

Cinemaplex Over the Pavese:

An Architectural Response to the Question of Looking at Territory

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Abstract...

This thesis describes one individual's contribution to a larger effort, an exploration that involved some thirty-two other students from the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, Switzerland. Our shared task was to study a bucolic agrarian region of Northern Italy and propose a strategy for its development. All projects ultimately included in the Atelier's vision were to have a significant strategic value to the territory, resonating with and magnifying the landscape's existing qualities. They were to intensify its complex identity without further complicating it. Included in this document are the author's initial impressions of the region as recorded over a series of visits to the place as well as a reaction to these impressions, an architectural response in the form of a cinema multiplex over the Pavese and its fields.



Esercitazione W (text excerpted from a handout distributed to all participants at the first meeting of Atelier Zumthor; written by Professor Peter Zumthor in collaboration with assistants Miguel Kreisler, Myriam Sterling and Massimo Curzi)

The Face of Pavia

This work aims at a description of the physiognomy of the territory of Pavia. The same way a child does, with no categorical judgment of our perception, we approach a portion of territory:

lines, patterns, surfaces, textures and masses, weight, temperature, sound, movement and light are patiently observed as if for the first time.

The approach is driven by emotional confidence.

Observation

4 items guide the observation: the phenomenology of water; motorways, railways and paths; the vegetation, fabric and masses; the solid bodies of built or tellurian objects. Others can be added: night light, power lines...

The observations are mediated by photography, diagrams and written specifications.

Record

The observations on site will be registered in a number of *sketch models*. The sketch model is a 3-dimensional object of synthesis for a particular configuration of elements in the territory. It shows the essential physical qualities of a situation of high articulation.

Work methodology

The area of study is divided into 31 sectors. Every group of maximum 2 students is assigned a sector with its related cartographic information. Every group surveys, observes and registers the assigned sector.

Result

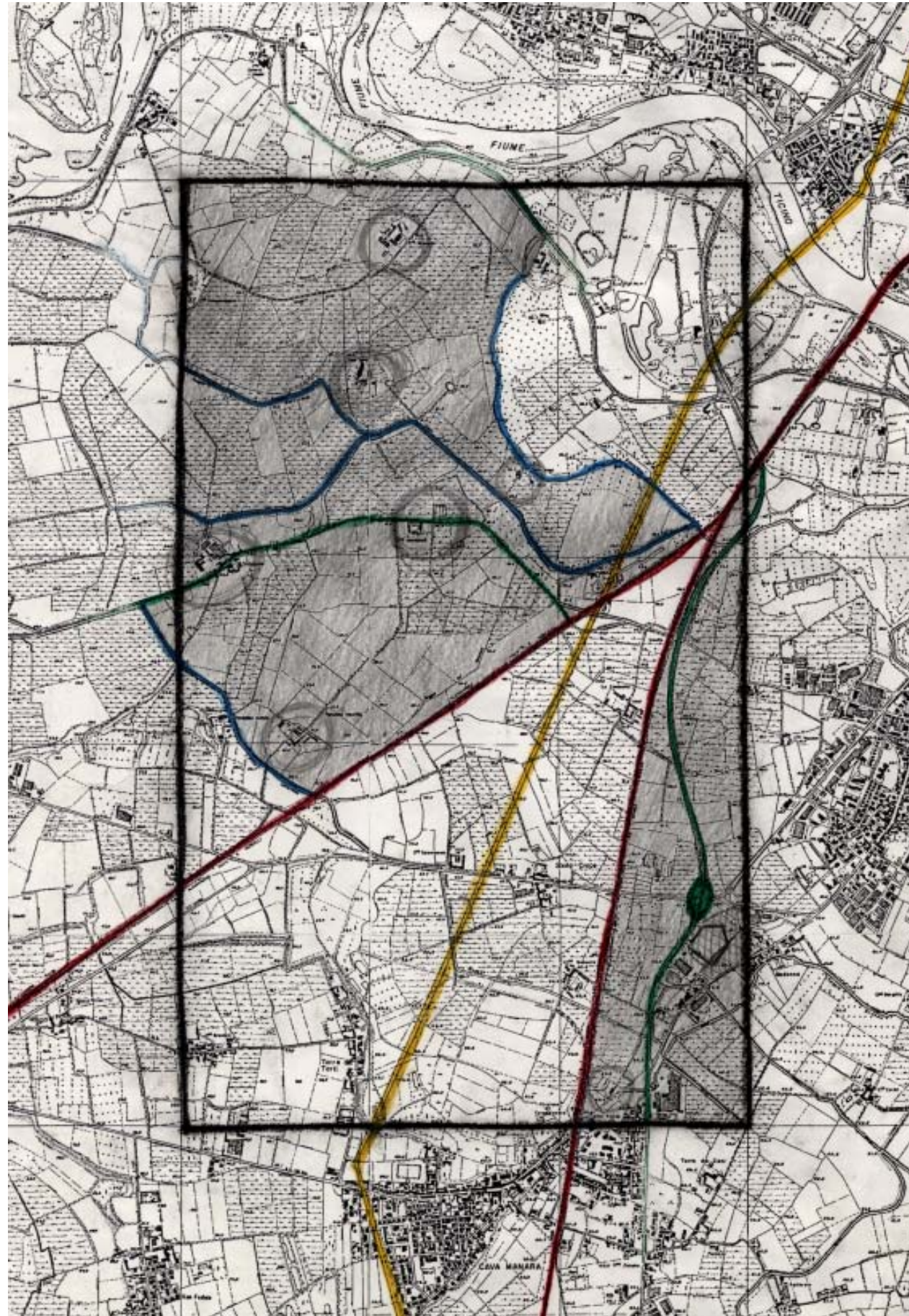
Inventory of images (collection of photographs, diagrams, and other visual documents regarding surveys and other sources).

Gallery of sketch models (collection of all wooden sketch models as topological document).

Map (map of the area of study as addition of situation plans of single points of high articulation).



Though conducted by a collaborative of architects, the initial study was not limited to built forms nor were the pieces of land investigated confined to potential building sites. Recorded here are the author's own pure emotional responses to all situations of physical phenomenon experienced in the place of study. These impressions were collected and gathered with others into a portrait of the place, on which all subsequent proposals were to be based.



An inventory of images...













The portion of territory I explored was divided evenly and marked in intervals by the regular occurrence of a *cascina*, which is a typical arrangement of modestly-scaled farm buildings that form a working unit and define both the home and center of operations for those who live and work there. Included in these buildings are usually a number of silos, sheds and at least one house. The language is consistent among both older and newer components to these complexes, older sheds being characterized by a unique cross-patterned brickwork and tile roof where newer additions are consistently formed in arrangements of concrete, sheet metal and steel. The individual components are typically ordered about a central space to form a courtyard-like enclosure, which may or may not be occupied by more sheds for storage of farm machinery. The land surrounding these compounds is subdivided, again in fairly regular intervals, to form a spacious expanse of flat and fertile fields. The lowness and flatness of the region yields a very damp and often saturated soil in the fields, a situation which creates long pools of water cradled between rows of planted grain, rice, and poplar wood. Drainage is regulated by a system of canals that transverse field after field and form a network that spreads its tendrils across the entire region, emptying out finally into the two major rivers that meet at its heart, the rivers *Po* and *Ticino*. At the banks of these rivers and along the edges of canals, there are large embankments of earth called *argine* that form barriers against flooding and often carry roads at their apex. Perched high upon similar mounds of earth, are the highway and the railroad tracks that transverse the area.

And in the wake of what is now familiar...

... Enter: the atypical.

Apart from those elements and situations that appear repeatedly across the region, there are also those exceptional occurrences that define a quality of the place in spite of (or rather, *due to*) their obvious conflict with the typical. A conglomerate structure of towering grain silos is perhaps the consummate antagonist to those robust yet humble constructions which typify the prevailing vernacular. Their high clean lines and massive plain geometries invade an otherwise unspoiled space of immense sky over fields. In doing so, these silos define themselves as “exceptions to the rule.” They also confirm the rule itself, that here in Pavia, all things of man are things belonging to the land. The people who inhabit the Pavese extract their livelihoods from what they plant in the soil and from the lines they cast into the waters that run through it. The flatness and lowness of all things here are what makes these silos tall, pretenders to the title of “things belonging to the sky.” Likewise, their unusual height draws attention to the lowness of other things, helping to enforce the understanding that most aspects of life here are inexorably tied to the earth. Typically, the horizon runs levelly in 360 degrees around. Details in the distance such as tops of tree lines and building profiles coalesce into a continuous contour. No single object tends to dominate the field of view. These silos, however, form an uncharacteristic landmark in the uniform fabric. They are that rare occurrence of an earthbound object breaking free and penetrating into the world of sky. Thusly, they become distinctively visible from far and wide. The uncharacteristic boldness and the unapologetic prominence of these silos underscore that which *is* characteristic of the region – modesty, durability, and consistency, the visible mark of man’s hand at its most unassuming yet productive capacity.





