

RICE UNIVERSITY

**THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED: PROPOSED ADDITIONS  
TO THE NATCHEZ TRACE PARKWAY**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

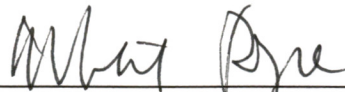
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May, 1998

ABSTRACT:

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One of the most visionary landscape projects ever realized, the Natchez Trace Parkway, a 449-mile linear unit of the National Park Service, roughly follows and memorializes the old Natchez Trace, an historic Indian trail and then colonial settlement and trading route running from Natchez, MS to Nashville, TN. Intimately coupled with the varying contours of the land, the parkway offers a driving experience phenomenologically subtle and complex in addition to its clear historic significance.

Despite its importance, this unique piece of *terrestrial infrastructure* is under constant pressure to *normalize* it which would, of course, ruin it. In response, the project becomes a series of nine rest areas/stopping-points' each composed of two, small prototype buildings (repeated nine times in nine different configurations.) As *quantifiable anchors*, these stops combine as an attempt to *hold* a large and slippery landscape, to make it even more uncommon and easily appreciated and thus to aid in its resistance to those who would undermine it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank, in addition to the members of my thesis committee, Mark Wamble, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Rice University, Michael Bell, Associate Professor of Architecture, Rice University and Sarah Amy Leach, Cultural Resources Specialist, Natchez Trace Parkway, for their insights, support and time at various points during the realization of the project.

Thanks also to my peers, Ben Thorne, for a couple of excellent ideas regarding presentation and documentation, and Brian Burke, for a bit of last-minute carpentry.

And, of course, thanks to Kathleen Roberts for her assistance throughout my tenure in school.



TWO ROADS DIVERGE INTO RADICALLY DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF TIME AND SPACE.



It is of some importance to briefly discuss the origins of this thesis project as they had considerable impact on sustaining and inspiring the process throughout its realization. It arose simply enough, out of an experience made possible by an almost incidental decision to exit the interstate highway system in search of something different, some *friction* perhaps.... It was really an unassuming, unpurposeful decision- no intention and not to be coerced into anything. Beyond the brown National Park Service sign marked-Natchez Trace Parkway awaited a magical journey, complex and beautiful, into a remarkably unexpected and improbable place. Displaced onto a temporal frontier, strange and quiet at 50 mph, the rider leaves the world while all the while getting closer than ever to it. It was only later that subsequent investigation revealed the potential for a project designed to intensify and thus strengthen and protect the parkway from the inside out.

Long before the parkway ever existed, the foot trail which would eventually come to be known the Natchez Trace had begun formation, deep in the abyss of prehistoric time. In fact, archaeological sites along this ancient seam date from the Paleoindian age- the Woodland and Mississippian periods as far back as 12,000 BC. In all likelihood, the trail originally began to be worn-in by wild animals and the nomadic native American hunters who followed them. As such the imprint or register of use had begun long before it ever came to be known the Natchez Trace. As expected, the various trails which ultimately became connected to form the Natchez Trace adhered to the timeless logic of following the path of least resistance- generally trying to keep to the higher ground while avoiding the numerous swamps and bayous characteristic of the water-saturated Deep South land through which it passed. Such determinism clearly gives evidence of the inevitability of the Trace and its route.

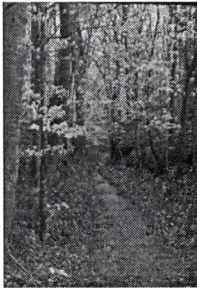
So the various localized paths gradually joined together as various peoples began more extensive and far-reaching trade and travel. By the time European traders and settlers filtered into the region, it was being extensively used by two well-developed tribes- the Chickasaws to the north and the Choctaws to the south as well as numerous other smaller societies interspersed among them. Soon, however, first French and Spanish traders and then American settlers began to impact the region. The "Trace" as it came to be known at this time, meaning 'a line of footprints' in Old French developed into the major overland route linking the already settled areas to the north and the east with the Old Southwest and its increasingly vital ports of Natchez and New Orleans. The route first appeared on a French map as early as 1733. Beginning around 1785, the use of the Trace sharply accelerated primarily as a *return road* for people collectively known as the 'Kaintuck boatmen.' They brought their crops and other goods down along the Mississippi River to the port markets and then, having sold everything they owned, including their flatboats, journeyed back by foot along the Trace. By 1810, the trace had been seeing heavy use to the point where certain basic 'improvements' had been ordered such as widening and grading at the request of the fledgling United States government in order that it also be used as a post road. It could be said that, in its heyday the trace functioned as the *countercurrent* to the Mississippi River as upstream travel was not yet feasible. The road, however, did present a long and arduous journey plagued by frequent seasonal flooding of low areas, intense heat and humidity, disease-ridden insects and, as legend has it, many thieves





and raiders lurking in the woods on the side of the road waiting to prey upon the money-laden returnees.

As it happens, 1812 turned out to be a watershed year in the history of the Natchez Trace. In this year the steamship *New Orleans* arrived at the port of Natchez, the first vessel capable of surmounting the powerful current of the Mississippi River. It didn't take long for people to recognize that river travel promised a considerably faster and less perilous means of getting home and, as such, the usefulness of the trace dissipated away. In places it became a series of local roads but more generally was simply abandoned to nature. So it quickly quieted and began to revert but not before playing an instrumental role in the history of the country's growth and expansion, for pioneers heading-out into the newly-acquired Louisiana Territory and as a road used by Andrew Jackson during military campaigns associated with the War of 1812- Britain's final direct attempt to usurp the sovereignty of the young nation.



And so the trace remained dormant for more than a century until the early 1930's when, again catalyzed by the events of human history it assumed a new role in a modern society. Spearheaded by certain visionaries including members of the Daughters of the American Revolution who had dreamed of modern scenic motor road which would reach-back into an era of frontier life and bolstered by a period of government spending on large-scale public works projects particularly in depressed, poverty-stricken regions of the country, congress and the FDR administration commissioned the Natchez Trace Parkway and ordered the surveying, land acquisition and other preparatory procedures for the construction process. As mandated, the new parkway road would roughly follow and memorialize the old Natchez Trace footpath in addition to being designed for unhurried pleasure and recreational travel free of the ills of a burgeoning urban culture. The road would prohibit billboard advertising and commercial traffic. Consequently, it was to be a place of peace and slowness- qualities which have been effectively achieved and which seem particularly evident today.

It is clear that the advent of the automobile and the infrastructure which supports it has radically rearranged the landscape. It has generated new proximities and collapsed the distance between man- small and slow under his movement and the landscape- previously vast and impenetrable. The car has engendered a new and abstract relationship with the world beyond. It has had both a remarkable and disastrous impact, making that vast expanse and the in-between spaces accessible but also bringing with it sprawl, noise and pollution. In this light, it should be evident that the few real parkways that we do have mark an important transitional period in our country's history and, it seems, in many ways are increasingly suggestive and relevant today. These roads, as Forgey notes, "are very much worth preserving in and of themselves as signposts of our culture's optimistic efforts to come to terms with the dawning age of the automobile, to humanize the machine in a particularly American way by bringing it into direct and pleasing contact with beneficent nature."

Today, the Natchez Trace Parkway, a 449 mile linear park running from Natchez, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee is maintained by the National Park Service. Over their parallel course, parkway and trail traverse common Deep South rural landscapes from the Gulf Coastal Plain to the Cen-



tral Tennessee Plateau.

