

Veils, Screens, and the Tectonic: a Gallery for a Small Town

Design thesis submitted to the Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Architecture
Approved by:

Frank Weiner (Chairperson)

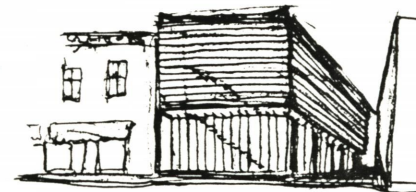
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April, 1995

Abstract

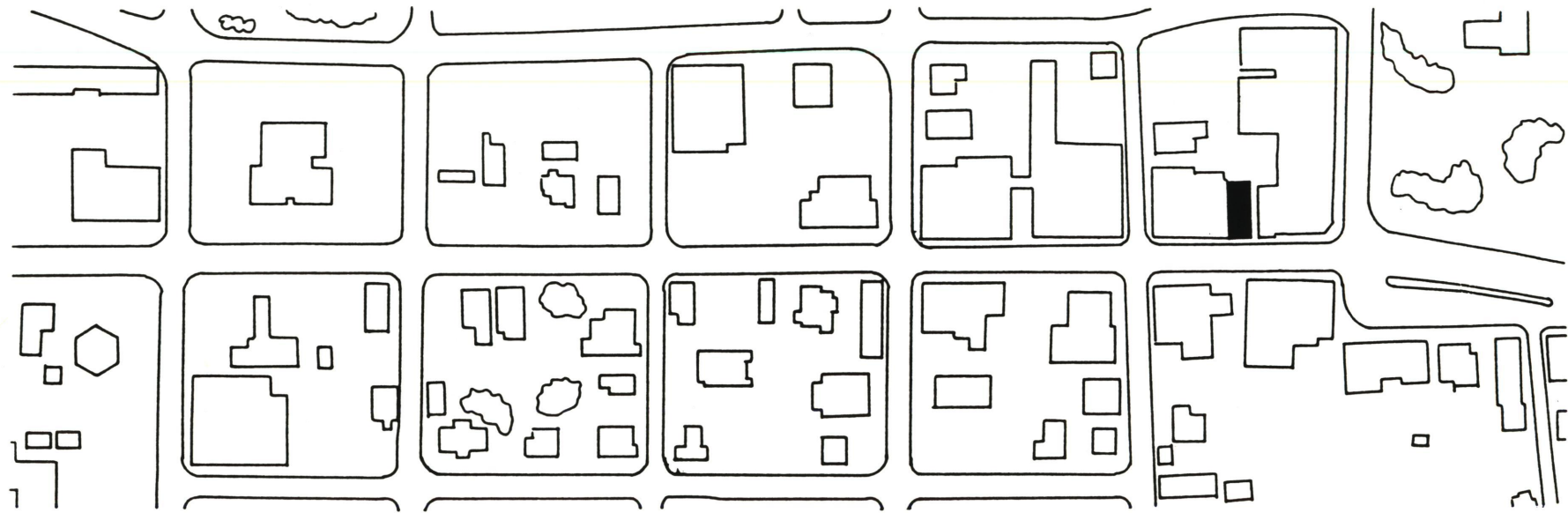
A small multi-functional gallery was designed for the town of Blacksburg, Virginia to accommodate the needs of students, university organizations, and towns' people. The gallery would serve as the location for exhibitions of art, lectures, films, and performance art.



I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first Modernist. The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself-not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant uses logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left in all the more secure possession of what remained to it.¹

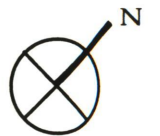
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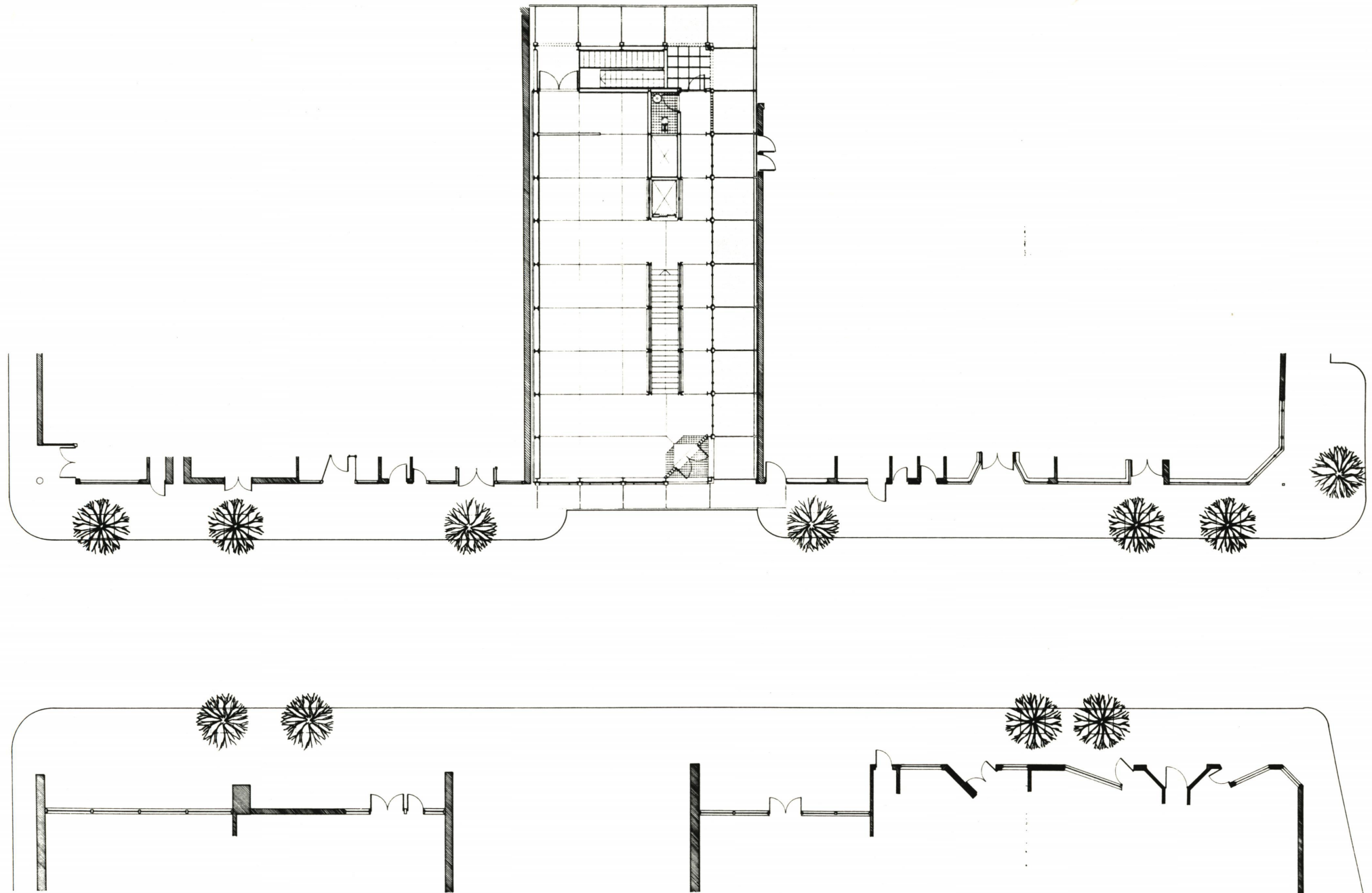


