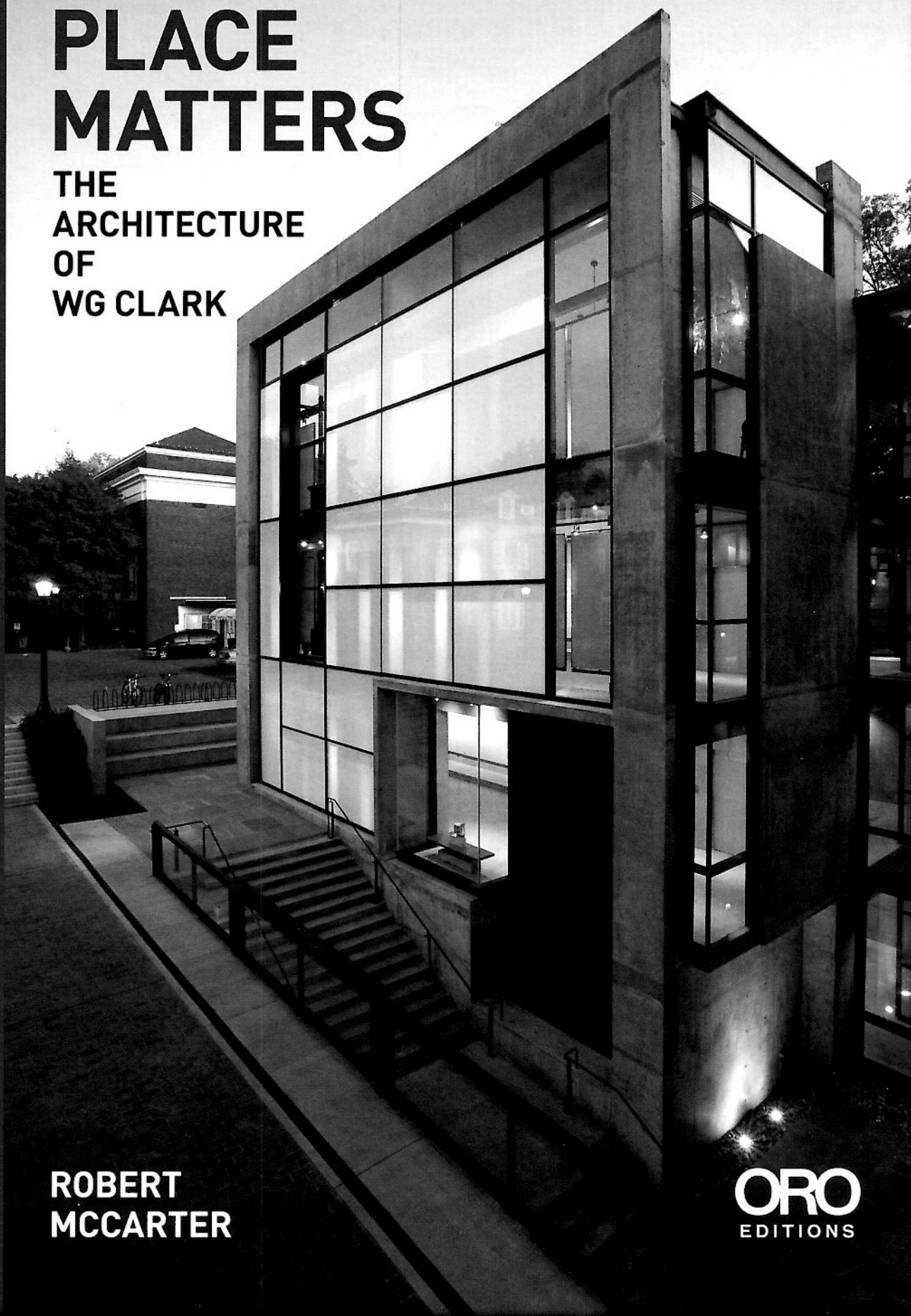


PLACE MATTERS

THE
ARCHITECTURE
OF
WG CLARK

ROBERT
MCCARTER

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ORO Editions
Publishers of Architecture, Art, and Design
Gordon Goff: Publisher

www.oroeditions.com
info@oroeditions.com

Published by ORO Editions

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The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia

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Managing Editor: Jake Anderson

Book Design by Pablo Mandel and Maureen Hollbol
www.circularstudio.com

Typeset in Avenir

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 First Edition

ISBN: 978-1-940743-42-4

Color Separations and Printing: ORO Group Ltd.
Printed in China.

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The career of the exceptionally talented W. G. Clark testifies to the regrettable provinciality of American regional culture, given the remarkably imaginative competition designs made during his partnership with Charles Menefee that were submitted for significant public works in Pheonix and New Orleans, neither of which would be realized, as well as Charleston, where the South Carolina Aquarium of 1987, sited on a canal that marked the original waterline of the Cooper River, would eventually be realized in revised form after a 13 year interval. An even more chequered fate will befall a more recent competition entry, designed by Clark alone, namely the Clemson Charleston Graduate Center which, despite having been accorded first prize is seemingly not going to be built.

The significance of this loss might be judged from the quality of the Clark and Menefee Middleton Inn, dating from as long ago as 1985 and built adjacent to a national historic landmark known as Middleton Place. What is striking about this work is the way in which a thick service wall, pierced at regular intervals by vaulting access stairs, is poised on top of a rectilinear ridge in such a way as to integrate the three-storey structure into the topography. Here, in the most explicit example of Clark's tectonic and topographic work, we encounter a version of the Kahnian interplay between servant and served, that is to say, between the heavy, opaque, thick-wall service structure bounding the hotel and the light-weight, three storey assembly of the bedrooms themselves, faced with floor to ceiling, wood-framed glazing which culminates in the rhythmic fenestration pattern of the common lodge/lounge at the end of the bedroom wing, fully glazed with the same framing at a larger scale. This syntactical play between heavy and light will also animate the cubic form of his Croffead House of 1989 which will, in effect, initiate the series of modest, two storey houses that are destined make up the bulk of Clark's career to date.

Clark's Lucy Daniels pre-school of 1992 and the modest house that he built for his own occupation in 1996 exemplify, at different scales; a micro-cosmic architecture made up of the articulation of diverse materials drawn from Clark's signature palette of concrete block, steel-framed glazing, glass lenses, exposed timber joists, and structural frames in fair faced concrete, along with built-in storage, tubular steel handrails, timber floors, and, very occasionally, precision brickwork and lightweight "aerial" roofs. Clark's stoic career has been that of a committed, sensitive and exceptionally skilled American architect who truly deserves to be better recognized on his own turf and one hopes that this new publication will finally gain for his highly refined achievements the local audience and support that he so richly deserves.