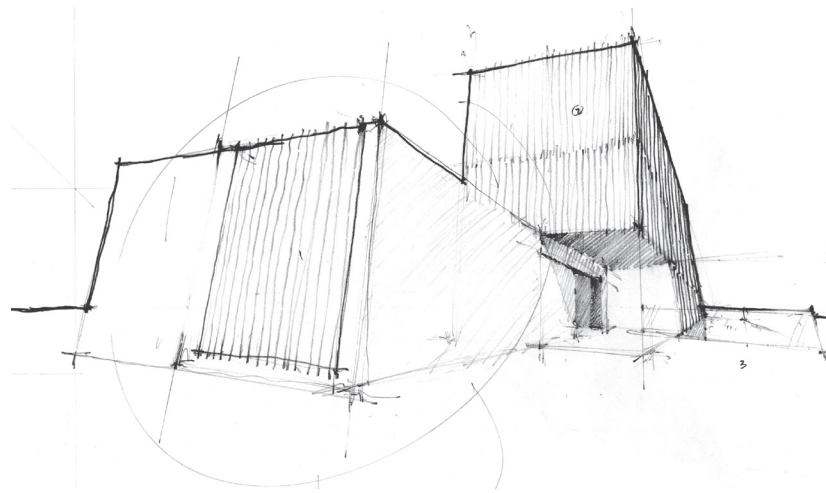


i n t h e b l u e
a n u r b a n r e t r e a t





in the blue
an urban retreat

jonathan e harrison

A design thesis submitted May 17, 2006 to the faculty of the College of Architecture and Urban Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture



Hans Christian Rott
Committee Chair

James Jones
Committee Member

William U Galloway III
Committee Member

keywords : mask | refuge | clinic | screen

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||abstract|||||||

how does a structure signal change?

in the absence of conformational alteration, of opening or closing, a dynamic must develop as a temporal function of the participant's experience.

in a place where change is sought after, the mask of the skin is lifted. renewal is found.

Within

dedication &
acknowledgements

change
genesis
foreshadows
precedents
elements
revelation

vita

for all who stumble upon this project.

The many thanks:

Over the past three and one half years spent in this place, nothing has been more fortuitous than the many encounters, mostly in overheard dialogue, with the great minds that reside here. To each of the faculty under whom I have been a student, I cannot express my thanks enough. Your sharing of knowledge will be missed. iv

To my committee members, who, despite every effort on my part, were able to find merit in this project. Without your words, this effort surely would not have come to fruition.

To my classmates, who were forced to listen to my often incoherent ramblings and poorly formulated stories. In return, you gave me encouragement, laughter, and a desire to continue to be a student of this art.

To my family, who always has faith that I will succeed. Your endless prayers and unfailing support in all that I have done mean more than you could ever know.

And to Gina. Nothing I do is complete without you.

"the use of a given material should never happen by choice or calculation, but only through intuition and desire."

Sverre Fehn, The Thought of Construction
Per Olaf Fjeld

Change

The skin grays, transparency is lost.

The mythical physician, Asclepius, with a wooden rod encircled by a snake - "in the blue".

The skin peels away, youth is regained.





aerial image, USGS National Map

Genesis

A well worn path snakes through the tall grass of an abandoned lot north of Baker Street in Richmond, Virginia's Northside. Typical of the blight that buffers the commercial and banking district from the more palatable Highland and Brookland park neighborhoods of north Richmond, the lot is retracted from the once prominent Jackson Ward neighborhood by the interstate projects common of nearly every American city. Overturned "supercans" and the detritus cast off by the myriad anonymous, waiting for the 32 bus to shuttle them downtown every 20 minutes, or so, litter the perimeter. Removing the surrounding disorder, the field, seems bucolic. It receives the shadow of the Independent Order of St. Luke Building, at one time a safeguard for the poor yet, now insuring nothing more than its own neglect, yet this place is nearly perfect.

2

This path is unlike the very similar one a few feet away. One of the oldest neighborhoods in Richmond, Little Africa, as it was known prior to the Civil War, and then Jackson Ward, became the home to Maggie Walker, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and many other prominent African-American entrepreneurs. When Interstate 95/64 incised Jackson Ward in the 1950's to allow transit through the city, auspiciously to bring people from the expanding suburban surroundings back downtown in, a stent to bypass the venuoles returning through a network of suburban streets, the subsequent bleeding it caused was not cauterized and the neighborhood divided.



In contrast, the path slicing through this field brings many of the nearly 2,000 impoverished residents of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority's Gilpin Court family development to a common point of departure. At the bus stop on First Street, time is established by the ebb and flow of bodies drawn to a steel signpost. At this intersection of employed and unemployed, old and young, the path denotes the beginning of hope of new things.

And so, here, at 2 East Baker the project was born.

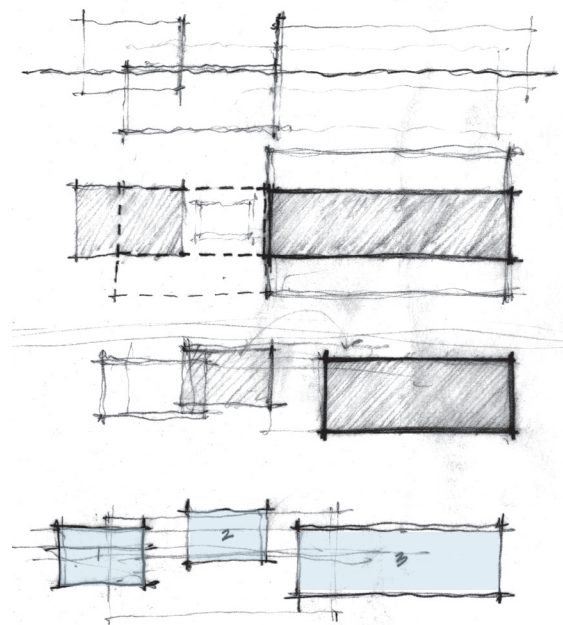




A medical clinic

The beginnings of this project are rooted in a more prosaic question than how an intercity field became important. The initial question regarded the loss of a connection between the Richmond Emergency Medical Services and the community it serves. Richmond utilizes a "system status management" approach to deployment of ambulances throughout the city. As runs go out, the fleet is repositioned on street-corners based on a computer analysis of historical emergency calls, arguably a more cost effective approach, but with many deleterious side effects. Chiefly, there is a loss of connection of the paramedics with the people who they serve.

As interaction with the public becomes isolated to medical response in times of emergency, the paramedics become purveyors of tragedy. Daily interaction is lost - and people become mere patients. Moreover, typically lacking other forms of primary care, the residents of poor neighborhoods have continued to increasingly rely on the emergency departments of local hospitals for non-emergent care. As these departments become overcrowded and improperly utilized, there are corresponding repercussions in healthcare costs.



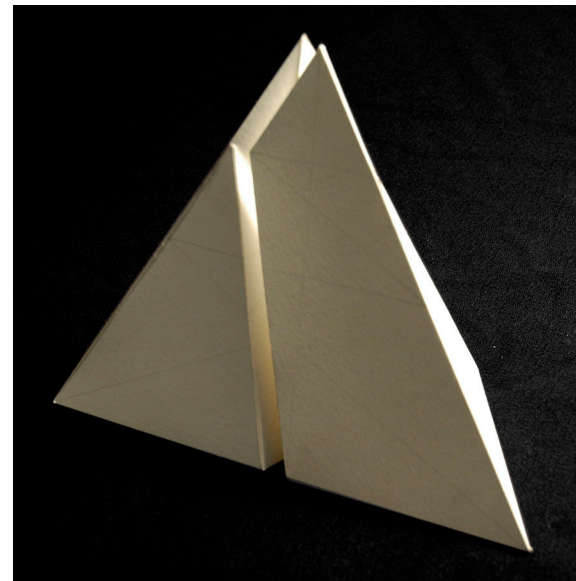
Towards architecture

Social implications aside, what are the architectural responses to combining a variety of functions within one place?

The program initially emerged simply as a medical center, allowing EMS personnel to act as primary care providers. Recognizing the clinic as a place representing, to many, disease, it seemed important to remove that which is overly "clinical" - there are no phlebotomy labs nor are there x-ray machines. Intentioned as a place of refuge from the surroundings, the medical center evolved into a place of physical renewal.

