

106 // FREE RADICAL
WORDS // SHONQUIS MORENO
PORTRAIT // KEETJA ALLARD

paper planes

ARCHITECT RAIMUND ABRAHAM BELIEVES THAT THE BUILDINGS THAT HE DRAWS HAVE AS MUCH POTENTIAL AS THOSE THAT ARE ACTUALLY BUILT. AN IRREGULAR OUTPUT OF TOTEMIC BUILDINGS AND HIS 'PAPER WORKS' HAVE LED TO A COMMISSION TO BUILD "THE MOST RADICAL BUILDING IN BEIJING".



RAIMUND ABRAHAM IS DRINKING HIS SECOND CAMPARI IN THE COURTYARD OF A SWANKY MANHATTAN BAR.

The 70-year-old architect, artist and teacher has eyes the colour of his faded jeans. He wears Mexican huaraches, two pairs of spectacles hanging on cords around his neck, and his grey hair is gathered into a low ponytail beneath the straw rim of a Panama hat.

Anyone who believes that architecture has to do with surfaces will be stumped by Abraham. In the vein of other philosopher-architects such as Piranesi, Wright, Archigram, Woods, Brodsky and Utkin, Abraham explores what is possible in architecture both through drawing and occasionally building provocative and furiously tectonic architecture that is a collision of ideas with form. The drawings collected in his book *[Un]built* explore the zones where meetings take place between earth and sky, between form and human experience, between the empirical and the ideal. It's difficult to imagine how these abstractions can be manifest in drawings of architecture—until you look at both Abraham's drawings and his buildings, the most recent of which went into construction this year in Beijing, and is being touted by the media as one of the

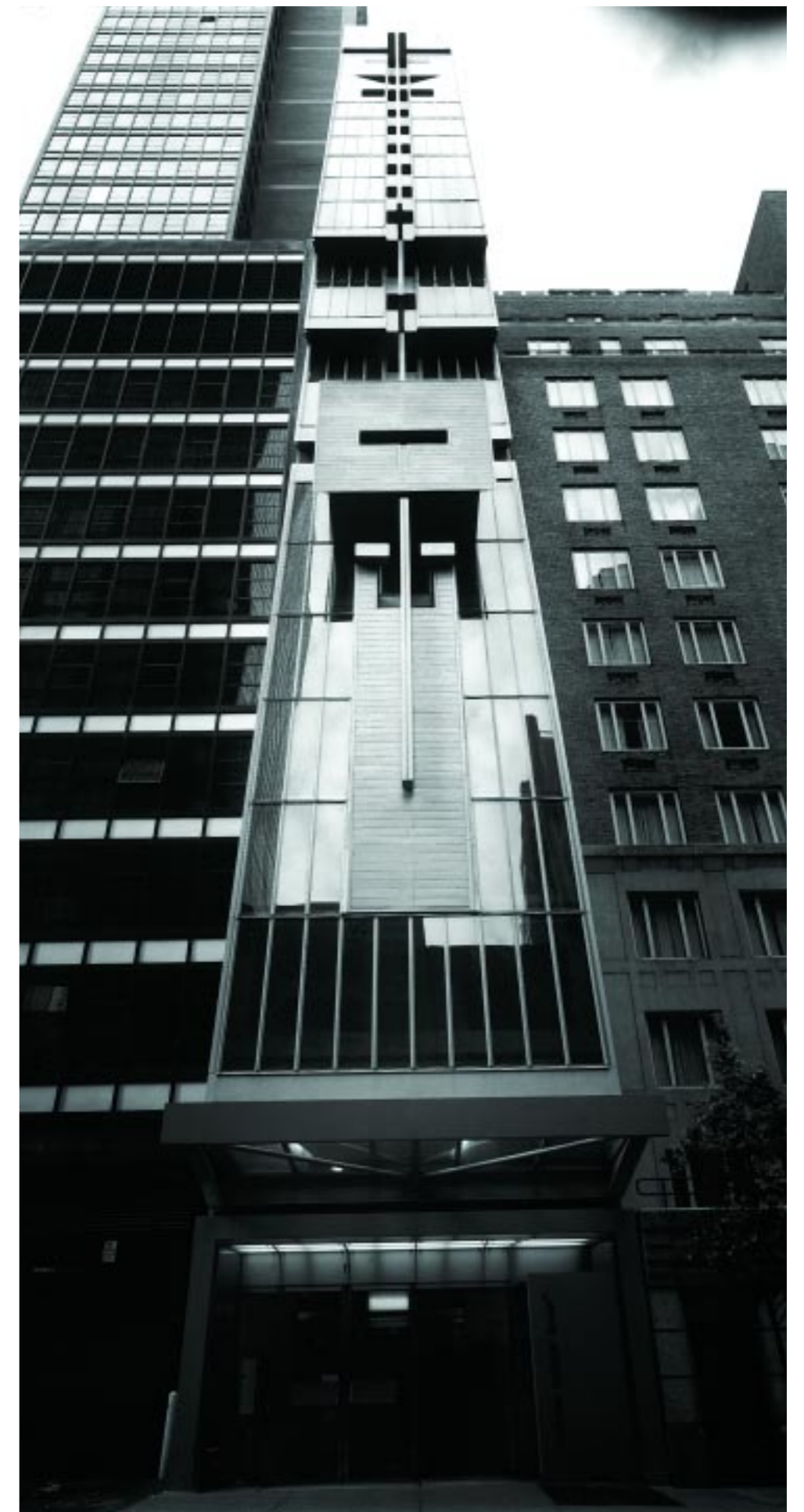
most radical buildings in a megalopolis famed for the radical architecture being constructed there.

