

Houses Between Allegory and the Novel

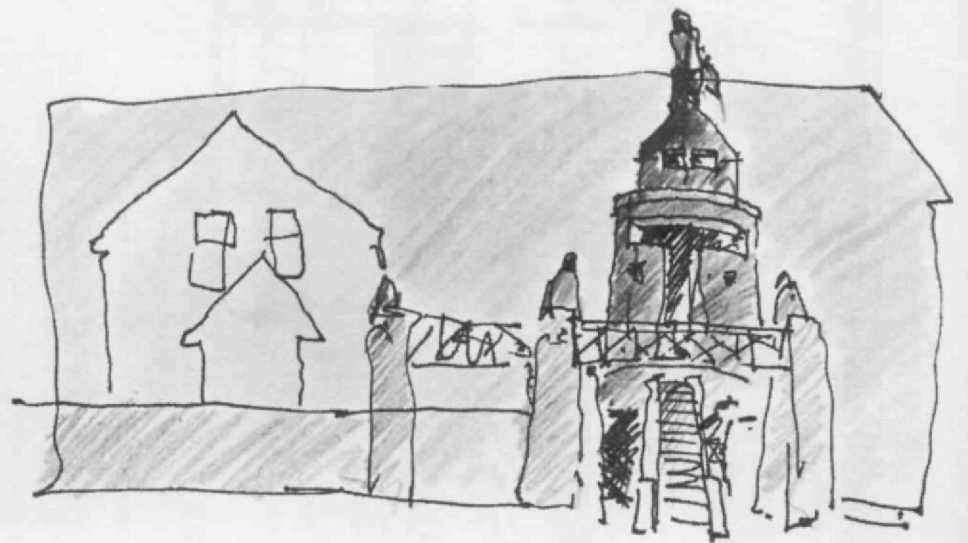
Alan Hirschfield and Peter D. Waldman

Bruce C. Webb

The allegorical landscape is the natural domain of architecture - a fable of abstractions which are settings for the fabled life. Within this context architecture confronts the allegorical dilemma of having at once two contents: the one literal and immediate; the other figurative and symbolic. It is a dilemma shared with all allegorical art, only here made more difficult by the very nature of the architectural medium which is always a medium of undeniable realities. In struggling with the problem of creating meaningful architecture in the modern world, the choices are these: to make allegories which struggle to be buildings, or to make buildings which aspire to be allegorical. Jorge Luis Borges, in discussing a similar situation in the evolution of narrative literature, writes that the date when the passage from the allegory to the novel, from the species to the individual, occurred was on "that day in 1382 when Geoffrey Chaucer . . . wished to translate a line from Boccaccio into English, 'E con fli occulti ferri i Tradimenti' ('And Treachery with hidden weapons'), and he said it like this: 'The smyler with the knyfe under the cloke.'" And in doing so he made the abstract, allegorical character, Tradimenti, into a picture invested with allegorical meaning.

The work of two Houston architects, Alan Hirschfield and Peter D. Waldman, in separate ways, operates in this space between allegory and the novel. Both make use of stories as a way of structuring the circumstances for their work: Waldman through constructed fables which he populates with his designs; Hirschfield through evocative early sketches which contain the conditions of a story. In terms of the distinction made by Borges, I think of Waldman's work as being more thoroughly allegorical in intent, more concerned with formal idealization, while Hirschfield seems to work through conceptual propositions which are

inherently messier and more complex, like those of a novelist. Both sometimes fall short on their agendas and in predictable ways. Particularly in Waldman's early work, the buildings are sometimes overly dependent on the text, more illustration than tectonics. And Hirschfield's buildings sometimes never quite emerge from their essential quirkiness, especially where an unevenness in execution obscures the distinction between what was intended and what was accidental. But these are perhaps the expected excesses of an emerging genre, one which is seeking a poetic alternative to current styles.



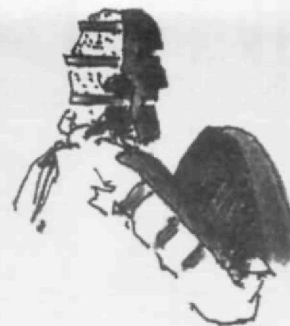
Alan Hirschfield Helmet House

Hirschfield's best buildings are also virtual landscapes in which mythical settings are brought into collision with the real and often constraining features of the site. In his Helmet House, located at 5215 Yoakum Boulevard near the Contemporary Arts Museum, the building is confined to a tight, infill site where a conventional townhouse solution might typically fill out, and consume, all possibilities of a "landscape." Although Hirschfield's earliest sketches for this project were founded on a Teutonic knight's helmet and armorial gear, the actual architectural pieces which comprise the house seem drawn from an idealized, story-book ensemble of building and site consisting of an enfronting wall and gate, a cubic base with long, ascending entry stairs, a breastplate tower and battlement, and, at the apex, a small house and chimney. The layers of space normally associated with these elements have been compressed and flattened in a way reminiscent of cubist painting, and it is significant that Hirschfield's initial sketches were primarily small elevation studies, drawings which could have been reconstituted spatially into more generous and more typical spatial layerings that might have included an entry court, a more robust tower, and deeper balconies. The overscaled pylons and gas lanterns which flank the front wall and entrance gate enhance the sense of perspective from the street by advancing the wall forward. A not-yet-in-place truss beam at the top of the first level will extend out to the adjacent property, pulling an existing house into a knight and vassal relationship. Enough of the martial characteristics of the initial sketch are maintained to make the house appear as a small castle, both menacing and friendly, like an illustration in a child's book.



The effect is saved from mannered picturesqueness by a genuine tectonic development in which the allegorical pieces are constructed in a variety of materials and colors - grey stucco for the gate and ramparts, black ceramic tile for the stairs and basement block, black and red metal siding for the breastplate and the loft house, and red-painted metal for the binding truss and super-scaled lanterns. The house displays Hirschfield's interest in an architecture of shaped and composed elements, reminiscent of a crustaceous exoskeleton where many jointed pieces comprise the hard shell around the visceral life inside.

