

THESIS BOOK

Eric Lachowski
2008



Our age of architecture is fortunate enough to be so multifaceted. There is no one dominating idea, or movement, dictating how we design. But oddly enough a condition of favoritism has determined certain architecture to be more noteworthy than the rest. In mainstream publications the spectacular and absurd is king. It is this architecture which garners the most attention and consequentially holds higher value in the public's esteem but, ultimately, is underwhelming experientially.

The ideas here within are a reaction to this favoritism. They examine the value structure in place and seek to readjust it in accordance with what is, potentially, a better way to design. The paper that follows will outline the architecture of spectacle, why it is flawed, its affect on the architectural community and the public, and offer some possible solutions to rectify these concerns.

The project is an instrument to show how these ideas can create a rich architecture. It will provide a visual supplement to the text showing how the solutions can be integrated into design.

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Architectural practice today can be described as “a mosaic of subcultures”. Within the broader category of architectural design, there are numerous styles, methodologies and thought processes; each with the possibility of providing a unique expression. The resulting variety fosters the possibility of many kinds of experiences and interaction. Since the quality of experience varies between projects and between subjects, developing a value system can seem quite difficult. But by judging the possibility for a rich variety of experiences within a building does seem feasible. Most design subcultures contribute rich architectural experience, but one is seemingly lacking. The architecture of spectacle, while initially thrilling, fails to provide a rich human experience.

Spectacle appeals to us through the manipulation of size, glitter, and kitsch. These elements provoke an initial excitement within us; indeed it is human nature to react in some way to sublime imagery. But this effect is usually fleeting. Behind the veil of spectacle the human experience is generally lacking. How it is insufficient is intrinsically linked to the very nature of spectacle itself.

Now before the witch hunt begins it is important to remember that architecture can be spectacular without being spectacle. Many buildings possess varying degrees of spectacle, but not enough to

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adequately label the architecture as such. My intent is not to condemn all contemporary architecture in favor of some ghost of the past. Nor is it to make overbearing aesthetic judgments. Provided here is an etiology of an architecture of spectacle: what it is, why its flawed, where it comes from, and why we should care.

An exploration of spectacle in architecture must begin with a means for identification. An architecture of spectacle can be categorized by three basic criteria: image dependence, abstract expression and neglect of function.

The first criterion, image dependence, is rather vague. All architecture requires visual communication to a certain degree. And furthermore aesthetics are often considered a benchmark for the quality of architecture. But the spectacular has a special dependence to the role of image which is absent from other expressions. The image of spectacle relies on first impressions as its determinant of success. It is in the first glimpse, rather than the whole, that it aims to win the viewer's esteem. The goal here is to make the biggest splash, to create the most hoopla. (Foster)

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In order to create an image the architect often relies on abstraction as the main device for expression. This brings up the second criterion, abstract expression. Concept itself is not something to be deployed. It provides many architects with a foothold through the design process and can often complement a completed project. But in the domain of spectacle the need to create ever more impressive imagery is imperative. To justify the form the architect uses metaphors.

The last criterion, a symptom of the others, is that the building often fails to function as it was intended. As attention and resources are directed to the image, the functional aspects of the building are often forgotten.

The need for spectacle in architecture is abetted by what Frederic Jameson called “the cultural logic of late capitalism.” It is in the corporate world, driven by media, that spectacle becomes a desirable trait of architecture. In one stroke a building, and thus the owner, gets world-wide publicity, a symbol of its wealth and also a logo; prompting some to call it corporate identity architecture. In this manner “spectacle is an image accumulated to such a degree that it becomes capital.” (Debord) The corporatization of information through the media has transformed information into entertainment. As such

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the media has an unrelenting need for spectacular imagery in order to entertain the consumers, us.

We are generally a passive audience, especially in terms of architecture. This is a symptom of how we value architecture in our everyday lives. There seems to be a separation between our everyday world and the architecture world. Some cultural phenomenon has asserted that only some of our built environment is suitable for design. This generally includes collective and cultural entities such as museums, universities, government, etc. Left out of the architecture category are our houses, offices, retail shops and the other things that make up our day to day lives.

The resulting effect is a very dull existence where we live and work. The uniform mass-produced model has caused a condition of “homogeneity and lack of variety” in the places where we spend the most of our time. Due to this condition we are drawn to the fantastic imagery of spectacle. It appeals to us because it is so sublimely different from the dull architecture of our “real” lives.

Unfortunately the excitement created by the spectacular does not last forever. After the initial novelty wears off, we can view the building as a whole and what we find is generally less than

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satisfactory. Without the glossy vision that excitement induces we find there is little motive to interact with the architecture. Because architects who craft these buildings focus on image and symbol as the primary means of expression, the crafting of compelling human experiences becomes secondary. This is true in several ways: first is a matter of scale.

The pursuit of impressive architecture generally pushes the architect towards two paths: monumental scale or ultra-expressive form, and in some circumstances a combination of the two. Monumental scale can be an effective way to craft a particular experience: courts, capitals, and churches are built with immense scale with a direct intent of making the individual feel small. Furthermore using spectacle, along with restraint, can effectively denote an entrance or other important threshold. The problem arises when restraint is not displayed. In the same sense that too much of a good thing is undesirable, too much monumental space is as well. Space that is too massive, and without refuge, feels alienating. As a result our actions seem insignificant in relationship to the architecture.

Designers of spectacle “see buildings as edifices, monuments, devices, or statements, not as places, shelters, harbors, or succor.” (Benedikt) This mentality promotes the idea that architecture con-

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mentality promotes the idea that architecture consists of the surface: the floor, the walls, the roof etc. In this regard the spectacular relies on vision as the principle method of orientation; what is important is what is seen and how. What is forgotten is the space in between the surfaces. It is through the manipulation of this in-between space that widens the possibility of human movement and interaction. Once we start thinking in terms of volume hearing, kinesthesia, smell and proximity become important ways of orientation. Our senses work in unison with each other; each of the interdependent on the next. We do not see without hearing, just as we do not feel without smelling. By designing for as many senses as possible we can expand the quality of experience.

One of the failures of abstraction, which the architects use to reinforce their projects, is it is not perceivable in everyday experience. The superimposition of maps, formal allusions, fragmentation and arrangement of floor plan (see precedent study) are all intangible experiences. More favorable is to design using sections, perspectives, materials, light, repetition and pattern and other things that are directly experienced by a visitor. One can also make a case that concept and symbol are not really the driving forces of design, but rather the lack of restraint of the architect is the cause. They design big

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because technology has made it possible; a notion that is self-indulgent and hopefully not the case.

One final symptom of spectacle in architecture is an apparent disregard for the functional concerns of the building. Perhaps the ego of the designer is to blame or maybe it is the client's lack of concern, but the spectacular does not usual function well. In other words: it just doesn't work. Gehry designs museum spaces that draw more attention than the art, Libeskind's museums were designed with utter disregard for the collection to be housed inside, Zaha Hadid's fire station has now been converted into a chair museum. These are not instances of accident, nor should they be forgotten. To compose form is not enough; the architect's intent is to design places that serve functional criteria as well. The architect's role lies somewhere between the expressive and the practical, drawing from both at the same time. Function must not follow form and form must not follow function. They share a symbiotic and necessary relationship.

All of this results in an architecture that is degraded experientially. But the architect can make a conscious decision to design in a different way. By embracing design values which are not self-indulgent and image driven the architecture we create can enrich our lives. We must first love design and

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the things of architecture. We need to value good design in all aspects of society, and not as an event or as the exception, but rather as the norm.

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PRECEDENT ANALYSIS

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Introducing the problem

The spectacle in Berlin drew 350,000 visitors before it even opened. Before any exhibit was installed the building had already become an attraction, an icon. The media was quick to endorse it calling it groundbreaking, a masterpiece, intellectual, an exhibit in its own right. Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum had indeed become a cultural phenomenon; an architectural prima donna.

The building has come to represent a trend in architecture toward the spectacular. The layering of concept and meaning is used as a device for expression; and thus, rather than crafting compelling spaces, the architect uses symbols reassure the project. This vague symbolism is intangible. These virtual ideas only have value when explained to an audience but remain unseen in everyday experience. The virtual becomes necessary to describe the real. Such a design methodology creates spaces which do not foster a rich experience of architecture. The result is an architecture that is temporarily exhilarating but ultimately degraded experientially.

This will become evident as I present, in two parts, a thorough analysis of two buildings with very similar intentions but drastically different results: Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum and Peter

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Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The first part is a mundane account of each museum describing an average visitor experience. The second will introduce the architects conceptual ideas and execution of those ideas. In this part the writings of Benedikt and Bloomer and Moore will compliment my investigation. Finally I will explore the wider implications of what a human scaled architecture can mean.

A tale of two museums

Although spatially only a mile apart and dealing with a very similar subject matter, Berlin's two Jewish museums offer very different experiences. Built within five years of each other they provide an interesting cross-section of the state of architectural design today. While the two museums exist as stand alone attractions, it is possible to see both in the same day and provides an interesting juxtaposition to do so. We will begin with a tour of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum.

Approaching the museum from the Lindenstrasse the first view is of the Jewish Museum's old building. The baroque façade is a rare remnant of pre-war Berlin and stands out amid the mass housing complexes typical of postwar construction. The building is symmetrical, proportioned and orna-

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mented with symbols of Prussian history. The yellow stone and red tile roof provide visual warmth in an otherwise gray area of Berlin. Juxtaposed with the historic building, Libeskind's addition is jagged, non-historical, and clad in metal. It is monolithic and doesn't appear to draw from its surroundings; it stands in defiance of its neighborhood. Together they make for an interesting street presence: two buildings seemingly out of place with their surroundings.

Entry to the museum is through the old building. Here the visitor remains for merely a moment before descending a flight of stairs into the new addition. This stairway is the single entry and exit of the building and feels less than monumental. It seems too small to be the entrance to the monolith outside. Upon entering Libeskind's addition one feels a sense of disorientation; the museum does not have a clear directive to the way one should move through it. This is intentional as "Libeskind set out to disorientate and constrain and baffle" (Reid) in an attempt to liken the visitor experience to that of a German Jew. A three story monumental stairway serves as the vertical circulation through the building. At the top the visitor is exposed to the permanent collection. The room unfolds cluttered with displays and artifacts. The walls are slotted with windows which do not seem to illuminate any-

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thing in particular; all of the displays are illuminated by track lighting. The displays range from artifacts, interactive media, to information panels. The exhibition space itself consists of long narrow winding hallways spread over two floors. Here there is less space for Libeskind's implied confusion as the narrative is basically linear: the visitor winds through the obtuse jagged rooms while transversing a central void several times. The ability to orientate oneself is also presented many times by the windows with scar the building. Some windows look in onto internal spaces without any real view. The formal arrangement of zig-zag spaces and voids creates many awkwardly shaped display areas and paths which have no real destination. The building does indeed seem to baffle and confuse in a way. To exit the visitor must retrace their initial steps in order to exit the building.

Only about a mile northwest of the Jewish Museum is a second museum dedicated to the Jewish people. The building consists of a monument to the Jewish casualties of the Holocaust and an information center. The site is located across from the Tiergarten between Potsdamer Platz and the Brandenburg Gate.

Approaching along Ebertstrasse Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe spreads

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out in front of you like a sea of concrete. Thousands of concrete blocks, or “stelae”, extend across an entire city block. Based on the public nature of the project, the memorial seems appropriate sited, sitting at a key point along a string of public plazas. From afar the memorial appears to be level with the street, but this is an illusion. As you draw nearer you see that the ground around the stelae slopes down towards the center of the site, disappearing into the middle of the blocks. The feeling created is ambivalent. The whole thing seems to have an order, arranged in an orthogonal grid, yet at the same time it is pervaded by a sense of randomness. Similar to Libeskind, Eisenman wanted to “produce an uneasy, confusing atmosphere.” (Eisenman)

As you descend deeper into the monument your field of vision narrows as the stelae begin disrupting peripheral vision. The stelae soon block out the sunlight and tower overhead. The further you move into the memorial the more it surrounds you. It seems to make its presence known. You begin to feel small, to feel lost. Your perceivable world has shrunk. If you go far enough in any direction this effect is reversed as you begin to ascend out of the stelae. Now your world is expanded, enlarged to its original state.

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To enter the museum you descend a stairway at the southeast corner of the memorial. This museum, designed in conjunction with Eisenman by Dagmar von Wilcken, is perhaps the antithesis of Libeskind's design. The building is small and functionally driven. It rests below grade and is practically unseen from street level. The visitor experience is directed through the building by design. Each room has a distinct expression using various different types of displays and colors to designate subject matter. Displays range from eye level to sunken in the floor. The progression through the space is simple and clearly defined. The ceiling throughout the building echoes the same grid pattern of the stelae above. After passing through the four main rooms and six total exhibit spaces you ascend back to street level into the field of concrete blocks.

Interiorist and exteriorist

So how do two buildings with very similar intentions end up with such radically different results? Perhaps it has to do with the design methodology of each architect. Libeskind built his plans off of a series of conceptual abstractions. The design is said to have come from the plotting and connecting of sixty various sites of Jewish importance in Berlin. The resulting plan appeared as a fragmented Star of David, adding another layer of abstraction. Further-

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more Libeskind describes his project by the moniker 'Between the Lines' because as he explains "it is about two lines of thinking, organization and relationship. One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments, the other is a tortuous line, but continuing indefinitely." (Libeskind) Within the straight line is a void, unreachable by the visitor which represents identity lost through suffering. These lines are meant to symbolize the path of the Jewish people through history. Ultimately Libeskind's intent is to leave the visitor feeling confused and unsure.

Eisenman's plan is also built upon a conceptual abstraction intended to induce uneasiness, but without as many layers of symbolization: the memorial aims to represent a supposedly ordered system that has lost touch with human reason. (Eisenman) The grid can be interpreted to represent the "rigid discipline and bureaucratic order that kept the killing machine grinding along." (Ouroussoff) The pillars can be seen as tombs. Here the intention is the same: to leave the visitor feeling confused and unsure.

