

This thesis examines how the architectural design of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) in Rotterdam (1993), by Jo Coenen, constructs a spatial choreography between public accessibility and institutional authority. Rather than treating the building as a neutral container, it approaches it as a sequence of spaces that organises movement, frames experience, and gives architecture cultural meaning.

Set within the Dutch 1990s, when architecture gained unusual public and political visibility, the NAi was asked not only to house exhibitions, research, and archives, but also to represent architecture itself. Through analysis of plans, drawings, photographs, and spatial sequences, this thesis argues that Coenen responds to this task by carefully staging access. The building guides visitors from the city into a layered interior, moving from open public spaces toward more controlled domains such as the exhibition spaces and archive.

In this way, the NAi organises not only functions, but importance. It presents architecture as a public cultural field while also framing it institutionally. The thesis shows that the building mediates between openness and authority not by removing hierarchy, but by designing it.

NAi, Rotterdam 1993  
By: Jo Coenen



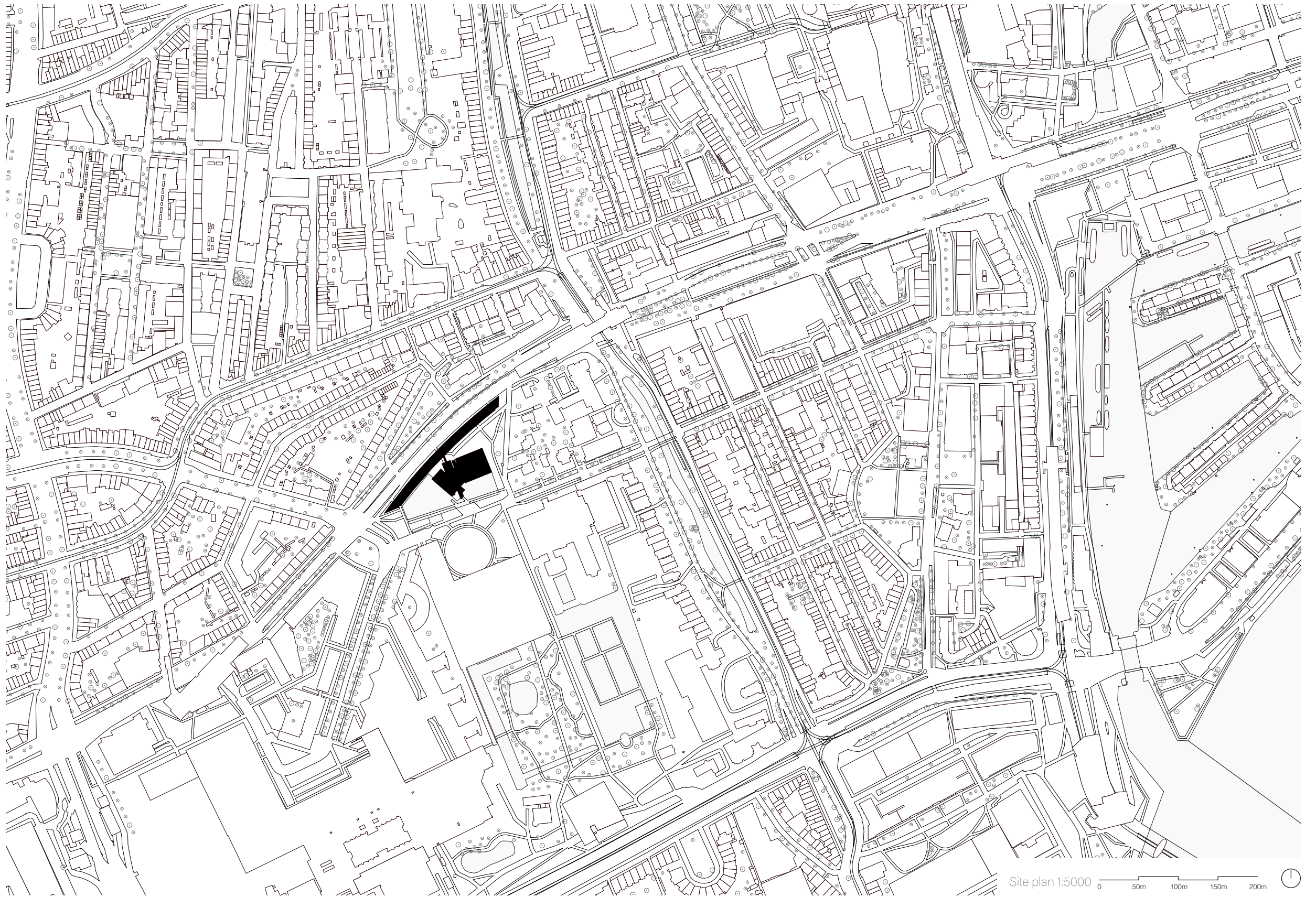
## Architecture on Display

Spatial choreography between public access and institutional authority  
in the Netherlands Architecture Institute

TU Delft AR2A011 Architectural History Thesis

Lior Gijrath





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## Course

AR2A011 Architectural History Thesis

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Dr. J.S. Zeinstra

## Acknowledgements

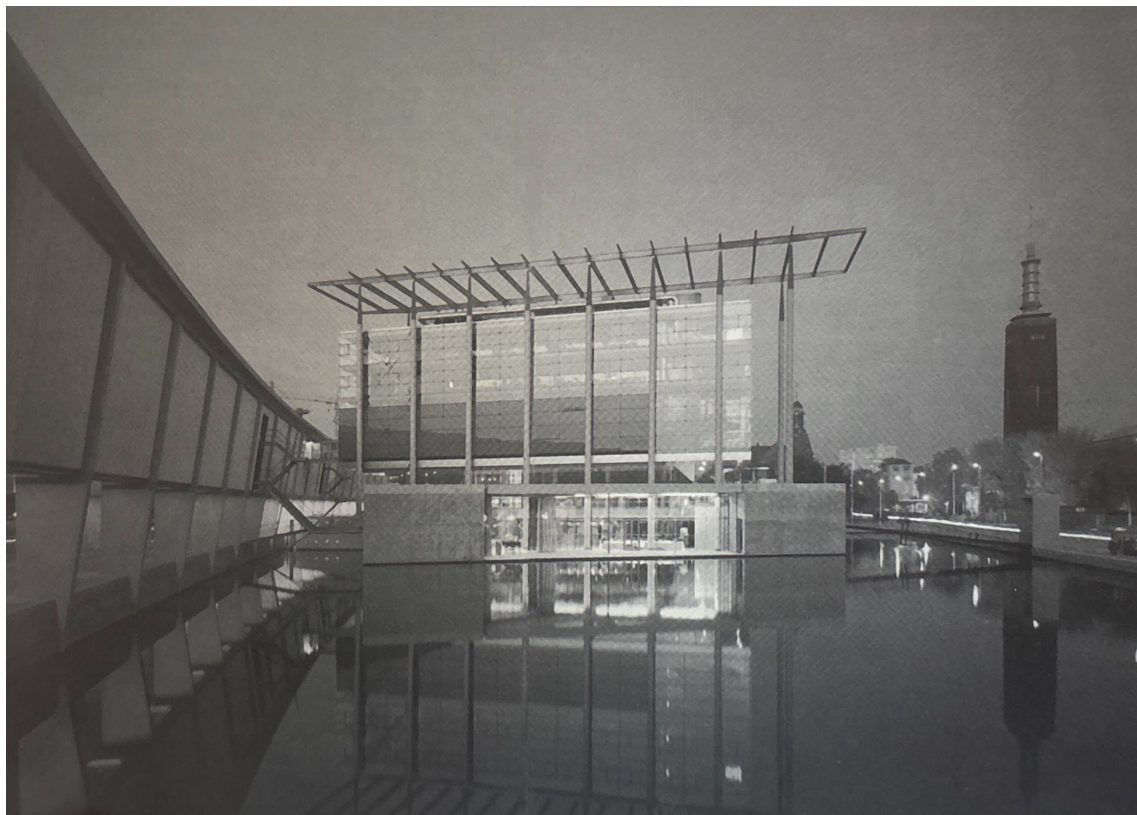
Thomas Offermans (personal communication)

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# Architecture on Display

Spatial choreography between public access and institutional authority  
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Under the pergola of the Netherlands Architecture Institute, arrival is never immediate (F. 1). One crosses water, changes level, passes through thresholds, and only gradually enters a building that presents itself not simply as an open public building, but as an institution. That tension between public openness and authority mattered in the Dutch 1990s, when architecture was gaining unusual cultural visibility through policy, funding, exhibitions, and debate. The NAI stood at the centre of that shift: both a national institute and a building asked to represent architecture itself. When Jo Coenen won the competition for the project, he gave form to that ambition through a carefully staged composition of volumes, routes, and boundaries. This thesis approaches the NAI through that spatial choreography, using drawings, photographs, plans, sections, contemporary documentation, and analytical redrawing's to ask: **How does the architectural design of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (1988–1993) construct a spatial choreography that addresses both city and institution, and how does this mediate between public openness and institutional authority within Dutch architectural culture of the 1990s?**

F.2



F.3



### Architecture and Institutional Ambition in the Dutch 1990s

The more one talks about architecture, the clearer it becomes that architecture is rarely only about buildings. The rise of Dutch architecture in the 1990s, often associated with striking projects and growing international attention, cannot simply be explained by the sudden emergence of talented architects. According to Lootsma, the key lies elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

#### Architecture within Dutch arts politics

Architecture did not suddenly become culturally important in the Netherlands in the 1990s. As Sergio Figueiredo shows in *The NAI Effect*, its growing prominence was the outcome of a much longer institutional development.<sup>2</sup> Already in the nineteenth century, architects sought to define architecture as an autonomous cultural discipline, distinct from engineering and construction, and increasingly aligned with the arts through theory, debate, and historical reflection.<sup>3</sup> In the Netherlands, that ambition gained real force during the 1970s and 1980s, when several organisations, including the Netherlands Architecture Documentation Centre (F. 2-3), the Stichting Architectuurmuseum, and the Stichting Wonen, began to build a public infrastructure for architecture through archives, exhibitions, and debate.<sup>4</sup> Political developments gave this process further momentum. Urban renewal connected architecture more directly to social and political questions, while the national architecture policy introduced in 1991 formally confirmed its cultural status.<sup>5</sup> The Netherlands Architecture Institute

emerged from precisely this moment. Founded in 1988 and supported by both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning, it brought these existing ambitions together in a single national platform for exhibitions, archives, research, and public discussion<sup>6</sup>.