In contrast to the vivid imagery of the front façade, the interior is more ambiguous, a study in sculpted drywall, creating a rather vague background for the main action unfolding along the central axis where a double tier of stairs connects the three levels. In plan the stairs split the house into two halves creating, on the ground level, a pair of undistinguished rooms, one too empty and anonymous, the other, containing a small bedroom and bath, too full with raised spa-tub, lavatory, shower, and a curvaceous nook for the toilet.



Clockwise from left: Central stair and loft space, Helmet House, 1985, Alan Hirschfield, architect; a warrior's face mask, source drawing for Helmet House; design sketch for Helmet House; front façade, Helmet House (Photos by Paul Hester, drawings by Alan Hirschfield)

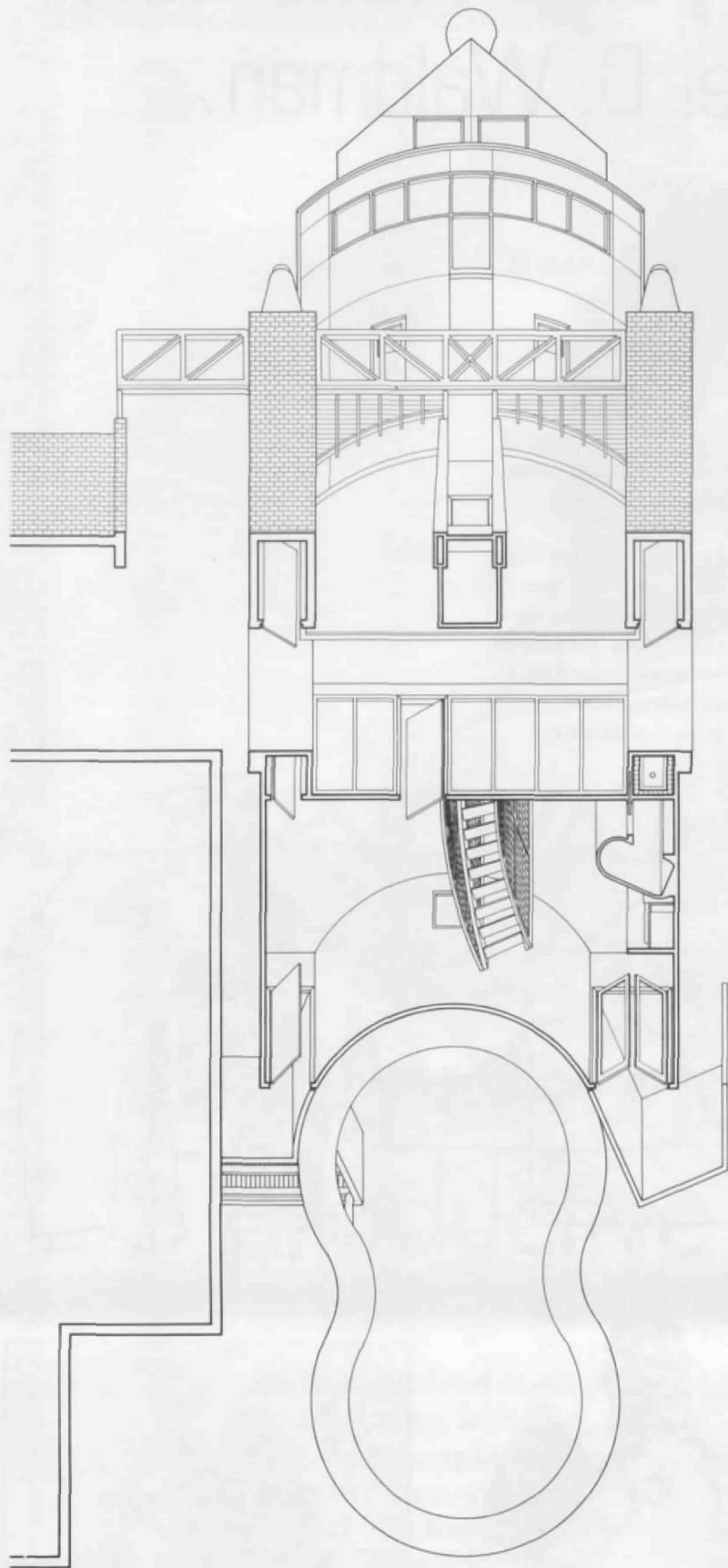


The second level, containing the public rooms, together with the third-level loft, are conceived as one space in which the sectional relationship between the stair and loft takes over from the plan creating a far more compelling ascending axis than that of the lateral movement into and between the dining and living spaces on the second floor. Service spaces have been relegated to the perimeter, creating the impression of two houses, the one a metaphorical watch tower with a long ascending stair, around which a second house of programmatic circumstance has been erected. The effect is enhanced by the materiality of the stair and its metal railing, which are treated as tectonic objects in the space, as well as by the idealization and clarification of the house concept in the loft, an aerie which commands a chimerical view onto the surrounding neighborhood below, one which is both voyeuristic and defensible - a child's "king of the mountain" promontory. On the backside, the loft shares views to the backyard trees with the living and dining rooms.

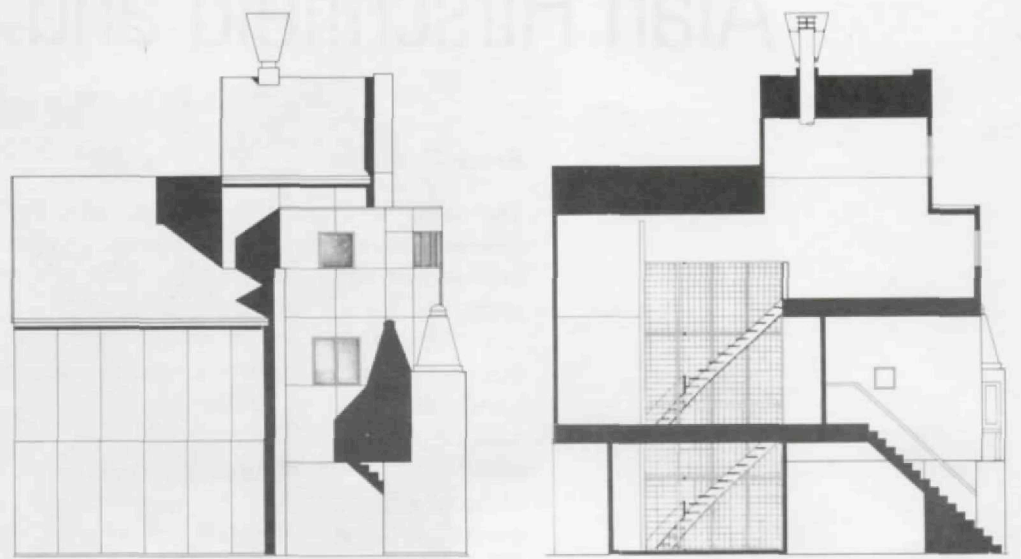
One wishes that the lower levels, particularly the base of the building, were as strongly defined conceptually as the loft

