

Stockholm City Library

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Prefix

This book is created as a summary of work done for the graduation studio of Interiors Buildings Cities, titled Palace. As part of its ongoing investigation into modern, public building types, this years studio addressed the idea of the public library. In specific, the Stockholm City Library, a widely celebrated building, which served as inspiration for many of the libraries in Sweden and Denmark around that time.

The project is based in the shadow of two failed competitions; one in 2006, the other in 2014. This proposal offers a unique opportunity to explore the potential of the previous competition briefs, while also allowing me to redefine and reconsider the fundamental questions posed by these briefs.

As I got further into the process of designing, I found that I was, in fact, not designing according to any predefined brief, and allowed myself to design much more free than any concrete brief would have allowed. It became a project of interrogation and careful consideration. Research into the history of the building, and other works by its architect came to inform many of the choices I made within my own design.

Within this book, I will elaborate on some of my findings, as well as present my proposal for the library.

As an idea, the library's history is synonymous with the development of culture and society. Ancient libraries were centres of learning that sought to embody the sum of human knowledge and to encompass and represent the known world, often through their own geometries. Privileged places for scholarly pursuit, they jealously guarded collections of books and manuscripts that were handmade, precious and often unique. The idea of the public library as a tool for broader social advancement arrived with the

French Revolution at the end of the 17th Century, building upon the opportunities presented by the innovation of the printing press.

The unrealised yet hugely influential designs of Étienne-Louis Boullée envisioned the vast, monumental interiors of a French National Library as the representative space for a new Republic, where the state would take responsibility for the collation and dissemination of all available knowledge to its emancipated citizens. This moment of political revolution prefaced an industrial one, during which the notion of the public library became a key component in the infrastructure of the emerging modern metropolis. Libraries changed that world, becoming spaces where scientific, cultural and political ideas were fermented and exchanged. As cradles of the emerging social democratic changes that swept through those industrialised societies during the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, they transformed again into places of education and social betterment for the masses.

This year, as part of its ongoing investigation into modern, public building types, the graduation studio of Interiors Buildings Cities will address the public library through a project that engages one of its most celebrated and influential manifestations: the Stockholm Library, which opened in 1928 and was designed by the notable Swedish architect, Erik Gunnar Asplund. Influenced by ideas formed on a tour of the United States, where he was introduced to North America's own strand of revolutionary architecture, Asplund's building was the catalyst for innovations which, by the 1950s, had led to the libraries of Sweden and Denmark being considered as the amongst the most advanced in the modern world.



Interior view of the new room planned for the extension of the King's library.
Étienne-Louis Boullée. (1785).



Interior view of the Stockholm Library.
Andreas Gursky. (1999).

Introduction

Asplund's design presented the books on tiers of shelves ringing the monumental circular room within the drum at the centre of the plan, although the void above them, perhaps acknowledges that, unlike its forebears, the library's collection could only ever be considered a fragment of humanities knowledge. For the first time, its shelves were freely accessible to its users. This, alongside the remarkable offer of a dedicated children's library, were just two outcomes of a broader commitment to creating an educated populace, understood as a vital and fundamental component of the more enlightened social construct that emerged across Scandinavia during the Twentieth Century.

By the end of that Century, the public library as a type had found a new social and political purpose. Confronting neoliberalism's privatisation of public space, alongside questions of its own role, in the face of the increasing digitisation of information, public libraries transformed from places devoted to the lending of books and quiet study into open and largely expectation-free environments, embracing issues of equality and multiculturalism. In Sweden, this paralleled prevailing attitudes in society at the time. In 2008, Stockholm Library launched an architectural competition that sought to significantly extend it as part of an embrace of such an expanded role. However, the failure of that competition to elicit change was the beginning of a long and frustrating period of stasis. In 2015, the British architects, Caruso St John were commissioned to undertake a more limited exercise of adjustment and expansion within existing spaces immediately adjoining the main building. This project was also halted, and this year, in 2023, a new call was launched to simply restore the building as it stands, recognising the deterioration that is one consequence of this extended period of uncertainty. Next year, the building plans to close its doors to facilitate this and is due to re-open twenty years after the launch of the original expansion project.

This is our starting point as a studio. Following careful study of the existing building, undertaken as part of a process of design research that will also collectively examine the oeuvre of an architect, the society in which he built it and the history of the public library as a type, you will each develop a proposal for Stockholm Library. Your designs will explore how the remarkable legacy offered by its architecture and urban situation might be best developed in ways that can address contemporary society and future change: accommodating the possibilities and dilemmas inherent in the dissemination of knowledge within an increasingly digital environment, acknowledging the ongoing importance of the book; creating an open, welcoming and accessible environment for both learning and pleasure and, critically, doing this in a deeply sustainable way, that acknowledges the challenges we all face.

From introduction by Prof. D.J. Rosbottom

01 | Understanding Asplund

Critical to my early understanding of the context in which the project is based was the research done into other works by Erik Gunnar Asplund. Within the Research Seminar, we collectively studied eight buildings from different periods of his practice. Exploring the ideas, methods, aesthetic, compositional, and material concerns that characterised Asplund's work.

Villa Snellman, 1917–1918

Woodland Chapel, 1918–1920

Lister County Courthouse, 1917–1921

Skandia Cinema, 1922–1923

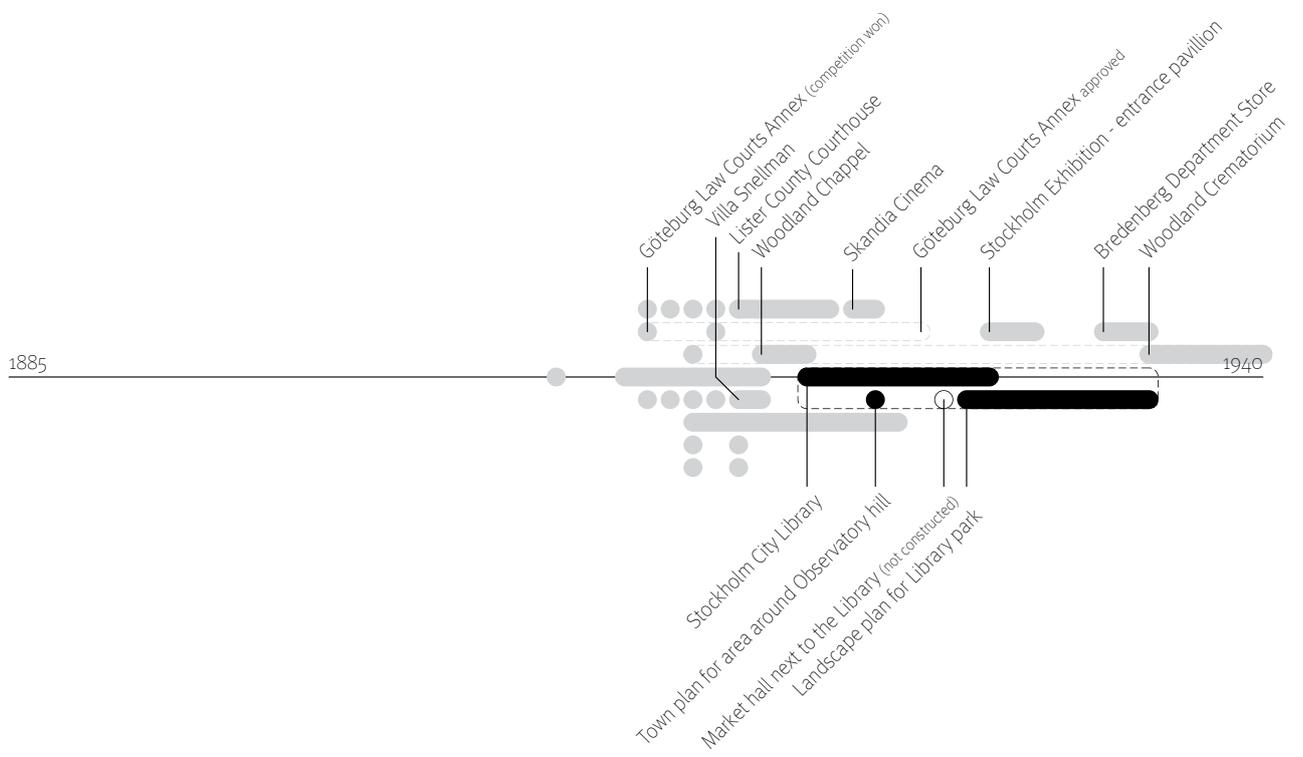
Stockholm Exhibition Main Entrance & Exhibition Hall for Transport, 1930

Bredenberg Department Store, 1933–1935

Göteborg Law Courts Annex 1934–1937

Woodland Crematorium 1935–1940

Through studying these reference projects from his oeuvre, I gained a sense of Asplund's architectural language in terms of spatiality, composition, material and ornament. As well as cultural themes and motifs which were often present in his work. This understanding provided a frame of reference that informed many of the design choices I made later on.





Exterior view of the Woodland Chapel



Interior view of the Woodland Chapel



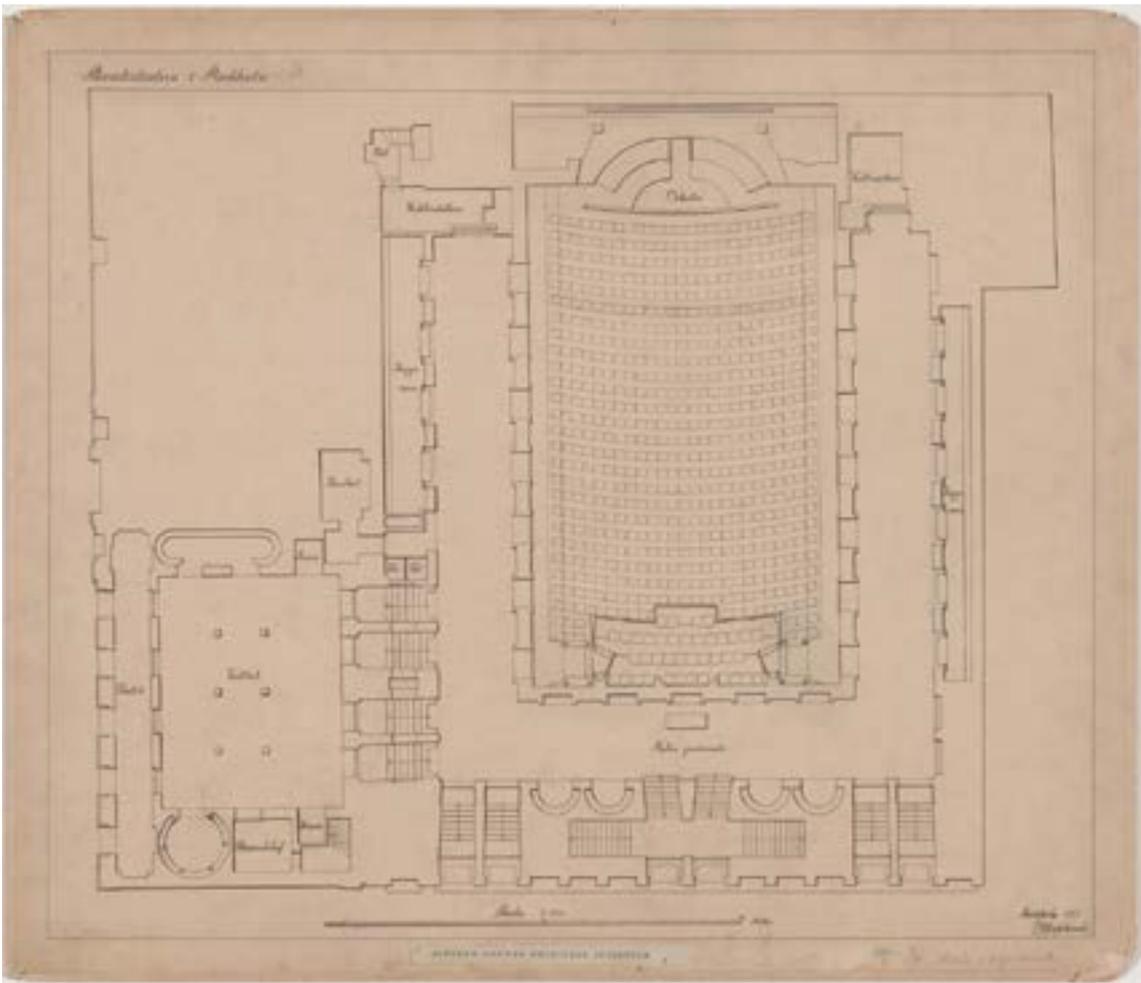
Skandia Cinema

The exterior of the Woodland Chappel, a barn-like structure inspired by Swedish country villas, reflects a domestic scale. As one enters the chapel, the great trick of the building is revealed, a luminous white dome overhead. Underneath, like a sort of clearing in the forest, the room is a gathering circle of simple but delicate chairs, positioned around the catafalque.

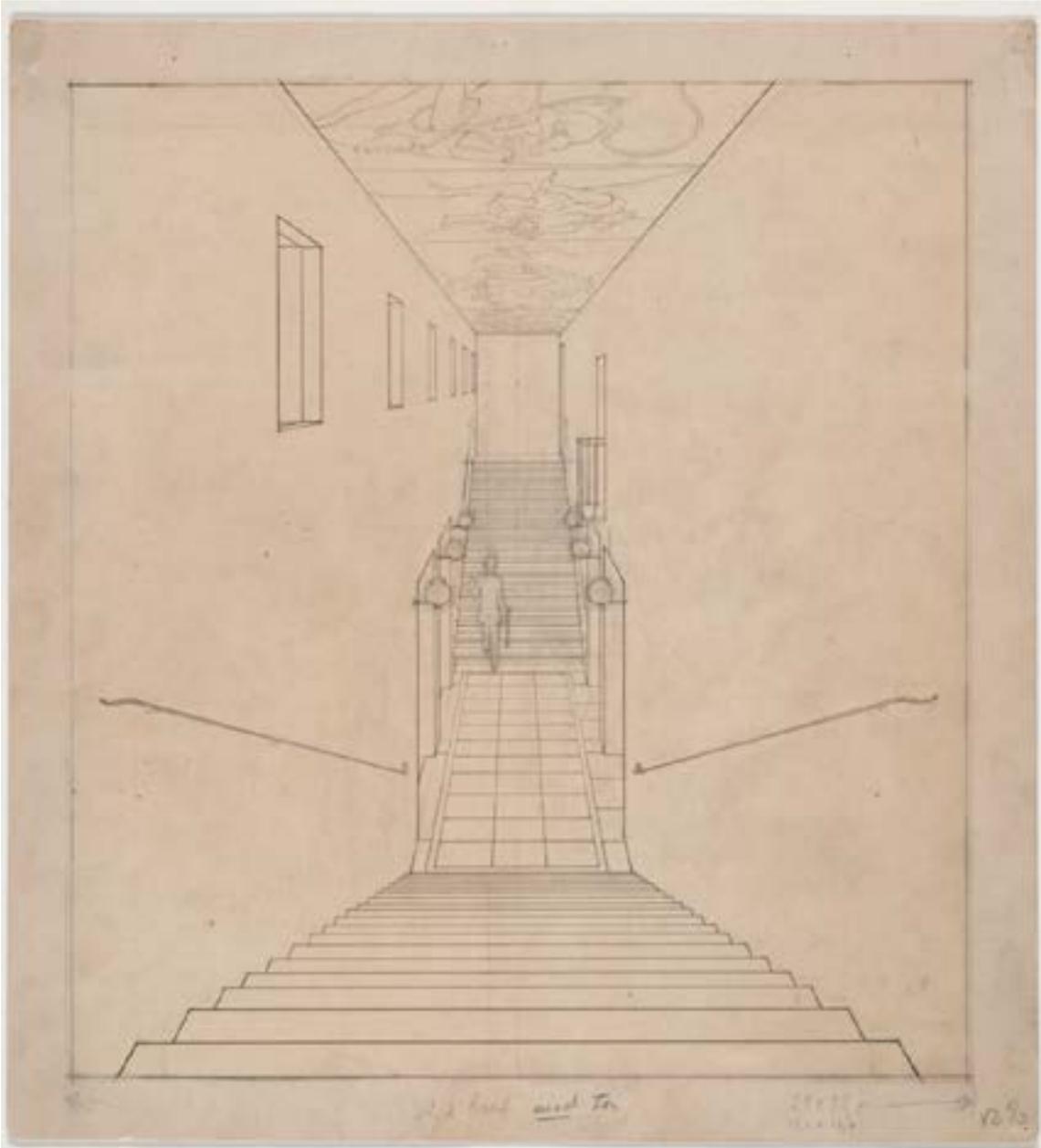
This use of natural light is an important aspect of its design. The skylight provides an illusion of the sky coming in from the forest. The idea of the 'void' or artificial sky is a prominent element throughout Asplund's work. Often employed as a surprising feature, or central element to a room. Notable examples include the starry night sky of the Skandia Cinema, or the circular roof light in the Lister County Courthouse.