The silos exert their presence over a vast area of influence and are a visible point of orientation in all directions. They stand tall and are a monstrous vertical presence in this landscape, which is a rustic tableau of agrarian flatness that extends for kilometers around. Their scale is monumental in proportion to the prevailing structures of the region and for this we may denote them a landmark.



So armed with this emotional knowledge...

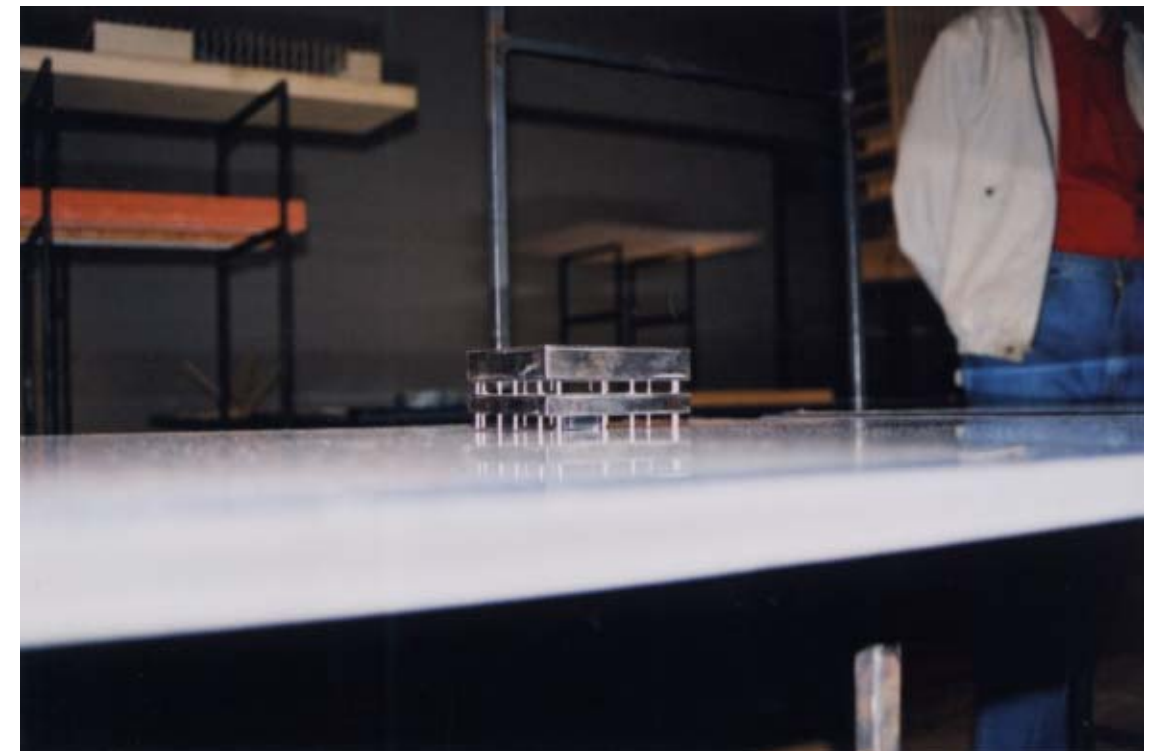
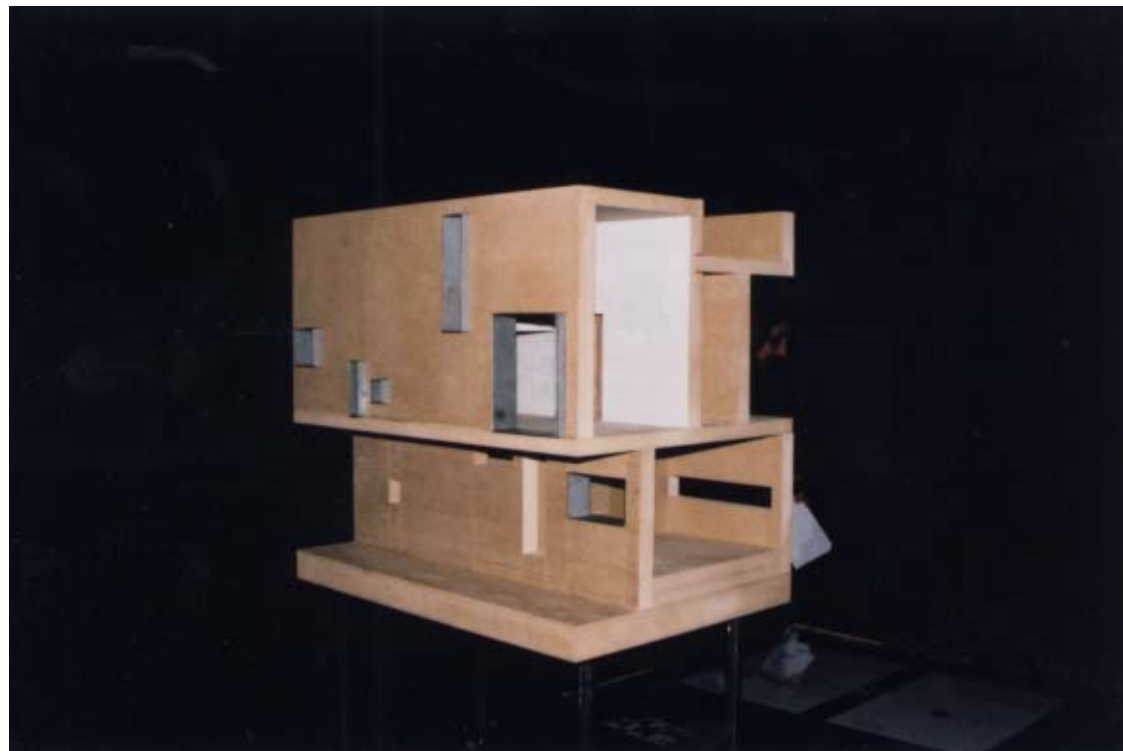


32 projects for Pavia

(text excerpted from a handout distributed to all participants at the outset of the studio's second phase; written by Professor Peter Zumthor in collaboration with assistants Miguel Kreisler, Myriam Sterling and Massimo Curzi)

Armed with an emotional knowledge of the territory, each student produces a vision for the project he or she desires for the Pavese

It is not a matter of defining a site, a list of necessities or of intentions; the vision is, first, an actual image. A concrete image where the existing and the envisioned, where the permanent and the everyday meet and inform each other.





Luis Buñuel was asked why would he introduce into the stages for his films objects or elements one does not actually see in the recorded scene. You do not see them but you feel them, answered the surrealist filmmaker. In the vision for a concrete image every element can be described; one can talk about anything in it, around it.

Our visions for the Pavese radiate their presence to the whole territory; they resonate with the landscape, the built and the life of Pavia. Modest or epic, revolutionary or banal, they are, in a way, necessary. They have a strategic value.

Each student produces a description of her or his own image. The description is conveyed through diagrams, photos, models or text. It is an idea for a project in a site.





