

*4 Theatres ...*

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By

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of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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## **Acknowledgments & Dedication**

I wish to express a profound gratitude to all the individuals and institutions which have helped me to find my way, I owe them all a great intellectual debt. Their collective efforts have made possible this gathering, arrangement and play.

To Jennifer Ruhland, my wife, to whom this book is dedicated, for her love, affection, sacrifices and understanding. Without her endeavor this would have scarcely been possible. Also for her constant measure to be sure I did not overwork or overstep my physical limitations. Living life with her has been a more valuable enlightenment than any other.

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To my brother Clark for his skills and assistance in documenting a few of my committee meetings, helping me with proofreading, and particularly for being a willing sounding-board over several meals

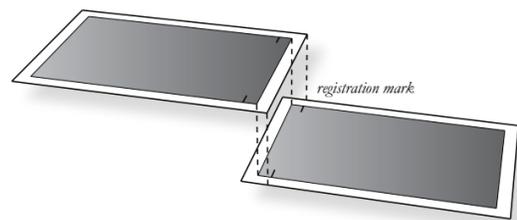
To Bro. George Arthur and Dr. Lisa Warren for their intellect, useful advice, the temporary use of the Roanoke College Theatre Department's main stage, and the use of their equipment for my final public defense.

To Kelly Mattingly and the Blacksburg department of Public Works, for their assistance, readiness to help, and special interest in this project.

To those who read this, for your willingness to take the time.

## Contents &amp; List of Drawings

Cover page	
Title & Signatures	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments & Dedication	iii
Contents & List of Drawings	iv
Prologue	1
Blacksburg Diagrams	2
Diagrammatic representations of large scale patterns of Blacksburg's buildings, topological conditions, and incidence patterns between the two	
Digital Photographs	3
Photographic images of the Old Blacksburg Town Hall, adjacent streets and parking lots	
As-Built drawings	4
Fragments of as-built drawings made as part of this documentation	
Construction Staging	5
Thoughts about construction requirements, work area protection and visual presence within the townscape	
Drawings	
Collection of architectural drawings describing the project at its most recent stage of development	
All drawings are orthographic parallel projections. Each drawing unfolds characteristics of the project which could not be shown in any other projection. Several of the drawings match together along a shared edge. That matchline is the geometric middle of the Studio theatre. Each drawing, plan, section or elevation shares this registration.	
<b>I. Southeast exterior building elevation</b>	6
Notable as the 'front' facade of the renewed building, this face marks the main entry into the building from Church Street. The undulating, but not curvilinear, articulated walls adhere to a painterly illusion of single point perspective by quickly diminishing in scale. This covered entry may serve as a stage to an audience sitting within a blocked intersection. The street edge of the sidewalk is bounded by seven low bollards.	
<b>II. Partial Southwest exterior building elevation</b>	7
The brick walls of the existing building have their openings filled. Respect is given to how the existing building address Church street.	



<b>III. Partial Southwest exterior building elevation</b>	8
The addition and mitigating connection to the existing building reveal different materials and methods of construction from the existing building. This face of the connection reveals the largest glazed area of any elevation. The balcony remains reserved for staff. The low perimeter walls of the balcony open in specific locations to reveal their section. A single central post is stopped before reaching the ground.	
<b>IV. Northwest exterior building elevation</b>	9
Notable as the 'back' facade of the addition, a pair of piano hinged oversized doors marks an impromptu covered stage for unique occurrences within the busy parking lot. One door is drawn closed, the other is drawn open to present the roll-up metal door inside the addition. The roll-up metal door is also drawn open to exhibit the framework and paneled skin of the Studio. The tall double doors also expose one corner of the mezzanine and its rail.	
<b>V. Partial Northeast exterior building elevation</b>	10
Turning the corner shows an endoskeletal elevation where the main framework of the addition is drawn outside of the thermal envelope. The connection to the existing building is negotiated by a split level entry. The shell-like framework surrounding the Studio theatre lands beyond the brick wall of the Old Town Hall.	
<b>VI. Partial Northeast exterior building elevation</b>	11
The brick walls of the existing building have their openings filled. Respect is given to how the existing building address Church street.	
<b>VII. Partial Longitudinal building section</b>	12
The raked floor of the facade rises from the bollards and sidewalk to the projected frame of the front door. The sloping dropped ceiling mimics the articulation of the walls in scale and rhythm. Inside the main door, the ceiling of the stairwell is a series of atrium windows. The base of the main stair opens vertically up to a skylit opening. The paneled skin of the Studio is doubled around a corridor to serve the machinery of the theatre. The volume of the stairwell corresponds to the volume of the cubic Studio.	
<b>VIII. Partial Longitudinal building section</b>	13
The framework and paneled skin of the Studio aligns with a metal roll-up garage door for direct access through the connector to the floor of the addition. The split level stair of the connector wraps around the corner of the addition up to the mezzanine. The mezzanine bridge connects through the existing brick wall to the raised corridors surrounding the Studio. Suspended from the framework of the roof is a rail and pulley system to fly large objects from one level to another. The section reveals a shallow opening in the roof for natural light. The interior elevation beyond the mezzanine shows the pattern of insulation material exposed in the addition. The end wall in the section is the covered pair of doors.	
<b>IX. Transverse building section</b>	14
Through the addition the balcony is drawn out of the main volume of the addition to show a shift in the exterior envelope and accommodate the high platform. The central post is stopped before reaching the balcony at an average persons height. The metal roll-up door is also drawn open to exhibit the framework and paneled skin of the Studio. The wall of the addition facing the existing building is both bridged and open to a column-less span.	

<b>X. Transverse building section</b>	15
A section thru the machinery corridor reveals the raised floor of the Studio, two flights of stairs, and a high attic. The entire volume of the Studio is surrounded by accessible space. The composition of the outermost shell, which is both framing and protecting the theatre, is exposed as a thin skin stretched over a set of ribs.	
<b>XI. Transverse building section</b>	16
Slicing through the point of entry inside the main door (shown partially open to Church Street) reveals a complimentary echo of the 'front' facade to the Town. The interior concealed frame window to the left of the door protects an unoccupiable wedge of space behind the main facade. The bearing wall of the lower floor frames two shallow niches.	
<b>XII. Partial building plan - Street level</b>	17
The acute perspective illusion and projected door frame of the facade to Church Street is revealed. Pockets of space are captured behind the angled walls. The plan of the ticket booth, at the left hand of the entry door, illustrates a seat barely big enough for one person. To the right of the central entry an elevator shaft connects the lower level to the entry level and the slightly higher mezzanine level. The widening stair is curbed by two low walls. Beyond the stairwell is a false window which borrows from the truncated perspective of the walls. Beyond the public areas are mezzanine level corridors reserved for 'backstage' crew.	
<b>XIII. Partial building plan - Street level</b>	18
The raised corridors continue around the Studio and bridge through to the full mezzanine and balcony. The mitigating connection between the addition and existing building collects and isolates all vertical exterior glazing. The mezzanine may be divided and arranged as each production/director sees fit. The mezzanine reserves an open off-center volume for taller set constructions. The oversized double doors facing the parking lot stand slightly taller than the mezzanine finished floor.	
<b>XIV. Partial building plan - Parking lot level</b>	19
The basement level of the original building easily makes way for the necessary toilet facility, and room for the storage of janitorial supplies. The main staircase and elevator stand in the space. The doubled walls of the main stair reveal light from the atrium windows to the lower floor. The double envelope of the Studio is flanked by an egress door to the alleyway.	
<b>XV. Partial building plan - Parking lot level</b>	20
The opening in the existing brick wall for the roll-up door is drawn aligned to the modules of the paneled skin of the Studio. The corner joining the mitigating connection, existing building and shell of the theatre reveals the careful proximity of each character. The tensions of each one attempting to accommodate the other two is evident in a shift from orthogonal. The wall construction of the addition's lower half is continuously load bearing to make a platform for structural play. The blocking of the balcony behaves similarly. The plan of the oversized doors displays a smaller door opening within each panel. The pair of piloti supporting the lightly framed proscenium mirror the hinge points of the oversized doors.	
<b>XVI. Partial roof plan</b>	21
This drawing of the roof indicates the area and pattern of the atrium over the main stair. The area and opening of the rectangular skylite is also drawn.	

<b>XVII. Partial roof plan</b>	22
This drawing of the roof indicates the area and pattern of the skylite over the open volume of the addition. The opening not only accommodates natural lighting, but so the work there may literally be exposed to the sun.	
<b>XVIII. Site Plan</b>	23
The project is depicted with minimal impact on neighboring buildings, and slight adjustments to traffic patterns. The existing alleyway to the southwest of the existing Hall is modified by rebuilt planters, sidewalks and a few steps. The intersection of Jackson and Church streets is drawn repaved with patterns in the pavement materials.	
<b>XIX. Town Plan</b>	24
The project location is illustrated as part of a figure/ground depiction of the 16 squares and bounding structures. The project is outlined in its final footprint.	
Monologue / Epilogue	25
Selected Bibliography	26
Specific books and articles referenced during this project	
References	27
General list of books and articles referenced during this project	
Typesetting Notes, Permissions, & Curriculum Vitae	28
Appendix	29
A selected collection of cartoons, sketches, drawings and digital photographs noting important moments during the project	

## Prologue

Theatre is remarkable. When creating worlds to entertain, enthrall and exhibit to us, Theatre suspends our senses as easily as it suspends its drapes. Whether in the round, behind a proscenium, or beside us, a Play somehow relies on illusions of heightening our senses and also devaluing them to near elimination. It is exceptional, amazing and spectacular.

Fundamentally, a modern theatre is a framework, explicit or implied, that provides a setting for plays which are to exemplify the ideals of a particular age and culture. Appropriately framed actions have the potential to change the way we see our own frameworks, actions and ideals.

Theatre is framed to simultaneously show us the artwork and protect us from the power of the Art. This simultaneity mirrors our place in the world. It mirrors our roles to concurrently evaluate and participate.

The framing institution must be designed to play a subservient role to the display of the artifact – so as to not impede its full potential. The framing institution must also be designed to keep us from getting too close – to protect the art from our clumsy mishaps. The framing institution is often designed to keep the art from hurting our world view – frequently on an implied level, the audience members must be reminded that they should be willing to suspend their disbelief, but the Art is not “real” either.

There is a tremendous weight which supports the curtains and veils. The Play happens under balanced tension.

Things are on show, and not. Things should interfere, and should not.

Only a slight adjustment in a world view is needed before the platforms of Politics, Economics and Routine become venues for some of the most unique plays which could bear public witness, and each of us are invested players. Only a similarly slight adjustment in a world view is needed before the general public becomes a coincidental gathering of rationally divided witnesses, as passive spectators to an uninteresting and repetitive motion.

Architecture within the public realm can become a stage.

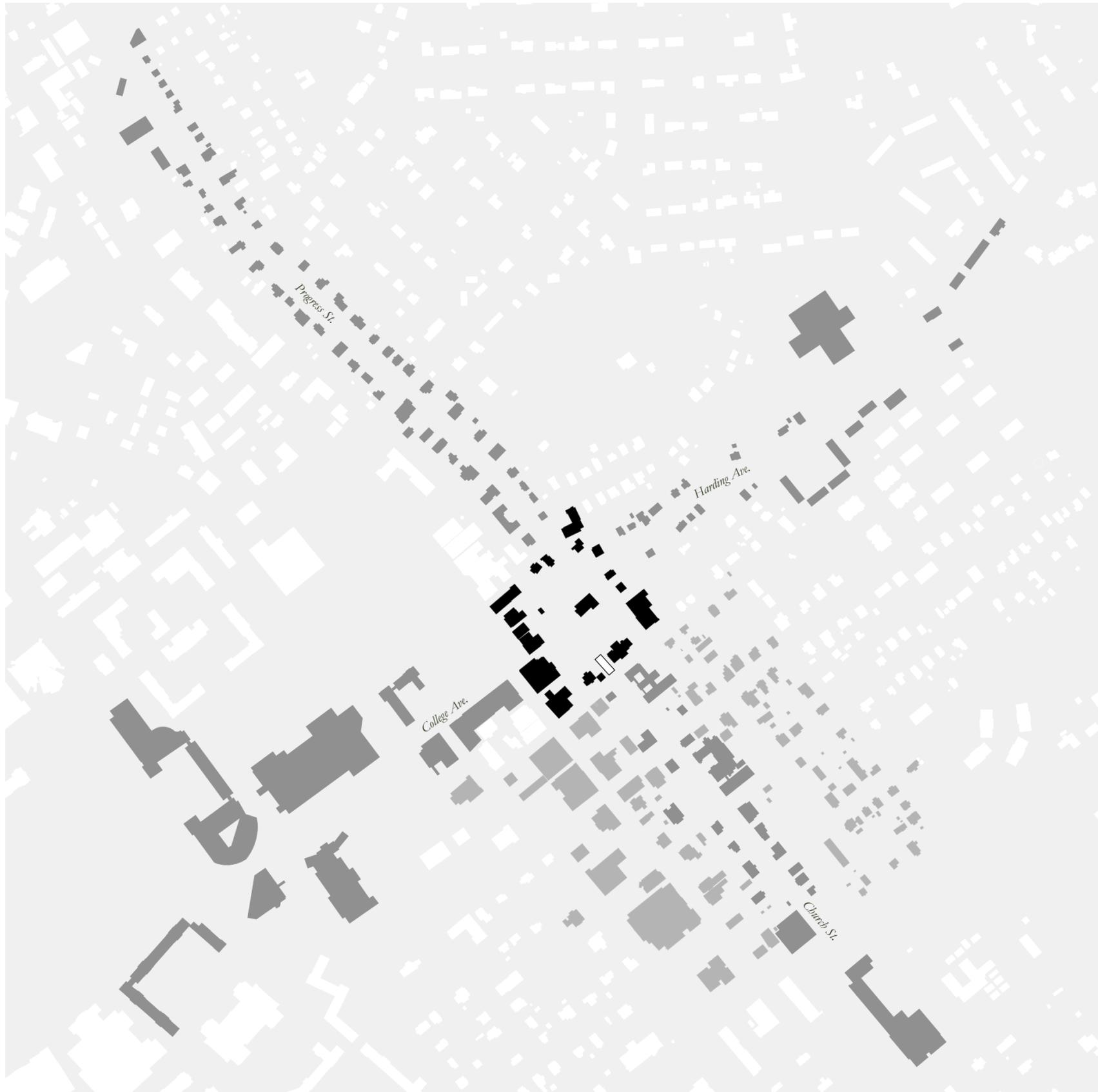
Given these circambulations to making sense of the world of Theatre, this Project will no longer recite, retrace or add to the sometimes unbridled musings about the more romantic notions surrounding these relationships.

Given these circambulations to making sense of the world of Theatre, this Project will seek to play with the lines and lineaments which guide, frame and rule my default notions of a small community theatre.

Calling things into appearance ... if only we are open.



*A town model of central Blacksburg was built in 1985-86 by the College of Architecture & Urban Studies. It sat in places of prominence in the Municipal Building before it was forgotten. It was found in the basement of the old Town Hall, and recovered before being thrown away. It has been cleaned and repaired as part of this thesis project.*



### Blacksburg Diagrams

These reconstructions of critical diagrams in *Town Architecture* draw out specific patterns of development found in Blacksburg. They specifically indicate two predominate patters within the town - the location and arrangement of the original 16 squares, and an open intersection of two significant thoroughfares.

The story and significance of the 16 squares is well known in Blacksburg. The entire area, rotated approximately 45 degrees from North, was divided into 4 equal squares by two main streets and again divided by alleyways. The intersections remained open, and did not belong to a single individual. A by-product of this development was a number of 'T' shaped intersections.

The larger, and more recent, pattern indicated here shows two connections. A path can be drawn from Southwest to Northeast connecting the Virginia Tech campus to residential Blacksburg. A second avenue can be seen traveling Northwest to Southeast, connecting residential areas to Downtown developments. These two paths intersect in a comparatively large, and largely undeveloped, open area. This area rests immediately adjacent to the 16 squares.

This area is also one of the lowest topological locations within walking distance of the 16 squares. This bowl-like opening in the town is home to one of Blacksburg's now underground streams. This same stream contributed to why the 16 squares was located as it was.

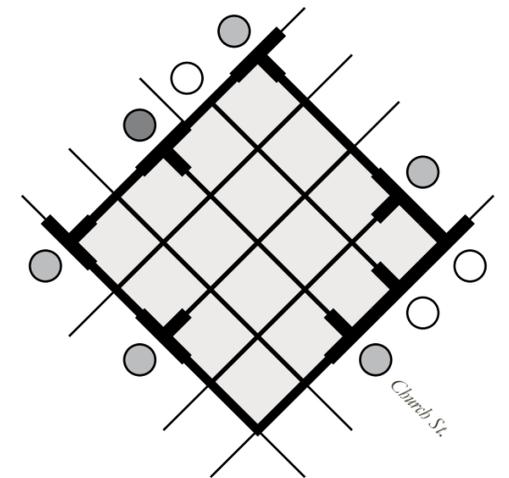
These three patterns share a common boundary. The edge of buildings along Jackson Street form one facet of the 'bowl' and the Northwest side of the 16 squares. The most prominent of these buildings is the Old Blacksburg Town Hall - resting on the centerline of a 'T' intersection and the centerline of the 16 squares.

Not only is this humble building significant because of its historical use, but it rests at the intersection of three important patterns and holds a unique place of prominence by ending the original Main Street of the town.

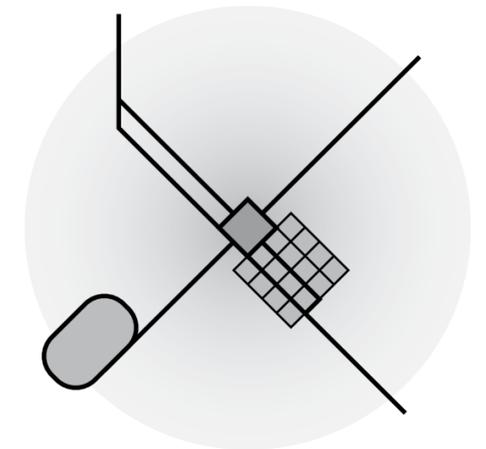
All these facts are noteworthy, generally understood by the town's citizens, and accepted by civil leadership as important information, but rarely recognized as an opportunity.

The Old Town Hall is perceived as a potential liability by the municipality, and does not fit anywhere in the town's management. Those municipal agents who occupy the building rarely stay there for long, and frequently battle the apparent isolation from remaining local offices.

Because of the historic use of the structure, and for politically motivated reasons, the town management is unwilling or unable to liquidate the real estate. They want to let it go, but choose not to do so.



*Subsequent patterns of commercial and social development since the original survey of the 16 squares has given reasons to extend only some of the original streets. This pattern has left only a few 'T' intersections remaining, and even fewer still which are ended by buildings. Some intersections have no structure at the end. The only street bounded by buildings on both ends is Church Street (the original Main street and central Northwest/Southeast axis). The street is bounded by the now unoccupied Old Middle School at the south end, and the Old Town Hall at the north.*



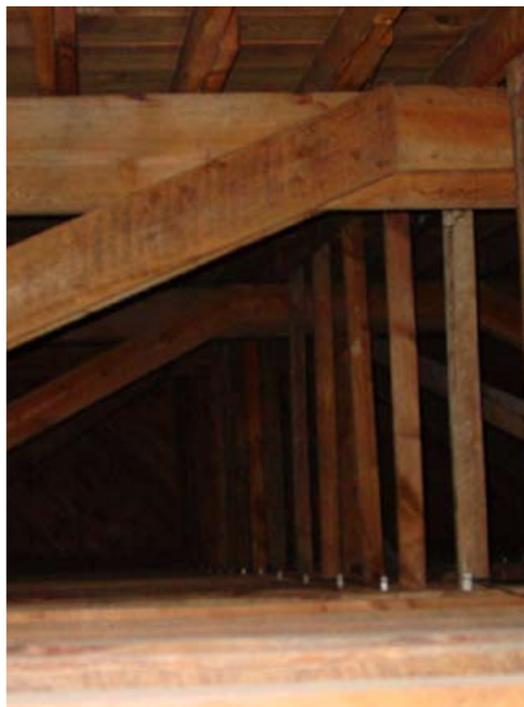
*The adjacency of the topological features, original 16 squares and the social thoroughfares, in addition to the historic value of the old Hall, make it a very unique opportunity to strengthen several patterns of development at once.*



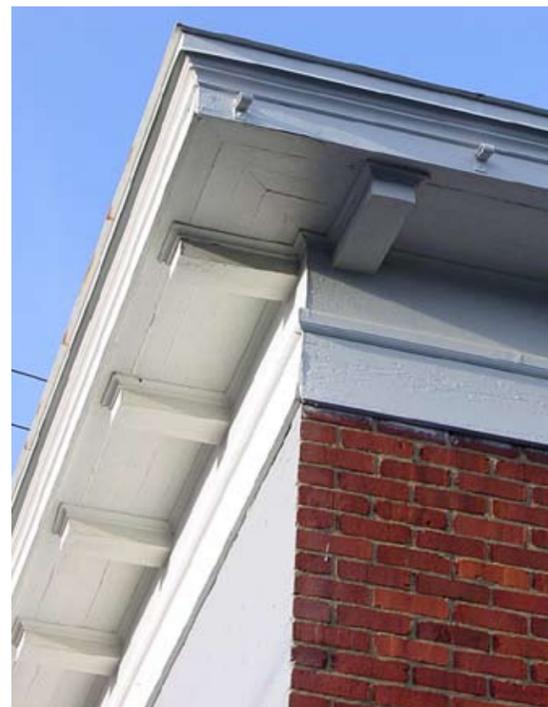
The parking lot level of the building stands as a maze of both wood and concrete block bearing and non-bearing partitions, and a network of pipes and abandoned wiring. The town used it for municipal storage.



