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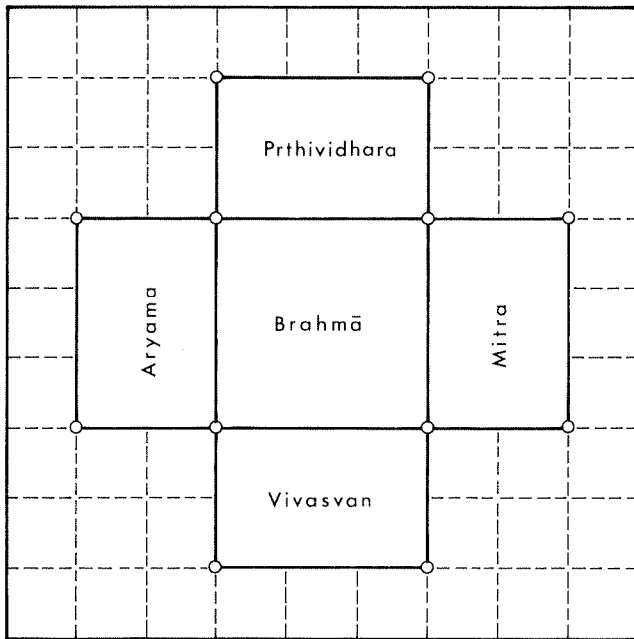
Arthur Allen

If perfection of landscape can only be found in a flat, square place, then Saskatchewan is perfect. There are several competitors for this honor. Wyoming and Colorado are closer to square, but they are disqualified by their extremely lumpy topography. Egypt, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Utah, and some Australian states try hard but are not quite able to complete their shapes to perfection. In spite of one flaw—the surveyors laying out the southern half of Saskatchewan's eastern border had some trouble finding the 102nd meridian of longitude—Saskatchewan's enormous, very flat, and very regular shape is, for all practical purposes, a perfect shape. It is at least as perfect as our globe will permit.

Considering reports that architect-priests (sthapati) of pre-Dravidian India laid out cities and buildings in square shapes on flat plains, there is little wonder that a group of architects in Regina, Saskatchewan, in the 1950s should have spent much time arguing about the shape of things. The sthapati believed that Brahma and some lesser dieties would only live with men in cities, buildings, and temples of perfect shape, that is, in square, flat places, the designs of which were based on various mandalas. Thus it was that the Regina architects, particularly the young ones passing through, wondered and endlessly debated the possibility that



I The garden of plenty.
Photograph courtesy of
Saskatchewan Government
Photo Services.



2

2 Paramasayika mandala.

After Andreas Volwahn, *Living Architecture, India* (London: McDonald, 1969).

3 Harvest celebration at a homestead with a sod house, Redvers, Saskatchewan, 1900–1905(?).

4 Arthur, Stella, and the children at the Cathedral of Pinkie.

the virtuous people of Saskatchewan were perfect simply because the place was square and flat.

As I remember it, most of us worked at one time or another in the very interesting architectural office of Izumi, Arnott and Sugiyama, and we were traveling in one of two directions. Canadians were often from farms, small villages, or the backwoods and were almost invariably on their way to Europe. Europeans, particularly Englishmen, were from densely populated cities and sometimes moved romantically in search of a remote and supposedly natural life in Western Canada.

I was headed from Vancouver to Europe, via Montreal, and stopped in Regina to work for a year. The day I arrived, a dust storm blew up, and twenty years later I left town during a similar storm. I had just finished architectural school in Vancouver, had very high hopes in a great profession, and had lived all my life to that date in the cool, green mountains of Alberta and British Columbia. The dust was a brown blizzard that choked and stung, and it was so thick that the clock tower of old Victoria School at 13th Avenue and McIntyre Street was invisible from two blocks away. It loomed like a huge three-story barn owl as I approached in the wind.

My dismay deepened when on my first assignment I was put to work on an alteration project at the Saskatchewan Mental Hospital in Weyburn, a small city seventy miles southeast of Regina. What a trip that is! For flatness it is utter perfection, and the highway changes course only once in the journey. The road runs twenty-five miles due south to the Corinne Corner, then tacks smartly forty-five degrees to the southeast, continuing to Weyburn with only minor loops to avoid grain elevators along the parallel railway.

We worked, and talked, and drank beer instead of Regina's infamous water, and argued, and worked some more, and baked corn in clay pits under charcoal fires, and a few, very few, stayed to become prairie dwellers. In the middle of all this, during an intense discussion of architecture in the service of politics, I met Stella. She is one of those genuine flatlanders who has a number for a birthplace—Sec. 28, Tp3, Rge4, W2nd, Saskatchewan—simply because she was born in the family farmhouse, not in the town hospital. Some day those numbers will be of great social importance to her descendants, who will claim her as a Saskatchewan Blue-Blood, as would a New England family with an ancestor on the Mayflower or an Australian family with connections back to the criminal lists of Botany Bay.