Lister County Courthouse



Ground floor of the Skandia Cinema



Decorated staircase in the Skandia Cinema



Stairs in the Skandia Cinema

In the early twentieth century, the idea of the cinema was still novel. Thus, the buildings in which movies were displayed had not yet been defined. In his design for the Skandia Cinema, Asplund took inspiration from a carnival he had visited, which would become the festive cinema hall. To reach this hall, the audience would undergo a series of transitions that gradually introduced this fantasy world.

The ground floor plan reveals an elaborate sequence of spaces. The audience enters into a vestibule, from which they descend into an ambulatory around the main hall. A second staircase leads up to the gallery level, on which temple-like doors lead to the boxes.

The spatial sequences of rooms with elaborated transitions can be found throughout Asplund's work, and are clearly present in his design for the Stockholm City Library.



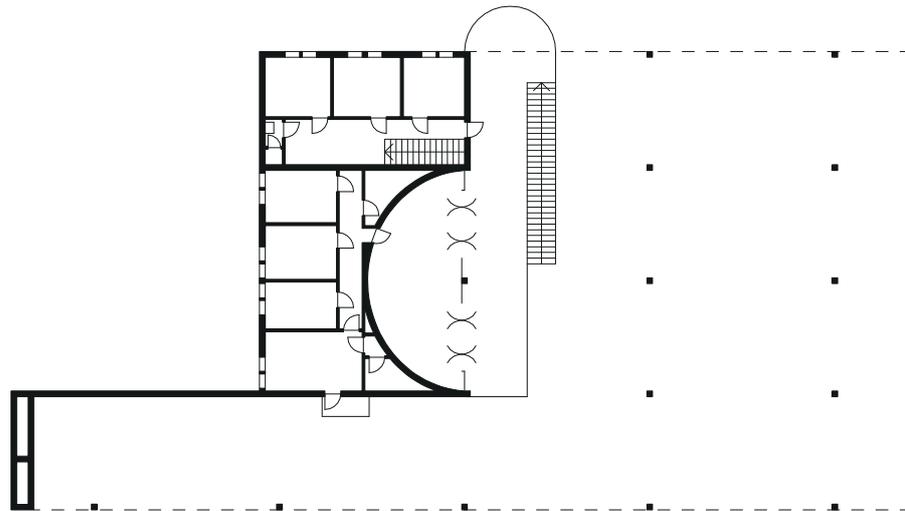
The temple-like doors leading to the boxes



The 'Paradiset' restaurant, constructed for the Stockholm exhibition



The transport pavilion of the Stockholm exhibition



First floor of the entrance pavilion

The Stockholm Exhibition, held in 1930, would come to greatly influence architecture in Sweden. Asplund, together with his contemporary Sigurd Lewerentz, served as curator and lead designer. Though Asplund had been known for his national romanticism, he would adopt aspects of stripped down design in the international style around this time. With the Paradise Café and entry pavilion as notable examples.

Given the Swedish apprehension to modernism, Asplund would attempt to find a language that takes elements from both the prevailing national romanticism and the modern international style. In his attempts, Asplund searched for a purity of form, incorporating a rigour of elements and geometry to his work that reminded of classical architecture, while using modern materials.

Many of his later work would see this blend of styles.



The entrance pavilion of the Stockholm exhibition

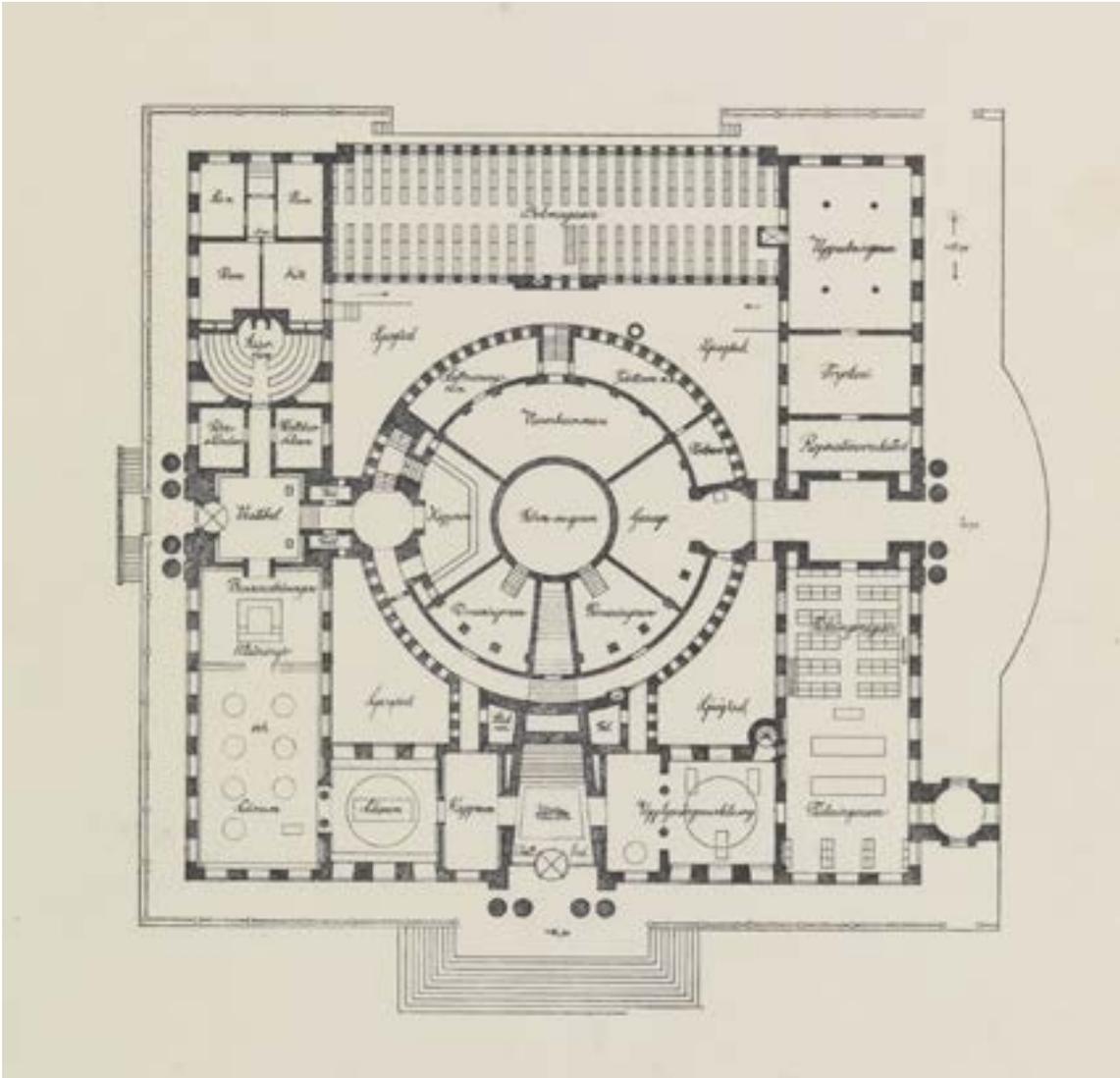


The pavilion for the Woodland Crematorium

There is something about Asplund's work that is complex and layered. Working with both perceptual reality through the senses, as well as overarching themes of culture.

Many of his designs work with perceptual reality through the senses. He plays with light- and darkness, employs changes in perspective and scale, and is a master of materials and finishes. His work often features moments of transition between spaces. In which he alternates between characters of rooms. Peculiar details are dotted throughout, and emphasize important moments in the building. And yet, his work is not only spatial, but also cultural. It seems rooted in Swedish actualities, as well as overarching themes and motifs.

02 | The Stockholm City Library



Early design proposal – 1921

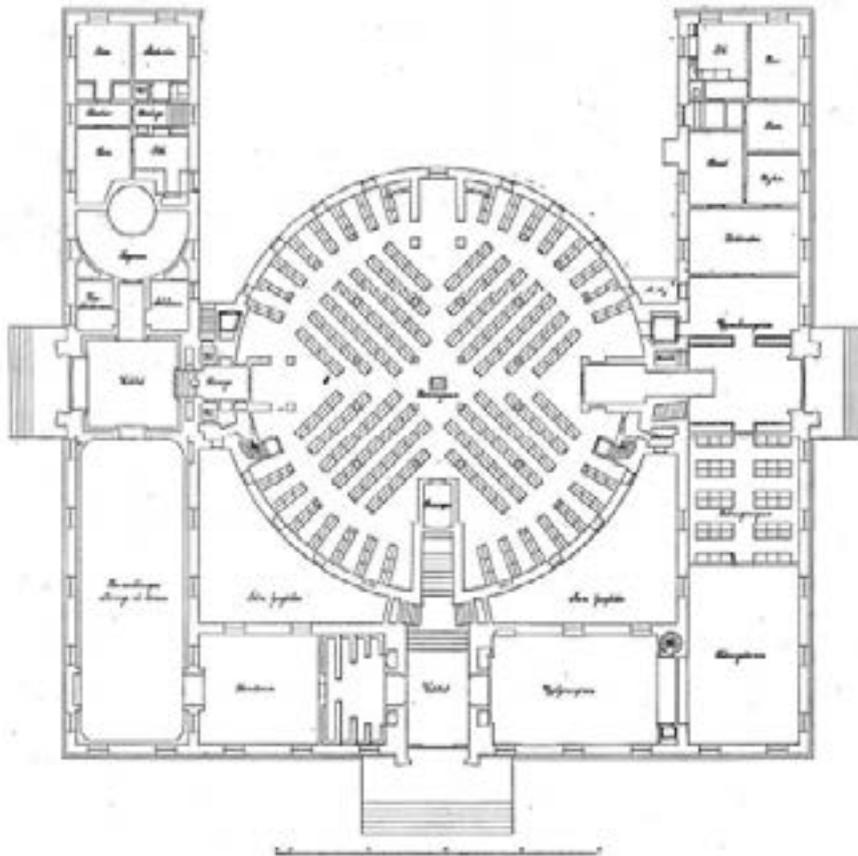
Ansicht des Michaelis-Hochschules Saal mit Kuppel

17

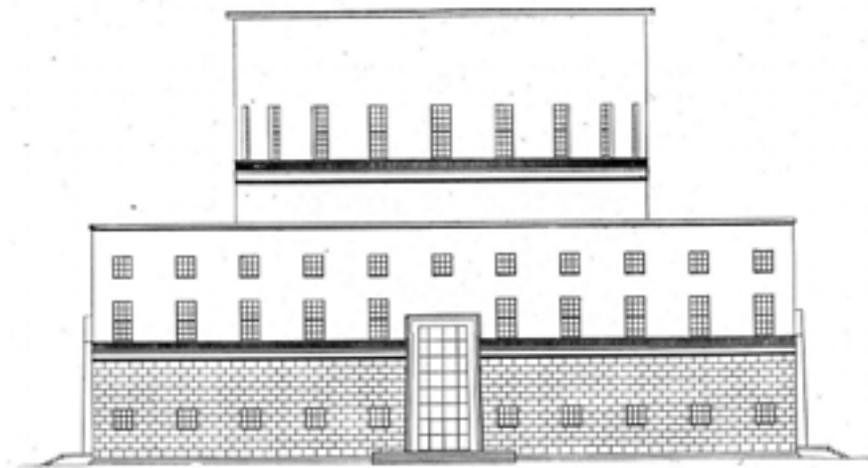


Architectural drawing of a building with a dome and a portico.

Architectural drawing of a building with a dome and a portico.