There are several layers of change evident in the many non-load-bearing partitions within the Church street level. A central hallway connects rooms and open areas of varying sizes.



The attic is made by a few regularly spaced stick built trusses. Each member of the trusses is rough cut lumber, and are configured to allow a column-less condition across the building. The trusses also support a dropped ceiling.



All of the architecturally significant elements of the building are completely invested in the front facade. The cornice clearly stands out, and confirms it typologically as a decorated shed and commercial shell.



The long sides of the building are irregularly punctured by windows. Long brick walls deteriorate through spalling, efflorescence and crumbling mortar. Cooling units and an abandoned flue reveal the methods to heat and cool the building.



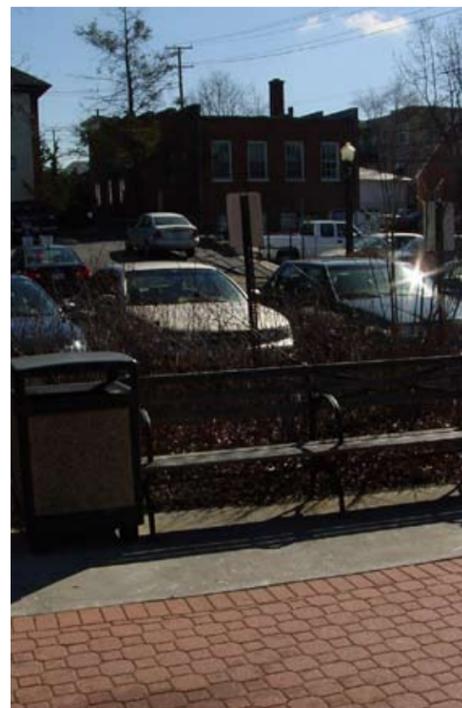
Church Street was once Main Street of Blacksburg. It is clear that this facade was erected to provide a visual stop at the end of the street.



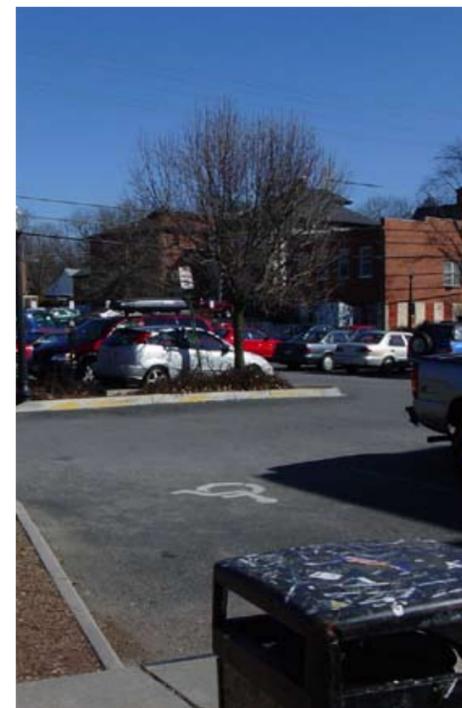
The rebuilt facade is based on the original glass and wood storefront. It was filled in after the building was struck by a car in the mid 1980's. Two planters resting under the narrow wood canopy are designed to withstand a car impact of 15 mph.



For approximately 50 years an addition sat behind the building which served as a jail, and covered parking garage for the fire department. The addition was removed in the 1980's to make six parking stalls. The rear face of the building now hosts a drop box for a clothing bank which operates upstairs.



The building shares a public parking lot with several businesses and the lower basin of a creek watershed. The underground creek is marked by a brick paved sidewalk through the parking stalls.



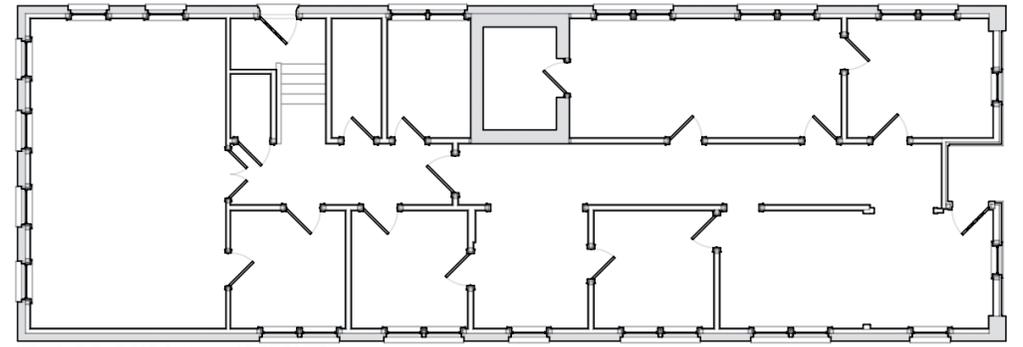
The public parking lot is shared by restaurants, bars, banks, clothing stores, a hairdresser shop, efficiency apartments, a record store, municipal buildings, and a few currently unoccupied buildings.

**As-Built drawings**

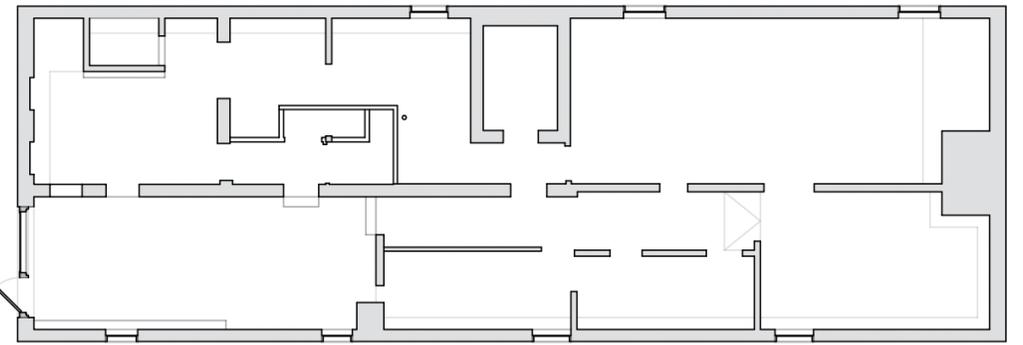
An "As-Built" set of drawings was made as part of this project. Blacksburg had no record of the dimensional aspects of the building.

These drawings indicate only physical measurable portions which were readily accessible. Basic materials and composition are indicated. A number of assumptions were made, which are indicated on the record set of drawings.

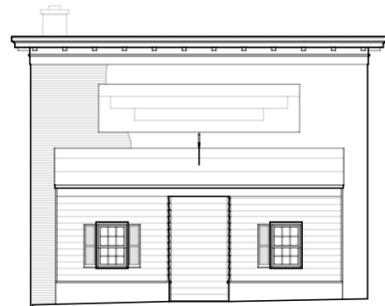
The final version of the drawing set was submitted to the town for their records.



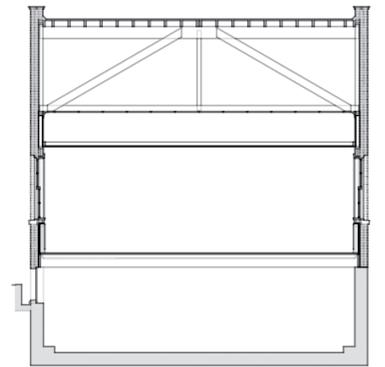
STREET LEVEL FLOOR PLAN - NOT TO SCALE



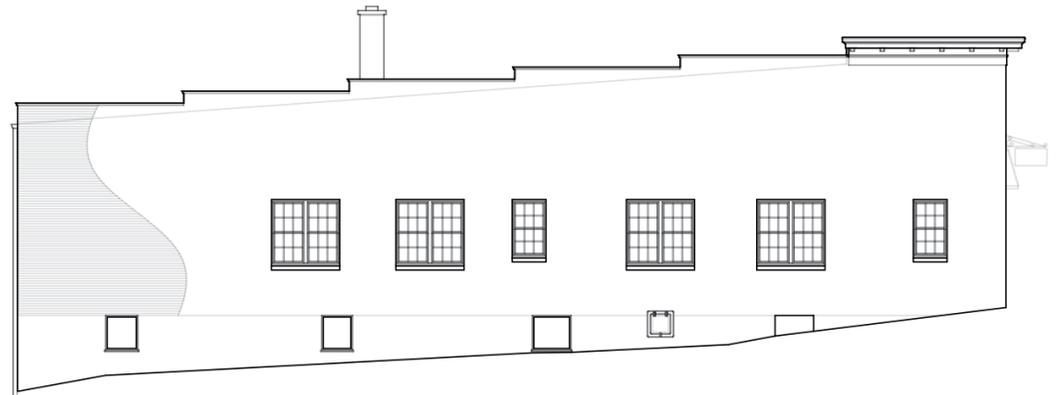
PARKING LOT LEVEL FLOOR PLAN - NOT TO SCALE



SOUTHEAST FACING EXT ELEVATION - NOT TO SCALE



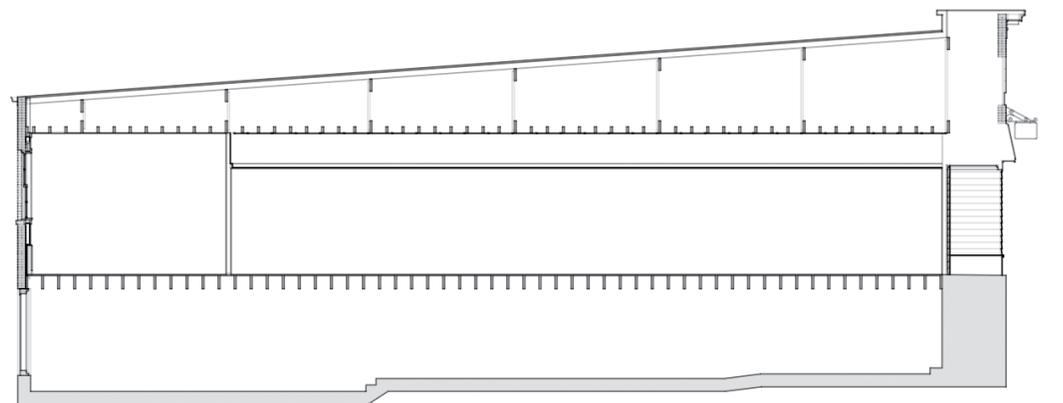
TRANSVERSE BUILDING SECTION - NOT TO SCALE



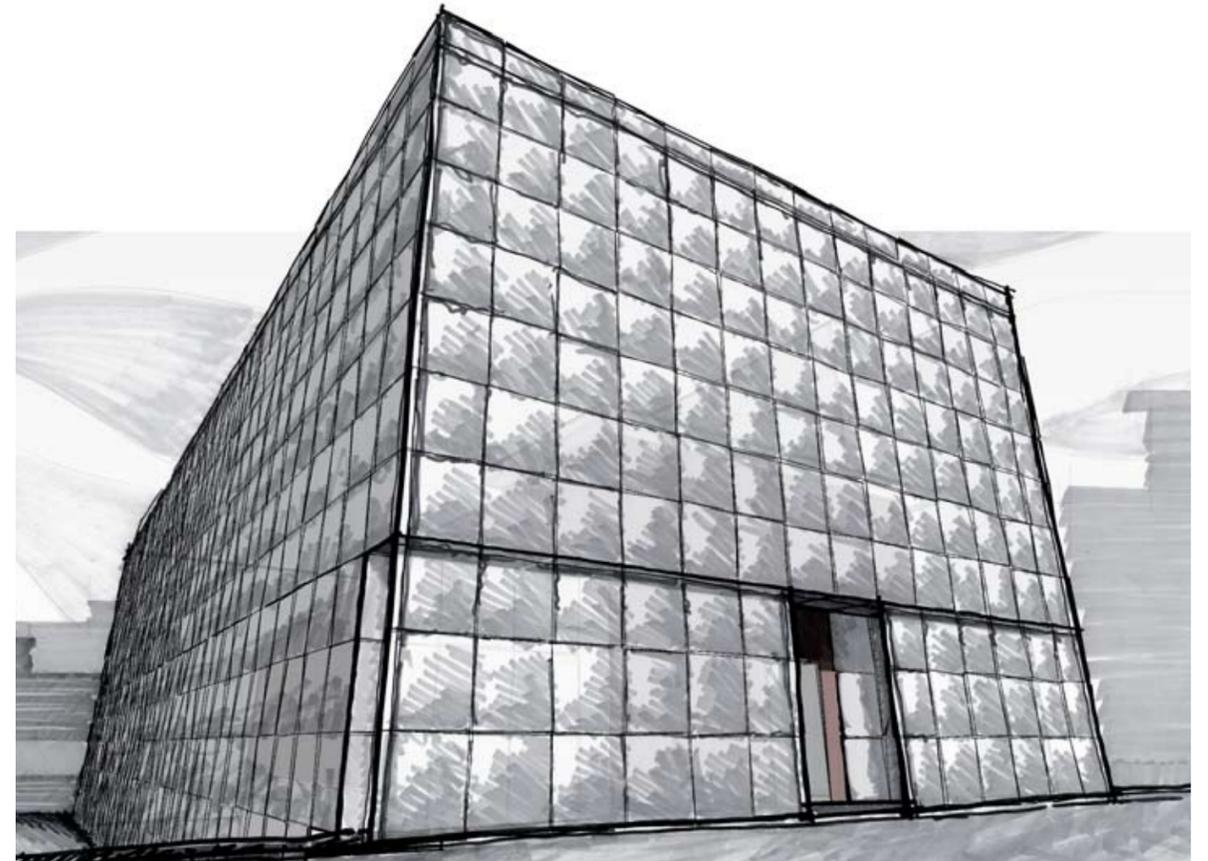
SOUTHWEST FACING EXTERIOR ELEVATION - NOT TO SCALE



NORTHWEST FACING EXT ELEVATION - NOT TO SCALE



LONGITUDINAL BUILDING SECTION - NOT TO SCALE



#### Construction Staging

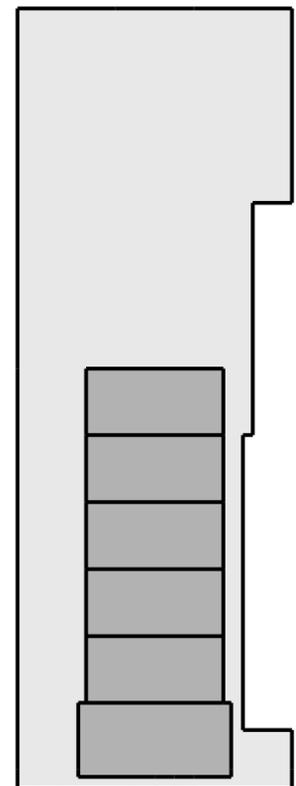
The first theatre is based around the spectacle of the construction stage of the renewal.

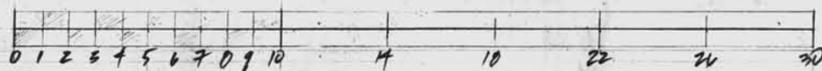
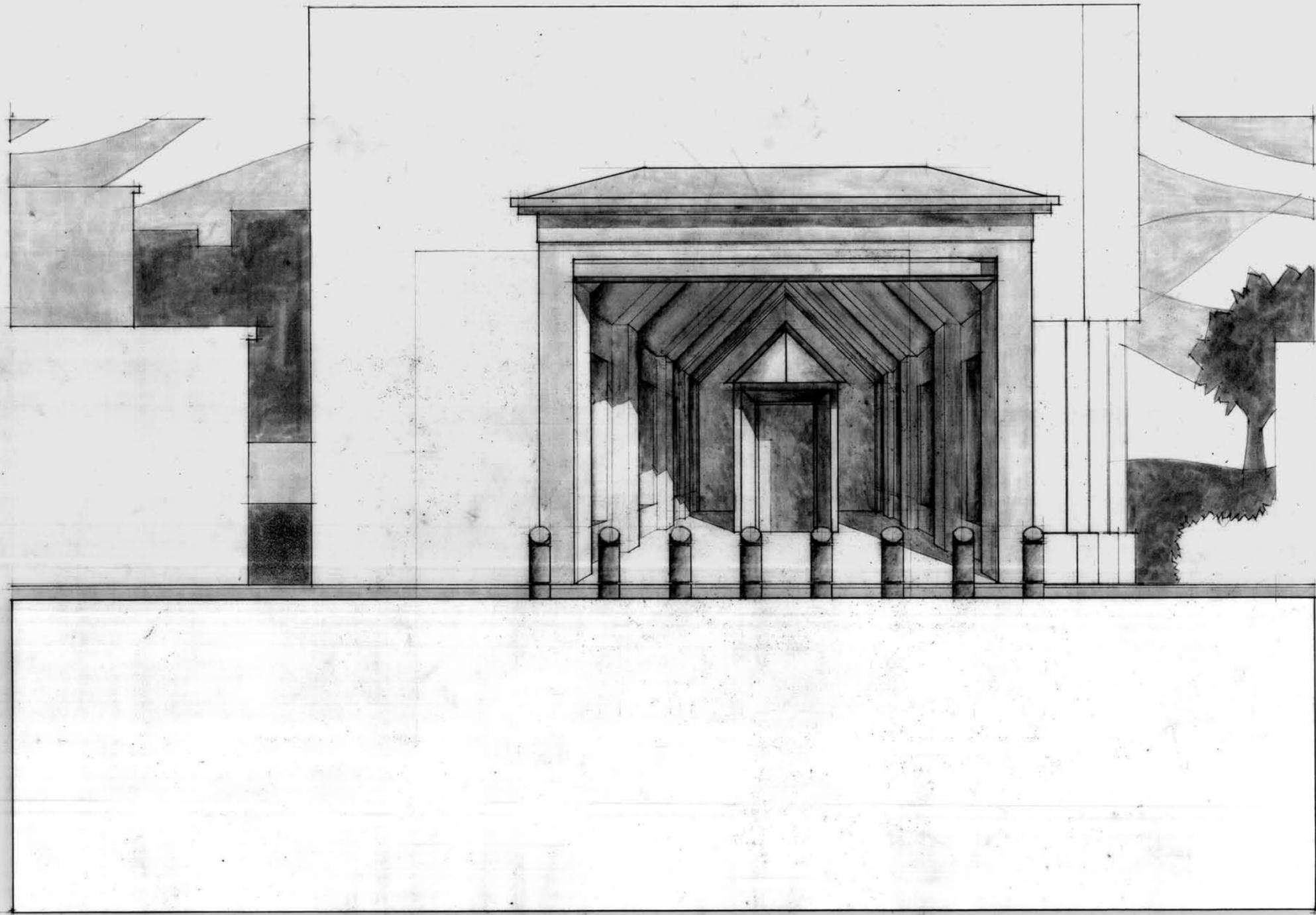
The general footprint of the screened construction site should be twice as long as the existing building and twice as tall as the front elevation. The centerline of the screen facing Church Street should remain on the centerline of the existing building. The entire screen should be divided into a four foot square module to allow for any site specific derivation from the outlined plan.

Four openings should in the screen should allow for different types of traffic. A pedestrian path along the sidewalk in front of the existing building for those traveling on foot. A tall opening in the center of the back elevation would accommodate deliveries and access to the construction staging site. A fourth opening in the veil, eight feet wide and twelve feet tall should be made as a signal of the front recessed door of the existing structure.