F. 2 Collection management in 'De Droogbak' in Amsterdam, the premises of the Netherlands Documentation Centre for Architecture (NDB). From: "History of the Collection," Het Nieuwe Instituut.

F. 3 Collection management in 'De Droogbak' in Amsterdam, the premises of the Netherlands Documentation Centre for Architecture (NDB). From: "History of the Collection," Het Nieuwe Instituut.

<sup>1</sup> Bart Lootsma, *Superdutch: de tweede moderniteit van de Nederlandse architectuur* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Sergio M. Figueiredo, *The NAI Effect: Creating Architecture Culture* (2016).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 78,79.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 143-147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 190,191.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 214

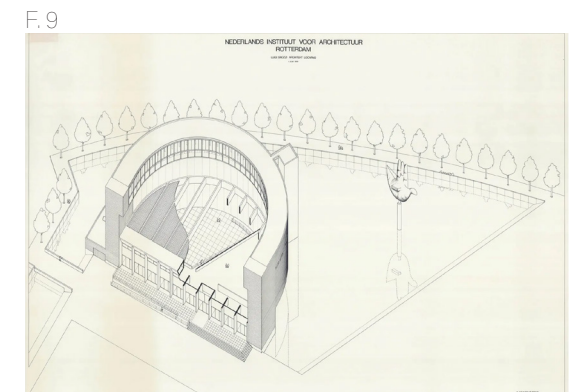
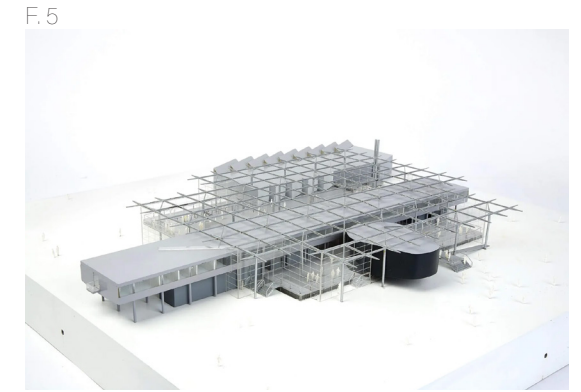
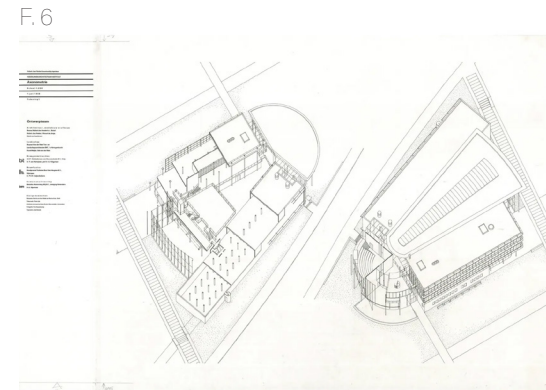
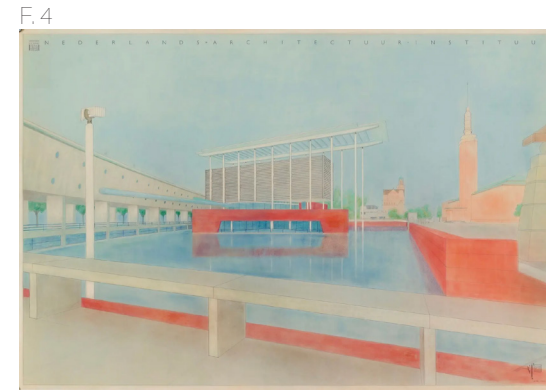
## The establishment of the Nai

In 1988 six architects were invited to produce preliminary designs for the new Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam: Jo Coenen, Jan Benthem and Mels Crowel, Hubert Jan Henket, Rem Koolhaas, Wim Quist, and Luigi Snozzi.<sup>7</sup> This was not an open competition, but an invited commission. The final decision would be taken by the client, advised by an independent evaluation committee, which meant that the choice would ultimately reflect not only architectural judgment, but also an institutional ambition.<sup>8</sup>

That ambition was unusually broad. The building was expected to do more than accommodate a list of functions. It had to give architectural form to a newly founded institute that wanted to present architecture as both a cultural discipline and a professional field.<sup>9</sup> The programme called for a place of research, debate, and public exchange, one that would house a major architectural library and a large international archive while also addressing a wider audience.<sup>10</sup> Although the brief specified roughly 8,000 square metres in considerable detail, the spirit of the institute was captured more vividly in three terms: treasure chamber, study room, and festive hall.<sup>11</sup> Together, these phrases suggest that the NAI was imagined not simply as a container of documents, but as a place where architecture would be preserved, consulted, and put on display. The six proposals that emerged from this brief therefore differed in

more than formal language. Each offered a distinct interpretation of what an architecture institute should be, and of how architecture might represent itself now it was becoming a national cultural institution.

The six competition proposals differed not only in form, but in their idea of what an architecture institute should be. Coenen translated the brief's three metaphors into distinct volumes within an open, multidimensional composition (F. 4). Benthem and Crowel also separated the programme, though more restrainedly, under a single canopy (F. 5). Henket organised it around an interior exhibition court within a wedge-shaped structure (F. 6). Koolhaas proposed a sharply defined triangular building with a sloping roof and dark tower (F. 7), while Quist offered the most pragmatic scheme, dividing public and private functions through a vertical slab and a horizontal platform (F. 8). Snozzi's semicircular design (F. 9), set in water, was the most symbolic, conceived as a monumental end point to the Museumpark axis.



F. 4 Jo Coenen. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI 2.27.

F. 5 Benthem en Crowel. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI m1.

F. 6 Hubert Jan Henket. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI 3.13.

F. 7 Rem Koolhaas. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI 4.26.

F. 8 Wim Quist. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI m9.

F. 9 Luigi Snozzi. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI 6.34.

<sup>7</sup> Ruud Brouwers. *Zes Ontwerpen Voor het Nederlands Architectuurinstituut*. (1988). 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 3

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 3

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 3

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 3

F.10



F.11



F. 10 Rem Koolhaas. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI m7.

F. 11 Jo Coenen. Competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Collection Het nieuwe Instituut MOAI m4.

F.12



These proposals did not remain internal documents. They were publicly shown in the exhibition *Zes Ontwerpen voor het Nederlands Architectuurinstituut*, held from 9 July to 28 August 1988 at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (F. 12), as part of a deliberate strategy to turn the future building itself into a public event.<sup>12</sup> For two months, visitors, critics, and architects encountered not just six designs, but six competing visions of architectural culture. The exhibition drew large audiences, generated substantial press coverage, and confirmed that architecture had become a matter of public interest in the Netherlands.<sup>13</sup> Lectures by the participating architects only sharpened the discussion.

As the public debate around the competition intensified, the field gradually narrowed to two serious contenders: Rem Koolhaas and Jo Coenen. Yet even before the final decision, it had become clear that the two proposals were being judged according to different criteria. The audience survey favoured Coenen, whose design was appreciated

for the clear organisation of the institute's parts and for a spatial atmosphere that was at once festive and intriguing.<sup>14</sup> Among staff and critics, however, support often leaned toward Koolhaas. His proposal was praised as a powerful architectural statement and for the sophistication of its urban response, even if doubts remained about its practical usability.<sup>15</sup> Janny Rodermond and Hans van Dijk were among those who regarded Koolhaas's scheme as the stronger answer to the ambitions of the new institute.<sup>16-17</sup>

What emerged in this contrast was more than a difference in taste. Koolhaas's project pointed toward a speculative and forward-looking architecture, embracing boldness and experimentation (F. 10). Coenen's design, by contrast, proposed a more measured approach: situated in its context, structured through sequence and composition, and marked by a layered, quietly monumental presence (F. 11). If Koolhaas projected an image of what Dutch architecture might become, Coenen offered a building that could give architecture a lasting institutional form.

That is why the final decision carried such weight. Many expected Koolhaas to win. When the newly appointed board of trustees, composed of figures from politics, design, planning, and culture, instead selected Coenen, the surprise was immediate, and so was the criticism from some quarters.<sup>18</sup> The outcome did more than decide which building would be constructed. It also hinted at what kind of architectural culture the NAI would come to represent in the Dutch 1990s.

<sup>12</sup> Ruud Brouwers *The Nai - The History of a deesign task*. (1993). 72.

<sup>13</sup> Beek, C. *Inventaris op het archief van de meervoudige opdracht*. (1992). 2

<sup>14</sup> Sergio M. Figueiredo, *The NAI Effect: Creating Architecture Culture* (2016). 224

<sup>15</sup> Beek, C. *Inventaris op het archief van de meervoudige opdracht*. 73

<sup>16</sup> Janny Roedermond, *Zes ontwerpen voor een architectuur instituut*, *de Architect*, vol.19 (1988). 38

<sup>17</sup> Hans van Dijk, *Zes architecten op zoek naar een opdrachtgever*, *Archis*, no. 7 (1988). 9

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

F. 12 'Six Designs for the Dutch Architectural Institute' Installation view, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1988

## Architecture and Representation in the 1990s

When the NAI opened in 1993, it was received not simply as a new building, but as a cultural event. That was telling: the institute had been conceived to give architecture a public stage, and the building was judged accordingly, not only as a design, but as a statement about what architecture had become in the Netherlands. The question was no longer just whether the building worked, but what image of architecture it projected.

