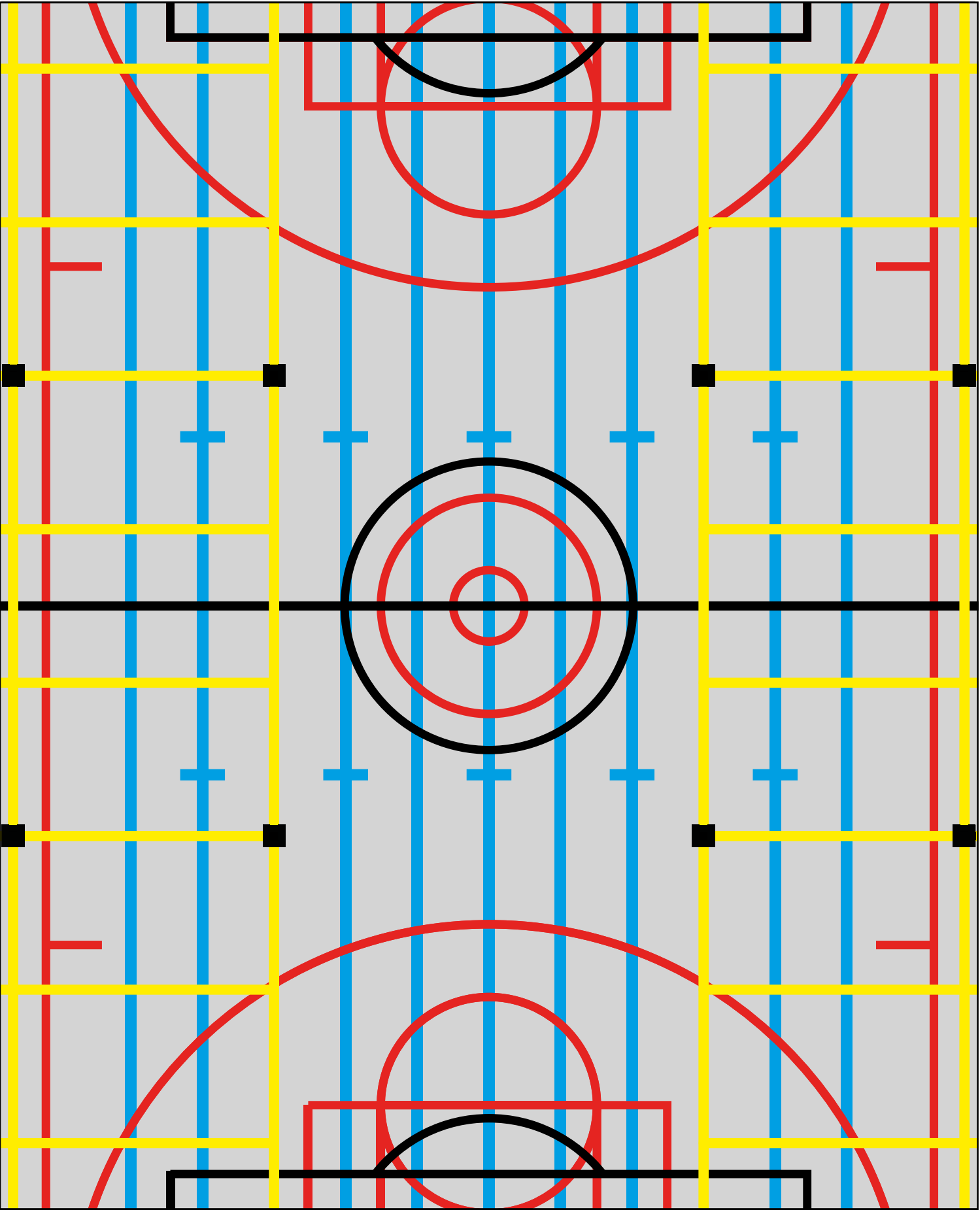


SUBORDINATE
TO THE CONTEXT

PROCESS
& PROJECT



“The analysis drives the design,
and the design drives the analysis.
In the process, they find balance.”

— Office Winhov (2024)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approach & Friends: Pleasure in the Context	04
P&P: Follow the Existing	08
Program: Follow the Surrounding Functions	12
Building Fabric: Follow the Garage Logic	32
Design Proposal: Follow the Ramps to Find th People	54

In an area with such a strong and complex identity, there is limited room for top-down visions of future development. As a student with limited access to local communities due to language barriers and a fundamentally different background, the ambition to propose “better” solutions or resolve the neighbourhood's existing issues felt rather inadequate.

The attempt to reinvent the site through the introduction of new programmes or forms of production also appeared counterproductive, especially in a context that already offers a rich and layered set of existing identities, practices, and architectural resources.

This led to a shift in design attitude: the design impetus should not originate from the designer's ego, but from the neighbourhood itself. At this point, the work of Belgian architect Xaveer De Vylder became relevant. In his lecture at Columbia GSAPP, he describes the notion of the “lazy architect”: an architect who does not impose preconceived ideas onto a site but instead consciously subordinates design decisions to the context and and most importantly “takes pleasure in it”. In this approach, architecture becomes a more precise expression of the place's identity rather than an act of reinvention.

Ultimately, the goal is to design with industrial heritage, not against it, in order to strengthen and further articulate the complex identity of Heyvaert.

APPROACH & FRIENDS: PLEASURE IN THE CONTEXT

A similar approach can be found in the work of Winhov Architects, whose practice is rooted in the idea that analysis is a fundamental design tool for reuse projects. In their method, “the analysis drives the design and the design drives the analysis,” establishing a continuous feedback loop in which both evolve and eventually reach a productive balance. This can be understood as a context-driven design process, or more broadly, research by design, where the project emerges from continuous reading and re-reading of the site.

Together, these approaches form the methodological foundation for the “lazy architect” practice. The intention is to allow the context and the building itself to guide the entire design process, from programme and spatial organisation to material expression. This puts the architect in the role of the translator rather than the inventor, allowing the industrial fabric of Heyvaert to articulate its own potential.

PROCESS & PROJECT: FOLLOW THE EXISTING

In recent years, the urban block has been gradually shifting toward a more residential character. New housing developments have replaced former industrial sheds and increasingly isolate the project site within a denser residential fabric. According to the master plan, this transformation will continue, with the site eventually being absorbed into a fully residential context as the car-related industry disappears.

While this would typically suggest housing as the default programme, the specific qualities of the site: deep industrial interior, limited daylight, and typology raise doubts about whether this is the most appropriate response. Instead, the question emerges of how the industrial character of the site can be retained and strengthened within future development.

Because the garage already contains wide open spaces, the project proposes repurposing the structure for a public sports function. Following the logic of the surrounding programmes, it does not introduce an alien function to the site but instead builds upon existing uses in the area. The proposal expands the neighbouring Mohamed Ali Sports Centre with a swimming pool facility inspired by Brussels' tradition of urban public pools.

Rather than replacing the building fabric identity, the project aims to reinterpret it, using public sports infrastructure as a social binder. This way, it connects new and existing communities and strengthens the constantly evolving identity of Heyvaert.

PROGRAM:

Pool Extension of Mohamed Ali Sports Center



The nearby Mohamed Ali Centre offers a key reference. As a community sports facility, it connects to its surroundings and acts as a social anchor within the neighbourhood, demonstrating how public programs can link fragmented urban conditions. In contrast, the project site is currently isolated from both residential and public functions, despite its central position within the block.



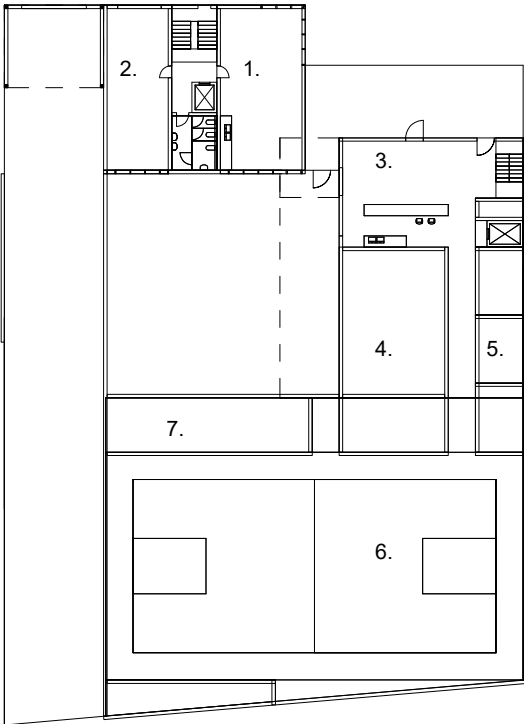




photo of the big sportshall

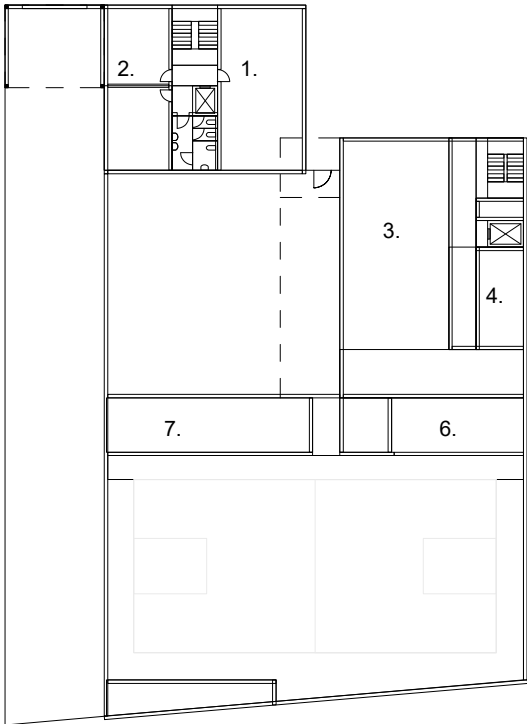


photo of the gymnastics hall



GR FLOOR
MOHAMED ALI CENTER

- 1. Community living room
- 2. Activity room
- 3. Sport hall reception
- 4. Rentable room
- 5. Changing room
- 6. Big sport hall
- 7. Administration



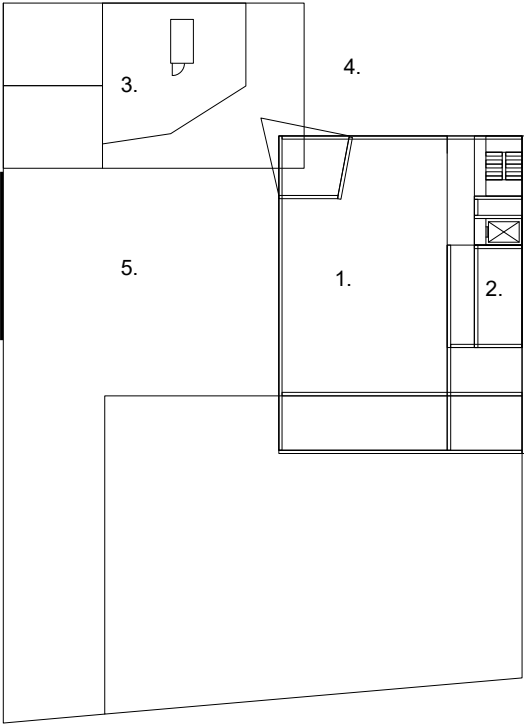
+1 FLOOR
MOHAMED ALI CENTER

- 1. Community living room
- 2. Activity room
- 3. Gymnastic hall
- 4. Changing room
- 6. View platform
- 7. Administration



photo of the big sportshall

The analysis of the Mohamed Ali Sports Centre in the neighbourhood revealed that, although there is already a diverse range of small-scale sports activities, the site lacks spaces for gathering between sports classes, which is essential for neighbourhood public life. The site conditions highlight the potential to extend the facility with public gathering spaces and to broaden sports-related opportunities for social interaction.



+2 FLOOR
MOHAMED ALI CENTER

- 1. Boxing hall
- 2. Changing room
- 3. Roof terrace
- 4. Canal balcony
- 5. Courtyard

As a public urban space located in an inner courtyard plot, the proposal introduces a swimming pool in relation to Brussels' history of urban swimming pools. The water-related activities are structured around shared rituals that guide users through sequences of preparation, activity, and rest, encouraging people to stay together before and after use. As a result, the facility can expand beyond its purely health-related function and contribute to the formation of a third urban space.

The project draws inspiration from historical Art Deco pools, including Piscine Victor Boin and Piscine du Centre. These "hidden" public spaces act as social connectors within dense residential fabrics, claiming the typical Brussels interior plots of for the public.

These pools are not only an important architectural reference for daylight solutions in dense urban environments and for dealing with limited access points, but they also demonstrate how Brussels' urban block courtyards can be celebrated and opened to the public. They show that even on tight, dense urban sites it is possible to fit an "elephant in the box" and create a rich spatial experience that is revealed gradually, rather than exposed all at once as a landmark.

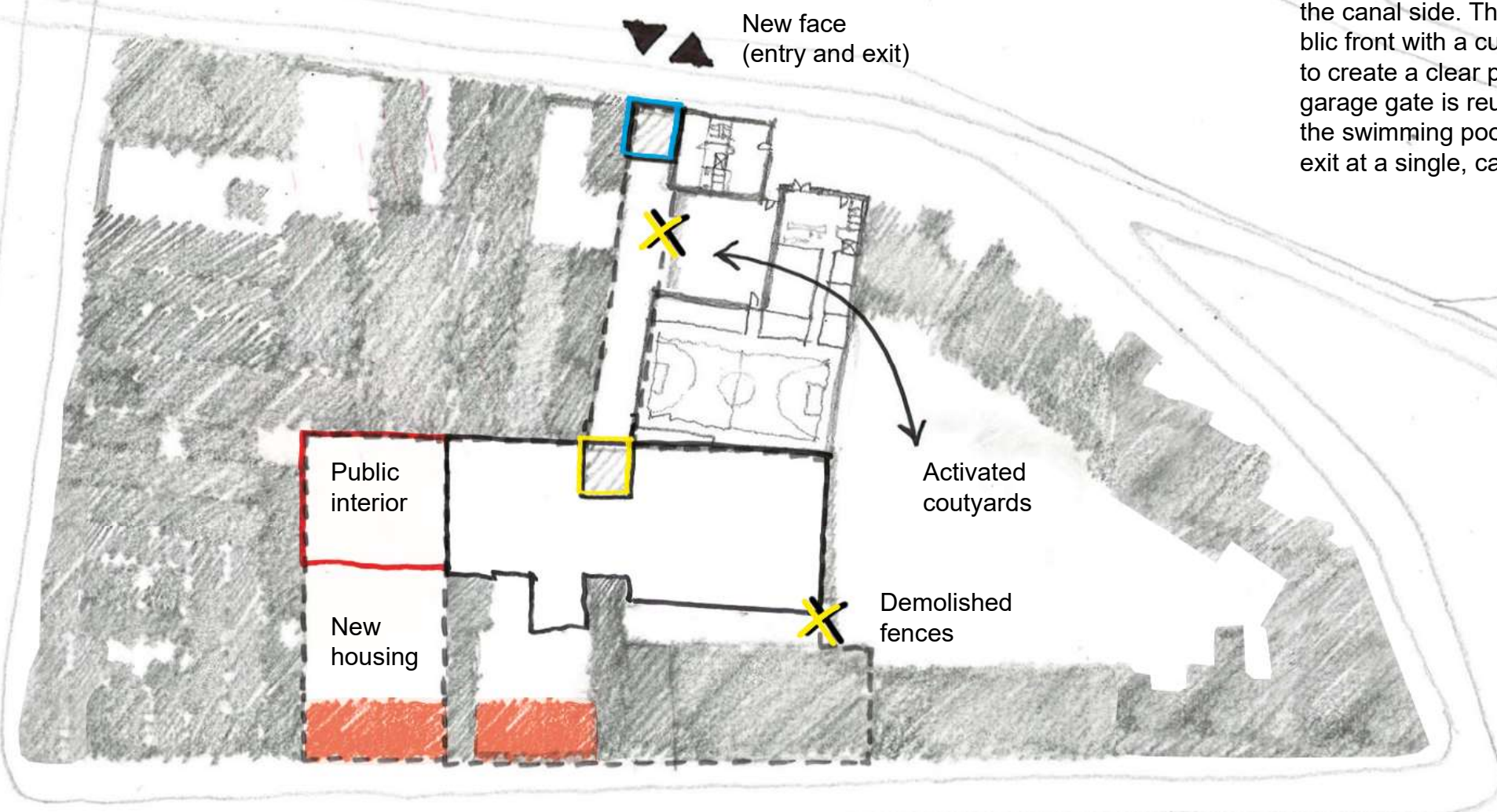


historical photo
of victor boin de saint-gilles

The proposal suggests the adaptive reuse of the existing car garage as a spatial framework for new public functions. In parallel, the street edge along Heyvaert Street is reinforced through the addition of housing blocks.

