

# The house of lost steps

A syncretic space for Judeo-Moluccan memory in Appingedeam

by

*Grisha Kirby*



# Syncretism

*noun*

The amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.

*etymology:*

The coming together of two groups to combat a common threat.

*- Context -*



*- Life in Appingedam's Jewish quarter, c.1915 -*



*- Life in Appingedam's Moluccan quarter, c.1970 -*

This is a story about an archive that could sit in the heart of Appingedam, commemorating two diasporic cultures which, against all the odds, found refuge in this quiet, mediaeval city.

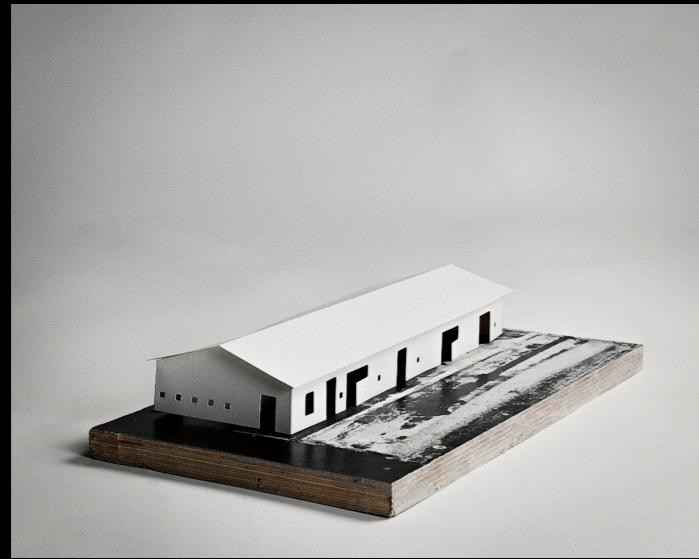
In 1795 my great-great-great-great grandfather, a 35-year-old Naftali Hirsch could no longer afford the schutzgeld, the tax Jews had to pay to be protected by the law. He decided to leave the country, starting a 650 kilometre journey by foot from his home in Bamberg in central Germany to the nearest Dutch city that would accommodate him. Naftali Hirsch became one of the first Ashkenazi Jews to settle in the Netherlands, finding his new home in Appingedam.



Shul



House



Barrack



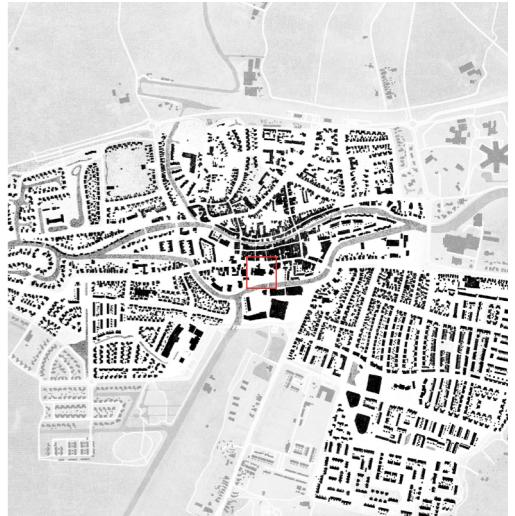


Appingedam  
*City Map*



# Appingedam *City Map*





Appingedam is small. Being one of the two mediaeval cities in the province of Groningen, its historic significance seems vastly disproportionate to its village-like size. Tucked away in the Northeastern corner of Groningen, Appingedam saw the birth of the oldest Ashkenazi Jewish community in the Netherlands. After the second world war the Jewish population of Appingedam was reduced to a total of 6. My grandmother is the last survivor of this community.

Nearly every Jew from Appingedam saw their end in the nearby transit and concentration camp Westerbork, a network of 30m long barracks. 15 years later these same barracks saw the arrival of a new group of occupants.



- Appingedam's Jewish musician, c.1920 -



- Appingedam's Moluccan musicians, c. 1975 -

The Moluccans were brought to the Netherlands intended for a temporary stay during Dutch-Indonesian negotiations so that they could return to an independent state. The barracks were unused and for 10 years accommodated over 12,000 Moluccans. Once it was clear the Moluccans would not be returning to an independent state, the impermanence of their stay dissolved quickly. In 1960 the first purpose-built Moluccan quarter, or wijk, was established and the Moluccans began their integration in the Netherlands in the quiet city of Appingedam.

Witnessing the birth of two significant communities, this city holds the legacy of both, centuries apart.

Though no direct overlap occurred, this project explores the spiritual connections between the two communities, advocating a syncretic commemorative approach emphasising the power of diverse memories over the exclusivity of a single collective remembrance. If we look to the etymology of Syncretism, I am exploring how the coming together of two separate cultures can strengthen the bond against the enemy of forgetting.



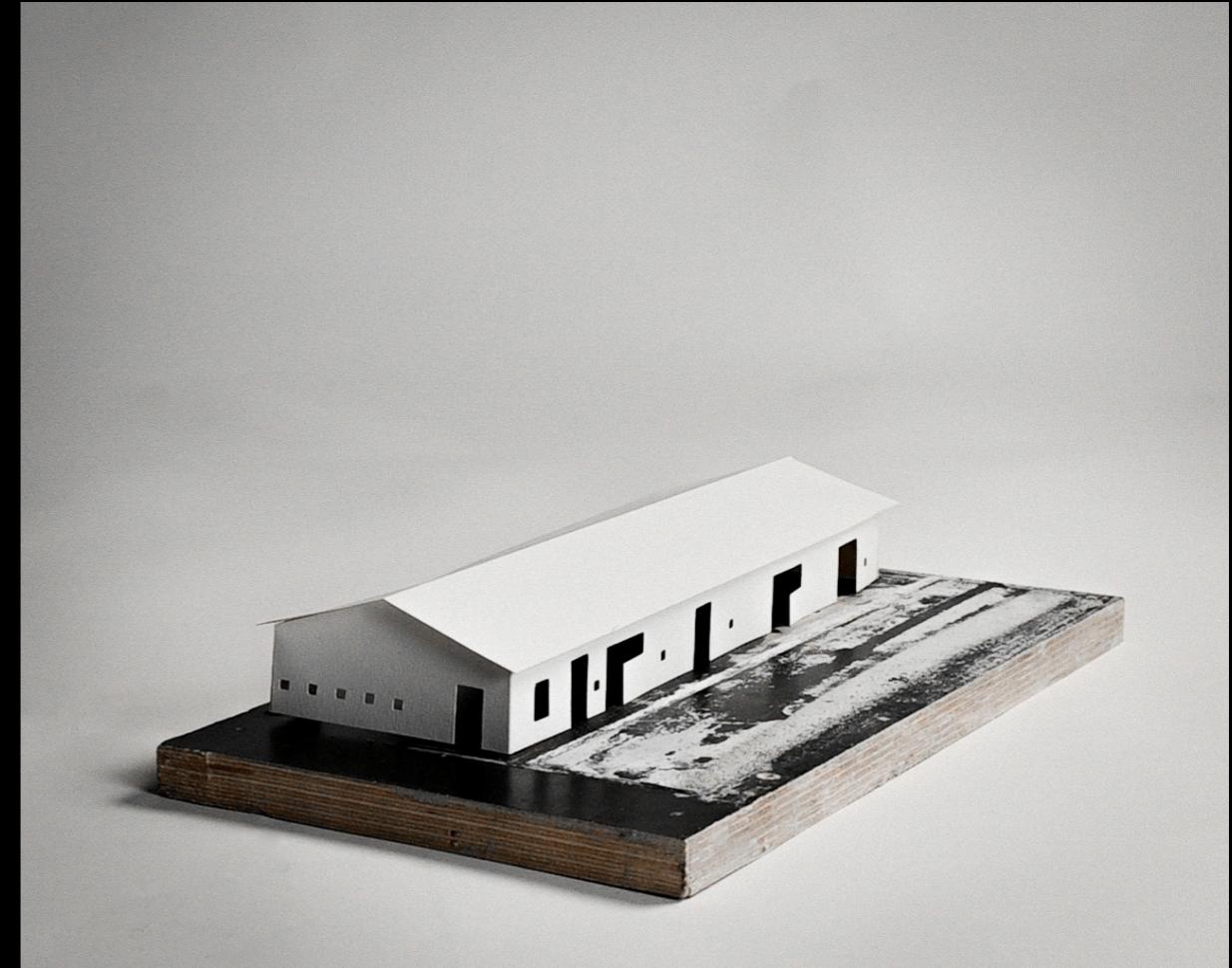
*Daniel Libeskind's Namenmonument, 2021*

*Photograph by author*

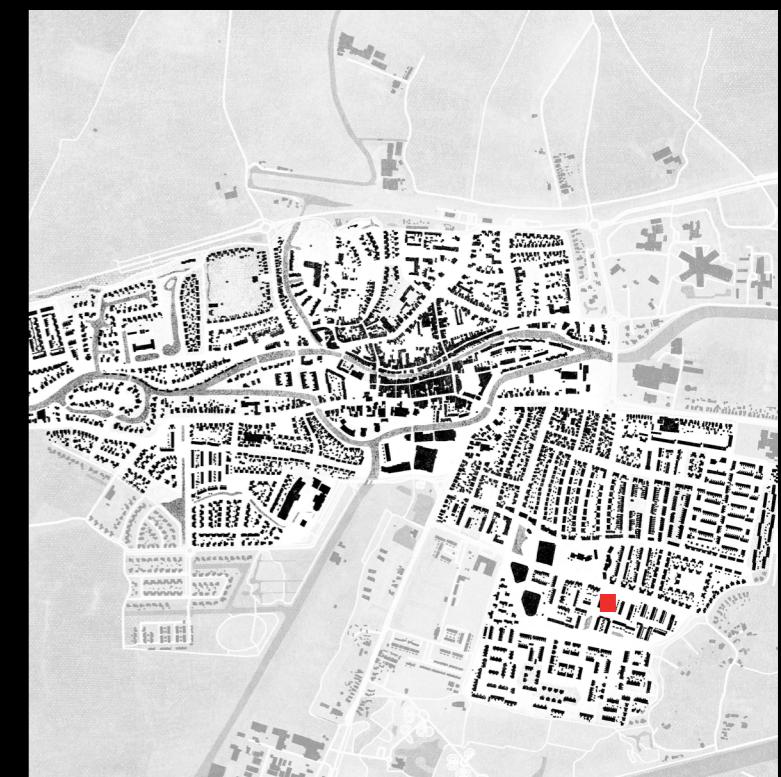


*Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine, laid for my great-great uncle and aunt in Appingedam, 2019*

*Photograph by author*



Depicted in the photo is the first Moluccan church in the Netherlands in Appingedam, modelled on the typology typically associated with Moluccans at the time, the barracks of the former concentration camps (right) - the places they were housed when they arrived in the Netherlands.



Both the Jewish and the Moluccan histories of Appingedam are at risk of being forgotten.

How can a memory space take a syncretic approach to provide an honest method of multi-directional remembrance?

*arkheion*: a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded

*arkhē*: begining, origin or source of action

commandment ← → commencement

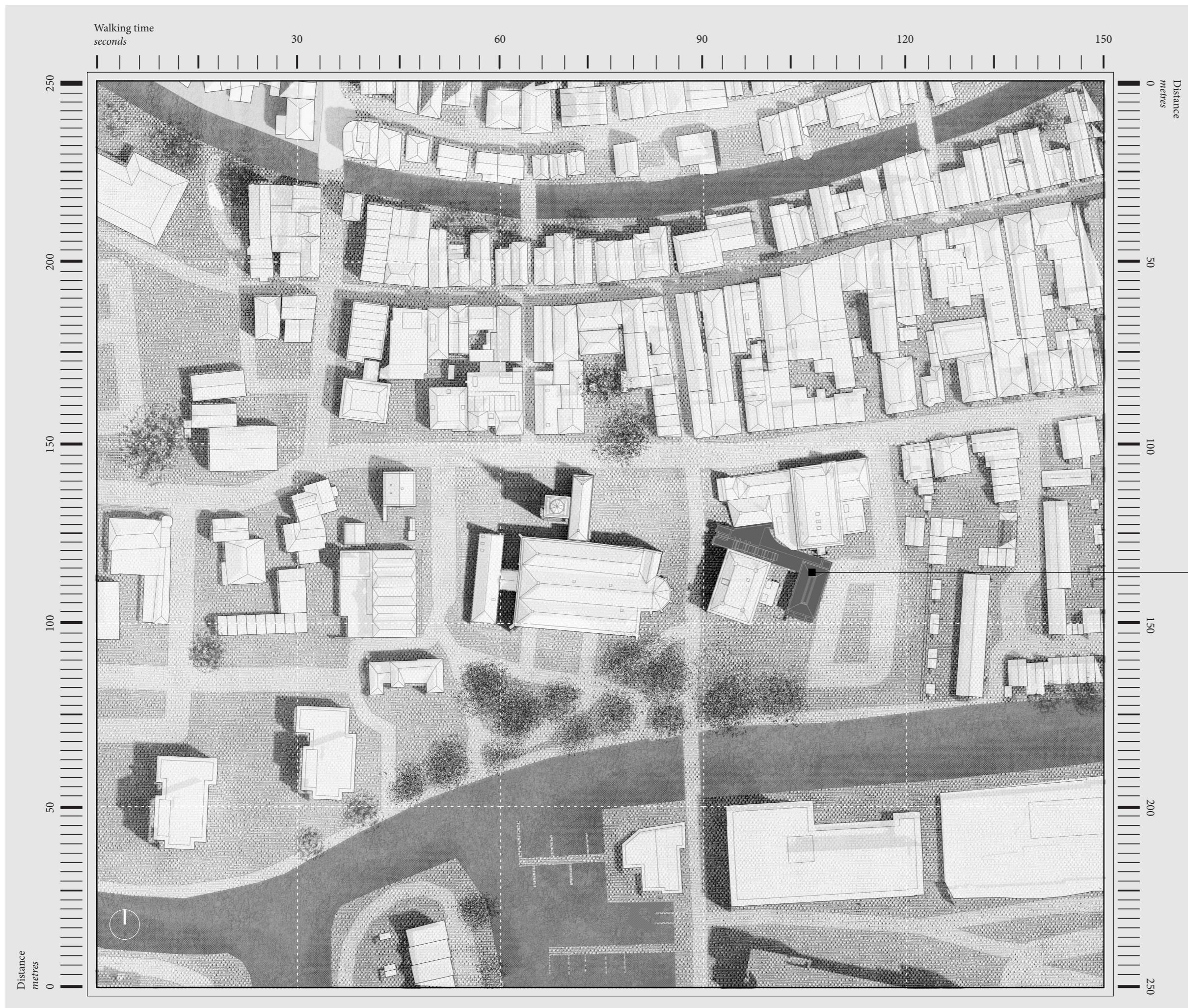
In order to funnel the depth of these stories into a design project and instrumentalise them into an architecture I began with the concept of a memorial. There is such thing as a good and a bad memorial - where does this happen? How can our relationship to memory shape space and vice versa. Moreover, how can a memorial devoted to two separate communities take shape and *where* can this happen in the city? The Jews lived in the North and the Moluccans in the South. What would this memorial be for and for *whom* would it be?

