

requiem: a chapel for blacksburg

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To my colleagues: to those who have taken an interest in my architecture over the past three years and to those who have shared their's with me. Thank you for the dialogue and exchange.

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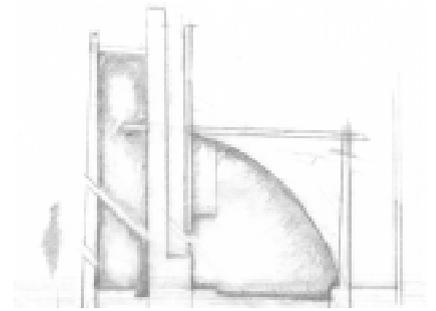
Mike Temple
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To my committee for their energy and criticism.

Mike O'Brien
William Brown
Hans Rott

The most comprehensive and perhaps the most important architectural experience is the sense of being in a unique place... Part of this intense experience of place is always an impression of something sacred.

J.Pallasma *The Geometry of Feeling*



conceptual sketch

The wall in Architecture is primary and paramount. In a hierarchical comparison with other elements, the wall is dominant because of the inherent potential housed within to inform our experience of place. It does more than divide what is *in* from what is *out*. It is where Architecture begins its presencing.

The juxtaposition of man within nature is always violent. In this role as reconciliator of form and environment the wall shapes our perception of being in nature. The architecture of the wall is the spatial record of the drama between interior and exterior forces acting upon it.

We construct walls to keep *out* from becoming *in*. At the same time, the wall is where a controlled *out* is allowed *in*. What penetrates our world, must come through the wall. The wall must be made to accept openings, carry loads, or transfer that load elsewhere. The wall is a deliberate or delicate connection to the earth. The wall accepts, reflects, mediates, or rejects all that it is confronted with.

Architecturally, permanence is expressed by means of the wall. By following the wall, one can understand the configuration of the internal vessel, its perimeter, its zones of focus, and the relationship of parts to the whole. *..By knowing the limits of something, you really know something. Then you know its order, because you know its limits...but if you don't know its limits, then you don't know its order...*" L.Kahn

Writing's relation to architecture affords only an uncertain mirror to be held up to evidence; it is rather in a wordless silence that we have the best chance to stumble into that zone comprised of space, light, and matter that is architecture. Although they fall short of architectural evidence, words present a premise. The work is forced to carry over when words cannot. Words are arrows pointing in the right directions; taken together they form a map of architectural intention.

Steven Holl *Anchoring*

Architecture has a responsibility to heighten one's experience of place. A successful work of architecture emerges when the architect's intention transcends that of mere function and a poetic expression is offered.

The language of walls reveals the existence and essence of architecture. An experience of place is gained from an approach to architecture that understands the inherent power of the wall. The projects offered on the proceeding page propose varying roles for the wall. The walls serve as both primary element and intermediary facilitator. The exploration each architect has taken with these projects reveals a position about the wall.

wall

In the work of Steven Holl and Le Corbusier, the wall serves as a canvas that allows for the play of light over its surface.

The wall as mass reveals its thickness in section, carving place out of its being. This notion of volume is used by Joy and Neumann to magnify the essence of the wall.

The wall as a screen allows for a dynamic, changing dialogue with the light and atmosphere. It does not have an association with pure, static surface.

The wall as an inhabitable space from van Eyck and Holl, creates tension within, activating place, allowing us to exist within the character of the wall.

The works of Barragan and Galfetti explore the possibilities of the wall as line, a boundary whose presence is the primary ordering effector of place.

The wall sculptures of Serra activate place through the tension of changing the perception of one's environment and uncovering the potential of a given place.

left of right

Indian Institute, wall as opening
St. Ignatius, wall as canvas
Casa Batllo, wall as sculpture
Yale Center for British Art, wall as material
Towers, Barragan, wall as sculpture
Brion Cemetery, wall as opening
Igualdad Cemetery, wall as inhabitation
La Tourette, wall as mass
Ronchamp, wall as sculpture
Church of Light, wall as canvas
Intersection, wall as sculpture
Garden Pavilion, wall as poche
Japanese screen
Convent Studios, wall as mass
Gossweinstein, wall as mass
Metropolitan Apartment, Holl
Igualdad Cemetery, wall as inhabitation
St. Ignatius, wall as structure
Red Wall, Barragan, wall as line
StoreFront for Art, wall as opening
Apartment, Herzog and de Meuron, wall as screen
Sculpture Pavilion, wall as inhabitation
Ronchamp, wall as opening
Bagno Pubblico, wall as line
StoreFront for Art
Ricola Storage, Herzog and de Meuron
Ronchamp, wall as canvas
Church of Light, wall as opening
Signal Box, wall as screen
Pavillion for Het Oosten, Holl, wall as screen



An Architectural experience silences all external noise; it focuses attention on ones's very existence. Architecture, as all art, makes us aware of our fundamental solitude. At the same time, Architecture detaches us from the present and allows us to experience the slow, firm flow of time and tradition. Buildings and cities are instruments and museums of time. They enable us to understand the passing of history.

Silence, Time and Solitude



The cemetery is unquestionably a different place in comparison to usual cultural spaces; nonetheless it is a space linked to the general effect of all the sites of the city or society or village...In all events, since the 19th century everyone has had the right to his own little personal decomposition...Cemeteries, then, no longer constitute the sacred or the immortal precinct of the town, but rather *the other city*.

cemetery

The project is a chapel situated in Westview Cemetery, Blacksburg Virginia. The individual opportunity to grieve, reflect, or meditate in the presence of light is that which becomes sacred about this Architecture. The journey, path, and story of this project is one told through material and light, as well as the spatial sequence of events presented to the visitor. The act of separation as journey is intrinsic to the arrival at the spiritual place, as one can not be alone in the open cemetery lawn.

What gives this project meaning is the ritual of leaving the world of the profane, the experience where no true orientation is possible, as described by Eliade, for something more spiritual. In the absence of sacred space, there is no longer any world, only fragments of a shattered universe...consisting of neutral places. Conversely, it is in the sacred that we acquire a sense of orientation amidst the chaos. *The sacred reveals absolute re-*

ality...; it finds the world in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world. The sacred is saturated with being. Architectural experiences of the sacred require the acts of recollecting, remembering, and comparing. An embodied memory has an essential role as the basis of remembering a space or place.

Architecture is the art of mediation and reconciliation. This project affords one such space. The introduction of a family of walls into the cemetery provides this *place apart* from the profane. The language of walls speak to the condition of the site and the sequential relationship of the parts to the whole. Decisions about the path, the entrance sequence, the threshold, the chapel, and the exit, are driven by the wall. The wall provides the baseline by which the other elements, floor, ceiling, light, etc... are introduced into the project.



