

BUILDING MEANING ANALYSIS

Diagramming Information
for Architectural Design

EDWARD T. WHITE



ArchiBasics Press

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Building Meaning Analysis: Diagramming Information for Architectural Design

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Relation of building image analysis to
semiotics

The myth of objectivity and
environmental control

The ethics of behavioral manipulation
of building occupants

Relation of this book to *Site Analysis*
and *Space Adjacency Analysis*

Author's Preface to the First Edition

As this book nears completion and approaches first printing there are some personal reflections that I want to express as a prologue to the body of the work. These thoughts form a context for understanding the book's content and the pedagogical landscape in which it is situated. My observations all relate to the paradoxical nature of instruction and the dualities that seem characteristic of teaching and learning processes.

- The purpose of the book is to instruct, but in order to instruct it must mislead. The more effectively it instructs the more seriously it misleads. Instruction by its very nature is forced to invent artificial constructs out of the swirl of life in order to make sense and to enable information to be transferred from one mind to another. In the same way that the menu is not the meal and the map is not the terrain, the instruction is never the lived experience. Even finely described instruction can only hope to be a metaphor for the actual activity of designing environments.
- The book reflects my belief that teaching translates instincts into learnable recipes and that learning translates the recipes back into instincts. The teacher searches for ways to effectively convert wisdom, sensibility and passion into language and form that are ap-

proachable, discussible and absorbable with the hope that, once taken in by the student, the recipes will convert back into full intensity passion, sensibility and wisdom. This conversion of recipe to instinct should be tempered and modified by the internal intellectual, emotional and spiritual life of each individual student so that these ways of being become highly personalized and intimately owned. The paradox here is that the desired currency of exchange in the teaching-learning transaction is instinct but the medium of transfer is language.

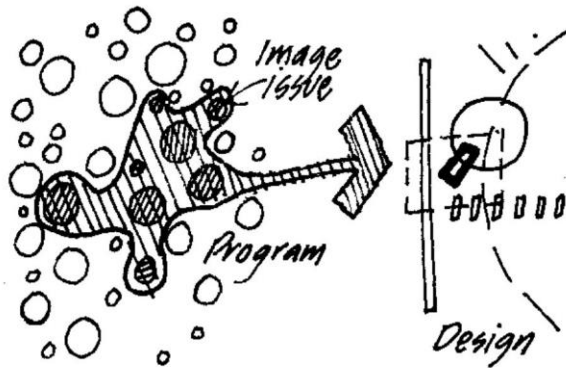
- Although the goal of most designers is to cultivate a holistic design approach that simultaneously considers all project issues while directing consciousness to the decision at hand, design discourse and instruction must segment particular routines out of the simultaneity and holism in order to talk about the process. Discussions about design activity tend to be reductionist, objectivist and positivist; all positions that are fundamentally counter to the messy, instantaneous webwork of intimately personal mental activity that really occurs during the act of designing.
- Because the book concentrates on one kind of programmatic requirement, that is, building image or message, there is an implication that good design is only a matter of meeting the program's mandate and that program - based issues are sufficient to elevate shelter to Architecture. This inferred value position holds that theoretical agendas brought to the project by the designer are superfluous and may even be detrimental to the responsible satisfaction of program requirements. Theory can cause

the answer to programmatic questions to be compromised since theory is presumably competing with program as a form generator. My belief is that theory offers an architectural language and disposition to creating form that provides a way for the program to be accommodated. The program requirements are met in terms of theory in the same way that a political manifesto might be embodied in a speech, a play, a novel, or a newspaper article. The theory serves as a vehicle for satisfying program needs so that the designer's process works not just to the program but through the program to the theory beyond the program. Program is satisfied on the way to or within the intention of a more lofty, poetic and inspired vision. Rather than a competitive relationship between theory and program, there is a symbiotic one in that the program needs the theory to generate a form that will satisfy it, and the theory needs the program to give it an opportunity to move out of the world of pure idea and into the world of built form.

