

Joel Ivan Plitt

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in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree

Master of Architecture

History Museum and Archive
of the
Lesbian and Gay Community
of
New York City

approved by

Heiner Schnoedt, committee chair

Milka Blizjakov, committee member

Arlene Hopkins, committee member





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This thesis is an exercise in responsibility regarding my actions as an architect. It is based upon the belief that architecture is a product conveying culture. While architecture can convey culture, it also has the potential to shape and facilitate change in culture. Therefore, one can view the architect as more than a technician, making architecture stand and work properly, or an artist, concerned with the aesthetic/architectonic qualities of architecture, but rather as an active entity who can both convey and change cultural values through the built environment. The struggle in this thesis regarding responsibility has been to make my role more than an active entity in culture, but a *consciously* active entity in culture. Since I have long viewed culture as a political product and one's existence in culture as a political act, then one's responsibility as an architect could be to make architecture as the conscious embodiment of a political ideology. For me, feminism is the political ideology, and Liberative Architecture is the conscious embodiment.

THIS IS A VIEW INTO THE MAIN EXHIBITION SPACES.

PROJECTIONS ON THEM FROM THE ARCHIVES HOLDINGS ON THE RIGHT SIDE

IT IS A FOUR STORY HIGH SPACE THAT RUNS THE ENTIRE WIDTH OF THE EXISTING BLDG. ON THE UPPER 2 LEVELS ARE SCREENS W/



ON THE UPPER 2 LEVELS ARE SCREENS W/

Architecture is a product conveying culture. It helps to maintain the knowledge, beliefs and behaviors transmitted from generation to generation. The fact that most of our public buildings, even small public buildings, tend to be more imposing than our homes is an example of architecture conveying our cultural beliefs. Architecture has the potential to go beyond conveying culture, it can shape and facilitate change in culture. Buildings made from recycled products, housing that questions the power relations in households, and cooperative/communal developments are examples of architecture being used to facilitate change in our culture.

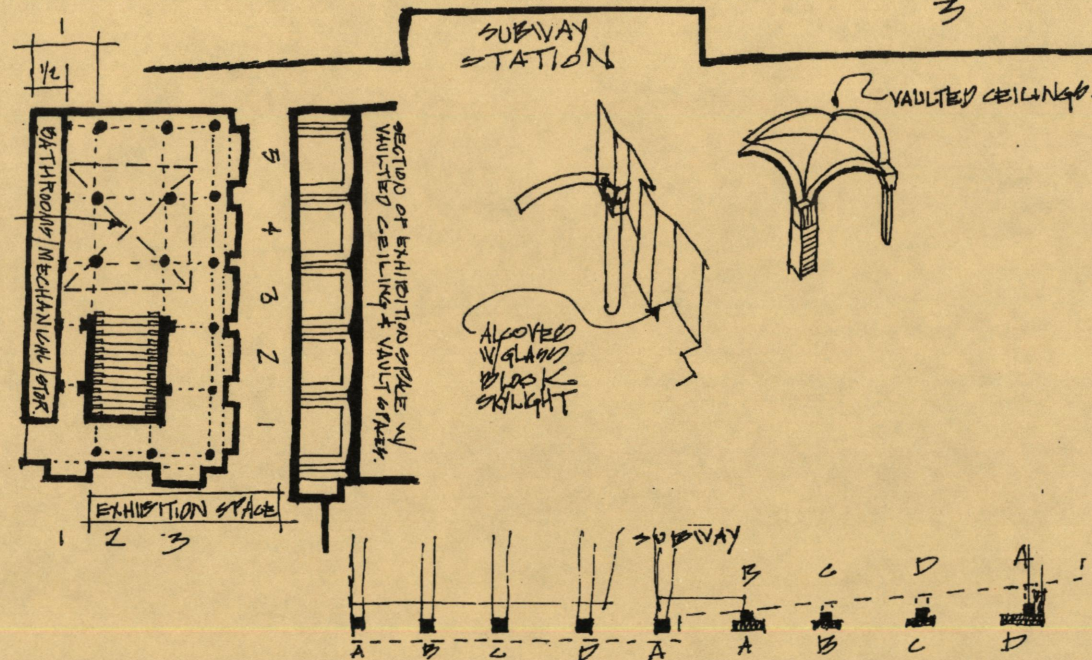
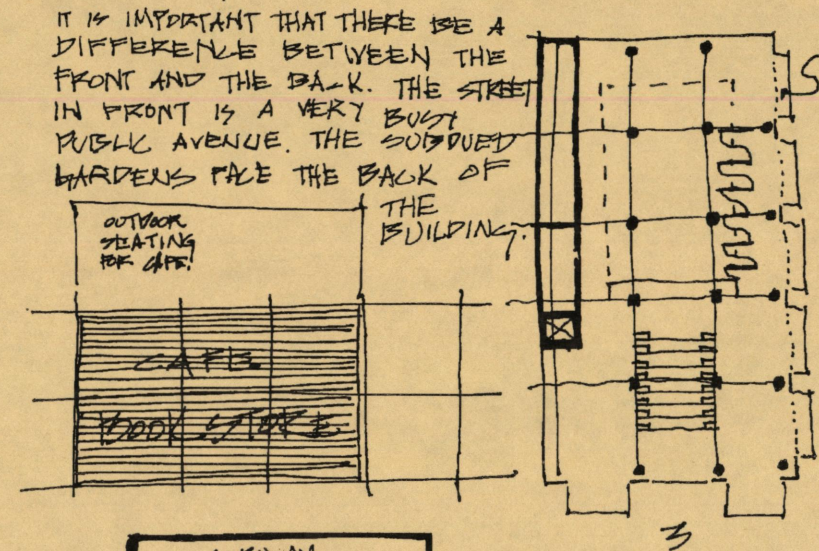
One's ability to change culture is particularly important to this thesis in terms of feminism and responsibility. One of the tenets of feminism is empowerment, specifically self-empowerment. When a person is empowered enough to define themselves, their needs, their likes and dislikes, then that person has changed themselves from a passive object in culture to an active subject making culture. When a person realizes that they have the ability to effect change on an entity, such as culture, then that entity has been demystified. When an entity has been demystified it can no longer victimize, because it no longer has the power to do so. Unfortunately, our top-down culture often victimizes because it denies most of us the ability to define ourselves, and in turn, to define the culture. We are forced to respond to the culture rather than have the culture respond to us.

An example of culture enforcing a definition upon us, whether it is appropriate or not, can be seen in our own homes. Most housing in this country has been built with master bedrooms. While there are no meanings inherent in master bedrooms themselves, our cultures' value of the "traditional" family consisting of a heterosexual couple with children counted among their possessions gives a great deal of value to the master bedroom. These implied values become a problem for households which define themselves in other terms. The 1990 census shows that less than half the households consist of couples with children, let alone heterosexual couples with children. Yet our housing continues to define the nuclear family as the norm. Now that some in this

culture are struggling to define what family is for themselves, they must confront architecture as a cultural obstacle. In this case, architecture would be a cultural obstacle because who ever would live in the master bedroom would experience special privileges; more room, a private bath, more closets, etc., which would automatically introduce a hierarchy into the household. This hierarchy will exert its presence on all relations within that household, either directly shaping relations or shaping relations through reactions against it. The author Alice Walker, has illustrated the idea of architecture being a cultural obstacle to be overcome in one's pursuit of self-empowerment, self-definition, and culture-making in several of her books.

In The Color Purple, Cellie, the main character, learns to demand liberation by means of self definition in all aspects of her life. At one point, Cellie learns from her life companion, Shug Avery, to question the imposed symbols within architecture. She becomes empowered by making architecture reflect the symbols of her life as she lives it.

I wanted to build me a round house, say Shug, but everybody act like that's backward. You can't put windows in a round house, they say. But I made up some plans anyway. One of these days...she say, showing me the papers. It a big pink round house, look sort of like some kind of fruit. It got windows and doors and a lot of trees round it. What it made of I ast? Mud she say. But I wouldn't mind concrete. I figure you could make the molds for each section, pour the concrete in, let it get hard, knock off the mold, glue the parts together somehow and you'd have your house. Well I like this one you got, I say. That one looks a little small. It ain't bad, say Shug. But I just feel funny living in a square. If I was square, then I could take it better, she say. Us talk about houses alot. How they built, what kind of wood people use. Talk about how to make the outside around your house something you could use. I sit down on the bed and start to draw a kind of wood skirt around her concrete house. You can sit on this, I say, when you get tired of being in the house. Yeah she say, and let's put awning over it. She took the pencil and put the wood skirt in the shade. Flower boxes go here, she say, drawing some. And a few stone elephants go here, she say. And a turtle or two right here. And how us know you live here too she ast. Ducks! I say. By the time we finish our house look like it can swim or fly.

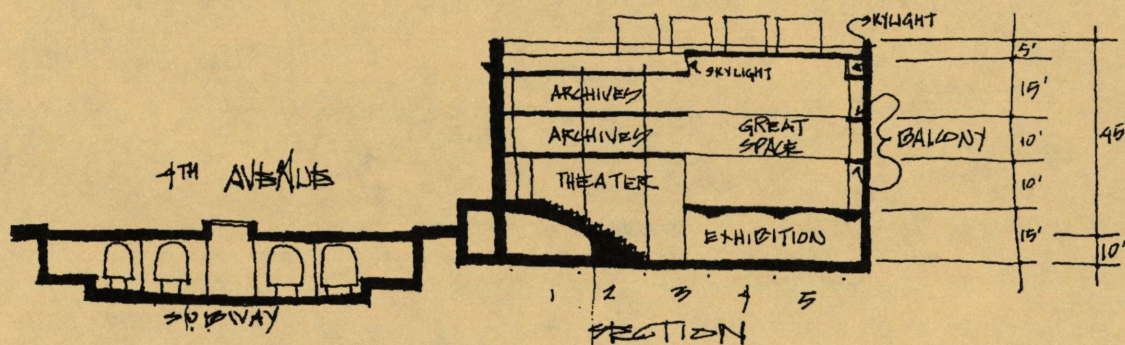
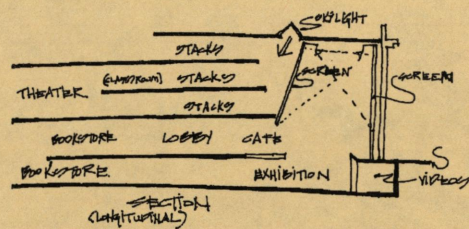
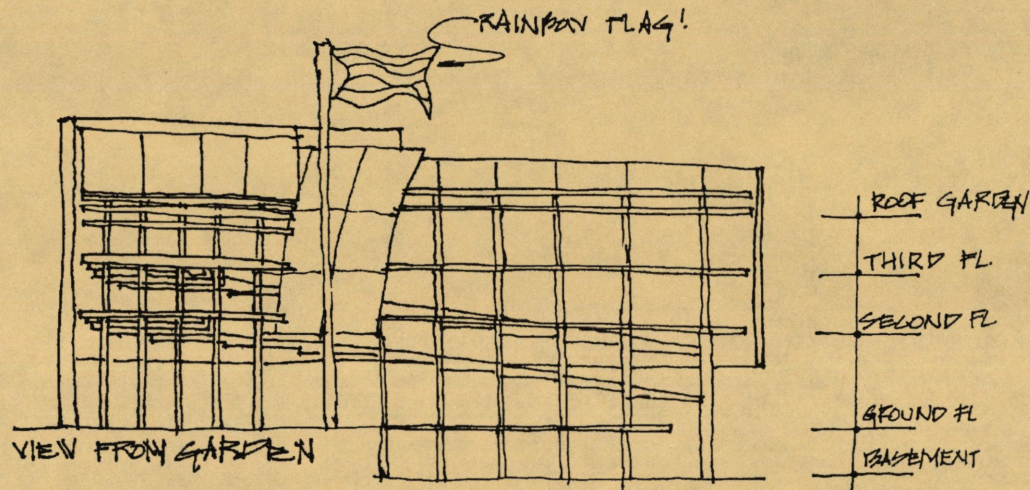