It is important to again note the physiological imperative which had a significant effect on the location of the old trace as well as the subsequent cultural imperatives which compounded this logic by further left the imprint of use and memory upon this seam- literally to the point where the soft soil has become compacted under the centuries of migrations permanently leaving a fragmented, depressed linear scar across the land. Used by so many people for so many years, this seam offers a density of archaeological remnants and historic sites from the ancient earthen burial mounds left by the prehistoric Indian cultures to the scant ruins of a colonial village to various sites associated with the Civil War. In offering periodic pull-offs which access and interpret some of these sites, the parkway acts as a *constructed allegory* telling numerous, simultaneous stories throughout its length/ duration.

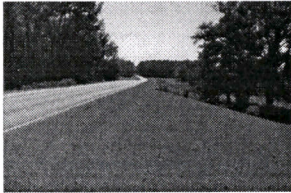
Intimately coupled with the varying contours of the land, the parkway provides a driving experience phenomenologically subtle and complex in addition to its clear historic significance. With its gracefully disposed alignments, narrow right-of ways, relatively few at-grade crossings and alternating passage across open agricultural fields and through closed, forested *tunnels*, the parkway has a richness and closeness to its environs which far exceed that of the conventional roadway. It flows with a remarkable meter and cadence. Even apart from its role memorializing an historic landscape, the parkway itself stands as one of the most visionary landscape projects ever realized in this country. It is a landscape of integration between the car, the road and the terrain. The road blends almost seamlessly into the land and thus defers to and registers its grain, its contours and many changes. Both vertical and horizontal alignments are deftly woven together to create this sense of fluid movement. As one moves along the road, it rhythmically unfolds as a series of segments- curves and compound curves which are first *seen* and then *fulfilled*. One segment flows into and overlaps the next. After driving for some time, one realizes that s/he has gradually lost his/her sense of the absolute datums of pure horizontal and pure vertical, those basic quantities endemic to the artificial/ built world. Afterall, no gradient is absolutely flat and no tree grows absolutely straight. It is really a strange, subtle, euphoric and perhaps disorienting phenomenon.

Compounding the experience is the manner in which this highly-unusual road, slipping through its natural surround, primes the senses for a kind of *perceptual unmooring* making one more aware of the presence of even the smallest and most insignificant residue of man's hand at work. As one travels along, one periodically gets a glimpse of something of the side of the road. Some leftover, peculiar object, it may be a dilapidated farm building, a rusting truck chassis, whatever. In short, being on the parkway puts ordinary things into a new light, it recontextualizes them, makes them seem somewhat weird. This reading of weirdness is generally compounded by the implicit obscurity of the woods which, along with the car's high rate of speed, prevents close scrutiny of anything. Simply because the parkway does not cut a huge and boorish swathe across the land relegating the periphery to the distance, small and otherwise hidden things can be seen along the side of the road- unexpected curiosities found within the devouring energy of a fecund land.





It cannot be overlooked that the parkway *feels* slow, despite the fact that it is a motor road. It seems somewhat fitting in this particular land- the American state through which most of it passes. Mississippi remains a primitive, backward, rural state which is still relatively undeveloped and still shows signs of its ignominious past. Ironically, such a setting for a highly-designed road project seems incredibly unlikely yet also almost inevitable. It is this reality which really adds to the appeal of the project and makes it so important- that thoughtful and enriching design might have a role in a world and for a people generally overlooked by the circles of architecture. Whereas on one level, the rural Deep South might seem unassuming and ordinary a second look reveals a magical and potent realm directly conditioned by this *ordinariness*. It is of some interest to note that such an outlook, that incredible and poetic dimensions pervade the most ordinary things right in one's own backyard, recurs almost incessantly in and is, in fact, generative in the work of William Faulkner, probably the state's most famous native son.



No doubt that highly-engineered capsule that is the car operates as the critical component within any road system including the Natchez Trace Parkway. The manner in which the world around is understood from within this fast-moving capsule has important implications. Speed radically conditions the driver's perceptions and psychological outlook. The momentum, noise and focus-constant, hypnotic and distorted conspire to produce sensations ranging from euphoria to outright weariness. In general, the experience of driving is one of drifting and detachment. It is smooth and abstract, the car shielding one from the severity and harshness caused by its movement.

Indisputably, the car, with its controlled microenvironment, tends to isolate and distance the driver from the surrounding environment. A primarily visual phenomenon, driving demands a focus which, as speed increases, correspondingly erases away that which is on the periphery. It is, however, somewhat oversimplistic to claim that the car only isolates one from the outside world to the exclusion of all else. Moving at 50 miles-per-hour over the land reveals a scale of a larger order in a very direct and convincing manner. As certain topographical features repeat in rapid succession, it gives a sense of the *grain* of a certain region. At a walking pace, such a reading would not be possible as it would be diluted and interrupted by the absorption of much more extraneous information as a function of the considerably longer time frame involved. In the same vein, it is not entirely fair to denounce driving as a purely visual phenomenon as a considerable amount of *information* translates into the body through the suspension and steering systems eliciting a powerful tactile and kinesthetic reading as well. In such unexpected ways, the car actually brings one closer to the land, if it is, indeed, more selective about the information it allows, it does intensify certain dimensions. Driving, in fact, can reveal previously hidden dimensions to the land which cannot be accessed by walking.

With that said, it can be argued that the experience of the Natchez trace Parkway really ought to culminate, in a sense, in an act of walking- walking, that is, along the old trace footpath, the shrouded narrow void which dissolves in either direction into an immeasurably deep wood. It is the real thing, not some surrogate or substitute. Being on the old trace conjures



the poignancy and meaning of history in a way which no museum could ever hope to achieve. It acts as a powerful catalyst for the imagination, allowing one to almost effortlessly form vivid impressions of what it must have been like in the past. It succeeds as such largely because it is just a void; it has no substance and thus it can not be easily possessed. It remains as a hidden space, merely a slight opening through the woods- tragically this fact also contributes to its vulnerability

Despite its undeniable value, this unique piece of terrestrial infrastructure routinely finds itself besieged in various ways. Leach has shown that the parkways today find themselves in a sort of 'identity crisis', a condition which has largely exacerbated their vulnerability. Not well understood relative to either the more familiar national parks, on the one hand, or conventional roadways, on the other, the parkways have been subject to periodic proposals to return control over them to the respective states through which they pass. The legitimate fear arise that state and local authorities, not cognizant of the value of the parkways, might, for any number of reasons, take or allow certain measures to pass which would compromise the roads. For reasons of usefulness and perceived safety, more grade crossings might be built or the curvilinear alignments might be straightened. Even without such an ominous transfer of power, regulations to protect parkway integrity such as those implemented to limit adjacent development have already been undercut or entirely ignored. All such bureaucratic maneuverings conspire to make the parkways more common and to undermine their uniqueness.

Underlying the quantifiable or easily-spoken-of reasons for preserving the parkway are the more elemental or spiritual reasons which seems can only become more relevant and meaningful as we continue the careless despoliation of the landscape. The Natchez Trace Parkway is a peaceful and reflective place that has a reassuring care and benign aspect not to be found in many public places any longer. Structurally and conceptually, it is both vast and intimate, imposing and gentle. Most significantly however strategically or sensitively designed with regard for the pleasure of driving, the parkway maintains a refreshing indifference with regard to those who travel along it. Such a reading comes about as the result of the prescribed absence of advertising. It is a world free of the intention, consumption and commodification found almost anyplace else. No *voices shout* in your face, no one is jockeying for your attention, trying to get you to pull-of and make a purchase. Such a road, a road not open to becoming an armature for commercial growth, really has radical and compelling implications. Instead, as a complex symphony in light and fluid motion, the parkway encourages a certain inwardness, a focused freedom and a chance to get lost in one's thoughts without the overabundance of signs- oversized cultural coding which is virtually impossible to ignore. To quote Yates, "this road....can be healing like the ocean I love, with its soothing roar and crash, repeated, repeated, repeated, ever different, ever the same, reliable for quiet harmony, for thought, and for concentration. This is the road to contemplation."

