

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD



## Artists' Retreat in the Florida Jungle

Office Building Resurgence

Computer Delineation Awards



# PROJECT DIARY: The story of two thirty-something architects and their ideal commission, the ATLANTIC CENTER FOR THE ARTS, in an unlikely setting, the Florida “jungle.”



by Karen Stein

fledgling practice. Putting their own firm on hold, they join the Cambridge, Mass., office of landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates. Thompson had been an assistant to Van Valkenburgh while at Harvard's Graduate School of Design; Rose was a student in his class. Thompson's father, retired in Florida and a board member of the Atlantic Center for the Arts (ACA), tells the duo that the institution, founded in 1978 by local sculptor Doris “Doc” Leeper as a working retreat for artists, is planning an expansion. On his recommendation, the architects are added to a list of some 10 potential firms for the project. Ted Potter, executive director of ACA, is wary of a family recommendation. “It’s usually a minus,” he says, but after reviewing their portfolio he is genuinely “intrigued.” Thompson's father recuses himself from any decisions regarding the commission. On a family visit to Florida, Thompson and Rose tour the site in New Smyrna Beach, a community of 18,000 people outside Daytona, and acquaint themselves with the place and the project.

**MARCH 1992** Thompson and Rose are one of five firms invited by ACA to interview for the commission. Provided with a thorough six-page document called a “Space Needs Evaluation” that outlines the center's mission—“a unique environment wherein creative experimentation is pursued in a protected atmosphere”—and physical requirements—workspaces for dance, drama, painting and drawing, sculpture, music, and writing—the architects begin intensive research into the program and the site knowing that they have less built work to show at the interview than the other candidates. Rose says the strategy is to “excite the client with a deeper

**Project:** Leeper Studio Complex, Atlantic Center for the Arts  
New Smyrna Beach, Florida  
**Architect:** Thompson and Rose Architects—Maryann Thompson and Charles Rose, principals-in-charge; Michael Grant, Joseph McDonald, Warren Van Wees, Michael Breau, Francisco Thebaud, Patrick Maguire, Tim Downing, Lisa Iwamoto, Dana Weeder, and Julie Kline, project team  
**Engineers:** Oemulgee Associates—

Wayne King (structural); Jerry K. Finley (civil); M-Engineering—Shige Moroi and Brad Shaffer (mechanical, electrical); PSI-Jammal Associates—Don Stites and Don Budnovich (geotechnical)  
**Consultants:** Hanson Taylor Bellomo Herbert—Glen Herbert (landscape); Cambridge Acoustical (acoustical)  
**General Contractor:** Epoch Properties—Dean Sandroni, construction manager

When Maryann Thompson and Charles Rose started practicing architecture, they were as eager for work as many and perhaps more focused than most. Even before finishing graduate school—Rose in 1987 and Thompson, with a joint degree in architecture and landscape, in 1989—the husband-and-wife team already had a project of their own. Commissioned to do a master plan for the Hartsbrook School in Hadley, Mass., they were on their way to securing their professional reputations well before either celebrated a thirtieth birthday. While the scope of the project—from landscape design to architecture—was ideally suited to their vision of a multidisciplinary practice, their involvement was drawn out over years. A subsequent commission for an arts center seemed ideal for Thompson, a painter, and Rose, an accomplished pianist, though its realization, too, was less than immediate. This project was to provide the lesson that more seasoned architects than Thompson, now 36, and Rose, 37, still struggle with: Architecture takes time.

**1989-1991** Work on the Hartsbrook School is at a lull by the winter of 1989, and Maryann Thompson and Charles Rose have no major projects to sustain their

understanding of the site.” To counter what they perceive as their underdog status among local firms with principals up to twice their age, the architects produce five alternate schemes for the presentation to “generate credibility and show enthusiasm,” says Rose.

The schemes preserve the site's low scale, jungle-like thicket of palmetto shrubs and twisted scrub-oak by proposing individual pavilions for each creative discipline. The buildings are joined by a boardwalk that appears to hover above the dense vegetation. The schemes interpret the 67-acre parcel as a spatial experience: a labyrinthian place where buildings are invisible 30 ft away. The lost-and-then-found quality is reinforced by the forms and materials, which are based on interpretations of the Southern vernacular Cracker style of architecture. Their youth is “not a concern,” says the ACA's Potter, who feels an instant rapport for Thompson and Rose's approach—a mystery of architecture that is obscured, then gradually revealed—pronouncing their ideas “a conceptual work of art.” Driving back to the Daytona airport, the architects stop to phone home, and learn they got the job.