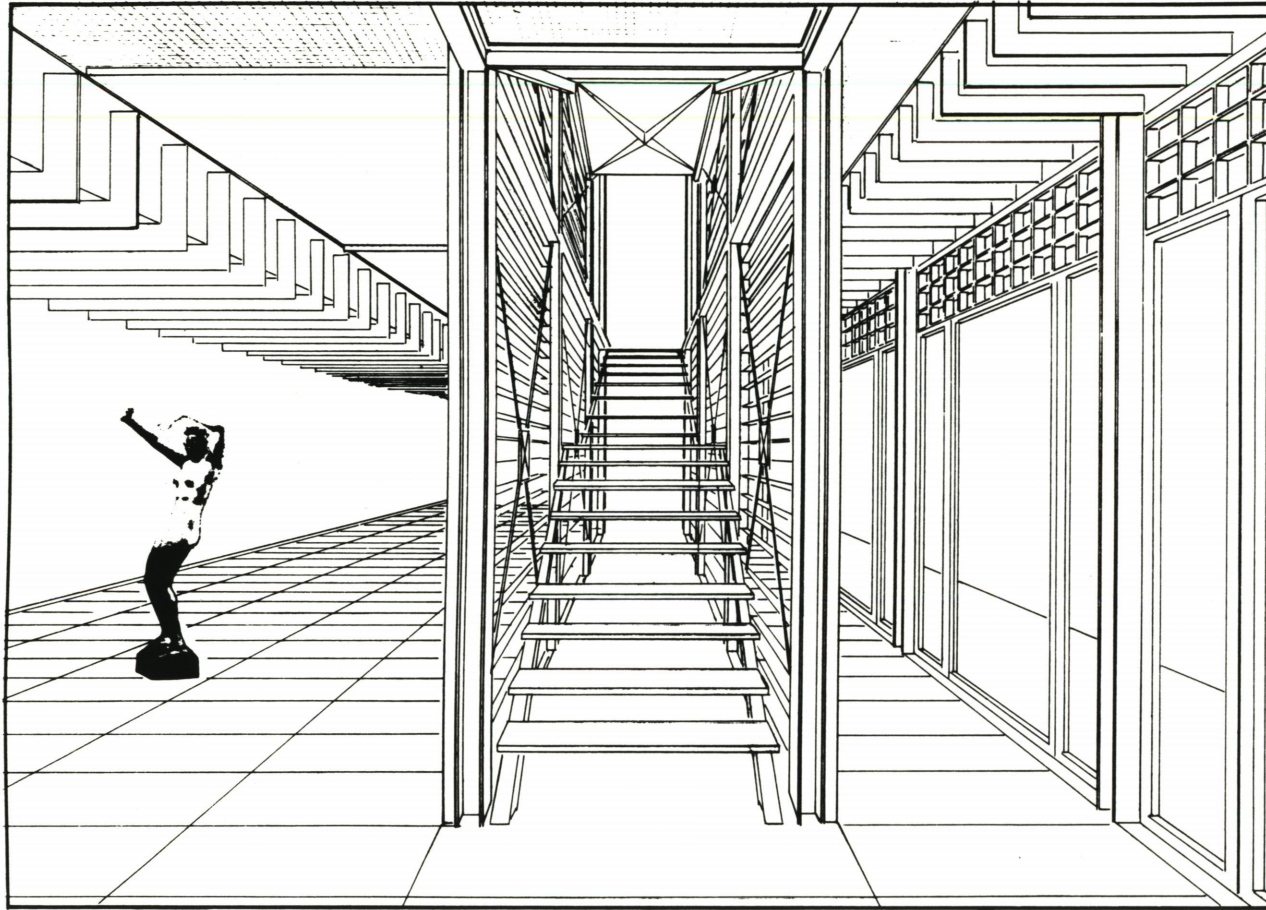
Site

The gallery is located in Southwest Virginia adjacent to Virginia Tech along Main street in downtown Blacksburg. This site, partly because of its university setting, has an urban character with many students and local town's people interacting throughout the day and into the evening. As an urban condition, many commercial and retail enterprises, restaurants, and civic buildings attract the population of the town to this area making this a vital space for the town. This site was thus chosen as the location for the gallery with the intent of integrating this structure into the urban fabric of the town and making a place for a broader range of cultural activity that could be engendered by a gallery in the downtown area.



