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Fall 2000

## Consuming Identity: Producing New Americans

Richard Nisa

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**Consuming Identity: Producing New Americans**

A Structure for the Americanization League of Midtown Manhattan

An Architectural Thesis Investigation by Richard Nisa  
Fall 1999

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## Consuming Identity: Producing New Americans

A Structure for the Americanization League of Midtown Manhattan

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"The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time and the determined inhabitants of space."

- Michel Foucault

The thesis will be an intervention on the property of the Seagram Building designed by Mies van der Rohe completed in 1958. It will consist of several programmatic elements organized around the situations that an immigrant or refugee goes through in order to become an "integrated American"--in short, what is proposed will be an Americanization League. Driving the process will be an investigation of the collage technique, attempting to produce spaces that are defined/experienced by the overlapping of dense programmatic fabric and form. The thesis is concerned with exploring situations of encounter and collision as they relate to the production of space within a [global] culture of conspicuous consumption. It will attempt to produce an architecture that is situated as a simultaneous critique *and* acceleration of a set of cultural givens. The project is not meant to solve a larger social problem (that of identity serving as a fetishized commodity for consumption), but serve as a diagram--as a decoding and re-coding--arising out of an analysis of a particular cultural condition. It is not concerned with maintaining the dominance of the impenetrable historical monument, nor the infallibility of the art object, but rather, reads them as potential sites for forces to collide, to produce a discourse of possibilities and potentialities.

**Consuming Identity: Producing New Americans**

A Structure for the Americanization League<sup>1</sup> of Midtown Manhattan

"The argument for a diagrammatic project takes it as axiomatic that every design project needs to take up anew the issue of what constitutes architecture both as a disciplinary and a social question, to suspend and rearrange ruling oppositions and hierarchies currently in operation, to promote design projects and processes that cannot simply be inferred from context or reasoning, but retrospectively transform their very contexts, social and intellectual."(Somol, 25)

Midtown resides unassumingly within the grid of Manhattan. It is a bubble--a zone where the city ends, and what lie inside its borders are unmediated monuments to a culture of conspicuous consumption. It is a field of economically driven institutions--the multi-national corporation, the bank, and the museum--institutions that operate solely in the interest of capital (cultural or economic). This creates an interesting situation, for there are no citizens of mid-town, only tourists. What is meant here is that while there is no "population", there is a constant flow of people of varying social and economic classes through its core and back out. A small population of homeless people occupy a few benches and street corners, tourists come to marvel at the skyscrapers, to go to the Museum of Modern Art, and to see St. Patrick's Cathedral--while simultaneously a different kind of tourist steps out of her cab and ascends into her Madison Avenue corner office, only to leave at the end of



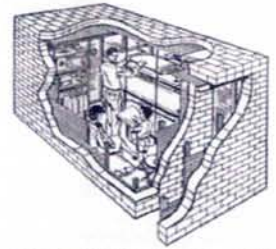
<sup>1</sup> The title of "Americanization League" is taken from the organization in Syracuse, NY that fulfills a social function similar to that of my thesis. Americanization as a word is interesting because of the unstable cultural meaning it itself has--some view it as a mechanism for the colonial aspects of globalization, while others deem it necessary for the future of the country's 'greatness'.

the workday. The latter never has to come in contact with either of the former. There are a series of safeguards for her--cab/car services, delivered lunches, and the security of the skyscraper itself (with its highly secured lower levels and its excess of surveillance equipment) allowing a view of the city from a safe distance. The reality of the everyday is rendered as an image to be consumed from a protected domain. This produces an introverted and sealed environment in which the daily situations revolve around individual location and promotion. The tourist can remain protected from the everyday--she is safe from the city.

The tourist represents a very narrow cultural cross-section, a group consisting of largely of one dominant race, class, and gender. By interrupting the monocultural system with a group that does not yet 'belong' to that culture stands to offer up a critique of that regime. But this critique is not a refusal. This distinction must be made, for it is theorized that simple refusal is a method that is just as fixed and totalizing as that which is negated. In a culture in which the critical and subversive are absorbed and turned into a commodity to be consumed by the dominant class, rather than work against it, this method of critique is dangerous. Dangerous, because it represents a stability and clarity in the form of an 'answer'--and that answer will itself begin to produce another fixed institutional regime. Instead, it is argued that the critique offered here is immanent, coming from within the mode itself, not to posit an answer, but rather, to openly diagram a possibility.

"It is a form of criticism that tries to unmask the representation of institutions, but without disqualifying that representation or the predominant visual culture in its own right. 'Unmasking' is not something you do in order to uncover an authentic ideal unsullied by the spectacle, but to break the representation open. Seeking the authentic is a praiseworthy starting point, but a quest for authenticity that depends on the negation of the spectacle is a hopeless, naive struggle. It is more fruitful to seek a constant unmasking of all kinds of institutional values that reside and hide in our society of the spectacle. This implies that movement, dialogue, and conflict are primary."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> van Toorn, Roemer. "Architecture Against Architecture" in *cTheory*, @<http://www.ctheory.com>. This essay discusses immanent criticism and cites it as important in a culture where everything is treated as a commodity, even the notion of radical change. See also *This is not a Pipe* by Michel Foucault.



