Reality and Imagination:

A Place For Blacksburg
Reality and Imagination

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MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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Reality and Imagination
-A Place for Blacksburg-

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Abstract

Architecture is the triumph of human imagination over materials, methods and men, to put man into possession of his own earth.  
Frank Lloyd Wright

There is nothing impossible in the world. Humans use their imagination to make their dreams come true or to achieve their desires. In architecture, a project should be completed by team effort and technology. Architects and engineers transform their ideas and imagination into a real object: space. Like a film, reflecting the director’s thought and expression.

How can space be defined? A wall, a column.... every element in architecture can define a space, even though it might be only a door. A wall can be a separation as defining edges of a space, but a wall also is a connection as indicating other spaces for human to enter. A column is not just a part of the structure in architecture; it may guide people approaching a space or imply that there is another different space beyond?....
Idea of Project

Film is a representation of fantasy and reconstructs reality in a two-dimensional manner. As a theatergoer, I would always like to find more public space when I am waiting in a movie theater. Thus, the idea for this project came to mind. If a movie theater is not in a busy town where there is a profusion of restaurants and pubs, it may be essential to provide refreshment facilities near the theater. In this design, I was trying to provide more space and opportunity to the public when people are waiting for the movie to start. If they arrive at a movie theater early, in my opinion, waiting space (lobby) is one of the most important parts in a movie theater. On the other hand, the public can be persuaded to enter a movie theater by the amenities it offers, and they may more easily be tempted to buy tickets for the movies it offers. The relationship between the theater and waiting space is immediate, but my real aim is to make the project an accepted part of the life of the community.
Site
A Place for Blacksburg....
The site is opposite the University Mall which is on University City Boulevard in Blacksburg. The old movie theater does not have enough space to accommodate the people of the city. Except for the downtown area in Blacksburg, this place offers the most potential to create a space for the public. There are several restaurants and shops inside the University Mall, but people seldom stay there after a meal or shopping. The challenge of this site is to create a place for community and to connect the Mall and this movie theater. One advantage of this site is that it could be a suitable place for people to stay with friends, to see people and be seen without worry about parking space or problems of transportation. This location is like a middle or transition space between Virginia Tech and the residential area.
The Project

- University City Blvd.
- University Mall
- Virginia Tech (Golf Course)

SITE PLAN
Axial Relation:

- Neighborhood and University Mall
- Visual appeal and connection

People coming from the downtown area (east) or from the west focus on this site because of the direction of University City Boulevard. The plaza could be a focus which leads people to get together and to approach the building.

Plaza:

- Focus
- Connection

The plaza not only connects to the parking lots of this site but also may become a way to catch people’s eyes because of activities occurring there.

Service Circulation:

- Vehicle

The service vehicles and customer’s vehicles are separated.
In this project, there are three parts based on my initial idea: movie theaters, transition space (shops, restaurant, pubs, and laundry), and semi-enclosed space (ticket booths and coffee shop). These three parts show different orders of structure and different orders of material. My intention is to make a connection and response to the site and create a space for theatergoers to experience before entering the movie theaters. There is an ambiguous relationship between reality and imagination which people always get confused, like this project, movie theater and transition space (shops which appear based on human’s needs and reflect the real life). The semi-enclosed space not only connects to the plaza and parking lot, but also attracts passers’ attention because of activities occurring here and visual penetration it affords. So the structure changes from heavy wall to column and the material from concrete blocks to steel.

It is much better not to cover anything up but to show the full nature and relationship of part to part, including the present condition of each which is a record of how it got that way.
Theaters

The theater is the heaviest part consisting of concrete block walls and concrete columns. A concrete wall connects (or I might say "separates") the theaters with the transition area and semi-enclosed space. This wall is a door. It not only implies a different space (theaters) behind it, but also shows a change of material. The different heights of the walls present a hierarchy in architecture.

