

DRAWING TOWARDS BUILDING

Daniel Wright

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Abstract

This is a story of a building's becoming. It begins sixteen years ago when I was first made wholly subject to a drawing. It was not the kind commonly considered proper to architecture, but no drawing in architecture has made sense to me if not for that first. The drawing was toward music.

The work of art for the architect is drawing out relationships of embodied belonging—drawing from memory towards building. I once remembered a beloved house of brick and drew upon it. As building emerged in the drawing, it became its own thing with its own desires. I was myself drawn in by its presence and made attendant to its longings. I listened, in a way, to what it called for and then drew it out, again and again, all the while towards building.

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FOREWORD

This is the story of a building’s becoming and begins sixteen years ago when I was first made wholly subject to a drawing. It was not the kind commonly considered proper to architecture, but no drawing in architecture has made sense to me if not for that first. The drawing was toward guitar music.

My family enjoys the artistry of Christopher Parkening, whose recordings of Bach transcriptions have held my father’s attention in particular. He is himself a classically trained guitarist, and I remember hearing him practice “Sheep May Safely Graze” and “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” over and over again in our family’s drawing room. These songs are played often in our house—either by his hand or the recorded hand of a master; but they have a striking presence late Saturday afternoon when they ring out like a bell through our home’s speakers to mark the end of the workweek and the beginning of the Lord’s Day. During the Lord’s Day Meal, our sound system cycles through Parkening’s recordings. We have memorized their order and know them well enough to hum the first few measures of the next song before it begins. I had always thought myself familiar with this music until one evening after dinner I heard “Sleepers Awake” as if for the first time.¹

Our family has an odd tendency of adjourning to the old drawing room after the Lord’s Day Meal instead of the den, which was added for that purpose. The lasting preference for the drawing room is considered something of a mystery since the den is better suited for gathering. The den holds our family and guests in comfortable furniture. There are a number of windows in its walls framing views of the giant pin oak in the backyard. The fireplace is set on an engaging hearth, and its nooks and crannies make perfect places for children to fall asleep while the adults talk about adult things and drink adult drinks. Still, we choose the old drawing room.

The anomalous draw of that room is often the first subject of conversation as we lead our guests there almost apologetically—some of us bringing our chairs from the dining room table. It must seem strange to those who aren’t familiar with the Wright way, so we feel obliged to offer some defense for making use of a room that doesn’t hold all of us. “The drawing room is cozier,” my mother says—a statement which carries with it, even if imperceptibly to most, the real draw of that room which has

to do with its role as the place where family memories have always been made. In this room we have conversed, argued, received guests, played music and games, sipped morning coffee, read aloud *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and gathered around the Christmas tree. When it isn’t housing a gathering of two or more, my mother holds refuge there away from demanding children and seemingly endless housework. During these moments the room is hers, and we seldom bother her for anything.

So much has the drawing room given itself over to our family activity that the floor had begun to sink and creak as we walked across it. Before my sister’s wedding its spanning members were given middling legs to better stand against the weight of the party. Even so, a child’s footsteps induce rattling amongst the Christmas dishes stacked in the drawing room buffet.

The adults were discussing the state of the Church in the Diocese of Memphis when my older sisters and I joined them after washing the dishes. We took our places on the floor. I sat with my back against the arm of the couch and listened. The conversation held my interest (even if for the most part unintelligible to me), but it was soon forgotten in favor of the sounds coming from the speakers in that room which doubled as book stops on the topmost shelves flanking the fireplace. I heard Parkening play “Sleepers Awake” as I had heard many times before, but in this hearing I was made wholly impressionable to the thing and not merely its sounds.

I heard two guitarists. The principal was playing conductor to a pair of voices: a lighter, melodic voice accompanied by a deep, droning voice. They played at times in parallel and at times in opposition, but their relationship throughout had an unchanging quality—neither voice could make sense without the other. A second guitarist played the third voice. It emerged suddenly and was slow in rhythm like the drone; but unlike the drone, it rang out like a bell distantly above the rest. When it had rung its last it receded in wait into the background for its next center-stage appearance. The song rose and fell repeatedly, and with each repetition subtle shifts in the phrasing served to strengthen its character. The voices turned about each other like dancers on a stage, and as the song progressed, the qualities they lent to the whole became more and more apparent. Near the end, just as I was becoming familiar with the patterned composition of the parts, every voice shifted suddenly. For a moment, I was pulled away from the comfort of the voices as I had come to know them and made to hear them in a different mode, a mode of yearning. I longed for the song’s end as I hadn’t before. It obliged. The voices turned toward the final rest as if they had been bound there from the beginning. It was beautiful! I was wholly drawn in, overwhelmed by the music, and desired more than ever to play a more intimate role in its making.

I waited impatiently for the last guest to depart and asked my father to show me how to play “Sleepers Awake”. He kindly said that he would in time, but that first I must learn the posture of the guitarist. He situated two chairs across from each other in the drawing room and told me to sit upright near the edge of the chair and let the guitar rest between my legs, lightly but securely. He then placed a stool under my foot, which set the guitar at an angle so that my left hand could move comfortably up

and down the fretboard. “The thumb of the left hand belongs to the center of the back of the neck,” he said. “This allows your fingertips to fret any of the strings at right angles.” He moved my left hand into position. “The striking hand should be relaxed,” he continued, poking at my wrist, “almost dangling—like you’re holding a tennis ball.” I felt as though my hands were unruly lumps of clay, which, no matter how often my father formed them, would immediately come undone. “The fingers of the striking hand should walk across the strings at right angles,” he said, “and the stroke should hinge from the topmost joint of your finger.” These rules all seemed reasonable, but my body had no memory for these positions. It all felt cumbersome. When my father saw that I had committed the rules to mind, he retired and left me with instructions to become master of an open string.

“Bom, bom, bom, bom, bom!” I played the same open “E” over and over again, being observant with each stroke that all the rules were being followed. Some went unobserved while I focused on the others, and so I started again with increased vigilance. “Bom, bom, bom, bom, bom!” It felt as though my body spitefully disregarded the commands of my mind, like a child licking a forbidden lollipop in plain sight of his mother. “Straighten up!” I would say to my finger, and it would straighten, but only begrudgingly and lazily. I groaned in frustration at its disobedience, and then began again. “Bom, bom, bom, bom, bom.” Again and again, the same note played in boring succession. If not for “Sleeper’s Awake” the drudgery would have been unbearable.

The sound of the novice guitarist plucking away at the strings and the awkward movement of his fingers about the instrument are a far cry from the workings of art. However, if Bach’s work would one day take place at my own hands, then suffering through the labors of practicing this basic posture was necessary. For days I played open strings, and my father watched and made adjustments when necessary. When I could play them comfortably, my father gave me simple intervals to practice—beginning with two notes played in succession. Then three. Then a major scale. Then two notes played simultaneously. My posture was slowly becoming a matter of rest. The notes were beginning to fall into place unhindered by conscious effort, and there came upon the labor a peaceful rhythm.

Impatience demanded a premature attempt at “Sleepers Awake”. I translated the first few parts of the song from the sheet music to their corresponding positions on the guitar. As written by Bach, they were never meant to be played by one instrument. In order to maintain the character of the song through transcription, the apparent effortlessness and grace of its parts, as heard, have very different counterparts in how I would need to compose myself to play them. I soon came across what seemed to be impossible finger stretches and quick-as-lightning transitions from one awkward position to the next. It was a rude awakening. I hadn’t heard any indication of strain in Parkening’s recording; all of that difficulty belonged to the song only by transcription and would need to be masked.

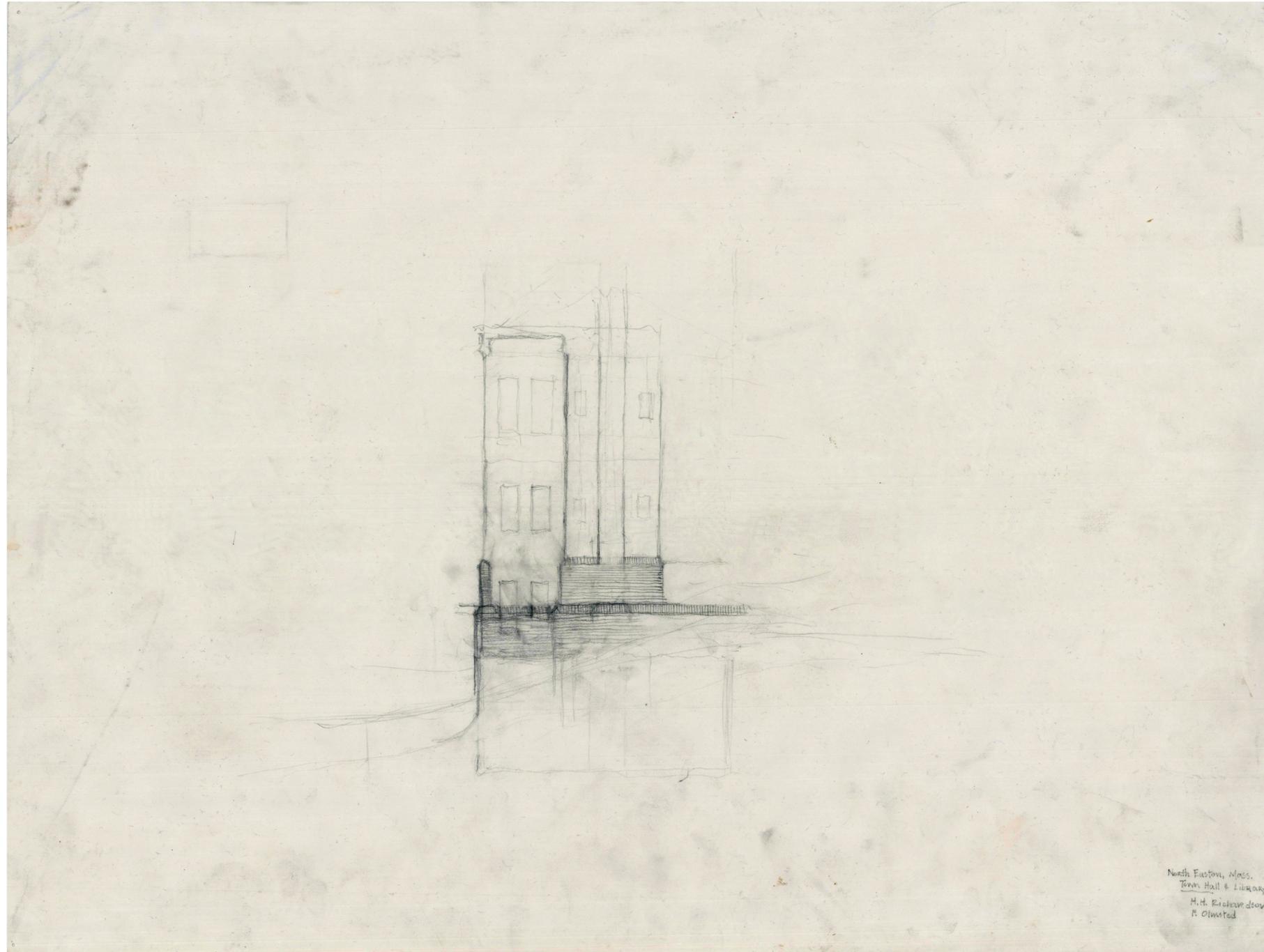
The labor pains returned. I set about committing the sequence of the positions to memory. I played the song at a slowed pace, over and over again, until it was structurally and rhythmically correct. Weeks later, the

finger positions for “Sleepers Awake” had become somewhat familiar, and the next few months were spent slowly bringing it up to its proper tempo. Eventually, the difficult positions and transitions between them became second nature, and I could play through the song seamlessly with only very few missed notes. However, this technical mastery was not enough to let the song sing in the way that it wanted to sing. It wasn’t yet finished. The bold steps of the low-lying bass line kept a steady pace, slowly climbing and descending. They were robust and foundational tones. From this droning voice, the high-rising melody would be cast to loftiness and then reeled in, cast and then reeled in. Each voice had its own character, and the tonal qualities making them were absent in my playing. They would require further refinement in the manner I composed myself relative to the instrument. These fine adjustments are subtle—to the non-guitarist imperceptible—but their effects are substantial and make the difference between a poet guitarist and a technical proficient.

