LET'S MEET AT THE CIVIC CENTER!

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by

Shiyu Wei
B.A. in Mathematics, Harvard College

Submitted to the Department of Architecture in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Architecture
at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

February 2015

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ABSTRACT

The town hall as a type of architecture has become so prevalent that the term has been used to describe the activities that go on inside - namely, social gatherings of the public for purposes of discussion, question, and feedback to the governing body.

The archetypes of the town hall, in the 12th century Italy, or 17th century New England, functioned not only as the municipal headquarters with offices and courts, but also in some cases included markets, church, warehouse, museum, pub, etc. Most importantly, it functioned as a meeting place for the public.

However, as an architecture typology, the town hall does not scale as the municipality expands. The administrative parts of the town hall can grow or multiply proportionally with the population, but the public functions that were originally embedded in the architecture were either pushed out into the large plaza outside of the city hall, or disappeared entirely.

This thesis project seeks to re-establish the ideologies of democracy manifested through the architectural typology of the town hall in New York City's Civic Center through creating small spaces for social discourse.

Thesis Supervisor:	Brandon Clifford
Title:	Belluschi Lecturer in Architecture

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Brandon, for your infinite patience and good humour on this journey and search for a thesis project. You have been a friend to this thesis since the very beginning, and I sincerely appreciate your guidance and insightful comments, as well as being my advocate during reviews.

Thank you Mark , for your rich reservoir of references and ideas, I learned so much from our conversations.

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Dear thesis team, thank you for putting together my final presentation and models. In no particular order, thank you Jinhui, Kenny, Bumjin, Stefan, Hui, Li, Kaining, Jason, Zhao, Duk, Alice, Xu, Dan, Ryan, and Xinyi. You guys are awesome! Special thanks to Jie Qian for being such a thorough and responsible project manager, I couldn't have done it without you!

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Thank you Tim, for taking care of me and supporting me through stressful times, and your never-ending supply of New Yorker references.

Dear Mom, thanks, I couldn't have gone this far without you behind me. Words cannot express; you are the best.

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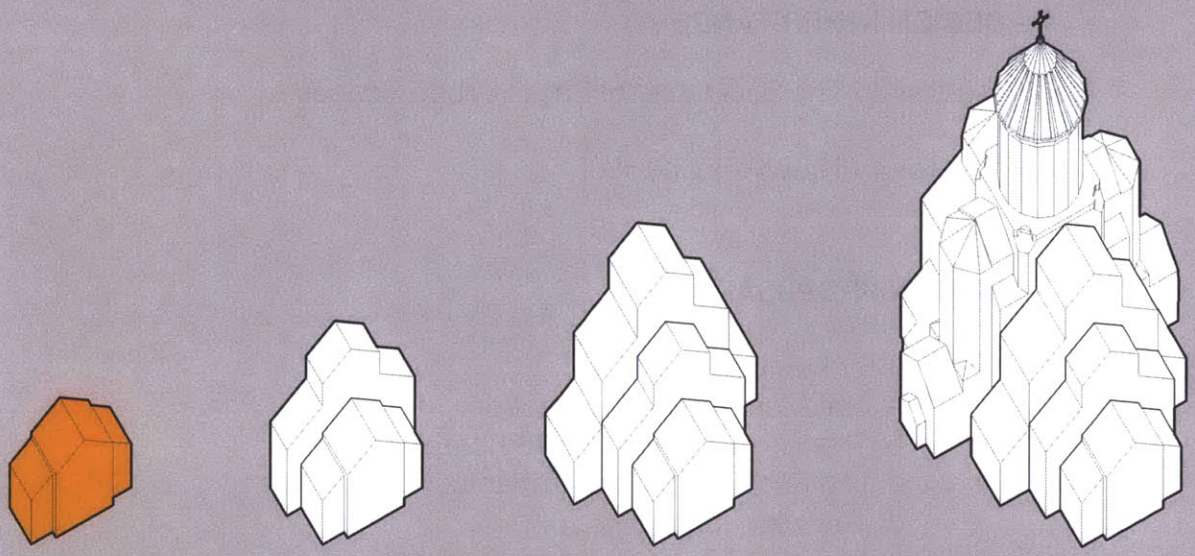
Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi
Tbilisi, Georgia



x 1 x 2 x 3 x 4

PROLOGUE

Chapter 1 /
Does it Scale?

Scaling is an architectural transformation, and in the development of societies, making something bigger or multiples copies of a type of architecture usually intensifies the site. The cathedral becomes more powerful/religious when the archetypal unit of "church" is appended to itself repeatedly.

The Chinese courtyard house, a unit of family, adds to itself and becomes a complex network as the family grows to a clan. The Forbidden Palace in Beijing is a nested series of courtyard houses, as perhaps the largest courtyard house residence of the most powerful family in China.

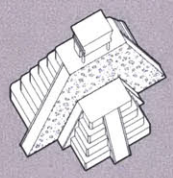
Excavations suggests the original Mayan temple of Kulkulcan in Chichen Itza is buried inside the current structure. Constructing a larger structure that resembles the original, and repeating the process after a certain number of years, results in a more grandiose and powerful temple.

Forbidden Palace
Beijing, China

x 1 x 2 x 900

Temple of Kulkulcan
Chichen Itza, Mexico

x 1



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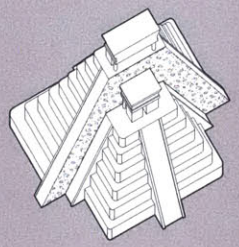

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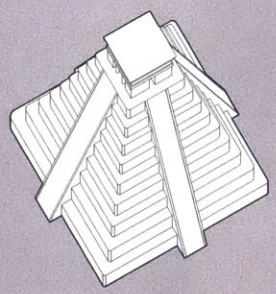

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PROLOGUE

Chapter 2 /
The Town Hall

The town hall, unlike the previous examples, is an architecture typology that does not scale. The architecture has become so prevalent that the term has been used to describe the activities that go on inside - namely, social gatherings of the public for purposes of discussion, question, and most importantly, feedback to the governing body.

The archetypes of the town hall, in the 12th century Italy, or 17th century New England, functioned not only as the municipal headquarters with offices and courts, but also in some cases included markets, church, warehouse, museum, sometimes a pub. However, the town hall does not scale with the growing municipality. The administrative parts can grow or multiply to accommodate the population, but public functions that were originally embedded in the architecture are pushed outward onto the empty plazas, or disappeared entirely.

Archetypal Town Hall

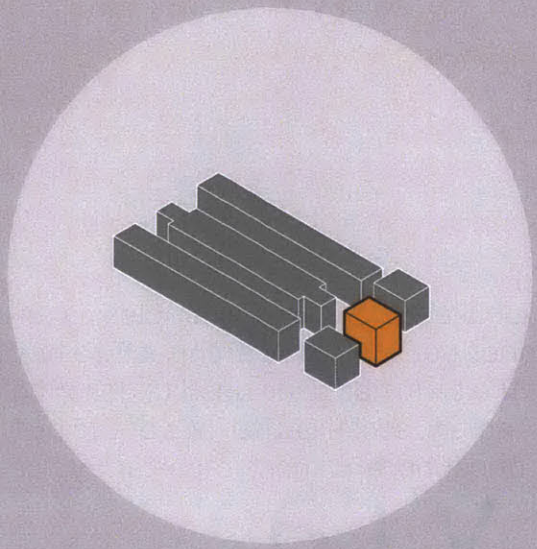


Figure 2.1

Fanueil Hall

Boston, MA
Constructed: 1742
Population served: 15,000

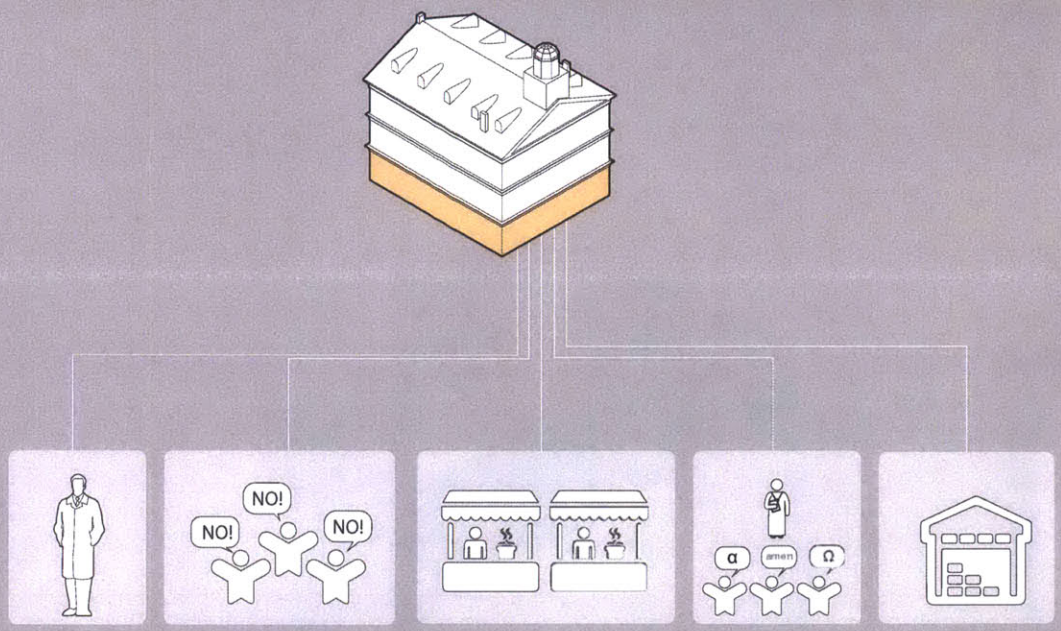


Figure 2.2

Since its construction in 1742, Fanueil Hall has served as a meeting place, market, as well as a gathering center for people. A series of this type of buildings are scattered across historic Boston, such as Old State Meeting house, Old South Church, Old North Church, etc. These structures were nested in the urban fabric, with size and porportions not unsimilar to its surrounding buildings. Everyone of these "town halls" served multiple purposes.

Growing into City Hall

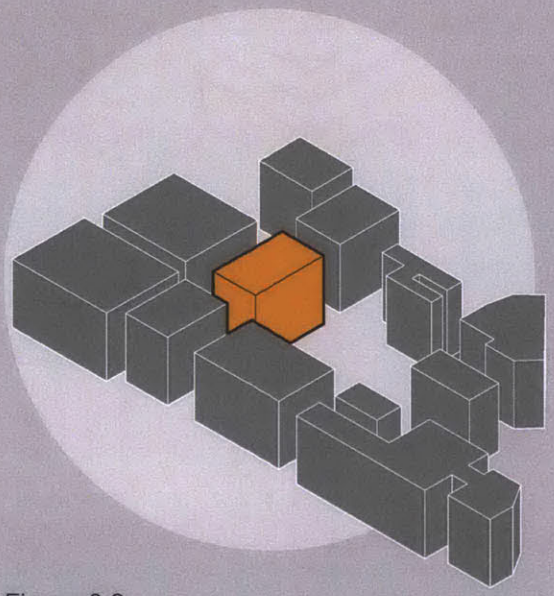


Figure 2.3

Baltimore City Hall

Baltimore, MD
Constructed: 1875
Population served: 270,000

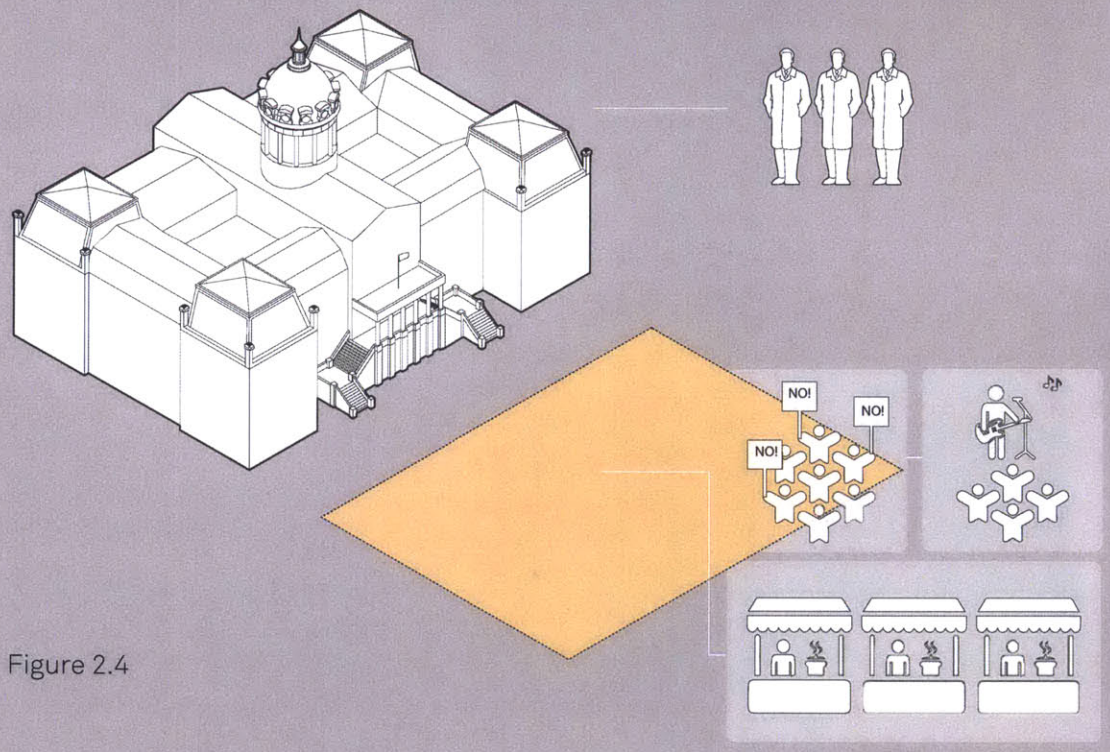


Figure 2.4

As the town grows into a city, the municipal structure grows into a more grandiose city hall, usually with a larger mass with more offices. Some public events that originally were hosted inside the building, such as a market, or large public meetings, were moved outside the onto a plaza to accommodate the larger population. The city hall, in the case of New York City, became more exclusive over time for reasons of security.

Multiplicity and the Civic Center

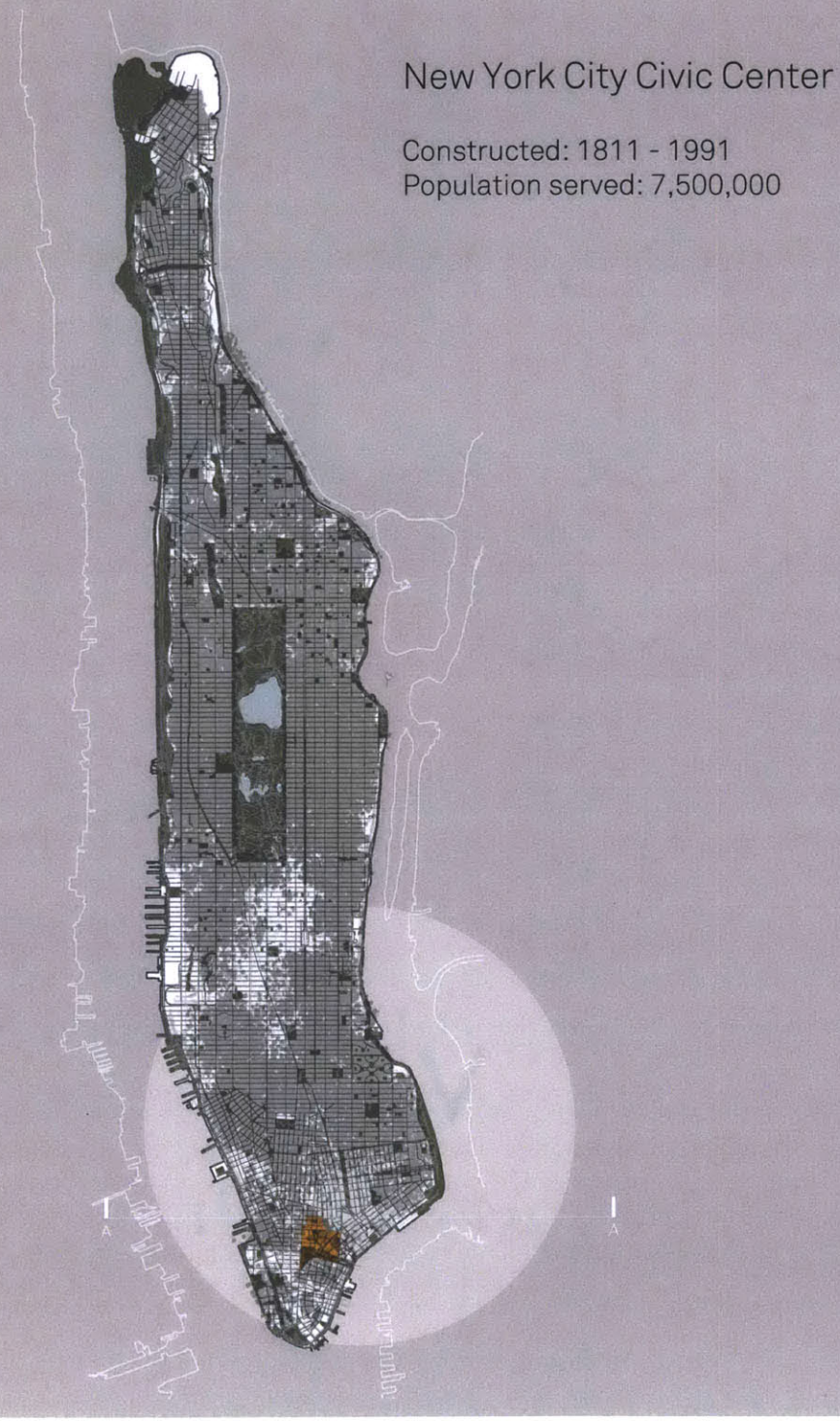


Figure 2.9

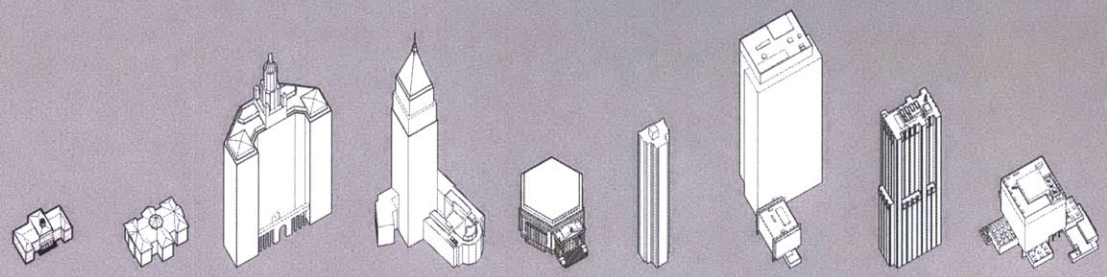
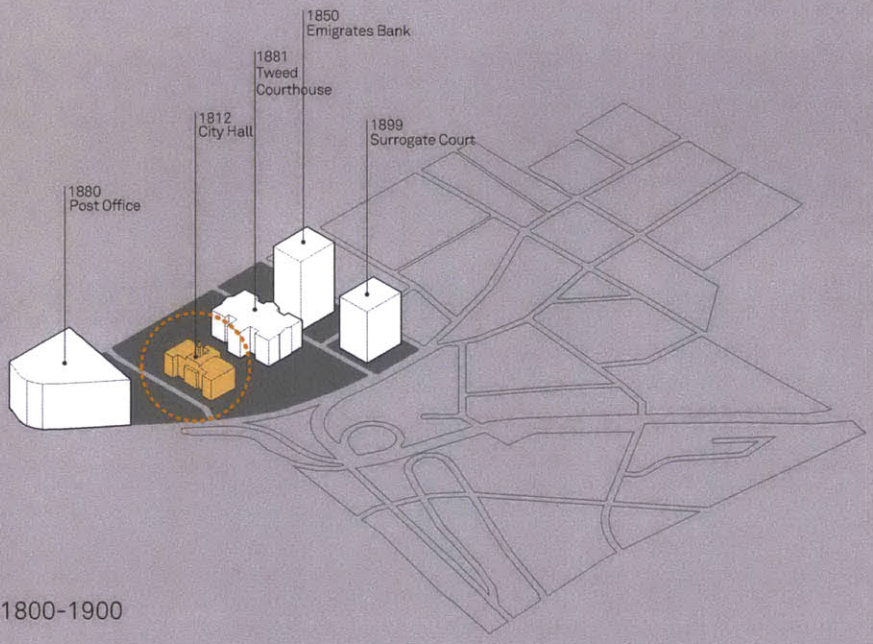


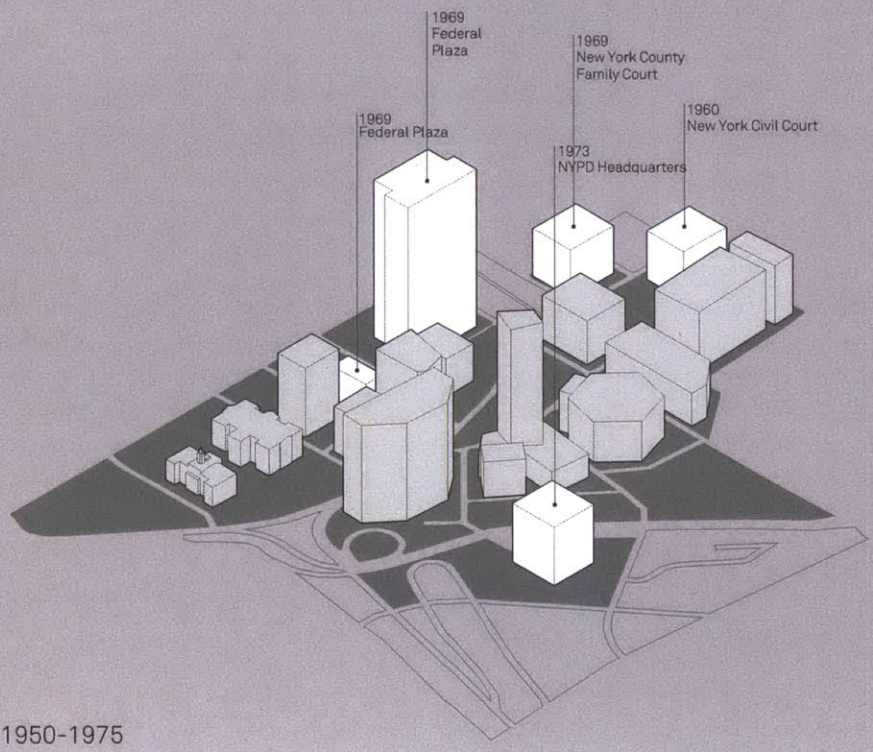
Figure 2.5 - Select buildings of New York City's Civic Center

When the city grows large enough that the administration offices cannot be contained within a single structure, the city usually constructs other buildings next to the original city hall. Over time, the original building grows to a cluster, also known as a civic center. Many major US cities have civic centers, some function more successfully than others as public spaces.

Figure 2.6 - Growth of the NYC Civic Center from 1800 to present day



1800-1900



1950-1975

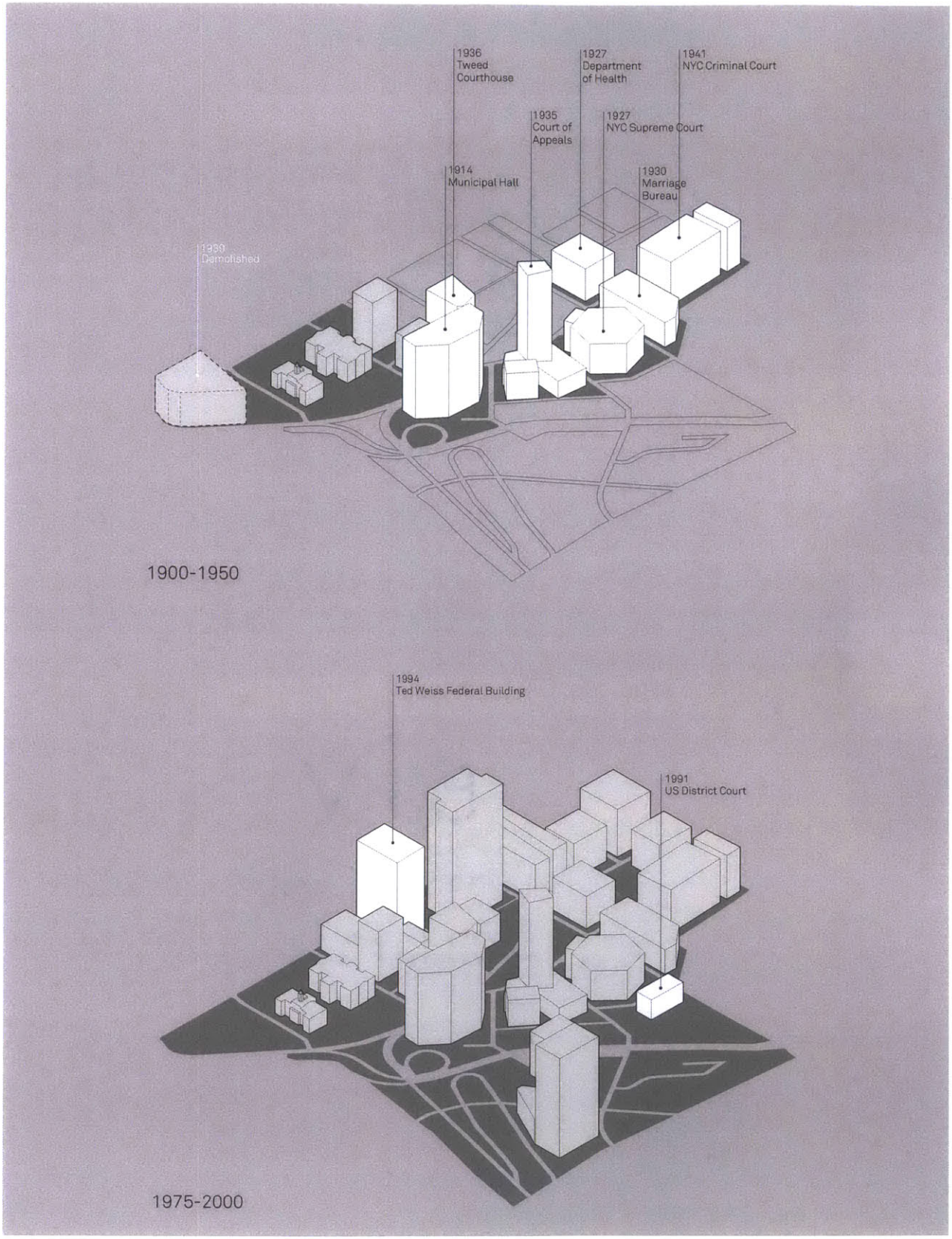
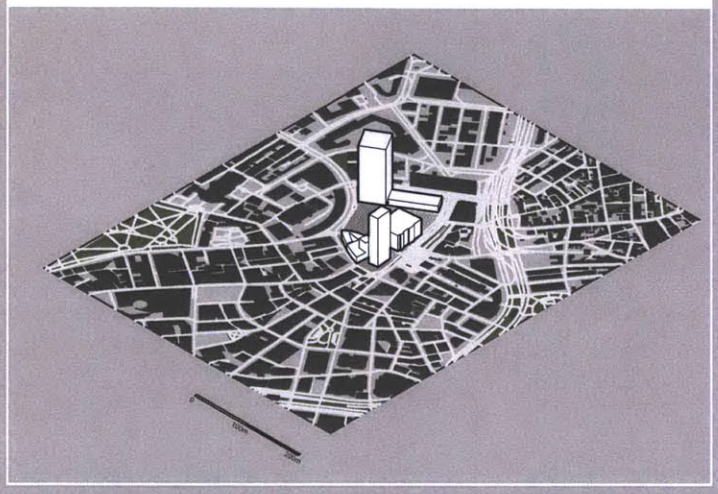

1936
Tweed
Courthouse
1927
Department
of Health
1941
NYC Criminal Court
1935
Court of
Appeals
1927
NYC Supreme Court
1914
Municipal Hall
1930
Marriage
Bureau
1939
Demolished
1900-1950
1994
Ted Weiss Federal Building
1991
US District Court
1975-2000

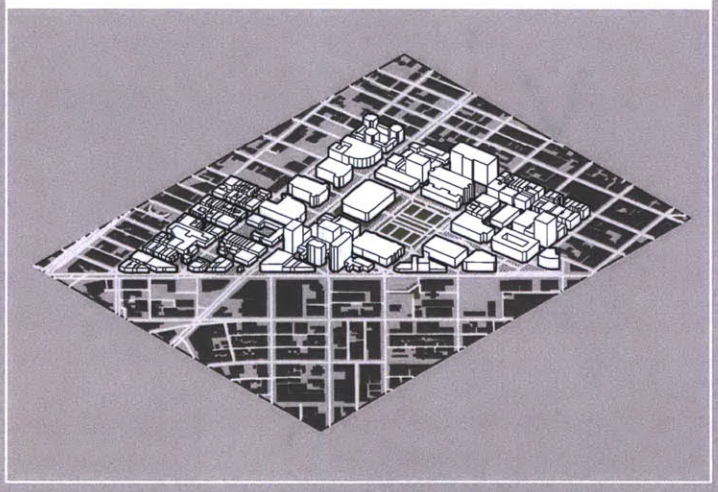
Figure 2.7 - Select US Cities with prominent Civic Centers

Boston, MA



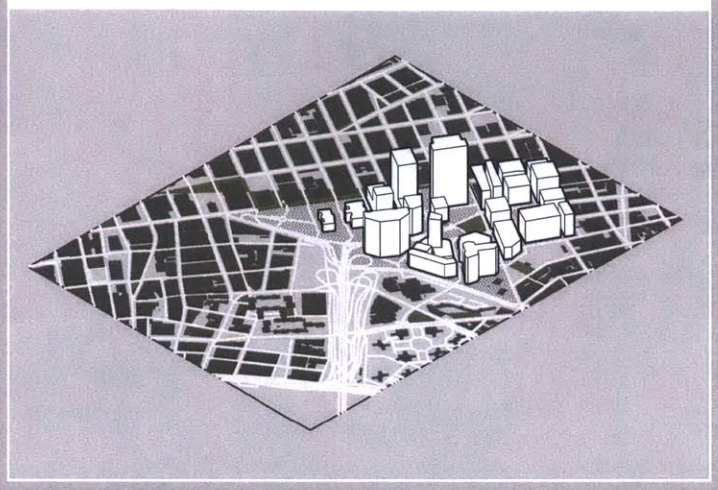
Metropolitan Population:	645,966
Metropolitan Area:	232.1 km²
Civic Center Area:	0.078 km²

San Francisco, CA



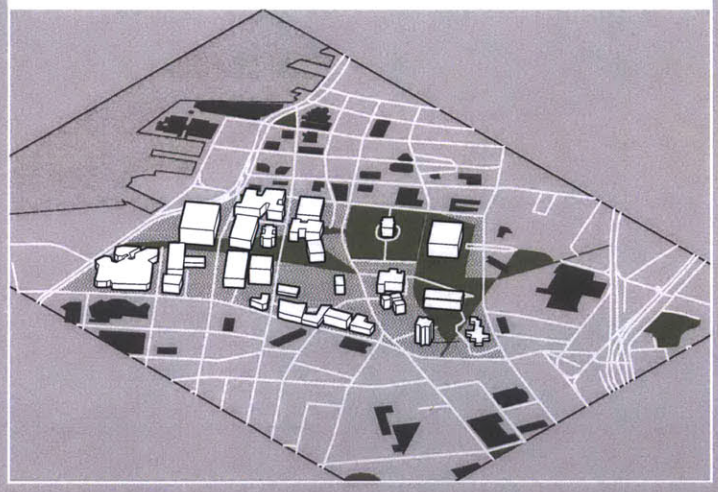
Metropolitan Population:	837,442
Metropolitan Area:	600.6 km²
Civic Center Area:	0.52 km²

New York, NY



Metropolitan Population:	8,406,000
Metropolitan Area:	1,214 km²
Civic Center Area:	0.27 km²

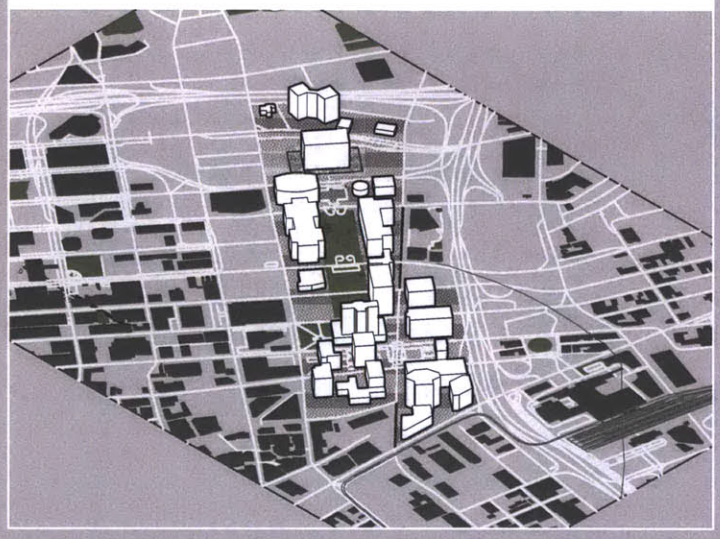
Honolulu, HI



Metropolitan Population:	374,658
Metropolitan Area:	177.2 km²
Civic Center Area:	0.54 km²

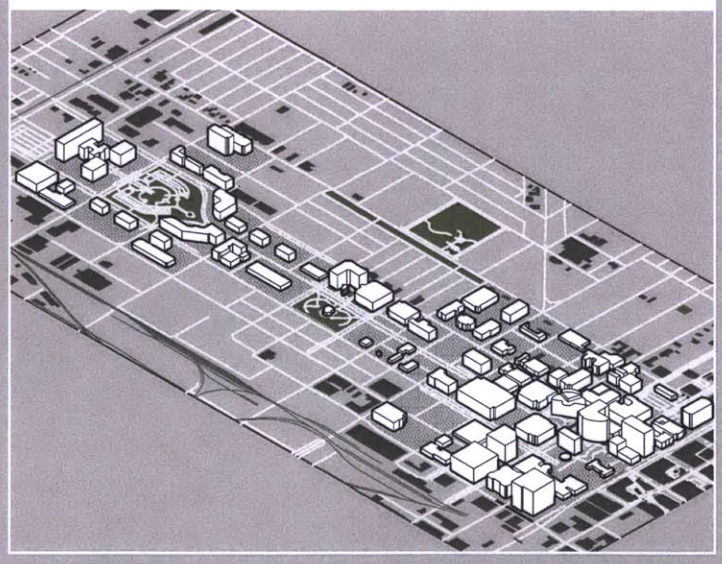
Figure 2.8 - Select US Cities with prominent Civic Centers (cont'd)

Los Angeles, CA



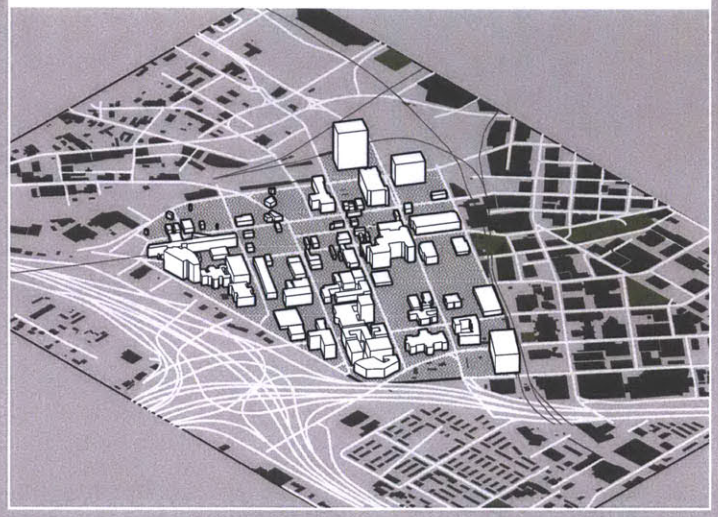
Metropolitan Population:	3,884,000
Metropolitan Area:	1,302 km²
Civic Center:	0.55 km²

Phoenix, AZ



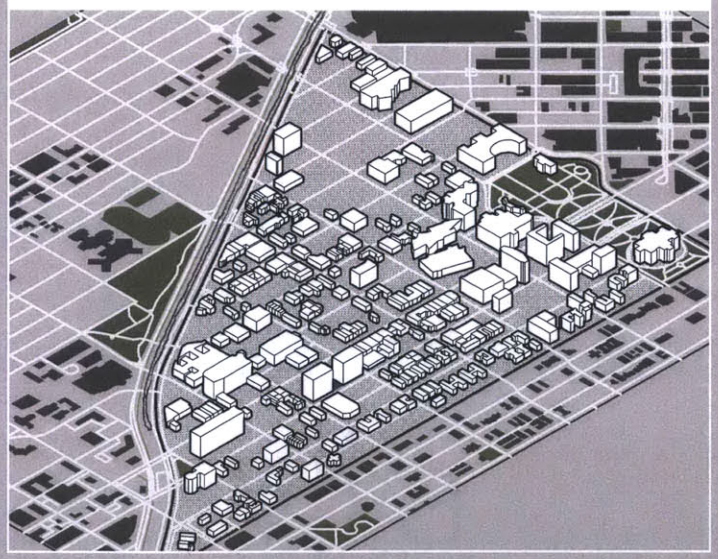
Metropolitan Population:	1,513,000
Metropolitan Area:	1,338 km²
Civic Center :	1.02 km²

Atlanta, GA



Metropolitan Population:	447,841
Metropolitan Area:	342.9 km²
Civic Center:	0.66 km²

Denver, CO



Metropolitan Population:	649,495
Metropolitan Area:	401.2 km²
Civic Center:	1.25 km²

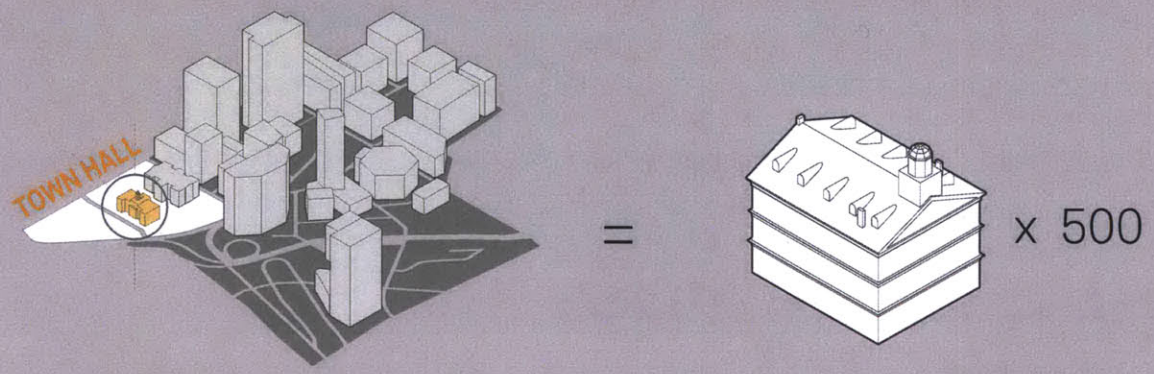


Figure 2.10

In colonial Boston, a town hall served roughtly 15,000 people. We would need an equivalent of 500 town halls for modern day New York City.

