

# R+EVUES B-THE

## BACK OF HOUSE

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Ludwig Wittgenstein and Paul Engelmann

Wittgenstein House  
Vienna, Austria  
1928

## FRONT BACK

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Peter Märkli

Houses  
Azmoos, Switzerland  
1981

## THE BACK THE

## EVENS THE SCORE

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Venturi Scott Brown

National Collegiate Football Hall  
of Fame  
New Brunswick, U.S.A.  
1967

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# A SEQUENCE OF BACKS

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James Stirling

Queen's College Florey Building  
Oxford, United Kingdom  
1966

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Andrea Palladio

Villa Rotonda  
Vicenza, Italy  
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Kobe, Japan  
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Peter Behrens

Crematorium  
Hagen Delstern, Germany  
1906

“The altar of the Priorato, an isolated object and thus perceivable as such, is nothing more than a mechanism that flaunts its duplicity. As the hidden face of the altar, as a concealed aspect to be discovered, in contrast with the triumphal exhibition of the recto, the verso of the altar of the Priorato reveals completely the internal dialectic of Piranesi’s ‘virtuous wickedness’. What is given as evident, as an immediate visual stimulus from a common point of view, reappears purified, rendered pure intellectual structure, on the reverse side, on the hidden side. But this structural essentiality, this revelation of the laws that govern the rhetorical emphasis of the ‘machine’ that faces the nave of the church, can be achieved only by a deliberate act, performed by one who refuses to be deceived by the ‘evident’ aspect of things. No other work of Piranesi’s succeeds, as well as the altar of the church of the Knights of Malta, in rendering so violently explicit the ultimate essence of his research ... the discovery of the principle of contradiction.”

Manfredo Tafuri

*The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s.*  
MIT Press, Cambridge. 1980.

Visible from only one perspective at a time, architecture suffers the fate of never revealing itself as a whole. An inherent duplicity arises between what can be seen and what remains hidden. The back side – which never shows a representative face nor welcomes us into the building and rarely gets printed in glossy architecture magazines – is the overlooked side of architecture.

For the modern natural sciences, Gaston Bachelard coined the term phenomenotechnique. It describes the need for researchers to first create the conditions under which the objects of investigation could be found. Thus they learn from what they create. We developed the web archive [www.architecturalreferences.online](http://www.architecturalreferences.online) which operates in the same way. It allows the user to virtually rotate physical models three-dimensionally to reveal an otherwise unknown object of investigation: the back side of architecture.

As a result, we studied the backs of a few famous buildings. What we found is the B-side of architecture. Liberated from the front’s representative obligations, the B-side is an ambiguous space of programmatic, representative, contextual or even ideological experimentation. We represent our discoveries through a series of analytical and experimental drawings.

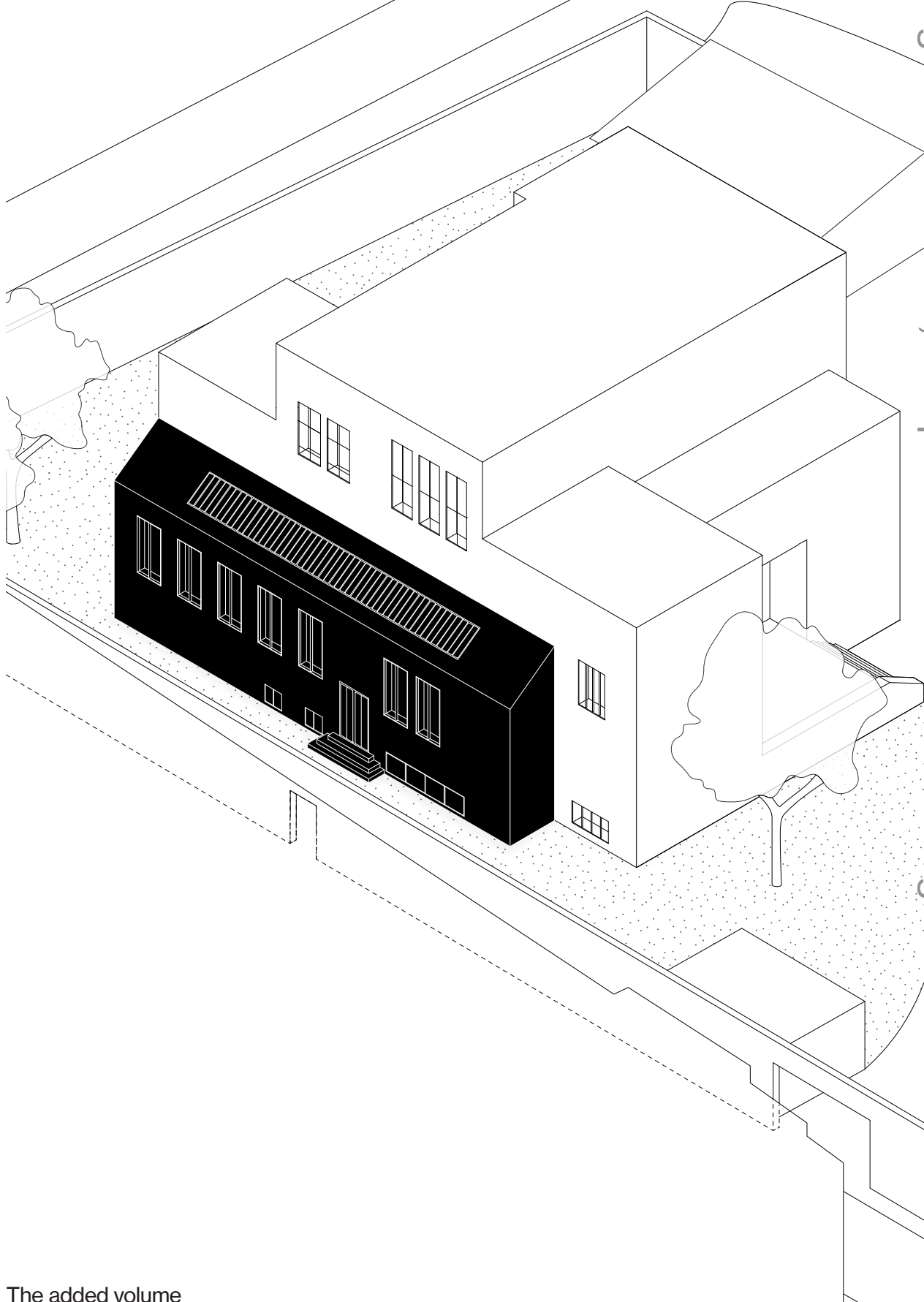


# BACK OF HOUSE

Ludwig Wittgenstein and Paul Engelmann

Wittgenstein House  
Vienna, Austria  
1928

Wittgenstein joined the design team when the project had already reached an advanced stage. His changes were minimal, except for the addition of an angled volume to the back.



The added volume

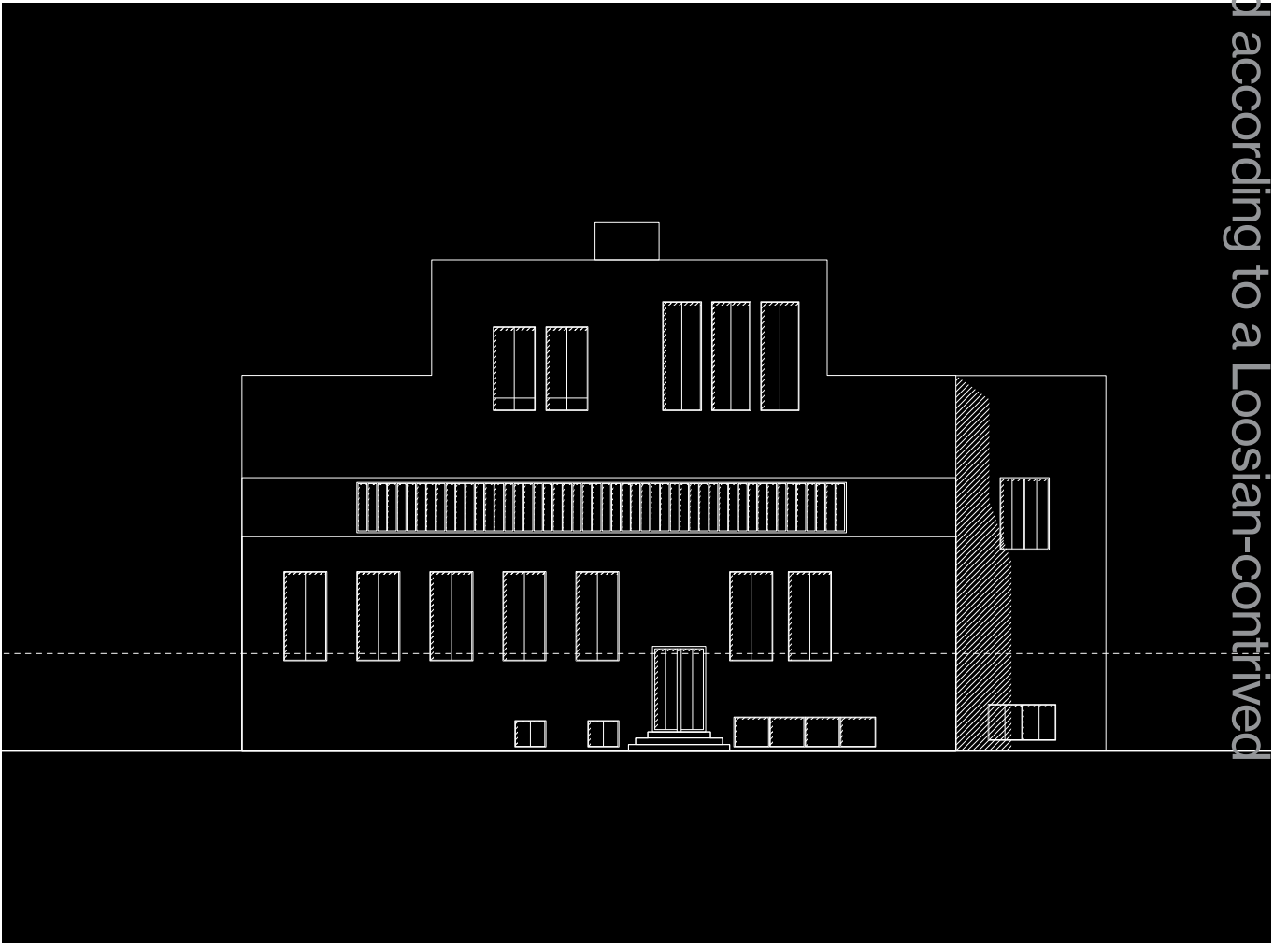


# USE

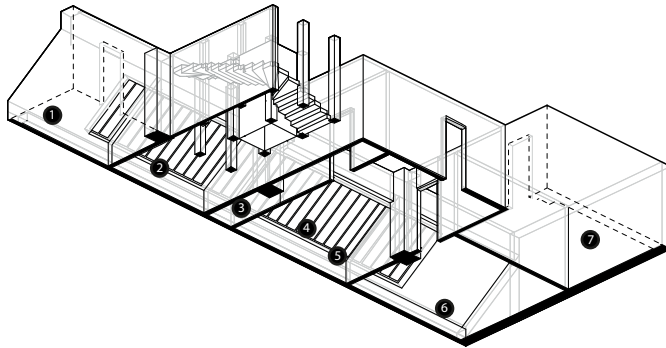
Where the rest of the structure was designed according to a Loosian-contrived monumentality...



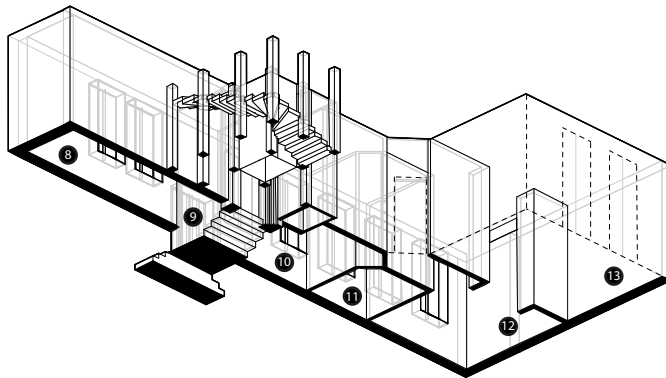
Front elevation



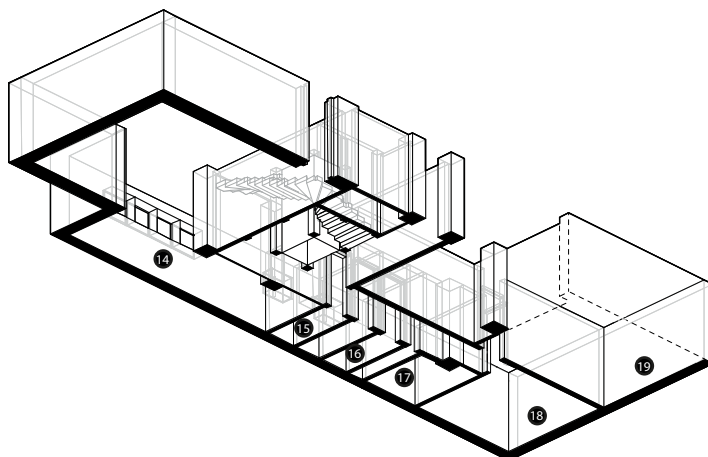
Back elevation



- ① Machine Room
- ② Landing
- ③ WC
- ④ Skylight
- ⑤ Sewing Room
- ⑥ Wardrobe
- ⑦ Secretary

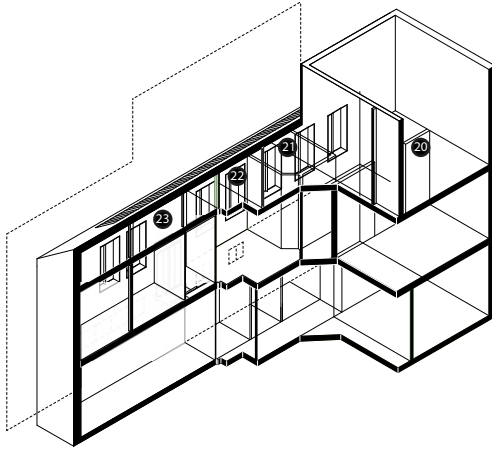


- ⑧ Office
- ⑨ Rear Entrance
- ⑩ Servant's Room
- ⑪ Bathroom
- ⑫ Margarethe's Bedroom
- ⑬ Living Room

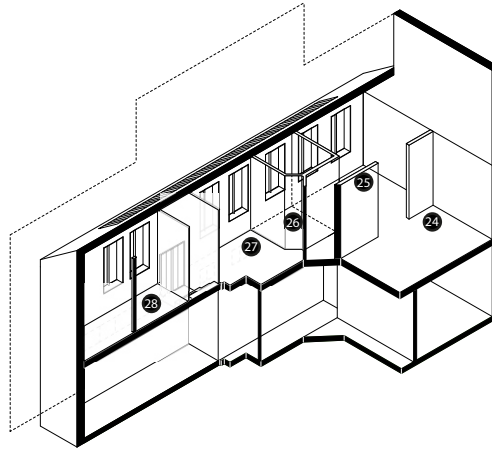


- ⑭ Kitchen
- ⑮ Pantry
- ⑯ WC
- ⑰ Bathroom
- ⑱ Laundry Room
- ⑲ Dining Room

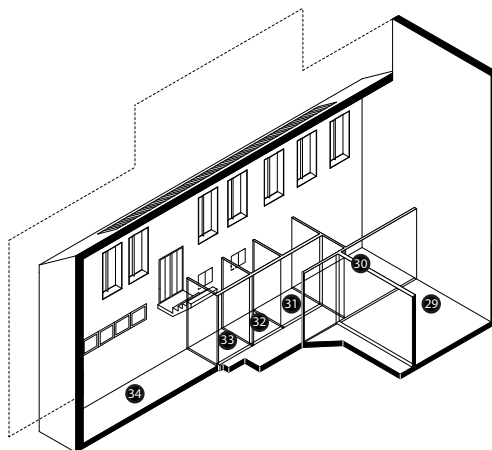
...the bluntness of Wittgenstein's intervention bears the mark of a distinctly different logic, less modernist perhaps, yet more functional. It hosts the private apartments of his sister and her servants. Only her brother could design to her needs.



