

# world architecture

## Uncanny

MVRDV's hyperreal houses  
near The Hague

**Alex Garvin: the man  
rebuilding Manhattan**

**Delugan\_Meissl's spectacular  
Viennese apartments**

**Fusion food and fractal  
forms in Sydney**



# Lessons from history

**To ancient poets, Arcadia was a rural ideal. To modern-day Californians, it's a town 29km from Los Angeles and the home of a contemporary take on history: a new museum by Sparano + Mooney. By Tim Culvahouse. Photographs by John Linden.**

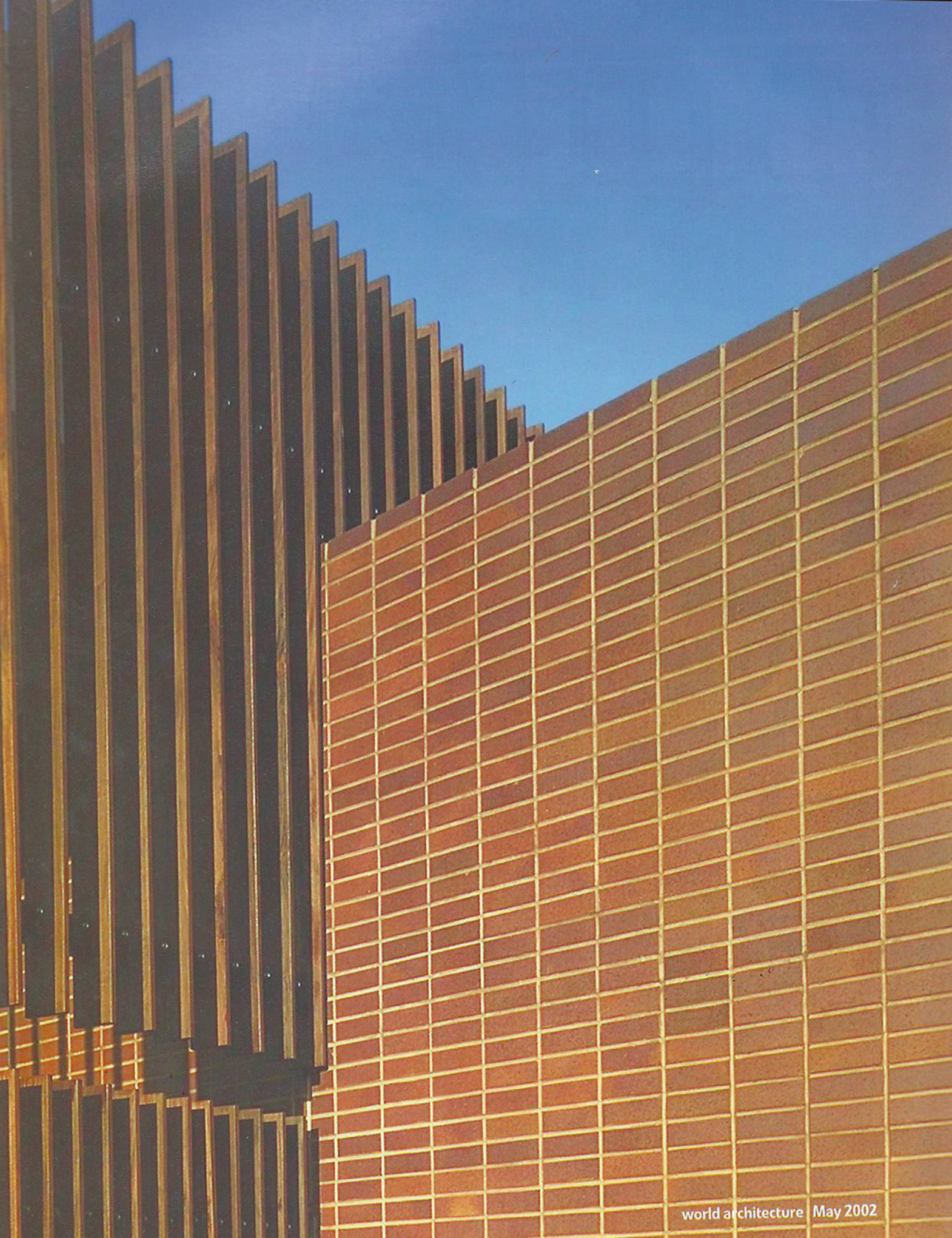
**Above and right: In Sparano + Mooney's scheme, the brick service wing intersects the exhibition wing with wooden screen.**

