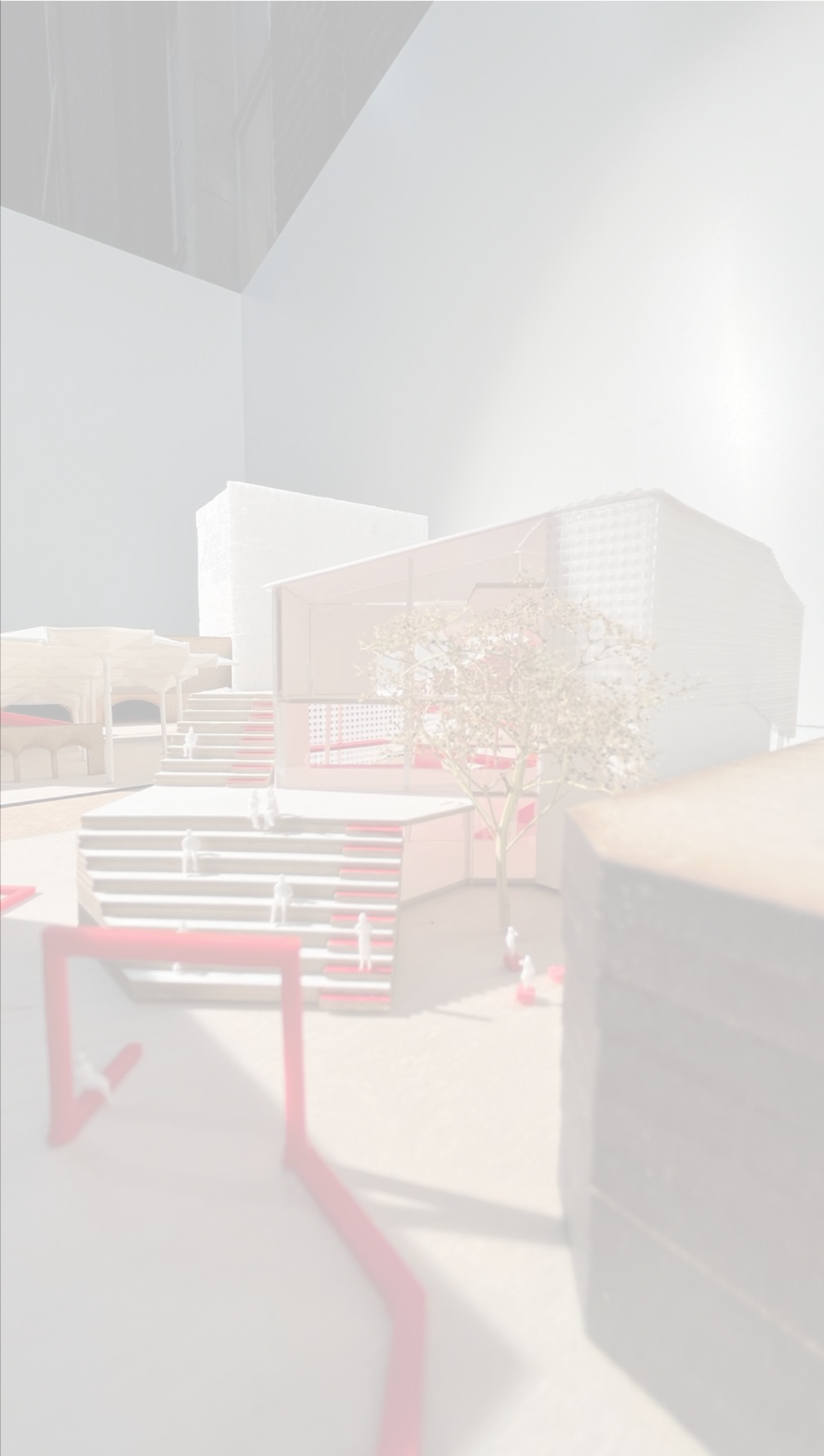


# Restaging the High Street

A strategy of regeneration for the high street by reactivating its interstices







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# Restaging<sup>1</sup> the High Street

A strategy of regeneration for the high street by reactivating its interstices

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<sup>1</sup> “To present again or differently”

# Abstract

The “traditional” high street that was once a distinctive element in the city’s historic urban fabric, is now slowly declining. This decline is further intensified by the insensitive development of its nearby leftover lands and the lack of investment in the public realm. This research is meant to support a new interpretation for the contemporary high street in the basis of urban interstices and it aims to emphasize the importance of considering the high street and its community in the future city planning. For that reason, a number of urban and architectural placemaking interventions are studied, using a precedent analysis in order to explore possible urban regeneration strategies as an attempt to reconnect the high street to its surrounding urban fabric and functions. Eventually, through specific case of Shoreditch district, this paper seeks to establish the development capacity for the high street, in terms of the available development sites and their potential relationship with the existing infrastructure and services.

## **Keywords**

High Street, Urban interstices, Urban crack, Urban regeneration, Placemaking

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# Introduction

The initial curiosity behind this research was to discover the implications of Placemaking in the field of architecture, as one of the society driven tool for improving a neighborhood, city or region. Placemaking usually starts in the in-between, as Mattias Karrholm notes, in *Urban Interstices*.<sup>2</sup> In this book in-between-ness is referred to an interstitial space in terms of spatial production through territorial transformation, resulting in a new singular place which defies classification. Karrholm further argues that this production is often likely to start in spaces or cracks in-between stronger territorial programs. These city cracks might be characterized by an apparent void or seem disconnected from the surrounding urban fabric but as Riet Steel and Elly van Eeghem claim, they can be ideal foundations for interstitial practices or crossovers that fall between the familiar boundaries of accepted logics of urban policies, beyond accepted interpretations of community and the social.<sup>3</sup>

remain hidden or neglected but they could be more easily discovered through reading the urban cracks as hints and indicators.

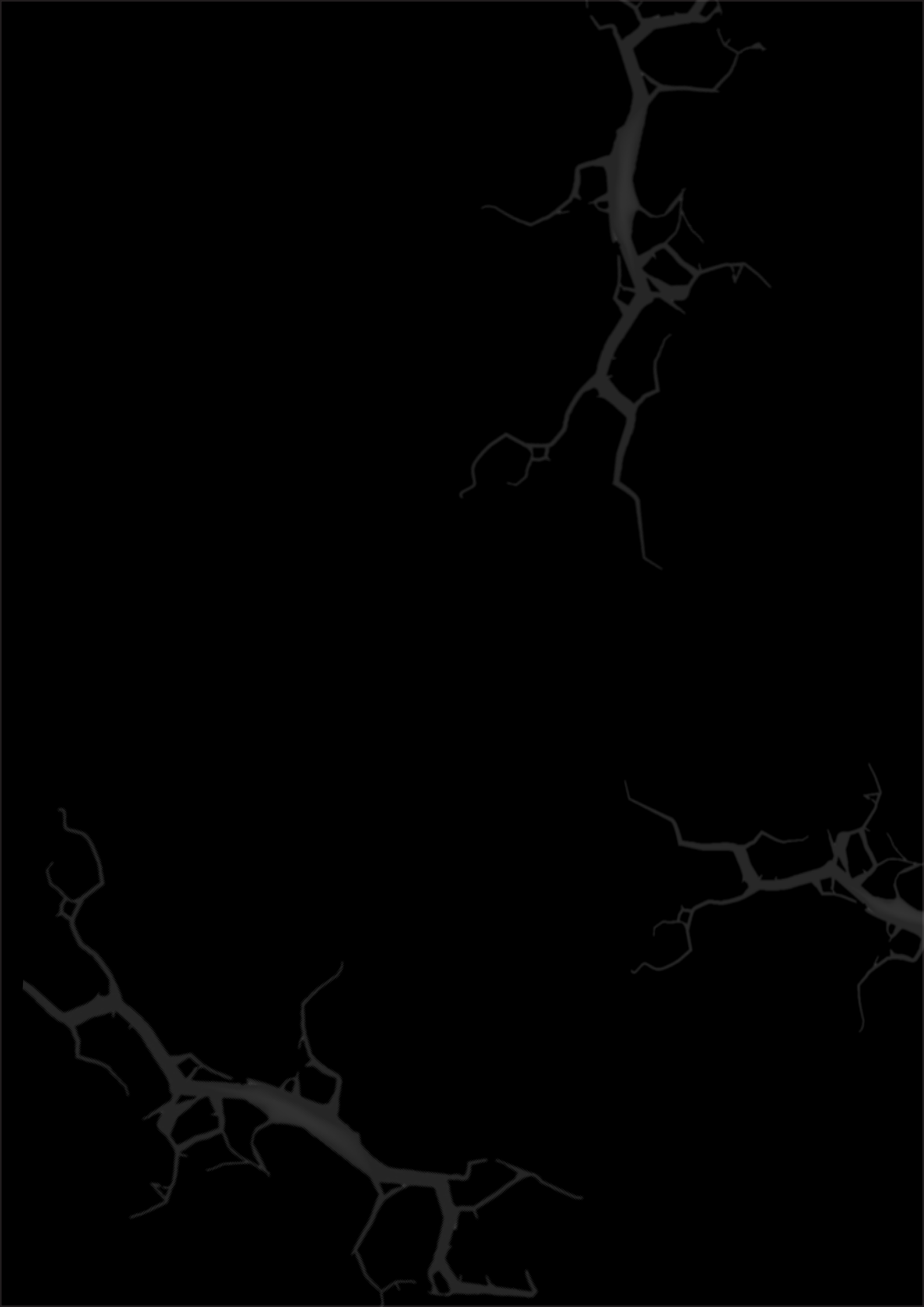
In the context of London, the notion of interstices could be experienced by looking acutely into the High Streets network. The term 'High Street' in the United Kingdom, refers to the primary commercial street(s) which is typically equivalent to main street or market street in other countries.<sup>4</sup> Vacant front shops, neglected backsides and nearby leftover fields that emerge around the high street, each introduce a different type of interstitial space which are either underused, misused or disused. These interstitial spaces usually

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<sup>2</sup> Karrholm, *Urban Interstices*, 144.

<sup>3</sup> Riet Steel et al., *Reading Urban Cracks*, 141.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Carmona, *London's Local High Streets*, 3.





# 1 | Prologue

- 
- <sup>5</sup> Fiona Scott, “High Street Productivity”, 204.  
<sup>6</sup> Carmona, *London’s Local High Streets*, 42.  
<sup>7</sup> Rute Sousa Matos, “Urban Landscape: Interstitial Spaces”, 66.

# 1.1 Problem statement & Research questions

“London is a vast network of high streets”<sup>5</sup>, Fiona Scott notes and further reports that high streets are neglected and poorly understood, even though they play a vital role across the capital. These complex and dynamic mixed-use urban corridors, are facing a wide range of challenges and life-style changes since 1970’s.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of out-of-town shopping centers, the growth of e-commerce or even most recently, the vast impact of covid-19 outbreak are some of the threatening issues amongst all, which have remarkably contributed to an increase of vacancy rates and resulted in an overall neglect of these public spaces.

Yet, high street does not merely equal retail and thereby the challenges are more extensive. Today, by looking more closely to the backsides, behind the façades, down the alleys and side streets, one might instantly discover urban cracks and interstitial spaces in different scales integrated as a system. Thus, apart from vacant shops, some of these interstitial spaces which have poor quality or feel disconnected from the surrounding urban context, leave a negative effect on the social, economic and environmental experience of the high street. This negative effect often increases with the lack of investment in the public realm including the physical streetscape and civic amenities such as local libraries and community halls as well as insensitive development schemes for these neighboring interstitial developable lands.

Nevertheless, as the landscape architect and researcher, Matos, argues: “when one penetrates the system of interstitial spaces and starts to explore it, one realizes that what has been called ‘empty’ is not so empty after all. Instead, it contains a wide range of uses”.<sup>7</sup> This argument suggests that informal encounters may take place in the formally abandoned interstices by the users of such spaces. But what if these informal encounters were better facilitated? Would it improve the experience of the high streets for its users and community?

Combining all these thoughts, the main research question posed by this research is:

***What role could architecture and urban design play in revitalizing urban interstices for the benefit of the high street and its urban context along with its community?***

With the following sub questions:

- What is meant by urban interstices and urban cracks?
- How do they translate in the context of London’s high streets?
- Where do they typically occur?
- What are the spatial characteristics of such spaces?
- Who are the main actors and what type of activities do usually take place?
- Through which urban or architectural design strategies could these interstitial spaces turn into the new driver of urban regeneration?



Sub-questions	Methods
<i>What is meant by urban interstices and urban cracks?</i>	<b>Literature review:</b> To better understand the notion of interstitial space, urban crack and the nature of such spaces.
<i>How do interstices translate in the context of London's high streets?</i>	<b>Document review and Historical analysis on high streets:</b> Analyzing reports, plans, precedents, etc.
<i>Where do they typically occur?</i>	<b>GIS-based mapping:</b> (top-down method) By superimposing relevant layers of maps such as railways, water, designated open spaces and high streets in order to find intersecting nodes and sites of investigation. <b>Field research:</b> Observational trials, photography, videography.
<i>What are the spatial characteristics of such spaces?</i>	<b>Field research:</b> Photography, videography. <b>Visual Catalogue:</b> Analysis through a collection of photographs, diagrams and collages.
<i>Who are the main actors and what type of activities do usually take place?</i>	<b>Field research:</b> Interview with local communities and designers/architects. <b>Visual Catalogue:</b> Analysis through a collection of photographs, diagrams and collages.
<i>Through which urban or architectural design strategies could these interstitial spaces turn into the new driver of urban regeneration?</i>	<b>Precedent analysis:</b> To gain inspiration from other architectural standpoints towards the interstices in London or other metropolitan cities. <b>Design research:</b> Defining urban strategy and architectural design.

Table 1. Correlation between sub-questions and employed methods

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework & Methodological positioning

Based on the research questions the theoretical framework of this research could be divided into three main dimensions. The first dimension explores the notion of interstitial spaces and urban cracks, their characteristics, commonalities and differences. The second dimension discovers the meaning and potential of placemaking as an approach for urban regeneration. Lastly, the third dimension looks into the High Street in relation to the urban interstices in the context of London. As depicted in the shown table (Table 1), a variety of methods have been chosen in accordance to each sub-question in order to apply the theories in the context of London and ultimately answer the main question.

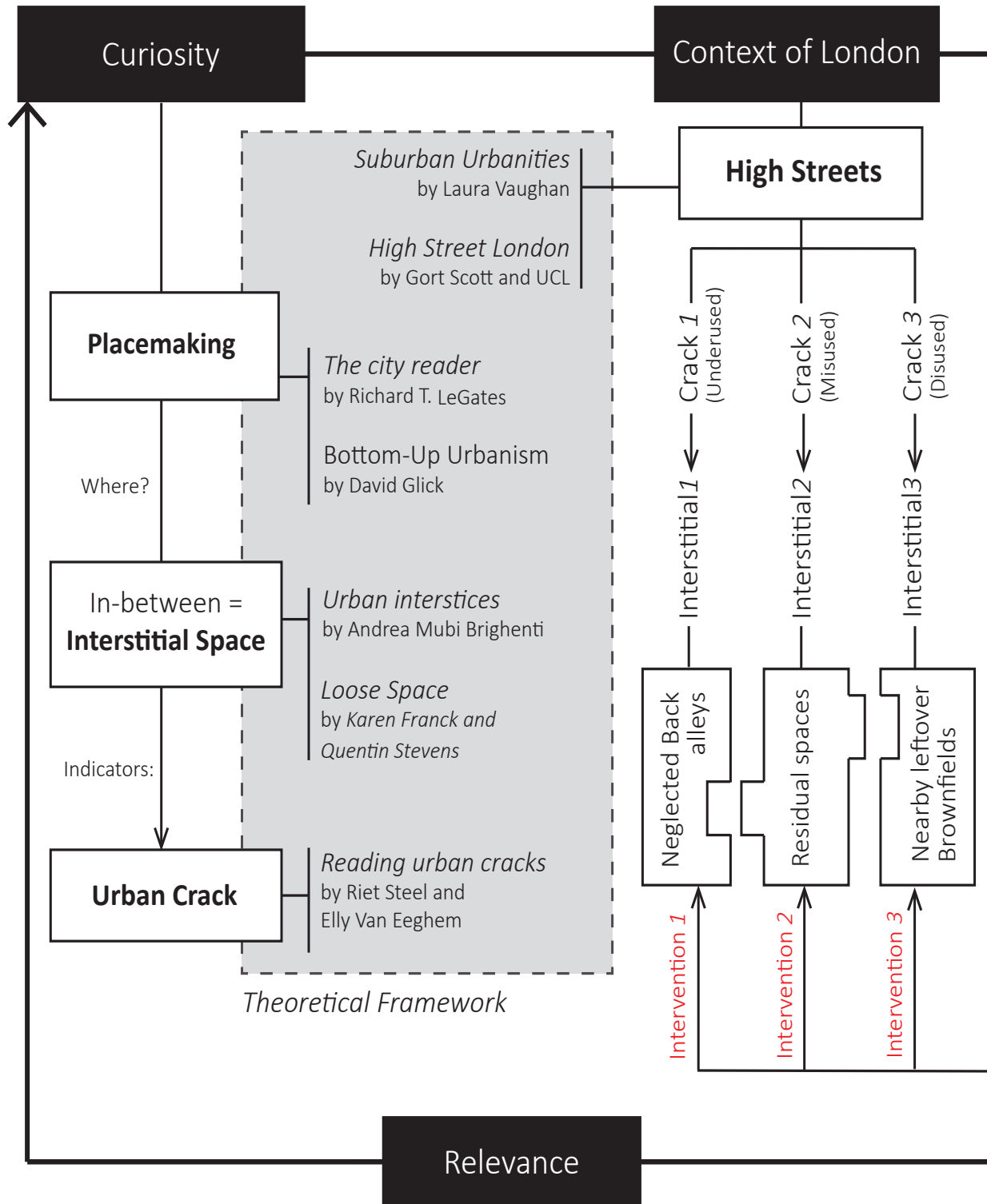
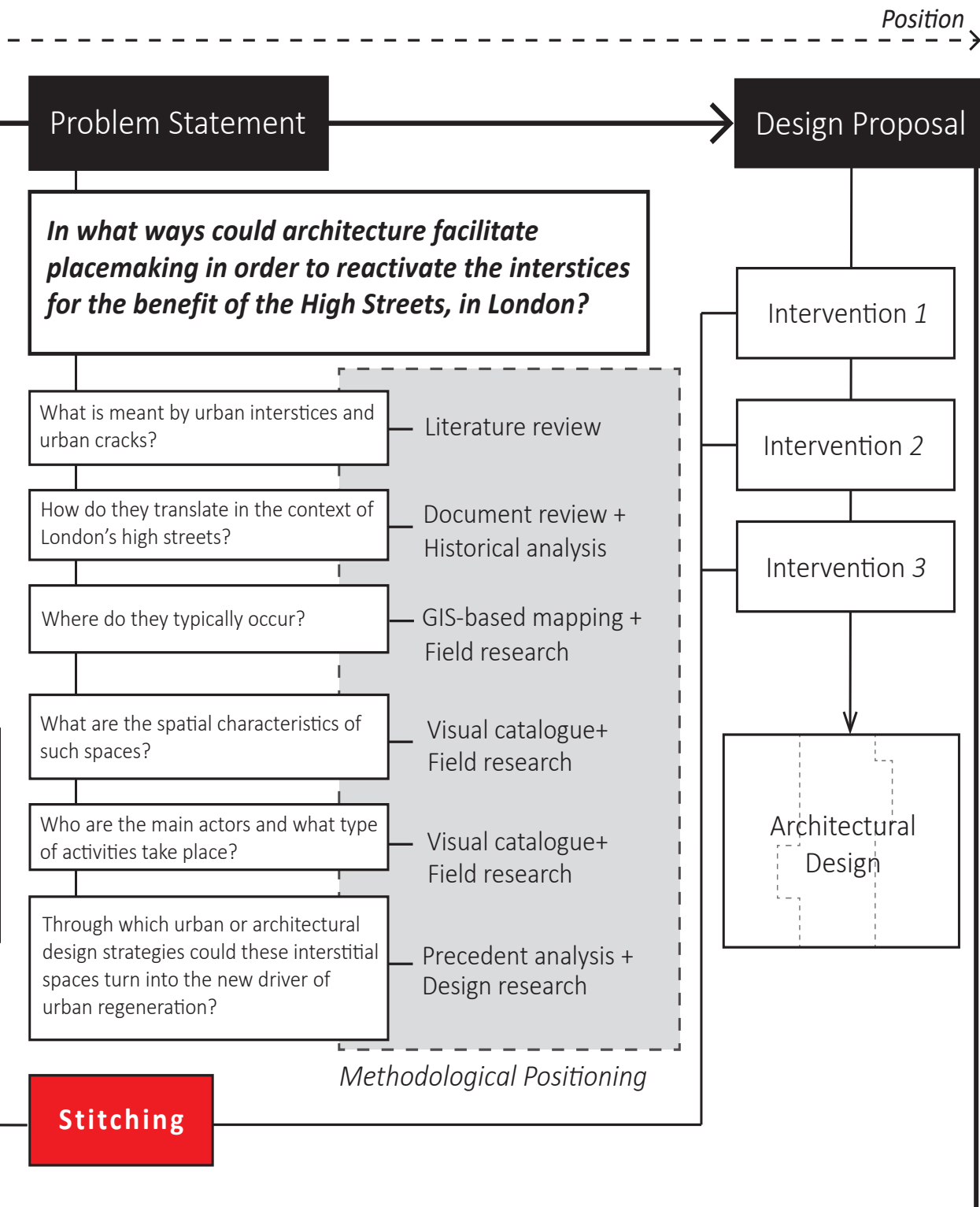


Figure 1. Research Plan Diagram

## 1.3 Research diagram





## 1.4 Personal glossary

### ***High Street***

In the United Kingdom the term 'High Street' refers to the primary commercial street (or streets) which is typically equivalent to main street or market street in other countries.

### ***Interstitial Space***

Spatial production through territorial transformation, resulting in a new singular place which defies classification.

### ***Placemaking***

The process through which the public realm is shaped to maximize collectively shared values and improve spatial relationships.

### ***Restaging***

To present something again or differently.

### ***Urban Crack***

Interstitial spaces in the city as in-between time spaces, characterized by an apparent void, with a remarkable past, for which future plan exist, but remain neglected and under-used at present.

### ***Urban Regeneration***

Urban regeneration is an approach to city planning to repair the social and economic problems of an urban area, improving the physical and environmental aspects of the city, as well as the buildings.



## 2 | Literature & Document review



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- <sup>8</sup> Levesque, *Urban Interstices*, 23.  
<sup>9</sup> Kärrholm, *Urban Interstices*, 139.  
<sup>10</sup> Rute Sousa Matos, “Urban Landscape: Interstitial Spaces”, 66.  
<sup>11</sup> Franck and Stevens, *Loose Space*, 7.  
<sup>12</sup> Kärrholm, *Urban Interstices*, 149.

## 2.1 Interstitial space

“The interstitial relates to the notion of interstice (from the Latin *interstare*: to stand in between), which is usually defined as a ‘small empty space’ within a substance or between different elements”.<sup>8</sup> In urban studies, as Kärholm suggests, Interstitial space can be described as spatial production through territorial transformation.<sup>9</sup>

The processes of urbanization, similarly, can hardly be considered without reference to the spaces that lie in-between developments. One could see how these interstices emerge over time by analyzing the transformation in the urban development such as an increase, decrease or removal of infrastructures, changes in urban planning and disuse of a post-industrial land. However, interstitial spaces may be generated in a city not only due to urban changes but also due to problems in the planning system, a weak estate market, or the prevailing political and economic situation.

Urban interstices bear resemblance to great number of related (but not always similar) metaphorical notions such as urban void, urban sprawl, terrain vague, no-man’s land, wasteland, derelicts, etc. These terms are often used interchangeably without being differentiated. Although they may often share commonalities in terms of their characteristics, scales or causation, relevant issues and conditions within each urban context may differ. Therefore, it is urgent to define the scope, as well as clear classification and insightful systematic analysis, when referring to interstices. In this essay, interstitial space is used as an inclusive term covering underused, misused and disused urban spaces between two

or more incompatible systems; examples of such spaces are neglected back alleys, leftover underpasses and greenbelts, abandoned brownfields and vacant lots.

Most of interstices might be characterized by an apparent void, abandonment or emptiness, however, as Matos argues: “when one penetrates the system of interstitial spaces and starts to explore it, one realizes that what has been called ‘empty’ is not so empty after all. Instead, it contains a wide range of uses”.<sup>10</sup> Or as Franck and Stevens argue, spaces that once had assigned functions but no longer do – such as empty lots, abandoned buildings, waterfronts and tunnels – have become detached from the former established purpose, leaving it open for new uses and new meanings. “Such spaces may be oddly shaped or difficult to get to, they may lack a name or be secret; yet they become places of expression and occupation allowing the insertion of activities in search of a home.”<sup>11</sup>

This argument chimes with Kärholm’s suggestion regarding interstitial practices, which, in his opinion, aim to singularize a place through de- and re-territorialization of its codes and meanings, and turn it into something unique. Kärholm further adds that architecture should be able to reveal and critique the rules and associations that define strong territorial programs, in order to open up the way towards new creative interstices. In this sense, interstices are important as the pre-requirement of something new, and they play a fundamental role in all kinds of appropriation as well as in the ongoing production of heterogeneous public space.<sup>12</sup>

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- <sup>13</sup> Brighenti, *Urban Interstices*, 148.  
<sup>14</sup> Steel and Van Eeghem, *Reading urban cracks*, 18.  
<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.  
<sup>16</sup> Franck and Stevens, *Loose Space*, 3.

## 2.2 Urban crack

As Brighenti remarks, the term interstice is translated as in-between spaces existing in the cracks of dominant urban orders where one system dictates a different logic and it eventually undermines the cohesion of the urban fabric and produces leftovers.<sup>13</sup> Thus, urban cracks can be interpreted as one type of interstices which are usually smaller in scale and characterized by poor physical and spatial qualities. They are not so easily recognizable at first, since their identity is often presumed or hidden rather than revealed. Therefore, one need to read them carefully in order to gain access to their layered meanings.

Riet Steel and Elly Van Eeghem, refer to these cracks as indeterminate places that fall between the familiar boundaries of urban planning: “They are not indicated on city maps; at best they can be assumed when reading between the lines of the plan.”<sup>14</sup> The authors further argue that, apart from the continuous urban transformation, new cracks can arise as random ‘by-product’, in the shifting boundary between the public and private space: spaces that were built as functionless leftovers on purpose such as green belts around housing blocks that are not quite inviting. This argument elaborates on the difference between urban interstice and urban crack: interstices are not necessarily dysfunctional and if not they often had a purpose at some point over time, whereas, the crack represents a residual space which occurs more randomly.

Authors describe the diverse manifestations of urban cracks as such: “Through their diverse appearances, urban cracks are breakpoints within the urban fabric, because they challenge the functioning of the city through their disorderly composition, their on hold status and their attraction towards unruly activities.”<sup>15</sup>

In terms of activities cracks are open to be used in diverse ways, however, they are usually perceived as problematic, given that they are less carefully planned and controlled.

Regardless of their disruptive perception, these urban cracks are essential breathing spaces in the city, narrating changing urban conditions. Therefore, in this research cracks are read, as the drivers of urban transformation, indicating a failing system, in order to find the potential misused, disused and underused interstitial spaces. They could be interpreted as scars full of meaning, shedding light on how the possibilities of interstices can be identified and interrogated.

“Here is the breathing space of city life, offering opportunities for exploration and discovery, for the unexpected, the unregulated, the spontaneous and the risky.”<sup>16</sup>

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- <sup>17</sup> Franck and Stevens, *Loose Space*, 29.  
<sup>18</sup> Kärrholm, *Urban Interstices*, 144.  
<sup>19</sup> LeGates, *The city reader*, 559.  
<sup>20</sup> Glick, *Bottom-Up Urbanism*, 10.  
<sup>21</sup> Lakeman, *The Planner's Guide to Tactical Urbanism*, 17.

## 2.3 Placemaking as an approach for urban regeneration

As it was previously mentioned, the activities that usually take place in interstices are diverse but less directed or regulated. Franck and Stevens refer to these interstices as loose space where the space is appropriated by citizens to pursue activities that are not set by a predetermined program.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Interstices could be seen a ground for urban intervention and placemaking strategies, as Kärholm argues: “placemaking always starts in the in-between.”<sup>18</sup>

The book of city reader defines placemaking as the process through which the public realm is shaped to maximize collectively shared values and improve spatial relationships. This definition is strongly rooted in community-based participation and tactical strategies aiming to empower the role of a citizen in the city.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in these strategies in different scales, as a form of soft rebellion against modern planning's perceived lack of creativity, flexibility and an increasing unwillingness to wait for slow bureaucratic processes. Adjusting to this movement, in architecture, strategies such as flexibility and adaptability are applied in order to make sure the building can meet different functions and facilitate a certain degree of physical changes by the user. While in urbanism the same bottom-up concept is approached under the title of tactical urbanism. The term was introduced

by a group of young urbanists as small-scale, short-term interventions meant to inspire long-term change.<sup>20</sup>

These appropriation tactics are not only techniques for increasing creativity or visibility in an undeveloped/underdeveloped property, but also to leave intangible social and cognitive quality. They build up a sense of belonging by promoting social interaction and adaptation over time and by providing a sense of uniqueness, rootedness and authenticity. This approach can, therefore, bring about multiple benefits into the planning practice, out of which boosting economic revitalization and offering opportunities for citizen to connect with one another are the most important ones for this research.

The idea is to provide the users with the right tools as Mark Lakeman proposes: “The role of the planner is to be facilitative. Not just to accomplish a project, but to facilitate the development of the literacy of the population so that everyone can start to become familiar with design principles and design practices... they become better participants.”<sup>21</sup>



Figure 2. "Then it was Bingham Halt [in 1930], now it's Addiscombe Tram Stop in Croydon", 2010.



Figure 3. Designated high street boundary by GLA, Shoreditch, London

<sup>22</sup> Gort Scott and UCL, High Street London, 7.  
<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14.  
<sup>24</sup> Scott, Suburban Urbanities, 206.



## 2.4 Context of London

London's 500 kilometers of high streets, outside the Central Activities Zone, grew diversely from a combination of development along the key historic routes (roman roads) out of the city, and from its pre-existing historic village centers.<sup>22</sup> Back in time, they represented some of the most important public spaces in UK by capturing the excitement, dynamism, endless variety and remarkable contrasts that characterized each neighborhood:

"A place where near neighbors 'bump' into each other on their way to the post office, parents accompany children to the library and the elderly swap local gossip at the bus stop. Above all, the idea of the high street was associated with the presence of a wide variety of small local shops, ensuring easy pedestrian accessibility to everyday goods and services (Figure 2)."<sup>23</sup>

As the city had to adjust to the post-industrial society, this idyllic image seen in historic photos of high street life has been increasingly challenged. The expansion of out-of-town shopping centers, the growth of e-commerce, the rise in car ownership and changing life styles (that have shifted patterns of movement and exchange, from a local to a larger scale) or even most recently, the vast impact of COVID-19 outbreak, are some of the most threatening challenges, which have remarkably contributed to an increase of vacancy rates and resulted in an overall decline of these public spaces. Yet, high street

is much more than parades of shops. As Fiona Scott mentions: "The uses at the rear of high street blocks also need to be thought of as part of the high street."<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, by looking more closely behind the façades, in the courtyards, down the alleys and side streets, one might instantly discover interstices in different scales, serving places of work, culture and community, and every kind of activity that sustains the high street. This could also be perceived in the official GLA map of the high street boundaries where it does not only mark a single shopping street, but instead a system of urban spaces which reflects the wider uses of the high street including community, public and cultural functions (Figure 3).

Another critical characteristic of high streets is their connection to the surrounding movement network and transport infrastructure. At the same time that this aspect presents a potential for the high street and its community, some of these infrastructures such as the railways, over grounds or canals, also tend to create residual interstices around the high street. Moreover, the report by Gort Scott and UCL, proves that half of London's brownfield land, is located on or within 200 meter of a high street, which could additionally hint to even bigger scale interstices. Simultaneously, it also implies that about a half of developable brownfields across London is within a two and a half minute walk from a high street, with the potential both



to benefit from the services already offered there, but also to enhance them through the multiplier effects of increased population and the consumers that new development will bring.<sup>25</sup> The potential is further multiplied by the presence of already well-established communities within the high street and the existing infrastructure; inherent advantages that many less connected brownfield sites do not possess.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, one could argue: the high street that was once presented as a showcase of shops is now a system made of heterogeneous interstitial pieces which might be disconnected, yet hold a huge potential.

