

WATSON'S HOTEL, MUMBAI-

A CELEBRATION OF THE CAST IRON FRAME

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ABSTRACT

Why tear down something old and beautiful in order to build something new and beautiful?' - Tony Tung

It is in human nature to preserve things and objects from the past, study, enjoy and cherish our history. This need to learn from and cherish the objects from the past has resulted in the development and evolution of spaces such as museums where people can come and see these objects, either to know or learn something or out of personal interest and curiosity.

Somewhere in all this, is architecture from the past taken for granted? A lot of the prominent historic buildings have been well preserved and are known to people. But at the same time there are numerous historic structures, story tellers from the past, being ignored and even trampled upon. Should we not look at these also as valuable objects that have to say so much about our social, cultural and technological past? Do they need a museum space as well? Can architecture be housed and preserved in a museum? Or maybe become a museum, displaying itself, allowing people to experience it from outside and within.

Watson's Hotel is one such historical building that lies today unnoticed, uncared for, decaying and falling apart.

My thesis is an intervention into this urban situation. The goal of the design has not been just preservation but rather an elevation or celebration of the structure, bringing forth its true nature that lies in its structural framework, a cast iron grid of columns and beams. It aims to highlight this essential core of the building by revealing the grid in different spatial conditions. There is also a constant wish to tie the structure back to its surroundings, to bring back the dialogue that the building shared with its surroundings in the past. The structural framework is revealed and experienced in different spatial conditions achieved with the help of geometry, light and material, surfaces added in and around it and the grid runs through all these elements bold, undisturbed and uninterrupted.



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Fig. 2.1



Fig. 2.2



Fig. 2.3



Fig. 2.4

THE SITE

Heritage buildings in kala Ghoda:
The kala Ghoda district houses the city's oldest surviving heritage structures as can be seen from the adjoining area map.

