

# **building duration**

## a house living toward death

ROBERT KOCHER

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

Master of Architecture  
in  
Architecture

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May 10, 2017  
Alexandria, Virginia

Keywords:  
Architecture, House, Life, Death, Ocean, Cemetery

*I could just remember how my father used to say that  
the reason for living  
was to get ready to  
stay dead  
a long time.*

William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

# building duration

## a house living toward death

ROBERT KOCHER

### ABSTRACT

The house, living toward death, is composed of aspects that call the dweller to death and to life. Death is reflected in a stone foundation and walls for the private quarters of the home, for rest and daily preparations. These ground the dweller in ultimate rest. Life is reflected in rooms of timber that create a place for nourishment, entertaining, and leisure during the day. The centerpiece of the house is a stone hearth that adjoins the stages of the house - stone and timber, death and life. Just as the stages of life are nonlinear, the stone and timber construction of the house meet and acknowledge each other and their respective roles. For example, the sleeping quarters have a stone foundation but east-facing walls of wood remind the sleeper that activity calls and that rest in the house is not permanent.

A key feature of the home is its moment of transition to the west, where the dweller is prepared to encounter and acknowledge final rest in the attached cemetery. Two rotating doors create a space for the caretaker to access the cemetery through a moment of transition. In this moment, the caretaker accesses her tools and reorients her mind. Transitioning to the outdoors, the caretaker must ascend to the cemetery and pauses on landing when eye-height with her charges, the headstones. Upon return from the cemetery, the moment of transition is a moment to remove dirt, clean, and again reorient to the living.

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### GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Life is a transition through stages, framed by birth and death. We transition through life in a nonlinear fashion, moving sometimes closer to, and sometimes farther from, rest. Daily, we rise for living and fall to rest. Daily, we prepare for activity and prepare for sleep. Daily we age and endure, but our burdens may lighten with the coming of Spring or a new member to the family.

In reverence to the stages of life, I have designed a house living toward death - a house that provides a meaningful setting for the stages of life and our daily transitions. The house provides a dwelling for a cemetery caretaker, whose very vocation is a daily encounter with death.



*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.  
Then, the whining school-boy with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then, a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then, the justice,  
In fair round belly, with a good capon lin'd,  
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws, and modern instances,  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

## DEDICATION

To the life of Matthew Musial, the lover, never to become a soldier.

To the life of Norbert Koch, the lean and slipper'd pantaloon. Rest in peace.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee for your thoughtful critiques.

Susan, Paul, and Paul, thank you for sharing your abundance of knowledge and precious time with me!

I would like to especially thank Paul Emmons and Ezgi Isbilen for their endless support, encouragement, and advice. Paul and Ezgi, thank you for illuminating the beginnings of paths I never knew existed!

I would like to give a special thanks to my friends at the WAAC. Alyssa, thank you for our discussions about dirt. Ryan, thank you for always helping me. Ian, thank you for our conversations about the importance of process. Anahita, thank you for our talks about architecture for animals.

I would like to thank Jaan Holt for his vision and dedication to create the WAAC. Jaan, thank you for being the spirit of the school.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my family. Mom, Dad, and Mike, thank you for your unconditional love. Charlie, Evie, and Nala, thank you for giving me new life and new challenges. Sarah, words cannot express my gratitude and your importance to my life. I love you, despite it all!

I would also like to thank the strangers I pass and those who history books will never mention. Thank you for teaching me *sonder*<sup>†</sup> and empathy.

<sup>†</sup> **sonder** n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own (*The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*)



# building duration

## a house living toward death

### STAGES

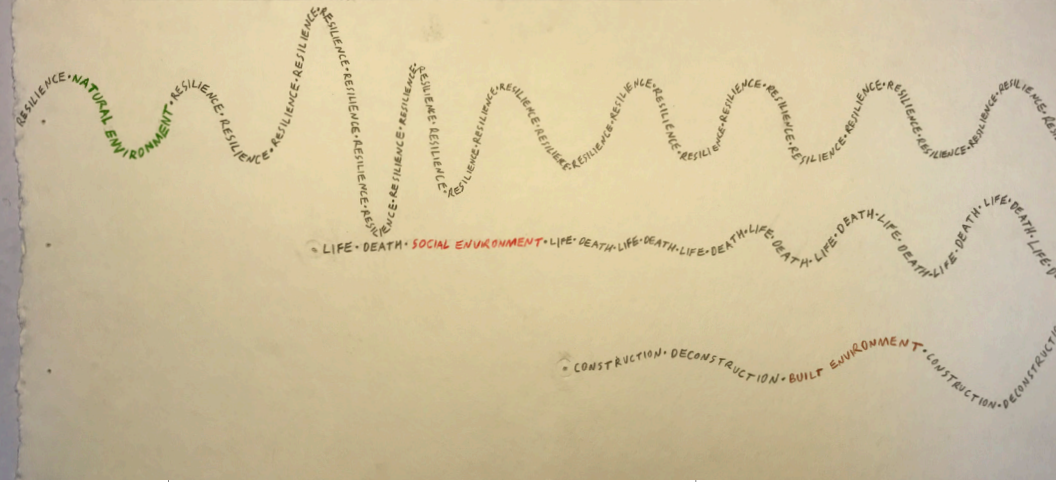
<b>impregnation</b>	
concept .....	1
<b>birth</b>	
site analysis .....	13
<b>life</b>	
process .....	21
<b>death</b>	
presentation .....	39
<b>memory</b>	
documentation .....	69
chronicle .....	85
bibliography .....	87
image credit .....	89

*... architectural duration implies a past  
that is caught up in the present  
and anticipates the future.*

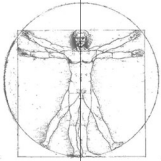
Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings  
in Time*

# **impregnation**

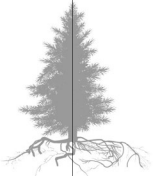
## concept



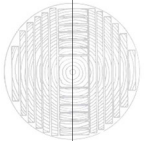
LEONARDO DA VINCI'S VITRUVIAN MAN  
GEOMETRY OF HUMAN BODY FITTING WITHIN  
THE EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY



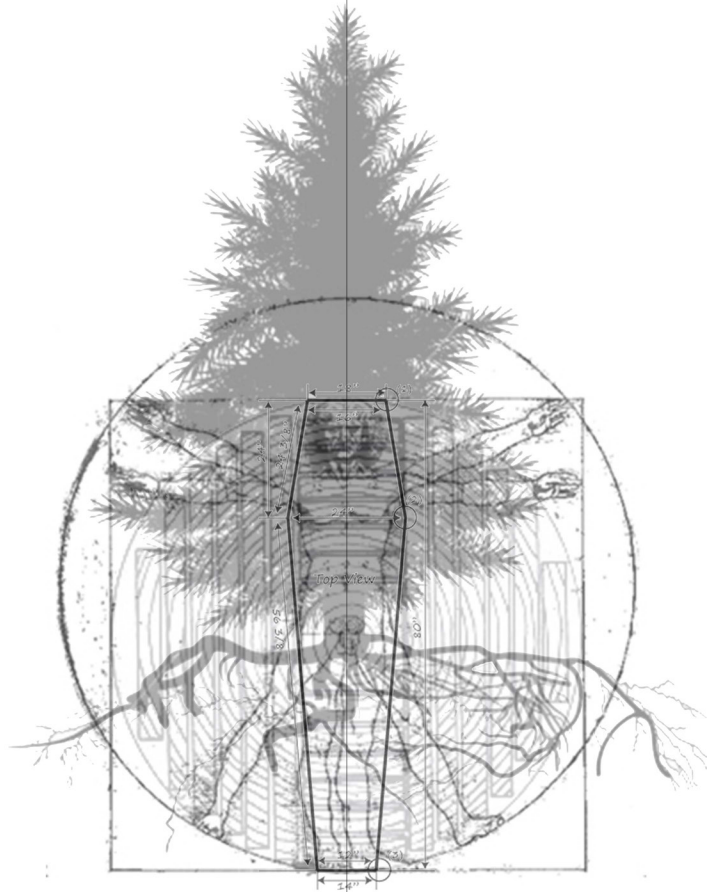
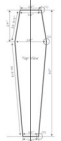
WHITE PINE TREE  
MAINE IS KNOWN AS "THE PINE TREE STATE"



LUMBER CUTTING DIAGRAM  
MAINE IS KNOWN AS "THE LUMBER STATE"



COFFIN  
MEASURED ACCORDING TO THE HUMAN BODY



Vitruvian Man  
White Pine Tree  
Plain Sawing  
Build Your Own Coffin

DWELLING TO LAST  
**BUILDING DURATION**

noun: a structure with a roof and walls  
 verb: the process of constructing

noun: continuance in time

FOR LIFE DEATH



Forever  
 is an awfully long time.

sun rise birth  
 set death



Sun is pulled by force from Earth to create life.  
 He spends his life painting the sky with  
 endless shades of blue, gold, and white.

Eastern White Pine Tree shoots from Earth  
 pushing his way.  
 His deep roots keep him connected to Earth.

Earth sends sweet life into Sugar Maple Tree.  
 His roots grow long from her nourishment.

Earth's gentle curves expand and contract.  
 Man shows Earth his affection with a kiss.

The compass glistens in the golden light.  
 The square sets Man straight.

Sun dies and is buried by Earth.

sensus perception  
feeling  
understanding

TRADITIONAL SENSES  
(taste) gustation  
(sight) vision  
(smell) olfaction  
(hearing) audition  
(touch) somatosensation

NON-TRADITIONAL SENSES  
equilibrioception (balance)  
thermoception (heat)  
proprioception (body movement and position)  
nociception (pain)  
chronoception (time)  
echolocation (reflected sound)  
electroreception (electric fields)  
magnetoception (magnetic field)  
hygroreception (moisture content)  
mechanoreception (vibration)



gustation



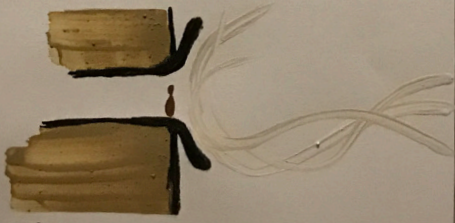
vision



olfaction



audition



somatosensation



equilibrioception

thermoception

proprioception

nociception

chronoception

echolocation

electroreception

magnetoception

hygroreception

mechanoreception

Ålderstrappan i kurbitsmåleri "Age Staircase for a Couple"



Le cours de la vie de l'homme dans ses différents âges "The Course of Life of Man in his Different Ages"



# STAGES OF LIFE

ages and degrees of Human Life explained by these  
different Stages from our Birth to our Graves.


The Various Ages and Degrees of Human Life Explained by These Twelve Different Stages

AGES and degrees of human LIFE explained by these TWELVE different stages from our BIRTH to our GRAVES.





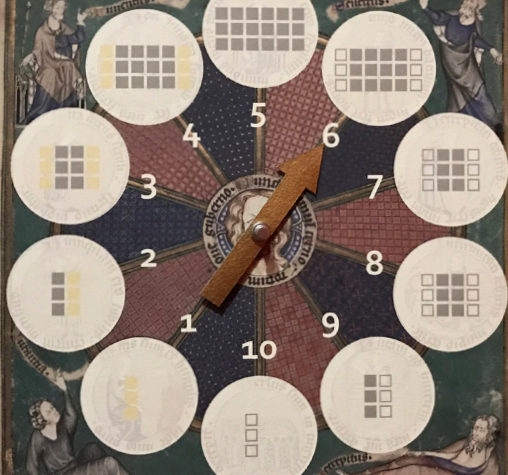
### human life duration



All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. **At first the infant**  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.  
And then the whining **school-boy**, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the **lover**,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a **soldier**,  
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the **justice**,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd **pantaloone**,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is **second childishness** and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Wheel of the Ten Ages of Man  
Steps of Life  
Life Stages from Infancy to Old Age

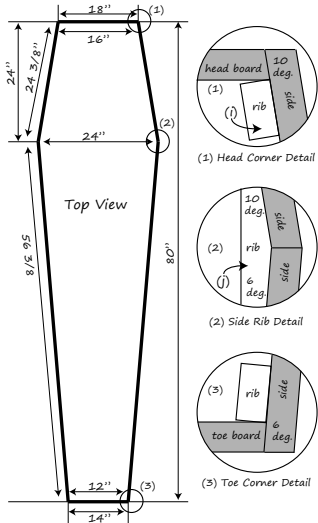
### life stages



1. The boy, yet an infant, puts forth his teeth in the first seven years of his age. 2. When Heaven shall have granted him another seven years, he arrives at puberty. 3. In his third age, his limbs now increasing, the beard of changing colour grows upon his chin. 4. Every one in his fourth septenary arrives at his full strength, and gives proof of manly valour. 5. In the fifth, the man, now mature, is led to think of a wife and his future posterity. 6. In the sixth, the mind of the man is fit for all things, and is no longer pleased with trivial matters. 7+8. In the seventh and eighth, the understanding and speech are at their best, and continue so through these fourteen years. 9. In the ninth, he still has some powers left, but his eloquence and wisdom are no longer capable of great efforts. 10. And now let him who shall attain his tenth septenary prepare for a not untimely death.

Wheel of the Ten Ages of Man  
Life Stages from Infancy to Old Age

### coffin deconstruction



**600,000 BC**  
Neanderthals in Eurasia were buried in shallow graves with personal items, including stone tools and animal bones

**3150 BC**  
Egyptians advanced preservation in stone sarcophagi and decorated wooden containers

**700 AD**  
Celts were buried in boxes constructed out of flat stones

**900 AD**  
Vikings sent deceased out to sea in a burning ship

**early 1600 AD**  
French coined "coffin" from Greek "kophinos" for "basket"

**mid 1800 AD**  
American undertakers use the term "casket," borrowed from the term used for jewelry boxes

**late 1800 AD**  
The American Civil War required mass production of coffins thus creating the casket industry

COFFIN CONFORMS TO THE ANATOMY OF THE HUMAN BODY

CASKET IS A RECTANGLE

# saltbox house

Salt was a valuable commodity in colonial America. To prevent the salt from caking up, special saltboxes were designed that were hung by the hearth to keep the salt dried out.

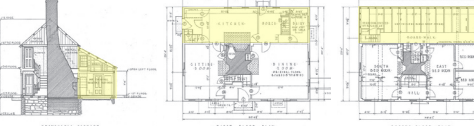
The lean-to addition on the house bore a substantial resemblance to the saltbox on the hearth, and thus the name for the style was born.

The shape evolved organically from the need for additional space for growing families and adding a lean-to was an economical way to enlarge the house.

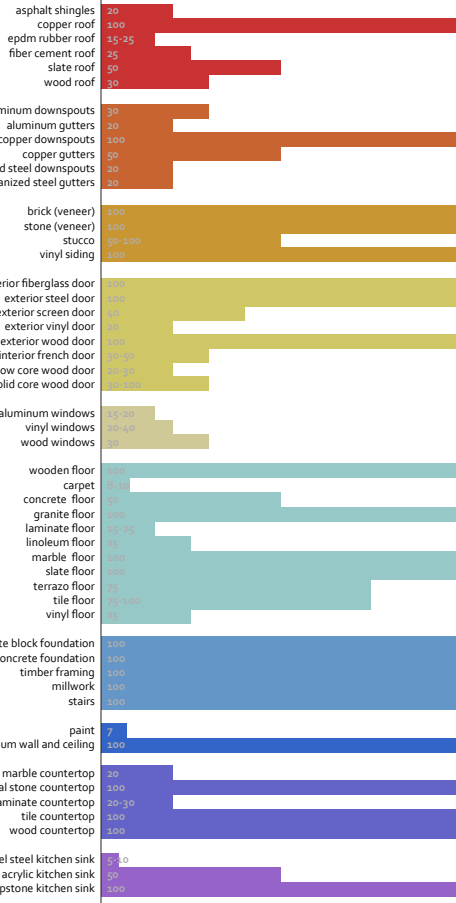
The rear lean-to addition was divided into three rooms: A central kitchen with a fireplace and oven, a room reserved for childbirth and nursing the ill, and a pantry.

**The New York Times**  
December 22, 1900  
**Books of the Season**  
**The Salt-Box House**  
by Jane de Forest Shelton

**The Salt-Box House.**  
The "Salt-Box House" was built in 1720, and the history of its country and more of construction gives an opportunity to see many an old order that has changed and others that has passed away. The "Salt-Box House" was a colonial style building, the name being derived from the building to the wooden salt box that hung in the kitchen chimney. The house was set upon a hill near the lively village of Stratham, Conn., where it may still be seen. It is a state-of-the-art among wood-frame and hardwood boxes.



# house life duration



# saltbox house

growing families  
organic evolution  
expanding house

design simplicity  
practical expansion



flat front  
central chimney  
unequal roof lines  
timber frame



# home building

The practical and simple saltbox was often a single room deep.

Construction was timber framing, or post-and-beam construction, joining large pieces of wood with woodworking joints, such as mortise-and-tenon joints, or with wooden pegs, braces, or trusses. Expensive metal nails were sparingly used.

Exterior was often finished with clapboard or other wooden siding.

The long, low pitch of the back of the roof faced North, where possible to partially deflect the blowing snow and rain that frequently came along with the North wind.

## JEFFERDS' TAVERN



birth WELLS, MAINE 1754 - 1939  
rebirth YORK, MAINE 1941 - 1959, 1959

## BOOKS OF THE SEASON.

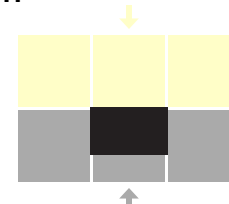
(Continued from Page 030.)

When she was nearly eighty she wrote again, without melancholy:  
"Table and hearth very no occupant but myself—no hurry, very little work and care; my house is clean and still, nothing disturbed or out of place, and these quiet times in my own house suit me exactly—and somebody's growing old! that tells the story."

Soon after Miss Mary's death the house died also, in the sense of sinking into collapse and becoming uninhabitable. The little book devoted to its memory is pleasant reading, lacking only illustrations to make an unusually attractive addition to the holiday book counters.