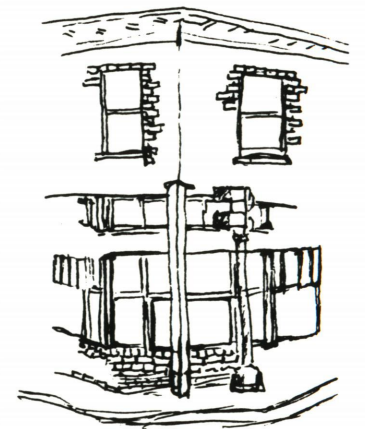
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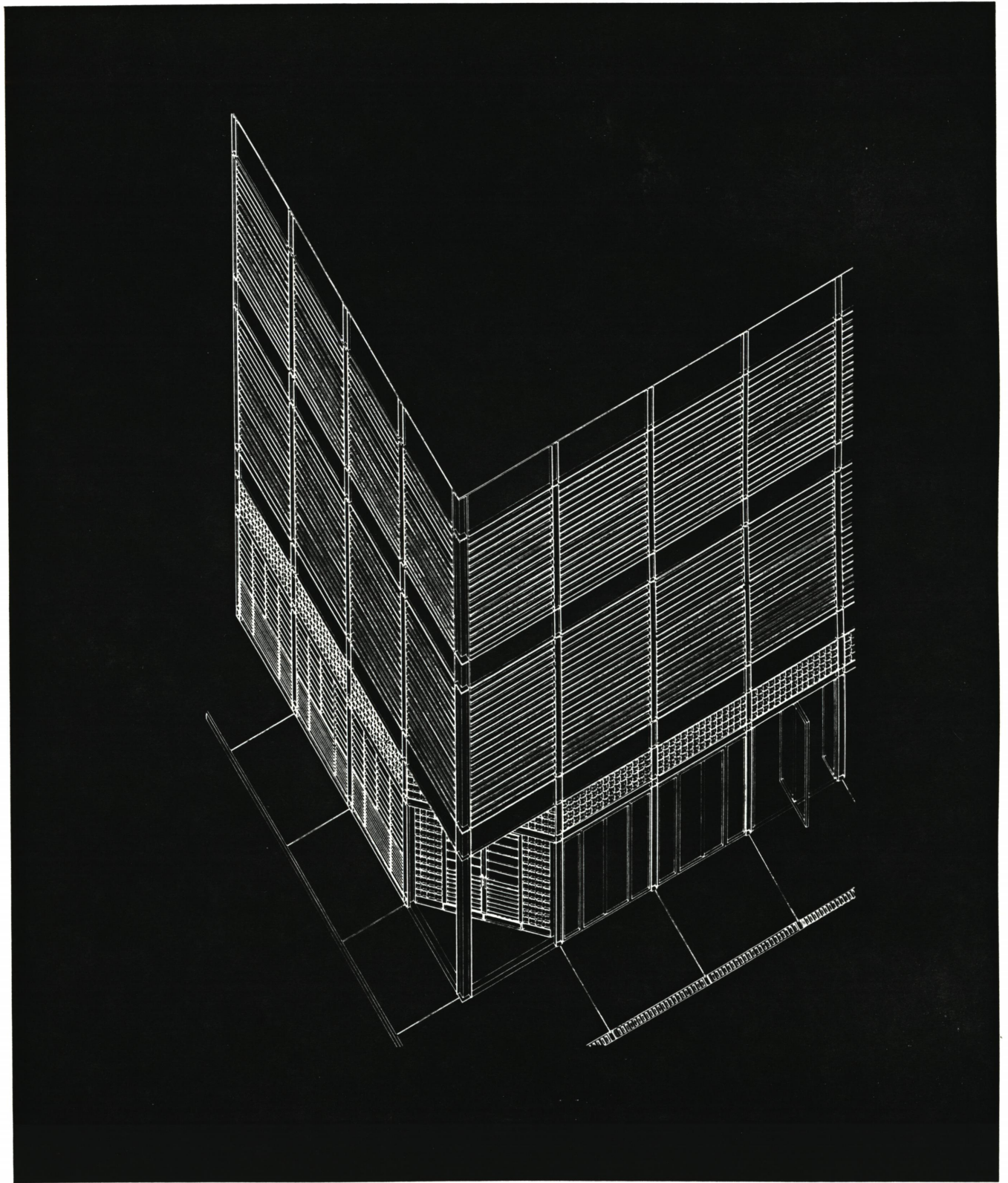
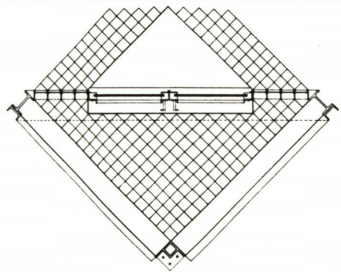
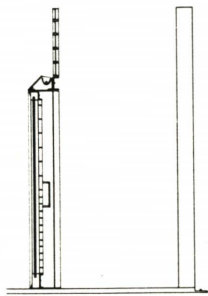
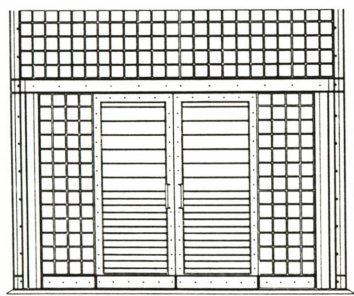


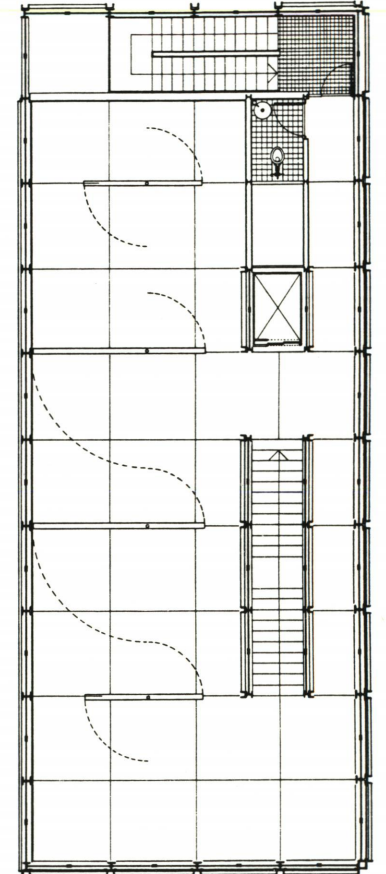
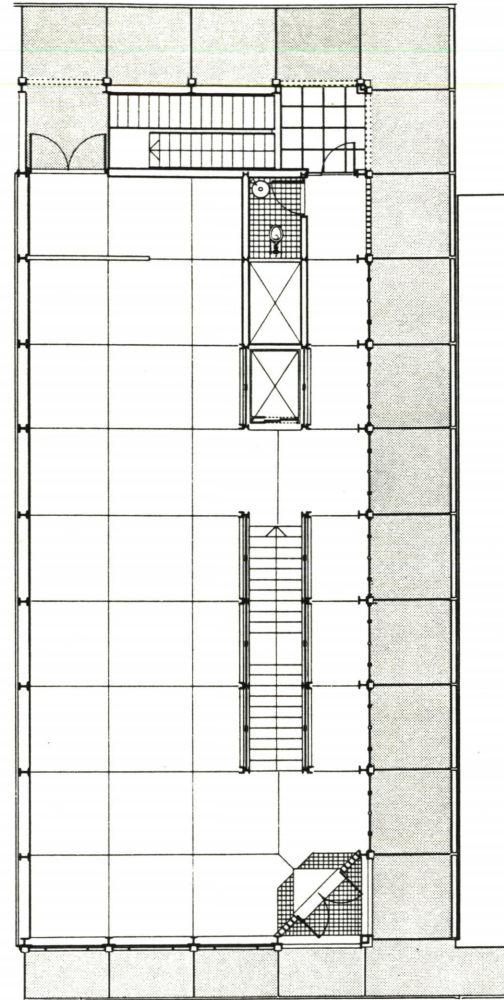
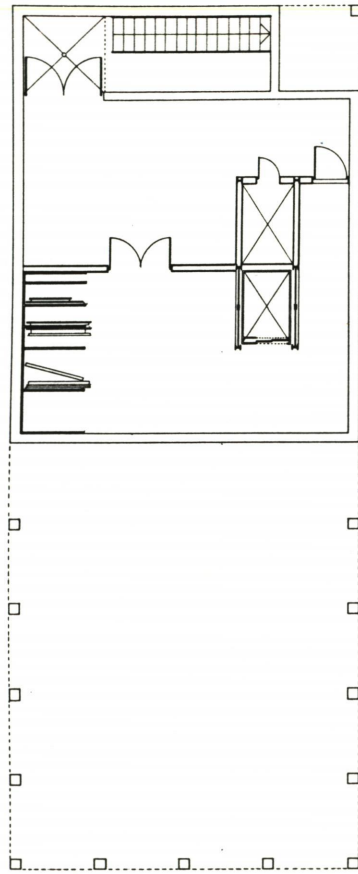


Context

The use of the girded glazing frame above the lower screen panels on the Main street and alley side attempt to reflect existing contextual elements in buildings within the general site. These elements were translated into the language of the design and used in a manner that integrates the building with the existing conditions that exist along Main street in Blacksburg. The angled entrance condition also reflects existing Blacksburg corner conditions that in this case makes the attempt to open the space of the alley to the street and connect the passage to the building. Further, the glazed windows on the alley side are meant to open to the alley thus bringing the alley into the building in warm weather. The articulation of the lower panels at ground level was done to give the building at ground level a human scale and differentiate the lower level from the scale of the building addressed in the rhythm of the upper screen panels.



