

# Filled With Absence:

## Spaces for Mourning

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Architecture

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Spaces for Mourning

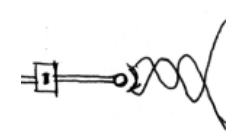
Gregory Scott Hirschmann

## Abstract

Long ago the stories common to men were clearly present in their architecture. Sculpture, mosaics, paintings, stained-glass windows, all blatantly told the beginning, the morals, the epics, and future of humanity. Today these elements have all but disappeared along with the stories that they told. One story still common to humanity is the act of death, transcending culture, nationality, or creed.

The pages to follow disclose an architecture for the emotional state of mourning. The seven spaces of this architecture exist in three dimensions:

the narrative,



the emotive,



and sacred.



## Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the help of several people. I would like to thank my committee members for countless hours of mind opening discussion about architecture, encouragement to present the best work possible, and fine-tuned critical eyes. I would like to thank my parents for all the support they have given me up to this point in my career. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife for her love, encouragement, and understanding during the completion of this work.

*“That night by the forest Boullée had an uncanny sense about himself, about the silent partner that every mortal carries within, and about the unending nothingness that each person will become. It appeared to him in the form of his shadow and then in the shadows of the entire forest.”*

Richard A. Etlin, “Symbolic Space”

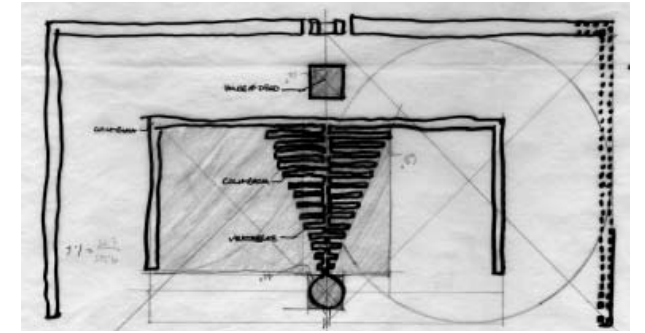
The contents of this thesis book were created under the impression that there are still some stories common to all men.



# Contents

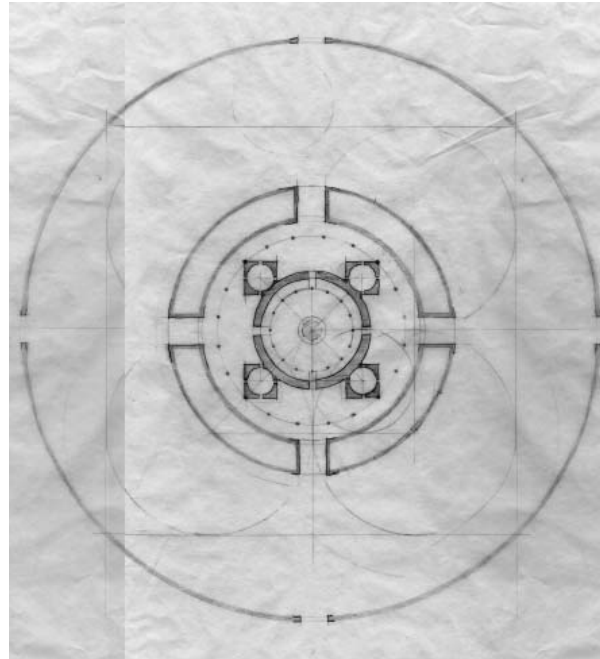
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Architecture can support a ritual by addressing a few key elements. While primarily responsible for space, architecture can also operate with allegories and metaphors to generate a narrative. This is the narrative dimension.



## Introduction

A rite is a prescribed form or manner governing the words or actions of a ceremony. Few true rites still remain in our society. Rituals exist today in the institutions of death, marriage, and possibly birth.



The backdrop for a ritual is architecture and architecture must support the ritual it envelopes. Spatially this begins with a center and a perimeter and by delineating the sacred and profane.

Secondly, the character of the space supporting a ritual, singularly or as a sequence of spaces, can assist an emotional response if thoughtfully executed. This is the emotive dimension.



Lastly, a ritual that is supported by well designed architectural space can sometimes present aspects of life that are otherwise intangible. This is the sacred dimension.



## Architecture of Mourning

One ritual that is important to humanity is that of mourning. Mourning, beginning in the pain of loss, allows a person to find a way from grief to healing. I propose the architecture that compliments mourning and burial rites should incorporate weight, light, and shadow.

Weight is complimented in darkness and earthbound mass (representing the pain of grief). Mass is less typical in architecture found in the United States of America. The embodied energy in concrete and stone work for example, far outweigh that which is more typically found in plastic, metal, and glass. Mass links us with something more permanent and timeless. This also affects how sound travels in a space and tells the ear what is solid and what is flimsy.



The above image displays weight. This mass is located in Sherwood Memorial Park in Salem, Virginia and holds the remains of deceased.

Hope appears as the light in the darkness. While darkness is important to the weight, light is equally important to mourning. Light which cuts through darkness can control views, highlight, and focus attention.



The above image displays a characteristic of light in Sherwood Memorial Park.

Mystery resides in the deliberate shadows and compliments an architecture of mourning. Shadow which is only possible with light, shows an alternate form of reality. While shadow reveals what is real, it also conceals and creates mystery. Shadow can hide the profane.



The above image displays a characteristic of shadow in Sherwood Memorial Park. Here the shadow hides the joinery of the timber to the stone wall.

Architecture which poorly compliments the rite of mourning often ignores these aspects (weight, light, and shadow). In the name of efficiency these thoughtless constructions contradict dignity and monumentality.



Above is a cemetery in Christiansburg, VA. The precinct is ineffectively separated from the outside world by an inadequate row of trees.



This is another image of the cemetery in Christiansburg, VA. This building lacks the weight, light, and shadow.



In this work, mourning is seen as seven distinct spaces arranged along a central path. The mourners and the deceased, taking a similar path, will take part in filling these spaces. There is a "world above" and a "world below". The world above is for the mourners. The world below is for the body. The two worlds intersect in the seventh space listed below which is the only exception.

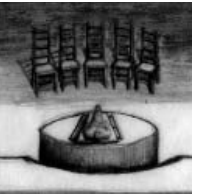
1. A space for the mourners to depart from everyday life.



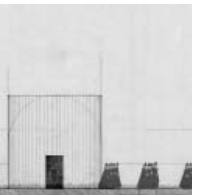
2. A space for mourners to gather



3. A space for the mourners to meet with the body.



4. A space for a procession of mourners and the deceased



5. A space for the body of mourners to commit the body of the deceased to the crematorium



6. A space for mourners to reconnect with everyday life



7. A space for the mourner to revisit the memory of the deceased





An early study of the presence and character of the crematorium on a hill in the Blue Ridge Mountains.



Site

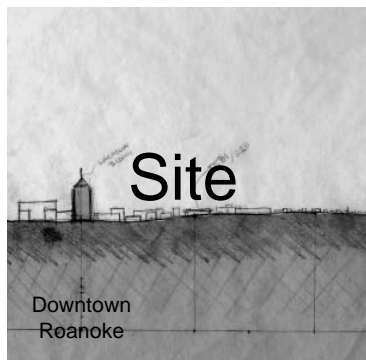
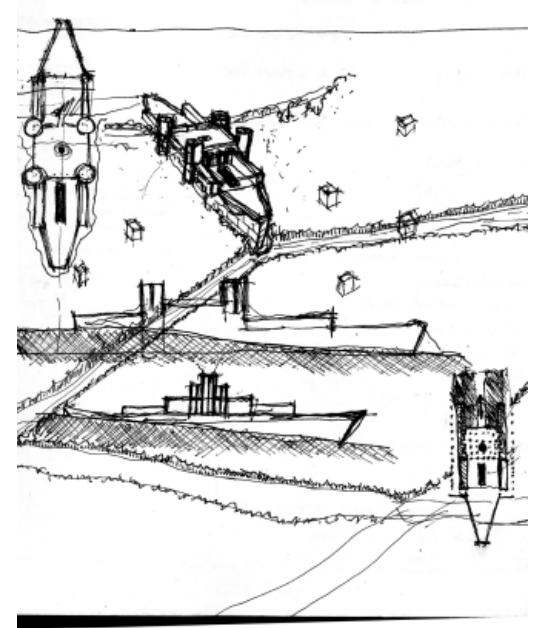
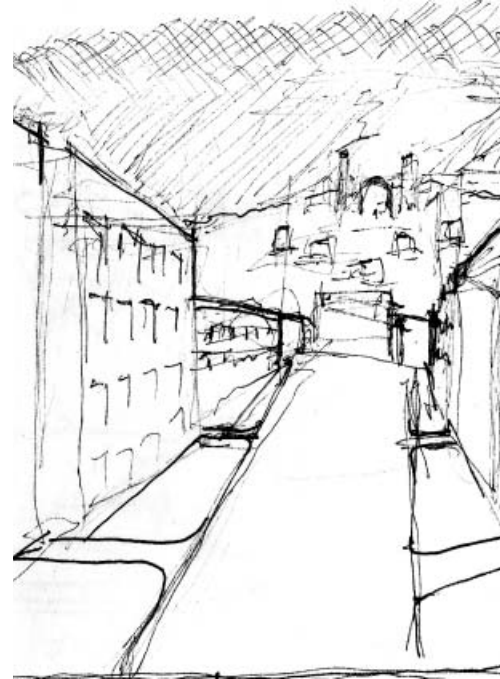
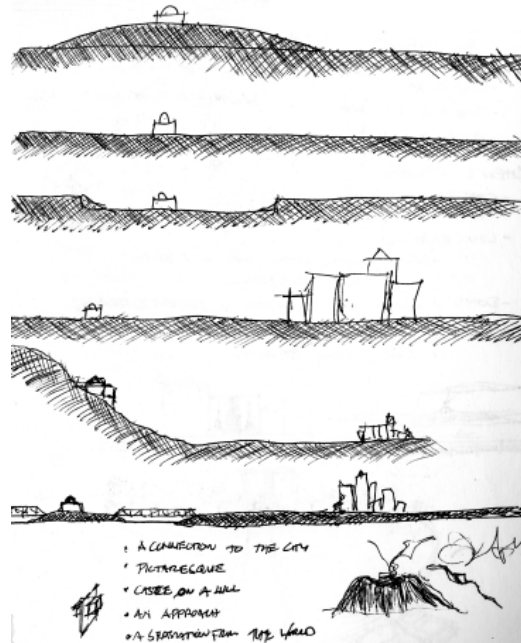


**Left:** A series of sketches deciding the terrain and relationship with the city.

**Middle:** An early version of the building as viewed from the city streets.

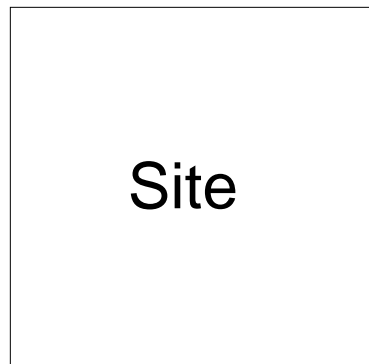
**Right:** An early idea of how the building would reach out into the landscape.

**Bottom:** A scale site section from the Wachovia building in downtown Roanoke to the crematorium on Read Mountain.





A sketch showing the final intention of the building's relationship to the town. The crematorium sits high above, in full view of the town.