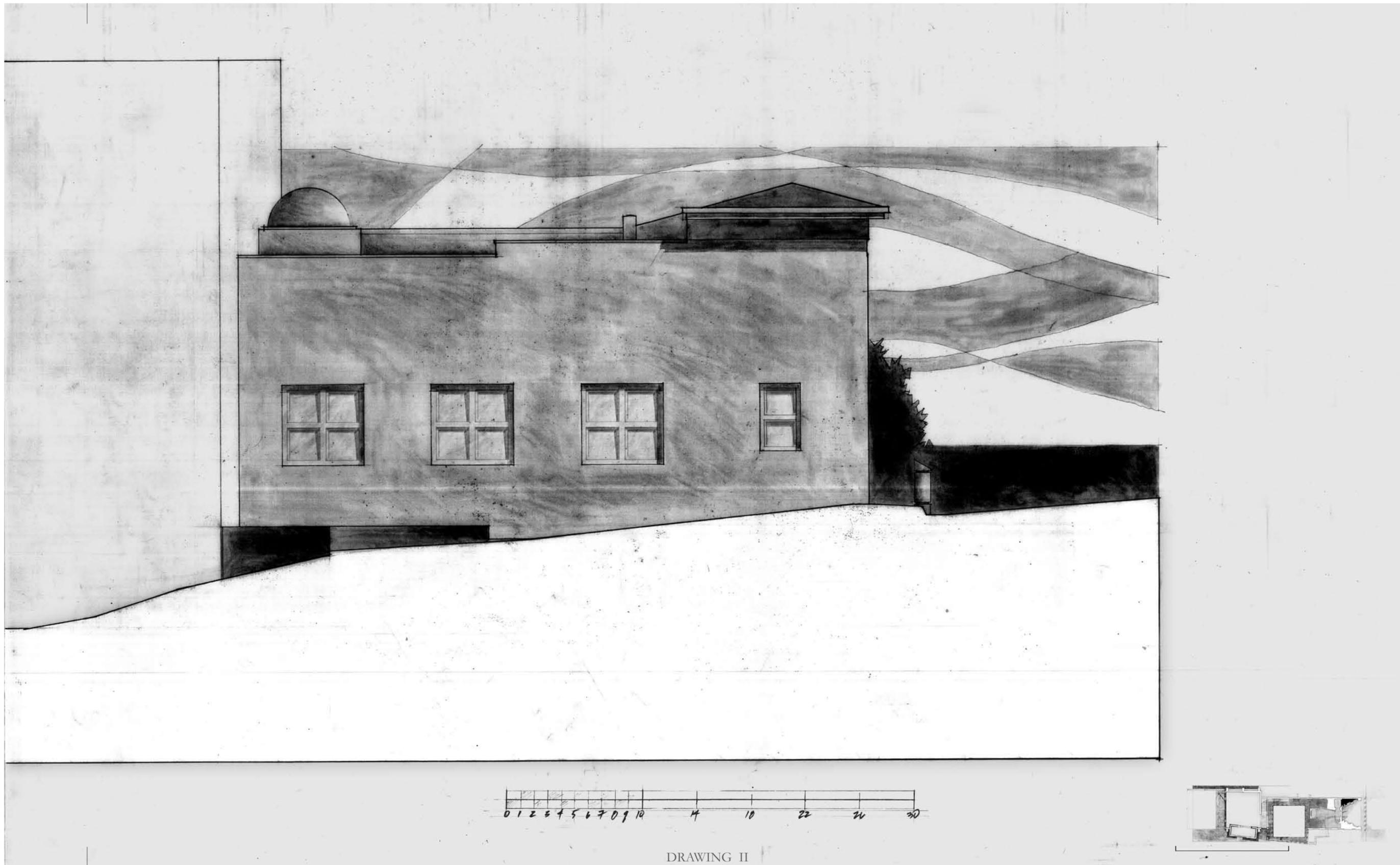
The net effect of a screen such as this is multifaceted.

The construction site remains protected. The now larger-than-life outline of the existing building appears as an object within the townscape. For the duration of the construction stage the general public would be more curious about the event because it has been hidden from view. The citizens of Blacksburg would be bluntly reminded of a building which has slowly been forgotten. Finally there should be a pair of orchestrated events based on the erection of the screen, and the final unveiling of the completed project.

