

**TO SPARK IMAGINATION:
THE AMERICAN FILM INSTITUTE**

By
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of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

Approved:

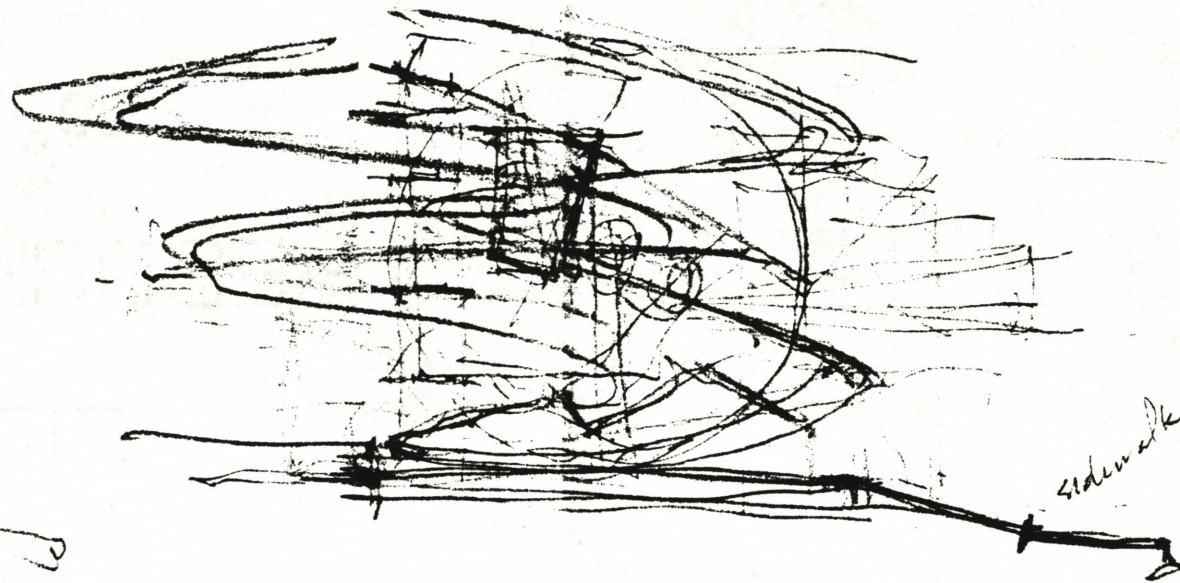
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Stephen Small



July 1989



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(ABSTRACT)

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role and influence imagination plays on a building for the arts.

The American Film Institute is considered to be a

building for the production and study as well as the presentation of film.

Because imagination is the most important tool the film maker possesses and is that which the general audience becomes a part of, this thesis strives to produce a building which enhances this tool.

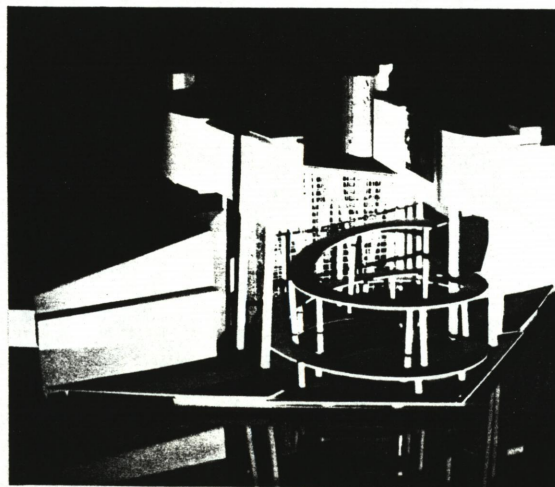
Steel and glass have been chosen as two of the three primary materials in the

film institute for their reflective properties as well as their specific properties to distort reflections. Concrete was chosen as the third primary material not only for its compressive strength, but for its many possible finishes and its compatibility (being non-reflective) with the other two primary materials.

The institute will be

created in such a way that even in their permanence they will provide for a changing space which will make for a re-occurring newness each time it is visited, thus sparking the imagination.

To the user of the institute, the space will each time be new. It takes on this characteristic as its users encounter their own reflection as well as



the reflections - sometimes distorted - of others. This is enhanced as movement occurs not always in a straight line nor only at one level. Shade and shadow from stationary light, as well as light in motion, further enhance the imagination.

"The spatial area, whatever it may be - room, stage, garden, street - is the screen; the moving objects

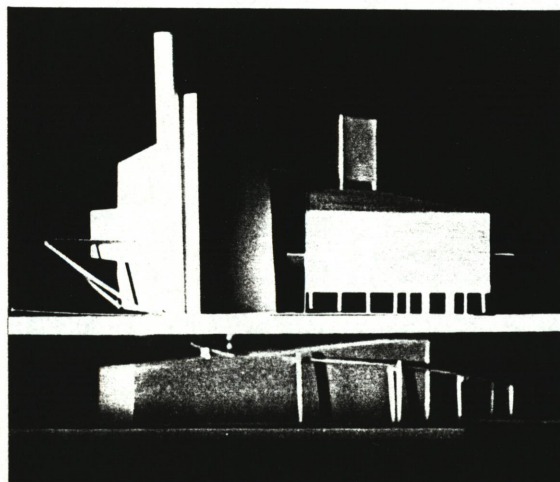
and people are the picture-in-solution reconstituted as a transient entity in time and space."³.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hope is the thing with
feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without
the words,
And never stops at all....².

GILBERT

GILBERT



FORWARD

"New material contingencies and changing spiritual conditions have in many ways left their imprint on our life. There is the ideal of a new beauty, still obscure and indeterminate, but already exerting its influence on the imagination of the masses. We have lost our taste for the monumental, the heavy and static, and we now prefer

what is light, ephemeral, quick."

Sant'Elia

"... its [architecture's] function is not merely to satisfy new exigencies, but to solve them with the aid of the artist's imagination.... Architecture... is more than a practical undertaking, it is the expression of a spiritual vision against a

background of practical conditions and scientific media."



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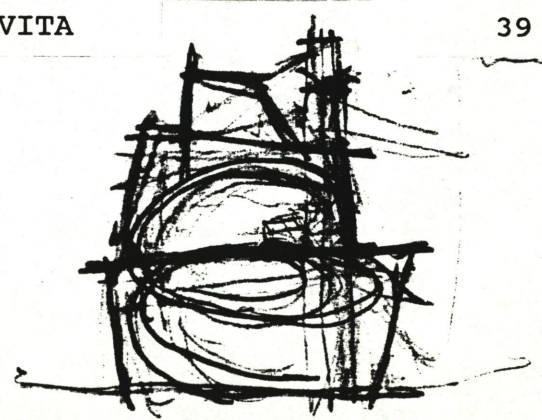
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INTRODUCTION

IDEA: WONDER, IMAGINATION
AND POSITIVE ILLUSION

Dialogue Between the Viewer
and the Screen
(The Film Maker, the Film
and the Viewer)

The Film:

A means of escape... making
reference to the real - to
be identified with - to get
lost in. No matter how

specific or explicit, a good
piece leaves room for the
imagination... to complete
the frame, clip or whole
piece, or interact with
it... a sort of starting
point for the individual.

The film institute can be in
this way. A beginning where
creativity exists, is
practiced, and is a
motivating instrument. A
material... a structural
entity... a captured moment

in time, in memory, that
makes use of choice
material, existing elements
and the institute's every-
day users and visitors, to
exemplify wonder,
imagination, and positive
illusion to enhance the
imagination.

An analogy of composer/
performer comes to mind:
imagination is extremely
important for both the
composer and the performer.

The composer is the creator
while the performer is the
interpreter. Likewise, the
architect creates an
environment (working,
performance, etc.) in which
the client will perform
certain tasks (here,
specifically the art of film
making and its study).

The tools of the trade
available to the composer
are somewhat simple in
themselves. The greatest and

most important tool, that which separates the good from the tolerable, is the very personal, imagination. So it is to the film maker. The building in which he is housed should be that which enhances this tool. Hopefully, not only will the imagination of the film maker be sparked, but also those of the passersby and other users as well. (The very personal imagination is shared.)

So, imagination is the most important tool of the film maker and student. But through the film the film maker must allow the viewer's imagination to be excited as well.

The composer creates a piece, not with the idea that every dynamic and tempo be followed religiously, but with the intention that the performer, the interpreter, would do just that -

interpret. The highly imaginative composition not only allows room for the imagination of the performer, but also incites the imagination of the performer as well.

Architecture as a finished composition should allow for interpretation. The built form of the American Film Institute should, in its chosen materials and their configuration, its form and

image, as well as its relationship to the human form, be highly imaginative. It must in and of itself be imaginative, but most importantly it must spark the imagination of those who inhabit the institute as well as those who will only gaze at it in passing.

Not only should it allow for this creative response, but it should provide springboards for such.

This response to the art of architecture comes in the form of wonder, imagination and positive illusion.

These springboards are not like a new toy - played with then discarded - but like that toy which a child comes back to over and over.

In Woody Allen's film, The Purple Rose of Cairo, the film takes on a literal interpretation of the

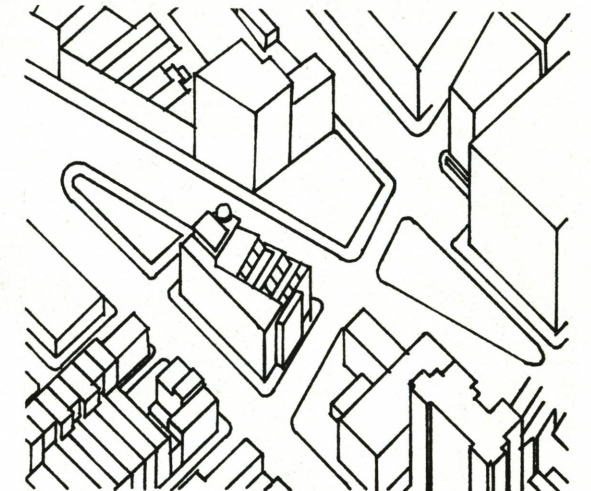
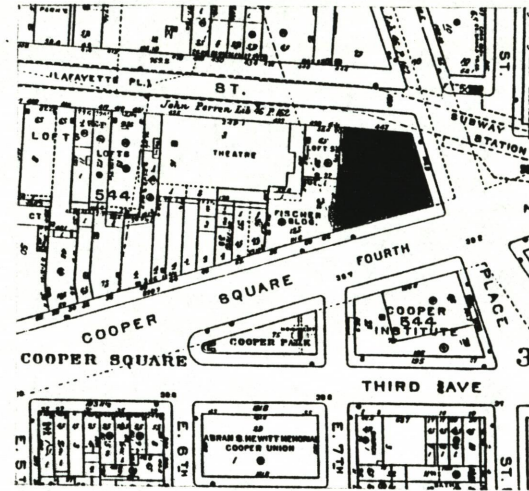
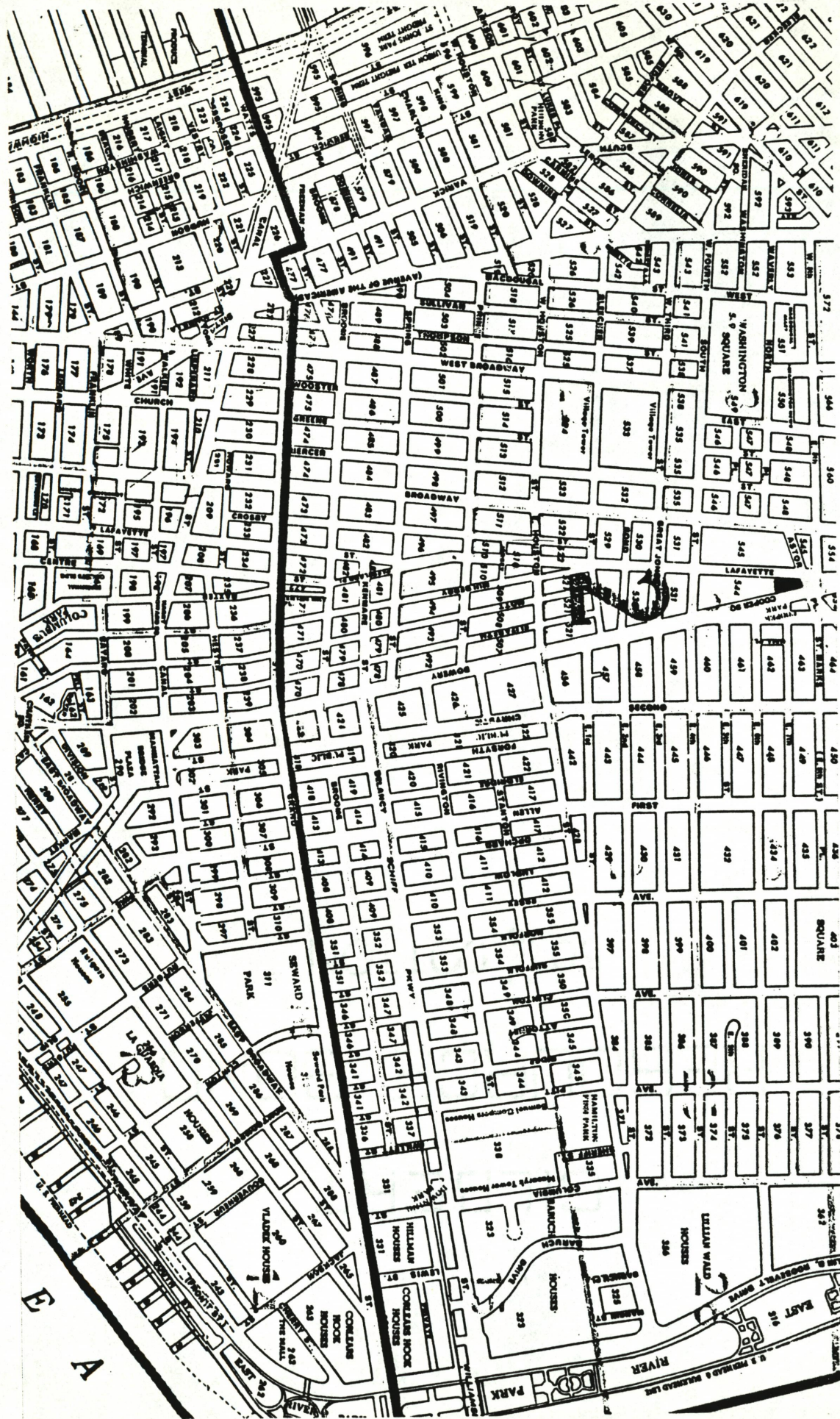
observance of the relationship between the viewer of film and the characters in the actual film.

In this film the point is two-fold. This relationship is confronted in the film while you, the viewer are confronted with the same dilemma, as you tend to believe the unreal to be real.

The Purple Rose of Cairo exemplifies the illusion and loss of reality in the relationship of the viewer of the film and the film itself.

Finally, imagination in architecture is the general... the essential in all architecture associated with the arts. The desire to express in architecture (through the use of material, manipulation of

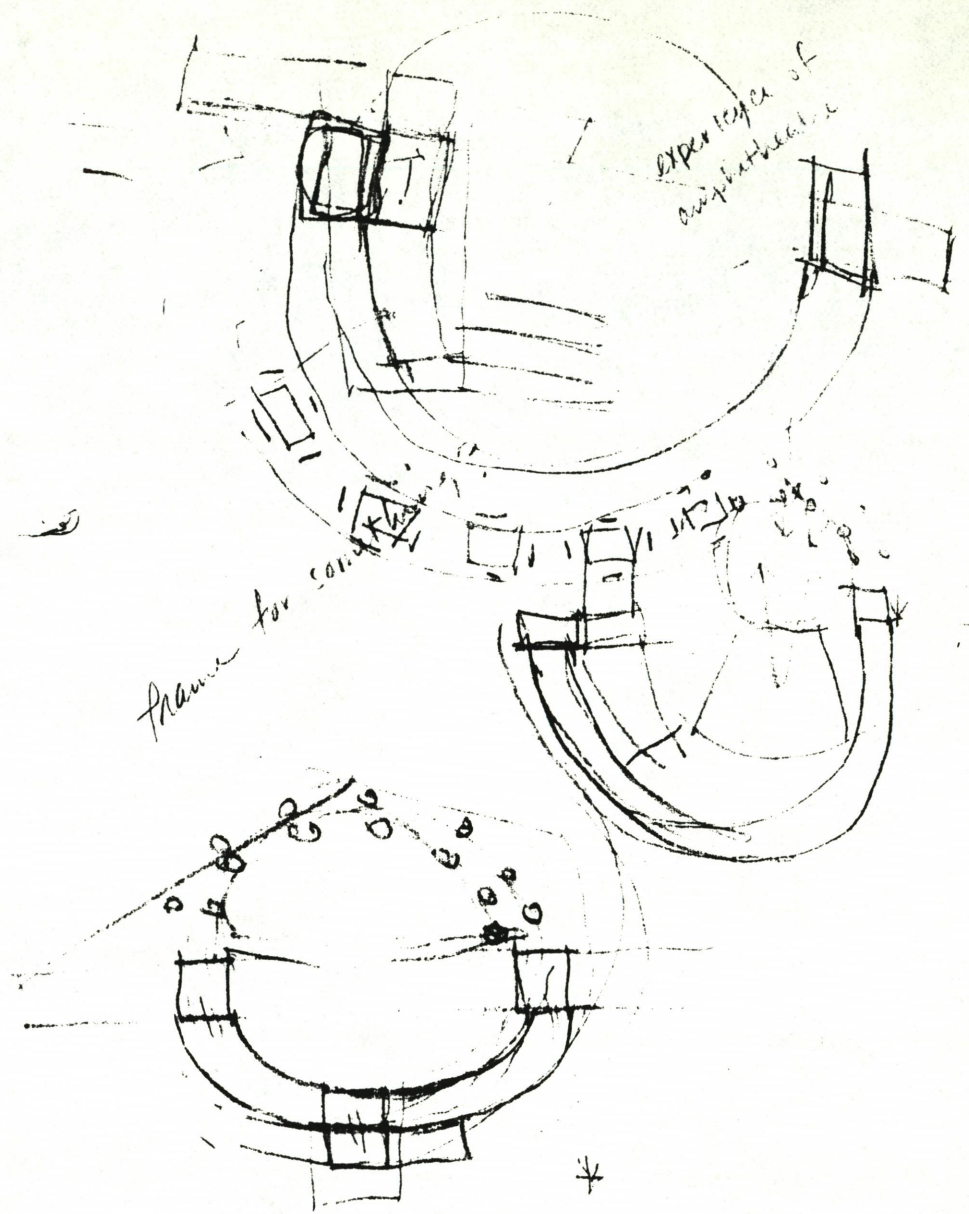
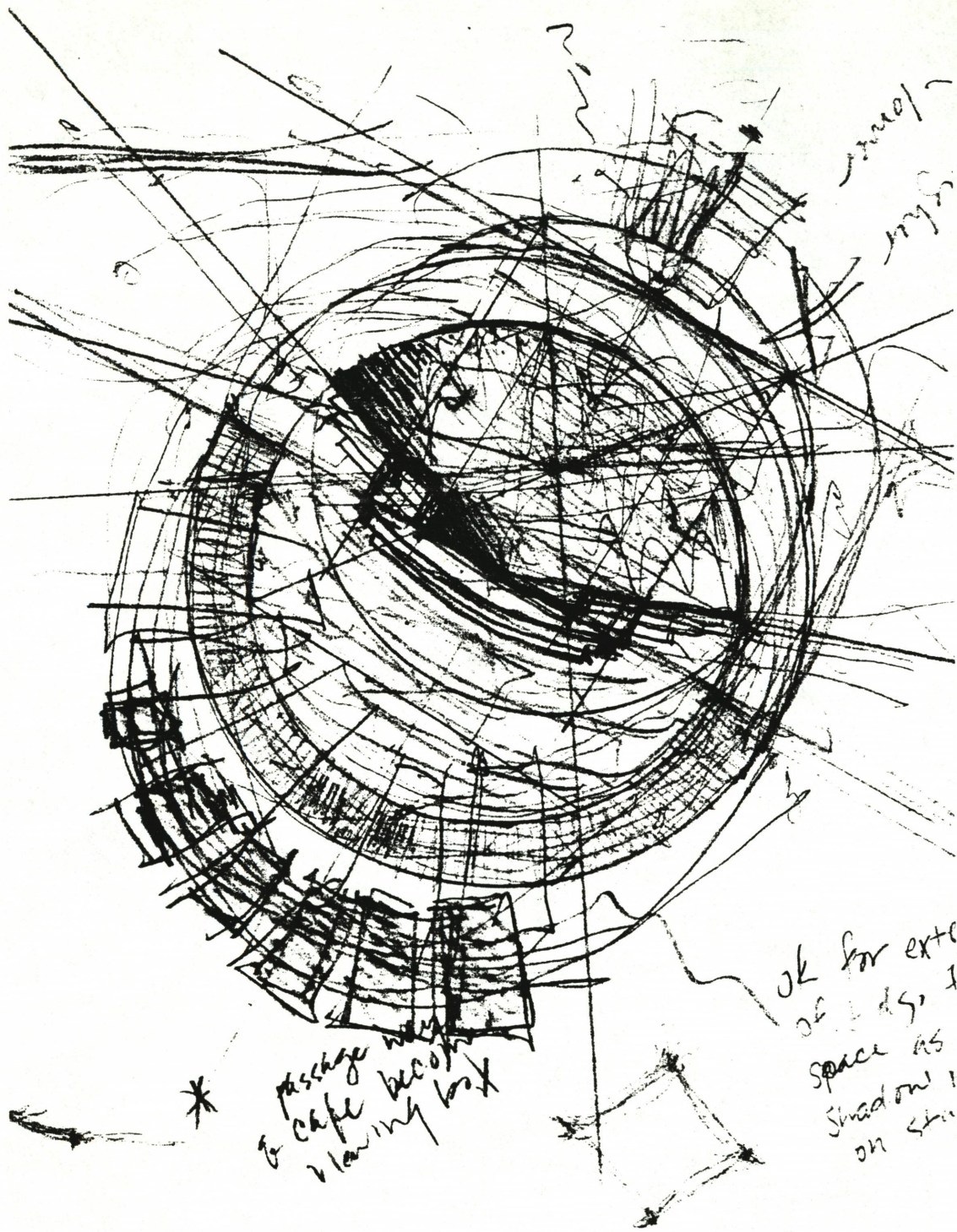
light, and composition), the illusion and imagination associated with the human/film relationship, is the specific architectural generator of the American Film Institute.



THE PROCESS

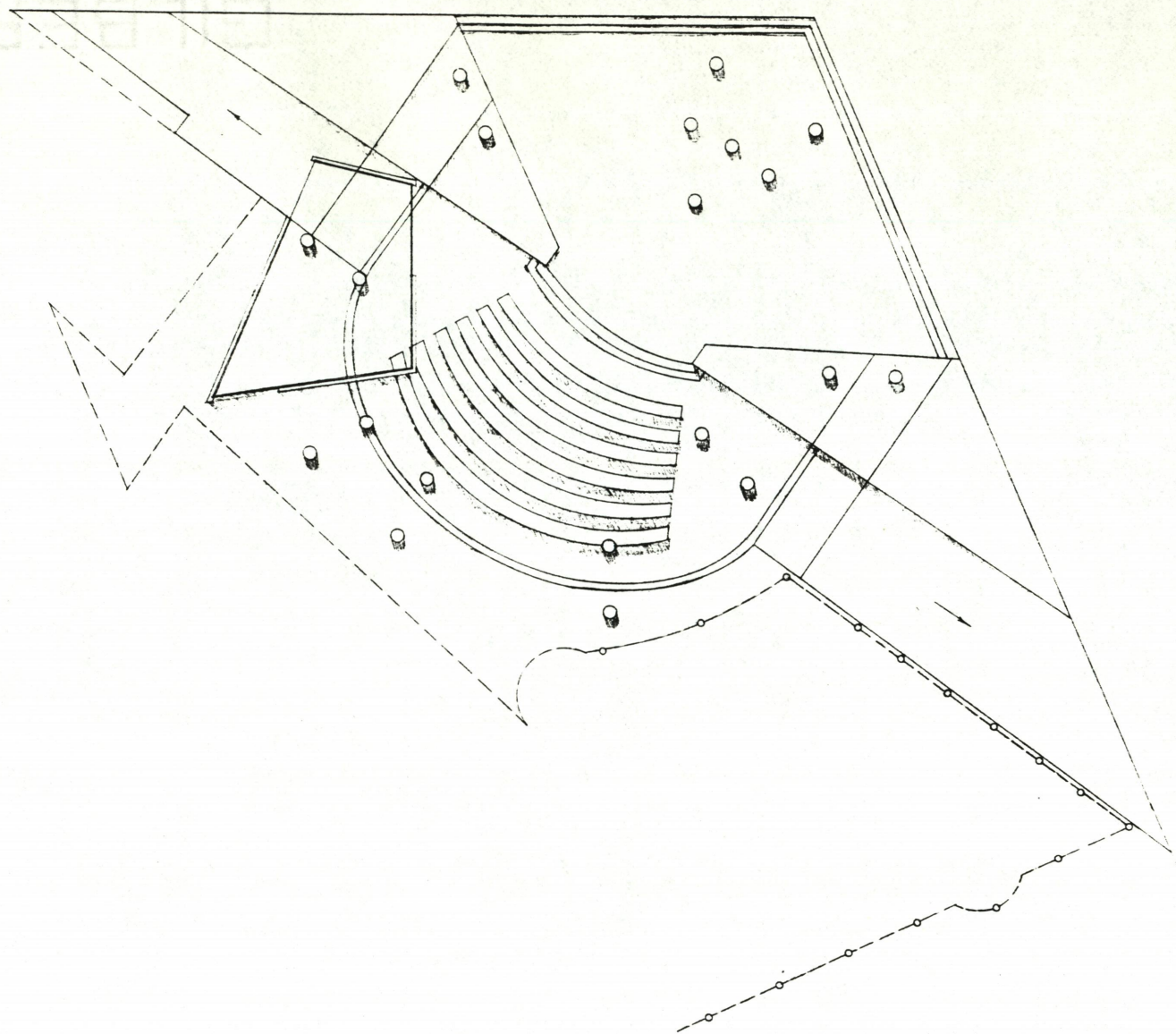
I agreed with the prevailing thought of the program: that being the theatres (occupancy of 600, 2 @200, and an amphitheatre) are the heartbeat of the American Film Institute. (Each theatre is mainly responsible for the viewing of film, but each should allow for minimal performances and lectures as well.)

