



STUART WEINER

## Paolo Soleri's visionary city

BY PETER BLAKE

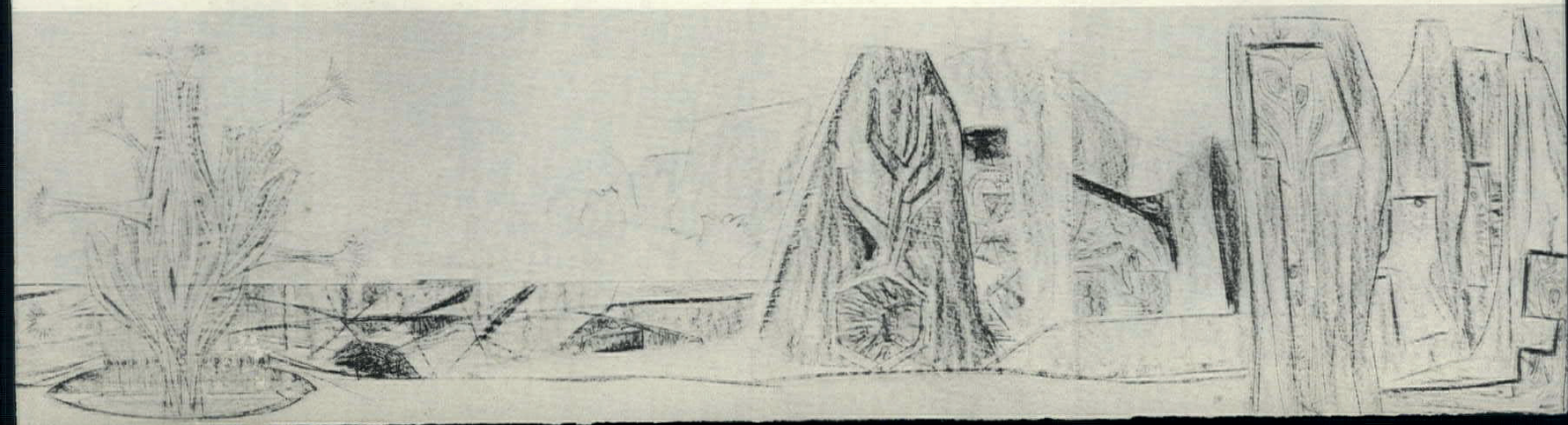
The strangely convoluted drawing being completed above is part of the plan for an ideal "City on a Mesa." This city is not about to be built—indeed, nothing like it may ever see the light of day, although Paolo Soleri (FORUM, Feb. '61) hopes, some day, to realize his proposal. But, for the present, what Soleri is trying to compose in swirling lines drawn on hundreds of continuous feet of butcher paper is a poetic manifesto about the kind of world we might be living in—if only we decided to build in harmony with nature.

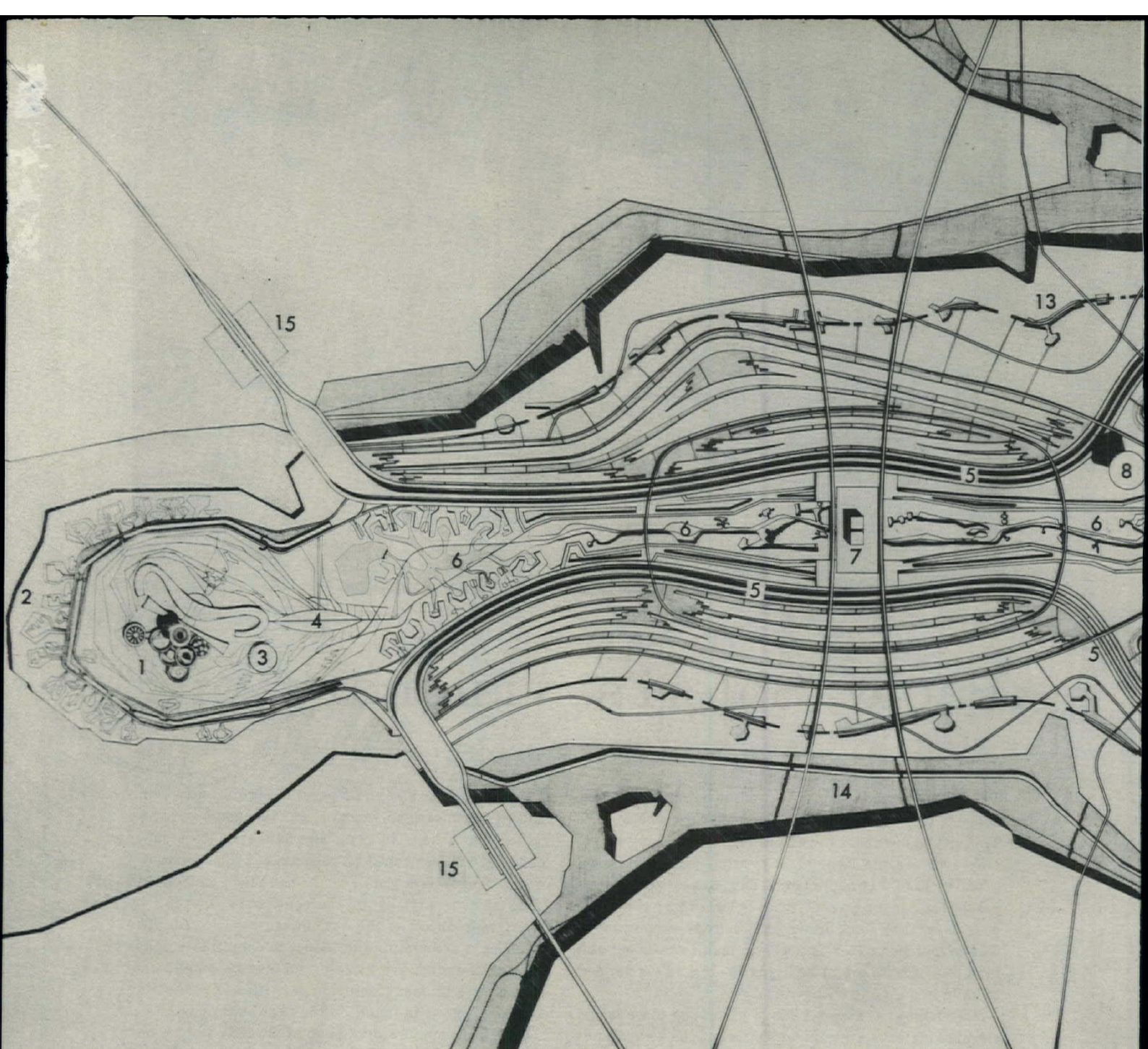
Soleri chose a mesa for his site because these large, elevated plateaus are part and parcel of the desert landscape in which he lives. A mesa has two chief characteristics: first, its life blood is water, and so Soleri proposed an elaborate system of dams, reservoirs, canals, and other waterways as the basic theme of his city plan; and, second, each mesa is an isolated plateau, almost perfectly suited to the kind of ideal, self-sufficient society that has always been the stuff of visionary dreams.