Do-it-yourself shelter from the Surviv-All catalog, 1962.



The thesis takes on the logic that identity is an image, that the subject is a commodity for consumption by the society of the spectacle, in order to unmask the institutional forces that construct such a notion. The readings it produces are capable of movement as different forces are applied to it. This is elucidated when considering that the program also serves to add to the monoculture by 'teaching' the other how to be a part of that culture. The program aims to produce more consumers--to create more tourists. The hope is to use architectural space to open a dialogue about the nature of cultural identity and inclusion (or the dominant institutional regime's exclusion and eviction) and architecture's role within such a culture.

### Program:

Americanization Leagues exist throughout the country under several different names and structures. They typically exist in urban areas, as these are places where the most immigrants and refugees initially locate themselves (or are located). In smaller cities they tend to be located in spaces donated by charity or free space within state buildings. In larger cities, there tend to be several structures operating in a very loose network if there is communication at all. Centers for immigrants are typically run separately from those for refugees, but occasionally occur within the same structure. In almost all cases they receive operating money from that is allocated from federal funding. There may be as many as forty contractors responsible for allocating funding streams from the various support agencies. There is usually a full time paid staff as well as a group of community volunteers. The operating hours vary from city to city and center to center, sometimes remaining open twenty-four hours. The staff works to aid immigrants or refugees in fulfilling the most important necessities of everyday reality. These programmatic elements include legal aids to help with paperwork, ESL classes and space for informational seminars about the new community or environment. Centers also take on the responsibility of helping to orient the immigrant in American culture. Here the programs tend to get more creative and contingent upon local factors. These programmatic elements are



sometimes funded or run by private businesses and may or may not be located on site. It is here [within the context of this intervention] that the program begins to represent/produce an American ideal. Programmatic pieces that embrace notions such as a fascination with the body fitness, to the subject's total immersion in new media and technology are utilized in order to highlight the *image* of identity. Calling as much from the programming and spatial logic of the suburban mall as from the dense and synthetic atriums of John Portman<sup>3</sup>, these programmatic elements are both didactic and reflective. These functions are representative of a subject existing in a culture of conspicuous consumption. Pursued are spaces that attempt to convey/display the image of belonging.



### Program Description and Sizing

#### Social Aid:

Job Placement and Housing Office	250sqft
Classrooms (5 units)	800sqft ea.
Testing Room	1200sqft
Computer Training Space	1000sqft
Multilingual Periodical Reading Room	800sqft
Small Clinic	500sqft
Day Care Facilities	800sqft
Offices (25 units)	200sqft ea.
Meeting Room	800sqft
Temporary Housing (10 units)	800sqft ea.

21340sqft      subtotal

#### Cultural Orientation:

Fitness and Health Center	1500sqft
Driving School/ Garage	500sqft more as req'd
Multi-Media Space	1200sqft
Green Space/ Playground	2000sqft
Fast Food Restaurant	1500sqft
Movie Theater	3000sqft
Commercial Spaces (2)	2000sqft ea.

+/-13700sqft      subtotal

Circulation	4000sqft
Support Spaces	3000sqft
Mechanical	1500sqft

+/-44500sqft      total

<sup>3</sup> Portman's structures provide a protected suburban ideal in the center of urban corporate structures. They were "brilliant solutions to the problem of reopening the inner city to the utopia promised by suburbia..." (Graham, 271) Koolhaas critiques Portman's utopic vision, citing that the atria "became a replica as inclusive as



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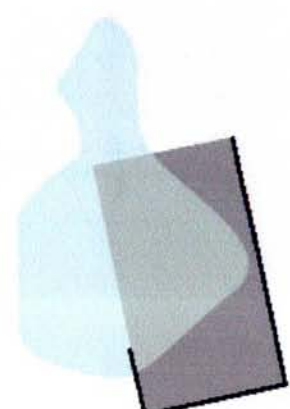
## Method:

The method in which this thesis will proceed develops out of a particular understanding of collage<sup>4</sup>. Collage attempts to translate the nature of the theoretical argument into a methodological approach. The process stems from the desire to introduce a condition of collision and encounter which results from the combination of elements in a given field. Rosalind Krauss discusses the nature of collage as challenging the stability of the ground in order to represent it. She writes:

"This capacity of "speaking about" depends on the ability of each collage element to function as the material signifier for a signified that is its opposite: a presence whose referent is an absent meaning, meaningful only in its absence. As a system, collage inaugurates a play of differences which is both about and sustained by an absent origin: the forced absence of the original plane by the superimposition of another plane, effacing the first in order to represent it. Collage's very fullness of form is grounded in this forced impoverishment of the ground—a ground both supplemented and supplanted." (Krauss, 38)

Collage re-presents the instability of the ground that constitutes it: revealing it for what it is while requiring it for its own constitution. In the case of this thesis, that ground is the physical and representational structure provided by the Seagram Building. By overlapping architectonic substance, the condition created is something different. The thesis will explore this combinative condition through a study at the experienced level, but also at the formal, and material levels.