Why Do They Call it a Salt Box?  
Jeffers Tavern, Harraseekit Road  
The Salt-Box House

# plan



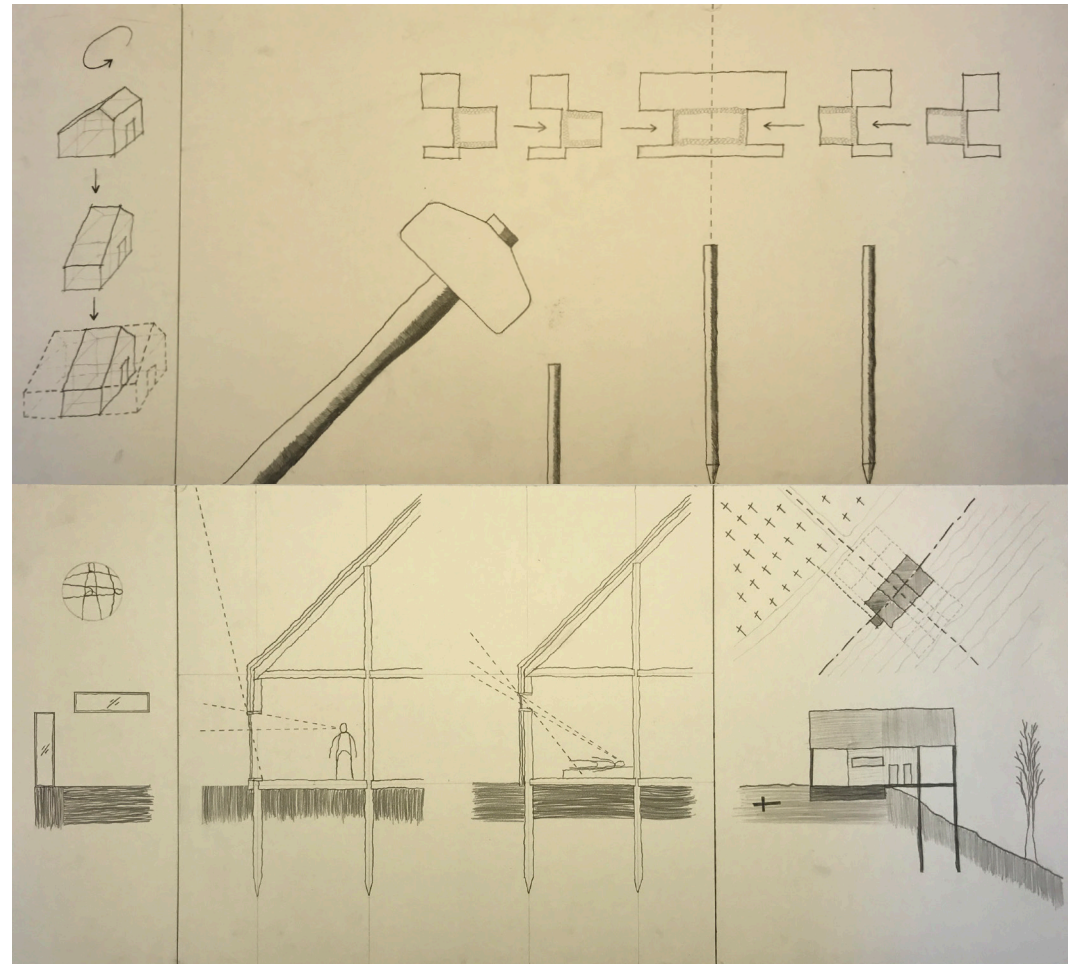
# section



Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture  
The Saltbox House  
Oronoque Saltbox Requiem







building site  
home setting



"the presence of the dead among the living will be a daily fact in any society which encourages its people to live"

"persons at each stage of life have something irreplaceable to give and to take from the community"

"connect the building to the earth around it by building a series of paths and terraces and steps around the edge... make the boundary ambiguous - so that it is impossible to say exactly where the building stops and earth begins"

"there are special places which have come to symbolize the area, and the people's roots there"

# **birth**

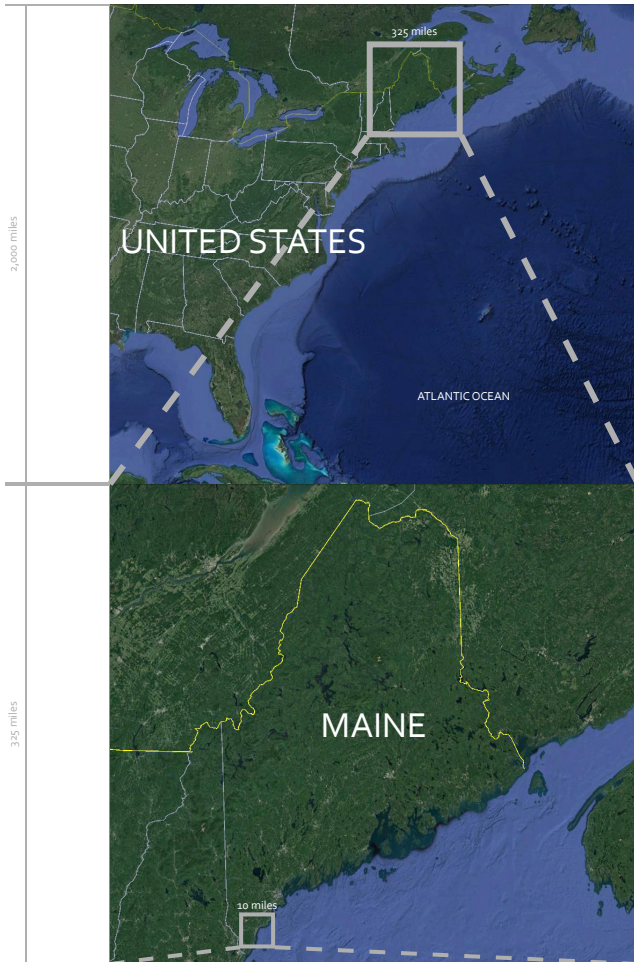
## site analysis



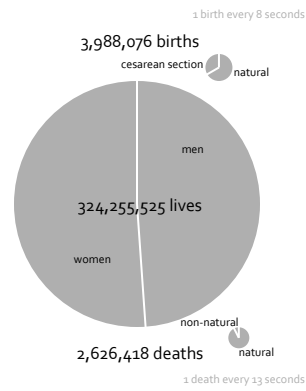
Ocean View Cemetery



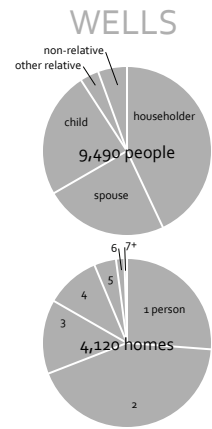
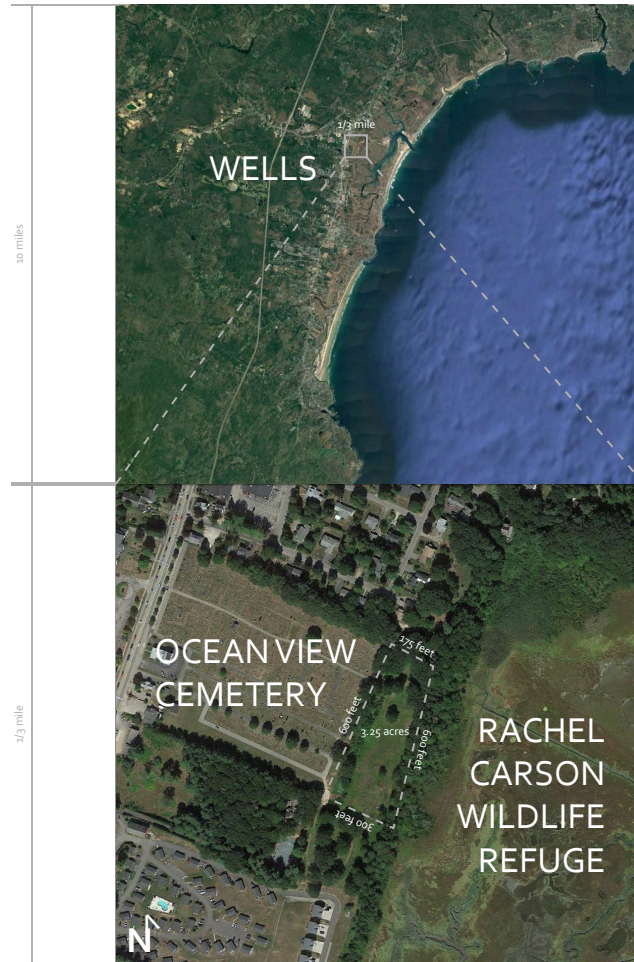
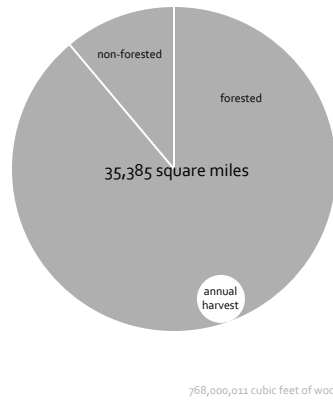




### UNITED STATES



### MAINE



2.3 people per home

### OCEAN VIEW CEMETERY

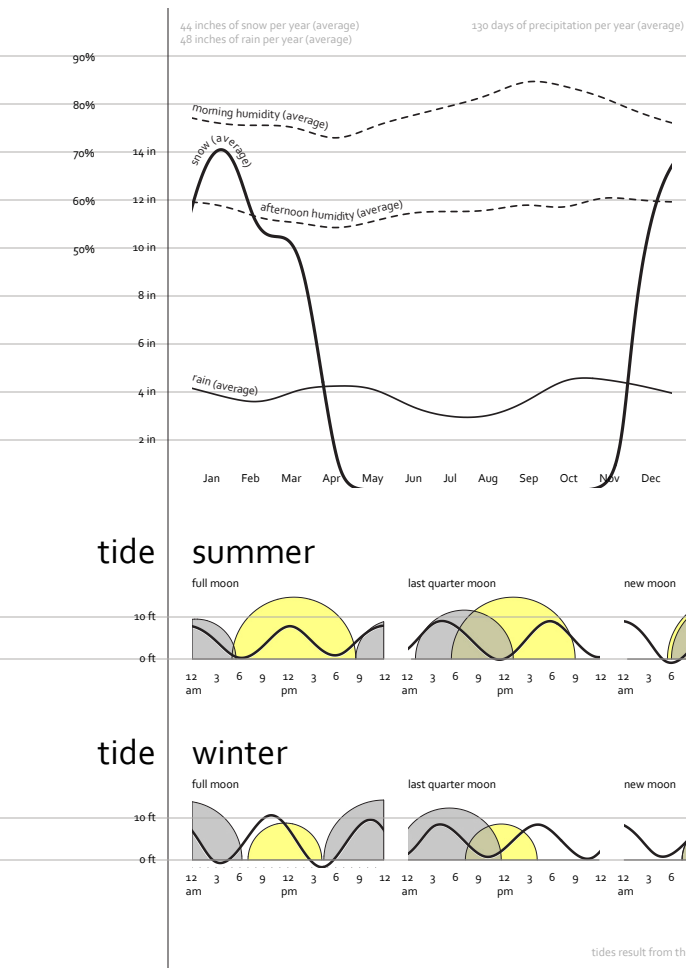
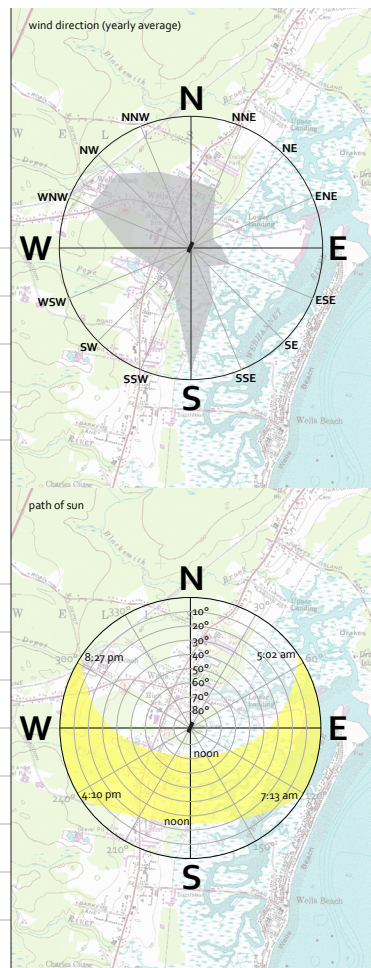
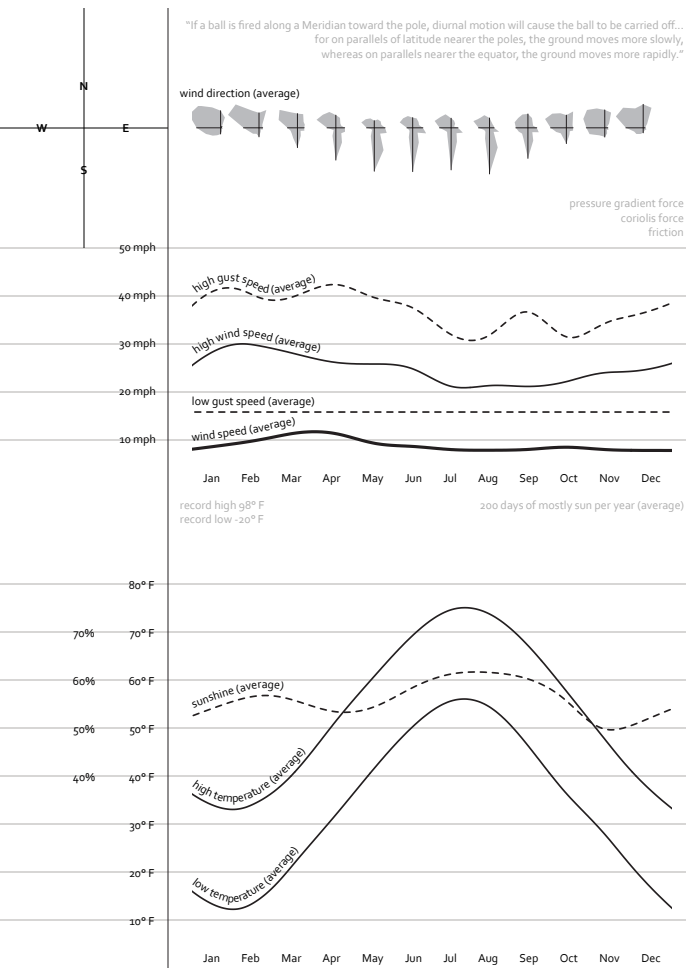
b. 1745 - d. 2027

earliest known burial projected maximum capacity

### RACHEL CARSON WILDLIFE REFUGE

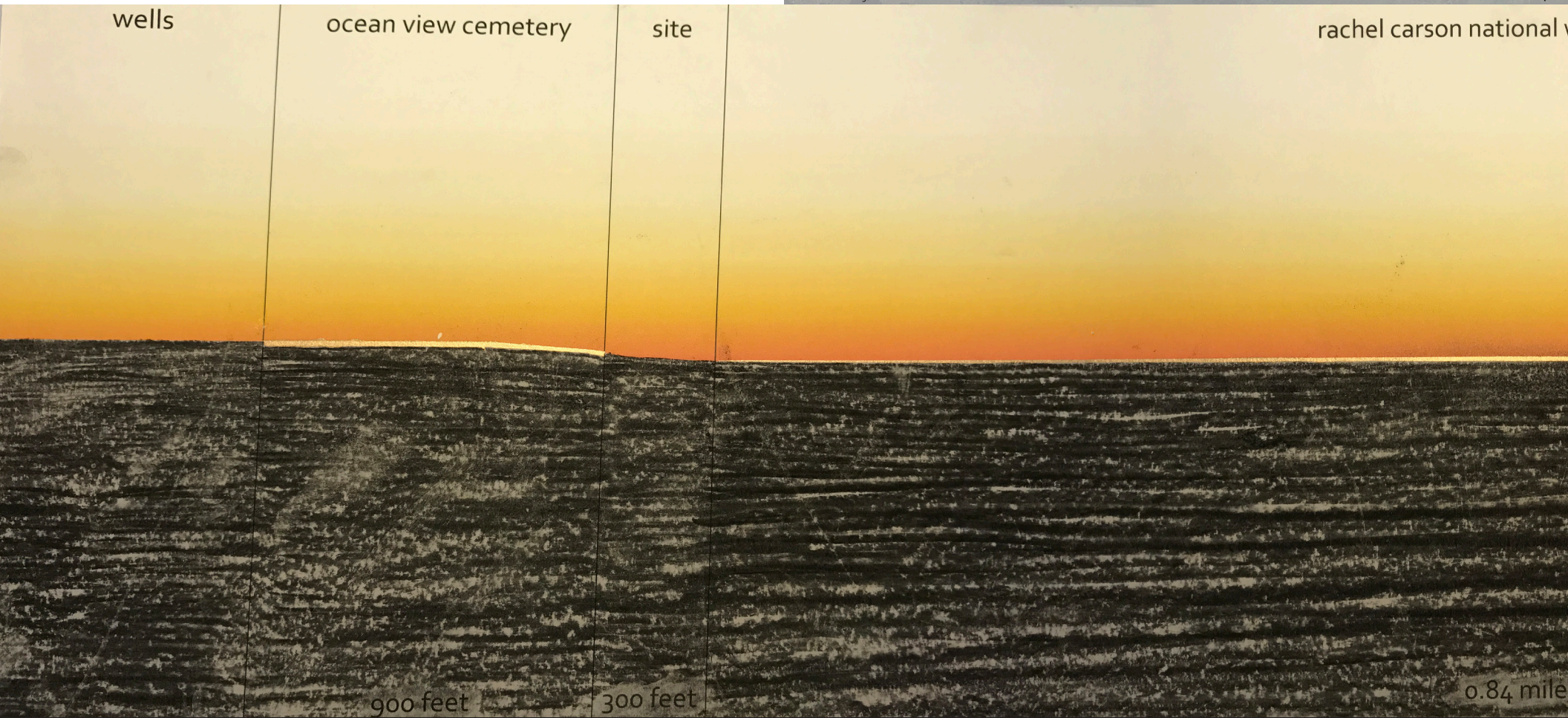
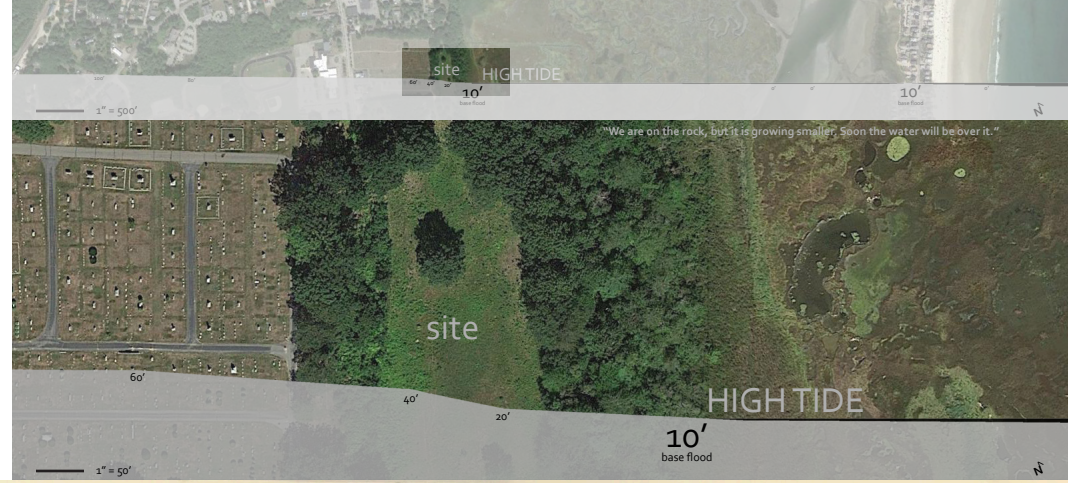