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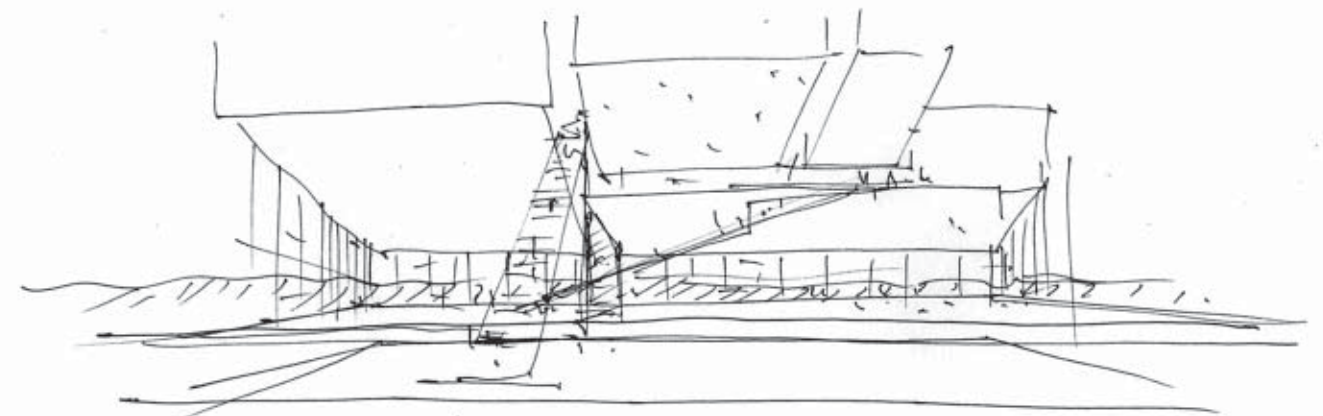
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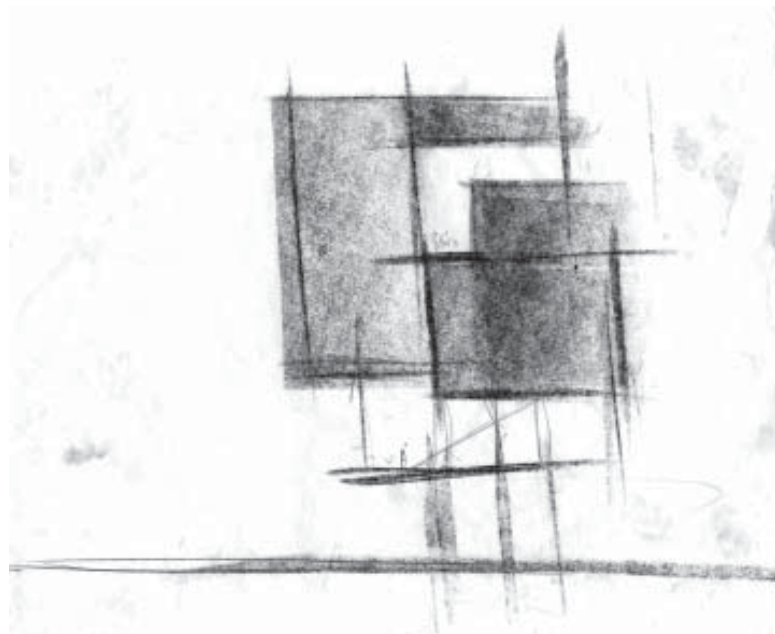
A massive dark volume sits in a vast open space of cultivated fields. It rests atop numerous slender and illuminated columns, which raise the volume up and over the long flat horizontal plane of the fields. The volume is made of a steel frame, which forms a rigid body in three dimensions. It is clad on all sides in sheets of metal that have the reflective quality of a car's finish when it is said to be of a "metallic" color. The color is very dark gray; it is as dark as gray can get before it reaches black. The columns beneath are of very fine proportions – long and thin and made of a highly reflective metal: nickel plated steel. They have a slightly bluish cast to them and are lit individually from above by small lamps in the bottom of the rigid volume. The reflective columns and overhead lamps fill the space below with an even cast of soft light. The columns are so many, so slender, and so reflective that they begin to disappear into the light space when viewed from a distance. At various locations inside the light-space, between the slender columns, there occur a number of diagonal light shafts at varying angles and intervals. Illuminated from within, they are made mostly of glass and have minimal steel structural members. They contain mobilized stairways and descend from out of the underside of the dark rigid volume, connecting its interior space to the ground plane below. The light inside these shafts is intense and concentrated in contrast to the soft even light that characterizes the rest of the light space. From afar, the image of the whole structure is that of a massive dark volume floating over a cushion of soft light, anchored to the ground and held in its place by the directed intensity of a few diagonal rays of light. The volume is rectilinear in plan and so has a pair of long faces and a pair of shorter ones in elevation. The northwest and southeast faces of the volume are the long ones and are oriented as such to address a highway and another major road that run along two sides of the open field in which it sits. These long faces are divided each into two sections. On one is mounted a system of red light bulbs, which form a matrix that can be programmed to display characters of various scripts and sizes. On this matrix is displayed the titles and times of films showing inside the volume at a scale that can be read easily by the passengers of cars traveling at high speeds along the highway and the other major road. On the other section of each long face, there are a series of large screens lined up horizontally to complete the remainder of the façade. These screens are made up of a much more complex matrix of colored lights that allow them to display images like the large television screens that are mounted on building facades in Times Square and at athletic stadiums and ballparks. A series of film stills are alternately displayed on these screens. They appear one at a time and in random order, disappearing as another still appears on another screen some moments later. Visitors to the cinemaplex must arrive by car from the major road that runs parallel to the volumes southeast face. An access road runs roughly perpendicular to this road ensuring that all visitors experience the southeast façade upon approach to the building. Parking occurs in the light space beneath the dark volume and extends outside the limits of the space for thirty meters on all sides. Here in the light space, the visitors purchase their tickets from vending booths that appear as frequently as the escalator/light shafts touch down from above. At each of these locations there is also another set of information regarding movies and show times inside; this time, at a smaller scale than on the face of the building. After purchasing a ticket below, the visitors will enter the interior of the building as they enter the diagonal light shaft. Once inside, the escalators carry them up and into the dark volume where the spectacle begins.

