

# A Chapel, Crematorium, and Columbaria

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(ABSTRACT)

Modern park-cemeteries have overcome the problems associated with cemeteries in past centuries. They usually are located away from population centers. They are designed for efficiency and are operated by professional caretakers. When loved ones are laid to rest there, we can be confident, as it is possible to be that their rest will not be disturbed by human beings.

But for all we have gained in peace of mind, we have lost as much or more of the trappings that reminds us of our connections to our ancestors. Cemetery landscapes usually are banal. Neither their settings nor their designs evoke memories or renew our spirits. When we visit cemeteries, we visit another suburb, another mall, a place that “sells” us with promises of security and efficiency, a place that keeps its promises but nevertheless disappoints. Except for individual graves, there is no focal point either in the landscape or architecture of a park-cemetery to help us honor the dead or to rejoice in life.

The Chapel Building is a focal point for a cemetery, the place where the dead and the living co-exist, however briefly. The ground floor of the Chapel houses the business of death. There is a place for preparation of bodies for burial, as well as a crematorium. The retaining walls cutting a section in the earth in an “L” shape is the columbaria.

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The Chapel Building is a focal point for a cemetery, the place where the dead and the living co-exist, however briefly. It is situated in the Riverview Cemetery. This cemetery is not modern. It lies on a hill on the outskirts of Charlottesville, Virginia. It is surrounded by unfashionable neighborhoods, so it too is not fashionable. Yet it is a beautiful place, with views north and east to a river and the Southwest Mountains, Southeast to Monticello, westward to the city, and on farther west, to the Ragged Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The Chapel is situated at the northern edge of the cemetery. One approach is by a path leading through the grounds from the south. Seen from this approach, the Chapel does not impose on the landscape. It does not rise from the top of the hillside. But the Chapel provides a landmark to guide the visitor; raised lead entryways, a gateway, behind which exist both the possibility of spiritual rapprochement and the reality of secular necessities.

From the Riverview Cemetery the cycles of nature can be seen clearly – starkly. Trees, shrubs, flowers, and wild plants color the green during their growing seasons and recede to dormancy at the approach of winter. The river rises with floods and falls during droughts. Sun, dark, rain, fog, snow, cold, and heat come and go in their times. Around the cemetery, humans and animals live according to their patterns. And as life continues, the remains of the dead continue to arrive at the cemetery.

The Chapel embraces nature’s cycles, both of life and dead. It aligns itself with the land and with the place it serves. The Chapel does not assert its dominance over the land but accedes to its contours.

Its gardens and its watercourse assimilate with local plants and streams. Its functions serve both the living and the dead.

But no building is completely natural to a place. A building, even the grass hut of nomad, is a human construction that is the practical expression of human imagination, of ideas informed by what we know. What we see, what we should know, what we long to see. It is useless to apologize for the powers of cognition made manifest in buildings; it is crucial to have good ideas.



MODEL SHOT: CHAPEL DURING SUNRISE



The Chapel proposes not only ideas inspired by the place where it is built and the natural life that exists there, but also the human ideas of what is appropriate for the dead and the necessary for the living. For instance, the person who has undertaken the journey from the south to the upper entranceway of the Chapel passes through the entranceway in the raised slab, crosses a bridge over a watercourse, and enters the Chapel.

The Chapel is non-denominational. It is suitable for services, silent revelry, or a bit of rest after a long walk. The west-facing, floor-to-ceiling windows slowly flood the Chapel with sunlight as the end of the day approaches, but reminding us the beginning of a new day. While the prospect afforded of mountains, trees, and the land beyond is glorious, and may therefore inspire reverence, the Chapel itself demands nothing of visitors except that they pass through it or leave it the way they came.

The ideas, and hence the connections between the living and the dead, inherent in this description are obvious. Life is a journey. Many people believe that dead is another journey. In life we go from place to place; so may we do so in death. The dead go from this place to another, many believe, as the living might leave their homes, pass through a portal, and cross a stream to visit the dead. But as the journey to the Chapel symbolizes in many ways the journeys of life and death, the Chapel structure allows visitors to see the abundant life surrounding them and affords them the opportunity to regenerate their

view, but, in the Chapel, we may at last speak to them or to them in the manner

we think best. And those who believe in a deity or have faith in an afterlife may hold conversations appropriate to their faiths. From there, the living go home to continue life, while the dead remain behind.

