

DESIGN

AMERICAN architecture, perhaps due to the pragmatic nature of American society, has always been more oriented toward physical productivity than polemic or theory. And for most of the twentieth century, a prolific and vigorously expanding economy has provided the necessary underpinnings not only for continuous construction, but also for the entrenchment of a highly professional, polished, and, ultimately, not very introspective mode of architecture which, based on an imported European principle, the post-Bauhaus "International Style," flourished for almost forty years.

It was not until the critical decline in commissions in the early seventies that a new generation of architects began to *think* architecture as well as *do* it. An unparalleled expansion took place on paper, and for a while, architecture seemed confined to visions and dreams executed in pen and ink rather than in bricks and mortar. Not surprisingly, the current revival of construction has brought with it the flowering of a new kind of architecture, one that is as associated with abstraction, with ideas and language, as it is with space and forms.

Susana Torre is an architect who was working on a wide range of projects—at least sporadically—throughout the lean years, from private houses to loft renovations, Fifth Avenue law offices to new lounges in the Old Pension Building in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps even more important, however, at least for the advance of architectural theory, has been her unremitting and tireless productivity as a lecturer, a designer of exhibitions, a writer, and a subject for other writers.

As a personality, there is an almost feverish sense of urgency in the expression on her face, the timbre of her voice and the posture of her body, as if she were straining every muscle and nerve to participate. There is nothing passive or indifferent in her psychology. One senses about her that latent claustrophobia she must have felt in the limited society of Argentina, where she was born and educated. The obliqueness, dislocation, and melancholy of the Latin American intellectual seems almost consciously repressed, replaced by a smooth, nearly hypnotic flow of words and ideas.

Torre thinks in absolutely unified and grammatically exquisite paragraphs. She is a born pedagogue, in fact, with the necessary sarcasm and enthusiasm to ignite the dullest student. And yet Torre is also, and most important, an architect who *builds*. She is distinguished by a growing body of work that is intimately related to her complex interlacing of thoughts, dreams and metaphors, surrealism, and kitsch, that is at once fashionably "post-modern," and yet absolutely idiosyncratic.

To understand the drive and complexity of Susana Torre it is necessary to review certain facts about her life. Her use of language to explain, deepen, and otherwise extend her architecture is, in a way, paradoxical, because it imbues her structures with complex "plots" that are in fact not really evident to the eye of the casual beholder.

