



A SITE REDISCOVERED

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and  
State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture in Architecture

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Illus. 1 | A ruin on thesis site | Great Falls in Lewiston, Maine | Fall 2009

by: Sarah A. Mailhot

“ Every new work of architecture intervenes in a specific historical situation. It is essential to the quality of the intervention that the new building should embrace qualities that can enter into a meaningful dialogue with an existing situation. For if the intervention is to find its place, it must make us see what already exists in a new light.”

Peter Zumthor<sup>1</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT

This is a site-driven project located in my hometown of Lewiston, Maine, a point along the Androscoggin River. Driving over the bridge as a child, I was intrigued by the waterfall, but it always seemed unattainable; the mills and abandoned buildings prevented access. When my dad said that the last mill burned down at Great Falls in 2009, I was saddened but knew this provided a new opportunity for the community.

This project is not about placing a building, but rather intervening and creating a conversation with the existing landscape by framing and experiencing its beauty.

This project is an exploration of redefining entry, thresholds and pathways, as well as interlocking public and private spaces. The design process was not linear; one question always led to another. The program evolved over time, as I became more acquainted with the water, ruins and topography of the site. My hope was that I would add a chapter to the site story of Great Falls and inspire future development for the community.



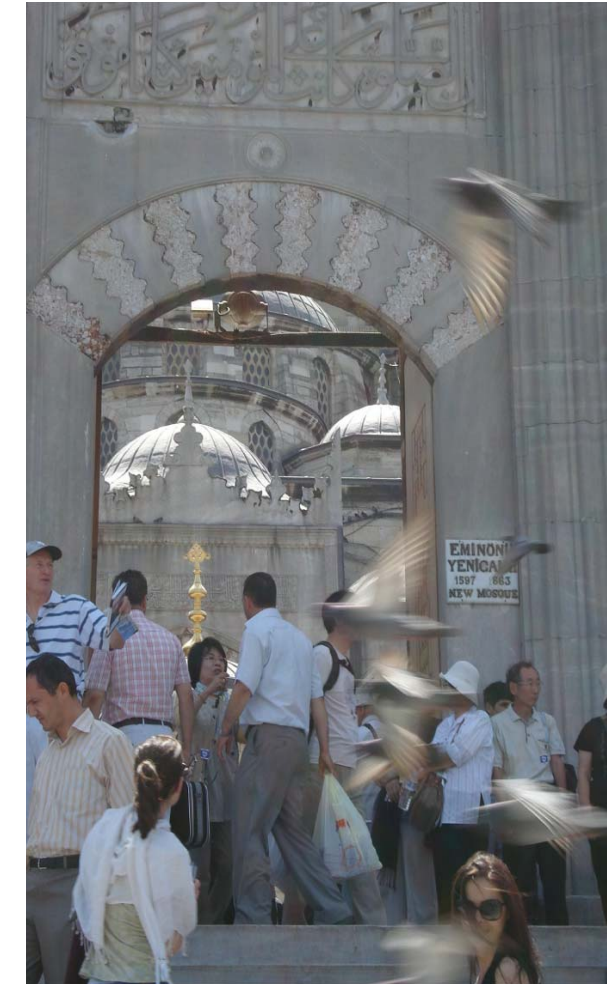
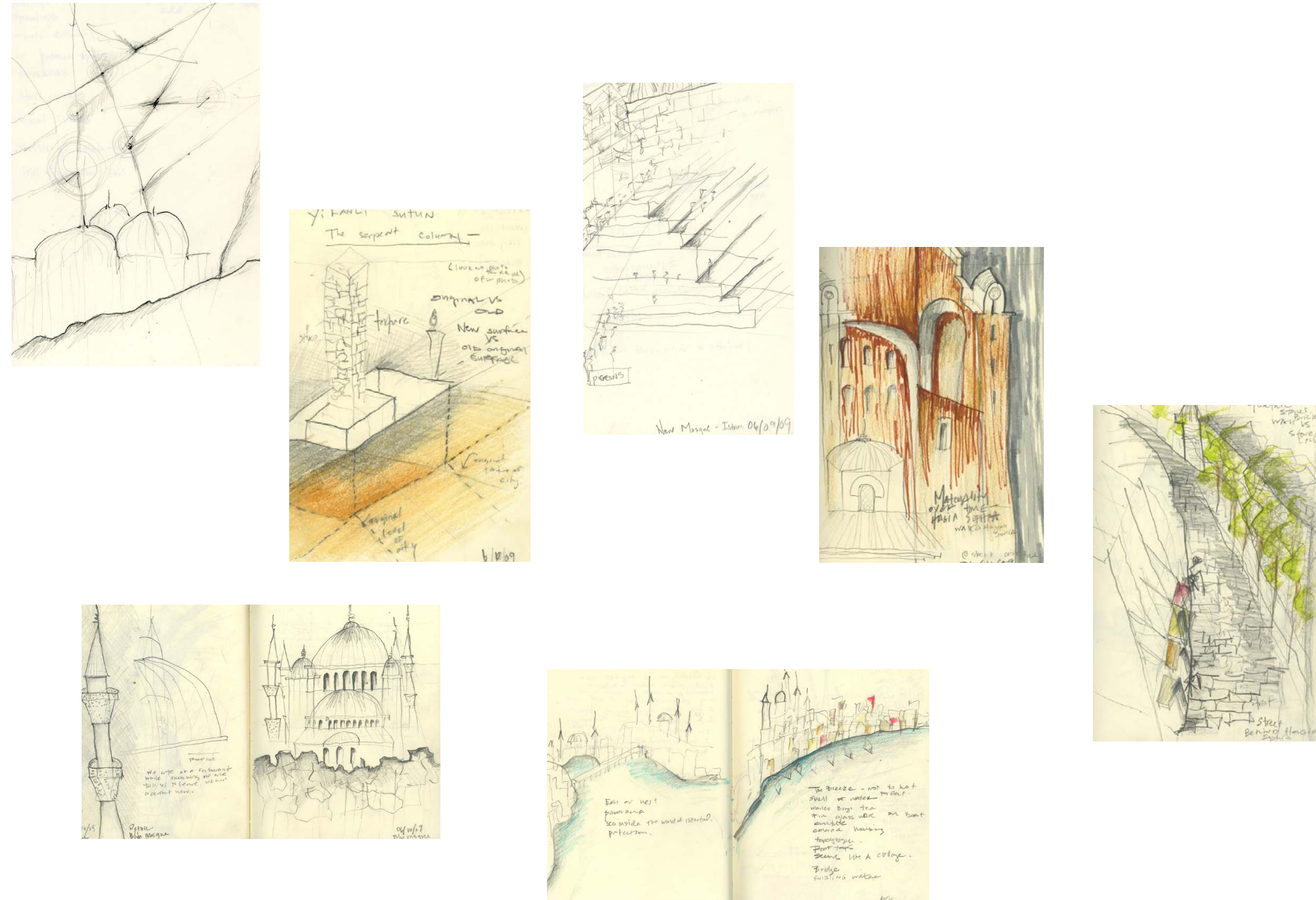
“The person standing in front of them is not someone who asks questions whose answers he already knows. Practicing architecture is asking oneself questions, finding one's own answers with the help of the teacher, whittling down, finding solutions. Over and over again.”

Peter Zumthor<sup>2</sup>

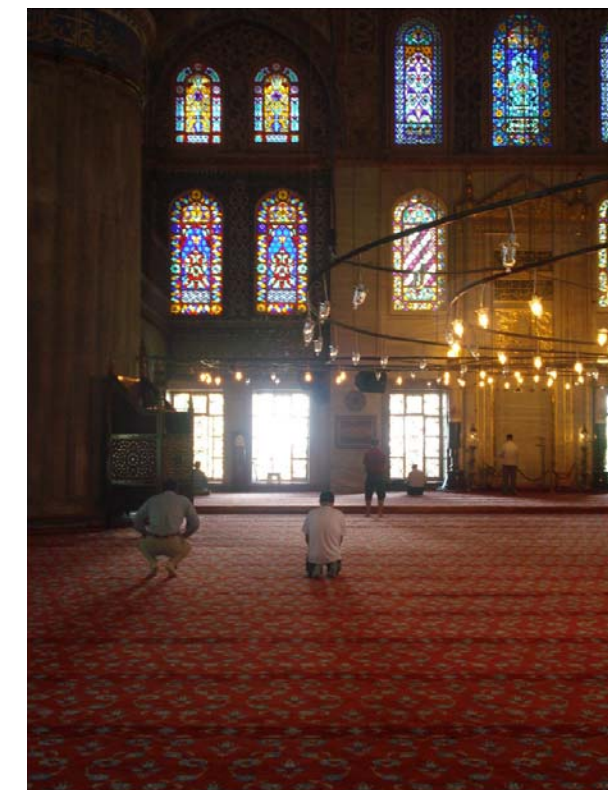
I want to thank my committee for their wisdom in asking the right questions and their patience in waiting for the answers. Most importantly, for never losing sight in what I was trying to achieve, helping me to 'whittle down over and over again.'

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Illus. 2 - Blue Mosque, 2009



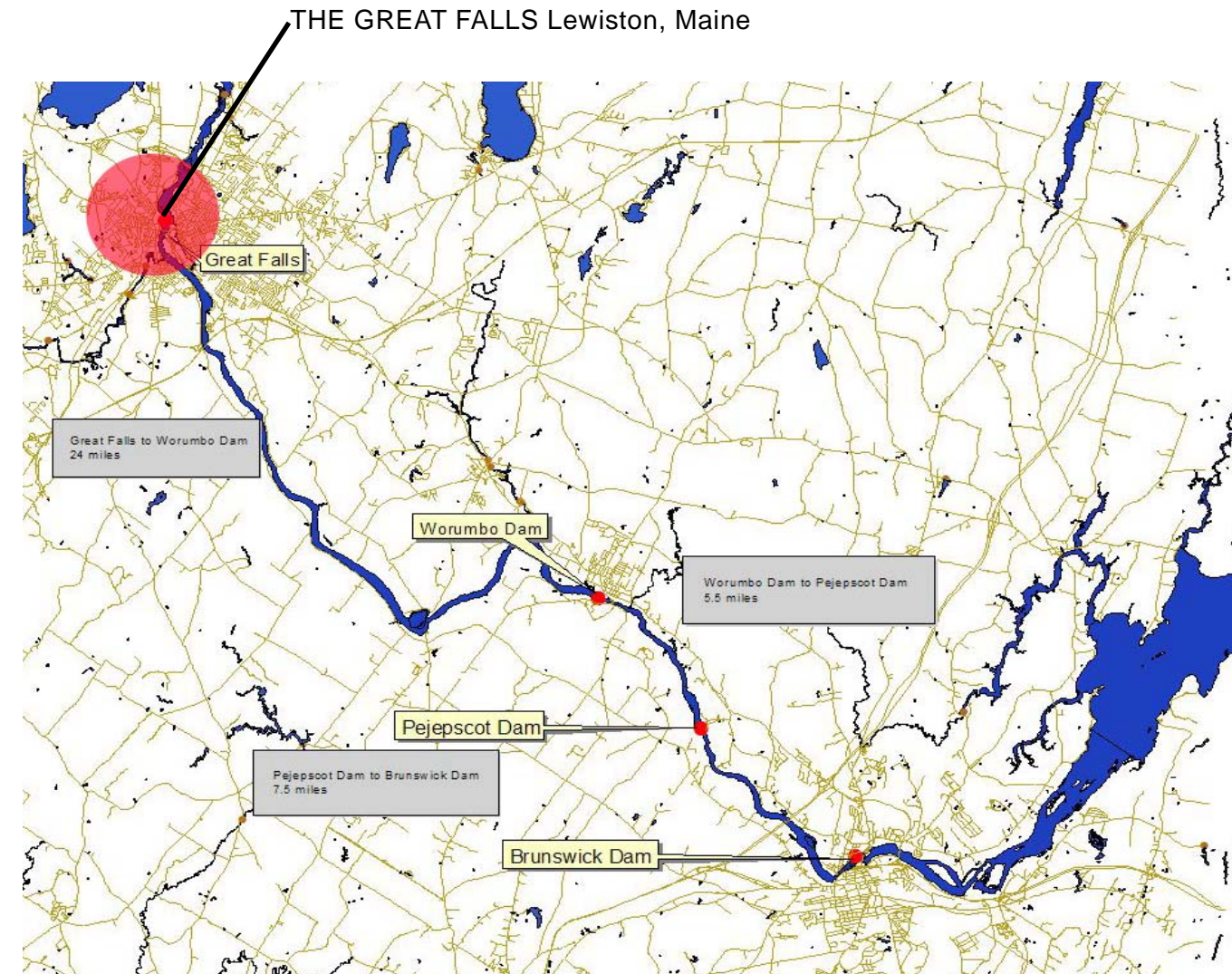
Illus. 3 - Blue Mosque, 2009

In the summer of 2009, I traveled to Istanbul, Turkey for a three week WAAC “Visual-ist” summer program at the Bahcesehir University. Istanbul has a rich, multicultural history. I visited places such as Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Palace on the Army Street and the Grand Bazaar. I documented what I observed: time, movement, layers, order, disorder, pathways, density, openness, in-between spaces, thresholds, materiality and street culture. These ideas were analyzed on an urban and building scale.

Often, I came across spaces where the outside was very chaotic, but the inside was still, as shown in the two photographs of the Blue Mosque on the left. I was intrigued by the dual characteristics as well as the physical layers between the old and new I found throughout the city.

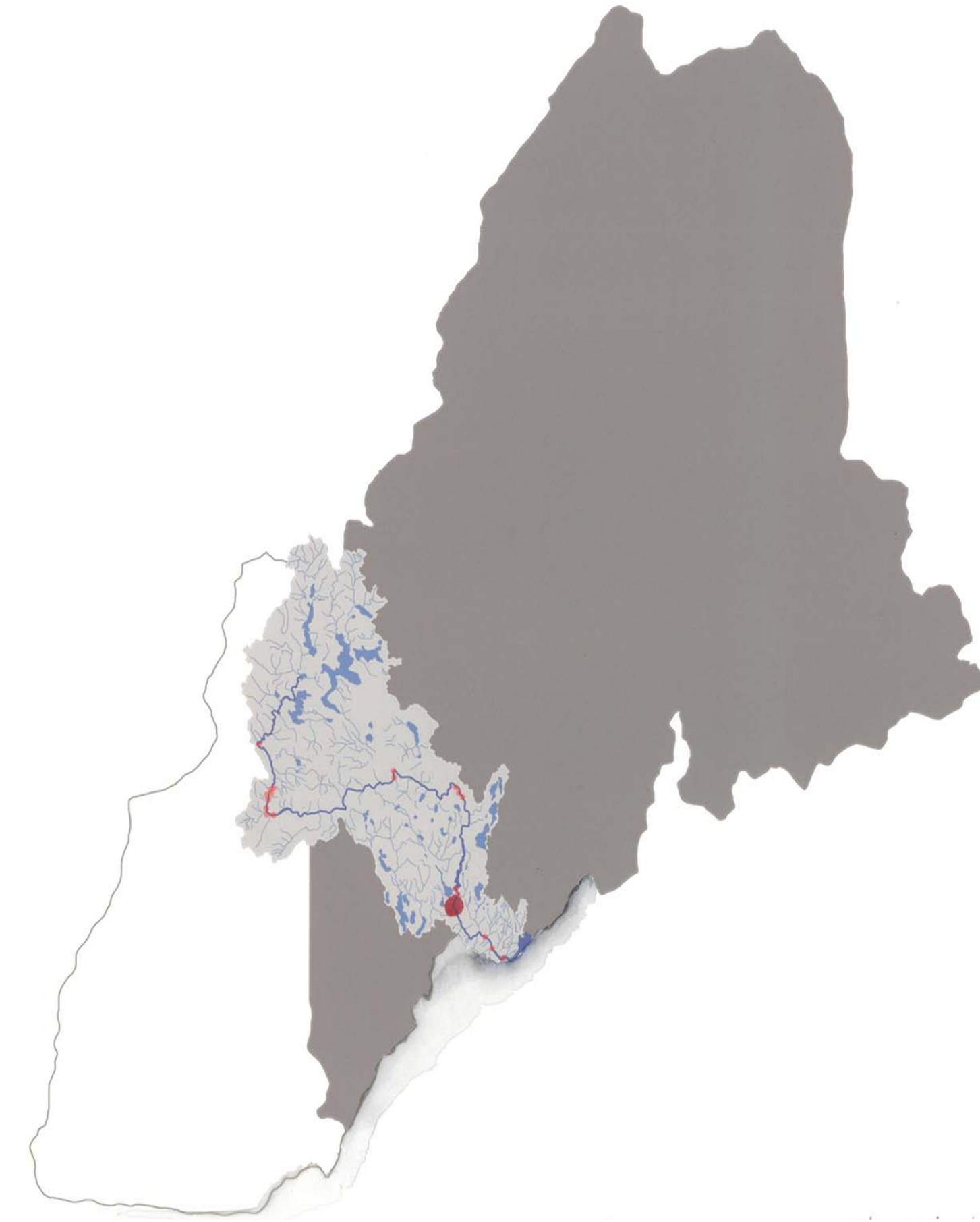
This trip to Istanbul set a precedent for my thesis. The experience in Turkey influenced the qualities I was searching for in a thesis site. I was interested in creating a site-driven project, by first studying history’s remaining layers.





Illus. 4 - Southern portion of the Androscoggin River and dam locations | Androscoggin River Alliance

map used with permission of Androscoggin River Alliance



Illus. 5 - Map of Maine highlighting dam locations on the Androscoggin River

The Androscoggin River is one of Maine's greatest assets. The water changes from season to season: calm in the fall, frozen in the winter, and during the spring, the ice melts and water gushes down the water falls. This change of season is a natural wonder enjoyed by the communities along the Androscoggin. The river is becoming a place of recreation rather than a symbol of the mills' financial success during the Industrial Era. The Androscoggin is known to be very steep at parts; its terrain was ideal to power the mills. These conditions make it difficult for a kayaker or canoer to navigate the entire river without having to portage his or her canoe to get to the higher or lower water level.

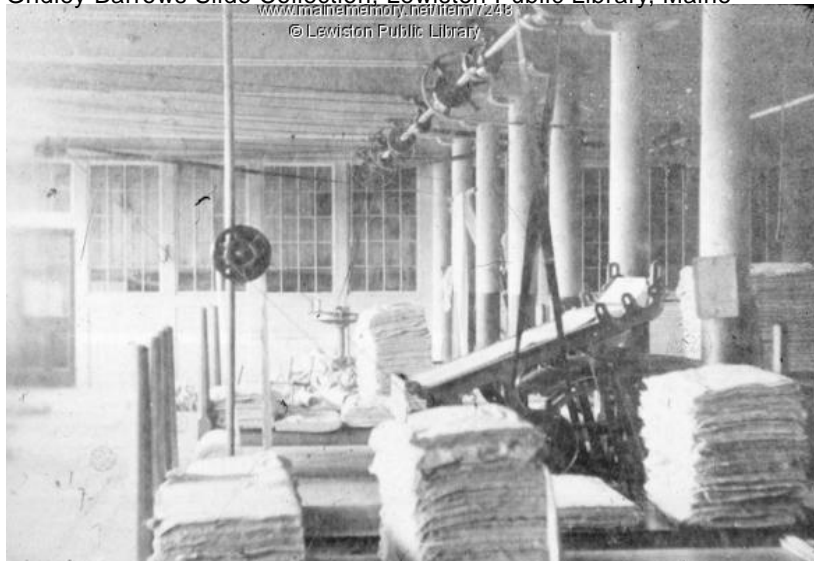




Illus. 6 - child laborers, 1900  
Gridley Barrows Slide Collection, Lewiston Public Library, Maine



Illus. 7 - man working, 1940-50  
Museum L-A, Lewiston, Maine



Illus. 8 - raw cotton, 1900  
Gridley Barrows Slide Collection, Lewiston Public Library, Maine



Illus. 9 - woman working, 1940-50  
Museum L-A, Lewiston, Maine

photos used with permission of Lewiston Public Library and Museum L-A

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of French Canadians were attracted to the mill towns of Maine. Half a million French Canadians arrived in New England between 1840 - 1940.<sup>5</sup> My ancestors were part of this group. There were many mills along the Androscoggin River. Unfortunately, the industrial age used the river as a chemical dumping ground. The image below is of the Great Falls during the Industrial Period. Many have said it was unbearable to live in Lewiston at that time. "Jewelers nearly went berserk keeping their stocks of silverware saleable because the sulfite-laden air turned silver and other metals black overnight."<sup>3</sup> Androscoggin River Alliance explains that after the river was found to be deplete of oxygen, Walter Lawrence began working to clean up the river. He was appointed River Master from 1947 - 1977. Towards the end of his term, the Clean Water Act was passed in 1972.



Figure 10 - The Factories at Great Falls | Lewiston, Maine, 1910

To the best of my knowledge, this image is fair use





AN AERIAL VIEW OF LEWISTON AND ITS RIVER  
 Taken in the 1960s, W.S. Libbey mills are in the foreground across the river, left; Bates Mills, with its tall stack behind it, is just right of center; Continental Mills, far right, across from New Auburn.

Figure 11 | Mills at Great Falls | 1960 | Gridley Barrows Slide Collection, Lewiston Public Library, Maine



Illus. 12 - 1914 Fire Insurance Map underlay reassembled and rendered by author





Illus. 13 | The Fire at Cowan Mill | Summer 2009 | Lewiston, Maine | Steve Myers



Illus. 14 | The Fire at Cowan Mill | Summer 2009 | Lewiston, Maine | Sharon Albiston



“But there has to be an interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity...that is what I mean when I say the necessity of ruins; ruins provide the incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins. There has to be an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform. The old order has to die before there can be a born-again landscape.”

- J.B. Jackson<sup>4</sup>





Illus. 15 | Great Falls in winter post fire | 2010 | Lewiston, Maine | Sarah A. Mailhot



Illus. 17  
Corner foundation of Cowan Mill  
post fire | Sarah A. Mailhot



Illus. 16 | Great Falls in fall post fire | 2009 | Lewiston, Maine | Sarah A. Mailhot

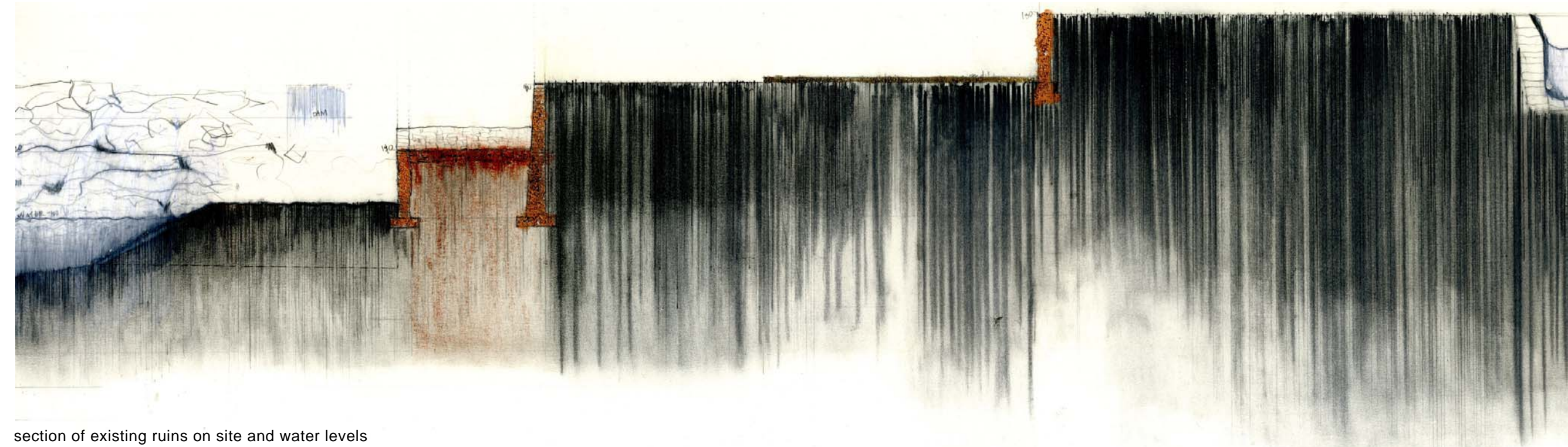
The last mill at Great Falls burned down in the summer of 2009, the same time that I chose my thesis site. The site visit was the most crucial part in understanding what was existing and how I would approach the design. I needed to go to the site, see the ruins, water and topography as well as feel the air on my face. I spent 3 cold October days measuring the site, taking photographs and sketching. I needed to develop my own hierarchy of existing site elements and understand what was important. I knew that I could not address one part of the site without looking at its whole, and I could not look at the whole site without developing a part of it.

When I arrived, it was extremely overwhelming. There was not a clear sense of organization. Questions that were going through my mind were: "What is going to happen here? What does the community want? How does one enter? What piece do I develop?" The biggest question was, "How do I add to this strong sense of place and not detract from it?"





site plan of existing ruins on site



section of existing ruins on site and water levels

As I began to sketch and photograph, the site hierarchy became clear.

Firstly, the river. Over the course of time, the river was always the focal point, whether it was for hunting during pre-colonial times or financial success during the Industrial Period. Currently, the community is trying to use it for recreation. I knew that I needed to first respect the river.