The document review revealed a vision for the future of the high street such that it should remain highly connected, both physically and to different transport modes; adaptable, although also sensitive to change; hugely diversified in the mix of uses as it should offer more than retail; and important social setting for civic and community life. It should also represent venues for a wide range of informal activities, making it an intense part of the public realm (Figure 4).<sup>27</sup> In line with this vision, the nature of the high street as well as its challenges or opportunities, fall under four categories:

1. Physical fabric: streets, street furniture, infrastructure, trees and landscape
2. Places of exchange: social, economic, cultural exchange

3. Movement corridors: pedestrians, cyclists, public transport, cars

4. Real estate: retail, residential, workplaces, community, entertainment, civic

The city of London calls for innovative strategies and visionary approaches to nourish the high streets by focusing on what makes them special and what their unique place might be as vital, complex and important assets of their local communities, with so much more to offer than just shopping.<sup>28</sup>

This will require interventions where places of exchange and movement are designed within the physical fabric, engaging the users in a manner that maintains a viable real estate market. Or as the GLA report suggests: “They could lead to a new community-led governance arrangement, a design code or a novel property management model, in response to specific place-based environmental, social or economic challenges.”<sup>29</sup>

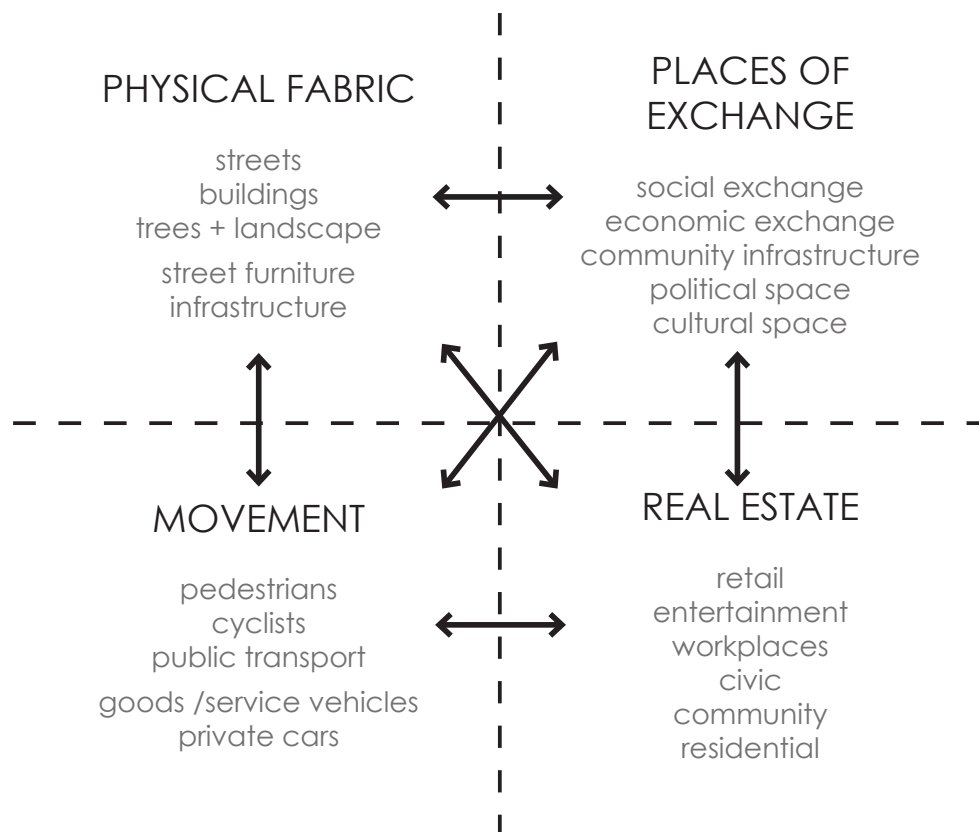
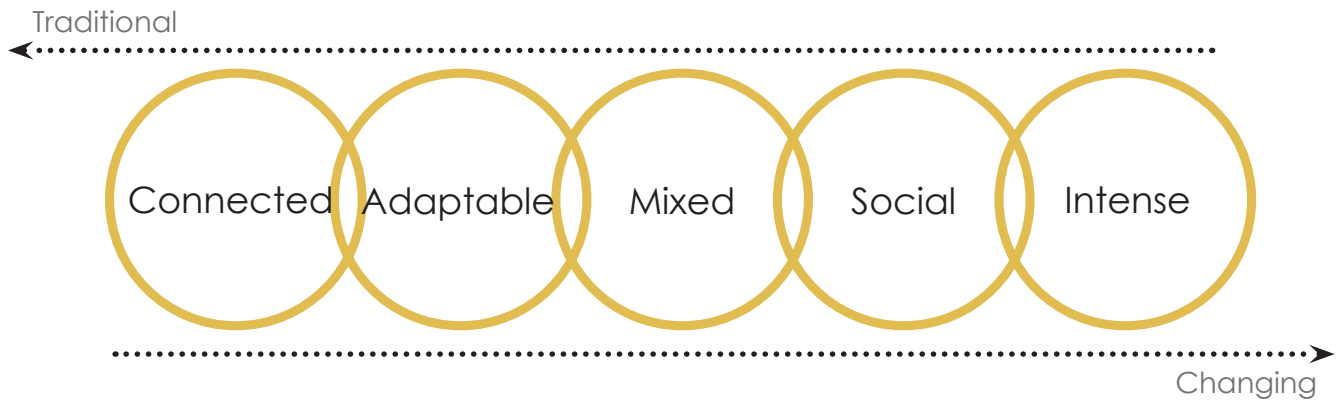


Figure 4. High Street characteristics and its analytical framework

<sup>22</sup> Gort Scott and UCL, High Street London, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 5.



## 3 | Precedent analysis



Figure 5. Central Parade now and then, Hoe Street, Walthamstow, London

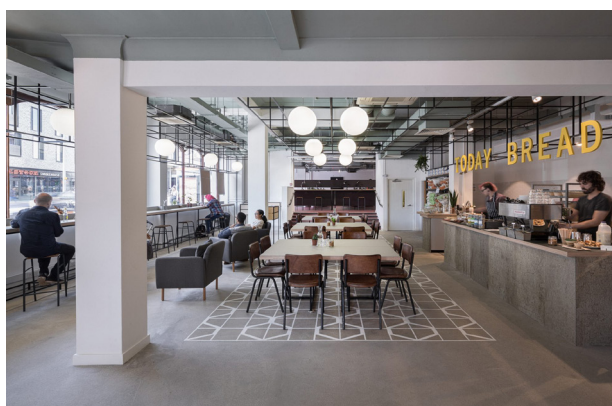


Figure 6. Central Parade phase 1, detailing and material palette

## 3.1 Central Parade

by Gort Scot, London, 2016-2017

This project is specifically on a prominent crossing corner of a high street in Walthamstow, where its first phase focuses on transforming a derelict building into an active public space and its second phase focuses on revitalizing the misused rears of the same building and reconnecting it to the neighborhood.

During the first phase, a series of disused and inactive ground floor spaces in the Central Parade, a grade II heritage building, were carefully renovated into a new cultural/commercial hub providing co-working, retail, café and creative studio spaces, aiming to boost economic regeneration on the high street.

In terms of program, this new scheme retains a diversity of affordable and inclusive workspaces and complementary uses which better serves the local high street community and even more broadly the London's creative individuals across the city. In terms of design process, the architects had an ambition to create nostalgia and stimulate the sense of belonging for the users:

"The original Central Parade building is known for its distinctive 'Festival of Britain' style architecture, which is reflected in the new scheme through our approach to massing, detailing and a material palette of brick, pigmented concrete and metal (Figure 5)."<sup>30</sup>

The architects achieved this ambition by creating visual connections which resembles the identity of the existing building. As a

corresponding design strategies they created a wavy pattern inspired by the iconic shape of the canopy which is applied with catchy colors on the façade externally and on the floor finishing internally. Furthermore, the underside of the wavy canopy has been painted a vibrant yellow, two new street entrances have been introduced in order to increase permeability and new signage highlights the change in use (Figure 6).

During the second phase, Gort Scott architects were assigned to develop a residential block situated behind the central parade building. However, apart from the residential block itself, Gort Scott developed a mixed-use scheme for the rear service yard of their former project, central parade, which played a key role in LB Waltham Forest's ambitious town center regeneration strategy.

The current arrangement of the backlands site, resembles a typical back of the high street, which in this case encouraged anti-social behavior with only little active frontage or overlooking. The main role of this phase of the project was therefore, to activate the backside while providing a number of new dwellings with ground floor commercial space and a shared backyard (Figure 7).

The architects achieved this goal by designing a number of urban furniture and playground for the kids, adding suitable plants and greenery to create a cozy atmosphere for the shared



backyard and maximize the back entrances in order to improve spatial relationships towards the main street and high street (Figure 8).

“In the proposed scheme, ground floor commercial space will introduce passive

surveillance and an active ‘mews’ courtyard between the new and existing commercial spaces will add to the active mews spaces off the High Street (Figure 9).”<sup>31</sup>



Figure 7. Central Parade phase 2, proposed floor plan for the backside

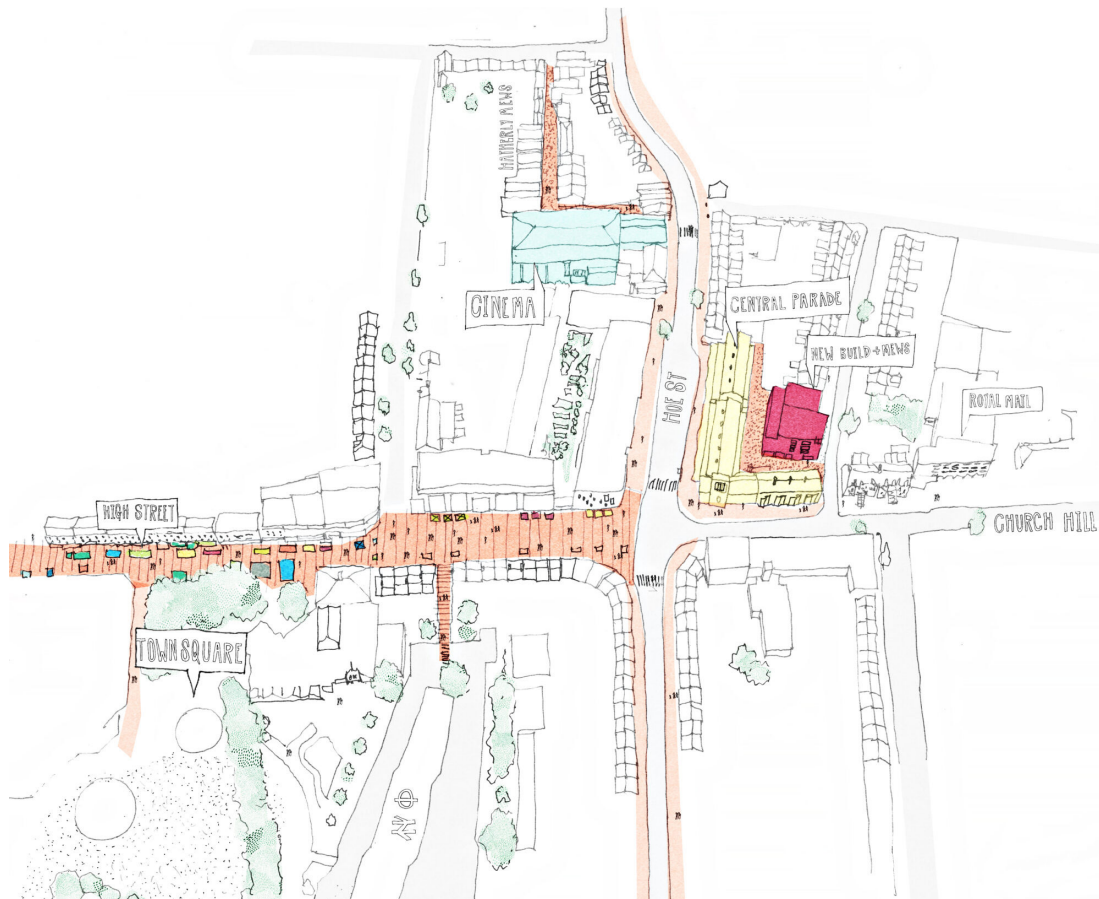


Figure 8. Central Parade phase 2, proposed scheme in relation to the high street



Figure 9. Central Parade phase 2, the transformation of the backside through urban regeneration strategies

<sup>31</sup> “Central Parade (Phase 2)”, Gortscott, 2021, <https://gortscott.com/projects/central-parade-phase-ii>.



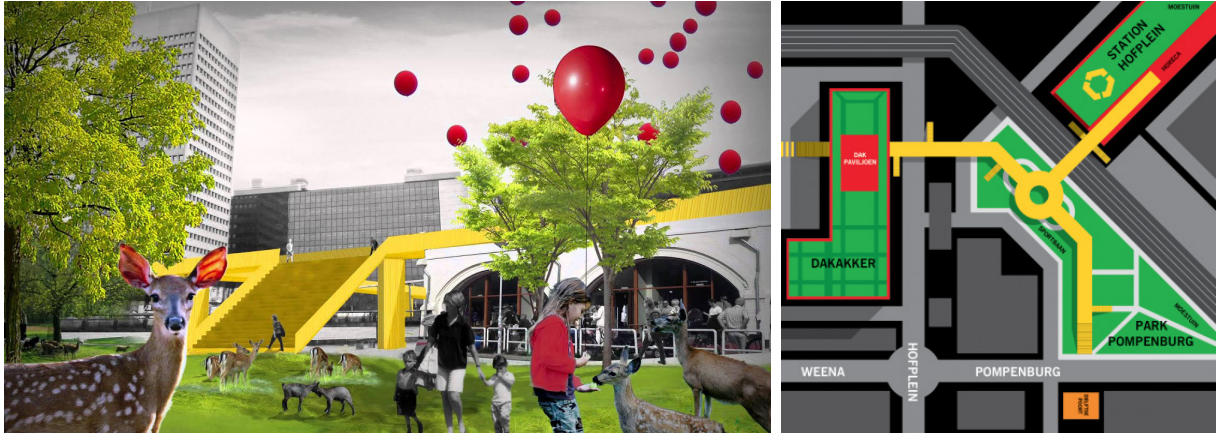


Figure 10. De Luchtsingel, proposed public spaces at bridge touchdown



Figure 11. De Luchtsingel, “each contributor gets their name etched on a plank”

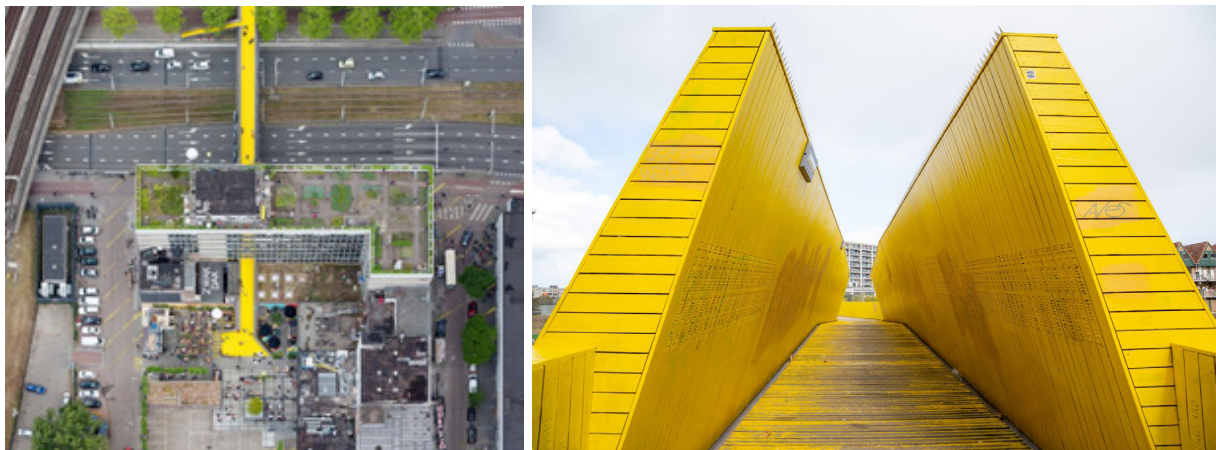


Figure 12. De Luchtsingel, choice of vibrant color as an urban design strategy

## 3.2 De Luchtsingel

by ZUS architects, Rotterdam, 2010-2014

De Luchtsingel is a 400-meter-long pedestrian bridge that runs over a highway, railway and parking lot to provide greater connectivity between three districts in the heart of Rotterdam, by creating an internalized pedestrian street, or a so-called “three-dimensional cityscape”.<sup>32</sup>

In 2010, when it was announced that a planned office development in Rotterdam Central District had been cancelled, leaving many existing office spaces vacant as a result, ZUS architects managed to negotiate a five year test period to experiment with the surrounding sites as a “laboratory for urban development”.<sup>32</sup> The proposed intervention was meant to act as a vital catalyst for economic growth and aims to bring new life to a forgotten area, using a bridge and a variety of public spaces such as the Hofplein station and its event rooftop, the Schieblock’s roof farm and the Pompenburg child-friendly park (Figure 10).

Another distinguishing feature of De Luchtsingel is that it is a crowdfunded project. The Luchtsingel’s crowdfunding campaign began in 2011 and anyone could fund a Luchtsingel wood plank and in return have a personal note etched in it for as little as 25 euros (Figure 11). This was a tactical strategy to collect crowdfunding and financial support of thousands of individual contributions ranging from 125 to 1250 euros but also to create a personal sense of belonging for the users. As a result of this collaborative effort, De Luchtsingel became the world’s first piece

of public infrastructure to be funded entirely through crowdsourcing. With the success of their project, ZUS managed to secure sufficient grant from the city to continue their placemaking experiments and eventually the project status changed from temporary to permanent.

The vibrant yellow color painted all along the wood planks across the bridge, stands for temporality and it plays an important role as a design strategy. Also, on the urban level, the architects increased visibility and curiosity about the activities within the buildings by painting the surrounding sidewalks with the same bright yellow colored stripes. The choice of color has created a clean visible route as well as allowing this infrastructure to stand out, even from far. Overall, the 400-meter-long bridge aims to provide synergy between these numerous sites simply by making them more accessible to people. Such unique ties grant the neighborhood a special place in Rotterdam’s urban fabric (Figure 12).

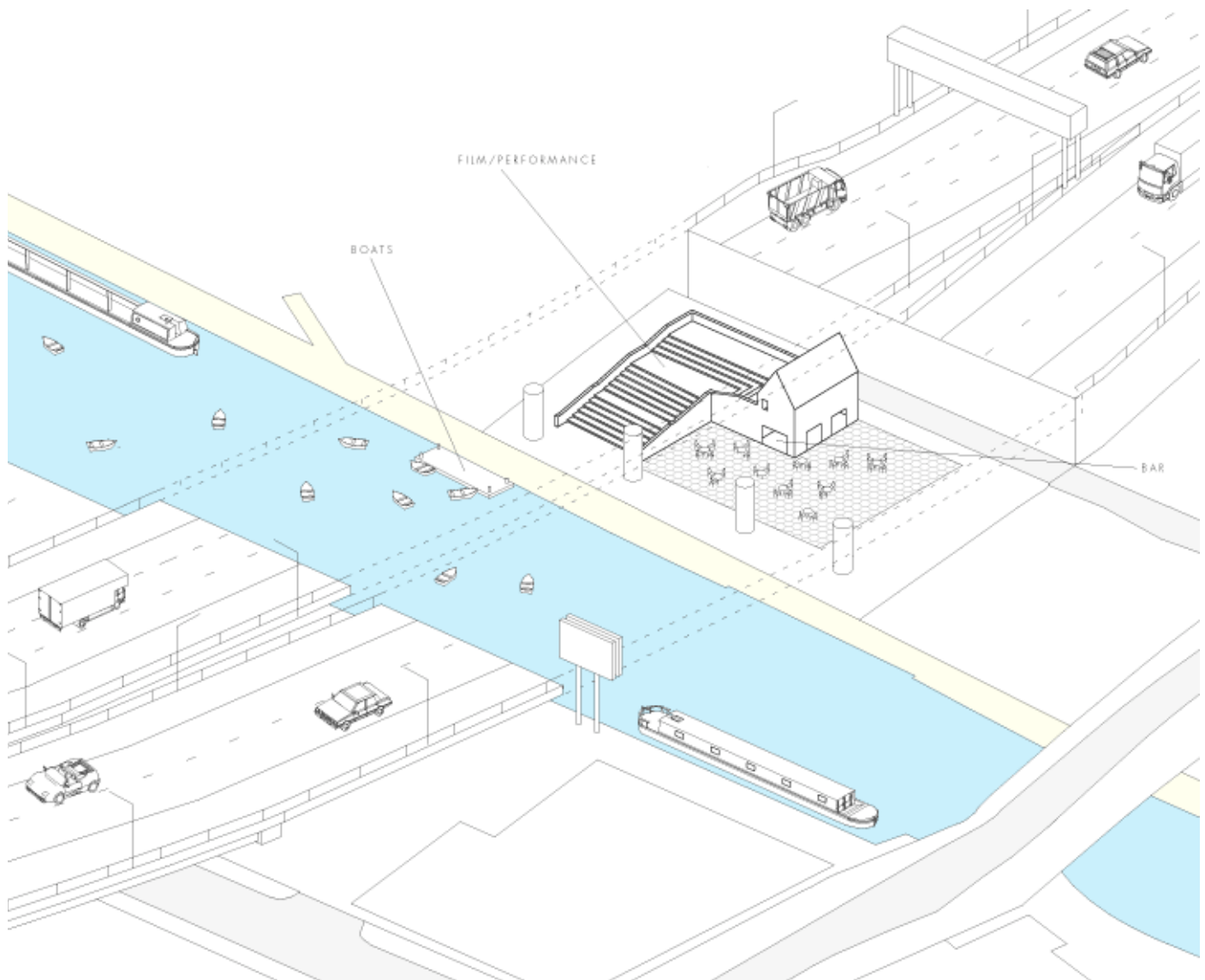


Figure 13. Folly for a Flyover, urban context

33 "Folly for A Flyover", Assemble, 2015, <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/folly-for-a-flyover>.

34 "Folly for A Flyover By Assemble", Dezeen, 2011, <https://www.dezeen.com/2011/07/05/folly-for-a-flyover-by-assemble/>.

### 3.3 Folly for a Flyover

by Assemble architects, London, 2011

Folly for a Flyover (Figure 13) is a project that transformed an abandoned highway overpass in Hackney Wick into a new public space and arts center. The purpose of this design project was to bring art and the community together in a forgotten, underutilized area of the city and change it into a new social space, supported by a café and a stage to facilitate different events and encounters. Consequently, it hosted a wide range of activities from knitting circles, yoga classes or boat trips exploring the surrounding waterways, to cinema (Figure 14) and performance, curated by Assemble architects in collaboration with the Barbican Centre, and several local organizations and businesses.

One of the design strategies in this project is about the careful choice of materials to construct the site with. All the objects have been sourced from nearby, including refuse materials from the Olympic Park, off-cut paving stones from London Underground, old railway sleepers and wooden bricks made from reclaimed timber from old ferry decks. These materials have a reddish shade, which resemble the red brick of Hackney for its community. The materials were eventually put together through a process known as ‘dry assembly’, meaning that they can be reused for other purposes later on.

Furthermore, the architects included the community in the construction of the project as a strategy to optimize the shared value for the user:

“The Folly was designed as giant construction kit, which allowed volunteers of any skill or commitment level to get involved in building it (Figure 15). The walls of the Folly were an inter-woven bead curtain. At the end of the summer, they were unstrung and used to make new play and planting facilities for a local primary school.”<sup>33</sup>

Essentially, the Folly recaptured the potential future of the site by re-imagining its history, based on the concept that how places are perceived is sometimes as significant as their physical attributes in deciding their usage, as Dezeen summarizes:

“Hand-built with local, reclaimed and donated materials, the Folly draws influence from the surrounding red-brick buildings of Hackney Wick, posing as an imaginary piece of the area’s past, a building trapped under the motorway (Figure 16).”<sup>34</sup>

Despite its short-term and low budget aspects, the project managed to leave a lasting mark after it was taken down, with a significant amount of engagement from the local community. This success resulted in the interest of the stakeholders for further development, envisioning longer-term plans regarding the connectivity of the site to nearby green spaces, in order to keep this interstitial space in active use as a public space (Figure 17).





Figure 14. Folly for a Flyover, movie night

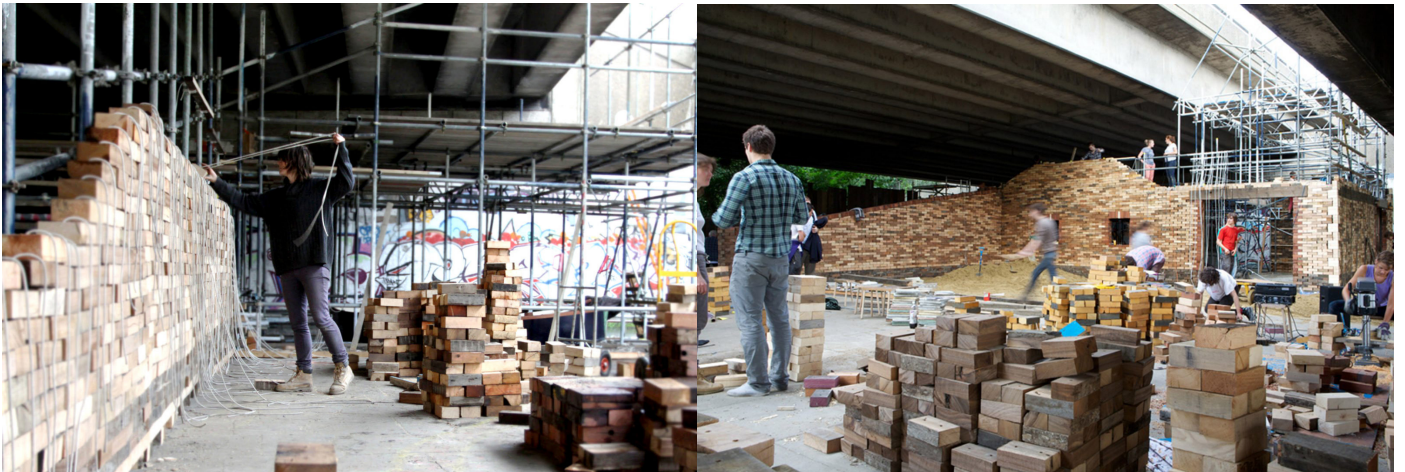


Figure 15. Folly for a Flyover, participatory building process

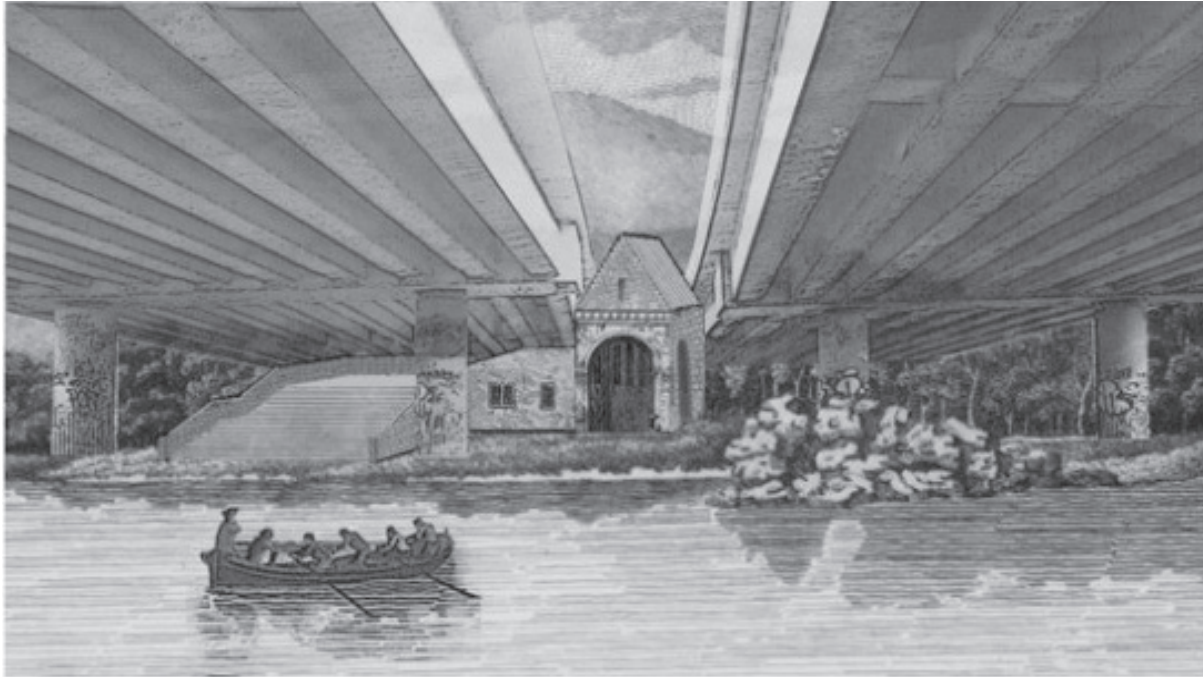


Figure 16. Folly for a Flyover, “an imaginary piece of the area’s past”



Figure 17. Folly for a Flyover, the underpass transformation



## 4 | Case study analysis



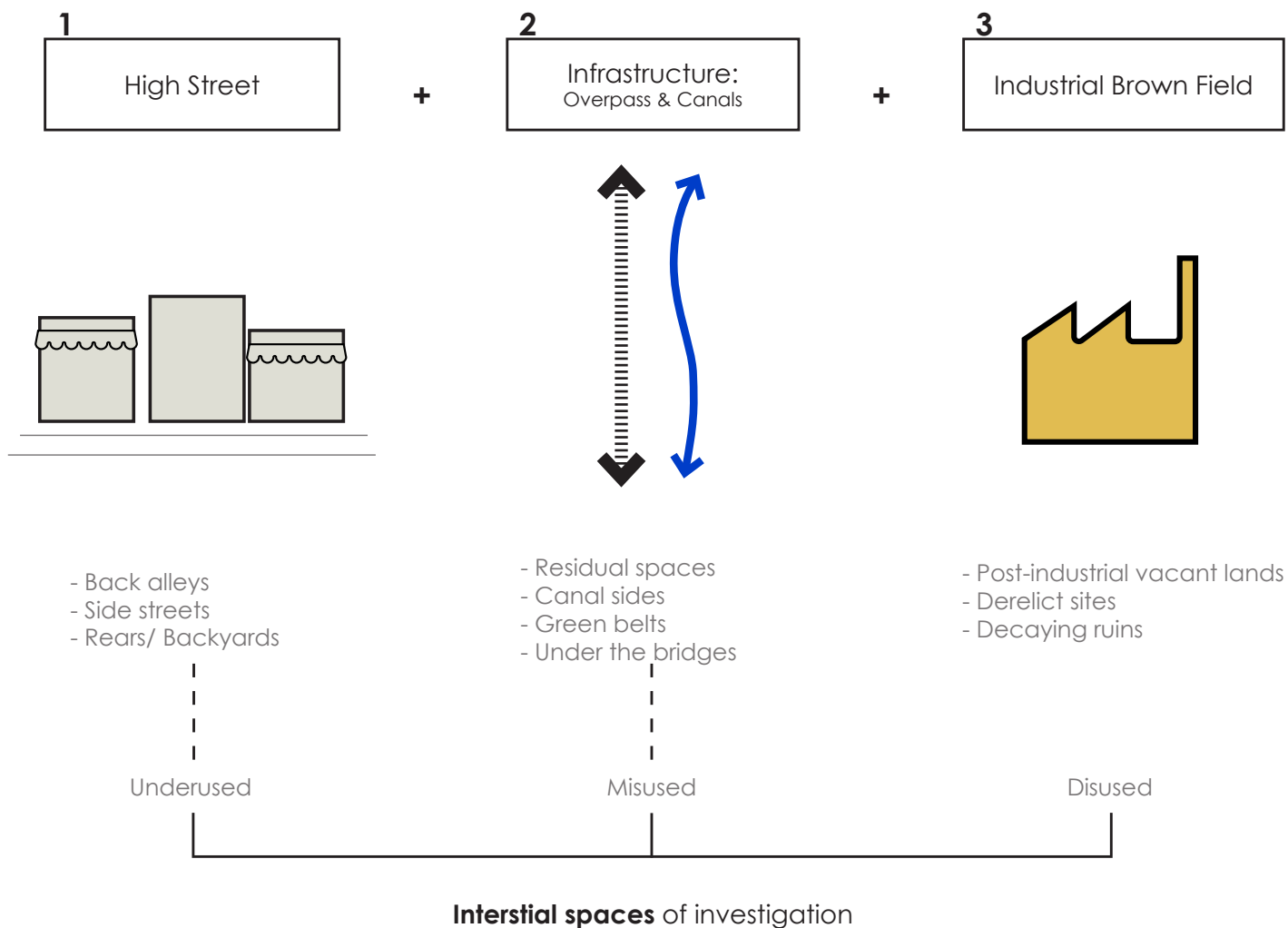


Figure 18. Main criteria for GIS mapping

## 4.1 Areas of investigation

As it was revealed throughout the document review, the existing infrastructure and the brownfields play an important role in creating potential interstices around the high street. Therefore, to determine the areas of investigation in this research, three main criteria were chosen namely the layer of high street itself, the layer of overpass and canal infrastructure and lastly, the layer of brownfields, where each layer creates interstices on its own, increasing in scale respectively (Figure 18).