The sharpest early response came from Geert Bekaert. In *A Versailles for Dutch Architecture*, he shifted the discussion away from style or composition and toward the institutional logic of the project. His concern was not simply that the NAI was monumental, but that an architecture institute embodied in such a building might begin to identify too strongly with its own image.<sup>19</sup> In his reading, the NAI no longer functioned as an open platform for debate, but as a palace for architecture: an institution that celebrated its object rather than questioning it. Its staged entry sequence and controlled autonomy only reinforced that impression. Bekaert feared that the building turned architecture into an "idol," detached from the reality it was meant to reflect.<sup>20</sup>

Writing a year later, Hans van Dijk places the controversy in a broader context. He argues that the NAI was almost inevitably judged in cultural rather than purely architectural terms, because it appeared at a moment when monumental architecture had again become acceptable for museums and

other cultural institutions.<sup>21</sup> In that sense, the building entered a wider lineage of cultural architecture associated with figures such as Hollein, Stirling, and Meier. Van Dijk reads Coenen's design as a serious cultural statement, one that draws on a broad architectural repertoire and translates the programme's metaphors of treasure chamber, study room, and festive hall into built form.<sup>22</sup> Yet he is not uncritical: the building's ambition is clear, but the spatial connections between its parts are not always convincing. Certain transitions are awkward, and some possibilities remain underused.<sup>23</sup>

Taken together, these two responses show that the NAI entered public debate as more than a functional building. Both critics, in different ways, treat it as a building that had to represent architecture itself. Bekaert exposes the risk that such representation could turn into self-monumentalisation, while Van Dijk explains why the building was judged so strongly in cultural terms in the first place. What becomes clear through their criticism is that the NAI was understood from the outset not as a neutral container, but as architecture placed on display through architecture. That is what made the building both ambitious and controversial.

F.13



F. 13 Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam, completed building as realised in 1993, view from the Museumpark side, photograph reproduced in Geert Bekaert, *"Een Versailles voor de Nederlandse Architectuur,"* *Archis*, no. 10 (1993), pp. 17–26.

<sup>19</sup> Geert Bekaert, "Een Versailles voor de Nederlandse Architectuur," *Archis*, no. 10 (1993), pp. 17–26.

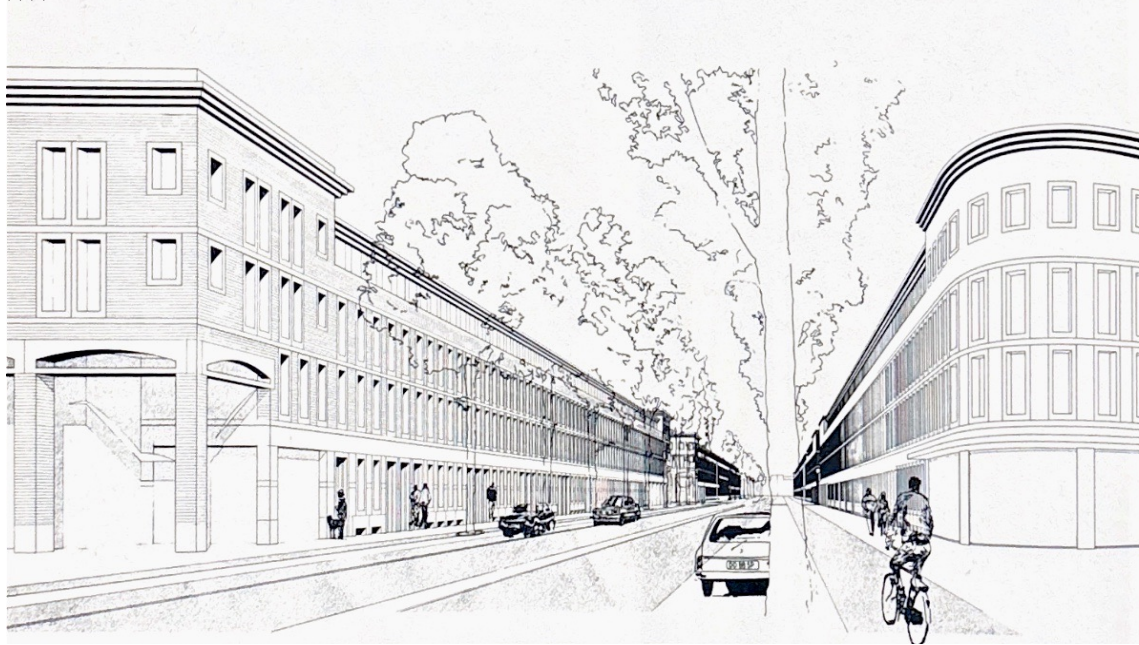
<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>21</sup> Hans van Dijk, "Monumentaliteit en culturele instituten," in *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 1993–94* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 1994), 144–147.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

F.14



F.15



F.14 Jo Coenen, Vaillantlaan, The Hague, perspective drawing, in H. Ibelings, *Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur* (1989).

F.15 Jo Coenen, Vaillantlaan, The Hague, façade variations study, in H. Ibelings, *Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur* (1989).

## Jo Coenen and Spatial Positioning

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jo Coenen's work began to stand apart within Dutch architecture because it was driven by a persistent search rather than a fixed style. That search began in reaction to the design culture that had shaped architectural education in Eindhoven in the 1970s.<sup>24</sup> At the Technische Hogeschool Eindhoven, this culture was still strongly marked by structuralist thinking and by the influence of John Habraken and the SAR method, which treated architecture less as a singular object than as a system of supports, infill, modular coordination, and adaptable frameworks for collective use.<sup>25</sup> In that context, design was often understood through structure, participation, and repeatable order rather than through the expressive or symbolic autonomy of the building itself. For Coenen, structuralism offered too little grip for developing a position of his own. Its emphasis on abstract systems and compositional logic left little room for the building as a singular object with presence, character and meaning. He was not interested in architecture as a neutral arrangement of parts, but in architecture as an act of ordering that could bring coherence to space and to the city.<sup>26</sup> What followed was not a rejection of modern architecture as such, but a rejection of abstract composition detached from place and history. Coenen began looking for an architectural order rooted in space and time rather than in systems, and for a form of harmony that could respond to the fragmentation of the contemporary city.<sup>27</sup>

What emerges from this search is an early

reparative approach to architecture. In Ibelings's account, Coenen no longer treats the building as an isolated object, but as a means of repairing, strengthening, or clarifying a damaged urban condition.<sup>28</sup> This is also how the idea of *genius loci* becomes important in his work: not as a nostalgic return to the past, but as a way of reading place, history, and spatial character before intervening in them.<sup>29</sup> Architecture is thus asked to restore continuity in a city that has lost it. Rather than accepting fragmentation as a given condition, Coenen looks for forms of order that can reconnect the city without reducing its complexity.

Two projects make this search visible in different ways. Vaillantlaan in The Hague (F. 14) shows Coenen working with limited means: as Ibelings notes, the assignment focused mainly on façade design (F. 15) rather than on a fully developed programme.<sup>30</sup> Precisely for that reason, the project is revealing. It shows how even a partial intervention could serve a larger urban purpose by restoring the legibility and continuity of a weakened street. What comes into view here is an approach close to *Stadreparatur*: architecture used to restore the legibility and continuity of a place that had been spatially weakened. As Thomas Offermans later recalled, this was central to Coenen's broader method: to "complete what was happening just across the street or on the other side of a site," and to create a relation between building, city, public space, and collective space.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Hilde de Haan, *Jo Coenen: van stadsontwerp tot architectonisch detail* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2004) 30-34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Hans Ibelings, *Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur* (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

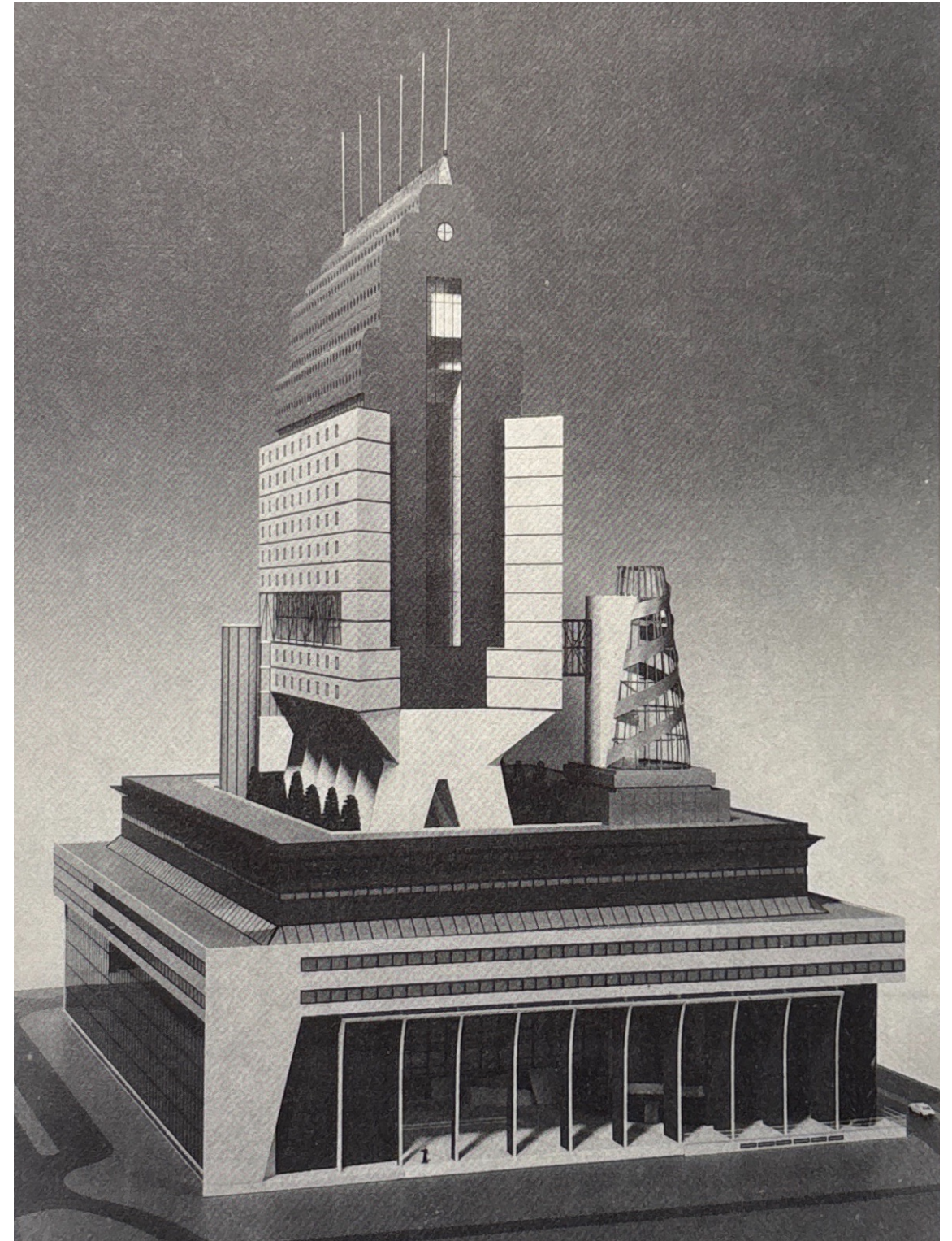
<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Offermans, interview by Lior Gijrath, 27 March 2026, unpublished interview transcript.

