

A School in Rosignano Solvay (1961-'63)

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Abstract: This essay, other than reconstructing with great sensitivity the political and cultural framework under which the project of the School in Rosignano Solvay took form, documents for the first time the original drawings produced and conserved in Cusmano's Archives; with the poetry of precision they describe the maritime Tuscan environment as the physical and social setting into which the project was inserted as an element of collective progress.

Keywords: space-geometries, minor architectures, school as a urban segment.

For Ludovico Quaroni¹, the beginning of the 1960s was a period in which there were great opportunities to design buildings, as well as many challenging subjects and difficult topics that needed to be tackled and that demanded experimentation. The school at Rosignano cannot but seem a minor episode when compared with his work on the urban plan of Ravenna or his early experiences of planning in Syria and Tunisia. Moreover, his objective of winning the high-prestige competition to design the business centre in Turin, or his most valuable work in the Punta Ala district, or, again, his design for the tax office of the Ravenna Savings Bank, all came happily to fruition. The school was a discrete piece, and certainly one of his least known works, but it nevertheless seems to represent well the *counterpoint* of theme and contents, an eagerly sought alternation between different dimensions and languages, which he seemed always to be seeking by moving from solemn architectural phrases to workaday discoveries, measures and accents. We believe that for these reasons the school is something that should not be forgotten.

But once again events from the distant past are worth more than words, as they retain the vivid colours of a living memory. These were the years of the early Centre-Left. The place was a municipality, Rosi-

1. The design group was composed by Ludovico Quaroni with Mario Guido Cusmano Lamberto Borghi, educationalist.

gnano Marittimo, in the Province of Livorno, noted above all for its district of Solvay, historical site of a chemical plant, with an equally well-known village of workers' houses dating from the beginning of the 20th century, designed upon rational principles and built by diligent Belgian engineers and technicians, closely advised, indeed commanded, by no less a person than Ernest Solvay.

The residential suburb, with abundant greenery and ample vistas seems to want to compete victoriously with the chimneys and imposing metal towers of the industrial plant. It is something in between the *Cité Industrielle* of Tony Garnier and the image of a peaceful, cheerful *Garden City*. Among its attributes are a careful choice of building types, a great abundance of urban services, kindergartens, schools for children of various ages, a library, a theatre, a hospital and a church. And even if it seems to be a heavy achievement in political and social terms, experienced mainly as an imposition, the cultural model is that of a *citadel*, of a rather singular kind, which cannot easily be ignored nor considered as something without influence.

The new planning committee was the child of a progressive local administration, one that was determined to gain greater autonomy, including that relating to its external image, when faced with a paternal presence that was increasingly less acceptable and seldom accepted. It had to come to terms with a rather particular history, composed of deep-rooted models, and to convince itself that, among the weapons it would use in the battle, the construction of a new school could become something more than a mere episode in the management of that *other city* which, in its own way, had begun to grow, to show how different it was, and to ask its own questions. This, at any rate, was the spirit that motivated the project.

The commitment was thus one of promoting a new form of experimental design, with an *interdisciplinary character*, which was expressed in the form of an organism composed of a strong integration between two cycles of teaching, that of the infants (classes 1 and 2) and that of the upper-level classes, nonetheless, without compromising their specific characters either in the functional or the spatial characteristics of the work. The architecture had to be endowed with *high quality*, which was to be both the preferred objective and almost a necessary attribute.

Today it is difficult, and perhaps somewhat embarrassing, to lift the veil of time, after almost 50 years that have passed, and be able to say how and in what measure those objectives were given to the project and to what extent they were achieved. Regarding the commitment of the local administration, one can remember the enthusiasm with which the Mayor, Demiro Marchi—also a teacher—examined the range of possible solutions, his comments and the judgements he expressed in the light of foreign practices, above all those from England. He had a natural affinity for architecture, with all its ideas about space, form and materials. Of that collaboration with the celebrated educationalist, traces remain of an organism rich in complexity which was nevertheless capable of being read easily by his pupils. In it, functional logic was never unclear, but always strongly fused with the pattern of space and form; hence it was as domestic and recognisable as a normal building, but it was also the expression of a new sense of community. In synthesis, Borghi insisted, there should be a *complicated simplicity*, a little world which knew how to be, not only a game, but also a form of *research*.

