

# The Civic Life of the City Block

A Study in Formal Decisions of Civic Engagement

## Abstract

Town planning and political interaction of citizens are the main factors that affect civilizations on the most basic level. My study comes from an understanding of a need for a society to develop politically active citizens that are ascetic in nature, less they wish for a more despotic government. This study makes an attempt at understanding the basic elements that make civic structure of a city at the scale of a block. These elements are broken down into: Site, Boundary, Axis, Residence, Commerce, and Civic. The major focus being on Civic and the engagement of making a virtuous citizen through the study of the self and the formal decisions that make the Architecture. Civic structure comes after the forming of the city and its managerial needs, so before civic can reside within a city other formal decisions must be made to create structure for the greater need of the civilization. I will attempt to layout the structure needed and my projection of this structure and the preceding Civic Life that comes from this architectural study.

I dedicate this work to my wife,  
you have always shared my burden,  
and so you will share my success.

# Acknowledgement

I'd like to give acknowledgement to all those who have helped in this endeavor. I would first like to thank Virginia Tech Architecture School in general, along with all of its professors, as my entire experience there and with them has changed my understanding of architecture and the world at large, and that there is no going back from what I know now. I would like to thank my thesis committee; committee chair Prof. Steve Thompson, subcommittee Prof. Hans Rott, and subcommittee Prof. H. Scott Garner. Each one of you has affected my work before and during this thesis that I do not know where it would be without your input or if it would be as fulfilling of work. I'd like to thank all my friends and colleagues in my thesis year who allowed me to tire them with constant questions and sometimes just needing to hear myself work an idea out loud. Special thanks to Charles Green and Jon Craig for your constant companionship as architectural and academic peers. And of course, to my family and friends who have seen me through all of my years leading up to this point.

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# Thesis

*Defining the question*

What is the Structure and Architecture of Civic Life in the City Block?

This question requires a definition for what Civic is and what pertains to a Civic Life. Also, what are the formal structures to this life of “the city within a city” and the terms that must be defined in order to understand the formal decisions of the Project?

Civic comes from our understanding of the Roman “Cives” which defines citizenship as a grouping of people who decide to coexist under the same law. This common law is the underlying structure of the Civic life. The Law is a prevailing figure that should not undermine the Civic engagement, instead precedes the Civic Life. This process is laid out by Aureli in his book *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*:

“First is the demand for good functioning of the city as a place of cohabitation through its economic

administration and physical manifestation of administration, its urban plan...” - pg.7

“Second is the demand for discussion and confrontation, its political life – civitas - otherwise would fall into despotic order of things...” - pg.7

Infrastructure or flow of goods and services is the managerial need for the city to have day to day operations. This is space between, which structures or supports a simple aggregation of houses. These are the operations that a city deems necessary to be a functioning society; water, electricity, transportation, mail, sewage, import, export, etc. These are crucial needs and wants to sustaining a certain standard of living. This is not the means by which a city better itself and its citizens. It is merely the means to which the city fights strife, allowing for greater good to prevail and thrive.

Civic and Political space is in-between private residences and is outside the realm of managerial order. In this space resides “discussion and confrontation” of what defines a better and virtuous life. This engagement is “for the citizens by the citizens” and should not be hindered by Law. Infrastructure and Law is the guiding structure of the Civic space but should not determine Civic life; there should be a difference in what Law is and what Civic is. Law precedes Civic life, but Civic life has the means to change Law and, in turn, itself. This is a bit satirical as there will always be a despotic nature as the Law is the precedence for political discussion and Civic life.

Political and Civic space differ as Political is the matters of individuals or groups, while Civic is the matter of the individual or self. Political engagement is the interaction between individuals or groups and how these interactions affect the community as a whole. The Civic engagement is ascetic engagement, this is an interaction between the individual and the community. This is the process of how the community effects the individual and how the individual becomes a better citizen. This is a process of the self and what is a virtuous life within your community.

Infrastructure and Civic life would not exist if there were not citizens and a means of governance first. Hannah Arendt writes, in the Promise of Politics, of the need for governance within coexistence of Man.

“Man is apolitical. Politics arises between men, and so quite outside of man... There is no real substance. Politics arises in what lies between men and it is established as a relationship.” - pg.95

The coexistence of man for means of an easier and in turn better

life comes with a need to govern this interaction. The infrastructure is the space in-between that connects the personal habitation of citizens and structures life in a managerial way. While Civic space is the political discussion between houses, that allows the community to practice a virtuous life and avoid falling into a more despotic order.



# Formal Types

*Defining the elements*

Architecture by its formal condition is political. Aureli discusses this in a lecture to the AA:

“Architectural forms always address a spatial condition and any spatial condition always implies the idea of the political.”

By creating a formal condition you create a limit and, sequentially, an “is” and an “is not”. The Site, is undefined and is represented by a single plane extending into an infinite horizon and is nonexistence itself. Only when action or decision is made, then there is a duality. This action is a Boundary, which separates and defines an existence. A grouping of these Boundaries is an amalgamation of plurality, or coexistence. Even a structure that is lacking coherence is political by its proximity to other Boundaries. Governance and infrastructure is the means of bringing a coherence to these political spaces. If

Governance predates citizenship, then it also shapes the singular figure of the house.

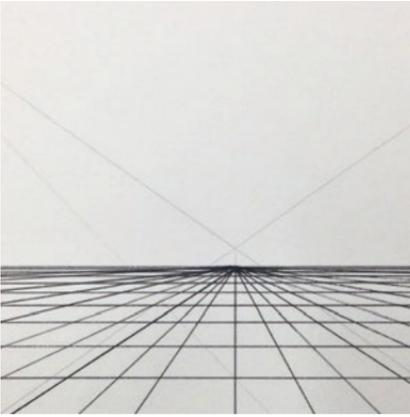
Vitruvius in his Ten Books on Architecture describes the method of laying out a successful Roman city. He devotes his first book on architecture to the forming of a city. The sequence of good site planning, then fortification of city borders, followed by laying out of infrastructure (roads), and lastly the development of public buildings; the ritual and moral structure of the City. This logic of urban planning is an example of governance that predates citizenship. This logic allowed the Roman Empire to expand beyond its initial development and grow into an expansive empire. This is in contrast with the Greek “polis” which started from pre-existing citizenship, and gave Civic structure after there were political connections.

The Roman city would start with a site that they deemed healthy and abundant. Then would make physical boundaries (walls, tower) circumventing their jurisdiction of the site, an area that was possible to survey and control. This was established first as a means of protecting liberty. The Romans would emphasize this boundary between what was inside, or under their governance, and what was outside, or was ungoverned by creating a trench: a Pomoerium. The Pomoerium was the border of civil society.

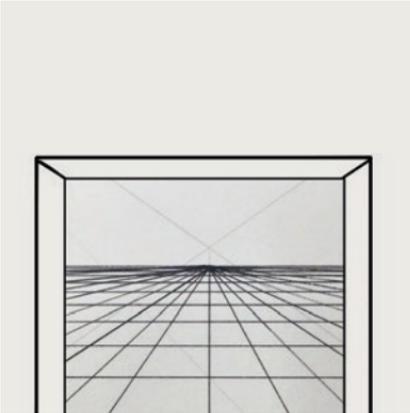
After the Boundary of what could be managed or governed, they would try to create a coherence to what was inside their rule. One way to bring coherence to a city is to give it an axis that creates an overarching rule. For the Romans this was the *Cardo Decumanus*. This main thoroughfare was also a connection of the City past its main jurisdiction to bring and enforce the Law or “Lex” to the rest of its Empire. The Roman gave emphasis to these breaks in their fortification or *Porta* (gate) where the *Cardo Decumanus* broke the outer boundaries of the city. They did this not only by creating multilayered fortification that showed strength at the weakest point, but also gave Civic importance by using monumental arches that celebrated great victories that happened just outside the walls. Anyone who entered the city would have to pass under the might of Rome.

When the main axis was established, the development of Civic building and private residences would be formed. This, in turn, would also form the minor roads and infrastructure, connecting the main city structure. Personal and Civic life was last in the development of the city.

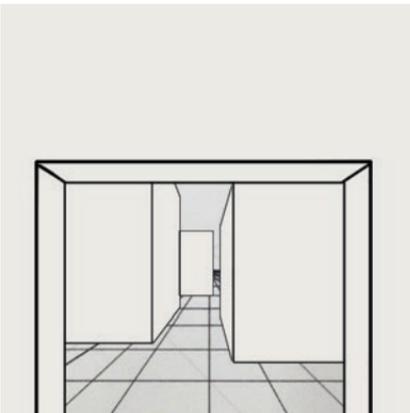
Private residences or the house was seen as an economy, a rule, and a position all its own, or “oikos”. A residence is absolute in its nature. The agglomeration of these house, or “oikoi”, are what creates the political space to control the interaction between absolute beings. Everything inside of the residence is outside the public eye and makes a definitive boundary between it and the city.