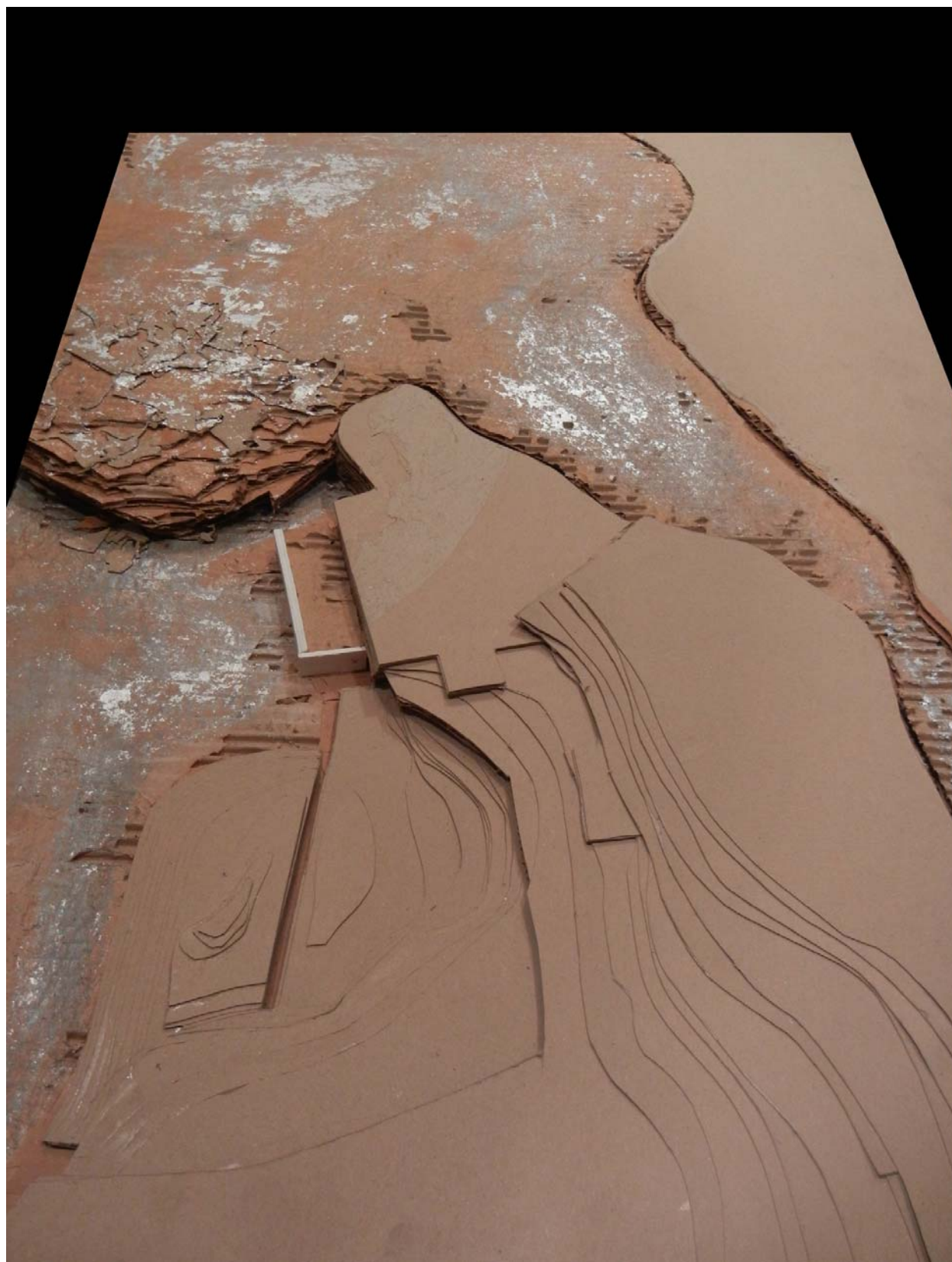
Secondly, the ruins. There is history and familiarity in the stone walls. The walls give the Great Falls a sense of place. They retain existing earth as well as provide a wall of protection during the river's turbulent floods. I knew that I needed to respect the ruins.

Thirdly, the topography. There are clear levels that I drew in the site section below. The first observation I made was that the ruins retained earth and created levels connecting the lower and upper river. The levels included: the lowest water level, the second level (Cowan Mill foundation), the third level (Mill Road and Libbey Mill foundation) and the highest water level (natural waterfall and man-made canal). I knew that I wanted to connect the lower and upper river through a proposed intervention.

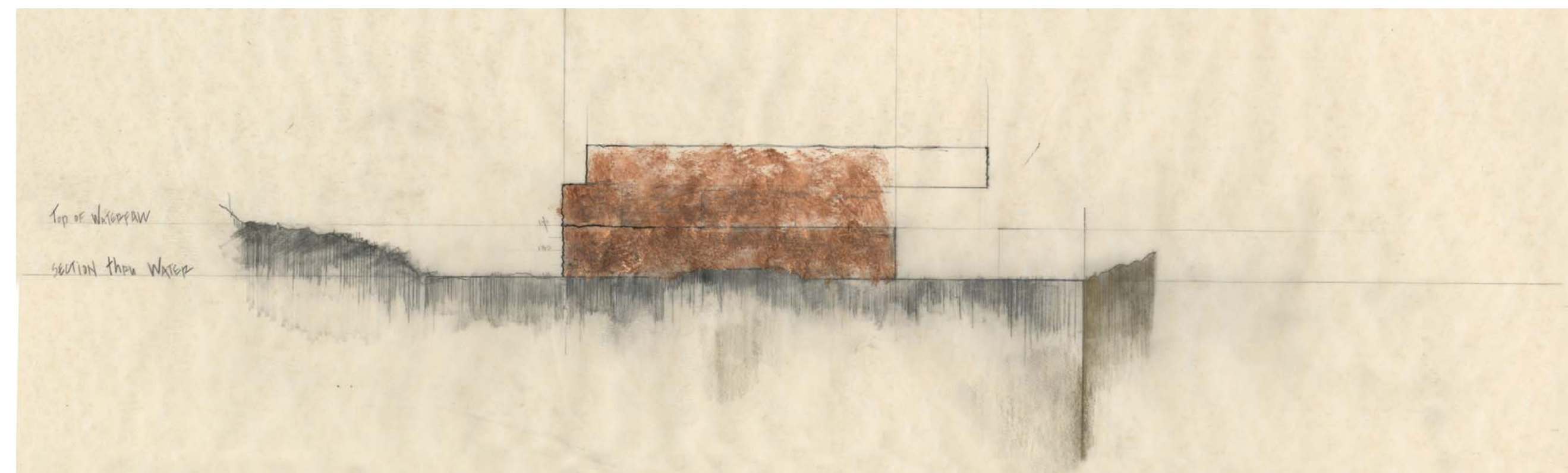








model studying topography and lower river, upper river and canal



topography studies



photo used with permission of Lewiston Public Library

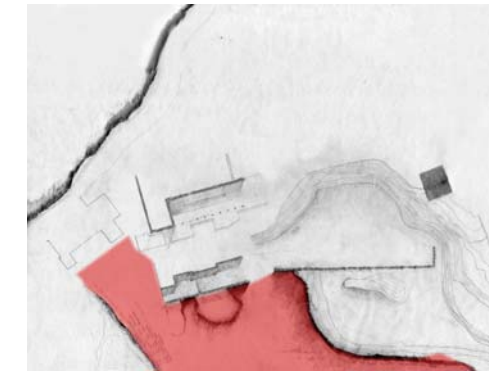


Illus. 18 - Flood that washed out a bridge, 1896  
Gridley Barrows Slide Collection  
Lewiston Public Library, Maine

photo used with permission of Androscoggin Historical Society



Illus. 19 - Flood at Great Falls, 1936  
Androscoggin Historical Society



site plan and section diagrams highlighting lowest level (bottom of the falls)



Illus. 20 | Water Reflections at Dusk | Fall 2009 | Lewiston, Maine | Sarah A. Mailhot  
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I studied the qualities of the water through the different seasons and times of day. It became apparent that the water can be calm or turbulent. The river has flooded in the past, so I knew that this would impact the design.



Illus. 21 | Water Ice Snow | Winter 2010 | Lewiston, Maine | Sarah A. Mailhot

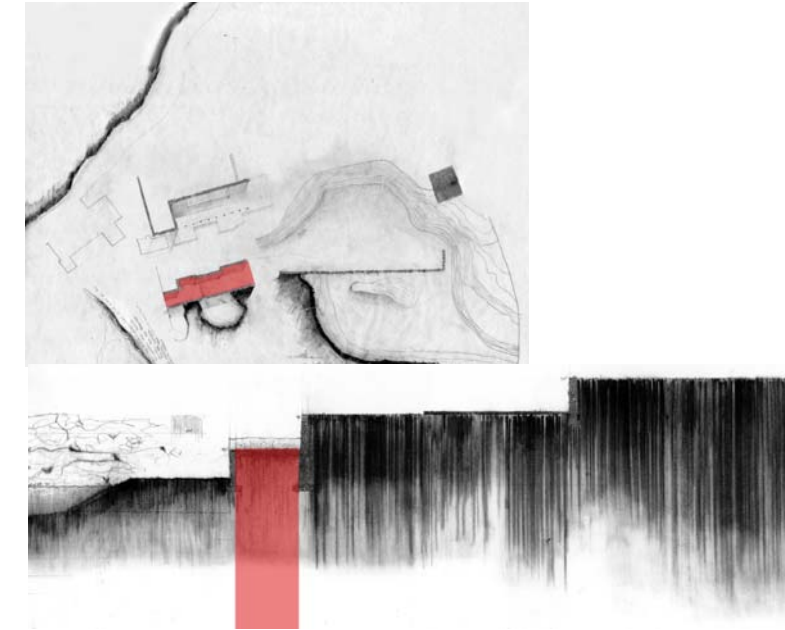




Illus. 22 remaining bricks  
photos by Sarah A. Mailhot

my dad measuring ruins

found object



site plan and section diagrams highlighting Cowan Mill footprint

My dad and I measured the Ruins on the entire site. This was extremely important to develop a sense of scale and feel the actual material that was to be incorporated in the project.



Illus. 23 | Cowan Mill stone wall | Fall 2009 | Sarah A. Mailhot  
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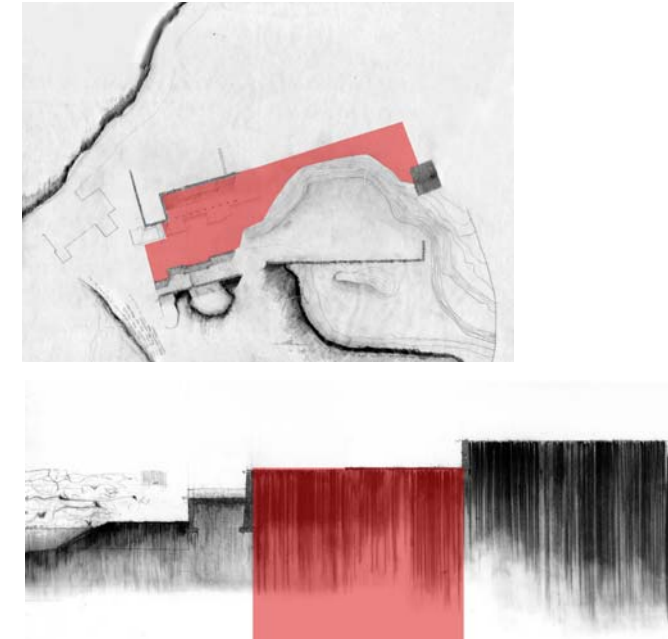


Illus. 24 | Cowan Mill footprint looking at river | Fall 2009 | Sarah A. Mailhot





Illus. 25 | Column imprints



site plan and section diagrams highlighting Libbey Mill remains and Mill Road

The third level was where Mill Road intersected the mills. Mill Road provided access for the main vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Part of the Cowan Mill and Libbey Mill were located on this level.

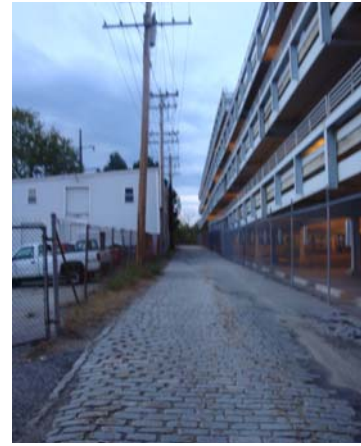


Illus. 26 | Libbey Mill Ruins | Fall 2009 | Sarah A. Mailhot

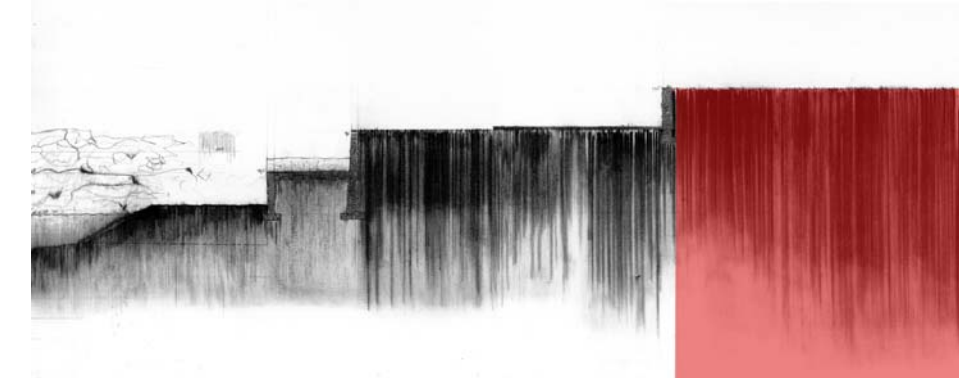


Illus. 27 | Libbey Mill Wall | Fall 2009 | Sarah A. Mailhot





Illus. 28 | Top of water fall - highest level @ Mill Pond | Fall 2009 | Sarah A. Mailhot

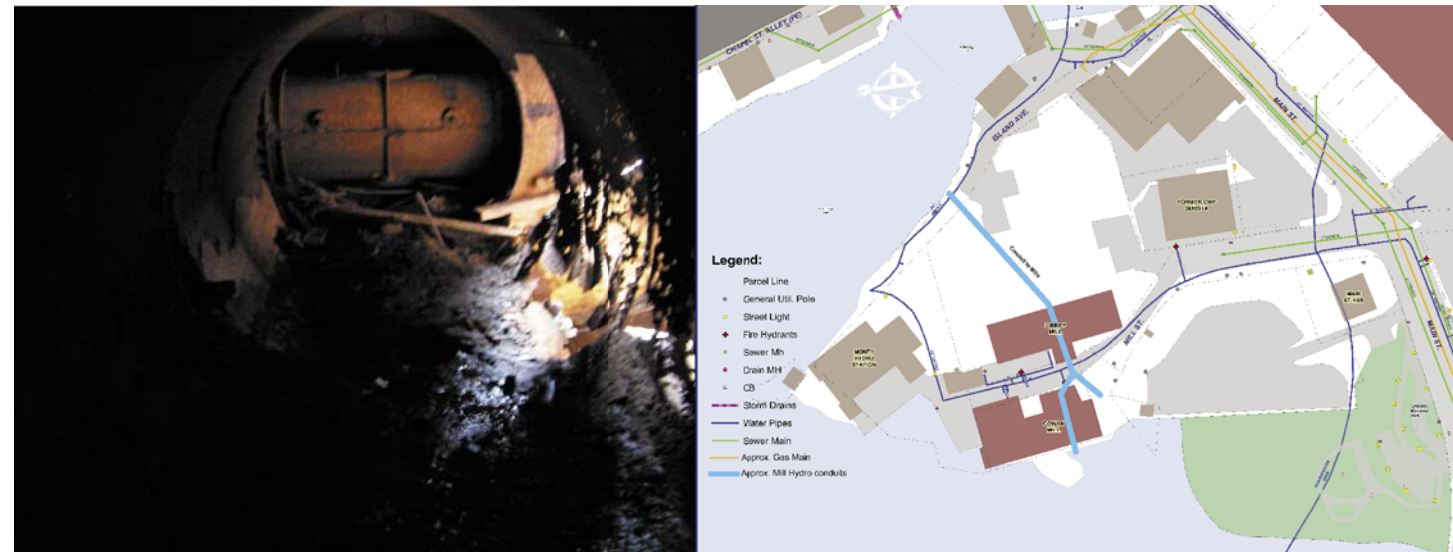


site plan and section diagrams highlighting highest water level and waterfall



Illus. 29 | Top of Water Fall - highest level | Fall 2009 | Sarah A. Mailhot





Illus. 30 | existing mill conduit | 2009 |  
Dr. Barry H. Rodrigue  
University of Southern Maine, Lewiston, Maine

Illus. 31 | mill conduit running through site | City of Lewiston

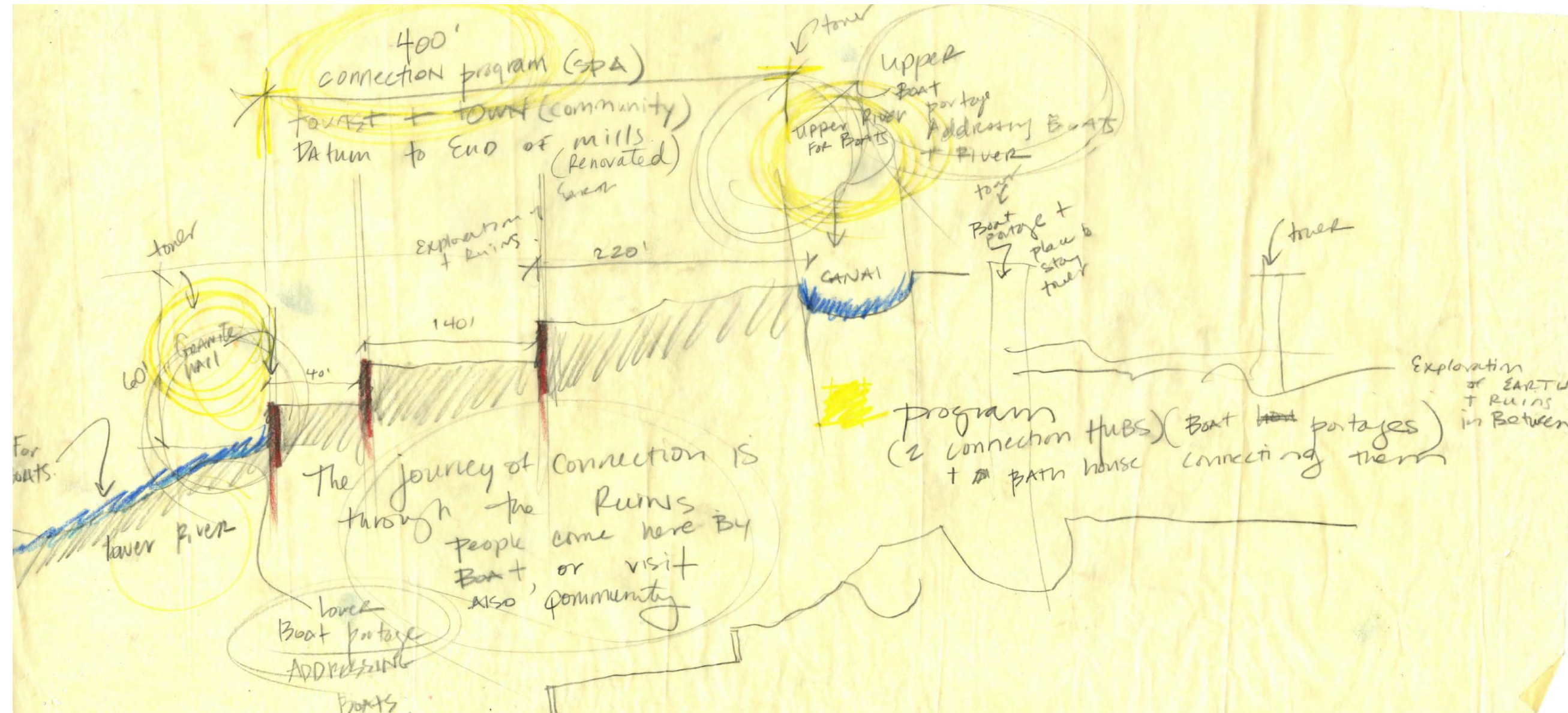
I had thoroughly documented the site and understood the existing conditions. I knew that I must respect the river, the ruins and the topography. At the beginning of the design process, I was trying to conclude what type of building should be on this site, but I could never come to a conclusion that made sense. This was the most difficult part of the project. Once I started to ask myself the right questions, the answers helped to develop the project. I realized there cannot be one “program” here and it cannot be for one group of people. Everyone deserves to enjoy the waterfall and river. It became clear that I must orchestrate the private spaces around the public spaces, so different groups of people can simultaneously enjoy the river and waterfall. Anything else would be turning our back on the river and community.

Kayaking and canoeing are prominent activities on the Androscoggin River. Because of the natural waterfall and dams on the Great Falls site, one cannot get from the lower river to the higher river. I wanted to provide access through the site where someone in a boat can get from one level to the next without having to get out of his boat. This is the design decision that influenced the rest of the project. Developing accessibility to the site is a central part of the overall design development as well as being able to have simultaneous functions. I needed to think about how a pedestrian would enter as well as someone in a kayak or canoe.





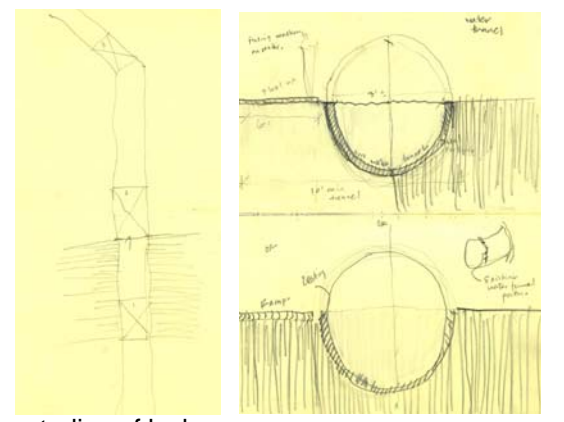
These are some of the first diagrams that I did after the site visit in Maine. The first site decision was to reuse the existing Mill Conduit to connect the river at the bottom and top of the waterfall. Given the large size of the site, I needed to make a site decision to know where to focus my attention. It made sense to me to reuse the existing tunnel, but with a new purpose. The site + building program developed from this one decision. Reusing the existing tunnel created a datum of circulation for a boat and person to move through the site with the natural flow of the water.



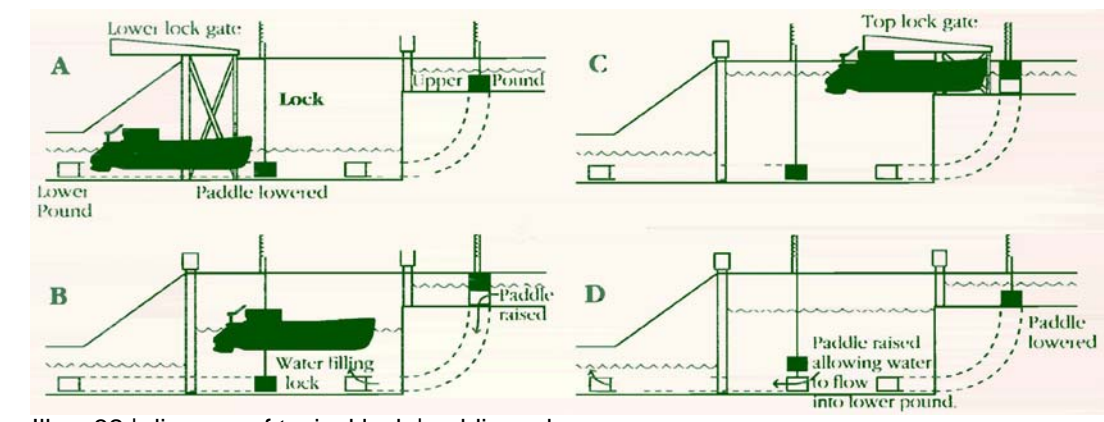




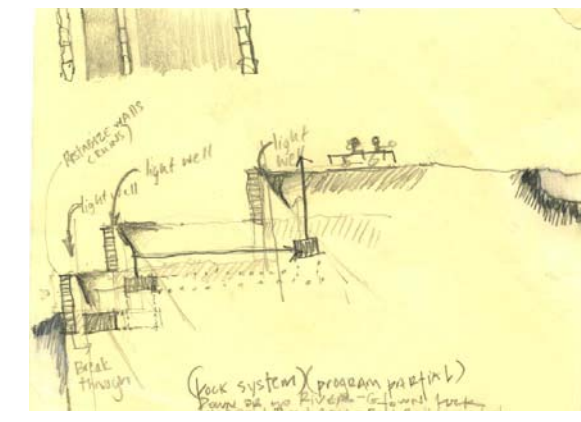




studies of lock



Illus. 32 | diagram of typical lock | public realm



The lock connects the lower and upper levels of the river through a journey of exploring the ruins. This would allow for a kayaker and canoer to get from one body of water to the next without having to get out of their boat. This decision was the stepping stone for all other decisions. The lock is not only the primary function of the building but it is a decision that organizes the master plan of the site.

