Architecture Design:
“The Bank”
—a Convention Center for Alexandria
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Premise

Any building in the urban context can be seen as in-between collective and individual interests, abstract concept and empirical experience. It is at the same time an object and part of the texture of the city, so it fits within an order of hierarchies and has its own order. Herein lies the conflict.

Oda Pälme

The goal of this architectural design was to create a place of interaction within the rule set by the previous urban design. Within the vision for the urban design phase, I drew upon two main points for this phase:

1. To provide a ‘face’ to the area; consideration of the Wall Building: a part of the whole - alignment of the wall to Eisenhower Avenue to form urban density and a memorable collective image

2. To provide a convention and conference facility by the proposed Metro station at the eastern end of the area; consideration of the architectural project as the initial action among the whole proposal: a catalyst

15,000~20,000m² (161,000~215,000sf) exhibition space
1,200~1,500m² (13,000~16,100sf) conference space

I needed to address the problem of locating a large enclosed space in an urban context. The key concern was how to provide diversity, flexibility, and human scale.
Makuhari Messe (1989/1997)
Chiba, Japan
Fumihiko Maki, Maki and Associates
Phase I: exhibition space: 54,000m² (581,000sf)
conference space: 1,390m² (15,900sf)
Phase II: exhibition space: 18,000m² (194,000sf)
Total exhibition space: 72,000m² (775,000sf)

Lille Grand Palais, Congrexpo (1994)
Lille, France
Rem Koolhaas/OMA
exhibition space: 20,000m² (215,000sf)
conference space: 1,800m² (194,000sf)

Washington Convention Center (1982)
Washington D.C., USA
exhibition space: 35,400m² (381,000sf)
conference space: 8,280m² (89,000sf)
Programming

Several programmatic combinations were put to the test. Each program was translated into form and material: Exhibition was oak, Conference was acrilic, Wall was birch plywood, and Parking was redwood. The schemes with the interpretation of the Wall idea and its proportional distance to the Metro station. Reading the gesture of the form was a useful tool for the evaluation of each scheme throughout the process.

How a festive place should be, as opposed to a mundane place, generated the spatial relationship between people to see and to be seen.
Accumulated programs are in a cube and above a base.

Primary room, the exhibition hall, is at the center of attention. This idea was carried into the final proposal.

All schemes were questioned on its treatment of the corner enclosed by Eisenhower Avenue and the Cameron Run and the railroads. After many attempts, I decided the character of the controversial corner would be the ideal challenge as the site for the convention center. The corner was also appropriate to begin with because of its location at the very edge of the area Eisenhower Avenue West. The site I was working on remained for the phase II of the convention center.
First Proposal

In following the rules set by the urban proposal, moving the site to the triangular corner forced the design to befriend a particular situation. The uniqueness of the site was its surroundings which included Eisenhower Avenue, the railroads, and Cameron Run. Among these three lines, I gave the most importance to the railroad because a direct connection with the Metro station brought people and activity to the convention center. This proposal celebrated the integrity of the Metro line and the convention center to generate possibility of interaction. The exhibition hall and the grand entrance hall sandwiched the Metro line. The auditorium was raised above the Metro line and the hotel rooms were located on the river side.

But this proposal was abandoned mainly because of the strategy to the site. This proposal contained all the particularities under one big roof. I tried to mediate the difference of the surroundings at the three sides with one general structural system. The perimeter of the building showed an inadequate engagement to the site. Steven Holl states in his book *Anchoring*, “Building transcends physical and functional requirements by fusing with a place, gathering the meaning of a situation. Architecture does not so much intrude on a landscape as it serves to explain it.”

Choosing the regulating lines by the river (above), by the river and railroad (middle), by the railroad (bottom).
View of the grand entrance hall. It accommodates conference facilities as well as a way to the exhibition hall on the other side of the railroad. Underground parking space is visually connected.
Site Revisited

*The sense of gravity is the essence of all architectonic structures and great architecture makes us aware of gravity and earth.*

Juhani Pallasmaa

What made this site unique was having Cameron Run behind it. The presence of water had been completely ignored until this site visit. I attempted to approach the site from a different point of view from the previous schemes.

What I found striking was the presence of a water tunnel under the rail tracks. This was my moment of inspiration. It had necessary size and slope to fight against water pressure during flooding as well as support the load of the train bed above. The bank of the site was also treated in the same way. The exciting architectural potential became apparent.
The departure from the new phase came with the transformation of the architectural potential residing in the site. In Vittorio Gregotti’s view: “Project design as modification ...must instead transform a place into an object of architecture, must reestablish the original and symbolic act of making contact with the earth, with physical environment, with the idea of nature as totality of all existing things, through the constitution and reconstitution of a principle of settlement.”

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Study of Structure: 
body as tool

The failure of the first proposal urged the next proposal to strengthen the engagement with the site. It was obvious that a large content needed a large container. First, I explored the possibility of formally relating to the site through the structure of the exhibition hall. Carlo Scarpa’s drawing for the study of Santa Maria delle Rose suggested the use of body as tool. Pallasmaa points out, “When experiencing a structure, we unconsciously mimic its configuration with our bones and muscles....the structures of a building are unconsciously imitated and comprehended through the skeletal system.”

Structural gesture implies bones and muscles. 
(left) Kansai International Airport, Osaka, Japan, Renzo Piano (1995) 
(bottom left) Washington Dulles International Airport, Virginia, USA, Eero Saarinen (1962) 
(right) Helsinki Institute of Technology, Helsinki, Finland, Alvar Aalto (1964)
The section became a part of the human body. Plan grew like an insect or a fish. It had an antenna, arms, a tail to be sensitive to the environment.
Second Proposal

The river side became an important facade. The spacious corridor along Cameron Run would be a place for people to relax in the intermission of the trade show. The overall sectional configuration showed the architectural force lifted along the river side wing and flowed towards Eisenhower Avenue like a cascade.

The roof structure rested on the ‘Wall’ on the both side. Both wings of the river side and the park side were not only independent buildings but also a part of the structure. The ‘Wall’ idea survived as a programming device.
View from river side. The corridor on the second floor has a band of opening and stairs to the river.

View from park side through Eisenhower Avenue. The hotel wing is equipped with three slopes: to the hotel rooms and to each side of the exhibition hall.
The exhibition space is divided into three rooms. Cameron Run originates the building and the Metro line orients it. The hotel wing is located the further side of the Metro line, and the conference hall connects the phase I and the phase II of the convention center.