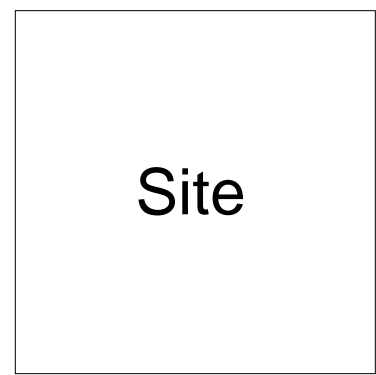
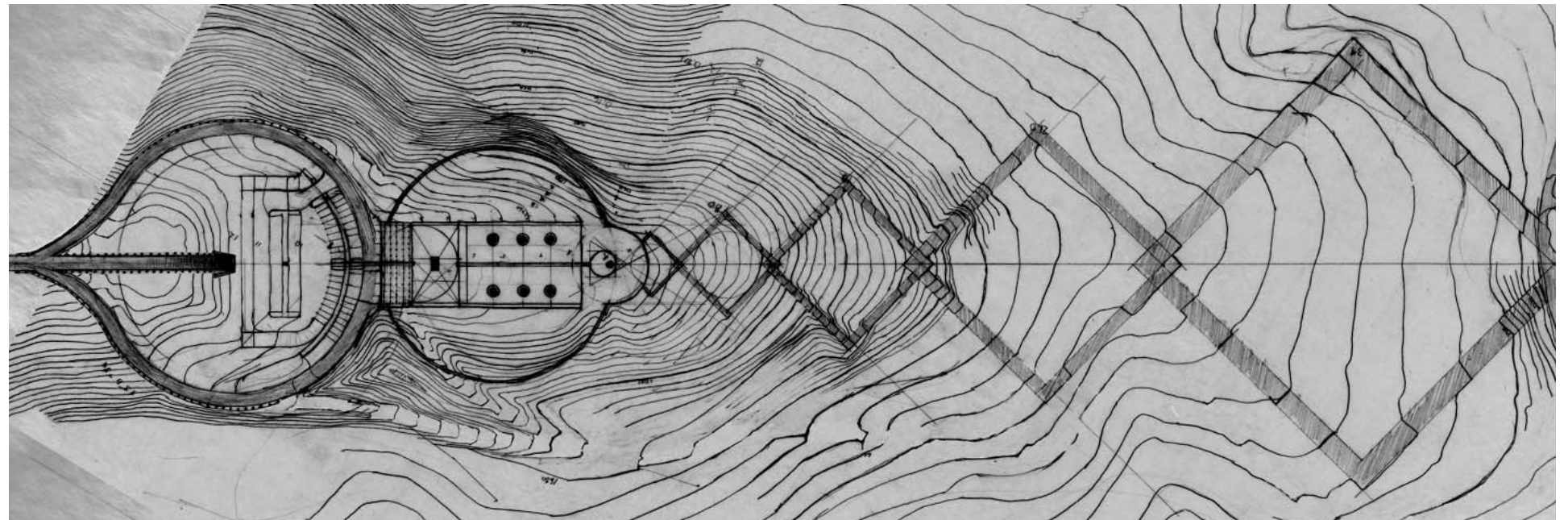
The crematorium sits just below the highest point of Read Mountain. Along this ridge there is a gentle slope change and to either side of the ridge the hill drops off dramatically. The building is organized along this ridge which points southwest toward the city of Roanoke.



Site

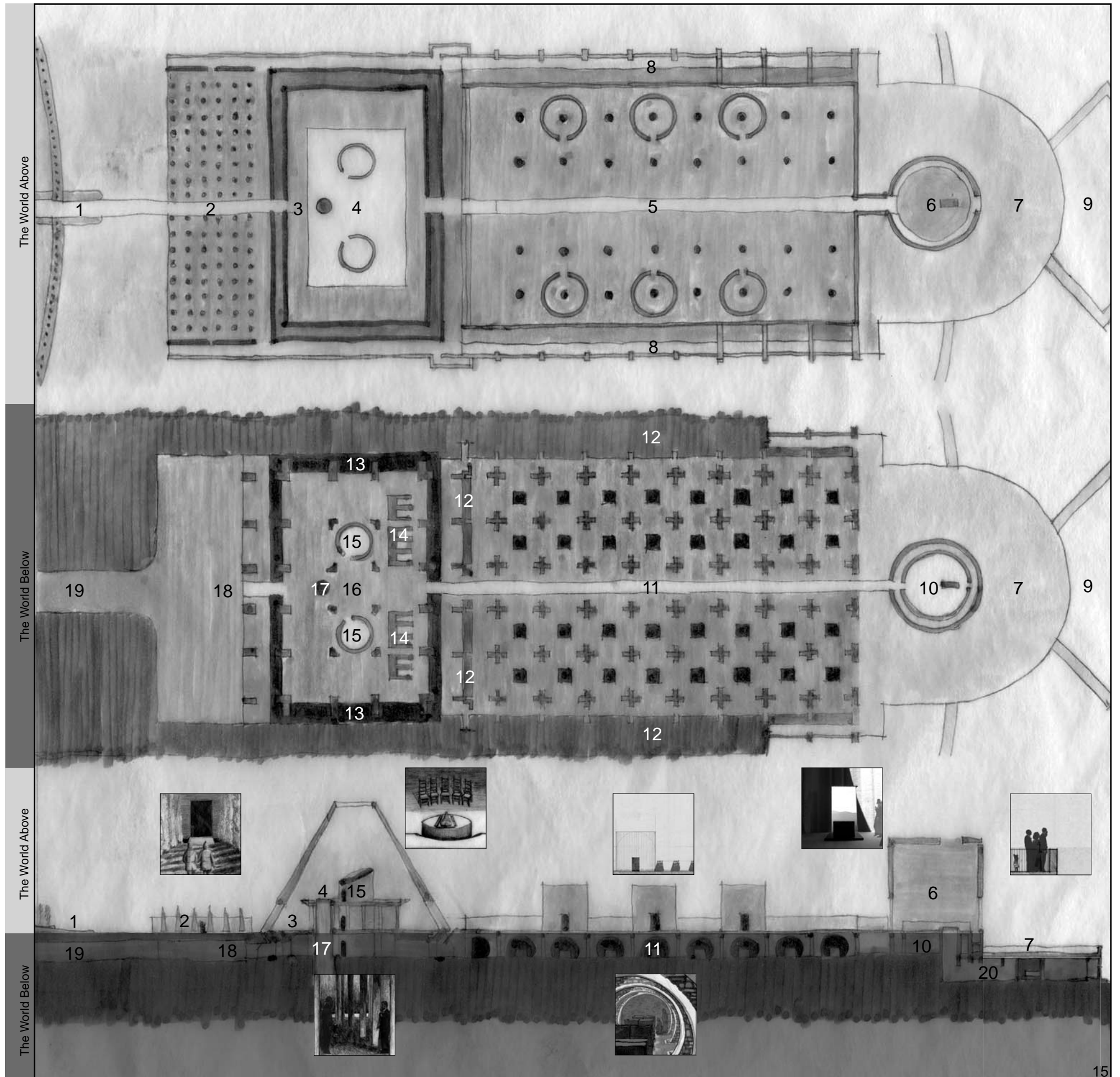


Cropped view of the site plan. The parking lot exists inside the circle to the left. Mourners follow a path to the right through the progression of spaces. Two paths form diamonds in the landscape, starting at the point of committal of the body amplifying it down the hill to the overlook of the Blue Ridge



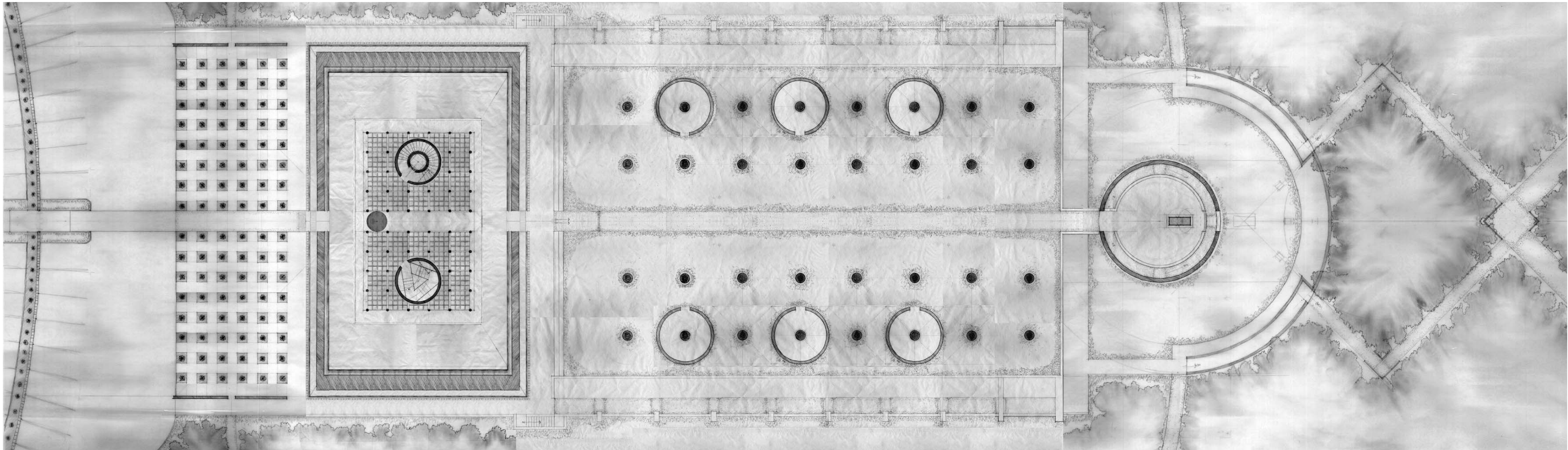
# Building Key

1. Passenger drop-off, driveway, parking
2. Forecourt
3. Entry level hypostyle hall; mourners will meet here upon arrival
4. Sanctuary space for the assembly of mourners
5. Field precinct for procession of mourners; surrounded by eight foot high concrete walls
6. Chapel for committing the body to ceremonial crematorium (shown in Section; "20")
7. Terrace
8. Ramps for the return to parking
9. Pathways into the woods and down the hill
10. Room for the receiving of the cremains
11. Crypt for family tombs (cubes)
12. Walls for cremains of individuals
13. Moat
14. Non-ceremonial ovens
15. Circulation towers
16. Waiting room
17. Body elevator
18. Receiving area for body
19. Tunnel for automobiles; to the roadway
20. Ceremonial crematorium