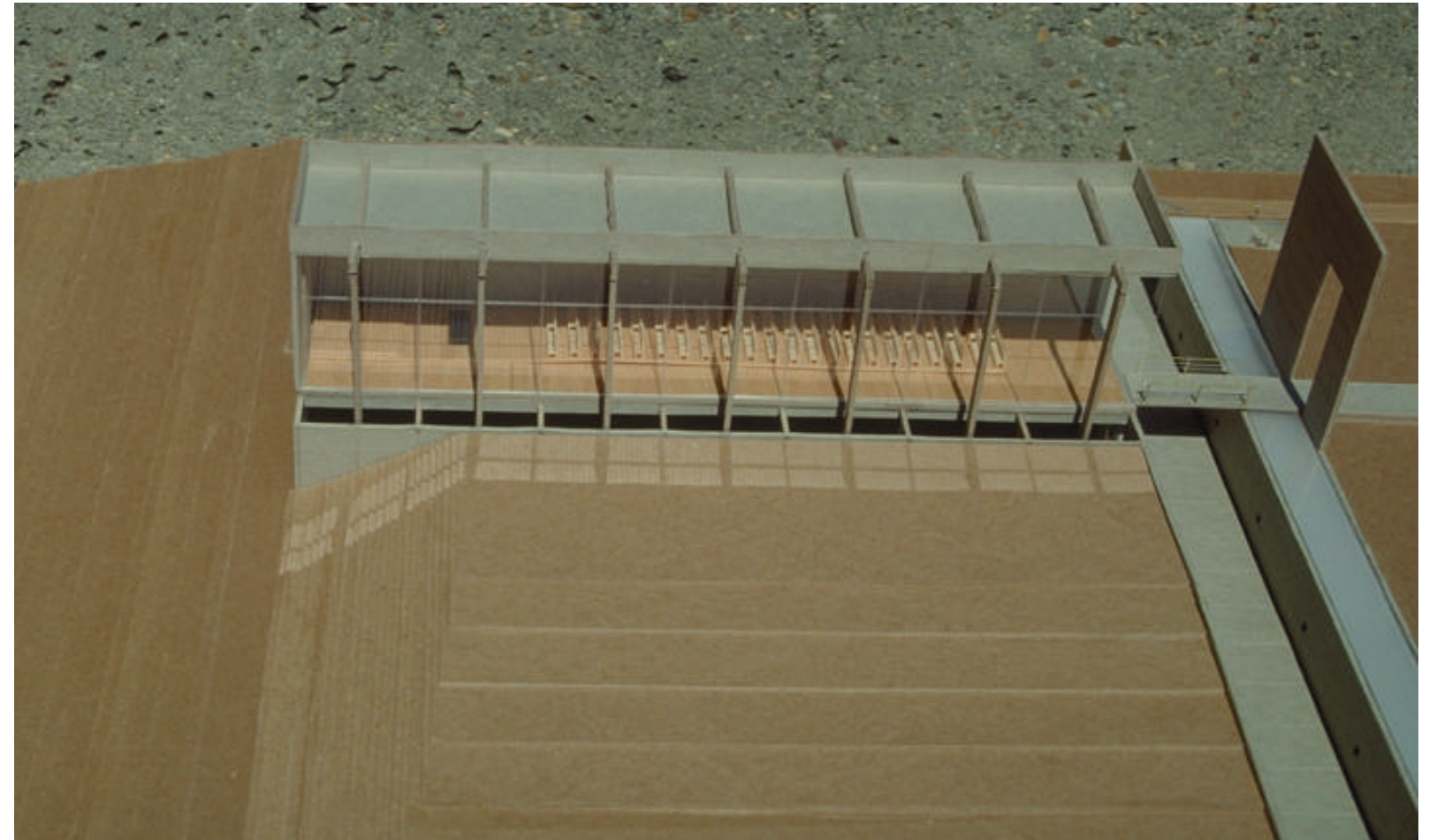
The ground floor of the Chapel houses the business of death. There is a place for preparation of bodies for burial, as well as a crematorium.

extending from the retaining wall of the watercourse traveling west and turning south, is the columbaria, providing individual recesses where urns can be stored. This columbaria is a west facing retaining wall cut against the sloping land running down to the river. It is both an extension of the Chapel and the landscape.

The lower level is not a lesser place than the Chapel above. Its walls create the foundation for the Chapel above and its walls extend beyond into the landscape creating a pathway in the earth for the living open to the sky and cumulating into the columbaria.

Preparation of the dead takes place in the lower level. It attends to the part of the ceremonies for the dead. Some natural light from the west penetrates into the lower level, so the dead, the specialist, and visitors are not left completely in the dark. It is not yet time for that.

