

Signs in Architecture: Beauty in the Ordinary

Thesis submitted by
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Architecture.

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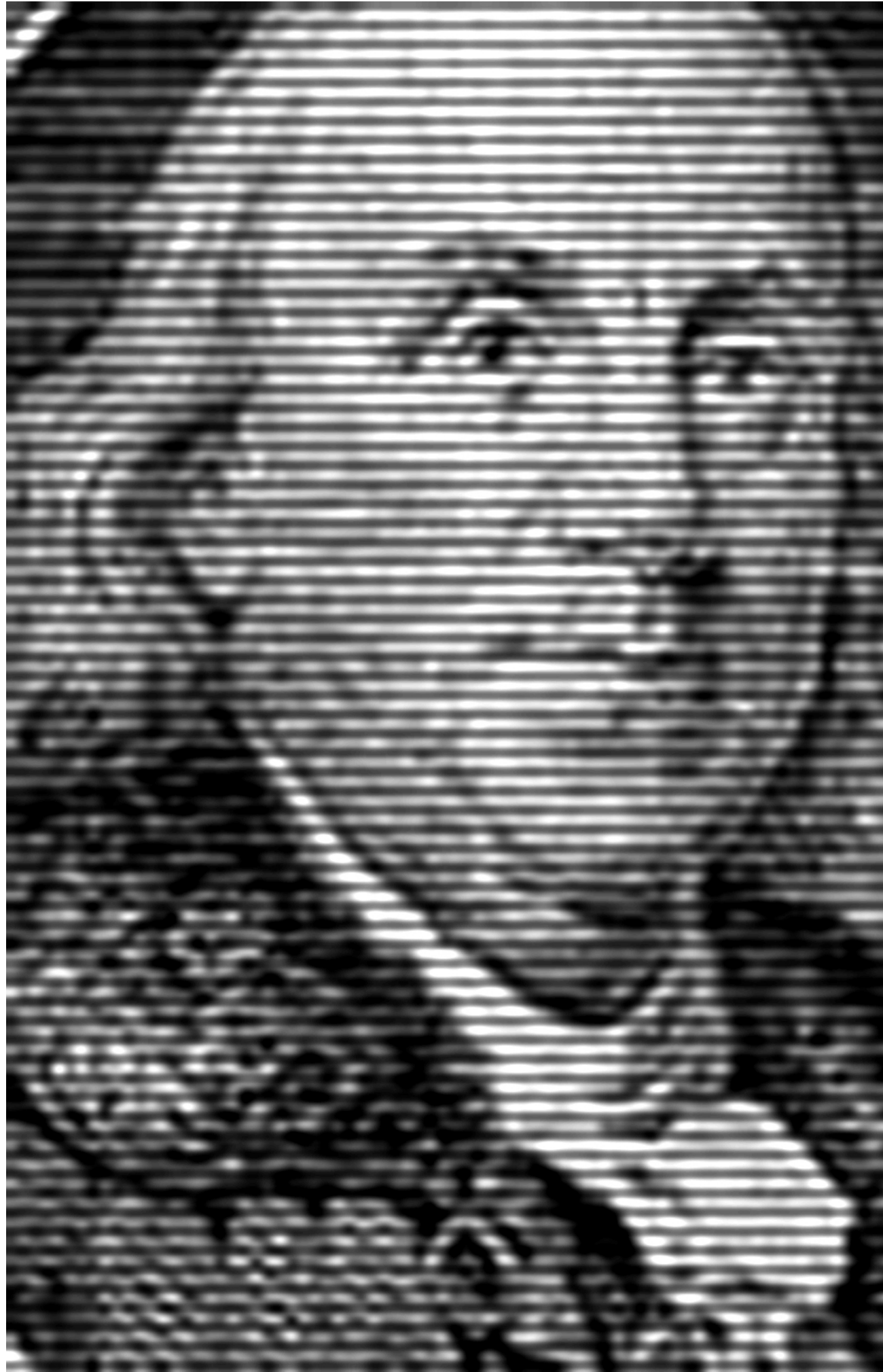
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AKIKO SUZUKI

SIGNS IN ARCHITECTURE: BEAUTY IN THE ORDINARY



FOR MY GRANDFATHER TAKESHI SHISHIKURA

ABSTRACT

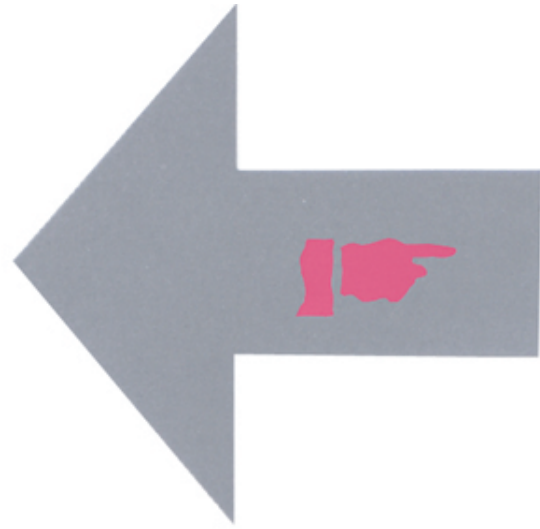
In Japan, the basics of living are described as three main elements; clothing, food, and shelter. These elements involve simple daily activities such as changing clothes in the morning, eating lunch, and sleeping at night. It may easily become a mundane topic since they are woven into our daily routines. Nevertheless, a moment in one's day may become joyful when we reconsider and play with the ordinary.

The first trace of a dwelling in Japan is a pit shelter. People dug a circular pit in the ground, placed sticks vertically at the perimeter of the pit, and covered it with straws to make a roof. The dwelling protected people from the weather, animals and other tribes. The function of architecture may be as simple as that. Today, the purpose of making architecture is not dramatically different from the ancient times, yet the technology in our profession as well as in our daily routines have developed over thousands of years and changed the way of life.

Today, one may easily get trapped in the graphical or stylish looks of architecture and ignore the fundamental reason to make architecture. Making architecture is quite an ordinary act. My intention for this thesis is to examine my daily activities and concerns and extract the essence of the Architecture that beautifully fulfills the function. I believe Architecture strongly influences people's experiences and feelings, and goal as a designer is to orchestrate spaces which will make one's ordinary day into an extraordinary one.