The difference between the two buildings is more apparent when you look past the conceptual ideas and focus on how those ideas were realized. Libeskind's ideas are intangible to the casual visitor. The floor plan is not humanly perceivable as we

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are never able to sense it as a whole. To a casual observer there are not sixty interconnected places of history that make up the building form; it does not express a fragmented Star of David. Nor are Libeskind's "two lines of thinking" perceived by the visitor. His pet name for the project, 'Between the Lines,' is a misnomer: the project neglects the interior space, the space in between, what Benedikt dubs "emptiness." (56) It is this area, which calls for human movement, which Libeskind devalues as secondary to the plan, exterior and voids. For Libeskind the end result of architecture is the object: the floor, the walls, the roof, the plan. It is in these aspects that Libeskind's building is meaningful. To describe this attitude I will borrow the term 'exteriorist' from Benedikt. The exteriorist attitude tends to value formal composition and the conceptual over the experiential.

Eisenman's memorial has a more tangible relationship with the visitor. Here importance is not only placed on the physical architecture, but also in the space that is created. It is this in between space and its manipulation which creates a rich experience. Whereas the Jewish museum is a "slave to its program, twisting and turning to accommodate our every movement and wish" the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is "formed according to innate principles of order, structure, shelter and the

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evolution of architecture itself.” (Benedikt, 52) It does not direct our experience to some predestined idea, but rather allows for personal experience and interaction. It is accessible not from one point but from all points. It allows the person to determine their entrance, path and exit. Through the varying heights of the stelae, the space transforms our personal space. In the deepest part of the memorial the proximity to the concrete stelae makes us feel shrunk. At this point our sense of center is heightened, as we are more aware of ourselves. Within the canyons of the stelae vision becomes a less dominate means of sensing the space; and as a result kinesthesia and hearing are heightened. Because what lies around the corner cannot be seen, we are forced to listen, to pay attention to shadows, to use our intuition. Eisenman’s memorial is meaningful in its form and concept, but gains much more meaning by our movement through the space. It becomes a “stimulus for movement, real [and] imagined.” (Bloomer and Moore 59) This emphasis on space and the human experience is an ‘interiorist’ attitude.

From this we can infer that exteriorists design “buildings as edifices, monuments, devices or statements,” and interiorists design human “places.” (Benedikt 4) We can examine this notion further by paying attention to the visitor’s relationship to the

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exhibit and the exhibition's relationship to the museum. In Libeskind's museum exhibits and objects seem to be haphazardly placed throughout, scattered about in hallways and corners. As a result the objects in the museum seem out of place. This begs the question: how can a museum be so indifferent to its collection? The answer is simple; Libeskind did not design with a collection in mind. He designed the building to function separately from the exhibition. The visitor is in a constant tension between paying attention to the exhibits or the architecture. Displays are set at awkward points; in the middle of hallways or in front of windows. The building seems to have a lack of seriousness, perhaps attributed to the apparent disregard of the exhibits. The museum is loud with activity, with many people chatting or running through the space. The atmosphere feels more like an amusement park than a testament to the Jewish people.

In Eisenman's memorial each space within the building has a particular theme which is reflected in the design. The building and exhibit work together complimenting each other. The information displays are designed upon the same ordered grid of the stelae, sometimes becoming extensions of the blocks above. The spaces are simple but effective. The Room of Dimensions features the personal accounts of Jewish men, women and children set

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into the floor. This act draws the head downward in an act of respect for the deceased. Throughout the building people are silent. The content is speaking to them, to their emotions. The progression through the rooms is slow and careful.

If “a building is an incitement to action, a stage for movement and interaction” (Bloomer and Moore 59) then we need to be attentive to how people move through space. Movement flourishes with the possibility of movement. Being able to see various paths that ascend or descend, to hear their footsteps, to see people moving through the space all build a desire to experience the space. There seems to be a fundamental need to alter our perspective of a space. By allowing numerous viewpoints and changing the dynamics of enclosed space we increase the number of unique experiences to be had.

By designing at a human scale we can actively create architecture that compels us to interact with it. The call of the spectacular is novelty, which encourages a “distracted viewing of the surface [rather than] the reading of depth.” (Eisenman) After the novelty wears off, there is little incentive to interact with the architecture. As Iris Murdoch wrote, “the spectacle of huge and appalling things can indeed exhilarate, but usually in a way that is less than ex-

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cellent.” (73) Our buildings should not merely be a tool for symbolic expression; the meaning should be expressed by our interaction with them. As illustrated with Peter Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, when architecture is designed enliven human experience the space becomes more evocative and powerful. It is the type of space people gravitate towards and prefer. Spectacular architecture spoils too soon, coming and going as with all styles; but human scale architecture will always have a place in our live world.

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SITE ANALYSIS

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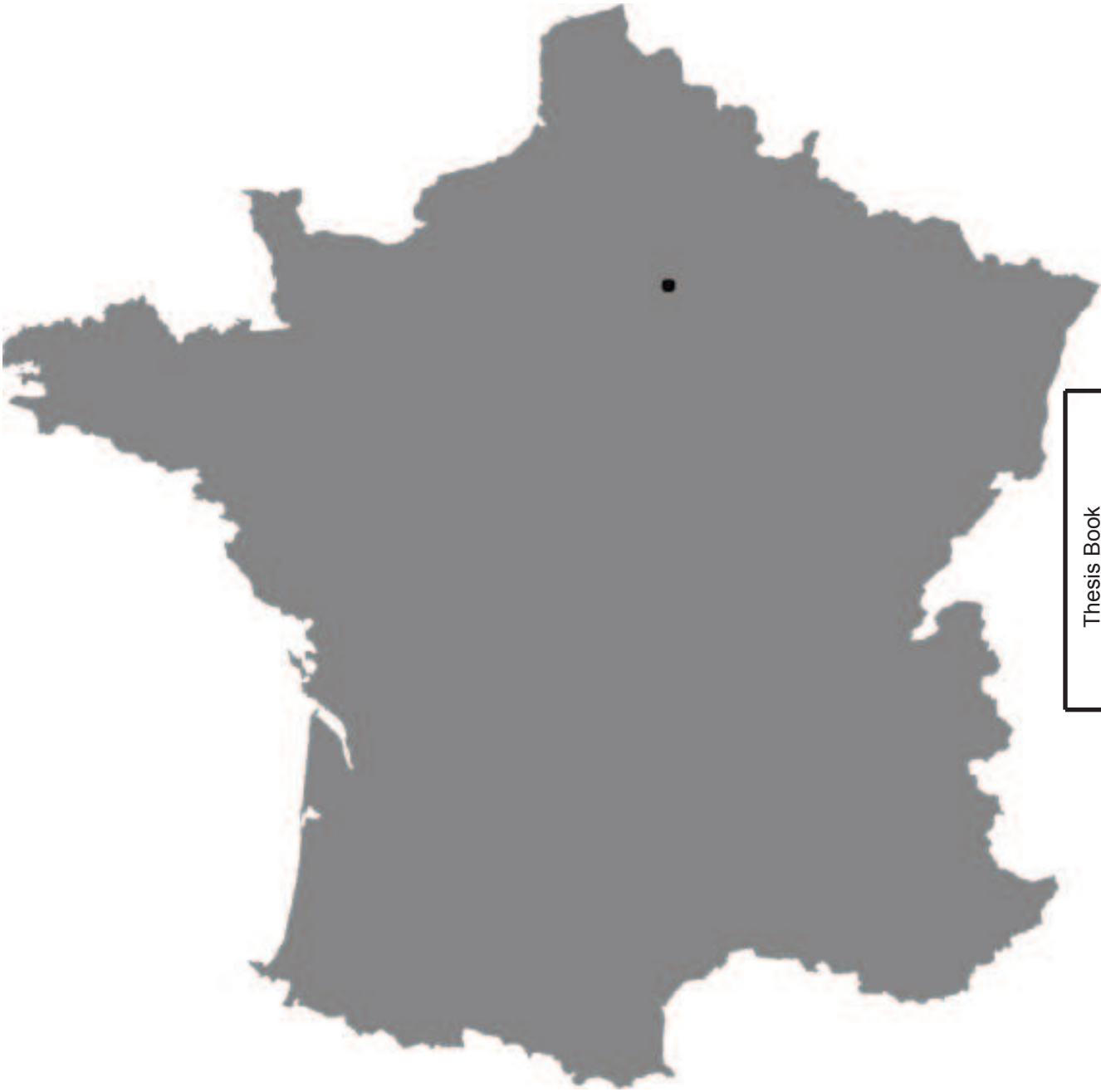
The site is in the commune of Ussy-sur-Marne in rural France. The city is located approximately 40 miles northeast of Paris. The site is serviced by the A4 which connects Paris and Reims.

Viewing the site broadly, it lies north of the Marne River just outside of Ussy-sur-Marne. Wheat fields cover most of the surrounding hills, although some forested land is preserved in areas. Dozens of small towns are located along valley of the Marne River. Extending outwards from the river, the terrain becomes hilly with varying grades. The character of the area lies in the roll of the hills and the coverage of the farms. The life is definitively rural, with all of the pleasures and boredoms that the land delivers.

At a closer look at the site will show the relationship ship to the town of Ussy-sur-Marne. The site is located between the Marne River and a drainage run called Courtablon. It lies within a flat that extends north from the river. It is within walking distance of the town and within driving distance of the larger cities in the area. The site has good access to train and automobile travel.

Population within 1 miles – 841
Population within 3 miles – 14,124
Population within 9 miles – 82,080

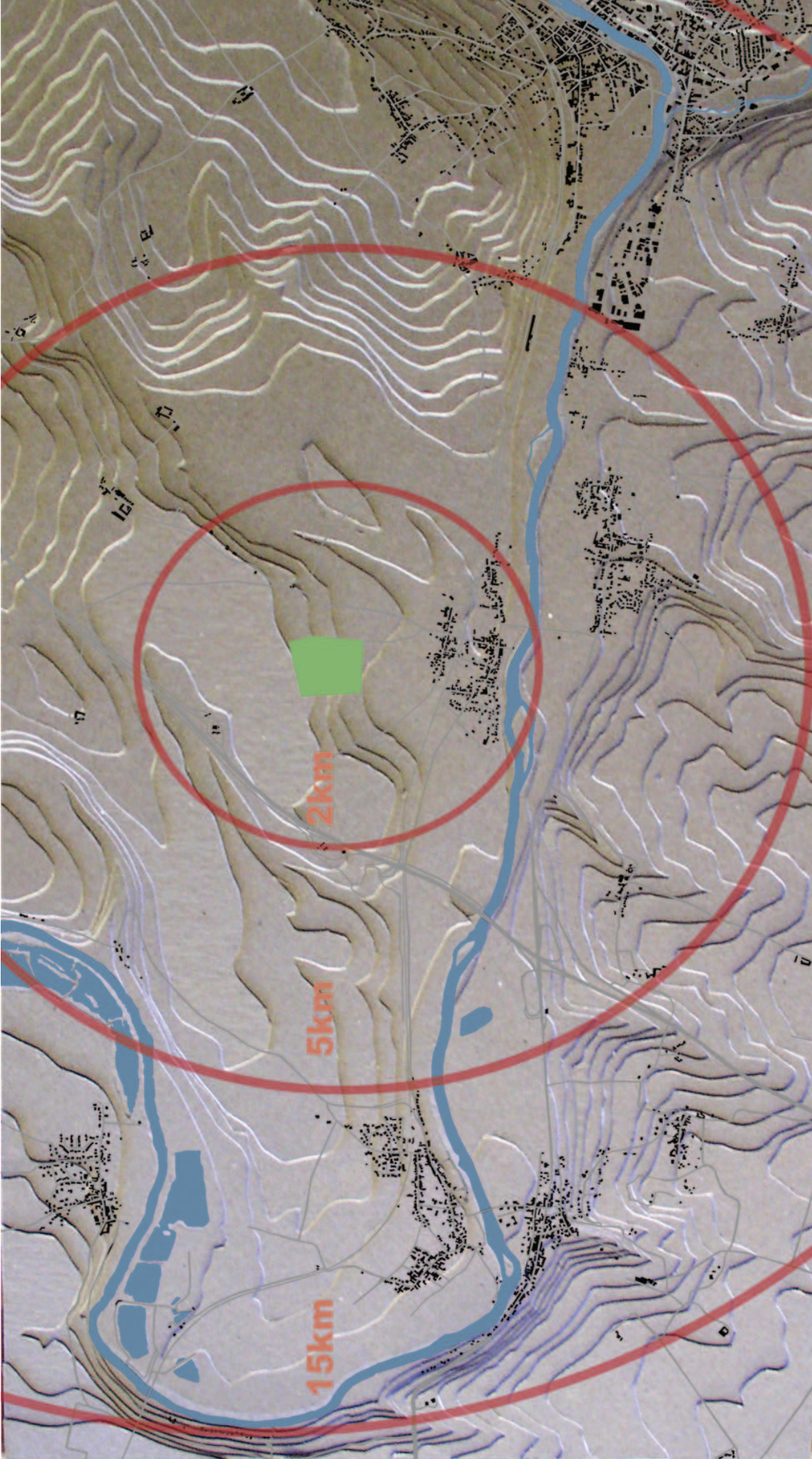
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The project that follows is an archives and library for the collected work of Samuel Beckett. Spanning over fifty years his body of work includes literature, drama, short fiction, poetry, film and countless letters to his contemporaries. His work is greatly influenced by the “everyday aesthetic,” the idea in which the mundane occurrences of rural life are indeed worth telling. The banality of rural life and the roll of the hills are fundamental to his writing.

Drawing from the ideas brought forth in the thesis, this project is an opportunity to design a building that allows for a rich human experience. This, I believe, would do Beckett proud. His writing has a very “real” quality brought about by the level of craft he put into developing beautifully ordinary stories. Harld Pinter writes:

The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him.

He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden path, he's not slipping me a wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy — he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not — he hasn't got his hand over his heart. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty.

His work is beautiful.