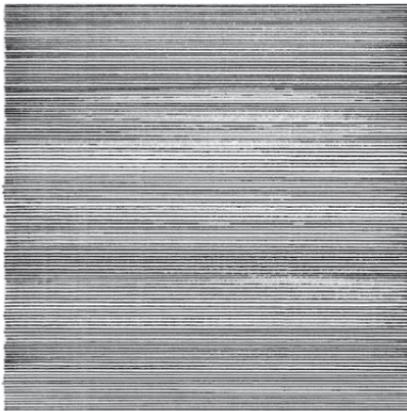
Infinite Plane (an apolitical singular entity)



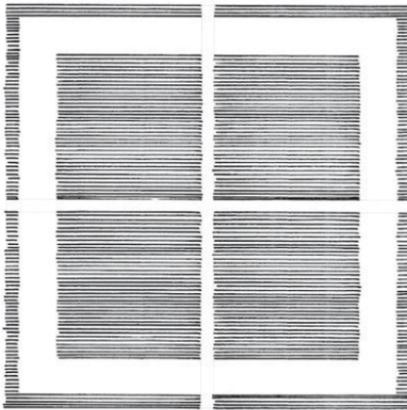
Decision of what is inside to what is outside ("is" to "is not")



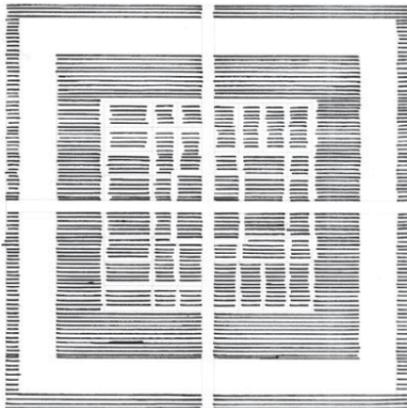
An aggregation of decisions (political space in-between decisions)



Site



Boundary and Axis



Organization of Residences and Civic buildings

# Project

*Defining the decisions*

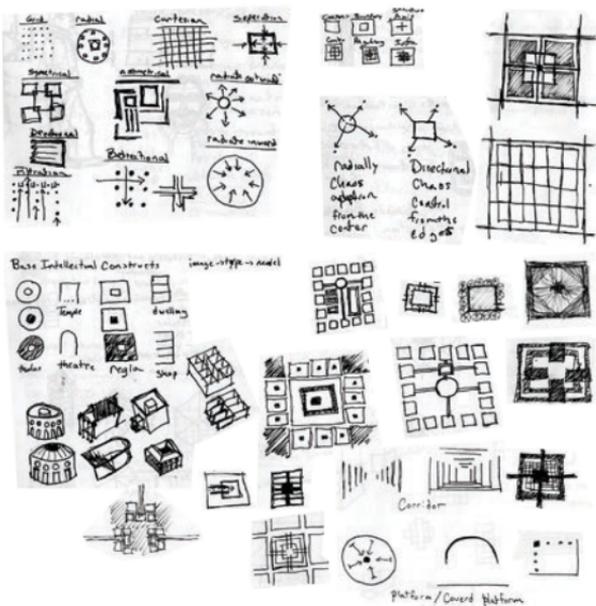
## Site:

The project site is confined to the size of an average square city block, roughly 600ft by 600ft. This allowed me to make more finite decisions about the project and gave a defined boundary of what is the project and what is outside of the project. Also, having it nested within the city gives a comparison between two man-made civilizations.

This project was thought of as an ascetic life, where one can study oneself and become a better citizen so it is only proper to give a stark backdrop or a border land that exemplifies what one is leaving: today's modern city life (fig. 1).

## Boundary:

To give emphasis to the absolute nature of the project, a boundary was made at the street edge. This along with a drop in elevation marks the break of the project from the city. This difference is



exemplified by its gates or Portas, which mark the ritual of entering what is this civilized society. This first boundary opens into a buffer space between the outside world and Civic life of the block. This is where commerce and residence resides (fig.3). As in any great society, economy cannot be bolstered without import and export. Past the first boundary, foreigners are allowed to enter to trade and visit loved one. I thought this proper since economy and family is not a closed off system and needs outside interaction. Though past this area is the grand ascension to the Civic Courtyard (fig.8) where only civic engaged residence of the block can partake in the beauties of an ascetic life. This main structure of an outer boundary and inner plinth is a layering engagement within the project.

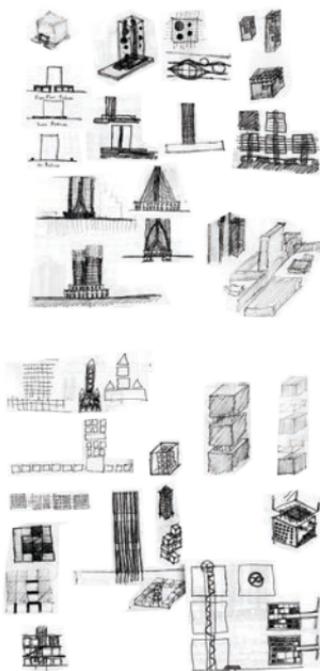
#### Residence:

Residential Towers broken in to modular blocks which are then broken into Cartesian horizontal grids (fig.3). The tower allows for the civic base in the middle of the site to have a backdrop of itself before the skyline of the outside world. The outside world in turn from the street, sees only the visual boundary of the residence and not the Civic Life within. I decided to have the residence be elevated off the ground and be a unit within a boundary to exemplify the need for privacy within the household, that one's household affairs and public affairs be separated.

I made two ways of circulation mattering on need or fancy. One, egress path or quick path, is a rectilinear staircase within a cylinder with elevators offset at its corners. These elevators are designated for one residential cube and will rush to that cube and all its preceding floors (fig.6) along with that residential cubes preceding exterior garden (fig.7). This is also the area where other utilities and infrastructure is brought into the tower. The Second, the meandering path, is a strolling ramp to take in the circumscribed view of the tower, these paths do not lead directly down or up just for taking in the view to the outside.

The under garden of each residential cube, is another area for strolling and interacting with co-residences of your residential cube (fig.7). This by no means is supposed to be forced on the residence to interact, but is an open, controlled area to do so if needed, and is only accessible by the residence of the above cube.

The structure of the tower is the main core where the egress stair, elevators, and utilities resides. It stands as a single pillar of strength, holding the weight of the floors. There are only two full floor slabs on top and bottom that are strengthened using a waffle slab and truss combo. The residences and walking paths in between these two floors are hung by metal cable, attached to the main core, and strengthened with Veradale trusses acting as handrails as well. The look is to be a wall of cables that make corridors for the residences to follow.



### Commerce:

The main buffer area between the outside world and the civic engagement of the city, is the commerce area. I choose this because to stimulate the economy and allow for outside knowledge to be gained, there needs to be a controlled interaction space that is the outside world and the inner world of the block. This space has many different size stalls for businesses to reside (fig.2). This allows for a real estate practice of leasing space to residences who wish to take their household economy to the streets. Residents can gain in their household economy and help fund upkeep of the infrastructure of the outer tower ring. This also another reason the residences are just above the commerce area. Also, at the level of the commerce is the under plinth area, that holds space for commuting in and mechanical needs for the block.

### Courtyard (Civic Arena):

This is a large raised plinth that allows the civic to be separate from the rest of the block. This is my symbolism to show foundation and structure of the prevailing governance of the block, yet civic sits on top of the plinth. This shows that Civic can only be built through governance, but civic is above and outside of governance. The access to this area is many ascending staircases and that reside in-between the residence towers.