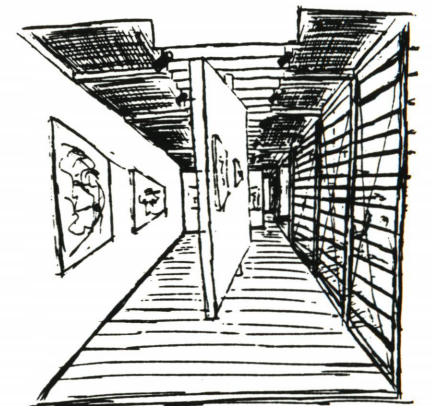


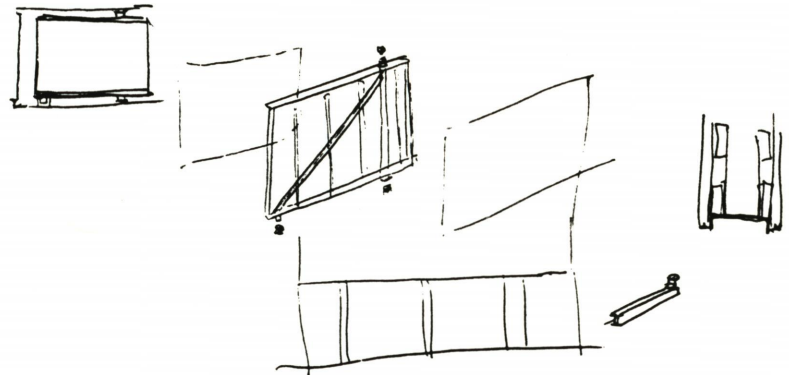
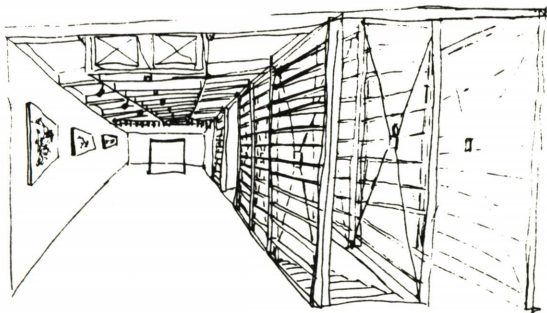
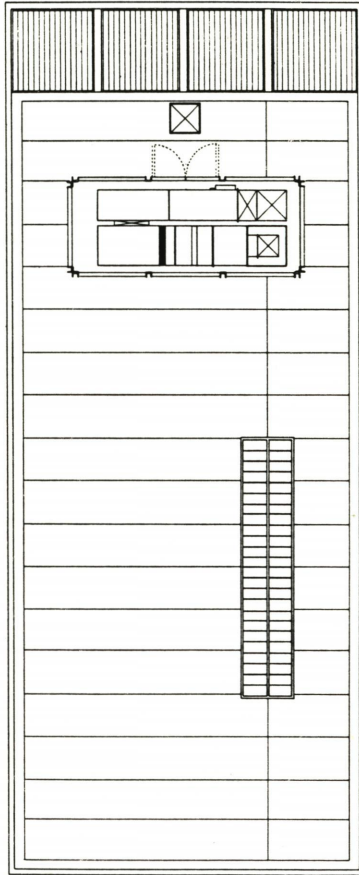
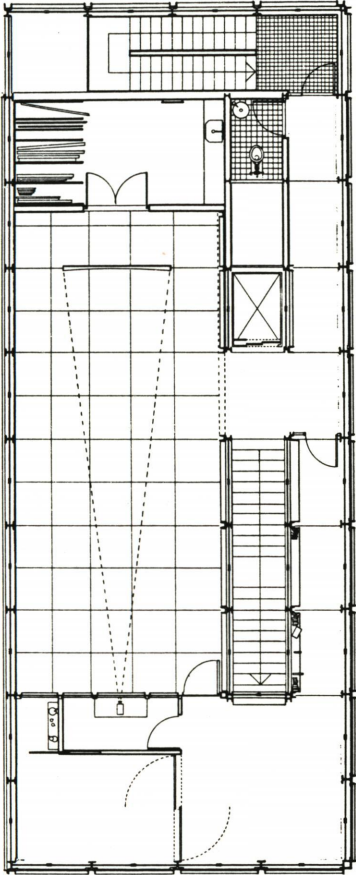


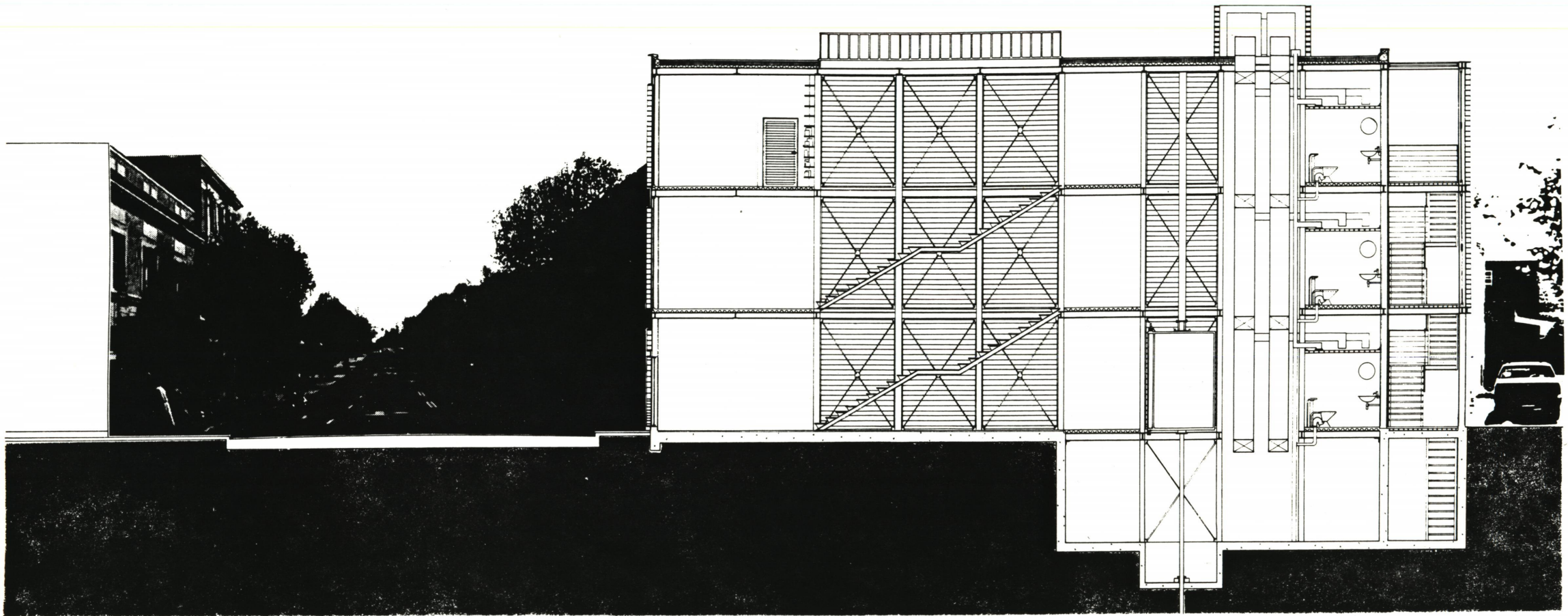
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Program