It is essential that one see culture, and in turn architecture, in political terms. Politics can explain the culture and its products, such as architecture, more fully. With architecture, this means understanding its forms, styles, and meanings as products of a particular politic. All architecture is a product of a particular politic because architecture is made with the hands and in the minds of people who are shaped by a culture which defines and is defined by a politics. All our social relations and products are bound up with the political forces in culture.

The previous example of master bedrooms can illustrate the political ramifications instilled in architecture by culture. While it may be the fashion for people to have sumptuous master bedroom suites, the roots of this fashion may lie in our political reality. In our hyper-capitalist system, benefits are bestowed upon individuals who appear to follow the rules as culture dictates them. Master bedrooms, as a benefit, are a very effective tool in that it allows some individuals to rule over their own personal hierarchies. This makes the larger hierarchies in culture seem normative, even if one's position in the larger hierarchy is not a fortunate one. Also, these personal hierarchies act as a release for frustrations over one's position in larger hierarchies. By establishing that hierarchies are normative within one's own home, it continues our paternalistic culture by legitimizing one person's (usually a man's) right to rule over others by giving them an actual physical structure to rule in and from.

Even after this relatively basic political critique of architecture, it becomes apparent that whether the architect is conscious of it or not, their architectural actions can have broad cultural implications. Therefore, one responsibility an architect can exercise in making architecture is to become conscious of the political ramifications of their actions. This thesis has been an exercise in making architecture as the conscious embodiment of a political ideology as a means of claiming responsibility for one's actions. I call this conscious embodiment Liberative Architecture.

Liberative Architecture is liberative because it employs a feminist paradigm to question the cultural relations inherent in the built environment towards making

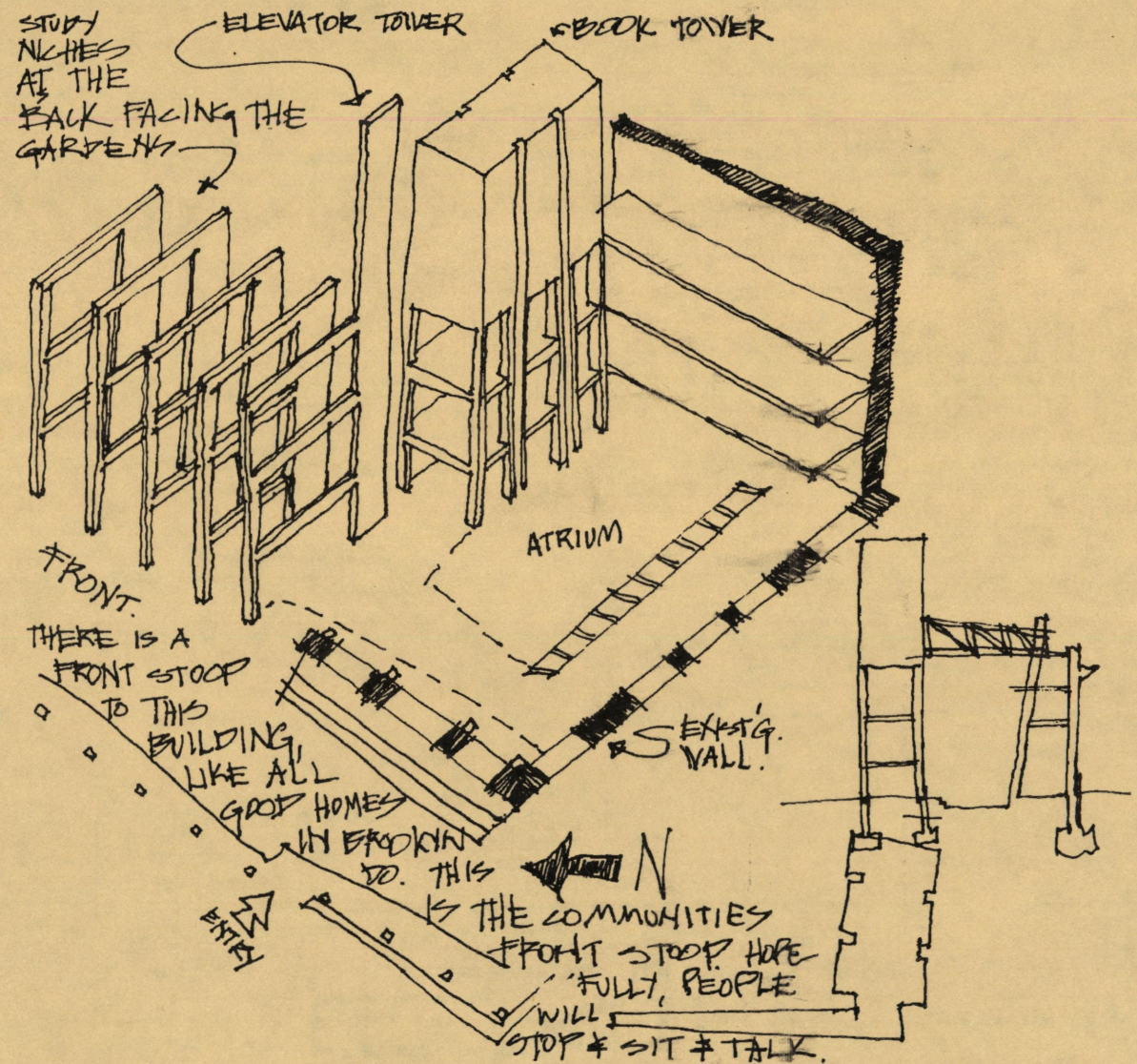


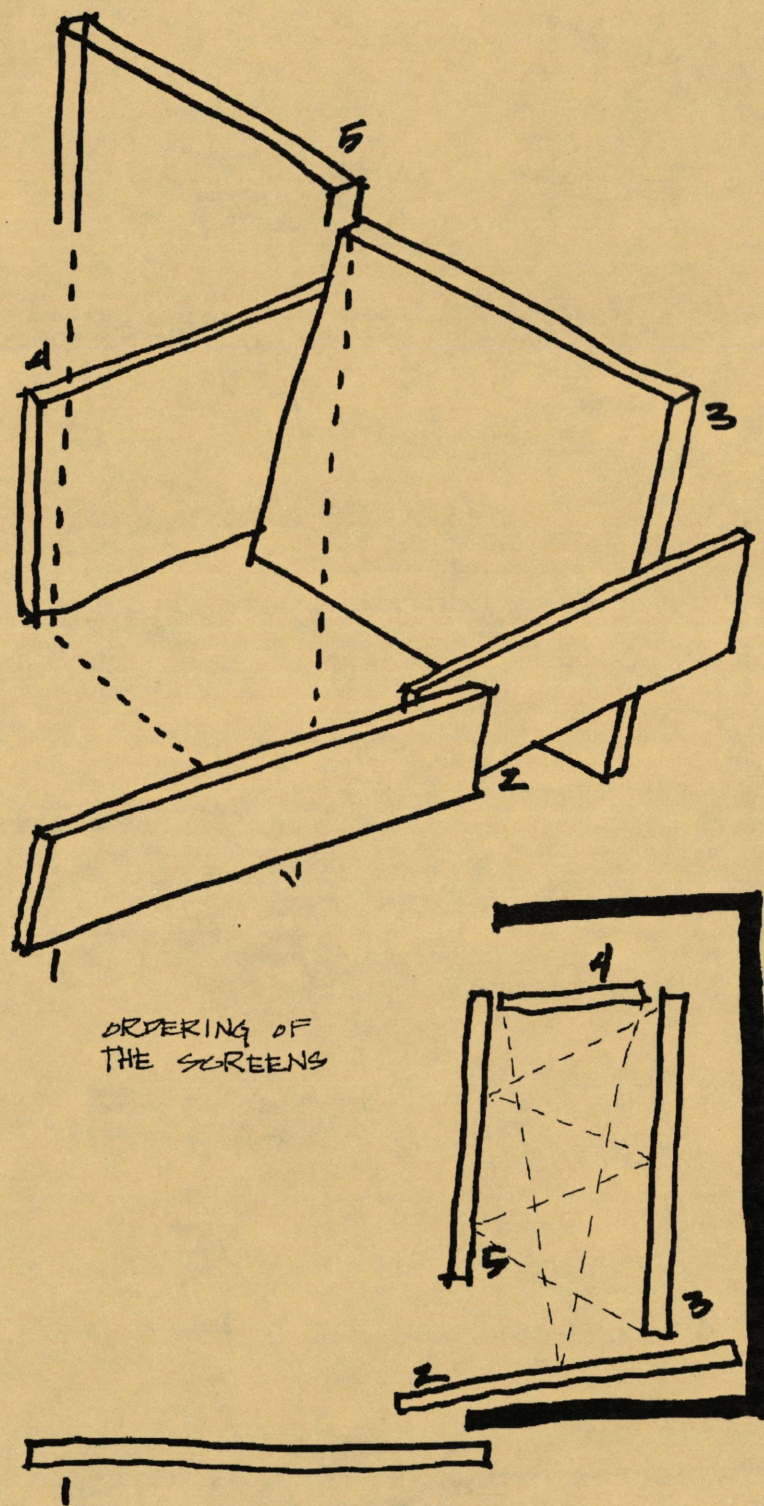
architecture that is enabling and celebratory of self-definition. It is the built environment of a bottom-up idea of culture where every individual can convey and change culture. It establishes that the built environment has the potential to be a supportive, non-intrusive structure to be used as one sees fit, regardless of who the one is. The basic humanity of all people is the idea that lies at the heart of feminism and Liberative Architecture.

