

# Matthew Nowicki

SKETCHES AND VISIONS

JANUARY 21, 1993

THROUGH

MARCH 21, 1993

Visual Arts Center  
North Carolina State University

# Introduction and Acknowledgements

ONE OF THE WONDERFUL COLLECTIONS I surveyed when I worked at the North Carolina Museum of Art was the 96 drawings by Matthew Nowicki. His drawings presented a view of the legendary architect and designer of the Dorton Arena that matched the accounts of those people who had been lucky enough to know Nowicki.

At North Carolina State University I was reminded of the museum's drawings every time I went to the School of Design Library. A Nowicki drawing, given to the School by Mrs. Nowicki, is on view. I wondered when or if we might exhibit drawings from the museum's holdings.

Two years ago Fernando Magallenes, associate professor of landscape architecture, joined the Board of Friends of the Gallery. He brought up the subject of drawings in the research collections and what he considered the serious need for students to see and study varieties of drawings. Within an hour we had developed the outline of a plan to acquire drawings for the university's collections. With this in mind I wrote to the North Carolina Museum of Art. We had just moved into the Visual Arts Center and I felt the Nowicki drawings should be here and accessible to faculty and students. Happily, Richard Schneidermann, NCMA Director, John Coffey, Curator of American and Modern Art, and the Museum's Board of Trustees agreed. On January 9, 1992 the Museum transferred the drawings to North Carolina State University.

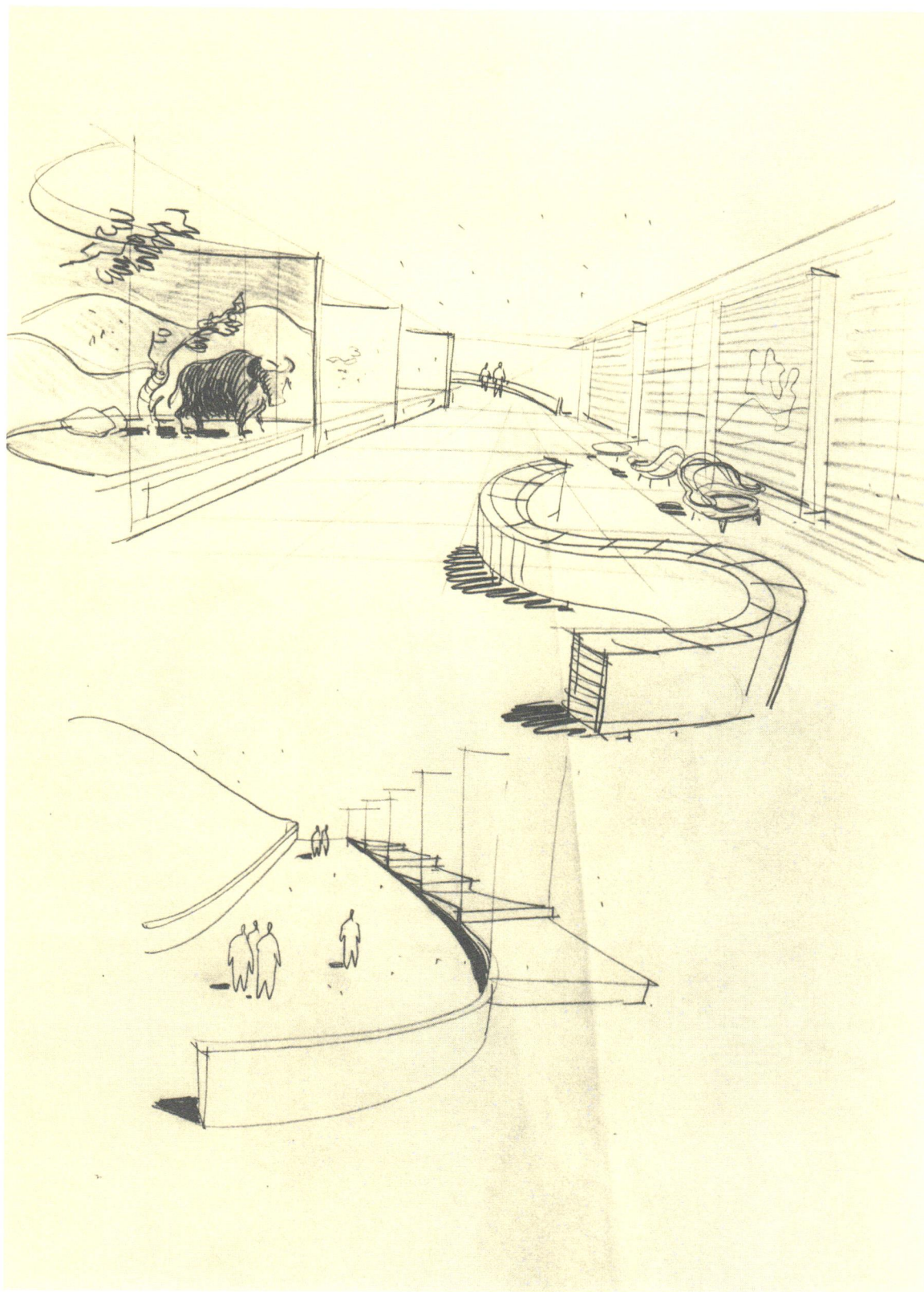
Professor Robert P. Burns was the natural and logical choice to curate this exhibition which he views as a work in progress. There is much to be found out about the drawings which can begin with this exhibition. It is also hoped that this event will encourage offers of drawings from designers, architects, and landscape architects practicing in the state and the region. The Nowicki drawings define *desiderata* for the collection and will provide a standard of inherent worth as we consider future gifts.

The Visual Arts Center and North Carolina State University gratefully acknowledges this transfer from the North Carolina Museum of Art. The Museum staff continues to be a source of support and encouragement to our collections and exhibitions development. The North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Architects are lenders to this exhibition and we appreciate their cooperation. I would also like to thank Charles Millard, Director of the Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for offering the expertise of paper conservator Lyn Koehline who surveyed the drawings and made recommendations regarding their care, storage, and exhibition. Bob O'Brien of Duncan Parnell, Inc. graciously agreed to view the drawings and properly identify the papers used by Nowicki between 1948 and 1950.



Charlotte V. Brown  
DIRECTOR





N. C. MUSEUM

Study for a proposed Museum of Art, Science and History for the State of North Carolina. ca. 1950. Graphite, colored pencils on the reverse.

## AS UNENCUMBERED OBJECTS

of artistic expression, the sketches of Matthew Nowicki are remarkably appealing. These seemingly effortless images of vast vaulted spaces, gossamery pavilions, and magical urban plazas dazzle the eye and challenge the imagination. For all their visual brilliance, they were produced not as gallery pieces but as part of a disciplined exploration of architectural form and space. This exhibition presents visionary designs, conceptual studies really, for several architectural projects planned for North Carolina by Nowicki, who for a brief interval illuminated the state's architectural firmament. The exhibited works provide insight into the architect's creative process, into his use of lightning-like line sketches to generate, compare, and distill concepts for an architecture emerging into reality.

