts. We did not acquiesce out of a sense of the preciousness of the existing condition but rather to draw attention to what we admired about Wurster by manipulating the scale and context of its familiar parts. In this situation, we chose

to err on the side of the “invisible remodel” rather than the inadvertent anachronism of a datable design.

On the interior our aim was to establish a sense of place or location, clear in its spatial and functional definitions. Our solution took the form—not of “areas” or “spaces”—but of “rooms” in the premodern sense: their use, size, and proportion are defined in terms of the cardinal surfaces of floor, walls, and ceiling. The subdivisions of these surfaces—the picture mold, wainscot, floor pattern, and fixture location—are scaling elements that further define the rooms and their parts.

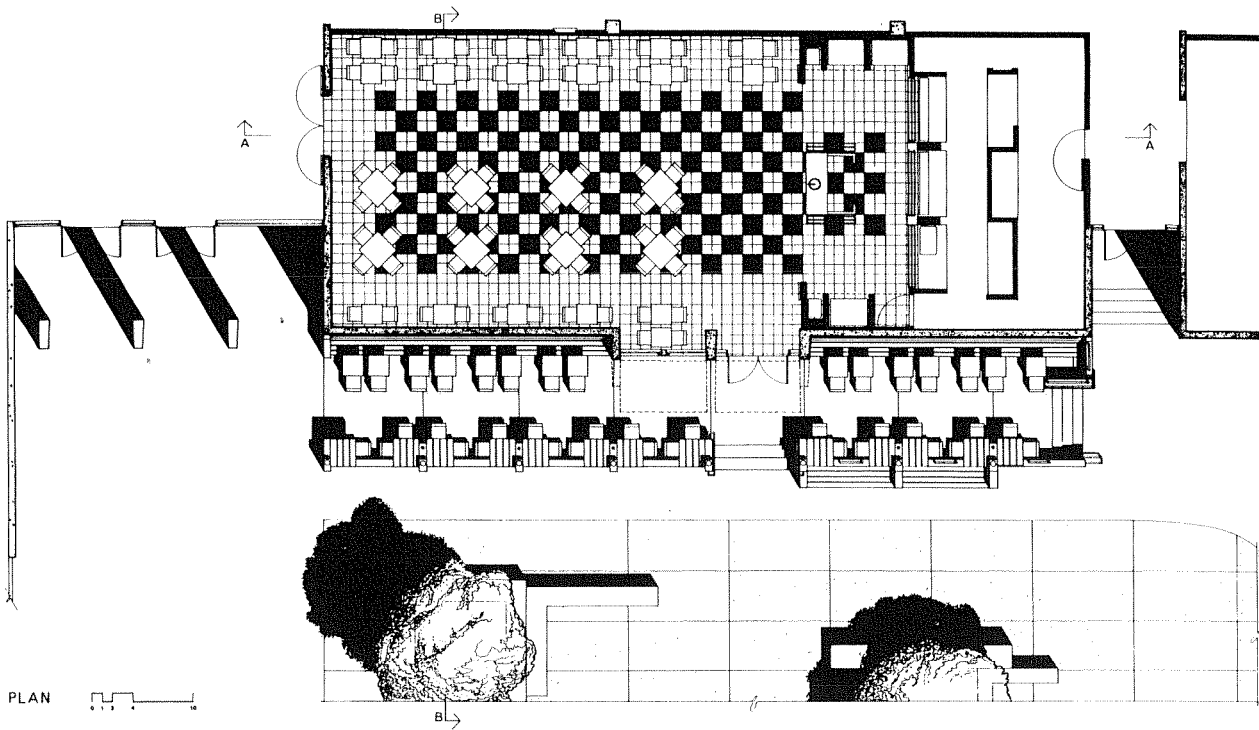
The situation on the exterior was more acute. Although the impulse to “soften” the building to accommodate its new use was doubtless legitimate, in doing so we wanted to avoid what might amount to putting a bowtie on a bulldog. A café is too small to tangle with ten stories of concrete. Again, by adapting the vocabulary of the building we were able to blur the distinction between old and new and introduce a secondary scale to mediate between the coffee drinker and the wall above.