Within a whole, there are three functional aspects to the building: a medical clinic, an EMS station, and a tripartite bath. While divergent in many aspects, they all represent functions of change: physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

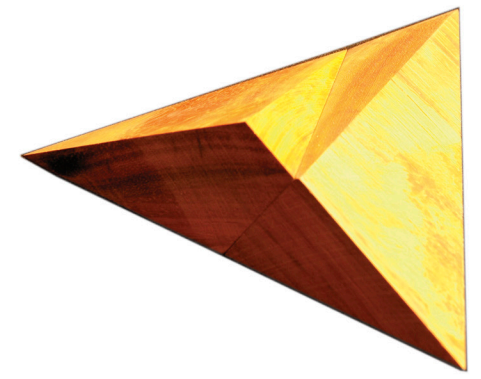
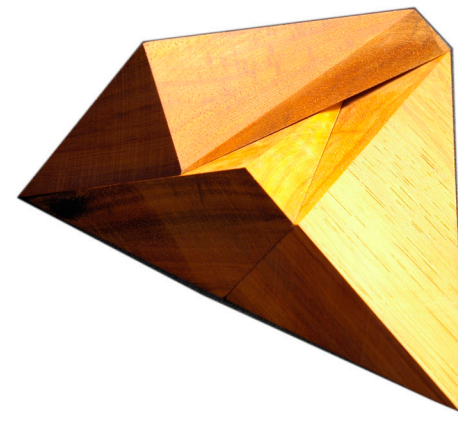
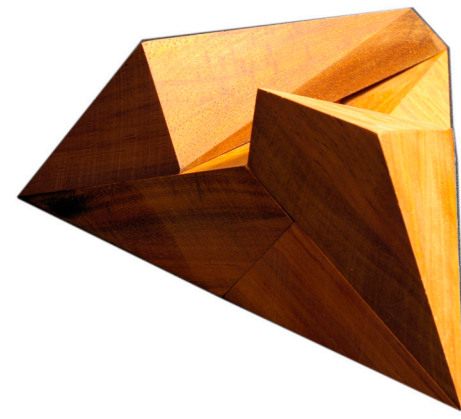
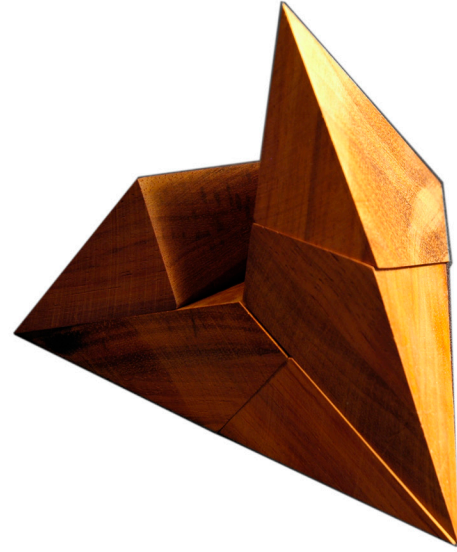
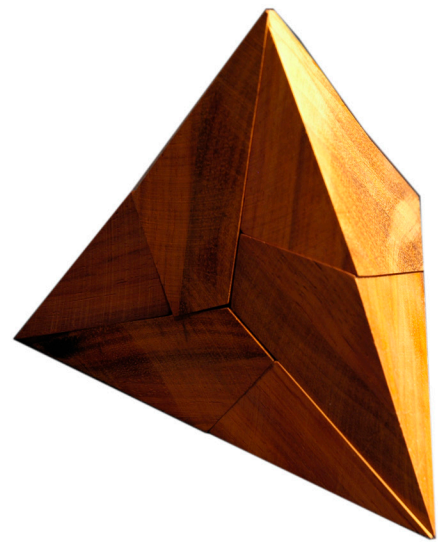
Within this framework, the question regarding the signaling of change emerged.



Foreshadows

A study of a tetrahedron. The facets are sliced to reveal an underlying structure divergent from the exterior. This study involves integral parts hidden by a whole - change through physical manipulation.

This study, undertaken early on, represents conformational change. The desire to move from the notion of a physical transformation resulted in an investigation of the interaction of the skin with the enclosure of several buildings.



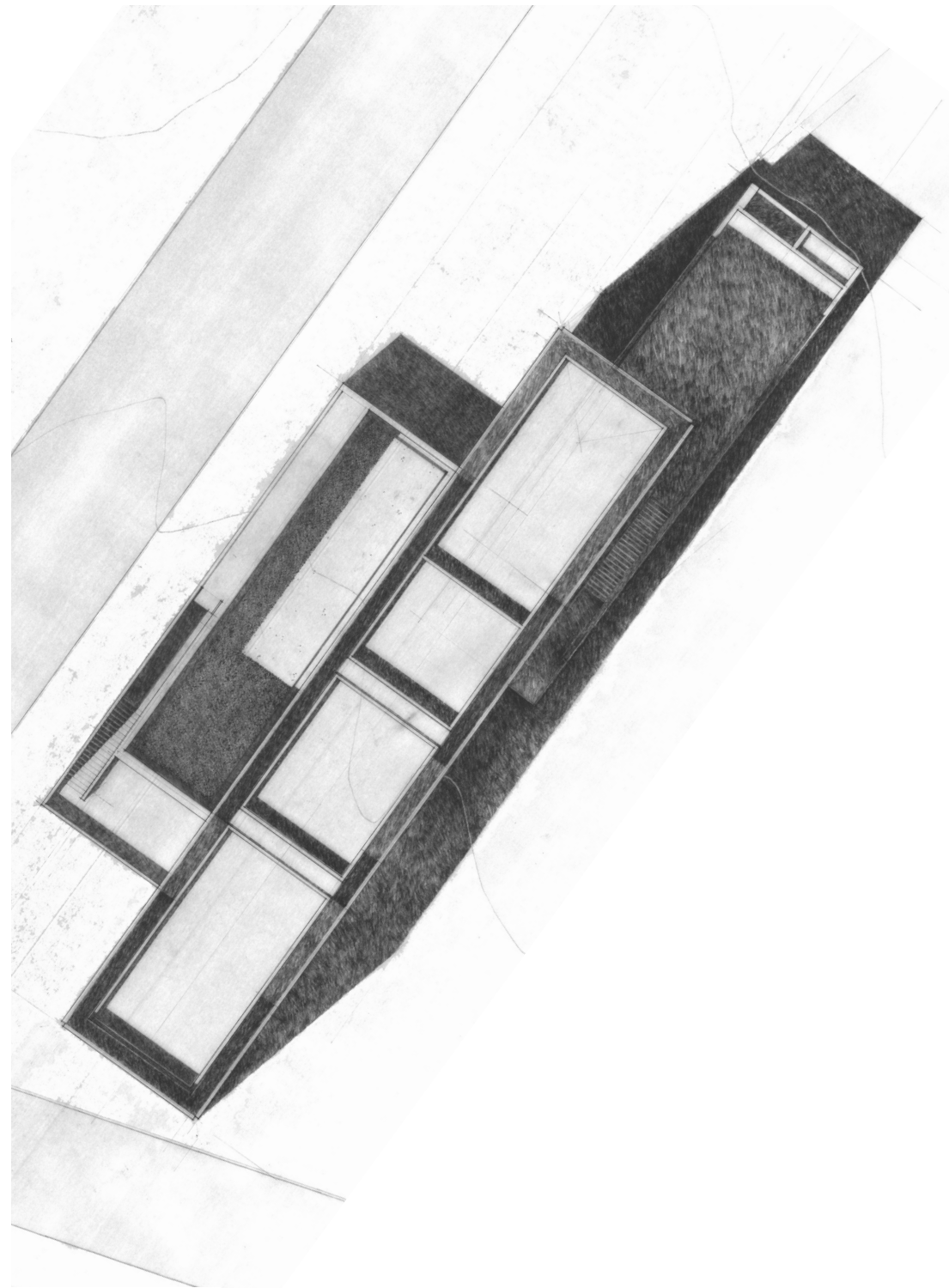
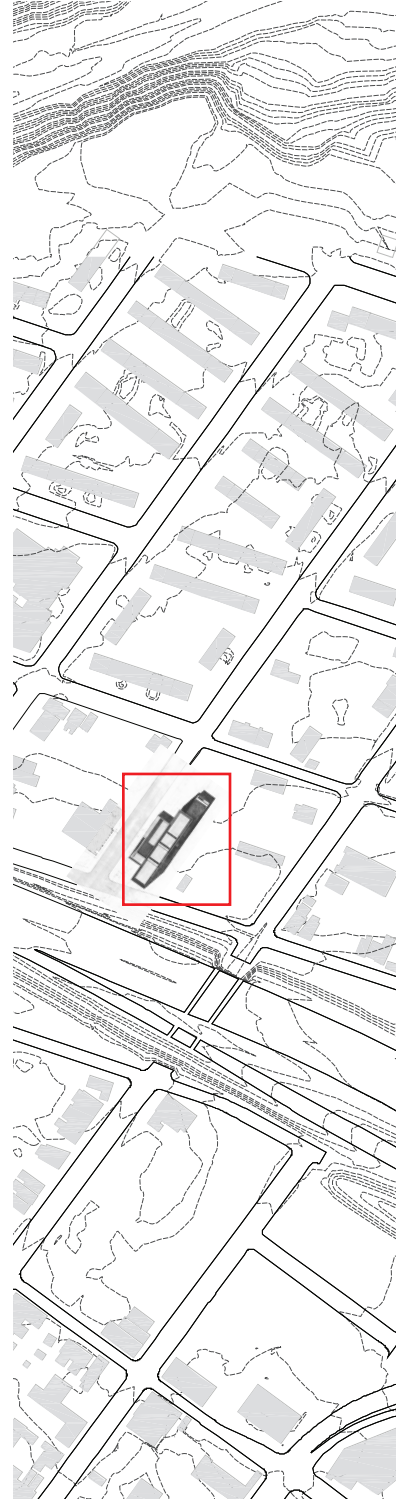


