



## Profile: The 1979 Firm Award Winner

*It is Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham of Philadelphia. By Andrea O. Dean*

If you had been a juror to select AIA's 1979 firm award winner, what reasons would you have given for choosing Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham? The question was addressed to Robert Geddes, FAIA, acknowledged by his firm as its guiding spirit. His answer: "Probably balance—coherence between design and technology, design and services, services and management, but also balance between doing individual buildings, groups of buildings and master planning, maintaining a sense of continuity among the three."

Since it was founded 25 years ago in Philadelphia, Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham (GBQC) has grown from a two-

man office (founded by Geddes and Melvin Brecher, FAIA) into a practice with nine principals and 49 other professionals, 15 of whom are now in its Princeton, N.J., office. GBQC operates as a group practice, with small teams being responsible for the design, building technology and management of each project. The firm's work over the years has included planning and design of major urban spaces and almost every possible building type—housing, community, health and educational facilities for private and public clients, plus commercial and industrial structures.

Geddes and George Qualls, FAIA, are the firm's principal designers, along with Robert Brown, AIA, James Dill and Neville





Norman McGrath



From top: G, B, Q & C.  
Left: Stockton College

Epstein, all three of whom joined the firm in the mid-1960s. Warren Cunningham, FAIA, is GBQC's technical mastermind, while Brecher "has always been the guy who kept the office solvent, the manager, the financial man, but also a first rate architect," in Qualls' words.

With five of its principals teaching full or part time, GBQC is rooted in intellectual principles and theory that are broadly based in humanism and were passed on to it in somewhat differing forms by three former deans of architectural schools: Joseph Hudnut of Harvard, Holmes Perkins, FAIA, of the University of Pennsylvania and Jean Labatut of Princeton, though Labatut's influence would not be felt until 1965 when Bob Geddes succeeded him as dean and the firm established an office in Princeton.

GBQC's two founders were classmates at Harvard, graduating in 1950; Qualls, who joined the firm in 1956, was Harvard class of 1951. "The kind of education we got there has influenced everything that's happened to the practice since," says Geddes. "Though Gropius' influence was much less strong than Hudnut's,

Gropius' concern with technology and collaboratives certainly had its effect, but he leaned toward minimalism, and our office has never been minimalist or polemical in any way." Hudnut, on the other hand, served as wellspring for GBQC's early and abiding interest in history and culture as design determinants, for the firm's view of architecture as an enabling mechanism (though not as a determinant) for shaping social, moral and political behavior and for its enduring interest in neighborhoods and the role of landscape in architecture. It was Hudnut, according to Geddes, who coined the term postmodern, way back in 1949, in a book which attacked prevailing definitions of modernism as being too narrow.

"The University of Pennsylvania, where Bob and I taught after leaving Harvard, was a kind of extension of Harvard because of Dean Perkins," says George Qualls. In 1950, Perkins left Harvard, where he taught planning, to transform Penn's arcane architecture department into an interdisciplinary school that embraced even painters and sculptors. And the city of Philadelphia in the mid-1950s was an ideal stamping ground for young architects interested in what they called social architecture. Edmund Bacon, FAIA, was eagerly planning a renaissance for the still moribund city, a building boom was starting and Mayors Richardson Dilworth and Joseph Clark "made architecture into something important to the public, politically and symbolically," recalls Geddes.

In 1956, Geddes, Brecher and Qualls were offered their first major commission, a new wing for the University of Pennsylvania's Moore school of electrical engineering—on the condition that a Penn alumnus be part of the design team. They enlisted Warren Cunningham, who joined the firm as a partner four years later. The Moore school addition, the first modernist building at the University of Pennsylvania, won an AIA national honor award in 1960 on the basis, thinks Geddes, "of its technical integration and its urbanistic qualities. It was a clear expression of modernism in juxtaposition to historicism and coexists harmoniously with the Tudor, brick and limestone buildings on either side of it because of its scale and use of materials." The key to harmony in buildings, he says, comes from an understanding of what "in the Renaissance was understood to be proportion and scale and coherence."