The combination of the rigid, rational formal logic of Mies with one which is more dense and congested will produce a third region, that of the 'in-between'. Out of this grows the desire to produce an 'in-between' zone as a place where people and architectures collide. There will therefore be moments where the intervention impedes upon the space of the existing structure (as in a cubist collage), as well as spaces where it is people that encounter one another. This creates an ambiguity of spaces, one that operates both graphically and experientially. Graphically in that one



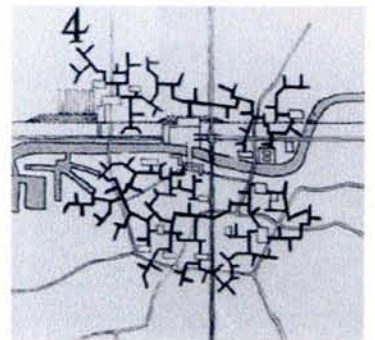
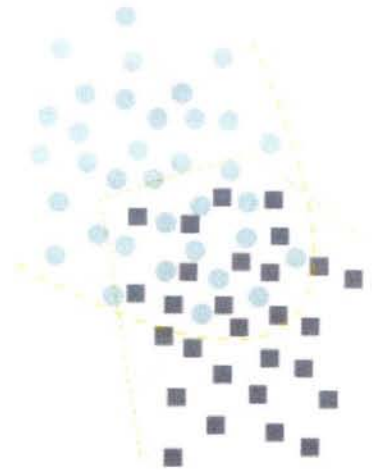
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downtown itself, an ersatz downtown." (Koolhaas, 843) These atria produce the *image* of safety and an idealized suburban 'stasis' within the urban chaos. See end diagrams.

can read the overlap of forms in planimetric or volumetric representation. The desire here is to take this representational space of formal collage, and pursue the 'in-between' in terms of occupation and movement: to emphasize the experiential encounters that result from these combinations. This third condition is aleatory, uncertain and fluid--a condition where seemingly disparate elements are forced into a dialogue with one another.<sup>5</sup>

"What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of ordinary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaborations, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." (Bhabha, 1,2)

It is in this space of encounter, like the play of Krauss' collage, that the subject begins to wrestle with their identity or location, attempting to locate a stable ground. This overlap is not unlike that of the suburban mall, where the consumer occupies/transgresses the borders between disassociated objects. The mall will provide one of the initial diagrams to begin studying the thesis. By beginning from a diagram of the typical mall, one begins to draw corollaries between spaces for the consumption of objects with spaces for the consumption of image or identity. The spaces desired here are dense and compounded, but not haphazard, and relate directly to the programmatic function of teaching 'Americanism'. The studying 'American' is submerged in the spatial contradictions that are a reflection of the everyday 'native' culture. This is achieved through the juxtaposition and overlapping of movement zones, the creating of a hybrid spaces that make their appearance in relation to the disjunct conditions that construct them<sup>6</sup>. Critical to this is a rigorous

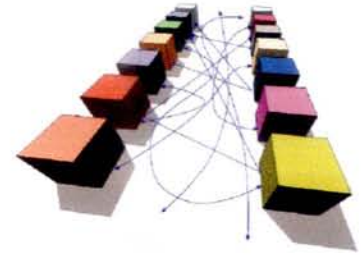


<sup>4</sup> I am hesitant to refer to the method as exclusively collage, for in its study and exploitation of the 'seam' or 'connective' condition it may also appear as a clear representation of the technique of montage.

<sup>5</sup> Here it can be articulated that the occupation of this third zone, this 'in-between' bears a likeness to the concept of occupying the seam of a photomontage, or the space of the cut in a filmic montage.

<sup>6</sup> Up until this point the 'quality' of the programmatic elements has not been articulated. The pieces of the intervention remain *functionally* distinct from the spaces of the

diagramming of the varying intensities of circulation that occur within the Seagram Building throughout the day<sup>7</sup>. These diagrams will begin to produce possible locations for specific pieces of the intervention. It is important to note that this approach does not consider circulation zones as directing or residual regions, but as the part of the collage that is pivotal in opening up the architecture to the encounters and collisions above stated.



In order to produce these border-zones, these congested spaces of movement, the material palette and formal logic of the intervention is as critical as the choreography of the spaces between them. The project will start from a reading of Mies's formal and tectonic palette as clean, edited, and rational--a palette that came to symbolize the midtown corporate aesthetic<sup>8</sup>. The formal and material logic of the intervention will not attempt to negate Mies's work (I would not argue that the Seagram Building is bad architecture or one that must be destroyed in favor of a new one. I have argued that the production of such a fixed ideal is dangerous above.), but rely on it as a referent which helps to establish and locate the emerging cultural identity. What is meant here is that the architectural juxtaposition is not meant to discredit Mies's building, but to engage it in as an institution in a discussion consistent with notions of encounter and inclusion. The architecture of the intervention will be echoes of the modernity that produced the Seagram Building--pulling on and distorting its logic, prying at its illusions of stability. The form will rely not only on the immediate physical presence of Mies's structure, but also the historical productions out of which it is manifest. It is perhaps here that the argument

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Seagram, their limits articulated and differentiated programmatically. This does not imply that the forms themselves always remain distinct, nor that the two are optically distinct, but rather maintain a programmatic rigidity.

<sup>7</sup> See diagrams that follow text for these and other more specific diagrams.