Proposed project

Harding Avenue

the corner

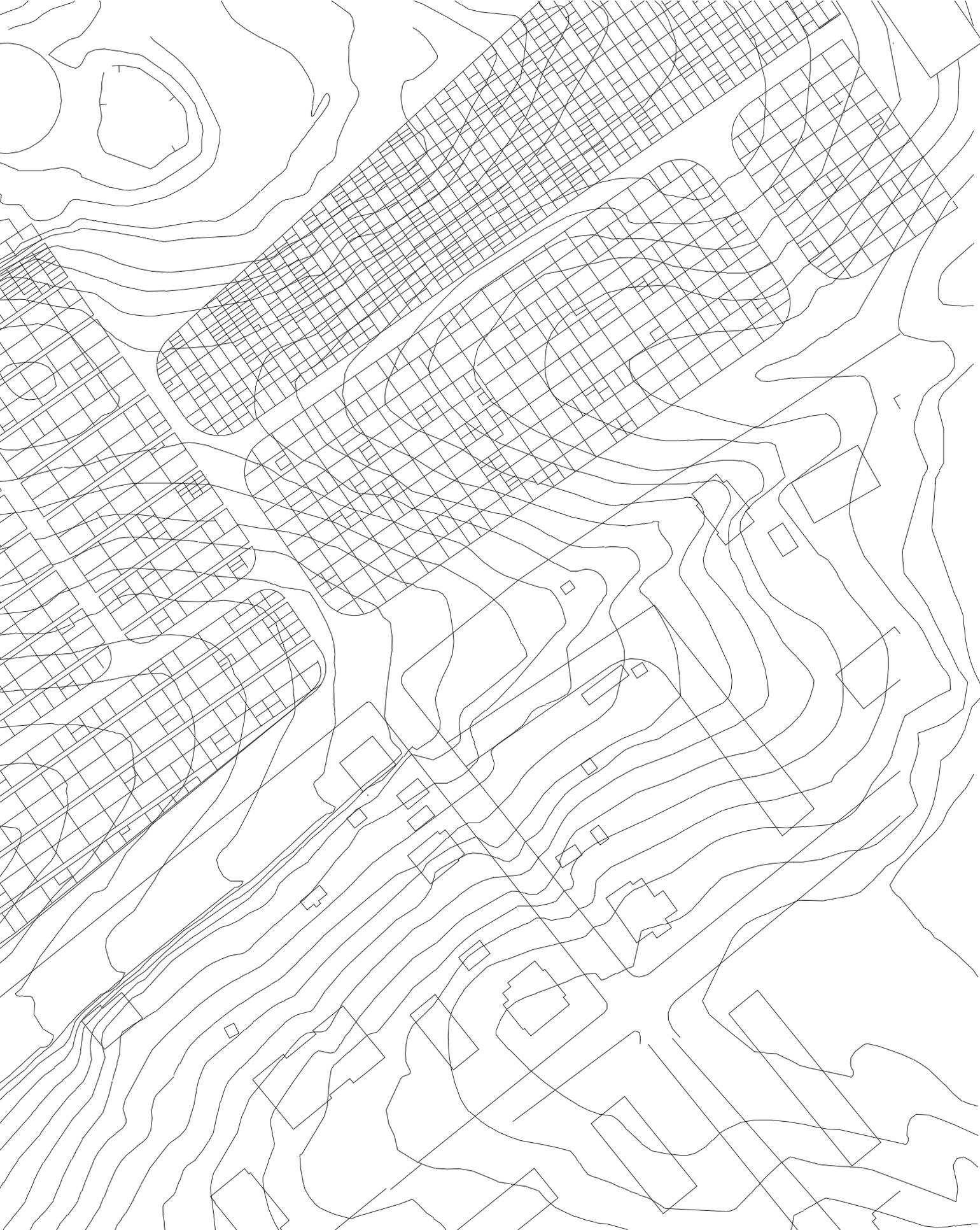
old plots

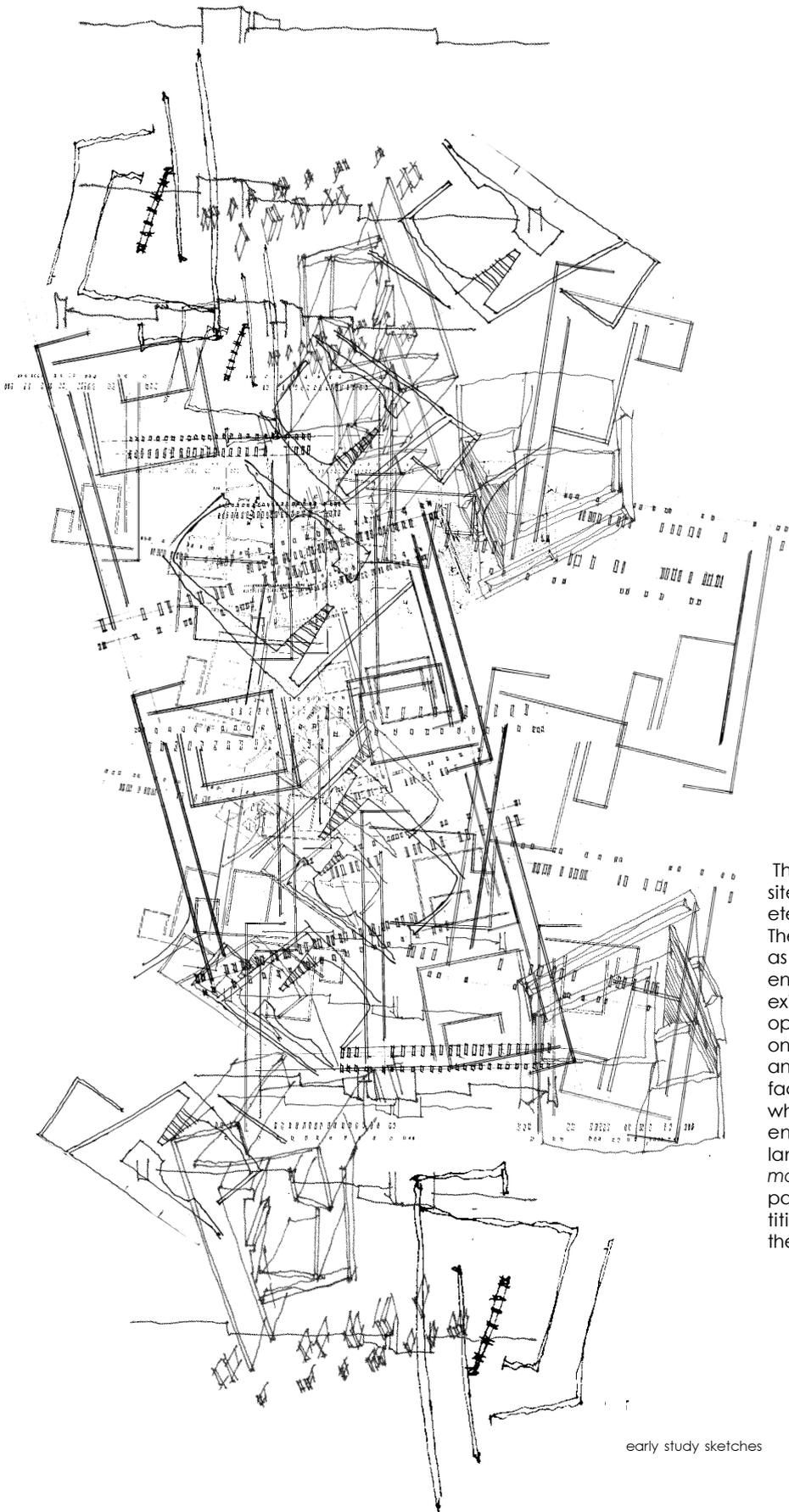
dates from early 1800s

contemporary plots

21'x16'