### Porta (Formal Entrance):

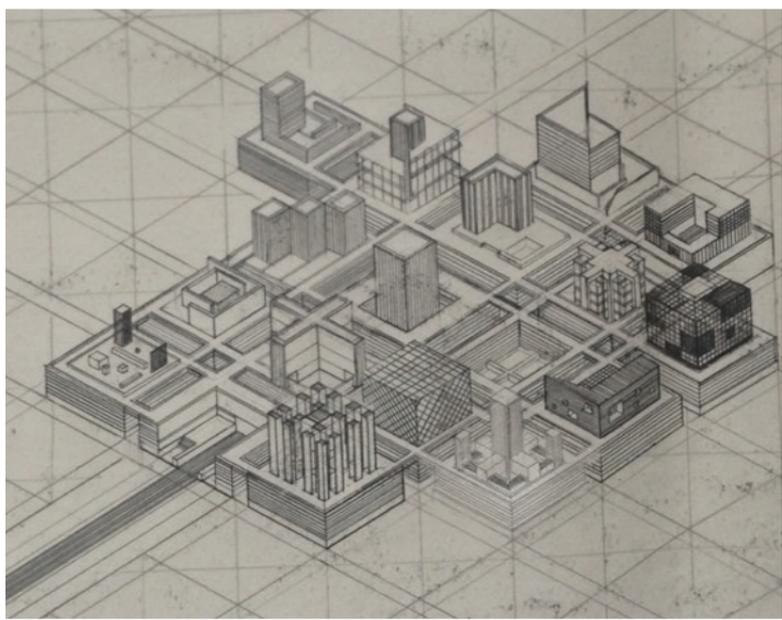
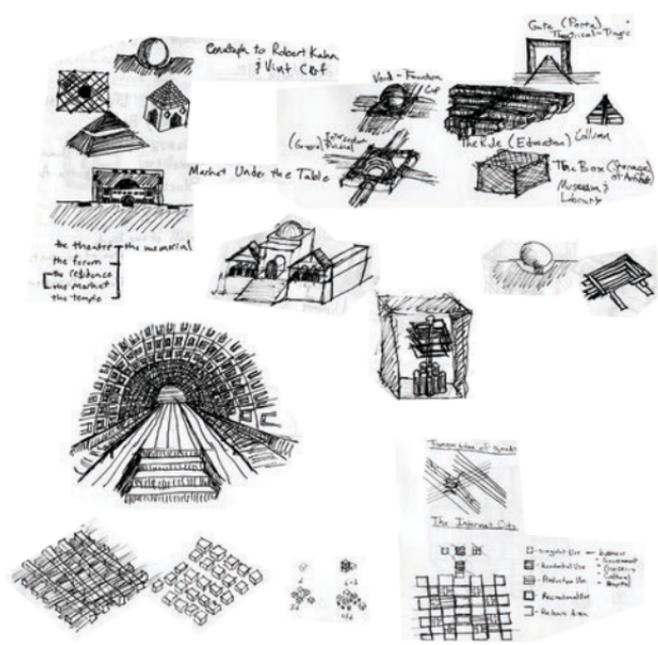
Large monolithic pillars of Civic entrance are placed at the four sides of the Civic courtyard, marking the entrance to civic life. Each one denoting the nearest Civic facility with pictures of important virtues. Much like the triumphal arches of the romans these show great important memories of the society.

### Forum (Main Political Stage):

I choose to have the public forum to be at the center of the entire civic courtyard, since discussion of politics is at the center of all public interaction. Also, this forum is inside a courtyard of a regulating figure of a assembly building. This is meant to show that structure and governance precedes the forum, but open discussion is at its center.

### Health and Wellness (Fitness, Bath House, Open Park, Medical Facility):

On one of the corners of the Civic courtyard is a center for health and wellness. This formally takes the shape of controlled open parks and a stepping well with a large spherical fountain in the middle. I choose this to denote the need for health and abundance symbolized by large amounts of clean water flowing over the large sphere that drops into a pool that you can sit next to and enjoy the misty air. (fig.8)



Underneath the surface, there are many rooms for bathing in different pools of water (hot, cold, or tepid) along with studios to strengthen and understand your body and its limits. A study of the body allows one to understand the great strength we have and also our limits as mortal beings.

Storage of Facts (Museum, Library, Art Gallery, and Theatre):

The "Box" as I have named it (fig. 11), is an area where residents can see new and old works of art, whether this be in sculpture, literature, painting, or theatrical performance. An understanding of facts and what is beauty is a key part to understanding one-self.

The entire facility is a glass box held together by large louvers. The inside is a series of ramps that hold the bookshelves and study areas. The four corners hold the egress, circulation, and utilities the building needs. In the center is a stacking of concrete cube rooms that hold all the major art pieces. At one of the sides resides the theatre, which is separated from the rest of the open space by means of a large concrete corridor to give respect for the performances at hand.

The Guiding Rule (Education and Academia):

This is where the study of the physical world are held. This is one of two facilities for the study of our world (the other devoted to the metaphysical). (fig.9)

The Academy has a long cornered corridor that houses the administrative and managerial needs of the building. Seven halls jut out from this main building that house all the different colleges. The entrance to these seven halls are at each end, one inside but separate from the administrative building and the other end outside in the open mall. The main area for the classrooms and labs reside well over head structured by the two end egress cores.

The mall in the center of the campus is overlooked by the administrative building at its edge and by the classrooms above. This is open discussion, practice and, free speech area of the campus. The many paths to different areas of the campus section off smaller green spaces for different activities to take place.

Metaphysical/Ethereal Study:

This is a large geometric volume sitting at one corner of the Civic courtyard (fig.8). Two large rectangular axis stretch from the two sides of the main axis of the courtyard as entrances to this building. These intersect with a large which is projecting out of a larger pool water. I choose these forms to denote a higher order of things, to show a study of true form and the shadow of the fact you see before you as you enter the building. The main purpose of this building is to study the metaphysical or a study outside of the physical world. The ritual entering and contemplating inside this dimly lit space is

a study of shadows within our world. The wish to remove worldly senses (hearing, sight, smell) and contemplate the metaphysical is what this facility is meant for. (fig. 10) The main space is a carving of voids that allow light to filter from above and bounce and play off of the many volumes that reside within the main cube.

I planned that as one entered this building corridor and light would shrink as to slowly dim the light of your passage and adjust your eyes to be more prepared for the your contemplative study within. The corridor circumscribes the inner void and has naves and pockets of quiet contemplation area that have different lighting qualities. This all leads to the exit corridor that slowly readjust your eyes to the outside light or if you wish to go deeper in contemplation, there is a circular staircase inside of one of the naves that leads down into a square open space only broken by five cylinders that one can enter to continue their study.

# Conclusion

## *Postnotes*

A main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is like any architectural work, “What can we continue on from here”. The thesis of this project is something that has many precedences, that can be studied and both formally and structurally. Overall though the political discussion of architecture is a lengthy study that I have only scratched the surface in my work. A further study of the City as project and the form which the political takes is where this thesis leads.

As for my project of my thesis, I have found some further studies that would bring a level of detail that it does not have at this moment:

A study of the scale of the project would further the understanding of the city within a city. This project had limited open space to offset the large scale buildings around it and lacked in a place between the different buildings. Having a larger scale or diminishing the scale of certain building might have created more dynamic in-between

spaces that would be areas of rest inside of a program driven courtyard.

A study of material would help embrace the feeling each structure was supposed to give to the surrounding area. This would help both in an understanding of structure and construction of these figures, and not just volumes within a space.

Since the project is supposed to be a city within a city that emphasizes a semi closed system of citizenship and interaction, finding what a resident of this way of life would look like. To live inside this world and to negate the outside world is a form of removing oneself from the outside world and looking within for answers. It would do the project and thesis well to study smaller communities like monasteries and communes to learn the nature of a life that gives up certain worldly goods and needs. The ascetic life of the monk is something that rings very true with this study. To see if a ritualistic life of a resident would further the ideals of the project and what formal decisions strengthen this approach.

Lastly, virtuous is a term that has been misused in contemporary speech and rhetoric. Research and defining the term would help my study of Civic practice and a better of the self.

This Thesis has large implications for how we decide to structure future cities. What scale should the city take? What elements are needed to have both a productive economy and nurture proactive citizens? What are the structures that precede citizenship and how do they lead to a healthy community? These are all questions that can be taken away from this study and furthered afterwards.