Precedents

(above) 410 Sarphatistraat / Stephen Holl / Amsterdam, The Netherlands

(below) Main Signal Tower / Herzog & de Meuron / Basel, Switzerland






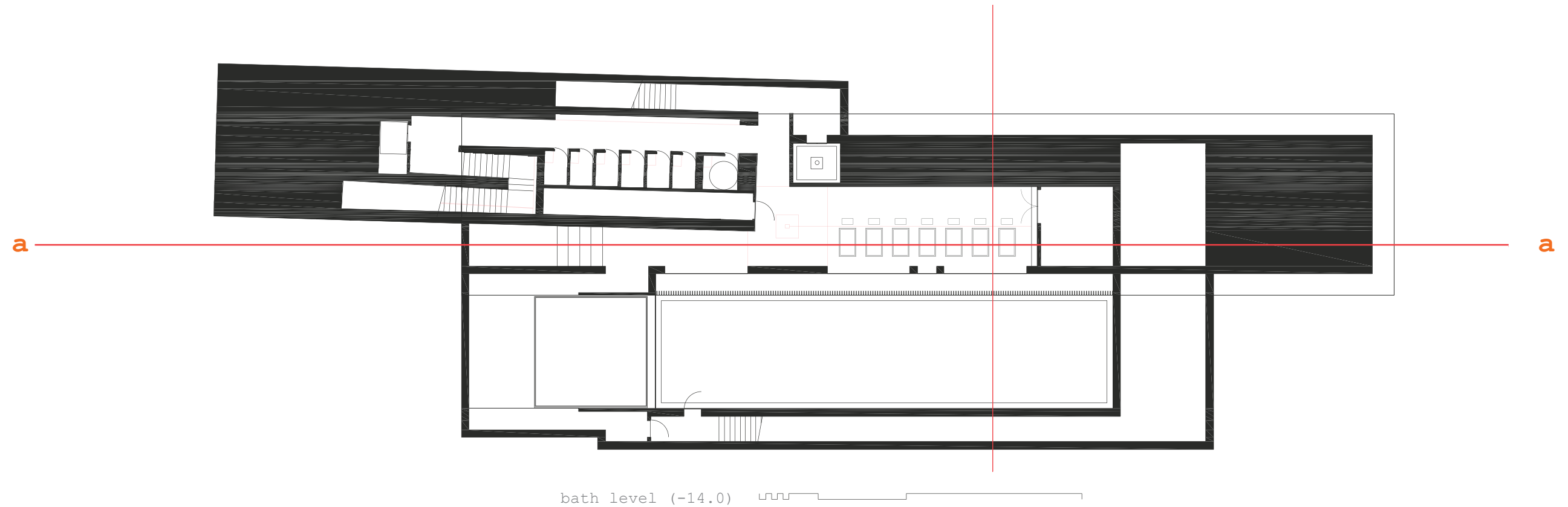
The building

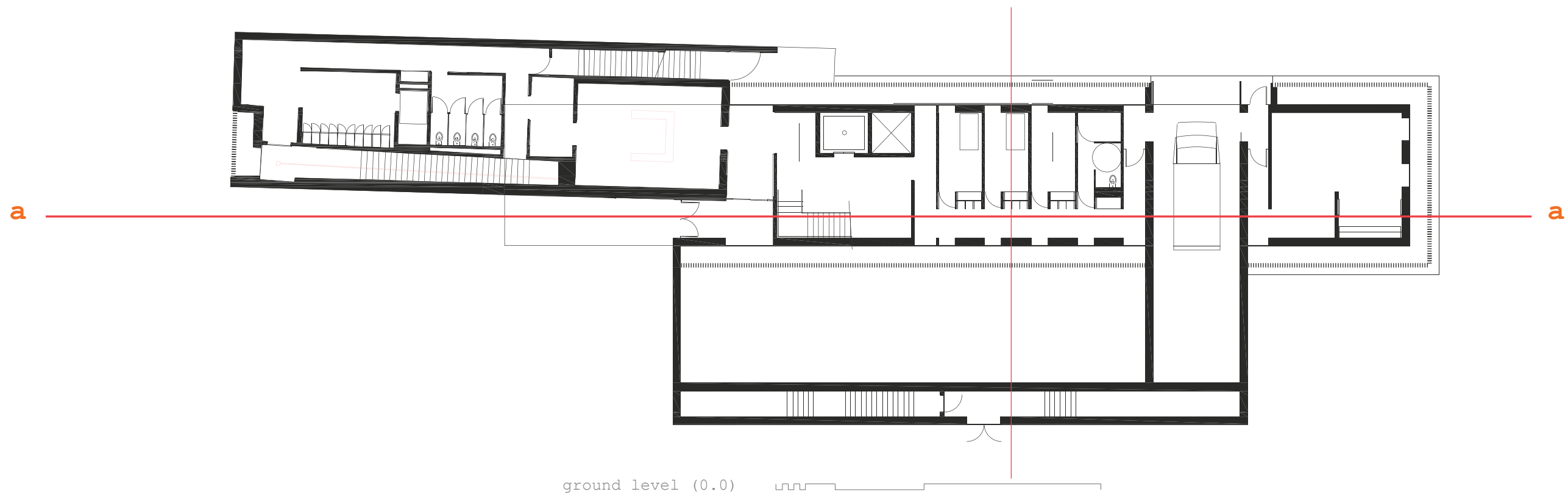
While preserving the path to the bus stop, the building nestles opposite the St. Luke building along St. James street. The ambulance bay points away, in hopes that a renewed life awaits the historic structure. This also minimizes the disruption by emergency vehicles on the patrons of the bath.

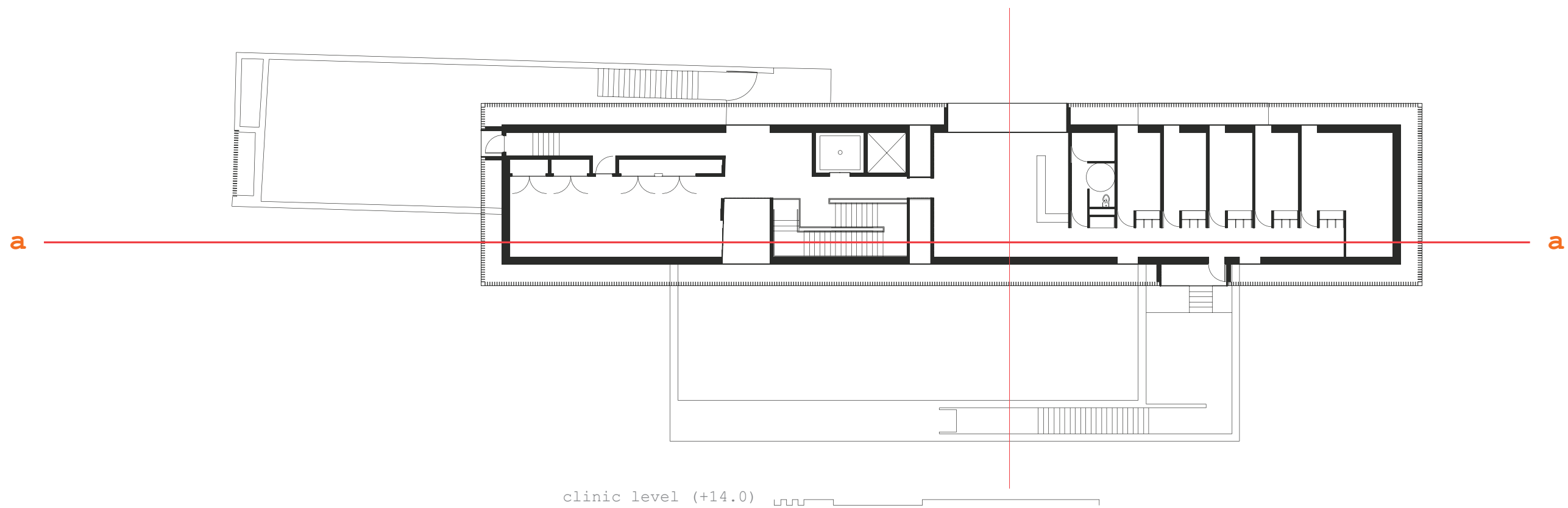
On-street parking is utilized, with the expectation that most of the visitors to the building would be community members, and foot travel comprising the chief mode of arrival. Limited parking for the paramedics and a small staff is in parallel spaces along East Baker.