Library as built – 1928

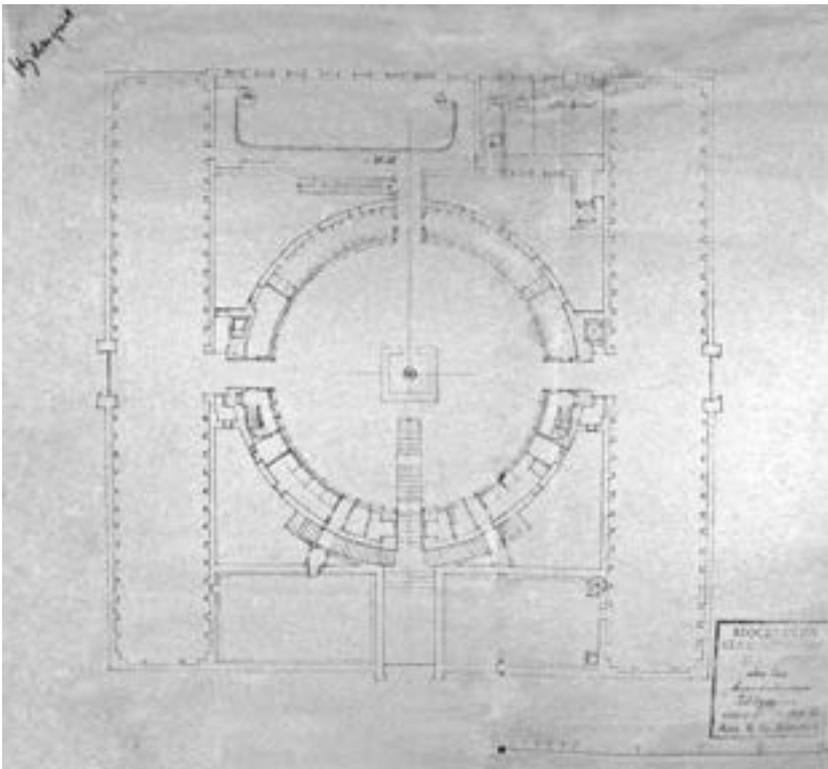
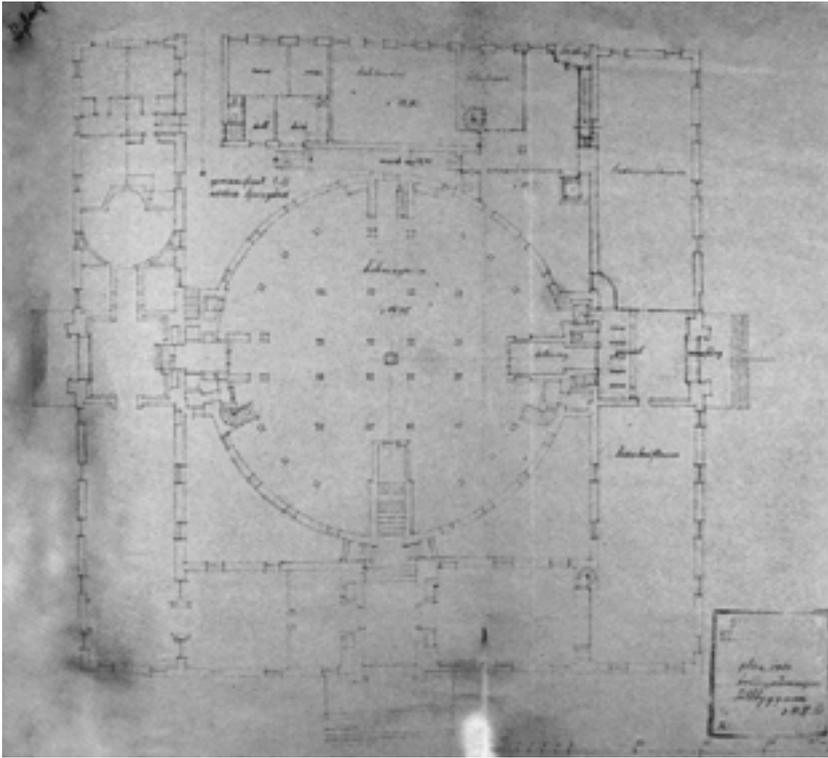


In the design process for the Stockholm City Library, Asplund experimented a lot. As he was simultaneously working on the area plan for the park and Observatory hill, he had a great deal of freedom in designing. Many of his sketches display a design more typical of the neo-classicistic style. An ornate and grand building, set on a rusticated plinth, topped with a monumental pantheon-like cupola, with doors framed by large columned porticoes.

Asplund presented the final drawings around 1924. At that time, the proposal had developed into the one we recognize today, bringing together the style of classicism with the contemporary dawning modernism. The proposed facades were simplified, two stacked halves; the rusticated base and simple plastered walls above, divided by a frieze. Instead of the earlier porticoes, the design featured large 'Byzantine' portals, that spanned the two layers. The complex classical dome had been adapted into the more abstract, now characteristic drum.

Though the exteriors were adapted significantly, the plan is still reminiscent of the classic spatial rigour of earlier versions. In addition to the Main Entrance, both the Children and Young People's section and the periodicals and newspaper rooms had their own entrances.

Only three years after the building was opened, it was already considered too small. In the early 30s, the previously omitted West wing was constructed. This housed much needed services for the building, as well as additional facilities for the staff. Designed by Asplund after he had worked on the Stockholm Exhibition, it is some of his early modernist work, and contradicts the original exterior and interior.

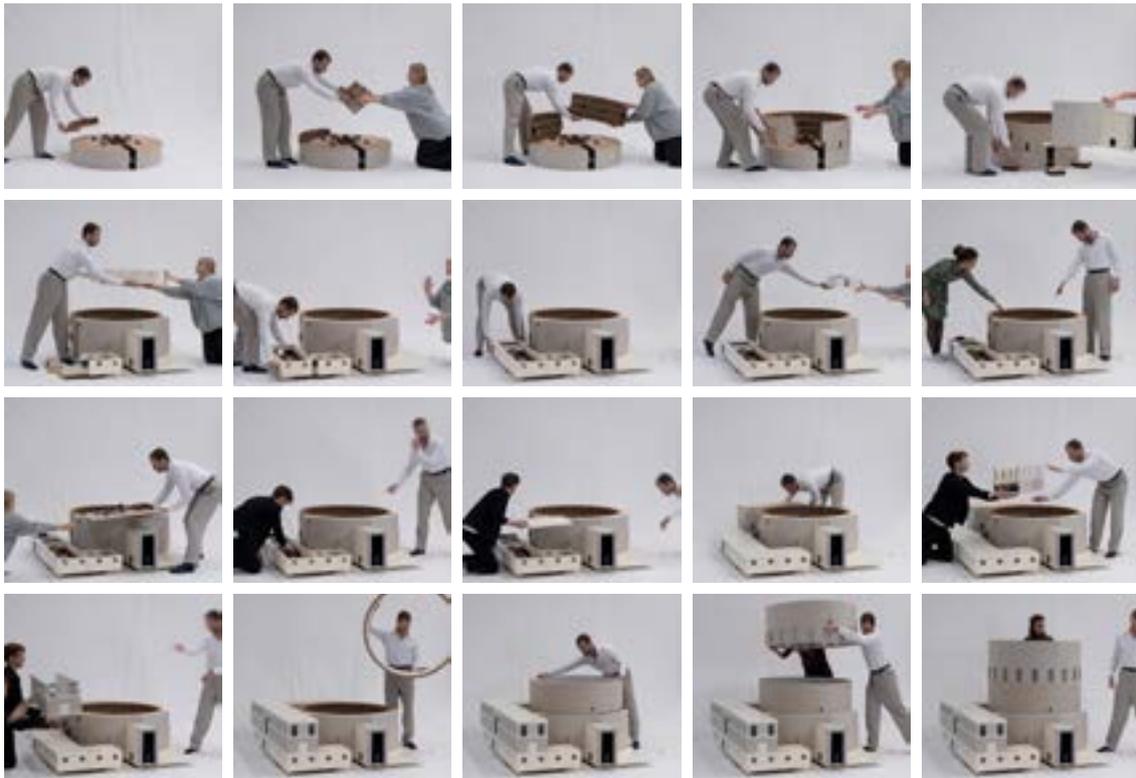


To better understand the character of the spaces as designed by Asplund, we set out to create a series of intricate 1:25 scale models of a selection of representative spaces.

- Entrance and poche staircases
- The Children and Young People's Library
- 'Rotunda' lending hall
- South reading room
- West reading room

Combined, these would provide a detailed insight into the design elements used by Asplund for the library.

To recreate the rooms as accurately as possible, archival drawings and photographs were studied carefully to see what was original, and what was altered. As many spaces have been significantly altered over time, this model provided a collective understanding of Asplund's intentions. Later photographs show the significant alterations made to the interiors in subsequent decades. A visit and tour of the library, provided the opportunity to compare the interiors as they appear now to their originals. What becomes apparent is a serious neglect, from refined and dedicated interiors to more generic spaces.



1:25 scale model – The Stockholm City Library



Entrance | Archival



Entrance | Model



'Rotunda' lending hall | Archival



'Rotunda' lending hall | Model



South reading hall | Archival



South reading hall | Model



Children's and Young People's vestibule | Archival



Children's and Young People's vestibule | Model



Children's lending & reading room | Archival



Children's lending & reading room | Model



Children's reading room | Archival



Children's reading room | Model



Children's storytelling room | Archival



Children's storytelling room | Model

The interiors as designed by Asplund show a formal, sometimes theatrical, clarity. What becomes immediately apparent is his skill to create dignified rooms, tailored to their specific use, while also creating a discernible spatial quality.

The main entrance, a tall and narrow vestibule, is deliberately clad in black lime-plaster. The long sides of the walls are decorated with classical bas-reliefs, depicting scenes from Homer's Iliad. Light emanating from the top of the monumental staircase, framed by a large portal that echoes the outdoor façade, draws visitors to the central rotunda space. To the sides, two dimly lit staircases follow the curve of the drum, and disappear into darkness.

Visitors continued up the main stair into the tall and abstract space of the rotunda, a tall circular space, ringed by layers of bookshelves. Above the bookcases, the walls are textured to emulate a clouded sky. From the centre of the room, one could see the library's entire collection. A central librarians desk monitored the rotunda and all the shelves around. The pattern on the floor is inspired by the Pantheon in Rome.

Through one of three ornate panelled passages inbetween the bookshelves, visitors continued to the main reading halls. The North and South reading halls are similar in design. The relatively narrow reading halls span the full length of the building. Once again, light is provided from above by clerestory windows, contributing to the highly introspective character of the space. A single great window looks onto the park at Observatory Hill, or Odengatan, and provides a moment of rest and contemplation. The rooms are furnished with bespoke furniture such as chairs, reading tables and light fittings.

The reading hall in the West wing, which was added later, is decidedly more modern. Two spiral staircases extend upwards, to a narrow concrete balcony that runs along three of the walls. From the balcony, one gets a view out through the windows, which are larger in comparison to the other facades.

The dedicated entrance for the Children's library entered into a vestibule. The room features a series of three portals, sculpted with classic motifs. Along the walls, visitors would hang their coats on hooks. The stair which holds the black urn-like vase, leads to two basins, in which children would wash their hands before entering the library.

The entrance to the lending and reading room is guarded by the librarians desk. The room features bespoke tables, chairs and bookshelves tailored to kids size. Wooden bookshelves ring the room, and separate the room into zones for reading and collective work. Low hanging opal glass pendant lights overhead reflect in the glossy ceiling. The second, smaller reading room, is similar in its furnishing. A painted ceiling displays the signs of the zodiac reflected in a starry sky.

To the other side of the vestibule, an intimate, semi-circular storytelling room. The benches wrap around the centre of the room, where a small apse houses the storyteller's chair, a little table, and a lamp. The walls and ceiling are painted in a dark blue, and the apse is decorated with classical fairy tale motifs. Curtains hang in front of the remaining walls.

What quickly became apparent is the great care Asplund spent in designing the interiors of the library.