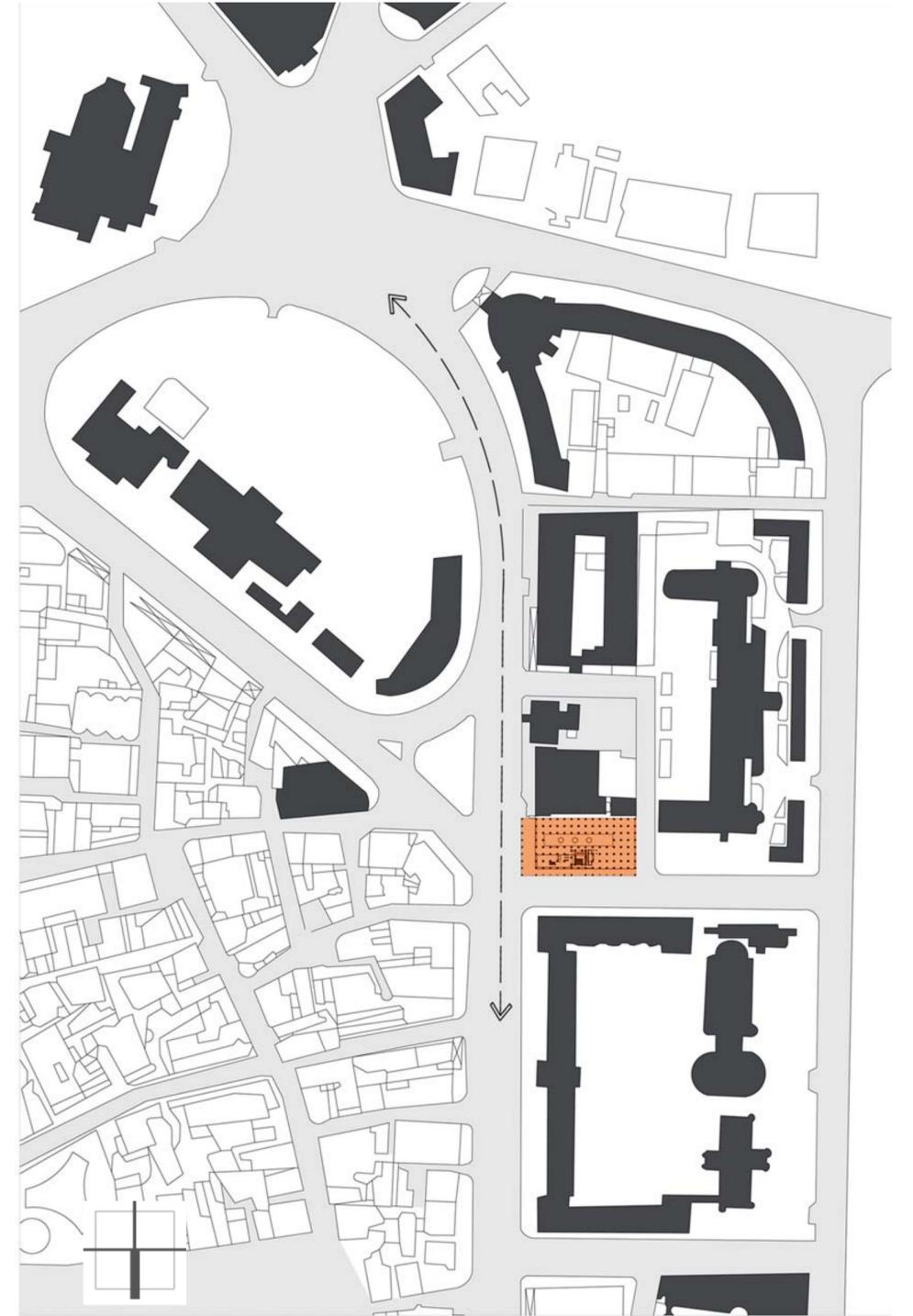


Fig. 2.6



Fig. 2.5



Fig. 2.7

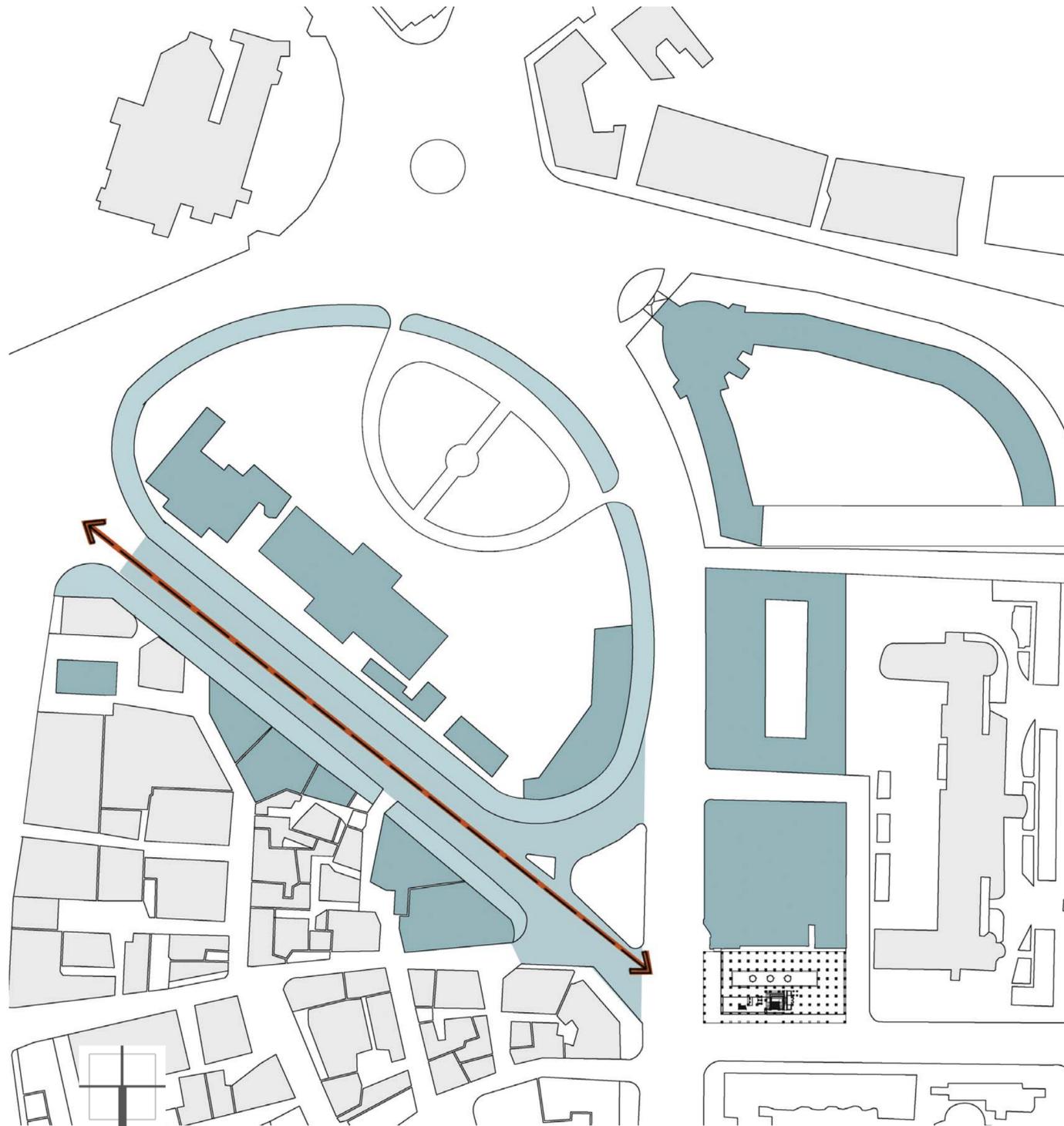


Fig. 2.8



Fig. 2.9



Fig. 2.10



Fig. 2.11



Fig. 2.12

The public realm:

Kala Ghoda is one of India's largest art districts with a number of art galleries, auditoriums, lecture halls and libraries. The area hosts the annual Kala Ghoda art festival every year. It attracts huge crowds from all over the city including celebrities. Performers, writers, artists, and famous people from diverse fields are the participants during the nine day long event. As a student of architecture, the festival interested me a lot and I have had the opportunity to attend lectures by architects such as Renzo Piano and Ken Yeang.