The empty demolished plot becomes a part of the strategy. Here, an extension of the sports hall is introduced, taking advantage of the spatial qualities of the block interior.

Overall, the whole plot gets reoriented towards the canal side. The back becomes a new public front with a cut done in the building mass to create a clear public entrance. The existing garage gate is reused as a reception point for the swimming pool, placing both the entry and exit at a single, canal-facing side.



The existing building proved to be as mysterious as the interior plot it occupies. What a passer-by knows of the building from the street are only its gates, which occasionally open to allow a new car delivery into the garage. In fact, from the outside it is barely possible to know that the building even exists behind the housing units. The interior courtyards of the block remain largely hidden from view.

Entering the plot was therefore essential. The aim was not simply to analyse the building, but to distil the elements that define its identity and allow them to guide the design of the project's spaces.

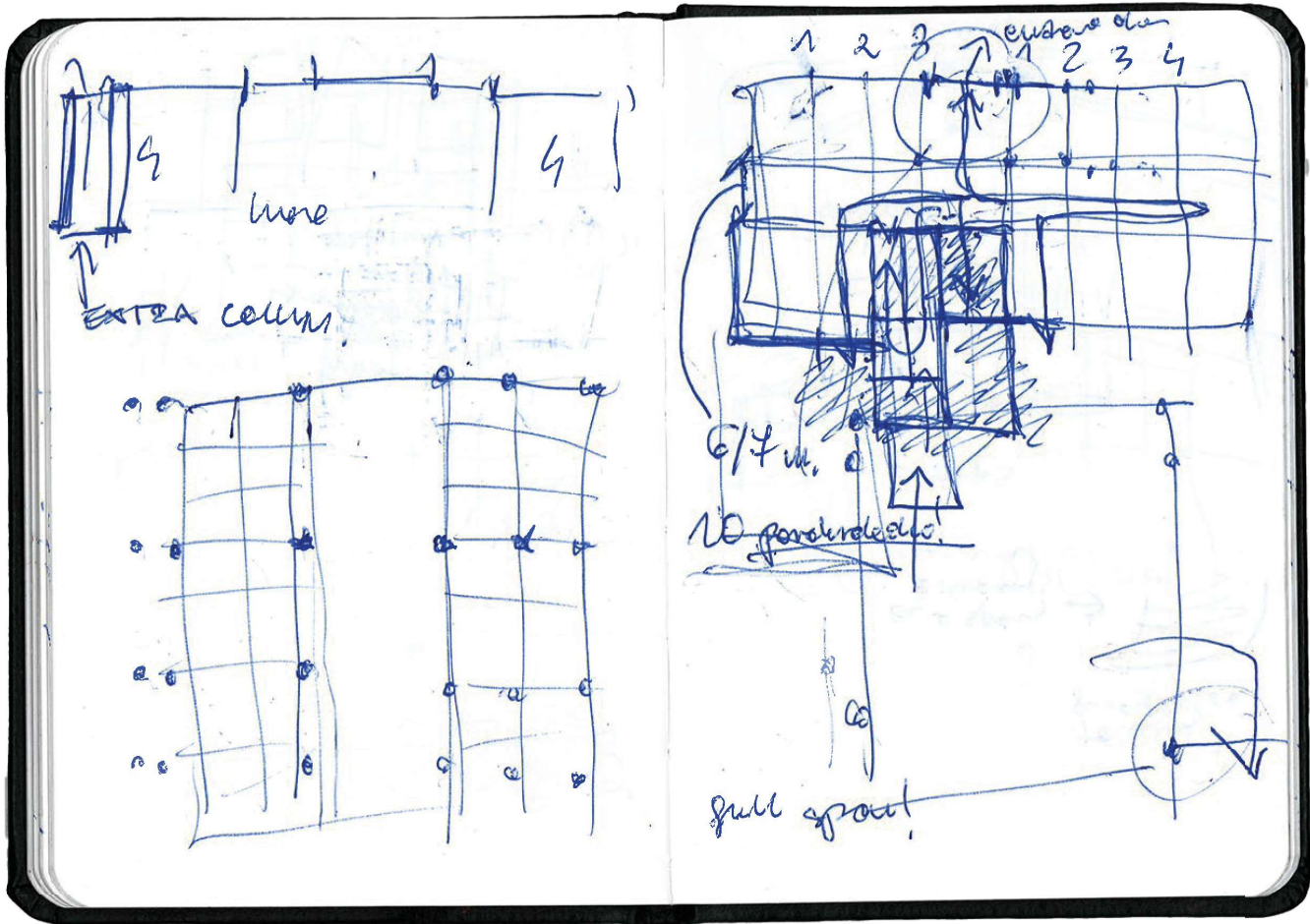
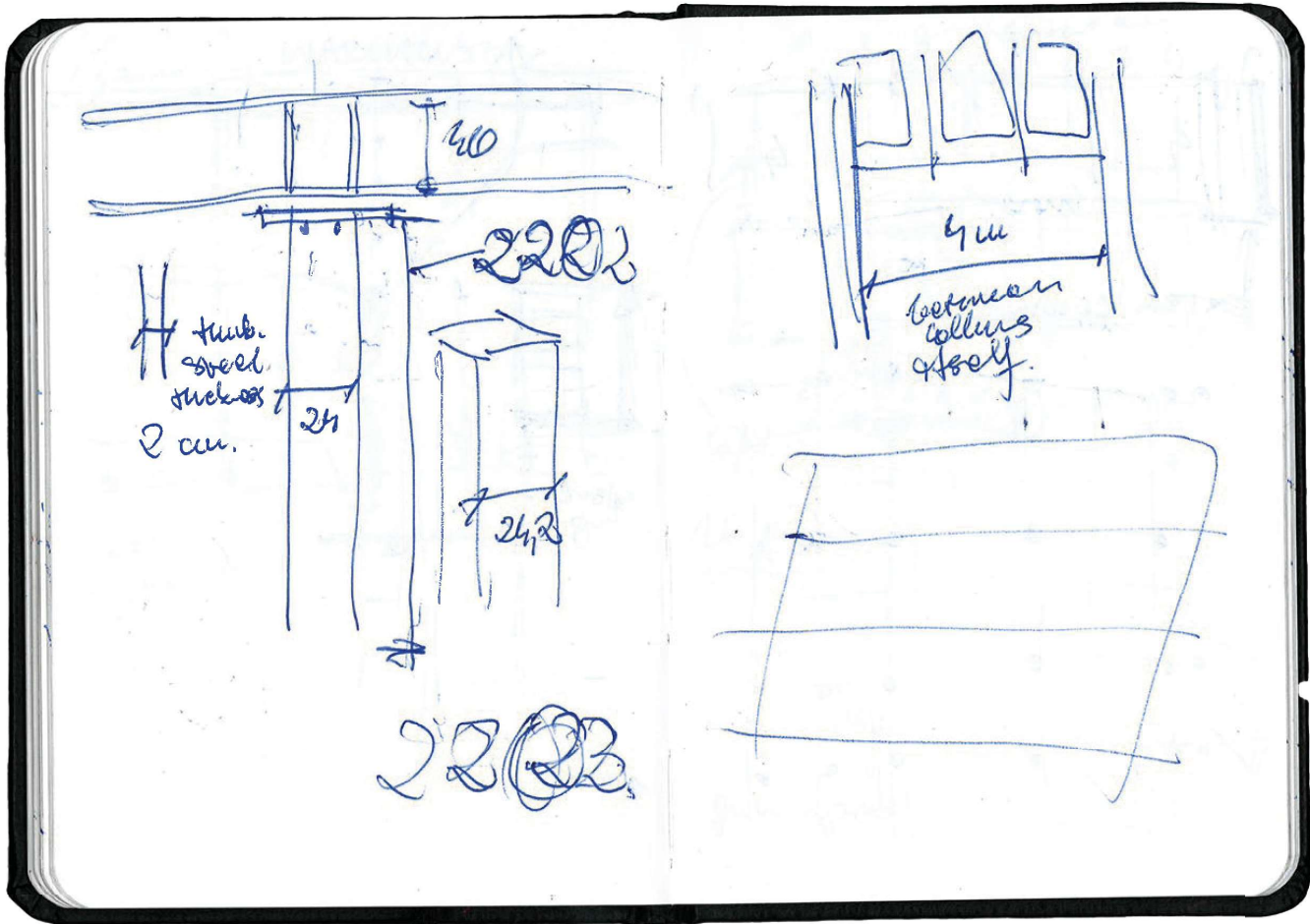
SITUATION:

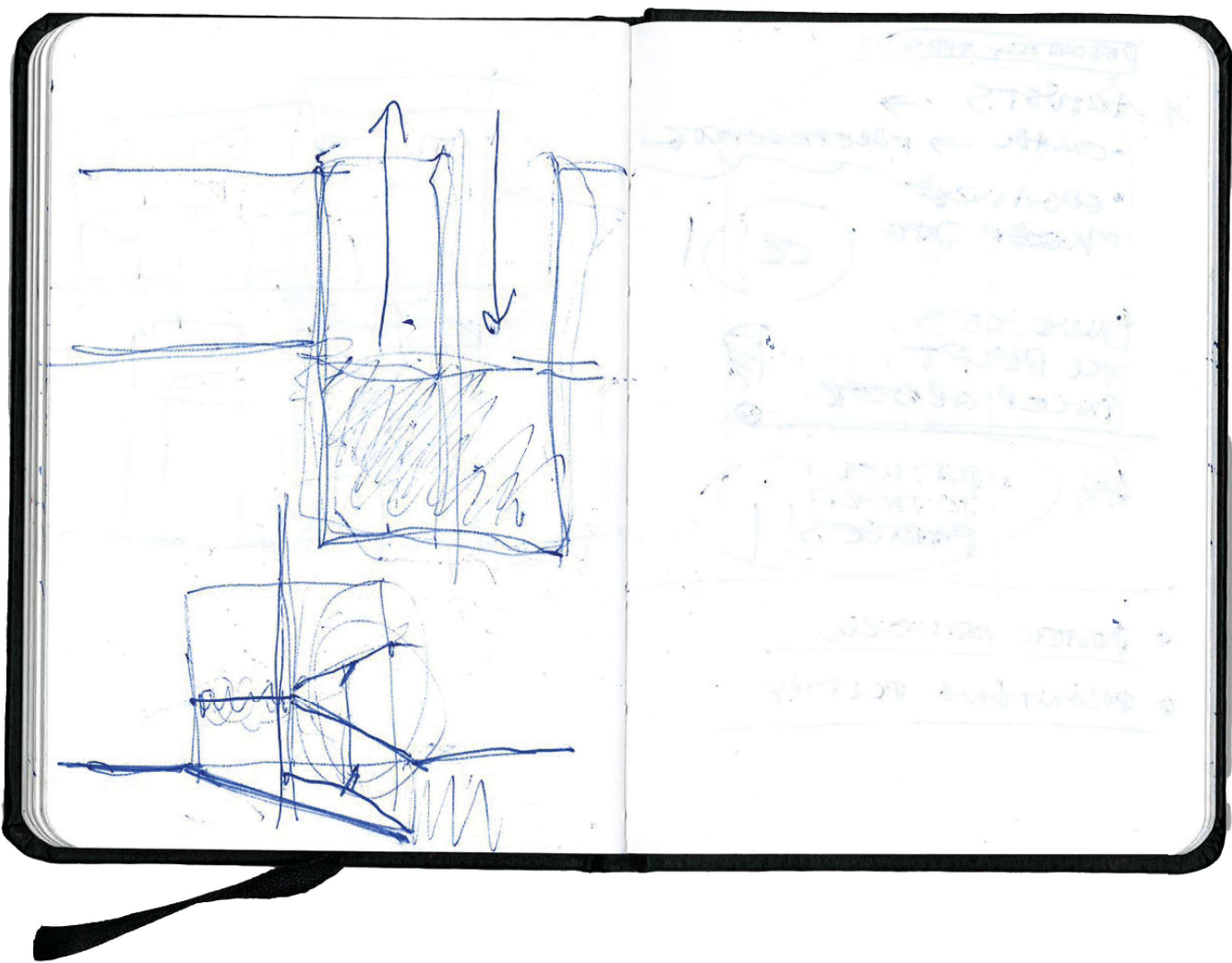
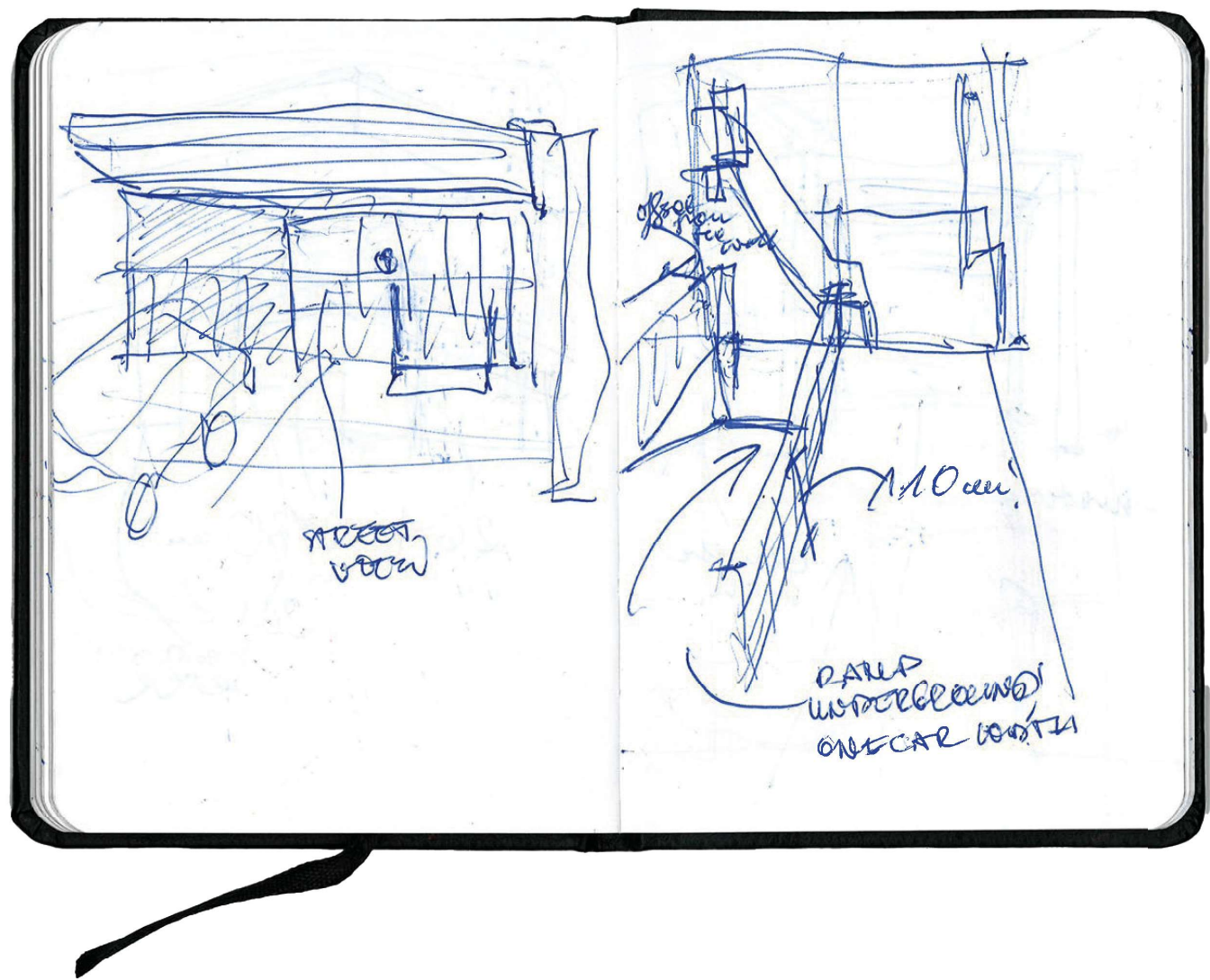
Follow the Garage Logic