However, as usual, it turns out to be much more complicated to relive the phases of design, and then the birth and development of the architecture, than to evoke a landscape or a cultural atmosphere. In those days of the early 1960s, Quaroni seems to have been living through an existential phase that was anything but easy in terms of the number of projects in which he was involved, from teaching to building design, and in relation to his own sense of inner calm. His meetings at work took place both at his offices in Via Frattina in Rome and in a smaller apartment in Florence, or occasionally in a modest *pensione* in a village in the Mugello Mountains to which, on occasion, he loved to withdraw and sit at a wooden table covered with a checkered tablecloth. Today, the memory, rather heart-rending, is that of a dusty bus which climbs the roads and hairpin bends of the hills and woods towards Covigliaio and of a young architect, with his designs rolled up under his arms, who climbs aboard, with the same frame of mind that he had a few years previously, slightly anxious about how to *revise* the plans.

Very quickly, his diffidence regarding the project was replaced with a set of designs for the floor plan of the building. The land, between the old Aurelian Way and the Tyrrhenian Sea, is flat and, as

the plains of the Tuscan Maremma so often are, neither urbanised nor cultivated for crops. After the passage of fifty years, the few indications that suggest themselves to the watcher's eyes just about decipher the long, straight incision of the railway with its bridges of cement and steel which, in repetition, signal the presence of stations, the long line of the inland horizon, where the walled form of Rosignano Marittimo nestles just under the skyline, forming a town centre that becomes ever smaller in relation to its expanding suburbs. Then there is the discrete presence of the coast and the sea; and *down there*, towards the south, rather than a panorama, the sensation of the mass and weight of Solvay, with the complicated arrangements of its plant, its smoke and vapours, and the northern simplicity of its village. In the foreground is that great empty rectangle, the land chosen for the school, delimited by four unmade roads and as yet without any sign of life. Via del Popolo, then nothing but a street-sign, seemed to testify to the need for freedom – and for a school.

Figure 1. The plan of the school is easy to read. In an ample square space, under a pavilion-style cover, the elements of the Lower School are grouped around a generous central, communal space. A long, rectangular body houses the classrooms and laboratories of the Upper School, brought together by a space with many windows, which functions, not only as a passage, but also as a place to meet and communicate. The composition of the two geometric figures—the square and the rectangle—allows a particular form of dialogue between the parts while allowing them to remain distinct in terms of their formal character and the autonomy of their functions.

Figure 2. Plan with indications of the modular grid. The ratio 90 x 90 given to all the structural elements and dimensions appears to lend the building rules of proportionality that, completely lacking in rigidity, allow a restrained freedom in the aggregation of component spaces.

(Drawings from the personal Archive of M.G. Cusmano)