The program for the project was to design a 10,000 sq. ft. gallery for the town of Blacksburg, Virginia. This gallery, located in a university town, would be multi-functional, and accommodate the needs of students, university organizations, and towns people. The gallery would thus function as a place to exhibit works of art by students, faculty, and invited guests, as well as a place for lectures, cinema, and performance art. The gallery was thus divided into three zones by floor. The first floor functions as a large open space, able to accommodate a wide range of community activities, public gatherings, and performances. The second floor is reserved primarily for hanging art and sculpture, although this space is also flexible and can accommodate other activities. The third floor functions as a lecture hall and cinema; it also contains the gallery offices.



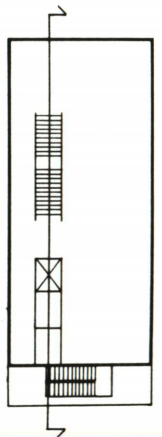


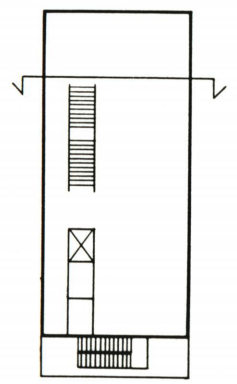
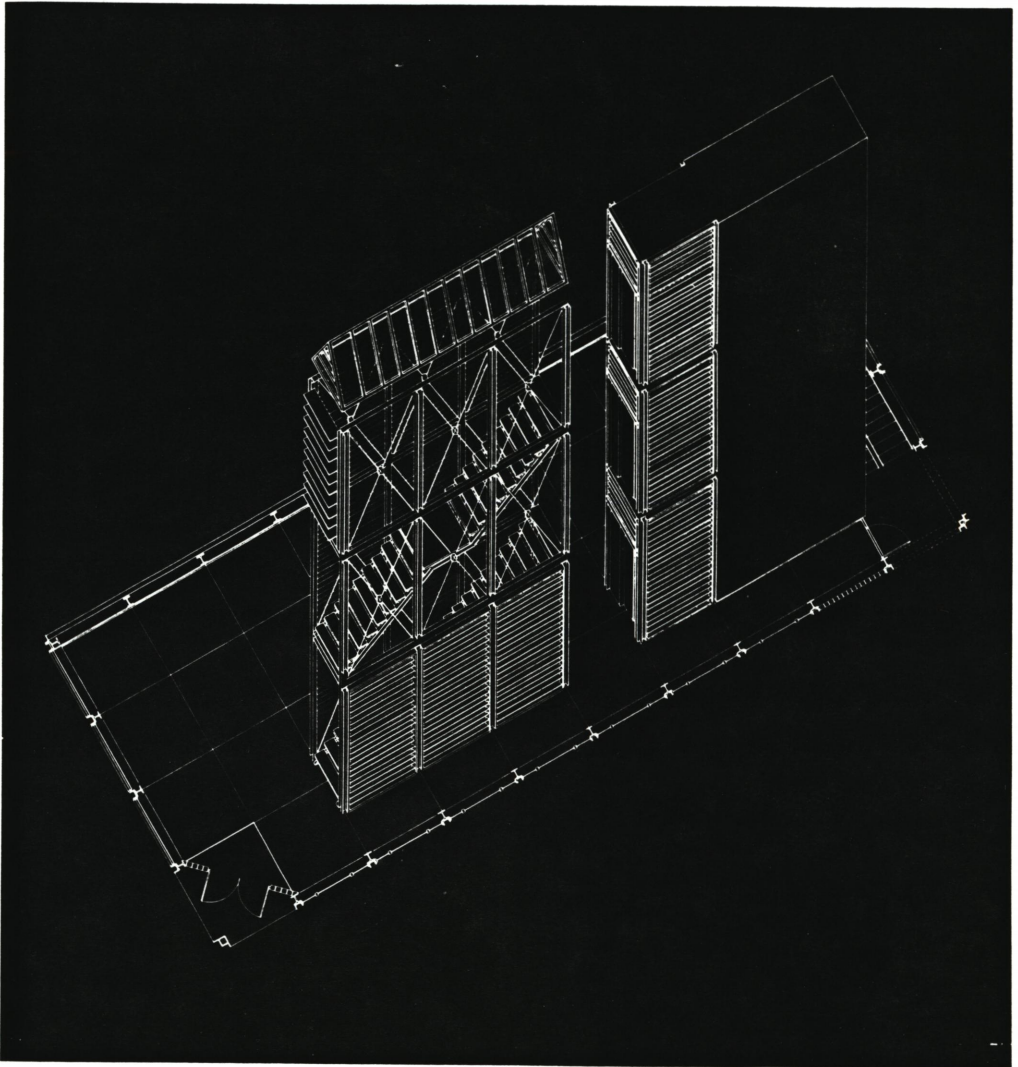
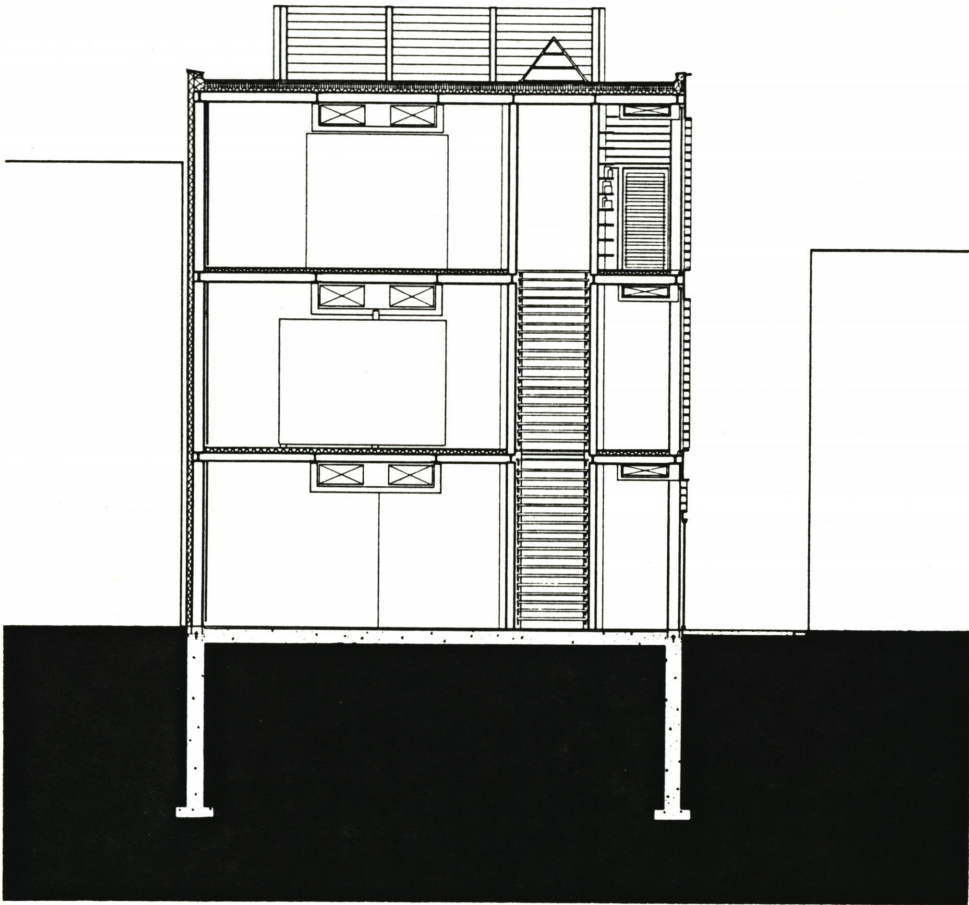