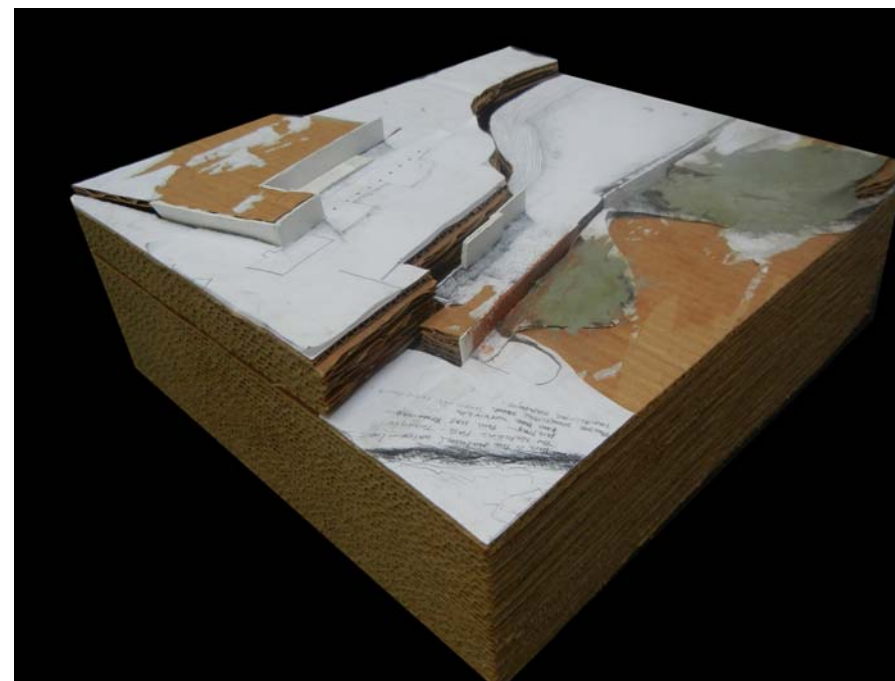


study models of lock

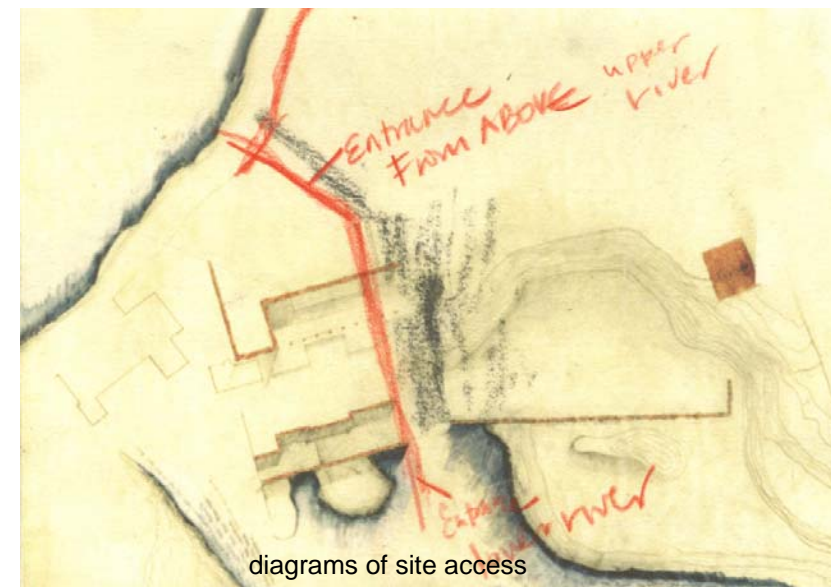
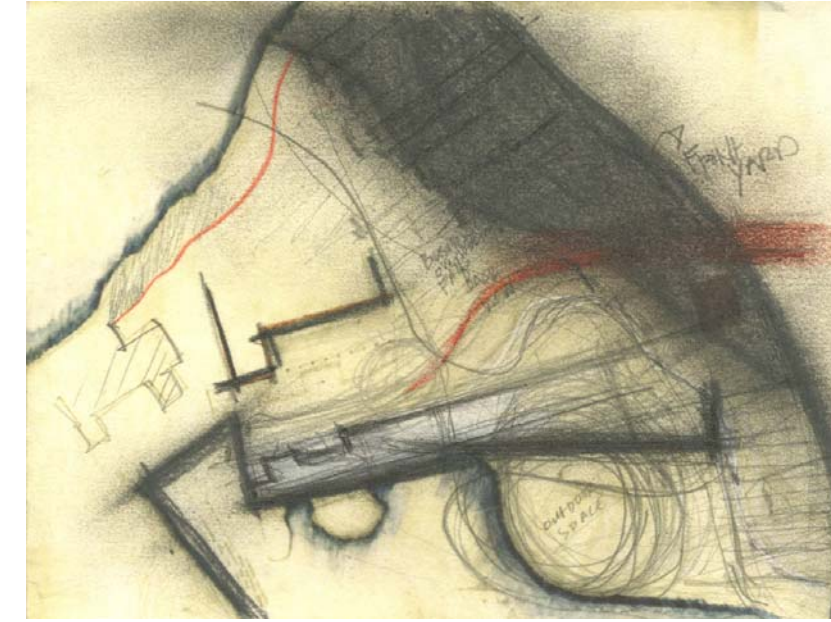
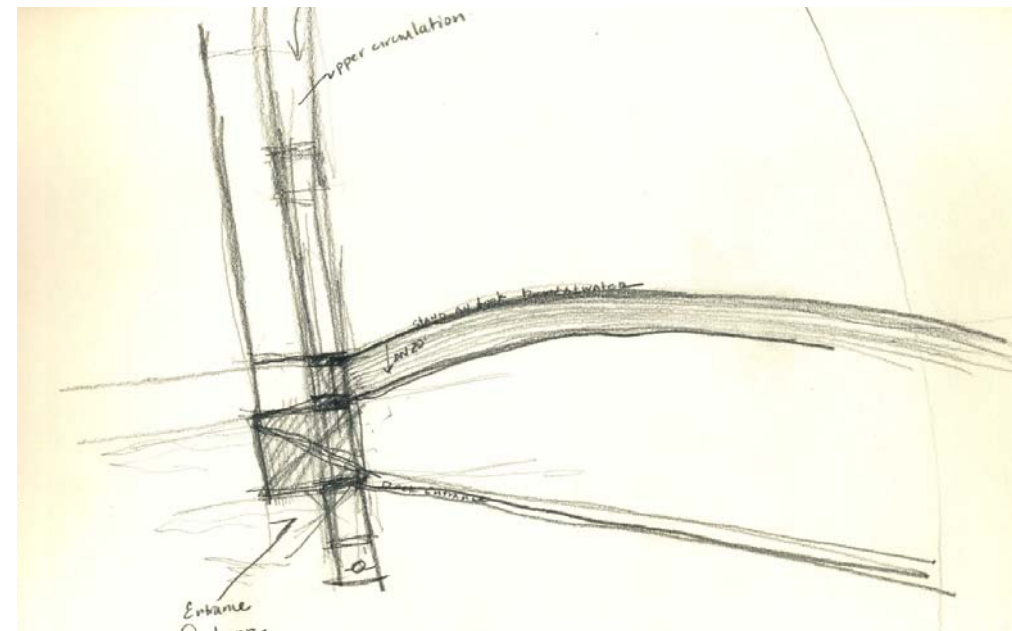


schematic section of rain | river connection



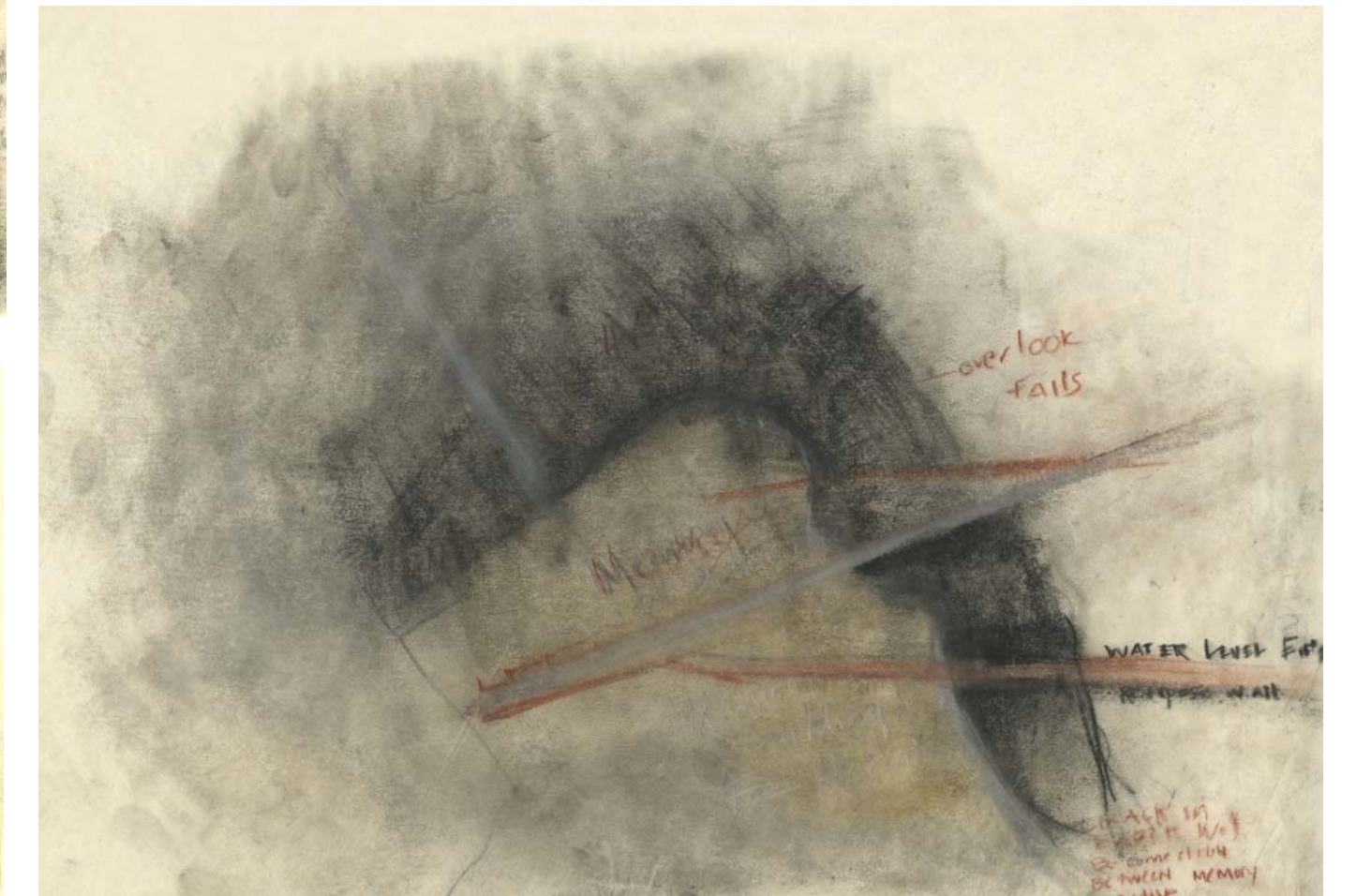


study models of site access

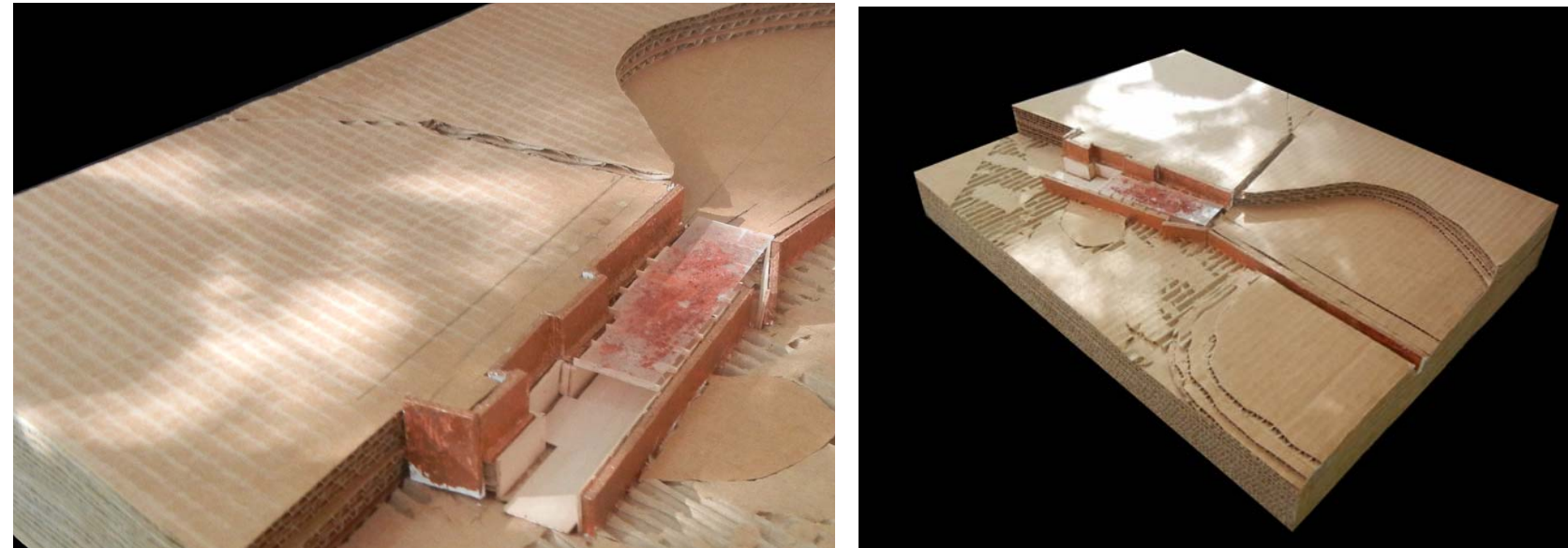
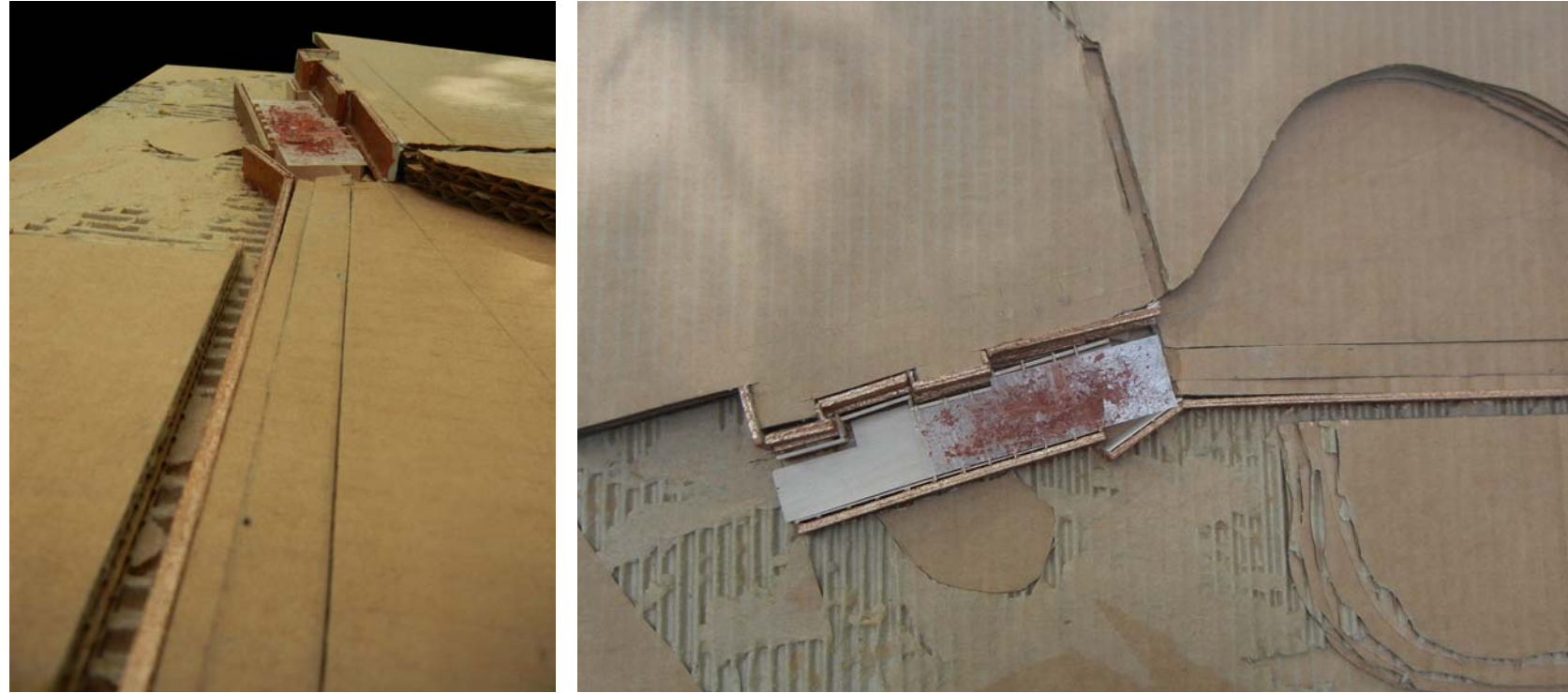


diagrams of site access

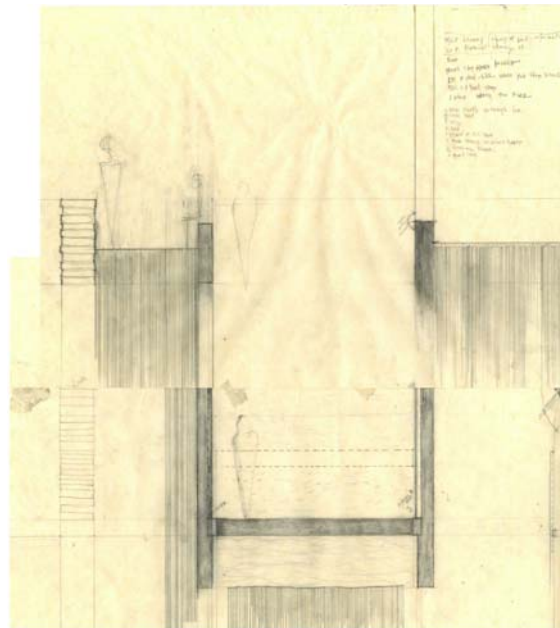
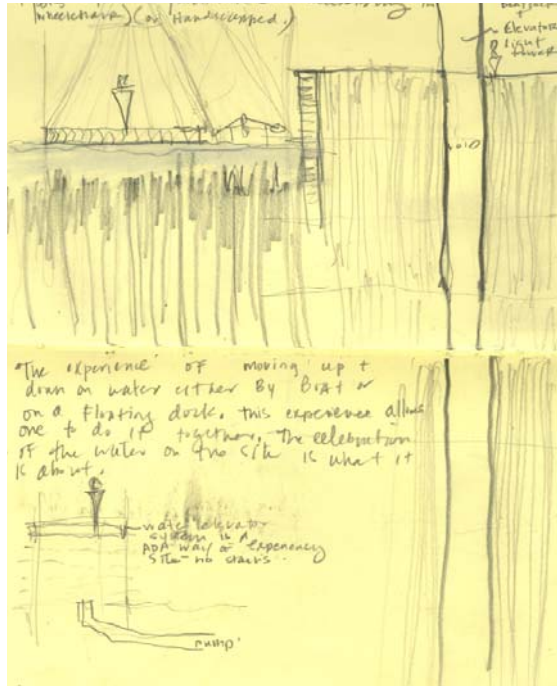
I began to look at how one can access the site from the various site boundaries. It became clear to me early on that there is not one or two site orientations. The site has a body of water on 3 sides and the main street borders the other. I always needed to think of who is entering and why. I had 2 visitors in mind: the kayaker and the pedestrian from the town. I organized the master plan where the street portion of the site would be redensified in the future; I would infiltrate entrances through the density to get to the waterfall. I started to carve away at the existing ruin walls to allow ramp access to the site by Veteran's Park.



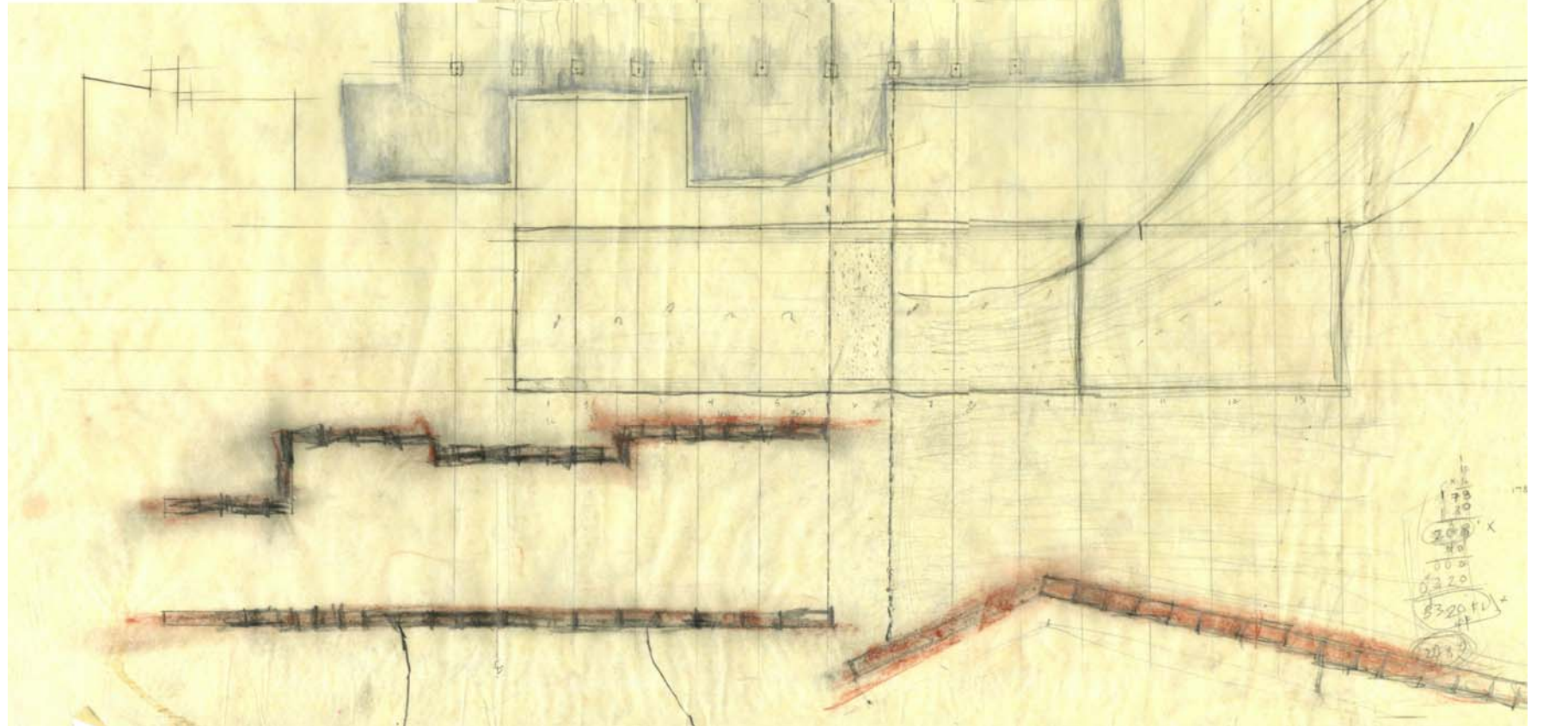




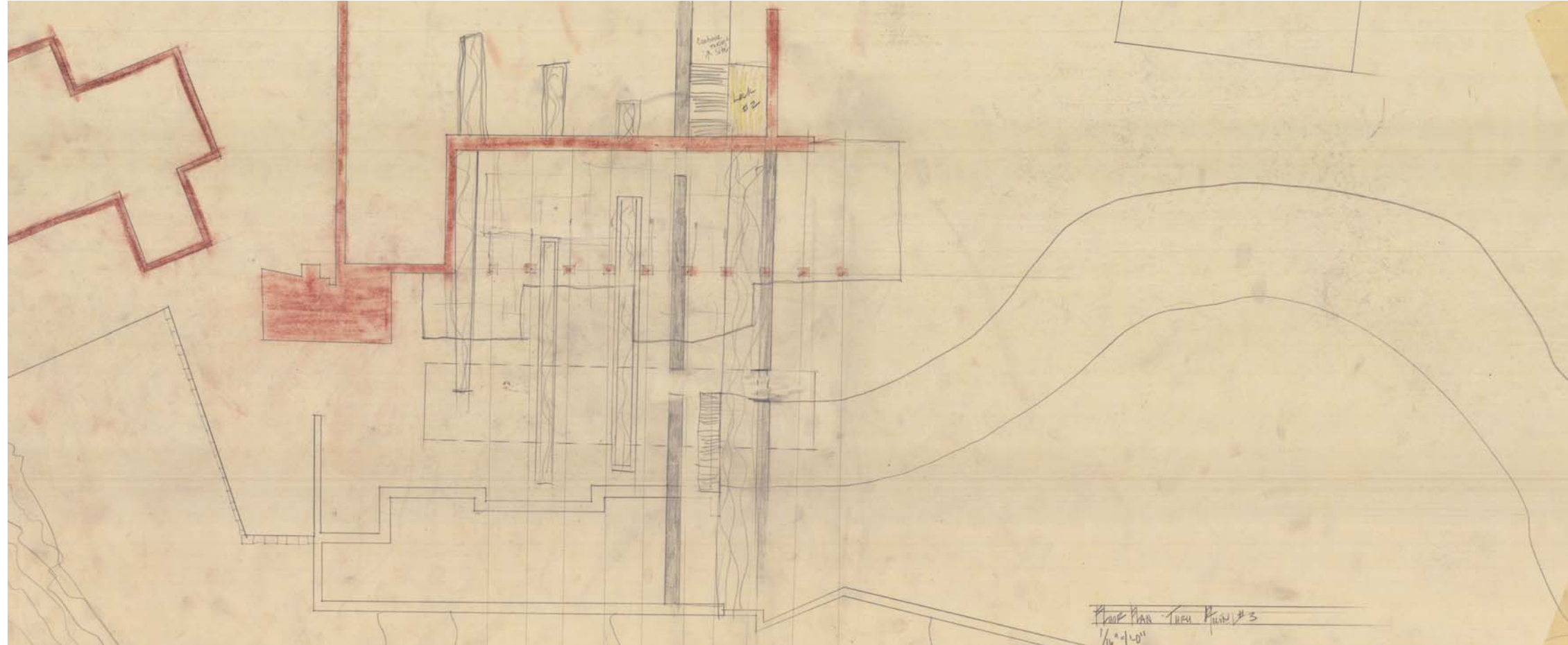
study models of boat entrance and storage



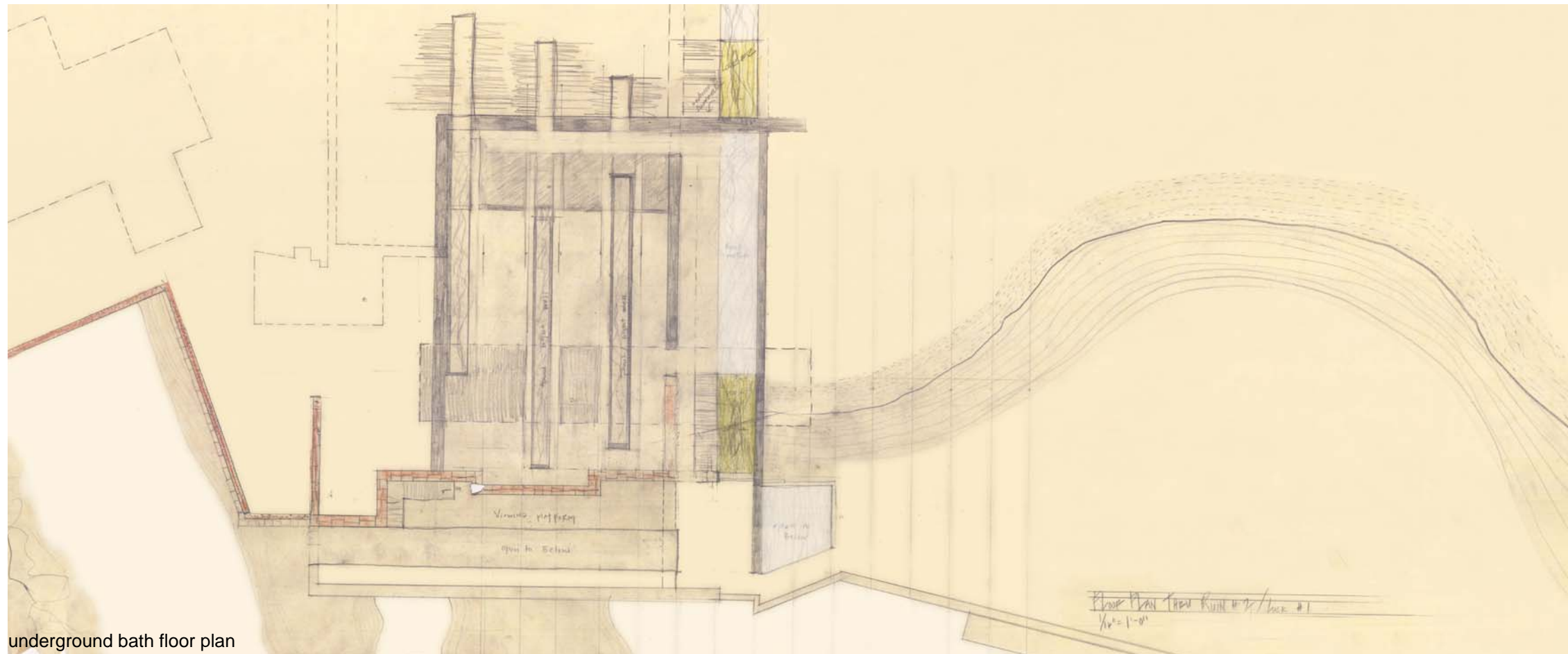
These studies show the exploration of entry from the lower river to the lock. I also developed a floating platform that would allow for kayak and canoe storage. I would need to underpin the existing ruin wall (the wall at the back of the floating platform) and would have the boats stored along this wall. I carved the earth out between the two walls to create the platform and boat storage.







