



Stair Column Tower

Gathering knowledge through experience
Architecture devoid of pragmatism

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Architecture devoid of pragmatism

L. Nikole Branch

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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William U. Galloway
Frank H. Weiner

July 26, 2013
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: horizon, sky, image, perception, rotation, time

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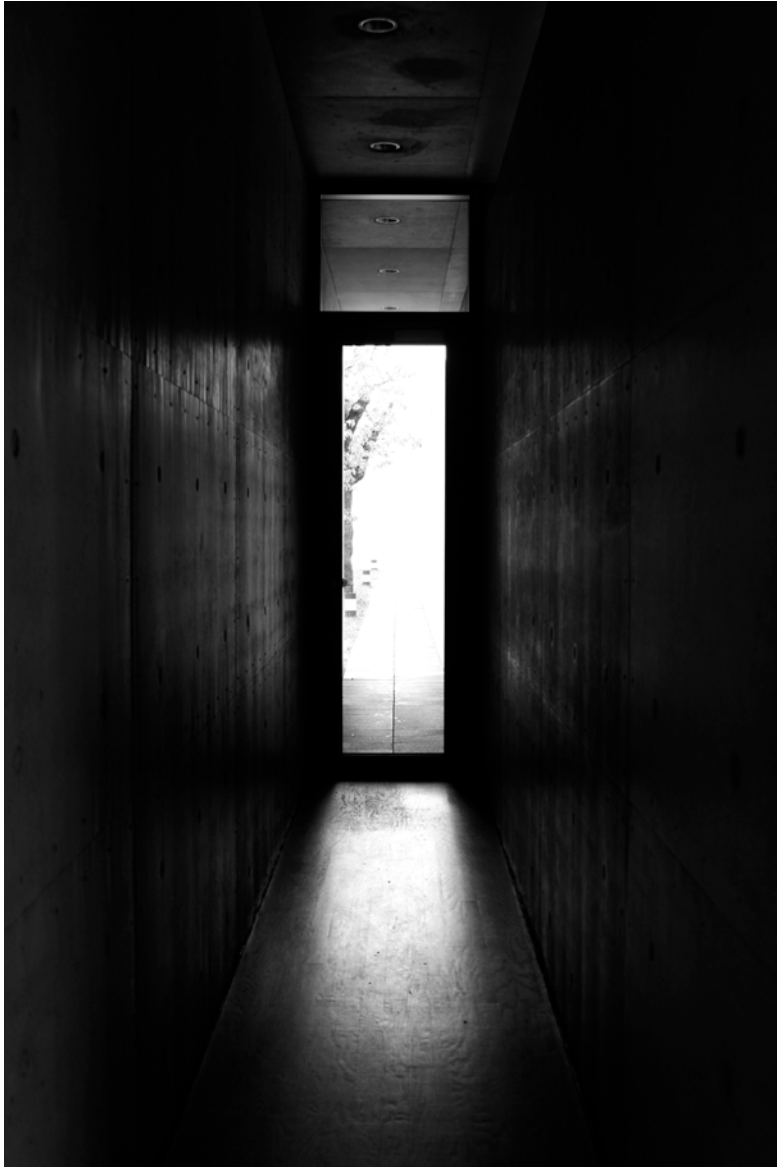
Abstract

This set of drawings, paintings, and photographs explores the realms of knowledge and experience in architecture through analytical and perceptual means. In other words, how physical, material considerations inform the experience of moving through space, the perception of space, and the memory of place. These themes and questions are considered through the design of an observation tower that punctuates the ambiguous joint between land and water, earth and sky on the southwestern most point on the Isle of Skye, Scotland, UK.

Dedicated to my Grandfather,

David Carr Branch

who was meticulous, endearing, brilliant and humble.



Acknowledgements

I am forever indebted to

Frank Weiner for his unwavering yet patient fervor in molding architects-in-training; Bill Galloway for succinctly and clearly saying precisely what needs to be said, exactly when it needs to be heard; Hunter Pittman for infuriating me on a number of occasions; Chip Clark for indispensable advice and numerous hours of consultation; Paola Zellner-Bassett for mentorship, friendship, a formative tour of Europe, and much needed laughter through it all; Shelley Martin for instilling in me a passion for lines, color, and texture, for unending encouragement, and for understanding, often times before I even do, my interests and inclinations; my parents for unconditional, immeasurable love and a kitchen that is never closed; and Ryan, who, for me, has learned to ask questions instead of make suggestions and has agreed to be my lifelong travel partner.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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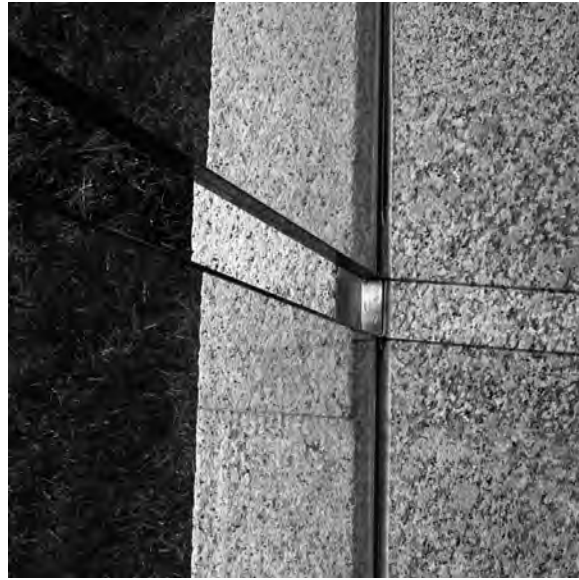


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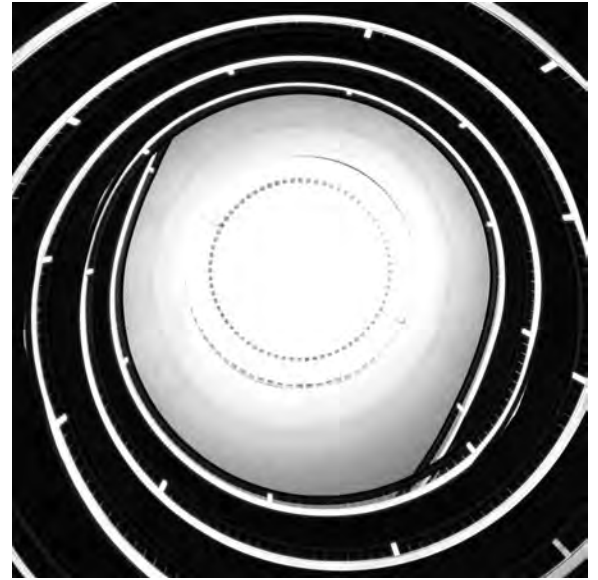
It is the things which are uncontrollable that are the makings of architecture. When wooden boards are freed from climate-controlled captivity and allowed to age gracefully under careful, persistent surveillance by the sun, wind and rain - here is architecture. When the din of a solitary water droplet succumbing to gravity resoundingly fills a room of concrete and stone - here is architecture. When a floor to ceiling window captures a weeping meteor shower and five hours later, allows the sunrise to serve as the most inviting end to a peaceful slumber - here is architecture.



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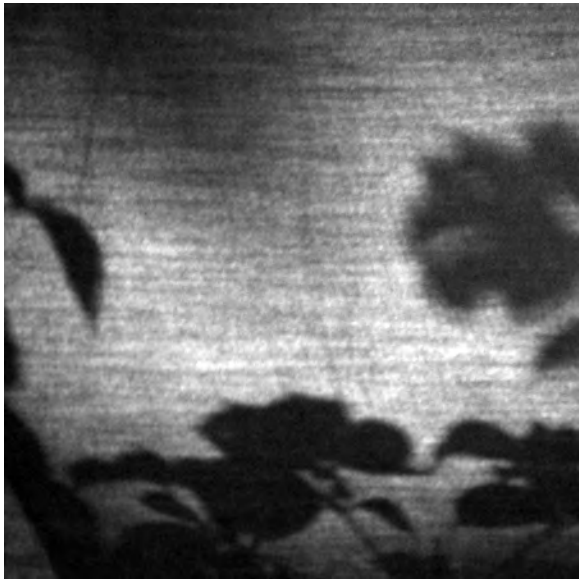
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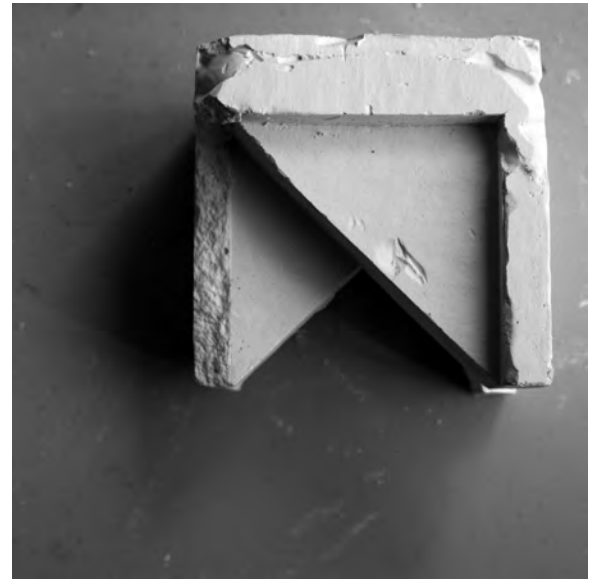
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Architecture relies on human perception and experience. A building does not transcend its role as an edifice that keeps out the rain until a living soul inhabits it. A building is architecture when it is seen, touched, smelled, heard, tasted. Once it has been ingested, the building transcends and architecture is made.



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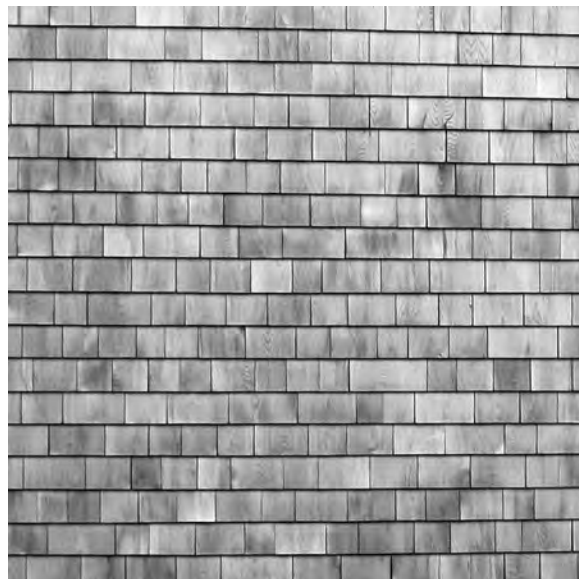
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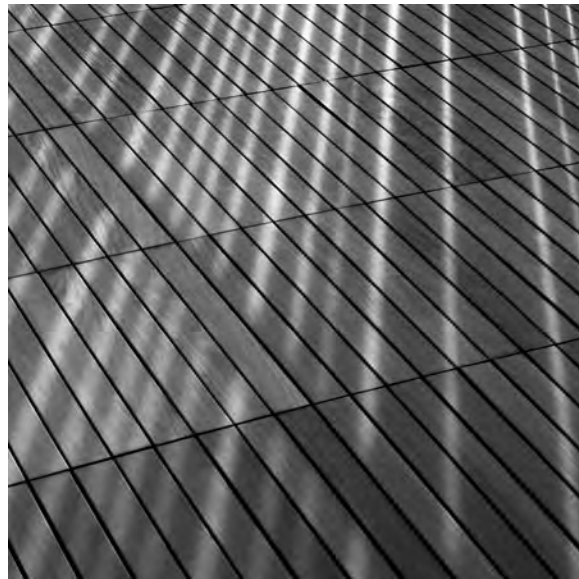


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The architect, no matter how seasoned, cannot precisely predict these experiences nor can she know the way another person will understand her designs or how they will feel in her spaces. Even with all the technology known to man, humans cannot see through the eyes of another human. We cannot know for certain that blue appears in the same way to us as it does to someone else. At the very least, preference and prejudice will cloud perceptions. In the same way, upon the entry of each new inhabitant, architecture is seen anew. Through her sensual perceptions, the inhabitant comes to know a room, a place, a city, and in the *finite* life of a work of architecture, it is *infinitely* remade.



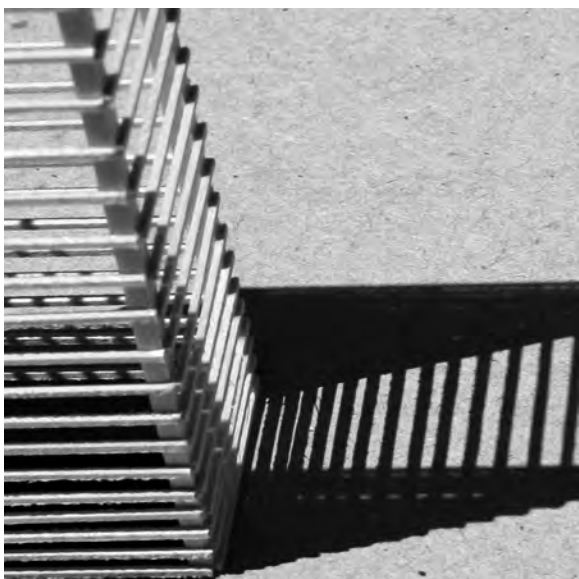
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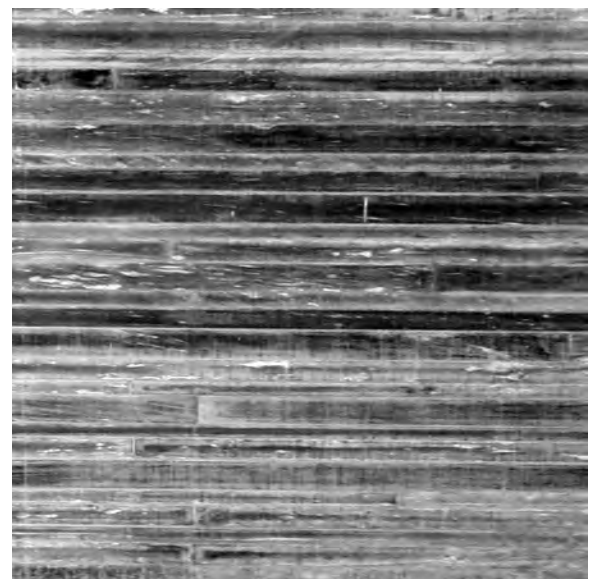
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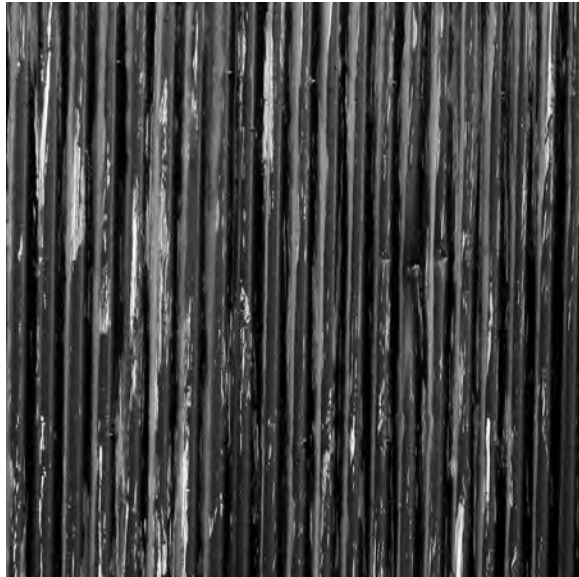


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Natural conditions that are never repeated from one second to the next infinitely remake architecture. It is in the infinite remaking that architecture increases its significance. Architecture, like a life well-lived, records and wears the passing of time, this infinite remaking, on its sleeve. I believe that architecture is at its best when well-worn, overtaken by vines and shrubs, faded and dyed and polished by the elements. I would prefer to dream of my architecture as ruins when it can no longer fulfill its pragmatic aims - lit by candlelight or better yet, moonlight, when rain splatters the floors and there are only solar rays and swift breezes to eliminate the dampness. When architecture is released from pragmatism it becomes pure.