## SPRING-SUMMER 1992

With their baby son asleep on the studio floor, Thompson and Rose work late nights developing their plan for ACA. Rose calls the design process “a total collaboration.” Thompson elaborates: “We both sketch for awhile and then come together and figure out which ideas we like.” After establishing an overall strategy for the complex of six buildings inserted into the lush landscape, “We each take a building to develop, then we trade and work on each other's buildings,” explains Thompson. What accounts for this seemingly effortless sharing of ideas? Thompson has a theory: “We did one of those around-the-world tickets where we traveled [from September, 1984 to August, 1985] with one set of clothes and backpacks full of sketchbooks. When we say it's like [17th-century] Katsura [the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, Japan], it's understood.” The ease of collabora-

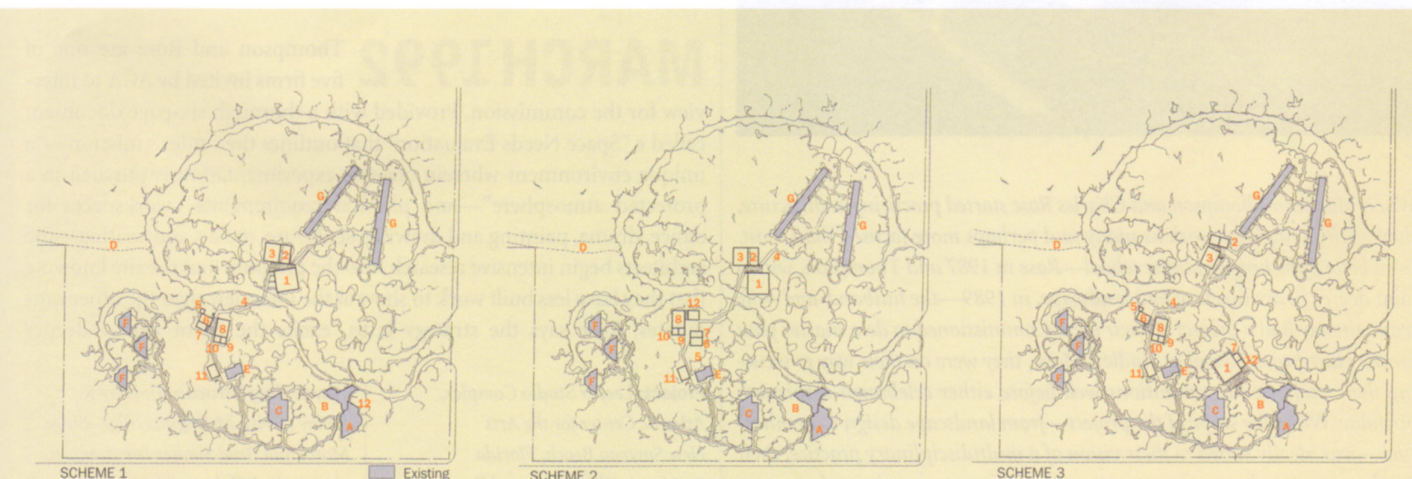
tion on this project is reinforced by the appeal of the program, which Thompson describes as “the [idealistic] kind you get in school.”

For this project, however, they credit additional collaborators. Working in drawing and model, the architects meet regularly with Potter and an advisory committee, including playwright Edward Albee, choreographer Trisha Brown, photographer Jack Mitchell, and poet Charleen Swansea, to understand the intense nature of the ACA's artist-in-residence program, where mid-career artists apply for the opportunity to interact with “master artists,” who are recognized leaders in their field. The sense of synthesizing that characterizes ACA's mission influences not only the site strategy but also the detailing and materials of the individual buildings. Thompson pays her client what she considers the ultimate compliment, by saying of the back-and-forth between architect and client: “We're treated like artists.”

Gradually, the individual buildings become emblematic of the disciplines contained within. In the painting studio, wood louvers and giant light monitors slicing through an expressionistic array of wood beams cast painterly layerings of light and shadow. The nearly windowless but high space of the music room is purposely “insular and uplifting,” say the architects. The upper walls of the dance workshop are splayed outward like a ballerina's uplifted palm in the downward arc of the *port de bras*. The roof of the sculpture studio hangs over an outdoor work area to reinforce a flow of space where inside and outside blur. The theater is cloaked in a mysterious wood box with a protruding glass lobby, and the library, hidden at the back of the site, is “antisocial” to the grouping, but has the only view out of the site toward nearby Turnbull Bay.