Matthew Nowicki must certainly have been among the most courtly and captivating men of his time. Those who knew him personally - faculty colleagues, students, even casual acquaintances - spoke of him with unrestrained admiration. The eminent historian Lewis Mumford, who became a sort of adoptive elder brother and champion of the young Polish emigre, wrote that "he was a man to attract attention. Gay, affable, scrupulously polite to the point of formality, he was at home in every kind of society." Photographs made shortly before his death in 1950 reveal him as tall and slender, comfortably dressed in light grey tweeds. His dark hair framed a long oval-shaped face which appeared sensitive, grave, and thoughtful. His creative accomplishments and the promise of future achievements evoked even greater devotion among his admirers than did his personal qualities.

Mumford voiced a widely-held perception: "he had every prospect of becoming the outstanding architect of the coming generation."

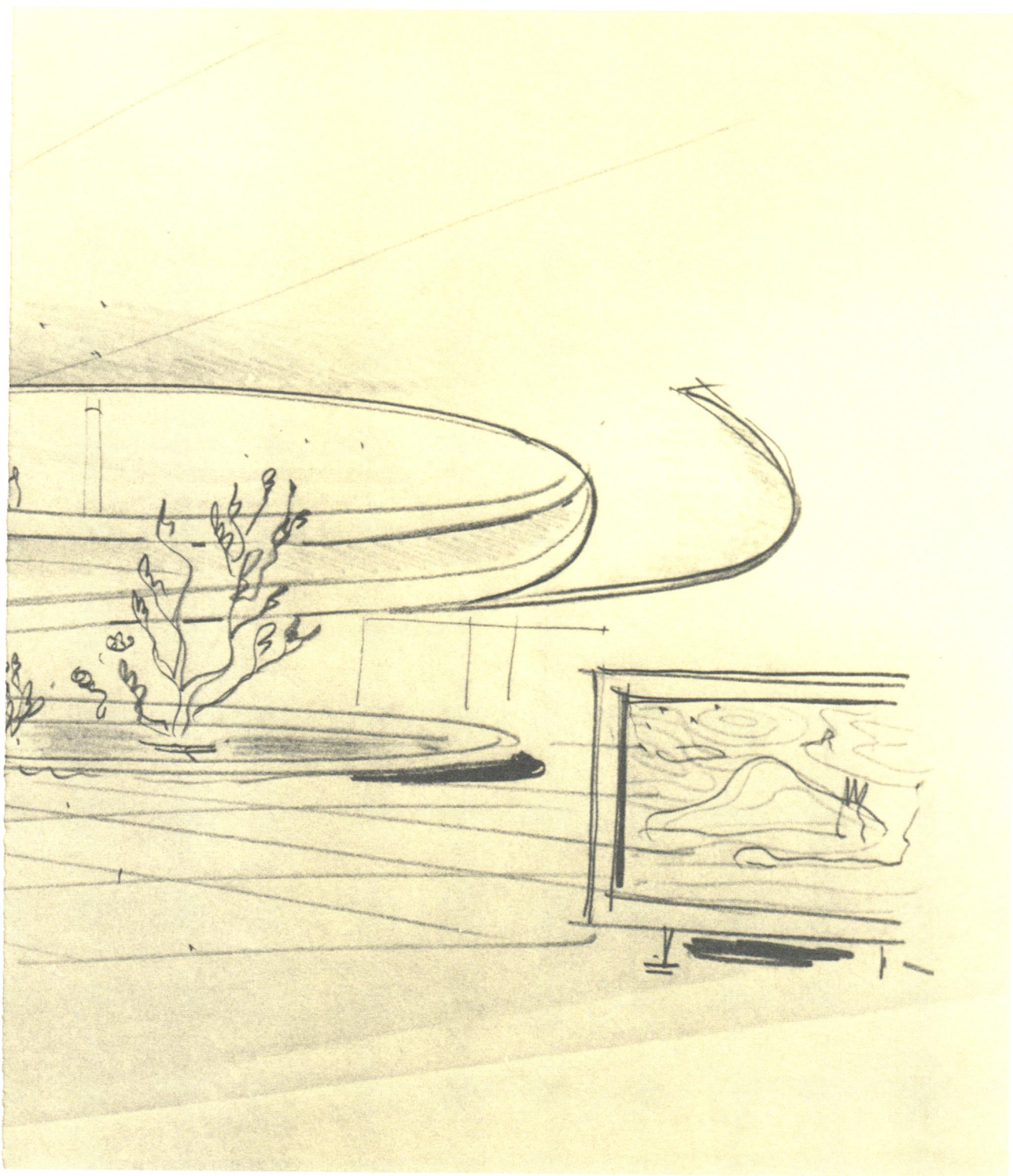
What circumstances led this exceptional person to Raleigh in the late 1940s? And what experiences, ambitions, and talents enabled him to conceive an architecture which in his own words would promote "the well-being of contemporary man"?

Matthew Nowicki was born on June 26, 1910 into a well-to-do, high-minded Polish family naturally disposed towards the arts, education, foreign travel and public service. Significant among his adolescent experiences was that the young Nowicki, accompanying his father on a government mission, spent two happy years in Chicago. There he acquired a working knowledge of the English language and a lifelong appreciation for the generosity of the American character.