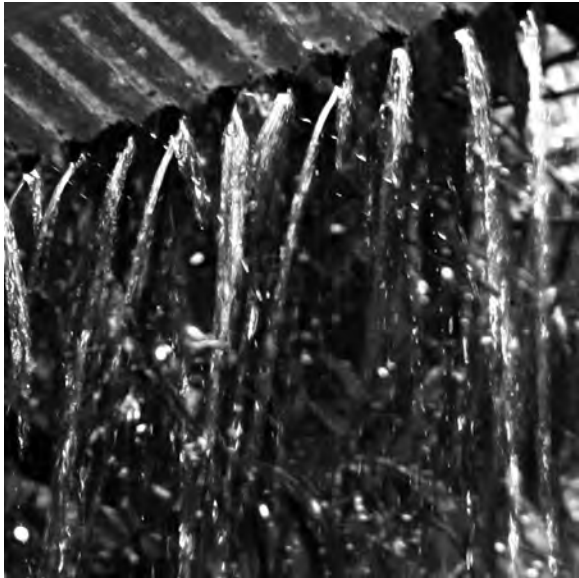
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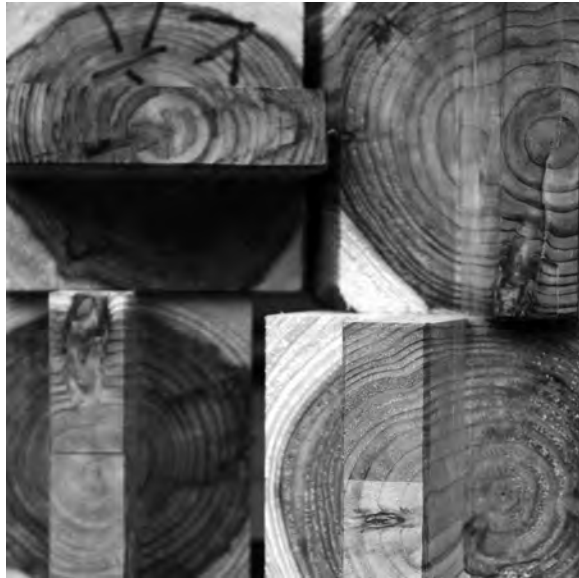
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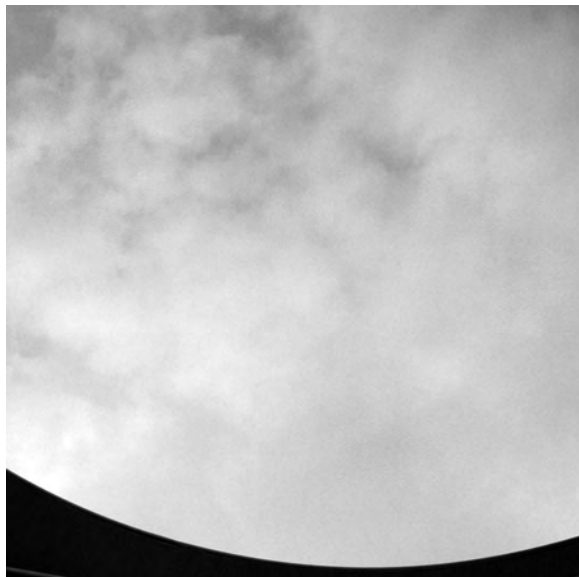
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It is the role of the architect to design a building that will transcend itself, soaring into the realm of architecture. The building is a canvas for life, for experience. Architecture distills moments, although fleeting, like film reels - one quickly cycling through to another - and the film of life is recorded, remembered, worn on walls, screened through windows, traced along roof lines. Here is Architecture.



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a column
lifting up the heavens

a threshold
between earth and sky
anchoring sky to earth

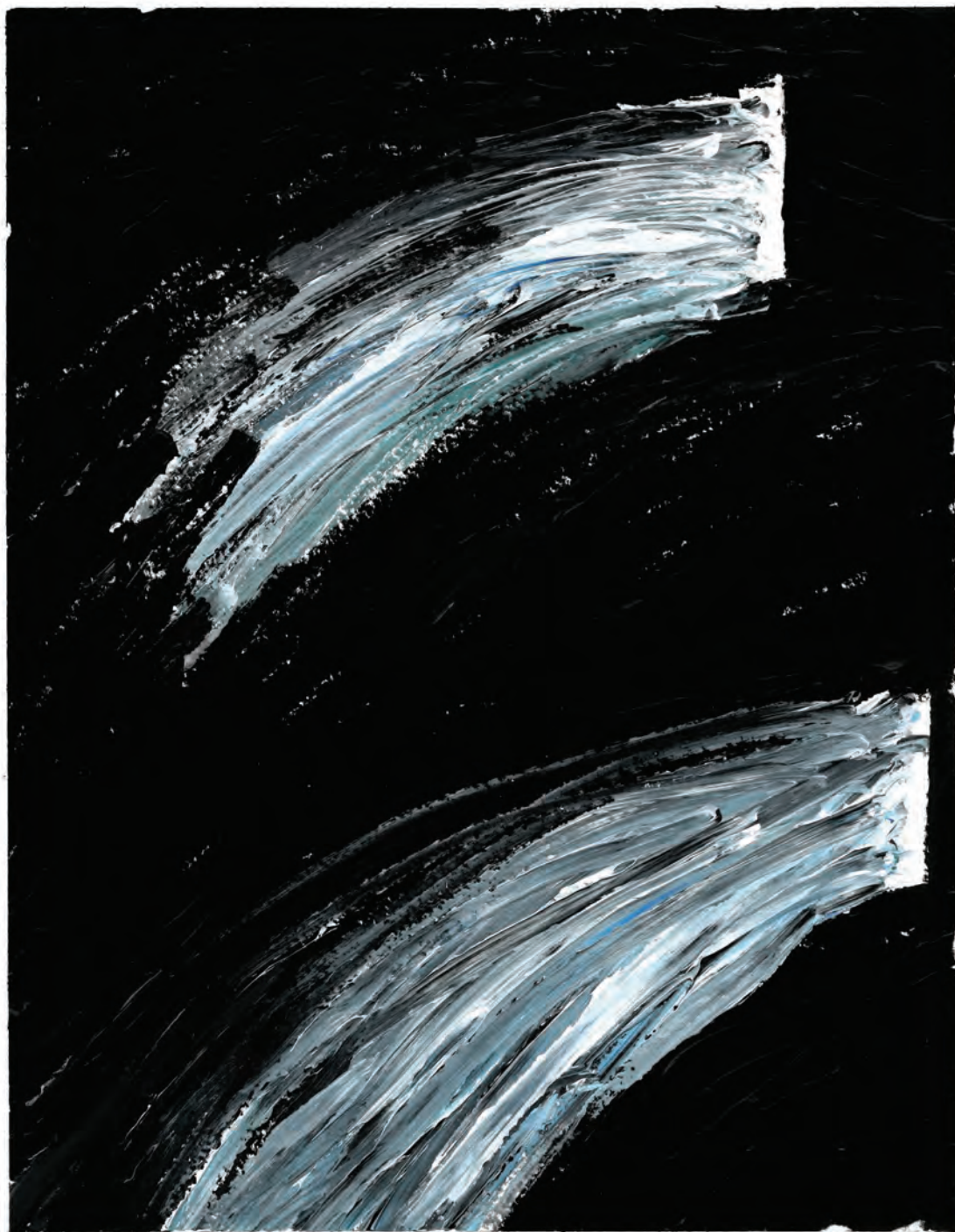
a tower
gathering that which is visible
everything that
is
was
ever will be

an aperture
offering rhythmic interludes of light
against the dark
opposites reciprocally intensifying perceptions
of the other

an object
standing in a room
bordered by mountainous walls
a canopy of sky
supported by an infinite foundation of stone
marred by the powerful whimsy
of the sea