On the other hand, I am trying to use this wall to represent my inspiring idea: reality and imagination. In a theater, you may encounter any kind of imaginative idea, but you still have to face reality after you walk out of the theaters.
A series of concrete walls and steel columns were used in the transition space. A long concrete wall extends from the theaters, and this wall may guide people to go in or out of the theaters. A series of concrete walls provides the same space to be used as shops, pubs, and restaurant. On the other side of the path, steel columns support this area and make a contrast to the concrete wall. In the semi-enclosed space, concrete columns and pairs of smaller steel columns make this the most open part of the project. This semi-enclosed space is a visual connection between the different approach paths people use to enter this area.
View from the entrance of the theaters section to the transition space
Continuity

Continuity can be maintained by keeping to the same scale, form, material, or area. In this project, a wall extends from the theaters and a series of concrete walls are standing behind this wall to make a separation between different spaces. In the semi-enclosed space, concrete columns show the idea of continuity of this concrete solid wall. It is also shown in different order of structure from single column to pairs of columns, from solid wall to frames.

Repetition

Repetition is the simplest way to present sequence. It could be repetition of a single part or an element. Concrete walls with vertical openings are used as a kind of sequence. Although these concrete walls define one area as a module, they still may create different spaces and different moods.

Hierarchy

Walls of different height are used to define the space between theaters and shops. On the side facing the parking lot, the walls are one story in height and also shifted. My intention is to imply where the entry is and lead people to enter this building.

Transparency

The facades of the one story shops are translucent glass. Although people cannot see through clearly from the outside, these translucent glass facades give people more space for imagination. Between these one-story shops, the transparent glass facades provide a visual connection which may satisfy human curiosity.
In the transition space, pairs of rectangular steel columns are used to support the second floor in order to make three bridges, which connect to shops on the second floor.

On the roof, the rhythm of these beams is visible. The roof opening with translucent glass becomes narrower and narrower toward the entrance of the theater. This space becomes darker and darker. The beams across the openings may not be seen clearly because the translucent glass is beneath them. This indicates to people that they are going to enter the darkness of the theaters and directs them.

Sometimes we can imagine when we cannot see clearly.
Pairs of rectangular steel columns support the floor in the transition space.

Round steel columns are used for the main structure in the transition space to make the contrast stronger.

Pairs of round steel columns not only support the semi-enclosed space but also are the connection between transition space and semi-enclosed space.
Plaza

People like to sit in a raised plaza which is visually accessible from the street. Most plaza users like to watch other people and be seen by the people passing by. Moreover, a raised plaza can provide a pleasing place which gives the user feelings of security and safety. This plaza is a meeting place and connection between the University Mall and the theaters. In addition, the plaza may encourage people to slow down and get them together. In this project, I was trying to create a space from which people can easily approach the building. It is not only a visual connection between the building and parking lot, but also an attraction to users. In a commercial building, I think that there are two essential means of attracting to people. One is the structure itself and the other is activities occurring there. The use of a semi-enclosed space was my initial idea. The structure and activities of such a space can easily be seen in a plaza.
Relationship between vehicle service path and parking space for the neighborhood creates a place which gives users a feeling of security and safety.

A raised plaza near the street (University City Boulevard) can provide opportunities for sitting and being seen by passerby.
1F PLAN

theaters
This semi-enclosed space consists of a coffeeshop and two ticket booths. Because it ends the axis, the coffeeshop becomes an important part of this project. It is a focus wherever people come from whether south-east or north-west.

The main entrance of this building is the point at which the axis changes direction. There are different activities occurring in each structural frame of this part, but the main entrance remains totally open. It may direct users in their approach to the building.
The 1F PLAN includes the coffeeshop and ticket booths. The semi-enclosed space, coffeeshop, and ticket booths are clearly visible in the plan.
View from the coffee shop on the second floor

View from the balcony outside the coffee shop
The semi-enclosed space is totally open on the first floor. It is characterized by not only visual transparency but also physical penetration. Users can easily pass through between the plaza and the parking space. On the second floor, the semi-enclosed space is covered with transparent glass which would become an advertising panel. In addition, users’ movements and activities can be seen behind this panel. These two layers would become the main attraction to catch people’s eyes.