- 20 Bedroom
- 21 Sewing Room
- 22 WC
- 23 Landing

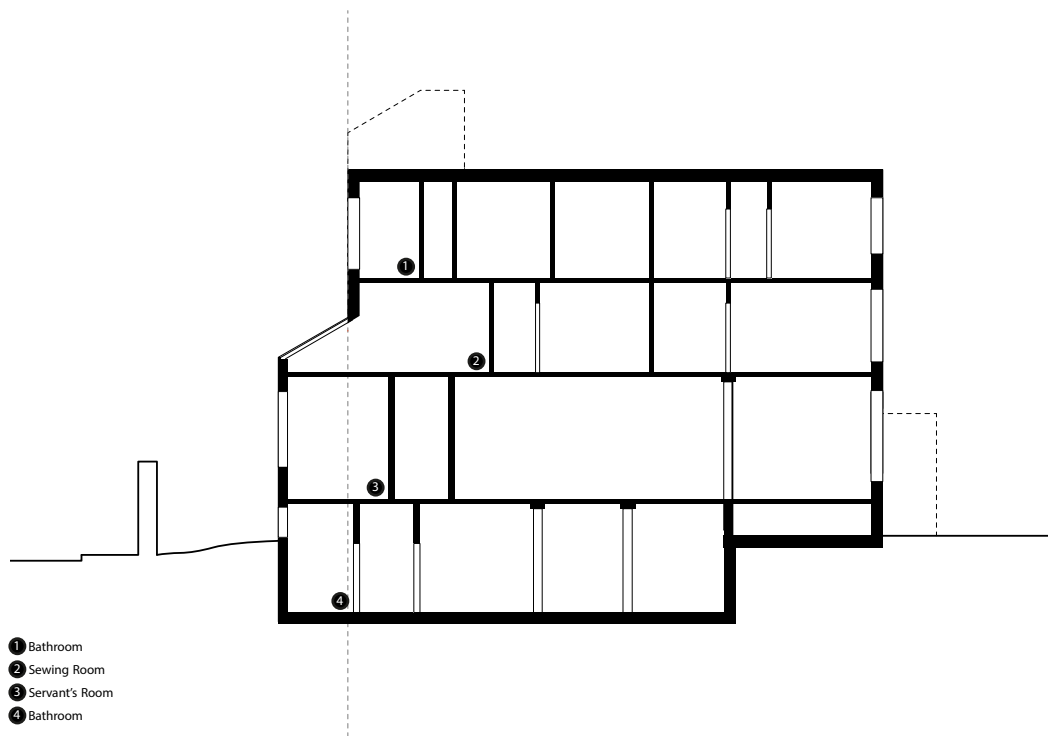


- 24 Living Room
- 25 Bedroom
- 26 Bathroom
- 27 Servant's Room
- 28 Office

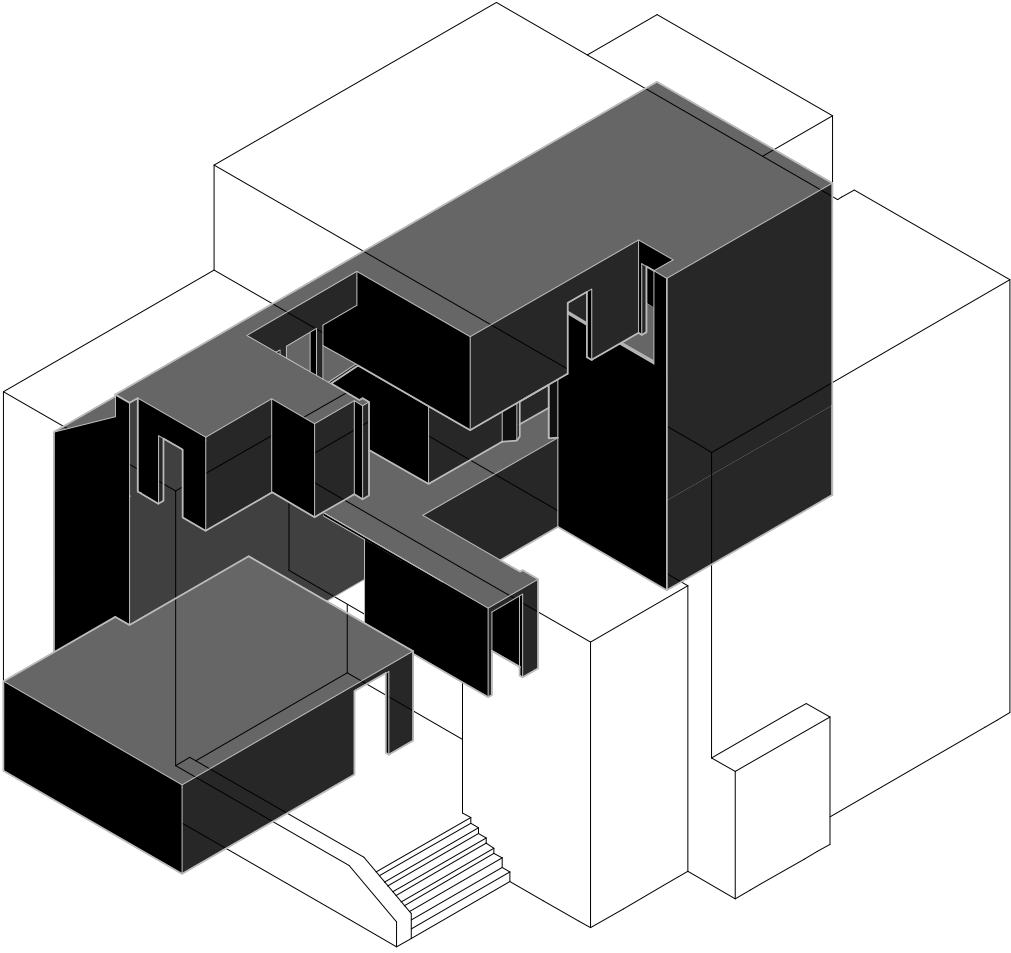


- 29 Dining Room
- 30 Laundry Room
- 31 Bathroom
- 32 WC
- 33 Pantry
- 34 Kitchen

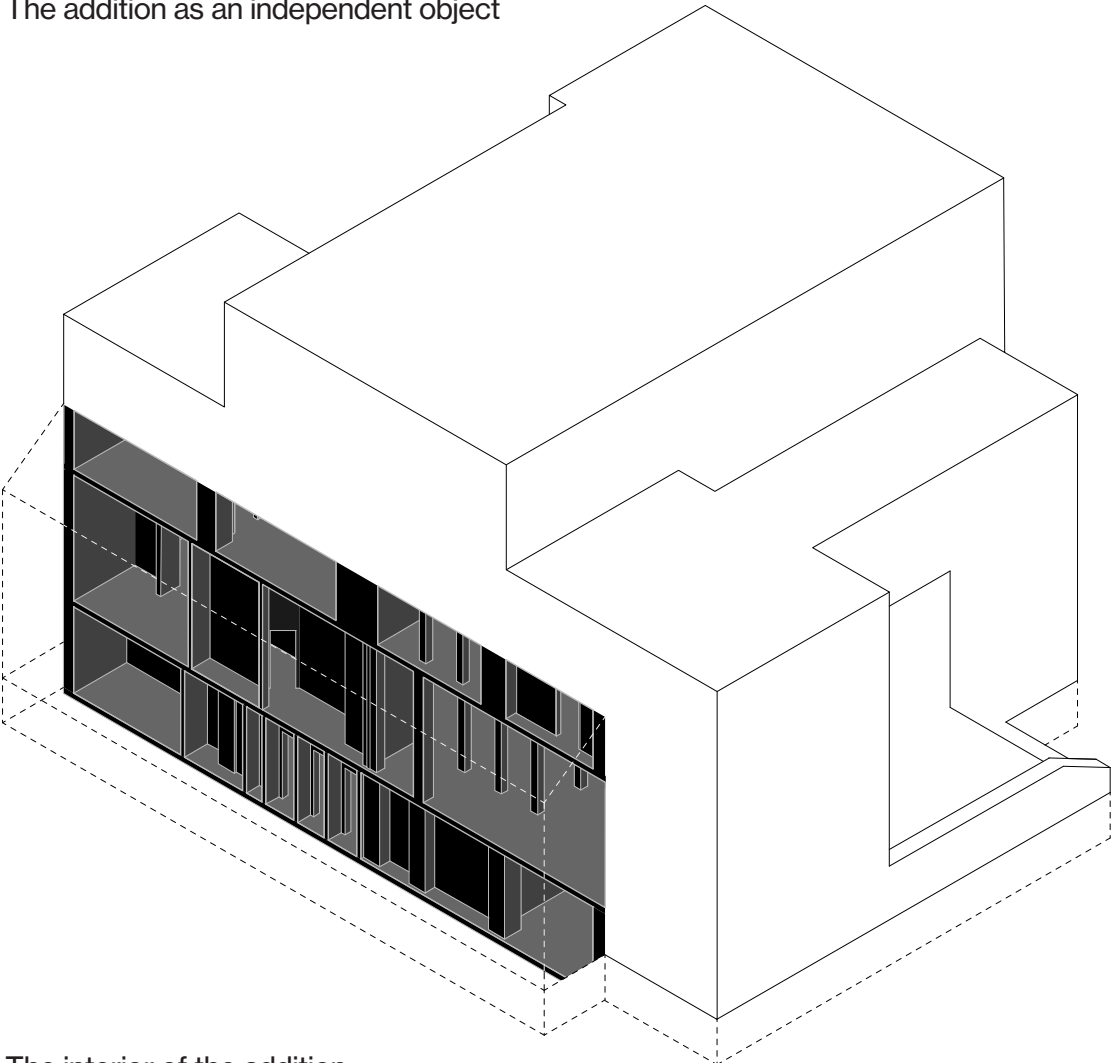




Wittgenstein turns the B-side into a place for architectural liberation, a subversive act. The lack of disciplinary and disciplining public scrutiny that usually characterizes the architectural front is what gives the B-side its liberating and subversive potential. Can the architectural back be the site of true radicality?



The addition as an independent object



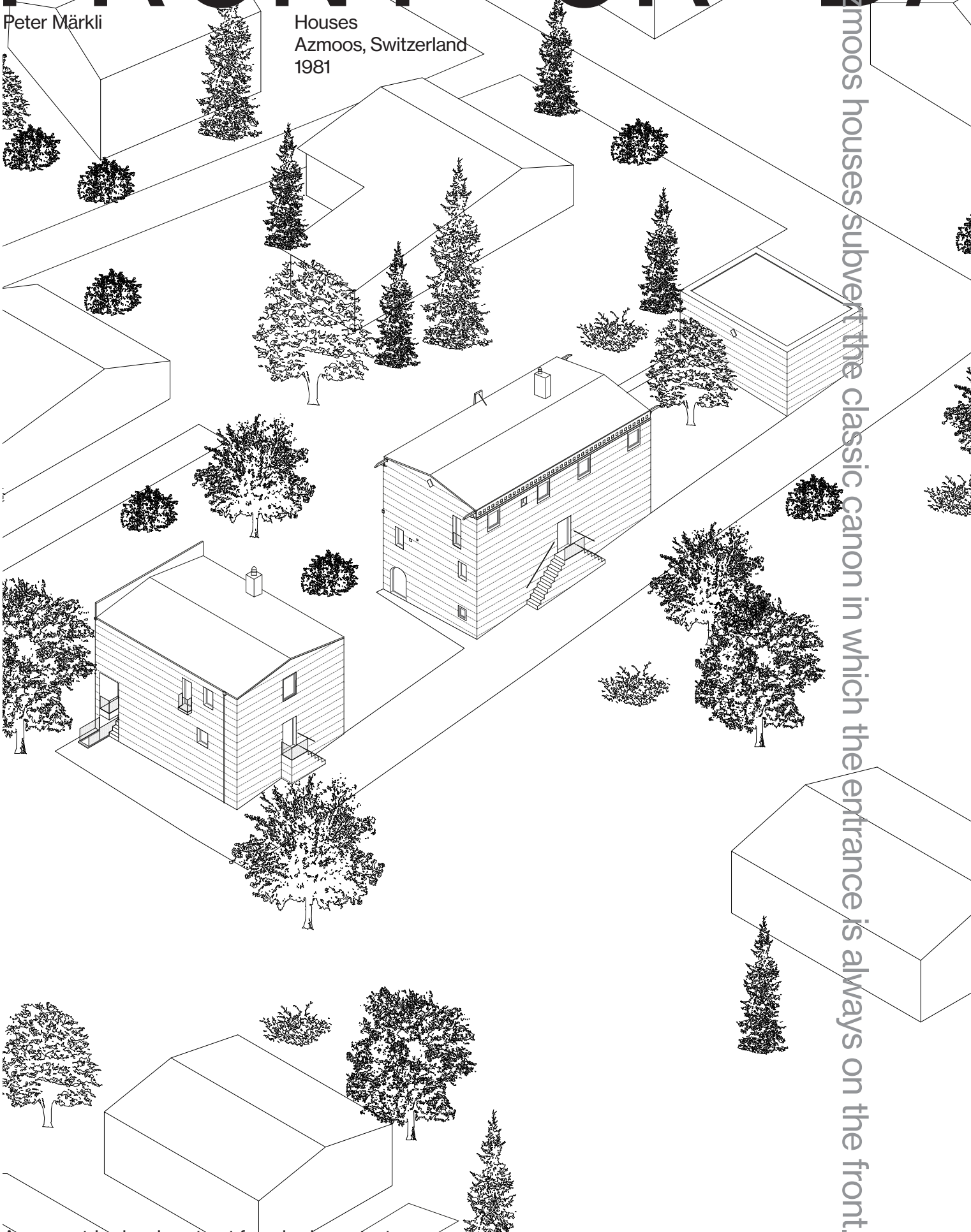
The interior of the addition

# FRONT OR BA

Peter Märkli

Houses  
Azmoos, Switzerland  
1981

The Azmoos houses subvert the classic canon in which the entrance is always on the front.



Axonometric showing street façades in context



# ACK

In these houses, the representative façades are turned away from the street. One enters through the back.

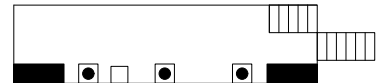
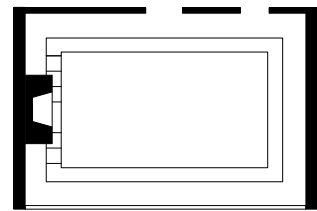
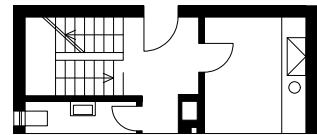
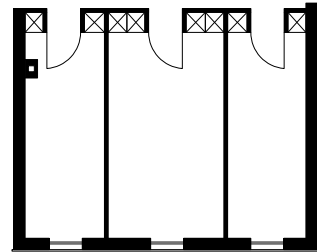
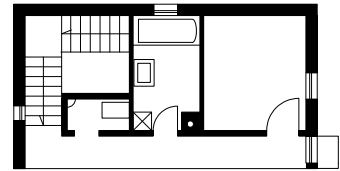
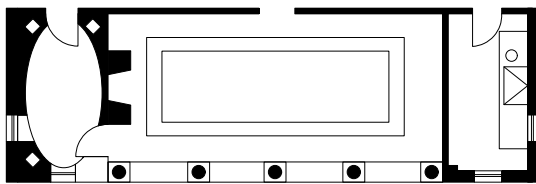
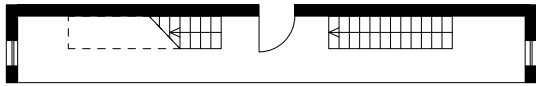
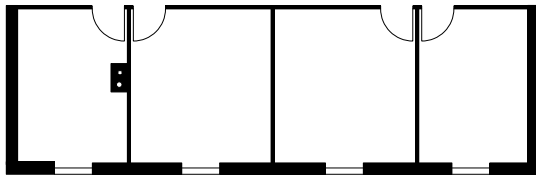
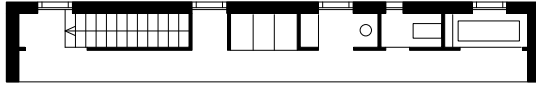


Front (garden) elevations

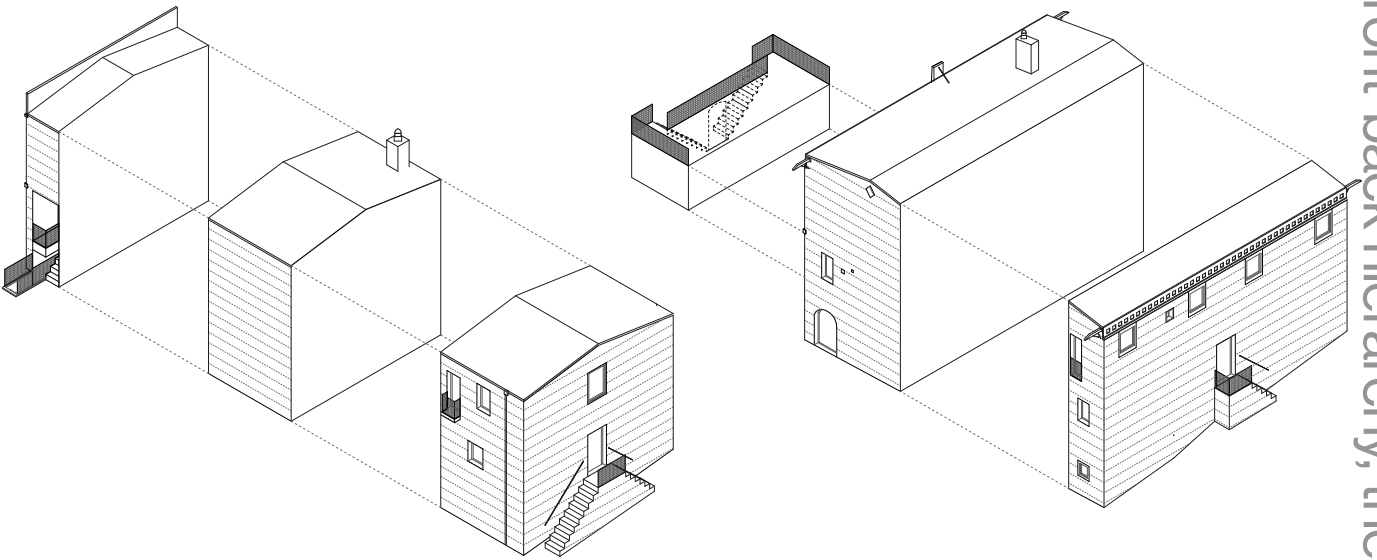
The interplay between the iconic street façades and the monumental garden façades generates a tension that structures the whole design.