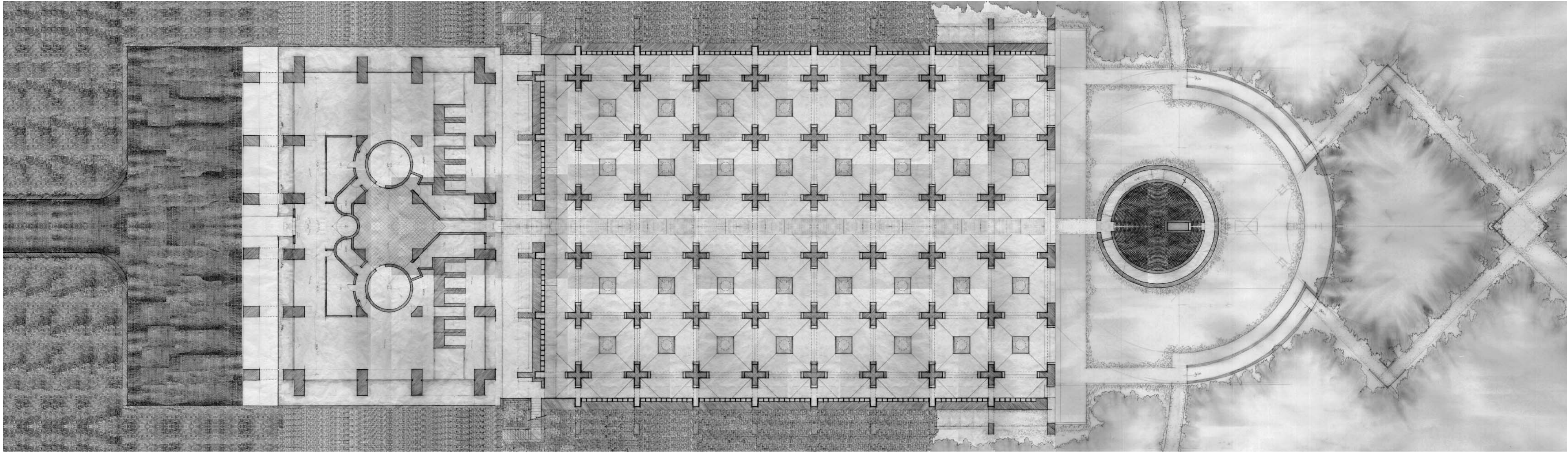


The World  
Above



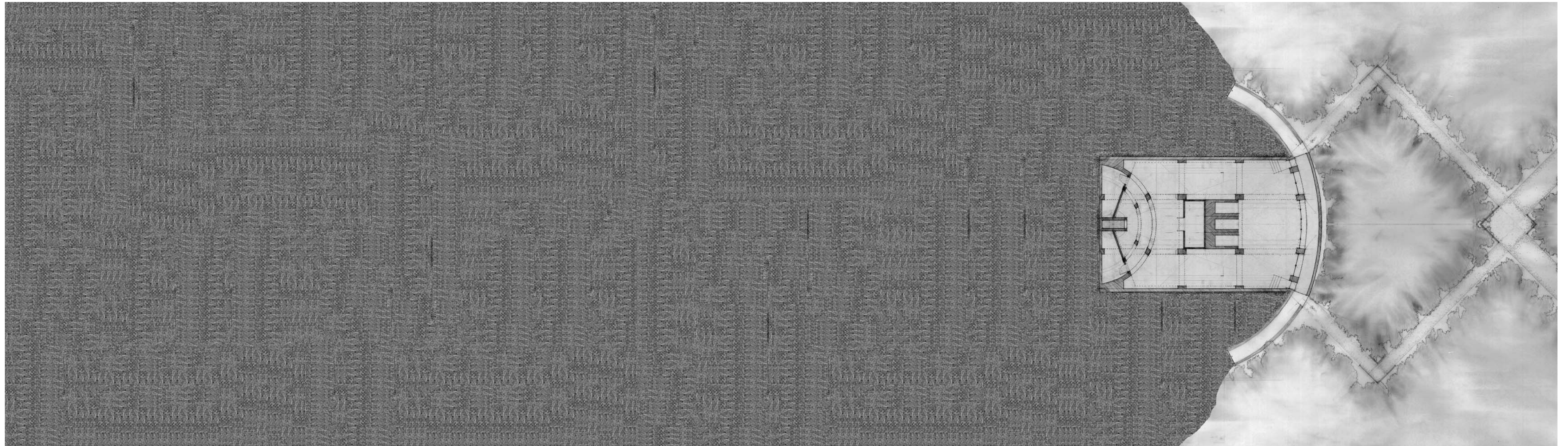
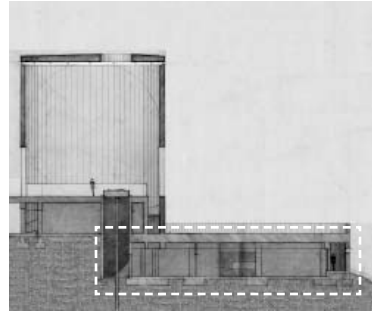


The World  
Below

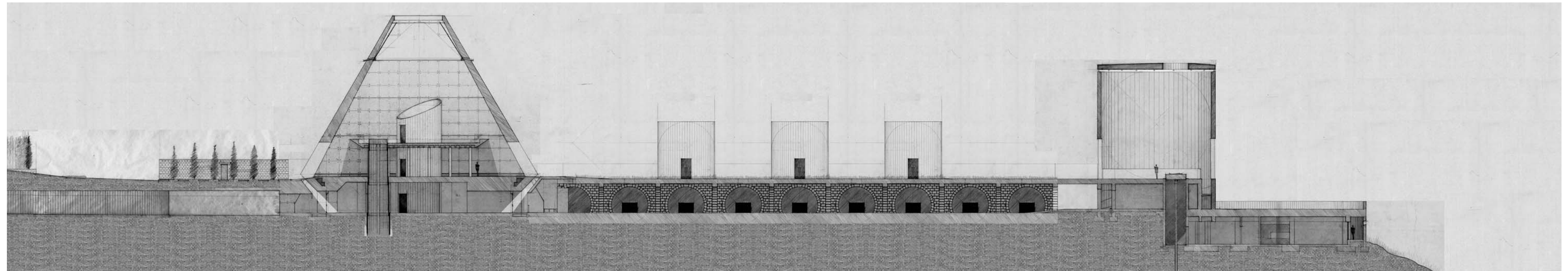




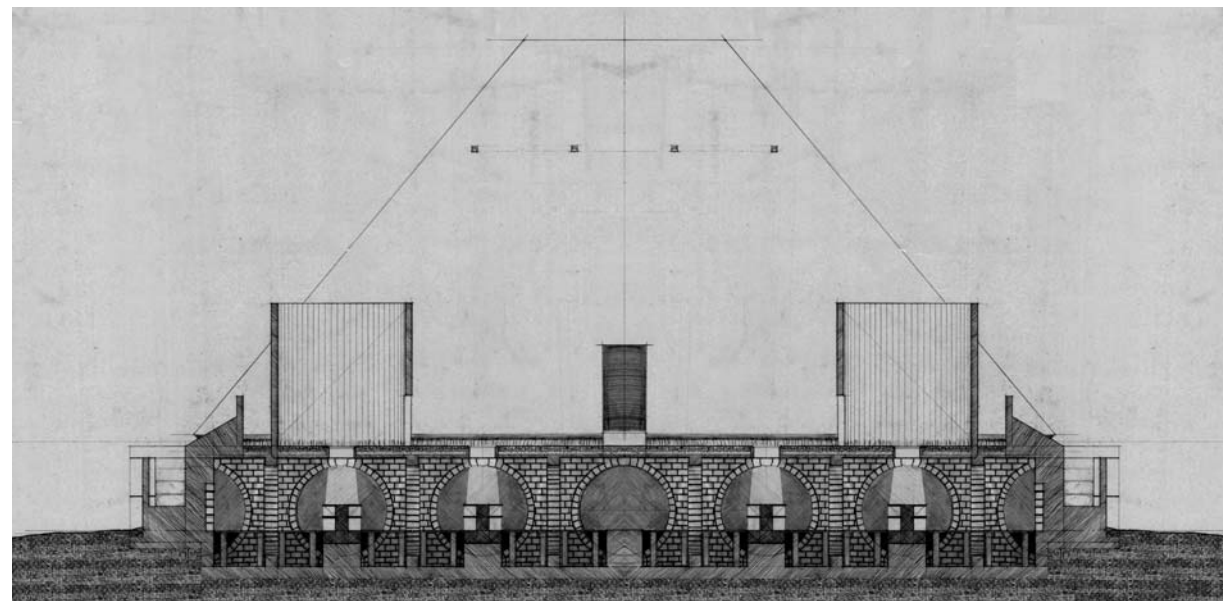
Lower  
Ceremonial  
Crematorium



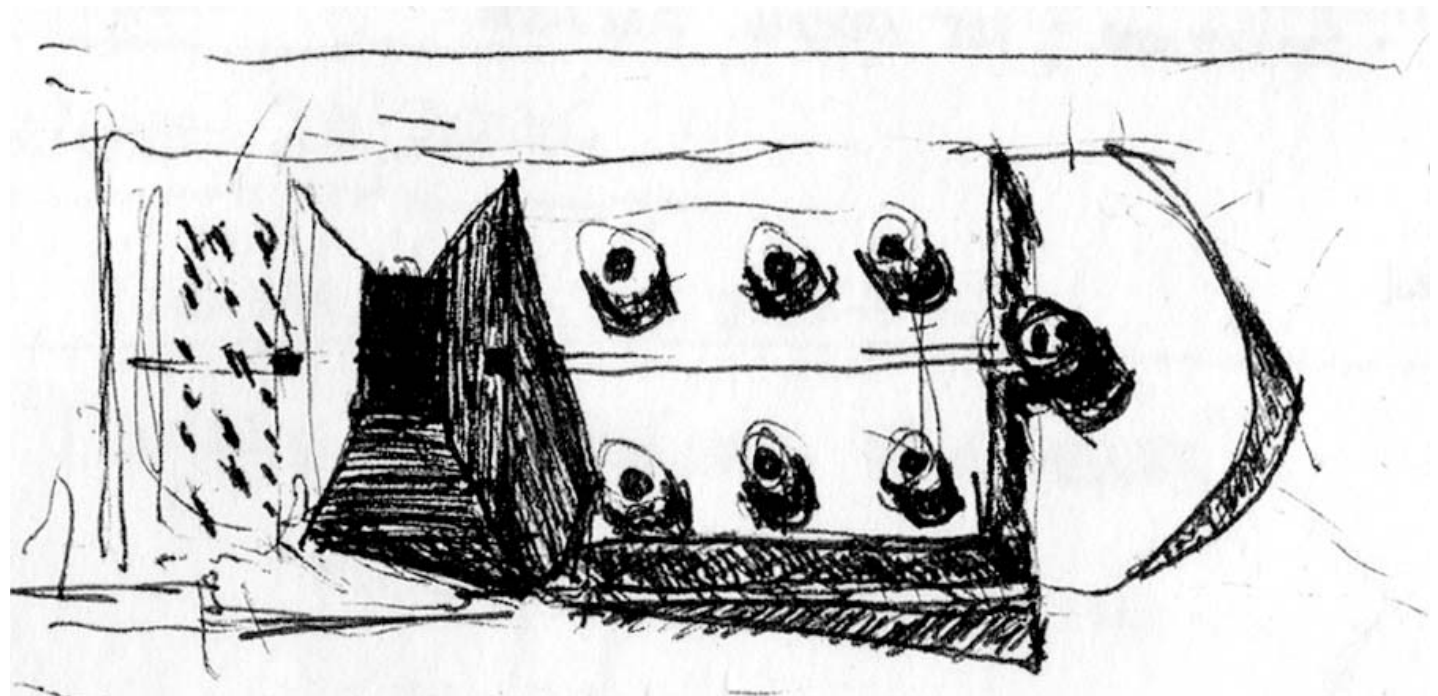
North East to  
South West  
Longitudinal  
Section