So, in short, the Natchez Trace Parkway can be seen as a preservation project which is now itself in need of preserving. The proposed project amounts to a series of modest additions which seek to satisfy several pragmatic needs while, at the same time, being highly-unusual themselves,





should hopefully act as an effective counterbalance to the *normalizing* trends currently at work. By making the parkway even more uncommon and positively contributing to the *spell* it casts, these additions, or *quantifiable anchors* combine as an attempt to *hold* this large and slippery landscape. Perhaps these additions, as objects themselves, might convince those who cannot see the real value of a road through the woods. Roads, indeed, appear and disappear; they are not easily possessed or understood as having potential beyond the utilitarian. Certainly in material terms, they amount to little more than a thin ribbon of asphalt. It seems more than plausible that such structural exigencies endemic to roads have a great deal to do with the difficulty many have in recognizing their value.

So it becomes evident that this project rests upon an idea- optimistic and rather modest in a sense. It is a proposal to strengthen the parkway from the inside-out, to clarify and make manifest its energy. Needless to say, the design and implementation of regulations and codes which do such things as control adjacent development have had enormous and positive impact in preserving the parkway as well as other historic landscapes around the country. Like anything else, though, such measures are never one-hundred percent foolproof. This project should not be seen as a proposed substitute for such proven methods but as a potential aid to these methods and the overall effort to protect the parkway. It really amounts to an attempt to change people's minds and allow them to see the parkway in a new light. With even a few more people made aware of the parkway's value, perhaps the divisive and coercive undertones which can result from the implementation of regulations might be abated. As a 449-mile linear park often only several hundred feet wide, the parkway closely passes many square miles of land beyond its control, but land which still remains visible and therefore has a direct influence upon the parkway driving experience. This attenuation is clearly the core structural liability for any parkway and is of a magnitude that cannot be realistically solved by land control measures alone. The property-rights movement is quite strong in this country as evidenced by the fact that infractions to these controls have already occurred.



The proposed project attempts to rigorously adhere to the basic structural and phenomenological mechanics of the parkway, to both its physical and temporal logic. In short, it entails nine rest areas/stopping-points' spaced approximately one hour from one another with slight variations made in this frequency in order that these additions be sited in zones of close proximity between the two parallel paths, the parkway road and the old trace footpath. Each rest area/stopping-point' acts as a *stitch* of sorts- tying together these two parallel paths. Each rest area/stopping-point' consists of two prototype buildings- one immediate to the road, the other situated along the old trace. The pairing/coupling of these two buildings becomes the reflection or condensate of the implicit dichotomies between the two paths. Although the buildings themselves are prototypes and thus remain internally constant, each rest area/stopping-point' would be different from the others depending upon the distance between the two paths and the orientation of the road at that particular point. In so doing, each rest area/stopping-point' would vary in amplitude as well as frequency. In one case, the parkway and the old trace might be very close to each other and then so would the two buildings. In another case, the two paths and thus the two buildings might be further apart, perhaps even several hundred yards



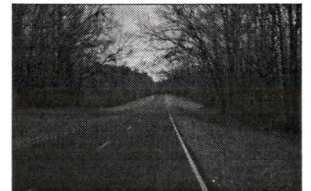
thus requiring a short walk to reach the second building. This logic recognizes that much potential resides within accrued, repeated, sequential objects and in this manner, the project clarifies and intensifies the basic *twoness* inherent within the Natchez Trace Parkway.

So disposed, the rest areas/'stopping-points' become periodic markers upon the land- synchronously registered and understood, perhaps even counted in the rider's mind. Every hour or so, the driver comes upon a new iteration of a common theme, always different yet always the same. A series of potential pauses in the trip and when to expect them gradually becomes imprinted in the driver's memory. If one is missed, the next lies only about one hour ahead. In this way, no single rest area needs absorb all the load or becomes overly-important because such a situation would be truly antithetical to the diffuse and attenuated ease of the road.

Another variation within the nine additions exists, informed by basic pragmatic needs. The nine rest areas/'stopping-points' would be arranged in a *major-minor* pattern as follows: *mMmmMmmMm* where the second, fifth and eighth units would also include gasoline and snack-food provisions. Spaced about three hours from one another, these three *major* rest areas roughly correspond to the times and distances when the driver traveling along the parkway from one to another would need gasoline. Perhaps most importantly, their presence alleviates the annoying current situation where one needs to exit the parkway in order to buy gas- a disruption in the *spell* already mentioned.

It should be evident that the issue of measure has already surfaced as one of the critical underlying themes informing this thesis project. As previously discussed, the car itself assumes a central and necessary role in any road project. In a sense, the car can be seen as a measuring tool outfitted with numerous devices, (odometer, speedometer, clock, etc.) which mark its own progress. Such devices increase, in fact, even create a syncopation and regularity that has a direct bearing upon the mindset of the driver conditioning his/her sense of time and distance, anticipation and planning, etc. They clearly impact the experience of the road and can easily come to have even greater *presence* and determining influence than that which transpires in the world outside. It seems reasonable to extend this metaphor and to place it outside of the car. The rest areas/'stopping-points' become external units of measure in an attempt to integrate the abstraction of measure with the natural and phenomenological world outside of the car. The driver now has another tool of measure at his disposal, the primary difference being that it now exists outside. It is critical to see that measure in this case should not be seen as a mechanism for control or ownership but instead as a fundamental and deeply-human conceptual apparatus, as a poetic device by which to *elicit a degree of cerebral buoyancy by evenly stretching the expanse beyond the immediate*. It is an attempt to recalibrate, to balance and to create an even synthesis by breaking the schism between one who sees and one who knows.

It is no accident that the proposed project entails nine rest areas/'stopping-points.' What might at first seem like overkill derives from extensive thought and research. First, at 449 miles and 50 miles-per-hour, the time required to travel the entire length of the parkway roughly equals nine hours which, in turn, corresponds rather neatly to one full day of driving. In addition, the





period of one hour is a natural and ubiquitous temporal frame, a unit of time through which most people divide and measure the passage of any given day. Based upon several informal scenarios, it seemed almost self-evident that a one-hour spacing system within the rest areas/stopping-points' best corresponded to people's internal clocks in addition to being the period after which many people begin to tire when driving. A shorter interval seemed too frequent whereas a longer interval would result in the nine stops being too far from one another.