164' MSL  -77° 26' 12" Lon 37° 33' 03" Lat UENH 182TQ84747 58781 (NAD83)

Plans

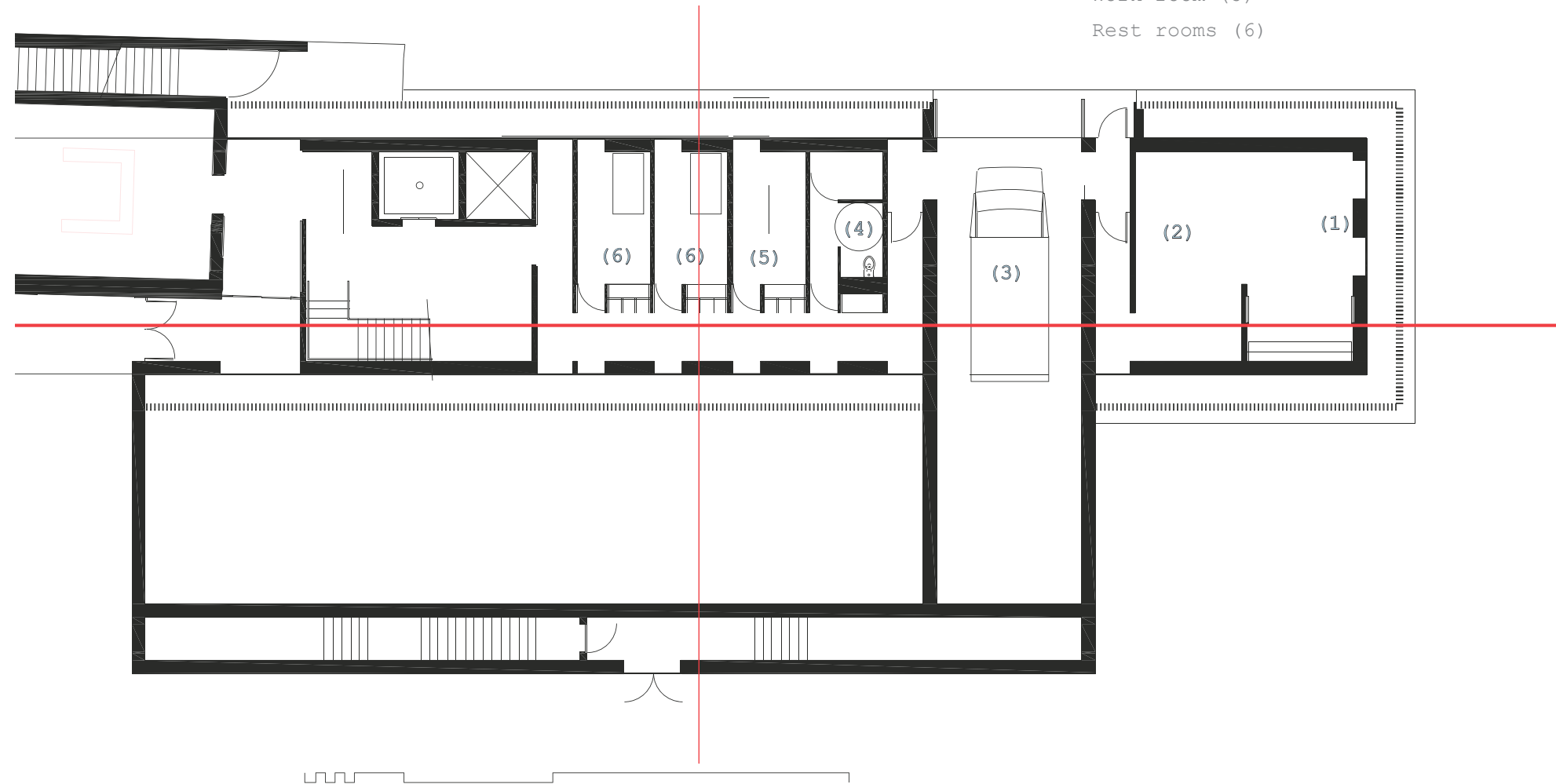






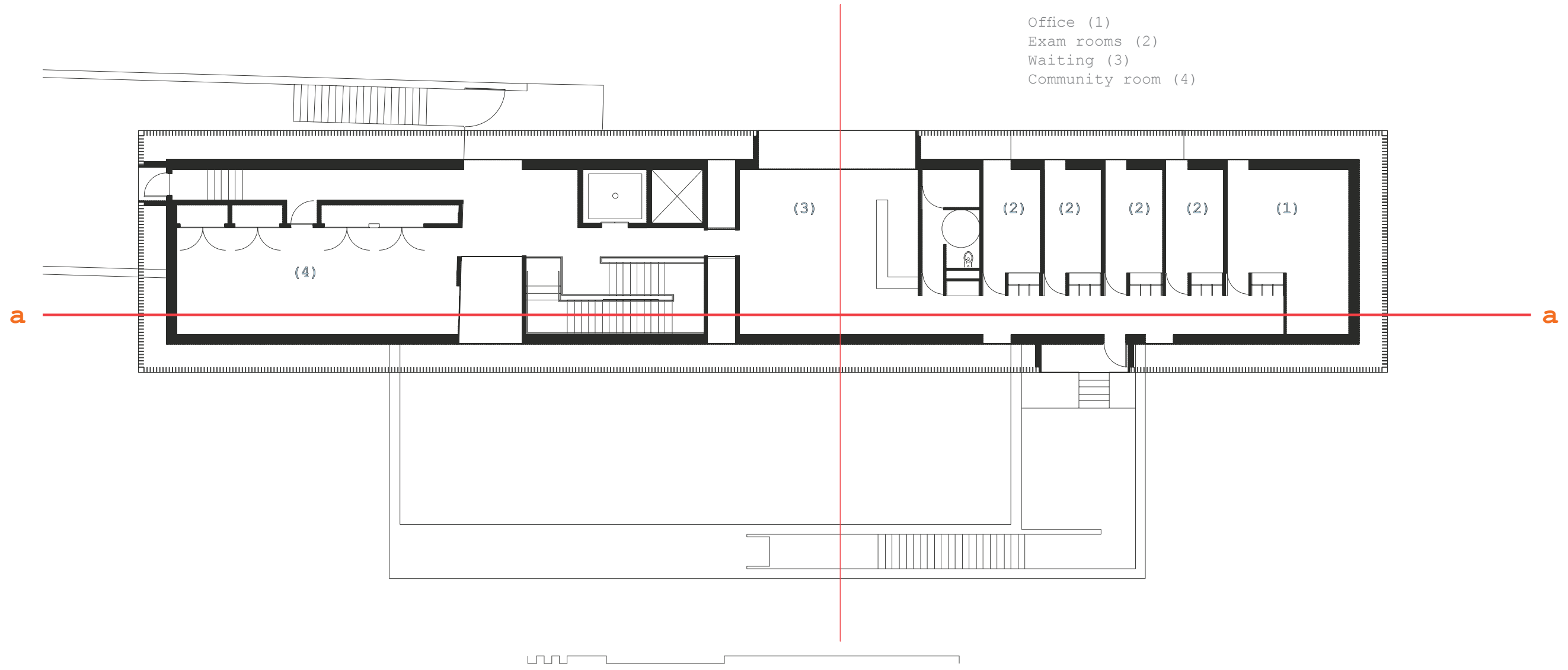
EMS station

- Kitchen (1)
- Crew room (2)
- Apparatus Bay (3)
- Shower/Bath (4)
- Work room (5)
- Rest rooms (6)