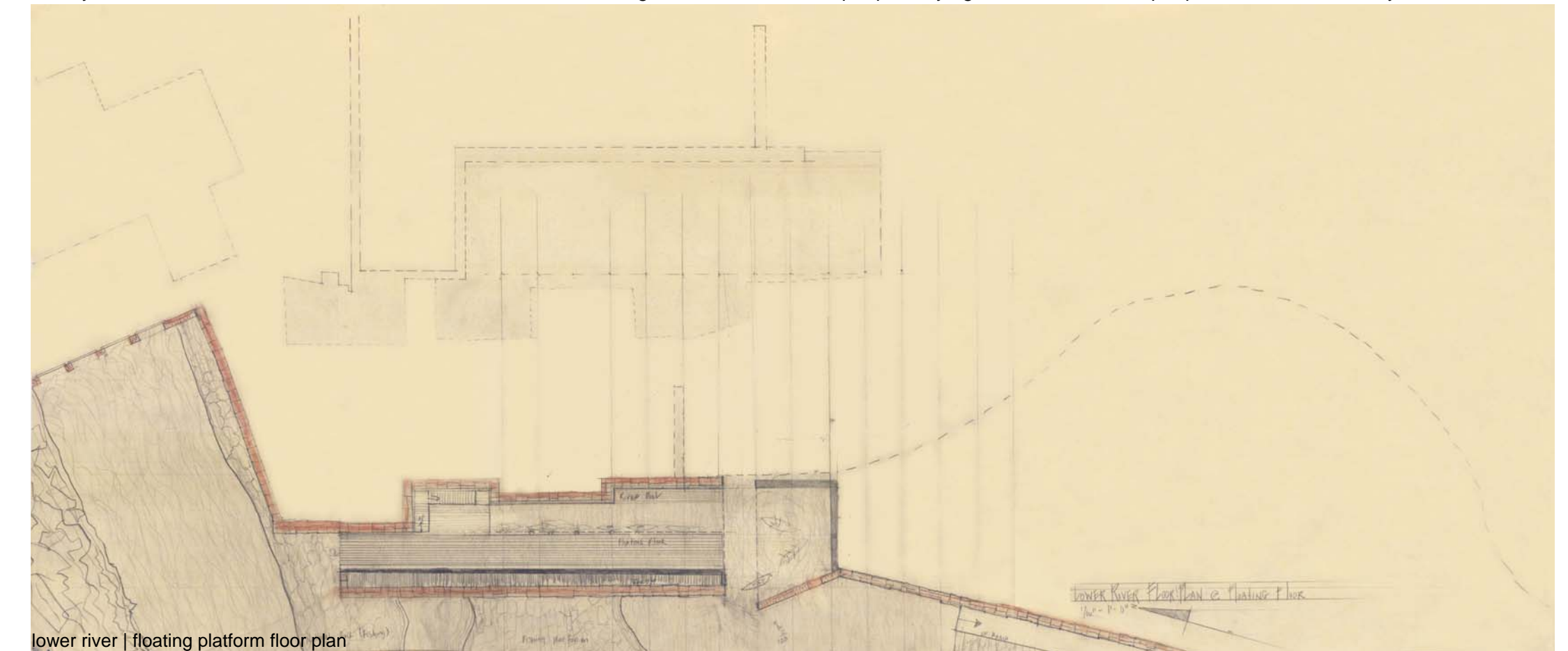
public courtyard | plaza floor plan



underground bath floor plan

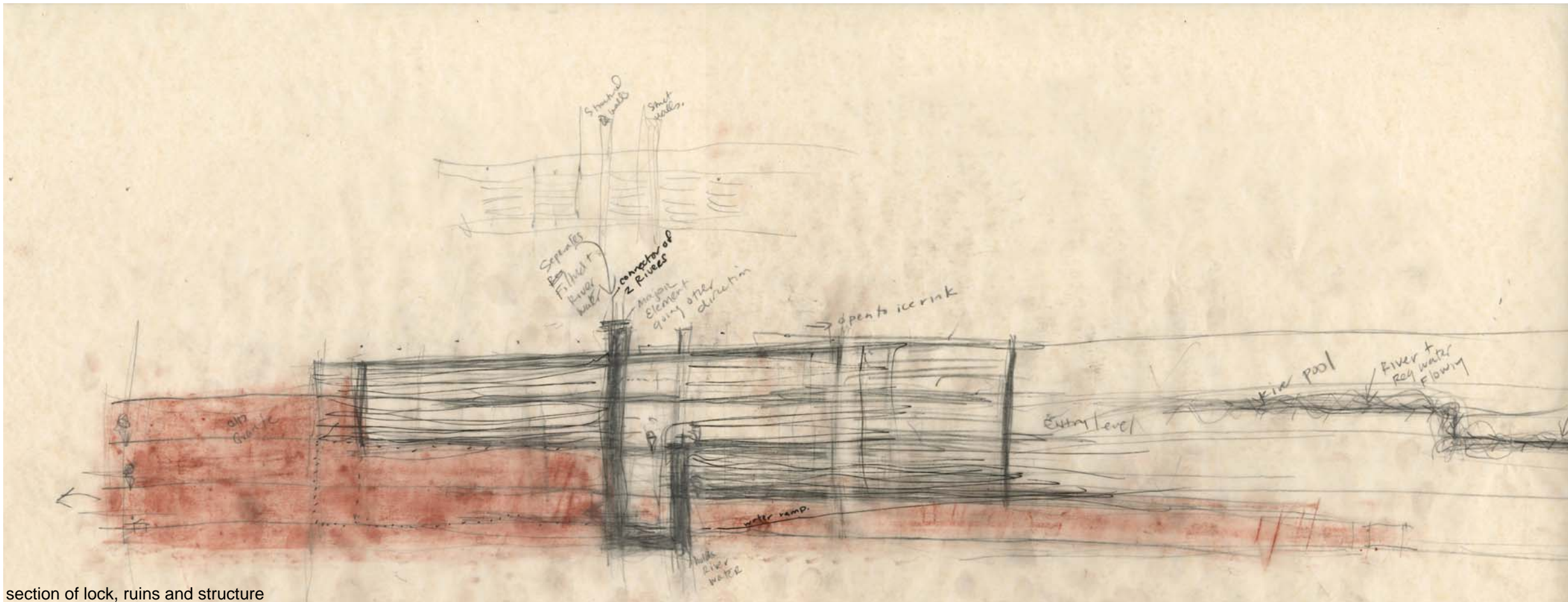
I developed the other spaces to support the lock system. I wanted this project to be a place of relaxation to overlook the waterfall. I needed to create multiple spaces for people to be able to enjoy the river and waterfall. I started with the lower river and worked my way up to the highest river. I developed the project by carving into the earth and building out of it.

Starting at the lower river, I created boat access to the lock and boat storage. I also carved away at an existing stone wall to create access to the water from the street. As one moves up the levels of the lock system, the function of the building changes. One level up are the underground baths. I wanted to have guest rooms for people to stay that overlooked the river as well as a restaurant. The underground baths were for people staying in the rooms or for people from the community.

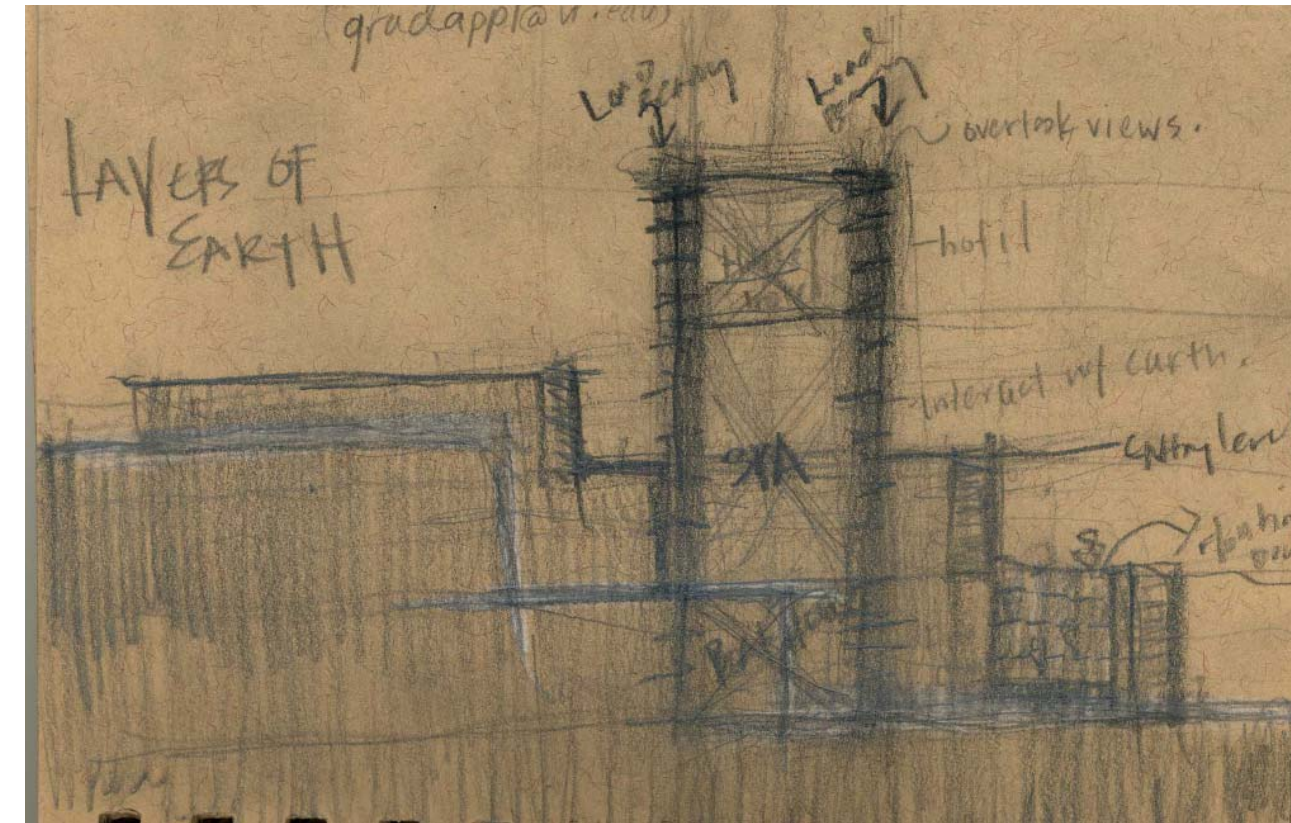


lower river | floating platform floor plan

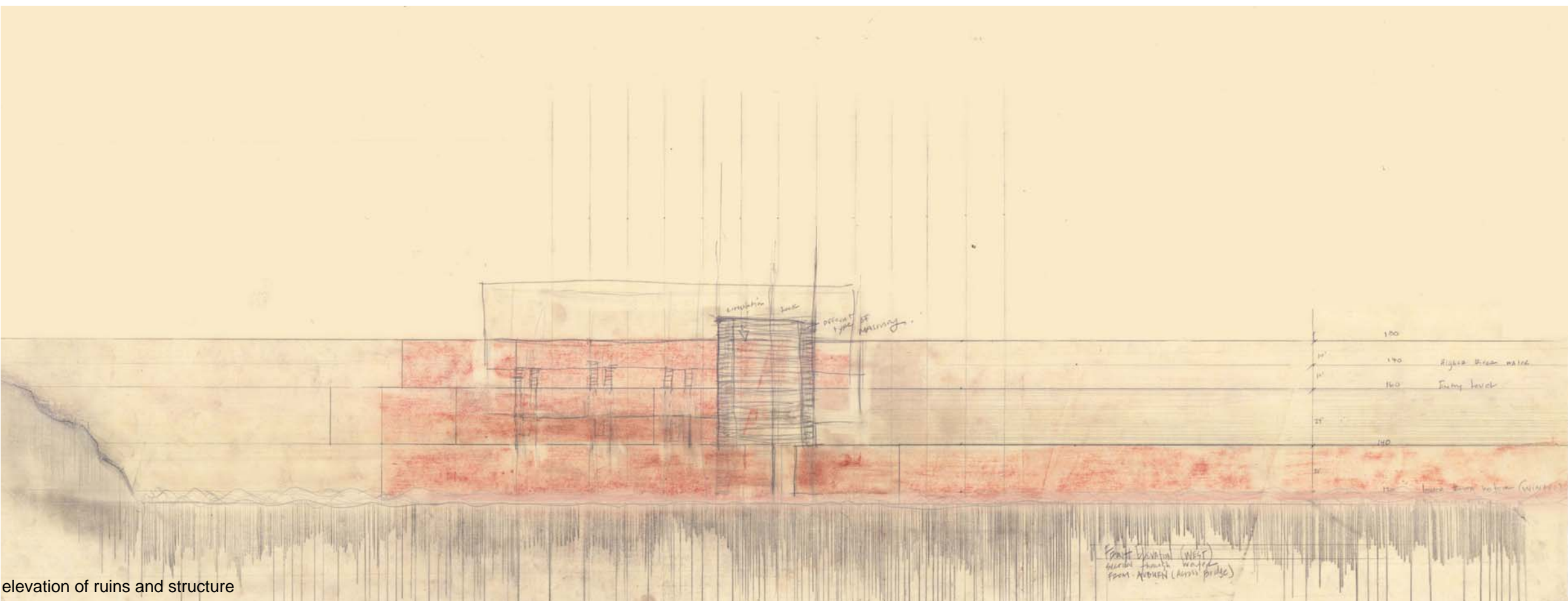
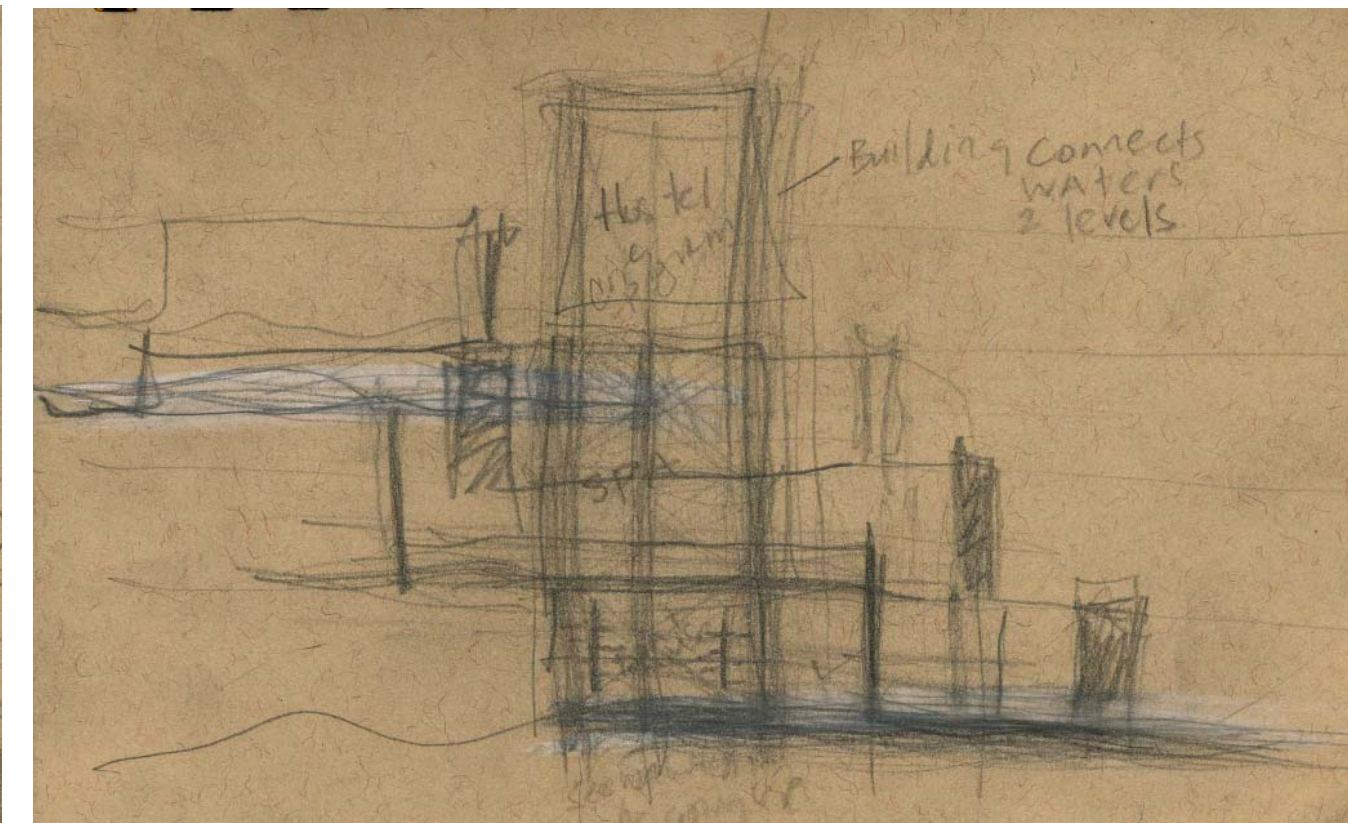




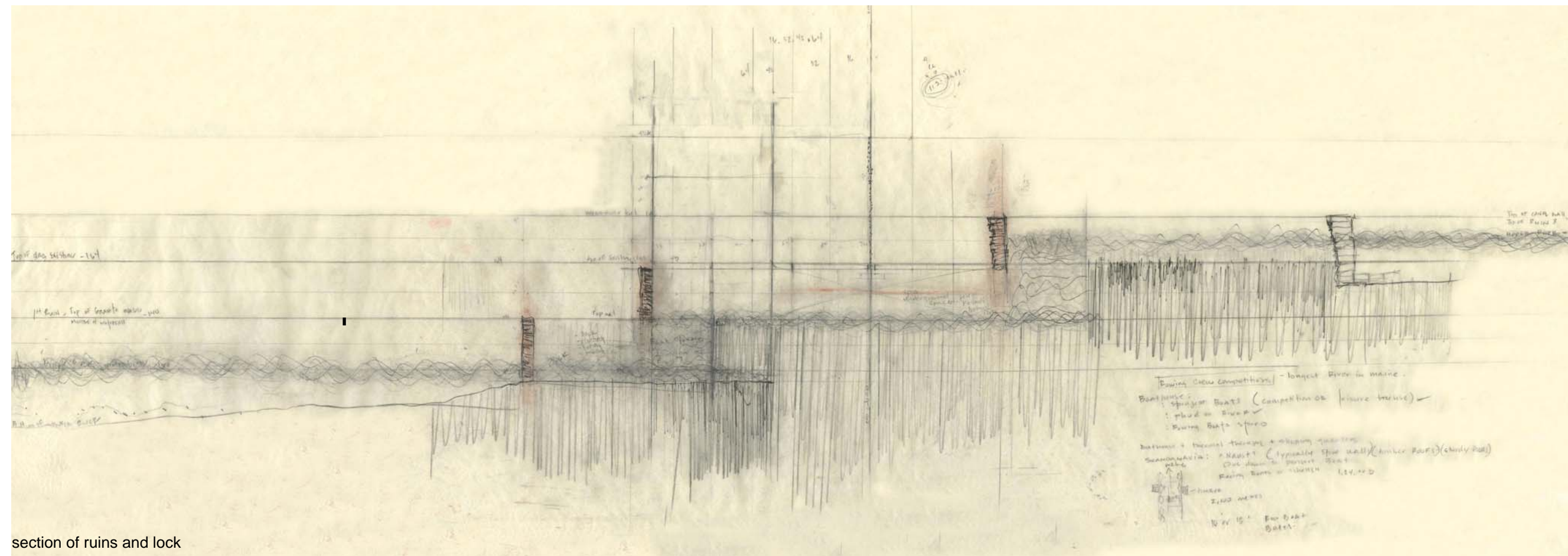
section of lock, ruins and structure



section of ruins, lock and building

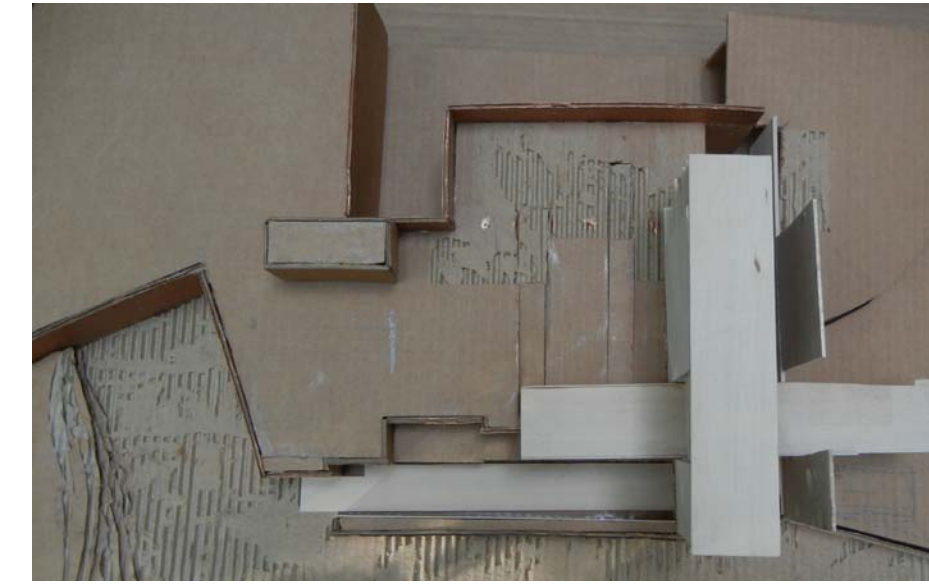
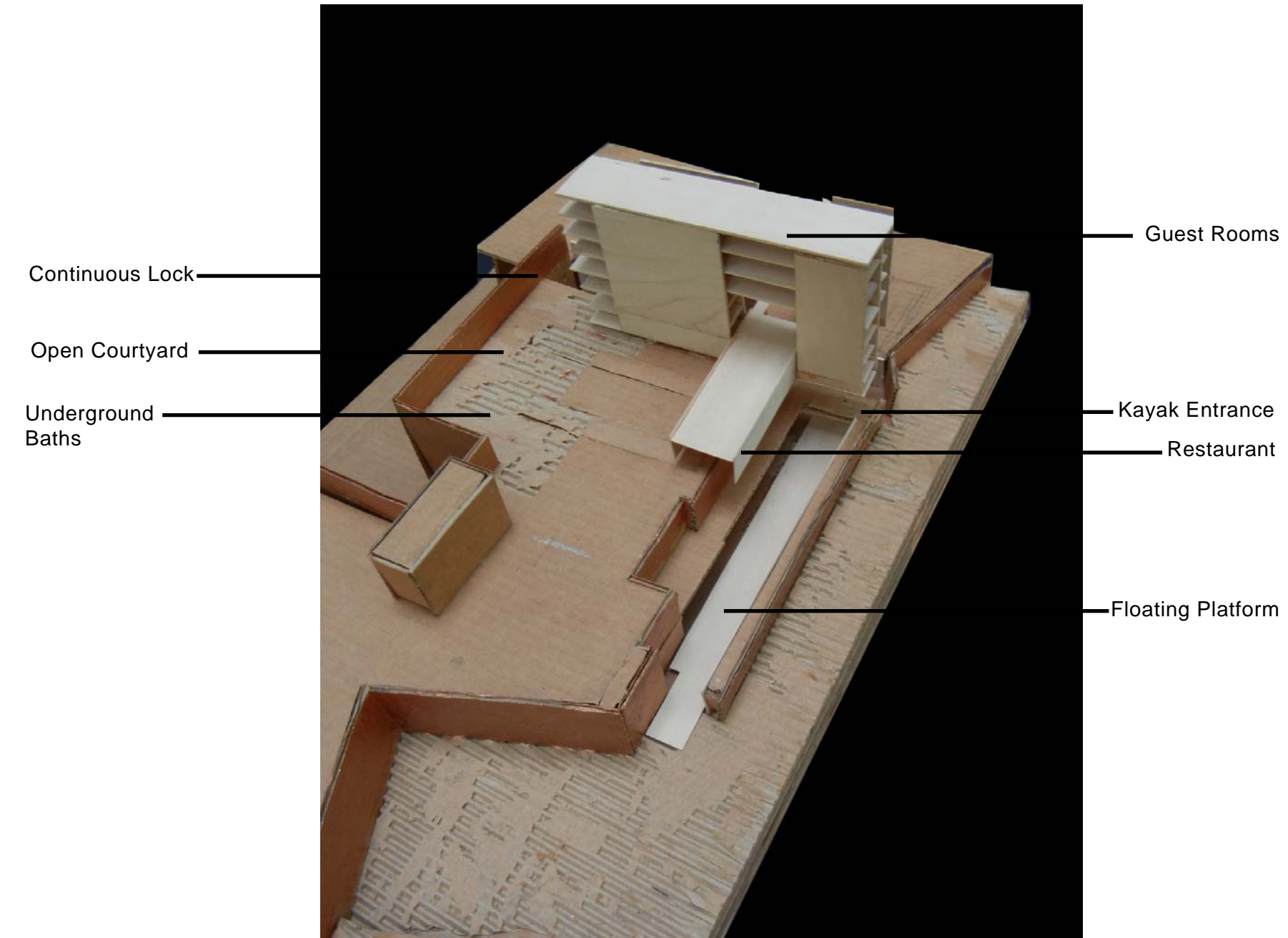


