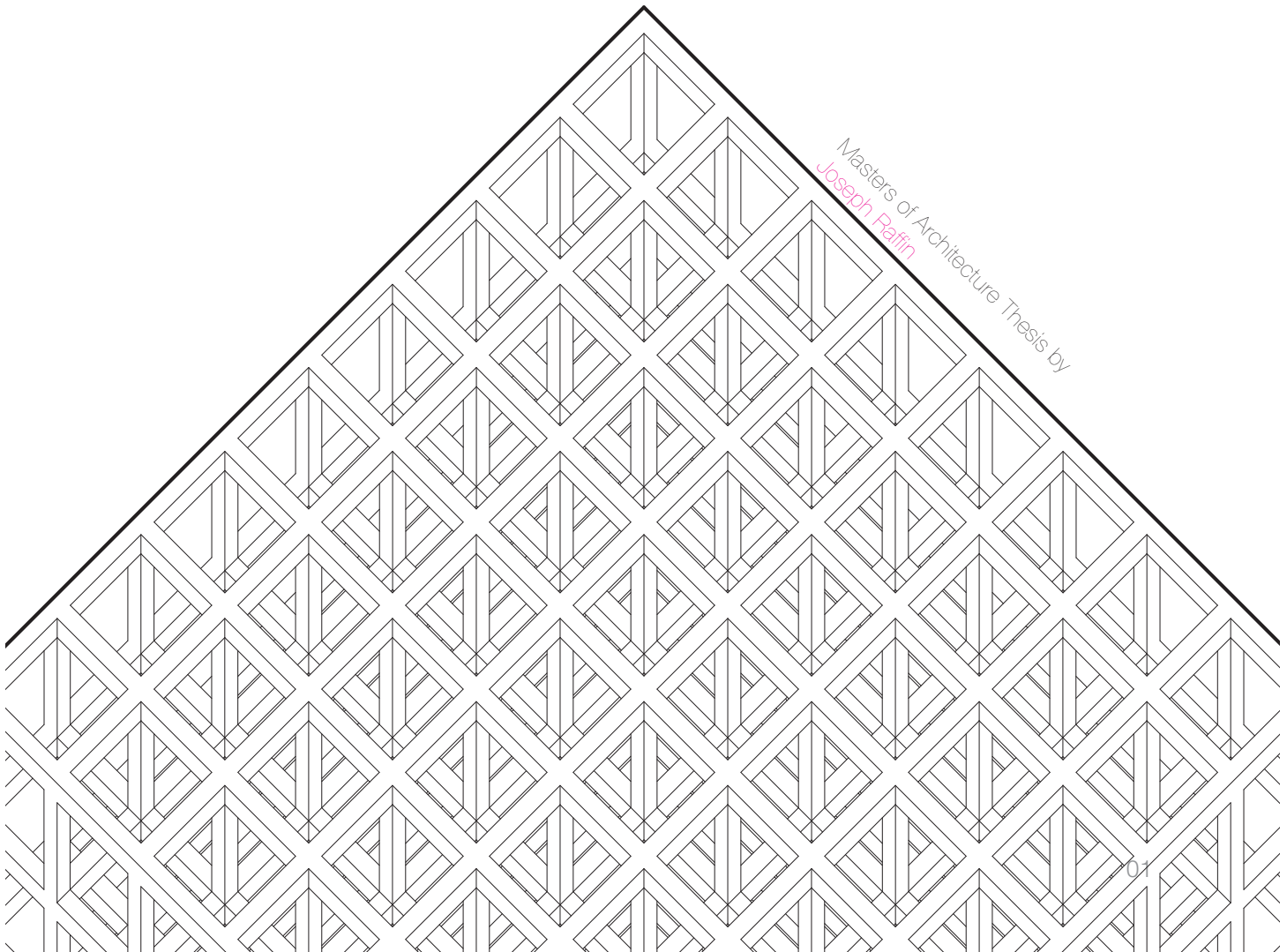# THE CRISIS OF AESTHETIC

Masters of Architecture Thesis by
Joseph Raffin

to those who think about
how we think about
architecture

THE CRISIS OF AESTHETIC
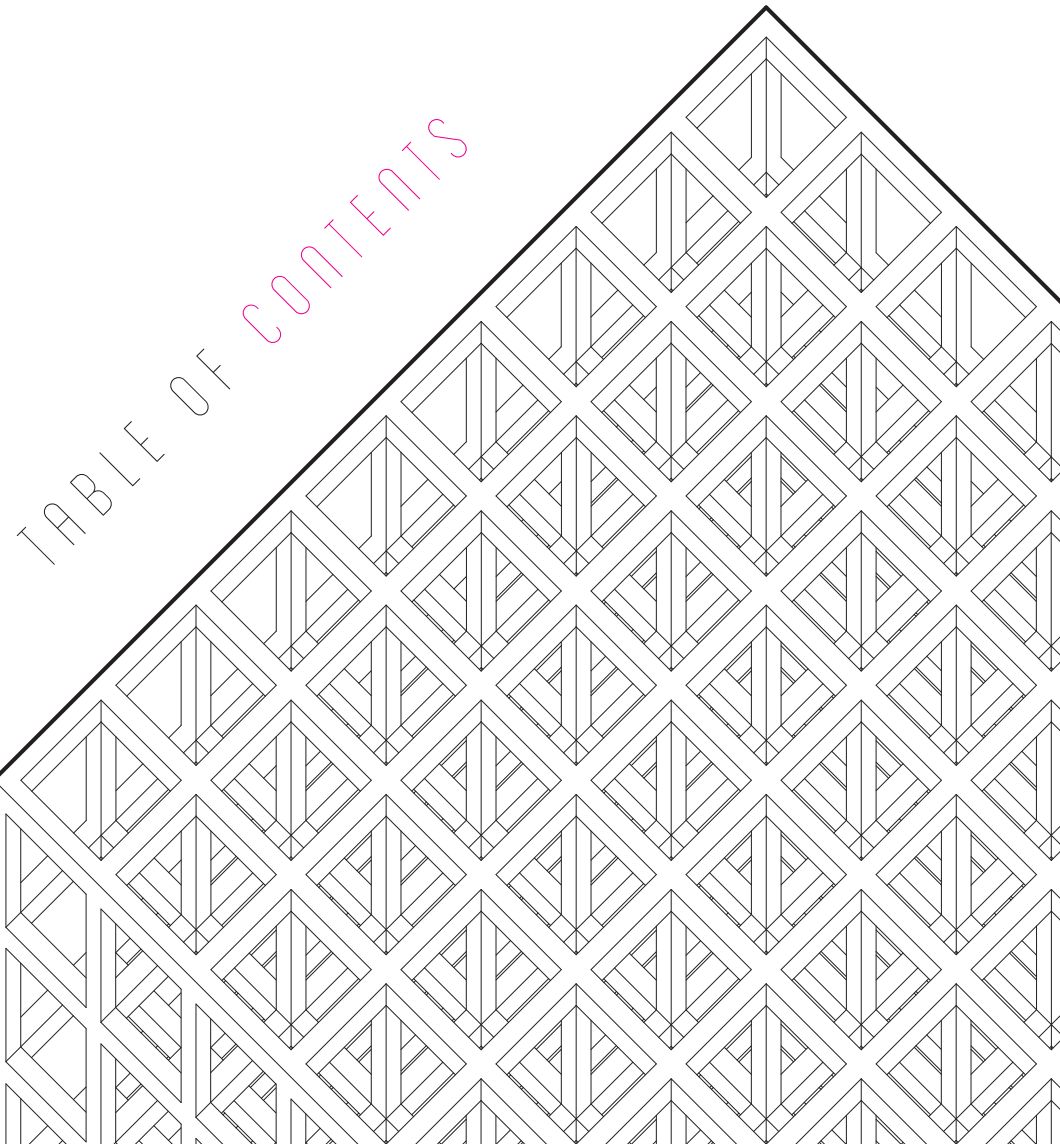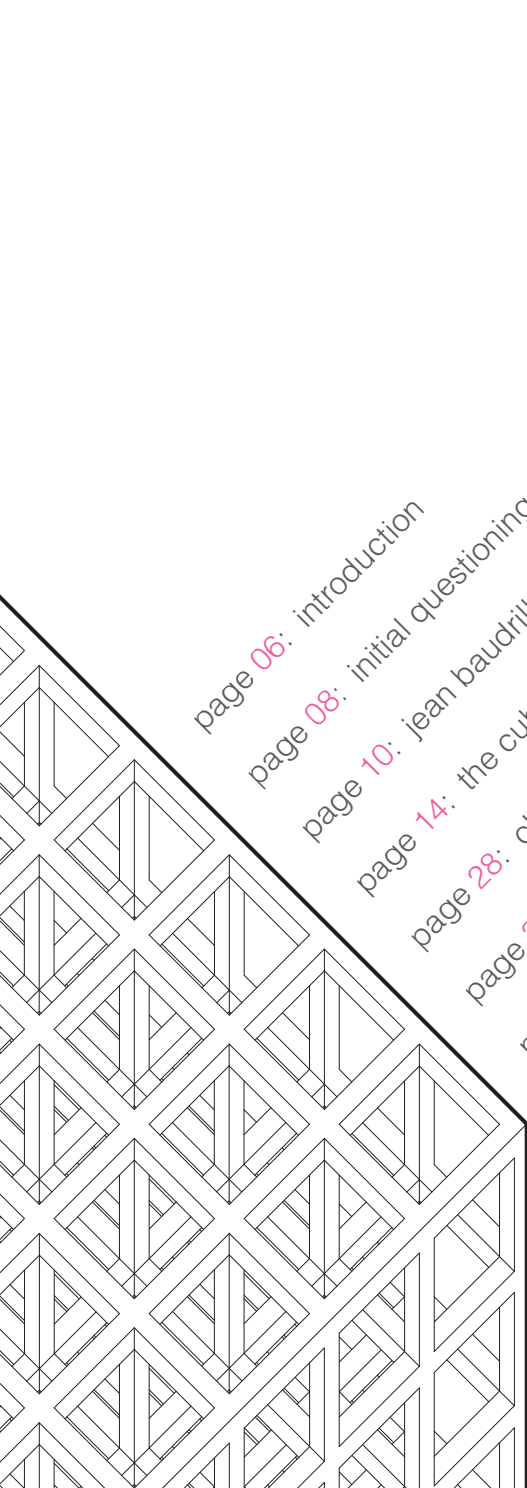
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INTRODUCTION

The past and present and future are not any one a singular theme within this thesis. Rather, they act as a three-fold, meticulously and continuously folding within and without one another. They are ever receding, ever coming forward, every tumbling into, ever tumbling out of. Issues of what is now or what will be is tangled in an intricate web of repeating geometries and patterns. Thus a thesis about the future, is a thesis about the past, and a thesis about the present equally.

Not everyone immerses themselves in theory. Actually, many architects that practice engage in almost no theory at all. However, there is an engagement of some ubiquity throughout those who concern themselves with anything architectural. It extends even beyond the practitioners and theorists to common people who beg a deeply theoretical question. "What the hell is that?" That is pertaining to almost all structures of any significance, from the tallest skyscraper to the suburban house. Almost anyone has at least some theoretical bone to pick when they question why things look the way they do. The anti-thesis of this idea is as simple as its question, "What the hell should it be?" or "what should it look like?" Both questions leave the contemplator equally confused as he begins to realized the complexity of such

a simple statment. The question carries with it uncalculatable weight of previous theories, ideas about culture, history, and philosophy.

In this way everyone immerses themselves in theory. These are simple and natural questions. These are also very personal questions. This is ever more understood when one considers that architecture is an extension of ourselves. This question of "what is this?" and "why is this" is deeply self analytical. The question is ultimately sought from within. The buildings that surround us are essentially corporeal. They encapsulate our modes of dwelling and being within the world. The body, the house, the neighborhood, the city becomes boundries that withold our innards against our constant struggle to project ourselves outward. In this way, the roof and the house emerge from our spinal cord and ribs that hold the innards of everyday living. Viollet le Duc's primitive hut mimics the protective nature of our skeleton.

Maybe the confusion lies in those buildings that one cannot see arising out of oneself. Progression up until now has always traced a line to our backs. It is one's animal instinct to survive and survive better. If humans can adapt a way in that makes it's species flourish, it is in the best interest of the species to do so. However, within instinctual drive of progression, there is a drive to be uniquely human. There are our histories of sheltering or histories of surviving. There is culture; a once harmonious interplay of the animal and the man. Progression is both ever forward and ever remembering.

Our forefathers painting the hunt upon the cave walls of Lascaux [1] are at one time totally progressive mode of survival and at the very same time and magnitude, expressive cultural devise. They fold much like the tenses.

But, progression is a factor of velocity. Harmony within progression is retained more or less easily at faster velocities. In the present our velocities are far faster than anything we have experienced as a species. The harmony of culture and progression are rent into two opposing dualities.

This is where the thesis picks up. It picks up in the moment when the velocities of progression are too fast for man to incorporate cultural expression. This might be where the disconnect lies. Francesco Proto elaborates on such an idea with frequent reference to Jean Baudrillard. The Pompidou center is a symbol of mass identity [2]. An expression that is solely expressive of itself and its inner machine threatens to annihilate culture. It at embodies only the pure drive of technological expression, speed, and movement. In this case it is both lacking in culture and embodying every culture at once because the need to be progressive is within our inner animal. Humanity no longer sees buildings as stepping out of their backs. Rather, a machine stepping out of a machine.