Figure 2.11 - Manhanttan Island Rendering

New York City, as many of the major cities in the US do, has a large and prominent civic center. It is a collection of municipal buildings such as offices, bureaus, and courts. The extreme singularity of the programs dedicated to civic service, along with restricted access, makes the civic center a zone that is autonomous and disengaged from the rest of the city.

The city hall plaza, as a public park around city hall that was intended for the public, has heavily forested walkways, fenced off gardens, as well as guarded access points. The result is a city hall plaza that has only slivers of public space available for use. Circulation hovers around the edge of the plaza, and never really penetrates into the site.

TThe architecture and landscape posits a relationship between the people and the government that is quite contrary to ideals of democracy. As the seat and symbol of the city government, the New York city hall can be perceived by the public to be inaccessible. Perhaps that is the intention for security purposes. The town hall, which fomented many democratic movements, worked well for a small municipality, but fails to serve as the platform, or interface, between the government and the people in the case of a large metropolis.

At the same time, the city hall plaza provides an opportunity for design interventions to re-engage the public.

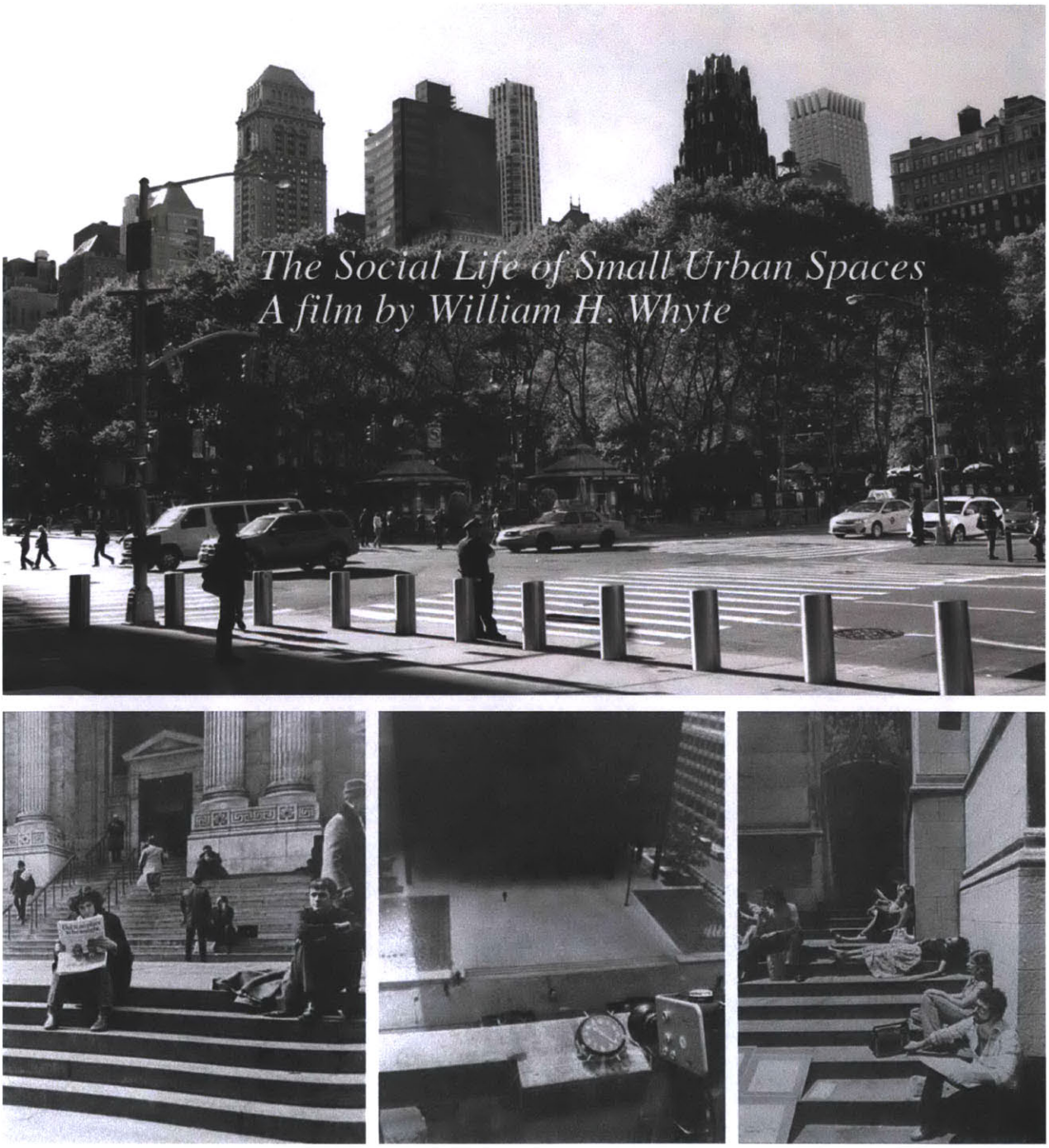
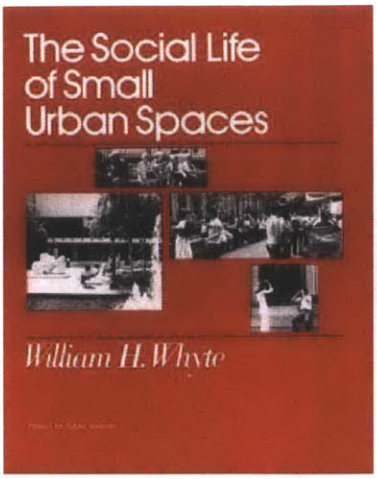


Figure 3.1 Images © William Whyte, Social Life of Small Urban Spaces



Chapter 3 /
The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

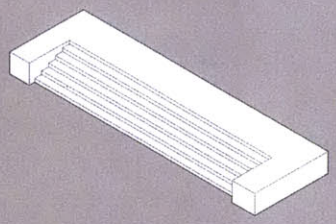
In order for the city hall plaza to re-integrated with the urban fabric, we must first study what makes a public space successful. As an interface between the people and the government, the density of the plaza as an often-used space is crucial.

The large plaza in front of the typical city hall serves many purposes. It is flexible and can host large events such as large scale protests, concerts, etc., as shown in Figure 2.4. However, its scale is not suitable for small groups of people. Therefore, the solution is not to simply re-establish the empty plaza, but instead to study the success and density in other urban spaces. The low density of the city hall plaza is problematic - for interfacing between the people and the public, we first need to establish the city hall plaza as some sort of landmark for New York City.

William Whyte studied the social spaces of NYC, observing why some are more successful than others. The successful ones are densely used, and he formulated a couple of points why people gather there.

1. Spaces to sit - the landscape
2. Things to look at - objects in the landscape

Landscape



The Seagram Plaza attracts many people on its peripheries, where there are steps for people to sit. Similarly, MIT's 77 Mass Ave entrance boasts a flight of stairs that people make use of.

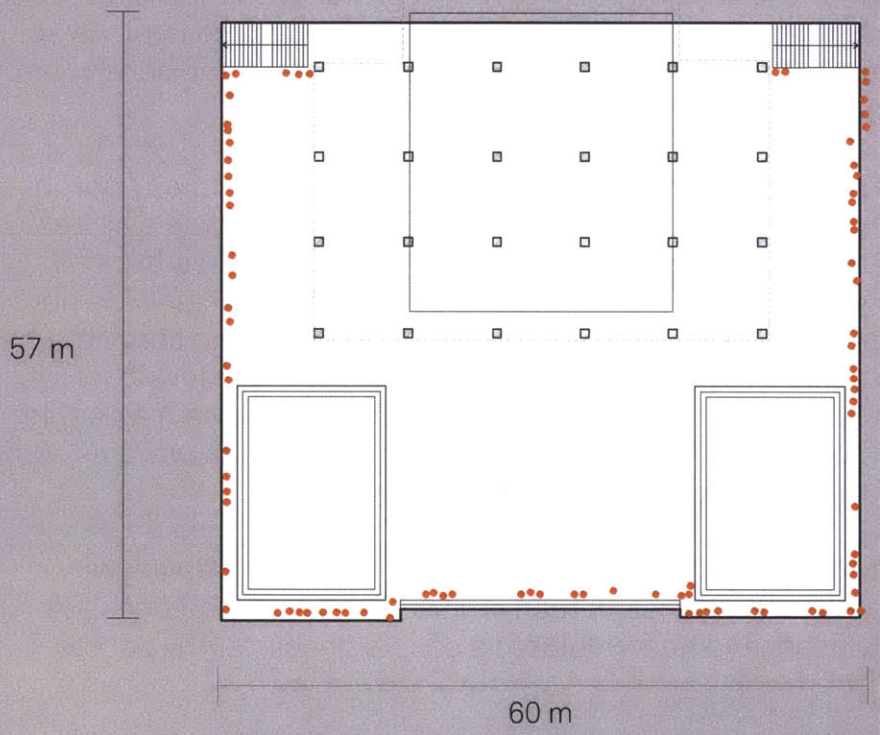


Figure 3.4 - Seagram Plaza in NYC, as observed by William Whyte

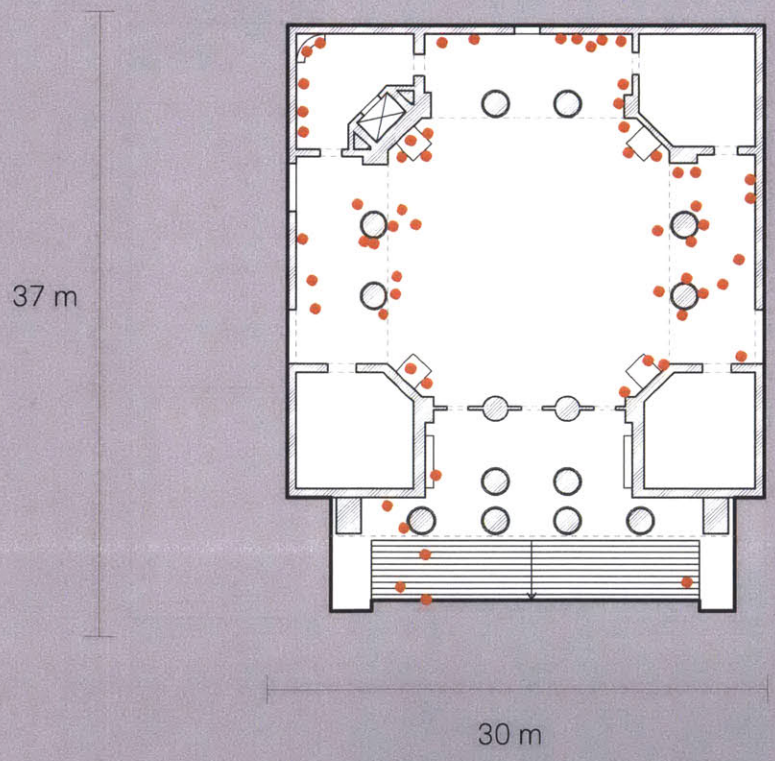
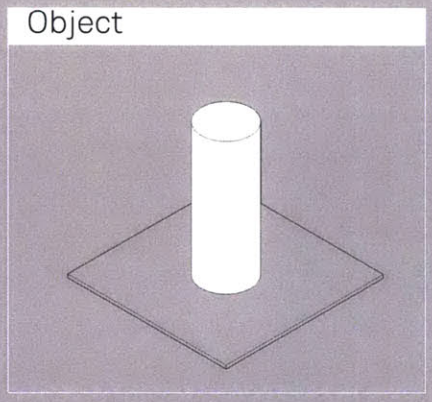


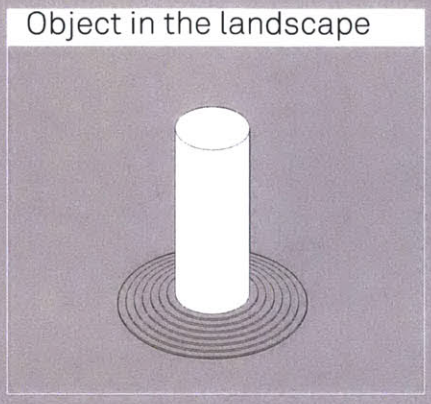
Figure 3.5 - Massachusetts Institute of Technology Lobby 7, as observed by the author



A sculpture on the Seagram Plaza attracts and invites passerbys to stop and interact. One can call these objects as they are not connected to the landscape. Similarly, people cluster around the flagpoles in the otherwise flat plaza in San Marco square in Venice.

Figure 3.4 - Seagram Plaza in NYC, as observed by William Whyte

Figure 3.5 - Saint Marco Plaza in Venice, as observed by William Whyte



Boston's city hall plaza is notorious for being empty. However, the parts that are used, when the weather outside is not too cold, are these small objects in the landscape - vents or entrances for the subway. Similarly, inside MIT's Lobby 7, in a crowded situation, people tend to cluster around the columns in the space.

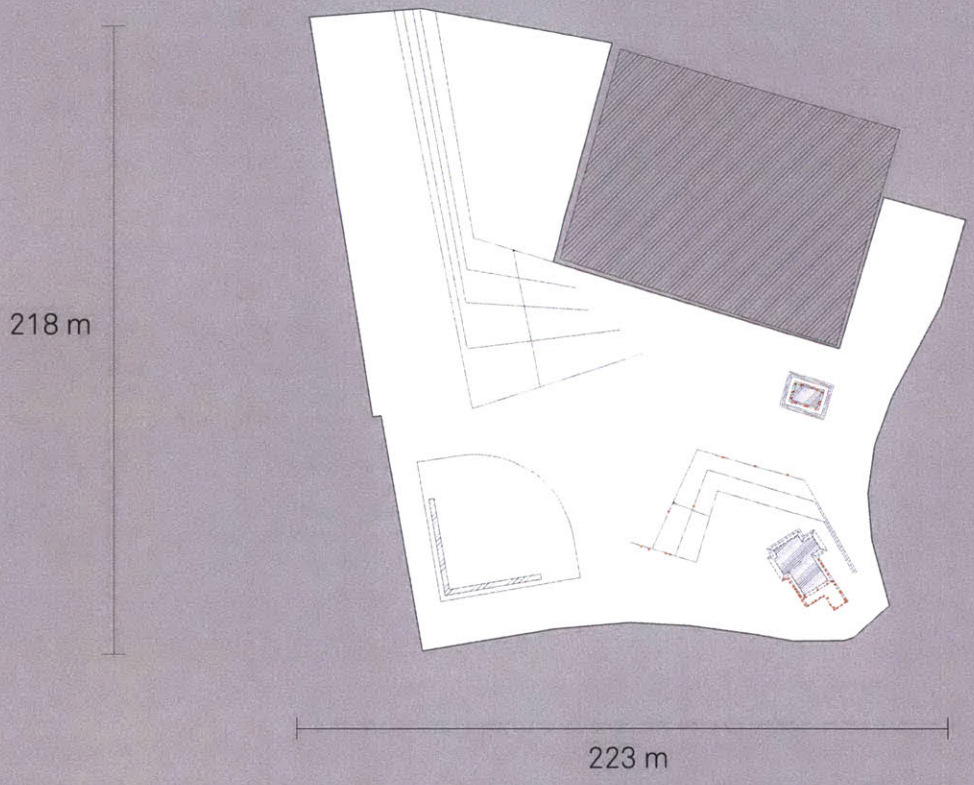


Figure 3.6 - Boston city hall plaza as observed by the author

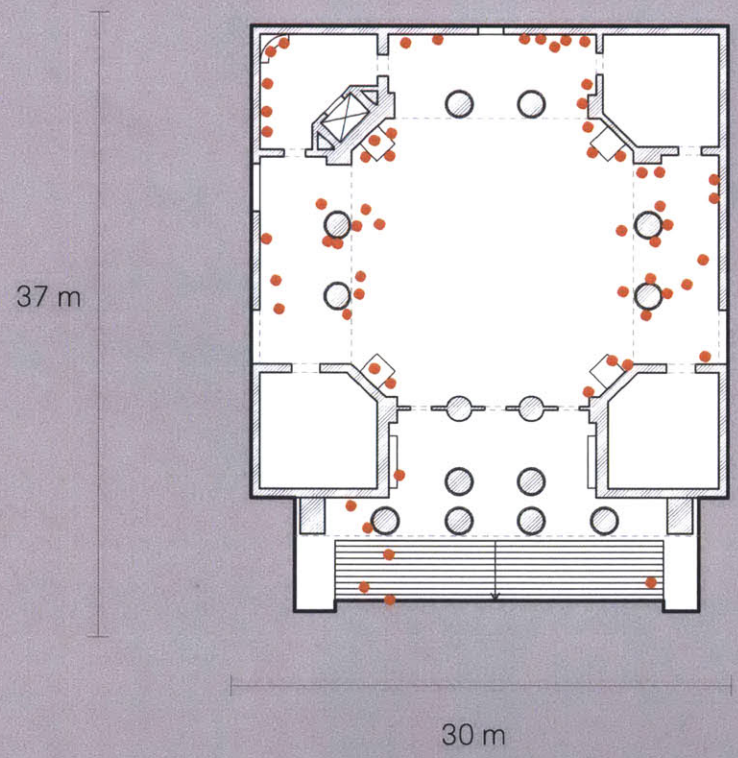


Figure 3.7 - MIT Lobby 7 as observed by the author

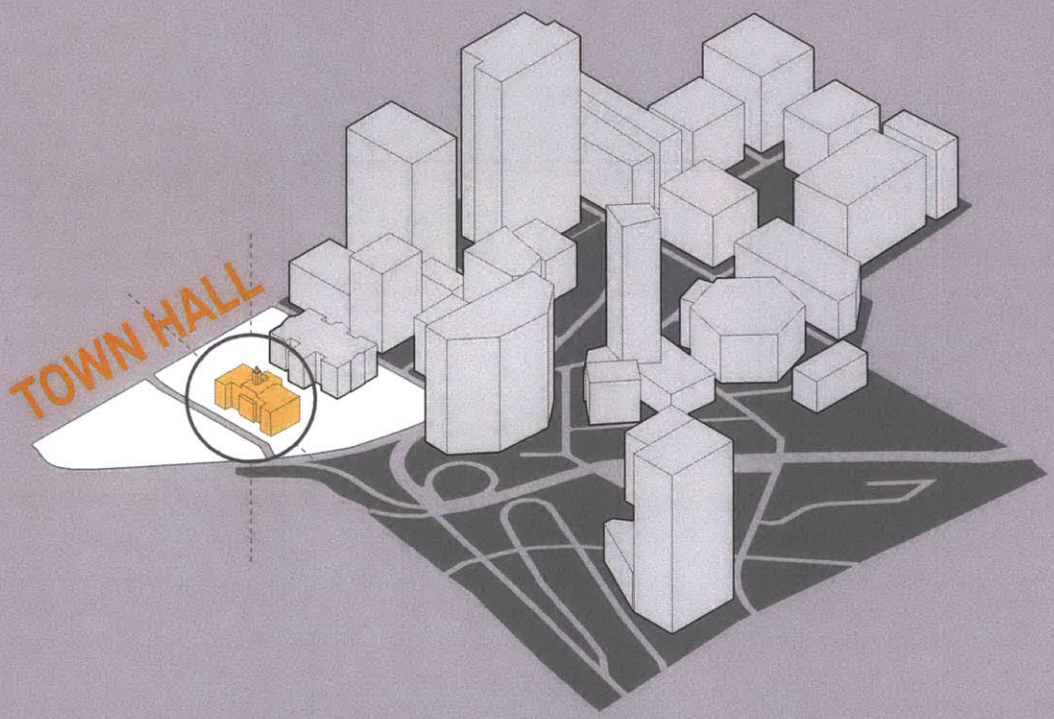


Figure 4.1 - New York City civic center and city hall plaza

Chapter 4 /
New York City Hall

The first structure that one might call the town hall, was built during the 12th century in Bergamo, Italy. The style, which influenced many town halls later, had an open ground floor, which allowed public functions to exist concurrently with the government chambers. Thus, the town hall was a place where people gathered to socialize. This thesis seeks to incorporate the social aspect of the town hall back into the civic center.

Going back to the original building of the New York Civic Center, namely the city hall and the city hall plaza park, this thesis proposes a different type of expansion of the civic center, where architectural components that characterize the "townhall-ness" is reintroduced to the Civic Center, through small scaled interventions that serve as the platforms, interfaces, between the civic and the people - facilitating, encouraging, and setting up interactions.

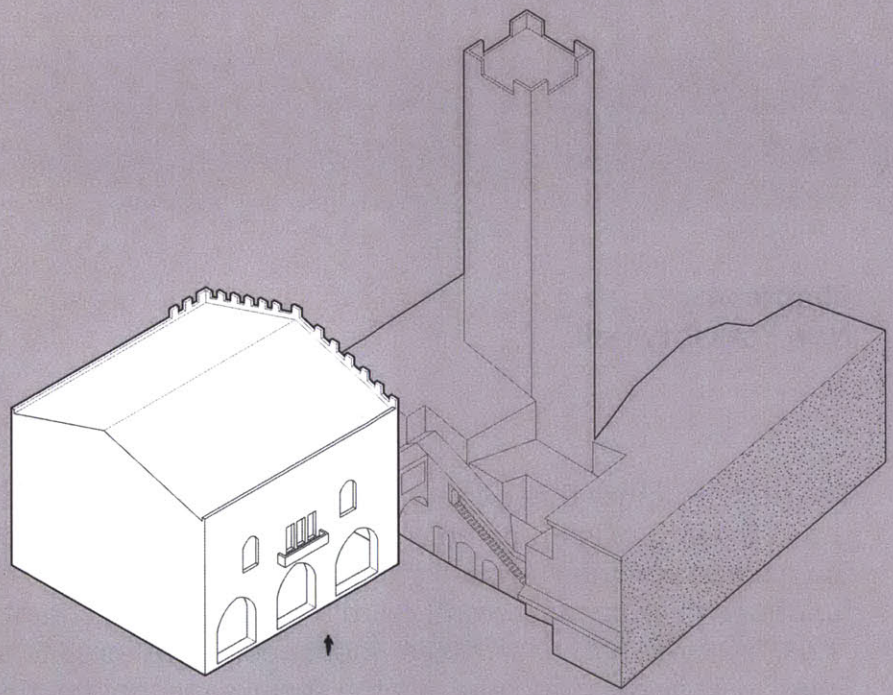


Figure 4.2
Old Town Hall
Bergamo, Italy
12th Century

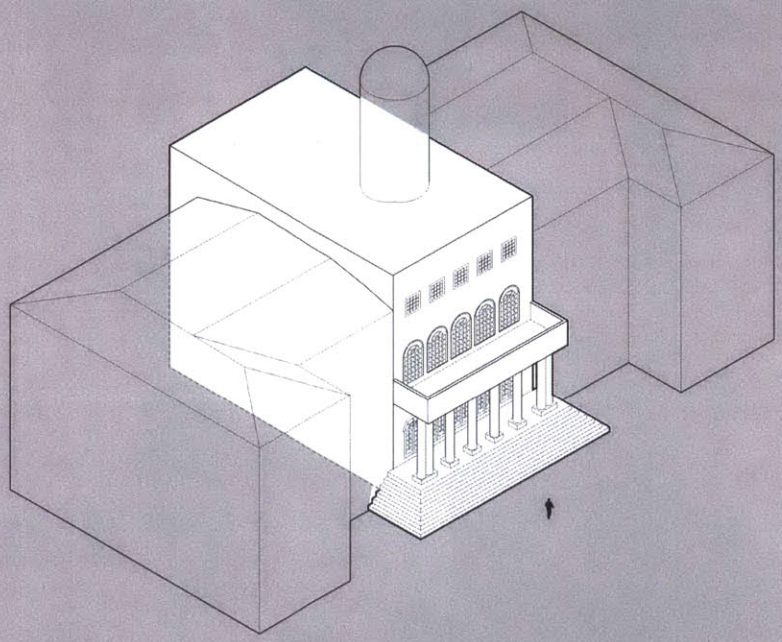


Figure 4.3
New York City Hall
New York, USA
19th Century

The town hall in Bergamo sets up an archetypal structure with an open ground floor, a chamber for the city council on the second floor, and a balcony that opens up to the plaza in front of the town hall.

Later town halls from different countries echo this composition, and we can see remnants of it in the New York city hall above. There is a balcony on the second floor, and there are suggestions of an open arcade on the first floor. However, the resemblance only goes skin-deep. The first floor is by no means open to the public, and the second floor chamber in this case is a ceremonial and exclusive dining room reserved for dignitaries.