The purpose of the following GIS-based mapping (Figure 19-25) was therefore to demonstrate how these layers are situated in relation to the high street and identify where they significantly overlap in order to find a potential focal point in London. Furthermore, to be able to find significant locations with development opportunities, the layer of Area of Opportunity has also been added to the initial GIS mapping. According to GLA, AOs usually require major investment in proper planning of utilities, social infrastructure and digital connectivity to support the daily lives of Londoners.<sup>35</sup>

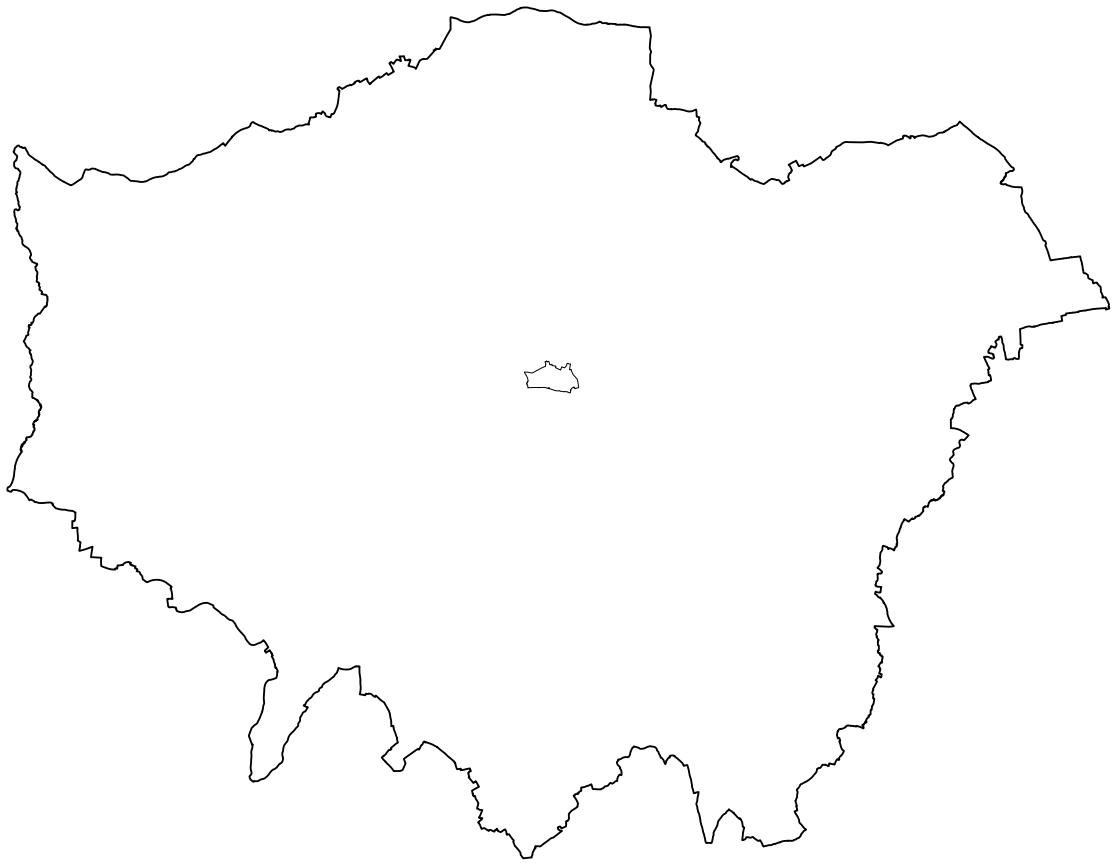


Figure 19. Map of London



Figure 20. Layer of High Street

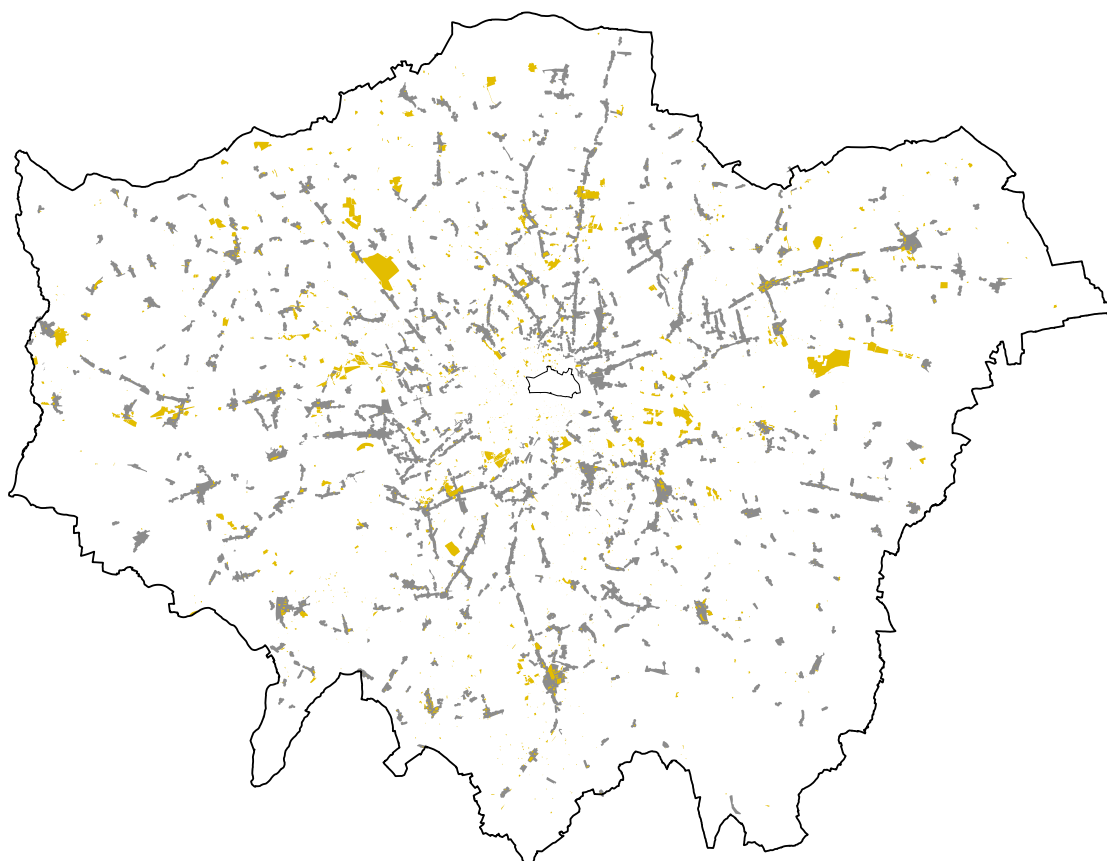


Figure 21. Layer of brownfields

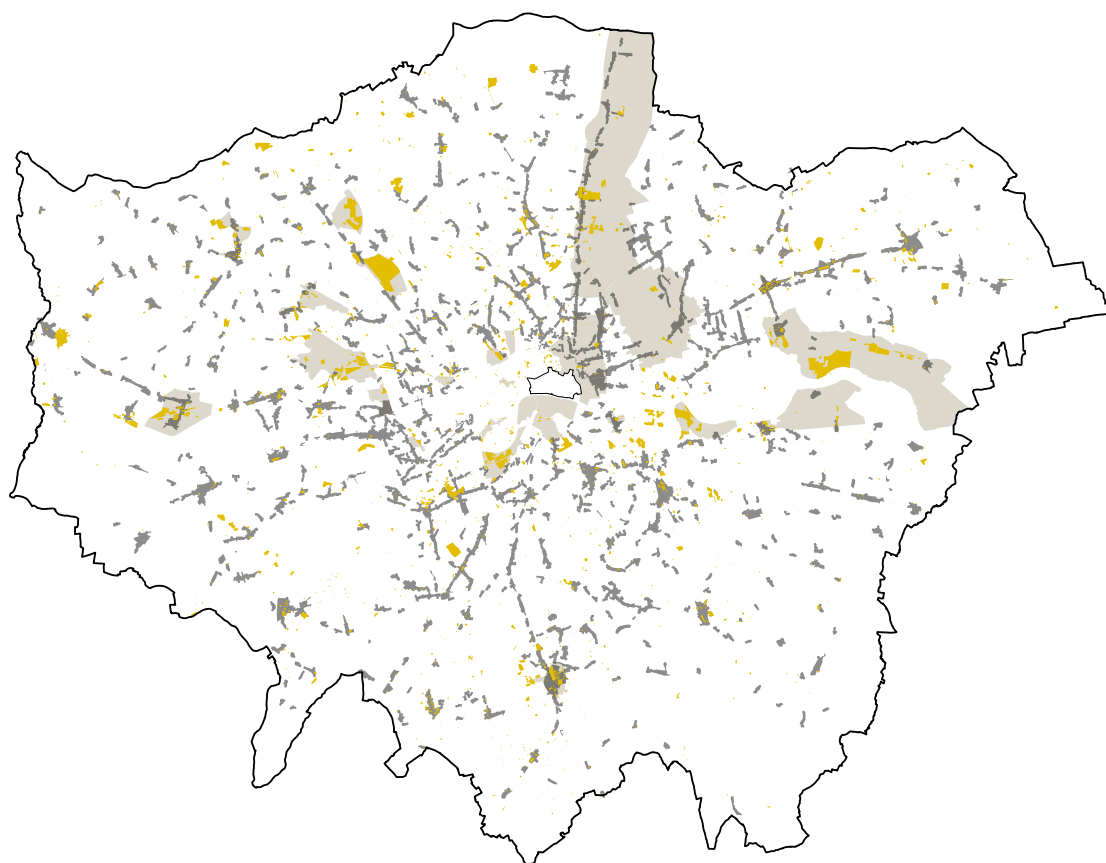


Figure 22. Areas of opportunity

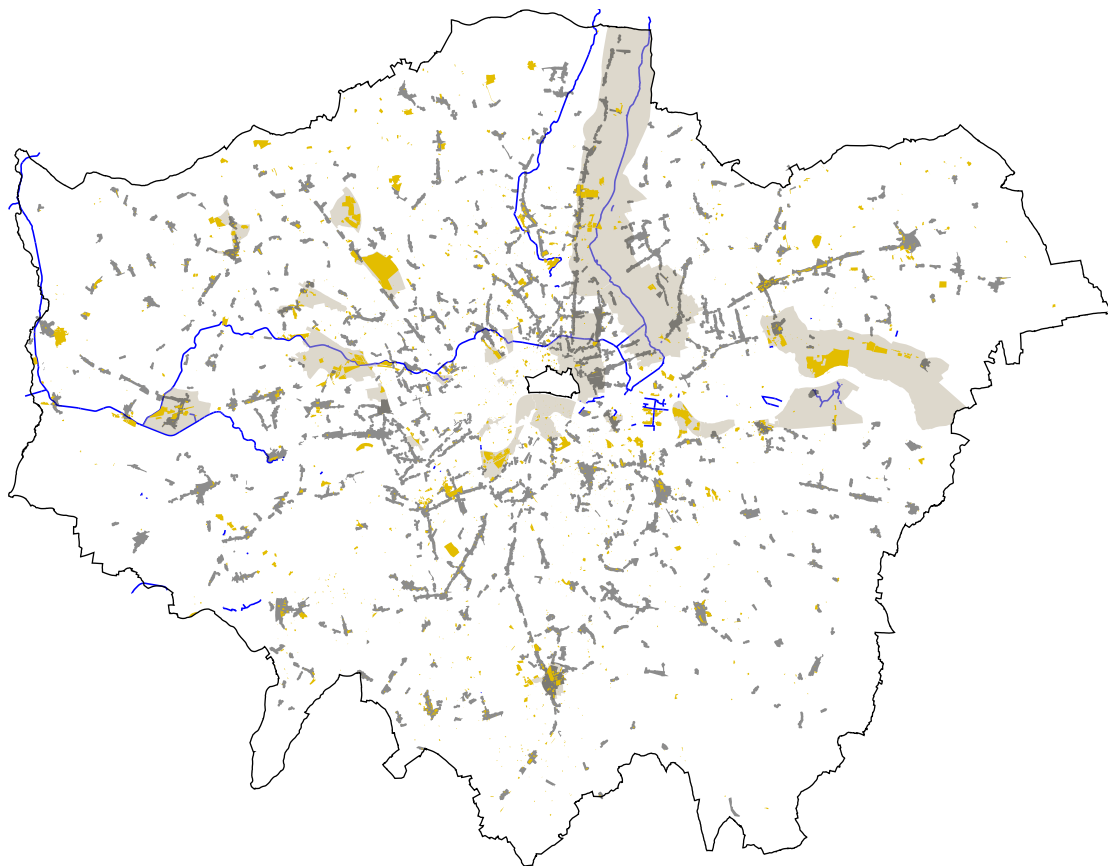


Figure 23. Layer of canals

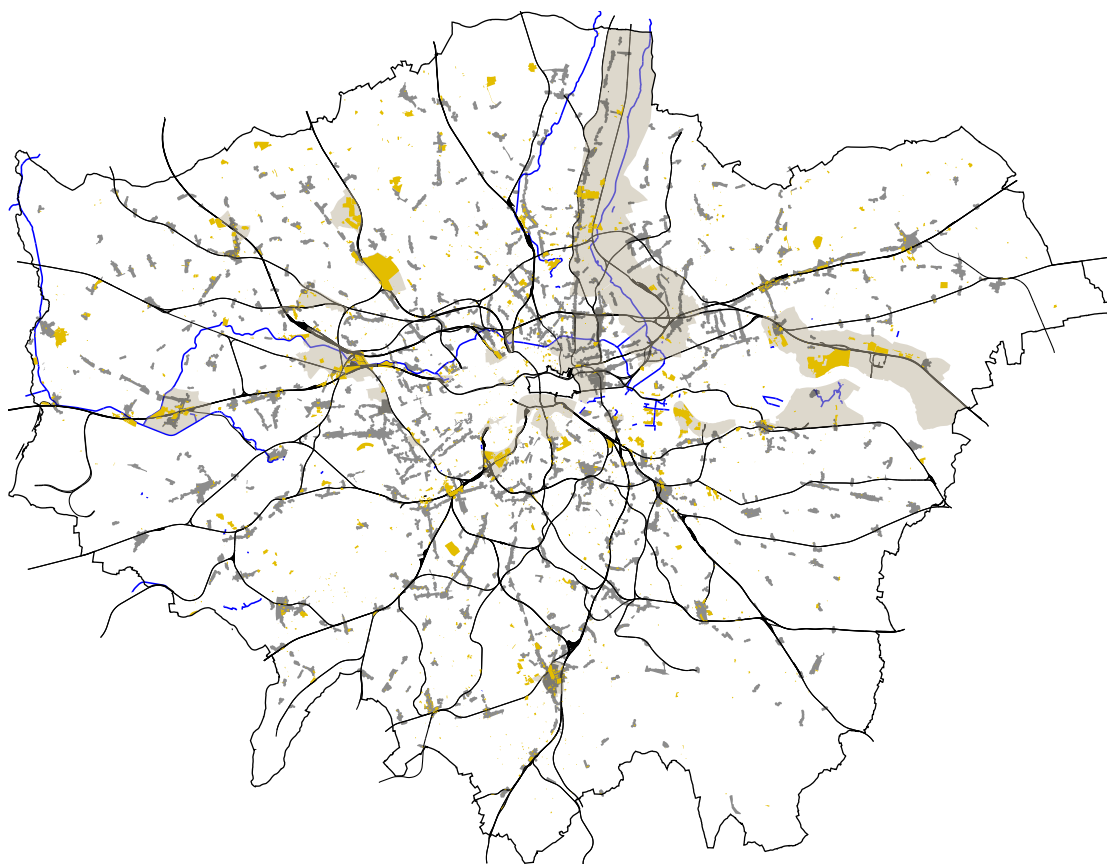


Figure 24. Layer of railways

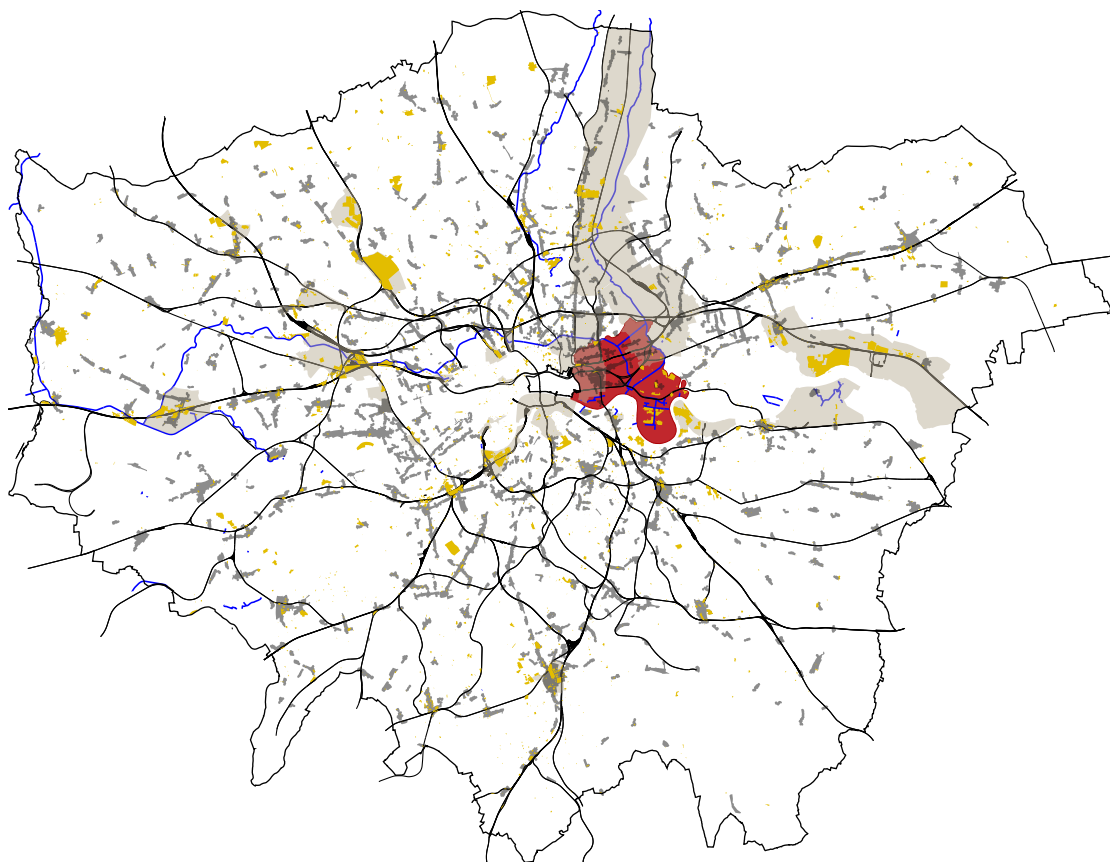


Figure 25. The chosen borough

Combining all the layers, the borough of Tower Hamlets was found (Figure 26) to be the focal point within which two possible sites with the highest density of all the main layers were chosen (Figure 27-28) for further detailed analysis. Therefore, in the next part, a comparative analysis will be carried out with an aim to visualize the areas of investigation (namely the layers of high street, canal/overpass infrastructure

and brownfield) on each site and identify the types of interstices that they produce, through crack reading. This study will further continue with a historical analysis followed by visual catalogues in order to uncover the underlying history, transformation, physical characteristics, activities and actors as well as the commonalities or differences between the two sites.

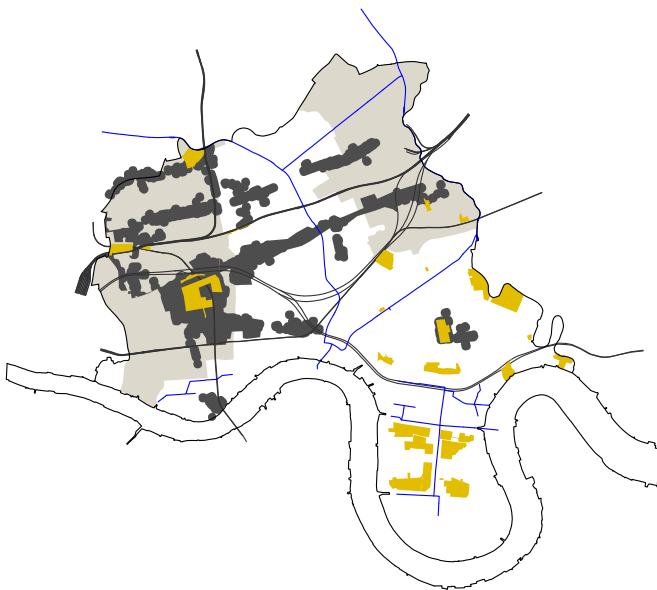


Figure 26. Borough of Tower Hamlets

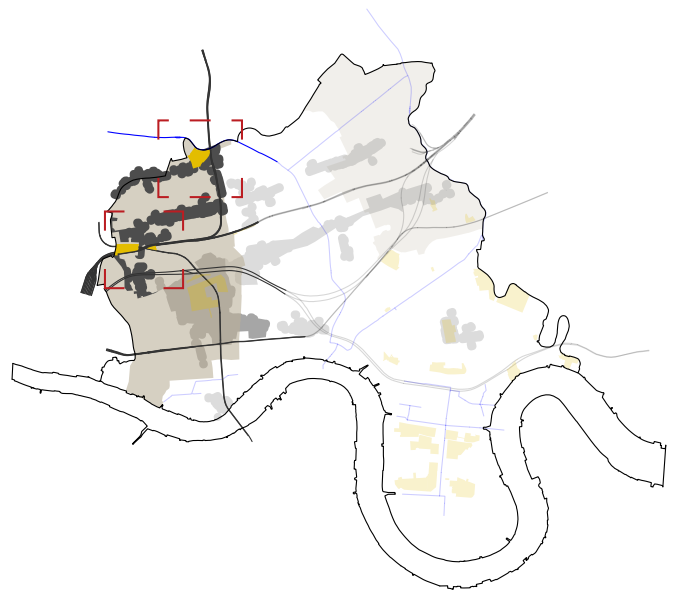


Figure 27 Possible sites

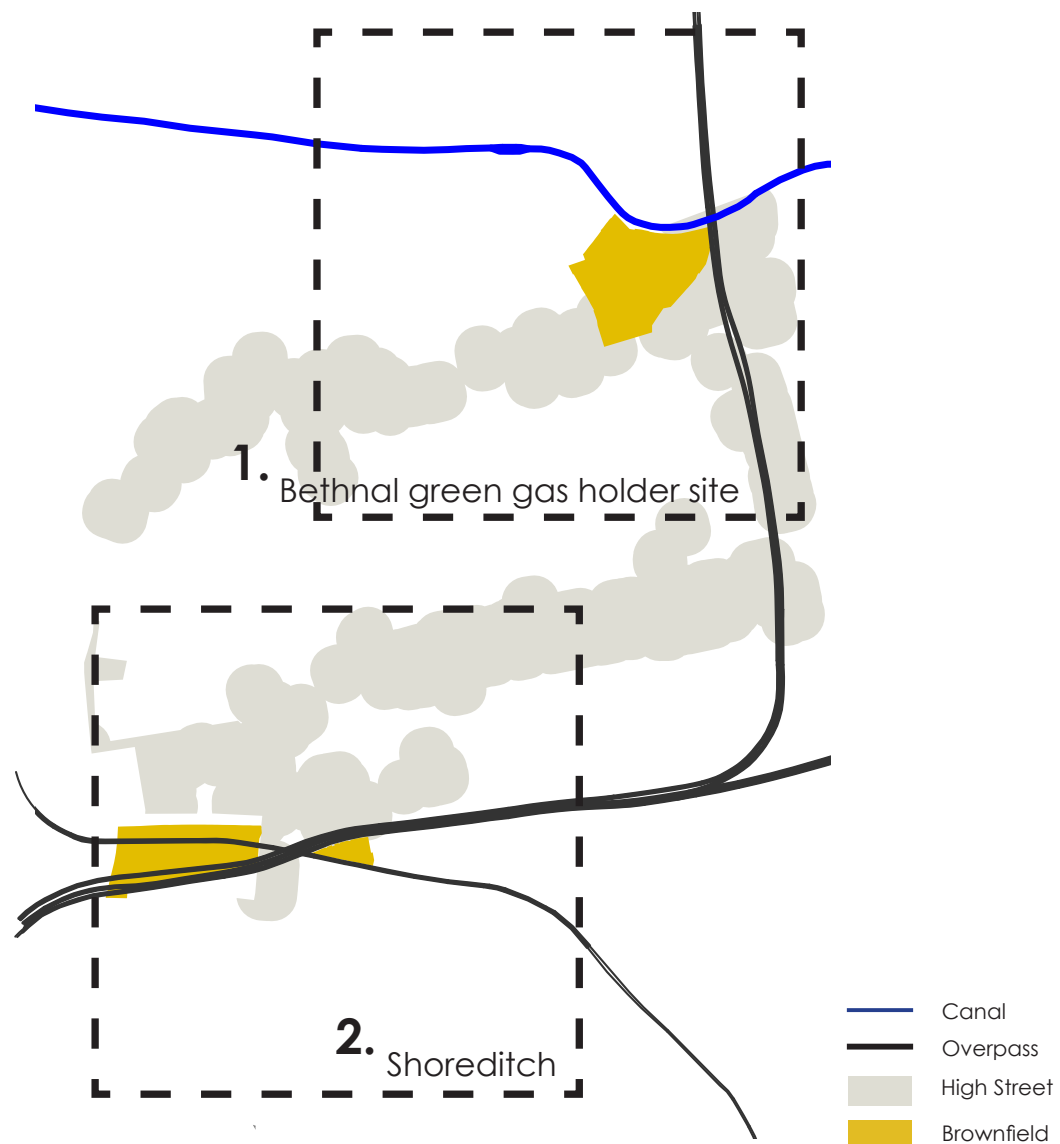


Figure 28- Possible sites



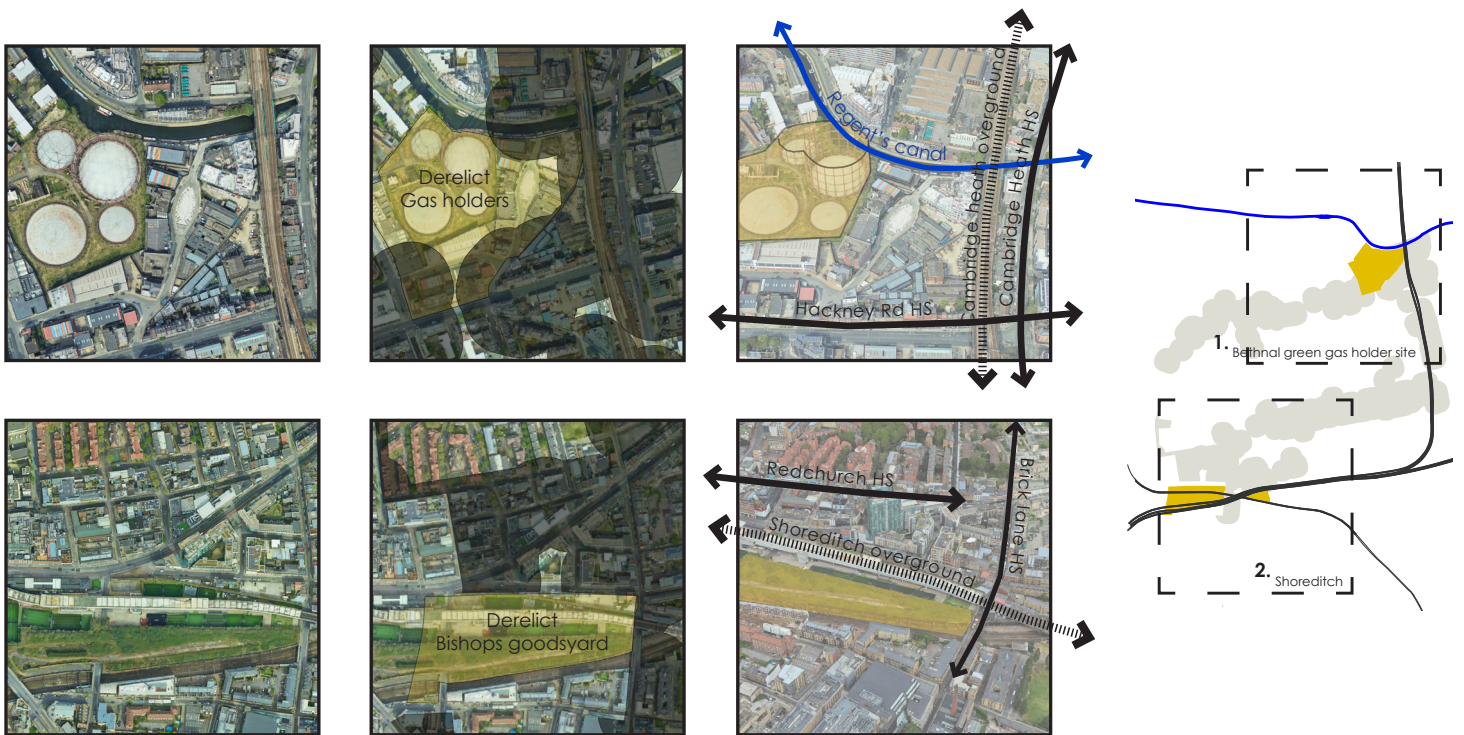


Figure 28. Composition of the main criteria in the context

## 4.2 Comparative analysis

As demonstrated in Figure 28, the composition of the infrastructure and brownfield shows a close relationship with the high street which was an expected finding according to the earlier document reviews on high streets. The following historical analysis proves that this relationship has been well-established over the years, even after going through several transformations. Figure 29, clearly shows that the high street had played the main role in the urban setting, during the early industrial time. Over time, with the development of new infrastructure and industrial lands as well as the changes in the accessibility or in urban planning, this main focus has been gradually distributed. Today the disuse of some of these post-industrial fields or the transformation of infrastructures (shrinkage, removal or addition) have caused an overall neglect and have encouraged the production of a series of heterogeneous interstitial spaces around the high street.

Neglect of both

The focus is shifted to industrial developments

Main focus on High Street



Figure 29. Historical analysis

After identifying the layers of investigation on both sites, namely the high street, overpass/canal infrastructure and brownfield, crack reading was applied during the field research in order to discover the interstitial spaces that are respectively produced around or in-between these layers.

For instance, in Bethnal green site, a back alley provided an unconventional access from the high street to an underused parking space which was also connected to the space underneath the Cambridge Heath overpass with a tunnel. The tunnel was completely filled with rough and irregular graffiti and its hidden aspect was accommodating antisocial behavior from time to time. Right at the end of the tunnel a narrow canal side appeared called the Towpath which was unexpectedly accommodating many informal activities such as exercising, gatherings and even a boat library. Ultimately, by following the Towpath one could immediately notice the disused gas holder site which seemed to be located not so far from the starting point at the high street.

This exercise therefore, helped to understand the composition and connectivity of the cracks and interstitial spaces. On the other hand, this connectivity was physically less visible in the case of the Shoreditch. Nevertheless, each layer of investigation created cracks of its own, by decoding which a wide range of information was acquired regarding the spatial characteristics, physical qualities, activities and actors. The residual spaces underneath

the overpass was reused as football fields but also space for trash, the fences turned into an informal love lock board, a hidden gallery of the goodsyard was holding a secret makerspace event and the little back alleys of the surrounding high street was filled with random graffiti and street art. This hinted on local artists as one of the dominant actors who were often spotted in these areas sitting on the ground along with many teenagers and local workers due to lack of space and urban seating. There were also many tourists getting off the overpass station, in the middle of the site, in front of football field fences, feeling quite lost. Figure 30 and 31 represent visual catalogues demonstrating a selection of these findings.



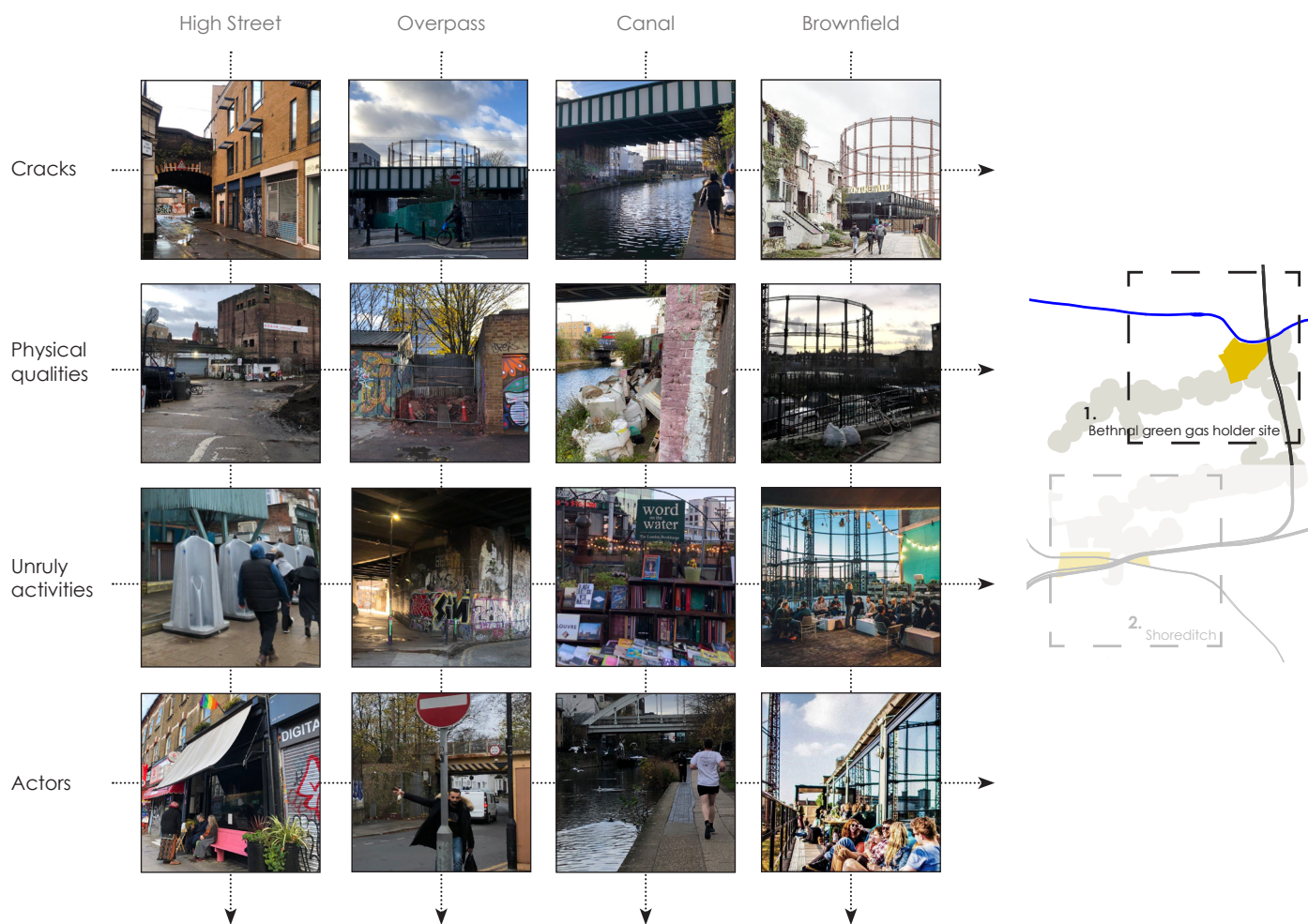


Figure 30. Crack reading, Bethnal Green



Figure 31. Crack reading, Shoreditch

The results of this comparative analysis is diagrammatically marked on the map (Figure 32), in accordance to the predominant elements in the context. The cracks were mostly found to be smaller scale residual spaces which hold many hints and information about their surrounding urban conditions but more importantly they seem to be connected as a system when followed closely. By reading in-between these cracks, in both cases, within a short distance to the high streets, bigger scale interstitial spaces such as disused/underused parking lots, green fields and brownfields were found. Moreover, it was noticed that the buildings in the high streets within Shoreditch were built more densely with less space in-between whereas in Bethnal green there was more permeability within the high street and its backside as well as more vacant shops.