Mesa City was planned to house some 2 million people, on about 55,000 acres of land. The form of the prototype

designed by Soleri (see next page) is, significantly, reminiscent of some organism in nature: an elongated shape, rather like a bone in plan, approximately 13½ miles long, and 6 miles wide at its widest point. The "marrow" of the "bone" is a 7-mile-long, man-made canyon and park (shown partially in the continuous drawing by Soleri reproduced at the bottom of these pages). The "muscles" surrounding the "bone" are multilevel bands of concrete and glass containing speedways, canals, markets, and light manufacturing facilities. These structures are shown in detail on the next seven pages.

Practical planners may scoff at Soleri's vision; and the forms which he has given to his buildings are indeed fantastic. But his is a creative, rather than destructive, fantasy: for Soleri has tried to create a city that is not (like most cities) a place from which all inhabitants constantly dream to escape, but a proud symbol of man's highest cultural achievements. "Within the awesome setting of nature," Soleri says, "I seek a manly setting within which... we can sense the grace of being and becoming." Mesa City is such a setting.



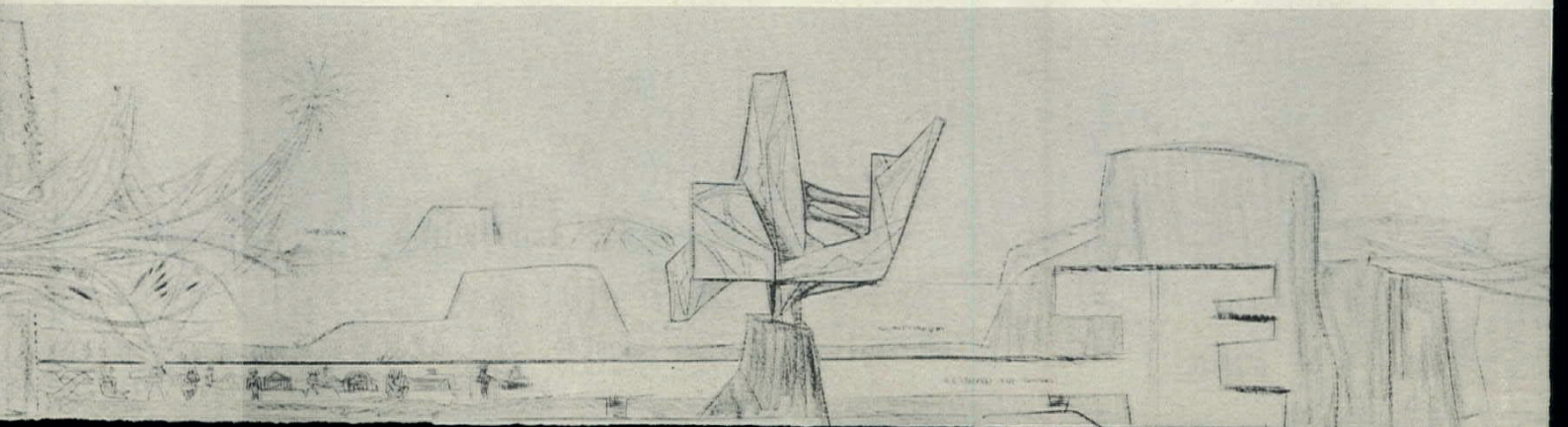


**Plan of Mesa City** has its main axis running  $13\frac{1}{2}$  miles north-south. The bold numbers identify the areas of the city: the Theological and Philosophical Center (1), the housing for artists and craftsmen (2), the umbrellalike structure for outdoor rituals (3), the parking area (4) which ties into the great, peripheral speedway and canal system (5), the 7-

mile-long, man-made canyon and park which runs through the center of Mesa City (6—see also the continuous drawing below), the Administrative and Business Center (7), the three tall structures (8) related in function to the Center of Higher Learning (9). This Center is surrounded by ringlike "villages" (10), each housing from 2,500 to 4,000

people in a single, doughnut-shaped structure. A series of bridges (11) radiate from the Center of Higher Learning toward the surrounding "villages"; these bridges serve pedestrians and cyclists, and their pylons contain student dormitories. At the foot of the bridges is a belt of home workshops (12). Beyond the "villages" and the peripheral speed-

way system are sunken, out-of-sight areas for second-hand stores and used-car lots (13). Finally, cut into the rim of the mesa are dwellings and workshops for art and craft guilds (14). The two principal gateways (15) contain transportation, freight and transfer centers, as well as dams and reservoirs to control the flow of water through the city.



Center of Higher Learning proposed by Soleri is a conical structure. Although most of the Center would consist of a cluster building (see city plan), there would also be three towers, each about 60 stories tall, containing university departments.