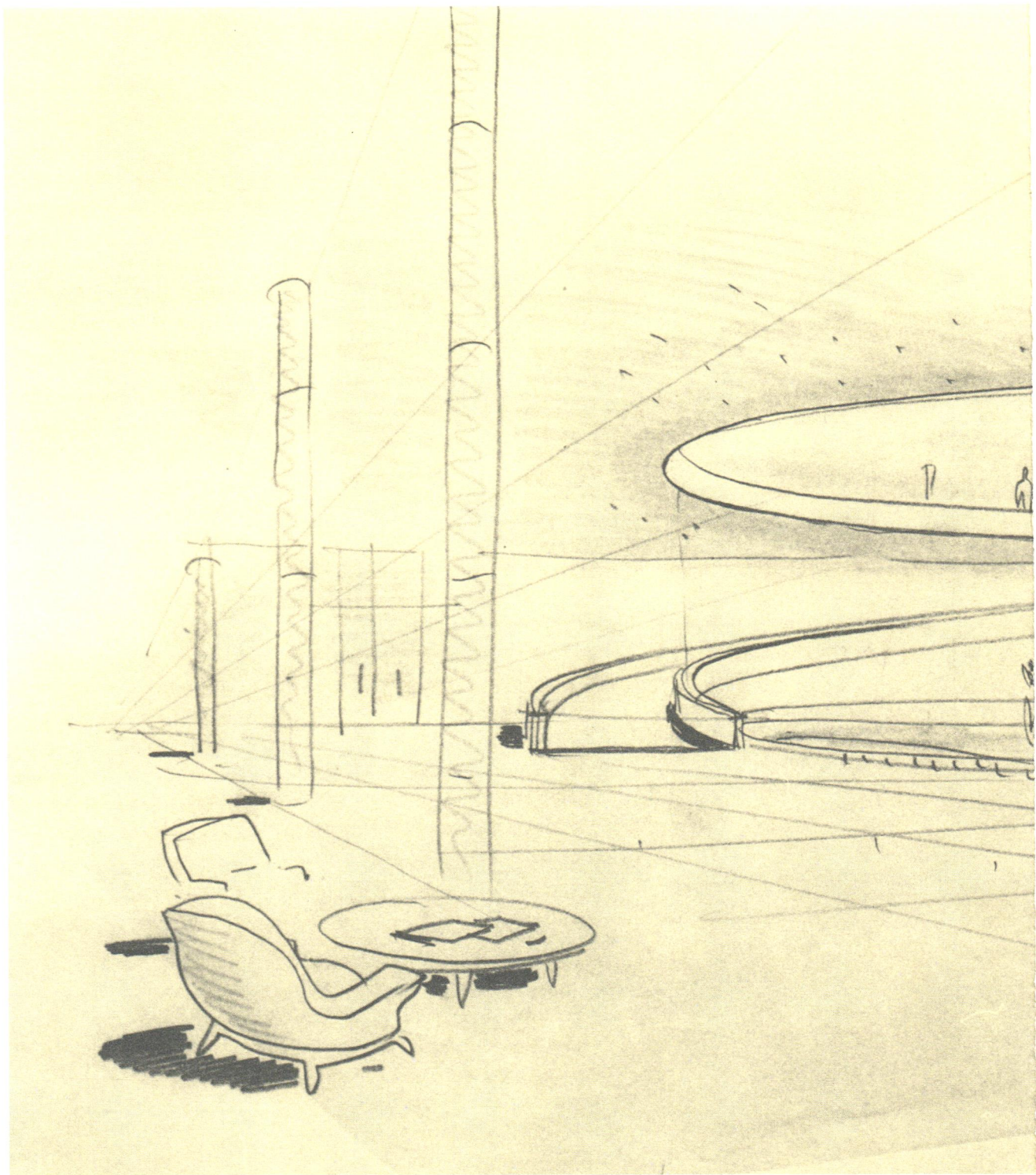
When he entered the Warsaw Polytechnic in 1929, his aptitude for drawing was already evident. Although the architecture curriculum emphasized engineering more than fine arts, he continued to develop his drawing skills, particularly as a means of analyzing and capturing the nature of architectural space and structure. In his hands this approach was to become a form of discovery and creative expression equalled by few other 20th century architects. It was here also that Nowicki met his future wife Stanisława Sandecka, another gifted architecture student, who became his sympathetic critic and lifelong collaborator on projects as diverse as fabric design and book illustrations.

Nowicki's years in Poland prior to World War II were full of discovery and personal growth. He traveled widely in Europe and even visited Brazil. From the architectural monuments of the past he gained a sense of order and of architecture's cultural purpose. He also encountered and absorbed the

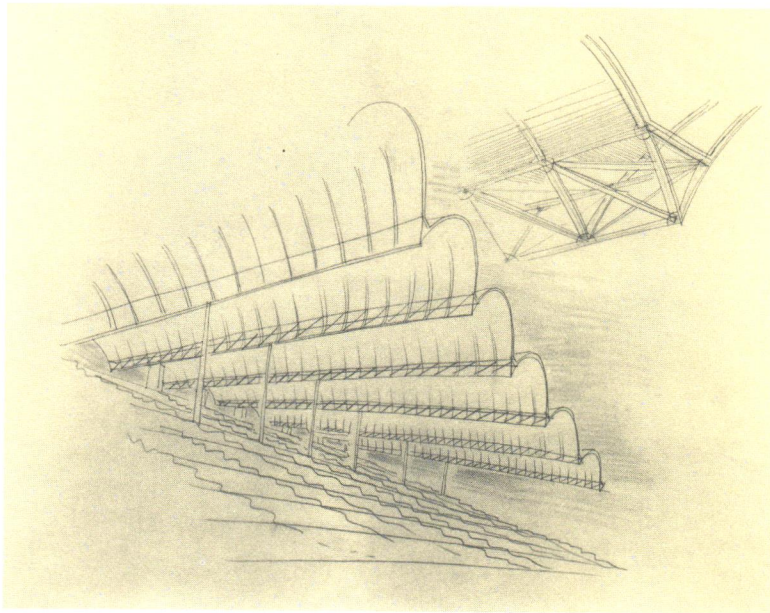












#### N. C. STATE FAIRGROUNDS

Study for proposed grandstand. ca. 1950. Graphite on paper.

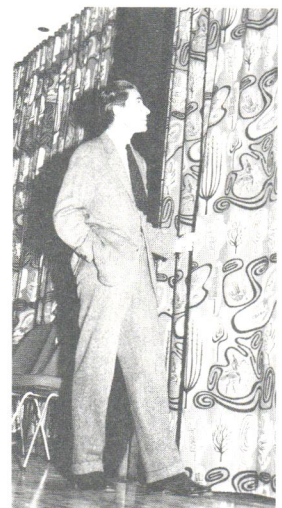
theories and works of early modernism, especially those of Le Corbusier, whose influence was deeply felt throughout Nowicki's life. His rigorous education at the Polytechnic also exposed him to the daring advances in 19th century technology from Paxton, Roebling, and Eiffel forward to Maillart, as well as the structural-determinist writings of Viollet-le-Duc, which was a seed that came to flower so brilliantly in his plans for the North Carolina State Fairgrounds.

In 1936 Nowicki was appointed associate professor of architecture at the Warsaw Polytechnic and began the practice of architecture. During the three intervening years before the war, he taught architecture and designed various buildings - churches, office buildings, housing units, and, most notably, the Polish Pavilion for the New York World's Fair of 1939. The devastation of Warsaw and the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany cut short his promising beginning. Nowicki was assigned to a trade school teaching bricklaying, but he also secretly conducted classes in architecture and town planning, an activity banned by the Nazi overlords. At one point he even became involved in a guerrilla uprising in the woods

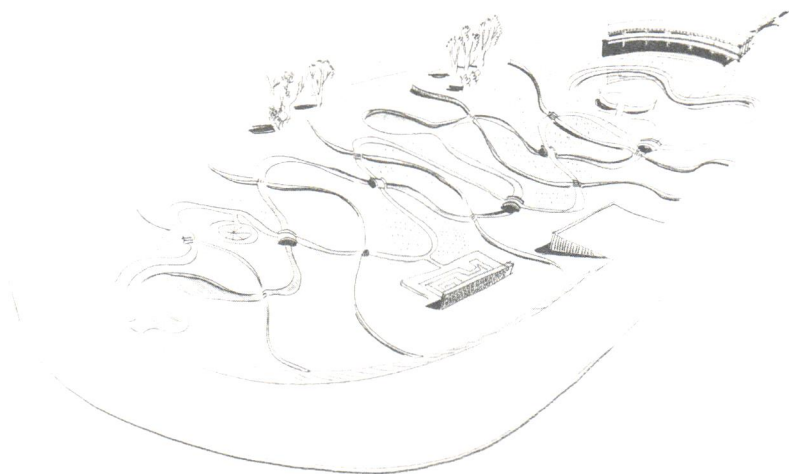
near Warsaw and was forced to flee with his wife and small son to a remote region of the country.