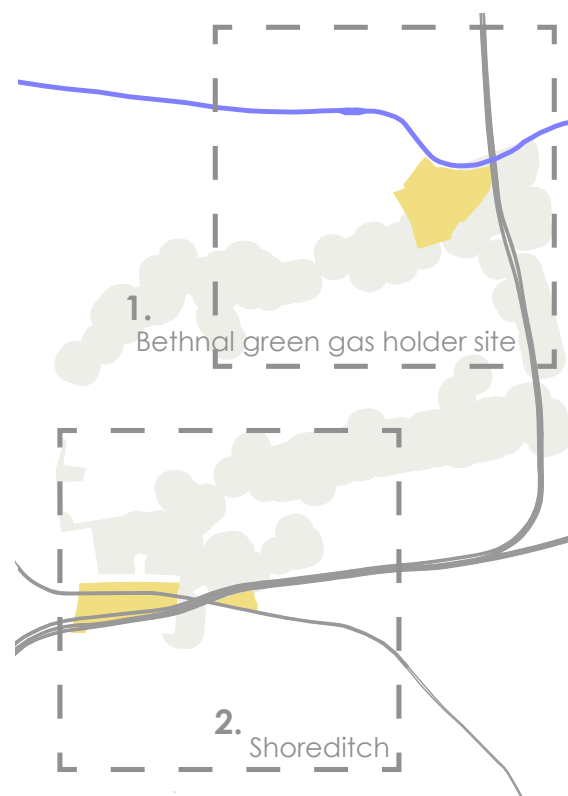
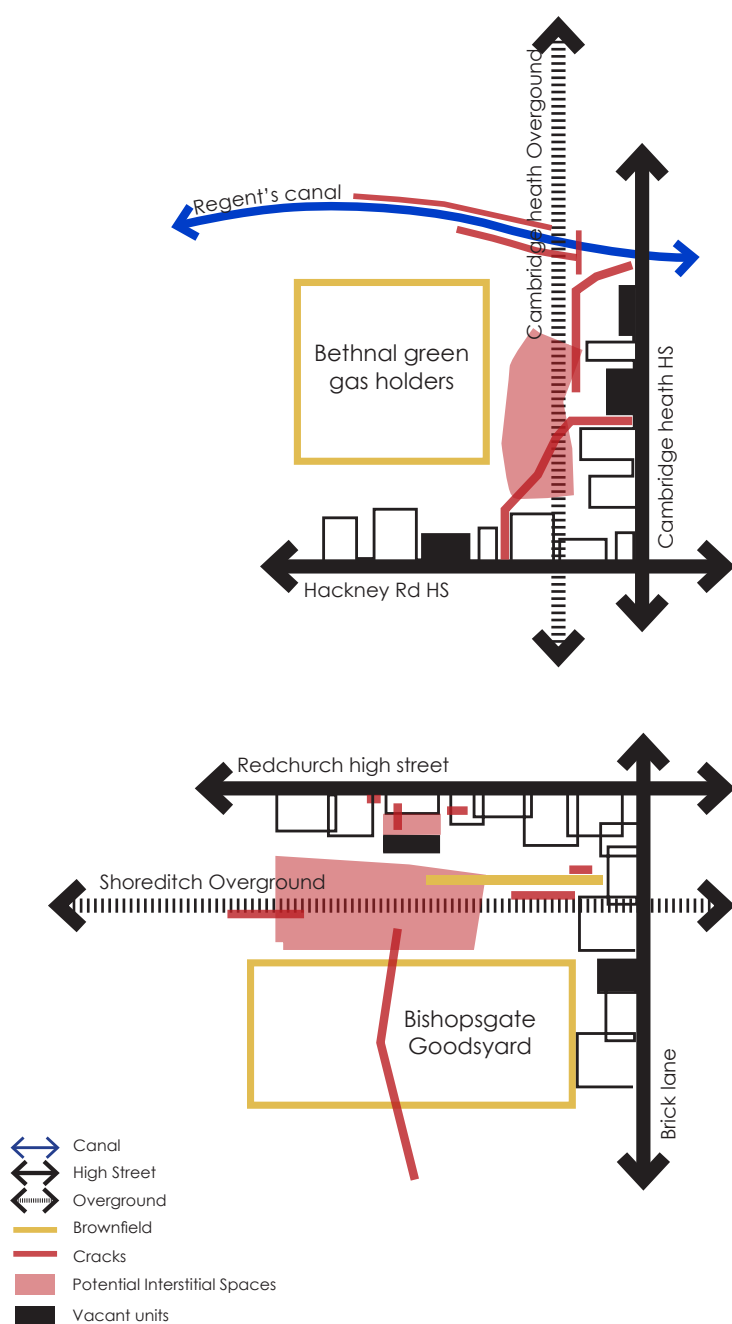


Figure 32. Comparative analysis conclusions



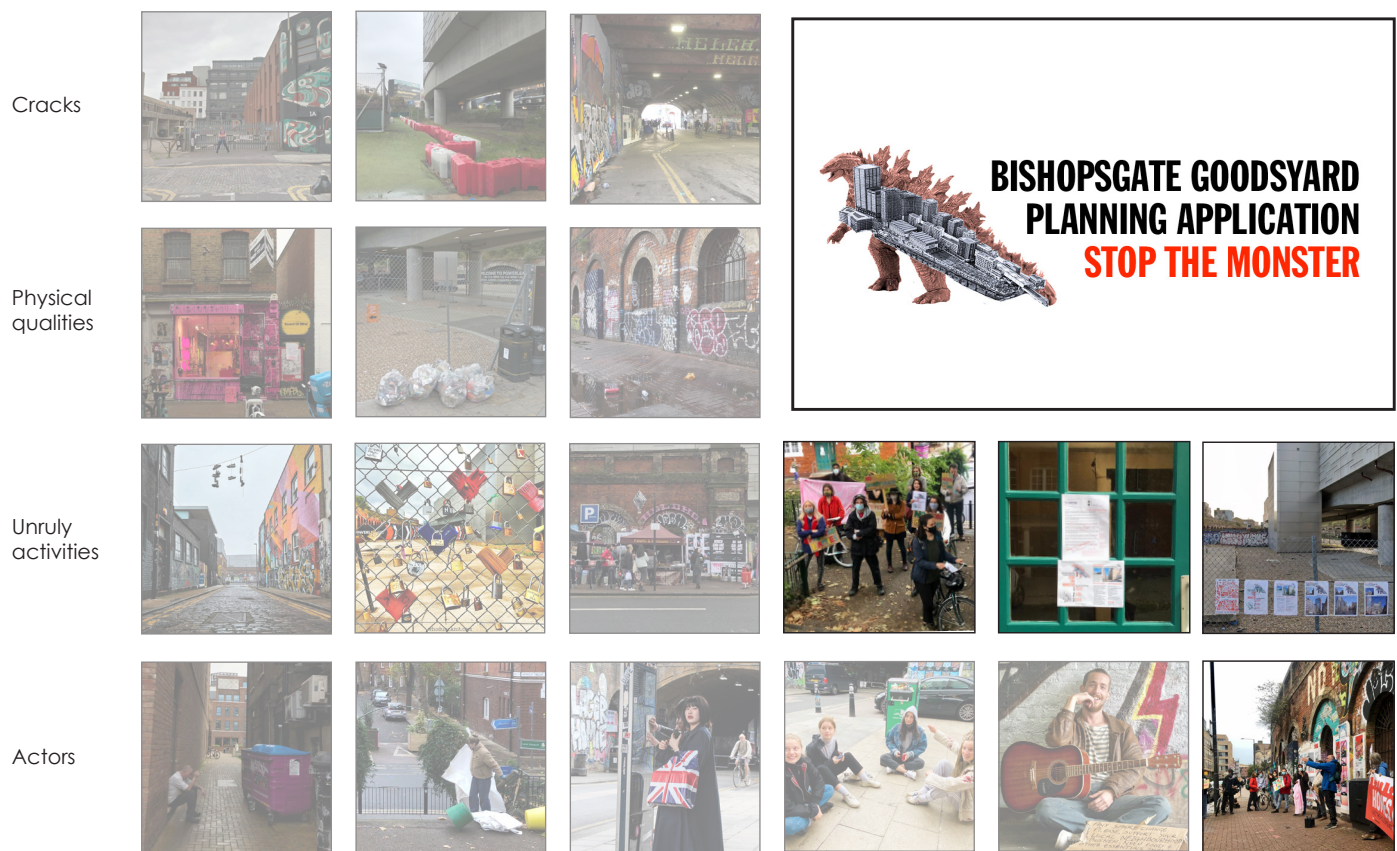


Figure 33. Completed image after Shoreditch crack reading



Figure 34. The view of Bishopsgate Goodsyrd development proposal from Redchurch high street

36 "The Goodsyrd", En.Wikipedia.Org, accessed 15 May 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Goodsyard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Goodsyard).  
 37 "Stop The Monster", Goodsyrd.Org, 2020, <http://www.goodsyard.org/>.  
 38 Lee Mitchell, interview.

## 4.3 Shoreditch case study

By extending the previous crack reading exercise, a few more substantial findings lead to Shoreditch as a focal point for the project site. As drifting between the cracks, a significant number of protesting posters were detected on the walls of Redchurch high street and the fences of the overpass, with a motto “Stop The Monster!” (Figure 33) referring to the new development proposal for the Bishopsgate Goodsyard. This brownfield site currently sits derelict and disused as it has been since the fire of December 1964. The developers submitted a planning application in 2014 for plans that initially included four towers of 30, 34, 42 and 49 stories and a total of 1,500 homes, 19,000 square meters of retail space, 60,000 square meters of office space as well as workshops. Even though this proposal has been revised and downgraded ever since the first submission, the community still seems to be unhappy as to them, it represents cold, corporate buildings with excessive bulk and height, small amount of green space and lack in character. Figure 34 could explain why they believe that the new development scheme ignores the surrounding context including the local high streets and its community.<sup>37</sup>

In line with this topic, an interview was conducted with Lee Mitchell, member of a non-profit organization called ‘OnRedchurch’ with a vision to expand the experience of visitors and residents and a commitment to support the high street by improving its physical qualities as well as social and economic performance.

Mitchell remarks that Redchurch Street, and Brick Lane, are dense urban areas with sections of narrow pavements, no back yards and limited public realm space and green spaces which consequently provides limited opportunities for the council to develop solutions to manage or improve these high streets. Figure 35 and 36 partially reflects on this density as well as the limitation of in-between spaces and public realm on Redchurch high street. She further mentions that adjacent communities often don’t visit the street as Redchurch isn’t associated with any meaningful moment in their lives.<sup>38</sup>

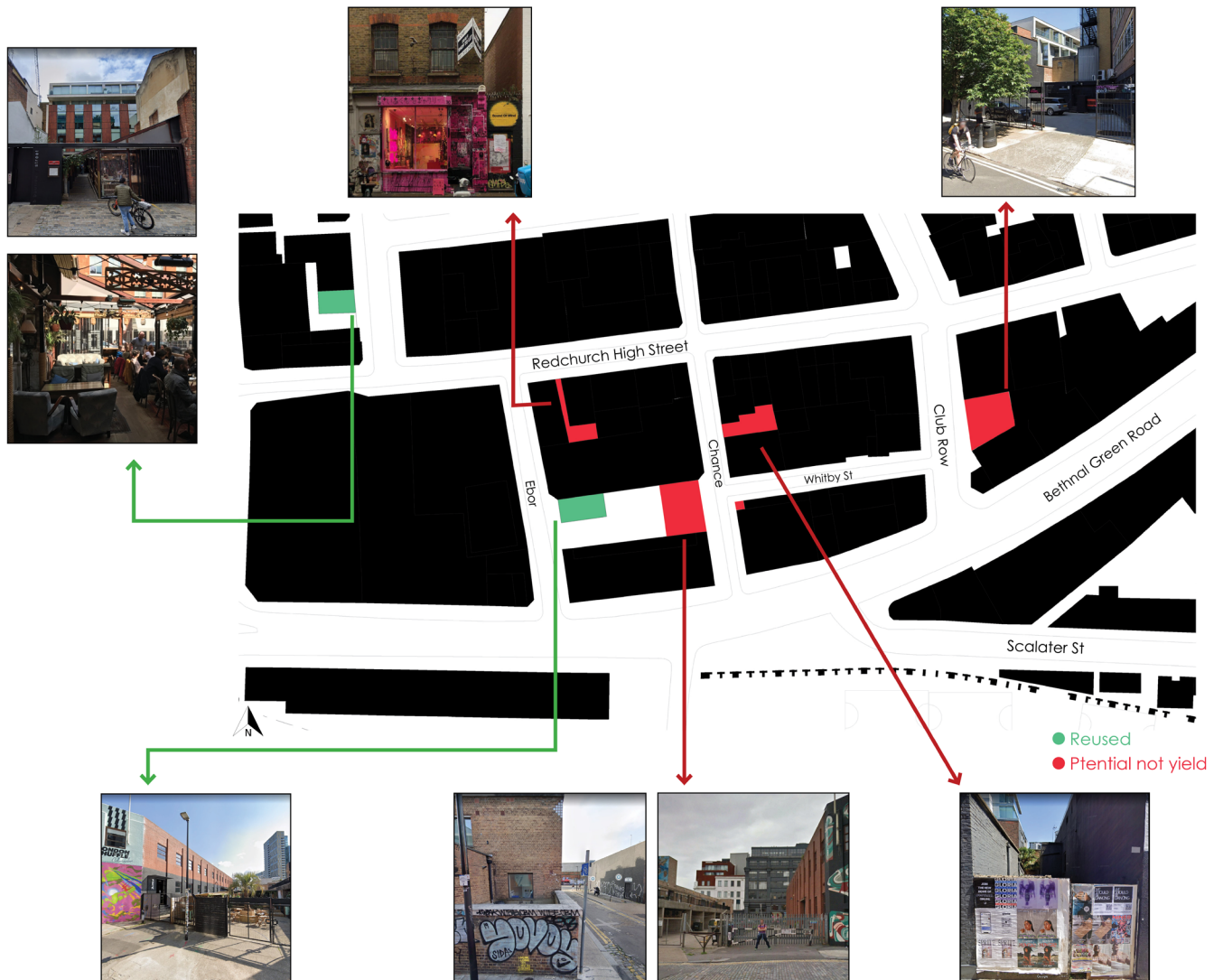


Figure 35. The limitation of (in-between) public spaces due to high density of buildings on Redchurch



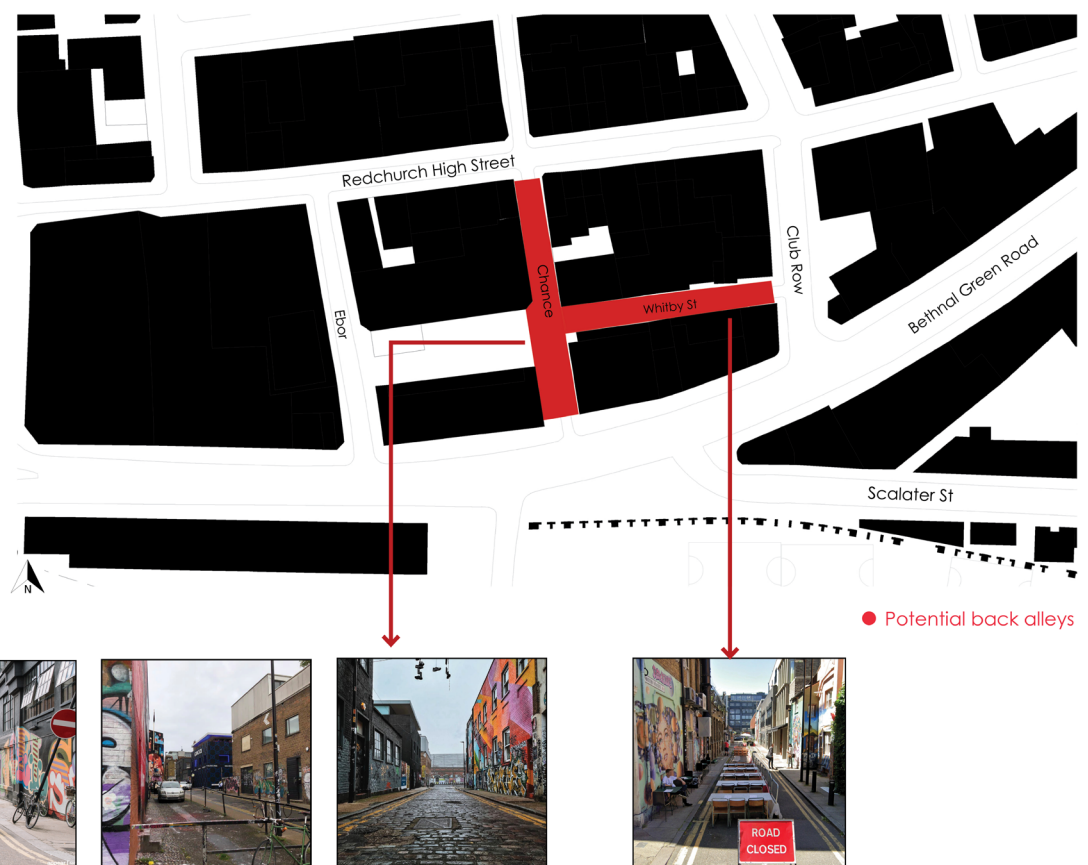
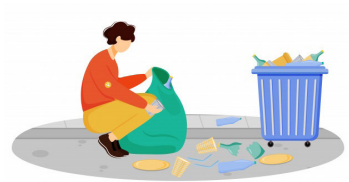


Figure 36. The potential back alleys of Redchurch High street acting as in-between public space





### Main Actors

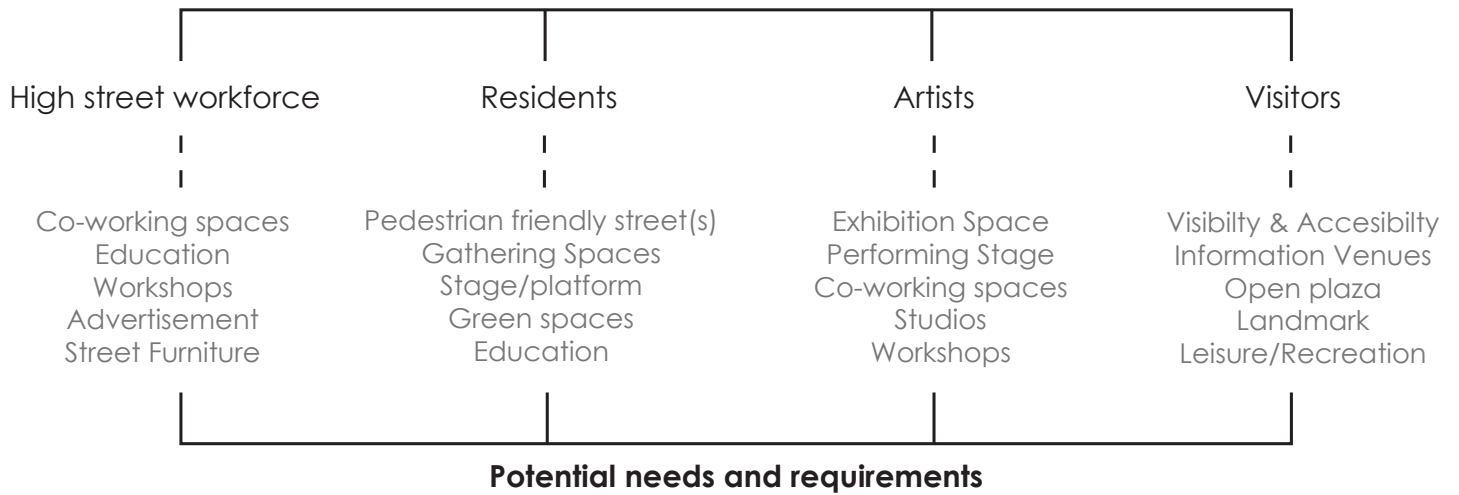


Figure 38. The main actors of the site and their potential needs

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<sup>40</sup> Leonard Cohen, Rebecca De Mornay & Yoav Goren, “Anthem”, in: *The Future*, Columbia Records, 1992.

## 4.4 Conclusion

The research resulted in a new interpretation of the contemporary high street as a system made of heterogeneous interstitial spaces of different scales which might have poor physical conditions or feel disconnected from the surrounding urban context, yet hold a huge potential for the survival and vitality of the high street. As the case of Shoreditch, some of these interstitial spaces open doors to developable lands which are usually haunted by developers without taking the high street and its community into consideration. This could be even riskier for less visible high streets such as Redchurch with already limited public realm.

The essay, therefore, puts emphasis on integrating the local high streets in the future developments by revitalizing its interstitial spaces and building a supportive connection between the high street and its surrounding urban context. Considering the multi-scale aspect of these interstices, a package of architectural and urban regeneration strategies is suggested in order to provide a wide range of appropriations and interventions, from improving the poor physical conditions to building meaningful public spaces that serves the community. In the case of Redchurch high street, it was notable that there is a significant need for the educational programs in the neighborhood and a lack of communal spaces which will be even more intensified by the future (massive) development of Shoreditch. In this process, reading urban cracks was an informative exercise which not only helped to

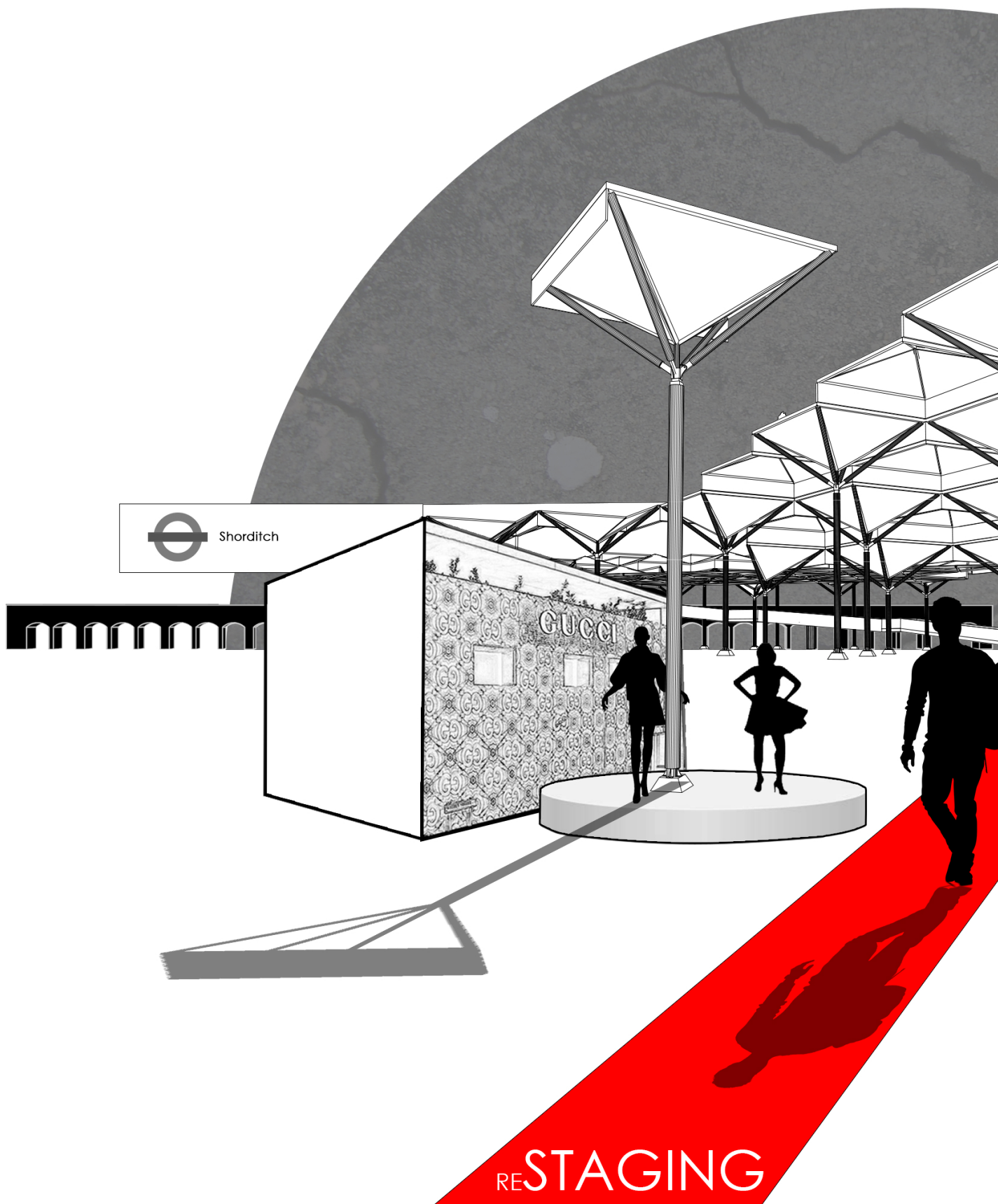
decode the system of interstices but also shed light on the future needs and possibilities. In Cohen's mystical words:

"There is a crack in everything. That is how the light gets in."<sup>40</sup>



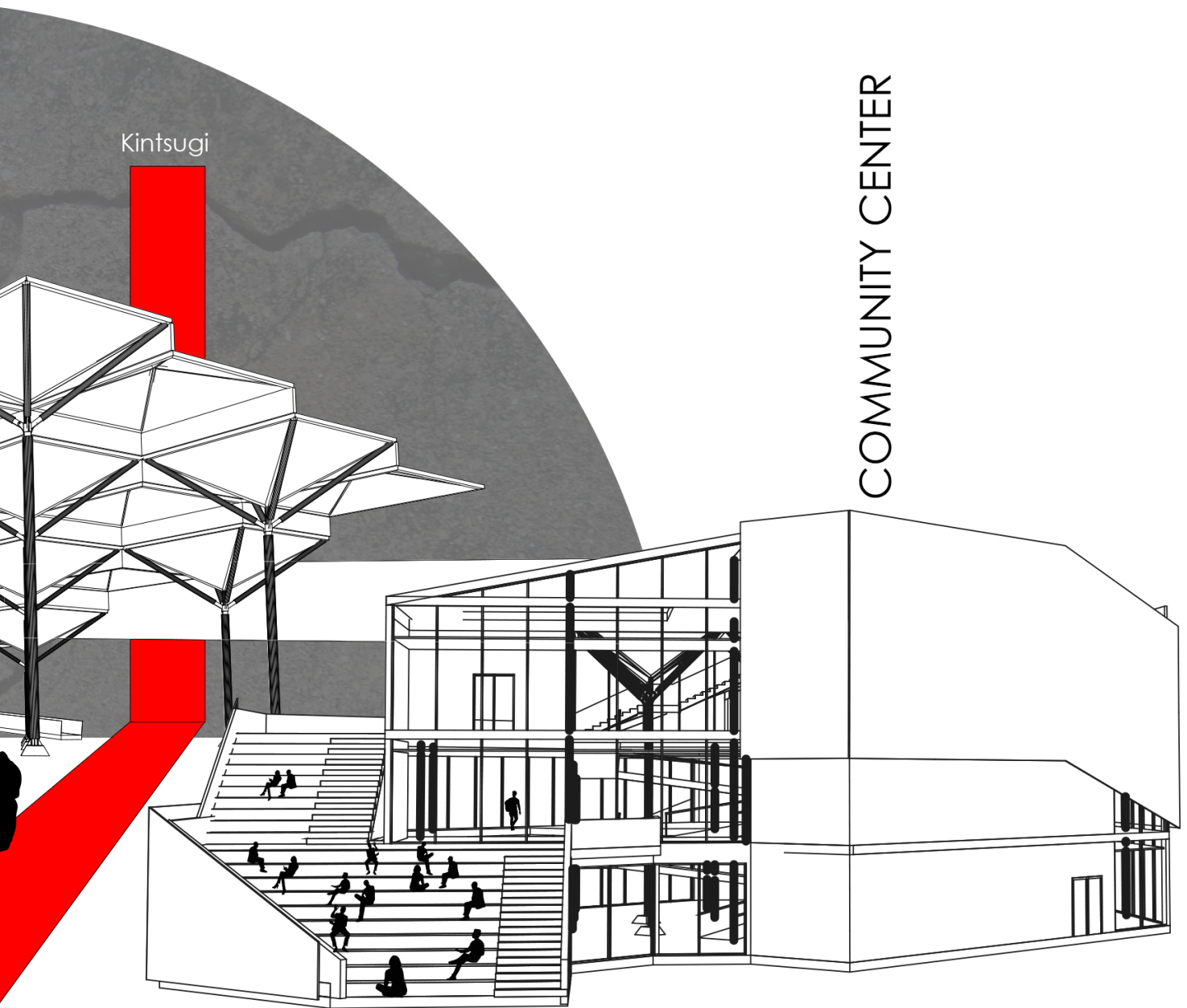


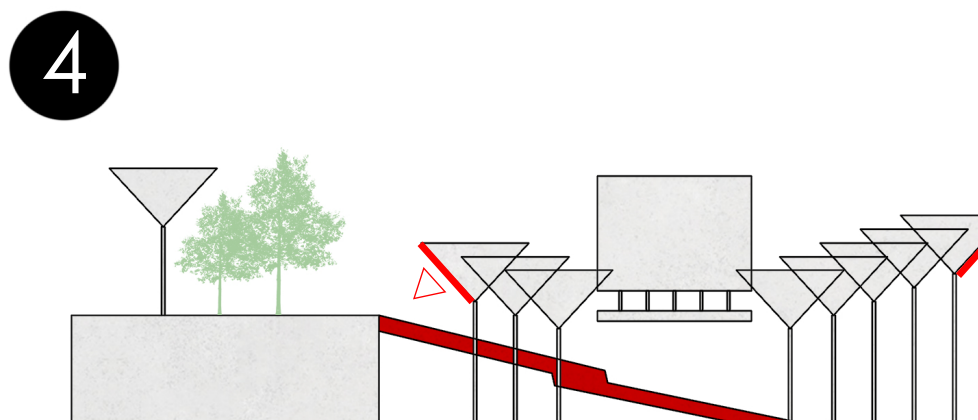
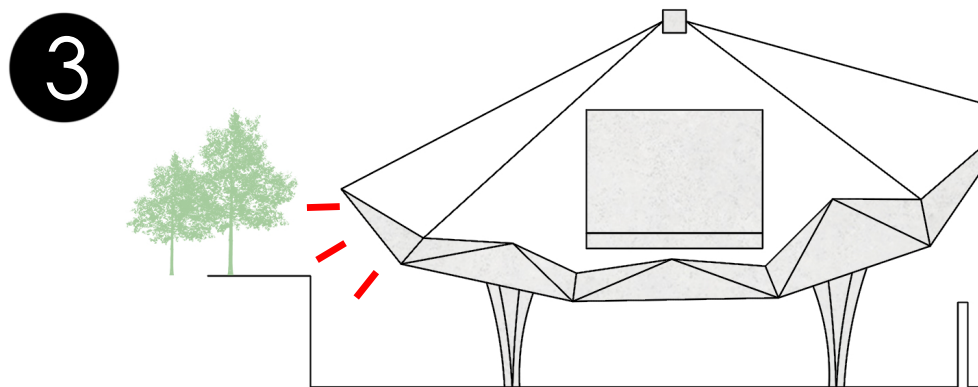
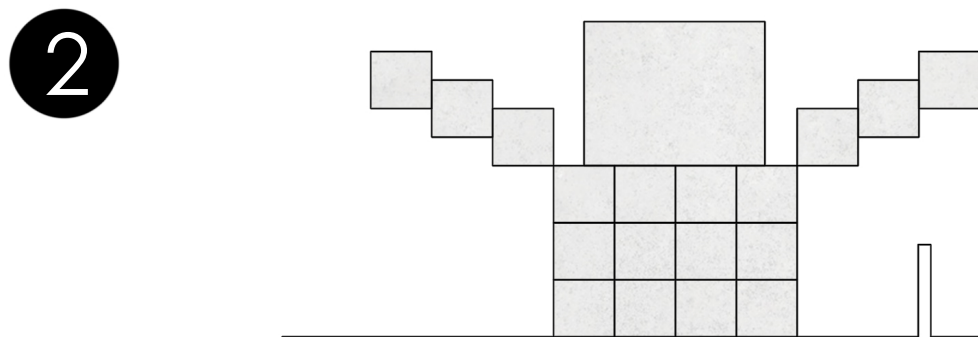
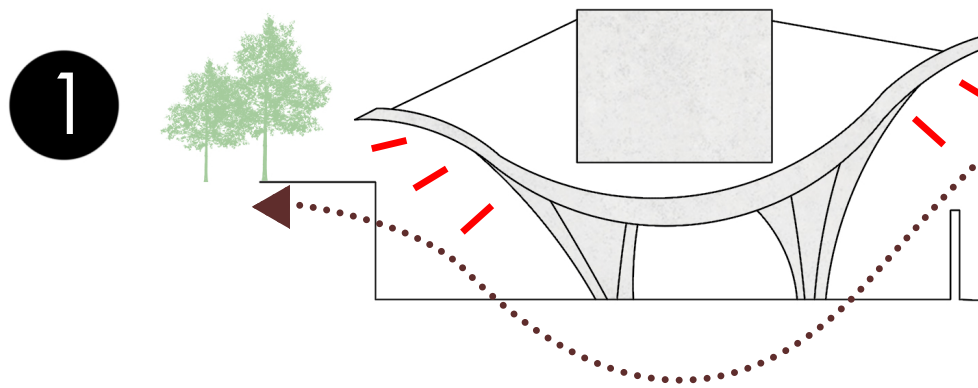
## 5 | Design

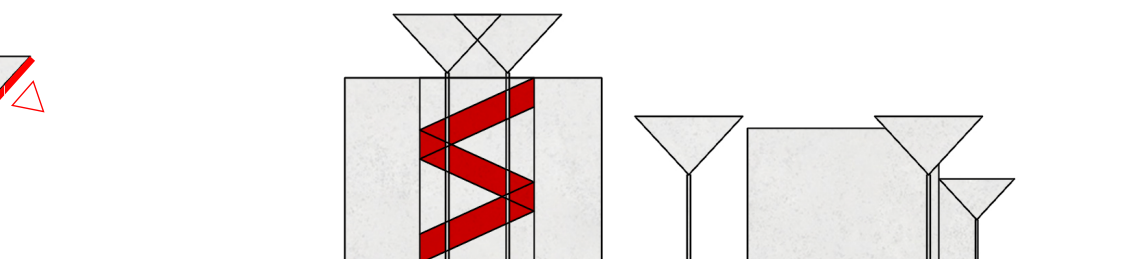
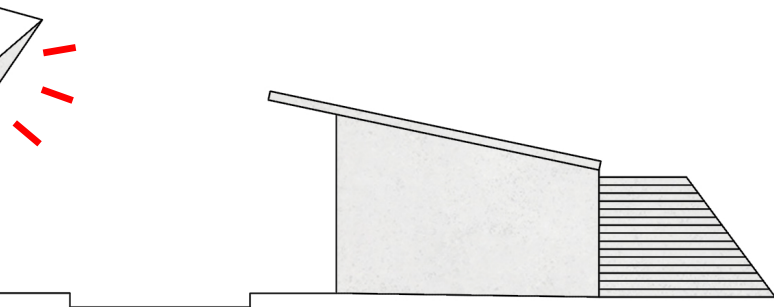
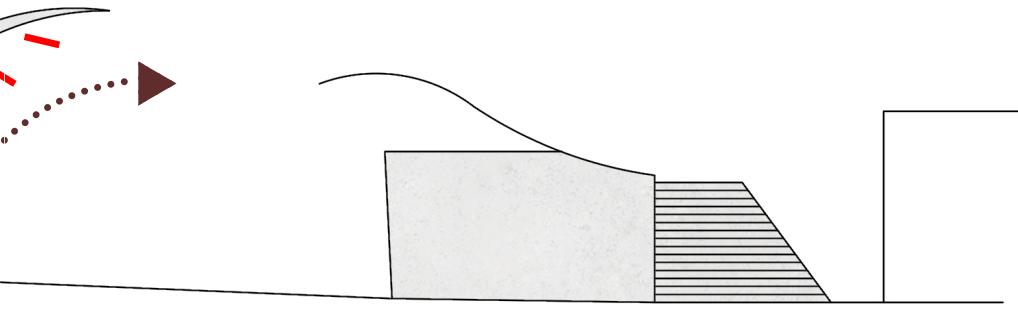


