

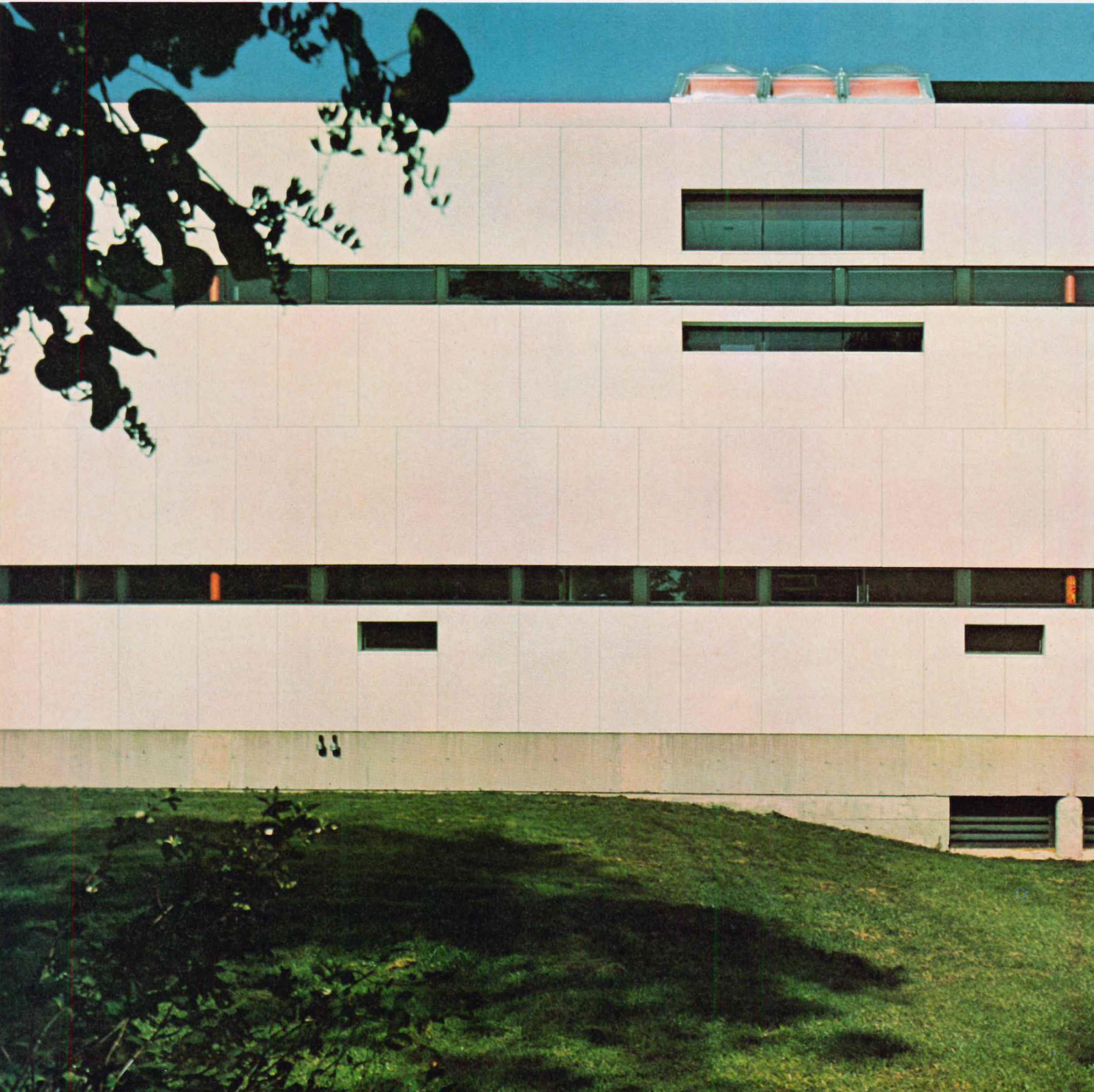
Administration Building, Willard State Hospital, N. Y.

# Tidy reality

Michael Dennis



Administration Building from north (above), and south (below).