I never did reach Europe, or Montreal for that matter, and my mind was never broadened. Instead, my backside was flattened by interminable travels with Stella all over the endless grid roads of Saskatchewan. One day early in our career, I asked Stella what we might do on a fine Sunday. She replied that she would love a ride in the country, and we spent four hours looking at the back of the next field of grain while she smiled or frowned at the crops and tested the soil for moisture. We traveled in straight lines and turned ninety-degree corners all afternoon. Sometime later, with our two children, we invented the Prairie Perfect Sunday Morning Square Drive.

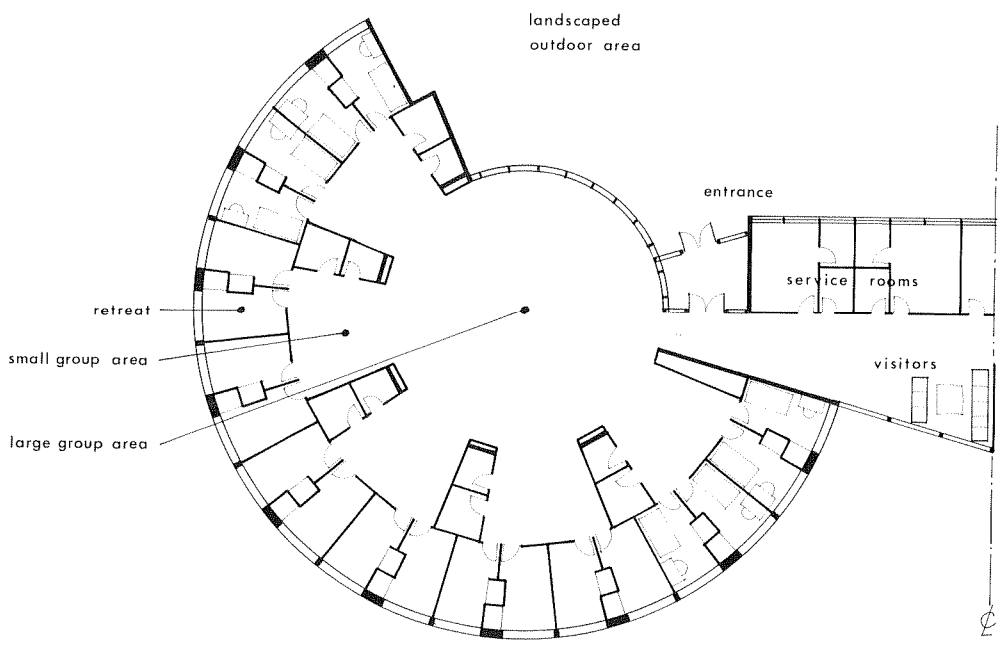


3

From the intersection of Albert Street and 13th Avenue, we would travel due west through a quiet residential district, past the city limits, and westward onto the flat and open prairie. Miles out we would stop briefly at the Cathedral of Pinkie, a rust red Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Elevator. Standing in awe of the huge icon, Stella would recall her father's tales of early trading in Saskatchewan wheat when the elevator was a place of greed and vicious competition for loading privileges rather than a symbol of plenty and cooperative grain marketing. Just past the elevator we would turn ninety degrees



4



Kyoshi Izumi, Architect

left and travel due south on a low dirt road, the wheat so high and close on each side that we couldn't see over it in bumper years. This passage seemed uneventful to me, but Stella, sometimes oblivious to distant views, would spend a delighted hour looking down at her feet in search of tiny wildflowers and relics of early farm life near an abandoned farmhouse now alone in the wind. I had not yet learned to enjoy those things, and once or twice I entertained the children with a new version of the creation story.

According to this tale, God wanted the whole world to be perfect, like Saskatchewan, and He started just east of Winnipeg with a huge bulldozer, leveling the Great Plains as He moved westward. Unfortunately the 'dozer broke down just west of Calgary, and He had to leave western Alberta and all of British Columbia in a terrible mess of rock and debris left over from the work of prairie leveling. The children's first trip to the Rocky Mountains was an interesting experience.

Two or three miles due south of Pinkie, we would make a second ninety-degree left turn onto the slick pavement of the Trans-Canada Highway and travel east with occasional slalom turns along the broken painted centerline of the deserted highway. Stella didn't like this maneuver. She worried that

5

5 Prototype design for a mental hospital by Kyoshi Izumi.

sinuous curving of the car might lead the children away from the straight and narrow and into heaven knows what manner of sensuous, twisted behavior in later years. The excitement mounted, however, because the last corner, at the intersection of the highway with Albert Street, was a cloverleaf. The children would nag and worry, shouting "Daddy, look out! Be careful! The road curves! Watch out!" Then we would spin, or creep, around the two-hundred-seventy-degree curve of the cloverleaf, heading sedately north into the city, back to the corner of Albert and 13th, on the east leg of an almost square and perfect drive.