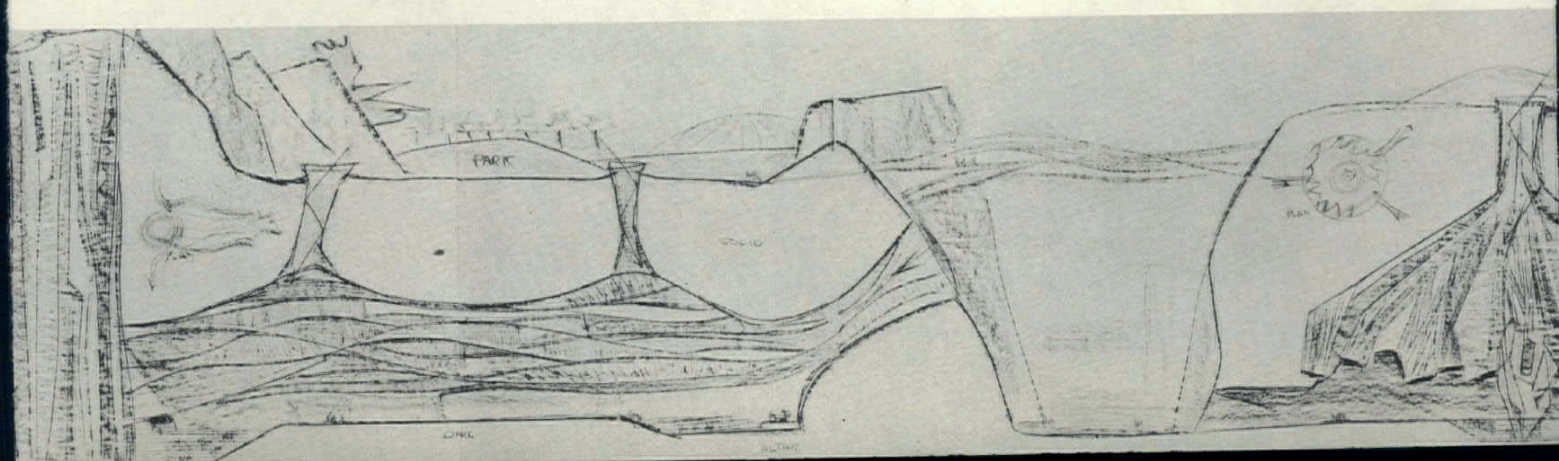
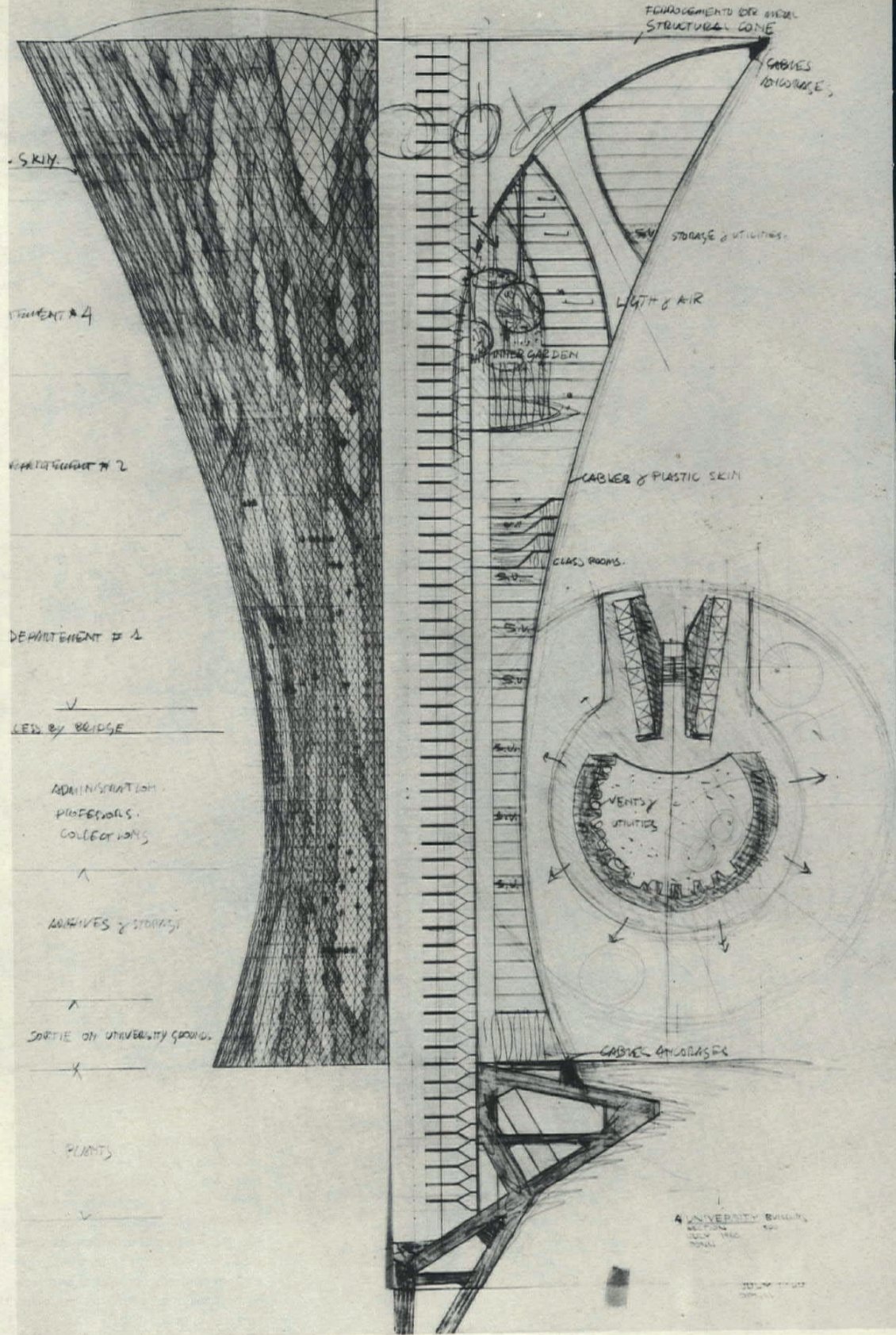
The core of these structures is of reinforced concrete and contains utilities and circulation; an outer ring is supported from this core at the roof level, and a network of cables is stretched between this top ring and the foundations to form a shape similar to that of a lobster trap. The skin of the building is transparent and translucent, in irregular patterns.