# North West to South East Transverse Section





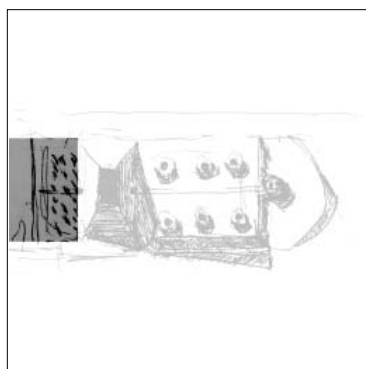
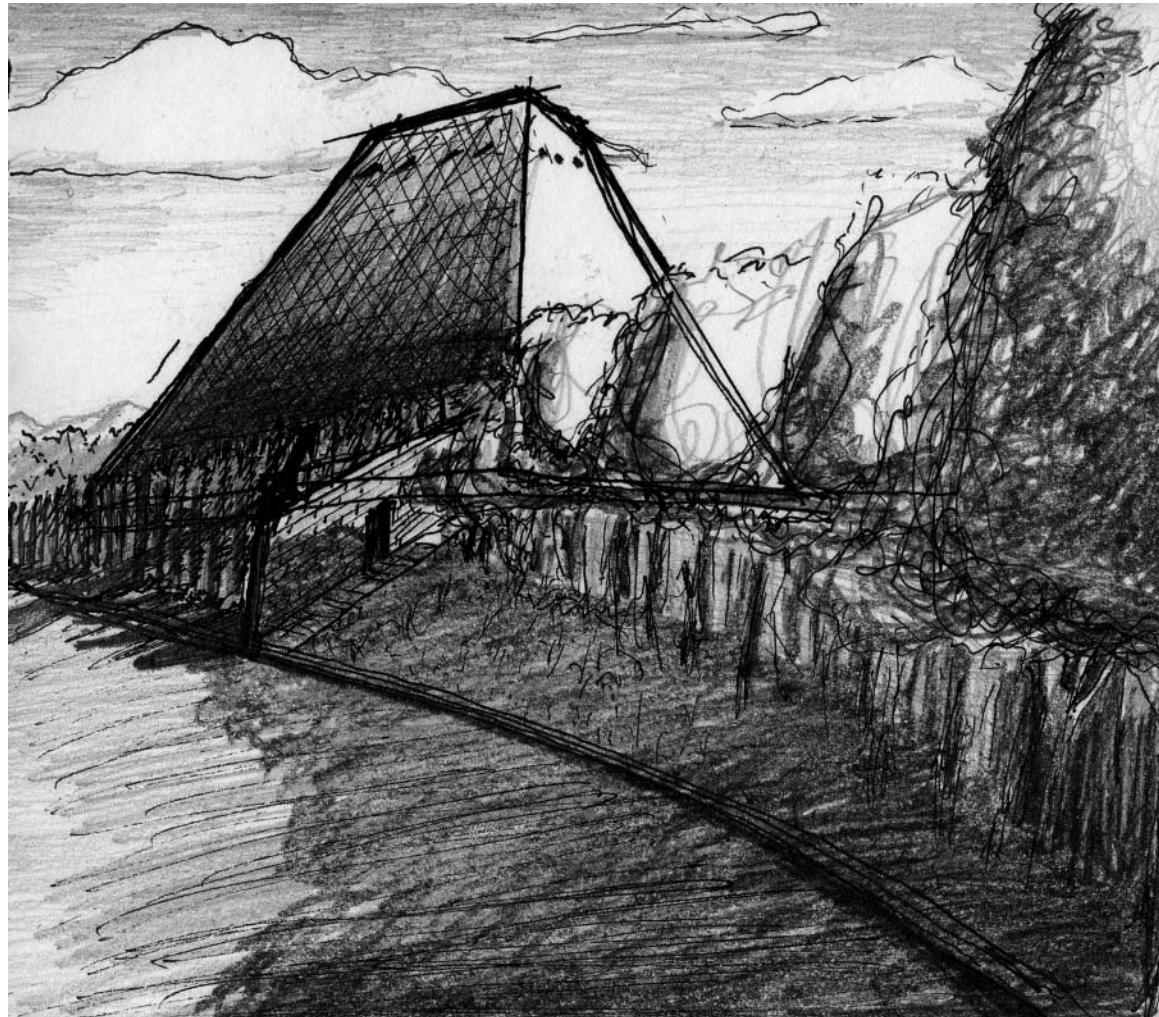


**Spaces for Mourning:**  
As Found in a Crematorium in Southwest Virginia

# 1 Forecourt

Mountain

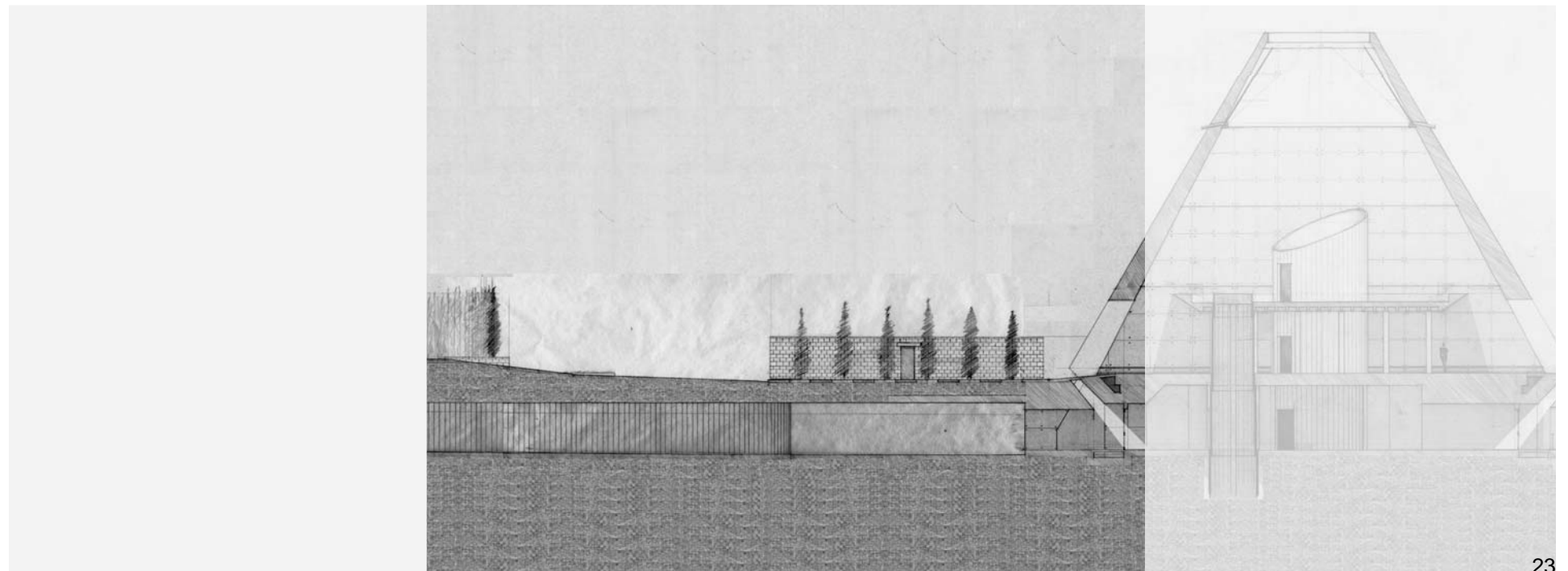
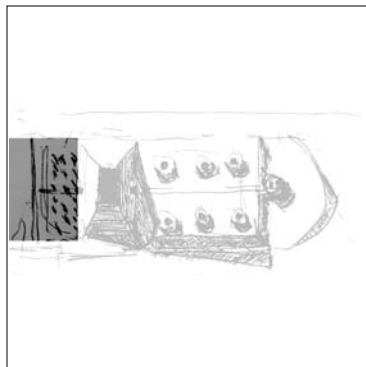
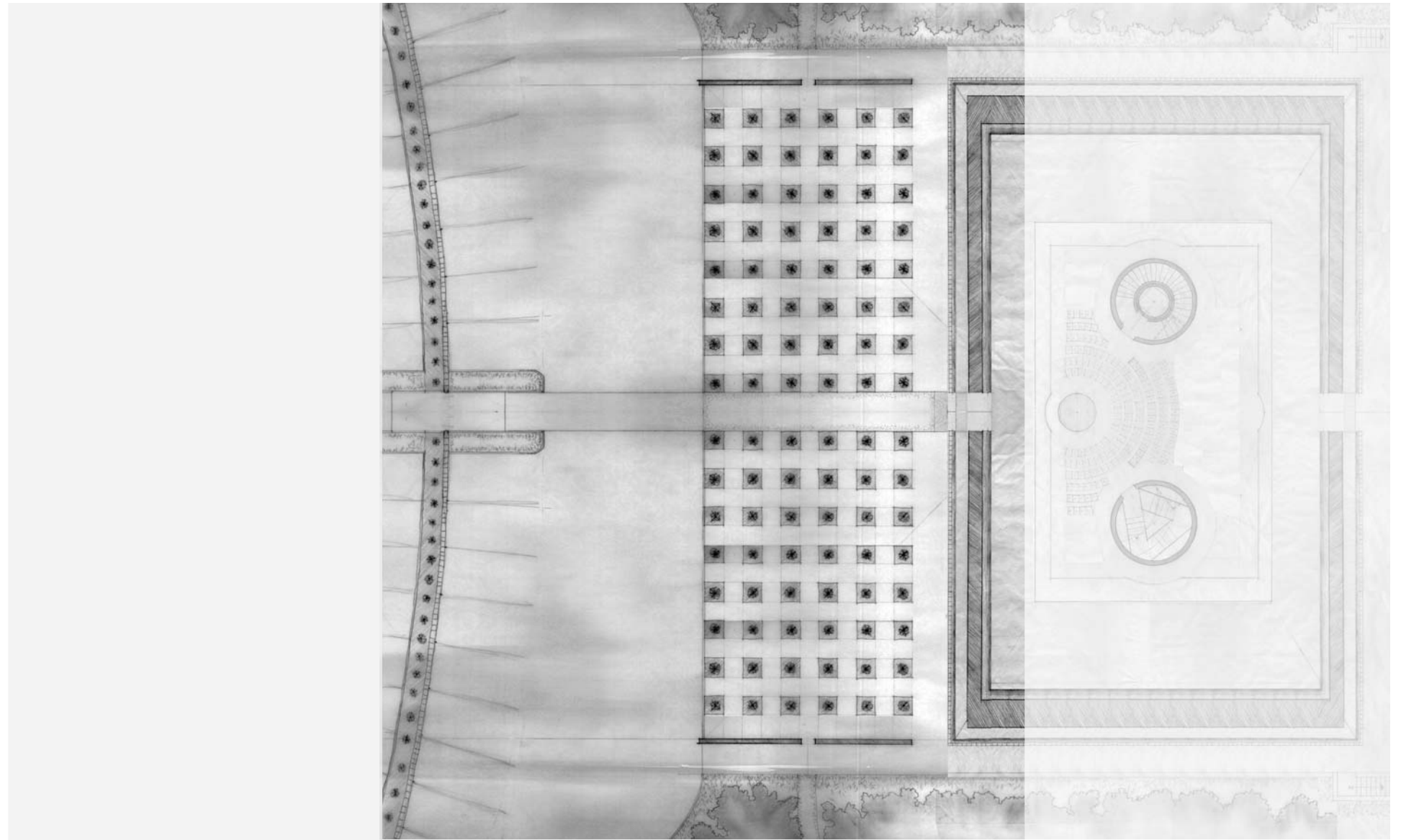
This is a sketch of the approach to the crematorium from the driveway.