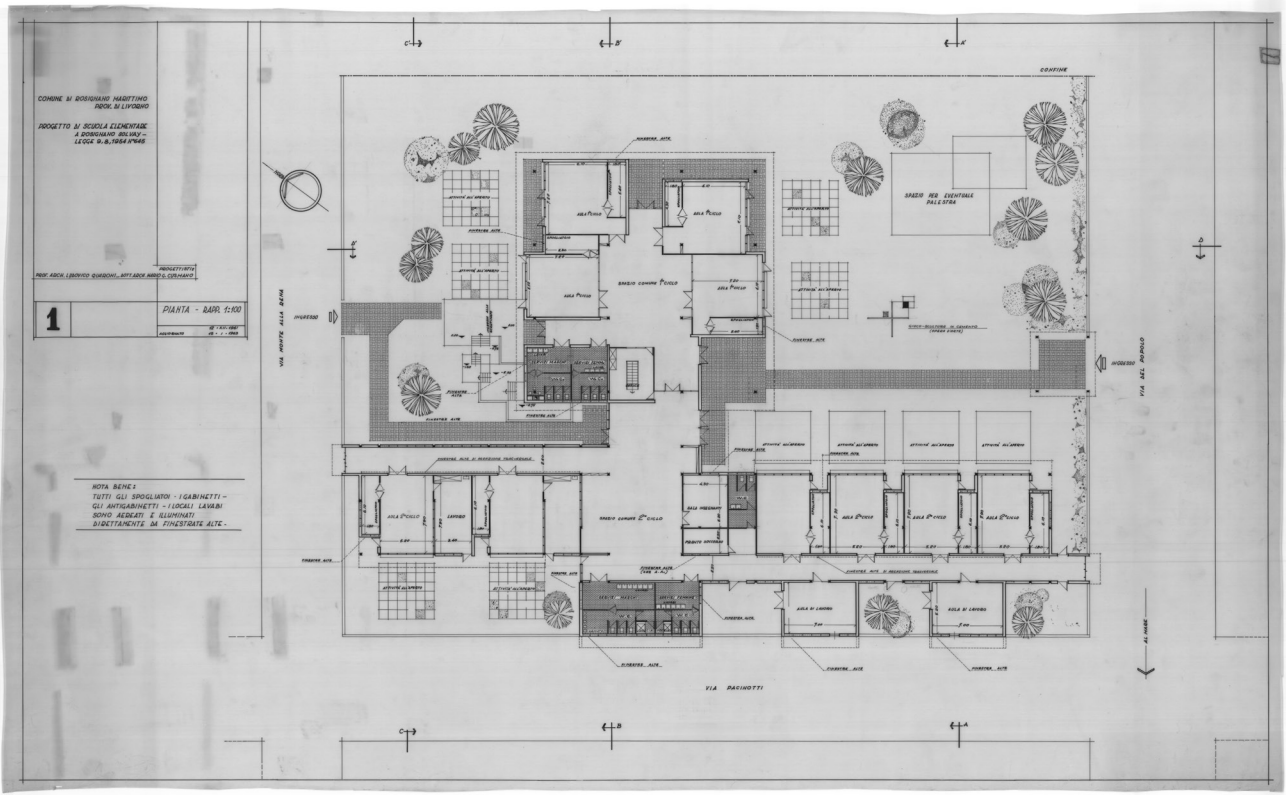


Fig. 1

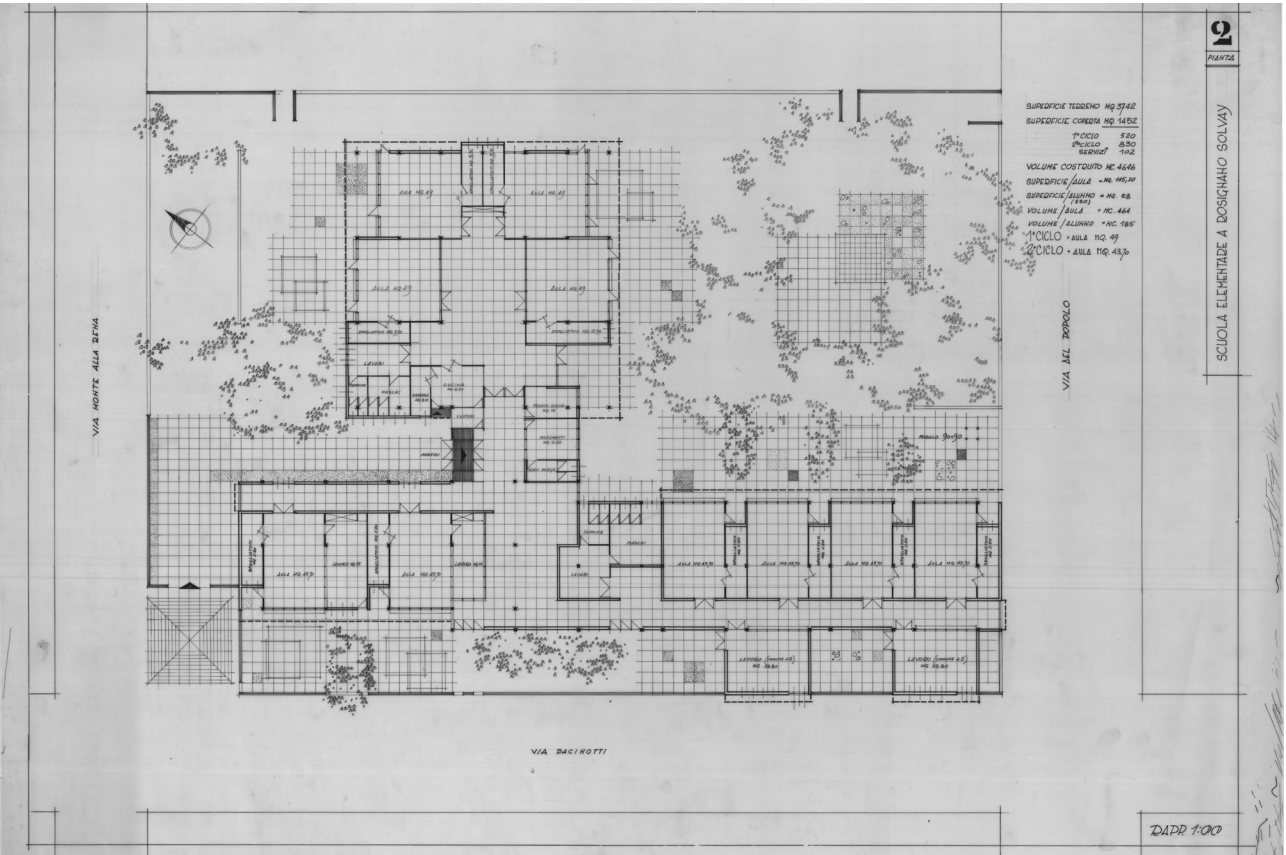


Fig. 2

In a landscape so deprived of recognisable signs and figures, geometry seemed to lend itself spontaneously to the vanquishing of doubts about composition and to open up the solution that was sought. Thus, a spacious rectangle destined for the Lower School buildings was laid out with an elongated rectangular plan, which served in turn to align the classrooms and laboratories of the Upper School. However, a design that was apparently so simple found its complexity when it became *space*. This happened when the smallest classrooms were clustered around a central environment in order to reappear beneath the great pavilion roof which mirrored the form of the plan. It also occurred when the largest classrooms were put together with other indoor areas, such as changing rooms, and with small spaces between the buildings that appeared as if they were green rooms. The broad corridor took the form of an indoor street, if only by implication, and assumed the character of a short *urban segment*, where meetings would seem natural and vivacity would be a regular characteristic. Thus, the desired level of complexity was that of an indoor microcosm, intimate in character, and given over to the children and their own ability to plan and design.

We do not know whether, in this way, that period in time was mature enough for one to speak of a modicum of *do-it-yourself construction*, to be entrusted to the children, or to identify that greater degree of freedom that went beyond the drawings and paintings taped to the walls or the ingenuous festoons of coloured paper