The relationship between the advertising panel and users’ behavior is like the relationship between imagination and reality. It is ambiguous, hybrid, and compromising. It is not separate, pure, and clear. Sometimes, not seeing does not mean you do not know because you have imagination.
The main material of the coffeeshop is translucent glass. The intention I had was to identify layers and differences and contrast in the semi-enclosed space. A stairs around the outside of the coffeeshop connects the first floor and the second floor. No matter whether users go up or down, it makes this area more lively. This coffee shop is the first part to be seen when people approach this area and also the last point when they leave. Thus, the translucent glass gives people opportunities to imagine what is happening behind them. Two layers are shown in this part: one is the movement of users going up or down by the stairs, and the other is the movement of users' shadows in this coffeeshop.
The first part which is seen by people approaching from the south-east on University City Boulevard is the coffeeshop. The structure and stairs around this coffeeshop would be a focus. Moreover, an advertising panel or any kind of information about the theaters might hang on this side. The semi-enclosed space offers wide flexibility in use for different kinds of functions or purposes. No matter which direction the people come from, they only see the frames of the structure which will not give them much of a feeling of heavy mass.
Colors can be another issue of architecture. Since the main material of this project is concrete blocks and concrete, I have tried to use different colors in steel columns, beams, and metal mesh. The materials and colors show conflict and contrast in the architecture.

Architecture is an art filled with contradictions. The more learned among us translate these contradictions into antitheses: between discipline and freedom, between technology and environment, between modernity and tradition.

Renzo Piano
Different kinds of materials and means were used for presenting the idea of transparency. Wherever a user stands, there are various views and multiple relationships with this area.

The shadows of metal mesh standing on the east side change along with the angle of the sun. It fulfills not only the desire for shadows but also the function of a shutter which provides a pleasant atmosphere.

Light gives objects existence as objects and connects space and form.

Tadao Ando

Light is the origin of all being. Striking the surface of things, light grants them an outline; gathering shadows behind things, it gives them depth. Things are articulated along borders of light and darkness and obtain their individual form, discovering interrelationships, and become infinitely linked.

Tadao Ando

View from outside of coffeeshop on the first floor

View from balcony of semi-enclosed space
A stair isn’t something you get out of a catalogue but a very important event in a building.
Louis I. Kahn

This stairs around the coffeeshop have the best view in this site. It may be like a watch tower, where users can have different views at different heights and different angles. In addition, people’s movements inside the coffeeshop and on the stairs become two layers which create more interesting and lively relations and interactions.
People may enter theaters by using these stairs to experience this semi-enclosed space, transition space, and the theaters. The user’s state of mind can be changed gradually for entering their own imaginary world. The frames may create interesting patterns of shadow when the sun shines come through from different angles.
This transition space is in the middle section of this project, which is between the semi-enclosed space and the movie theaters. The major structural elements of this part are a series of steel columns and a solid concrete wall which extends from the movie theaters. On the east side, the angle of the walls implies the entrance and different material are used. These shops in this transition space reflect the real life which is different from the imaginary world in movie theaters.
The module idea of shops

1F PLAN (shops)
The shops on the east side are one story and the shops are two stories on the west side. A modular idea was used in these shops, which has different purposes although using the same materials and elements. These shops are separated by a series of concrete walls with vertical openings which let light in and also show a contrast between solid wall and opening. On the east side, the second floor terrace becomes an important space which connects the parking lot and this building visually. Pairs of rectangular steel columns support the second floor walkway, which is totally separated from these shops but connected by three bridges. There is a clear gap is between shops and path. On the other hand, the roof is supported by regular beams which have translucent glass beneath them in the opening and are completely exposed in the rest of the structure.
Between two shops on the west side a seating area is offered.

The relationship between the path and two-story shops is primarily visual. People can watch others and also be seen in this space. Natural light penetrates from the skylight on the roof which becomes narrower and narrower, implying the darker space of the theaters is ahead.
The two stories shops are totally separated from the path, but connected by three bridges to the path.
In this area, the second floor on the east side is completely separated from the balcony and terrace on the west side but connected by three bridges. These different spaces are defined and show a pleasing contrast in material and structure. In addition, the shadows created by the glass wall and columns give this space variety and enhance the contrast between these two sides.

A great American poet once asked the architect, 'What slice of the sun does your building have? What light enters your room?'--as if to say the sun never knew how great it is until it struck the side of a building.

Louis I. Kahn
The modular idea is used in these shops which are enclosed by concrete walls with vertical openings. Sometimes the same spaces might give inspiration to the user who is the one change in the space.

A module is not the repetition of a motif but the expression of an architectural principle.