<sup>8</sup> This is represented by buildings like the Union Carbide Building at 270 Park, and the First National City Bank Building at 399 Park-- mimetic structures that adopted Mies's rationale as representative of a burgeoning corporate ideal. Corporations would refer to the Seagram as an ideal representation of power and stature. Construction of the building led to the 1961 ordinance in mid-town that states that a building can rise up in an unmodified shaft (free of setbacks) if it occupied 25% or less of its site.

moves to a discussion of the site, as it relates to the program, as well as to the line of critique.

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**Site:**

The choice to perform the intervention on the site of the Seagram building is, as was stated before, not meant to usurp the architecture of Mies. The building provides a locus where multiple institutions collide, as well as also offering up physical space in the form of the plaza with which to begin working. It is therefore important to proceed from an analysis of what the building *is*, culturally and architecturally in order to complete the argument for its selection as the site. Mies's architecture could be characterized by what has been called 'supreme indifference'. He desired for an architecture aligned with the zeitgeist, architecture in tune with the spirit of the epoch. "For Mies the world is what it is; not given to us to change it in its structures." (Tafari, 335) Mies wished for a representational architecture, an architecture that mirrored the systems it operated within. In American culture now twenty-five years after the politically charged era of the 1920's European avant-garde, new technologies were common in building and the once demanded architecture had become a representation of the ideal corporate image under the new regime. The Seagram represents a hybrid, an *Americanized* Mies: unbuildable in the fervid ideological climate of Europe, but a demonstration of Mies's 'European self'<sup>9</sup>. The reception by American communities (academic and economic) was positive. Mies's architecture became the image of efficiency and grandeur that the new corporate behemoths would strive to emulate.



It was not until the Seagram Building opened in 1958 that the second great age of the corporate monument began in earnest. Louis Sill, a prominent realtor, observed in 1961 that corporate leaders were coming to value new office buildings not just as efficient business instruments but as symbols of corporate stature and reflections of a progressive outlook: "In an age of lightning

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<sup>9</sup> Rem Koolhaas describes the quasi-Corb United Nations building a hybrid between European Corb and American Wallace Harrison--citing that the building could not exist without both. He follows that the Seagram is a hybrid of one person--Mies. (Koolhaas, 363)

change, American industry is looking for symbols that reflect its progress." (Reynolds, 92)

This was not only an architecture that the patrons appreciated but also one that was championed by the academy for its formal and aesthetic beauty. The building has come to represent an image of architecture that is to be consumed, and it is from here that the discussion can begin about what the building *is*. Seagram Ltd. is an anonymous multinational corporation like the majority of institutions in the midtown area. The corporation has many holdings, most notably is its role as an alcoholic beverage giant—but Seagram is also head of some of the largest entertainment producing companies in the country, such as Universal Studios, USA Networks, and MCA and Geffen Records. The corporation is already involved in the production of the image of Americanized subjects. There is therefore an uneasy dialogue between structure and intervention. Seagram produces images of (architecture) the contemporary American to be consumed, and the intervention is 'helping' to produce subjects that reflect the image produced by the corporation. Therefore the site selection is based not only on the image architecture that the structure represents discursively, but also for what it produces culturally.



