

Towards the figurative

'He did not distrust his imagination any more than he did his hand. From this came the grace and richness of his decorative compositions.'

Apollinaire on Rousseau, 1913

With *People and Architecture* Mike Gold has set out to induce a Rousseauesque confidence and innocence in the work of his students. With a type of automatic drawing, hand-trusting perhaps, imagination is released and, as the title suggests, the aim is to explore the figurative in architecture.

Being a pedagogical exercise, *People and Architecture* is a consequence of Gold's own original and provocative design evolution. It has been said of him that he looks around and, seeing the fashionable architectural manner of the moment, heads instinctively in the opposite direction. While not inaccurate, this description underrates both the discipline and the depth of his architectural understanding. Although not presented as the consequence of a theoretical polemic — the usual didactic ruse at the AA — the Gold thesis is based on a critique of the contemporary debasement of the figurative. Both 'figurative' and 'abstract' are too often taken at face value, that is to say, literally and as mutually exclusive opposites. Hopefully the hypothesis is that neither is an end in itself but rather a key to the more elusive qualities sustainable in a work of architecture — 'the human images which float in the azure of our memories and damn the metaphysicians' (Apollinaire on Picasso, 1913).

The incarnation of the Architectural Muse en-

counters her most serious problem with Step 1, 'Draw a figure.' Although the programme contained the option to draw from life, students have preferred borrowed images. The result is unfortunate, a studious but inanimate emphasis on surface, only occasionally overcome in the latter stages of the project. Early schemes like *Gauguin Game* (1980), by Khanda Rouse, trap themselves in the overwhelming aesthetic of their source material; similarly, Ada Wilson mirrors with increasing bitterness, but fails to transcend, the original irony of her subject, Duane Hanson's sculpture *Supermarket Lady*. Another recurring but not unproductive characteristic of the projects is the high calibre of candidates for the role of Architectural Muse. After Gauguin's naked Polynesian we have Marilyn Monroe, a spiky fashion model, Jean Shrimpton, and Veruschka. From this last image, Chris Saunders has avoided interpretation of physiognomy in favour of location. She is found merging into a door, and the most literal 'people and architecture' has people emerging from the architecture (as did the Surrealists, as did Cocteau).

Steps 2, 3, 4, etc. of the exercise are the real test, each moving relentlessly closer to the architecture (add a piece of furniture to the figure, add the architectural element, add the room . . . ante-room . . . apartment . . . building . . . site). Graham Modlin's remarkable illustrations for *The Seam, Jerusalem*, although predating the rigorous week-by-week increase in scale, set the scene for the interchange in scale between figure, object, building and city. Stark, upright figures — Modlin's own inventions — populate stark, upright buildings; both are clothed in vol-



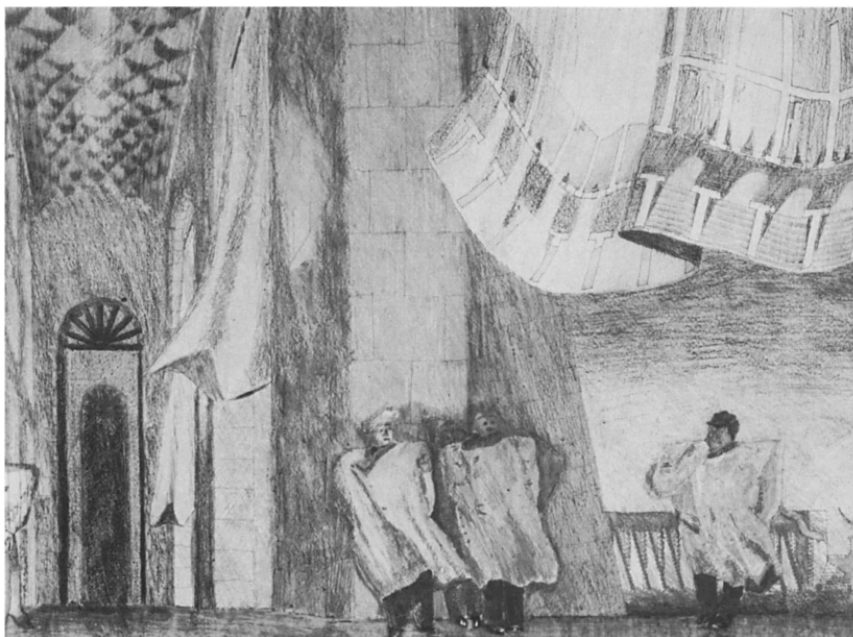
Khanda Rouse — *Gauguin Game*, 1980: Screen.

uminous hanging fabrics. But these fabrics, planned and pleated, ultimately distract the author; he prefers them to their frames.