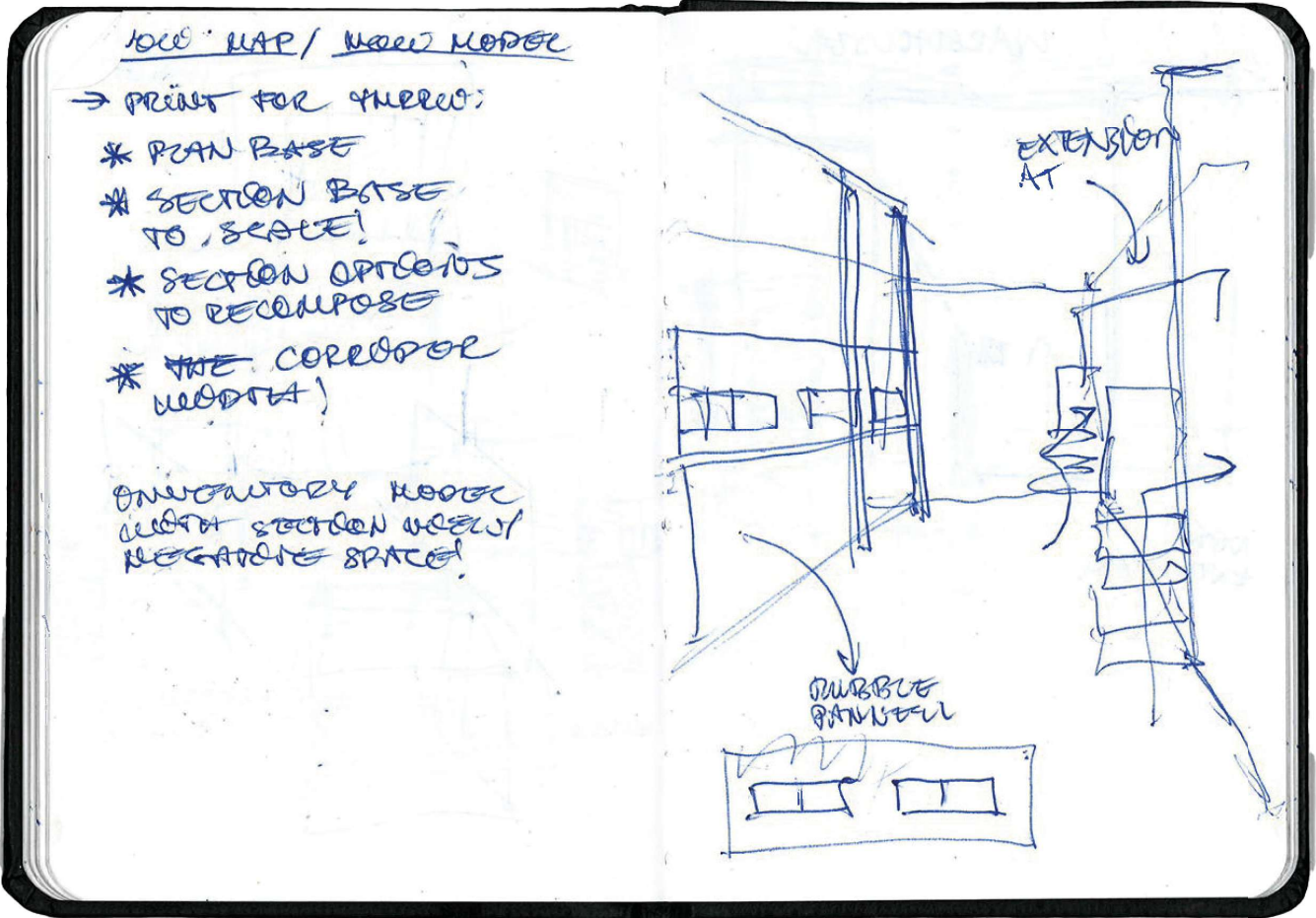
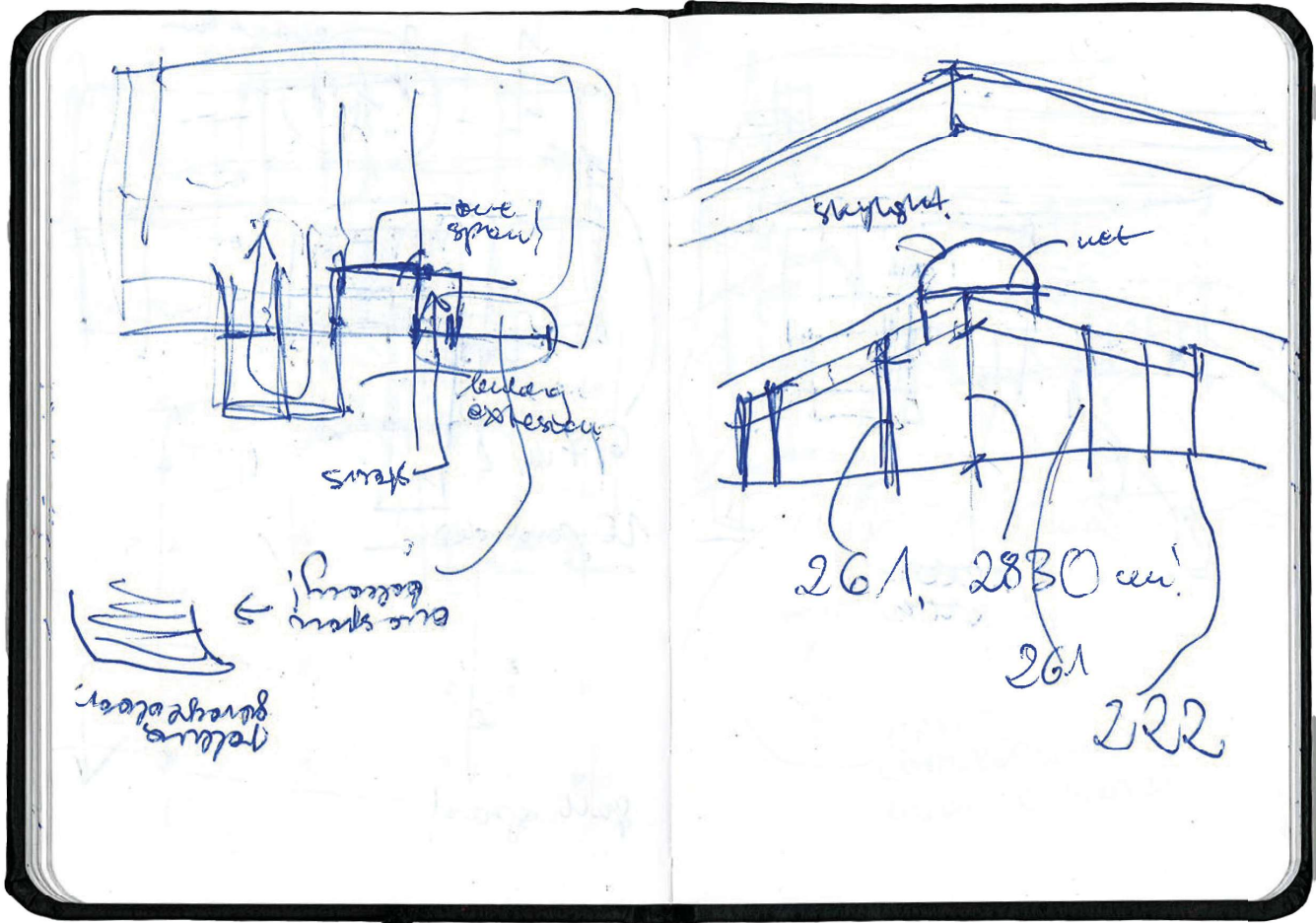
Gaining access to the building, was difficult. Its hidden interior qualities, which is one of the site's most intriguing characteristics, also made it one of the hardest places to study. From aerial imagery, the structure appeared almost facadeless, with few openings and little indication of what happened inside.

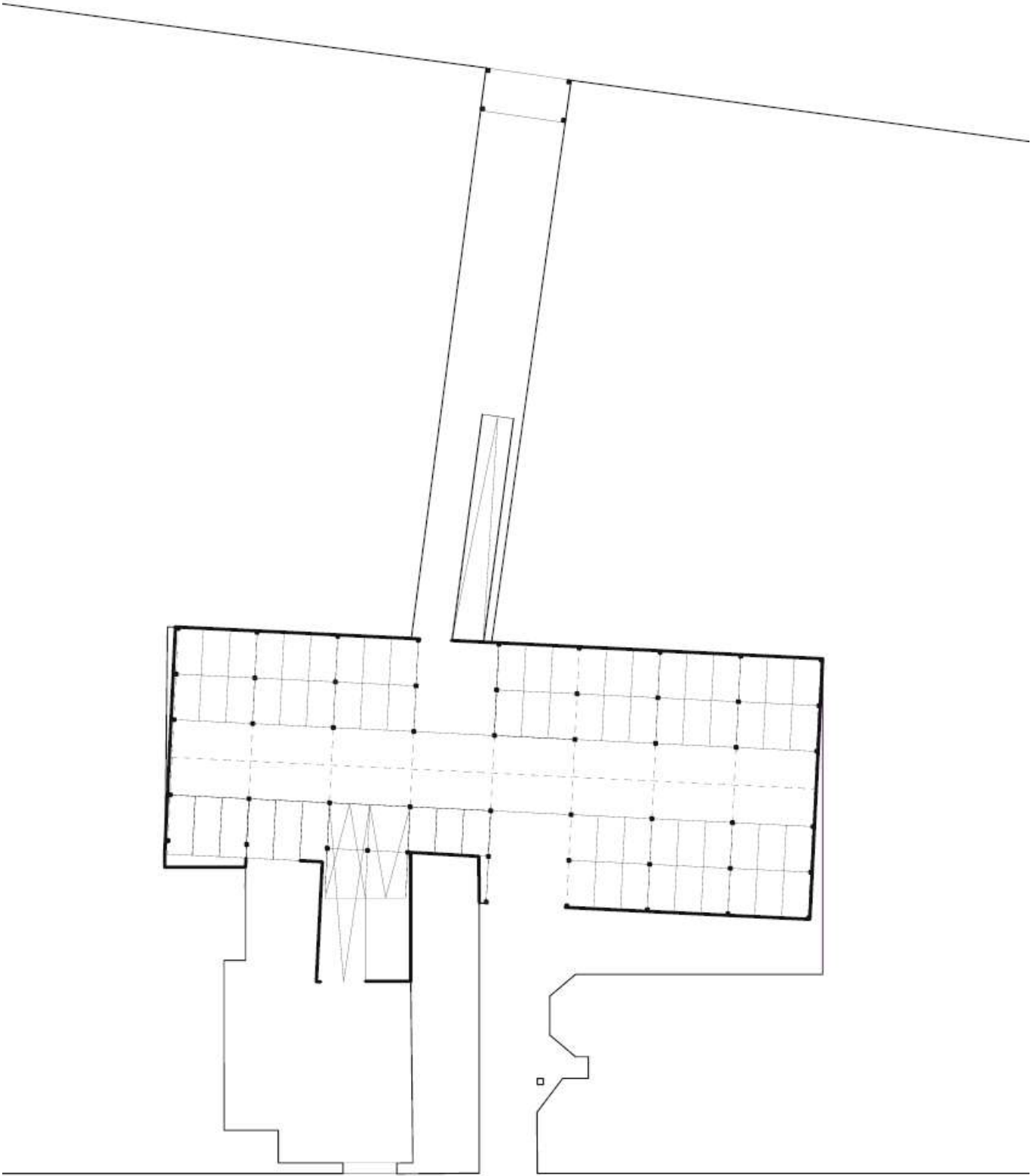
What ultimately made the analysis possible was the kindness of the IMS garage staff, who allowed the entry into the private car trade premises. Equipped with a measuring tape and sketchbook it was possible to have a meeting one to one with the main protagonist, the garage.