The significantly greater number of rest areas/'stopping-points' also facilitates the dispersion of people more evenly across the entire length of the parkway. It becomes a means to remediating the inevitable load of tourism which descends upon the parkway. Such a plan is really of no small consequence. As it now stands, the parkway includes two nuclei which happen to be quite different from one another. They share a common trait, however, in not functioning well in part because such nuclei are antithetical to the spirit and the mechanics of the parkway. One, the Jeff Busby rest area, a nondescript service station located at about the halfway point along the road, offers the only gasoline over its entire course. Consequently, nearly everyone stops here and it can quickly become somewhat overcrowded. By contrast, the other nucleus, the National Park Service Visitor Center and parkway headquarters at Tupelo, sees little activity despite its interesting interpretive displays. People simply do not find themselves inclined to stop there. Indeed, it does keep some archaeological artifacts taken from various points along the seam through which the parkway runs but much of the collection is currently kept at the Center for American History of the Eugene Barker Texas History Center of the University of Texas at Austin! As such, many fascinating and representative remnants and fragments from the prehistoric tribes to the colonial settlers remain inaccessible, unseen by the people driving along the parkway. In response, each of the nine rest areas/stopping-points' also would provide for the display of certain of these artifacts. Each then doubles as a museum of sorts. Just as the nine rest areas/stopping-points' spread people across the parkway, they also do so for the reclaimed artifacts as well. It then requires little effort for someone who has stopped to use the restrooms or fill the tank to also see a small sample of the artifacts associated with the Natchez Trace Parkway. What s/he sees will depend upon which of the nine rest areas/'stopping-points' s/he decides to use. It is also worth noting that evenly distributing people across the whole parkway ought to aid in preserving the solitary experience, the feeling of being alone with one's thoughts which seems to be so critical to the whole experience. Many pull-offs do offer such opportunities but tend to go unused. Hopefully, the new rest areas/'stopping-points' can effectively catalyze the decision to temporarily get-off the road.

As far as program is concerned, the two continue to respond to the oppositions/dichotomies between the two paths already discussed and in so doing, suggest two different degrees of *stopping*. The building immediate to the parkway road houses the functions typically associated with any rest area, i.e.- the restrooms, telephones, soda machines and a map. It is intended as an end in itself for those who want to quickly stop, use the restrooms, make a phone call, etc. and then continue on before the engine cools. For others, it really only acts as a precursor to the second building, the viscous-looking wedge-shaped form marking the old trace. Each of





these buildings contains equipment which monitors the weather. All nine are to be connected to one another allowing the motorist to discover what the conditions are like or expected to be at the stops ahead in his/her journey. It allows one, if you will, to see into the future. Most of the time, such information really has no purpose besides being interesting. Occasionally however, the provision of such information might have consequences with regard to safety. For instance, if one has stopped at rest area/stopping-point' M2 just south of Jackson and sees that torrential rains have been moving across m6 near Tupelo, s/he may have reason to avoid traveling at that time. It thus seems logical that any rest area offer such information but they really never do. In addition, the second floor is space reserved for a ranger station to be either permanently or temporarily occupied.

In both formal and material terms, the two prototype buildings continue to interpret and draw-upon the recognition of the implicit dichotomies between these two parallel paths. In both cases, one in particular, a material transformation acts as the critical design element resulting in unexpected and highly unusual constructions. To preface this argument, it can easily be argued that the pervasive standardization of materials and methods of construction today conspires as a sort of *dulling mechanism*. Predictable and often devoid of care, the typical and generic materials and methods fail to engage and prime the imagination- fail to act as catalysts for seeing the world in new and exciting ways. Highly unconventional, the methods and materials developed in the two prototype buildings attempt to provide an alternative to this unfortunate trend.

First, in the building immediate to the road, that which contains the basic rest area program, the activating agent is the woven skin which wraps around the entire volume. Like a basket, but at a much larger scale, it consists of an alternating weave of 1x4 pine boards, planed-down to increase their flexibility and then bound into a matrix of thin metal members. Of course, such a configuration has tremendous structural rigidity relative to the amount of material utilized. Such a wrapping allows for the even penetration of air and light, resulting in a refreshing airiness within. As air gently filters through the woven boards and light becomes evenly mottled throughout, the inside becomes somewhat buoyant- it seems to breathe. It is just enough to allow for the outside to creep in while protecting the occupants from the torrid sun and stiff winds. In plan, too, the building departs from the ordinary. Within the wrapping, as if slightly disrupted by the turbulence from the road, loosely-disposed enclosures seem to float within the woven wrapping, resulting in perspectively-distorted, angled circulation spaces between them. These inner enclosures are clad in thin, translucent, yellow acrylic panels allowing light, but not the eye, to penetrate, affording a warm glow within. All in all, this building has a coarseness and tenuousness which directly contrasts to the refined solidity of the second building set along the old trace.

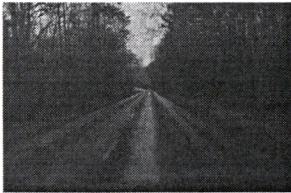
The second building, that which contains the meteorological equipment and ranger station has enormous implications for the project at large and, in a sense, carries the distilled and compressed energy of the whole. Again, a material transformation becomes the activating agent and, in this case, becomes charged with the heavy responsibility of making people reconsider the parkway as a whole. It is almost entirely clad in a skin of thin glass panels filled with wax. The wax melts and becomes transparent





when exposed to a certain amount of heat. Considerable research and development went into the creation of a full-scale prototype wax panel and some discussion of that process seems appropriate at this point.

Such an idea grew out of the simple observation that paraffin wax undergoes a solid-liquid phase-change at a temperature of 130 F which is relatively close to the normal range of temperature we experience everyday- it is *within reach*, so to speak. In addition, the phase-change causes the material to transform from a translucent solid to a transparent liquid. Such obvious potential could not be ignored. Development then proceeded in several iterations where each successive time, increased amounts of other ingredients were added to the paraffin in order to progressively lower its melting point. Research suggested that white petrolatum (vasaline) and mineral spirits could be added to the wax in order to achieve this goal. When combined, a homogeneous mixture results which makes sense, given that all three ingredients derive from the same petroleum base. The sixth and final iteration combined 50% paraffin wax, 45% petrolatum and 5% spirits yielding a melting point of 116 F. Exposed to direct sun and an ambient air temperature of 90 F, the wax becomes liquid in under an hour. The prototype proves that the idea indeed works although further development and fine-tuning of the mixture would be necessary before application in a real building project. It could be argued that the wax panel allows one to *see heat*- to experience an incredible transformation that allows one sense, (the eyes) to understand a phenomenon usually understood by another (the body/skin)



Sheathed almost entirely in these wax panels, the second building literally responds directly to thermal change- to the fluctuations in temperature which occur every day. As a result, the space within swells, undulates, breathes- it is quite literally alive, expanding and contracting, dissolving and congealing. Activated only by the sun and its energy, it is bound materially to a larger order beyond the ordinary and the everyday. Because it reacts to heat, it is responsive to that which is endemic and overwhelmingly present in the South. Indeed, this building seems particularly appropriate in the South and, in fact, would not work nearly as well in colder climates.

This building too acts as a measuring device, registering diurnal and seasonal changes in thermal energy. The building becomes a phenomenological apparatus pregnant with implications; the material is highly-charged and carries with it the potential to heighten awareness and sensitivity to the world all around, to stimulate people to *see* the magic, the volatility and the beauty within the environment. It is a phenomenon that just might be able to help reveal some of the extraordinary dimensions latent within the everyday world.

The wax building also has a specific purpose both in terms of orientation and in terms of form. While the first building is sited according to the local position of the parkway road, the wax building remains fixed in orientation, all nine aligned to the *primary tangent* of the Natchez Trace Parkway, approximately 37 SSW. The *primary tangent* refers to the hypothetical straight line between Natchez and Nashville, the most direct line between the two opposite endpoints of the parkway. If all the infinite tangents to every curve and idiosyncrasy within the actual road were to be added, the result would, of course, be the *primary tangent*. As such, the building adheres to a fixed



constant on a macro-scale and, in so doing, becomes a neutral register both of one's direction and the passage of the day. It is rooted within the abstract logic of the compass in addition to the sun's energy. The wedge shape reinforces these two connections as it *opens-up* to the south-south-west and has a strong sense of direction, as if it were *facing* Natchez and the sun in the distance. The combined shape and orientation serve to *locate* the driver relative to the larger and unseen logic determining his/her journey.