# 1 Forecourt

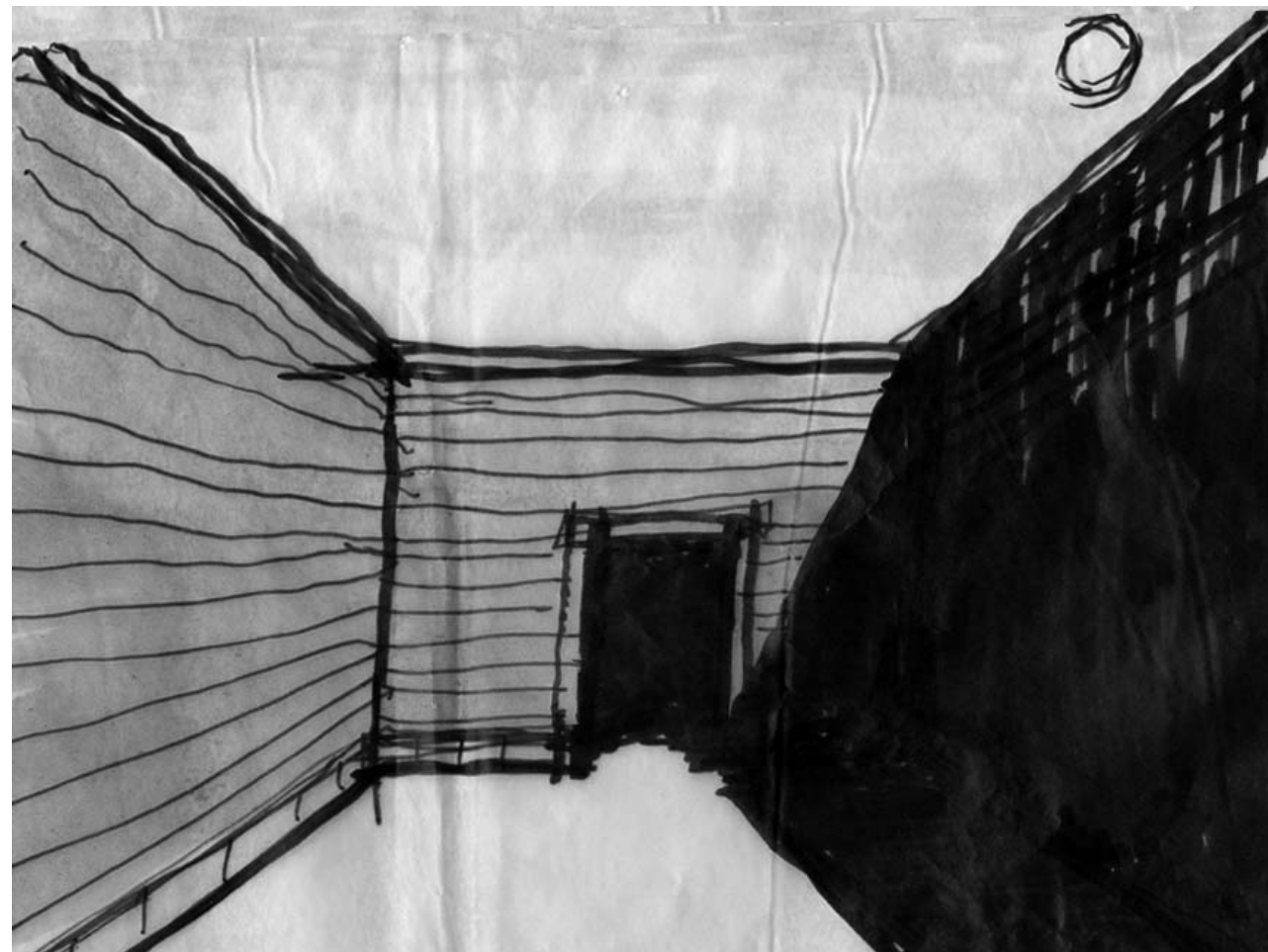
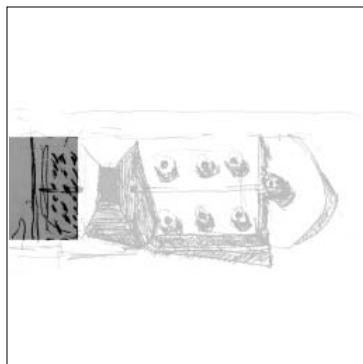
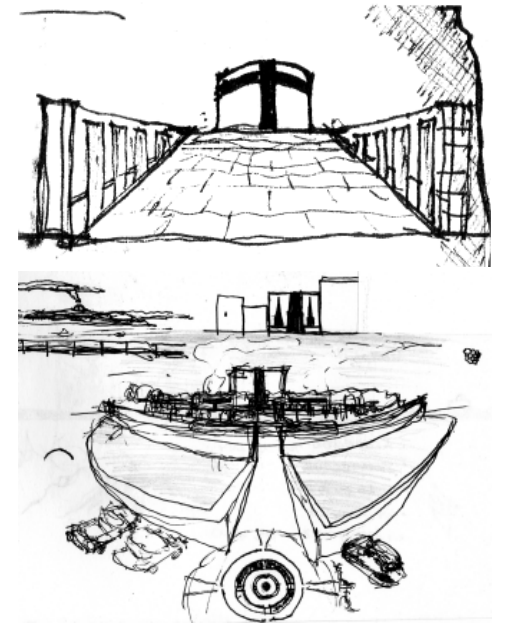
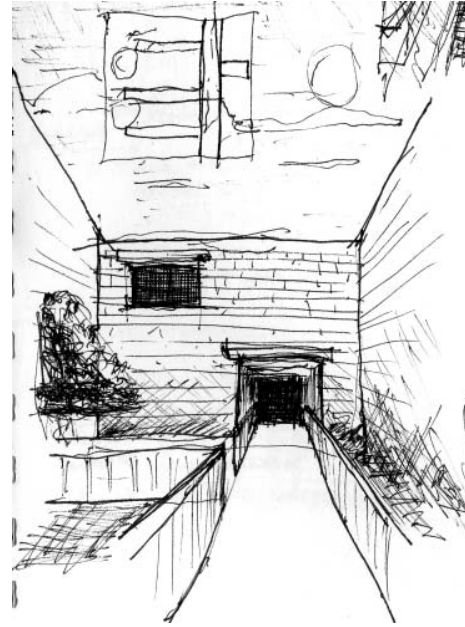
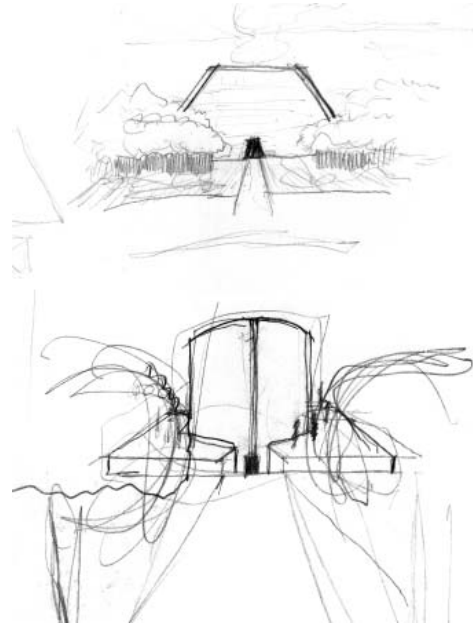
**Top:** Plan of the entrance court showing a pathway flanked by numerous rows of cypress trees. Beyond the trees on both sides, is a granite block wall

**Bottom:** Section from the edge of parking lot through forecourt to the leading edge of the pyramid. The cypress trees stand in the foreground and the granite wall beyond. Under the forecourt is the tunnel for the arrival of the vehicle transporting the body to the crematorium.



# 1 Forecourt

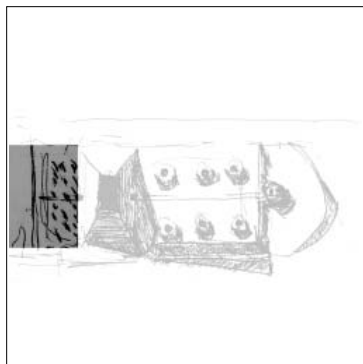
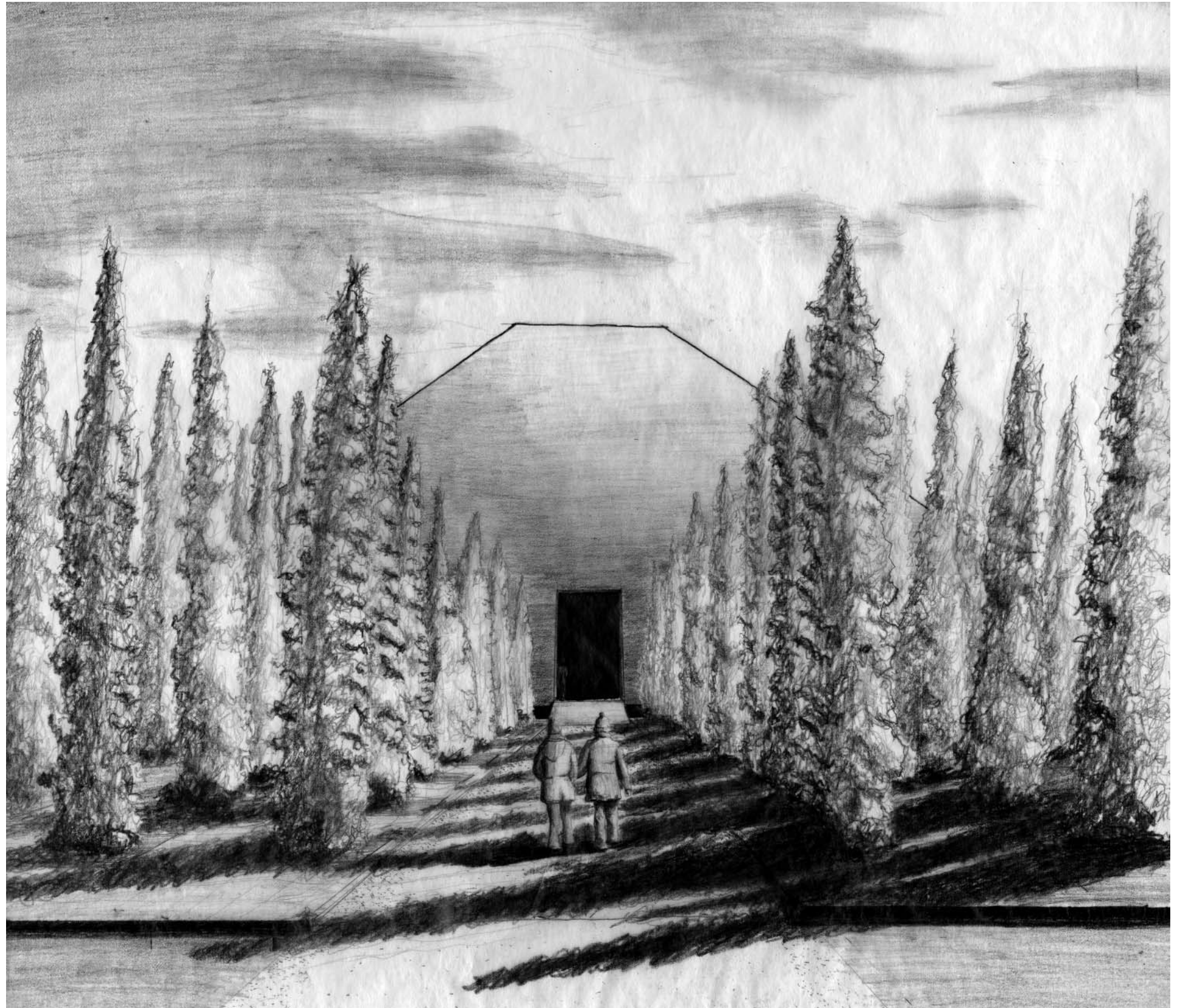
The forceful one point perspective focuses the mourners mind on the occasion. The walls surrounding the path of entry in the sketch below would eventually become the rows of trees, blocking out the world along the path of the forecourt.



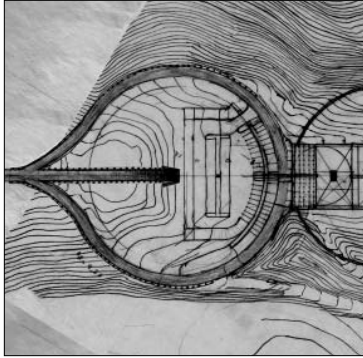


## 1 Forecourt

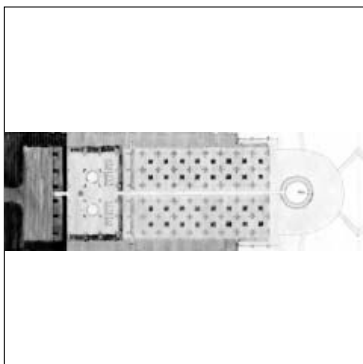
Stepping toward the large doorway shrouded in shadow, gravel cracking under foot, the senses of the mourners focus. The forest of trees filter out the ordinary from which the mourners have come.