The design for the office of Nationale Nederlanden in Rotterdam (F. 16) marks a different step. Here, as Ibelings shows, Coenen moves from relatively regular forms to a more complex composition, shaped by the programme and by the need to bring different demands together within one design.<sup>32</sup> Together, these projects show that Coenen's search for order was no longer pursued through simplicity alone, but through context, repair, and the careful composition of differences.

Seen together, these projects show Coenen's position at the turn of the 1990s. He was searching for an architecture that could restore urban meaning without falling back on nostalgia, and that could produce order without reducing the city to an abstract system. His work in this period is defined by that tension: between repair and autonomy, between clarity and complexity, and between the desire for harmony and the reality of a fragmented urban condition.

F.16



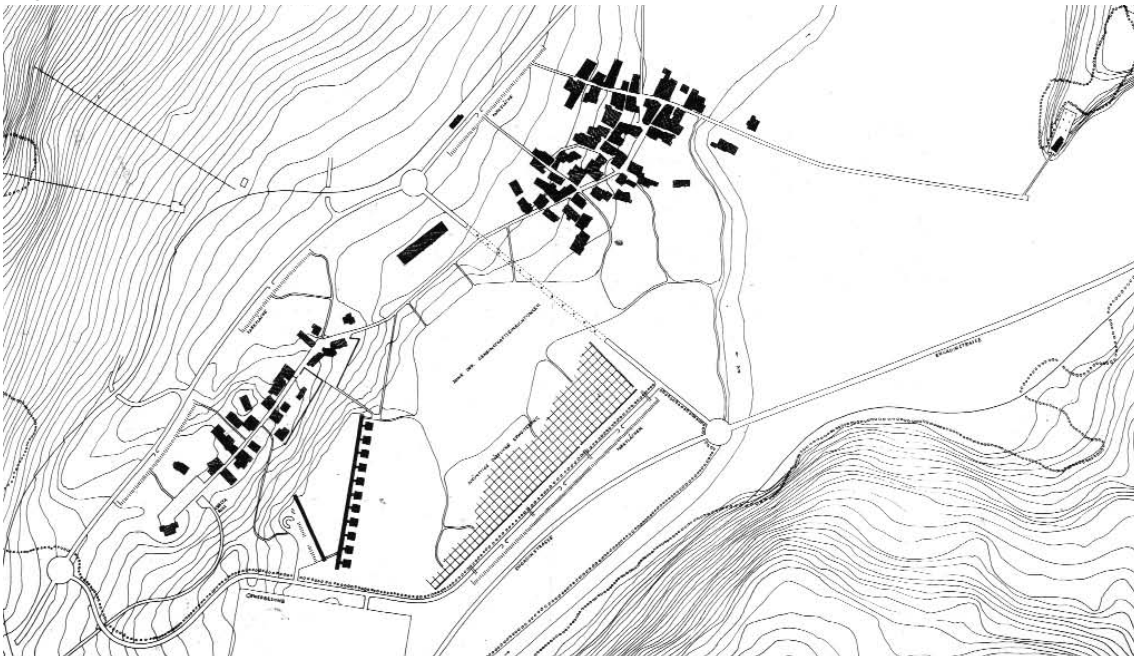
F. 16 Jo Coenen, Nationale Nederlanden, The Hague, model of the west façade, reproduced in Hans Ibelings, *Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur* (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Hans Ibelings, *Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur* (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989)

F.17



F.18



F.17 Leicester University Engineering Building, Leicester, England, exterior view, from the James Stirling/Michael Wilford fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, 1959–1963.

F.18 Luigi Snozzi, plan for Celerina, Engadin, reproduced in Luigi Snozzi – Architecture (n.d.), p. 33.

### Influences: Snozzi and Stirling

Within Coenen's search for an architecture that could give order to the city, James Stirling forms an important reference. As Christoph Grafe argues, Stirling was not an architect of pure systems, but of assemblage: his buildings are composed of distinct parts whose meaning lies in their tension and coexistence.<sup>33</sup> The Leicester University Engineering Building makes this clear (F. 17). Its different elements retain their own form, scale, and expression, yet together produce a forceful composition rather than a neutral whole. That way of composing through differentiated parts, and of combining the picturesque with the monumental, helps to clarify Coenen as well. His architecture is historically aware but not nostalgic; it uses motifs and compositional devices from the past not to imitate history, but to produce a new spatial order. In that sense, Stirling mattered for Coenen as an example of how architecture could be urban, monumental, and composite without retreating into abstract systems or simple historical quotation.

Where Stirling offered Coenen a way of composing architecture through clearly articulated parts, Luigi Snozzi appears to have sharpened this search in a different direction: less concerned with compositional tension alone, and more focused on precision, boundaries, and the physical presence of architecture within the city. In an interview with Hans Ibelings, Coenen recalls how he sought out Snozzi after encountering a drawing of his plan for Celerina (F. 18) in *Lotus*. That visit proved decisive. Snozzi became, in his words,

his "real teacher", precisely because of his insistence on placing "the precise line in the right place."<sup>34</sup> In this formulation, one already recognises what Coenen himself would continue to pursue: not an abstract system, but an architecture that defines space with exactness.

Pisu and Chiri describe Snozzi's architecture as austere and unornamented, composed of bare volumes that often act as boundaries in the city.<sup>35</sup> The wall is central here, not just as enclosure, but as a means of giving urban space order. Architecture becomes less a matter of style than of spatial discipline. This also clarifies Coenen's work, in which walls, boundaries, and clearly defined volumes structure both building and site. What mattered for Coenen was not Snozzi's formal language itself, but a way of thinking in which architecture sharpens, orders, and makes place legible.

### Spatial Order as Architectural Position

By the end of the 1980s, Coenen's concern with spatial order had become more than a matter of composition. In his 1989 interview with Hans van Dijk, he presents architecture not as image or style, but as the ordering of matter into space, and modernity not as a formal language, but as an attitude grounded in judgment and responsibility.<sup>36</sup> He rejects the idea that contradiction or fragmentation should simply be accepted as expressions of the time. Instead, architecture must define boundaries, organise movement, and give spatial form to collective life.

This position sets him apart from both abstract system thinking and easy

<sup>33</sup> Christoph Grafe, "Assemblage en monument: de englishness van James Stirling," *OASE* 79 (2009).

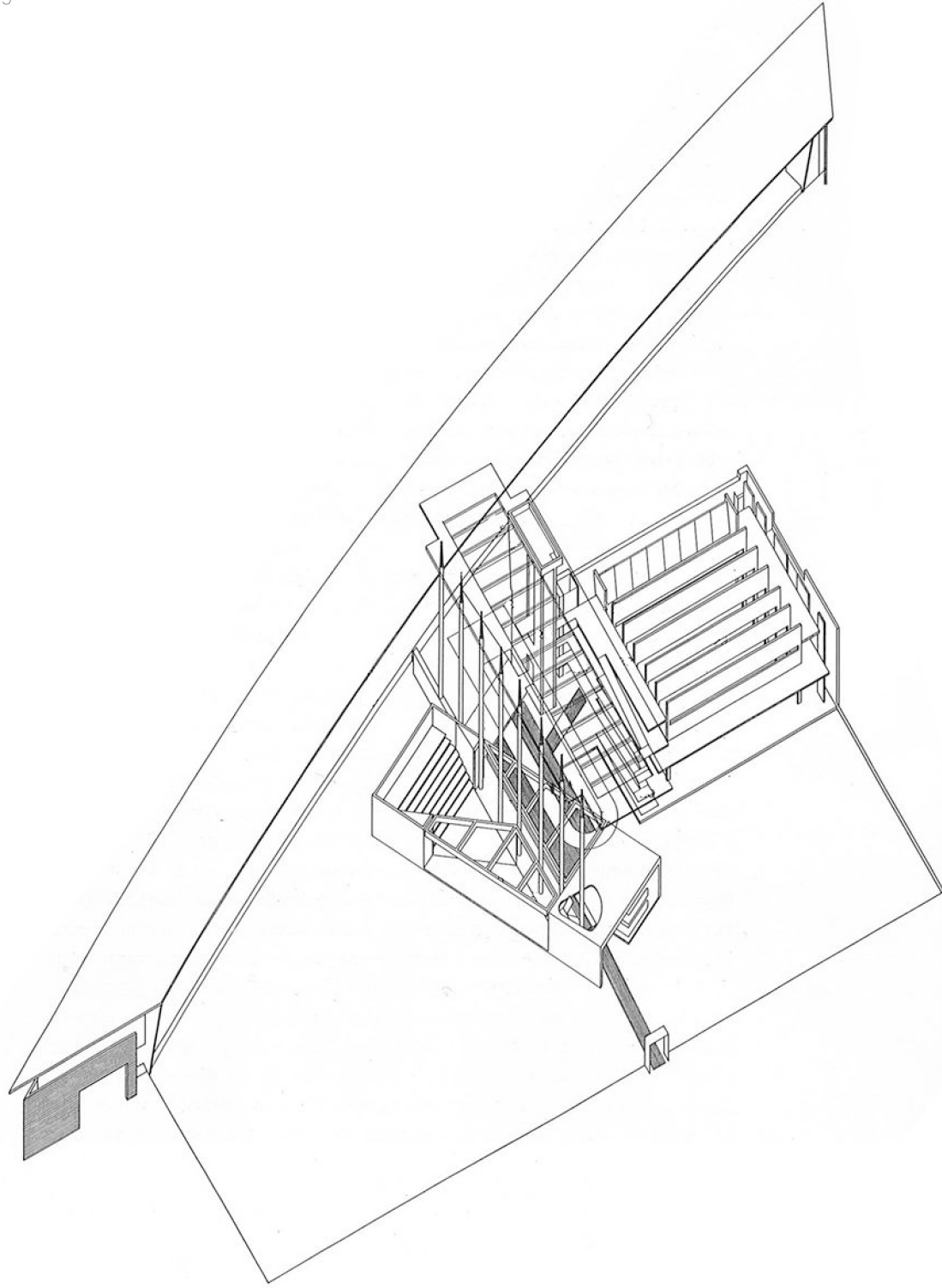
<sup>34</sup> Hans Ibelings, *Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur* (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989), 112, interview with Jo Coenen.