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The building is to be organized in a way that promotes a feeling of embeddedness. Whether you are in the interior space or exterior public space the feeling of comfort is key in the building. The archives are to be developed according to the type of work: separated into fiction, drama, film and correspondences. Each section will try to manipulate human experience in a fitting way to the medium; the space for letter should feel more intimate than that of fiction.

In addition to the archives a small theater will serve the surrounding communities and allow a wide variety of cultural events. The space will be able to accommodate dramatic theater, academic lectures, and community events. This space is to have its own place within the whole allowing it to work independent of the archives. The buildings will share common exterior spaces and have sight lines to the other components of the whole and the rolling hills that make the site unique.

Support functions such as office, conference rooms, individual study spaces, and special handling for rare sensitive materials will surround the two primary functions. All spaces are meant to have a relationship to each other. This will be achieved by use of material, pattern, sight lines, and an overall feeling of embeddedness (which should be extend-

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ed to exterior spaces as well)

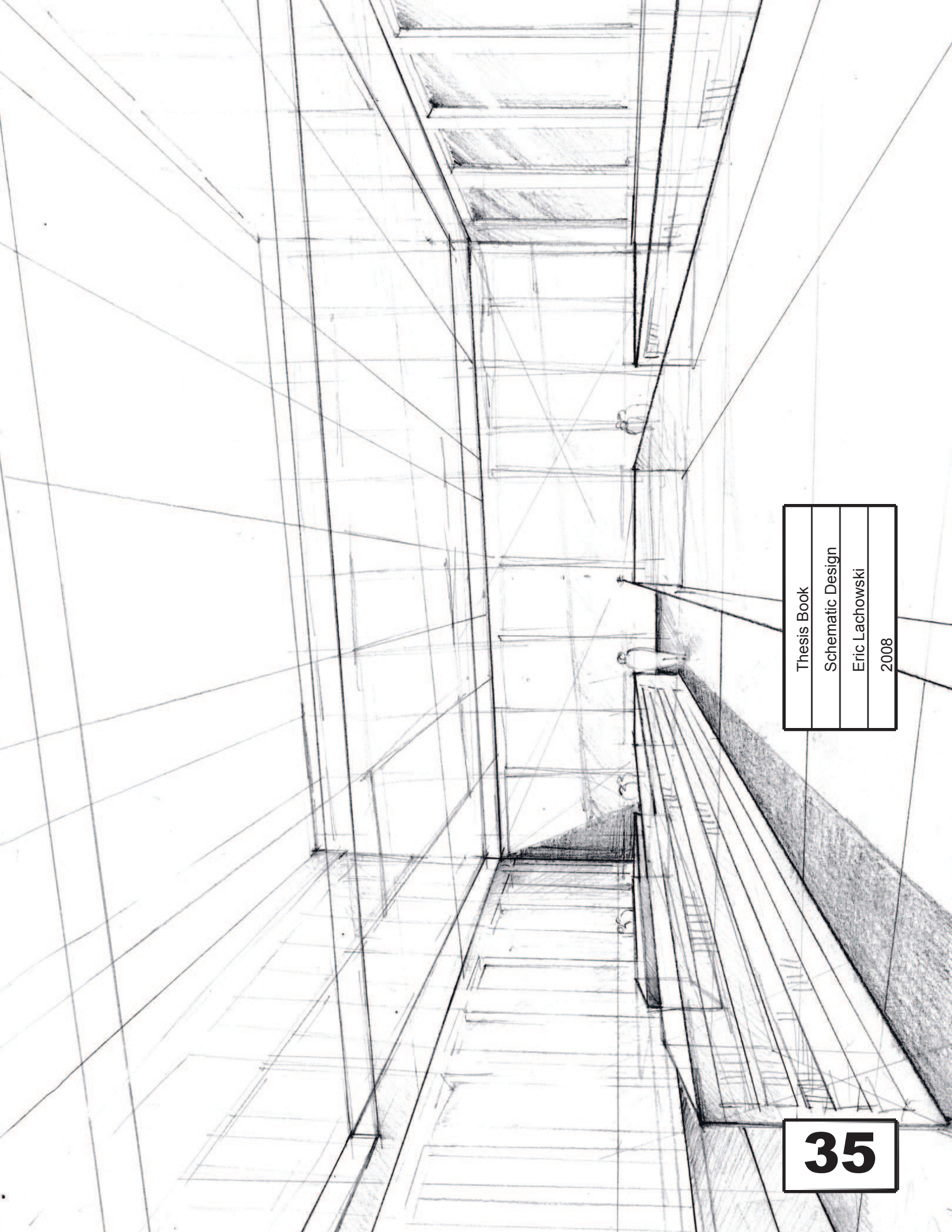
The building will not exceed the human scale. Beckett was keen to appeal to individual scale in his writing and the building would not be suitable if it were too big or sprawling.

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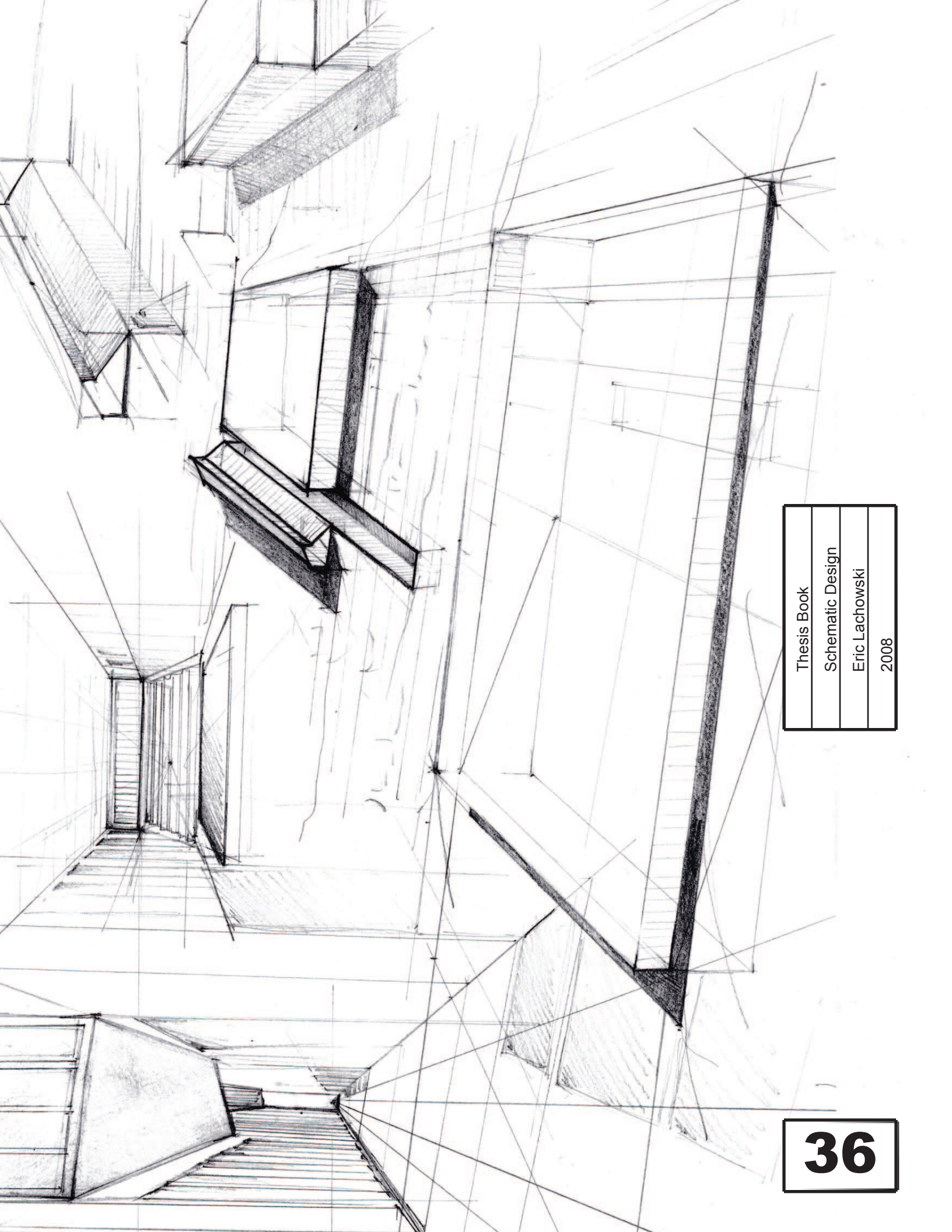
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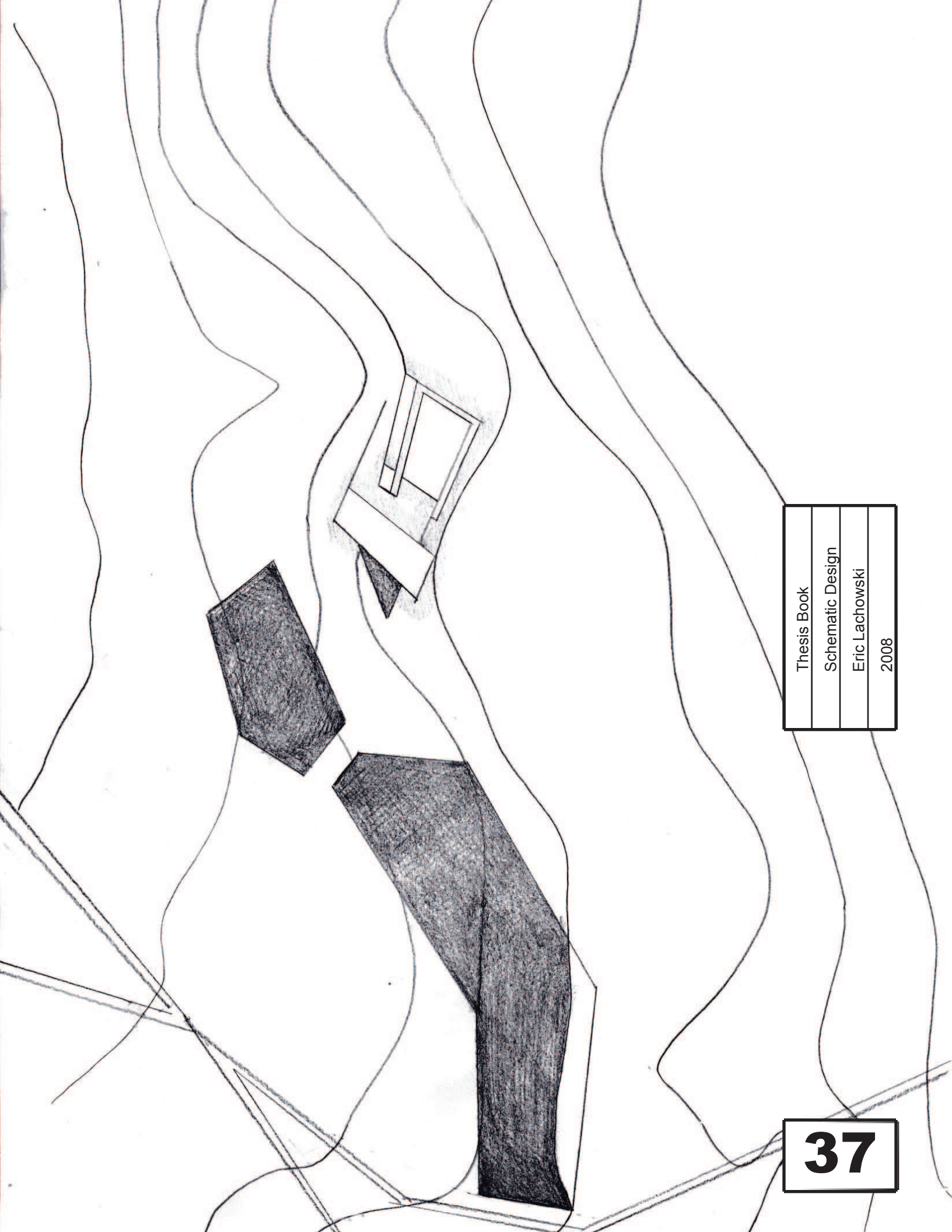