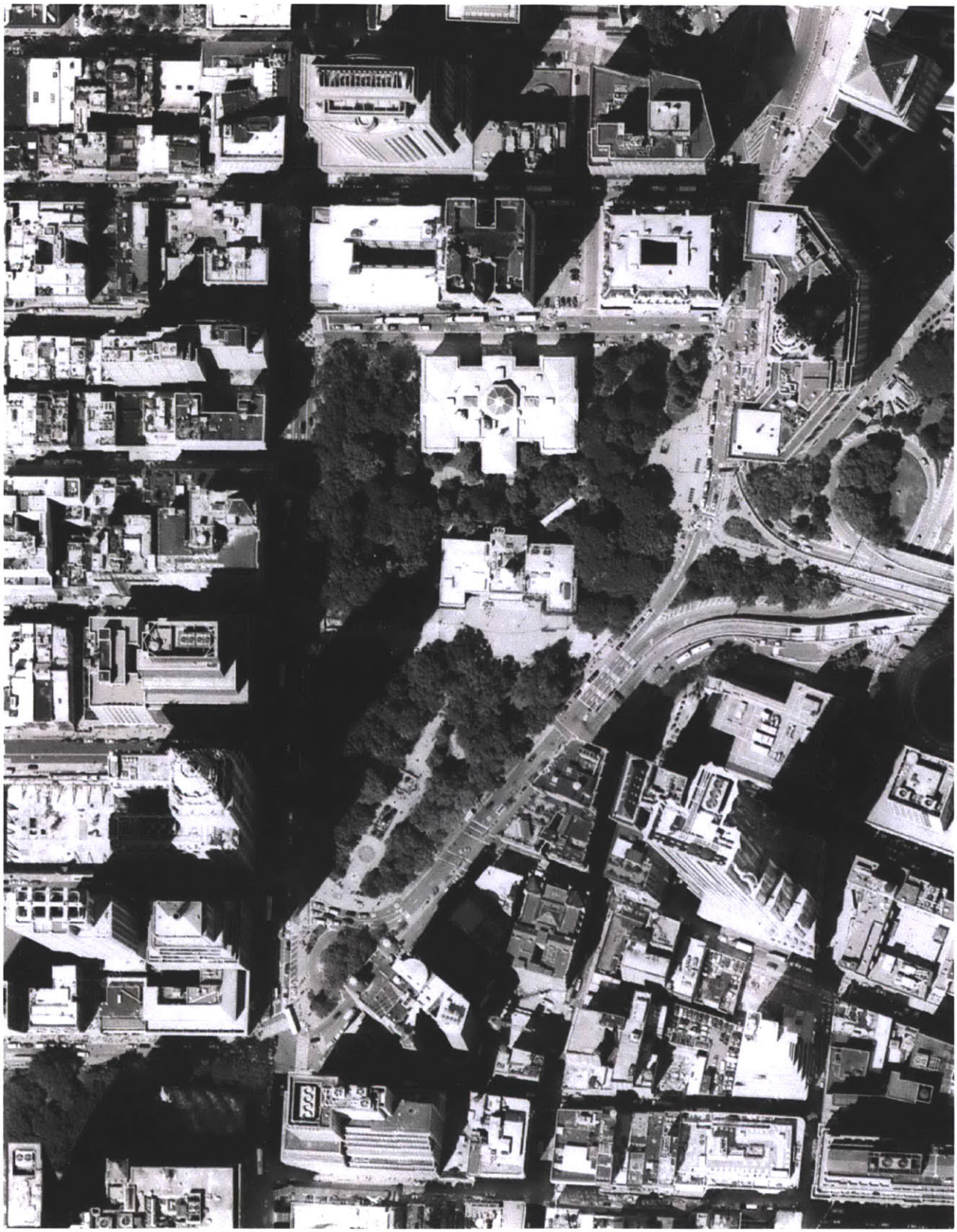


Figure 4.4 - Aerial Image of the city hall plaza and surroundings ©Google Maps

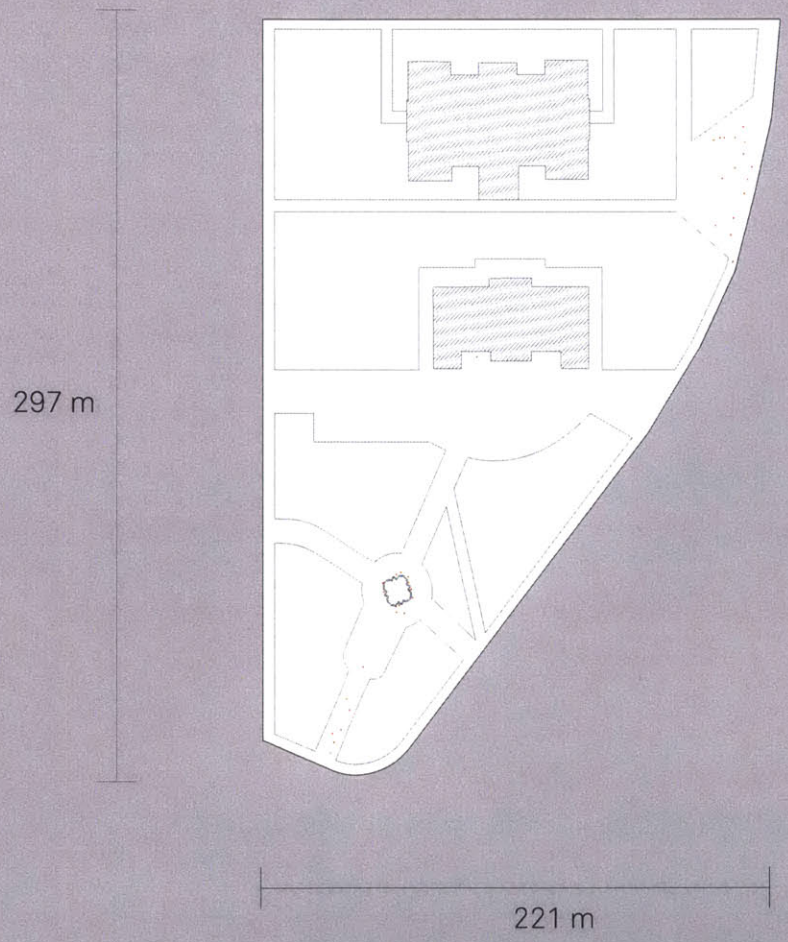


Figure 4.5 - Where people gather in the New York city hall plaza, as observed by the author

Figure 4.6 - Forested Picturesque

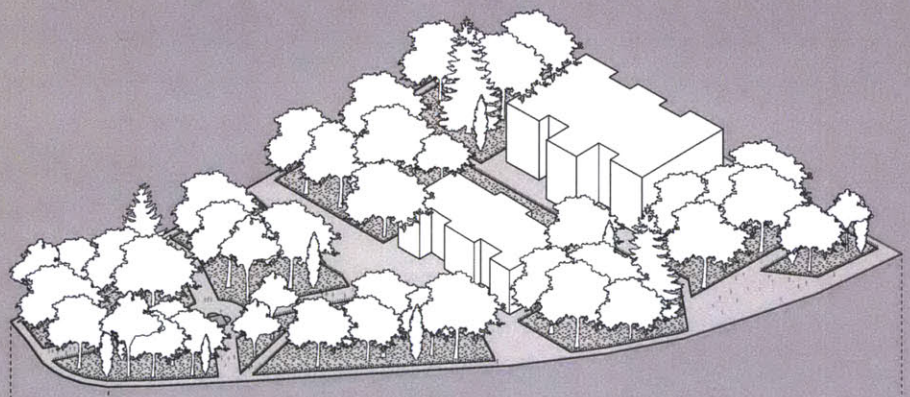


Figure 4.7 - Projected Public Space and Garden

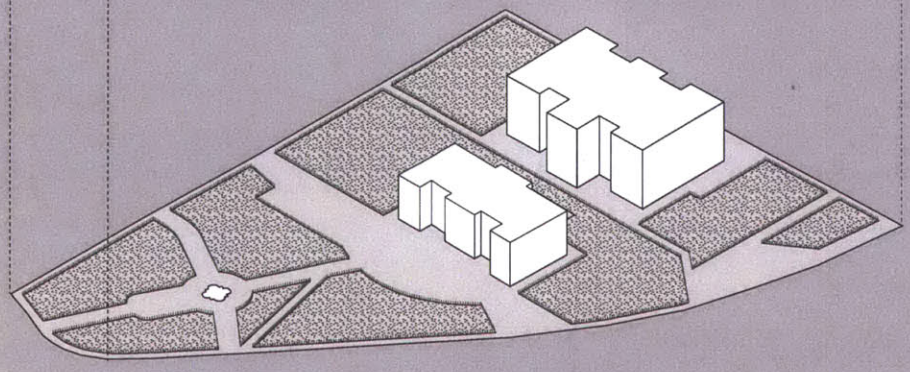


Figure 4.8 Restricted Access Zones

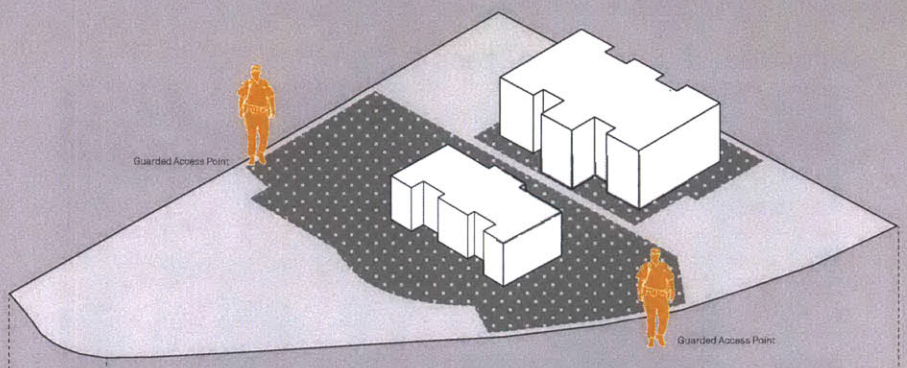
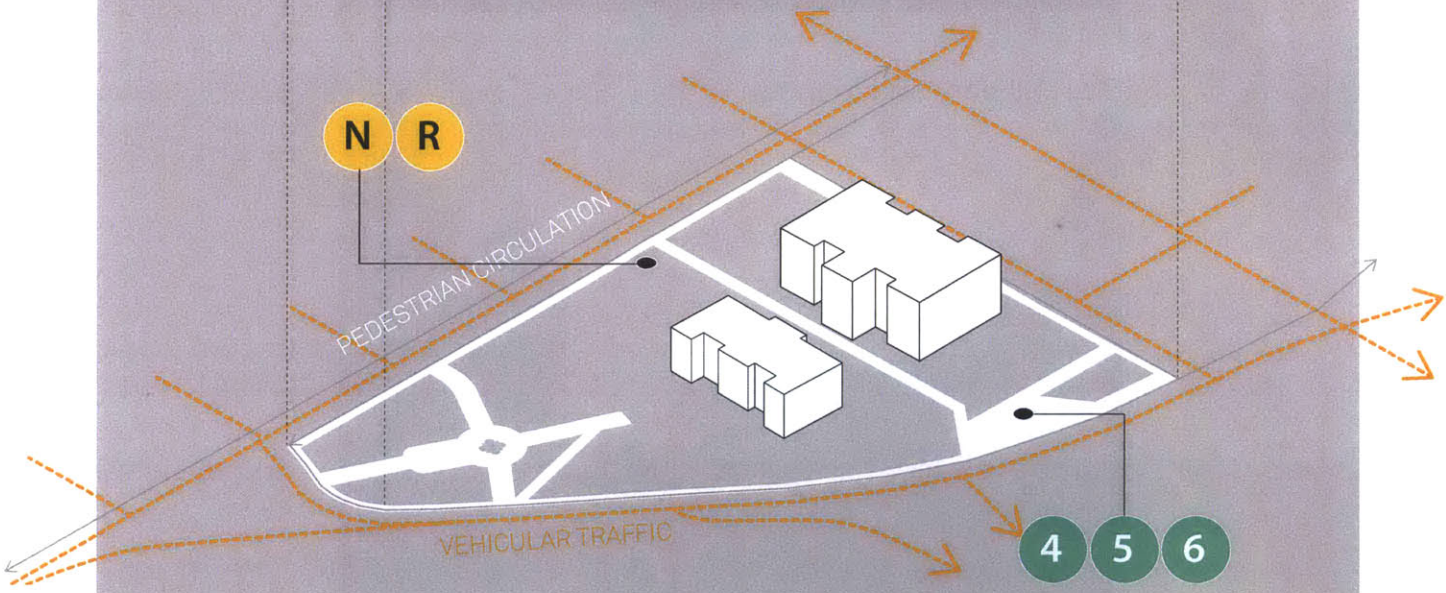


Figure 4.9 Actual Public and Circulation



City Hall - Restricted Access

Figure 4.10

City hall park and fountain

Figure 4.11

Fence surrounds the city hall's perimeter, with a strong security presence of the New York City Police Department. Public access to the building is restricted to tours and to those with specific business appointments.

Tweed Courthouse

Figure 4.12

Plaza edge circulation

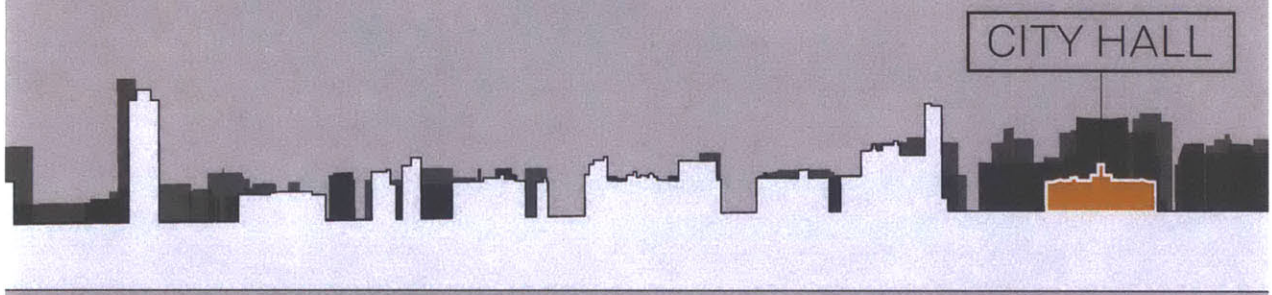
Figure 4.13

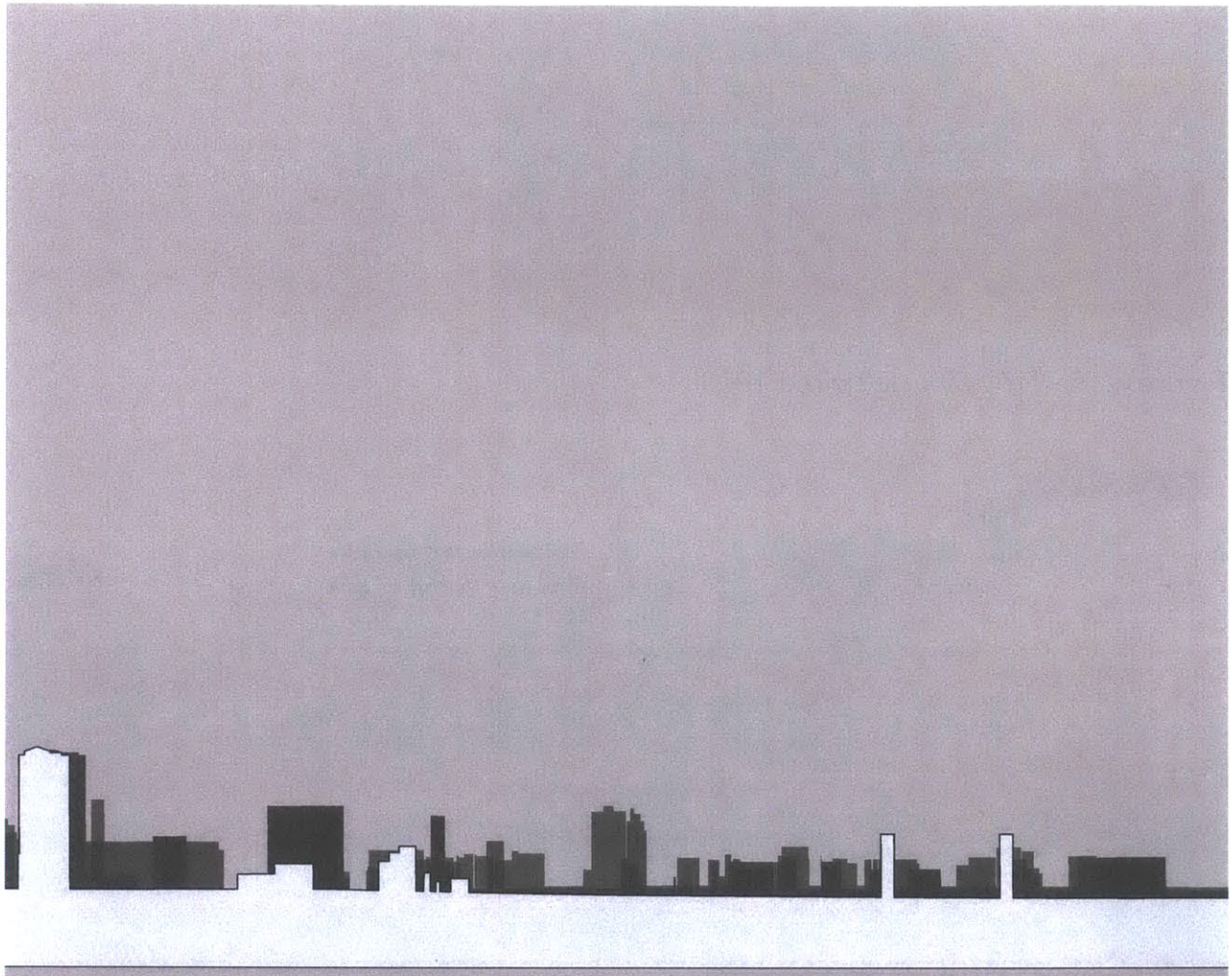
City hall park viewed from the west

Figure 4.14

BROADWAY
ALL
TRAFFIC

Figure 4.15 - Section AA through Manhattan Island





The development of high-rises in New York City leaves the city hall dwarved by its surroundings. The city hall plaza park, with the density of trees, creates a seclusive villa-in-forest environment for the city hall.

Figure 4.16 - NYC City Hall circa 1903

Figure 4.17 - NYC City Hall in 2014

The former city hall plaza was open to the public, with people passing through and spending time in the park. For purpose of security, the plaza has been closed off to civilians by fences, restricted access zones, as well as guarded access points.

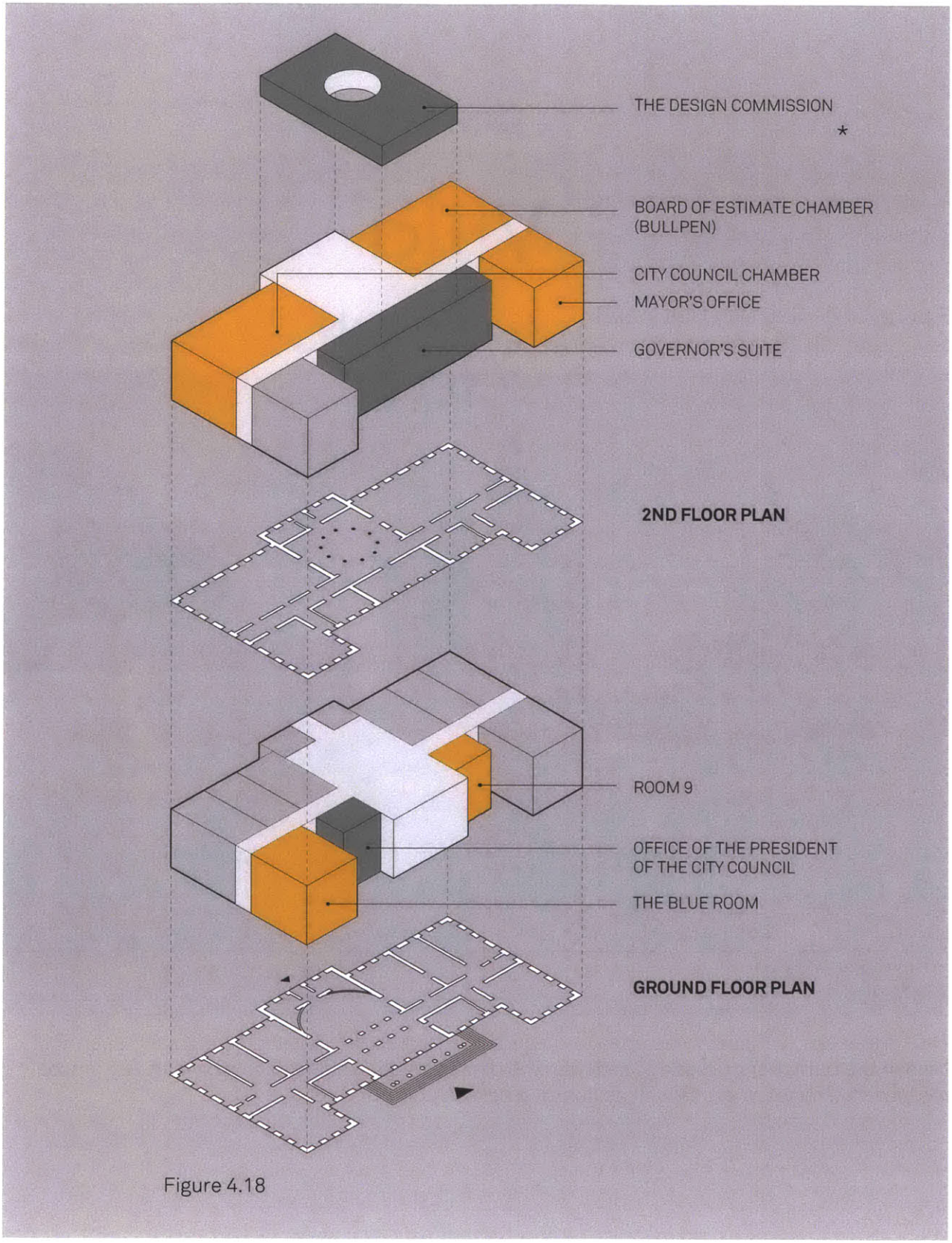

THE DESIGN COMMISSION
*
BOARD OF ESTIMATE CHAMBER
(BULLPEN)
CITY COUNCIL CHAMBER
MAYOR'S OFFICE
GOVERNOR'S SUITE
2ND FLOOR PLAN
ROOM 9
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
OF THE CITY COUNCIL
THE BLUE ROOM
GROUND FLOOR PLAN

Figure 4.18

Figure 4.19 - City hall facade

Constructed: **1812**
Architects: **Joseph-François Mangin and John McComb, Jr**

Official receptions are held in the Governor's room, which has hosted many dignitaries including the Marquis de Lafayette and Albert Einstein. The historic Blue Room is where New York City mayors have been giving official press conferences for decades and is often used for bill-signing ceremonies. Room 9 is the press room at City Hall where reporters file stories in cramped quarters. The steps of City Hall frequently provide a backdrop for political demonstrations and press conferences concerning city politics.

* **The location of the rooms are not accurate, but are hypothesized based on limited information available.**

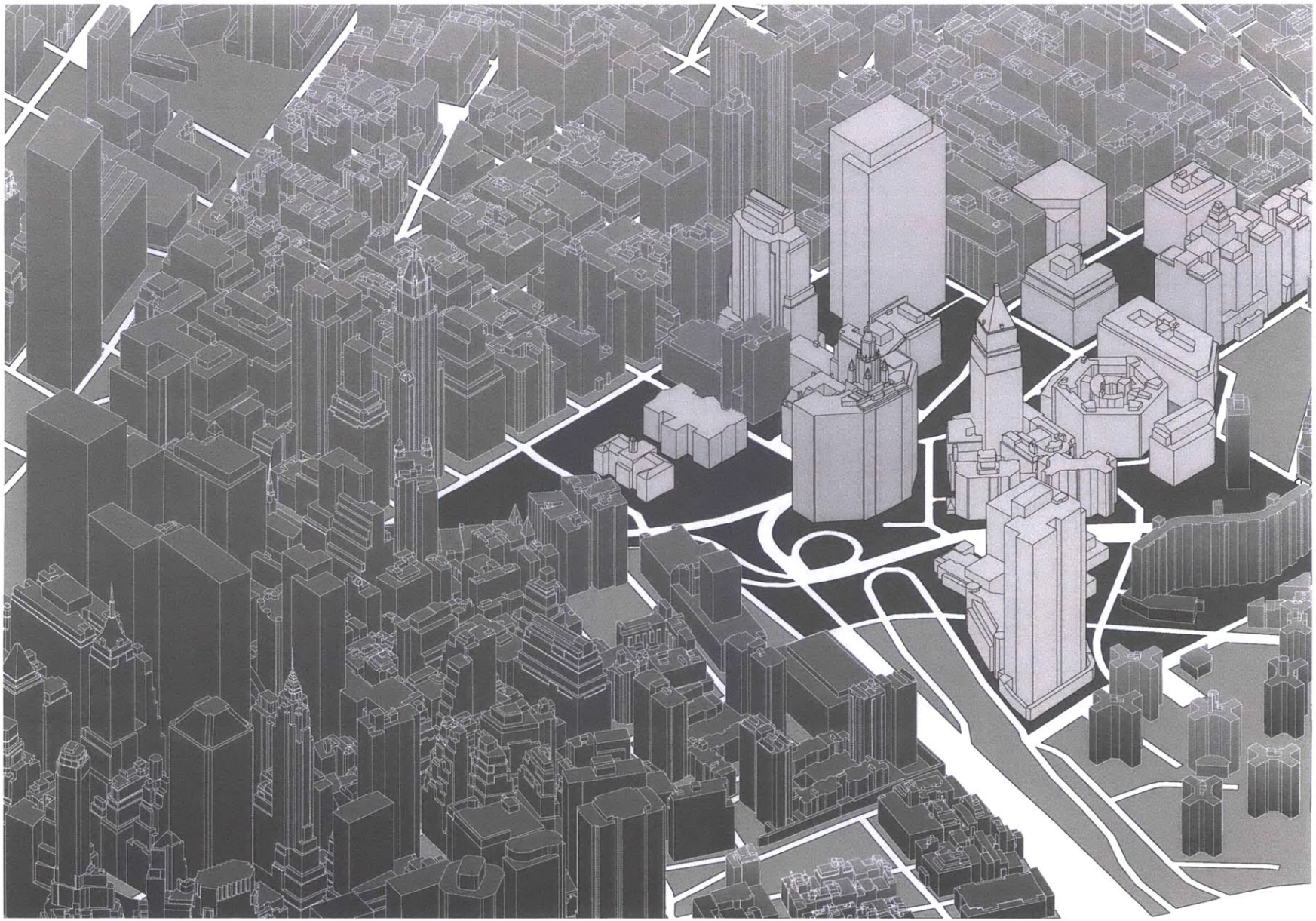


Figure 5.1 - Axonometric of New York

Chapter 5 /
The Four Interventions

The power of architecture, in a statement that perhaps undermines the role of architectural design, lies in very fact that something exists as a physical object in the physical world. The design, whether the structure is round or angular, comes after the fact that the structure exists. The purpose of the structure and what it is perceived as form the inherent value of existence.

In the same manner, by providing these small platforms that serve as the interface between the people and the city hall government, half of the work would be done if the roles of these structures are made clear and are recognized by both parties.

For example, let us go to a more diminutive scale. A comment box is a physical object that serves as a connection between two parties. A restaurant management might put out a box for feedback from its customers. Whether the box is large, green, or made out of wood, does not matter as much as the fact that the comment box exists. The inherent value of the comment box, then, is its intended purpose as a liaison between two parties that otherwise might not come into contact with each other.

The point, in this case, is that the psychological state of both parties are satisfied: the customers recognize the effort of the restaurant management through the comment box, thinking that their opinions will be heard, and these opinions are accessible to the restaurant in a candid manner. Of course, whether the comments are read, is another story.

The comment box, perhaps not very costly, finds that it has a high inherent value in its physical existence, as a signifier of a larger intent. The interventions of this thesis, finds inherent value not in the shape or large size of the platforms, but in the fact that they (would) exist, on the city hall plaza, next to the city hall. These platforms would serve as psychological signifiers to both the government and the civilians who use them, that these structures were placed there as "town halls", carrying out ideals of democracy.

The design of these platforms, then, centers around the individual. One might argue that the essence of democracy lies in the people; the public makes its mind heard through democratic voting or public protests. In a dense metropolis such as New York City, large protests such as the "Occupy" movements are powerful in that they gather masses of people and disrupt quotidian rhythms by taking over places that were not originally meant for public assembly. The individual, or causes that pertain to a select few, becomes problematic because it is hard to get these voices heard. The massive scale of the skyscrapers dwarfs small demonstrations. Therefore, these interventions are designed with the scale of the individual in mind - it legitimizes the voices of the few.

The interventions in this thesis are based on agonism. The term agonism refers to conflict, but in an optimistic manner that conflict can be constructive. Because human societies are able to communicate and elaborate either verbally or visually, conflict can lead to resolution. Thus, these intervention spaces, by inviting interactions between two parties, creates an environment that encourages constructive discourse.

Figure 5.2 - Site Model, Scale = 1/500

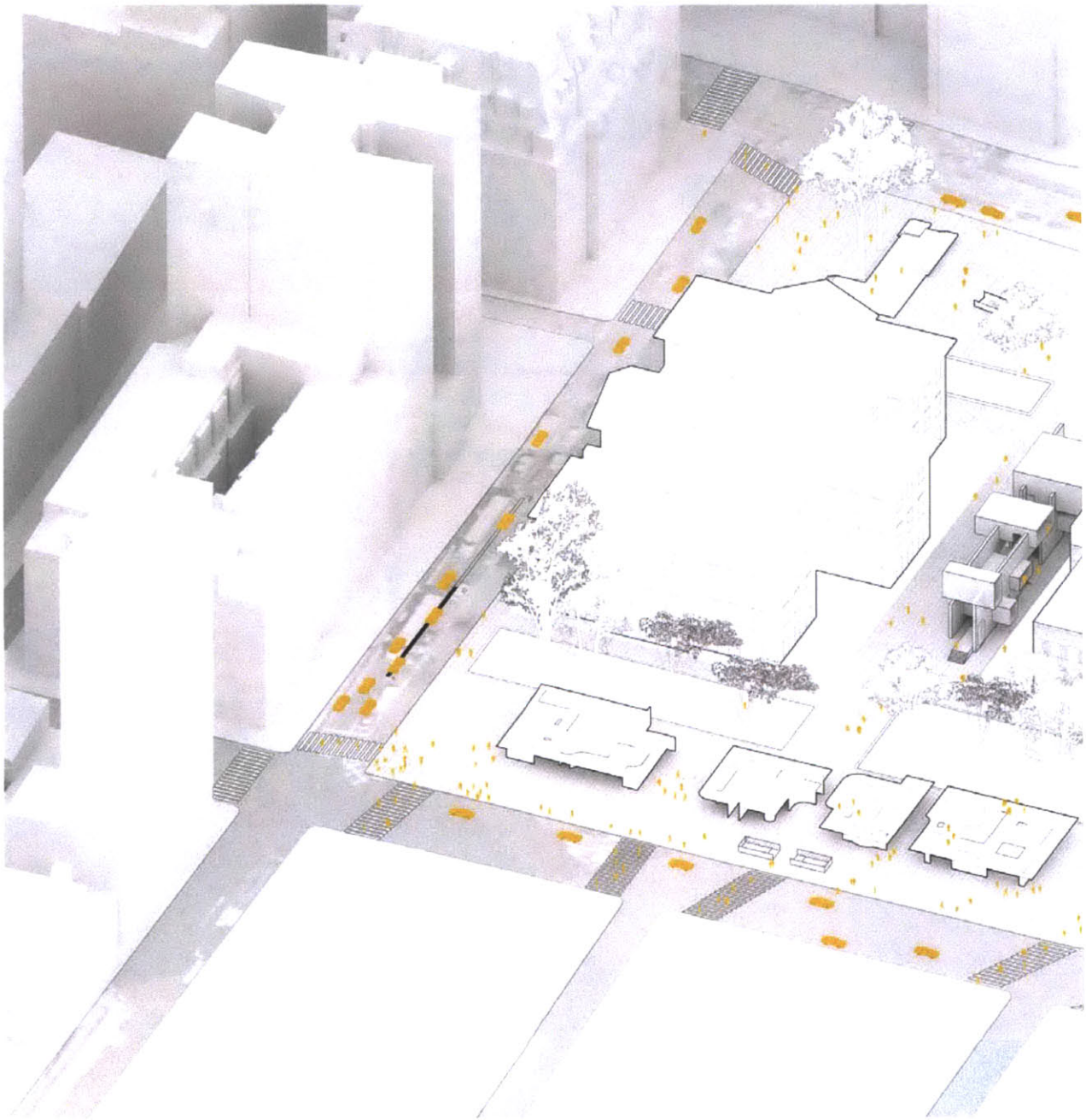
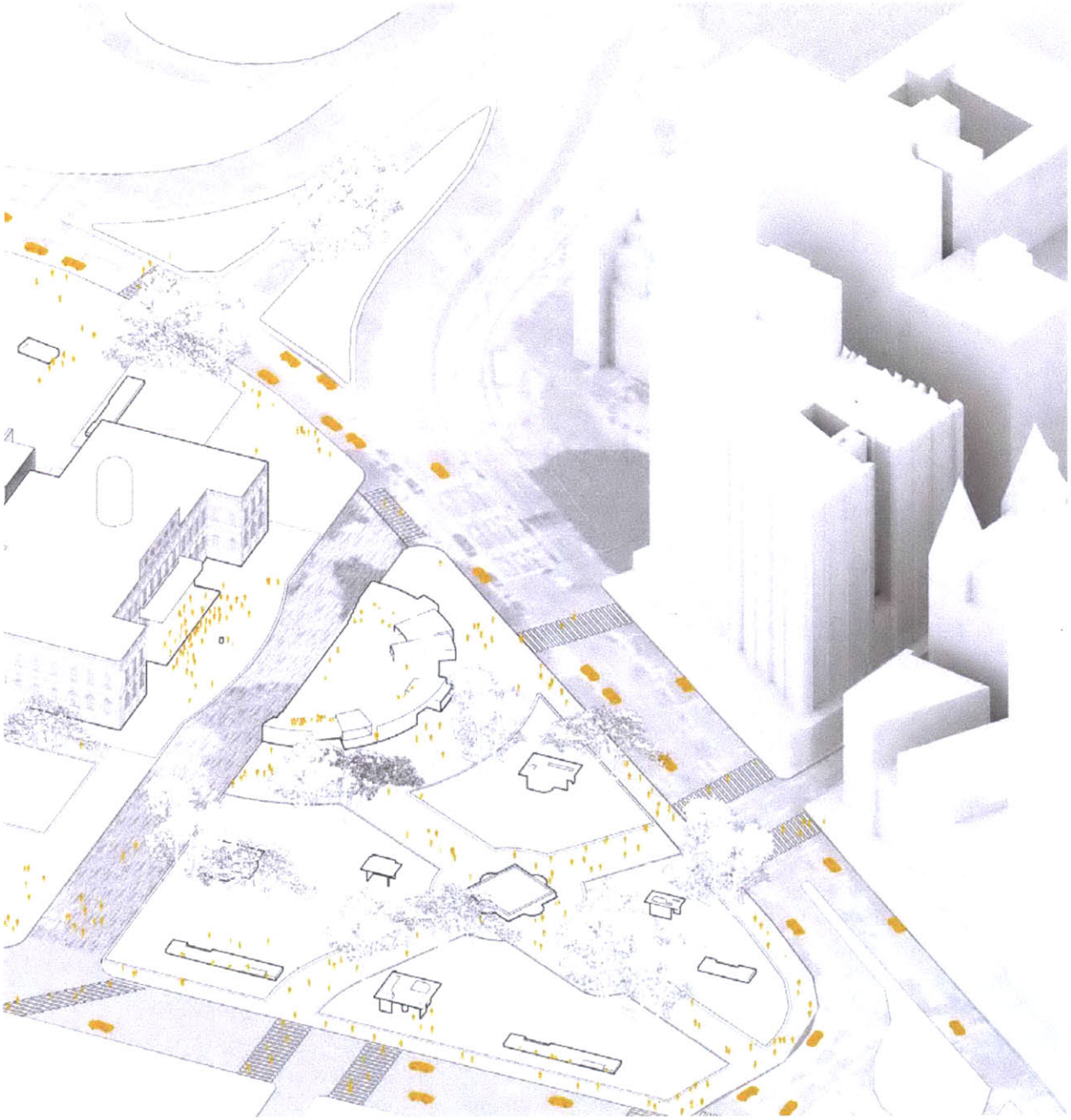


Figure 5.3 - Site Axonometric



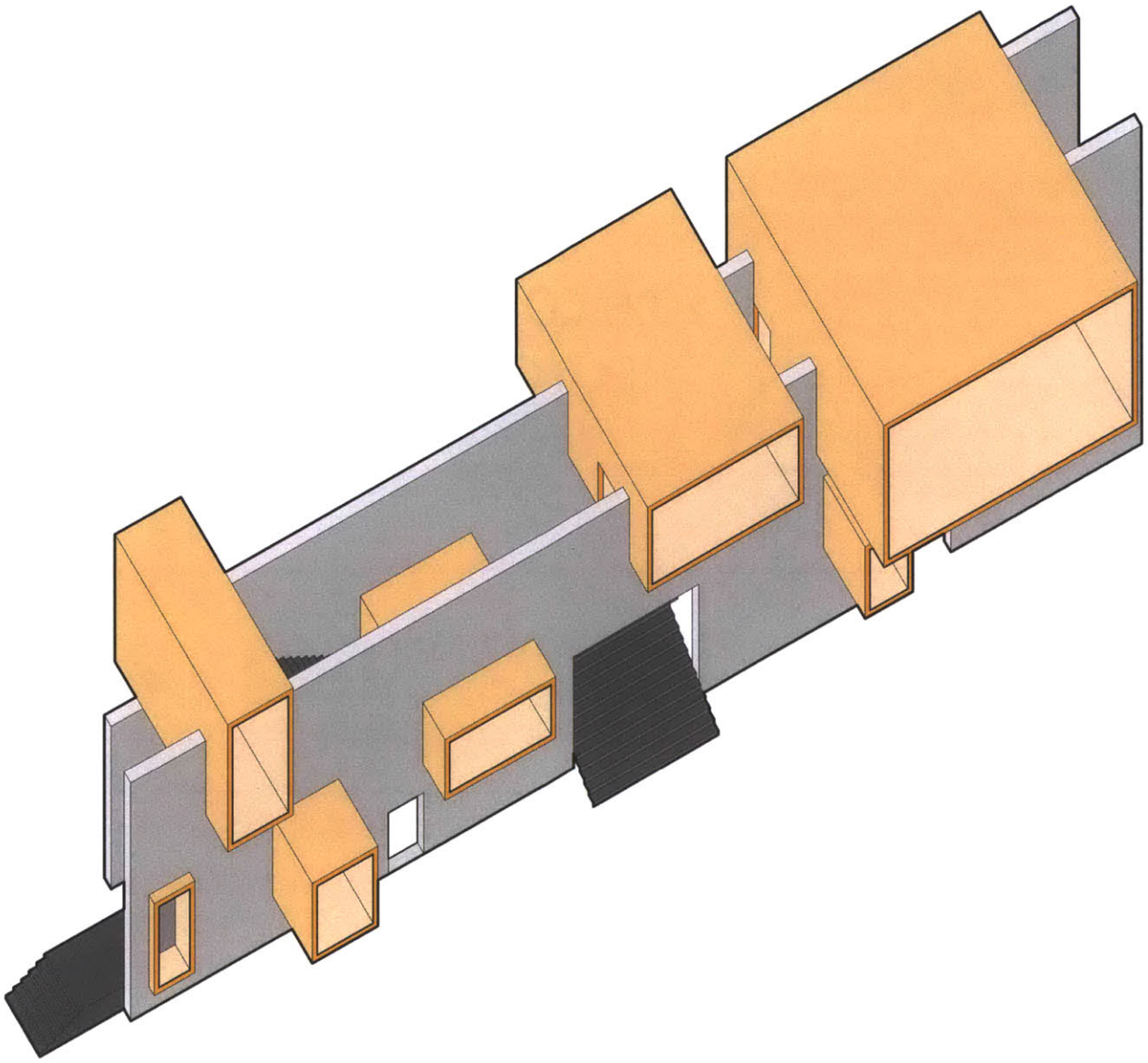


Figure 5a.1 - Axonometric

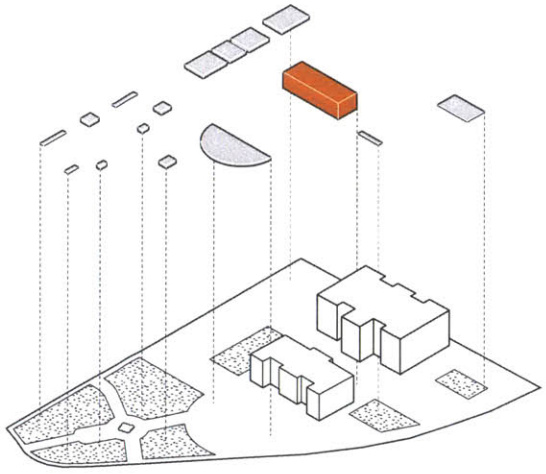


Figure 5a.2

Chapter 5a /
The Moments of Connection

The first intervention is the most explicit and borders on being disagreeable for the people in city hall. The structure is a series of tubes that are supported by two concrete walls, and are made accessible and linked by stairs. These tubes allow the civilians to peer into the offices and meeting rooms of the city government. These tubes become platforms that create visual connections between two spaces that are topologically separate, but spatially echo each other through size, sectional position, and visibility.