03 | Developing the Library



East façade



North façade



West façade

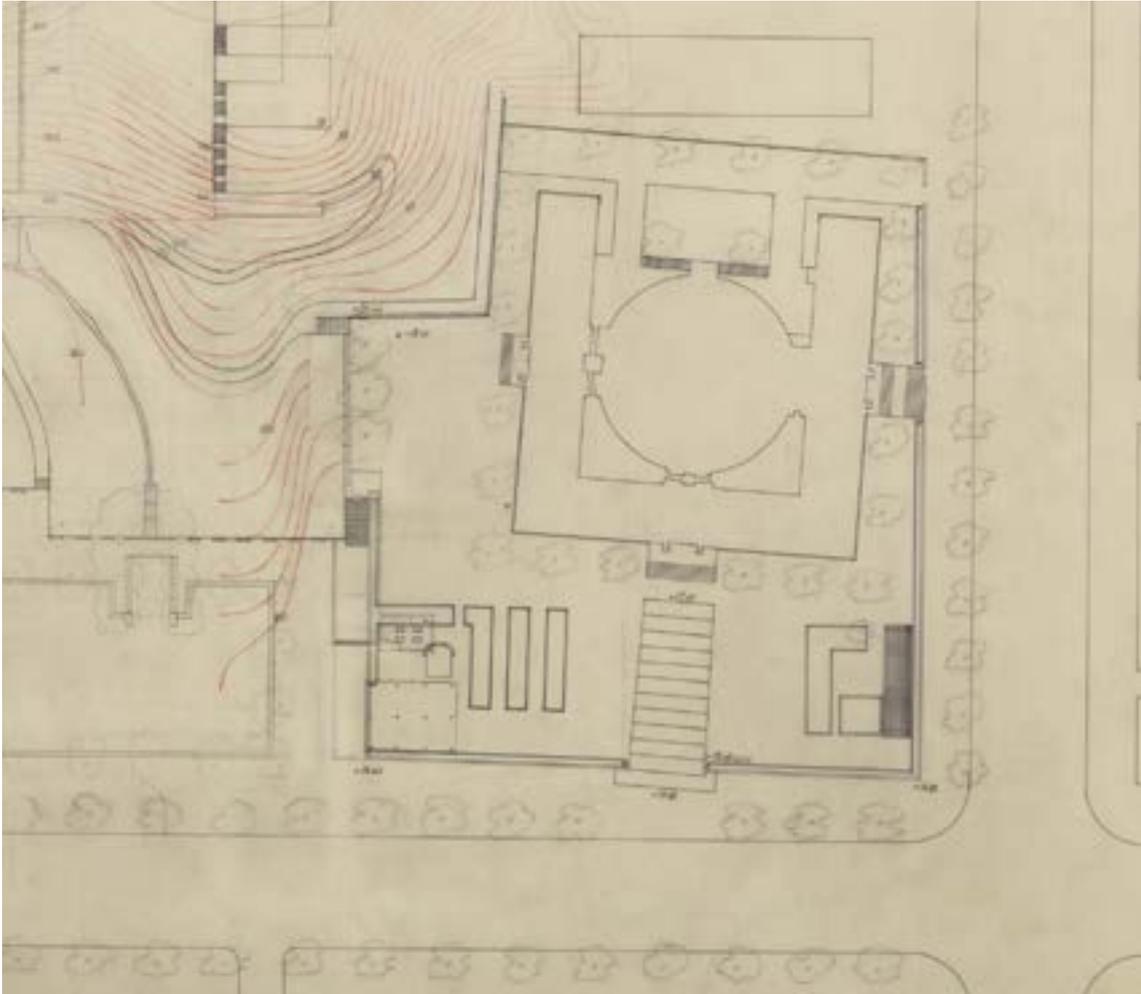


South façade

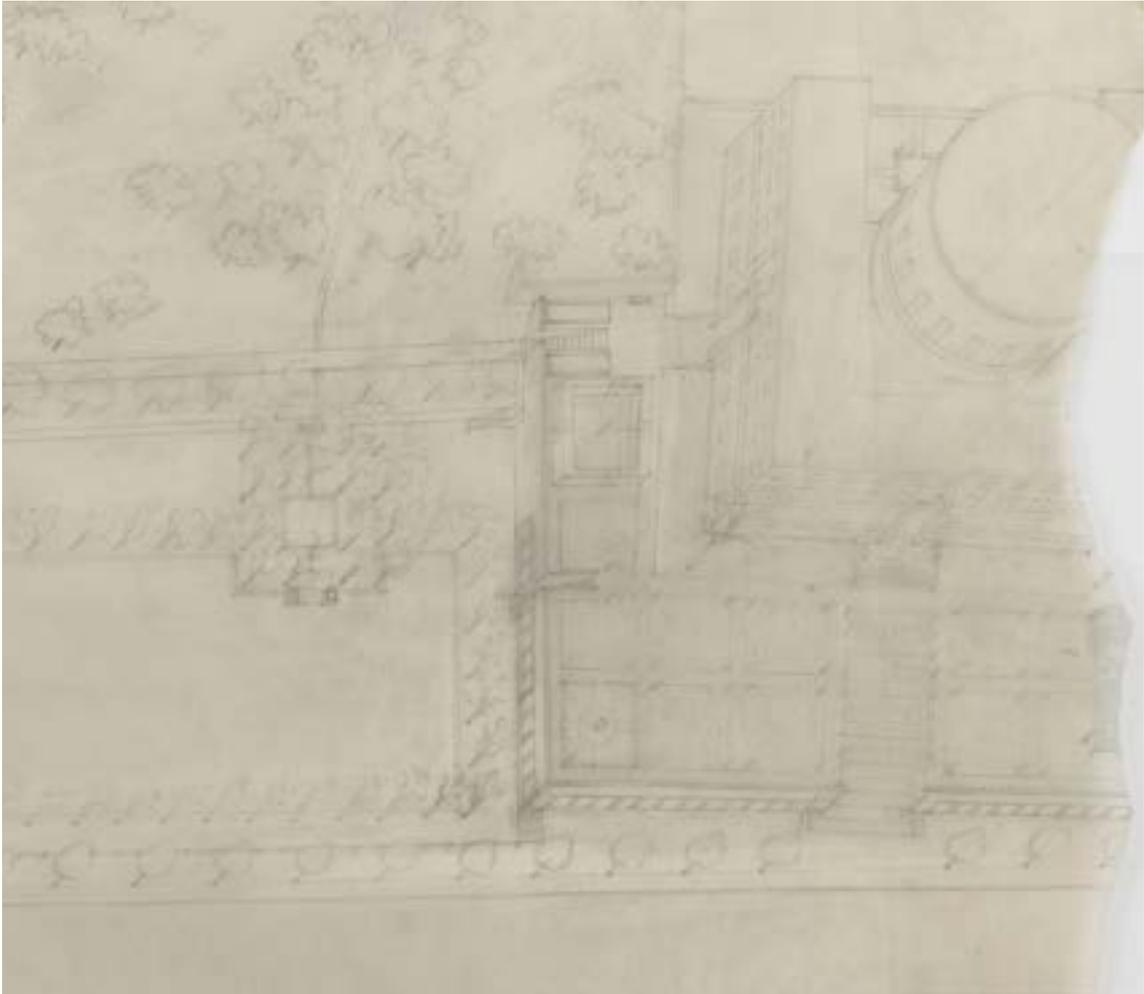


Stadsbibliotheket, Plaskdammen
1934

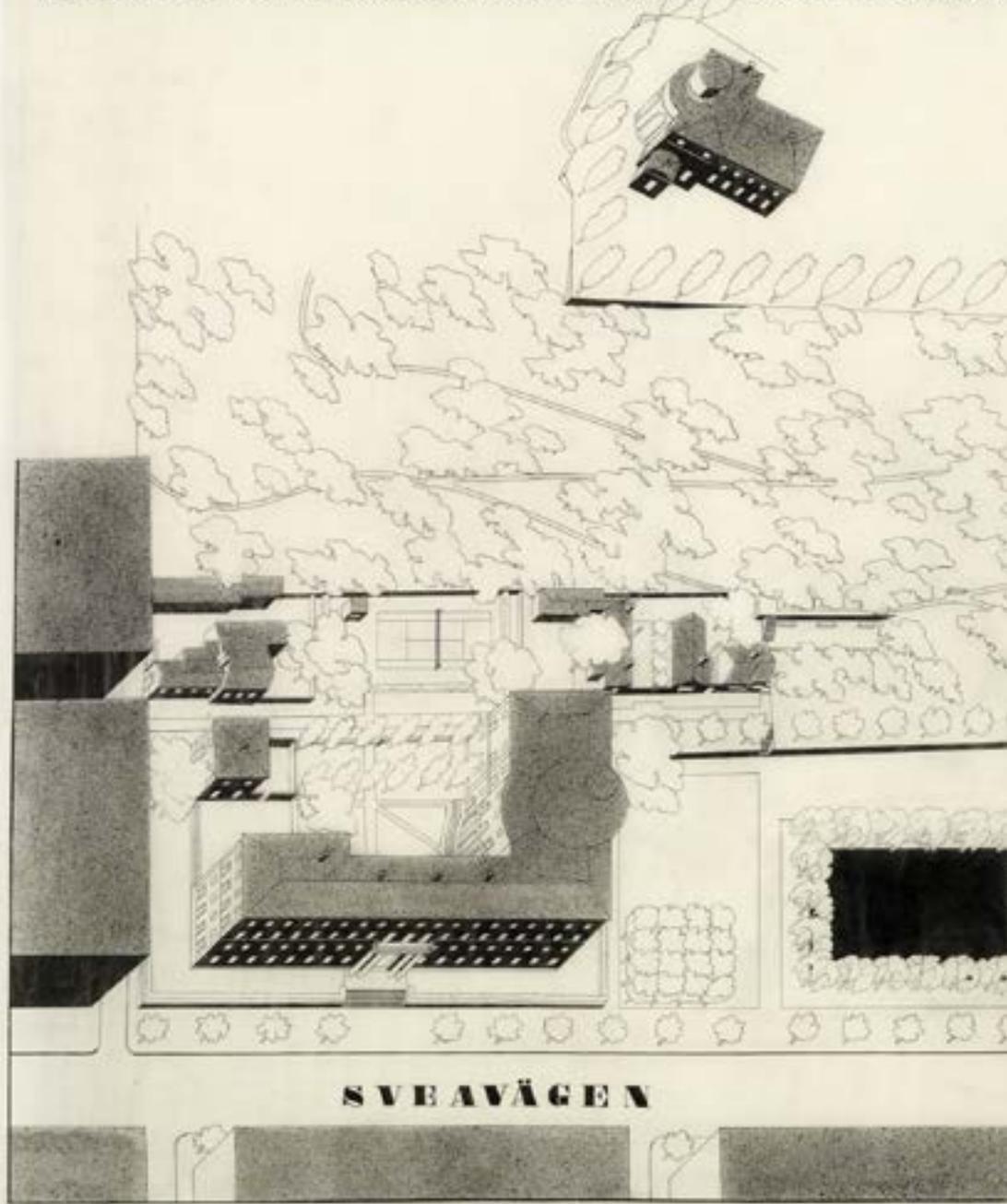




Sketched site plan, Asplund
1929

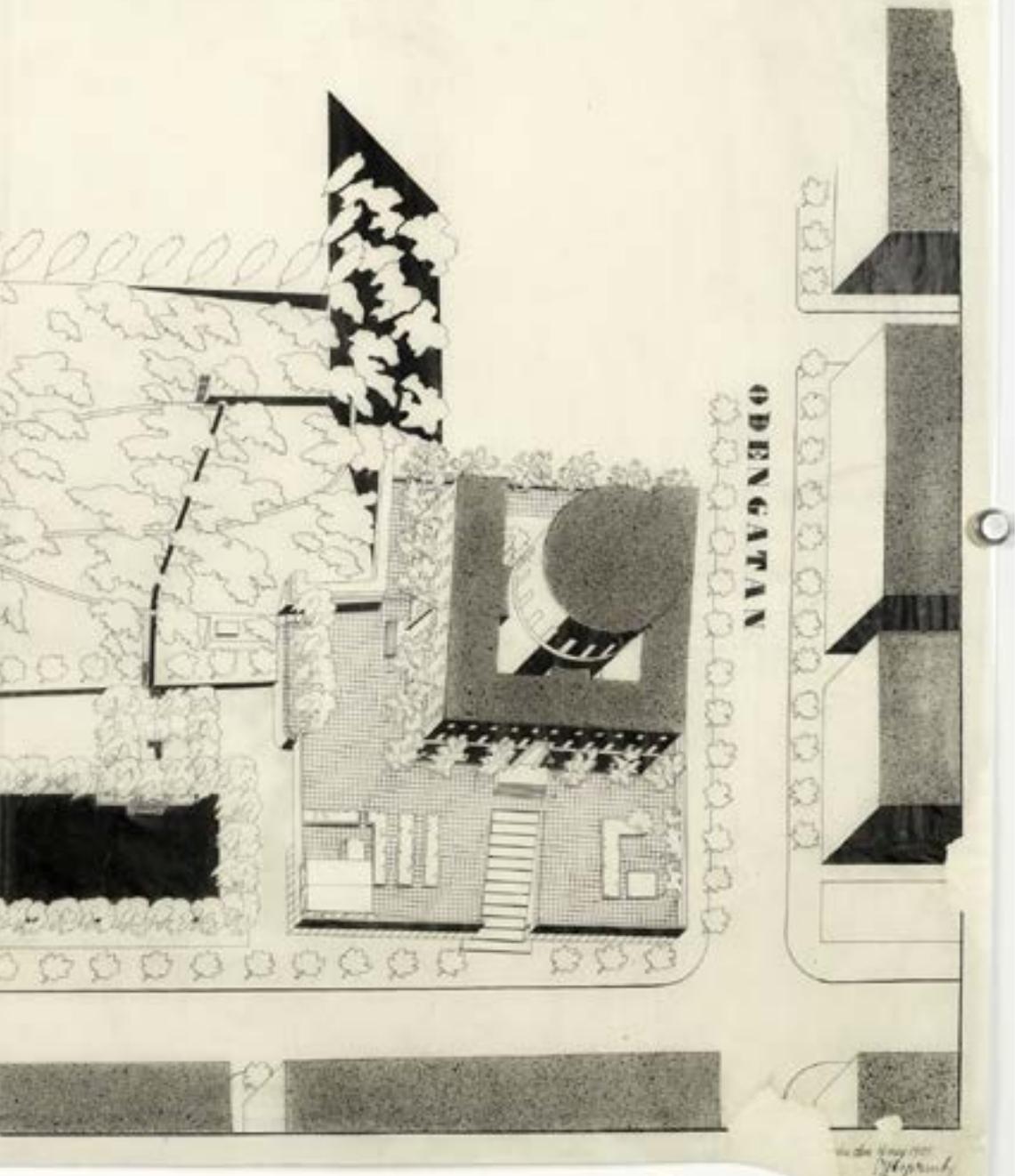


**FÖRSLAG TILL PARKANLÄGGNING ÖSTER OCH
MELLAN STADSBIKLIOTEKET OCH HANDE**



A proposed site plan, Asplund
1929

OM OBSERVATORIEKULLEN
LSHÖGSKOLAN

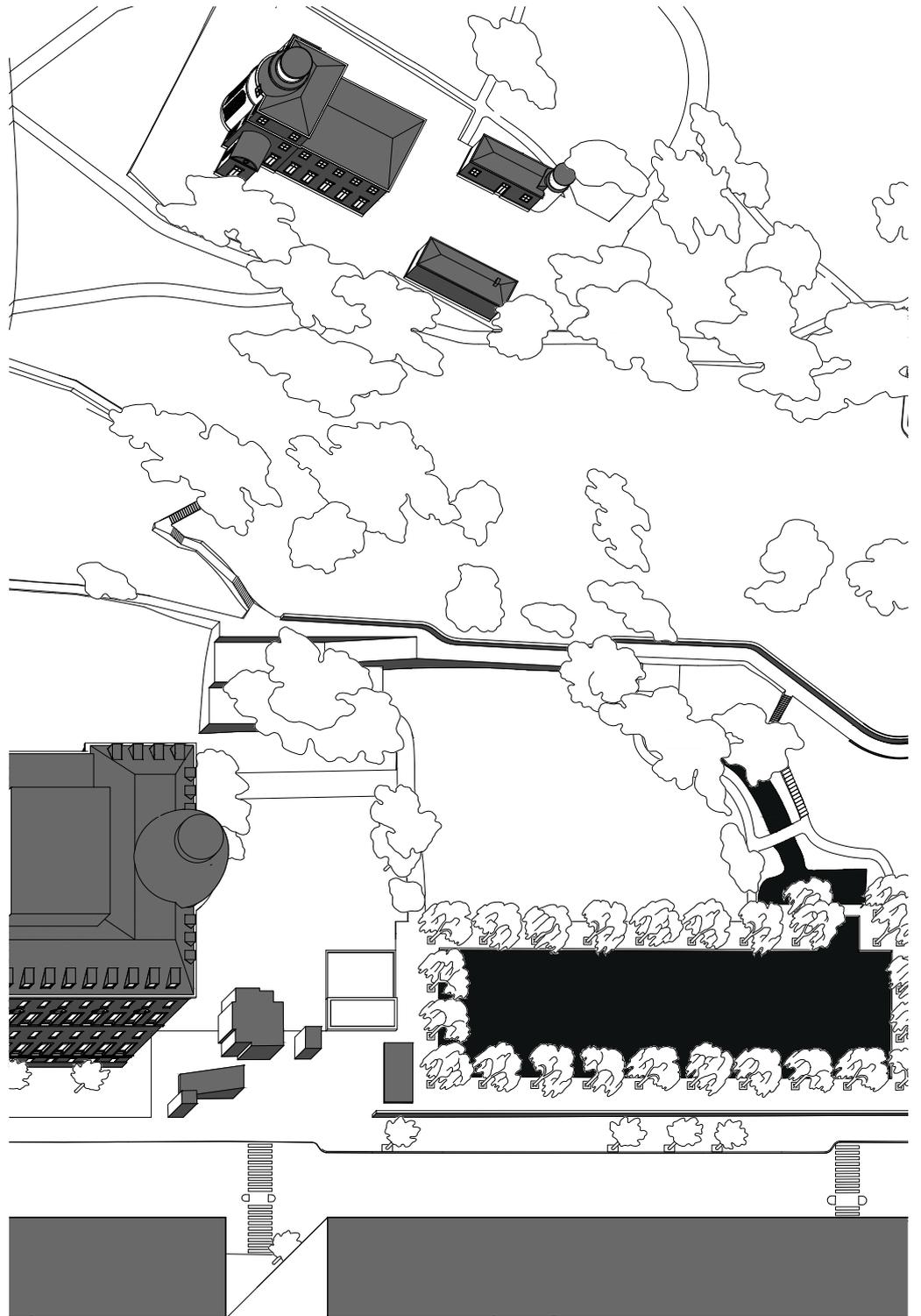


Early on, the particular character of each of the sides of the library.