made by the teachers. However, the intention was to provide spaces that, one by one, suggested varied combinations of furnishings: not only tables and chairs, but also spaces for creative play, or, to an even greater degree, accommodating the opportunity and the fantasy, so dearly held in childhood, to invent different and unusual scenes for stories devised, not only in the tender years, but also at school, and so befitting to the square dimensions of the large rooms of the Lower School, with their deliberately isotropic dimensions. Such environments were ideal for the vital work of learning to play.

Although the space – its lines and geometries, its proportions and tacit laws – seem to have conferred poetry upon the whole work, the language of architecture seeks out its own legitimacy and an identity that is instantly recognizable and thus easily memorised. The modest

volumes; the sloping roofs covered with the Tuscan style of tiles (although Quaroni might have preferred a thatched roof); the walls and their ample windows, the play of fenestration, all of it tailored to the small stature of the children; the slim load-bearing structures in reinforced concrete; *the modularity (90x90)*, a hidden but pervasive and explicit rule of dimensions; all of these simple ingredients lend the building the sensation that the planes and vertical elements, rather than rising up from the ground, might have fallen from the tranquil heaven of the plains, to huddle on the land surface, ready to receive and cultivate a playful childhood. Such a metaphor is simple and ingenuous, but certainly not extraneous to the spirit and to the desires of that brief episode.