At the end of 1993, with fundraising under way, Potter leaves for a new job in New Orleans and Suzanne Fetscher, who had been with ACA in various posts since May, 1990, is made the new executive director. The

**New Smyrna Beach, south of Daytona, is developing a reputation as an artists' community. The Atlantic Center for the Arts owns some 67 acres adjacent to Turnbull Bay, a tidal estuary.**



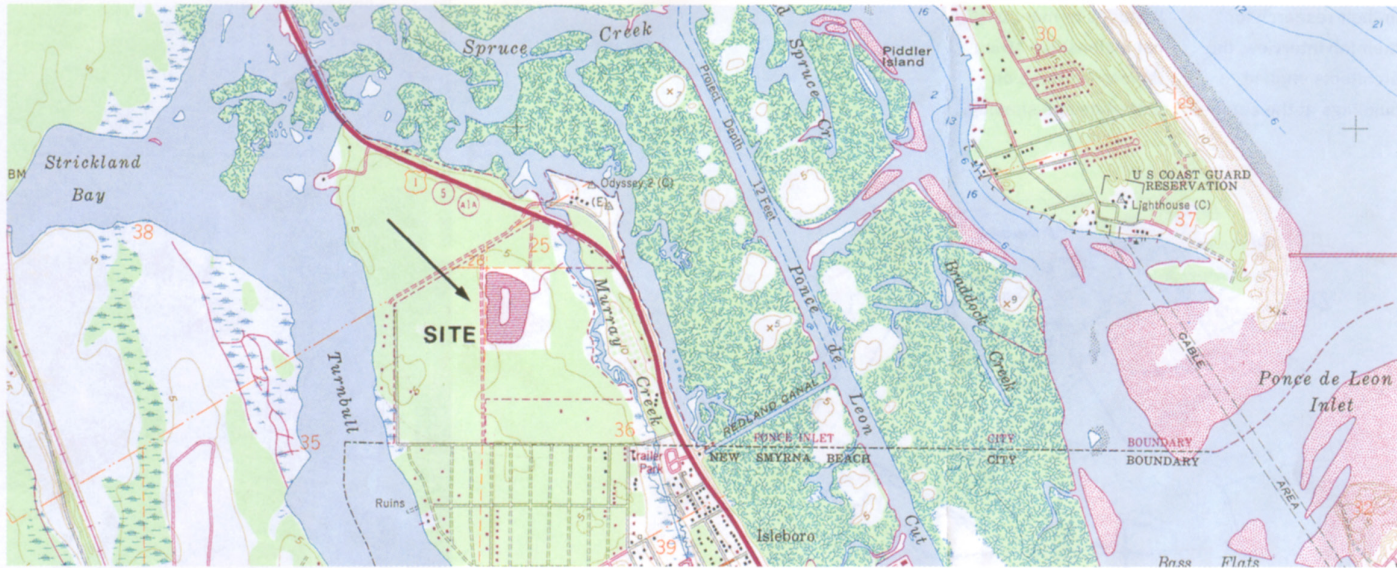
## ONE IDEA, FIVE OPTIONS

**When Maryann Thompson and Charles Rose** went to New Smyrna Beach to interview for the ACA commission in March, 1992, they came equipped with five alternate conceptual proposals. While all

of the proposals show the various parts of the program—drama work space, dance studio, sculpture studio, painting studio, music studio, and library—scattered along a boardwalk, each has a different

relationship of parts. Since the ACA provides a three-week or longer working retreat for artists of all disciplines and is not a performing institution, there is no stark public-private delineation. However, several



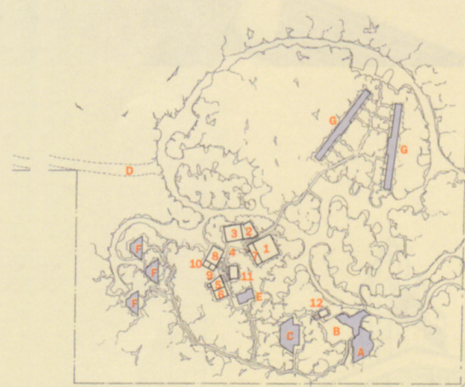


architects worry that Potter's departure will delay the project and, more importantly, that the removal of a strong design ally will force them to revisit what they consider to be resolved aspects of the scheme. Their fears are unfounded as Fetscher proves to be firmly committed to the design. She shares the architects' vision and says of ACA, "We're about risk-taking; we're about providing opportunity to artists." A challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts is denied, but state funds and private donations from Leeper's many friends are raised.