elevation of ruins and structure

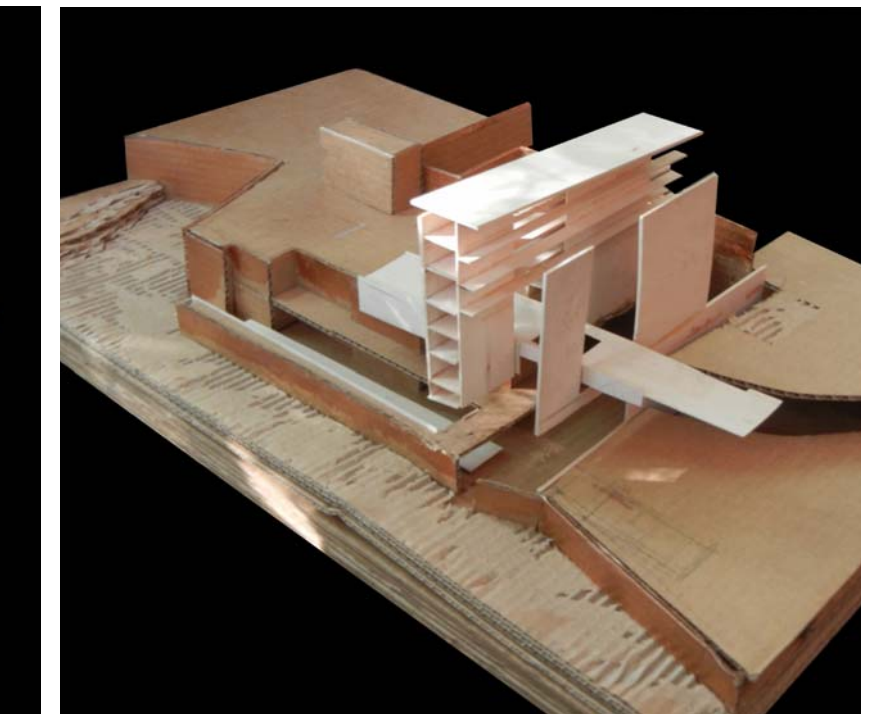
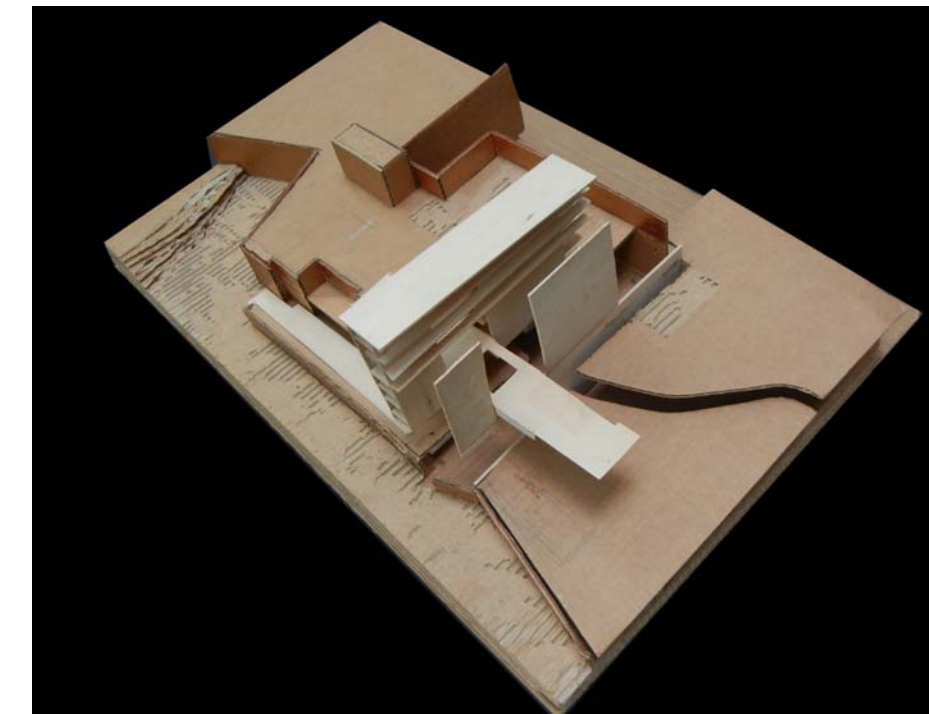


section of ruins and lock

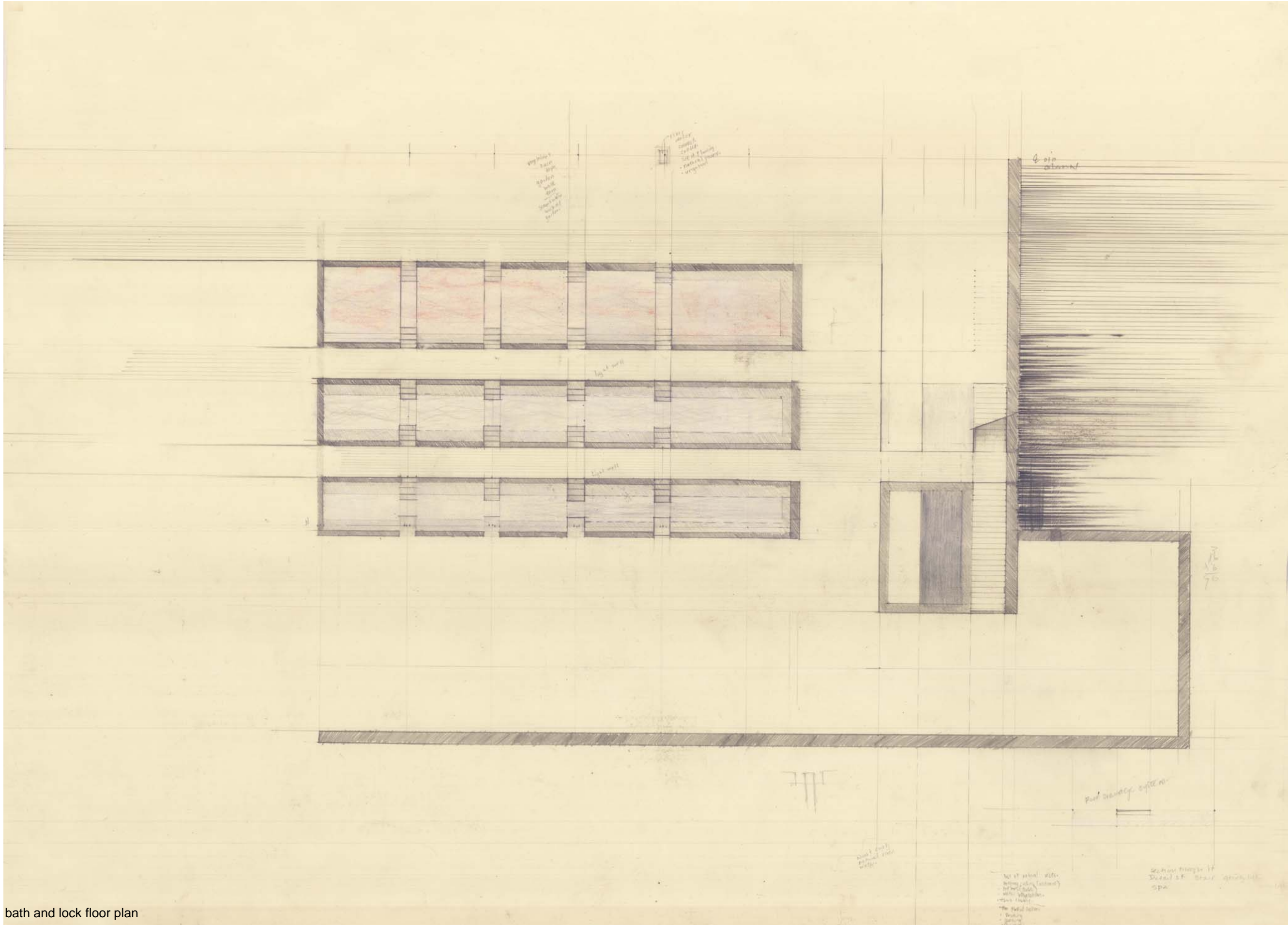




This is my "breakthrough" study model because I began to see all of the programs taking form and see how they interact with the surrounding landscape. The idea of public and private spaces became apparent. The study model shows how one begins in the river and can make his way into the sky where the guest rooms are located, overlooking the river and waterfall.





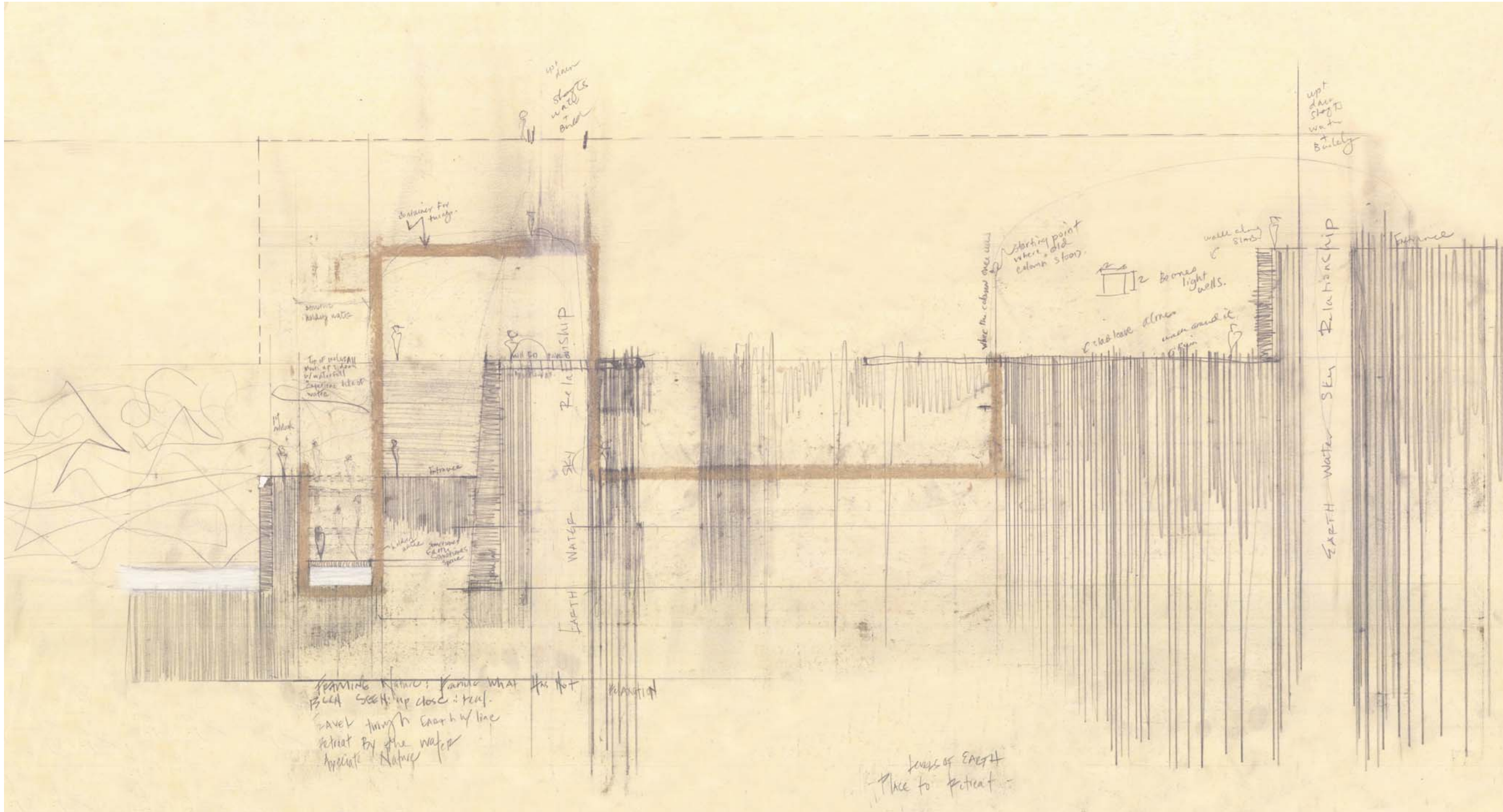


bath and lock floor plan

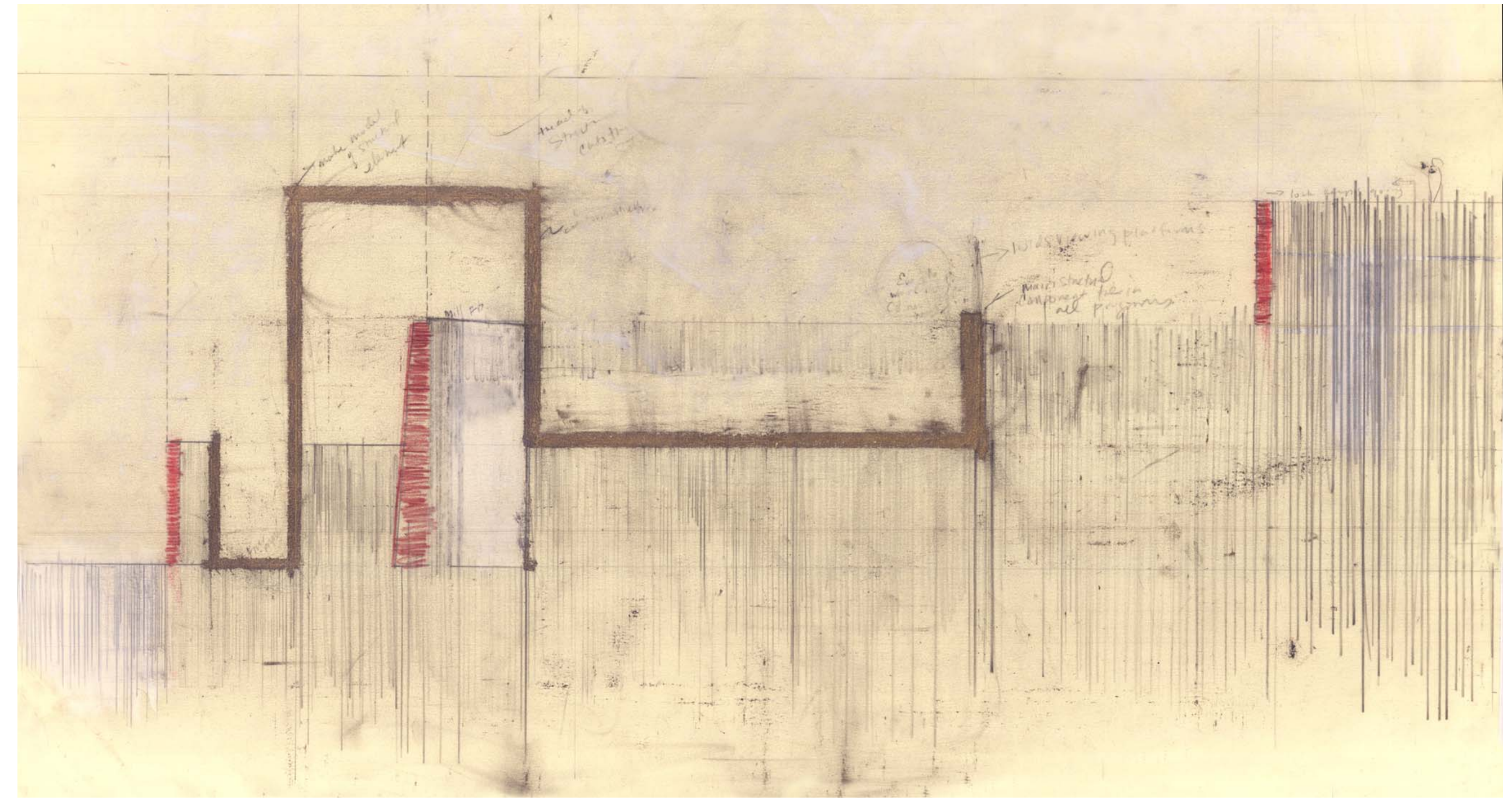


boat entrance | floating platform | lock floor plan





section study

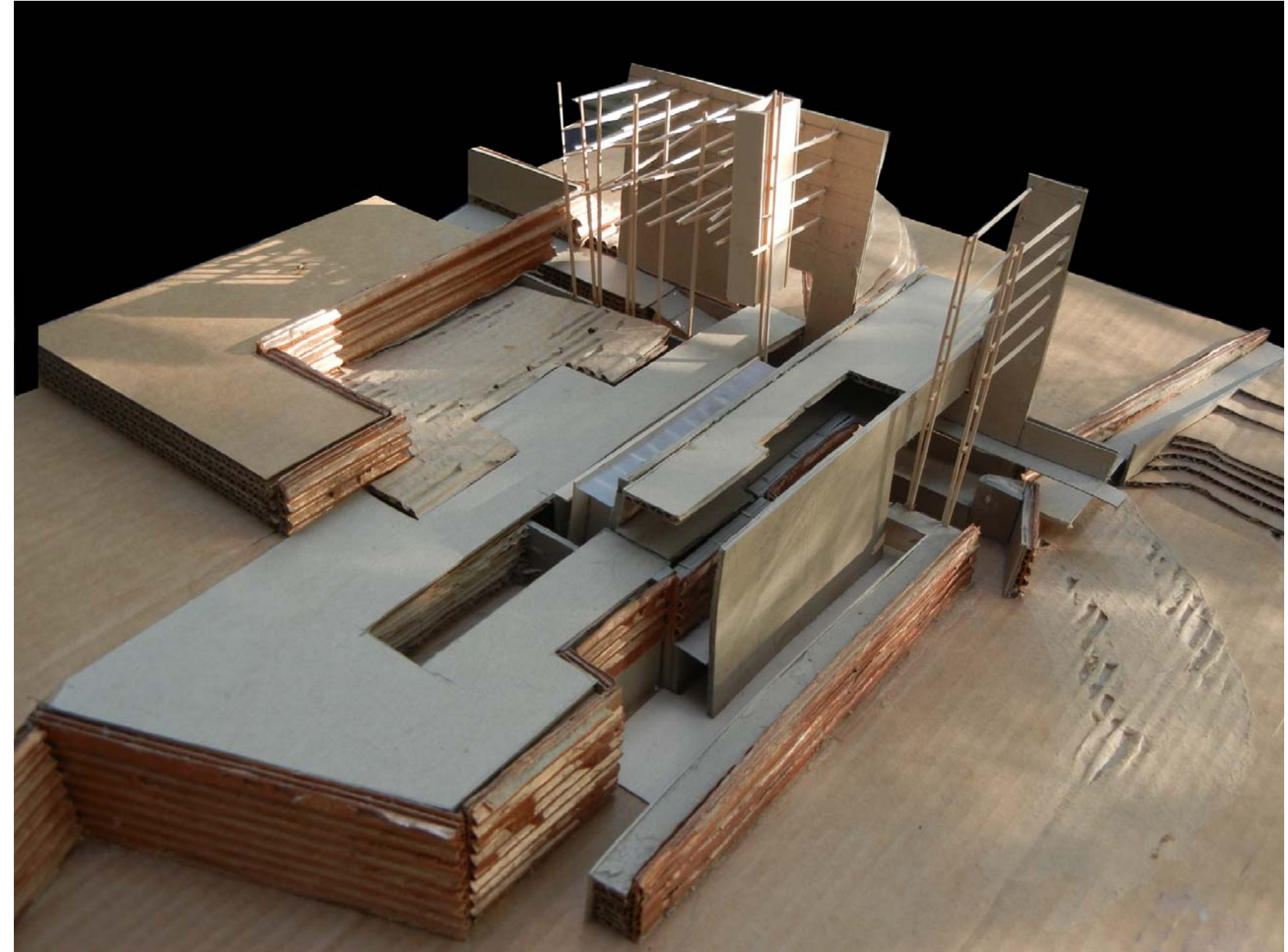
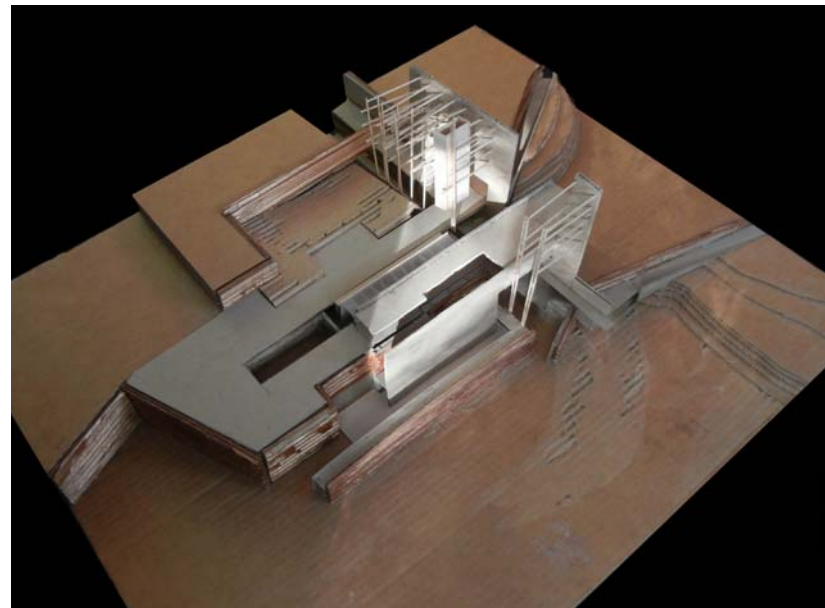