"In my view Abraham's drawings are essentially philosophical, in that they struggle with questions of existence and its meaning," says architect Lebbeus Woods, who first met Abraham at Cooper Union where both were teaching in the late 1980s. "They are not prescriptive and illustrative of some next step, but formulations of principles, grammar, methods of thinking and working. They are something highly personal. At the same time, they address ideas that allude to the universal, in his use of archetypes—square, cube, circle, sphere, point, line and plane. The interplay between these supposed extremes creates an inner tension, an existential, dialectical, ultimately tectonic—that is, a constructed—idea of place, time, the world."

The son of a Tyrolian winemaker, Abraham grew up skiing and climbing the Austrian Dolomites. He earned an architecture degree in Graz, established a studio in Vienna, and in 1964, emigrated to the United States of America. Since then, teaching—at Cooper Union where he has

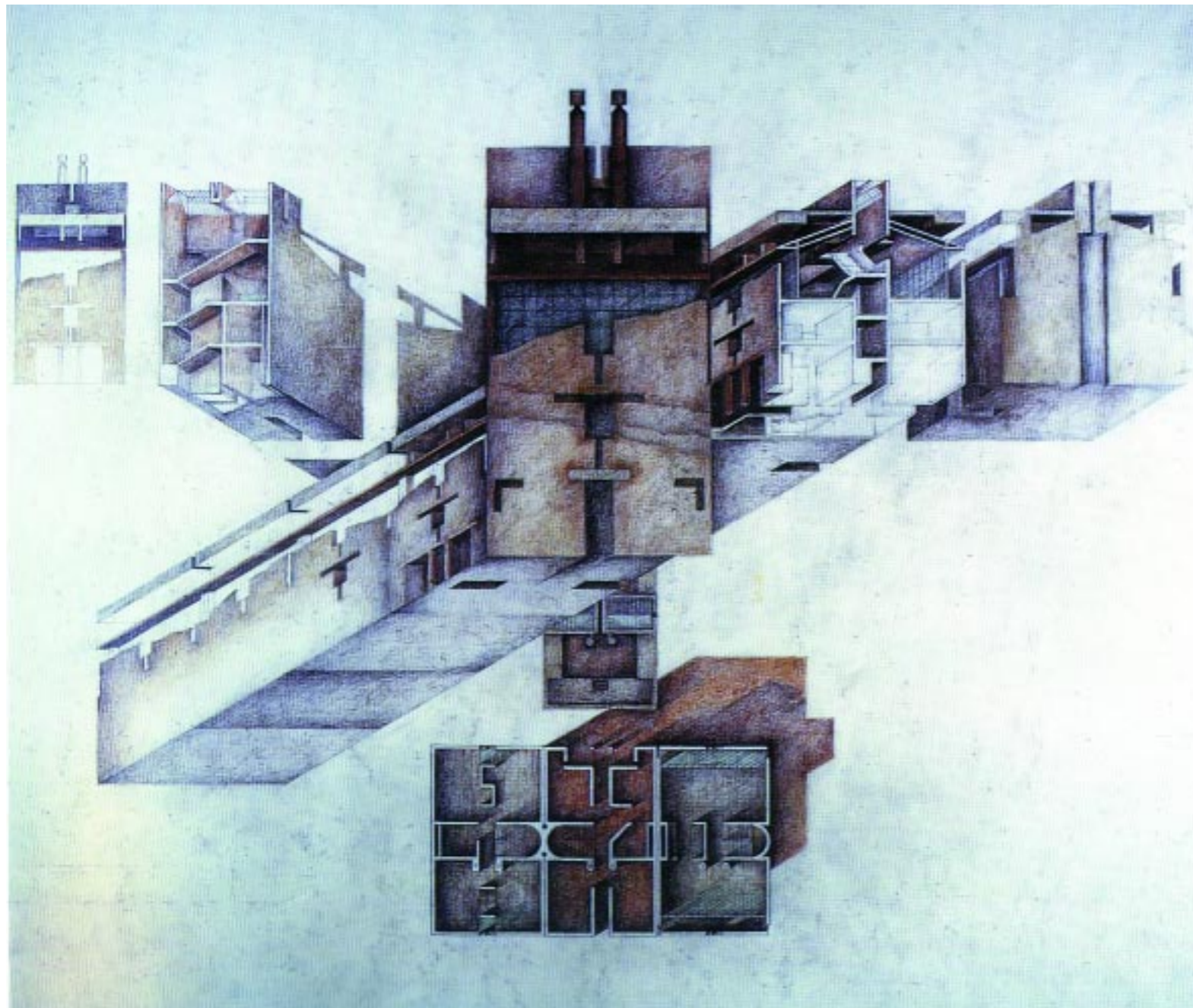
PREVIOUS PAGE Abraham in his New York Office. He eschews computers, preferring instead to work by hand. **FACING PAGE** Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, 2002. "My intention with the building was to resolve the extreme condition of smallness of the site, its void, its lateral compression," says Abraham.