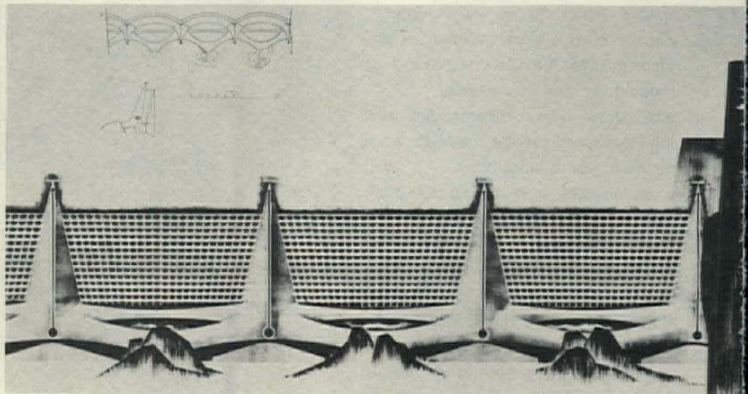
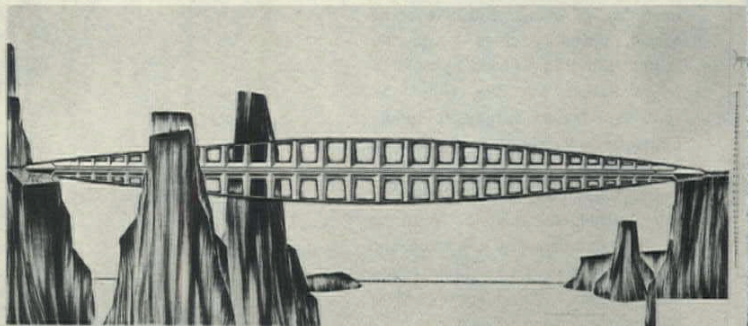
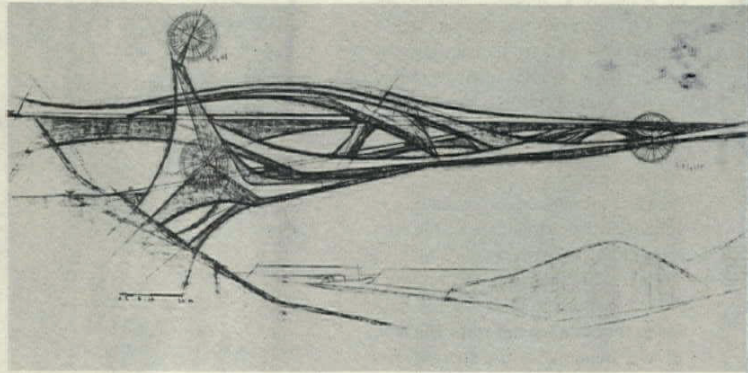
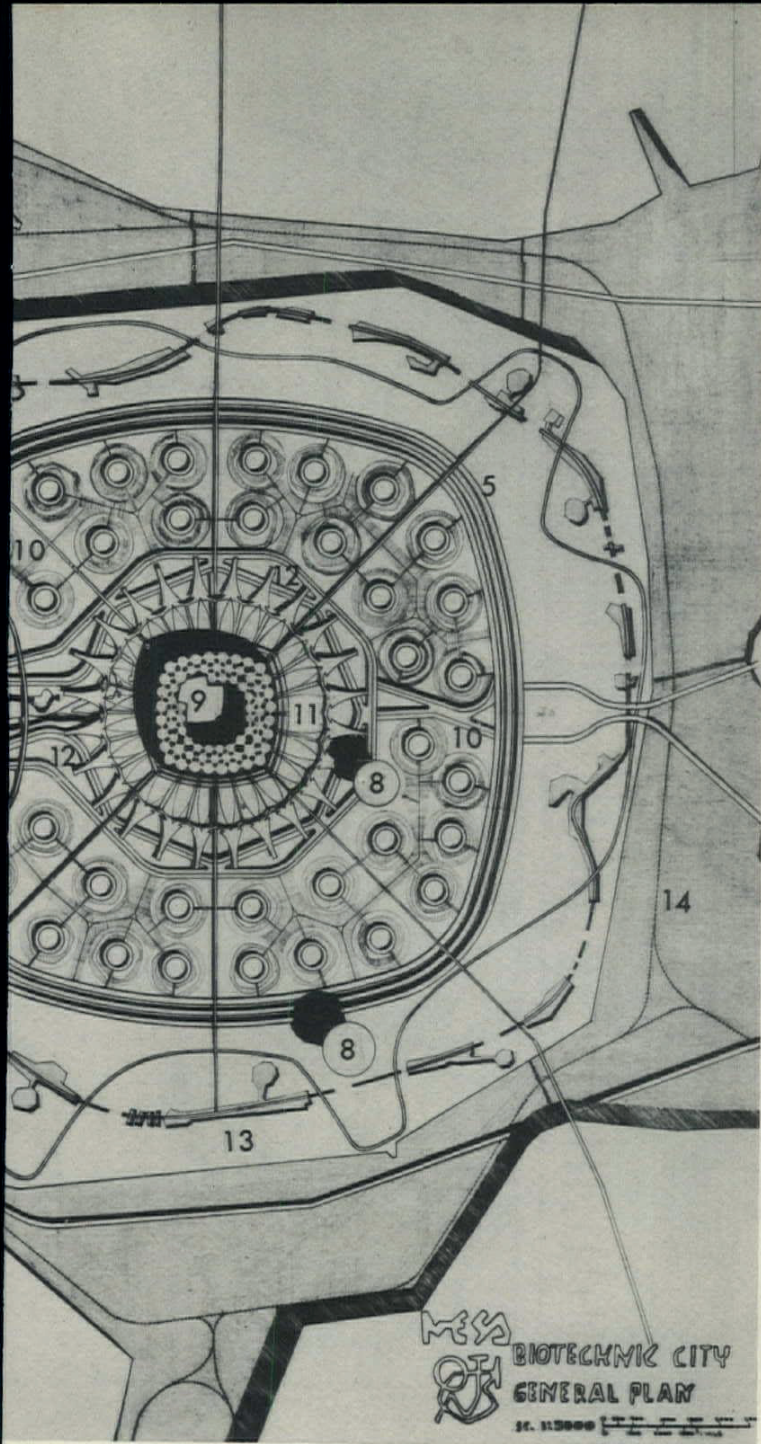
Not many planning officials in the U.S. are likely to find in Mesa City solutions applicable to their own, everyday problems; but like some earlier, visionary cities — e.g., the "Città Nuova" proposed by Soleri's fellow Italian, Sant'Elia, almost 50 years ago—Mesa City may profoundly influence city planners in years to come. In 1914, Sant'Elia said that "we... must find our inspiration in the new mechanical world." Well, the new mechanical world is with us, and others besides Paolo Soleri have found it less than inspiring. Mesa City is one answer to Sant'Elia.