house, thus rendering a more complete interpretation of the promises made on the exterior. This conceptual inconsistency manifests an anomaly in this particular building type where the ground floor, having been bypassed by the entry stairs to the public level, is basement, although it frequently serves as the location for one or more of the primary sleeping spaces. The fable set forth on the front façade calls for a basement of magnificent austerity, one which deals with the rationale of resolved support, but the criteria of the program disallow this interpretation and treat the lower level like those above. Thus the basement lapses into a formalistic accommodation of circumstantial requirements, creating rooms which could be anywhere, on any level, disconnected from the house of fables - an equivocating partner for the loft house.

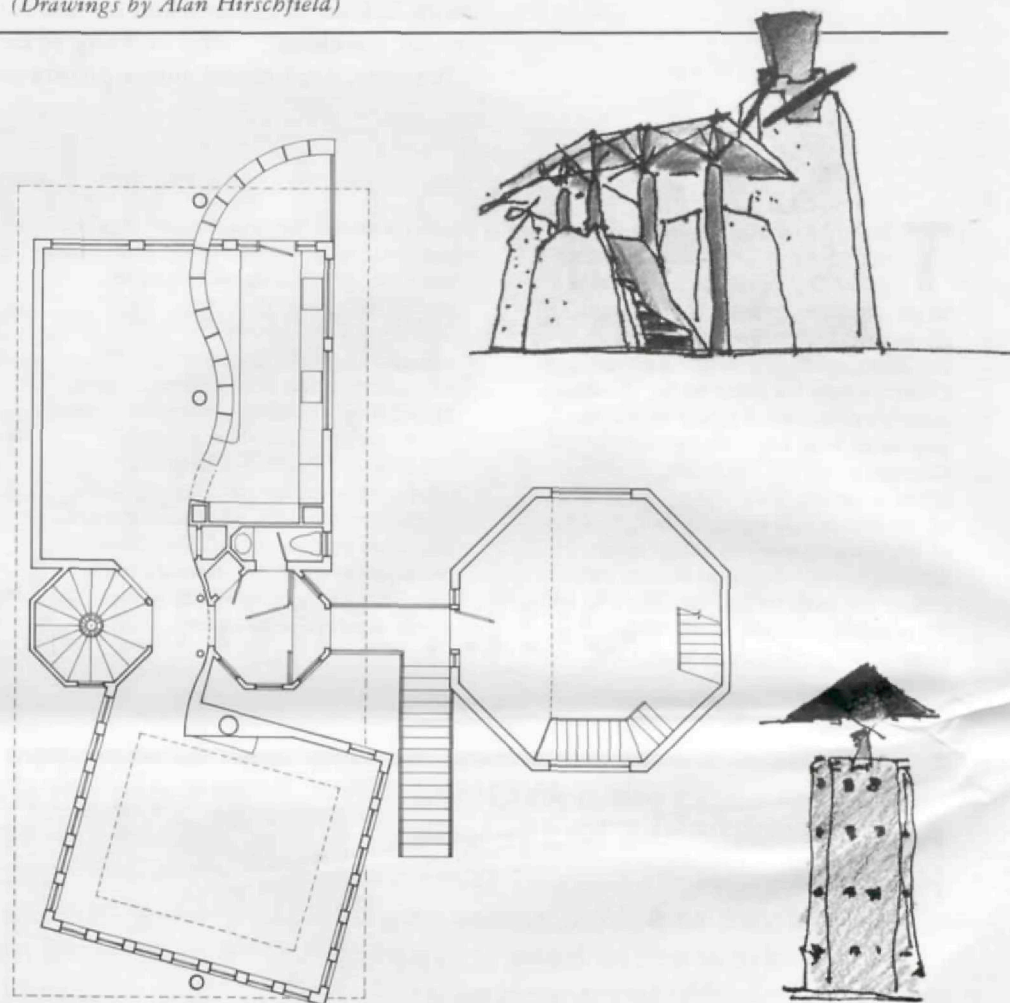
Hirschfield's current interest is in reductionism, leading not towards greater abstraction but towards an increased awareness of the essential features of the architectural elements forming the medium of the work. This frequently leads to the identification of a number of



West face up, projected drawing of Helmet House (Drawing by Alan Hirschfield)



Left: Side elevation, Helmet House, Right: Section, Helmet House (Drawings by Alan Hirschfield)



Preliminary design of a house for a musician and a collector, 1985, Alan Hirschfield, architect. Clockwise from top: Figurative sketch of tower and pole building; tower and canopy; first-floor plan (Drawings by Alan Hirschfield)

typological elements, many of them drawn from vernacular buildings, which are represented through simple, geometric shapes - cubes, pyramids, triangles, cylinders - in a manner reminiscent of a Cezanne painting where a sense of structure is latent in the shapes and their interrelationships. A parsing of the Helmet House, for example, reveals a compositional sub-structure made up of Platonic solids, architectural building blocks encased in an interpretative crust that aims to specify these shapes, treating them as characters rather than characteristics. The backside of the building is conceived in starker terms, creating a more purely compositional backdrop for the swimming pool and patio, which reinforces an interpretation of the front façade as a street masque.