biodiversity











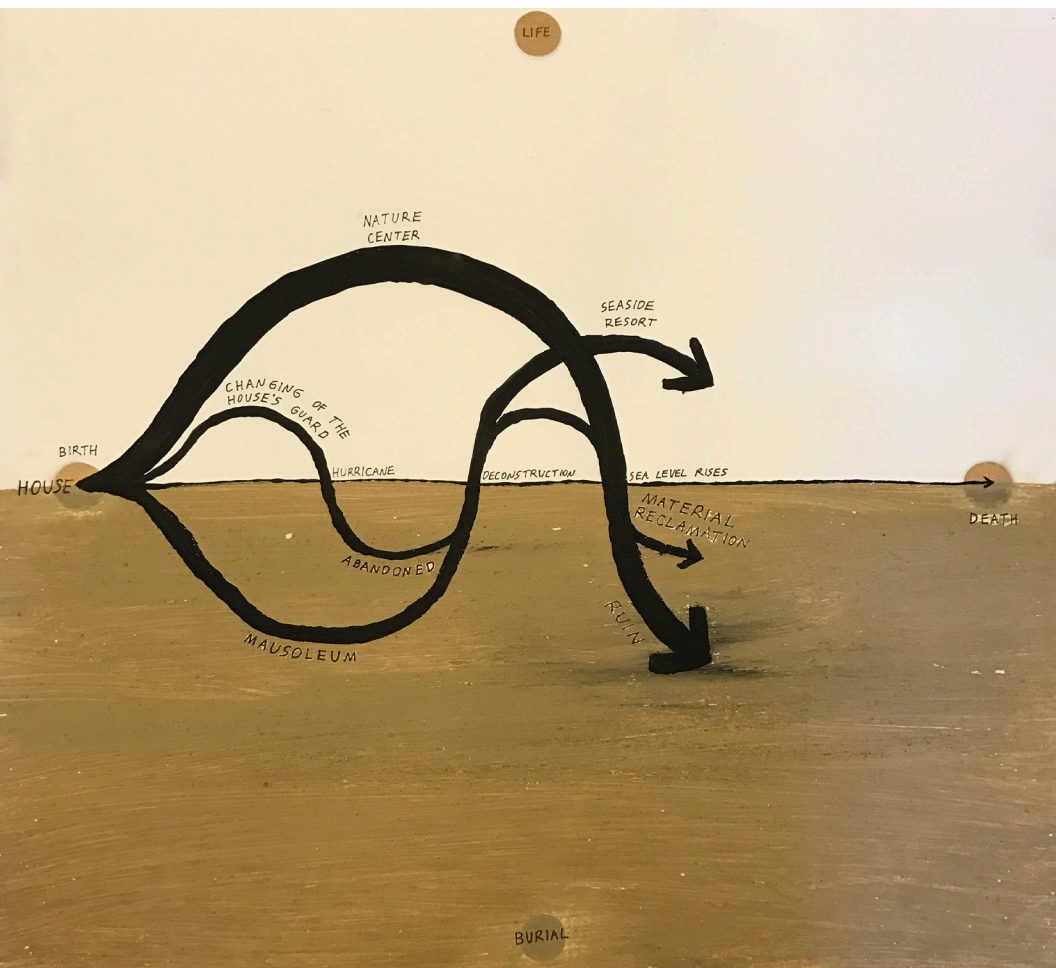
wildlife refuge

wells beach

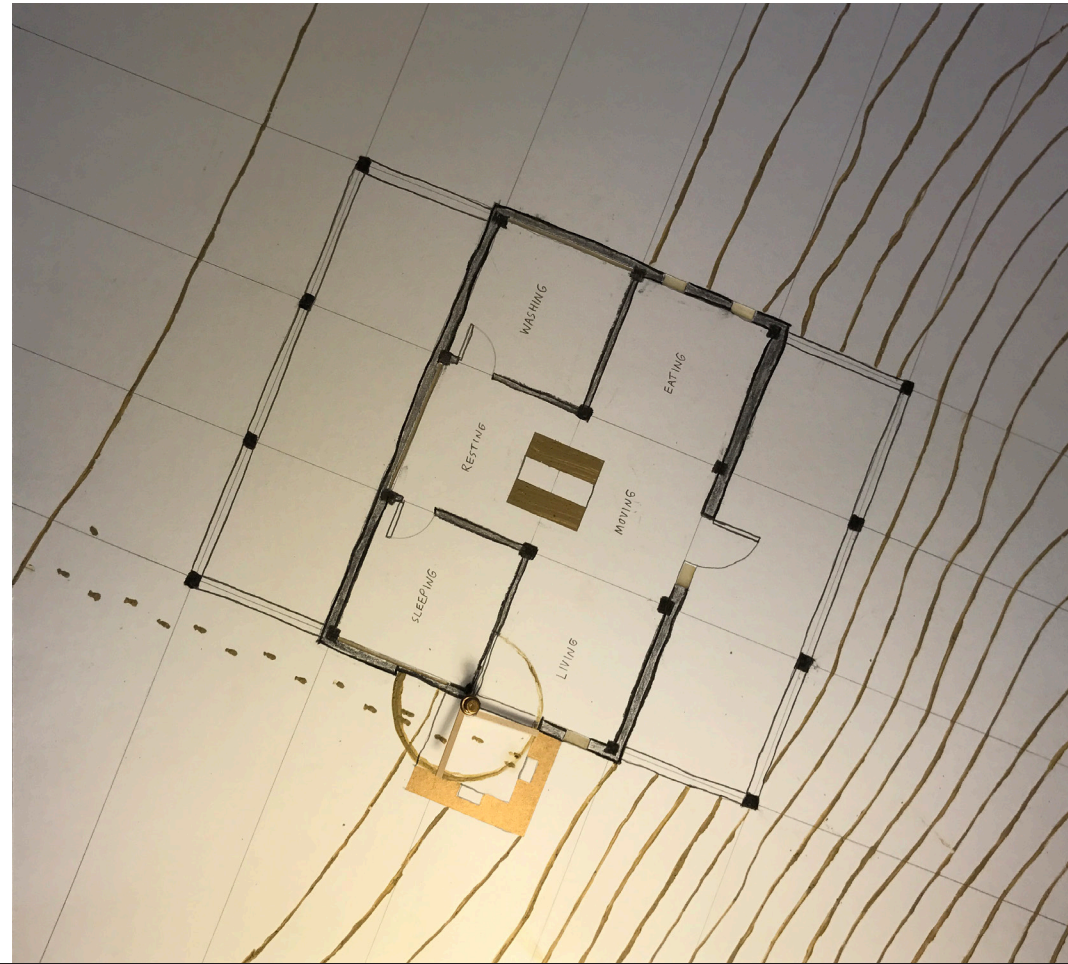
atlantic ocean

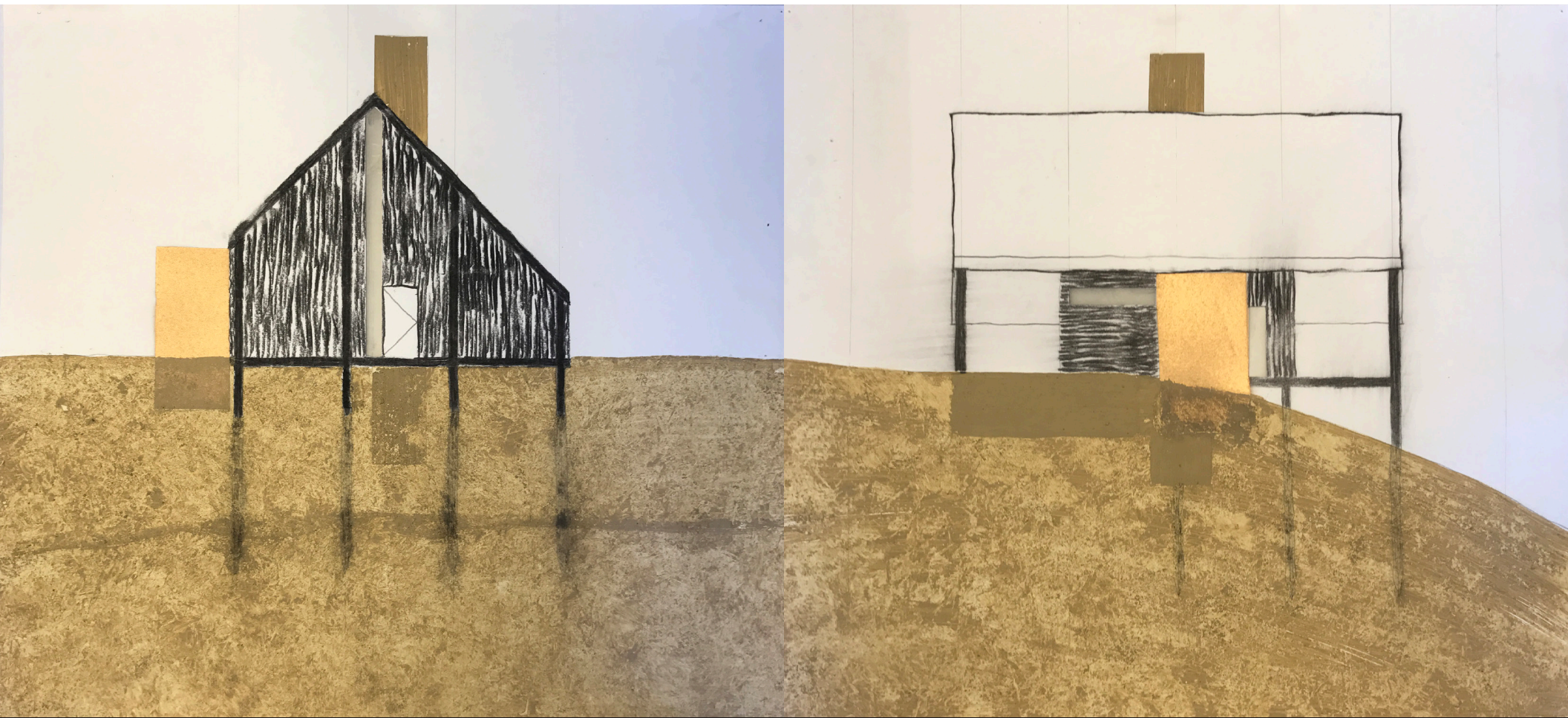
150 feet

# life process









the caretaker leaves the cemetery

she exhales

she pushes the wood door

the door rotates around a joint

it connects to a second door

the doors form a right angle

the doors scrape the ground

one door opens in front of her

the other door closes behind her

she faces a stone wall

she sees a tool in a niche

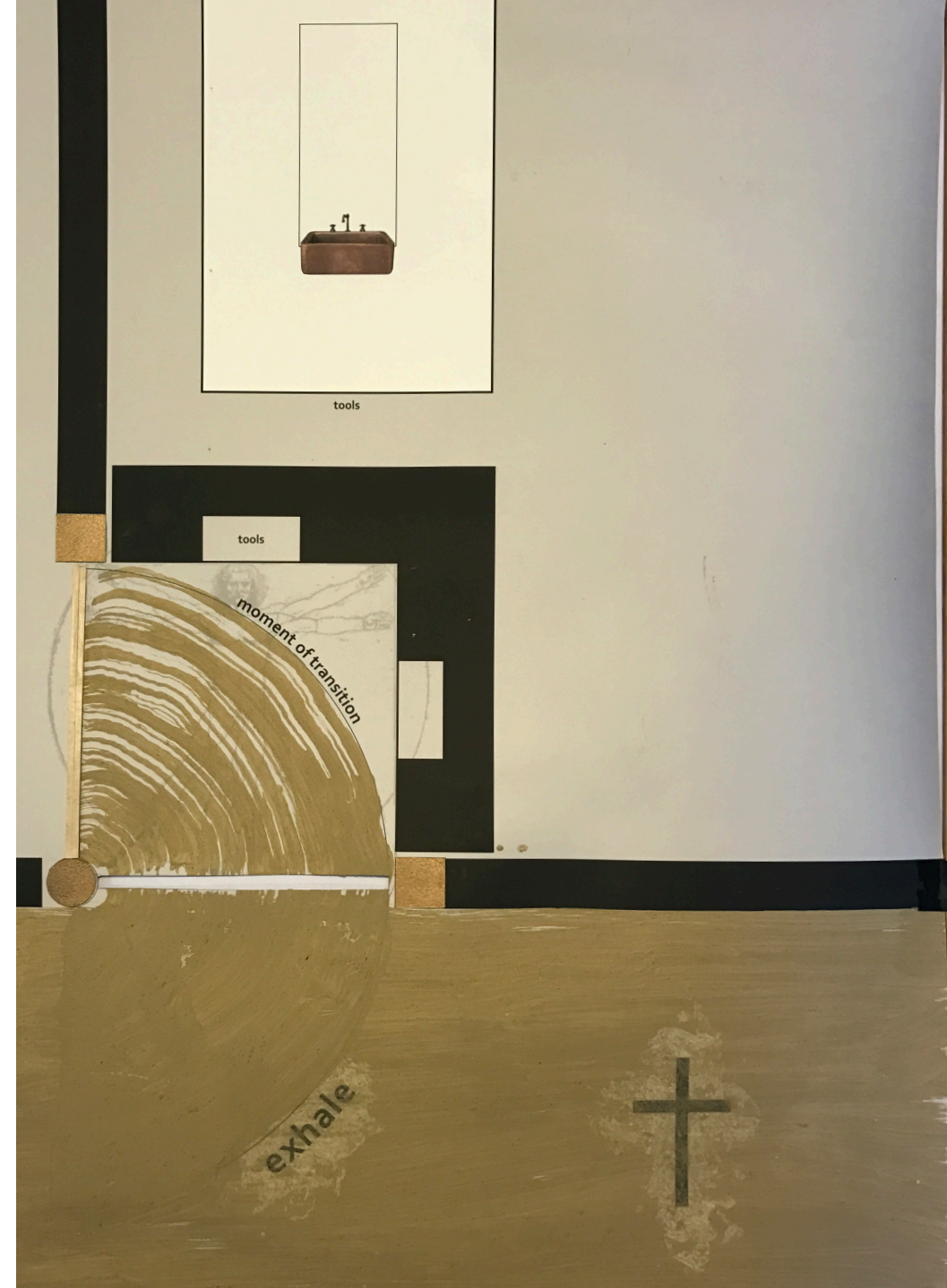
a sink

she is leaving a place

she is entering a place

she wonders

## moment of transition

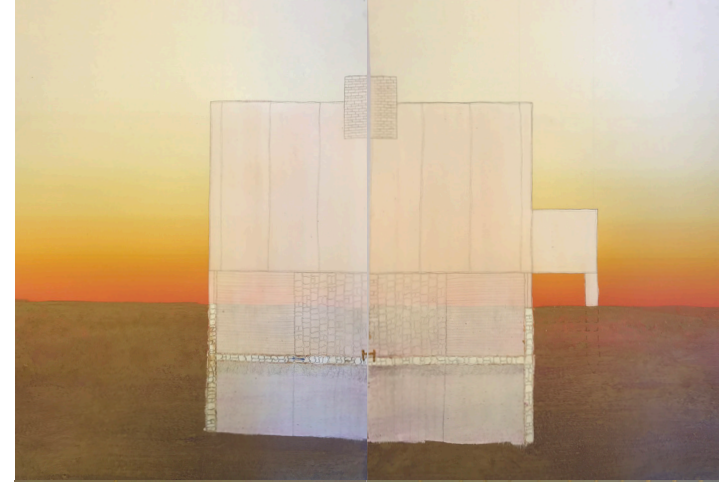




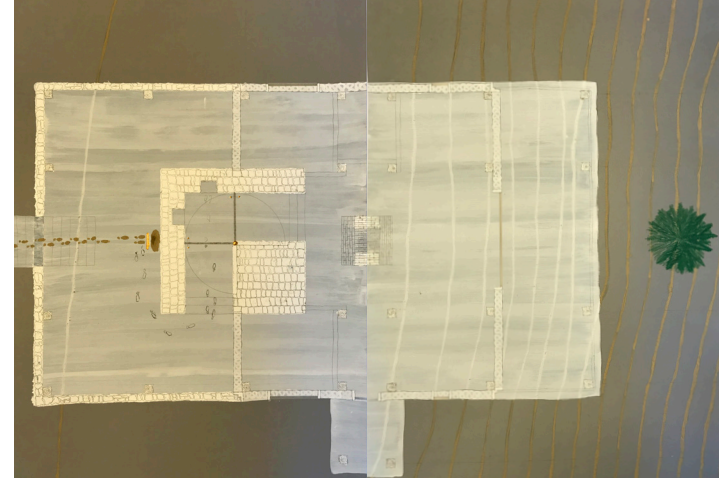
the caretaker leaves the house  
she inhales  
she pushes the wood door  
the door rotates around a joint  
it connects a second door  
the doors form a right angle  
the doors scrape the ground  
one door opens in front of her  
the other door closes behind her  
she faces a stone wall  
she sees a tool in a niche  
a shovel  
she is leaving a place  
she is entering a place  
she wonders