<sup>35</sup> Pisu, Davide, and Giovanni Marco Chiri, "The Architect as Nomothete: Luigi Snozzi at Monte Carasso," *The Journal of Architecture* 26, no. 2 (2021): 174–190.

<sup>36</sup> Hans van Dijk, "Een vraaggesprek met Jo Coenen," *Archis*, no. 7 (1989): 29–33.

theatricality. Place is not a backdrop, but something architecture must actively clarify and structure. At the same time, this order is not rigid. Coenen's remark that he wanted to "take the weight out of the work" suggests an architecture that combines monumentality with openness, and gravity with ease.<sup>37</sup> Seen in this light, the NAI makes this position especially clear: its volumes, routes, boundaries, and thresholds do not simply house the institute, but give form to Coenen's broader argument about space, order, and public presence.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.* 29–33.



### Spatial Choreography in the Nai

This chapter approaches the Netherlands Architecture Institute not simply as a finished object, but as a choreography of space. It examines how the building guides movement, frames entry, and structures the relation between city, institution, and interior. As completed in 1993 (F. 19), the Netherlands Architecture Institute was organised as a composition of distinct but connected volumes rather than as a single compact building. Along the Rochussenstraat stood the archive slab, which formed the building's urban edge. Set apart from it was the enclosed exhibition volume, while the glass volume contained the offices, study centre, and library. Beneath and between these parts were the more public spaces: the entrance, foyer, restaurant, and auditorium. The ensemble was visually unified by the large pergola, which gave the institute a recognisable presence in the Museumpark.

The realised building could be entered from both the Museumpark and the Rochussenstraat, but these entrances led not into one continuous hall, but into a layered interior organised through changes in level and separate routes. The entrance hall functioned as the main point of orientation, with the foyer and auditorium below as a more public base layer. From there, the exhibition spaces, study centre, library, and archive were reached through differentiated sequences, each maintaining a distinct spatial character.

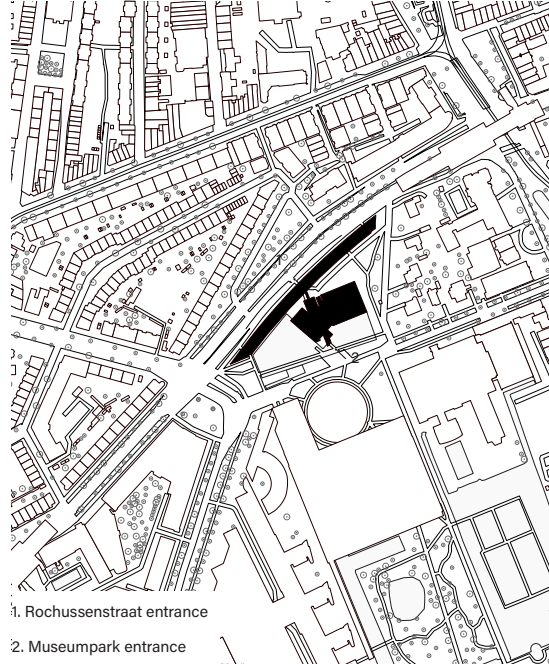
The building's composition relied on the clear expression of its major volumes, while

the pergola acted less as a roof than as an ordering frame. This completed arrangement provides the basis for comparing the competition design, the realised building, and the later interventions after 2010.

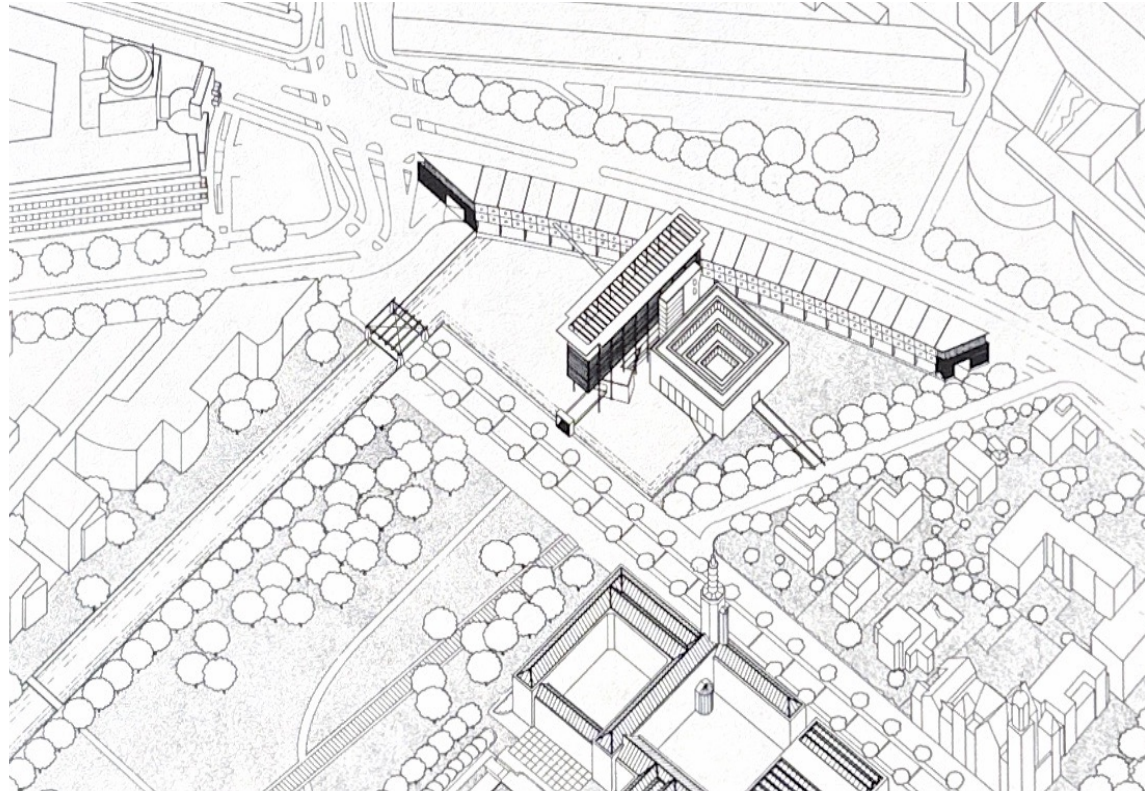


### Sequence from city to institution

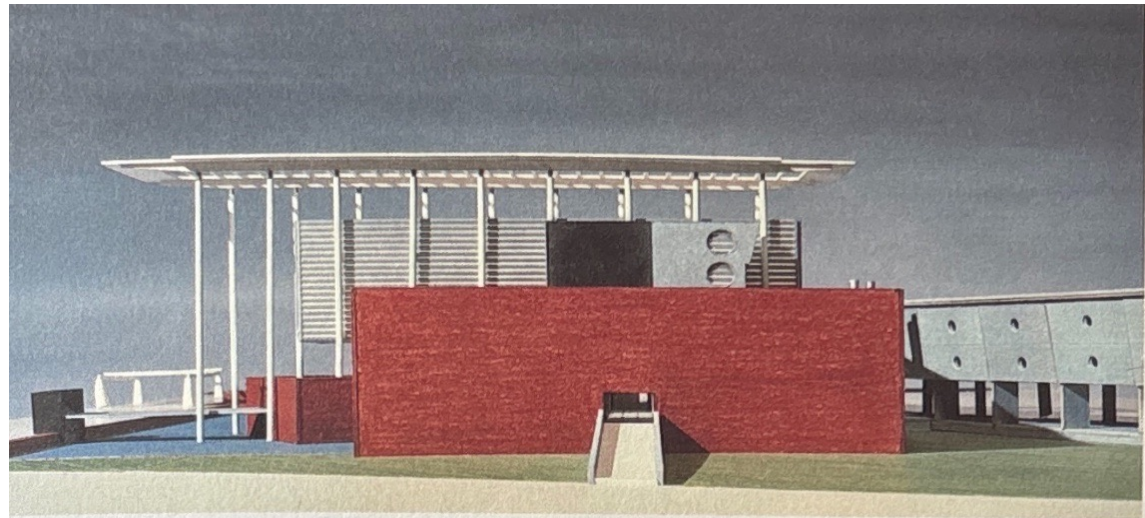
Approaching the NAI as completed in 1993 (F. 20), one does not arrive at a single front door in the usual sense. The building is encountered in parts. From the Rochussenstraat, the long archive slab follows the street line and acts as an urban wall, giving the institute a clear edge. On this side, the building appears firm and bounded, more like a filter than an invitation. From the Museumpark, by contrast, the ensemble is read differently: the slab becomes a backdrop to a looser composition of volumes set in water. The approach is quieter and more theatrical, leading the visitor across water (F. 22), over a bridge, and up toward the diagonal entrance beneath the glass volume. Arrival is thus staged as an experience rather than simple access.



F. 23



F. 24



F. 23 Axonometric drawing of the competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi). From: Hans Ibelings, Jo Coenen: *de ontdekking van de architectuur* (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).  
 F. 24 Model photograph of the competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), east side with the entrance to the exhibition building (unrealised). From: Hans Ibelings, Jo Coenen: *de ontdekking van de architectuur* (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).

The competition design (F. 23) suggests a different balance. The bridge from the Museumpark was wider and level (F. 25), creating a more direct and generous entrance into the hall. The scheme also included a broader entrance from the Rochussenstraat and a third entrance on the east side (F. 24), connecting the institute to Museum Boijmans through the park and into the exhibition building. Together, these three entrances imagined the institute as more open and multi-directional, allowing access from different urban situations without forcing every visitor through the same controlled sequence.

The later interventions show that access remained a persistent issue in the building. As Thomas Offermans recalled, the reduction of entrances was not only a spatial choice but also a practical one: multiple entrances required additional control, staffing, and ticketing, even as permeability and an all-sided relation to the city remained central to Coenen's work.<sup>38</sup>

The 2010 intervention marked a clear shift by bringing the public entrance down to ground level and replacing the bridge with a forecourt (F. 26), making the building more directly accessible from the Museumpark. The three versions of the project therefore suggest a gradual recalibration rather than a simple opposition: the competition design proposed the most open and multi-directional access, the realised building translated this into a more selective and staged arrival, and the 2010 changes lowered the threshold again. What remained constant was the idea that access should be spatially

composed. In the NAi, the route from city to institute is never merely functional, but part of how the building positions architecture between urban life and institutional form.