Of these most difficult times, Mumford writes: "No one can undergo such experiences without being deeply affected by it. Such an ordeal burns away residual weakness and brings out unexpected sources of strength. In Nowicki it deepened his dedication, both to his art and the needs of his fellowmen; partly perhaps as a refuge from his macabre memories, he threw himself into architecture, as into an asylum and a sanctuary."

At the conclusion of the war, Poland exchanged one form of oppression for another. Soviet domination and the imposition of communist rule left meager opportunity for the liberal, freedom-loving architect to practice his art and to contribute to the culture, now vanished, which had nurtured him. After a short stint as planning chief for the reconstruction of central Warsaw, Nowicki was appointed as technical advisor to the Polish Embassy in the United States, assigned to seek American assistance in the rebuilding of Warsaw. This led to his selection in 1947 as the Polish representative to the international team of architects and planners responsible for site selection and design of the United Nations complex.



Matthew Nowicki, Carolina Country Club, Raleigh, ca. 1949.



#### N. C. STATE FAIRGROUNDS

Study for proposed racetrack. ca. 1950. Graphite on paper.

The youngest and, at the time, the least celebrated member of the illustrious assembled team (which included Le Corbusier), Nowicki nevertheless made important contributions to the difficult task facing the team. Published sketches in Nowicki's distinctive manner convincingly demonstrate that his ideas shaped the Assembly Building whose low, curving profile provides a horizontal counterpoint to the towering Secretariat.

Towards the end of his UN experience, Nowicki accepted an invitation to become the Acting Head of the Architecture Department in the fledgling School of Design which Dean Henry L. Kamphoefner was organizing at North Carolina State College. Presumably this appointment was due in large measure to the personal recommendations of Mumford who himself was to join the new School's faculty as a lecturer for several years.

The formation of the School of Design in 1948 and the simultaneous arrival of Nowicki and other adventurous young teachers recruited by Kamphoefner initiated an architectural revolution of sorts in this unlikely setting on Tobacco Road. Conservative by nature, North Carolinians gave this infusion of new ideas and imported creative energy a mixed reception. Intellectuals and artists were enthusiastic, but the more conservative members of the architectural community viewed the extreme modernist direction of the School with apprehension, and a McCarthyite radio commentator stirred up a public tempest when he thought he spotted communist leanings among the politically progressive, cosmopolitan faculty. Within a few years, however, the international recognition won for the School by the achievements of its students and star-studded faculty overcame these fears. The School of Design, in fact, became widely respected within the state and region; Matthew Nowicki was already beginning to transcend state and local standards.

Among the many design prizes and acclaimed creative works which fueled the School's reputation in its early years, none

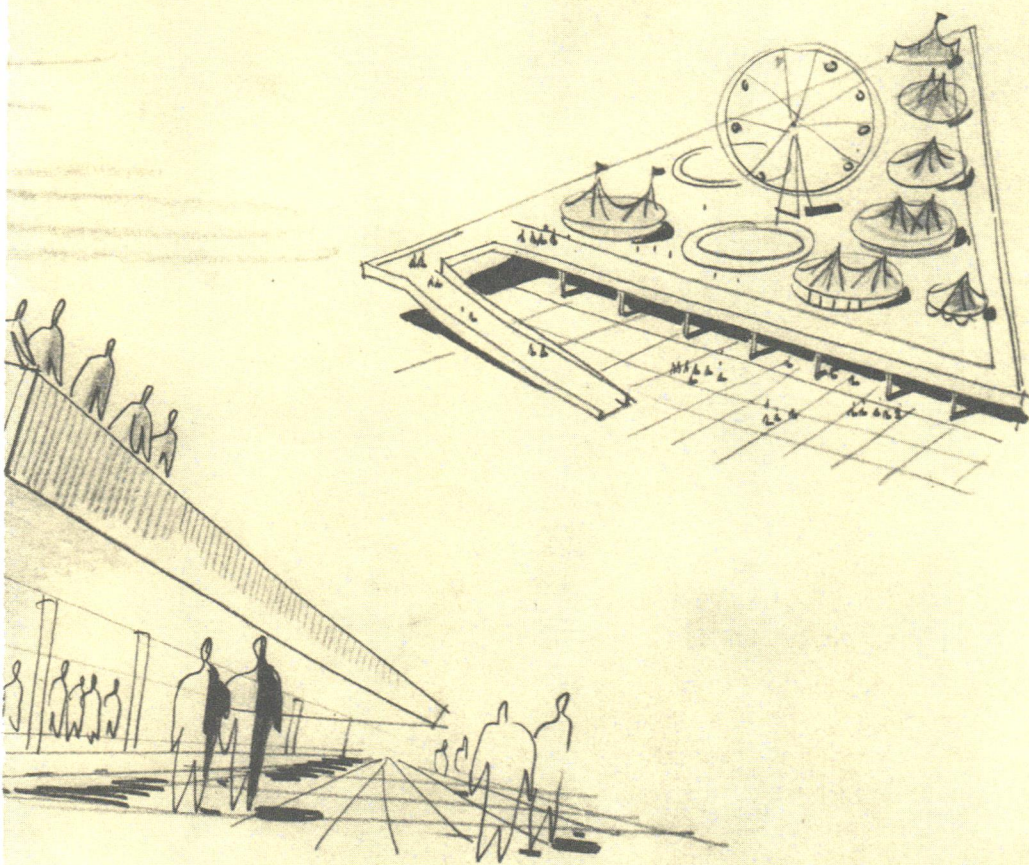
was more visible or long-lasting in its impact than a group of design studies produced by Nowicki in collaboration with a Raleigh practitioner, William Henley Deitrick. These studies comprise plans for the North Carolina State Fairgrounds, including early concepts for the Dorton Arena, a proposed state museum of art and history, and a low-income housing project for Raleigh. It is Nowicki's distinctive sketches for these endeavors which form the core of this exhibition.

Mr. Dietrick was a shrewd and well-connected older architect who had designed many buildings in a wide variety of styles (the Italian Lombard-style Broughton High School and the austere Raleigh Little Theater, both in Raleigh, demonstrate his range). He recognized that the new directions advocated by the School of Design and other newcomers represented the wave of the future and he set out to create within his office a supportive environment for young architects bent on exploring modern principles of design. Nowicki's output in this setting represents the single most creative architectural production in the state's history, possibly equalling the greatest periods of such world-renowned figures as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier.