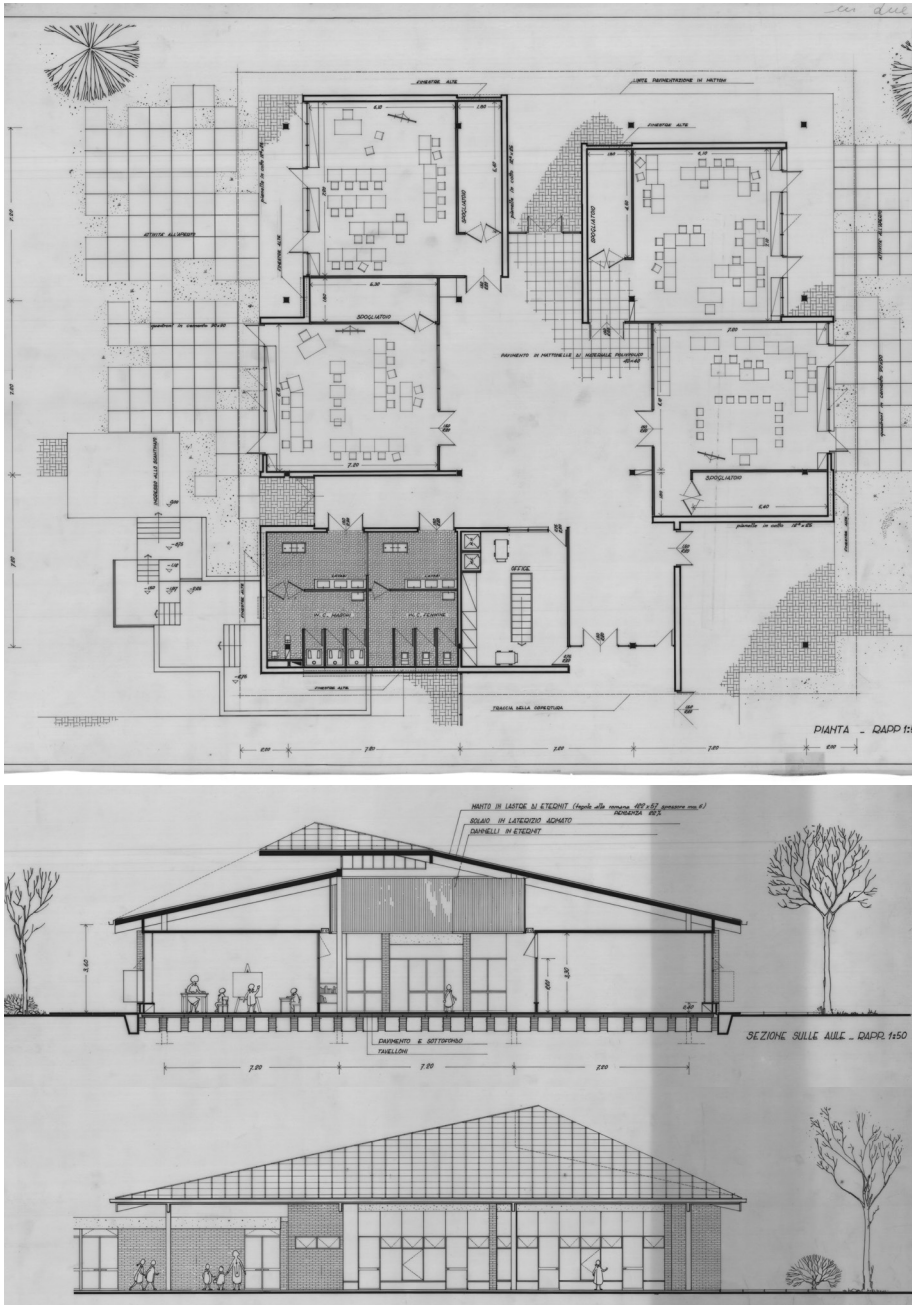


Fig.3

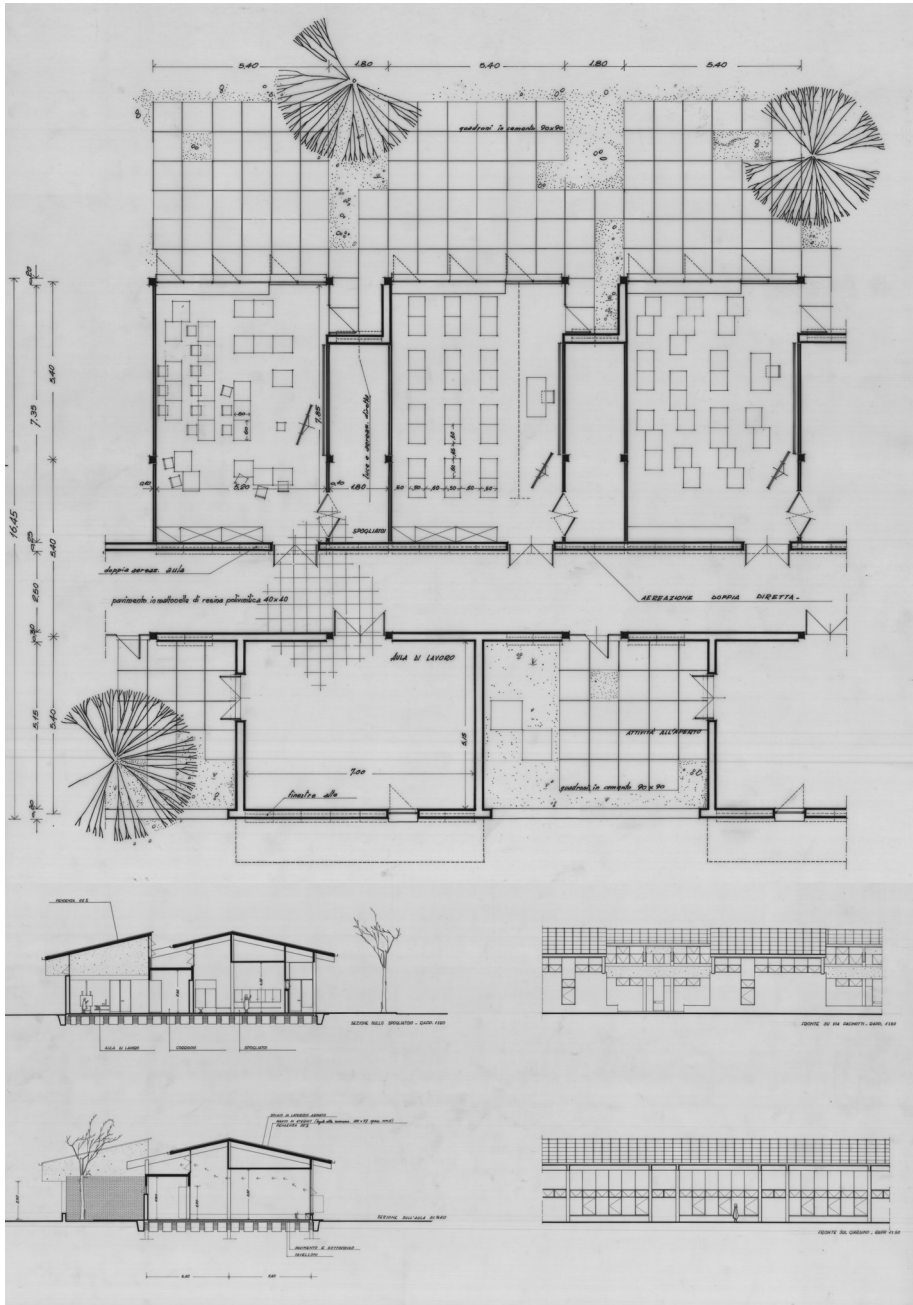


Fig.4

Fig. 3. Detail of the Lower School: plan, section and perspective. The four small classrooms with more or less square dimensions are particularly well articulated when considered together with the large central space and the arrangement of services. The section and the façade clearly show the volumetric effect caused by the apex of the pavilion roof

Fig. 4. Detail of the Upper School: plan, two sections and two perspectives. The classrooms alternate with their respective changing rooms and are aligned along one element of the line of connection, while in front of them laboratories and open-air workspaces alternate with one another

Fig. 5. General view of a model of the school. The play of volumes and covers, connecting at very modest heights, is one of the most characteristic elements of the composition

Fig. 6-7. Model of the school: detail of the front entrance and view of one side of classrooms in the Upper School

(Pictures from the personal Archive of M.G. Cusmano)