Inevitably, any living person who has come to work or to mourn or to pay respects is led away from the business of death back to the set of ideas that support life. The urn bearer emerges from the crematorium, passes through the open tunnel, and emerges into an open space beneath an open sky where the urn can be stored. From darkness to light, from death to life. The casual visitor ascends from the relative darkness of the lower level to the light and openness of the Chapel, from the inevitability of death to the presence of life



MODEL SHOT: CHAPEL DURING SUNSET

and the hope of some existence beyond the grave. The worker leaves by the back door thinking of a job well done.

In spite of ideas discussed above, the Chapel does not make “a statement” in the sense sometimes attached to buildings proposed by architects. It rejects the idiosyncratic fancy inherent in such statements. But it also does not pretend that it is not there. It is the focal point for the cemetery; it is there for the living and the dead.

It seeks to resolve the tension always present between site and structure by embracing nature’s creative supremacy over land and life. But its formative ideas celebrate the fact that, while human beings also live and die on this earth in nature’s cycle, we have the power to imagine, at least, that our lives and our deaths have purposes, and that these purposes inevitably shall be revealed.

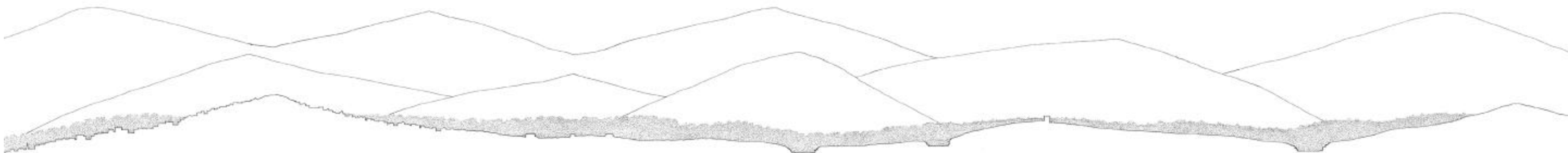