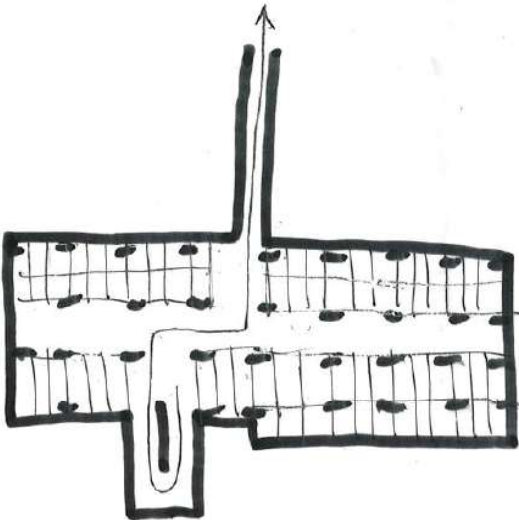






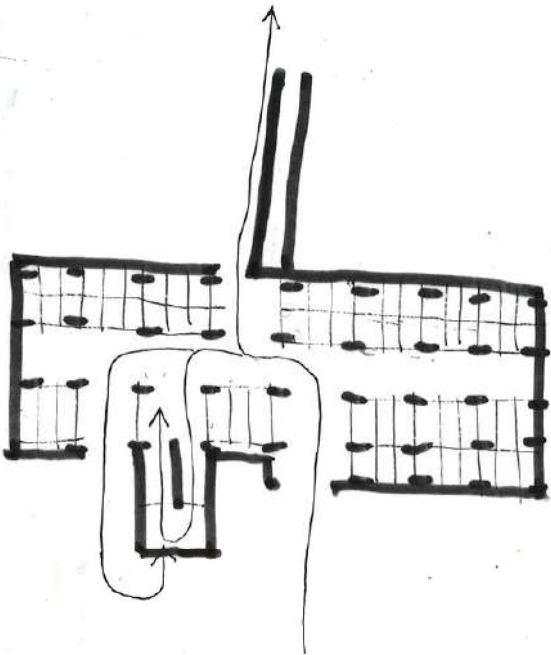
BASEMENT FLOOR

- + gr floor connection
- + direct exit towards the canal



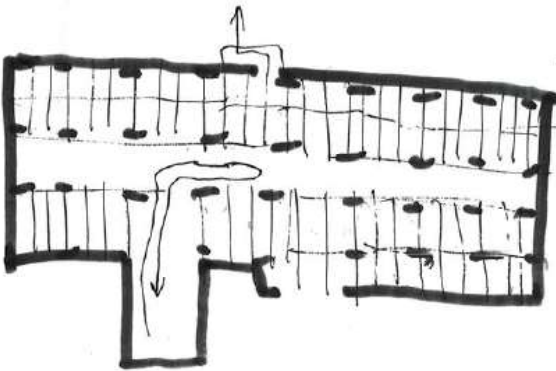
GROUND FLOOR

- + first floor connection
- + direct exit towards heyvaert st
- + direct exit towards courtyard



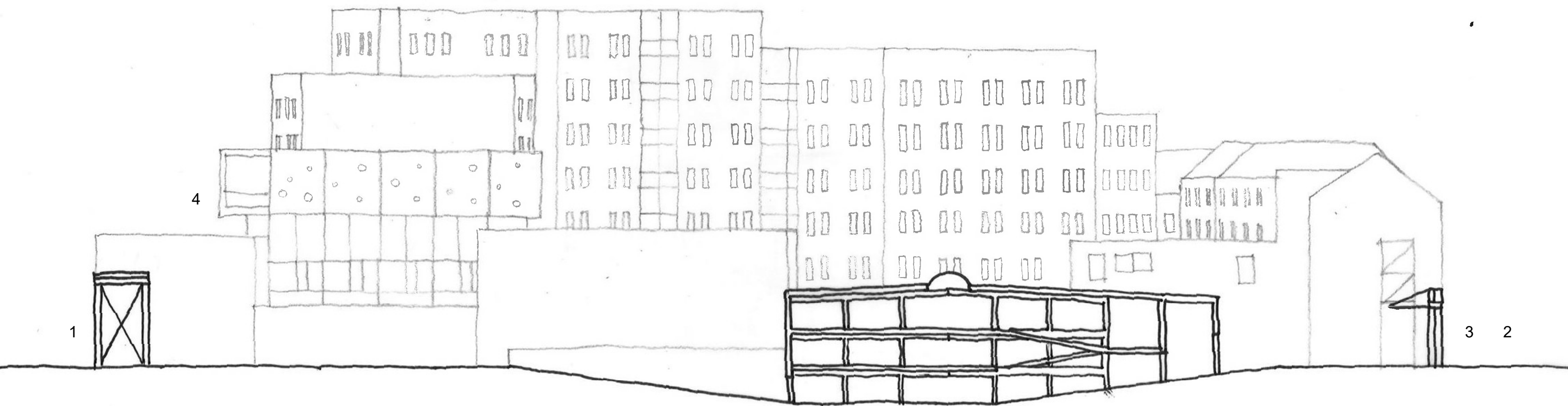
1ST FLOOR

- + gr floor connection
- + no direct exit





Experiencing the building in person revealed another important quality. Entering through a previously unnoticed access point beneath the adjacent residential block, the journey unfolded through a sequence of gates, tunnels, ramps, and changing levels. The continuous movement through the structure created an experience reminiscent of an architectural promenade. The ramps appeared to be the key elements in this process as they not only connected the floors, but they choreographed the entire journey through both the site and the building.





site access 1



site access 2



site access 3

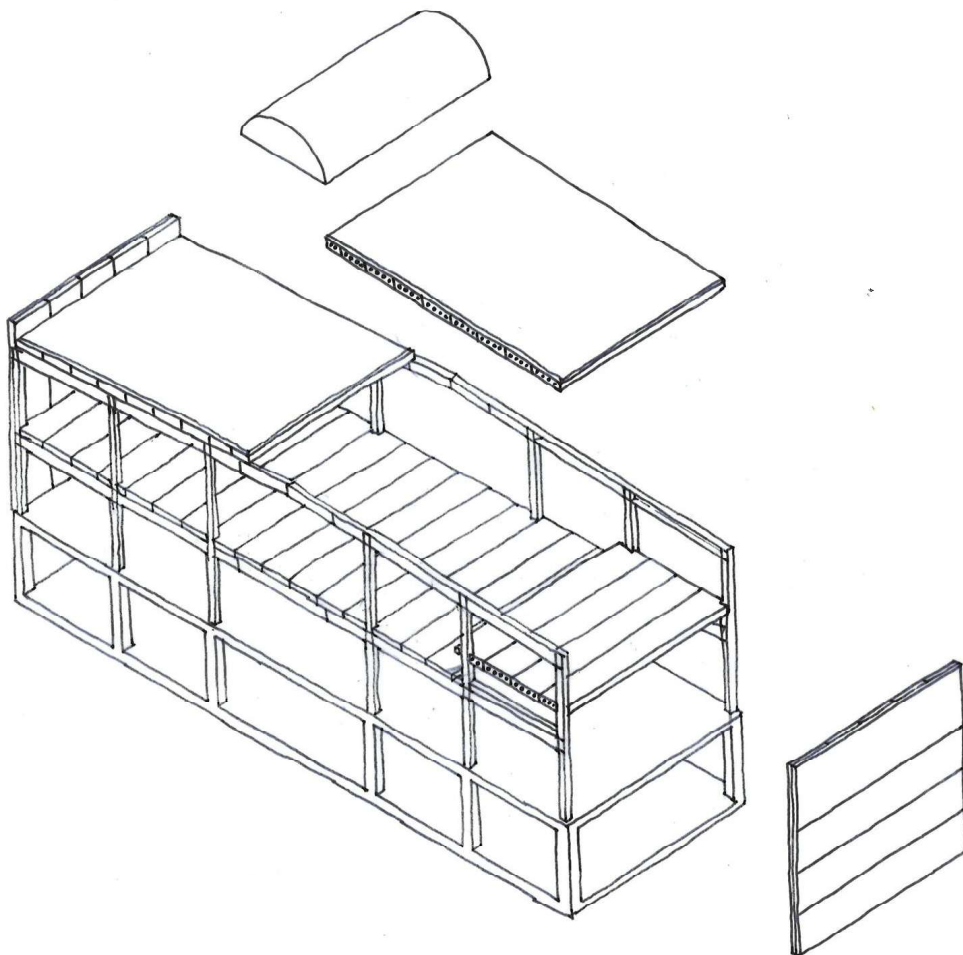
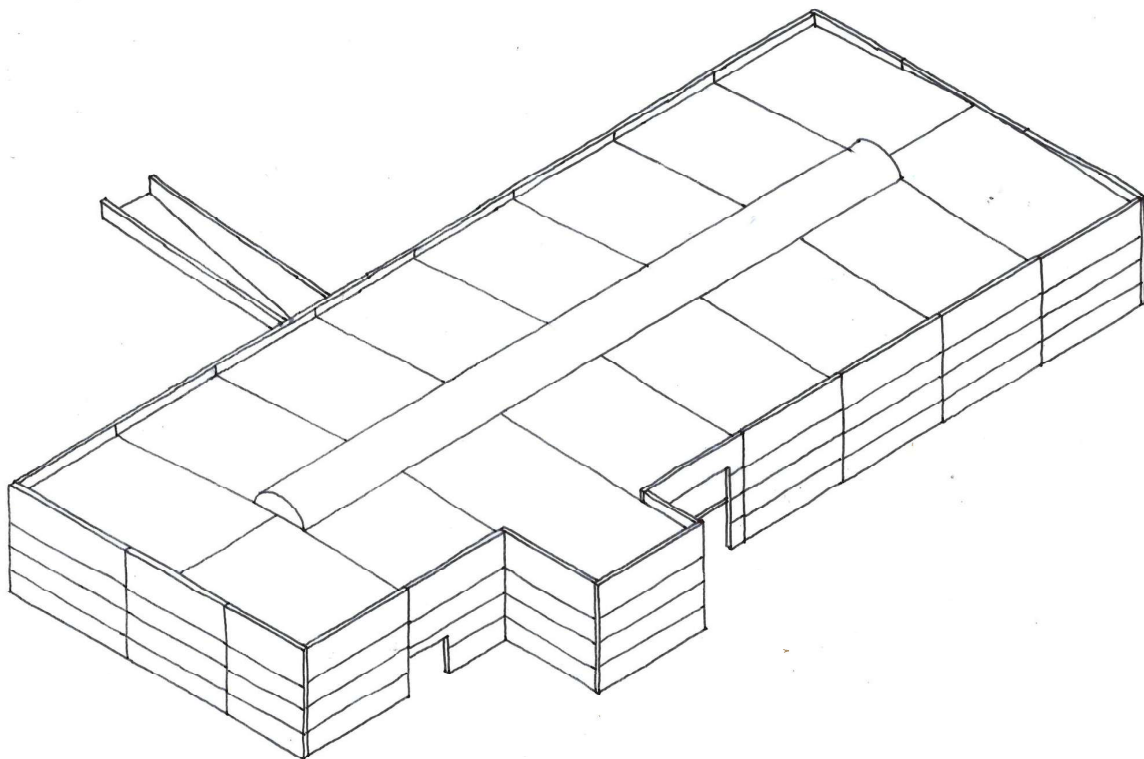


site access 4

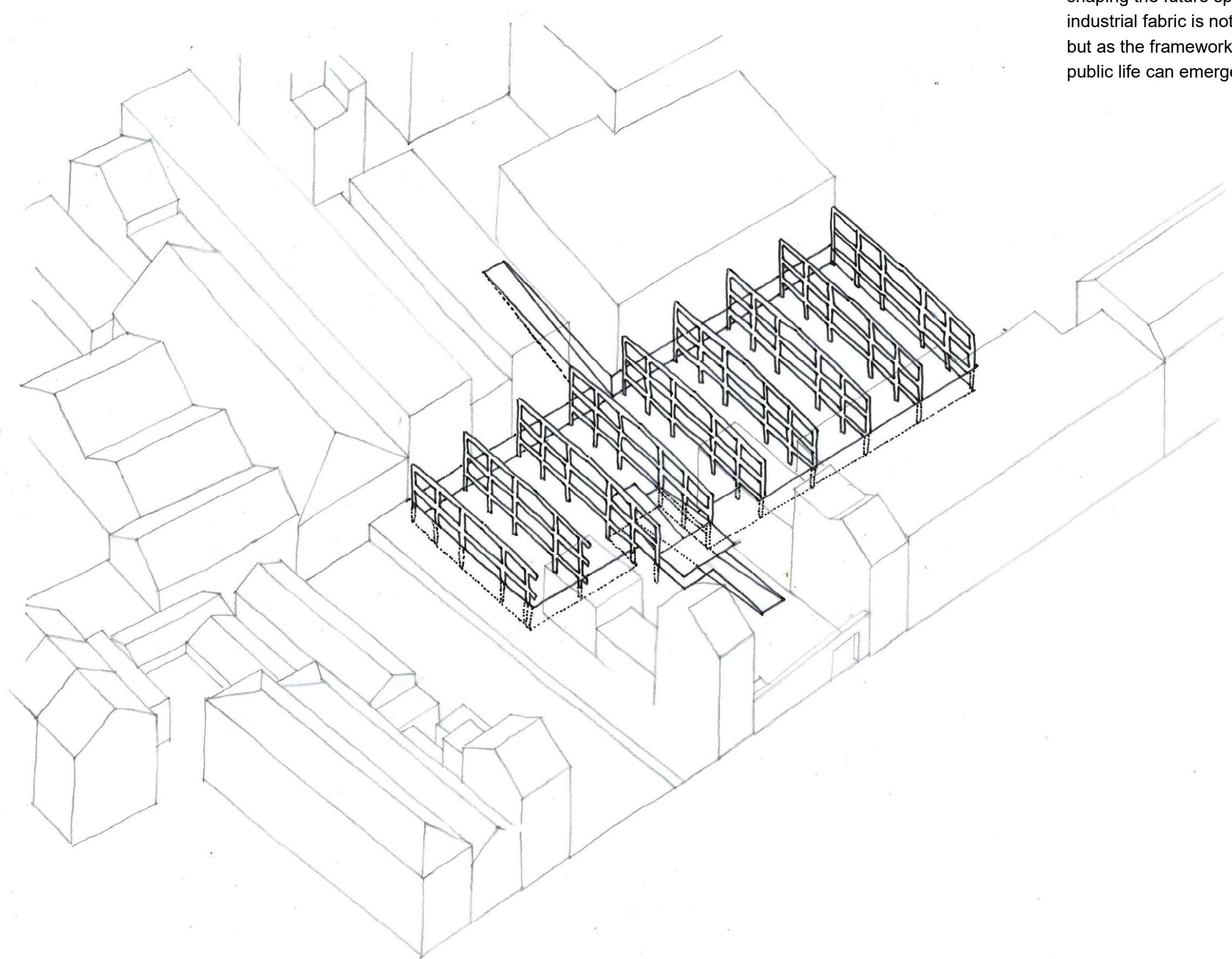
EXITING GARAGE
STRUCTURE DIAGRAM

The exterior cladding appears to consist of separate exposed aggregate concrete panels, most likely installed over a layer of rigid insulation to meet Belgian energy standards. This construction system is consistent with the period between 2004 and 2009, when the building first appeared in aerial photographs.

The project building is essentially a steel frame structure stabilized along its longitudinal axis by hollow core concrete floor and roof slabs. Based on observations made during the site visit, particularly the vertical arrangement of the wall panels on the interior and the visible horizontal arrangement on the exterior, a prefabricated concrete panel wall system was assumed.