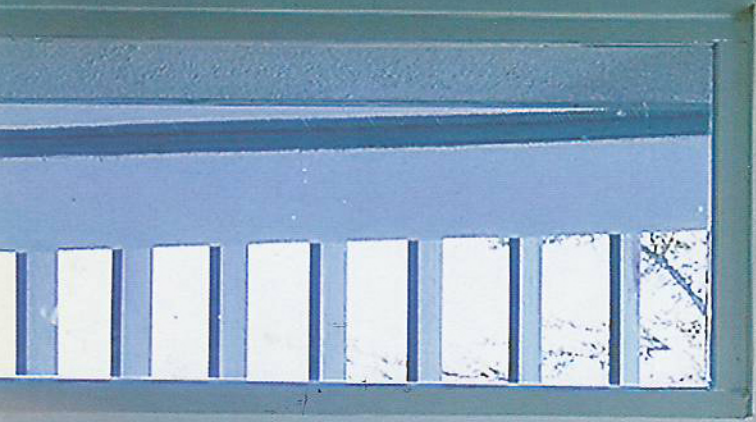
**Sparano + Mooney's Arcadia Historical Museum is a study in quiet contradictions.** Set in a community of 50,000 people, 29km north-east of downtown Los Angeles, the building is modest, yet its conception was insistently intellectual. The scheme employs notions from historiography but the museum's pleasures are easy and immediate. It is at once cool and playful. In the photographs, it looks isolated from its surroundings and somehow European. In reality, it is eminently suited to its suburban American setting.

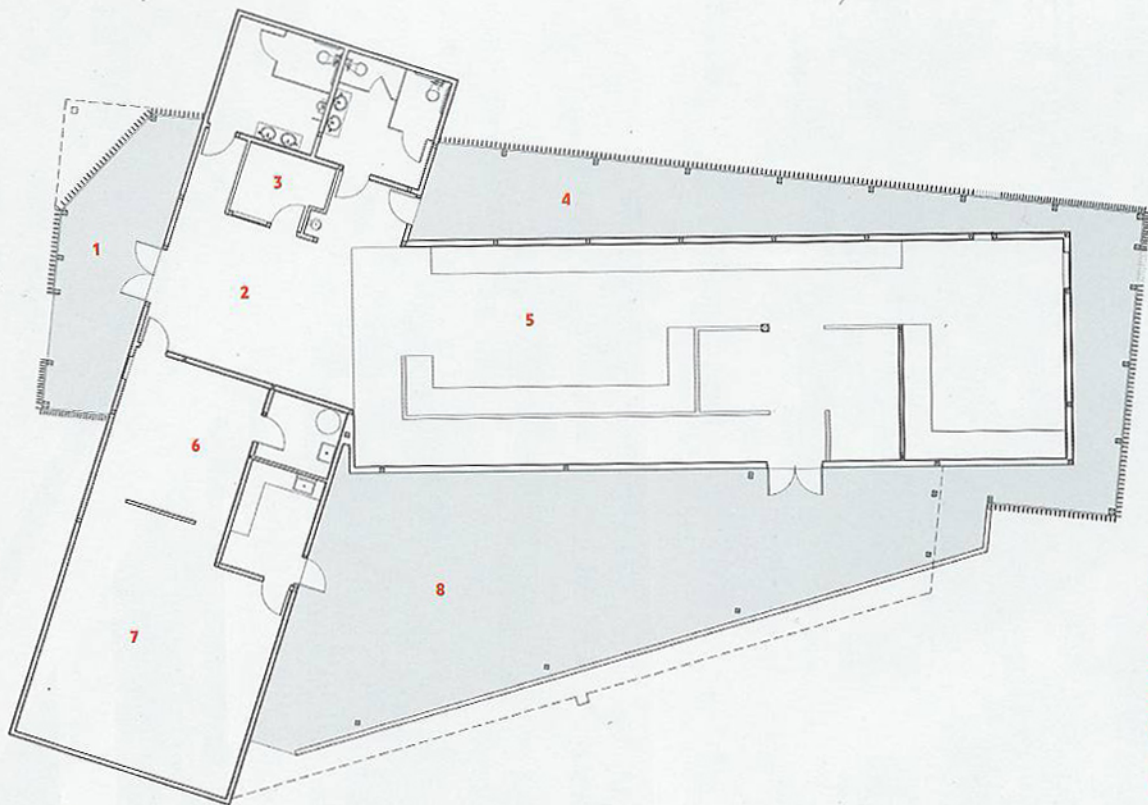
Skewed volumes these days tend to remind us of the aggressive gestures of Daniel Libeskind but the shifts among the superimposed volumes of the museum are more akin to the inflections of Robert Venturi, without his overt symbolism. The museum is urbane in the way Venturi, after his sojourn in Rome, suggested that buildings ought to be: acknowledging, incorporating, perhaps resolving their neighbours' discordant geometries.