A Cinemaplex Over the Pavese

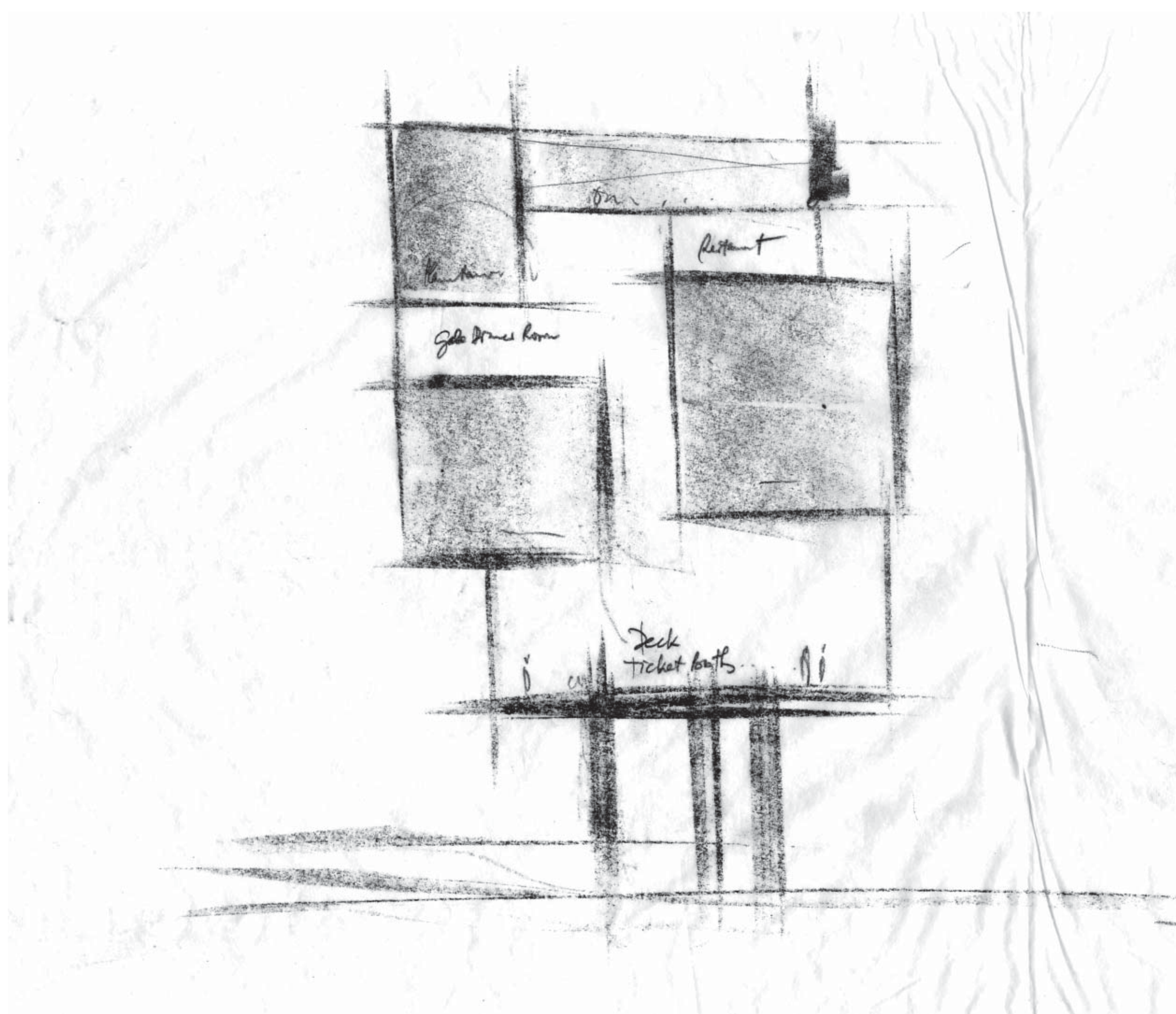


The preceding narrative describes the author's initial vision for a project in the Pavese. Its theme of play between the opposing qualities of darkness and light produces a surrealistic image, in which there exists an extraordinary tension in the space between a massive volume and the ground that it bears down upon. There is an apparent contradiction between all that we know about the nature of gravity and the manner in which this immense volume is lifted from the ground atop an airy void of openness and light. Elevation of the cinemaplex, however, is fundamental, in this case, to the way it functions. By entering and exiting the object from below, circulation through the cinemaplex is a centralized and circuitous business, that is to say that the way people move through the building does not determine whether there is a front or a back to it. All four faces are free to be as elaborately articulated or as nondescript as they need to be. This solution also addresses the fact that a variety of people may be coming to visit the cinemaplex from many different points of origin. It accepts them all equally in such a centralized manner and is optimally efficient in returning them to the ground at the same point from which it picks them up.

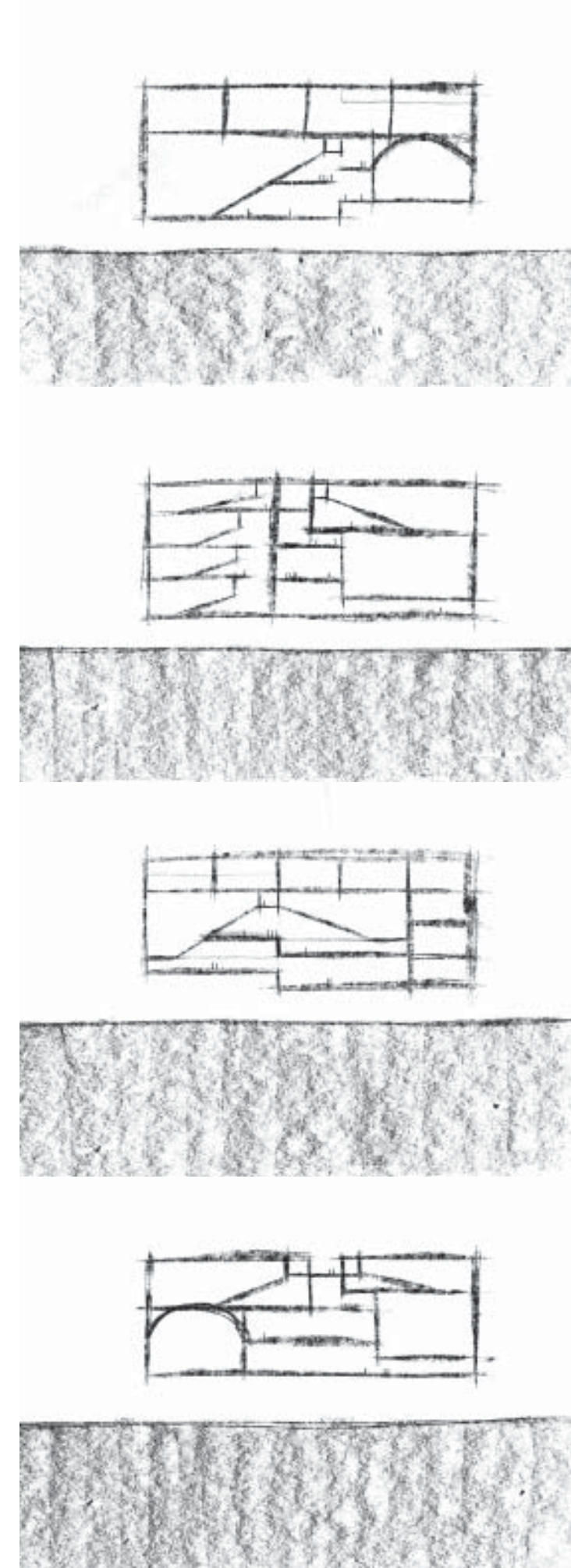
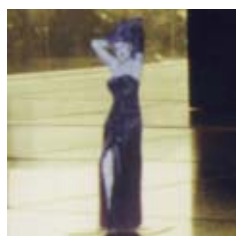
Shortly after the conception of this initial image, an alternative scheme for the cinemaplex was born out of a desire to set projection spaces apart from interstitial ones. Moving forward with the ideas of elevation and the interplay of opposites, the concept for a sort of "spatial magma" was developed, which would flow freely around individually articulated volumes containing a variety of novelty theatres. The magma and theatre volumes would form a pair of opposing entities; interstitial magma being characterized by openness, light and freedom of movement, whereas theatre volumes would be dark, enclosed and confined. The novelty theatres introduced in this scheme would include an Imax theatre, an open-air theatre, the world's largest cinema, an art house cinema and a planetarium. The magma flowing around these distinctive volumes would be labyrinthine in nature. However, it would sustain a singular continuous space. Sightlines within the labyrinth would serve to guide moviegoers through a circuit of concessions and support spaces along the way to each of the individual theatres. Entry and exit to the complex as well as departure to individual cinemas would occur from a single terminal platform, a second horizon hovering just above the ground and right below the rest of the cinemaplex experience.

