

Project Journal

An aerial photograph of a city intersection. A large, multi-story building is highlighted with a green outline. The building has a complex shape with several rectangular sections. It is situated at the intersection of a major highway (with multiple lanes) and a street. The surrounding area includes residential buildings, trees, and other commercial structures. The text "Project Journal" is overlaid in a large, green, sans-serif font at the top of the image.

Veronica Danesin

weeks 4.5- 4.9

A new edge for DeSingel

Framing the Landscape

Introduction - BRIEF
Archiving Architecture

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But fist a step back

P4 feedback

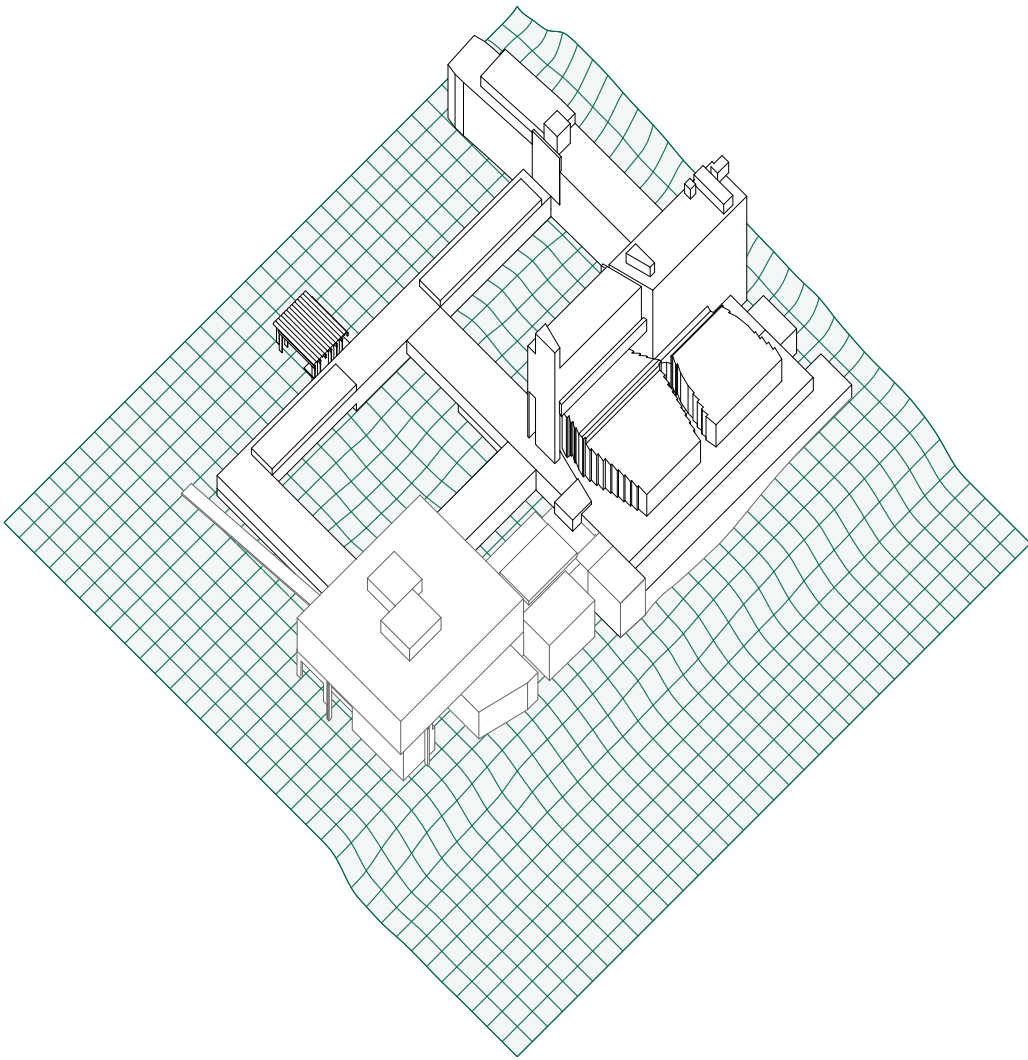
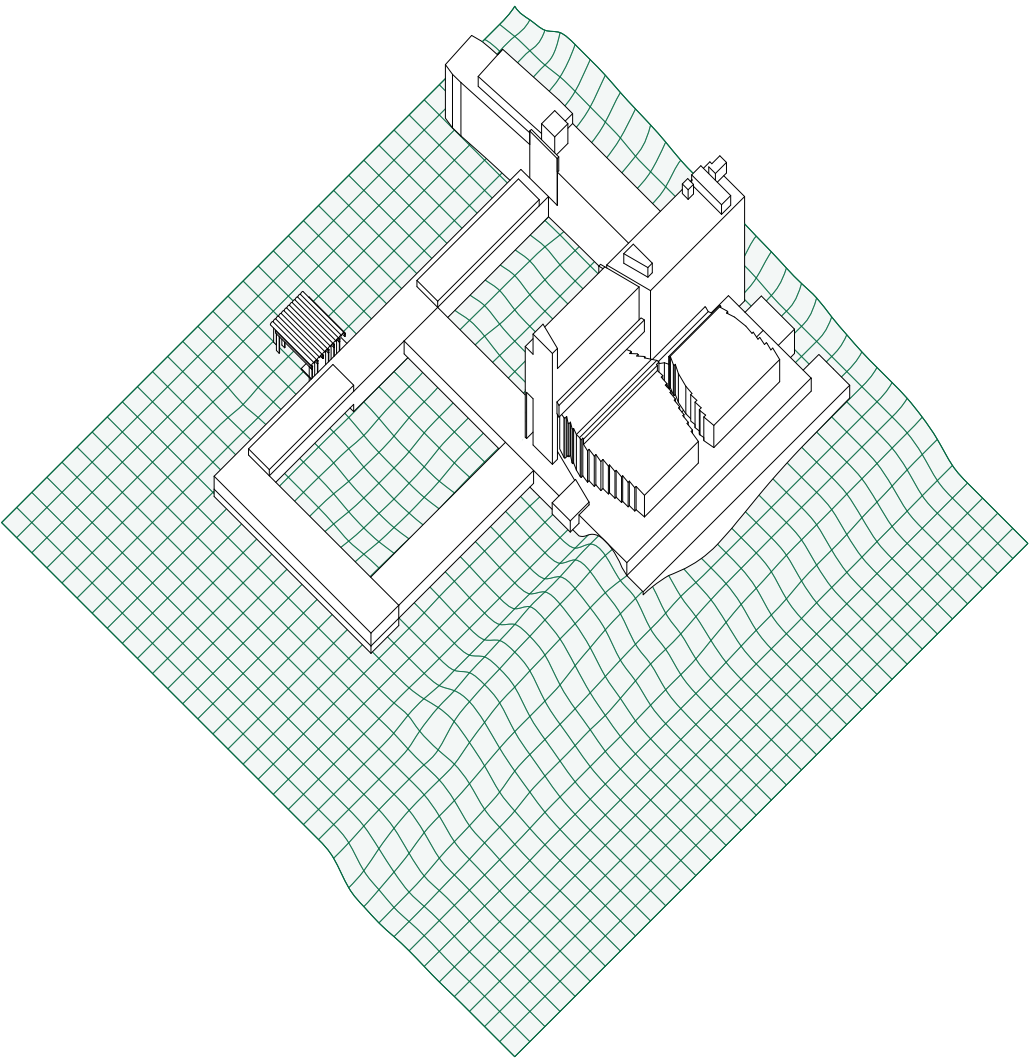
Your building proposal consists of two clear interventions to DeSingel: first, you create a “thick” wall that follows the curve of the Ring-road and not only protects the existing complex from the noise and pollution of the railtracks and highway, but also, though its “thickness” offers a solid, protected linear archive space. Second, this new volume offers you the possibility to clear out space for a new entrance court / garden, next to the existing large courtyard, thus continuing on one of the main architectural themes of the original Stynen building. While all this is there in your P4-project, your presentation now fails to explain this clearly to a non-informed audience, so you need to bring in some clear hierarchies and storylines, developed from a super clear explanation of your building proposal.