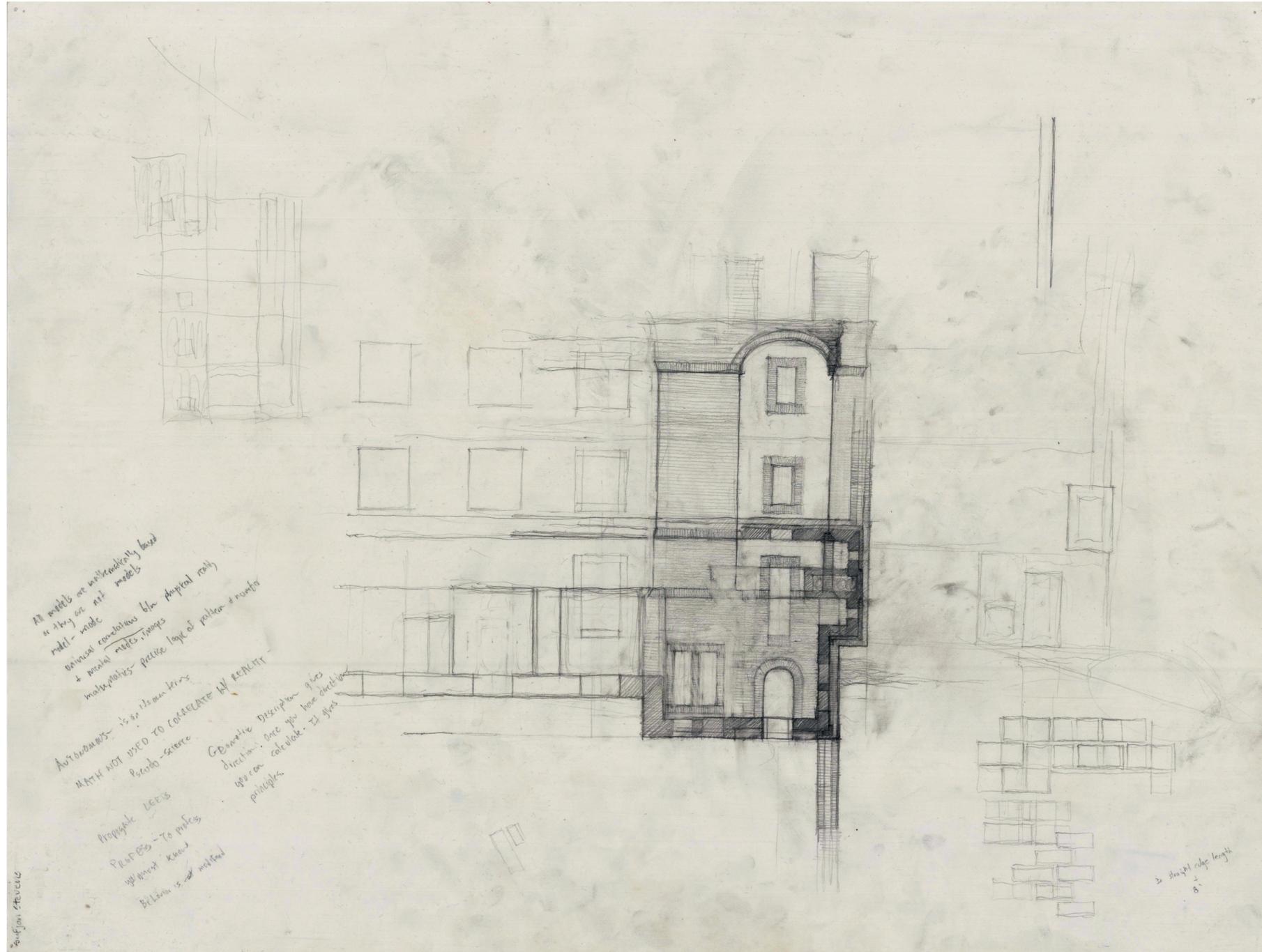
I began fine-tuning. The first phrase of the song had the character of a grand introduction and would be played with a firm gentility. I struck the strings just behind the sound hole to let the notes ring crisply. The droning tones wanted slightly more strength than the melody at first and slightly less as they followed the melody upward. At the end of that first phrase, the robust quality of the drone would return to mark the end of the introduction. The phrase then repeats itself, but its second playing is hushed—its tones more round than crisp. I moved my hand to gently strike the strings just above the sound hole and let the tones ring a touch longer. In time, the following parts were also refined, and I began to hear the work of art emerge at my own hands. It was far more pleasing than I had imagined.

Years have passed since that evening in the drawing room when I was first drawn towards “Sleepers Awake”. I’ve since played the song often for guests in that same room. Yet, I feel no less overwhelmed by the music. In the end, the fruit of my labors has been to make myself the instrument of its remaking.

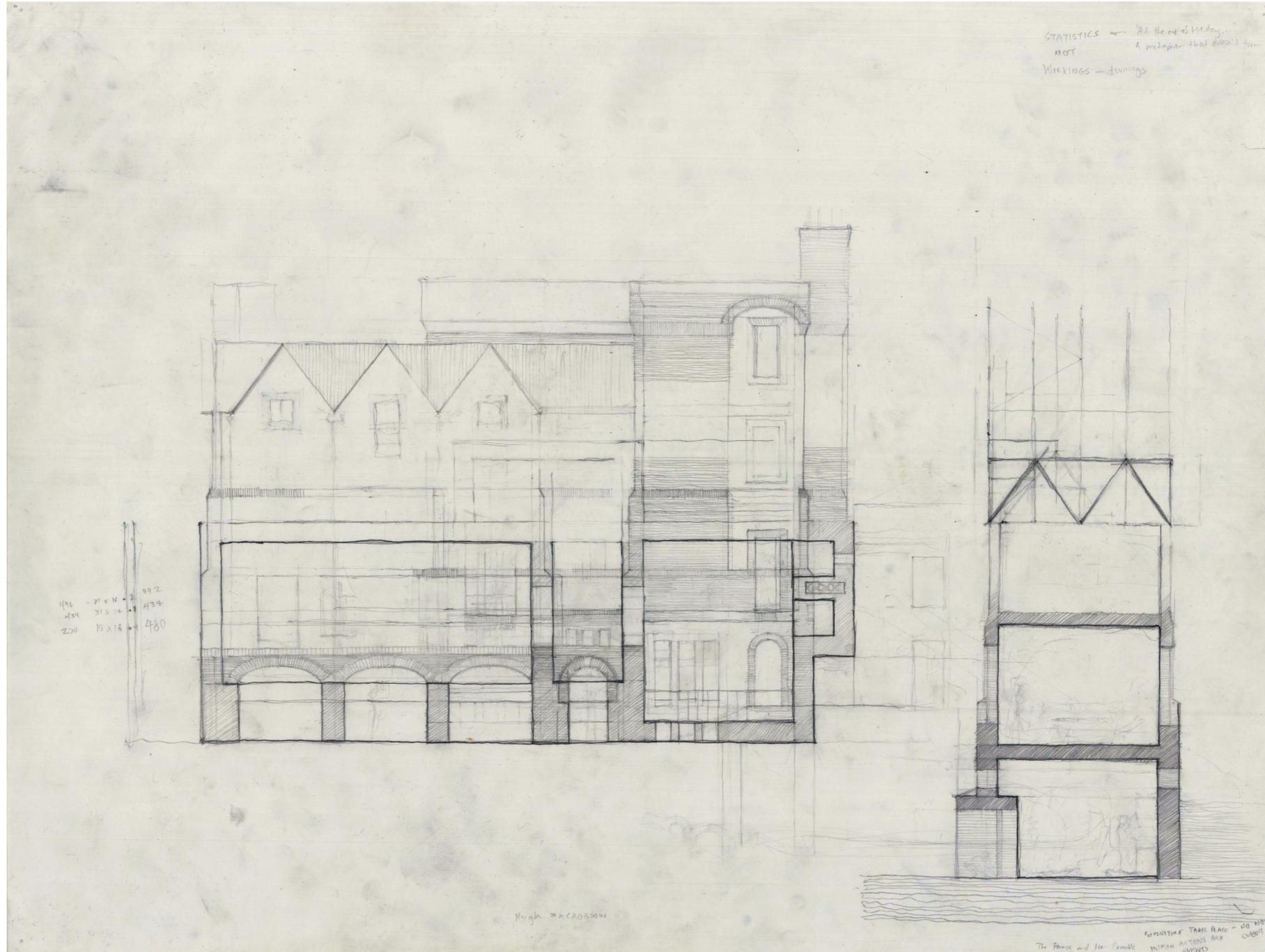
¹Parkening, Christopher. “Sleepers Awake.” *Parkening Plays Bach*. EMI Music, 1986.



