



P4 Reflection  
Guillermo R. Verjan

# LITERARY BOGOTA

The Literary Description of Spaces Negotiating  
With a Past.

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By Guillermo R. Verjan

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*“The subject of this book is not the void exactly, but rather what there is round about or inside it. To start with, then, there isn’t very much: nothingness, the impalpable, the virtually immaterial; extension, the external, what is external to us, what we move about in the midst of, our ambient milieu, the space around us.”*

G. PEREC.

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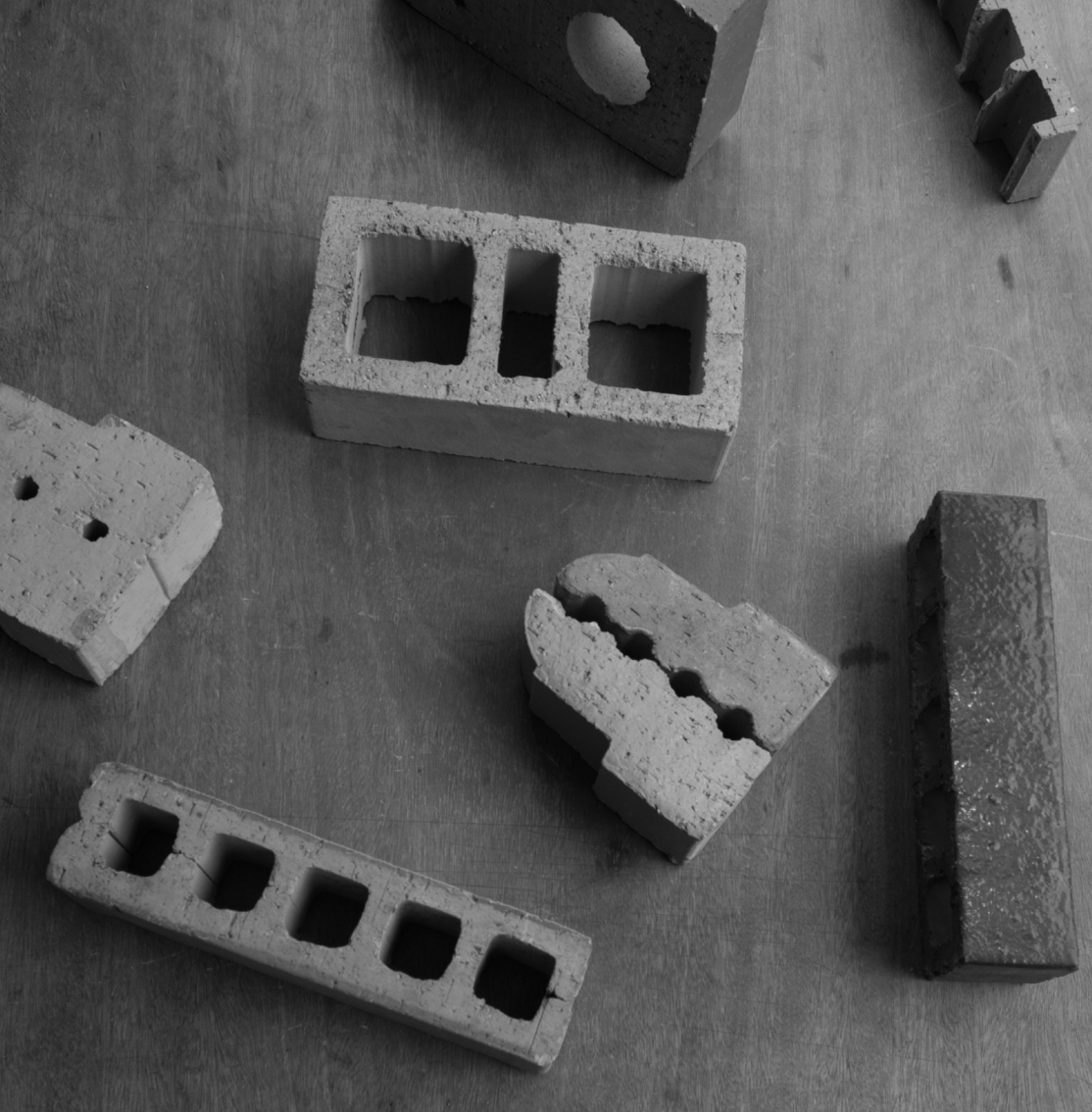
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## Part I

Underlying Premises – Reading Between the Lines



“No weight nor mass nor beauty of execution can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought”<sup>1</sup>

John Ruskin .

The epigraph that opens this reflection was written by the art and architecture theoretician John Ruskin, in 1843. When he wrote that, he was theorizing on art. I interpret it as a declaration on the importance of the ideas that guide and give form to the art, over any other aspects. The same belief can be hold towards the architecture. The Literary Bogota project’s development has two main architectural themes or, one can say, fascinations behind it. On one hand, the project explores ways to trigger a synergy between literature and architecture. On the other, this work takes a position towards Bogota’s existing built environment, and explore its consequences. The city has a problematic relation with its built past; numerous buildings that are not necessary monuments, even though, they have great architectural qualities, have fallen in disrepair and the city seems to do not enough to stop their eventual disappearance under the real state pressure.

The first fascination departed from my realization that, it is not desirable a literal translation of the literary contents into architecture. That road would have lead me to be a prisoner of the text, and compromise any other architectural consideration. Nevertheless, I’m persuaded that both literature and architecture are expressive languages, this is, both are vehicles of thought. It is in this way, that I explored ways in which literature can enhance the design process of the architectural project. In fact, I used two different approaches to reach the aforementioned synergy.

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1. Ruskin, J. (1843) Modern painters: their superiority in the art of landscape painting to all the ancient masters, proved by examples of the true, the beautiful, and the intellectual from the works of modern artists, especially from those of J. M. W. Turner. London: Smith, Elde, 12.

In a very early stage of the analysis, I turned my efforts to read short stories and chronicles of Bogota. Specially those written under the municipality patronage, in a program called Book in the wind (Libro al Viento). In this program, there is a book collection named Bogota narrated (Bogota Contada), whose aim is to invite foreign writer to visit the city and write about it. In my analysis, I could use their outsider perspective to find common themes and ideas of the city. The product of this analysis was a book called a Story Machine. In this book, the short stories are combined with images and maps of those places they evoke. This analysis unveiled how interesting and lively is the book scene in a neighborhood of Bogota, namely Teusaquillo. It unveiled as well, how manifest are the different fragments that compose the city, and how much the citizen praise the libraries as places of peace among a chaotic and somehow hostile city.