So the questioning of "what is this?" is an idea about the relationship between an object and its simulacra. It is a formal investigation. It is an idea that has been picked up abandoned and picked up again. It is an idea of the future as it relates to both past and present. As humans, pure progression is not enough for us. Humans need culture to retain a sense of ourselves. The intensity of progression will always follow with an intensification of cultural expression; even if it is just a desperate act of reassurance. And this is where the thesis begins.
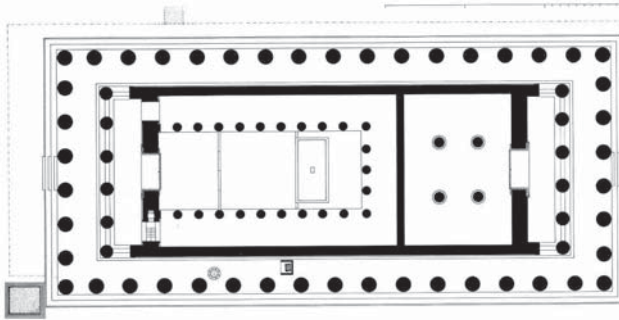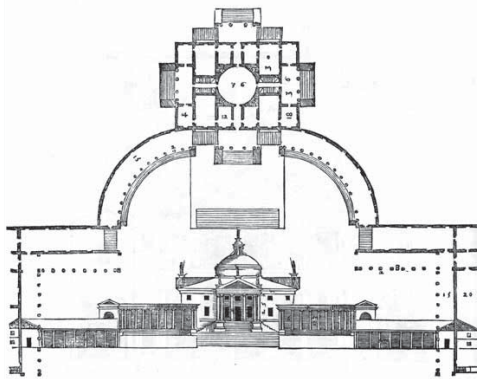
Notes
1. Turpin, Etienne. "Jimmie Durham in Lasceaux – A Parable for Artists in the Anthropocene" University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture 2012 Lecture Series. Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills. 21st December 2012. Lecture
2. Proto, Francesco. Mass. Identity. Architecture. The Writings of Jean Baudrillard. West Sussex: Wiley-Academy, 2003. Print.

INITIAL QUESTIONING

Why does Peter Eisenman, in an Architecture Association critique, stand behind Classicism as a necessary foundation for a good architectural education?

Why does Rem Koolhass, in the Areen Lecture series of 2010, idealize the Parthenon?

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, STAINLESSNESS, AND CULTURAL DETERIORATION

The Pompidou Center is an example that seems to frequent the musings of architectural theorist Jean Baudrillard but it exemplifies and overreaching phenomenon. [1]

Through the impudent transparency of façade, the Beaubourg represents the annihilation of the semiotic relationship (signifier/signified) between the building and the façade itself. It is not by accident that the collapsing of the latter into the graphic sign of the escalator coincides perfectly with the logo for the for the products sold in the museum shop.

The Pompidou Center stands as a moment of dramatic autonomy. In a fantastically bold move, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers have inverted the guts of the building making the innards the simulacra of the object. It is a façade of totally autonomy. The machine like object neither signifies nor embodies all or any culture. It contrarily consumes it. The only sign that we can derive from its façade is the mode of circulation that traces across the façade. The escalator: it is a devise of smooth shopping and optimized consumption.

So it goes with many of the progressive structures these days. Proto elaborates upon the Frank Ghery's Guggenheim Museum. [2]

In contrast to the Guggenheim Museum, where Ghery exploited the opportunity it offered to propose a 'rewrapped' object, the impossible-to-repeat shock of the Pompidou was caused by the fact that , once and for ever, the building was offered 'unwrapped'.

It seems as though within contemporary architecture, the buildings of significant cultural value embody such a given aesthetic. The mechanical progression and expression of building systems has allowed architecture to push the capabilities of the building envelope. Envelope has become a way of dressing or wrapping the machine beneath. Sleek stainless expression has taken president. Etienne Turpin, who concerns himself with matters of culture and art in the theoretical geological age of the Anthropocene, questions the notion that "stainless" things are considered culturally progressive. [3] The aesthetic of "stainlessness" is reflective of the smoothing over of the earth's surface by human appropriation. This happens at such a force that its effects can be compared to a new geological age. He is careful to point towards Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate and Frank Ghery's Guggenheim Museum as specific examples of this.

The speed and progression brought on by rampant technological expansion has a way of deteriorating culture. By the very nature of being human we cannot be a purely progressive. Survival is an instinctual act and the tendency to be progressive can be viewed as a constant struggle to "survive better" or "survive easier". However, our cultural response will always manifest itself to some kind of fruition. In an age of unkempt technological advancement and speed, cultural objects have appeared in the forms of cheap kitchy histories such as classicism. This has come with some force roughly equal to that of the progressive expressions. As the species gets caught up in the speed that progression affords it, people find refuge in the shade of their past; even if it is just a shade. An example of this would be the suburban homes whose façade contains broken and severely abstracted classical elements.

So the continually separating duality lies in the tension between objects are totally autonomous, and the objects that are a mere shade of all the histories, obsolete ideals, and culture injected into them. They are at one end, objects whose semiotic relationship have been ultimately destroyed, or objects removed so far from their simulacra, they cannot speak to the same values that they used to. Both opposing situations share the fact that they are totally idealized, and fade from any real context or region. They both exist in a philosophical dessert.

The situation can be further illustrated by the "changing architectural styles curve". This map outlines identifiable architectural styles in the past 8,000 years. One can recognize an asymptotic-like projection over the past millennia and especially 250 years. The situation insinuates a kind of "identity crisis" within architecture. While humanity sits between autonomy and symbolism self definition becomes self defeating. The question of "Who are we?" goes largely unanswered.

The thesis approaches this situation at two different scales. The first is at a formal scale, thinking about two objects and their semiotic properties. The second is at a broader story telling scale. This scale sets out various allegories of city planning based around city planning as it relates to the situation of lost identity within extreme progression.

Notes
1.	Proto, Francesco. Mass. Identity. Architecture. The Writings of Jean Baudrillard. West Sussex: Wiley-Academy, 2003. Print.

2.	Proto, Francesco. Mass. Identity. Architecture. The Writings of Jean Baudrillard. West Sussex: Wiley-Academy, 2003. Print.

3.	Turpin, Etienne. "Jimmie Durham in Lasceaux – A Parable for Artists in the Anthropocene" University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture 2012 Lecture Series. Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills. 21st December 2012. Lecture

THE CUBE AND DUCK SERIES

The Cube and Duck series was ultimately developed around the same time as these charts were being disseminated. The idea is that, the narrative of the trajectory of architectural form requires an in depth examination of the meaning of form itself. Stemming from Baudrillard's ideas about the Pompidou Centre and its relevance to the machine aesthetic, the cube and duck series, is an investigation in the contemporary treatment of form.

One can imagine that all things abide by an innate relationship with one's simulacra. The object is what it is but at the same time carries with it a shadow-like association typically tagged upon by other objects, assumptions, abstractions, and prejudices. All form becomes a semiotic complexity comprised affected by past histories and time. The object and its simulacra is another philosophical phenomenon worthy of and uncountable number of investigations, books, pages, thoughts and musing. For now, we'll stick to the understanding that and object is both itself and its symbolic associations.

The cube fills this description in a distinct way. As an image, the cube can be seen as a symbol of efficiency, idealism, organization, and progressivism. This is through its autonomy and historical formal significance. As a thing itself, it fulfills the same ends. It is a simple figure wrought with complex and calculable

geometrical patterns. Thusly the cube is both and object and a complex assemblage of multiple object. Collapsing its own semiotics inward, the cube is purely autonomous. It's simply symbolic of itself. This is nearly an impossible end to achieve, and these images hardly do the phenomenon justice.

However, as hard as the destruction of semiosis is to achieve, it happens again within the realm of form. This is illustrated (imperfectly) by the duck. The duck in axonometric, opposing the cube in axonometric, is purely a symbolic devise. It has no autonomy. There is an endless association with the form of a duck, from Venturi's great post – modernism manifesto, to the toy that graced the surface of our childhood bathtubs, the duck (in this image) has been riddled of its autonomous nature to take on a totally symbolic presence.

The rest of the duck and cube iterations indicate some kind of collision between the two ideas. Each drawing is an axonometric elevation or section of a basic synthesis between the object of pure autonomy and pure symbolism. This is to iterate the second idea of style. That is, style is comprised of forms that synthesize at some level, the given symbols and truly avant-garde/ autonomous expression within any given style.
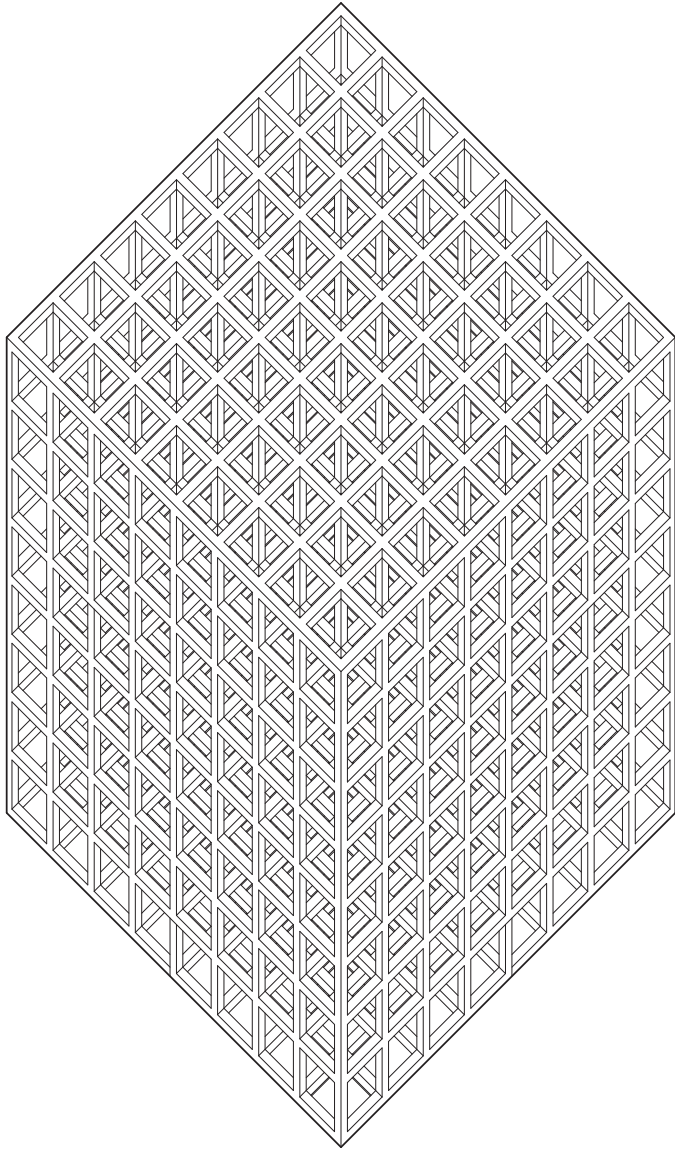
This gives light to definition of style as an operation of phases. Both Edward Said and Peter Eisenman explain that style tends to begin with some significant cultural, social, or technological phenomenon, sparking avant-garde thinking to become increasingly relevant until the idea is so abstracted that it enters a "late phase". This "late phase" emulates a synthesis that favors the formal duck, the avant-garde, on the other hand, favors the cube. As style moves through its phases, the things that start as mostly autonomous collide with symbolic forms that turn the form over toward a more or less symbolic form.

The emergence of the idea of interstitial space came at the collisions these purely symbolic and autonomous forms, most specifically realized in the creation of the sections. Here the phenomenon that the cube and duck engage in an active role in adding and subtracting both autonomy and a-priori symbolic meaning becomes very evident. The intricate geometrical nature of the autonomous form ruptures symbolic form while equally the symbolic form restores meaning to random geometrical patterning. Interstitial spaces become open at the meeting of the two forms.