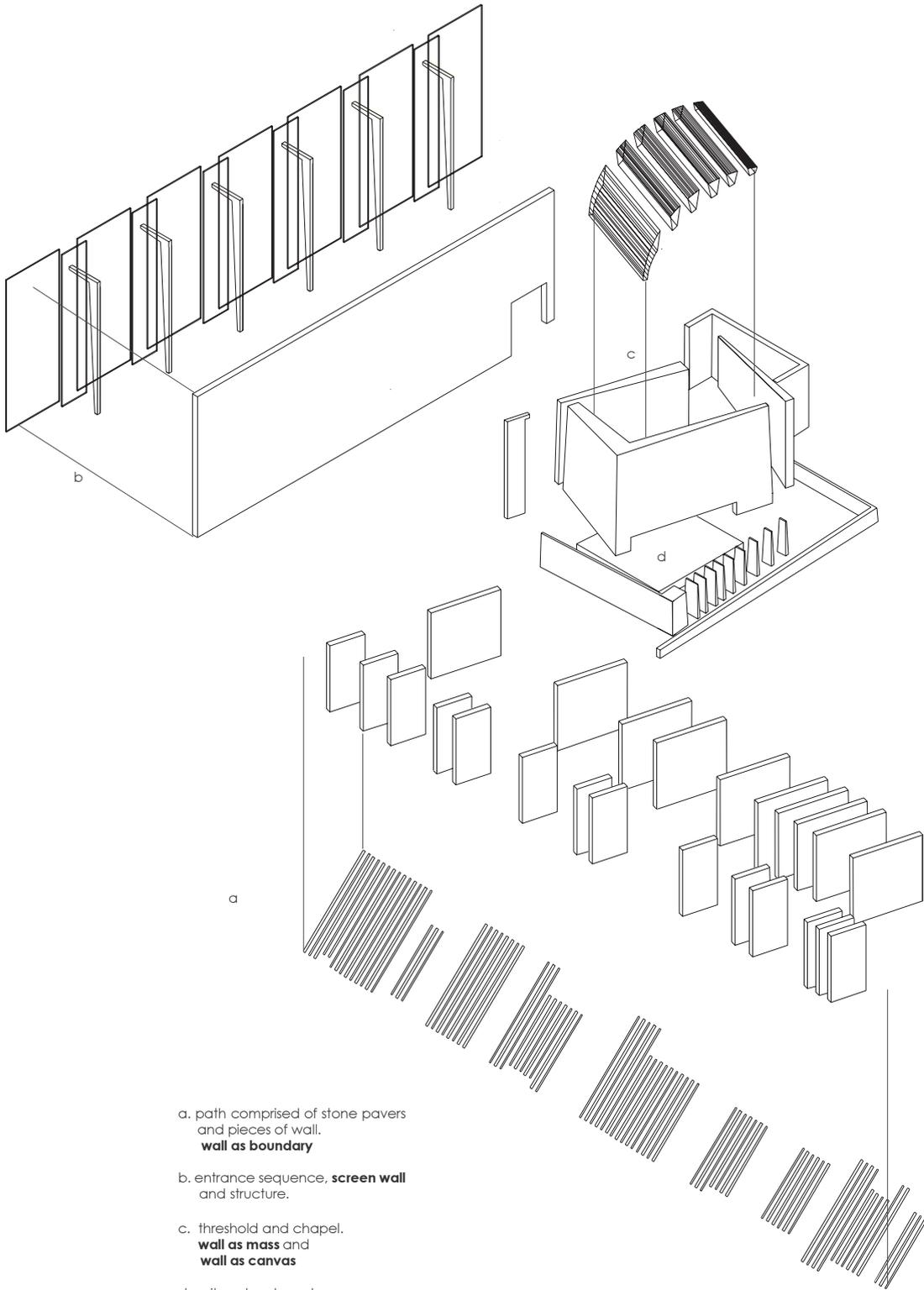






The project serves to hold the corner of the site, keeping the momentum of the cemetery from spilling out into Harding Avenue. The shape of a corner was explored, as well as the conceptual pieces of the project: the entrance sequence, threshold, chapel and exit sequence. A family of walls were developed to speak to the two conditions found on the site: the contemporary grid (NE/SW) and the historic grid, consisting of westward facing plots. The path conforms to the grid while the chapel recognizes the historic orientation with a rotation to the west. The language is that of *boundary wall*, *wall as mass*, *screen wall*, and *wall as canvas*. The path and chapel exist as independent entities, never touching. The path surrounds the chapel, safely nestling it inside her walls.

early study sketches



a. path comprised of stone pavers and pieces of wall.
wall as boundary

b. entrance sequence. **screen wall** and structure.

c. threshold and chapel.
wall as mass and **wall as canvas**

d. exit and sunken plaza.



1

1. the uniformity of the existing grid within the context of the cemetery

rows of monuments that fall into line.



2

2. search for individual space

attempts to define personal space amidst the cemetery lawn. the use of stone and natural elements to give boundaries where none exist.



3

3. the scale of the cemetery

the grave markers are the reference point, what the visitor comes in contact with.



4

4. historic section with its apparent disorder

the freedom to wander.



5

5. monument as extension of the earth

inspiration for character of walls.

existing site facing east



There is something powerful about the order to the site that is formed by rows of headstones and monuments that fall into line. There is also a poetic quality about the freedom of movement offered here by the historic section. The uniformity of the grid is relieved by this preexisting section of the cemetery. The site sits along the juxtaposition of both worlds and it is important that parts of the project acknowledge these conditions.

historic grid

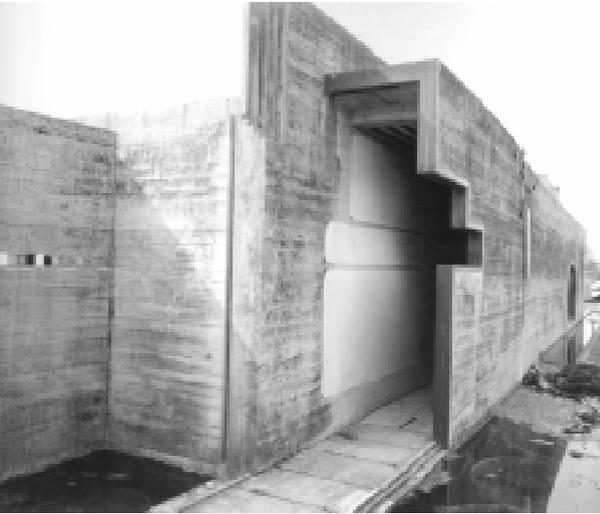


juxtaposition



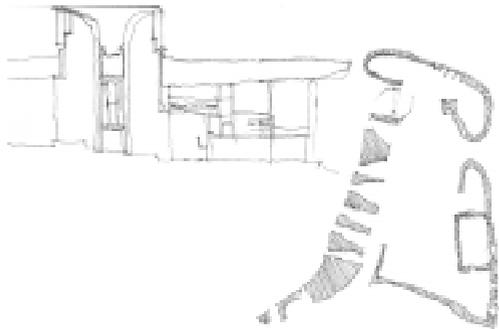
contemporary grid





Brion Cemetery

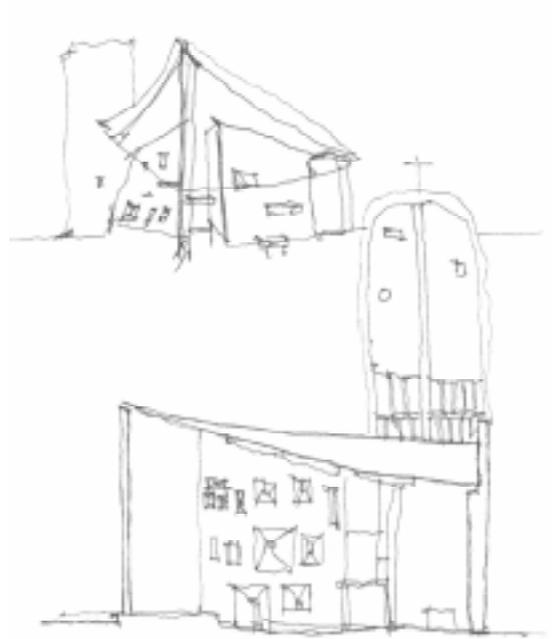
The *Brion Family Tomb* by Carlo Scarpa is a study in the movement from path to destination. There exists a delicate balance between controlled movement and a freedom to wander through the site at Brion. Scarpa achieves this through a density of paving and level changes found throughout the cemetery lawn. The proud concrete wall that encloses the limits of the site, along with the green lawn, the sparse plants, and this mixed gray of black and white concrete structures create a framework of language that Scarpa uses not as a reference to mortality but rather as a testament to life after death. It is this interest and attention to materials that age heroically that the Westview project clings to. This ennobling of material speaks to the record of time.



ink sketches by author

Le Corbusier's chapel at *Ronchamp* provides an important precedent. The wall is the baseline by which a quality of stillness is achieved. All other elements exist as servant to the wall. It shapes the light, air, and silence of the place. *My intellect does not accept that adoption of the modules of Vignola in the matter of buildings. I claim that harmony exists between objects one is dealing with. The chapel at Ronchamp perhaps shows that architecture is not an affair of columns but an affair of plastic events. Plastic events are not regulated by scholastic formulae. They are free and innumerable.*

Corbusier



Ronchamp

narrative

*rows of white and gray spread across the lawn
markers of time*

*wander gives rise to direction, hesitation
grass turns to stone and then back again
steps quicken along the path
concrete slices cut the views beyond*

*direction changes
inside screens outside
feet press into crushed stone
light and shadow breath from above
noise becomes sound, sound becomes echo from feet below*

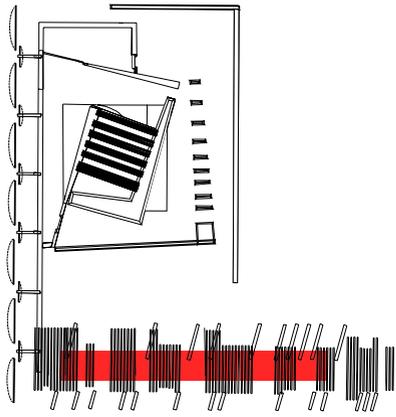
*hands seek threshold
wall pivots, revealing compression, security
silence replaces sound*

*light leaks from beyond
treads slow, walls part
release and rest
meditation, reflection, pause*