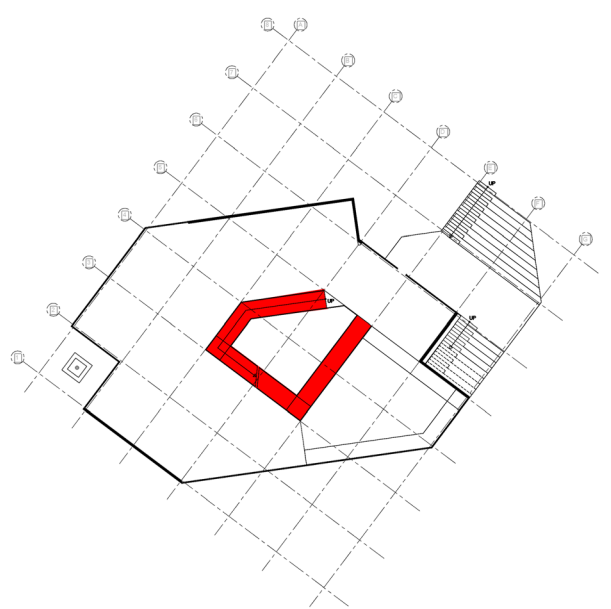
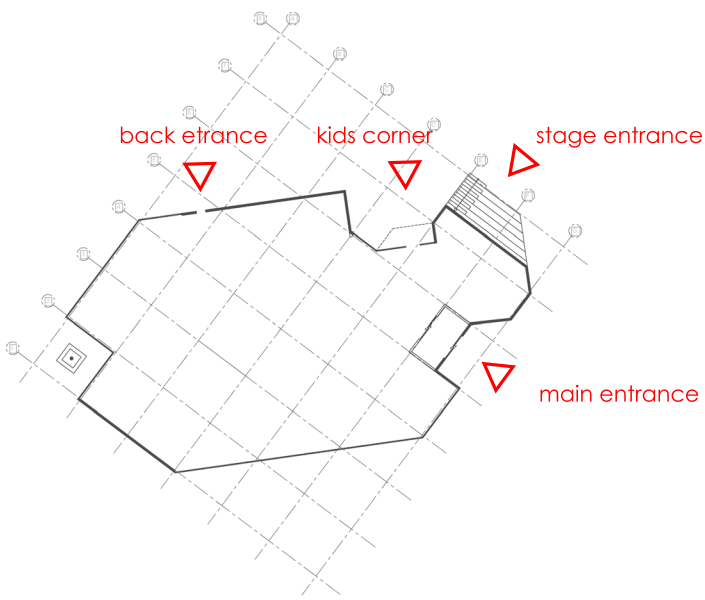
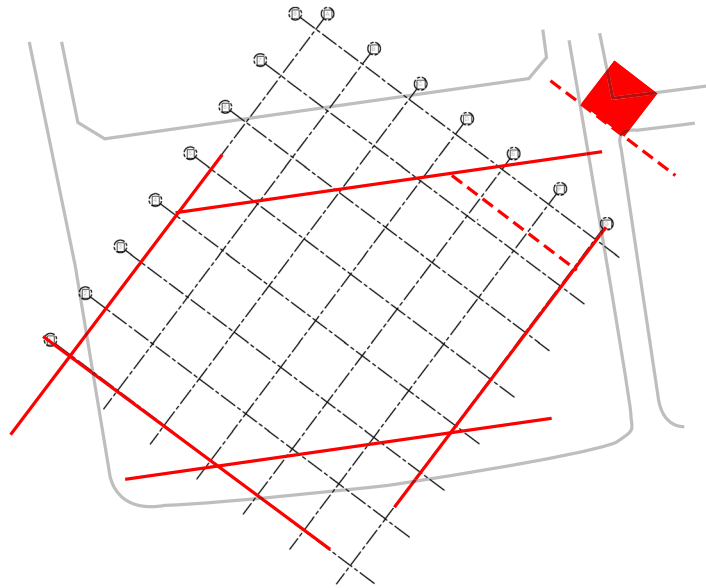
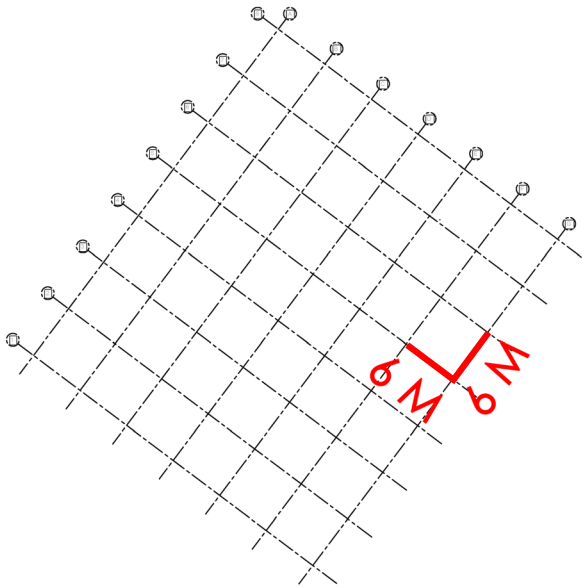
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COMMUNITY CENTER



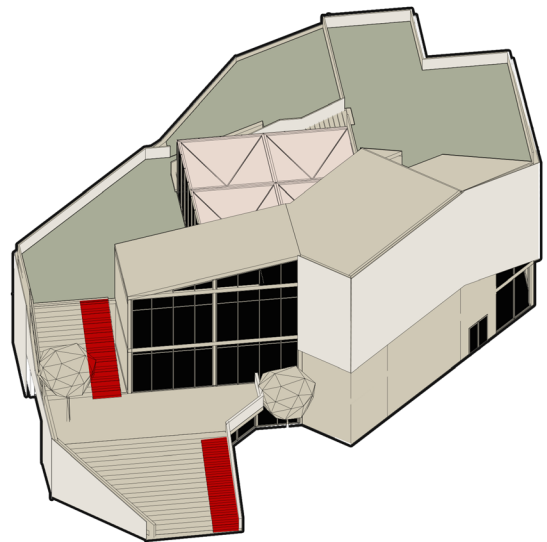
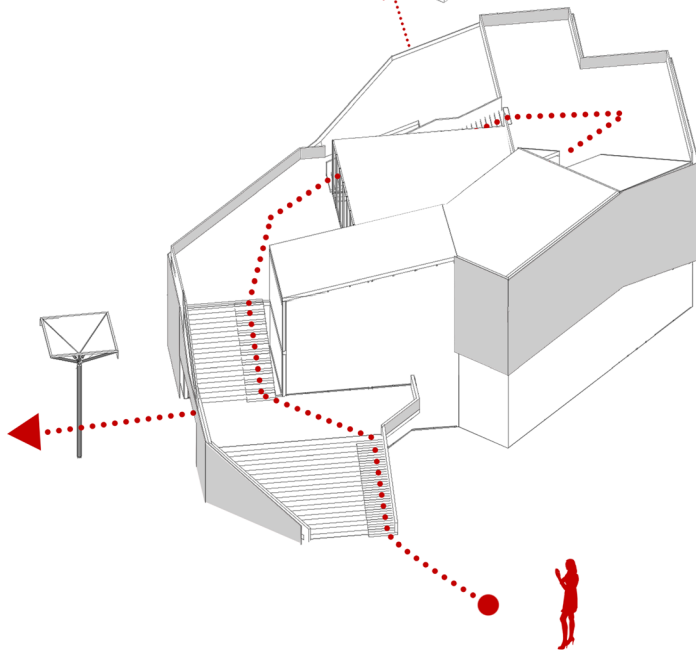
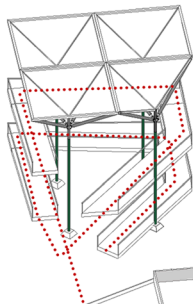
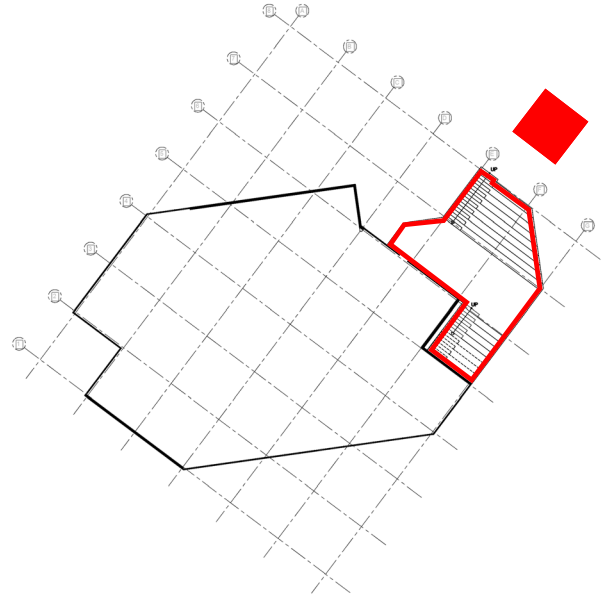
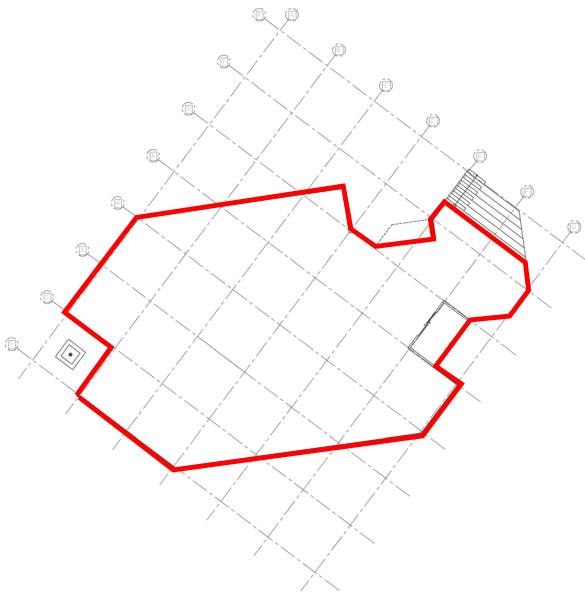






# Concept 5.1

## Community center design development diagram



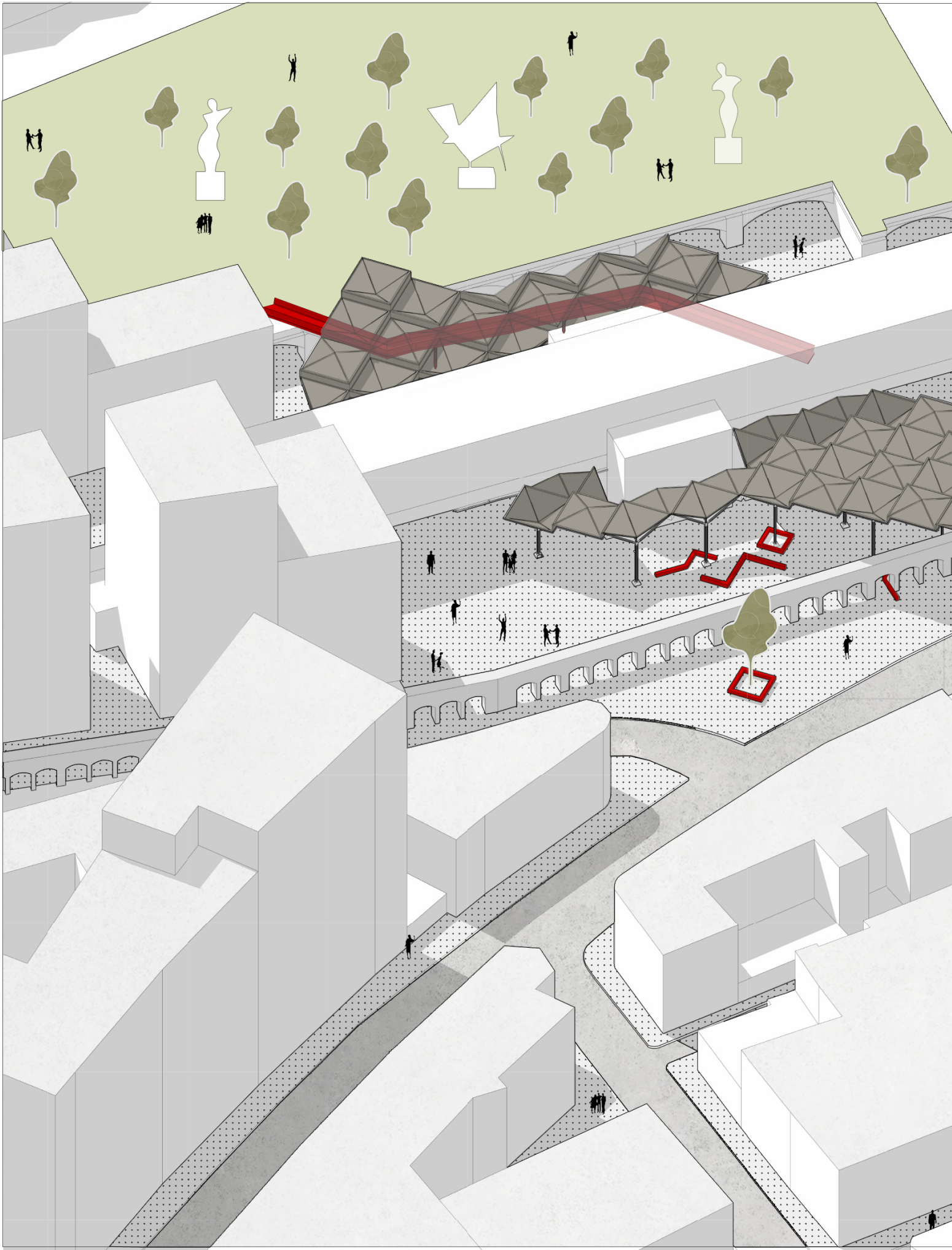


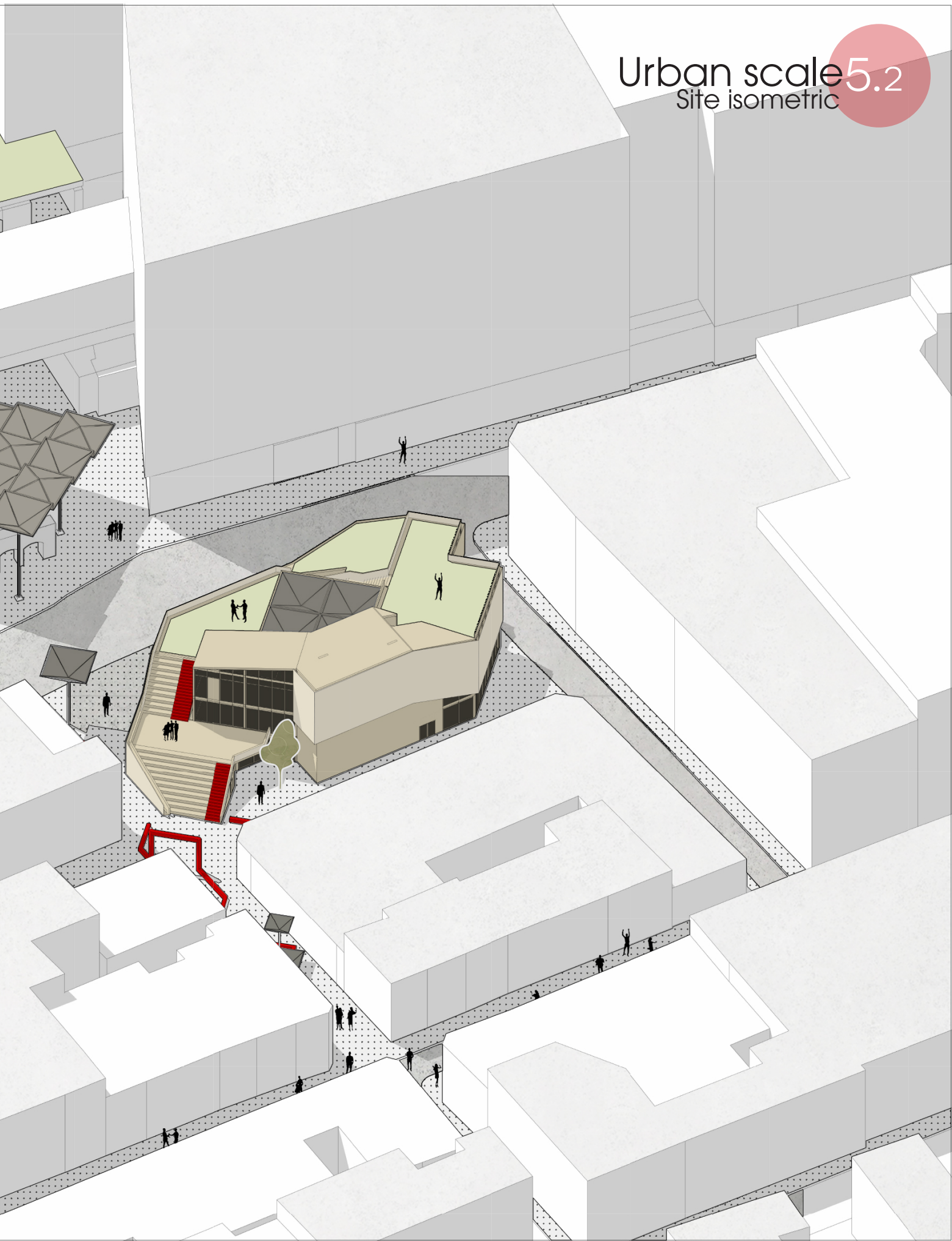


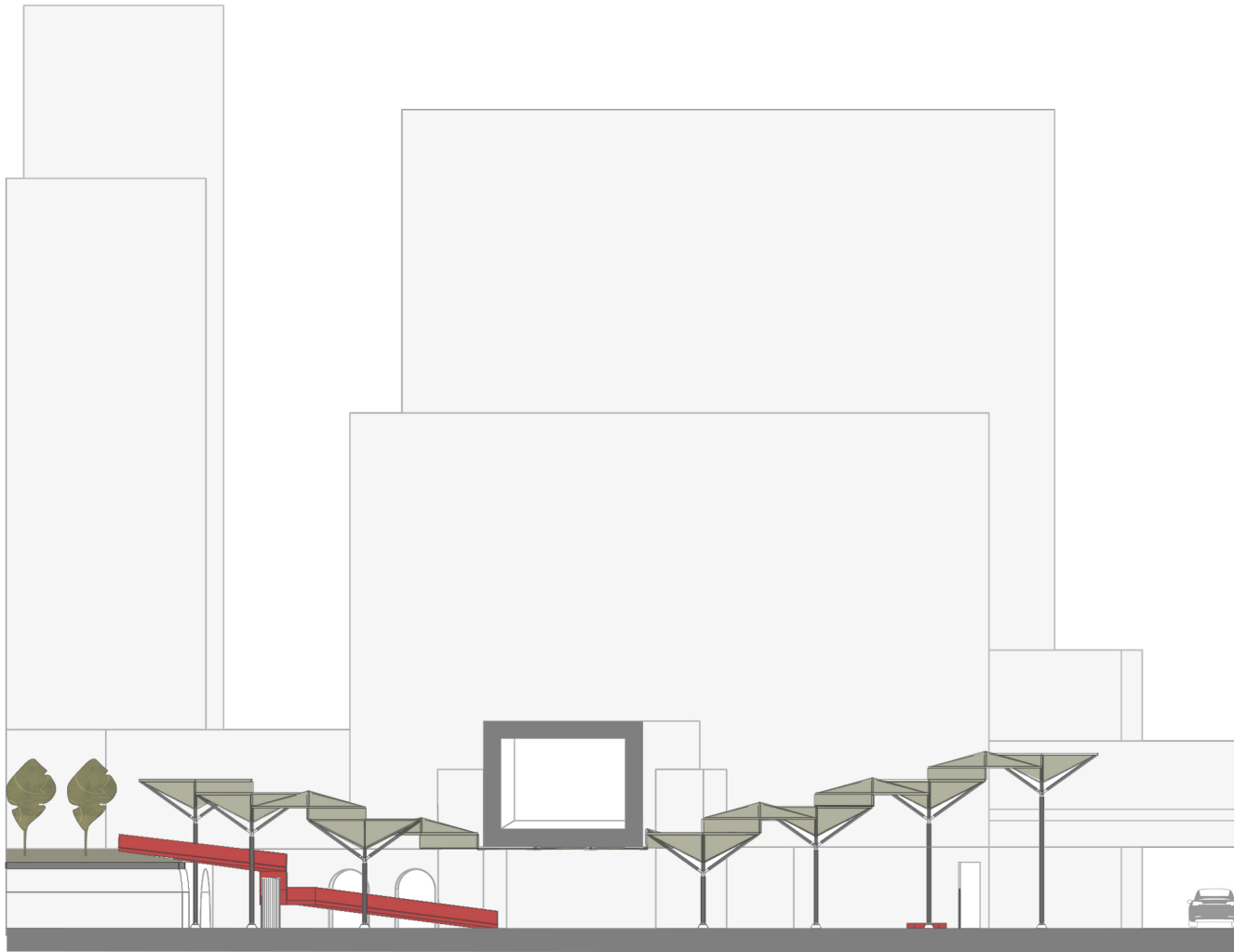
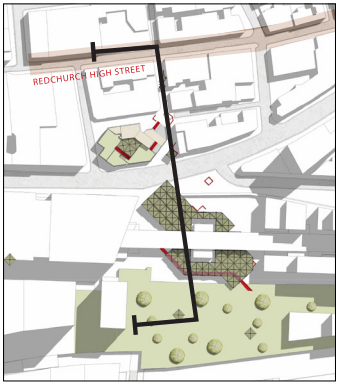
Urban scale 5.2  
Site plan 1:2000

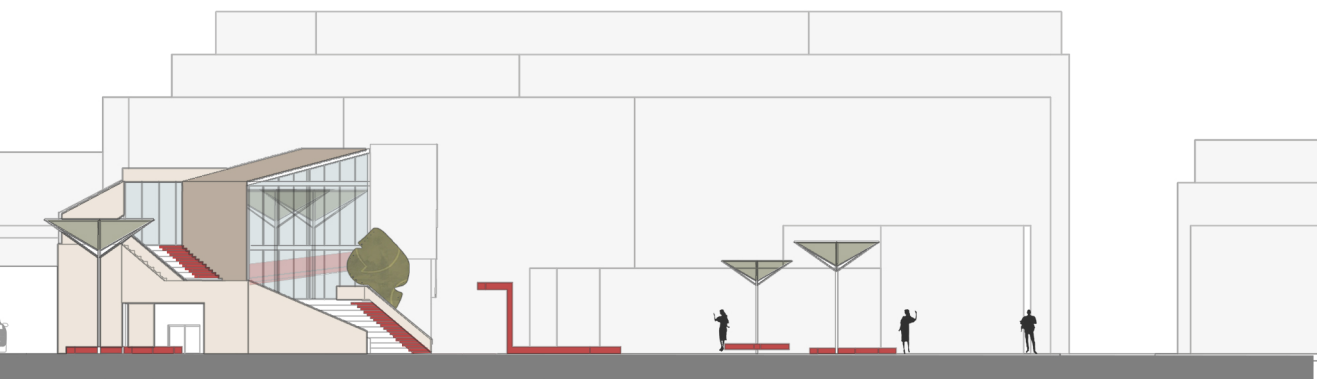




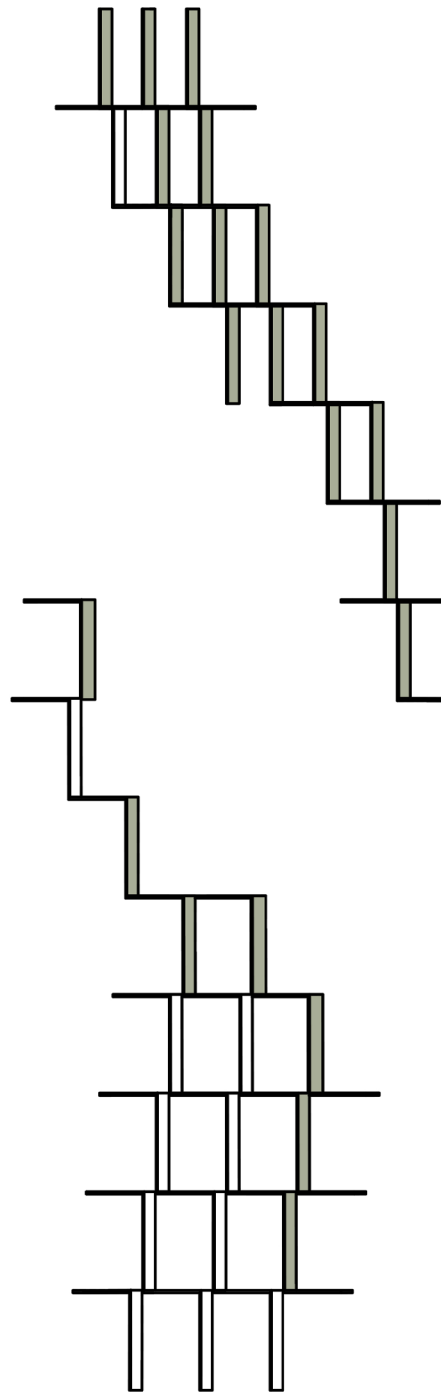
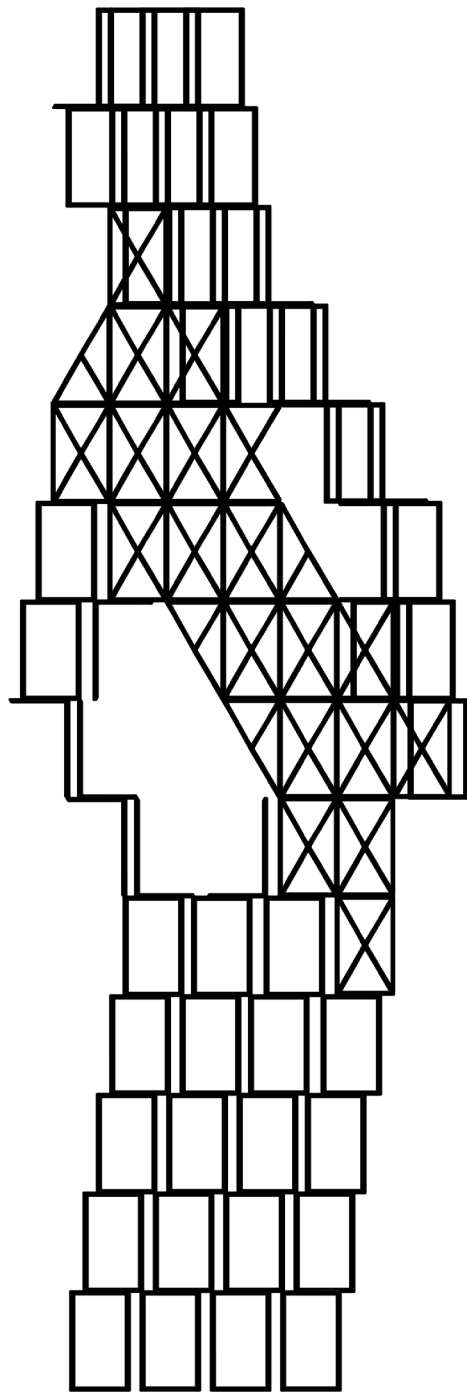
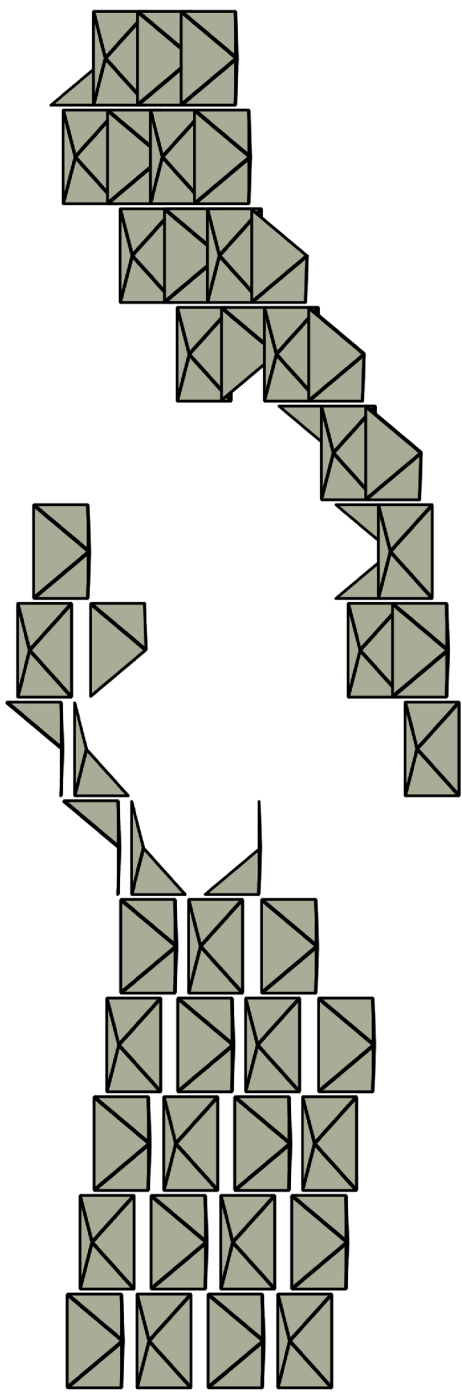


