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Author

Oliver, Richard

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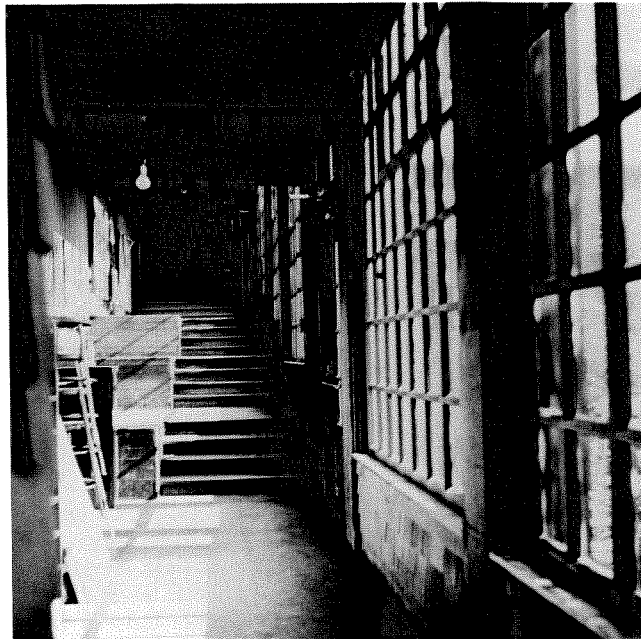
A Machine in the Garden

Richard Oliver

Wurster Hall was successor to the Ark, a gentle, wood-shingled building designed by John Galen Howard that had first housed the College of Architecture. Richard Oliver began his studies there and completed them in Wurster. We have asked him to reflect upon the influence of the two settings.

When the students of the College of Environmental Design (CED) returned to the campus in the fall of 1964, we attended classes in a new building. We had left the familiar qualities of the Ark and the T buildings for the new setting of Wurster Hall. For those of us who were planning to graduate the following spring, the move was particularly full of anticipation and trepidation. Almost 20 years later, this is one person's account of what we think we found and what we imagine we left behind.

Until the summer of 1964, the center of the CED was the Ark, a modest, wood-framed, shingle-sided building placed on a knoll along the north edge of campus at the Euclid Avenue entrance. The building, which wrapped around a brick-paved courtyard, held a lecture hall, jury room, library, administrative offices, shop, and only enough studio space for graduate students and seniors. These rooms were placed along a broad, light-filled, L-shaped hallway that followed the lay of the land—flat around the courtyard, a cascade of steps rising along the knoll—an abstract topography that fused the building to its site. The jury room occupied the preeminent position, placed at the end of the hallway, at the summit of the stairs. It is astonishing to consider that all those facilities were fitted into a building that seemed like a large house—or perhaps a modest temple.



I Stair of the "Old Ark,"
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Among the building's many charming idiosyncracies was the fact that the chairman's office had a side door that allowed us to have clandestine meetings with Charles Moore, the chairman, without having to encounter his awesome secretary. Among the many disappointments of Wurster Hall was the fact that the chairman's office had but one door, which was closely monitored. We all had lectures and juries in the Ark, but because of the move to Wurster Hall, never a studio. The Ark was a building we came *to*, but were never *in* for long stretches of time. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that it was the heart of the college.

Most design studios were held in wooden, so-called "temporary" buildings—an enduring legacy of the post-World War II shortage of classroom space. For our first three years, studio was held in T-10, initially on the first floor, later on the second; in our fourth year, we moved to T-4. These two-story, loftlike buildings were linear in organization, with doors and stairs at each end. They served, therefore, as both destination and route. It was not uncommon to pass quite naturally through the entire length of T-10, and in doing so to stay in touch with other students and their projects. The T buildings encouraged interaction. Nevertheless, they were far from ideal: years of intensive use had left the work

surfaces and walls in a rude and battered condition.

An unofficial though important part of the physical setting of the school was the Café Espresso, an elegant coffee house located just across the street from the Ark. The interior had been designed by Donald Olsen, a member of the faculty, and its crisp, light-filled, flag-festooned atmosphere seemed wonderful. The Café served sophisticated fare as well as coffee and donuts, and its cosmopolitan air added to its charm. At any time of the day or night, one could stop by and expect to find faculty and fellow students. It was possible to mingle here, overhear gossip, be regaled by humorous faculty members, and discuss important matters.