**moment of transition**

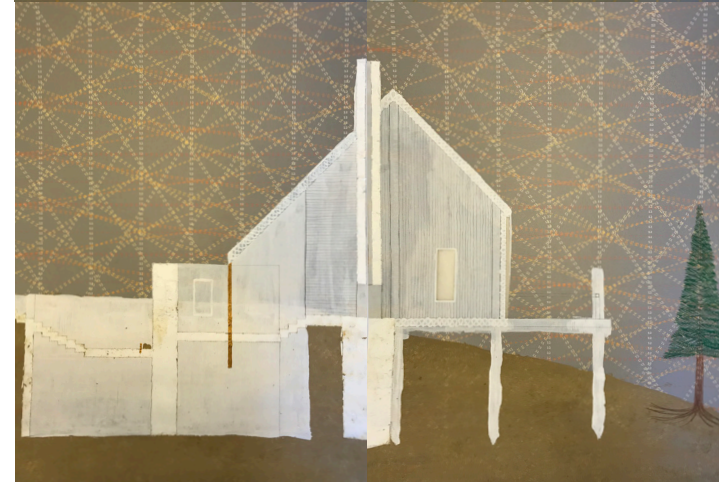
west elevation

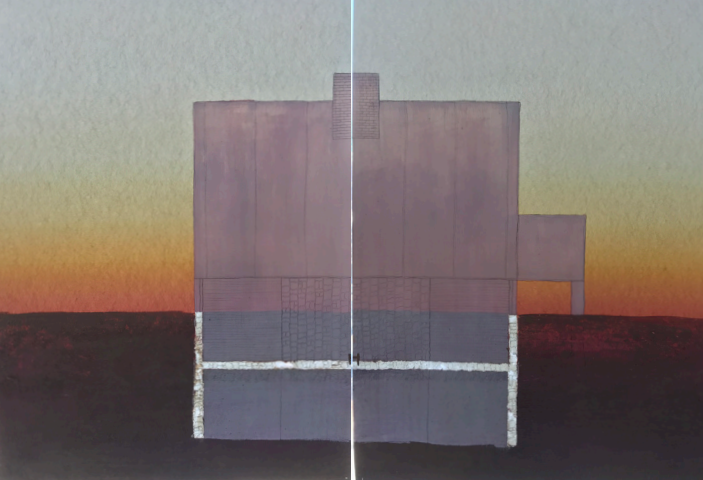


floor plan

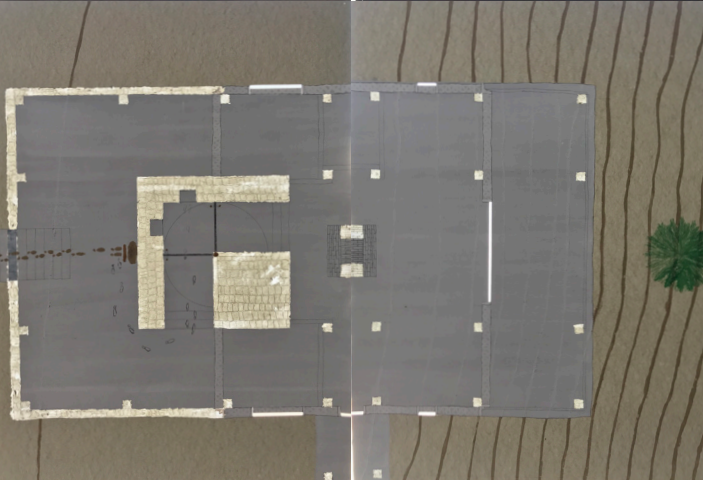


east-west section

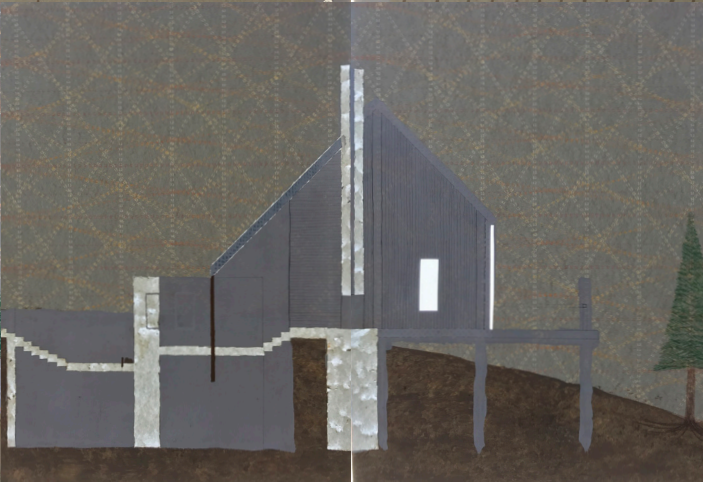




west elevation



floor plan



east-west section

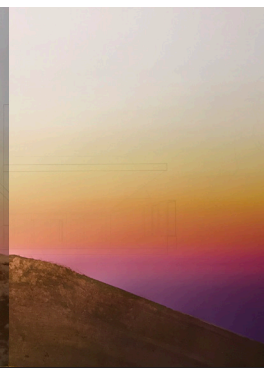
sun



earth



deconstruct



construct

fill

finish

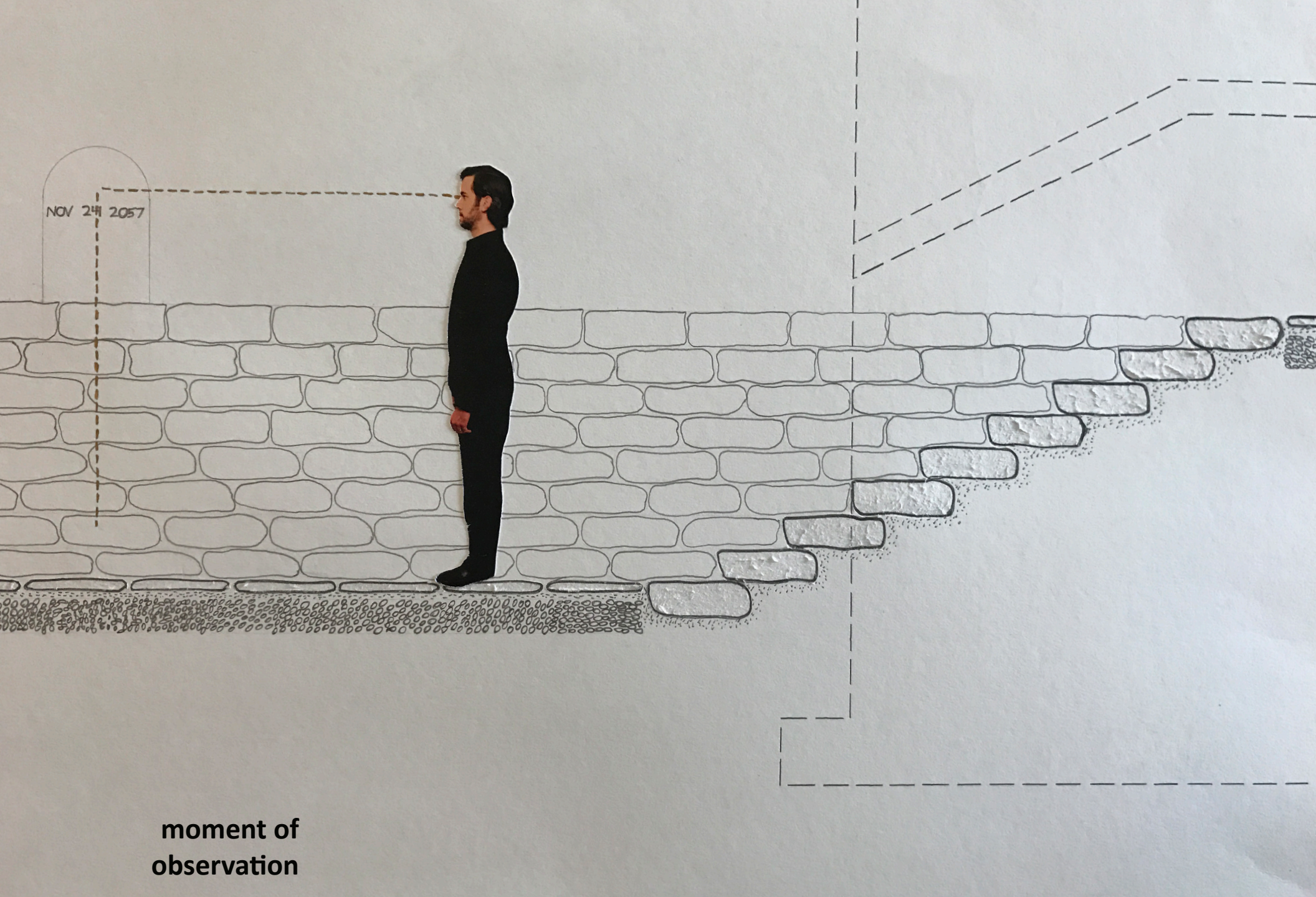




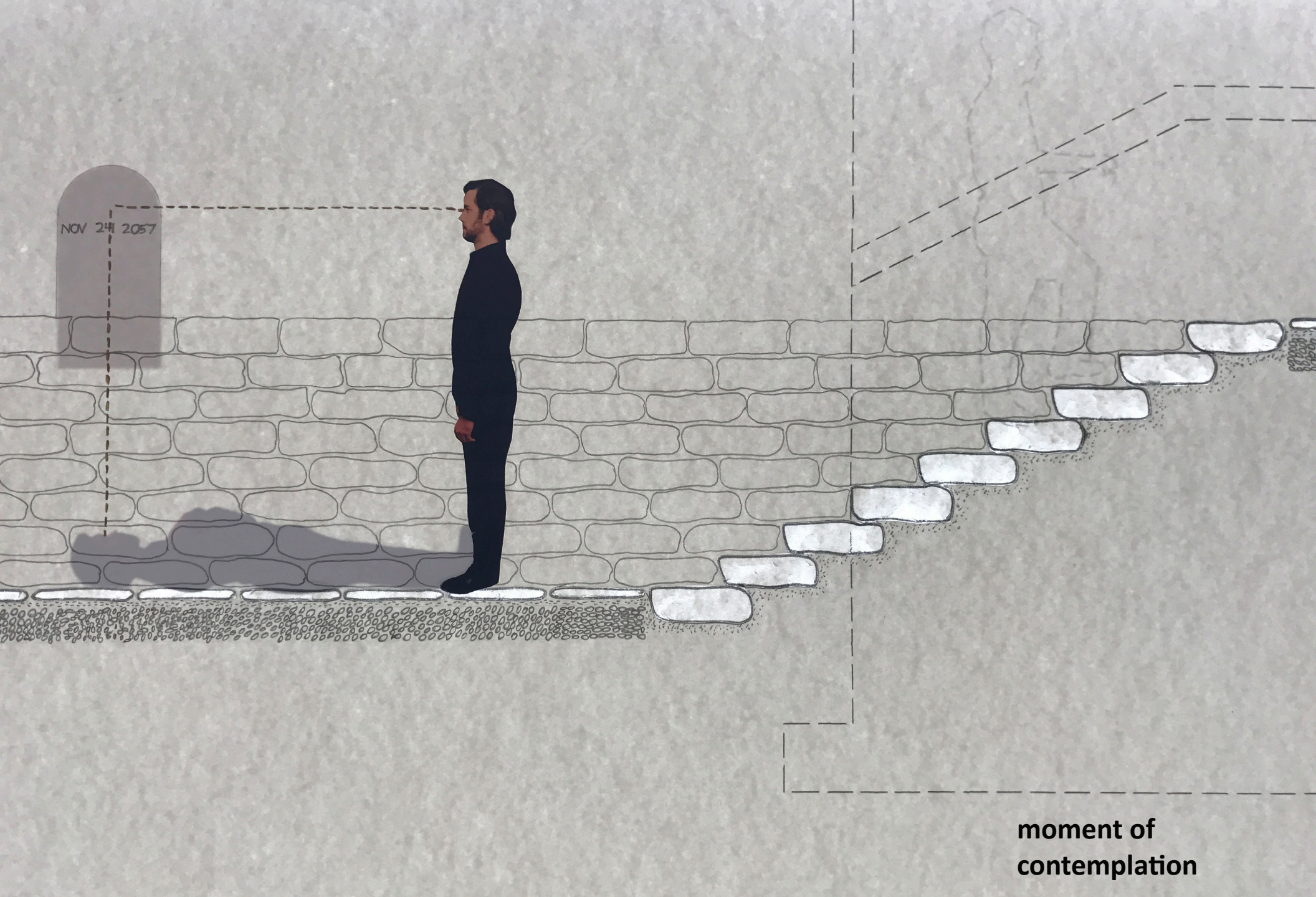


life





**moment of  
observation**



**moment of  
contemplation**

the caretaker leaves the house

she steps on the stone

she ascends

she steps along the stone wall

the wall reveals a cut

she puts her hand in the cut

it is a handrail

she touches the stone

she holds the building

she is steadied

she steps on the stone

she descends

the caretaker enters the house

## handshake





the caretaker leaves the cemetery

her boots bring mud

mud on the path

footprints

the stone house welcomes her

she enters the niche

a boot scrape at her feet

a cut in the wall at her hands

she puts her hand in the cut

it is a handrail

she touches the stone

she holds the building

she is steadied

she raises her foot

she scrapes her boot

the mud falls

footprints