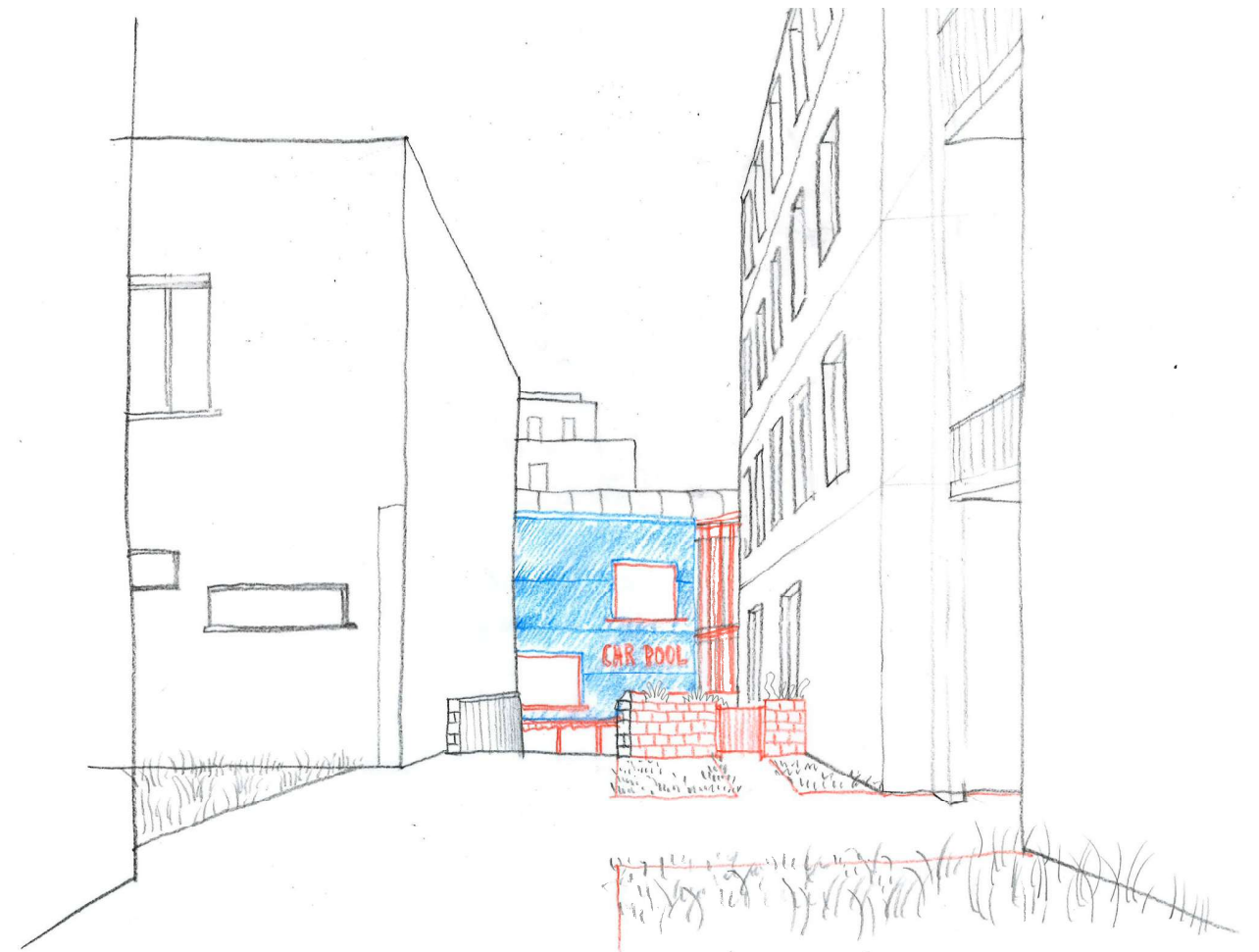
The ramps fitted around the steel frames revealed the potential to be the key infrastructure element that can serve the public infrastructure, guiding visitors through the building and shaping the future sports centre. The existing industrial fabric is not treated as a constraint, but as the framework through which a new public life can emerge.



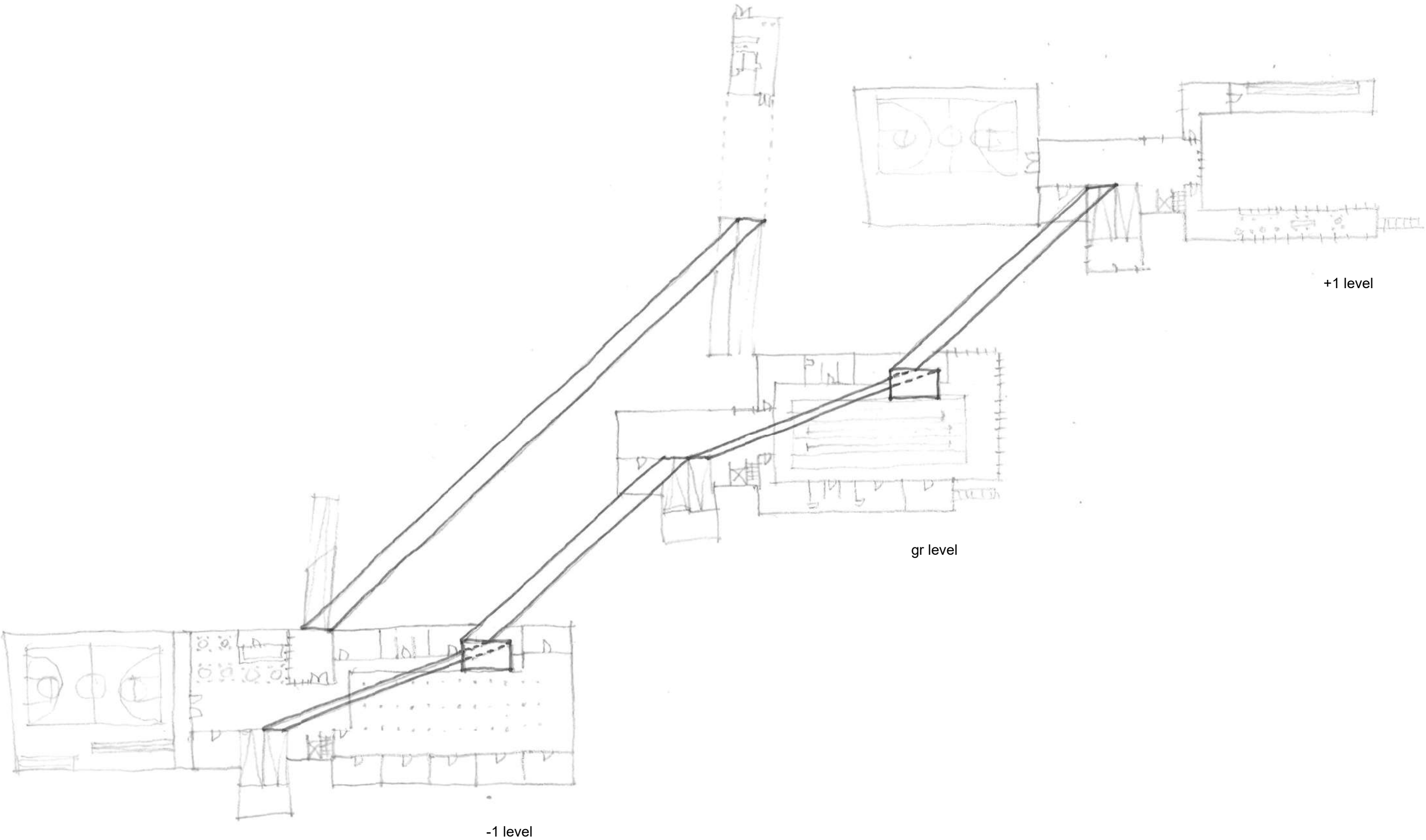
The design starts with the conversation with the existing community center and the Mohamed Ali facility. The preserved tunnel ramp way leading to the building, instead of being the separator secret tunnel way to enter the closed of space, becomes a leading way inviting the people to explore the interior qualities of the plot. Along the way the connection with the community center courtyard is strengthened as the tunnel walls get removed from the courtyard. Still, the way is kept separated from the street level allowing the public space to be monitored and kept safe. Along the way the eyes on the street from the neighbouring workshop and living development provide the social security feeling of the place, opening socially up the blank facades along the tunnel and reconnecting the plots, bringing the relationship between the people living and working the spaces and the users of the public sports center.

DESIGN PROPOSAL:

Follow the Ramps to Find the People

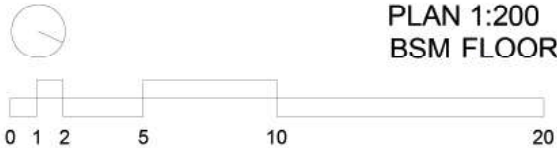


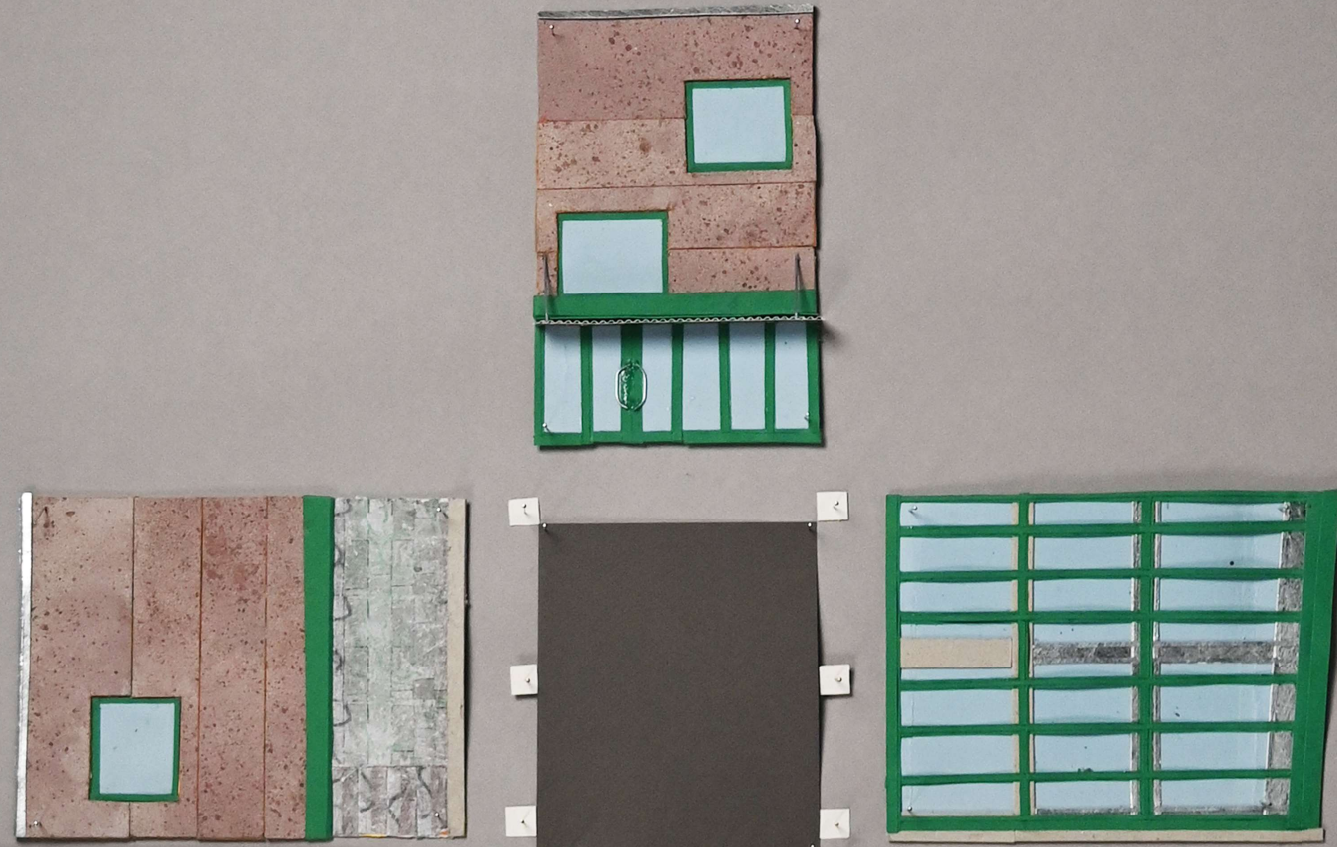




- 1. Cafeteria
- 2. Entrance courtyard
- 3. Sportshall
- 4. Gear Storage
- 5. Reception
- 6. Changing rooms
- 7. Showers
- 8. Toilets
- 9. Pool tech zone