Specifically, our solution was to break through the wall, create an entry under the *brise-soleil*, and string out a narrow terrace across the face of the building. A low wall punctuated with short columns around which tables

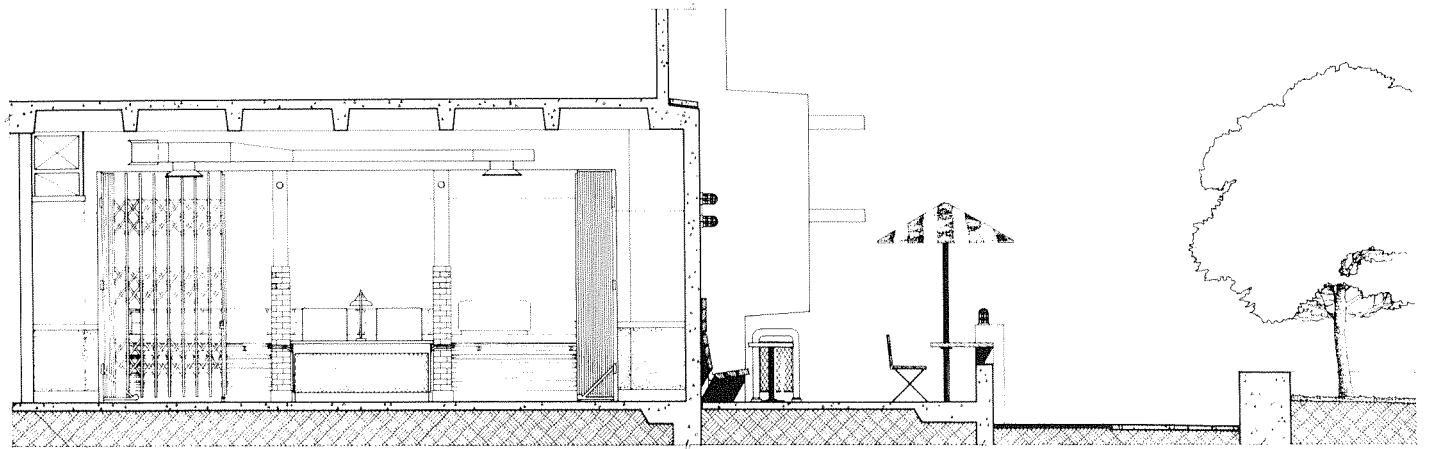
are wrapped defines the terrace. A long, highbacked bench inspired by two others on campus—one taken from John Galen Howard's old architecture building and the other from Maybeck and Morgan's Hearst Pool—rests against the foot of the building, running the full length of the terrace. Large stainless steel and canvas umbrellas provide shading.

More peacefully than in the late 1960s—when heavy timbers were boldly thrust through the firewalls on the diagonal to challenge the authoritarian barrenness of the stripped MIT industrial building type and to create a new environment for learning—the café has made its place at the edges of the dome, where little was planned, less expected, and people were somehow forgotten. The café's language of form is plain and unmistakable.

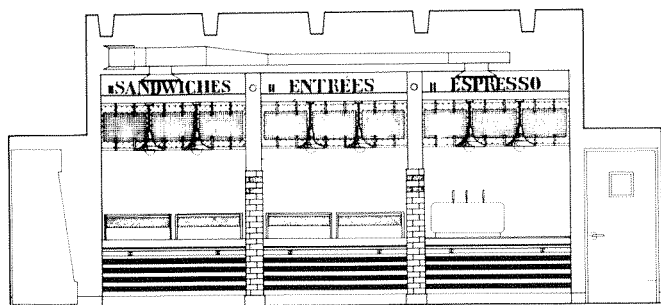
The day of the café's opening was like no other. Conversations were animated, people talked who had not talked before, at least not *that* much. The school's Visiting Committee saw a social center for the architecture department. But the opening day was also the closing day; there was no money to operate the new café. Nevertheless, students continue to use it informally and it seems to have begun its own, fragile life.



PLAN



SECTION B



SERVERY ELEVATION

2 Ramona's Terrace, plan, section and elevation