*wall accepts flame, holds memory
absence becomes permanence*

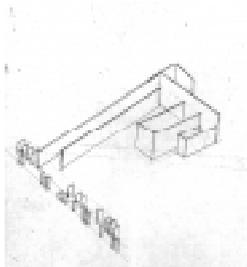
*descent begins
sky returns*

ascent

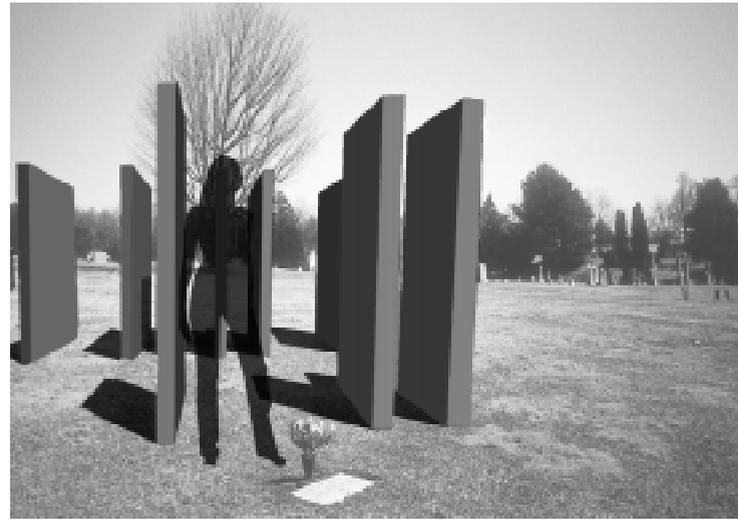


entrance





early interplay between line and segment



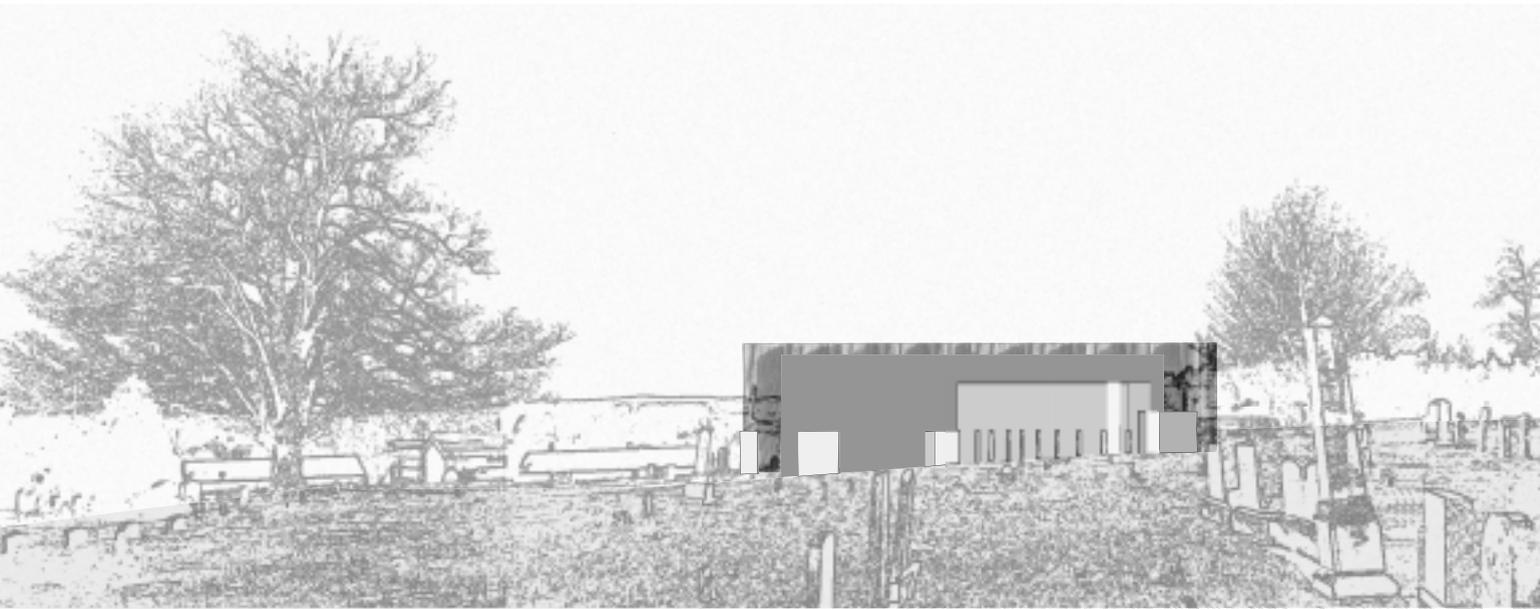
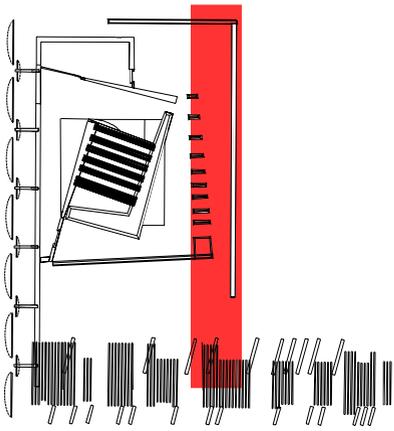
superimposition of path walls on historic order of plots

The entrance sequence developed out of studying various approaches offered to sacred spaces. This sequence is needed to prepare oneself for entry at the threshold and affords the opportunity to modulate the permeability of the site, closing the corner to the road.

The path emerges as stone pavers that extend into the cemetery lawn, beyond the boundaries of the site, reaching into the historic section, gently inviting one to approach. 8' pieces of wall begin to enclose the entrance sequence. These markers of entry follow the grid but are angled along an east/west axis, providing framed views of the cemetery beyond. Made of granite, their material and scale unite them as monuments within the given context. The polished edges serve as reflected lines, harnessing the setting sun. The walls screen the view from the road and allow a degree of visual permeability back towards the cemetery.

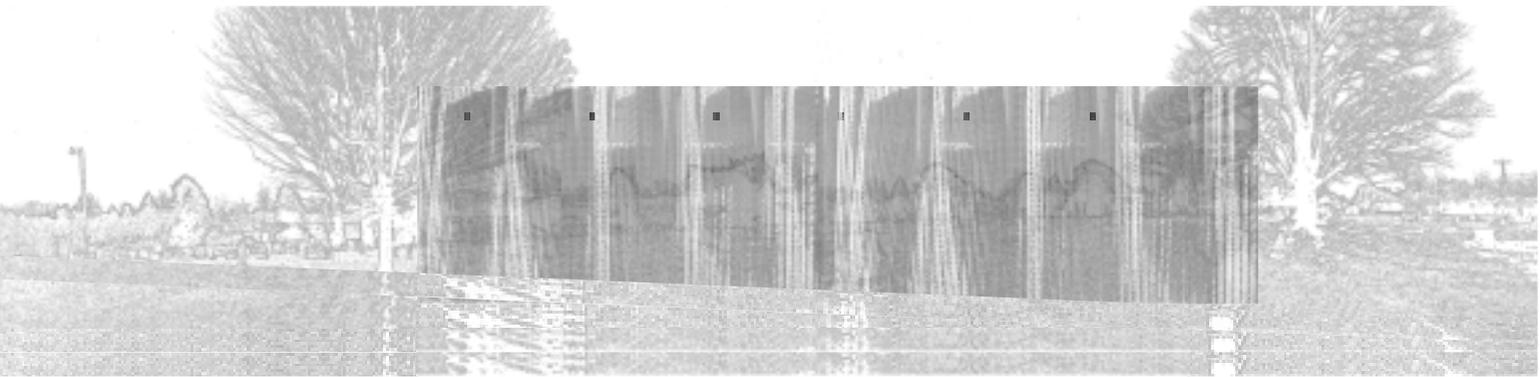
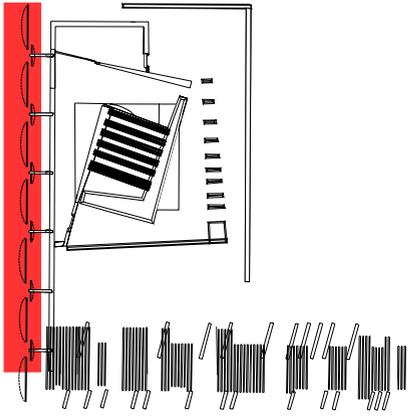
This path through the cemetery allows for movement left and right but this sequence begins to control direction by increasing in density as one approaches the screen wall. The power comes from the contrast between the segment (piece) and the line (wall).