In some ways, these two prototype buildings, despite being quite unusual, still seem eerily familiar, reminiscent of preexisting realities. Indeed, it could be reasonably asserted that these two buildings at least partially succeed in *conjuring-up* the latent spirits emanating from two specific southern vernacular types- the dogtrot house and the small, rural church, respectively. Such modest, ubiquitous structures evince an uncanny toughness and indifference, standing lonely and isolated in a hot and fecund land. Queer and distorted, yet indisputably *ordinary*, such buildings reveal a strange but convincing convergence of the "actual and the apocryphal."

The first building immediate to the parkway road and wrapped in woven boards recalls the dogtrot house, often found somewhat dilapidated and in the slow process of yielding to nature. Formally, it consists of two or more independent volumes beneath one roof with open, thru spaces in-between. These spaces become slightly-elevated frames for the landscape beyond. In its typically out-of-plumb state, it warps and distorts both its own spaces and the reading of the landscape seen through it. It does strange things to the expectations of perspectival vision. Loosely and informally assembled with a raised floor and an overhanging roof, it is not shy about its rough and often disjointed tectonics.

In the same vein, the second building, the *wax wedge* which marks the old trace seems to recall some of the compelling aspects of the small, rural church. In contrast to the rather open dogtrot house, the small, rural church, often painted completely white and with little or no fenestration, reads as surprisingly flat, almost without perspective. From certain vantage points, it can look like an abstract, two-dimensional shape cut out of the sky. It has a stereometric simplicity and muteness beguiling any simple understanding of its scale. It foils the eye in its incessant attempts to penetrate its shell. Haunting, particularly on a moonlit night, and strongly inward-turning, it is one of the most powerful icons of the rural South.

So connected to such timeless Southern types, the two prototype buildings themselves might be capable of eliciting a deep and meaningful resonance within the human psyche. Highly-specific forms, intuitively-generated, they combine as an attempt to intensify the mystery, meaning and beauty of the parkway. Such new ingredients in the parkway system seem right and almost inevitable, respectful and appropriate without resorting to nostalgia or dumb mimicry of existing buildings. Hopefully, the two suggest a substantial absorption of the genius loci of the Natchez Trace Parkway, particularly due to the fact that the connections back to the southern vernacular were only realized in hindsight, after they had already been designed.

Having described the intricacies of the various components of the project, it seems important to again zoom-out and take several synoptic and com-



prehensive views of the overall implications of making the proposed additions. Such examinations ought to shed more light upon the enriching potential within the thesis project. As one travels along the parkway and stops at (or just passes) one or more of the rest areas/stopping-points' over the course of a day, one is effectively negotiating a multivariable function where time, location and temperature change relative to one another. The results, or solution (to extend the metaphor) clearly register in several ways but nowhere more poignantly than within the wax building, the degree to which it is melted reflecting the time of day, weather conditions season and position along the road. Such a reading is contingent upon experiencing several of them over the course of a day. To use an example, after embarking upon his/her journey early in the morning from Natchez, the driver stops at **m1** and finds the wax building there solid and translucent. Continuing on for several hours, the driver stops at **m4** to find the wax building there in the process of melting, somewhere in-between solid and liquid, translucent and transparent. Several more hours of driving finds the driver at **m7** at about 3:00pm where the wax building there is very warm after a long day in the sun. The skin has completely melted, liquid and transparent. Totally dissolved away at the height of its energy, the building seamlessly admits the outside world.

The conceptual and actual links between the nine, new proposed additions act as a subtle and gentle mechanism of *compression* imbuing the parkway with a new tautness and strength. It is of importance to distinguish *compression* from *perceptual shortening*, it seems unlikely that the new additions would make the parkway *feel shorter*. *Compression* is only intended as a means to unify the parkway and to aid in the prehension of it as a special *unit*- more purposeful, less incidental, less cloaked and worthy of continued protection and preservation. Again, the project, informed internally by the parkway itself, amounts as an effort to make people more aware of the value of this unique piece of terrestrial infrastructure.

Finally, it is worth noting that implicit within the project is the relationship between static and dynamic, the important point being that this distinction might not be as obvious as initially supposed. In fact, it could be said that an inversion of sorts occurs wherein one actually becomes the other. On one hand, the fixed building of wax is in constant diurnal flux and, on the other hand, at whatever speed, the experience of being in a car, abstract and encapsulated, amounts to a strange sensation of stillness. At times one actually feels as if s/he is not moving; outside, one is exposed to the ever-changing forces of nature whereas, inside the car, one is static and fixed. The world inside is controlled and unchanging and the outside can end-up seeming somewhat unreal.

In short, this project resides in the optimistic belief that, by modest means, the enormous can be achieved, that is, helping people to better see the magic and beauty in the ordinary, everyday world. Such is one of the major underlying intentions of the extraordinary Natchez Trace Parkway.



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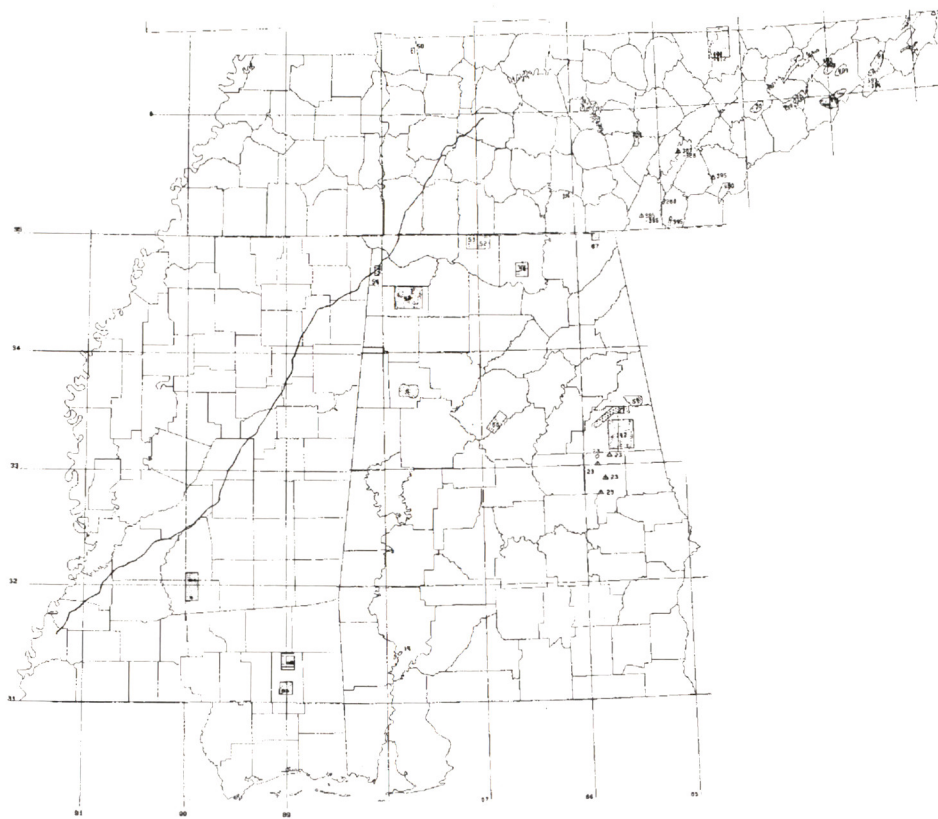
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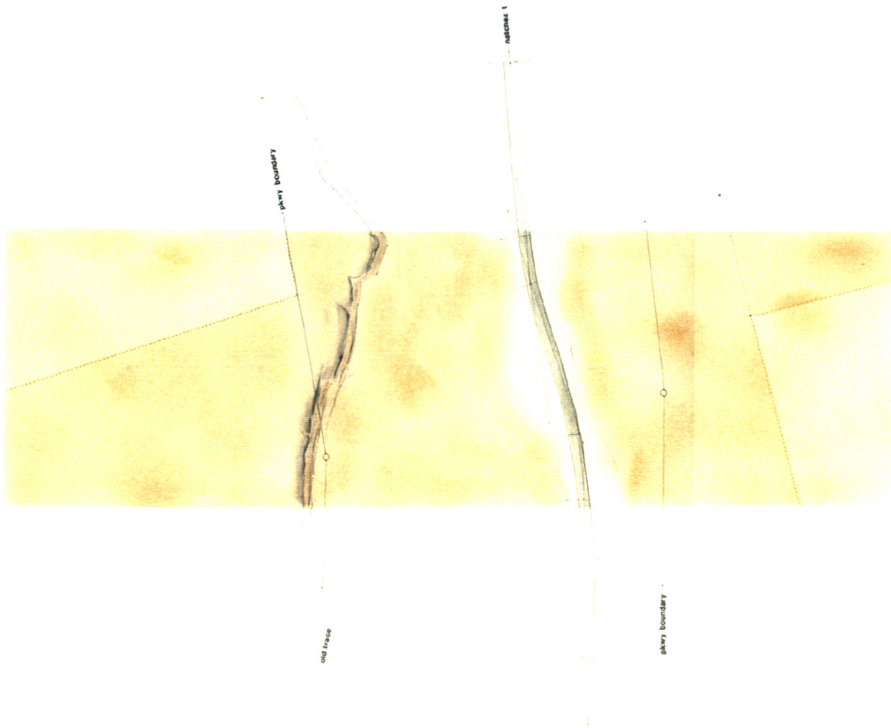