- demolished
- added
- existing
- reused/relocated

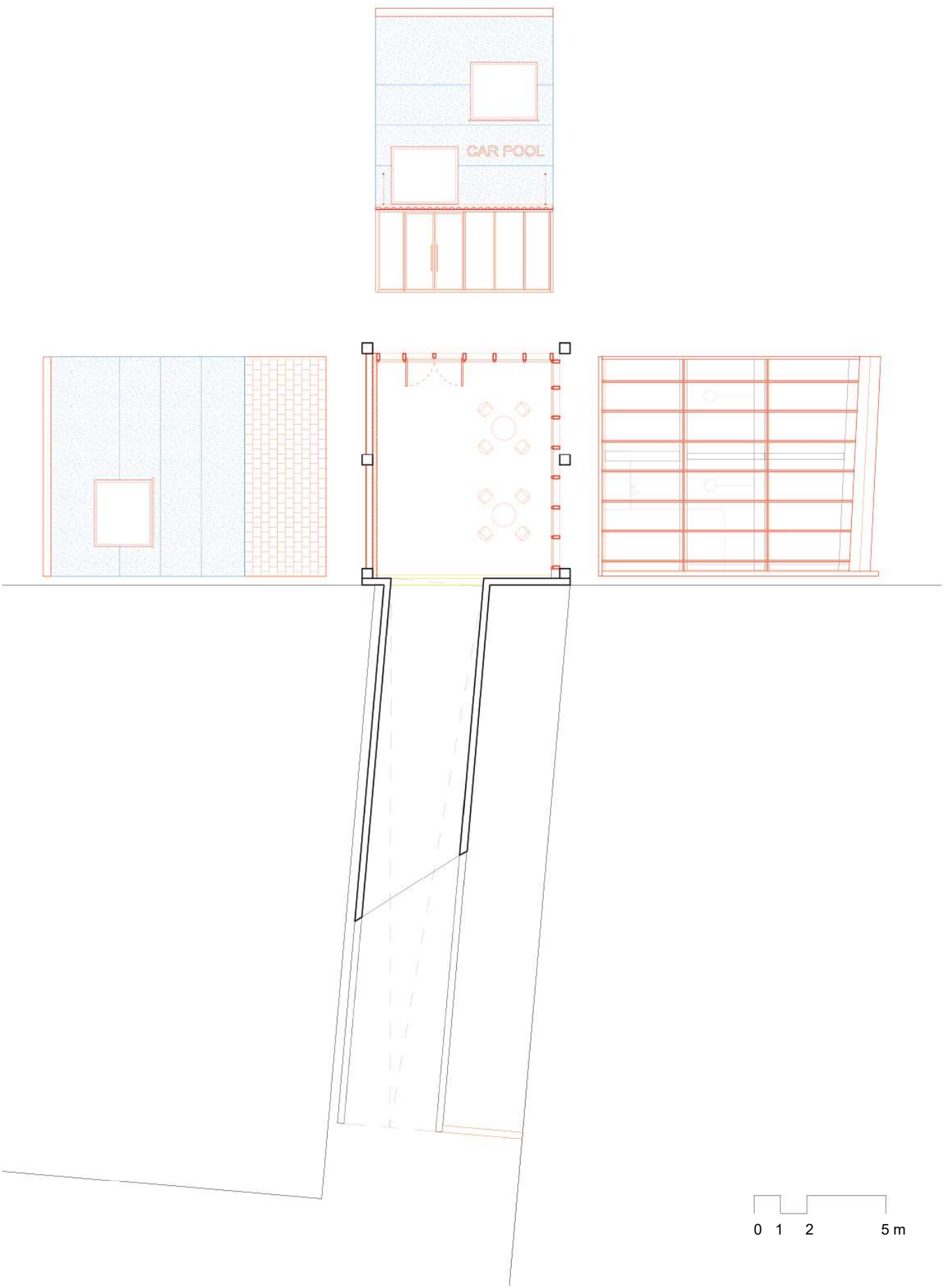




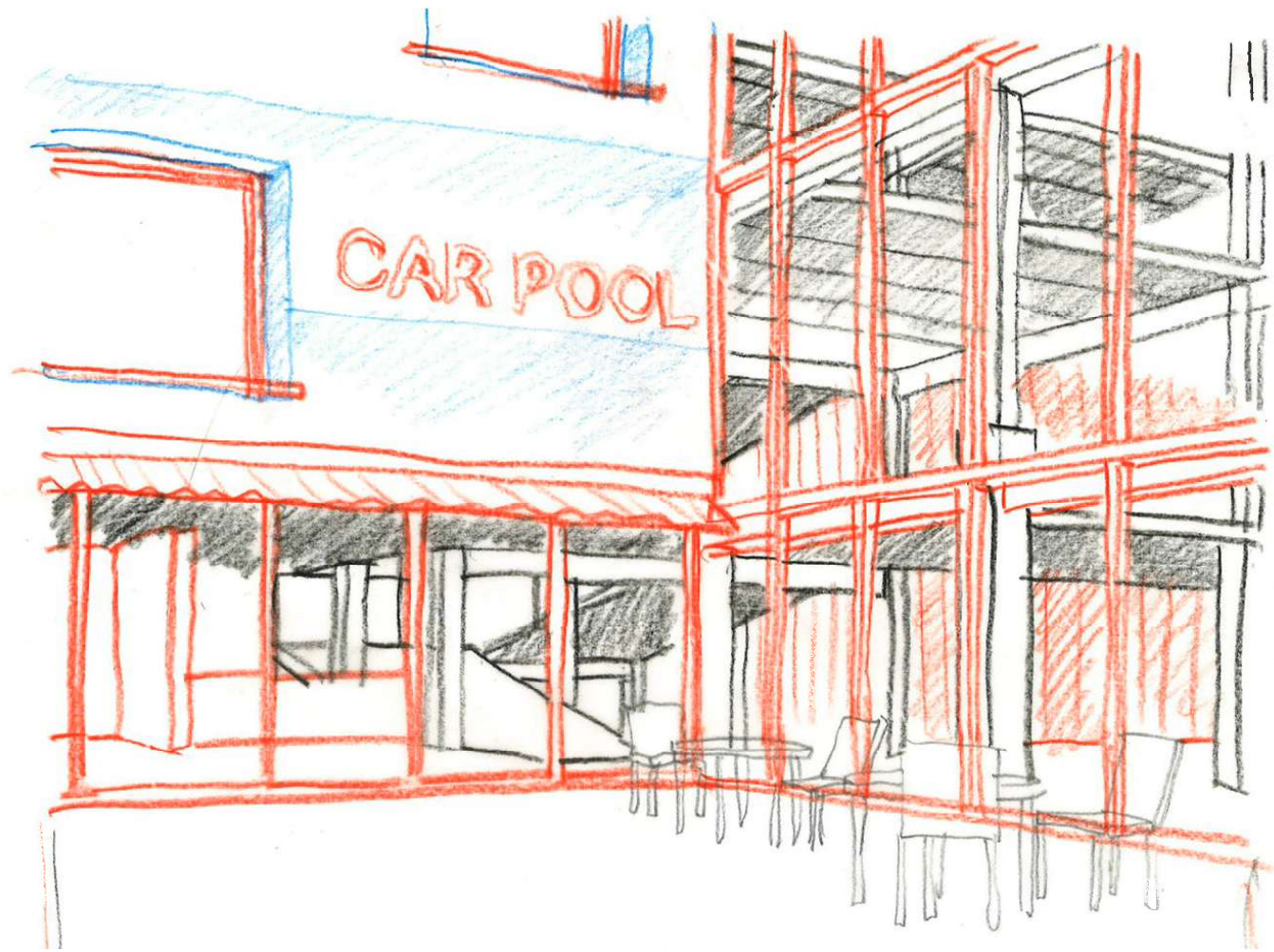
Allowing the architectural promenade to continue, the first alteration to the building happens at the interface between the exterior ramp and the tunnel. Previously, the rear exit route of the largely facadeless building now becomes its front face, requiring a different architectural response. Positioned between the blank walls of the neighbouring buildings, the space called for a more generous gesture of opening. Previously layered and enclosed surfaces are made transparent at key points, allowing the ramps to continue seamlessly while inviting people into a more vibrant and publicly visible environment.



The green entrance glazing relates to the colour accent in the neighbouring Mohamed Ali Centre, suggesting that these 2 facilities work as one complex.



Through this transformation of the building's back into its front, the structure reconnects with its canal-side, residential, productive, and sports-centre neighbours. It reinforces the identity of the interior, the hidden heart of the urban block situated between these different functions. The route ultimately leads people toward the centre of the plot, the literal public heart of the project, where a café and terrace are located. This space becomes a social hub, encouraging people to meet, gather, and spend time together before or after engaging in sports activities.



The ground-floor entrance ramp directly re-connects with the interior circulation ramps, which become the central social ribbon of the building, leading users further into the sports facility. Moving one level up, the ramp brings people to the mezzanine level, which serves as the main access point to the swimming pool.

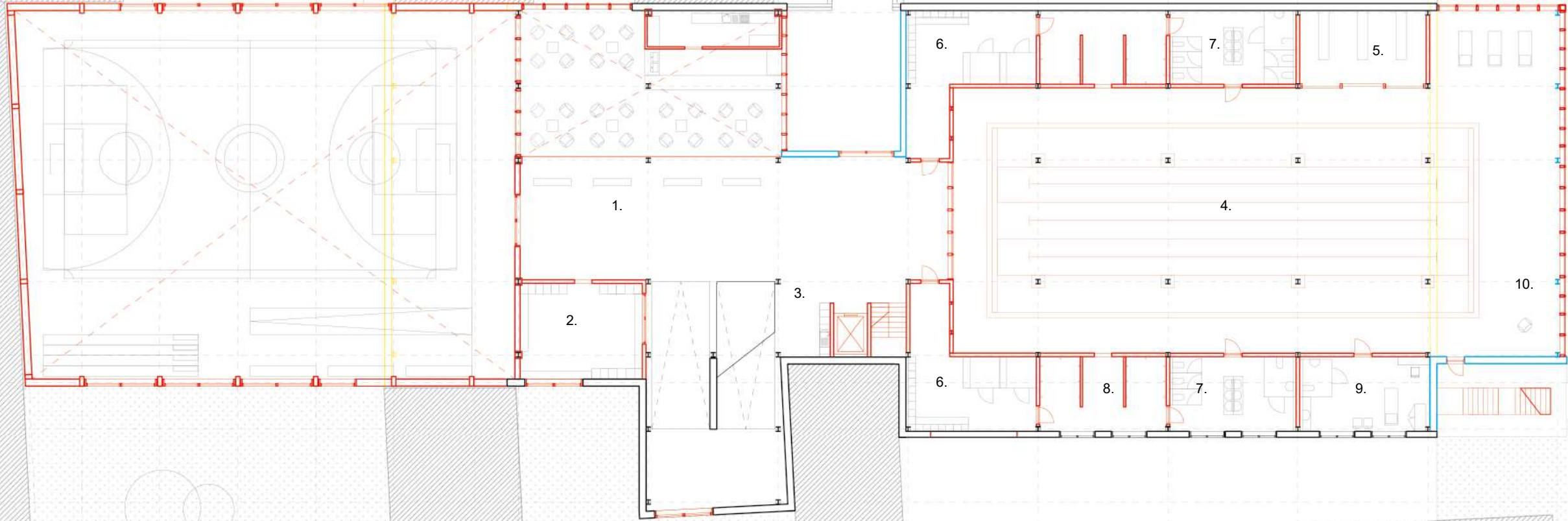
Drawing parallels with the tradition of Brussels' urban pools, the pool becomes a hidden gem for the community, tucked away behind the surrounding buildings. Through the central glazed axis, daylight penetrates deep into the building and establishes a new visual connection with the internal courtyard park that was previously disconnected from the site. In this way, the pool becomes an interface with the new residential estate, activating the park and allowing people to discover and enjoy this hidden green space.

The introduction of this permeability brings greenery into the experience of the building while still respecting the industrial identity of both the plot and the existing structure. The intervention preserves the building's character and transforms it into a kind of urban sanctuary, a place of leisure and public life returned to the community.

The key architectural gesture is the glazed façade facing the park. Together with the connection established through the Mohamed Ali Centre, it opens the building toward the previously blank façades surrounding the courtyard, giving them a more public interface, reactivating the shared spaces, and reconnecting the internal courtyards. In this way, the swimming pool replaces the car as the primary social condenser of the block, connecting spaces, users, and functions through shared public use.

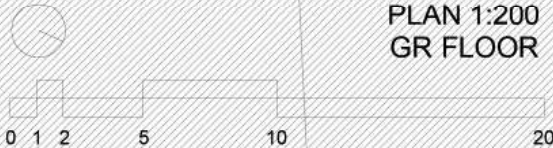
- 1. Rest space (mezzanine)
- 2. Drying room
- 3. Kitchenette
- 4. Pool wet area
- 5. Pool storage
- 6. Changing rooms
- 7. Toilets
- 8. Showers
- 9. Emergency room
- 10. Seewatch spot

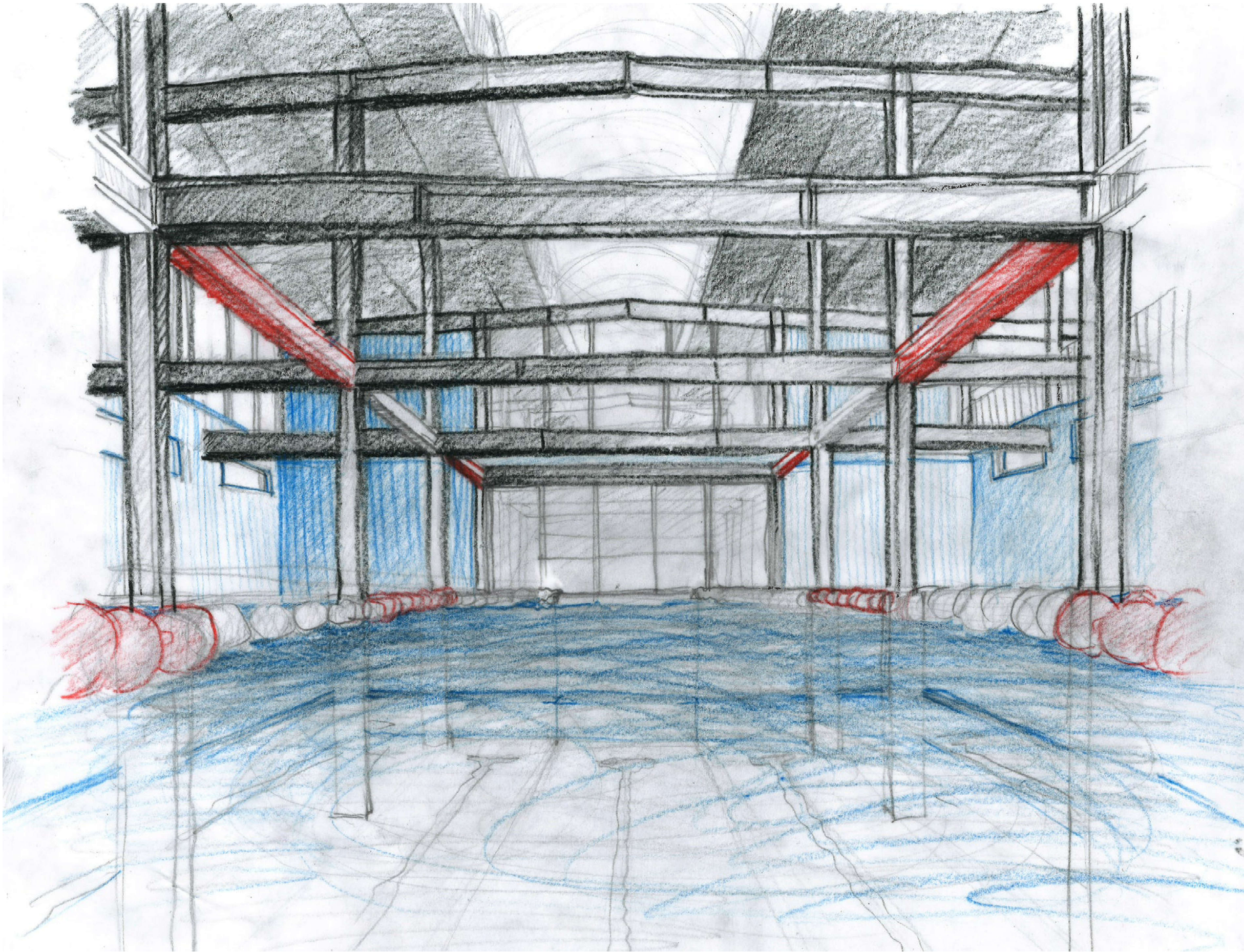
- demolished
- added
- existing
- reused/relocated



H
G
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16





Following the ramp upward once again, visitors are led to the upper level of the building. Tracing the path once taken by traded cars, they move toward the edge of the structure, where the glazed façade of the former garage opens onto a rooftop outdoor sports pitch.

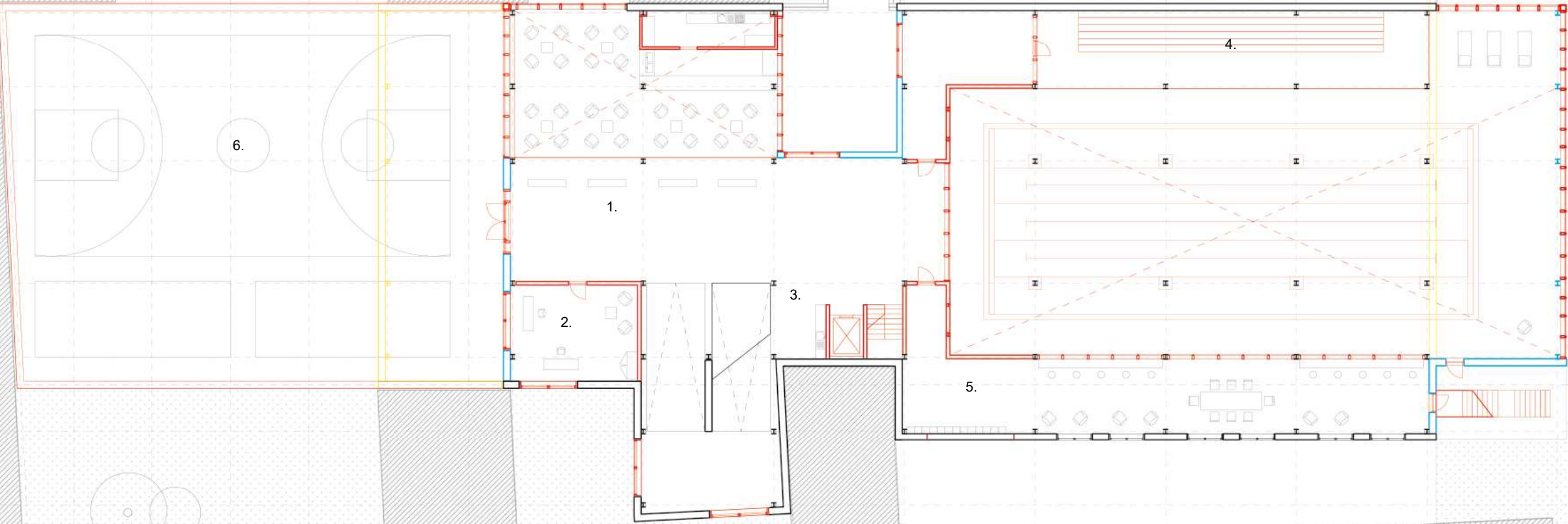
Through this gesture, the building embraces its enclosed condition. Surrounded by neighbouring buildings, the rooftop becomes a naturally monitored public space, benefiting from the presence of the surrounding community. The historic character of the plot is not erased but strengthened and opened up for public enjoyment.

At this point, the building becomes a key intersection between old and new identities. The industrial past enters into dialogue with the future public life of the sports centre, while the materials and structure of the former garage continue to dictate the architectural language and spatial form of the new intervention.