My conclusion was that this is a memorial not for Jews and not for Moluccans, but for the city of Appingedam. One of the primary elements that ties them together is that they became citizens of Appingedam. Placing the memorial in the civic heart of the city became an act of acceptance for the city - it would sit quietly but proudly amongst its most significant architectures. If we look at the composition of the civic centre of Appingedam the buildings seems rather scattered, random. This was reminiscent of the composition of the ancient Agora in Athens, within which one of the most significant buildings was the Metroon, or the archive.

This leads me to my next point about function. How should a memorial function? The archive is a special building typology. At its most fundamental it serves two functions, to store and to display. The two primary rooms are a space for storage and a space to analyse the stored artefacts. If we return to the two cultures which this archive is serving, we can see examples of their attitudes towards history. The Jews present the Tabernacle: a highly specific lightweight demountable structure that accompanied them 2000 years ago when they were wandering the desert of the Middle East that stored their most holy possessions. The Moluccans demonstrate the symbol of the trunk, or suitcase, which they would never unpack during their time spent living in the old camps, for if they were to unpack them it would signify their permanent distance from home.

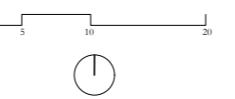
The archive also comes to represent a memorial in constant use. It is not a signatory flourish to scar the land but an applicable connection to the history being absorbed. It is a memory in practice.

*- Drawing Set -*





Site Plan  
*Appingedam Historic Centre*



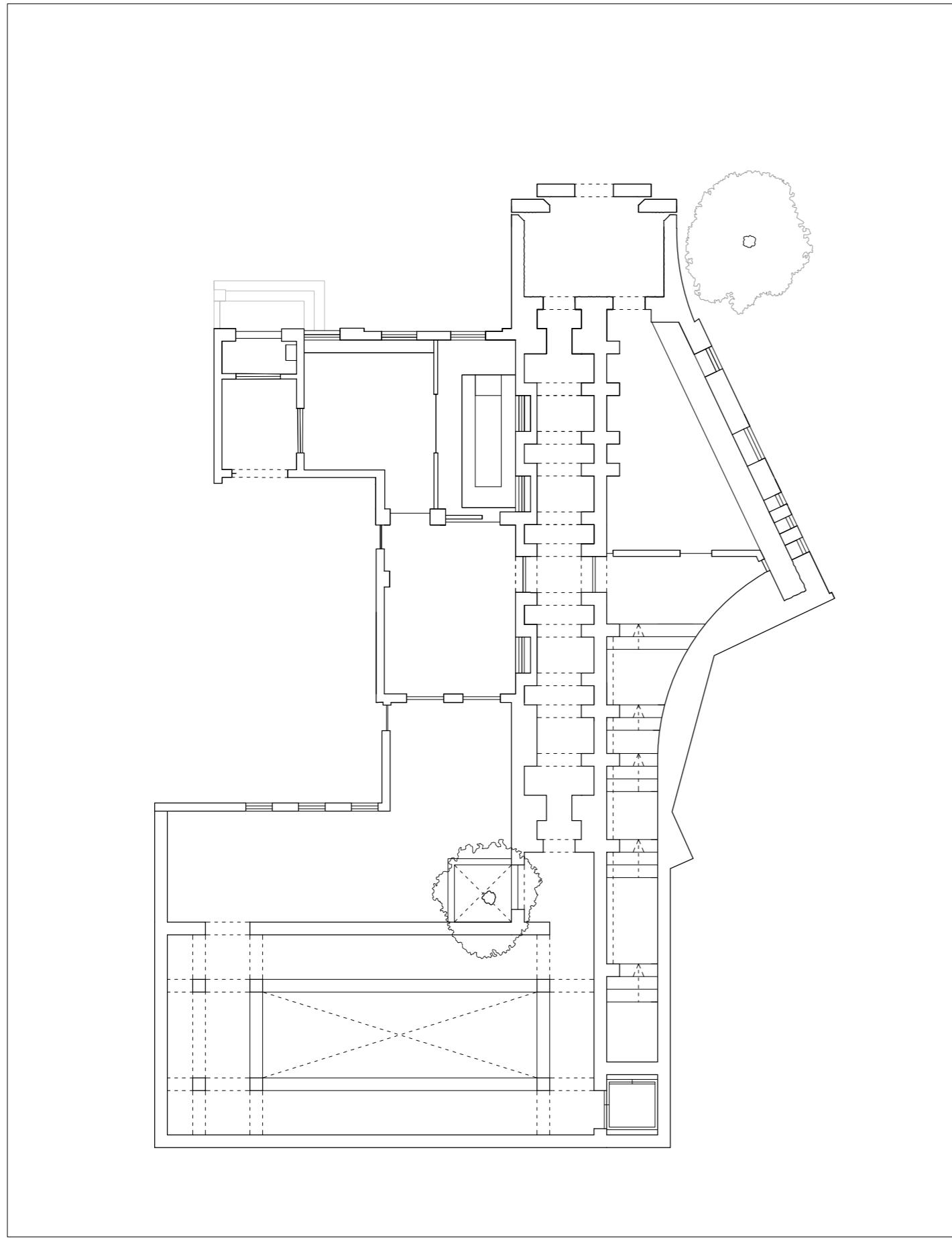




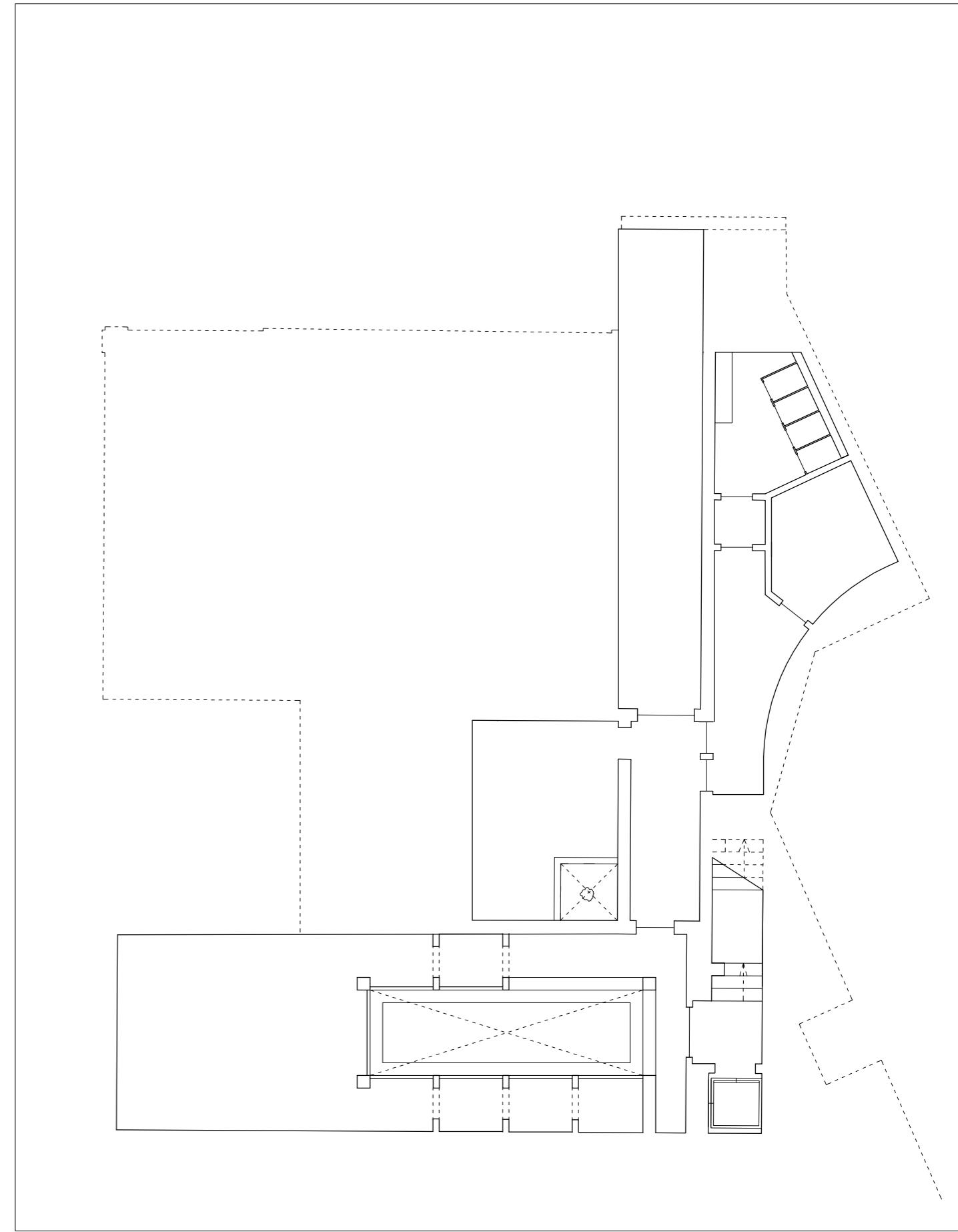
## *- Situating -*

There are 2 storeys: the ground floor is a series of unprogrammed places. It is primarily a peripatetic space. It is a space for movement. Through a series of moments of compressions, tensions, weight and shadow it becomes a process of movement.

Start with the portico: the point at which the building greets the square. It forms a full stop to the otherwise open ended alley between the two very different buildings. Suddenly the civic square is finished. It faces directly onto the highly decorated Raadhuis - it is monolithic but forgiving; squeezed between the two buildings it hugs the old courthouse and tempers the chinese restaurant. With one open square archway it mimics the portico of the Raadhuis in scale and materiality. The glazed brick paviors are borrowed from this design; referencing the local area but also creating its own identity.