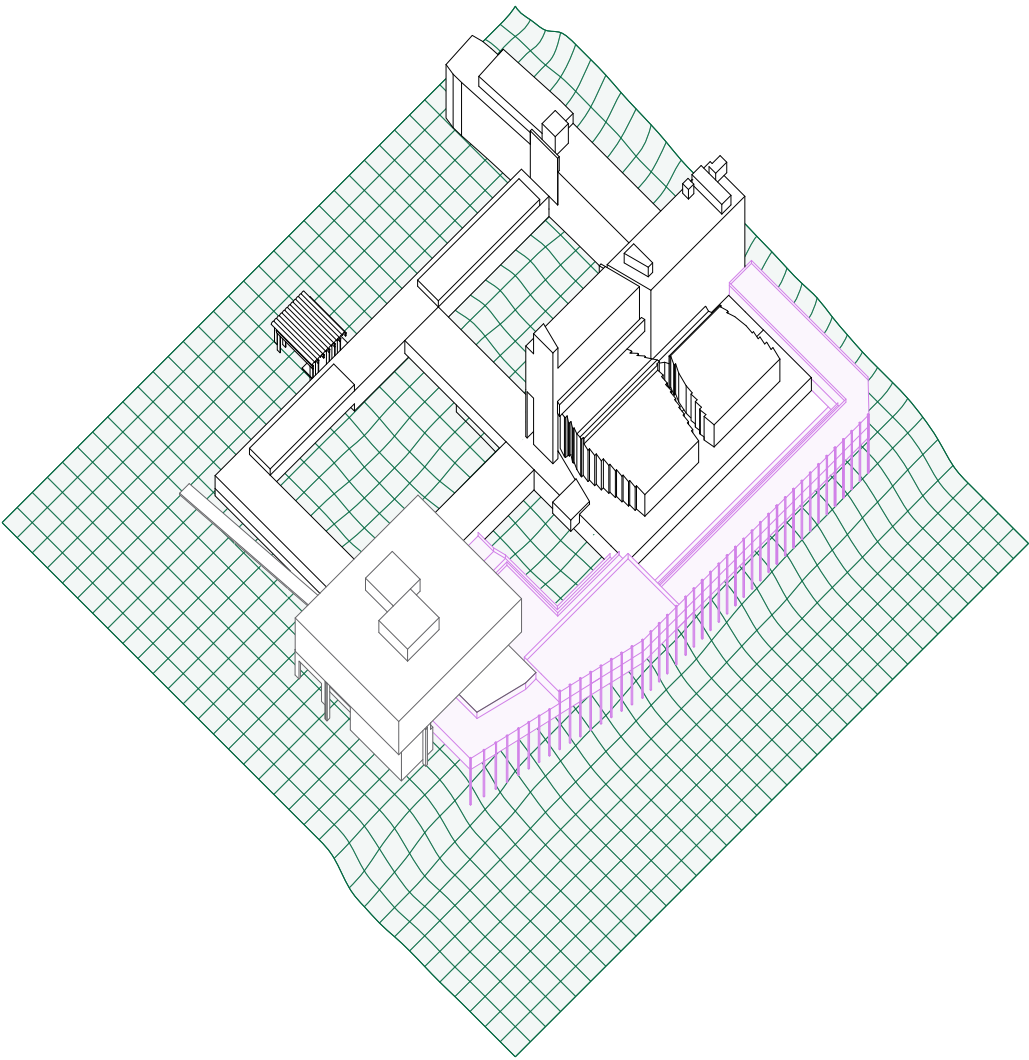
While the Project Journal catches the character of a design process quite well (messy, intuitive, iterative, with many sidepaths and sudden ideas, jumping through scales and references), it now needs a more reflective conclusion at the end (and perhaps also a clear introduction for someone not familiar with the studio). Writing this conclusion would also be quite helpful (and should find its way, even if only partial) in your P5 presentation.

In your P4 presentation, you present your project mainly from the side of the Ring-way both from a distance and more in detail. How does this building proposal look from the other side and what are the effects of this repetitive structure on the experience of the interior? How do you “feed” the plants that grow on the wall and what can you offer to various animals and insects? Does this have an effect on the appearance of the wall?

An Approach to the Project

Through the year, the project has taken shape as a wall, an architectural gesture that defines new open spaces and offers the public an alternative way of interpreting both landscape and building. However, the project's development has remained closely tied to its research aspect. The design strongly refers to the site's historical transformations over the centuries and its current condition, particularly in relation to the original vision of architect Léon Stynen.





An Existing Building

As part of the brief, we had the opportunity to work with DeSingel as the building to connect with the new archive. In fact, the VAI would eventually need to move the depot to the DeSingel site. This raised important questions:

How could these two entities relate to one another?

How can a building as complex as DeSingel also become an archive depot?

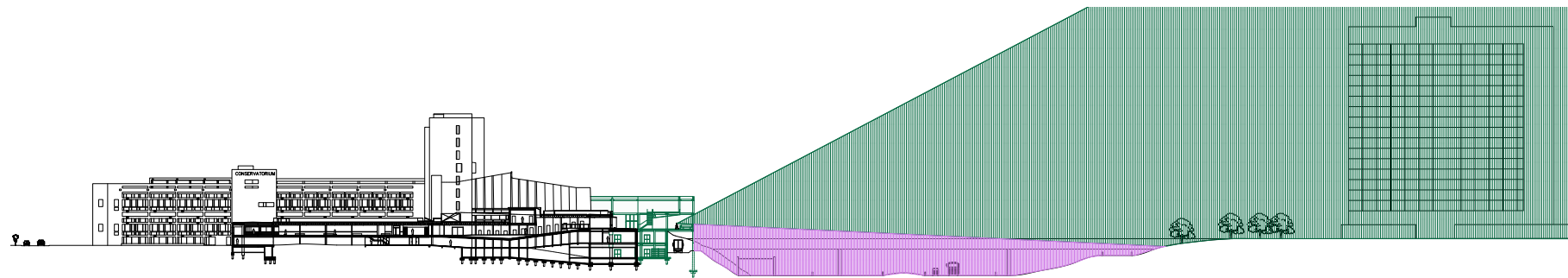
At first, the site does not offer many clear options. It's difficult to imagine where a depot could be added. The building, originally from the 1960s, has already undergone several transformations. Starting from Léon Stynen's original two-phase design, later expanded by Paul De Meyer and further altered in the 2000s by Stéphan Beel, the building's logic has become more layered and complex.

The result is a kind of above-ground double loop of corridors, forming two inner courtyards where the landscape becomes an integral part of the site. The building was not only intended to serve the students of the Royal Conservatoire, offering them space to study and practice, but also to create new public zones along the still-undeveloped ring road.

Stynen's intention was to reframe the perspective—to allow views from the inside out, toward a landscape where nature could grow freely. This approach invited a new way of perceiving the city edge, blending built space with openness.

The site of DeSingel itself is unique. Stynen deliberately chose this undeveloped area, which had long been part of the city's former ramparts. This gives the location a special relationship with the "outside." It acts as a kind of wall, a transitional zone from city to nature. Elevated above street level and sloping gently toward the moat, or Singel, the site creates a striking spatial perception at the city's edge.

This position gave DeSingel both a façade toward the city and a façade toward nature, reinforcing its dual role as an urban and a contemplative cultural space.



An Archive

After studying different archives and gaining insight into their nature, the central question that emerged for me was: what defines an archive?

Unlike museums, which are clearly defined by the ICAM and come with a list of required programs, archives do not follow a strict typological definition. This offered a chance to interpret and define what an archive could be within the scope of this project. One of the key case studies I explored was the Canadian Centre for Architecture. This institution significantly shaped my understanding of what an archive can be. I found it particularly compelling how the building was organized with a clear division between public and non-public areas. Its programmatic clarity was reflected in the spatial arrangement, from the underground vaults to the exhibition spaces above. There was a conscious effort to maintain distance between the public and the storage depot, while also revealing their relationship through curated exhibitions that presented archival material.