In a later house, designed for a married couple in a Montrose neighborhood, Hirschfield begins with two simple, vernacular building forms, the pole building and the silo, which he transforms into a dialogue between two allegorical, architectural elements: a tower house and a wall house. The two elements satisfy and symbolize the respective needs of the couple: the tower as a sanctum for the husband who composes and plays electronic music; the wall house as a gallery for the wife, who collects paintings and jewelry and who has fond memories

of Norman towers from her childhood spent on an island off the south coast of England. Hirschfield conceives his building through figurative imaging. Drawing in a surreal, stream-of-consciousness fashion, he works in the space between programmatic requirements that are expressed mythically rather than quantitatively and the resonant memories of vernacular building shapes. Elements are made to appeal to both a literal and subliminal process of association, revealing a private world of memories brought to life. This project, which is still at a schematic stage, promises to evoke a more complete resolution of its story line in tectonic terms, allowing the parts to be realized more fully as construction than as shape.

Peter D. Waldman Hurricane House

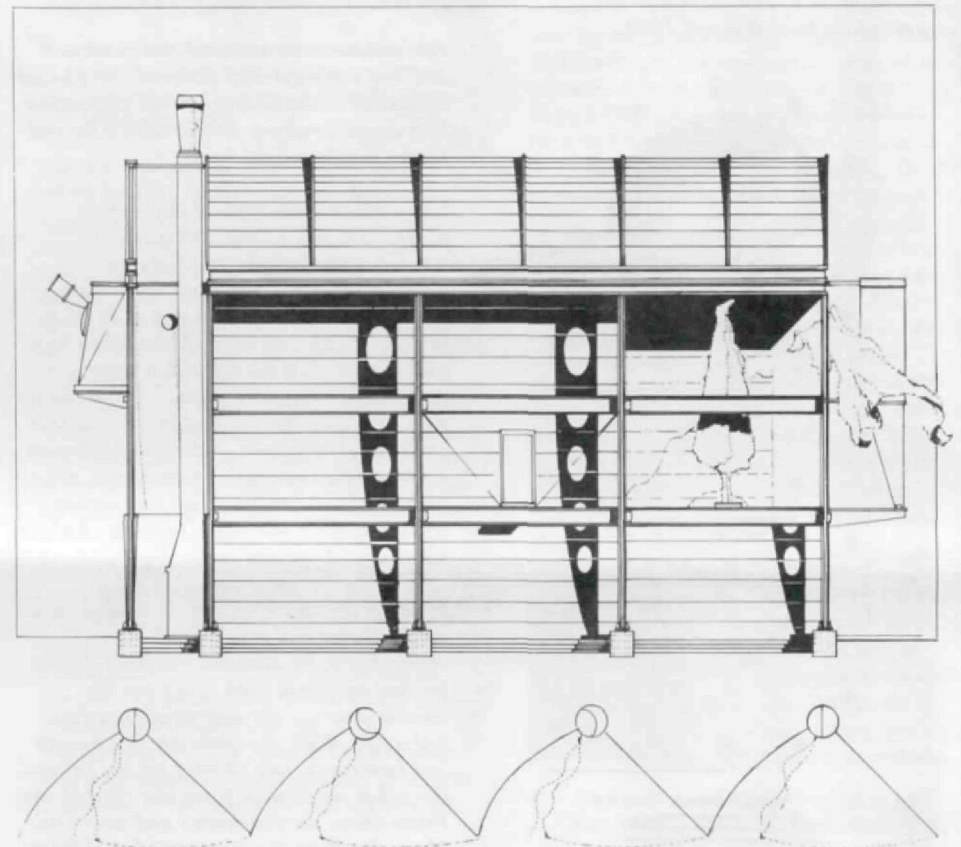
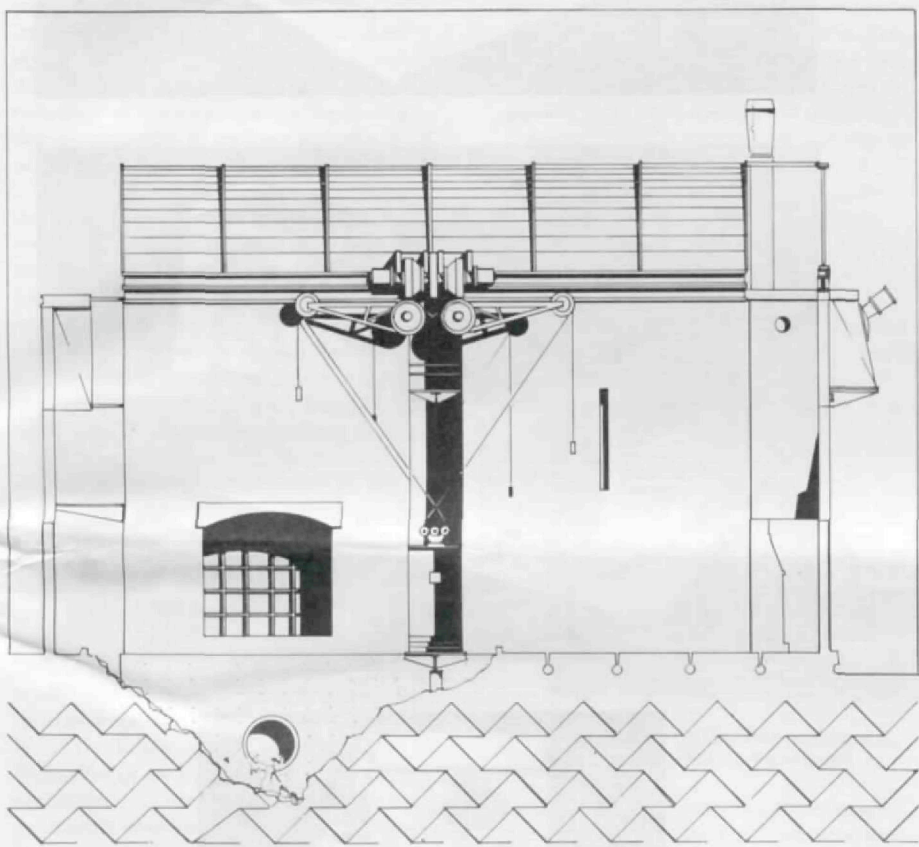
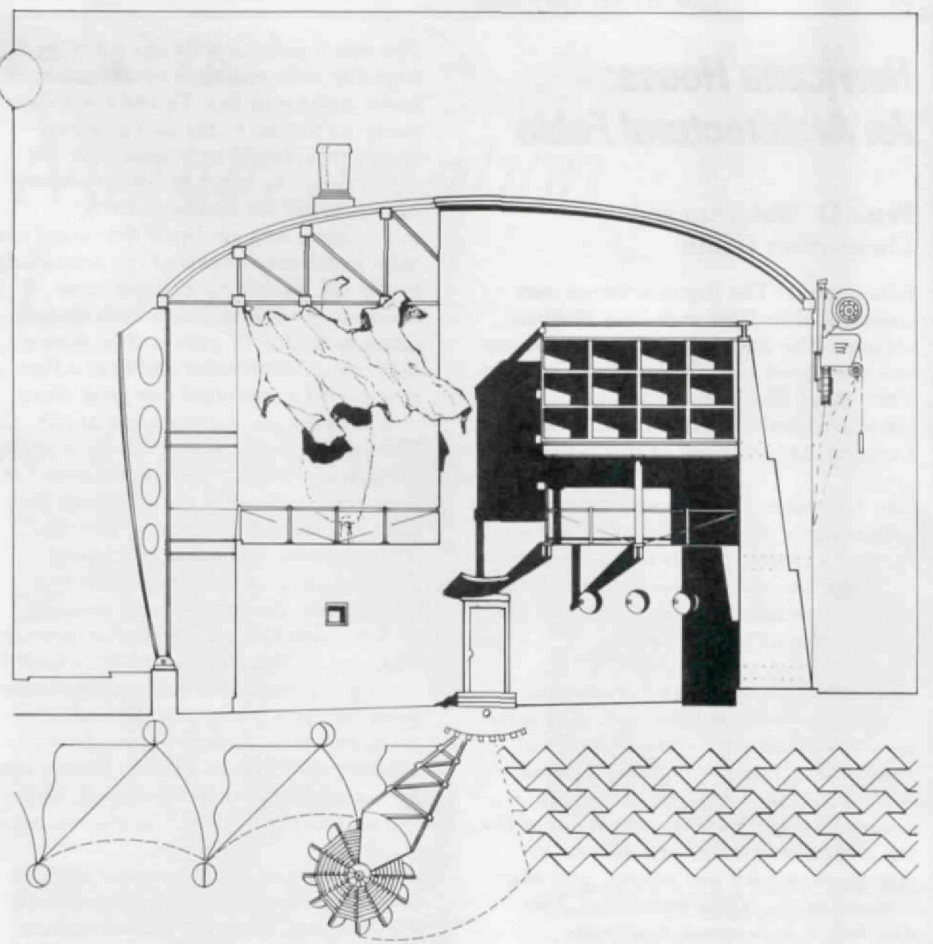
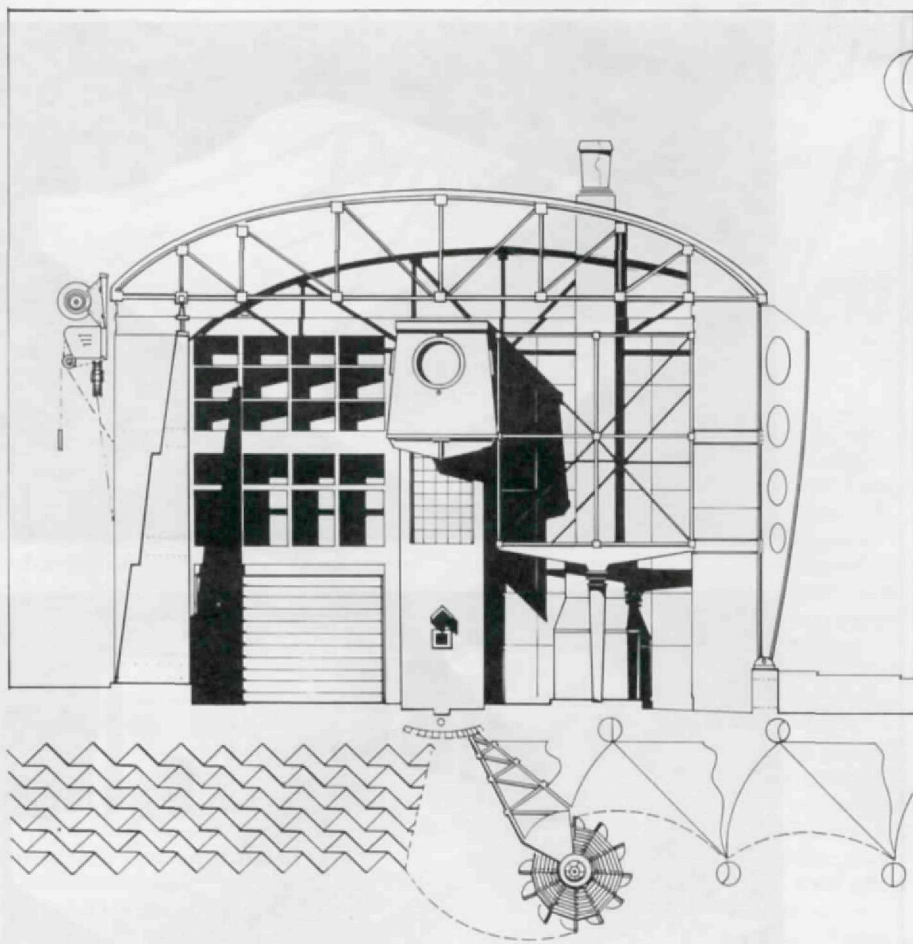
Peter D. Waldman's pedagogical projects, done with students at Rice University and at Princeton University where he formerly taught, frequently make use of certain constructed myths or fables as a way of getting into the architectural problem. One of his primer projects which is described more fully in the essay, "A Primer of Easy Pieces: Teaching Through Typological Narrative" (*Journal*

of Architectural Education, Winter 1982), begins with a serialized fable recounting the life and times of a mythical population on the island of Malta. Using the story as a "program," students were asked to elaborate a simple sheltering building in terms of elemental conditions of door, window, roof, attic, and basement. An architectural structure was given in the form of a *megaron*, a walled enclosure or *cella*, surrounded by a trabeated portico, recalling two fundamentally different forms of primitive shelters, the cave and the tent. In subsequent exercises, the mythical architecture is extended into the landscape through a consideration of the garden and street and the conditions of façade, porch, patio, and fence.