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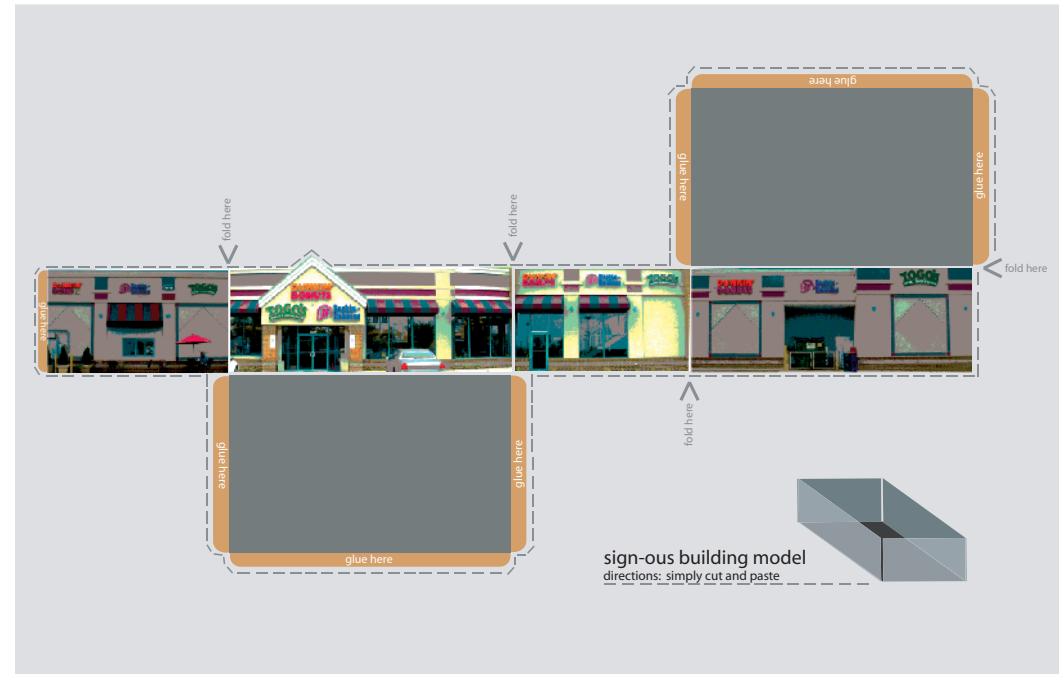
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Ordinary

Ordinary scenery in American cities today contains many commercial signs. These signs are large and bold in order to attract people who travel in automobiles. Many people, especially in the suburbs, rely on automobiles to manage their daily activities in the United States. I feel that we are in a critical situation when buildings that we go to everyday such as grocery stores, drycleaners, offices, and banks are neglected by designers in our communities. I feel happiness when the first dogwood flower blooms in town; when the smell of freshly ground coffee beans flow out to the sidewalk from a cafe; when the apartment window frames the same scenery but in a different way according to the weather, time of day, and season. Such small occasions enrich my life. When there is an occasion for Architecture to trigger these joyful occasions and make people happy I will feel satisfied as a designer.

1. Where is the pharmacy: The pharmacy sign is placed so that people in automobiles can see it from the street and not for the pedestrians. The sign gives confusion to the pedestrians since there is no entrance or window for the pharmacy.



2

Strip malls

Strip malls are one of the most common places for one to conveniently run errands in the United States. Grocery stores, post offices, bakeries, salons, clothes stores, and even cinemas are built next to each other in a long complex. Bold commercial signs and a sea of parking spaces characterize a typical strip mall. After visiting one of the popular strip malls in Alexandria, Virginia, I noticed that the facades of these stores have no relationship with the interior. The signs are randomly pasted to the facades which are then pasted onto the building. People visit strip malls a couple of times a week to buy their necessities and take care of errands, but they are not the most pleasant places in our community. They are nothing more than warehouses that contain what we need. The identity of the store relies just on the signs, and not the Architecture.

2. Cut and paste facade: Signs of stores, windows and doors are chosen and pasted on to the elevations of the building. The facades have no relationship with the interior.

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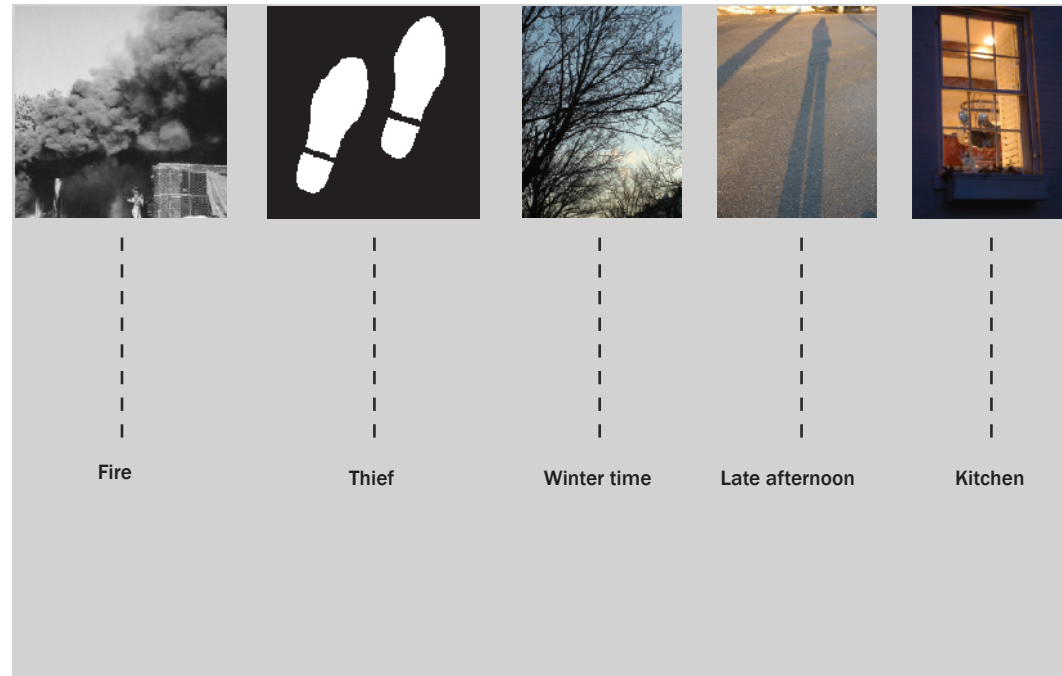
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Signs

In our daily environment, we often see conventional signs such as parking signs, store signs, toilet signs, and stop signs in order to provide necessary information to the public. Nevertheless, conventional signs do not communicate universally since the symbols and lettering carries different meanings from culture to culture. In the dictionary, signs are also defined as "a motion or gesture by which a thought is expressed or a command or wish made known." For example, when we communicate with another person, we not only use words but also body language and facial gestures to express our opinion. I believe strip malls have loudly spoken words and no gestures. My intention for this thesis is to play with gestures in order to signify different information throughout the architectural experience.

3. Conventional signs, commonly seen in streets and buildings, are direct ways of providing information and direction to the public, yet they are detached from the quality of the spaces.