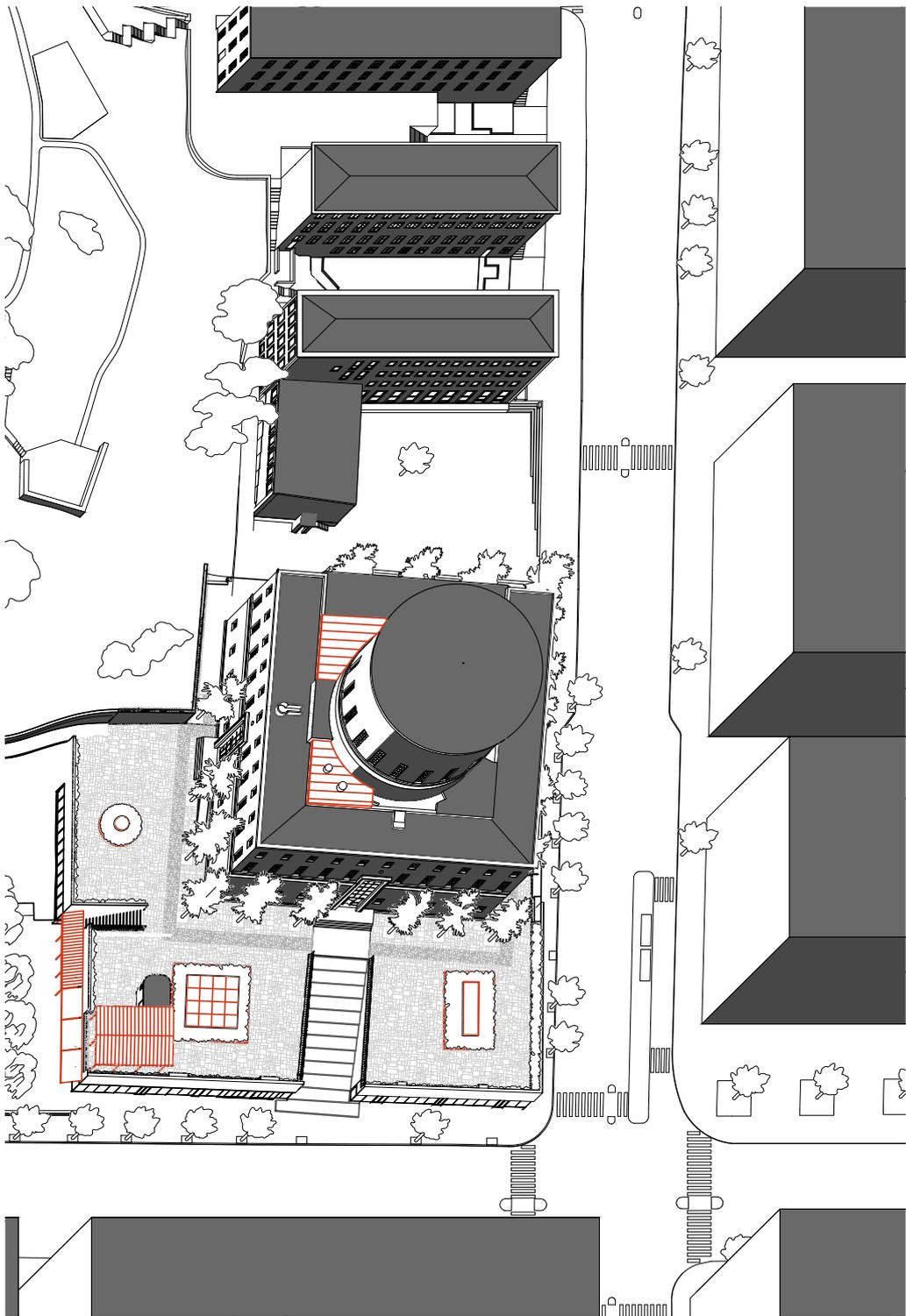
fitting the idea of three distinct entrances for the various programmatic elements of the library; the Children and Young People's Library, the Periodicals and Newspaper rooms, and the main lending and reading halls. Though easily considered a building in the round, the West wing, which features the entrances for staff and services reads as a back. At present, the South entrance, which had originally been dedicated to the children's library, is not in use.

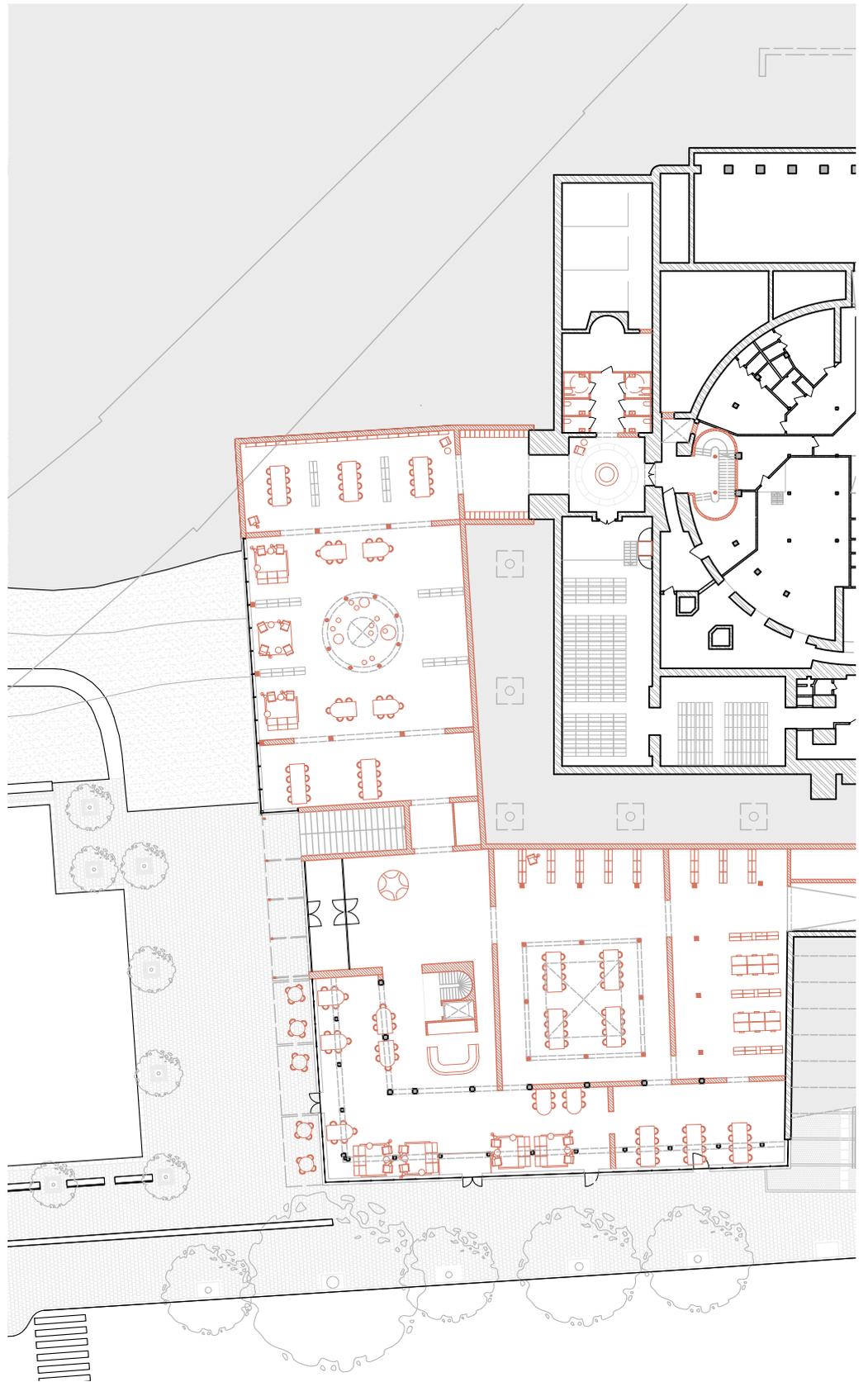
Historic photographs reveal the plinth originally continued further along the South of the building facing the park. Various drawings for the site made by Asplund show a form of this continued plinth. Shortly after the library opened, this side would be altered. At present, the terrain slopes up from the pond to the (now closed) South entrance.

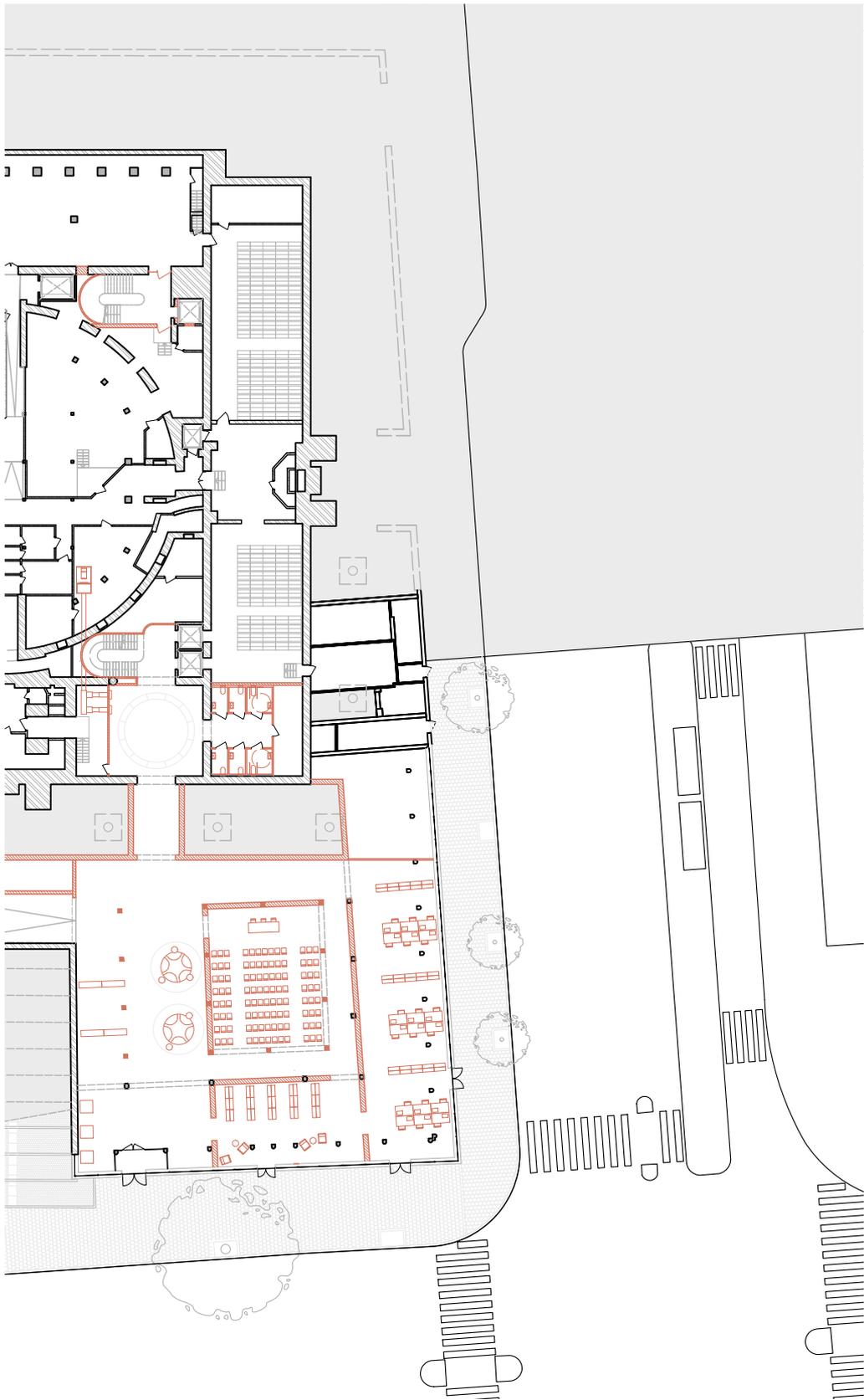
The proposal focusses mainly on expanding the Bazaar along the park, following the outlines of the original layout.