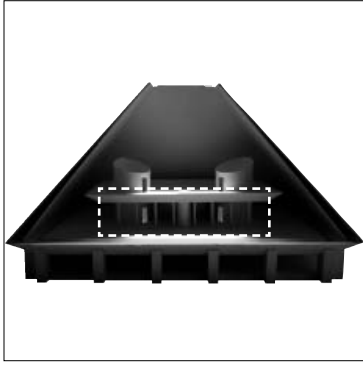
## The World Below



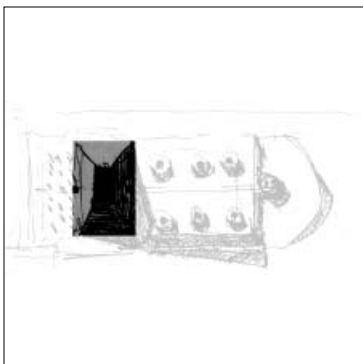
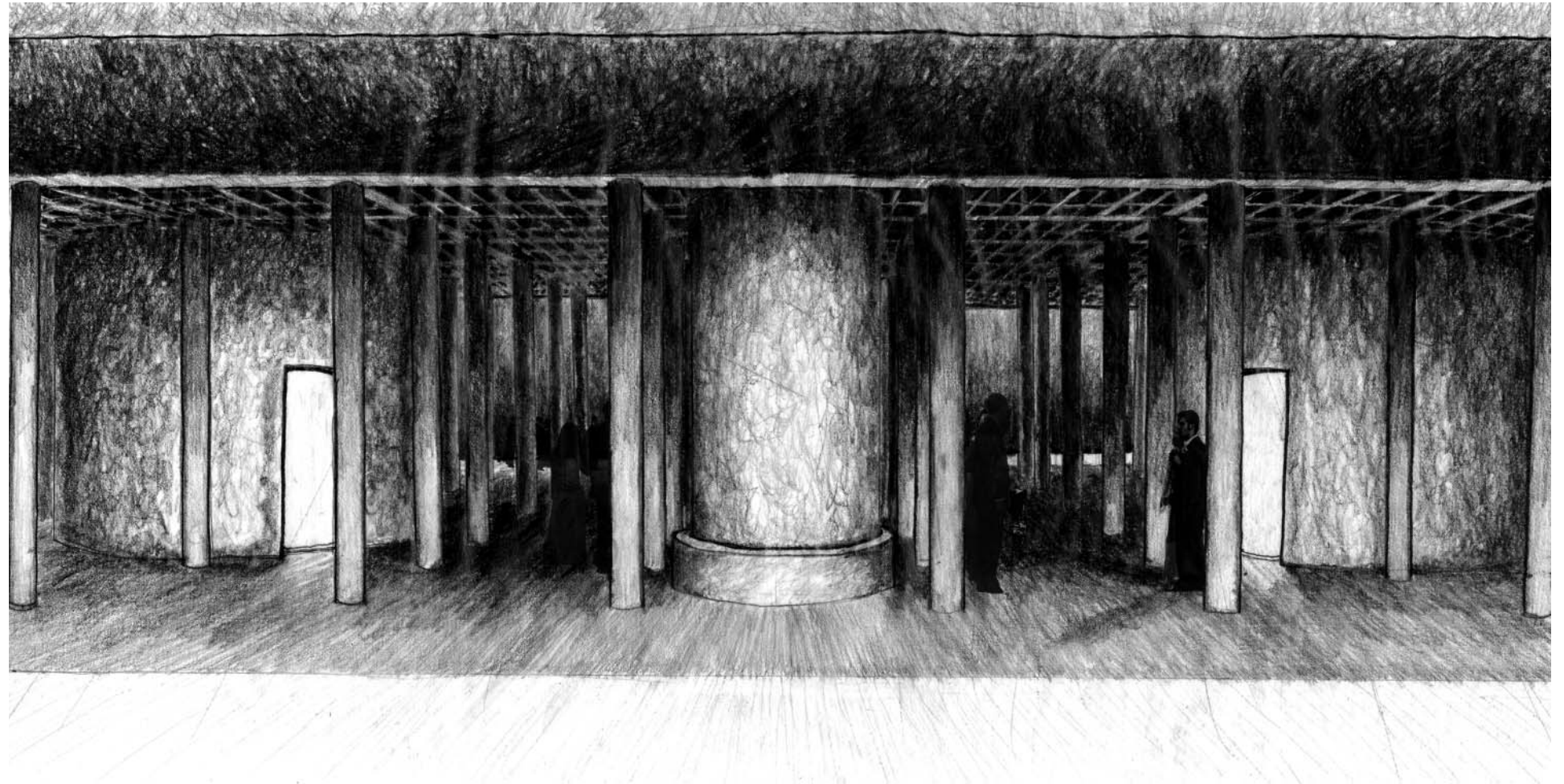
Beneath the entry court for the living is the entry court for the deceased. As seen above the roadway on axis with the main axis of the building slips into the earth and arrives at the underground entrance pictured to the right. In this image a slit of light (which enters this underground realm under the edges of the pyramid above) reflects off the moat below dimly lighting the cavernous space.



## 2 Parlor



**Right:** Back in the world above is the space inside the pyramid, at the level of entry. The large column, front and center, blocks the path while two lit doorways beyond reveal themselves from the dark forest of columns. Waiting and patience fill the space among the columns.

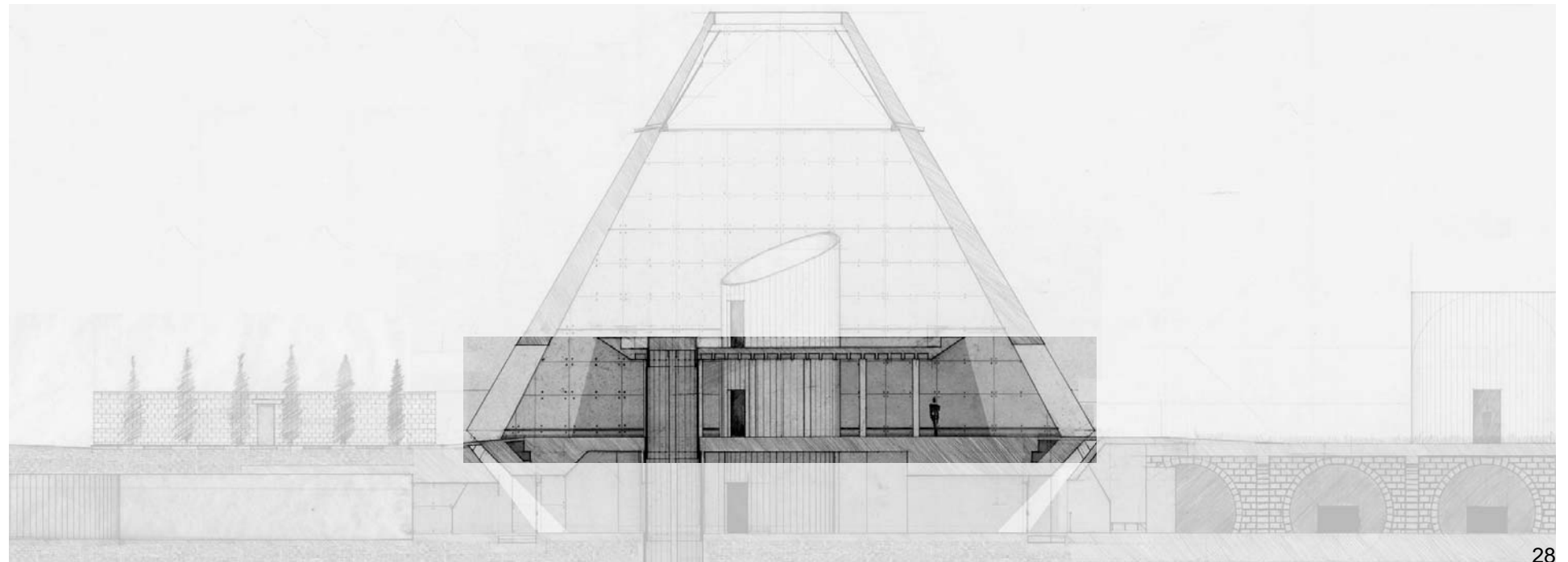
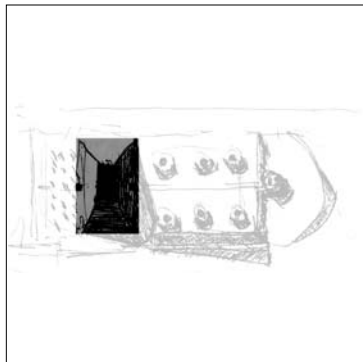
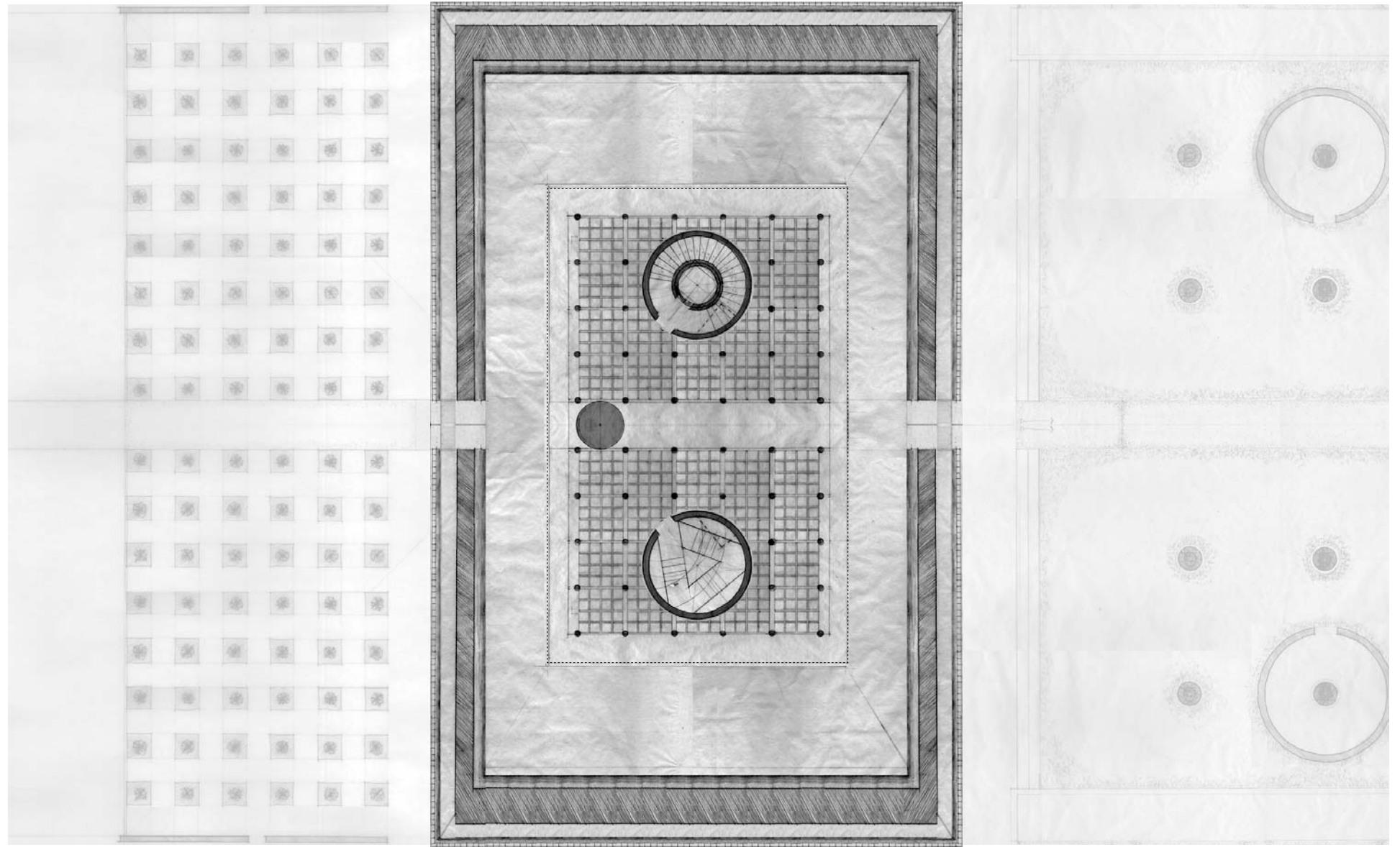