An open urban corner site in the heart of older, cultural Manhattan, the current lot is located across the street from the Astor Place Subway, Cooper Union and a park somewhat beside the Union. Because of the subway location and the arrangement of the streets to acknowledge this, there is a concrete lot, directly across from the site, where the current subway vestibule exists.

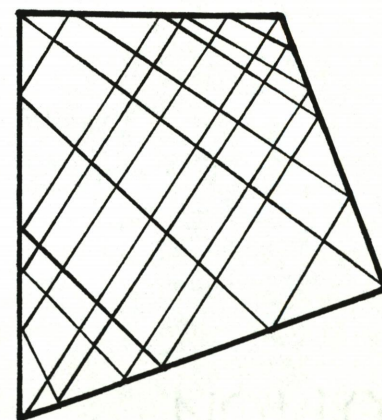


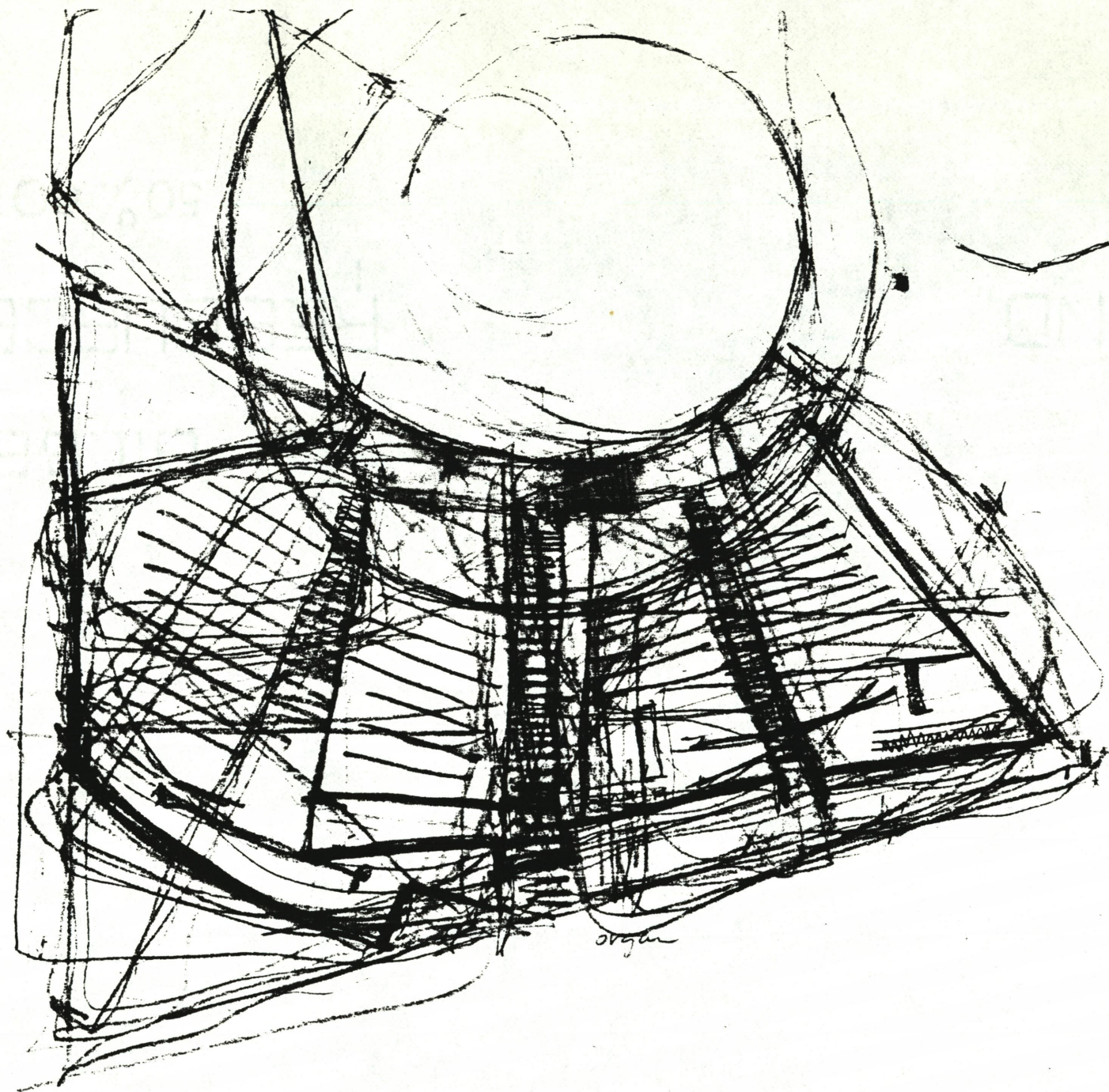
Because of the somewhat irregular shape of the site, its urbanity, and the largeness of the many theatres to be located here, coupled with the fact that they are the heartbeat of the facility, the theatres were given form and site placement priority. Of the four theatres, the amphitheatre was given the most significance at street level. This was because of the amphitheatre's potential

contribution to the urban public as an open plaza area when not specifically functioning as an amphitheatre. Its form was decided as a means of addressing the urban corner. The open northwest corner was chosen for optimum light. A grid was developed from this form from which the other rooms (theatres given precedent) would emerge. (The grid was realized as an architectural



Plan of Amphitheatre





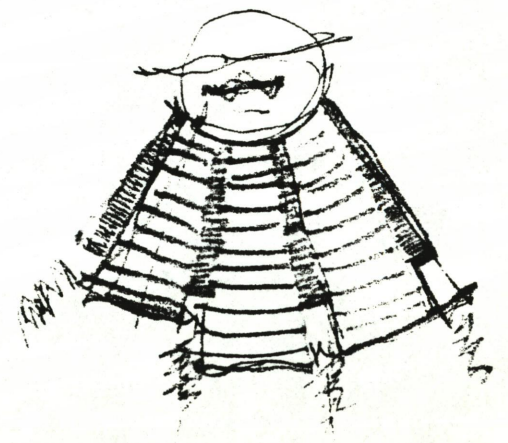
guideline: that from which literal form can - and did - emerge.) As well as literal interpretation, the grid allows for guidance which may veer from strict adherence to its form giving.

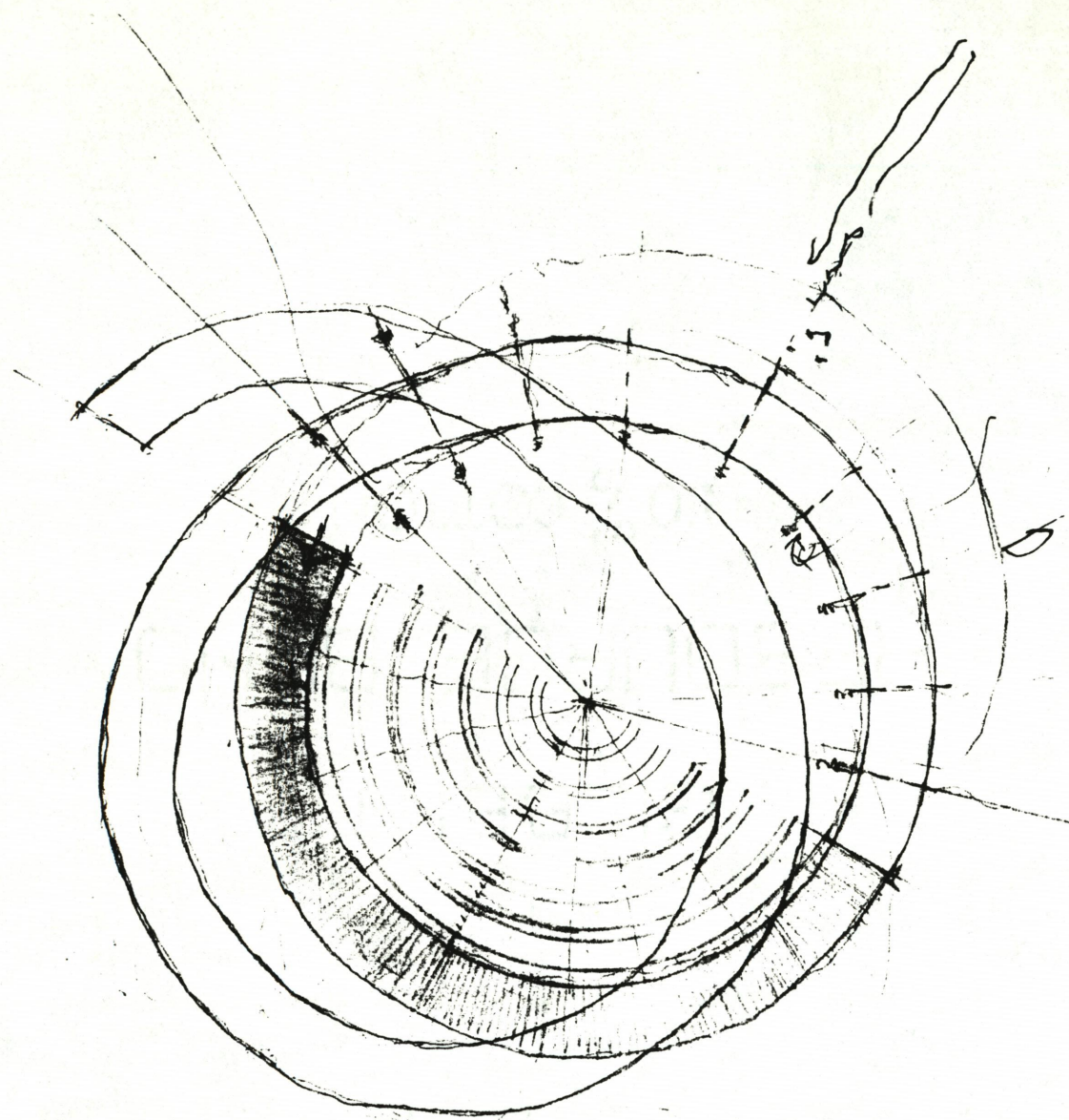
The theatres as entities became separate buildings from a simple idea pertaining to acoustics as well as a sense of arrangement on the site

specific, to allow for light to penetrate to the amphitheatre. The theatres, each having its own form, allow for individual identity signifying the importance of each, a hierarchy, as well as an easy identification for the patron.

At the street level, the amphitheatre is plotted and gives a method of form giving to its peers: one

secondary theatre that arrives at its form literally from the grid and another secondary theatre, which breaks from the grid to allow passage and connection to three streets. This theatre's form also allows for a visual connection from the third street to the interior of the site.





**THE BUILT FORM:
SUBWAY LEVEL**

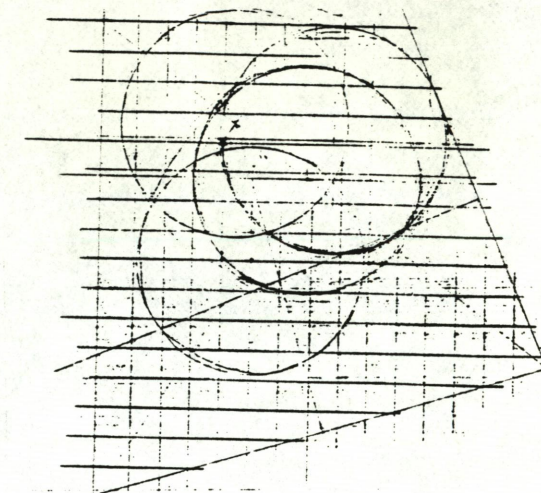
RAMP

From the amphitheatre is generated a somewhat necessary urban edge. This edge will not only embrace the open urban plaza (which the amphitheatre will become when not in performance or viewing mode) but will also become a sort of urban landmark amidst the window

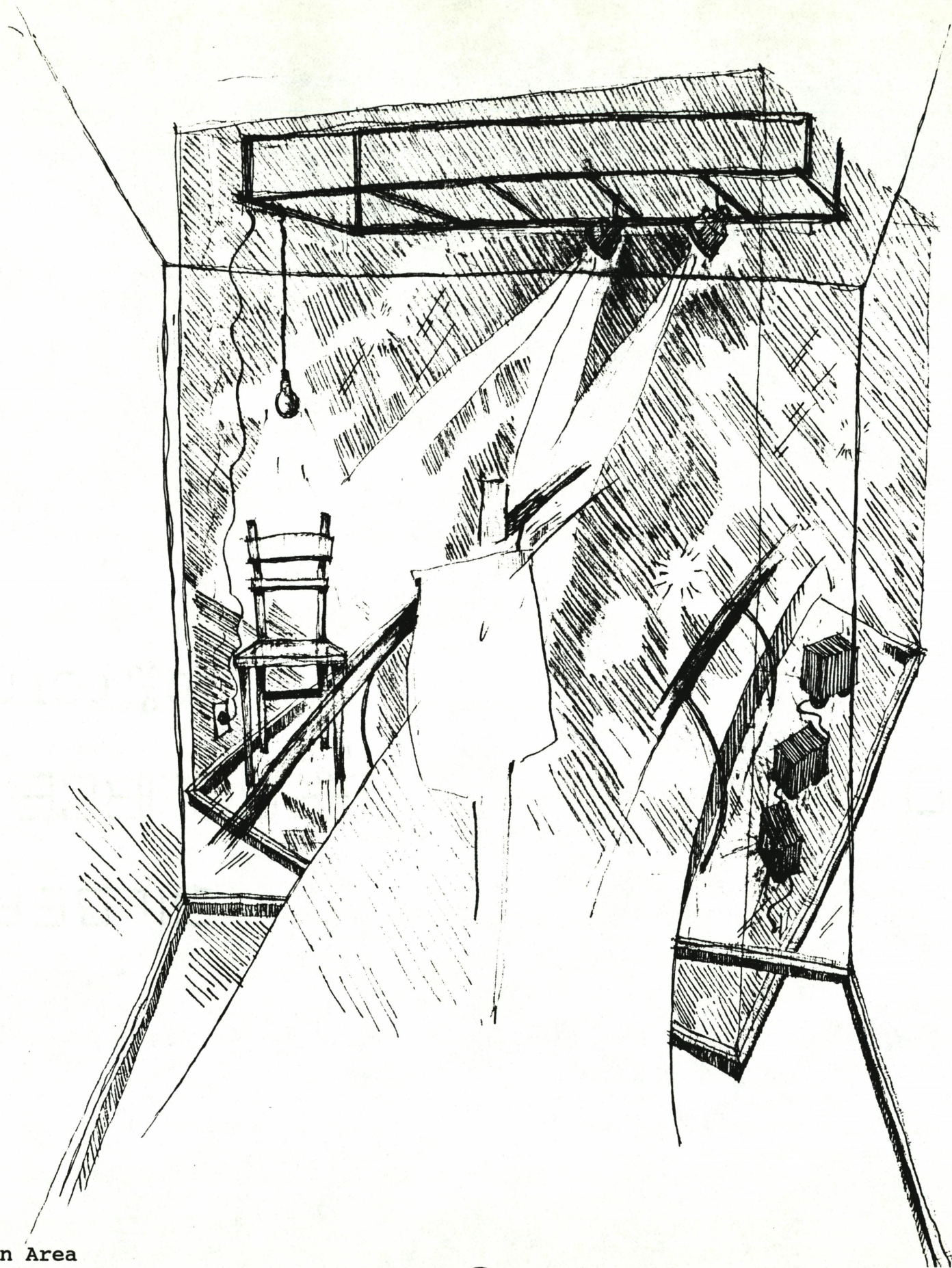
penetrated walls of the surrounding warehouse-type buildings adjacent to the site. (Only the somewhat massive Cooper Union is the exception.) The urban edge and landmark, as well as the classic drama of ascending on a grand scale, takes the architectural form of a majestic ramp which flows with ease in a spiral-like motion, allowing people to penetrate the site, thus giving access to the

theatres and other functions. Having such a commonly recognized dramatic quality, the ramp becomes a symbol of the classic film which allows for a relationship between the built form and the viewer of the American Film Institute. This symbol, in its grand elegance, is a means for identification with film by the public.

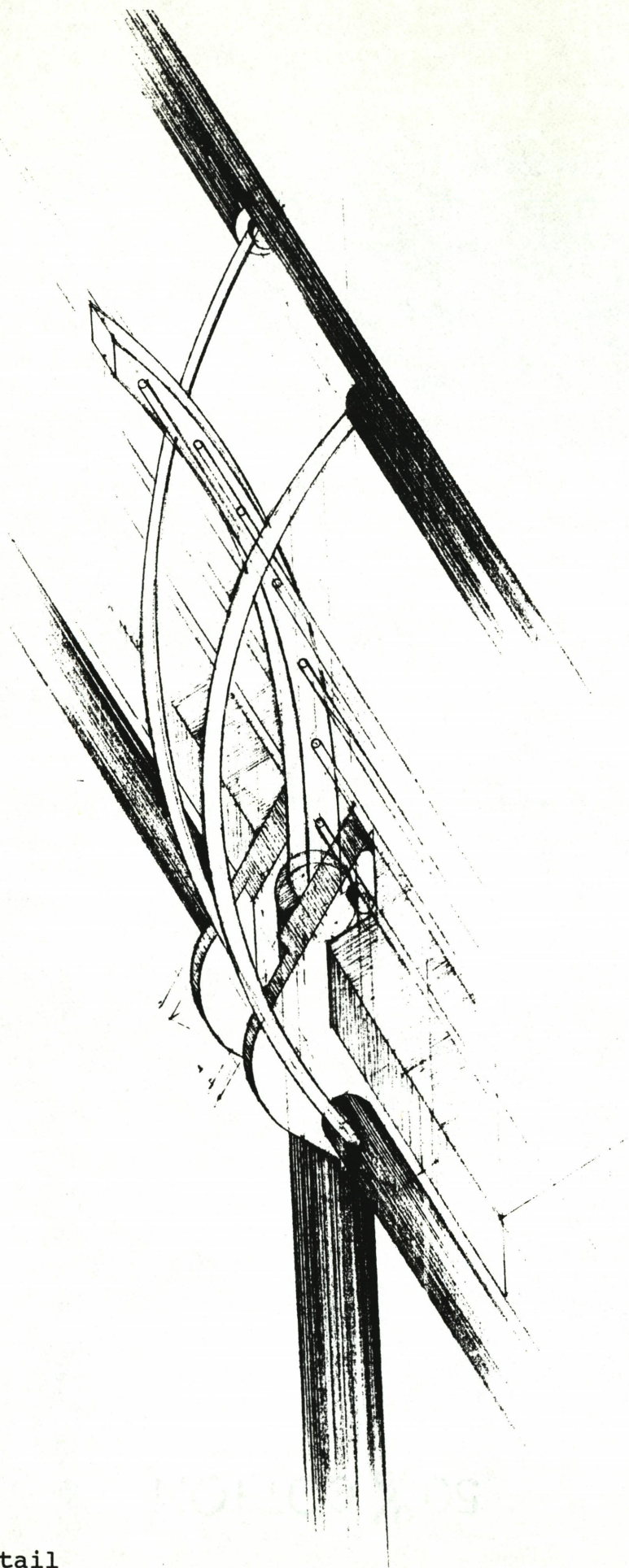
The ramp reaches not only to



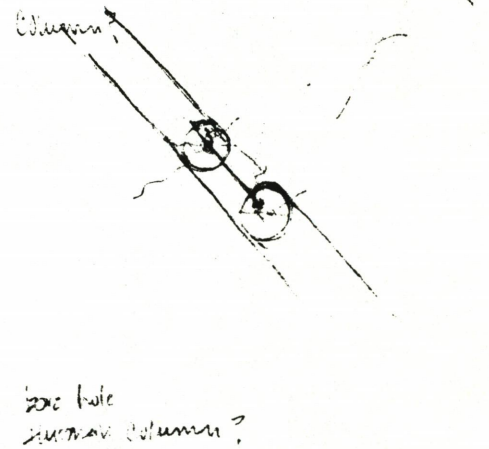
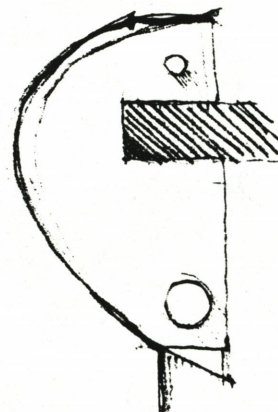
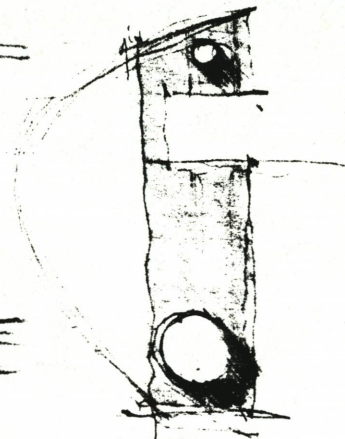
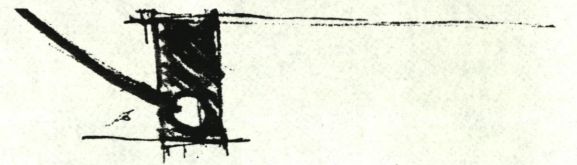
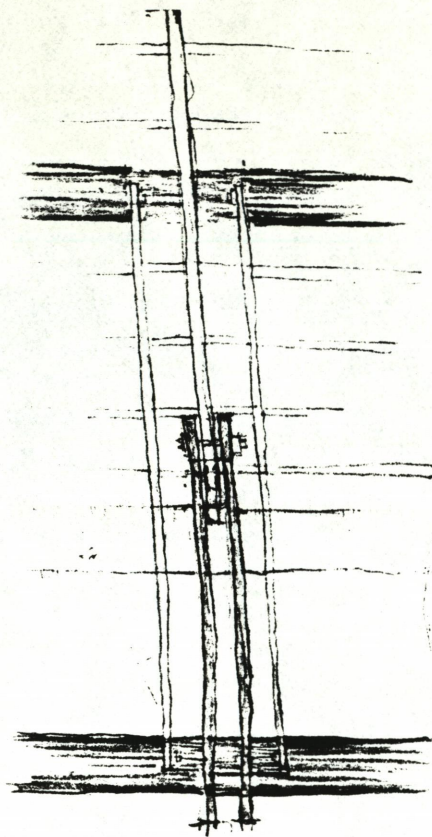
the sky, but to the known depths of the city: the subway. Upon entrance to the underground world from the street level, the ramp becomes a viewing platform for the changing exhibition rooms. The rooms are structurally independent of the ramp. These rooms of translucent walls hang from the necessary connecting points of the trusses which support the street level area. The translucency of



Changing Exhibition Area



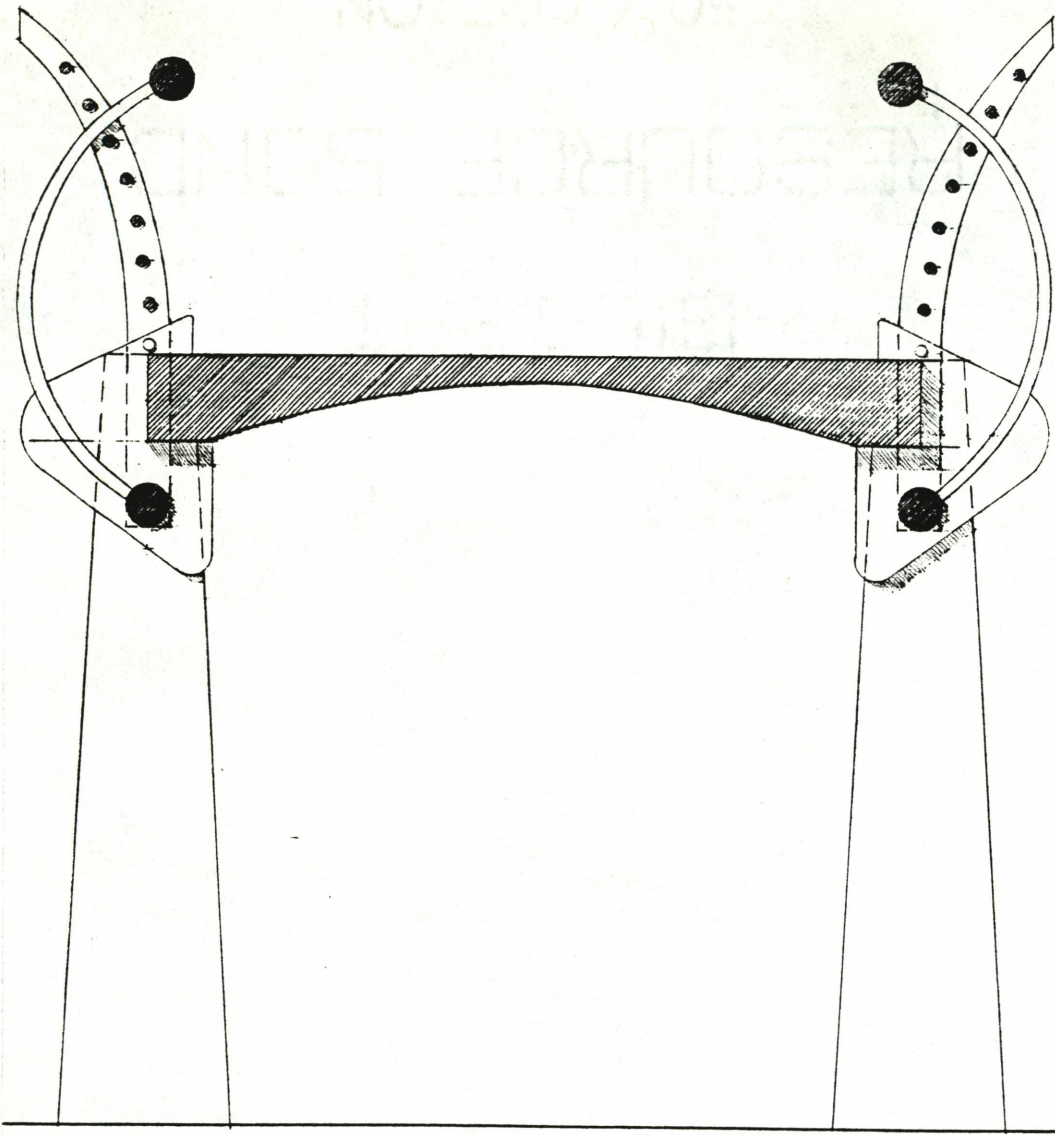
Handrail Detail



the walls allow for the illusion and sparking of the imagination desired, through the movement of people, the changing light from the train, the dim luminescence of the present subway, and the possibly colored and varied light from the exhibits themselves. These conditions acting singularly and in conjunction with one another cause a changing quality of the place. This changing quality allows for

an ever-present newness that is constantly generated and re-generated by the movement and motion of those people and elements specific to the place.