## FRAMES

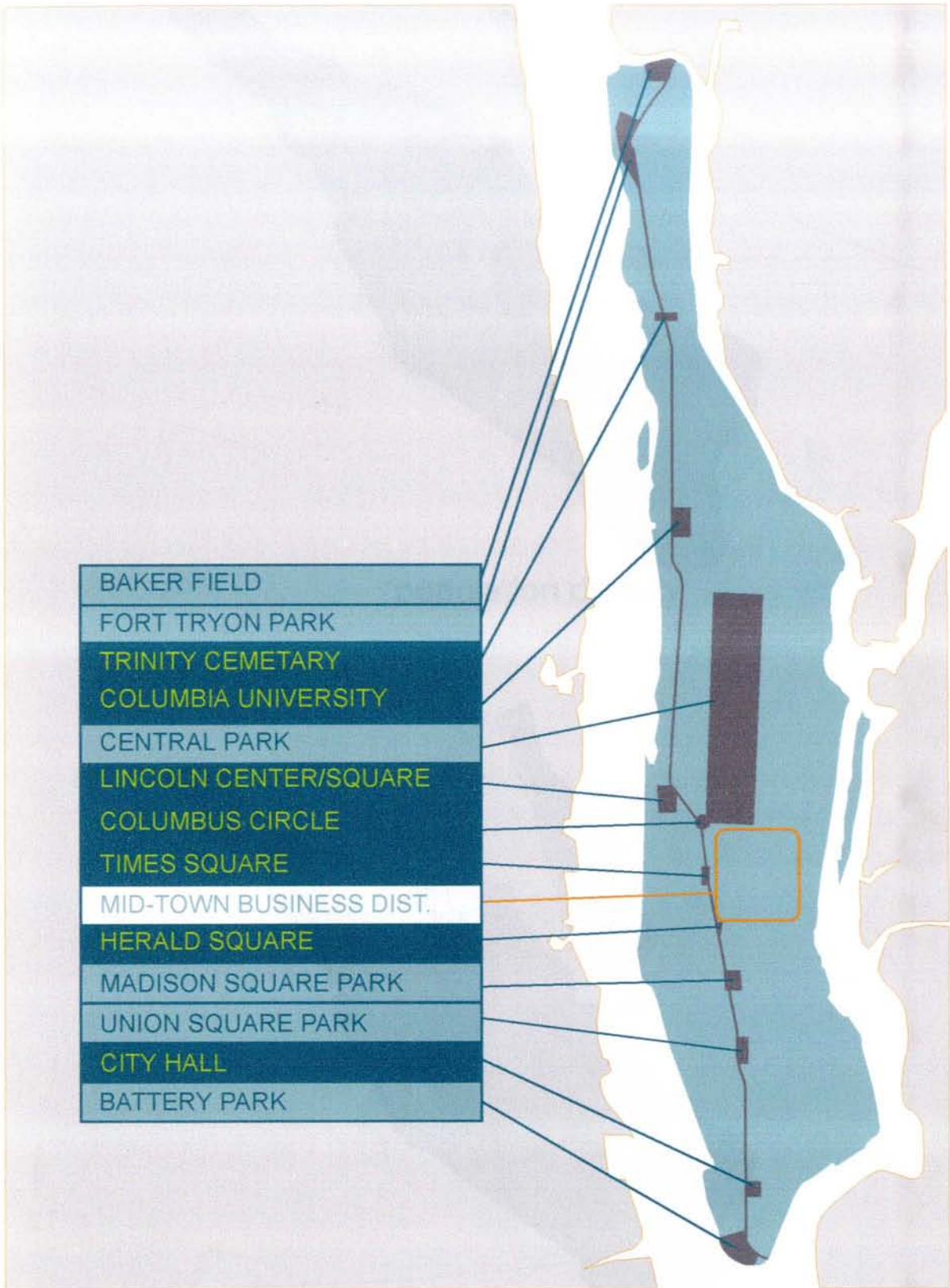
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The Baffler: Number Seven. *The Journal That Blunts the Cutting Edge: The City in the Age of Information*.  
The Baffler: Number Ten. *The Folklore of Capitalism*.  
Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States from 1492 to the Present*.  
The design of Tibor Kalman.



broadway stabs westward to avoid the clutches of midtown



population density



rent values





salary \$150000+



white population density

59th  
 58th  
 57th  
 56th  
 55th  
 54th  
 53rd  
 52nd  
 51st  
 50th  
 49th  
 48th  
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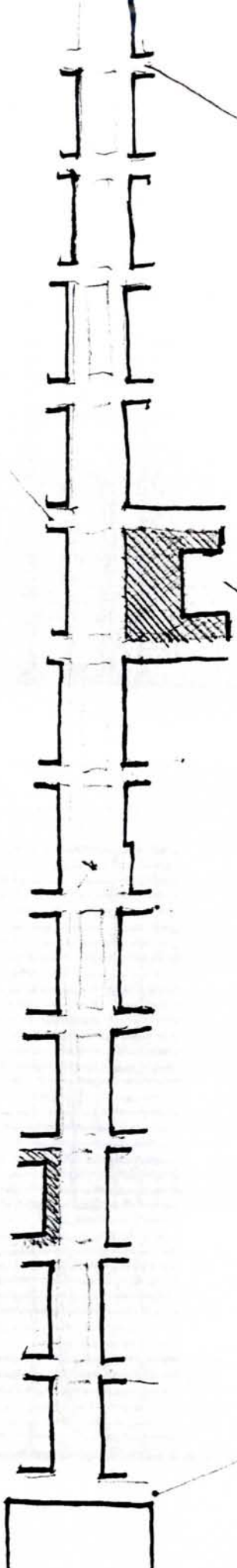
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53<sup>rd</sup>