# Figures

*Final drawings*

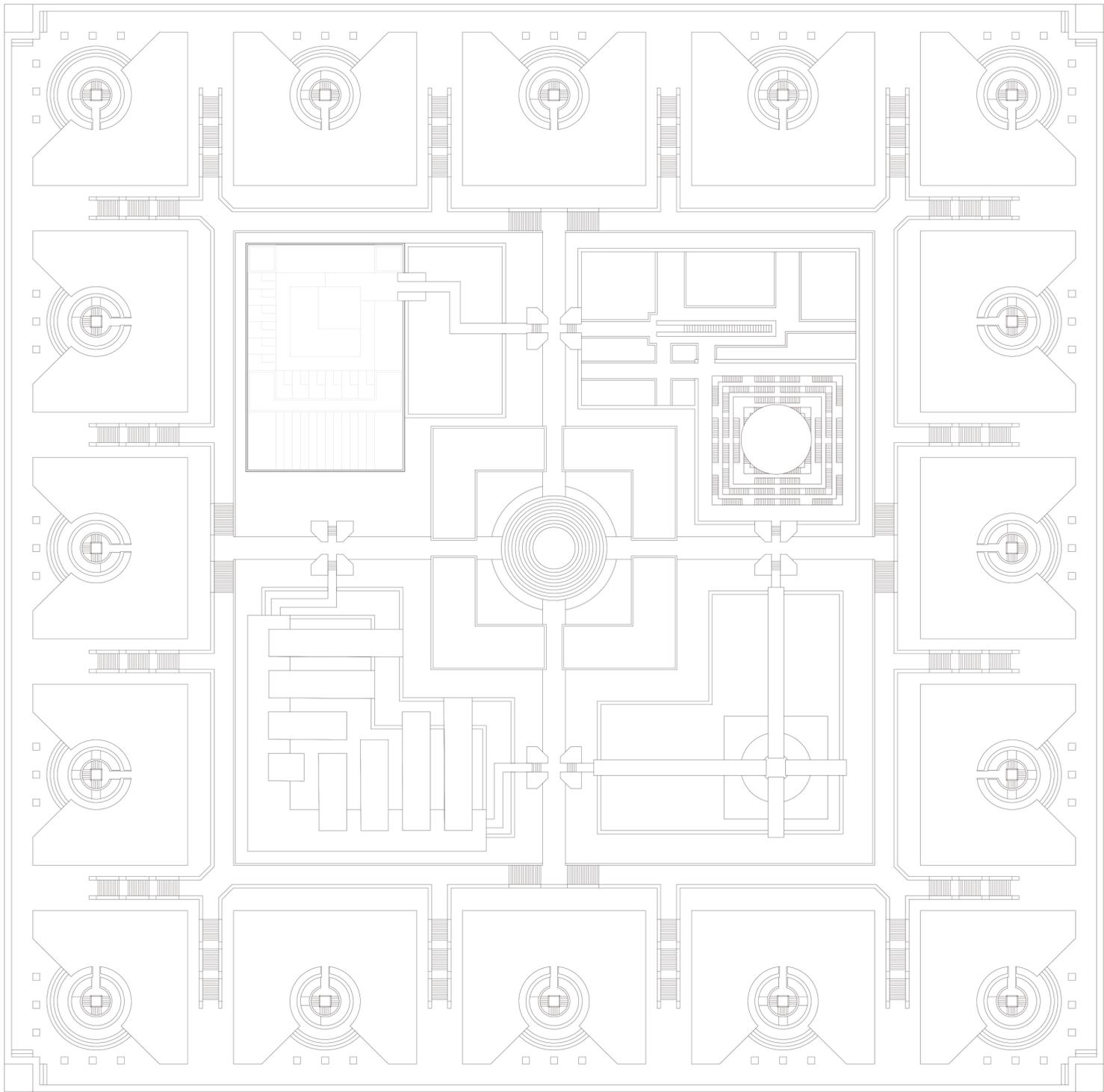


fig. / Site Plan:  
Plan  
Scale: 1" : 50'

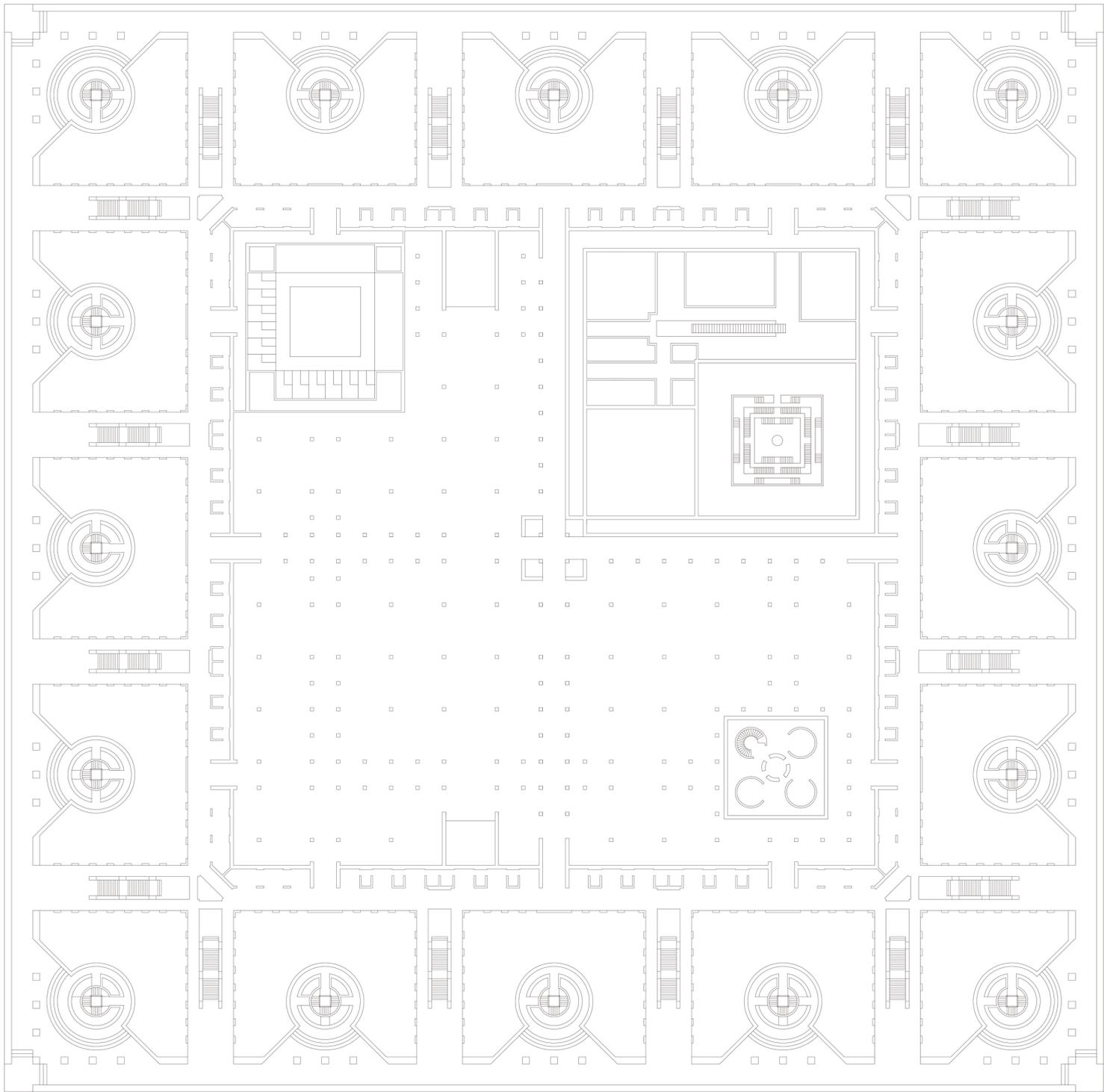


fig.2 Site Plan: Underground  
Plan  
Scale: 1" : 50'