section study











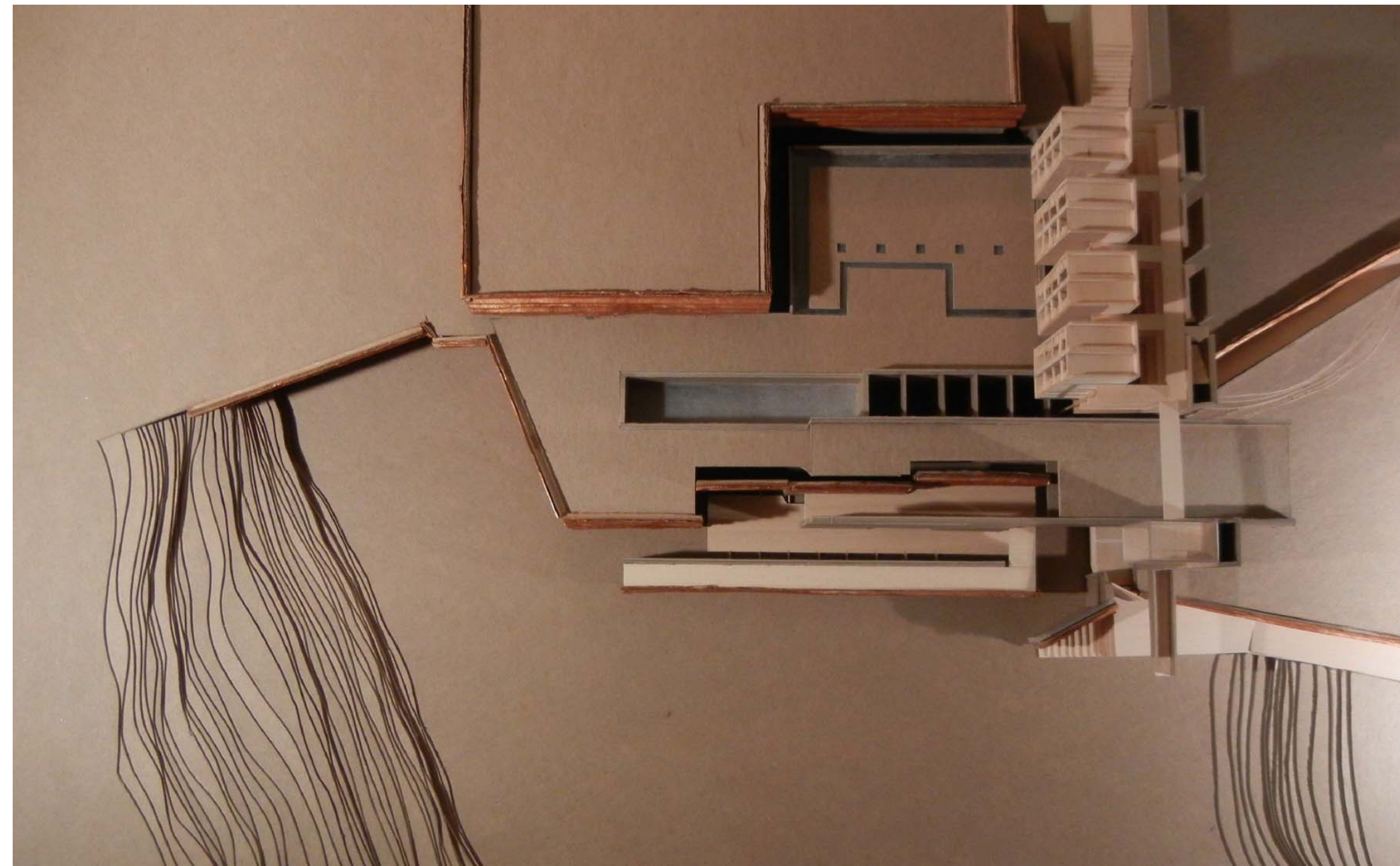


The Fire



Final Model





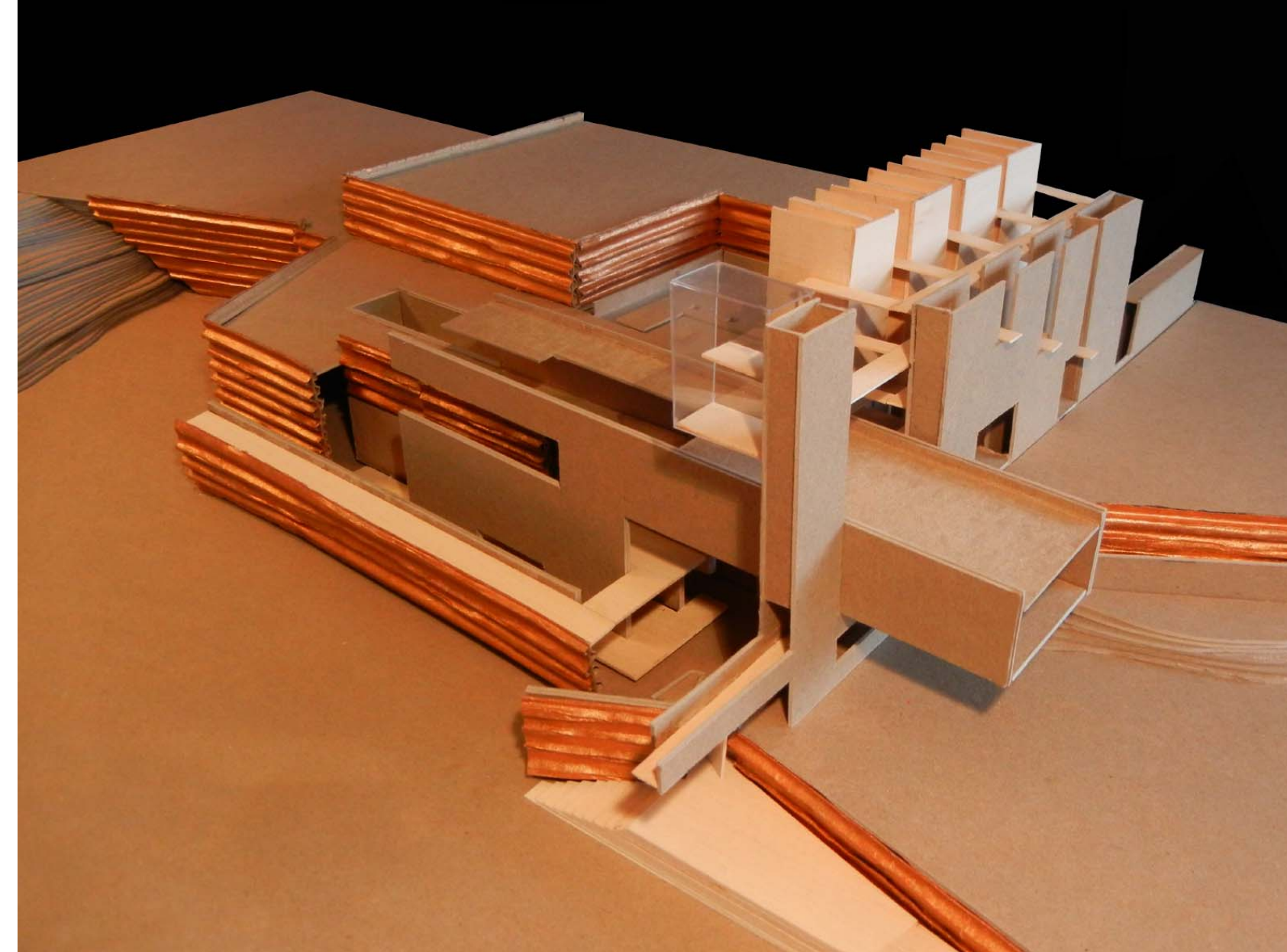
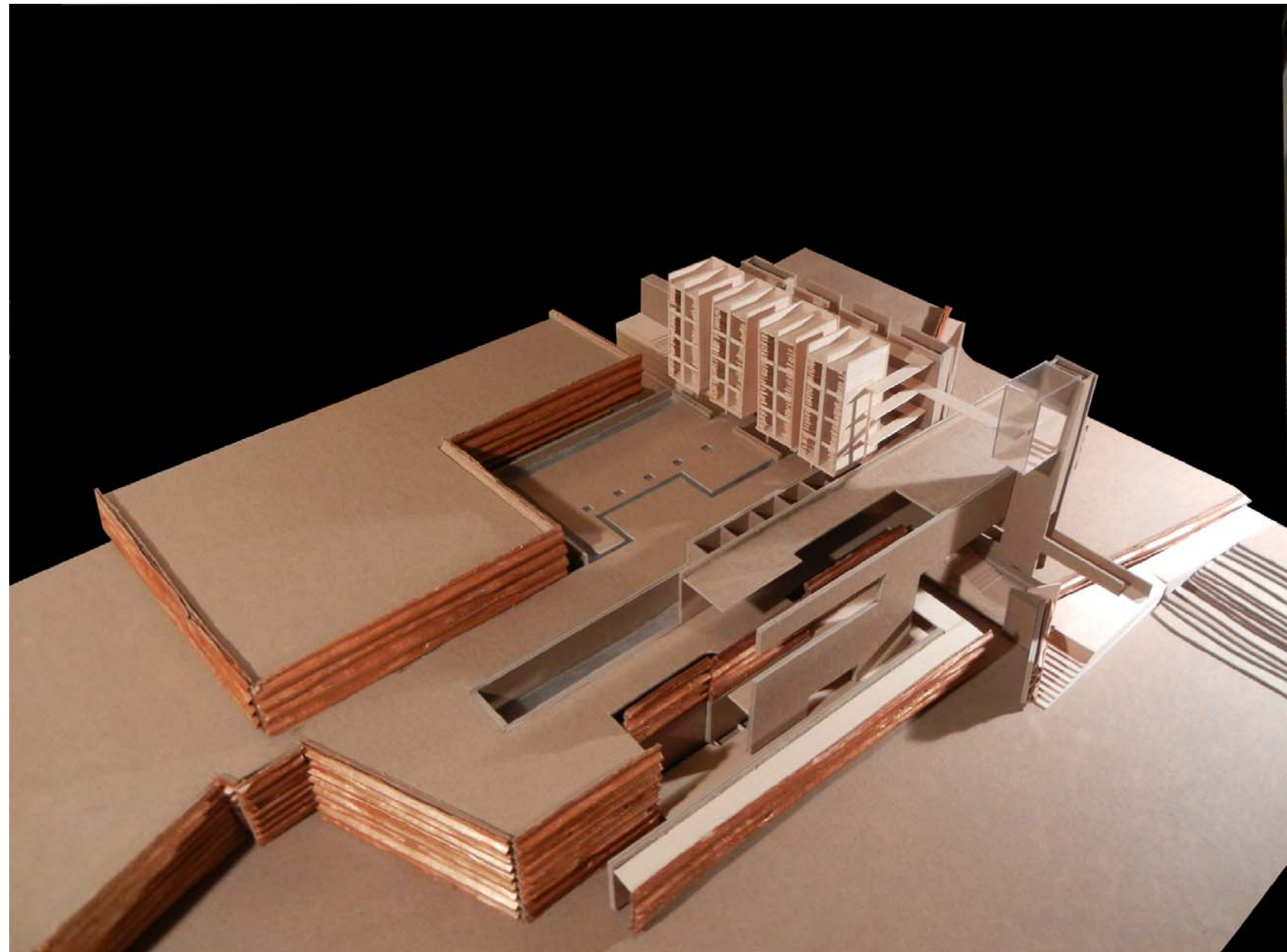
final model from above



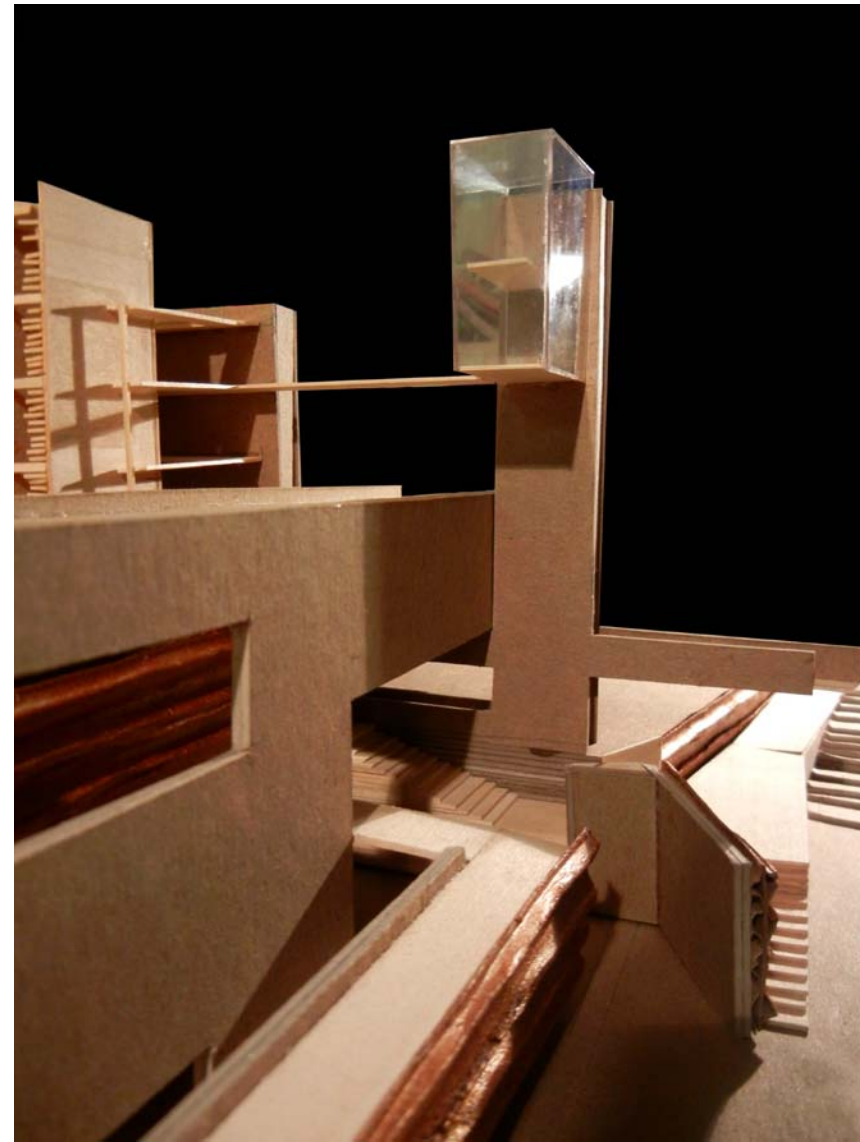
Site Plan

site plan

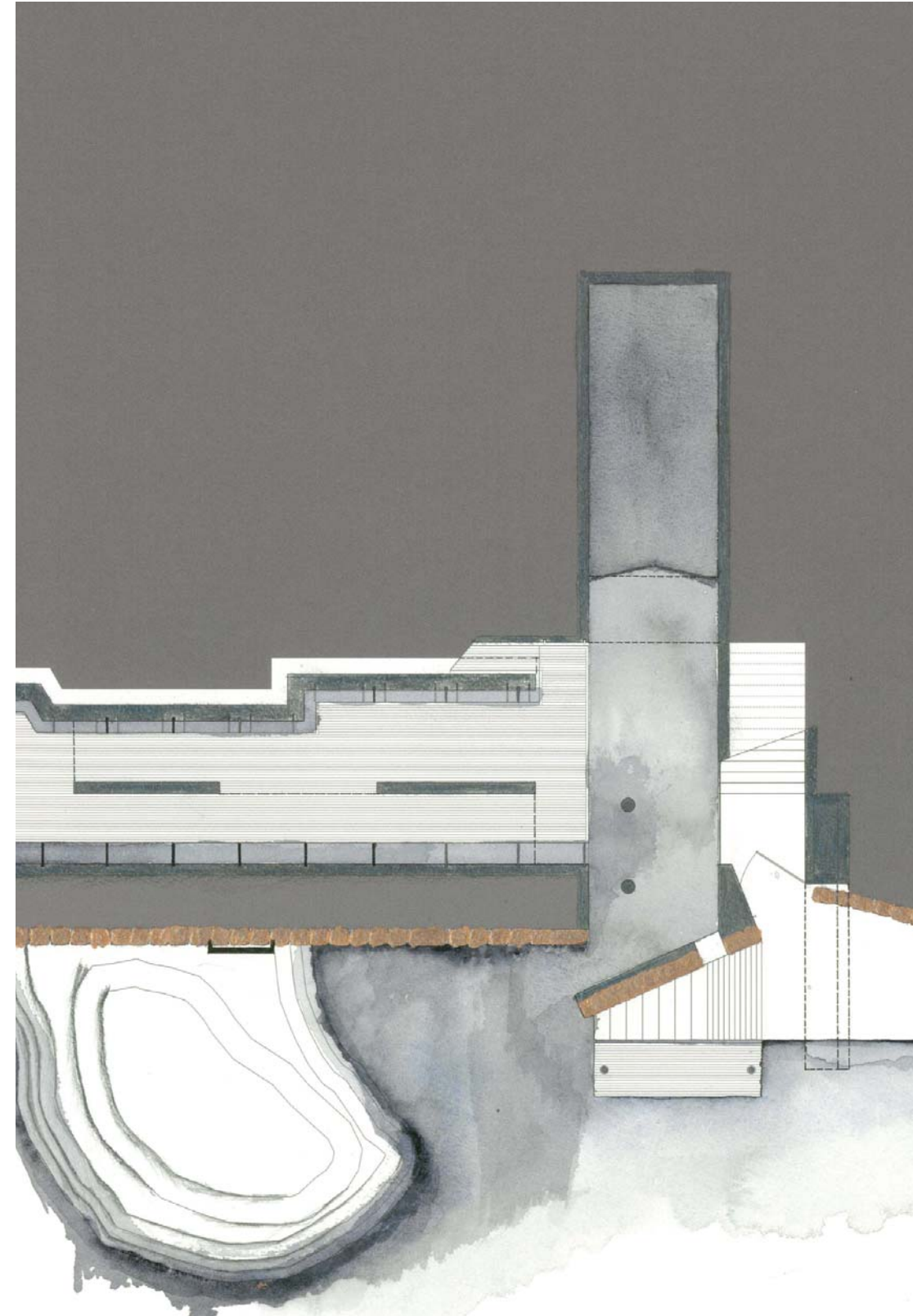




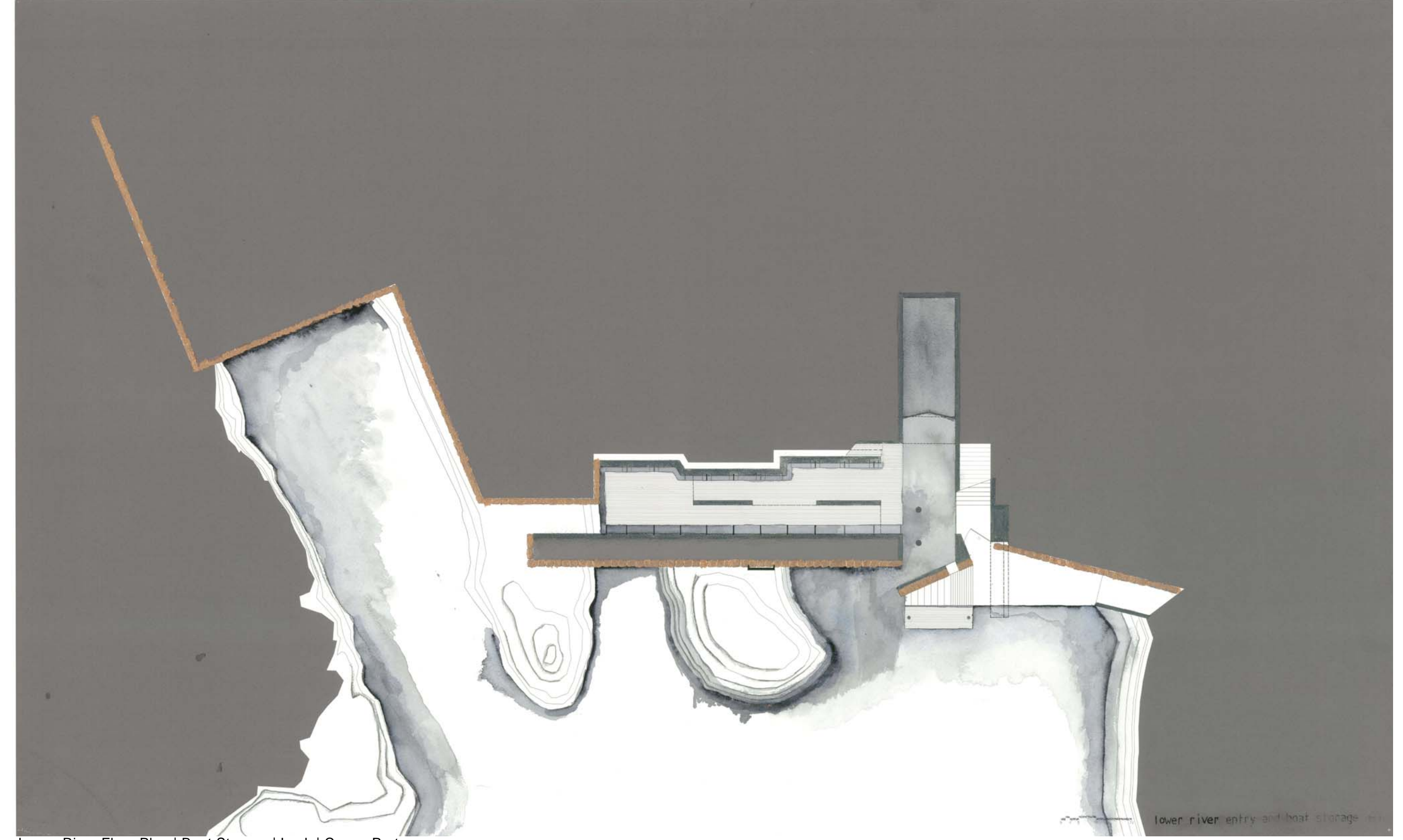




Model of Lower River Entry



Blowup of Lower River Entry and Lock

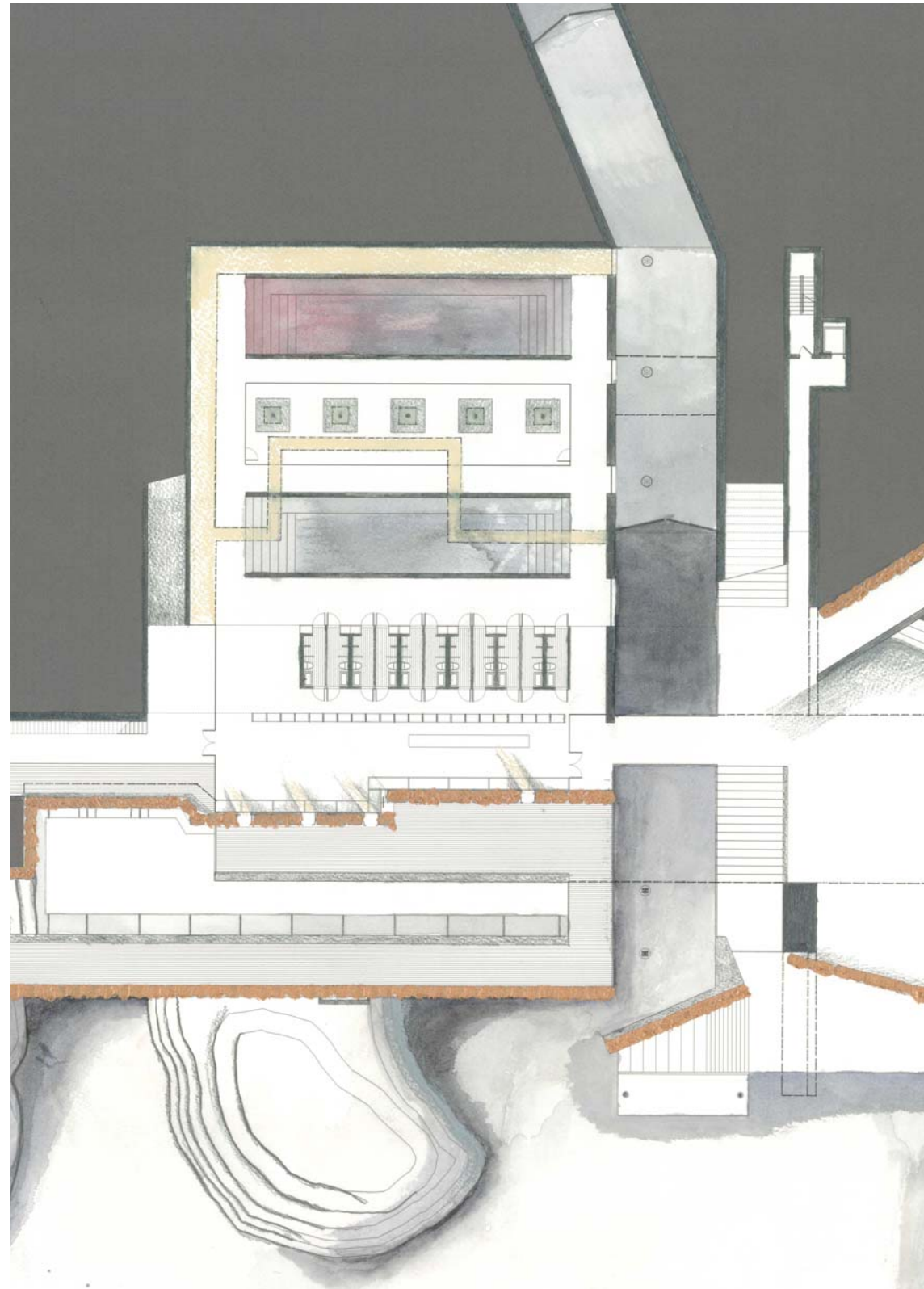


Lower River Floor Plan | Boat Storage | Lock | Canoe Portage

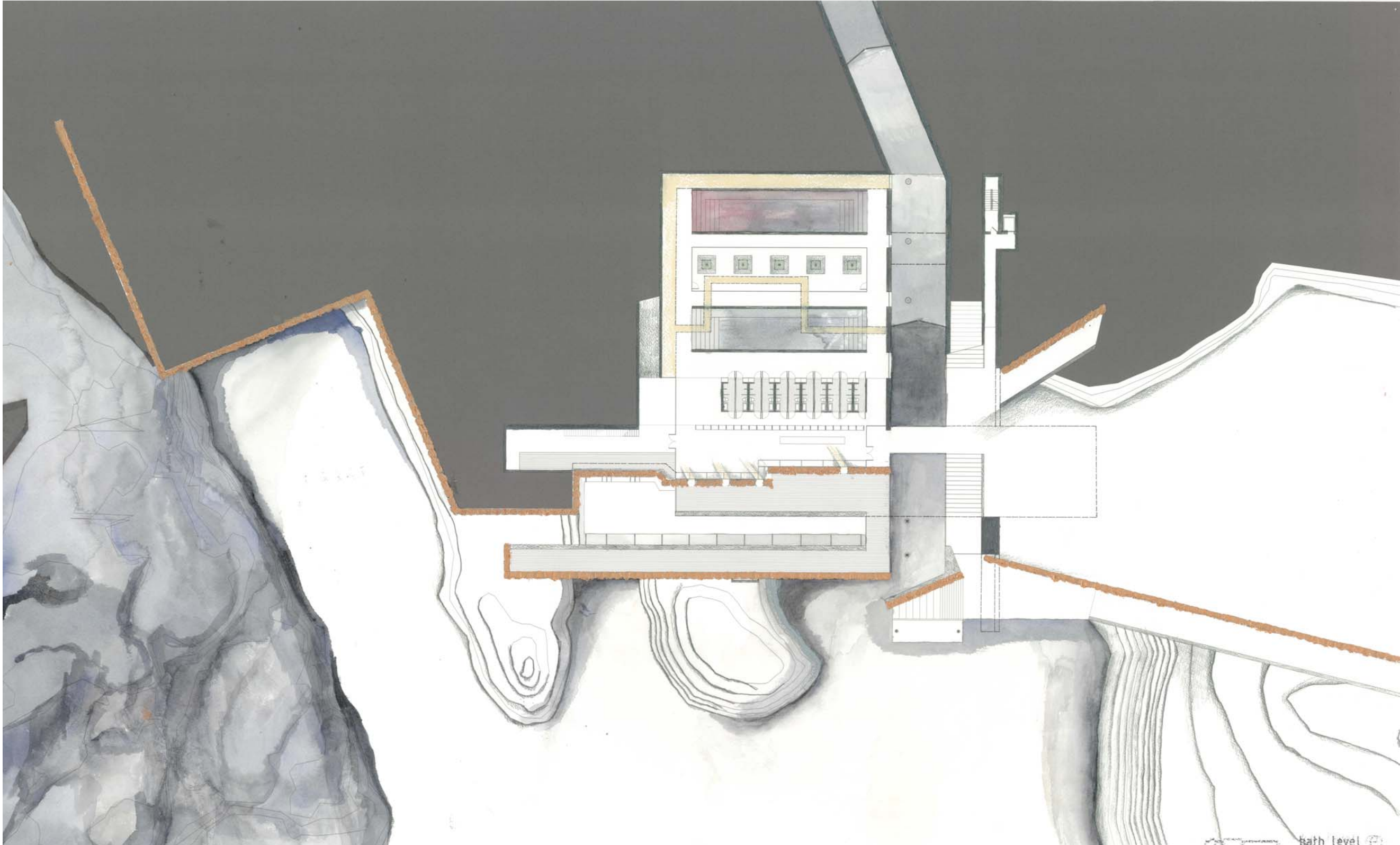




Model of Lock and Canoe Portage

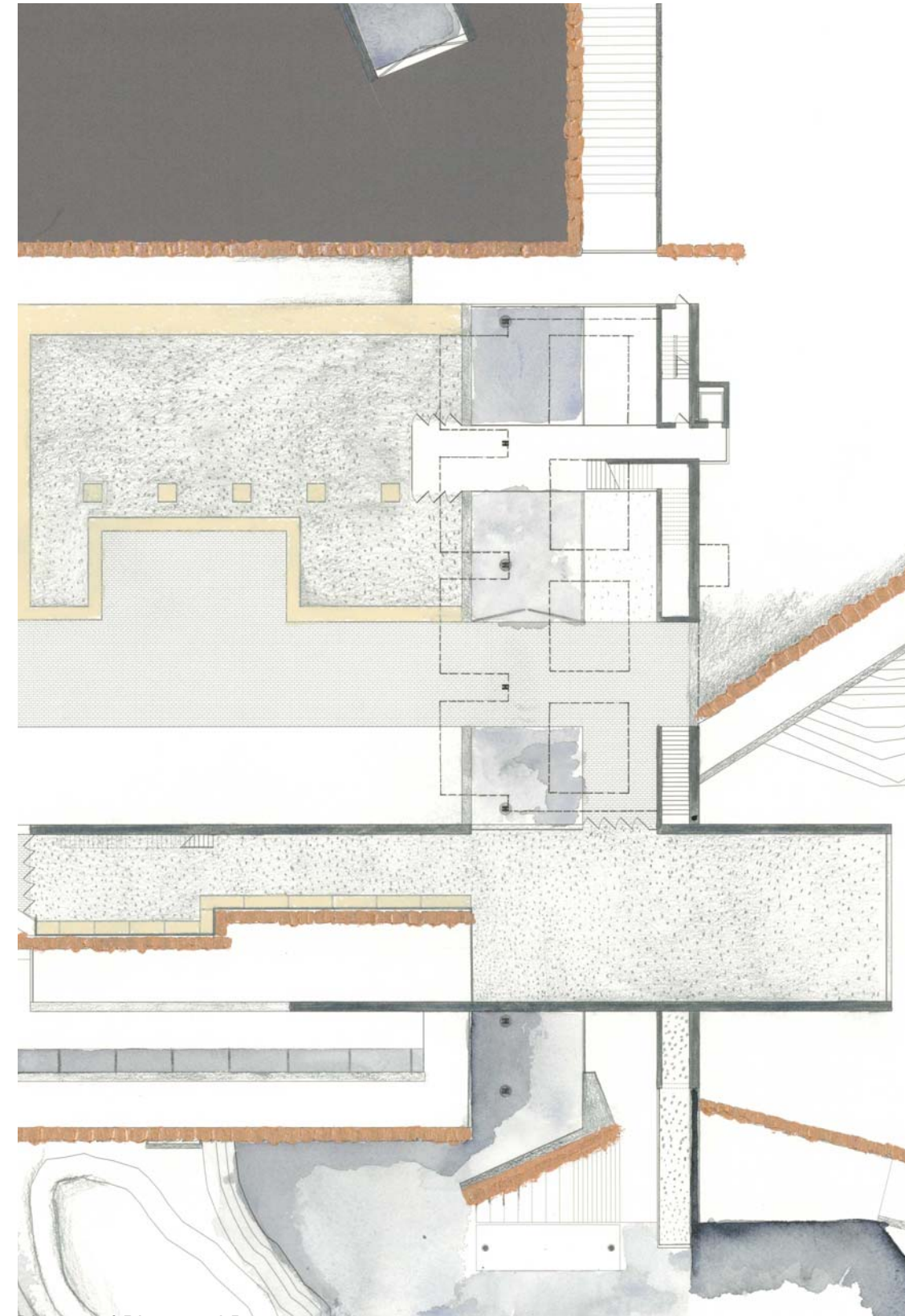
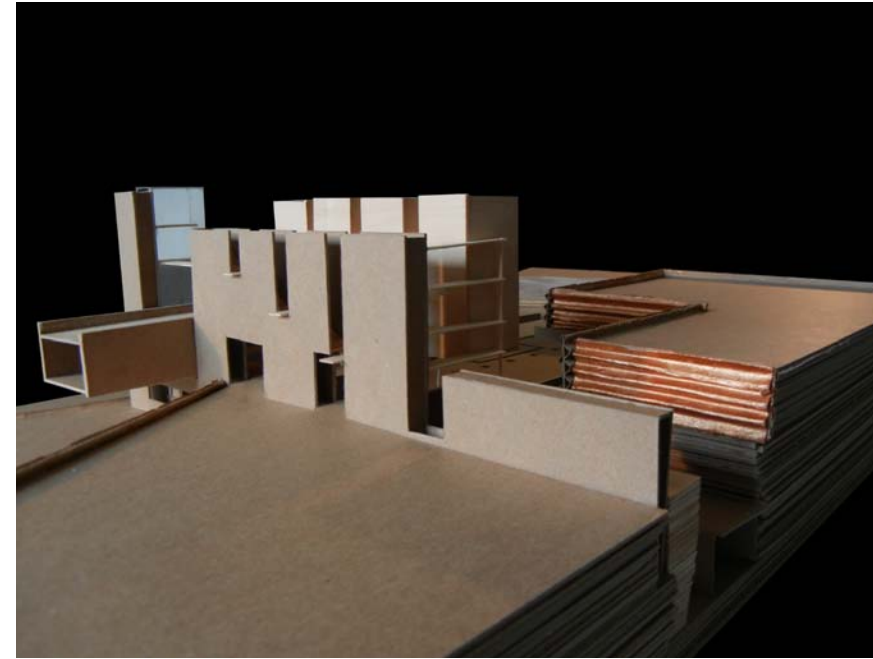