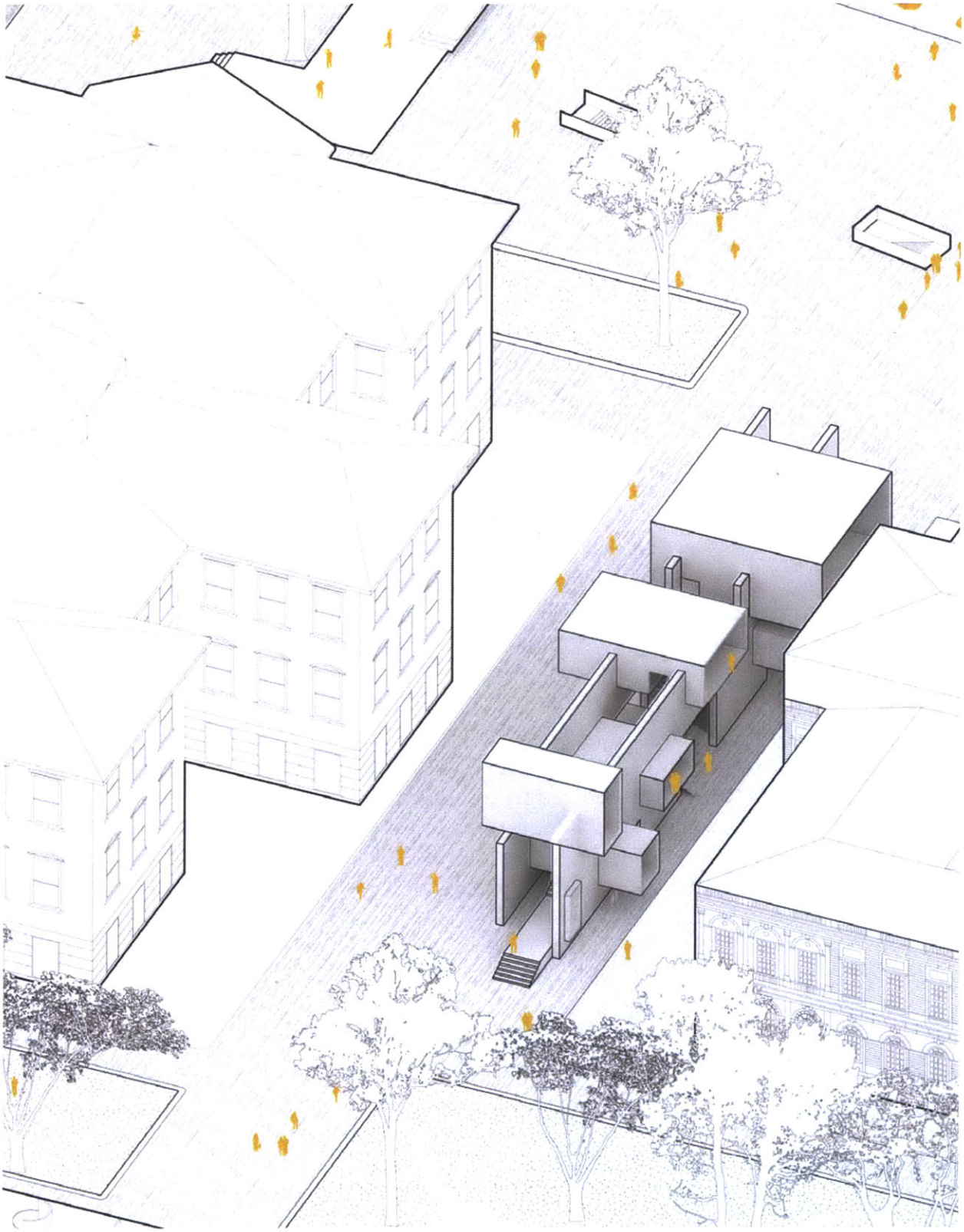


Figure 5a.3 - Close up of site axon

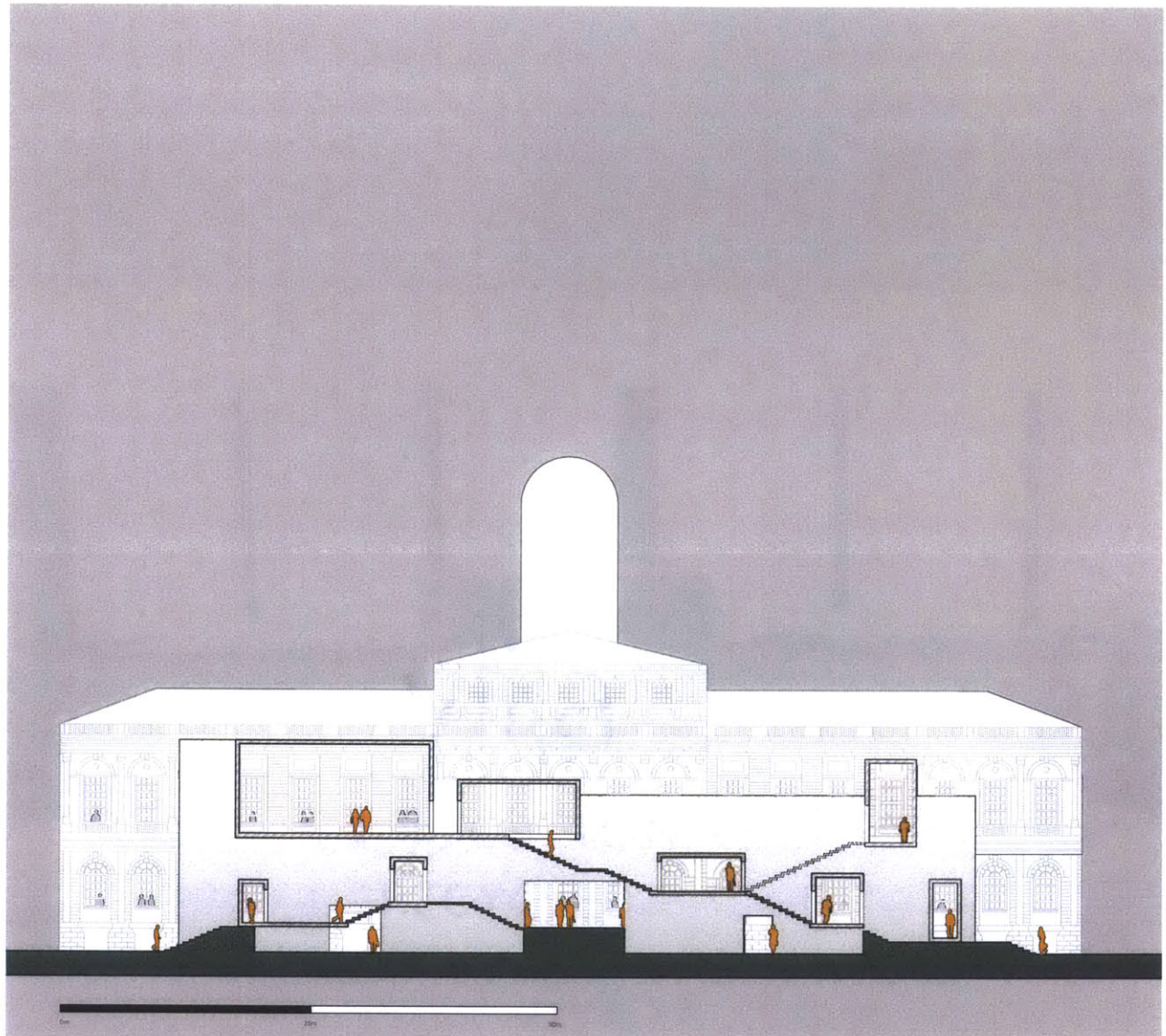


Figure 5a.4 - Section Drawing

Figure 5a.5

Figure 5a.6

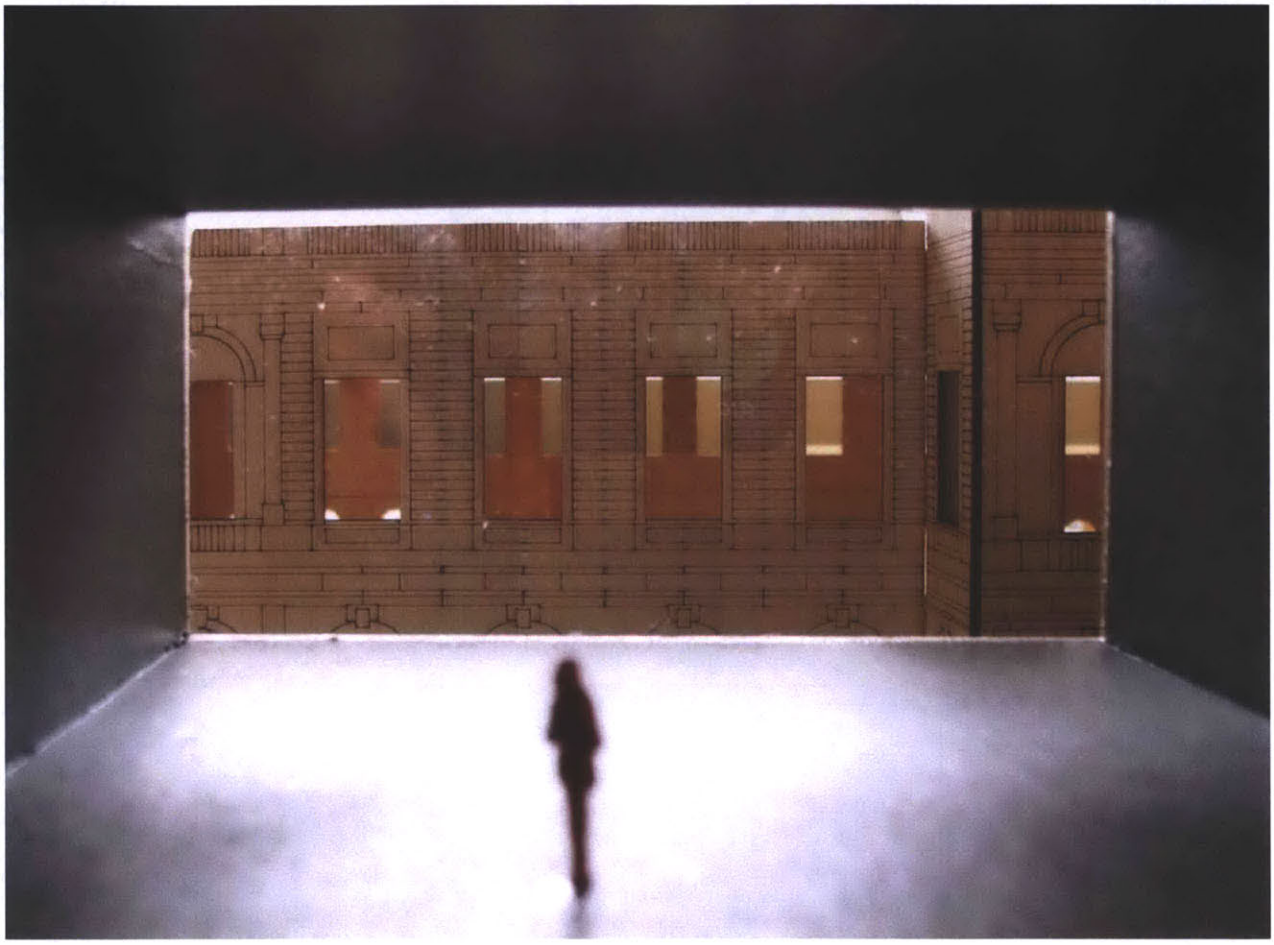


Figure 5a.7 and 5a.8 - Views into the city hall

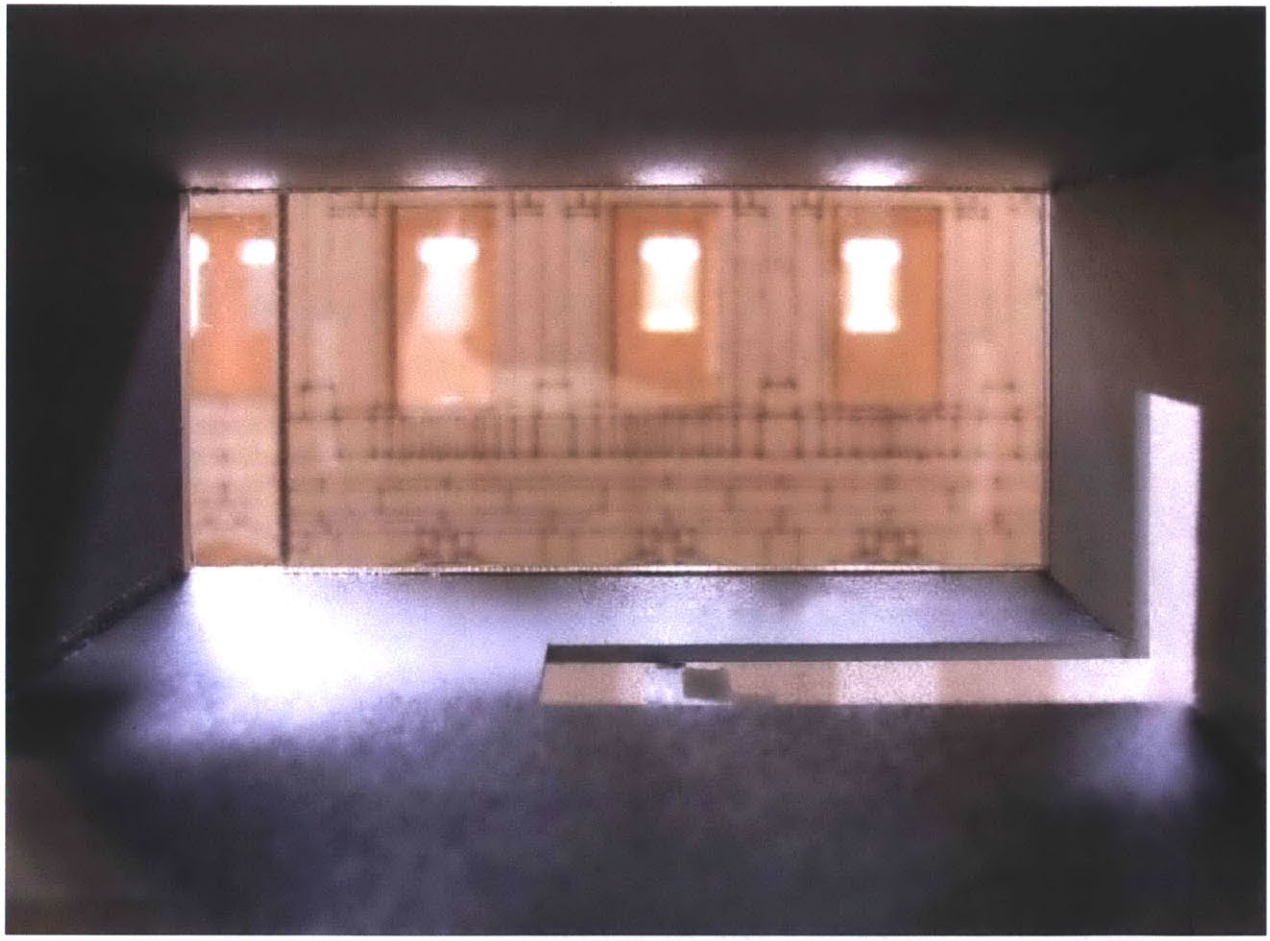
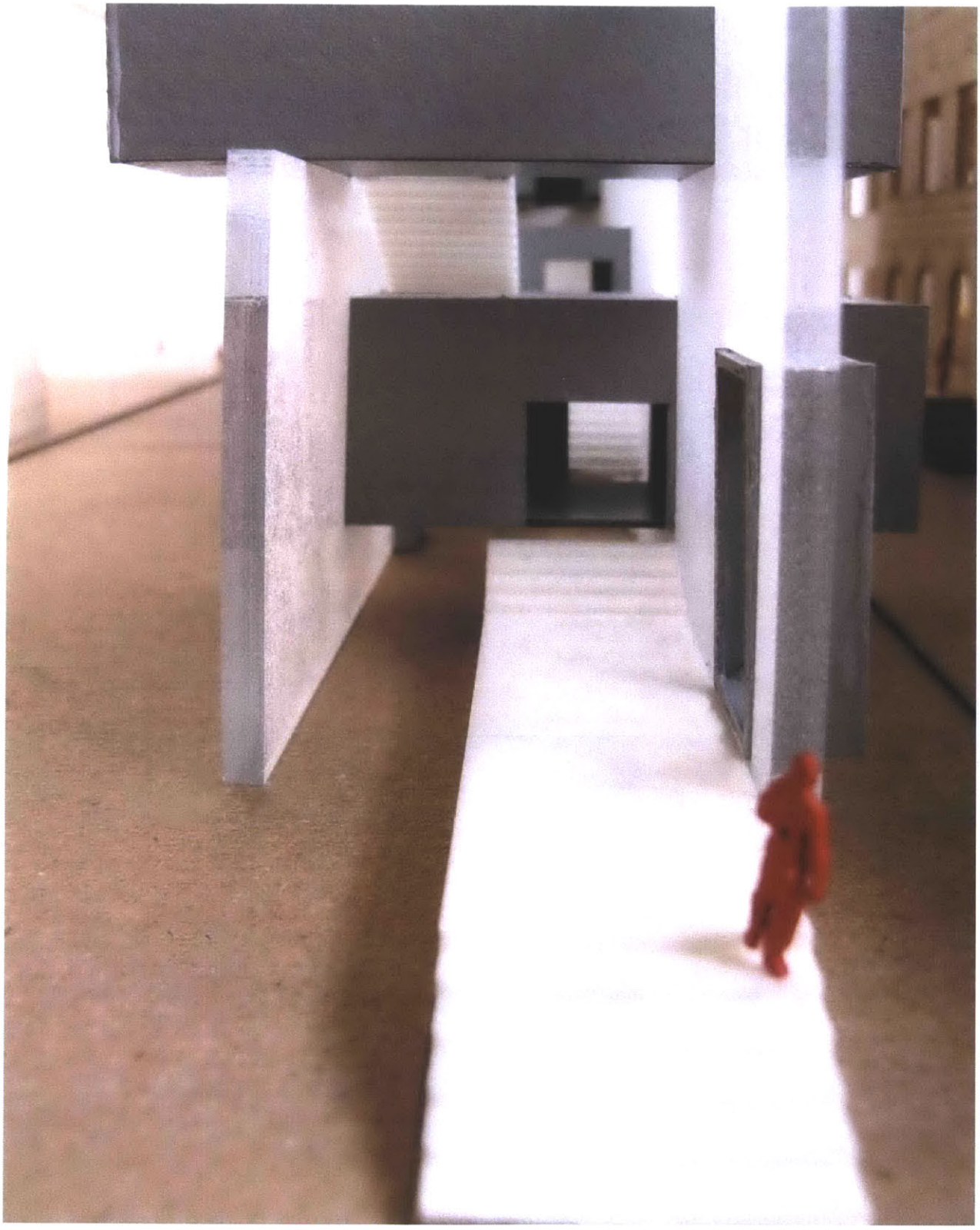


Figure 5a.9 and 5a.10



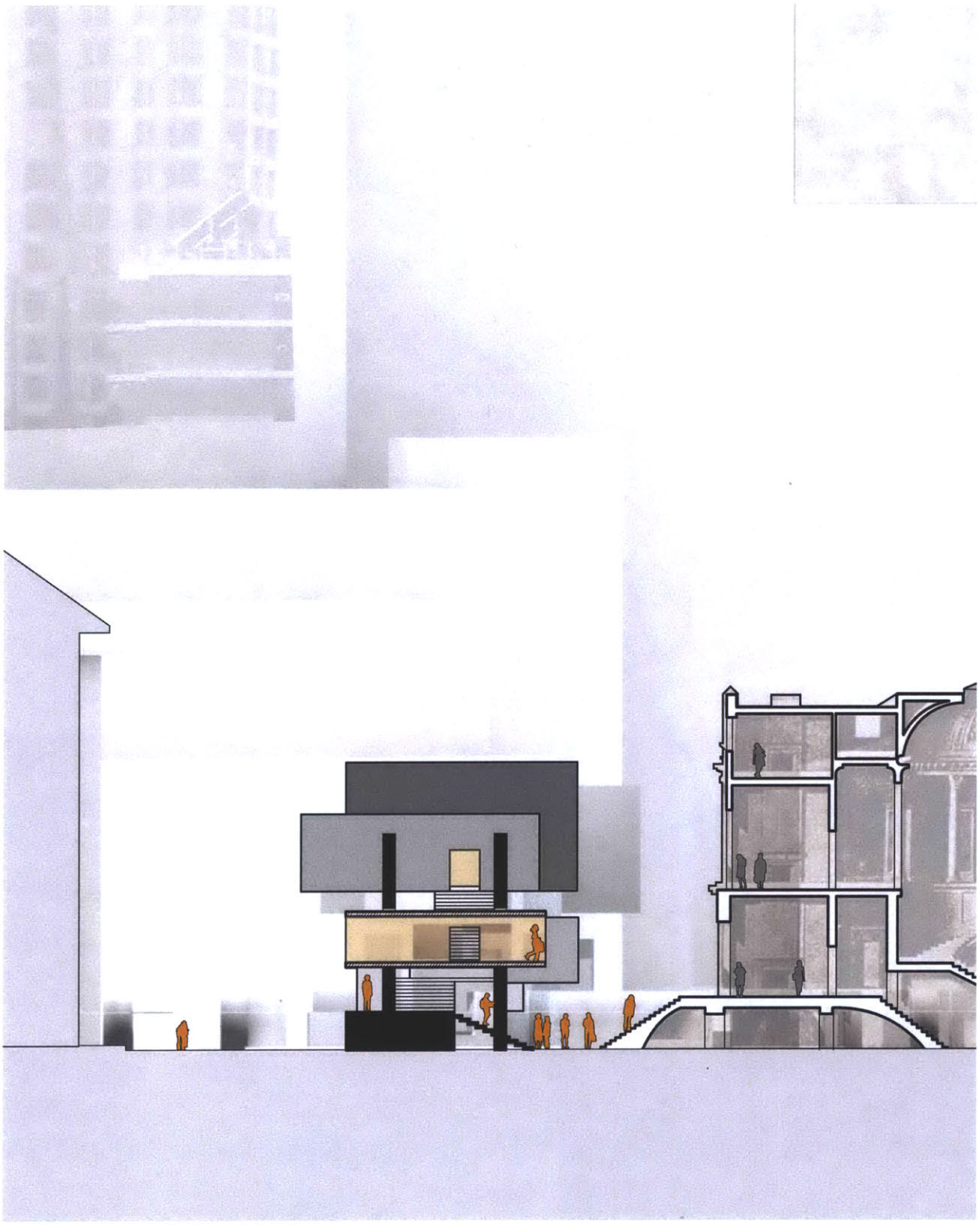
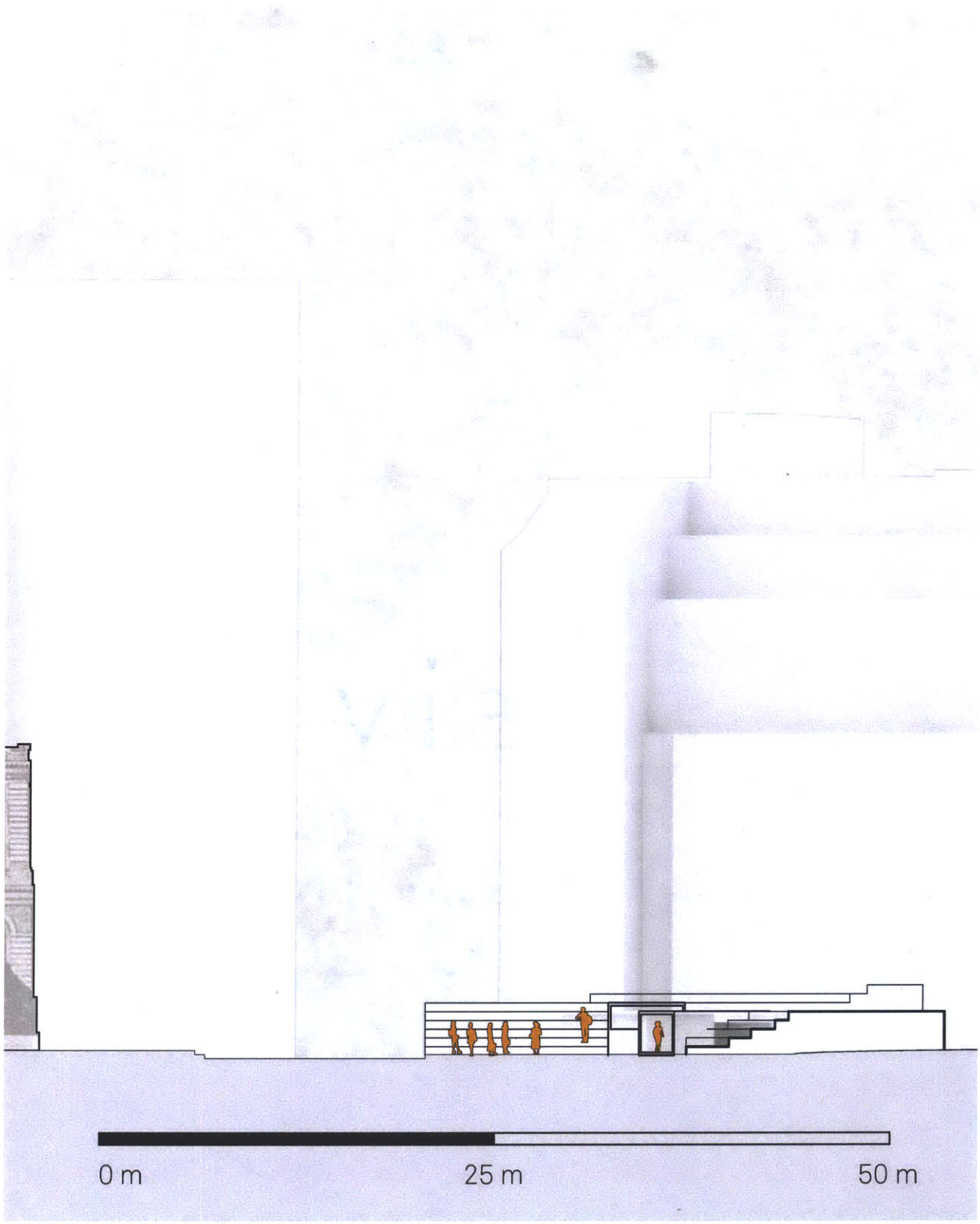


Figure 5a.11 - Section across the city hall


0 m
25 m
50 m

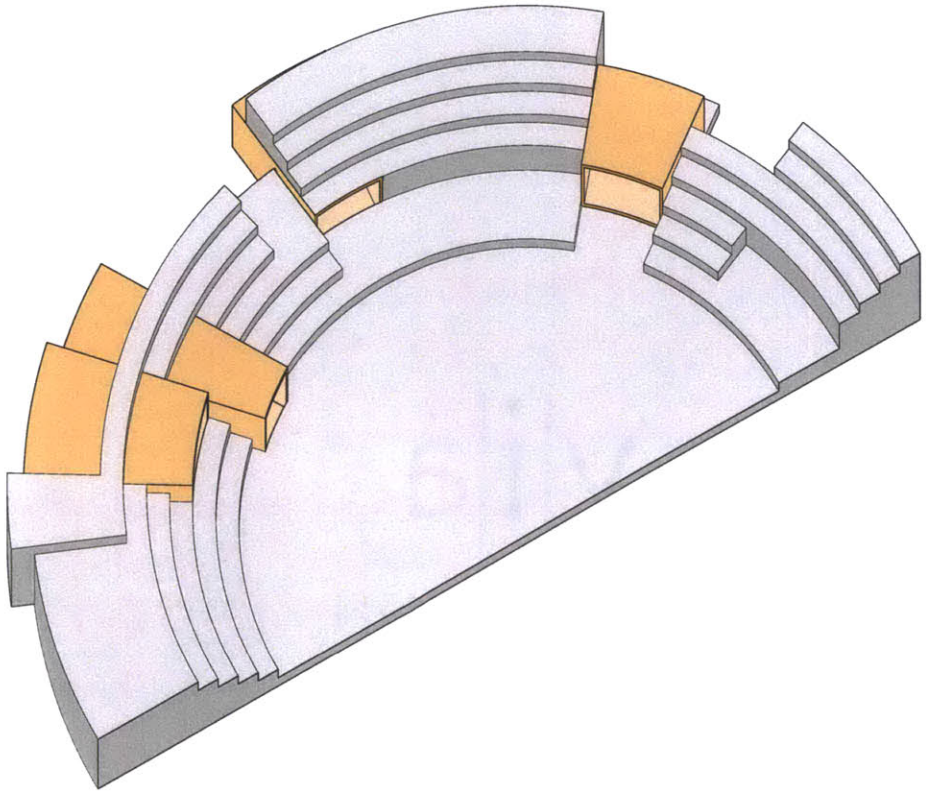


Figure 5b.1

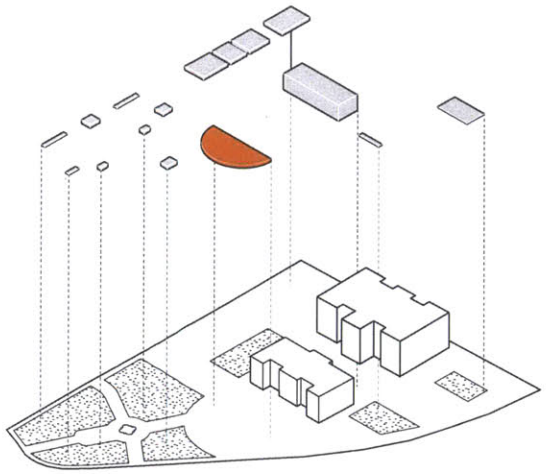


Figure 5b.1

Chapter 5b /
The Surreptitious Amphitheather

The surreptitious amphitheater serves two purposes. First, it is a structure that is placed directly opposite of the city hall steps, providing the seating for an audience. This allows opportunities to bring the programs of the city hall outside to the plaza. If the mayor were to make an announcement, or the city government hosts a debate between two candidates for mayor, this would be a chance for the civilians to participate. This amphitheater serves as an interface that allows the two parties to come into interactions with each other.

The seating of the amphitheater also has punctures, a play on the traditional vomitoria. These punctures serve similar purposes as the tubes in the previous structure, as a platform for small groups of people to engage with the city government. These punctures create an uncanny experience for the presenter as silent but very visually-striking protest platforms.