* <http://www.m-w.com>



4

1sign *

Pronunciation: 'sɪn

Function: noun

Etymology: Middle English signe, from Old French, from Latin signum mark, token, sign, image, seal; perhaps akin to Latin secare to cut – more at SAW

1 a : a motion or gesture by which a thought is expressed or a command or wish made known b : SIGNAL 2a c : a fundamental linguistic unit that designates an object or relation or has a purely syntactic function d : one of a set of gestures used to represent language; also : SIGN LANGUAGE

2 : a mark having a conventional meaning and used in place of words or to represent a complex notion

3 : one of the 12 divisions of the zodiac

4 a (1) : a character (as a flat or sharp) used in musical notation (2) : SEGNO b : a character (as ÷) indicating a mathematical operation; also : one of two characters + and - that form part of the symbol of a number and characterize it as positive or negative

5 a : a display (as a lettered board or a configuration of neon tubing) used to identify or advertise a place of business or a product b : a posted command, warning, or direction c : SIGNBOARD

6 a : something material or external that stands for or signifies something spiritual b : something indicating the presence or existence of something else <signs of success> <a sign of the times> c : PRESAGE, PORTENT <signs of an early spring> d : an objective

4. Many different signs can be seen in our daily experience. Example: smoke signifying a fire: footsteps signifying a robber: trees signifying seasonal changes: shadows signifying the time of day: pots and pans signifying the type of room.

* <http://www.m-w.com>

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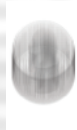


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Minka

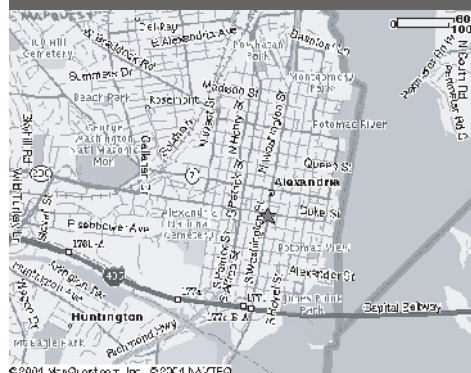
A Minka is a traditional Japanese private house. The structure, form, and detail of the Minka have developed with local habits and traditions. It is common for a carpenter to design and build a Minka, therefore the house is rich in materials and full of playful details. Many of the details not only satisfy their purpose but signify a deeper meaning to the house or the household. One example is a wooden beam at the entrance of the house which gives a clear definition of inside and the outside and creates a place where people take off their shoes. At the same time, this beam indicates the wealth of the household. It becomes an important element especially for the merchants since the entrance is the only place the customers see from the outside. In this case, the way the household presents itself in society is very humble. Japanese people use an indirect way of expressing themselves in the Architecture.

5. Agarimachi: Nakagawa, Nihon no ie.



The project for this thesis is a Bank. Many banks today are designed around the company logos and colors. These commercial signs are the primary inspiration for bank designs, thus the bank's identity in the community and people's experience through the building are weak in the designs. After all, the archaic meaning of the word, design, is "to indicate with a distinctive mark, sign, or name." My intention for this project is to explore an appropriate sign for a small bank in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, which will be named "The Trust Bank."

6. Piggy bank: In the Middle Ages, people stored money in a "clay jar". The clay it was made from was called "pygg". By the eighteen century England, the name and shape of the container had evolved to a "pig bank". Later the name evolved to "piggy bank."*
* <http://www.ideafinder.com/history/inventions/story028.htm>



The site of this project is in Alexandria, Virginia which is across the Potomac River from the District of Columbia. Old Towne Alexandria was once a major trading port in the mid-18th century. Many brick row houses and cobblestone streets still remain today. The project is located along Washington Street which, is heavily used by local traffic and two blocks South of King Street which is the main commercial street that attracts tourists all year round.



7. United States of America. Virginia. nts
8. Alexandria. nts *www.mapquest.com
9. Old Towne. nts



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10



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The project is located in an existing parking lot between an office/apartment building and a church. The site slopes up approximately 4 feet from the wide sidewalk along Washington Street to the brick wall which separates the site and a private residence in the back. There are beautiful old trees that hang over the rear wall and provide a pleasant shade in the afternoon.

In the morning, the sun shines from the rear side of the church and throughout the day moves toward the front of the church. Half of the site is shaded most of the time by the church which is on the south side of the site. As for the climate, Alexandria has generally mild winters and humid summers.



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10. South-East view towards the site
 11. East view towards the site
 12. Church elevation facing the site
 13. West view looking across the street

11



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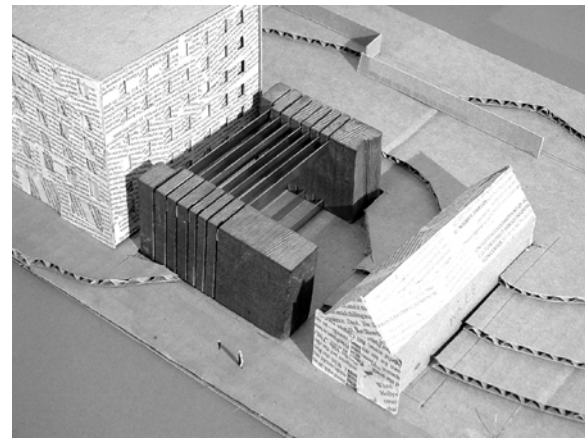
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14. Plan diagram of the concept. nts
 15. Site plan



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a The project begins with a wall which is created to protect the bank from the street. It becomes a fortress and also the face of the bank to the public.

b The second wall is created at the rear end of the site. It faces the alleyway and also the residences behind the site.

c The two walls make a spatial boundary for the bank.

d The space towards the street is dedicated to public customers.

e It is considered as an extension from the sidewalk.

f The space towards the back alley is dedicated to the bankers.

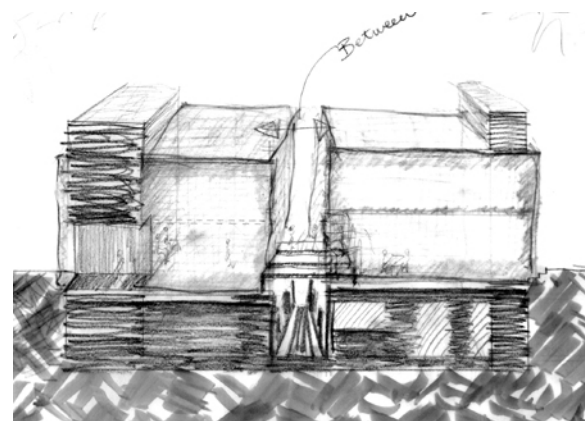
g In middle, the habitable area for the public and the bankers overlaps.

h The third wall, formed by many smaller walls, is created along the overlapping area.

i The third wall is a see-through wall that connects the side for the public and that of the bankers.

j This is where the customers and the bankers meet to make transactions.

These three walls represent the sign of security, wealth, and circulation of the bank.