When the young firm was designing the Moore school wing, "Lou Kahn used to come around to our office and look at the drawings," says Geddes. "We worried about whether the university would accept the building because of its modern design. Lou kept saying, 'It's very good; they will build it.'" Though his effect on Geddes and colleagues was less compelling than on such other Philadelphia architects as Romaldo Giurgola, FAIA, and Robert Venturi, FAIA, Kahn's influence is still apparent. He too was at Harvard when Geddes, Brecher and Qualls were students, and Geddes writes about architecture as "a coherent and idealized representation of nature and ourselves," of form deriving from "arrangements that serve users and their social institutions (in other words, by life) and by the arrangements that have so far been tried out (by historical precedents)." Which is very Kahn-like, indeed. Geddes also cites Kahn's influence on his firm's consistent inclusion in design schemes of universal spaces, loft type spaces, "but we've gone beyond to include very much more specific and humanized spaces," he says. Also sympathetic to GBQC's sensibilities was Kahn's concern with materials and handcrafting, as was already evident at the Moore school where they used cardboard boxes to board form concrete.

"People in Philadelphia became aware of our existence in





panding into the private sector. The Philadelphia office, especially, became increasingly involved in working from early stages of design with the construction industry, which not only streamlined the firm's production work, but helped it win commissions, a major one coming from the Turner Construction Co.

Until recently, the Philadelphia office remained responsible for all production work. Princeton was primarily a "think tank," led by Geddes and two younger designers, Neville Epstein and James Dill, both of whom were former students of Jean Labatut, as was Robert Brown, who, along with Qualls directs design at the Philadelphia office. Geddes cites Labatut's influence on the development of the firm's emphasis on "procession"—linear axes for physical and visual movement—on its ideas about color, light, complexity and on what Geddes calls classical coherence.

The first series of projects designed at the Princeton office came in rapid succession; all were educational facilities. "They had enough in common," says Jim Dill, "to allow us to explore and develop certain fundamental concepts that we were toying with at the time—and which are still basic to the firm's work and thought."

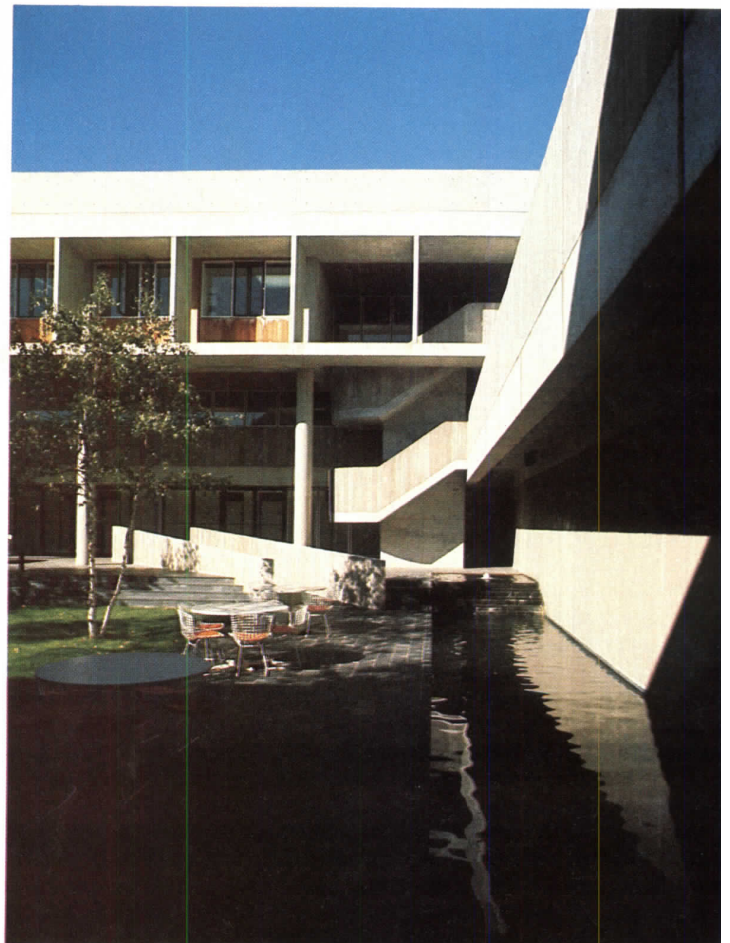
Among these were the use of linear galleries as unifying ele-

## A continuing interest in public architecture.

1957 when we won second prize in the Sydney Opera House competition," says Qualls. Geddes explains, "George and I were very interested in the potential of circular forms. For my Harvard thesis I did a circular building. I think it may have been a way of thumbing our noses at Gropius." Their Sydney competition entry, a radial plan with pie-shaped, prefabricated elements, was parent to their first major public commission, the Philadelphia police headquarters building of 1962. It consists of pie-shaped elements rotated around three circular cores. The idea was to achieve a maximum amount of space without building a tower that blocked views. Mayor Dilworth, who commissioned the structure, "wanted a fresh symbol," says Geddes. "He wanted a baroque palace and he got a baroque palace. And now," he adds, "let me tell you the truth. Don't ever build a circular building. It's tyrannical; it has no escape."