But Arcadia is not Rome. Nothing here suggests a past more distant than the 1930s, and its nearest neighbour is almost 40m away. Such is the typical condition of the North American landscape, where density is rare and almost uniformly orthogonal. Here, contradictions are not imposed by circumstance but must be teased out of a loose and accommodating context. Too often, the architectural complexities wrought in such circumstances are strained and pointless. Not in Arcadia. The museum takes its cue from the orientation of the road, of the adjacent community centre, of a storm water drainage canal that separates the site from the municipal golf course. But the architect has absorbed these geometries into the building to create a series of graceful, irregular spaces.

The building is formed of two rectangular, obliquely intersecting volumes. An opaque volume houses services. Around the other volume, which houses the exhibitions, is superimposed ▶







**Floor plan**

- 1** Forecourt
- 2** Lobby
- 3** Curator's office
- 4** Outdoor exhibition space
- 5** Exhibition space
- 6** Meeting room
- 7** Storage
- 8** Outdoor events space

▷ a wooden screen. This is shifted in plan to form an irregular interstitial space, covered but open to the air.

The screen is made of ipe, a very hard, durable, tropical wood, a species often acquired by clear-cutting in circumstances both environmentally and socially injurious. Despite the budgetary constraints of the public project, the architect was careful to specify wood that had been sustainably harvested. It was diligent in requiring chain-of-custody documentation, assuring that it received the wood specified.

The brick service wing swings away from the adjacent community centre, forming a common plaza that widens subtly toward the automobile approach. The screened enclosure projects across the service volume to form an entry pavilion. Here, the screen itself is broken and folded back to welcome visitors.