In his discussion of this project, Waldman makes frequent reference to archetypal fairy tales, as well as Dick and Jane primers, in developing a sense of his characters, who include "monks, musicians, mayors and maidens . . . characters who appear and reappear in the role of both the self-confident inhabitant as well as the self-conscious guest." The process portrayed in the exercises is one of space or building becoming *place* through the transformation of generic architectural elements into parts of, and settings for, the story. What is especially fascinating in

this work is Waldman's interest in an architectural idea unfolding over time, so that at any given moment in its evolution it is both a representation of events which have preceded as well as a precursor of what is to follow. Peter C. Papademetriou has written about Waldman's use of ritual movement in his design for the lobby spaces of the Alley Theater Center ("Mayer House and Alley Theater," *Ritual: The Princeton Journal*, 1983), where "sequence and passage become the glue which binds the juxtapositions into a narrative of experience." But the extension of the narrative idea to cover the process of incremental construction is unique and powerful, particularly in a society which is always changing, adding, and subtracting. In describing the two-year implementation schedule for his "Parasol House," a redevelopment of a tight suburban lot in Southgate near the Rice campus, into a "Palace in Paradise," Waldman proposes the following scenario:

1. Remove the freestanding garage-apartment and den addition to the house to clear out the south-facing garden for an exclusively introverted vision of paradise.
2. Construct perimeter walls around house and resultant patio and locate a pool in the spirit of the house as the major focus of the area.



Clockwise from upper left: East elevation, Hurricane House, Peter D. Waldman, architect, and Christopher Genik; west elevation; north elevation; south elevation

3. Place a parasol to provide shade from the high noon sun for this new Nymphaeum.
4. Beneath the parasol construct three cabanas: formal entry and master bedroom to the east, service entry to kitchen and children's bedroom to the west, living-dining rooms in the center, oriented to the north.
5. Demolish those redundant spaces remaining in the original house leaving one portion as a studio-guest-gate house.
6. Move into the house and walk to work.

Waldman began to make use of stories as a way to resolve conflicts in the programmatic criteria for his projects. Things which were in conflict in the disparate needs and desires described by his clients - the differing views of a house which came from a working husband and a housewife, for example - became essential ingredients. It was an attempt to make designs out of the real events of people's lives rather than the distorted sense which often results when conflict is suppressed in the programming stage. Things which would be denied to the formal logic of problem-solving (either-or) became the basis for a story. After a time, the stories became more allegorical in nature as such recurring themes as the peacable garden, the palace, the procession of entry, and the

idea of performance were used to recast the architectural problem in terms of fables.

In the design for Hurricane House (1985) on a bay-front site near Kemah, Waldman and Christopher Genik use a material dialectic to weave a story about a place in which to ride out a storm. The house as spatial object is a fragile, metal-ribbed, glass cube, geometrically precise and spare. A set of sheltering elements establish a protective context for the cube: a plinth which raises it above the damp and uneven ground, a heavy battered wall which shields it from winds and provides privacy from neighbors, and a hovering, canopy roof formed on bowstring trusses supported by triangular, metal columns. The foundation walls are genuine relics which once belonged to a plantation house washed away in a storm. The sheltering wall and the glass observatory space join together along the south wall where the thickness of the wall is used to house the water utilities.

Entry to the house is from the south by bridge across a storm gully, then under a Copernican gate whose mechanism of operation is visible, portraying a kind of mechanized ritual of entry. The heavy walls on the south contain two windows, one facing a view through the storm ravine, the other fixed on a line of live

oaks belonging to the old plantation road. Inside the wall one again is situated visually in the outdoors in a transparent space seized by the metal framework and decorated by the sky and sea - a room Waldman and Genik describe as a "lense for the sky." The metaphor is suggested by the client's interest in telescopes, and the interior provides numerous platforms or points-of-view for espousing the panoramic view.

The house is as tall as it is thin, throwing emphasis on the climb upward from the fireplace to the loft, and then from the loft to the "hammock," a retreat nestled at the top of the house which is hung from the trusses. The interior is treated as one large room in which a lightweight, scaffold-like system is used to support platforms at various levels. The sparseness and transparency of the living spaces emphasize the presence of the sheltering elements, and create an idealized point-of-view in a place between the earth and the stars.

Subsequent revisions to the original scheme resulted in a paring down of the program to half its original size. Waldman was able to use this reduction to emphasize further the independence of the sheltering from the sheltered elements: by maintaining the original size of the south wall and canopy while

shrinking the transparent cube, the roof is made to appear more generous, gathering outdoor spaces underneath in the unbuilt portion to the east. A stairway projecting into this zone, which formerly was internal, was wrapped in glass, creating a vertical passage which in a sense involves a trip out from, and back to, the house.

Waldman's designs are frequently discussed in terms of formalistic dualities, propositions which deflect attention from the true metaphorical nature of the work by recasting it in the language of logical criticism. In the case of Hurricane House, the sheltering wall is not the conceptual opposite of the glass cube except in formal terms. Metaphorically it is its companion: the wall makes the glass building possible. Thus the wall mass and the framed hollow are two sides of the same proposition, a construction perhaps denied to formal logic (either-or) but a demonstration of the true nature of metaphors as a union of regions of experience. By embodying complex circumstances of program and site, rather than willful, formalistic invention, in the work, Waldman makes visible a special condition of dwelling, one which is idealized as a place informed by fictions rather than a formal fiction.