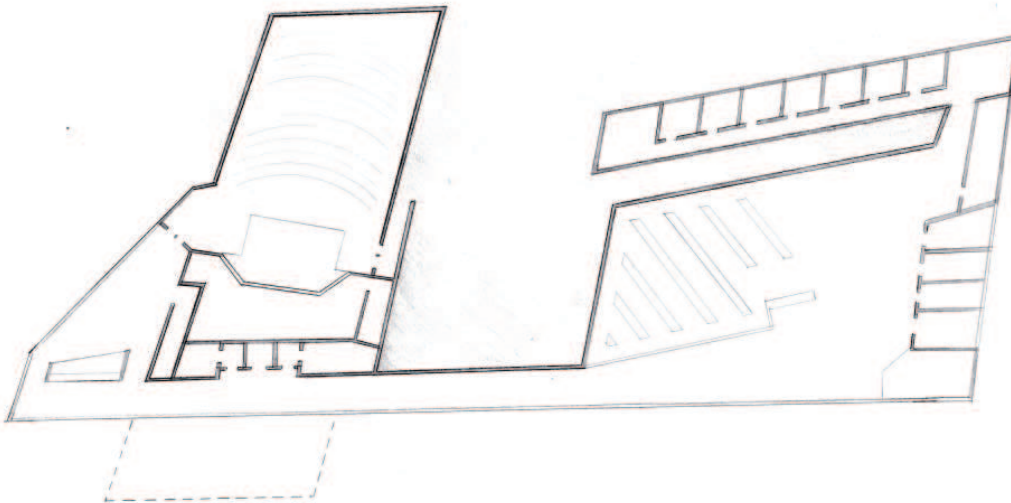
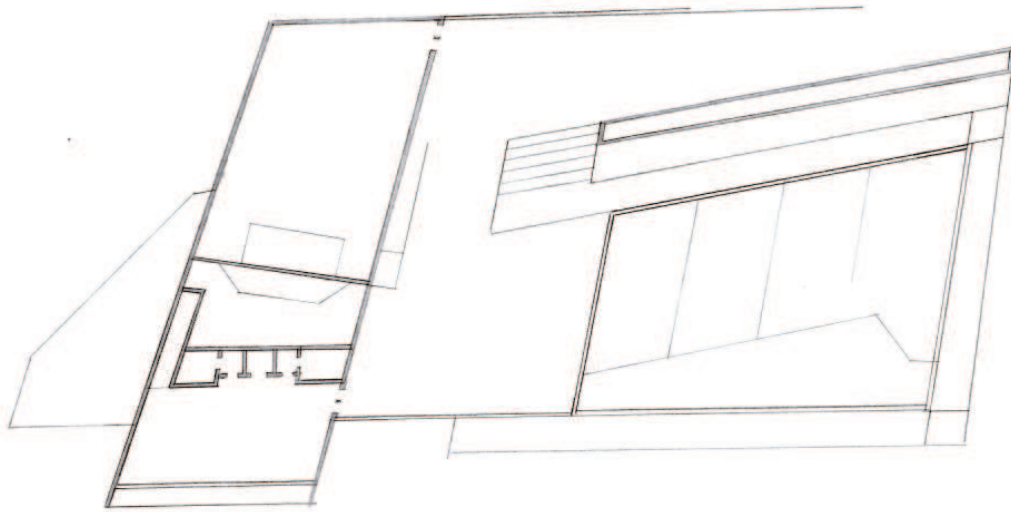
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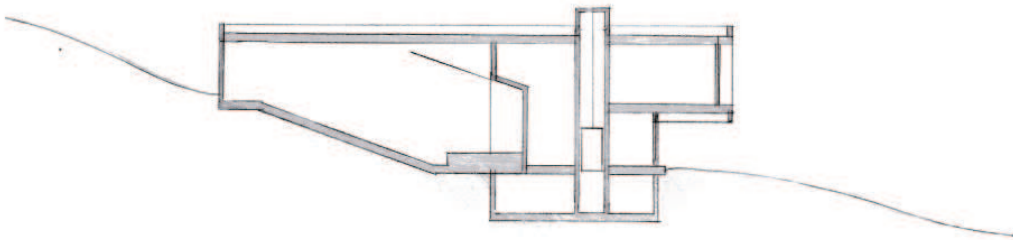
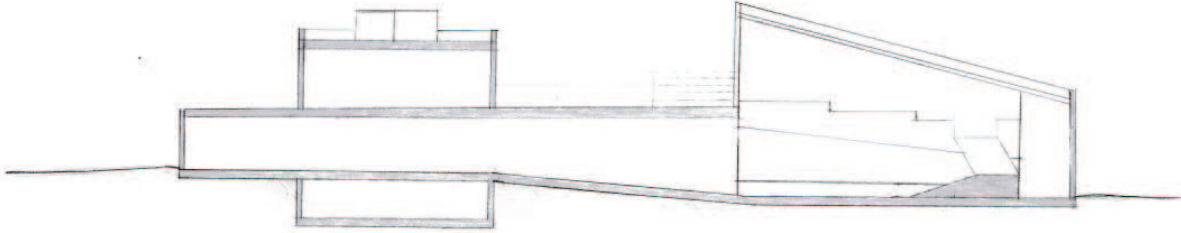
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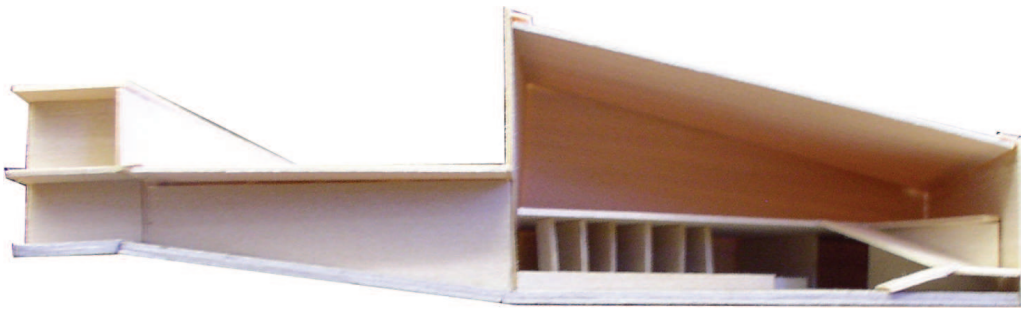
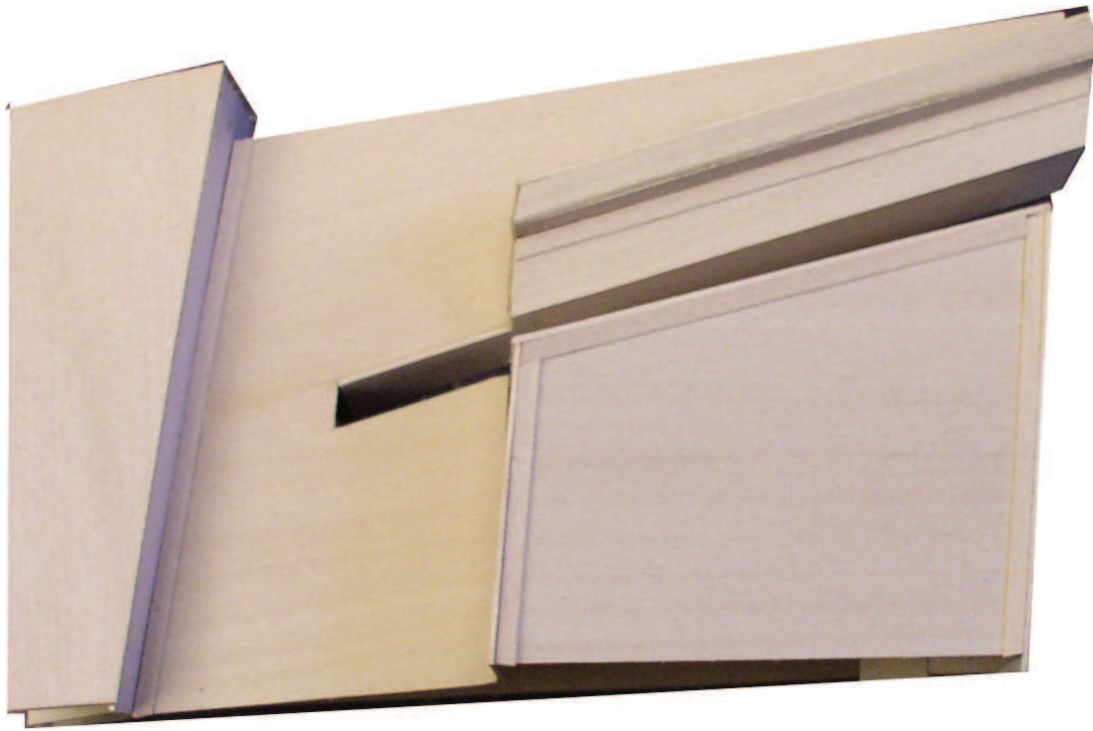
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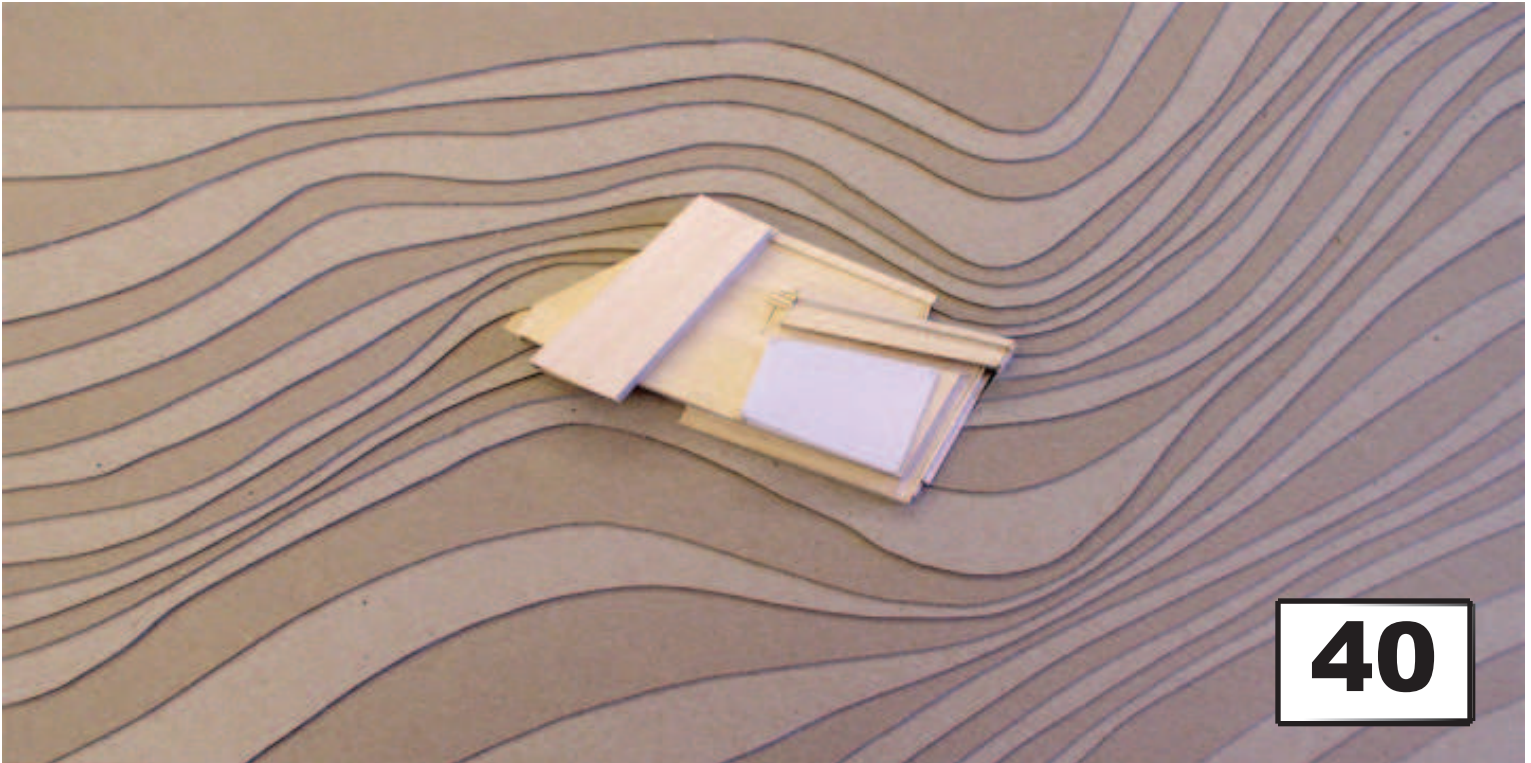
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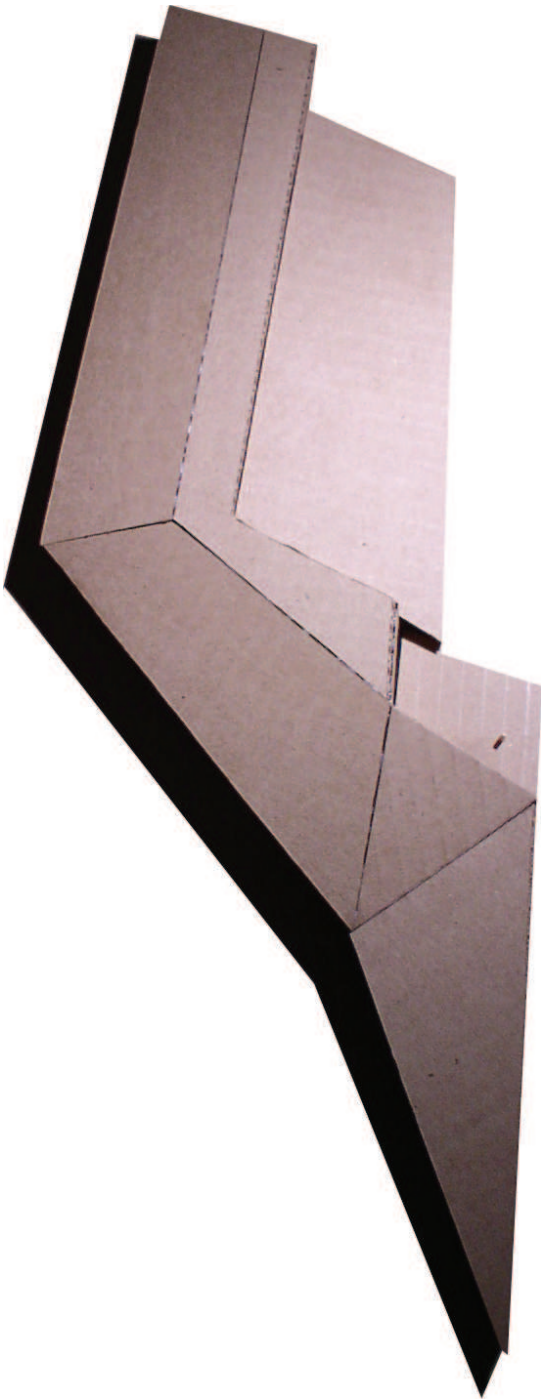