This quality is that which brings to fruition the ideas which generated the architecture of the American Film Institute. An illustration comes to mind of an airport. Most everyone would agree that many hours

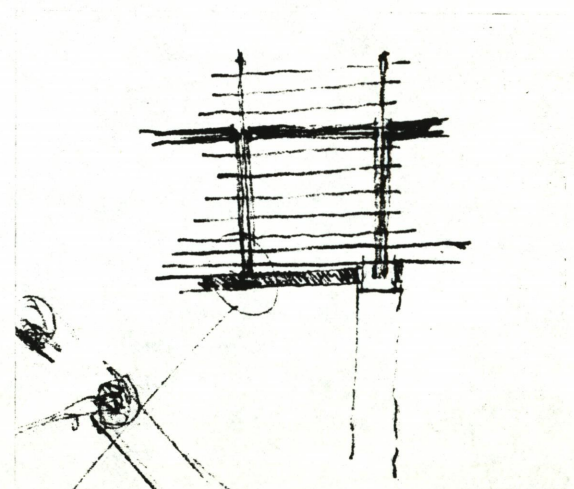
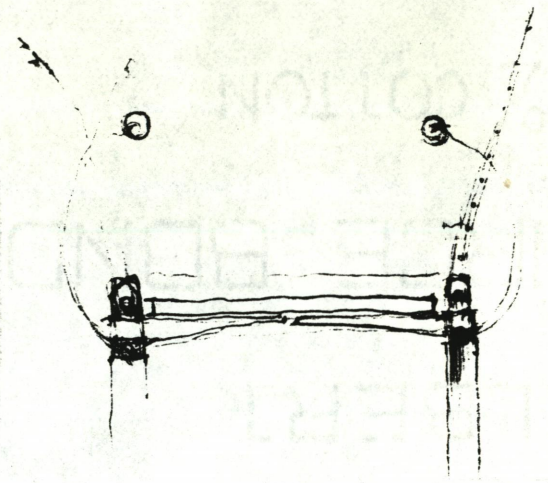


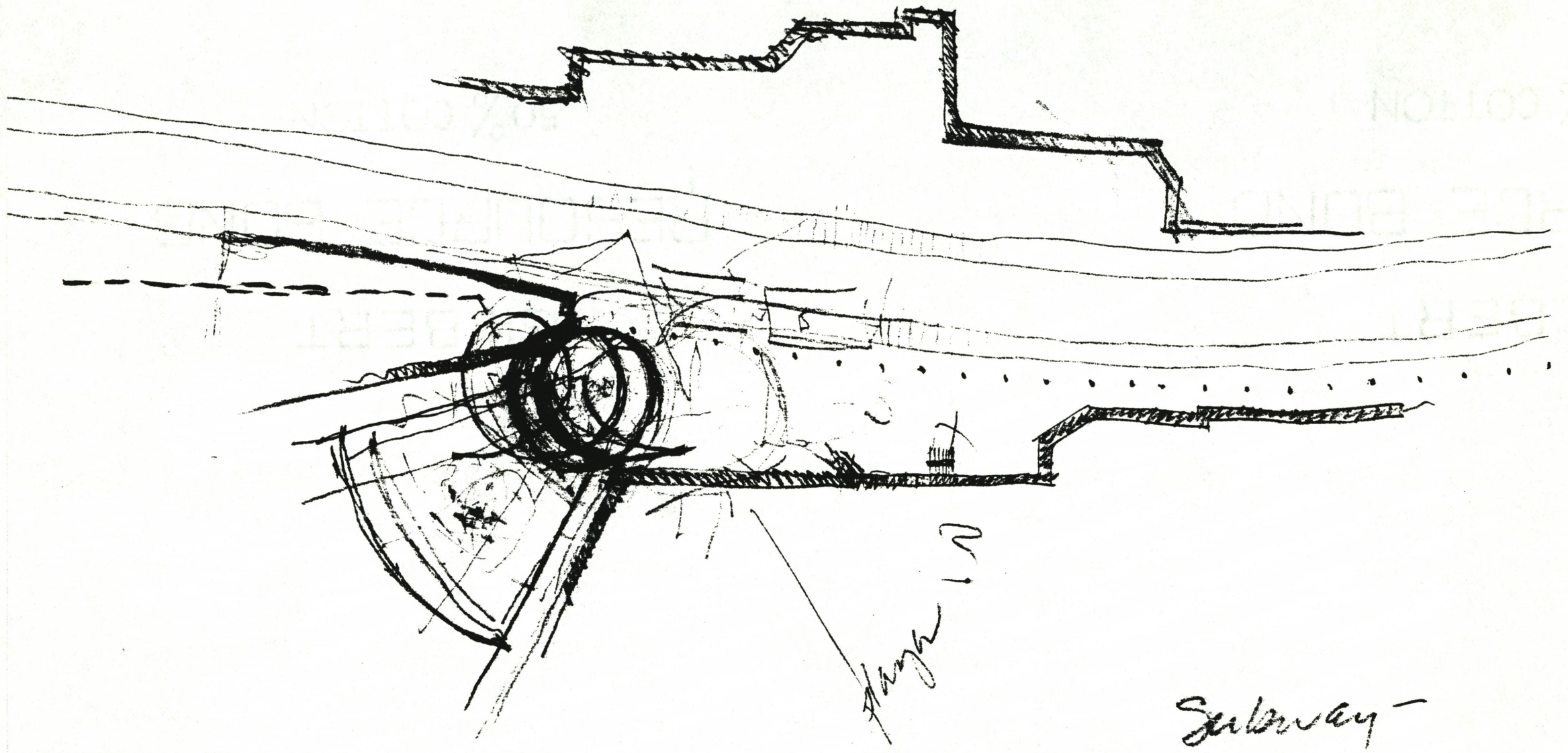
Section of Ramp



can be spent in such a place, "people watching." The many thoughts and assumptions flowing through our brain from such a viewing can have this newness quality previously mentioned. In this illustration, however, the sparking of imagination has nothing to do with the architecture, but only a fascination with people and how they operate. In contrast, this film

institute generates a similar quality from its architecture (translucency, arrangement of walls, and the varying plays of light in this example).





MAIN THEATRE

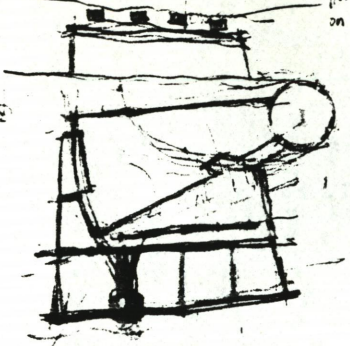
The main theatre develops its form, not from the grid above, but from the flow of commuters as they wait on the platform. The main theatre finds its location in the subway addressing the fact that few parking spaces are to be had in the city proper, and that subway travel is quite commonplace. Having such a theatre located in the city depths

encourages the betterment of the area.

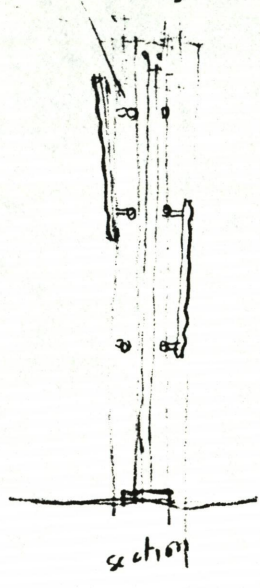




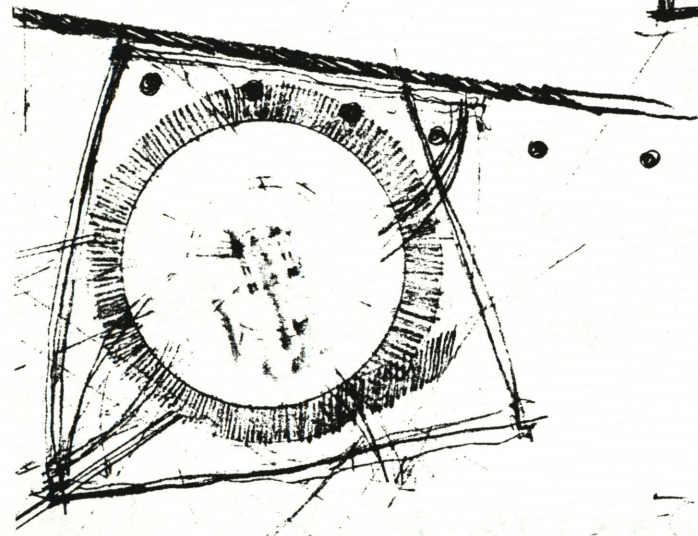
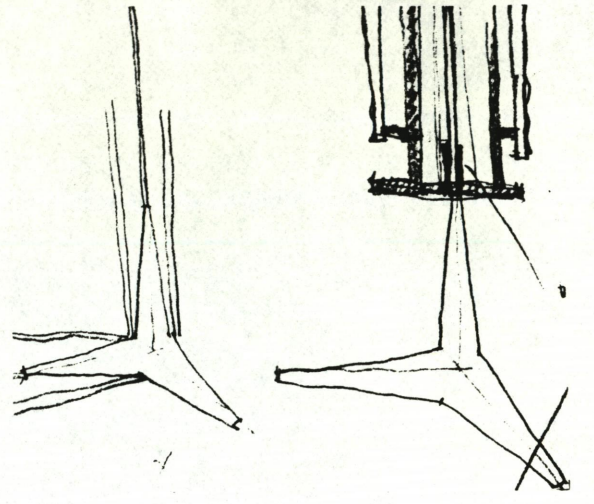
glass block floor on sidewalk



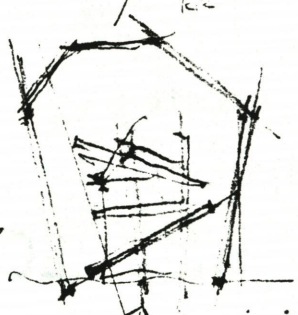
these tubes independent of glass wall. supported by main supports



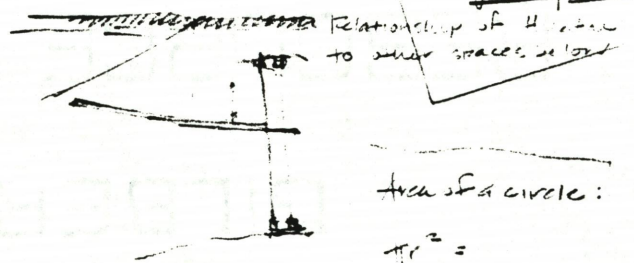
section



adjustable ceiling



set inside gallery space

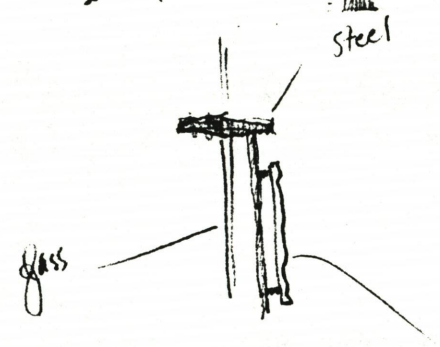


Relationship of H. space to other spaces below

Area of a circle:

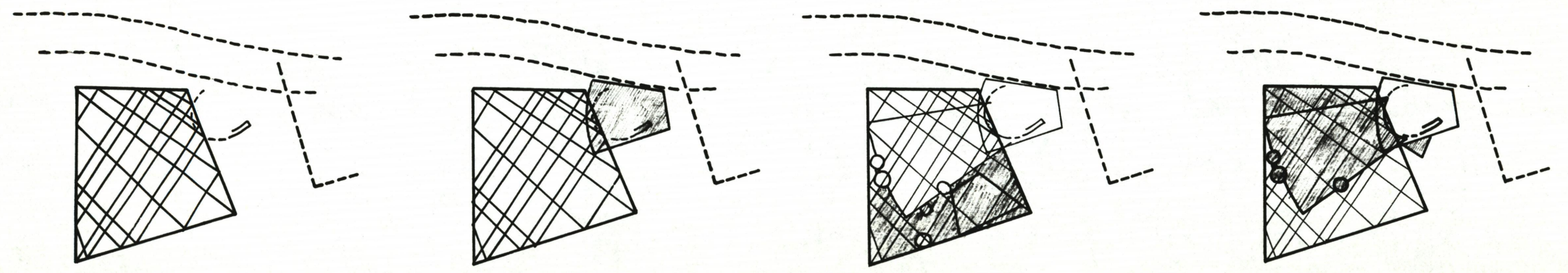
$$\pi r^2 =$$

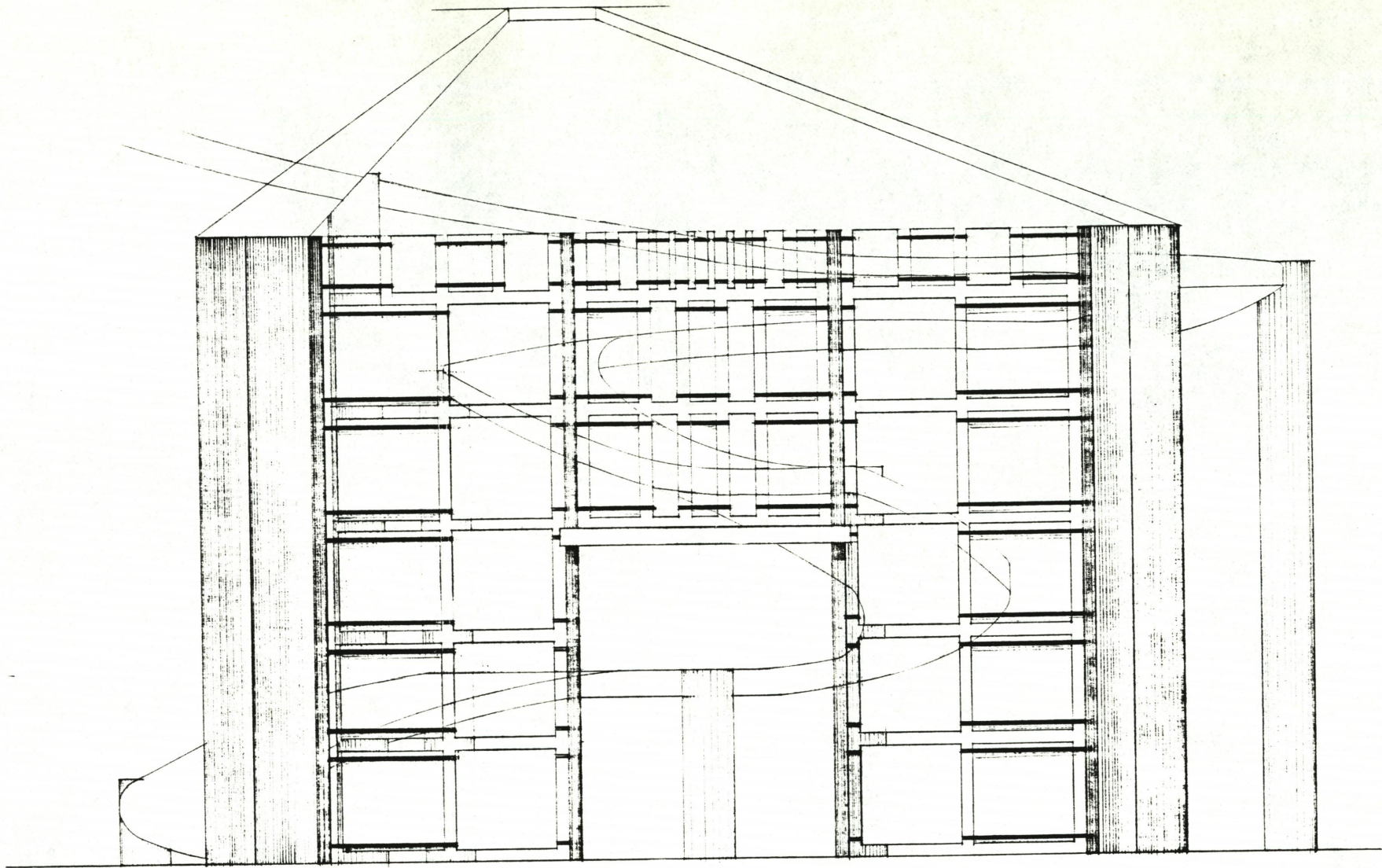
angle steel



glass

plan





Elevation of Main Lobby Wall



MAIN THEATRE LOBBY

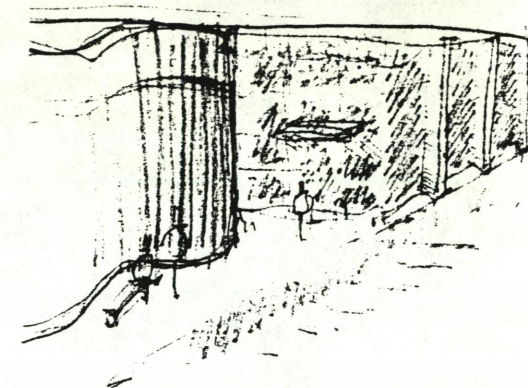
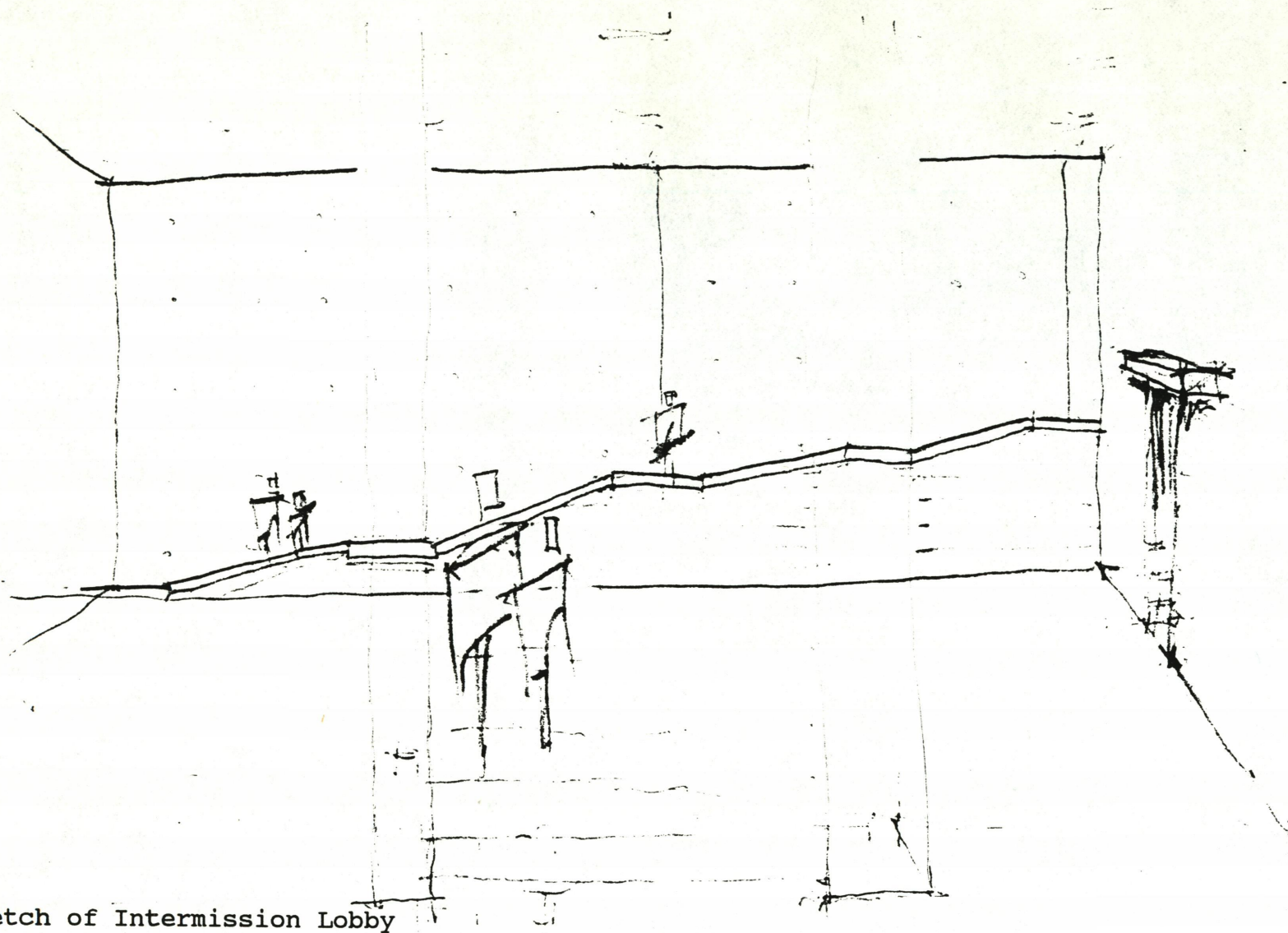
The lobby of the main theatre is a translucent setting which allows subway light and moving rhythmic light from the train itself, to set a mood... an atmosphere. The entrance from the subway platform is made up of structural steel columns of a modified cruciform shape in plan. Between the reflective, slender surfaces of the

steel columns are clear glass panels. Connecting from column to column are thin steel tubes which allow for attachment of rose quartz panels. Each of these translucent rose quartz panels has a polished, irregular surface, and is carefully placed so that only six inches of the clear glass is seen on all four sides between panels. This not only changes the light, but changes the perception

of beings in motion... a new perspective... one that is always new, although the physical will remain unchanged.

In this lobby, partial sets of the current film may be reconstructed as a three dimensional movie bill to inform the public. An object will be located in the center of the room and is surrounded by the majestic and graceful motion of the

ramp. As an occupant of the space travels the ramp, he views the object mentioned from all sides around, above and below. This is reminiscent of the motion picture in its various views shown in such a short time span to the viewer. At the same time the person is viewing the object, he sees various reflections and shadows of himself and other viewers, as well as an actual film, or clips, being



Sketch of Intermission Lobby

shown on a wall which partially embraces the ramp. These are constantly in motion in a directional (ascension/descension of the ramp) sense. These reflections, shades, and shadows are constantly changing as they run across the various materials such as steel columns and walls, the concrete of the ramp, and the glass and rose quartz walls of the lobby area. A final piece of

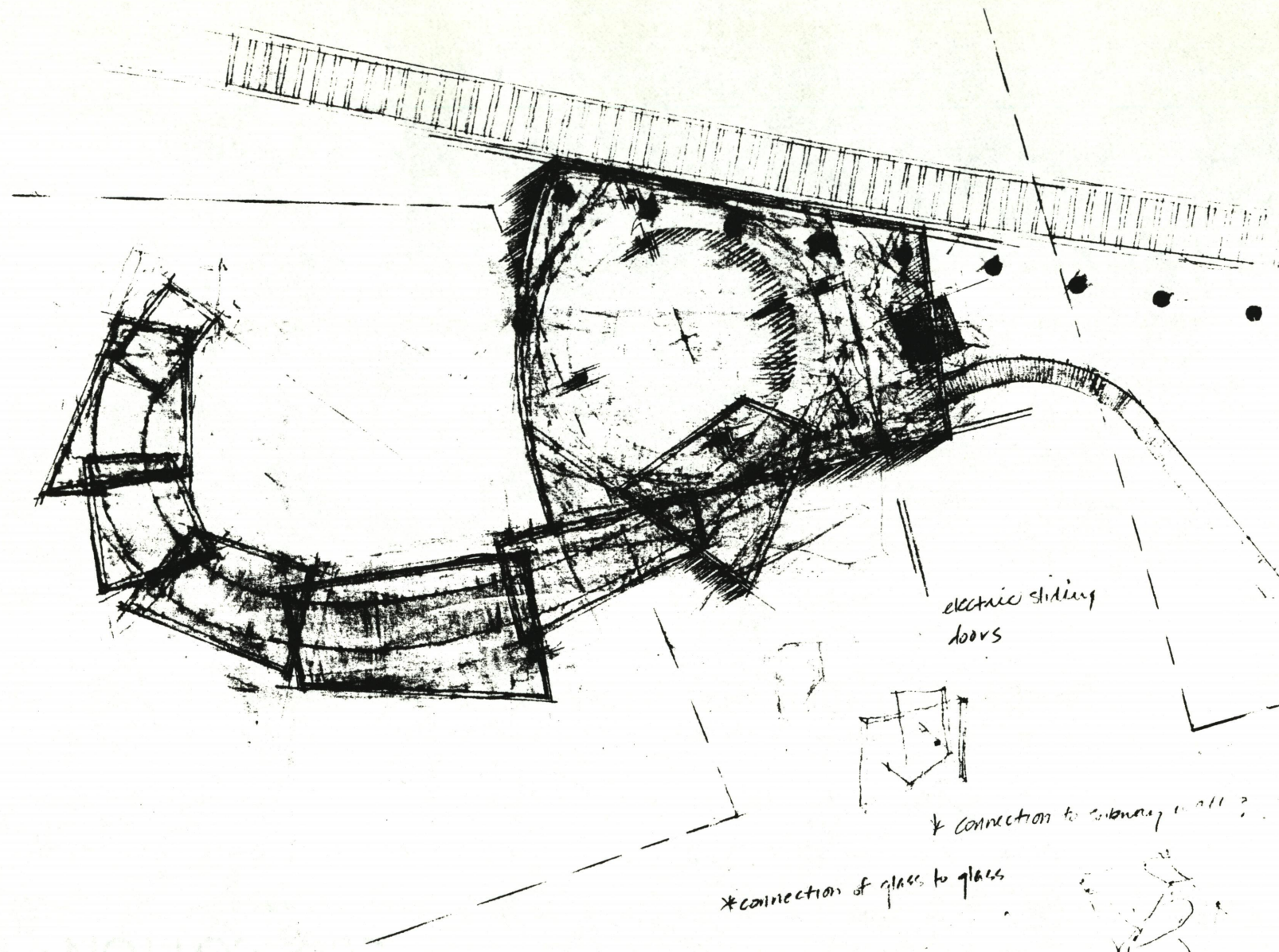
changing light is let in as the room reaches to the street level and, by the use of structural glass block, lets in a dim, changing light from above.