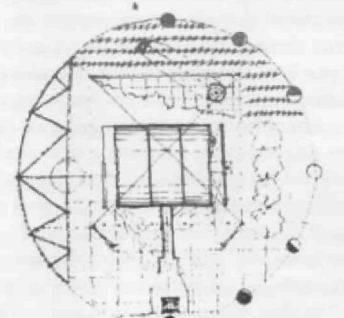
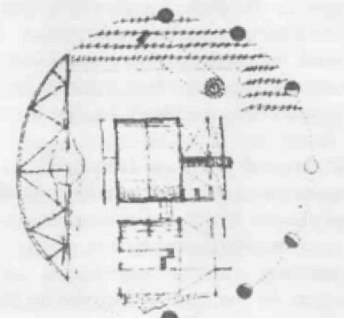
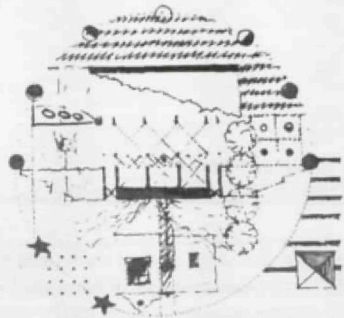
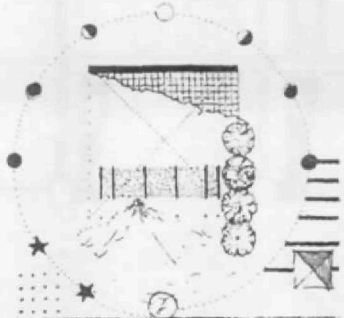
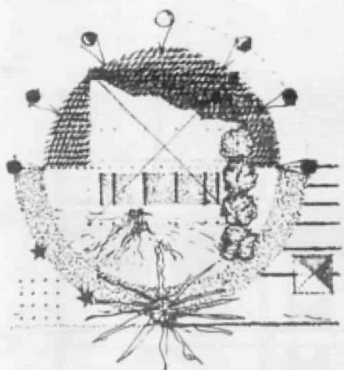
Hurricane House: An Architectural Fable

Peter D. Waldman and
Christopher Genik

Editor's note: The Bayview House was commenced in 1984 with Lucy Hubbard Holmes. The Hurricane House as allegory was developed with Christopher Genik in 1985. Peter Waldman wishes to acknowledge the collaboration of George Cunningham on behalf of this project.

The Hurricane House is an allegory of the geography of the imagination. It is the story of a spatial genesis in collaboration with the sun and the moon. It is the tale of the laborings of one gardener and the machination of one engineer.

Not so long, long ago, and indeed not very far, far away, a young geologist came upon the fabled plantation of Bayview. Descending from the highway onto an ancient oak-lined road, he saw in the distance the sky making a room out of the sea. At the junction of sky and sea, a jagged green lawn was scarred with the remains of the fabled plantation. This dwelling, it is rumored, had been destroyed and rebuilt repeatedly during the late 19th century and finally was washed from its foundation in the tremendous tidal wave of 1903.



Illustrations above: Figurative drawings showing the sequential development of the Hurricane House in a cosmological landscape (Drawings by Peter D. Waldman)

The side is concealed on the north by huge live oaks and open to the south facing Galveston Bay. To the south lives a young astronaut, to the east a retired mason: one neighbor to anticipate the mapping of the skies; the other already had spent his life building strong walls. Our young geologist first asked the elder gentleman to extend the jagged edge by the sea, building a straight stone breakwater to redefine the building lot into a neat 100'-0" square. The mason came out of retirement and over a two-year period constructed one good stone wall to resist the deterioration of the sea. The geologist who had spent his energies with success sorting the earth's crust for its secrets then asked the astronaut to help him learn the secrets of the sky. The astronaut instructed this young Prometheus in the making of an observatory. First the ground must be perfectly levelled and marked to measure time and distance. A wall must be built to the south to hide this nocturnal operation from the ever-spying sun. Several platforms must be built from which to measure the horizon. Finally, frames must be constructed to map the ceiling, walls, and undulating floor of this sky-seascape.

At the terminus of this ancient allée, where the sea meets sky, two neighbors and their new geologist friend dedicate themselves to a common landscape to observe the stars and to take refuge from the sea.