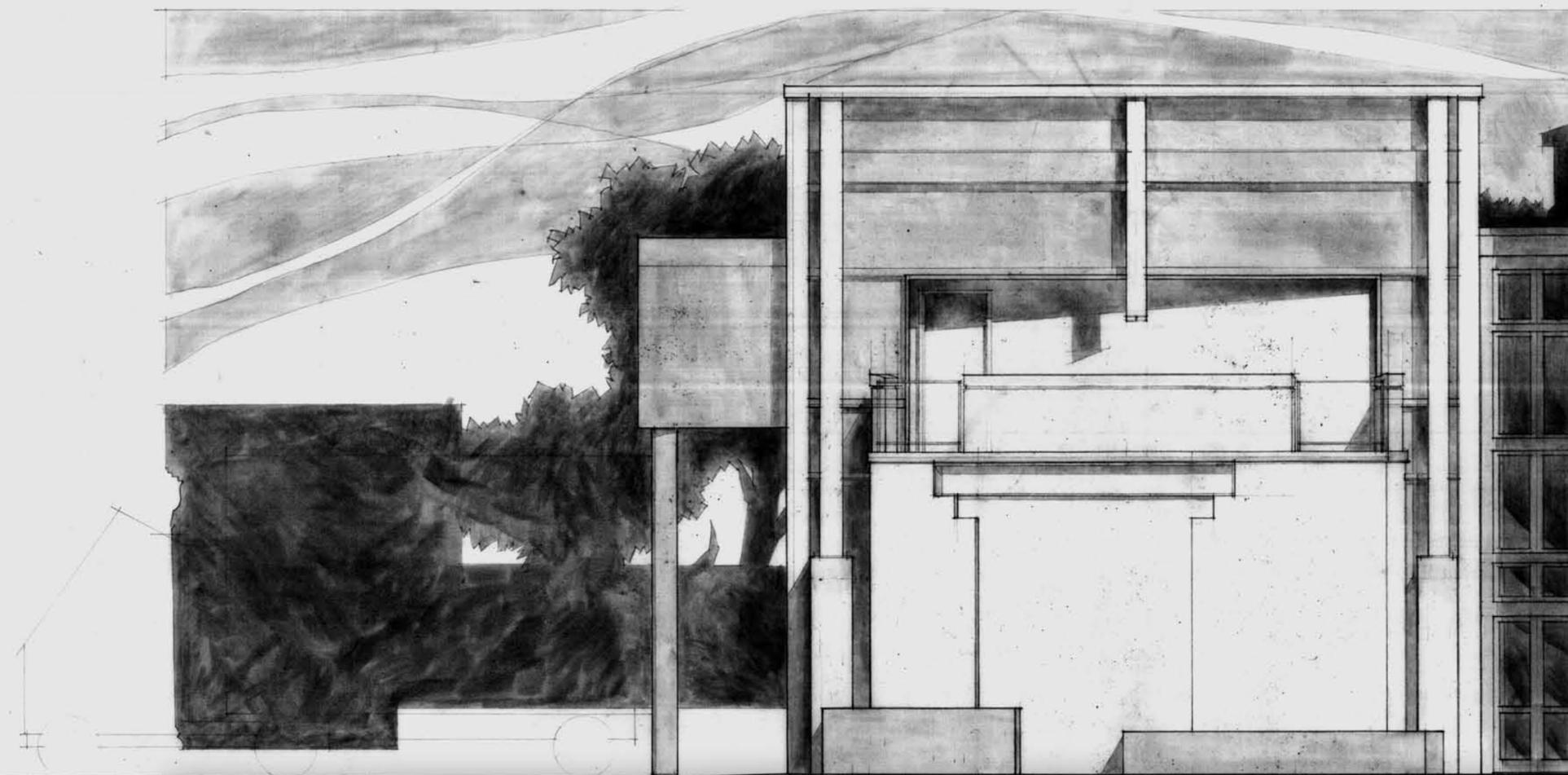




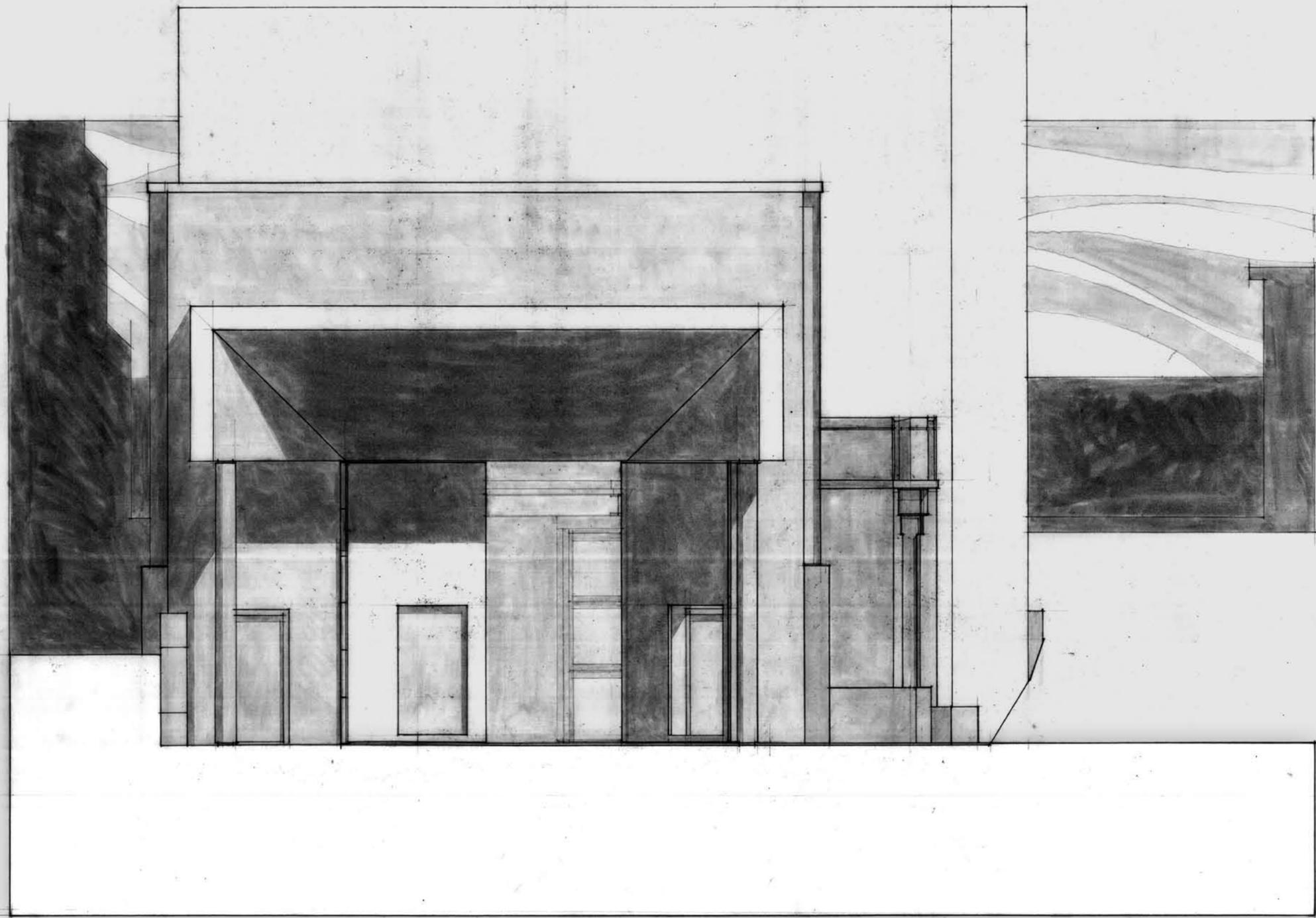
DRAWING I



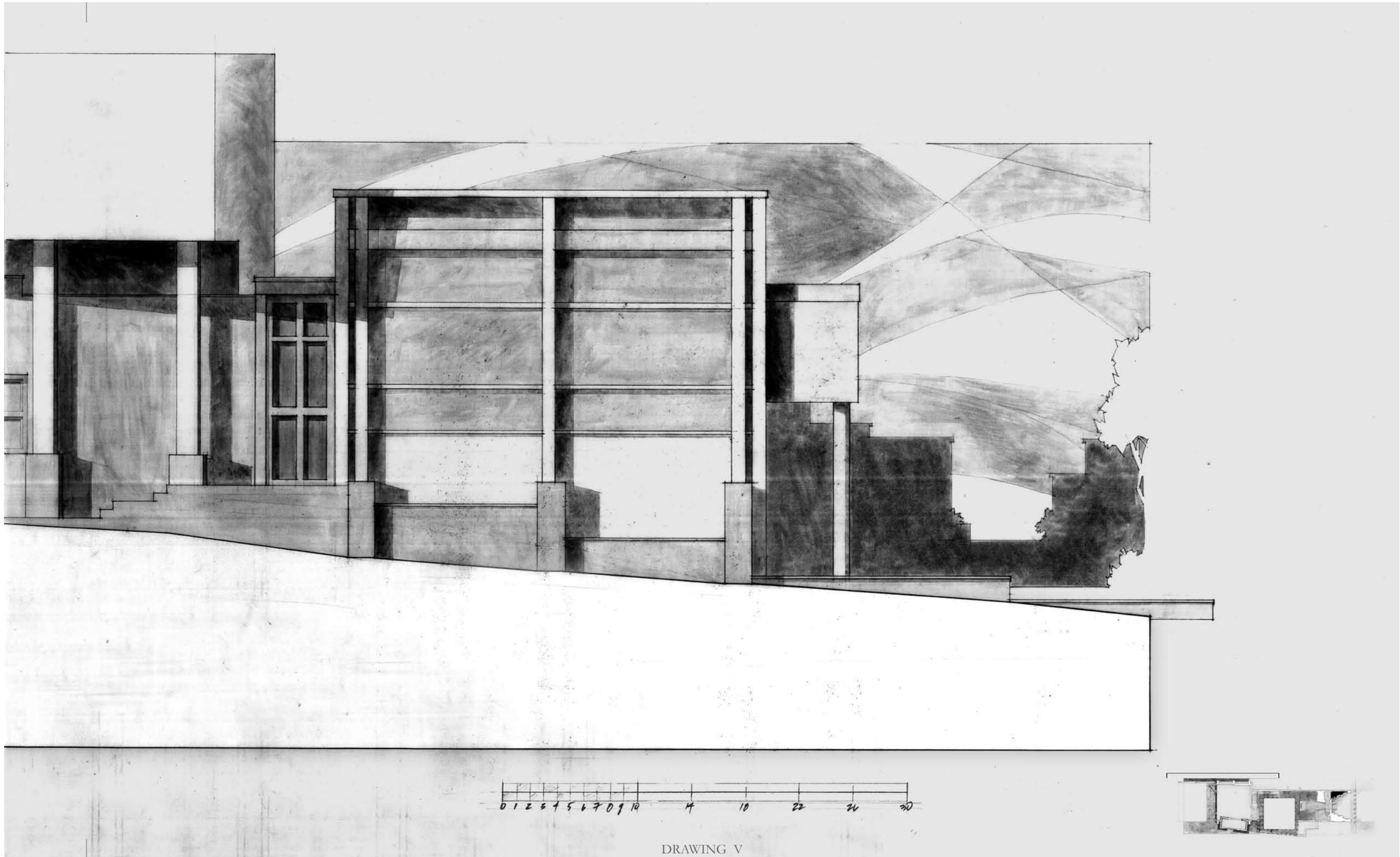
DRAWING II



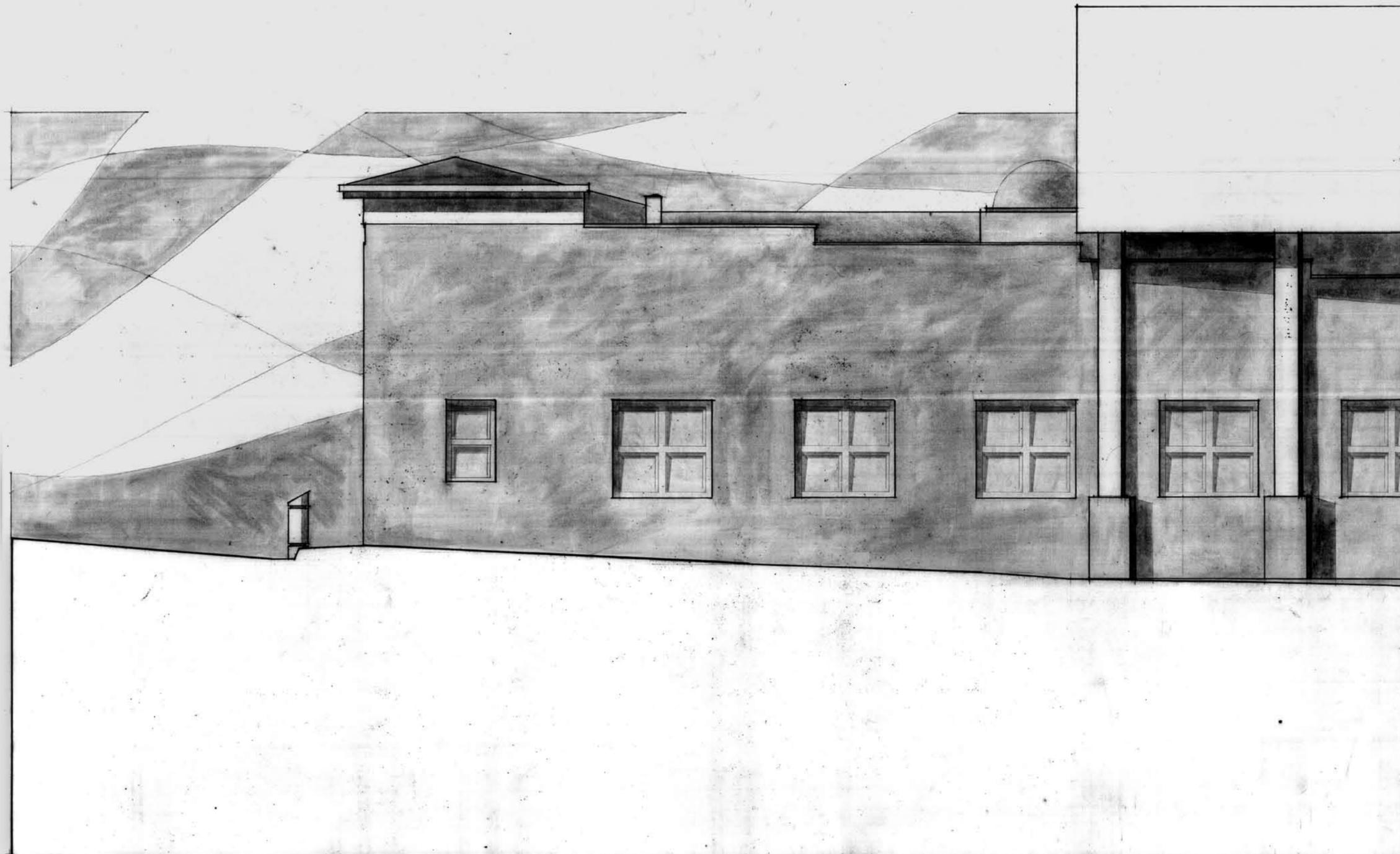
DRAWING III



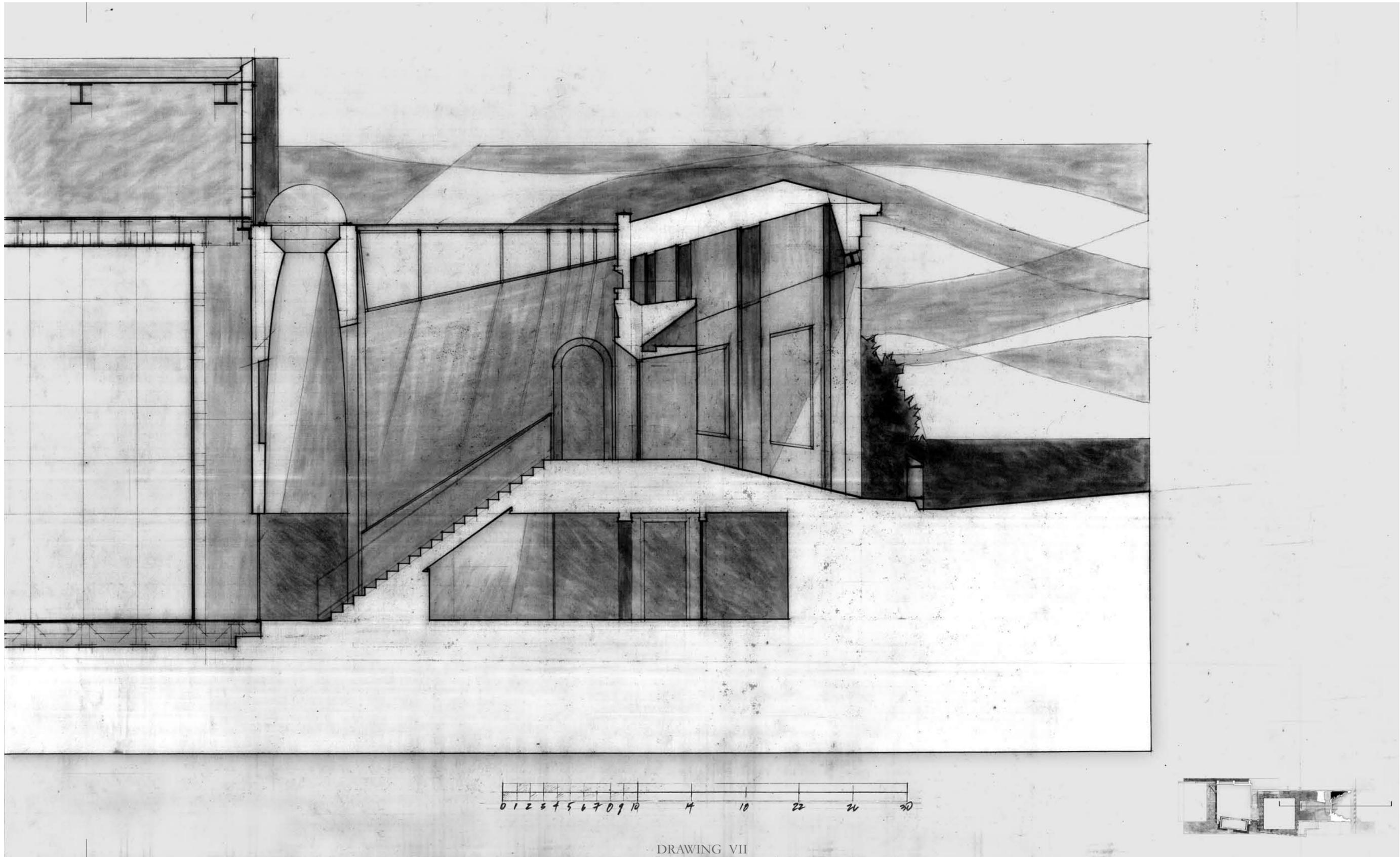
DRAWING IV



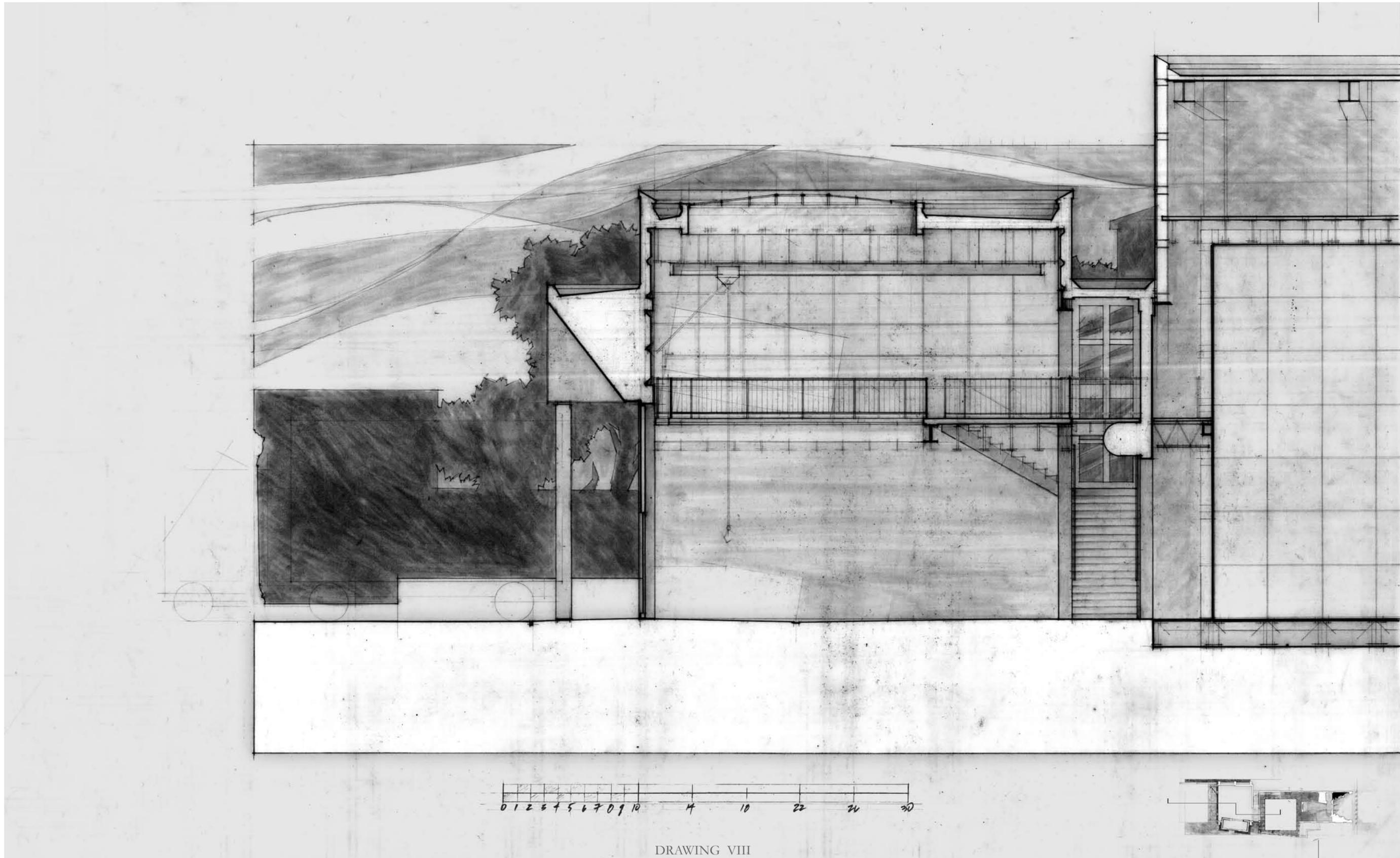
DRAWING V



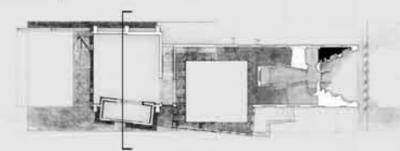
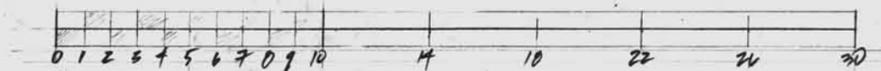
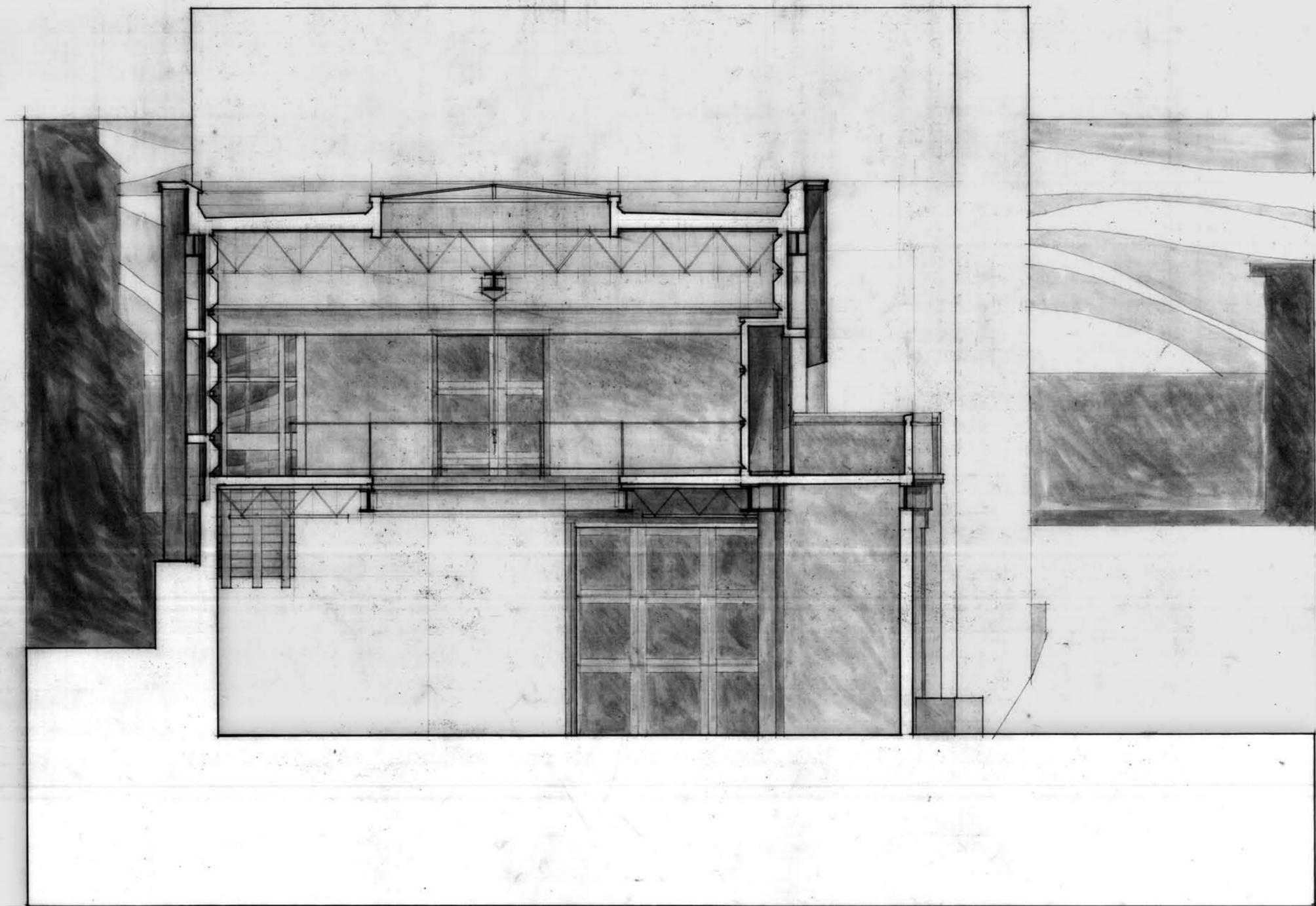
DRAWING VI



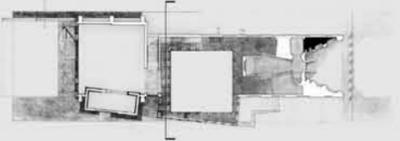
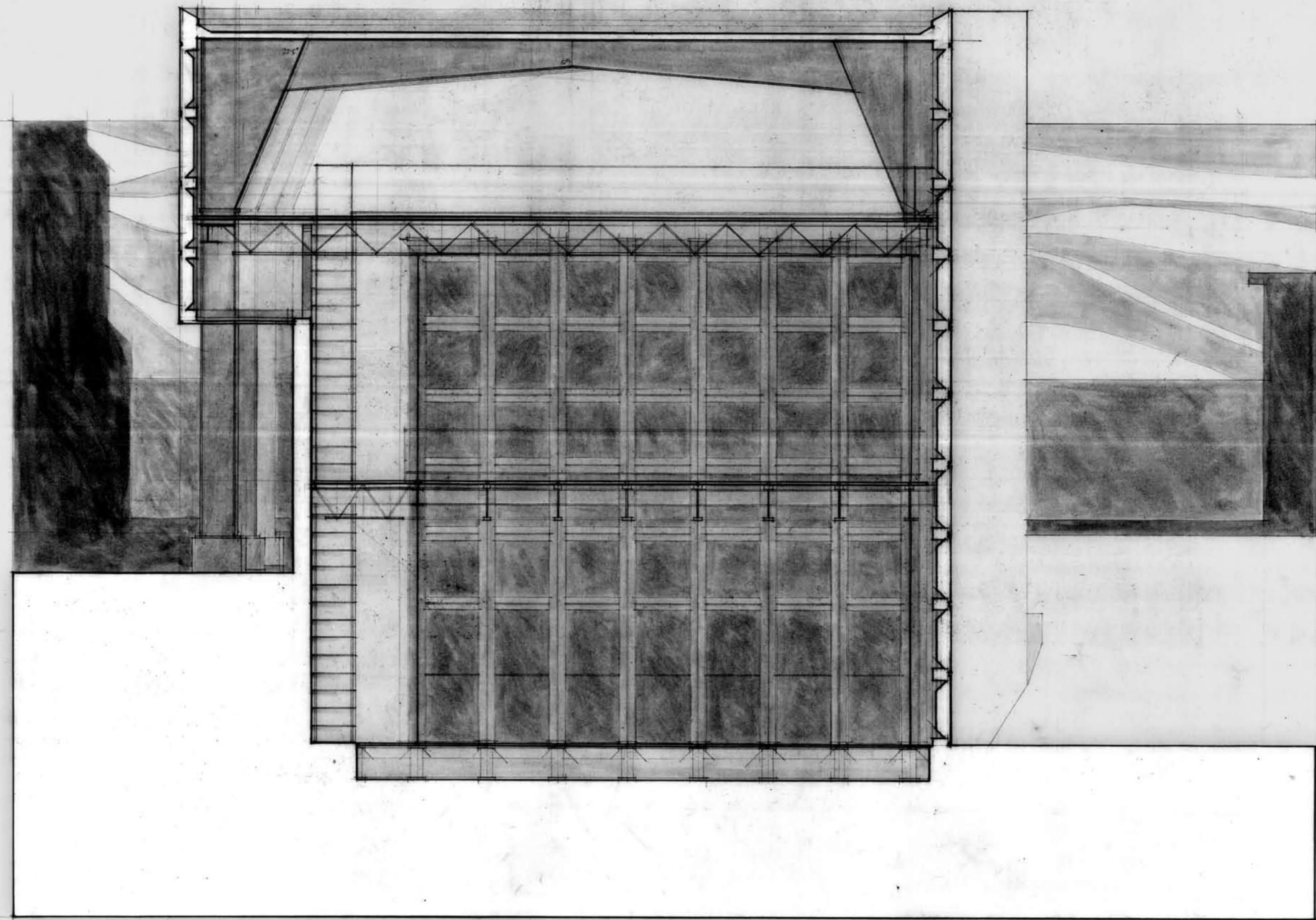
DRAWING VII



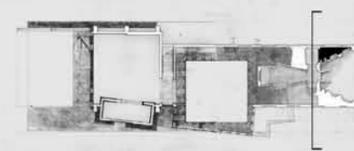
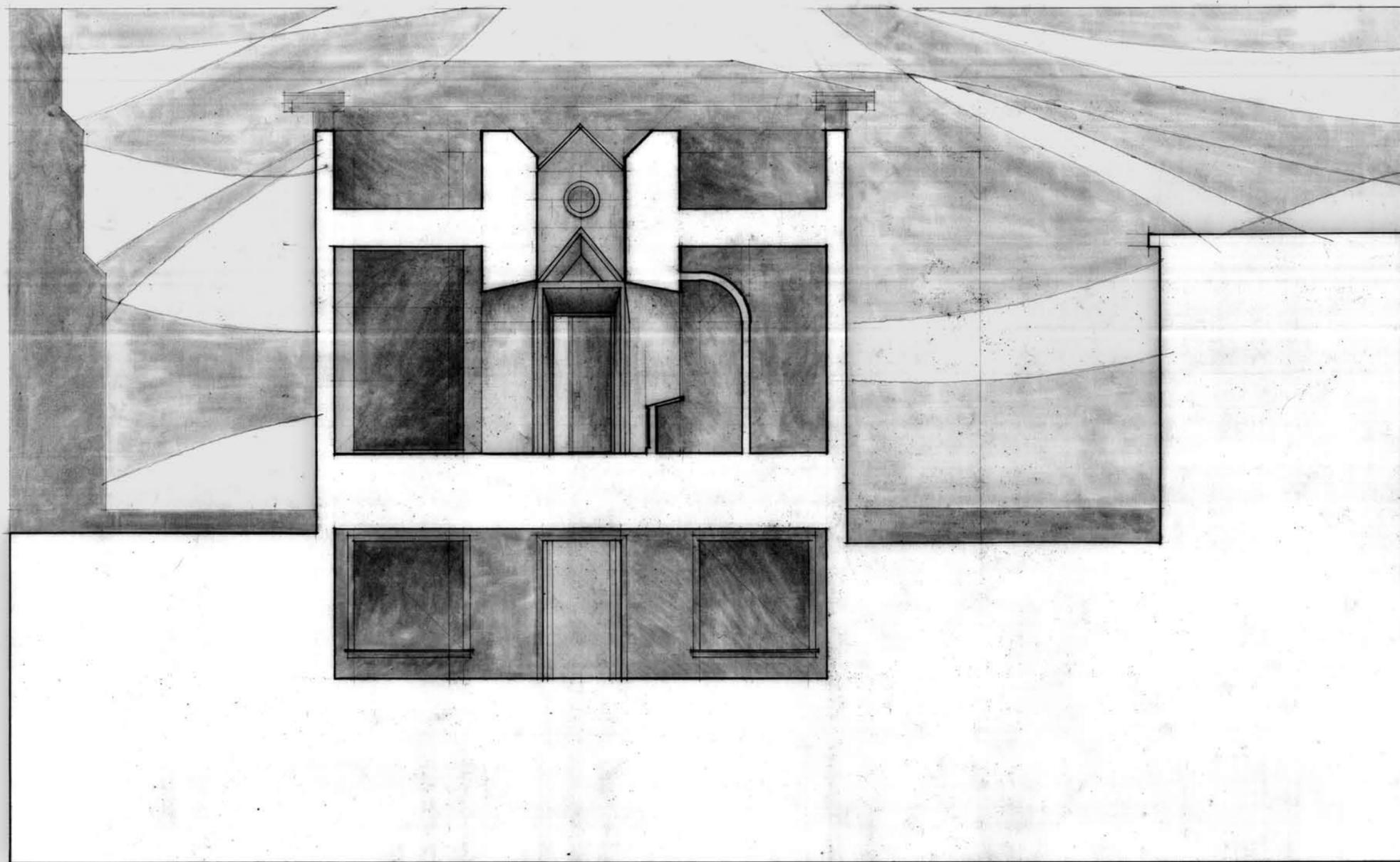
DRAWING VIII