Paolo Soleri lists these as his primary objectives:

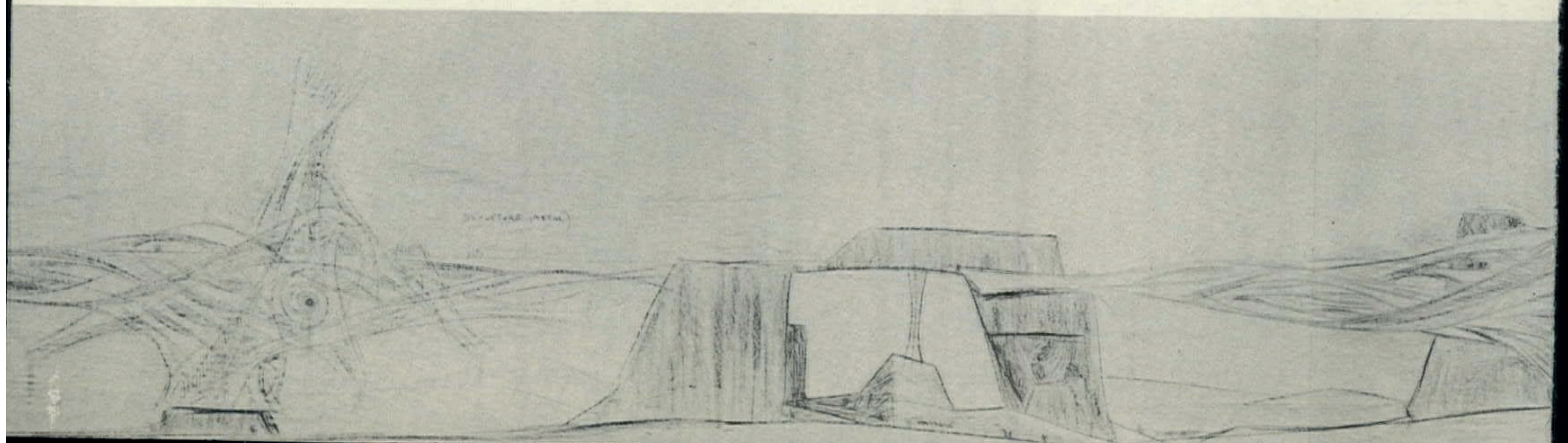
- "To present a new conception of spaces—inner spaces and volumes;
- to develop a great number of environmental variations, many of these quite new in character;
- to show how concentration and high densities can be made to work for man, not against him;
- to indicate how the automobile problem (and its accompanying blight) can be faced and dealt with;
- to demonstrate all the drastic economies made possible by standardization, automation, directness, higher densities, multipurpose uses, curtailing of waste (of time and of energy);
- to explain how leisure might be converted into a useful contribution to the esthetic character of the city;
- to find a new role for the artist in all fields, particularly in those arts and crafts related to the tending of water and of plant life; and
- to make a clear statement about means and ends."

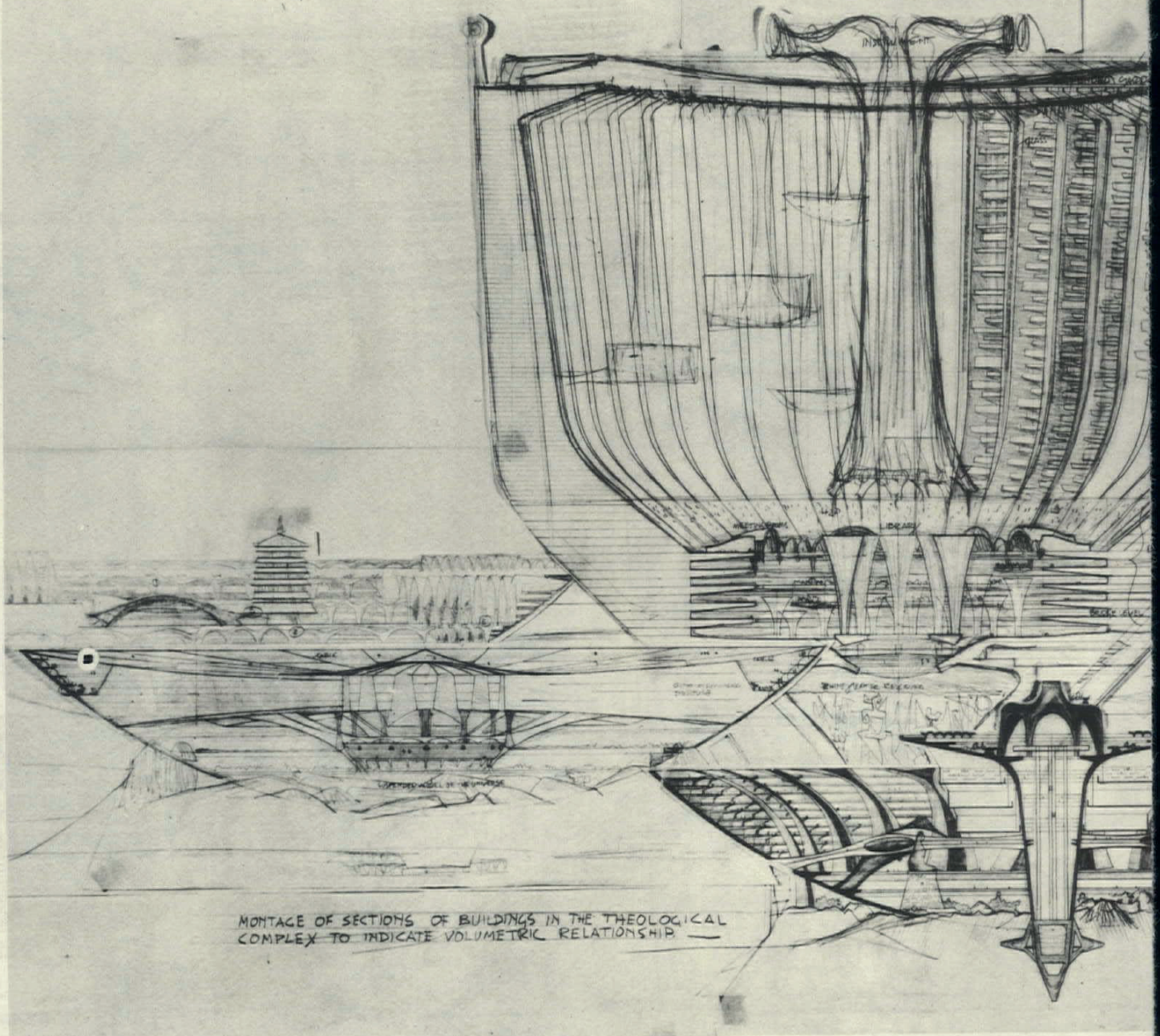
Soleri points out that his study of Mesa City is still in an early stage, and will be subject to many changes.