This approach protects the archival collections by keeping them in secure, climate-controlled conditions, while also offering the public a tangible sense of their scale and relevance.

This led me to question the limits of making an archive public.

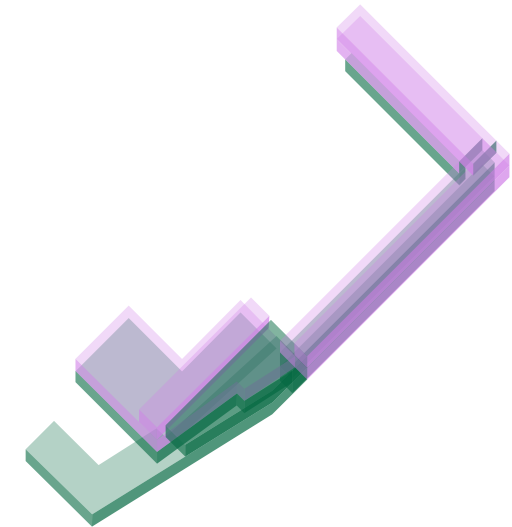
Archives require specific conditions: stable climate, low light, minimal exposure. These needs often conflict with what public spaces demand, making it nearly impossible to merge both functions directly.

It became clear that archives need an intermediary space, something that connects the two worlds. A moment in between, where the public can get a sense of how the archive operates without compromising the integrity of the materials. Still, combining these realms is difficult. In many ways, the archive identifies itself as a protective shell, somewhat detached from the city around it.

The relationship between archive and public is always complex. Traditionally, the archive is seen as a closed space, accessible only to specialists who can work with the stored material. Yet paradoxically, the archive exists to preserve knowledge for the future of society.

It is, in this sense, a public institution, a place that belongs to the city.

This idea relates closely to how the Flemish Architecture Institute (VAi) engages with the public. Located in Antwerp, the VAI operates in two locations: the depot on Parochiaanstraat 7 and its offices at DeSingel. This separation complicates interaction between storage and public access, especially considering the VAI's goal of fostering engagement.



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On Exhibiting Archive Ensembles

At DeSingel, the VAI follows two main strategies for exhibiting archival material. One is the formal exhibition room, which sometimes extends into the corridors. The other is the Table Setting Project, where young architects are invited to present their ideas. This happens in a specific space at the front corner of the building near the Beel ramp, where tubular tables are rearranged to display drawings and other materials. This concept of fostering interaction between the archive and the public became one of the main drivers for the design of the archive room.

In my case, I focused on the ensemble of Bound Rombouts, a relatively unknown figure in architecture. His limited presence in the field posed an interesting design dilemma. Should his work be part of the exhibition? Should it shape the layout of the room?

The small amount of material available made it difficult to dedicate a full narrative to him. Yet the idea of him as an “unknown architect” stayed with me and became a foundation for the final proposal.

The design resulted in a simple, flexible room, conceived as a public-facing space that could exist anywhere. Its purpose is to bring part of the archive into public view. I titled it “The Unknown Architect’s Room”, where documents belonging to lesser-known architects stored in the archive can be exhibited. This not only gives visibility to overlooked work but also shows the public how archives operate and what kind of materials they hold.

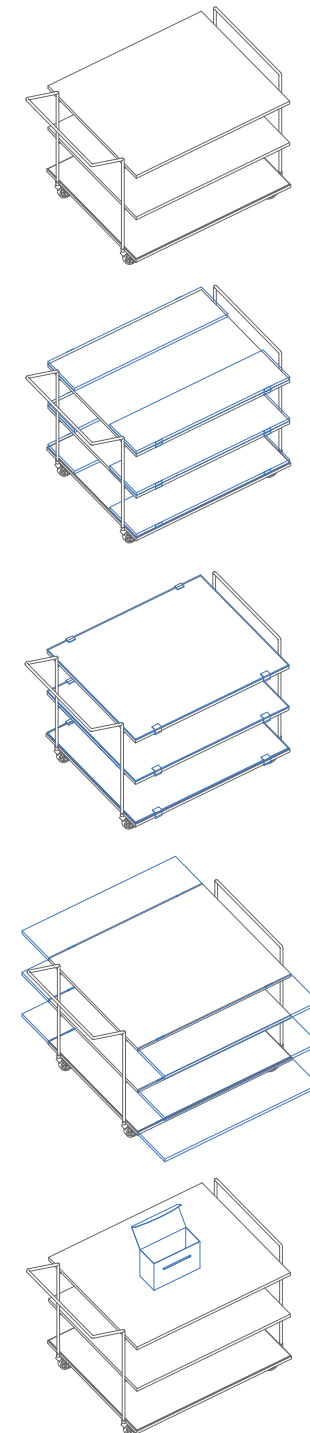
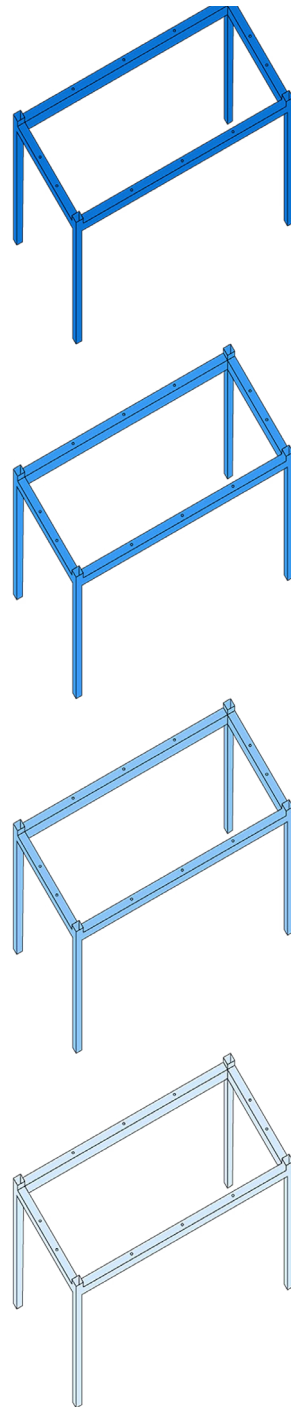
The most important aspect of the room is how the materials are presented. A new program was introduced: a rotating exhibition that transforms existing archival trolleys into display tools.

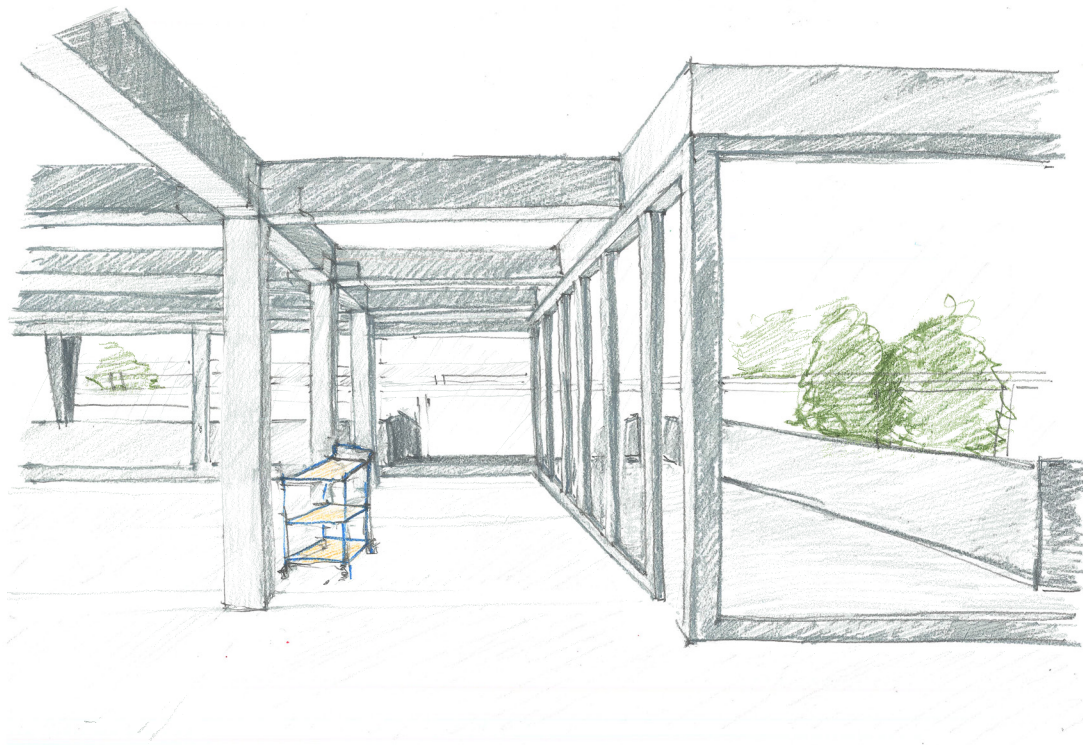
By adding wood panels, plexiglass surfaces, and metal profiles, these trolleys become mobile exhibition units.