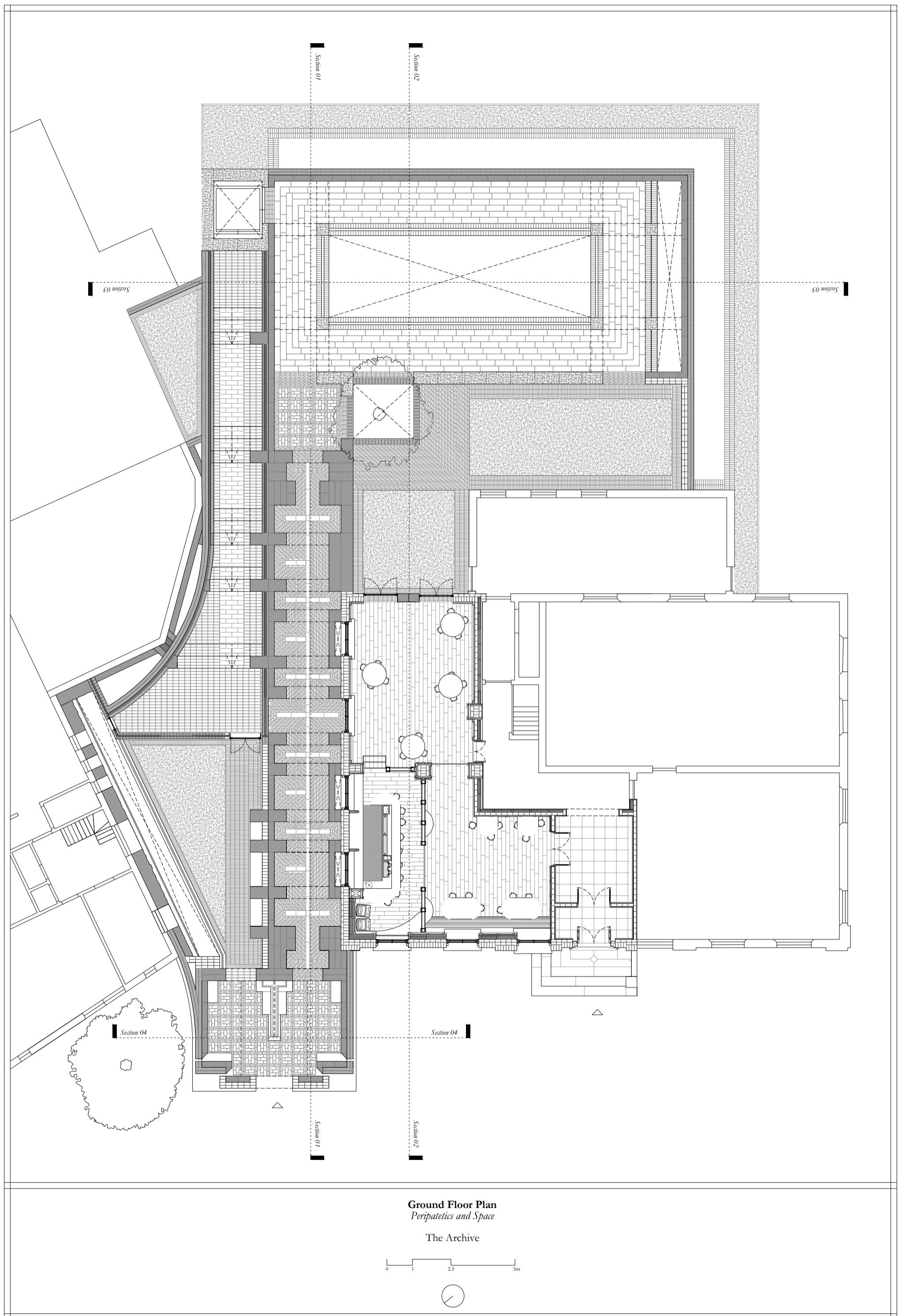


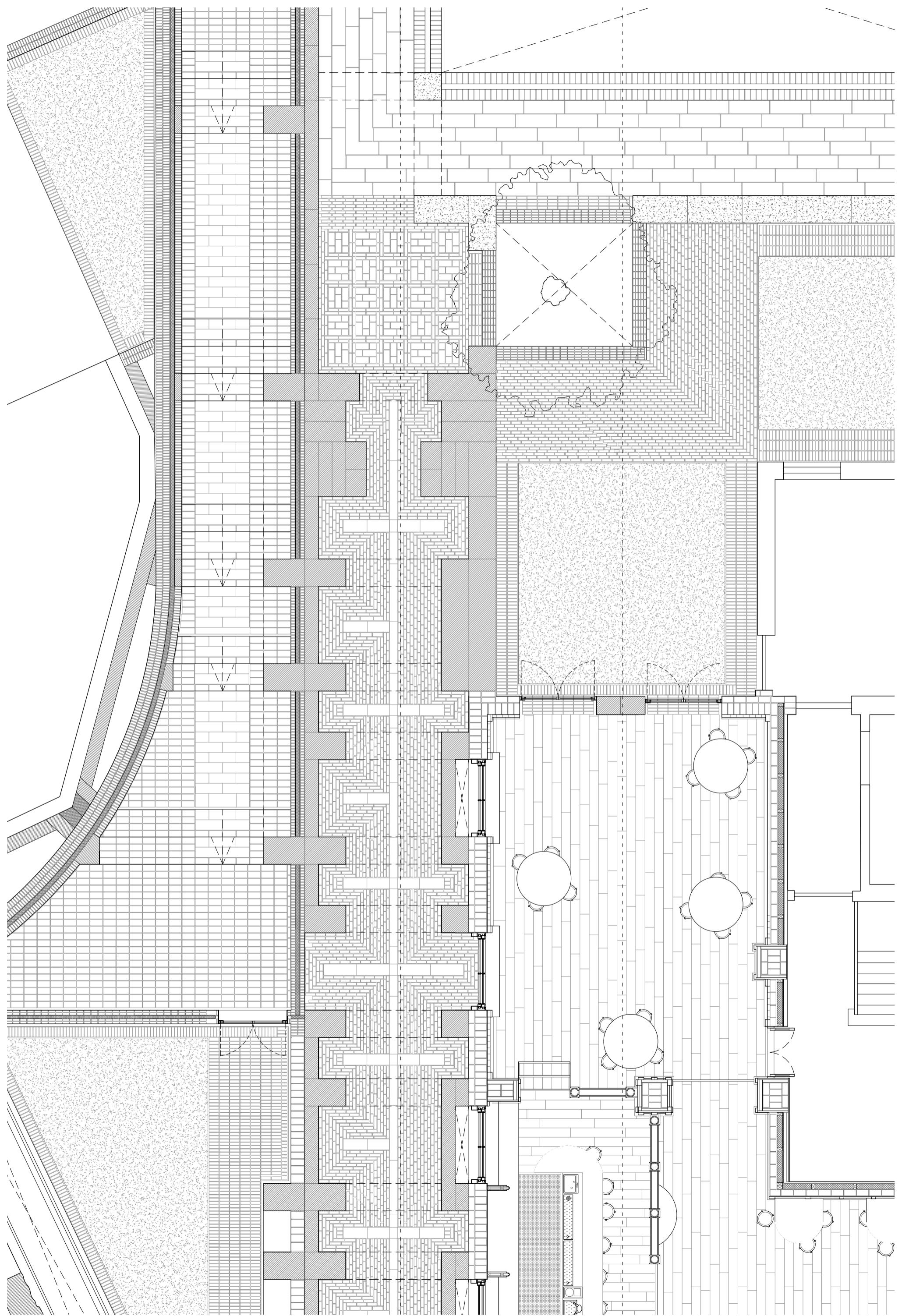
Ground Floor  
1:200

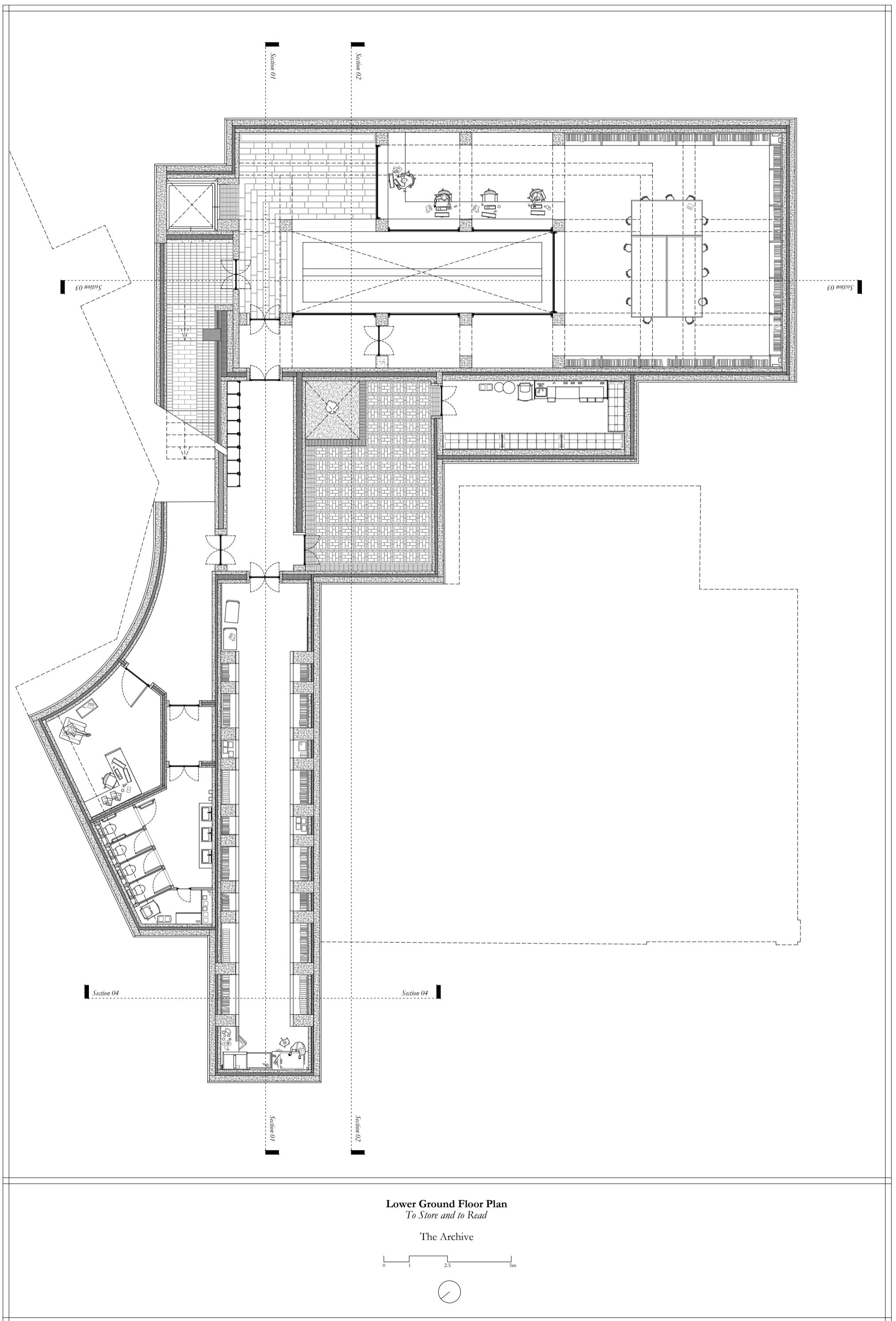


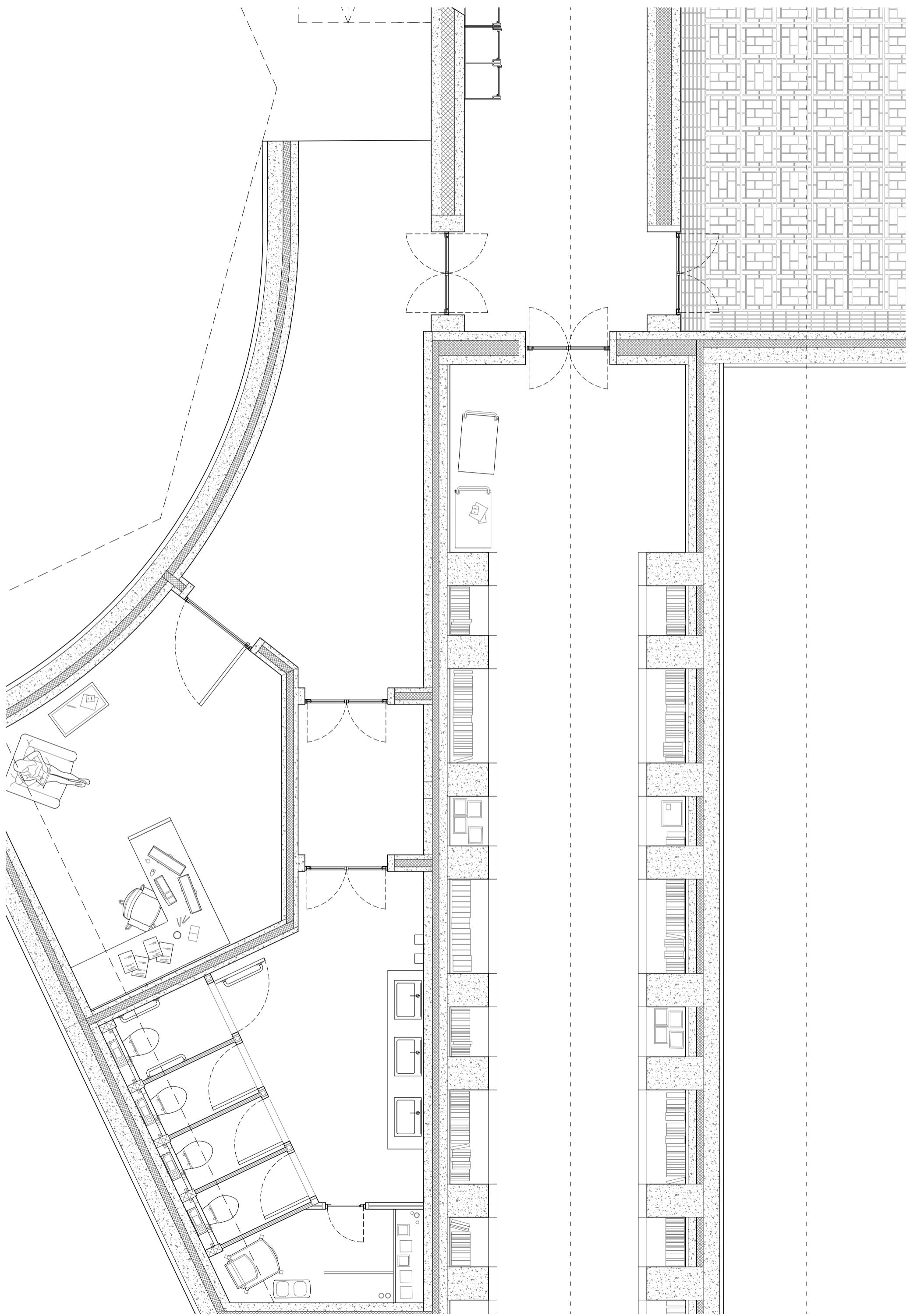
Lower Ground Floor  
1:200

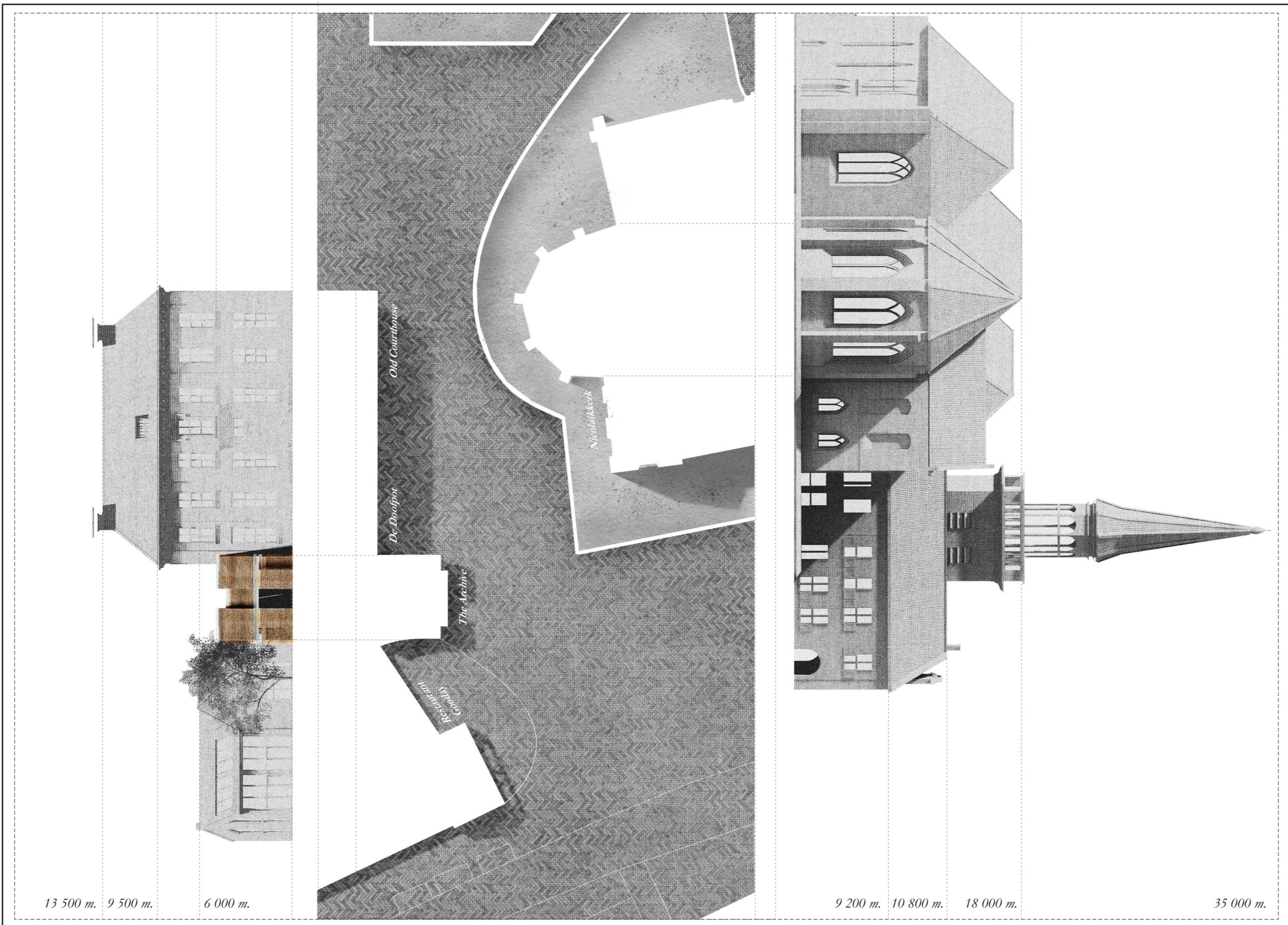












**Site and Facade**  
*Surrounding Relationships*



## *- Programming -*

The first drastic decision is the split in two. The archways are now split into the long corridor and the open enclosure formed by the neighbouring Chinese restaurant. The corridor is a long, dark space punctuated by narrow slits of light all along. The rhythm of the dynamic stone was created from the windows of the Old Courthouse and cover the windows to allow a gap of light through to the bar. It is part of the old building but still independent.