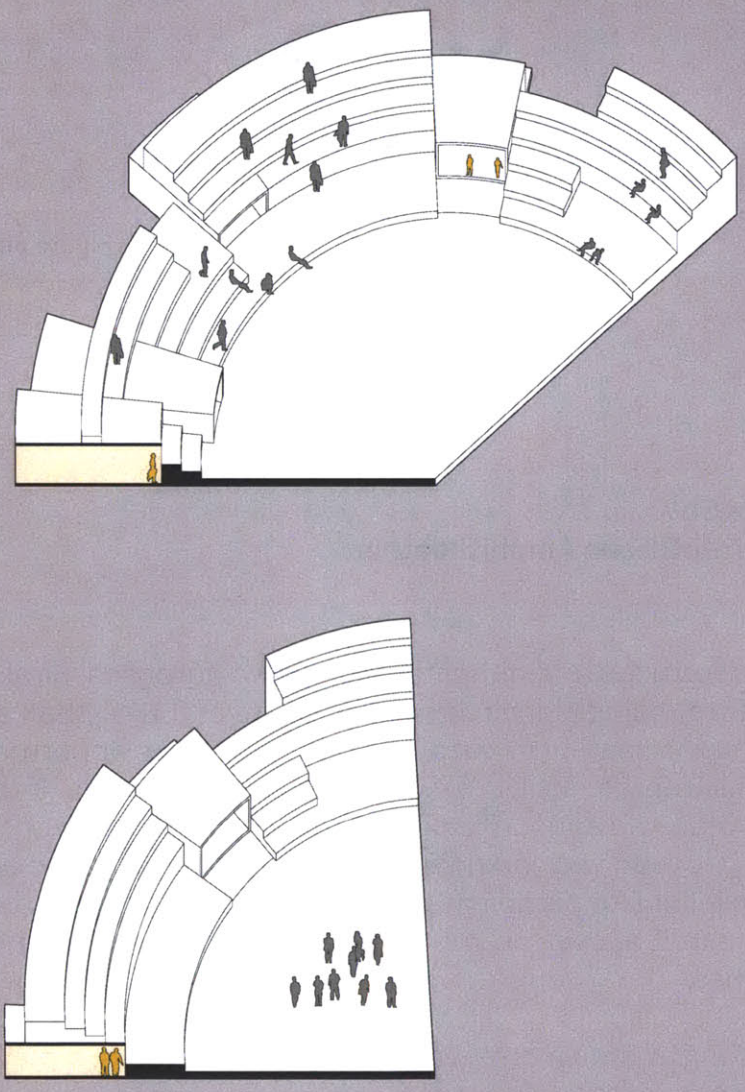
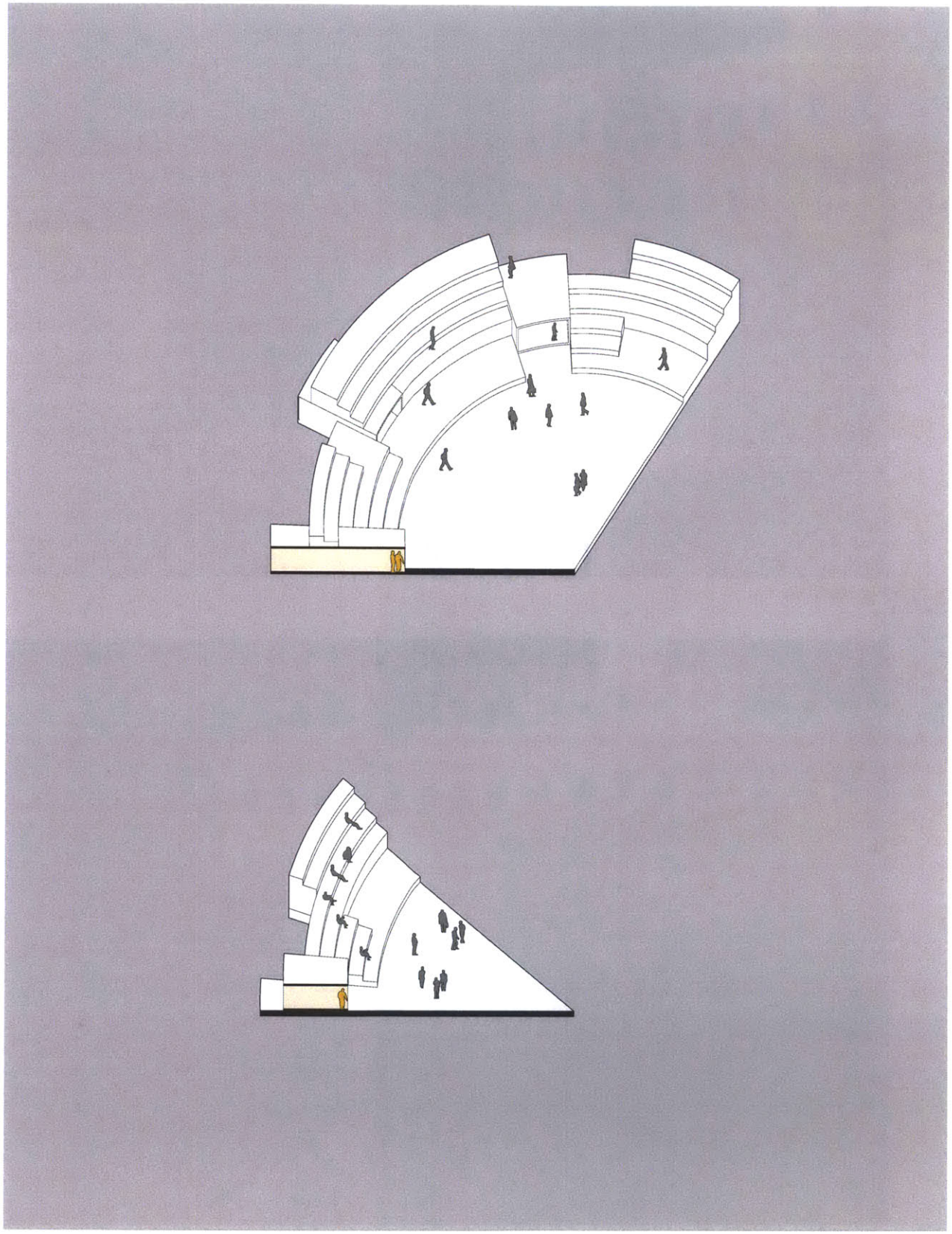


Figure 5b.3



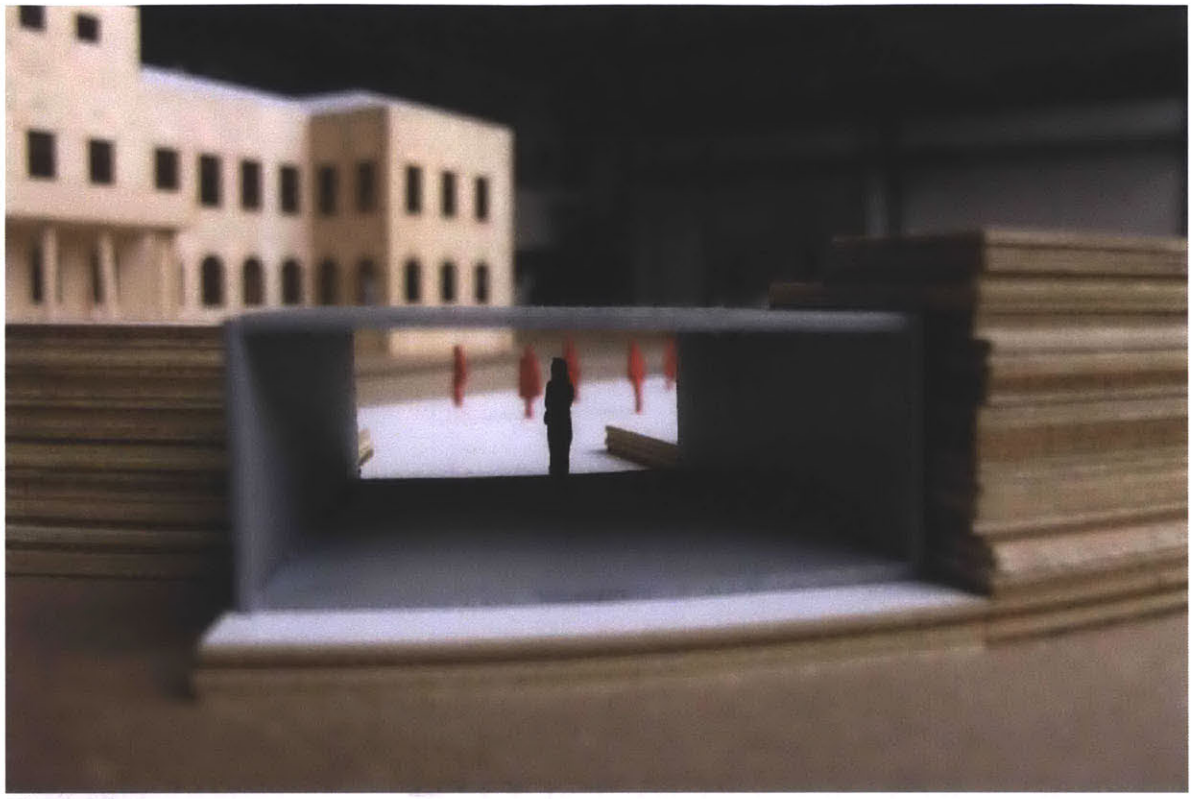
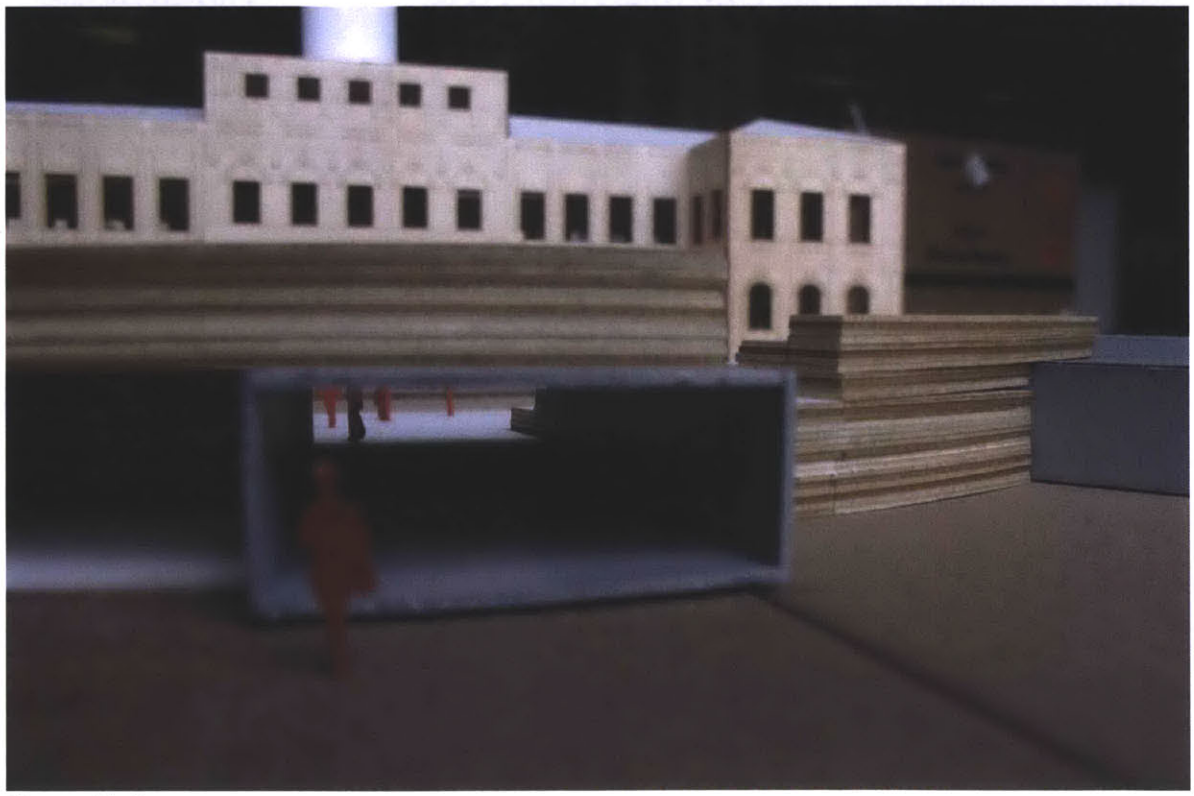


Figure 5b.4



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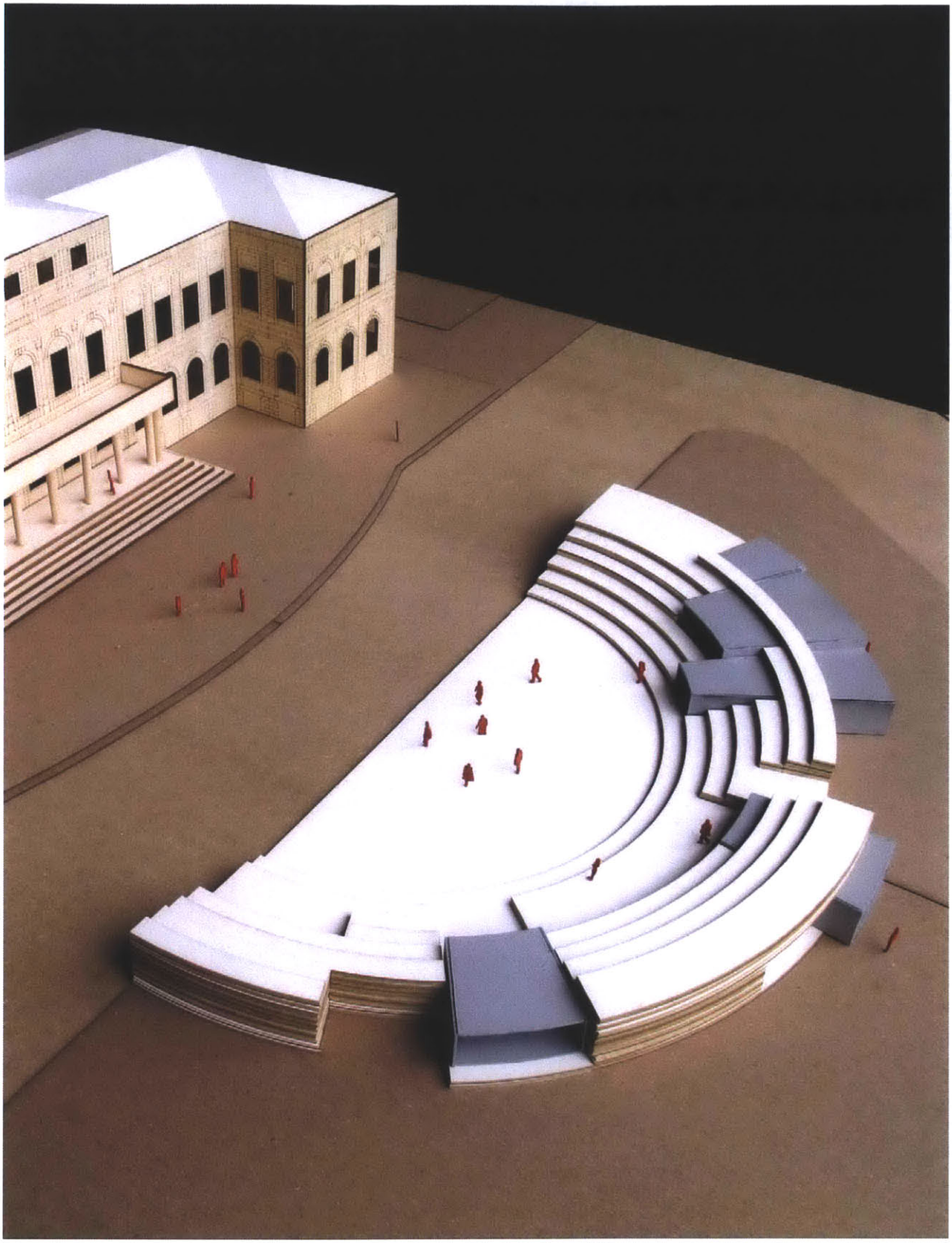

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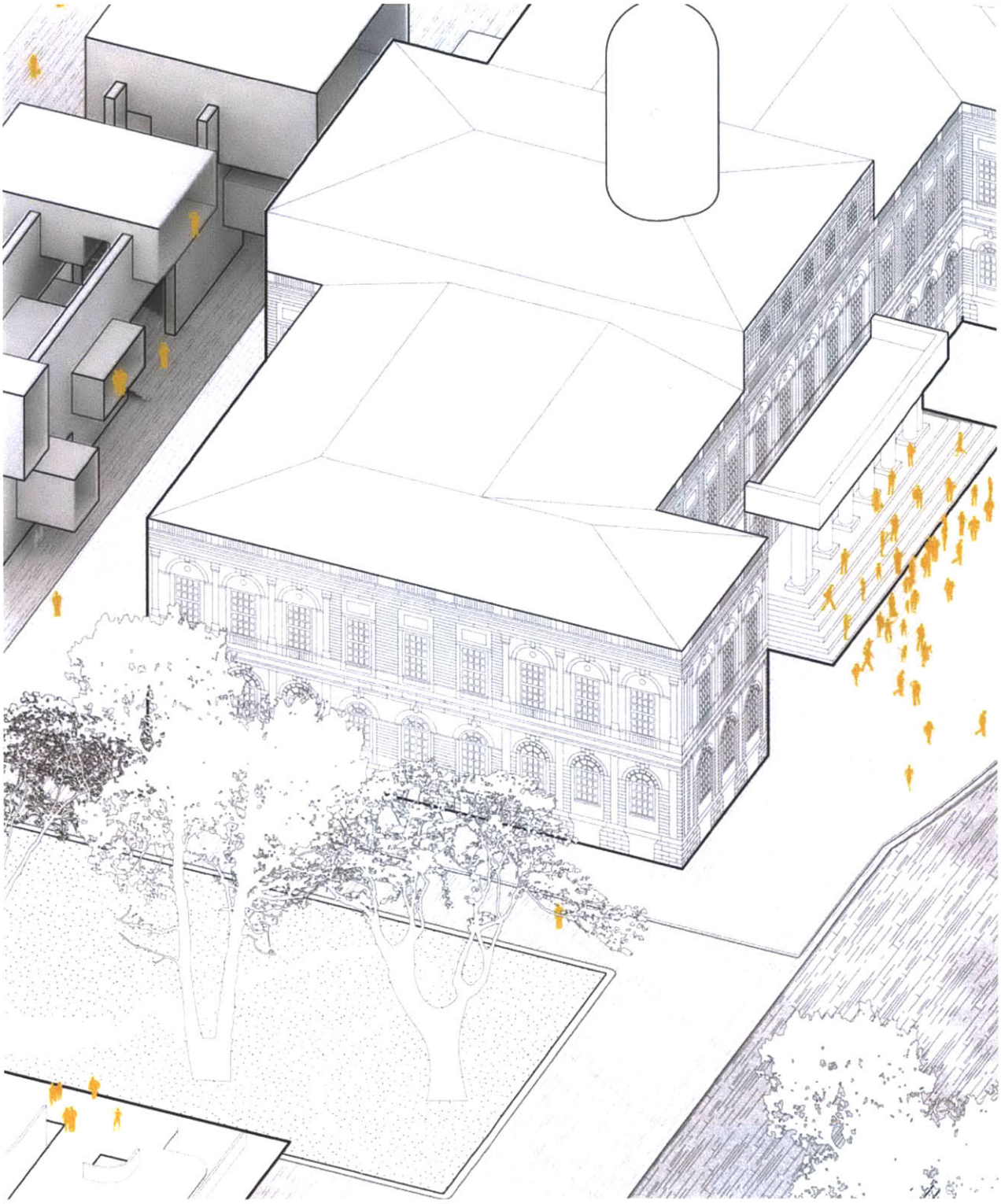
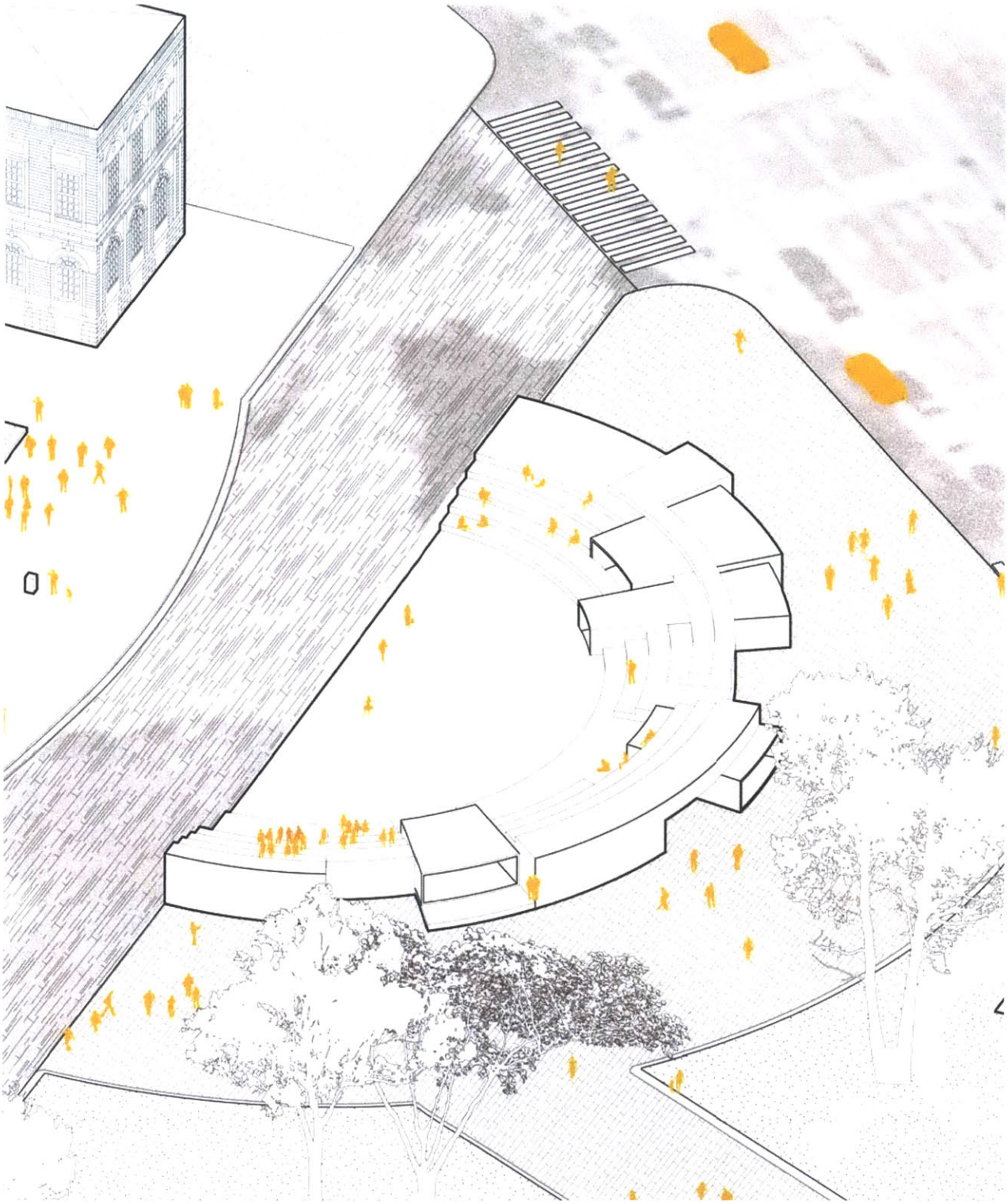


Figure 5b.7 - Close up of site axon



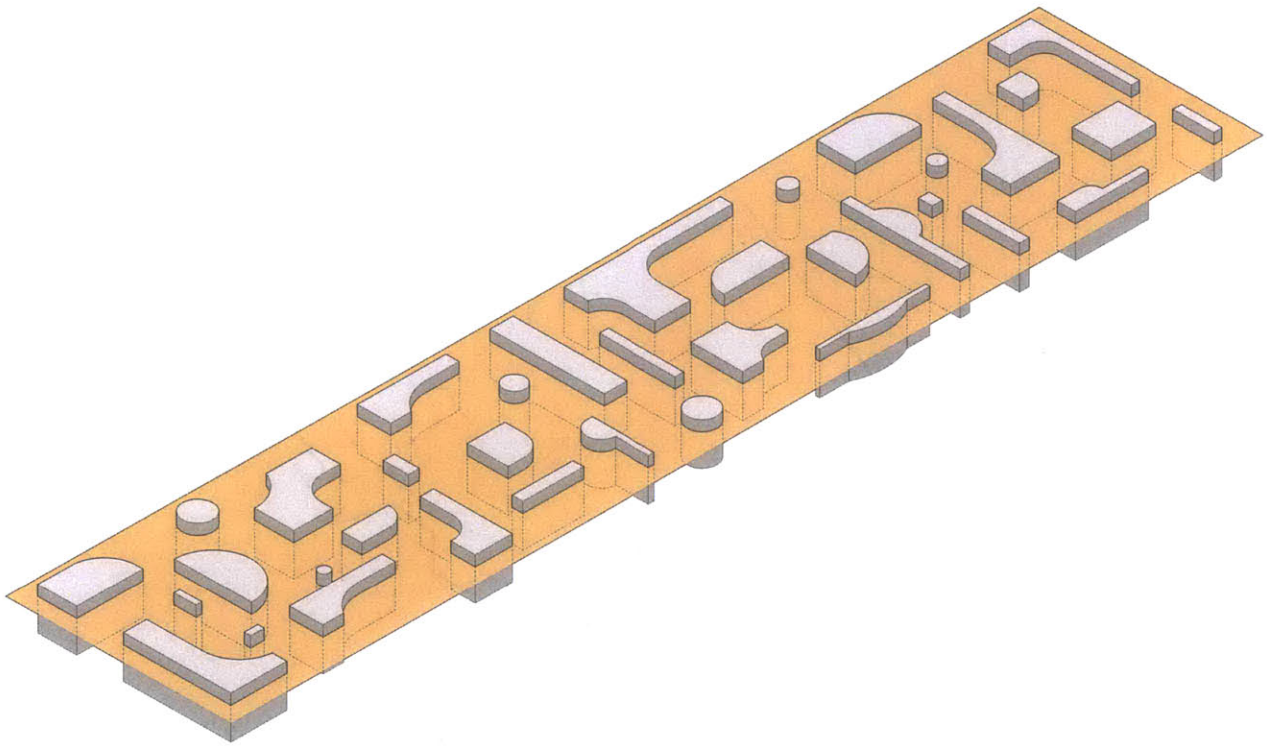


Figure 5c.1 - A pattern of light punctures

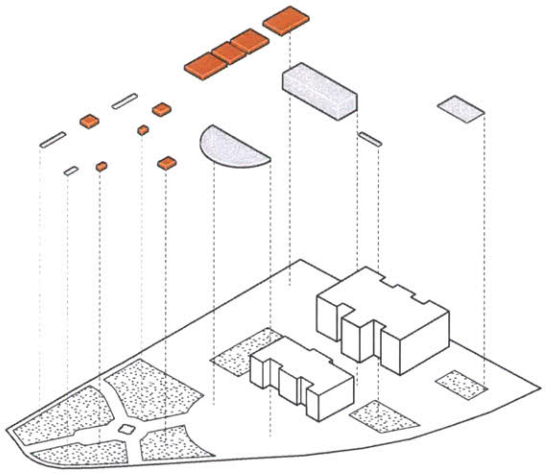


Figure 5c.2

Chapter 5c /
The Roof of Small Ephiphanies

The roof of small ephiphanies was conceived as a gathering place for the people. The top roof are supported by walls, that catches the light from above and creates pockets of spaces that are lighted up.

These pavilions have walls that also serve as pin-up surfaces in a gallery-like space, and could be used by a small group of activists or the city hall government for their promotion materials.