To exercise the idea of Liberative Architecture, I have chosen to design a building for the Lesbian and Gay community of New York City. The building will house a history museum and archive. Three specific parameters were created.

The first parameter established as a guide for the design process acknowledges that the Lesbian and Gay community has been excluded from the making and living of culture. Until recently, Lesbians and Gays were denied positive words and images to describe themselves, denied a history, denied even the right to form as a community, and mostly just denied. Culture submerged Lesbians and Gays into a sub-culture of silence. Each new generation, denied any knowledge of previous generations, was taught how to be oppressed by way of enforced silence. In envisioning an architecture of a bottom-up culture, this building would be defined by the need of the Lesbian and Gay community to have a means to come to voice, to record their own history, and in the process define themselves as a community and as individuals. This involved two ideas about the building.

The first idea was that a traditional history museum and archive would be inappropriate for the Lesbian and Gay community. A traditional archive would be furthering the victimization of the community by gathering and storing words and images that speak more of victim than survivor and thriver. This is so because there is little recorded and surviving of the history of the Lesbian and Gay community, and much that is available is either conjecture or strongly warped by previous generations of homophobia. For the Lesbian and Gay community, history is in the making. Therefore the building would be more about the collecting and storing of history as





it is being made. There must be places where people can be recorded and/or taped and space to store these tapes for the archive. The empowering idea of this archive is that anybody who wishes to have their words and experiences recorded as part of the history of the community may do so. *Every individual history is valued greatly.*

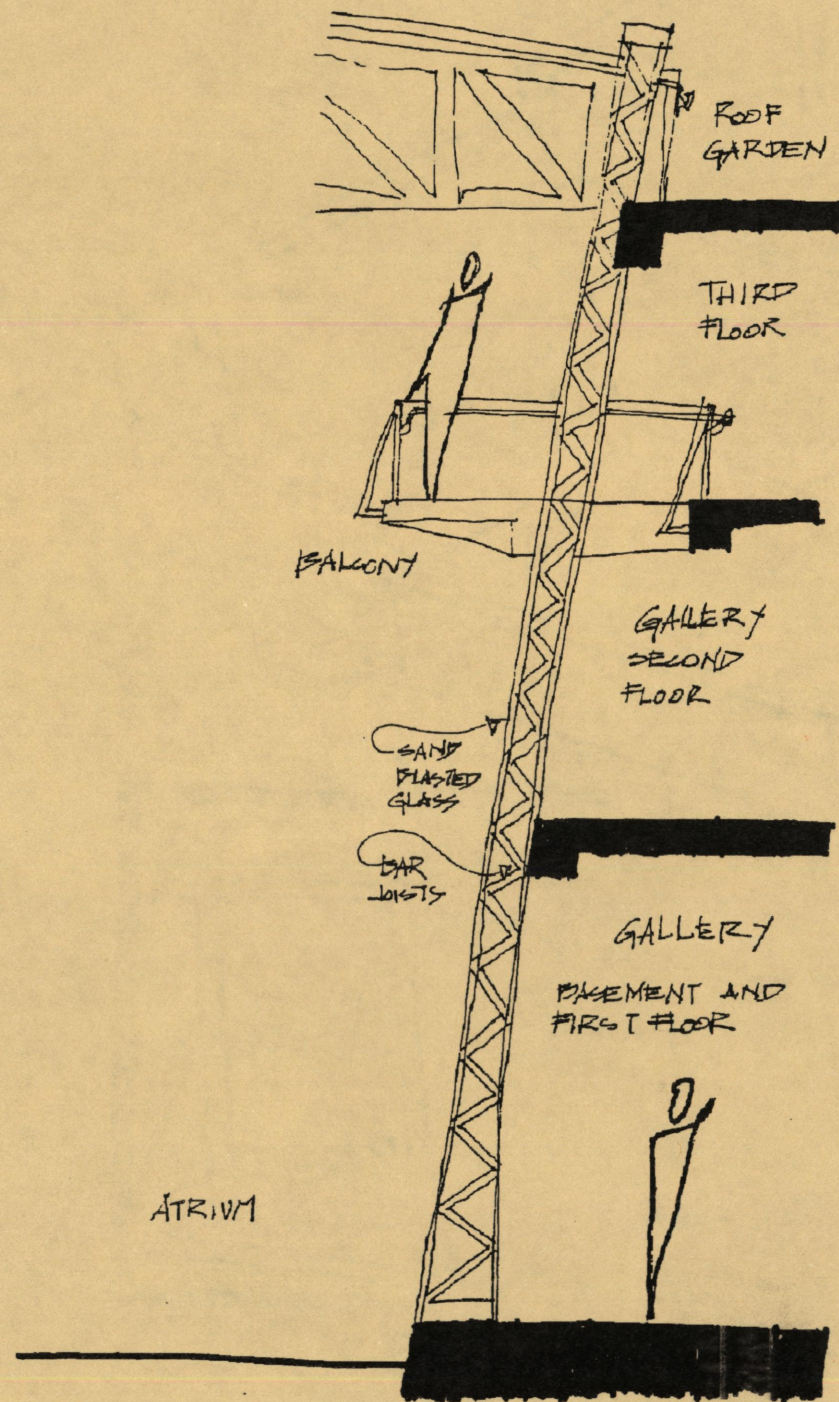
The second idea is that after history has been collected it will be projected out into the culture at large as a means of making culture. This will be done through the use of screens. I use the word "screens" very loosely, in that they are not the traditional idea of a fabric screen with images projected on it. Instead, the screens will be a combination of liquid crystal displays, electronic display boards, and projections on glass. A person in the museum would have the ability to have themselves recorded and projected immediately on the screens. Not only are their lives valued as an integral part of the history of the community, but their words and images will be an active part of the community's movement in culture making.

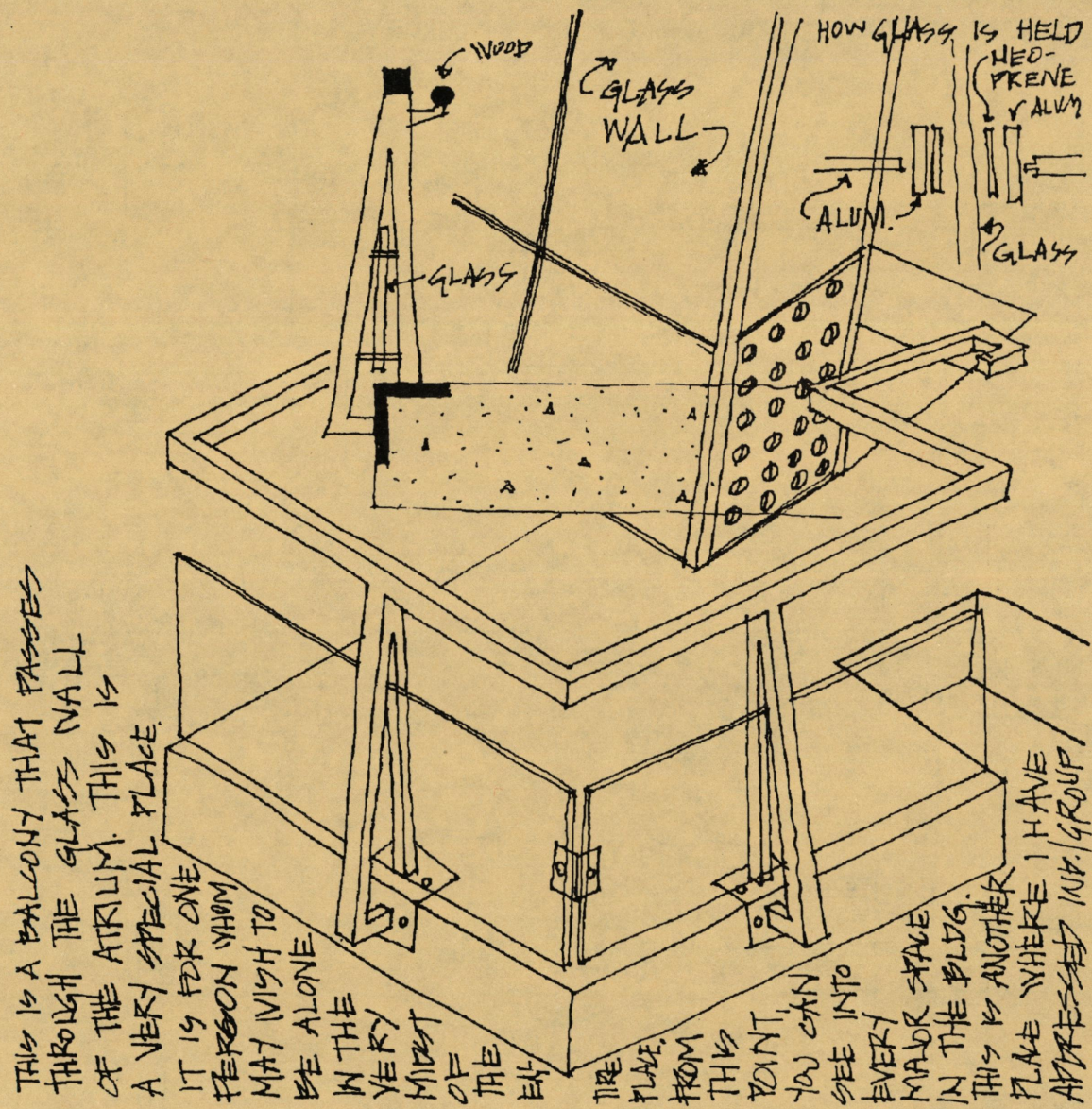
There is also a second ordering to this last idea. The placement and make-up of the screens form a narrative. This narrative tells the story of how the community has time and again absorbed an external negative, made it an internal, positive structure, and then sent it back out into the culture with a new and empowering meaning. We have seen this with the pink triangle. The pink triangle was the patch that all homosexual prisoners of the Nazi death camps had to wear. In the seventies, lesbian and gay activists adopted the pink triangle as a symbol of the Lesbian and Gay rights movement. Today, the pink triangle is a deeply moving symbol for lesbians and gays around the world. Not only does it say *never again*, but it symbolizes the energy and love of the movement in its struggle towards liberation. It is this process that the screens tell. Whether you start from the internal outward or the external inward, the process is the same. First, there is a screen that is hung off the structure of the building, facing the street. Its images are projected outward only. Second, there is a screen that is flush with the structure but is not structural. It is in the part of the new building that is just behind the existing front facade. It has images projected on both sides; one side out

to the street, the other side inward toward the atrium. Third, there is a glass faced wall that functions as the main vertical shaft for the mechanical systems in the building. Images are projected on the wall from across the atrium. These images are faintly visible from the galleries and street on the other side of the wall. Fourth, there is a wall that is entirely structural and mechanical. It is the wall for the bathrooms, and has a walkway off one side towards the atrium. Images are projected onto this wall from across the atrium. Finally, there is the external wall of the archive tower. The image on this wall is a permanent tile mural. When taken together, the screens illustrate the narrative.