Upon entrance to the main theatre from the ramp, one progresses through a somewhat narrow passageway (located on either side along the depth of the theatre) and begins a slight ascension as the passageway

widens. From each of these landings one can make his way through the arrangement of concrete bearing walls to his personal seat for that performance.

INTERMISSION LOBBY

At a common landing on the east passageway the patron has access to an intermission lobby. Being located next to a small kitchen allows for the lobby to be used for receptions which are often held at the American Film Institute. Although it contains other necessary public functions, the intermission lobby emits the dim light of the subway

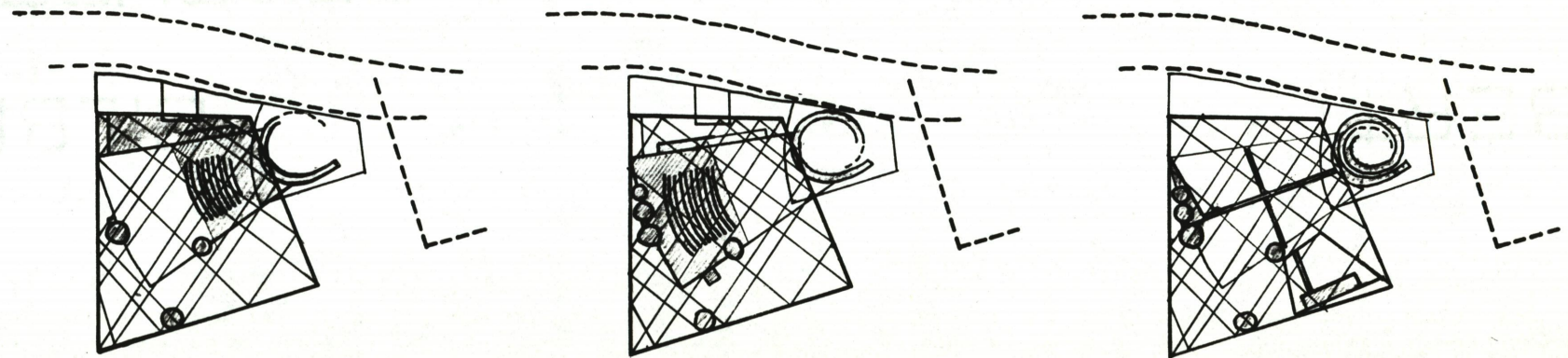


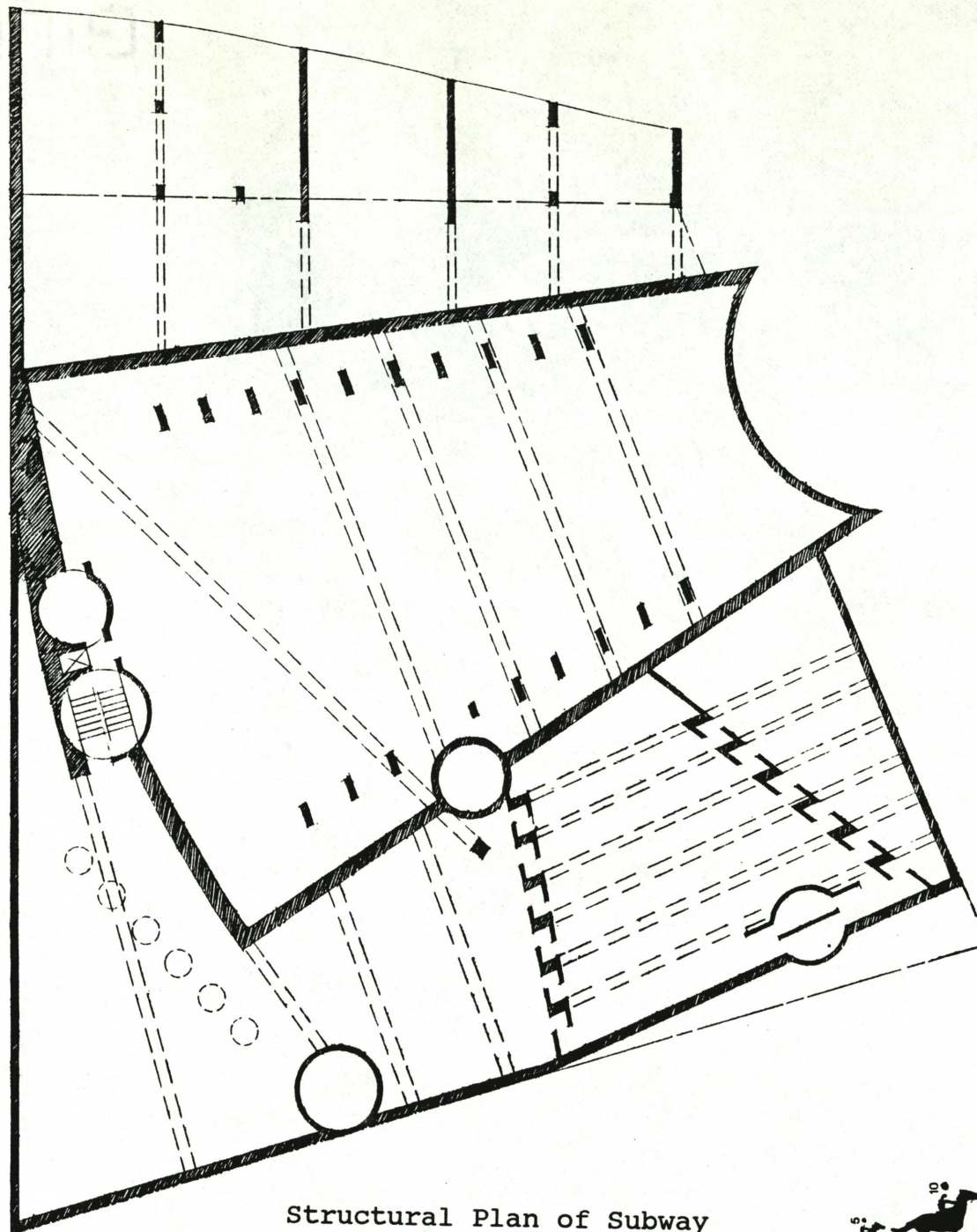
electric sliding doors

*connection to subway wall?

*connection of glass to glass

as well as the changing light of the subway train, thus enhancing the sense of motion and dynamism of the room and patron. The silhouette of the train can vaguely be discerned (being somewhat abstracted by the glass block walls). Its rhythm combines with the rhythm delivered by walls of concrete (perpendicular to the glass block walls and platform edge). A dialogue between the room, the patron





Structural Plan of Subway Level

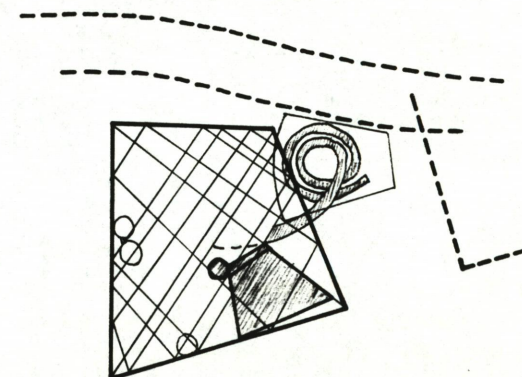


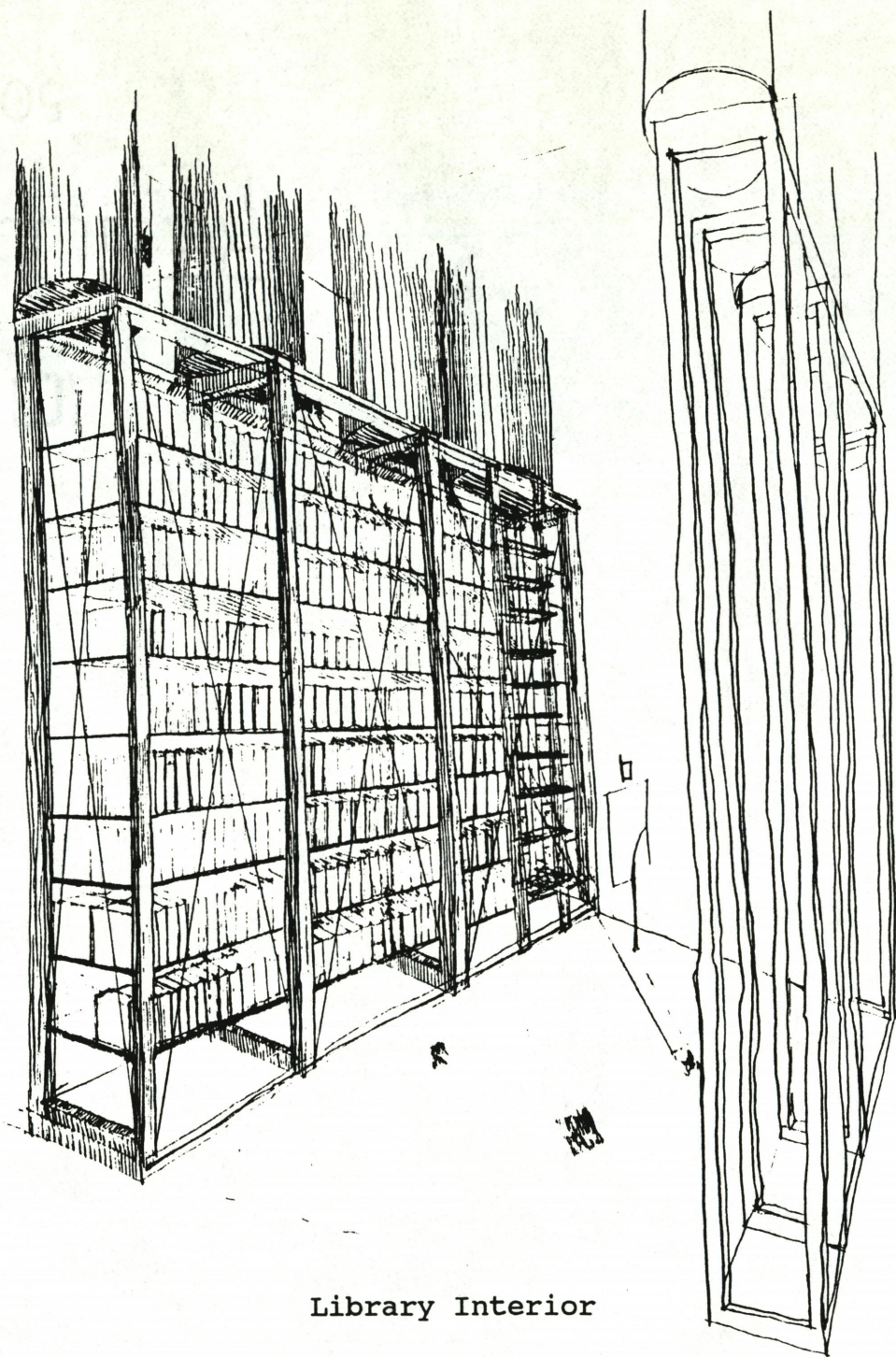
and the train, relating to the moving image, is created and observed.

The structure between the members of the subway level and the street level consists of a series of trusses approximately fourteen feet in height. Although these trusses are spaced so that rooms may be added, the film library will exist in a partial field of the overall site of

structural steel. The library takes the form given by the secondary theatre not conforming to the grid. These two rooms have a wonderful dialogue between themselves. The theatre above ground, because of its positioning and because of the surrounding elements, allows a glimpse of the site's interior through the column and glass arrangement between the level of the sidewalk and the theatre.

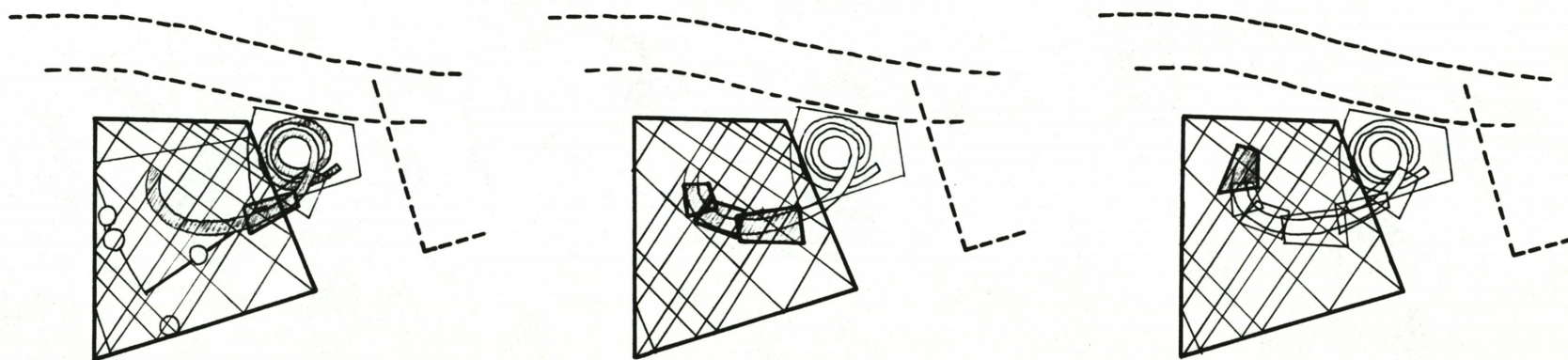
This glazing of the theatre's perimeter consists of mullioned glass with a small area of each panel between columns being stained glass. This system of columns meets the trusses of the film library so that a unique lighting effect is experienced. The trusses of the library, reaching fourteen feet in height, become the shelves for placement of the film. Once a film has been obtained

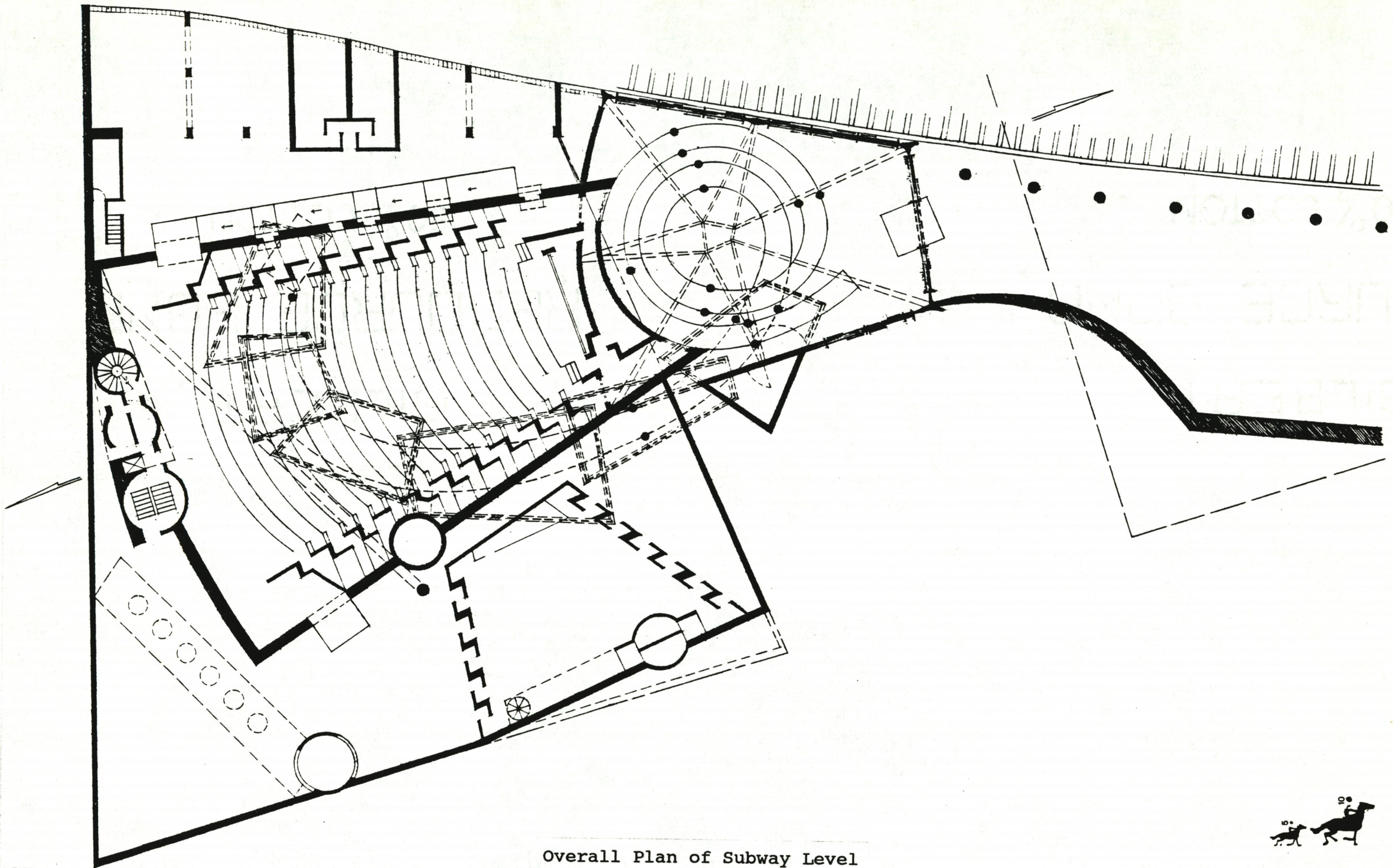




Library Interior

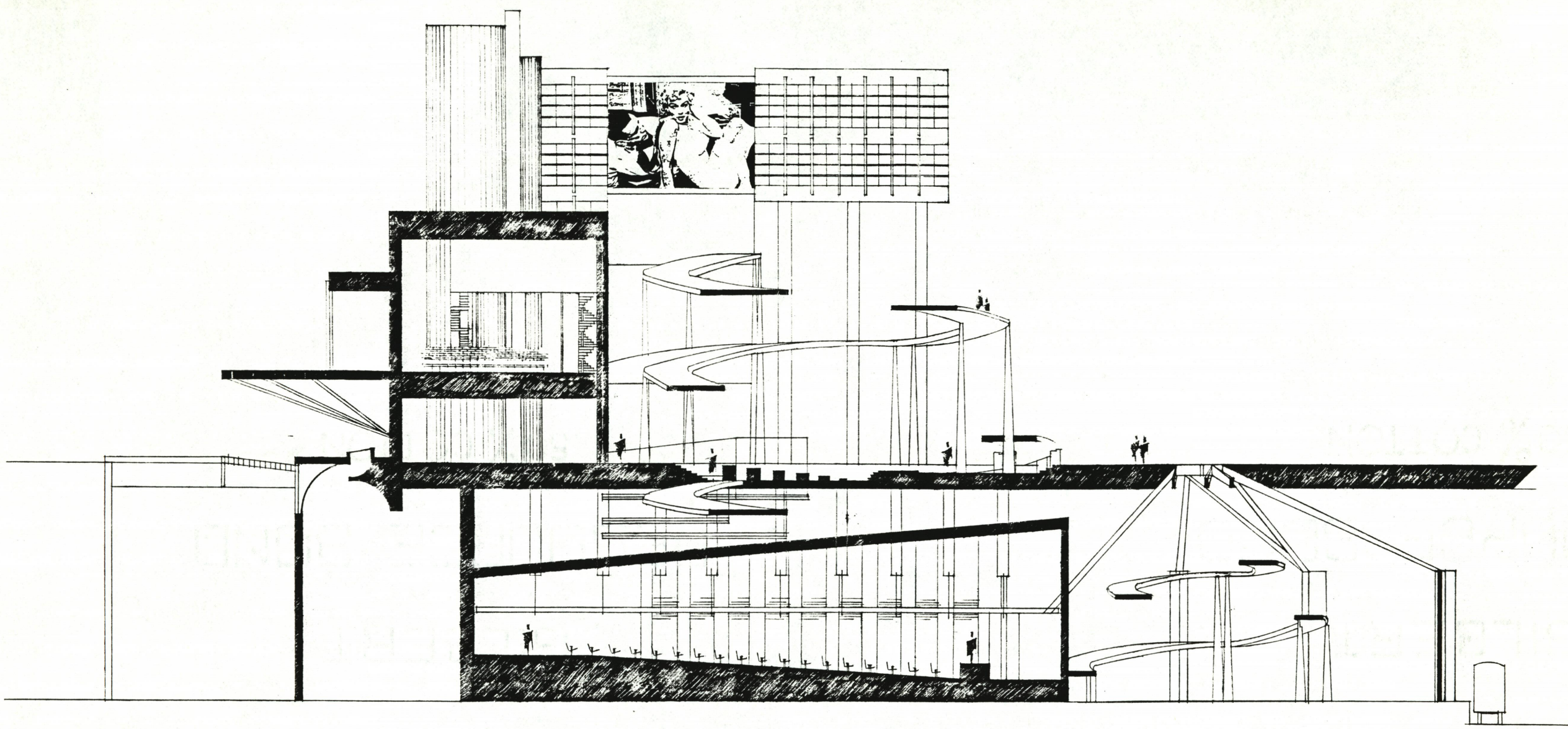
from the library (accessed only by students and faculty) one may proceed through the zig-zagged walls to a personal viewing room.