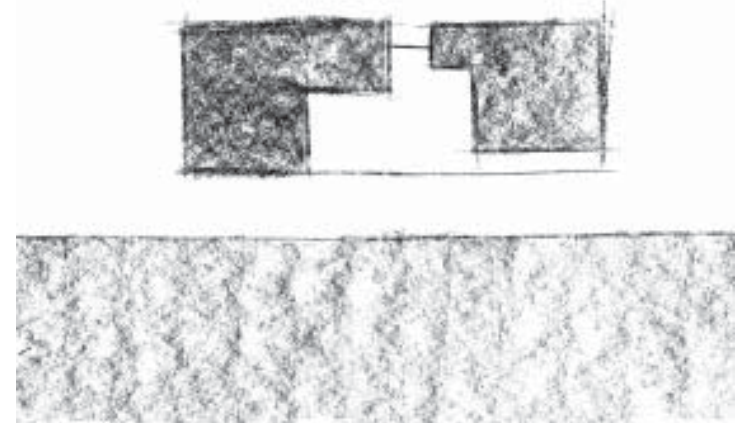
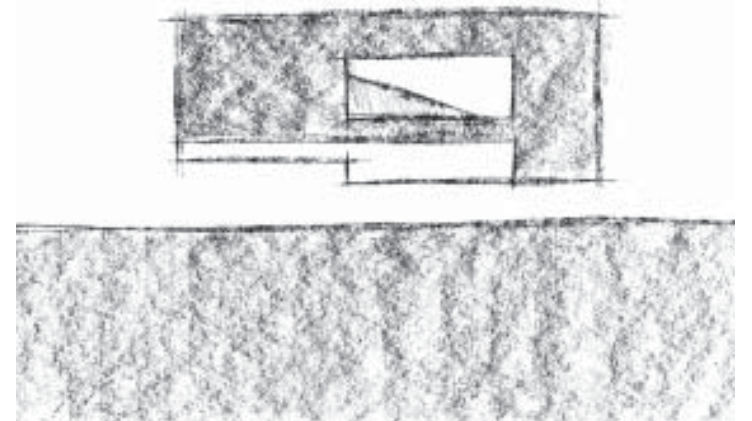
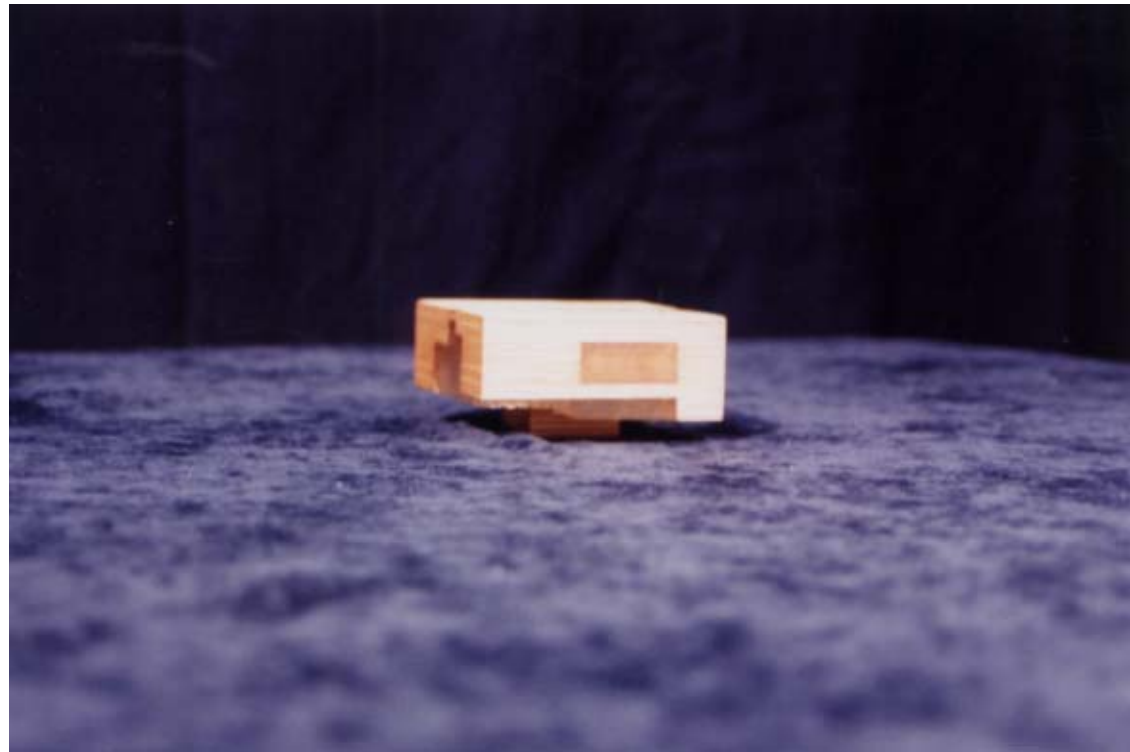
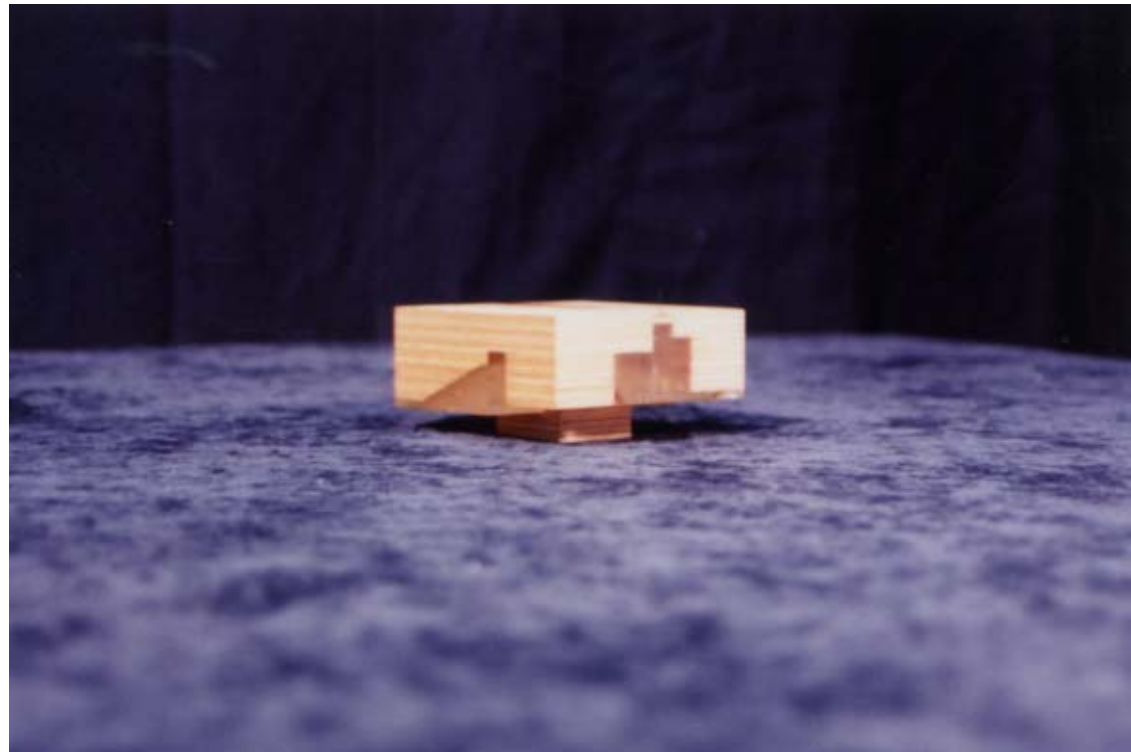
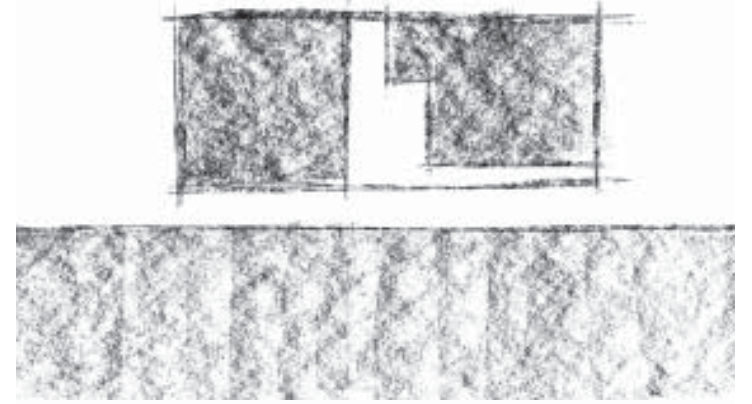
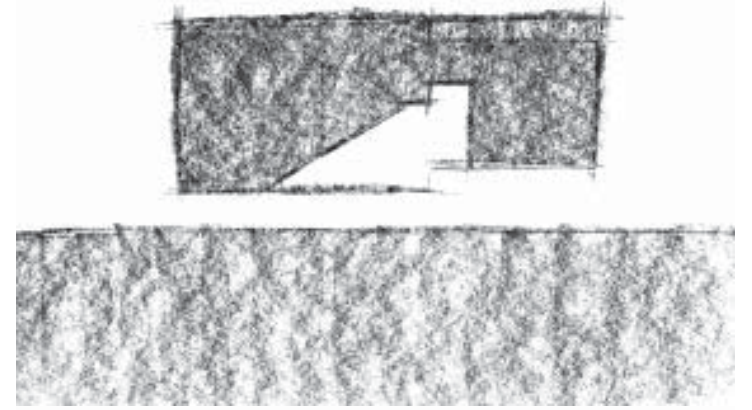
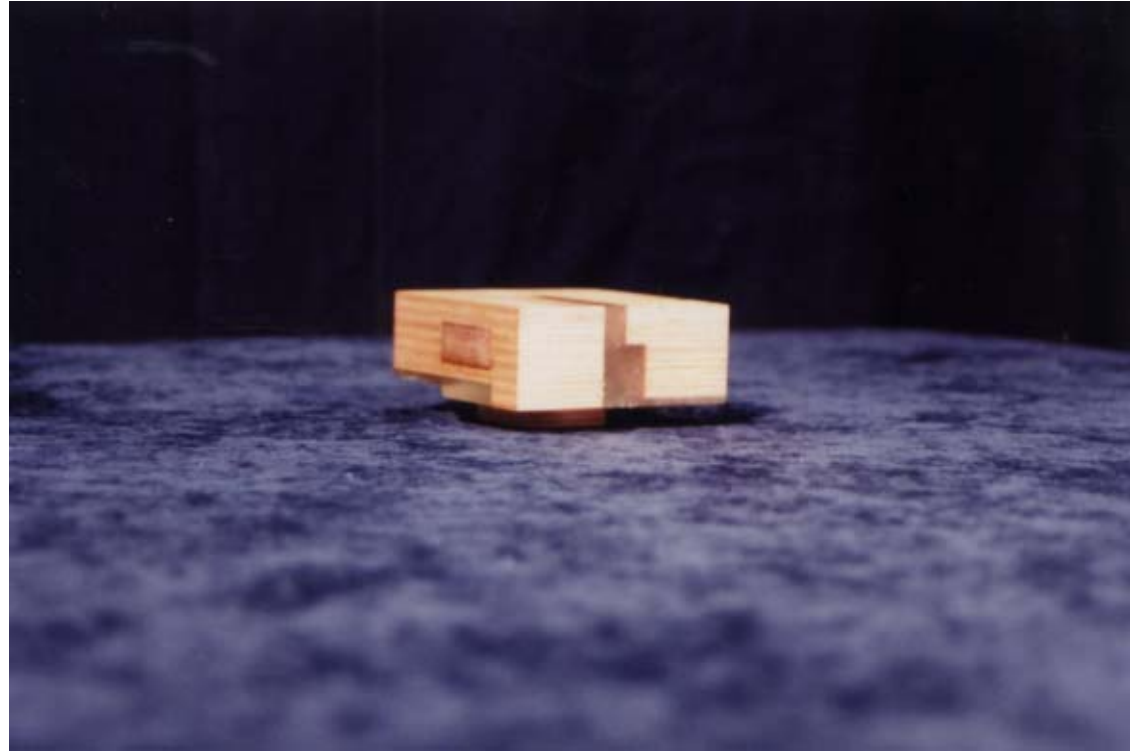
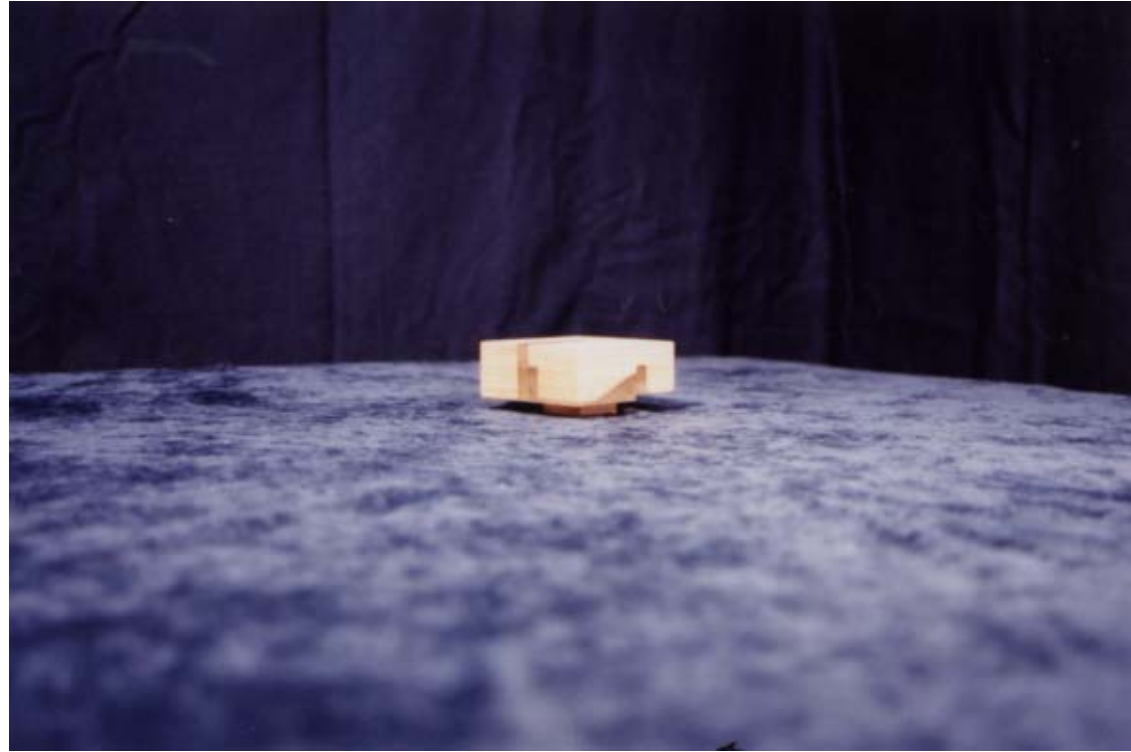