Towards the end the dark corridor opens up into the atrium; the ground floor becomes the upper storey as you realise the space is, in fact, an ambulatory around a double-height space below.

There is an impluvium at the back to allow light in and the right-angle of the building creates a joint around an introduced birch tree which sits in the corner of the newly formed outdoor bar area. I am using the existing bar as part of the design; it can be considered part of the idea of the banality of good; a way of emphasising the innocence and pride of the city.

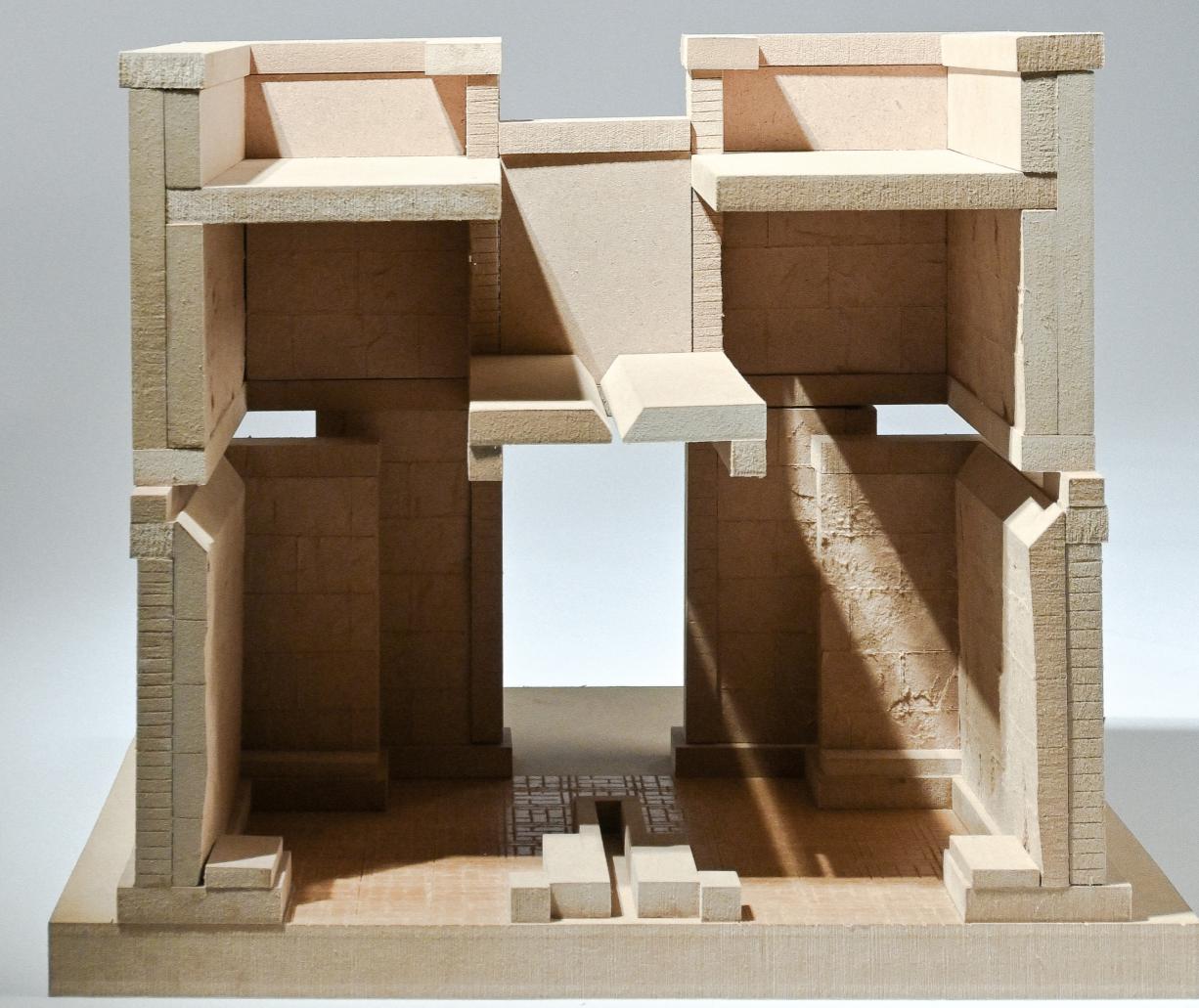
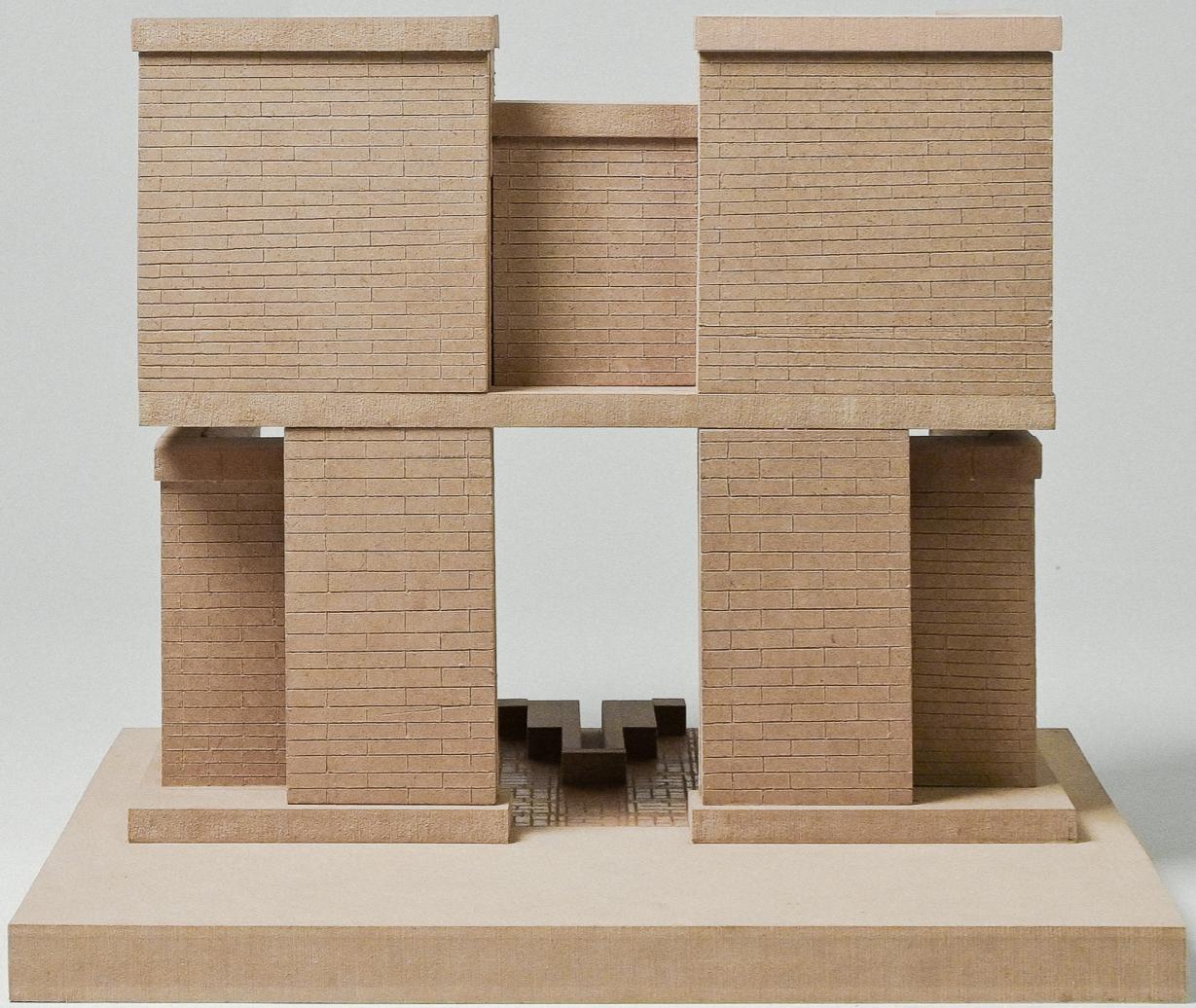
The unprogrammed nature of the storey give rise to an extremely physical relationship to the space. The steps taken within the rooms become almost monastic in nature. The hyper-focus on movement and the relationship with the body to the space is key.

## Site and Facade

*Surrounding Relationships*

0 m 1 m 2.5 m 5 m









The Portico Entrance



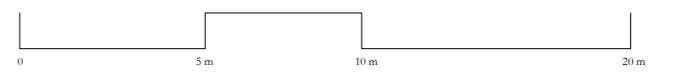
Existing Elevation (As seen from the church)

1:250



Proposed Elevation (As seen from the church)

1:250

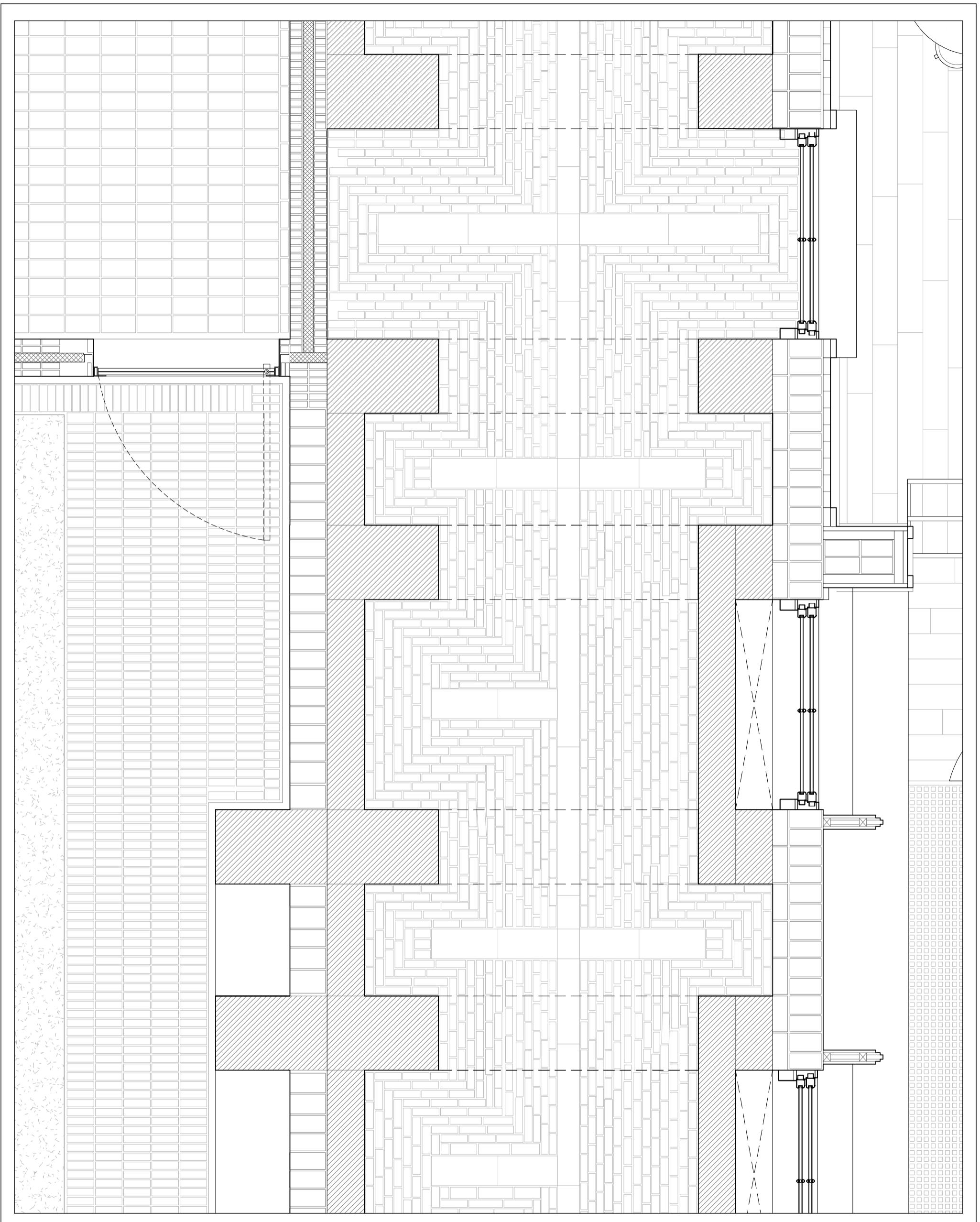








The Corridor



— **Ground Floor Detail** —  
*Brick & Stone*

## *- Programming -*

The lower ground floor is where the insulated, programmed rooms exist.

Down the stairs you arrive at the lower floor of the double-height atrium. Wrapped around it is the reading room. The reading room is highlighted by the opening in the ground floor with bookshelves lining the walls.