Quite opposite in intent was GBQC's public planning and housing work for the city of Philadelphia. Their plan for the renewal of Penn's Landing, the first scheme for which was completed in 1961, was a conscious understatement. Their design for the West Chester, Pa., housing development, a HUD design award winner in 1966, shows again the benign influence of Joseph Hudnut, according to Geddes. This small, lowrise complex, with facades resembling indigenous architecture, blends easily into the existing streetscape, yet forms a community of its own by virtue of being set back and having small plazas and play areas. Kitchens face the street so that mothers can supervise their children, and each unit—slightly different from its neighbor, with its own porch and recessed front doorway—has a sense of individual identity and territory.

The year 1965 marked a major change for GBQC. Bob Geddes was appointed dean of the school of architecture at Princeton, and the firm opened an office there. GBQC in Philadelphia maintained its interest in public architecture, while ex-





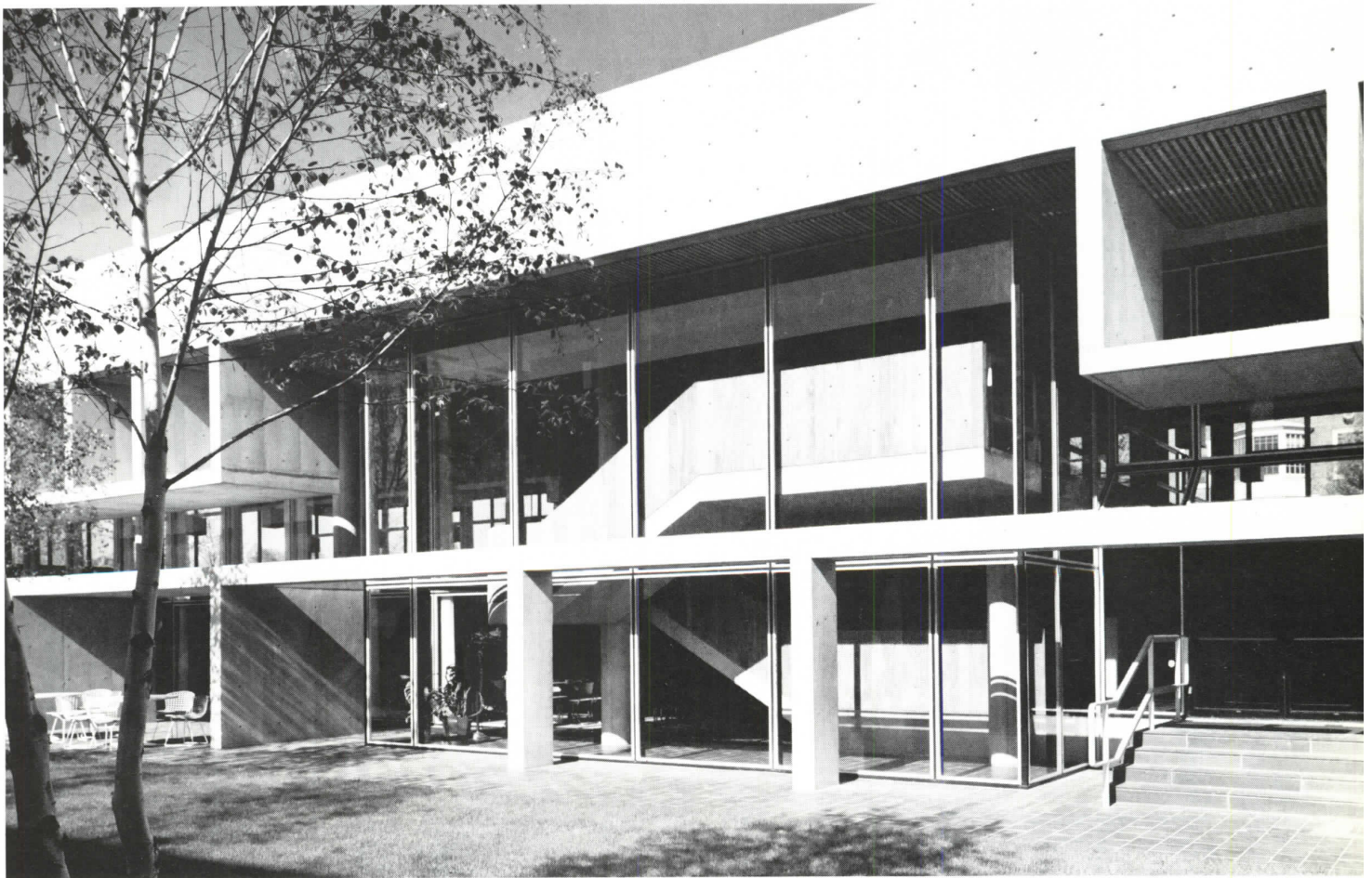
ments, with projecting loft spaces for general and flexible use plus fixed spaces for specific functions, courtyards in between. These architectural elements derived from Geddes' conviction that "buildings must understand the need for private spaces and spaces for small group and communal use." Key to his thinking is the statement: "If architecture is separated from human social experience, it loses its values, it loses its ability to speak. And it loses its source of imagination." Architecture for art's sake is, for him, the road "finally to escapism." The firm's early concern with scale—integrating buildings with overall planning processes, with landscape and existing structures—remained constant. In terms of architectural style, Geddes and colleagues were searching, in his words, for "an enriched architecture, but still a modern architecture, developing ornament out of materials, texture, the symbolic aspects of entrance or even of the structural wall and with light as a generating element."