F. 25



F. 26

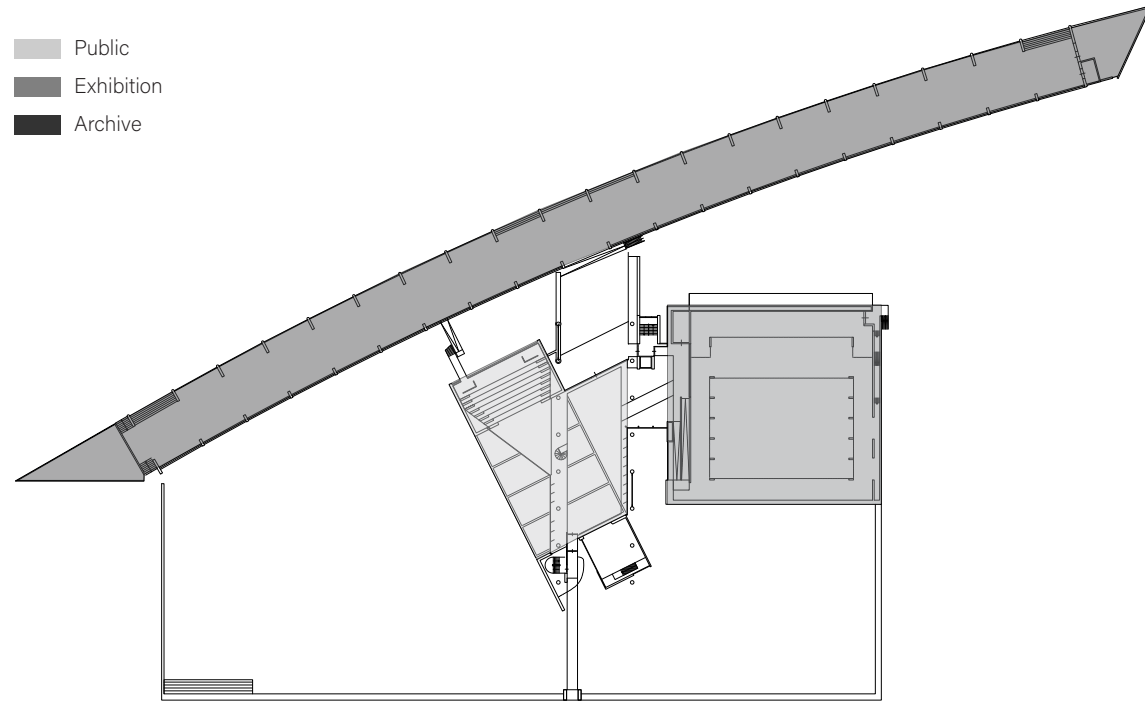


<sup>38</sup> Thomas Offermans, interview by Lior Gijrath, 27 March 2026, unpublished interview transcript.

F. 25 Model photograph of the competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), with the Main entrance (unrealised). From: Hans Ibelings, Jo Coenen: *de ontdekking van de architectuur* (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).

F. 26 View of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) after the 2010 intervention, showing the lowered entrance and forecourt at the Museumpark side. From: ToornendPartners, project reference "Nederlands Architectuurinstituut."

F. 27

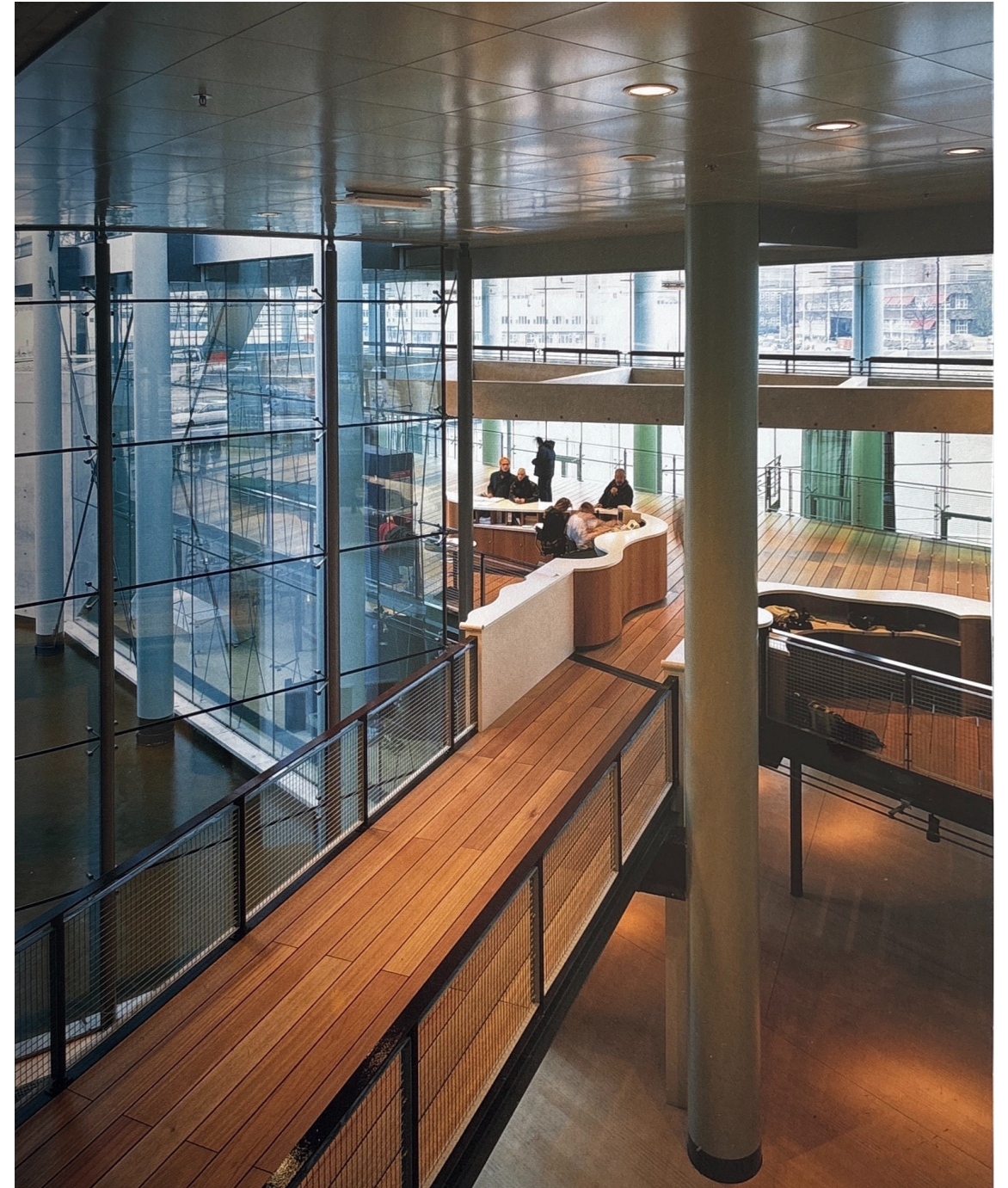


### Transitions within the building

Inside the completed NAI of 1993 (F. 27), movement is organised through distinct but connected worlds rather than one continuous public interior. The first is the public layer. Entry takes place in a hall positioned 1.40 metres above street level, so that arrival already marks a shift in status. Rather than entering a neutral foyer, the visitor arrives in a space where several routes meet. The hall functions less as a reception area than as a point of orientation, with sightlines toward the terrace and auditorium below that make the interior legible as a layered composition (F. 28). Beneath it, the foyer and restaurant

form the first collective base of the institute, while the auditorium extends that public role by giving debate, lecture, and gathering a clear place within the building.

F. 28



F. 28 Interior view of the entrance hall of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), showing the layered public space. From: *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 1993-94* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 1994).

F.29



F.29 Interior view of the exhibition hall of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), showing the multi-level arrangement of the exhibition spaces. From: *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 1993-94* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 1994).

F.30



F.31



From this public layer, the exhibition world is reached through a more compressed sequence. The visitor crosses a bridge (F. 30), passes through a narrow vertical space, and descends by ramp (F. 31) before entering the larger exhibition volume (F. 29). More controlled than the first public arrival, this route prepares the visitor for a different atmosphere. Inside, the exhibition spaces continue to unfold vertically through changing levels, walkways, the balcony room, and the attic room. Unlike the relatively open and social foyer, the exhibition world has a more ceremonial quality. It remains connected to the rest of the institute, but also clearly distinct from it.

F.30 Interior view of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), showing the bridge leading toward the exhibition spaces. From: Geert Bekaert, "Een Versaille voor de Nederlandse Architectuur," *Archis*, no. 10 (1993), pp. 17-26.

F.31 Interior view of the ramp leading to the exhibition spaces of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi). From: *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 1993-94* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 1994).

The third world is that of study and archive. The glass volume containing offices, study centre, and library (F. 33) is quieter and more withdrawn than the exhibition route. Its calmer, more open, and often double-height spaces encourage reading, consultation, and concentration rather than collective gathering or display. From here, a bridge leads to the archive (F. 32), linking consultation and preservation without collapsing them into one domain. The archive (F. 34) itself remains more linear, cellular, and controlled, organised for storage and access rather than public experience. Knowledge is thus made available, but not immediate.

F. 32



F. 33



F. 32 View of the bridge leading to the archive of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi). From: Hilde de Haan, Jo Coenen: *van stadsontwerp tot architectonisch detail* (Rotterdam: NAi Uitgevers, 2004).