Bridges and dams regulate the traffic into Mesa City. Three of these structures are shown above. At the top is a cantilever bridge; next comes a bridge of light metal and plastic, with top and bottom chords consisting of taut cables. The great dam shown at bottom contains communal and residential facilities within its powerful, curved walls.





MONTAGE OF SECTIONS OF BUILDINGS IN THE THEOLOGICAL COMPLEX TO INDICATE VOLUMETRIC RELATIONSHIP

Theological and Philosophical Center is shown in the diagrammatic sections above, and in the detailed plan at right. The four low, bowl-shaped structures contain different monastic orders — Confucian-Taoist, Atheist-Agnostic, Hindu-Buddhist, and Zoroastrian. Two other, low structures not visible in the section serve Judeo-Christian and Moslem orders. Each

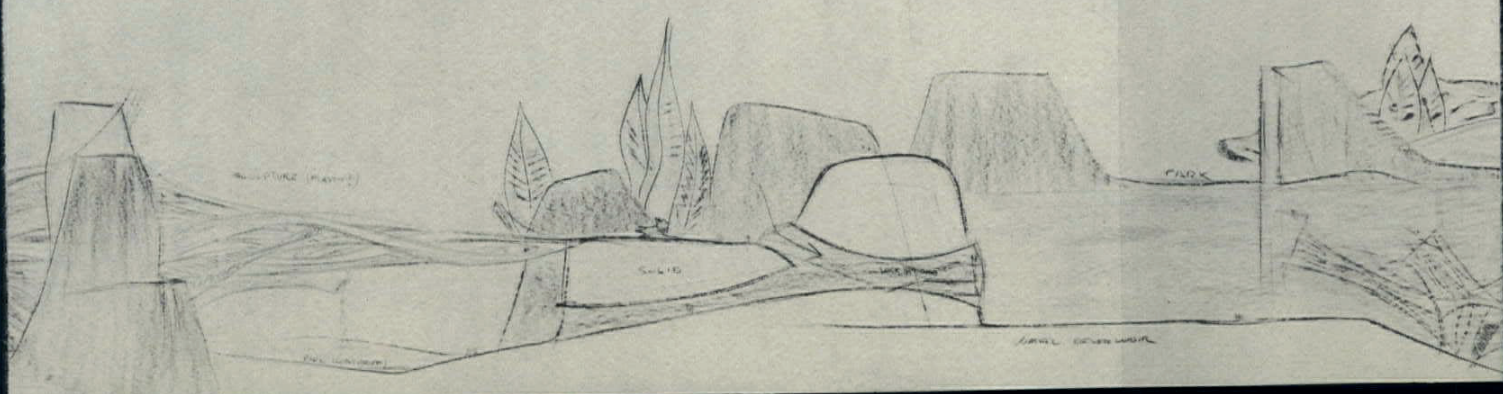
of the bowls is an isolated, introverted entity, centered upon circular gardens that contain special shrines or chapels. The six bowls are, however, connected by passageways. The tall, central structure contains libraries, lecture areas, meeting and conference rooms, cells for visiting scholars, etc. Like most major structures in Mesa City, this one has a