These elements create a new way of showing archival work:

The Unknown Architect Exhibition, a two-week showcase of material from the archive, focusing on a lesser-known architect.

This temporary exhibition allows archival content to emerge from storage, breaking down the traditional separation between archive and public. In this way, the public becomes part of the archival process.





A Wall

By taking all these aspects into account and analyzing the unused spaces within the building, it became clear that the most appropriate site for intervention was the back façade—the side facing highway E34.

At the moment, this façade is underutilized and largely neglected. It lacks a meaningful view, sits uncomfortably close to the highway, and is dominated by noise and visual clutter. There is no specific feature to draw the eye; it feels overwhelming and disconnected.

What's interesting, though, is that this façade was originally intended to be one of the building's most significant features—the terraces. That's why it felt important to me to reinterpret the role of these terraces, offering a way to look outward while also creating a protective barrier—something akin to the city's former ramparts, shielding the building from the chaos of the highway.

Additionally, there are vacant interior spaces just behind this façade. The former Radio 2 studios, located beneath the terraces, are no longer in use, as Radio 2 is no longer part of the DeSingel institutions. This gave me the opportunity to reuse those spaces and focus the entire intervention along the back façade.

The first move in the project is the creation of a wall—a high, solid mass that runs along the highway. From the outside, it appears as a rhythmic sequence of vertical elements. This is achieved through a pre-cast concrete structure, designed to echo the existing façade, where long columns and infill panels already form a recognizable rhythm.

My intervention is essentially a reinterpretation, using new materials to maintain a coherent architectural language while improving the experience of both the terraces and the building's interior.

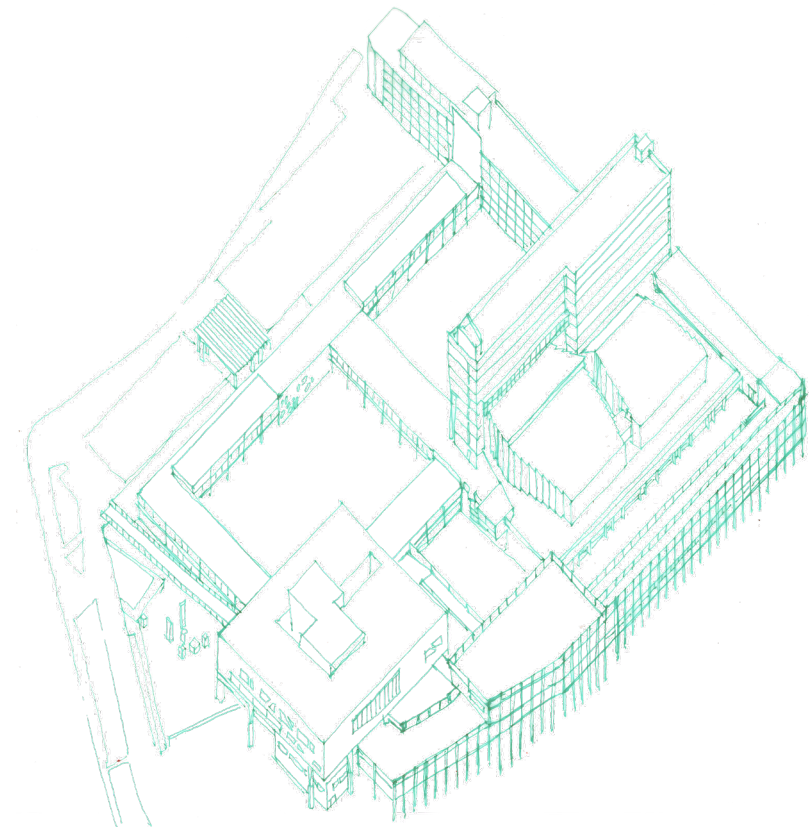
By designing a closed south-facing wall, there's also the opportunity to capture and retain solar heat—an ecological strategy that aligns with the local climate. In this way, the archive becomes a climatic buffer, shielding the building while offering a new environmental logic.

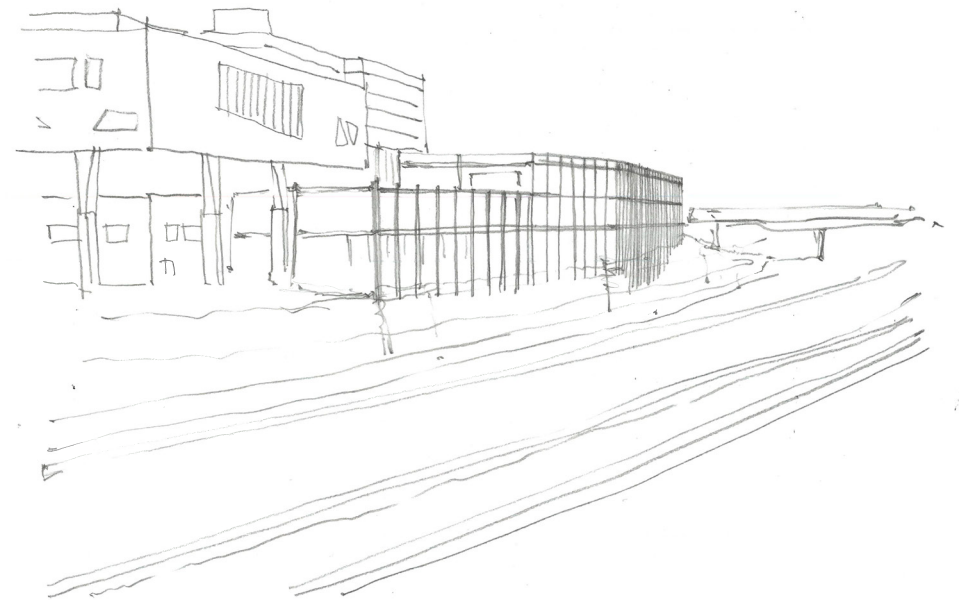
This strategy draws inspiration from the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) in Rotterdam, where the archive building forms a barrier at the edge of the museum park. Similarly, the archive typology proves ideal for this purpose. It does not require openings, and it naturally lends itself to being a protective edge.