MODEL SHOT: BIRD’S EYE VIEW DURING SUNSET





CITY SITE PLAN

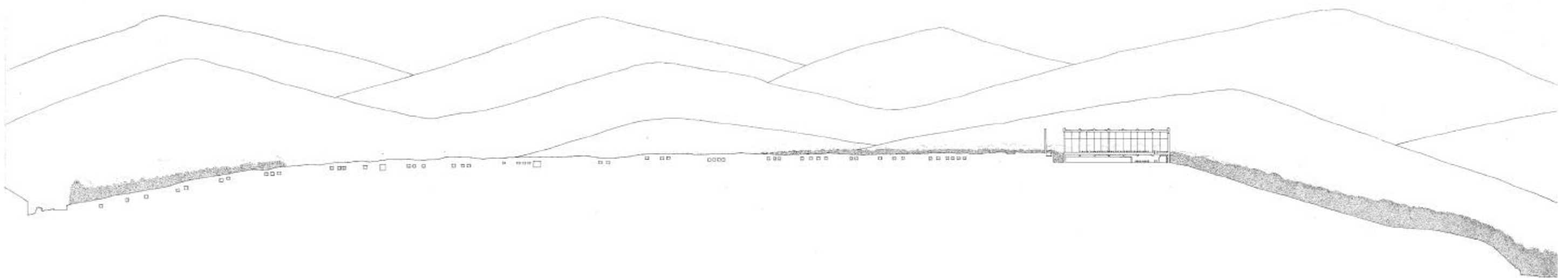


CITY SITE SECTION

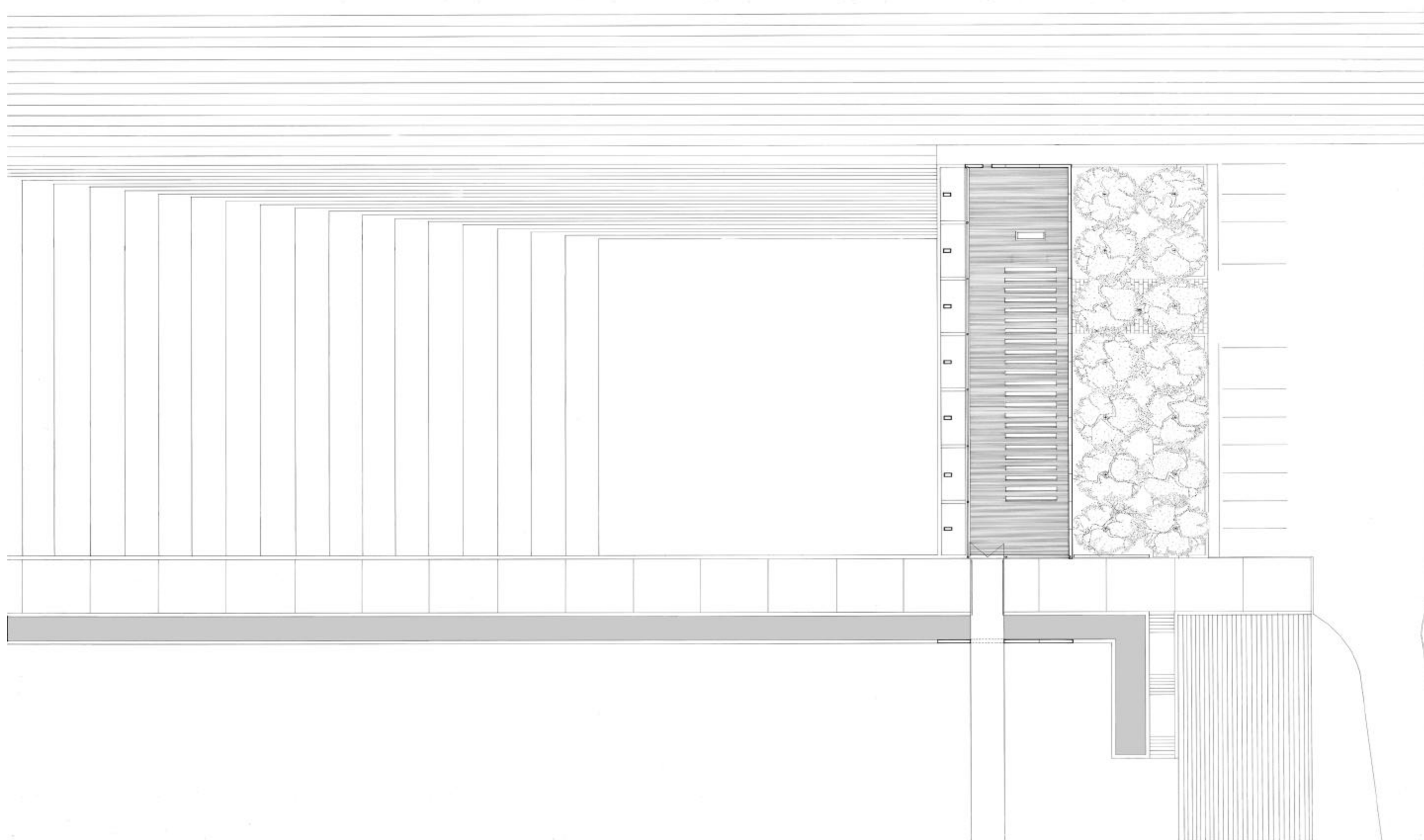




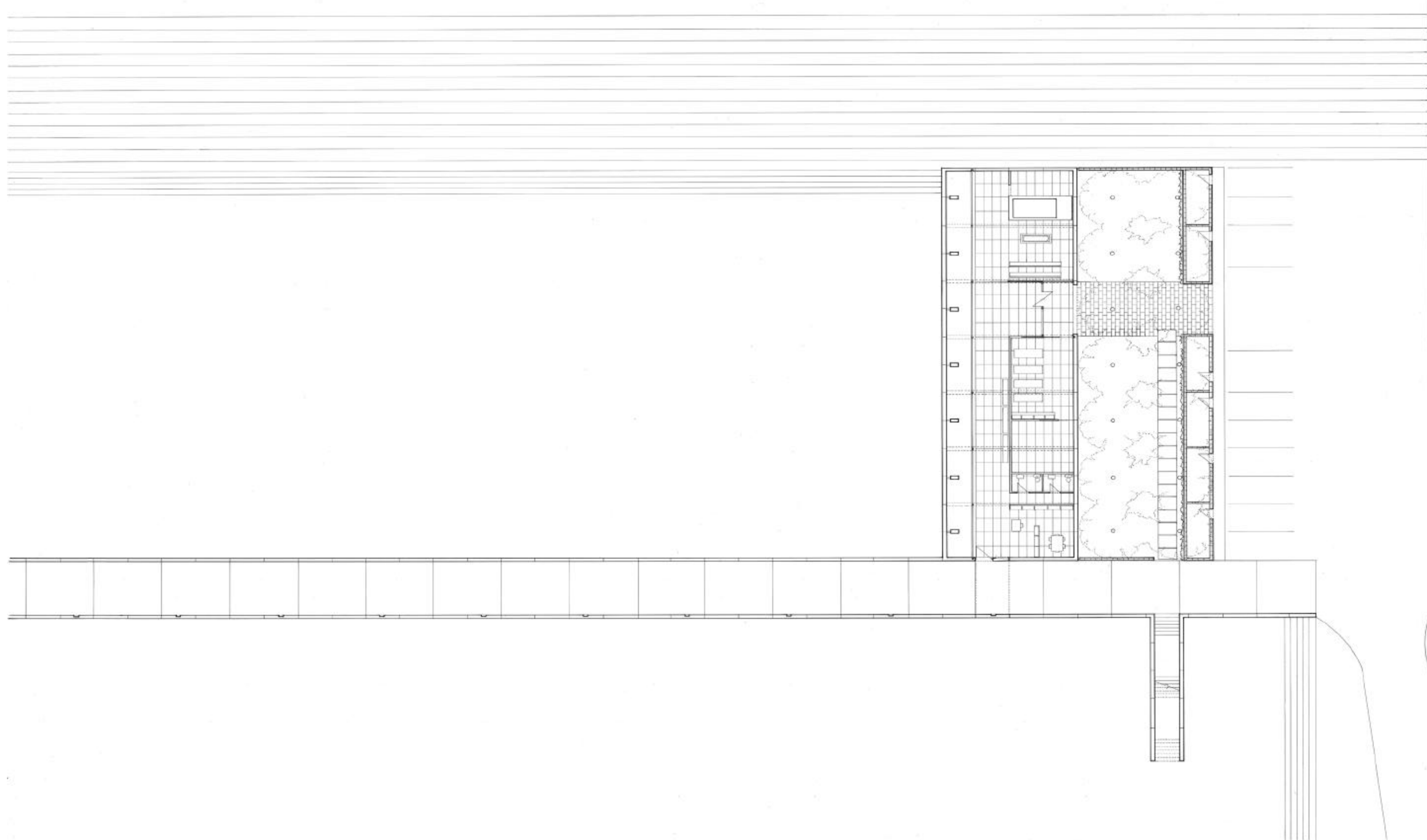
SITE PLAN



SITE SECTION LOOKING WEST

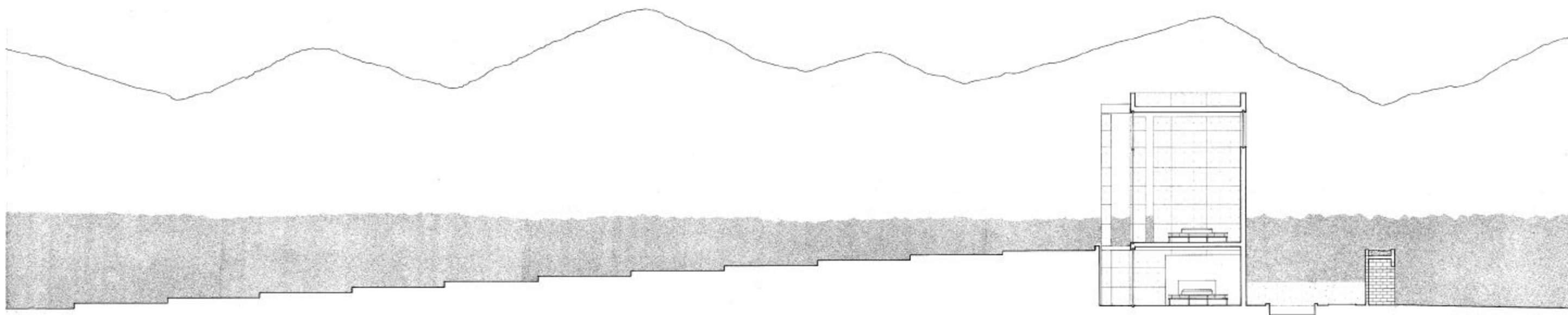


CHAPEL: FIRST FLOOR PLAN

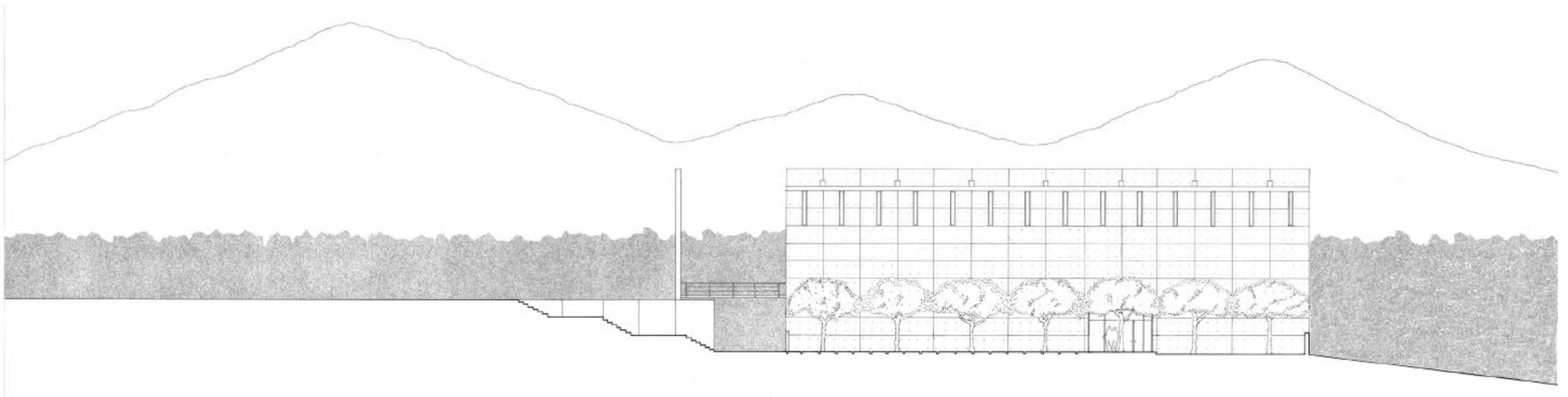