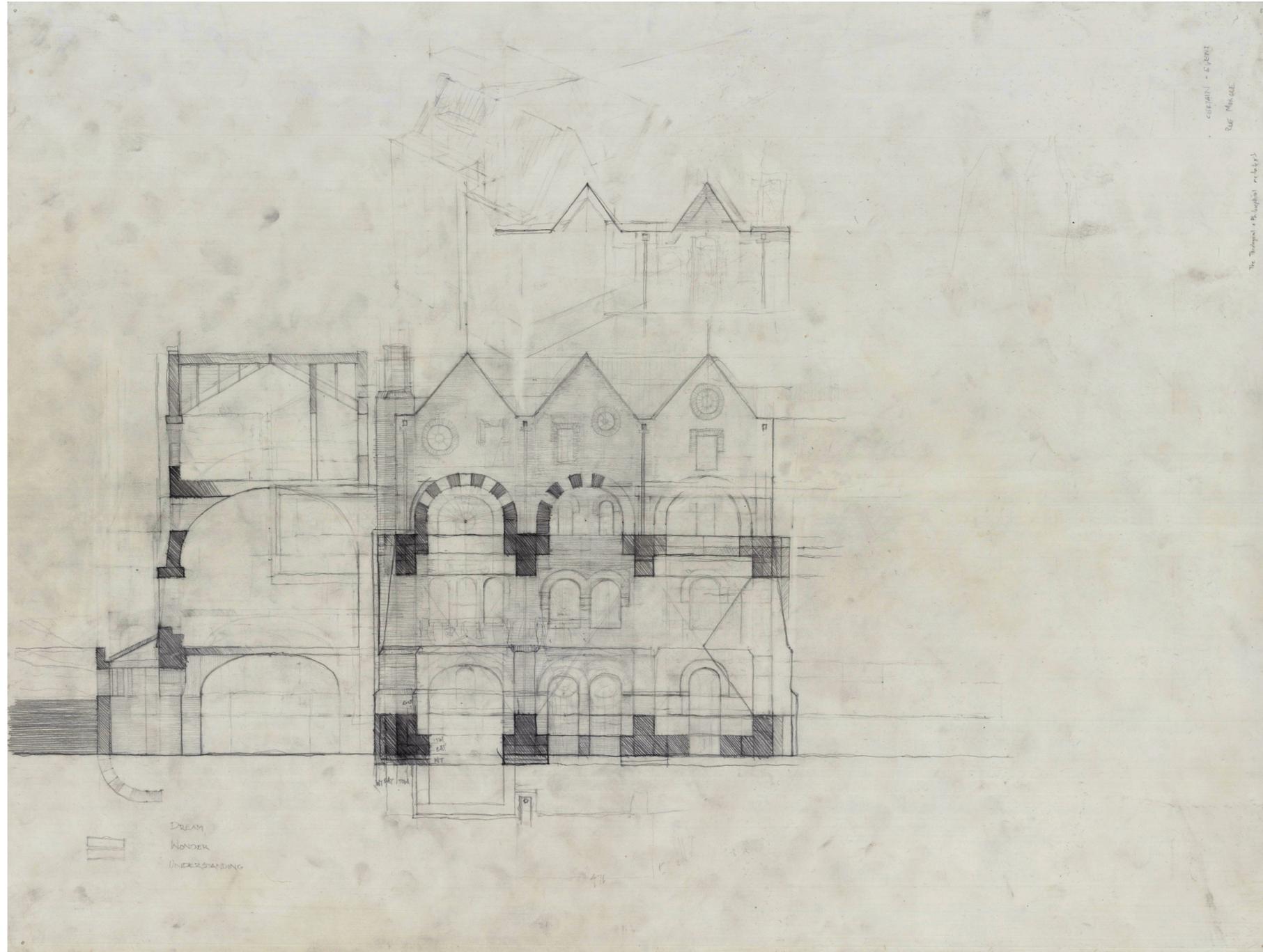
MEMORY DRAWN



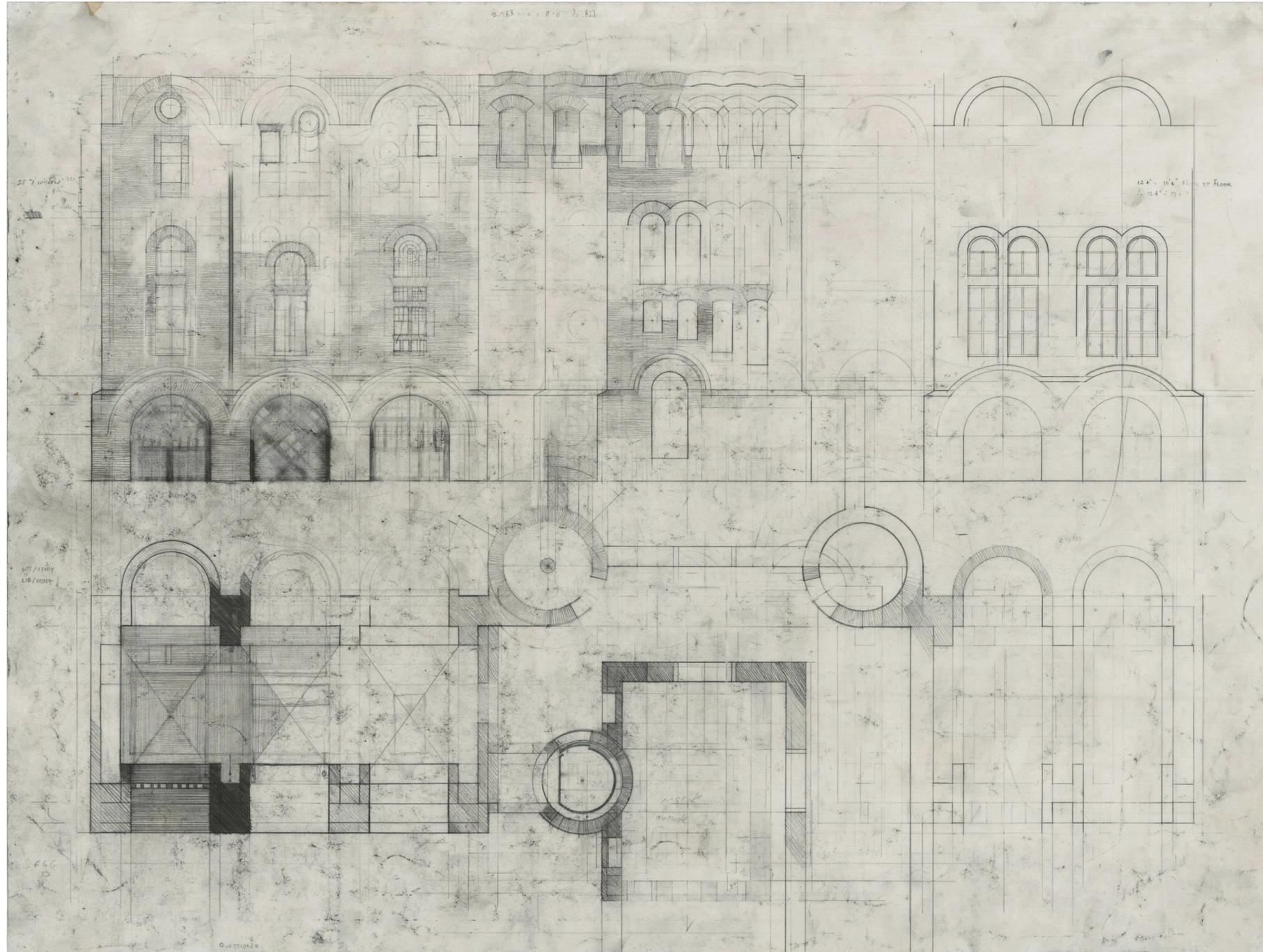
MEMORY TURNED 1: FACADE AND PLAN



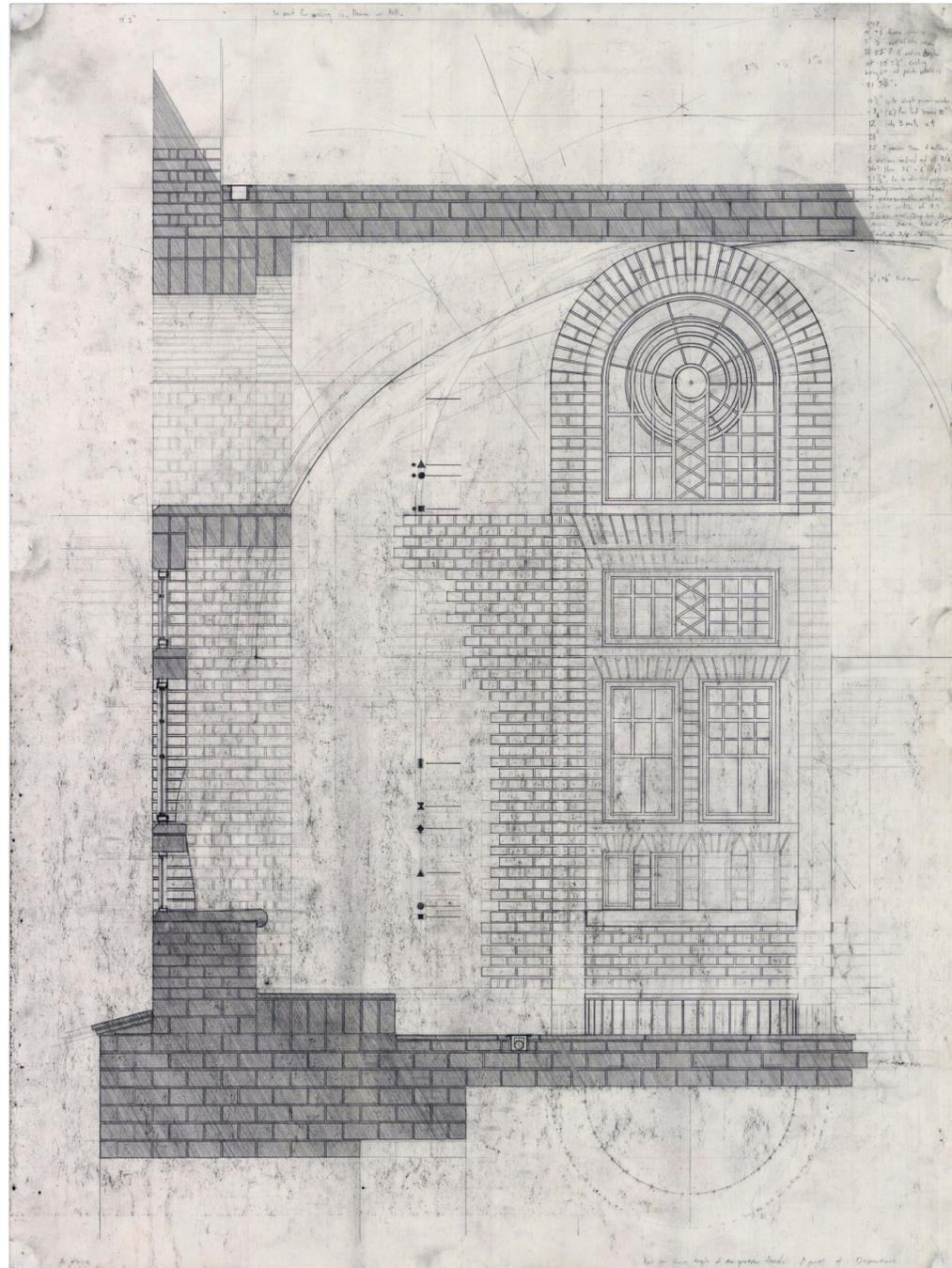
MEMORY TURNED 2: FACADE, PLAN, AND SECTION



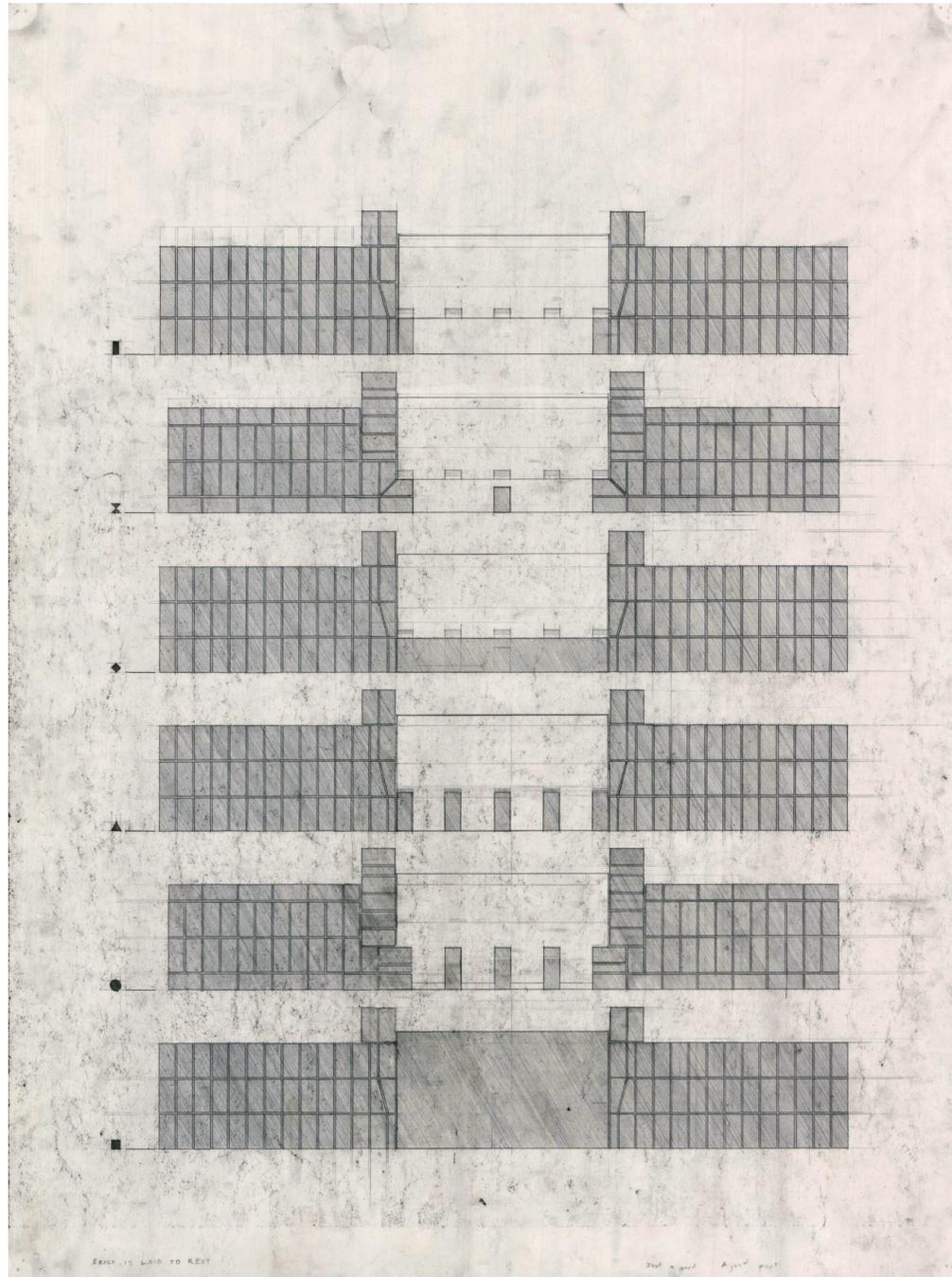
MEMORY TURNED 3: FACADE, PLAN, AND SECTION



