transformer:
strategic interventions at the VEPCO hydroelectric plant

issues:
This year’s Virginia Society AIA Prize competition brief is conceptually related to the upcoming Site Out of Mind symposium at the University of Virginia March 26 + 27, 2004 [http:\www.virginia.edu/arch/siteoutofmind.html]. The event will focus on unacknowledged sites that pervade American cities, but are rarely recognized or tackled by designers: edges between one thing and another, leftover spaces found at a disjuncture in scale and use, and ruined buildings left behind as technology changes or capital flows elsewhere. These seemingly problematic conditions provide an opportunity for provocative design investigation. The abandoned VEPCO 12th Street Hydroelectric Plant along Richmond’s constantly changing riverfront is such a site for strategic transformation.

site / history:
The city of Richmond has always been inextricably linked with the James River. Settled along the fall of the James, a lively tobacco warehousing and commercial district developed along the river’s edge. A complex system of canals was built, only to be abandoned as boat transportation gave way to the railroad and ultimately the interstate highway [I-95] that now passes by the site. These changes are recorded in a rich landscape layered with both working and obsolete infrastructural systems of river transportation, canals, railway lines, power distribution, highways, etc. The 12th Street Hydroelectric Plant, designed in 1926 by the Engineering Department of the Virginia Electric & Power Company, is a compelling remnant of that past. Located between the city and the river’s edge, the large concrete and steel structure is bordered by two small bodies of water – the forebay and tail race [depicted in the cross section] – essential to its former life. The plant generated electricity by taking advantage of the sectional difference between the two by directing water through giant turbines within the building. The turbines are gone, but the intertwined site / architectural section suggest intriguing design possibilities for a new hybrid use. In its derelict and inaccessible state, the building is largely “unseen” and provocative for just that reason. Your design must carefully consider what a transformational process means to its existing and future condition.

problem:
You are asked to imagine that a new Contemporary Art Gallery will activate the existing structure, while programmatically requiring strategic insertions or transformations to the hydroelectric plant both inside and out. The Gallery intends to transform the Richmond art scene by creating a compelling venue for cutting edge art production in all media: film, visual art of all kinds, music, etc. Exhibitions and events will rapidly change and there will be no permanent collection, so extensive curatorial and storage spaces are not required. Complex sectional development at multiple scales is suggested by the stepped building section, vast interior volumes, and intricate site section from dense urban fabric through forebay, hydro plant, tail race, elevated railway viaduct, open river landscape and beyond. The given program may be broadly interpreted, but the following spaces must be accommodated:

- entrance landscape strategy
- outdoor installation space
- exhibition: large flexible galleries to display drawings, paintings, sculpture + video art
- indoor / outdoor performance: venue for music, dance + theater events, seating for 150 people
- dark projection room: seating for 25 people
- children’s interactive workshop: smaller scale space where children to make art
- café: small kitchen / bar, indoor / outdoor seating for 40 people
- service core: stair + elevator [if required by design], restrooms

site documentation:
Drawings and photographs of the plant and surrounding site are available at: http://faculty.virginia.edu/vsaia_competition_04/

submission:
The competition begins on Friday, January 30 @ 5pm and concludes on Monday, February 2 @ 9am. Each school will select one first prize and up to seven finalist to go on to the final jury in Richmond. VSAIA prize competition rules require that all work must be generated by a single author—no collaborative projects are allowed. Complete the following required drawings: site plan, section, floor plan, perspective and additional drawings as desired. Work in any medium [paper / computer, etc] you prefer. Mount your work on a single 20”x30” board (max. total thickness 1/4”: no models accepted). Securely fasten an unlabeled sealed envelope on the back that contains your name, school, and email address. The author’s name and/or school affiliation may not appear [unconcealed] anywhere on the board.