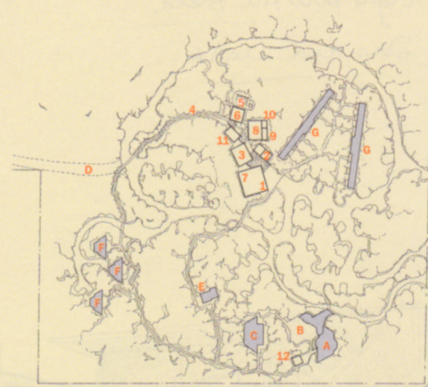
**1994-1995** The first phase of construction, which consists of the black-box theater, the painting studio, and the music studio, begins in September, 1994. Thompson and Rose provide a set of 101 construction drawings done by

hand. Dean Sandroni, the construction manager, admits that it took "awhile to get the vision in my head." He is in constant communication with the architects regarding the project, which at 16,000 sq ft, has a budget of \$2.5 million. Some unresolved building parts are drawn by the architects in the field; other issues are handled by phone or fax. Sandroni calls the continuous routing of detail questions from the sub-contractors to him then to Thompson and Rose and back to him "correspondence through shop drawings." Materials are debated from a cost point of view. In the case of the lead-coated copper cladding and roofing, for example, the architects argue convincingly for the life-cycle cost benefits.

By sprinkling the site with only three of the planned six buildings, the character of the discrete forms is visible, but not the overall intent of creating hybrid indoor/outdoor space in between. (text continues)



SCHEME 4



SCHEME 5

- |                            |                       |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| A. Administration          | 1. Black box theater  |
| B. Amphitheater            | 2. Dance support area |
| C. Dining/meeting          | 3. Dance studio       |
| D. Future driveway         | 4. Existing walkway   |
| E. Field house             | 5. Outdoor work area  |
| F. Master artists cottages | 6. Sculpture studio   |
| G. Associate artists       | 7. Film/video studio  |
|                            | 8. Painting studio    |
|                            | 9. Dark room          |
|                            | 10. Storage           |
|                            | 11. Music studio      |
|                            | 12. Library           |

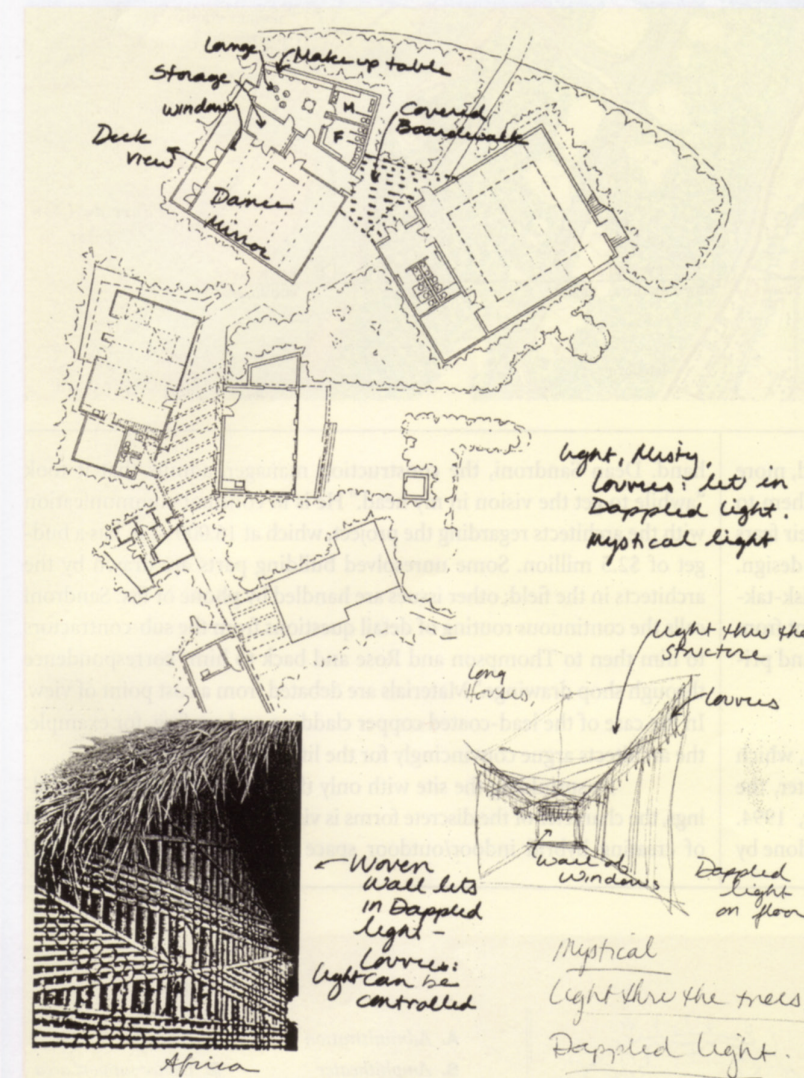
of the schemes interpret the "performance" spaces—the dramatic artists' black-box theater and the dance workshop—as the ACA's frontispiece, placing them between the existing artists' living quarters

and the existing administration building. All schemes show studios grouped together to encourage collaboration across disciplines. Another strategy, not shown here, was also presented at the interview.