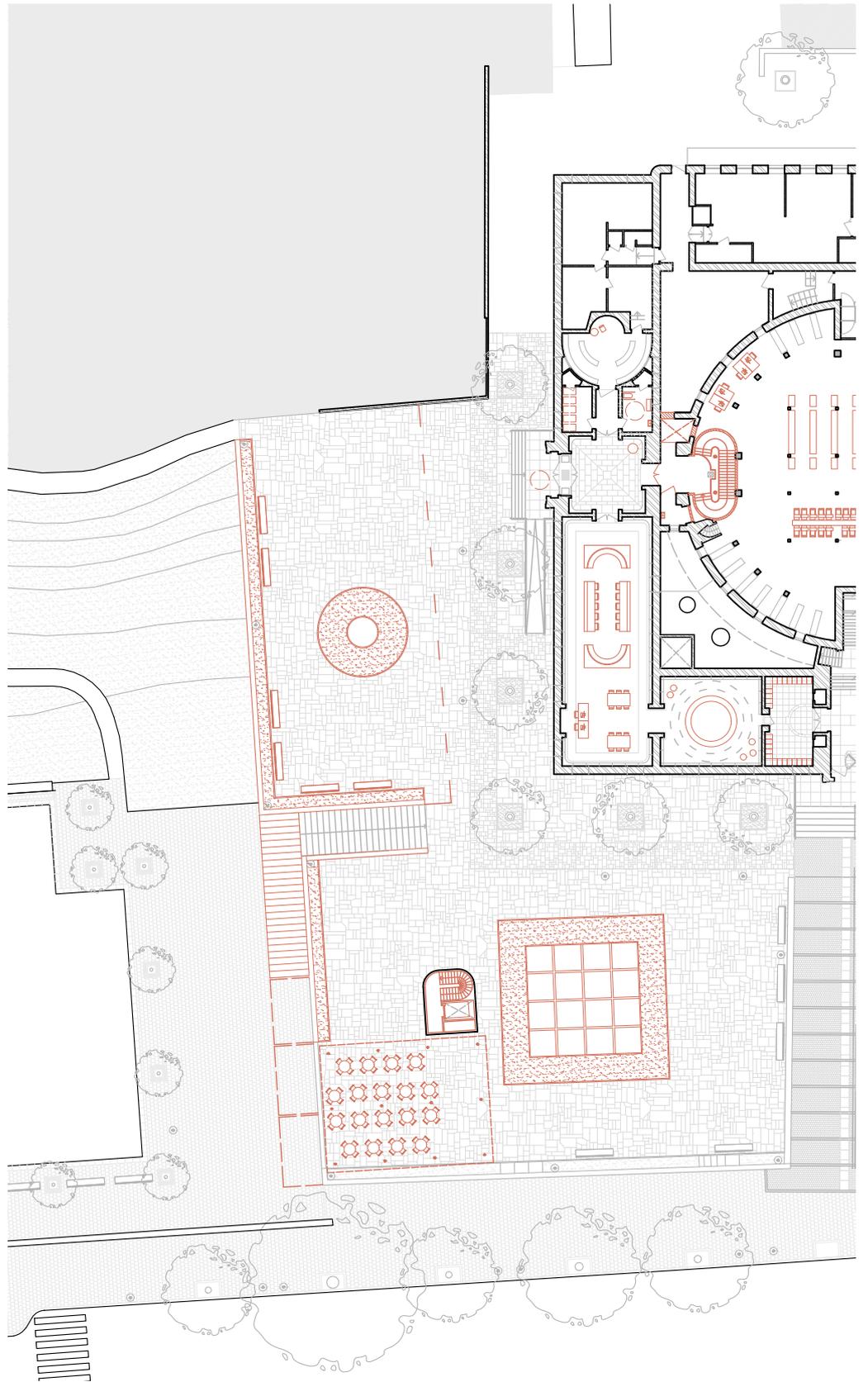


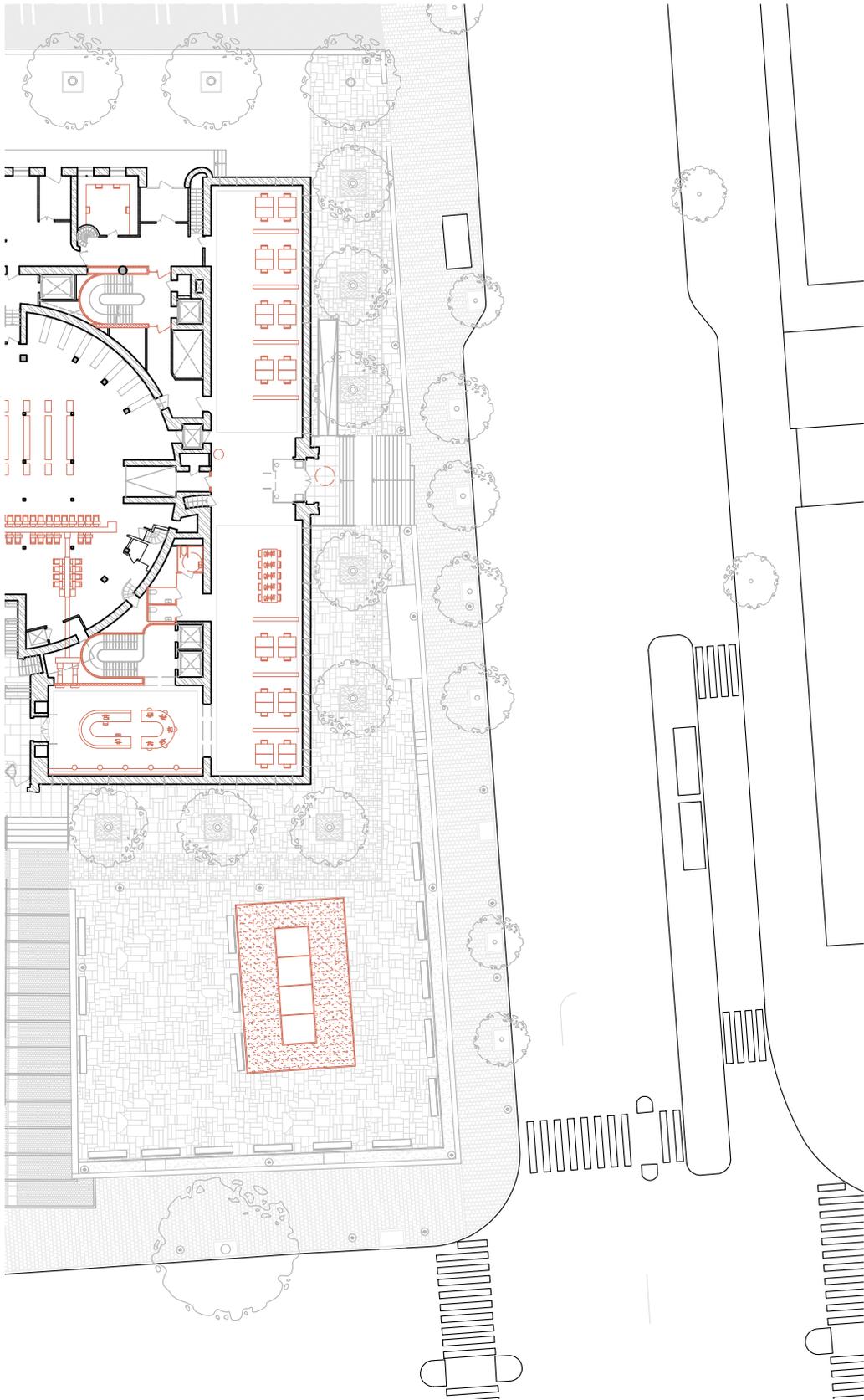
Proposed additions

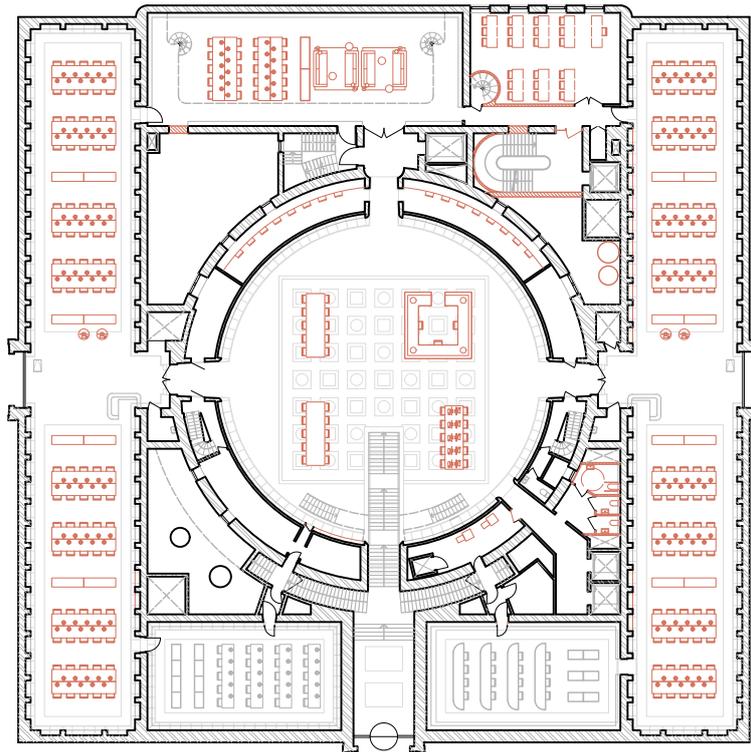




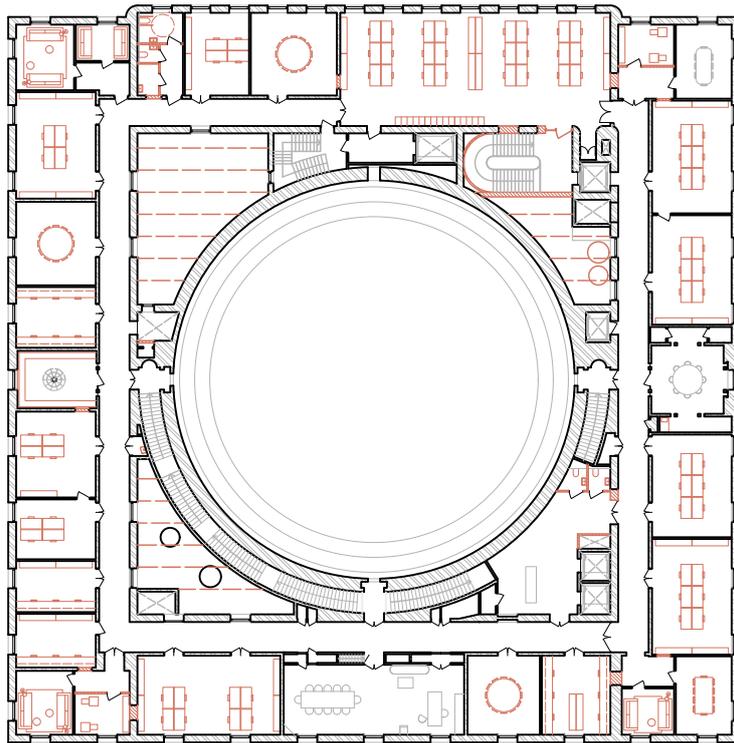








Rotunda floor



Office floor



In the basement of the library, existing plant rooms and book storage room are kept in place.

Two new public staircases connect the public programme of the bazaar to the library above. Taking advantage of the aforementioned preparations carried out in the 70s in this former light well. And creating a new staircase that connects the new children's bazaar to the historic children's library above.

To finish the internal scheme, a third stair, dedicated to the staff, is created within the North-Western light well. This replaces a series of convoluted steps and stairs that are the result of different interventions, and allows for staff to traverse all floors of the library with ease.

On the floors above, this one being that of the rotunda and reading rooms, the layout is left largely unchanged.

Reinstated as a more formal library. Introduction of a new group room

Return of the banana rooms

The back of house staircase allows for direct access to the staff break room, which was previously only accessible via a very narrow spiral staircase, that did not travel up to the office floor.