The sketches shown here were created over the course of a discussion between the author and studio assistants Miguel Kreisler, Myriam Sterling, and Massimo Curzi. As ideas developed, they were sketched out by head assistant, Miguel Kreisler.

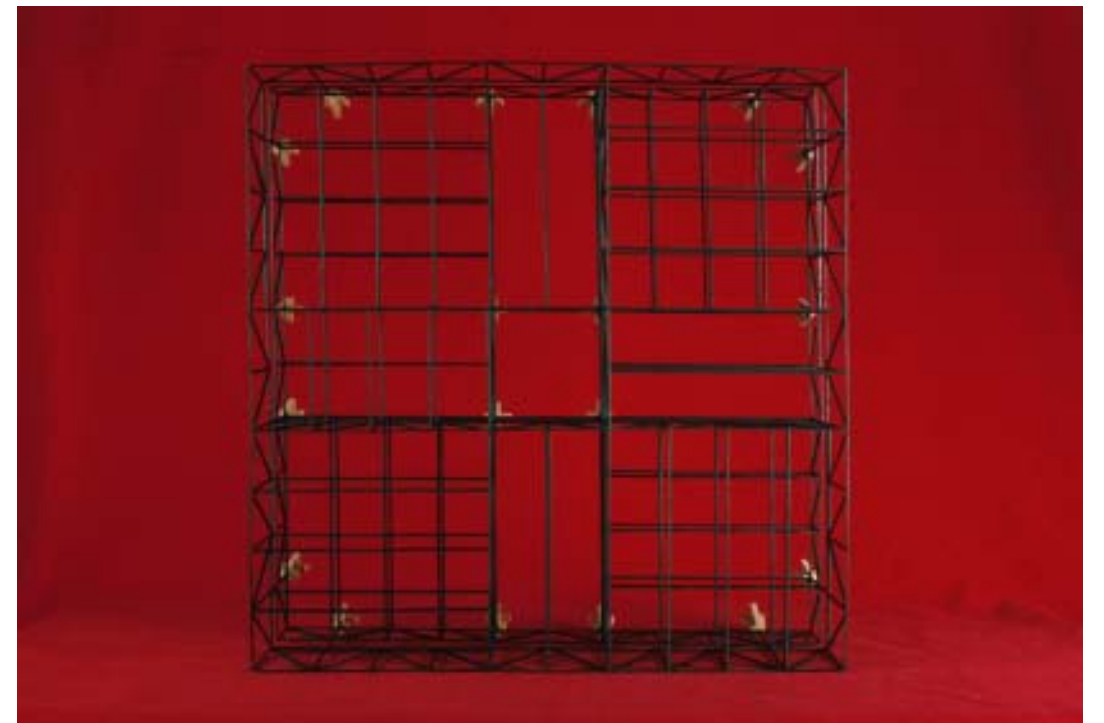


... the Cinema evolves.





Enter: A Structural Concept...



The rigid box-truss had formed the structural basis for the very first image of the cinemaplex. However, its subsequent incarnations were moving further and further away from a construction that could be built in such a way. It was necessary, then, to form a synthesis of ideas from the latest design schemes into something with the kind of structural clarity present at the project's beginning. A matrix was developed using four rectangular bays (40 meters x 60 meters each) in a pinwheel configuration about a central square (20 meters x 20 meters). The result, in plan, was a larger square measuring 100 meters by 100 meters that formed the basis for a three dimensional box. Two sets of large trusses, to be concealed inside of walls, would be arranged according to the matrix and stacked one on top of the other to form two boxes with a void below and in between them. Columns were to be placed only at the corners of each rectangular bay with the exception of those corners at the extreme limits of the entire box-truss structure. This meant the largest span between columns would be 60 meters and so the sizing of members would have to be very large. A structure with comparable spans proposed by Mies van der Rohe for a convention center in Chicago was consulted to verify the feasibility of building with spans and members of such a remarkable scale. The box-truss structure made possible by the use of the matrix formed the bare bones to a final cinemaplex scheme, which was exhibited in Pavia as part of the studio's proposal for regional development.



... the stage is set for The Final Proposal.