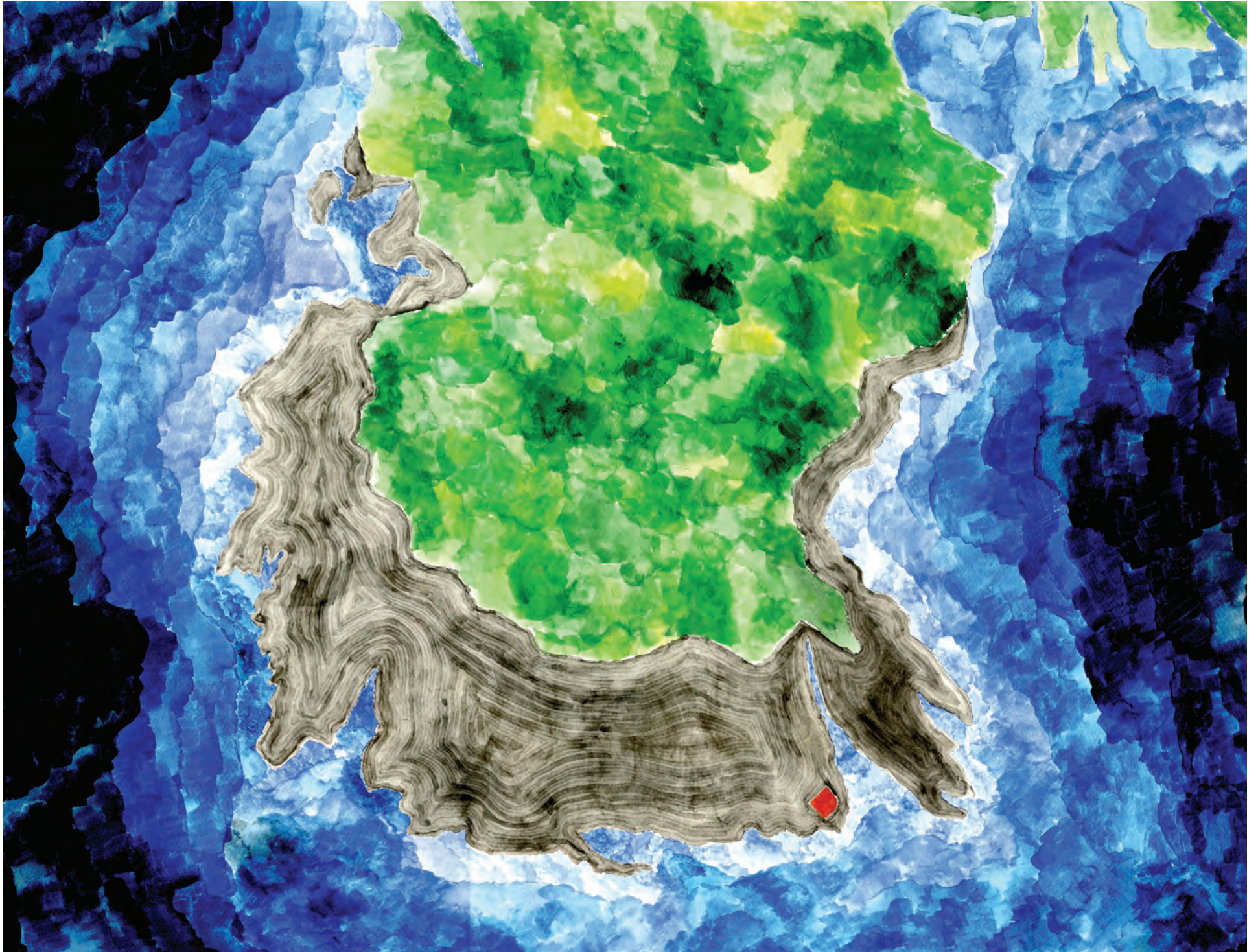




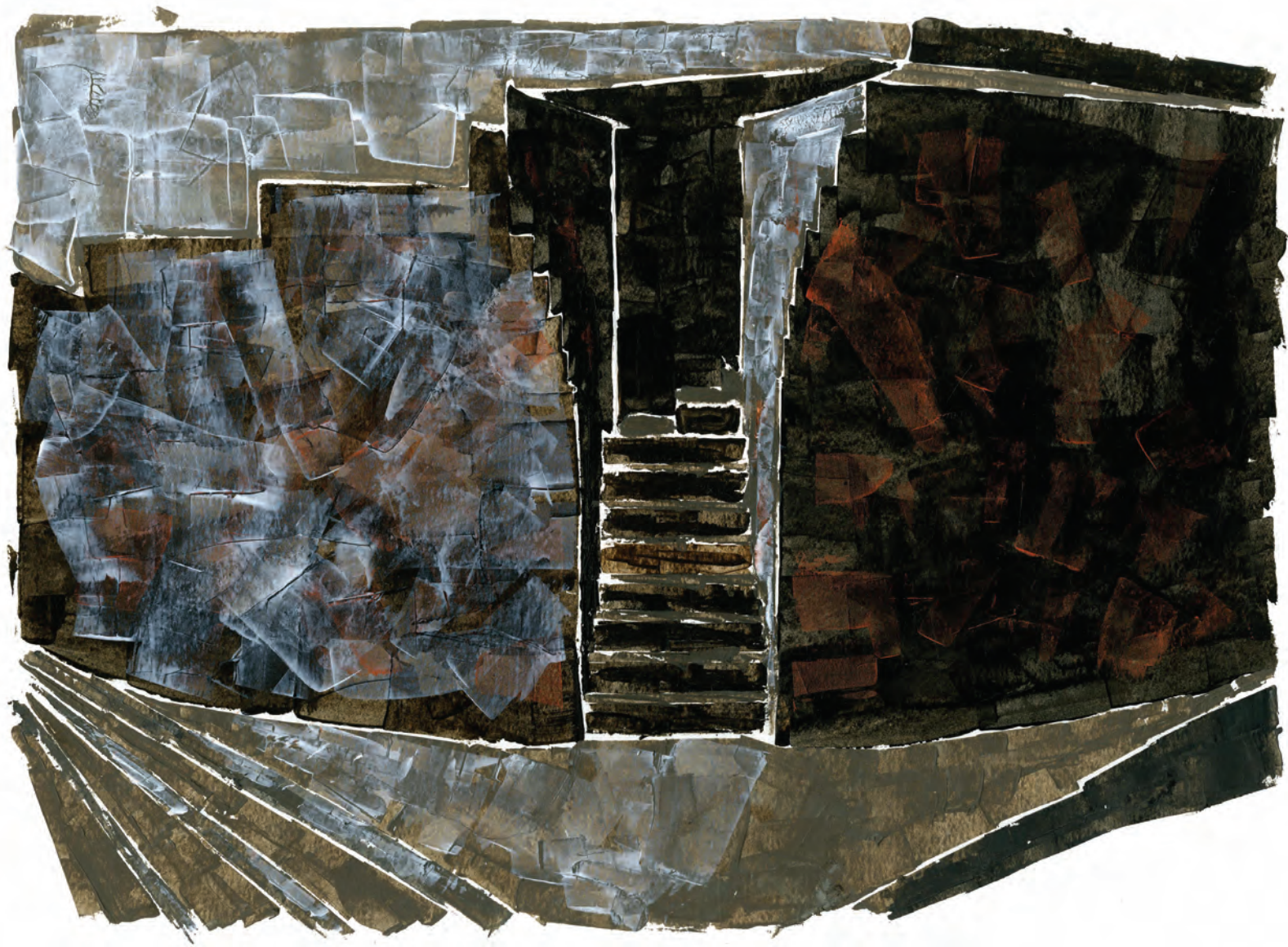


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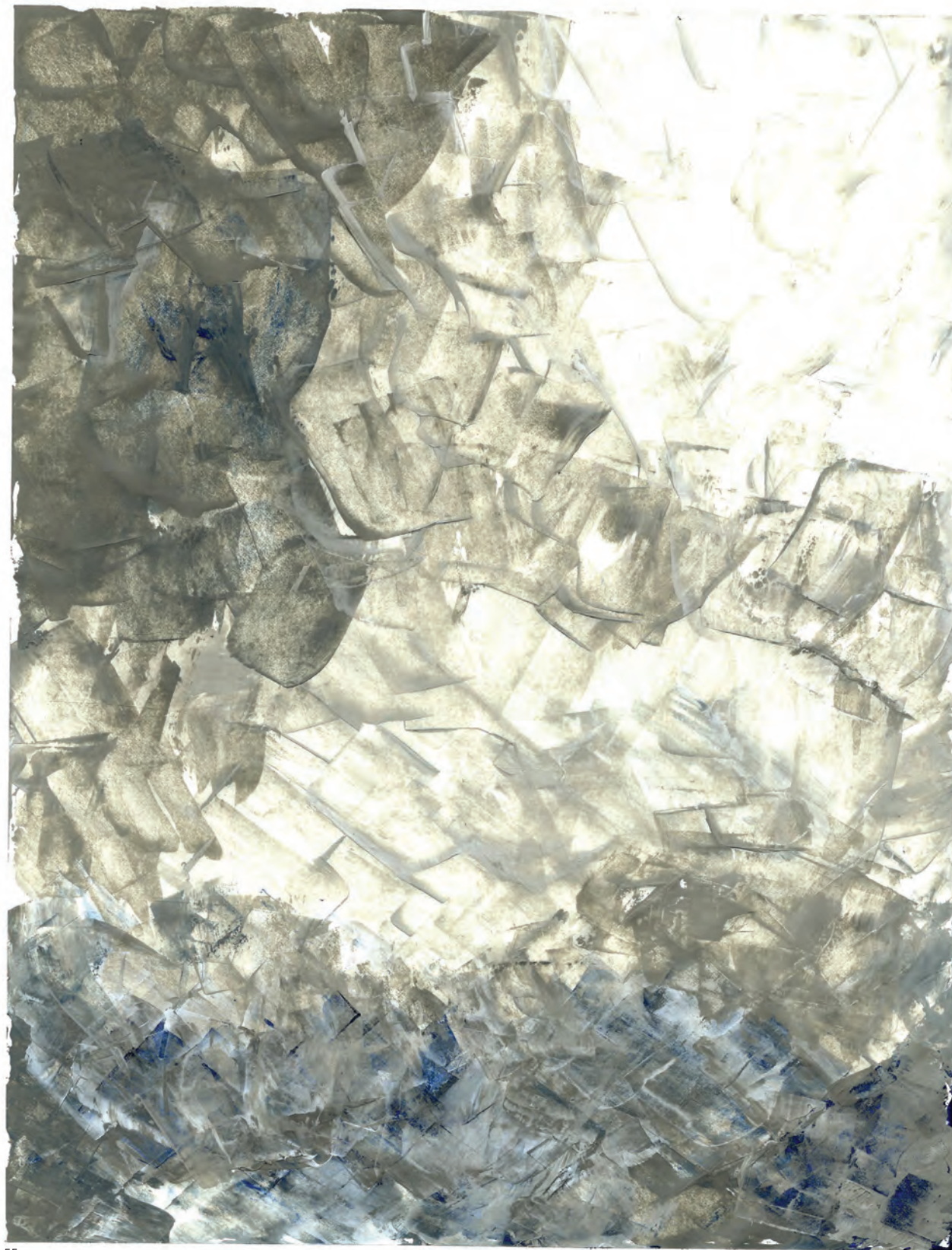




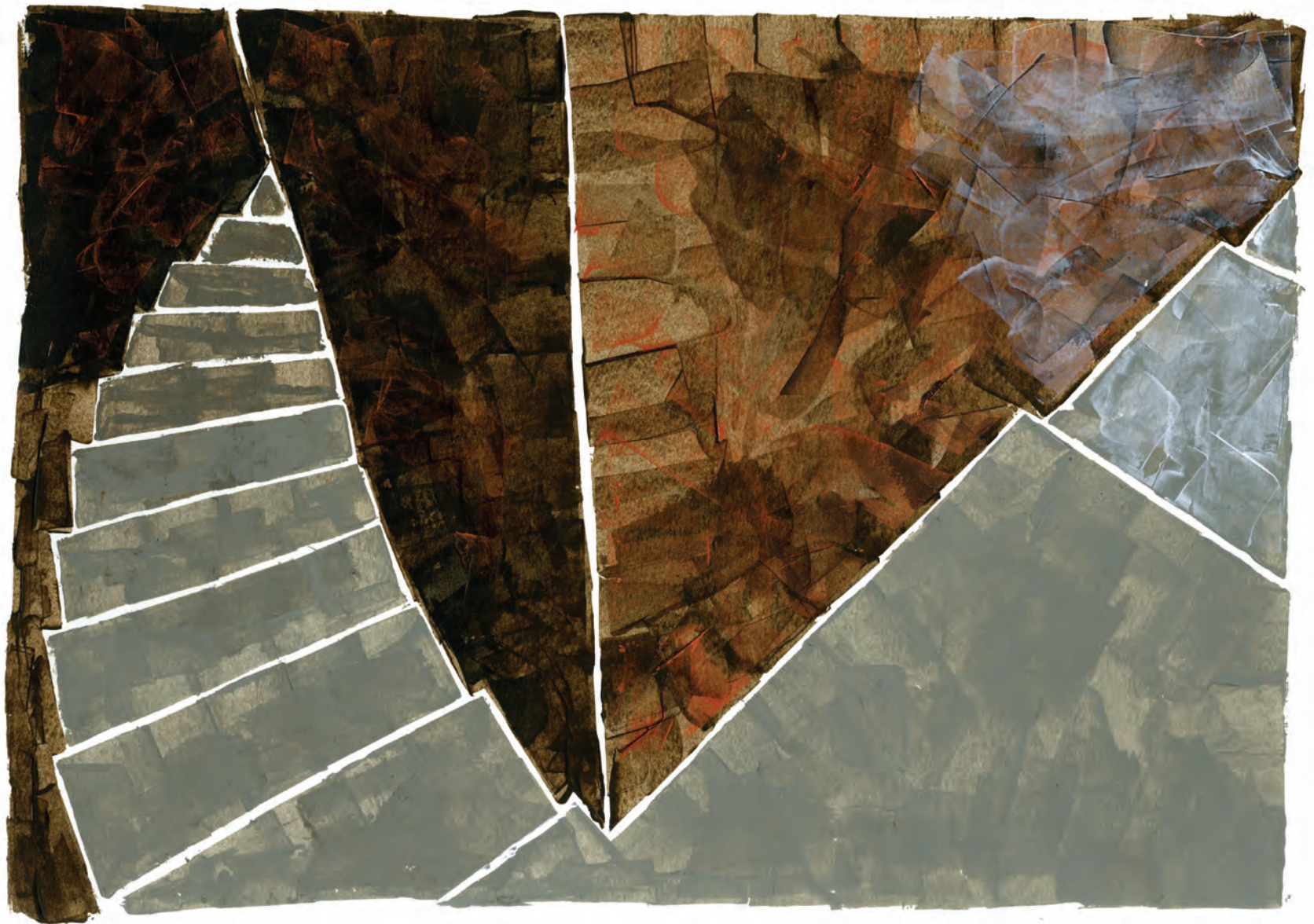


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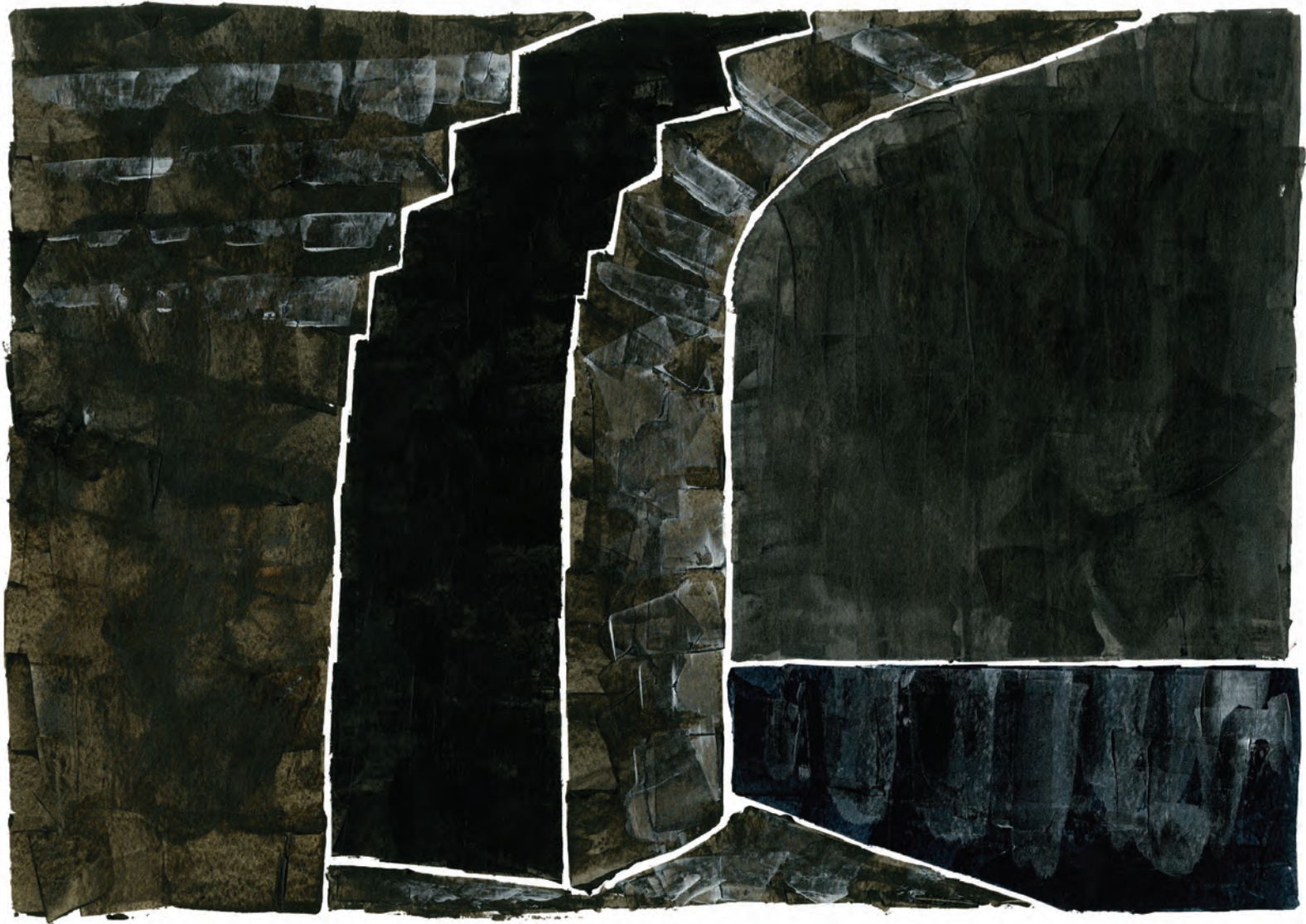


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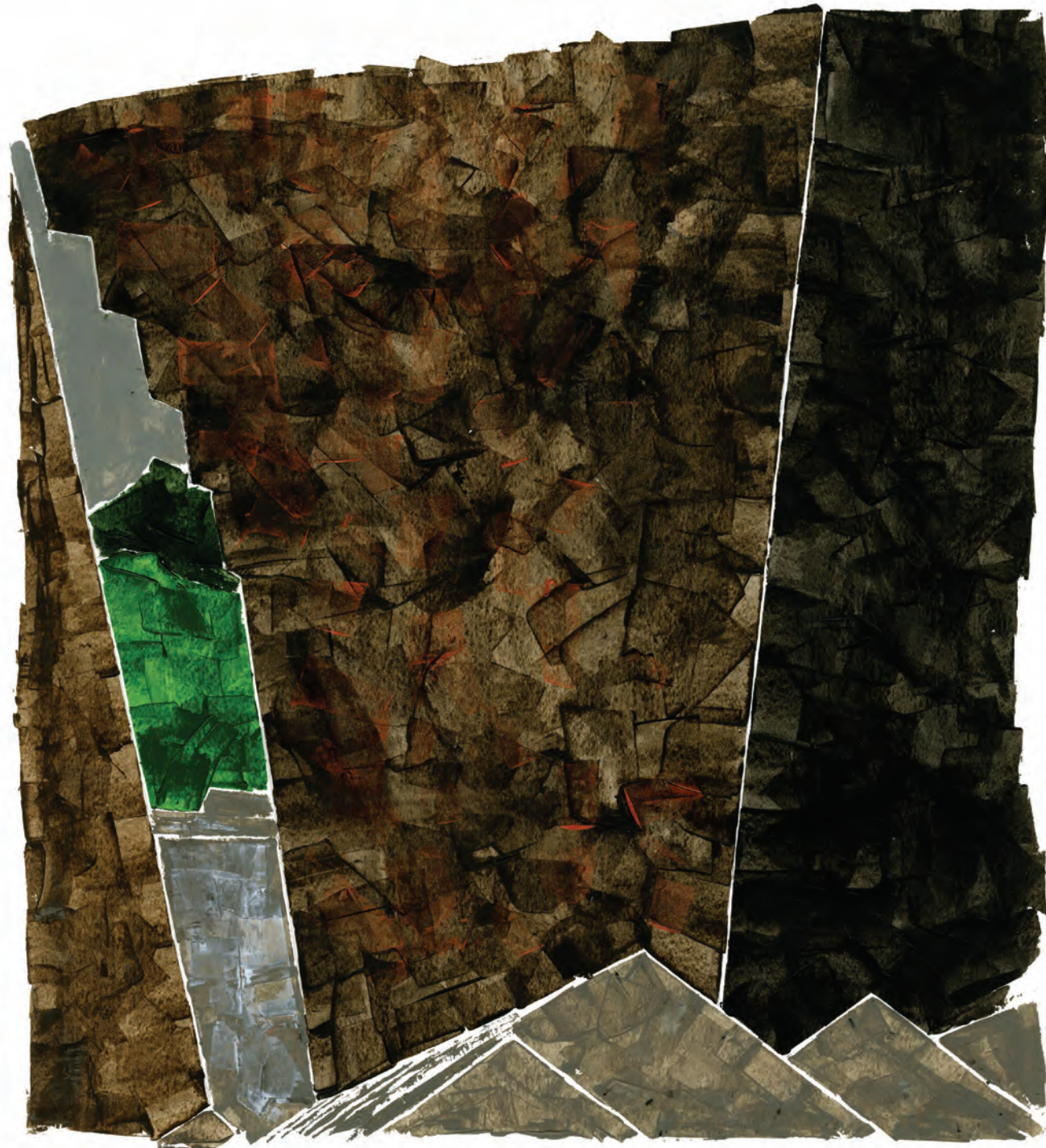
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Annotation of Plates

Page 12. 270 layers of concrete anchor the sky to the earth. The tower is a joint between what lies above and below the horizon.