Three institutional buildings, especially, show the firm's application of theory to practice: The humanities and social sciences center at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale, an AIA 1977 national honor award winner; Stockton State College in Pomona, N.J., and the dining hall and academic office

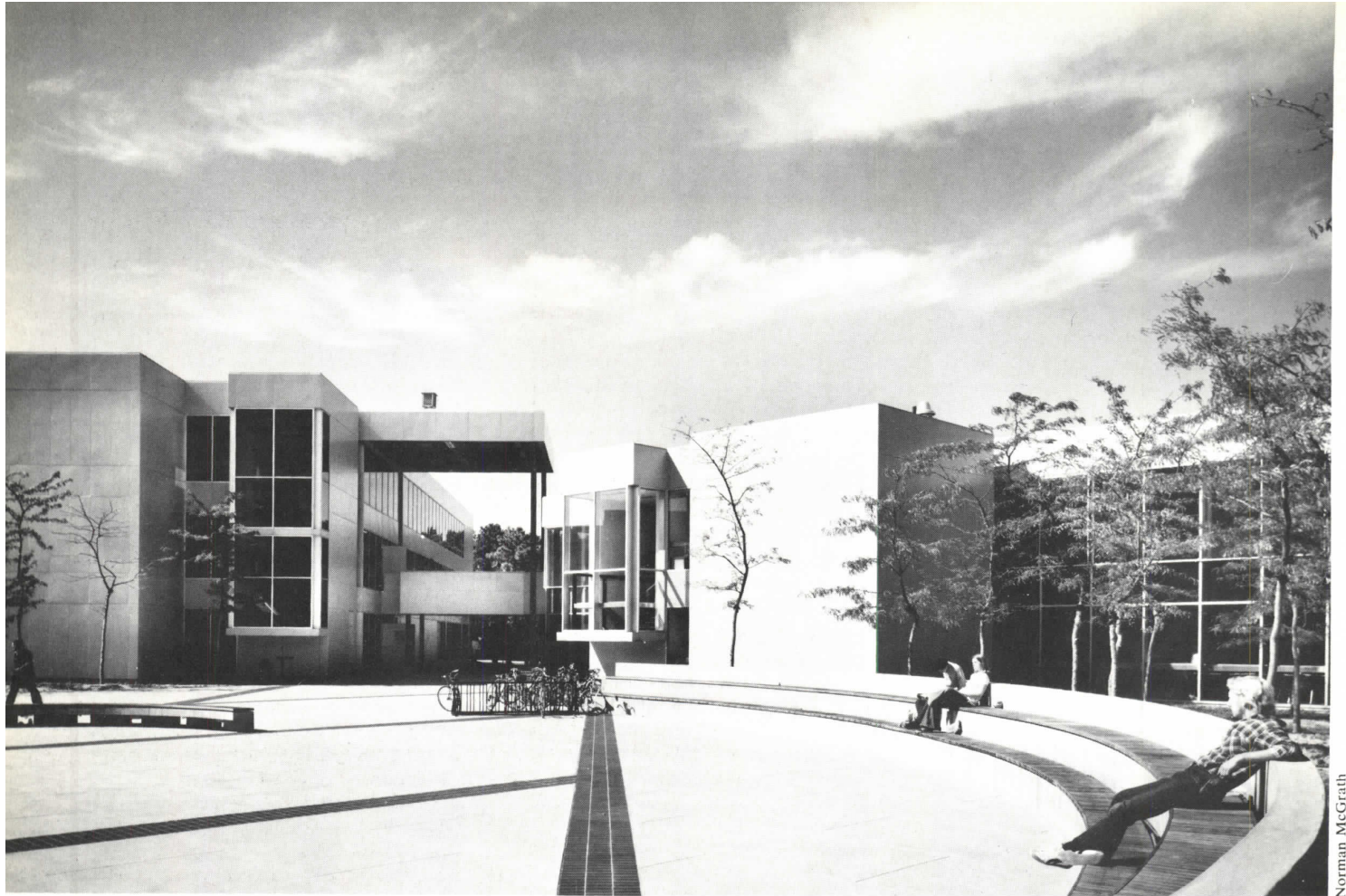
building for the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton.