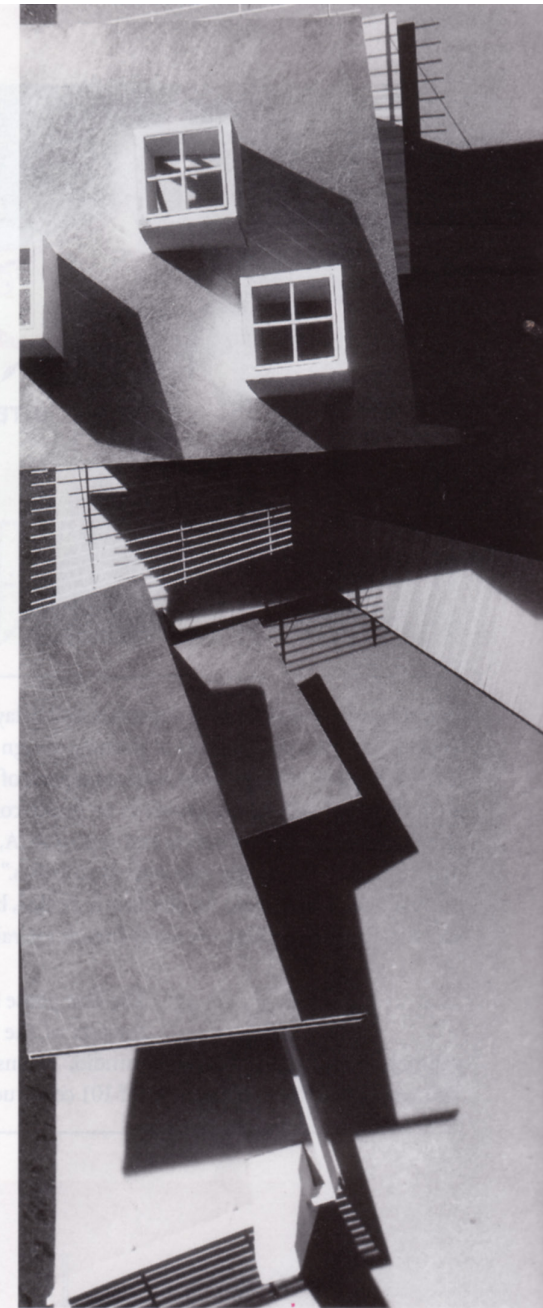
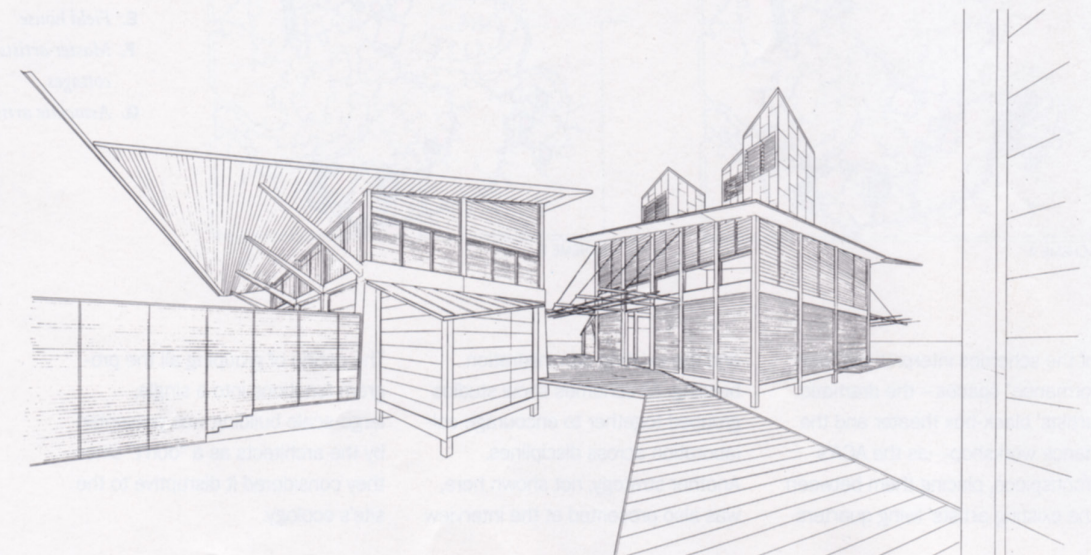
The option of grouping all the program functions into a single, large-scale building was presented by the architects as a "don't" since they considered it disruptive to the site's ecology.