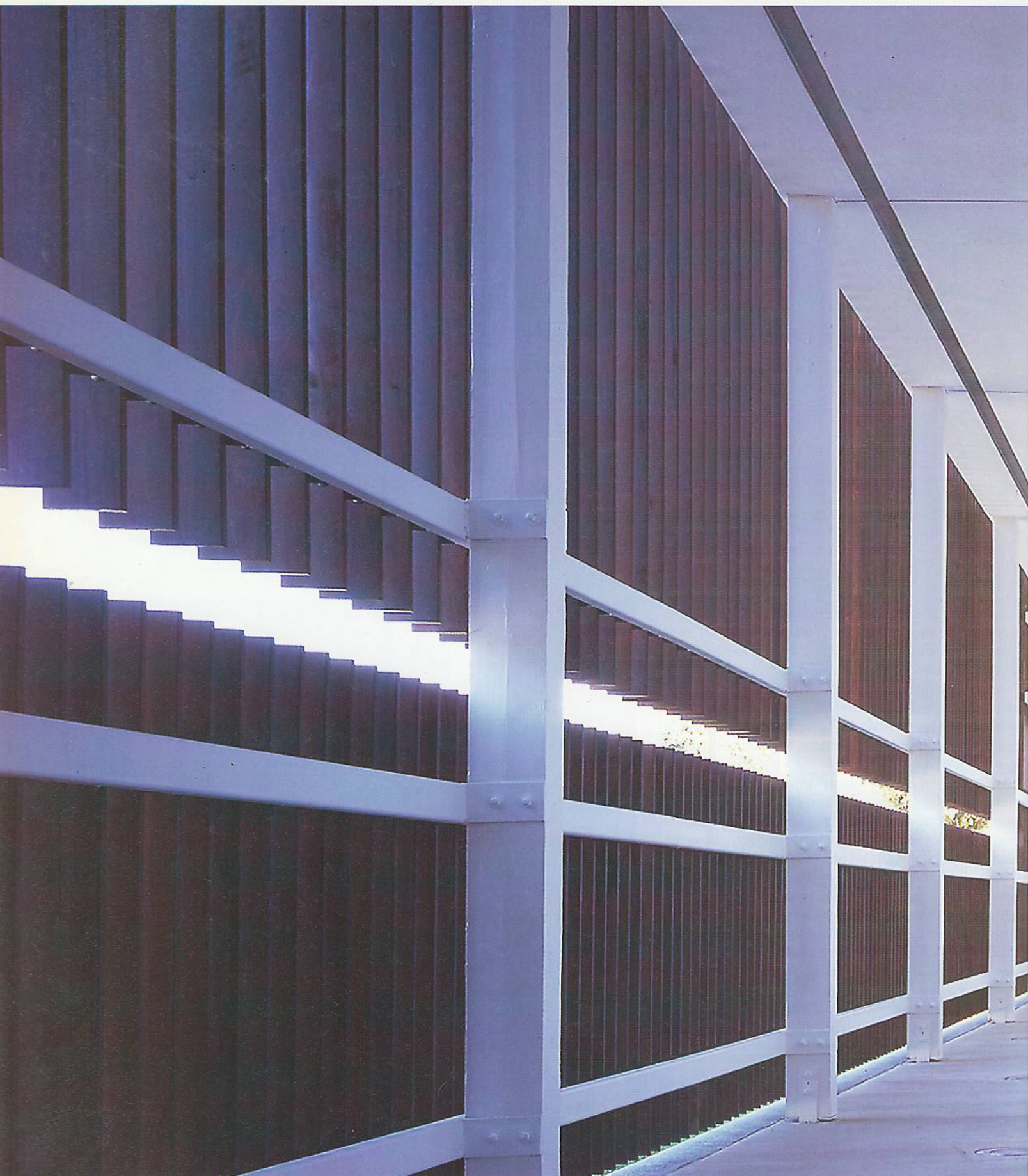
Inside, the exhibition space is a restful, gently lit volume. Two carefully located windows isolate significant views of the landscape. One, at the opposite end of the gallery from the entry, focuses on a tree in the foreground, drawing you through the space. A smaller window frames the view (on clear days) of nearby Mount Wilson. Other high windows bring north light into the space, which is simply partitioned. The irregularities generated by the superimposed forms are encountered only outside, in the space between the gallery and the surrounding screen. This space is intended for the collection's more durable artefacts and will be a favourite with children.