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16. Concept model with site
17. Concept sketch



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18. Bank facade during the day: ATMs and the outside teller window allow activity to happen in front of the building. These activities become an indication of a sign of a bank.



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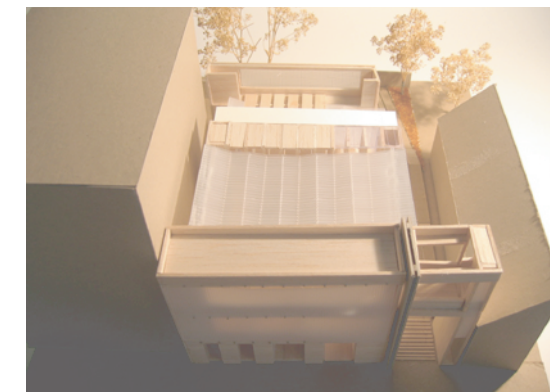
19. Bank facade in the evening: ATM niches glows to signifying what part of the building is active at off hours.

Customer's view:

- a. Washington Street carries heavy vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Locals, business workers, and tourists will visit this bank everyday.
- b. During business hours, a teller window is open to the street. The window not only allows people who are in a rush to make a transaction quickly, but also allows the banker to keep an eye on the street for security. The window behind the teller allows the customer to take a glimpse of the inside hall.
- c. There are two Automated Teller Machines on the street. These machines are purposefully placed, not straight ahead, but on the side wall of the niche. This is so that customers feel secure by knowing their backs face a wall, and to maintain a view of others waiting in line.
- d. Customers experience a spatial transition by entering the main entry door through a concrete threshold. During the summertime, the temperature of this threshold will drop from that of the sidewalk. The acoustical qualities, for example echoes of voices and footsteps, also add to the experience of the transition from the outside to the inside.
- e. Drive-through customers also experience spatial changes by the tires running over a series of small bumps. A digital information board on the driver's side provides daily stock and foreign exchange information and updated office hours of the bank.
- f. Parking spaces are indicated by differentiation in ground materials. Bricks are laid between each space, instead of drawing white lines on the asphalt. Also this brick area is slightly raised so that people will not step in a puddle on a rainy day. Customers, who park in the back, walk along the church wall to the front of the building.
- g. The drive-through teller window pushes out towards the alley when it is open, and becomes flush with the wall when it is closed to easily signify the information without using conventional open-closed signs.
- h. The vault is straight ahead when customers walk through the door. The vault door is two floors high and may be seen from the main hall, especially from the check-writing counter.
- i. The main hall is open to the third level, and it is enclosed by frosted glass panels used on side walls and the roof. This frosted glass envelope provides the main hall a different atmosphere depending on the color of the sky and also creates silhouettes of the activity outside. The brick floor material in the main hall is the same as that of the sidewalk in order to extend the public space into the customer's side of the building. A wooden board is hung from the beams above to create swing-like benches for customers to wait in line.
- j. As mentioned earlier in the series of diagrams, half of the space is dedicated to the public and the other half to the bankers. The customers make their transactions with the bankers where the two spaces meet. The three teller spaces are on bridges that connect the main public hall and the banker's working area. Each bridge is made intimate with solid walls on both sides and small lamps that softly light the counters.

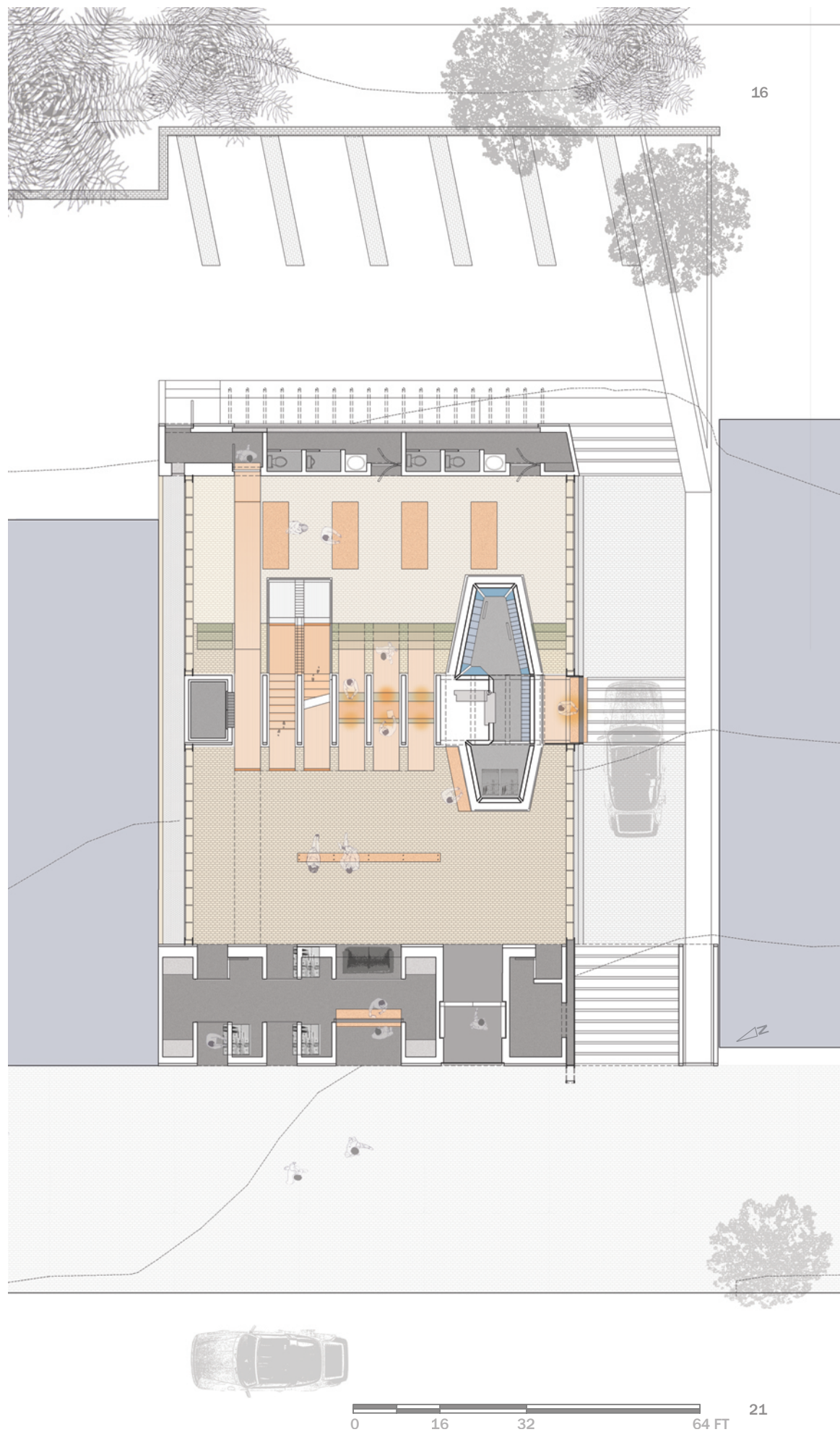
Banker's view:

- A. People who work for the bank have different perspectives in terms of inhabiting the building. Bankers walk towards the small door at the back facade, either by taking the steps or by using the sloped walkway along the wall. Then, they walk through two doors.
- B. After going through the second door, bankers are on a path, as the yellow brick road from the Wizard of Oz although the path is a wooden one in this bank. This path leads the bankers to the elevator hall, the staircase, and continues on to the upper floors.
- C. When the bankers greet the customers, they take a few steps down the milky glass steps, which are textured for them not to slip with their working shoes. The steps have different depths so that each step makes a different tonal sound. The same play happens in staircases. The floor level of the banker's side is higher than the main public hall due to the sloped nature of the site, yet also becomes an advantage for bankers to observe the customers.



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20. Model: Bird eye view
21. Street level plan



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0 16 32 64 FT

Customer's view:

a. Customers who own a safe deposit box will be escorted by a banker to the floor below the main hall. After they arrive at this level via stairs or elevator, they will see the vault door at the end of the path. The granite tiles are embedded into the brick floor as a path so that the clear foot steps give a rhythm to the procession to the vault. Light pass through between the bridges above and adds to the rhythm.

b. The interior space of the vault is two floors high and various sizes of safe deposit boxes fill all the walls. The banker enters the number of the customer's box into a machine which lights up the specific box. The banker then moves the sliding ladder to the indicated box and takes the box out for the customer.

c. The safety deposit box maybe views in a private room with a narrow counter. The counter extrudes out of the sliding door where the customer may slide in their box for the banker to return to the vault. The room is kept dim except where small lamps light the surface of the counter. The light indicates whether the room is in use or not.

Banker's view:

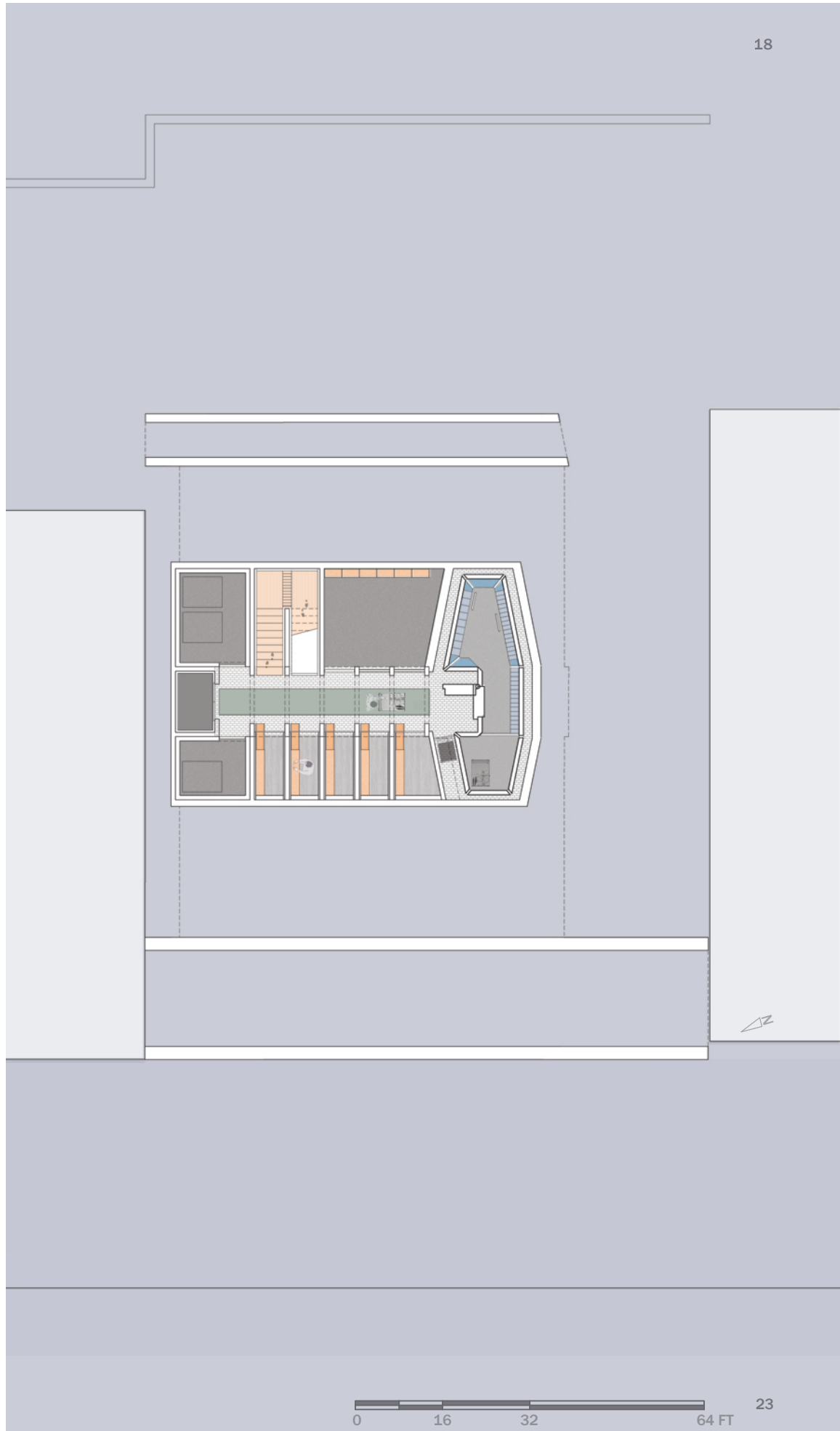
A. The banker may store documents in this space. It is a secondary vault and also a reference library for the workers.

B. The money from of the bank is kept in the smaller room of the vault. There is a grill door between that and the safety deposit boxes. The shape of the vault signifies stability and a jewel-like presence in the building. Solid steel panels are bolted together at corners with a slice of glass in between. The light passes through the gap and indicates the thickness of the walls.



22

22. Model: Vault
23. Below street level plan



0 16 32 64 FT

Customer's view:

a. Customers will be escorted up to the second level for any personal meetings with the banker. They may take the wooden staircase or the elevator and walk across the floating path which is an extension from the lower level.

b. The private rooms have carpet floors to absorb the sound waves of their voices and foot steps. There are windows along the exterior wall and another layer of screen of chain mail. Bankers and customers may look down to the street, yet will not be viewed from the street. The desk of the banker extends through the wall and makes a pocket which is open from the hall into the room. This expression signifies the activity in the room and also allows other bankers to drop off papers without interrupting the meeting.