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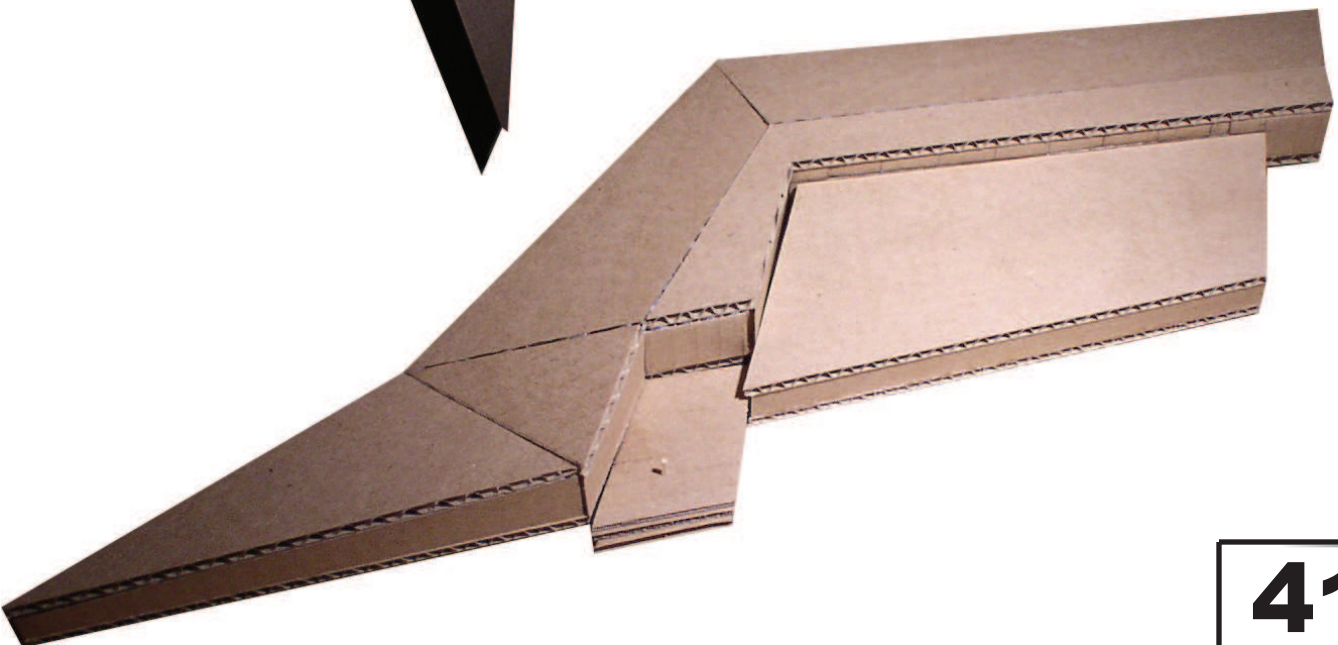


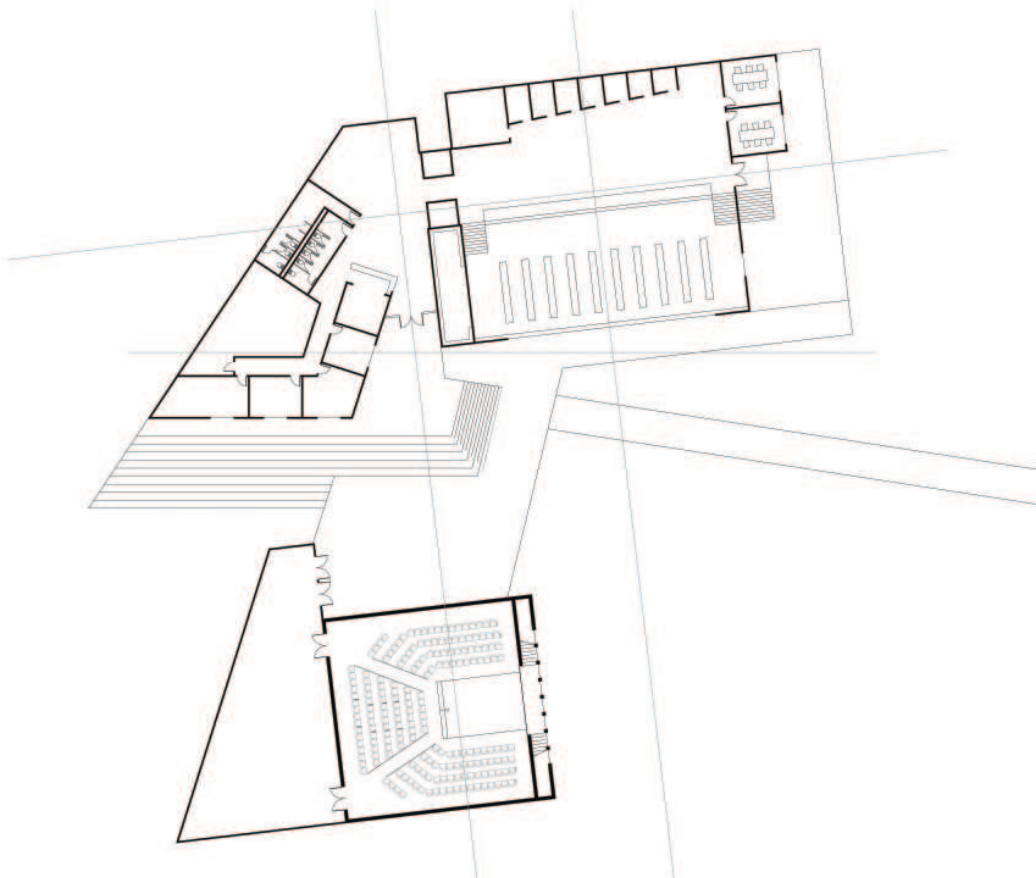
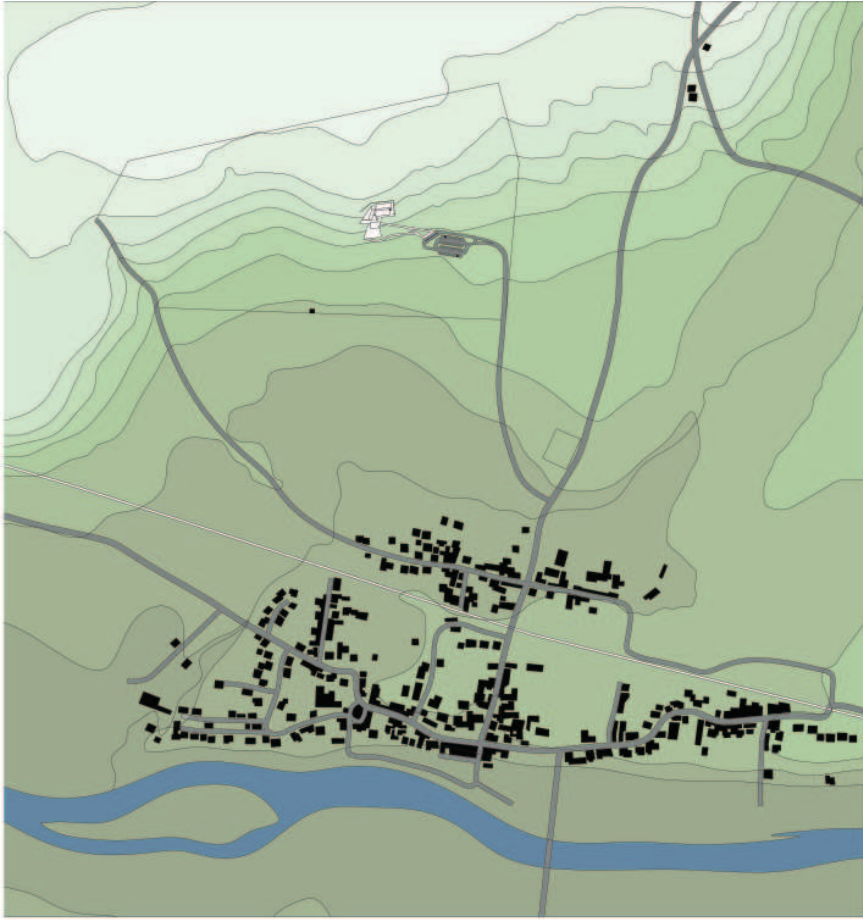
The schematic design evolved into a more fluid shape as the project progressed. The building took on a more expressive form. Here the intention was to explore the possibilities of the topography: by terracing the building different functions could be located on different levels.

In this scheme the library is located on a lower level than the reading room. The offices are positioned near the entrance.

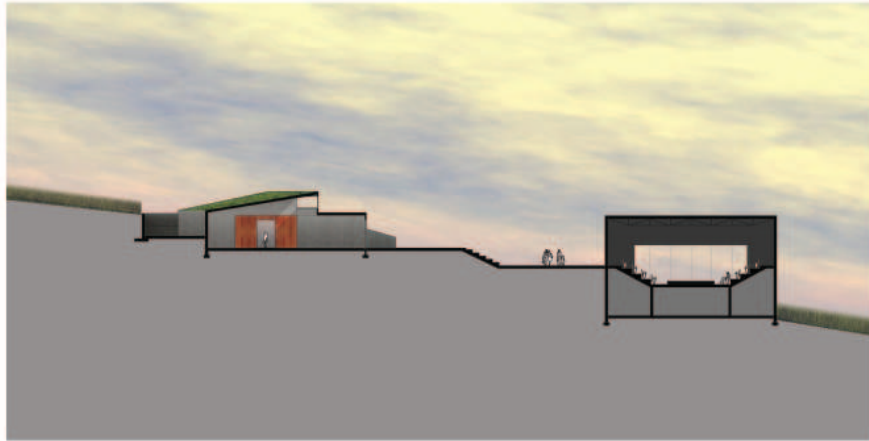
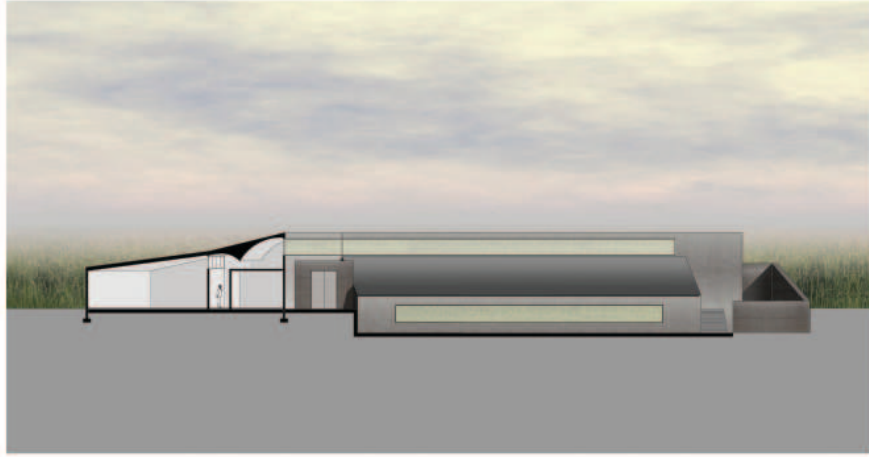
These studies become the focus of the next design phase.

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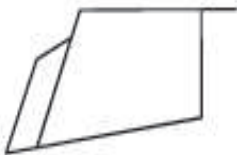
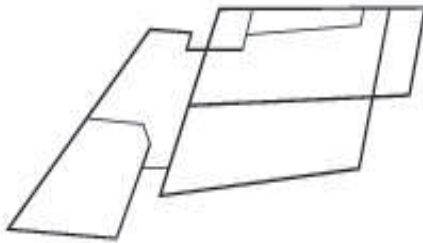
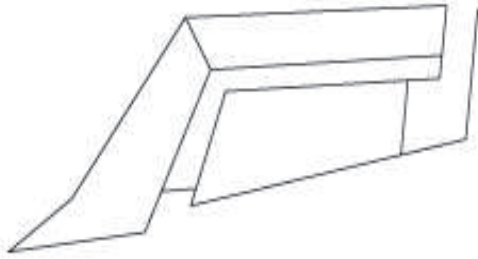
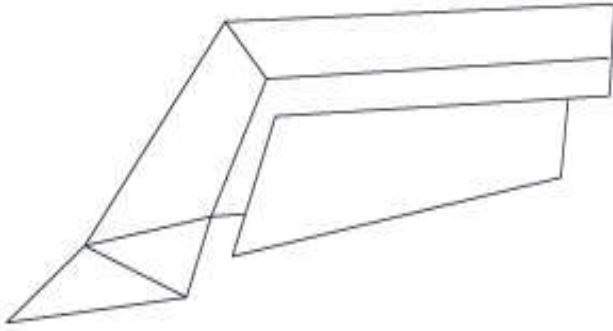




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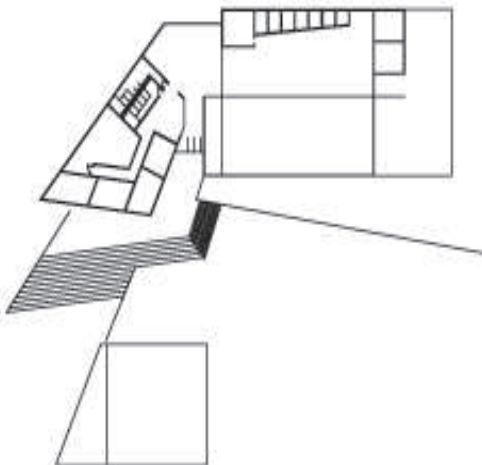
FINAL DESIGN