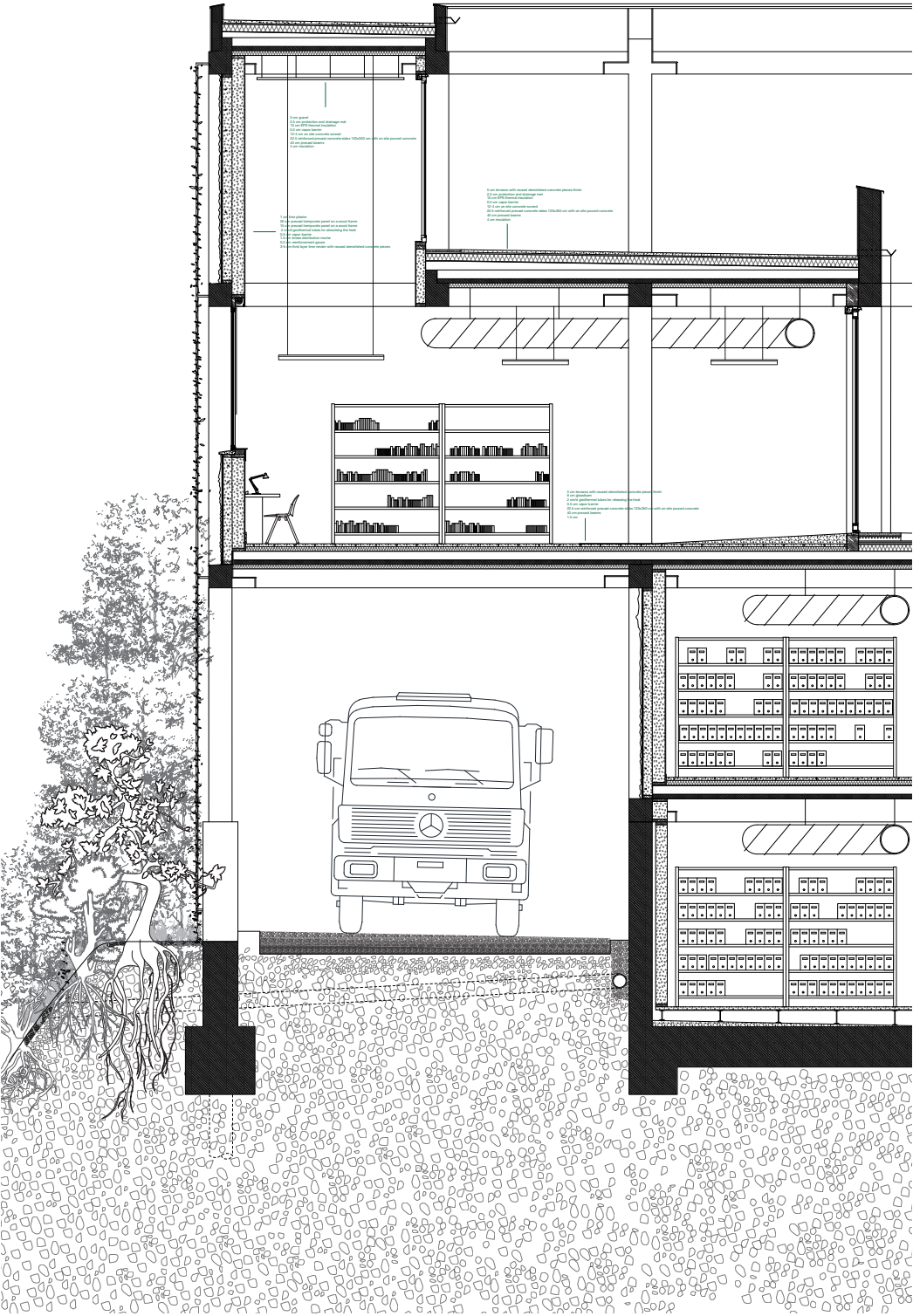
Interestingly, this barrier quality also repositions the archive as a public asset—a silent infrastructure that improves the quality of urban space.

Rather than isolating the archive, this approach makes it an integral part of the city. It becomes a kind of urban wall, one that defines and protects new collective spaces. A comparable example can be found in the Archives de Bordeaux Métropole, where the mass of the archive building defines public zones and creates meaningful open spaces around it.

In this way, the archive becomes not just a container for memory, but a landscape-forming element. It opens new possibilities for the site by resolving the fragmented rear façade—particularly Stéphan Beel's lower extension—into a unified architectural statement. By enclosing the back of the building, new potential emerges for interior public areas, turning a previously ignored side into a meaningful and generous part of DeSingel's spatial experience.









A garden

As said multiple times already, DeSingel is a landscape-defined building. The structure and nature are strictly in relation, and the modification of the built structure through the years has almost entirely lost this strict relation between the two.

As we can see now, there is still a relation between the two courtyards that once continued at the back of the building, with a hill going directly to the terraces. The building played with the concept of interiors and exteriors, public and private, and landscape and building, especially in the connections between floors.

The first floor, the main floor, is directly connected to the landscape, and in the configuration of the floor, with ramps to connect the differences, it makes the experience of the interiors of the building a landscape that needs to be explored. As a matter of fact, the hill and the ramp bring to the terraces the moment in which the building should have been directly connected to the landscape, with the view directly on nature, which has been lost with the construction of the highway.

All this information and analysis were the driven aspects to develop my project. Could the connection with nature reappear? Could the landscape be integrated again in the building, recreating the lost connection? And how could the connection between the highway and the building change?

I have interpretate the landscape as two new moments in the building. The terraces as a landscape, where the connection with outside has changed. The moments in which the terraces leave a look to outside has been modified into specific moments where the people can look at nature or the skyscrapers by hiding the highway, by using the HA-HA technique.

By doing so, the terraces go back to their initial intention: connection with nature or specific elements, as the Crowne Plaza Antwerp. This approach is strictly connected to the role of landscapes in the modernist movement, where, as described by Mitchell, the landscape is:

“(Modernist or Contemplative landscape is) an attempt to understand the history of landscape mainly through the history of landscape painting, and to tell that story as a process of gradually refining the visual field” (Mitchell, 2002)

Therefore, by doing specific interventions, the perception of the space changes, turning the terraces into a sort of new outside courtyard. In the meantime, they offer framed moments of connection with the city. Those moments are designed to have higher quality spaces in the building. By inclining the ceiling the sound is blocked from the terraces, and the plants help into developing less polluted air.

The second intervention is a new courtyard: the reuse garden. After analysing the existing gardens, what was interesting to see is how the conformation of the continuous garden has remained. However, it has disappeared where the Beel intervention has happened. It is interesting seeing how the furniture of those courtyards is minimum. The seats are reused gutter elements of the façade, modified to be used as the chair legs with simple wood panels on top.

Other than those: the stone path, some trees in the corners, and the Alphaville? Exhibition of 2004, with the mosaic pond and the lamp. However, all these elements are just in one courtyard. The second one has been treated completely different. It doesn't have a specific treatment of the floor. The Artist Foyer has the outside terrace on the courtyard, therefore the bar tables are spread around the terraced area.

Somehow, this is a more introverted garden compared to the entrance one.

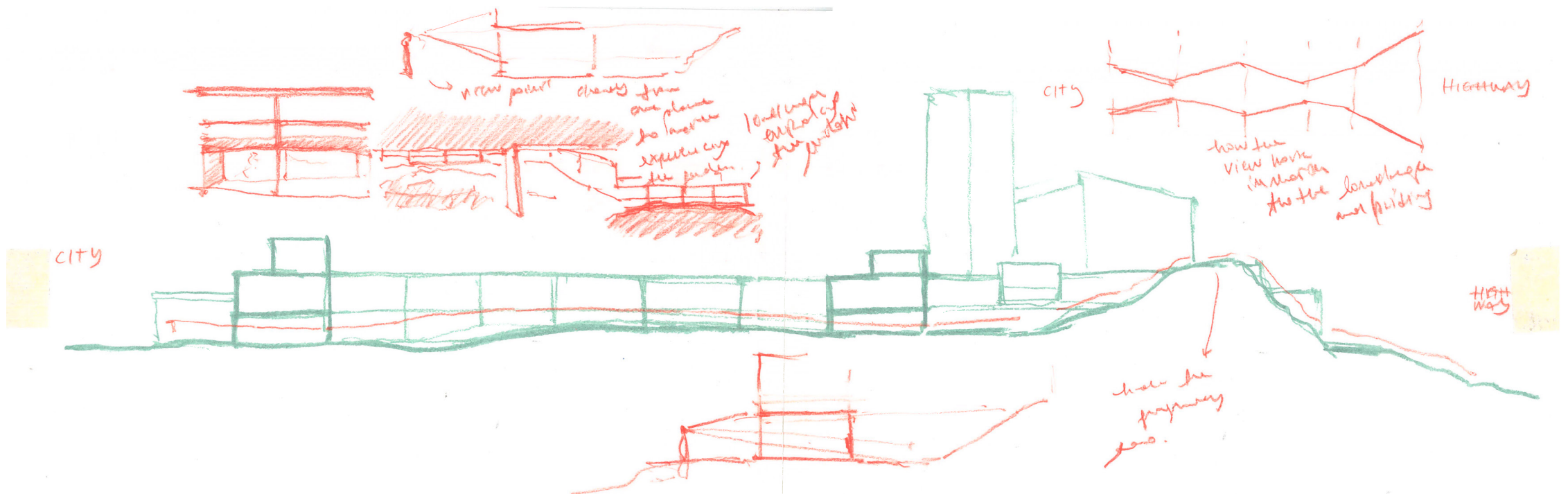
By considering this, the new addition that I did is a new interior garden. The space is reachable from the ground floor and the first one. However, it should be experienced from the first floor.