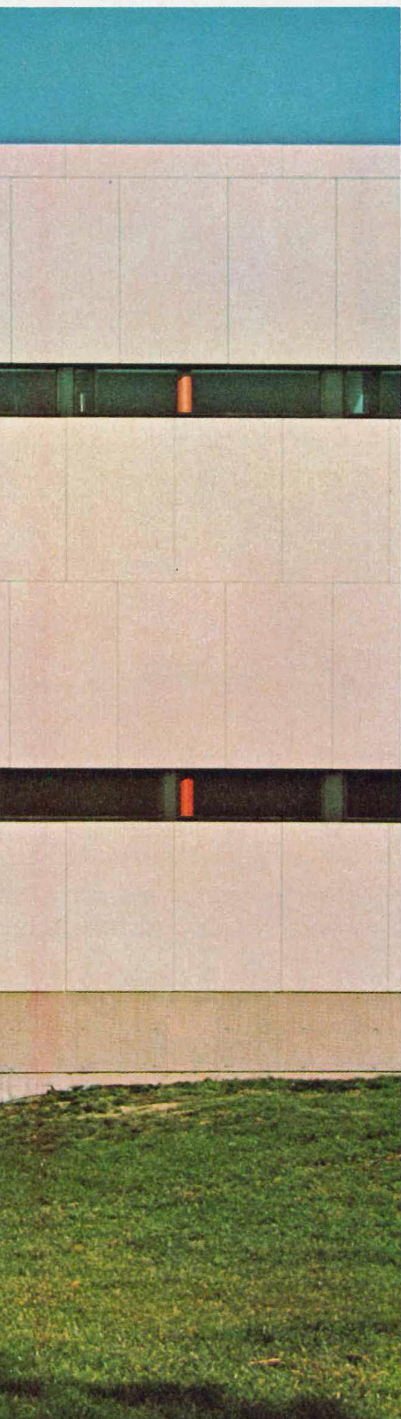


**Within its apparently unified whole, a small building by Werner Seligmann & Associates is paradoxical: its self-contained form has implied extensions; its modern, catalog materials produce a historicist image; unpredictable relationships between industrialized systems can make its rational aspects seem irrational.**

*'Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow.'*—T.S. Eliot. Modern architecture in Europe, born out of fantasies of socialist society, has ironically been an ideal partner in its common-law marriage with the American dream. Modern architecture's predilection for Platonic, or freestanding, objects and its promise of technological (read "economic") deliverance via industrialization were to prove irresistible to American corporate enterprise. Freestanding buildings, af-

ter all, are "tidy" (no party wall problems with neighboring buildings), and they offer high potential for identity (McDonald's or the High Court at Chandigarh—take your pick). They promised to be fast, flexible, easy, and above all, cheap. Who could resist? Certainly not bureaucratic agencies for whom image potential generally takes a back seat only to self-preservation. The various agencies established in New York State by Nelson Rockefeller, although "enlightened" by most standards, are not immune to these tendencies, nor are their usually talented architects.

It could be (and was) argued that the Willard State Hospital Administration Building should not exist as an independent building on a remote, exposed site, but rather should form part of a more coherent complex nearer the center of patient services. The Department of Mental Hygiene was adamant, however. They obviously wanted the tidiness of "a building," the identity of a prominent location, and a



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## Administration Building, Willard State Hospital

new "mental health" image to replace the old brick images of "insane asylum" days.

Further, it could be (and was) argued that the program as presented to the architect was not only unhierarchical and undistinguished (inherently not the raw material with which to fashion a new face for the old campus) but was also overly specific for an administrative building subject to use changes. Again the Department was adamant. The random room sizes based on bureaucratic pecking order could not be systematized, and flexibility was not an issue.

It is against this background that the administration building should be seen. That is to say, if the building is exceptional, that is due primarily to architectural intentions and ideas, since the program is more or less neutral and the site offers few cues to organization.