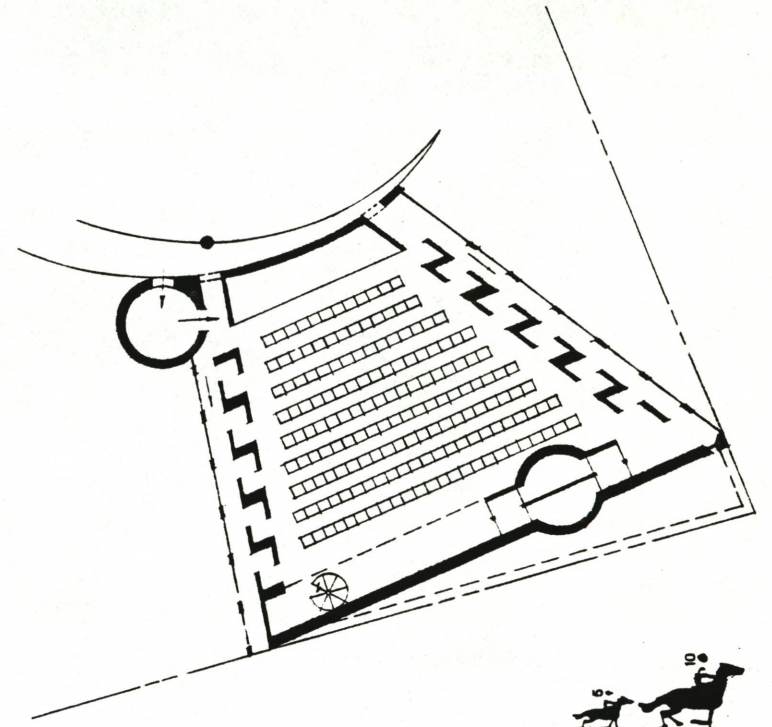
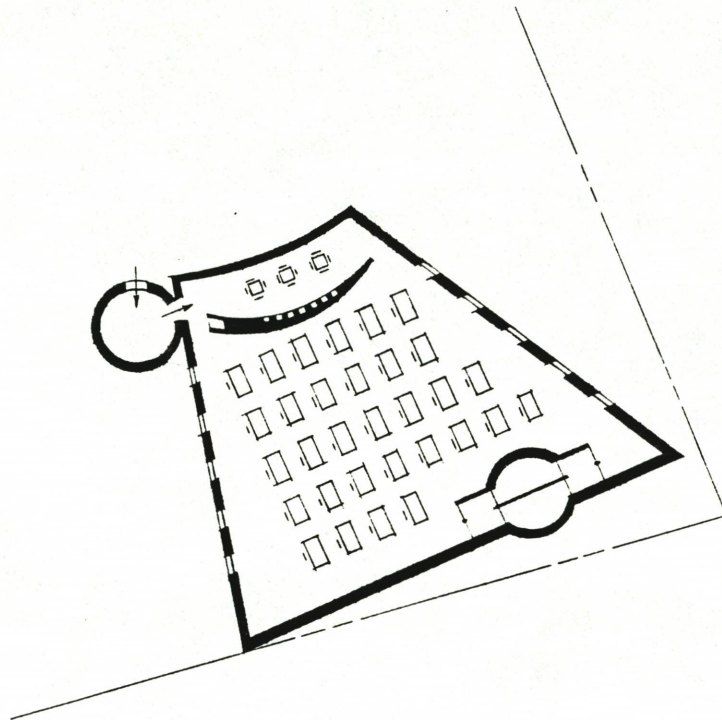
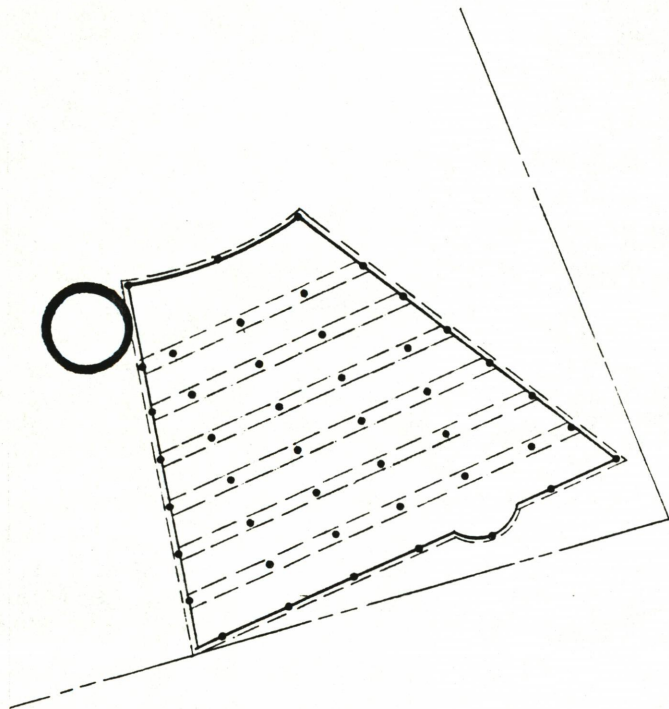
Overall Plan of Subway Level





Overall Section





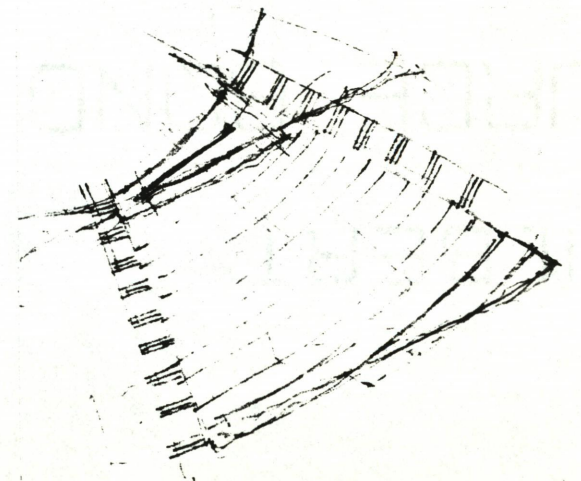
Plans of Secondary Theatre
(off grid)

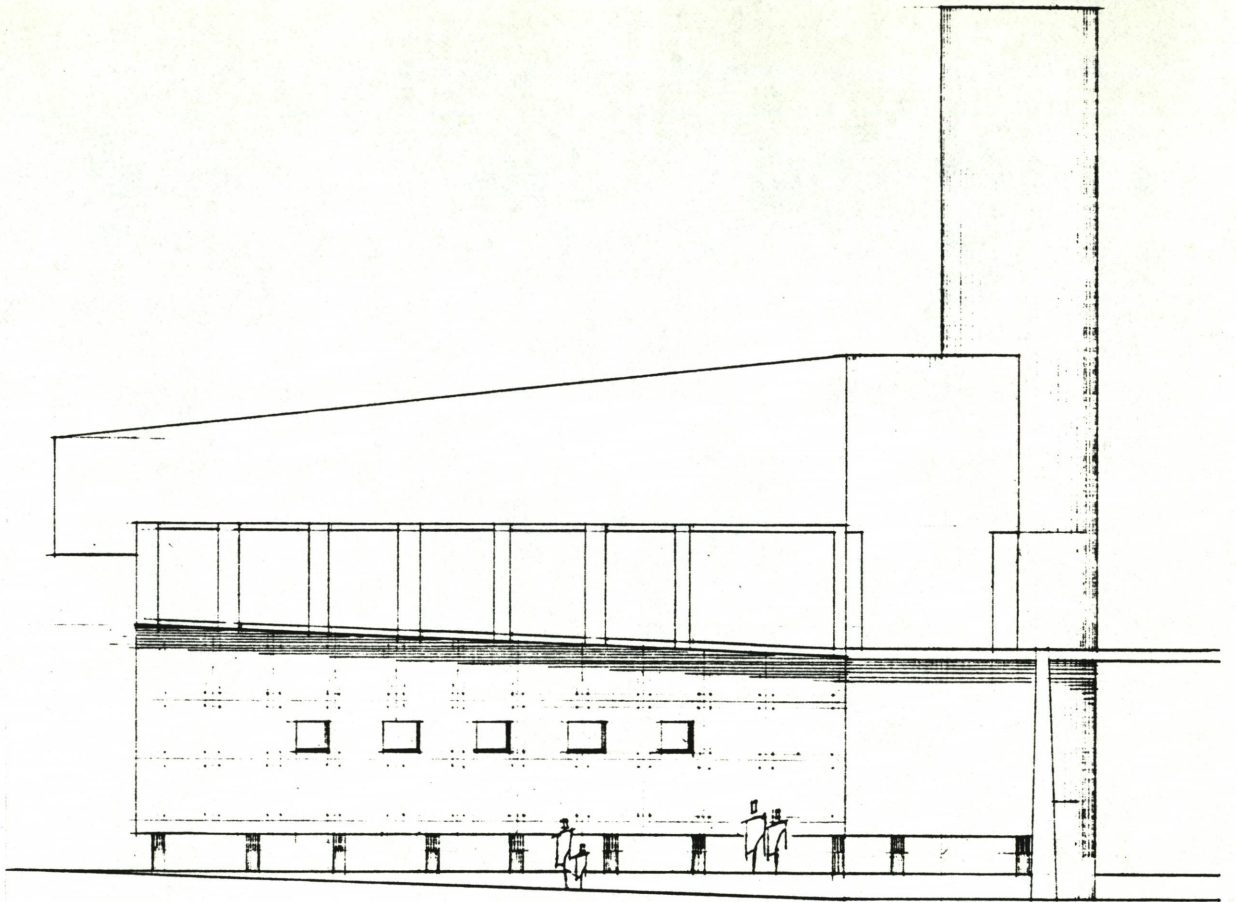
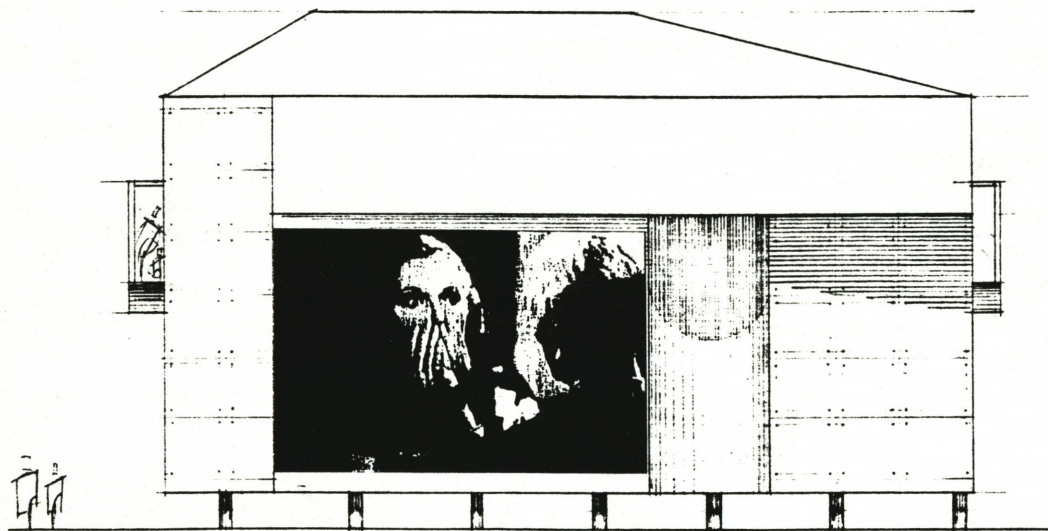
- a) ground level
- b) administration suite
- c) theatre

**THE BUILT FORM:
STREET LEVEL**

The secondary theatres show more obscure films such as foreign and silent films. This is an element of the whole complex which is moved from the grid to meet the ramp. Because on the Fourth Avenue side of the site there is no obvious entrance to the complex as a whole, this theatre building is placed on columns to

allow for a visual connection to the interior of the site from that particular side. These columns gently hold stained glass amidst a larger field of clear glass, which allow natural light to gradually and sparsely penetrate to the film library below.





Secondary Theatre (off grid)

- a) Fourth Ave. Elevation
- b) Astor Place Elevation

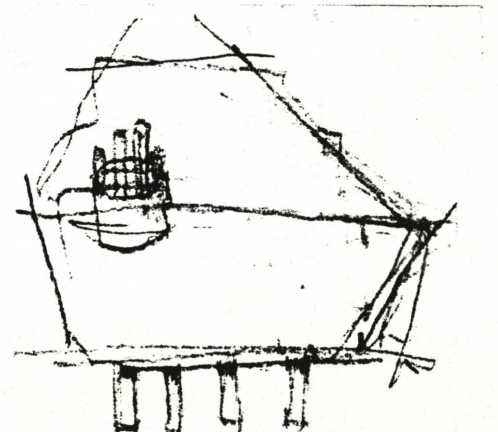
ADMINISTRATION SUITE

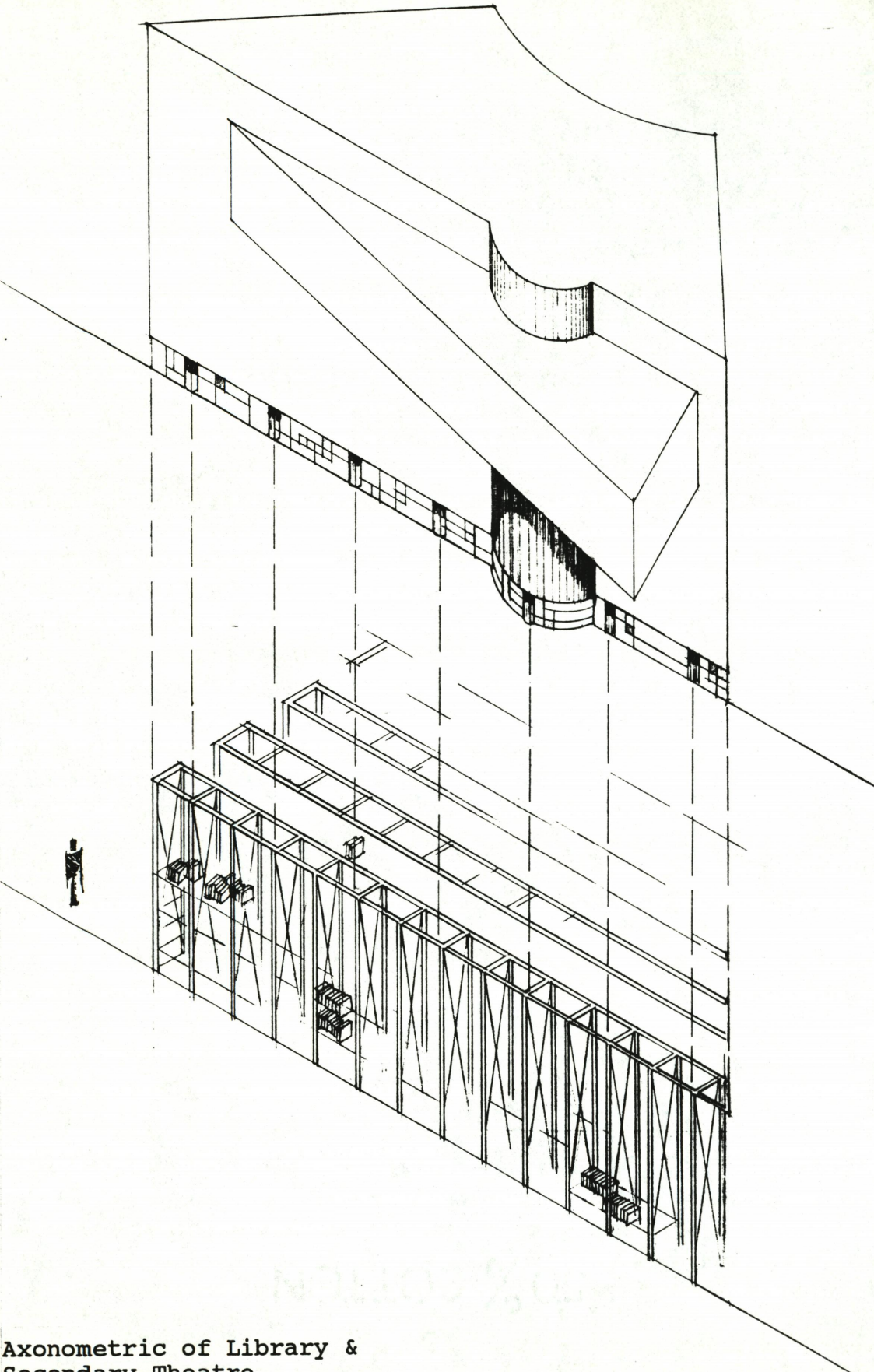
The floor above this special glazed series is where the administration suite is housed. Upon entering from the grand elevator, one passes by the lounge area through side aisles to one's desk. The desks are placed between the side walls with glazing on either side to light the cross aisles. Here, small, square, operable windows carefully

placed on the North and South sides, allow for natural lighting and cross ventilation. The square windows are placed at a level above the floor of the suite so that the natural light may be enjoyed while one is either seated or upright.

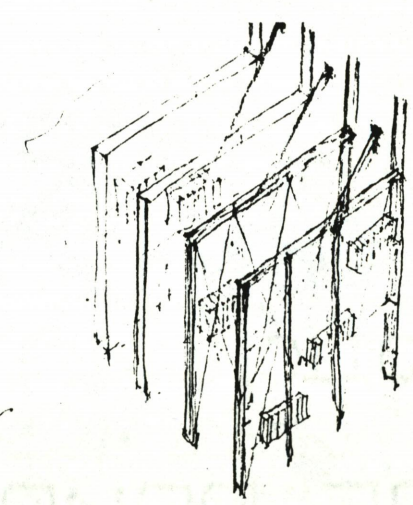
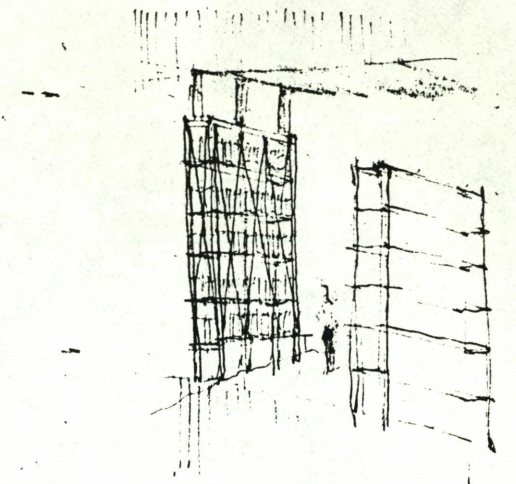
Above the administration suite is the secondary theatre which would show foreign films. One enters

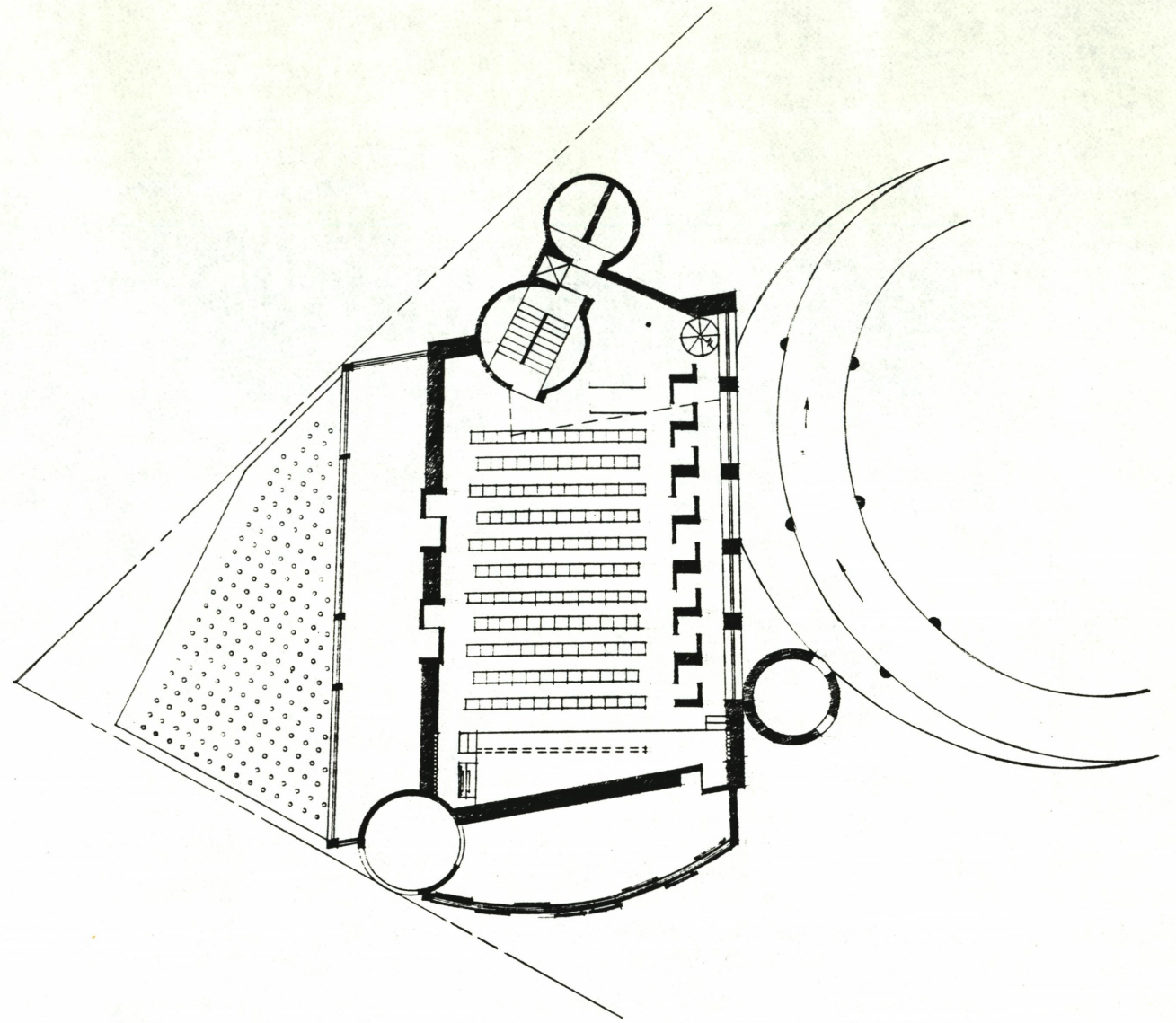
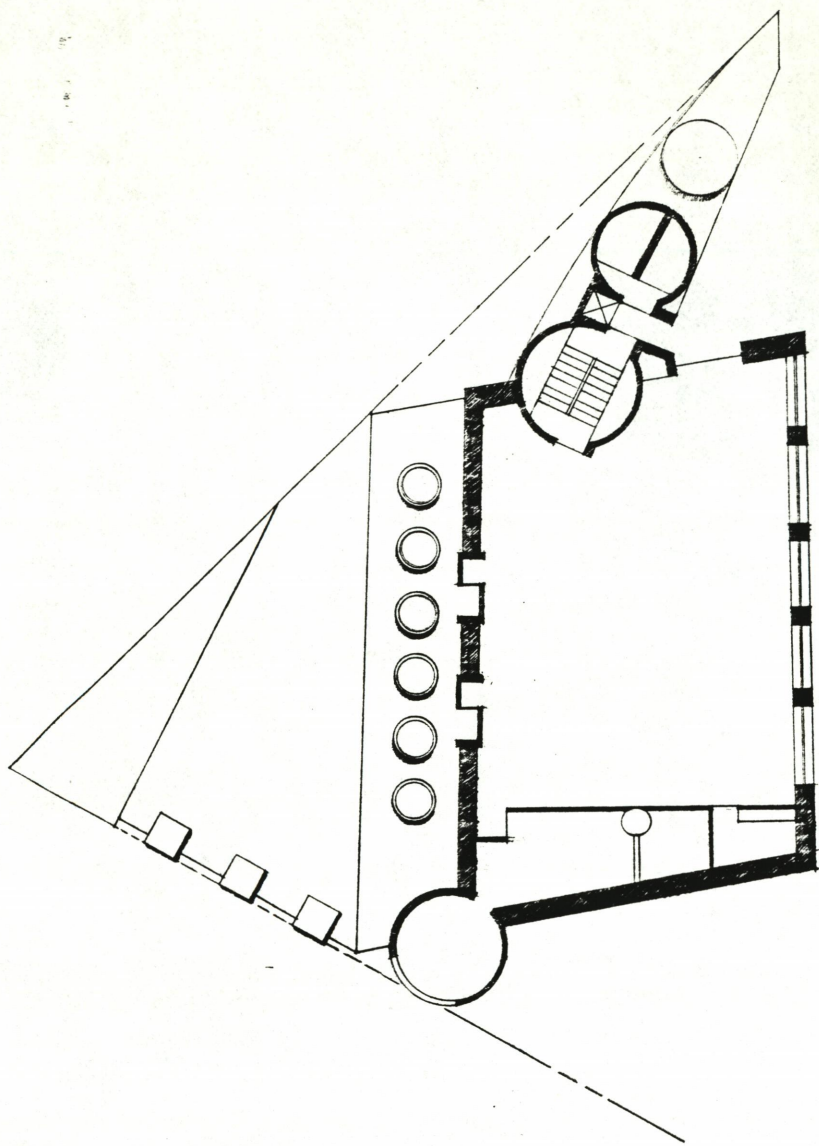
the theatre from the landing evolving from the ramp, then proceeds up the outer, side aisles of the theatre, through zig-zagged concrete walls to one's specific seat. The outer aisles of the theatre are viewed from the outside as attachments to the theatre proper. This is so the outer aisles may be glazed, showing the movement of the people inside to the people outside, and visa versa.