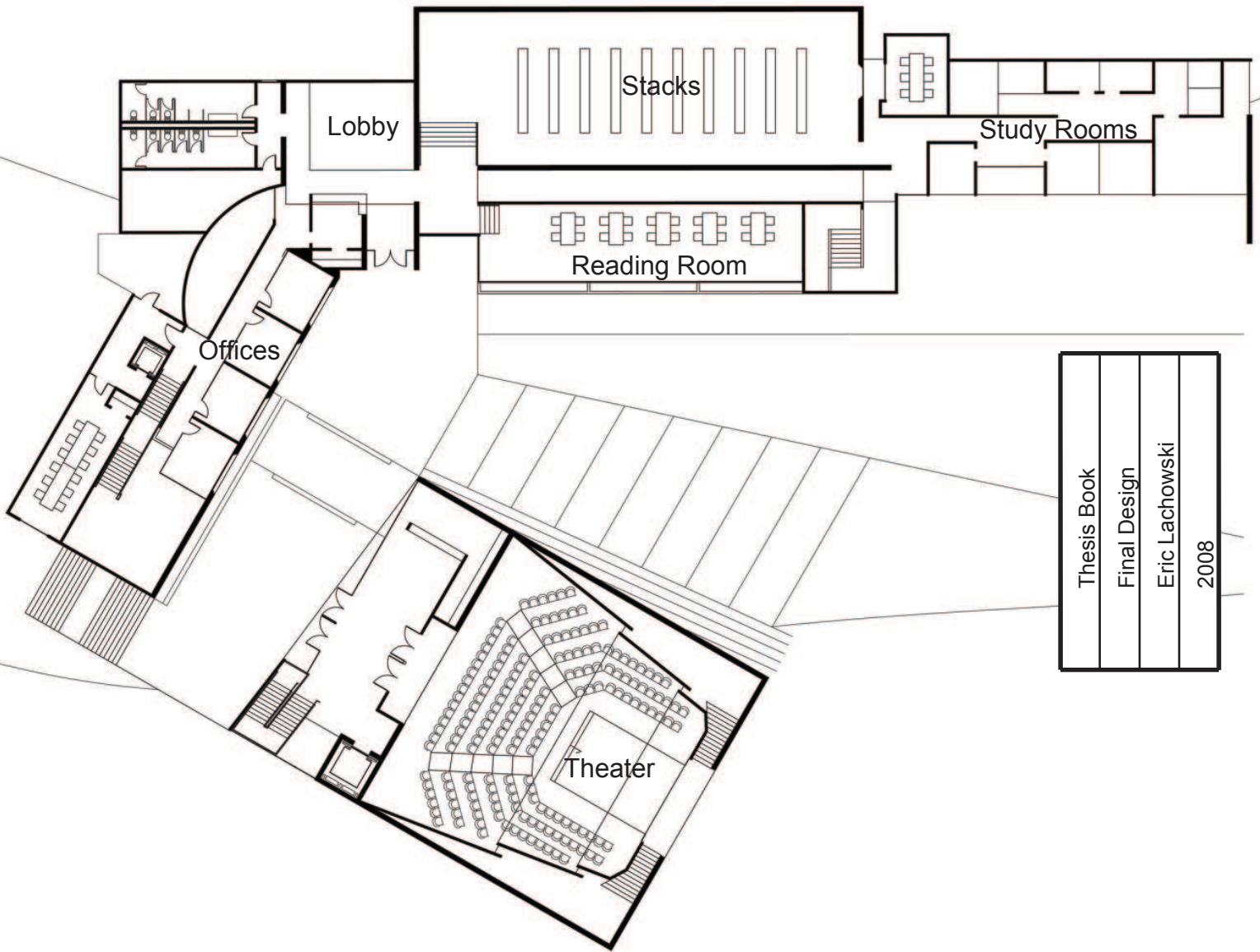
After this progression, an orthogonal ordering system was implemented. The reading room, stacks, and theater were already based on cartesian coordinates which made the skewed office section seem arbitrary.

The next phase was to impliment a common design theme throughout the building.

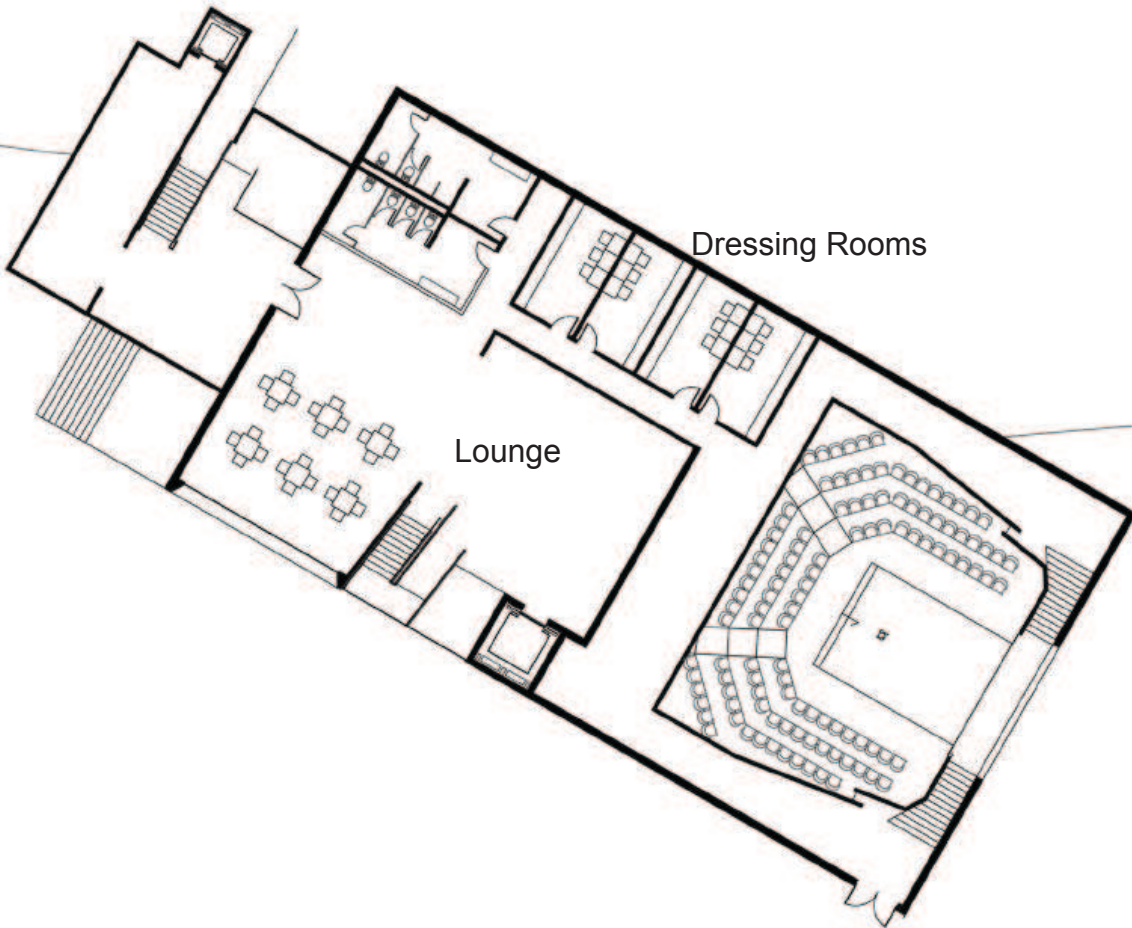
The outdoor spaces become more defined and shared for both the theater and the library. The expression became narrower and longer. Concrete became the main building material; giving the building a stark, minimal feeling.

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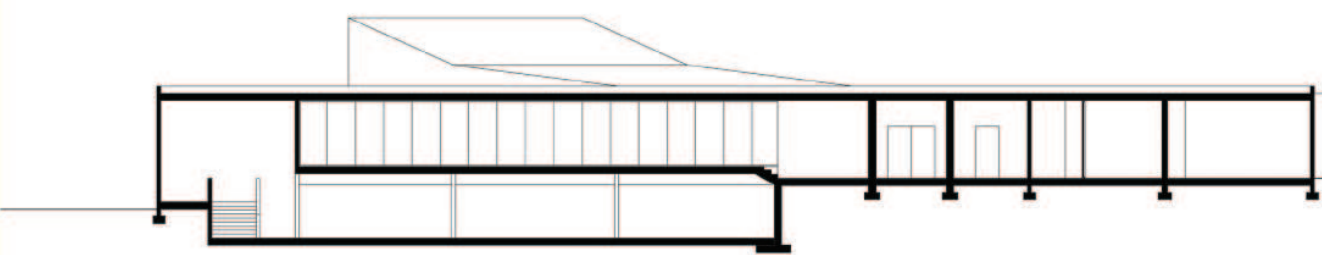
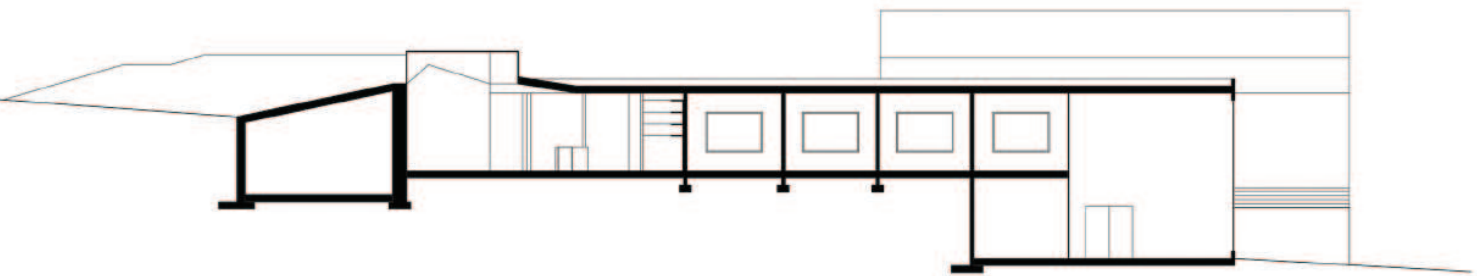
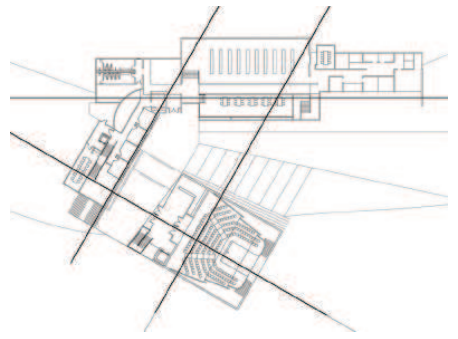




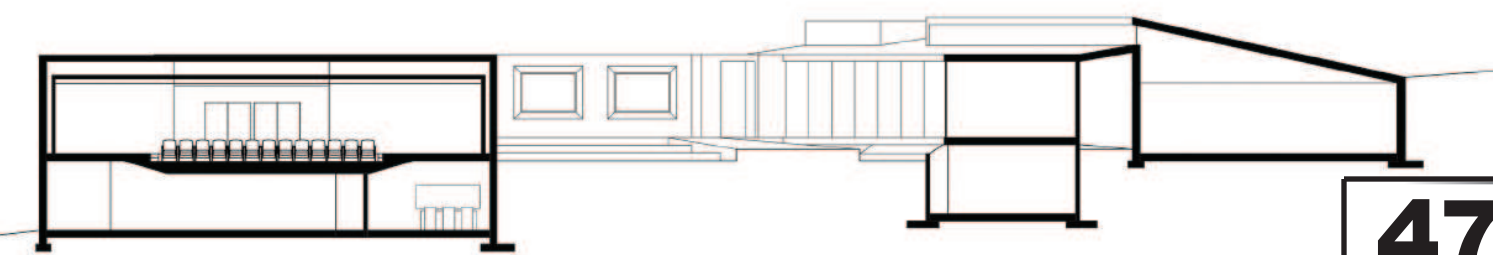
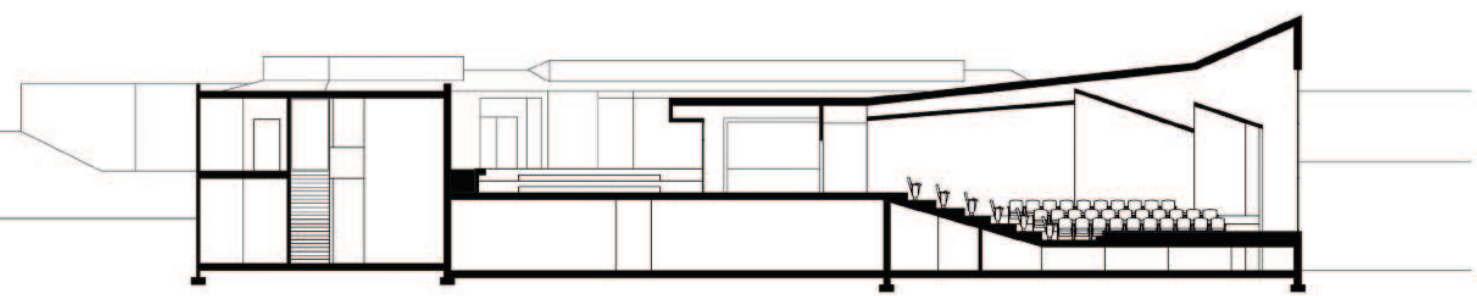
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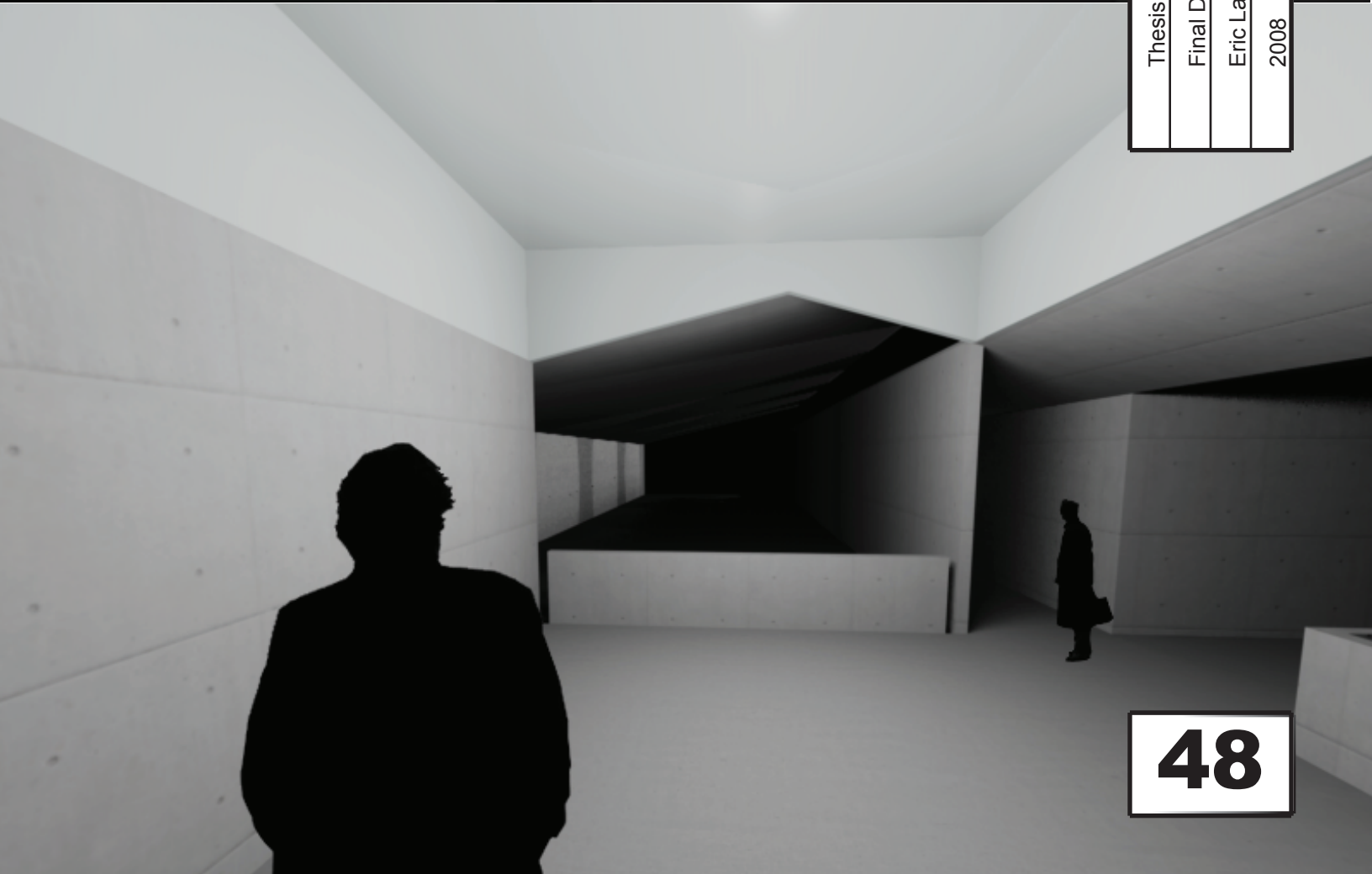