Back (street) elevations

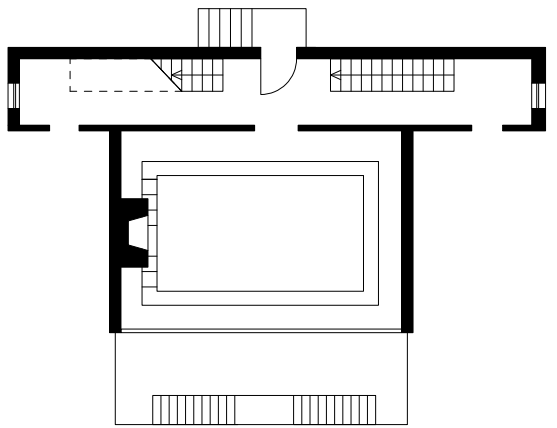
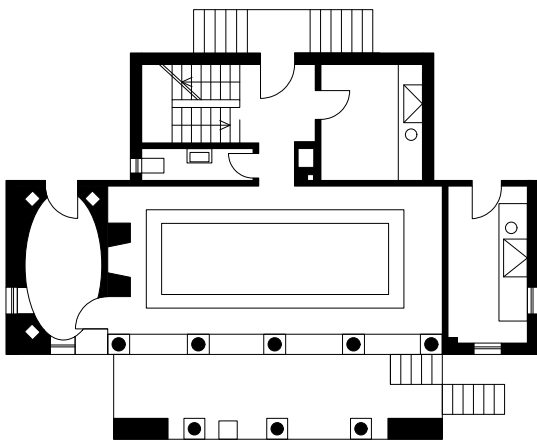
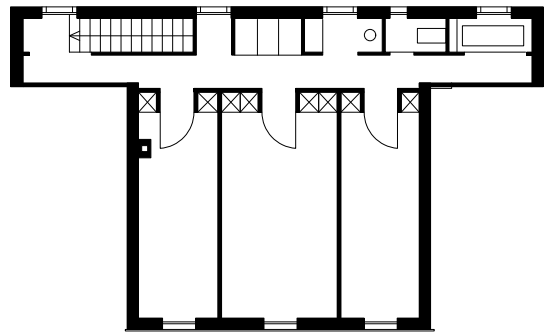
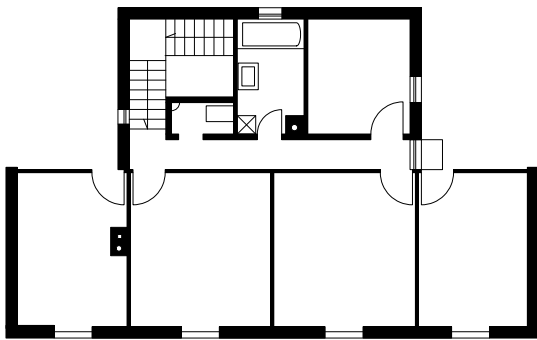


Because of this inversion of the front-back hierarchy, the identity of the B-side requires a constant negotiation.

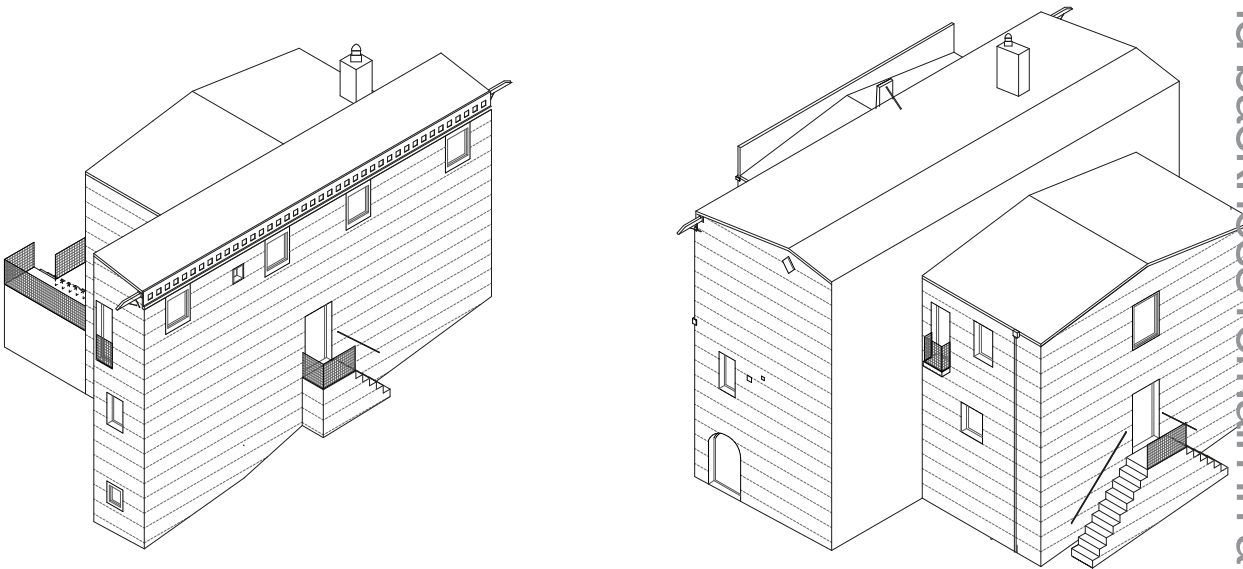


Exploded axonometric of components





Can we imagine an architecture where the programmatic, representative, contextual and ideological notions of frontality and backness remain in a constant state of ambiguity?



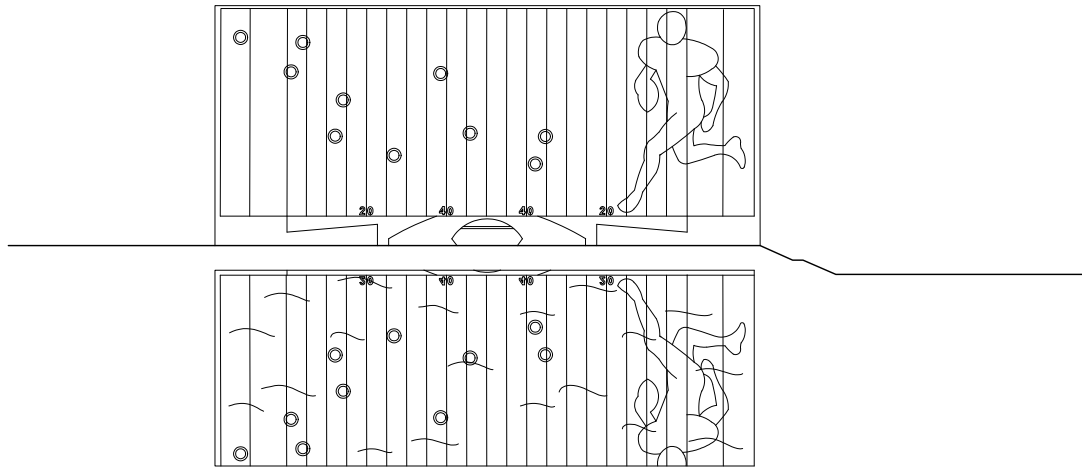
# THE BACK

# SCORE

Venturi Scott Brown

National Collegiate Football Hall  
of Fame  
New Brunswick, U.S.A.  
1967

EV  
In their iconic image "Recommendation for a Monument", Venturi and Scott Brown  
mount a supersize billboard on top of an anonymous shoe box building, propped up by  
two slender poles.

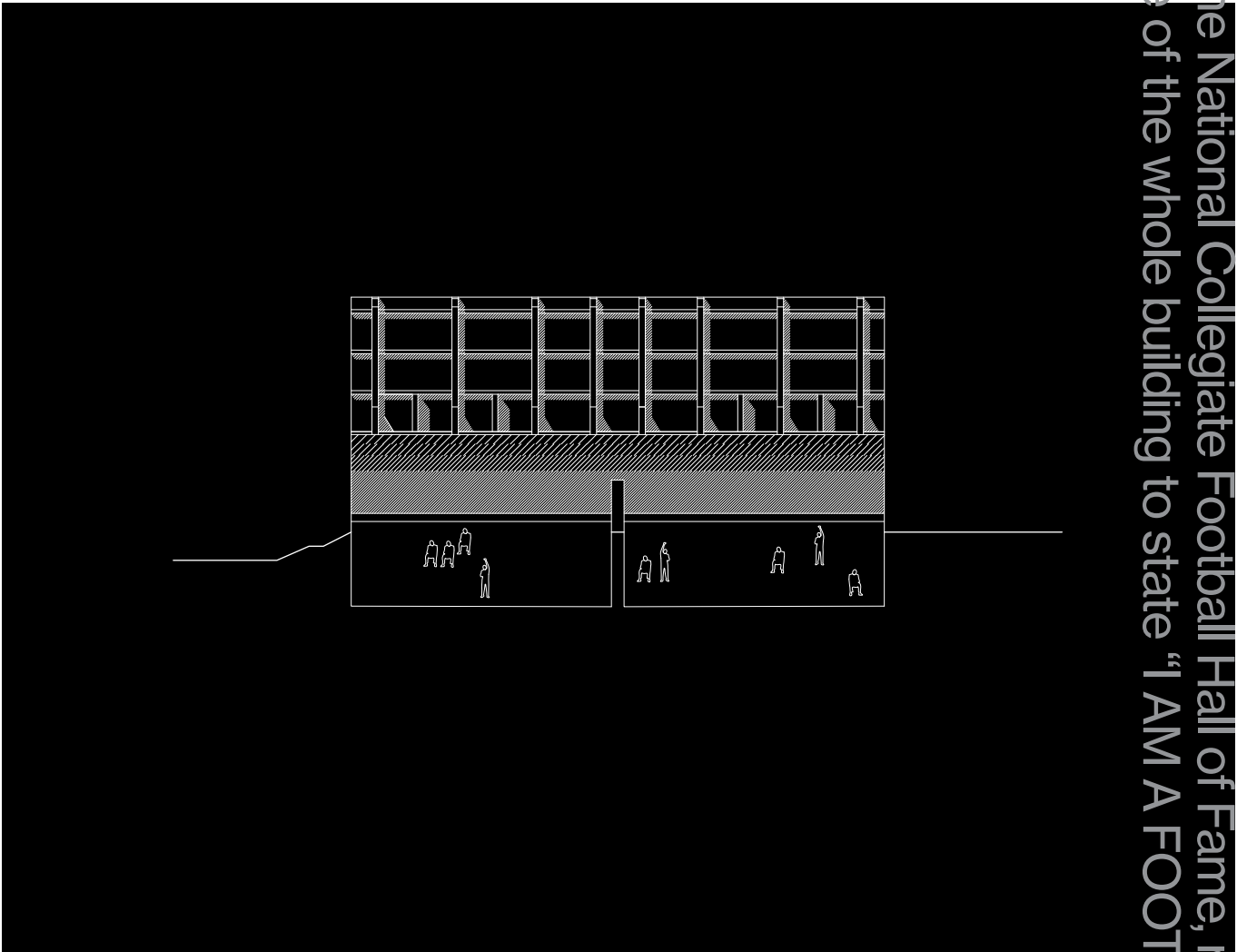


Front elevation with reflection



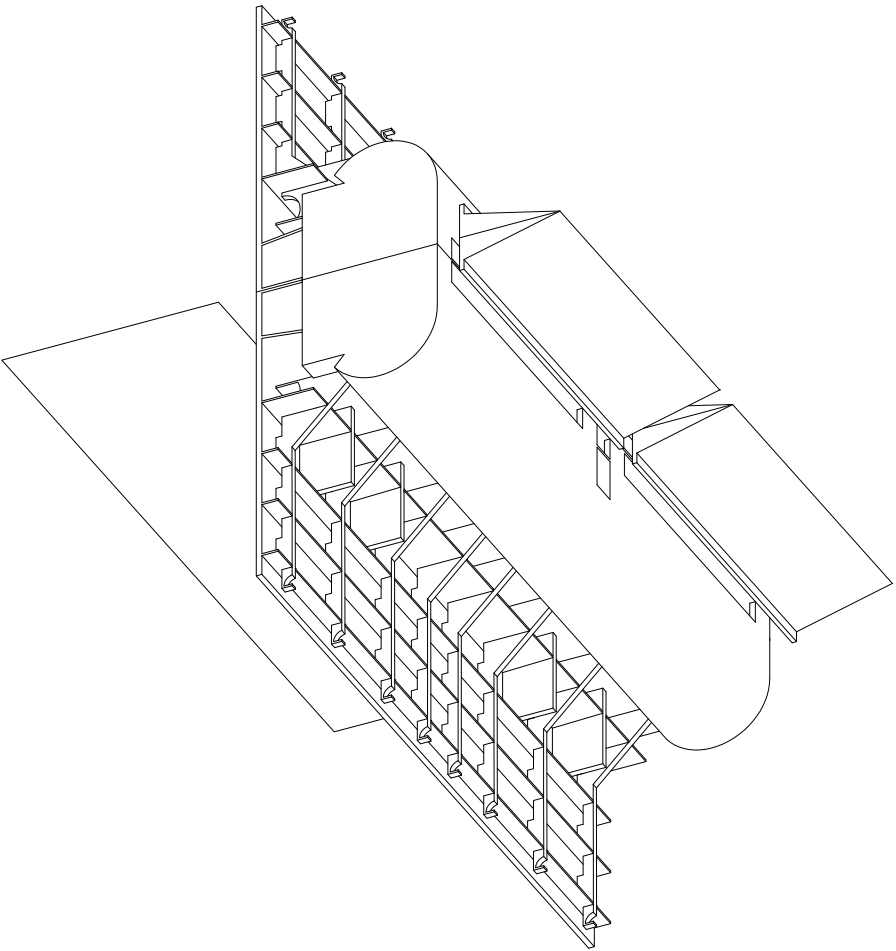
# VENS THE

For their proposal for the National Collegiate Football Hall of Fame, rather than two poles, they need the structure of the whole building to state "I AM A FOOTBALL MUSEUM".



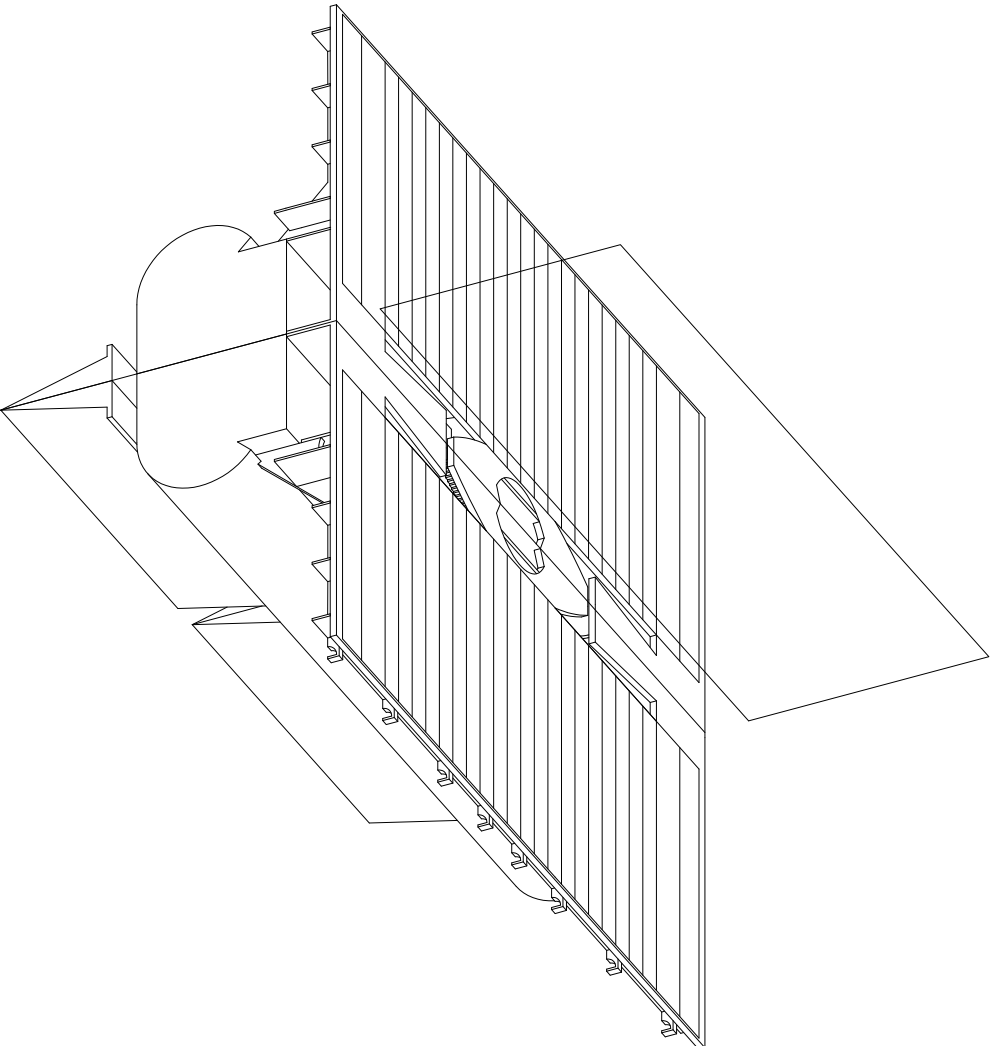
Back elevation with audience

The building acts as a scaffolding for the front; a construction that is subject to its immaterial counterpart, the ephemeral image of an electric billboard.