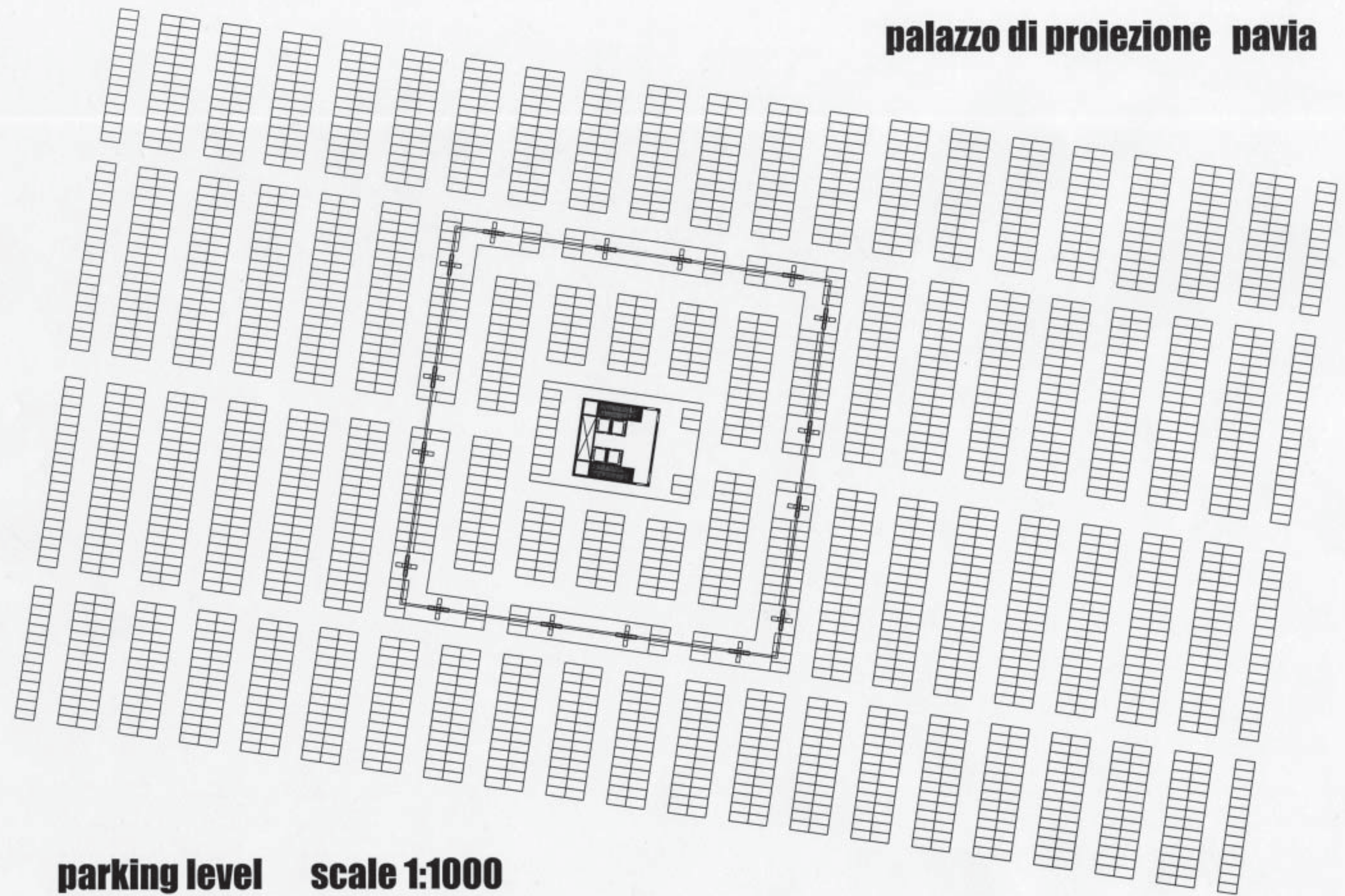


The proposal for regional development put forth by Atelier Zumthor called for reinforcement of already established growth patterns, construction along existing arteries and the establishment of a major thoroughfare of activity stretching from Pavia southward to the mountains at the foot of the Po Valley in addition to augmentation and control of the area's waterways. These patterns of development were established only after individual projects were conceived of and assimilated into a singular plan. The objective was to be sure that our individual proposals would be supported by the work of the studio as a whole and that the final proposal would be in agreement with our study of the landscape, that it would not simply be an imposition of our own wills upon the face of the territory. The cinemaplex found its place along our north-to-south-running thoroughfare as one of a number of landmarks spaced at regular intervals. Its height primarily determined its significance in this position as both a player in the procession southward and as a point of observation from which to trace the conduit of activity back up to the city lights of Pavia.

Void Level One...

The movie-going experience begins, again, on the road to the cinema where spectators approach a prominent figure in the countryside. The multiplex is of monumental proportions by Pavia's standards (100 meters x 100 meters in plan, 44 meters high) and sits in the middle of an open field. The building is separated into four distinct strata, alternating layers of open illuminated spaces and enclosed projection areas. The first open space is on the ground level and it's the parking level. It is open on all sides and is inhabited by parking spaces, sixteen cruciform columns, and an enclosed volume at its center that marks a point of entry and exit as well as a core of circulation. Parking spaces extend out beyond the limits of the theatres overhead and are evenly distributed in a field that spans the length of space between two roads. All moviegoers must exit their cars and pass underneath the cinemas to the circulation core. Elevators inside will carry the spectators through the first enclosed level and deliver them to the second open space, a lobby (point of purchase for tickets and concessions) and a departure terminal to all projection spaces and theatres.

palazzo di proiezione pavia

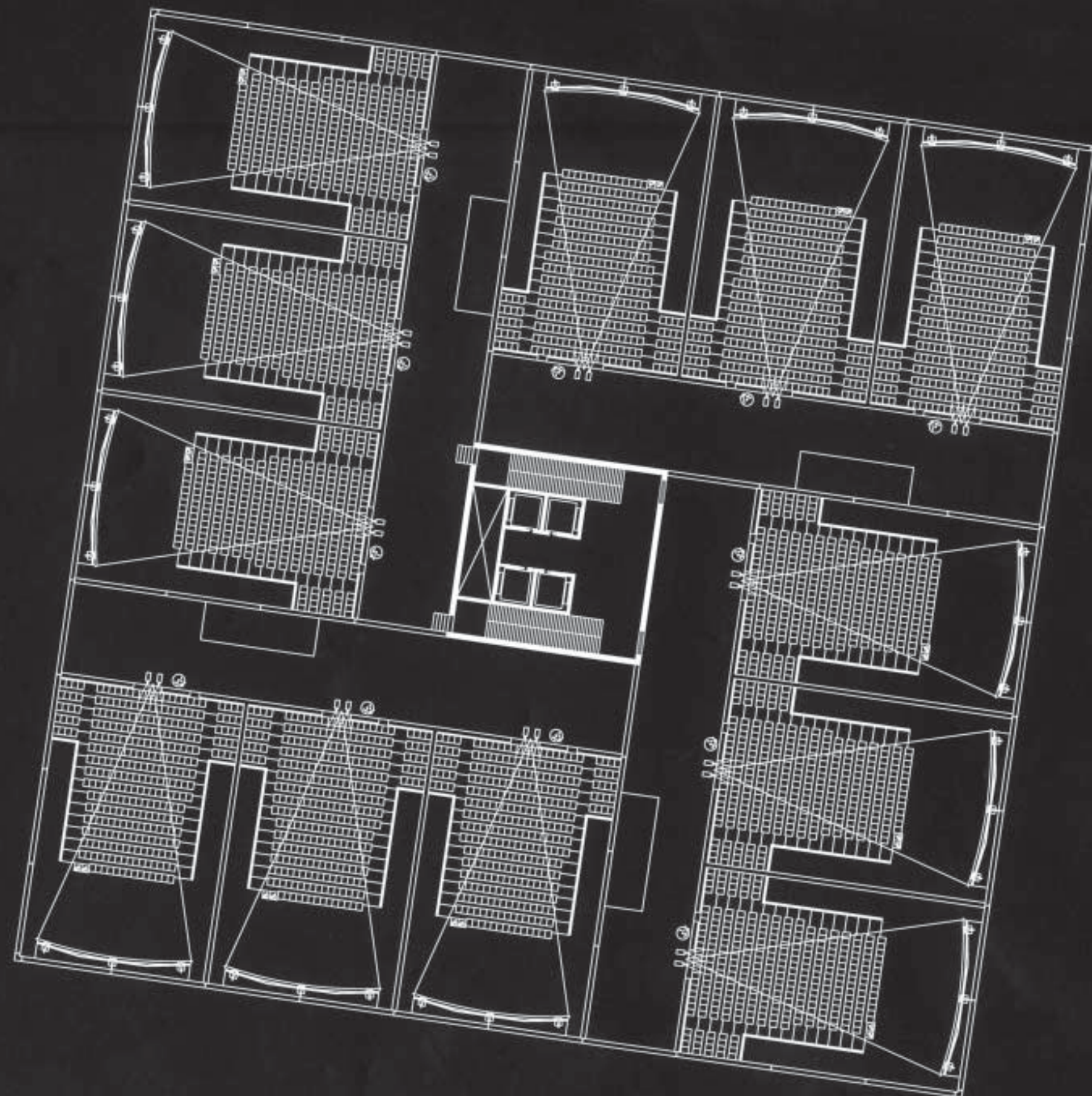


parking level scale 1:1000

Mass Level One...