In a later stage of the design process, it took place the second approach to literature. It constituted a strategy of composition based on the description and sequencing of the spaces experienced by fictional characters. Literary descriptions have been written and used by architects many times in the past. Therefore, the literary description in architectural design is not so much an exchange between disciplines, but more like an enhancement of an architectural tool; one that writers also have at their disposal. This strategy helped to show that an important part of the architectural job is to think about the way architecture is 'used', and consequently how the architecture affects its 'user'.

The second fascination deals with a personal view on the built environment heritage. I hold as a truth that by repurposing, re-elaborating, or refurbishing existing buildings it is possible to assemble unique and eloquent spaces which otherwise wouldn't be possible. Such spaces merge different layers of time, and materiality. But then again, considering Ruskin's notion of art, these spaces merge different fragments of thought.

The projects explore a way in which existing structures of the city can be repurpose, in a broader attempt to take a position towards Bogota's heritage. Understanding heritage in the broadest sense, as every standing building. At the beginning of the 20th century, Bogota started to be called the Athens of South America. Partly because the ubiquitous political discussions carried in cafes and bars, but also because a process of "modernization" of the built environment. Nowadays most of the city center consist of modern buildings. In words of the director of Heritage, in the Ministry of Culture of Colombia, Alberto Escovar "the 20th century was built upon the heritage. We thought that it was an obstacle; it was something we should remove. The world started now, the change was now."<sup>2</sup> Decades after, one can see how this process is taking place again, but now is the modern heritage that is been endangered. In a scenario where the resources are limited, the city can benefit if the architect engages in the adaptation of existing buildings to the new times. The benefits are twofold, firstly a more intelligent management of the built environment. Secondly a shift of perspective upon Bogota's heritage implies an architectural and aesthetical pursuit of itself; a pursuit for new kinds of architectural and urban spaces written not upon the old, but rather among it.

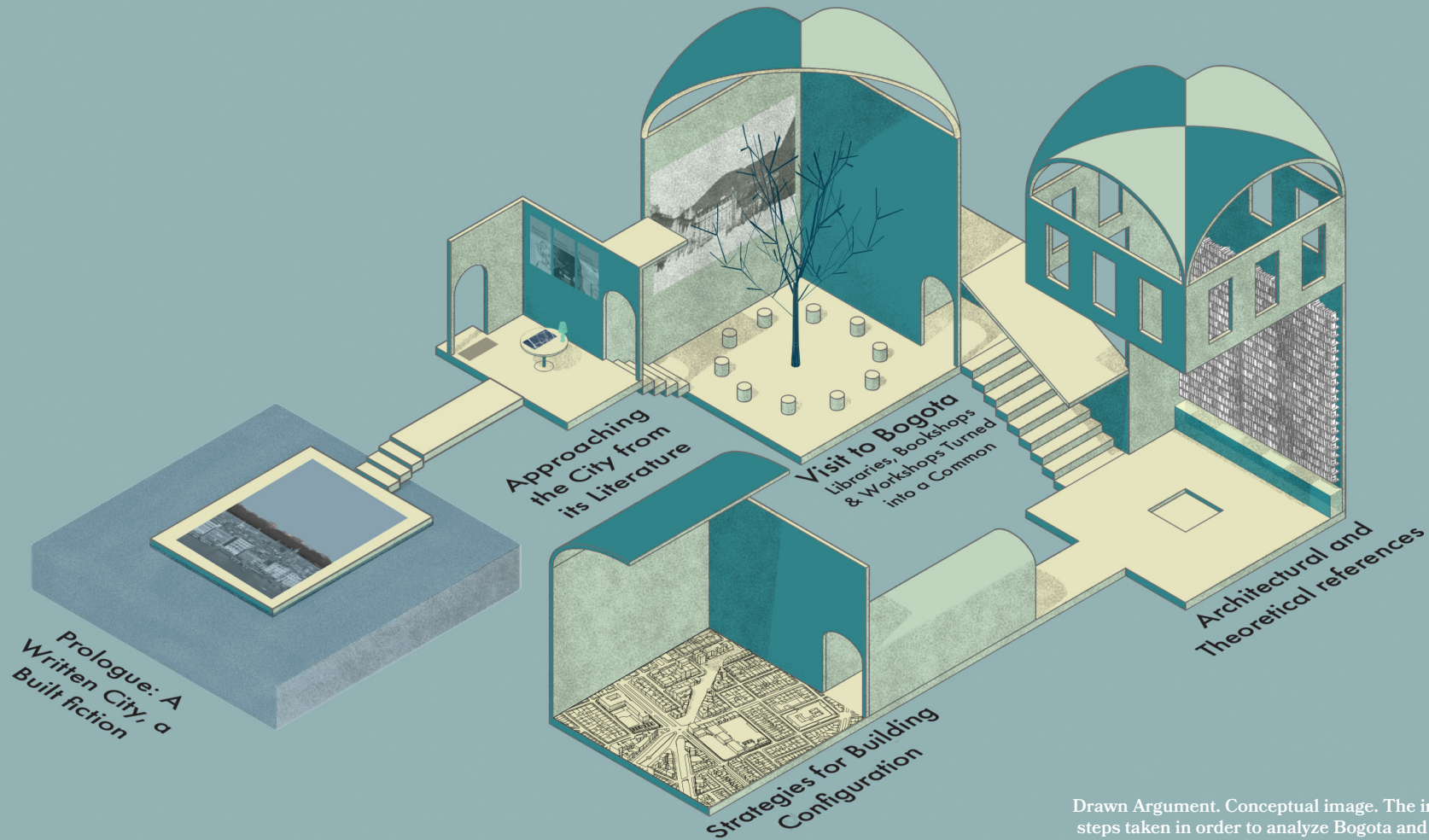
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2. Villabona, C & Sánchez, M. (2017). In Bogotá Visible. Retrieved from <https://www.bogotavisible.com/2017/06/20/alberto-esco-var-renovar-sin-destruir-el-patrimonio/>



## Part II

The Project - The Literary Description of Spaces Negotiating with a past



Drawn Argument. Conceptual image. The image shows the different steps taken in order to analyze Bogota and design the architectural project.