During this time of the year the various buildings that house all the institutions such as art galleries, lecture halls etc become a part of the festival and hold different events. The Rampart row road is the backbone of the festival as it becomes the main spine for the movement of people, as also a host to street events.

It is an exciting experience to hop from one building to another with an event chart in the hand and amidst all the celebrations one comes across Watson's Hotel building which has to be ignored and skipped as its name is to be seen nowhere on the event map!

I would like to point out here that the Rampart row has developed a silent relationship with the building. It is the only axis from where the building can be seen from a distance.

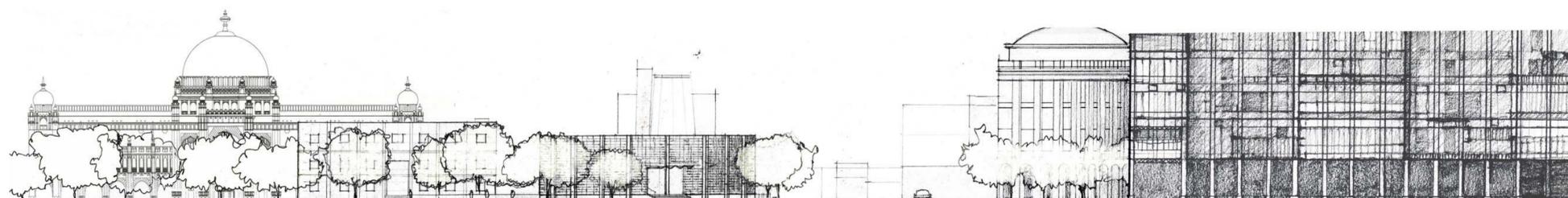
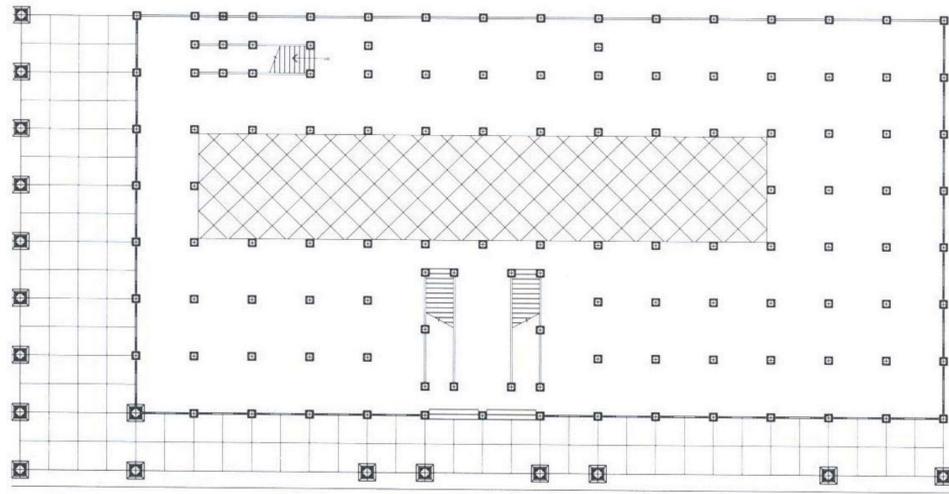