Enough of these inventive pastimes; work and argument were the main diversions in Regina. When we weren't working, we visited and debated through the long winter evenings. Those of us in Izumi's office debated the emerging collaboration of social science and architecture. In 1966 we heard Paul Goodman's CBC lectures on the "Moral Ambiguity of America" and tried to connect Goodman's ideas with architecture. None of us succeeded at that time. During those years I met a large number of traveling architects and traded many arguments with varying degrees of interest.

The main source of architectural ideas in the

office was Kyoshi Izumi's work on the design of a prototype mental hospital proposed for several small cities throughout Saskatchewan. "The Saskatchewan Plan" called for the eventual closure of two huge mental hospitals, including Weyburn, after construction of six or eight small, community-oriented hospital facilities. In his prototype design Izumi drew a semicircular plan of one story with a social lounge in the center. Small parlors ringed the lounge, and individual patient bedrooms occupied the periphery of the circle. It was believed that the shape of the thing would facilitate easy movement between private and public spaces, thus aiding mentally handicapped people who experience difficulty in making these transitions. Only one of the small regional hospitals was built, and it was done with rectangular cottages because the Department of Psychiatric Services did not wish to raise any eyebrows, at least not with unusually shaped buildings.

Many years later the Saskatchewan Association of Architects received a letter, from the Canary Islands, I believe, asking about the shape of rooms in Saskatchewan mental hospitals. Apparently the book *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* states that trapezoidal rooms in Saskatchewan hospitals were developed as part of the

treatment of mental illness. To my knowledge there was no magic intended in Izumi's shapes and spaces, but who knows. There were some unusual and interesting people working in the Weyburn Hospital.

T. E. Weckowicz undertook perceptual experiments with patients in a long, narrow room that we built for him and established that schizophrenia does distort perception of distance, leaving a victim unsure about the space in which he moves. This work reminds me of some moments when the vast space and empty foreground of prairie scenes created a landscape of miniature architecture. In winter, when snow obliterates all traces of perspective in the foreground, it really is easy to believe that distant farms and elevators are miniatures and that freight trucks are Dinky Toys sailing a dry ocean.

Leonard Ghan was in and about Weyburn in those days and continues to use rectangular diagrams in explaining the principles of Transactional Analysis. He seems to be less comfortable with recent spiral diagrams (like Stella, he grew up on straight prairie roads) and forcibly reminds me that his drawings are maps for people lost in their own minds. They are not intended to be used to develop plans for buildings or other devices that restrain



6

6 The four seated ladies of Weyburn. Photograph courtesy of Robert Sommer.

people. Ghan's work reminds me of some fascinating medieval diagrams used in the explanation of religious ideas. Various arboreal diagrams, and some architectural ones, are beautifully illustrated in an article by Michael Evans, "The Geometry of the Mind," published in the *Architectural Association Quarterly*. In the article, the biblical Tower of Wisdom and its seven pillars give a clearly architectural form to the structure of an idea. The Tree of Architecture, shown as a frontal plate in Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture*, is a similar device used as a diagrammatic aid to thought and discussion.

Humphry Osmond was director of the Weyburn Hospital in the 1950s and was a fountain of ideas. One of my favorites at the time concerned possible disturbance to disoriented people arising from the ambiguous patterns and images of traditional architectural ornament. In 1957 Osmond wrote (in *Mental Hospitals*, April 1957),

Gratuitous burdens are not uncommon. A famous British mental hospital welcomes its new arrivals in a richly painted and gilded hall. Among the intertwining leaves covering the walls, goblin-like creatures are concealed. Sometimes a whole head can be seen,

sometimes only an eye gleams malevolently at the new arrival.

The unintentional ambiguity of decorative forms, and possible ill effects, poses a question that has not been tested so far as I know. It may be of interest to post-Modern designers who show a renewed interest in traditional architectural forms and ornament.

My memory is uncertain, but I think that my first meeting with Robert Sommer occurred while he and Jack Cleland, another psychologist, were attempting to estimate the number of crows that could be placed at regular intervals on the telephone wires between Weyburn and Regina. Sommer had located a book, *Studies of the Psychology and Behavior of Animals in Zoos and Circuses*, by Dr. H. Hediger, a noted Swiss zoologist, and was finding it very useful in his research. Some of Hediger's observations apply literally to the human species in and out of mental hospitals, and some zoological concepts are of course applicable to human behavior and therefore to architecture.