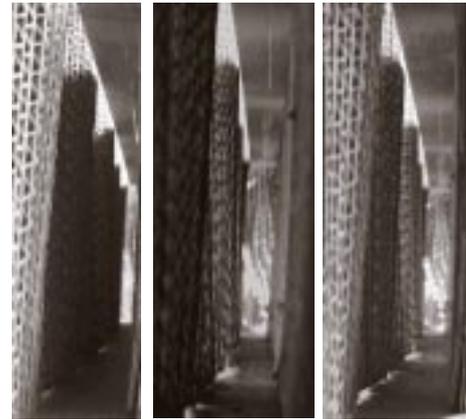
The elevation beyond the site is controlled with the introduction of a 24' high 84' long copper screen wall that blocks the view of the apartments across Harding Ave. This forms a new edge and backdrop to the corner, protecting the chapel and its visitors from the traffic and noise while its permeability breaths light and shadow. The density of the cemetery grid is allowed to fill in around the site. The relief occurs beyond the project, where the land falls away from the building, devoid of markers and man.







...but the light holds the people together so that no one loses his way..

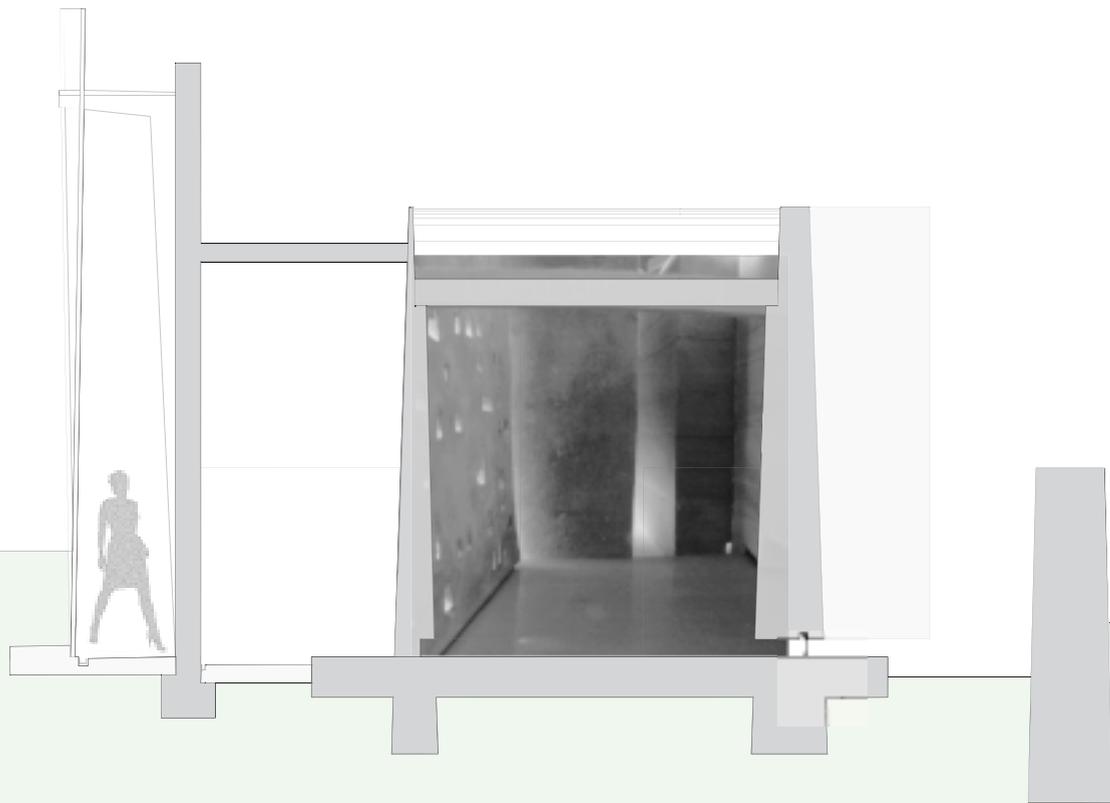


entrance sequence in natural light

The transition from the cemetery lawn to the chapel is one that takes the visitor through a variety of scales and changes in the quality and intensity of light. This section of the entrance sequence is tall and narrow, meant for individual travel, distancing one from the profane experience of the world in preparation for the destination. The journey needs to be long enough to create this separation, both physical and spiritual. Some eighty-four feet is offered to slow the pace of the visitor.

The desire to introduce light without allowing a view into the path was reconciled with the introduction of a screen wall. The screen wall is composed of individual copper panels, perforated and rolled, the undulating light pulling one toward the threshold. The light and sound is gradually taken away, until one can only hear himself.

The undulating copper screen gives a facade to the street. The play of light and shadow keeps the massive wall from overpowering the site.



threshold

The large 7' wide threshold door pivots out of the wall. The ceiling behind is dropped to 7' above ones head. The compression is an attempt at creating tension in anticipation of the destination. Once the door swings closed, silence and darkness surround the visitor.

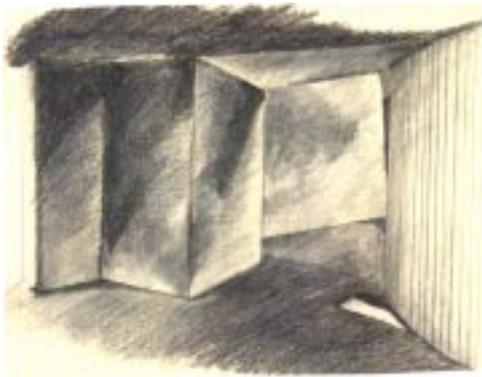


how concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome, and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors that one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have the story of one's entire life...



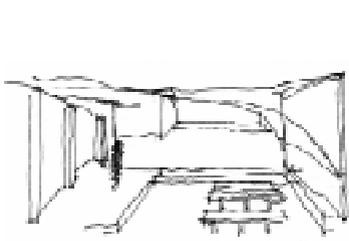
view at threshold

view at threshold, looking into chapel

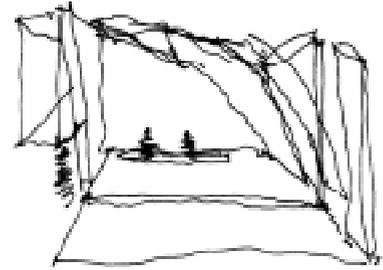
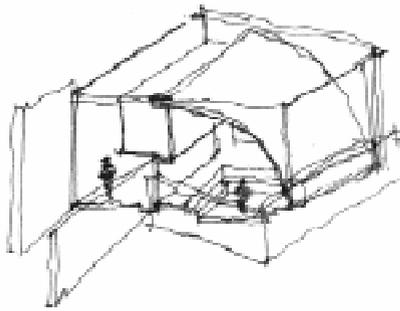


..shadows are the sign that profane man is in the process of "dissolution" and that a new personality is on the point of being born...



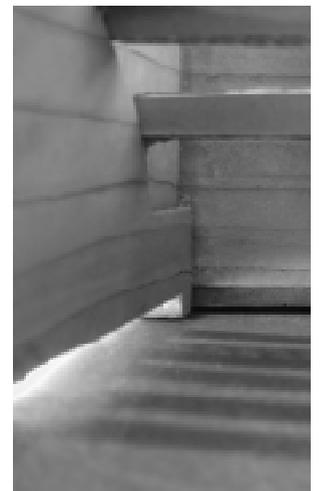
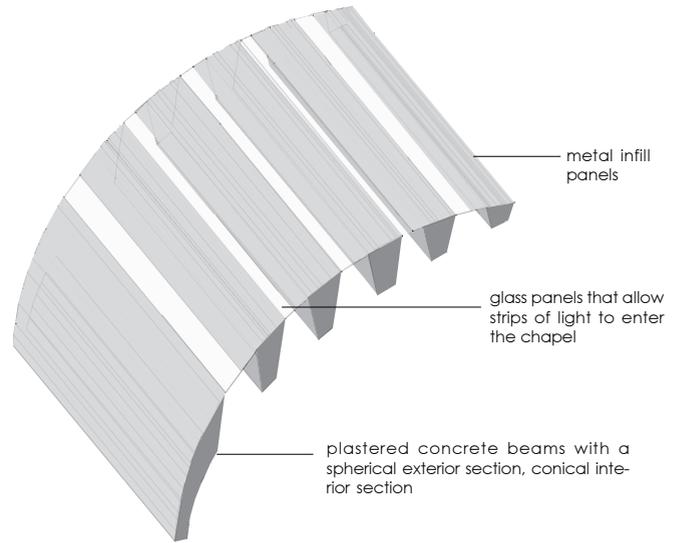


early studies of the section of the chapel



chapel

The chapel is the destination of the journey. The compression that one encounters in the threshold is released by means of the arc ceiling. The volume of the massive concrete walls silences all noise. The rotation of the chapel is presented by the scored brass joints in the floor. In the chapel, the wall yields to the floor, allowing light to enter, revealing the change in thickness of the wall. All of the light sources are hidden. The darkness is pierced by the light from the candle wall and that which pours down behind the arc. The chapel is not meant to house the funeral services. There is no altar and no internal orientation. No icons adorn the walls. The spirituality comes from a conversation with the silent light, in a personal solitude housed within massive concrete walls. *A strong architectural experience always produces a sense of loneliness and silence, irregardless of the actual number of people there or the noise...*