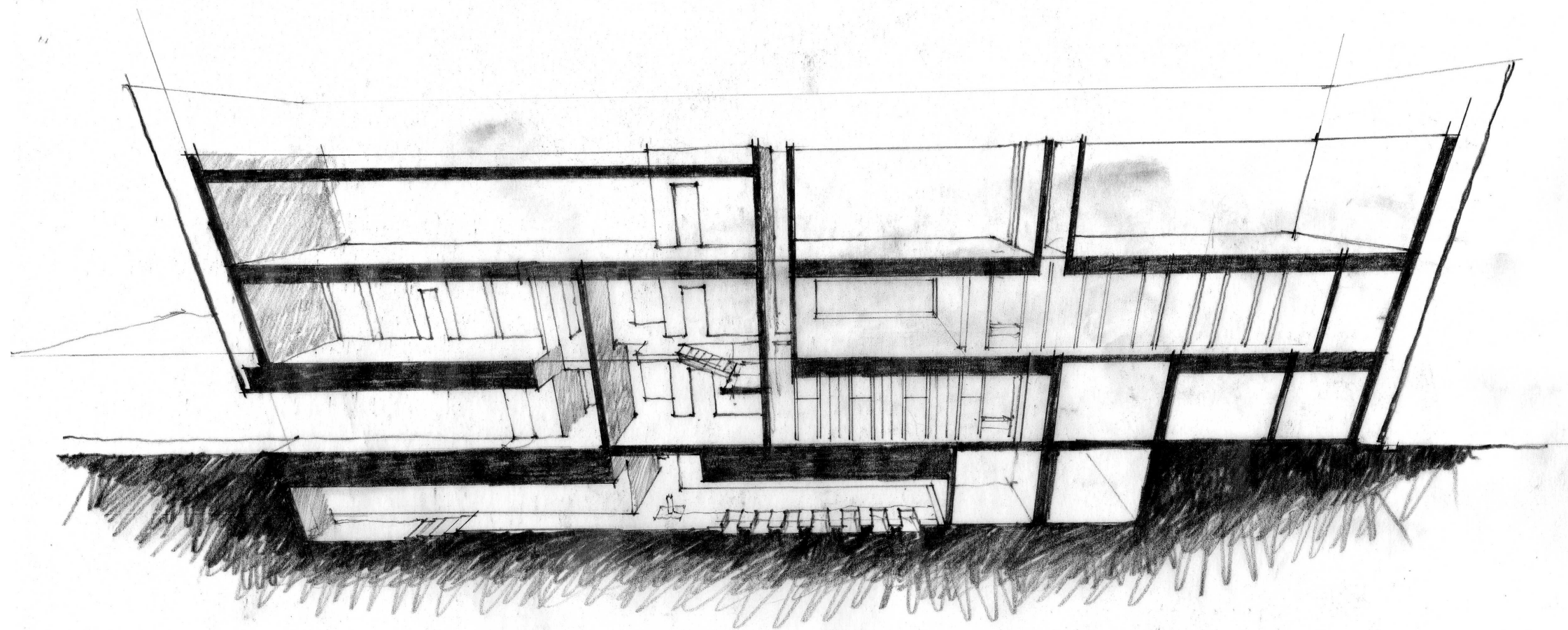


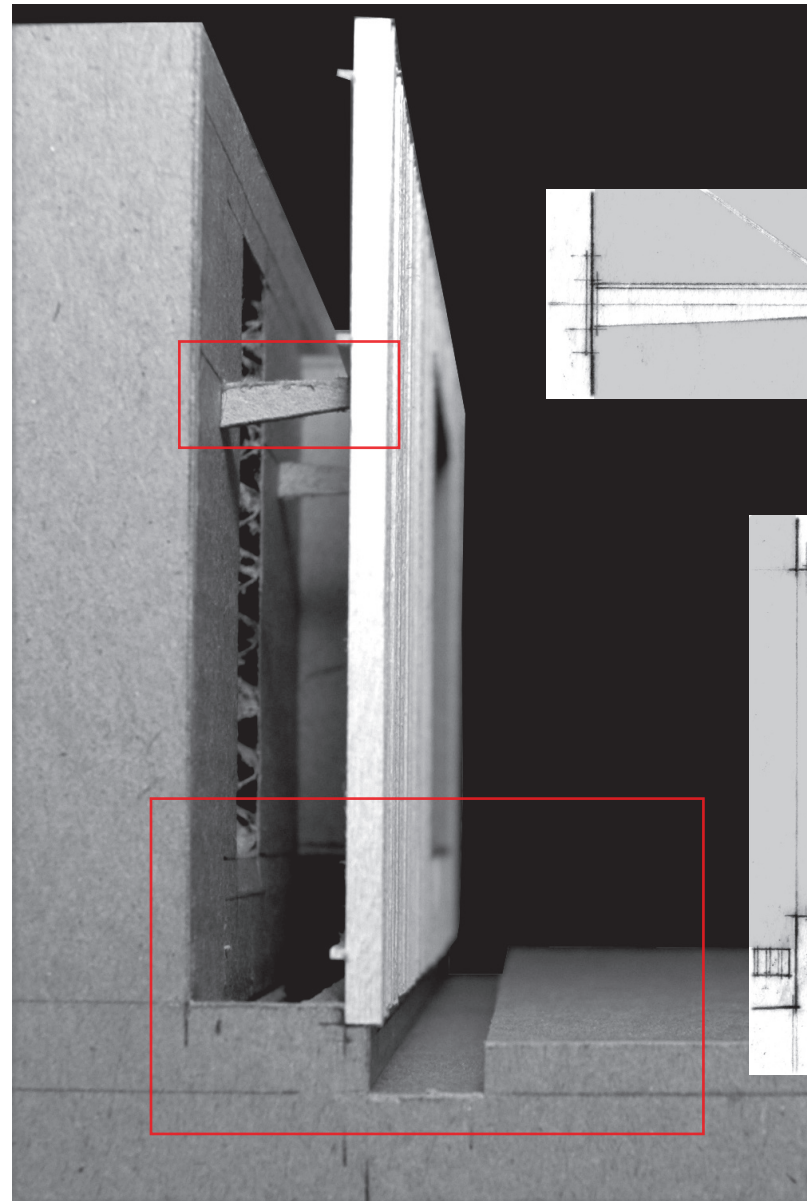
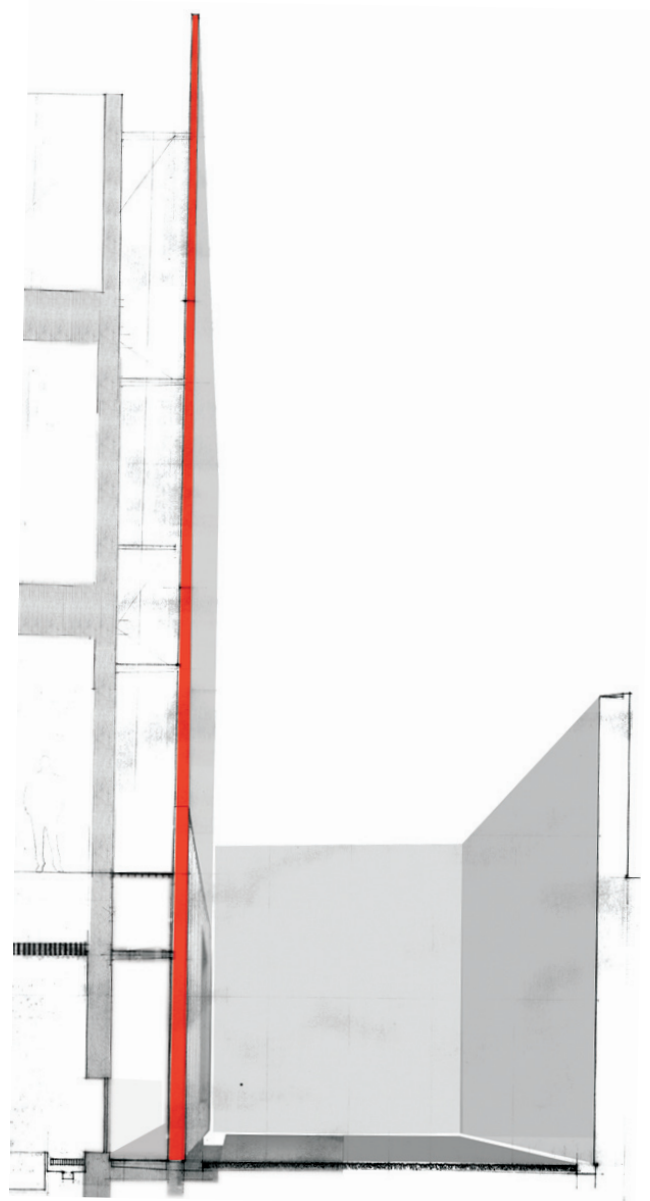
Clinic

- Office (1)
- Exam rooms (2)
- Waiting (3)
- Community room (4)

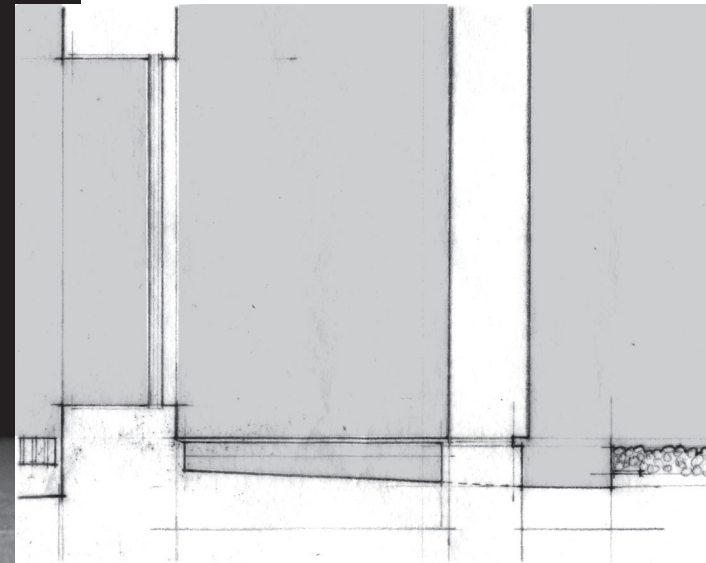
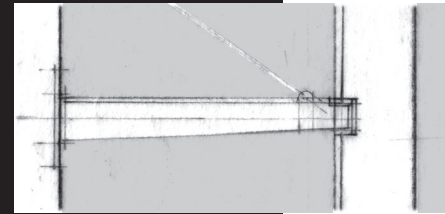