ATELIER RAIMUND ABRAHAM



“There is a rather intriguing scientific theory that in the evolution of our organs, the brain evolved last. It was the hand influencing the evolution of the brain and not vice-versa. I’m not a genius, I’m a labourer. I labour on my ideas.”

< RAIMUND ABRAHAM >



ATELIER RAIMUND ABRAHAM

been on the faculty for over 30 years, at Rhode Island School of Design, Yale, Harvard and others—has guarded Abraham’s independence of mind. Woods has called him the “teacher of the teachers” and, indeed, Abraham seems to embrace teaching as a way to consider and evolve ideas. Although he has built (homes, a daycare centre, cultural spaces), and is building now, teaching has allowed him, first and foremost, to think—and to draw.

THE DRAWN
 “I would claim that architecture does not have to be built, like music doesn’t have to be performed,” says Abraham. “You have little dots and lines and they become sounds, and you have a drawing of architecture which could become a building. I never draw images; when I draw, I realise concepts. I try to evoke the pragmatics: structure, gravity, materiality, light. I don’t need the building to verify the idea; the drawing itself is the final statement. I construct with my pencil, anticipating the structure. Music is not melody.”

There is an almost Platonic sense of form in Abraham’s landscapes, as if they exist in an interstitial realm—the space between what is, and what can be. “A drawing remains mysterious because it’s still latent,” he says. “A drawing is like an imaginary world that you have to inhabit like a real building. I prefer a drawing, because it’s never complete. It always waits either to be inhabited or to be built.”

In Abraham’s 1982 concept for a monument called *Church on the Berlin Wall*, he uses intersecting planes to describe austere crosses. Someone once suggested that Abraham’s work resembled an excavated archaeology; however, one might argue that it is more elemental than that. *Church on the Berlin Wall* resembles tectonic plates, earthen vertebrae which break through the crust of the earth and slide to a momentary, antagonistic rest. (A series of drawings called ‘Times Square Tower’, completed two years later, are similarly ‘spinal’.) Abraham has said that, although he distrusts history as an interpretive fiction, he is always interested “in the beginning of things”. Indeed, his work seems to recall a time when things were, literally, first formed, the original architecture when magma flowed and cooled and when water cut canyons through layers of rock.

In his *Curtain House* drawings from the 1970s, Abraham, as usual, uses an element that we think we know—a curtain—but places the curtain outside the building, exposed to, and blowing in, the wind. Looking at the pictures, you can imagine the exhaling sound of the wind and the occasional plunk of the curtains coming to rest momentarily

FACING PAGE One of Abraham’s works on paper is a series entitled *Nine Projects for Venice, 1979-1980*. Each page contains an architectural drawing followed by a piece of writing.