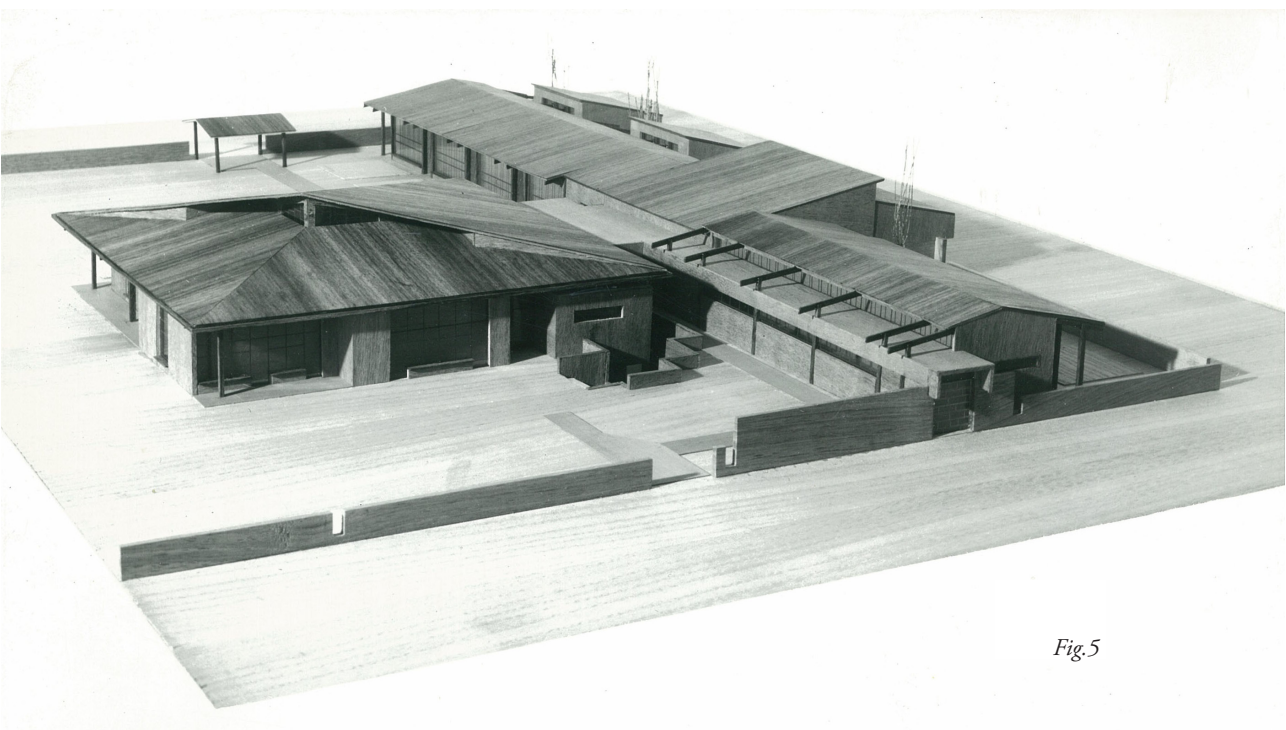


Fig.5



Fig.6

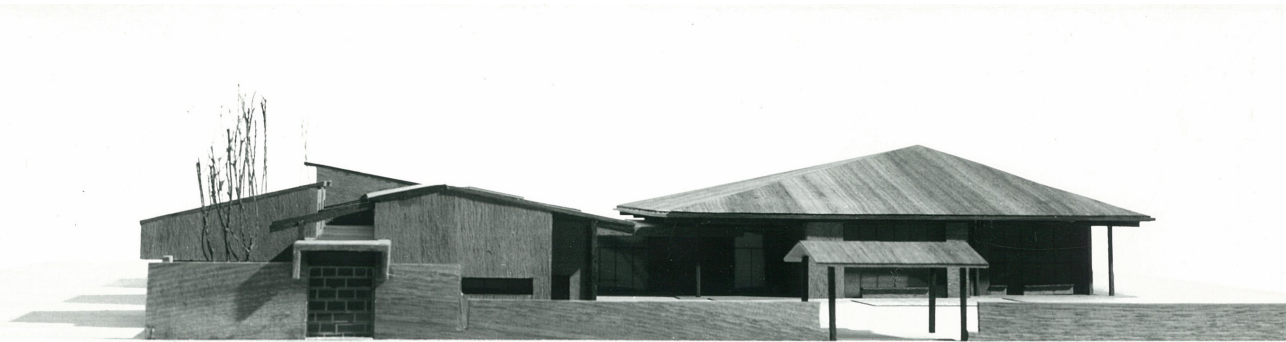


Fig.7