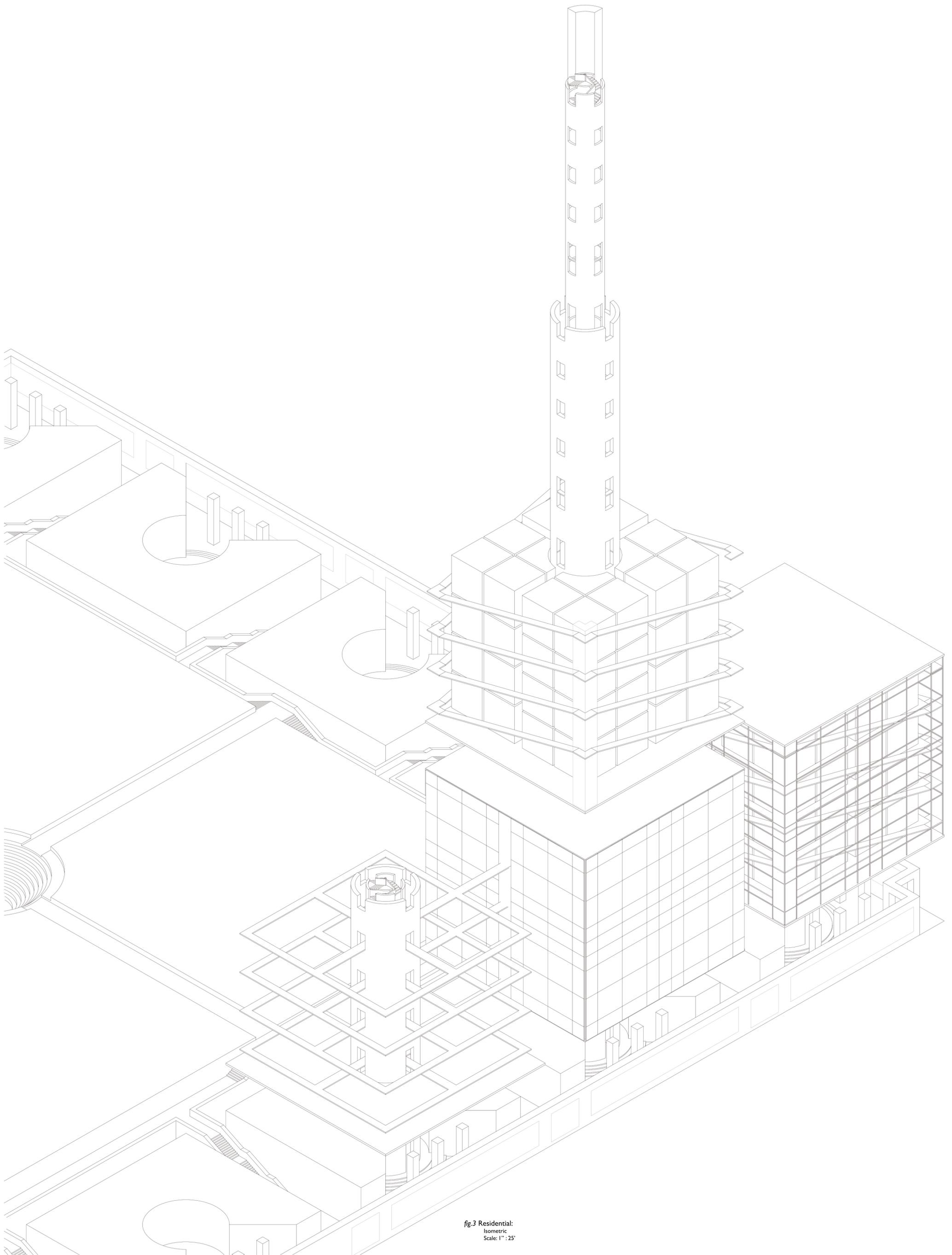
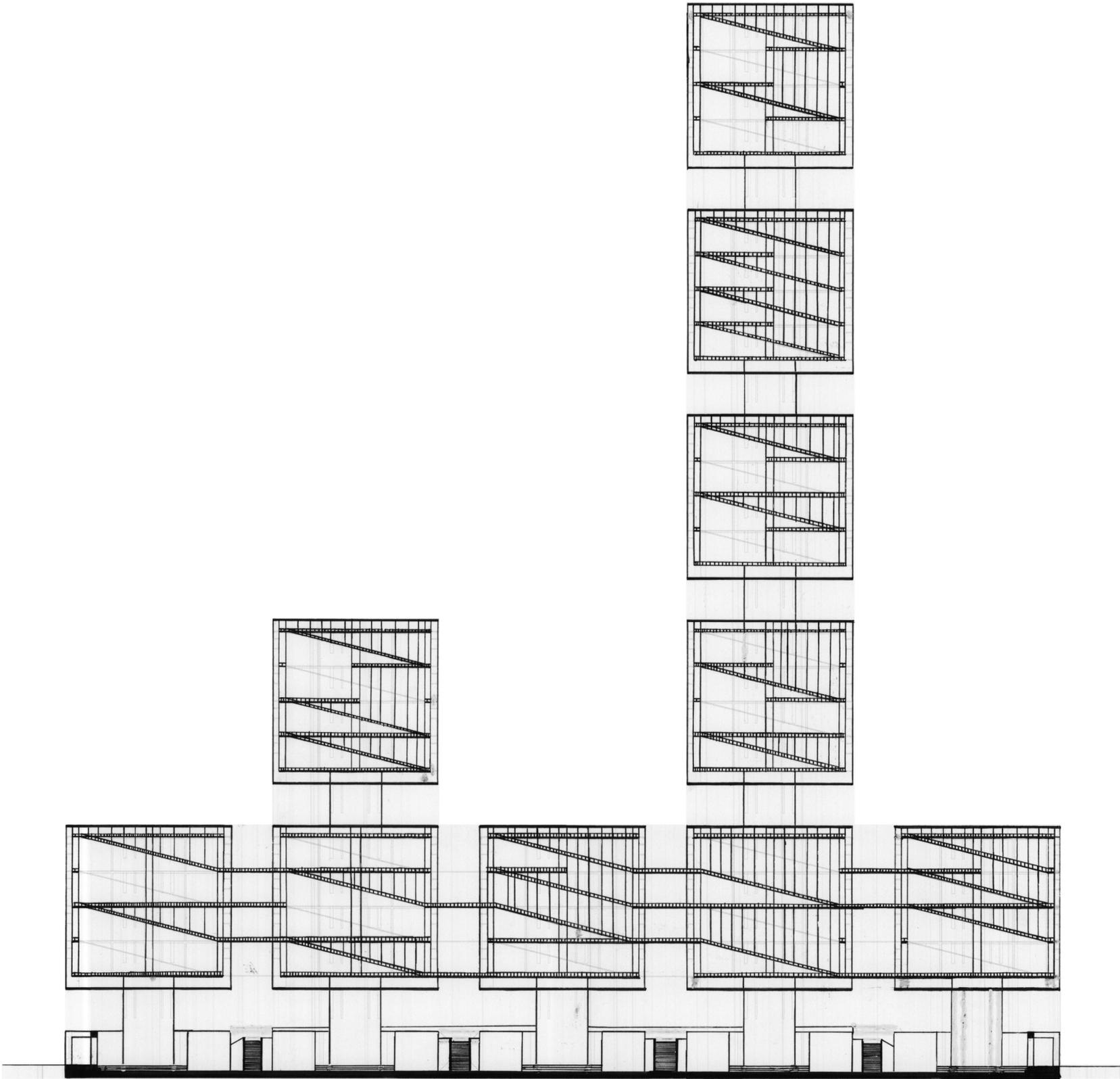


fig.3 Residential:  
Isometric  
Scale: 1" = 25'