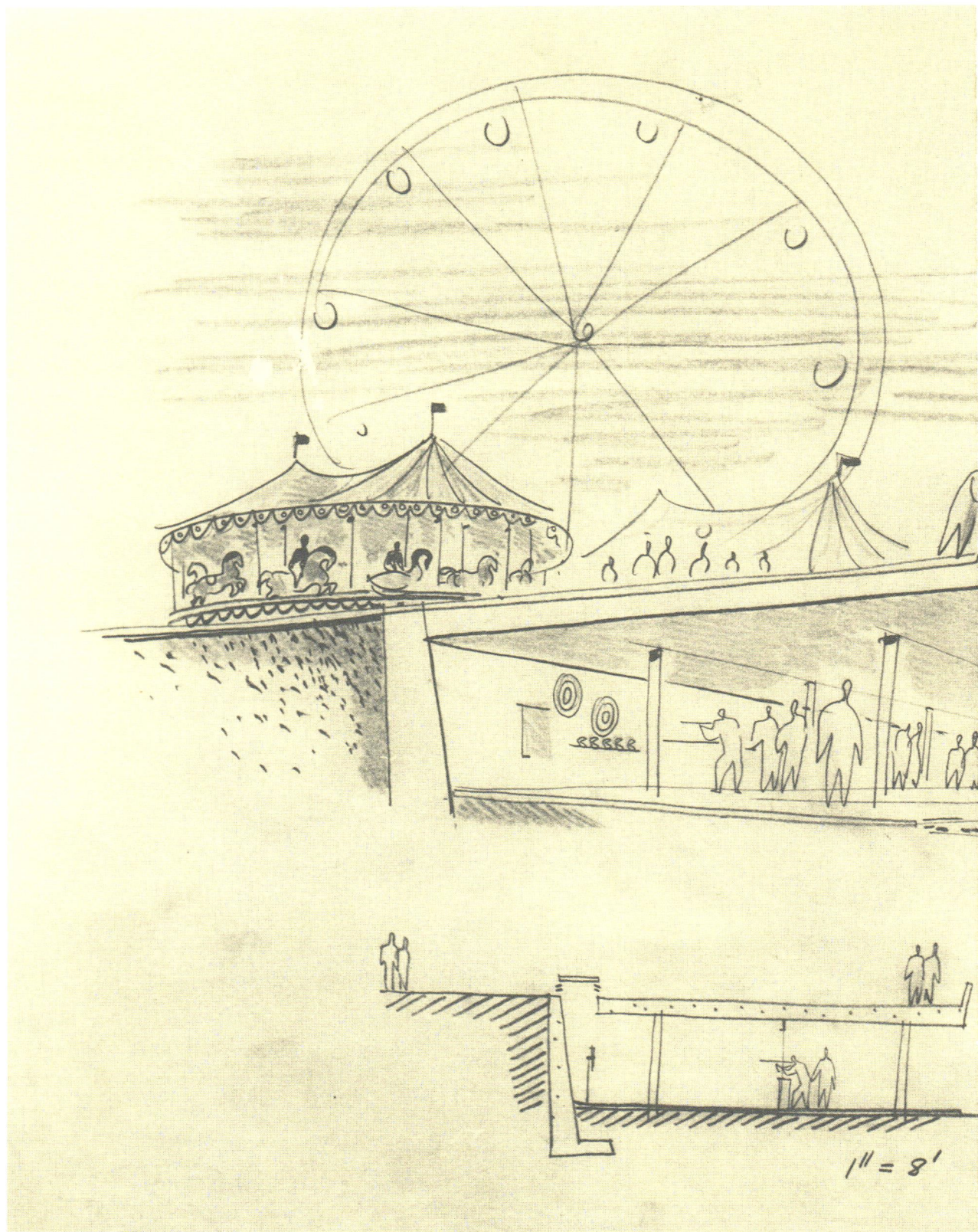
The exhibited sketches, left behind in Deitrick's office at Nowicki's death, document the architect's wide-ranging search for the appropriate architectural solution for each problem-type. They also vividly demonstrate the resources at his disposal - a treasury of existing and previously unglimped formal models as well as a mastery of technical solutions which incorporated the most advanced thinking of the previous 100 years.

What exactly were his intentions and how did he go about his work? The making of the drawings, in a technical sense at least, is easy to imagine: Nowicki, seated lightly on a stool, leans over a broad drafting table on



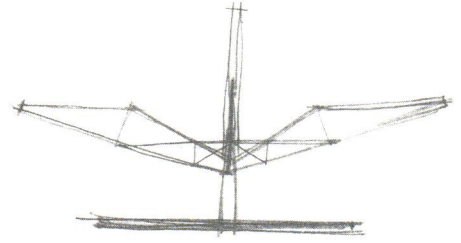








which a roll of tracing paper lies unfurled. He holds a plain drawing pencil of wood and graphite. To one side stands another architect to whom Nowicki outlines his idea. In quick, sure movements he begins to inscribe on the paper's smooth surface the outlines of a taut tent-like canopy covering a race track grandstand. The roof's front edge is drawn in one motion as a continuously curving parabola - forty inches from end to end, unwavering. No mechanical aids - T-square, triangles or compasses - impede or regulate the swift process. He pauses for a brief moment to survey the work, glances toward his watchful colleague, and proceeds. A few more lines add a needed detail, and the drawing is finished as surely as it began. Only three minutes have elapsed, and before him, the completed

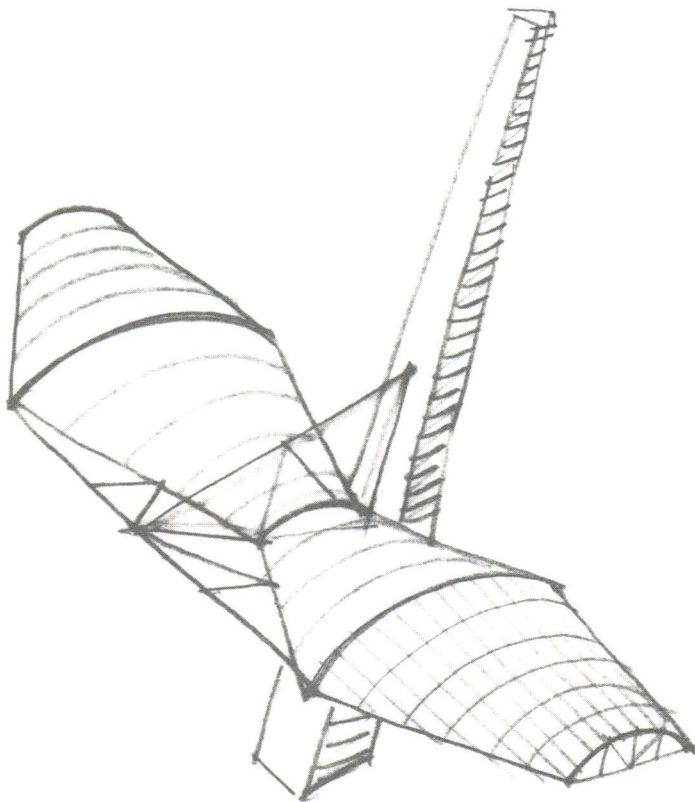


Study for a roof structure. ca. 1950. Graphite on paper.

sketch reveals an architectural conception never seen before. If the simple act of drawing is, as stated above, easy to imagine and describe, what is nearly unfathomable is the naturalness, the fluidity, and the conceptual boldness of the work itself. Each line is rendered with supreme confidence. The characters of space and figure are captured with precision. One senses neither hesitation nor wasted motion in the process of conception or execution. With the exception of two or three atypical impressionist pieces, color is employed sparingly, generally on the back of the paper, to profile a roof against the sky or to signal the presence of a significant detail in the larger composition. If Nowicki allowed himself any expressionist indulgences, it must have been in the robust statues of rearing horses, their manes wind-tossed, which he set in contrast to more earthbound structures. In all cases, whether an isolated detail or a complex architectural assemblage, his design concepts are set forth with compelling clarity and an absolute economy of means.