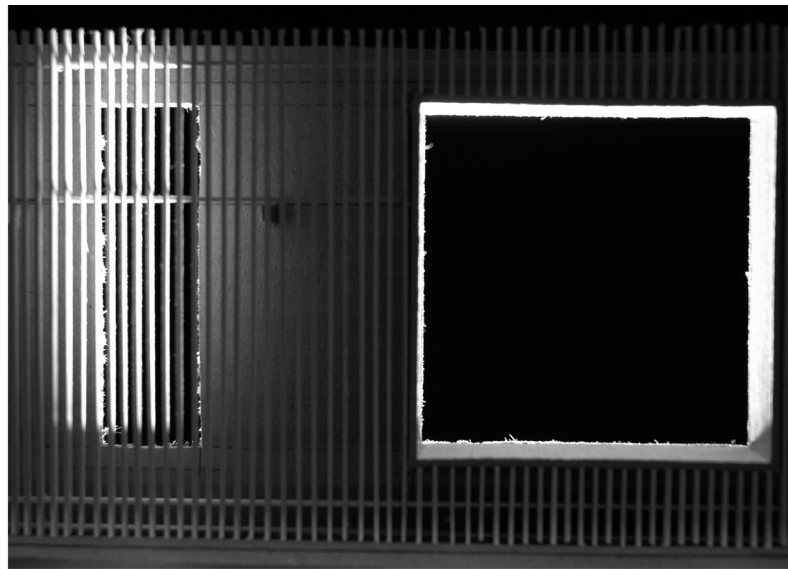
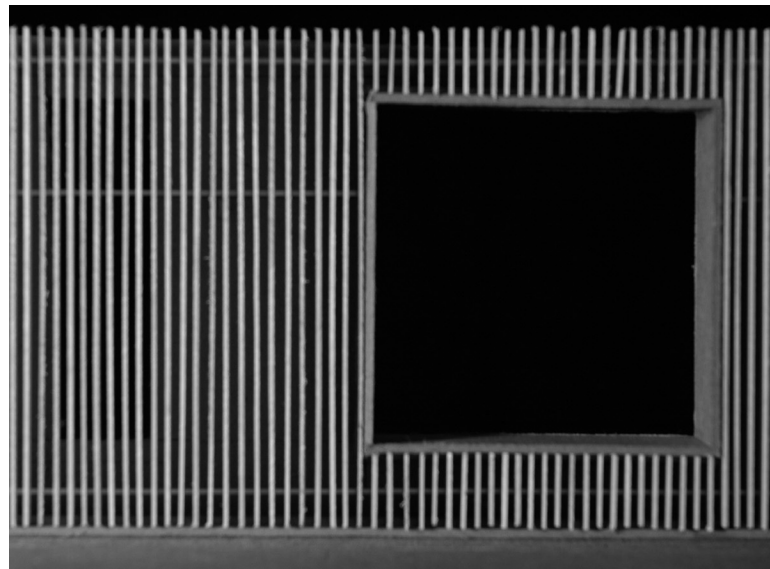
Section a-a





Cross section detail of the mask





The mask in elevation

Within the 3 separate functional structures, the mask serves as a unifying force. In contrast to the St. Luke Building directly opposite, this monolithic screen functions as textile, shrouding that which is beneath, but also allowing moments in which an understanding of the underlying structure is possible.

Constructed of a panelized series of vertical cypress slats, the structure within, cast in place concrete, acts independently of the mask - unifying the composition but allowing a vestige of its multiplicity to remain. As lighting conditions temporally change, the mask asserts unity and yet serves to contradict the simplicity of the structure. The overall harmony of the structure is subverted by the patterns of natural and artificial light projected upon it, but not to its detriment. Rather, the rhythmic pattern of the slats overlaying an entirely different order serves to express the unity of the whole.

17

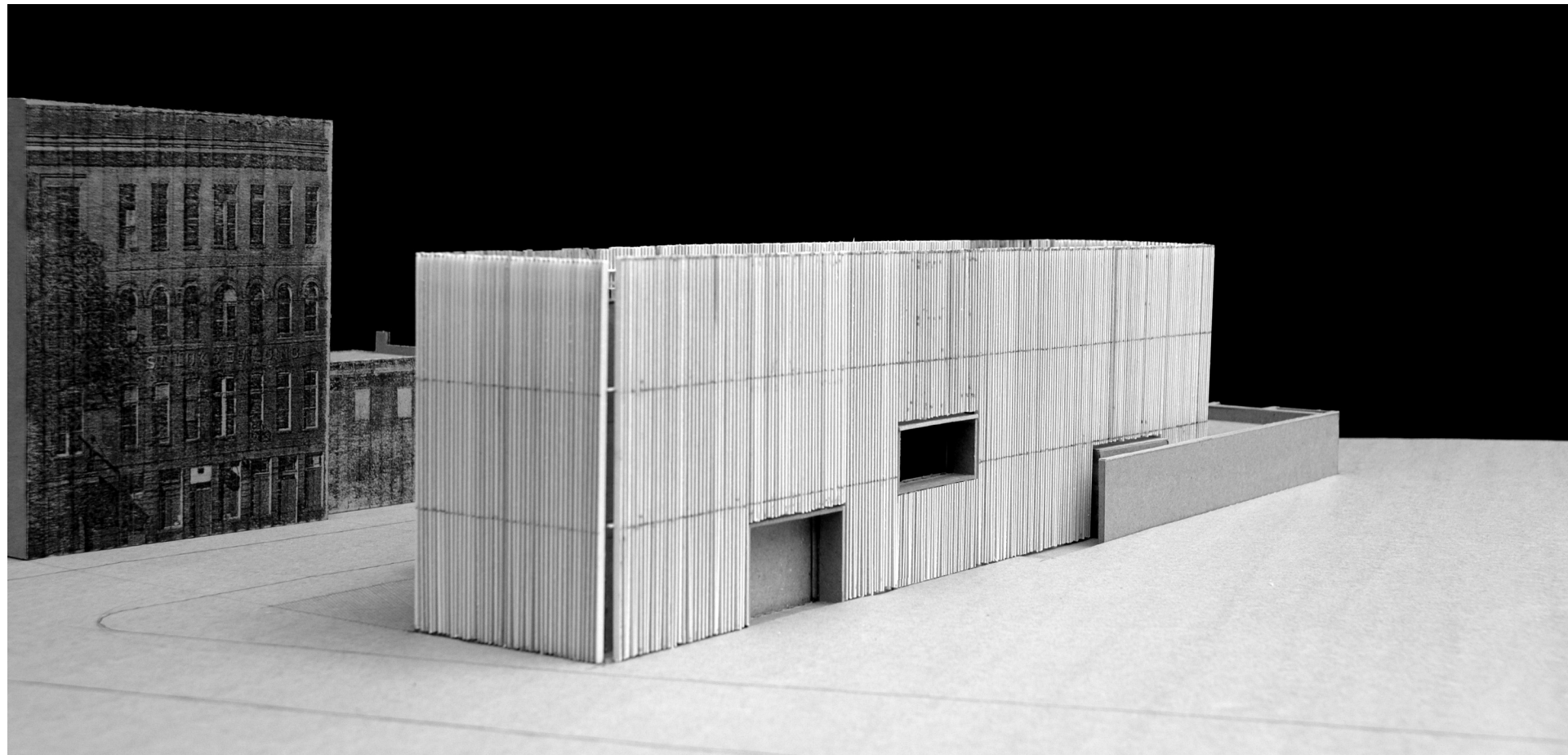
The material is not of the city, and this is precisely why it is what the screen must be. More easily reflecting time in its response to the elements than concrete or steel, the slats exhibit their own temporal nature in their weathering.

Gently tapering (from 10" to 4" over 54'), the slats reveal more of themselves as they ascend to the sky. This reduction in opacity renders the building as if in transition.

As the physical surroundings change, or the observational point moves, the underlying form is revealed or obscured.