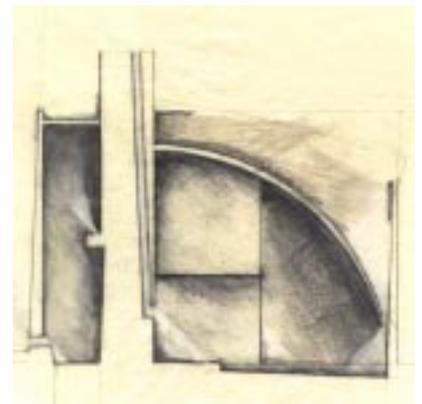
view of candle wall, early morning

...the shadows fall across the long nosed sundial and tell me that I exist, I exist...

view of chapel, late afternoon

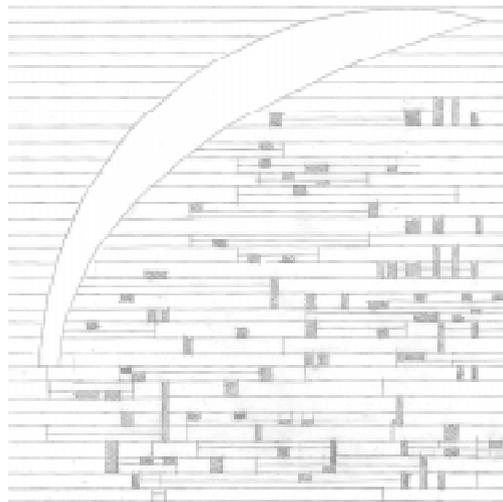


...shadow inhales and illumination exhales light...

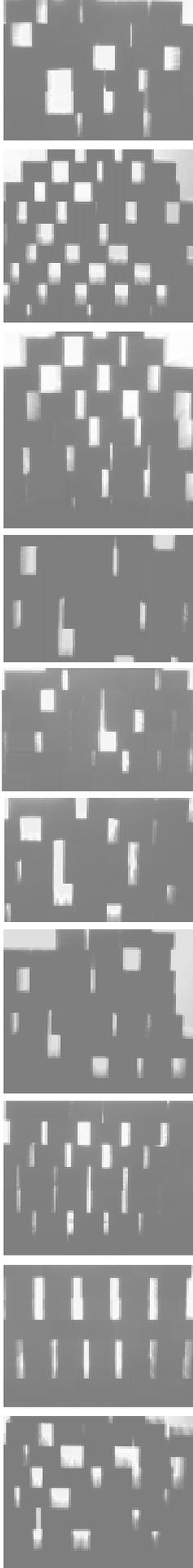


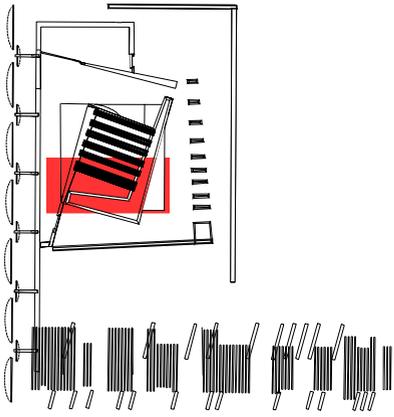
The act of journey to this sacred destination involves leaving something behind. The light that is placed in the candle wall tells a story about memory. This light grows as a function of remembrance. The openings are not subtractions in the wall but rather the result of gaps between layered stone, big enough for the placement of a votive candle. The pattern is one abstracted out of the density of the grid on the site. There exists a dialogue between the natural light and this additional light in the chapel.



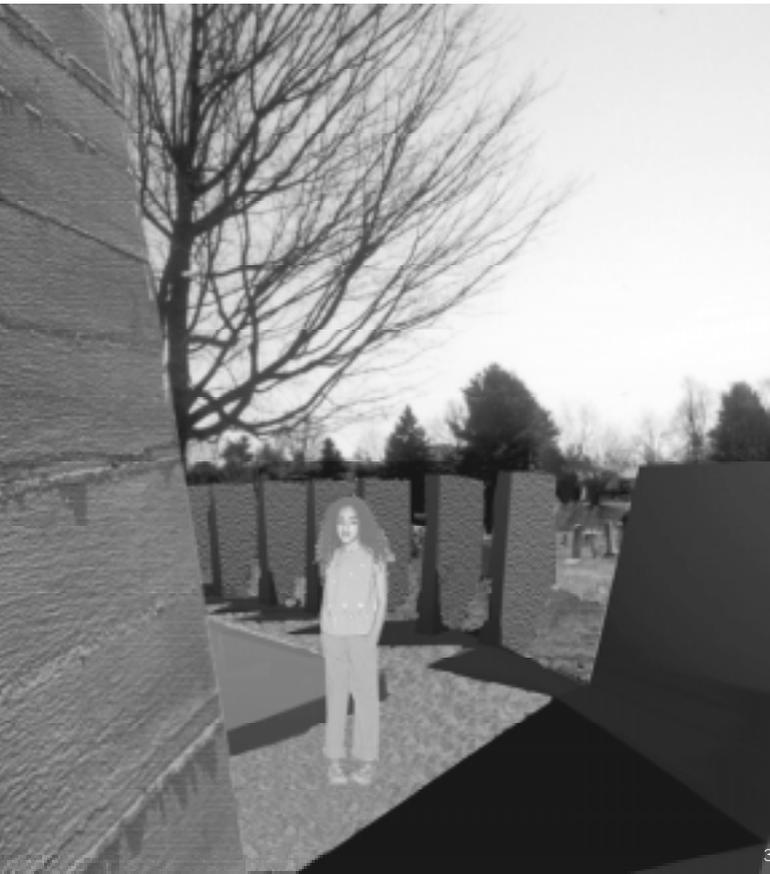


study of pattern for candle wall. The pattern chosen is one abstracted from the density of the grid found at the site.





exit

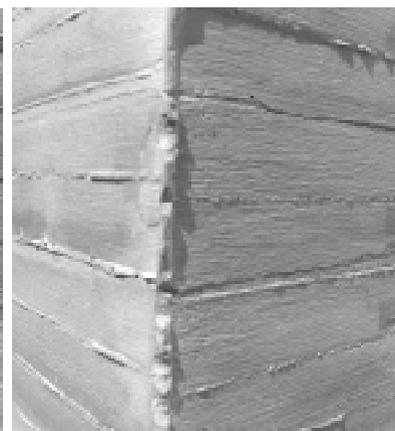
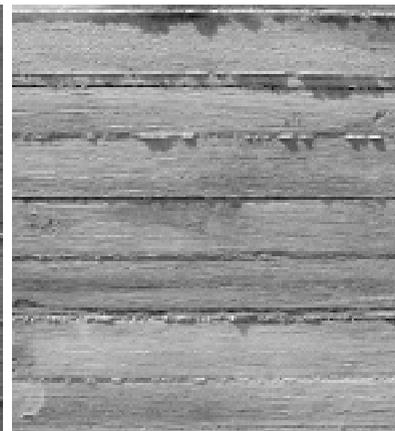
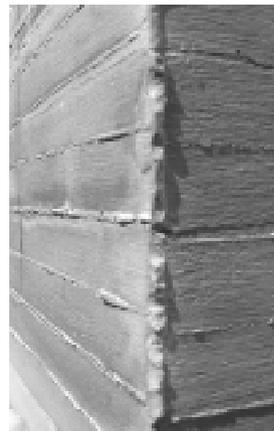


The exit sequence is different from the entry, as one leaves. The events presented to the visitor on the entry do not hold the same value as an exit in reverse. It was important in the development of the project that an exit sequence grew to hold this role. The light that is taken away is during the entry is gradually given back. The passage is a slow descent to the outdoors where one finds a sunken plaza. This in-between space is meant as a transition back to the profane, a space to linger and reflect. The repetition of the markers allows for privacy and permeability. Their direction leads the slow climb to the way out. The chapel floor spills out into the landscape, offering a place to sit.

photographic montage of exit and sunken plaza

The was important for the character of the concrete walls to collect the light on the exterior as well as the interior. The thick section of the wall demands a slow controlled pour. This affords an opportunity to introduce texture. The joints from the form work and the pours are exaggerated, casting shadows across the surface.