Fig. 2.13



Ground floor plan

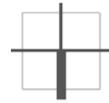
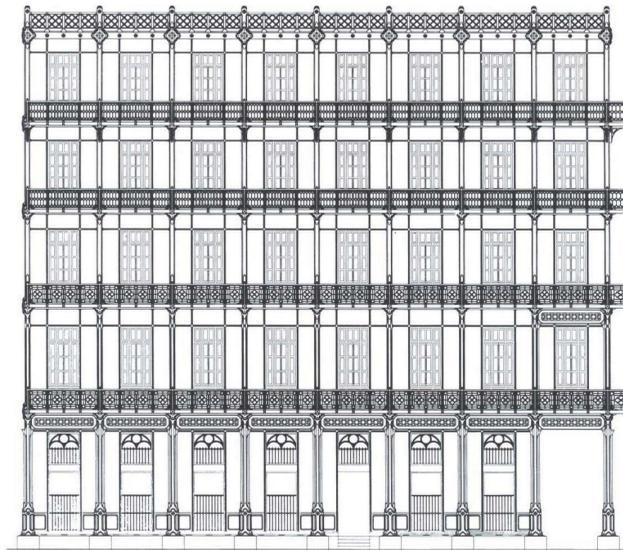


Fig. 3.1



Elevation along M.G. Road

Fig. 3.3

THE BUILDING:

The structural system of the building consists of cast iron columns and wrought iron beams. The ductility and malleability of wrought iron allows for the decorative details in the beams. The structure was fabricated in England and constructed on site.

The columns are located on a grid of 3.5 m x 3.5 m and the structure measures sixteen bays along its length and eight bays along its width.

At the ground level the first row of bays on the east and north side form an arcade that continues in the adjoining Army Navy building and further.

The building has an atrium in the center that allows for light to filter within. On the southern side of the building there is a break in the structure, where the central four bays that run along the atrium extend only up to the second level. This would allow for the building to overlook the Army Navy Building through the atrium (currently this is not happening due to the haphazard additions to the building). In the absence of the Army Navy Building during the first few years of construction the building overlooked an open space through the atrium.

The west façade, a part of which collapsed due to structural weakness, was clad with louvers initially to protect the façade from the direct sun.