This interstitial space, though seldom wholly identified, is something that has always lingered throughout architectural history. The baroque is probably the most significant example of this as architects such as Borromini began to take rupture the Virtruvian classical cannon by fracturing pediments, pushing the rules of scale, extruding facades, and creating new orders. The complex geometrical patterning were a way of not diagramming context and program, rather diagramming purely formal and perceptual elements within a buildings plan or façade.
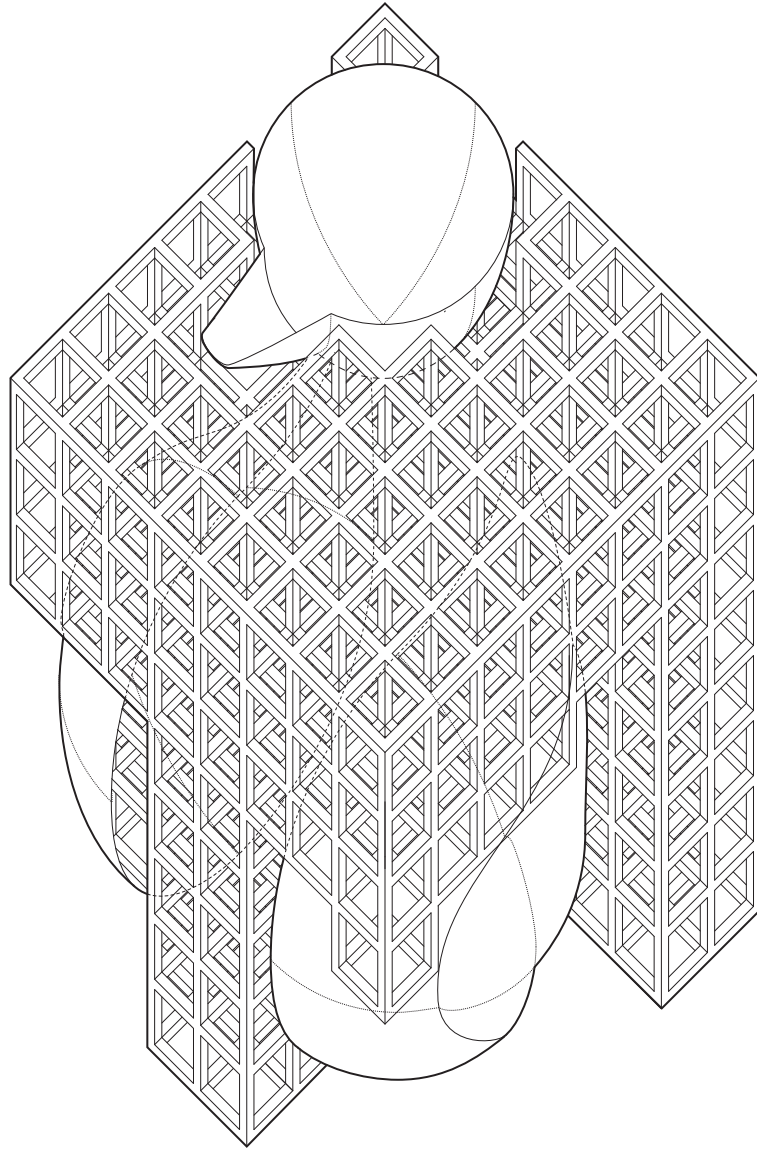
At some level architecture has always succeeded in this synthesis of autonomy and symbol. However, in light of the crisis-like situation indicated by the curve graphs, the difficulty of doing this in the present age becomes more and more apparent. Today, this synthesis is less evident. Consider for a moment the ideas of infinity, instantaneousness, and holism that were derived from the graphs. Today the buildings seen as progressive, as well as those unprogressive ones, take on a singular form rather than any kind of careful synthesis. The synthesis has become more of a polarity, each form is an instantaneous expression either over abstracted like the duck, or over autonomous as with the cube.
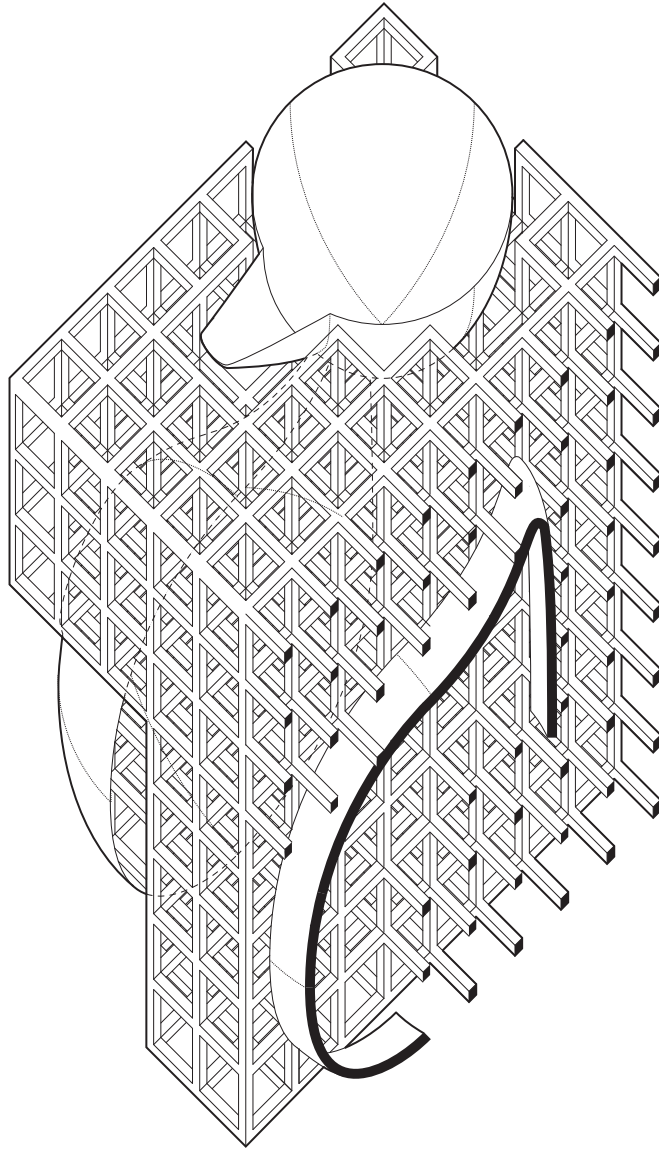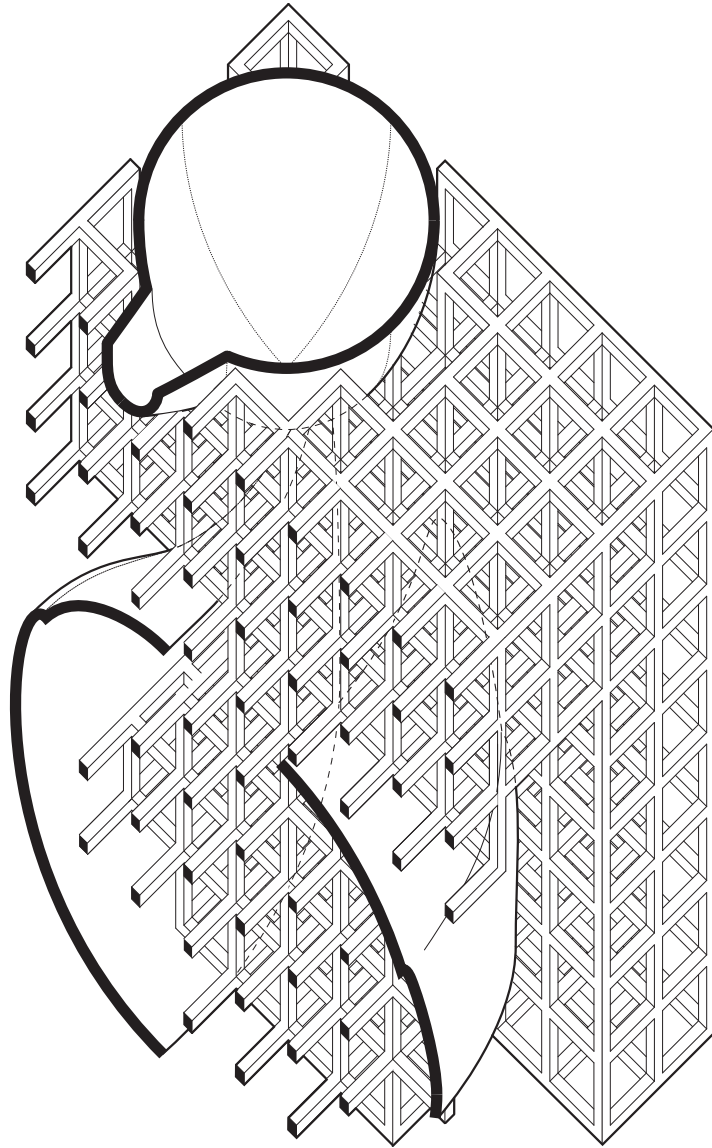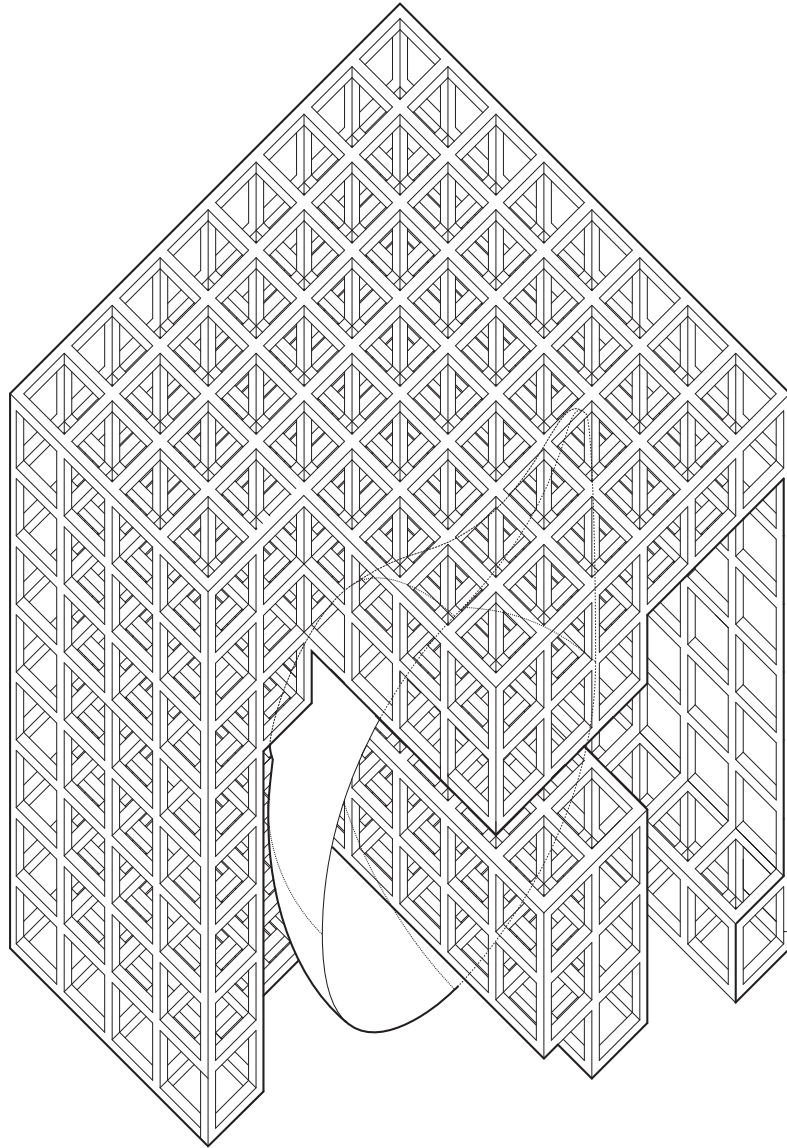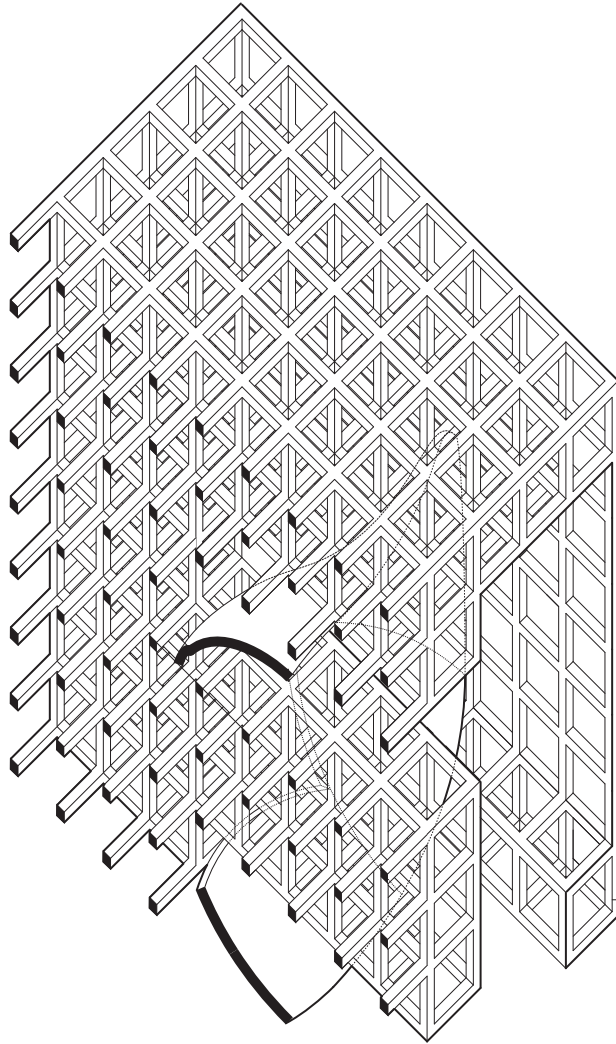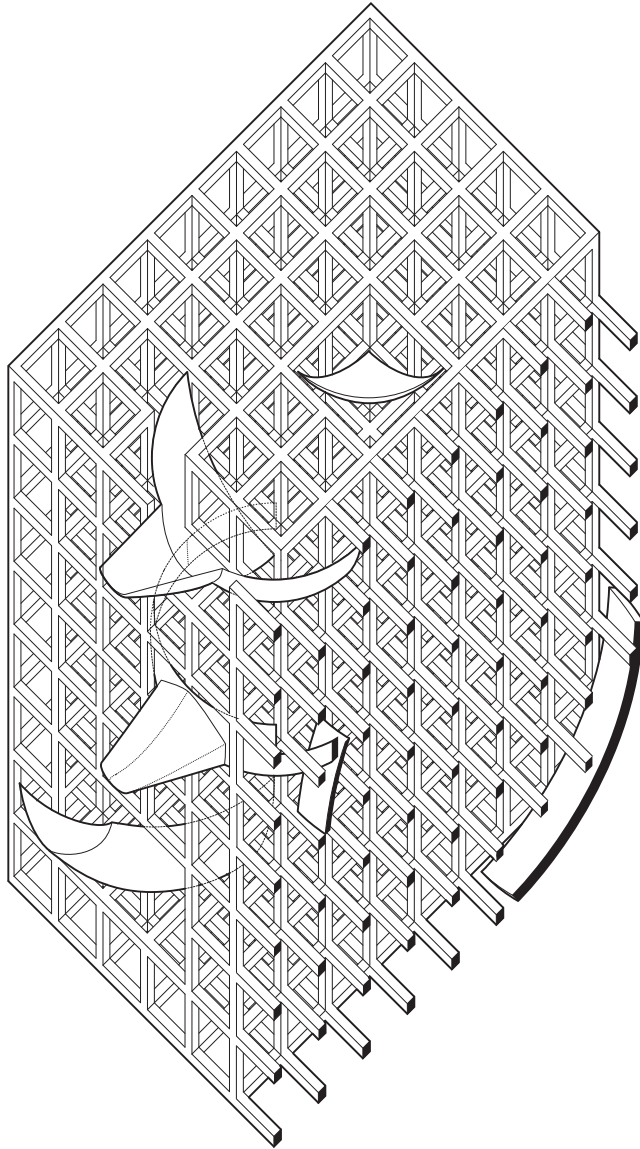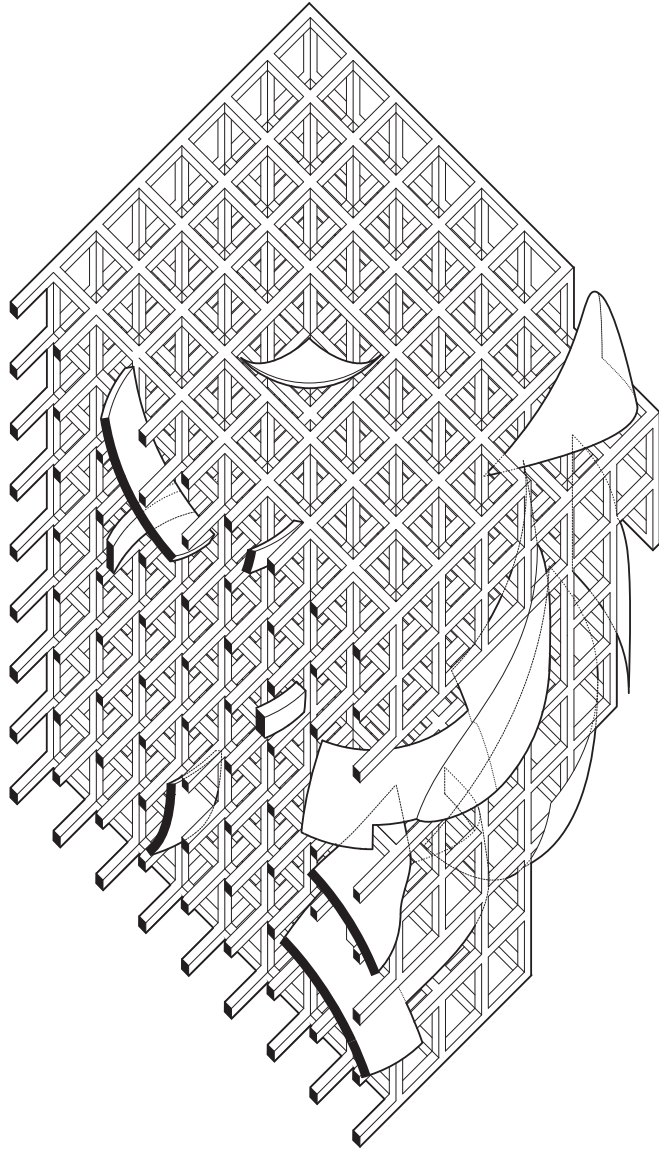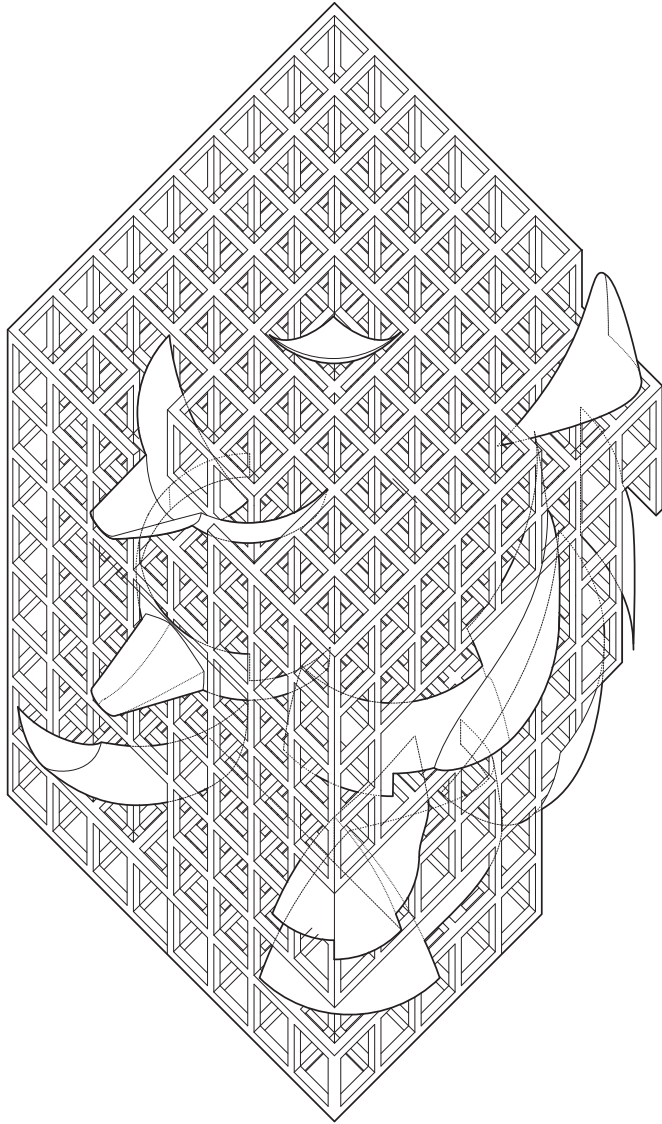
CHARTING ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