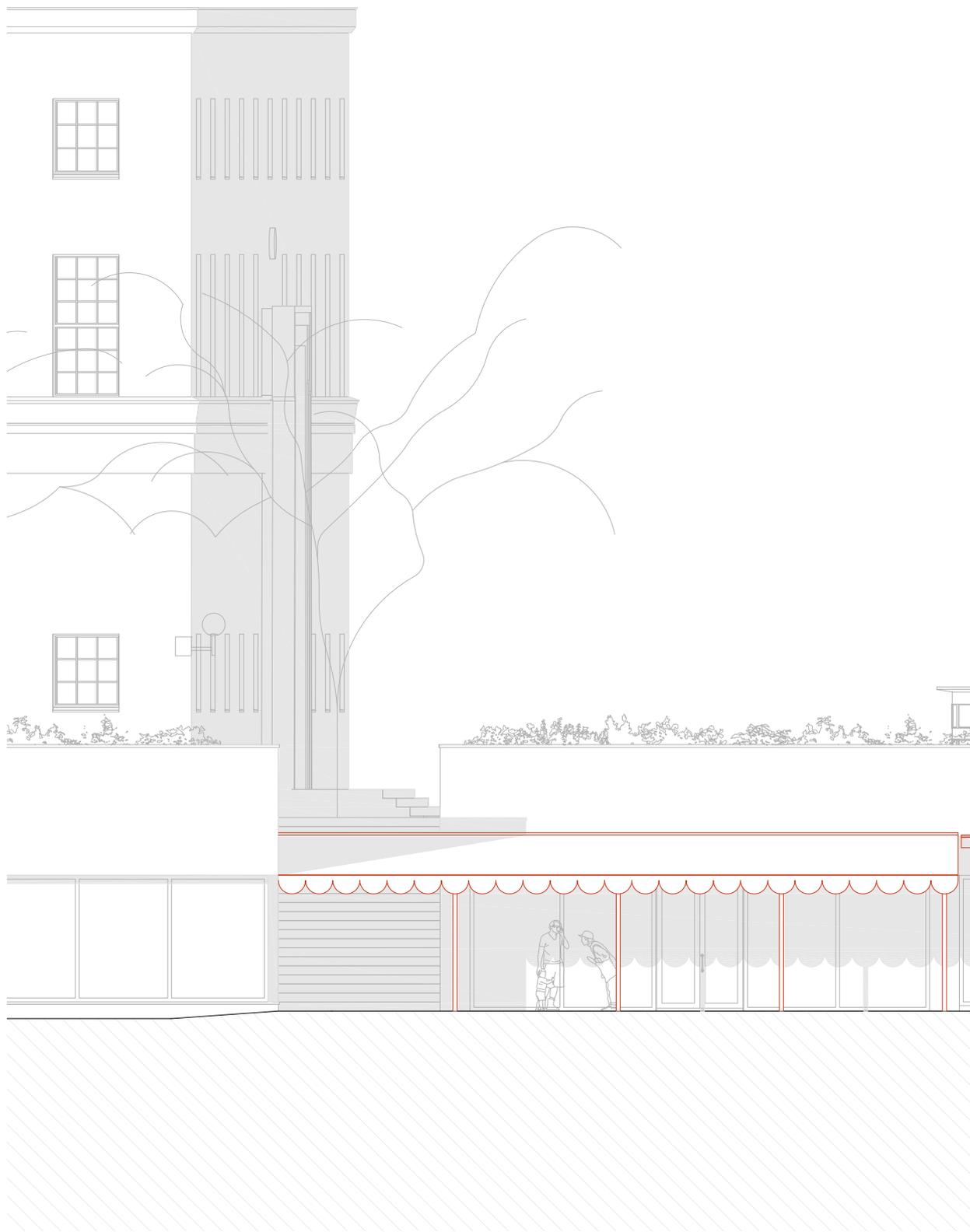
The office floor

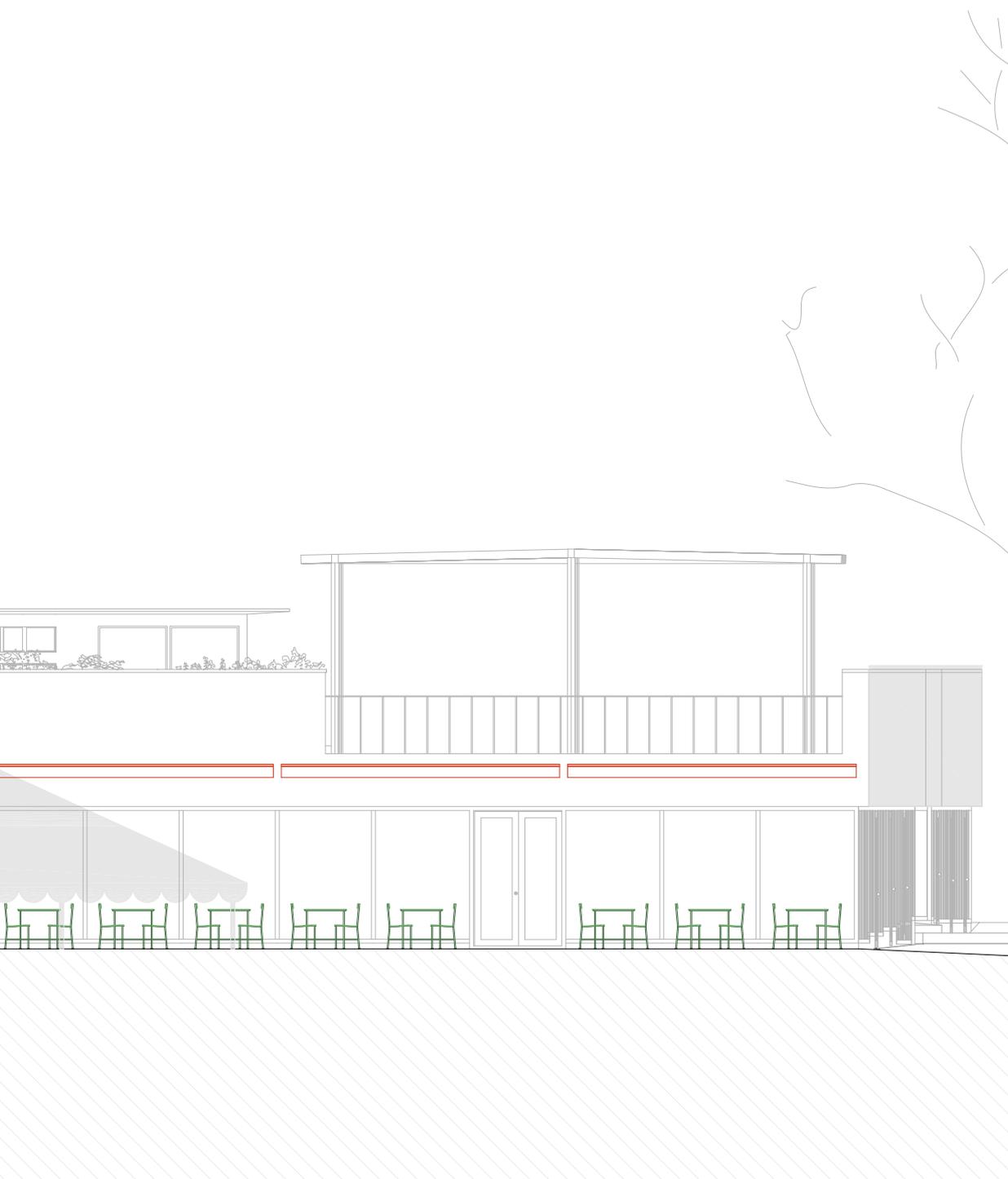
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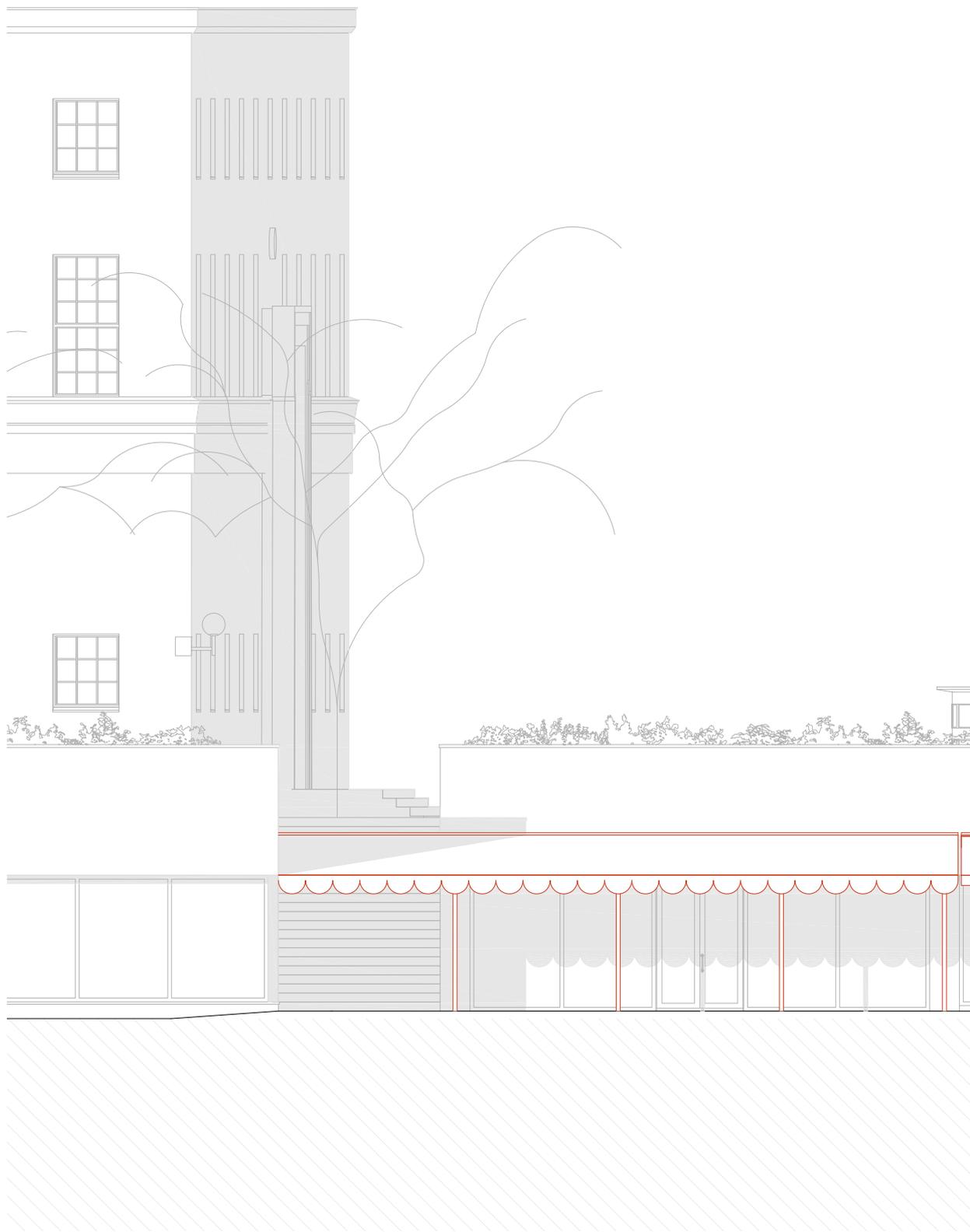
No more corner offices

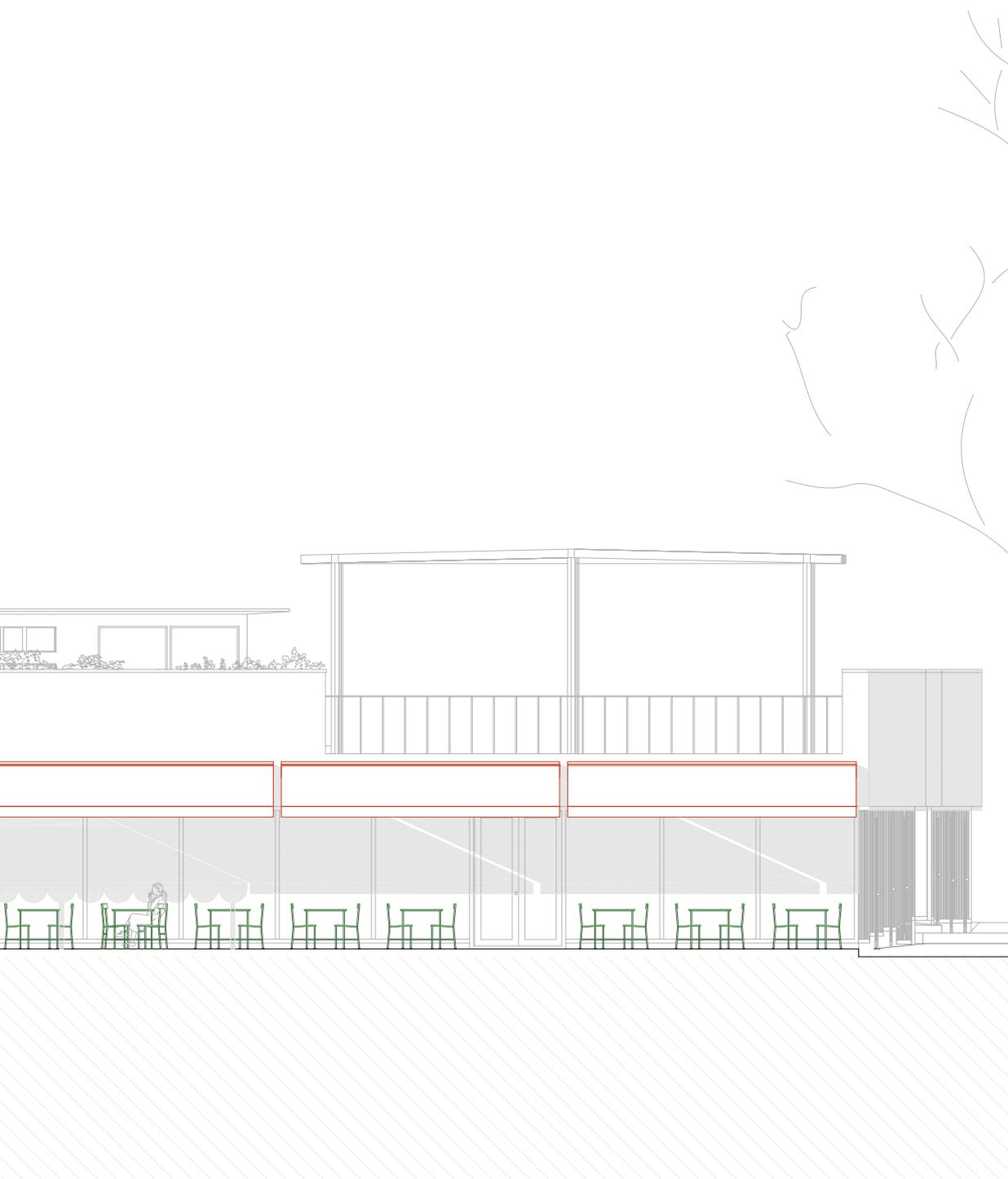
Glazed light wells

04 | Façades











Bazaar after completion
1930

The bazaar is designed as a plinth to the library. Designed by Asplund around the same time as the Stockholm exhibition, it is a distinct break from the more decorated library above. The façades of the bazaar feature elements of functionalism, in particular the horizontal emphasises of the façades with a glazed lower half, and smoothly plastered upper one. The load bearing columns are set back from the façade, creating an illusion in which the plastered walls appear to rest on the delicate window bands. The façades of the bazaar have remained largely unchanged, and still feature original windows on the Northern bazaar.

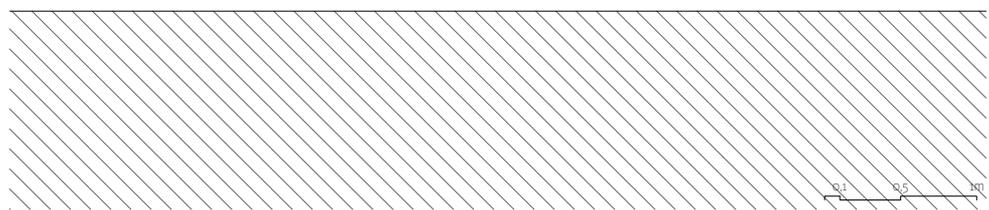
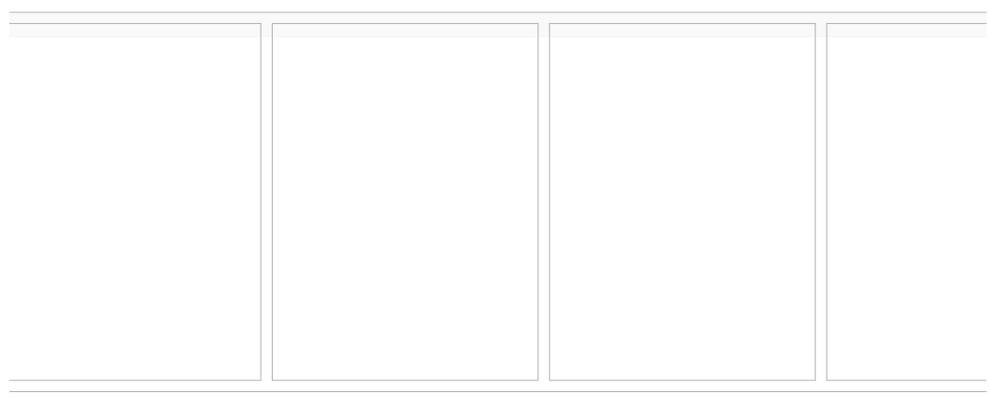
The proposed extension along the park closely resembles the original design. The narrow profile of windows is echoed in thin aluminium frames, which are coloured to match the blackened copper of the original frames.

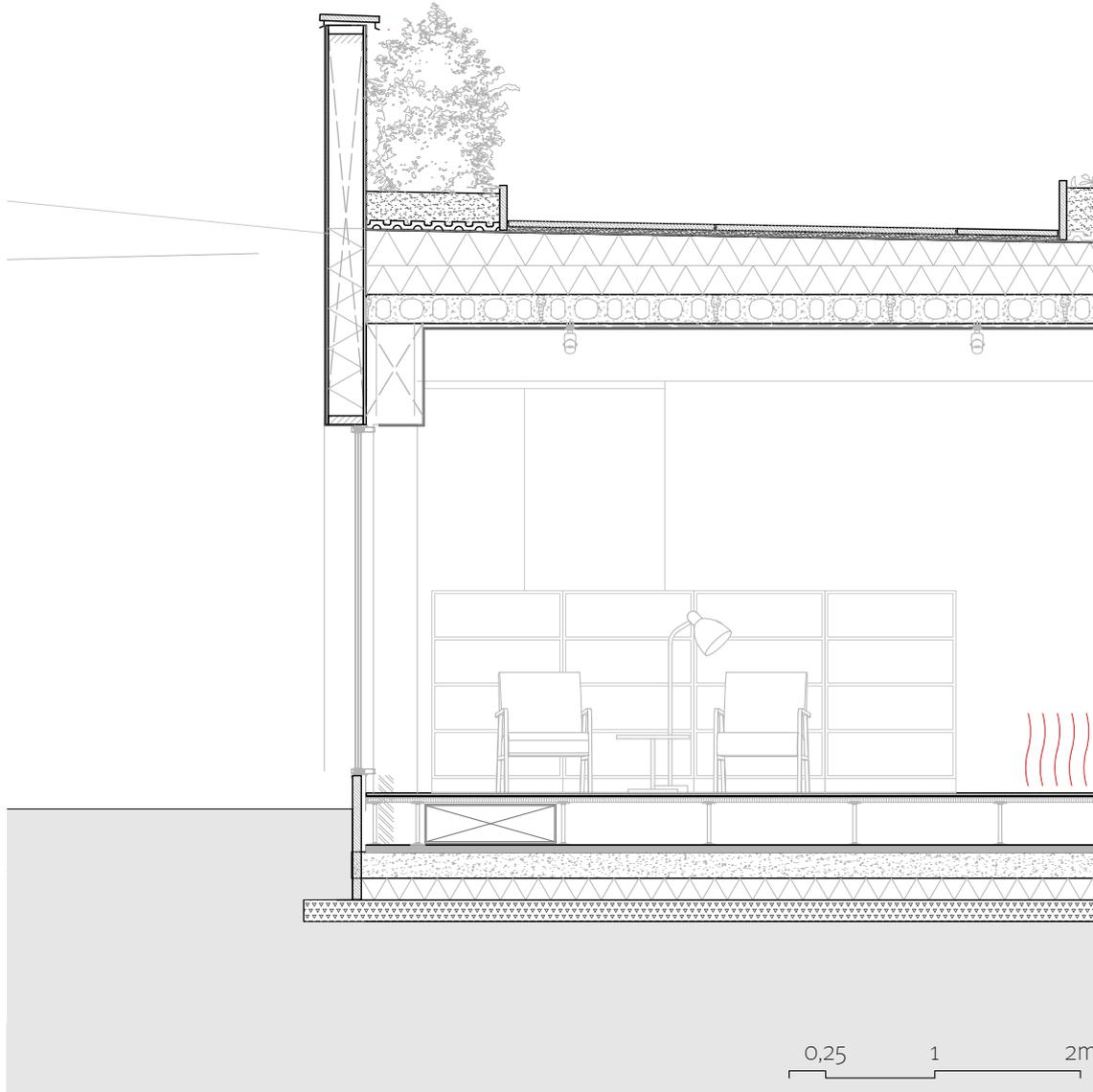
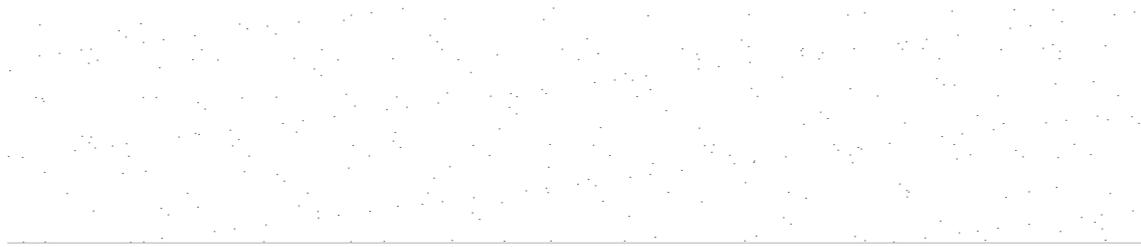


Bazaar
2024



Original window frames
2024







Scalloped awning
1928

For the Southern terrace, Asplund designed a kiosk and glass covered pergola, which could be used for summer catering. The Bazaar below originally housed a café, which would later become a restaurant. To serve the café, a temporary awning was constructed on the facade facing the park. This early version of the awning featured a striped pattern and scalloped edge. To the left of it, a collonade extends the plinth along the park. This part of the facade would be significantly altered in the 1930s. In the proposed design, the edge of the bazaar is continued to mirror the original outlines of the plinth. A new entrance to the library is introduced in the position of the original collonade. The entrance is covered by a delicate steel canopy, which takes on elements of both the awning, as well as awnings located around Stockholm.