The second parameter established as a guide for the design process acknowledges the potentially important role that an institution such as architecture can have on a person's ability to define themselves. As stated earlier, architecture is often an obstacle that one must overcome on the path towards self-definition. However, if architecture removes itself as an obstacle, even if it is not directly supportive of the individual, it is enabling of self-definition. It is essential that an institution as all-pervasive as the built environment should provide awareness in all people that they are as valued whether they are in a group or alone, even if they are alone in a group. This is important, since the first step to self-definition is acknowledging that you are a self that is worthy of defining. Architecture is in the position to be a positive force in that direction.

The primary way that this notion of individual and group was worked out tectonically was through spaces that could afford, even celebrate, one as an individual. Throughout the project there are places where an individual can go to be apart from the group. Some of these places are apart physically and visually; some are apart physically but still afford a view towards the group areas as well as a view in from the group; some are apart in the very middle of all the group areas. While the size of the individual spaces may not come anywhere near the size of the group areas, the individual areas are compensated through materials and their uses; wood floors instead of polished concrete floors; celebration of construction and assembly joints as opposed to emphasis on the total structure; and scaling in proportion to the human body instead of





monumental scaling. In these ways, both group and individual areas are celebrated.

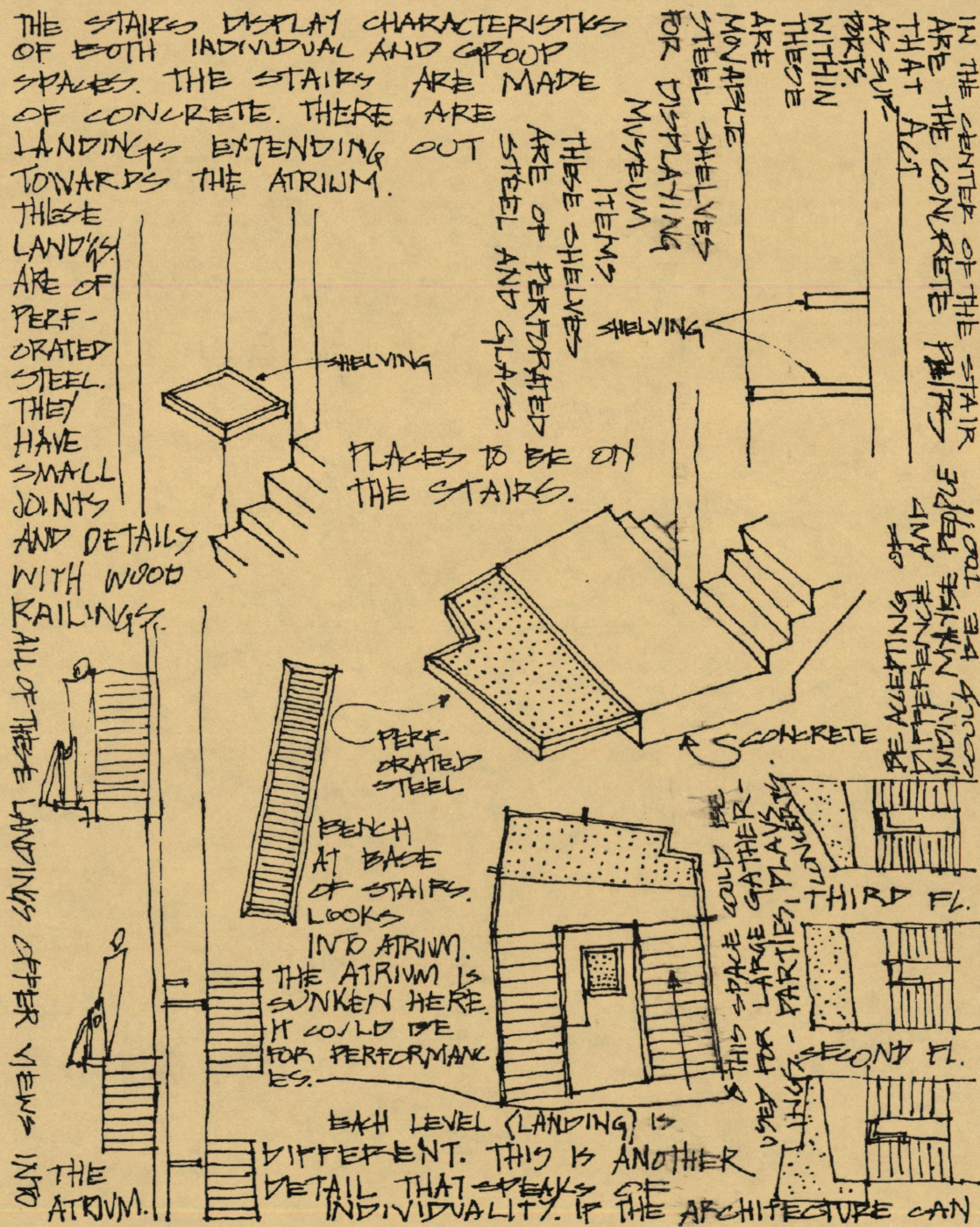
The third parameter established as a guide for the design process acknowledges that the site and its specifics are no less important to architecture than the individual. Indeed, from a political standpoint, pride in place is not very far from pride in the individual. If architecture is to be enabling of the individual, in order to be supportive of self-definition, it must be able to recognize and celebrate individuality wherever it may appear. Place is an expression of individuality since every place is the way it is for a very specific set of reasons. Architecture should celebrate the place by allowing itself to be informed by it. However, I am not calling for all new buildings or rehabilitations of existing buildings to mirror exactly what exists in the area. That would be inappropriate, since the buildings that were built in the past were built the way they were for very specific reasons that may or may not be appropriate today. Instead, the building should be a timely extension of the particular features that define the area. In this way, we can acknowledge where the building has come from, while allowing it to make its own place today.

The site for this project is on Fourth Avenue between Union and President Streets in Brooklyn. Fourth Avenue is the only major north/south street in that area of Brooklyn. Fourth Avenue is also the dividing line between two neighborhoods. To the east, behind the site, is an historic residential neighborhood called Park Slope. Park Slope was built in the 1840's to 1860's and is known for its well preserved four and five story brownstone and limestone row houses. To the west, directly in front of the site, is the industrial neighborhood of Gowanus. Gowanus is known for its electric signage on large freestanding billboards. These electric signs advertise the products manufactured in the area. About twenty of these signs remain, and they have been landmarked by the City of New York and cannot be torn down. These signs face west and northwards the harbor and New Jersey and the Wall Street office district in Manhattan. Fourth Avenue is also a major industrial shopping street. Like most shopping streets in Brooklyn, Fourth Avenue is dense with signage. Some of this signage

is directly on the facades, and some are on free standing billboards on the roofs. The last major feature of the site that was taken into consideration during the design phase was a public garden existing adjacent to and immediately behind the site. The garden, known as "the Gardens of Union," was made from several empty lots and backyards that were linked together with paths and small garden plots. The paths are paved with rubble from the buildings that used to stand where the empty lots are now.

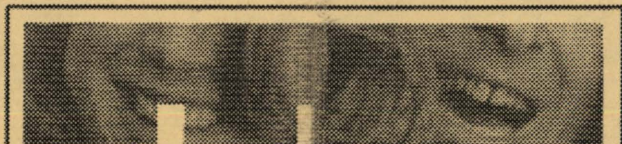
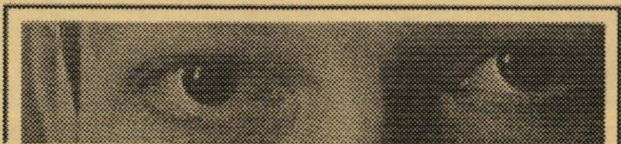
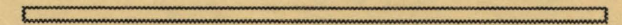
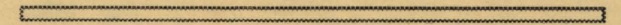
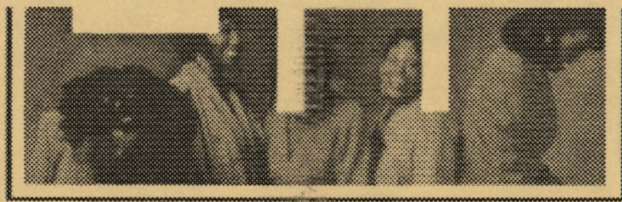
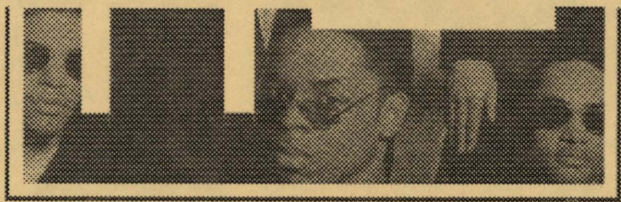
These features informed the building in two ways. First, the large electric signage was taken for the facade of the building. While the idea of the screens as an ordering for the new building had other reasons for existing, the large electric signage in Gowanus and the visual clutter of the signage on Fourth Avenue helped to make the building into a billboard in and of itself. Second, with its site in a residential neighborhood and adjacent to a public garden immediately behind it, the building played with the idea of public and private. This was significant to the idea of places for individuals and the group in that it gave a level of ordering to it. The further one moves into the site, the more individual the spaces become. I should add that individual spaces do not imply private, as one can be an individual in a group, and there are spaces reflective of that. However, one ordering of individual spaces is privacy. Located in the rear wall are individual study areas, individual video viewing areas, and seating for the cafe.

These three parameters provided a framework within which I was able to conduct the design process. I need to stress that Liberative Architecture, as a theory, is no more than a framework enabling one to make conscious design decisions. One must still show utmost concern for the qualities of the space: tectonics, mechanics, details, lighting, materials, etc. The framework provides a way of dealing with the qualities of the building. As previously stated, the basic humanity of all people is the idea that lies at the heart of feminism and Liberative Architecture. The desire to be in spaces that are a joy to be in must surely rank as one of those things basic to humanity. To that end, the greatest amount of struggle in this thesis went into the making of spaces that would be



a joy to be in; the ability to define one-self , while a major concern, was still but one concern.