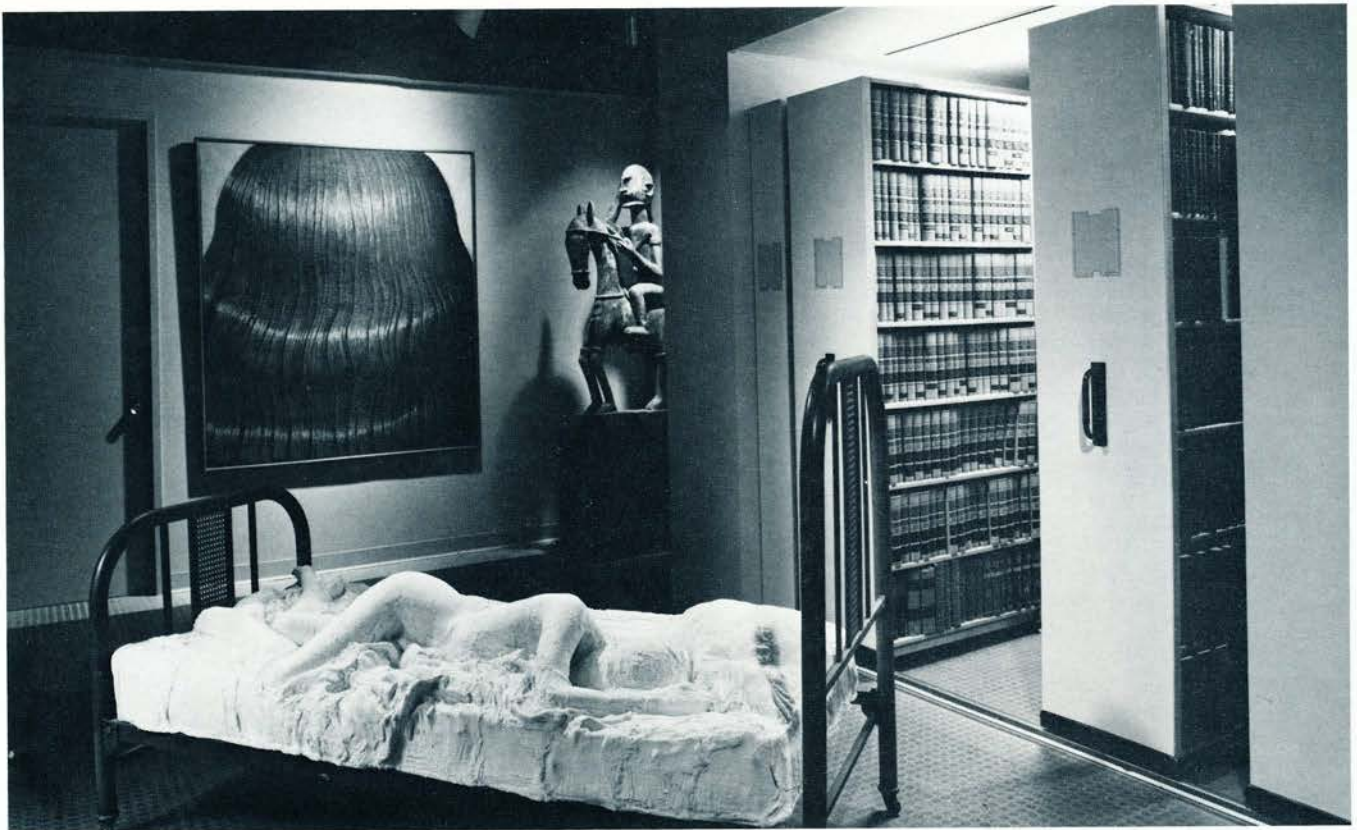
"I was at first unsure about becoming an architect," she says. "So I studied architecture and psychology simultaneously. That was living dangerously — as a result, I almost had a breakdown. What finally tipped the scales for me was a house that Le Corbusier had designed at La Plata [in Argentina]. I realized that my response to architecture was complete and visceral. At the time, Argentina was very cosmopolitan, intellectually. I was part of a cultural milieu that was at least nominally liberal. Of course, in retrospect, it appears to have been tragically fragile. But

Susana Torre is an architect with a sense of history who is also exhilarated by her own time.



Adaptive re-use: The National Endowment for the Arts sponsored this renovation.





Three-dimensional surrealism: the law offices of Torczyner and Wiseman on Fifth Avenue.

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at the time, we saw the work of Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris, for instance, even before they were given full recognition in New York, and I formed many friendships with painters and others who were engaged in defining the art of that time."

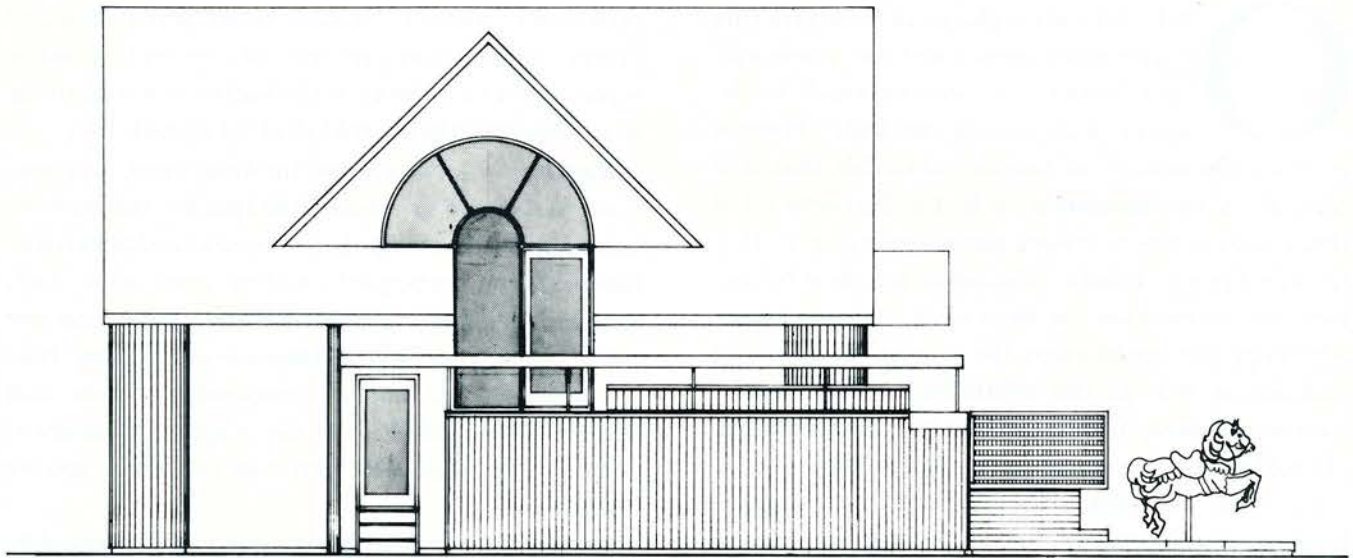
After a year in the graduate program at Columbia's School of Architecture and Planning, Torre "fell into" American life—and its ways of thinking. "These things happen slowly," she says. "You stay another year, then another, and then one day you realize you are never going back." And yet she remains outside the smug mainstream of American academic and creative life. There is still an edge to her ideas which remains unblunted by the relatively insular world of American architecture. "I think what I miss the most is the discussion of architecture as a cultural phenomenon, and the lack of any attempt to establish a relationship between the disciplines, such as interior design and architecture. Americans lack a sense of the wholeness of a subject. Everything is compartmentalized."