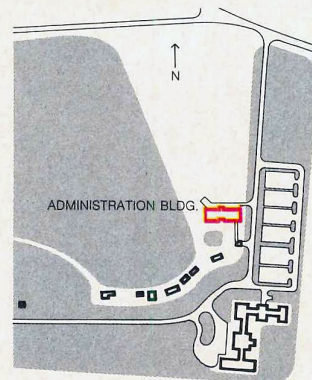
In fact, the basic ideas and vocabulary are in themselves not new, but are obviously developments of themes of the "heroic, or classical period" of modern architecture. It was, after all, Le Corbusier who made the most cogent statements of the free plan, the free façade, and contextual issues of the site. The villa at Garches, for example, is literally freestanding, but it also implies possible extension and/or replication. It presents simultaneously a rational, measurable world (grid and Platonic volume) and a relative, unmeasurable world (idiosyncrasies of the free plan). It renders shallow, layered space as well as deep, continuous space, and it presents the building fabric as a series of related but articulate independent systems free to be organized more or less according to their own individual requirements. These are also primary themes in the Willard Administration Building, but for pragmatic reasons as well as for human or ideological ones. But Garches, although conceptually prophetic, was a handcrafted building and not a product of the factory—it might be seen as a painting of the problem rather than a solution. Now, however, some 40 years later, when the various technologies are reality rather than dreams, these earlier themes tend to take on new relevance and meaning. Although the administration building is admittedly not yet an industrialized building, it is largely built of "dry" construction, and made of commercially available components; it can be seen as a conceptual and a literal "assemblage" of images and materials.

The primary image of the building—a white box in the landscape—is initially jarring in contrast to the drab brick buildings of the Willard campus. One might be inclined to consider it a sheet metal rip-off of LeCorbusier's Brasilia French Embassy project, except that a tour of the surrounding area reveals additional similarities to other forms. The parti is in fact, and consciously, similar to that of barns indigenous to the area—a two-story white box on a one-story masonry base with an earthen ramp leading to a large opening on the main level. The other peculiar aspect of the building—the strangely monumental scale for so small a building—can also be traced to the barns, to their openings that are either very small (south) or very large (north).

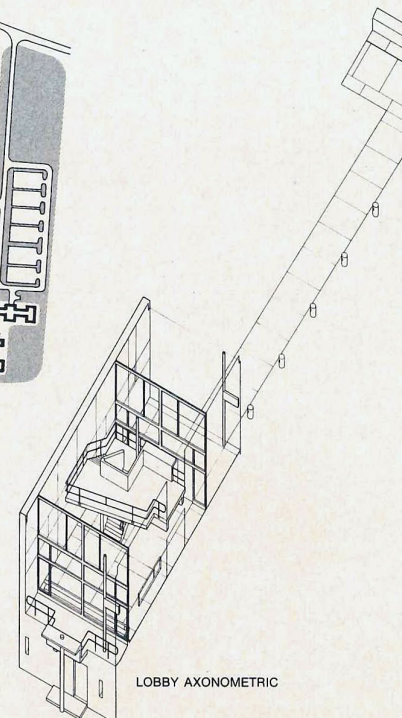
The functional distribution of the building is simple and clear. The base contains mechanical and service spaces, on the main floor are public offices, and on the top floor are the administrative office, a library, and a conference room.

The two-story lobby on the end unites the two upper floors and serves as an entrance. Each floor spine is double-loaded, with larger offices to the north and a service zone and smaller, special rooms to the south. This asymmetrical zoning of the plan was not simply a programmatic accommodation; it also puts the smaller rooms in close relationship to the small scale of the landscape and staff residences to the south, and orients the larger offices to the open landscape on the north. In addition, differentiation of the fenestration and structural systems on the south and north give a preferred direction to the double-loaded plan.