View from southeast, substructure revealed



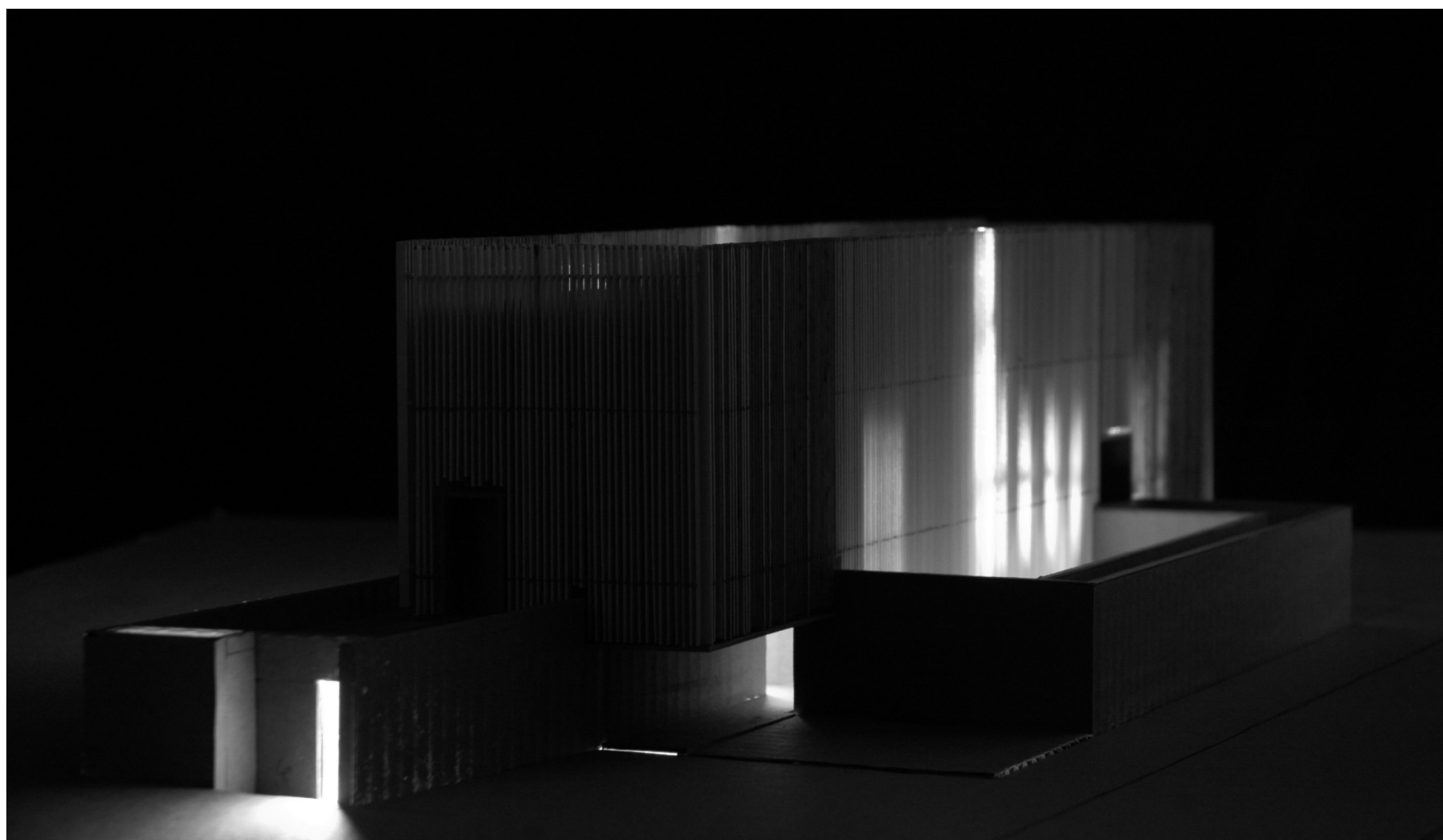
View from southeast, substructure concealed



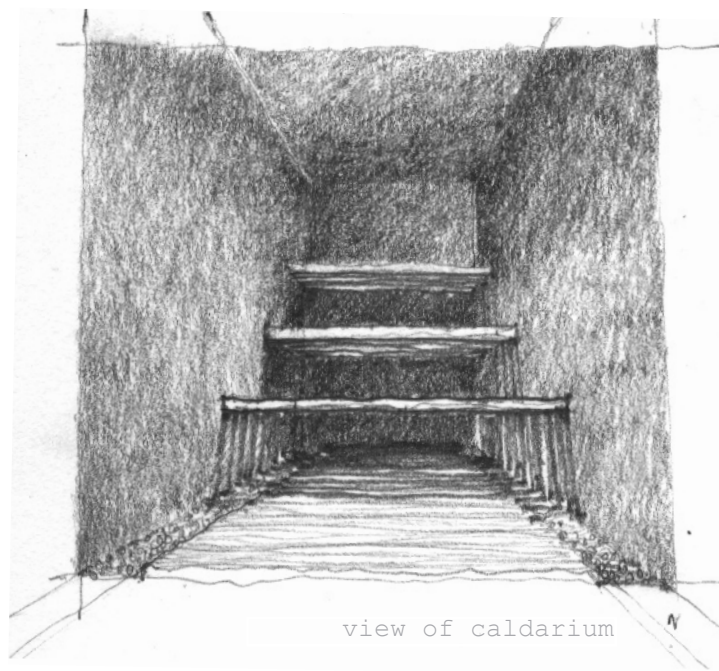
View from southeast, artificial lighting reveals elements of the substructure



View from northwest, substructure masked by daylight



View from northwest, artificial lighting signals points of entry and concealed elements of the substructure.

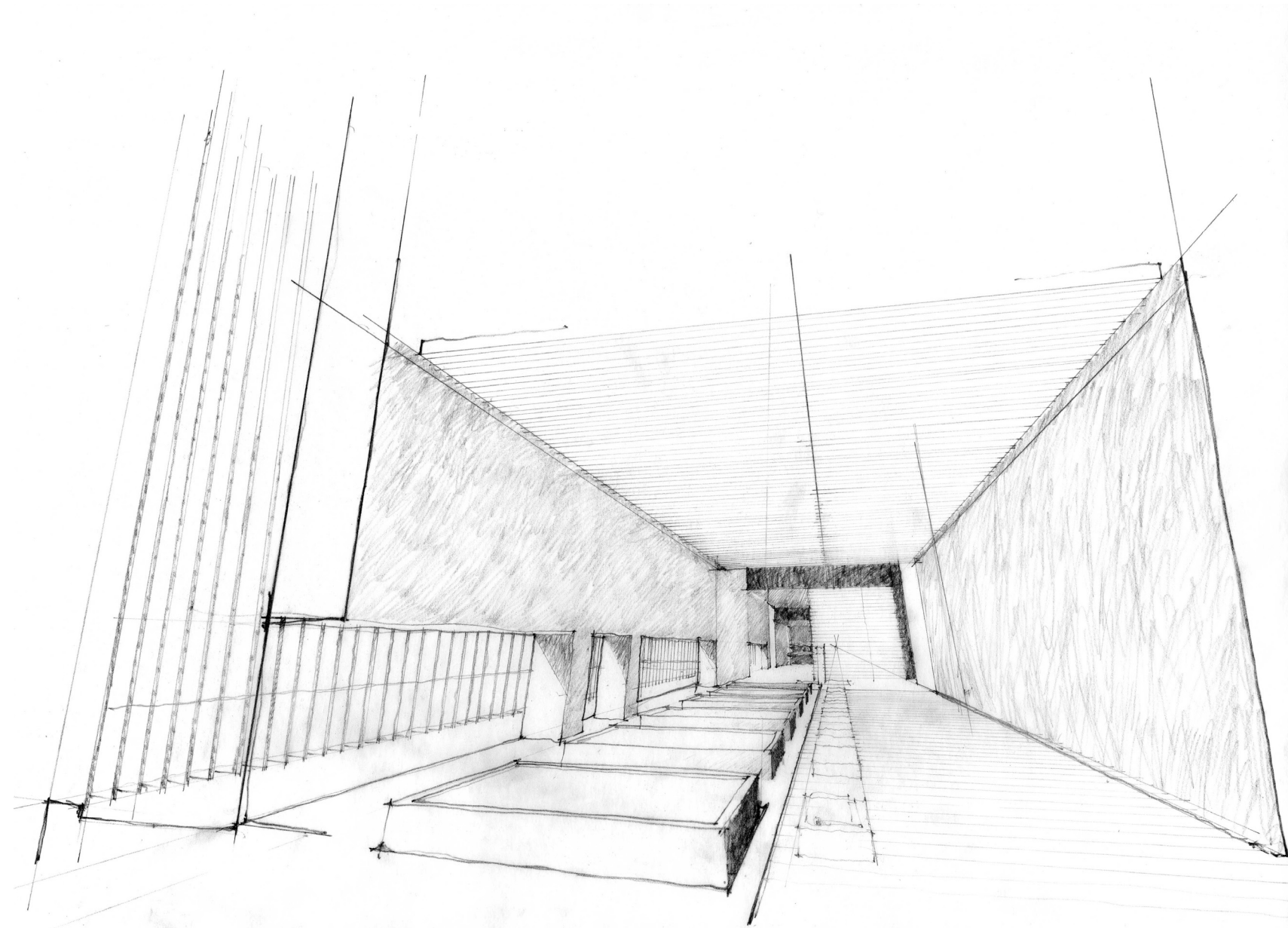


Water

The ceremonial immersion in water has signaled more than mere physical cleaning for many. Water is used as a symbol in ablution practices throughout the world's major religions. Within this project, the use of a bathing facility as a place of renewal is sought.

The American process of bathing is, like many of our other activities, founded in time management, and very different than baptism. It serves an antiseptic function and belies the sensual physiological aspect of tactile sensation. The shower is immediately ready, whereas the bath must be filled. The shower serves to clean. The bath serves as a refuge for cleansing. 23

It is through the procession between these baths that change occurs.