Blowup of Baths and Lock | Canoe Portage

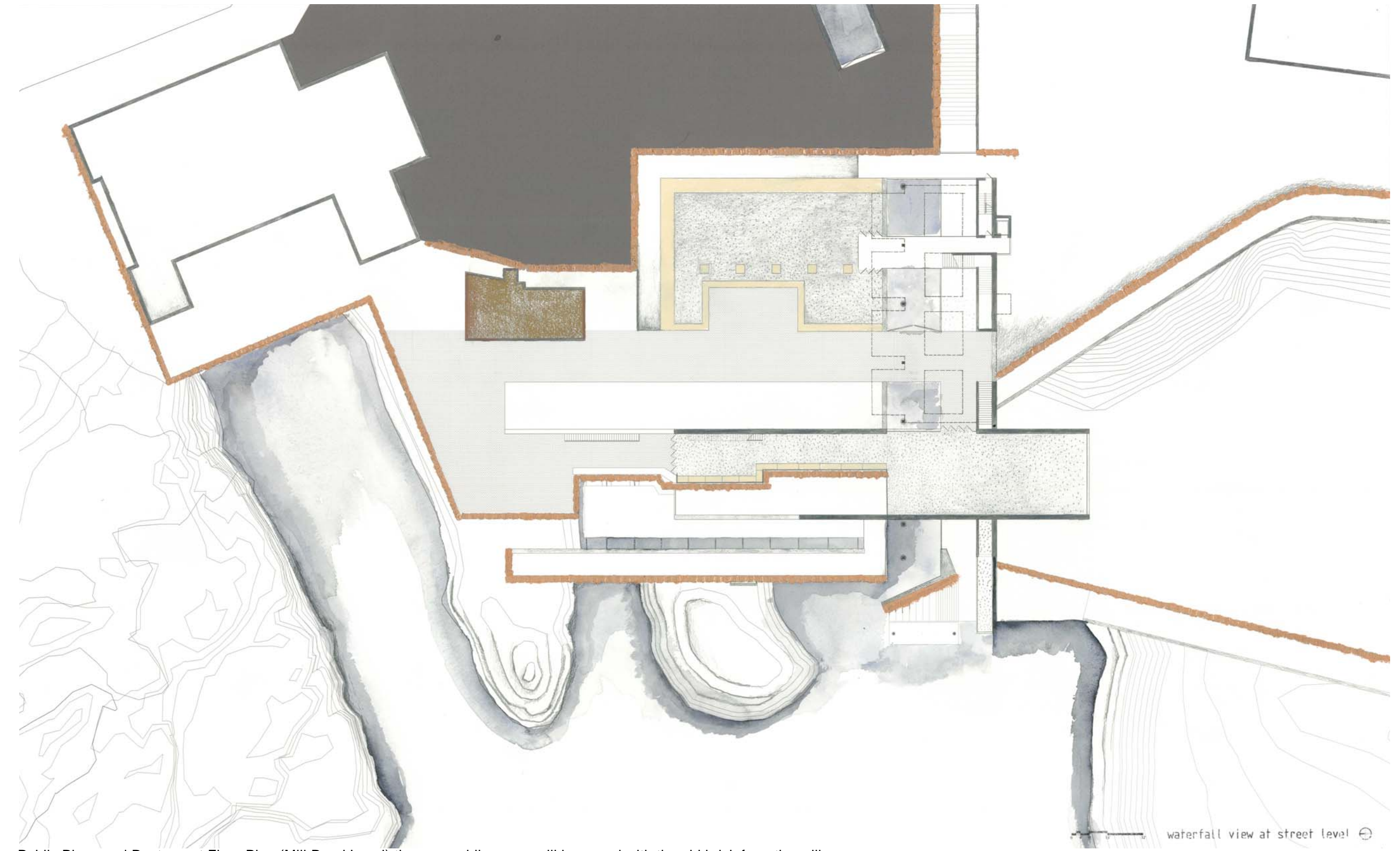


Underground Bath and Lock | Canoe Portage Floor Plan





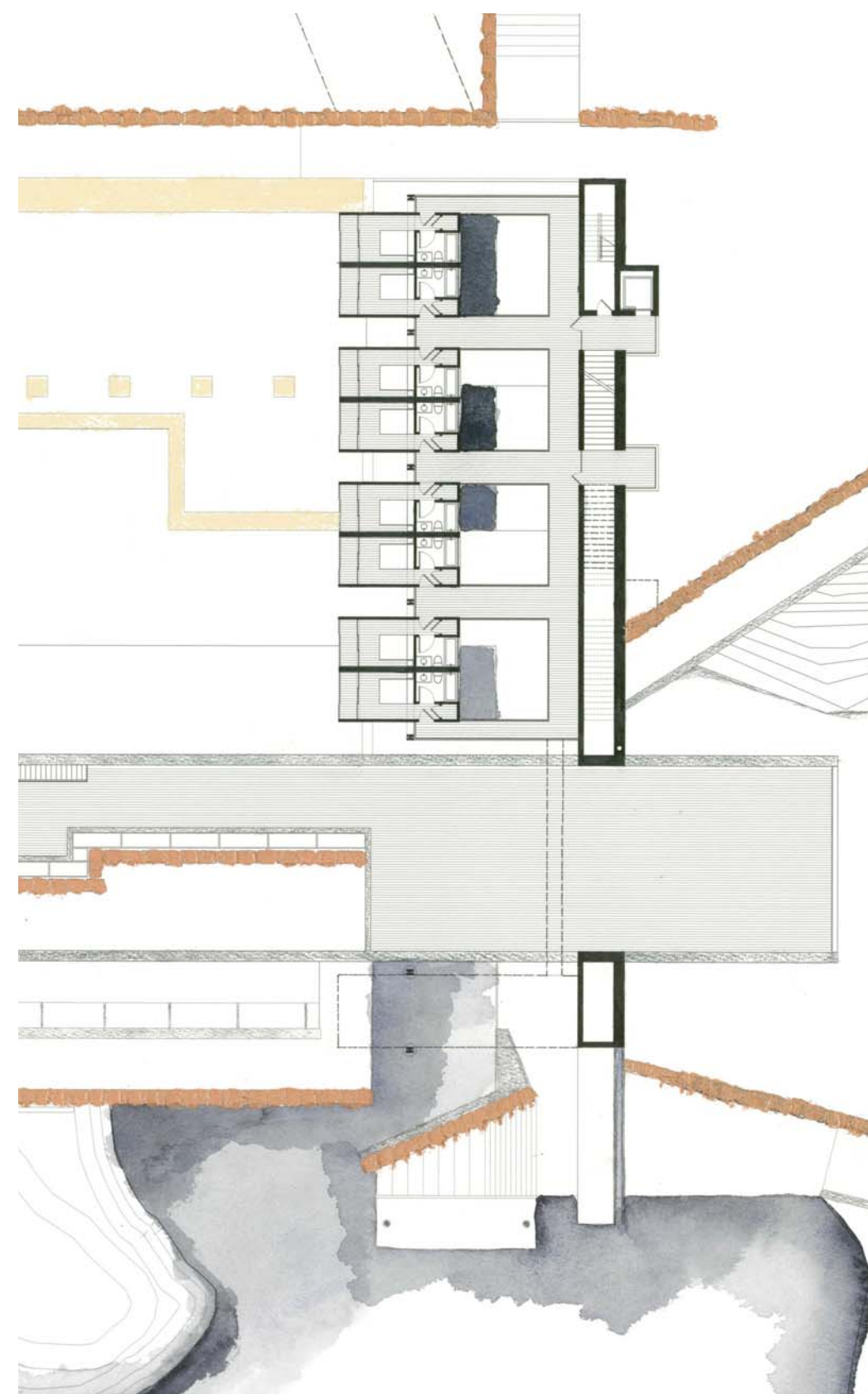
Blowup of Plaza and Restaurant



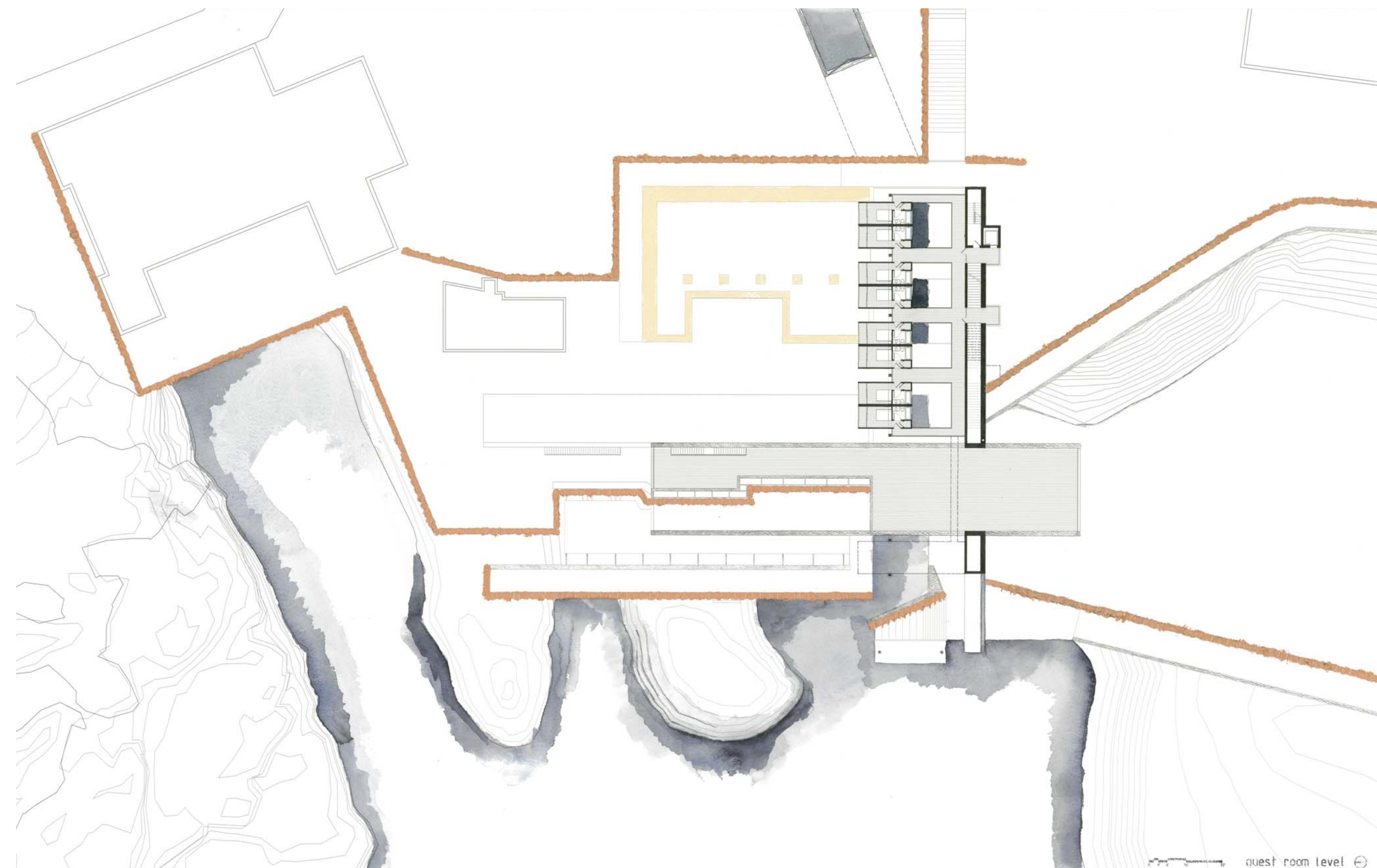
Public Plaza and Restaurant Floor Plan (Mill Road Level) the new public space will be paved with the old brick from the mills

waterfall view at street level



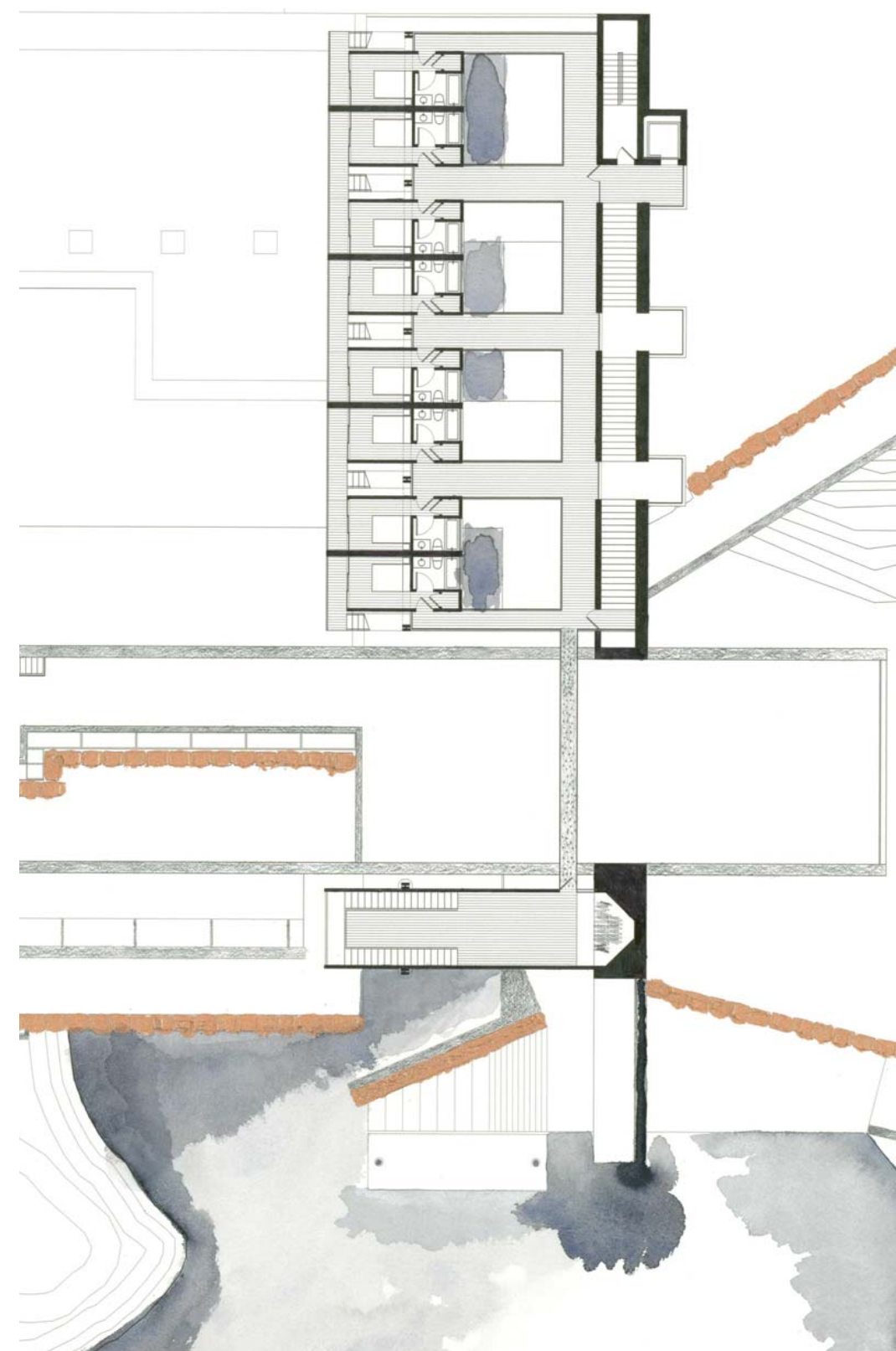


Blowup of Guest Rooms and Rooftop

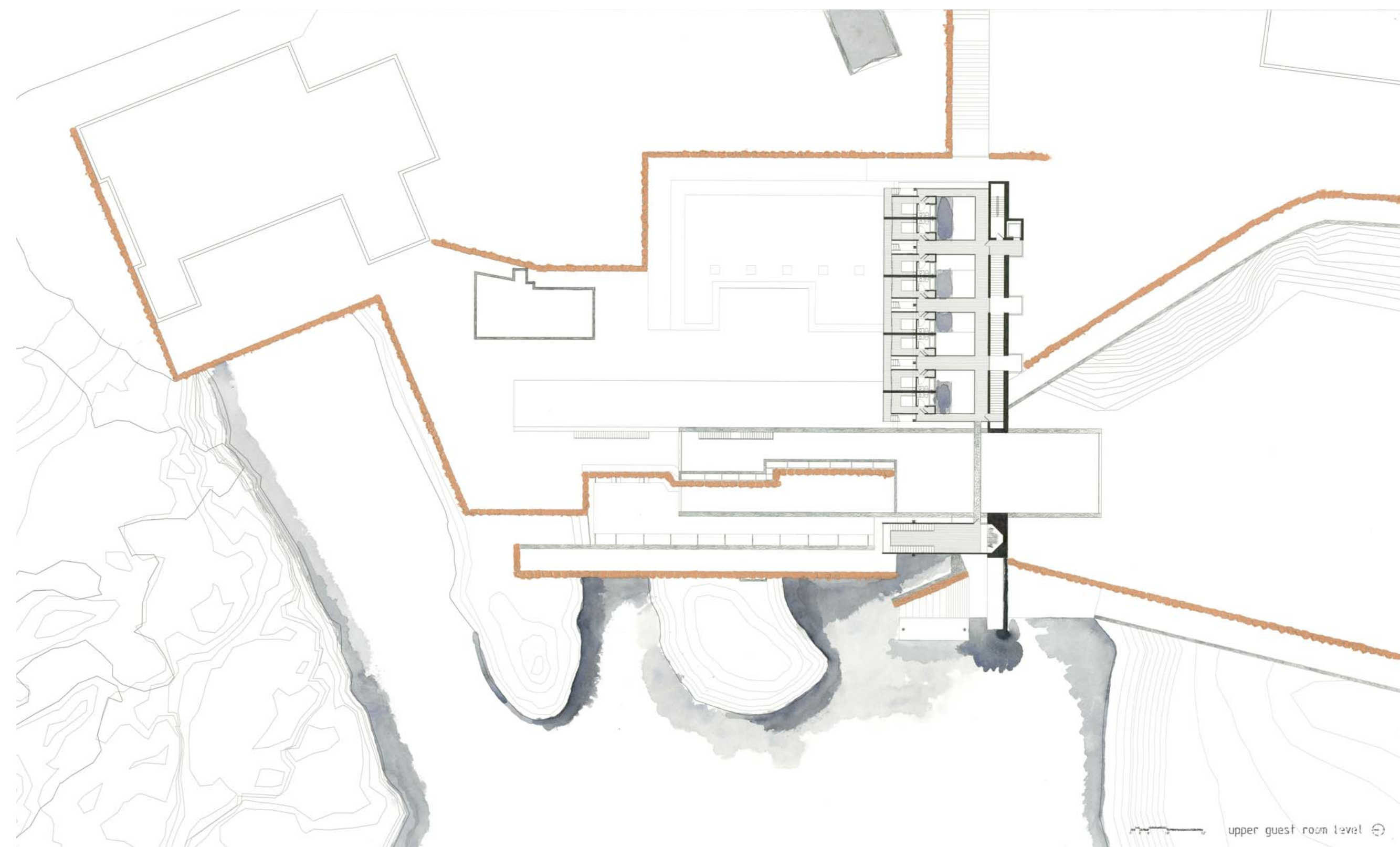


Guest Rooms and Restaurant Rooftop Floor Plan



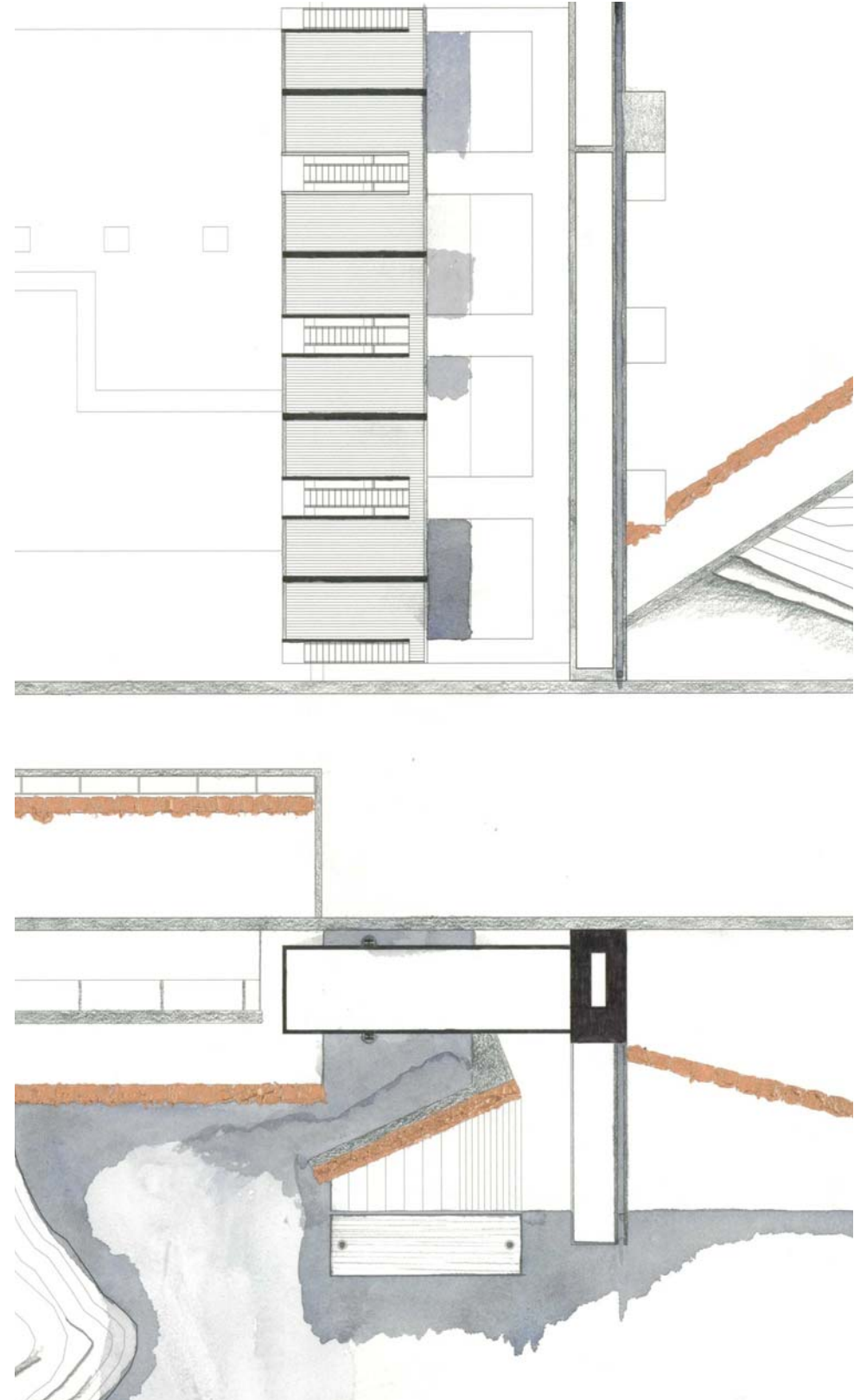
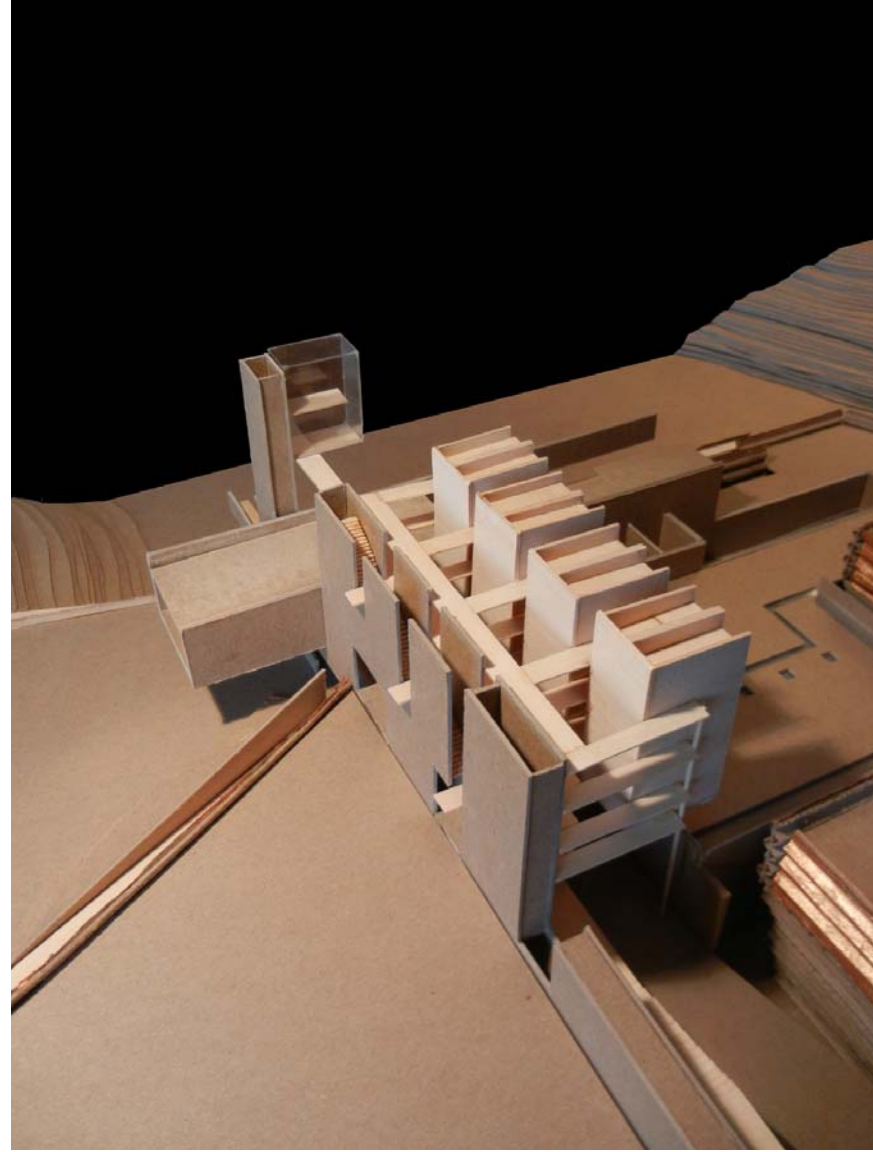