The Ark, the T buildings, and Café Espresso were part of a composition that aligned itself with a powerful ally—the hilly topography of the campus and of Berkeley. The Ark and its dependencies formed a coherent though dispersed entity, a kind of "landscape" with a "temple-studio" at its heart and a social hall and workspaces at its periphery. Movement within the Ark and outward to its dependencies was almost completely horizontal, a choreography enriched by the rise and fall of the earth, and punctuated by light and shade, by the quiet of the campus, and by the noise of the street. The physical arrangement of the

college bridged town and gown in a most direct and simple manner.

In contrast, Wurster Hall severed its ties to topography, fused the official parts of the CED into one structure on campus, and replaced casual, horizontal movement with structured, mechanized, vertical movement. The studios were removed from the T buildings and placed in a vertical stack linked by two elevators, forming the distinctive tower of the U-shaped structure. The studios, being high in the building, were reached most conveniently by elevators and entered from one end. The stairs at the other end were not used very much. Thus, the studios were destinations—indeed defensible territories—but not routes; it became less easy to "drop by" another studio. Awareness of and within the school as a whole began to decrease.

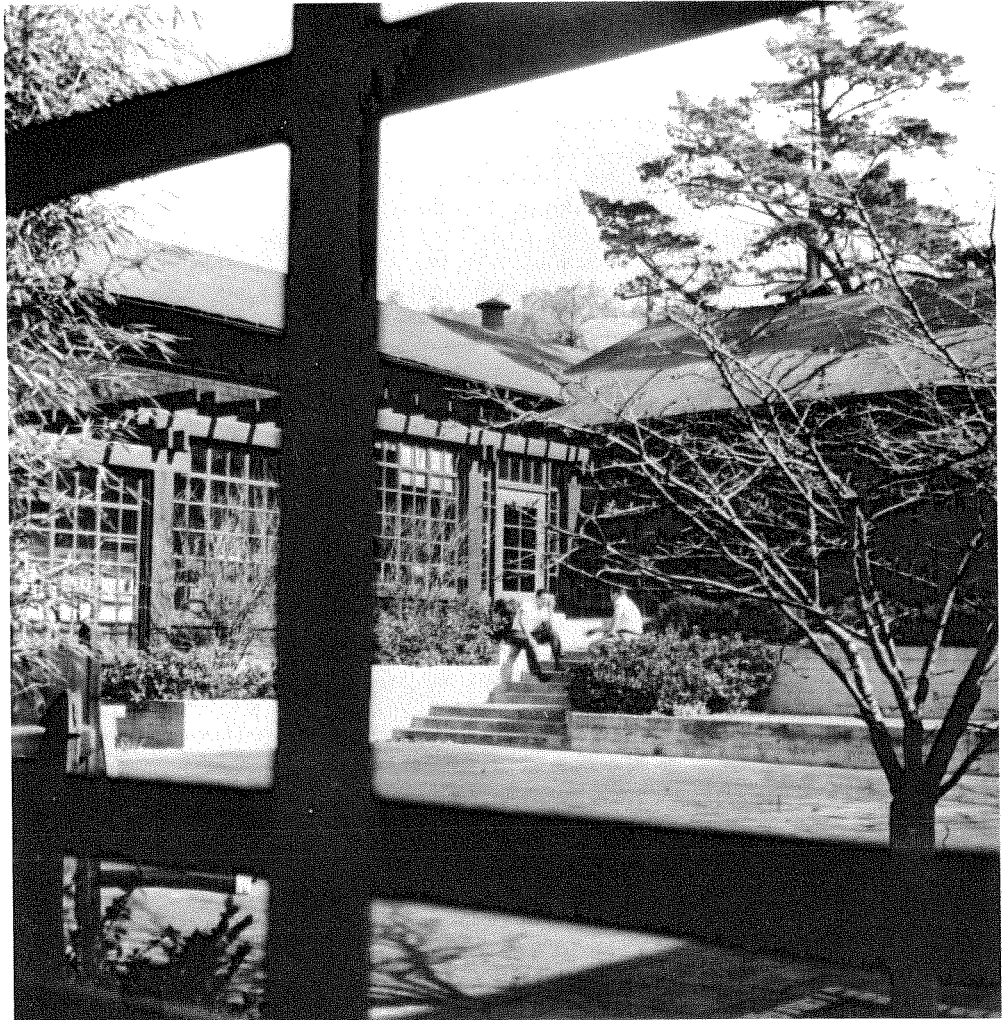
The studios were airy and spacious, and those at the top offered spectacular views across San Francisco Bay. The furniture was new, and everyone had a stool. The newness and clean precision of the drafting furniture engendered contradictory feelings: people seemed to appreciate the crisp, unbeaten, professional-looking furniture, and yet that very quality seemed to inhibit the kind of rough-and-ready model making that seemed so essential to creativity. How could one cut chip-