Page 13. The tower holds an archive of every sunset, sunrise, thunderstorm, shadow, wave, rumble, explosion, murmur, footstep, touch... Her infinite facades reflect and gather, retain and absorb the beauty embedded - made and remade - every moment of each day.

Page 14. Cascading Sky[e].

Page 15. Rigid stability offset by an ever-changing landscape. The tower is a background, a canvas, a theater.

Page 16. Situated at the edge of the earth and rooted in ancient stone, the tower spirals toward the sky.

Page 17. Materials: Concrete, steel, basalt, lycopodium annotinum, osmunda regalis, triglochin maritima, troposphere, tropopause, stratosphere.

Page 18. The exterior is the interior and the interior is the exterior. Traditional understandings of inside and outside dissolve.

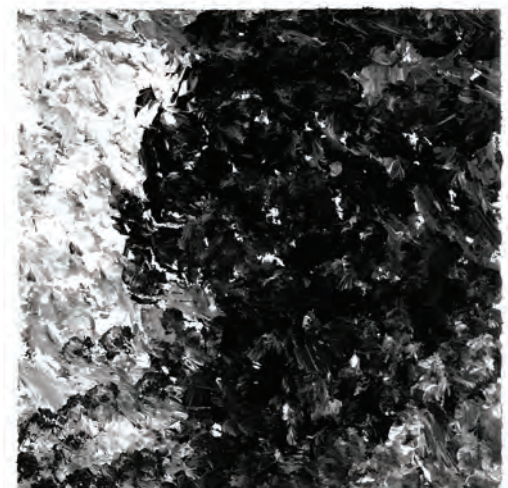
Page 19. Among the twisting, turning, ascent to descend and descent to ascend, the horizon endures, guides, orients, and centers.



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68

Annotation of Plates continued

Page 20. Osmosis through the horizon.

Page 21. The form of the tower emerges as 270 8-inch slabs are stacked and rotated in plan at five degree increments around a center point. Three plans regulate and define the relationship between the continuous interior and exterior stairs. There are four types of secondary stairs with primary importance joining the interior and exterior stairs. The rhythm and repetition are the cadence that propels one to reach the top, but the interruption of the platforms begs even the most determined visitor to be still.

Page 22. The tower is a device for framing moments. The moments, in their isolation, are intensified. Blue is bluer. Light is lighter.

Page 23. Day 10,012 of observation: Midnight. Moon is waning. 5 visitors. 2 whale sightings.

Page 24. A strict system of impenetrable rules, penetrated by landscape and light.

Page 25. Your experience, my experience, his experience, her experience is never duplicated.

Page 26. A ladder-stair meets a spiral-stair.

Page 27. Day 2,453 of observation: Azure sky against a frighteningly still sapphire ocean. Wispy aggregates of clouds. Reinforcements purposefully placed too close to the surface of the striated walls bleed in contrast to the blues of the seascape.

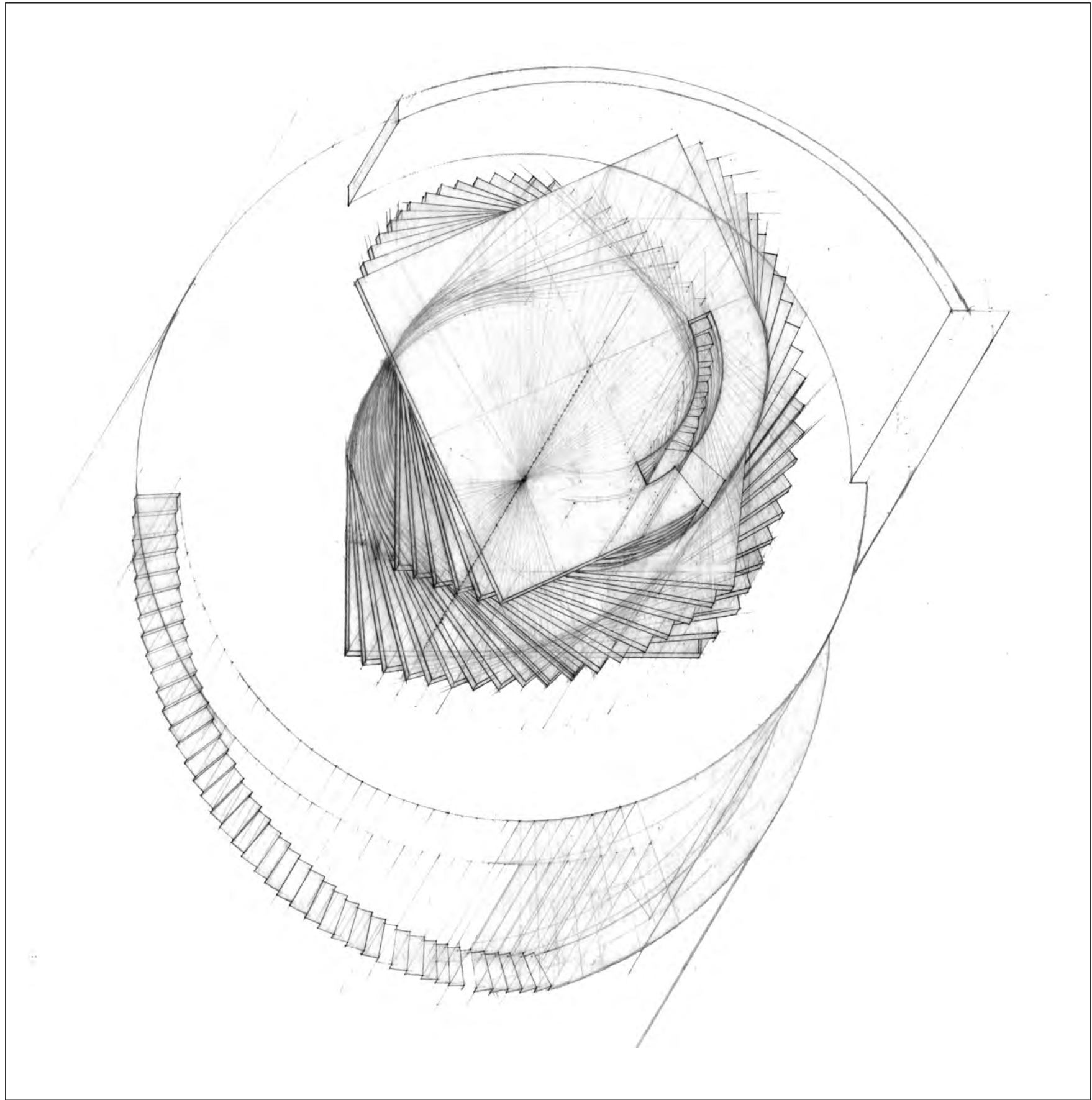


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ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS

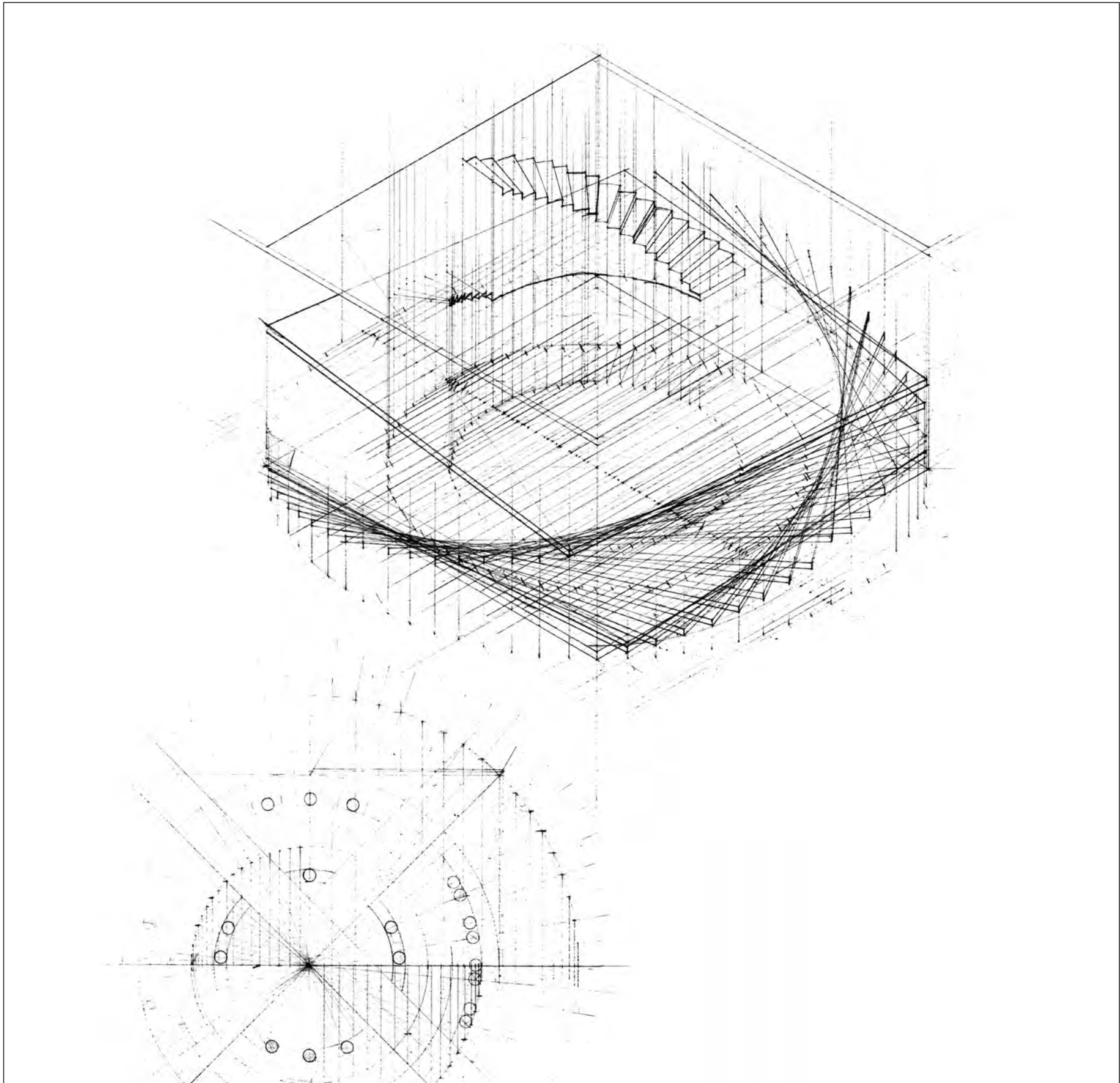
Out of the following came what preceeded. These works are in no way subordinate or inferior. They are the impetus and what allowed for the thesis.

A. Thinking Drawings



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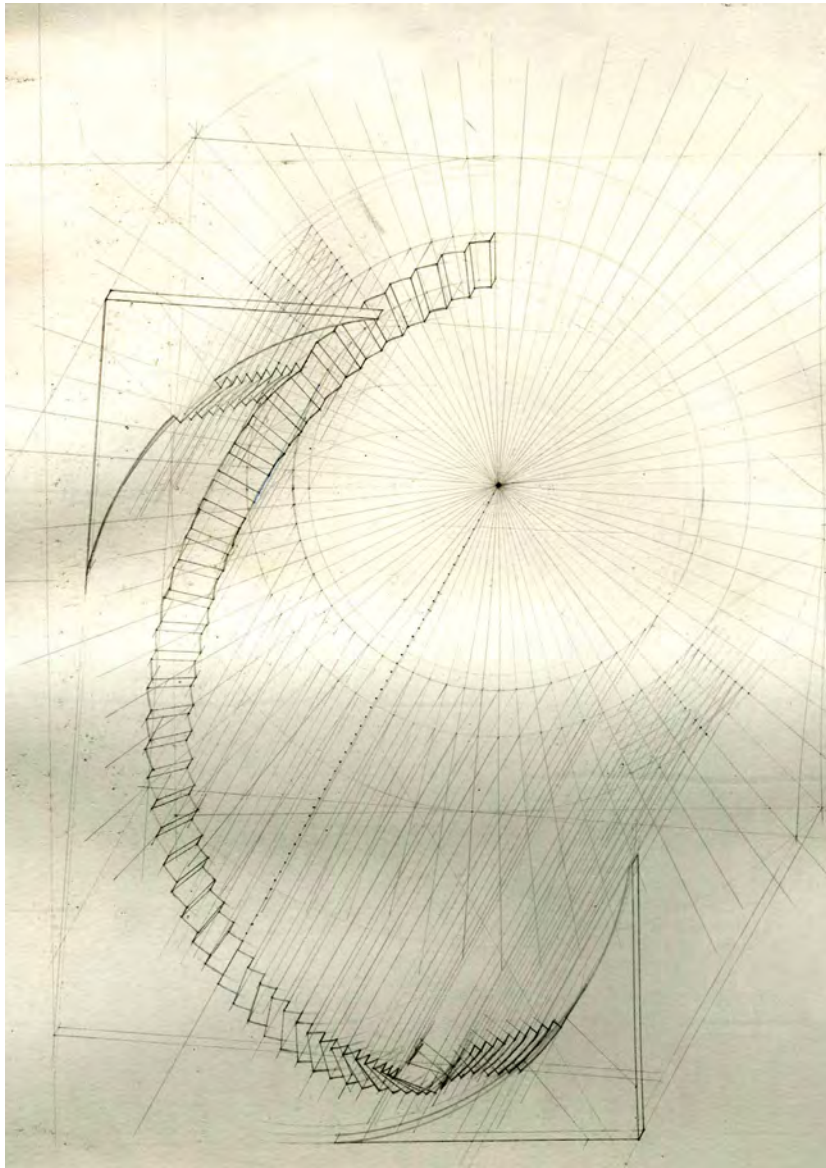
Hovered above the threshold between ocean and shore. Entrance to the tower.