"I think the Institute for Advanced Study [GBQC's dining hall and academic office building] especially argues against all this talk about architecture not influencing behavior—the possibility that architecture is trivial to behavior," muses Geddes. The program was for a cafeteria/boardroom and offices, but "our intuition told us," he says, "that there should also be a courtyard as an enabling mechanism for social activity." Geddes defines intuition as "prepared imagination." The intent at the institute was to meet needs for privacy while providing opportunities for scholars to socialize and exchange views, and to create a symbolic as well as literal "grove of academe." The new buildings were also charged with "responding properly," as Geddes puts it, to the institute's existing group of buildings, six of which

*The contrast between the Moore school, 1959, and the Institute for Advanced Study's dining hall and academic office buildings, 1974, shows GBQC's evolution toward more varied forms within a modular grid. The institute has a birch-planted courtyard (below left) to create a sense of community. Deep sun screens reduce glare on the west-facing entrance facade (below).*







Norman McGrath

## A new campus and a centerpiece for an old one.

are neo-Georgian. A seventh, of modernist design, is the work of Wallace Harrison, FAIA.

GBQC's addition consists of two parallel, linear buildings of poured-in-place concrete. One is a three-story academic office building, the other a two-story dining hall and commons. Between the two is a courtyard of birch trees. The glass walled dining and commons area, with spaces that range from open to closed with many variations in between, allows intriguing views of the academic building. The cornices of the new buildings are level with the eaves of the old, scale being very consciously related. Commenting on the new buildings, Ada Louise Huxtable wrote in the *New York Times*: "And for once, there is a tie between the standards of scholarly endeavor and the setting where it takes place. At a time when arrogance is often synonymous with architecture, these buildings teach human and artful lessons in the building environment. They are lessons of quality as well."

At Southern Illinois University (SIU), the firm was charged with creating a unifying focal point for a university that had become a hodgepodge of 19th and 20th century buildings. "We consciously had to look at the question, 'How do you make the center of a campus?'" says Neville Epstein. "The old way was to make a single center. At SIU we were influenced by the Free University of Berlin plan, the idea of building a gridded structure where anything can plug in." The humanities and social sciences building is three and four stories high, and almost 1,000 feet long. The organizing principle is a linear grid on which pedestrian paths resemble a tartan plaid with major and minor lines. The result is not one center, but many, linked by an outdoor covered arcade. Classrooms, laboratories and a museum are on the first level adjacent to the arcade. Seminar, meeting rooms and faculty offices are on the upper floors.



Above and across page bottom: the humanities and social sciences building, Southern Illinois University. The two-level arcade serves as linking element and connects with the campus' existing circulation paths.