Banker's view:

A. File cabinets are located on the south side of the walls so that the customers do not see them upon entering the bank. The balcony extrudes out towards the main hall so that the bankers area is not secluded from the public. It is visually yet not physically approachable.

B. The desk layouts are designed according to the lines of electric outlets, air supplies, and light fixtures which are all located between wooden floor panels.

C. In Japanese, this space is called the Engawa. It is typically an intermediate space between the outside and the inside of the private residence. Engawa is traditionally a multi-purpose space where people read their news papers, enjoy the weather or chat with neighbors. This is also a multi-used space for the bankers. It is designed so that the bankers are able to take a short break and enjoy the rear view. The low bookshelves which may also be used as a bench separate the work area and the Engawa. The windows have a layer of chain mail on the outside for the purpose of security and privacy.

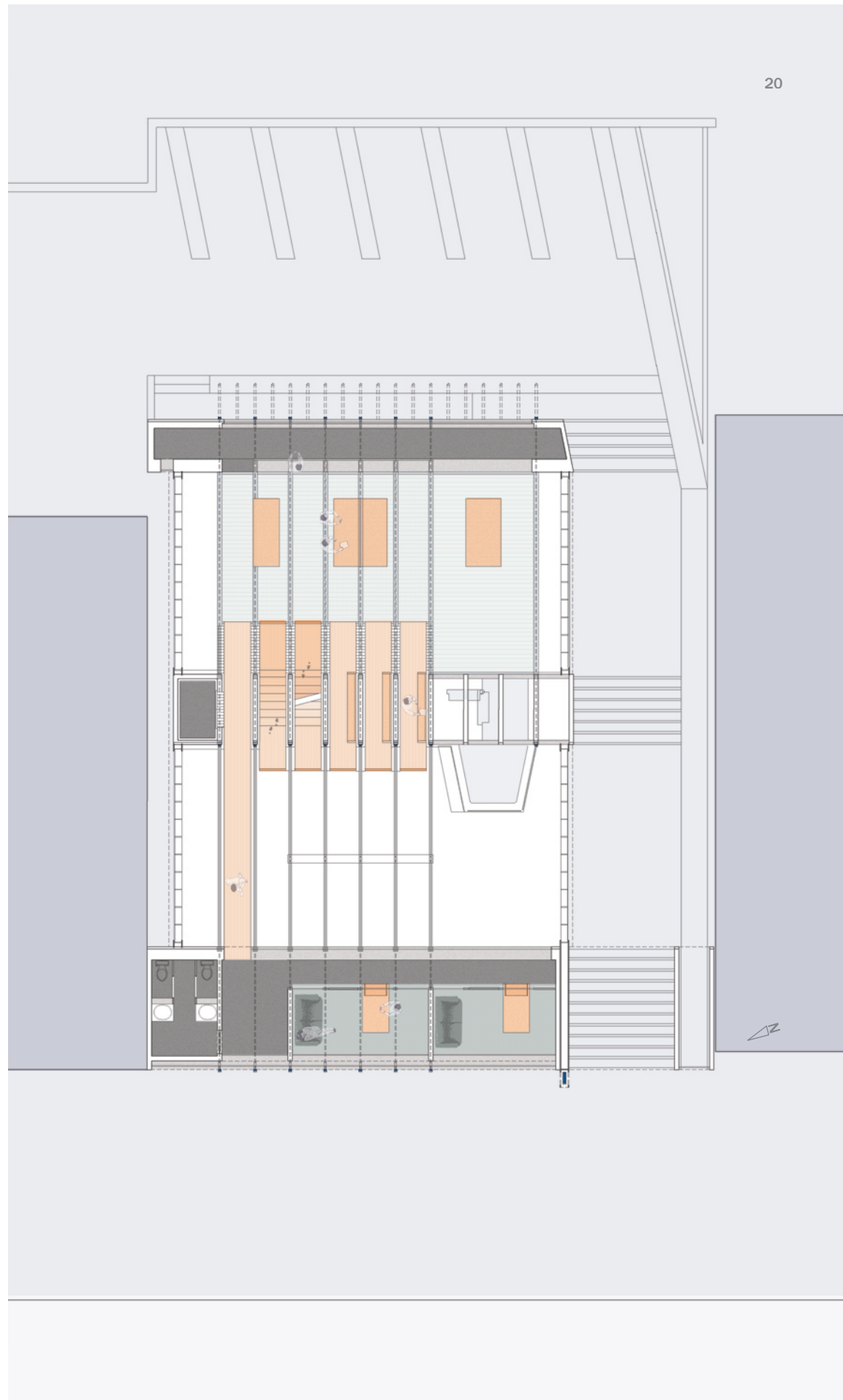
D. Copy machines may be placed in this niche so that the sun does not fade the papers.

E. Bankers may take a look down to the vault level from this area.

F. The low wall contains shelves for reference books. This area allows the manager of the bank to maintain a view of all activities in the building.