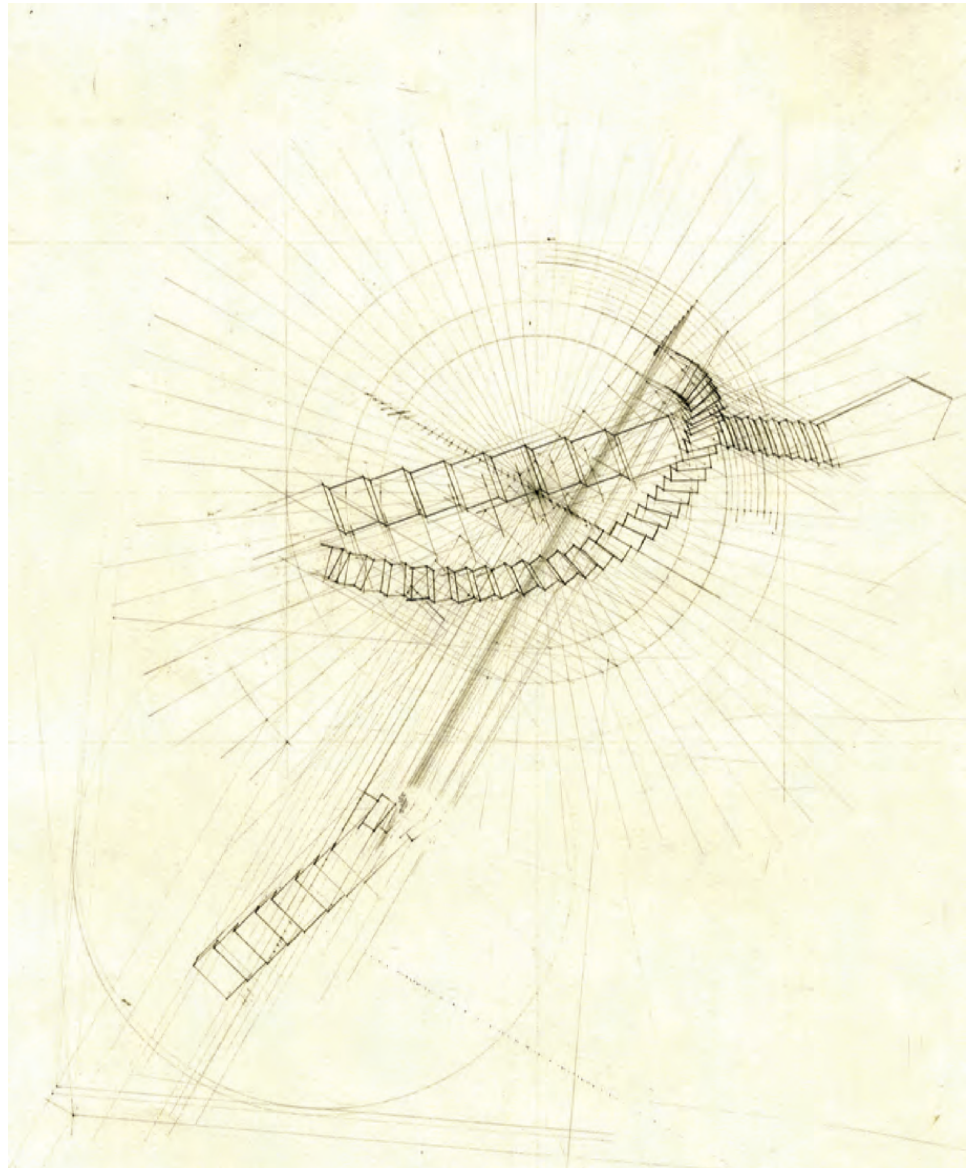
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[top] Isometric projection of interior and exterior stairs. [bottom] Plan sketch of structural columns.

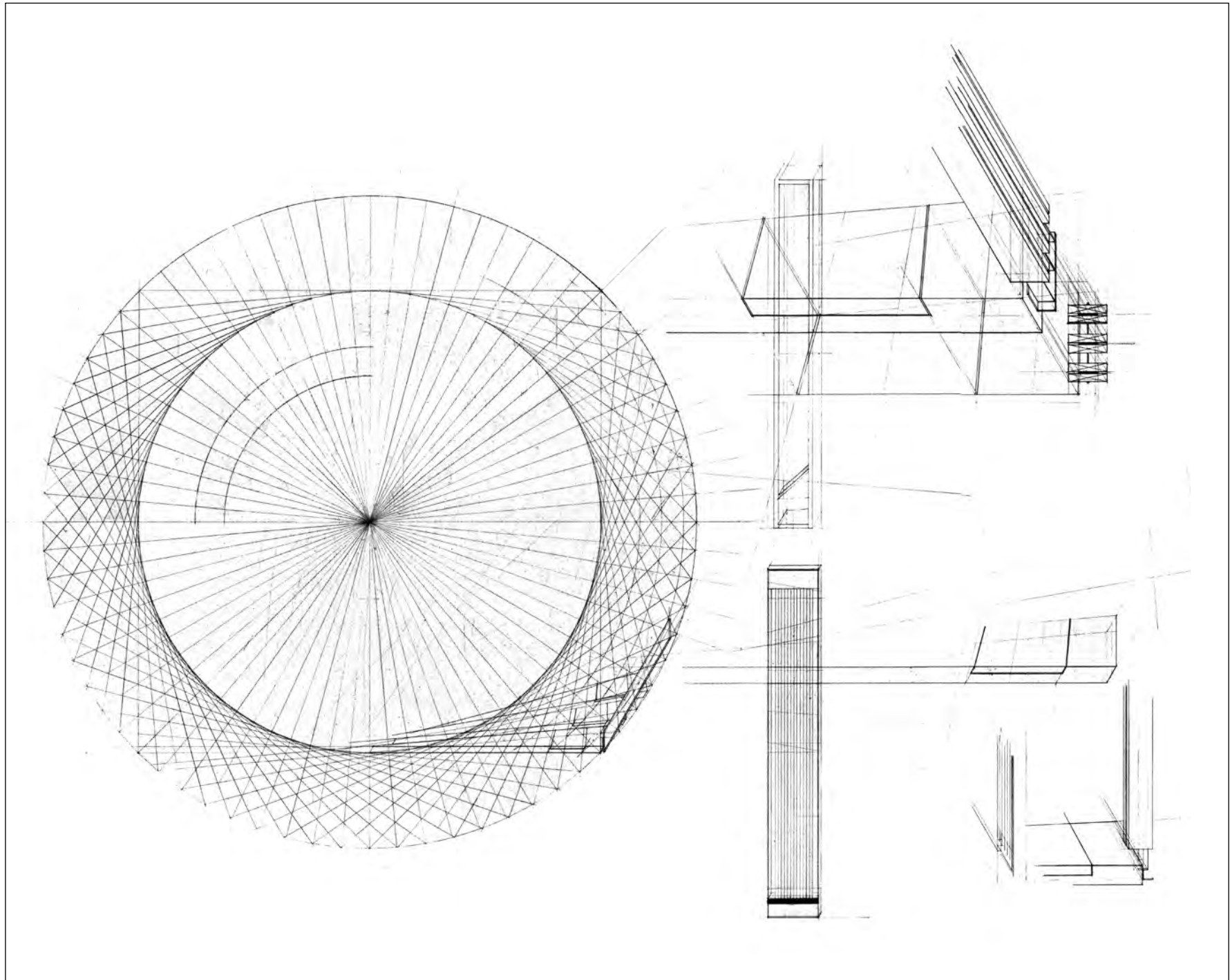
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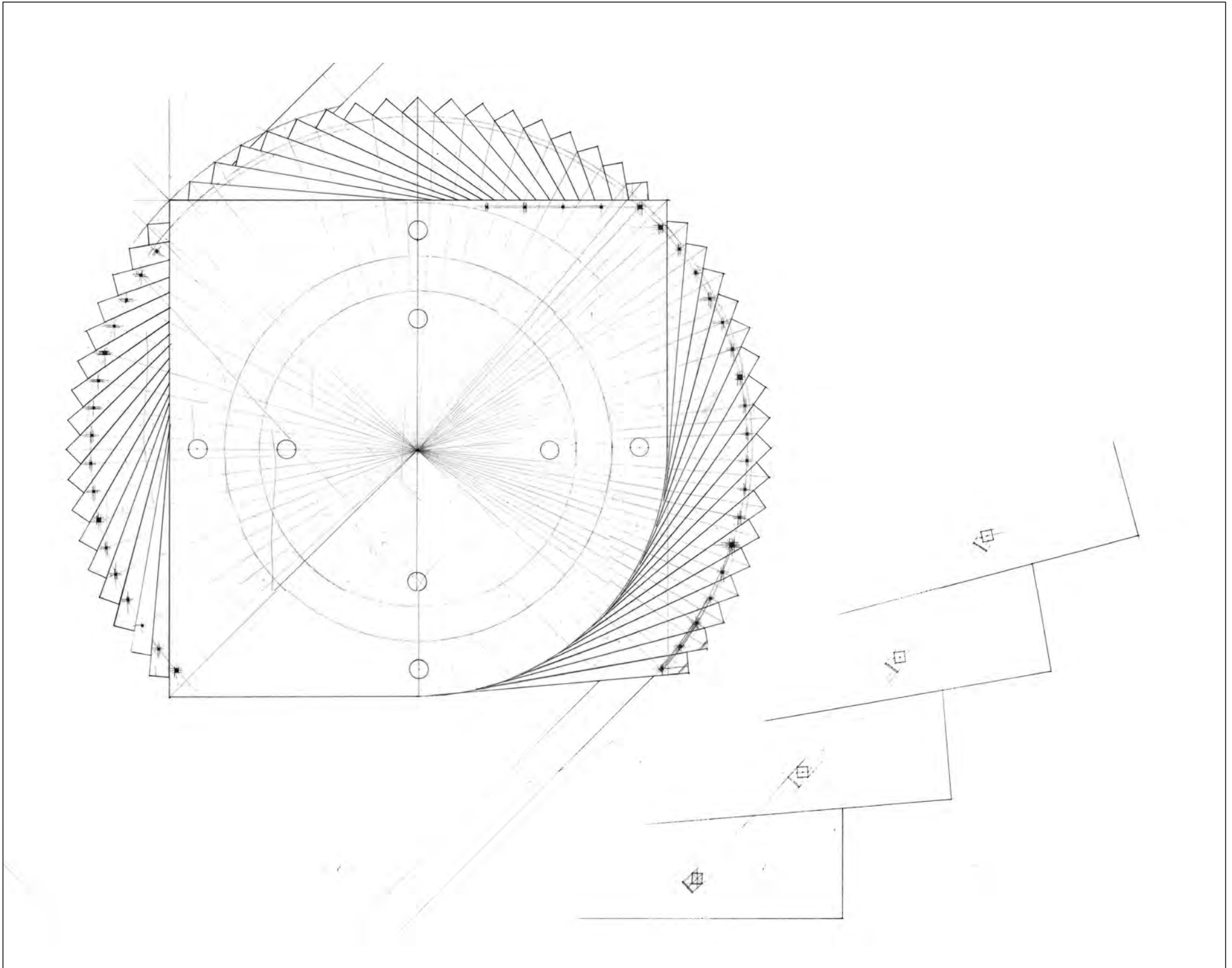


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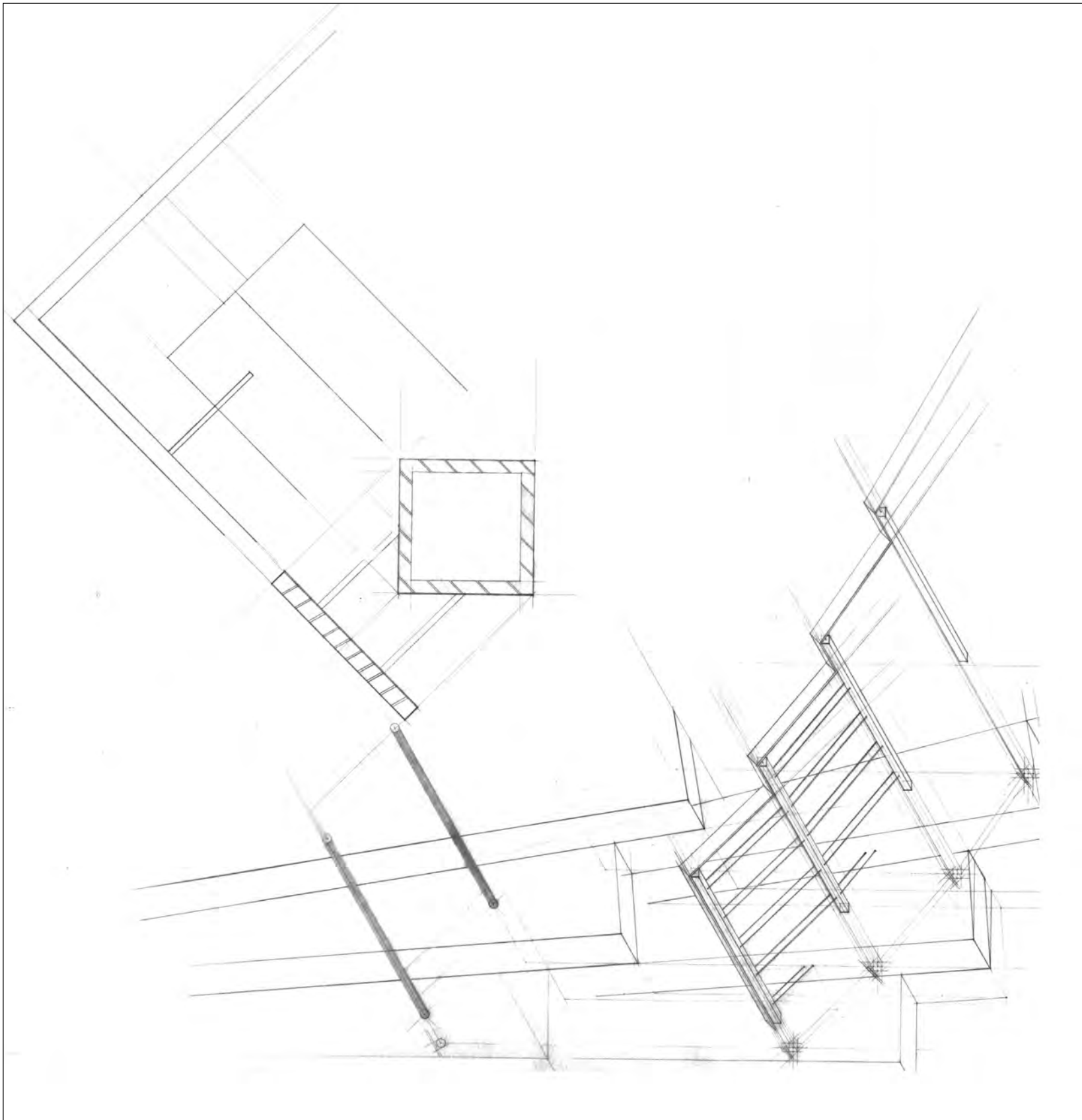
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Proposal for enclosing the exterior stair.
On the ascent, the landscape is obstructed by the columns but it is revealed through them on the descent.