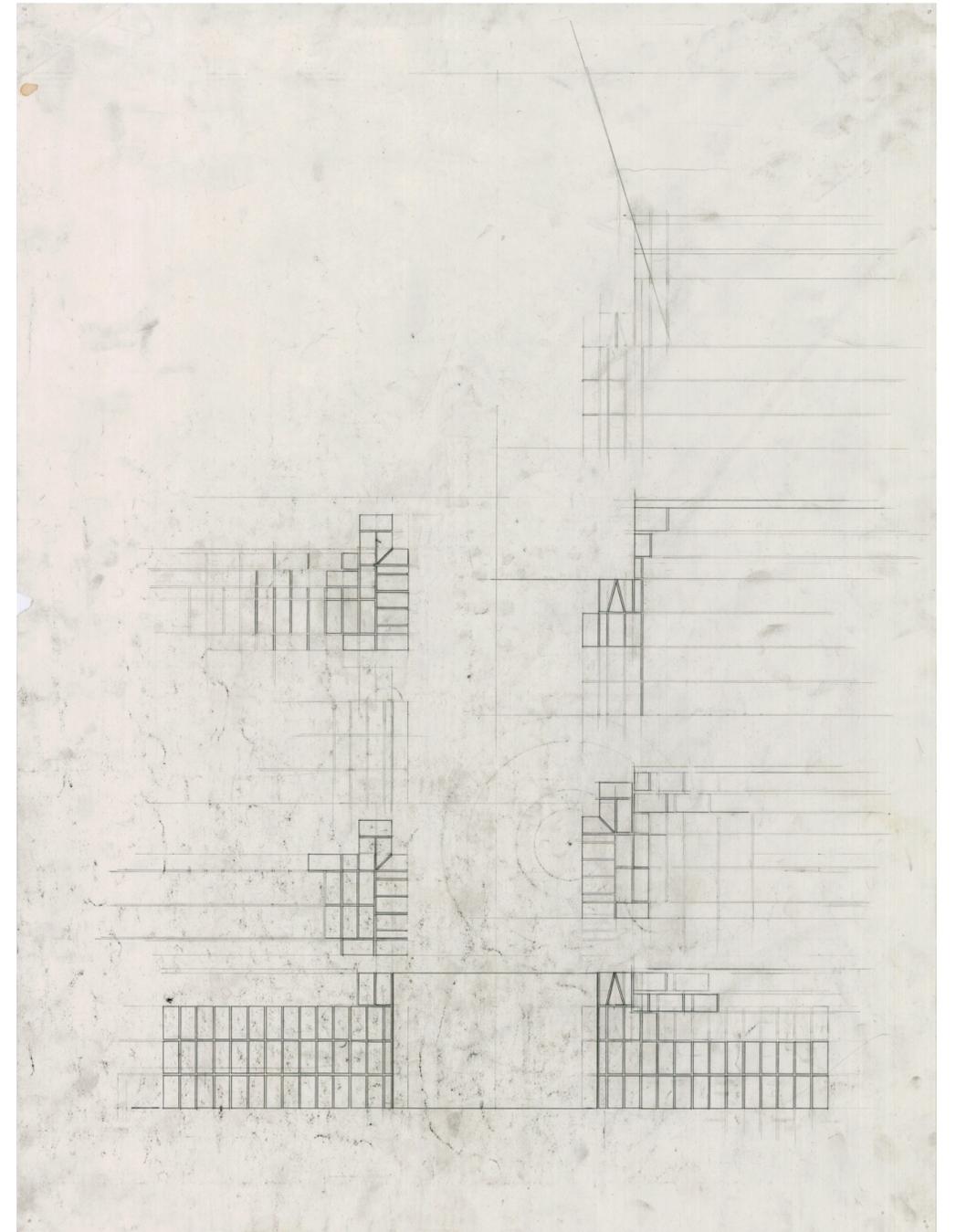
EMERGING 1: FACADE AND PLAN



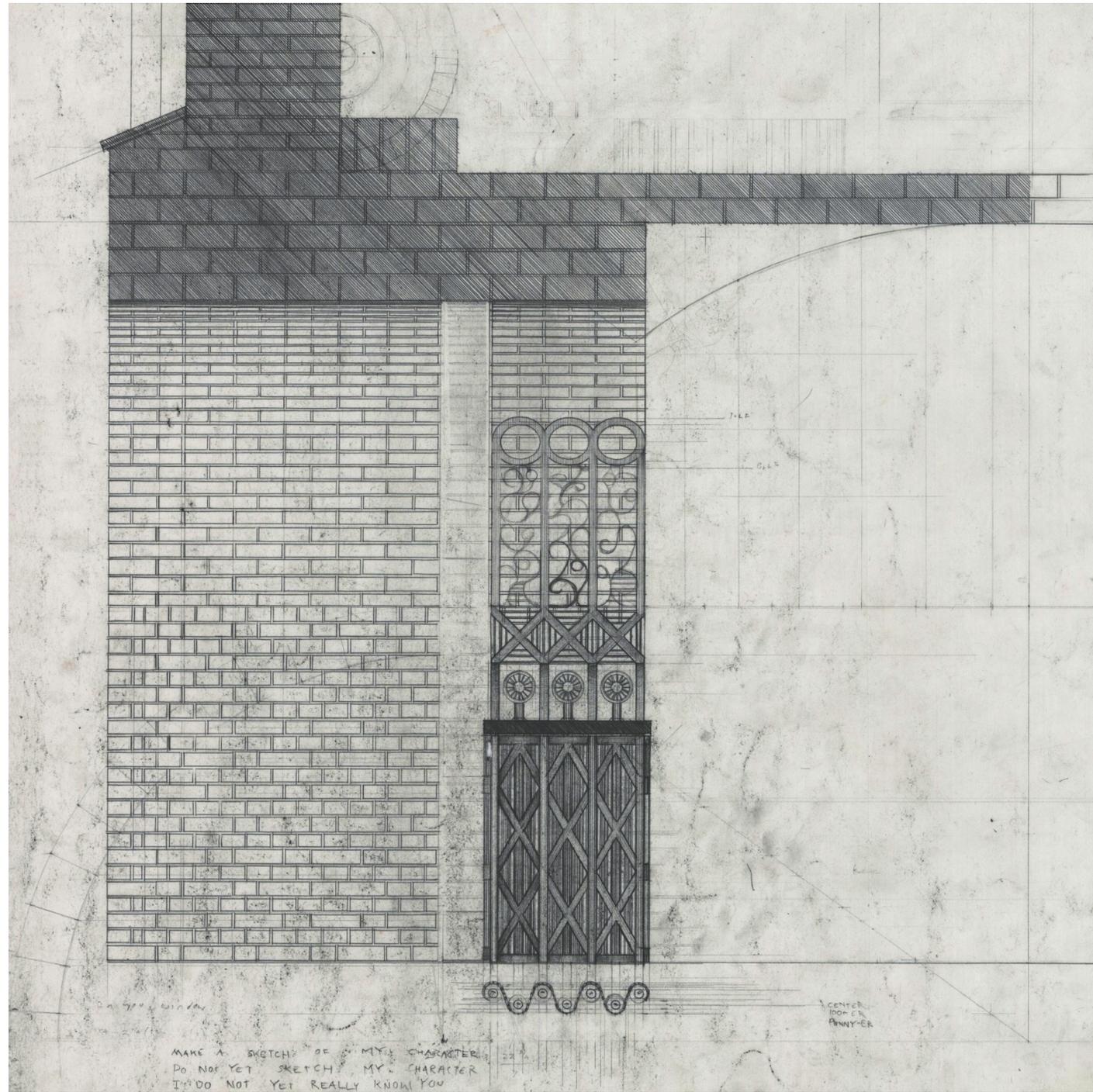
WINDOW IN BRICK



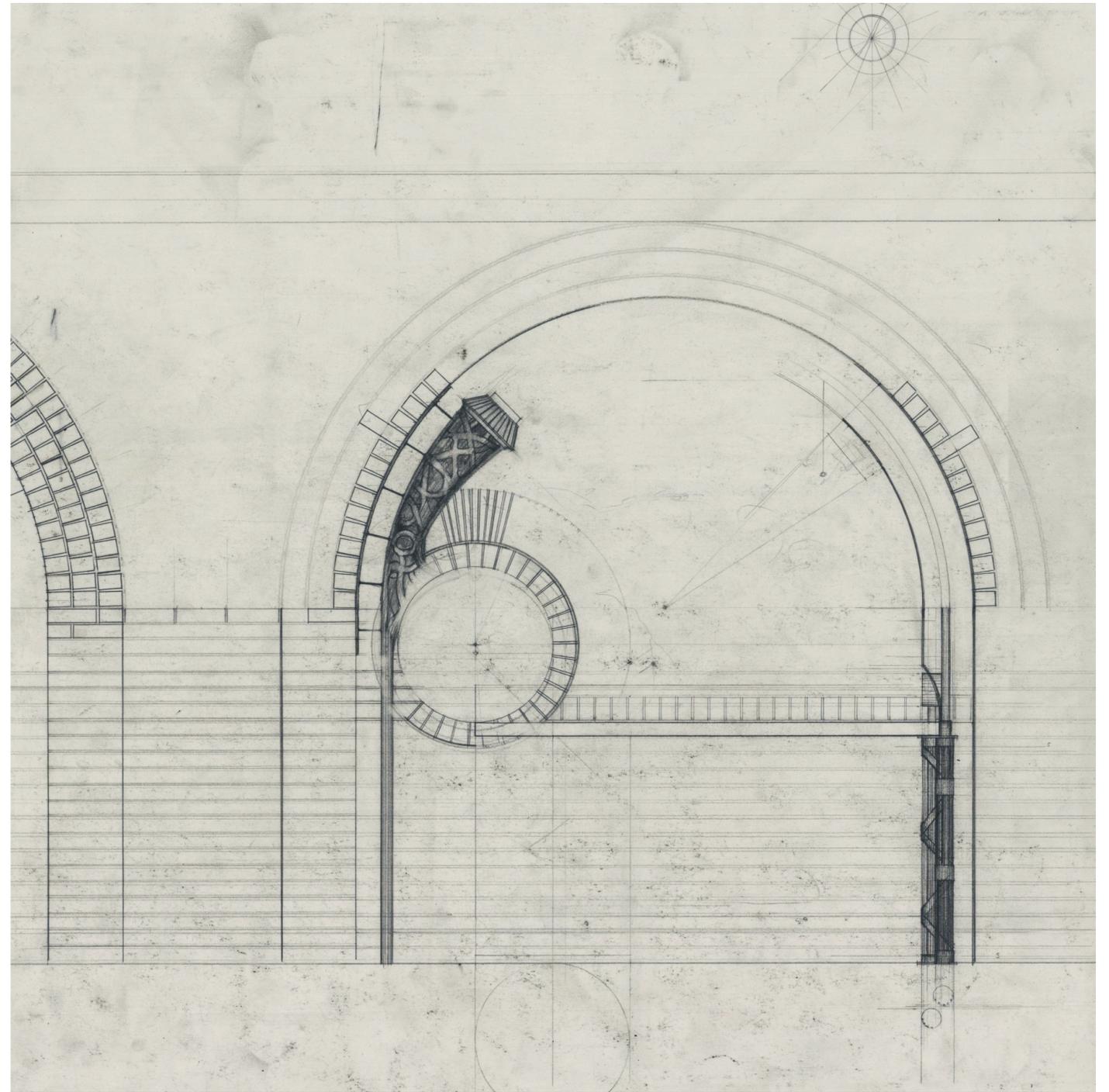
WINDOW IN BRICK: COURSING PLANS 1



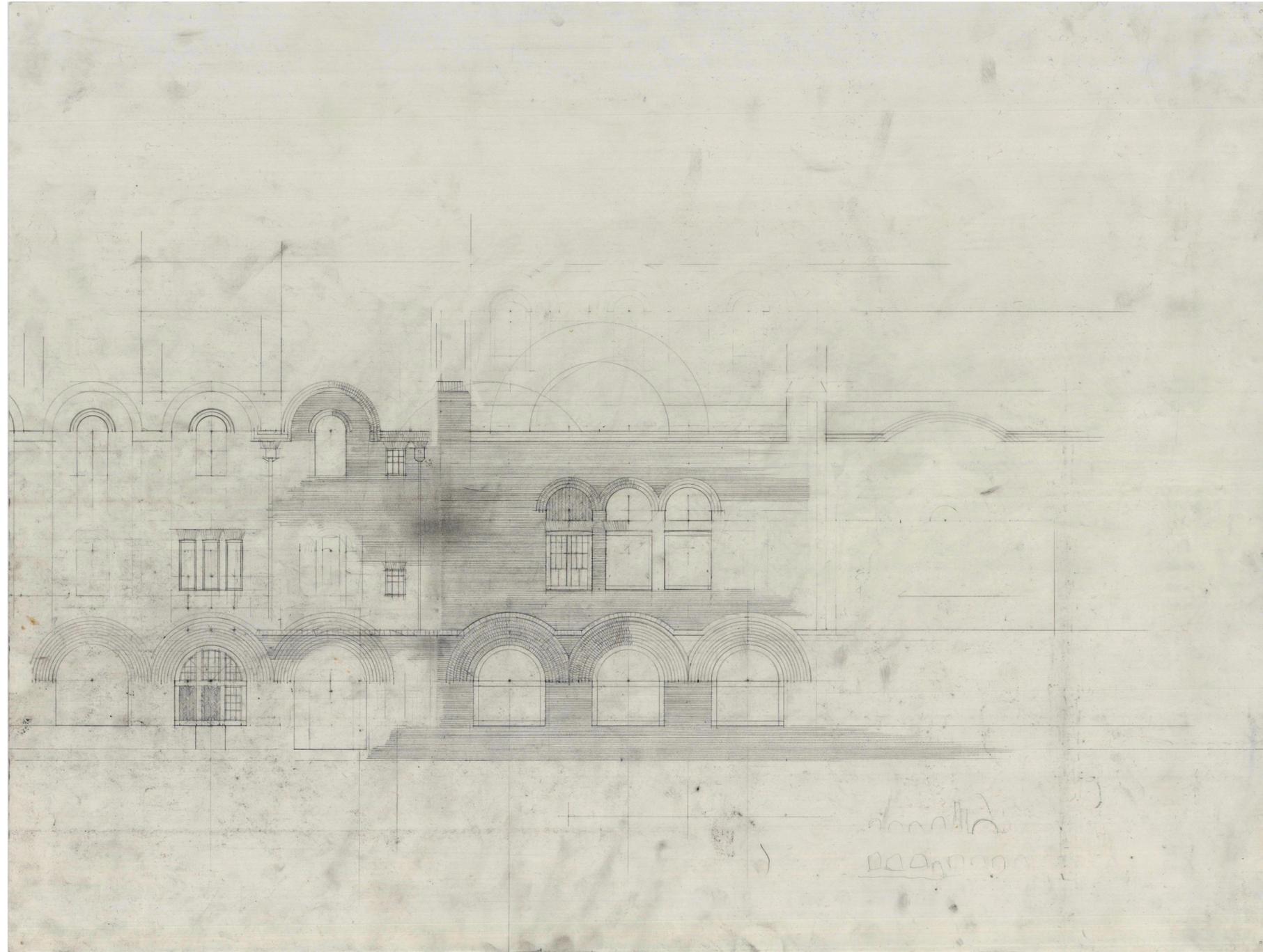
WINDOW IN BRICK: COURSING PLANS 2



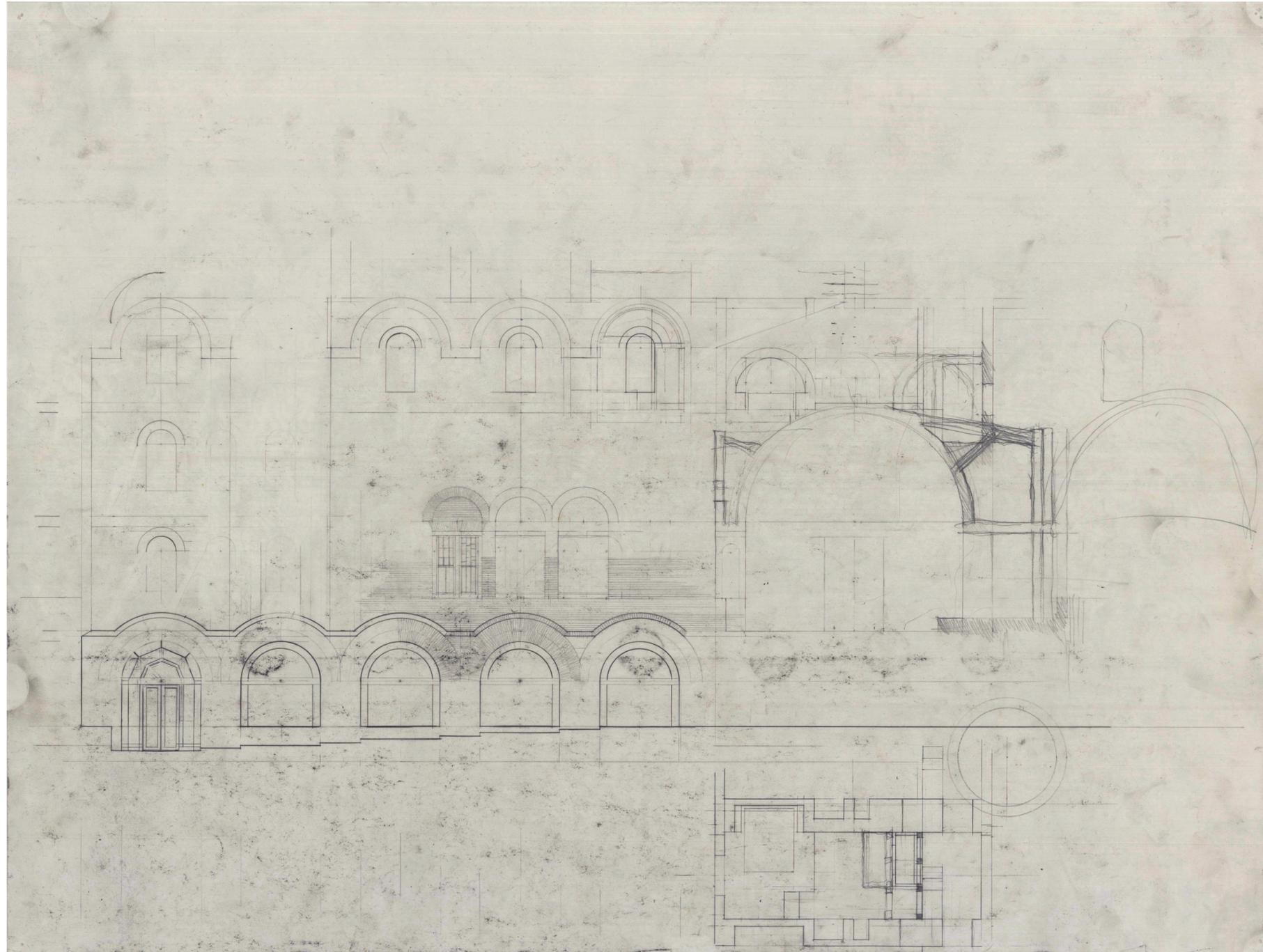
LAMPS ATTACHED TO UNFINISHED VAULT 1