In their research for their job interview, the architects studied buildings at the same

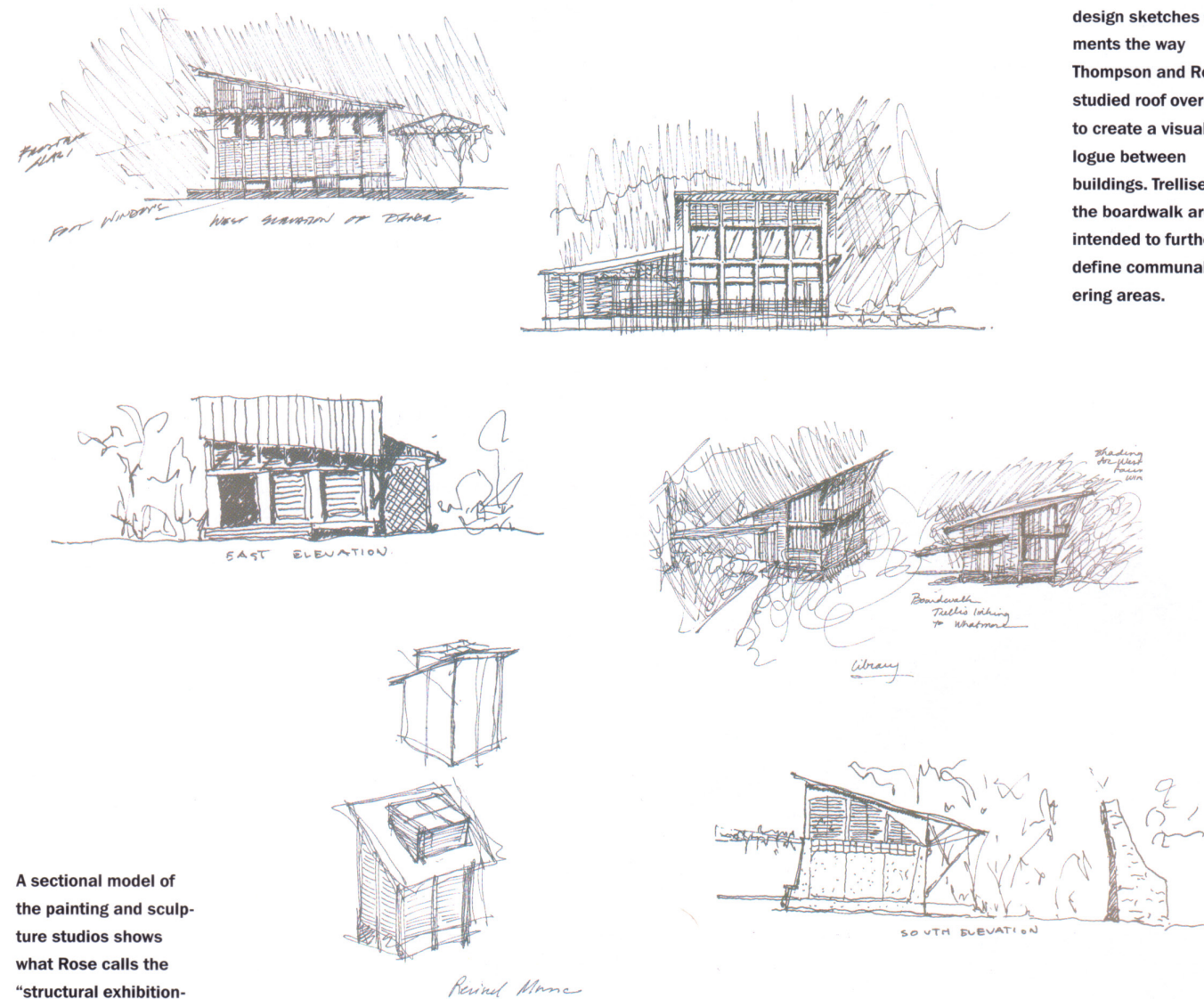
latitudes or more tropical regions like Africa (below) for ideas on materials and shading.



The buildings are set on concrete footings so that they barely touch the ground. The boardwalk is laid on pilings.







A sectional model of the painting and sculpture studios shows what Rose calls the “structural exhibitionism” of wood trusses.