TWO ROADS DIVERGE INTO  
RADICALLY DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS  
OF TIME AND SPACE.



**NATCHEZ TRACE PARKWAY**

dashes and bars indicated zones of close proximity between the parkway and the old trace.



loess drawing PRESENCE

PRESENCE on the road

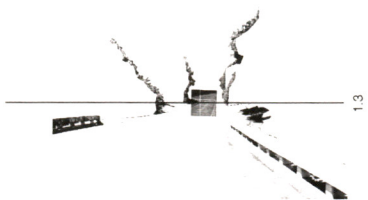
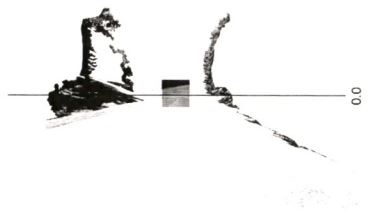
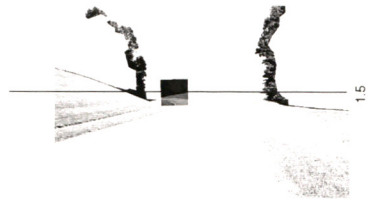


**ON AND OFF THE TRACE**  
in and out of the woods



THE VIEW FROM THE ROAD





## MECHANICS OF THE ROAD

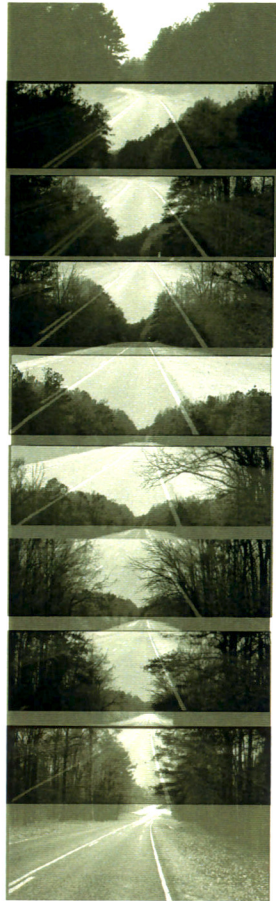
curves and compound curves.



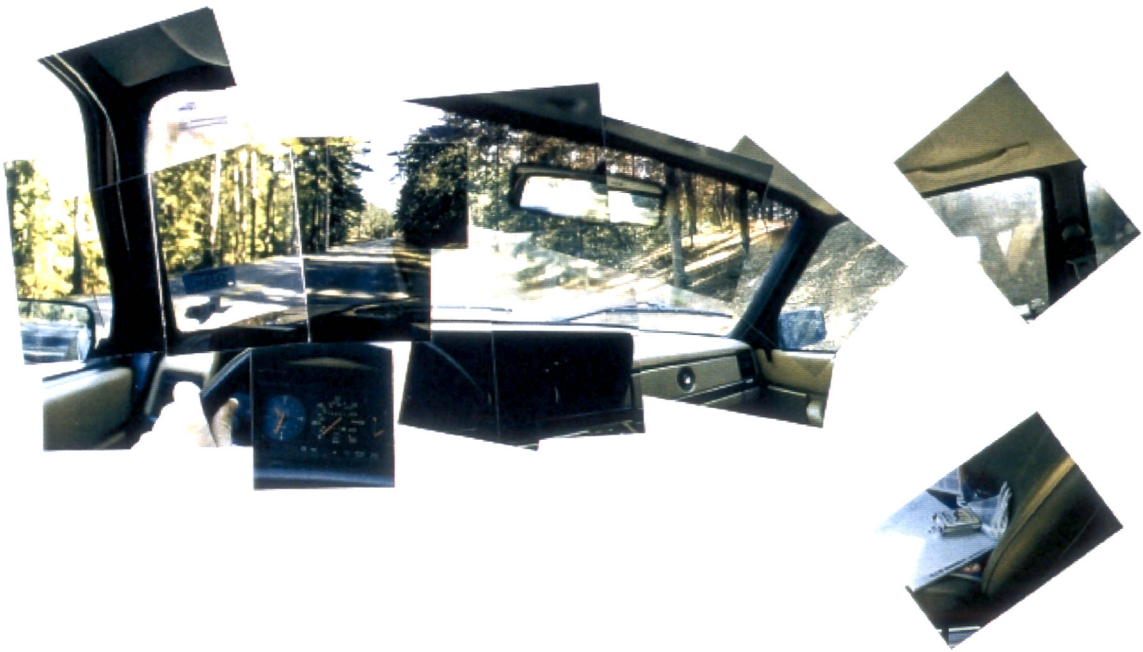


**turning one's head**

the thick, dense wall dissolves into a thin screen...