board on those pristine drafting surfaces?

The building was made of reinforced concrete, baldly expressed. The contrast between the machinelike precast work and the rougher cast-in-place work underscored the basic “honesty” of the structure. The mechanical systems were frankly exposed, and there was austere but evocative detailing everywhere, in doors, windows, hardware, joints of all kinds, and especially in the sunlight shading devices that remain one of the most distinctive elements of the building.

To many, however, the new building seemed harsh and even brutal in its appearance. This impression was furthered during the first year when cardboard shark’s teeth were installed at the outer edge of the protruding, penthouse, seminar room balcony, giving the building an unmistakable image of a monster. Nevertheless, to some of my classmates and to me, Wurster Hall embodied an approach to design we pursued in our own student projects, and it seemed to many of us that the building transformed into concrete the spirited and iconoclastic character of the wooden architecture of the professors we most admired.

Being in Wurster Hall for our last school year meant we had been directly deprived of spending that year in the Ark. Thus, the



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2 Courtyard of the “Old Ark,”
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“Victorian lounge” that appeared on the top floor of Wurster Hall that fall of 1964 reflected a sad longing for the Ark as well as a witty and wicked commentary on the new structure. The Victorian lounge was the inspired creation of Peter Behn and Larry Gavin, though others contributed heavily to its design and production. The ceiling was a suspended, cardboard rendition of one of the aedicular tempiettos in Moore’s Orinda House—minus the columns. There was a cardboard fireplace with gross trophies on its mantel, flowery wall paper on an adjacent concrete column, a tattered rug, and a pair of comfy overstuffed couches. Its frumpiness and coziness were all that Wurster Hall was not, and the lounge served as the only congenial gathering spot in the entire building.

Once installed in Wurster Hall, we all realized immediately that there was no replacement for the Café Espresso, either within or near the building. A really central social component of the college had been left out of the planning. Social interaction seemed to atrophy, further contributing to a sense of estrangement many people seemed to feel in the new building.

If an important social dimension remained unaccounted for in the new building, a hierarchy of parts so clearly expressed in the

Ark had similarly been diluted. The jury rooms, for instance, were placed unceremoniously off the main lobby and its emanating hallways, where they failed to have the central position that the old one in the Ark had possessed. With that loss of position and hierarchy, the drama of juries subsided.

At the heart of Wurster Hall’s problems, however, was the elevator core. Movement into and through the building lost grace and continuity; it became chopped into segments controlled by the elevator. Social contact lost its easy casualness, and became disjointed—people passed each other in separate elevator cars or were forced to confront one another in a single car. The elevators could not handle the surges of movement at various times of day, creating the specter of hordes of agitated people waiting. Rather than providing convenience and coherence, the elevators of Wurster Hall engendered a disconnected anonymity.

Wurster Hall never came to be loved by those of us who graduated in 1965. The lack of affection for it (and the affection for the Ark) was not merely a resentment at the passing of old ways or a sense of poignancy about the loss of our senior year in the Ark. Indeed, countering these nostalgic feelings was a genuine excitement with the new and a great pleasure in the straightforward, un senti-

mental manner of Wurster Hall. The essential problem with Wurster Hall was an irony: as the building gathered the disparate pieces of the CED under one roof, it acted as a social centrifuge. Wurster Hall proved to be centrifugal because it relied upon the elevator—a symbol of technology—as an organizer of space; the Ark and its far-flung dependencies had been centripetal because their spaces had been organized horizontally, draped across a memorable landscape.