While the seductive pleasures of the individual sketches are inescapable, it is ultimately more rewarding to consider them in related sets. The three major projects seen in the exhibition - the State Fairgrounds, the museum, and the housing project - are represented in entirely different ways.

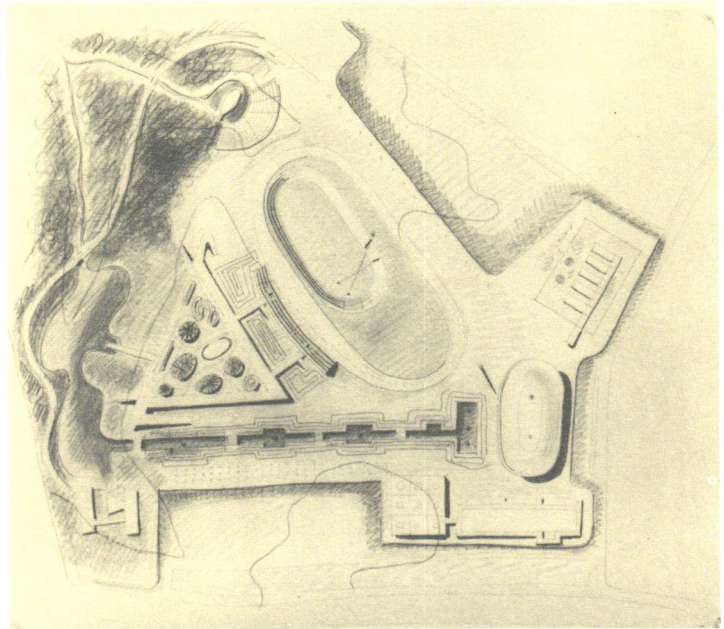
The many studies for the Fairgrounds and the coliseum (later named Dorton Arena in honor of the State Fair manager at that time) present the architect's progressive development of design concepts from the earliest, most diagrammatic master plan to more



N. C. STATE FAIRGROUNDS

Study for a roof structure. ca. 1950. Graphite on paper.

highly articulated schemes. He employs multiple perspectives - aerial, eye-level, and orthographic (plan, elevation, section) views - to explore an astonishingly wide range of possible designs for each component - the grandstand roof, the race track infield, the various structures which dot the grounds. Each alternative is represented with a high degree of objectivity in similar multi-view formats. There is no conclusive evidence in these drawings as to which of these approaches was favored or most likely to be adopted had the entire project progressed to reality. In the case of the Arena, the one executed element of his plan, the unprepossessing cylindrical form pictured in the earliest studies was quickly abandoned in favor of the twin-arched design ultimately constructed. Nevertheless, Nowicki's numerous published sketches of the Arena (few of which are included in this exhibition) suggest a lighter, more dynamic and transparent structure than what was realized after his death.



N. C. STATE FAIRGROUNDS

Master plan, ca. 1950. Graphite on paper.

While Nowicki's studies for the State Fairgrounds present a comprehensible set of alternative strategies, each internally consistent, the surviving sketches for the proposed state museum reveal only fragmentary and somewhat contradictory evidence of his design intentions. According to Mumford, it was recognized that the museum planned for downtown Raleigh should not compete with the State's revered Capitol. Nowicki's proposal for the museum's exterior is subtle and dignified. A three-story, steel-framed mass, clad in refined stonework, faces a broad sidewalk from which rises a free-standing Doric colonnade. Other sketches depict enormous vaulted rooms housing skeletons of dinosaurs and whales and a spacious circular gallery containing boldly spiralling ramps. That such vast, dynamic volumes could in fact be contained within the restrained cubical forms of the exterior seems improbable. Indeed, these drawings, so full of vitality and optimism, raise ques-

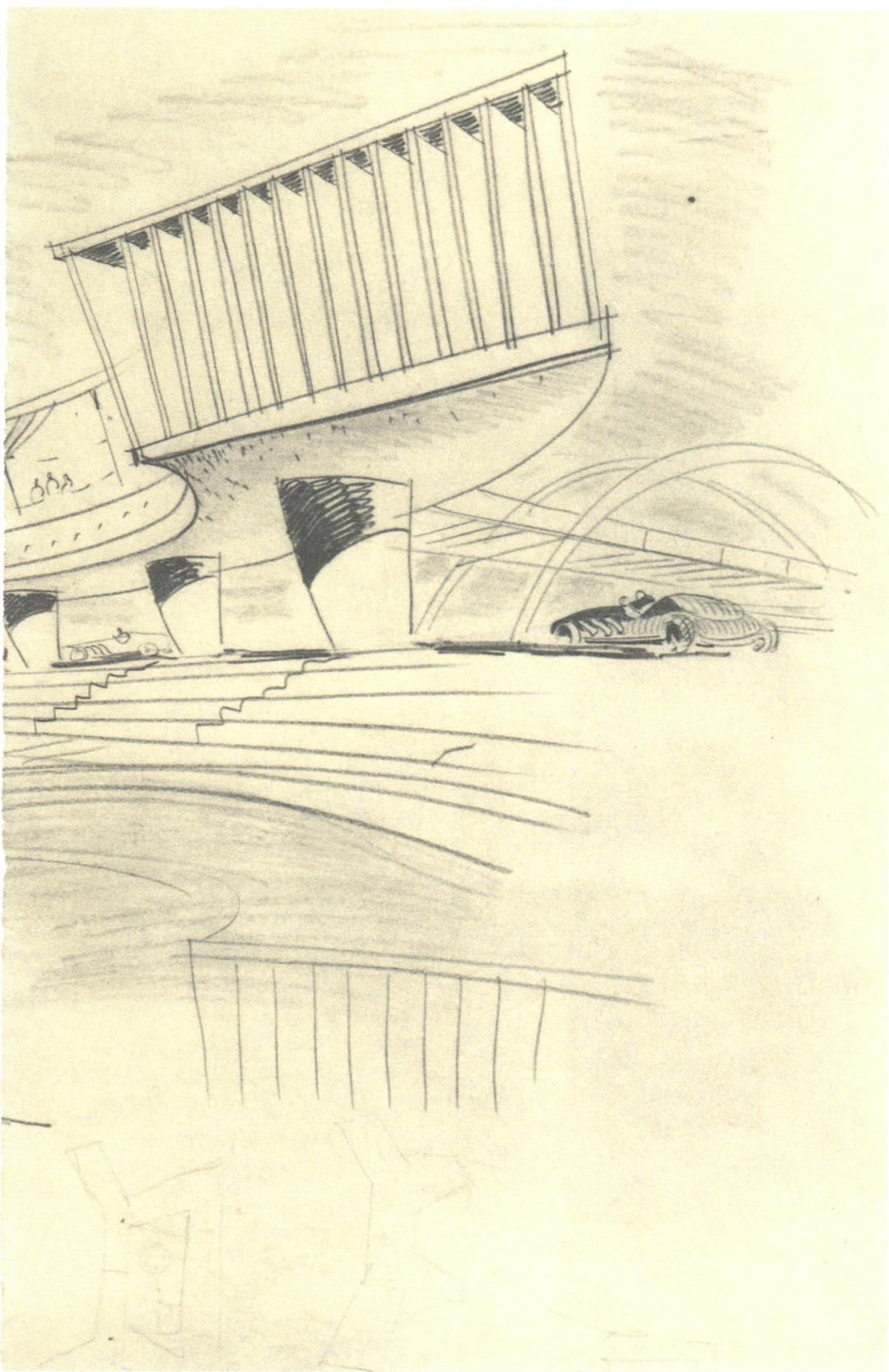
tions as to whether the program and purposes of the museum had been fully defined and whether Nowicki had in fact reached a design synthesis for this important public commission.