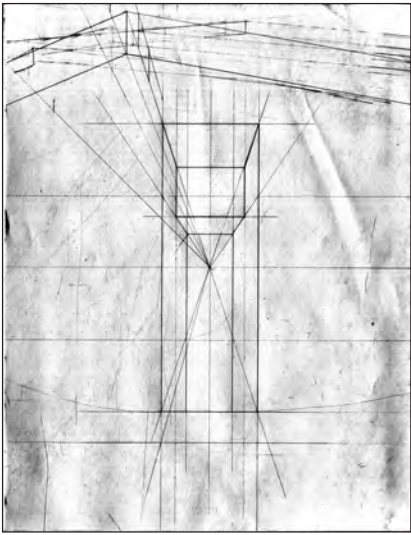
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Plan of first 18 slabs with railing. Detailed plan of railing posts.

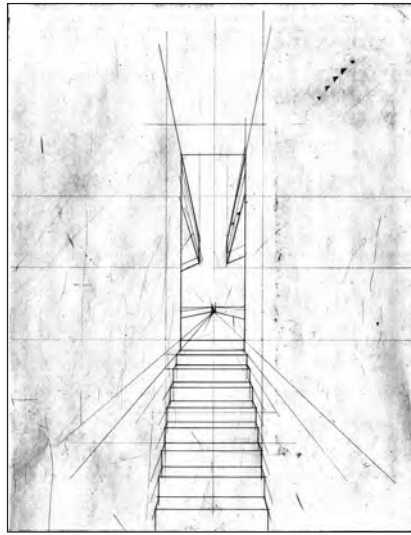


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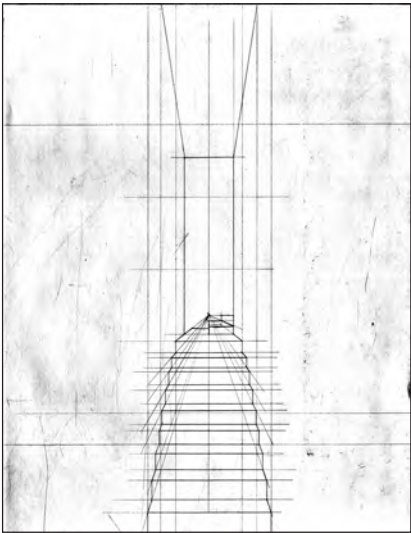
Elevation and plan of railing detail. Axon of railing.



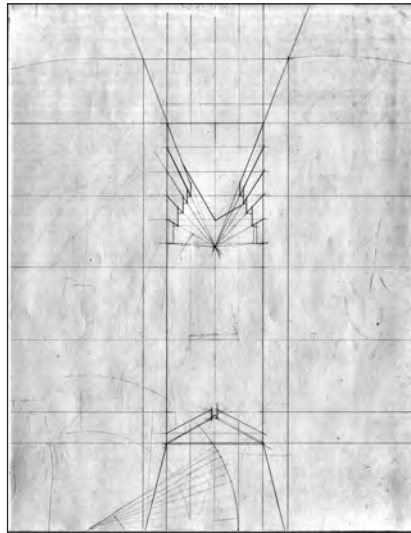
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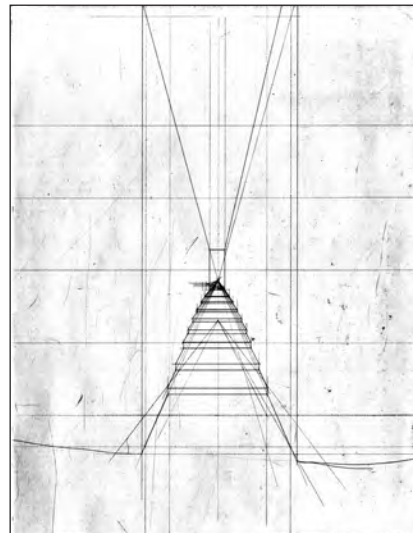
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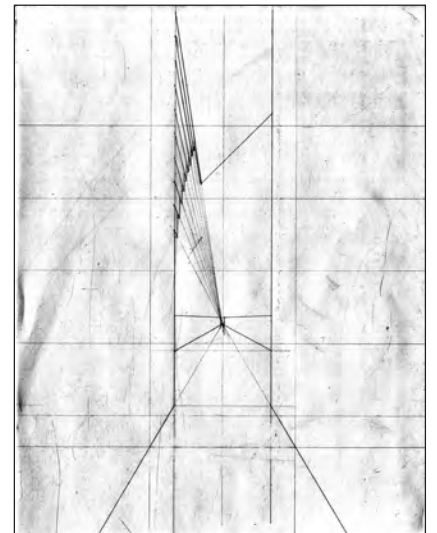
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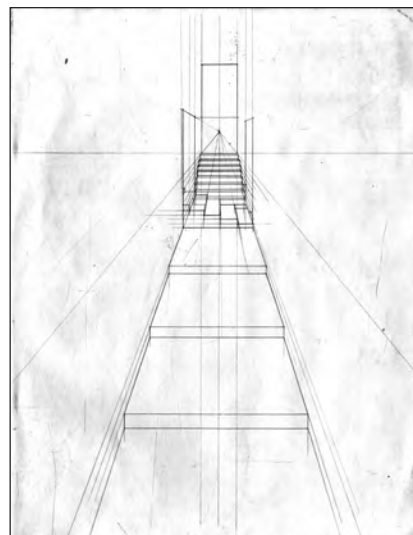
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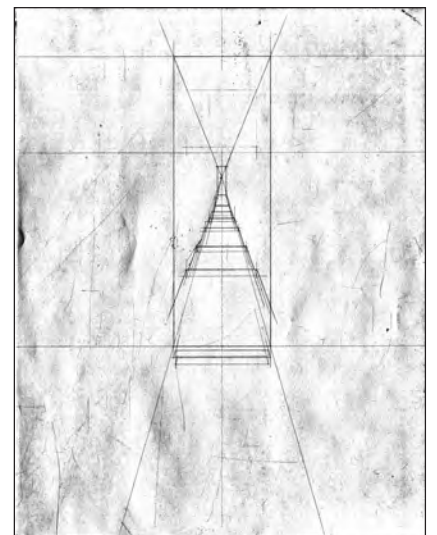
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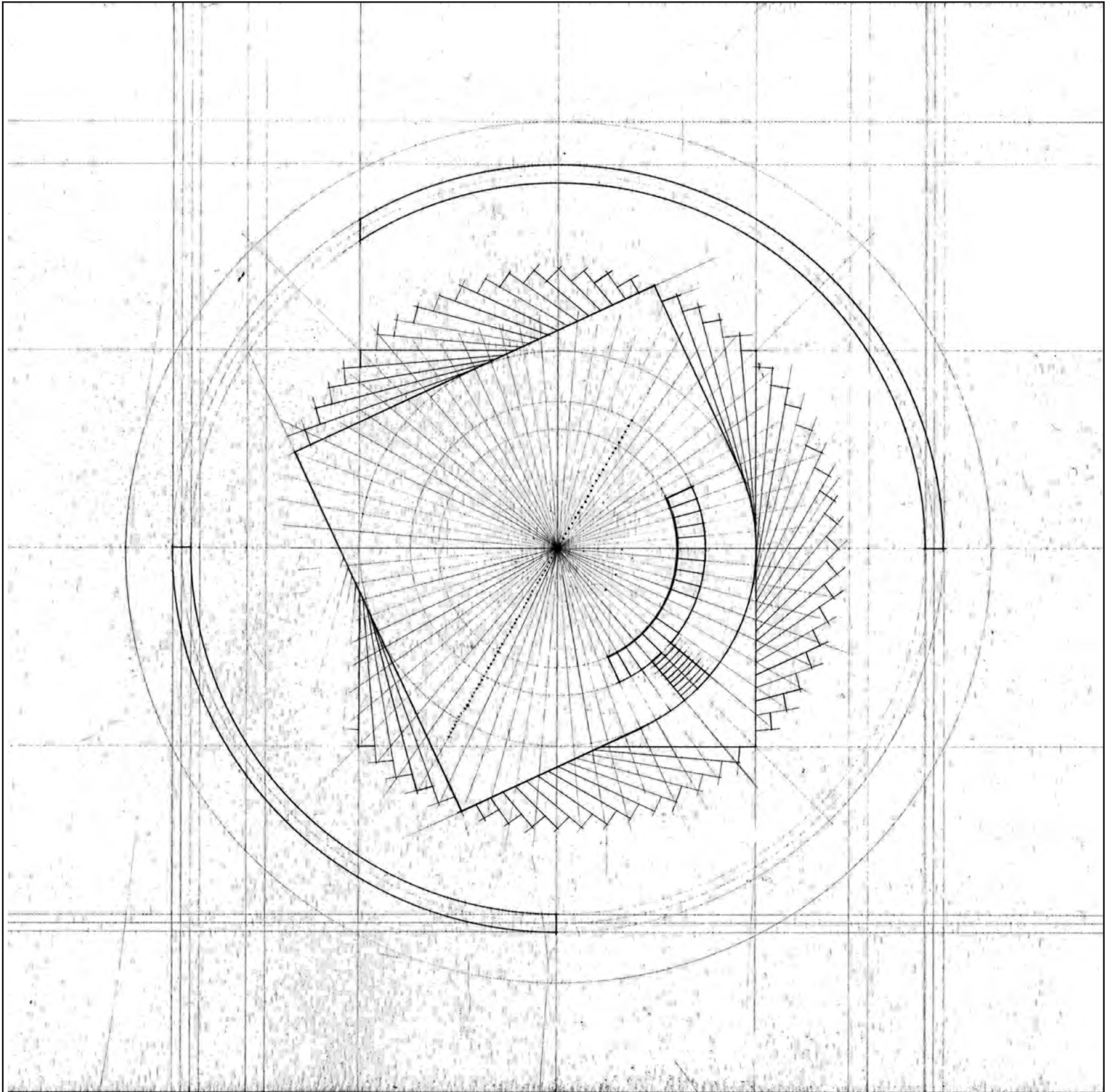


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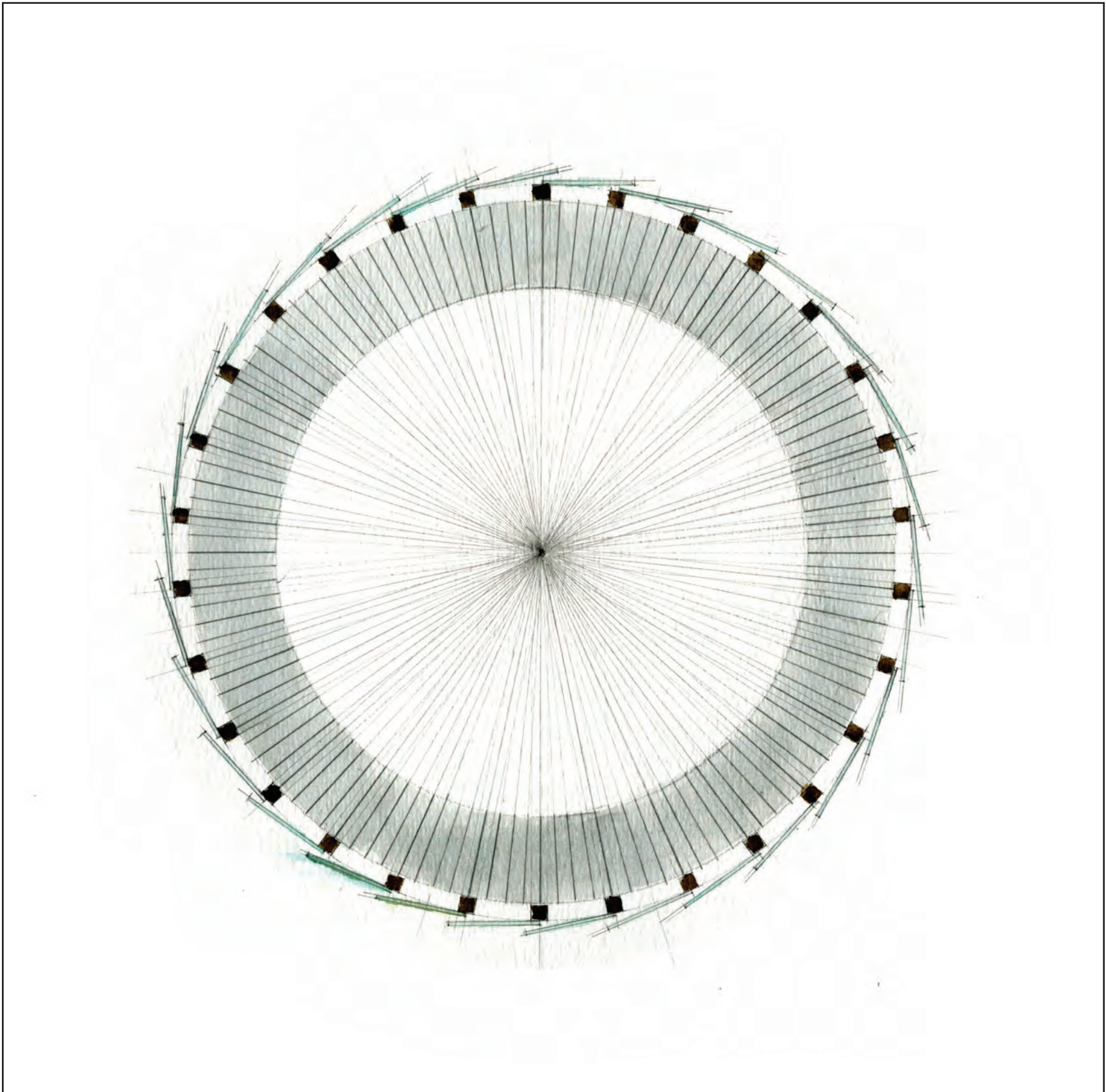
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Perspectives of secondary stairs leading to and from viewing platforms.