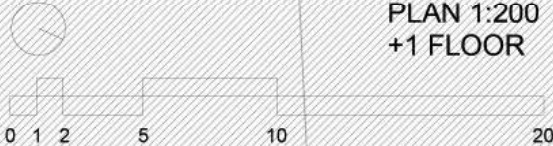
- 1. Rest space (mezzanine)
- 2. AdminiStration
- 3. Kitchenette
- 4. Spectator tribune
- 5. Quiet room
- 6. Rooftop sports pitch

- demolished
- added
- existing
- reused/relocated



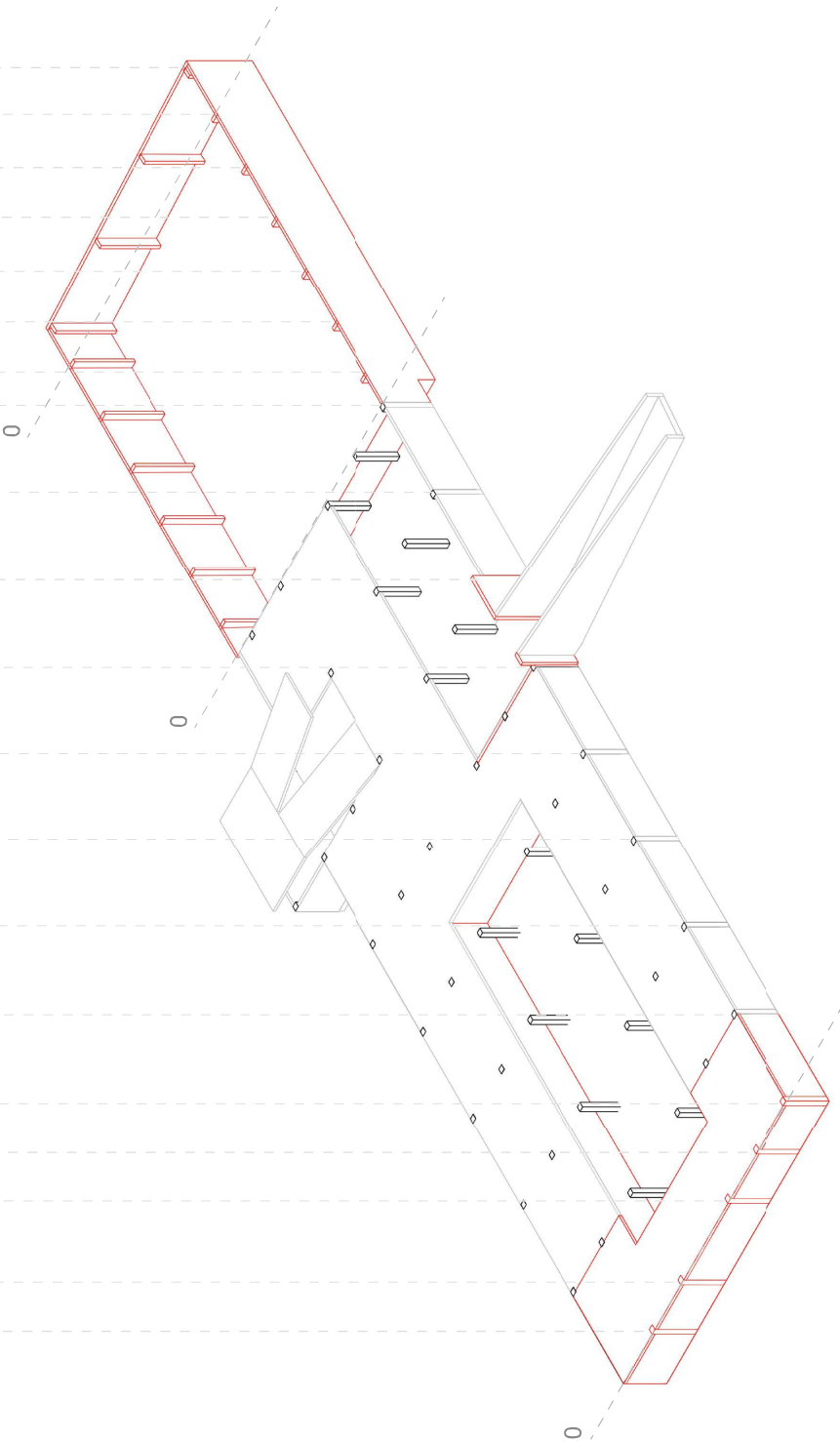
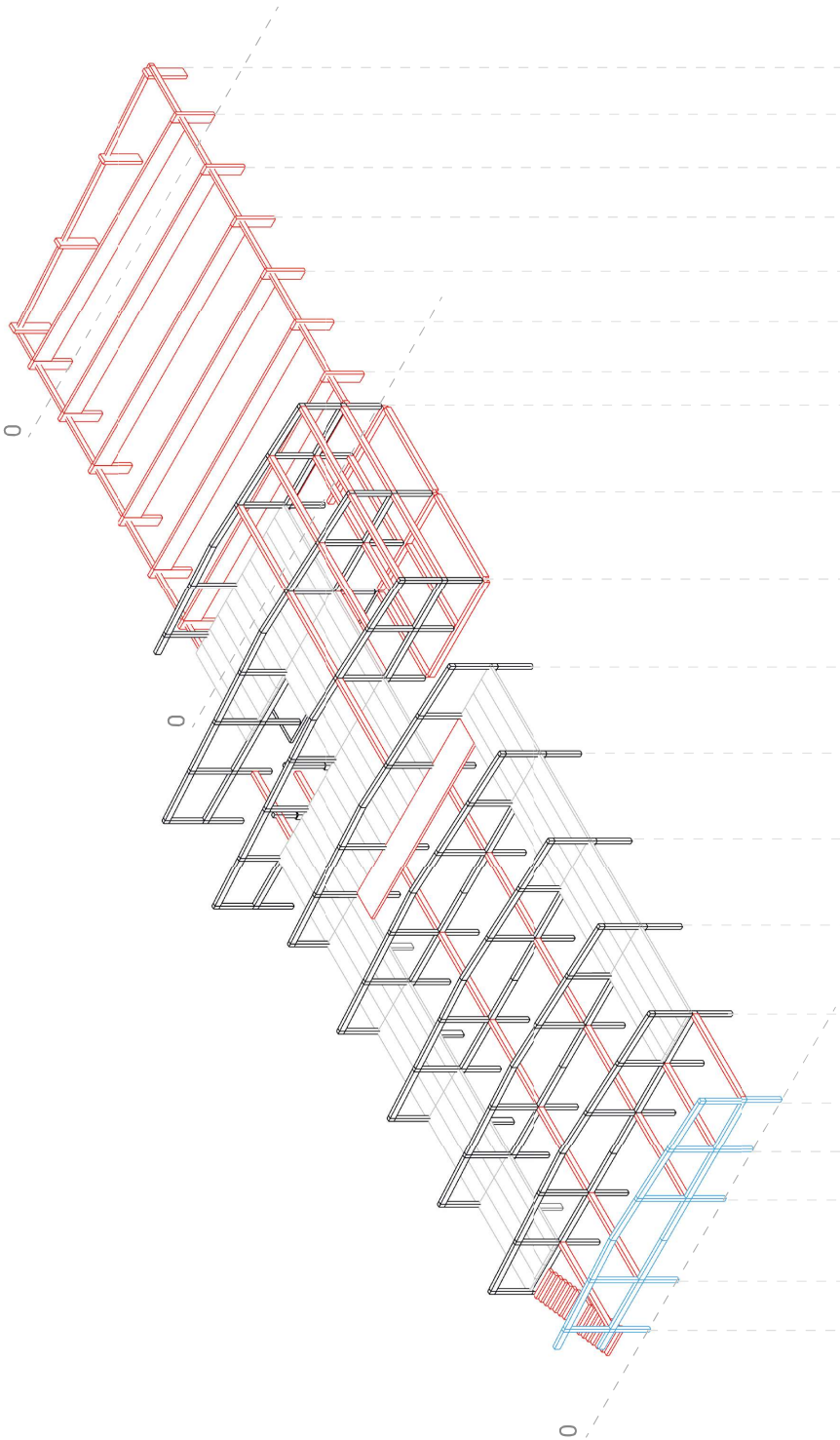
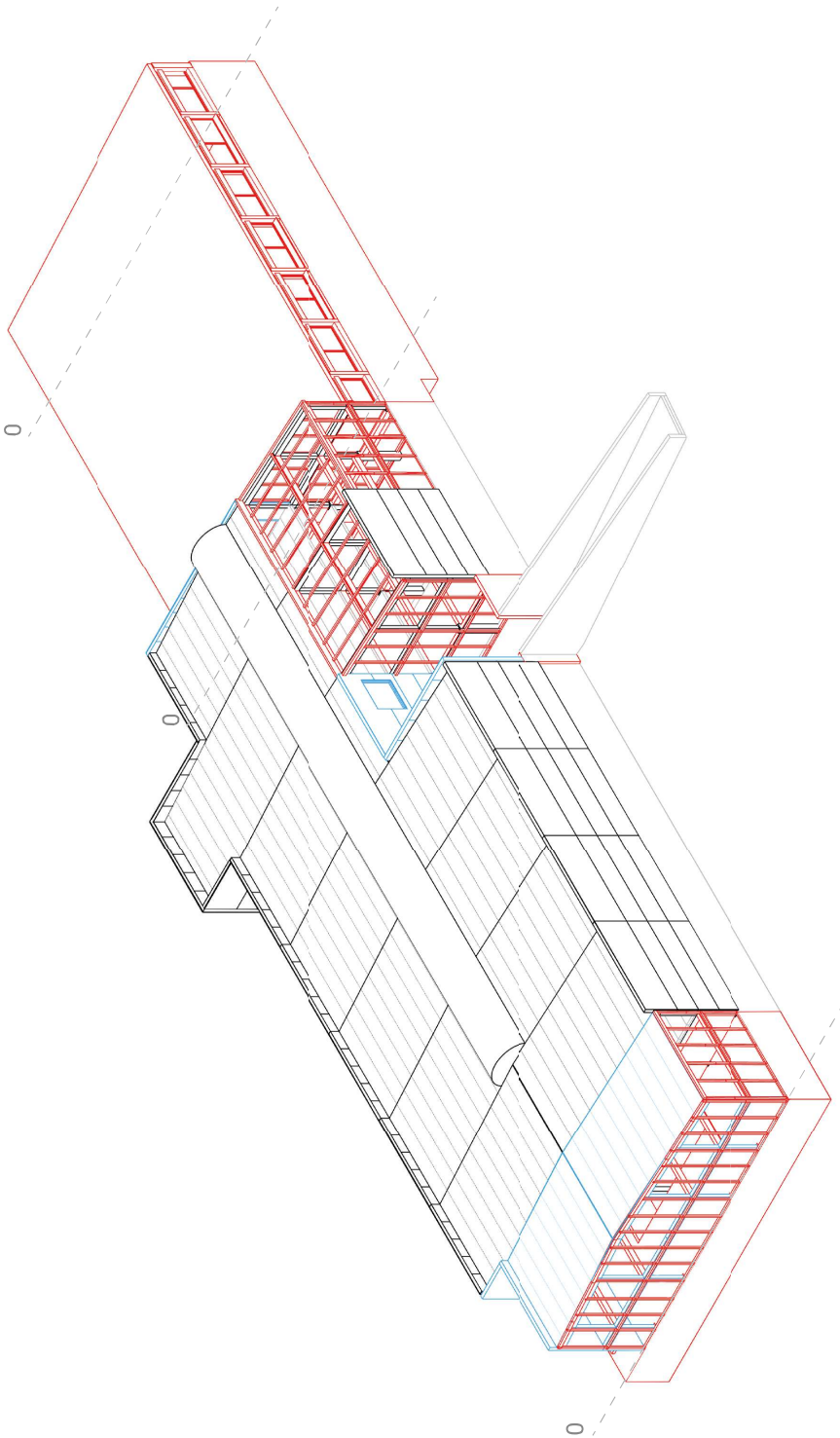
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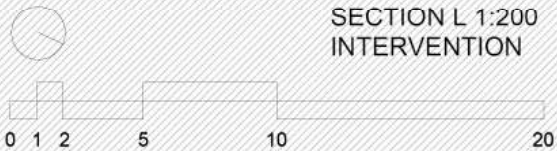
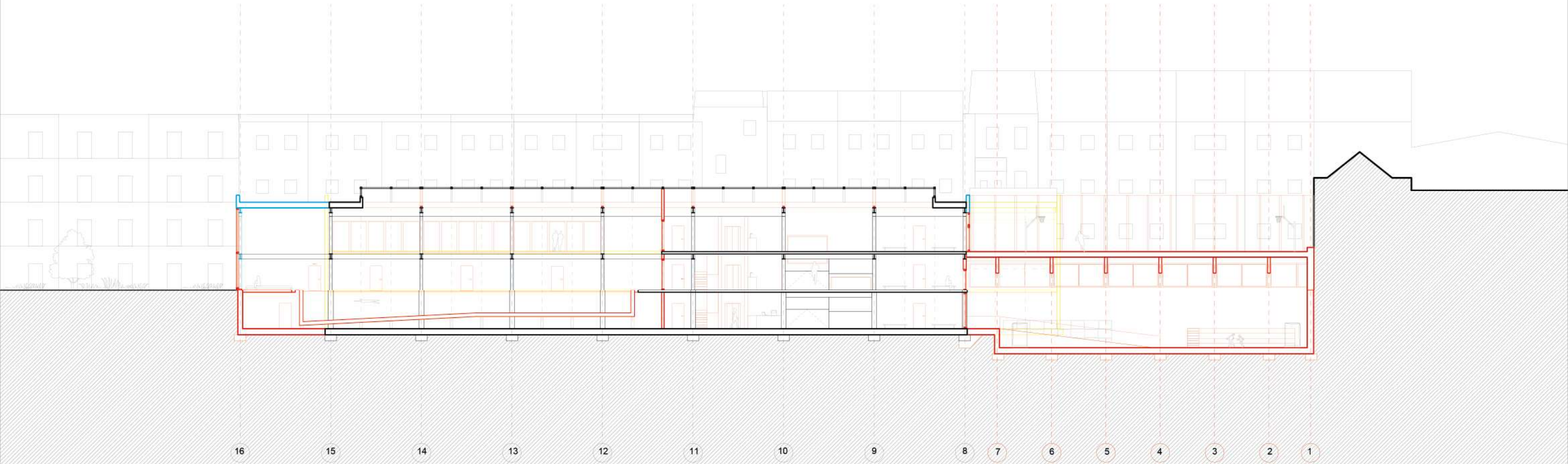