Axonometric of Library & Secondary Theatre





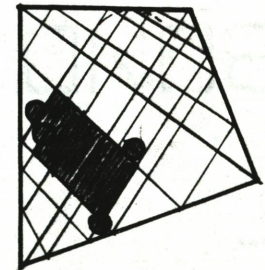
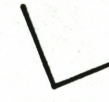
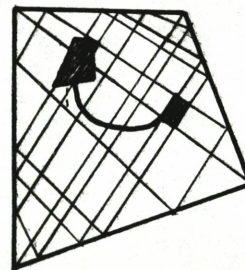
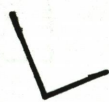
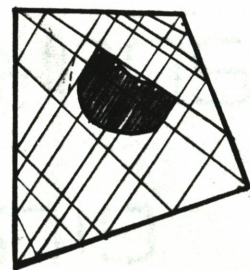
Plans of Secondary Theatre
(on grid)

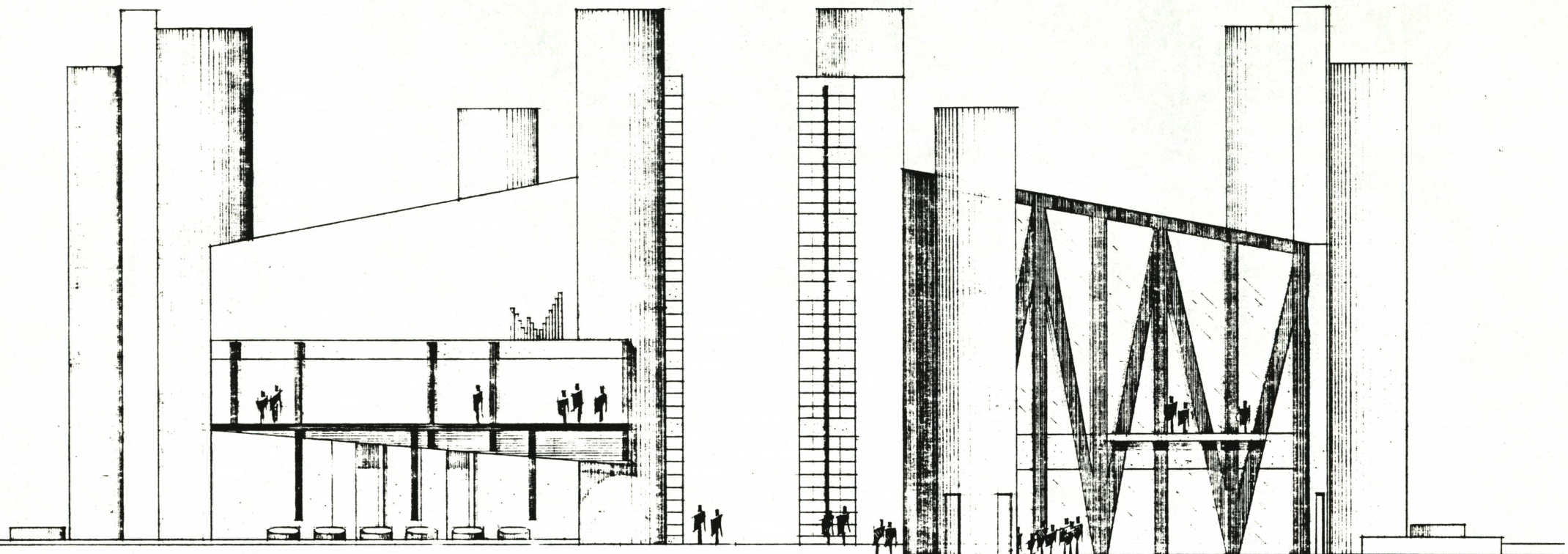
- a) Publicity Area
- b) theatre



SECONDARY THEATRE
(ON GRID)

Taking its form from the grid, the building housing the secondary theatre for the viewing of silent films, also houses the publicity area and gives way to the place of the fountain. As a strong element in itself, this building's most powerful single element is the wall which faces the plaza or amphitheatre. This





Elevations of Secondary Theatre (on grid)

- a) Angled to Fourth Ave.
- b) Angled to Astor Place



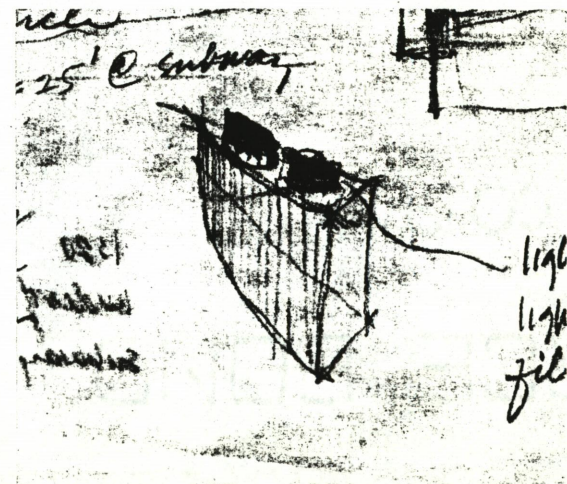
wall is a large steel truss with glazing in between its exposed members. Structurally, the truss and a similar member carry the weight of this building to the subway level. It is here that the truss spreads in length to land on either side of the theatre not penetrating the viewing space. The truss element supports the ideas of the film institute as well. Because of its large

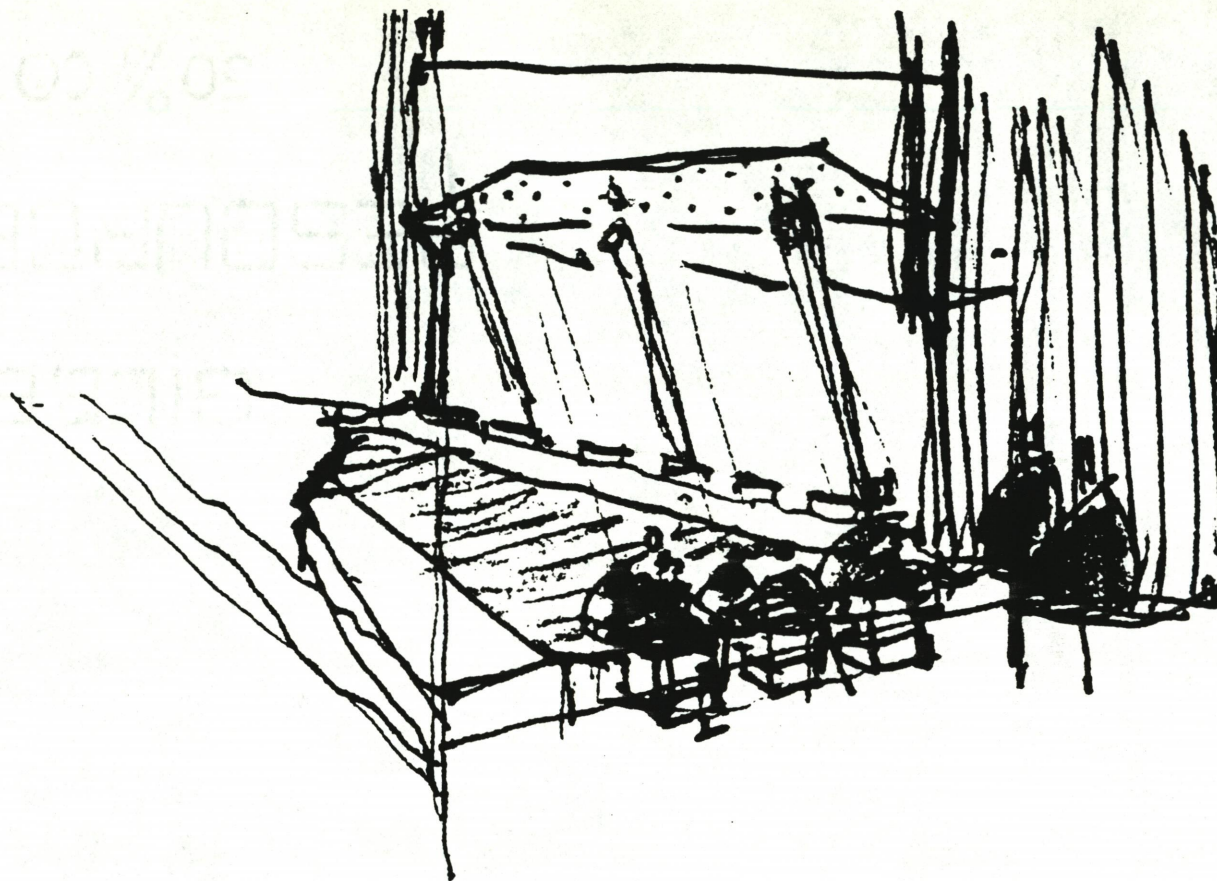
quantities of glazing, its location on the site, and the activities which it exposes, the truss wall allows for the observance of motion of people traveling through, and in the theatre, as well as the viewing of the fast paced activities concerned with the publicity area. Not only is the movement and motion itself of interest, but the passage of these moving objects from a transparent medium to one

of solidity, as is found in passage along the truss wall, creates a rhythm somewhat analogous to that of film.

PUBLICITY AREA

Because access to this building is from the plaza, the entrance to the publicity area is located two feet below street level. At this level, one may pass through the glass doors of





Sketch of Fountain Area

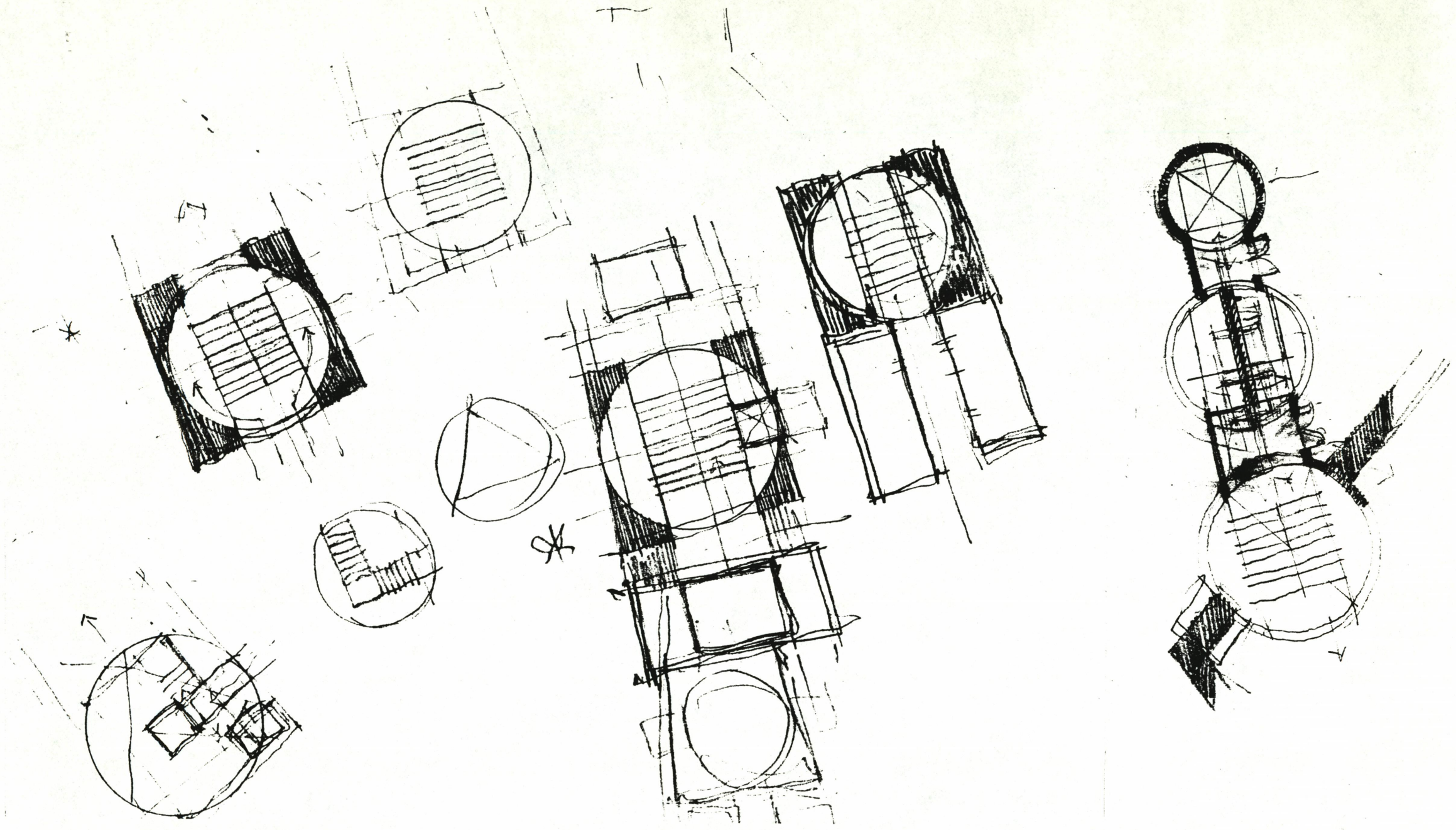
the glazed steel truss to the large room of the publicity area, where drafting and other functions concerned with publicity are performed. In two, smaller rooms adjacent to the larger one, the darkroom and printing facilities are located. The publicity area receives light from the exposed truss, and a glow of light from the opposite wall. It is between this wall and the south-eastern

corner of the site that the place of the fountain is located. This area derives from the grid, the happenings above this area, and an attempt to give a resting place to the public on this side of the site. From the corner, a triangular piece of polished stone rises one foot above the sidewalk level. At the ending of this triangle, another triangular stone begins. It slopes one and

one-half feet and is the origin of the flow of water. Four feet square smooth concrete seats rest between the sloped surface and the sidewalk. The stone surface ends its slope at a raised rectangle which holds six light and air wells. These give light and fresh air to the work area at subway level. (These wells also act as air wells to the publicity area.) As the water from the triangular

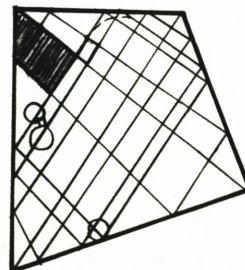
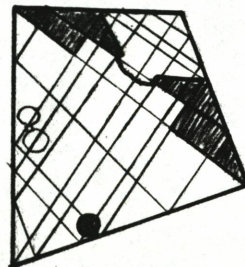
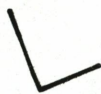
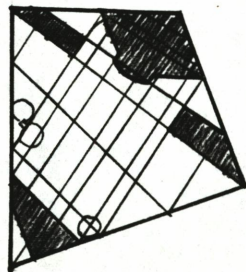
piece of stone comes to its lower edge, it falls along the side of the subway level outer wall, then returns to its beginning point. As the water falls along the side wall below grade, the light from the well is scooped to hit the movement of the water. It is then reflected to the floor of the lower work space.

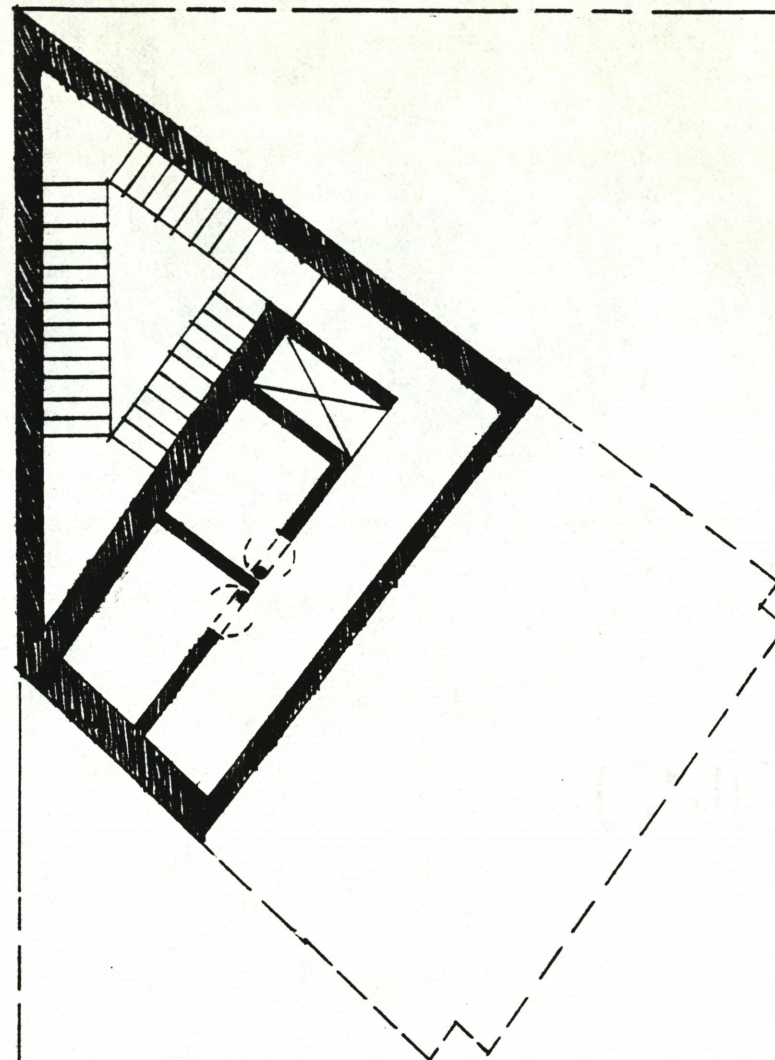
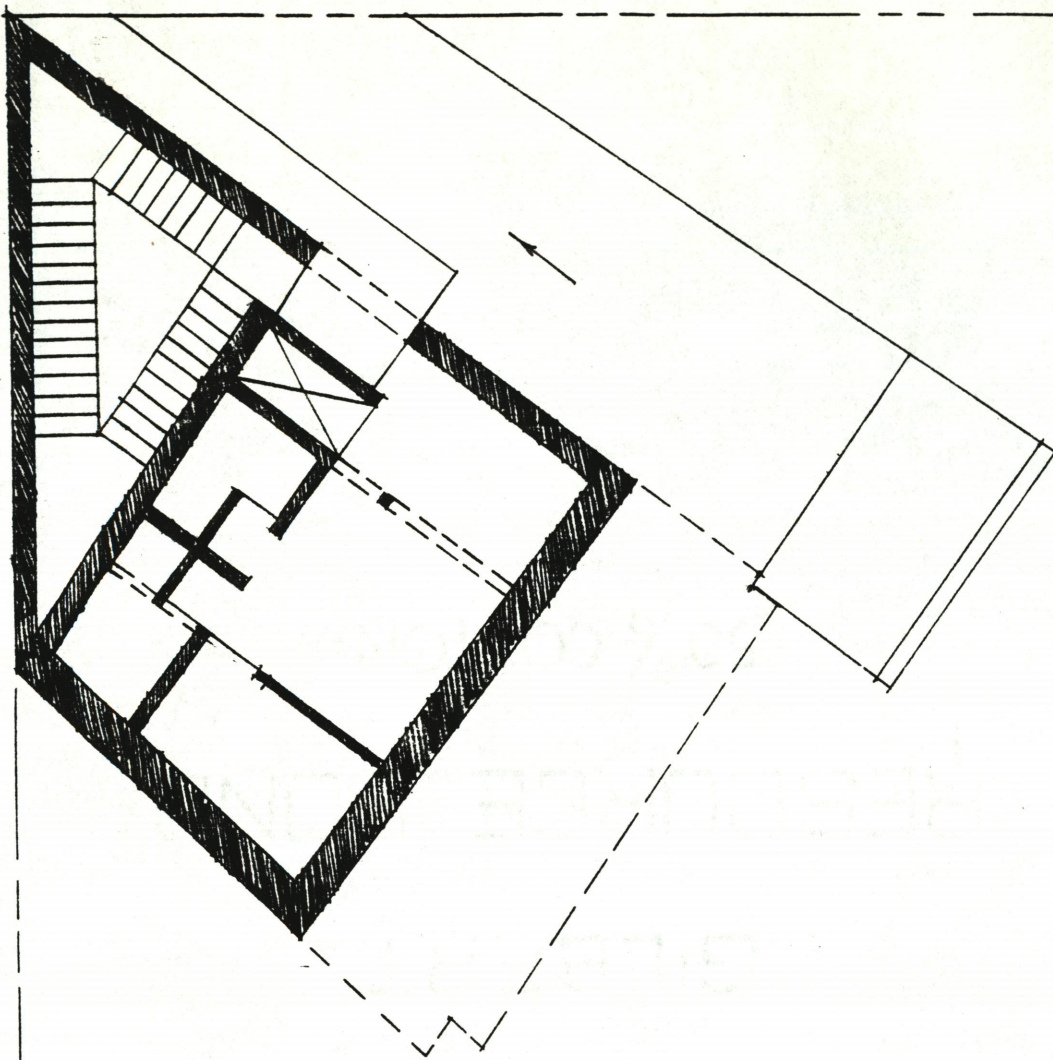
The secondary theatre has direct access to the



spiralling, majestic ramp. From the ramp, a patron enters, and travels the main aisle, through the zig-zagged concrete walls to his seat. It is this main aisle which allows for the viewing of movement beside the large truss. Opposite the main aisle is a glazed intermission lobby which opens out to a triangular, steel deck with evenly spaced lucite filled holes. These allow light to filter

through the deck and glisten onto the watered stone surface directly below.



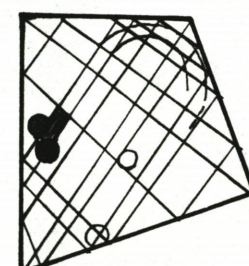
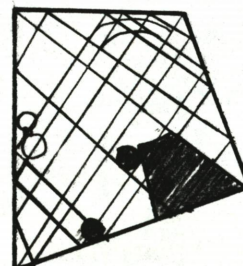
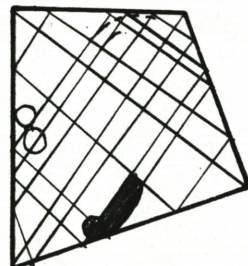


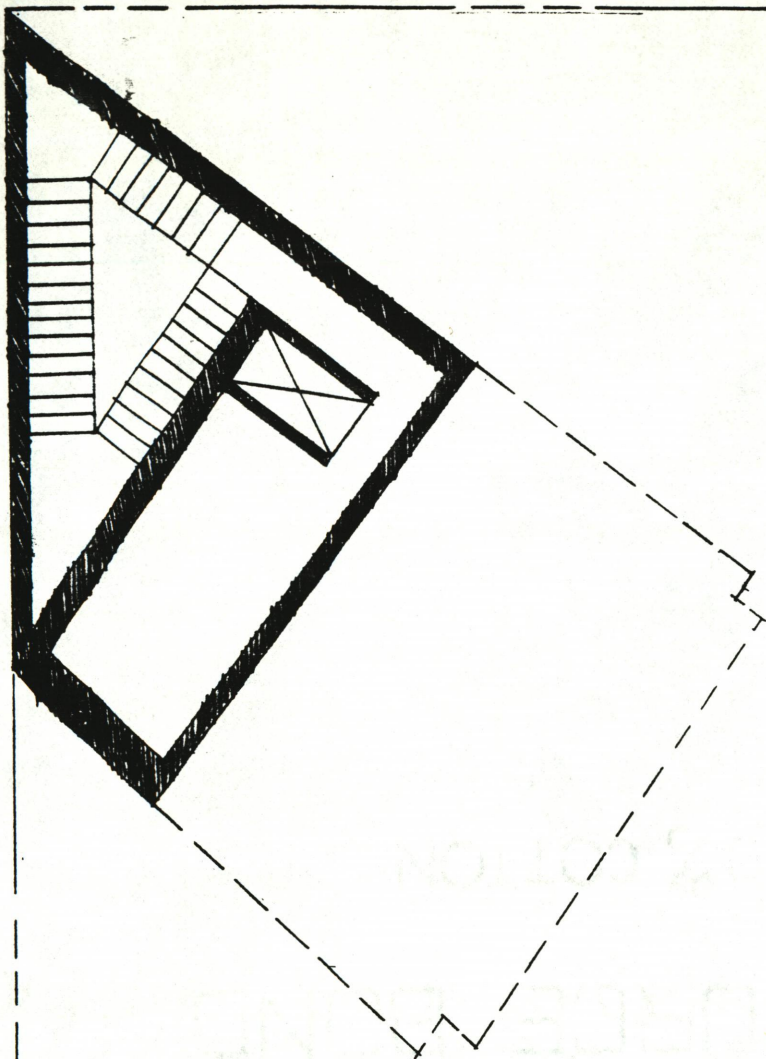
Plans of Archives Bldg.
 a) Level 1
 b) Level 2



ARCHIVES

Appearing somewhat vault-like, and functioning the same, the archives building is the protector of the films. Holding three viewing rooms, its main function is that of archival storage. In order to protect its extra fragile contents, the archives is equipped with a special temperature regulating system, and does not lend itself to any



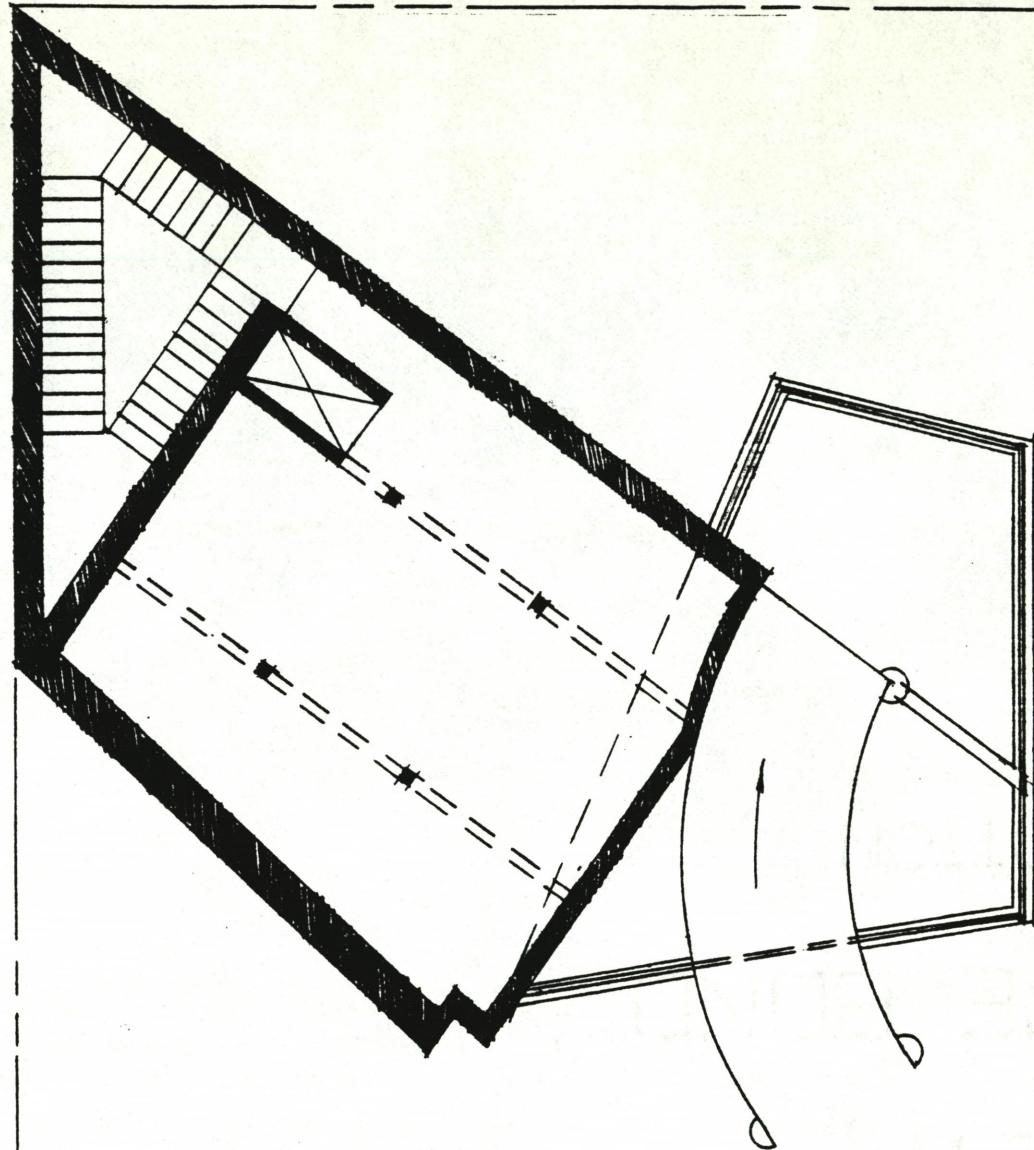


Plans of Archives Bldg.
 a) Level 3
 b) Level 4

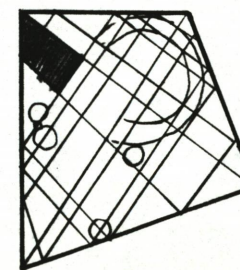
natural light. Those who may visit or work there, however, will find a certain pleasure in the light well over the perimeter of the triangular stairway.