## Approaching the city from its literature

*“How difficult is to escape from the mentality of those who have just arrive, he thinks again and again, the recently arrived reporter. How easy it is to pay attention to what all the foreigners pay attention to; this is what the foreigne reporter thinks. The rolling weather, yes, and the presence of the mountains, and the mind-blowing graffities, and the estratos, and the violence or the shadow or the memories of the violence. To scratch under the surface, thinks the shaking reporter, I need more than a week. I need months or years, thinks the doubtful reporter.”<sup>3</sup>*

R. HASBÚN.

This is a fragment of a narration written at the Bogota contada, in its second edition. Written by the Bolivian author Rodrigo Hasbun, it clearly expresses the challenge of understanding a foreign city. In each edition, they invite nearly a dozen of authors to visit Bogota and narrate it. Each writer faces a foreign city and looks for a theme to write about. Some narrations focus on the territory, which is the first attribute of a city and from many of its characteristics arise: its climate, topography and its flora and fauna. There are also writers that leave aside what is first seen, and look for themes not so evident. for example the particularities of the culture or how the inhabitants shape the city. We found, in the narrations a third approach, which is an attempt to find what is familiar among the foreign. Several writers emphasize how similar Bogota is to other Latin-American, in particular their common histories. In each approach tensions are spotted, and because of them, the narrations are relevant as prior knowledge for those visiting in the context of the current architectural research. Ultimately the narrations about territory, culture and history show a more profound reconciliation: the perspective of the locals are contrasted with the foreigner’s interpretations.

We can say that the architects, like the authors, try to find themes, attributes and tensions and more important commons. It is in this way that the narrations worked as a first approach to the city. The task in hand was to map those recurrent subjects, places and memories described in the narrations. Consequently, two sets of maps were created, each one collected in a book.

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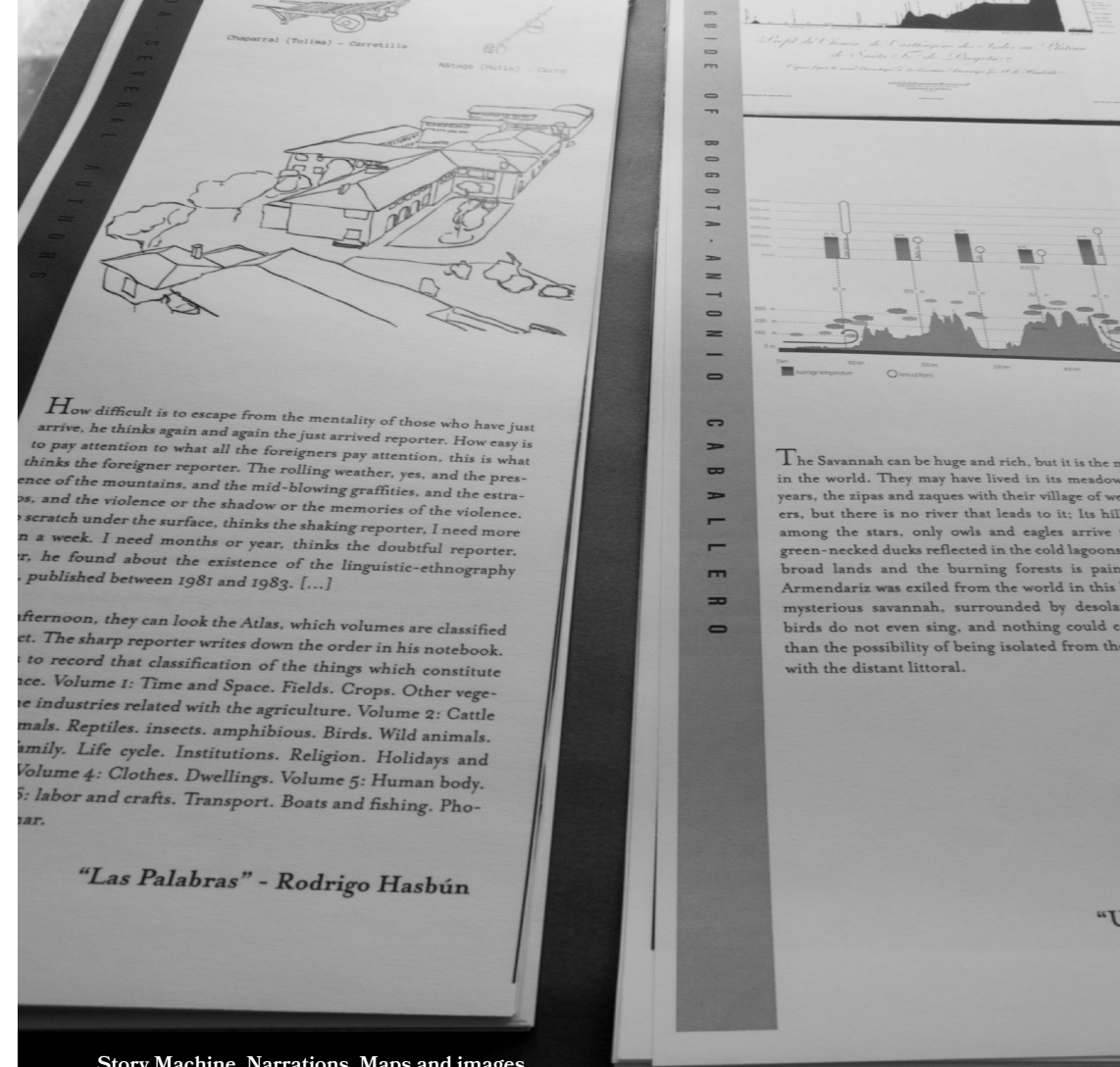
3. Hasbún, R., (2015) Las Palabras. In: Garcia, A., (Ed.) Bogotá Contada 2.0. Bogota: Libro al Viento.



The first book deals only with the narrations by foreign writers. This set of maps tries to understand the narrations on two of its levels: on one side, the narrations describe spaces in Bogota, on the other they portray the atmospheres of them. In order to show those two levels, the book is printed on tracing paper, as a result the maps are superimposed. We shall explain how those two levels are mapped.

There are spaces in the city that are recurrent subjects of the narrations, such as the poetry house Silva, the central cemetery or Luis Angel Arango Library. The Guatemalan author Rey-Rosa describes the library in his narration. A place where he found himself at ease. It has been a meeting point for numerous writers and intellectuals. Rey-Rosa depicts the library as an island of peace, in the midst of a chaotic and violent city. So, the map of this level focus on the location of the library, its surroundings and its architecture. The narrations also describe the experience and atmospheres inside the space, its long corridors, the abundant marble and numerous skylights. The second level is therefore portraying with photos and drawings. In short, each narration is presented and printed on three pages, one layer holds actual narration, underneath are the locations and finally the illustrations.