The House

Central spinal core of stairs and baths break open to the sky to form the larger network of lines of terminal infinity toward centric squares. Rooms solidify along passages of shadows walls made visible in broken horizons. Roofs flatten the archaic skins of bricks chimneys reach over the upper horizon.

FACING PAGE The Beijing Centre for Wellbeing, a cultural centre and spa currently under construction.
BELOW *The Monument to Aviation*, 1979. This piece was inspired by a poem by American James Laughlin called *Above the City*, which is about the B-25 bomber that crashed into the 79th floor of the Empire State Building in 1945. It reads, in part,

none of us were much surprised
 because we'd always known that those
 two paragons of

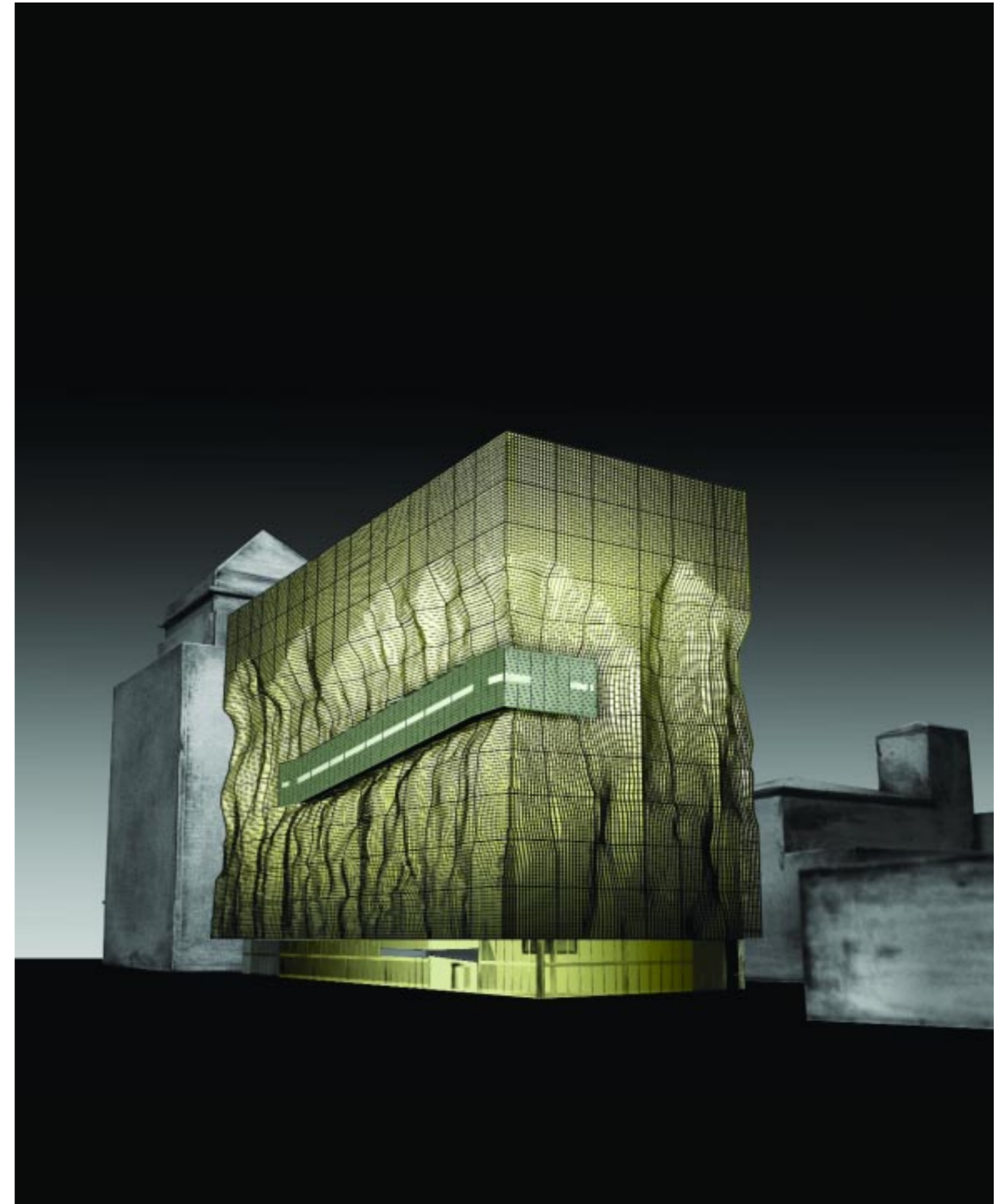
progress sooner or later would
 perform before our eyes this
 demonstration of their
 true relationship.

against the window pane. "I don't want the Curtain House to be built," says Abraham, "because when there is no wind, the curtain will hang flat against the glass. The power of the drawing is that I can make the curtain float on the wind indefinitely. Each medium [built or drawn] represents a different reality; one is not better than the other. Each demonstrates its own limits."