The second part of this thesis book contains the images of the building itself. I would like to take some time here to discuss two issues regarding these images. First, I have kept some separation between the text of the first half of the book and the images of the second half of the book to stress that even though this exercise in Liberative Architecture resulted in the building you will see, the building must stand on its ownright. For example, The Palaces at Versaille were the physical embodiment of a harshly top-down culture. These palaces were built to be enjoyed by a very few, while the great many suffered in the streets. Yet many people the world over enjoy the beauty of the architecture of Versaille today. In the end, architecture must stand alone of whatever intentions built it. Therefore, I kept the final images of the building in the second half of the book. Only sketches from the design process were integrated with the text. Second, I would like to touch on the particular form that the final images took. I used collage in addition to the more traditional ink on mylar to illustrate the building. I did this because of the strength of meaning in collage. With collage, images that were put out by others, for many different reasons, saying many different things, can be gathered and given new meanings by the person making the collage. This is very significant, given the particular project. As stated earlier, there are a series of five screens that provide an ordering to the building. These five screens tell a narrative. That narrative relates the process that the community has undergone, time and again, whereby an exterior negative is taken in and given a new, more positive meaning and then sent back out into the culture, changing the culture. That is what the process of collage does.

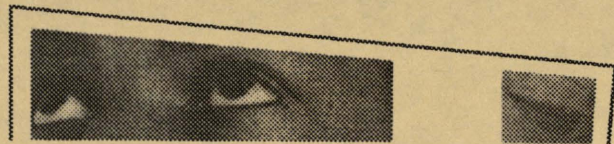
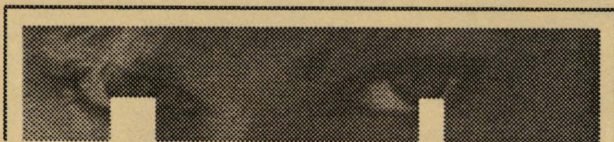
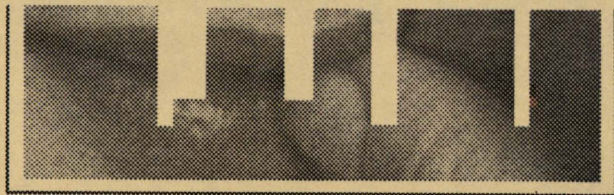


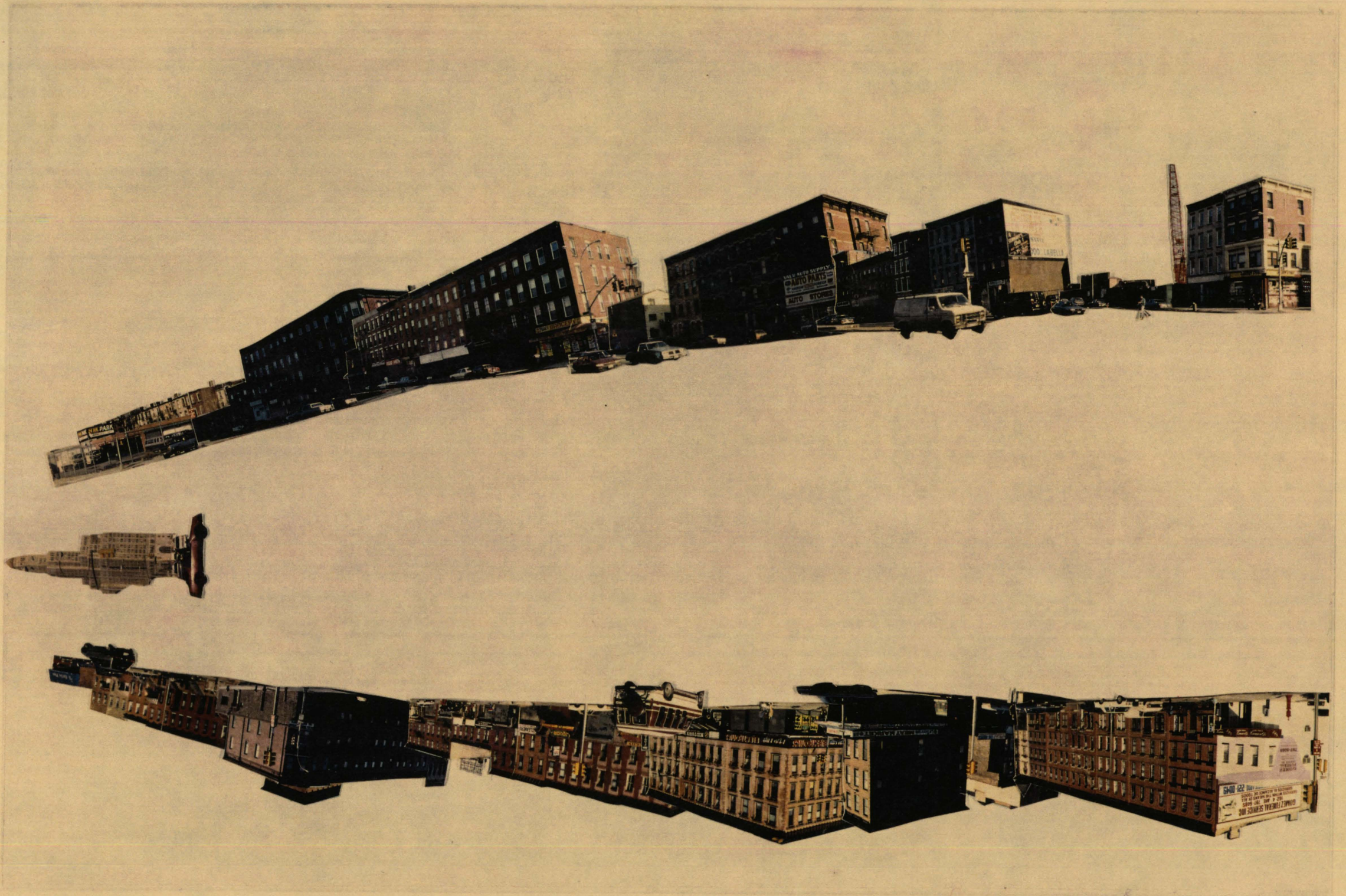


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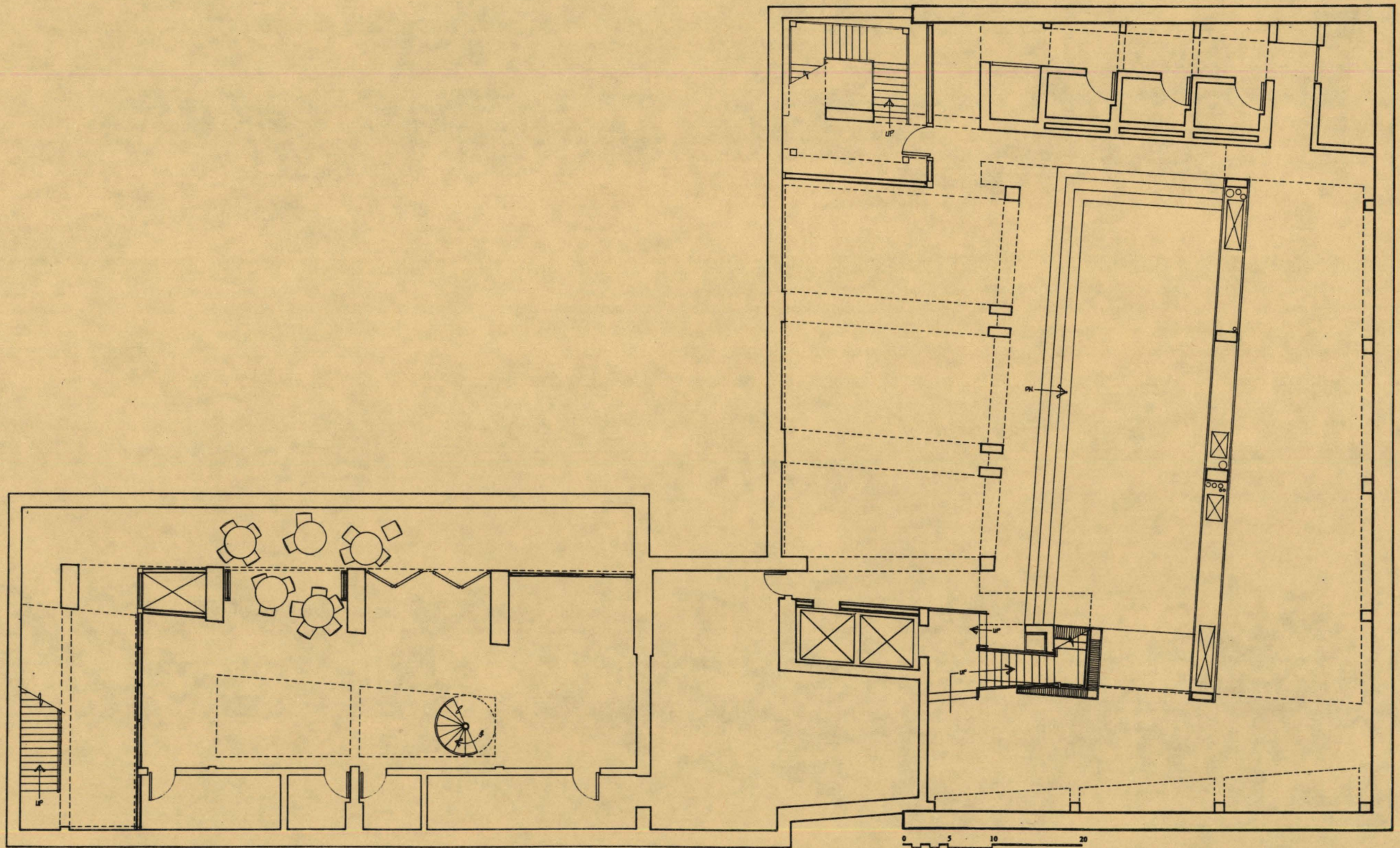
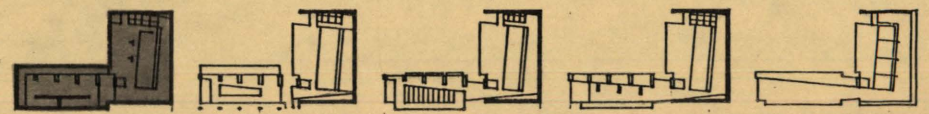
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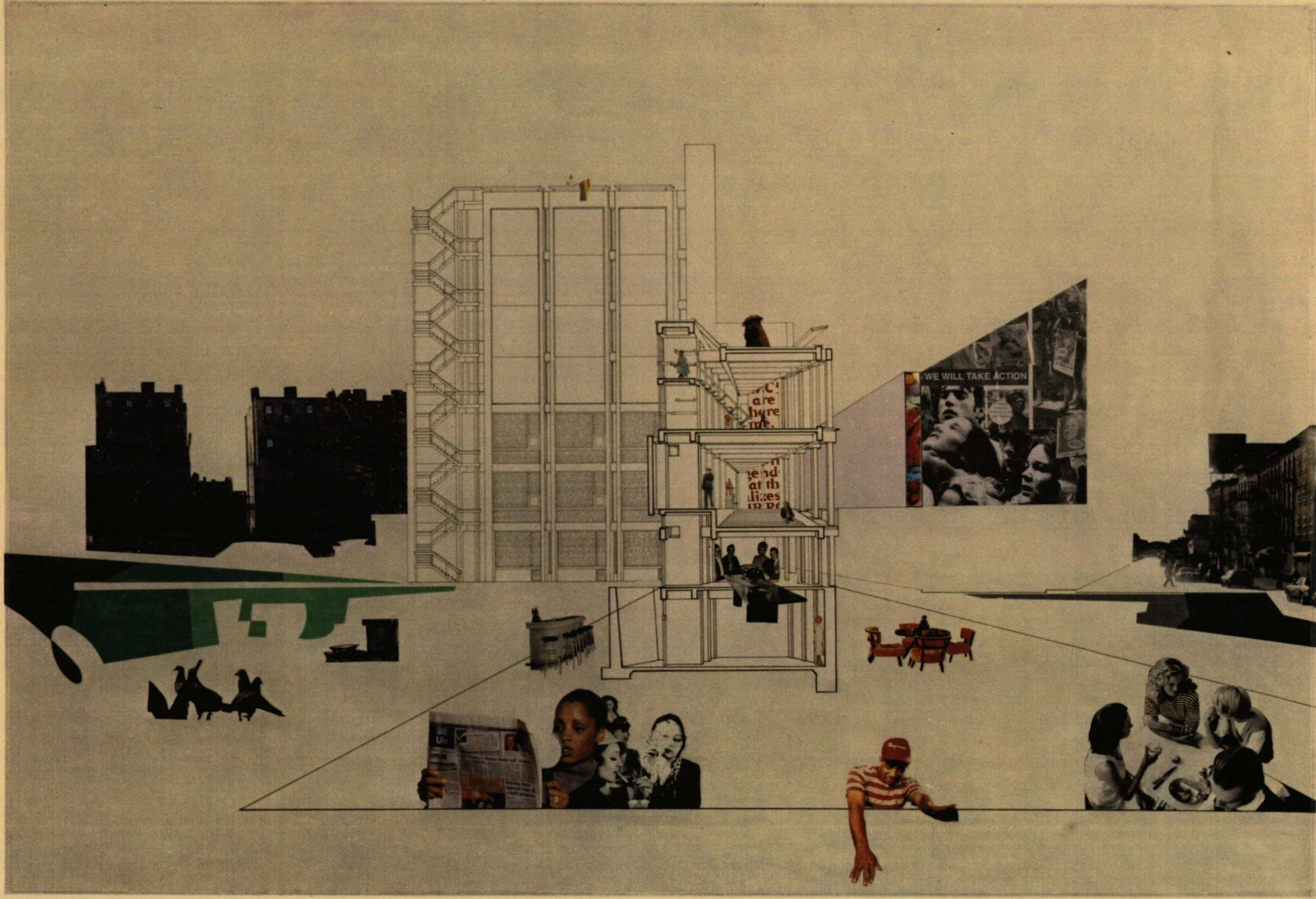