Another inventor of figures, Greig Crysler, diverges into the inventor's sinister option of mutilating his creation. He designs torture machines not dissimilar to the one in Kafka's *Penal Colony*, a powerful and disturbing set of images. But, finally, it fails to transcend the realm of comment, and the people and the architecture are left to suffer. There is an obvious maturing of the unit's work, from the early raw images like these from the first year of the exercise, to the later, sharper and more refined buildings. Common to both is a recurring existential bleakness, later translated into masses of black backgrounds. These are people and architecture of the night.

Emerging from harsh light and deep shadows, Robert Griffin's twisted tower, 'A Muse in Geometry', moves quickly from the spiky figure to a corresponding language of form and material. Here the imposed sequence of the exercise is at its most successful. The original figure recurs as an aesthetic yardstick in later drawings. But the 'sombre, slanting precision of polished marble and metallurgical inventions' transcend their origins to become a rich, provocative architectural syntax. Whether or not the final product is figurative architecture, the resolution of this building in detail and as a coherent whole validates the process.

Although highly rendered, the more successful projects betray, on closer examination, another aspect of Gold's influence, an inheritance of his 'cool school' background: the sim-

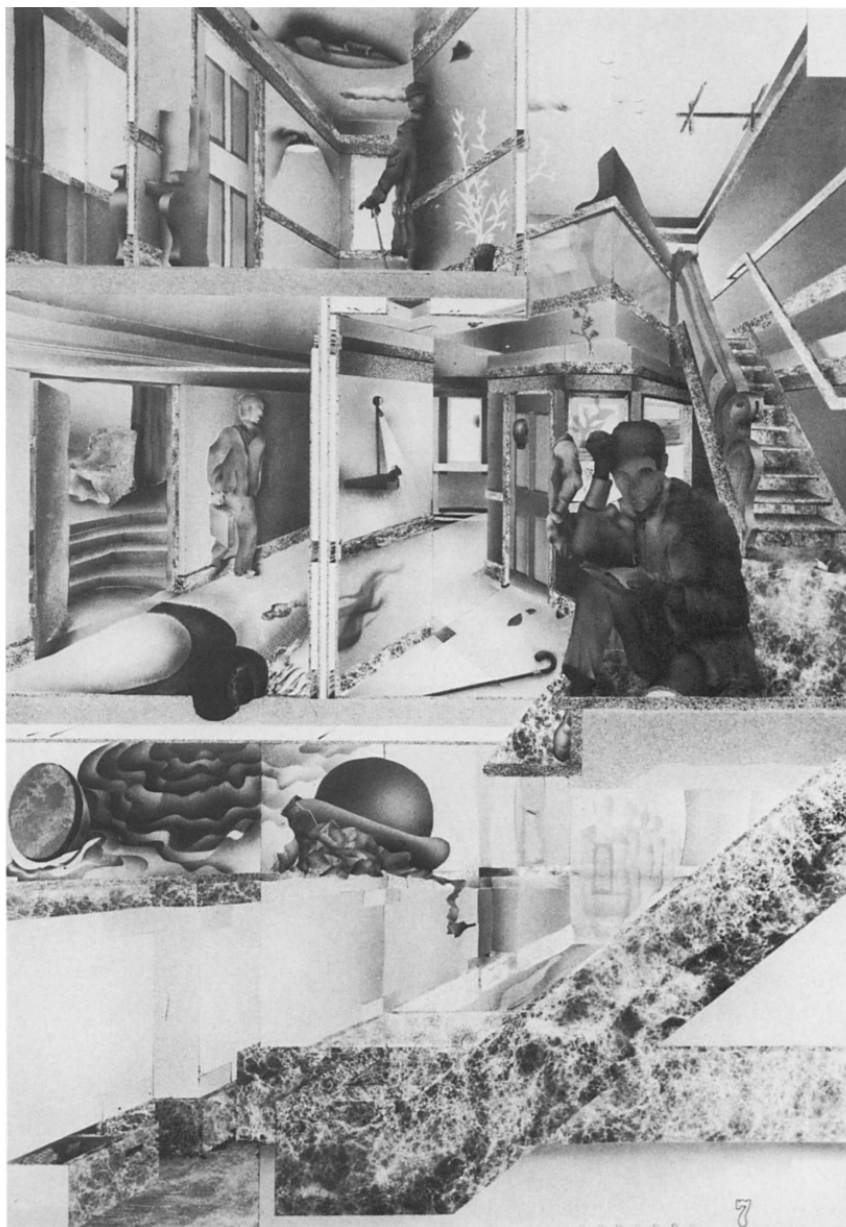


Graham Modlin — *The Seam, Jerusalem*, 1979: Colonnades, plan and view.