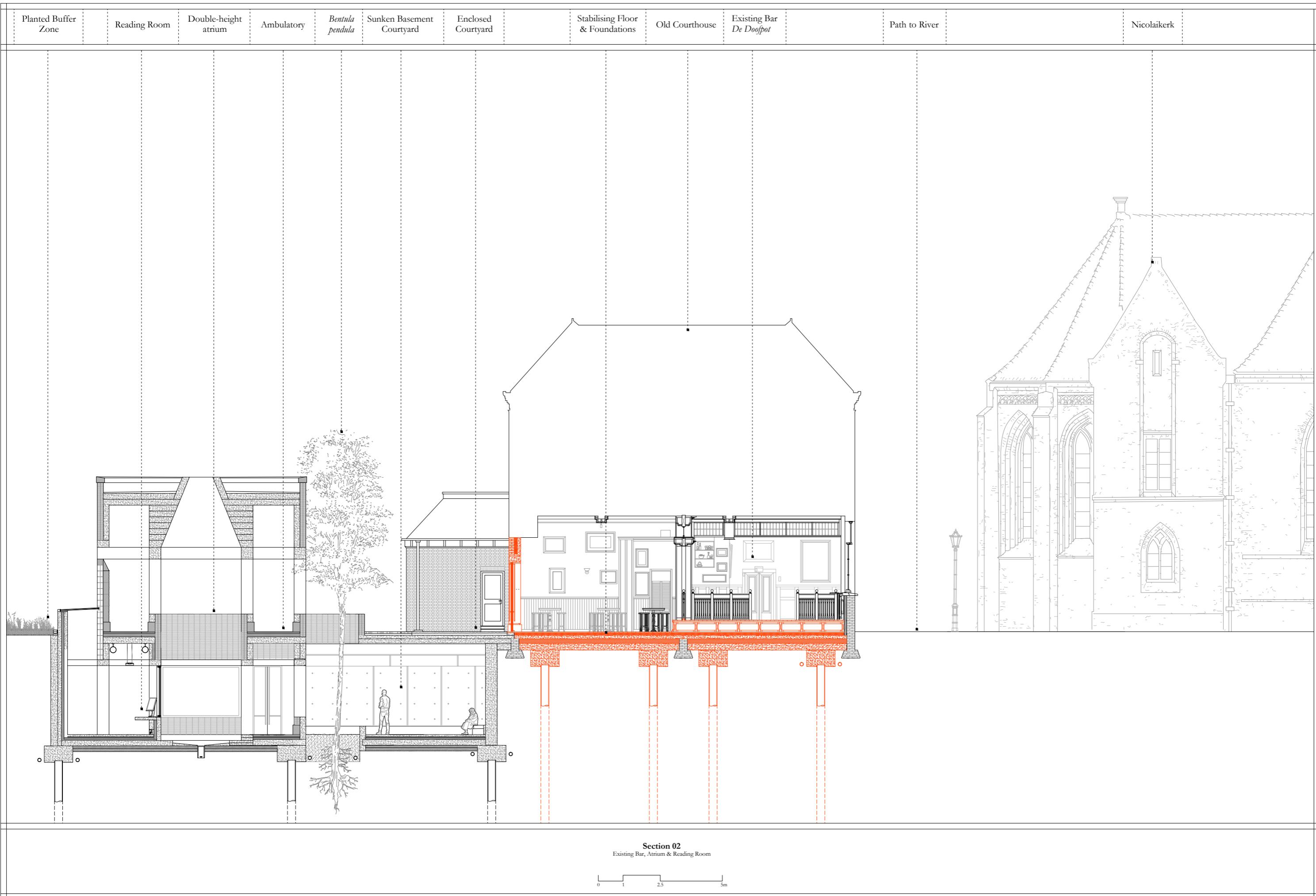
Entering through beyond the atrium you come to the sunken courtyard which is anchored to the birch tree that passes vertically through the building.

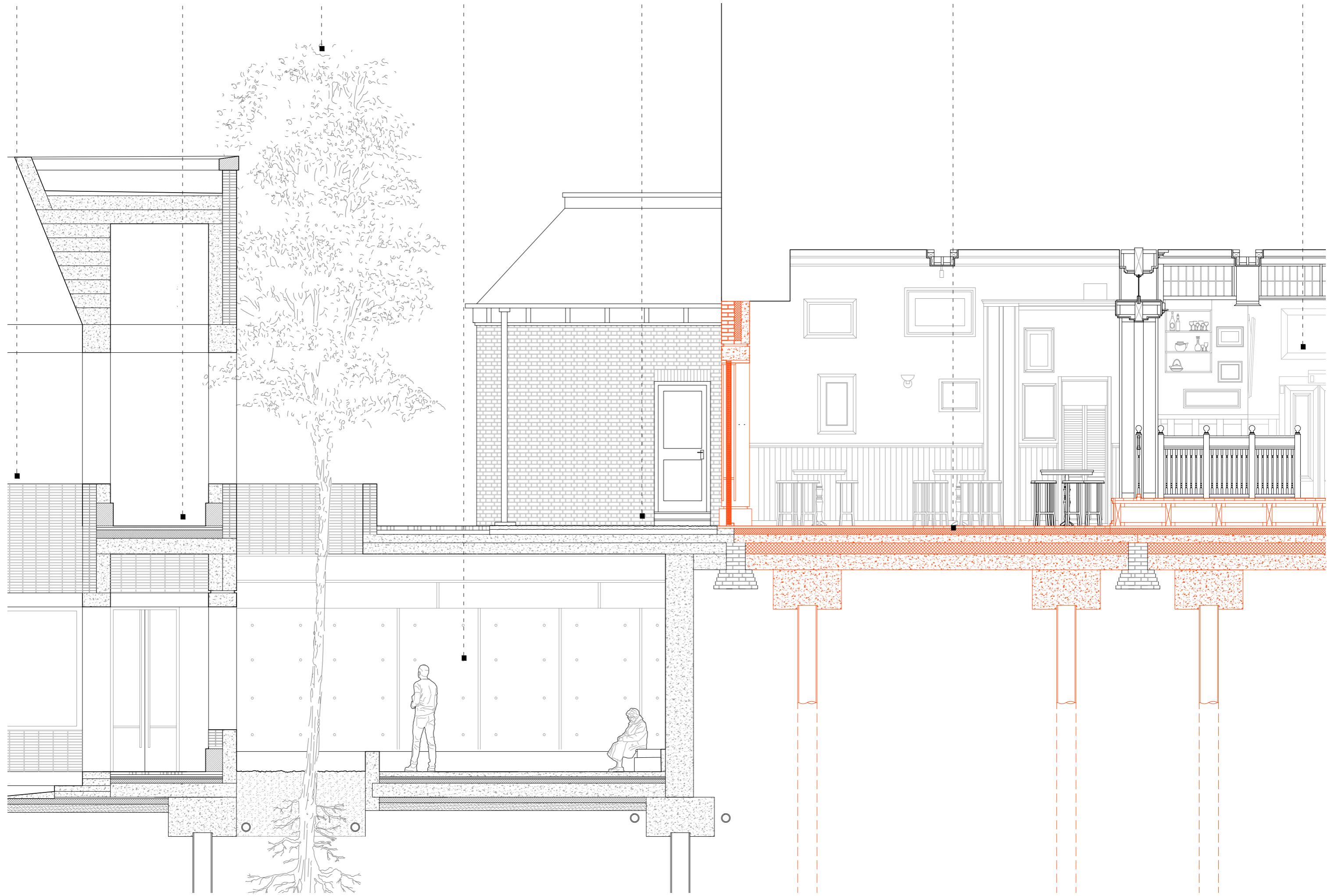
The Lower Ground Floor is conceived of as a concrete shoebox, underpinning and supporting the existing buildings and counteracting the quiet architecture upstairs.

Continuing on are the ancillary spaces that fit around the only curve of the building, formed by the geometry of the next-door-neighbours. An office and a bathroom take this space, also lit by the impluvium above.

Finally the archive itself: the place to store the history. Conceived of as a long corridor mirroring the one above, the same structural articulation (now in concrete as opposed to stone) creates cavities in the walls to function as bookshelves, angled as buttresses so as to support the contention walls of the basement.

A storage room sits within the elbow of the building, the most banal of all the spaces but if the research and stories have taught me anything it is that we cannot live enriched lives without the beauty of banality.