When Torre begins a discussion of her work, she devoutly reiterates those traditional principles of

"firmness, commodity and delight," but quickly adds, "My aim is really to re-state or re-define space. I consider myself as one who is of her own time who acknowledges the extreme importance of the rapid development of human knowledge in all disciplines, and who recognizes the dissonance of human behavior. I think language is a pre-condition of culture, and yet merely to *talk* about architecture is meaningless, unless you are pleased by the sensual quality of your experience. Therefore, my work seeks to reconcile the concreteness of the built form with the psychological perception of space. The energy comes from the collision between the two."

Torre's work is quite clearly historicist in that the framework of references and suggestions of tribal and folk memory that she sets up in her projects depends on a wide knowledge of the past. "I'm excited to be living in a country that is rediscovering its historical memory, and architecture, which I believe should be at once absolutely of its time while intimately rooted in a conscious past, must reflect this," she explains. And, of course, there is a personal dimension at work here. Perhaps the hallucinatory and surrealistic feeling in some of her work has to do with feelings of dislocation and severance from her own heritage.

To Torre, each of her projects represents a "com-



West Elevation

0 1 2 5 30 feet

The Clark House: metaphor and remembrance in Southampton. Torre believes in expanding the traditional role of architecture.

plex system of allegory, allusion, and complexity." And therein lies the difficulty of describing her work, except on a project-by-project basis. It is the uniqueness of her response to each challenge that makes a universal critique impossible. "I attempt to express the complexity of the matrix of conditions that composes the world we live in," she states innocently. "Probably because of my early interest and involvement in art, I use certain objects as metaphor. An architectural form, sculpture, or a painting may be used to express several layers of meaning.

"I will explain," she continues, "but first I want to say that I believe complexity is a 'given' in our lives. In my work, I seek to accept this without oversimplifying or going to the other extreme and becoming too fraught. One thing that separates my work from other architects' is perhaps the sense I have, not only of referencing other architects and architectural history, but also of coming to terms with popular art, and through that mediation, with the world itself."

Confronted, then, with the individuality and diversity of Torre's *oeuvre*, it may be more revealing to examine a single example, a current renovation of a former stable in Southampton, than to attempt an overall analysis of her work.

That structure, which was moved from an inland

site to a position facing Shinnecock Bay, has two carousel horses on each side of an entrance to a garden. Stripped of their gaudy paint, they brood as eloquently as *Citizen Kane's* "Rosebud" under the weight of Torre's metaphors. "To me, the horses represented a three-fold symbolism," she says. "First, remember that the house was originally a stable. So that's the first reference. Second, a summer home is, to me, essentially a retreat, a return to the dream-world of childhood; the fact that the horses were carousel animals suggests that link. Third, the house was moved, so the horses suggest mobility. They mark the point where the house 'stopped,' as though they had dragged it to that position."

The architect's use of such elaborate and multi-layered symbols is fascinating, and rather mannered. The danger lies in its becoming an overly complex and private language, comprehensible only to the owners of the house and those favored with the story behind the choice of metaphor. But Torre's architectural thrust is still too strong to disintegrate into mere anecdote. It will be fascinating to observe the growth and changes ahead for Susana Torre as her star rises.

—PETER CARLSEN