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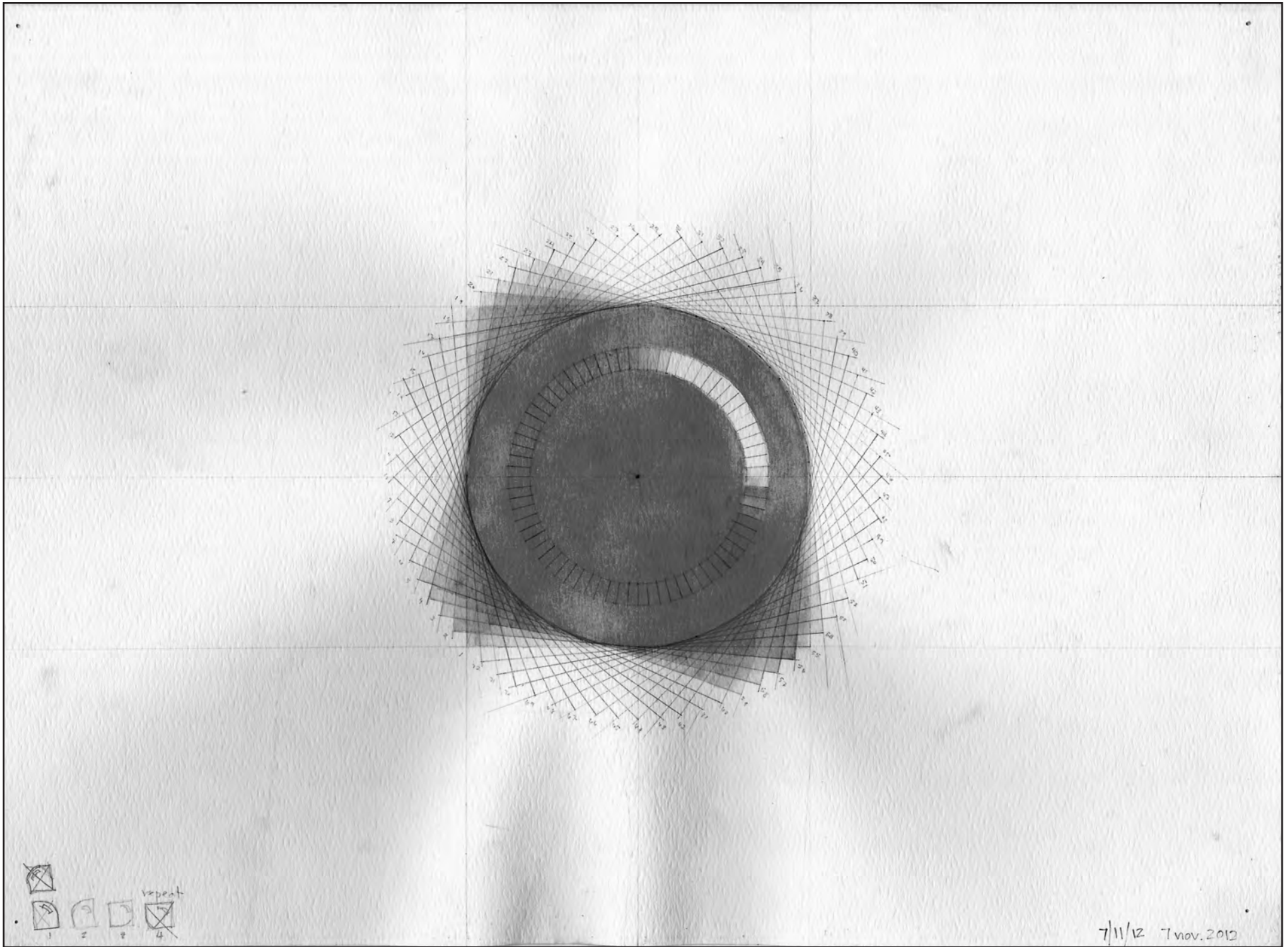
Plan of tower entrance.



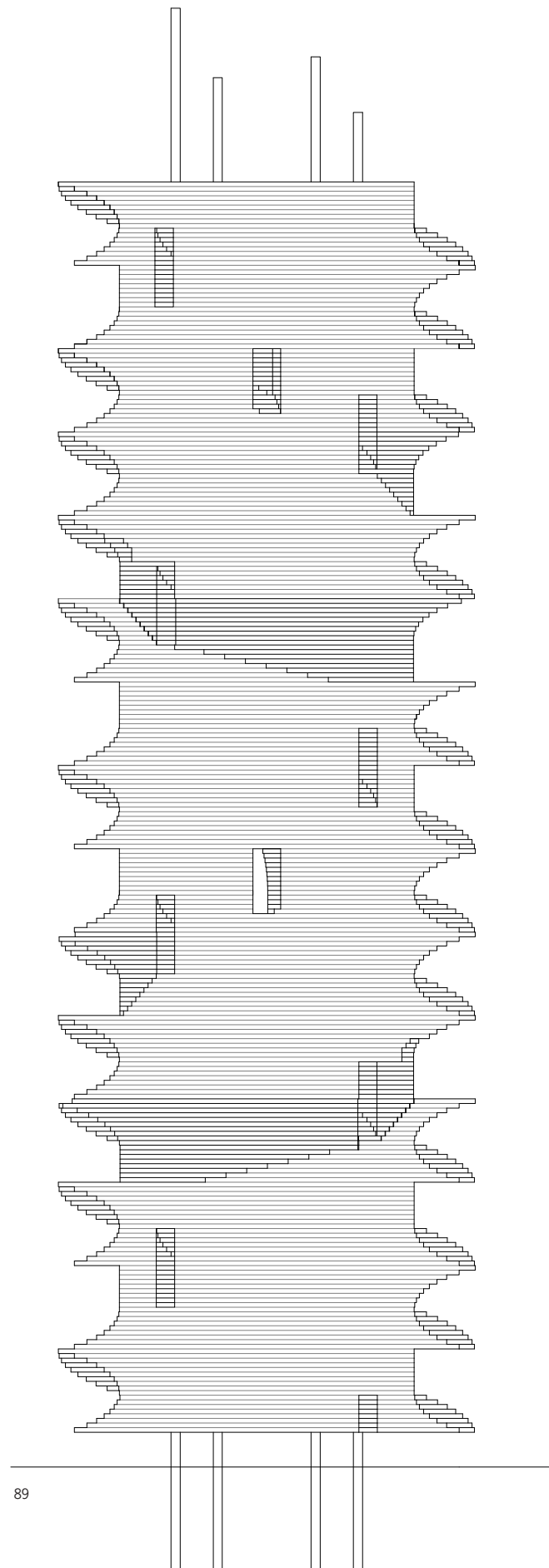
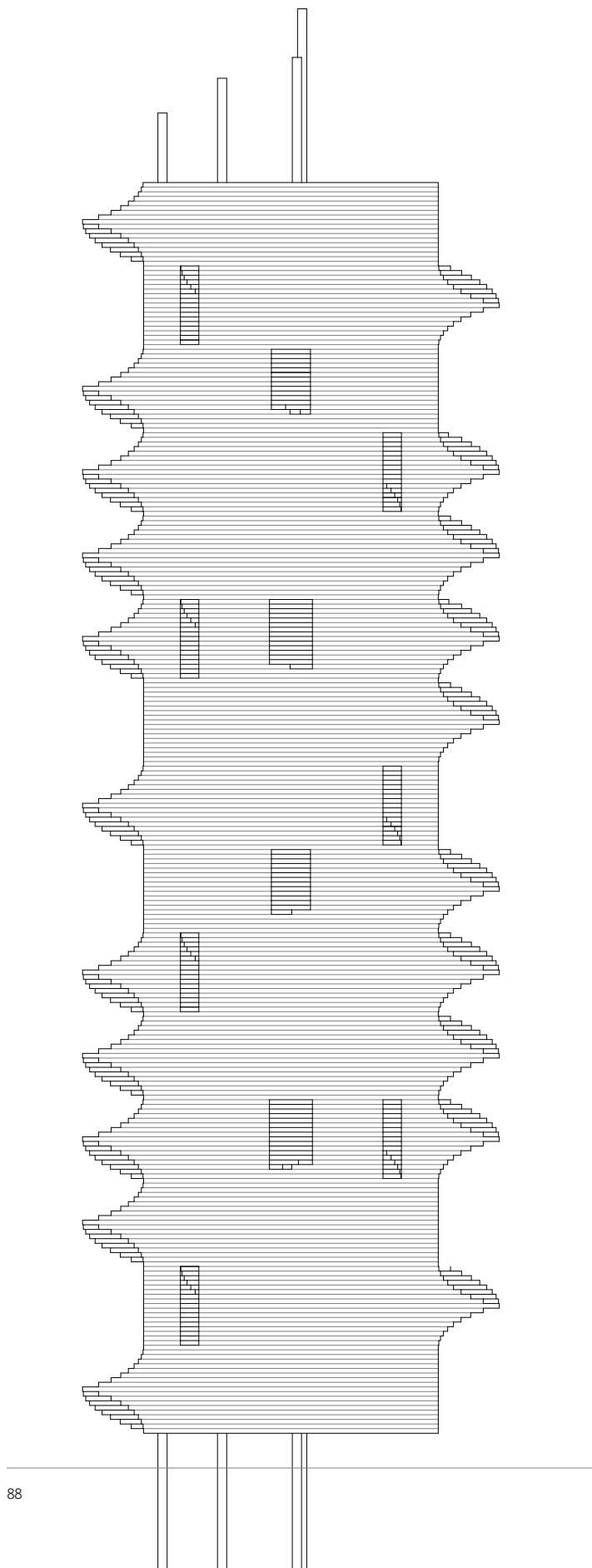
86

Early proposal for exterior stair enclosure.

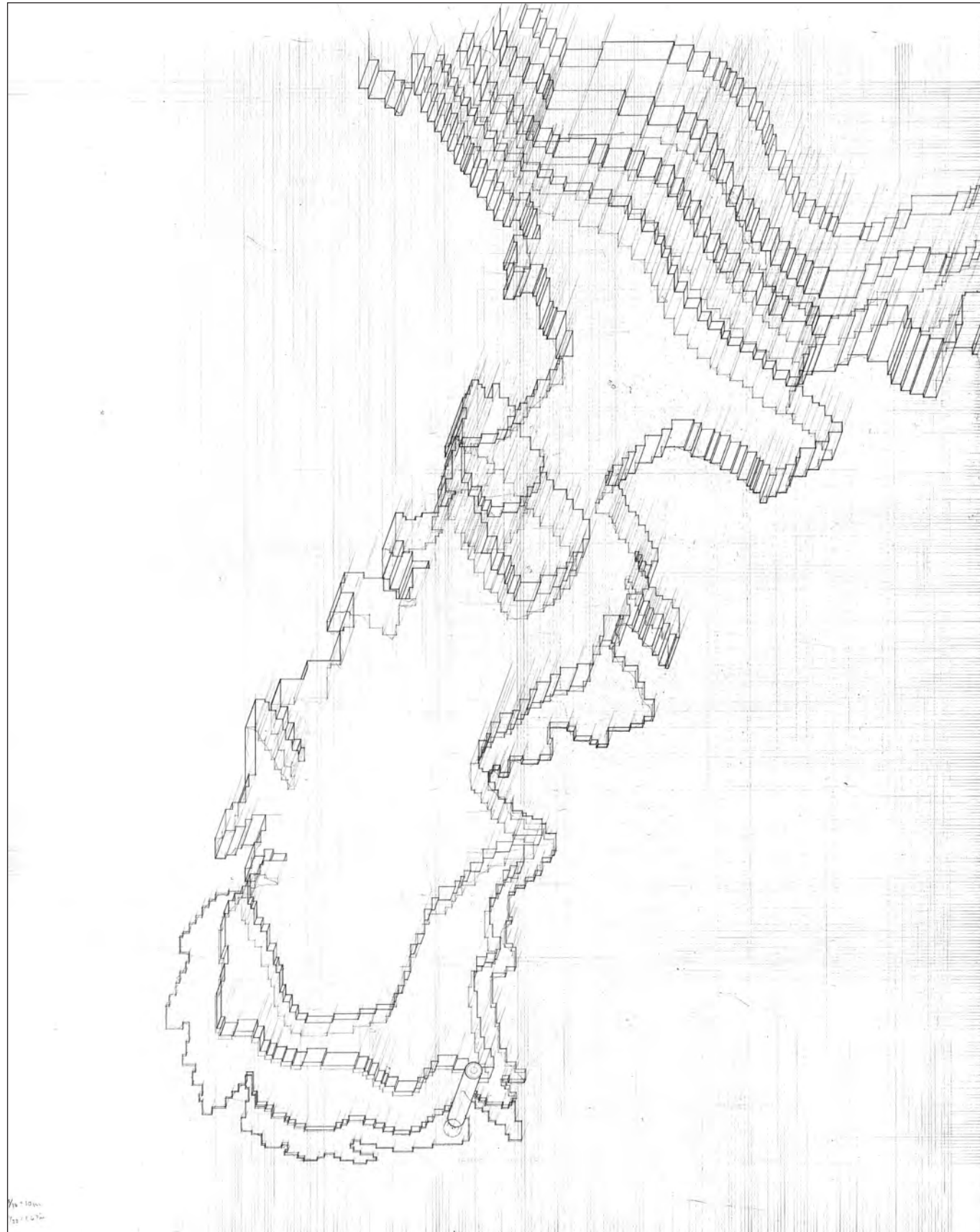
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[left] East-West section [right] North East-South West Section



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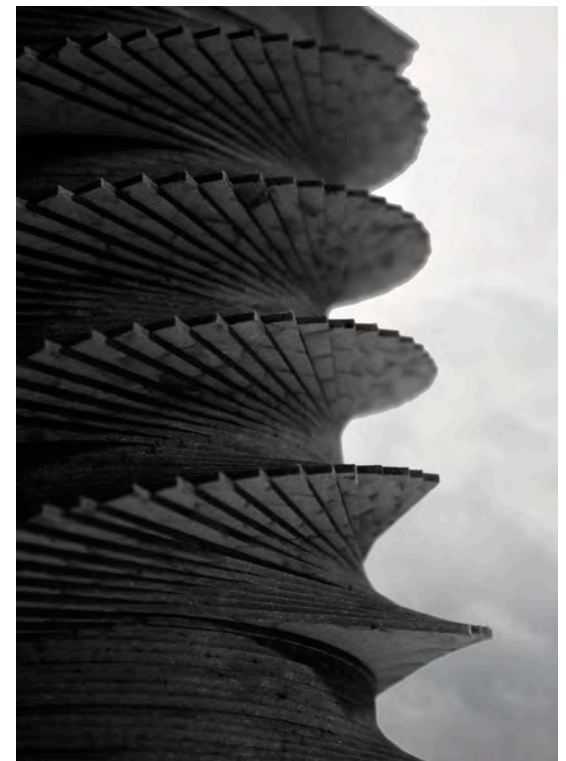
B. Images