concrete studies in natural light

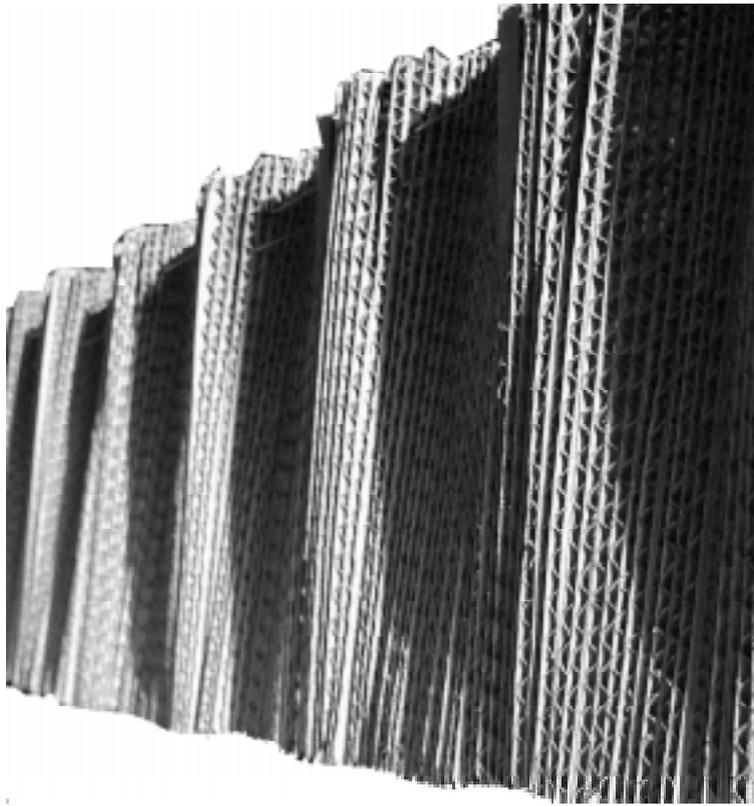


...I believe that "architectural materials" are not limited to wood or concrete that have tangible forms, but go beyond to include light and wind- which appeal to our senses...

studies in light

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know...We measure time. But how can we measure what does not exist? The past is no longer, the future is not yet. And what of the present? The present has no duration...when I measure time, I measure impressions, modifications, of consciousness..

St. Augustine



screen wall in natural light



chapel view in natural light, mid-day



projections from candle wall

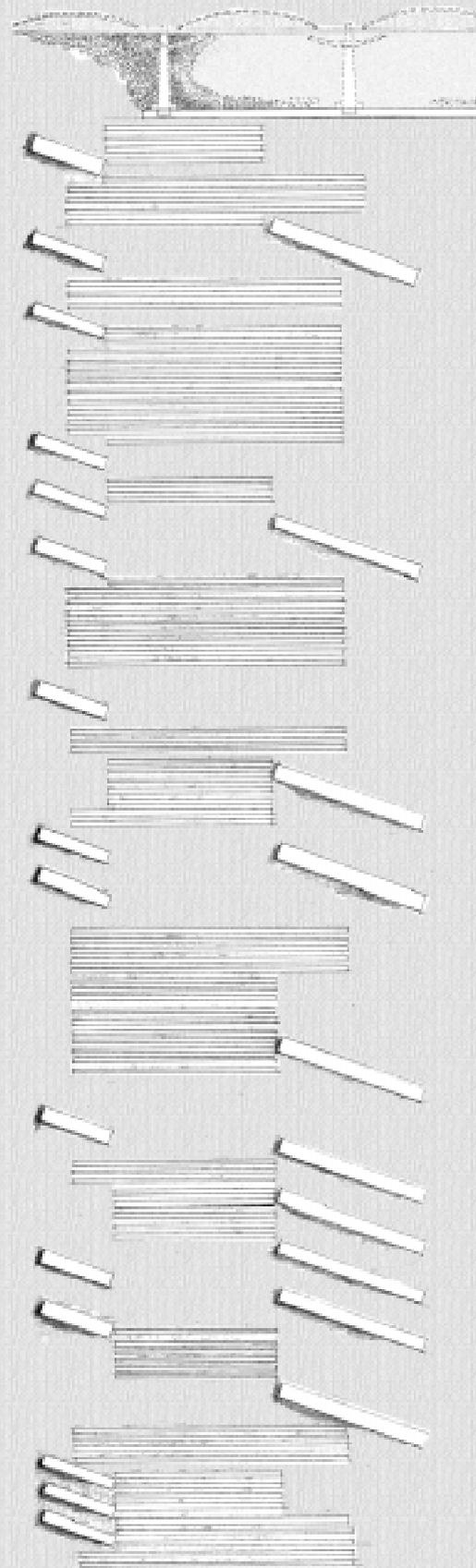
epilogue

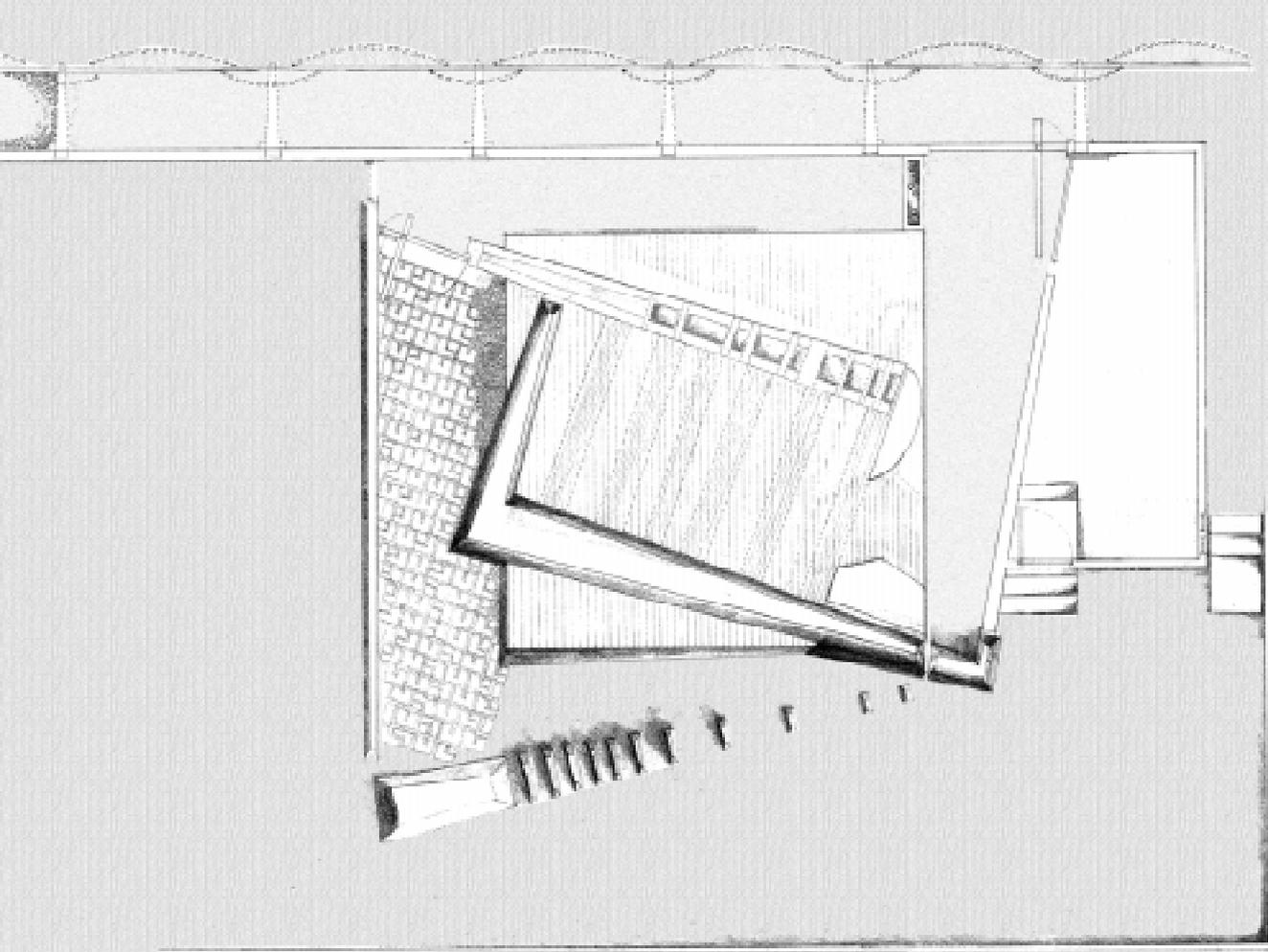
This thesis affords the opportunity to explore an element of architecture, the wall and its dialogue with light, in a search for *place*. What separates the architecture of *space* versus that of *place* is a memorable relationship with character. We live in an environment where events *take place*, uniting *place* as an integral part of existence. A place is a qualitative, total phenomenon, comprised of space, character, and atmosphere, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties. The existential purpose of building (architecture) is therefore to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment. Place is the point of departure as well as the goal of our structural investigation as architects.