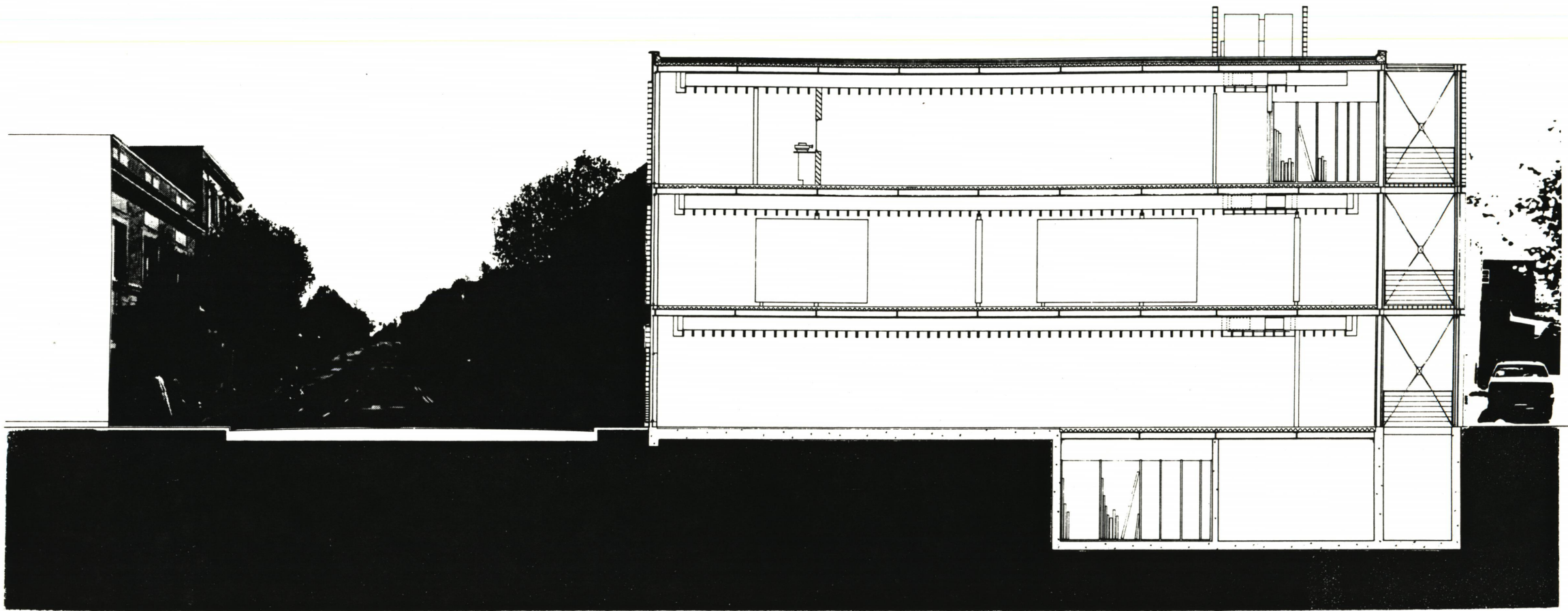
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Skin as Veil: Screen Panels

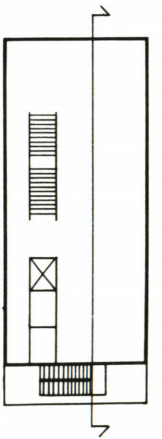
The screen panels function to mediate vision and the gaze from both inside and outside the building. The screen panels become a frame of mediated transparency that both limit access to the interior of the building (through vision) and at the same time create a type of enticement, sensuality and possibly erotic nature by way of acting as veils. In this way the screens can be read as having a metaphorical nature acting in a similar way to the metaphor in language; the screen tries to become diaphanous before the works of art enclosed within the building but is blocked from doing so by its own material existence. One wants to see behind the mask, to move into the interior to see the work that is given up only after one is through the exterior and stair cage and in the place of the work, this was the thinking behind the veils.

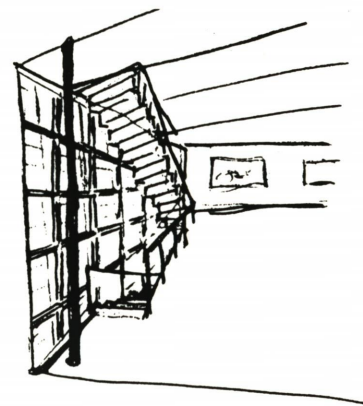
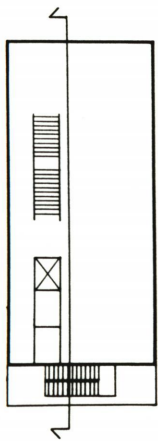
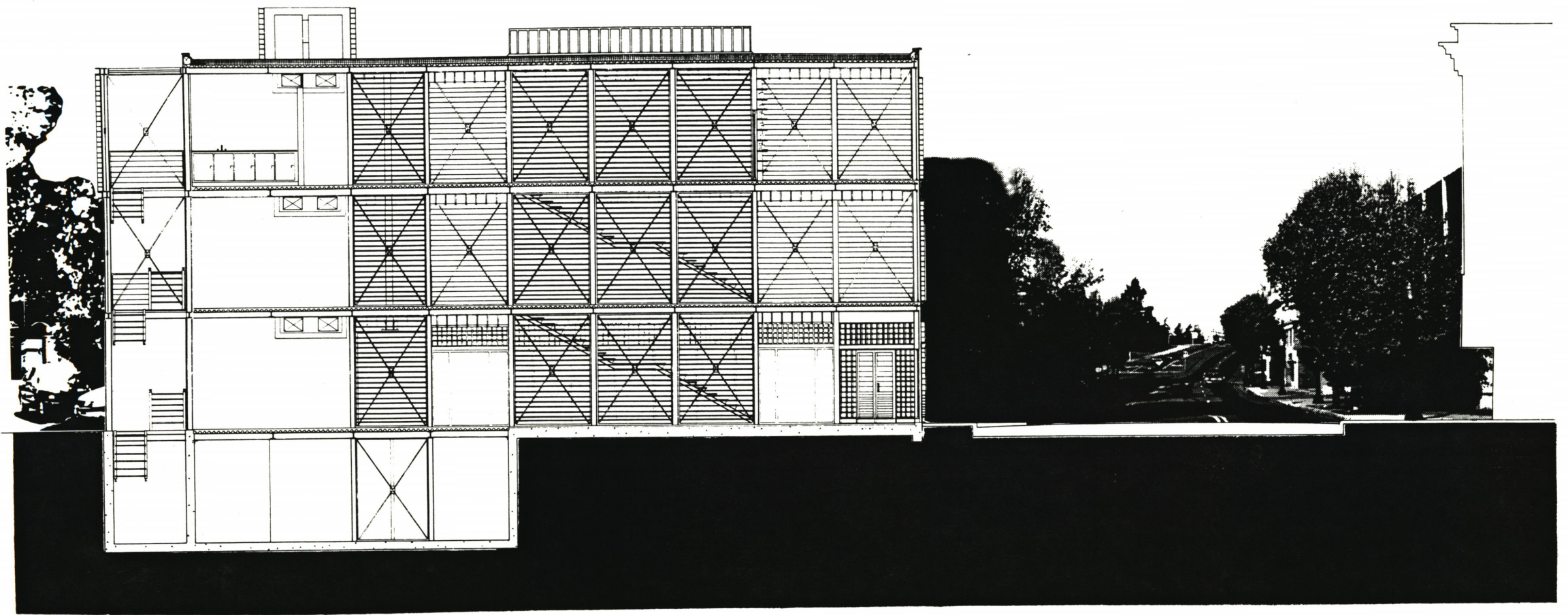