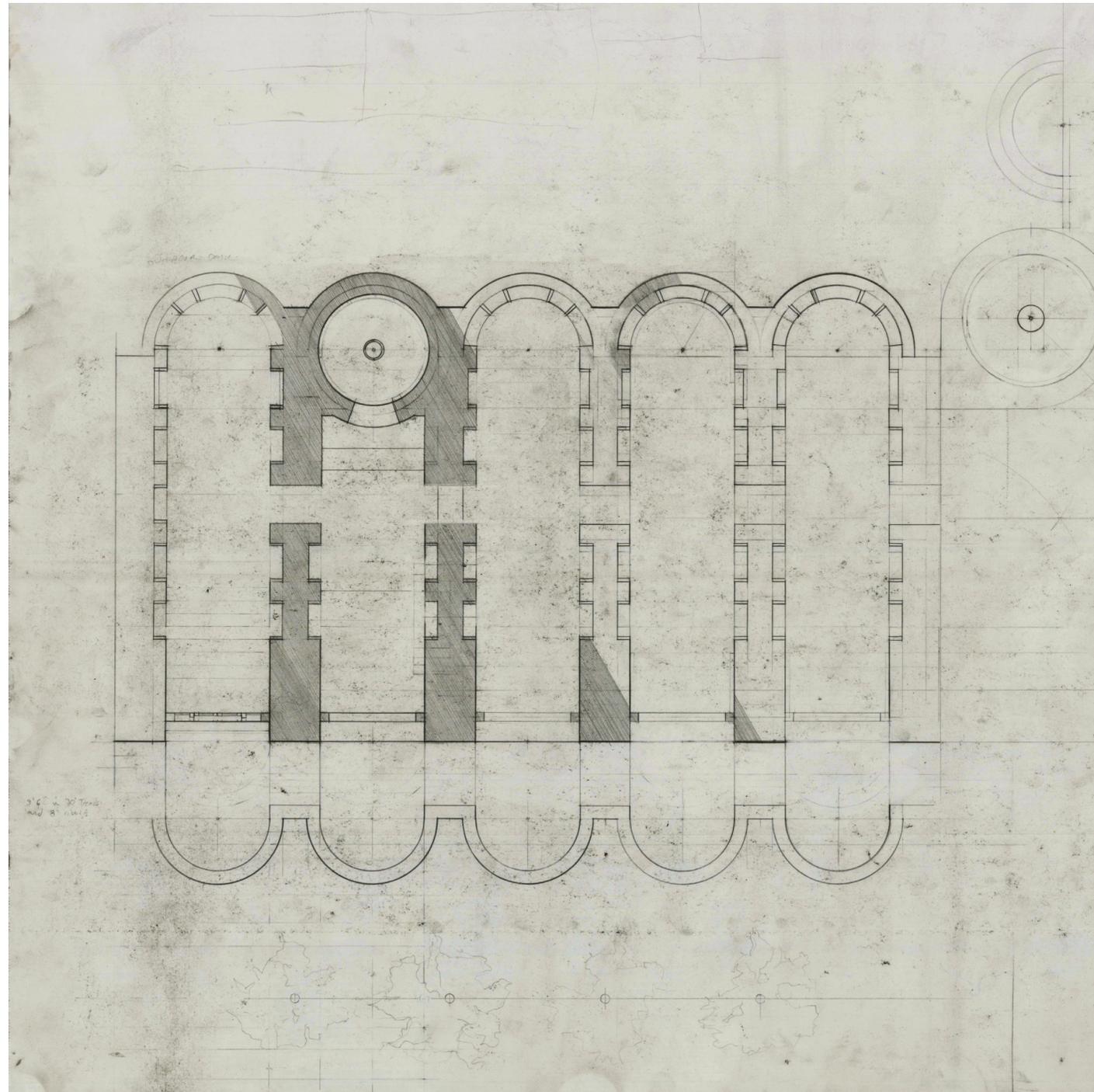
LAMPS ATTACHED TO UNFINISHED VAULT 2



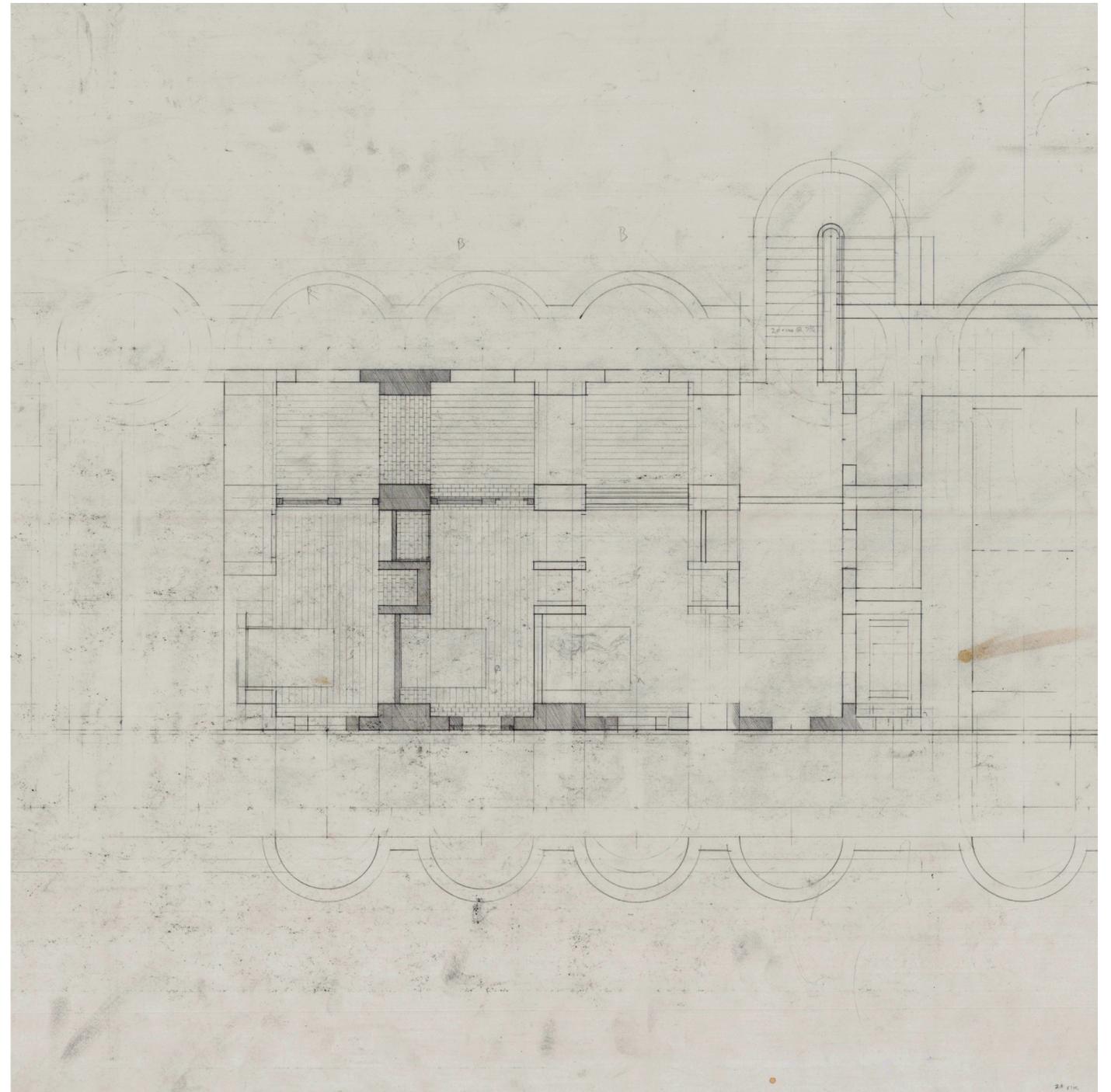
EMERGING 2: FACADE



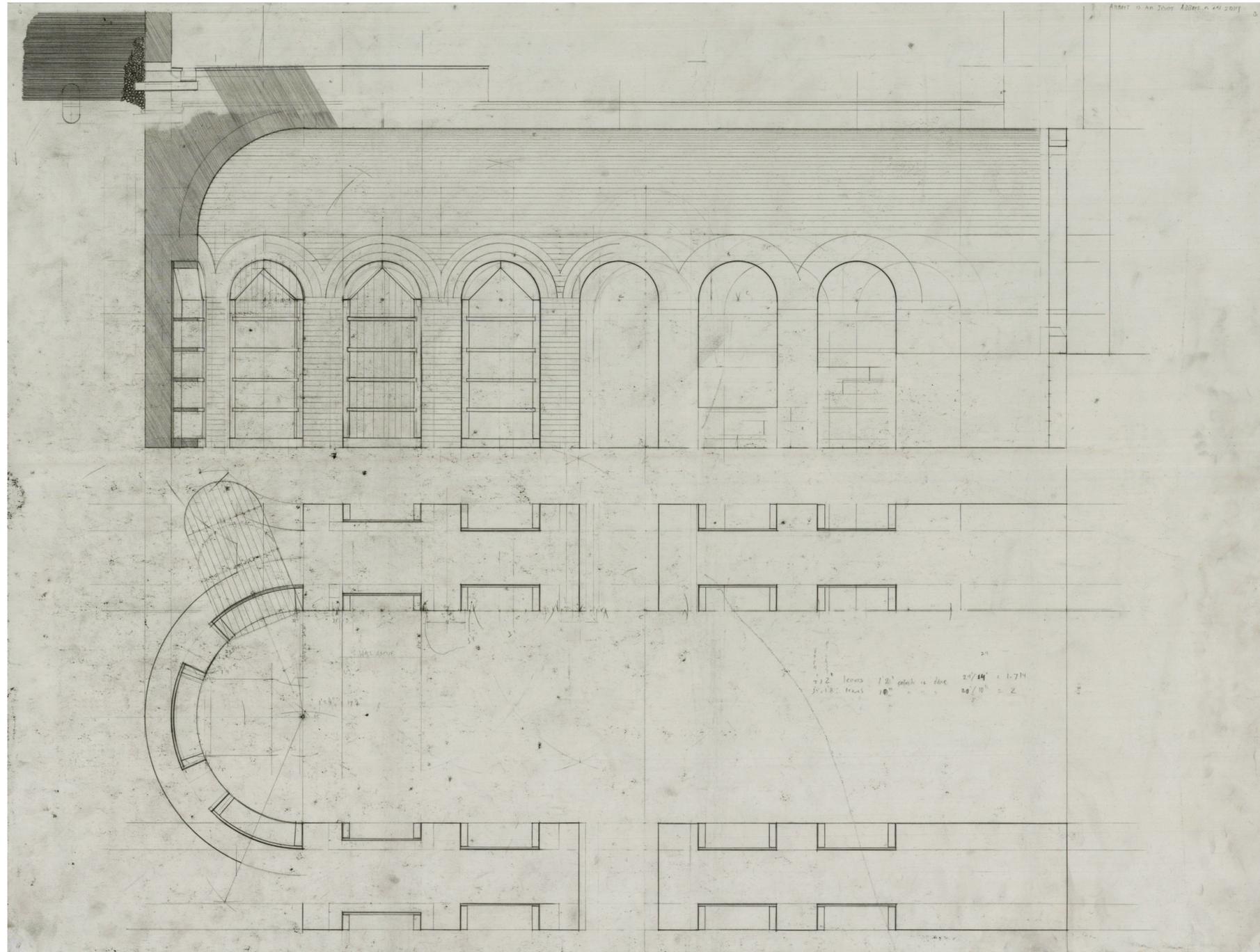
EMERGING 3: FACADE AND SECTION



PLAN OF BARREL VAULTS DRESSED FOR LIBRARY



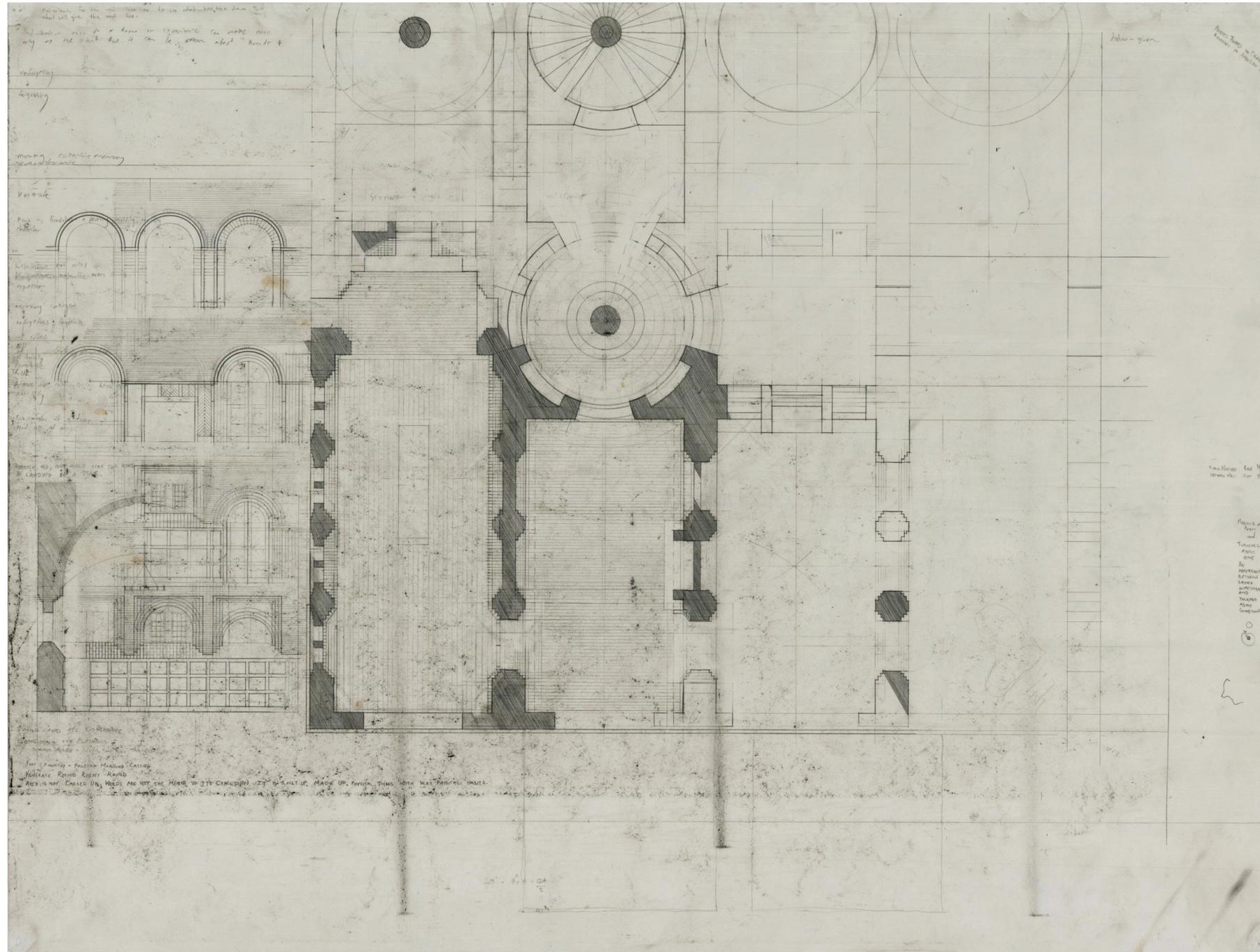
PLAN OF BARREL VAULTS DRESSED FOR BEDROOMS