*Across page top and below: Stockton College, where GBQC employed a systems approach using metal elements. The circular outdoor space is for concerts, graduations, etc.; another gathering place is the theater.*



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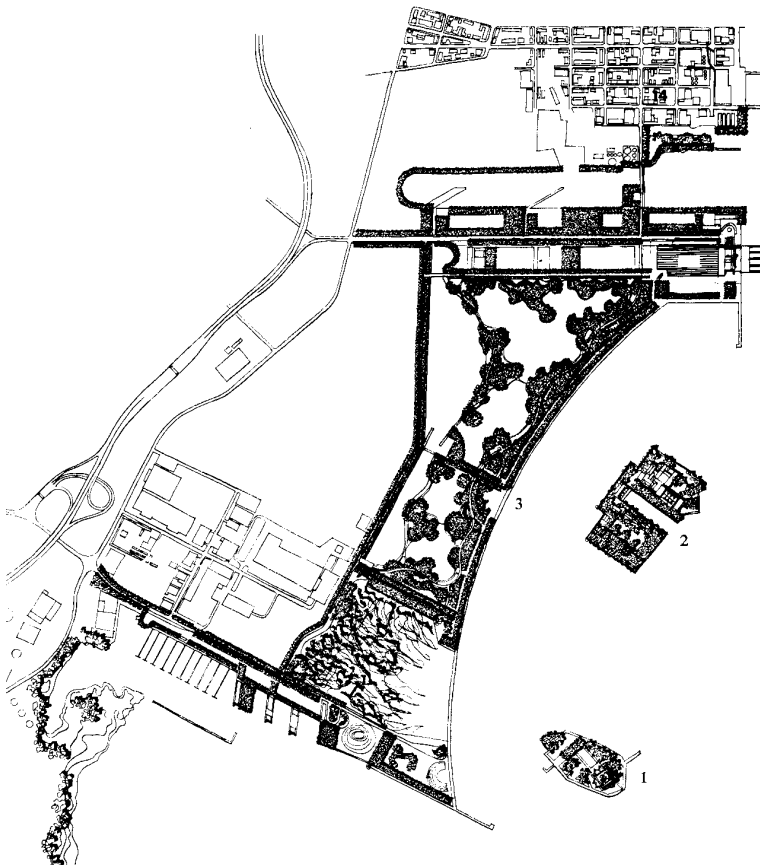
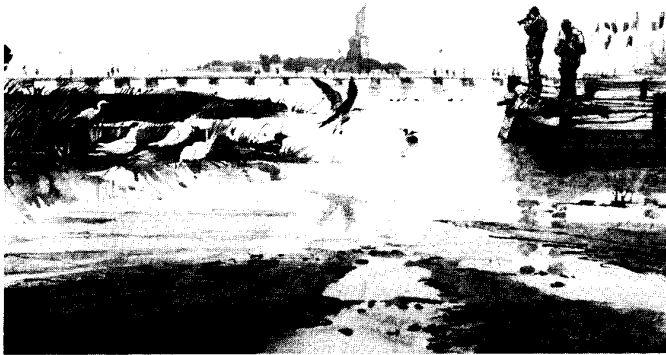
At Stockton College, a brand new school in a wooded setting near Atlantic City, the architects, though faced with a very different set of problems than at SIU, used a similar approach—linear grid, connecting gallery, loft spaces, fixed spaces, courtyards. “One of the issues,” says Geddes, “was that one half of the college would be residential, the other half for commuting students. We wanted a spatial organization that could unite the two. Stockton’s attitude toward education was similarly democratic, the program calling for as little differentiation of departments as possible.”

GBQC’s solution was a two-level spine that serves as a main circulation gallery, linking all teaching and faculty spaces. Most of these are loft spaces, organized with 30-foot grids, and have completely movable partitions within. The spaces between these finger lofts are planted with trees, the untouched pine forest coming to their outer edges. “The buildings on the exterior are thus an edge to the woods and the courts, an unobtrusive framework for student activity,” says Geddes. The circulation gallery at Stockton is bent to accommodate the existing landscape. At the far western end of the complex, where the gallery jogs, is a trio of fixed spaces—gymnasium, exercise room and swimming pool; beyond them is a theater.

George Cserna







## An emphasis on urban design and 'diplomacy.'

Because of cost and time constraints—one year from beginning of design to completion of the first phase of the building—GBQC employed at Stockton a systems approach, using prefabricated metal elements organized on a five-foot module. A prebidding procedure was used for five subsystems: structural, ceiling and lighting, interior partitions, HVAC and exterior skin. Manufacturers bid on schematic drawings and performance specifications of the subsystems prepared by the architects. GBQC then selected the manufacturers and worked with them while simultaneously developing construction documents.