INTRODUCTION

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This book will explore and explain the design tool of building image analysis. The book is intended as a desk reference, and like the two previous books in this series, *Site Analysis* and *Space Adjacency Analysis*, provides a way to pay special attention to a particular type of design issue, in this case the issue of building image or environmental message. As pointed out in the two previous books, tools such as building image analysis can help us to responsibly handle large amounts of design information in a more systematic way, to communicate better with our clients about the nature of the design problem to be solved and the reasons for design decisions, and to become more efficient and effective in our design processes.



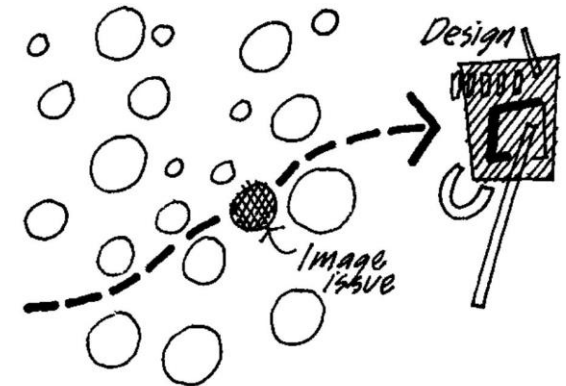
*Building image analysis focuses on the **design** implications of meaning and message requirements.*

What Is Building Image Analysis?

Image analysis is a tool that can assist us in becoming better informed about the image requirements of a building design project and about the architectural design ideas that may satisfy those requirements. Image analysis helps us to answer questions about the design of a new environment such as:

- What messages should be conveyed to building occupants by the new facility? Should the building be welcoming? Exclusive? Subdued? Aggressive?
- What building ambience or atmosphere does our client want to create? Should the ambience be residential? Professional? Elegant? Informal?
- What feelings, attitudes or moods should the facility evoke for the building occupants? Should the occupants feel oriented? Relaxed? Intimidated? Safe? Excited?
- What environmental or visual themes are suggested by our client's operation that will be housed in the new facility? Should the visual theme be young? Contemporary? Southwestern? New England? Oriental?
- How can messages, ambience, atmosphere, feelings and themes be effectively communicated by architecture? How can we convey these things through building form? Fenestration? Landscaping? Lighting? Furniture? Color?

- How can we plan environments in a way that increases the likelihood that intended environmental messages are, in fact, read correctly by building occupants? How can we ensure consistency among the various visual clues in the new facility so that they all communicate and reinforce the same messages?
- How can we avoid inadvertent or inappropriate environmental messages? What tools are available to us for dealing directly with the image issues of the design project?



*Image analysis helps us to be more **deliberate** and **purposeful** in designing for **image** issues.*

The Image-Driven Project

The environmental messages of any building project are important and of concern to us as designers. There are some kinds of facilities, however, where image seems to be a particularly crucial factor in the successful design of the building. These are image-driven projects where we must pay particular attention to visual clues in the building design that establish mood and ambience, determine visual themes and convey messages to building occupants.

Although each individual project has its own unique context, requirements and set of design issues to be addressed, certain kinds of buildings seem always to involve important image considerations. Some examples are:

- Government buildings
- Churches
- Banks
- Libraries
- Theme parks
- Theme housing
- Exclusive retail buildings
- Mortuaries
- Child day-care centers
- Corporate headquarters
- Offices of design professionals

For these kinds of projects, the way the building looks has a major impact on whether the client's operation succeeds or not. Each of these types of buildings must communicate appropriate messages to employees and customers who use the facility in order to establish a frame of mind, a sense of self-worth, a feeling of pride and dignity or an understanding about what the building owners stand for.

A city hall should convey community pride and welcome participation in the government process.

A church should reflect the beliefs of the congregation and promote the activity of worship.

Banks must convey the message of security balanced with invitation and convenience.

The library may communicate concepts of quiet learning, assistance to patrons and easy access to resources.