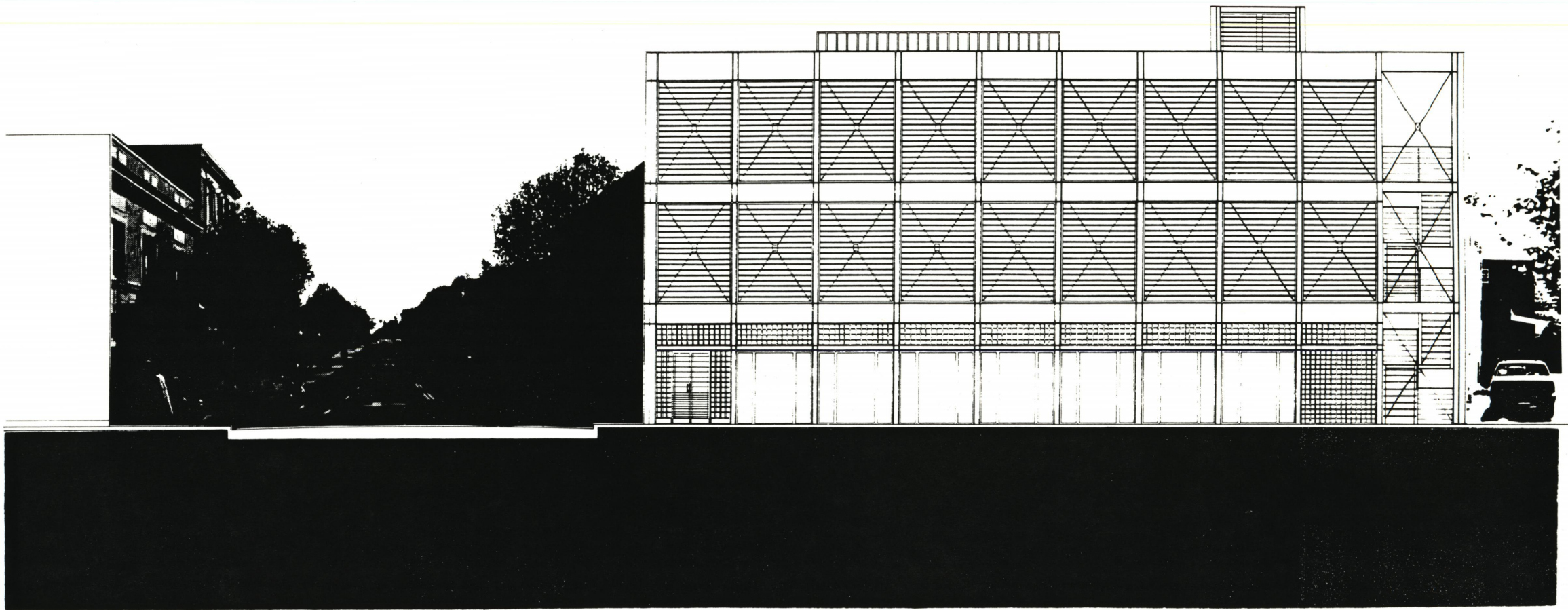
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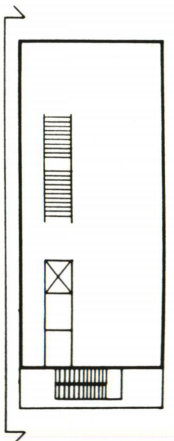


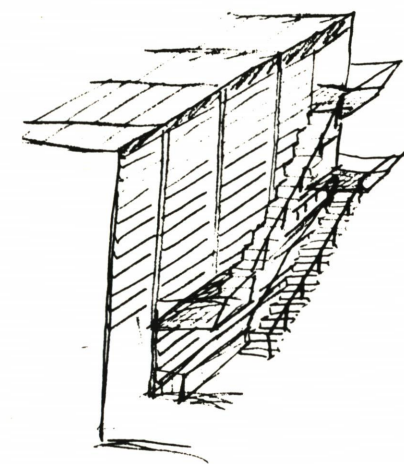
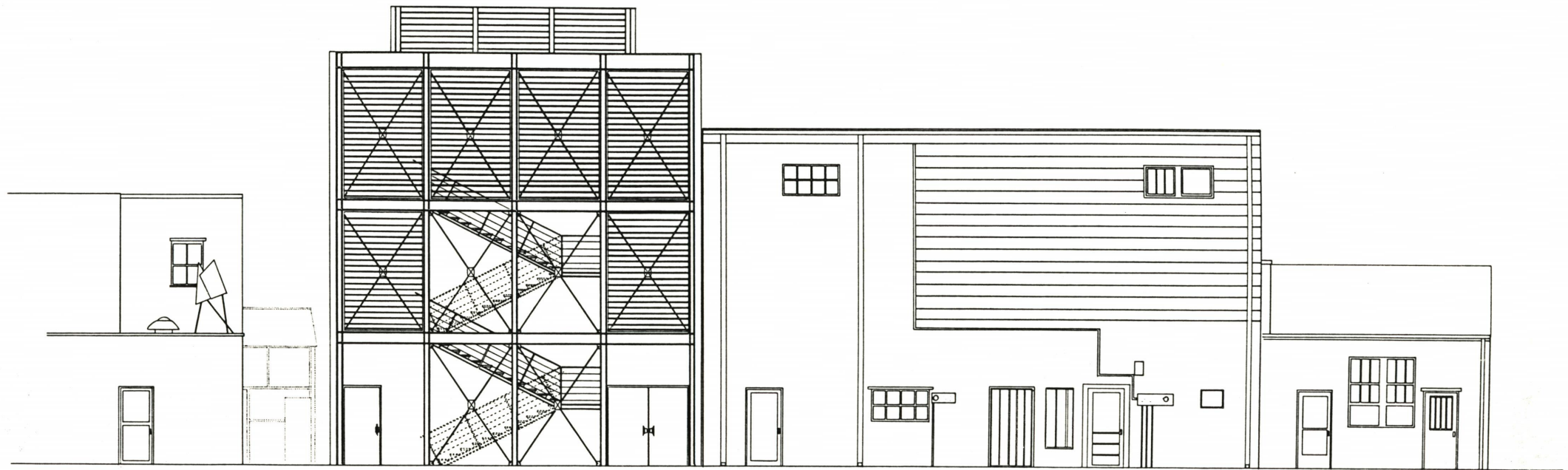