## boot scrape



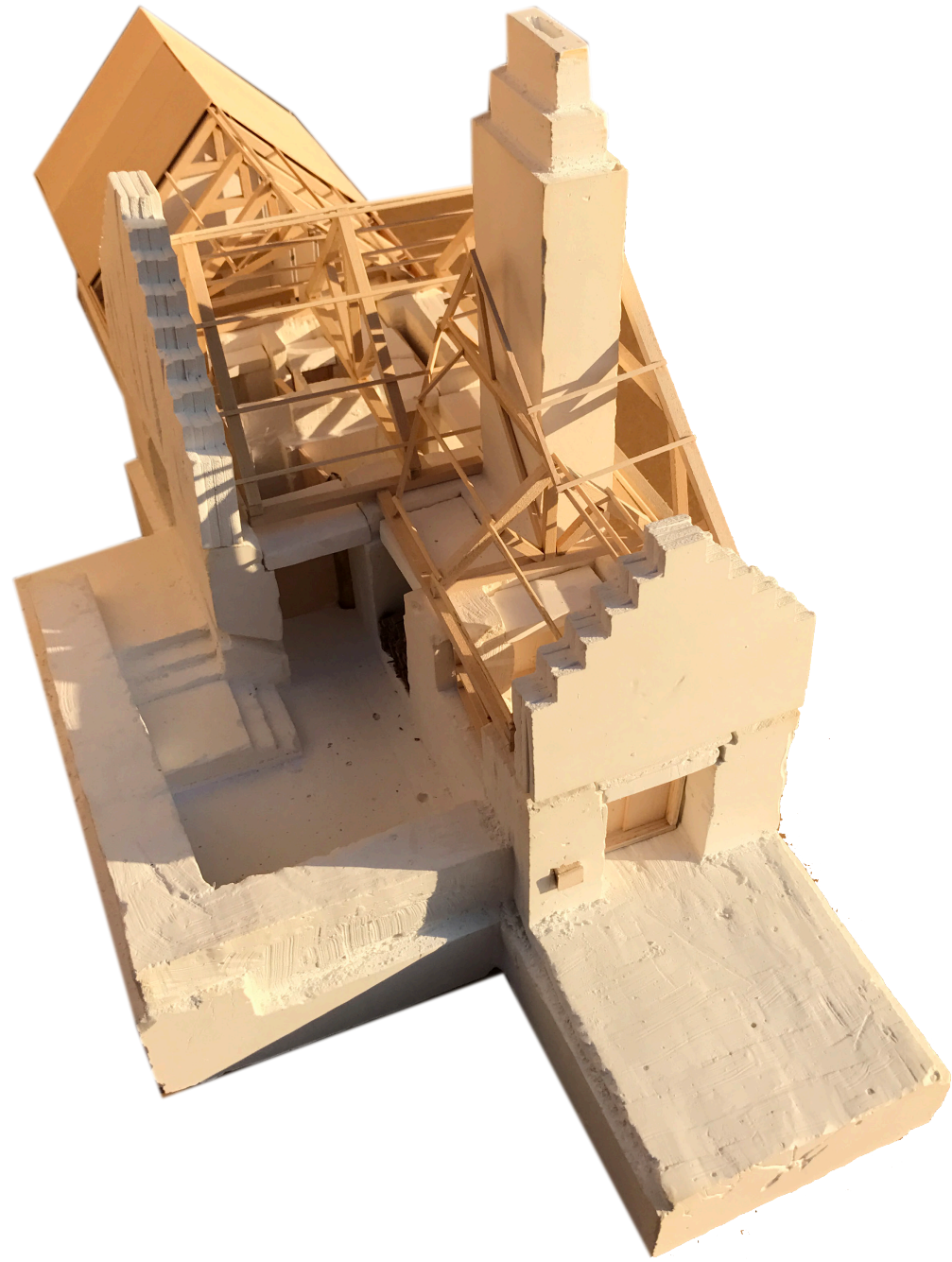




# **death**

## presentation













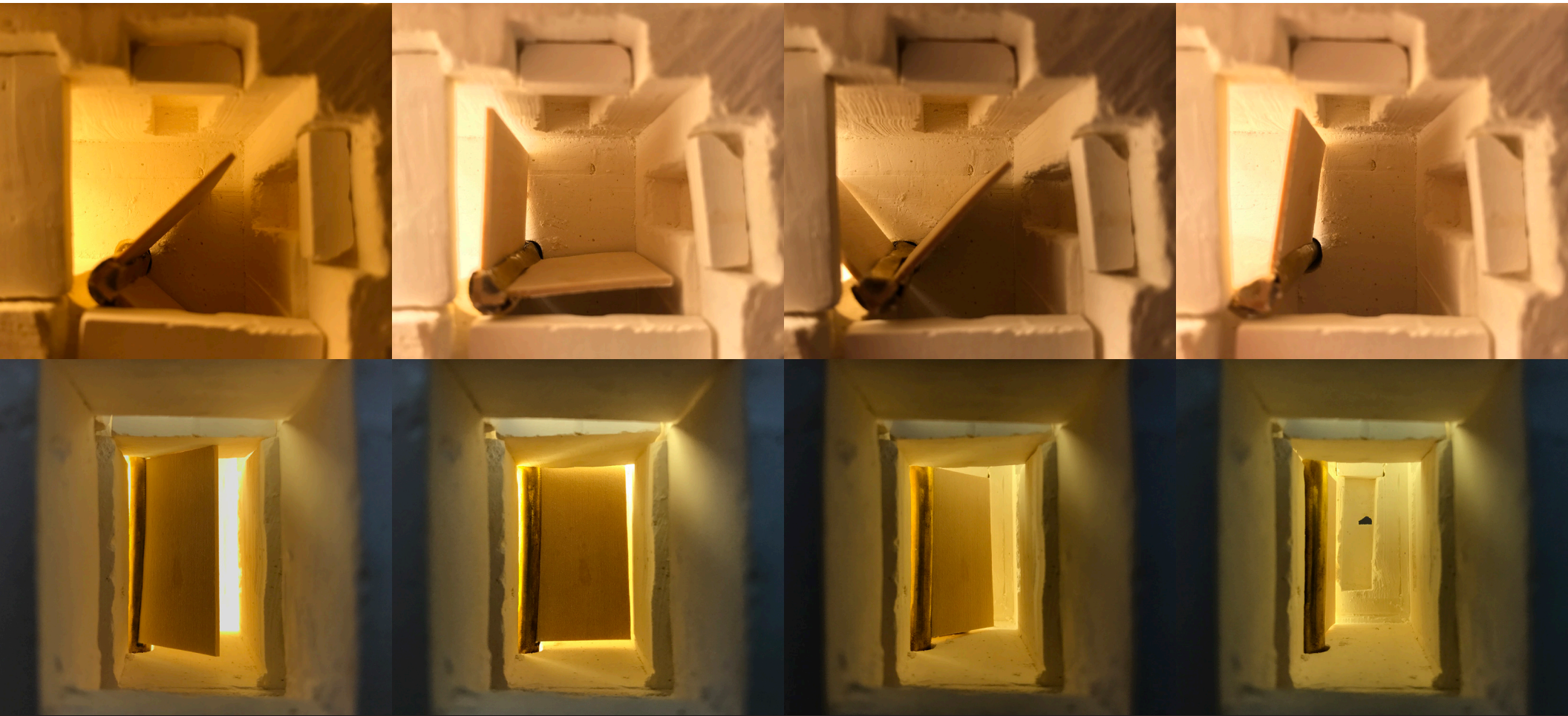






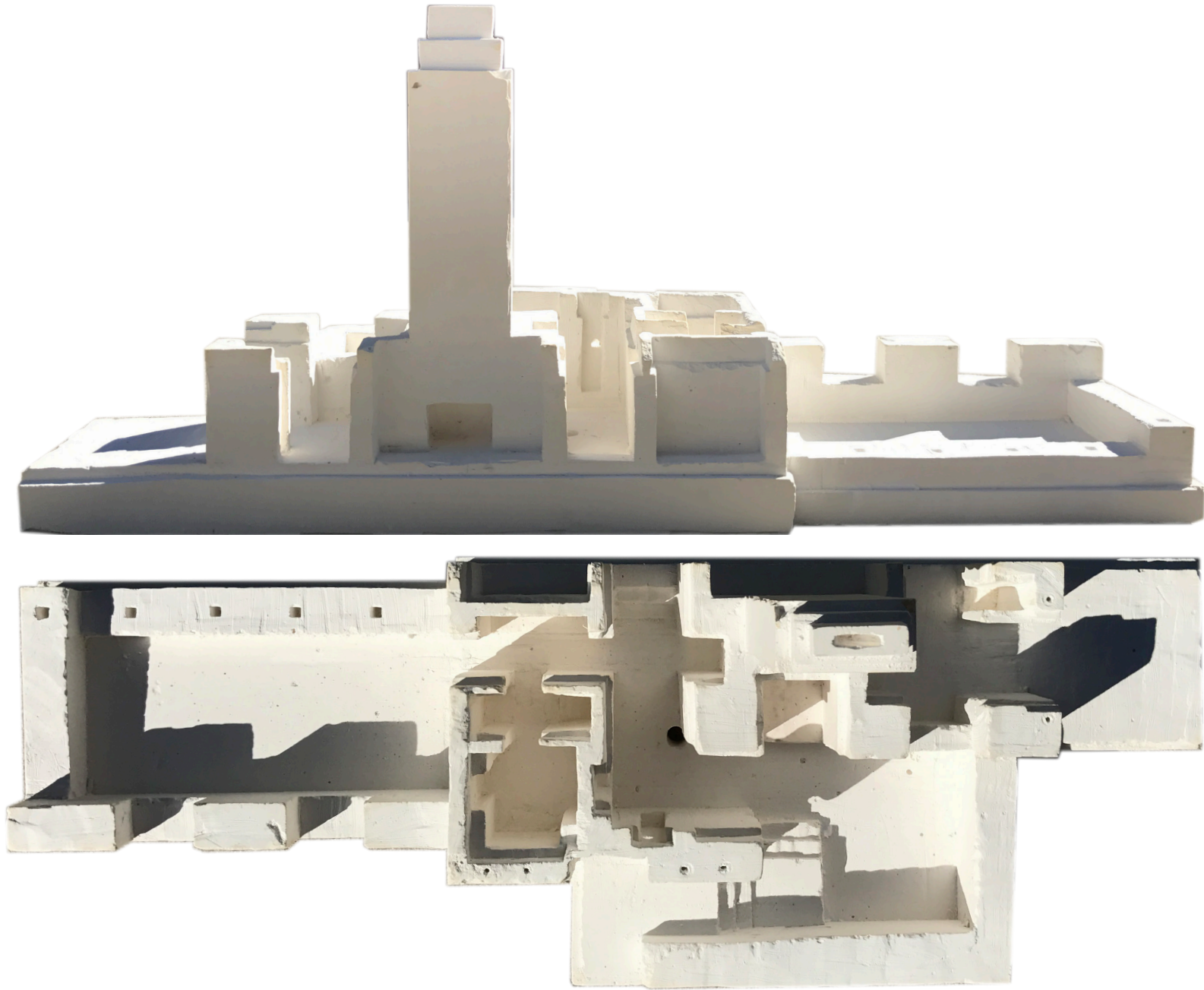


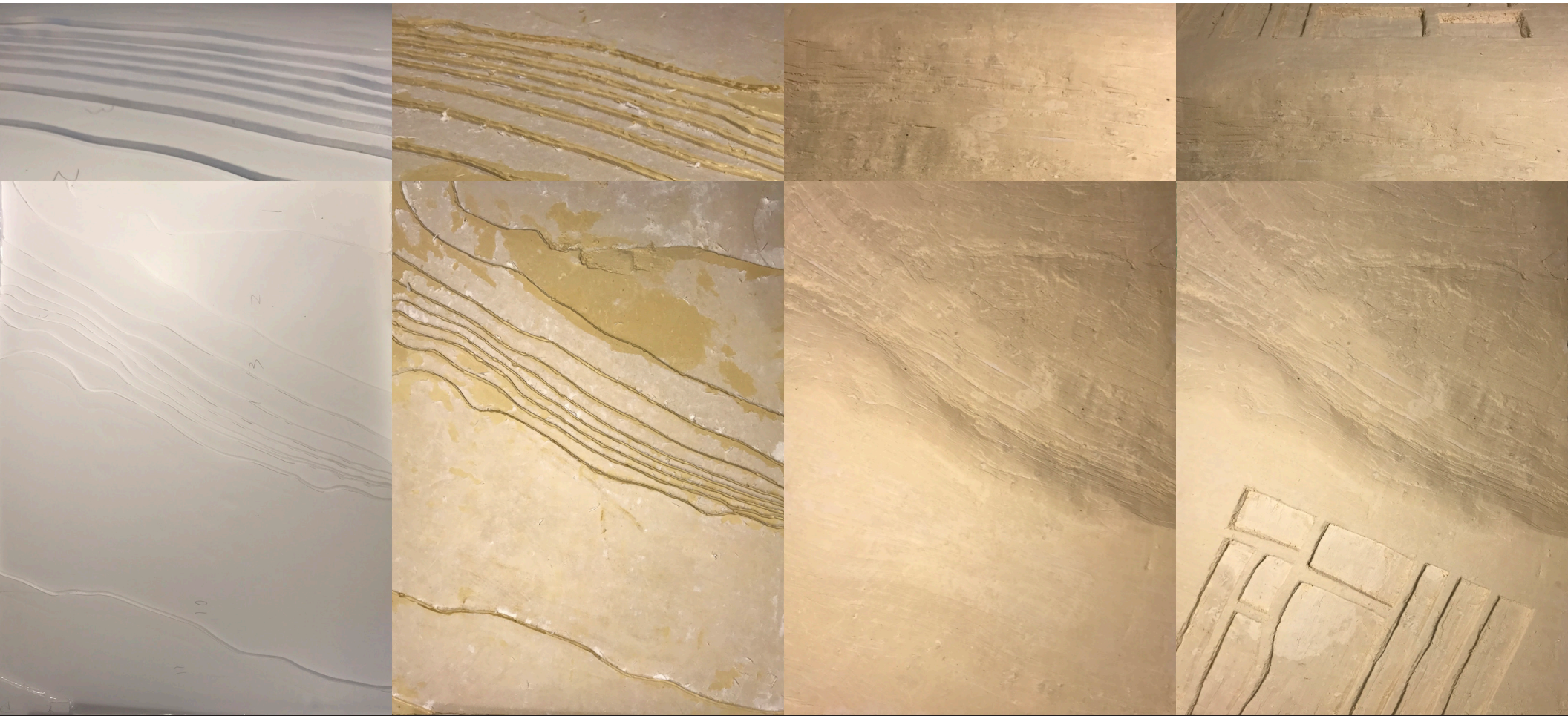






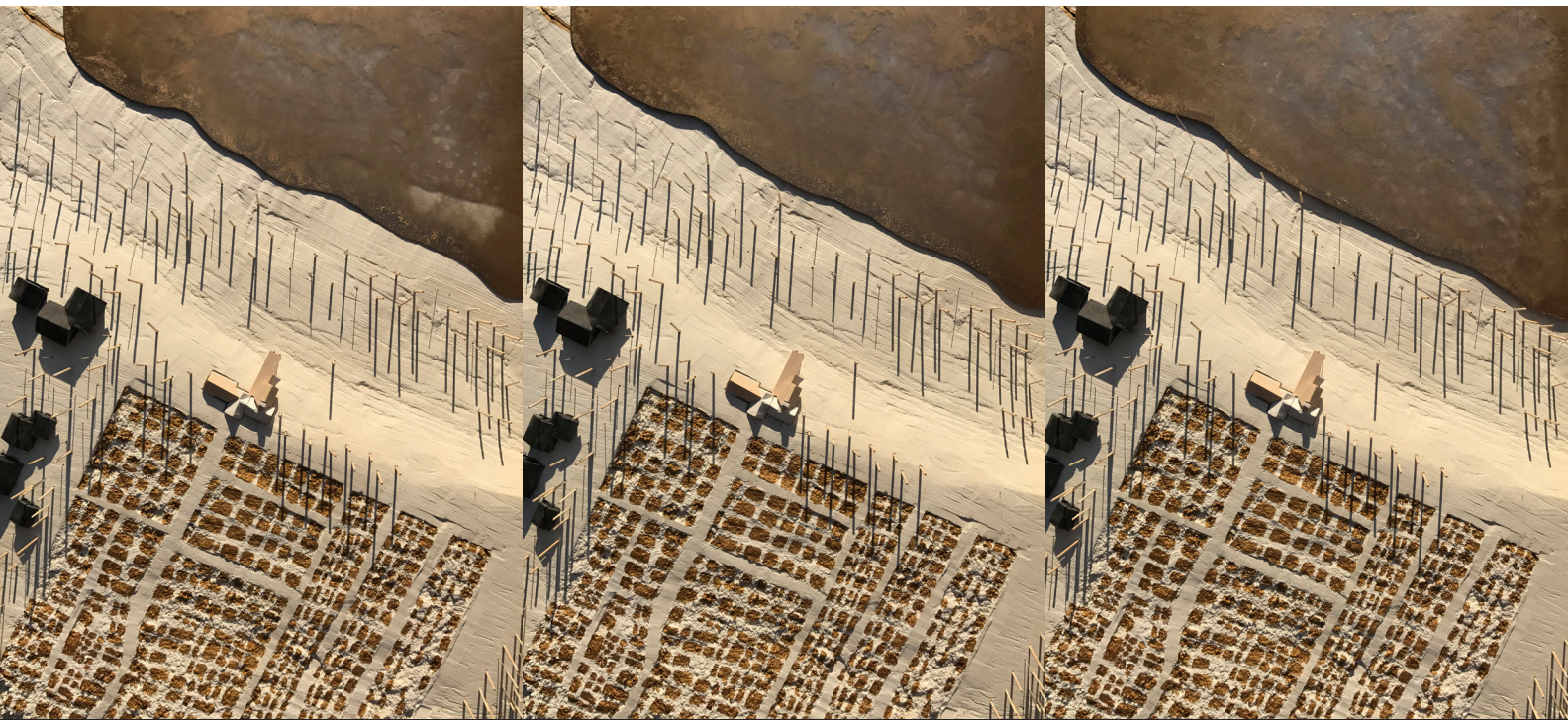


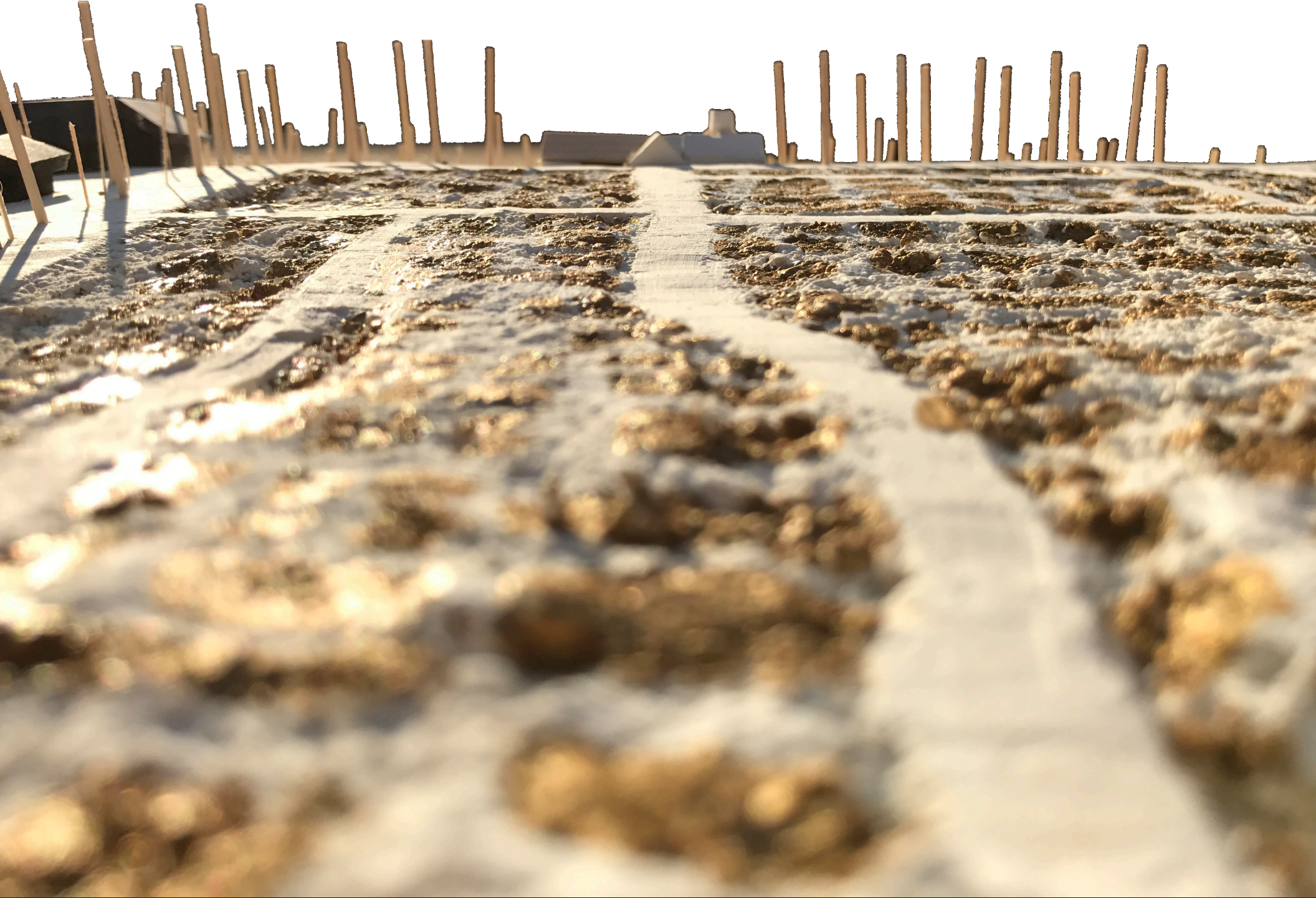


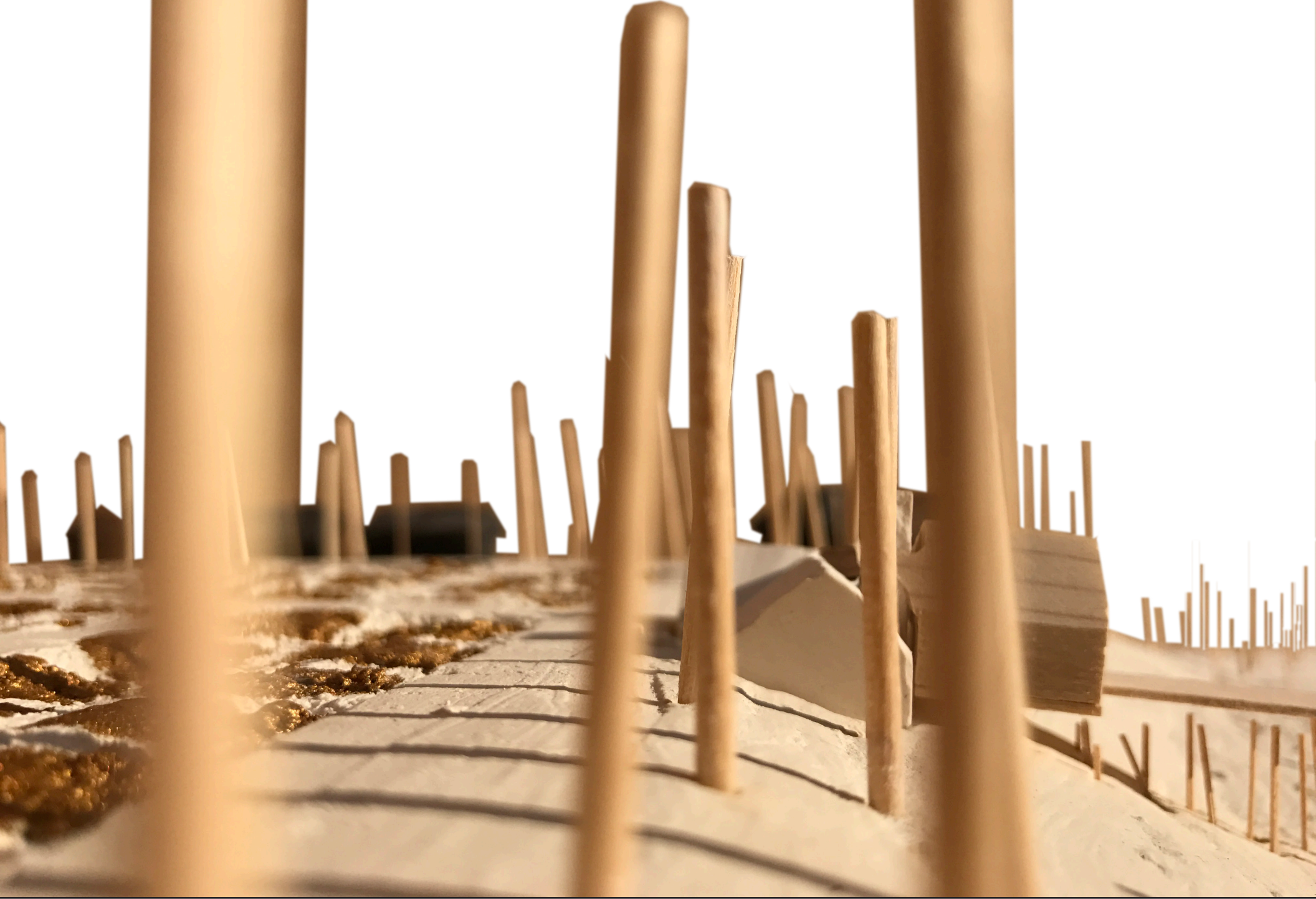












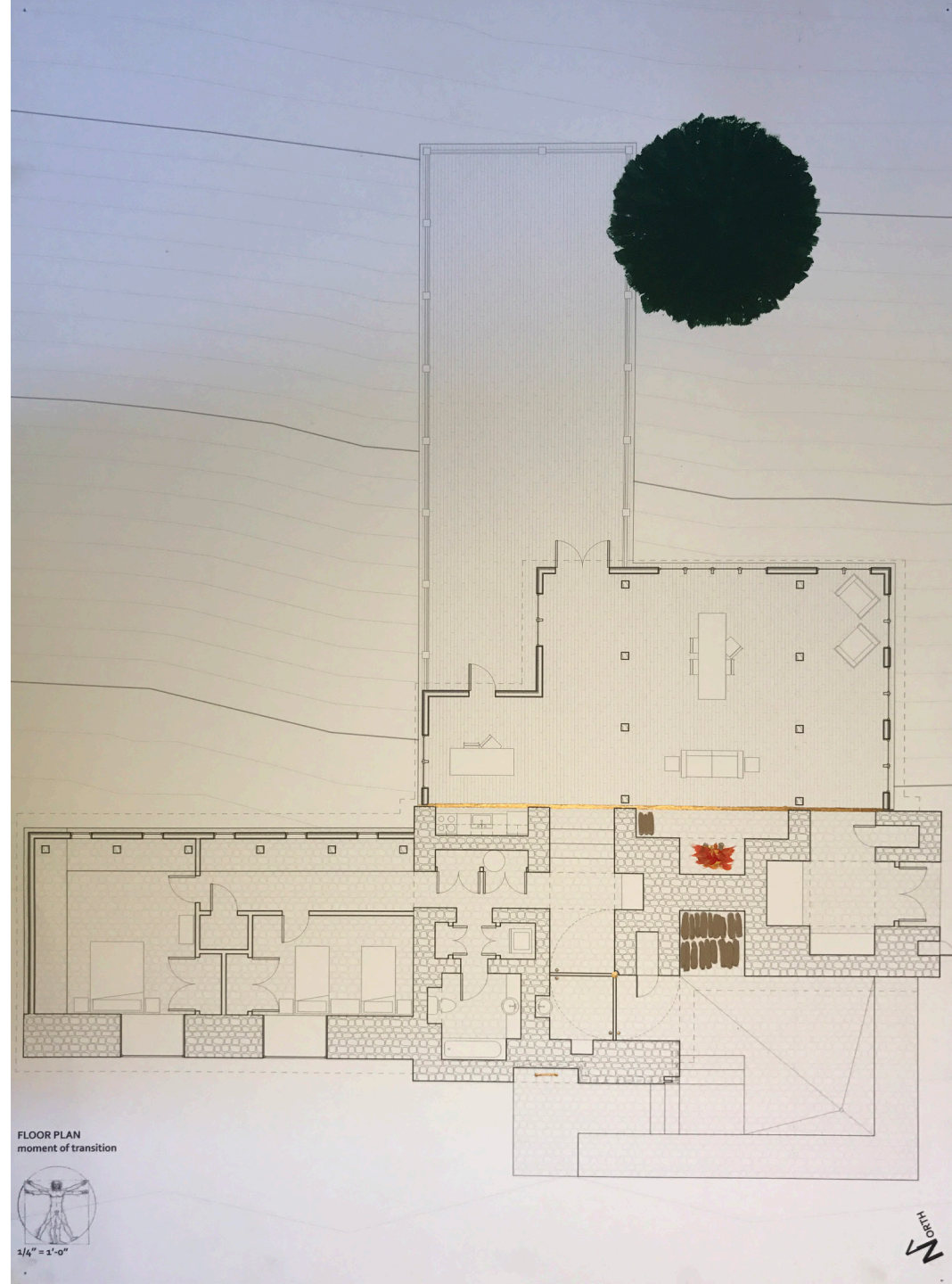






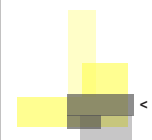






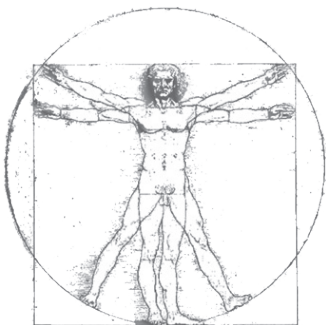


SOUTH ELEVATION  
sunrise



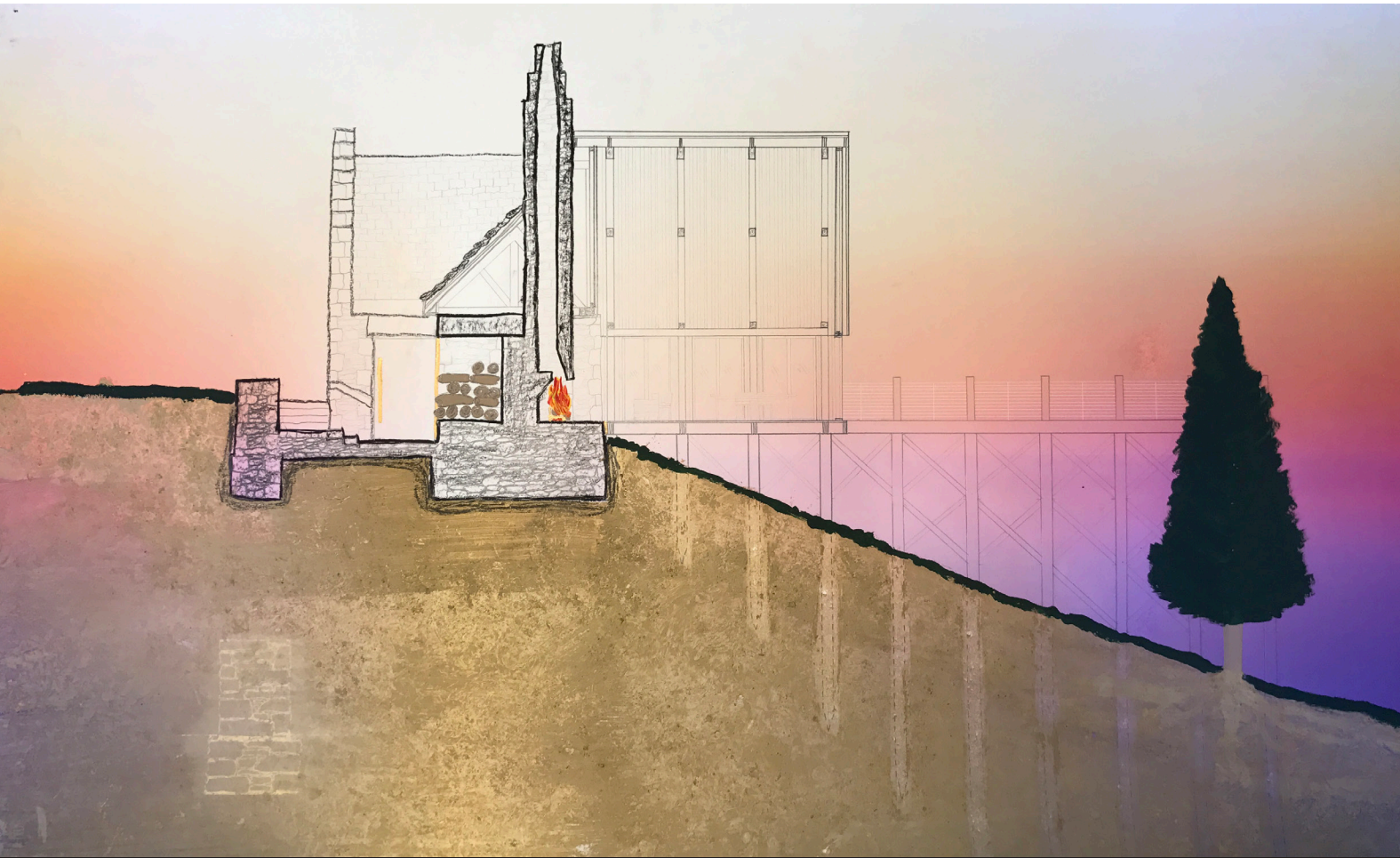
1/4" = 1'-0"

QUOIN  
corner

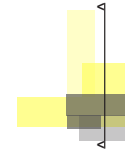


1" = 1'-0"

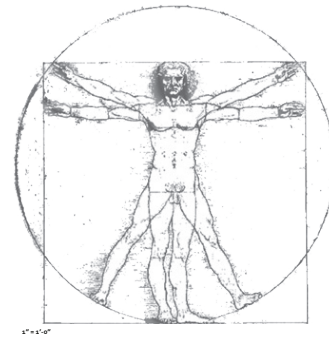




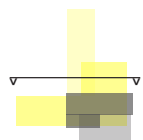
EAST-WEST SECTION  
sunset/sunrise



FOUNDATION  
footprint

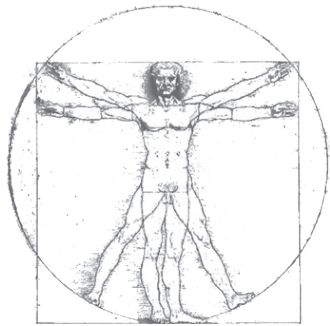


NORTH-SOUTH SECTION  
day



1/4" = 1'-0"

WALL SECTION  
wood

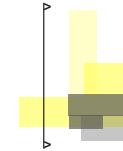


1" = 1'-0"

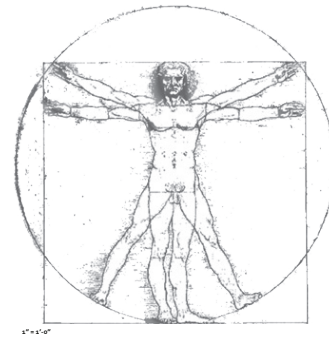




EAST-WEST SECTION  
right



WALL SECTION  
stone

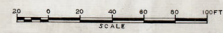
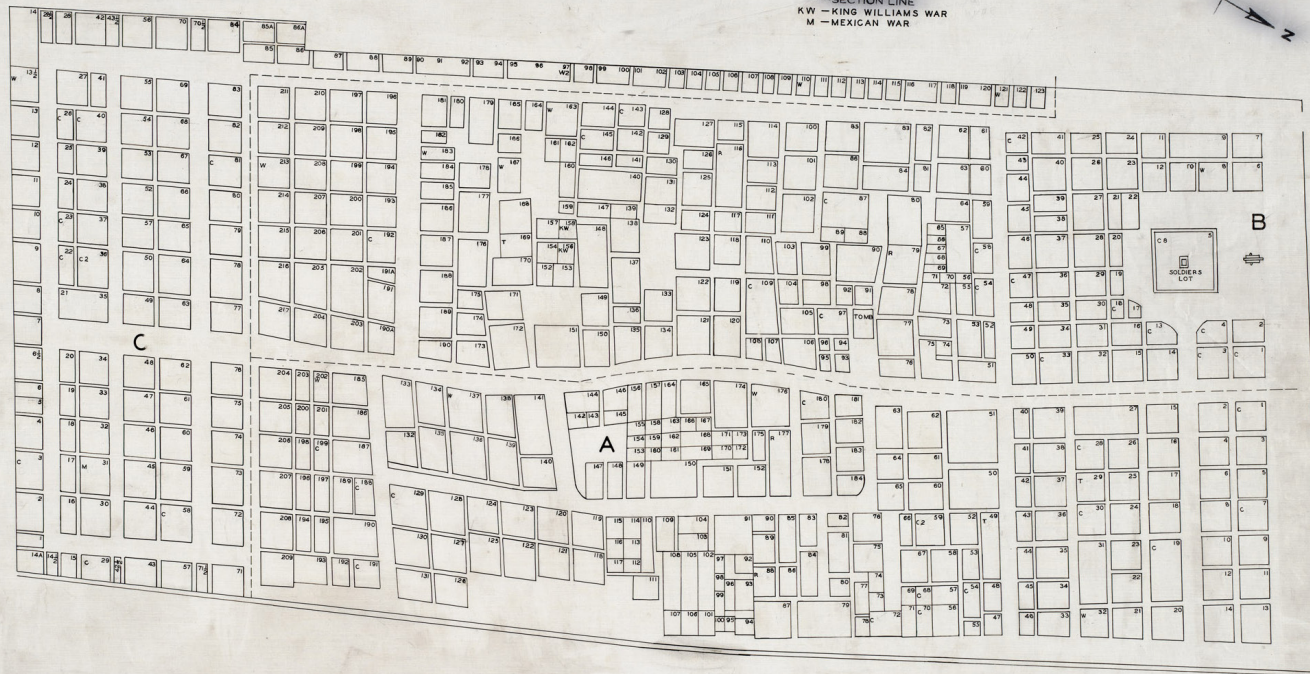


# **memory**

## documentation

Plan of Ocean View Cemetery, Wells, ME

W - WORLD WAR  
 S - SPANISH WAR  
 C - CIVIL WAR  