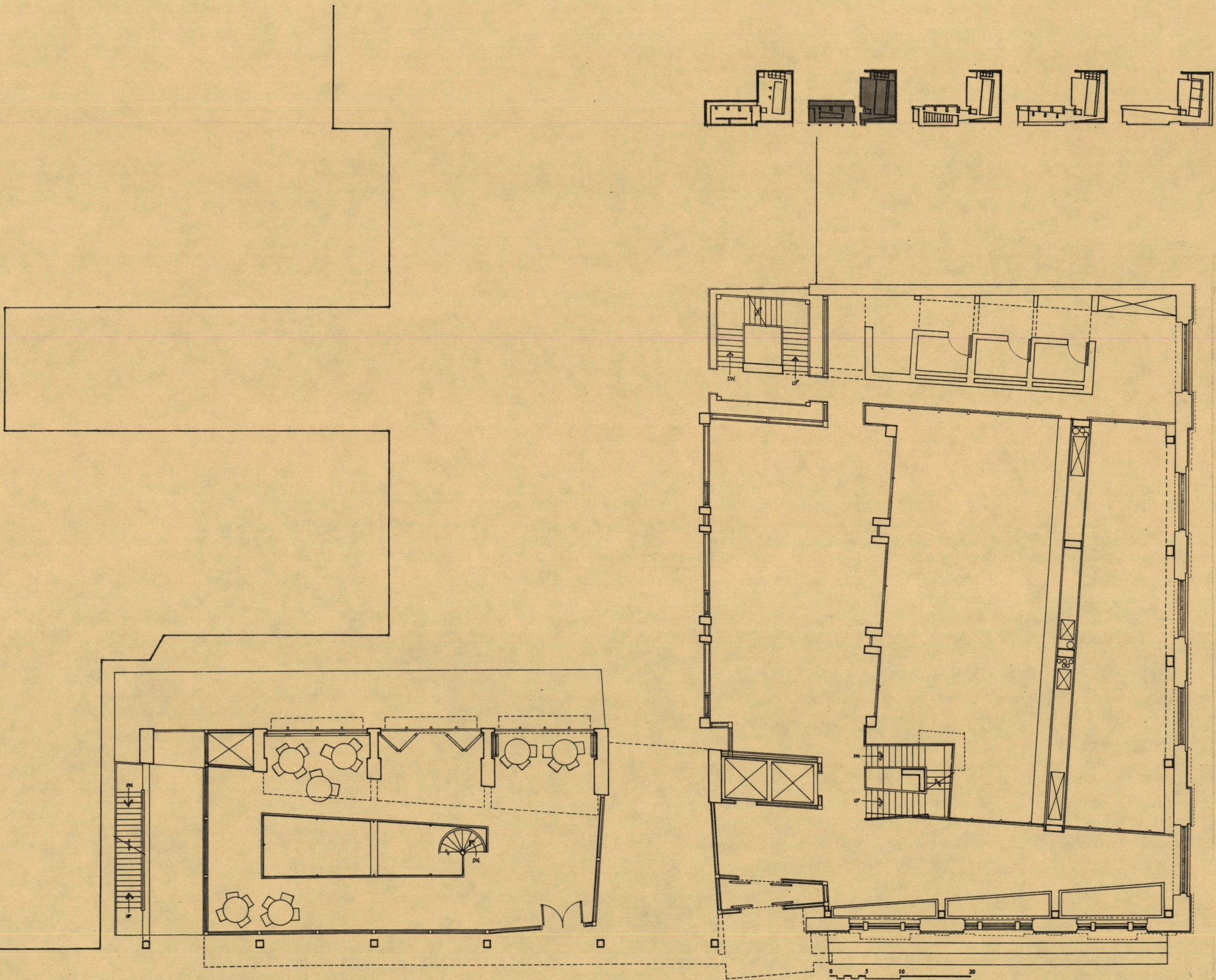
fourth avenue elevation, north

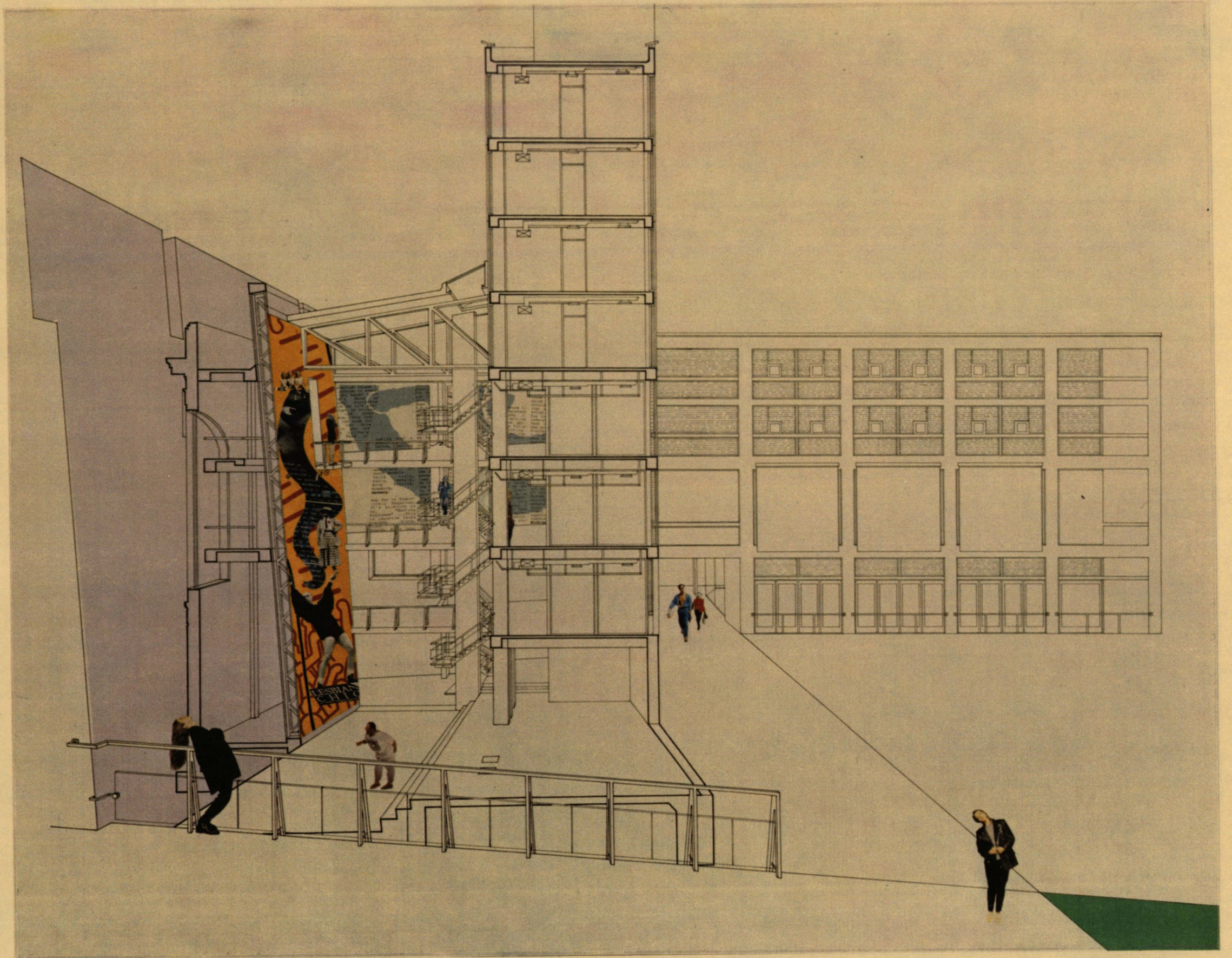


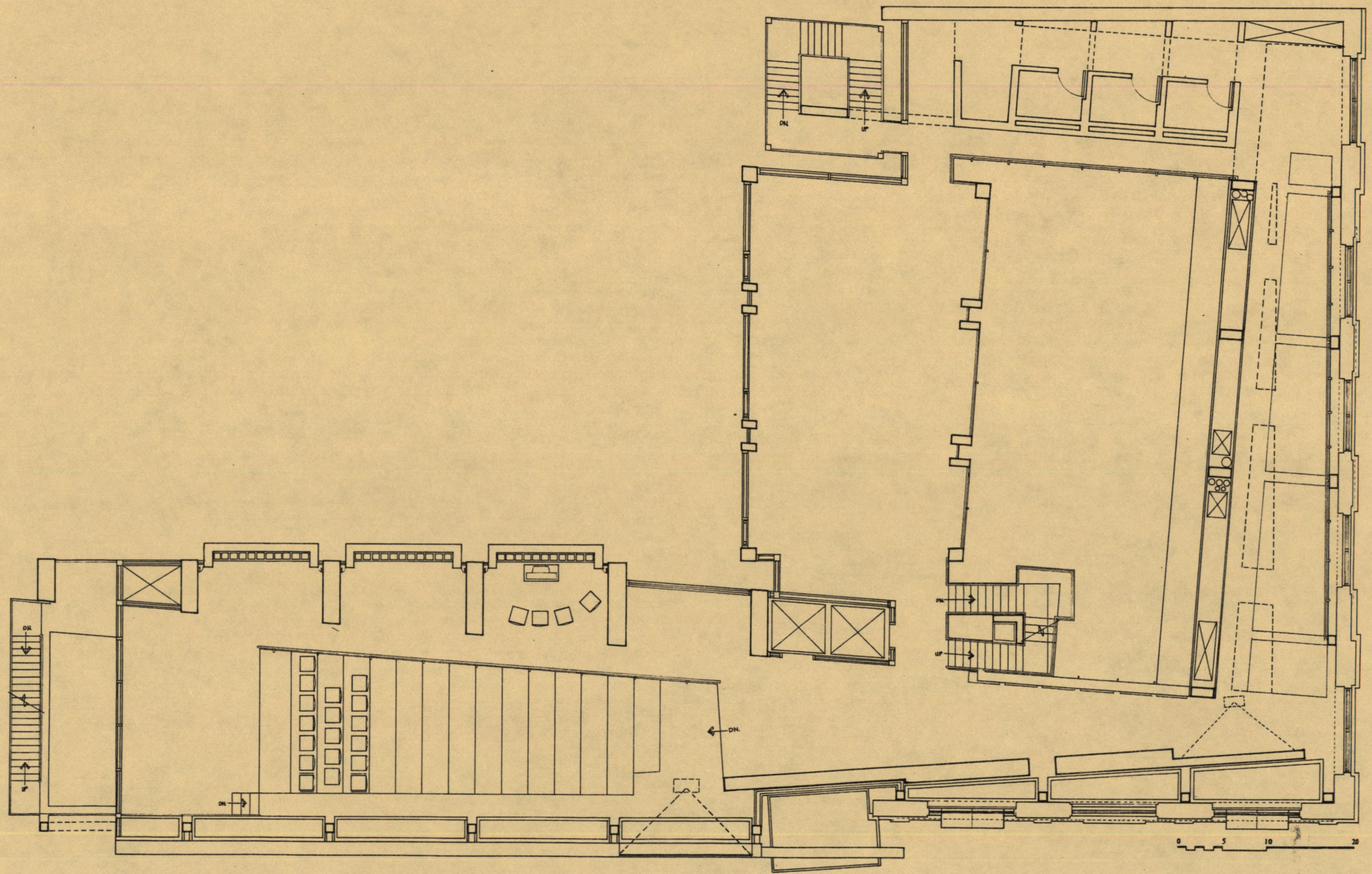