The 1890's theme park must communicate both festive recreation and safety and clearly establish the historic mood of the entire complex.

A Spanish territorial high-priced condominium clearly should be top quality and luxurious and should strongly convey the Latin ambience.

In addition to its menu, the Mexican restaurant must be concerned about visual clues that establish the South-of-the-border atmosphere.

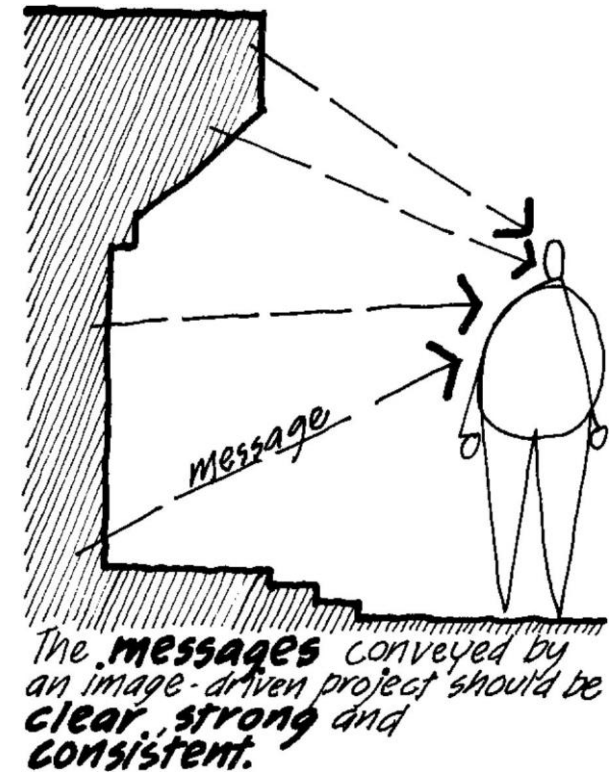
An upscale clothing store, jeweler or car dealership should be elegant, high quality and tasteful.

A mortuary must convey dignity and caring as well as many of the environmental messages of a church.

Day-care centers must communicate an image of safety and care to parents and fun, adventure and recreation to children.

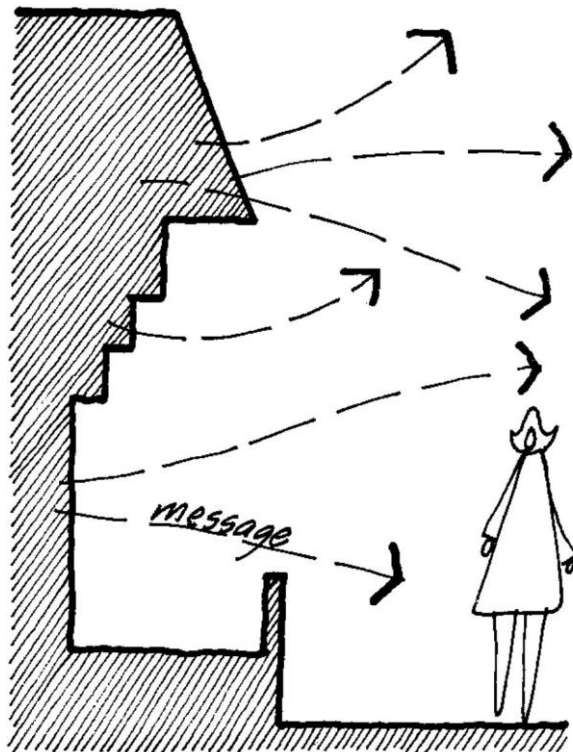
Corporate headquarters should reinforce the worth and value of the employees while expressing the company's philosophy to the public.

The office of a design firm must convey the company's commitment to attention to detail, to producing quality environments and to an attitude about architectural form and respect for context.