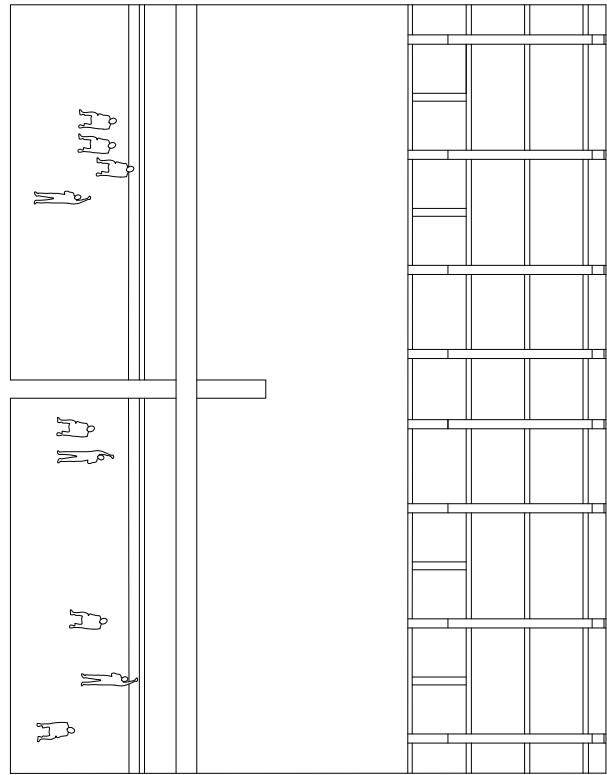
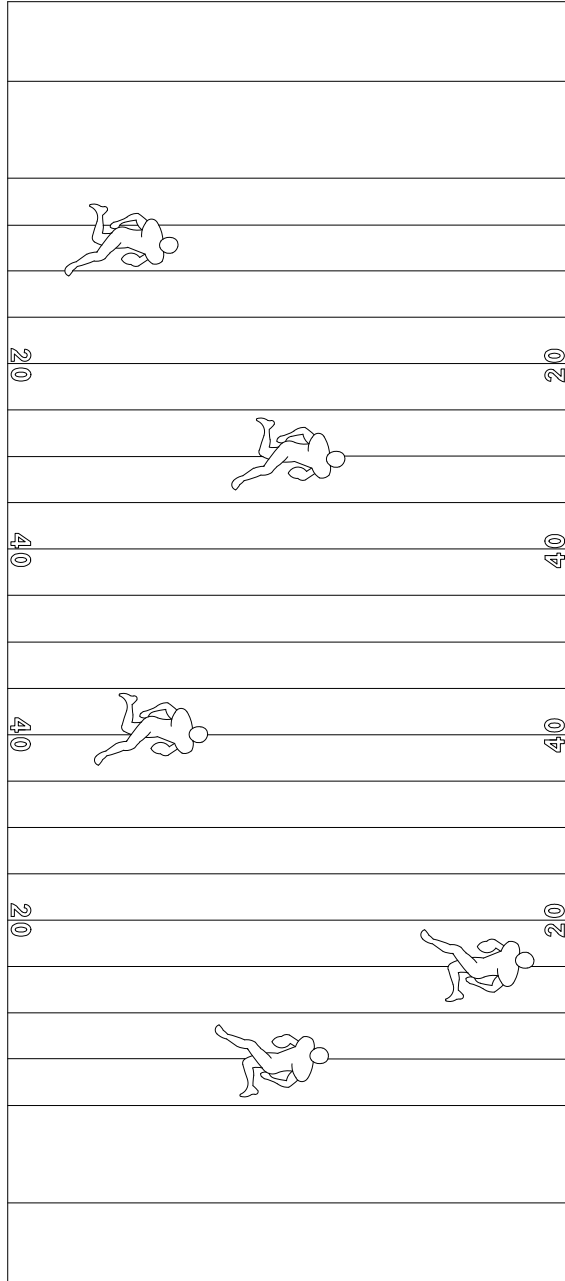


Mirrored Axonometric of back (structural) side

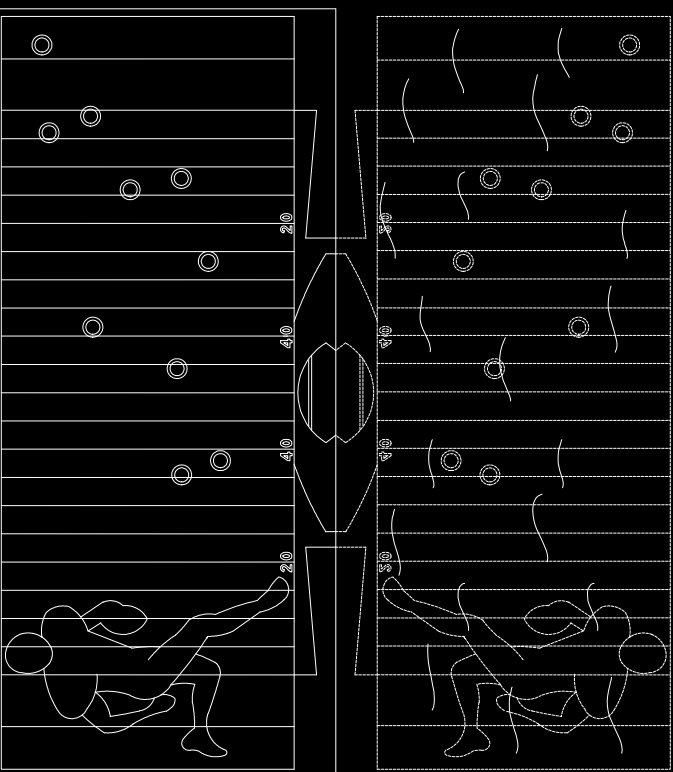
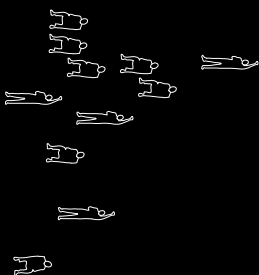
The symbolic surface of the billboard splits the building into two distinct characters: construction and sign. The vaulted hall on the back acts as the center of gravity, while the weightless image on the front is doubled by its reflection in a pool.



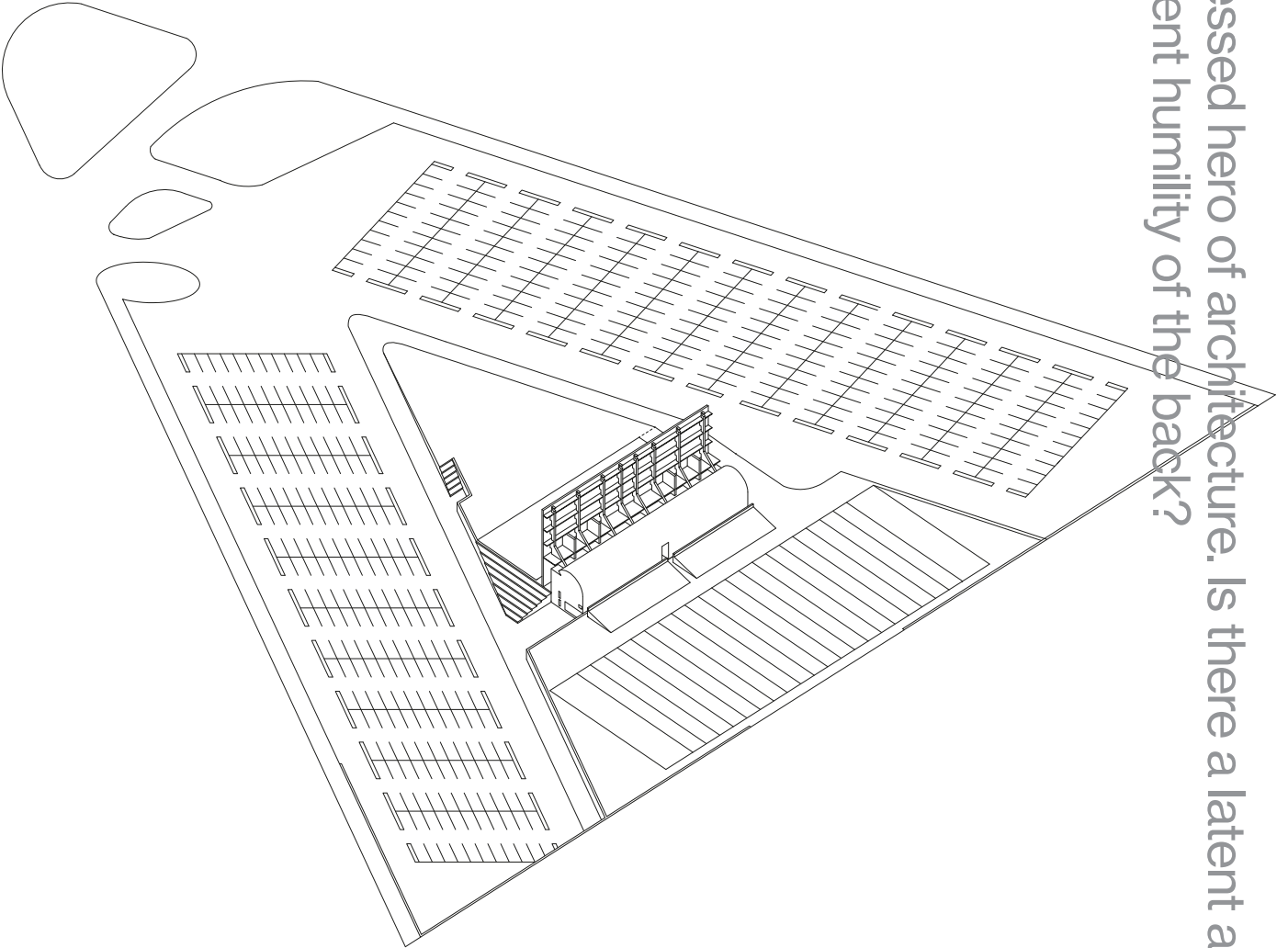
Mirrored Axonometric of front (billboard) side



As the project's symbolic presence is confined to the front, the back takes its ultimate revenge. The whole building has turned into a back. Backness becomes its sole raison d'être.



The back is the suppressed hero of architecture. Is there a latent architectural strength contained in the apparent humility of the back?



Axonometric, B-side

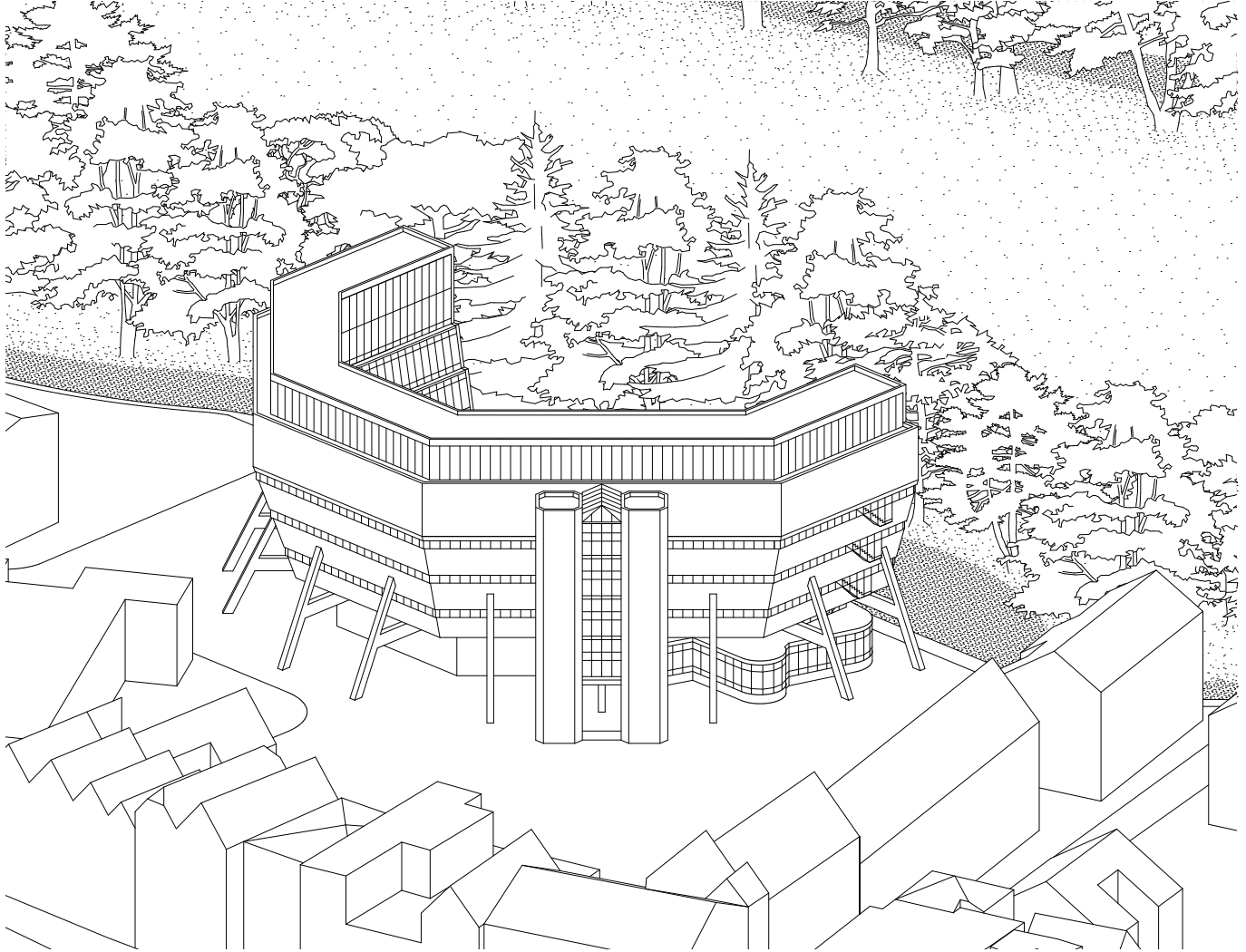




# A SEQUENCE

James Stirling

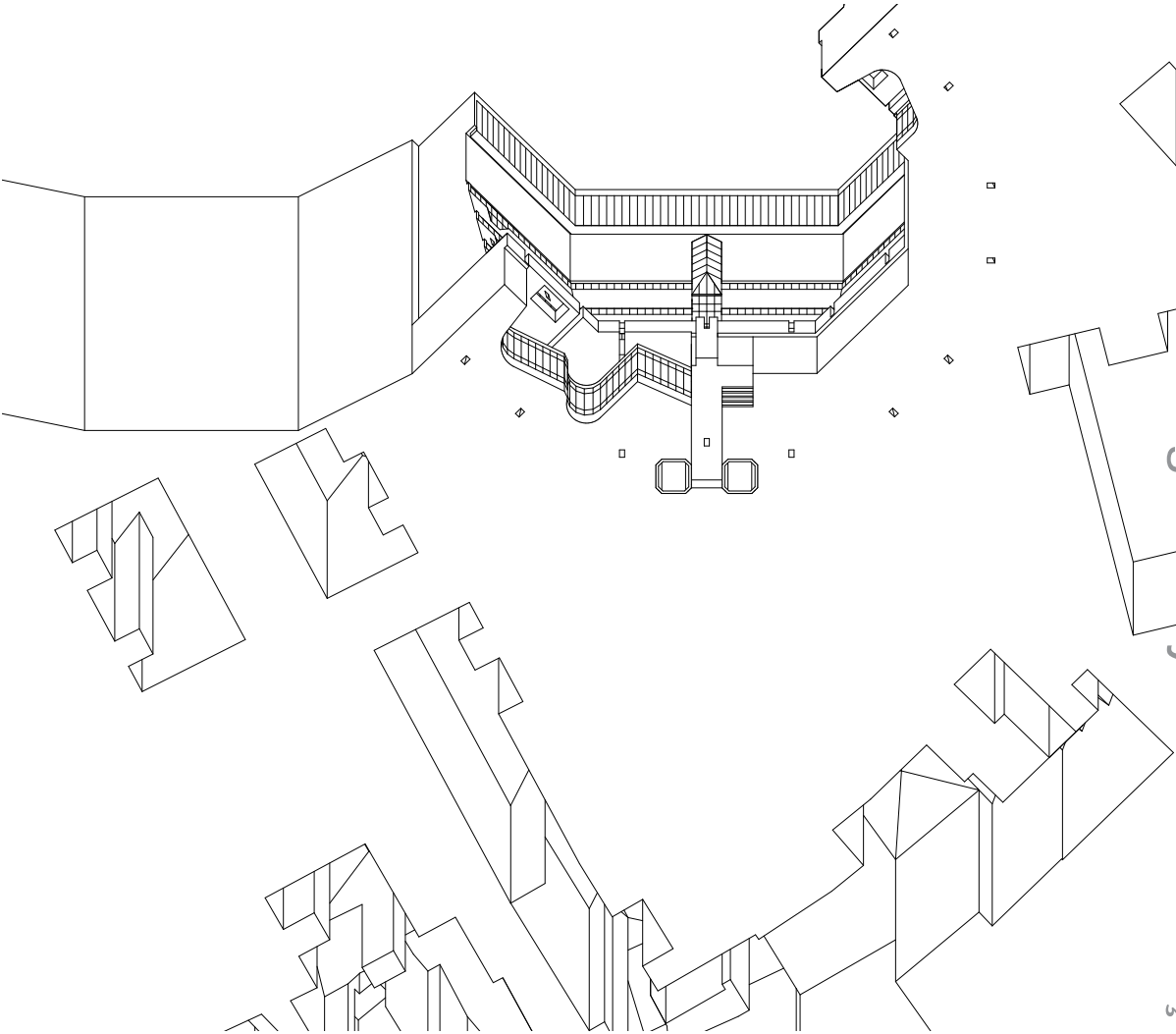
Queen's College Florey Building  
Oxford, United Kingdom  
1966