 R - REVOLUTIONARY WAR  
 T - WAR OF 1812  
 I - INDIAN WARS  
 - SECTION LINE  
 KW - KING WILLIAMS WAR  
 M - MEXICAN WAR



OCEAN VIEW CEMETERY  
 WELLS - YORK COUNTY - MAINE

279

SURVEY AND REGISTRATION  
 WAR VETERANS GRAVES

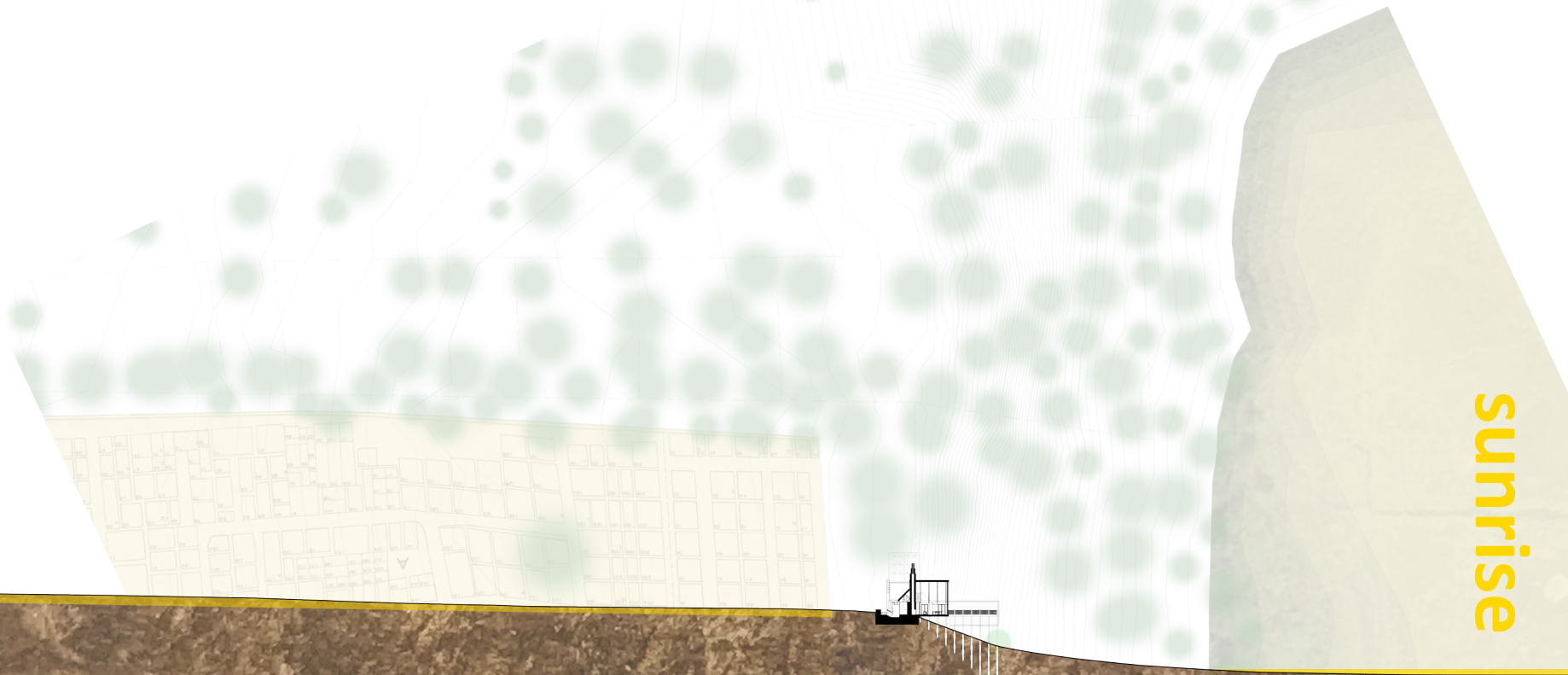
PL-57  
 DR-41  
 CO

WORK PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION  
 OFFICIAL PRODUCT NUMBER 680-31-3-17  
 SPONSORED BY THE STATE OF MAINE  
 DEPARTMENT OF THE ADJUTANT GENERAL

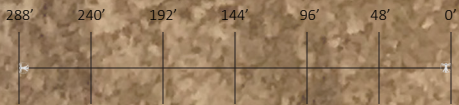


**sunset**

**sunrise**



**site section**



sunrise

june  
july

may  
august

april  
september

march  
october

february  
november

january  
december

june  
july

may  
august

april  
september

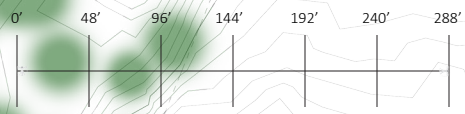
march  
october

february  
november

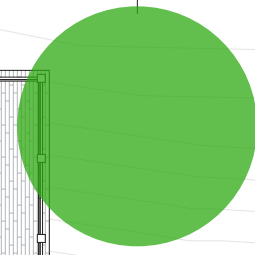
january  
december

sunset

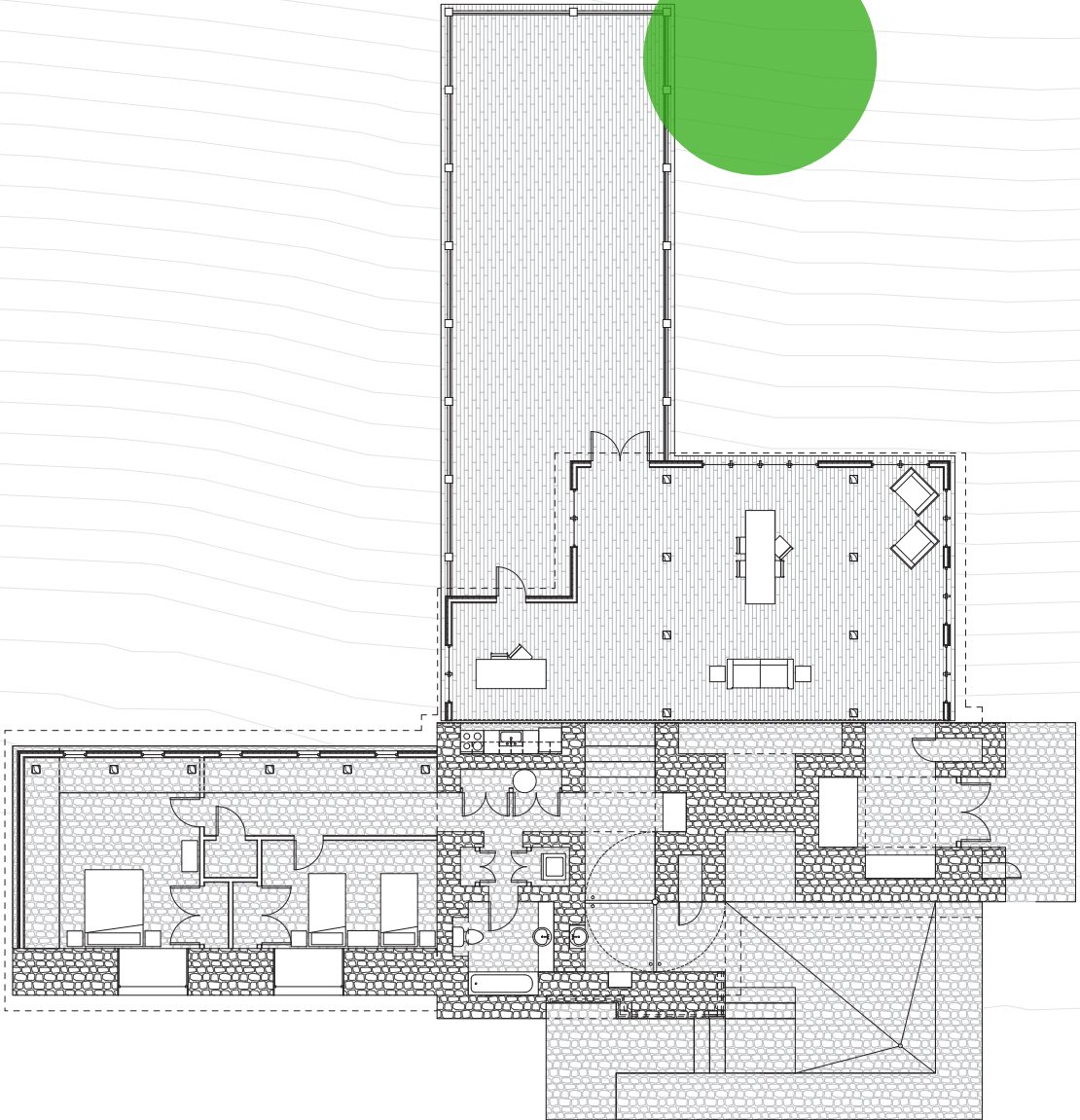
site plan



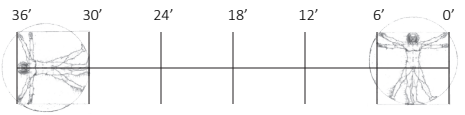
sunrise



sunset



floor plan



82

81

75

79

79

78

84

84

80

80

82

81

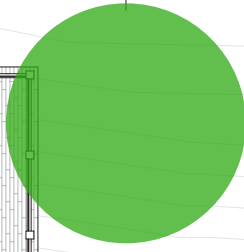
76

sunrise

82

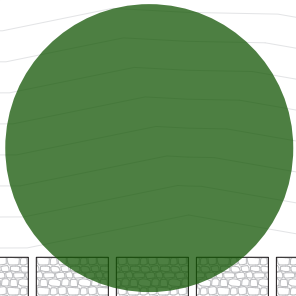
81

75



79

79



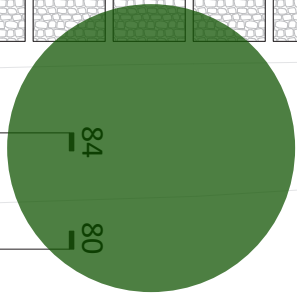
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84