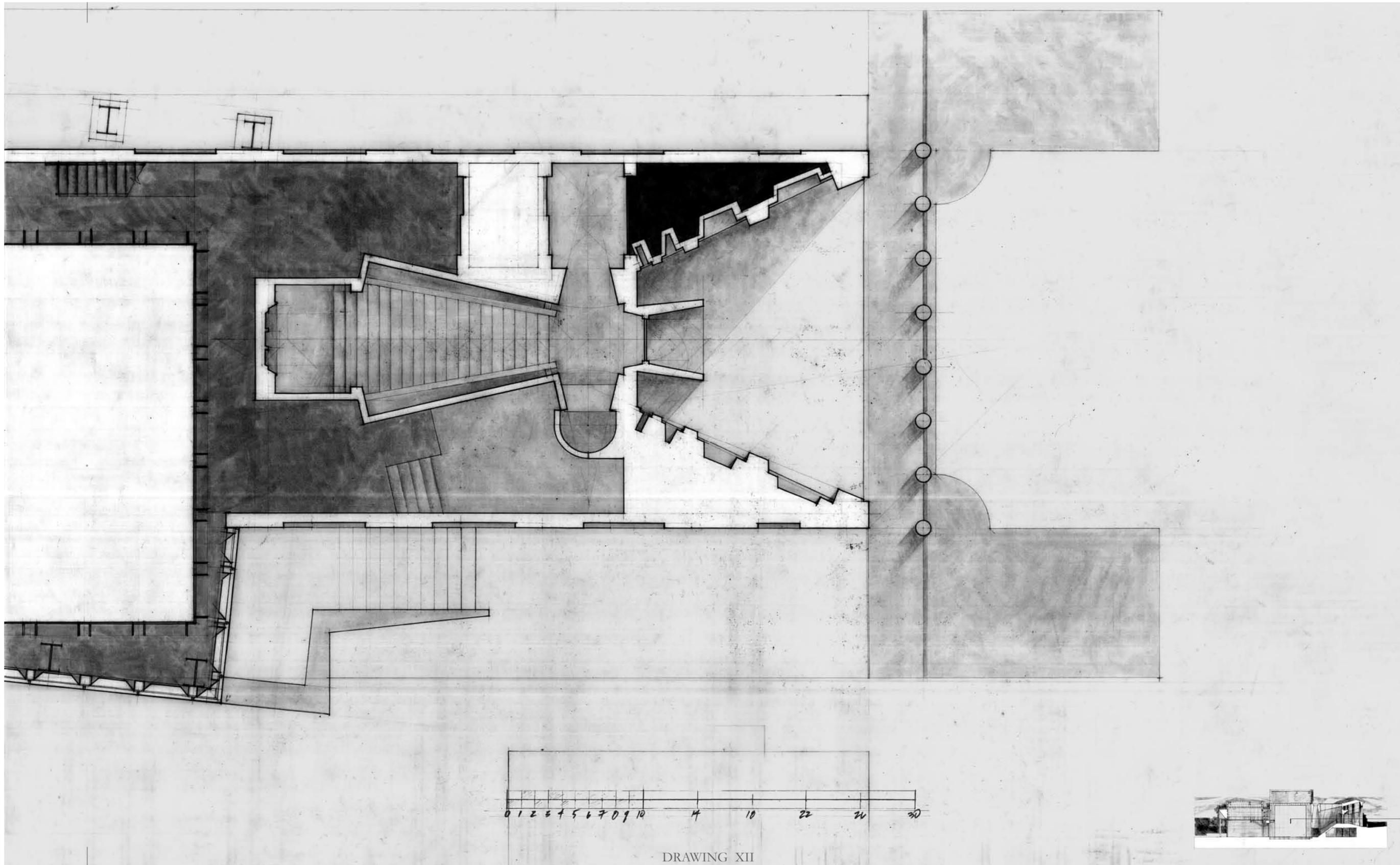
DRAWING IX



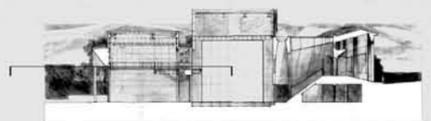
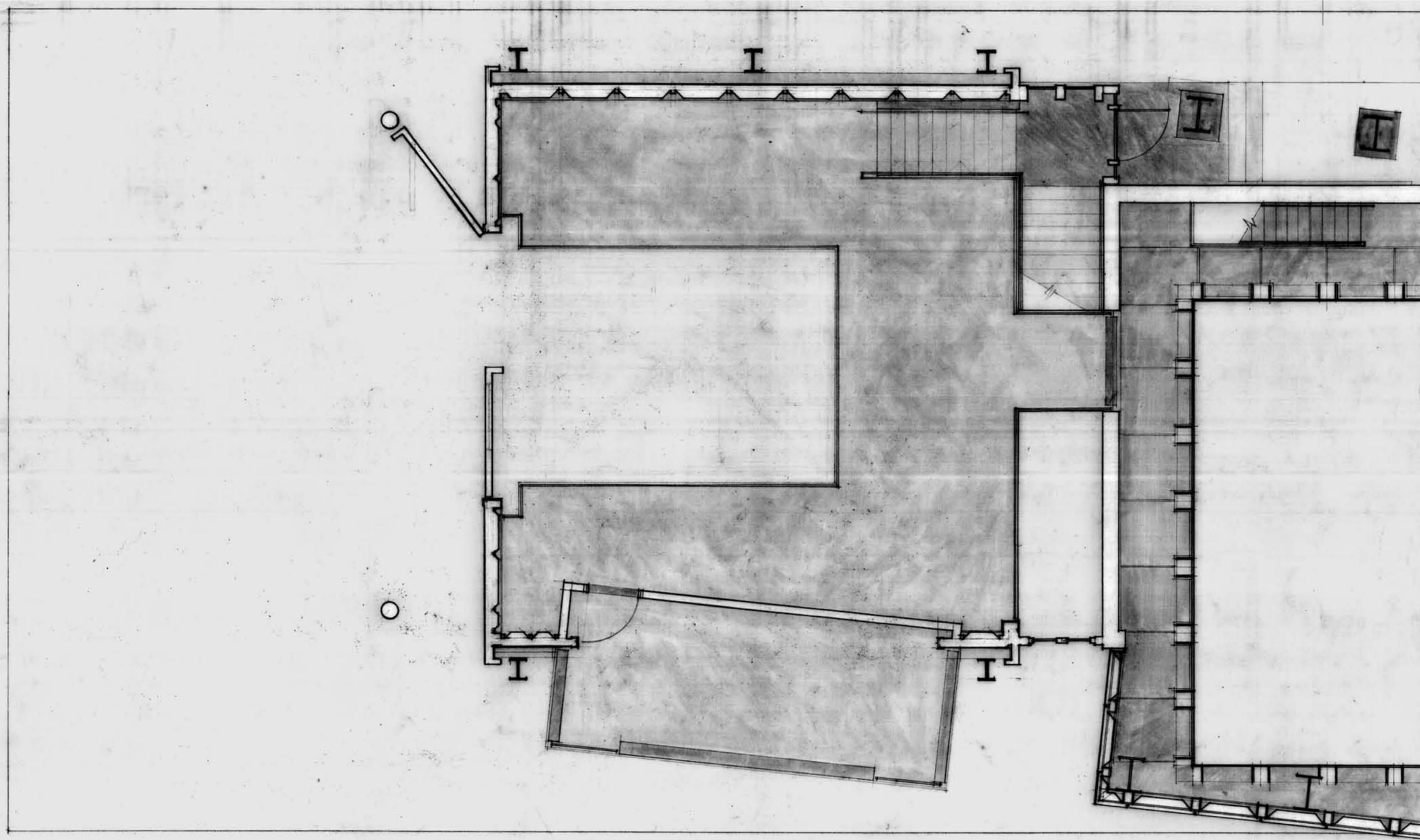
DRAWING X



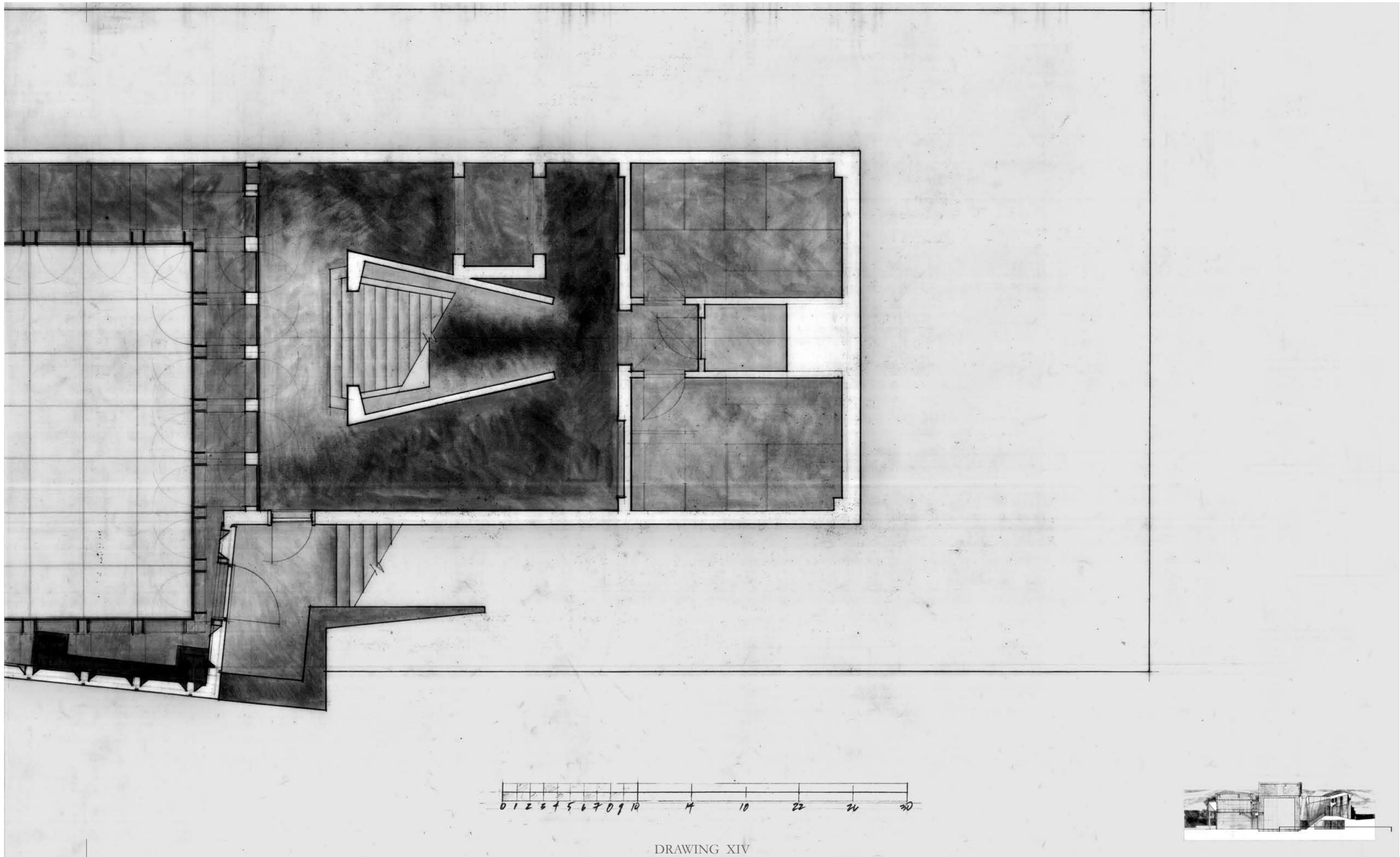
DRAWING XI



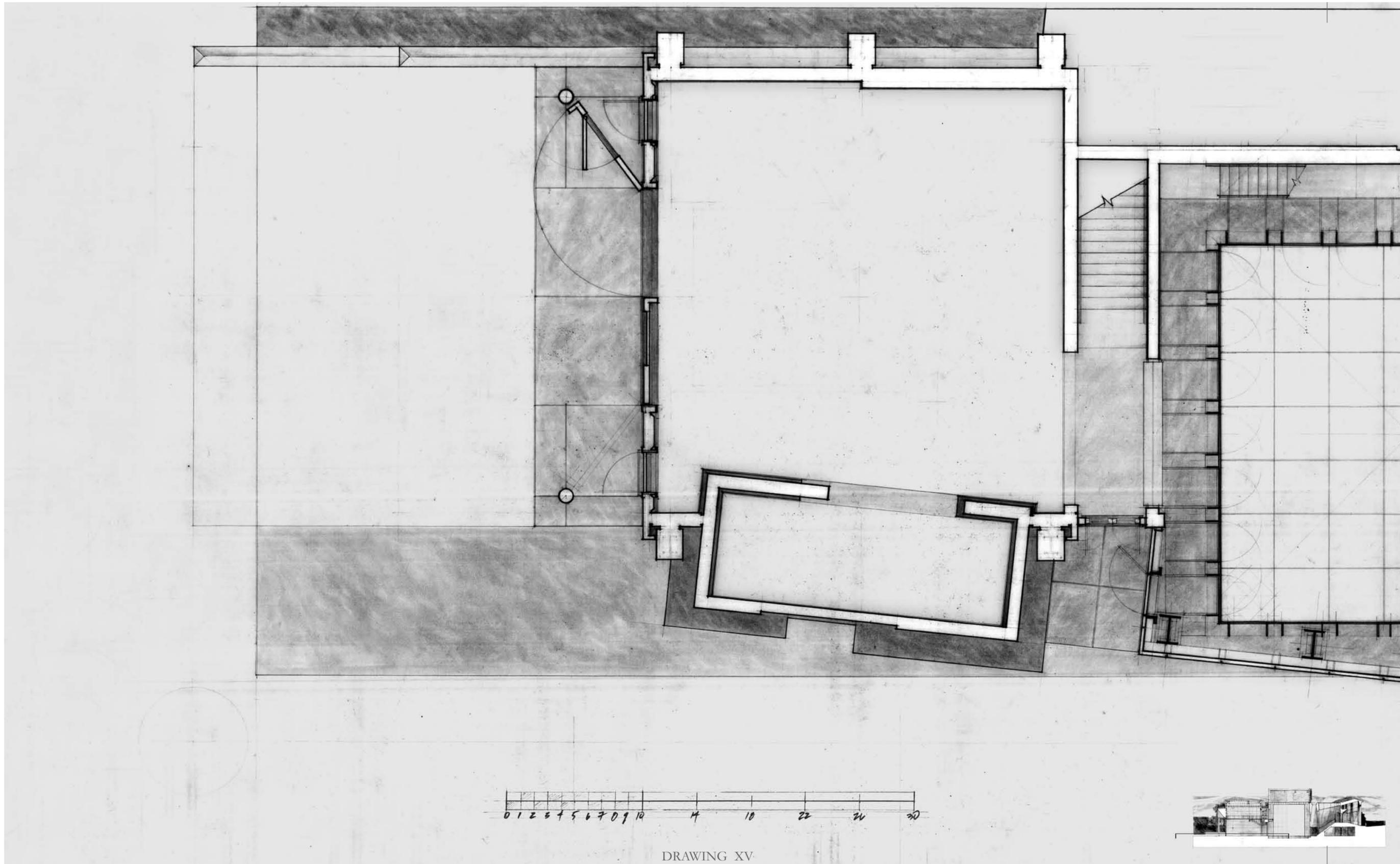
DRAWING XII



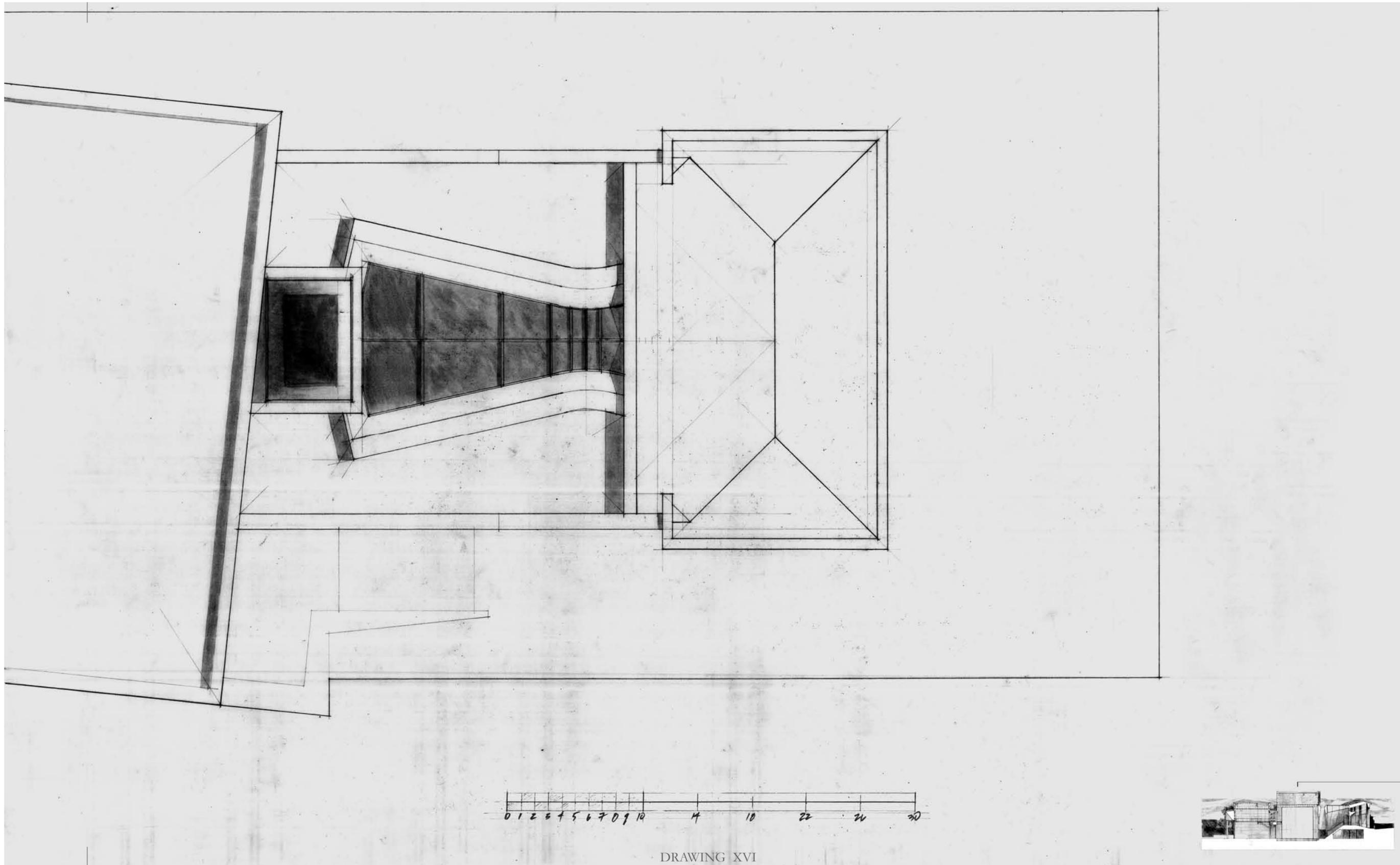
DRAWING XIII



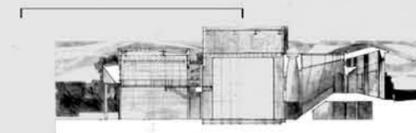
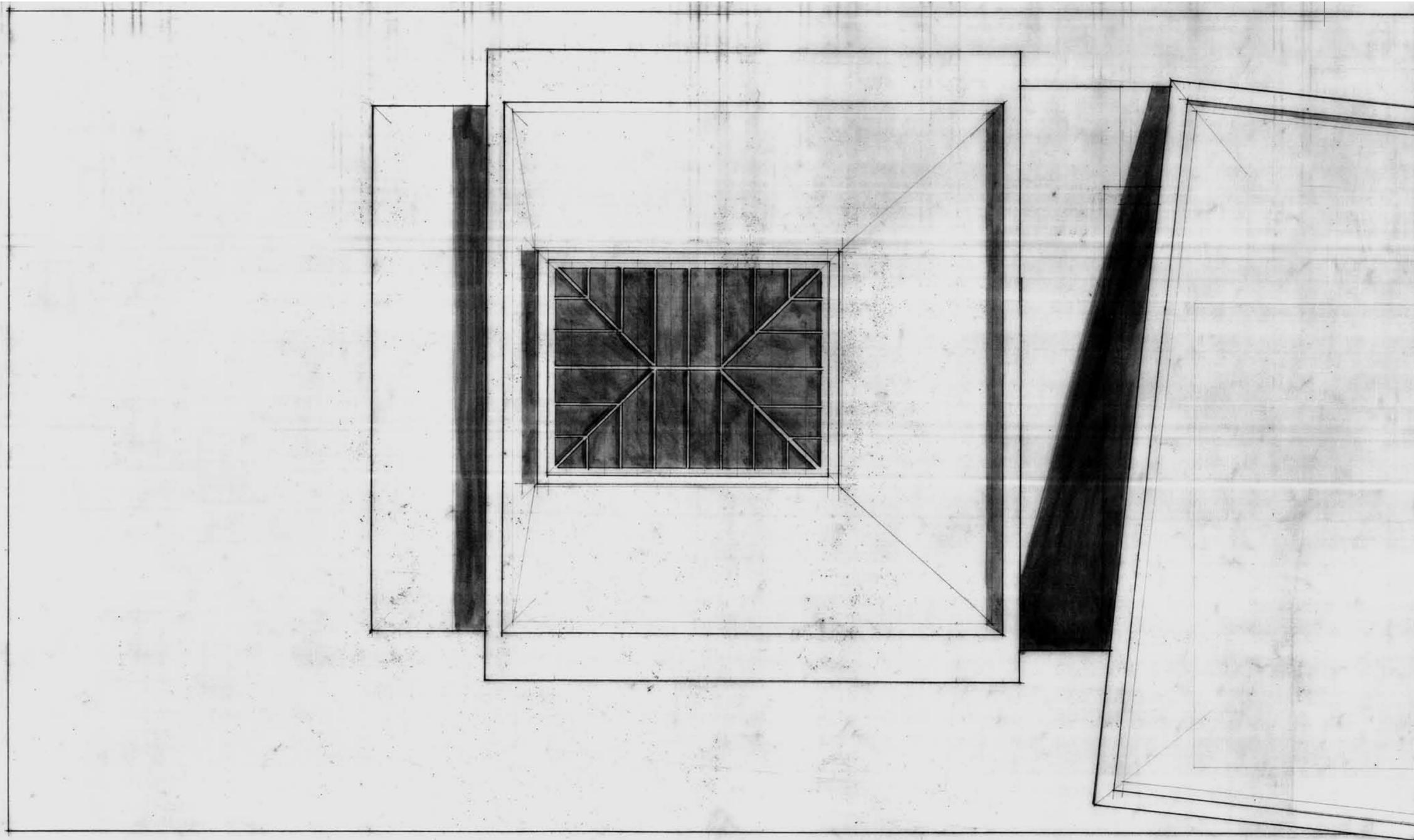
DRAWING XIV