Axonometric drawing in context

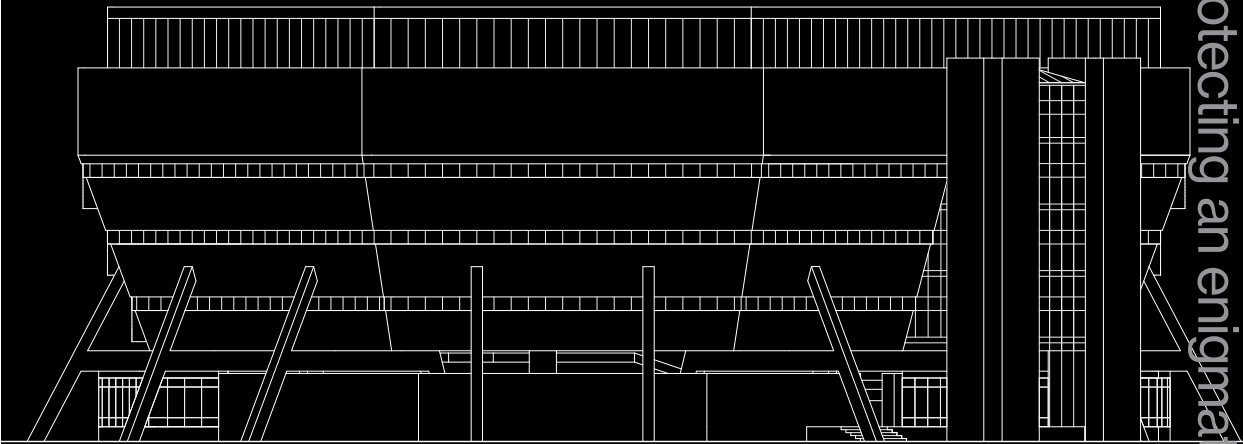
# OF BACKS

Approaching the Queen's College Florey Building, the visitor is greeted by its back. Encroaching into the surrounding urban space is a stack of octagonal shapes, propped up by exposed columns. From its convex geometry and closed façade, the back has an imposing character.



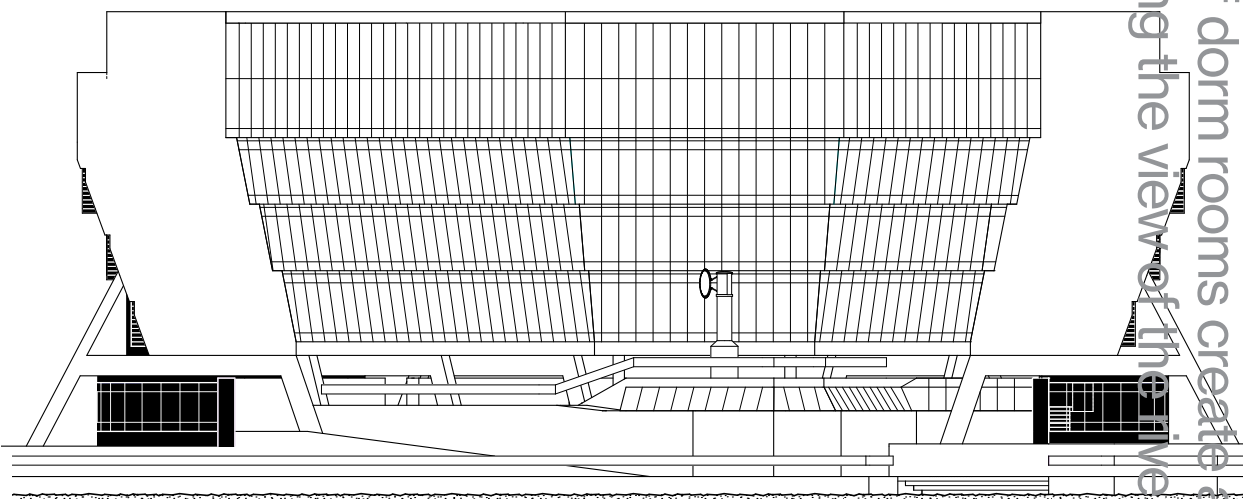
Axonometry of the negative urban space

Moving through the passageway, the viewer sees the massive circulation towers: a fortress protecting an enigmatic center.



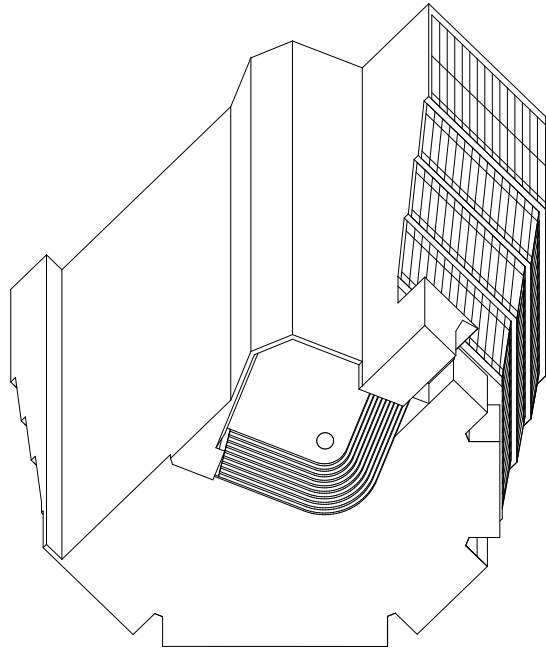
Back (urban) façade

Stepping up to the central elevated plaza, the fortress opens up into an amphitheater. The rows of dorm rooms create a terraced back, framing the view of the river.

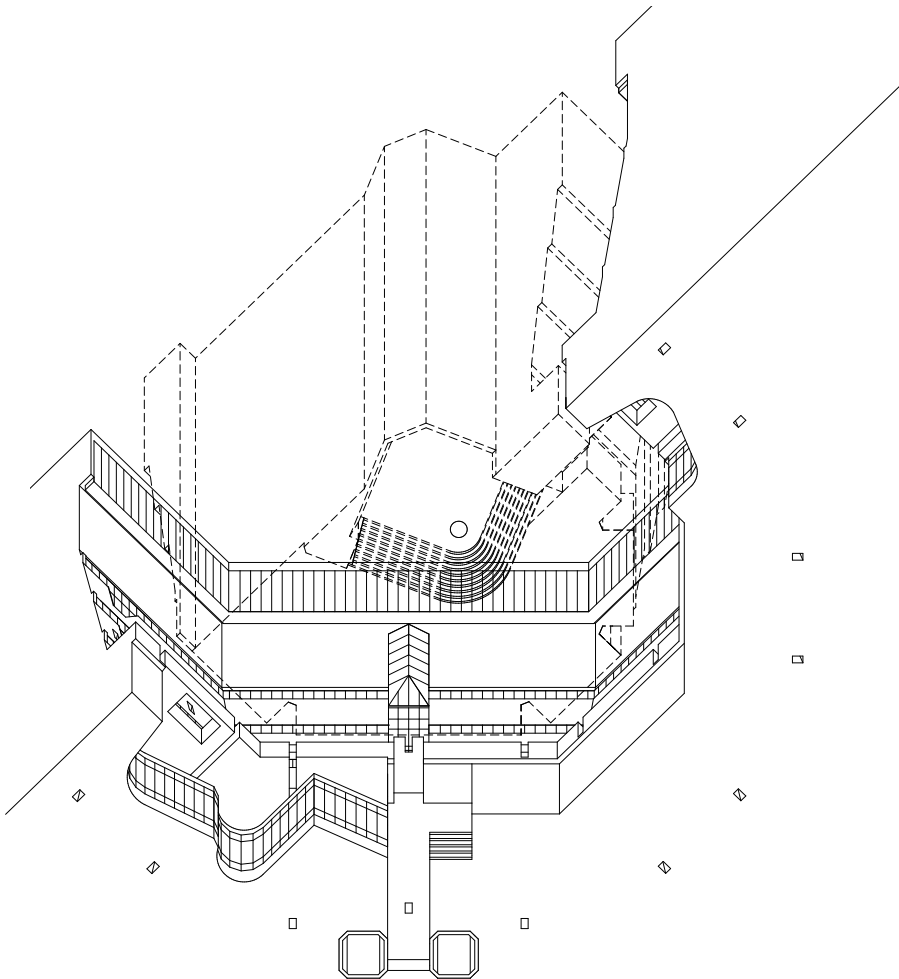


Front (amphitheater) façade

What if a sequence of backs was all a project had to offer? Can architecture exist without a front?



Axonometric of two backs: the negative urban space



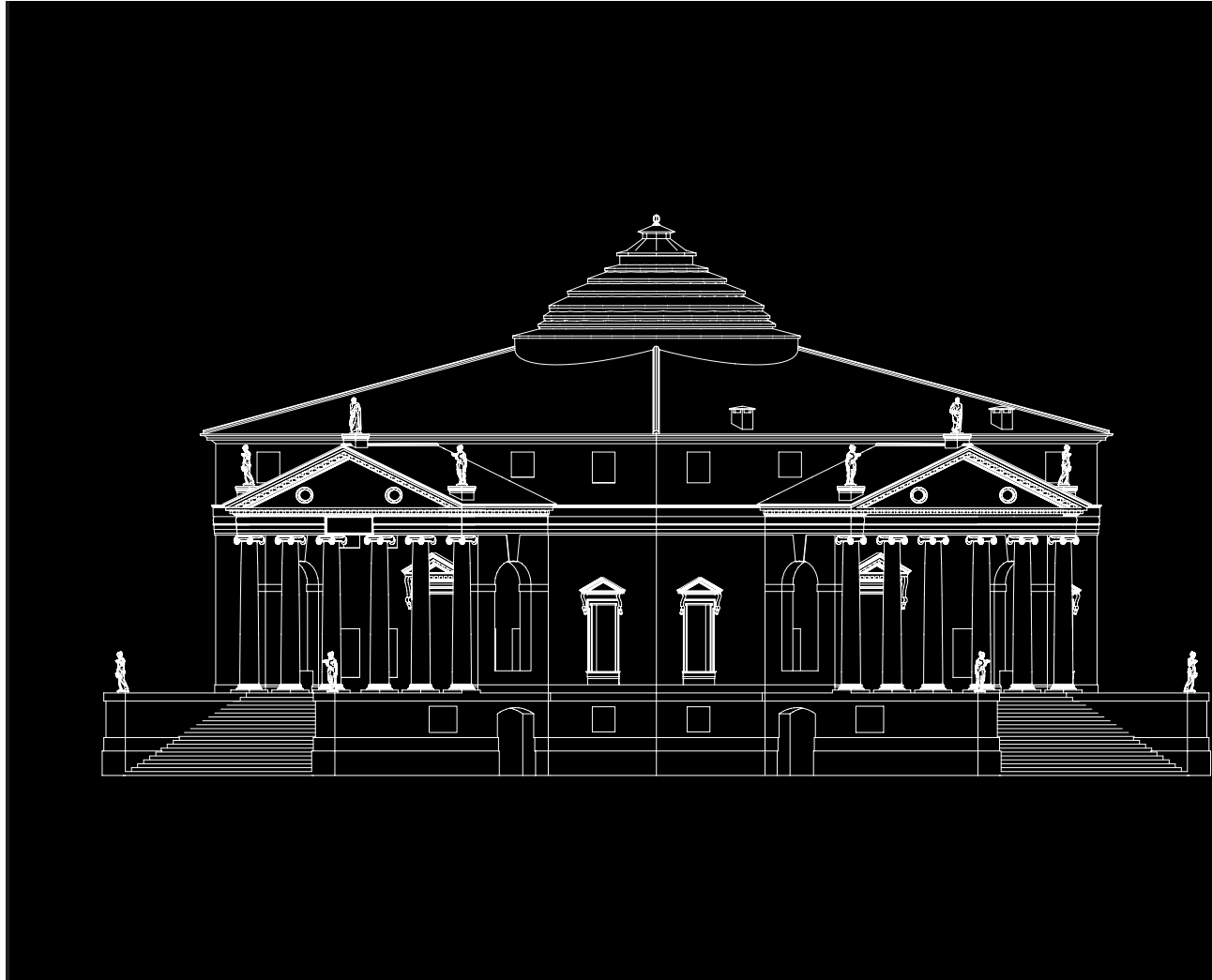
Axonometric of two backs: the negative space of the central plaza

# THE INEVITABLE

Andrea Palladio

Villa Rotonda  
Vicenza, Italy  
1567

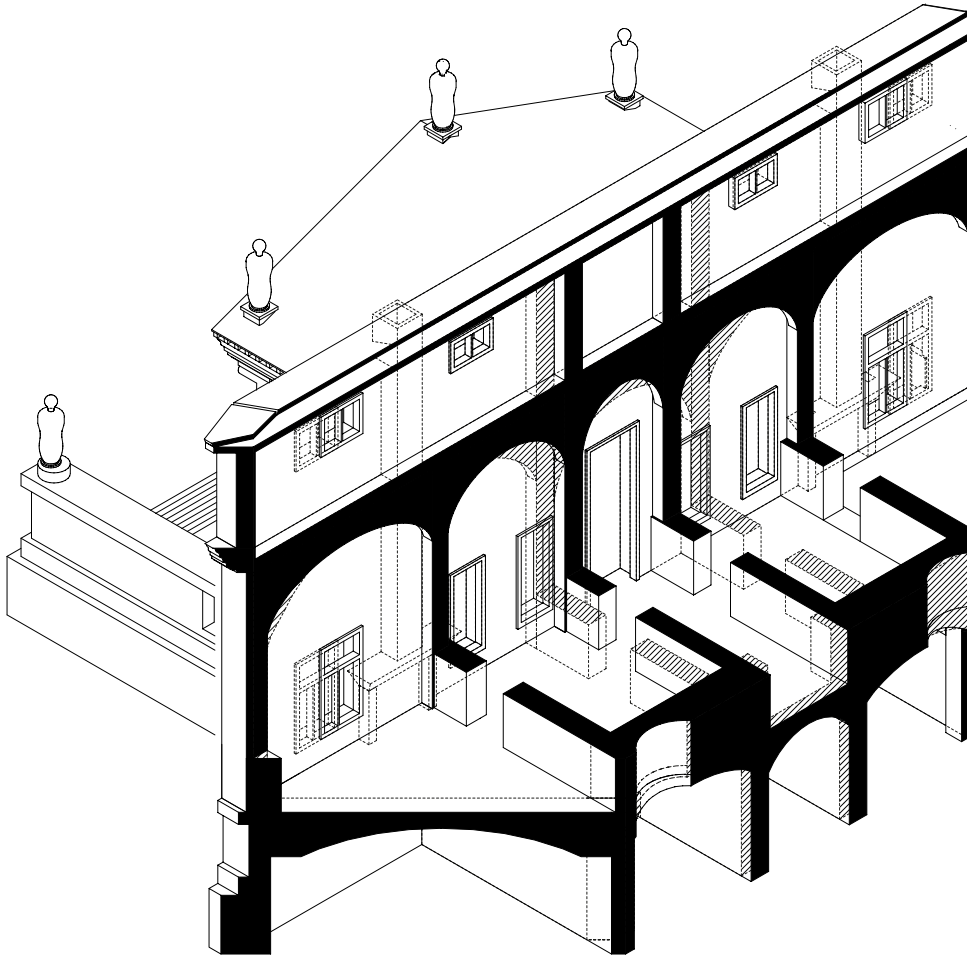
Everyone assumes that the four façades of Villa Rotonda are identical.