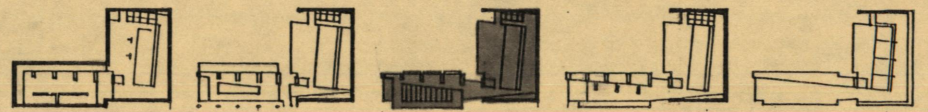




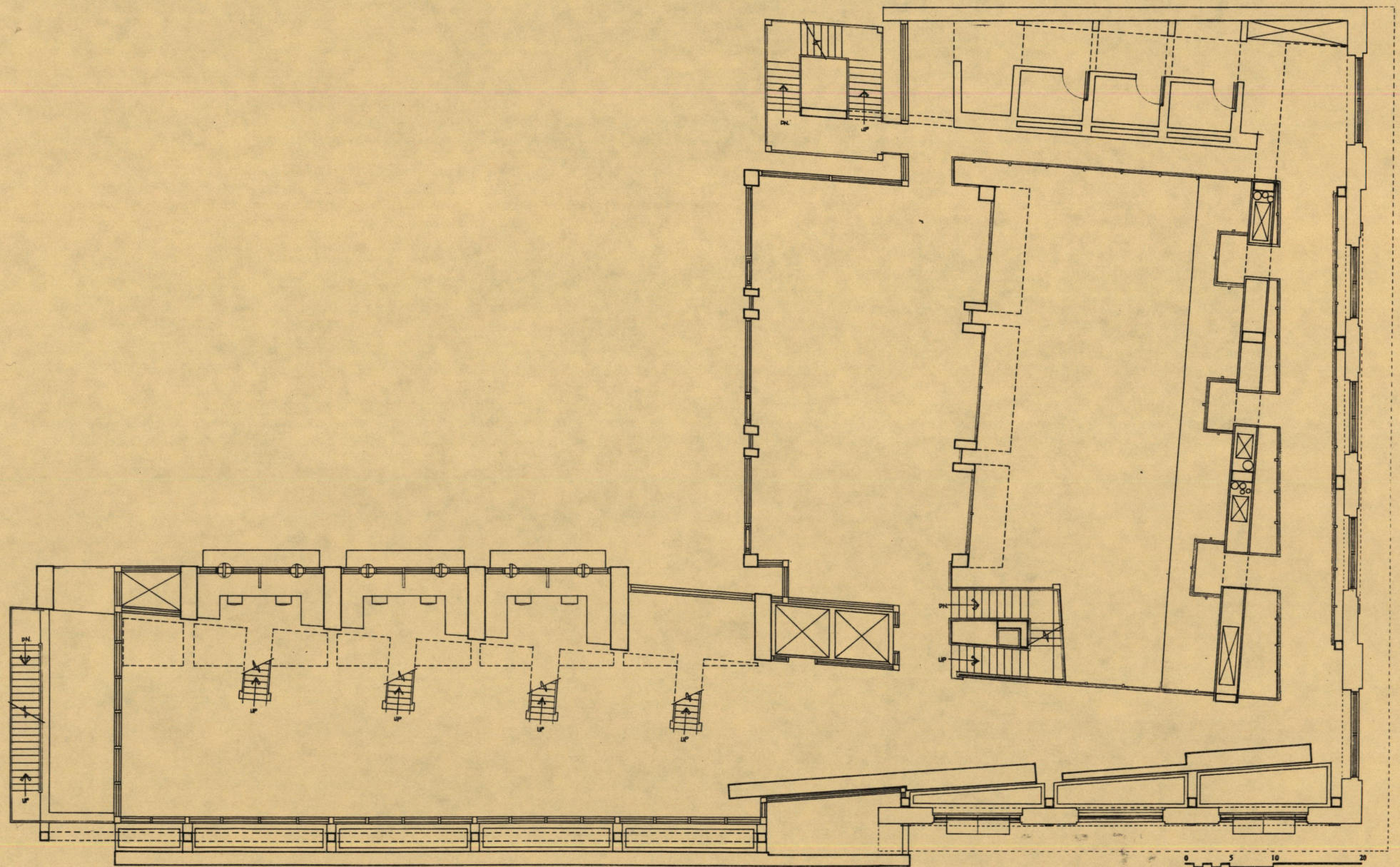
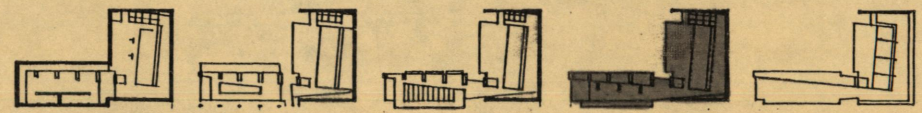
19 section thru cafe, theater, reading room