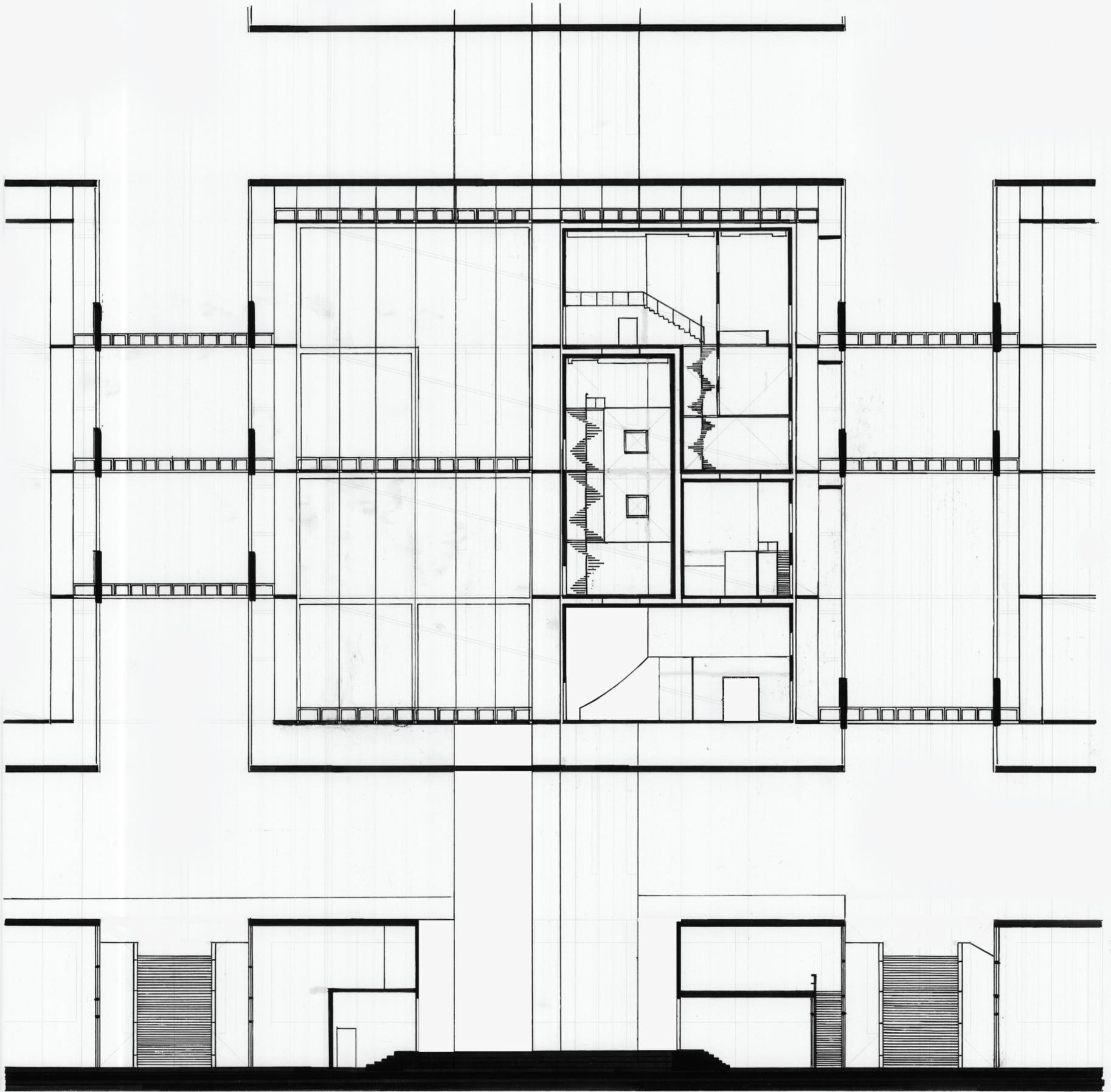
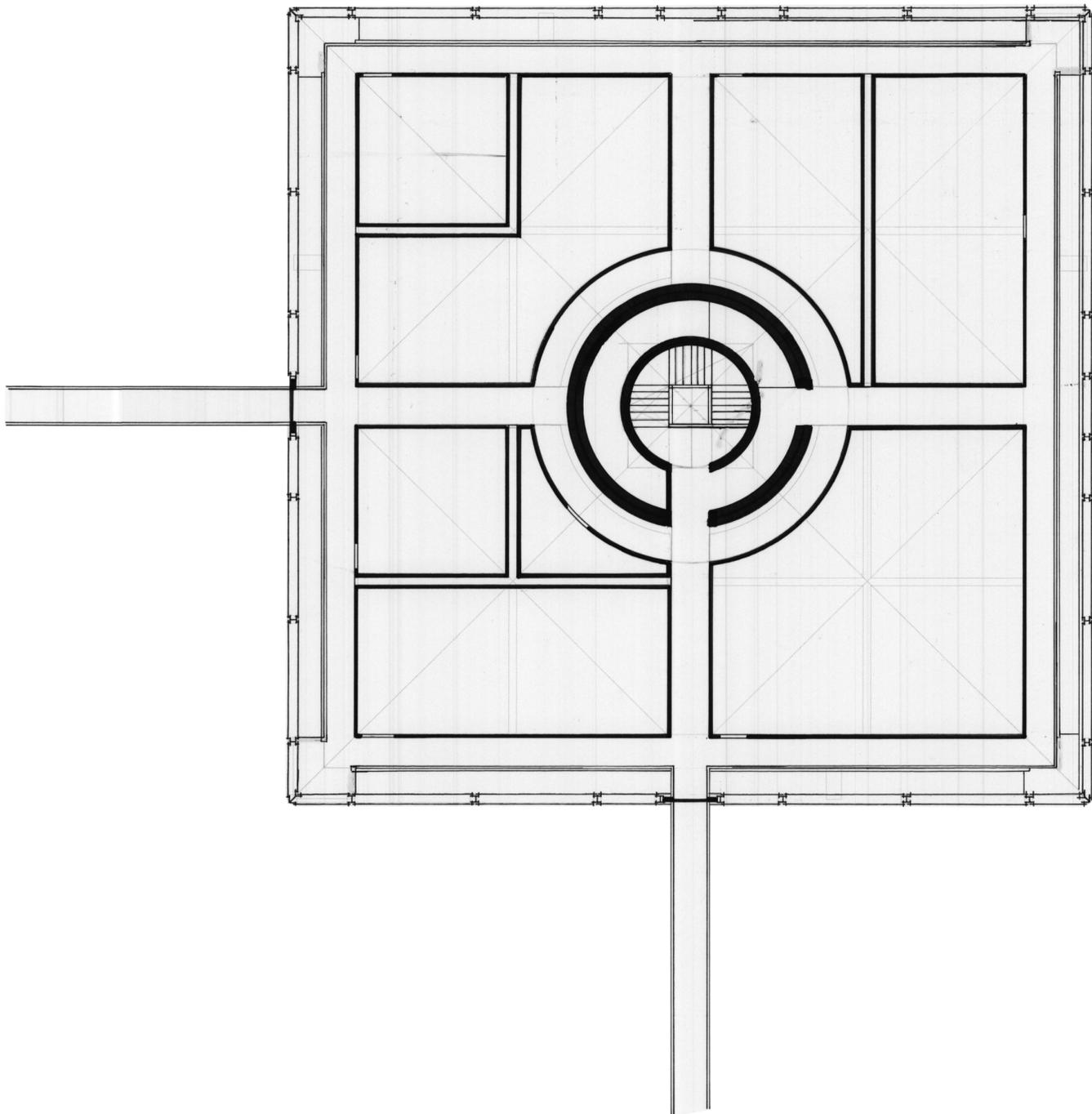
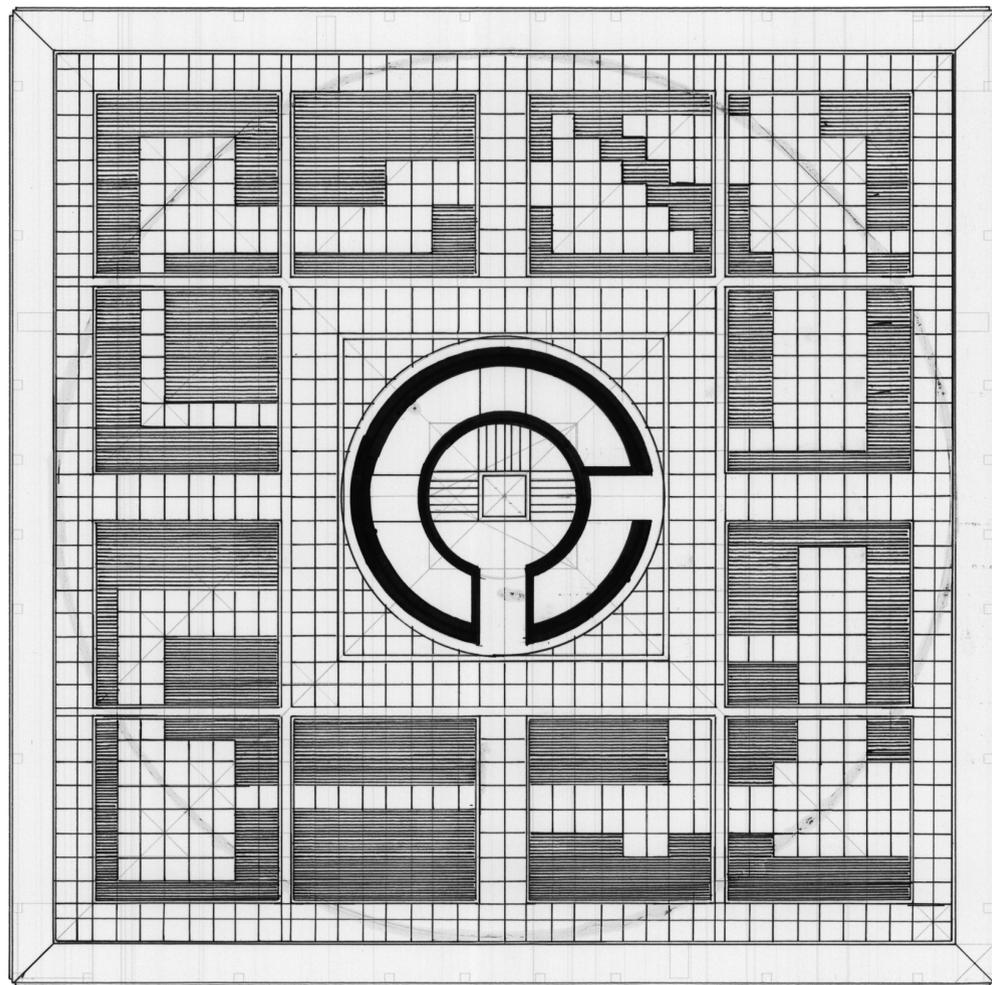


fig.5 Residential: Living  
Section  
Scale: 1" = 12.5'