Back façade

# ABLE BACK

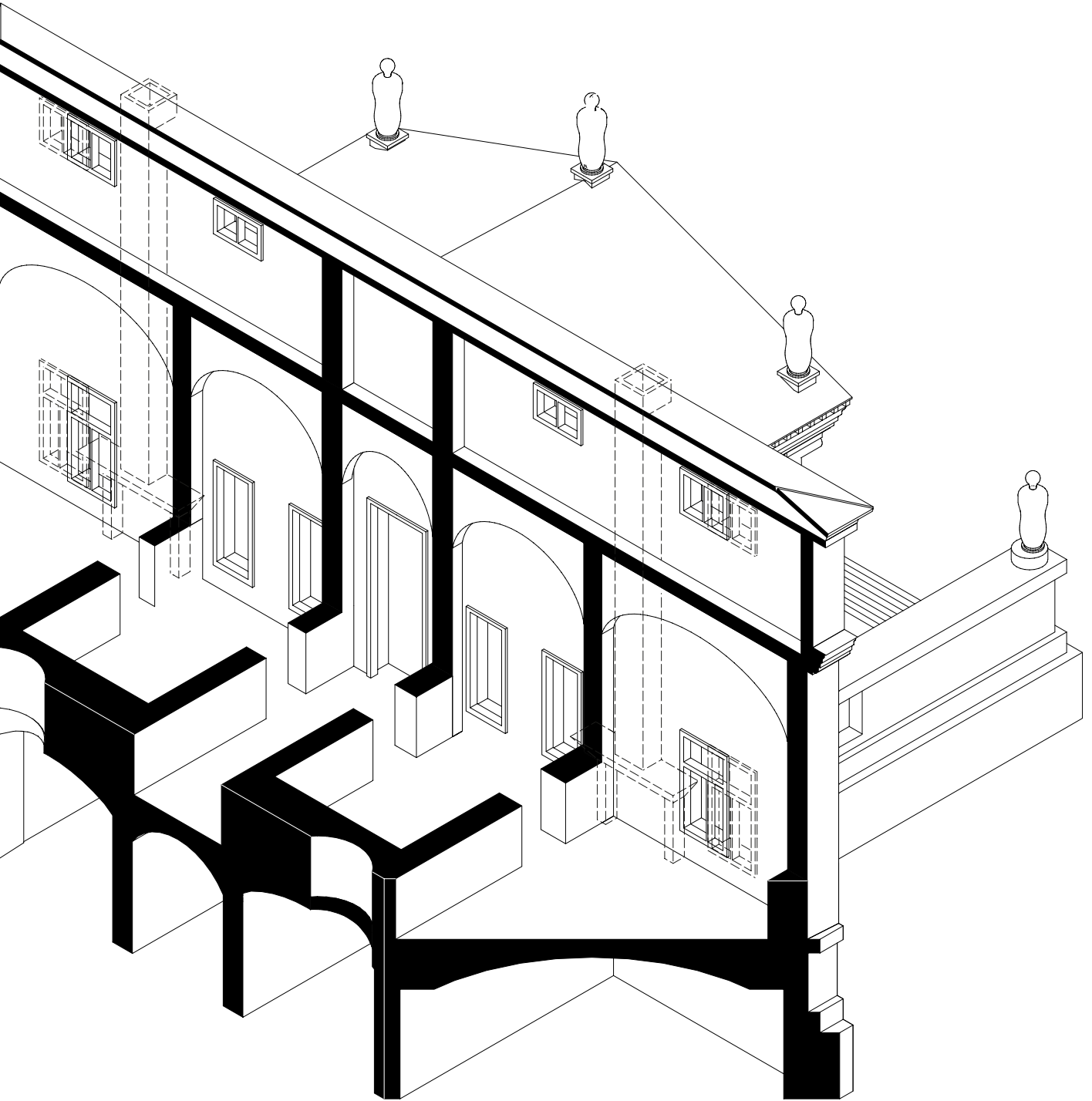
But look carefully: there are small differences in the positions of the windows. This is a consequence of the internal symmetry of the chimneys.



Asymmetry visible through the overlaid axonometric of the back and front interiors

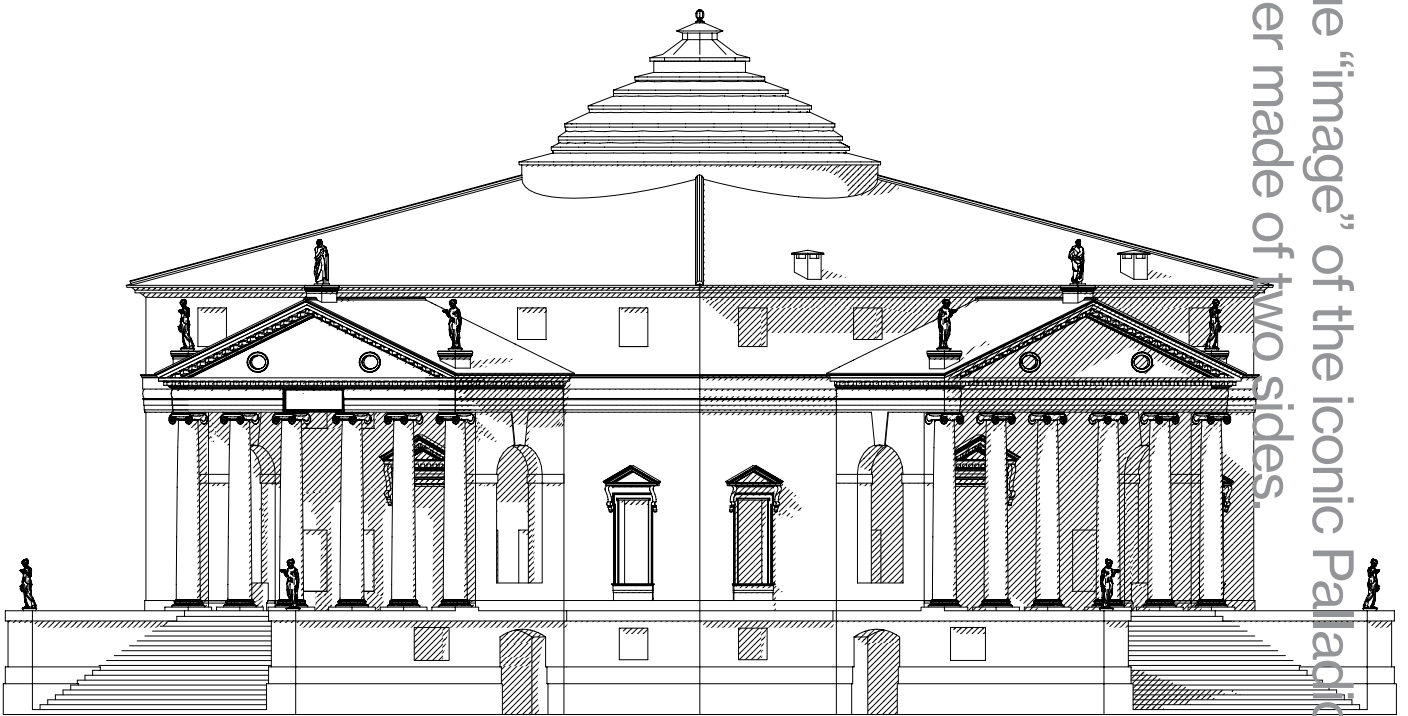






Rather than a square, the villa has a diamond shape.

Viewed from the corner, the true “image” of the iconic Palladio reveals itself: rather than a single side, the front is a corner made of two sides.

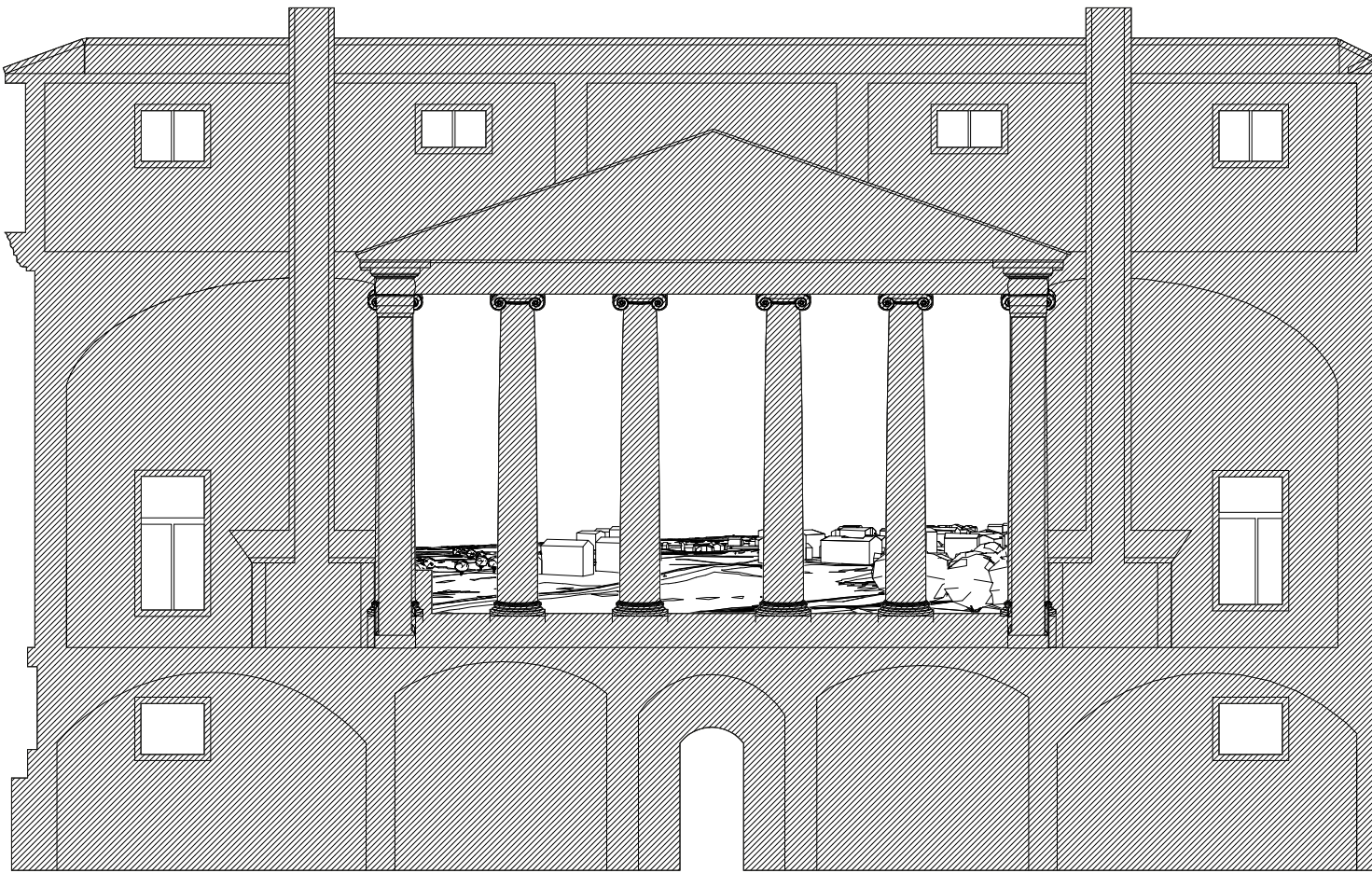


Front façade

The four corners of the diamond shape mark the four cardinal directions: north, south, east and west. Looking out across the landscape, the sloping terrain clearly differentiates the front from the back.

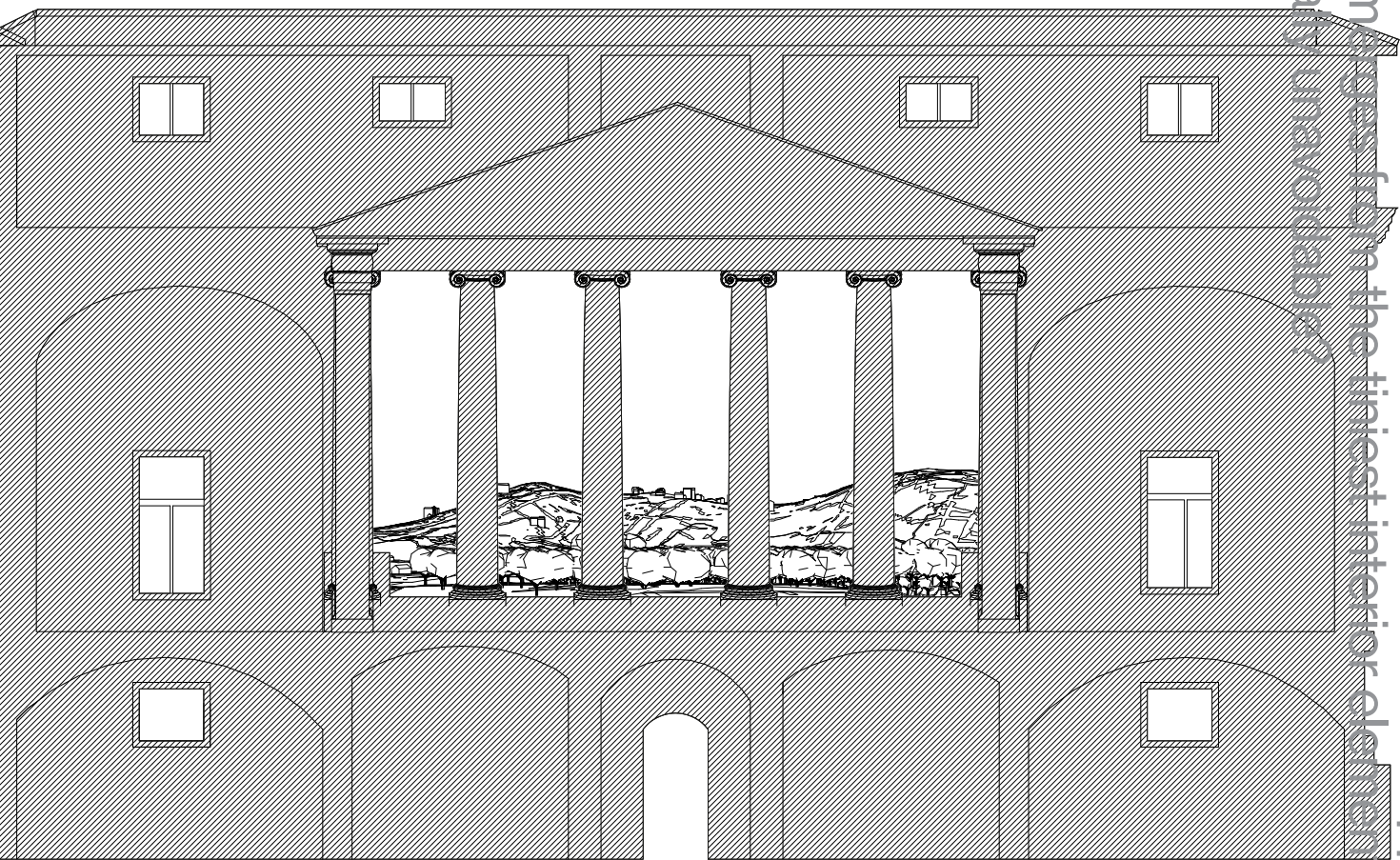


Site plan



View of the landscape through the back façade

No matter how hard the architect tries to conceal it with four apparently equal, frontal facades, the B-side still emerges from the thickest interior elements and topographical conditions. Is the back really unavoidable?