At the crux of the thesis lies a curve that maps identifiable architectural styles over the past 8,000 years. Let us consider for a moment the use of the term "style" as it pertains to the ongoing thesis investigation. As expected the idea of style is an entire subject is an inexhaustible amount of research, writing and investigation in itself. The investigation here explores ideas about style on a few levels. The first is a process by which avant-garde things become grounded and after thorough fruition, become over abstracted. The second process is at a formal level, where forms acting within this process of style seem to emulate both autonomous and symbolic elements. Lastly, style, as an operation of grouping and timeline, is neither a process nor a synthesis of dually symbolic and autonomous form. Rather, style is merely a grouping of seemingly similar formal characteristics occurring around the same time period.

The last definition is one, at the surface, most present in the various timelines assembled by Jacob Voorthuis of the Eindhoven Technical University in the Netherlands. However as the timeline becomes unpacked both a deeper understanding style and its trajectory of styles become revealed. The statistical timelines can be approached like a narrative rather than a scientific or historical fact.

The narrative told here is seen at first glance through its obvious asymptotic characteristics. While one can blame such an instance on the accessibility of historical data allowing one to separate specific aspects of style, another equally compelling argument arises. I seems as though, considering that the x axis indicates time and the y indicates quantity, the amount of architectural styles per given year is on a significant compounding trajectory. As time progresses, the every straitening of the best fit curve reaches an indefinite slope, the narrative of infinity becomes more and more apparent. Perhaps the underlying story of this curve begins in one of infinite proportions.

The narrative gains complexity amongst other iterations. [Figure A and B] depict another aspect of the trajectory of style. As the curves that follow the beginning and end of style come together, there is revealed, in the narrative, an idea about the obsolete and the imminent as well as the speed by which these things occur. As time progresses, the meeting of the curves suggest a spontaneous and instantaneous nature by which style becomes very relevant as well as obsolete. In this way, our understanding of style is ruptured by the very idea of progress; and the complex processes associated style become harder and harder to realize as things

that are at one moment imminent become in almost the same moment completely obsolete.

A further abstraction from the timeline indicated the way form acts within the styles of the timeline. Each building associated with each style does not display qualities totally unique to that time period. Rather, it traces within its complexity previous forms associated with previous style. This is hardly ever an accurate trace, rather a trace happening with some kind of more or less significant abstraction. Even our suburban houses today consist of haphazard references to architectural form employed thousands of years ago. In this way, individual building forms can be mapped using a vertical line capable of crossing multiple styles. As the asymptotic projection of architectural styles become near a straight line, the potential for a building to embody traces from an infinite number of styles becomes ever more realizable.

In the later instance, the individual building form is injected into the conversation of style. The charts narrate a future that is every more, infinite, instant, and holistic. To say holistic implies that there is an underlying aspect to infinity in this particular case. That is, while the charts suggest a future of both instant and infinite form, they also imply and unifying aspect to the vast possibility of forms. As styles turn to lines as finite as momentary spots [figure C], our understanding of how form and style differ become extraordinarily difficult to distinct. On one hand, each form is really its own unique style, coming and going in the same moment.

On the other hand, every form (and style for that matter) can trace vague references to every other form. Form becomes both infinite and holistic. This draws connections to Baudrillard's ideas about images as being an indication about mass culture.
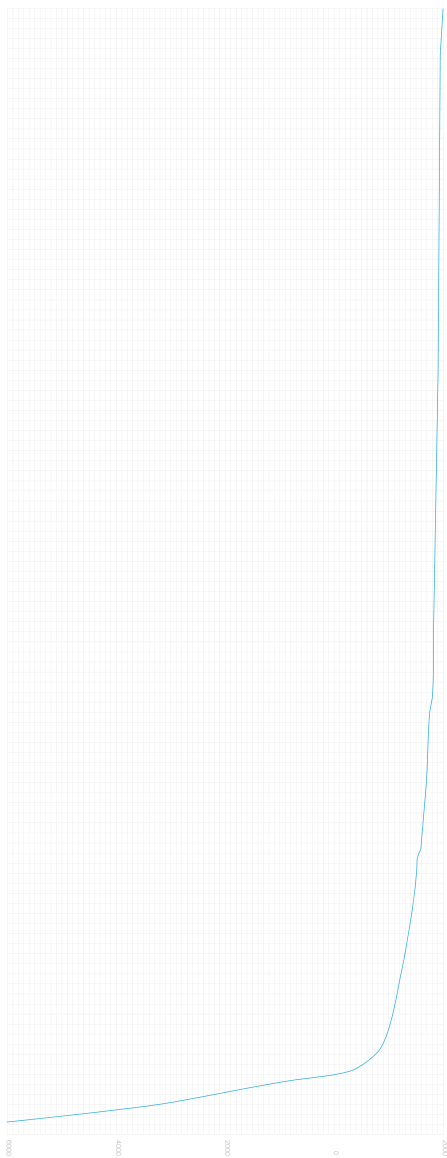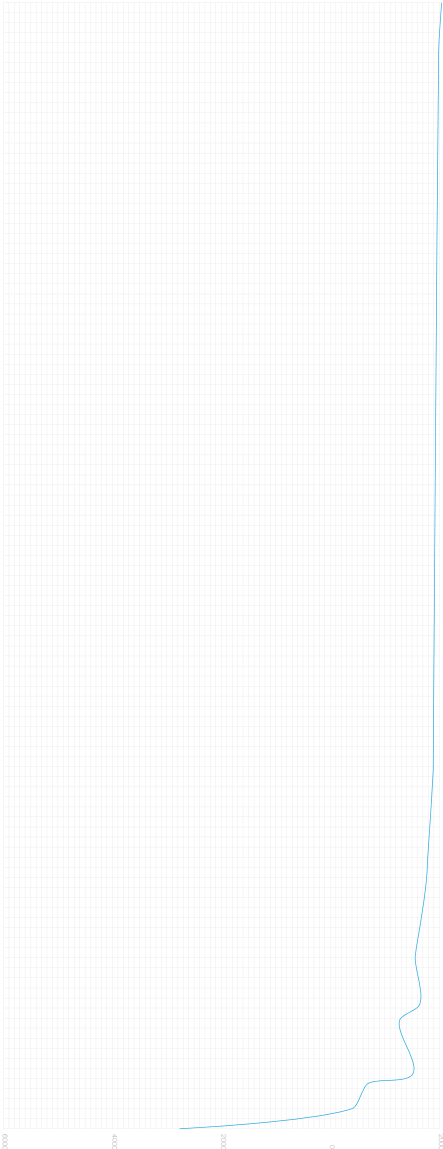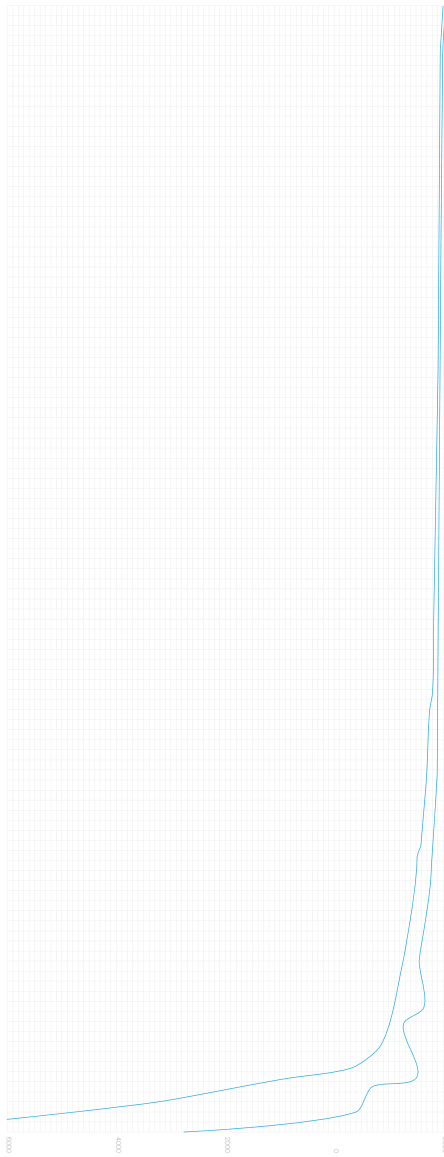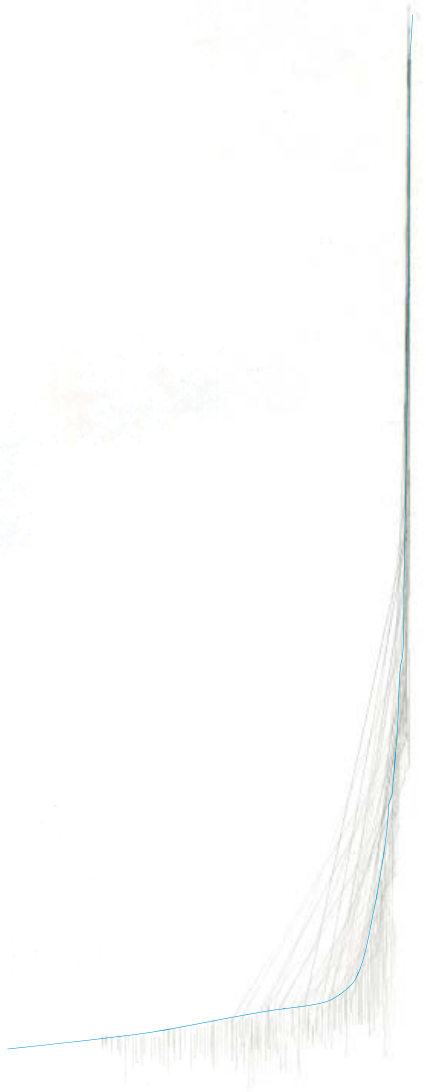
figure A
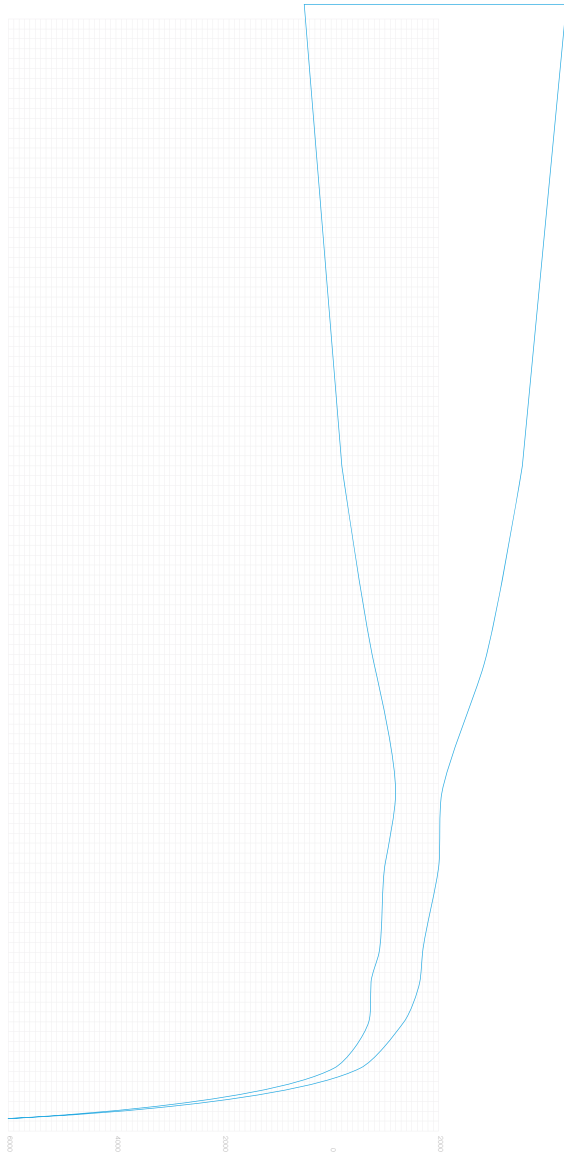
figure B