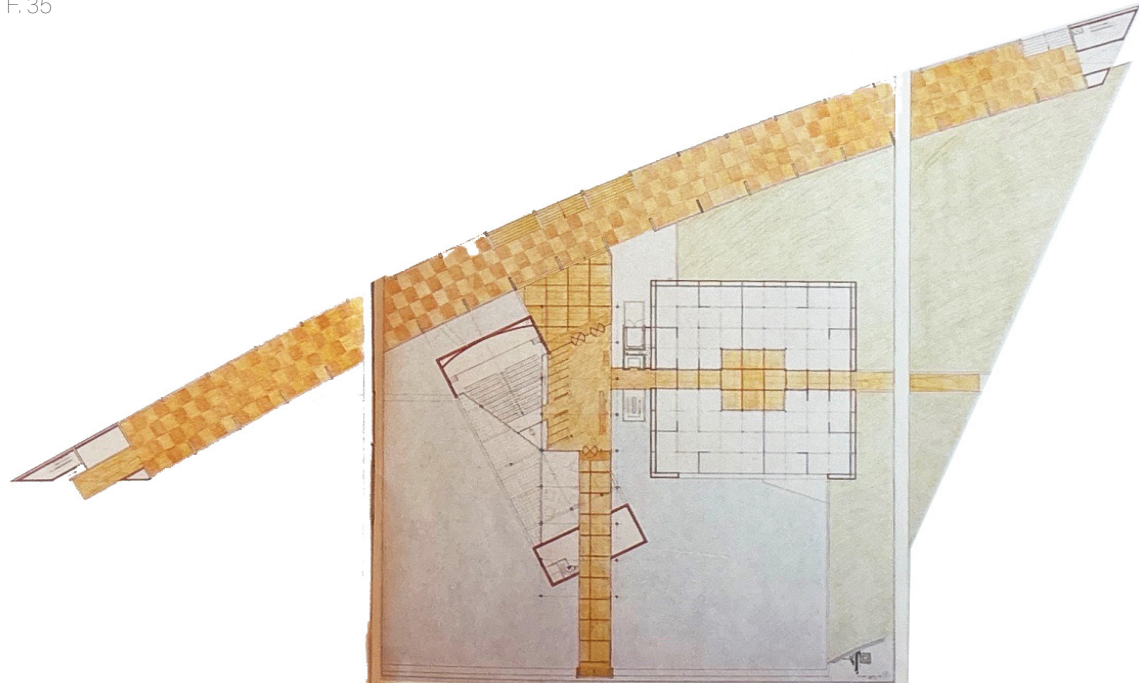
F. 33 Interior view of the study centre and library of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), showing the double-height reading space and archive consultation area. From: Jo Coenen Architects & Urbanists (JCAU), *Het Nieuwe Instituut*, Rotterdam.

F. 34

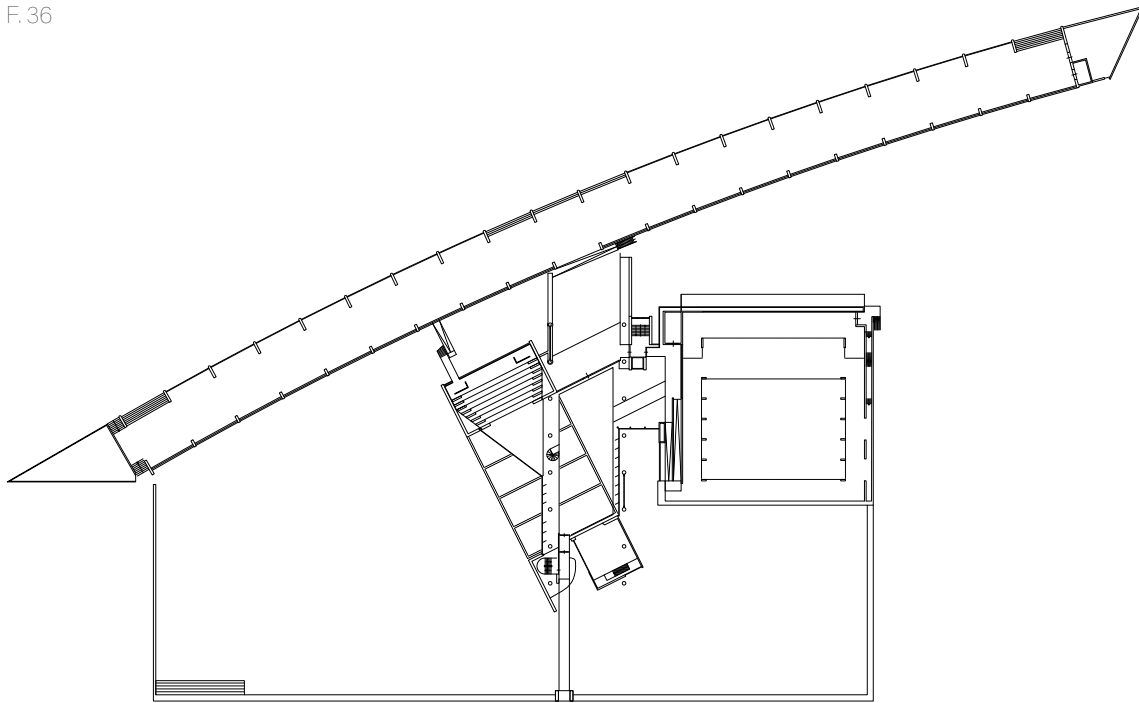


F. 34 Interior view of the archive of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), showing the cellular organisation, glass block walls, and controlled circulation spaces. From: METALOCUS, *Dutch postmodernism and the New Institute*. *Het Nieuwe* by Jo Coenen (2021).

F. 35



F. 36



F. 35 Competition design plan for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), with the public domain indicated in yellow by Jo Coenen. From: Ruud Brouwers, *Zes ontwerpen voor het Nederlands Architectuurinstituut* (1988).  
F. 36 Level 1 plan of the realised Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), 1993, drawn by the author.

F. 37



The competition design imagined these relations somewhat differently. The entrance hall functioned more clearly as the building's central knot (F. 35), with three routes converging in one place. In the realised version (F. 36), that clarity was reduced, and the later addition of the spiral stair toward the café further softened the hall's original nodal logic. The competition scheme also included three pneumatic tube posts linking archive storage more directly to public consultation. Together, these features suggest that the earlier design proposed a stronger and more explicit relation between circulation, study, and archive use.

The interventions around 2010 did not undo the building's internal logic but redistributed its public layer. The freely accessible part of the institute was enlarged through the expansion of the café and bookshop (F. 37) and the addition of the education pavilion inserted as a strip through the existing

entrance building. This gave the entrance zone a broader and more explicitly public role, while shifting the boundary with the exhibition spaces further inward. As Thomas Offermans later recalled, the original three-part structure of treasure chamber, study room, and festive hall was conceived less as a functional division than as an urban ensemble of differentiated volumes; after the later interventions, these relations became "slightly less diverse," but remained intact in their overall logic.<sup>39</sup> What changed, then, was not the principle of internal differentiation, but the distribution of the public domain within it.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Offermans, interview by Lior Gijrath, 27 March 2026, unpublished interview transcript.

F. 37 Expanded public foyer and bookshop area after the 2010 intervention, showing the enlarged publicly accessible domain. From: Jo Coenen Architects & Urbanists (JCAU), *Het Nieuwe Instituut*, Rotterdam.

## Monumentality, hierarchy, and representation

In the realised NAI of 1993, hierarchy is built into the visitor's route. The building does not treat all parts of the institute equally: the foyer and auditorium form the most accessible public layer, the library and study spaces are quieter and more withdrawn, and the archive is the most controlled part of the ensemble. Above all, the exhibition building receives the greatest emphasis. It stands apart, is reached through a more deliberate sequence, and becomes the symbolic centre of the institute. Compared with the competition design, the realised building makes this hierarchy sharper by reducing the number of entrances and directing movement more clearly.

This is the key point: the NAI organises not only functions, but importance. Its monumentality does not depend mainly on size, but on how the visitor is guided through thresholds, delays, and changing degrees of access. The building presents architecture as something public, but not fully open or immediate. The 2010 interventions lowered some of these thresholds by enlarging the public zone, yet the basic principle remained the same: access is carefully staged. The NAI therefore mediates between openness and institutional authority not by removing hierarchy, but by designing it.

Seen in this way, Van Dijk's reading becomes especially useful. He understood the NAI as part of a broader return of monumentality in cultural institutions and noted that Coenen translated the programme's metaphors of treasure chamber, study room, and festive

hall into built form.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, his criticism that the connections between these parts are not always fully convincing points to an important tension within the building itself.<sup>41</sup> Bekaert sharpens that tension further. If movement is gathered and staged rather than allowed to pass through freely, the institute can begin to appear less as an open platform than as a palace for architecture.<sup>42</sup> In that sense, the NAI gives architecture public presence, but does so through a spatial order that also frames it institutionally. Van Dijk and Bekaert help to show that the building presents architecture both as a public cultural field and as an institution that seeks a visible and lasting form.

<sup>40</sup>Hans van Dijk, "Monumentaliteit en culturele instituten," in *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 1993–94* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 1994), 144–147.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Geert Bekaert, "Een Versailles voor de Nederlandse Architectuur," *Archis*, no. 10 (1993), pp. 17–26.

## Conclusion

The architectural design of the Netherlands Architecture Institute constructs a spatial choreography by turning approach, entry, and movement into a carefully ordered sequence. From the Museumpark and the Rochussenstraat to the foyer, exhibition spaces, library, and archive, the building guides the visitor from city to institution. That is especially significant in the case of an architecture institute, because such an institute begins with a paradox: architecture is already present in the built environment, so how can it be represented again? The NAI answers this not by treating architecture as an object on display, but by making architecture itself the medium of representation.

This is also how the building mediates between public openness and institutional authority. It invites the public in, but through a clear spatial hierarchy. Exhibition, study, archive, and public gathering remain distinct, and in that sense the building recalls a modernist logic of functional separation. Yet here that separation is not used to maximise efficiency, but to give architecture cultural weight and institutional presence. The NAI therefore presents itself both as a public platform and as a building that frames and stabilises architecture. That is what made it both ambitious and contested.

Read from the present, the NAI does not simply belong to the Dutch architectural culture of the 1990s. It exposes a question that remains urgent today: how can public and cultural buildings be truly open to the city without becoming vague, weightless,

or generic? At a moment when institutions are again asked to be more accessible, more public, and more flexible, the NAI reminds us that openness is not the absence of form, but something that must be carefully shaped in space. Its lasting relevance lies precisely there. The building shows that architecture can welcome the public while still giving cultural life clarity, hierarchy, and meaning. That may still be one of the central tasks for contemporary architecture in the Netherlands: not simply to make buildings more open, but to make them publicly meaningful.