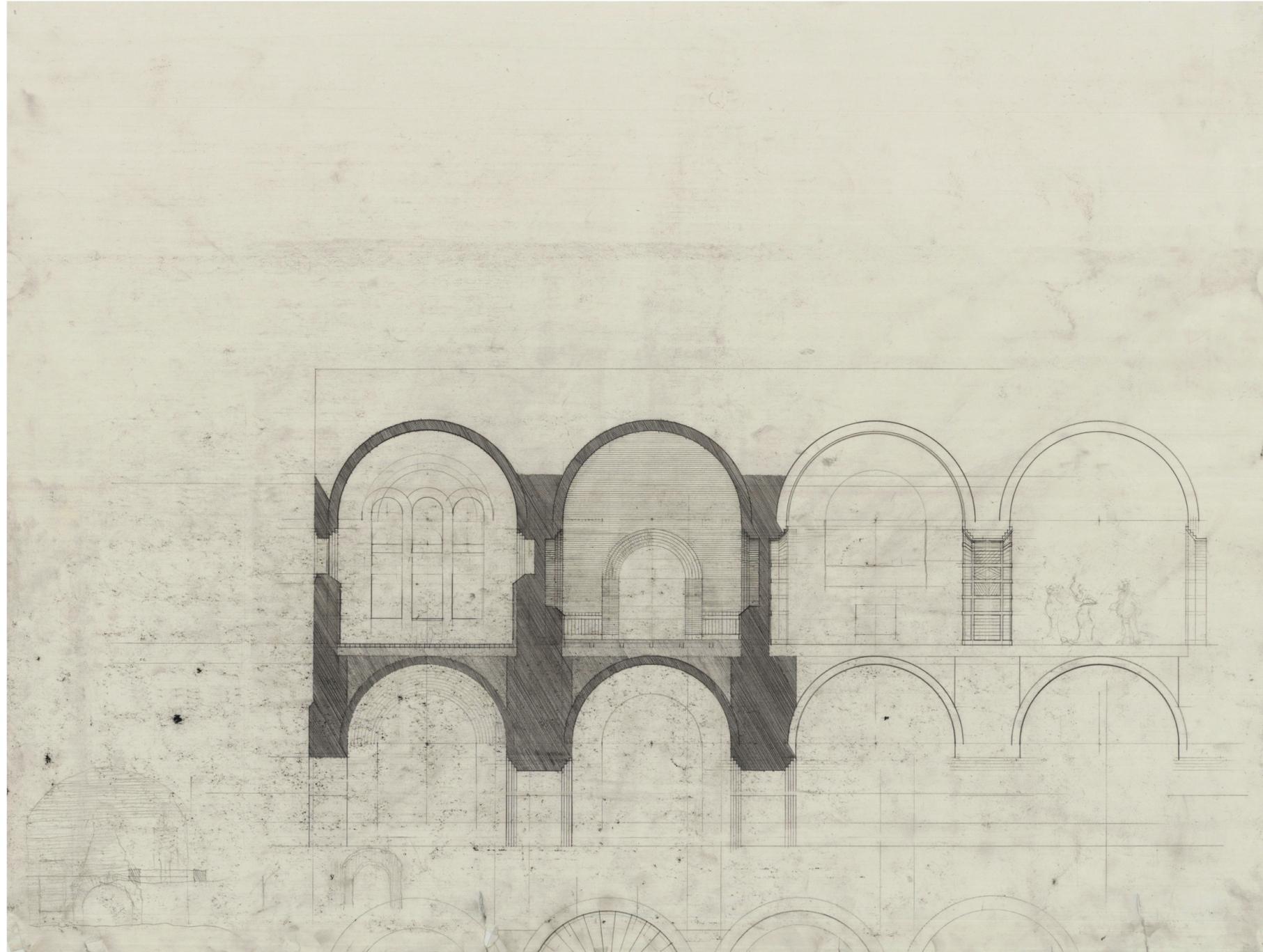
BARREL VAULT DRESSED FOR CELLAR



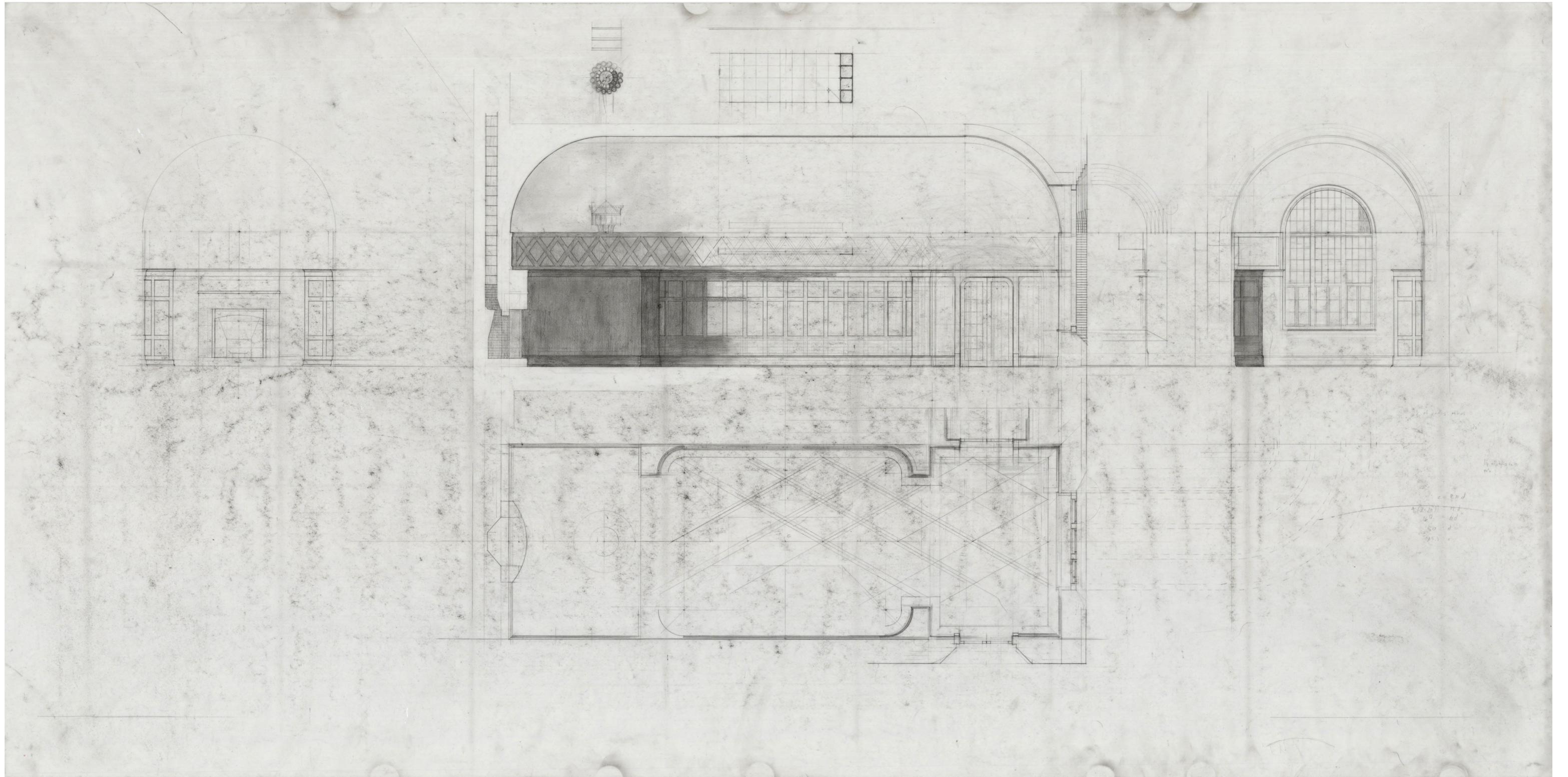
EMERGING 4 : FACADE AND SKETCH OF PLAN



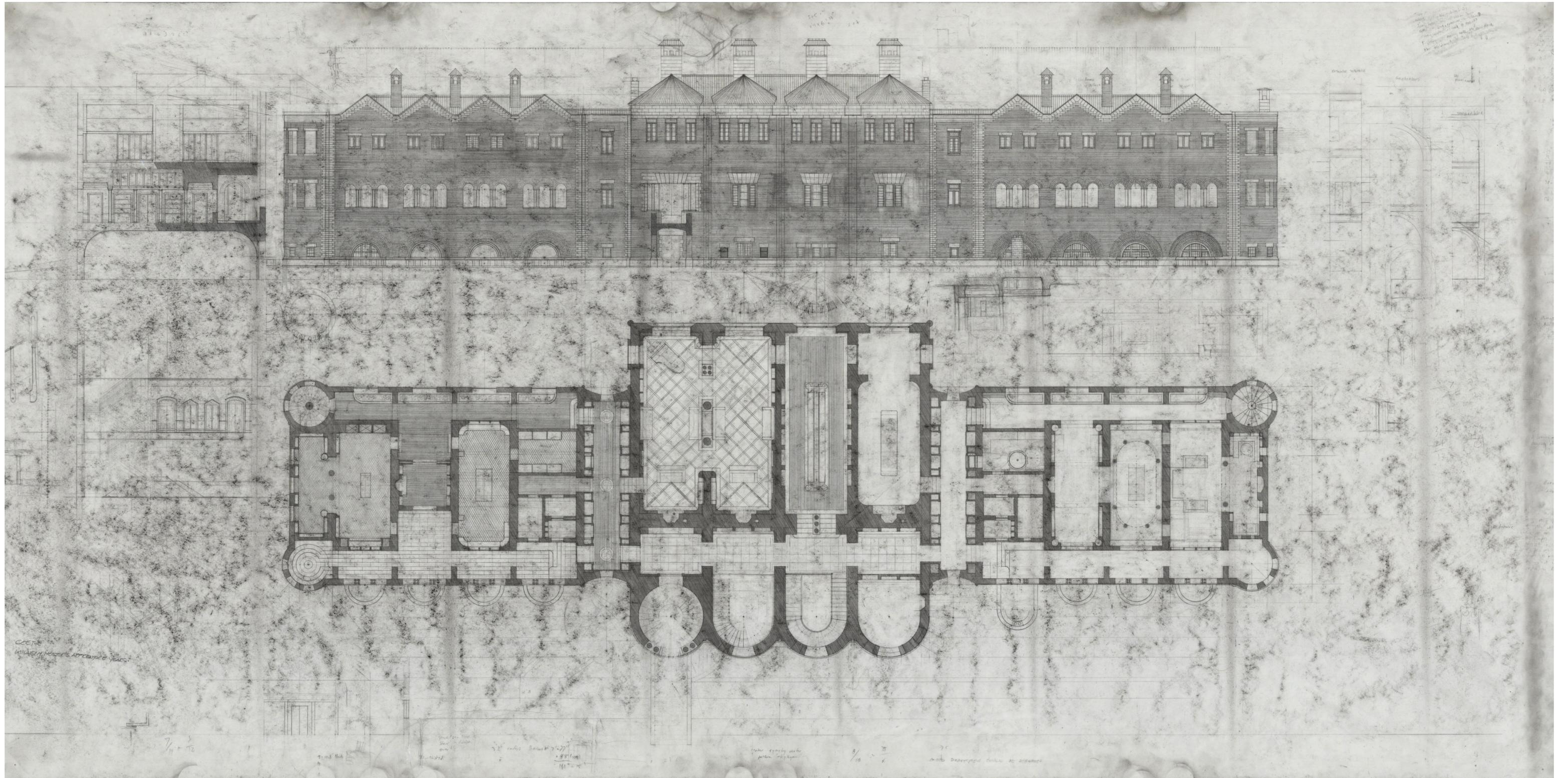
EMERGING 5: PLAN AND ROOM STUDIES



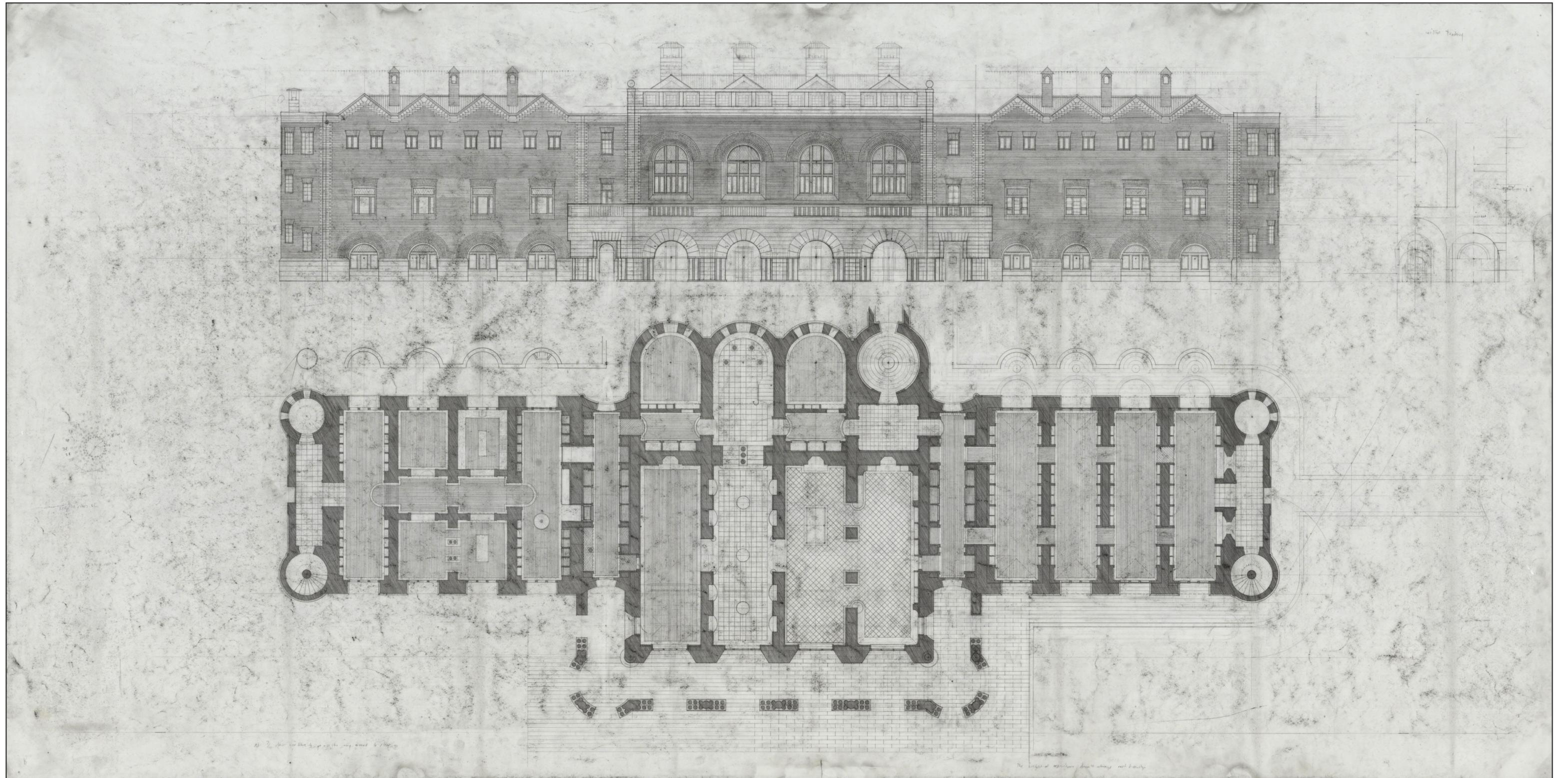
EMERGING 6: BARREL VAULTS SECTION

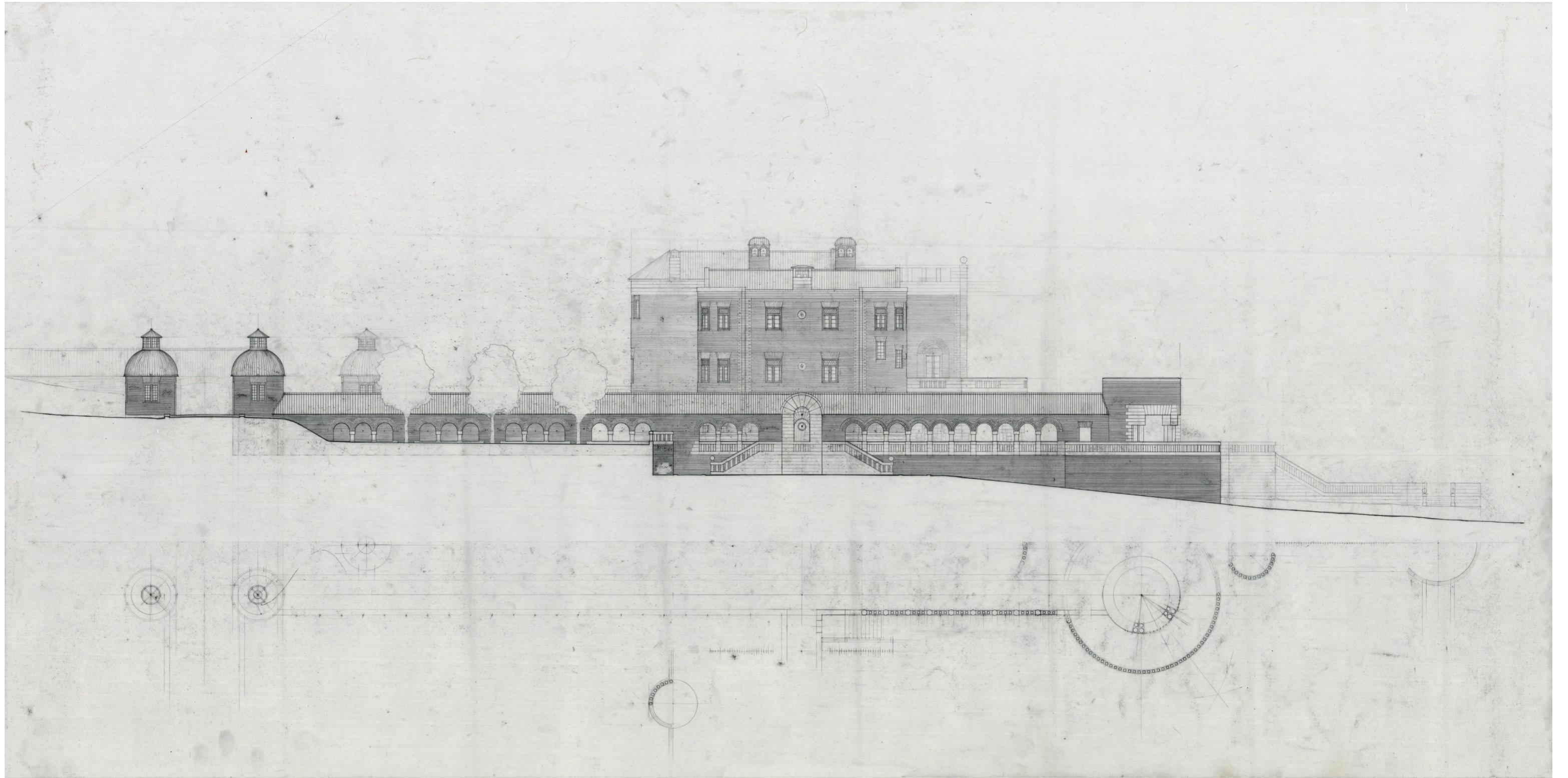


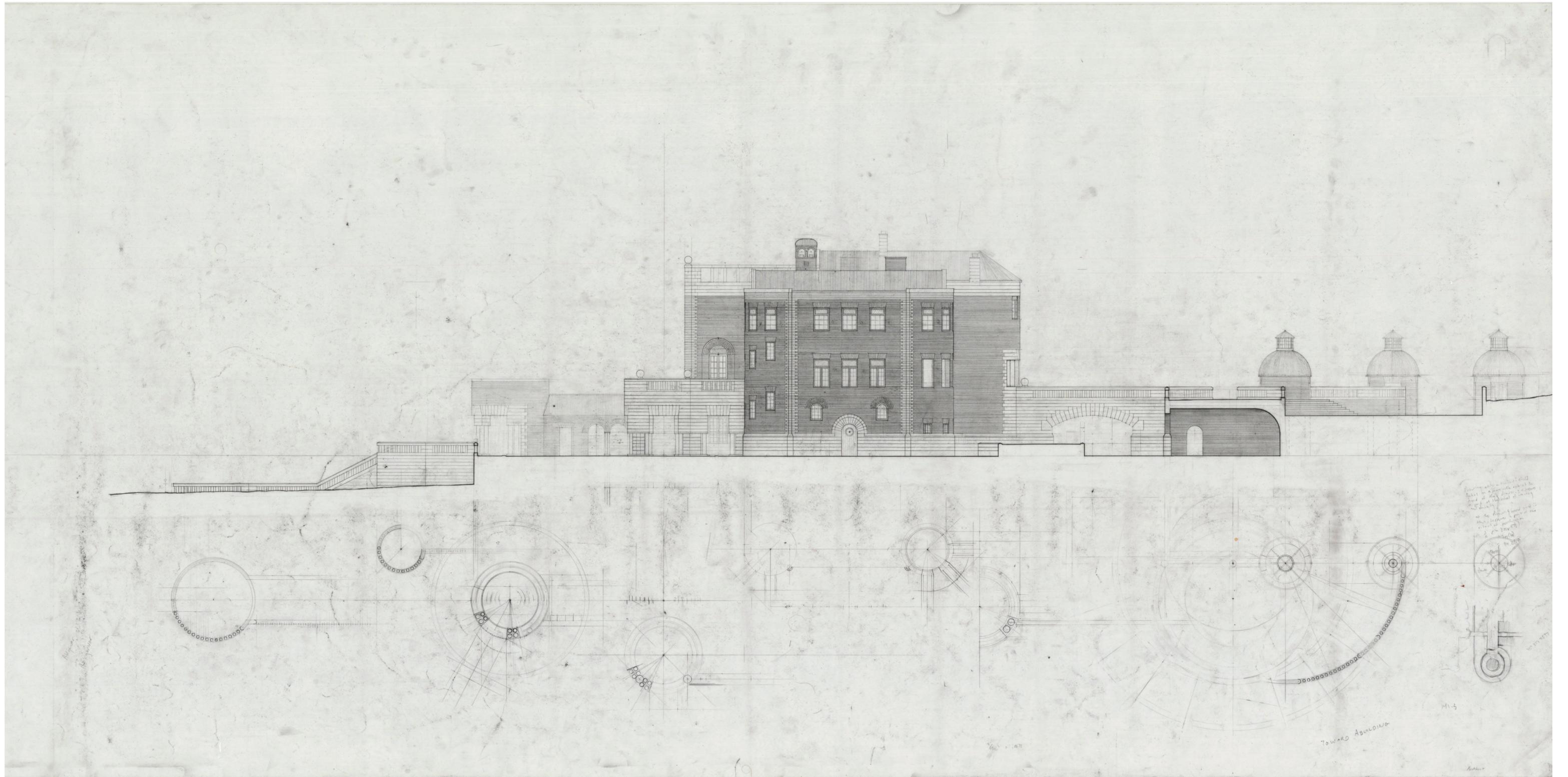
FINISHED DINING ROOM



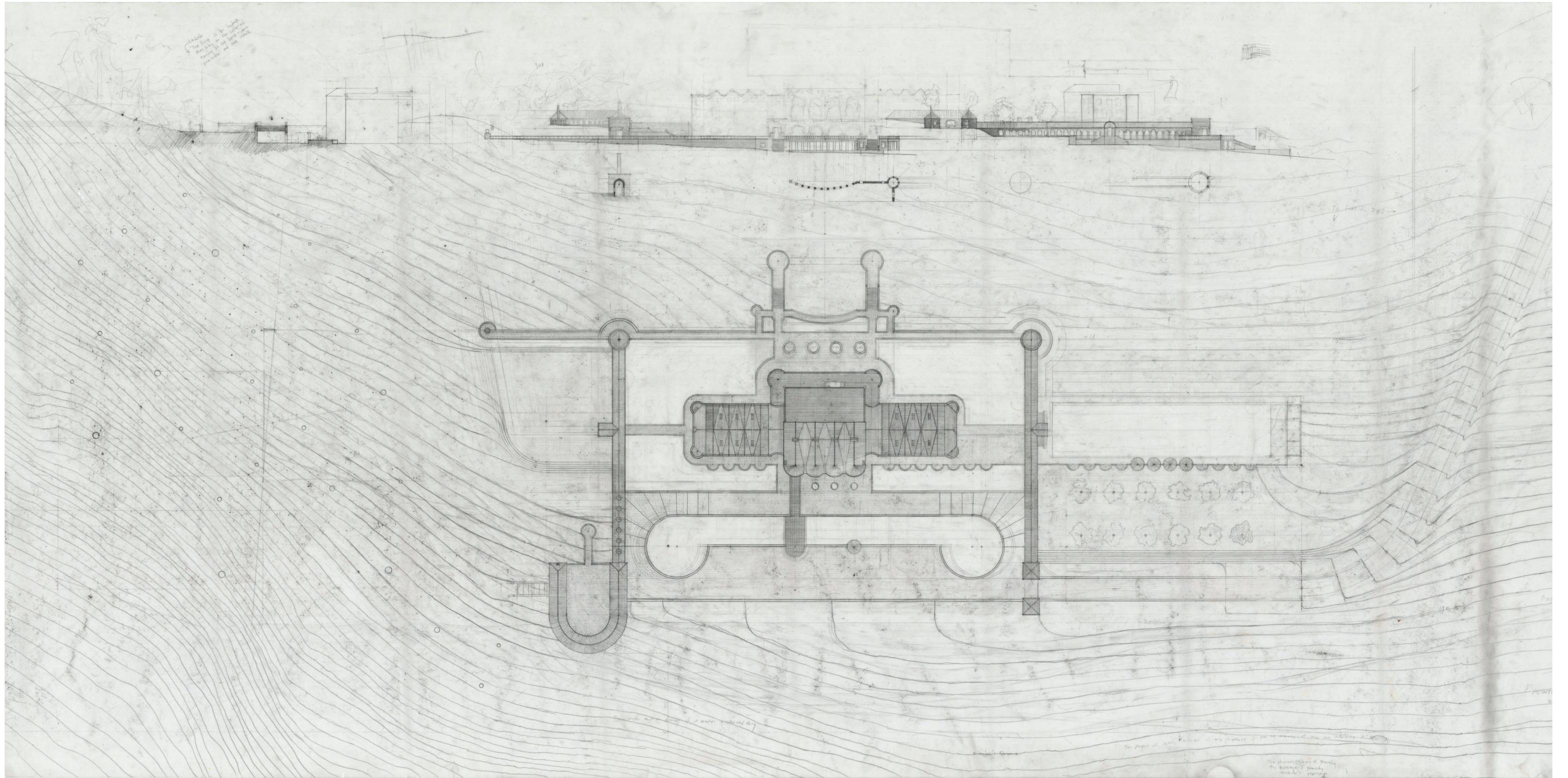
HILLSIDE FACADE AND RAISED FIRST FLOOR PLAN







END FACADE AND GOUNDS SECTION



AFTERWORD

There is a bar on Main Street in downtown Memphis called the Rumba Room. Early Friday evenings before the Latin dance enthusiasts arrive, the band plays swing music, and my sister and I dance for a few hours. Among the regulars is a young man who I noticed from the first to be a technically proficient dancer. He had a well-stocked catalogue of moves from which to choose and rarely repeated the same sequence in a single song. But his movement seemed limited to that technical proficiency; the steps, while rhythmically accurate, had little of rhyme in them. Inasmuch as there can be achieved a sort of acrobatic poetry in that particular kind of dance, there was much wanting.

This fellow dancer approached our table during a break in the music one evening, and I soon discovered that he believed himself to be knowledgeable of many things. He issued a great variety of words, but they made no sense to me. I suspected they made no sense to him either. As the evening wore on his “know-it-all” character became more apparent and wore my patience thin. My sister was doubly annoyed. As long as I was arguing, she wasn’t dancing with her favorite partner. Being a polite girl she took to kicking my shins under the table rather than forcing closure on the conversation and potentially embarrassing our acquaintance. So to be quite sure that he was in fact as ignorant as he seemed, I asked him what he believed an architect to be. He answered without hesitation, “Someone who makes blueprints.”

Blueprinting is a kind of negative imaging used to copy drawings. It was indeed a common part of the profession once upon a time, but it was low-level employees, not principal architects, who were made to suffer the stench of ammonia all day long—the copy boys of architecture. How the term came to define what an architect is and makes is a mystery to me. Had he answered, “I don’t know,” I would have been more inclined to continue the discussion, despite the beating my shins were receiving.

I’ve come to some understanding of the answer to my own question since beginning my thesis work, but the beginning itself was awkward and made about as much sense as the ignorant dancer’s definition. The awkwardness arose from a common misunderstanding that buildings are given before they are made, that the role of the architect is merely to choose from a catalogue of styles, materials, and square footages to de-

termine what is right for the building. This makes the architect a gatherer, accountant and problem solver of circumstantial items set in combination, and leaves him no room to consider what the building is and how its parts want to be composed. Under this assumption, the making of a building can proceed with a kind of Cartesian certainty. It becomes a formulaic discipline, not unlike mathematics, in which the architect draws legalistic contracts between programmed spaces rather than proper physical relationships.