figure A and B

figure C

THESIS QUESTION: SEVEN ALLEGORICAL CITIES

As one continues to ponder the rising narrative of the future of architectural form within the graphs and the duality of symbolism and autonomy within form, one can rightly see a crisis arising. In our struggle to survive better and our struggle to retain a sense of meaning, culture steps forth. However as things become so instantaneous that there is no possible way to synthesis these two sensibilities, architecture may be forced to grasp on to severely nostalgic expression in order to retain some kind of meaning within this struggle. This means like the duck it is essentially expressive of only the vaguest meaning.

The narrative seems to have arrived at a bit of an impasse. What does this crisis of cultural form mean for the future of architectural form? Let us propose this, to take the narrative to an absurd level in order to speculate on the trend of architectural form considering its present tendencies. In the future, possible hundreds of years from now, when form is finally totally vague, instant, and holistic, whole cities will no longer deal with the scarcity of natural resources as they do today. Rather, they will struggle most with the way by which they find and preserve form that they find is meaningful, local, and cultural.
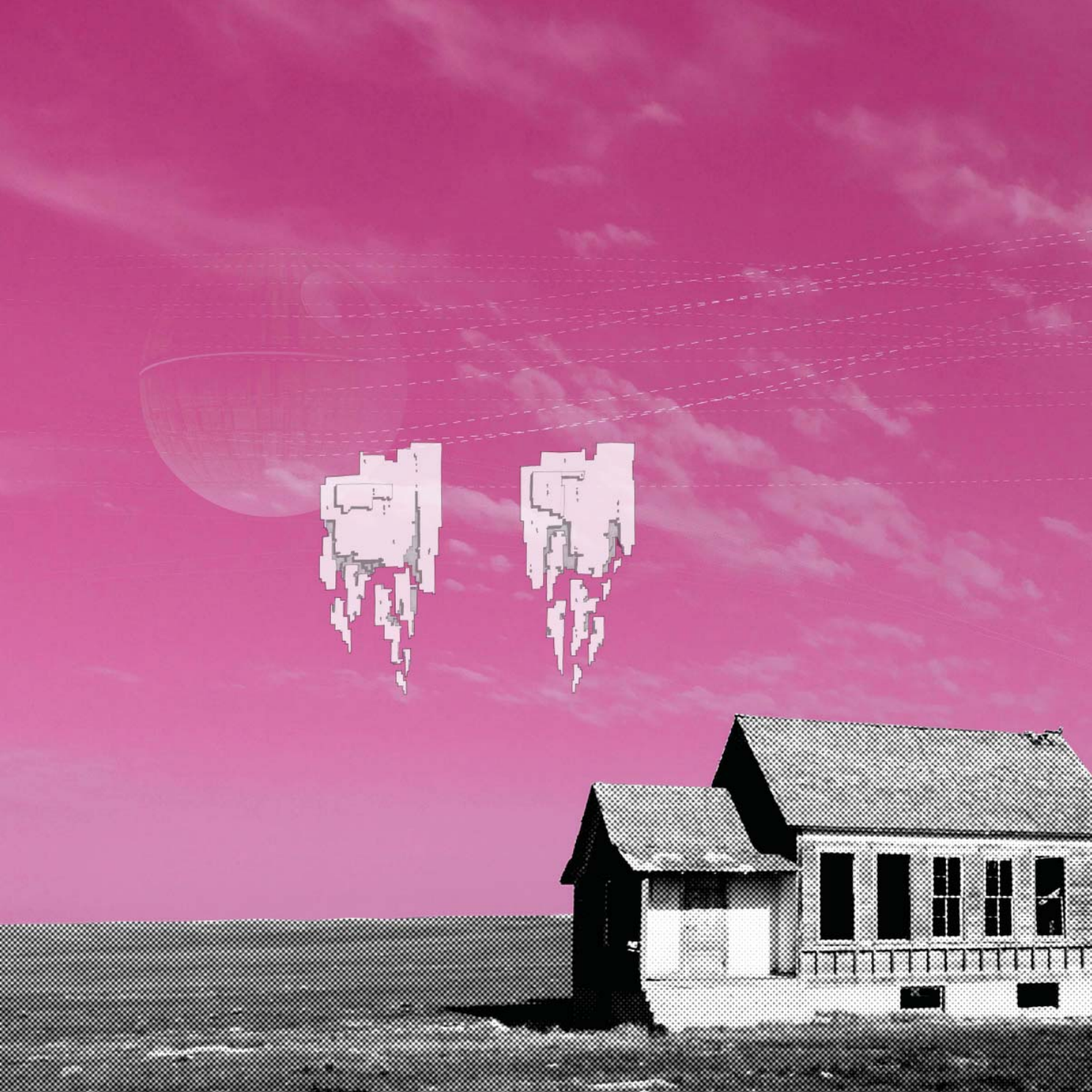
This narrative is extended through the seven allegorical case studies. As an allegorical devise, the narrative is kept from veering into the realm being projective, accurate, and for that matter prescriptive. Each individual allegory employs two components that further the dialog about meaningful form in the far future (and in the present for that matter). The first component is an idealized pragmatic system. The second component arrives as a kind of afterthought. The over-idealization of the pragmatic system forces the citizens of each city to think about meaning and identity within their respective struggles to be progressive and efficient. Being neither prescriptive nor projective, each allegory lends the conversation of interstitial space differently and with more or less success.

DISTANT CITY

Having no need to attach itself to the land, Distant City is forced to look to its own obsolescence and imminence to find cultural form. Ideal forms are realized at the top of the city at instantaneous rates. Equally as instantaneous is how they morph and divide in order to become useful. As they become obsolete. The sub forms hang from the bottom of the city as way of being historical. The historical forms are eventually dropped off to the ground as the city makes room for new form.
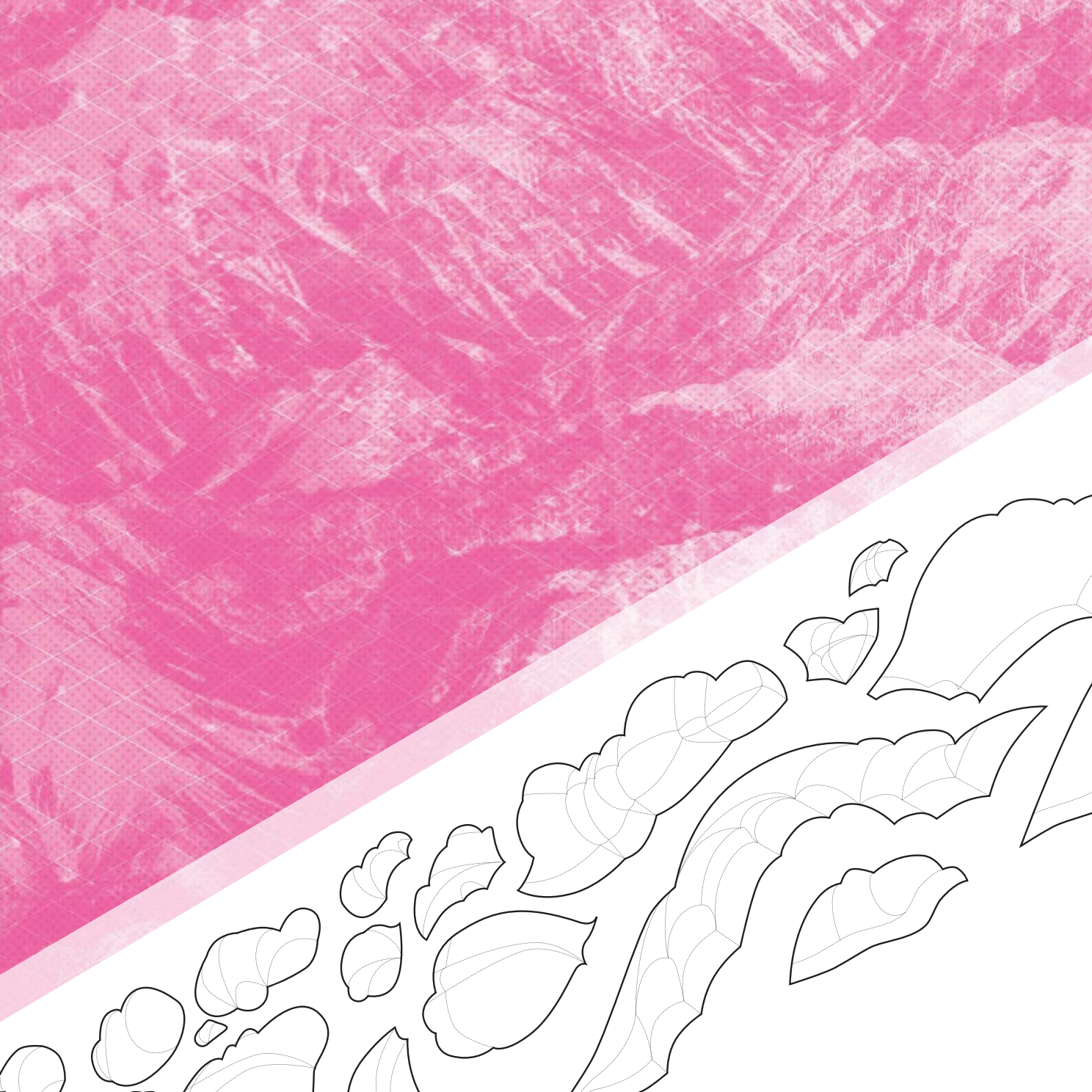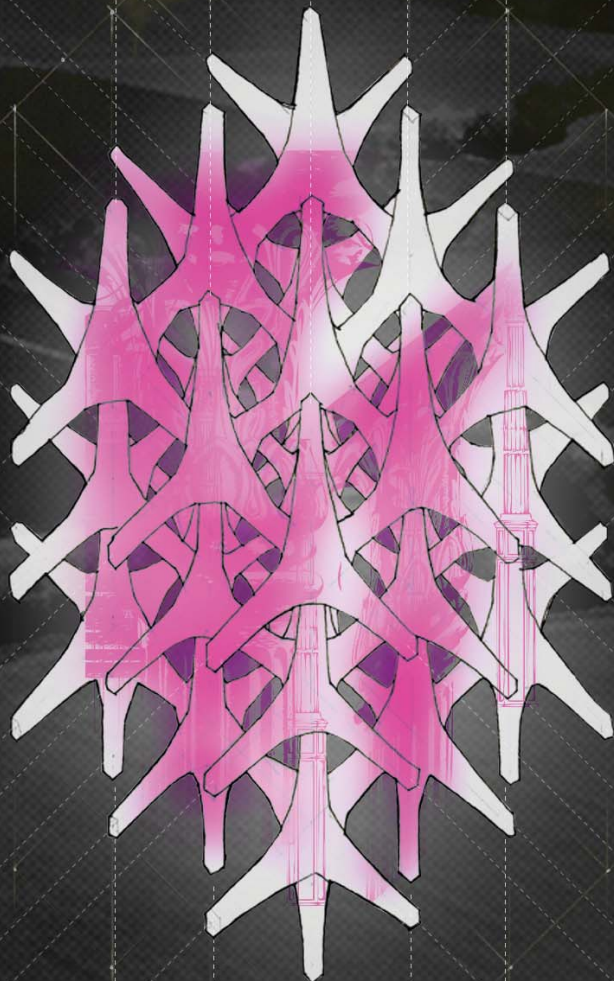
EATING CITY