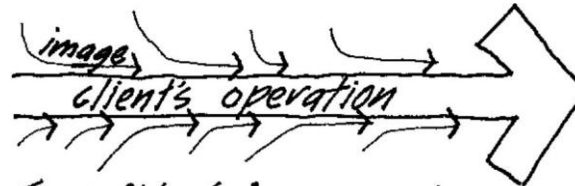
Messages of the image-driven building must be read correctly by the majority of its occupants and so visual clues used to communicate those mes-

sages cannot be subtle. The clues must be strong, clear and numerous and must reinforce one another. They should all be “saying” the same thing, not different or conflicting things. It defeats the purpose of achieving image goals if the roof profile, fenestration, landscaping and lighting all communicate the intended “residential” message, but the furniture, color, materials and spatial scale say “corporate professional.”



Inattention to image considerations in design risks inadvertent messages being conveyed by the built facility.

It is important to remember that our buildings convey their messages whether we address image as a design determinant or not. If we ignore image as a project performance issue and simply “let it happen”, we risk having the building communicate inappropriate, even damaging messages that may jeopardize the success of our client’s operation.



The building's images and messages should contribute to the success of the client's operation.

Our goal in design is to have the building’s symbolism actually contribute in strong positive ways to activities housed in the building. Whether key activities in the facility involve learning, selling, performing, working, manufacturing, managing, viewing exhibits or playing, appropriate environmental messages for the building should be identified. Then, the most effective visual clues for communicating those messages should be deliberately and carefully integrated into the design. Ideally, these visual clues come from building components that are intrinsic and necessary to the building’s design and are not additive or cosmetic. As we make design decisions to establish the building’s visual character, we must take care to not create visual clues that contradict or neutralize our intended messages but, rather, continue to reinforce what we want the building to say with every visual clue in the scheme. Where visual clues

cannot support and reinforce intended messages, they should at least be neutral; that is, not damaging to what we are trying to achieve with the building’s image.

Image Locales, Audiences, and Timing

When considering the issue of building image in design, we may, at first, assume that messages to be communicated apply to the whole building, to everyone who occupies it or sees it and to all time periods over a day, week, month and year. We also may assume that the facility need only convey one primary message. All of these assumptions are wrong.

If we carefully consider all available aspects of the building with which we may establish ambience, mood and message, think about the various building occupants and messages that each of them should read in the building, then give some attention to how the client's operation, the building occupants and the appropriate messages may vary over time, we realize that image goals often are plural and complex rather than singular and simple.

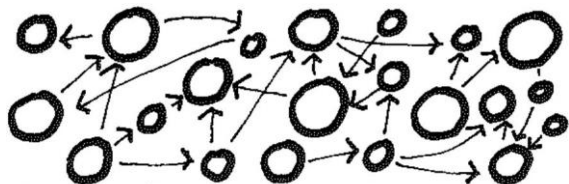
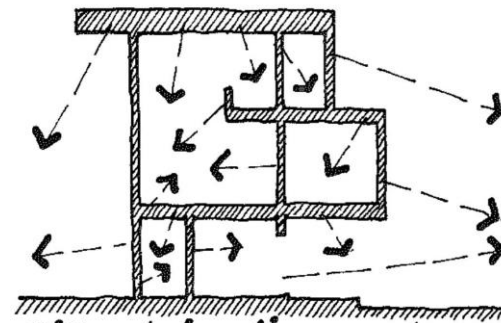


Image issues in projects are often multiple, intricate and complicated.

In terms of where, in the building, particular images might occur, there may be projects in which:

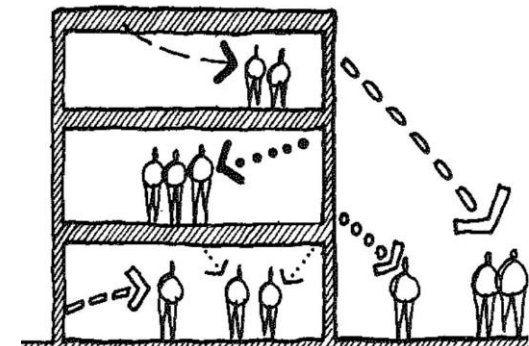
- The interior of the building needs to express different things than the exterior.
- Each facade of the facility should convey a different message.
- The roof must communicate a different message than the facade because the building is seen from above.
- Various departments or zones within the building must convey different messages or establish different moods.
- Individual spaces in the facility should communicate a different theme.
- Different areas within the same space must establish their own environmental messages.
- Various surfaces of a single space have to communicate different things.