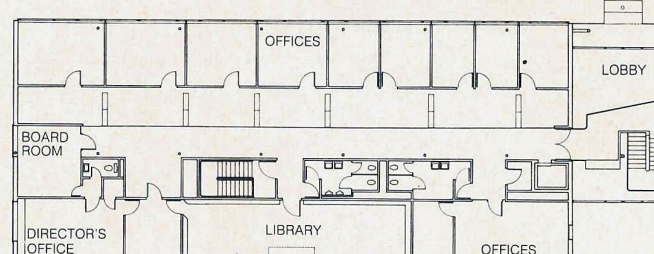
Conceptually, the building is a rational, or neutral, volume into which a specific, contrasting figure (circulation) has been inserted. Rather than being simply a corridor, the circulation becomes a street that connects the space of the lobby with the landscape to the west and provides the key (almost literally) to the building's resistance to the implica-



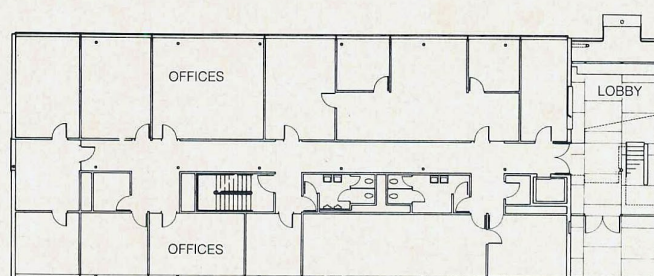
SITE PLAN



LOBBY AXONOMETRIC



SECOND FLOOR

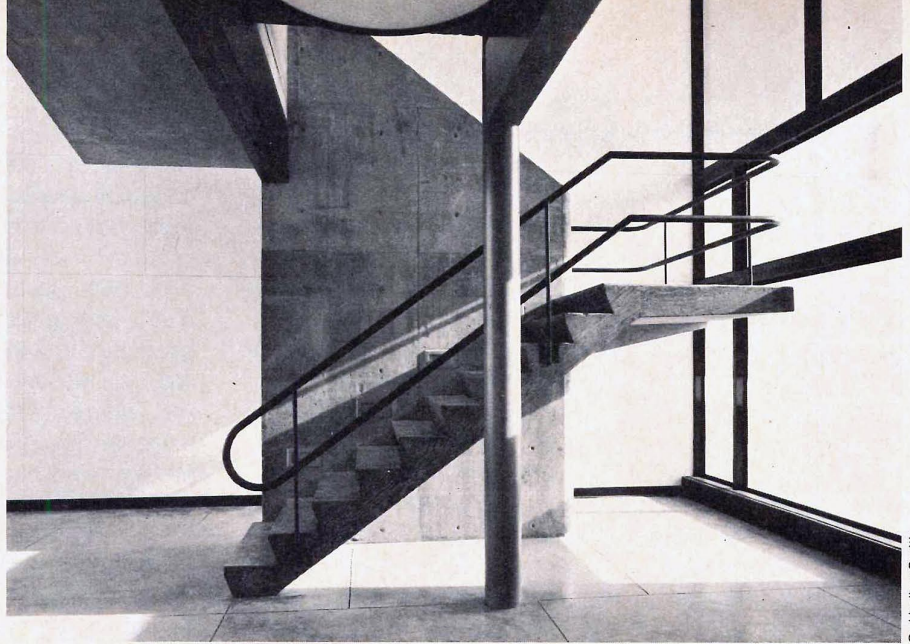


FIRST FLOOR

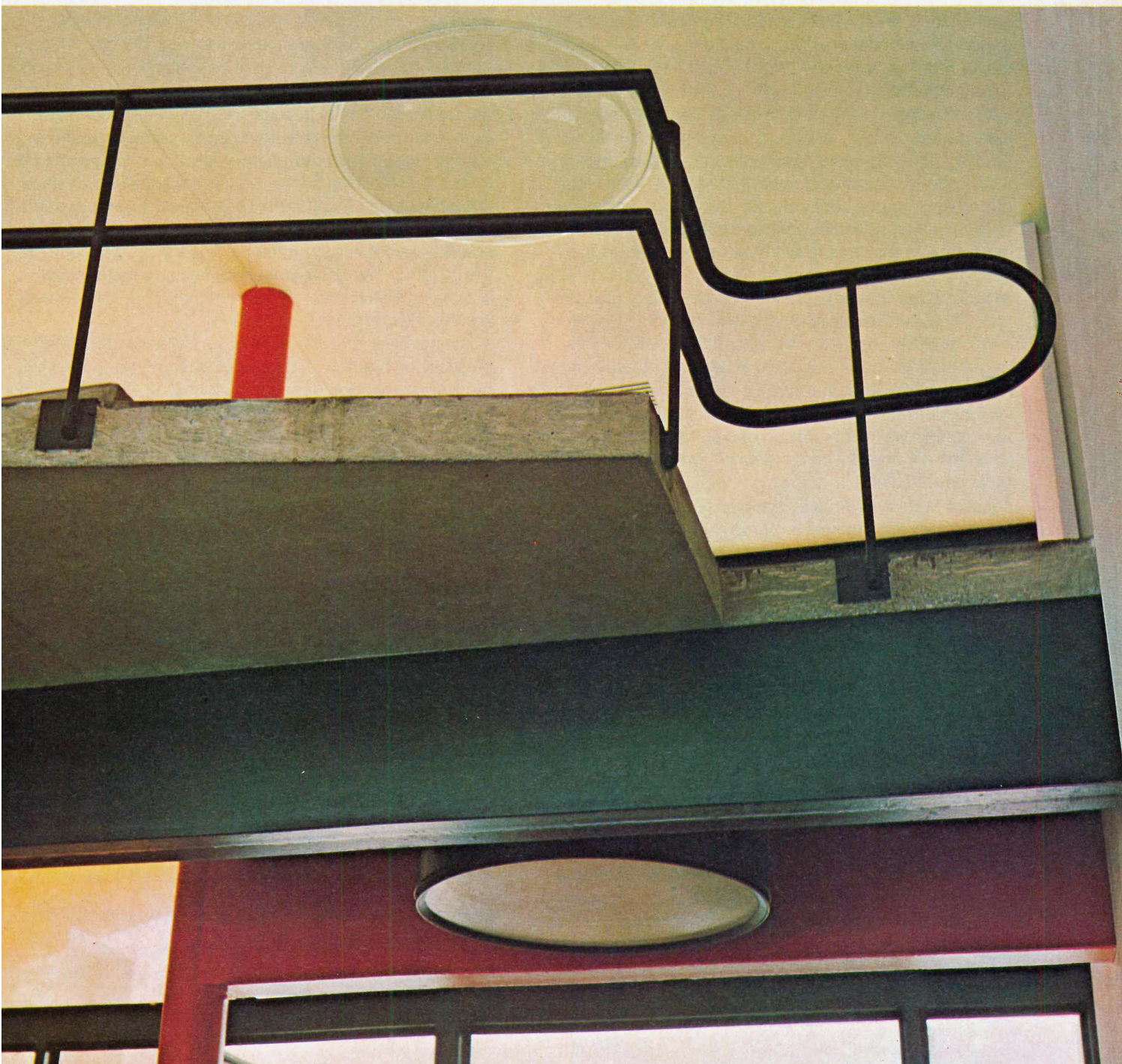




Lobby (north façade above; interior right and below; axonometric below left) and landscape to the west are united by circulation "street."



C. Hadley Smith





tions of closure and finiteness. At this level of generalization, the internal subdivisions of the office zones are largely irrelevant and can be seen as independent systems of thick, habitable blocks or *poché*, which are used to define and shape the axis between the man-made landscape of the lobby and natural landscape at the other end. The street, by its implied western extension, attempts to impart an almost Hellenic awareness of the environment.