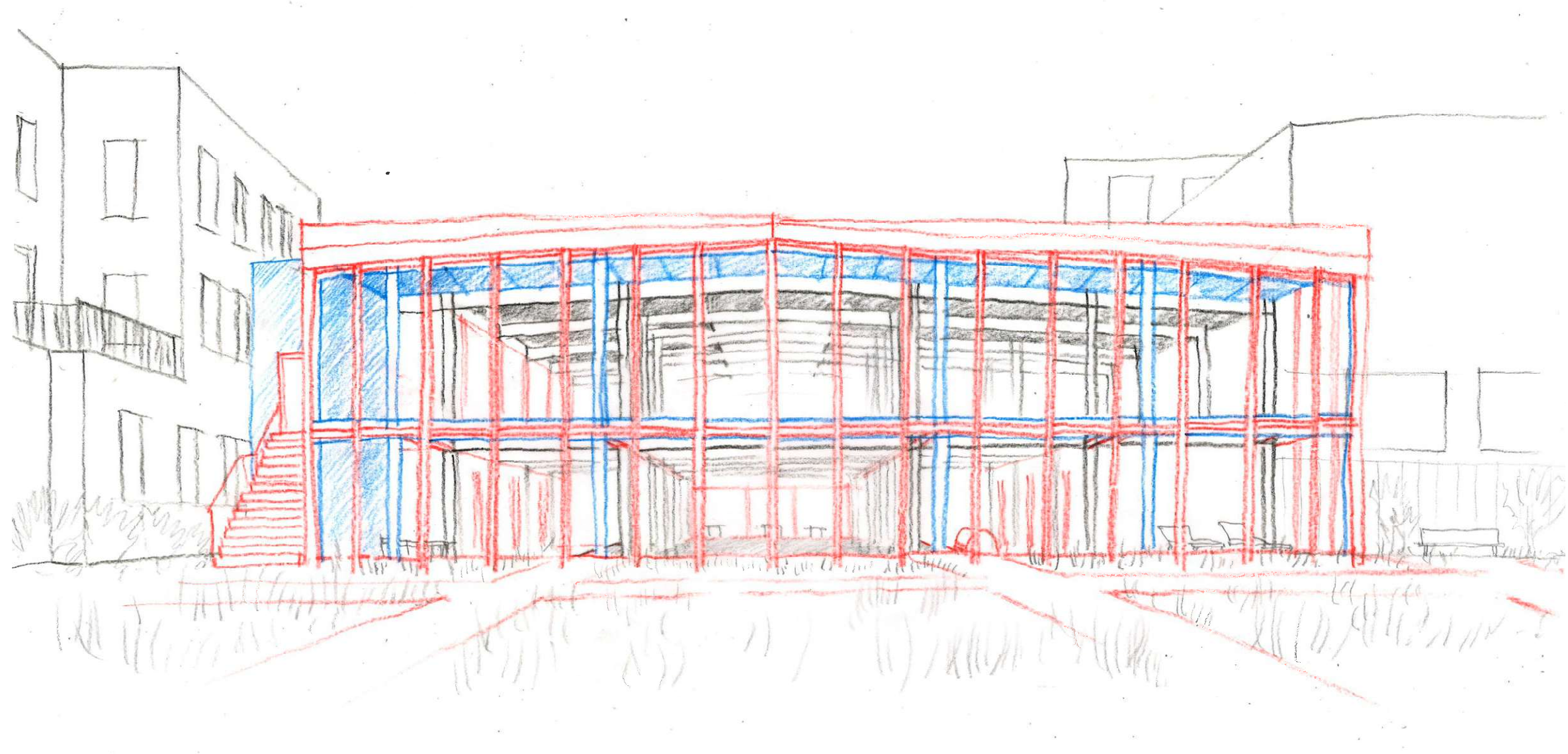
- demolished
- added
- existing
- reused/relocated

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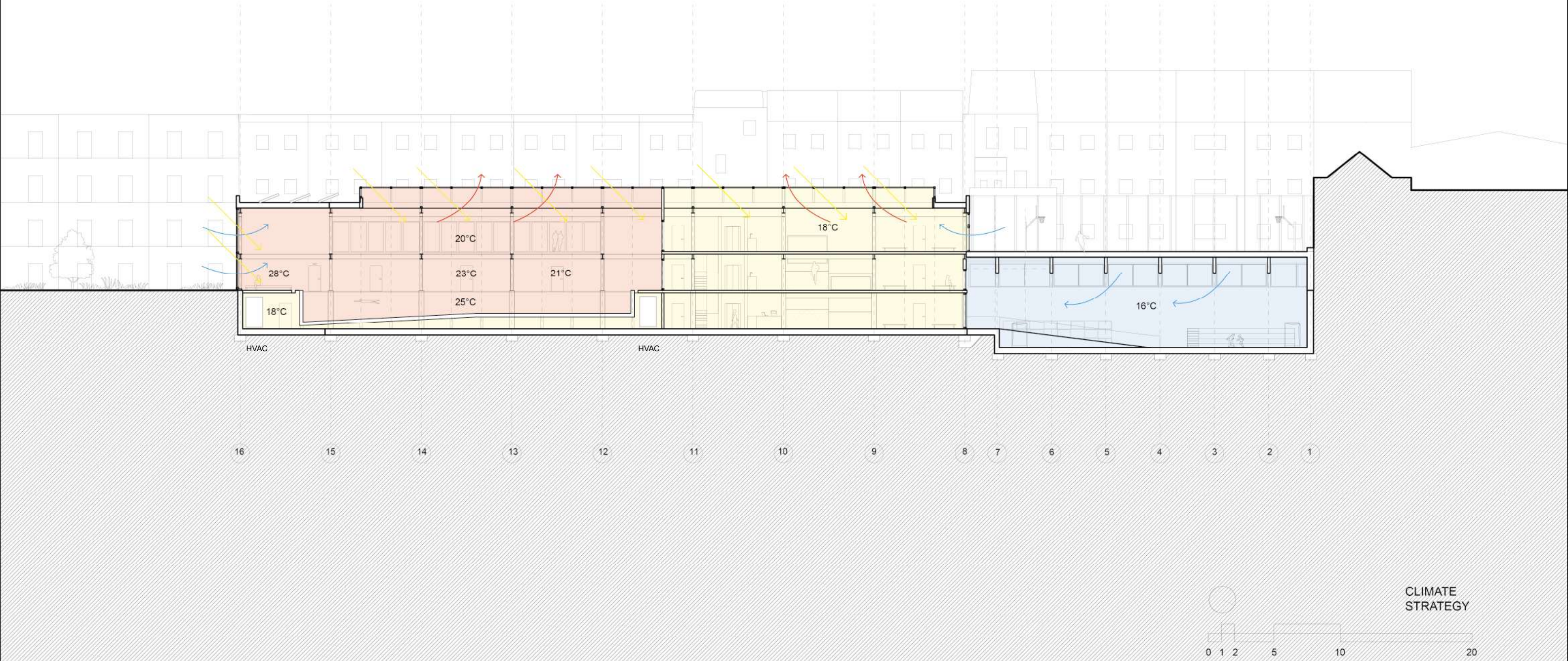
- demolished
- added
- existing
- reused/relocated





The project applies a three-zone climate strategy, where each part of the building is conditioned according to its function rather than maintaining a uniform temperature. The sports hall is kept at 16°C for active use, the communal and circulation areas at 20°C for general comfort, and the swimming pool at 28°C within a highly insulated wet zone. Each zone operates with independent heating control, ensuring energy is only used where needed and improving overall efficiency and comfort.

The pool hall is positioned next to the park to enhance daylight access, visual connection, and support natural cooling and ventilation during warm periods. Skylights and selective floor slab openings distribute daylight deep into the space. Ventilation is provided mainly by a basement-located HVAC system operating efficiently in a cooler environment. Rooftop solar panels supply renewable energy for pool pumps, filtration, and partial water heating, reducing operational energy demand.



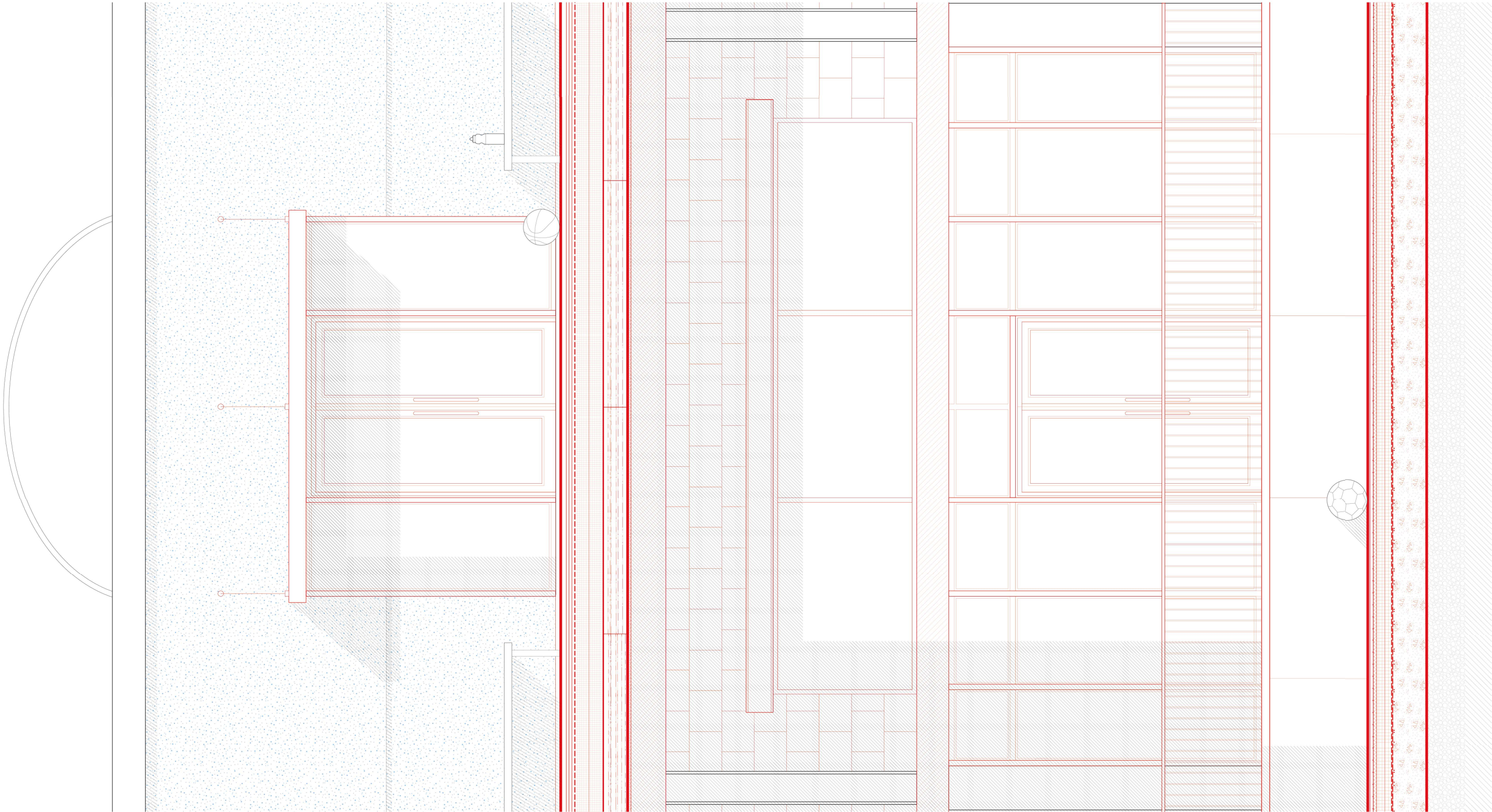


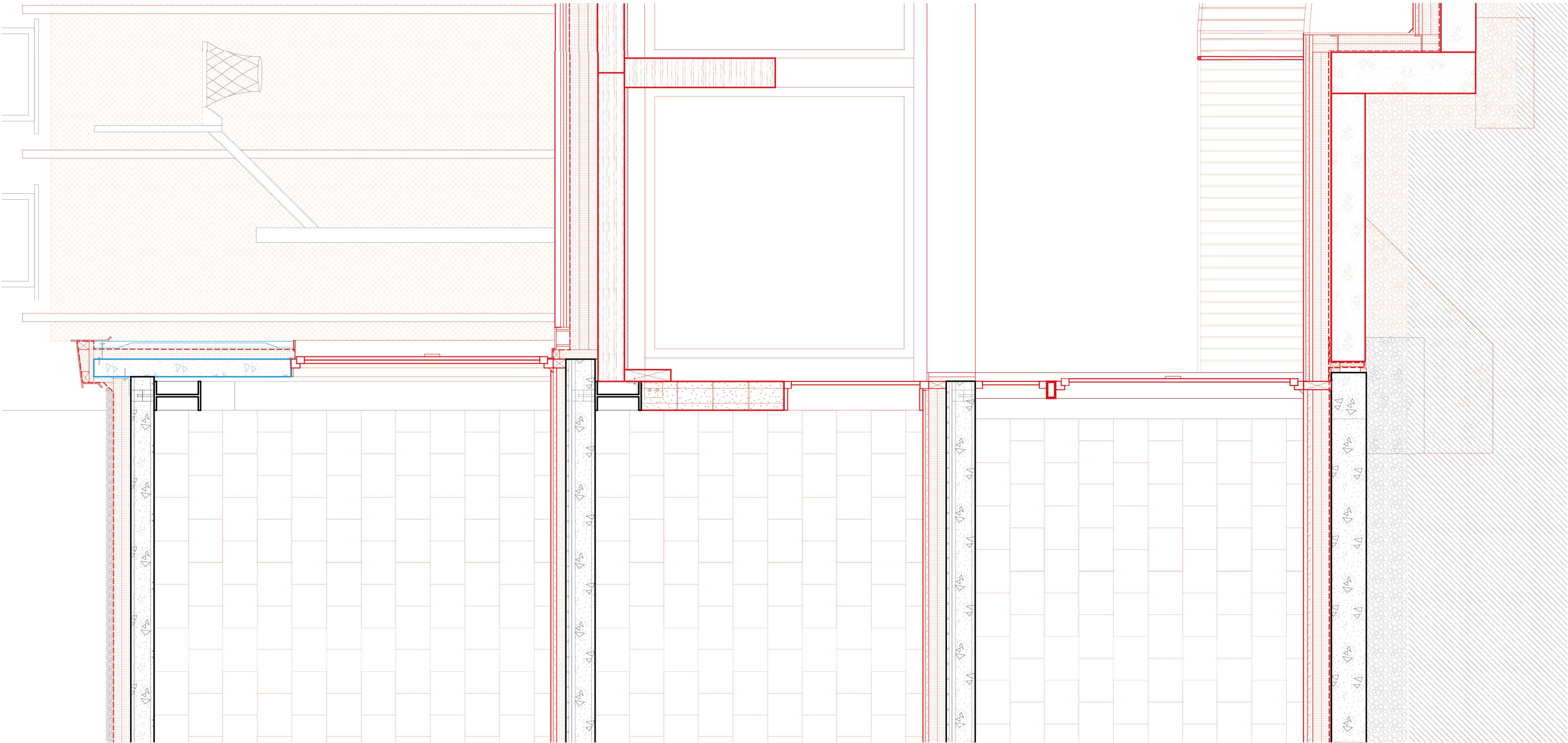
This is the point where simple materials such as sandwich panels and pebble-concrete facades, often associated with inexpensive 1990s or early 2000s architecture, gain new significance through their combination. In this context, studying the building's structure becomes an exercise in interpretation, where assumptions and imagination play an active role.

Here, the logic of reuse emerges: the small scale begins to take precedence over the large scale, shaping both façade composition and structural organisation. Openness to the unexpected becomes essential, and improvisation turns into a central design tool. This stage is defined by turning points and unforeseen interventions, creating space for accidental, personal, and site-specific outcomes that enrich the building's identity.

Elements removed from one part of the structure are reintroduced elsewhere, almost like a Frankenstein process, resulting in a reassembled and reconfigured whole. If realised physically, the building would likely evolve beyond a fixed design: material decisions would emerge from existing conditions, connections, and construction logic, with crafts and repair processes contributing directly to the final form.

Ultimately, this is the moment where the project most clearly attempts to express Heyvaert's identity, through its existing presence, its layered past, and its possible futures, which the swimming pool program helps to reveal.





ROOFTERRACE
PARAPET DETAIL 1:10

- demolished
- added
- existing
- reused/relocated

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