

# CONSTRUCTING THE LIMINAL

*Applying the Japanese concept of Ma  
to the design of a liminal space*

JULIA BRANDBERG



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design of a liminal space*

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## ABSTRACT

The void is an important feature in the Japanese concept of Ma. Ma is found within many artistic fields in flexible and unique expressions, but in architecture it appears in the negative space of an environment and its potential of atmospheric character. It is an in-between space designed for heightened awareness in relation to its contrasting borders.

A western coined term, liminal spaces, is an in-between space, creating a form of threshold from one place to another, a transition. Traditionally the limen would appear in historical architecture at for example the Propylaea at The Acropolis, a monumental gateway between the outside of the temple area, and the sacred inside, consisting of the rite of passage's three phases: the separation, the limen, and the incorporation. In architecture, the rite of passage is a tool to enhance expectations while creating a moment of ambiguity and disorientation.

In recent years the term "liminal space" has boomed on online platforms such as Reddit, Instagram, and Youtube. The images shared online intend to capture and transfer the spectator(s) to

the unidentified and transitional realm portrayed. However, for architects, the spaces shared and discussed as examples of mysterious and atmospheric liminal spaces becomes an interesting reaction to our designed surroundings. It is something we should have in mind, especially as the online examples in most cases are unintendedly designed to trigger such a response.

This project aims to discuss and understand in-between space from a physical and atmospheric point of view and will be put into example through a speculative design at Gustaf II Adolf's square in Gothenburg. Here, the concept of the eastern Ma and western liminal spaces will work in symbiosis, contrasting, and complementing each other in the creation of a physical space that holds room for atmosphere on a more complex level than what the space, in relation to its rational concrete format as a space, has the expected outcome to create.

keywords  
Ma, liminal space, negative space, non-space

## STUDENT BACKGROUND

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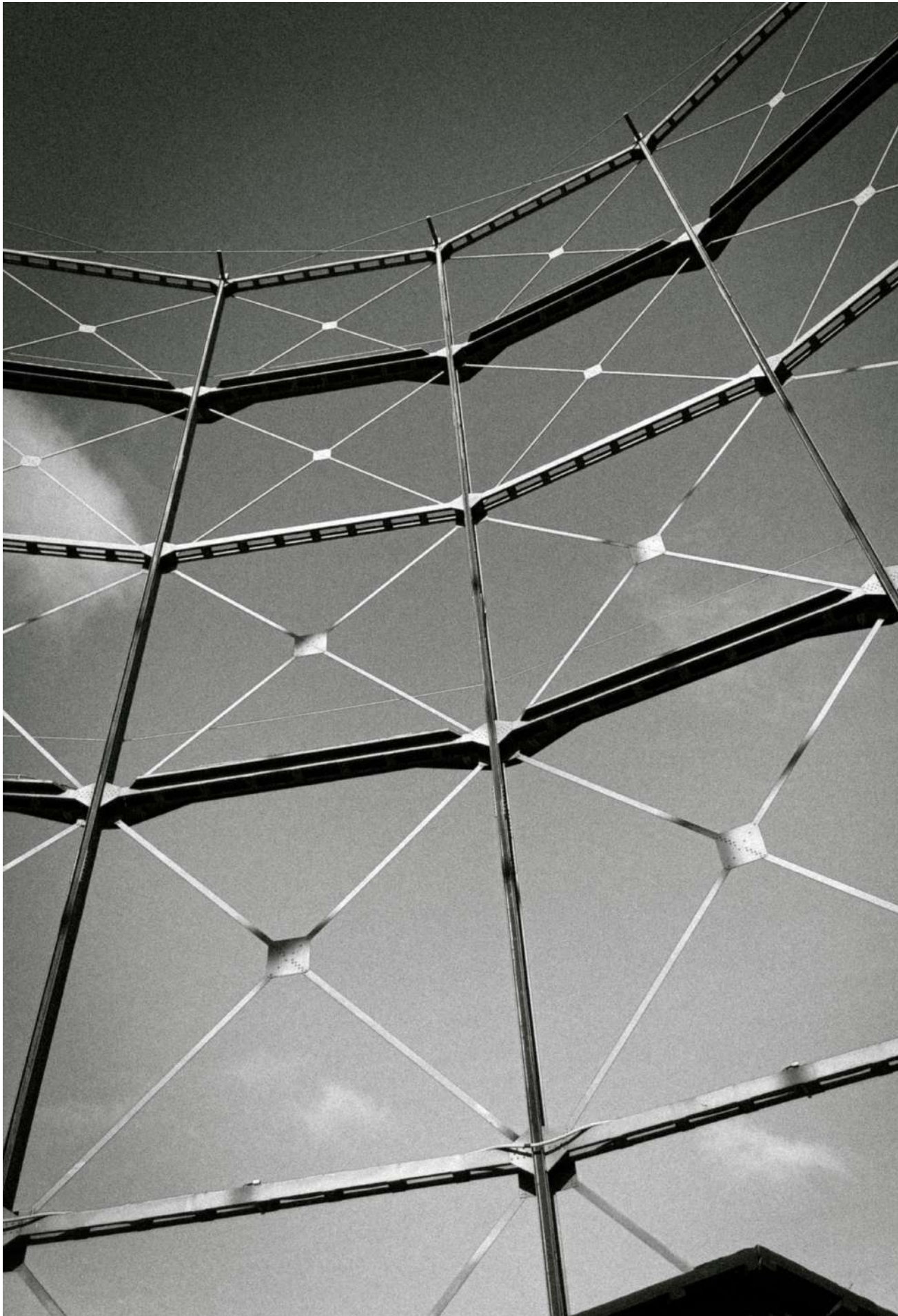
*It is early spring and the wooden ladders are up  
leaning towards elderly pine trees  
in a public garden of Kyoto.*