If, on one level, the office subdivisions are unimportant, on another level they are extremely important in that they do not, and could not, conform to any modular system. Similarly, the other systems, such as mechanical, structural, metal skin, fenestration, etc., each have their own internal requirements and unique characteristics of module, tolerance, and compatibility with other systems. More often than not these various systems, *as found*, are at odds with each other, thereby necessitating costly and time-consuming custom fabrication, both in the factory as well as on the job, in order to "integrate" them into one unified whole. In contrast to this tendency towards unity and integration, the administration building is orchestrated as a series of articulate, but interrelated, independent systems, thus allowing for change in one system without simultaneous change in all the others. This change can, within limits, take place during the planning, construction, or post-construction phases of the project. Beyond the pragmatic convenience of separating the various systems, however, there is an added dividend. On the one hand the multiple modules of window, wall, structure, panels, etc. do tend to grid, layer, and articulate space in a rationalistic manner. On the other hand, however, because of unpredictable relationships between the systems, a condition of paradox emerges where the rational can appear irrational, or vice versa, depending on the interpretation of the observer. Structure (that "factual" antigravity machine) can appear loose and painterly, while the supposedly free, "relative" world of circulation becomes fixed and unchanging. One can then see the circulation system as a highly specific sequence of events beginning with the landscape, proceeding through a rationalistic, shifting, gridded world, and ending with a curious re-presentation of the landscape.

From the main road to the north, the building is presented frontally across a large, open field. At this distance its layered façade of multiple grids flattens out to throw the shifting symmetries into sharp profile. As one approaches, the various layers of the façade become apparent, with the flat curtain wall acting as a foil for the cyclopiian oculus of the lobby. The regularly spaced (16 ft) red-orange columns are seen in depth through the slightly projected glass wall and the white frame of the metal skin. The steel and glass wall itself is actually dead flat, but appears to undulate in depth due to the rhythmic spacing of verticals—their varying widths tending to make them recede from the picture plane, which is then re-established by the spandrel and surrounding frame. Seen from further along the access road, the north façade becomes simply a flanking plane for a distant vista west toward Lake Seneca.

From the south, access is via the long, earthen ramp. Here, where the relative proportion of window to wall is the

reverse of that of the north façade, a two-story yellow portico is set into the opaque white surface. The lobby, punctuated by special windows, is also supposedly a waiting room, but it is clearly not a space in which to sit. The built-in bench is too low and uncomfortable and chairs are, at best, token gestures. The lighting fixtures are exterior quartz lamps, the floor is waxed concrete (subsequently carpeted), and the ceiling is putty-coat plaster. The lobby can only be seen as a circulation space and viewing platform where the faint tracery of plaster joints and fenestration offer the only stability for the kaleidoscopic plastic extravagance of a concrete stair that should only be credited to the miracle of modern engineering. Here, the middle column is displaced longitudinally to the center of the room. Ascending the stair, there is a vista of the entry ramp to the south, and then from the precariously open mezzanine with its higher view of the lobby and northern approach, the main body of the building may be entered.

The office spaces themselves are white, black, and gray and have the normally high level of fluorescent illumination required for the daily routine. In contrast, the circulation "street" has a low level of general lighting, with large round fixtures illuminating the polychromed subspaces that serve as distribution points through the deep wall of services. Thus, the street has a hard side and a soft side, and the irregular sequence of the green, yellow, and red distribution points are stabilized by the regular cadence of the red-orange freestanding columns. The sequence leads past the library with its special windows, mirrors, and skylight to the conference room and director's office at the west end of the building. The conference room has a large window which exposes the last of the corridor columns and gives another view of Lake Seneca.

It is the director's office, however, which receives the last curious comment on fantasy and reality. Across the western wall is a window flanked by mirrors on one side and a book case on top. The space of the room appears to disappear deep into the mirrors, and the image of the distant landscape hangs in a black steel frame behind the desk. □

#### **Data**

**Project:** Administration Building, Willard State Hospital, Willard, N.Y.

**Architect:** Werner Seligmann & Associates; Werner Seligmann and Michael Dennis, design; Michael Dennis, job captain.

**Program:** a freestanding building of approximately 12,000 sq ft to house administrative and library facilities.

**Site:** hospital campus in rolling, upstate N.Y. rural location.

**Structural system:** simple, inexpensive steel frame and bar joists.

**Mechanical system:** unit heaters, cabinet heaters, condensing unit, climate changer, wall fins, and enclosure.

**Major materials:** exterior wall system above basement level is preassembled light metal framing sections and white porcelain enamel panels. Interior partitions are light gauge steel studs and gypsum board. Ceilings of suspended acoustic tile. Exterior and interior glazing is in bent (hollow) metal frames. Except for topping slabs and stain, building is dry assembled. (Building materials, p. 122.)