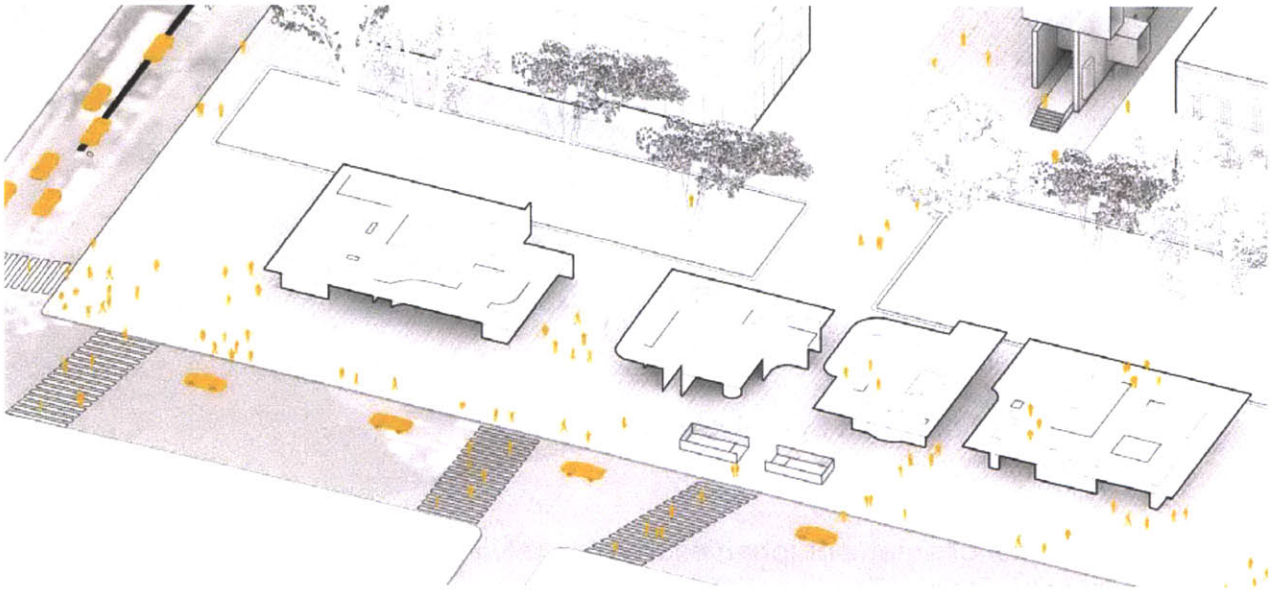


Figure 5c.3 - Close up of site axon

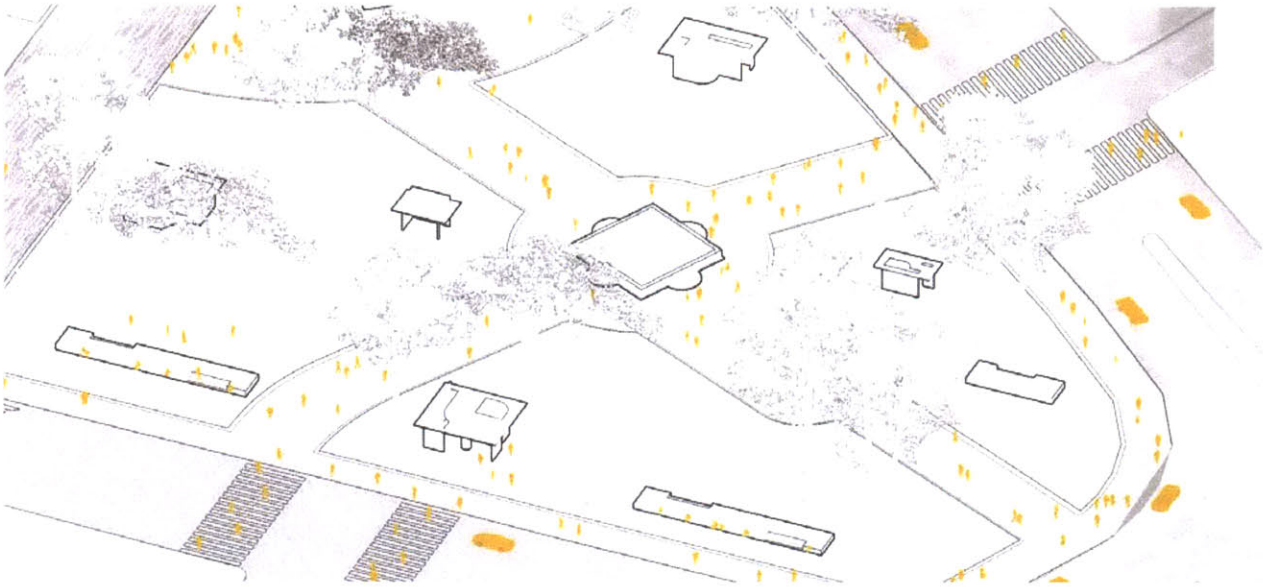


Figure 5c.4 - Close up of site axon

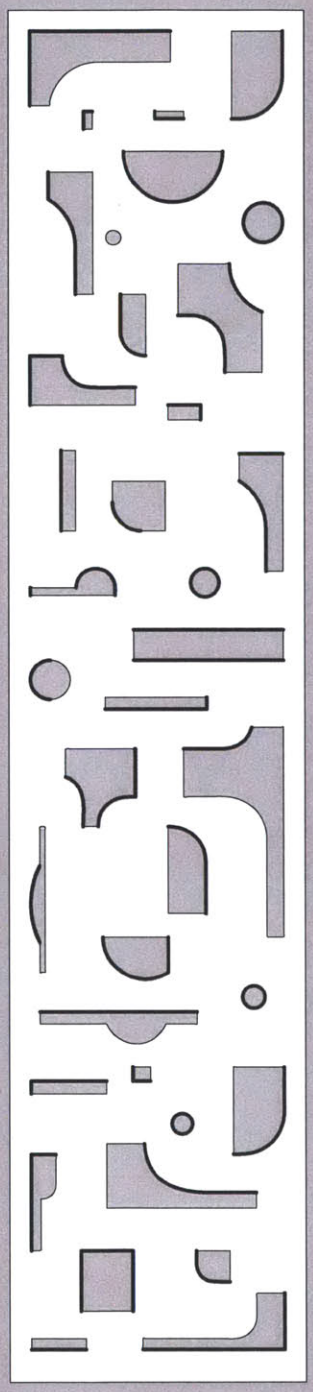


Figure 5c.5 - Plan Diagram

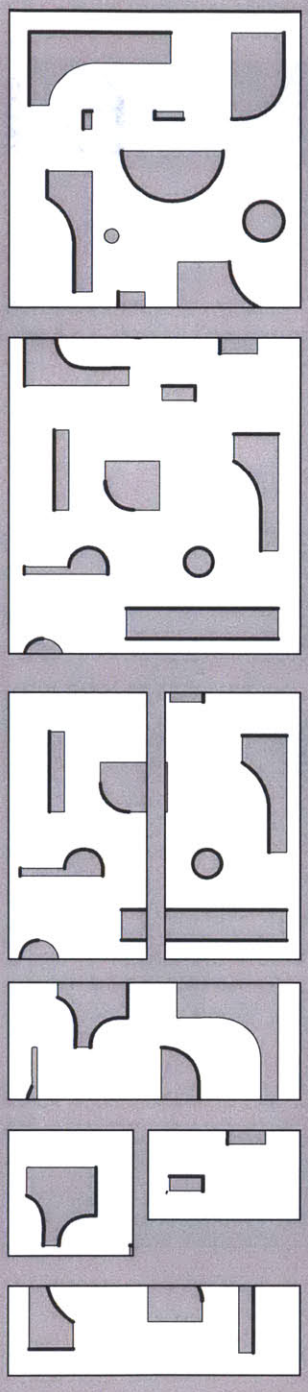


Figure 5c.6 - Slice and dice and distribute

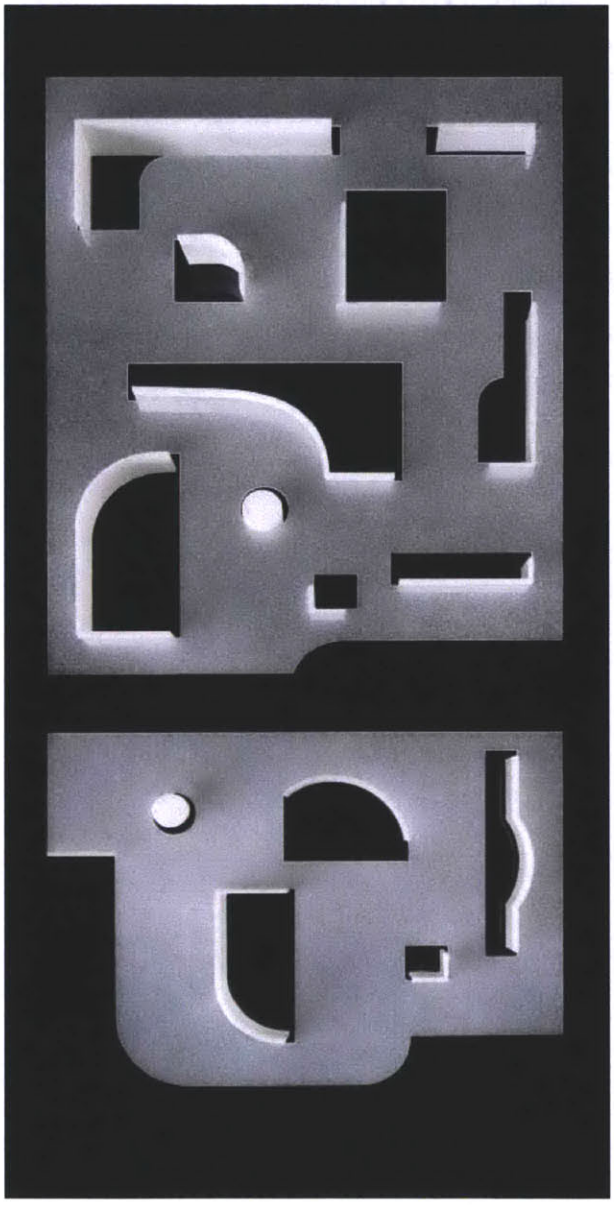


Figure 5c.7

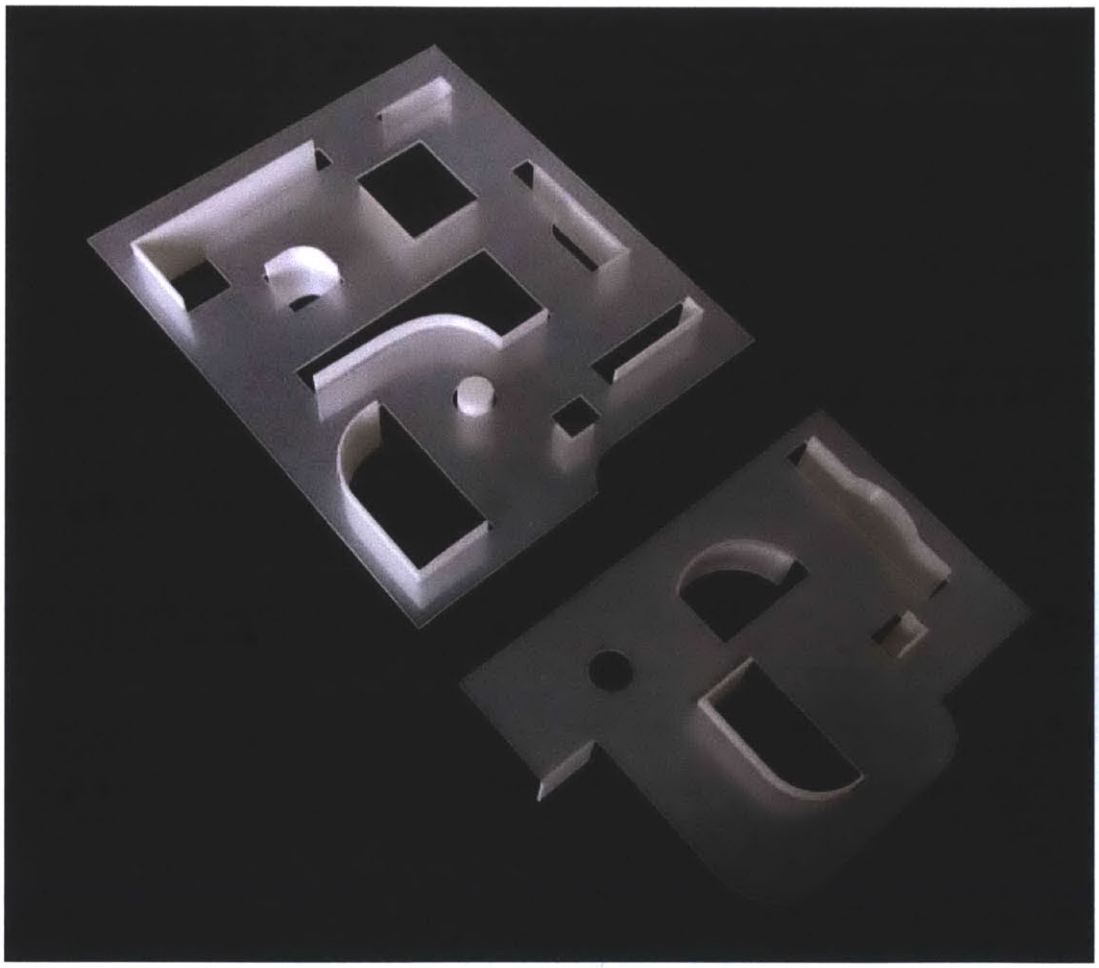


Figure 5c.8

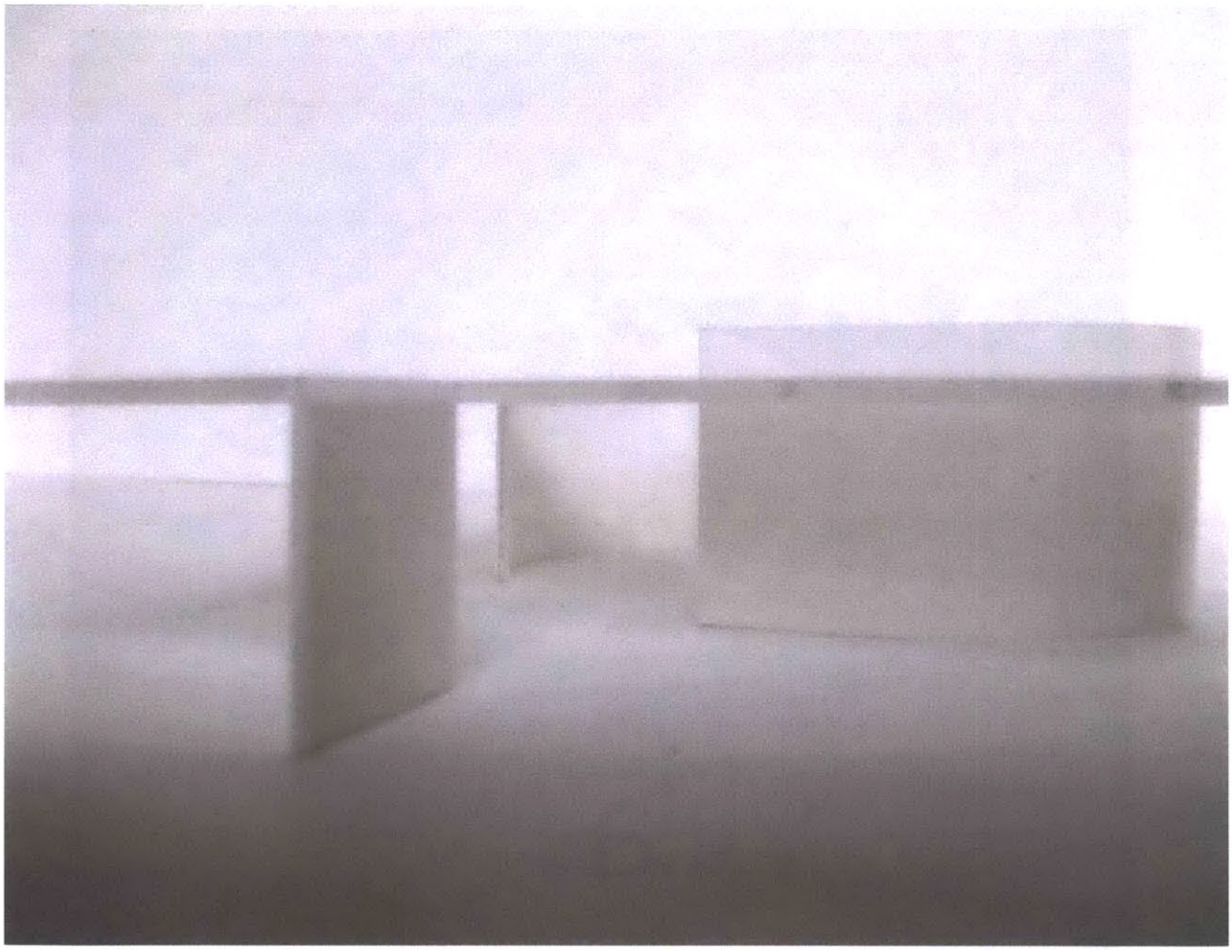


Figure 5c.9

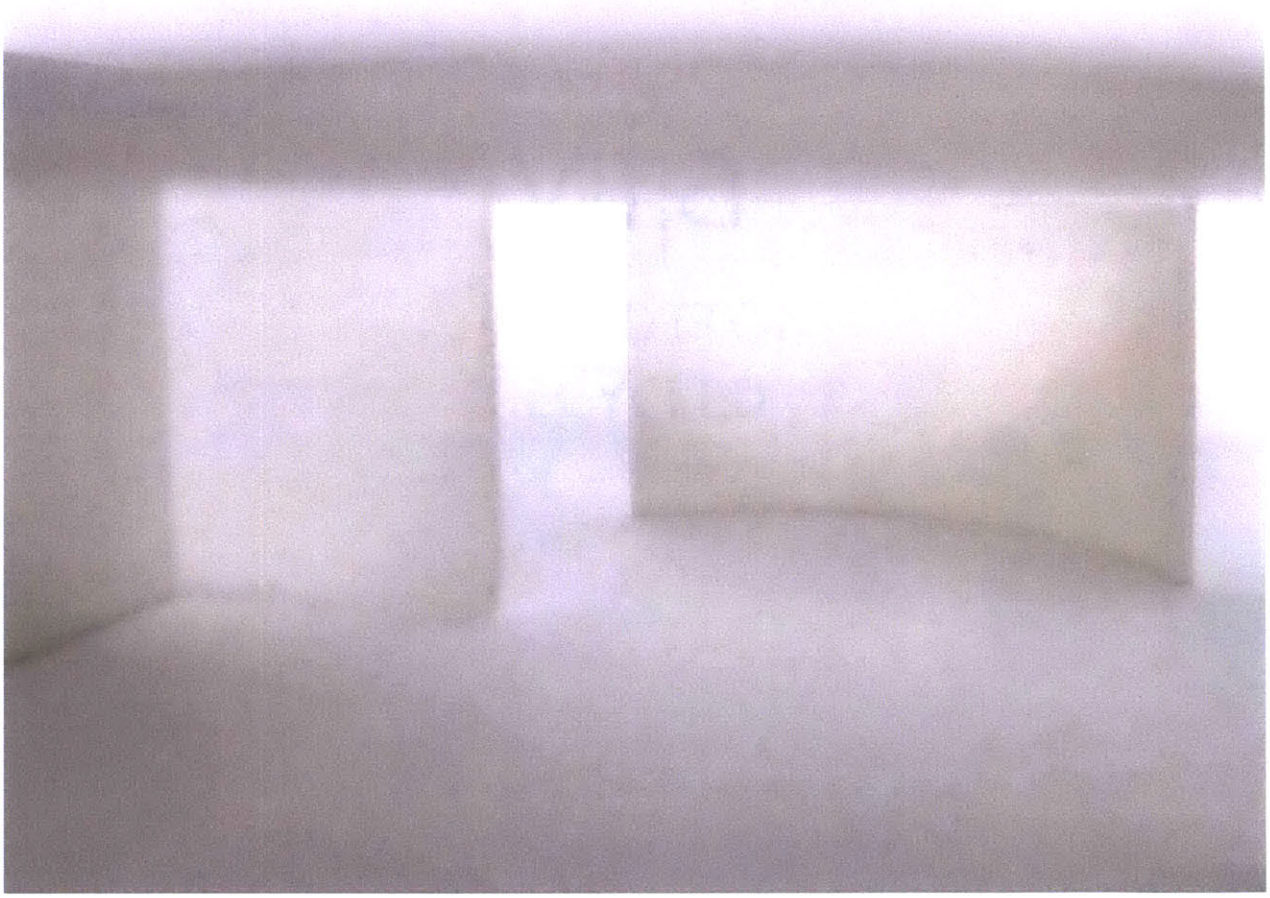


Figure 5c.10

Figure 5c.11

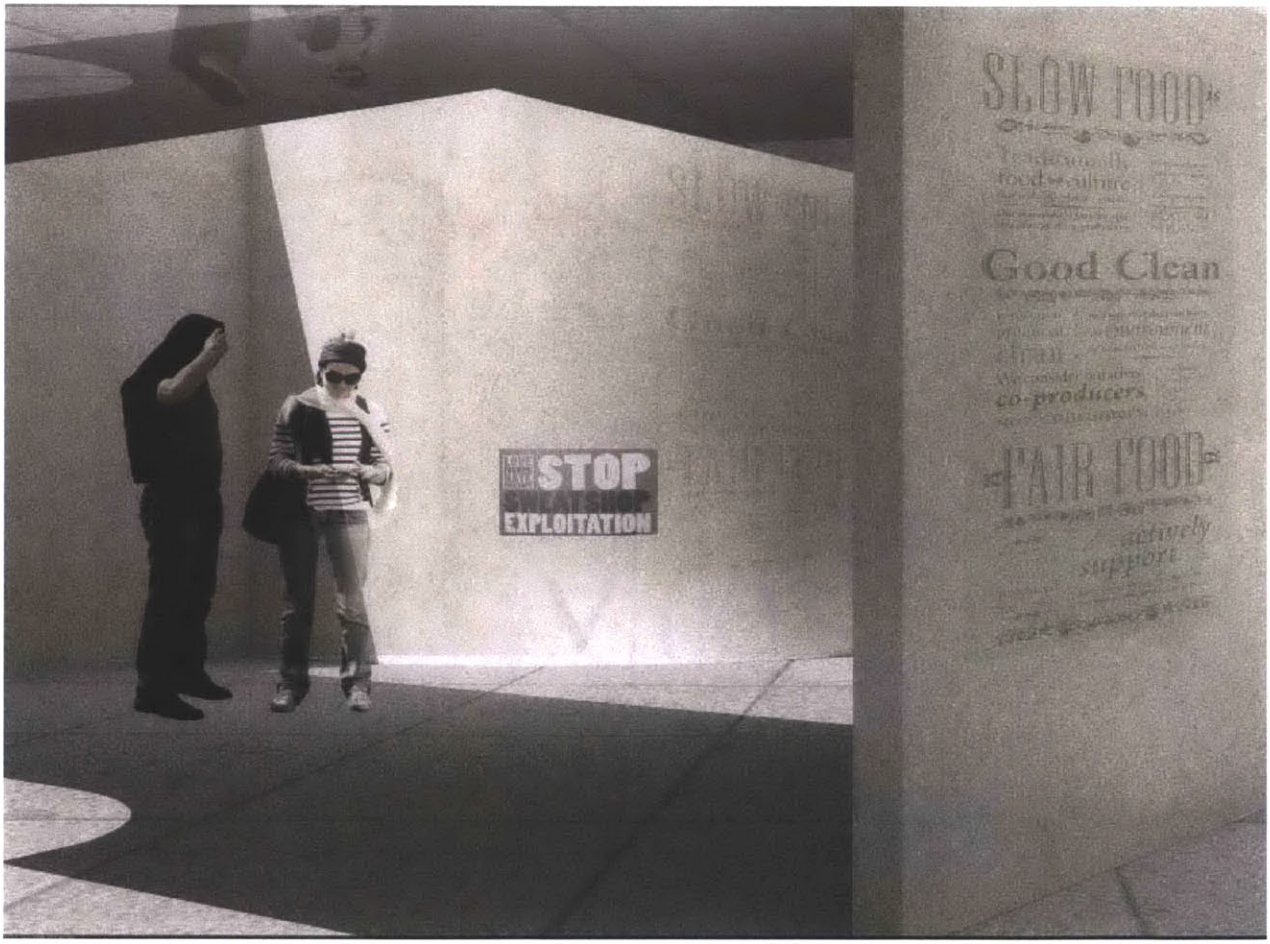

STOP
EXPLOITATION
SLOW FOOD
Good Clean
co-producers
FAIR FOOD

Figure 5c.12

Figure 5c.13

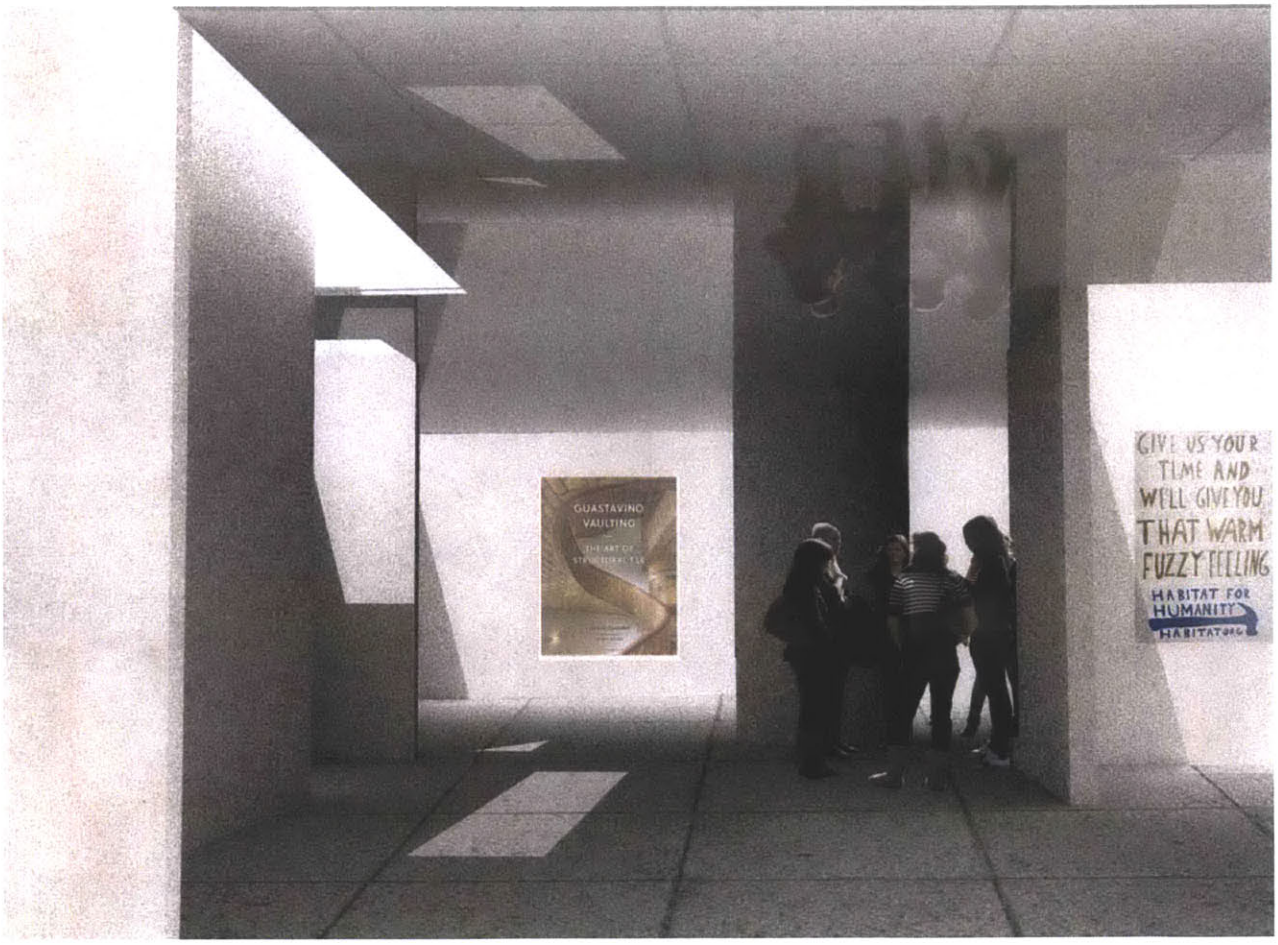

GUASTAVINO
VAULTING
GIVE US YOUR
TIME AND
WE'LL GIVE YOU
THAT WARM
FUZZY FEELING
HABITAT FOR
HUMANITY
HABITAT.ORG

Figure 5c.14

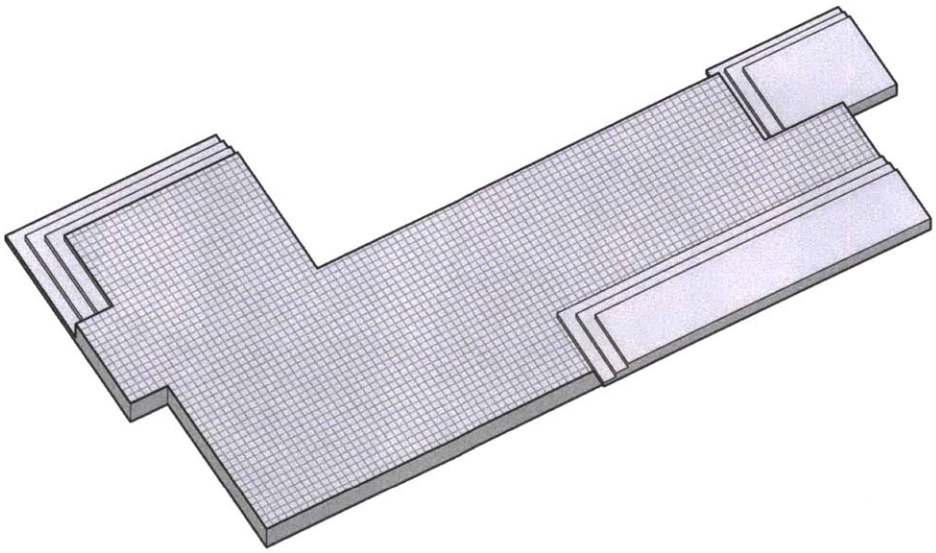


Figure 5d.1

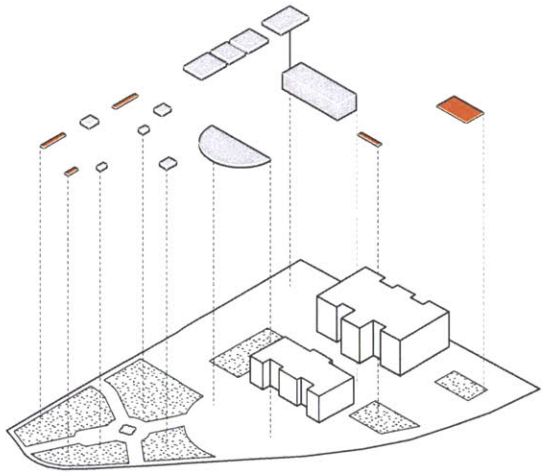


Figure 5d.2

Chapter 5d /
The Very Large Bench

The large bench was conceived towards drawing people to the city hall plaza. William Whyte's observations of New York urban spaces showed that people love to sit, even when proper seating weren't available. Based on his studies, these benches were designed so that there are various ledges/steps for people to sit.

At the same time, these also serve as a platform to engage people, whether it is the government with the people, or the people with themselves. The slight cantilever of a small balcony on the side of the bench creates a stage.

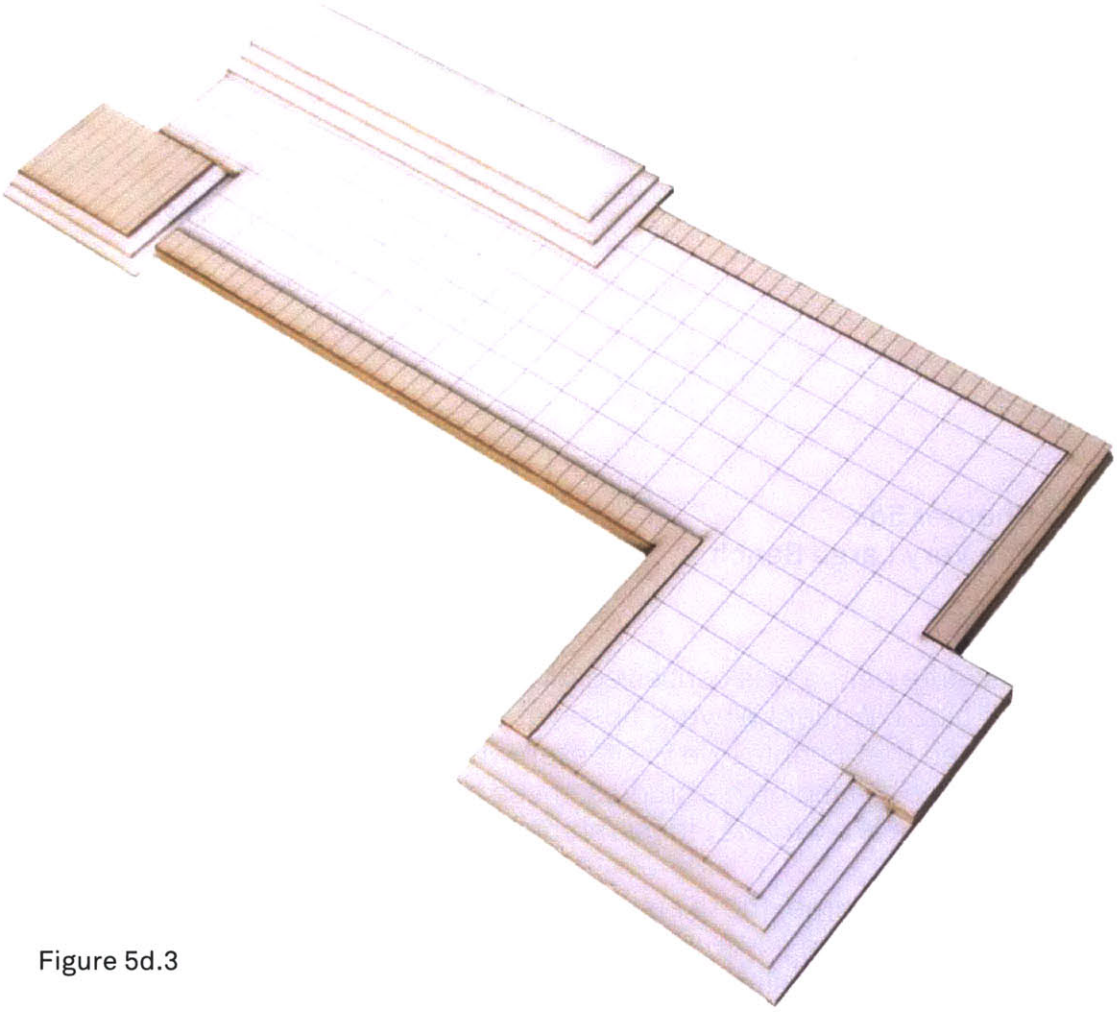


Figure 5d.3

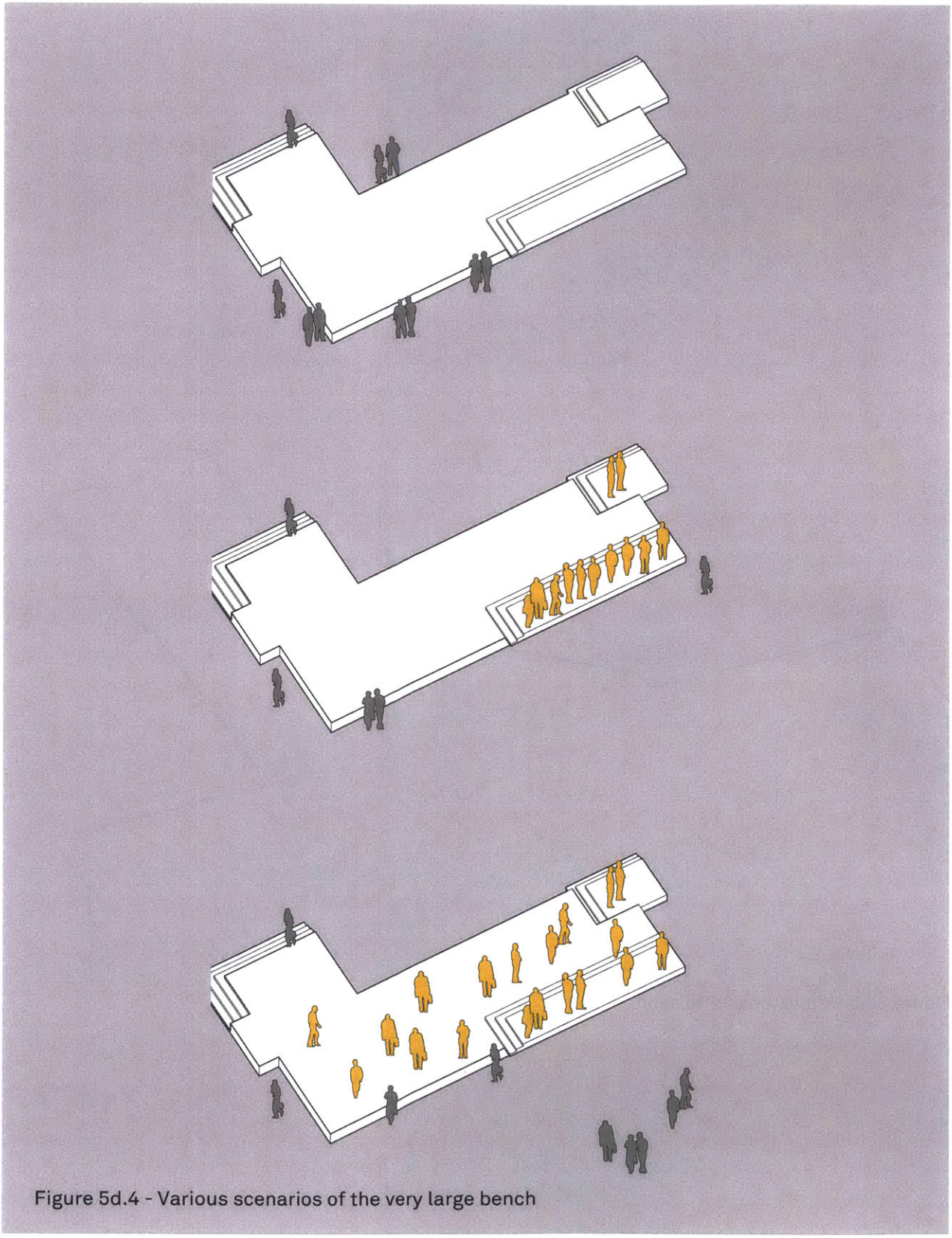


Figure 5d.4 - Various scenarios of the very large bench

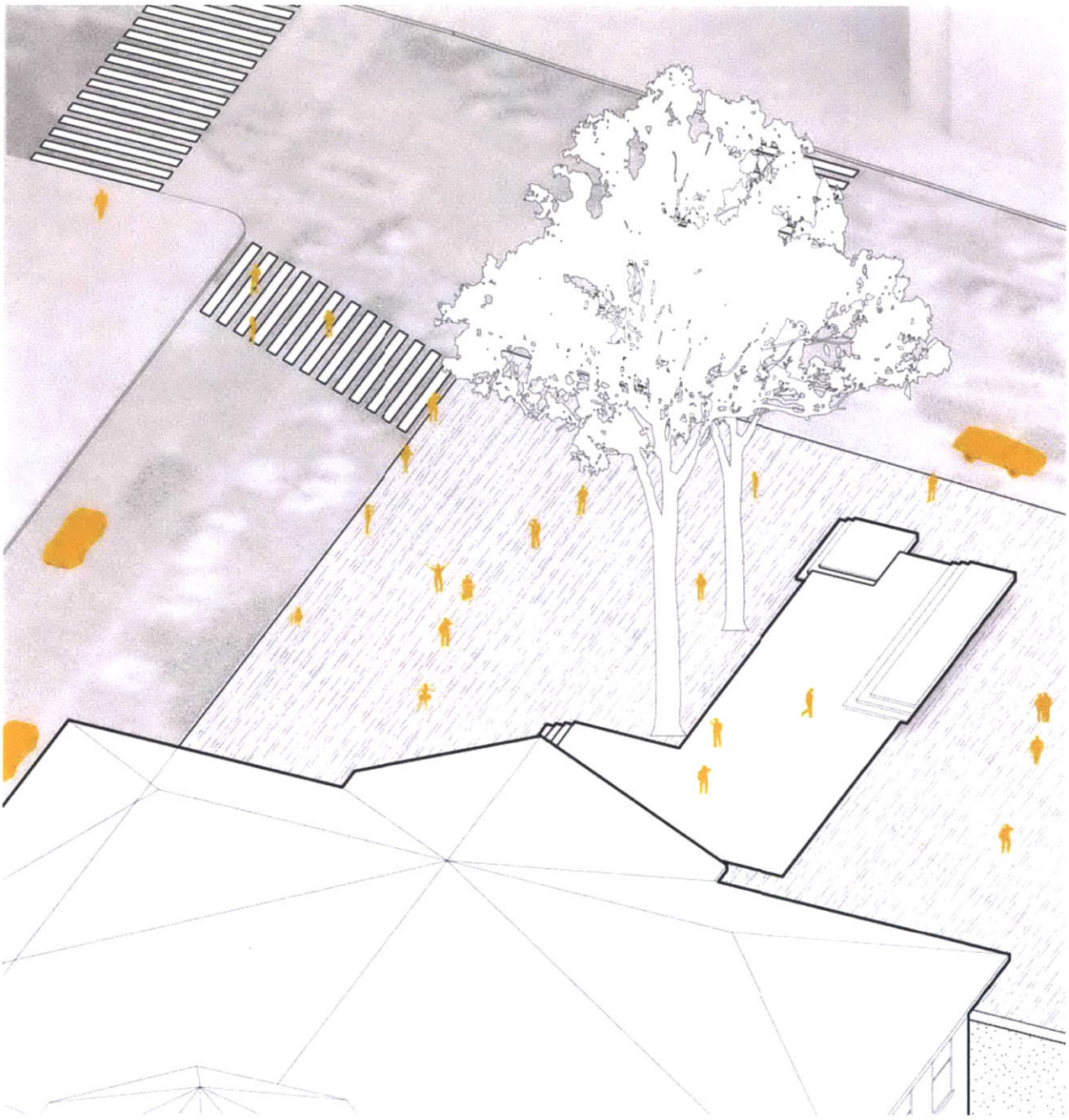


Figure 5d.5 - Close up of site axon

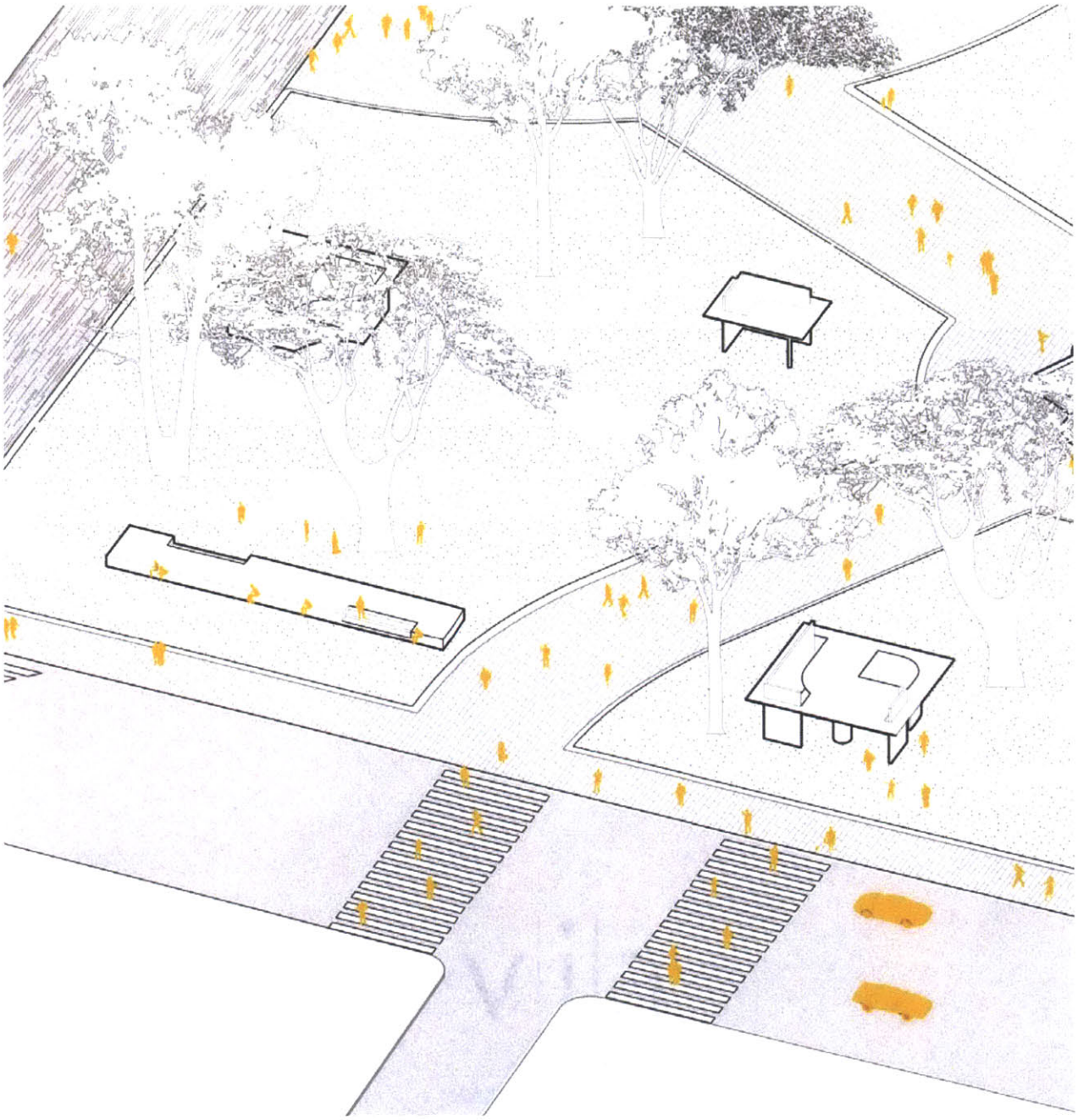


Figure 5d.6 - Close up of site axon

Figure 6.1

APPENDIX

Chapter 6 /
Thesis Presentation

The Master of Architecture Thesis Reviews took place on December 18, 2014 in Building E-15, the Media Lab. The invited critiques for my review were:

Amanda R. Lawrence
John McMorrough
Nasser Rabat, Nader Tehrani

as well as

Brandon Clifford
Mark Jarzombek
John Ochsendorf

Thank you for your thoughtful comments!