plified, disciplined, almost minimalist plan. A few precise but separate elements coexist, like Robert Griffin's 'wall of compressed copper slag blocks', 'floating marble screen with perforated titanium supports', 'thin facade of rusting corten steel' and 'wedge of cells' — each maintains its uniqueness of form, character and material. This underlying discipline comes to the surface in the black-and-white images of the final two projects, by Roger Turton and Juha Kaapa. Here we see, not the exercise of step-by-step drawing, but the ensuing project, presumably after the figurative sensibility has taken root. Kaapa in particular sets out to reinvestigate and infiltrate familiar modernist themes with the new sensibility.

The strongest advocates for the didactical deviance of this programme are these few elegant, original and challenging buildings. As for the figurative subject, it proves to be a fruitful expedient. We are left, at the end, with the tantalizing promise of a figurative architecture unfulfilled. Finally, one must return to the drawings. There, unashamed indulgence has polarized opinion, both within and outside the AA. With drawings given the status of craft, the architecture becomes a by-product of their elaboration. The technique is semi-automatic and obviously pleasurable. It involves the subversion of design conventions such as sequence and taste, and this is why it is underestimated as the naive studio. Ultimately, by developing an extreme hypothesis, *People and Architecture* has produced something any school of architecture should aspire to: a substantial and challenging body of work.

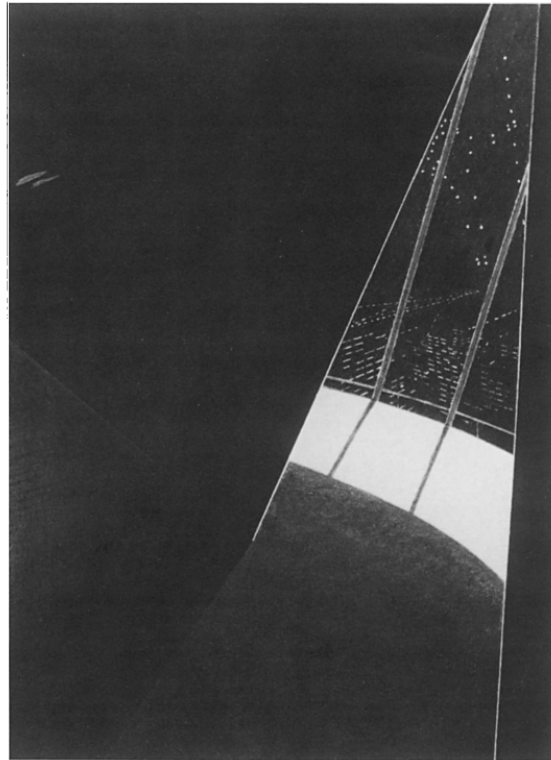
Peter Wilson



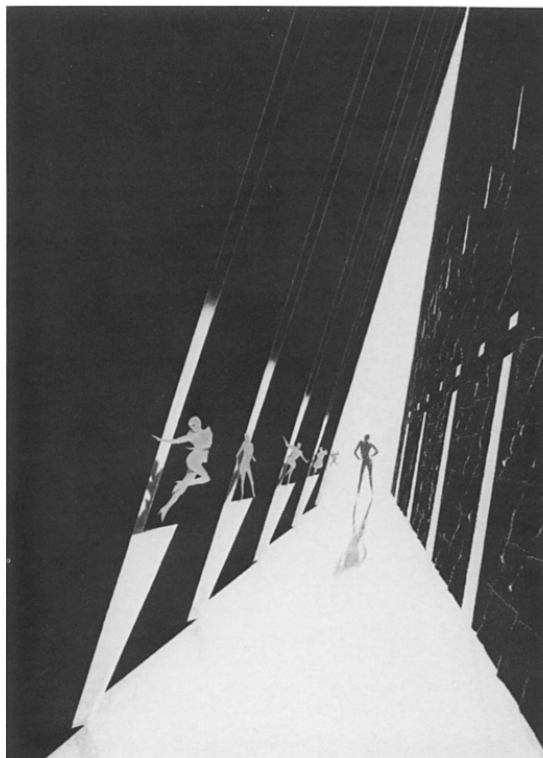
Chris Saunders
People in Architecture, 1980: Rooms.