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Postscript: The Space of the Return

If we return, it is because of a basic and constructive omission, an omission that is not the result of accident or incomprehension... This non accidental omission must be regulated by precise operations that can be situated, analyzed, and reduced in a return to the act of initiation. Both the cause of the barrier and the means of its removal, this omission- also responsible for the obstacles that prevent returning to the act of initiation- can only be resolved by a return... It follows naturally that this return...is not a historical supplement that would come to fix itself upon the primary discursivity and redouble it in the form of ornament... Rather, it is an effective and necessary means of transforming discursive practice.

Michel Foucault "What is an Author?"²

How does one begin? Is the barrier overcome by a simple motion of the pen? Does this omission signal an active forgetting necessary for the development and practice of a whole architectural discourse? If so then the journey, in the form of a return, cannot be made alone. One needs a guide, someone who has traversed this terrain before, someone who becomes both vehicle and object allowing for the opening of a space in which the return can be situated. This someone has a proper name, and the proper name always names more than is initially apparent: this name can take the form Mies van der Rohe. I will venture this proposition: architecture in terms of the International Style and late Modernism imitating Mies van der Rohe has become a historical supplement that redoubles itself in the form of ornament rather than being an effective means of transforming discursive practice in relation to architecture. Hal Foster states in relation to this notion of a return: "Of course these practices are not lost and found, nor did they disappear... Yet in spite of this work, sometimes because of it, important aspects of all these discourses were misplaced."³ This is not to say that at the level of present architectural theory this was not evident, but at the level of practice, an active forgetting was firmly in place. Architectural practice, imbued with its theoretical principles that were supposed to be engaging architecture at a critical level of understanding through building, became a historical pastiche evoking the symbols of Mies van der Rohe but not the content of his investigations. This architecture became the continuation of a style without any rigorous investigation into the ground out of which Mies van der Rohe and his architecture were born. Kenneth Frampton recognizes this in talking about the creation of the *Burolandschaft* (office landscape) in his "Six Points toward a Critical Regionalism."⁴ In the beginning of this work, Frampton critically evaluates our culture's architecture in terms of its reduction into a ubiquitous type of building modeled on the International Style office building that ignores climate, region, place, type etc. While Mies van der Rohe is far from this notion of critical regionalism, it seems apparent that an understanding of his workings and modes of thinking architecture - translated into a present mode of building through a rigorous, critical

inquiry through the return - could alleviate and avoid this lapse into generic architectural types whose sole purpose it seems is to produce architecture for the least possible cost. This architecture, beyond its mere economic function, also serves a sociopolitical function in that by being generic and ubiquitous it offers no resistance or challenge to the institutions it serves. By virtue of its being a style, this architecture can be recuperated and used in the service of those institutions it once sought to challenge and change in the name of humanism. Forgetting can be a dangerous action. Hal Foster, continuing, states: "[The return] is to clarify the contingent strategy of the readings, which is to reconnect with a lost practice in order to disconnect from a present way of working felt to be outmoded, misguided, or otherwise oppressive. The first move (re) is a temporal one, made in order, in a second, spatial move (dis), to open a new site for work."⁵

One of the problems that arose in the schools that taught Modernism (IIT and other schools emphasizing Mies van der Rohe) was their failure to understand or transmit his sensibility and understanding of both the tectonic elements in terms of his detailing and the history that lay behind his work. Kenneth Frampton writes in *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*: "Mies van der Rohe's development after the mid-1930's concerned itself with the conciliation of two opposed systems. One was the heritage of Romantic Classicism which, when translated into the skeleton steel frame, pointed toward the dematerialization of architecture, to the mutation of built form into shifting planes suspended in diaphanous space - the image of suprematism. The other was the authority of trabeated architecture as it had been inherited from the ancient world, the implacable elements of roof, beam, column and wall."⁶ Frampton goes on to state about Mies van der Rohe: "Crown Hall, designed at about the same time as the Mannheim Theater, was a decisive return to the tradition of Shinkel and in particular to Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin, always admired by Mies. This Shinkelschuler type-form is generally evident as an organizing paradigm throughout Mies's work of the late 1960's."⁷ Further Colin Rowe, according to Frampton, has argued that 'the whole evolution of the International Style in architecture was profoundly affected by a conceptual schism between centripetal and centrifugal space, the one stemming from Palladianism and the other ultimately deriving from the anti-monumentality of Wright's extension of the English free style plan."⁸ Thus one could draw the line from Palladio through Shinkel to Mies. In doing so one begins to strip away the pejorative labels of "International Style" and "Modernism" which reduce and confine Mies van der Rohe to a narrow dimension of understanding delimited by the connotations of these signifiers. This understanding that can be transmitted through the return, and by an active engagement against forgetting, blocks the naive repetition of form as image and content as correspondence to prevailing institutional norms. It is possible to see Mies van der Rohe through the movement of the return as radicalizing architecture and opening the space in which one can stand against an active forgetting within architectural discourse.

Through the movement of the return the deeper significance of architectural languages and modes of signification and meanings can be drawn into the present. The possible incomplete project would be to write a genealogy of modernism through this lens of the return and also at the same time with the other hand to write this in relation to the prevailing sociopolitical/cultural conditions of the time. It would be interesting to do a reading of Modernism in this light using Mies van der Rohe as the lever, the hinge, to open Modernism - through the return - and to expose a deeper, and possibly more radical cultural and architectural dimensions. Secondly, one could concentrate on finding a way of building that searches for the roots (is radical, radix = to the root) that cuts through the pastiche and naive repetition of form as image, but seeks to find a place for a new architecture through this return.

References

1. Clement Greenberg, "Modern Painting", quoted in Thierry du Duve, "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," *October 70* (Cambridge: MIT Press, Fall 1994), p. 61.
2. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?", quoted in Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", *October 70* (Cambridge: MIT Press, Fall 1994), p. 7.
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4. Kenneth Frampton, "Six Points toward a Critical Regionalism: an Architecture of Resistance", *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Post-Modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983) p. 63-64.
5. Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", *October 70* (Cambridge: MIT Press, Fall 1994), p. 7.
6. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 232.
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8. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 236.

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