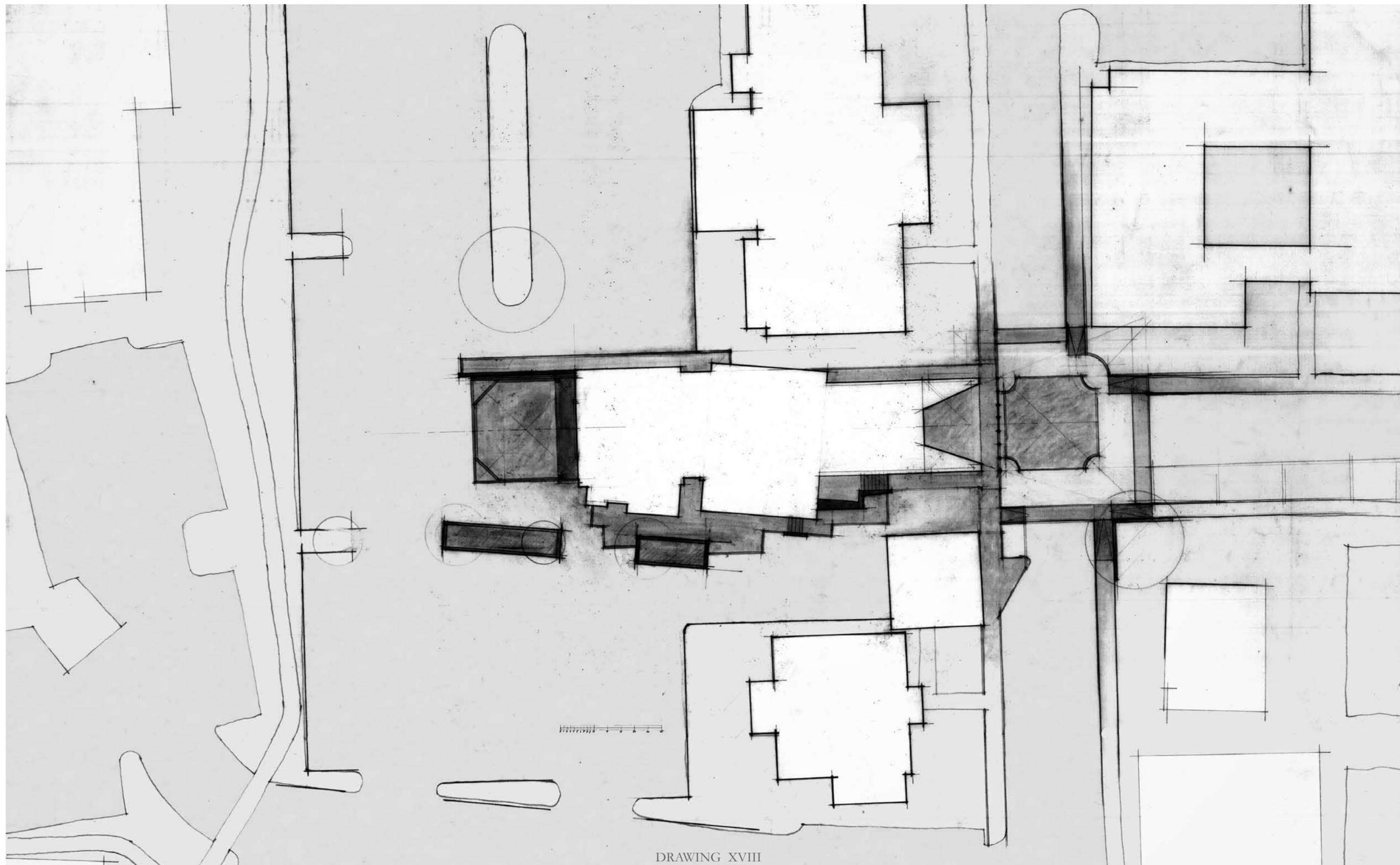
DRAWING XV



DRAWING XVI



DRAWING XVII



DRAWING XVIII



DRAWING XIX

### Monologue

Structure can sometimes be completely unimportant when it comes to the suspension of our disbelief. For the attenuated perspectival games a great deal of structure must be employed for the mechanism and the proper frame. However for the illusion, the structure does not matter. In this instance the construction of the stairwell's risers, treads, and built materials are of little consequence since such a greater emphasis is placed on the surface. The appearance of material finishes is important.

This is not to say that the employed materials for framing the building are useless. Utilitarian, pragmatic and technologic questions may not get to the basis of the project.

There is a curious reversal when structural play can insist on being on show, and simultaneously having to serve a working role. Akin to our frequent role as Architects, we are to participate in the world around us, and at times we must also recede into the background.

Within this project this game of role inversions is drawn out in the apparent differences and similarities of the perspectival play in the stairwell and the fabrication of the addition. In both cases the structure is somewhat unimportant, but the medium of 'expression' is very different.

This reversal is one facet of a much larger play. Many of the other facets must be actualized - and may not be described except directly from one person to another.

These four theatres are each important because they are exemplars. There are inversions, reversals and reflections evident in each. Through these sometimes strange translations we can catch a glimpse of the bizarre spirit of Theatre by calling it into appearance.

Things are on show and things are not. Things should interfere and things should not.

### Epilogue

The words to explain, clarify and describe this project are heavily weighted; they are not so easily disposed. They aide and support this project and, in some way, legitimize it. The several tensions between the School, the University and Academia et al stand in support of this project.

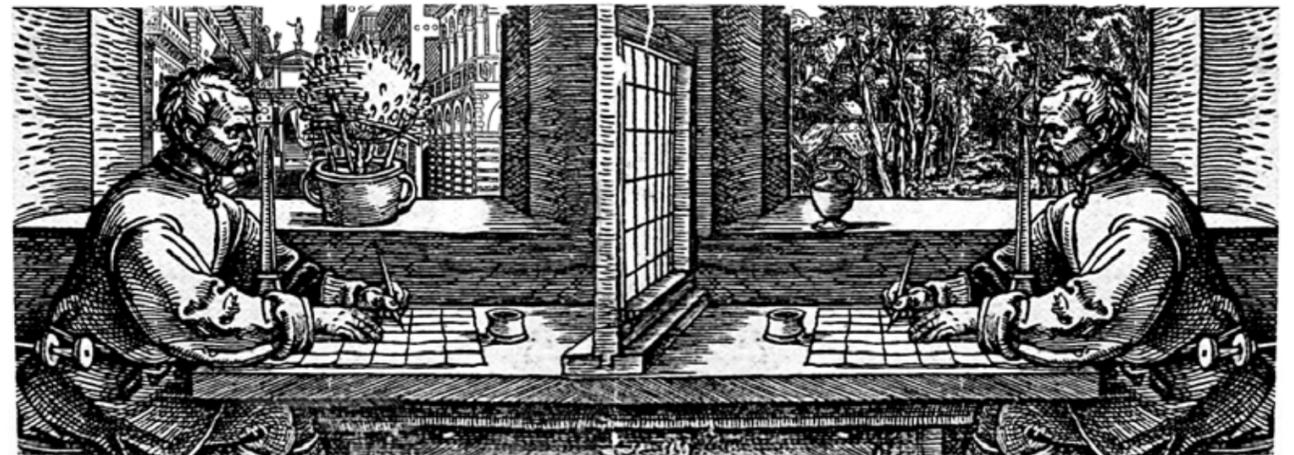
It could go on.

Think of this project itself as a stage for a host of plays. Every detail is an opportunity for the larger Play to continue.

Think of the nearly inordinate opportunities as an important well of intellectual and architectural inspiration. Those opportunities, which have only been highlighted as such within the duration of this project, make it clear that practicing means questioning every moment, and continuing to sharpen a heightened architectural sense. That acute sensibility will require deep and substantially focused discipline.

The questions asked here are the inspiration for future projects. It is important to maintain a strong drive and energy.

Be open. Act. This gift will continue to be revealed.



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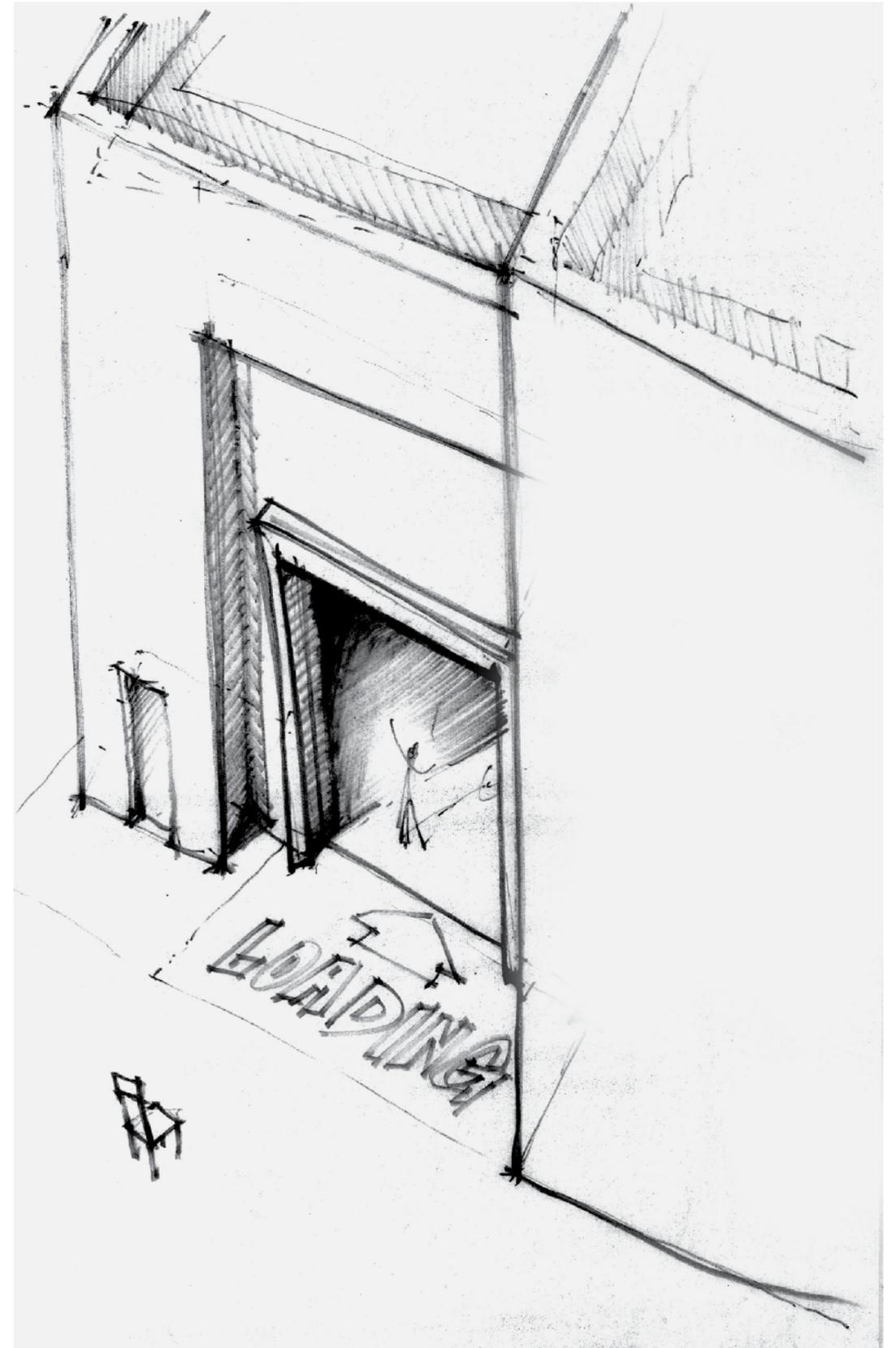
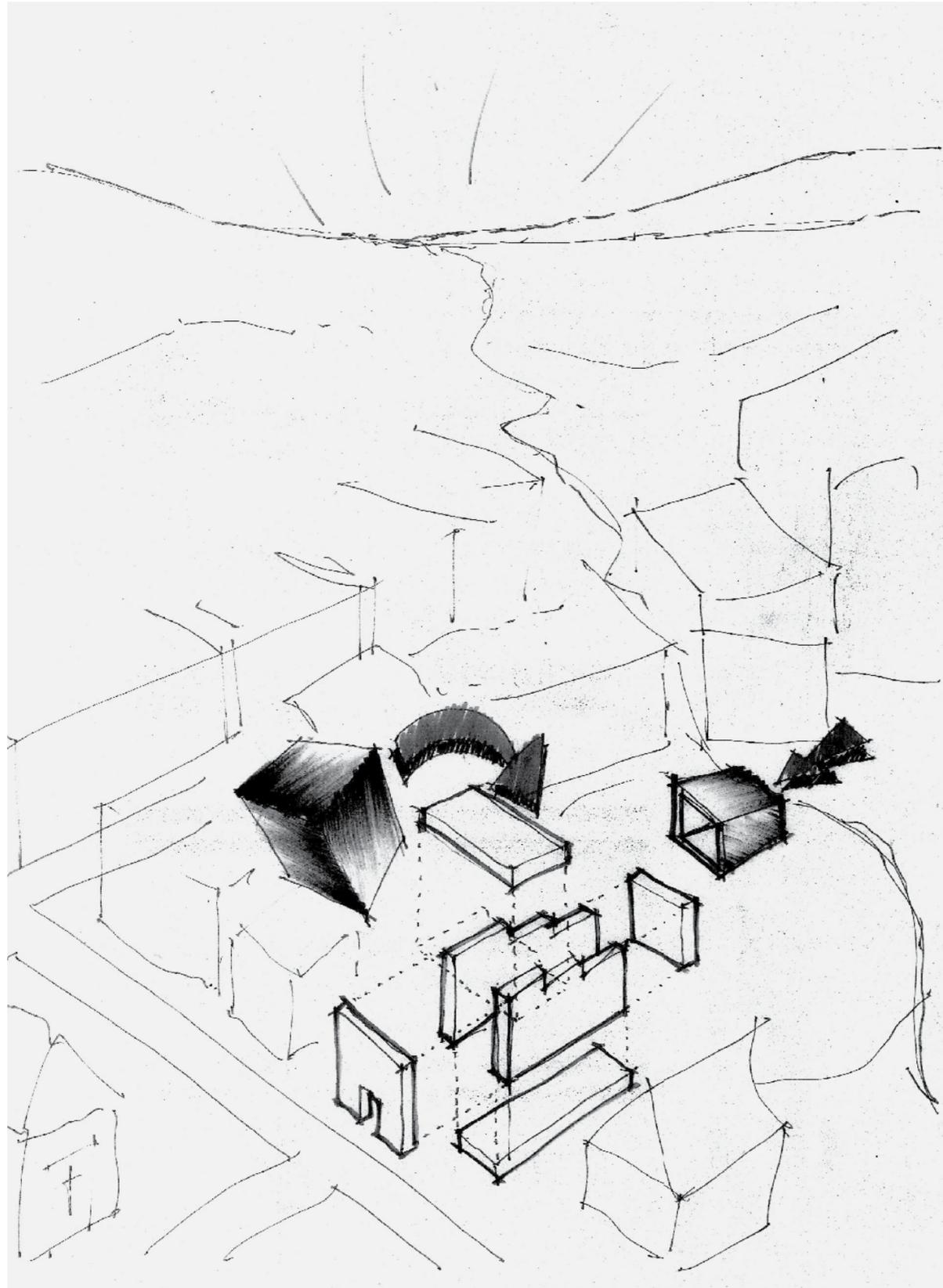
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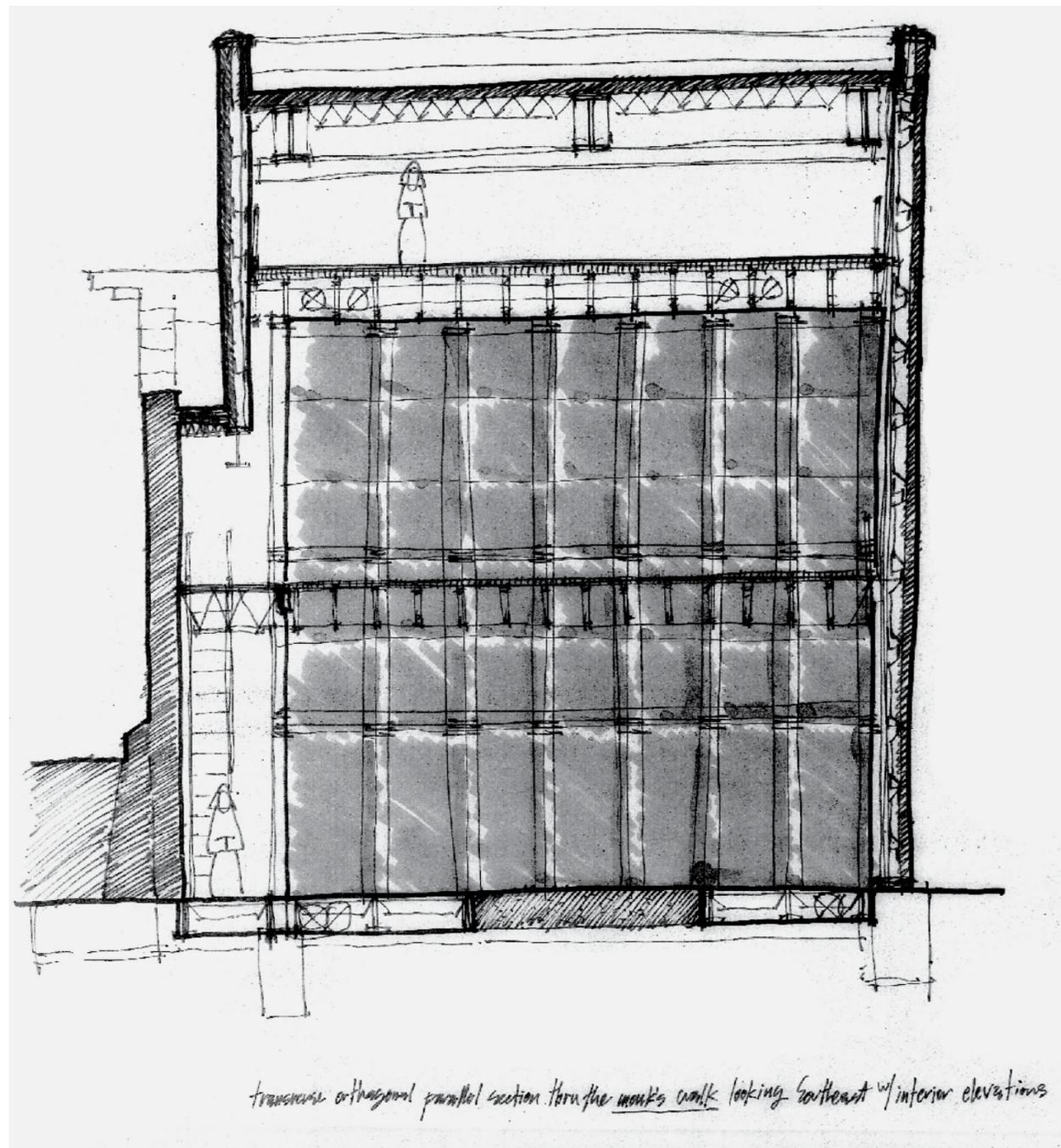
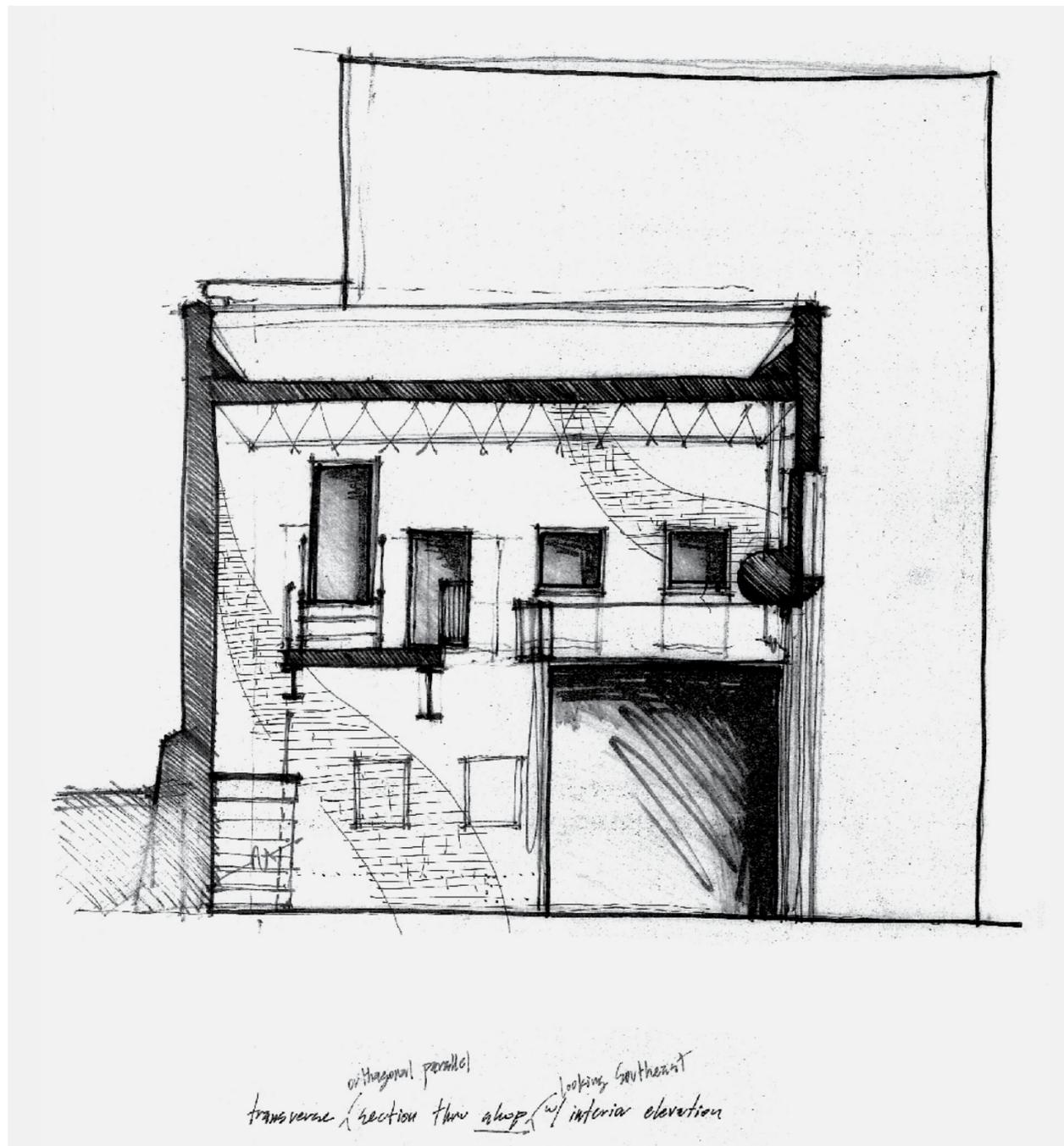
## Curriculum Vitae