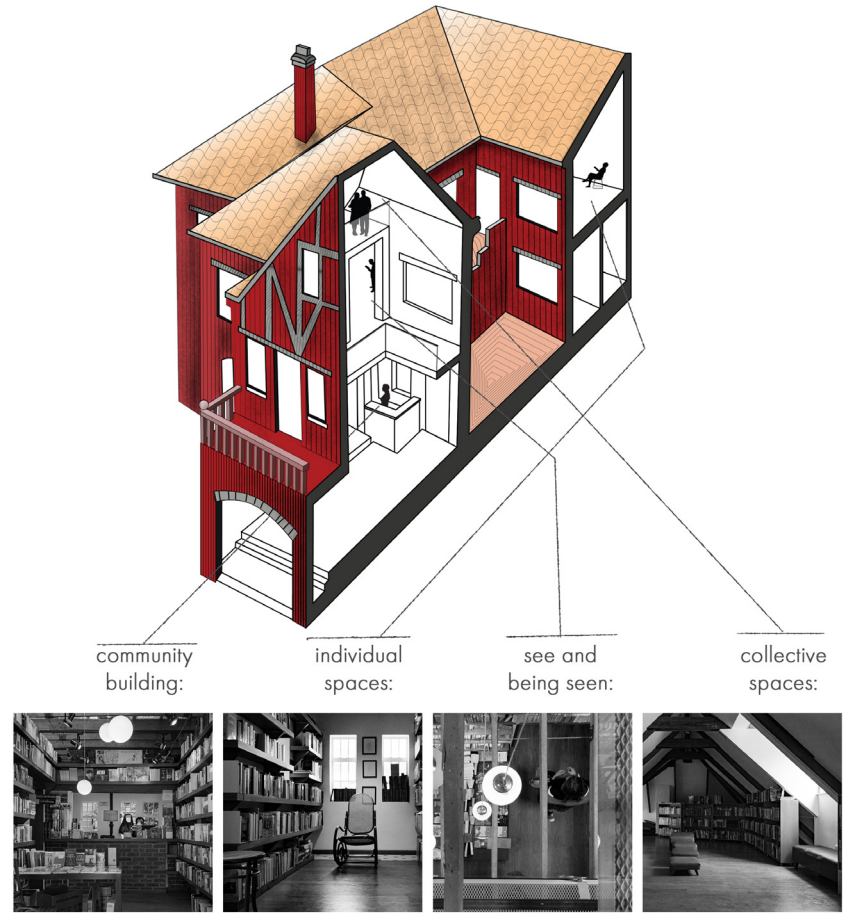
The second book seeks to oppose the narrations of the foreigners with the ones made by local writers. Bogota has several writers who have describe and use the city as a background in their narrations. A well-known example is the narration by of William Ospina in Ursua. There the writer wonders about the very existence of a capital in such an isolated place on the Andes. A curious condition in times where all the goods could only reach the city carried by dunkies climbing the mountains. Each narration is illustrated with a collage that represents the main elements of the narrations, together with a drawing of the spaces mentioned. The book is printed in such a way that several histories can be seen simultaneously, and therefore the book plays with the idea of mixing images and stories, and consequently produce new interpretations about the city.



Story Machine. Narrations, Maps and images.



In order to endure, the bookshops have to build a community of readers, therefore they turn into a Common



## Visit to Bogota Libraries, Bookshops & Workshops Turned into a Common

Everyone has an image of the city that is somehow different, narratives and stories can help to change that image. The narratives alter the experience of the city in the sense that literature can set the reader on a certain aesthetic attitude. Such attitude influences the way in which is interpreted our experience. Therefore, each everyone's city is made of memories, spaces and narratives woven through time.

The approach to the city from its literature helped me to find an aesthetic attitude before visiting the city. Once there, I tried to analyze part of the city taking into account the themes found in the narratives. One theme was particularly relevant. Rey Rosa described one of the most important libraries of the city, the Luis Angel Arango Library. He argues that, thanks only to that library, and no matter how hostile and cold the city is, it is possible to find a wellbeing in Bogota. Indeed, the libraries are public spaces on their own right. They are space to be alone, as much as to be in a community. Spaces for creativity, as much as spaces just to be.

Intrigued by what kind of public space the libraries are. I wanted to analyze part of the city from the perspective of the industry of the book. The Teusaquillo neighborhood has the greatest number of bookshops, publishing houses and storehouses for the distribution of books in the city. Such concentration of activities around books responds to the localization and architecture of the neighborhood. It is located between four of the city's main universities. Its architecture consists of houses in a row, that in the past housed the economic elite of the city. Such houses have a great quality and aesthetic to make them an invaluable opportunity to be repurposed.



Section of the Diocletian's Palace Peristyle combining the reconstruction and the actual situation.

*“The intermingling of public and private life in the gateway constructions is most gratifying. The enormous scale of the Roman constructions has been turned into a human scale by the occupants. Thus a block of stone of a cubic metre, apart from being a place for selling flowers in the daytime, appears to become the place of encounter for a group of people at night. The fourlegged table could never have done this, it would have been knocked over. And the coming and going of all those people of Split through the extant gateway constructions is for more acceptable (because of the very enormity of those measures) than it is in the spaces that have been created between our carefully arranged blocks.”<sup>4</sup>*

J. BAKEMA

## Architectural and Theoretical references

### Diocletian Palace

In the fourth century A.D., the roman emperor Diocletian built on the coast of the actual Croatia, his retirement palace. The building, which floor plan is an irregular rectangle, has 150 x 200 meters. As the time went by, the palace fell in disrepair. Although, the people of the city started a process of transformations, in which they re-used the palace's structure as the foundation for a city of more than 3000 thousand people.

Jaap Bakema read in the Diocletian palace an expression of the society that dwell in there. He interpreted the palace as an open structure that people eventually filled, everyone according with their own aspirations. “There are historic examples illustrating how architecture might be the expression of a form of society that is founded on using each other's roofs and walls (the Pueblo of Taos, New Mexico, with its Adobe walls), and on using an extant Roman palace structure in building individual rooms (Spilt, Yugoslavia)”<sup>4</sup>. My interpretation of the palace acknowledges Jaap's notion of the individual expression among the society. But I find in the roman structure a third principle that, in my opinion, are more relevant for the project at hand.

So, there are three architectural principles behind the Diocletian palace. The first principle, mentioned by Bakema, is the idea of an open support. Its aim is to have a structure which allow to house several units in it. The structure of the palace and its wall are so stable and massive, that the people of Split saw the opportunity of building their city among them. The roman constructions work as a skeleton to support houses with six and

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4. Bakema, J. (1962). bouwen voor de anonieme opdrachtgever. Forum, 1, p.41.