Its intention is to give a break from the complexity of the building, by showing again the royal loggia, which has been hidden by Beel intervention.

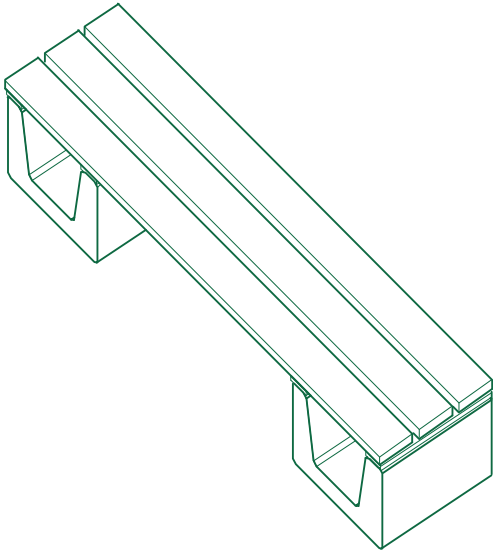
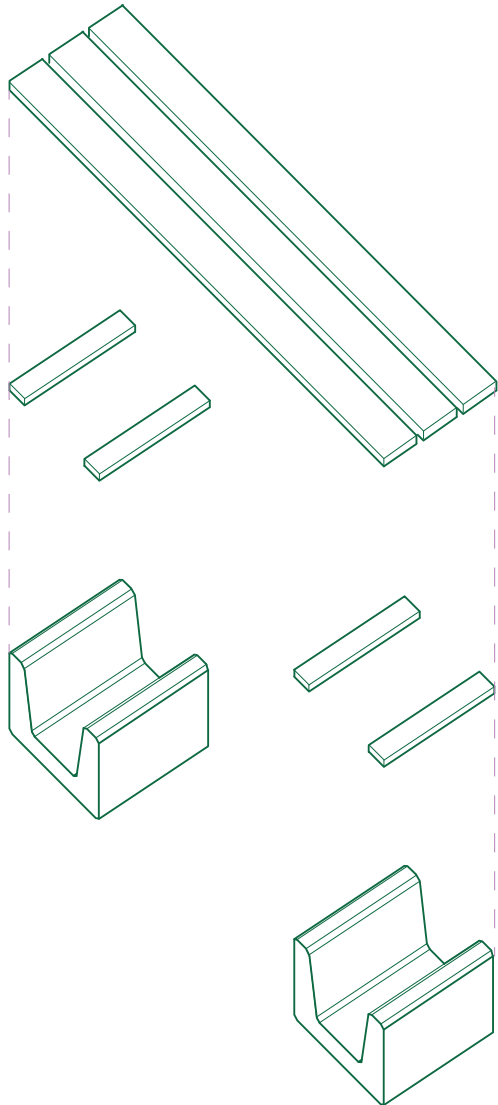
To create the garden and the new building, part of Low Beel needs to be demolished. The complicated part that tries to merge High Beel and Stylen is too complicated and badly organized.

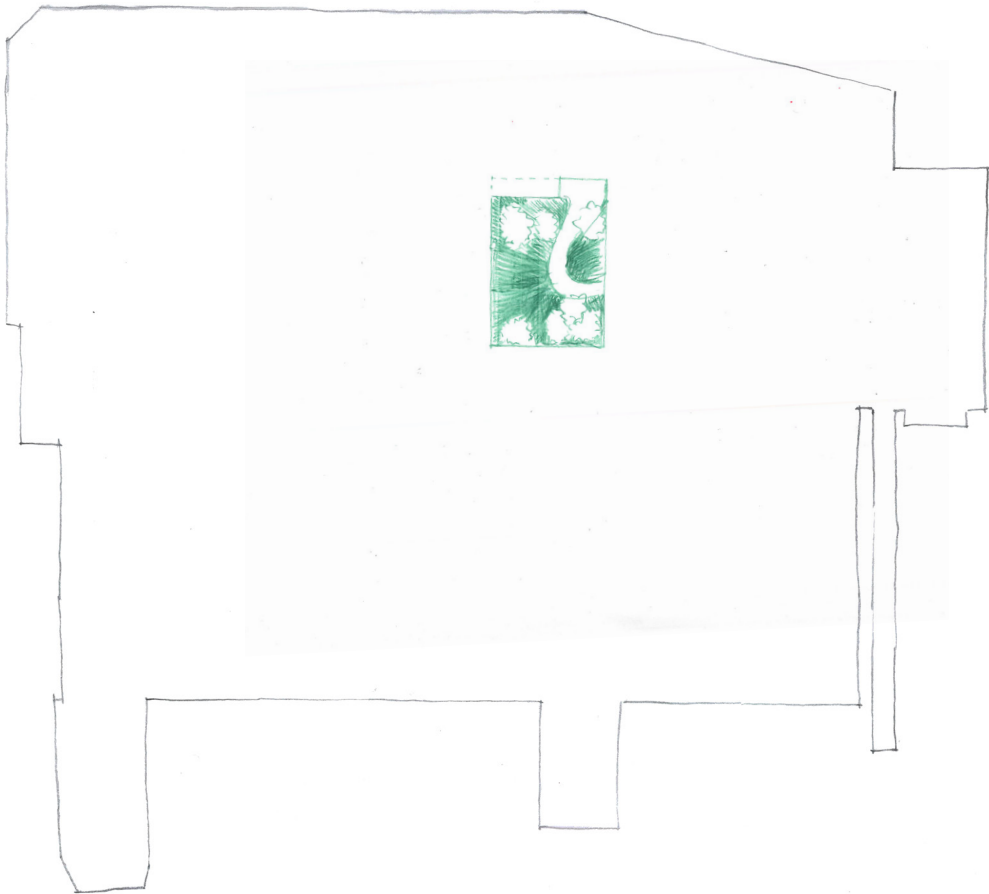
Therefore, by redesigning this connection, there is the possibility of connecting Beel with Stylen and showing again the lost landscapes.

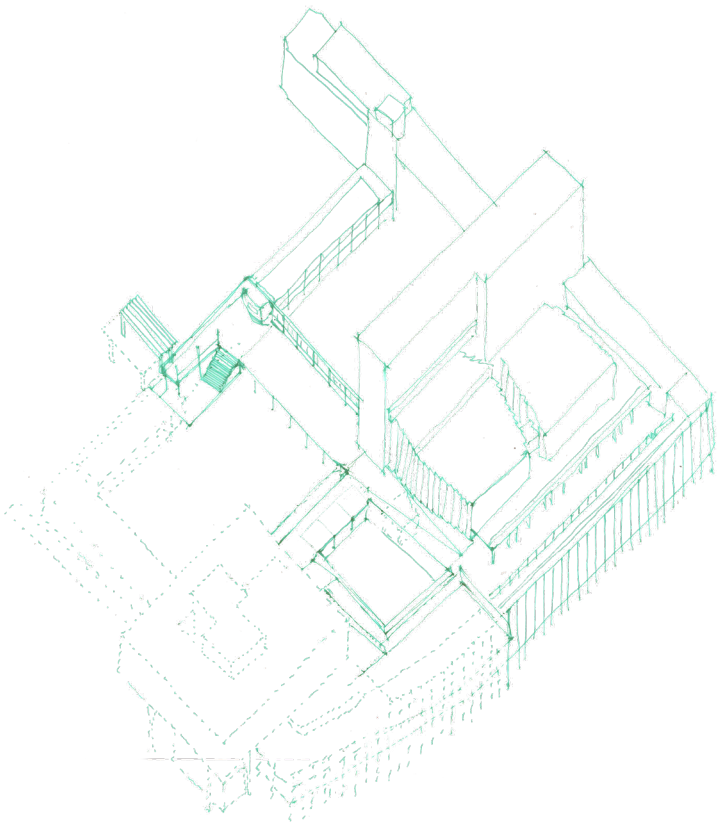
The reuse garden is a highly planted garden, which aims to frame the view of the loggia, shade the buildings that surround it, and reuse pieces of the demolished edifice. The garden interacts with the interiors, which are simple and reflective, to give the impression that the landscape continues in the interiors of the building too.