A series of schematic design sketches documents the way Thompson and Rose studied roof overhangs to create a visual dialogue between buildings. Trellises over the boardwalk are intended to further define communal gathering areas.



Lead-coated copper roofs poke out over the foliage (above), but from ground level the buildings are always surrounded by scrub oaks and palmettos (left). The boardwalk widens at the entrance to the theater, creating a gathering space between it and the dance studio (opposite). Each building has its own rhythm of Mahogany panel proportions and lead-coated copper inserts.



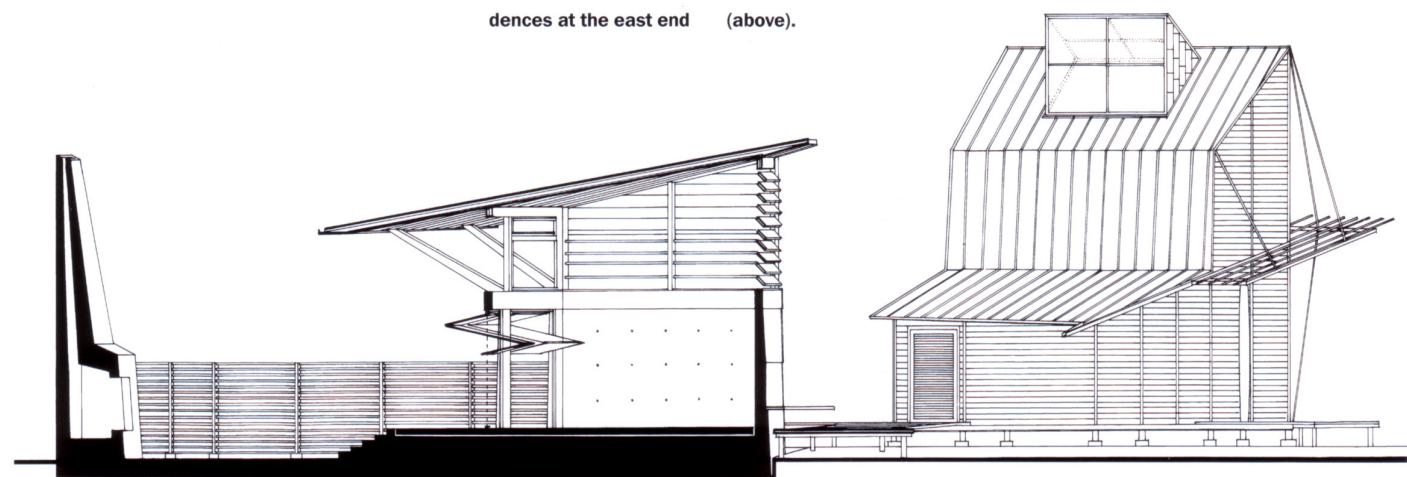






The boardwalk makes the shape of a loose "C" through the dense foliage, linking the associates artists' residences at the east end

of the ACA grounds with the master artists' cottages and the administration building at the west end (above).



SECTION THROUGH SCULPTURE STUDIO WITH MUSIC STUDIO



Roofs tilt toward one another and the jungle, suggesting views and relationships among the artistic disciplines. The painting and sculpture studios have parallel profiles (above). The upper portion of a dance studio wall leans almost 10 degrees toward the jungle (far left), while the library rises over Turnbull Bay for a mezzanine level view (near left). Painted steel trellises will eventually be covered with foliage.



## CLIMATE

### Responding to the elements

New Smyrna Beach, on the east coast of central Florida, may seem like an unlikely place for an artists' community where people in disciplines from painting to music come for residences of three weeks or longer. "Why New Smyrna Beach?" jokes Doris Leeper, a sculptor and environmentalist who founded ACA after her own Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored residency in Winston-Salem, N.C., in 1977. "Because I live in New Smyrna Beach and because I thought of it." Client and architect were equally concerned about preserving the site's native growth of scrub oaks, palmetto bushes, and pineforest.

Trees and other foliage were removed only as buildings were going up in their place, says construction manager Dean Sandroni. Snow loads are not a concern, but hurricanes are, so the striking roof forms were studied for potential uplift. Cables help hold them down, as do extra-sturdy fasteners. Thompson and Rose used a sun-angle calculator to measure the precise position of the sun relative to each building. Although air-conditioning is a must in summer, deep southern overhangs and screened sliding-glass doors and windows provide enough cooling for part of the year. The painting studio has operable louvers to induce natural



exhaust of paint odors. With torrential downpours common, the architects made the most of what can be a water show: Each roof dis-