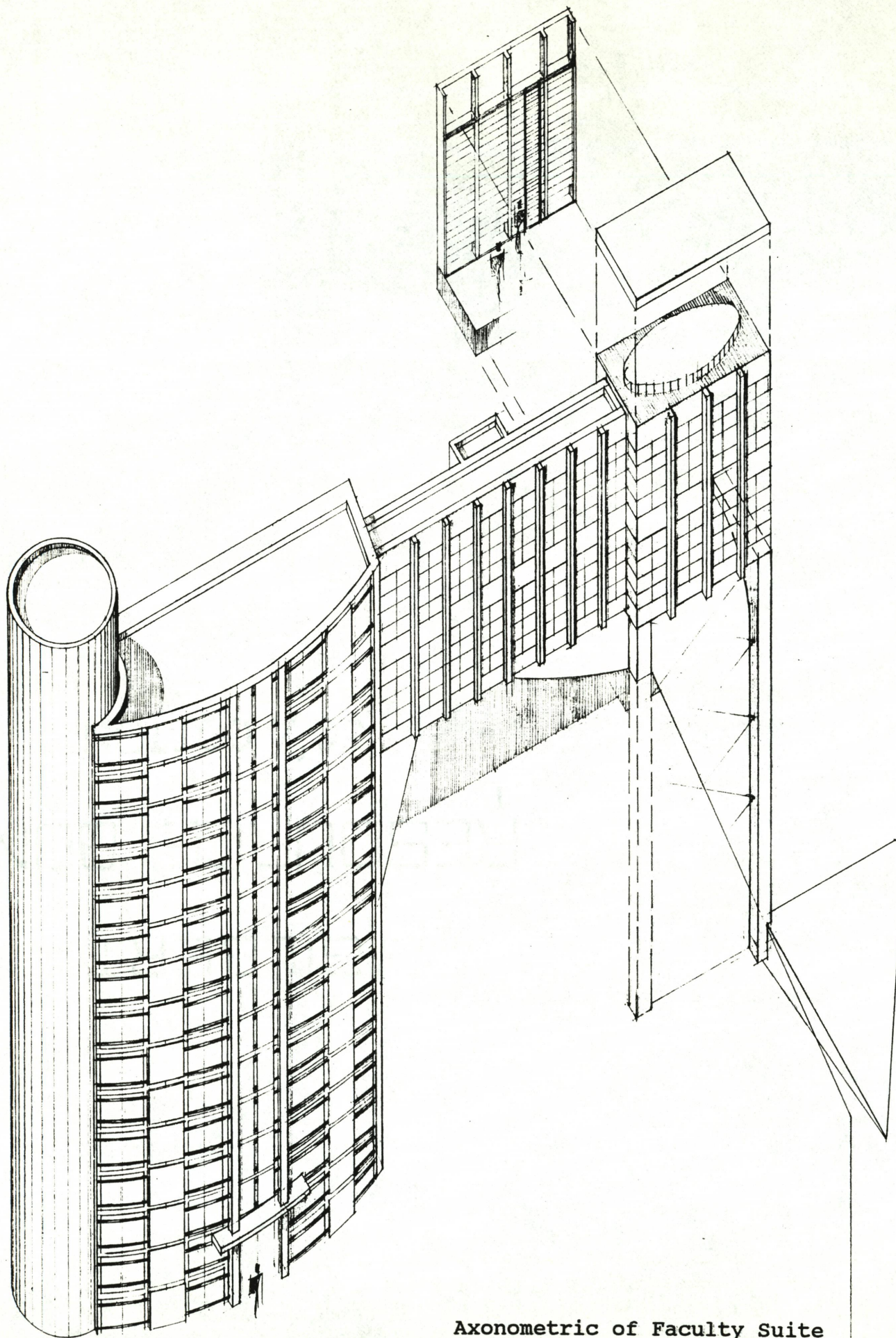
Besides the special qualities of the archives as an entity, the archives is a special place in that, it is where the ramp terminates. This termination is in the same vertical plane where the ramp began at street

level several feet below. The spiral complete, having no beginning and no end, actually renders, symbolically, the thirst for knowledge being an ever-present search. The translucent room of the ramp's end/beginning is identical in form to the room below. As a physical entity, the completion of the ramp, although not the highest point of the institute, becomes a



technological lighthouse of primary colored lasers. These lasers tell of the technological achievements associated with the production of film and become a beacon to the city, announcing the presence of the American Film Institute as did the marquees of the movie houses past.

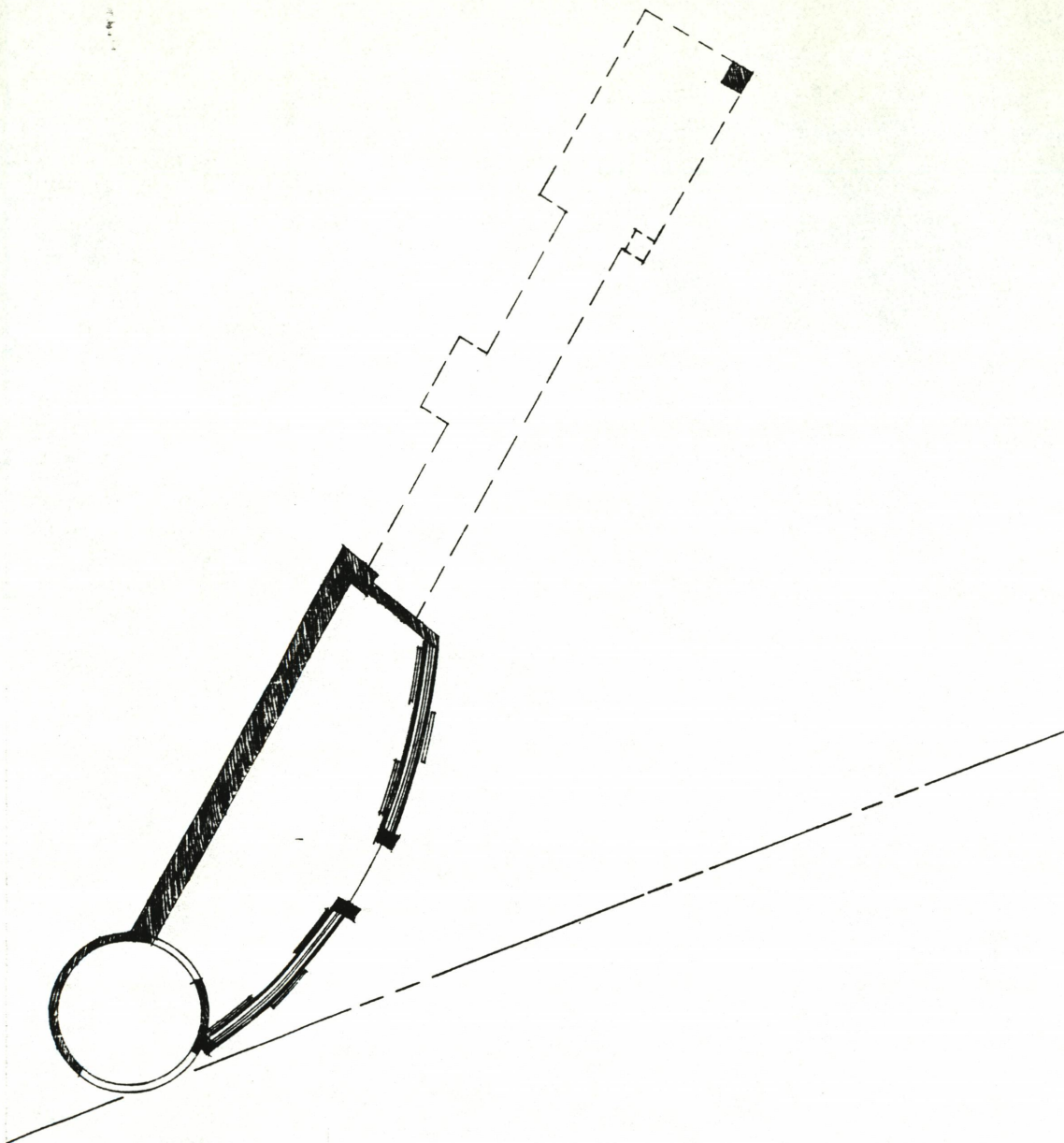




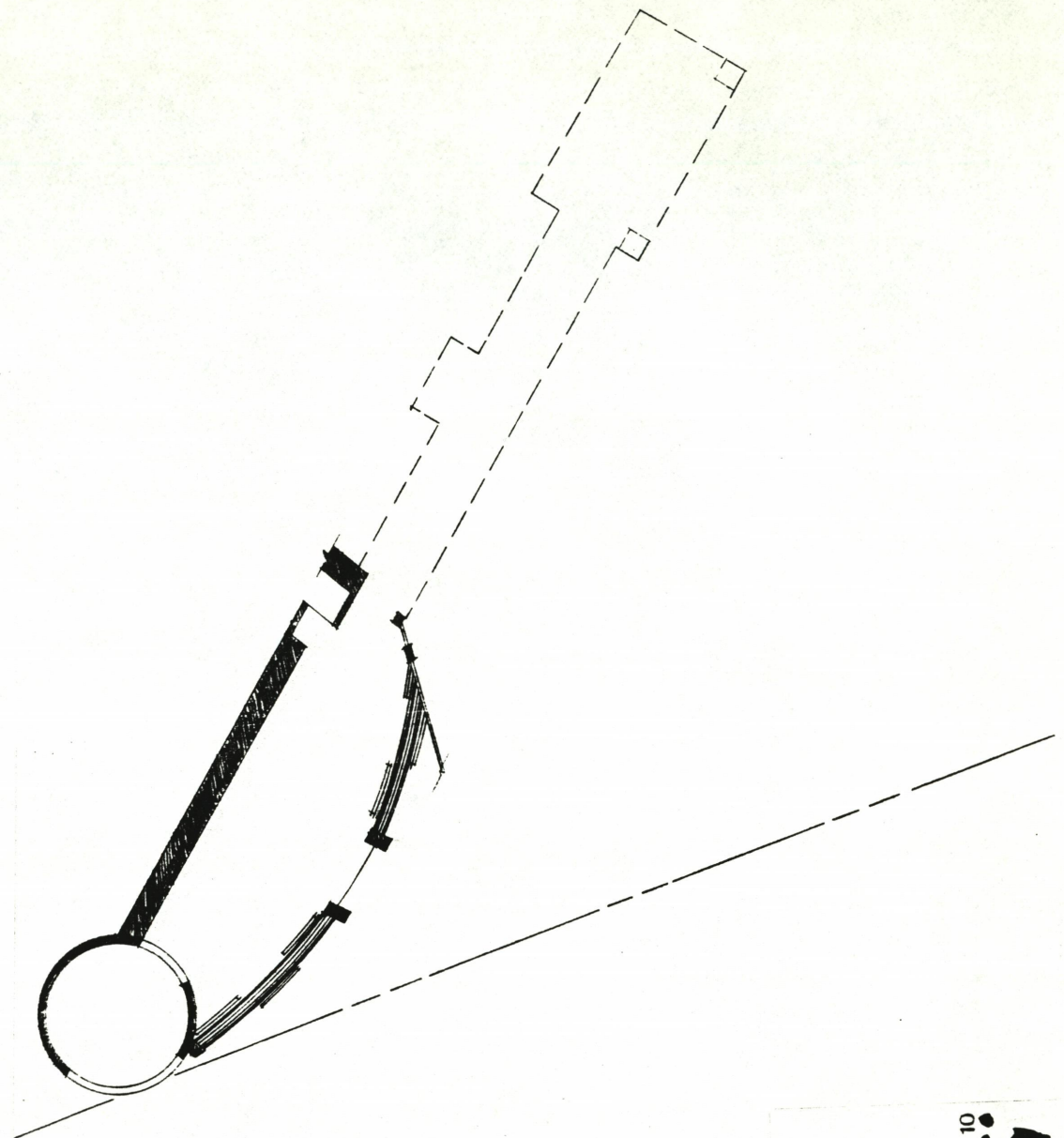
Axonometric of Faculty Suite

FACULTY SUITE

The faculty suite will be inhabited by visiting professors. This suite is accessed from an elaborate lobby space with a wall similar to that of the subway level lobby area. The wall is made of transparent pieces of glass with steel tubes running parallel to the outer surface of the glass. Attached to these tubes are thin, translucent



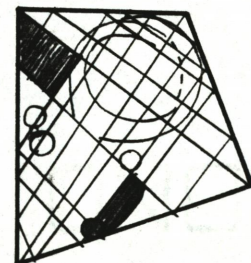
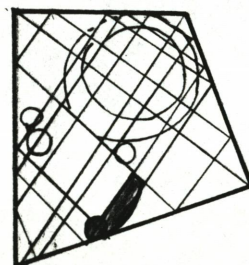
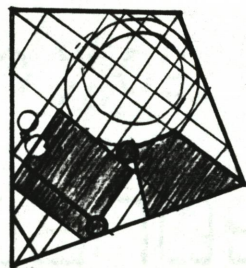
Plans
 a) Lobby
 b) Commons

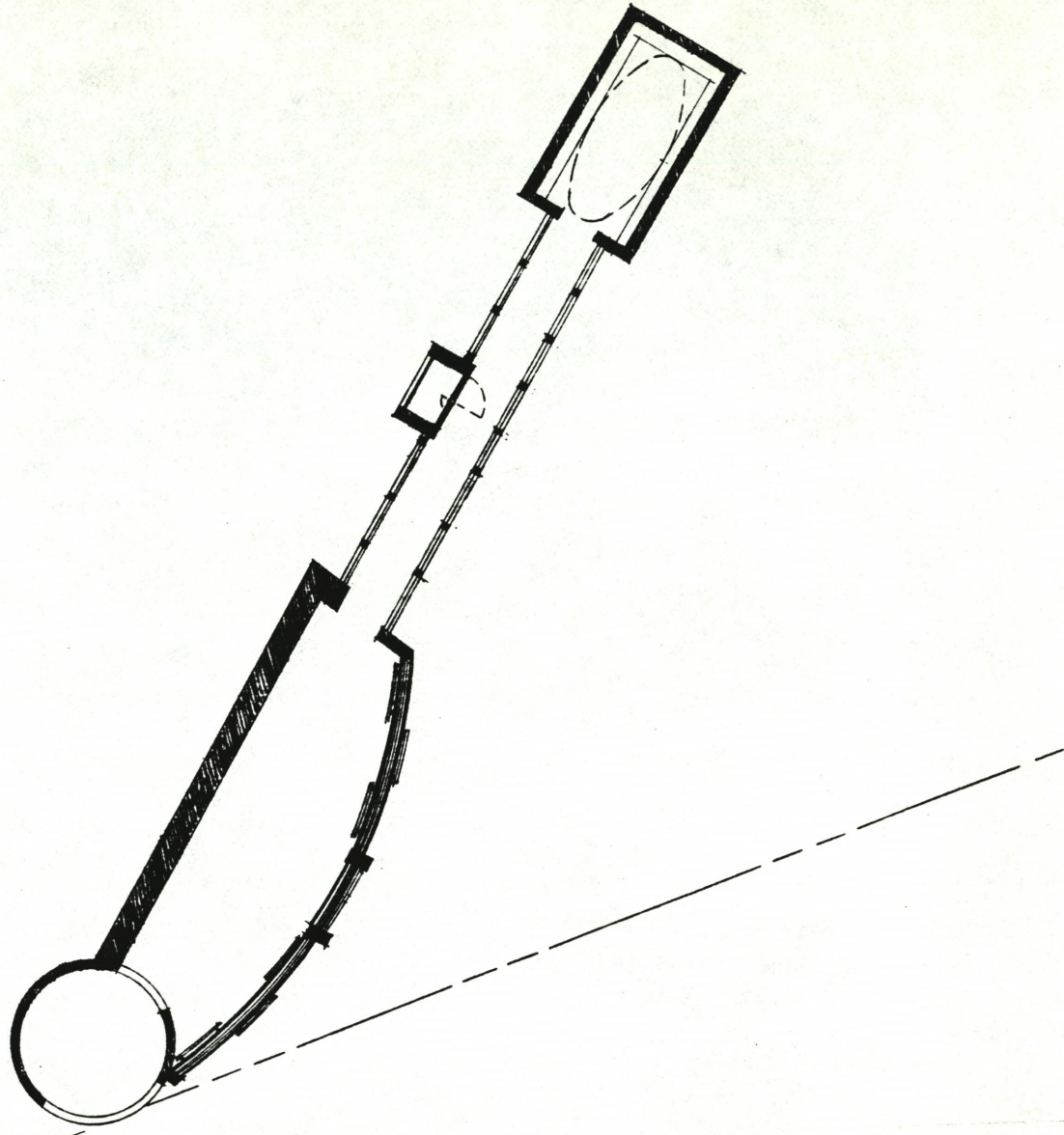
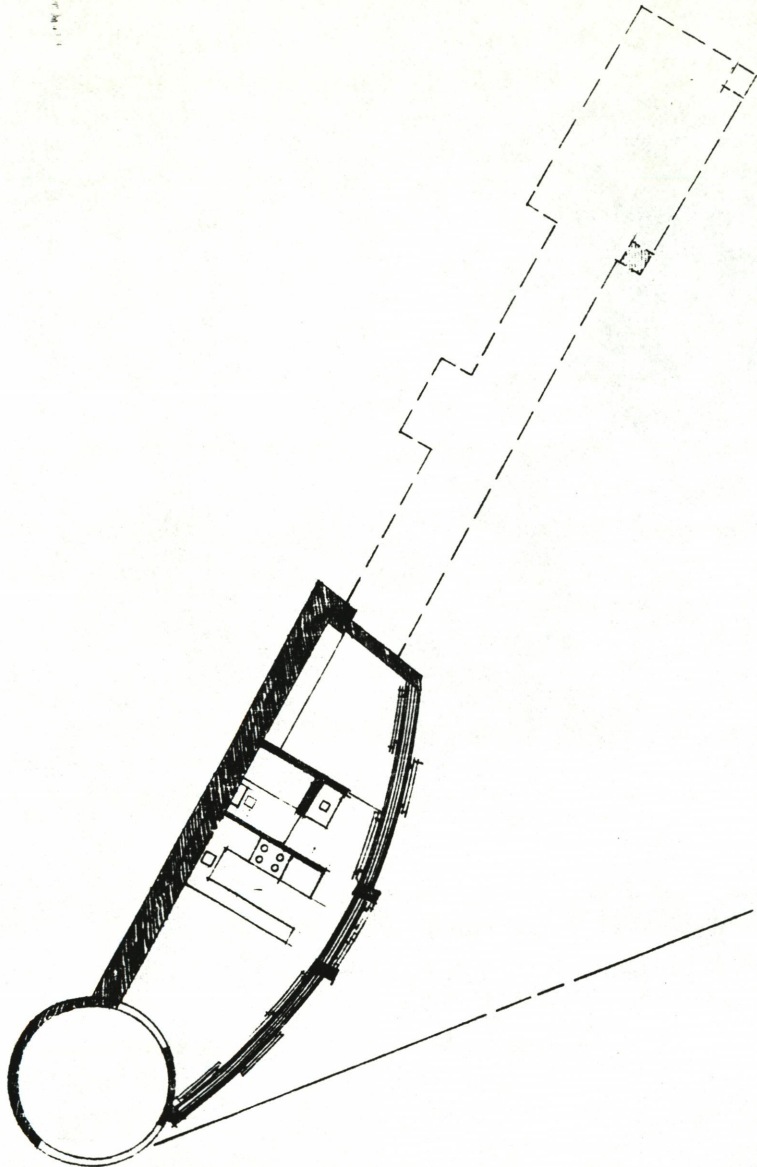


panels of rose quartz with an irregular, polished surface.

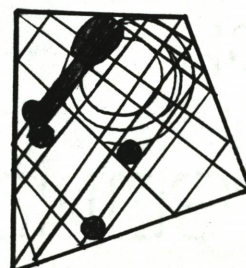
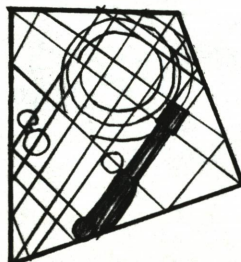
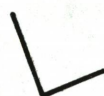
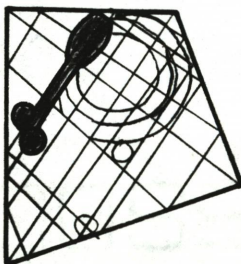
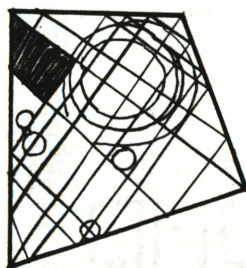
rhythmic pattern (as that of film) of transparent/translucent glass.