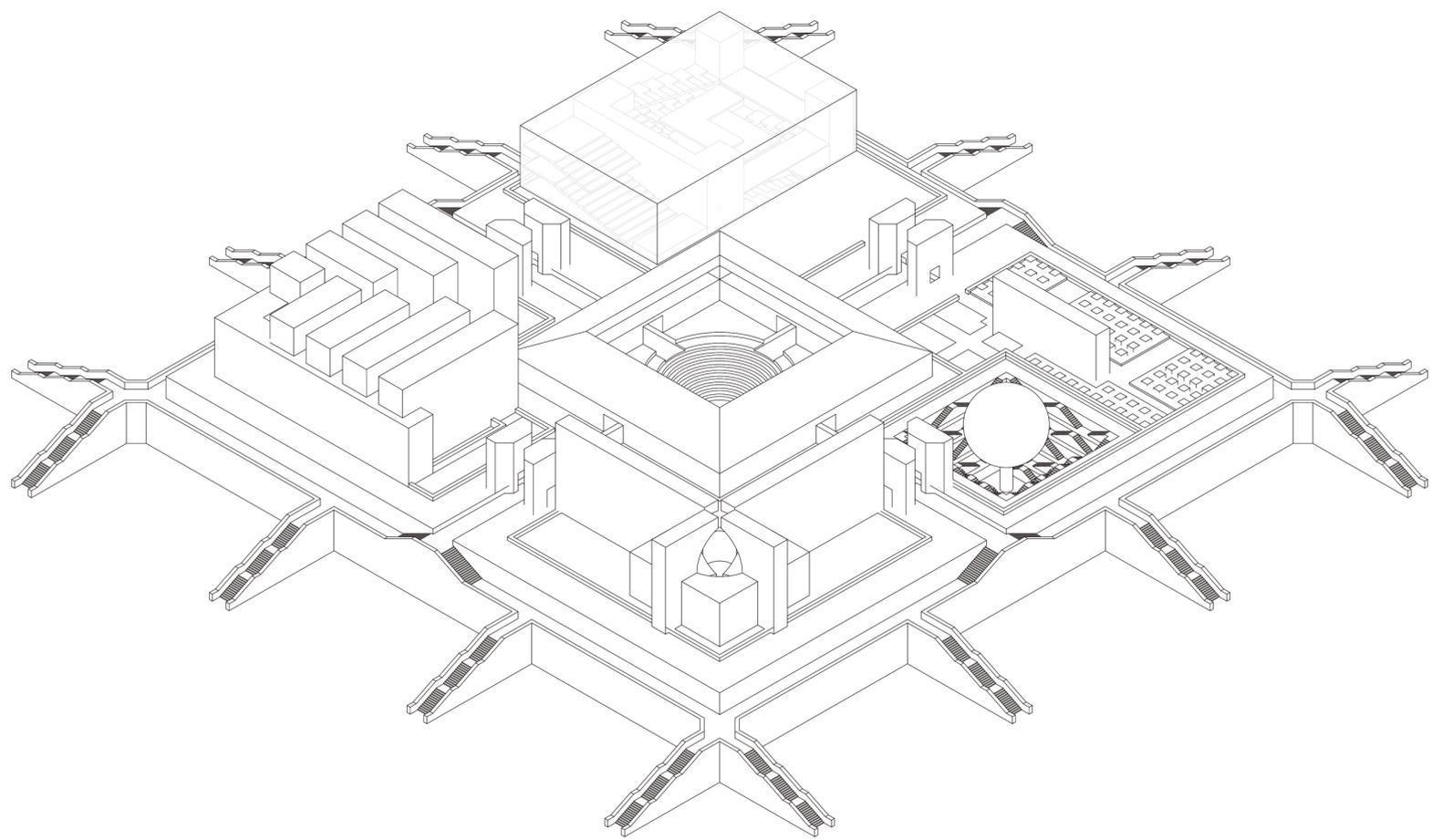
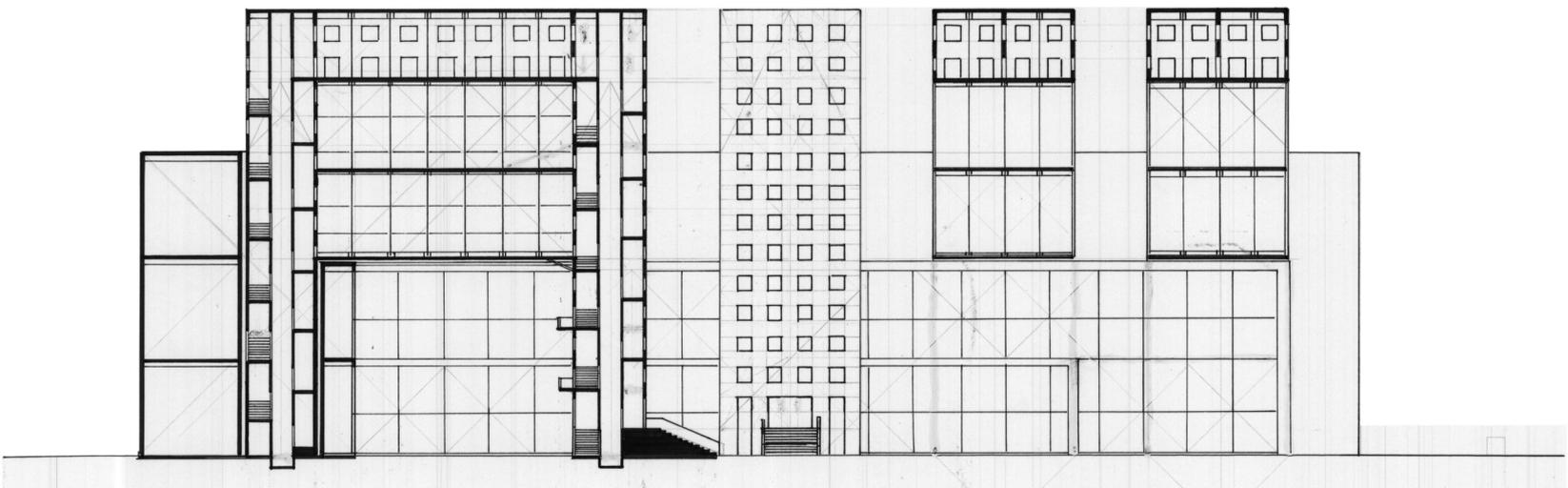
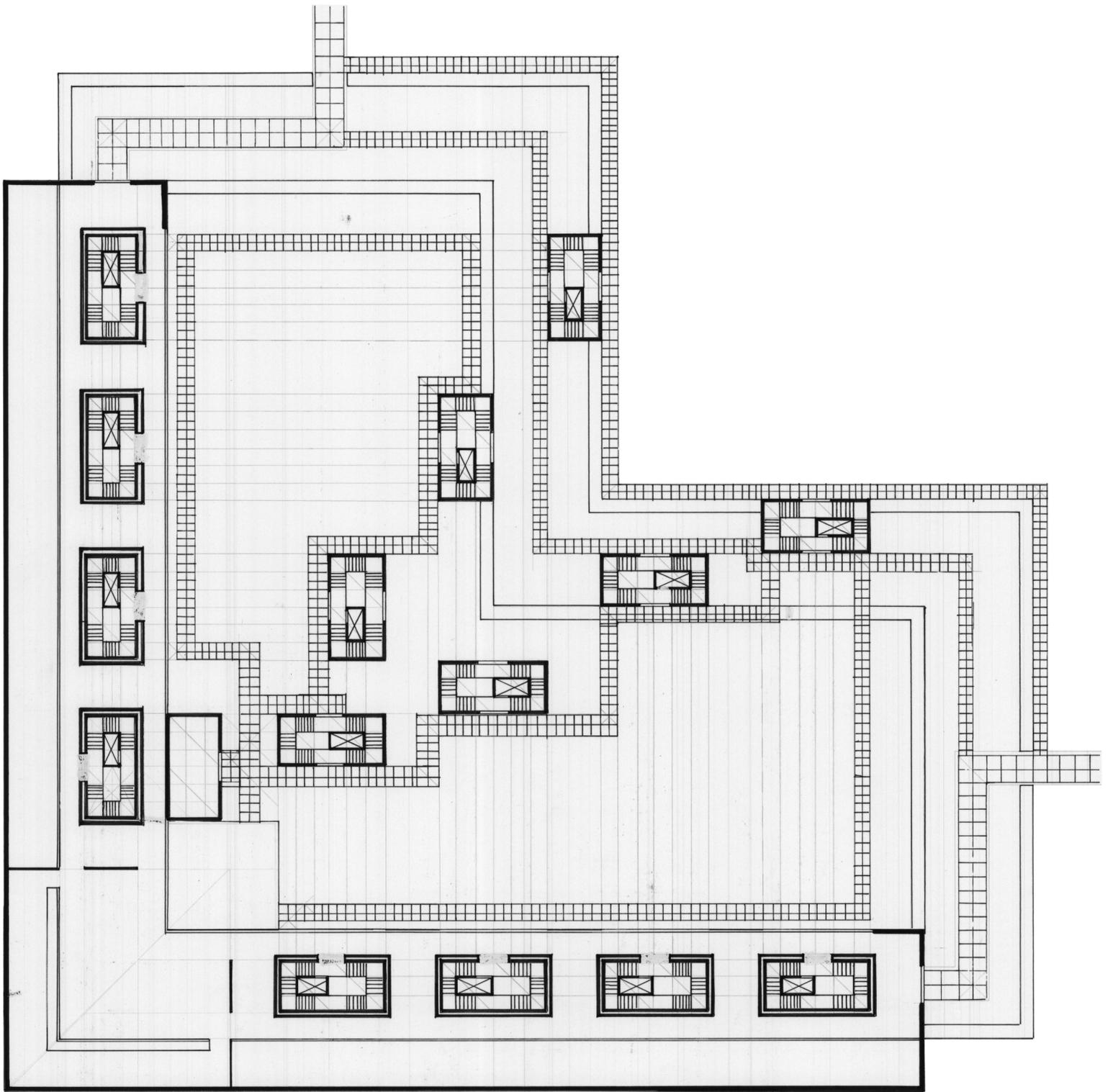