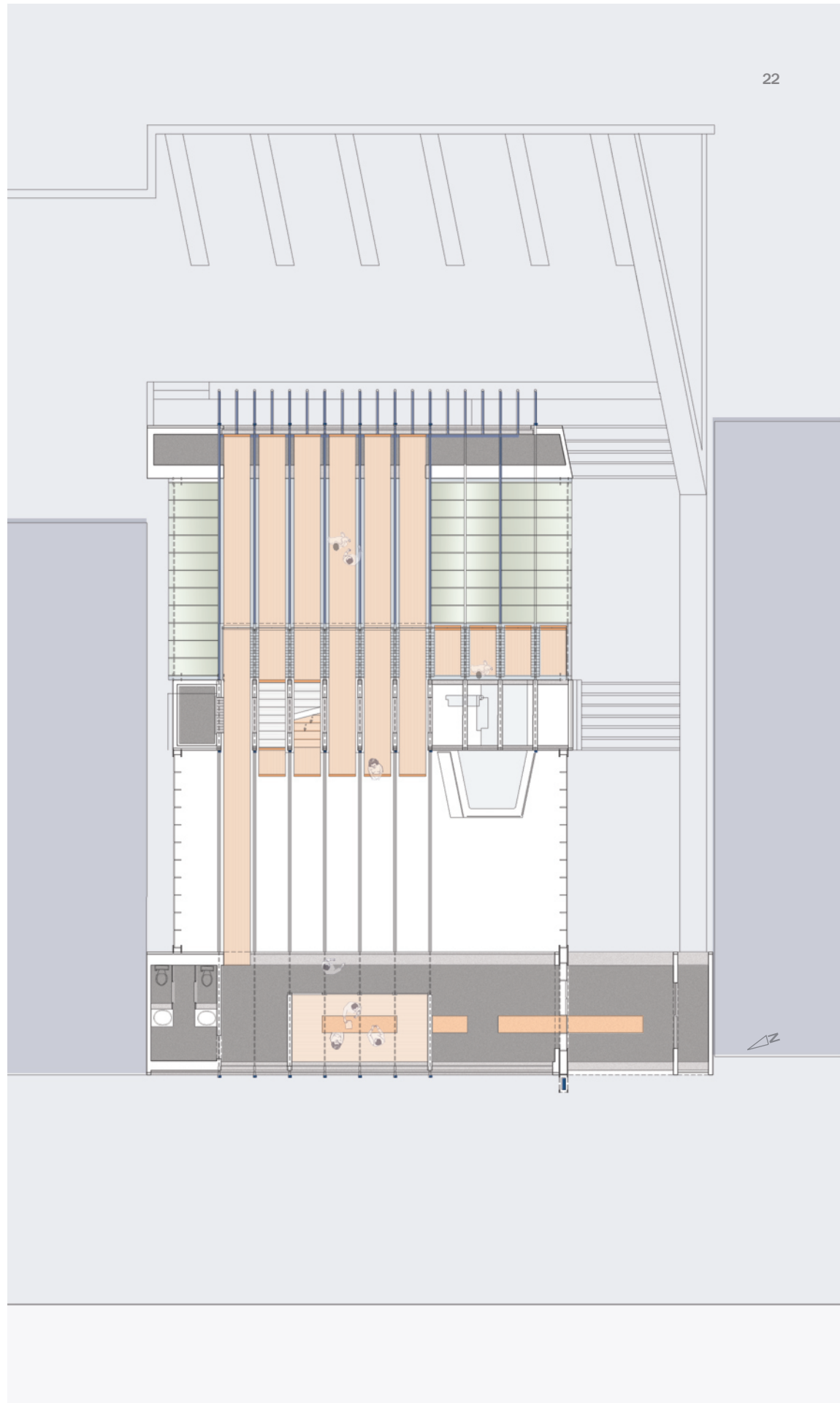
24. Model: Main hall
25. Second level plan



Banker's view:

- A. The floor of the meeting room is carpet in order to reduce noise.
- B. The bankers may eat, chat, and relax in this area. When the weather is pleasant, they may choose to eat their lunches outside and enjoy watching people pass by below them. The third level is dedicated to special events to inspire the bank officials to promote cultural events, social gatherings, and public lectures.
- C. This space may be used as a gallery to possibly show local artist's works or historical artifacts of the bank.
- D. The large deck extends out to give office workers the chance to enjoy the weather while working.





0 16 32 64 FT 27

Banker's view:

A. The main public hall is enclosed by a frosted glass roof. Panels of glass are slightly angled to shed the rain water, which is then taken down towards the back of the building.

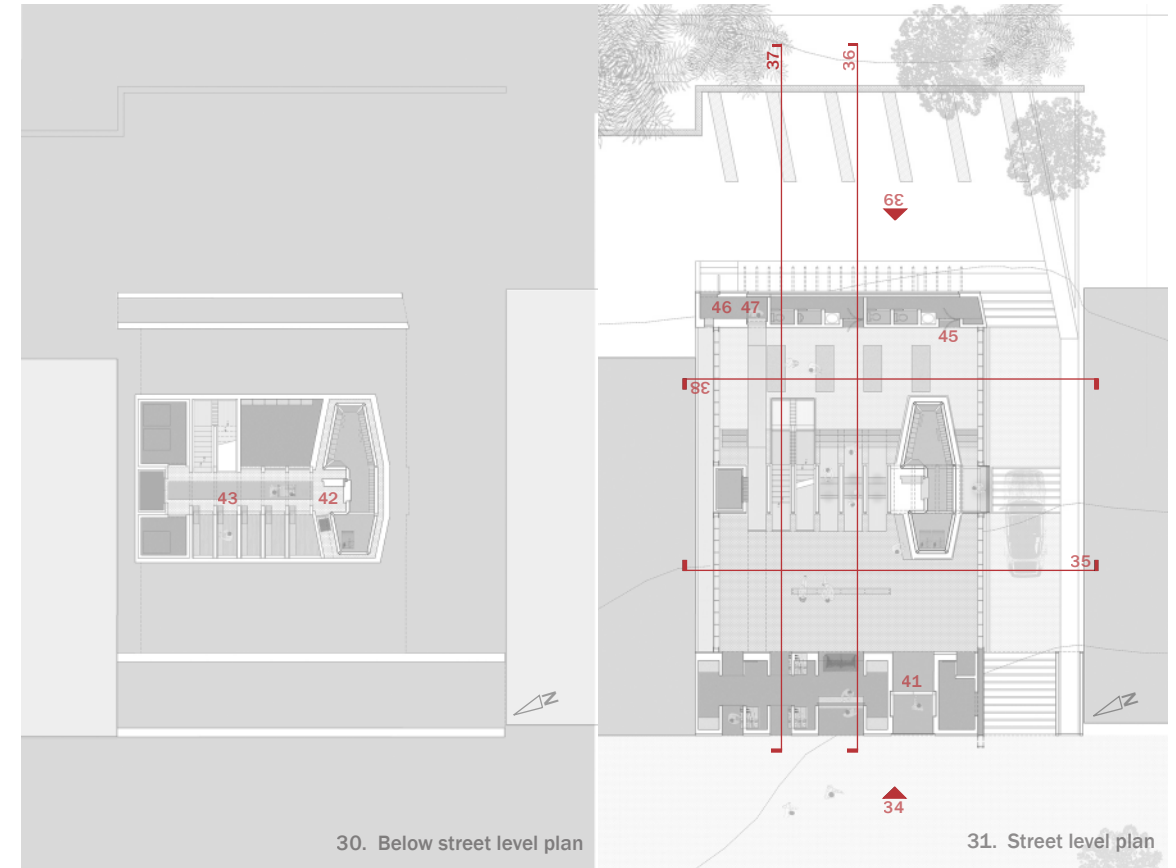
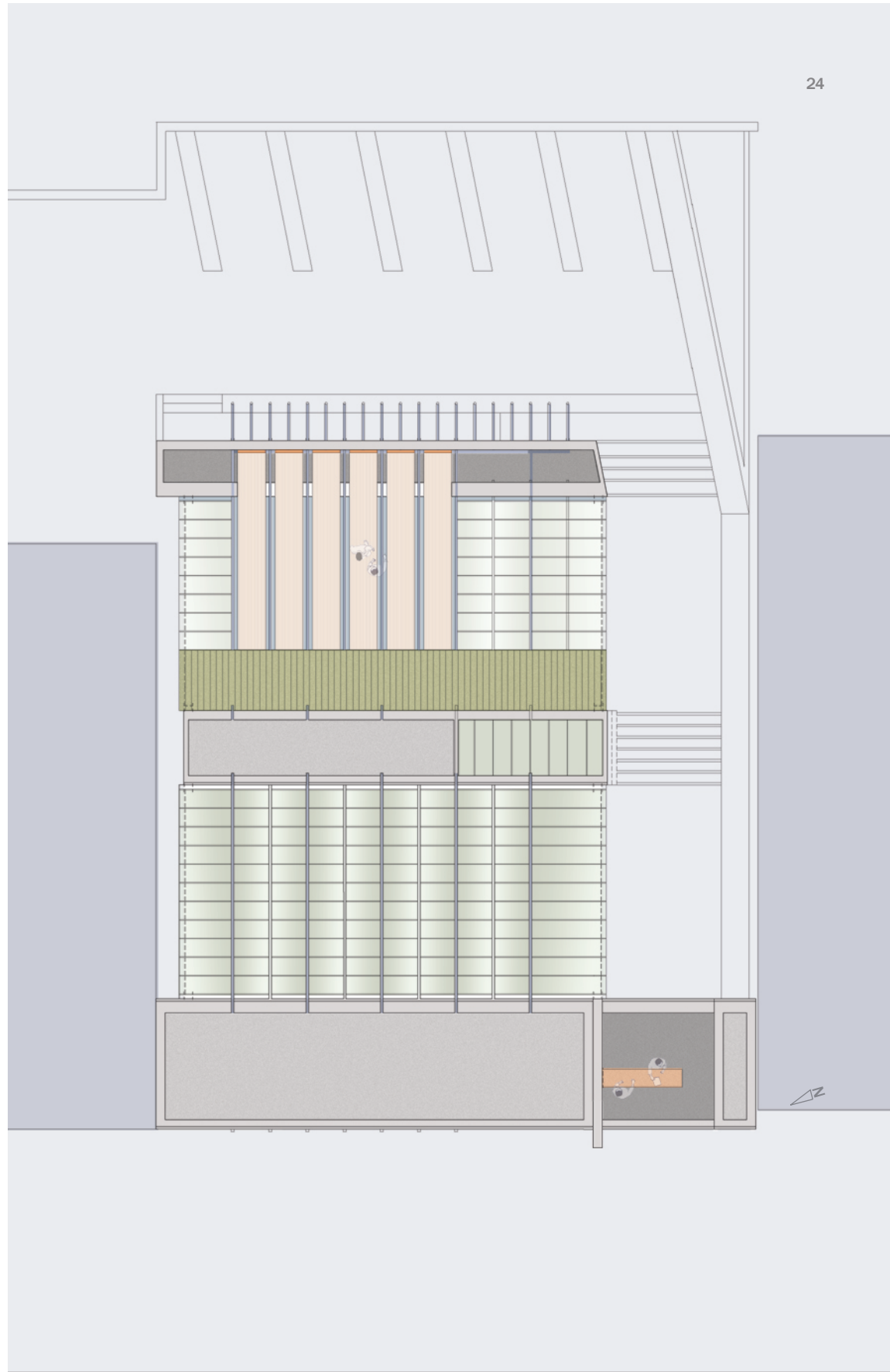
B. The roof over the vault is also frosted glass, which allows light to penetrate down to all lower levels.