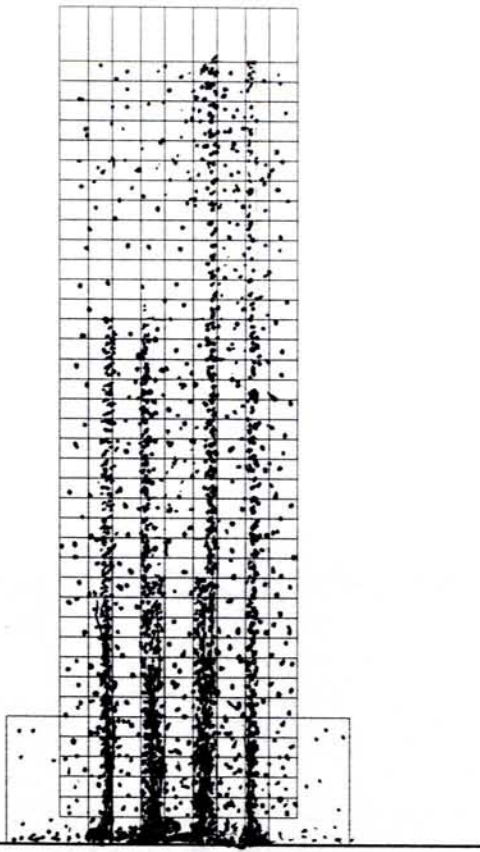
57<sup>th</sup>

seagram

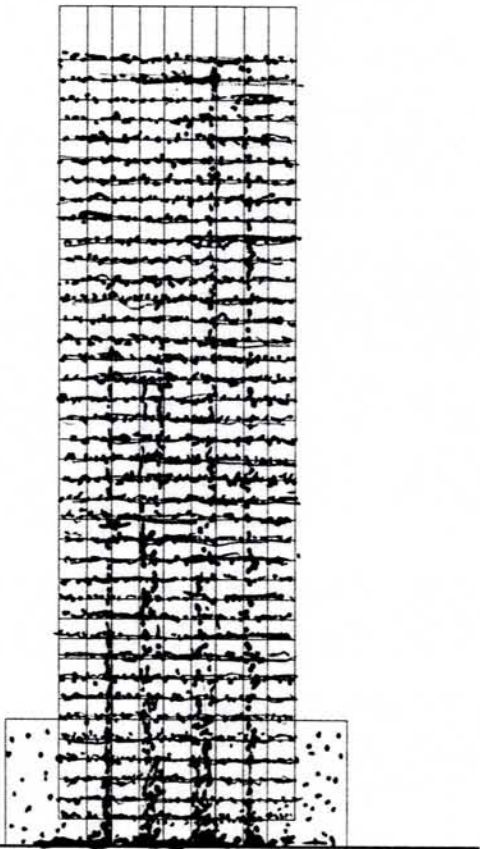
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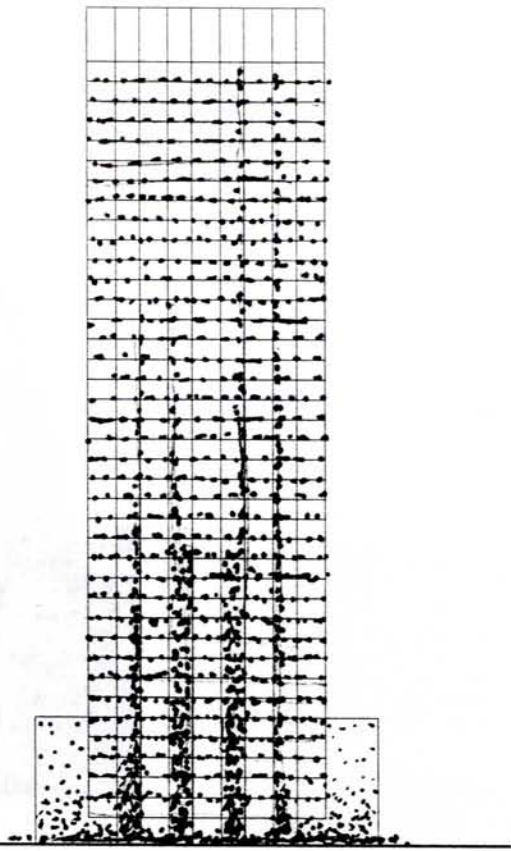
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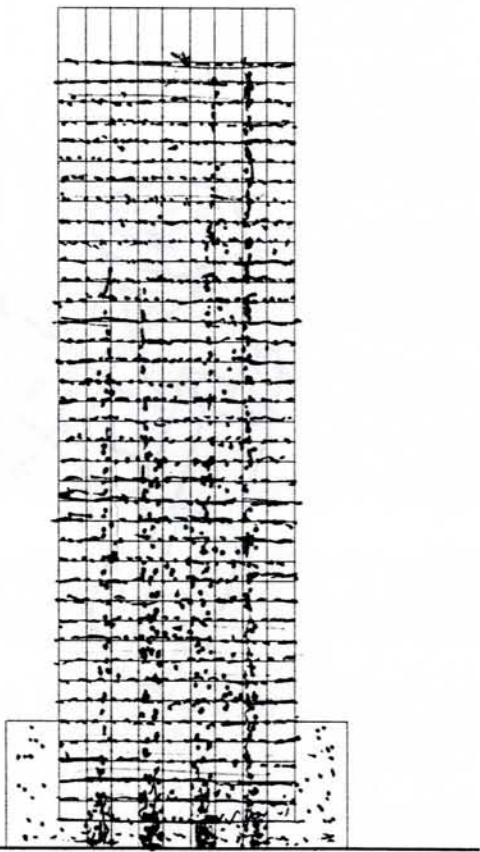
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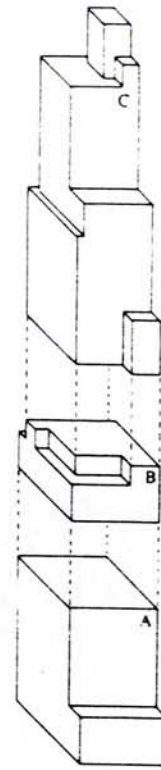