When I began the thesis project there were no external limitations. There was no site, client, program, or budget. Since there were none of the certain starting points, there was nowhere to proceed. I made drawing after drawing of lifeless, diagrammatic “rooms” that made no sense. These spaces were contained by ideal lines with no thickness, indicating a separating “thing” that could neither be seen nor touched and so did not belong to this world. To the question, “from what is this made?” there was no answer. There were no stones, bricks, wood, metal, or glass—only distant, nonsensical placeholders for those things. To the question, “who makes it?” there was no answer. The ideal lines separating “rooms” were immaterial. No craftsman could make them. There were no masons laying brick, no carpenters sawing wood, no welders with masks, and no glaziers with putty. To the question, “what is it for?” there was no answer. There was nothing to indicate what activity these spaces could house. But still I struggled through a number of these drawings, growing more frustrated from one to the next and waiting in busied idleness for a building to emerge as if from nothing.

Professor Hans Rott was a frequent visitor at my desk during these drawings. Once a day for several weeks, he would pass by, silently look over my shoulder at my drawings, and then return to his office. Eventually, he stopped, and spoke with a firm gentility. “I’ve been watching what you are doing,” he said, “and it’s not working.” He asked me to collect all the drawings I had made so that we could look through them together. As he flipped through the drawings, he stopped at one that I had made in a few minutes as a sort of break from my scrupulous attendance to near nothingness. It was a simple drawing of a brick façade with a few openings and a chimney. “In this drawing,” Hans said, “all to which you have made yourself impressionable, all the things that you have loved and been drawn towards, have found expression.” I remembered the drawing to be an effortless and enjoyable one. Ever since I first turned an observant eye to buildings, I have loved masonry, and here I had drawn the face of a brick building. This wall had presence. It stood there and it made sense. “Start again from this drawing,” Hans said.

I began again. This new beginning had the feeling of an introduction. There are a number of rituals in place to ease the initial relationship between two people that previously had not known each other. When the ignorant dancer introduced himself, I shook his hand, asked where he was from, where he worked, whether he had a family, what he was drinking, and so on. By his answers and manner of expression I made a sketch of his character. In further conversation I came to know the person. The hu-

man mode of knowing is to make sense of things, and the human mode of expression is to speak—to be impressed by a thing’s sensible reality and to express again in a mode proper to man. In the same way that the ignorant dancer’s words were divorced from their own meanings and consequently made no sense, my first drawings were far removed from a material reality. They were senseless. Just as there can be no conversation of substance with a person who has not made himself impressionable to what things are, there can be no further drawing out of a building that makes no sense. But the brick façade that I had drawn had a very strong existence. It had a thingness, a character. It was made from brick, and I could imagine the masons at work laying one course on top of the next. There was some indication in the drawing of the building’s nestled relationship to the earth—one undrawn face retaining the ground and the other open to something, perhaps a prospective view. It had the appearance of a house for a family and friends set into a hill. Professor Rott had asked me to begin again with this drawing, and I saw that he was right. This drawing was of something that could be known—something that could be drawn out.