**an expanding and contracting 'POUCH'** *to borrow terminology*



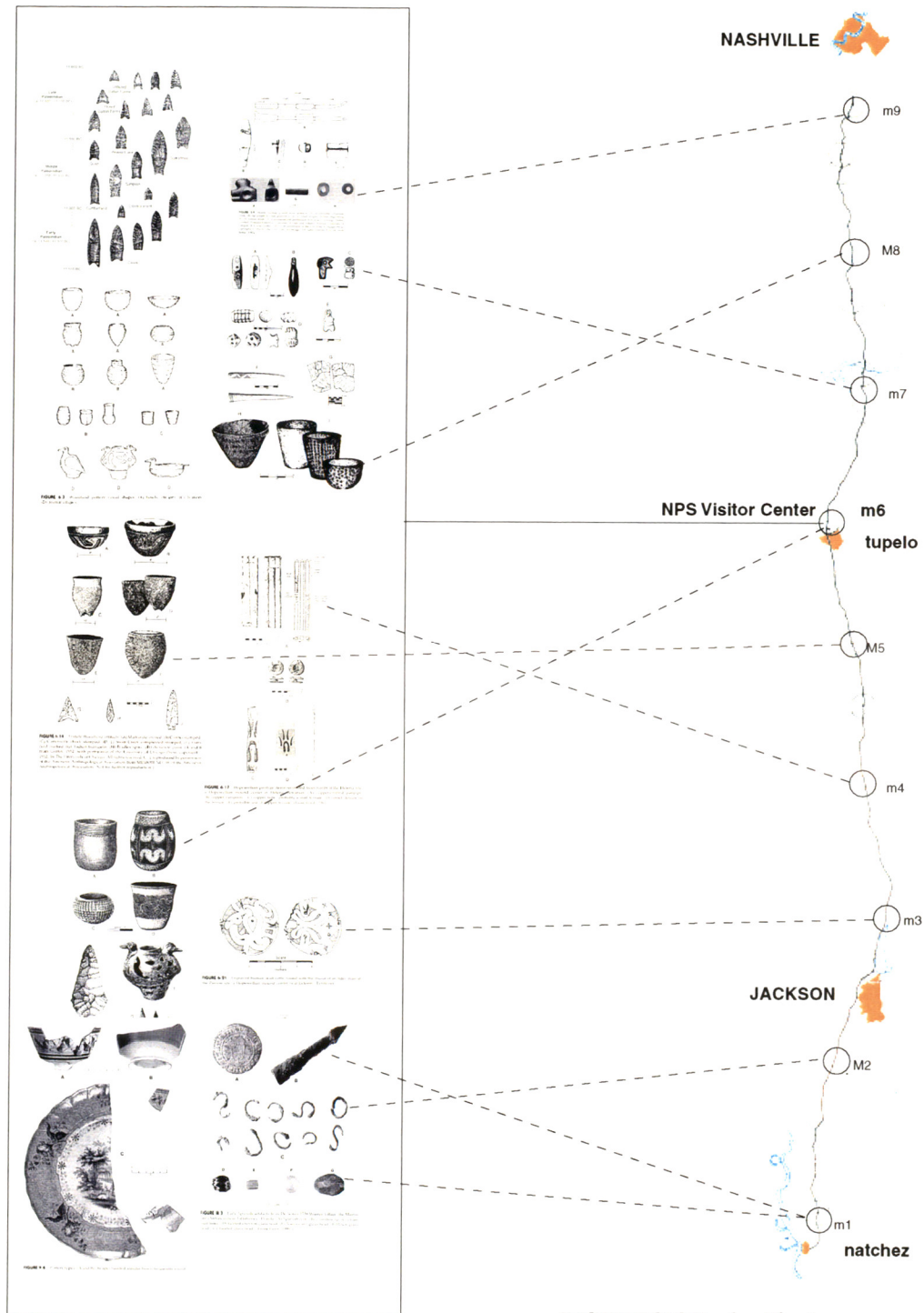
THE VIEW FROM WITHIN





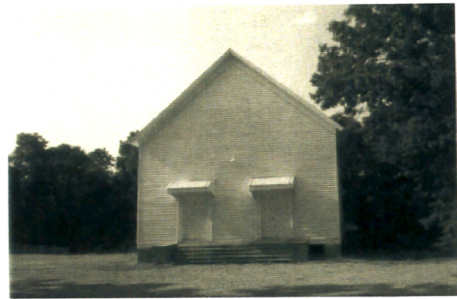
## PROPOSED ADDITIONS

- m:** minor rest areas/'stopping-points'
- M:** major rest areas/'stopping-points'  
includes gasoline and snack food service.





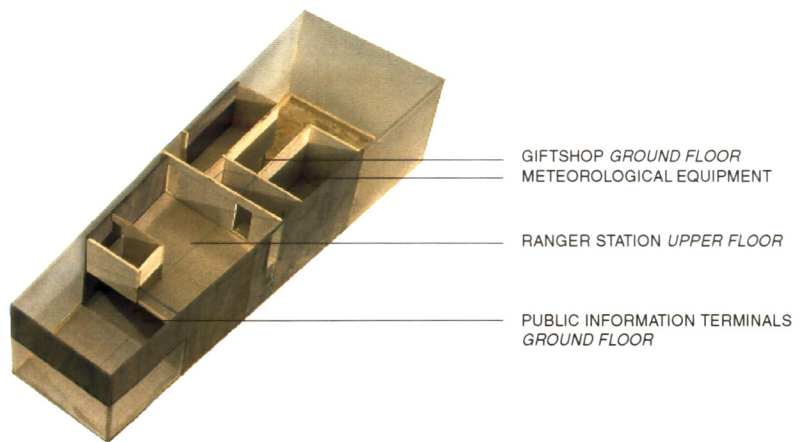
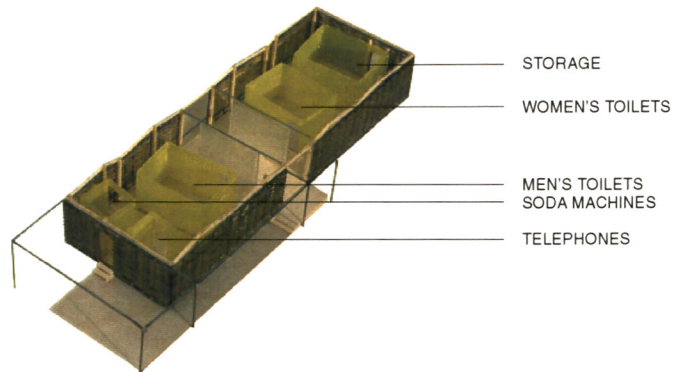




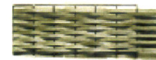
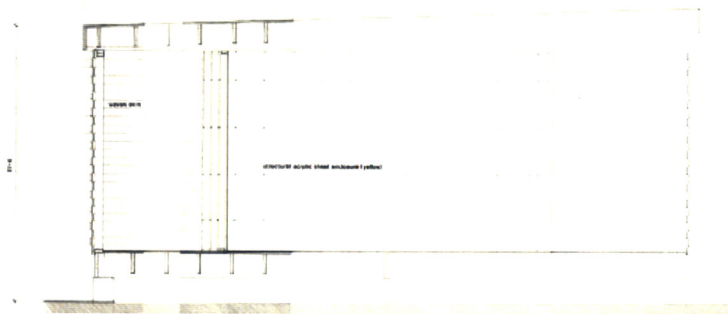
***ALIEN YET INVIOLABLY DURABLE...***