Whatever the answers to these questions may have been, the museum was clearly of great importance to Nowicki. From Paris shortly before his death he wrote to friends in Raleigh: "By now I have seen all the museums here to refresh my memory...I am sure now that our museum is going to be very good and that they do not have any museum building in Paris which would work as well. I am starting to count the days to my return." Sadly he was never to return to Raleigh nor to realize his dream of a great museum.

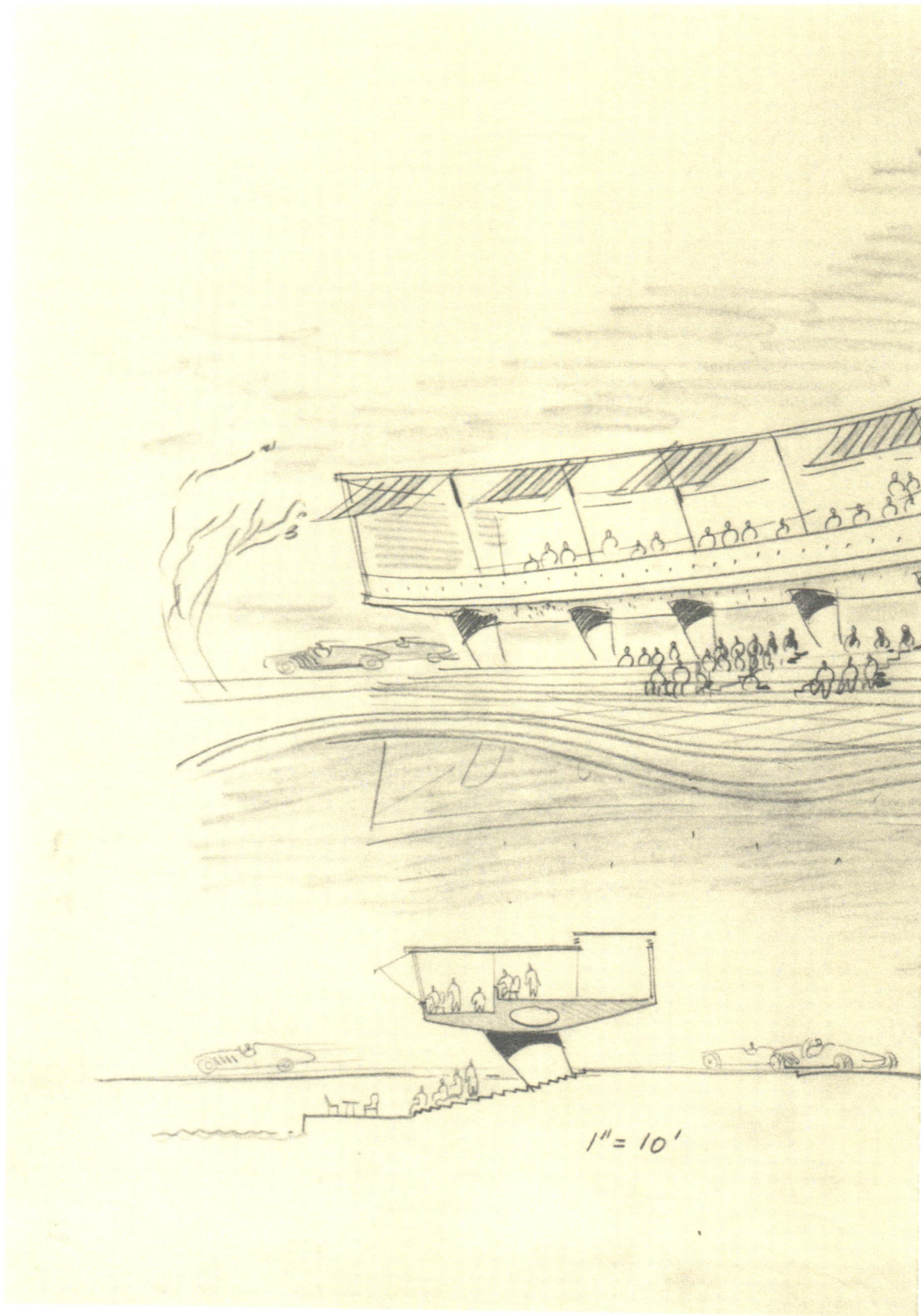
The drawings for the Halifax Court housing project in Raleigh represent yet another distinctive mode of architectural delineation. Compared with others in the exhibition, they constitute an interesting but minor effort. While most of the other sketches can be considered design studies or works-in-progress, the Halifax Court drawings seem to be little more than a set of presentation drawings, albeit sensitive and elegantly produced. The design may not have been Nowicki's; it lacks the richness and vitality of his slightly later housing designs.

The final chapter in Matthew Nowicki's life was played out on the Indian sub-continent. Throughout the summer of 1950 he was feverishly engaged as a design consultant to plan the new capital city of the Punjab,











Chandigarh, and to design many of its public buildings and residential quarters. Within a two month span he produced a prodigious number of drawings which many believe represented the high point of his creative life. He seemed to have developed a profound empathy for the complexity and spirit of Indian culture and to have found a sympathetic architectural response which both complemented and expanded on those qualities.

Nowicki's death, resulting from the crash of his return flight in the Egyptian desert on August 30, 1950 was a tragedy felt most deeply in North Carolina and in India. Both forfeited forever the inestimable promise of his fertile imagination and vast energies. His plans for Chandigarh, so brilliantly set forth in his drawings, were abandoned once Le Corbusier was selected as his successor as the architect-planner of the new city. His numerous designs for North Carolina resulted in but a single testimony to his genius - the Dorton Arena. But, in truth, the world community may well have suffered an even greater loss. Matthew Nowicki's potential was of such a grand scale that he might well have led modern architecture on a far different path than the one it has taken over the past four decades.

What set Matthew Nowicki apart from the other architects of his generation was his recognition that a valid architectural tradition can arise only when it draws its inspiration from its cultural context. While others were content with an architecture based on technological innovation or on avant garde visual experimentation, Nowicki appeared ready to define a new integration of the diverse cultural forces present in the world of 1950 in such a way as to alter the course of modern architecture. What this might have yielded can only be glimpsed in his sketches and completed works. His writings also offer

clues: he saw in architecture such varied goals as the "discovery of underlying truth", "the logical development of the skeleton - lightness, lacework, translucency", "the richness of form", and even "the forbidden fruit of ornament". Finally, "Humanism may well be considered the main principle of the new movement, even though functionalism was its official title. Man and his way of life became the main source of inspiration to a modern architect...man, in the basic sense of individual and social character, again became the object of creative attention".