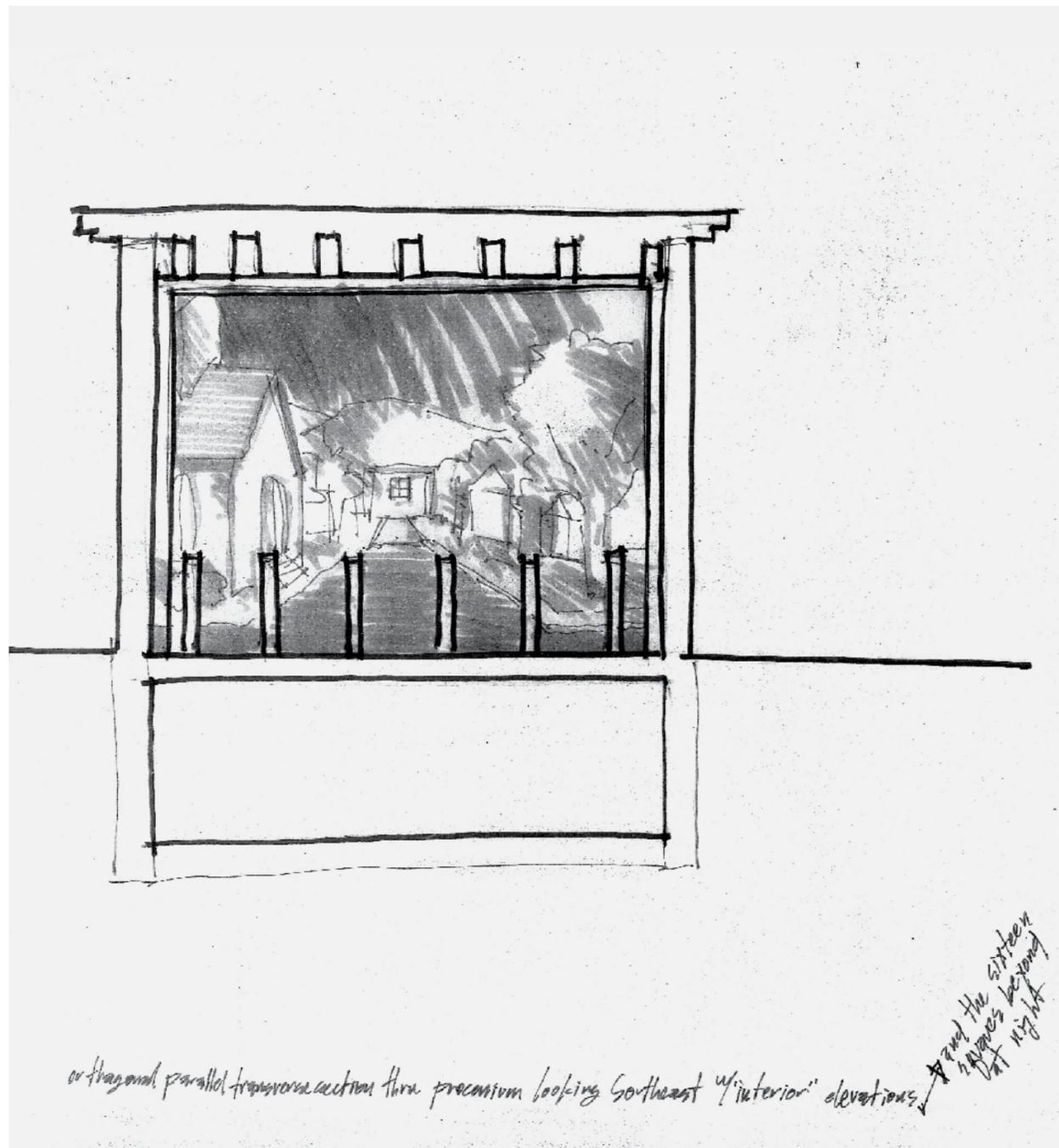
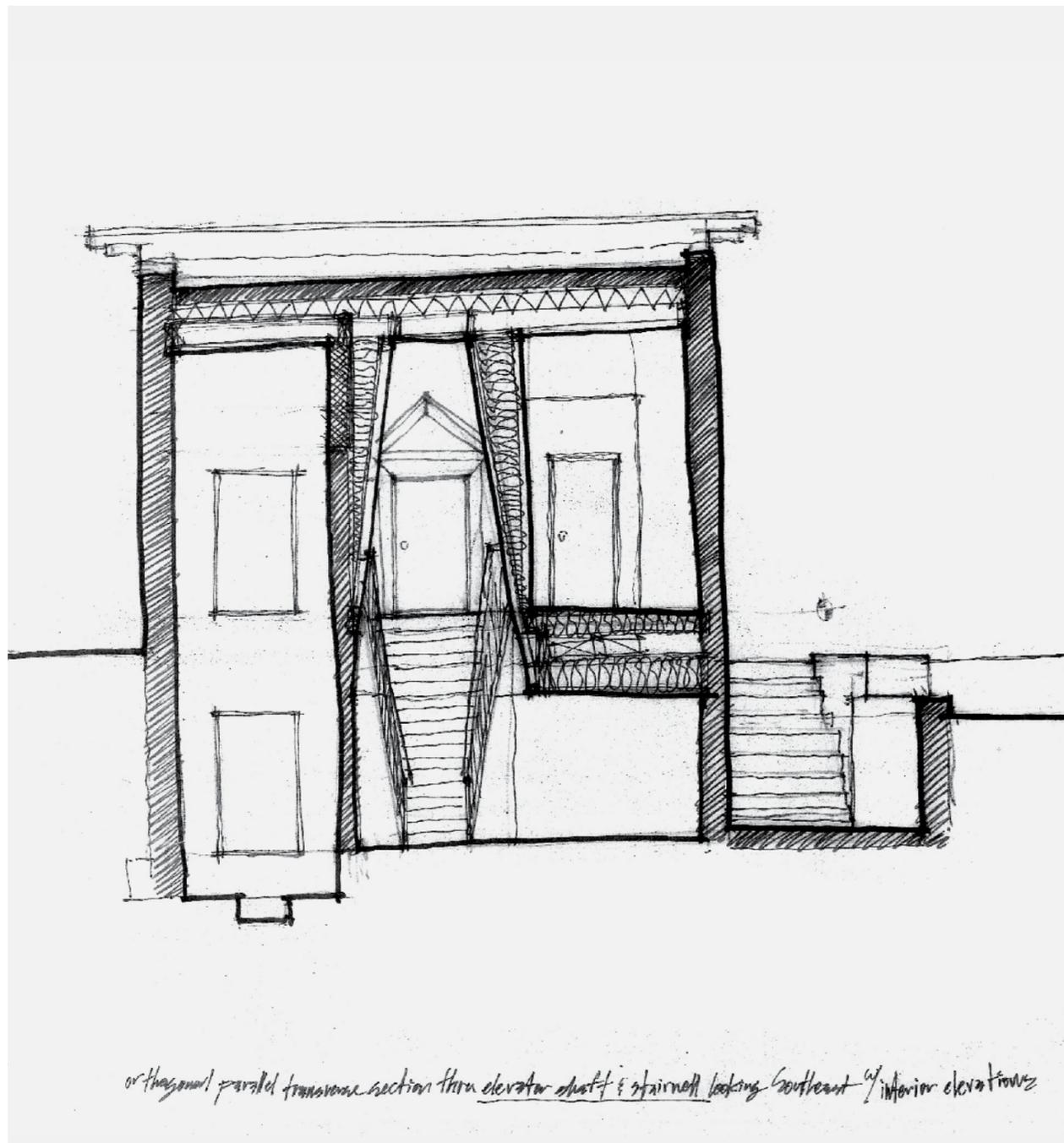
James Randolph Ruhland III  
26 July 1976

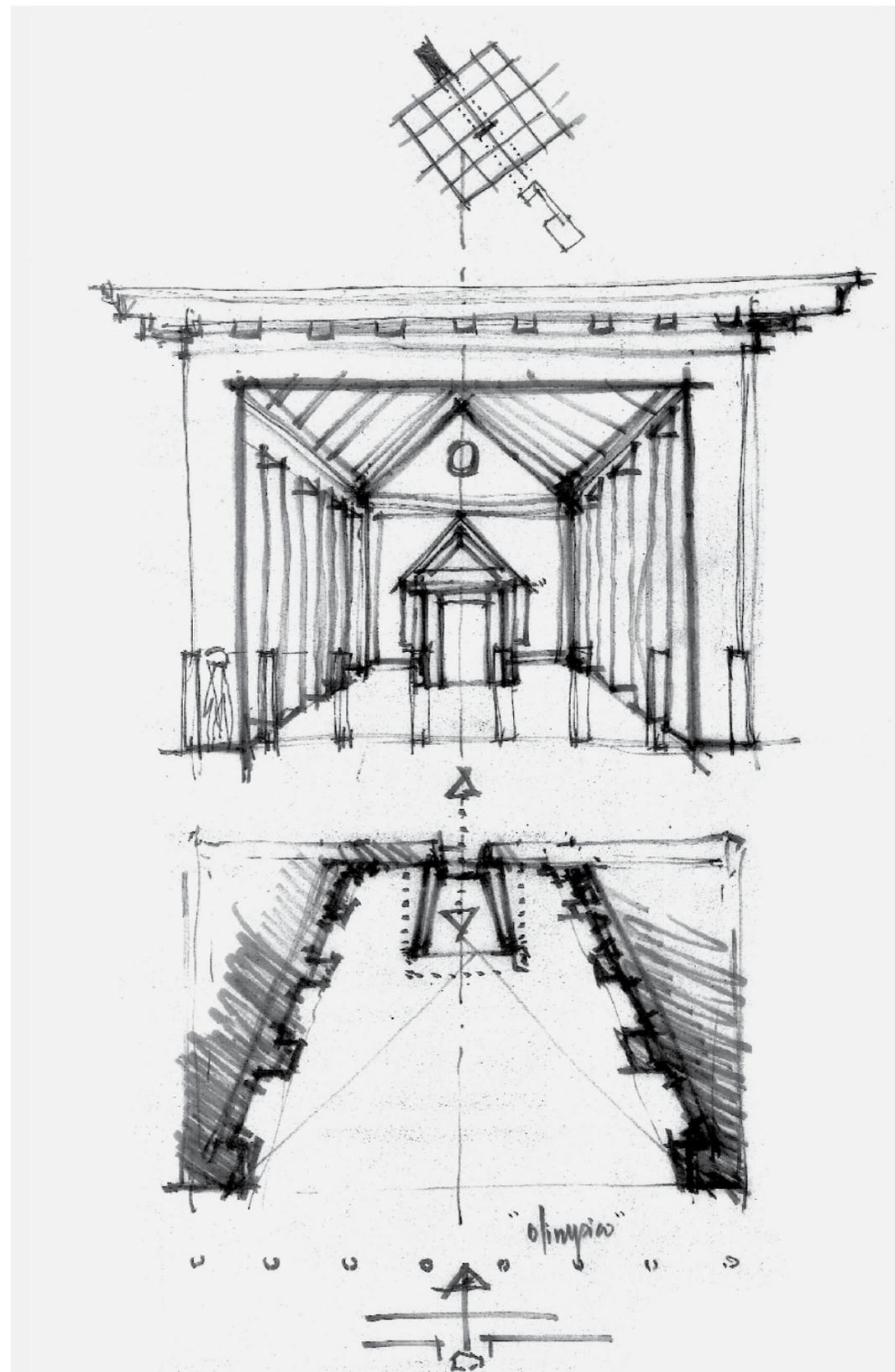
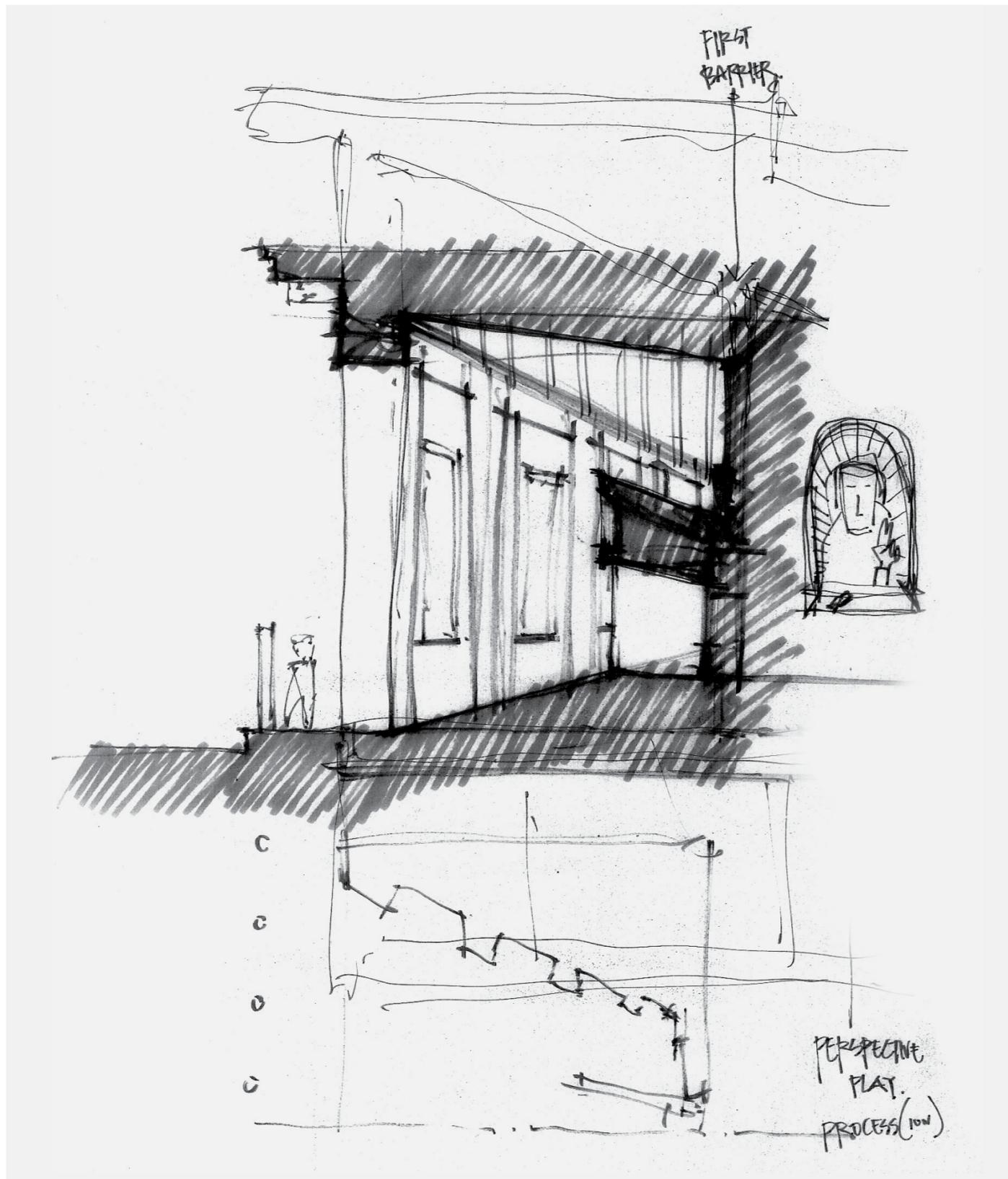
Master of Architecture  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
Blacksburg, Virginia  
May 2006

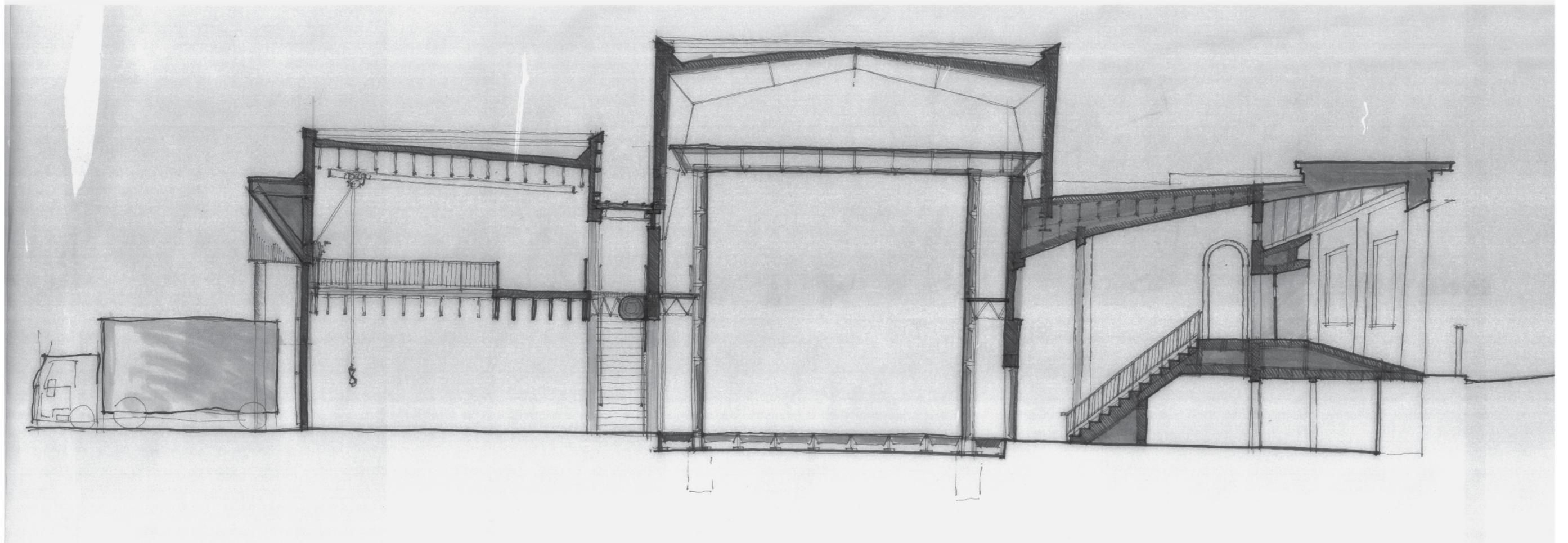
Bachelor of Architecture  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
Blacksburg, Virginia  
May 1999