84

80

80



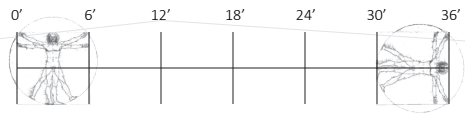
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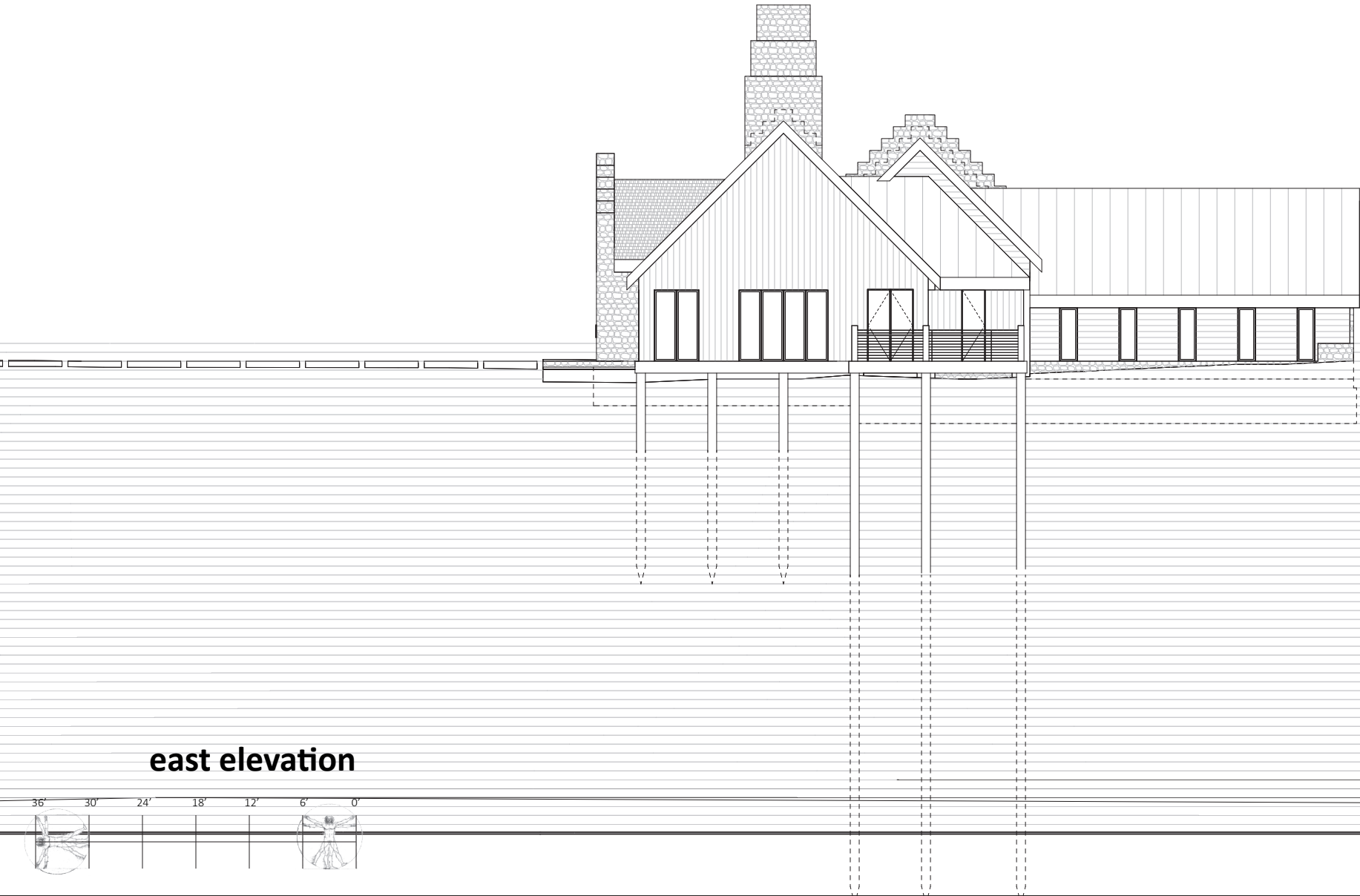
sunset

82

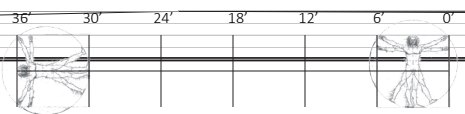
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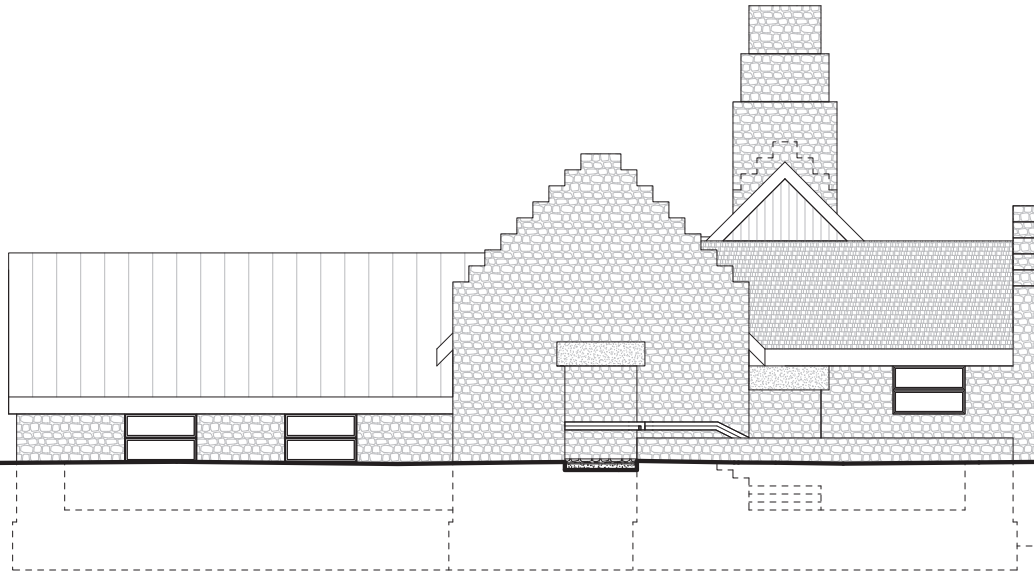
roof plan