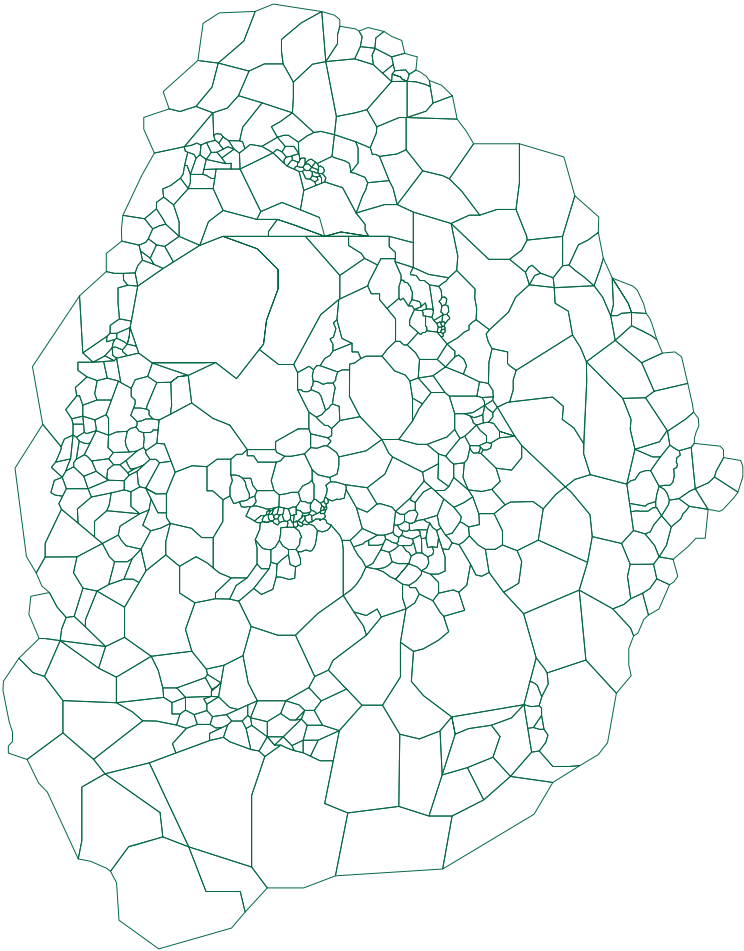
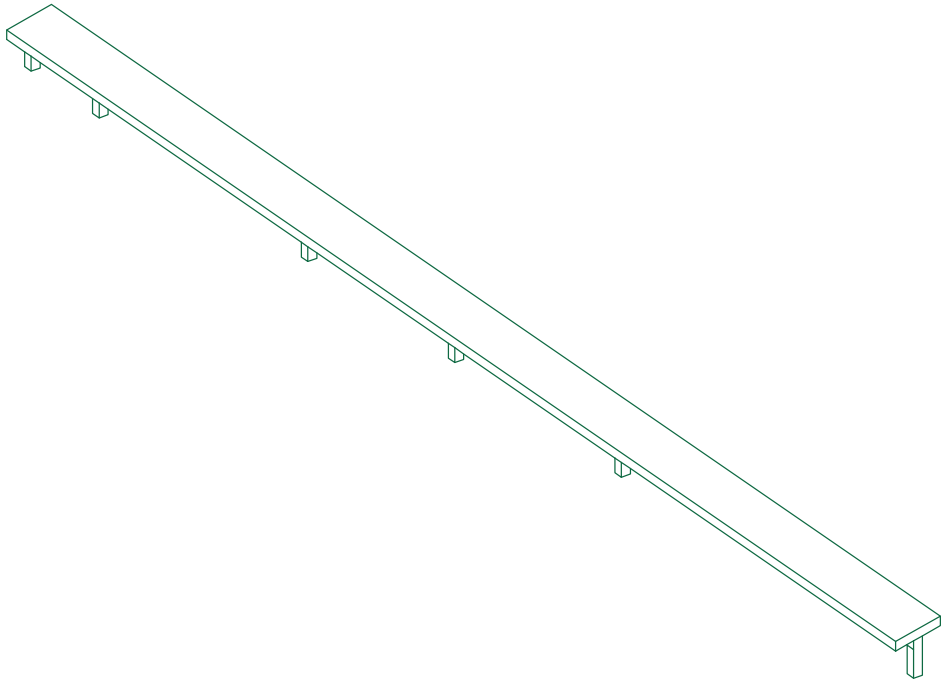