**DOWNTOWN ATHLETIC CLUB**

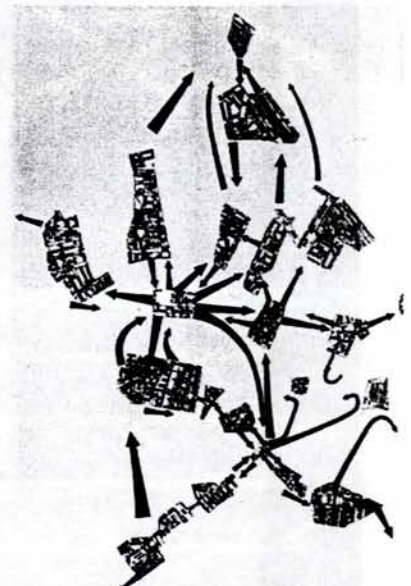
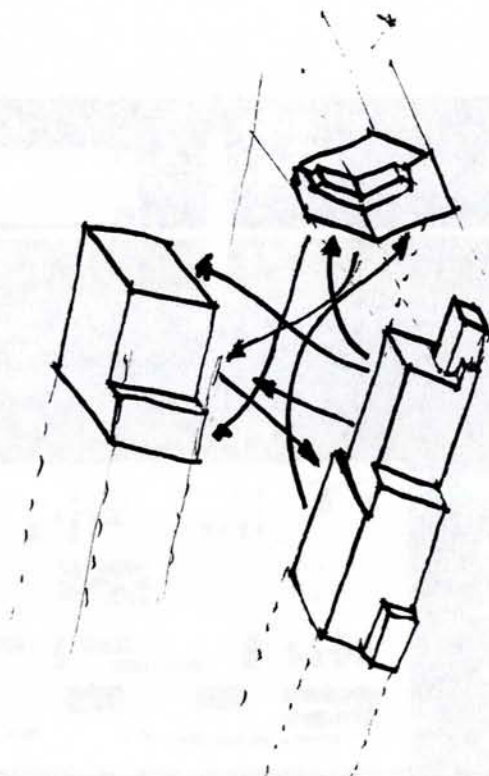
New York, New York 1931