Fig. 3.2



Fig. 3.4



Fig. 3.5



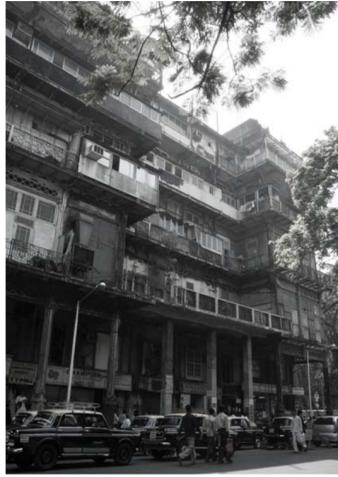


Fig. 3.6



Fig. 3.7



Fig. 3.8



Fig. 3.9



Fig. 3.10



Fig. 3.11



Fig. 3.12



Fig. 3.13



Fig. 3.14



Fig. 3.15

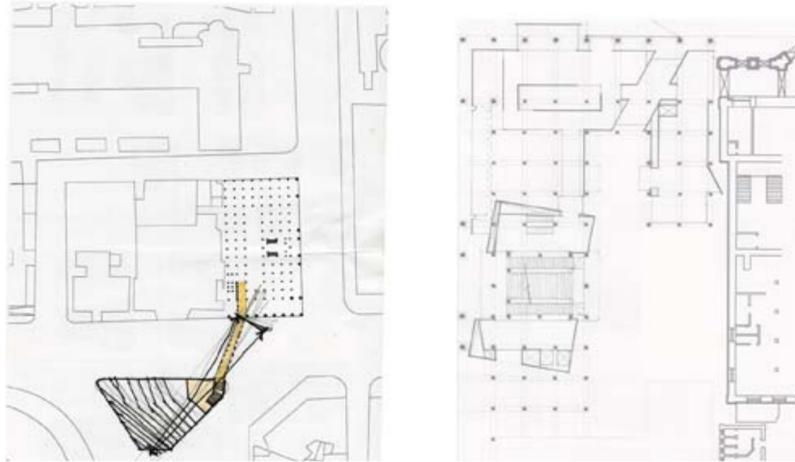


Fig. 4.1



Fig. 4.4



Fig. 4.5

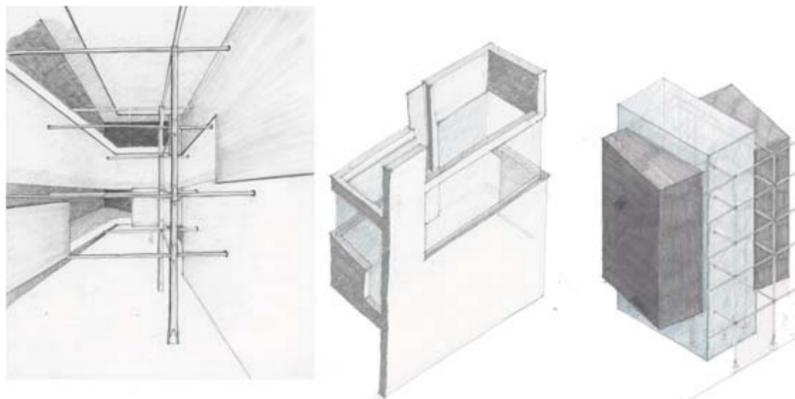


Fig. 4.2

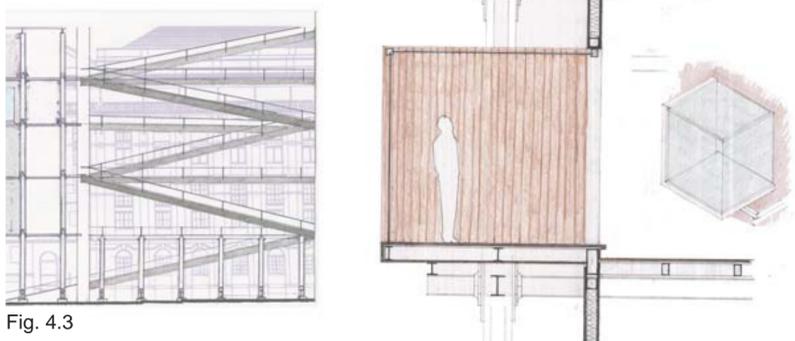


Fig. 4.3

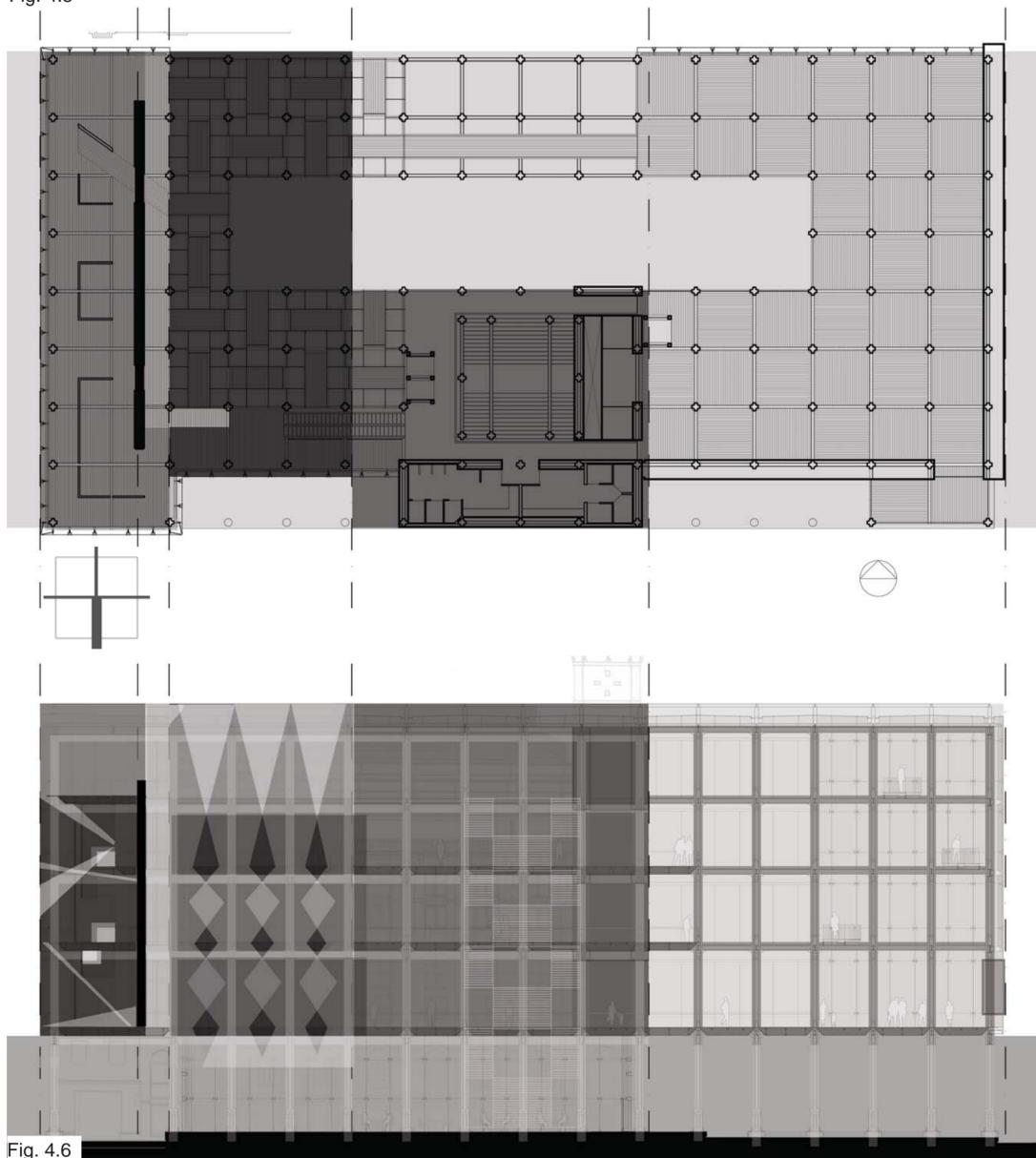


Fig. 4.6

THE PROGRAM:

I propose to introduce art galleries and exhibit spaces in the building. I believe this to be the first step in the effort of tying the structure back to Kala Ghoda Art district.

INITIAL THOUGHTS AND KEY CONCEPTS:

The building as mentioned is in a state of complete dilapidation and the only component that has stood through time is the structural grid of cast iron columns and wrought iron beams. This structural grid for me was the real nature or the core element in the building. It is one of the oldest surviving cast iron structures in India and due to its construction technology it also stood out from its surrounding load bearing masonry structures. The use of a cast iron framing system allowed for large openings and more connection with the outside. The structure also forms the ordering system for everything else to follow (from space planning to façade design), which ultimately gives it a character and forms the identity of the building. The other important elements were the main staircase which formed its circulation backbone and the atrium that was designed to bring in light.

I therefore propose to retain the structural grid, the staircase and the atrium and demolish the rest. So as a starting point in design I had the cage of cast iron columns and beams with the staircase embedded across three bays on the central north edge of the building.

Key Ideas:

The structure as a museum for itself- The grid seen as a giant sculpture wrapped by surfaces and presenting itself in different spatial conditions created by juxtaposition of light, material and geometry. Highlighting other key elements of the structure such as the main staircase and the atrium. To re-establish the relationship of the building with its surrounding.

As some of the sketches suggest, my initial approach towards revealing the grid was by creating distinct conditions through geometry, light and texture. During my initial iterations, these conditions coexisted, overlapped with one another, occurred and reoccurred at different intervals. The outcome was a design composed of a complex set of spatial conditions that diluted the effect of one another.

The grid was therefore divided into essentially three volumes that carried three spatial conditions that I would like to call as the 'point', 'plane' and 'volume'. In addition to these three conditions that explore the grid, I look at the ground floor and the staircase as the other distinct conditions that define the overall design. I will describe each condition in detail in the coming chapters.

Here, I would also like to point towards a question that has always intrigued me which is how much of a design is about the designer himself and how much is it about the site or the situation. In previous years I have always started with virgin sites that gave me a lot of freedom and flexibility to accommodate some of my personal self, my own style.

The adjoining diagram shows the different spatial conditions that the structure gets divided into.

THE FIRST CONDITION : REVEALING THE GRID - POINT

There are two aspects of the grid that I have been keen on exploring : one is the delicate details at junctions and the other the quality of the grid as a three dimensional matrix composed of linear and parallel elements running in two directions.