Blowup of Upper Guest Rooms and Fireplace Room

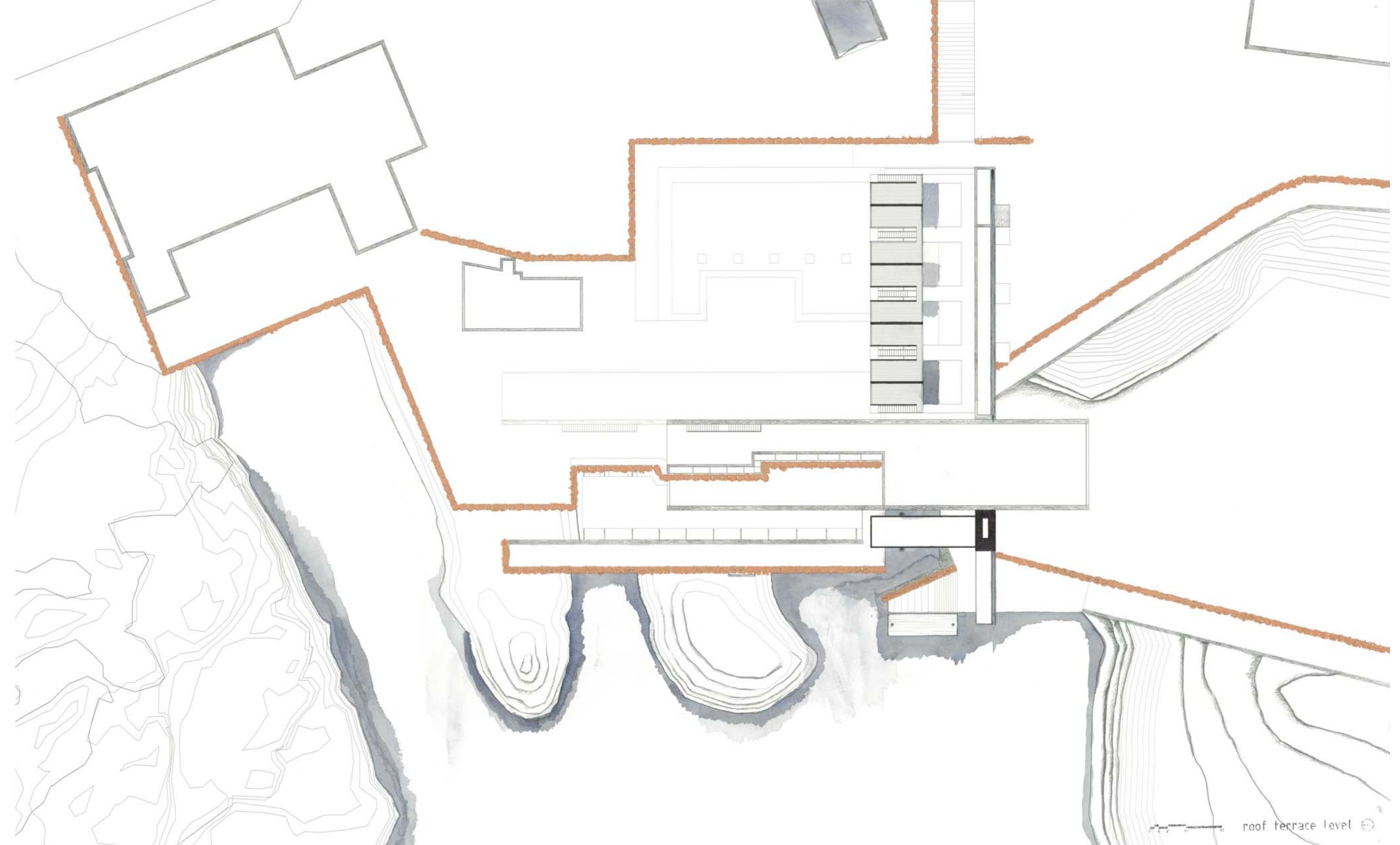


Upper Guest Rooms and Fireplace Room Floor Plan



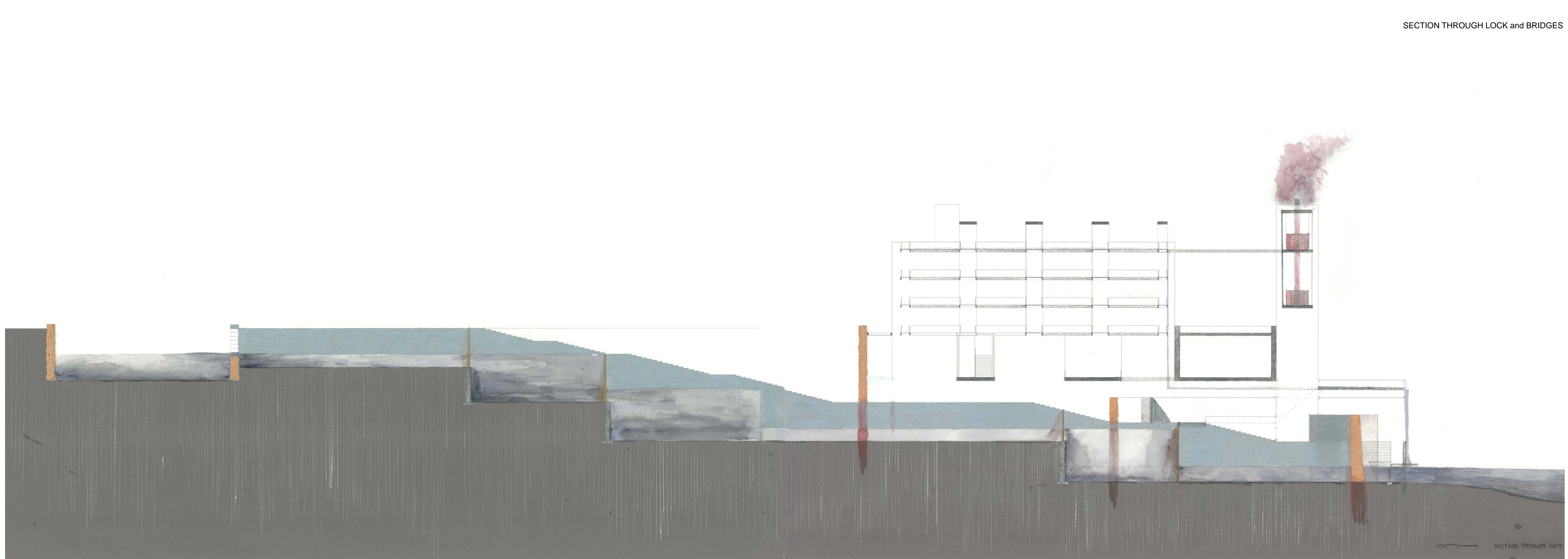


Blowup of Guest Room Roof Deck

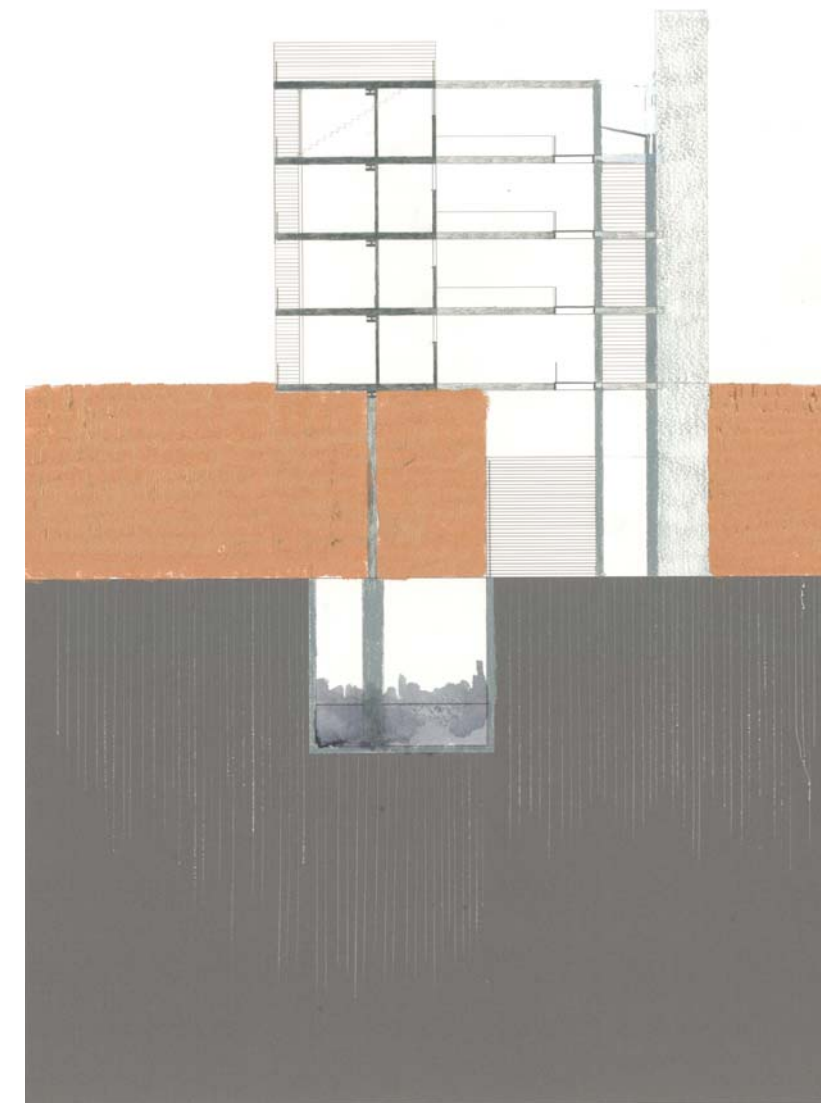


Guest Rooms Roof Deck Floor Plan



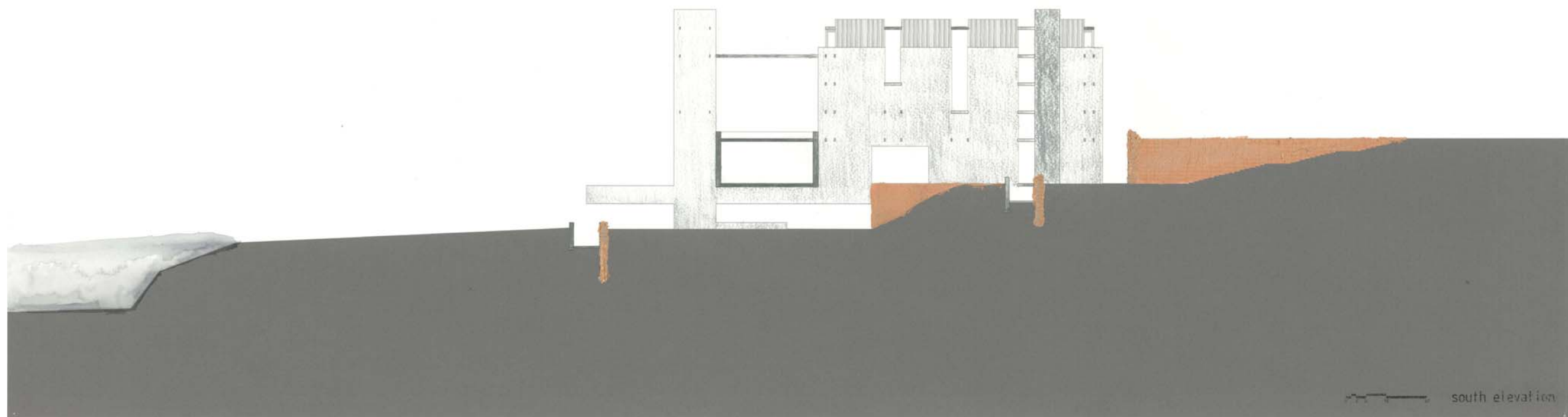




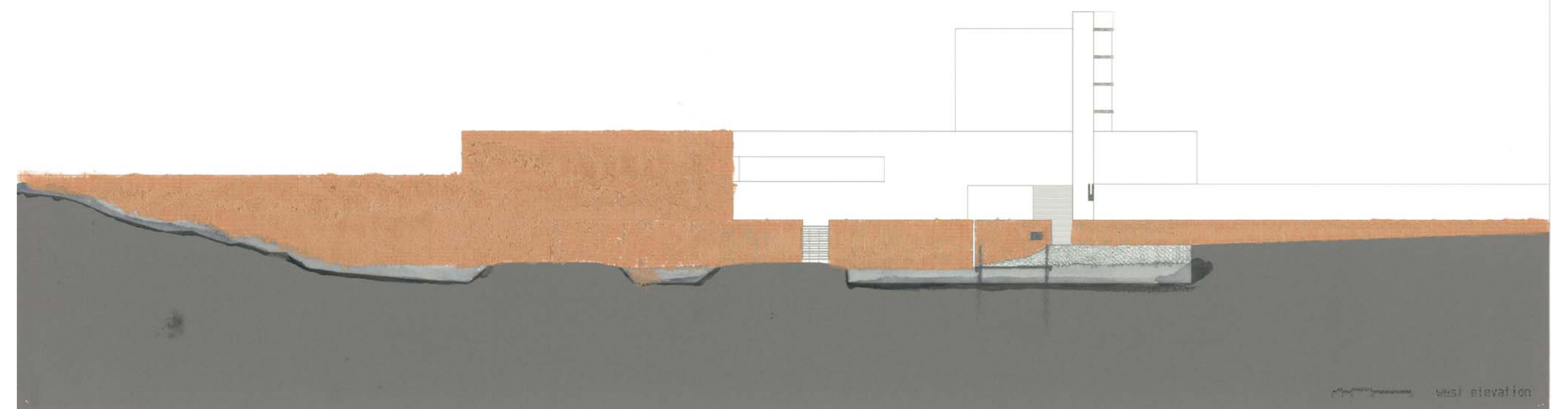




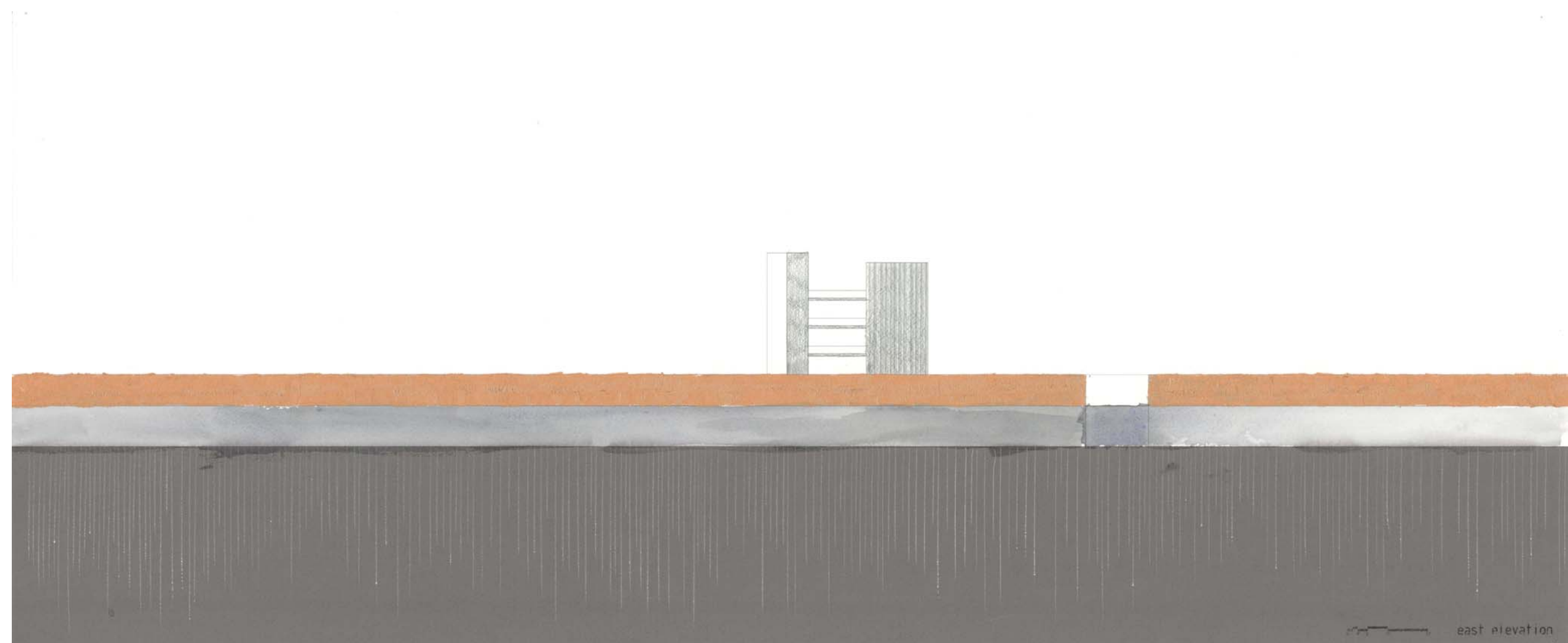
SIDE ELEVATION from the main street



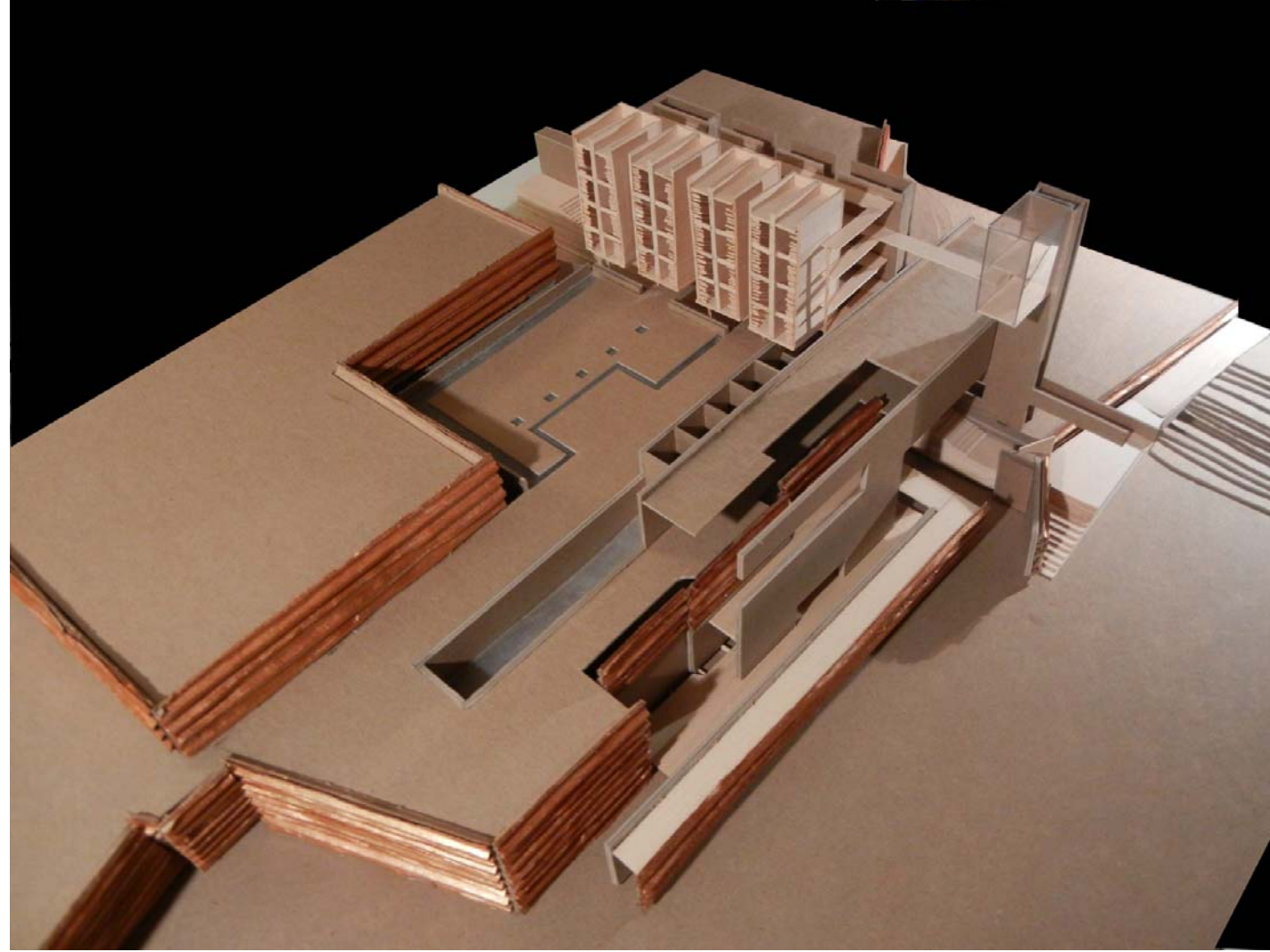
FRONT ELEVATION from Auburn











I feel fortunate to have been able to work on this project, on this site, with the faculty on my Committee. Special thanks to Jaan Holt, Susan Piedmont-Palladino, Marcia Feuerstein, Kent Abraham and Paul Emmons for always saying the right thing and inspiring me to move forward. I would leave our talks with more than I could handle, but the project is much better because of it. I will be forever grateful for what I have learned from all of you. Thanks to Henry Hollander for keeping the WAAC running smoothly and answering my day-to-day questions. Thanks to Fekade Amare for your help during the last week. Thanks to my parents for their life-long support and telling me to never give up on what I want. Thanks to my dad for mentioning the site to me. Thanks to the people of Lewiston, Maine that took the time to meet with me and give me information about the site: Susan Beane, Gil Arsenault, Lincoln Jeffers, David Hediger, Jon Labonte, Neil Ward, Dr. Barry Rodrigue, Pamela Crane and Steve Myers.

THANK YOU.



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Illustration 3: Mailhot, Sarah A. *The Blue Mosque (interior)*. Istanbul, Turkey. Summer 2009.

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Illustration 17: Mailhot, Sarah A. *Corner of Foundation of Cowan Mill Ruin looking at waterfall*. Lewiston, Maine. Fall 2009.

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Illustration 21: Mailhot, Sarah A. *Water Ice Snow*. Lewiston, Maine. Winter 2010.

Illustrations 22 – 24: Mailhot, Sarah A. *Ruins of the Cowan Mill*. Lewiston, Maine. October 2009.

Illustrations 25 – 27: Mailhot, Sarah A. *Ruins of the Libbey Mill*. Lewiston, Maine. October 2009.

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Illustrations 32: public realm | Diagram of typical lock.

Illustrations 33: Mailhot, Sarah A. *Assemblage of brick*. 2009.

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1. Peter Zumthor, Thinking Architecture (Basel: Birkhauser Verlag AG, 2006), 17-18.
2. Zumthor, 65.
3. Page Held Jones, Evolution of a Valley: The Androscoggin Story (Phoenix Publishing, 1975)
4. J.B. Jackson, The Necessity of Ruins (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 102.
5. Nelson Madore and Barry Rodrigue, Voyages A Maine Franco-American Reader (Gardiner: Tilbury House Publishers, 2007) 107.



Illus 33 - Sarah A. Mailhot | Assemblage