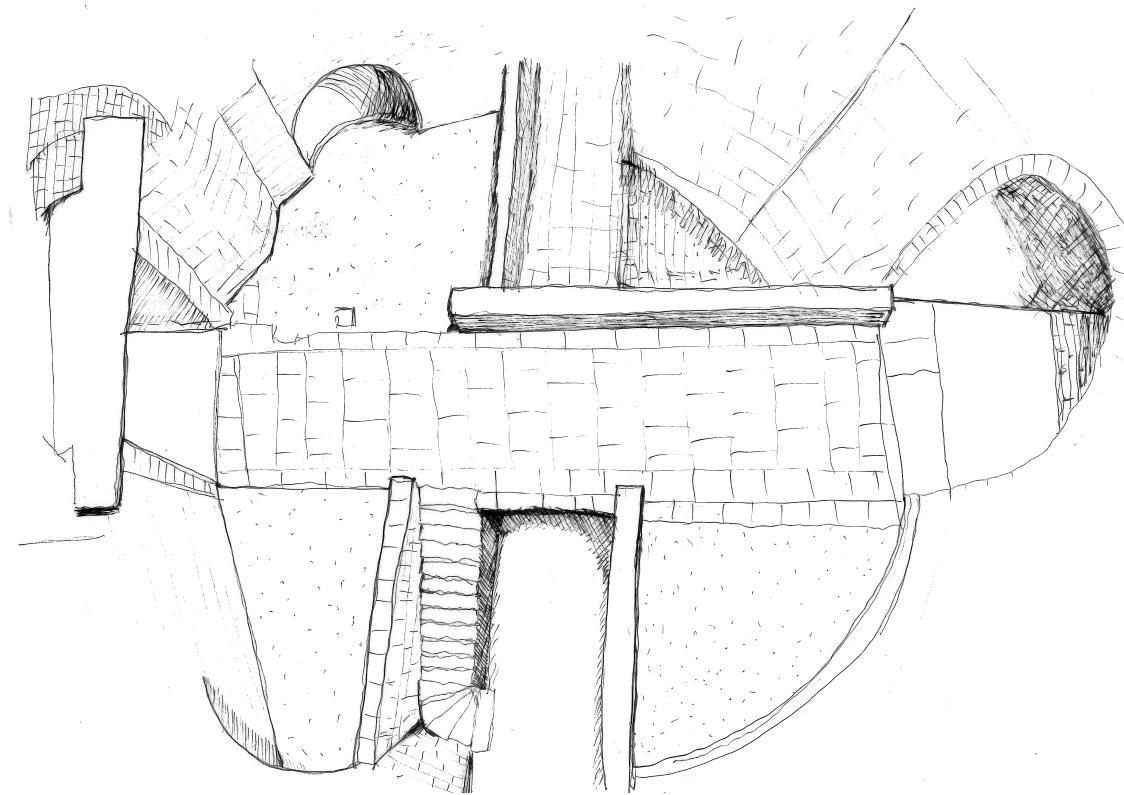
seven floors. Each person built accordingly to their needs, resources at their own pace. The second principle is the formal unity that obtain the different parts thanks to the roman skeleton. The principle is better expressed, again, by Jaap Bakema: “If one stands on top of the tower of later date, one can see how the palace wall became part of a to one another, forming a dimensionally plastic totality with many transitional forms”<sup>5</sup>. The third principle are the considerations towards the heritage. The architecture of Split is an expression of a negotiation with the past. The past is neither deified, nor neglected. The heritage, when possible is seen as a chance to create new spaces.

The above-mentioned principles are relevant for a project in Bogota, because they proof that, in order to improve the built environment, it is not always necessary to start from scratch, and it even explores a way to revitalize the heritage. The Diocletian palace is a symbiosis between the existing structure and the new building, creating an unexpected harmony. The city of split honor the roman heritage, but is transformed for the needs and aspirations of their inhabitants. The architect can improve the built environment by reusing the existing structures, even if at first look they don't look architectural appealing.

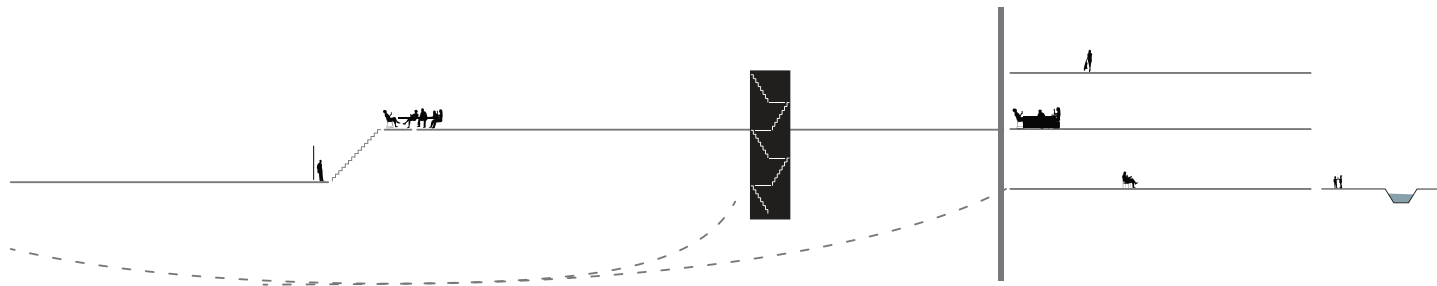
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4. Bakema, J. Ibid.

5. Bakema, J. Ibid.



**Diocletian Palace. Vestibule before beginning of renovations in 1956.**



## Literary Description

This tool aims to explore the link between literature and architecture, by means of sequencing the descriptions of the experiences awoken in the space. The descriptions are combined with the diagram of movement along the project. In each space is described the experience. Below is transcribed the description of the Wall House in Groningen. At this stage of the general proposal, the literary description works as a tool to analyze existing projects. Nonetheless, this tool will be use in the actual design of the proposal for Bogota.



[...]The property lies far away from the city downtown. Facing a river and at the back the seemingly infinite city. It is also a flat property. While trying to enter the house, one see the several volumes of the house floating from the different perspectives. What strikes the most is how long the bridge is. From here one start to imagine the function of each volume. The entrance door is quite simple, the spectacle is inside.

[...] Surrounding the house is also possible. Leave the house trough the kitchen and enjoy when is a doing a good weather. The bridge allows you to have a shade under the house, a place where to sit to rest. From here is not visible the riverside, but it is enough to be in the garden.