This section of the design strives to reveal the different elements of the grid, the points of details as opposed to a rhythmic display of repeating modules of the grid where it reads as a 'grid'.

The linear volume of the building that houses this spatial condition is the group of bays right above the colonnaded arcade at ground level. This part is located on the east side of the structure which also is the main façade of the building.

Framing the view- The design is based on what one sees as one travels from one end of the condition to the other. It can be very well explained by the arrangements of design elements and their interaction with the grid along two axes that I would call the XZ axis and YZ axis.

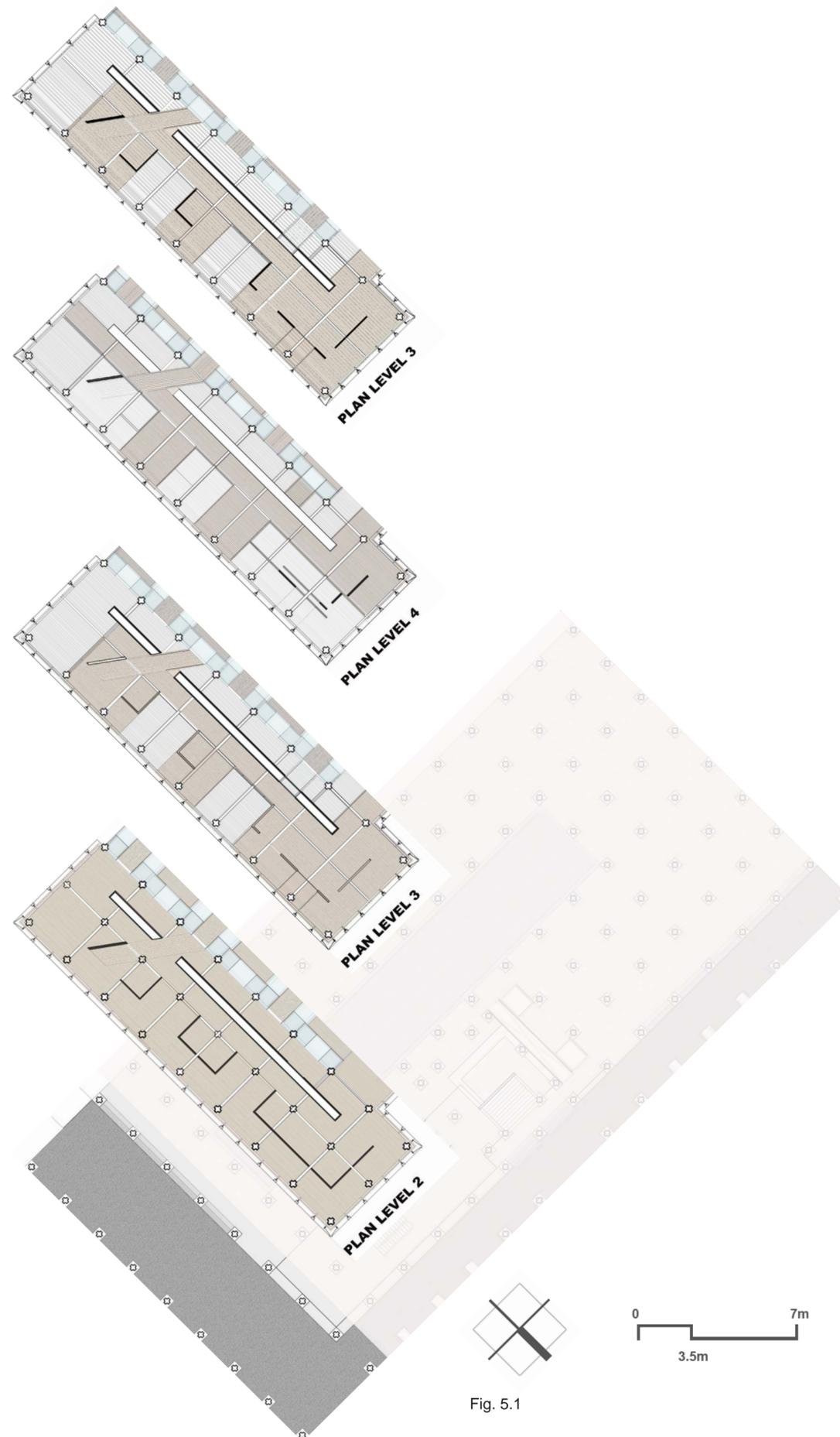


Fig. 5.1

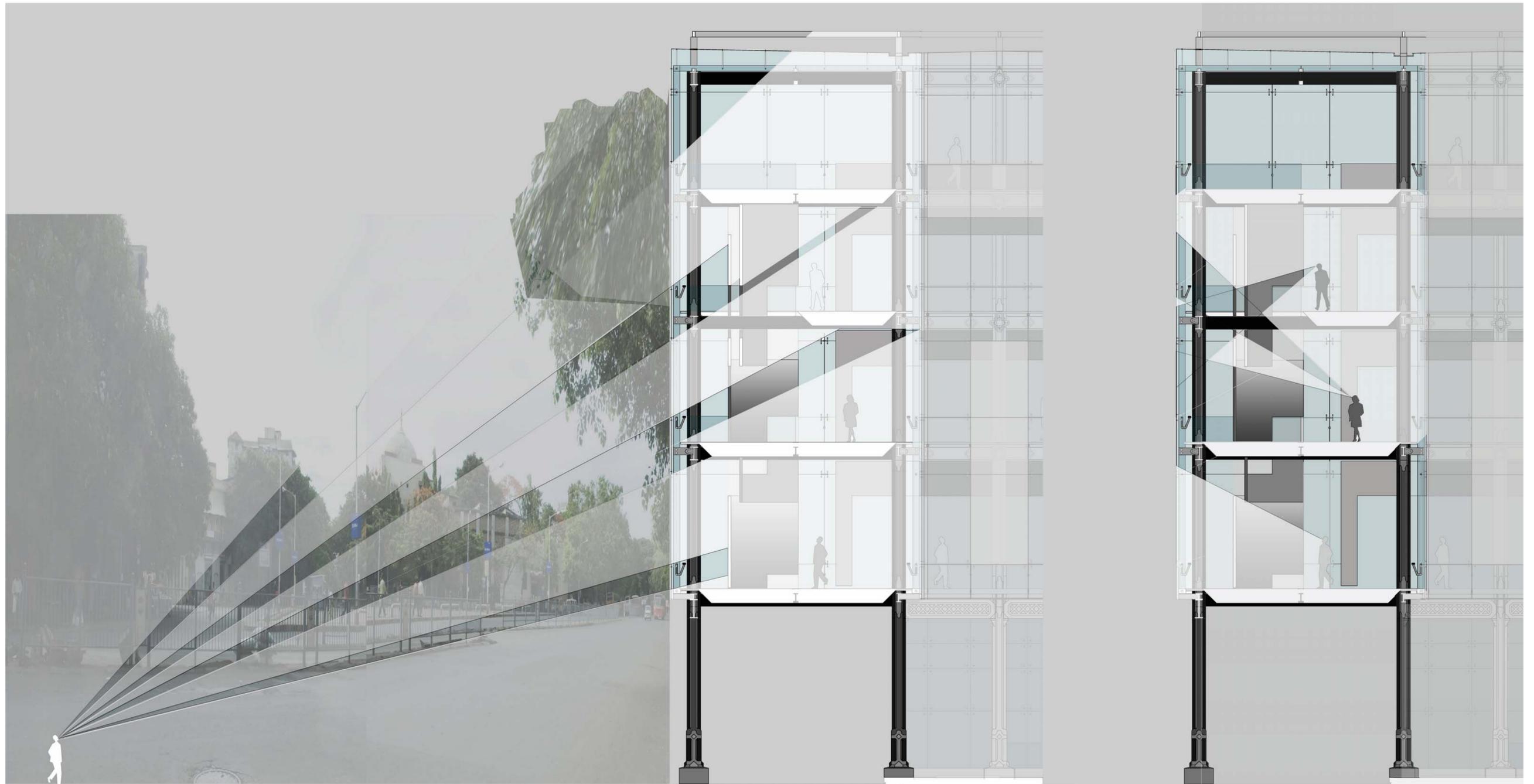


Fig. 5.2

Along the XZ axis- The grid lies between solid panel surfaces on the inside and a sheet of glass consisting of frosted and clear glass panels on the outside. The idea is to frame certain portions of the grid from the inside as well as from the outside. From the outside the composition of clear and frosted glass elements reveals the grid as details in some parts and as a set of elements sharing a dialogue with the glass and the solid panels on their back in other parts. The arrangement of the solid panels with their cut-outs creates similar framing conditions from the inside.