## 2 Parlor

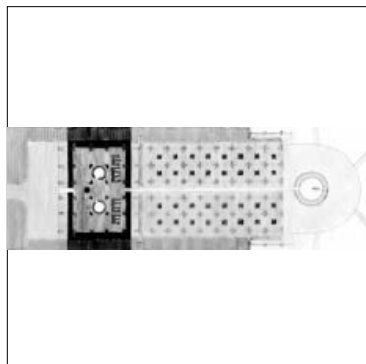
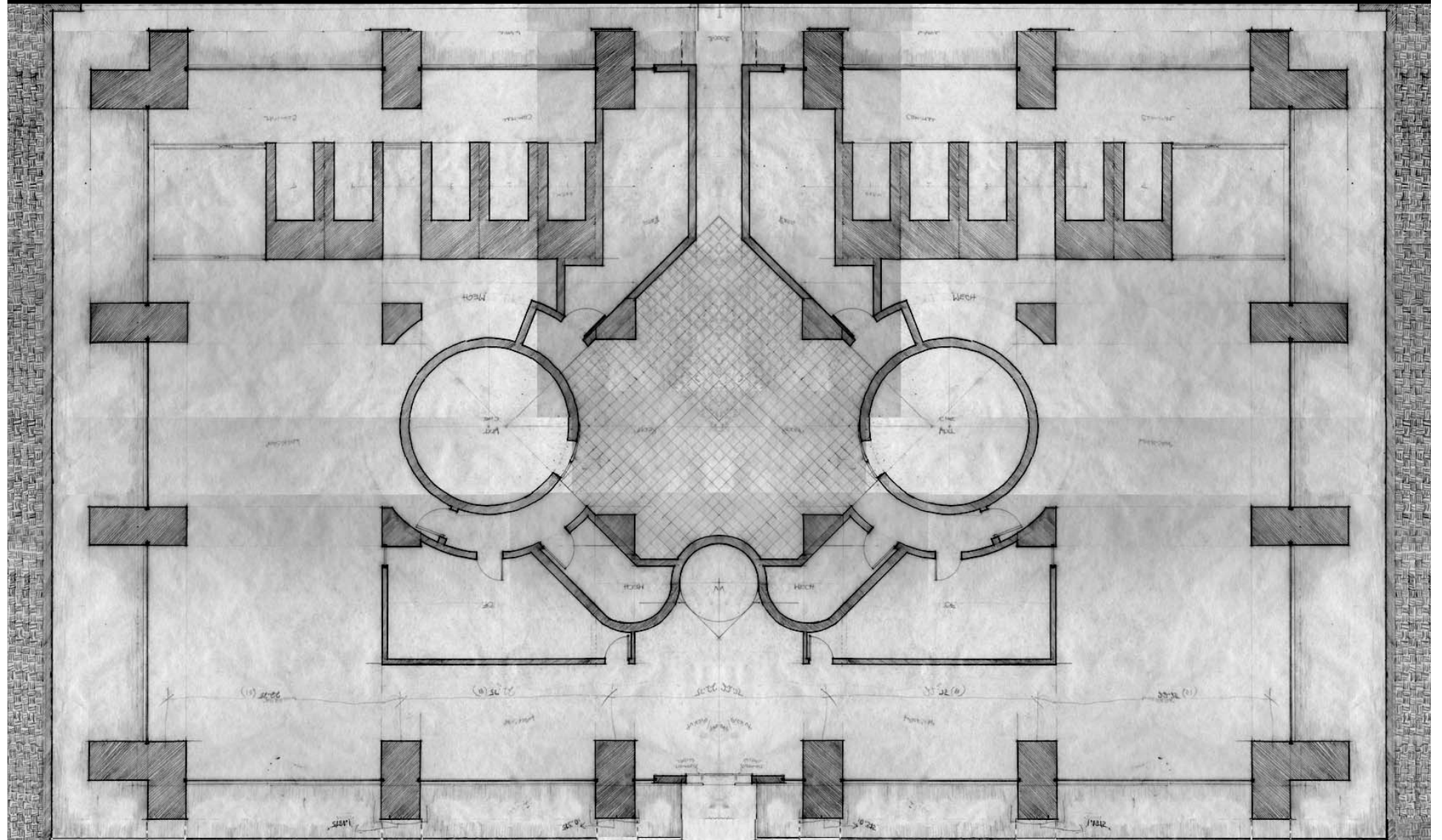
**Top:** The plan is of the entry level hypostyle hall. Shown here is the relationship of the circulation cylinders to the mechanically lowering column which transports the body from its place of preparation below to the space where it will meet for one last time with the body of mourners. It also shows an earlier iteration for the reflected plan of the underside of the platform.

**Bottom:** A section through the middle of the pyramid on the main axis. This section also cuts through the mechanical column that transports the body from the space in the base of the pyramid (in the world below) to the space of the sanctuary on the platform (which is the highest occupiable level in the section).



## The World Below

Plan of the workspace and cremation ovens in the base of the pyramid. It is here that the body of the deceased is prepared for meeting with the body of mourners in the sanctuary space of the platform in the pyramid above.

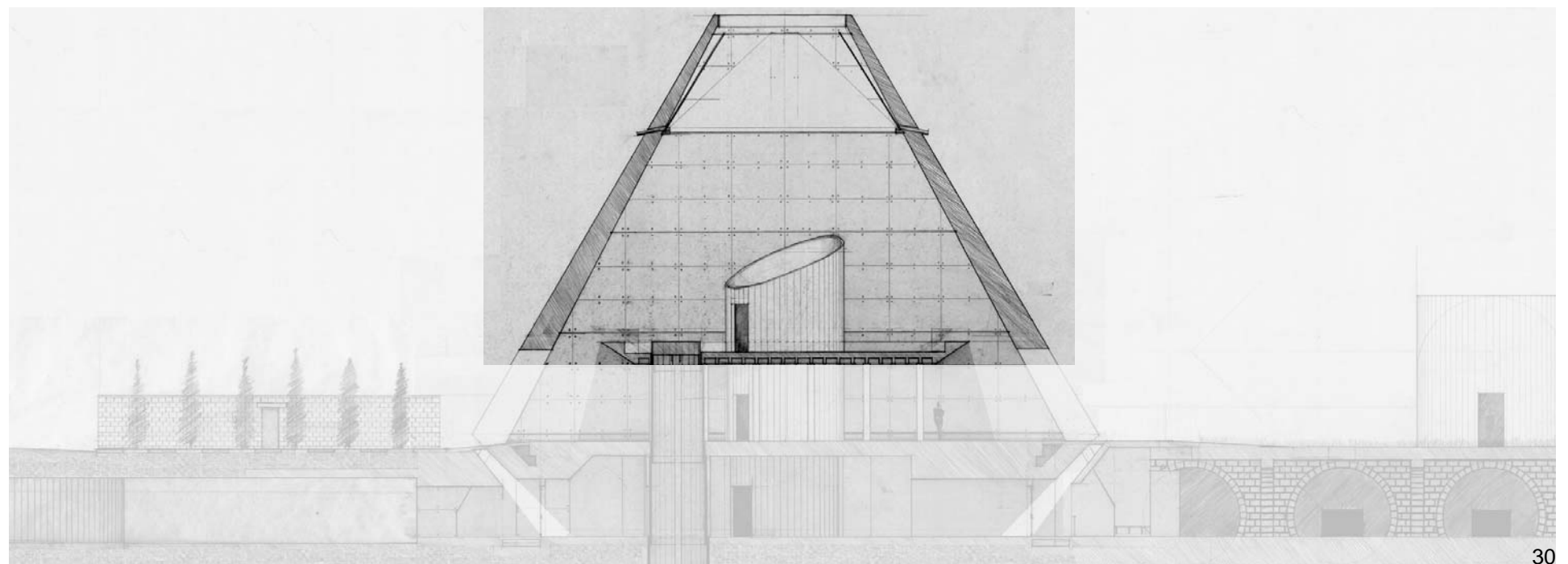
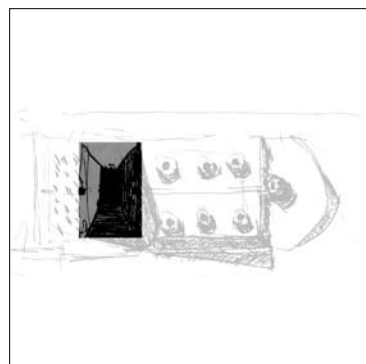
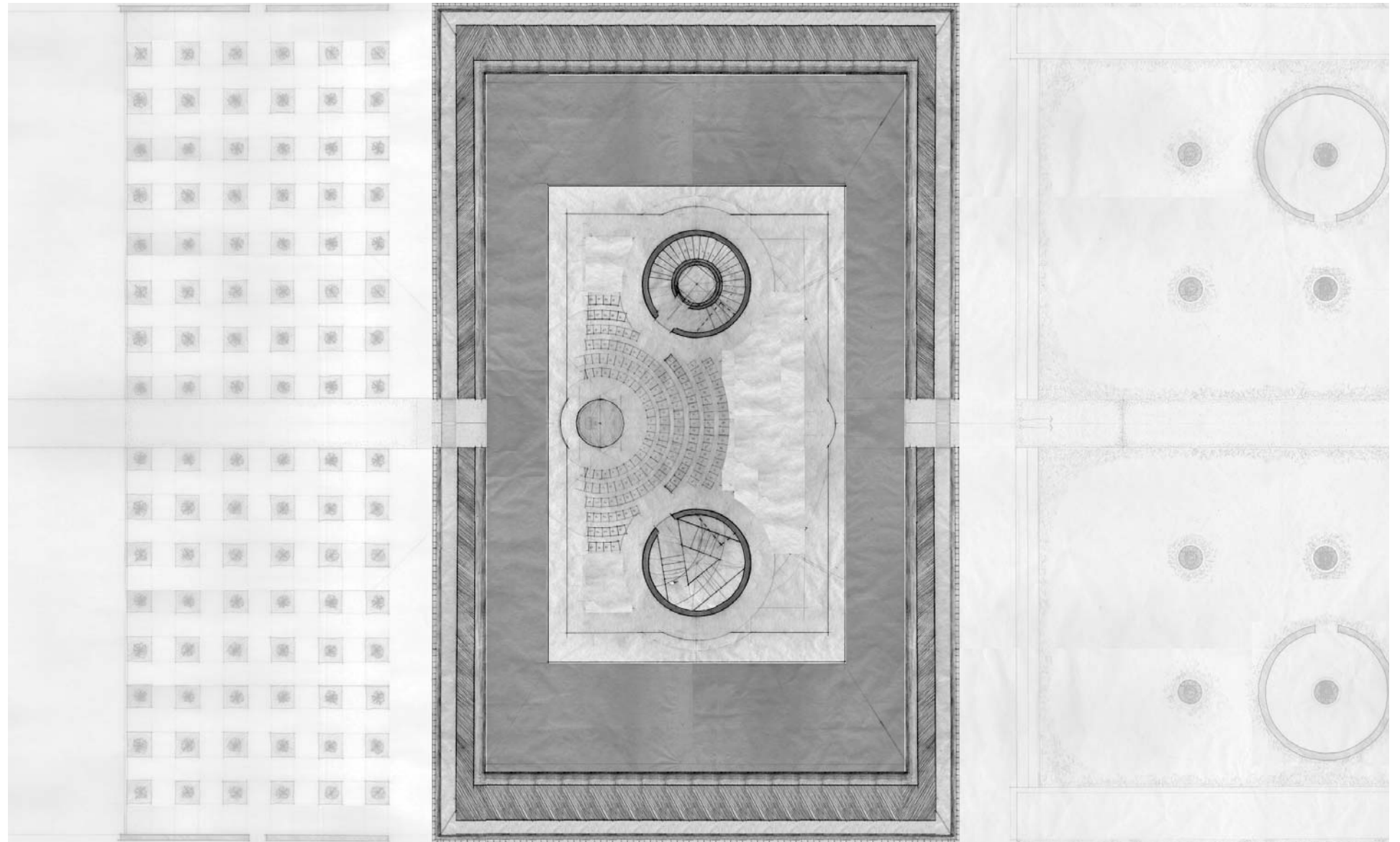


### 3 Sanctuary

Following the stair towers up to the light, distancing themselves from the world from which they arrived, the mourners flow out onto the elevated platform inside the pyramid. Two bodies participate in the activity here, the body of the deceased and the body of the assembly of mourners.