William Faulkner fr. Knight's Gambit

**THE DOGTROT HOUSE AND  
THE SMALL, RURAL CHURCH.**



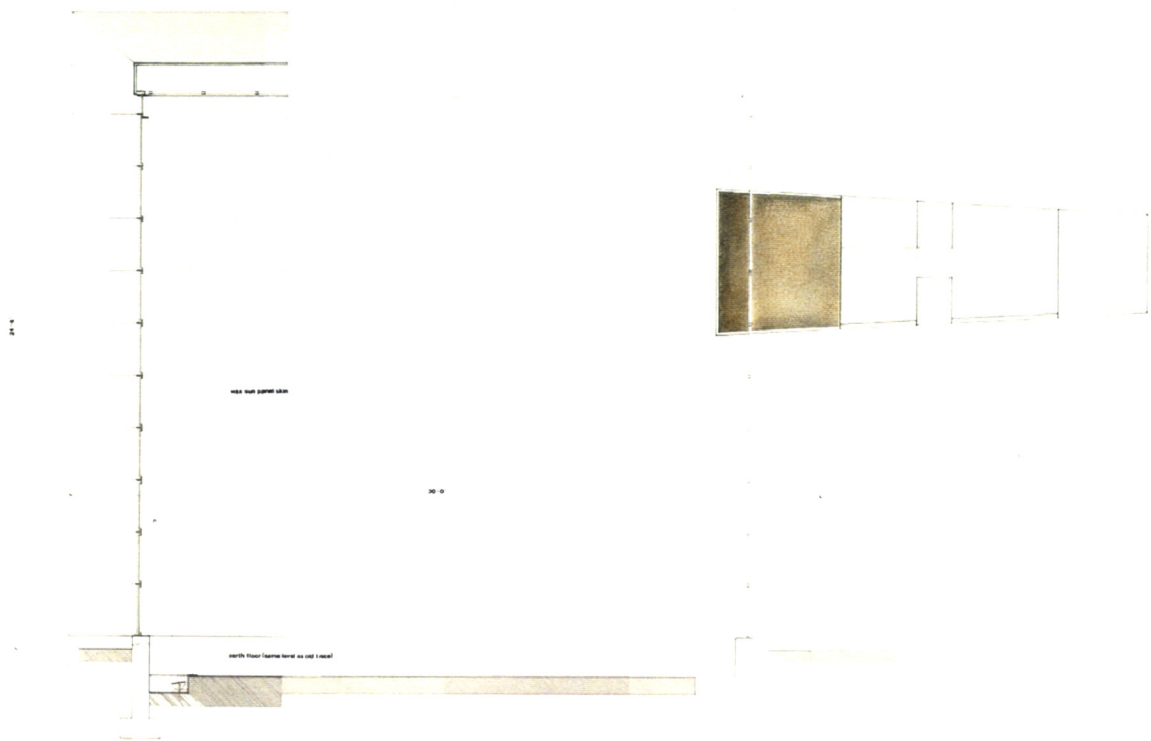
## RESPECTIVE PROGRAMS



WALL  
CORNER  
THICKNESS  
OLD  
LEFT



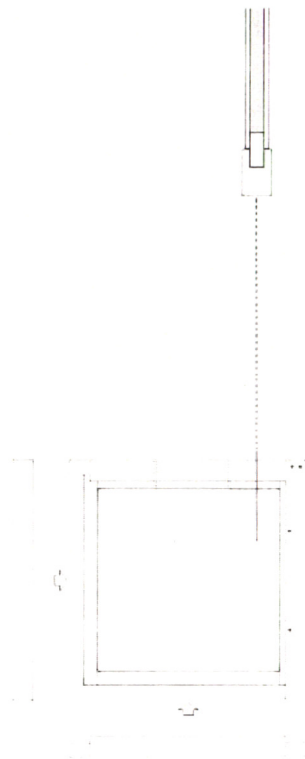
## BUILDING SECTION



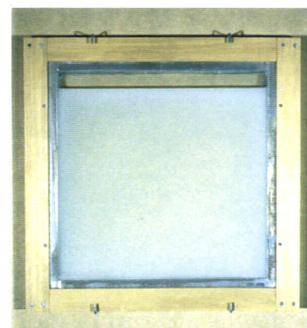
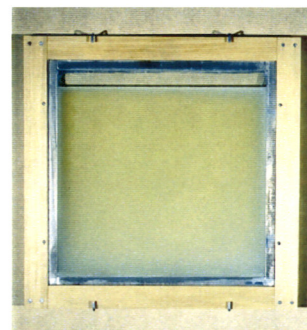
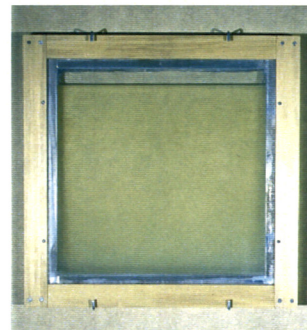
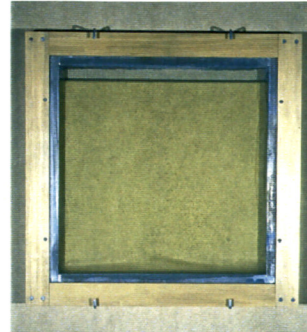
SLIP  
REFRIG  
CUTTING  
NEW  
HEAVY



**BUILDING SECTION**



1/8" tempered glass  
wax  
3/8" x 1" welded aluminum frame  
hardwood frame



## 'WAX' PROTOTYPE PANEL

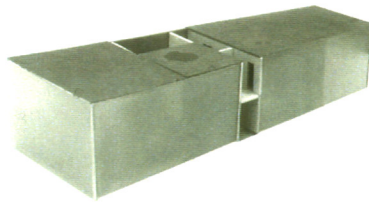
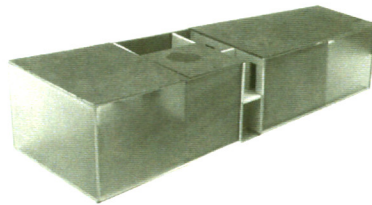
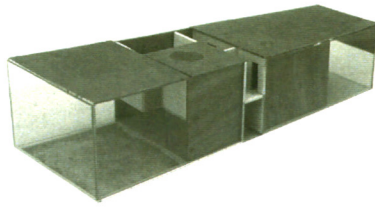
### SEEING HEAT

admixture ingredients:

50% paraffin wax  
45% white petrolatum (Vaseline)  
5% mineral spirits

mixture yields 116 F melting point  
*solid-liquid phase change*

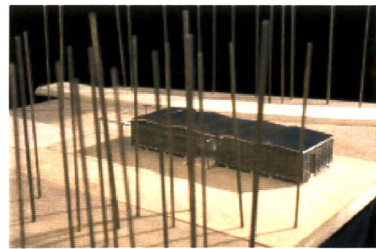
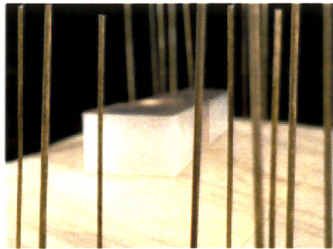
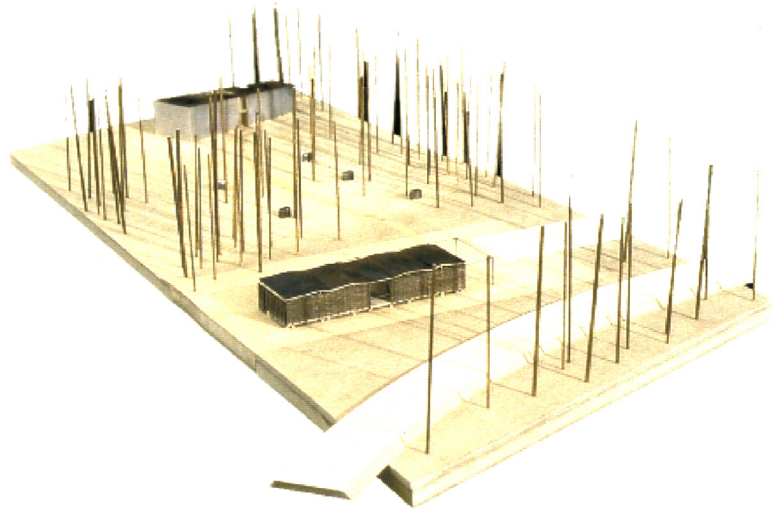
\*additives to reduce melting-point of wax from ~130 F to ~116 F.



## **LIQUID BUILDING**

as the ambient temperature rises, the 'wax' melts into transparency.







***THREE TRACES***