Terence Riley, chief curator of architecture and design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, doesn't make a distinction between Abraham's built work and his theoretical work. "I think other architects should try to understand the interrelationship between the built and the theoretical," says Riley. "Most of the time, an architect's built and unbuilt works seem to inhabit different worlds. Abraham's do not." Although drawing and building are autonomous exercises in Abraham's eyes, there is a remarkable kinship between the two when he builds. He sees architecture as both a violation and subsequent reconciliation of space but, for him, it also seems to represent a tearing down and reconstruction of habits of thought—of ideas, themselves.

AND THE BUILT
 In the early 1970s, Abraham's Hinge Chair (he pronounces it as "hinch") featured a wooden chair cut in half and reassembled using a hinge so that it opened and closed along its vertical axis. It was photographed with a seated, nude woman, legs spread to varying degrees in synch with the arc of the hinge. Out of context, we see anew both how a chair operates and how the human body performs the physical act of sitting. For Abraham, this was an effective reduction of architecture to a single object.

When Abraham is asked to build, he draws less and begins instead to build models. "When I theorise, I theorise, and when you theorise, you speculate. When you work, you eliminate speculation," Abraham says. "There is a rather intriguing scientific theory that in the evolution of our organs, the brain evolved last. It was the hand influencing the evolution of the brain and not vice-versa. I'm not a genius, I'm a labourer. I labour on my ideas." It is the immediate requirements of a specific site that drive the design, superseding the philosophical exploration. A drawing may never find its solution, but Abraham knows that a building must.



ATELIER RAIMUND ABRAHAM

BELOW WTC New York (Groundzero), 2001. Abraham's suggestion for the site where the World Trade Centre stood is for three inhabitable concrete slabs of 880 feet long, 110 feet wide and 550 feet tall, 110 feet apart. At the time of each plane hitting the towers and the collapse of each tower on September 11, 2001, the position of the sun has been located and fixed at the lateral angle from true east. Four 33-foot-wide and 550-foot-high passages are cut east-west through the three slabs at these centre-lines, marking the events as a memorial.



CULTURAL TOTEMS.....

This is true with Abraham's US\$80 million midtown Manhattan Austrian Cultural Forum which was completed in 2002 and became an immediate landmark. This building seems to confront gravity through a shearing set of planes that taper back from the street, cascading out and down. The extremely restrictive, 81- by 25-foot footprint meant that the final design recalled the *Church on the Berlin Wall* and his totemic Times Square Tower. Like other buildings of his, it involves intersecting geometric forms: spheres, triangles, cylinders and planes. "The building as it stands is a great building," says Lebbeus Woods, "and one of the very few in this vast landscape of generic buildings. It exhibits all the qualities of Abraham's best drawings, including that visually compelling, mysterious and rather frightening quality of the personal confronting the universal."

Mahadev Raman, Arup's lead mechanical engineer on the Austrian Cultural Forum project, met Abraham in March 1993, unaware of the architect's experimental work. "In going through the *[Un]built* book later," Raman says, "I was struck by how fluidly Abraham moved from the highly conceptual to the nitty-gritty stuff that would work in practice. In other words, he didn't shy away from the reality of producing real buildings."

Abraham's most recent physical project went into construction this year in China: the Beijing Centre for Wellbeing, a cultural space encompassing a spa. Abraham's reaction to the bland site was to erect a vast cube, and veil it with a grilled aluminum façade that looks solid from a distance but sheer from within. Because of the way Abraham has carved into its flanks, it evokes a cliff eroded by the forces of the ocean, as his brief required. The man who hired Abraham contacted him last year. He told the architect: "I want the most radical building in Beijing." It is vintage Abraham when he smiles mischievously recalling this, and says his first thought on hearing such a declaration was: "Let's see how much courage this man has, no?"