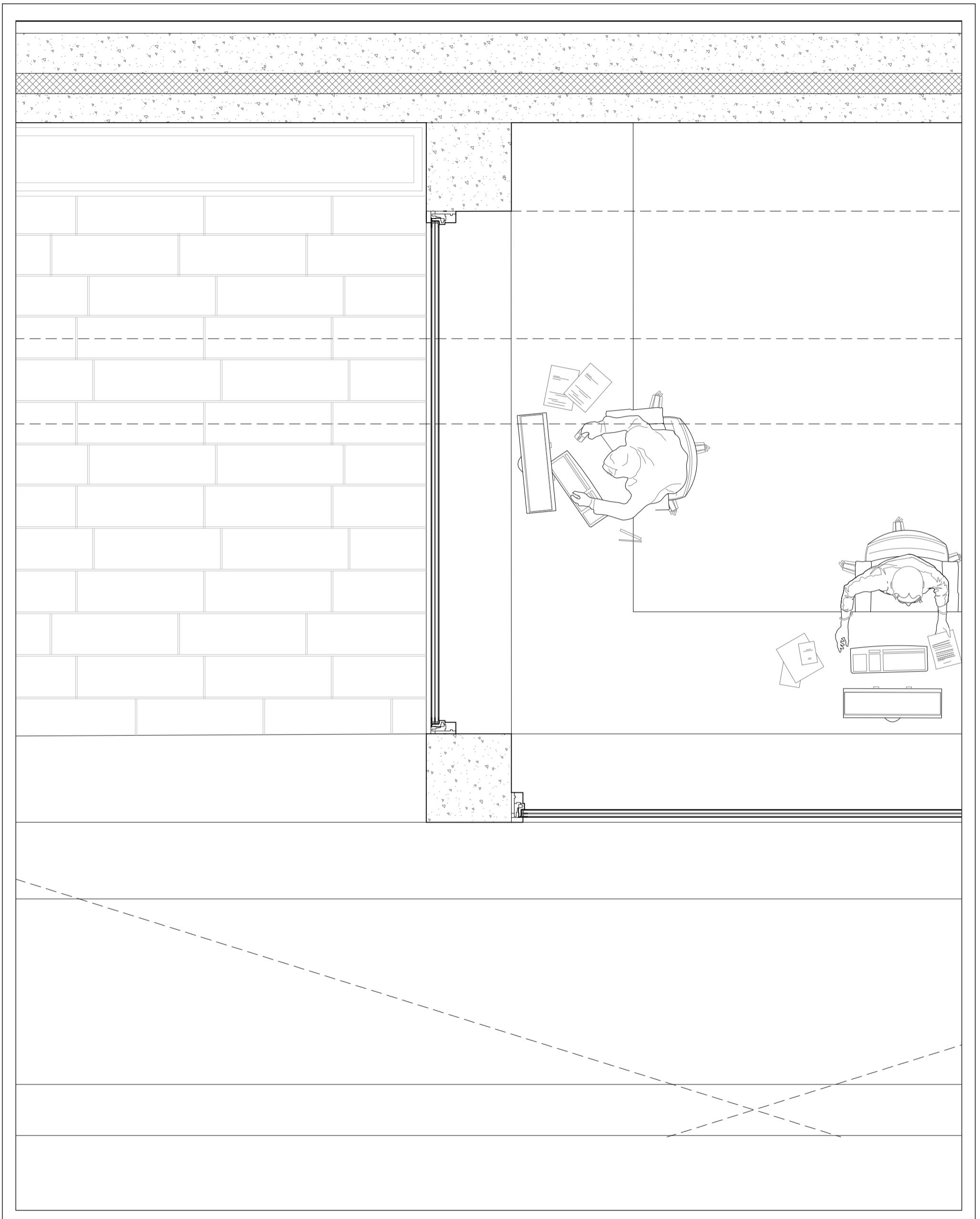


**Atrium**  
*Pouring light*

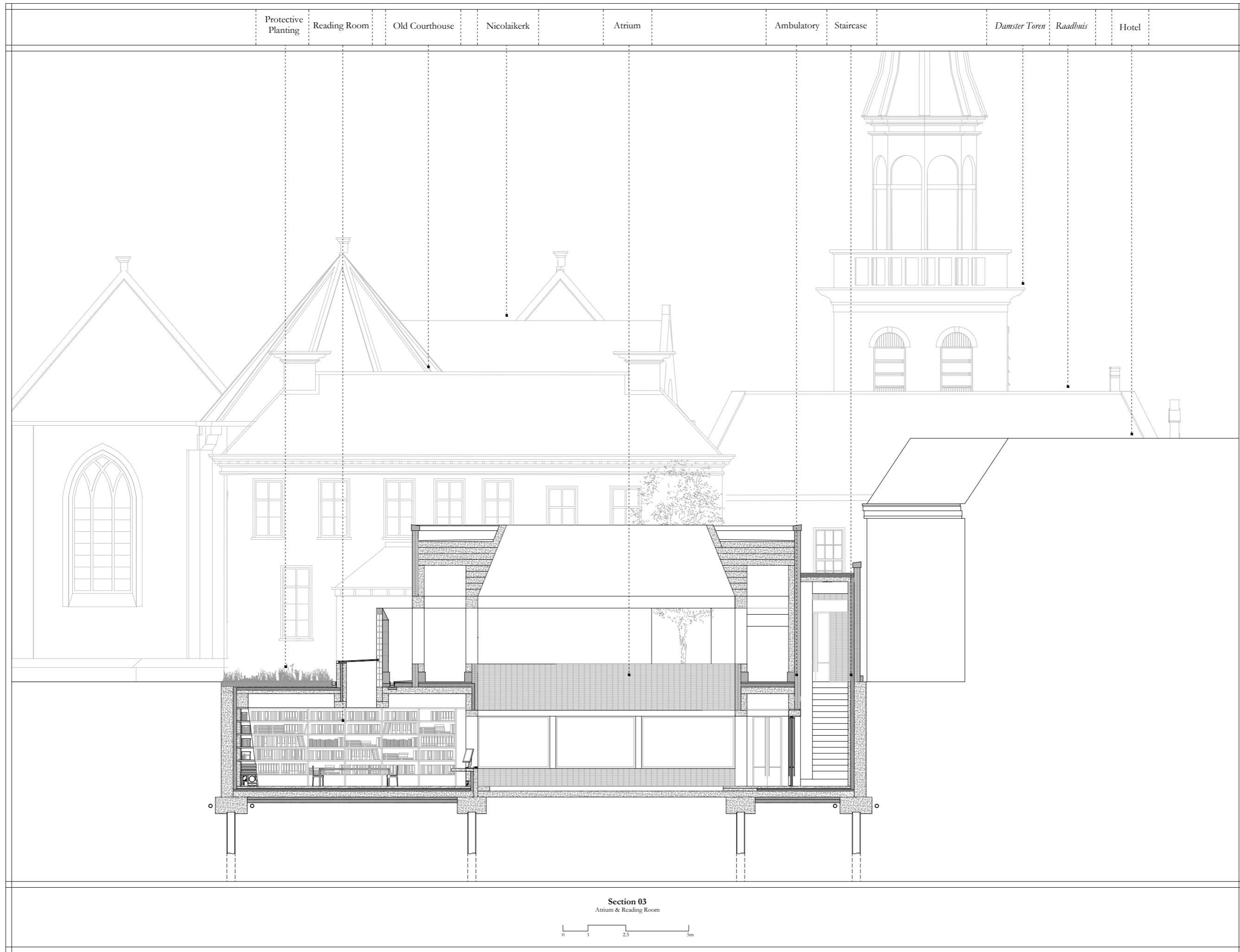


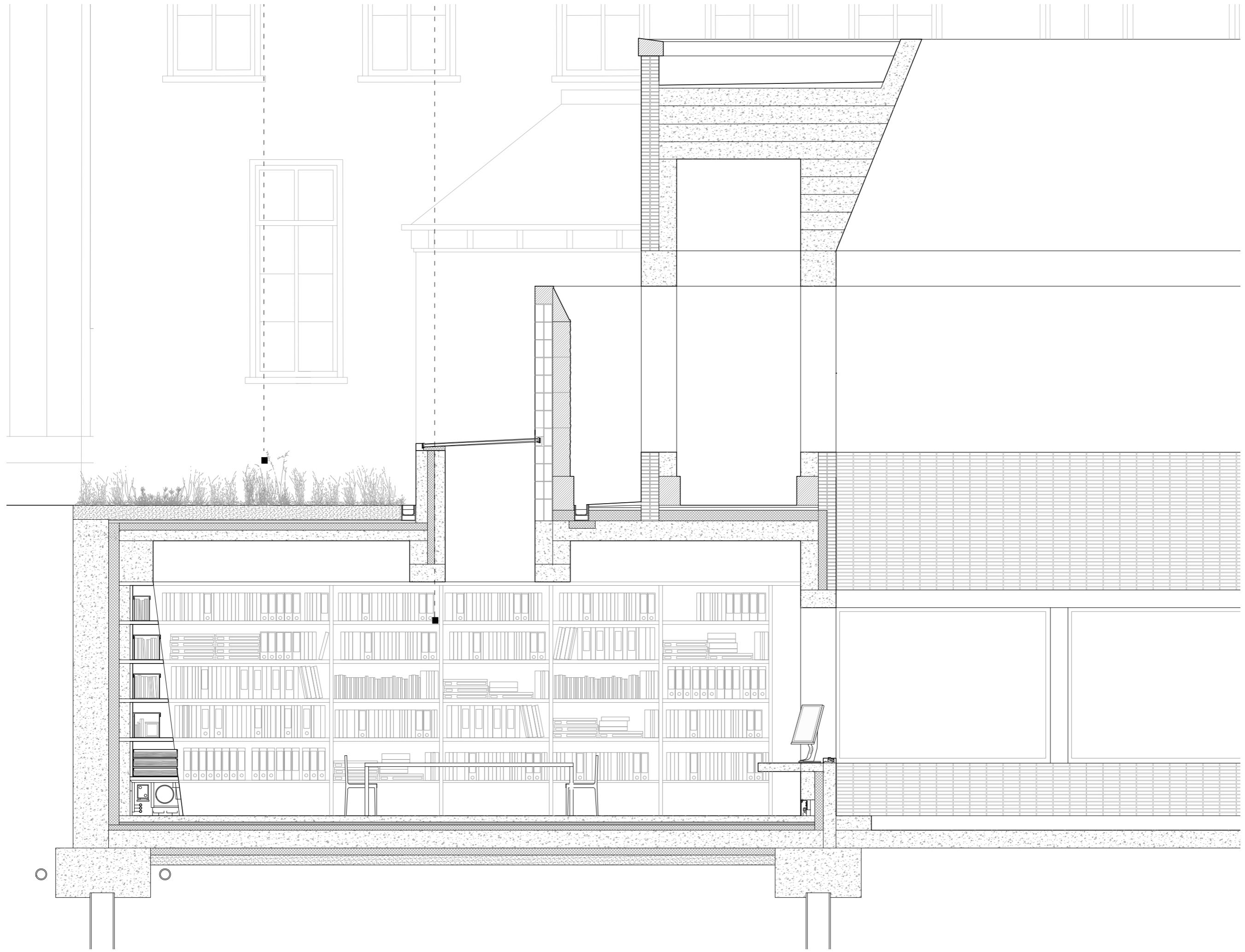


The Sunken Courtyard



— Lower Ground Floor Detail —  
Reading Room





## *- Tactility -*

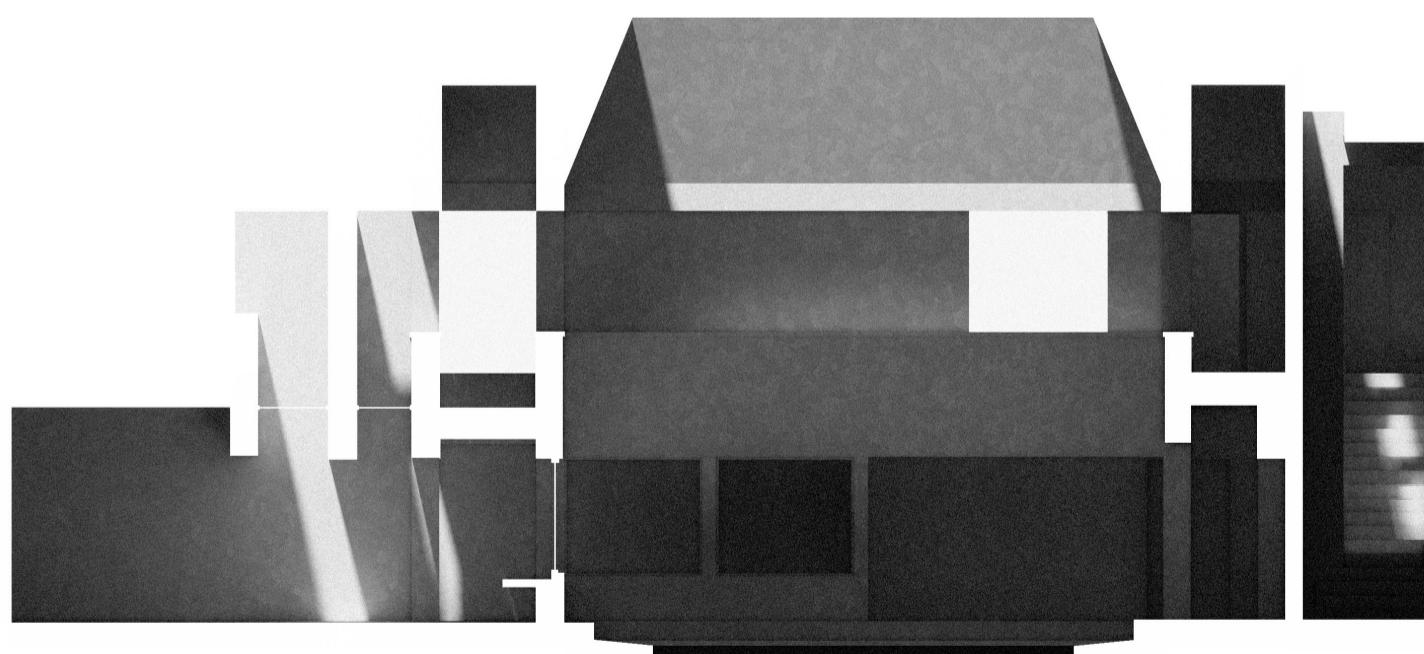
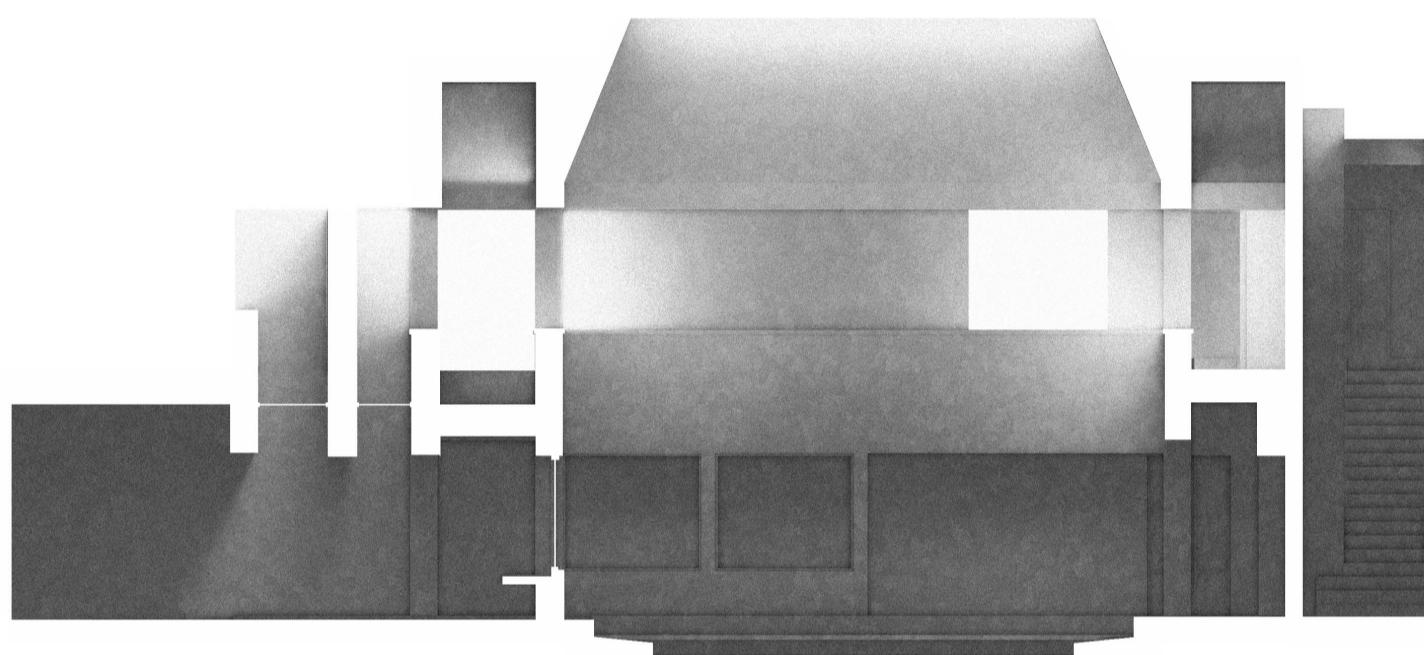
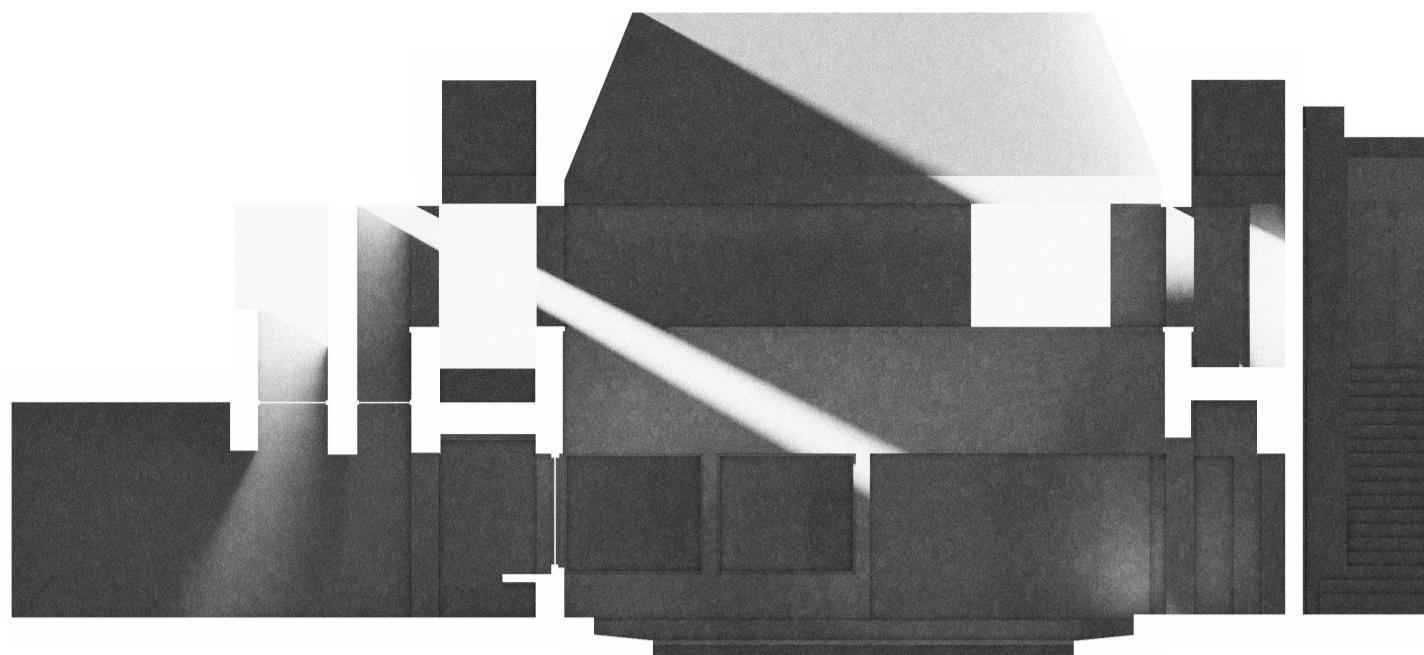
It is a heavy building: made primarily of three materials: brick, stone and concrete. The ground floor sees the building similar to an ordinary blazer with a rich lining. The half staggered stretcher bond of the long, thin bricks wrap around a rough, stacked stone interior.