Different locations and components in the building may need to convey different messages.

In a given project, the *types of building occupants* to whom we might want to communicate messages through environmental clues may include:

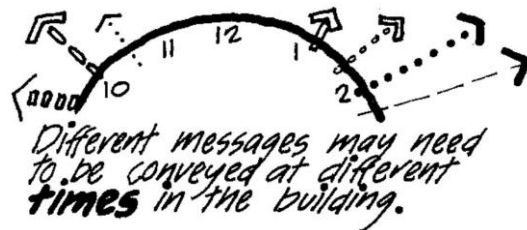
- All those who live or work in the building.
- All those who do not live or work in the building but who live near it or pass by it.
- Particular groups or individuals who live or work in the building.
- Particular groups or individuals who live near or pass by the building.
- All those who visit the building on a temporary basis.
- Particular groups or individuals who visit the building on a temporary basis.
- Those who own, manage or maintain the building.
- Absentee owners



Different building occupants may need to read different messages in the facility.

When we add the factor of *time* to image locale and audience, we realize that:

- For some image audiences, we have multiple occasions to convey messages while for others we have only one occasion.
- The occasions in which we have opportunities to communicate environmental messages to audiences may vary in duration from long exposures to short exposures.
- Different environmental messages may be appropriate depending on the time of day/night, week/weekend, month, season or year.
- Certain environmental clues may become dated over time and eventually lose their original meanings or shift to other meanings.
- Different image locales may be important at different times.
- The same image locale may need to convey different meanings at different times.
- There may be particular occasions when special environmental clues must establish a particular building ambience.



Inadvertent Symbolism

In designing a building, images that we create and messages that those images convey often are by-products of decisions that actually were directed at satisfying other project requirements. In these situations, the way the building looks – that is, its form, massing, roof profile, solid-void relationships, sculptural complexity, scale, etc. – actually is a result of design attention paid to other kinds of project concerns such as function, site, budget, energy, codes and technology. Here, because we don't actually *design* the building's image and the messages it conveys, visual characteristics of the facility largely are accidental, inadvertent and unintentional. Resulting inadvertent symbolism in the facility risks the communication of inappropriate messages to building occupants. Often, these inappropriate messages actually undermine the success of the client's operation by surrounding those activities with the wrong visual signals. When inappropriate signals are communicated to employees and customers, problems may arise that affect the client's operational efficiency, productivity and quality of product or service.

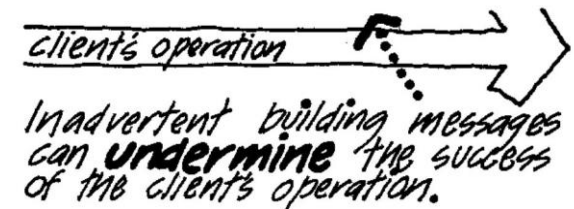
If a college restaurant wants to be a comfortable hang out in which students relax and spend time (and money), but the building's visual clues say that it is a cold, efficient profit center, then the building's image becomes a liability to the operation's success.

If a university conference center desires to attract meetings of organizations outside the school but ambience in the facility is institutional, hard, low maintenance and stingy, then the building itself works against the goals of the organization.

When a governmental office should invite, welcome and promote citizen participation in civic affairs but, instead, intimidates, demeans and confuses its visitors, then the building frustrates the intentions of the government it houses.