In its materials – stack-bonded brick for the service wing and 25 × 150mm ipe slats surrounding the white plaster of the exhibition hall – and in their layering, the museum is reminiscent of Alvar Aalto (the stepping incision in the screen also reminds this author of the plaster treatment in Eiel Saarinen's First Christian Church of Columbus, Indiana, which also features a vertically ▷



**Above:** Display cabinets are mounted on casters – another nod to the idea that history can change.

**Left:** Windows were placed to frame views of Arcadia.





The space between the white gallery and the screen will be filled with the museum's more robust artefacts – and its younger visitors.

▷ membered wood screen). Aalto's screens are typically figural punctuations, and, as a modernist motif, the screen of sticks is most often used to highlight a special circumstance. At the Arcadia museum, however, the screen wraps the whole of the major volume. As such, it shares something with a more recent phenomenon – the volumetrically simple building with all-over striations in a single material, whether copper strips (in Herzog & de Meuron's railway switching tower in Basel, or stone (in Peter Zumthor's thermal baths in Vals, Switzerland). There is clearly some tension in the air between a minimalist imperative and a longing for tactile richness.

That tension is present here, but the genesis of the slatted screen lies elsewhere. It is a product of the practice's search for an understanding of historical study and its effort to find a physical expression of the historian's telling of the past. Its solution is a built version of the now commonplace notion that the historical account is an interpretation of events that cannot be got at directly, and that these interpretations are ever-changing. Sparano + Mooney maintains that things actually happened; the variability of interpretations is a practical matter of distance and viewpoint. The displacement of the historical account from the fixed reality of the event is what interests the practice, and it has constructed a charming, if idiosyncratic, object to represent this model of historical understanding.

To the architect's credit, this construction does not directly determine the building's form. It is instead suggestive of ways that an optical filter (standing in for the idea of historical distance) might qualify the experience of an object. In the building, the wood slats are the filter and their effect is simple but forceful: to make the screen opaque when viewed obliquely but transparent when seen head-on. In a passage around the building, the white box of the ▷



▷ exhibition hall is progressively revealed (most dramatically at night, when it is illuminated behind the screen) and then hidden again. Whether this effect, in the architect's words, 'heightens the visitor's awareness of [historical] filters' is doubtful, but what it does do is frame and illuminate the collection, suggesting both its value and its fragility, like a pearl within its shell. Meanwhile, the shell echoes the workaday quality of the community centre, similarly dark and most un-special under its flattened, 1970s suburban mansard.

Sensibly enough, the idea of changing interpretations of history is suggested most clearly in the exhibition apparatus itself. Display cases, constructed frugally of a blue plastic laminate over particleboard, are mounted on casters, so that they may be easily repositioned. A long, narrow chalkboard runs along the principal exhibition wall just above waist height, allowing for an easily changeable narrative and appealing, particularly, to the primary school children who regularly visit the museum.

The job of educating the public about the uncertainty of historical interpretation – if, indeed, the public does not already recognise that uncertainty – is left finally in the hands of the curator, where it belongs. The building reminds us simply that to see, we have to look, and that we do so in our bodies, moving, always, in the world. That seems to me enough.

It is encouraging to see, in a theoretically ambitious project, the resolution of a wide range of concerns – for the impact of the building on the larger environment, for the experience of the building by the everyday user (especially the young user) and for the understated decorum of the suburban civic centre. The principal virtue of the Arcadia Historical Museum is that its intellectual origins are so thoroughly subsumed in the experience of it. If they were not, it could not be the quiet, dignified citizen that it is. **wa**



**Above and left: The slats filter views of the exhibition wing as visitors approach. Seen head-on, the screen is transparent. From some angles, it is opaque.**

#### **Clients**

City of Arcadia  
 Arcadia Historical Society  
 Ruth and Charles Gilb

#### **Architect**

Sparano + Mooney  
 Architecture

#### **Exhibit**

**designer/graphics**

Melisa Keeler

#### **Structural engineer**

William Ho

#### **Mechanical and**

**HVAC engineer**

Moroko & Shwe

#### **Electrical engineer**

Felix Roth & Associates

#### **Landscape design**

Gil Flores