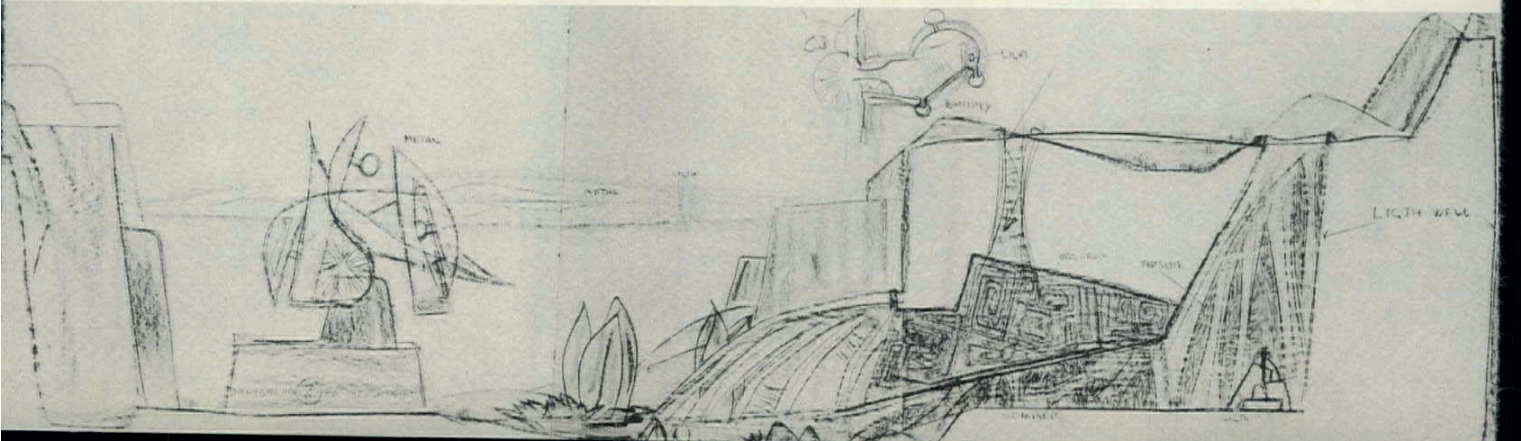
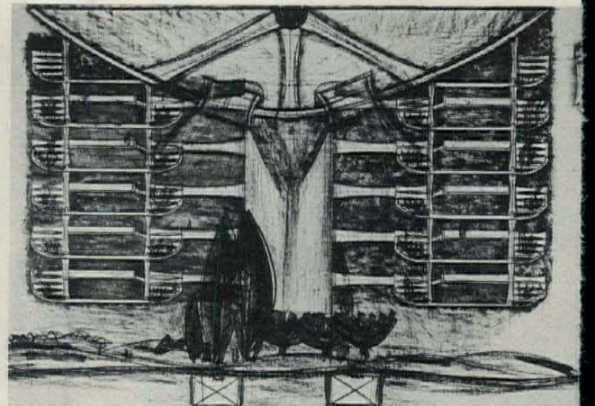
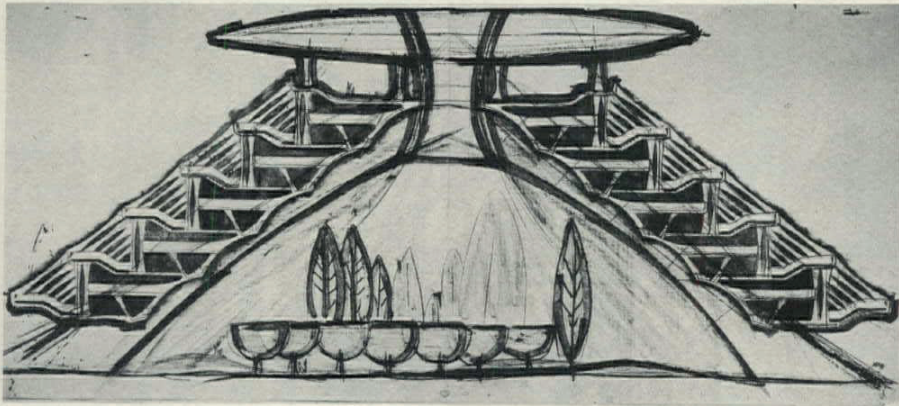
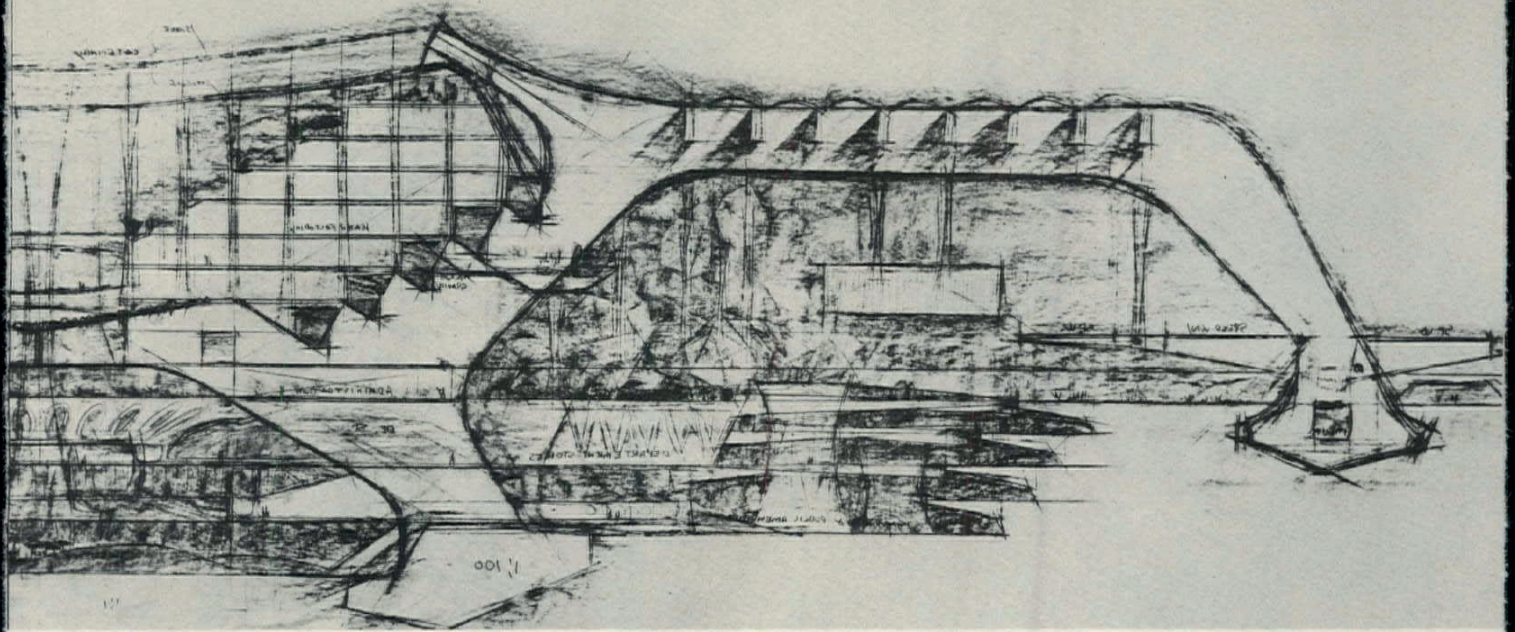
hollow center which is lit from above and contains suspended chapels and suspended gardens and a water reservoir with a submerged shrine. A huge "organ" hangs above this reservoir and extends upward through the full height of the court.