Figure 6.2

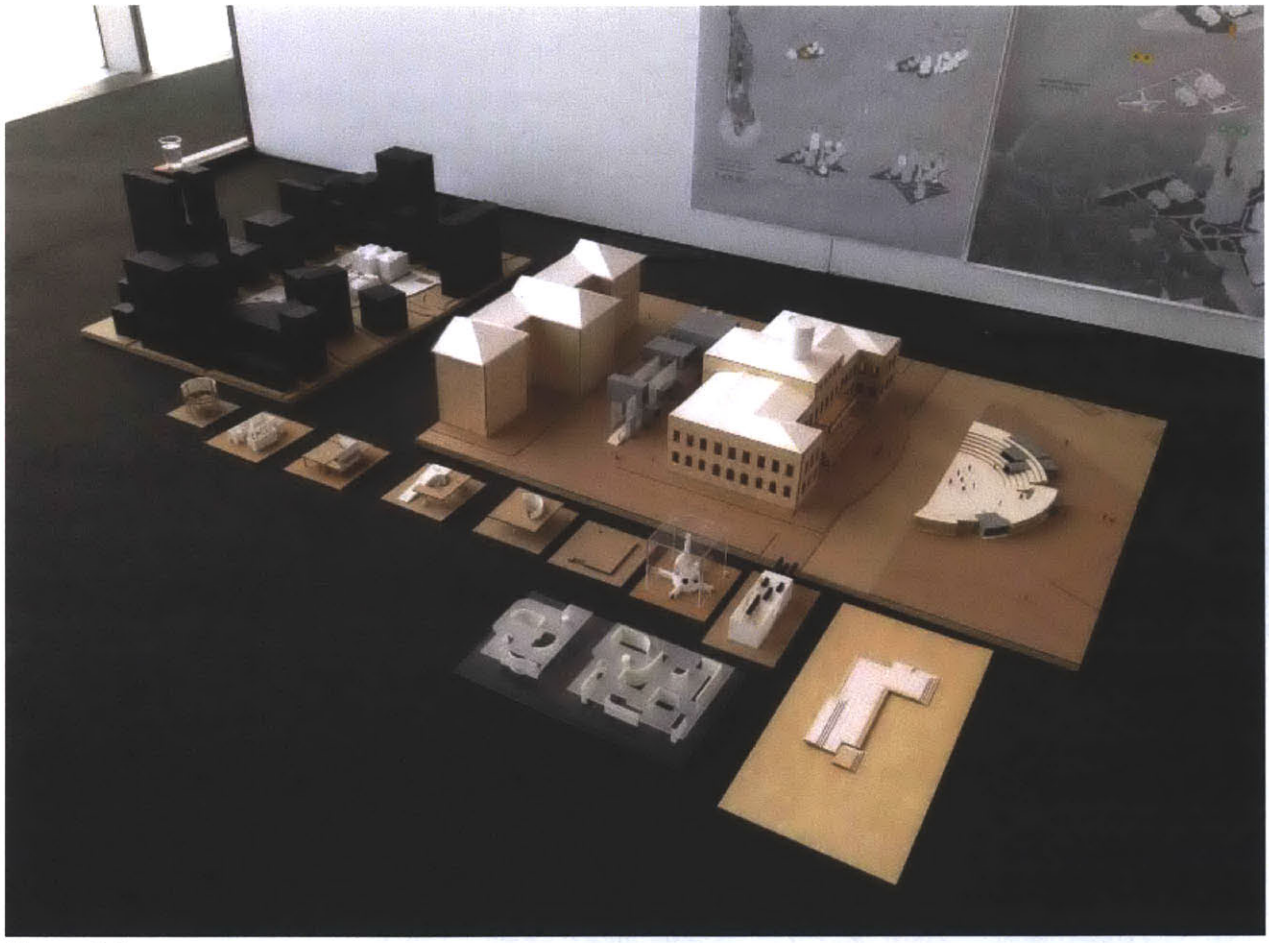


Figure 6.3

Figure 6.4

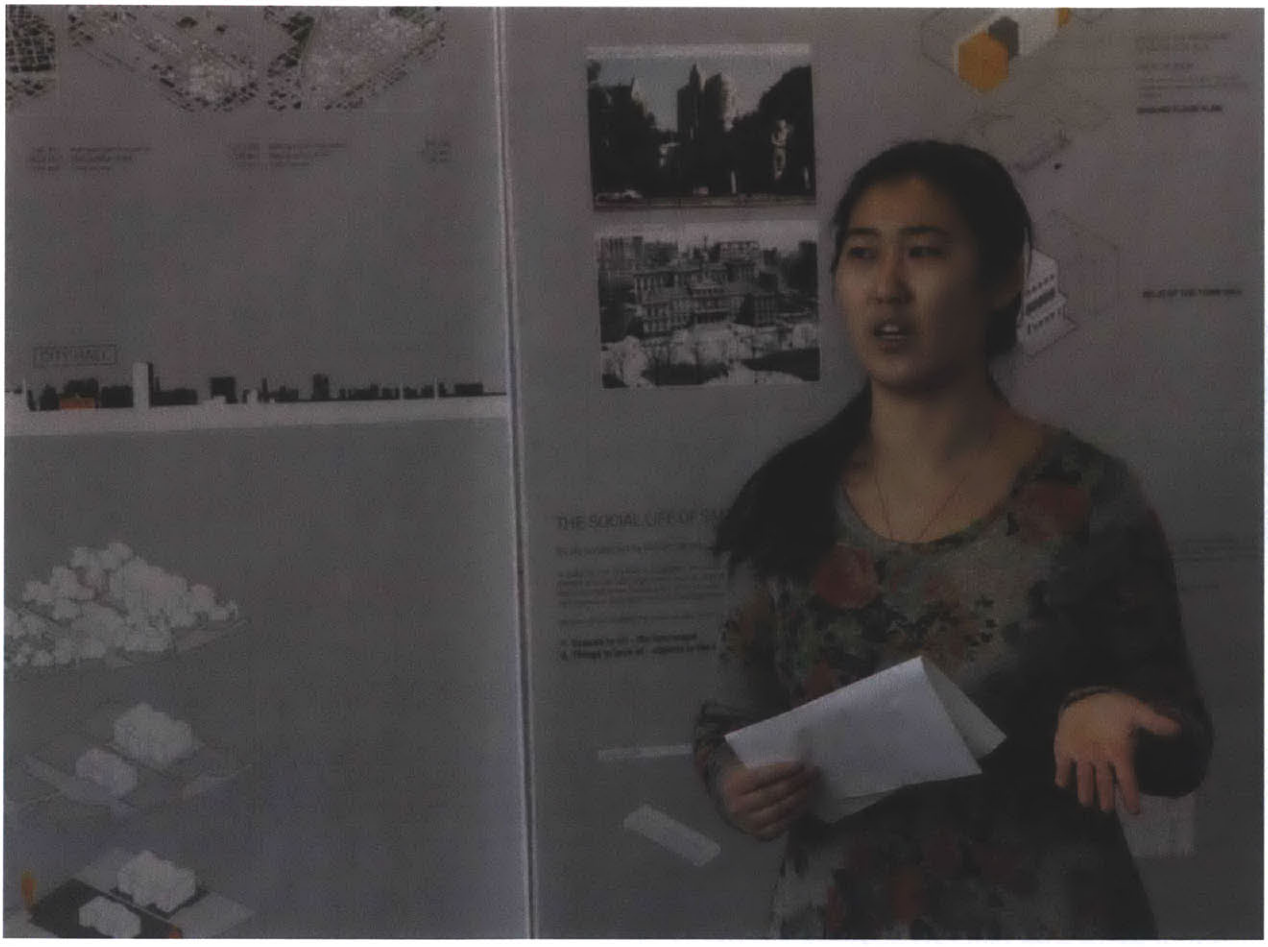
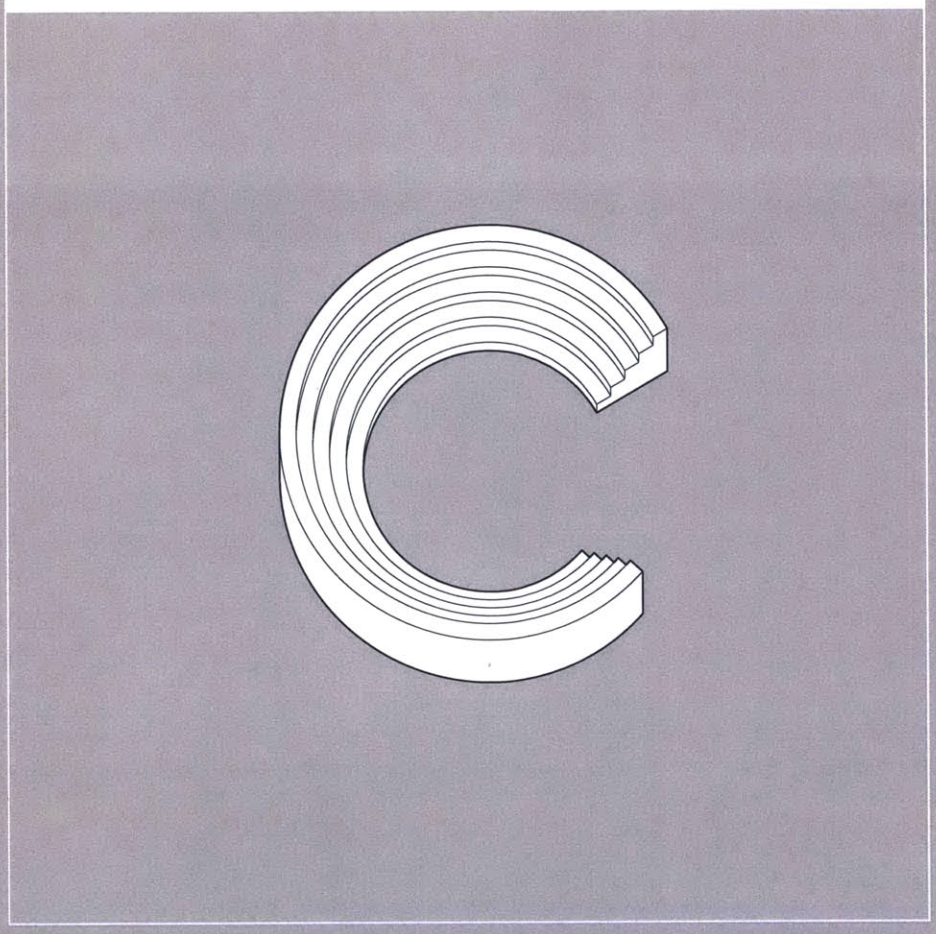


Figure 6.5

Figure 6.6

Figure 6.7

THE COMITIUM



PLAN

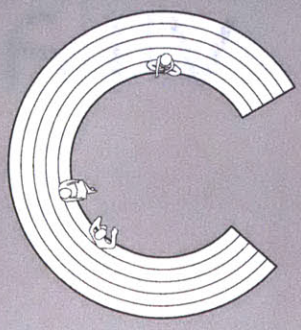


Figure 7.1

APPENDIX

Chapter 7 /
Progress Models and Drawings

These models and drawings were progress made towards the final design. These can be described as small pavilion-like structures that present different ways that people can interact with each other in agonistic manners.

Some are prototypes for the final designs.

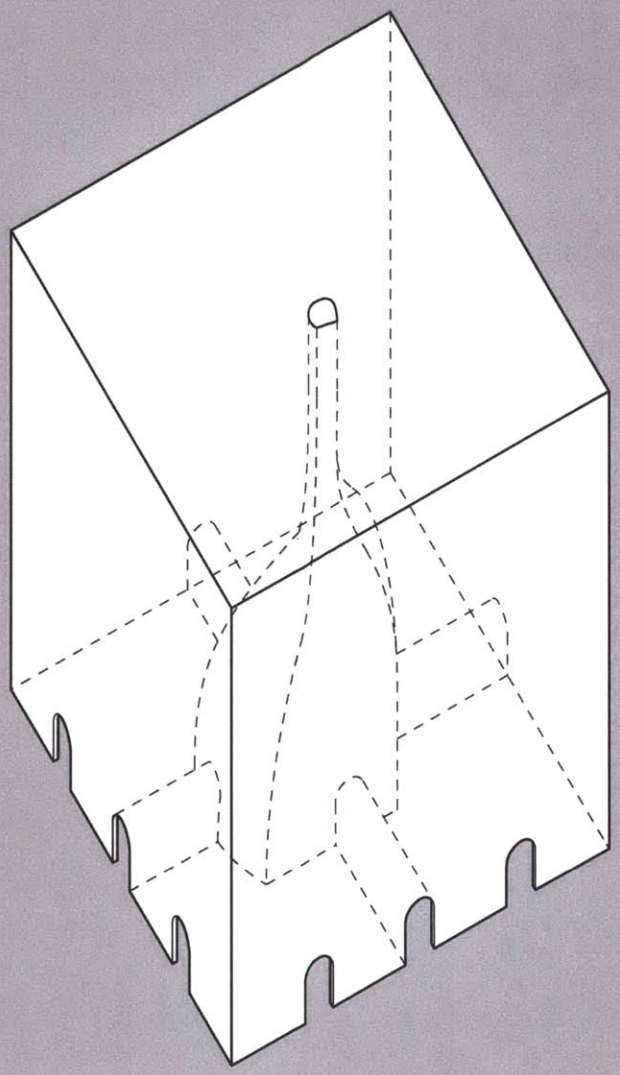


Figure 7.2

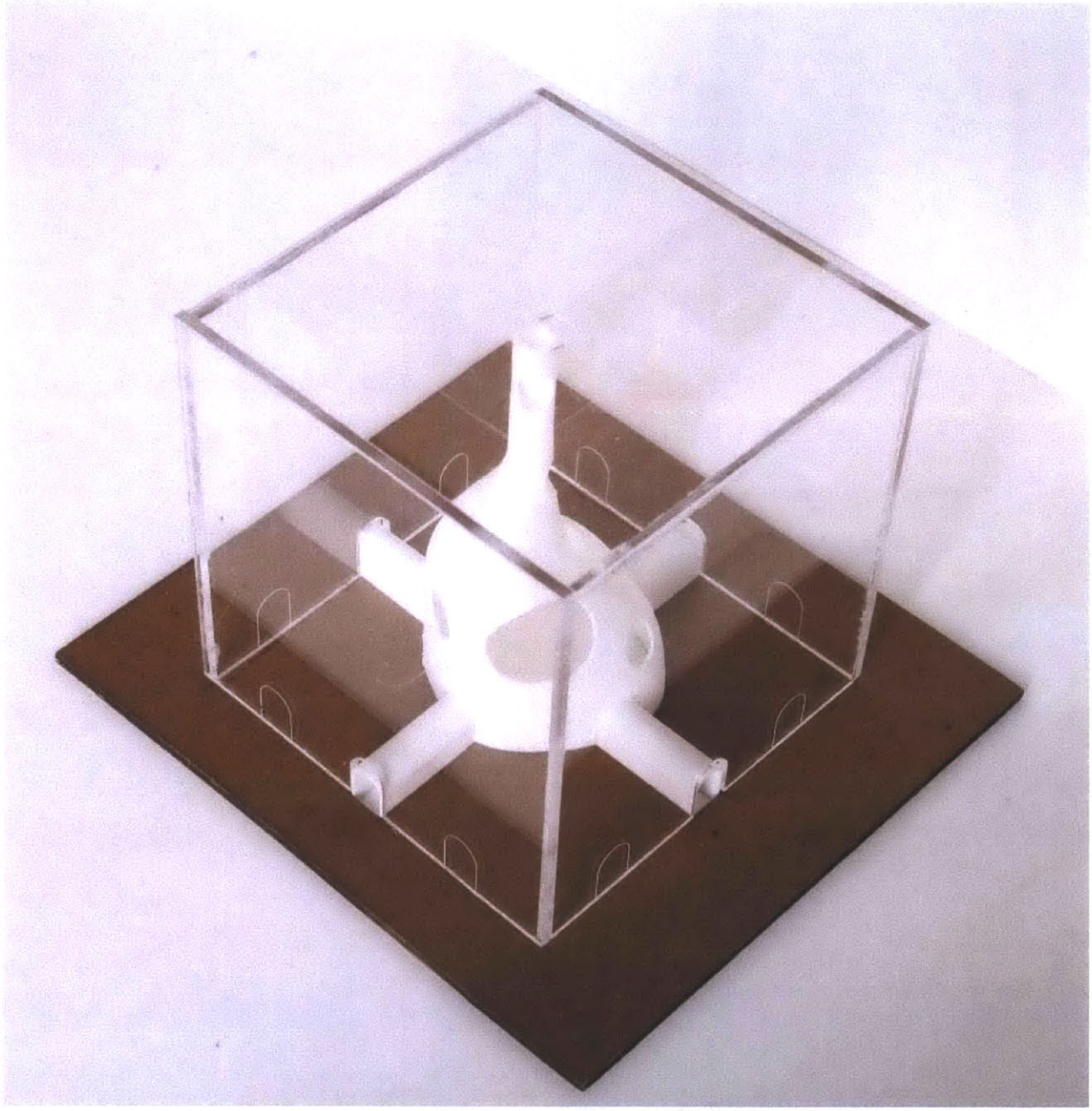


Figure 7.3

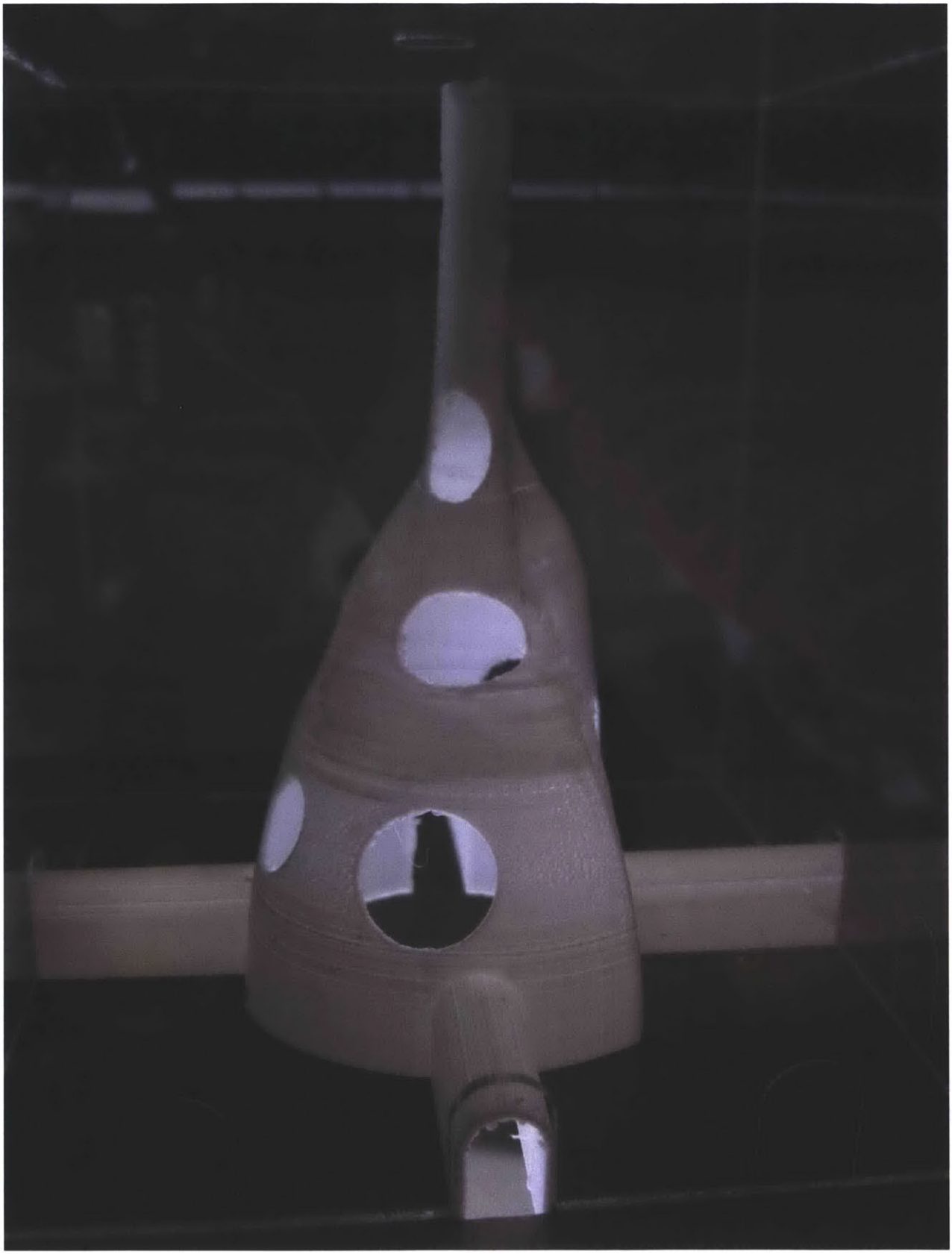


Figure 7.4

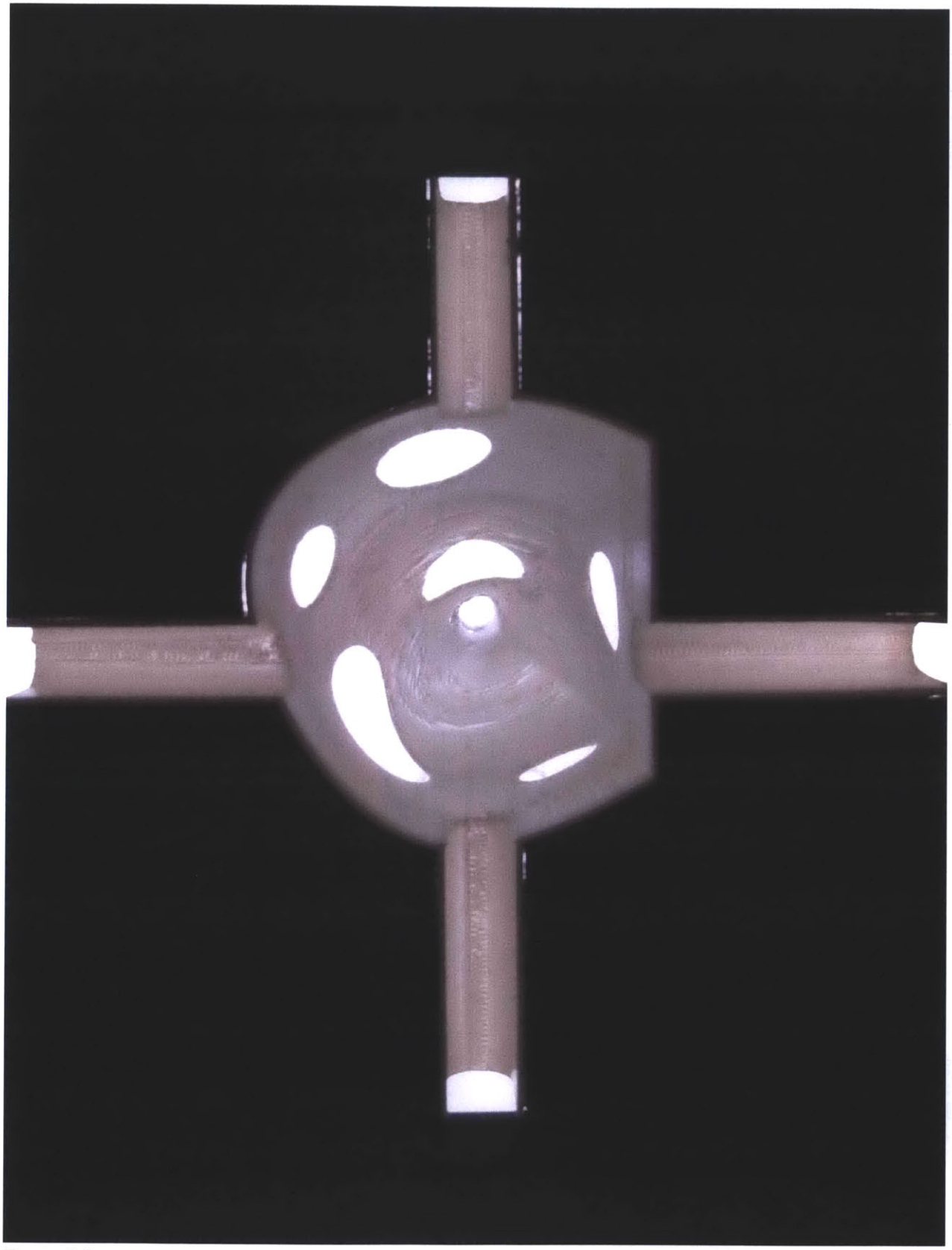


Figure 7.5

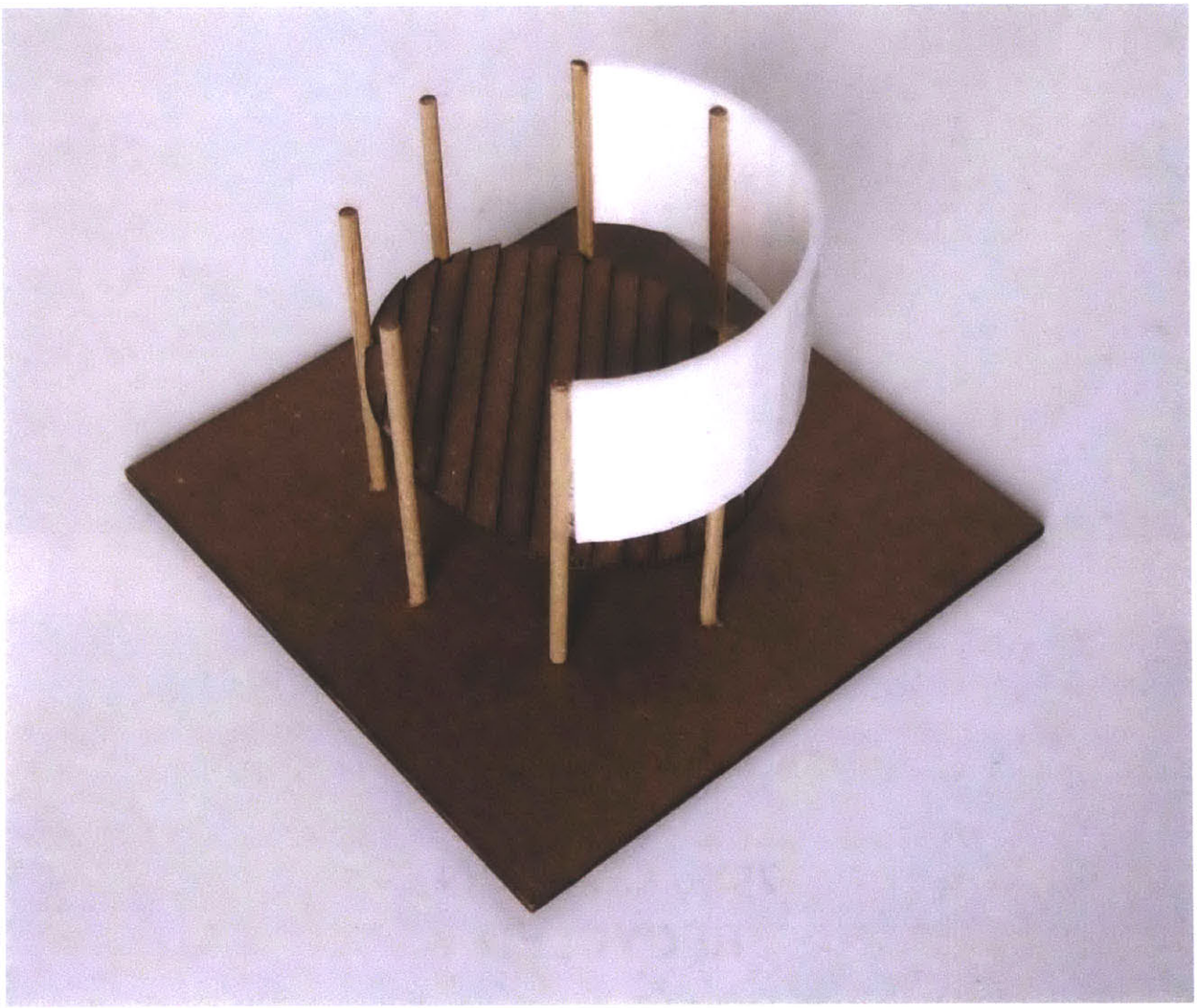
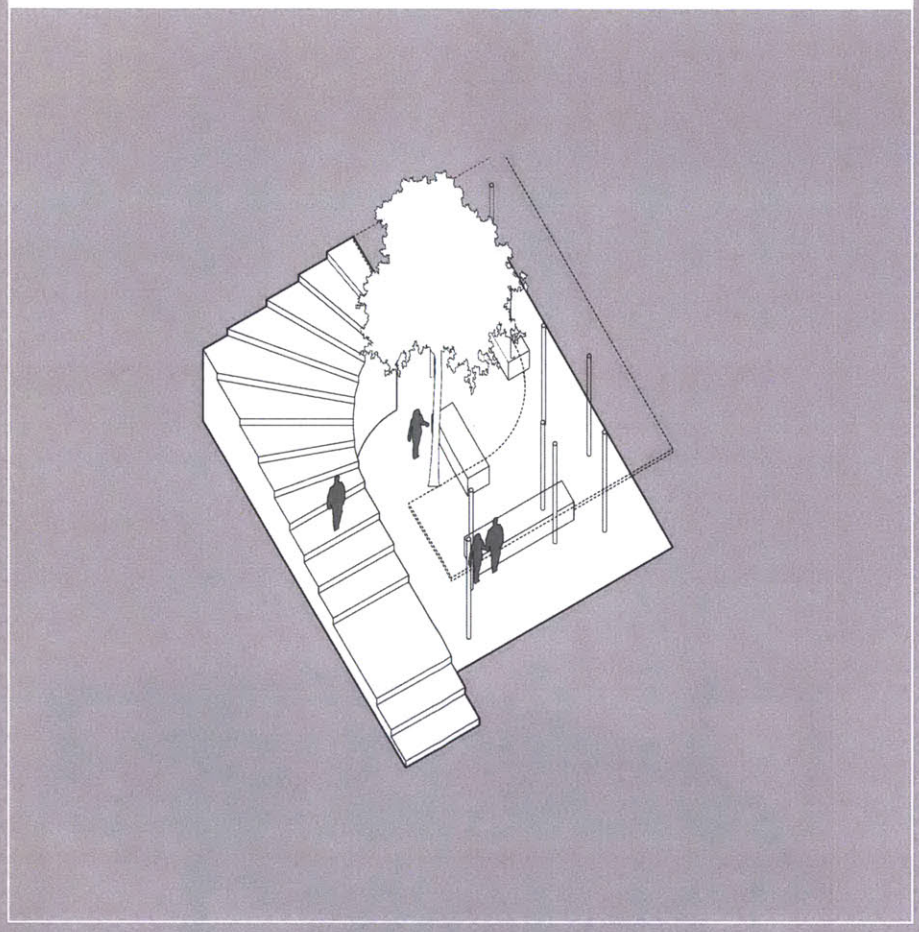