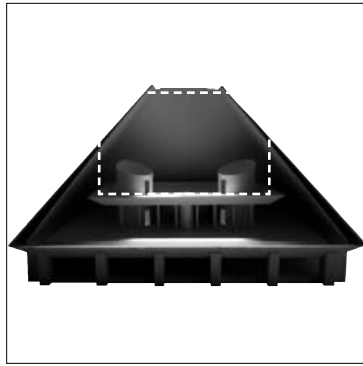
**Top:** Plan of the sanctuary on top of the platform with the space surrounding (showing the floor below) shaded.

**Bottom:** Section through the pyramid.

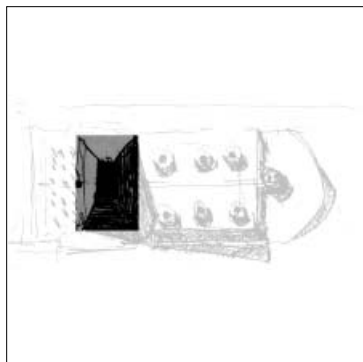
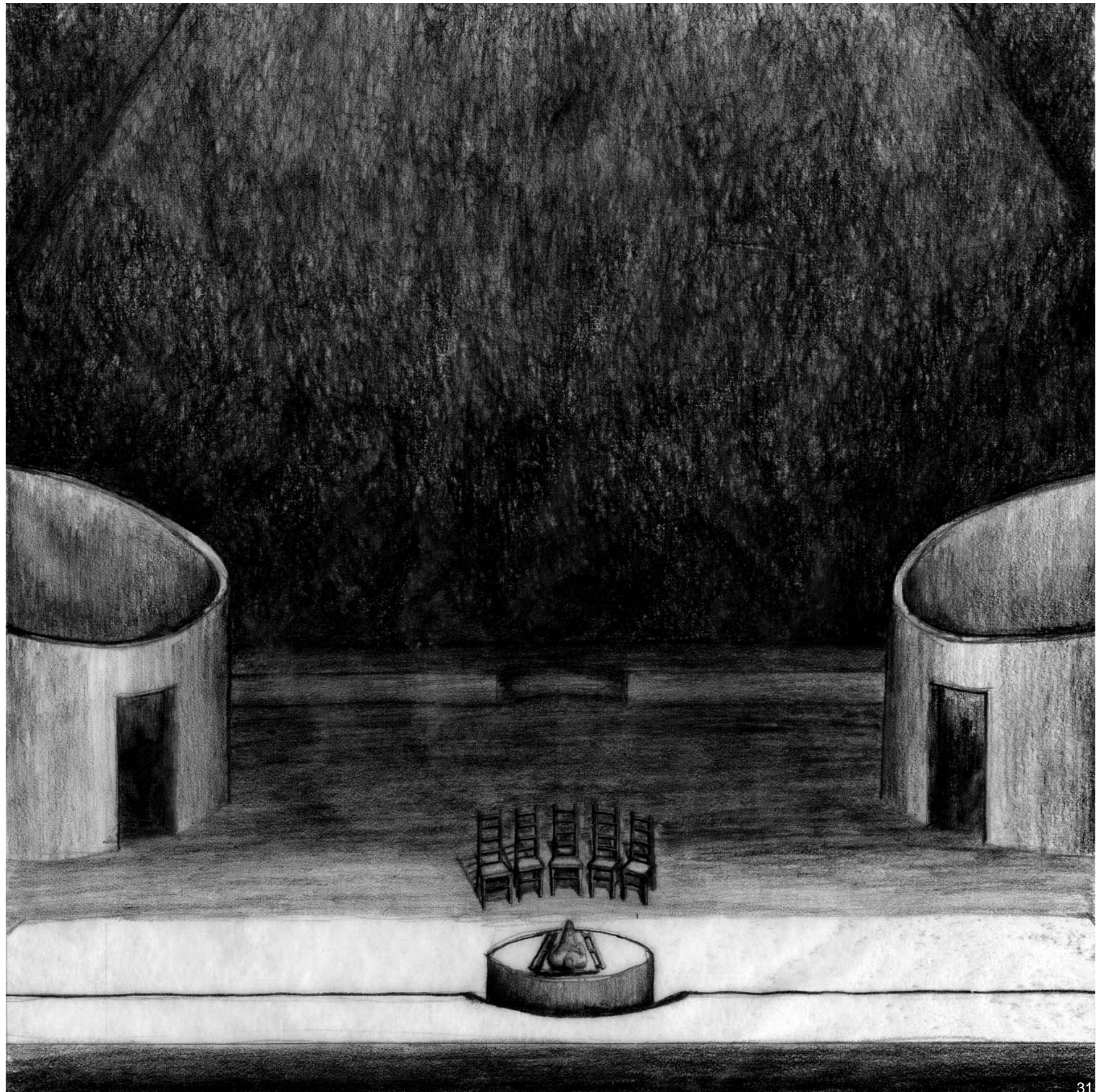




### 3 Sanctuary



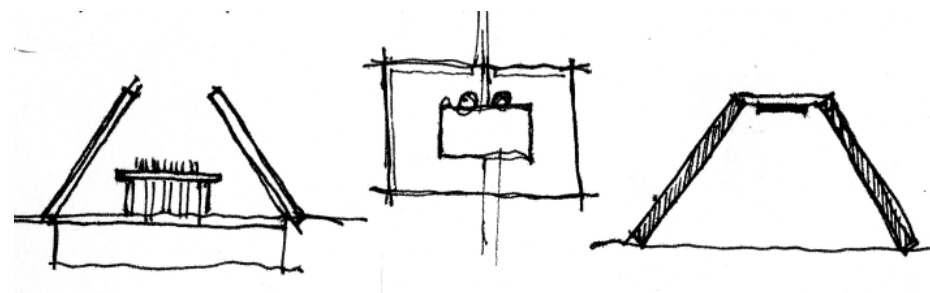
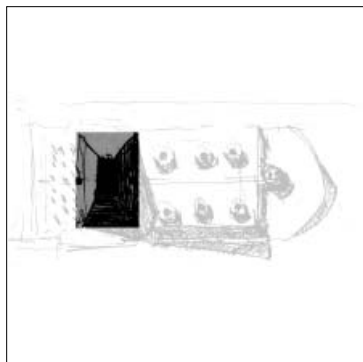
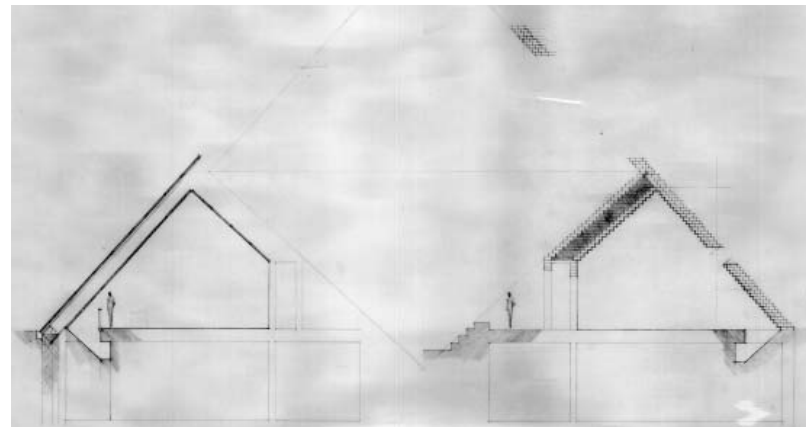
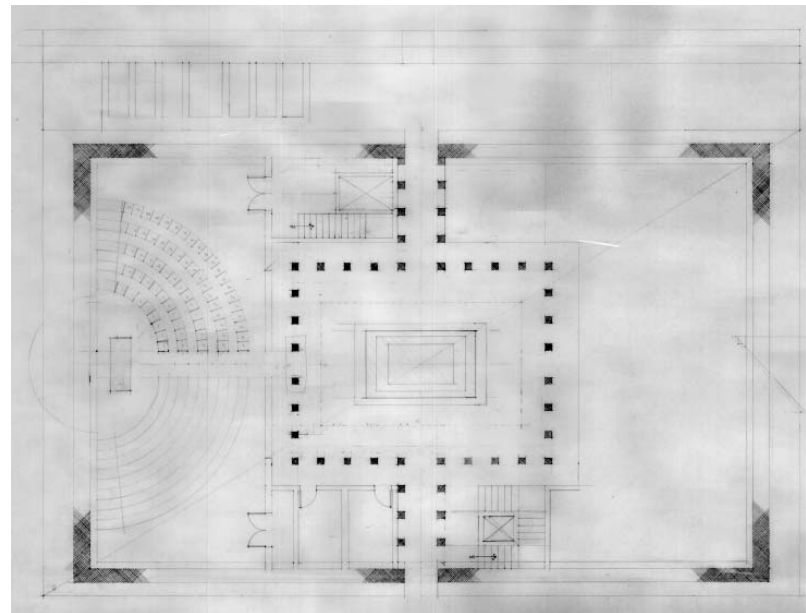
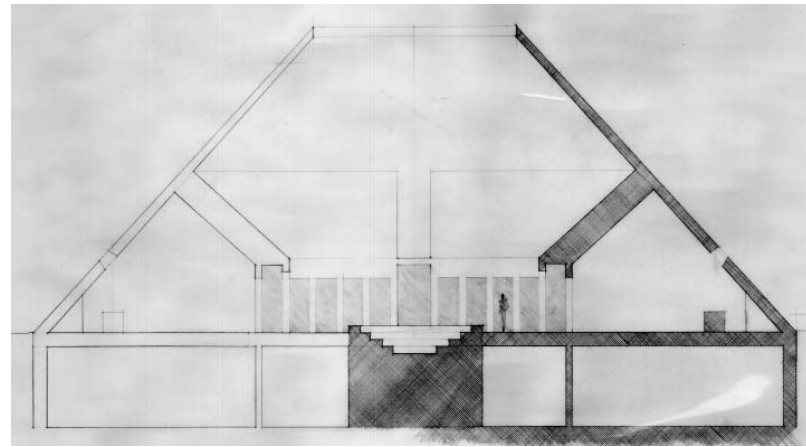
To the right is a rendering of the space where the mourners meet with the body. The cylinders which hold the circulation are truncated in the direction of the deceased's body. Light spills into the cylinders and illuminates the steps and the doors in the hall below.



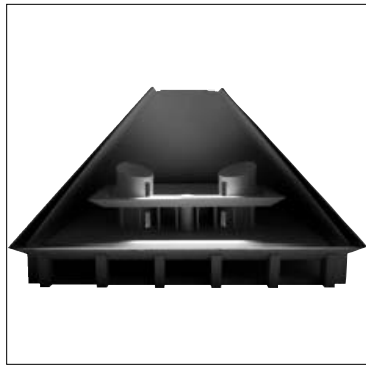
### 3 Sanctuary

In early studies the space under the pyramid was intended to hold a ceremony for the departed in two chapels on either side of a peristyle hall. Chapel walls interacting with the walls of the pyramid diluted the spatial clarity of the pyramid. The sanctuary platform supported by columns (bottom sketches) suggested a more pure approach toward the primary pyramidal form.

The drawing above the bottom sketches is a study in the material make up of the pyramid: the left side was an idea of clad steel members, the right is an idea of corbeled stone.







The pyramid study model. Top left shows the model from outside with the ground removed to expose the concrete piers below. The middle image shows the inside of the pyramid without the insertion of the columns and platform. The bottom left shows the pyramid with one of the side walls removed (as demonstrated in the sketch).