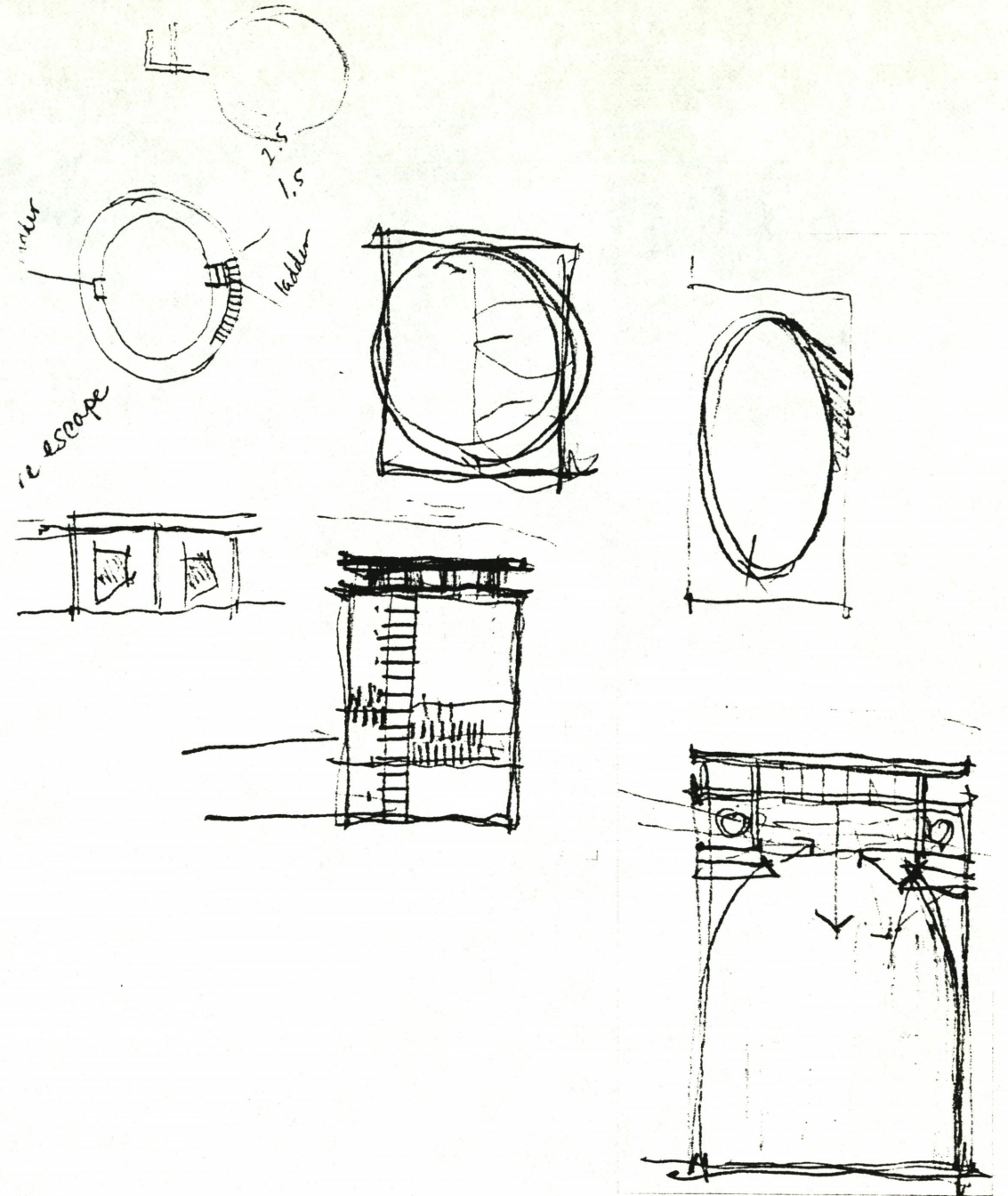
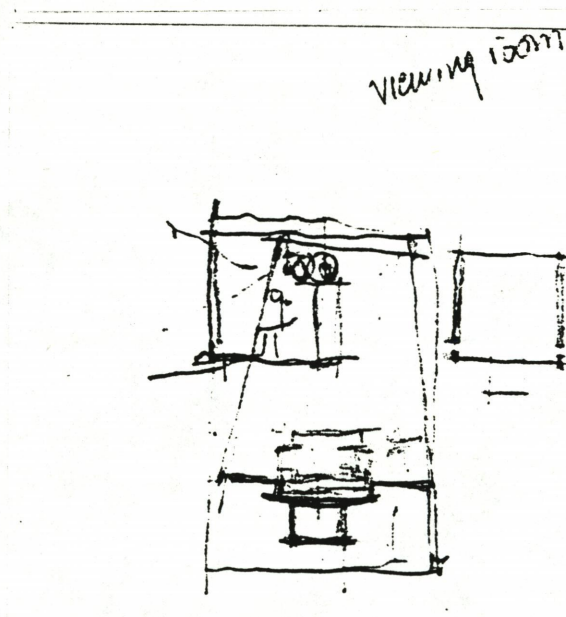
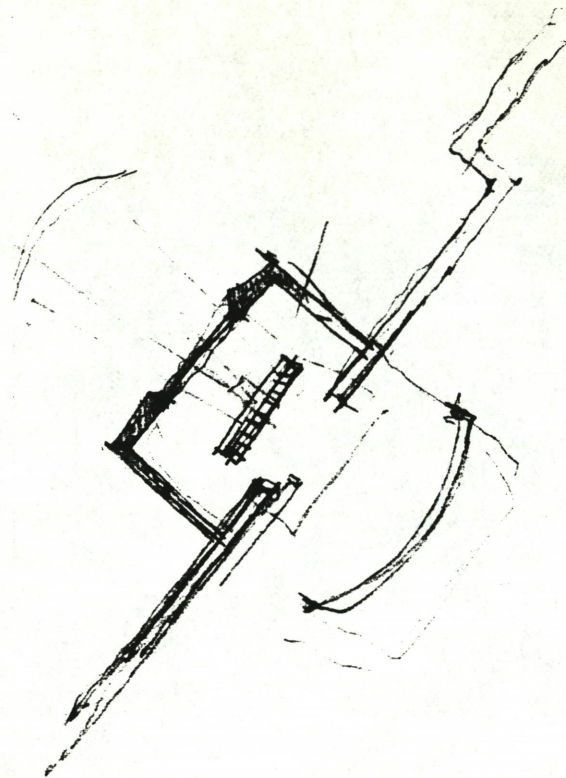
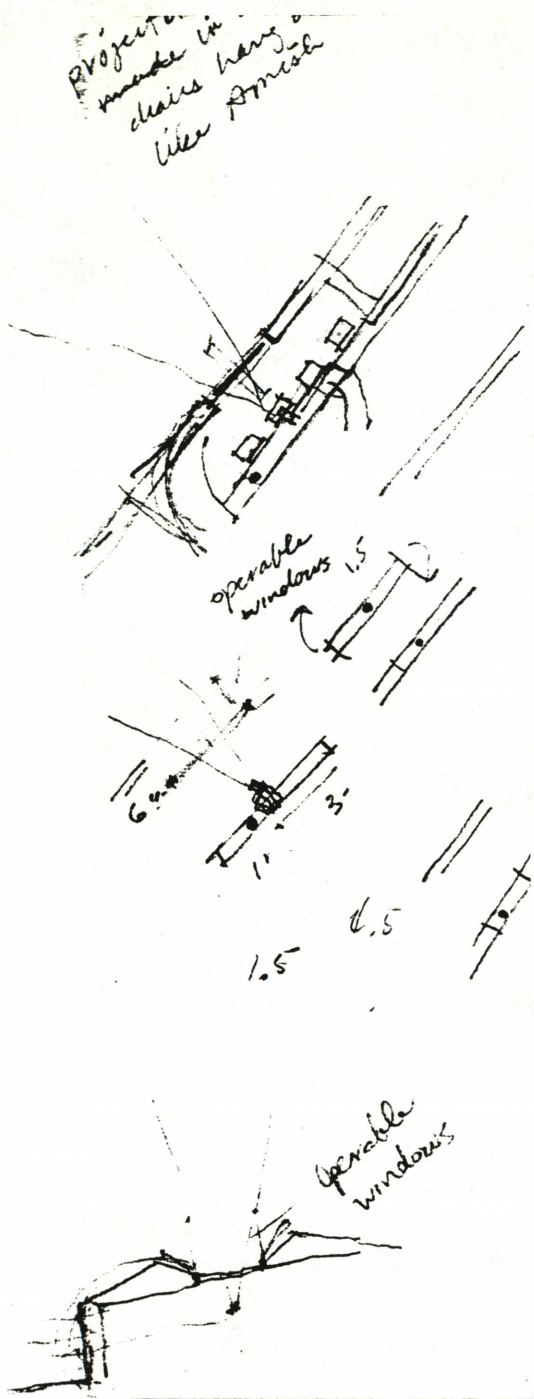
The elevator lands in each unit. These are made up of a living and dining area, kitchen, bathroom, and a bedroom. The same wall that one is greeted by in the lobby, is the same in the suites. From these rooms, those specifically studying and teaching film are seeing parts of New York through a





Plans
 a) Faculty Suite
 b) Commons, Library, Viewing Room



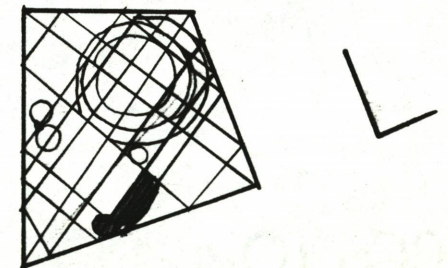


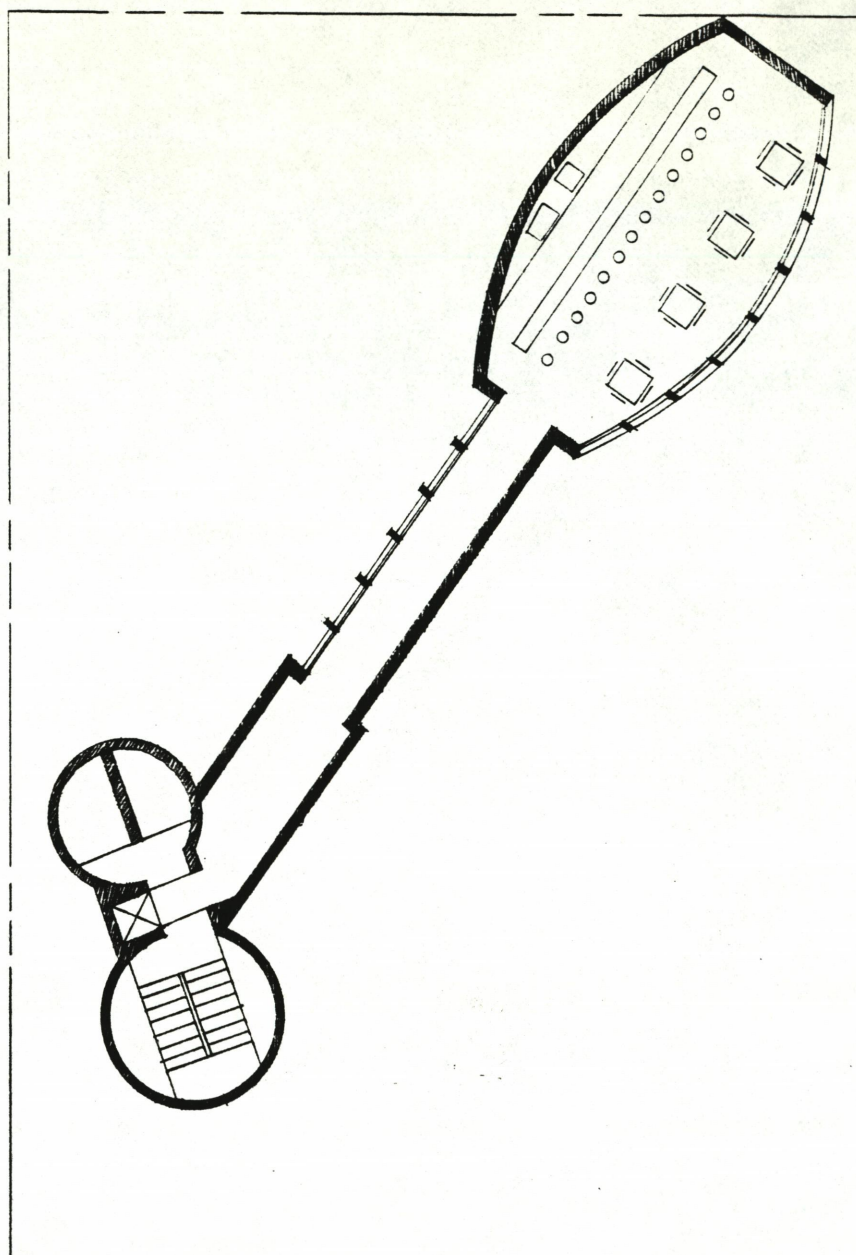
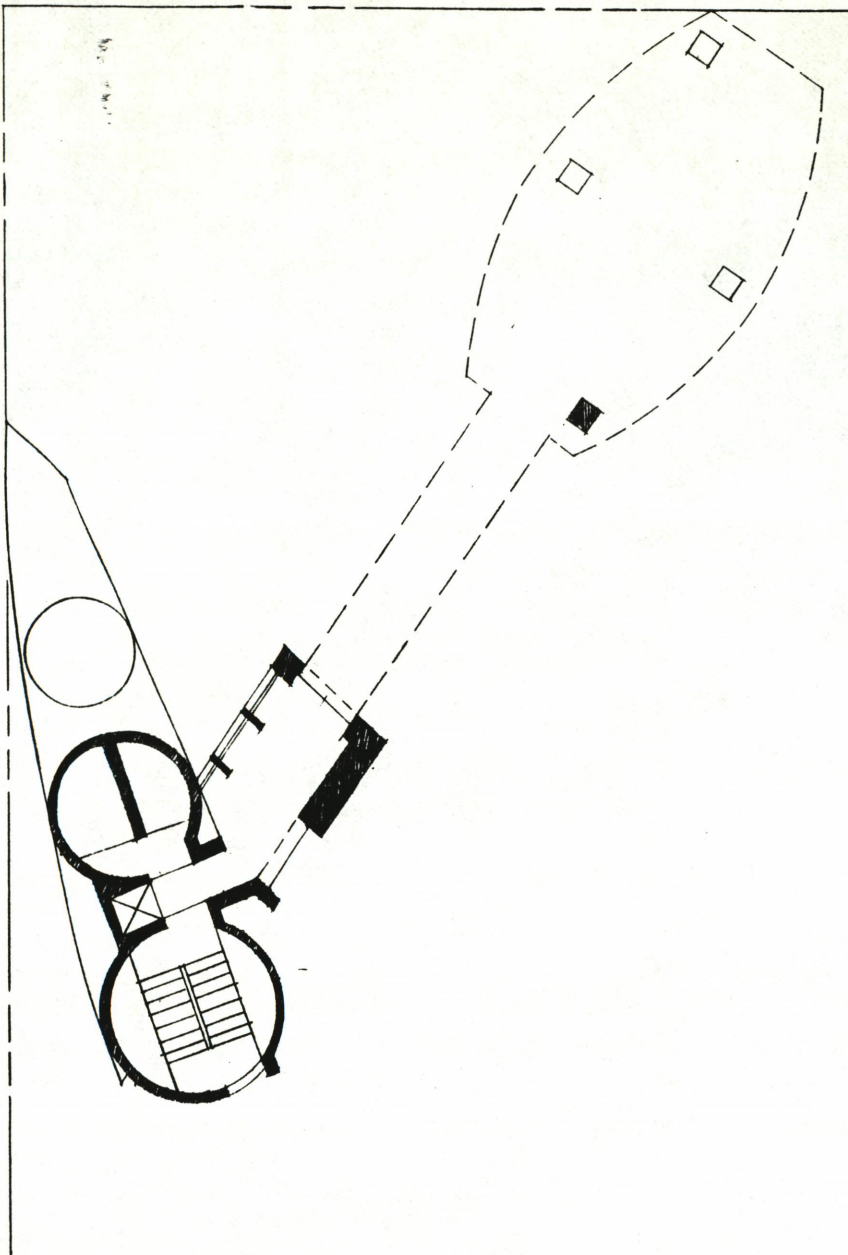
VIEWING ROOM/ LIBRARY

There is a commons area on the fourth floor of the faculty suite building. This leads through a hallway in which exists a special viewing room. It is only large enough for one person and a projector. The film is shown through the opened window or directly through the non-glare glass to the solid area of a similar building across the plaza

area. Continuing through the glazed hallway, the professors have direct access to a library of film related books. This space is two storeys in height. The books are recessed in the wall, and are accessible by the rolling ladder attached to a steel track along the shelves. The ceiling of the library lets in an interesting array of light through the elliptical band of stained glass which is

struck by indirect light because of the rectangular roofing panel above.





Plans
 a) Classroom
 b) Cafe'

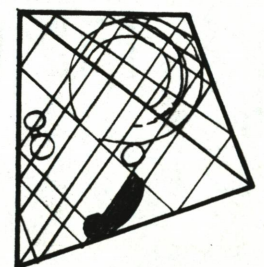
**CLASSROOMS,
 RESTAURANT/CAFE'**

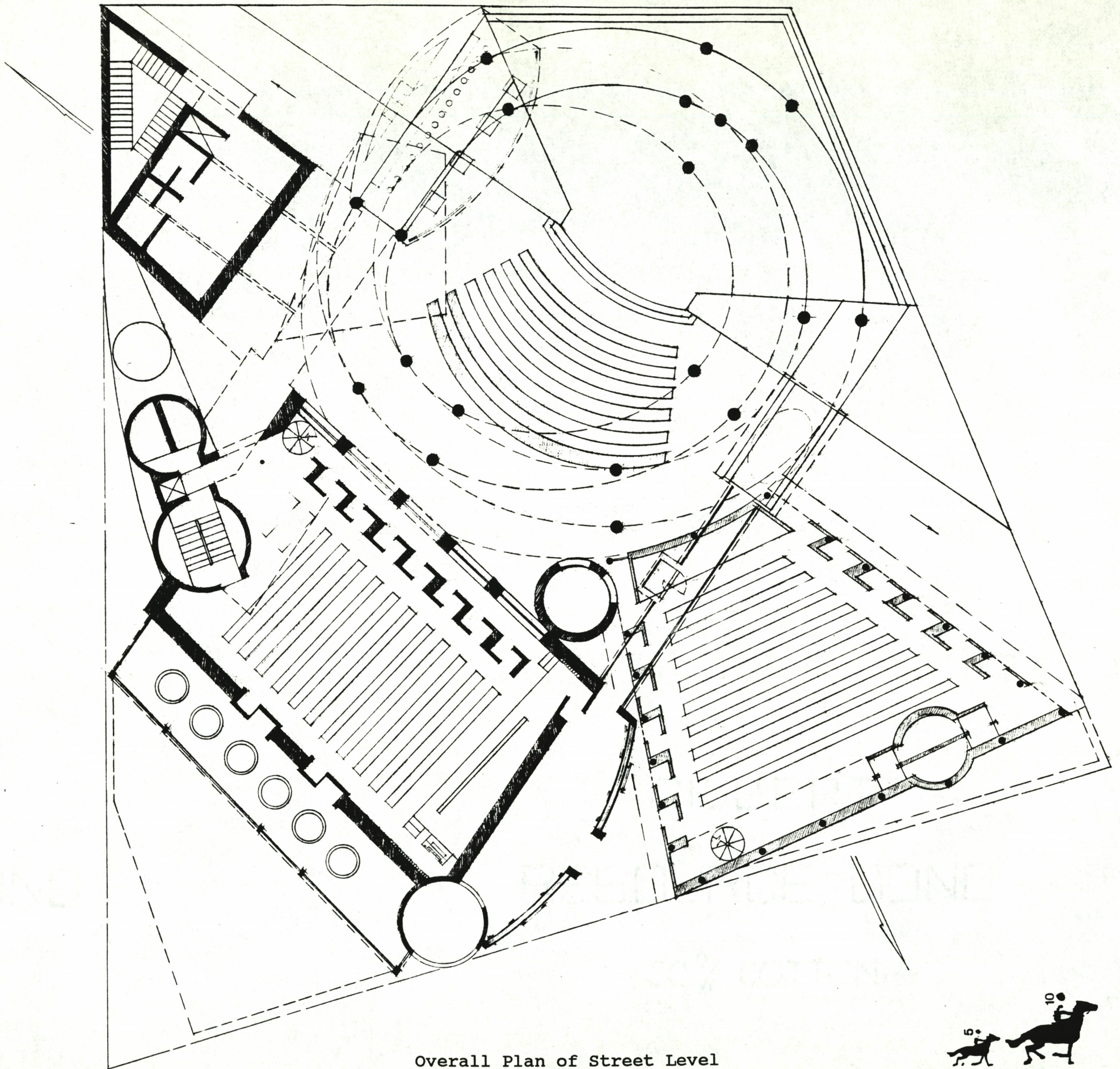
This building, having similar characteristics to that of the faculty suite and library, houses the classrooms and small cafe'. One enters this area of the complex two feet below the street level. Upon entering, one is in an access area and may take the elevator to the two storey classrooms. Because the area is minimal

in square footage, the volume was increased so that classrooms would exist with a loft space.

Above the classrooms to the commons area, one may journey through the glazed passageway. Only one of the two walls is glazed since the east wall is the viewing wall of the projection room in the hall of the faculty suite.

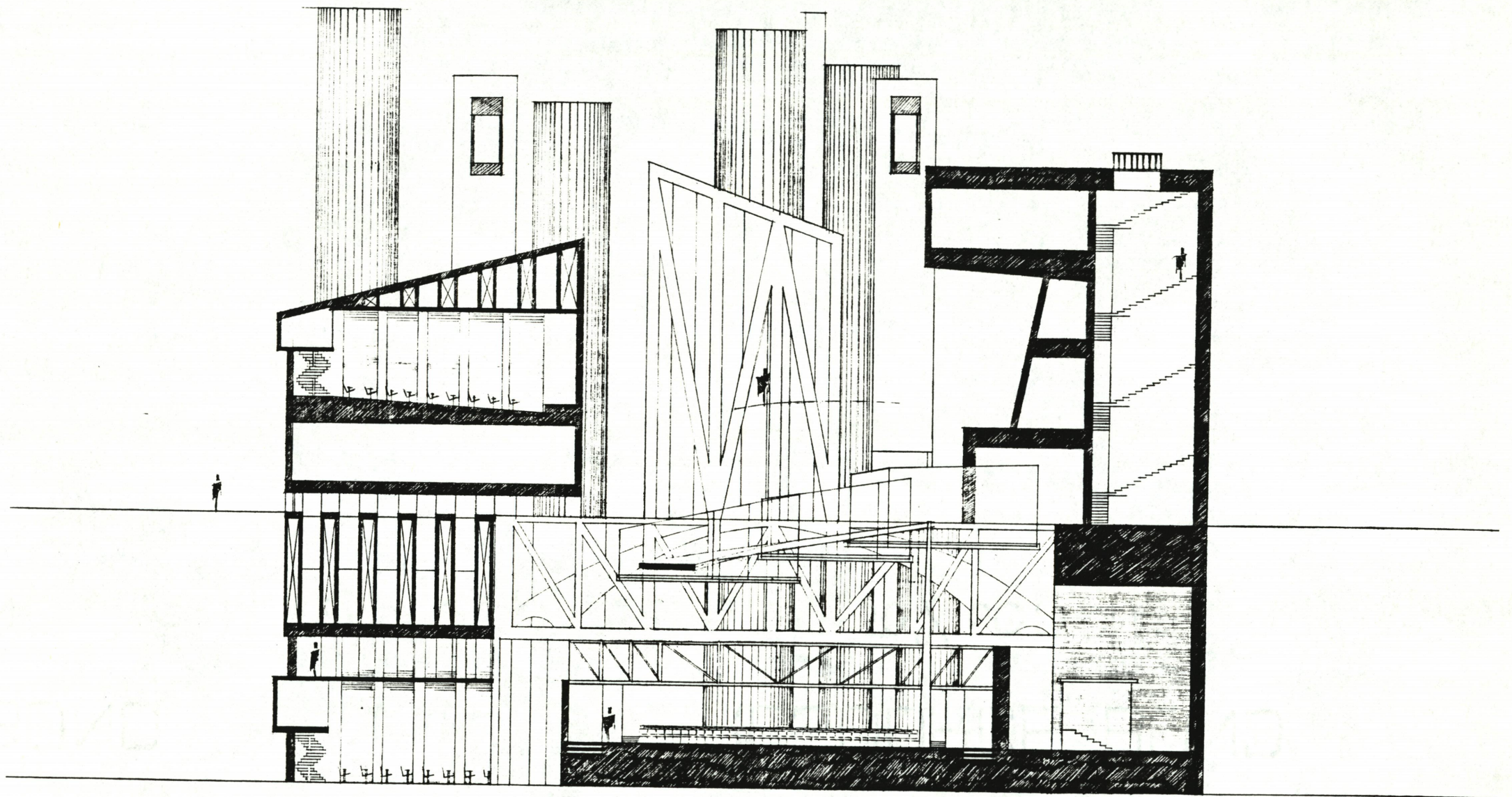
The cafe' is entered from this hall. The cafe' bows on both of its longer sides, giving slightly more room to the area. Patrons may be seated at the bar or at tables facing onto the site, specifically, onto the amphitheatre where impromptu performances may be viewed.





Overall Plan of Street Level



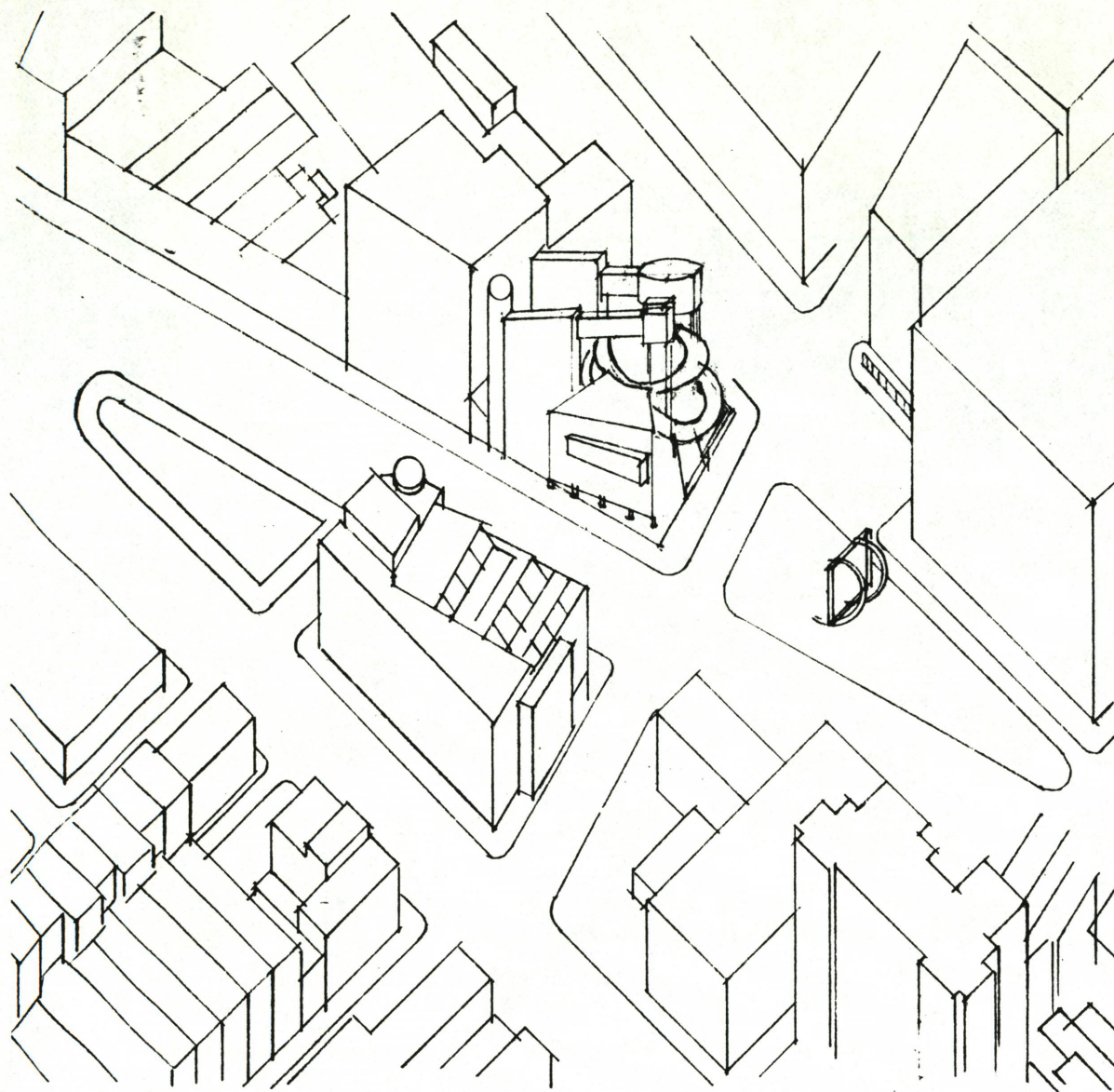


Overall Section



ENDNOTES

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3. Clough, Rosa T. Futurism (New York: Greenwood Press, 1961), Forward.



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