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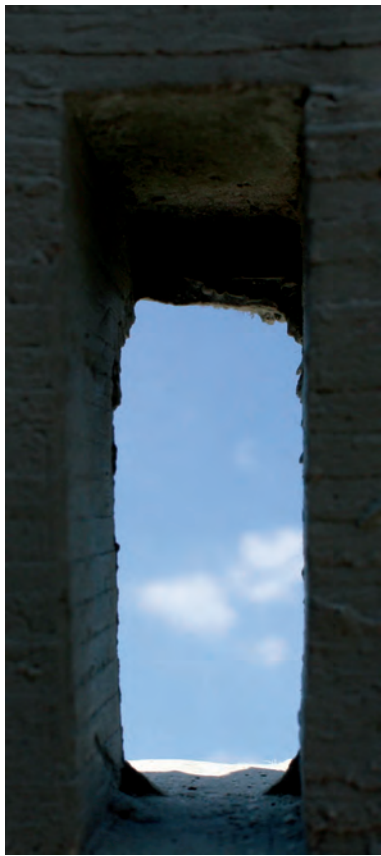
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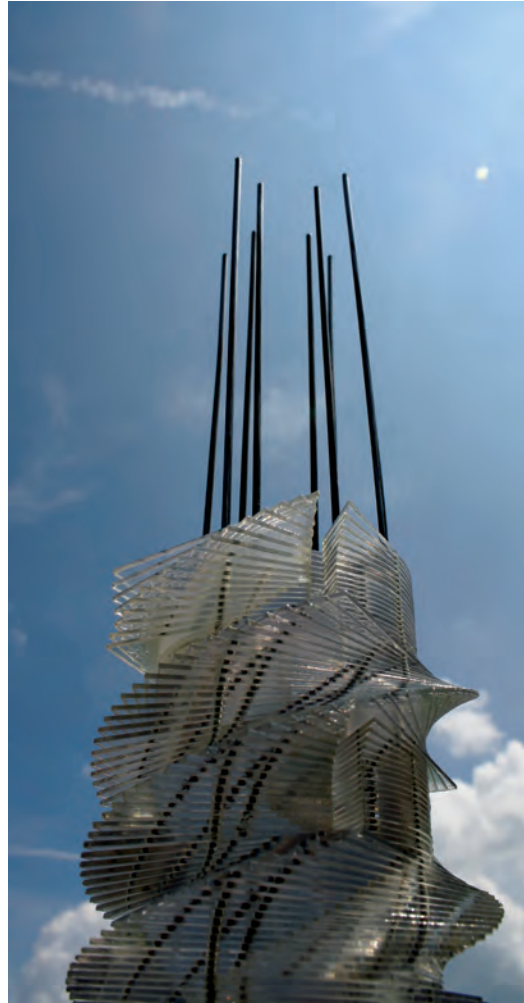
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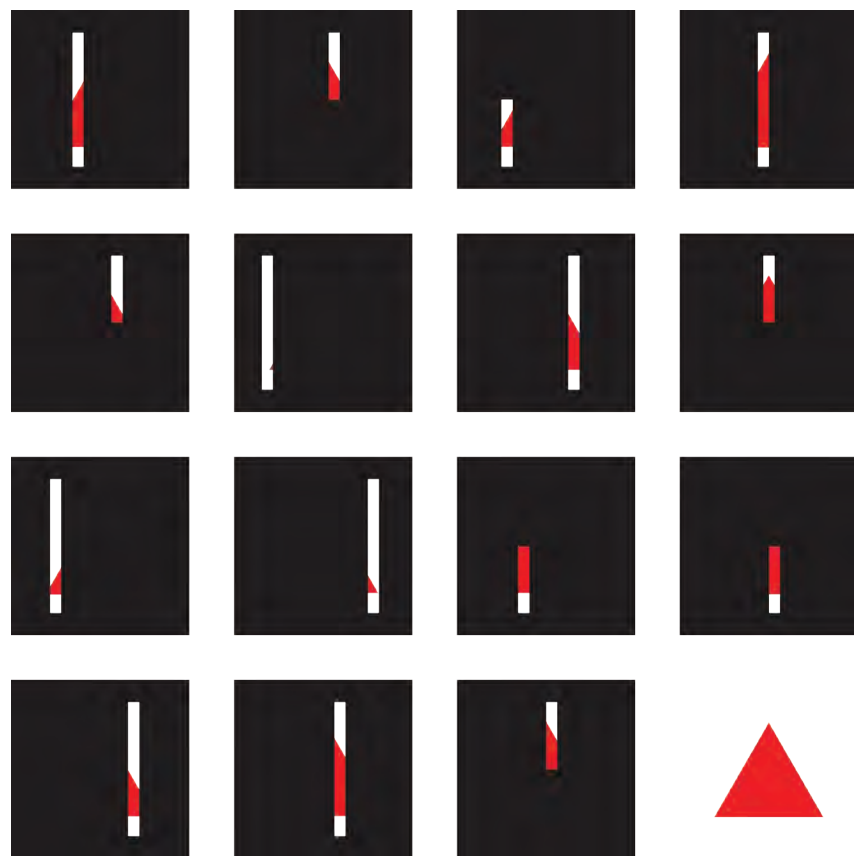


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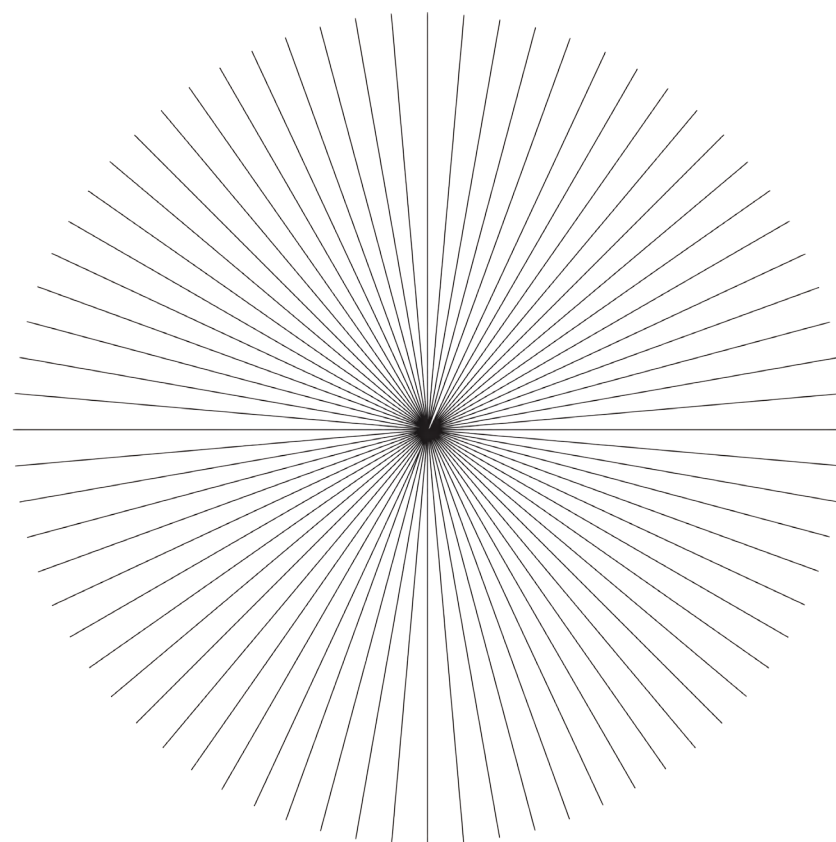


113

C. Diagrams



114 Frame



115 Rotation



116 Horizon I



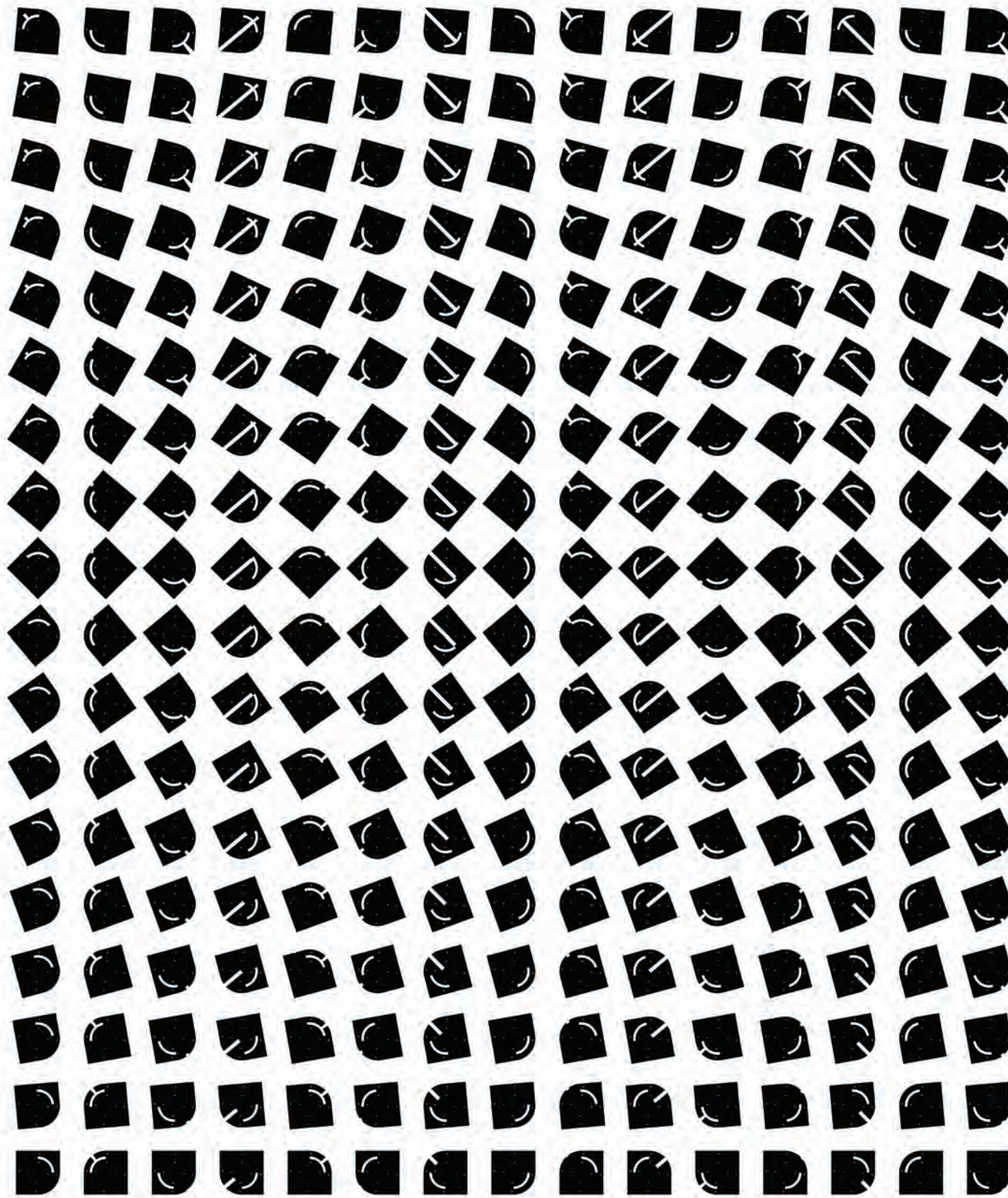
117 Horizon II



118 Horizon III



119 Horizon IV



120 Plan of each of the 270 plates.

D. List of Figures

All were made by the author.

- 01 Piazza Collegiata. Bellinzona, Switzerland. digital photograph
- 02 Leaking light. Salem, Virginia. digital photograph
- 03 Industrial. Salem, Virginia. digital photograph
- 04 Red barn. Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. digital photograph
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- 06 Castelgrande. Bellinzona, Switzerland. digital photograph
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- 48 Atmosphere I. acrylic on vellum. 14x17
- 49 Cascading light. acrylic on watercolor paper. 7x10
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- 54 Entry to the tower, exit from the landscape. acrylic on bristol. 19x24
- 55 Atmosphere II. acrylic on vellum. 14x17
- 56 Through stair meets spiral stair. acrylic on bristol. 19x24
- 57 Blue sky framed leading up to the third platform. acrylic on bristol. 19x24
- 58 Midnight on the seventh platform. acrylic on bristol. 19x24
- 59 Enclosed spiral stair. acrylic on bristol. 19x24
- 60 Stair down to tenth platform. acrylic on bristol. 19x24
- 61 End of the enclosed spiral stair. acrylic on bristol. 19x24
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- 63 Sky I. acrylic on bristol. 3x3
- 64 Sky II. acrylic on bristol. 3x3
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- 66 Grass. acrylic on bristol. 3x3
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- 81 Perspective sketch of stair #3. pencil on paper. 8.5x11
- 82 Perspective sketch of platform looking out. pencil on paper. 8.5x11
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- 96 Interior stair set against the sky. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 97 Front elevation of exterior stair. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 98 Right facade of exterior stair. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 99 Left facade of exterior stair. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 100 Front elevation of interior stair. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 101 Side elevation of interior stair. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 102 Section in elevation. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 103 Ladder stair. digital photograph of chipboard section model.
- 104 Imitation of a painting. digital photograph of second rockite model.
- 105 Platform in the shadows. digital photograph of second rockite model.
- 106 Four rockite models, two with charcoal dye. digital photograph collage.
- 107 Through: sand. digital photograph of second rockite model.
- 108 Through: sky. digital photograph of first rockite model.
- 109 Through: stone. digital photograph of first rockite model.
- 110 Through: vegetation. digital photograph of first rockite model.
- 111 Top of tower column. digital photograph of acrylic model.
- 112 Middle of tower column. digital photograph of acrylic model.
- 113 Tower column embedded in the stone shore. digital photograph of acrylic model.
- 114 Framing, enframing. digital diagram.
- 115 Rotation at 5 degrees, 72 parts. digital diagram.
- 116 Horizon I. digital diagram.
- 117 Horizon II. digital diagram.
- 118 Horizon III. digital diagram.
- 119 Horizon IV. digital diagram.
- 120 Plans of all 270 plates in the tower. First plate is bottom left.
- 121 La Tourette, France. digital photograph

E. Collection of Selected Works

Interaction of Color by Josef Albers
The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture by Pier Vittorio Aureli
Grain Elevators by Bernd & Hilla Becher
Marcovaldo: or the Seasons in the City by Italo Calvino
The Alphabet and the Algorithm by Mario Carpo
Toward an Architecture by Le Corbusier
Raimund Abraham, Unbuilt by Brigitte Groihofer
The Question Concerning Technology by Martin Heidegger
Grain Elevators by Lisa Mahar-Keplinger
IKB 191, a painting by Yves Klien
The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott edited by Lockhart & Turner
Topographical Stories by David Leatherbarrow
The Image of the City by Kevin Lynch
Vision in Motion by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy
On Weathering by Mohsen Mostafavi & David Leatherbarrow
The Square by Bruno Munari
An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris by Georges Perec
Callanish & Other Megalithic Sites of the Outer Hebrides by Gerald Ponting
Around the Shadow Line: Beyond Urban Architecture by Franco Purini
Turner and the Elements by Richter-Musso & Westheider
The Architecture of the City by Aldo Rossi
A Scientific Autobiography by Aldo Rossi
Four Public Squares in the City of Leonforte by Jorge Silvetti
Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky
Skye: The Island and Its Legends by Otta Swire
The Crisis of Utopia: Le Corbusier at Algiers by Manfredo Tafuri
In and Of the Eiffel Tower by David Travis
The Manhattan Transcripts by Bernard Tschumi
Turner: The Late Seascapes by Ian Warrell
Anarchitecture: Architecture is a Political Act by Lebbeus Woods
Underground Berlin, a film by Lebbeus Woods
To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf
A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf
Atmospheres by Peter Zumthor



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Postscript

After 72 hours of driving rain, French villages shrouded in fog, and windshield wipers operating at maximum capacity, she woke up to morning's reassuring light sweeping across her cheek, beckoning her to explore the stilled and slumbering monastery.

One somber, blanched cloak dangling on one hook in a row of many against a crimson wall.

A private library in glass cabinets under lock and key and a forbidden staircase, tempting all.

An echo of horizontal light along a narrow hall.

The bombastic, resonating explosion of a door latch violently filling its void in a metal door frame.

A tiny crucified Jesus hanging in a room that snatches the warmth out of her breath the moment it emerges from her lips.

A mirrored reflection of a reflection on a transparent surface overlaying a textured surface - a palimpsest plane.

The view of l'Arbresle shared by one woman and a basket of *pain*, the silence is deafening.