# BACK AS GEN

Tadao Ando

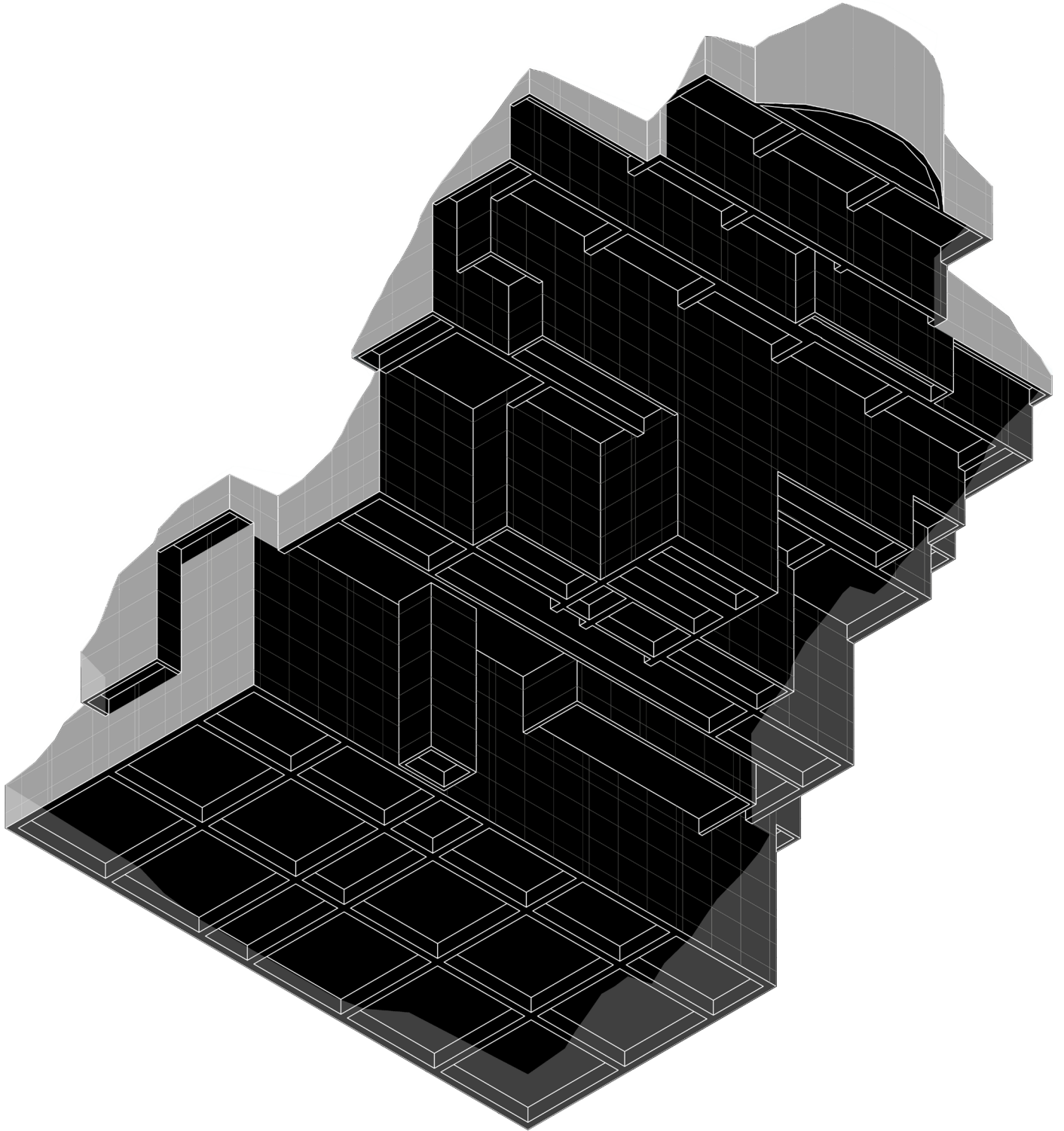
Rokko Housing  
Kobe, Japan  
1981



Front elevation

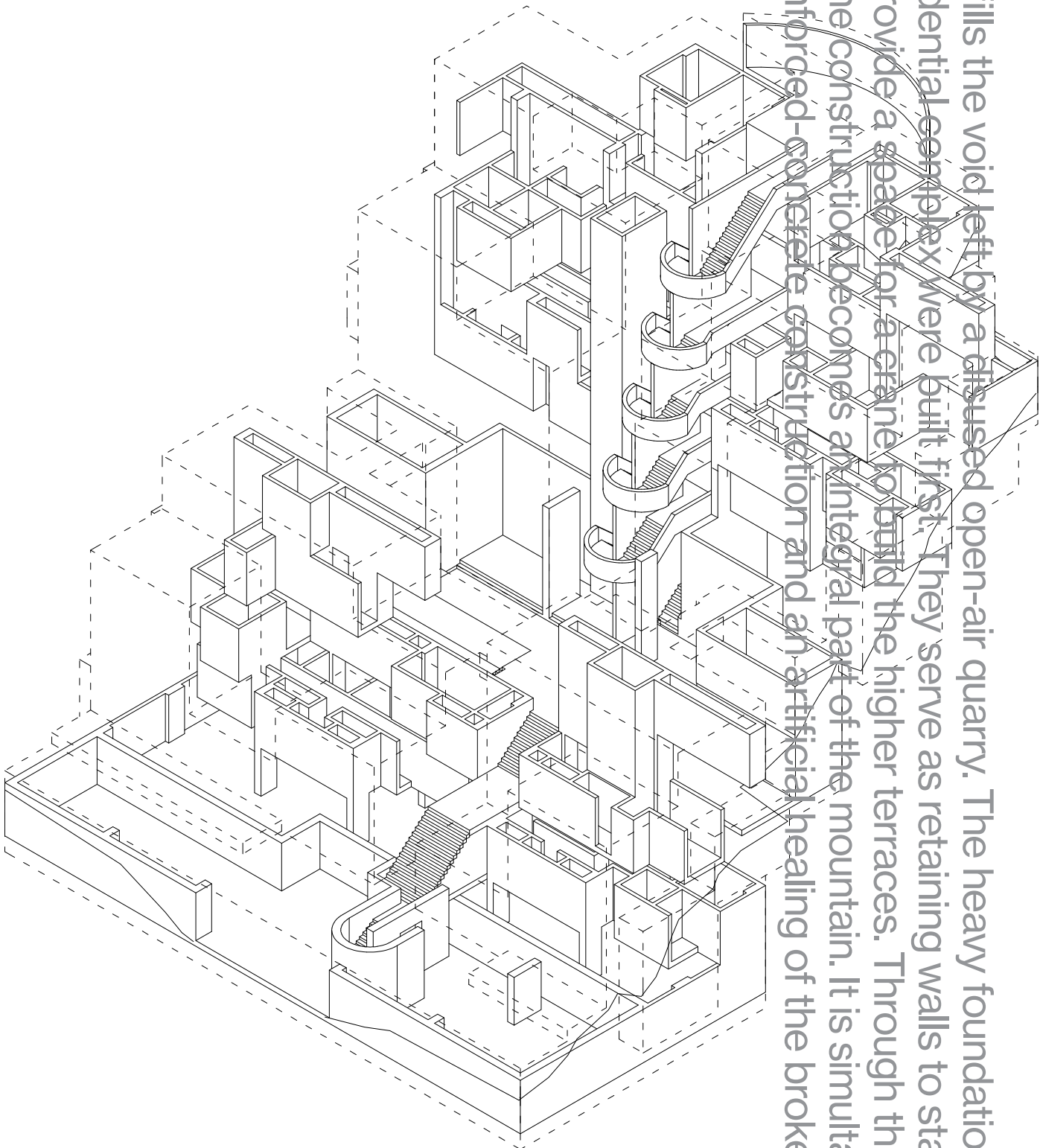


# GENERATOR



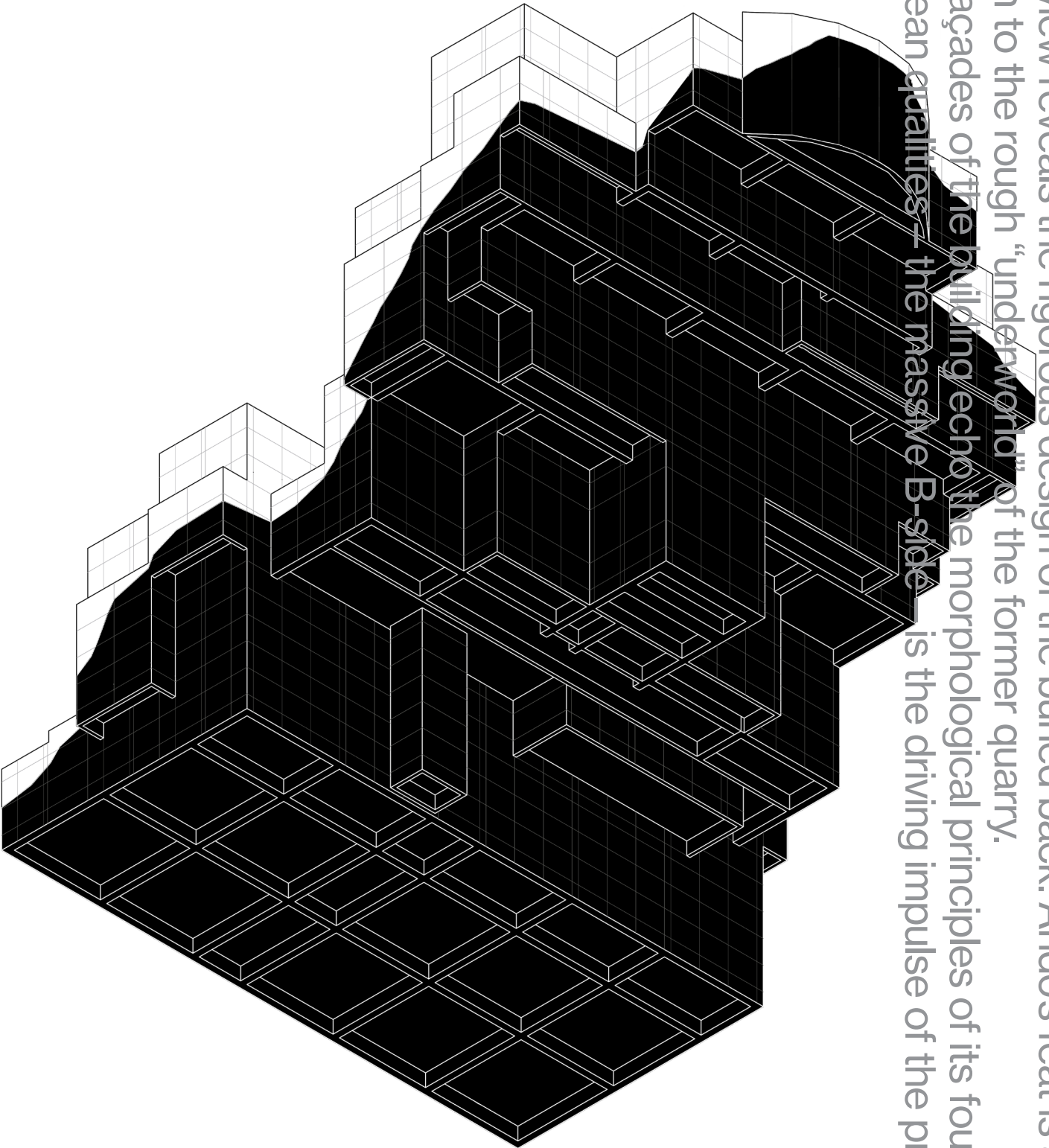
Axonometric drawing of the back, worm's eye perspective

The building fills the void left by a disused open-air quarry. The heavy foundations of the terraced residential complex were built first. They serve as retaining walls to stabilize the hillside and provide a space for a crane to build the higher terraces. Through this relationship, the construction becomes an integral part of the mountain. It is simultaneously a synthetic, reinforced-concrete construction and an artificial healing of the broken stone surface.



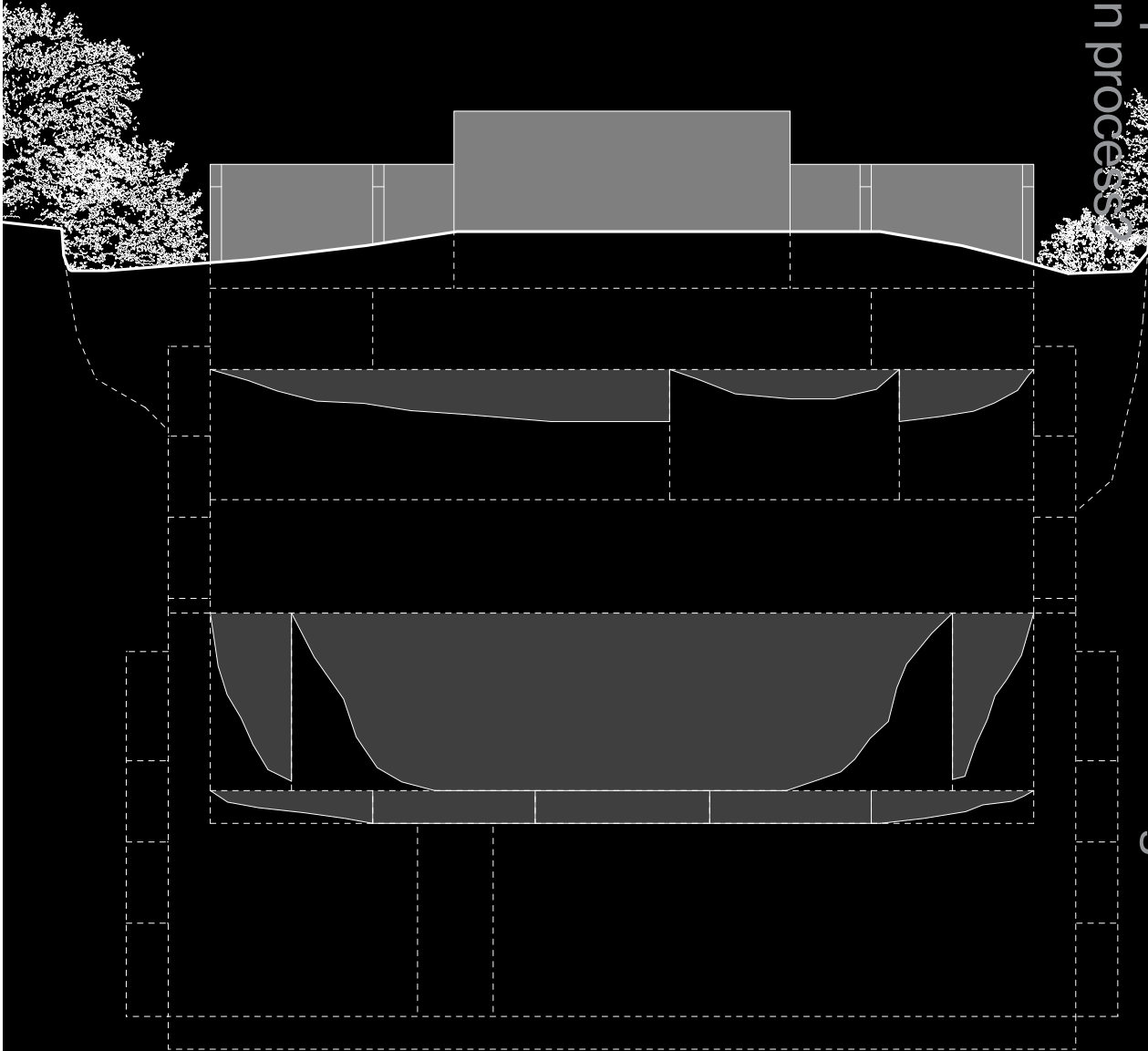
Axonometric drawing of the front

A worm's eye view reveals the rigorous design of the buried back. Ando's feat is applying great precision to the rough "underworld" of the former quarry. The stepped façades of the building echo the morphological principles of its foundations. The subterranean qualities – the massive B-side – is the driving impulse of the project.



Axonometric drawing of front and back, worm's eye perspective

The B-side expands its role from serving as mere structure to becoming a structuring device. This raises the question: how architecture would change if the B-side was the generator of the design process.