CREMATORIUM / SERVICE: GROUND FLOOR PLAN

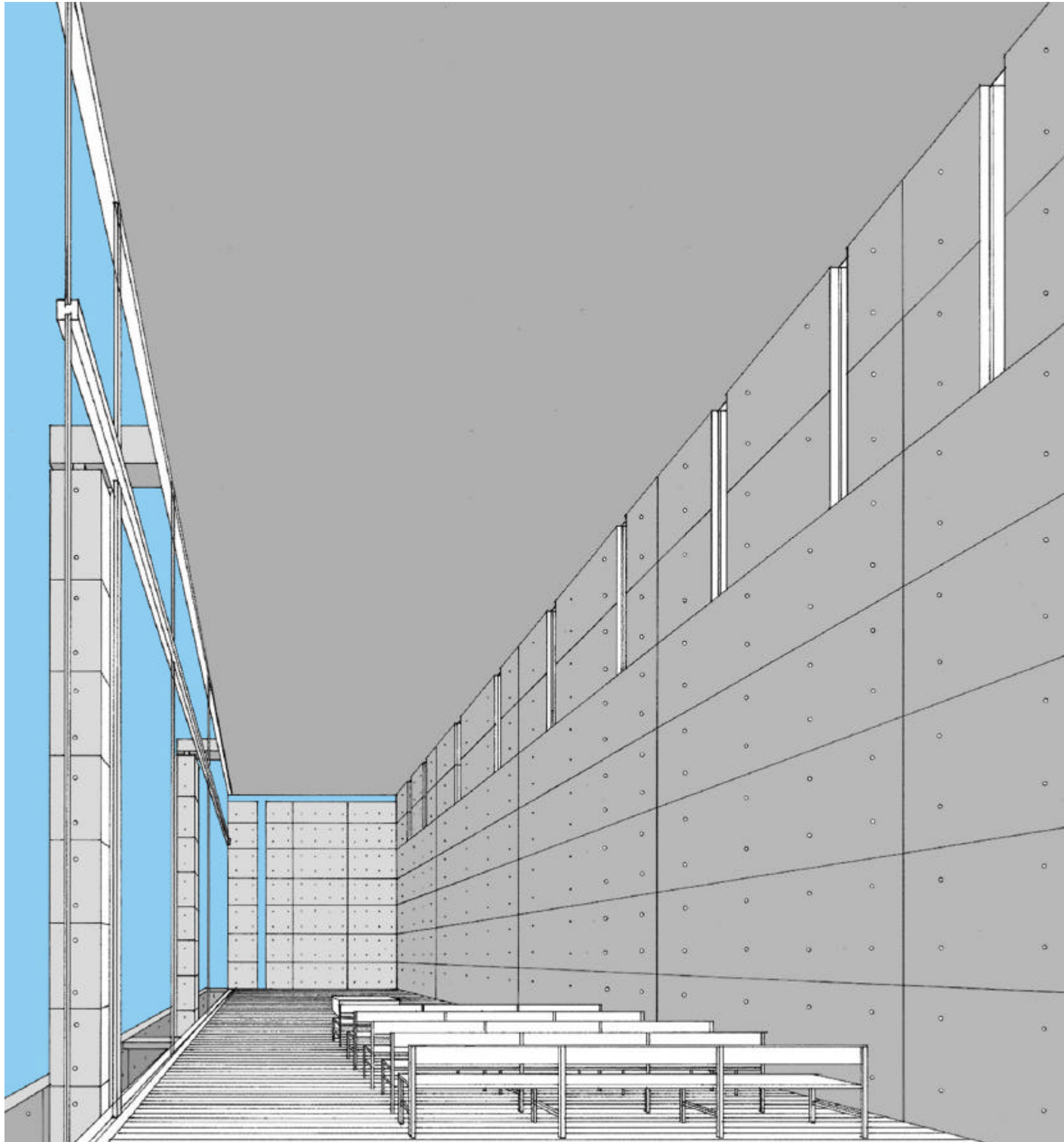




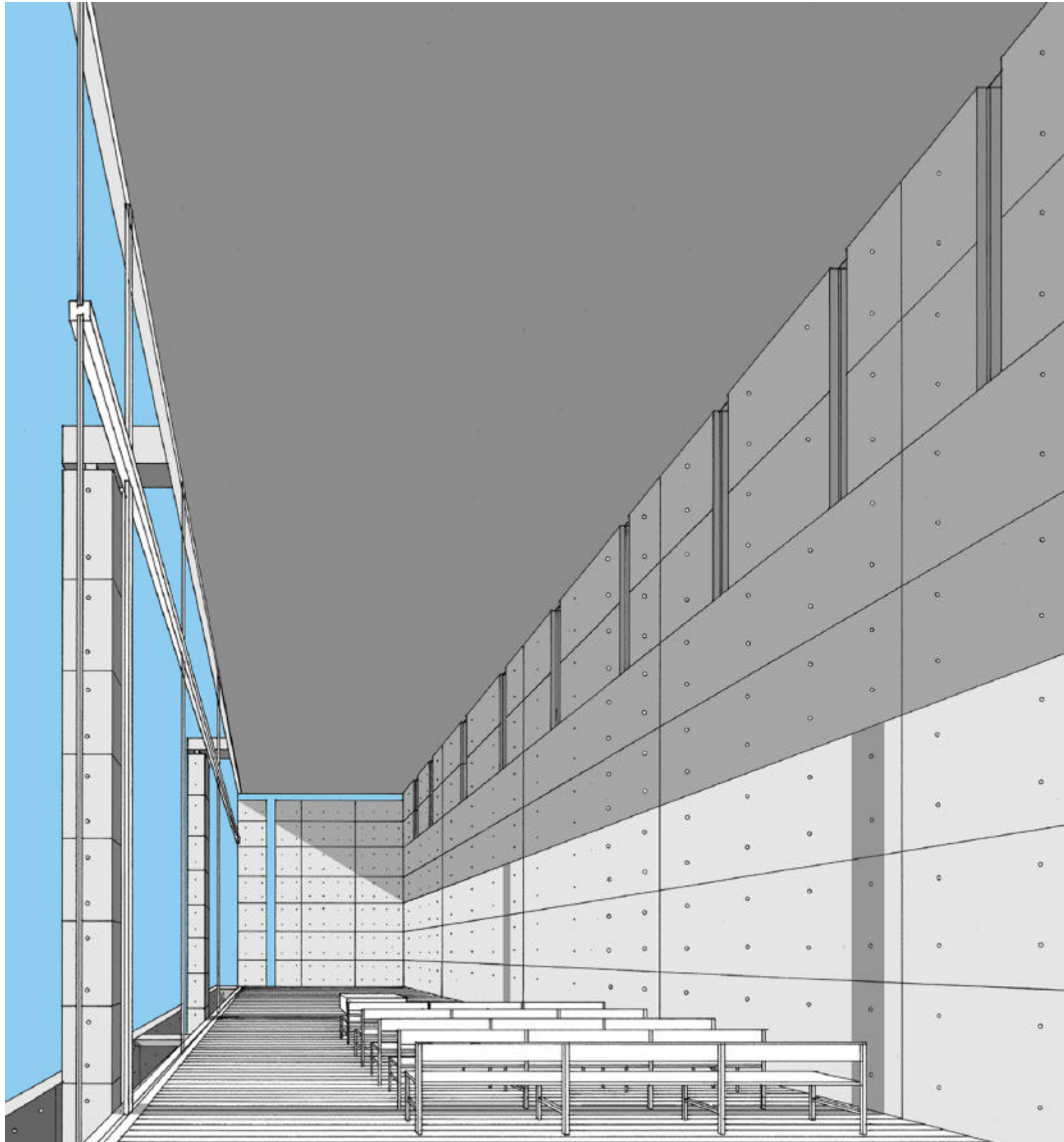
SITE, CHAPEL & CREMTORIM SECTION LOOKING NORTH



EAST ELEVATION

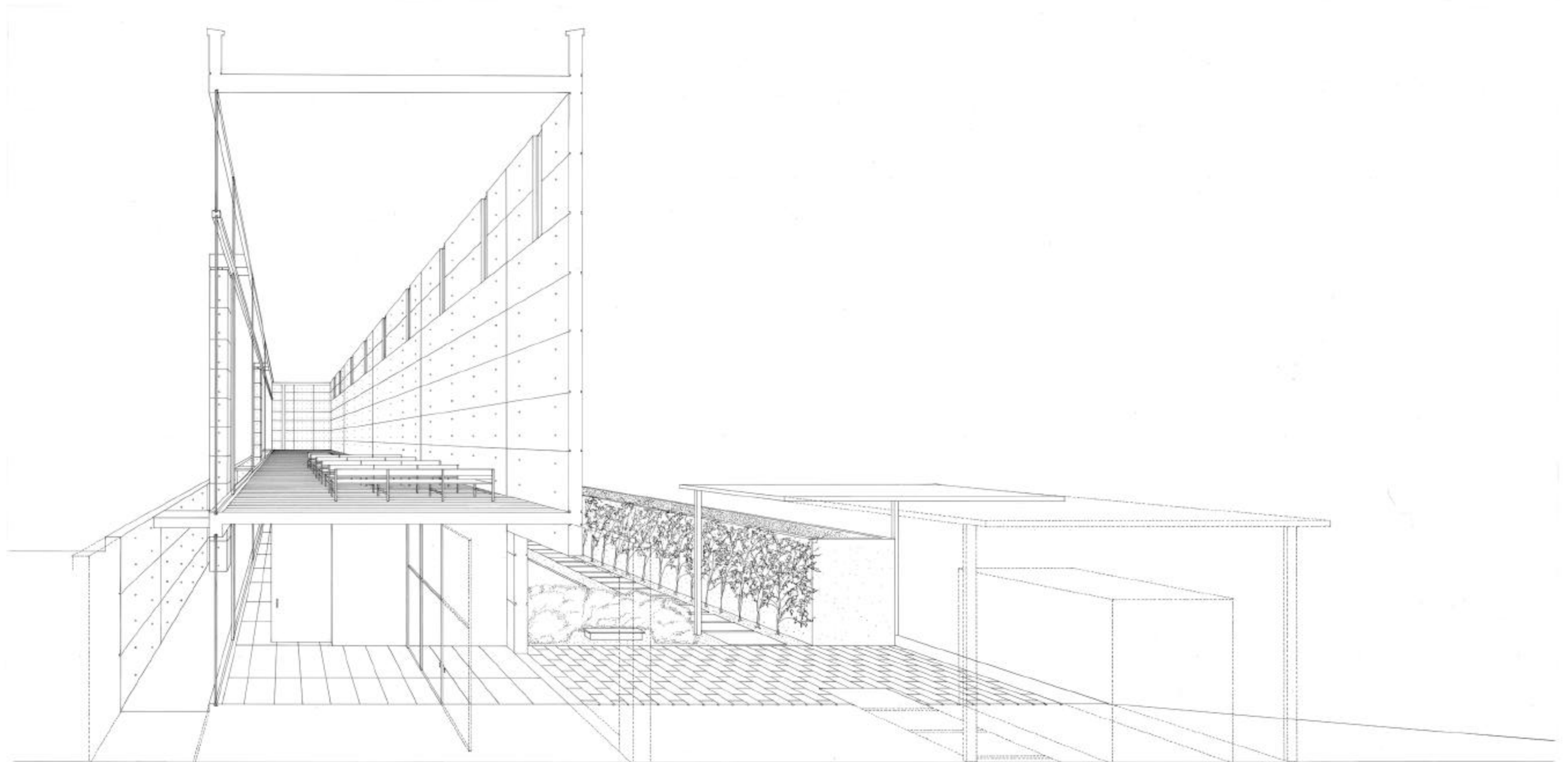


INTERIOR PERSPECTIVE OF CHAPEL DURING SUNRISE



INTERIOR PERSPECTIVE OF CHAPEL DURING SUNSET





SECTION PERSPECTIVE OF CHAPEL & CREMATORIUM