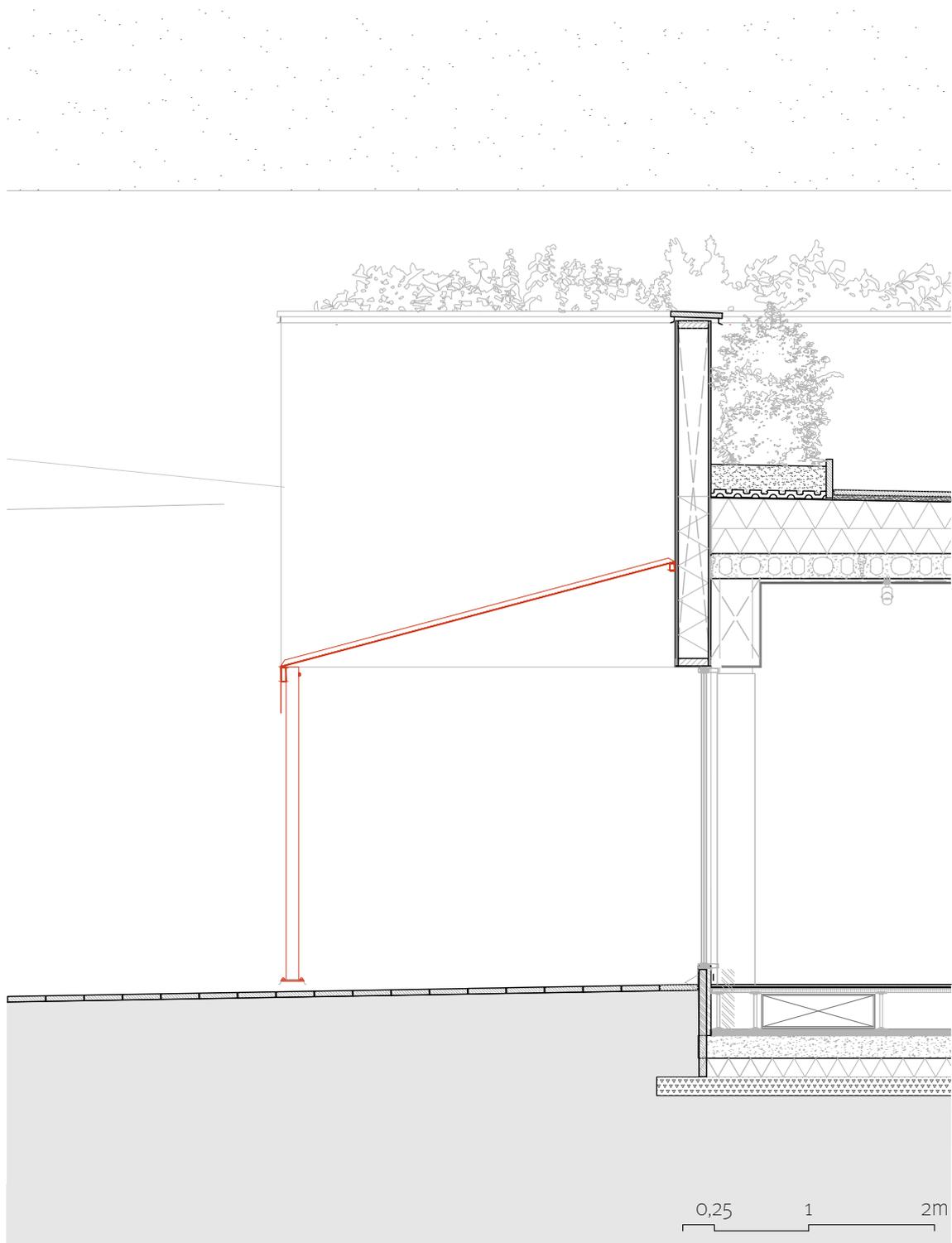


Blackened copper awning across the street



Canopy of the intiman theatre







Awning and pergola
1930s

For the Southern terrace, Asplund designed a kiosk and glass covered pergola, which could be used for summer catering. The Bazaar below originally housed a café, which would later become a restaurant. To serve the café, a temporary awning was constructed on the facade facing the park. Though it was replaced a couple of times in the following decades, its idea became a permanent fixture on the facade.

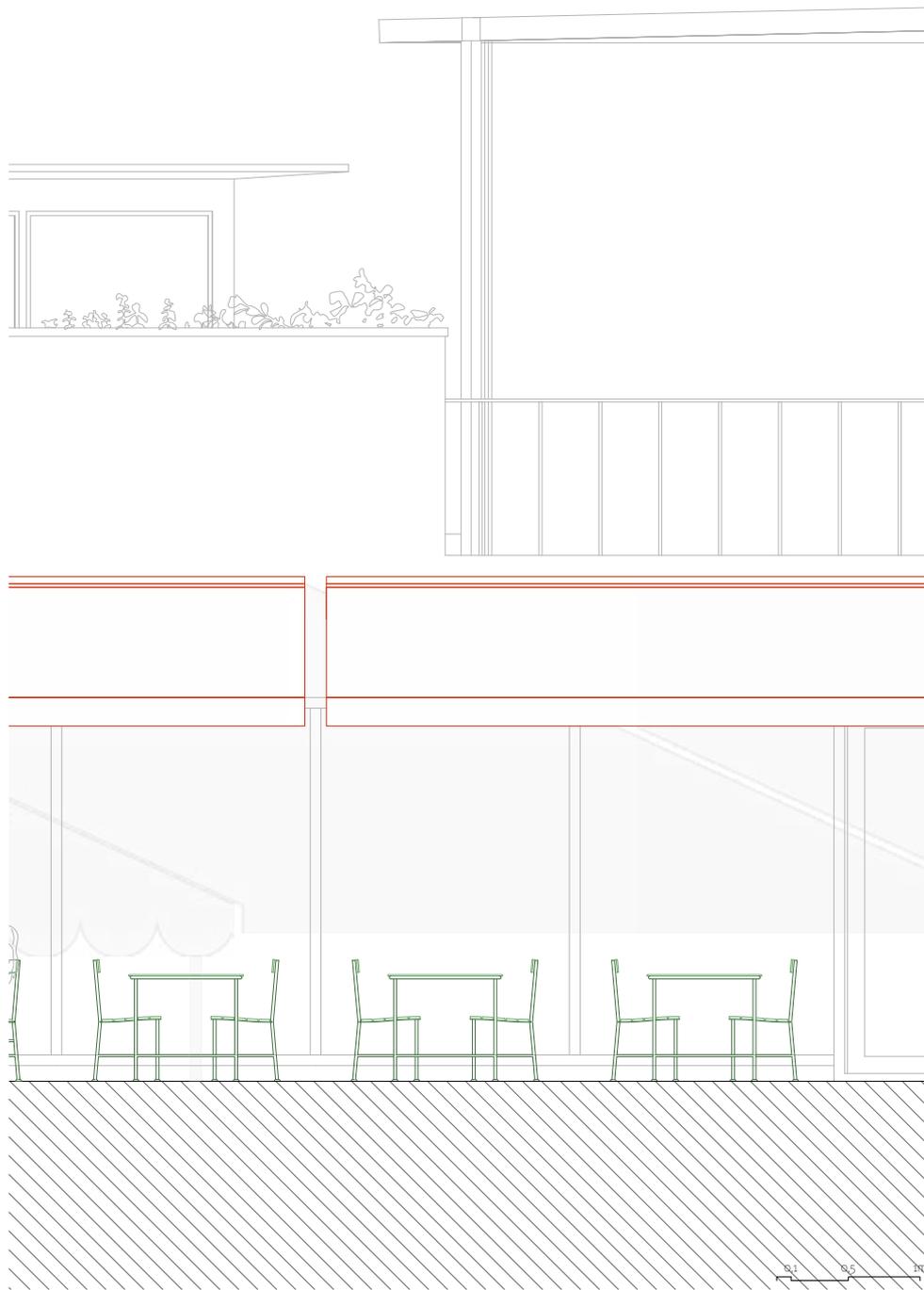
In the proposal, a retractable awning is introduced. Referencing those that were there before. The colour is a nod to the awnings for the Paradiset restaurant, designed by Asplund for the Stockholm Exhibition.

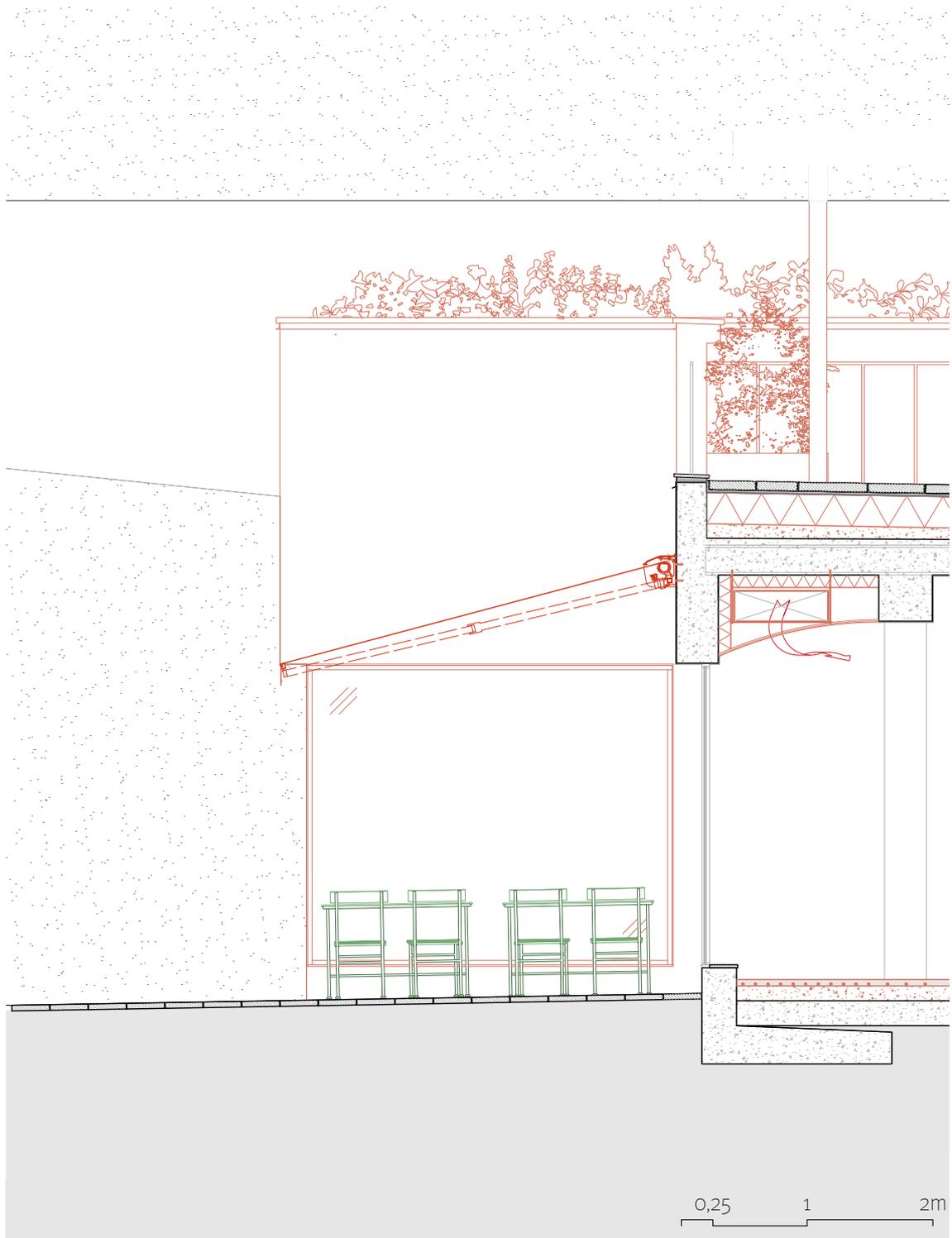


Restaurant awning along the park
1946



Awnings on the Stockholm Exhibition by Asplund
1930s





05 | Reimagined Interiors



A room for A Library – Relation to the city



A room for A Library – Enfillade



Children's reading room – archival



Children's reading room - 2017

The Children's Reading Room

On the left, children's reading room, with the ceiling painted to reflect the night sky, and the signs of the zodiac. Painted by artist Alf Munthe. A playful take on the void overhead that Asplund often employed. The bespoke furniture is appropriately sized to be used by children, and the average adult would almost certainly hit their heads on the dropped pendants. The room is small, and great images exist of it being packed with children. Yet, there is a great elegance to it.

Now when we look at the room's more current appearance, we see little of this former elegance. Much like the previous room we saw, it seems to be in disarray, housing scattered grouping of mismatched furniture. Positioned to the sides of the room, as it is now the only entrance to the children's section. Here, the comfort of sitting down to read a book, especially sitting down to read a book together with a parent or guardian, is once again neglected.



To accommodate the library's youngest users, a dedicated space is furnished to cater to play. A central object, somewhat like a meadow underneath the starred sky, becomes a playpit. A parent or guardian can sit on the edge of the object, and read to their kid as it plays, or can join them in playing. The lower edges are filled with toys, and encourage an initial idea of taking stuff out of a shelf.



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