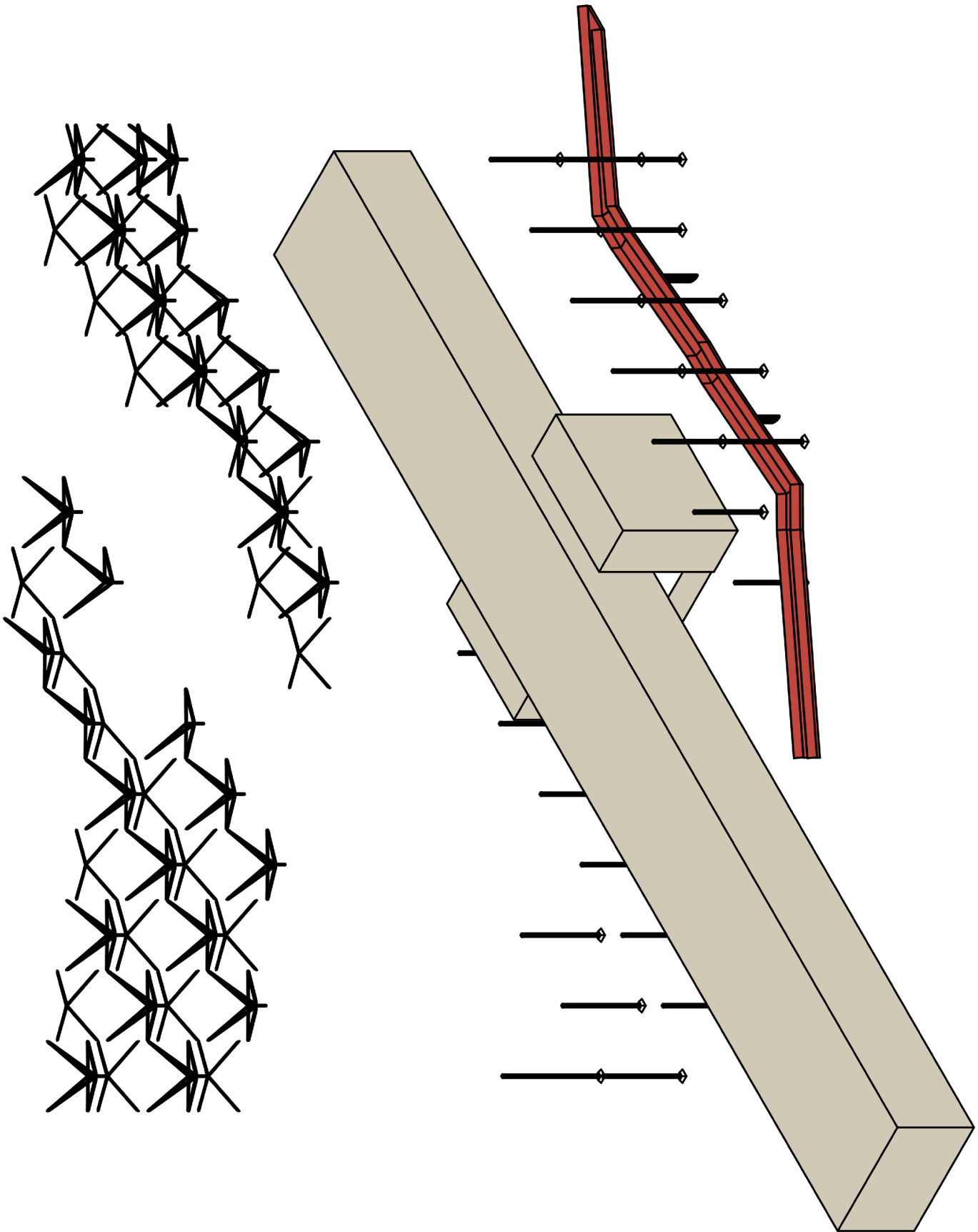










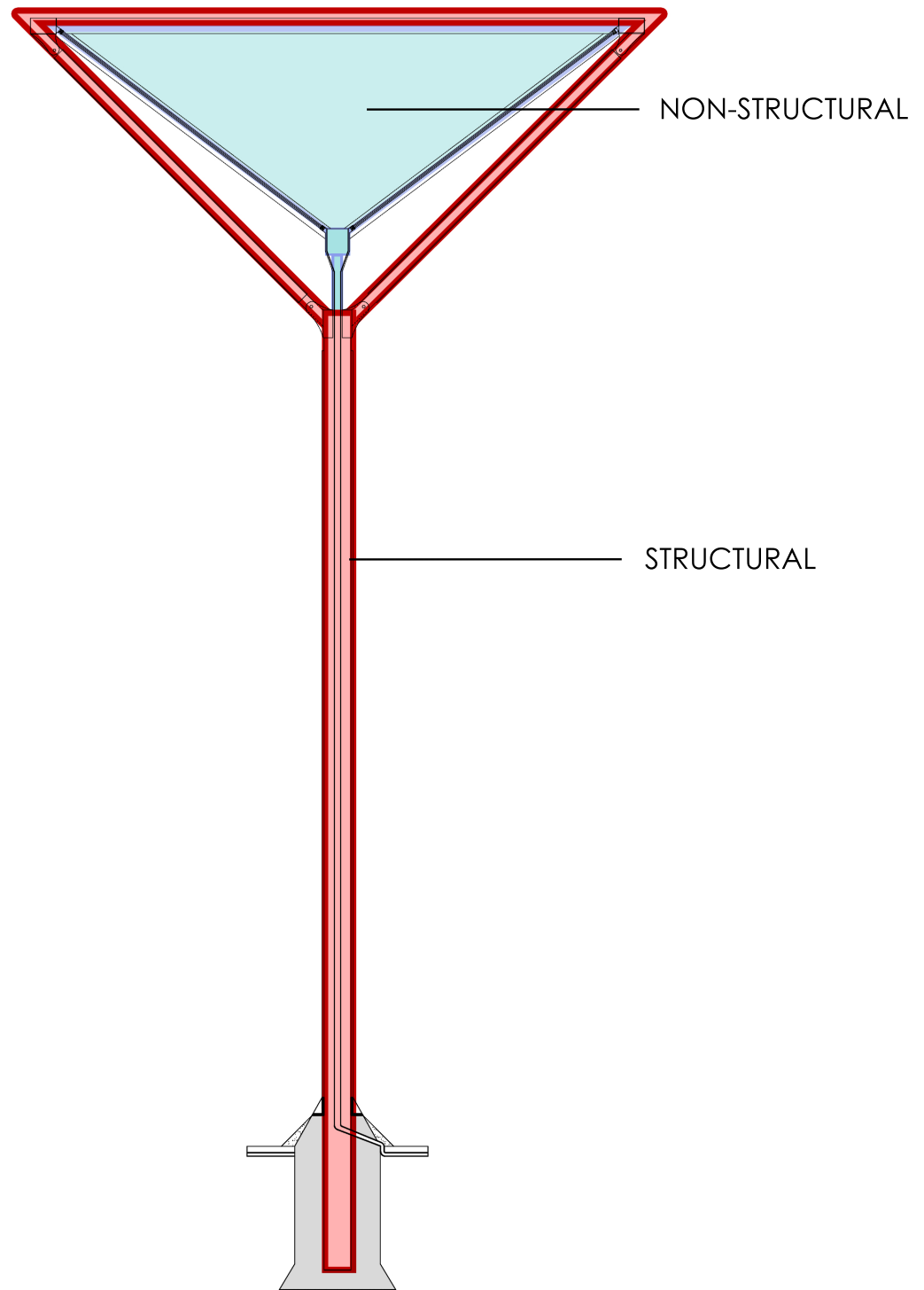


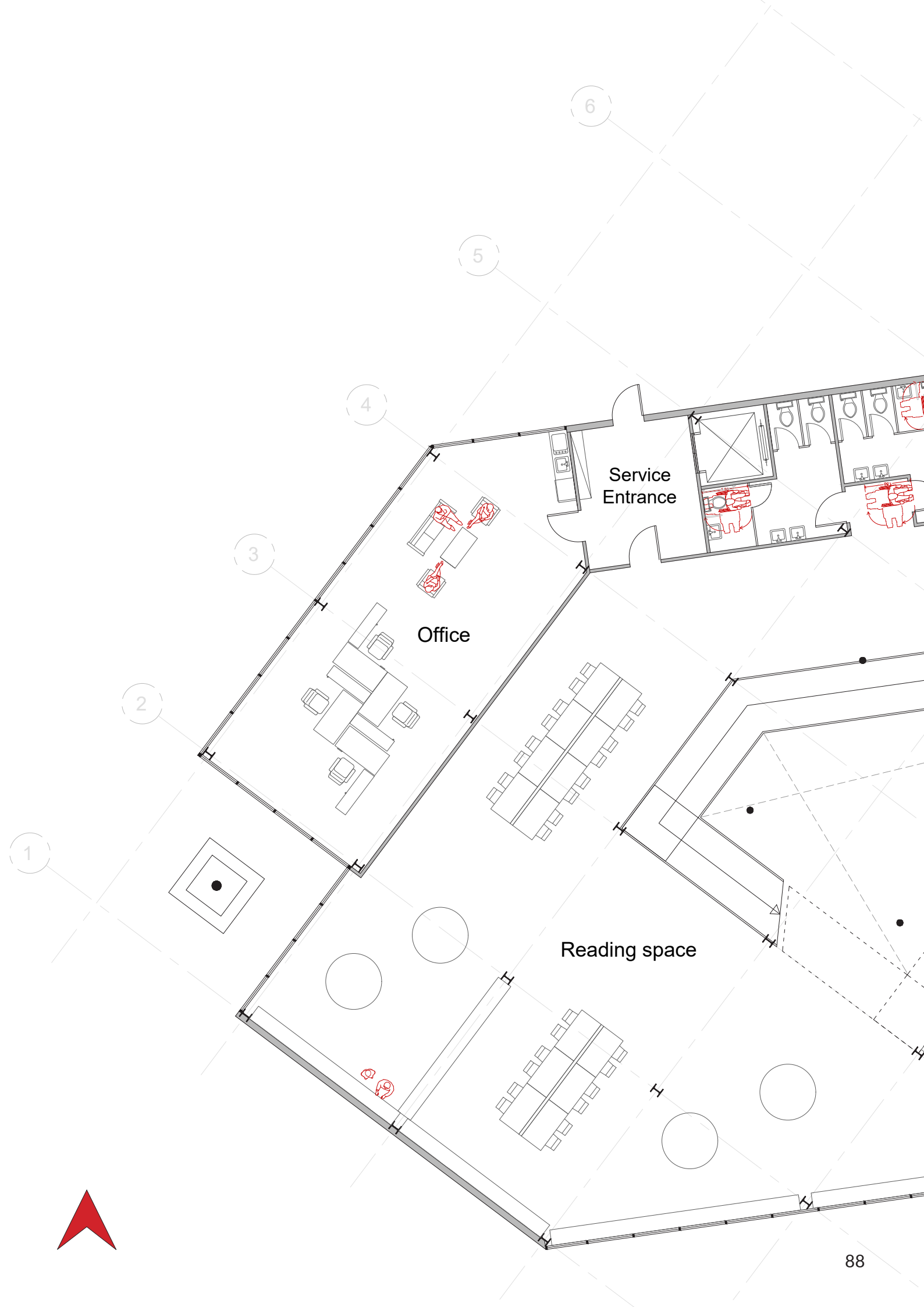




# Canopy 5.3

Module exploded view & section





# Floor plans 5.4

Ground floor 1:200





# Floor plans 5.4

First floor 1:200





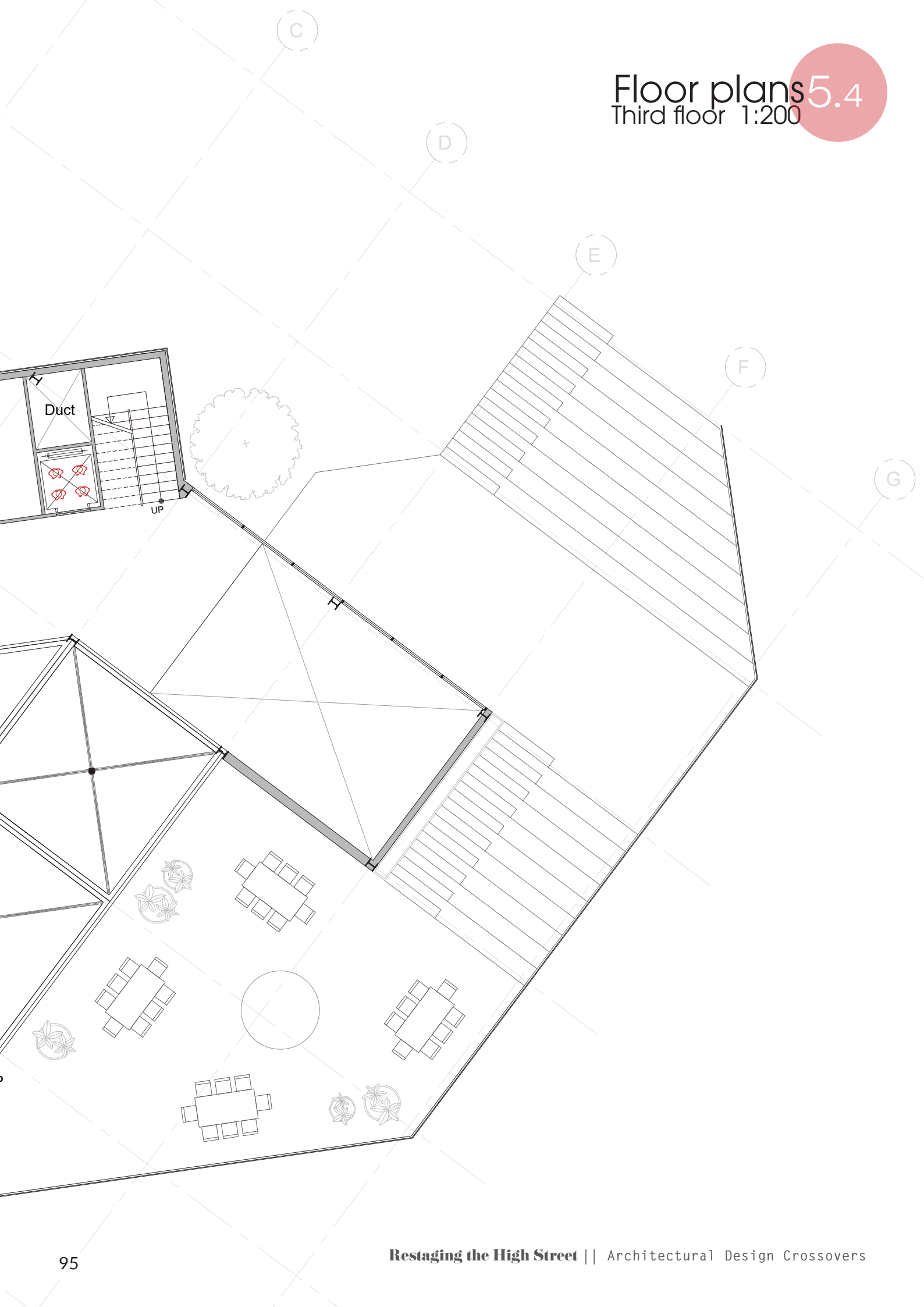


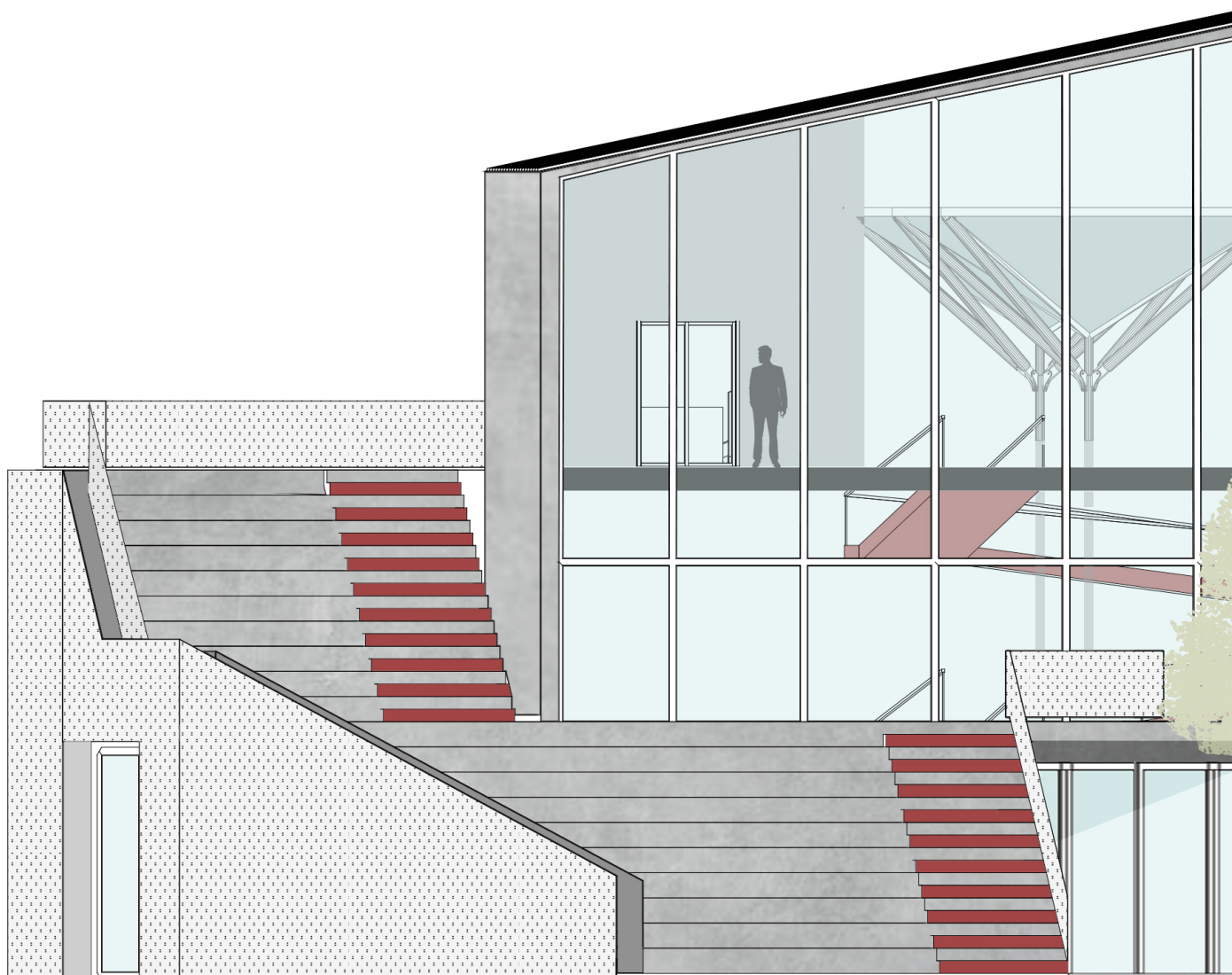
# Floor plans 5.4

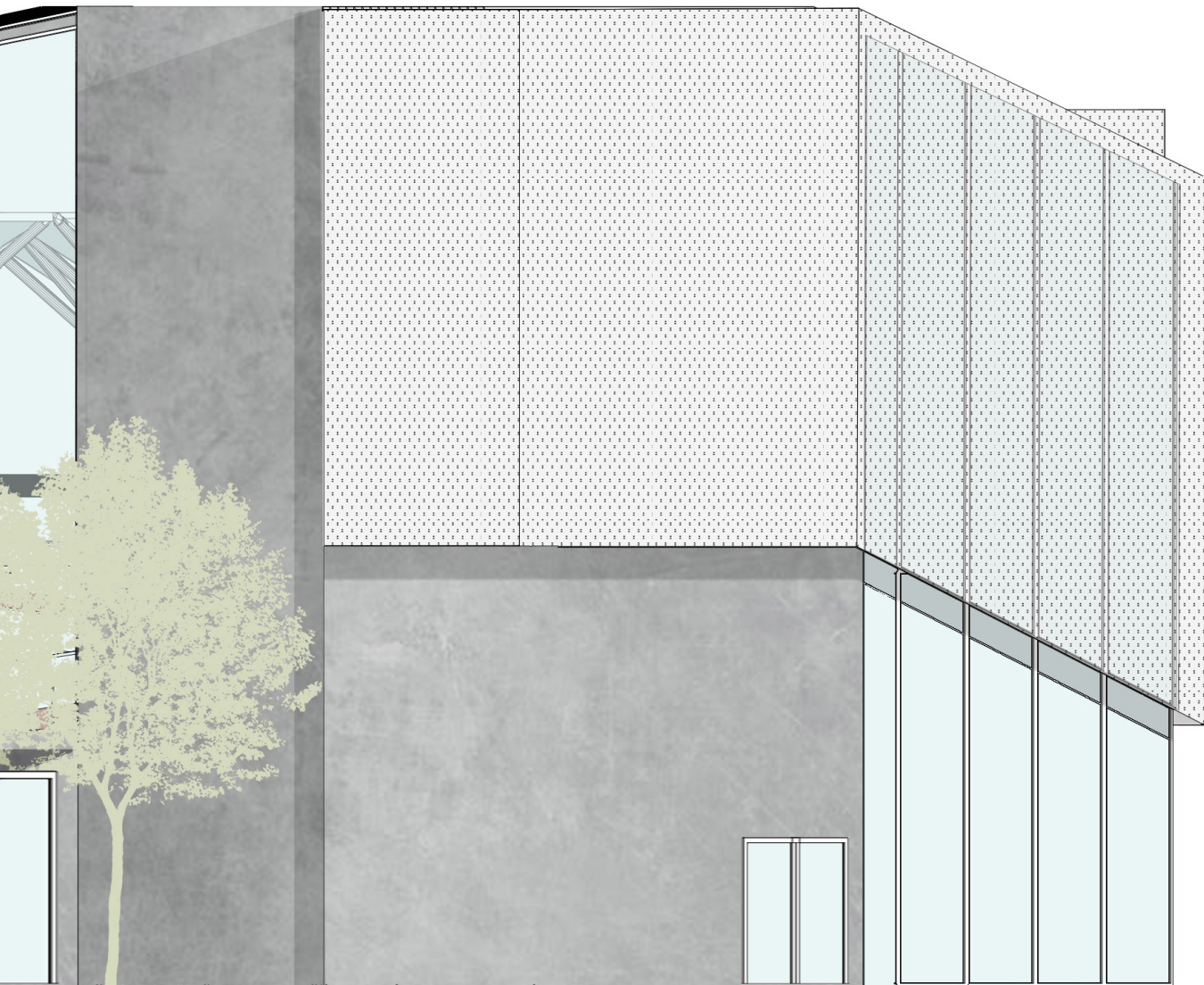
Second floor 1:200





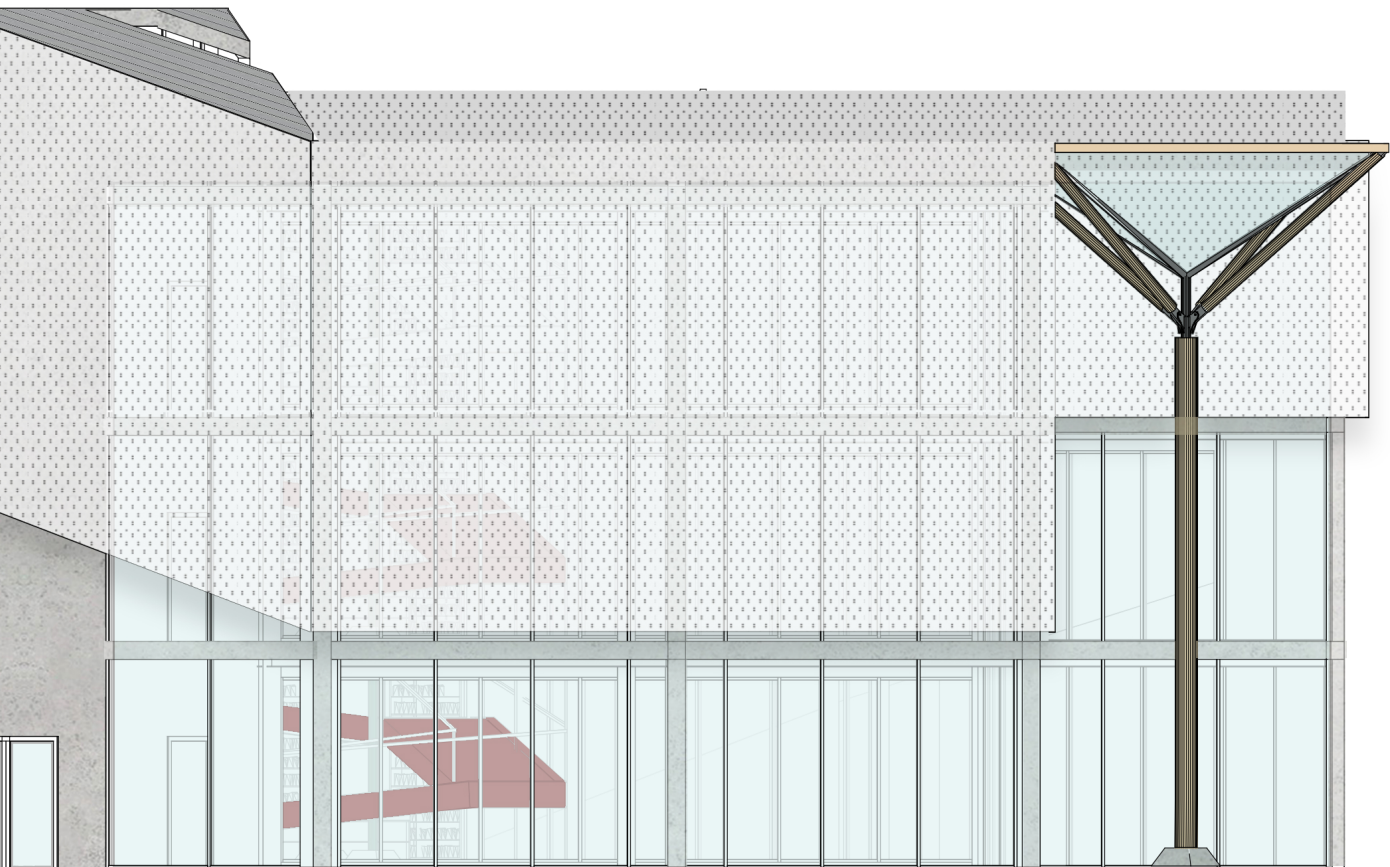




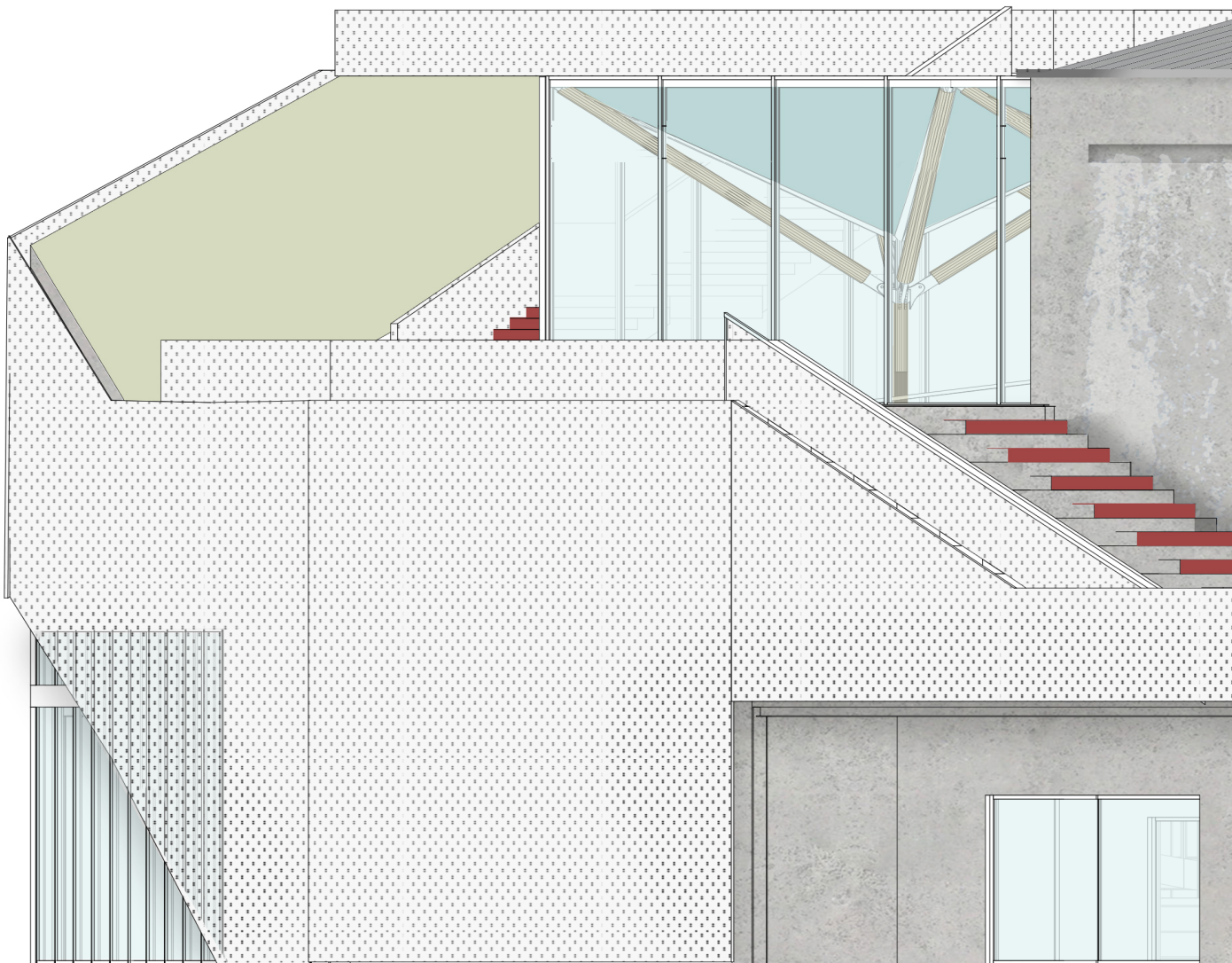


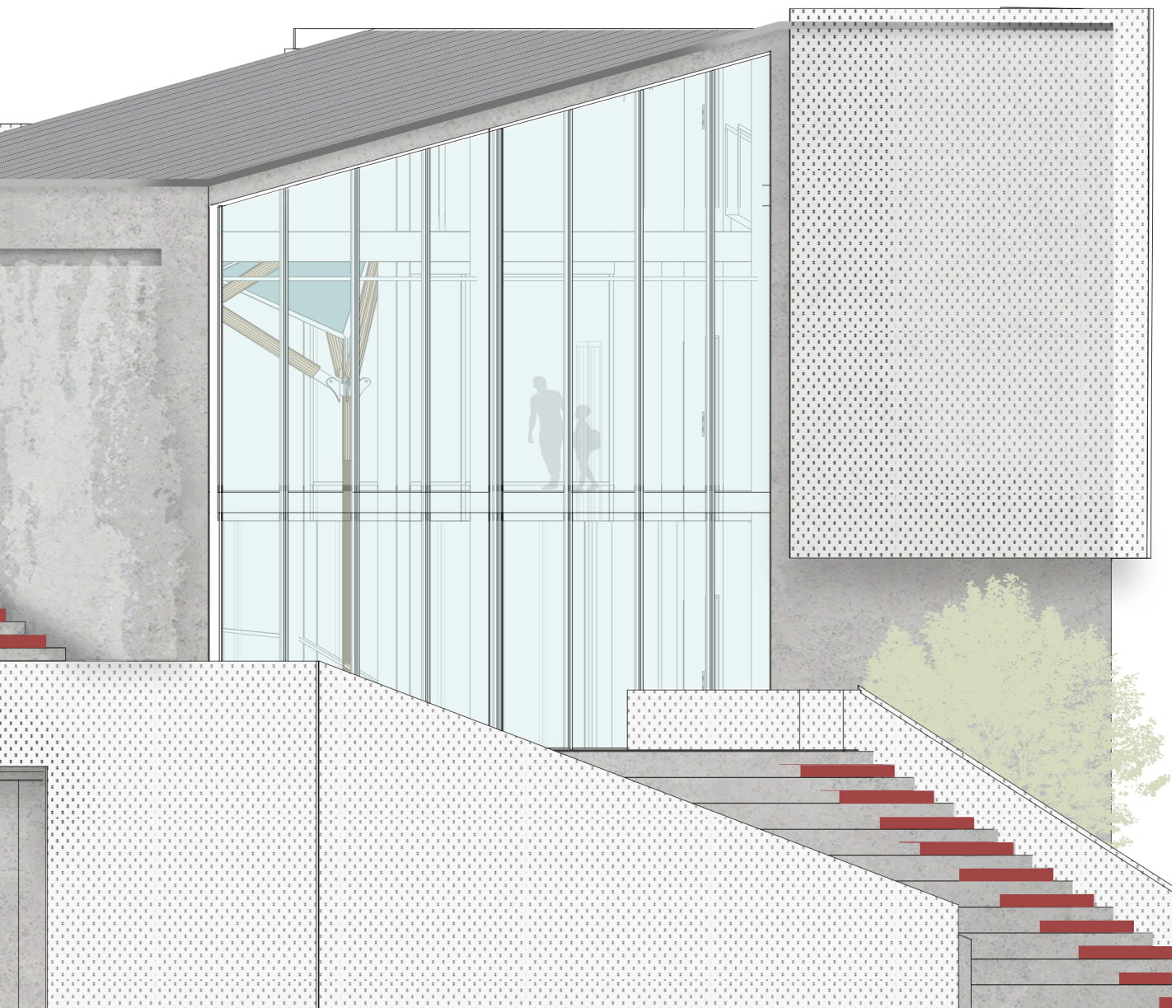


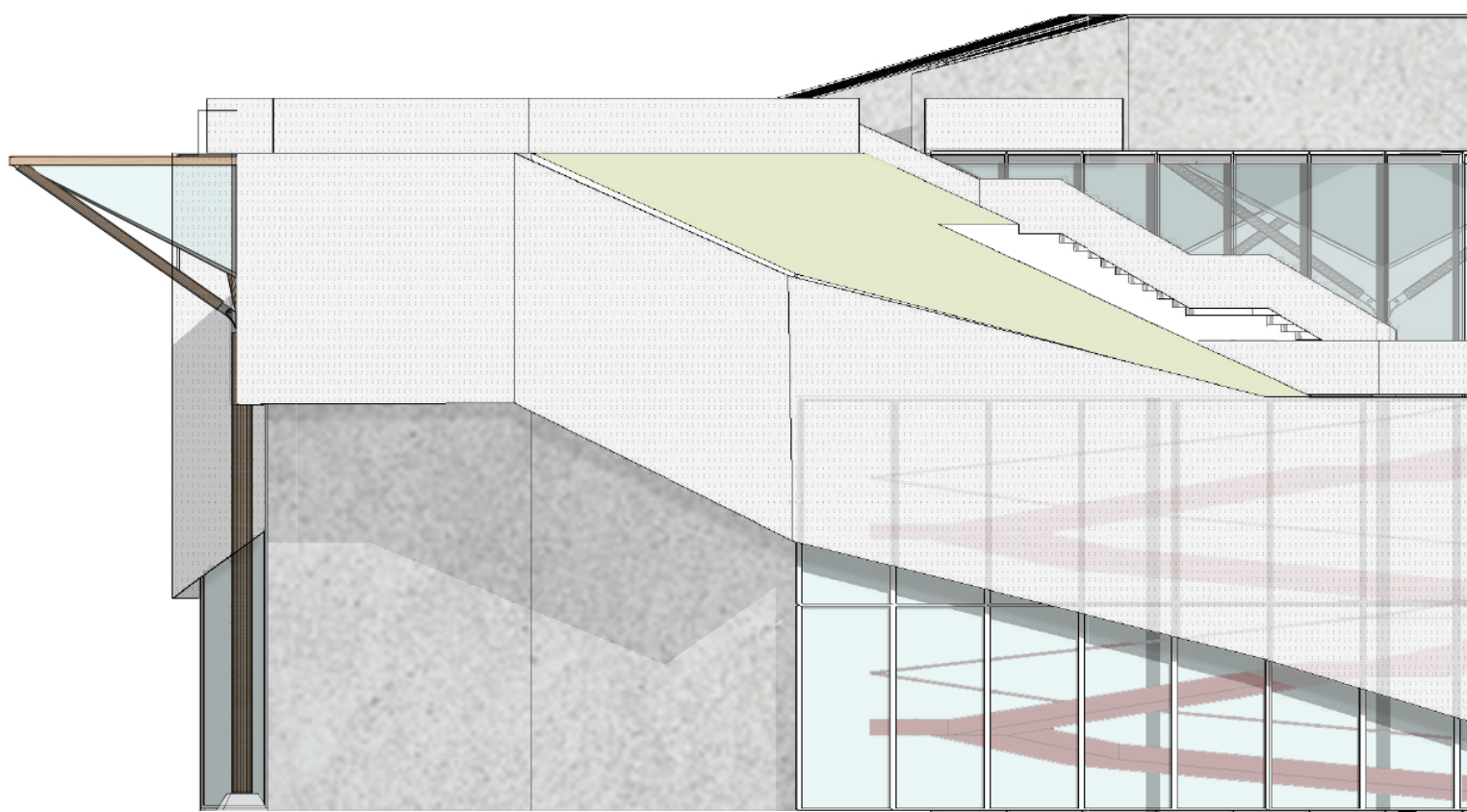






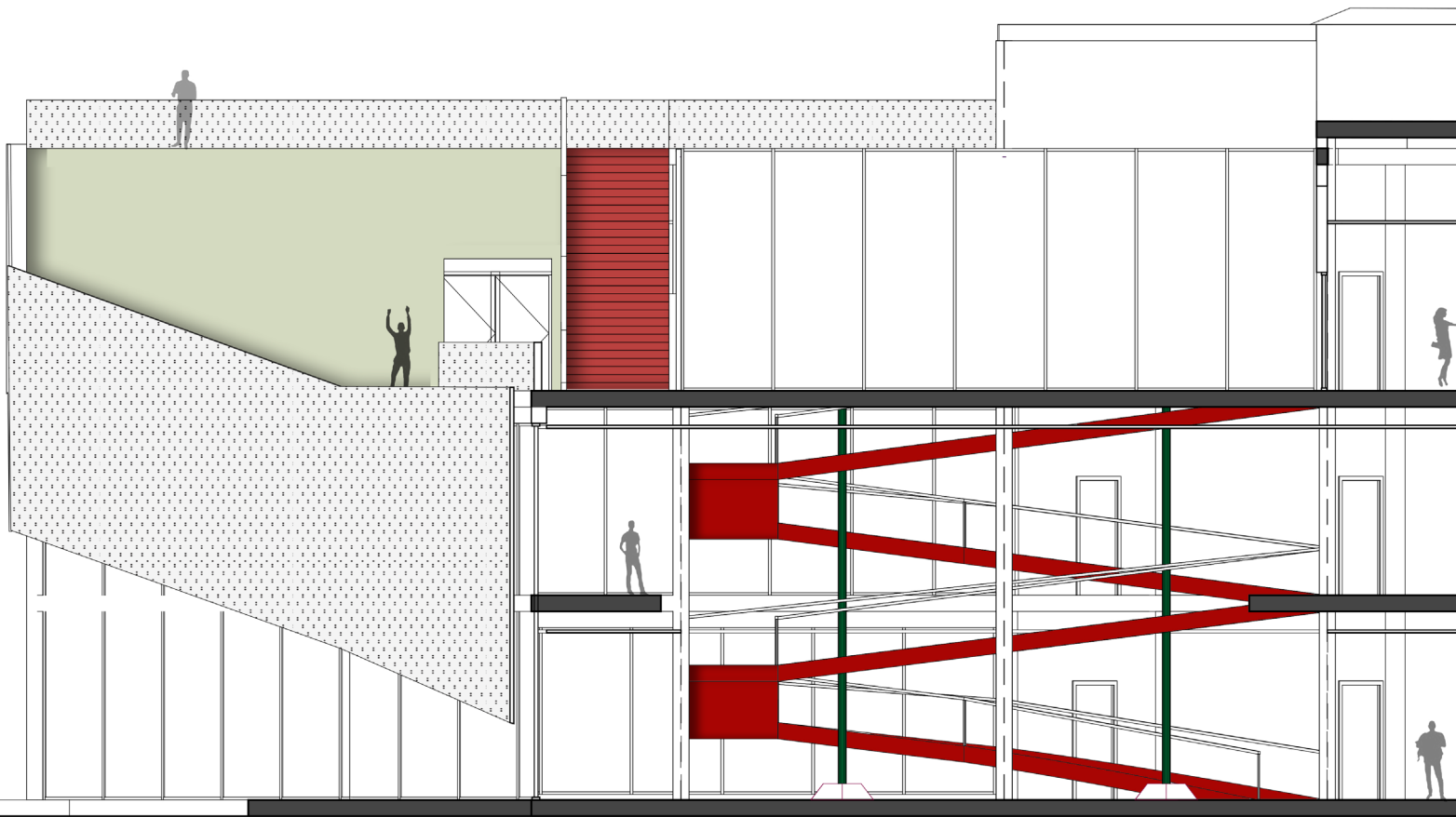
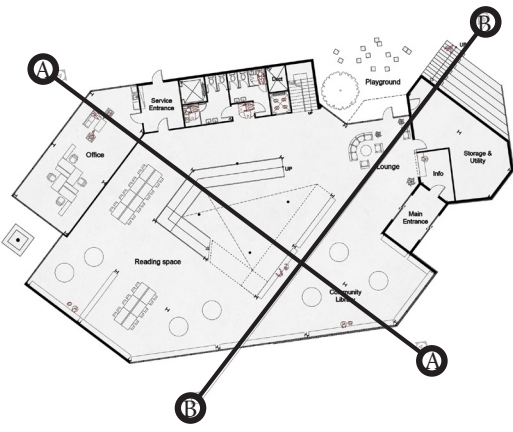