Entrance

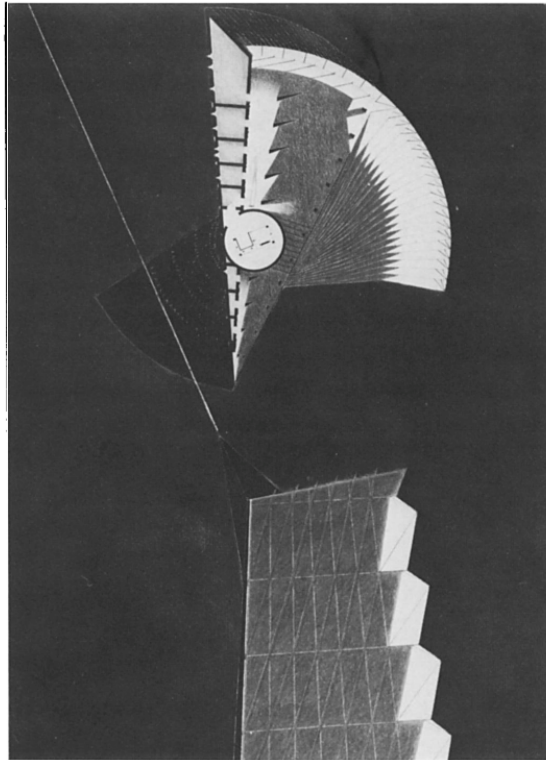


Screen and windows

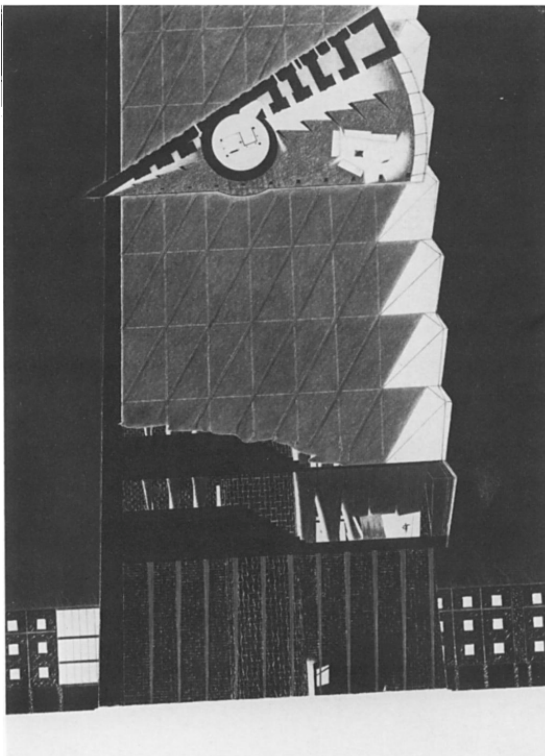


Gallery

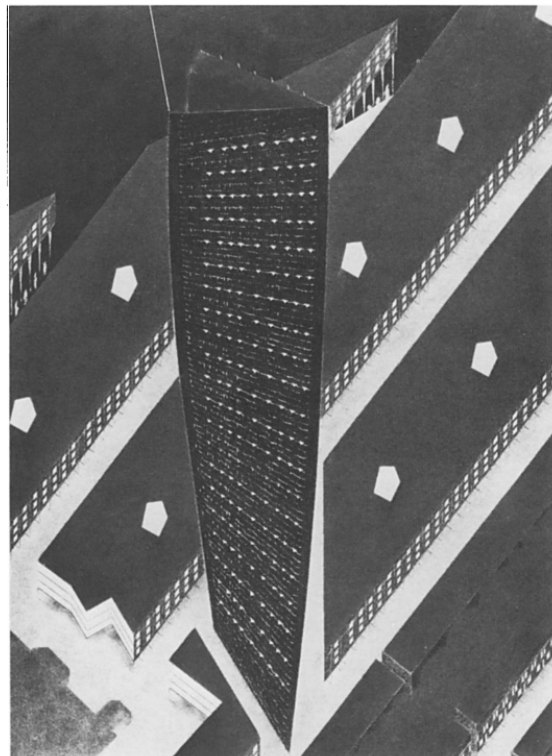
Robert Griffin
The Twisted Tower, Coin Street, 1981-2.