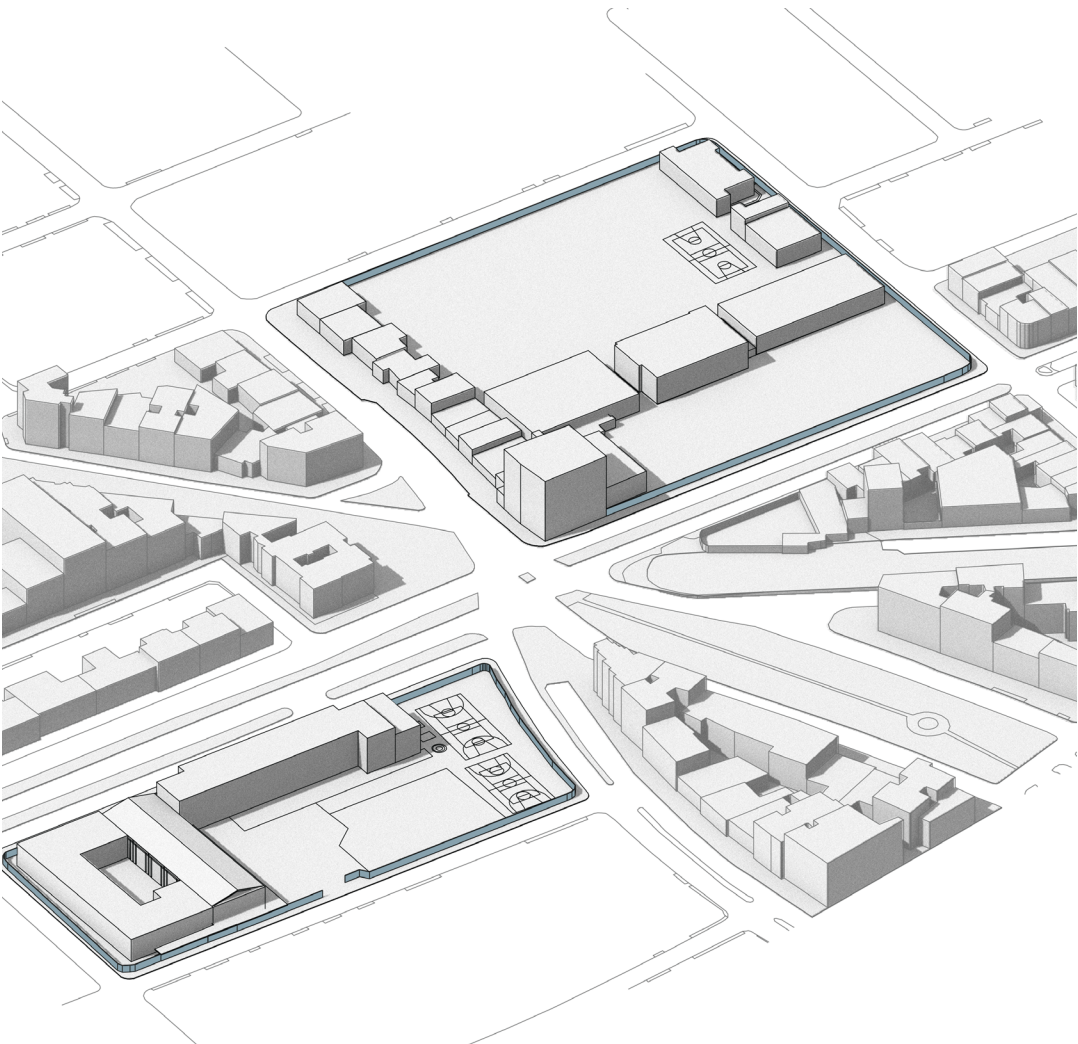


The crossing of different systems on the site.