Back elevation



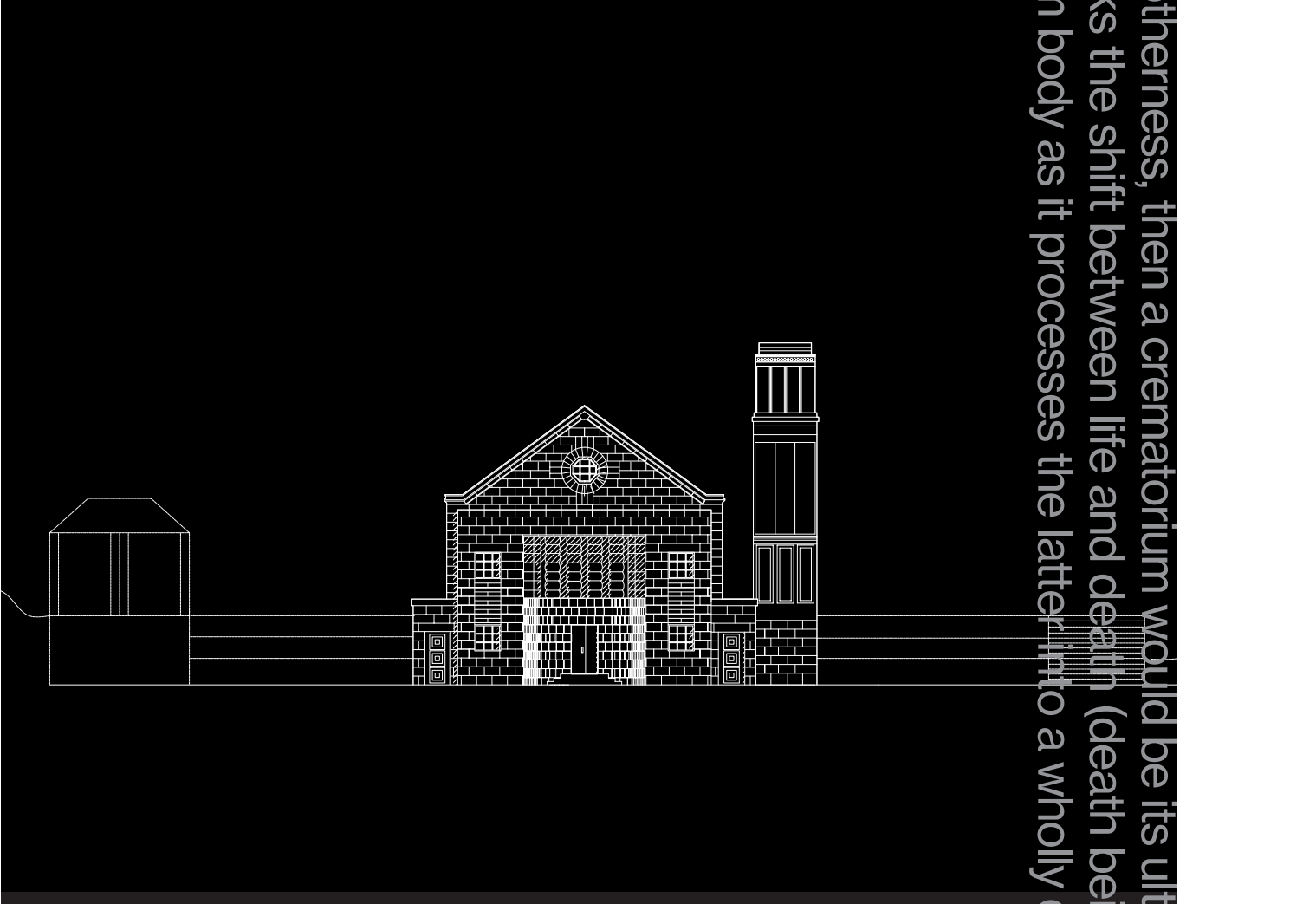
# MULTIPLE

Peter Behrens

Crematorium  
Hagen Delstern, Germany  
1906

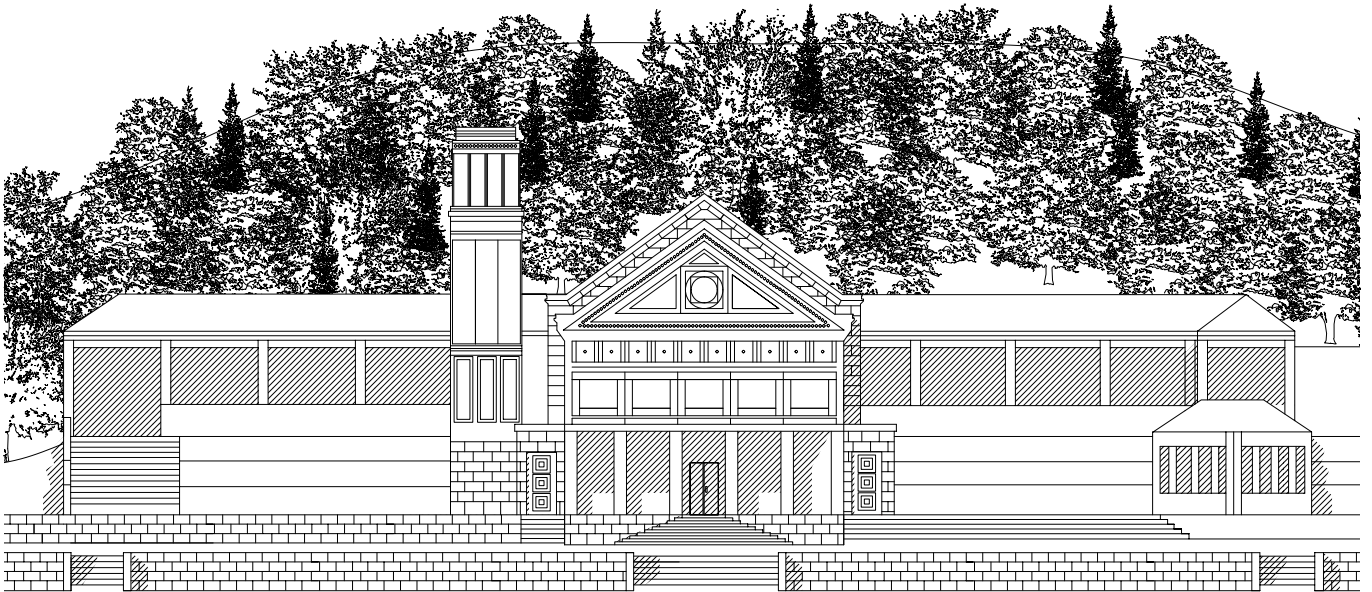
If the B-side relies on otherness, then a crematorium would be its ultimate fulfillment. The crematorium marks the shift between life and death (death being the B-side to life). It also disjoins soul from body as it processes the latter into a wholly different physical state.

# BA



Elevation, rusticated stone back

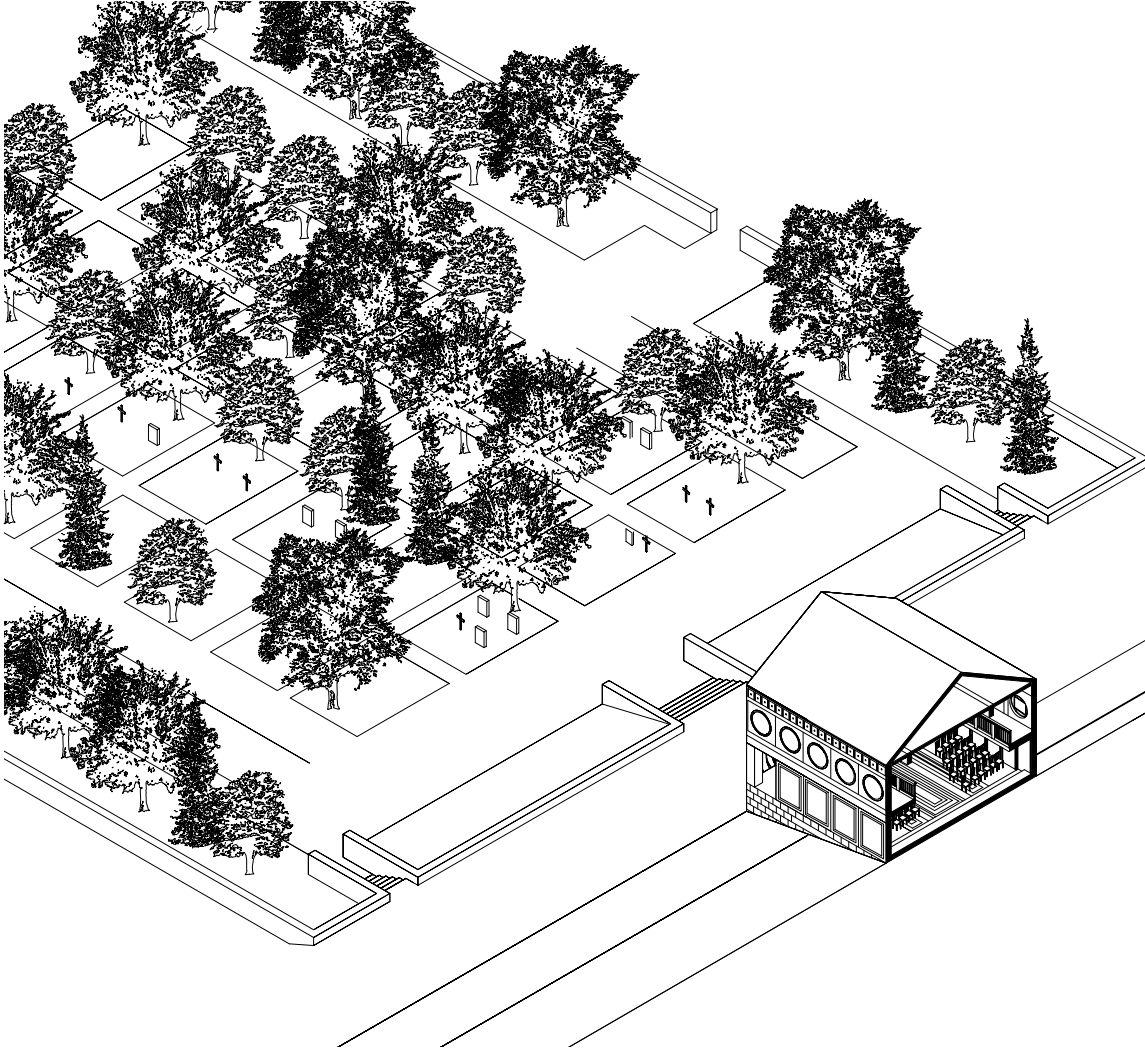
# ACKS



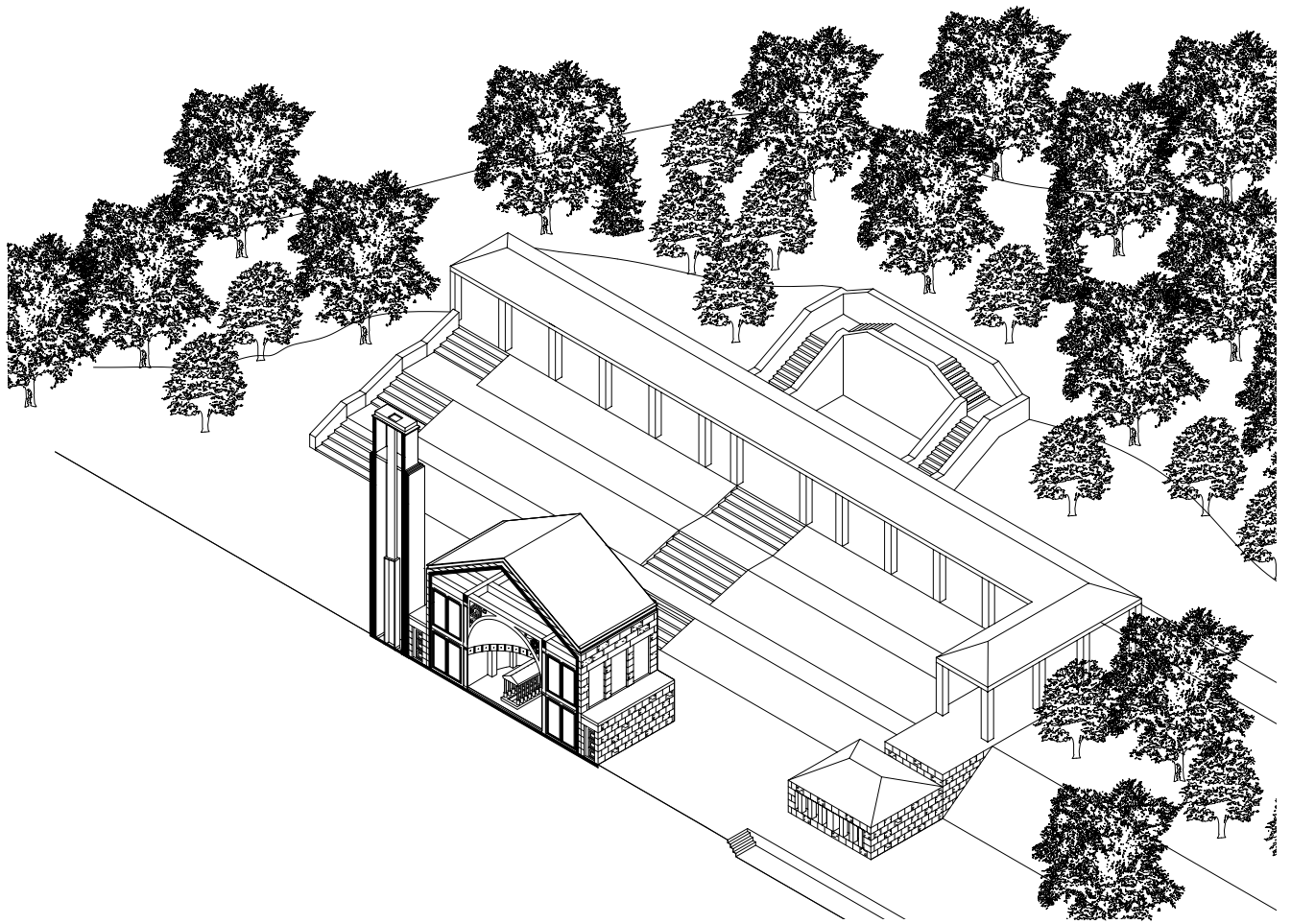
Elevation, polished front



In the Hagen crematorium, Behrens implements the B-side explicitly that the building becomes an allegory of passing away. The building itself transforms from the polished white marble front exterior to the rusticated stone back.

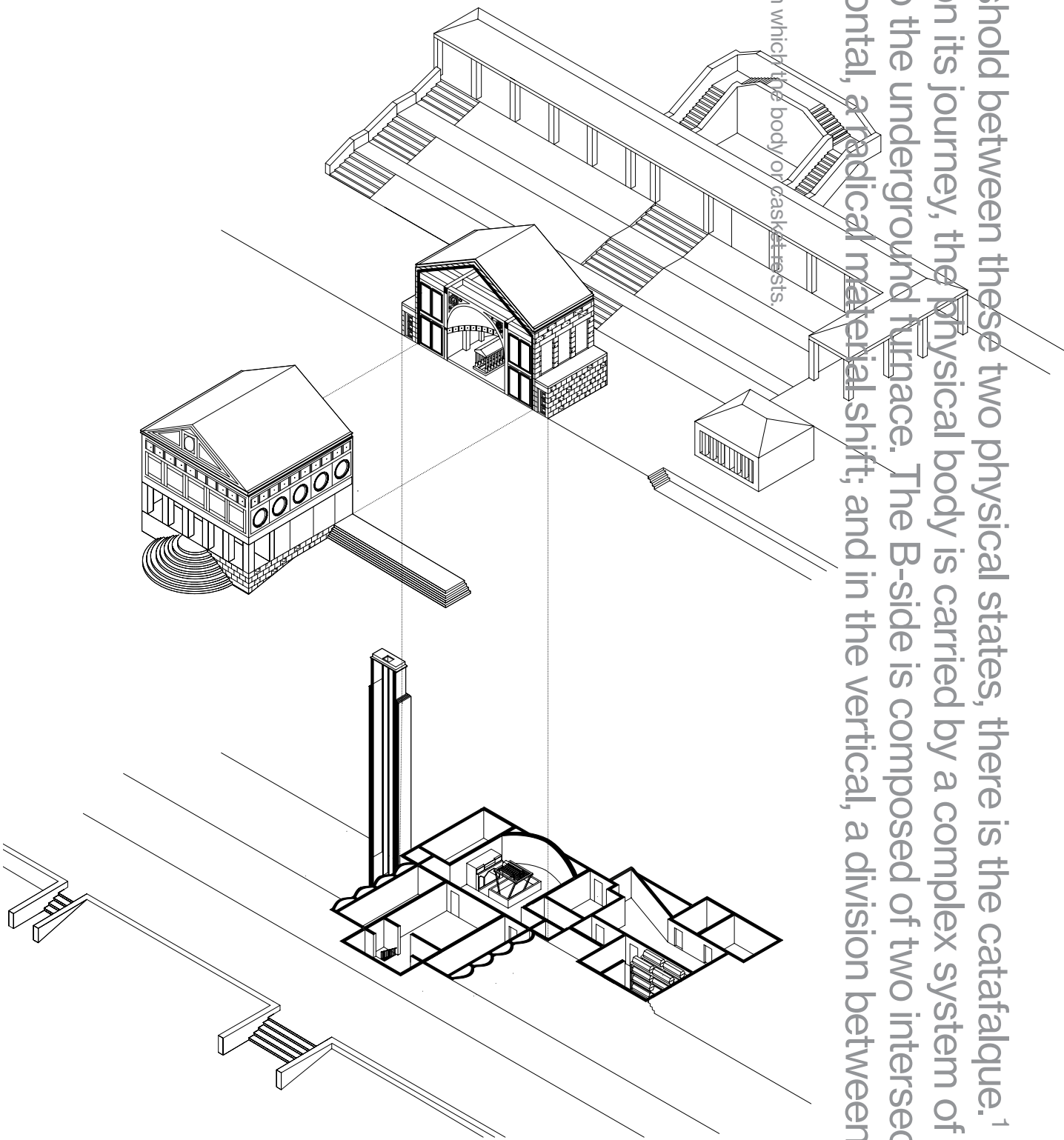


Exploded axonometric showing the split between front and back at the catafalque



At the threshold between these two physical states, there is the catafalque.<sup>1</sup> As the soul continues on its journey, the physical body is carried by a complex system of mobile platforms to the underground furnace. The B-side is composed of two intersecting backs: in the horizontal, a radical material shift; and in the vertical, a division between art and technology.

<sup>1</sup> The platform on which the body of a king rests.



Exploded axonometric, vertical division between art and technology



# WHETHER DOES THE BACK END?