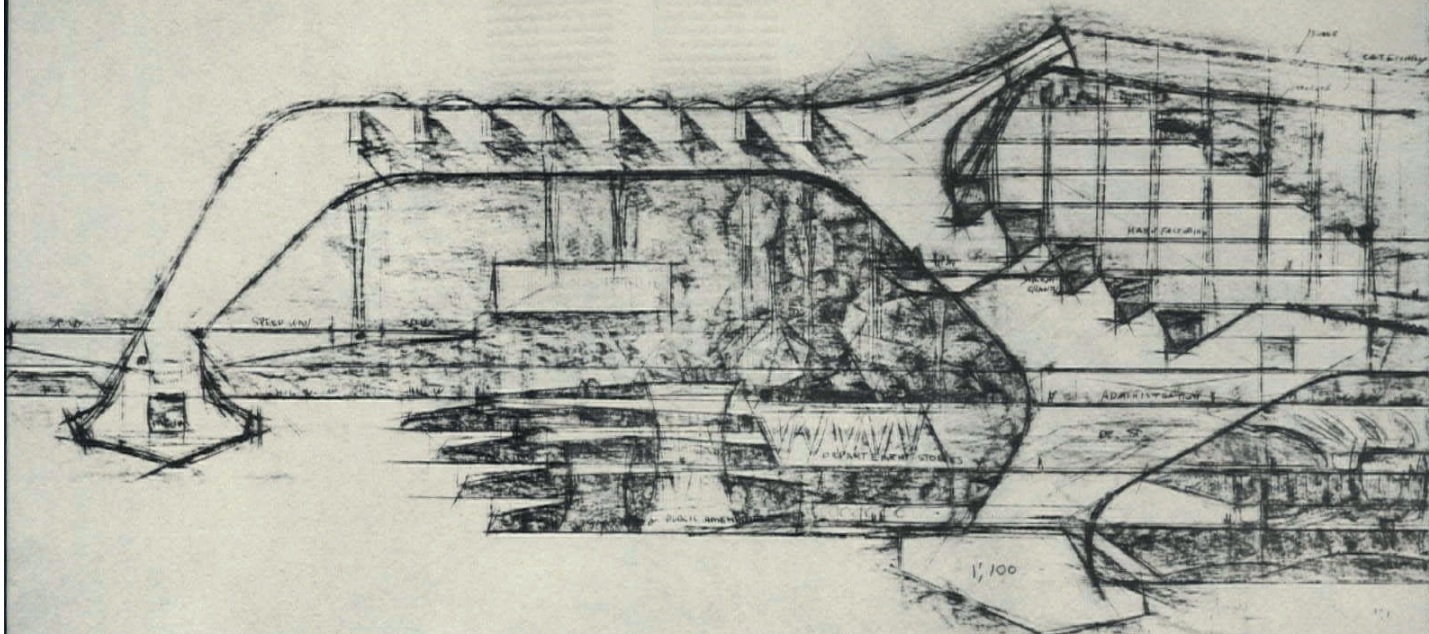
The starlike structure shown in plan off to one side of the main group of buildings is a place for out-

door worship, sheltered under a series of umbrellas or "angel wings," as Soleri calls them (top, right).

Beyond the main group, to the east of the Theological Center, is a long, low-slung structure, roughly shaped like a double S, which contains libraries and research facilities related to the principal ideas developed by man in the course of history.



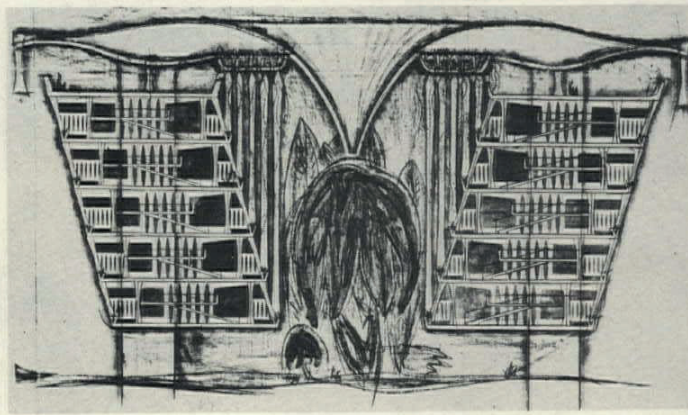
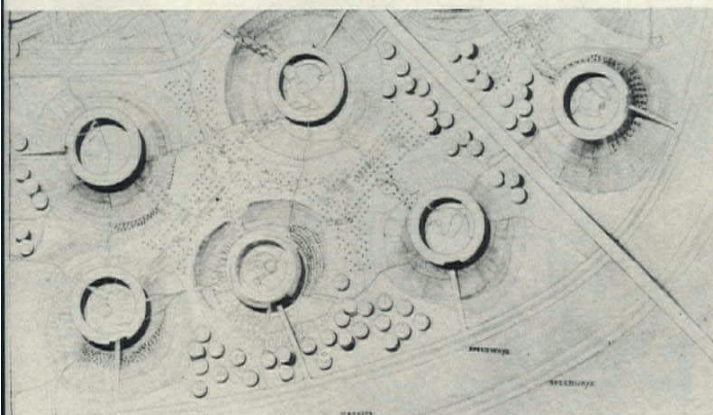




Main artery of the city, the massive structure shown in section above, is a huge peripheral band that surrounds the central areas. On each side this band contains a double-deck highway system (speedway above,

local traffic below). Down its center runs a wide waterway which acts as a natural "conveyor belt" for the entire city. On both its banks are terraced manufacturing facilities and continuous public markets. Between

these and the double-deck highways are parking levels, public gardens, and department stores. The girders that span this fantastic ribbon structure are hollowed out to form passageways for goods as well as people.



Doughnut-shaped "villages" surround the Center of Higher Learning. These villages are the principal residential areas of Mesa City, and each is a community of up to 4,000 inhabitants. (By comparison, Le Corbusier's structure at Marseilles houses 1,600.) In cross-section, the village structures somewhat resemble the Marseilles apartments in that

each dwelling unit has two exposures (one outward, the other toward the central court), and in that each unit has a double-height living area, with single-height sleeping and service areas backing it up. But here all similarity stops, for the "villages"—being circular in plan—suggest a greater sense of small-scale community than do Le Corbusier's slabs.

Each central, village park contains communal facilities like schools, clinics, and local stores. The "villages" are raised above the ground to permit circulation at pedestrian level. Each "village" stands above an underground parking garage equipped with repair shops. Communal centers for several "villages" occur between ring structures.