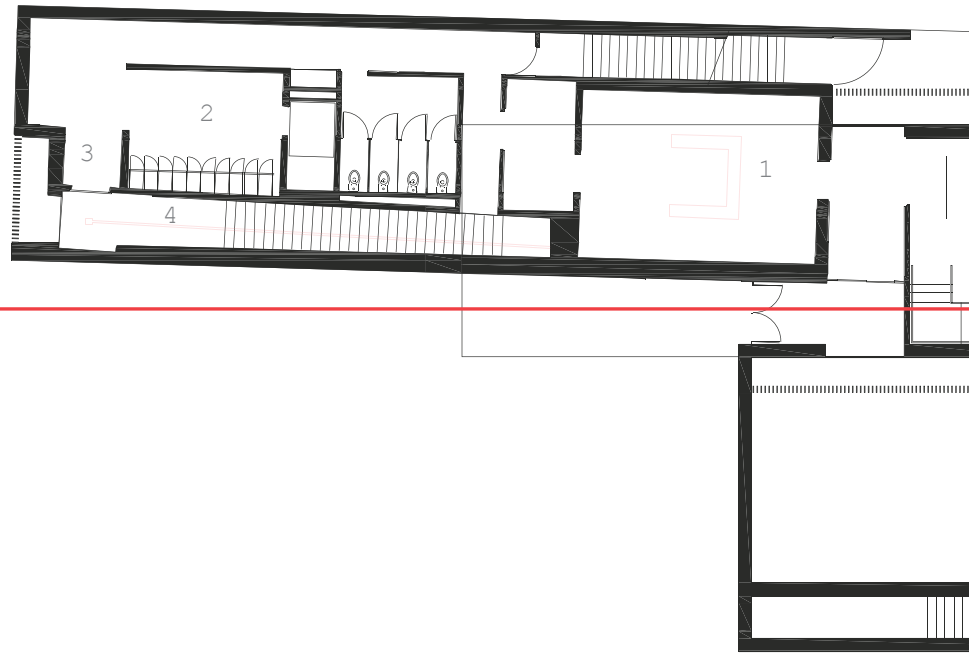
view of tepidarium, looking towards foot wash with caldarium beyond

Entry is through a large vestibule (1). Moving past a glimpse of the descent, one encounters the water closets (2) and passes into a changing area (3). The entry into the descent is marked by washing one's hands in a column of water falling from above (4), beyond which is a view interrupted by the mask. Descending, the passage compresses horizontally, mimicking increasing water pressure at depth. The water from the fountain above is drained along the floor.

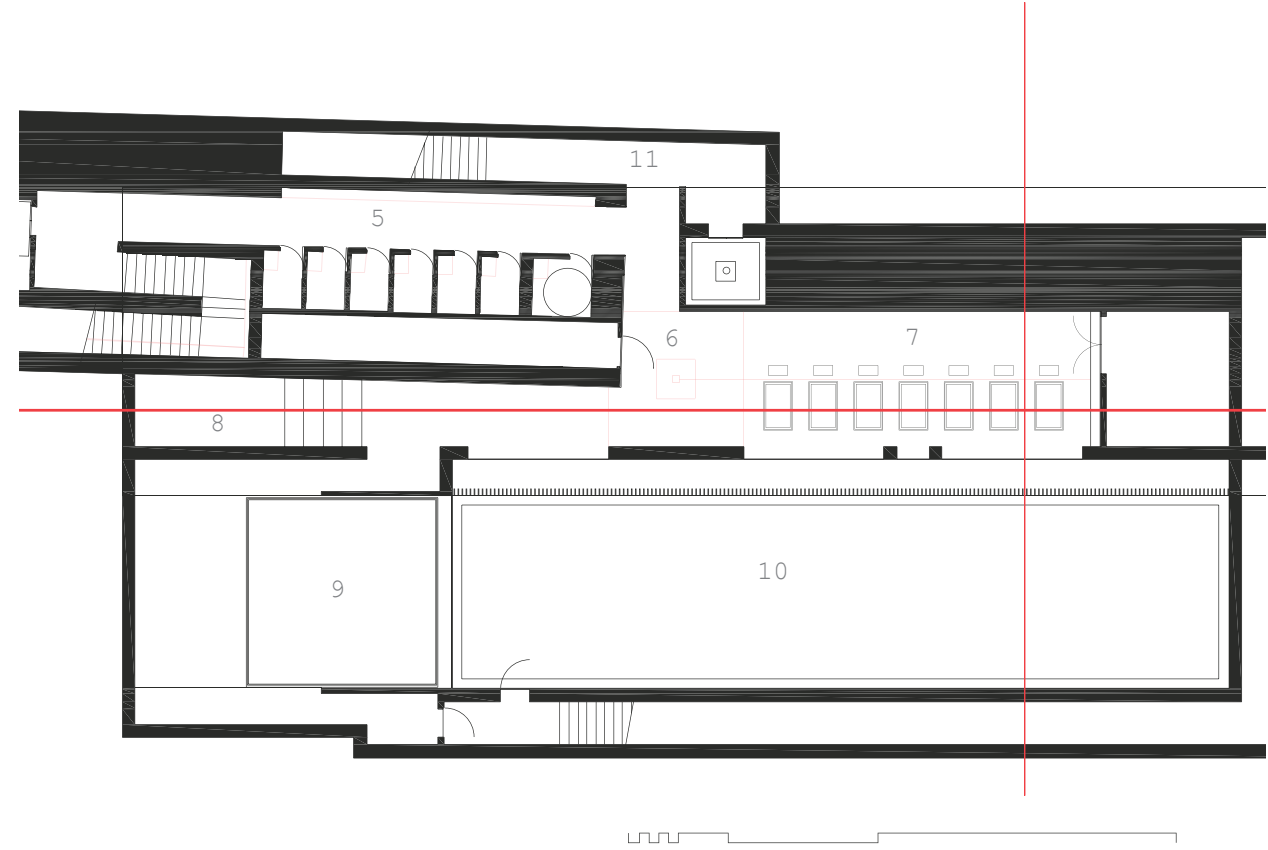
Upon reaching the bath level, a series of showers (5) are provided. Moving to the bathing area, the low ceilings ascend as one again encounters a fountain (6), where the bather may rinse her feet. A tepidarium (7) is the first of the tripartite baths. These baths, sized for a single occupant, are constructed of cypress, referencing the vertical wood slats of the mask. Low (24") strip windows allow privacy as the bathers traverse the wooden floors of the tepidarium, but provide views through the mask to the gravel courtyard beyond. The mask begins to reveal. The bather then moves to the caldarium (8), a hot bath with a series of platforms to rest above the water. This is the most concealed of the bath spaces. The bather will quickly move to the cooler communal frigidarium (9), where the gravel court (10) is finally revealed.

24

The court is comprised of stone from the Belle Island quarry along the James river. It is obscured from the surroundings by the mask to the east, and cast in place concrete walls north, south, and west. These walls, serving as a gutter for rainwater from the roof, are rimmed with a lip of Cor-ten steel, which leaves traces of runoff along the wall face. The resulting vertical striation is a foil to the wooden slats, and signifies the cleansing of water. The refuge from the surroundings is complete. Upon leaving, the bather may again rinse their feet as they ascend via the exit passage (11).



ground level plan of bath entry

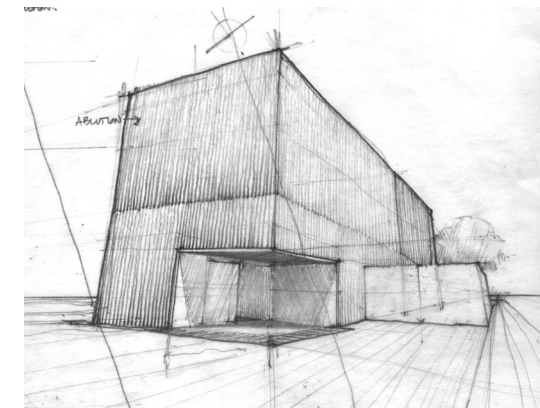


bath level plan

Conclusion

This thesis began in an investigation of social, rather than architectural, ramifications. While the elements of the program were investigated, the baths being the most detailed study, in the end the specific functional aspects of the program paled and the contrast of change both in, and in the absence of, movement became the clear focus.

In surrounding a programmatic black box, the function of the mask, in both revealing and concealing, became primary. The temporal change of the building as evidenced by the mask over the course of a day is, literally, illuminated by light and shadow. So while the exterior of things may appear the same, change sometimes comes from within. 26



VITA

Jonathan Harrison
20Sep1976

Master of Architecture
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
2006

AIA Henry Adams Medal and Certificate
Bruce Scott Ethics Initiative Scholarship
Tau Sigma Delta Architecture and Allied Arts Honor Society
Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society
HEWV First Year Design Competition, 1st place
USM Architecture Study Abroad Scholarship

Paramedic Certification
The Center for Emergency Medicine of Western PA
2000

Bachelor of Science, Chemistry
The College of William & Mary
1998