*The needles are to be handpicked  
by 60 men  
wearing wide brims and beige clothing*

*But not every needle, only very specific ones.  
This is for Ma to appear in between the branches.  
The gap is the motive.*



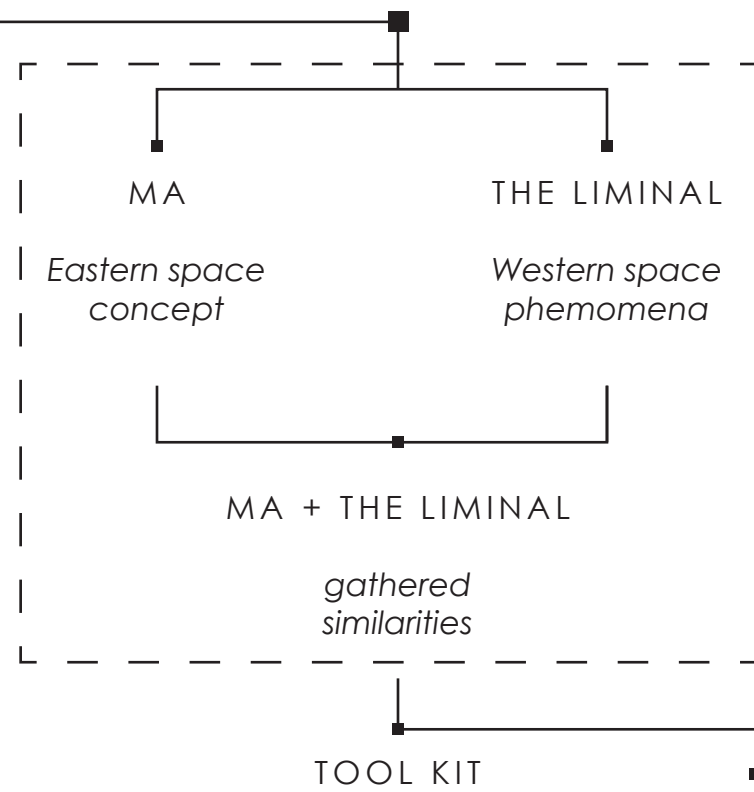
*An ungroomed pine tree in the woods of Småland*