Louis I. Kahn
View between the service entrances

View from the entrance of movie theater section
There are two secondary entrances between the shops on the west side, which allow people to enter the building in different ways. These two secondary entrances are transition spaces between outside and inside. Two concrete walls stand in these secondary entrances present the information about movie schedules and the shops. A guest can sit on benches along the wall in this part or on the second floor terrace for different views of people going in and out of this building. The facades of these three angled one-story shops on the west side are translucent glass, so people might not see clearly what is happening inside, but they can see through from the transparent walls of the secondary entrances. Thus, it could encourage people to go in or to stay longer.
A stairway located between this gap in the second floor connects the two floors. When sunlight comes in, this stairs becomes an important space of this transition part and also leads people to use it to enter theaters on the second floor.
The main structure of the theaters is concrete block walls and concrete columns. There are three larger movie theaters and two smaller ones, which provide 1145 seats. There is a preview space in the central area of this theater section and a service counter beneath this preview space.

Each larger movie theater has an independent stairway which connects the two floors. People can enter these five movie theaters from either the first floor or the second floor.

Natural light penetrates from the top of the central part which brings a life in the theater section. It is a kind of live stage where people see others and can be seen.
preview space

The preview space is surrounded by the five movie theaters. On the first floor, the service counter provides soft drinks and popcorn for moviegoers, and sets of two stairs connect the first and the second floor. In addition, the stairs become the seats for the preview space. It is an important space where people might get information about the theaters or refreshments. When a user enters or comes out of a theater, they can pass or stay in this space. The opening in the roof lets natural light come into this space and makes this area a real stage which is in contrast with the stage in the movie theaters. The natural light penetrates from the top through the second floor, creating a better relationship between the first floor and the second floor. In addition, this central preview space may attract people and encourage them to stay and buy food.

The idea of this preview space is to provide a space with a pleasant atmosphere space for people when they are waiting. If people can get more information about the movies to be shown in the theaters, they can easily choose what they want to see next time or what they are going to buy. This place makes people feel comfortable and want to stay. Furthermore, people have another kind of experience in seeing movie previews which is different from simply sitting in a movie theater.

Staircase of the preview space

The lobby and the preview space
At the end of this area, light comes in from two narrow gaps between three concrete walls. It is a focus of this area where some information or posters may be hung. There is emergency exit between every two theaters. Since the material of the theaters is concrete block, which presents a sense of heavy mass, a contrast is made by using translucent glass for those exits. These emergency exits are not just exits but becoming a space where people can experience the narrow path between two solid walls. Besides, when users come out of the theaters by using these stairs, what they see in this narrow pathway is the real world. It heightens the very strong feeling of change in going from the theater to reality.
These emergency stairs are covered by a series of curved steel beams with translucent glass over them which makes the contrast between the solid mass of the theater and narrow path stronger. The solid concrete wall provides a place for viewing film and also separates the preview space and service space (restrooms).
The sky light comes into the central part and brings a life to this area. The pattern on the floor changes along with the angle of the sun. It is a kind of focus to impel people to get together and to stay in this complex. In the nighttime, spot lights are hung around the opening and create a bright area for this preview space.
View from the entrance of theater section on the second floor

View from a bridge to the preview space on the second floor

View from the entrance of theater section on the first floor

View of the central space on the first floor
People can not only go up to the second floor by using an independent stairway in a larger movie theater but also they can see other people in the lobby when they are on the landing of this stairs. The relationship between the theaters and what is outside of the theaters is more strong. It is interesting that people always like to see the movements of other people at different height or on different floors. Although the wall is of simple material with mono-color, the people and the natural light change this place and this space.

Architecture cannot exist without relating to human beings.

Tadao Ando
The stairs in the preview space is not only a main meeting space but also provide a good view and relationship for each seat.
Two bridges cross the opening on the second floor of the theater section, and light comes from the skylight in the roof in this area. The movements of people can be seen clearly and people affect each other. A space can be influenced by people’s actions and thoughts because we are in this space.
View from a bridge to the screen in the preview space
The most important part of a movie theater is a seat. People care about whether they have a good view from their seats when they go to a movie theater. The idea I have developed for larger theaters is a two-story space which has more and better seats for users. In addition, an emergency exit is necessary for such a movie theater. Thus, how a movie theater space should be defined was the most difficult part of the design for me. Since there are five movie theaters in this project, a projection room is shared by two movie theaters. Workers use stairs inside the movie theater to go up to the projection room on the third floor.