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F. 23 Axonometric drawing of the competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi). From: Hans Ibelings, Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).

F. 24 Model photograph of the competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), east side with the entrance to the exhibition building (unrealised). From: Hans Ibelings, Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).

F. 25 Model photograph of the competition design for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), with the main entrance (unrealised). From: Hans Ibelings, Jo Coenen: de ontdekking van de architectuur (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 1989).

F. 26 View of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) after the 2010 intervention, showing the lowered entrance and forecourt at the Museumpark side. From: ToornendPartners, project reference "Nederlands Architectuurinstituut."

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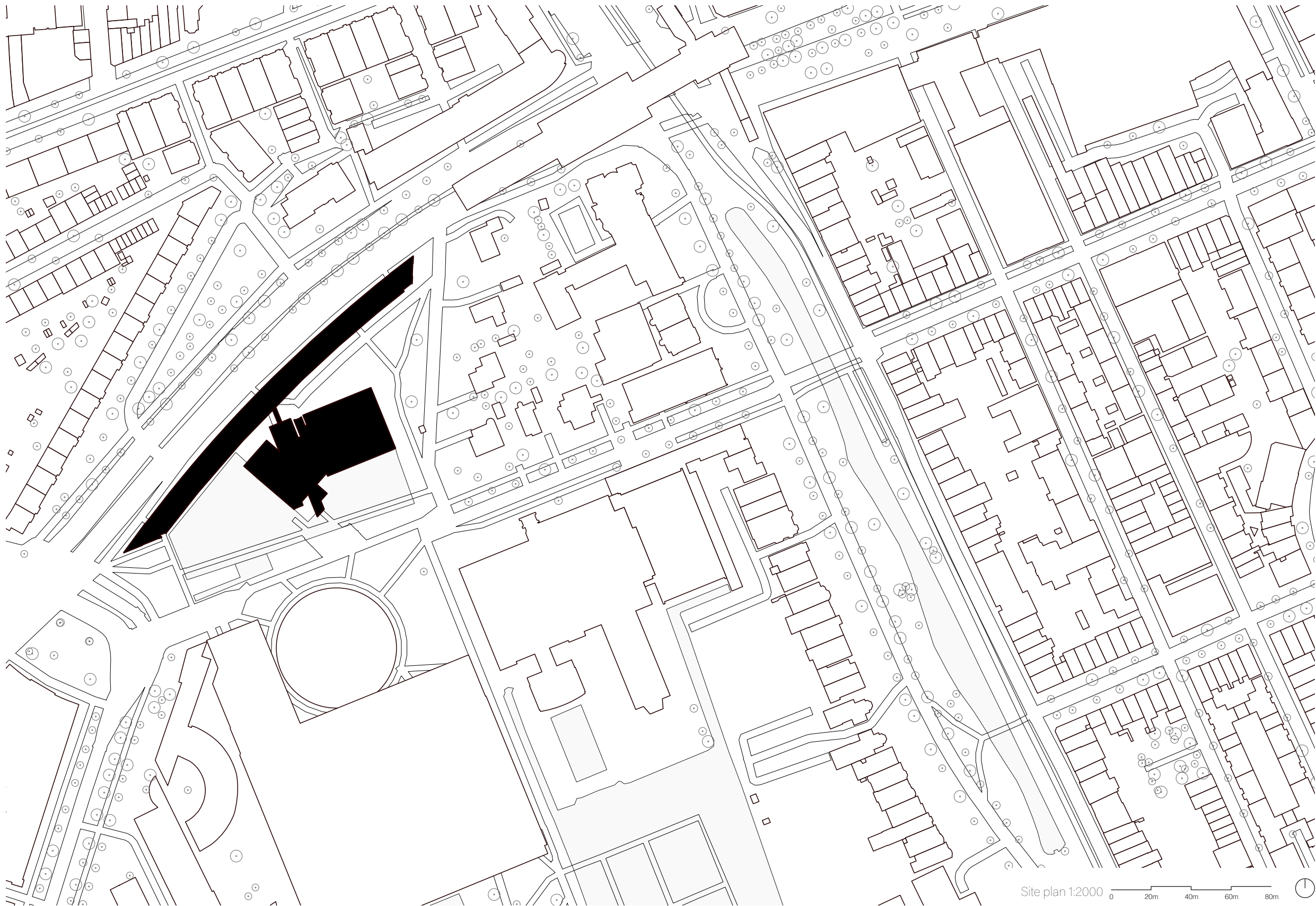
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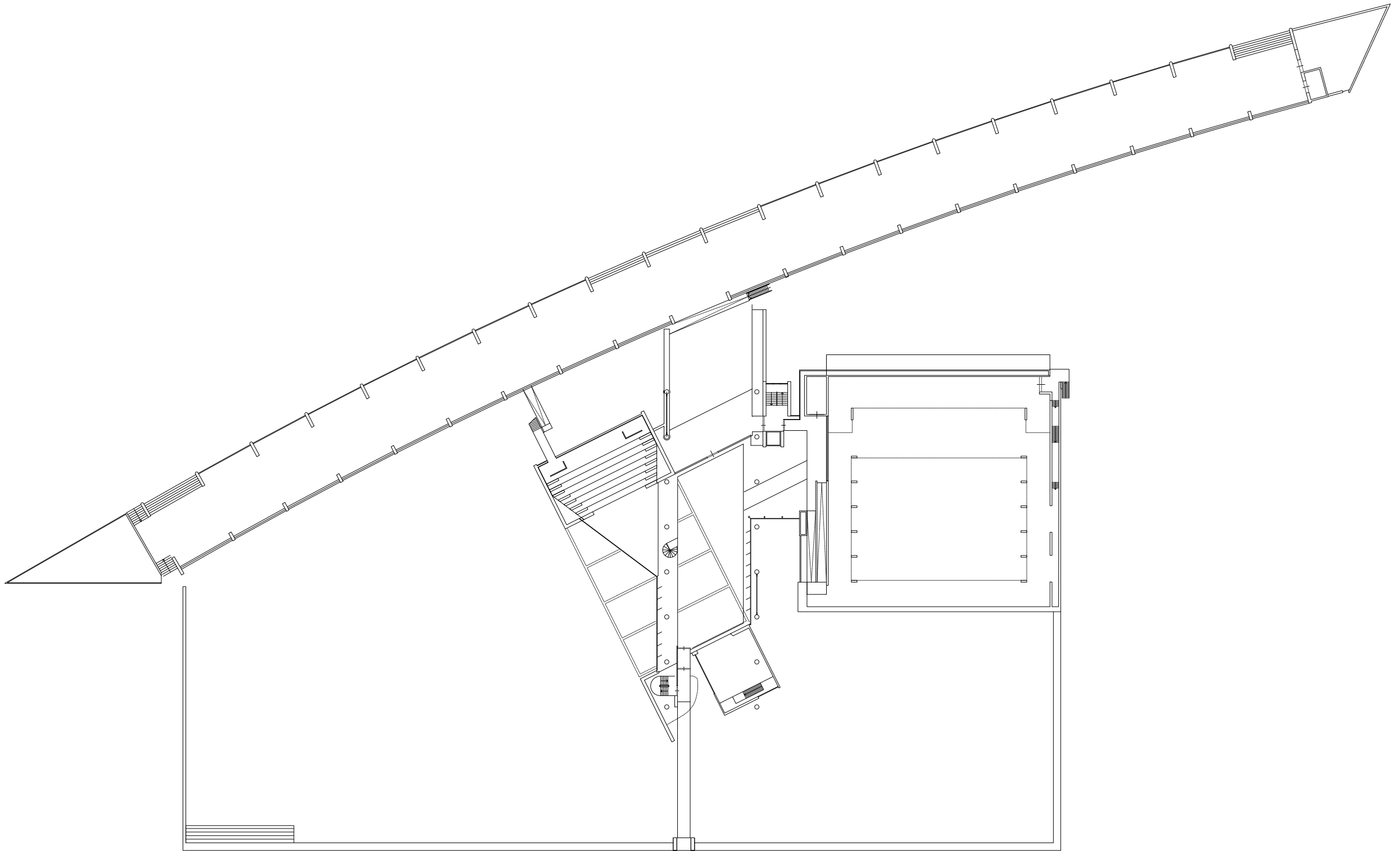
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F. 36 Level 1 plan of the realised Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), 1993, drawn by the author.

F. 37 Expanded public foyer and bookshop area after the 2010 intervention, showing the enlarged publicly accessible domain. From: Jo Coenen Architects & Urbanists (JCAU), *Het Nieuwe Instituut*, Rotterdam.

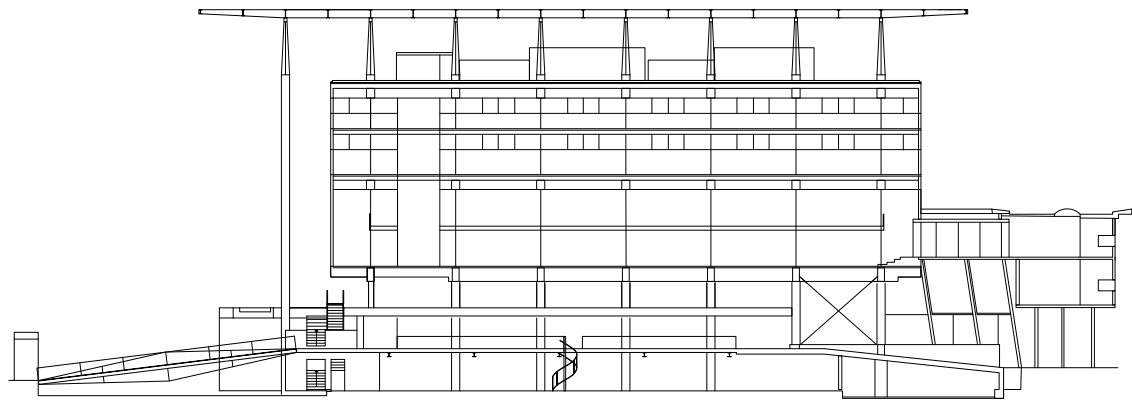


Site plan 1:2000 0 20m 40m 60m 80m



Floorplan 1:500 (scaled to 85%)





Section 1:500 (scaled to 90%) 0 5m 10m 15m 20m