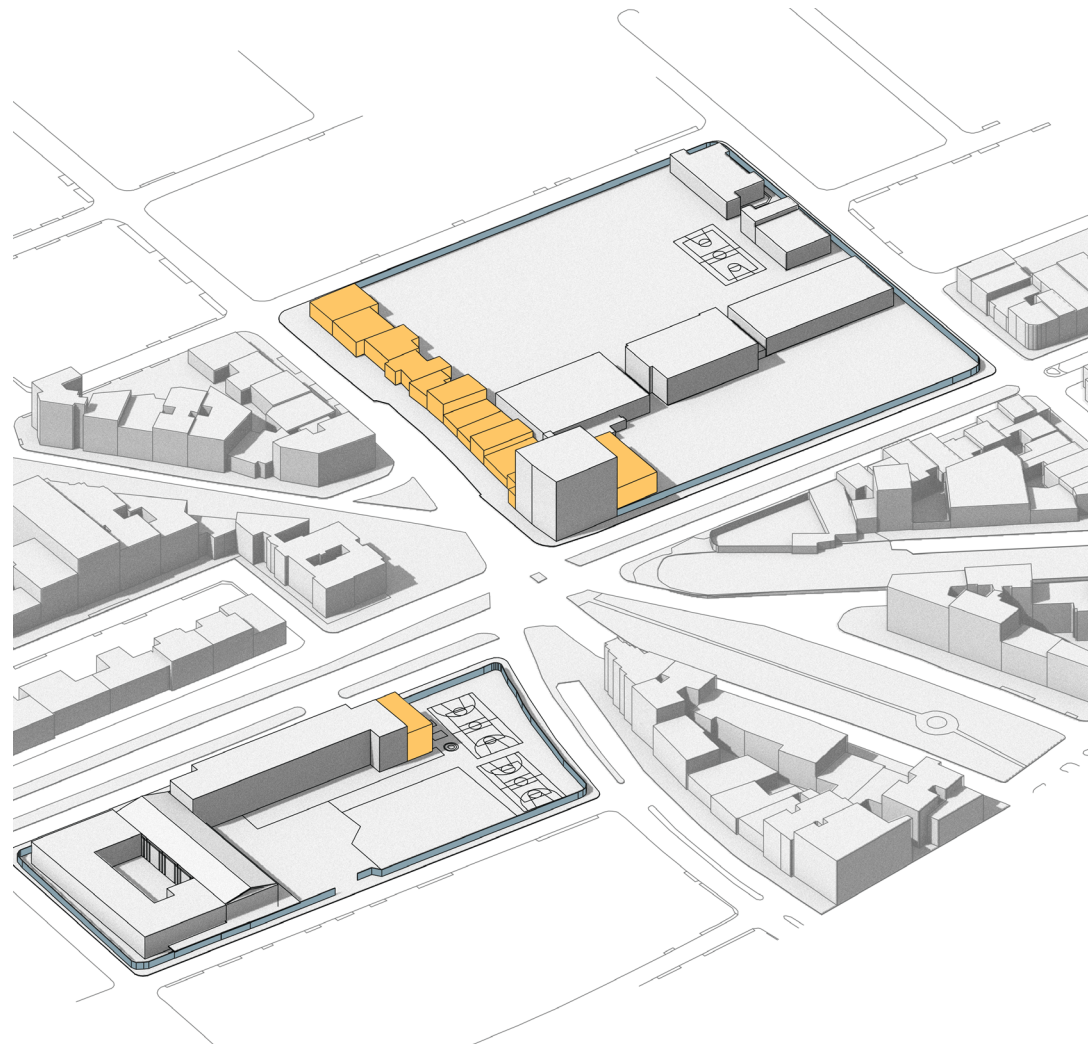
Part III

The Project - Strategies for Building Configuration

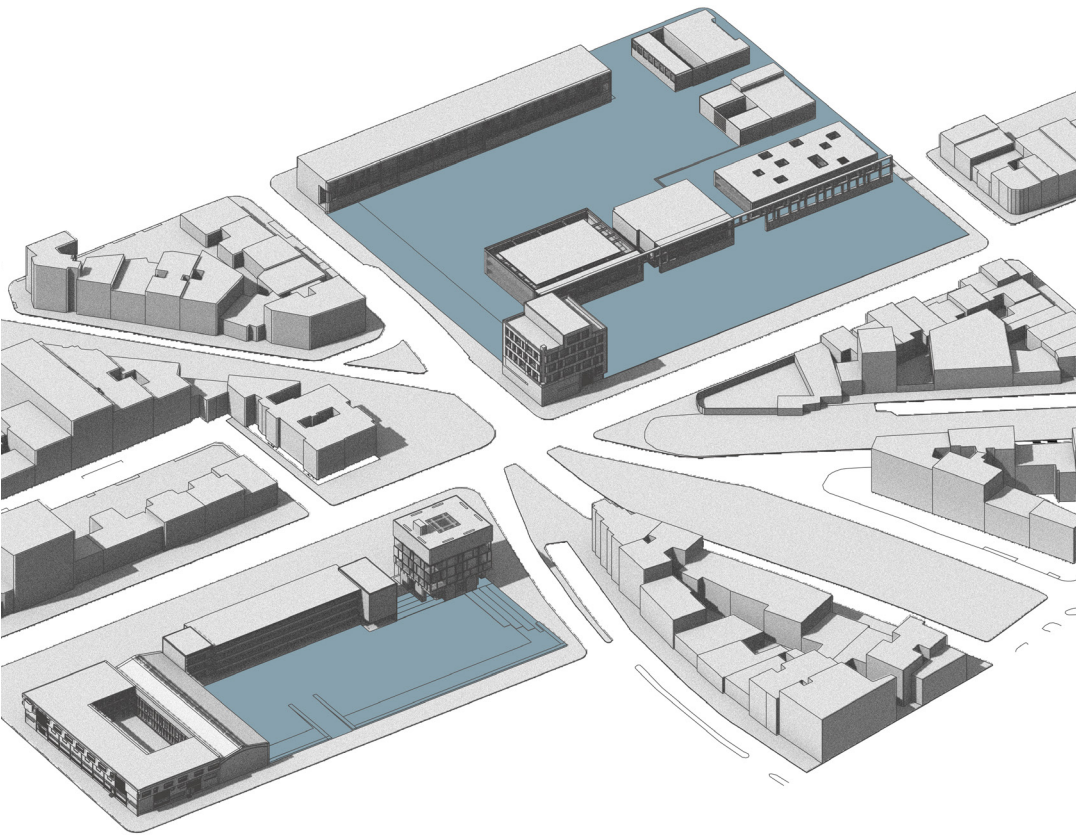




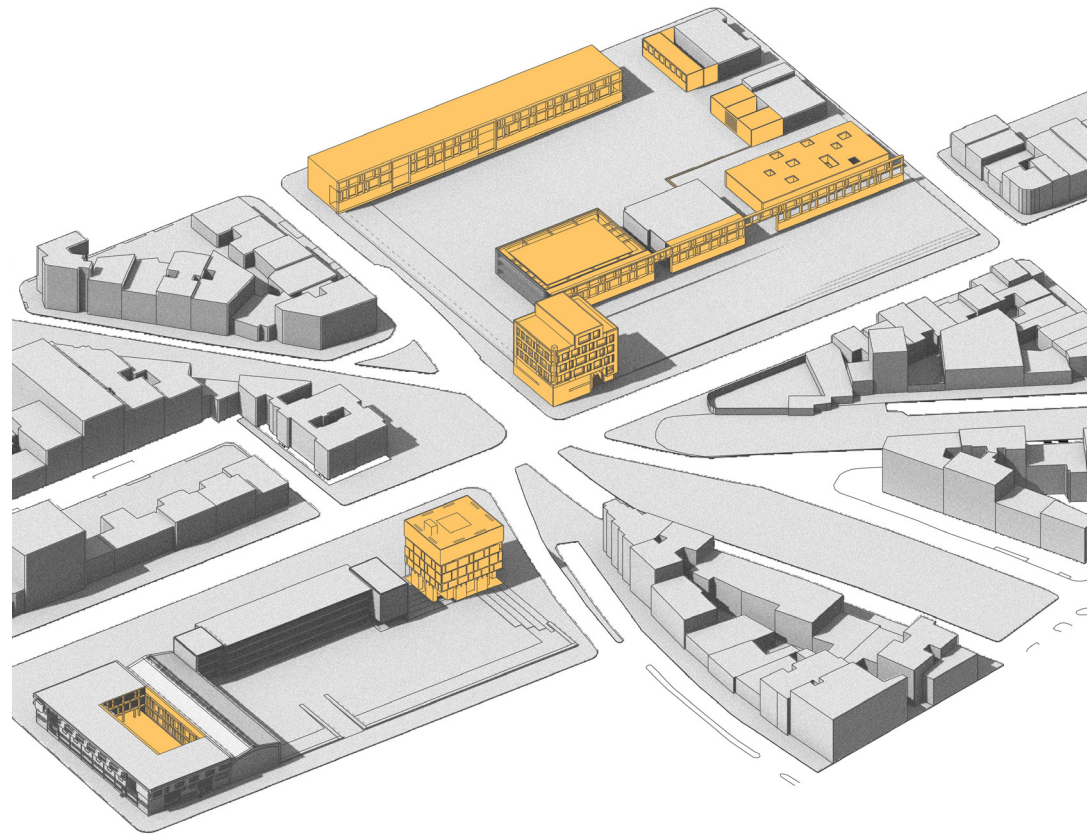
Existing blind walls



Demolitions



Public space instead of blind walls



Additions