The program also required the building to be energy efficient. Hence the use of deep sun screens that latch neatly onto the windowwalls which, in turn, latch onto the external structure. Covered passageways, shaded open spaces and the encroaching woodland also help reduce demands placed on mechanical systems.

GBQC's development and evolution as a firm can be seen as dividing into three phases. The first ends in 1965, with the move to Princeton. The second terminates in the mid-1970s after completion of SIU, Stockton and the Institute for Advanced Study. That brings us to the present, about which Geddes says, "I think in terms of formal organization, we are moving toward further expression of the surface. For the first time, for example, we are doing a building [a convention hotel in Kansas City] that is made up of many different materials in a kind of polychrome that hasn't existed in architecture since Queen Anne. It is brick and tile of many colors, porcelain, stainless steel, aluminum in silver and white, natural wood and white plaster. The range now is going much more to the conscious study of foreground and background colors, colors that are related to nature. Our second kind of evolution results from having different kinds of clients, many more private urban developers and corporate clients. Our most significant current jobs are, for me, the Chesapeake Life Insurance building in Baltimore and our urban design projects in Miami and at Liberty State Park, N.J."

The Chesapeake Life Insurance building, designed under the direction of Bob Brown of the Philadelphia office, is in early stages of construction and will cover more than a block of downtown Baltimore. The complex, shaped in a squared U surrounding a large garden facing the street, includes an office building with ground floor shops, an apartment tower and garage. The arrangement is a linear grid on a sloping site with pedestrian connections on several levels. Brick was chosen as material to blend the new complex with neighboring, mostly Georgian-style buildings. "But two colors of brick are used, so it isn't just square boxes," says Brown. There is also a variety of window sizes to complement adjacent buildings and achieve a richer surface.

"In terms of long-term significance, Liberty State Park is probably the most important thing we've ever been involved in," says Geddes. The project, begun in 1975, is a joint undertaking with landscape architects Zion and Breen. (Robert Zion was graduated from Harvard in 1950 with Geddes and Brecher, reminding us that past is prologue.) More than 20 years from now when it is completed—if it is ever completed, since funding will depend on a multitude of sources—Liberty Park will transform 800 acres of New Jersey shoreland from a forsaken jumble of weeds, litter and rotting piers into a huge recreation area over looking the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, most of Manhattan and, in the distance, Brooklyn Bridge.

*Liberty State Park (left): 1) Statue of Liberty, 2) Ellis Island, 3) crescent walk, 4) restored railroad terminal, 5) urban recreation, 6) residential neighborhoods. Across page, the two-level gallery at Stockton College that links teaching and faculty spaces.*





A crescent-shaped, stepped embankment will form a strong sculptural edge for the park and provide ample seating for river watching, fishing, fireworks displays and the like. Topping the embankment will be a broad, paved promenade providing what Geddes calls "the most exciting walkway in the world." At the northern end of the park, nearest Jersey City, will be what he describes as "an intensely urban recreation center," with swimming pools, ice skating rinks and tennis courts within walking distance of the city. He hopes there will also be a farmer's market and shops in the vicinity. GBQC will transform a nearby, deteriorated railroad terminal probably into a transportation museum.

Another of Geddes' favorites among the firm's current projects is the master plan for Miami's new government center. It was begun just last summer and is similar, he says, to I. M. Pei's plan for Boston's government center "in its intent to stimulate

the downtown and serve as a center of government." As with Pei at Boston, GBQC at Miami will design none of the proposed buildings. Rather, the firm's task is to integrate schemes by the firms of Johnson/Burgee (one which has stirred controversy), Hugh Stubbins & Associates, Harry Weese & Associates, Cambridge Seven and others into a coherent whole. "What we've gone back to here," says Geddes, "are our fundamental ideas of movement systems, the coordination of pedestrian armatures—east-west, north-south—an arcade as at SIU and Stockton that borders open space."

When GBQC received the Miami commission, the *Miami Herald* announced, "Government center gets a diplomat designer." And, in fact, the firm's role in several recent urban projects has been, among others, that of "public architect and diplomat," in Geddes' words. It is a task for which GBQC is well suited. For it is a firm mercifully free of polemic and dogma. □