**Consultants:** Galson & Galson, engineers; Dr. Donald P. Greenberg, structural.

**Client:** N.Y. State Health and Mental Hygiene Facilities Improvement Corp.

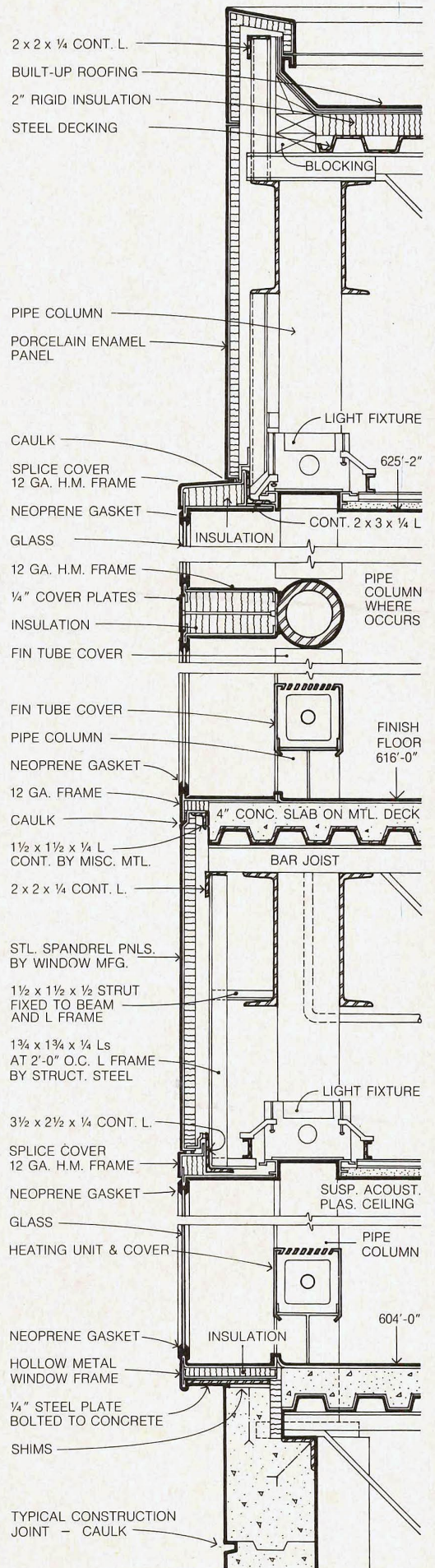
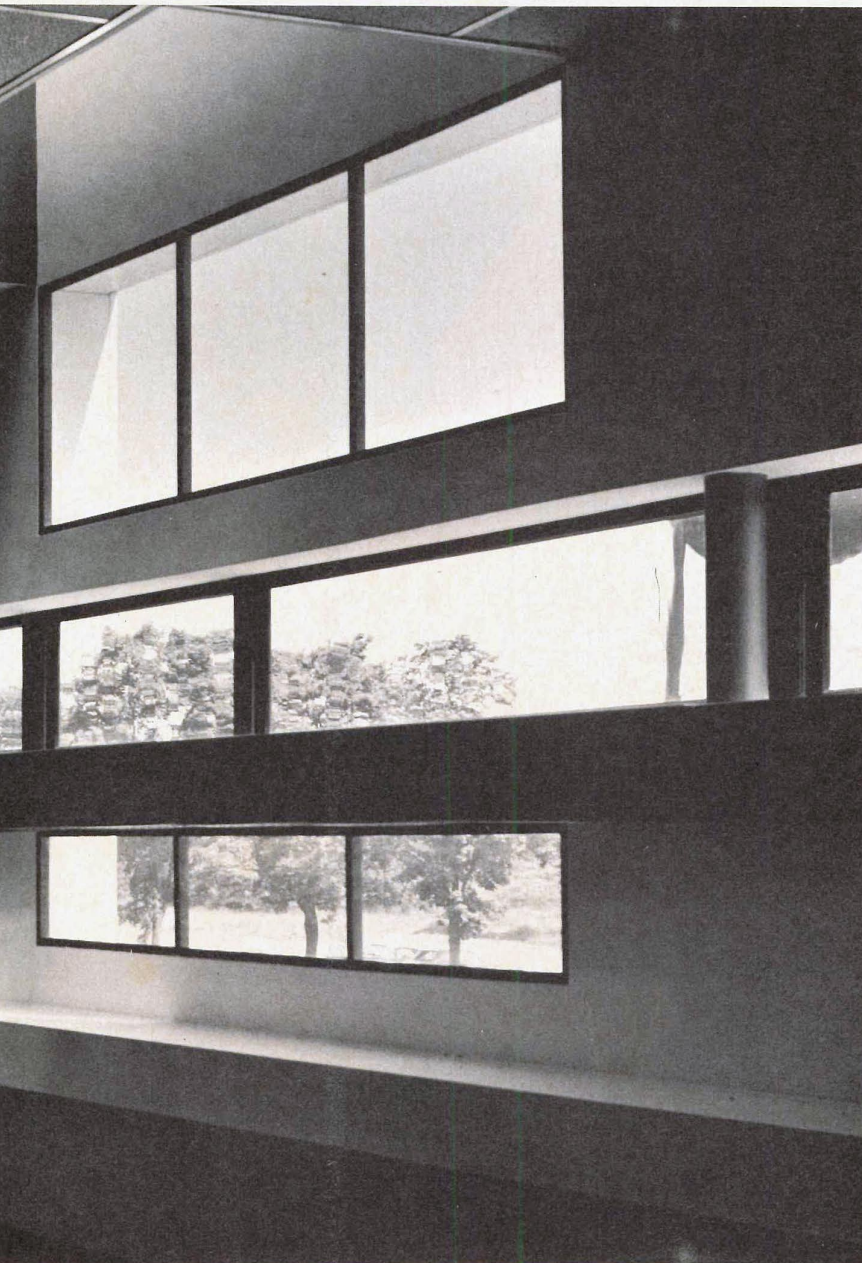
**Costs:** \$600,000, about \$33 sq ft.