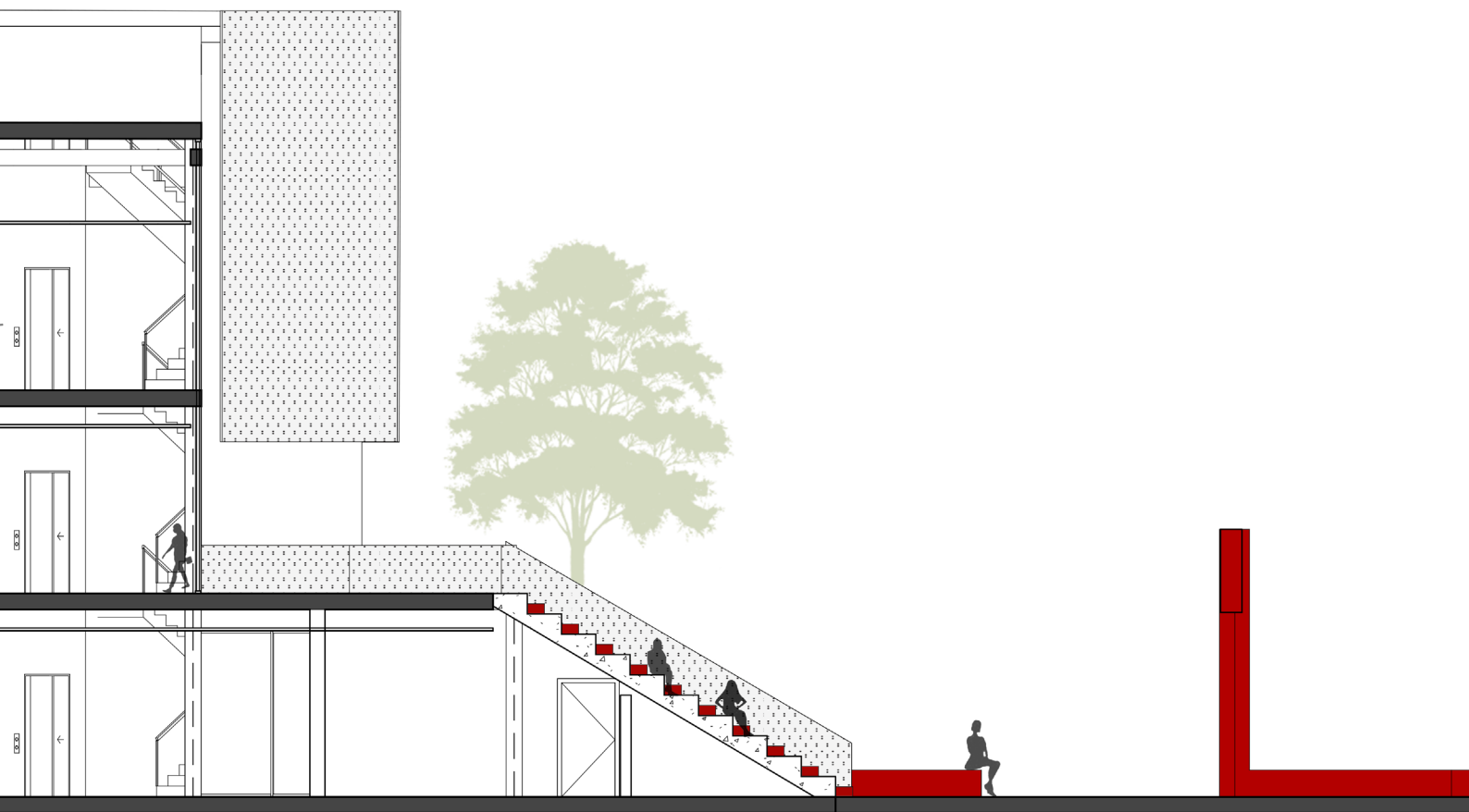




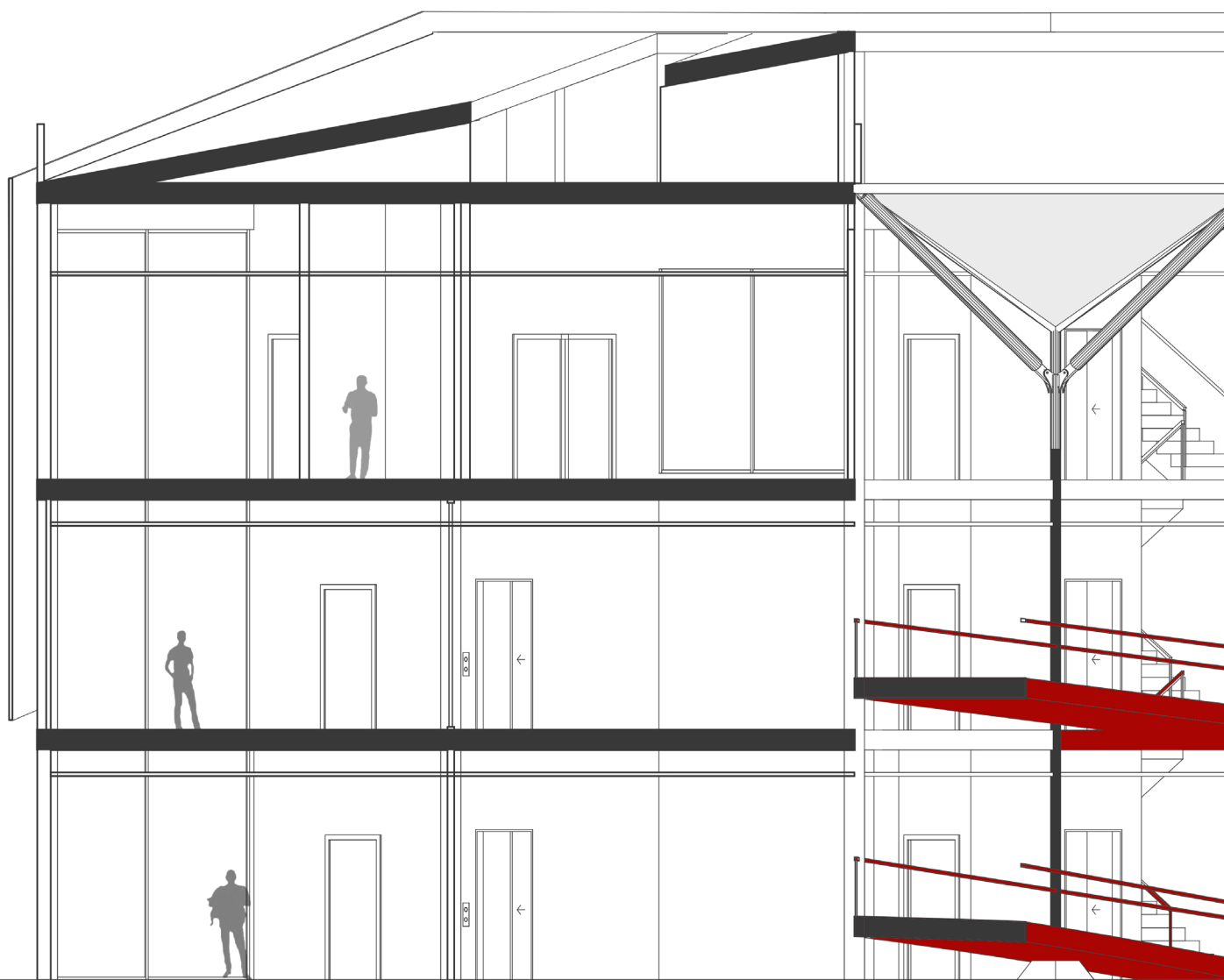
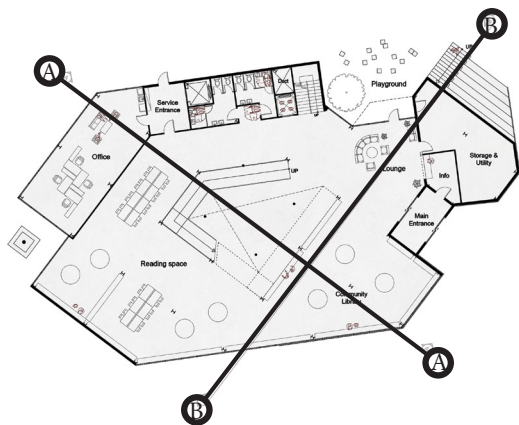