When people come into the movie theater space from the transition space on the second floor, they have to go under a projection room which makes this area darker and narrower. And, then they enter the large central preview space with natural light coming in.
Behind the screen of every movie theater, there is a mechanical space (sound system) which is defined by two solid walls. Double translucent glass is used on both sides of these spaces, which blocks the sound and makes a contrast with those solid walls and also awakens people’s imagination. People can walk beneath these mechanical spaces which extend from second story height of the movie theaters. The main structure of the roofs of the movie theaters is a series of trusses which support the roofs and from which the required acoustic ceilings can be hung.
Section of two movie theaters and a projection room shared by them
An independent stair inside every large movie theater, not only connects the two floors but also defines the entrances of these movie theaters. In a large movie theater, there are two emergency exits on each side, which provide better circulation and seating. These emergency exits are connected to emergency stairs which are between two theaters and so that users can go out of the building directly in case of need. Two angled walls on both sides define these emergency exits and also provide a better view for every seat.

When people go into a theater from the second floor, they go through a space which is a one-story height and then into an open space with a light from a sky light coming in in the central part.

The two smaller movie theaters are on the second floor, and the first floor underneath of them could be used as office space or locker rooms... for employees. As in the larger movie theater, there is a space for mechanical function (sound system). Several layers of solid walls define the movie theaters space. A building is alive because of people and light.
One advantage of using concrete blocks in movie theaters is that the space between concrete blocks can be used for the lighting system or air-conditioned system.
In this project, the width of those walls is 60 cm, which provides space for the systems a movie theater needs.
In three larger movie theaters, concrete walls support the independent stairs and define the entrances of each theater.
Plan of a large movie theater
The entrance of movie theater on the first floor.
The entrance of movie theater on the second floor.
In a space, the dialogue between human and room is always there. It cannot be neglected. If the movements of people on different floors can be related to each other, a space is not just a volume. The human is the most important element in a building. There are several different height areas for the seats in this project, which provides various feelings among the movie theater users. There is interaction happens between a film and its audience, individuals in the audience with each other.

Section of the large movie theater
View from the first row of seats in a large movie theater
People go to a movie theater to enjoy an imaginary world, but, at the same time, they might enjoy the space. I think that reality and imagination become ultimately mixed in our life and make it better.

To complete a movie a lot of varied techniques of a team needed, and likewise, an architectural achievement represents the possibility of many people’s efforts. Architecture is a challenge to make any kind of idea and thought possible.
View of the back seats on the first floor in a large movie theater (right above)
View from the central seats to the screen on the second floor in a large movie theater (right middle)

View of seats on the second floor in a large movie theater

View of the screen on the second floor
Steps in the seating area provide a good view for each seat. In a movie theater, the best seats are always in the central area. For this reason, the aisles are on both sides along the wall. The two entrances not only define three areas in the back seats and the seats on the second floor but also help to disperse the audiences. An independent stairs connects the first floor to the third floor which is a projection room, and also makes a pathway at the entrances long enough to allow audiences adjust to differences inside the theater.
View of the whole movie theater from the screen.
Nature...Light...Shadow
I respect the environment where we live and which we feel every day. An architecture cannot be an architecture without a way of relating to the environment. The response to a site is always an issue to be discussed. The relationship between building and environment may change the manner of people's movements and activities. So, the human is always related to an architecture. The other essential point which changes an architecture is the light. For me, light is always attractive because it changes all the time. From this project, I have realized that the main point is not what I want this building to be but what this building can be by itself. I do not know if my architecture is good, but I know I tried hard to achieve my ideas of this project within the site I chose and natural light. Like light, people and their behaviors will never be limited by an unnatural force. However, we may give them ways and lead them to become a part of an architecture. Implicit function actually is the same as explicit. Most of the time, implication is much better than clarity because it leaves more space for us to feel, think, and imagine. An architecture could be represented in different ways by different people. On the other hand, we all know that a space without light and activity could never be a good space.
notes

p.8 map and p.9 aerial photograph from Donna Dunay
Town Architecture: Blacksburg
Penn Washington, 1986 (p. 90, p.154)

p.22 images from Clare Cooper Marcus, Carolyn Francis
People Places Design guidelines for Urban Open Space
Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990 (p.3, p.15, p.33)

Unless otherwise noted, images are produced by the student.
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vita

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