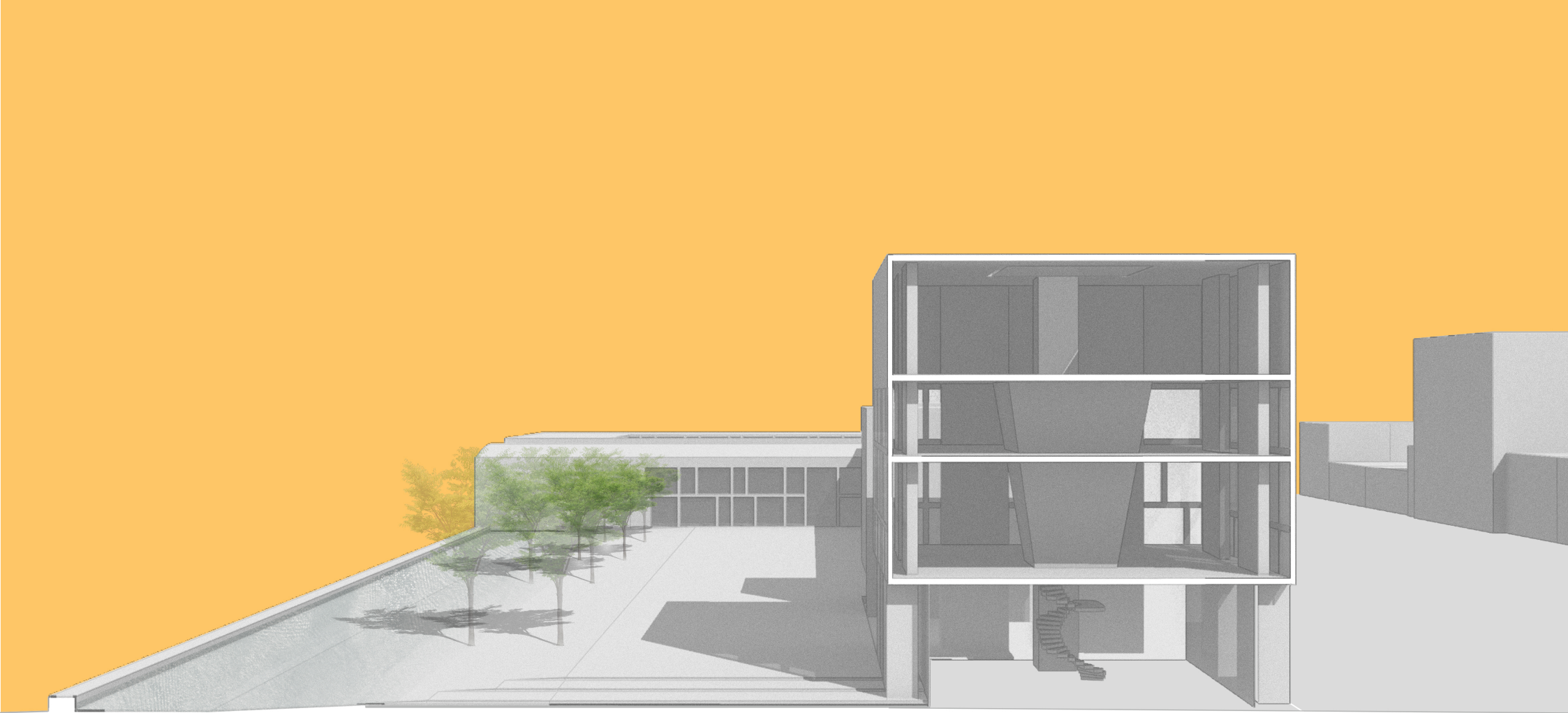


Image of the Project. Part of the Literary Descriptions

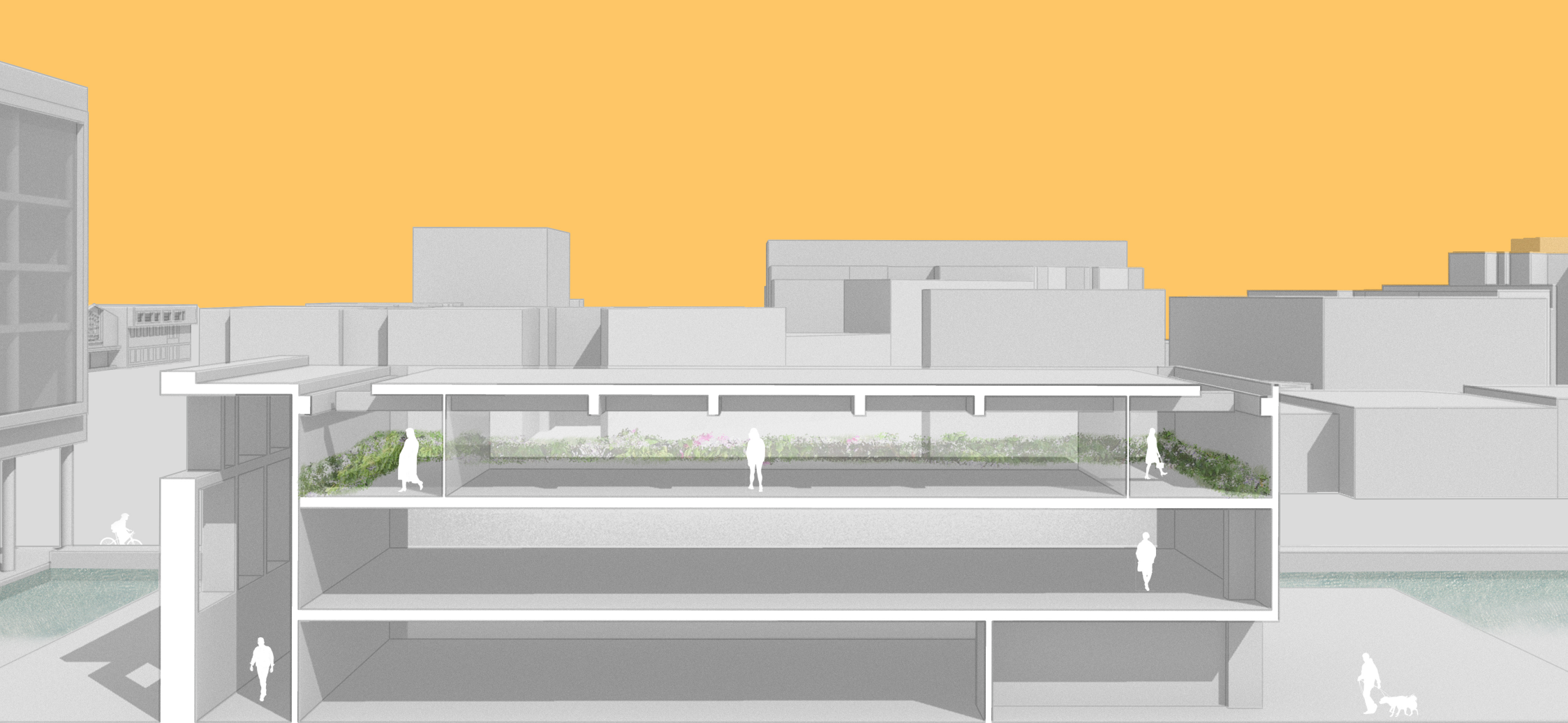


Image of the Project. Part of the Literary Descriptions



Image of the Project. Part of the Literary Descriptions

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