To achieve this level of perception of place, architecture must be understood as a series of experiences rather than a singularity, engaging all sensory receivers. The joy is derived from a personal discovery with the phenomena of the built world. The challenge for architecture is to generate this response, heightening the experiences of day-to-day.

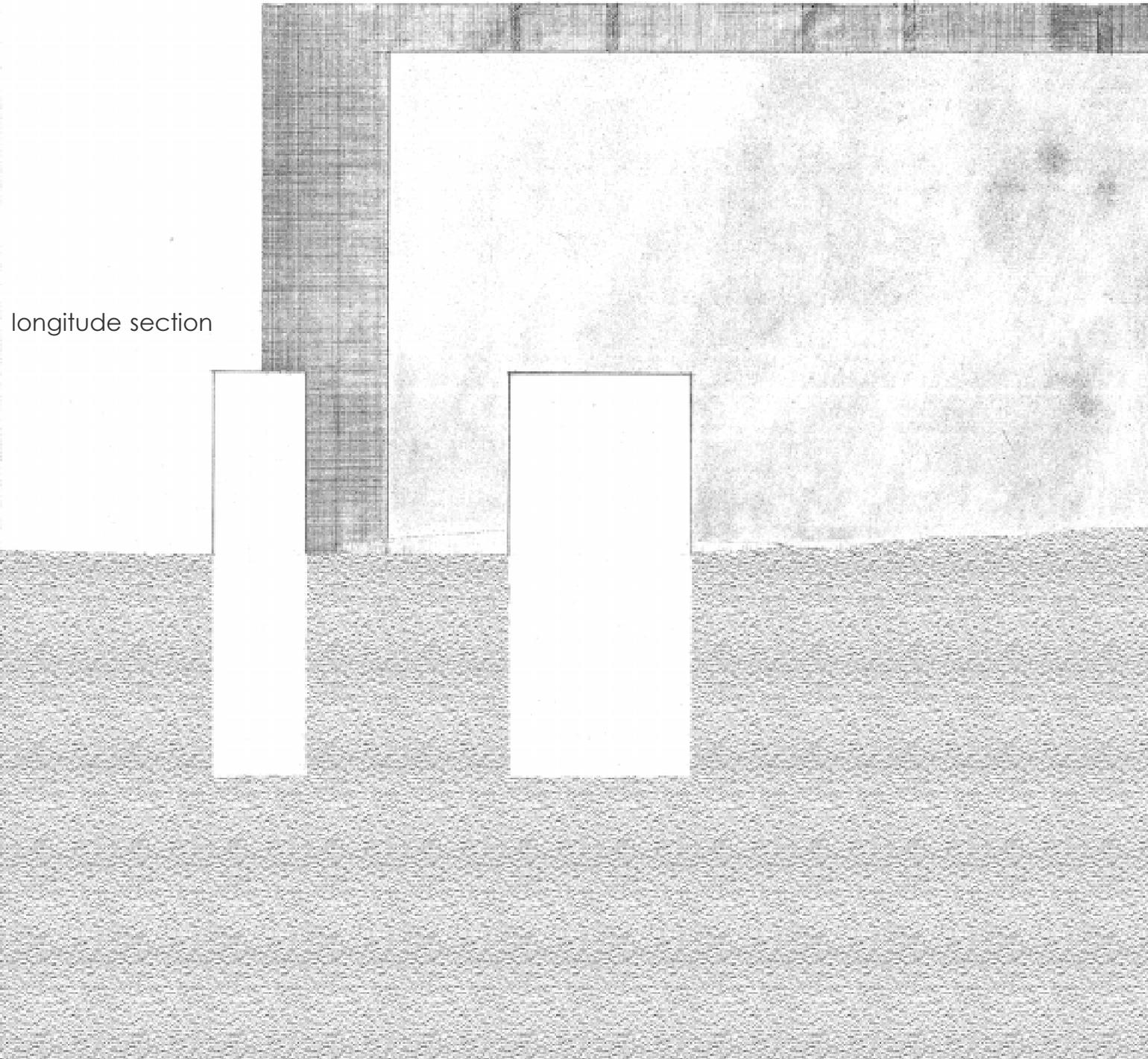


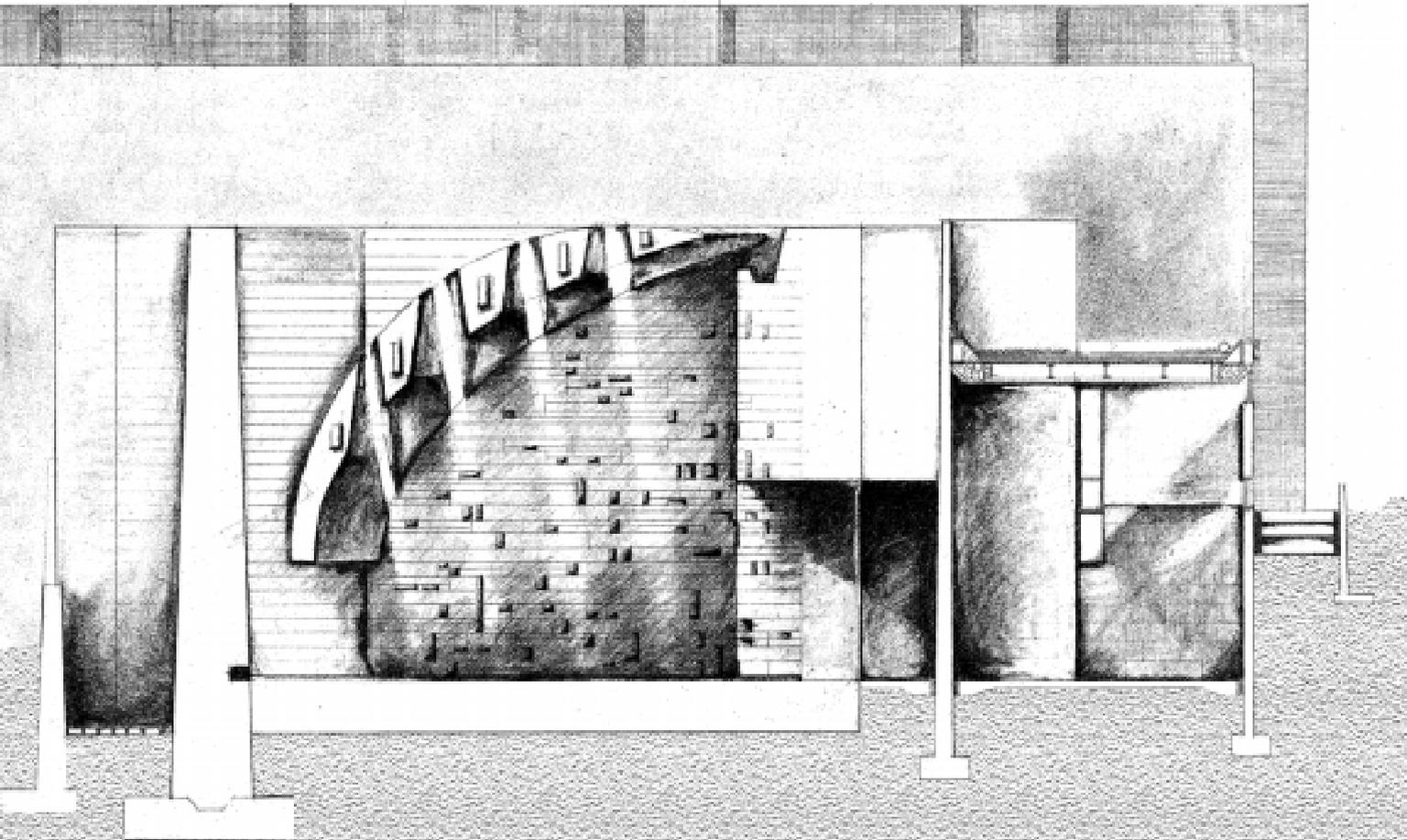
plan of the floor





longitude section





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