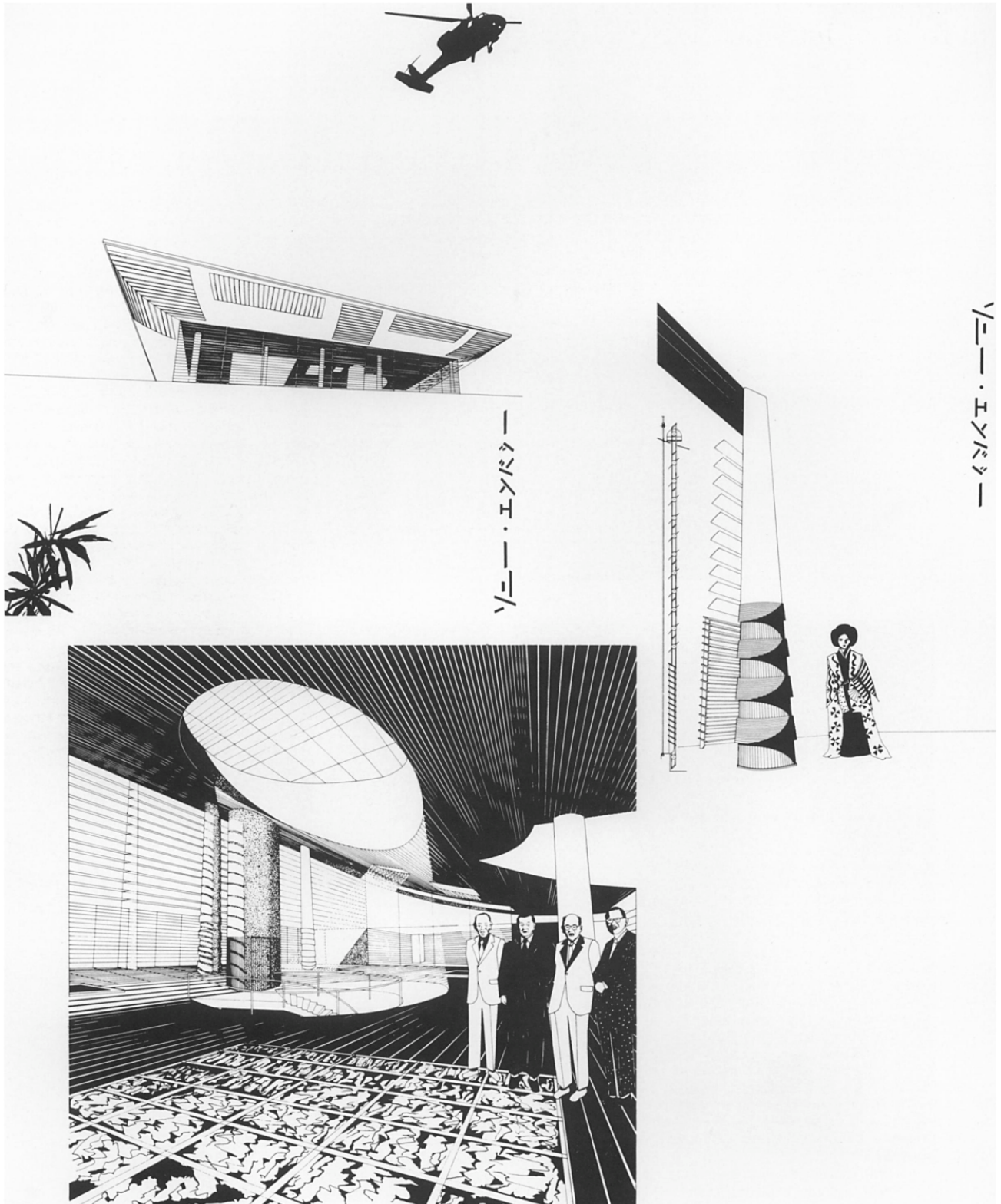
Upper floors



Lower floors



Axonometric



Juha Kaapa
Sony Embassy, 1983.