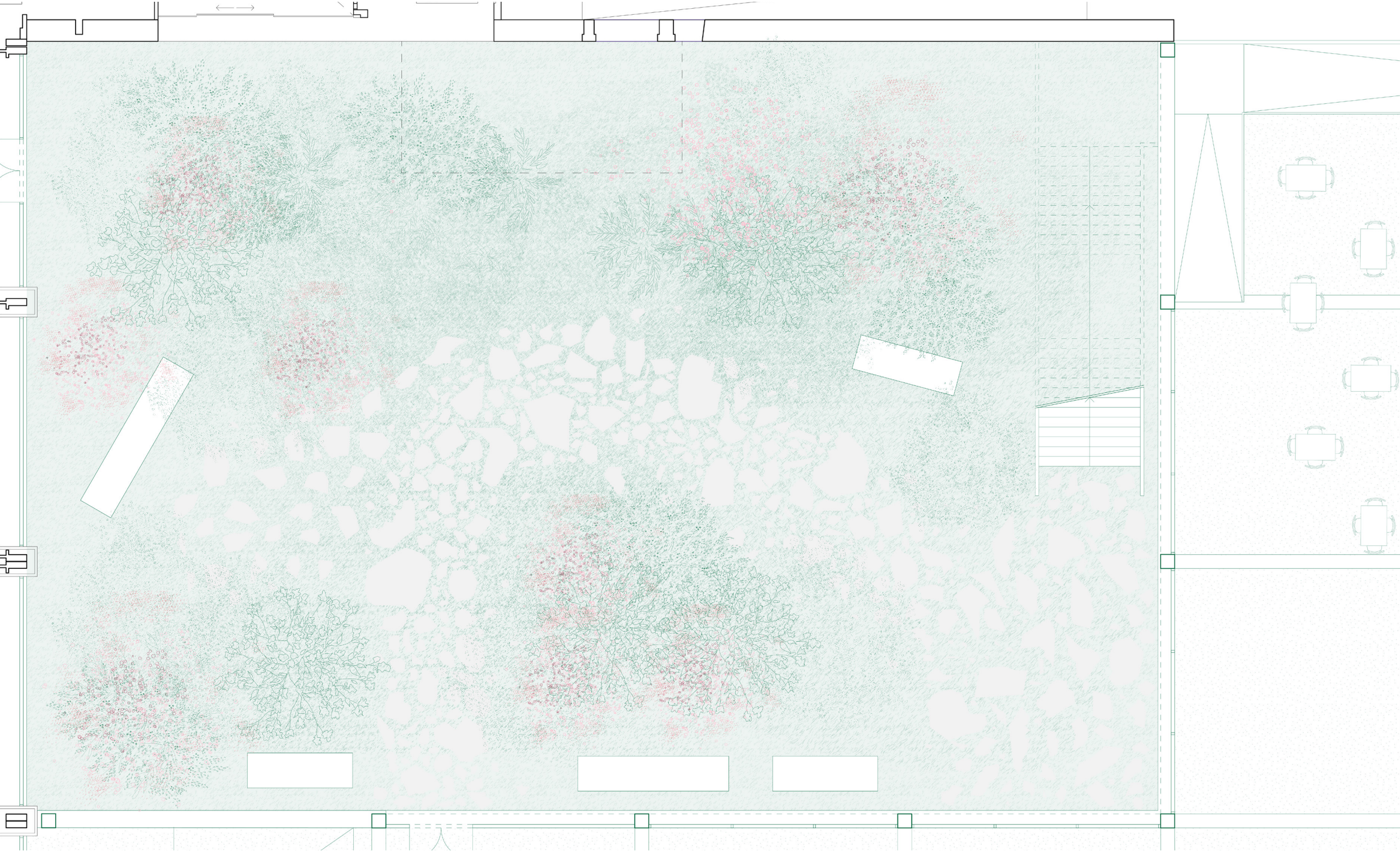


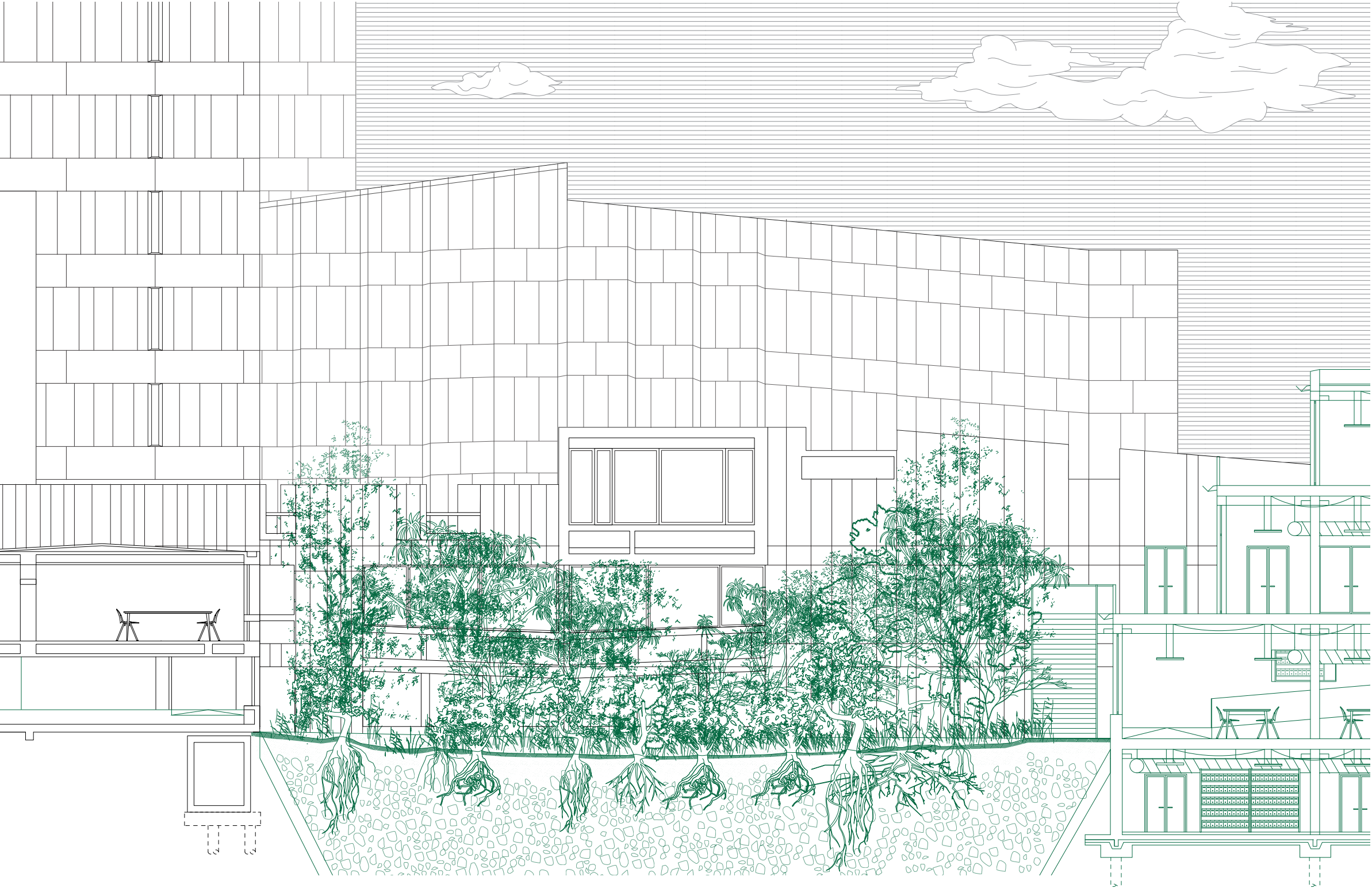




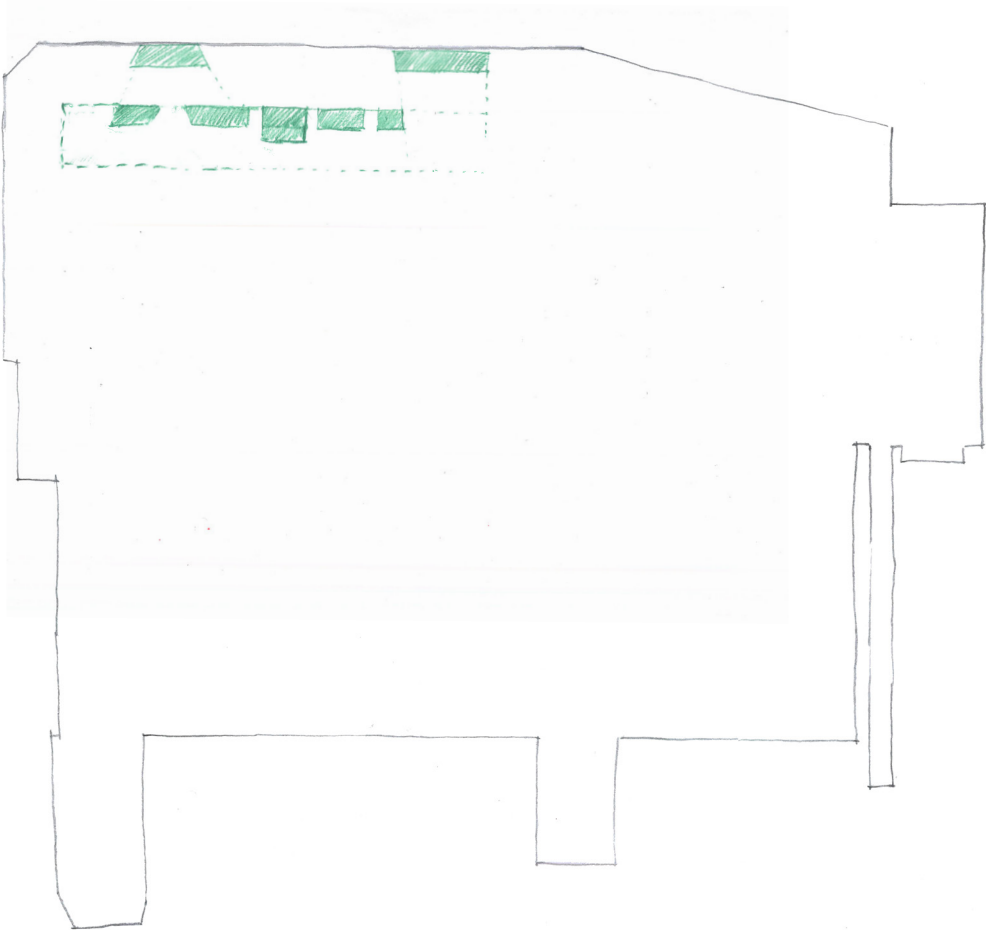












28. Made by author, sectioned axonometry passing throught the circulation to reach the terraces, 2025
29. Made by author, view of the terraces from the main corridor, 2025