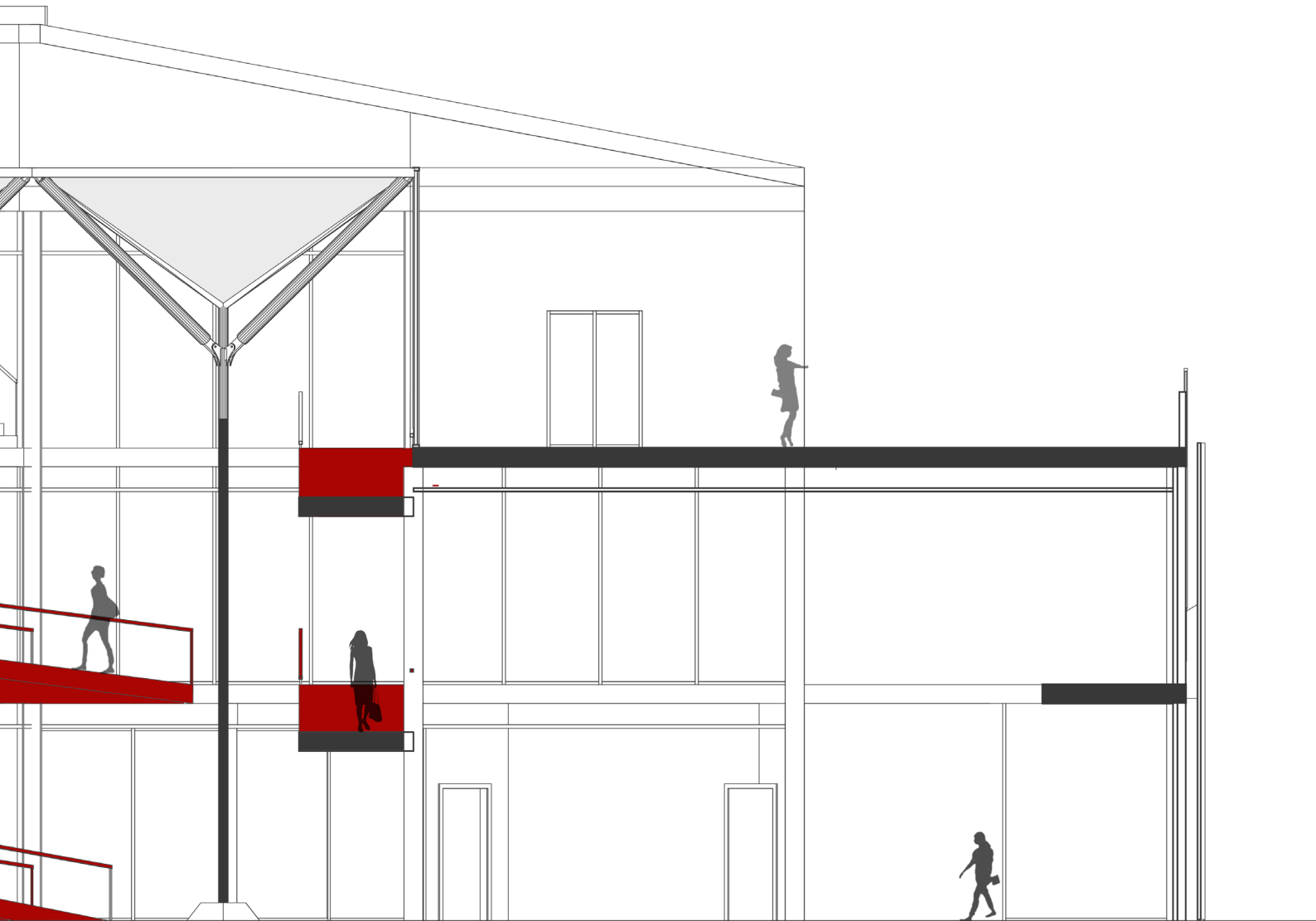








































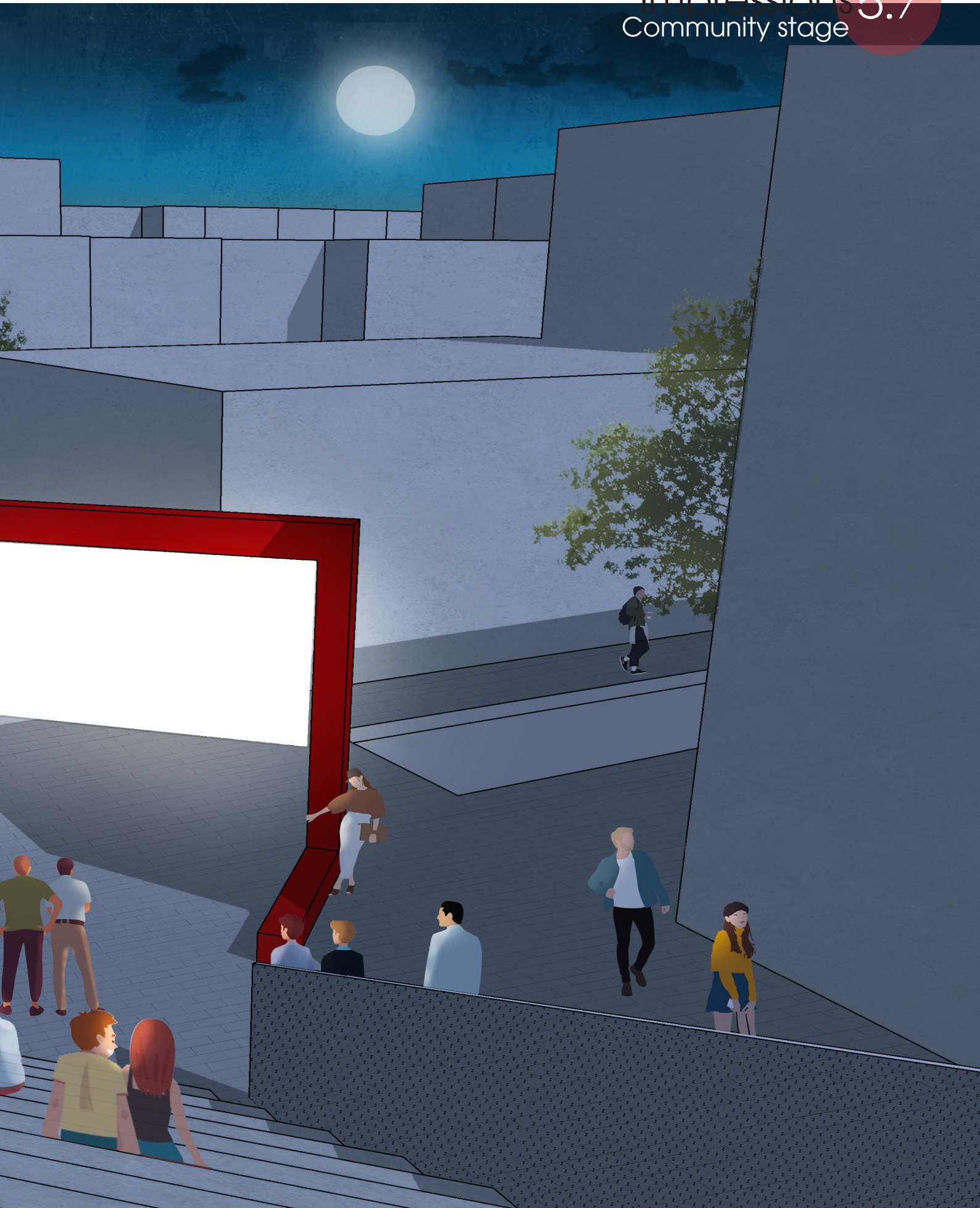














































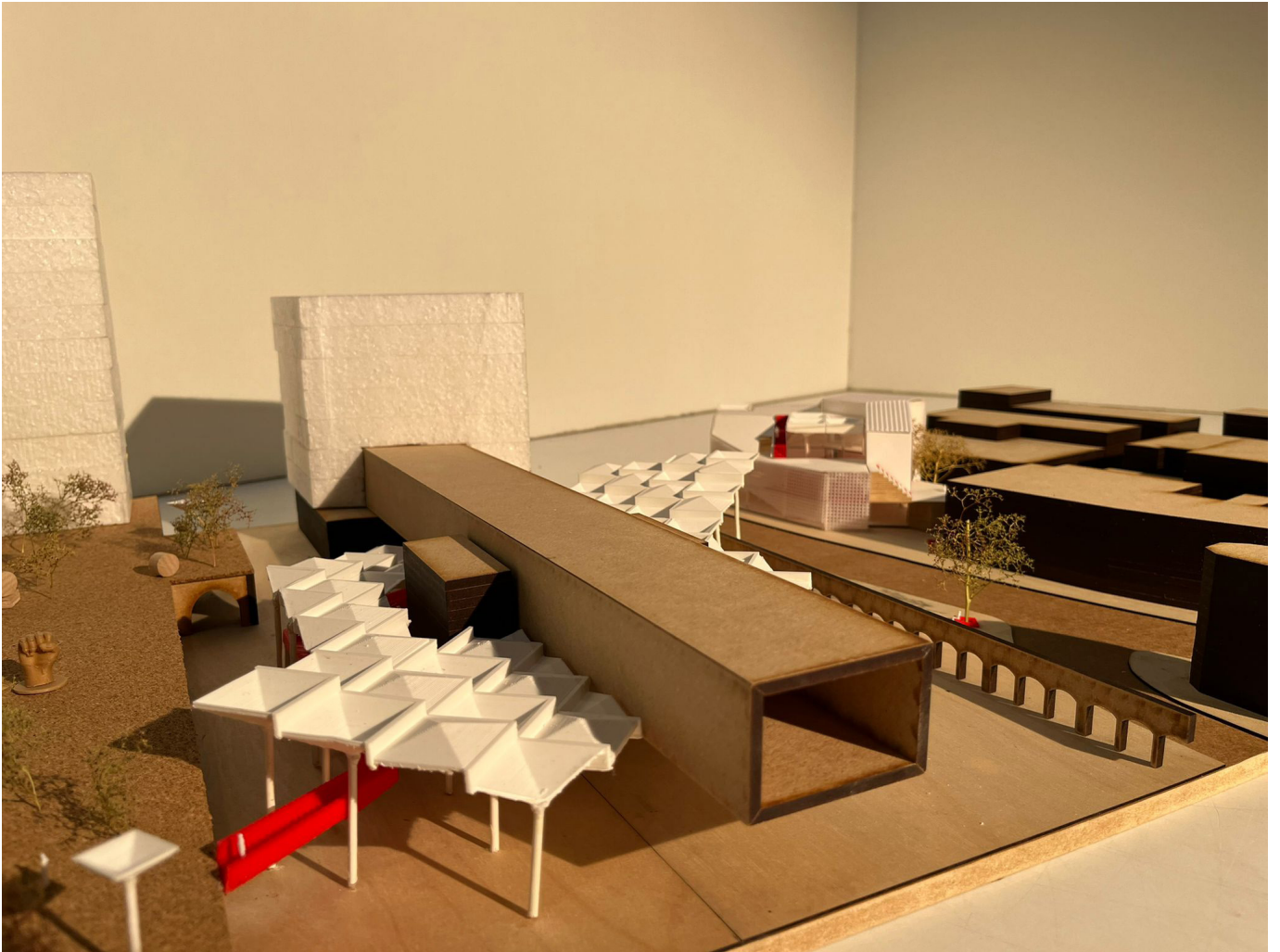






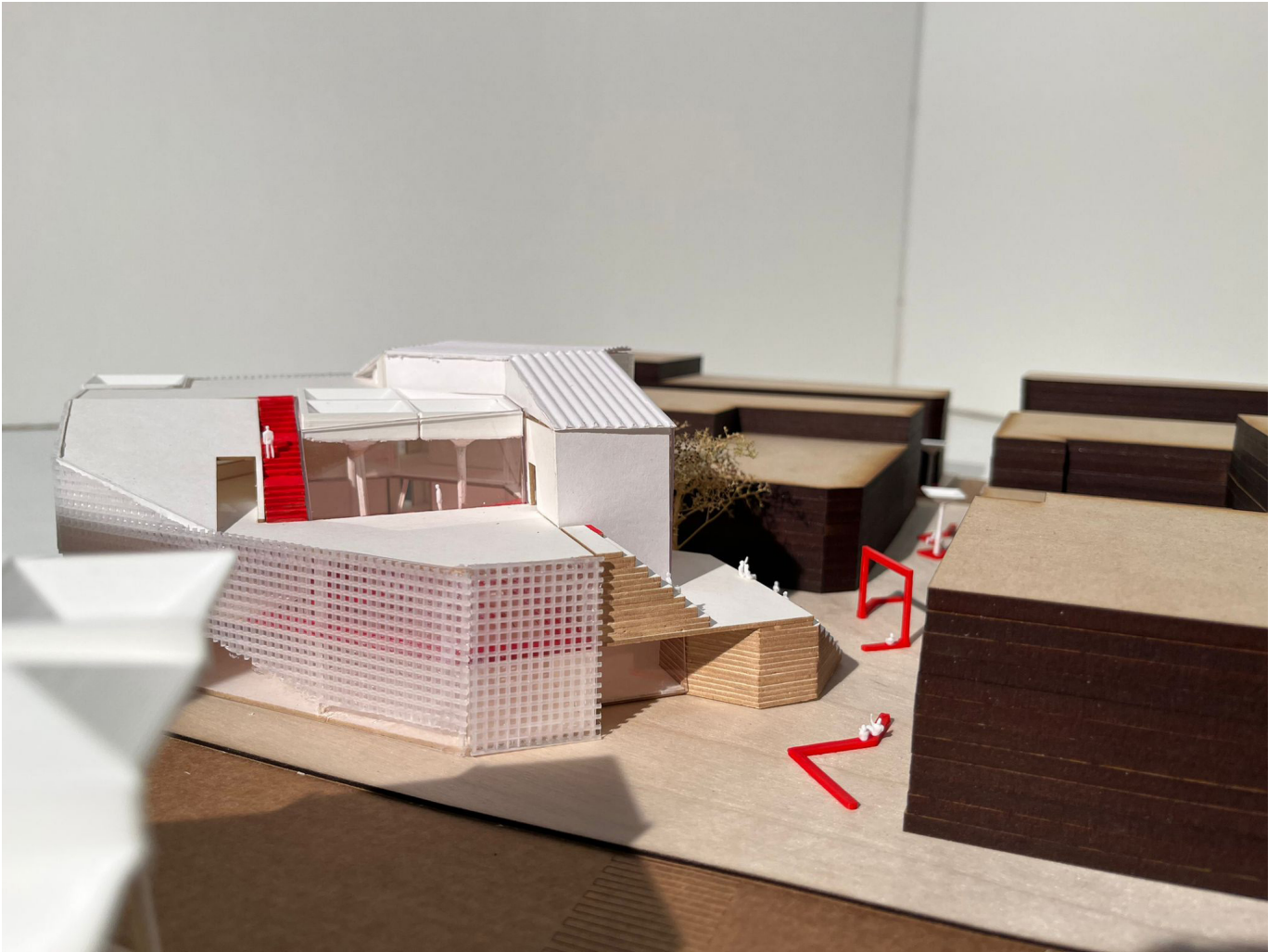












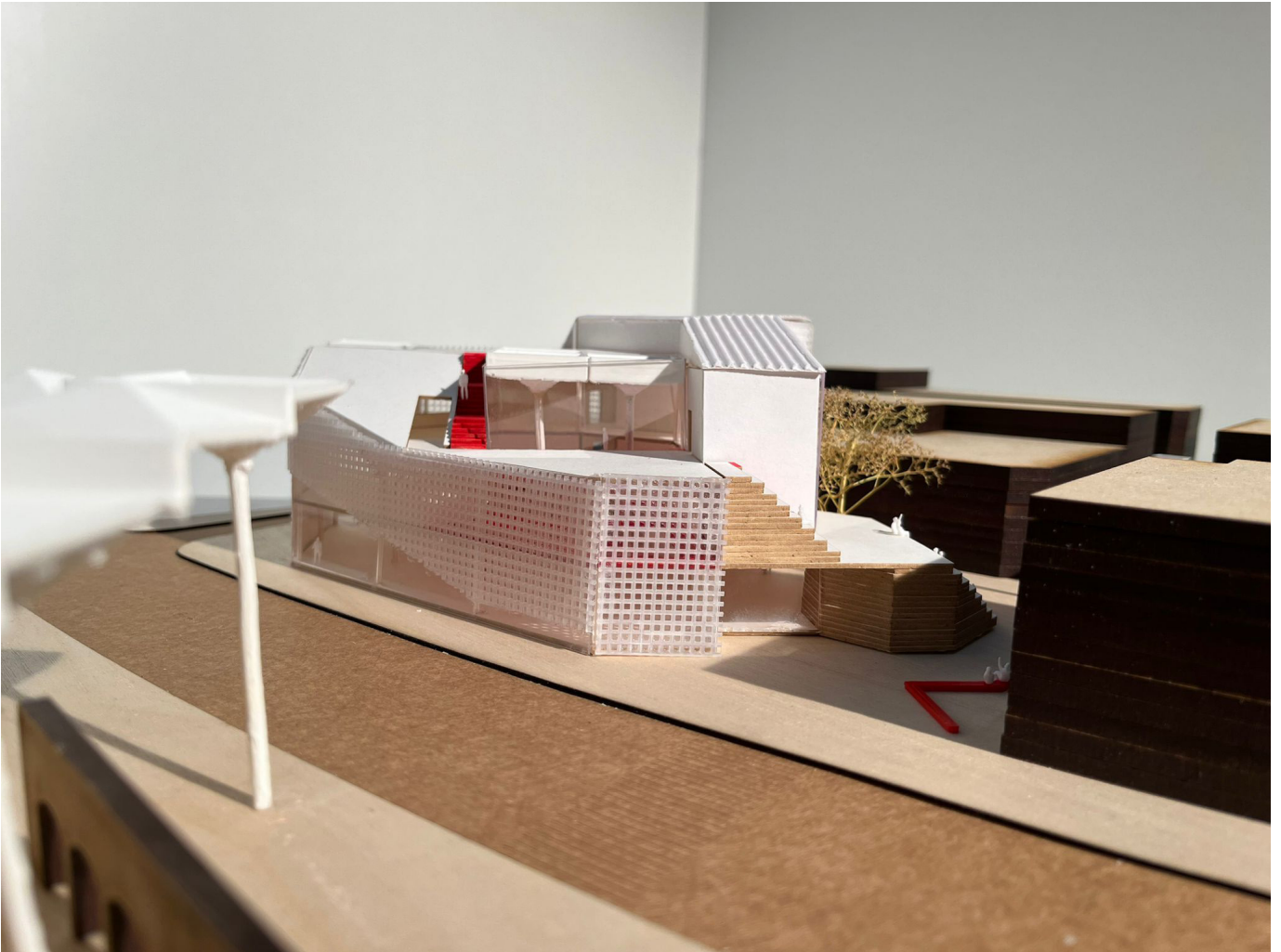


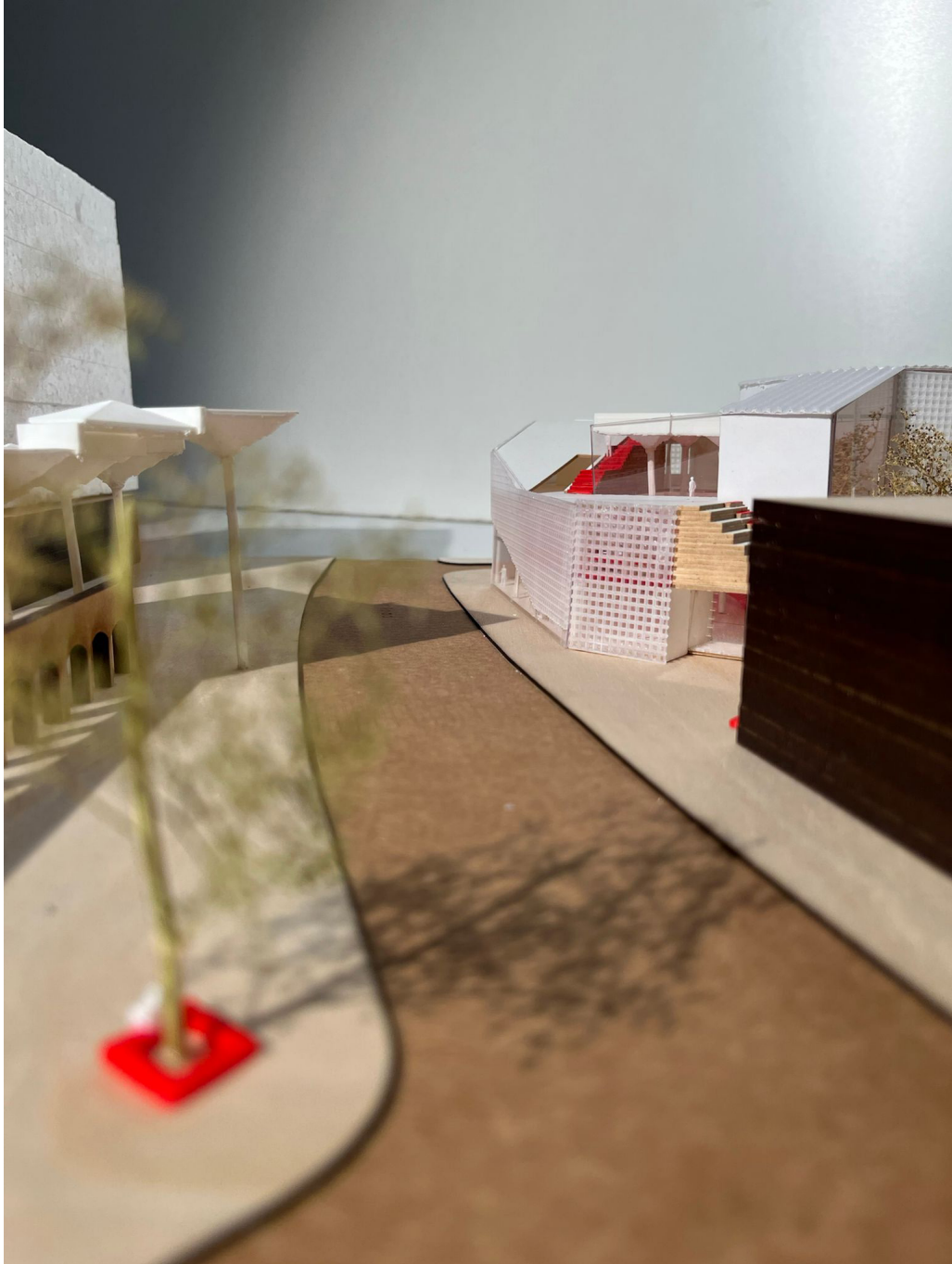






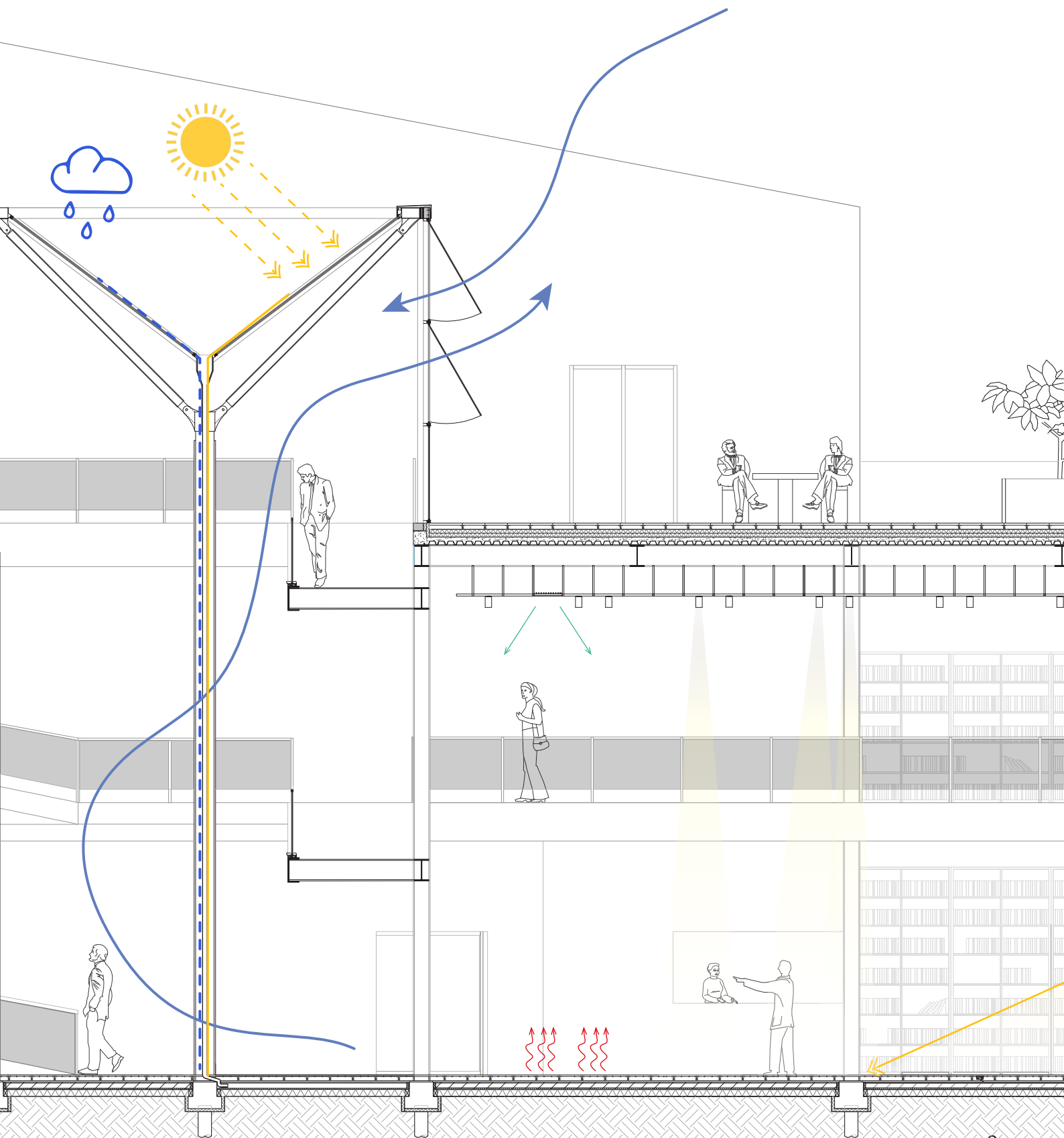




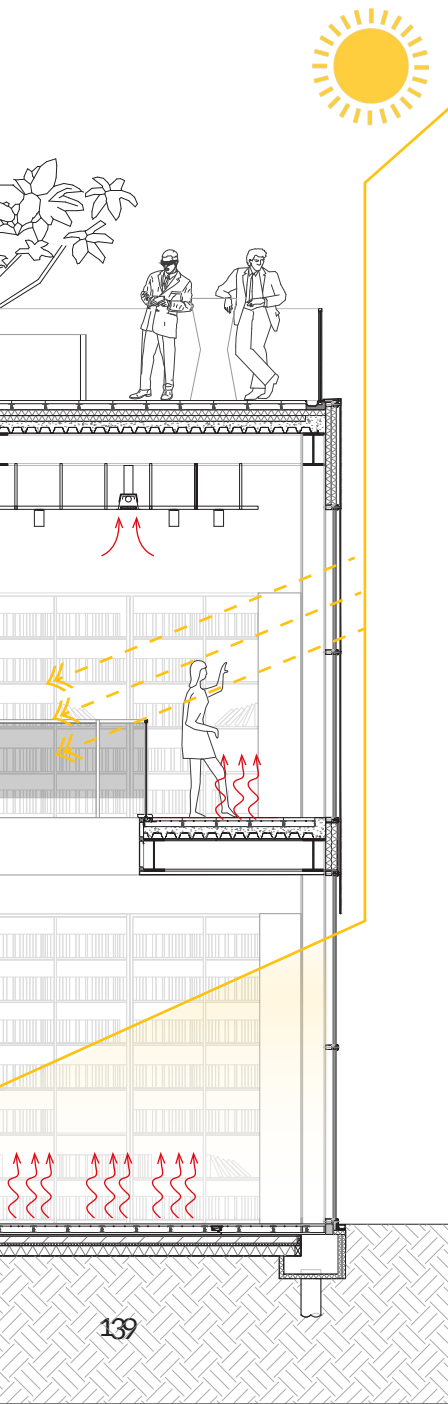








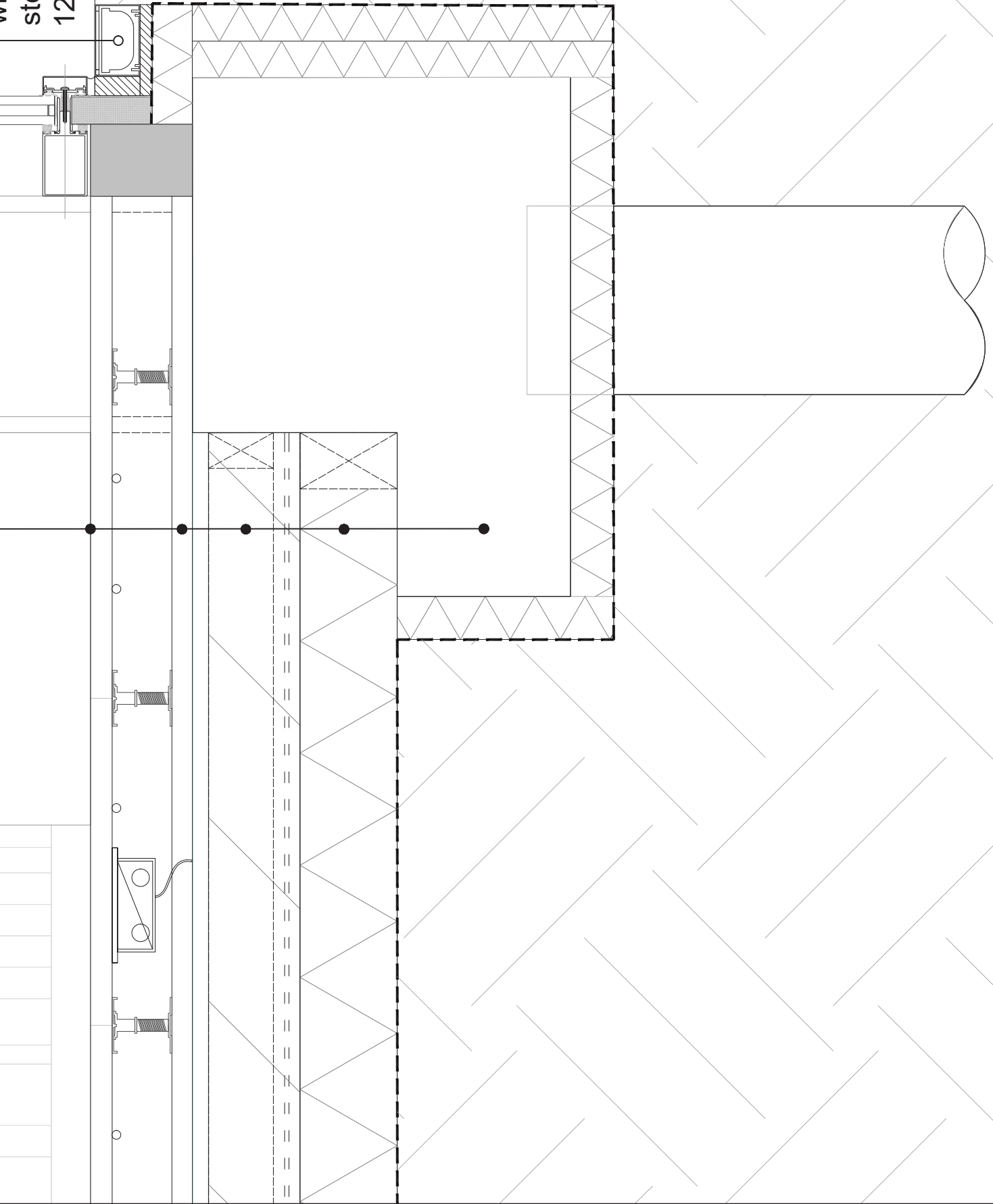


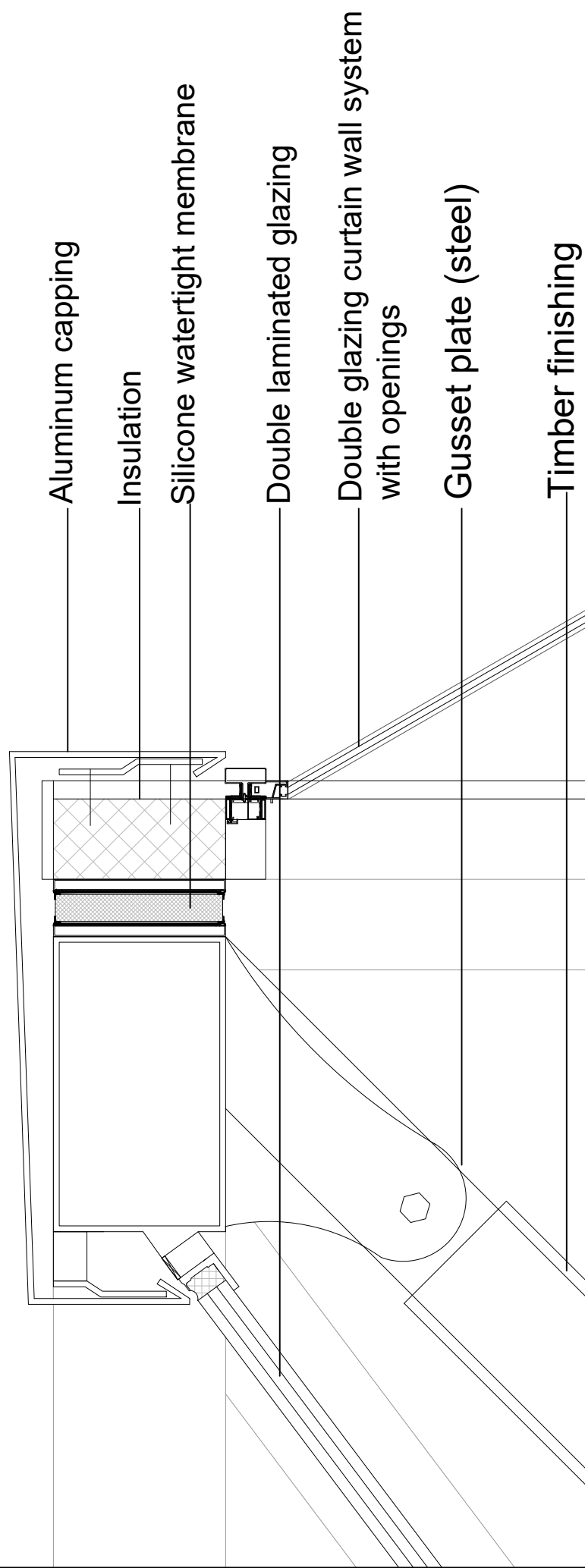






with galvanised  
steel grating  
129mm x 80mm

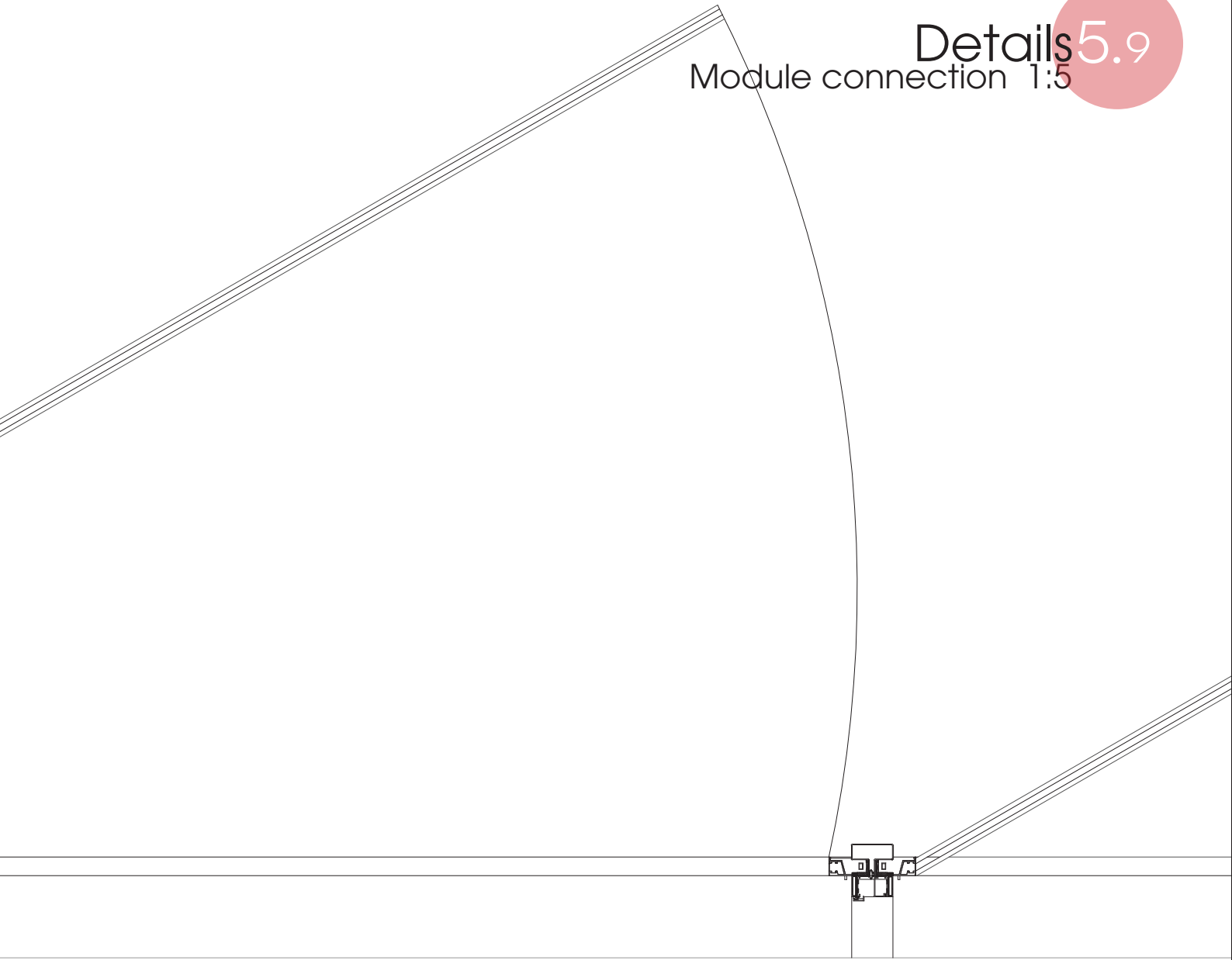


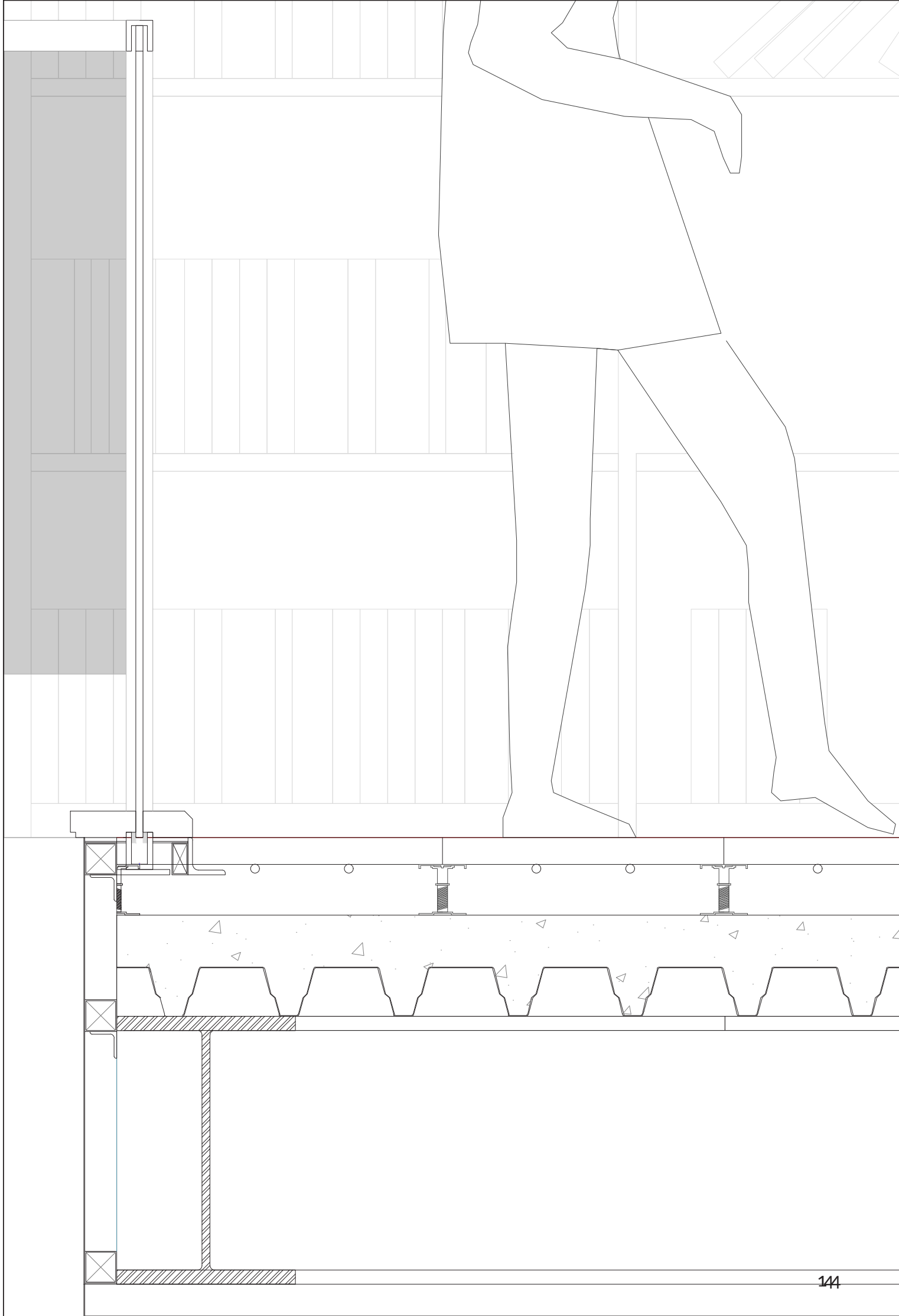




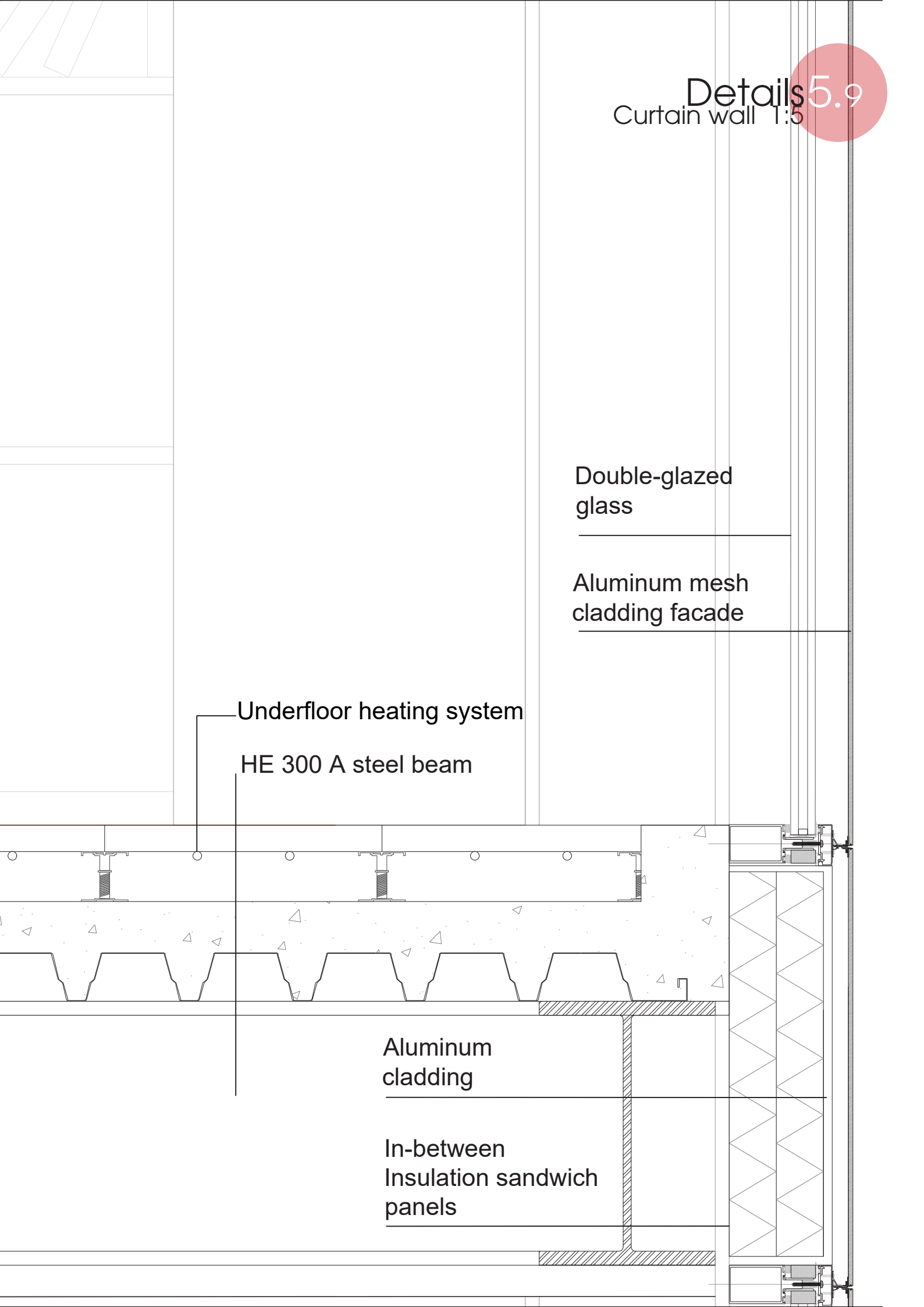
# Details 5.9

Module connection 1:5









Double-glazed  
glass

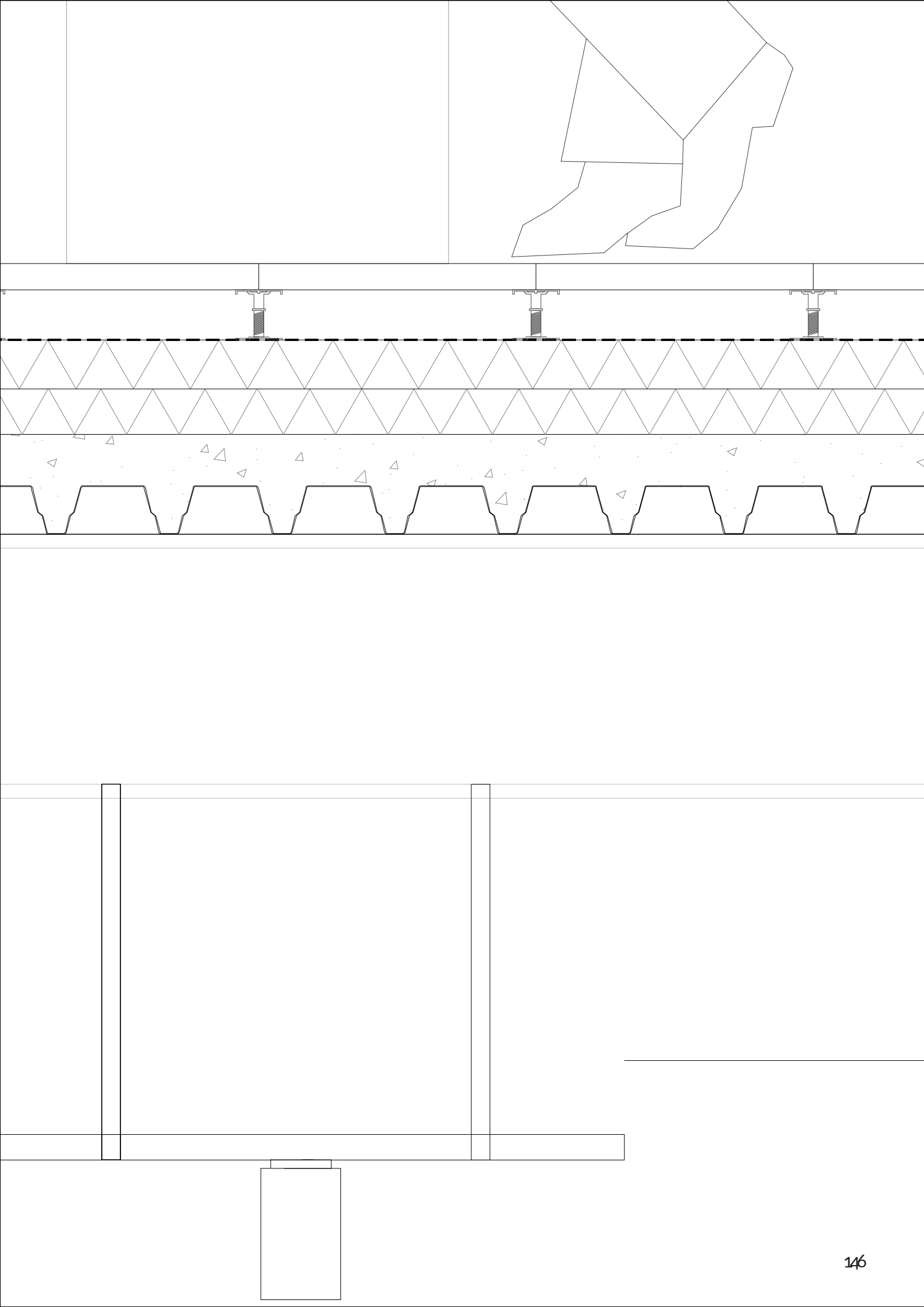
Aluminum mesh  
cladding facade

Underfloor heating system

HE 300 A steel beam

Aluminum  
cladding

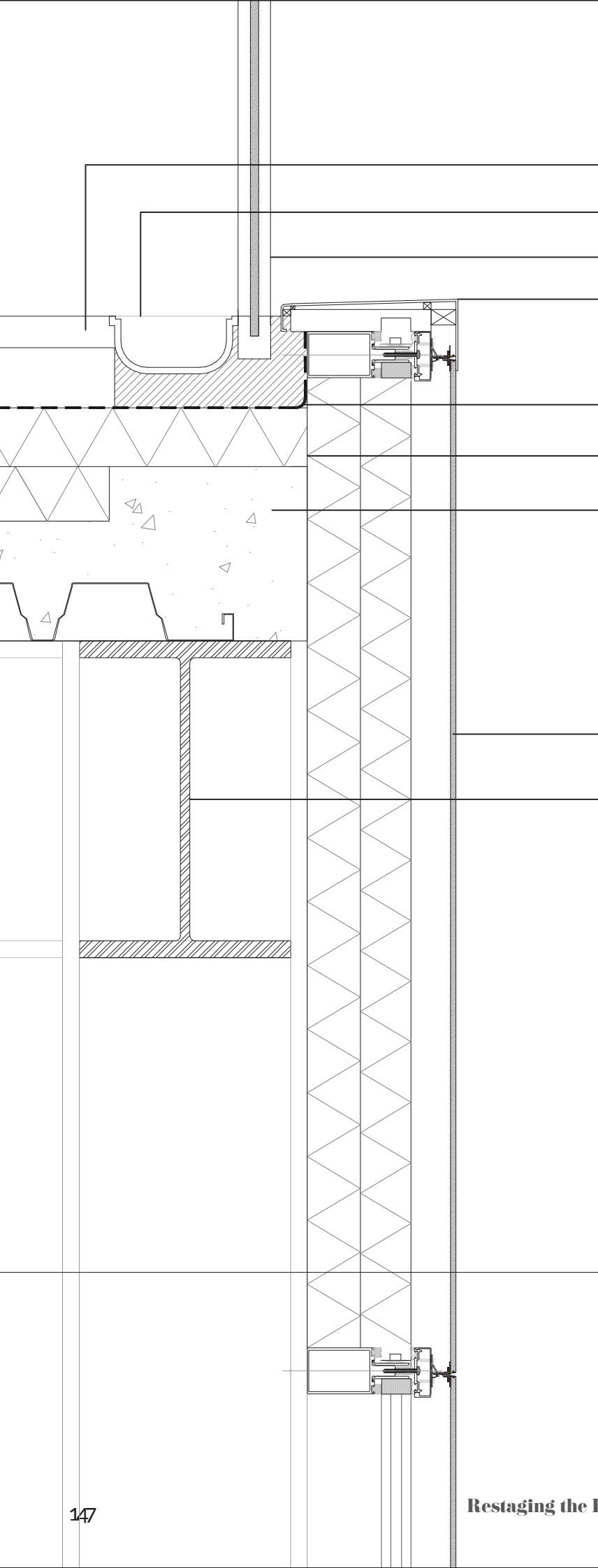
In-between  
Insulation sandwich  
panels





## Details 5.9

Roof 1:5



Roof tiles, finishing layer

Drainage layer

Aluminum mesh safety railing

Aluminum parapet capping

Waterproofing layer

Insulated roof system

Corrugated steel decking,  
filled with concrete, 165mm

Aluminum mesh cladding facade

HE 300 A steel beam

False ceiling system



## 6 | Epilogue





## 6.1 Reflection

### **Aspect 1**

#### *The relationship between research and design*

The ultimate purpose of the research was to emphasize the importance of considering the high street and its community in the future city planning. As one of the approaches, this project suggests to look at the “contemporary” high street as a system made of interstitial spaces of different scales. These interstices could therefore play an important role in keeping the high street connected to the city.

To elaborate on this matter, Shoreditch has been chosen and analyzed as a potential case study with an ambition to extend its less visible high street (Redchurch) to the surrounding urban fabric and further to the new proposed development of the site. After conducting literature review followed by the site analysis including local interviews, it was notable that there is a significant need for the educational programs in the neighborhood and a lack of communal spaces which will be even more intensified by the future (massive) development of Shoreditch.

As a result, the design assignment focuses on converting the existing interstitial spaces into quality public spaces and create a landmark which reflects the neighborhood’s identity, serves the community and more importantly does not ignore the traditional high street.

The architectural design proposal includes a package of interventions namely an urban

plaza with a pavilion in the center of the site, facilitating different encounters and structurally acting as a visual connector, together with an educational community center. In this way, the proposal aims to strengthen the connections and create a sense of belonging, with a mission to train the local community as the future entrepreneurs who could run the vacant shops and maintain their local high street.

### **Aspect 2**

#### *The relationship between the graduation topic, the studio topic, the master track, and the master programme*

The topic of this graduation project as well as the sites of investigation is inspired by the main topic of Architectural Design Crossovers graduation studio, Heterogeneous City: The research looks at interstices as heterogeneous pieces made by interrelated layers in London, namely the layers of infrastructure (overpass and canal), brownfield and high street and it further analyses the crossover relationship. Respectively for the proposal, a package of architectural and urban interventions is suggested as a binding strategy which aims to hold these interstices together and build a supportive connection between the high street and its urban context. For that reason, the multidisciplinary framework and the multi-modal design research proposed by the studio is well established in the approach of this project.

### **Aspect 3**

*Elaborating on the research method and approach chosen in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work*

- **Literature study:**

To build up foundation knowledge on the history of traditional high streets in UK as well as the concept of urban interstices and urban cracks.

- **Document review:**

Reports and data analysis on high street by GLA and other agencies.

- **GIS-based mapping:**

By superimposing relevant layers of maps such as high streets, railways, water, designated open spaces and brownfields in order to track down intersecting nodes representing the interstices and identify sites of investigation.

- **Field research in London using:**

- Photography/videography
- Drawings
- Notes/observations
- Multiple personal interviews

- **Visual Catalogue:**

Analysis through a collection of photographs and diagrams in order to organize the field trip findings.

- **Precedent analysis:**

In order to gain inspiration from other architectural standpoints towards interstices and potential developable lands, in London or other metropolitan cities.

- **Research by design:**

To define a supportive urban strategy and architectural design.

### **Aspect 4**

*Elaborating on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results.*

Derived by the literature study there is significant call both from the majority of British citizen as well as the municipality, for innovative strategies and visionary approaches to nourish the high streets by focusing on what makes them special and what their unique place might be as vital, complex and important assets of their local communities, with so much more to offer than just shopping. This will require interventions where places of exchange and movement are designed within the physical fabric, engaging the users in a manner that maintains the dynamism of the traditional high street. As the GLA report suggests:

“They could lead to a new community-led governance arrangement, a design code or a novel property management model, in response



to specific place-based environmental, social or economic challenges.”<sup>41</sup>

Correspondingly, this study aims to provide a new insight to the traditional high street by recognizing its interstices, enhancing their spatial qualities and even possibly reconnecting their lost socio-spatial relationship to the surrounding context by providing an interactive urban and architectural solution which could be applied and adapted in similar situations elsewhere.

Moreover, most of the previously mentioned challenges that high streets are facing, are wide-reaching. In fact, many formal vibrant mixed-use commercial streets might feel a gradual decline, due to similar economic, cultural and global changes within the society. Therefore, the points of discussion in this research could still be applicable for similar cases elsewhere around the world.

### **Aspect 5**

*Discussing the ethical issues and dilemmas that may have been encountered in (i) doing the research, (ii, if applicable) elaborating the design and (iii) potential applications of the results in practice.*

One of the struggles in the beginning of the research, was the limitation posed within the scope of urban cracks, as they are usually quite small in scale for architectural interventions.

However, as the research went on, my perspectives got shifted and I realized that these city cracks could actually help the architects by reflecting a wide range of information about the history, spatial conditions, potential actors and even future needs and possibilities of a neighborhood. Respectively, in this project, by carefully reading those reflections, one could decode the system of interstices and find developable lands with potential for the benefit of the high streets. For that reason, perhaps instead of fixing the cracks it is important to let them be and use them as guides to detect bigger ruptures for which architectural solutions could have a stronger impact.

Furthermore, after visiting and analyzing several high streets, it was understood that every high street is unique; a product of its own local set of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. As such, although the literature suggests a range of generic high street issues, these may or may not be pertinent to local circumstances. Therefore, this project does not propose a one-size-fits-all solutions for all high streets in London or UK.

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<sup>41</sup> Greater London Authority, High Streets & Town Centres Adaptive Strategies, 9.

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The rest of the figures are made by the author.