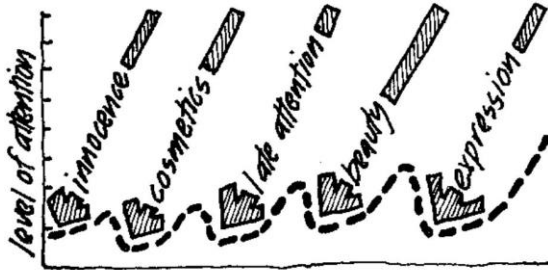
In response to extensive marketing studies, a client may intend that his new condominium complex communicates a Mediterranean theme and ambience to attract a particular type of buyer, but inadvertent visual clues in the scheme shift the mood to an oriental flavor.

These are examples of projects where the building's appearance has an important impact on the client's success. We have seen advertisements on television and in print that apparently are meant to impart an impression about a product but actually leave us with the opposite impression. They serve to diminish attractiveness of the product rather than enhance it. There are similar lessons to be learned for building design.



Some Causes of Inadvertent Symbolism

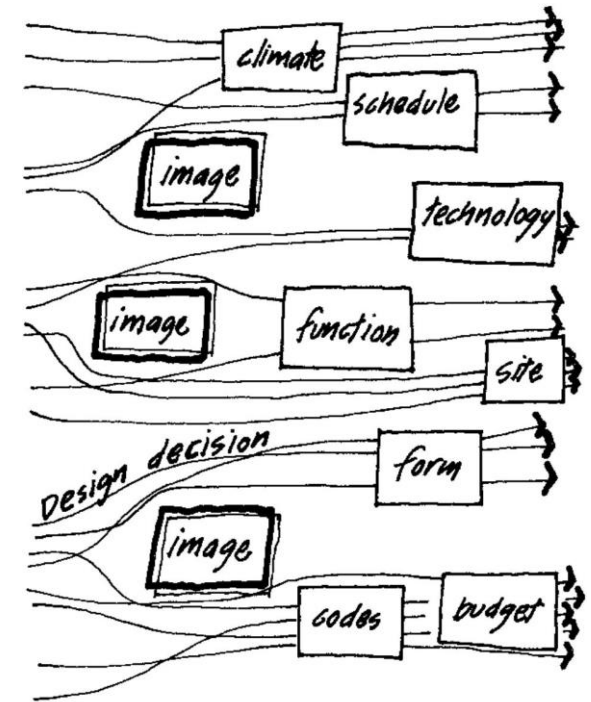
Here are five reasons why we often do not pay enough attention to image requirements when planning new facilities and why we often communicate inadvertent messages with our designed environments.



Five factors can diminish the level of our design attention to image issues.

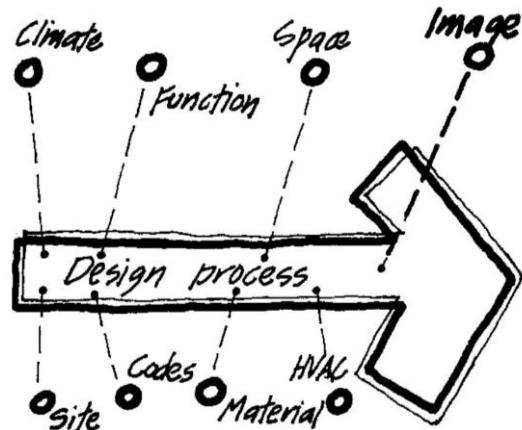
Image innocence. Many of us believe that the image or appearance of the new facility automatically is successful if it is a true, honest, and faithful expression of solutions to other (non-image-related) project requirements. If we solve undeniable project issues such as function, site, climate, energy, budget and technology, then the resulting building form and other visual qualities in the facility will, by definition, be appropriate. This attitude values creation of an “innocent” building image in the sense that the image is produced unselfconsciously and with no premeditation; it evolves as the appearance of an airplane evolves, from design attention actually directed at uncompromising and non-negotiable (non-image-related) project requirements and constraints. An airplane looks the way it does because of the unforgiving laws of aerodynamics and its beauty derives from the designer’s creative and masterful obedience to those laws, not because of any direct attention to the airplane’s appearance. To be preoccupied with image, appearance and message is to jeopardize the success of the airplane or the building in other areas of performance that are crucial to project success.