I turned one of the corners drawn and drew another face to the building. “Good!” Hans said, “Now, draw the plan on top.”

“But there is no room on the page,” I said.

“Not above,” he responded, “on top.”

I imagined such combination to be confusing, but in trust I carried out his suggestion and drew the plan directly on top of the elevation. In doing so, I came to see that the craft of the architect is an indirect one. To the potter and sculptor belong the ability to make the finished thing itself, and their judgments are direct. They stand back, tilt their head to one side, then the other, turn about the thing, and make adjustments. When an architect draws, however, he isn’t making the thing itself, but rather an indirect drawing of it. In this way, his drawings are more akin to a composer’s musical notation. The finished work for the composer is not the music written but that music translated and performed. Neither do finished buildings exist on paper. They are drawn up out of the ground and stand upright. While the architect’s drawings have a deceivingly close appearance to the actual building, they are in fact distant models that require reading and translation. In drawing the plan on top of the elevation I had drawn a geometric relationship—the face of the building was rotated about its corresponding wall drawn in plan. These were not pictures of the thing as it might one day stand. They were overlaid parallel projections whose appearance, even considered singly, can never be matched with any viewpoint about the imagined building. The comfort of a drawing that “looks” like the future building was lost, but was replaced by a drawing which could say more of *what* and *how* the building would be.

The drawing out of this building’s relationships took on a form similar to a dialogue. When I drew a segmental arch over a ground floor opening, the building said, “No, this arch is too thin for me and its vaulting too flat given the weight it bears.”

I doubled the thickness of the arch and made it semi-circular. The building responded, “This is too thick. I only have two stories on top of this

arch. Make me five stories, or take a few bricks out of this arch.”

I took a few bricks out. “Now,” said the building, “I am confused.

Am I a long thing or a tall thing? The openings you’ve drawn are far more tall than wide. You’ve repeated them in length toward the horizon, but only three times. There is not enough height for me to be a tall thing. Neither is there enough breadth to be a long thing. Which am I?”

I extended the repetition and made the windows to be more square. It became a long thing. “Now,” said the building, “this arch you’ve drawn in elevation is misplaced. It belongs to another drawing.”

I drew it again, this time in plan.

“Neither does it belong to the plan,” the building said.

I drew the arch again, this time in section, and it became a barrel vaulted thing.

“Indeed,” said the building. “You have drawn me right. I am what I want to be”

The work of art for the architect is drawing out relationships of embodied belonging—drawing from memory towards building. I remembered a beloved house of brick and drew upon it. As building emerged in the drawing, it became its own thing with its own desires. I was myself drawn in by its presence and made attendant to its longings. I listened, in a way, to what it called for and then drew it out, again and again, all the while towards building.