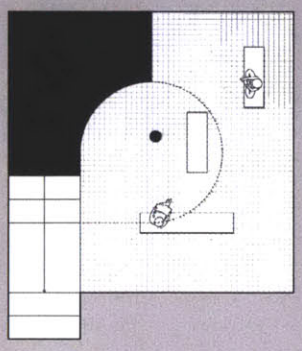
Figure 7.6

Figure 7.7

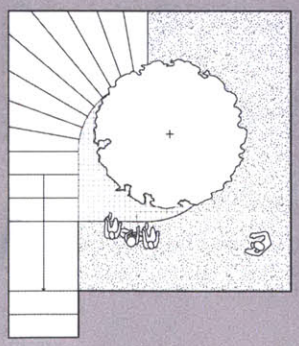
THE OVER_UNDER LOOK



GROUND PLAN



ROOF PLAN



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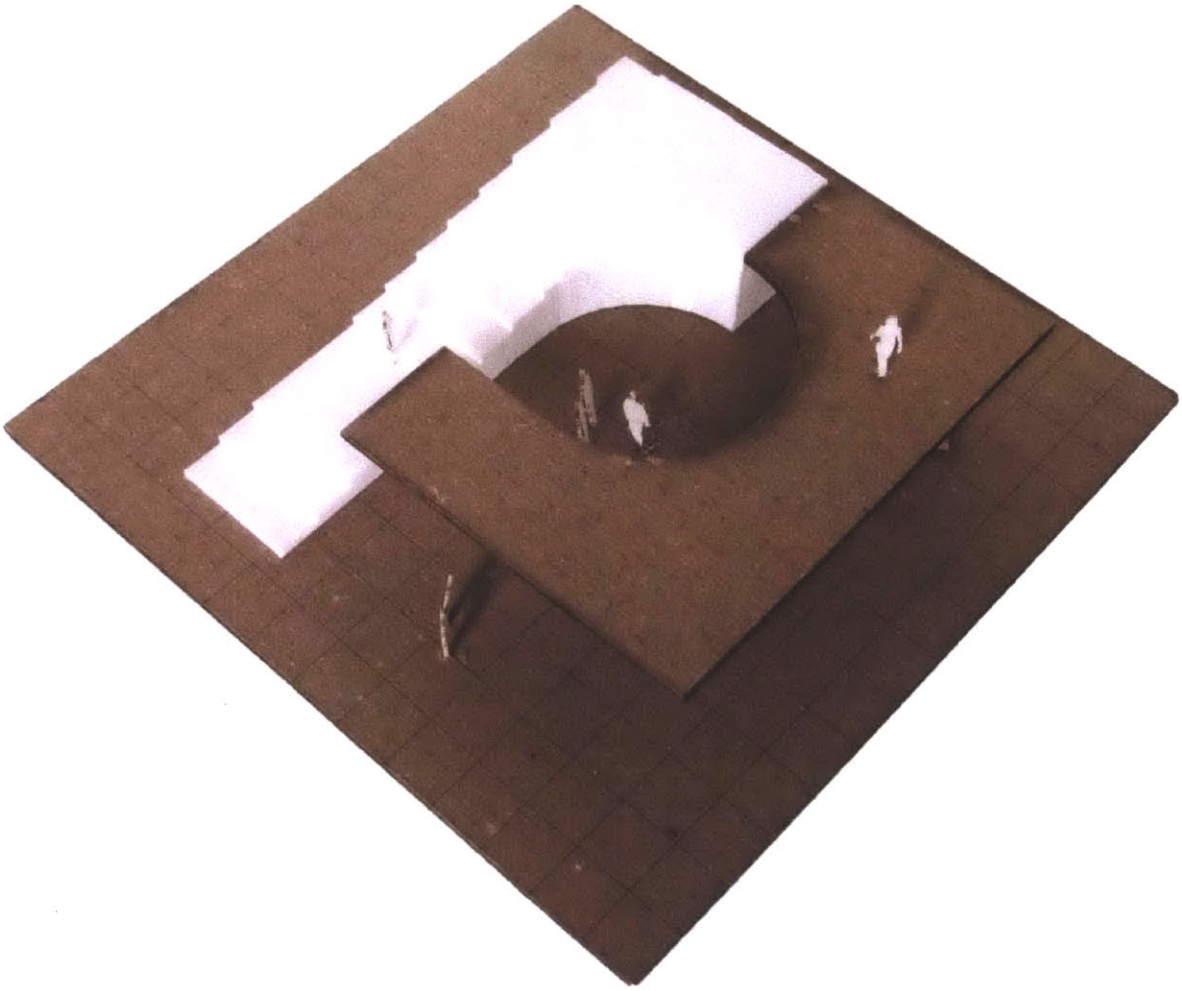
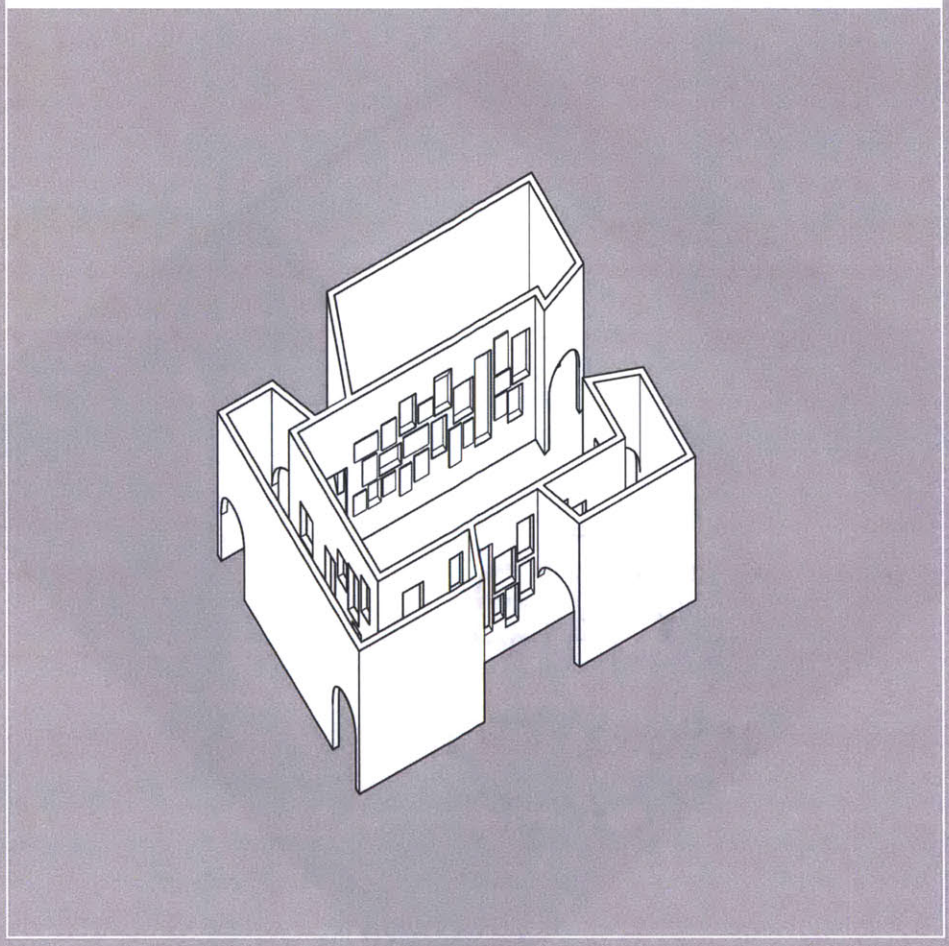


Figure 7.9

THE GALLERY



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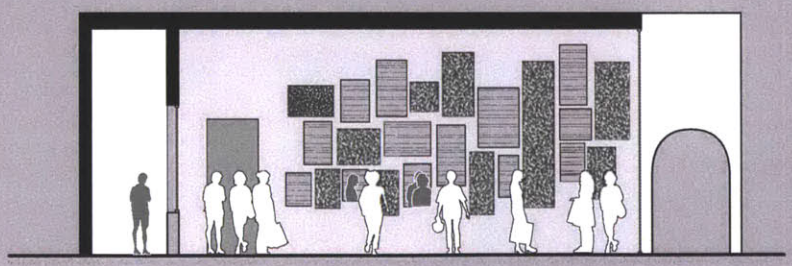

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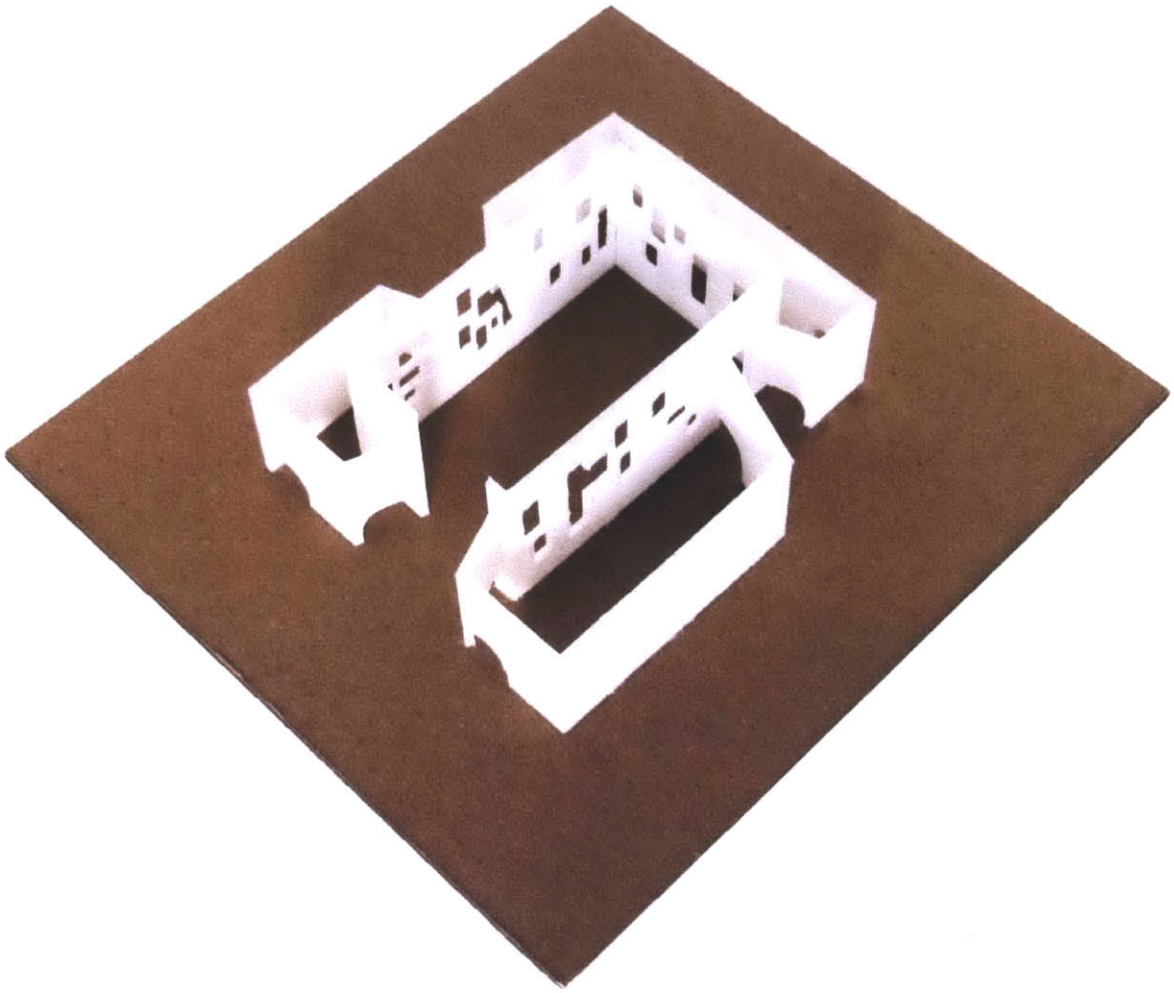

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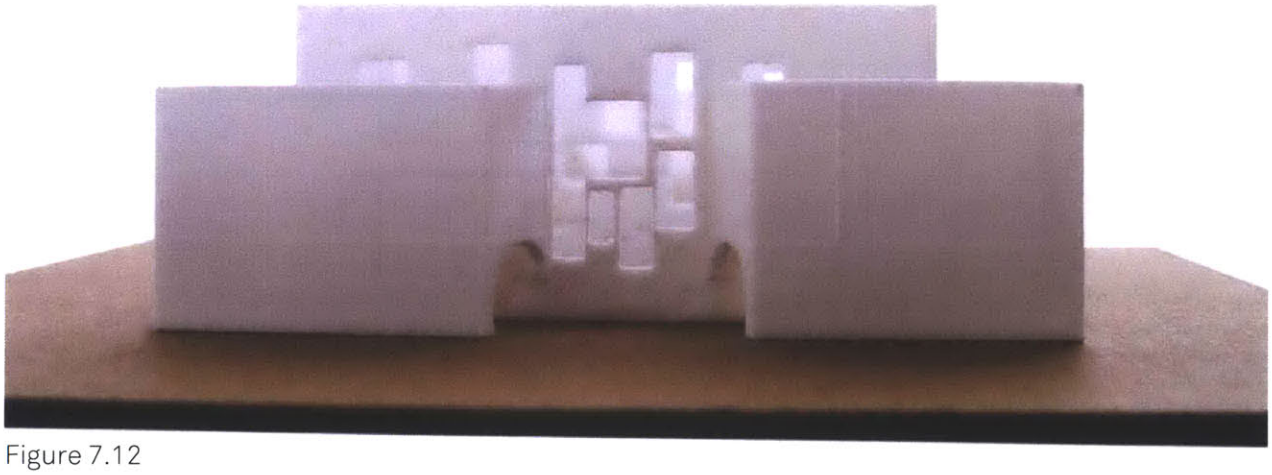
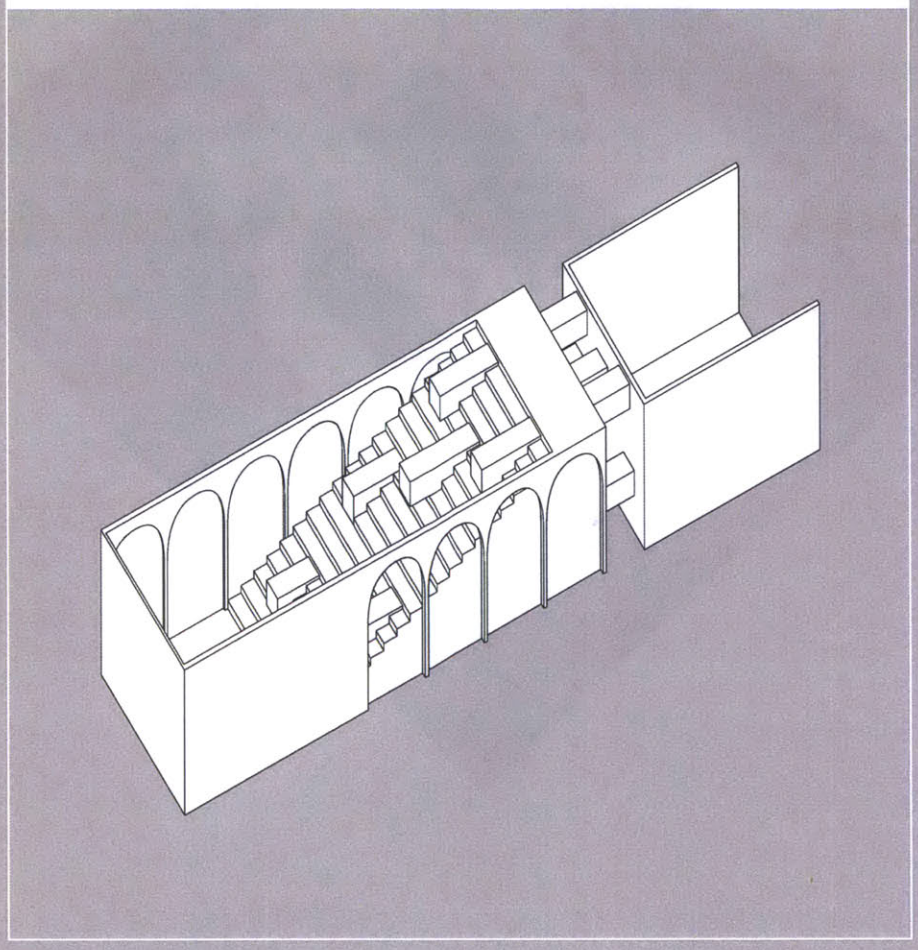


Figure 7.12

UNCANNY FACE TO FACE



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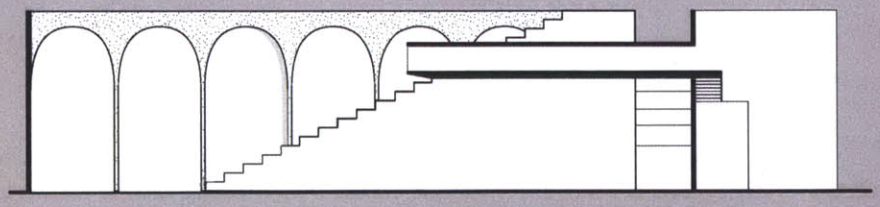

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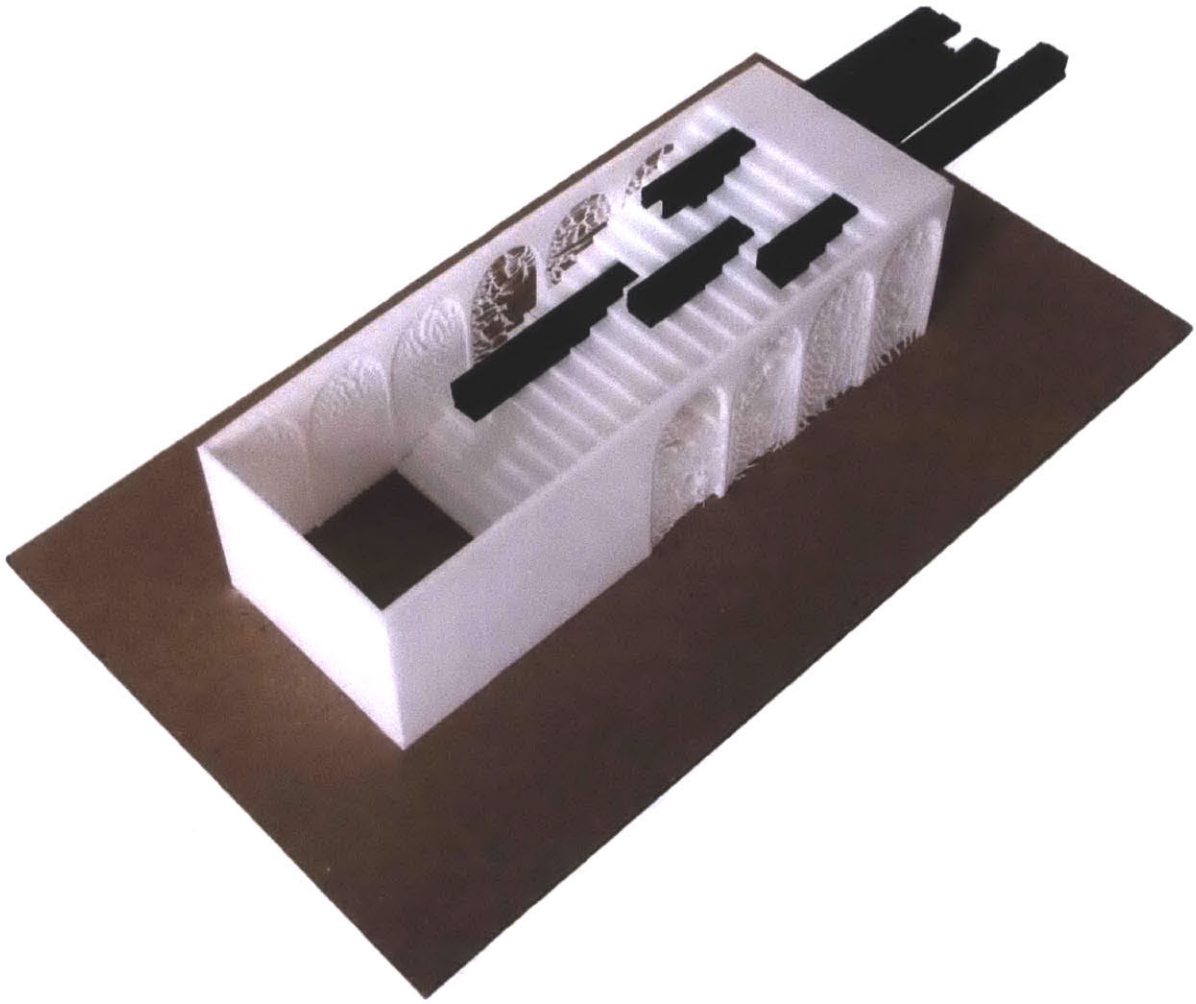
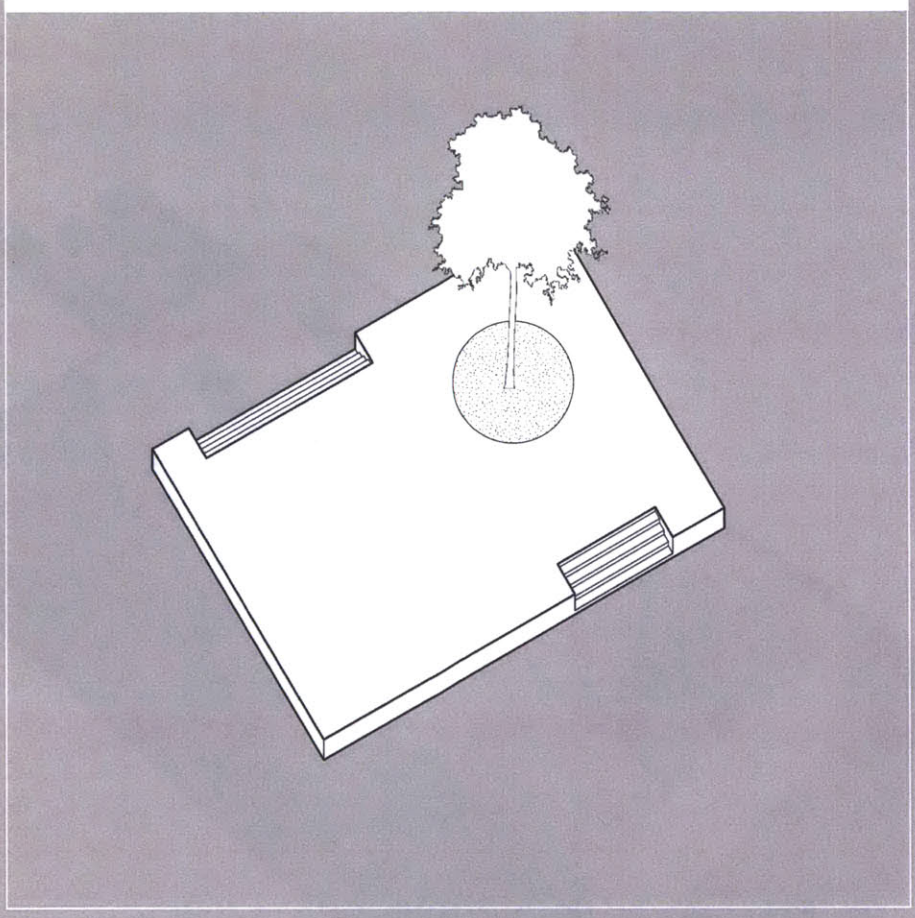


Figure 7.14

THE LARGE BENCH



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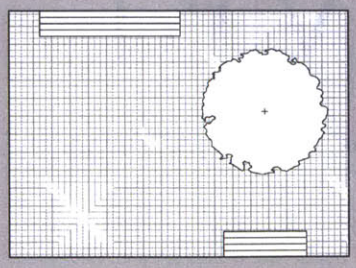

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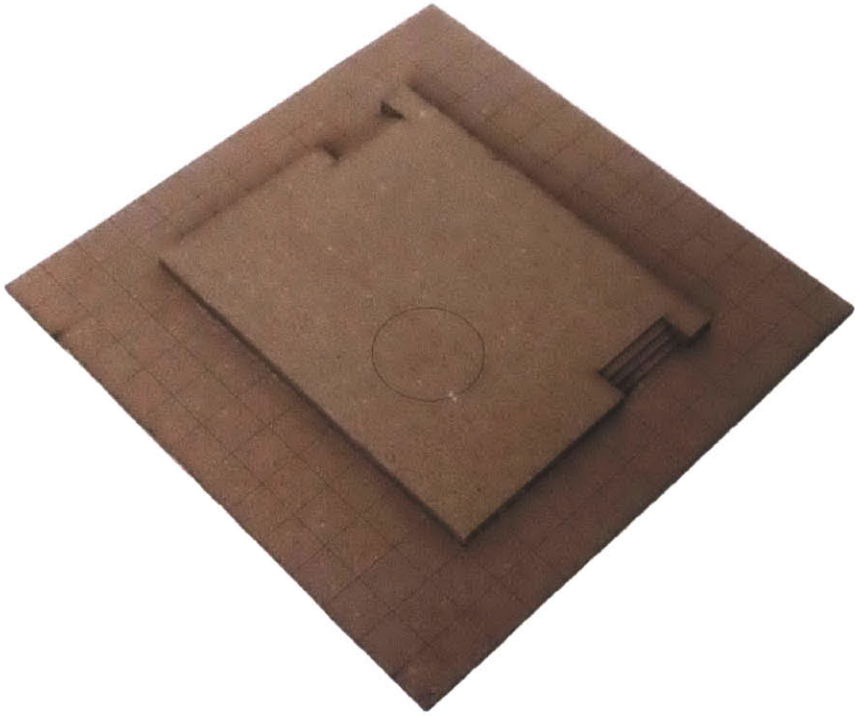

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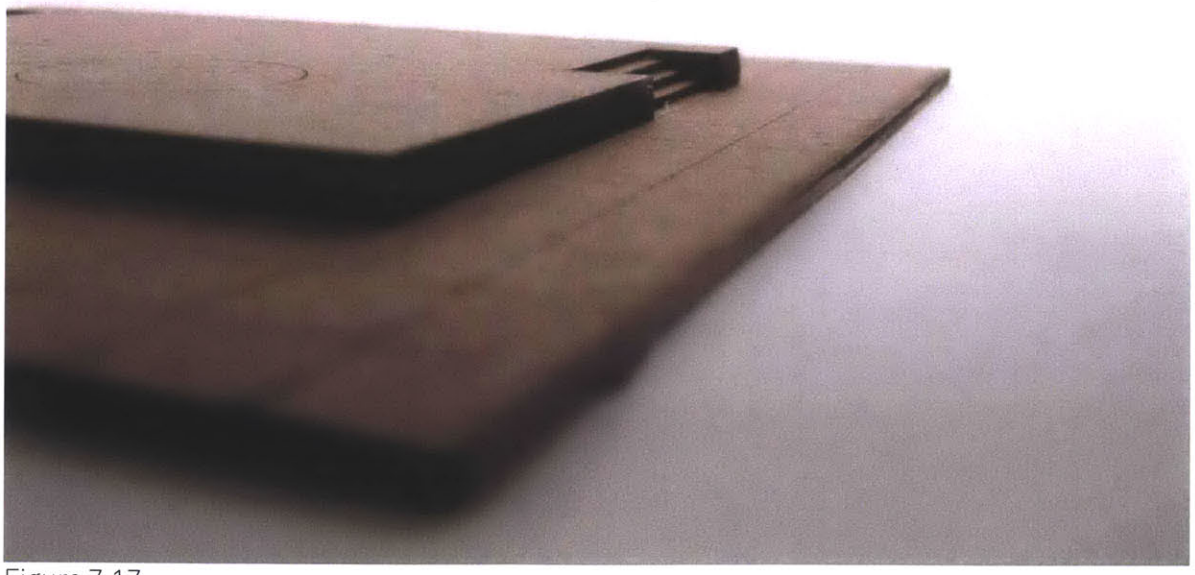

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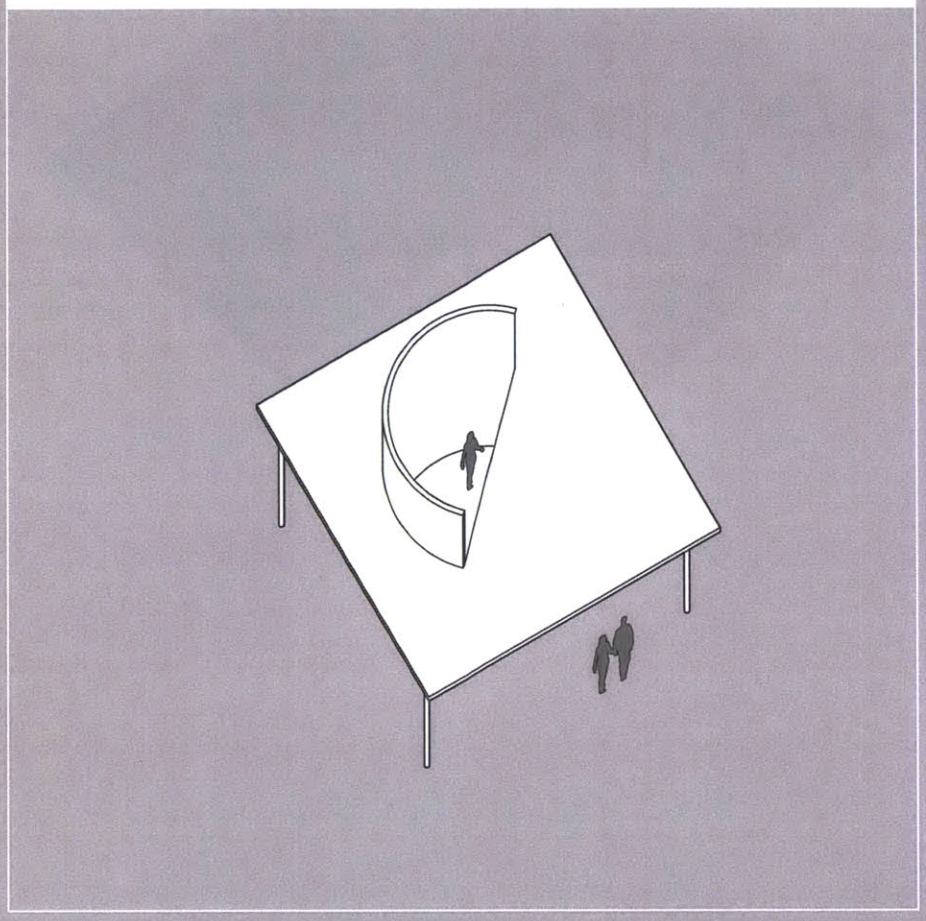
THE OVER_UNDER LOOK



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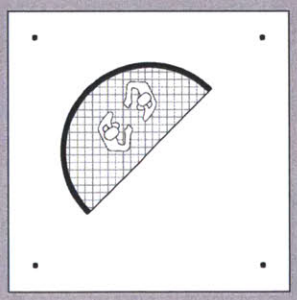

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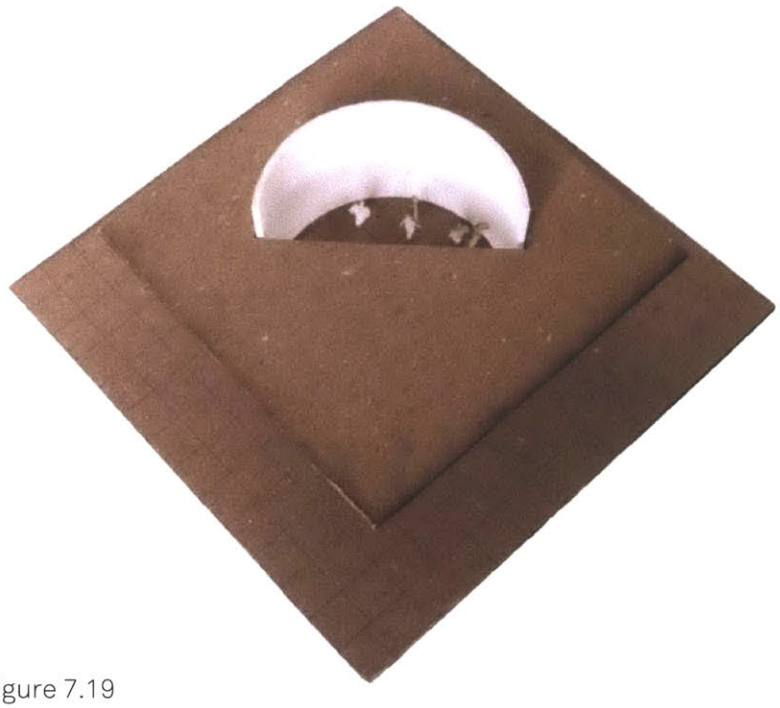

Figure 7.19

Figure 7.20

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