**Photography:** Werner Seligmann except p. 81 top, right, C. Hadley Smith p. 83 top. Lyon Photo.





Columns in director's office (above) seem to extend room into pastoral landscape; vertical orange-red columns punctuate white, gray, and black library (below).



WALL SECTION, NORTH FACADE

1'



# WILLARD

Quite different in tone from all the other rehabilitation centers is Architect Werner Seligmann's design for Willard State Hospital. With the existing hospital a dark, dirty brick the architect chose a deliberately contrasting environment for the new center.

The proposed structure is steel frame, with sandwich panels of porcelain enamel screwed to the light metal framing of the exterior walls. HMFIC was receptive to this seemingly different approach because the technique was already being proven by Seligmann and the Willard State Hospital in the hospital's new administration building.

Seligmann had chosen this structural system in the hopes of getting better control over workmanship; he admits that the system won't necessarily save any money—it is probably initially more expensive than more conventional construction, he says, but may go up faster and thus balance out in cost.

In plan, too, the center is something of a departure. Seligmann reports that he "tried to make a whole center of it, a quadrangle, open, like an arcade, to be used in a casual way." Thus he created the very open space on the ground floor, with the different areas flowing into one space.

The auditorium is also a departure from other centers, with its different levels making it work like a small flexible theater.

The architect intends to use color "to combat the site," which he describes as "all green in the summer, all grey at other times." The exterior of the rehabilitation center will be completely white (except for several places such as the auditorium superstructure, which will be grey), but the steel will be brightly painted inside.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

Rehabilitation Center, Willard State Hospital, Willard, N. Y. Architect: Werner Seligmann and Associates (Siegfried Saur, job captain); Frederic P. Wiedersum Associates, associate architect. Engineers: Severud Associates (structural); Flack & Kurtz (mechanical and electrical). Area: 62,000 sq. ft.