Tactility is where history can be seen most clearly - the natural materials all exude a unique, rough surface. It was never going to be a shiny, factory-made building but one made and laid by hand.

The glazed floor picks up on the beams and slits of light which perforate the building and the rough hewn stone enriches this further.

Concrete lintels are exposed on the ground floor wherever they are needed. The three materials are sewn together carefully - a hint at the syncretic nature of the building.

As said before, underground the finish is a smooth concrete - it makes no effort to hide the technical requirements of maintaining the neighbouring foundations, thermal and environmental comfort of the user and of the artefacts inside. Exposed ducts, wiring and lighting all create a very distinct atmosphere from the storey above.

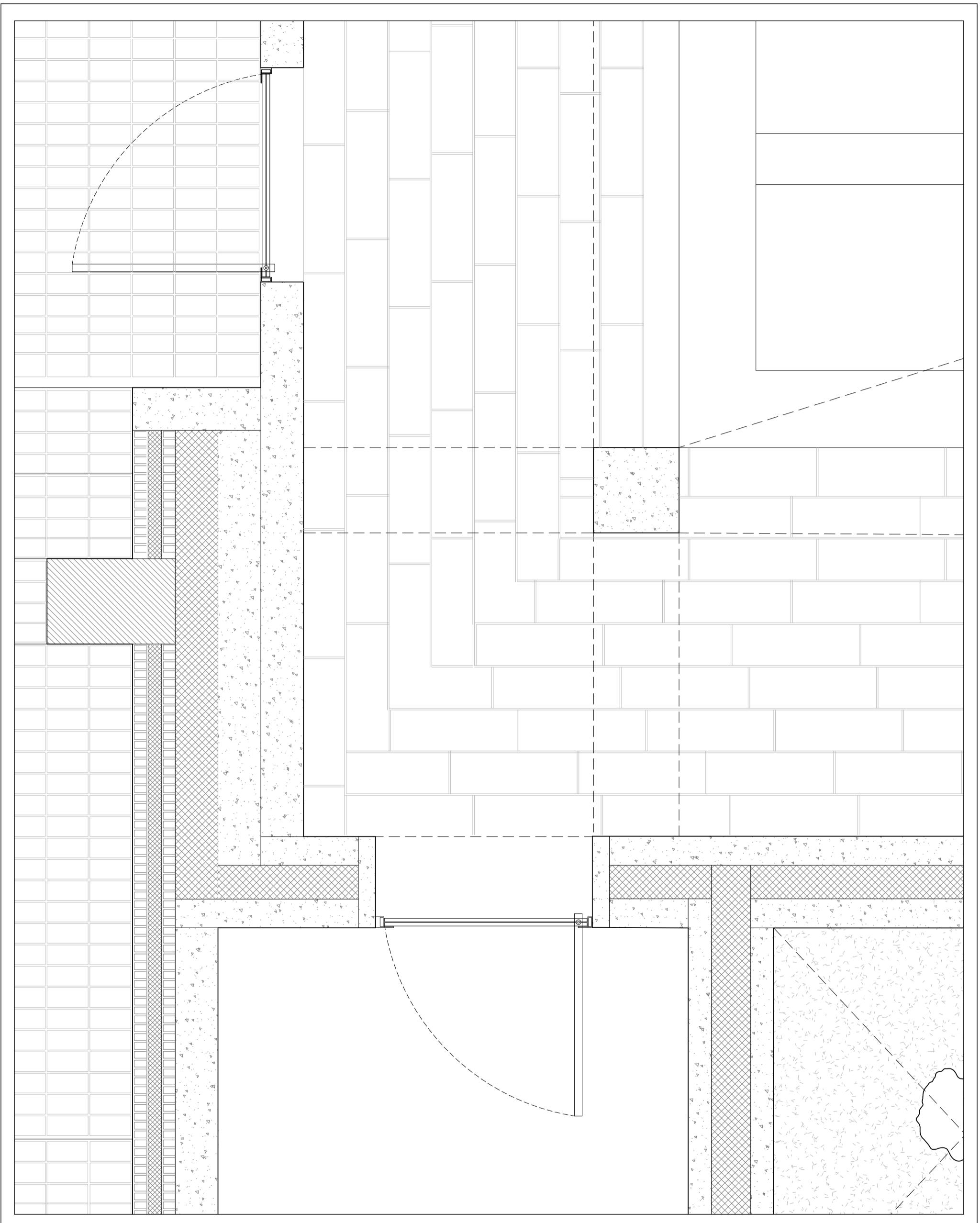


**The Reading Room**  
*Pouring light*

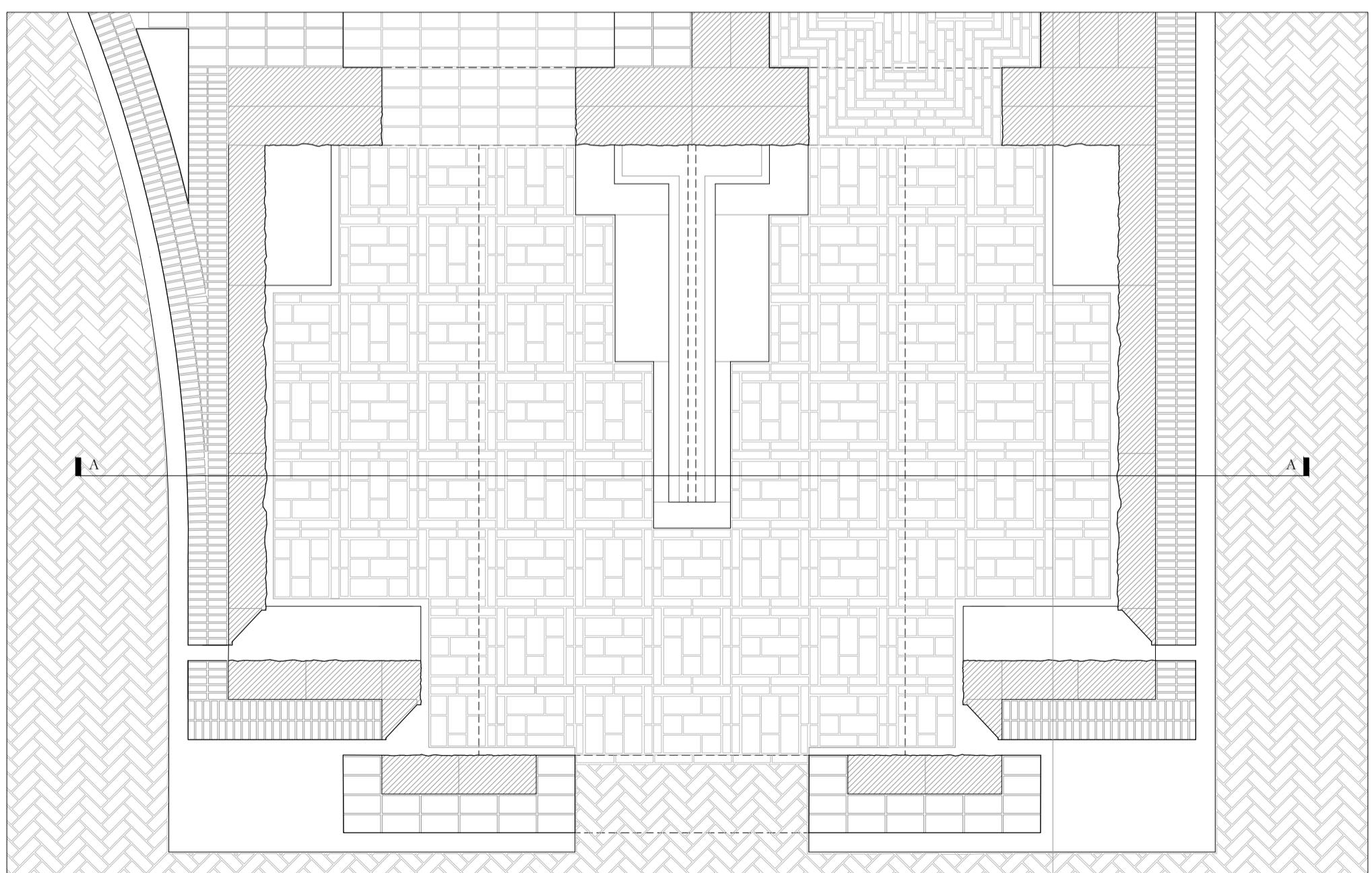
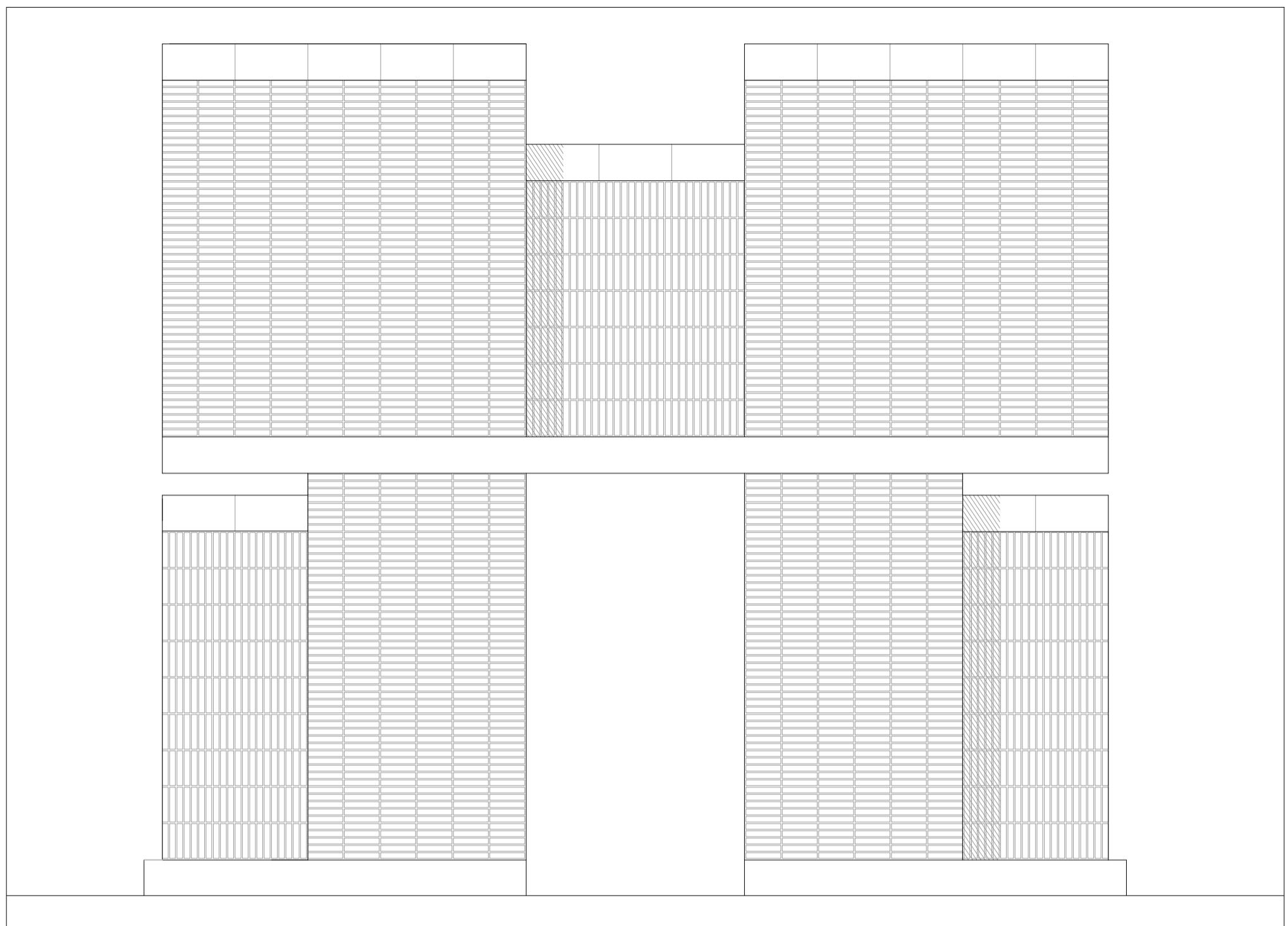




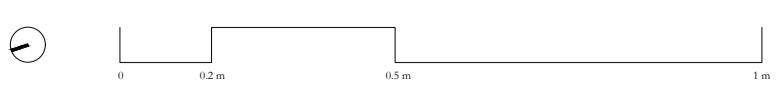
The Ambulatory

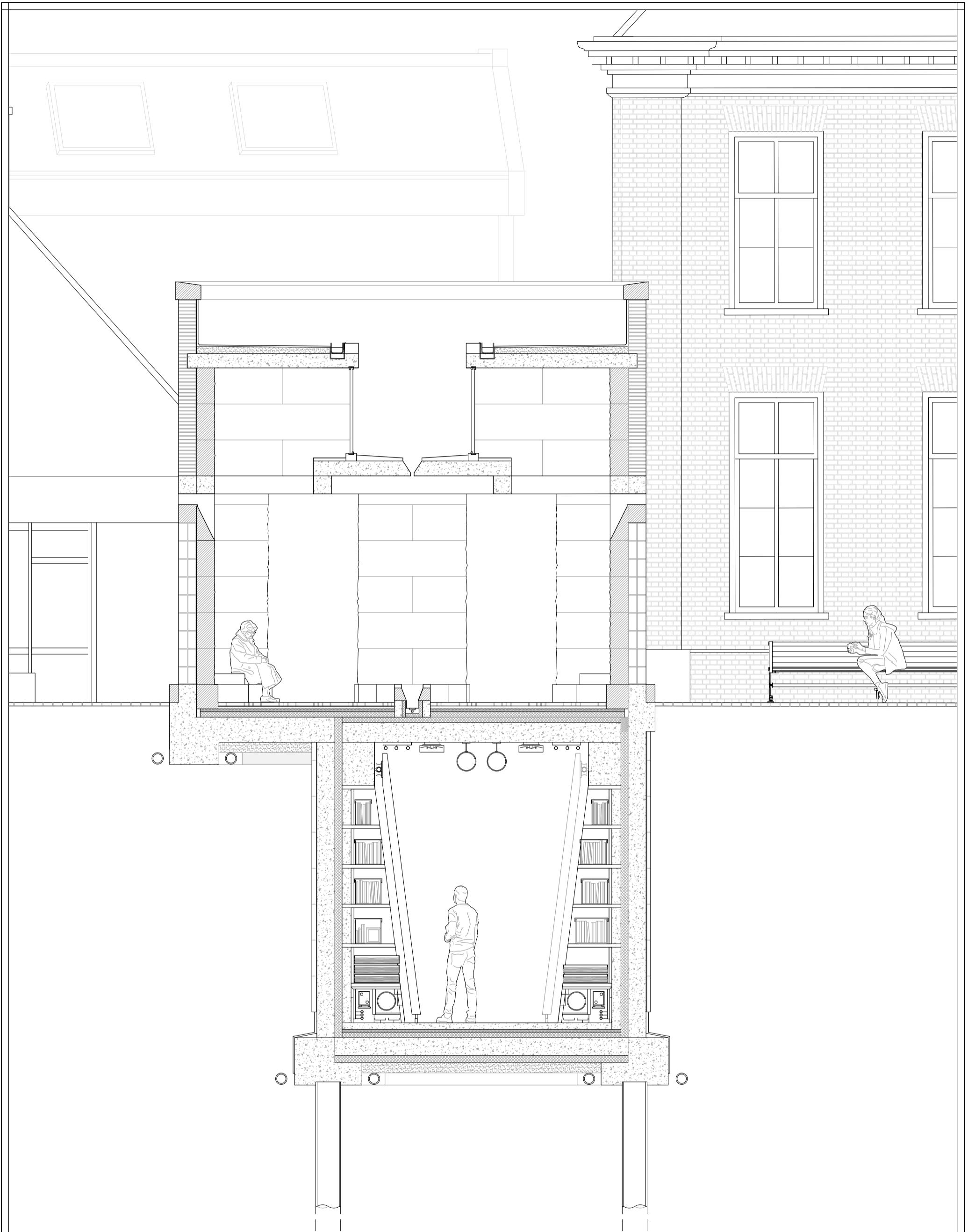


**Lower Ground Floor Detail**  
— *Brick & Stone*



Portico Plan  
1:33





**Section 04**

The Archive

0 1 2.5 5m

## *- Light -*

Light is the main character of the building but it has no windows.