These sketches, these visions of places and rooms never-to-be, are evocative and poignant reminders of one architect's search for "underlying truth" and the "richness of form". This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to gaze into the well of creative insight possessed by only a handful in each generation.

**ROBERT P. BURNS**

# Matthew Nowicki

## SKETCHES AND VISIONS

JANUARY 21, 1993 THROUGH MARCH 21, 1993

Visual Arts Center, North Carolina State University

**Notes on the Exhibition:** Because of the fragile nature of the objects in this exhibition, the light level must be kept low. Your eyes will adjust in a very short time.

## Introduction

THE DRAWINGS IN THIS EXHIBITION were selected by Professor Robert P. Burns from the nearly 100 transferred from the North Carolina Museum of Art in 1992. The subjects of the drawings are inferred from the drawings themselves and from written and oral sources. There is, however, much still to be learned about the drawings, and this exhibition should be considered as part of the work in progress to learn more about Nowicki and the work he had hoped to do in North Carolina.

The drawings were executed between 1948 and the summer of 1950 with graphite and colored pencils. Typically, but not always, color is applied on the reverse, not on the face of the drawing. The paper is one of two types:

Type I is a natural "rag" tracing paper. It has fair transparency (contains air pockets), good strength and good performance and is 100% cotton fibre cellulose. It is heavier, less transparent and yellows less than Type II.

Type II is a natural sulfite tracing paper. It has very good transparency (no air pockets), poor strength and poor performance and is +/- 75% fibre cellulose. It is thinner than Type I, and turns more to yellow than Type I.

The installation of the drawings was inspired by their original ephemeral nature. Each drawing is mounted on a strong acid-free supporting tissue, and the tissue is pinned to the board as the drawing might have been in the architect's office.

In the exhibition the drawings are grouped topically on panels, beginning on the east wall of the Foundations Gallery and moving clockwise around the room. This checklist follows this pattern, noting the topic and including a brief description of each drawing and its accession number.



# The Drawings

## **Museum of Art, Science and History for the State of North Carolina**

- PANELS 1 AND 2**
- 1992.3.1 Perspective, facade
  - 1992.3.2 Perspective, interior, entry(?), circular pedestrian ramp
  - 1992.3.3 Perspective, interior, entry(?), circular pedestrian ramp
  - 1992.3.4 Perspective, interior, exhibition areas
  - 1992.3.5 Perspective, interior, circular pedestrian ramp with planter
  - 1992.3.6 Perspective, interior, exhibition hall with lighting detail
  - 1992.3.7 Perspective, interior, two multilevel exhibition areas

## **Vaulted Exhibition Hall, site unknown**

- PANEL 3**
- 1992.3.8 Aerial view, plan and perspective
  - 1992.3.9 Perspective section, interior
  - 1992.3.10 Perspective, interior

## **Halifax Court Housing Project**

- PANEL 4**
- Designer unknown, sketches by Nowicki(?)
  - Plot Plan
  - Four Building Unit
  - Elevation Four Unit Block
  - Perspective, North End of Halifax Courts

Lent by the North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

## **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

- PANEL 5**
- 1992.3.11 Fireworks at the North Carolina State Fairgrounds
  - 1992.3.12 Schematic site plan, labeled: "tobacco, agriculture machines, livestock, coliseum, industry, state"
  - 1992.3.13 Site plan with legend: "coliseum, model farm, barns, etc., technical exhibition, zoology, mound (triangular midway/arcade?), botanical gardens"
  - 1992.3.14 Site plan, no legend, four part water feature in foreground, amphitheater, triangular midway/arcade, related to 1992.3.13
  - 1992.3.15 Site plan, no legend, racetrack with grandstand, infield with rectangular reflecting pool, arcade, and amphitheater, related to 1992.3.13 and .14
  - 1992.3.16 Site plan, racetrack, arena, pedestrian causeway ending in circular ramp, and serpentine midway/arcade, also plan and typical sections of grandstand, related to 1992.3.13, .14 and .15

1992.3.17 Site plan, racetrack with infield of serpentine paths and water, scale noted: 1" = 40'

1992.3.18 Perspective, racetrack, related to 1992.3.17

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

PANEL 6 1992.3.19 Perspective, racetrack and grandstand with folded suspension roof supported by two pylons

1992.3.20 Perspective, racetrack and grandstand, catenary cable suspension roof with terminal pylons

1992.3.21 Perspective, racetrack and flat roofed grandstand

These three drawings are related by site plan, serpentine midway, and an elliptical arena design.

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

PANEL 7 1992.3.22 Site plan, racetrack with reflecting pools, exhibition court and amphitheater in infield

1992.3.23 Perspective and section, related to 1992.3.22

1992.3.24 Perspective, exhibition court and pool

1992.3.25 Plans and perspectives, exhibition pavilion

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

PANEL 8 1992.3.26 Aerial perspective, racetrack with infield reflecting pools, exhibition arcade, stage and grandstand

1992.3.27 Aerial perspective, exhibition pavilion (?)

1992.3.28 Perspectives, symmetrical facing grandstands with racetrack

1992.3.29 Perspective, exterior of grandstand and exhibition hall with equestrian sculptures

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

PANEL 9 1992.3.30 Plan, section, elevation and perspective, vaulted cover for grandstand

1992.3.31 Perspective, vaulted grandstand cover with structural detail, related to 1992.3.30

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

PANEL 10 1992.3.32 Plan, section and perspective, flat roofed grandstand

1992.3.33 Section and perspective, trussed(?) roof grandstand

1992.3.34 Section and perspective, grandstand, unspecified structural system for roof

1992.3.35 Plan, section, elevation, perspective, 2-bay grandstand with flat roof suspended from central pylons

1992.3.36 Plan, section, elevation, perspective, catenary cable suspension roof with terminal pylons

1992.3.37 Plan, section, elevation, perspective, like .36 but with greater elaboration



#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

- PANEL 11** 1992.3.38 Plan and section, suspended roof  
1992.3.39 Section, elevation, perspective, grandstand with folded plate suspension roof supported by two interior pylons  
1992.3.40 Plan, section, two perspectives, grandstand roof, related to .39  
1992.3.41 Plan, section, elevation, perspective, grandstand roof, like .39 but with four bays and pylons

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

- PANEL 12** 1992.3.42 Structural studies, articulated and suspended roof forms  
1992.3.43 Structural studies, articulated and suspended roof forms  
1992.3.44 Structural studies, articulated and suspended roof forms

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

- PANEL 13** 1992.3.45 Perspective, grandstand with tensile fabric roof  
1992.3.46 Section and perspective, enclosed racetrack grandstand

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

- PANEL 14** Perspective, circular coliseum and arcade  
Perspective, serpentine midway/arcade; site plan; midway/arcade  
Perspective, pedestrian ramp

Lent by the North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

- 1992.3.47 Perspective, circular arena, pedestrian ramp  
1992.3.48 Perspective, circular arena and triangular midway/arcade  
1992.3.49 Section and perspective studies, midway/arcade

#### **North Carolina State Fairgrounds**

- PANEL 15** 1992.3.50 Plan and section, elliptical arena  
Perspective, elliptical arena

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