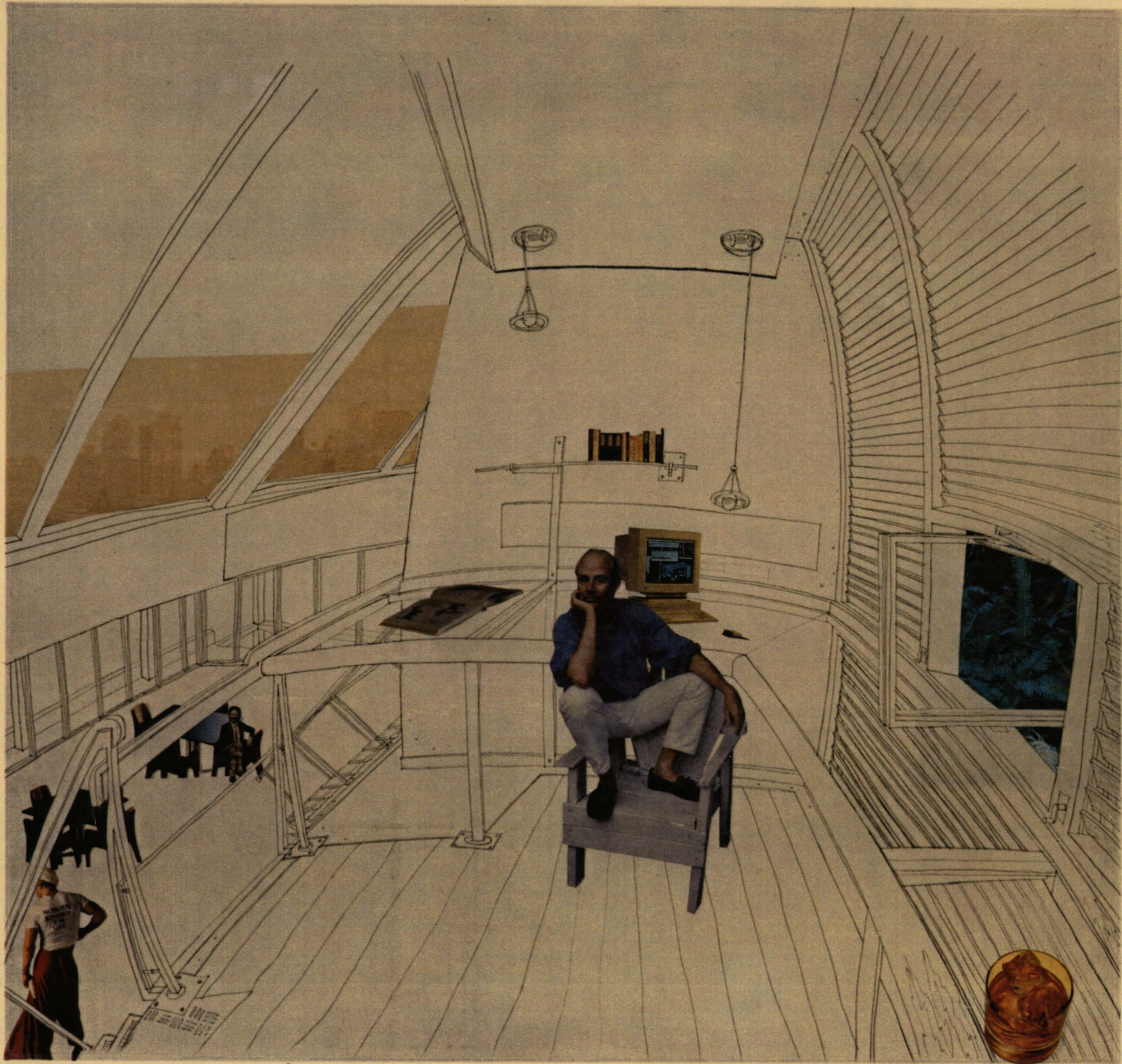


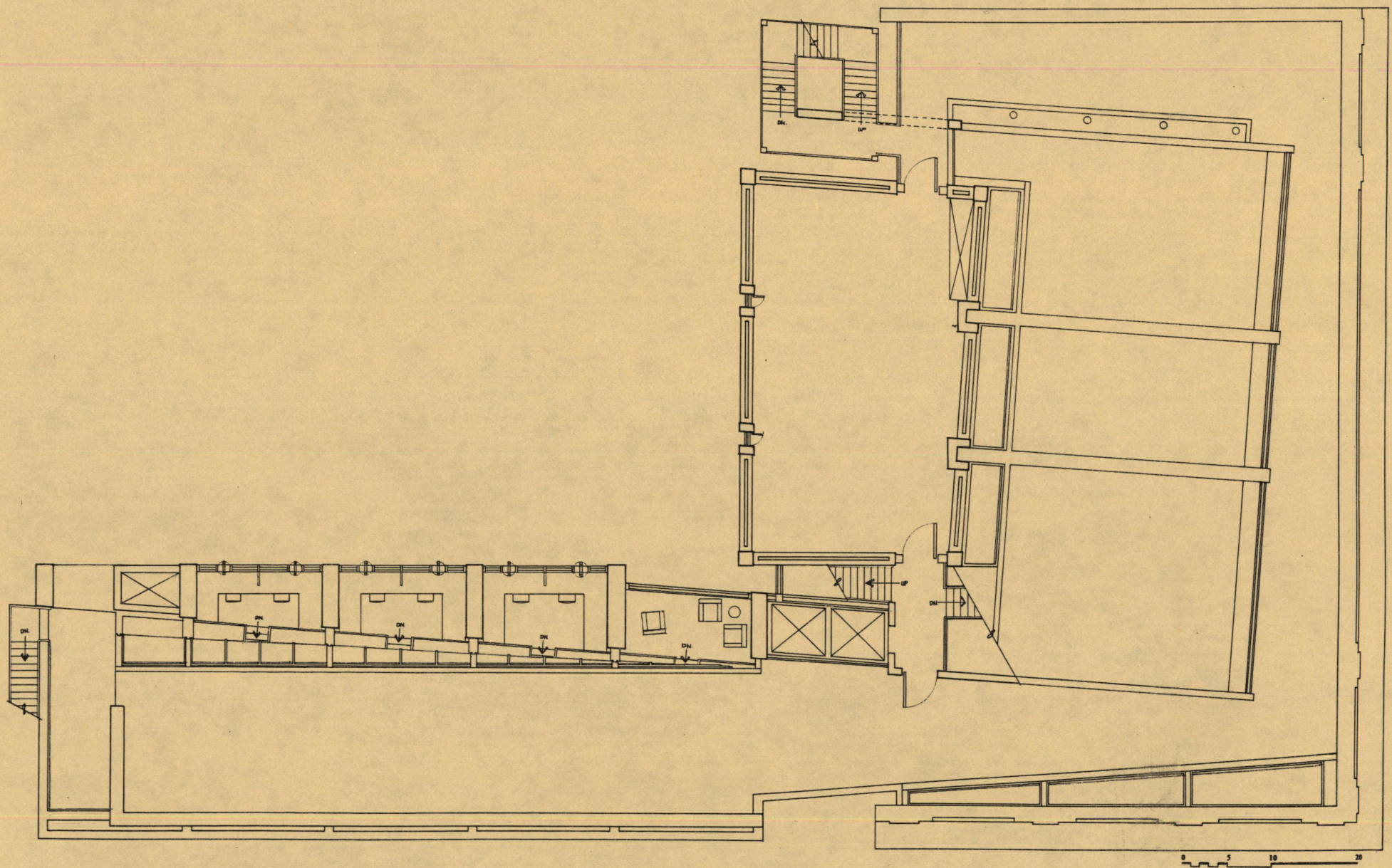
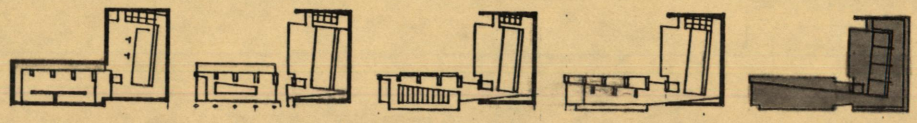


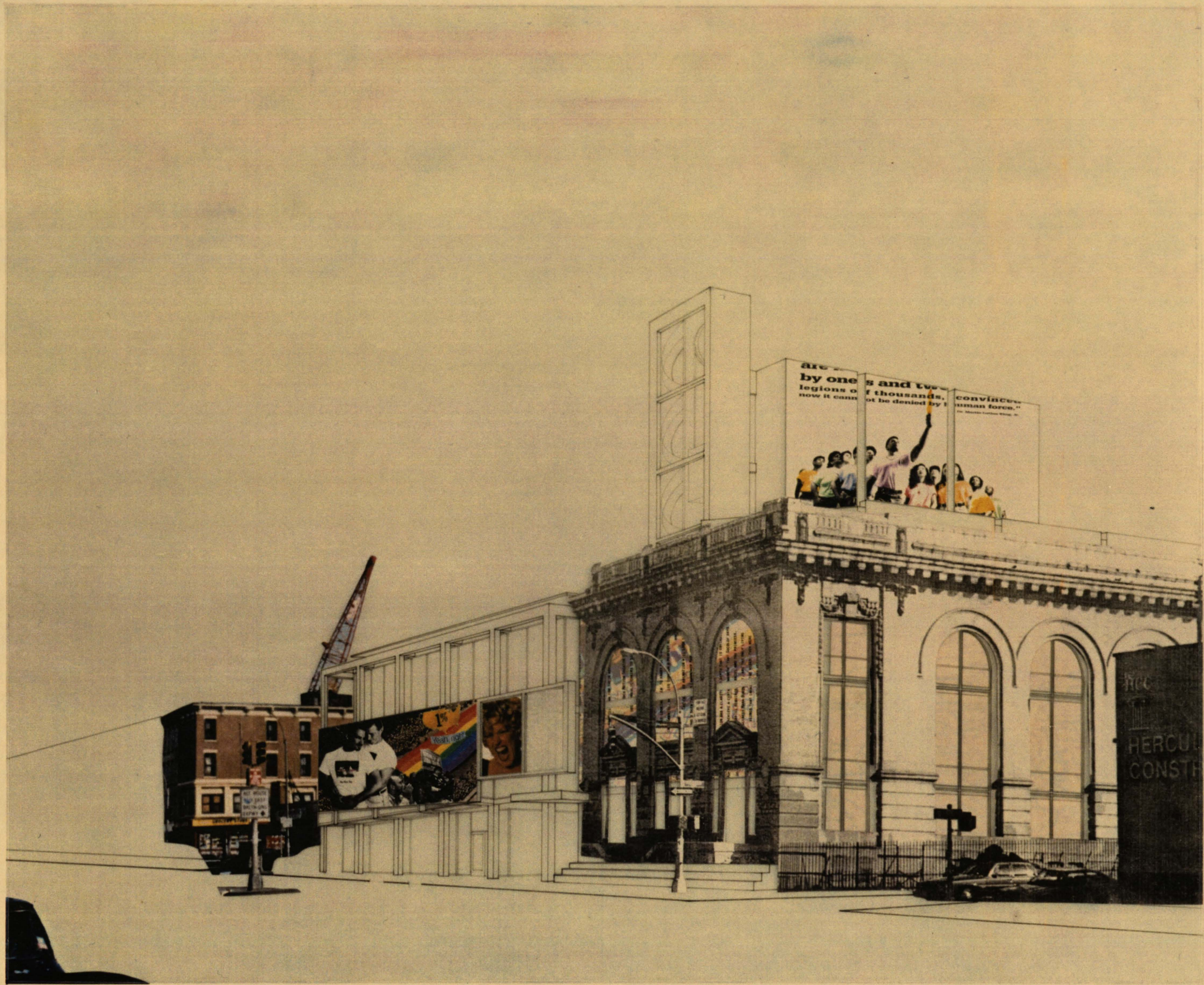












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