Careful incisions and coordinations of materials create a peripatetic movement from dark, to darker to laser beams of light. Sometimes it bathes a space and sometimes it is only just permitted. There is a calmness to a careful balancing of light. I looked to a lot of Baroque influences for the storytelling aspect of the orchestration of light. Apart from the outdoor enclosure and the open bar area there is nowhere that light floods in.

Light can ground you and light can expose you. As in churches it is the play of light that sets your spirit - how it generously pours in through some windows and through others it is violently extracted with scalpel-like gestures.



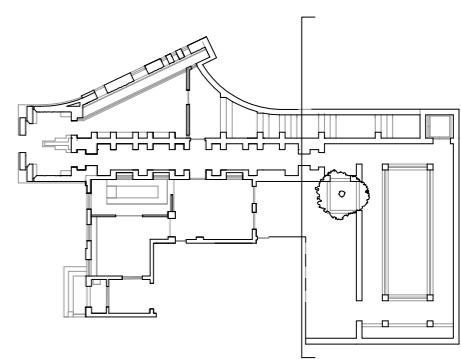
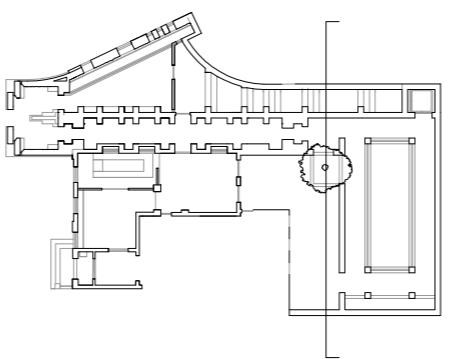


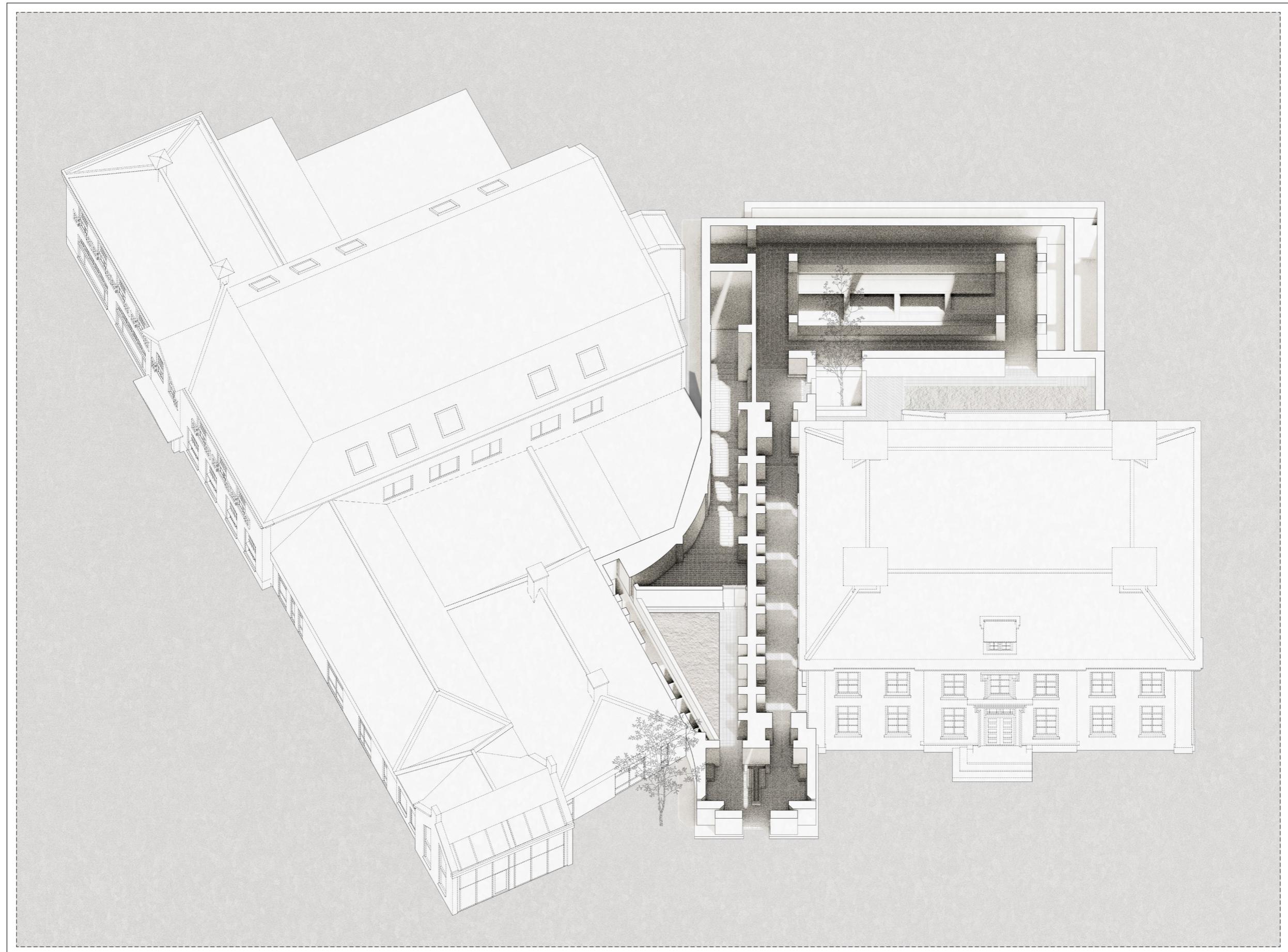


Cross Section  
Courtyard - Corridor - Bar  
1:100



Cross Section  
Stairs - Corridor - Outdoor  
1:100





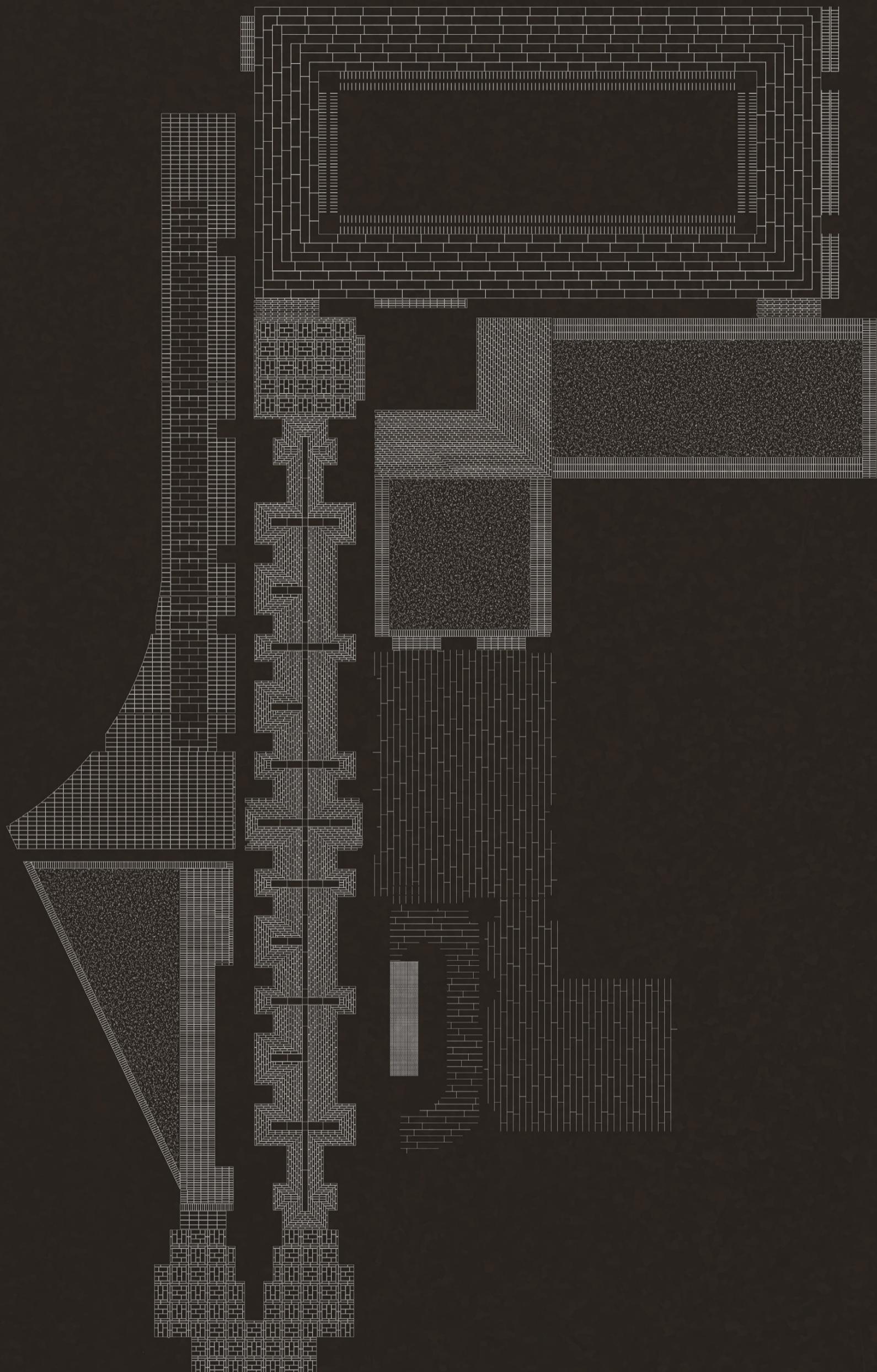
**Site and Facade**  
*Surrounding Relationships*

0 m 5 m 10 m 20 m

## *- Lost steps -*

The concept of lost steps runs throughout 19 and 20th century architecture - French halls of lost steps would be the rooms in which the only duty it had to fulfil would be to hold the movement of people.

This is a house of lost steps. It is a house of memory and a house of solace. The lost steps in this archive can be found historically underground and can be seen continuing today upstairs. The concept of an archive as a house can be taken metaphorically as a dwelling of memory. Within the purely didactic nature of the words inscribed on the paper there is a simultaneous profound spiritual connection to the patina of the paper itself, the question of who else has held and observed this document.



**Ground Floor Plan**  
*The Felt surfaces*

# The house of lost steps

## A syncretic space for Judeo-Moluccan memory in Appingedam

My exploration of syncretic architecture always returns to the Jews and the Moluccans - two groups who had no physical or temporal overlap but whose stories are intrinsically intertwined. Creating an archive specific for a multiplicity of communities to act as a place of remembrance is an idea formed fundamentally by the stories told. It is formed by the stories and to maintain the stories.

My story ends with an analysis of the future trajectory of this project. Over the past year I have built a close relationship with the people of the city.. I've described to them this project from its early concept phase through to a more careful understanding of its spatial arrangement. Next month I hope to meet with the citizens to present to them this final work. Regarding scale it is not an unrealistic project but the ambition and the sensitivity of the site would be a huge concern for heritage planning. If the mayor decides that she wants it to be built, great, but if she also understands it as nothing more than a conceptual architectural formulation of the power of the city to house two diasporic communities then that would also be fulfilling. Describing the nature of the memorial to citizens as one which focuses on both Jews and Moluccans was often met with quizzical expressions but they would relax eventually as the profundity of the connection between the two communities became clearer. Even my grandmother took a while to come round to it. The potency of the memorial as 'sacred object' is fading drastically. The 20th century bore witness to events whose effects could not be sufficiently characterised and commemorated with words alone, thus giving rise to abstraction as an effective method of crystallising that which words can't. The 'sacred object' became a gift to a community who could never forget and a symbol to outsiders who should always remember. The value of conceptual artistry and abstraction elevated these objects to a sacral status. The object-ness of these memorials can easily be interpreted as belonging to or owned by a specific community. I believe this typology of memorial inherently exhibits certain shortcomings; the nature of the physical object-symbol-gift in conjunction with the exclusivity of the owner-recipient-possessor constructs strict divisions as effectively as it can break them down. Perhaps this new perspective relies not upon the exclusivity of a single group's collective memory, but the agglomeration of a multiplicity of collective memory. Where multiple communities, however distant, share common experiences it can be profoundly beneficial to inspect the relationship between such collective memories as opposed to the simpler - arguably more convenient - method of segregative memory. I hope the citizens of Appingedam will agree.

by

*Grisha Kirby*