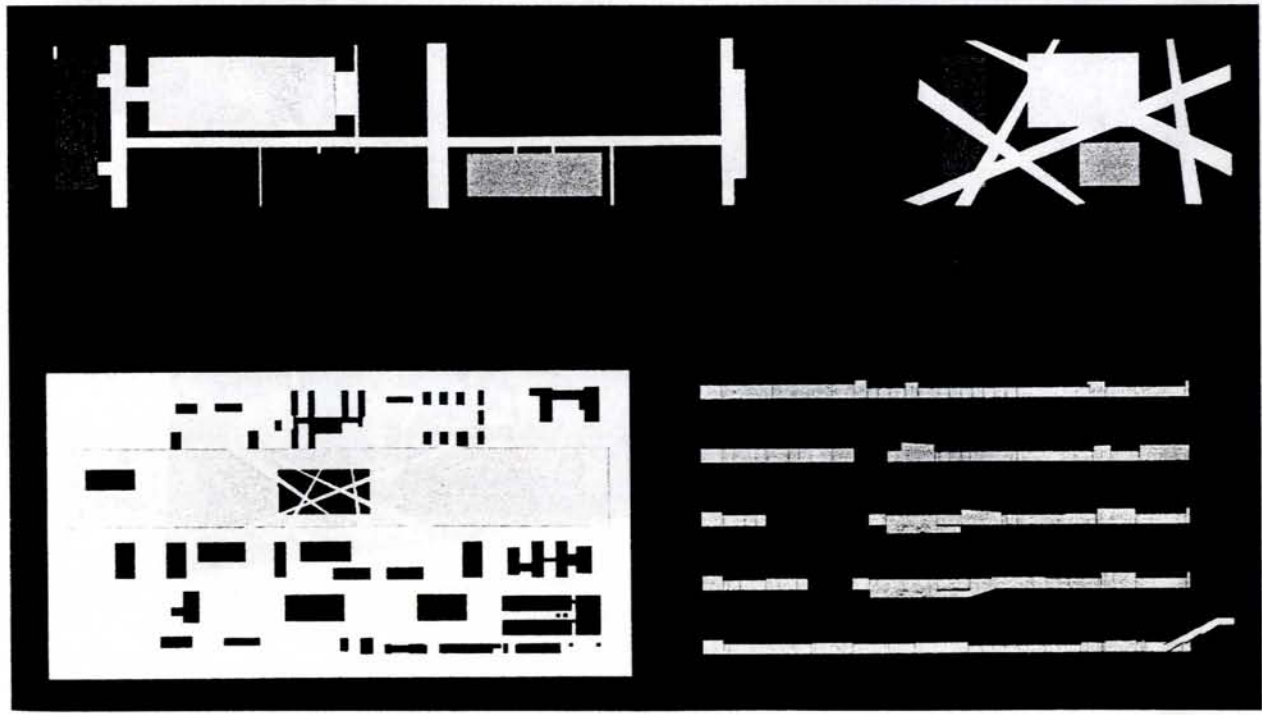
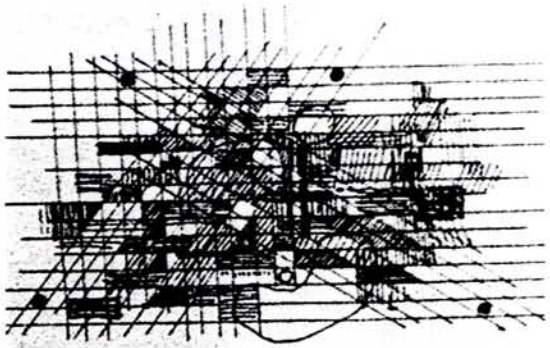
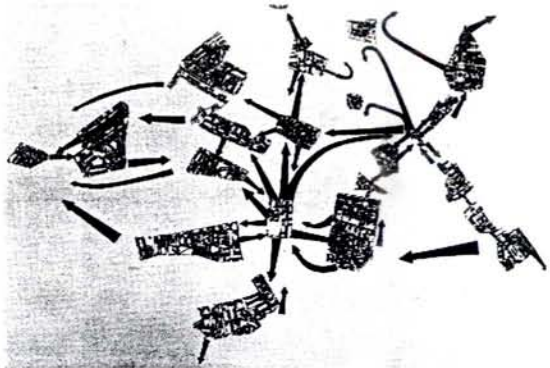
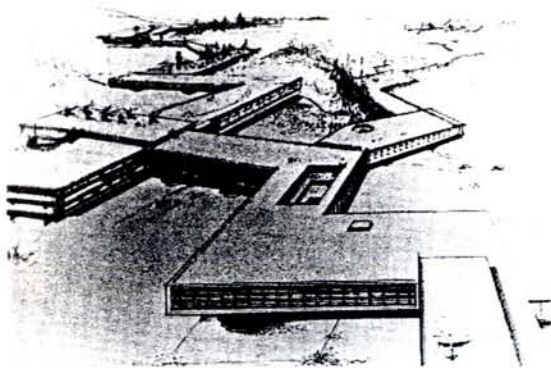
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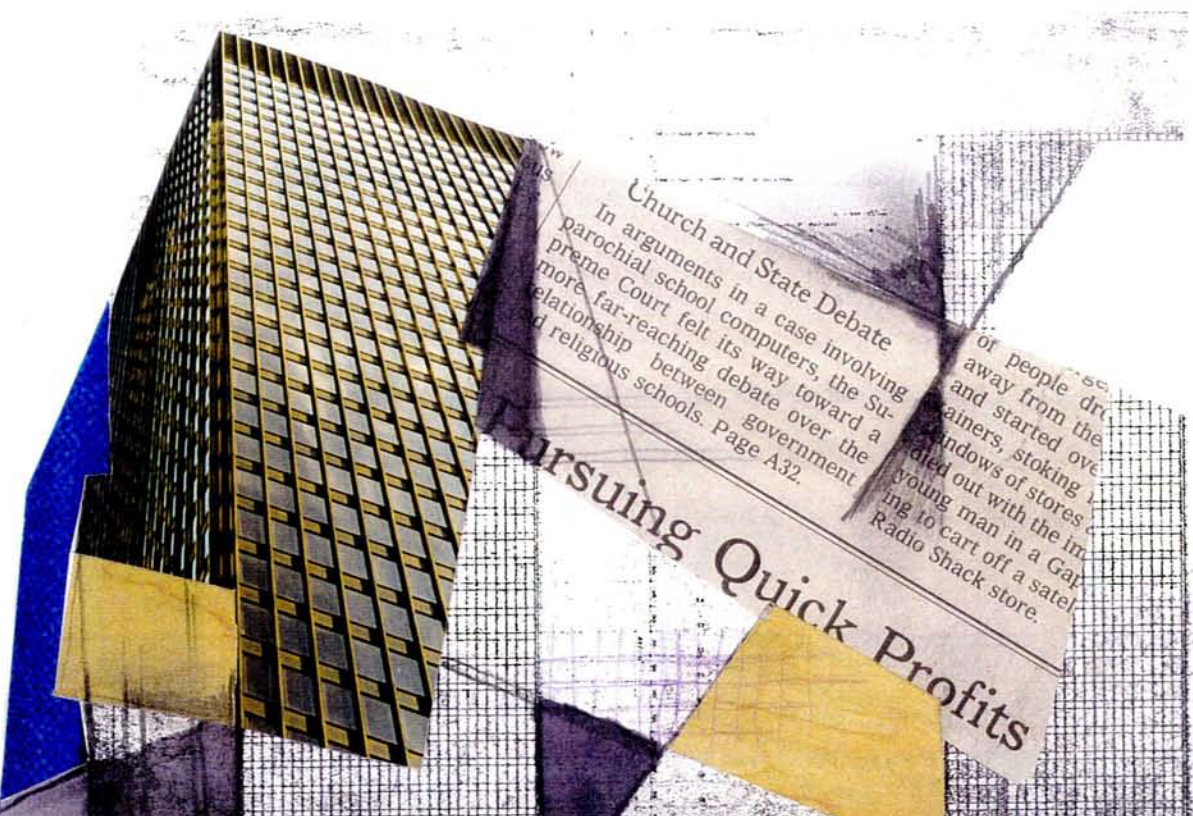
Program: Athletic club, restaurant, hotel



- A. Athletic club
- B. Restaurant
- C. Hotel







### Church and State Debate

In arguments in a case involving parochial school computers, the Supreme Court felt its way toward a more far-reaching debate over the relationship between government and religious schools. Page A32.

### Pursuing Quick Profits

...or people drove away from the scene and started over. ...ainers, stoking windows of stores. ...died out with the im... young man in a Gap... ing to cart off a satel... Radio Shack store.

an intense hour, the current bat-

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

ordinarily buoyant market





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