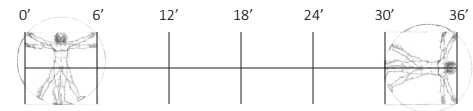


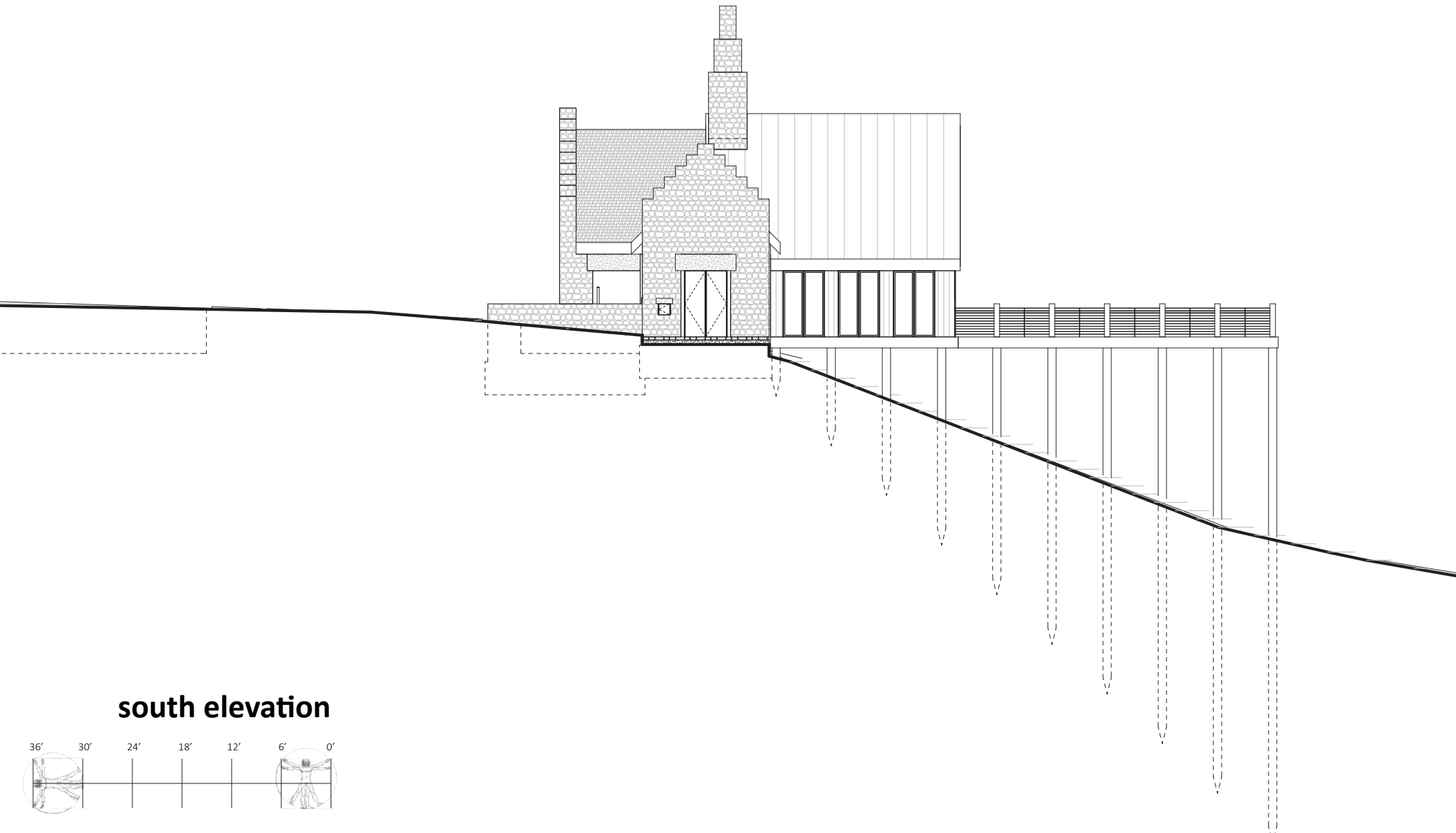
east elevation



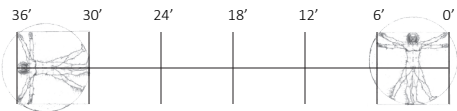


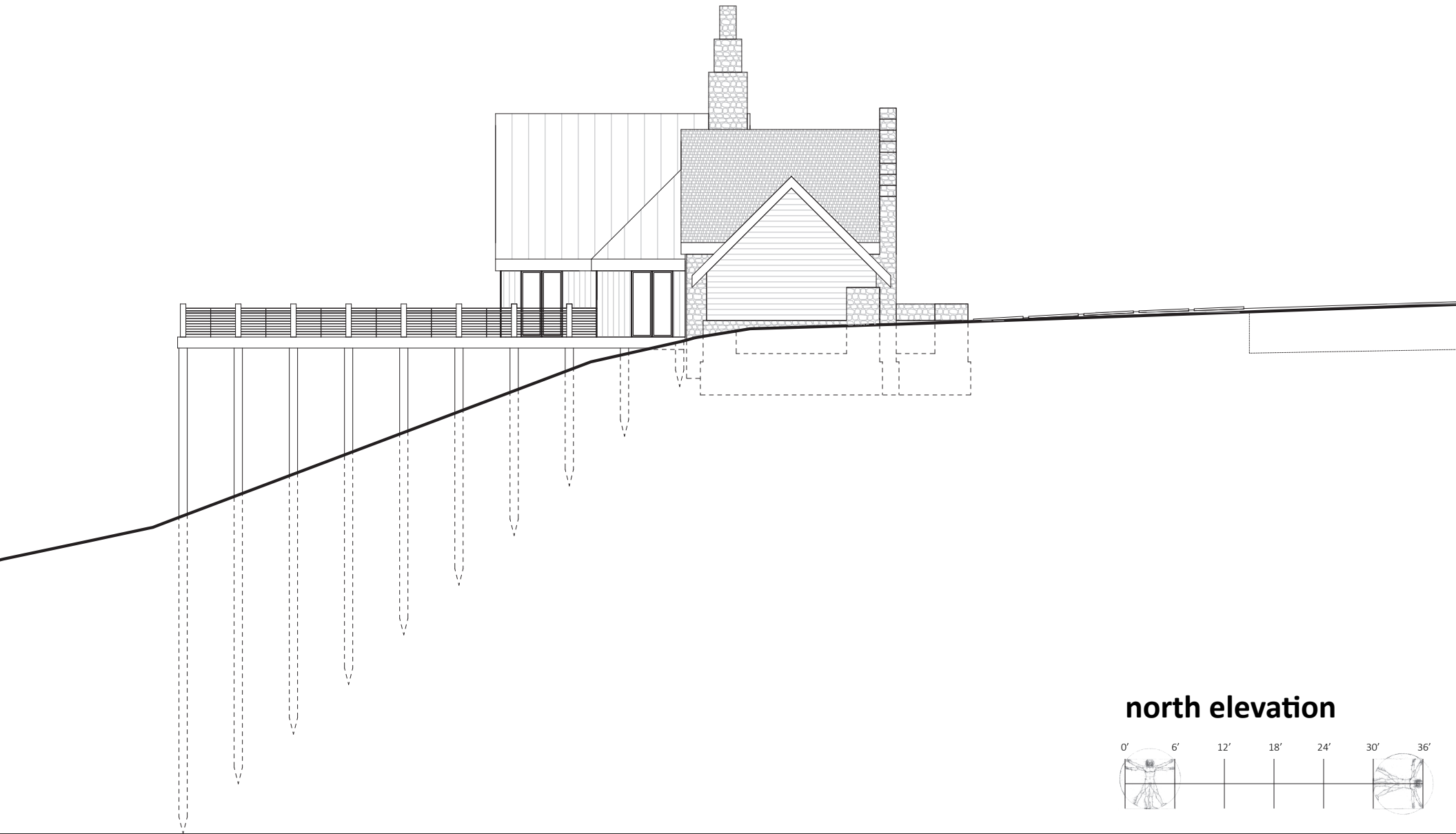
**west elevation**



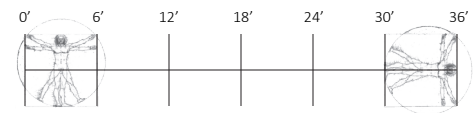


**south elevation**

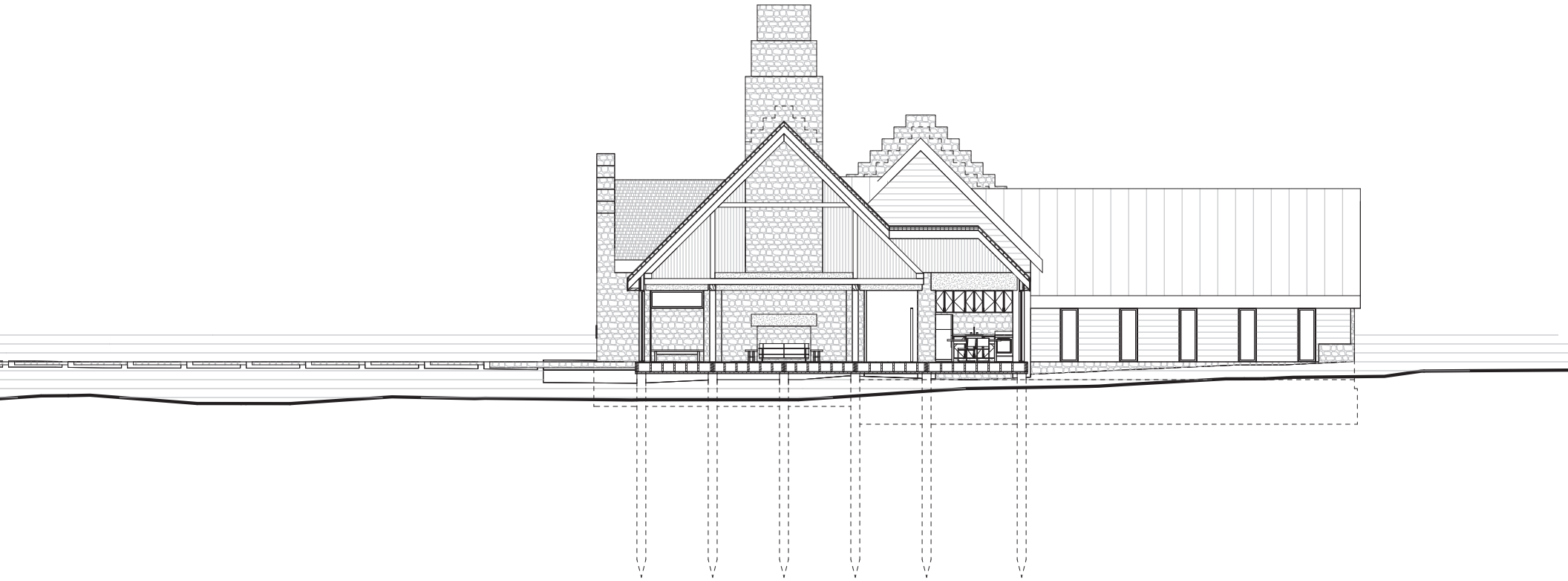




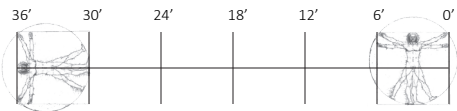
**north elevation**

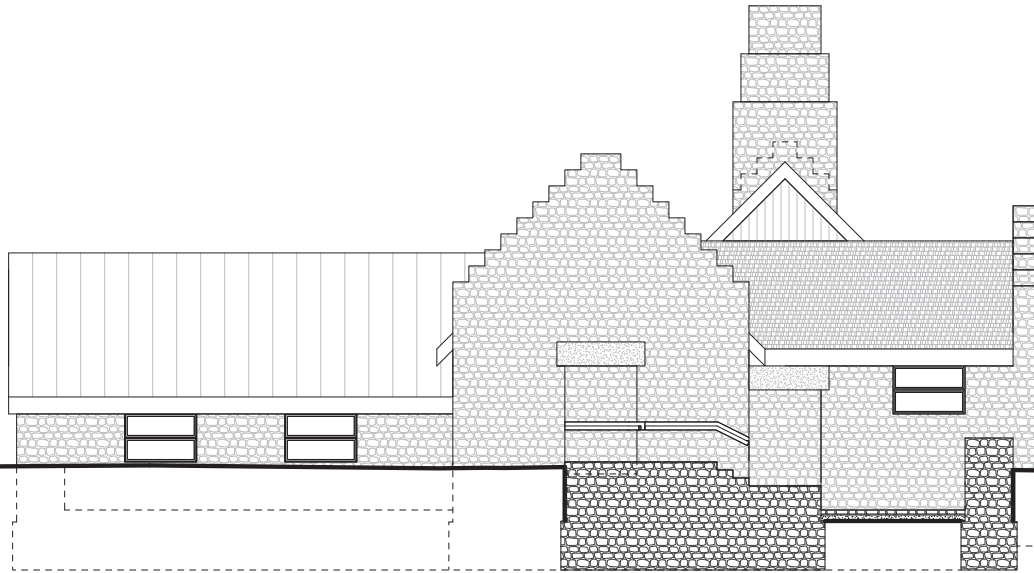




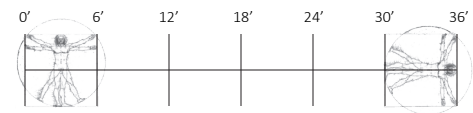


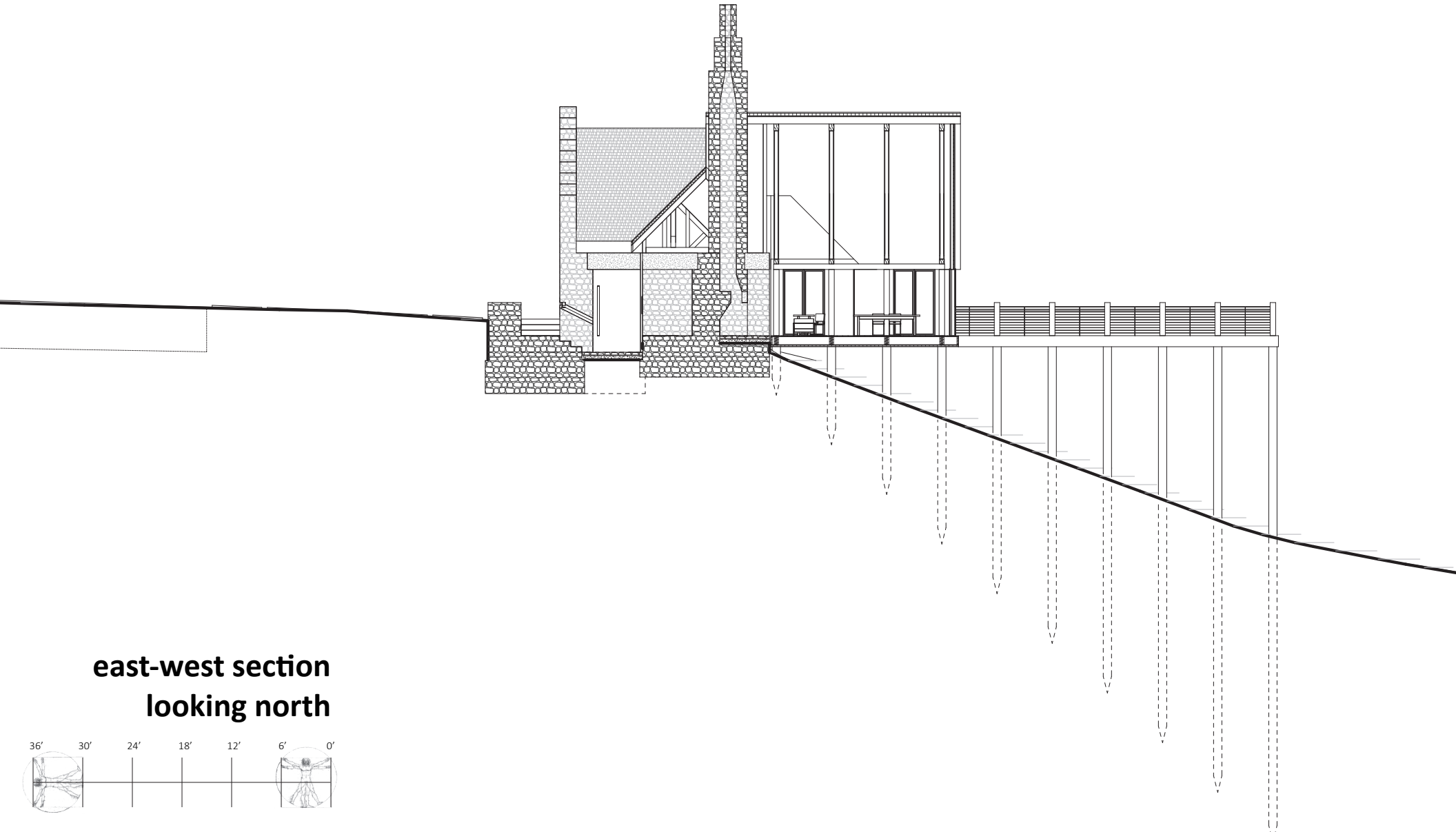
**north-south section  
looking west**



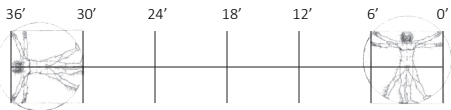


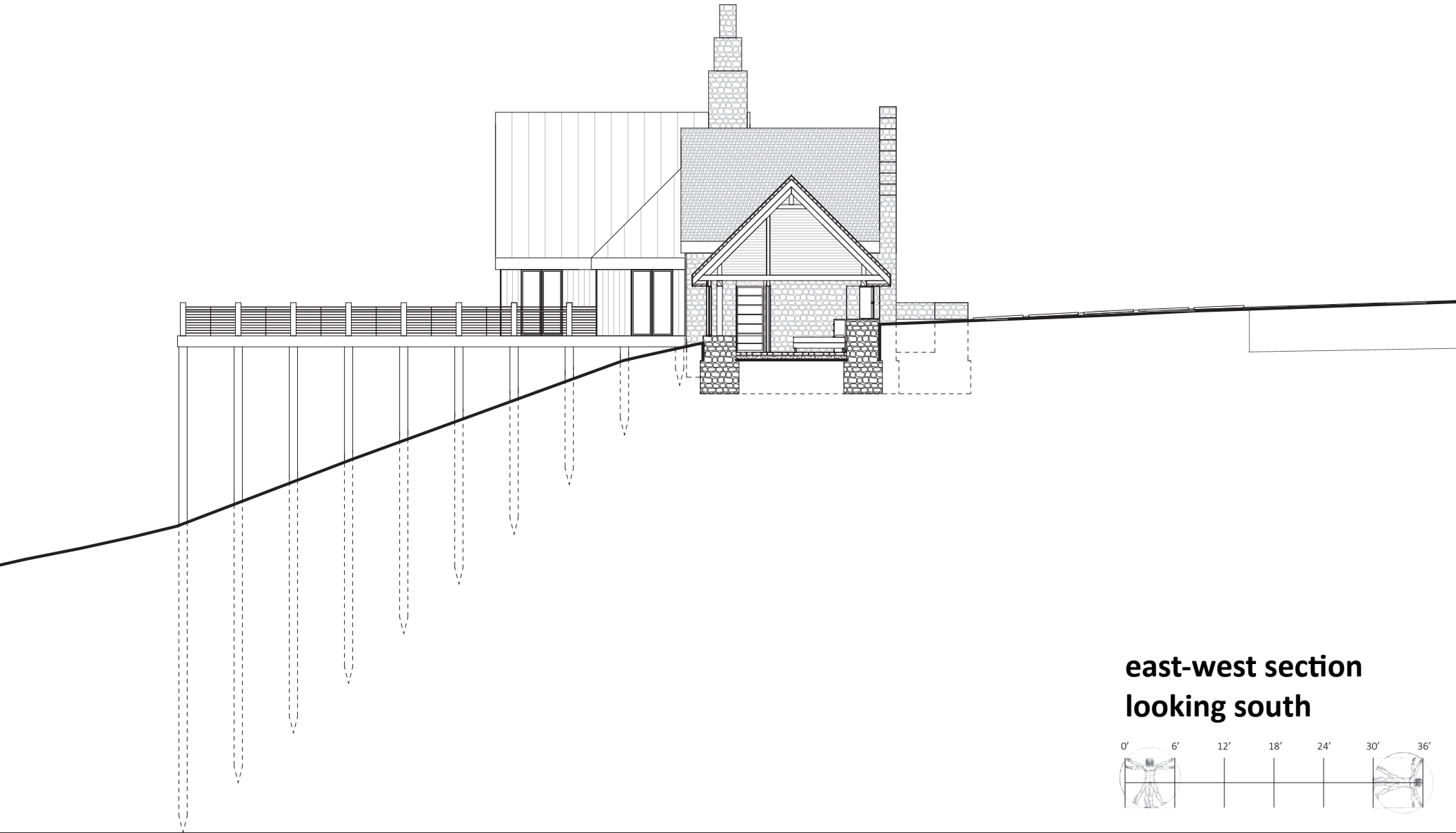
**north-south section  
looking east**



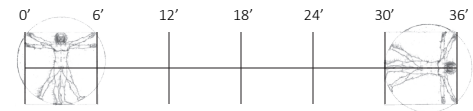


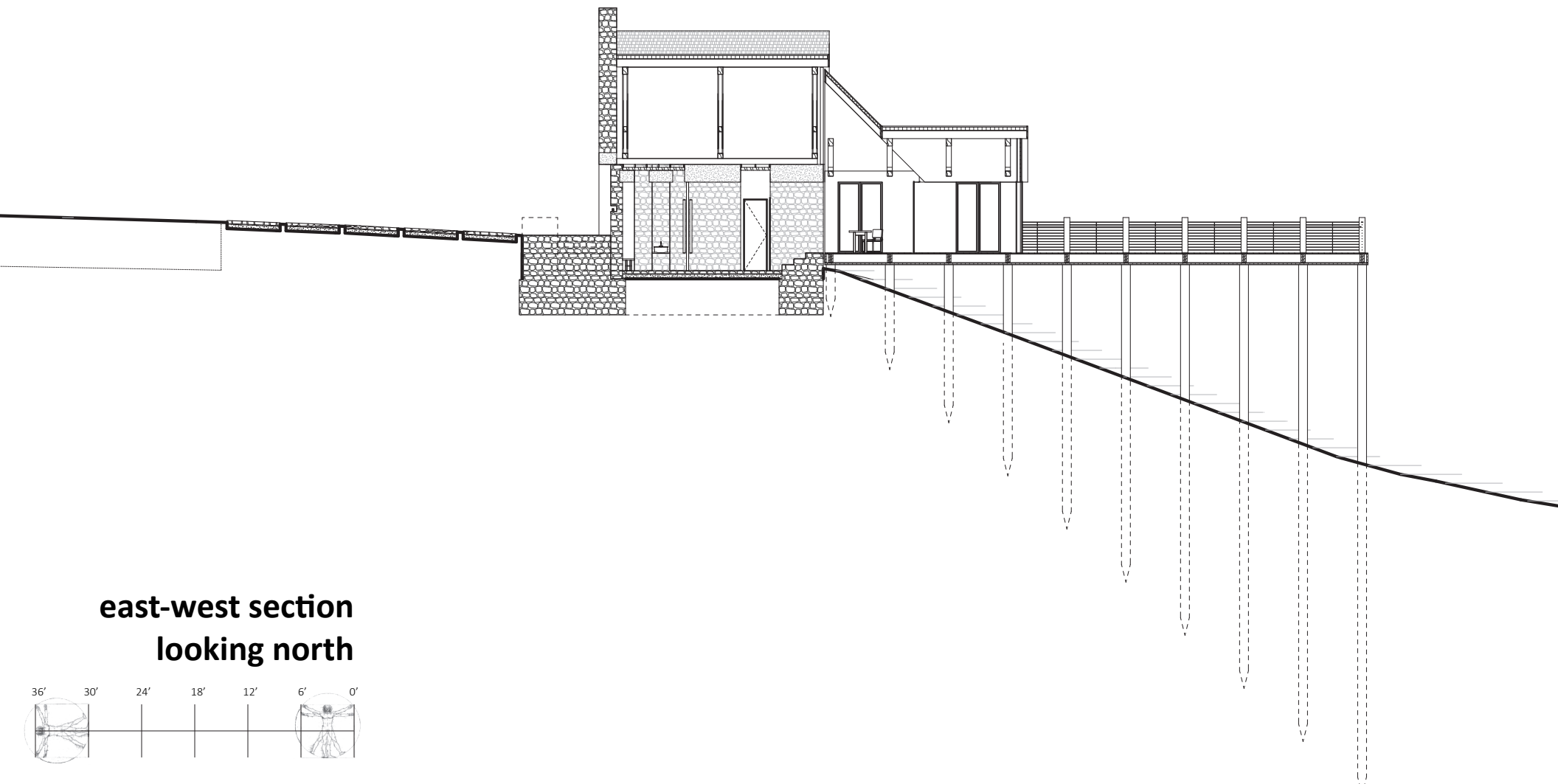
**east-west section  
looking north**



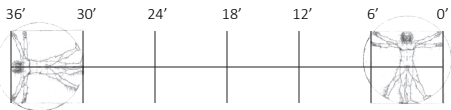


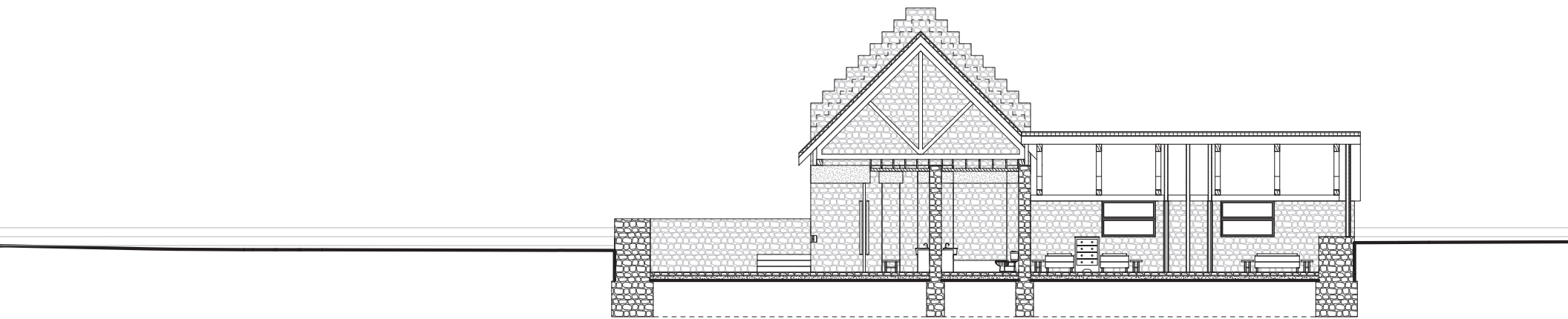
**east-west section  
looking south**



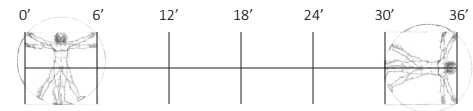


**east-west section  
looking north**





**north-south section  
looking west**



## CHRONICLE

### **2017**

A stone and timber house is designed and built for the caretaker of Ocean View Cemetery and is passed through three generations of caretakers.

*84 years pass*

### **2101**

Ocean View Cemetery no longer has the funds or the need for a caretaker. The house is abandoned.

*52 years pass*

### **2153**

The Rachel Carson Wildlife Refuge purchases the house to commemorate the 500th Anniversary of Wells and converts the house into a nature center.

*92 years pass*

### **2245**

To celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the town's founding, the cemetery and house are provided with funds for much needed maintenance.

*183 years pass*

### **2428**

The tide now reaches the base of the pier structure supporting the house. The floodplain now includes the site of the house and the house is condemned.

*225 years pass*

**2653**

To celebrate the 1,000th Anniversary of the town's founding, volunteers mark the former headstone locations using crosses carved from salvaged timbers from the house.

*30 years pass*

**2683**

The wood structure collapses into the ocean during a hurricane.

*62 years pass*

**2745**

A stone monument is erected at the former entrance to Ocean View Cemetery to commemorate the 1,000th Anniversary of the cemetery. It does not mention the house.

*31 years pass*

**2776**

To celebrate the second millennium of the United States, a developer purchased and transformed much of the coast of Wells, including the former Rachel Carson Wildlife Refuge, to create a year-round seaside resort in the now subtropical climate of southern Maine. The former site of Ocean View Cemetery is converted into an oceanfront garden with paths created from stones found on the site.

*56 years pass*

**2832**

A powerful hurricane forces the seaside resort to close.

*321 years pass*

**3153**

A book detailing the history of Wells is published to celebrate the town's 1,500th Anniversary. Ocean View Cemetery is noted but there is no mention of the house.



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*To die will be an awfully big adventure.*

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*