fig.8 Civic Courtyard  
Isometric  
Scale: 1" = 50'



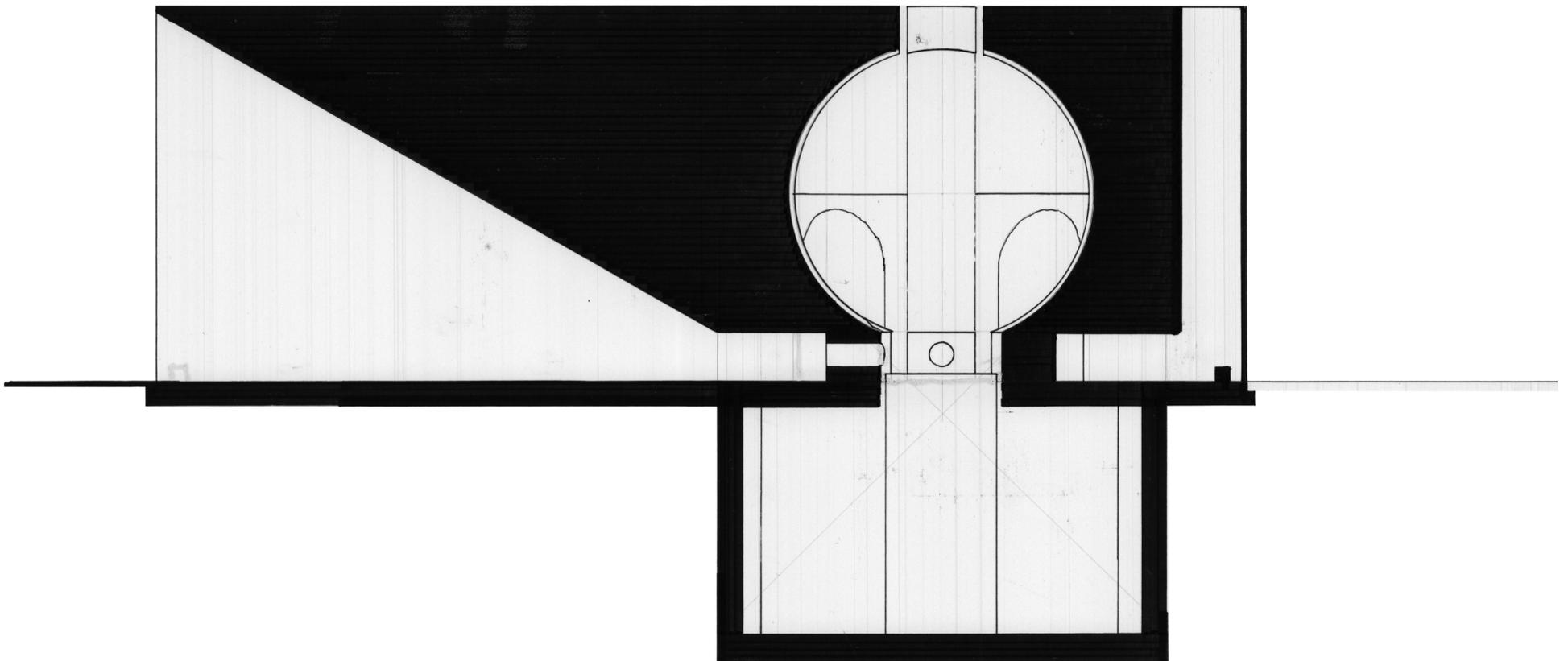
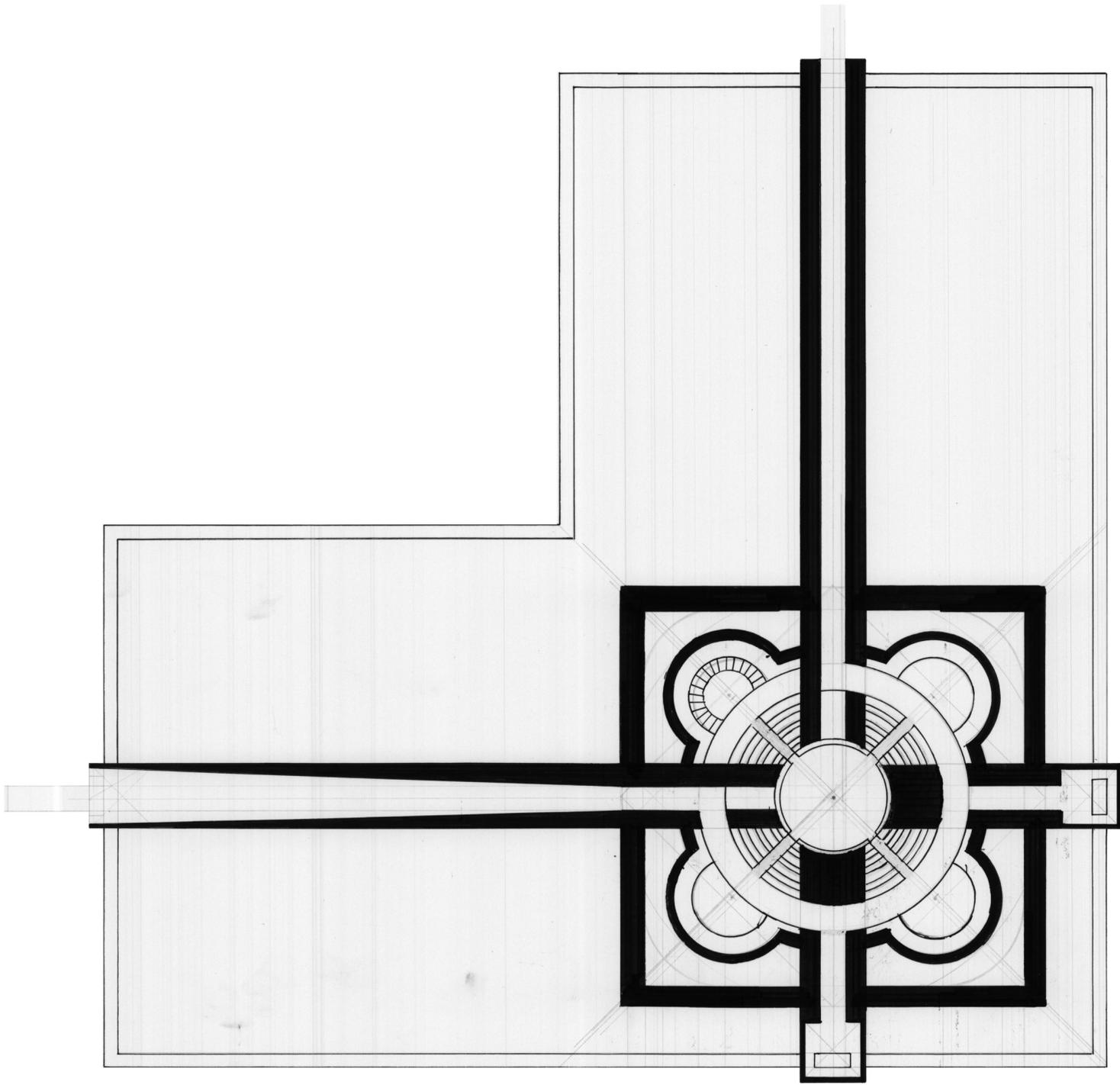


fig 10 Metaphysical  
Section and Plan  
Scale 1"=12'