The second level of the cinemaplex is the first level of enclosed space, which is space designated for projection events. This level is composed of twelve identical cinemas ordered regularly in a pinwheel configuration about the circulation core. Hallways run along the backsides of the theatres, with projection rooms above. Bathrooms and additional concession stands adjacent to these hallways are tucked under the steep incline of the theatres' stadium seating. Moviegoers enter this level through motorized stairways descending from the lobby terminal above. They pass through the appropriate hallway past concessions and restrooms to the theatre where their feature is playing. When the show is over, they go back through their hallway to the circulation core and exit to the parking level below. This level is conceived of as a variation on the most conventional notion of a multiplex cinema. A massive amount of moviegoers are passed through a large space where a wide variety of movies are shown. They have an identical architectural experience, regardless of the film that they see, so that the sole focus of the experience can only be the feature itself.

palazzo di proiezione pavia



multiplex level scale 1:500

Void Level Two...

The third level in the cinemaplex is the second open and illuminated layer. It is the lobby terminal and departure point from which all moviegoers go off to their individual movie experiences. It is enclosed in floor-to-ceiling panes of glass with a minimal incidence of mullions on all facades. At night, the light from inside shines out, a slim horizontal band of light in the darkness. During the day, sunlight comes in to illuminate the terminal, an unbroken space that wraps around the circulation core, free of structure and full of life. There are concessions inside, some bars and some cafes with open seating and a variety of menus. Curtains hang between the various concession spaces, dividing the terminal into distinctive zones and allowing for a range of moods to be set in a single continuous space. Tickets are purchased to all shows at a collection of freestanding booths directly opposite the point at which spectators enter through the circulation core. Escalators lead upward to a number of unusual theatre spaces, each one offering a vastly different experience from the next. Other motorized stairways lead downward into the multiplex level.

palazzo di proiezione pavia

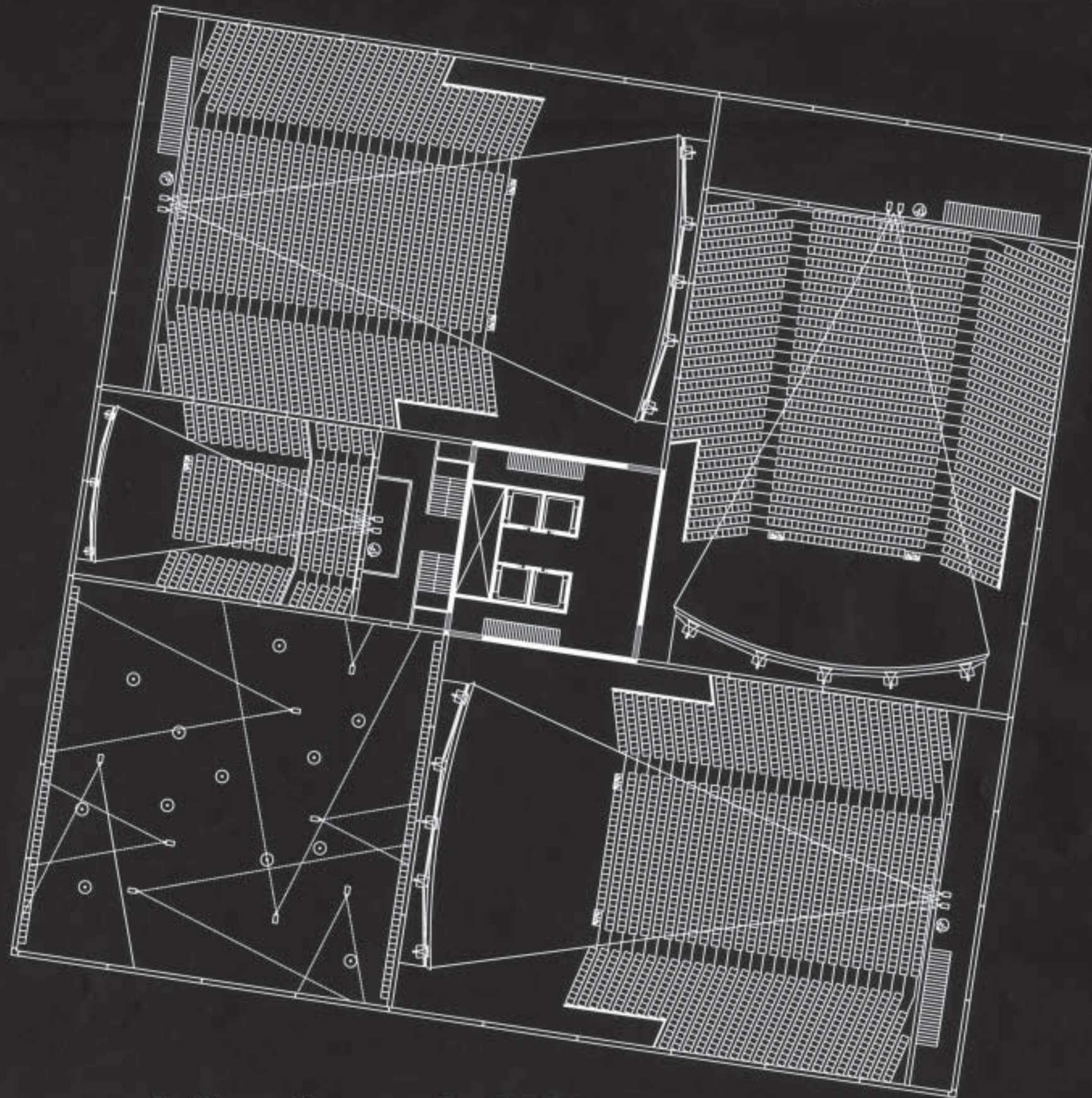


lobby terminal scale 1:500

Mass Level Two...

The fourth and final level is the second level of enclosed projection space. It is made up of five distinct spaces, each with its own unique identity and its own escalator entry that ascends from the lobby space below. There is an Imax theatre that shows features shot on Imax film, a standard movie theatre with an uncommonly large screen (approx. 35 meters), an open-air theatre with a screen of the same size, an art-house cinema with a balcony and a projection lounge that serves drinks and has a dance floor. Spectators ascend to their respective theatres, enjoy the features inside and exit the cinemaplex through the circulation core to the parking level on the ground. These projection spaces are all uniquely outfitted with distinguishing finishes and fabrics. They are unlike anything that a moviegoer will find in any other multiplex cinema. The distinction of their inclusion provides for a draw of audiences from a much larger geographic area than that which can be expected of a more conventional multiplex. They serve to elevate this particular cinemaplex to a landmark known throughout all of northern Italy as opposed to being simply a local Pavian attraction.

palazzo di proiezione pavia



cinema special level scale 1:500





The Palace of Projections, as it was finally named, is a proposal for a modern machine, a kind of vast and varied people mover, delivering spectacle and relief from the visitor's daily life at certain stops along its continuously pumping path of human circulation. The lobby interior has an atmosphere that is more characteristic of a train terminal, a bus station or an airport than a cinemaplex and much of the movement as well as signage and information delivery is automated for maximum efficiency. At the same time, the Palace attempts to restore the act of movie going to its old glory, to the forgotten days of the great cinema palace with all its pomp and circumstance. Old-time movie houses with their ornamental facades and plush interiors were setting the stage for the feature film from the moment a visitor stepped up to the ticket booth and walked through the door. This project aims to capture something familiar about the experience of going to the movies, as we understand it today, and to fashion it into a larger than life event, a lofty encounter with a phenomenal means of mass communication and story telling. The basis for this idea is the notion that when we go to the movies, when the lights go down in the theatre and we are completely closed off from the rest of the world outside, when the film starts rolling and the story begins we are carried away. We are transported off to whatever world the filmmaker has fashioned for us, passengers in a stationary vehicle, world travelers without ever leaving our seats. Then, when the last of the end credits roll by and the lights come up we leave our seats and go out the way we came in. We go back to our lives in the real world outside, having lived a piece of our lives in a strange and distant place alongside some distant people whose experiences and memories we now share.



Acknowledgements...

The author would like to thank everyone he's ever known. A special thanks to Matt, Scott and Zac for being there too; to Patrick, who wasn't there, though I wished he was; to everyone from Atelier Zumthor, the Accademia and the citizens of Ticino for welcoming me into your world; to Professor Zumthor, especially; and to Massimo Curzi from Pavia as well as all the other good people there. The biggest thanks go to Miguel and Myriam, my good friends and mentors; to my advisors at Tech; to my family for supporting me; and to Raluca, who I miss very much.

vita

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