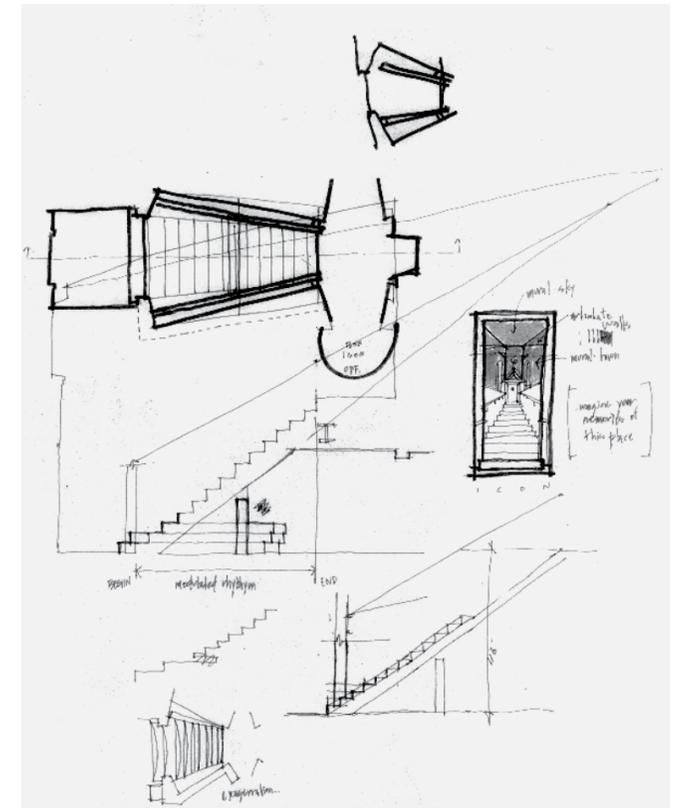
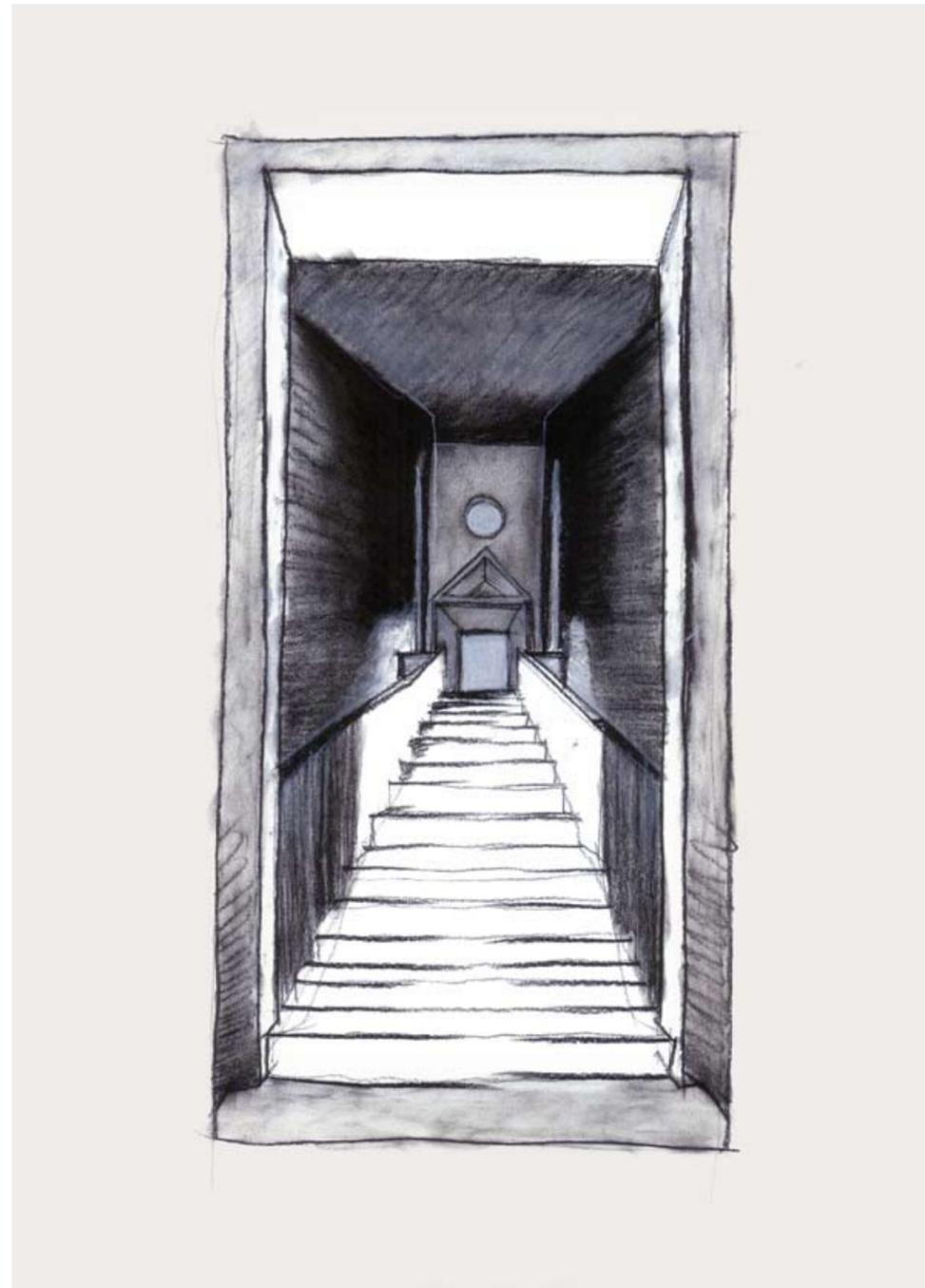
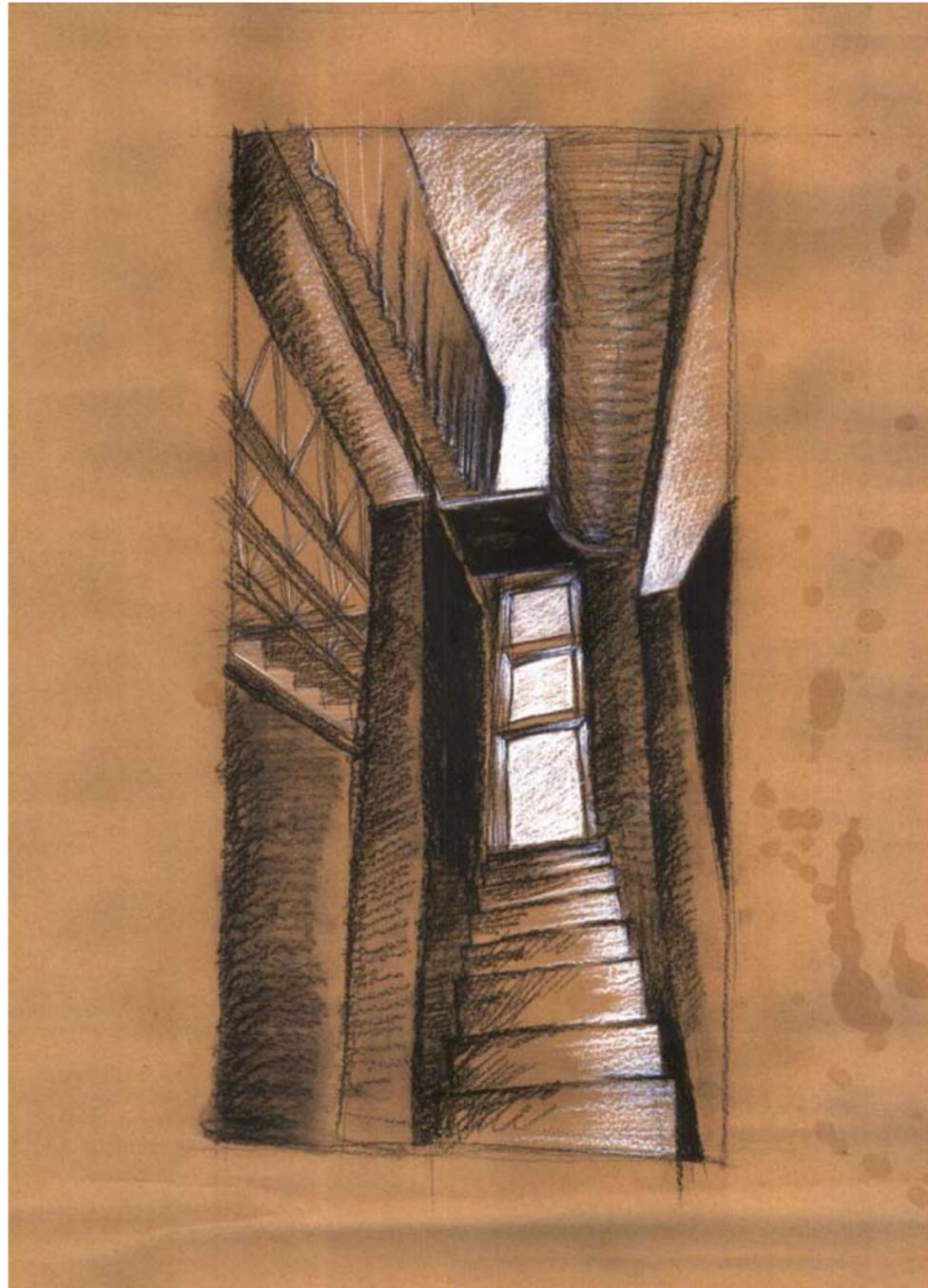


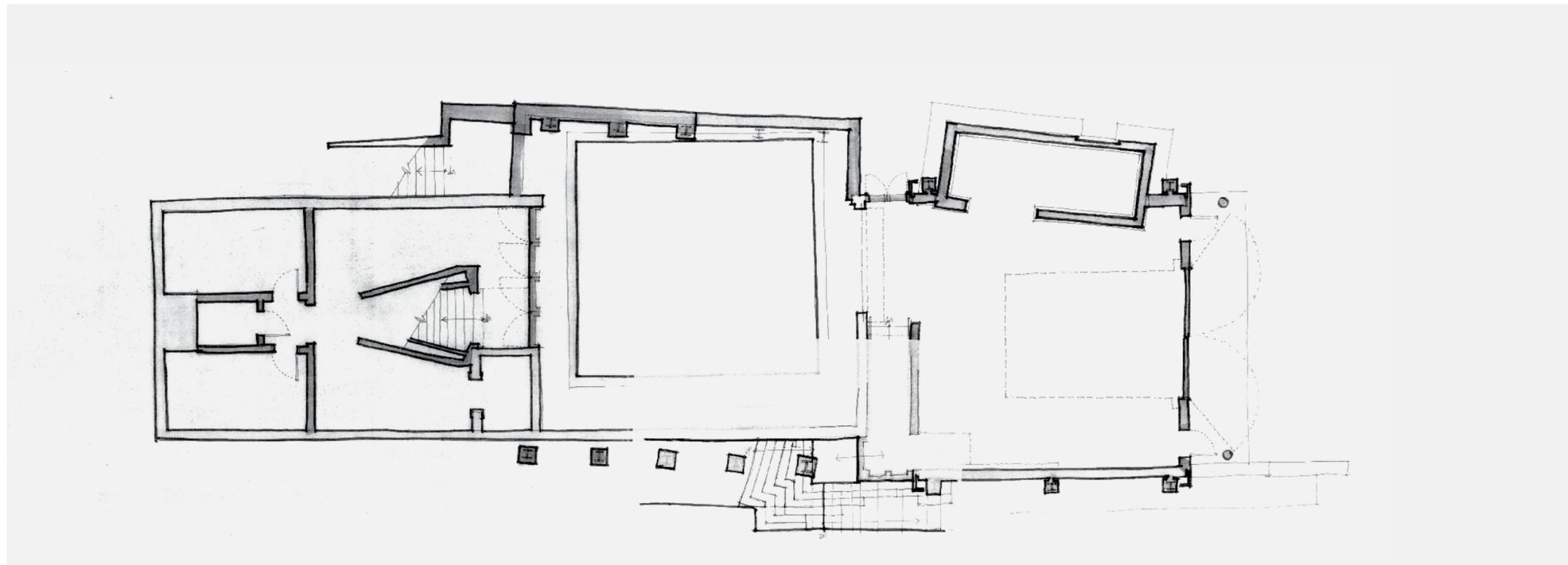
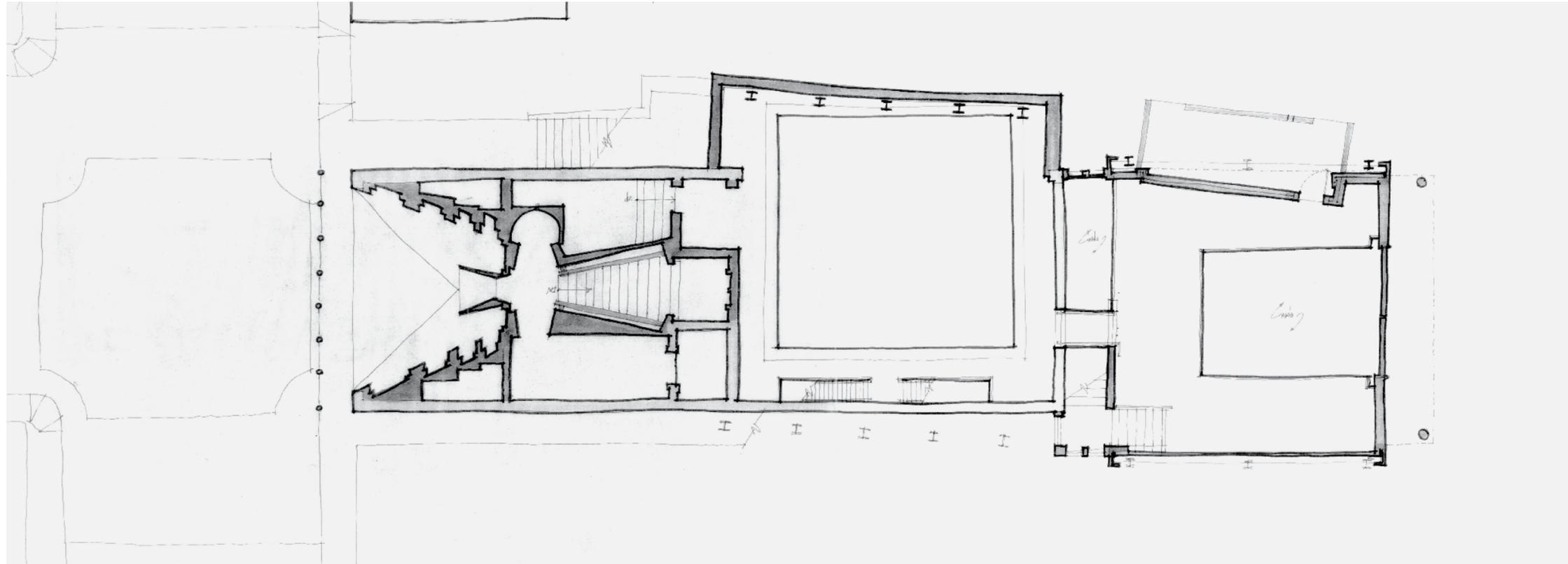














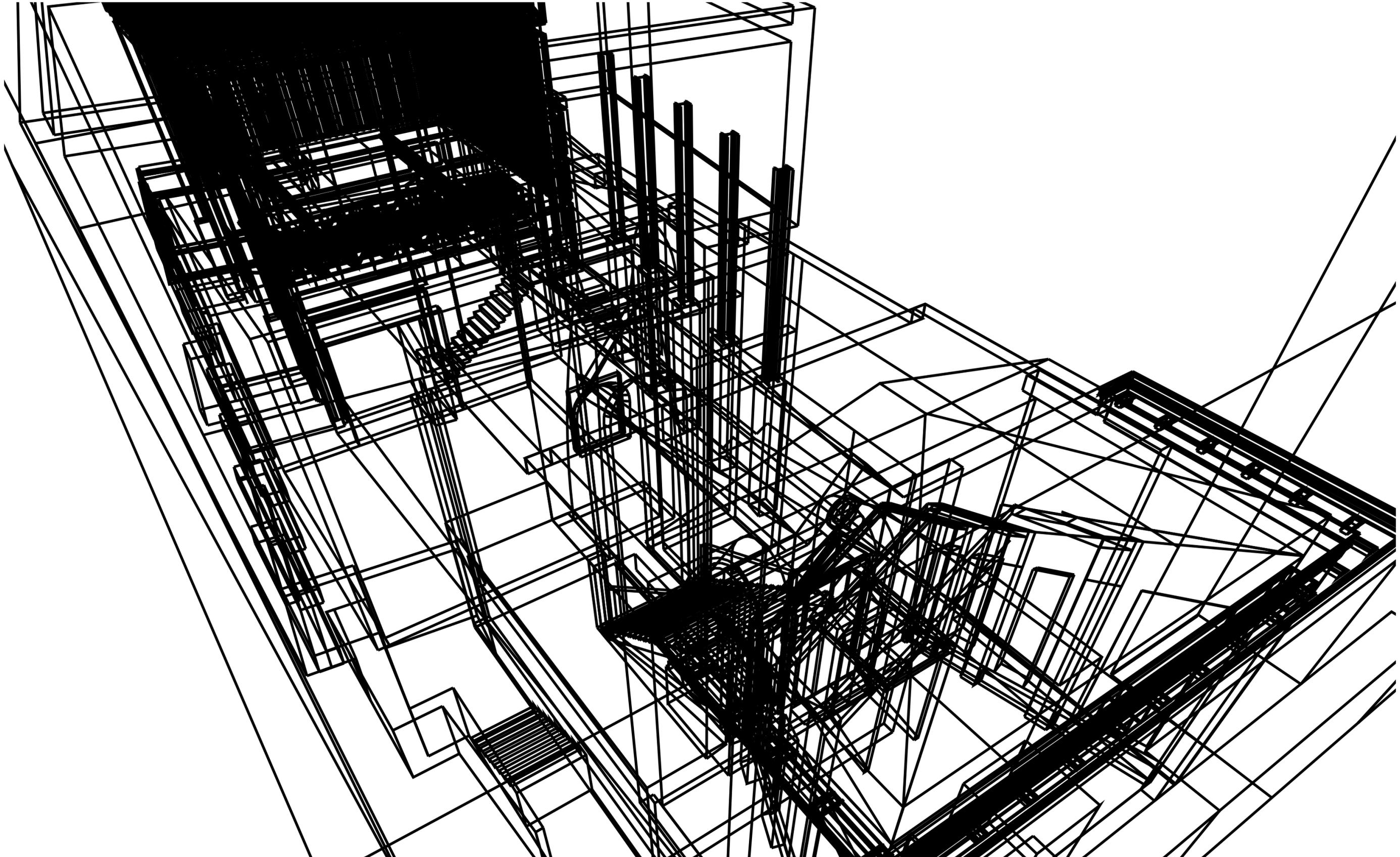
The perspectival illusion hinted towards in the proposed facade proved to be difficult to draw. Orthographic sketches, and hardline drawings barely suspended the illusion. Small models were no help in investigating the spatial qualities of the covered area. Computer models were not only difficult to construct, but also no help in finding the right vision of the space.

Attenuated perspectival suspension is very elusive.

The faculty and staff of the Roanoke College Theatre department gave me permission to stage a full scale model of the proposed facade for the project. The Theatre department's technical director assisted me to locate the main drape, legs and masks. We used two flats as the rear wall of the facade. An auxiliary main drape was employed to make a false rake on the stage. In place lighting was adjusted as necessary to support the illusion. The entire build took about 90 minutes.

Only for a brief moment during the build, while standing in the house, gazing into a dark stage could I see it. Those who helped also saw the illusion. But it lasted only a moment. These pictures act only as a record of the event. The illusion could not be captured.

The assemblage was struck in a little over ten minutes. The technical director opened the door to his shop and stowed the materials for a future stage.





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