Eating city idealizes the cube, an abstraction of the grid. The cube is isometric, Cartesian, and efficient. The cube also embodies little to no identity allowing it to free itself from context. For this reason it crawls across the landscape roaming for cultural form. It devours the landscape it roams using the natural form to satisfy its nostalgic sensibilities. The city fights a losing battle however, as it abstracts the form into something usable, the devoured landscapes turn into unidentifiable blobs.
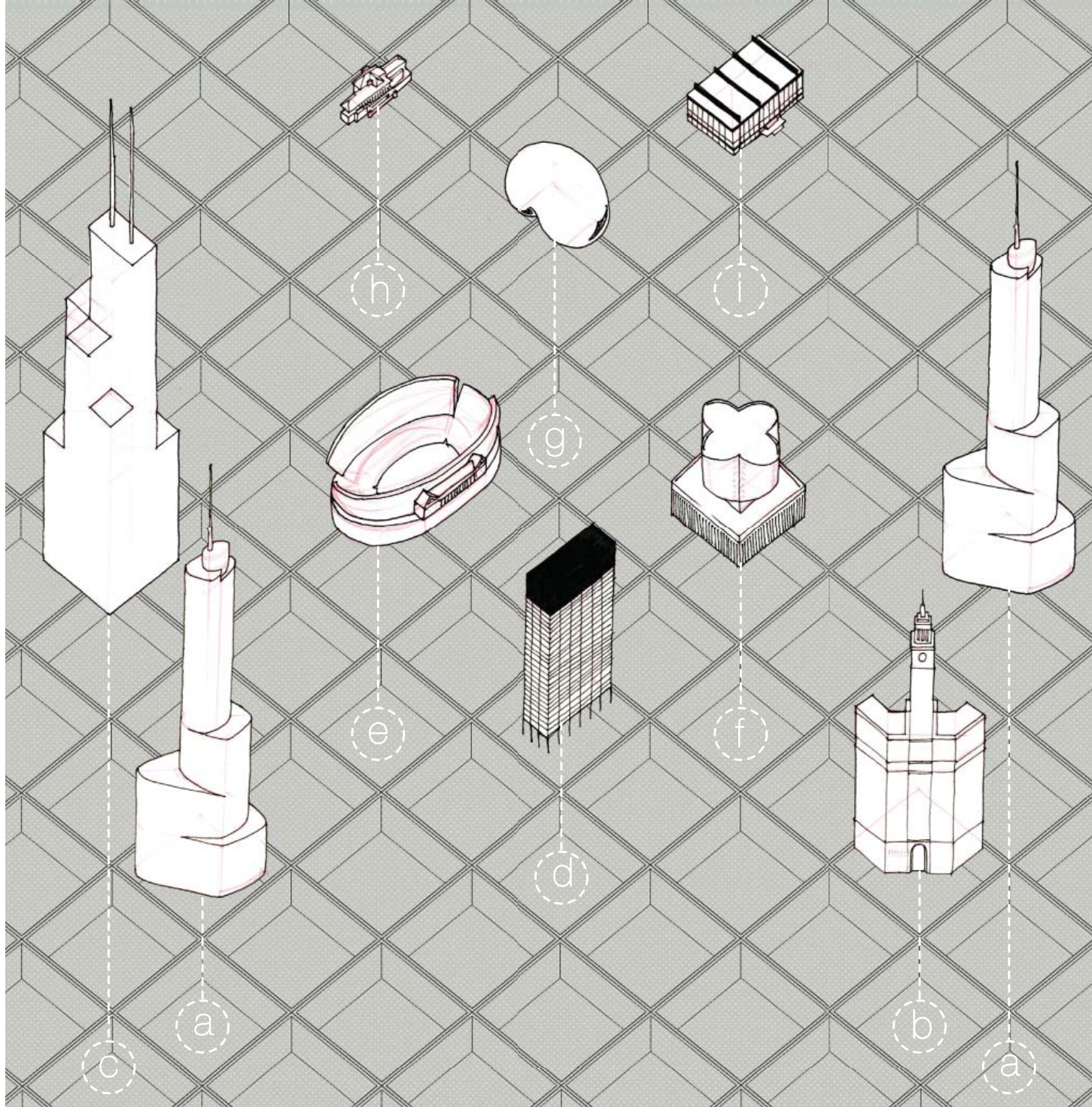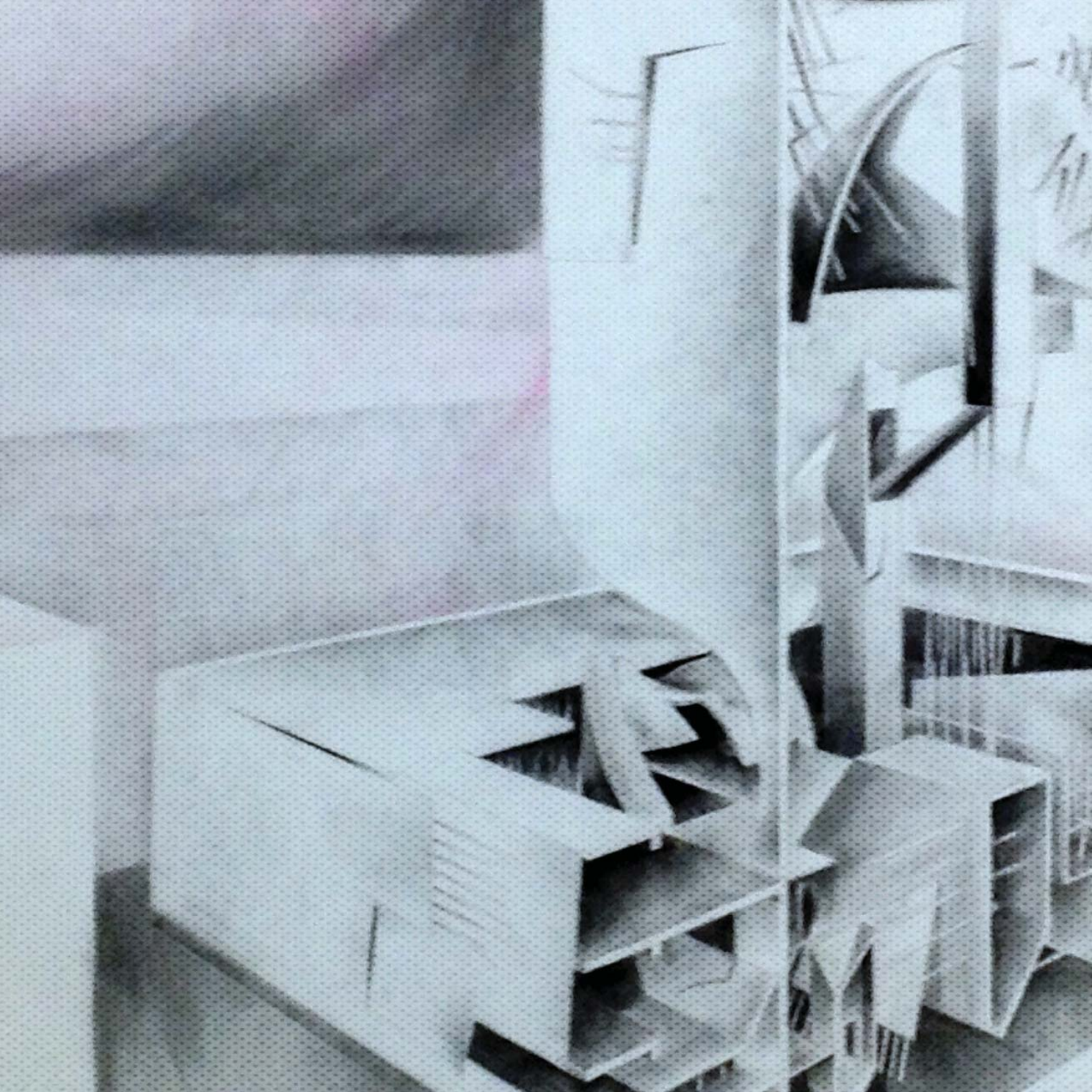
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day render

night render

ORGANIZING CITY

Organizing City idealizes the grid as an urban ideal. Being both efficient in flexibility, organization, and direction; it seeks to obtain meaningful identity.   It takes old urban from the antiquated city of Chicago as a means of nostalgic relief. The buildings themselves are valuable solely in their ability to provide the Organizing City with meaningful form.
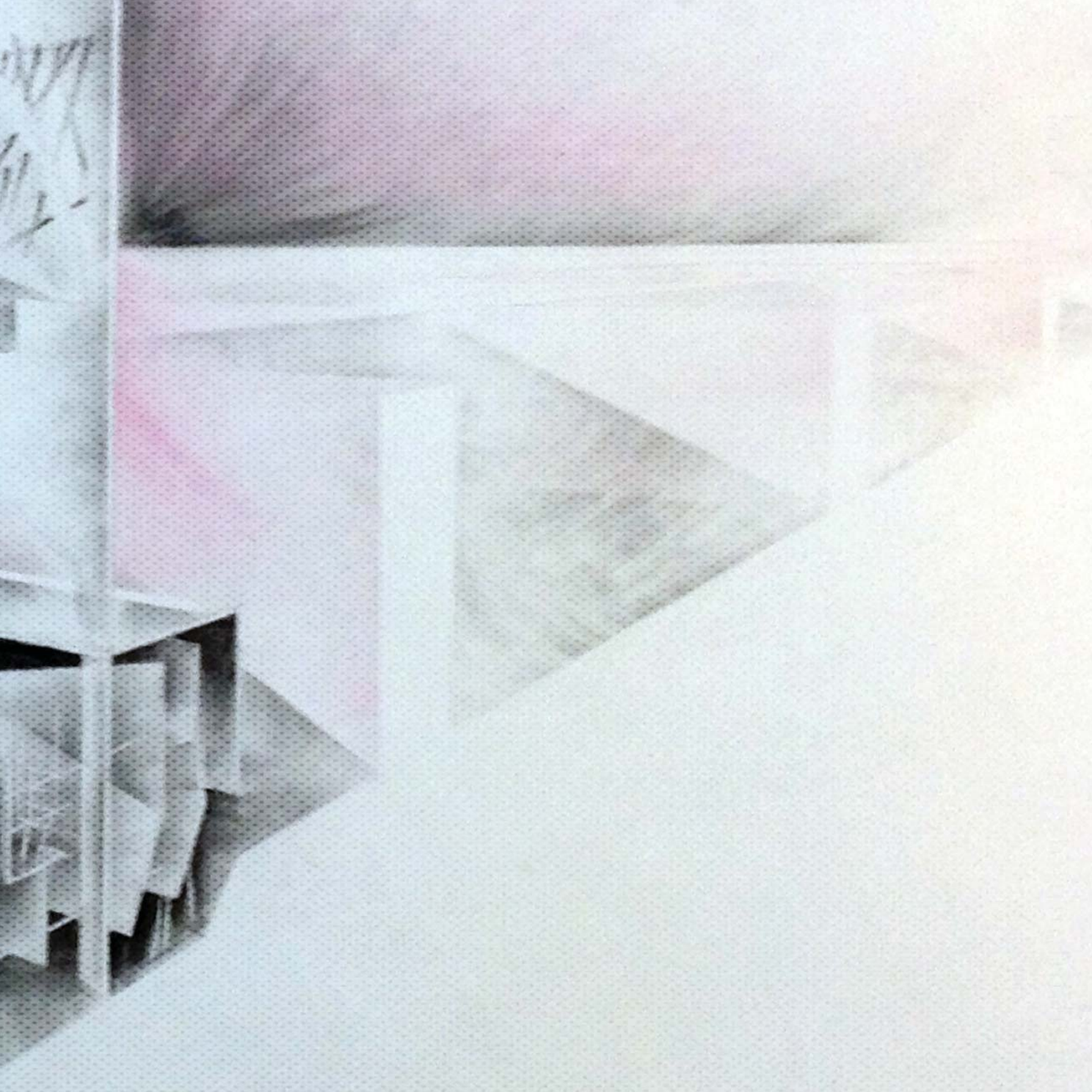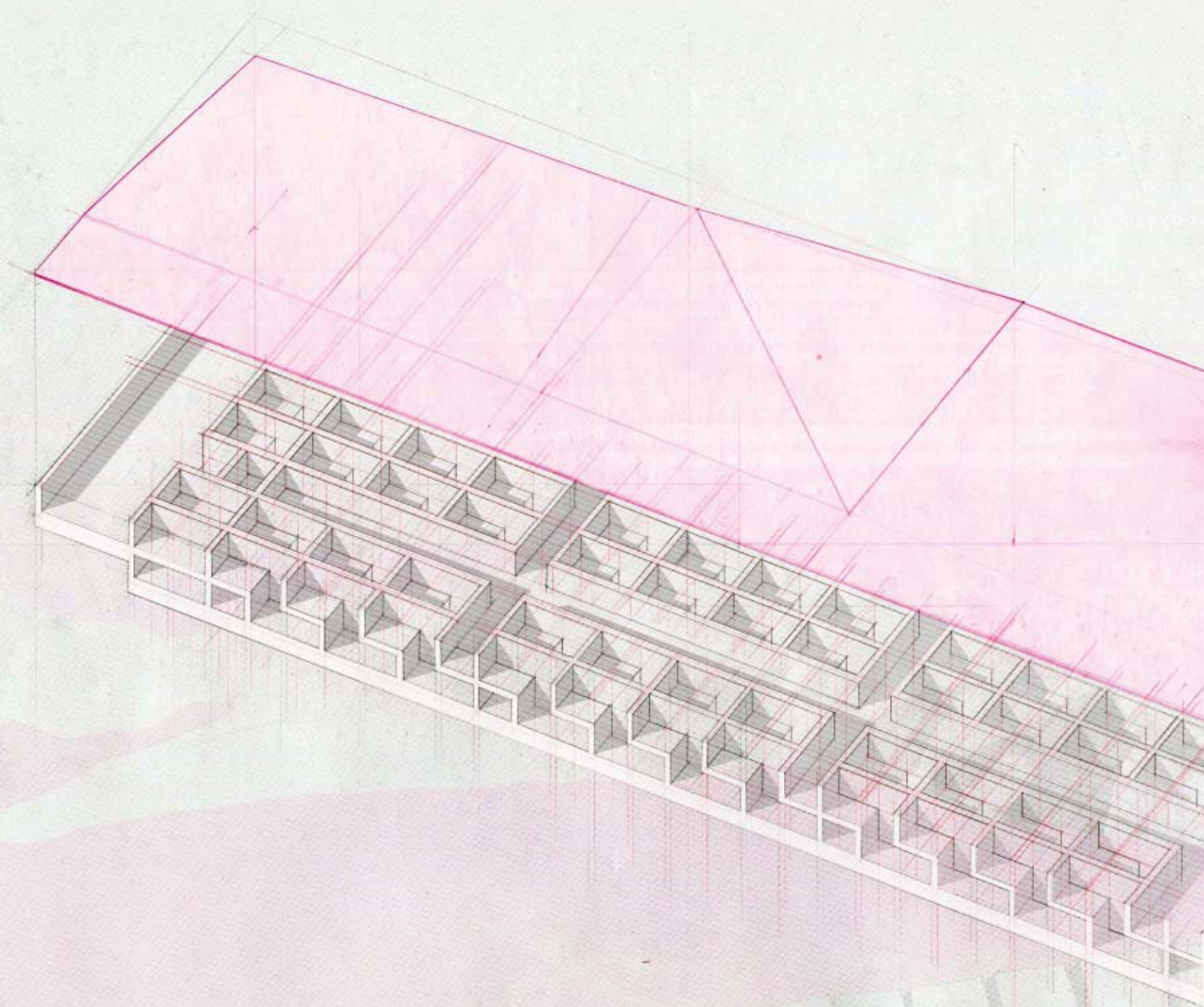
PLATE CITY