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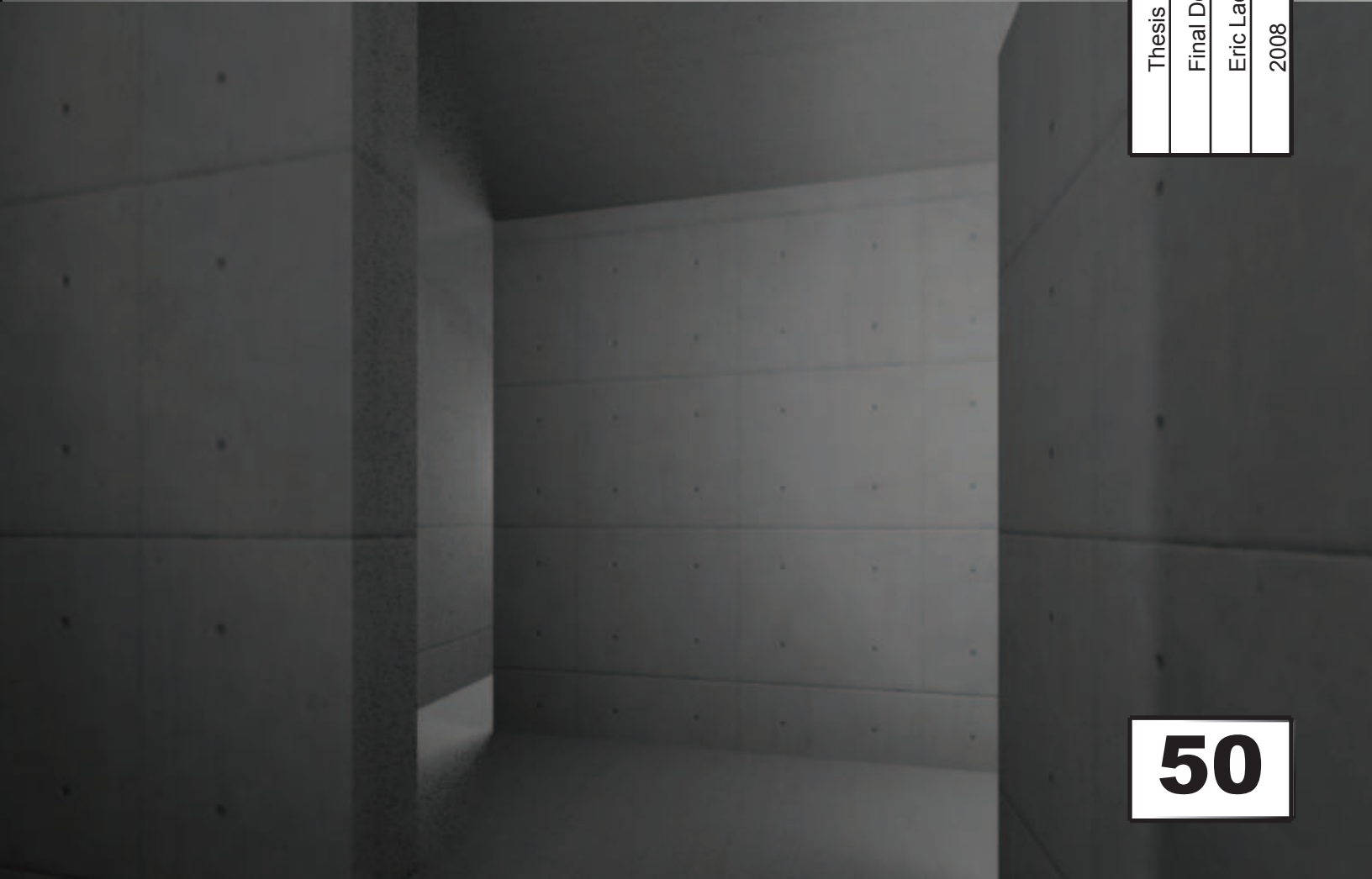


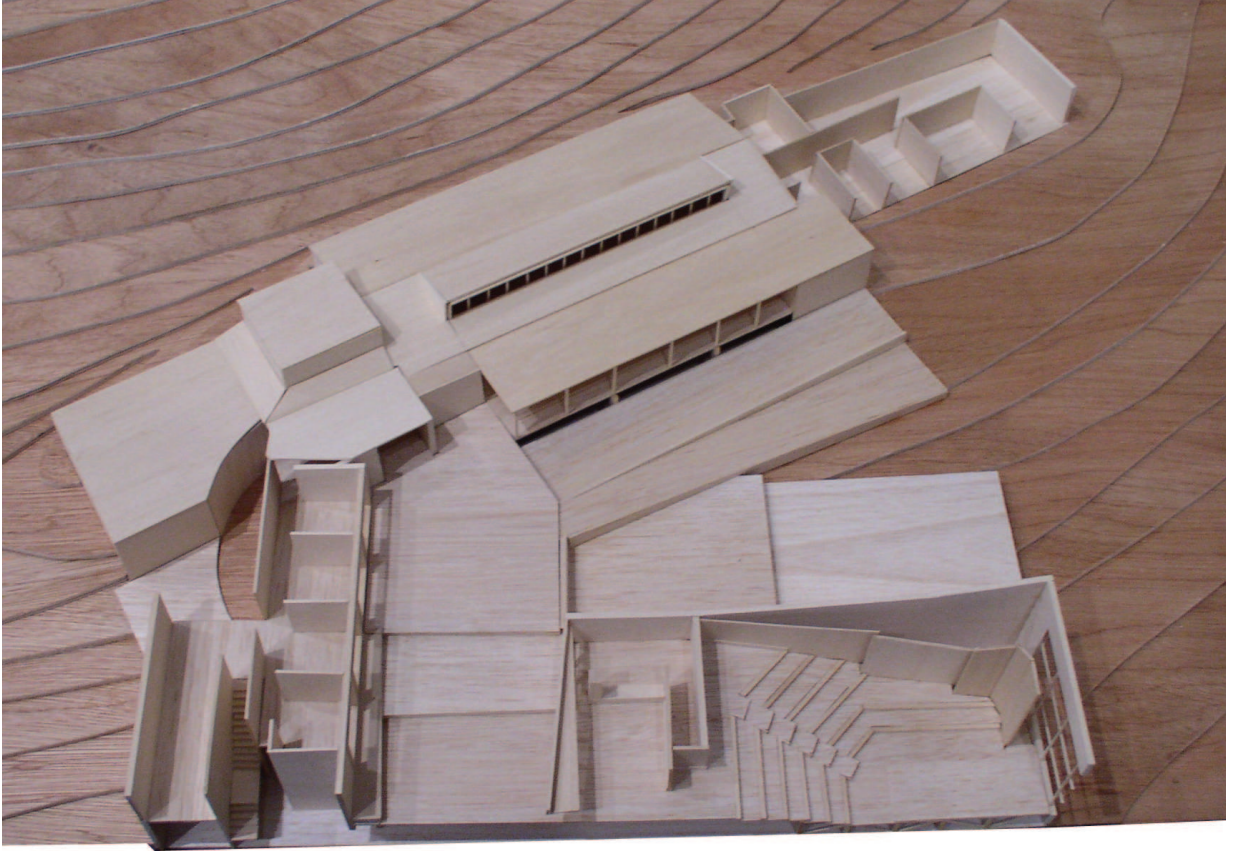
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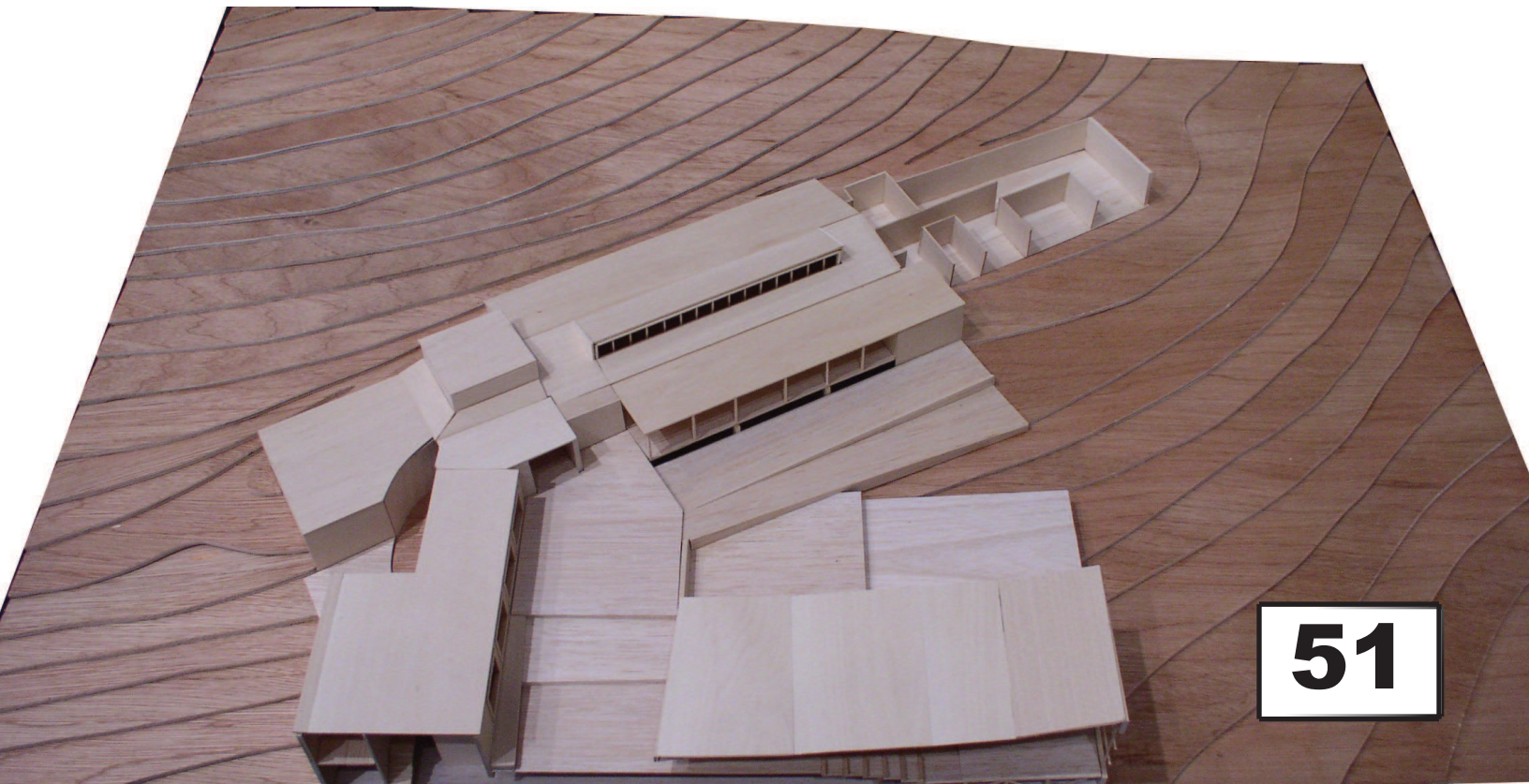