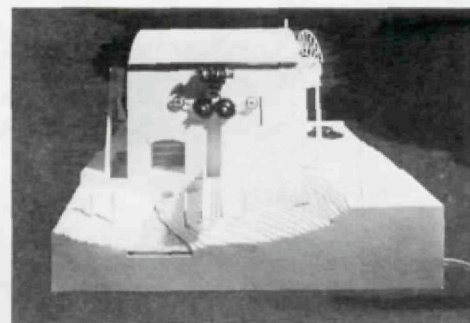
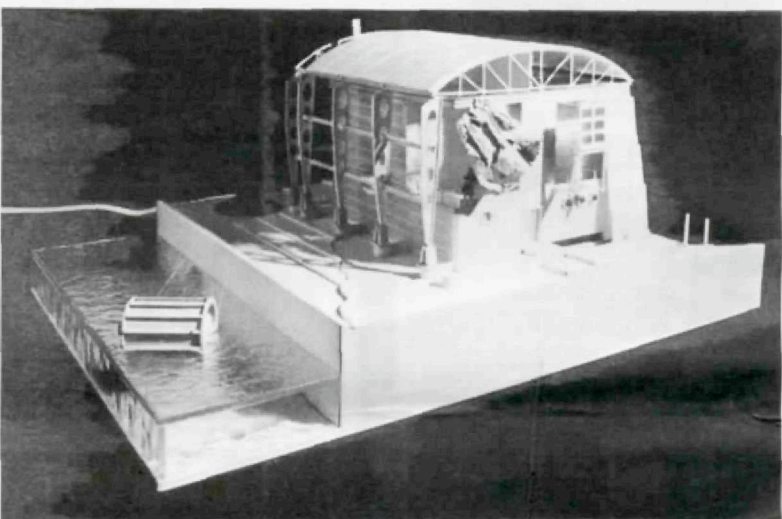
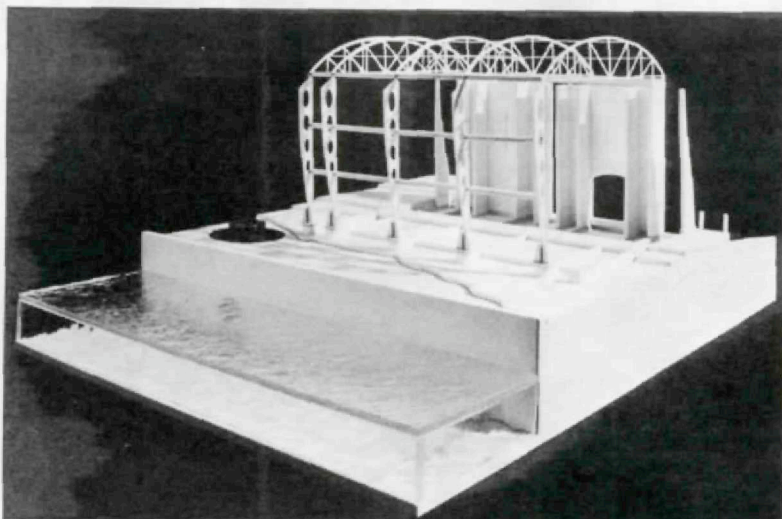
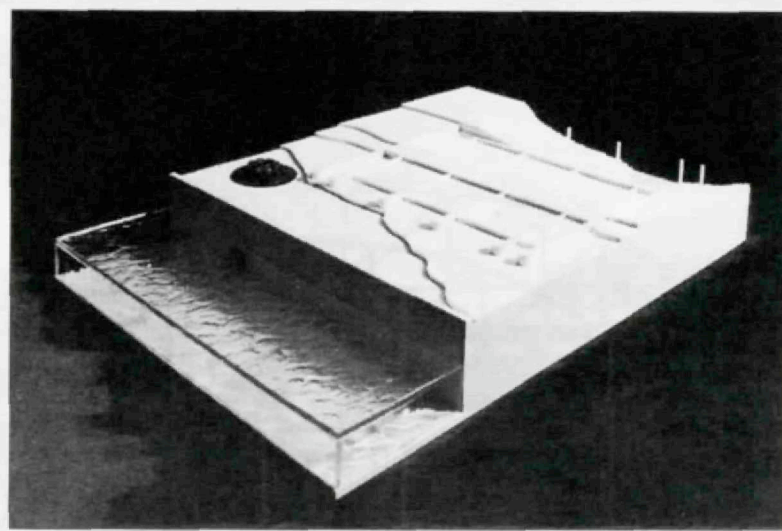
For architects he enlisted one gardener and one engineer and planned the phased evolution of the reconstructed plantation into an observatory within which he and future family would dwell.

Upon the foundations of this very plantation, this young Prometheus labored with his gardener and ancient neighbor to raise one stout wall against the spying southern sun, and ever more jealous young neighbor. Then when light and shadow had been fixed, a crane was imported to raise six framed pylons in six days to frame the sea and sky. Upon this primordial structure, something between a cave and a tent, this Prometheus, now turned Icarus, projected six bow-string trusses against the sky. They cast shadows upon sandstone and turf.

Beneath this mapping of sky and ground, young Icarus had established his observatory; he occupies one half of this modest megaron with space for his ancient microscope and newly acquired telescope. With the addition of a hearth and hammock, one resting on the ground, the other suspended from the trussed sky, Prometheus-turned-Icarus and new bride, Herz, dwell on the western edge of Eden. To the east extends a porch on a plinth, a court and a garden, and a stairway that leads them through the diurnal routines and nocturnal rituals of dwelling in an observatory.

With the passing of storms and the more frequent rising of mirrored moons, Cupid, followed rapidly by Mercury and Andromache, will come to dwell in this first half house suspended without gravity and measuring several horizons. The house then will be expanded into the porch, outdoor terraces become indoor rooms, and then this once fragile observatory becomes fortified for the introverted aspirations of a familial Hurricane House. Generations pass and the cycle comes full circle; one day another generation's geologist will discover the tentative secrets that observatories yield to young men by the sea with the help of a gardener and an engineer.

In the chaos of the storm, this Texas coast was born, and in the same chaos the hurricane routinely reduces the land and renews the task. Every generation from the beginning of time has built again and again an observatory in the face of the hurricane. To build well is indeed the only distinction between the hut and the palace. The work of gardeners and engineers as of late seem to be more palatially stable than the laborings of this generation of self-indulgent architects.



Sequential models of the Hurricane House viewed from the southwest showing, top to bottom, site regularization; construction of wall and frame, and completed house; south elevation showing Copernican entry gate, Hurricane House (Photos by Paul Hester)

Postscript

Postmodernism is intensely concerned with the problem of discovering a referential system upon which to base a theory of architectural form. Most Postmodern architecture is imbued with a certain systematic and formal logic which readily can be decoded, often through analogical references to structuralist propositions borrowed, for example, from linguistics, music, geometry, or painting, or in terms of other, formal architectural propositions and conventions. Jonathan Holden has written about this situation in poetry, where poets who were deprived by the modernist revolution of any sure sense of what poetic form should be, have turned to such non-literary analogies as conversation, confession, or dreams as substitutes for the lost "fixed forms." "Postmodern poetry," he concludes, "is analogical poetry with a vengeance." But where these analogies usually can be absorbed in the poem, in architecture they frequently transform the abstract properties of the medium into the primary contents of the work. In aspiring

to become idealized abstractions, architecture frequently ends up consuming its own materiality - becoming in the end pure proposition - just as the allegorical hero consumes his humanness.

Hirschfield and Waldman, along with several other Houston architects, have been working through this Postmodern dilemma by creating a more complex and personal frame of reference for their work. In their pursuit of characters and situations rather than compositional determinism, they seem guided by the same idea that Umberto Eco claims as his reason for writing *The Name of the Rose*: "What we cannot theorize about we must narrate about." To do this at all in architecture requires a poetic imagination such as these projects demonstrate, an ability to see the allegorical possibilities in the problem: the site as landscape, the program as episodes and situations, the inhabitants as characters, and the architecture as a compilation of their story. ■