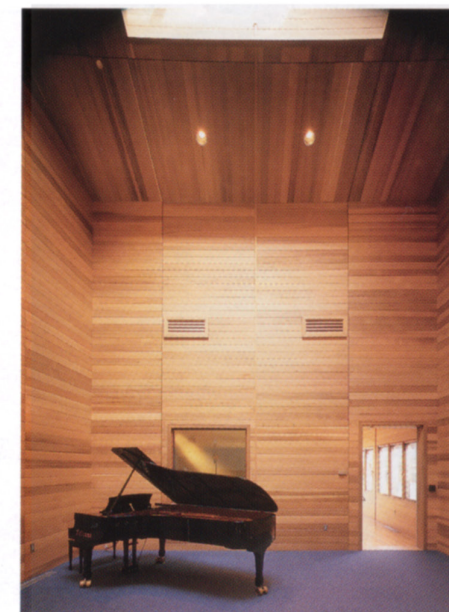
charges to one dramatically attenuated lead-coated copper scupper, which pours, waterfall-like, into the dense foliage (above).



The sculpture studio, grounded by a battered concrete wall (foreground of photo left and opposite bottom left), opens to an outdoor work area. The music studio (background of photo left and opposite bottom right) is inward-looking. The boardwalk provides vistas through the buildings and into the dense foliage. The boardwalk also serves as a utility corridor: Wiring and plumbing conduits are hung underneath.



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The sliding glass doors of the dance studio open to a semi-private deck (above). The sculpture studio faces north and louvers shade east and west sides (far left). The music room is lined in cedar (near left).





PHOTOGRAPHY: © CHUCK CHOI, EXCEPT FAR RIGHT, JEAN-CHRISTOPHE MICHEL



Windows of sand-blasted glass line the upper edges of the dance studio, while dancers' feet can be seen from the outside through clear bands of glass (left and below). "The dancer, moving in the zone between these two [types of] windows, hovers between earth and sky," wrote the architects of their intention. In the painting studio, light is filtered through louvers and skylights (opposite).

"We could take elevation shots" for the architects' portfolio, says Rose. "We have buildings supporting an idea," explains Rose. "But the idea isn't there." The architects are concerned that the second phase will never come, its timing determined by the flow of financing and the contractor's schedule since Epoch Properties, as a donation to the ACA, is doing the job at cost. And so was Fetscher, who later admits: "I was worried we'd build one phase and loose momentum. In fact, the reverse happened."

**MARCH 1996** Six months later, with the expectation of soon receiving a \$250,000 state grant, the second phase of construction begins. These three buildings go up quicker because, says Sandroni, by now he knows what the architects are looking for. Oversized wood doors are covered in lead-coated copper for extra rigidity. They are similar to doors in the first phase that Rose says hadn't met specifications and warped from the extreme heat and humidity. The concrete base of the sculpture studio, intended to be "of the earth" like the discipline itself, is a challenge for the construction crew because of its unusual detailing. A mock-up is done of the intricate formwork, which tapers as it rises, to achieve the battered look desired by the architects. A glass canopy over the dance studio entrance is deleted from the design by Fetscher, who is worried about upkeep. It's replaced with a black-painted steel trellis similar to others in the project. An off-the-shelf spiral staircase rather than a custom stair is the only significant change to the library.

**FEBRUARY 1997** The project is dedicated as part of a celebration of the ACA's 20th anniversary, with artists who have completed residencies paying tribute to the program and the newly named Leeper Studio Complex. Leeper herself calls it "a remarkable job: More than we envisioned when we started." With an endowment of \$2.7 million, Fetscher says her ongoing task of approaching potential donors for the money to cover her annual operating budget of nearly \$1 million is made easier by her new showpiece. "People will invest more easily in our future," she says. "They now know we're serious. We have our history and now we have our buildings." ■

*Manufacturers' Sources*

**Mahogany windows, central-pivot and sliding glass doors:** Duratherm Window Corp.

**Sandblasted glass:** Solar Seal Co.  
**Stainless-steel locksets, hinges:** Sargent Mfg. Co; Stanley Commercial Hardware

**Aluminum-finished closers:** LCN  
**Stainless-steel exit devices:** Von Duprin (5500 Series)

**Stainless-steel pulls:** H.B. Ives

**Stainless-steel cabinet hardware:**

Häfele America Co. (Rafix)

**Birch, maple-veneer plywood:** Custom by Royal Cabinets, Inc.

**Interior finishes:** Southern Paint  
**Resilient flooring:** Forbo Industries (Marmoleum)

**Exterior lighting:** Nightscaping (Duoliter)

**Interior high-bay lighting:** General Electric

**Downlights:** Lightolier, Inc. (1002PI)