Plate city employs mass production as its idealized urban system.   The city brings this conversation to an mega-urban scale. It imagines the mass production of entire residential corridors at an instantaneous speed. As the city grows it slowly plates the landscape. Thusly, the city attempts to find meaning in the natural landscape that it embodies; through an ironically parasitic relationship.   In this specific instance, citizens of now old Los Angeles have migrated into this mass produced city.   Rising sea levels have devoured the old city, where the only things visible above the tide are the old skyscrapers.   They stand like giants in the distance.
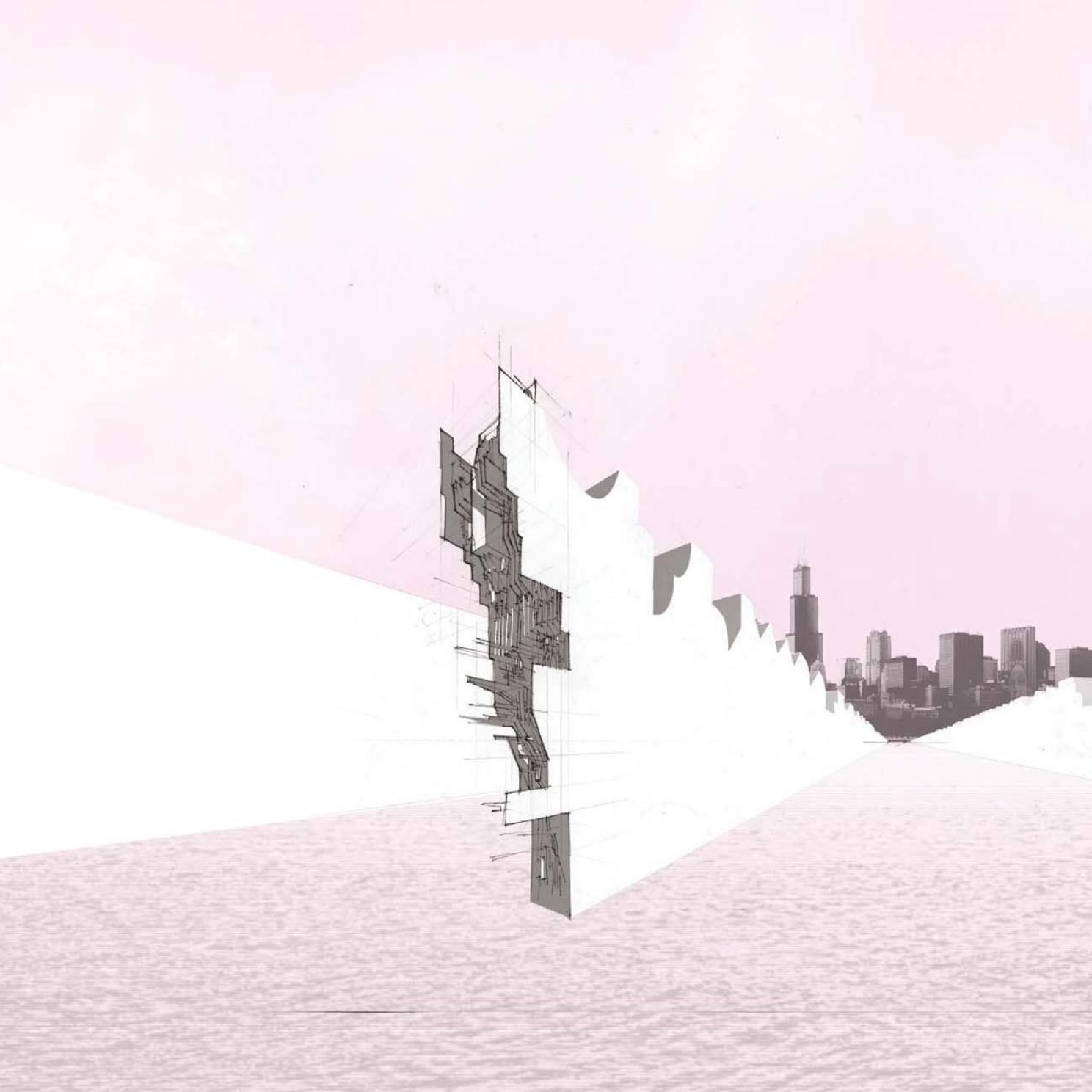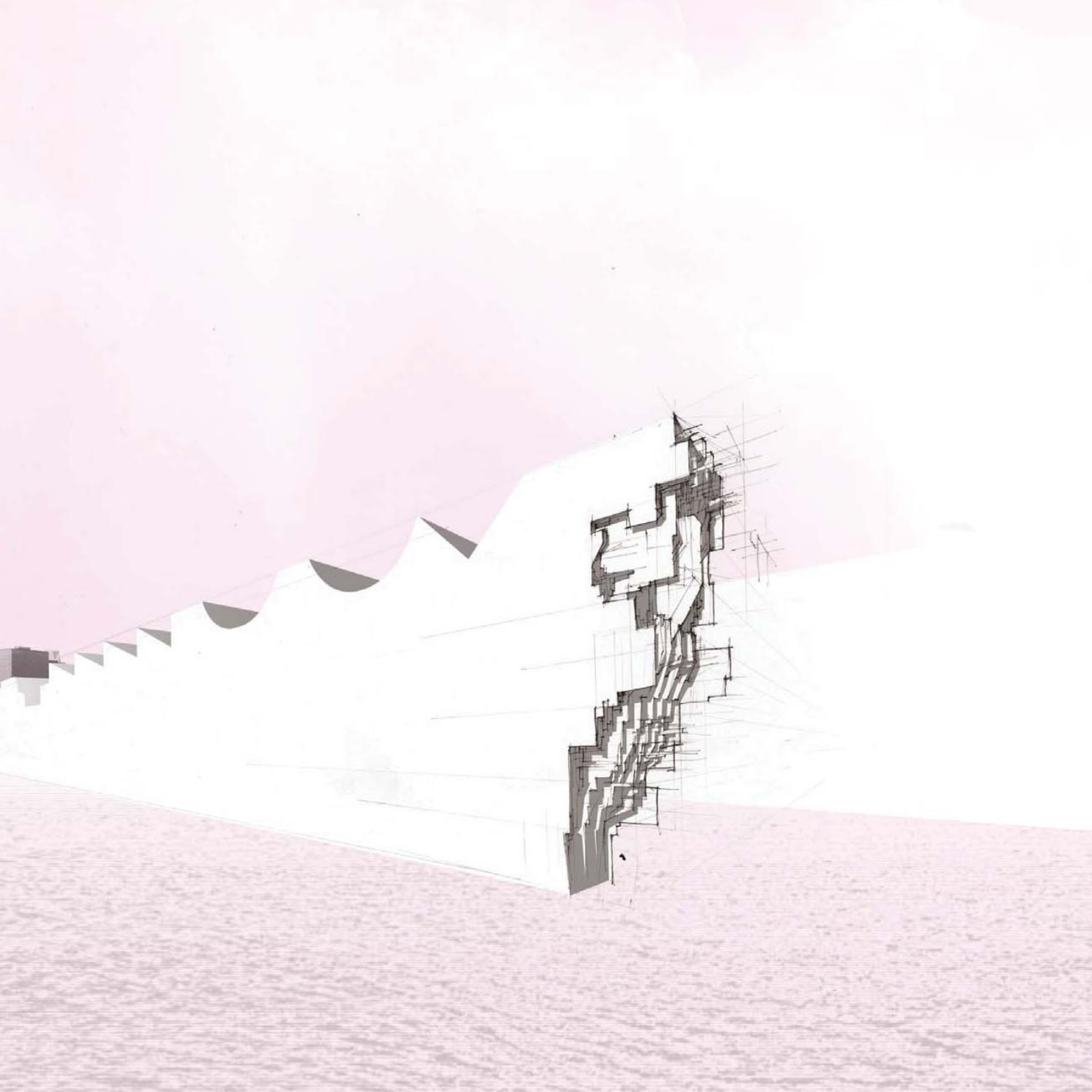
ROW CITY