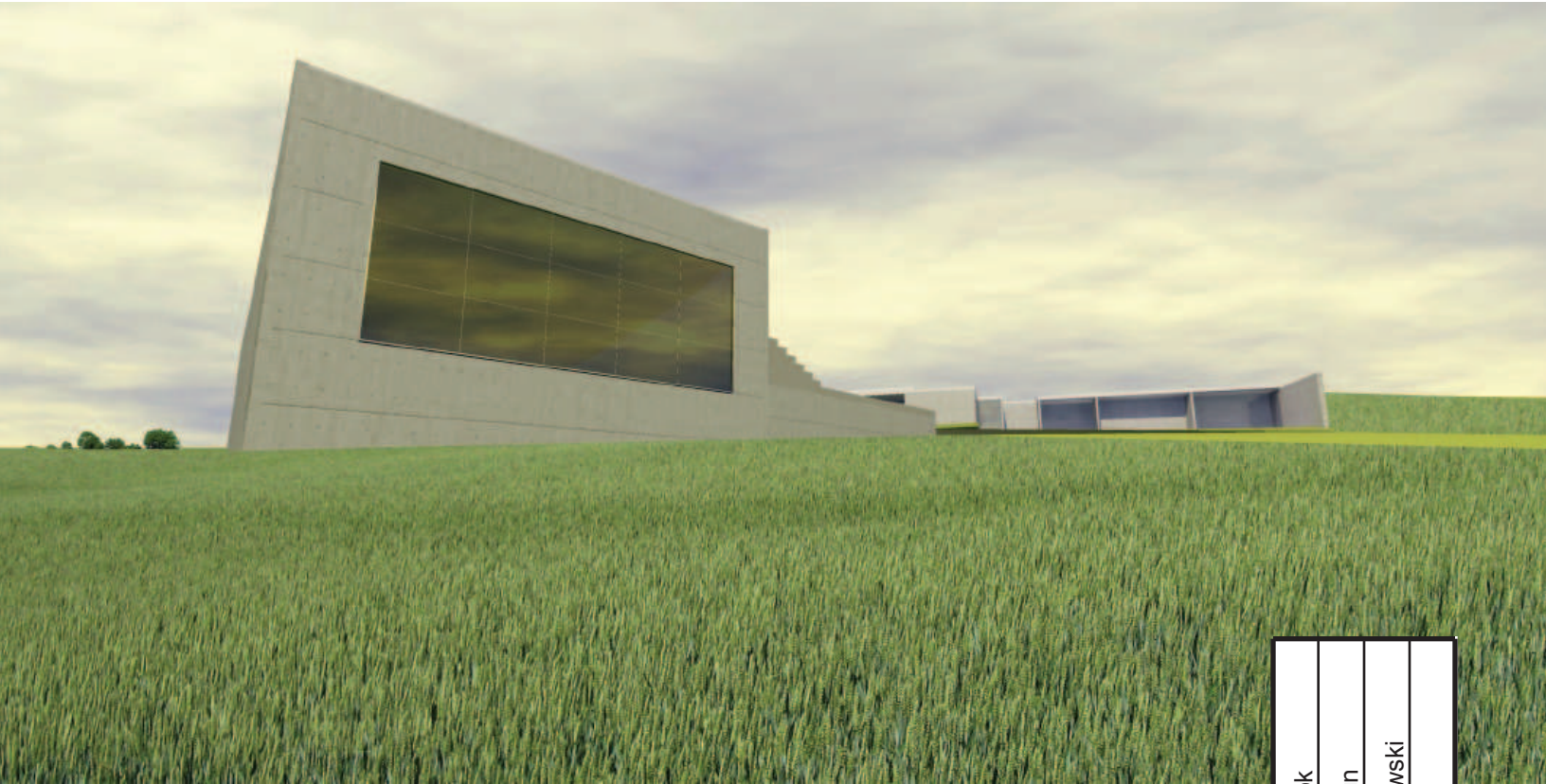
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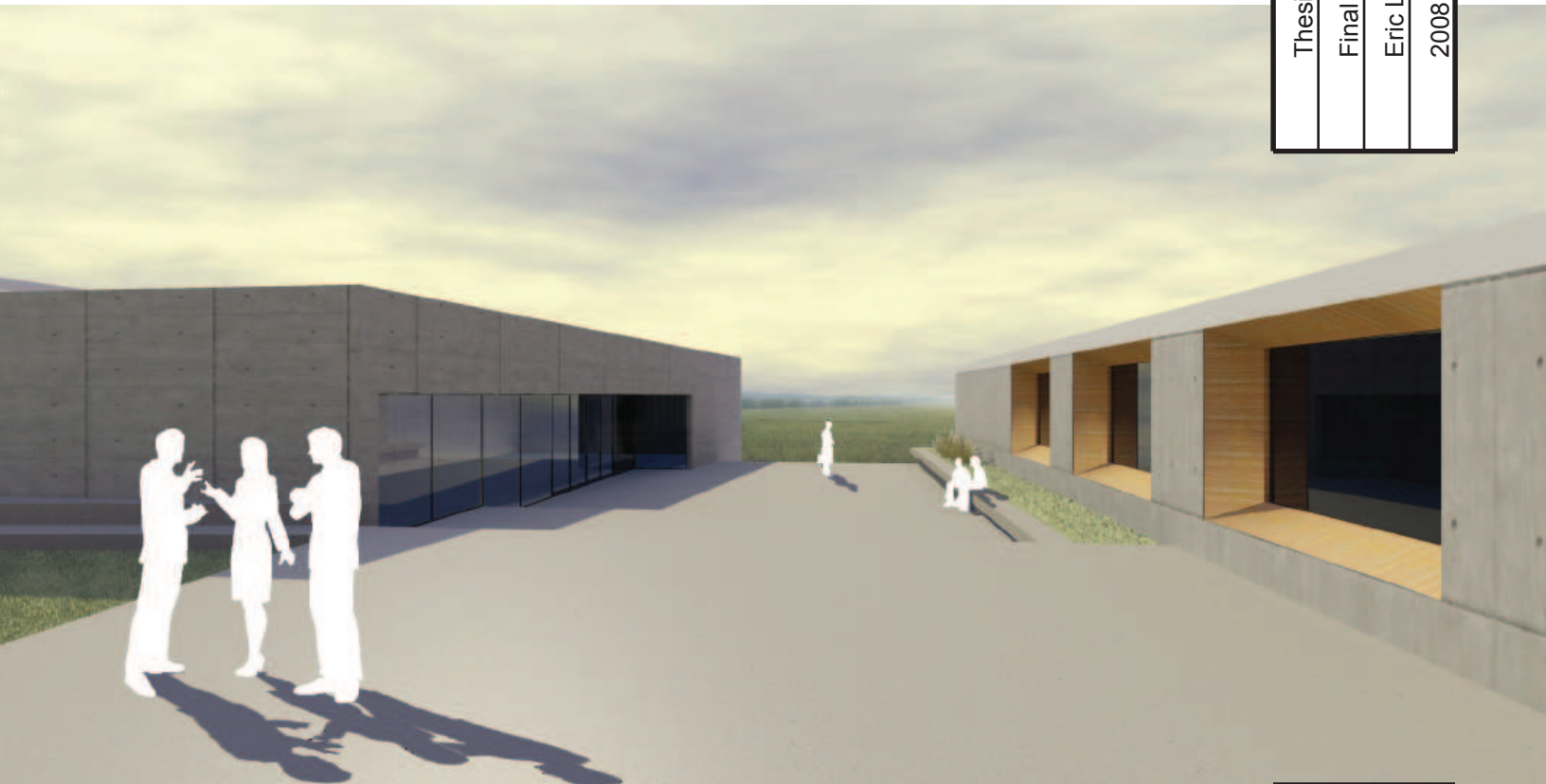


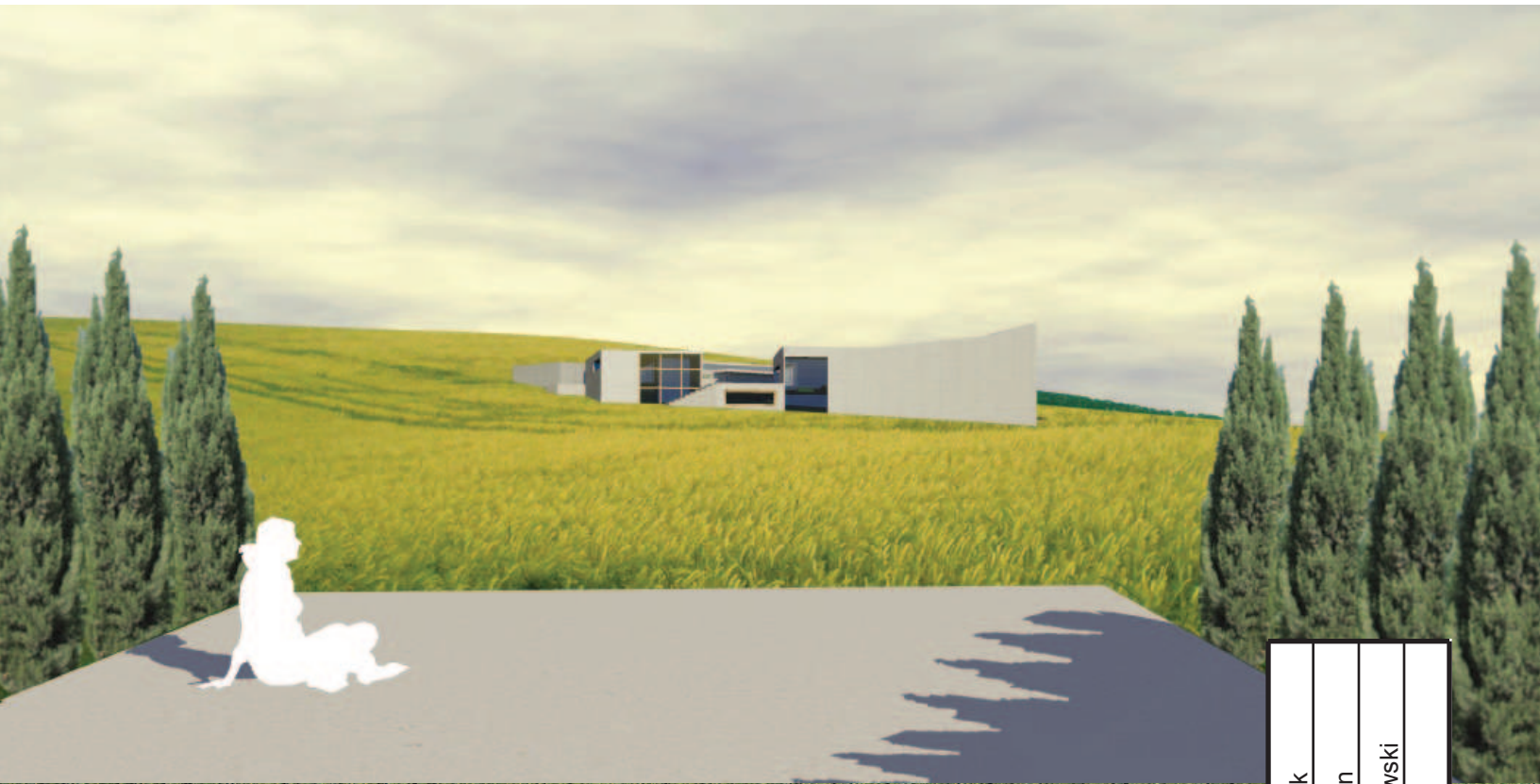
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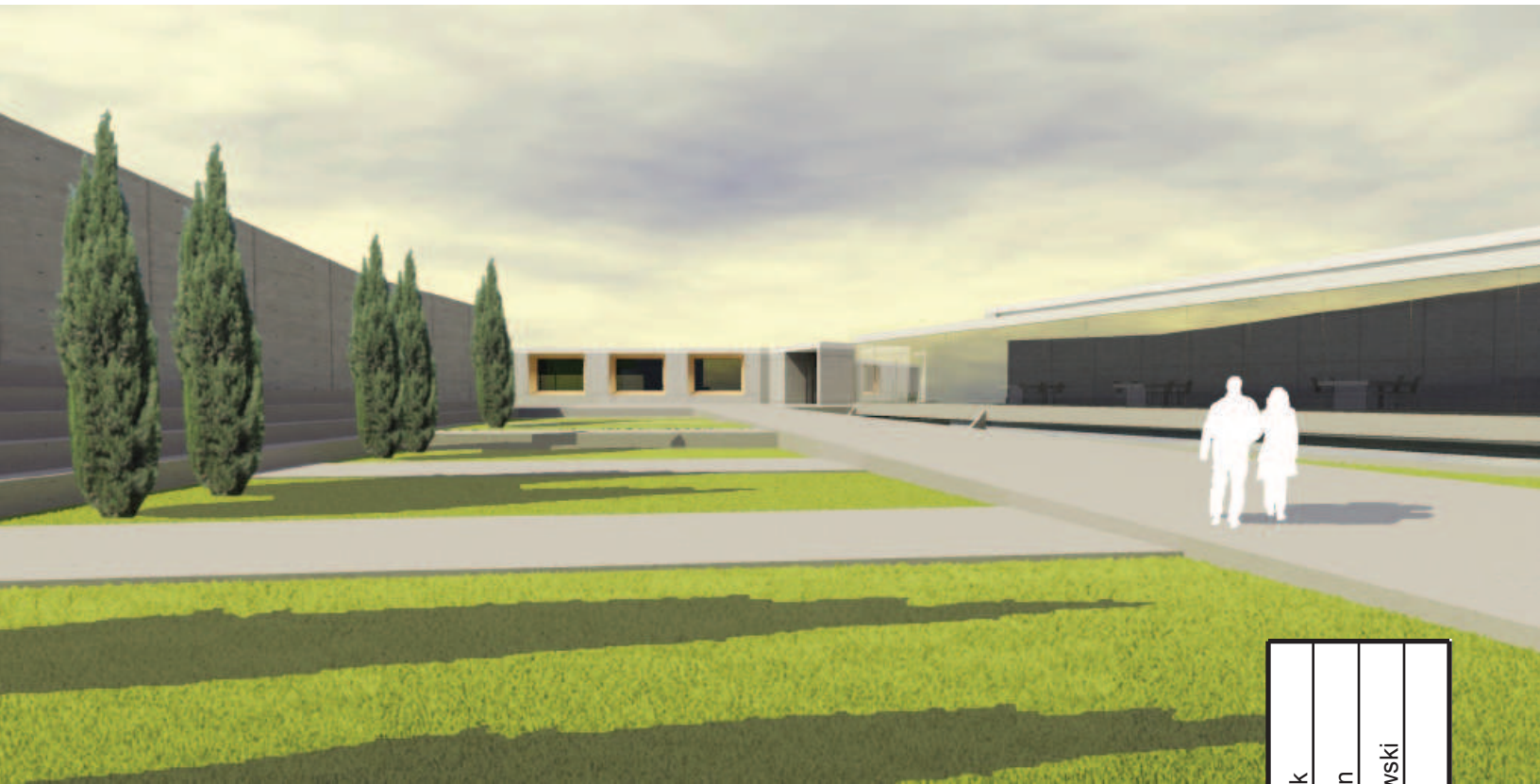
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