Image as cosmetics. For some designers, paying direct attention to the building’s image and, therefore, permitting image to become a primary form-giver is shallow and self-conscious and beneath their dignity as makers of human environments. Image in their view, is something that takes care of itself in the process of planning the facility and any effort to “dress up” the building to look a certain way is a waste of their time and the client’s money.



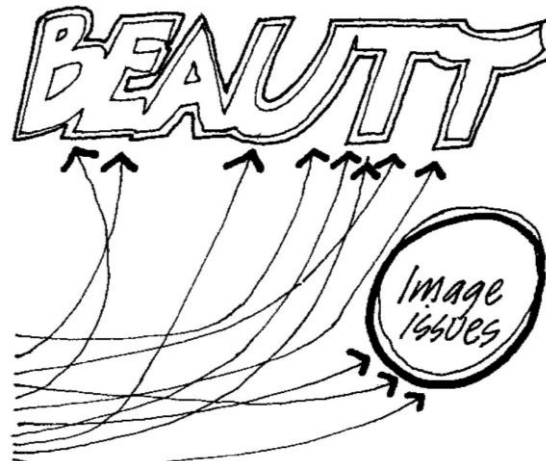
We may avoid direct attention to image because we believe that image issues are essentially cosmetic in nature.

Late attention to image. For those of us who do believe that the building's image is important, it often is not until very late in the design decision process that we finally get around to thinking about environmental appearances and messages. By then, most of the important visual characteristics of the facility already have been determined by our design responses to other project factors, leaving very little maneuvering room to incorporate major image-driven features into the building design. This late attention to image usually ensures that any design gestures toward appearance and message are subordinated to other features of the scheme and, thus, relatively cosmetic and ineffectual.



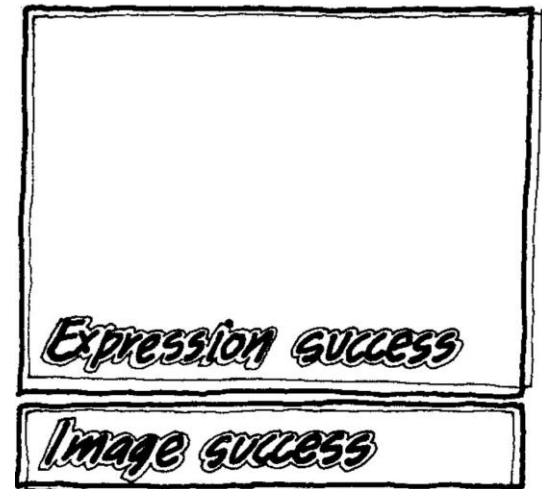
We may address image issues too late in the design process to allow them to have any major influence on the building form.

Image as beauty and composition. As students in design studio and later as practitioners, we tend to define visual success of our building design in terms of abstract rules of composition. As we manage our designs to conform to these rules, we are concerned with issues such as mass, balance, rhythm, tension, graceful connections, plane, point, line, proportion and movement. We manipulate components and visual qualities of our building to impart appropriate characteristics in each of these compositional categories. Visual success of the building's image is thus measured by these rules of beauty rather than by the impact of the environmental messages on building occupants.