Sommer became widely known for his work, establishing himself as a leader in the environmental design movement. His research and his books are close to direct architectural application. His books

include *Personal Space*, *Tight Spaces*, *Design Awareness*, *The End of Imprisonment*, and *The Mind's Eye*. I know that the crows on the wire had something to do with *Personal Space*, but *Tight Spaces* was prompted, I suspect, by the story of the four seated ladies of Weyburn.

The events behind this story took place before I arrived in Weyburn but are recorded in an article by Robert Sommer published in *Designing for Human Behavior*, edited by Lang, Burnette, Moleski, and Vachon. Sommer reported that early in his work in Weyburn he noted that the hospital wards chairs were often grouped in rectangular grids facing away from each other, in straight rows back to back, and occasionally on each side of a square column, facing the four points of the compass. These arrangements, preordained by an architect-priest and rigidly maintained for easy cleaning and management by hospital staff, frustrated normal social interaction of sitters. Sommer regrouped the chairs and reported the following:

The arrangement we selected involved the chairs being placed around small tables in a good conversational arrangement. Although it is hardly surprising now to report this, we found that this more than doubled the amount of conversation

between patients. Magazine reading went up twenty fold because the tables now provided places on which the magazines could be stored.

A picture of the four seated ladies from *Designing for Human Behavior* (in this case they are seated back to back) is a terribly sad picture. In my opinion it provides additional proof that the shape of things does matter.

The draughting of floor plans for buildings sometimes produces drawings as intricate and delightfully geometric as the plan view of a snowflake. This is true of many historic styles of architecture where symmetry and repetition play major design roles. It is especially true of the strict axial and radial symmetries of prison and military structures. It is a social irony that asylums, invented in the optimism of nineteenth-century reform, ultimately became warehouses to some degree, degrading in part to the function of a waste container for usually harmless but eccentric and inconvenient people. It is an architectural irony that the drawing of floor plans for these structures can be such pleasant work in spite of some miserable purposes involved in the use of these buildings.

After meeting the four ladies I continued for two years

working on the hospital renovations, meeting regularly with Kyoshi Izumi, Robert Sommer, and others on various issues of mental hospital function and design and for broader talks about architecture. My attitude was usually black. I was decidedly antigeometric and looked upon the regular prairie roads and farmsteads, and upon all symmetrical buildings, including the Weyburn Hospital, as the work of devils who had nothing better to do than trap people in rigidly ordered patterns of space and time. My disillusionment was severe, and architectural debates with my friends in Regina developed a sharper tone when I asserted that architects were demiurges, Gnostic artificers of the world, and the originators of evil.

It was Stella and the Prairie Perfect Square Drive that first eased my mind to laughter, and I began to take a new interest in the geometry of large things. I asked about wrong angles but found no one willing to debate the morality of right angles. The possibility that rect-angles might have some unrectified kin also interested me, as it still does.

Our two growing children completed my cautious return to order when we found that degrees of discipline and geometry were necessary in the shaping of

their lives. There are still places in Saskatchewan where they could lead their lives with the relative freedom of great Cree hunters, but that will be their choice, not mine.

Professionally I still worry about the four seated ladies of Weyburn and plan to continue work on the geometry of institutional buildings. Prisons, for example, generally use geometric designs, with minute and increasingly electronic surveillance and control of the activities of inmates. In spite of apparent improvements over ancient practices, some prisoners and critics have grave reservations about the totalitarian nature of modern prisons and the effect of these institutions on inmates and staff. I am therefore cautious about the extent to which architects and other caretakers are authorized to impose order on the lives of building occupants. In a wide sense every building is, or ought to be, an asylum, a safe place, and I am now ready to admit that there can be a measure of goodness in any building designed by an architect of good intentions. I am not at all sure just how and when that goodness might prevail, particularly since architects usually leave their works promptly after turning the keys at opening ceremonies. If the architect is followed by occupants and caretakers who care less, then good intentions will fail.

When these thoughts become dark, and serenity vanishes for a while, the satisfaction that I normally find in the contemplation of architecture remains, but it is not the same as it was when I was young. At these moments I remember that on many occasions Stella and I were successful in finding tranquility in a high place. Saskatchewan does have one lump, a blemish, on its otherwise flat and perfect face. From a high point in the Cypress Hills, in the southwest corner of the province, the plains can be seen best at sunrise. The farmlands and the grid roads lie flat to the horizons, laid out like a vast mandala to walk upon. On the hills, in the fresh and peaceful morning, it no longer disturbs me to wonder if the sthapati were correct. I can even chuckle, thanking Kyoshi Izumi for introducing me to social science and Robert Sommer and for sharing with me his own unique view of this very round world.