Row City is an effort to further the idealizing the grid. It streamlines the condition by removing it's cross members. This allows the city to improve the efficiency of movement in and out of the city. Row City investigates culturally meaningful form in the act of serif-ing its urban edges. Much like the modernization of textual fonts, the removal of the serif was seen as ideal in embodying multiple cultural identities. In an effort to find meaning within strife, Row City allows its roof to serif as a method of self identification.
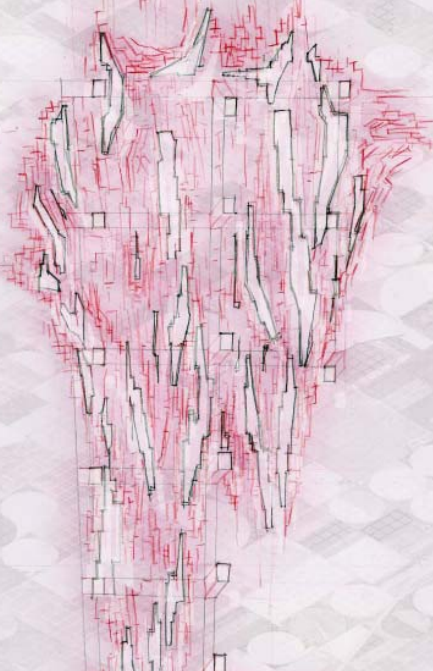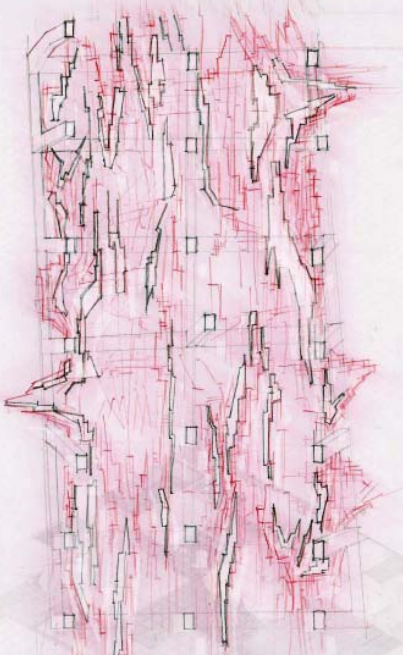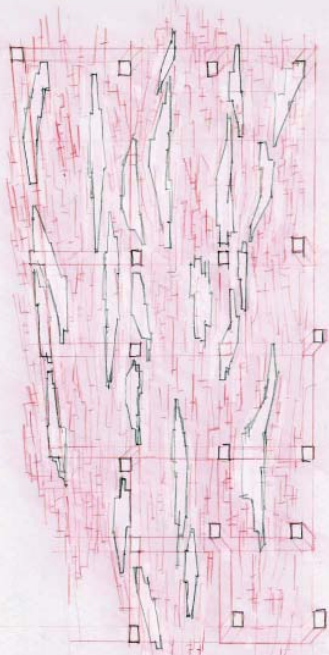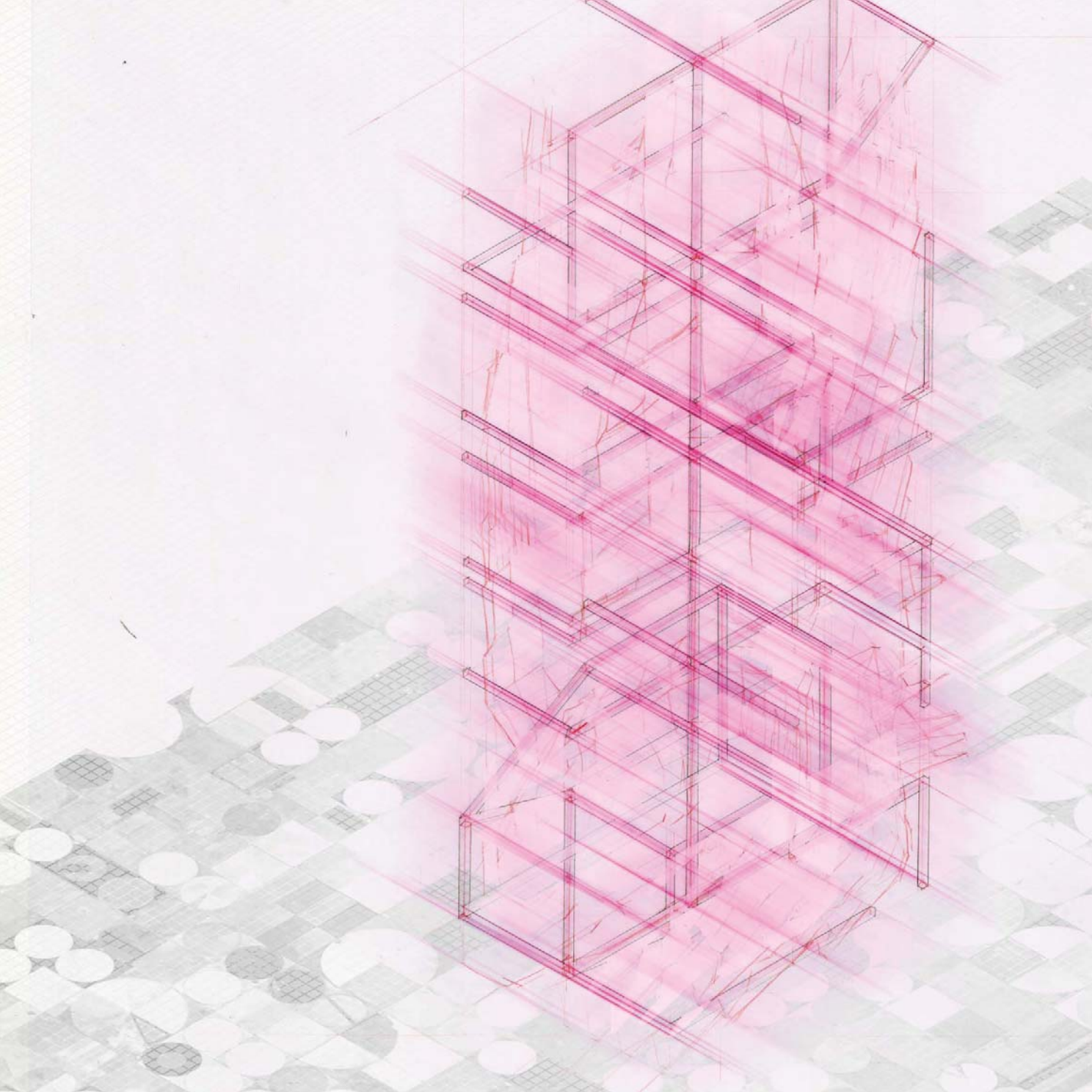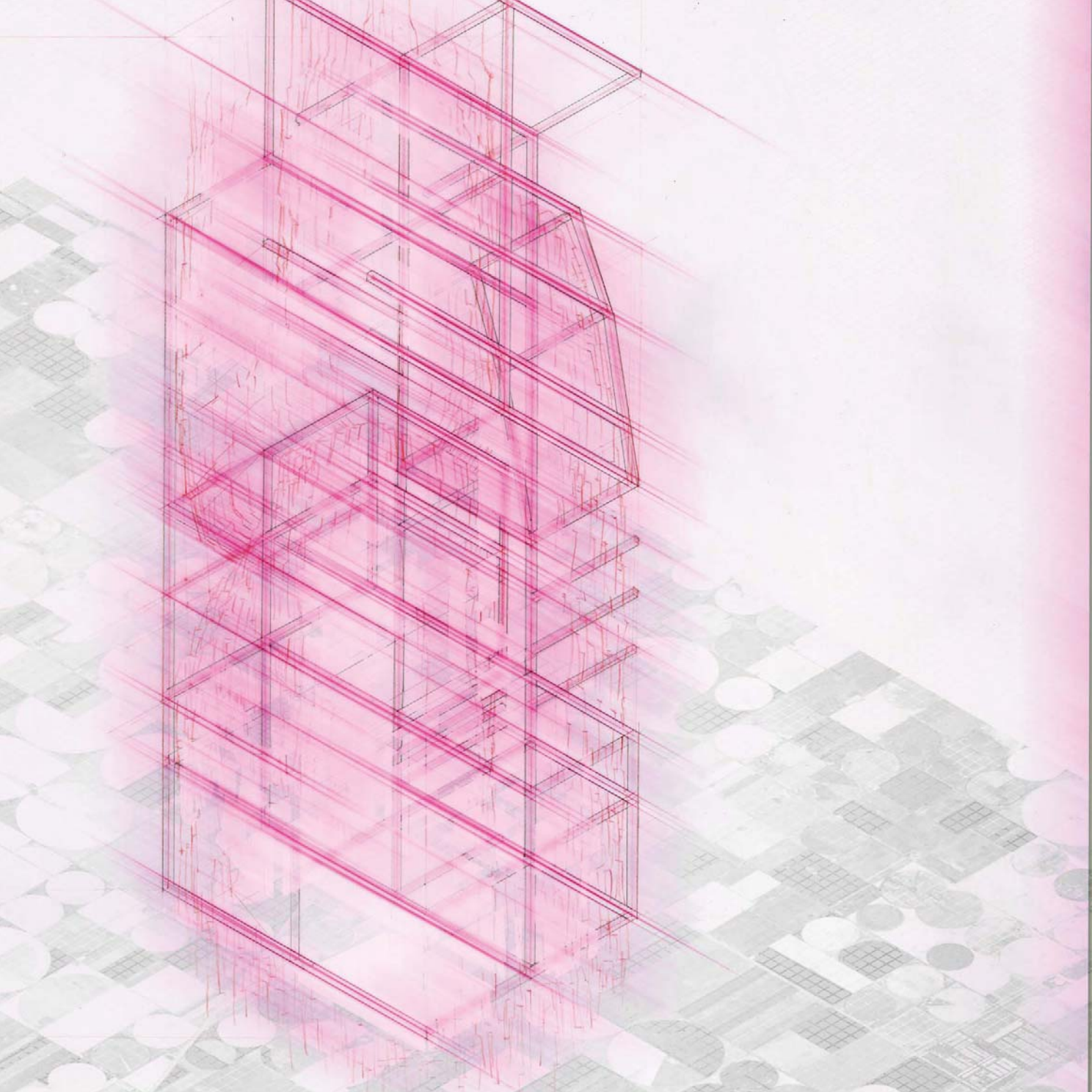
SOFT CITY

Technology has a way of reversing our notions of what form is soft and what form is hard. As this system becomes both autonomous and instantaneous, it constantly changes form to accommodate the ever changing needs of its citizens. In this way, its form is very soft, being almost definitive of nothing. Soft form hardly even embodies temporal identity. Thusly, this city's urban form is the meaningful component. Its hard frame acts as more of a cultural devise than an efficient system. The soft city, however active and unpredictable, remains within the confines of the urban framework.
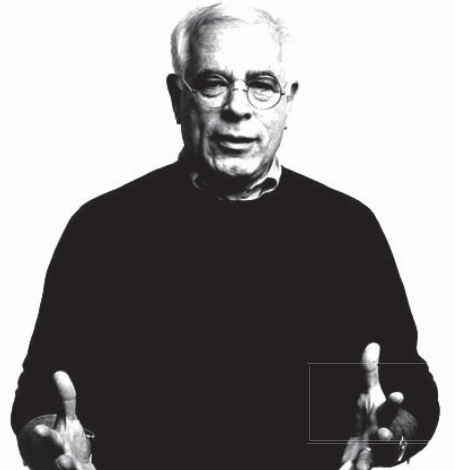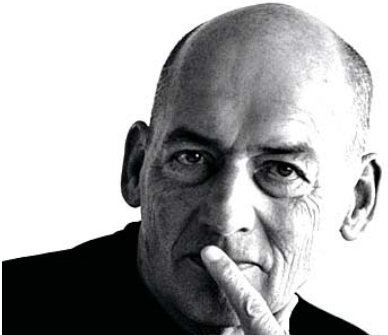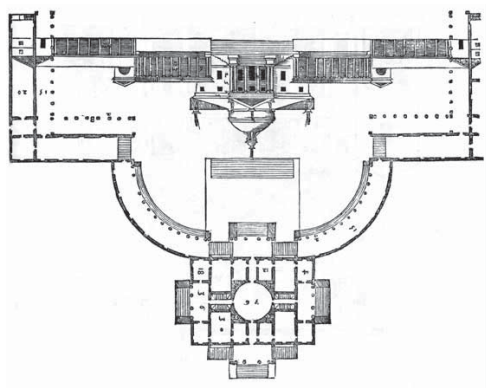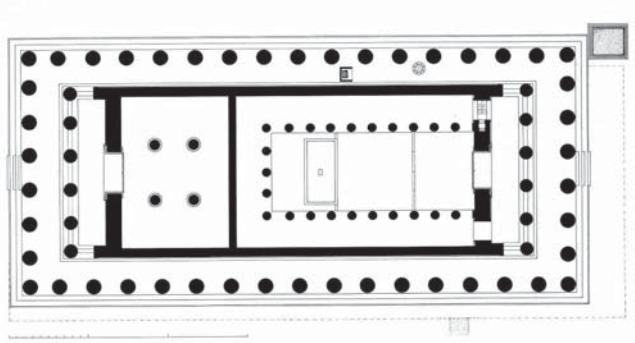
ONGOING CONCLUSION: THE OPPORTUNISM OF INTERSTITIAL SPACE

Perhaps in this light one can begin to bring closure to the afore questioning. What do Eisenman and Koolhass see within classical architecture that is still so valuable today? This will probably be a question that goes largely unanswered or even more probably, answered beyond anything they were truly trying to prove. However, there is something to be said about the way that image and language is presented to us today as opposed to the past. Today, with the infinite nature of information it is becoming harder and harder to present anything in a truly critical manner. What is truly the envy of the past is the ability to synthesize singular forms into something that is truly meaningful, critical, and complex. And of the star architects of our time, Rem and Peter's work on both a formal level and a conceptual level speak directly to this elusive quality.
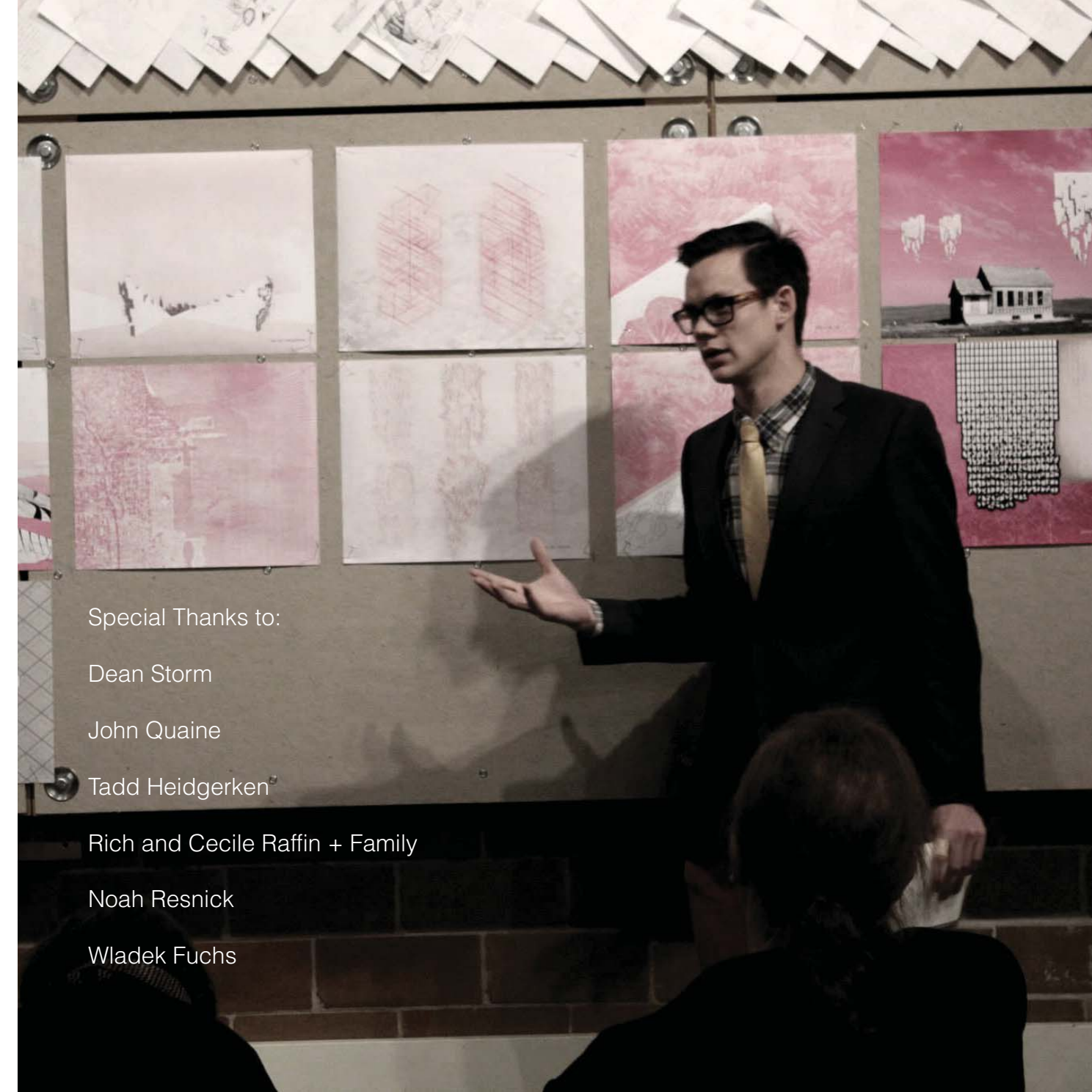
From its conception within the first iterations of the Cube and Duck Cities, the notion of interstitial space has risen to the surface. In a future the world may retrospectively identify with and infinite amount of cultural form and style, it is not these formal objects themselves that constitute meaningful and cultural form. Rather, these are the things to be taken for granted much like information today. In its infinite nature,

form becomes extremely taken for granted and is presented "as is". It is the unique position of the designer, to capitalize on the opportunistic interstitial space. In this way, interstitial space, is not so much the rupture of geometric patterning, but the space in between presented "as is" ideas and form. Thusly, in a future where form and identity is both infinite and instant, the designer may place the individual within this interstitial space. The space between spaces, the form between forms.

In this sense form is very important to any society. It's innately a political move, as well a cultural statement. It is a pivotal operation by which any group of people finds and preserves local identity. Interstitial space, as a tool, has been employed throughout history as man continually synthesizes the cube and duck. However, the future holds the challenge of creating this synthesis within compounding and unprecedented velocities. But with the onset of challenge and crisis, a new epoch rings forth. This epoch begins not where any idea ends (or begins); rather, it sits uncomfortably between ideas. It moves the infinity from retrospective style to prospective possibility.

This is beautiful. This is ugly. This is good. This is bad. Pay heed to the proverbial itch,

This is beautiful. This is ugly. This is good. This is bad. Pay heed to the proverbial itch, embodied in everyman's curiosity towards form. It is the crux of the avant-garde, the birth of a new paradigm.

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