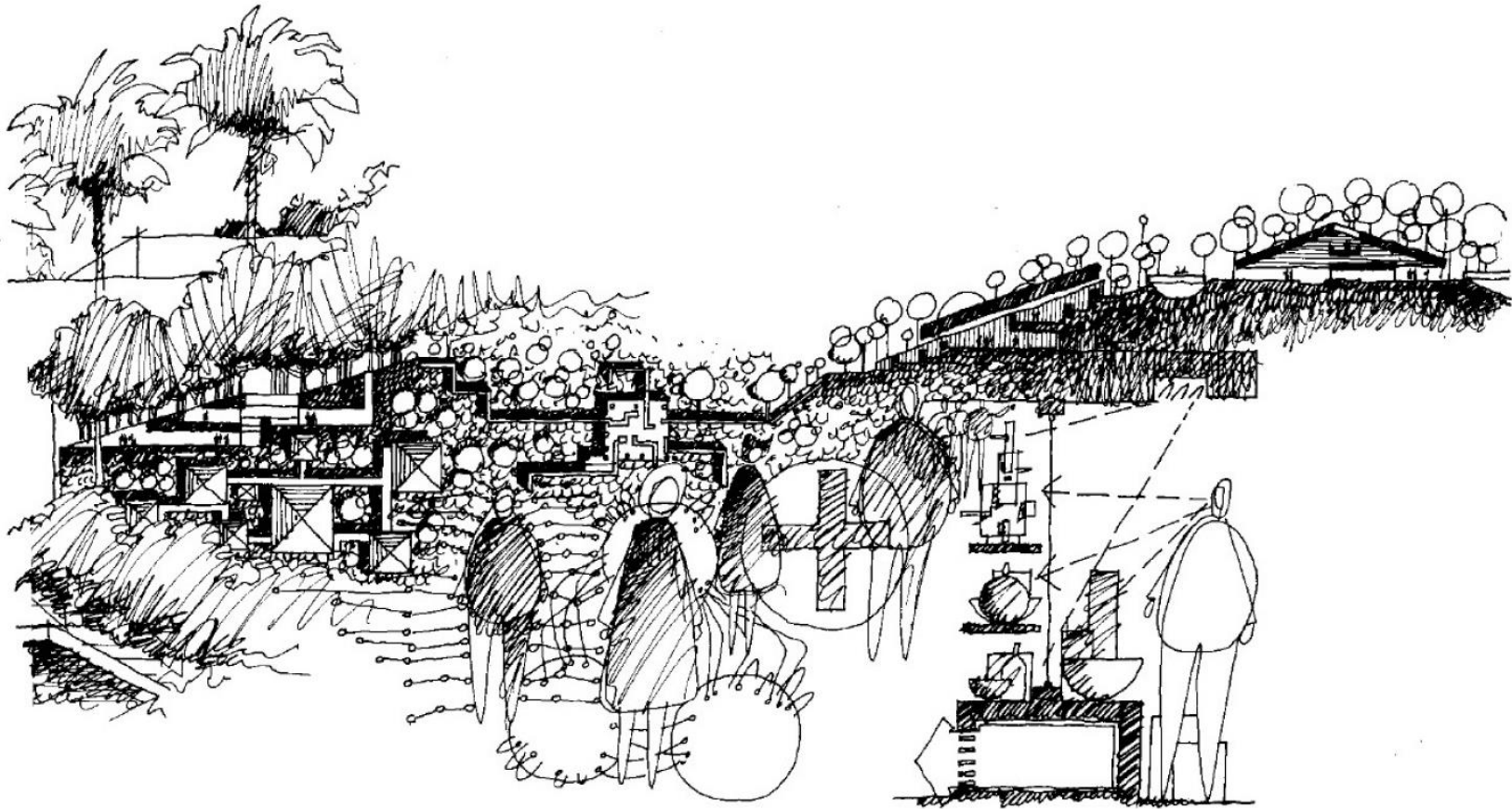


A preoccupation with beauty alone can divert design attention away from image issues.

Image as expression and emphasis. Our attention to visual success of the building design may take the form of expressing or emphasizing certain building components, spaces or housed functions. Clear articulation of particular aspects of the scheme (entry, stair, roof) or exaggeration of certain visual characteristics or qualities becomes our method of creating an appropriate image for the new facility. Here, we consider the design to be successful if the expressed elements truly read in the scheme. This is a very different agenda than planning the building to communicate appropriate environmental messages.



The image success of the building may be diminished by investing most of our design attention to the expression of function.



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