C. The canopy is copper panels which lightly hang over the gallery.

D. The gutters extend out to from the rear facade to allow rain water to trickle down to add a playful gesture to a gloomy wet day.

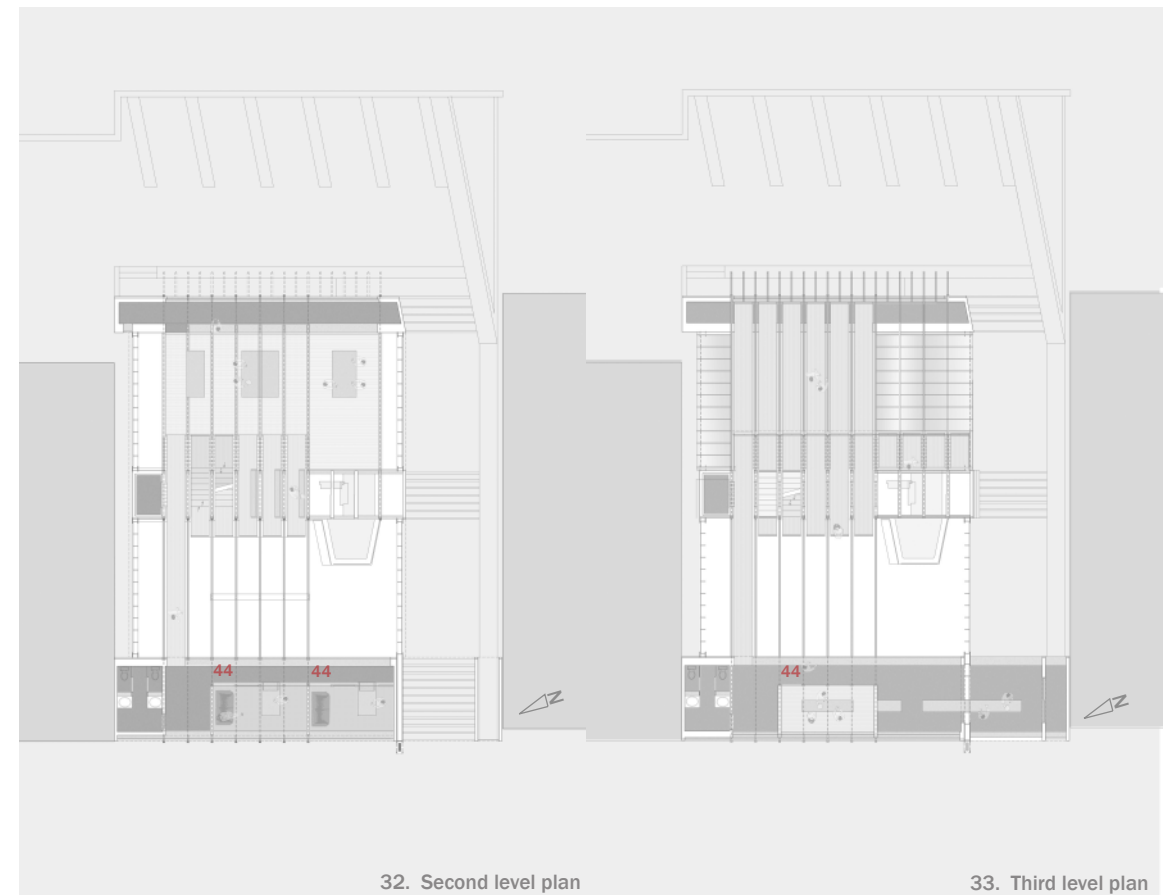


28. Model: Rear view
29. Roof plan



30. Below street level plan

31. Street level plan



32. Second level plan

33. Third level plan