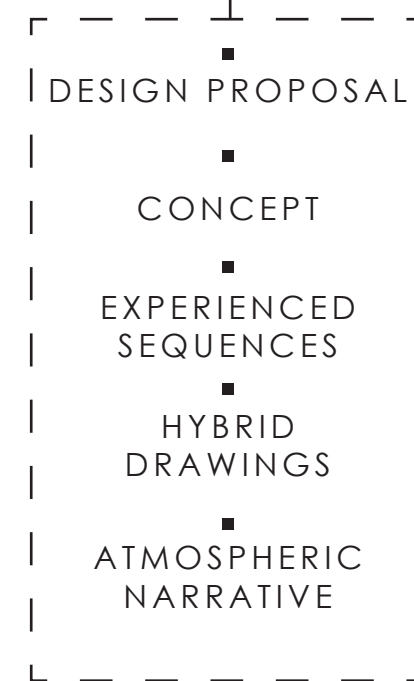
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METHOD  
*Research by design*



DISCUSSION

EXTRAS

Project structure diagram



## PURPOSE AND EXPLORATION

This is a speculative conceptual project about voids, spatial consciousness, place and non-place, and the Japanese concept of Ma applied to a western context of liminal architectural spaces.

Both Ma and the liminal holds room for a heightened awareness of space and emotion on a more complex level than what the space, in relation to its rational concrete format as a space, has the expected outcome to create. However, while the design of the former integrates this intentionally, the latter can be unintentional (i.e. not an active design outcome from the architect).

To grasp the concept of liminal spaces I will look at modern and classical examples from architecture where this concept is applied, the theory on liminal spaces, and the cultural and social aspects of liminal spaces. The popular culture's increasing interest for the modern liminal architecture indicates the power and potential of these in-between spaces, something architects should be aware of and have in mind when designing. As cities densify, and with liminal spaces being part of the public landscape, these spaces contribute greatly to how our surroundings are perceived. Architects can also use this knowledge of in-between spaces when designing as a tool for spatial dramaturgical effects.

The final design of this project is a constructed liminal space with added inspiration from the Japanese space-concept Ma. As a lowered hovering grid structure at Gustav Adolfs torg, the design will be an exploration on how to design a sequential experience, contrasting voids through for example atmosphere, mindfully added objects as a character enhancing ingredient, size, light and movement, as a tool for heightened awareness and curiosity. The experience is designed to awaken a subjective perception and physical experience of space at a specific time, with the possibility to be a changeable process in the mind of the occupant.

## THESIS QUESTIONS

How can the concept of Ma be used in the design of a liminal space?


How can abstract concepts like Ma and the liminal be concretized and added to the architect's toolbox?

*To the left: Vindarnas Tempe<sup>1</sup>*



## BACKGROUND AND THEORY





(Ma)

## THE CONCEPT OF MA AND ARCHITECTURE

In the Japanese language there is a character with the shape of a gate above and a sun below, portraying how the light finds its way through the open gap of a doorway. The character is called "Ma" and is an interpretation of empty space (Fridh, 2001).

Ma goes beyond the visual and the spatial and is used within many artistic fields. It is a concept which operates from a subjective perception and physical experience of space at a specific time, with the possibility to be a changeable process in the mind of the occupant.

The pause in music is Ma, and depending on the tune it can appear very different as the pause is in constant relation to what was, what's next and the ambiance of the piece. What does the pause sound like, silence? If yes, what does silence sound like?

The empty in-between space makes room for the subjective emotional dimension of a place, where the space is understood from a space of consciousness, a consciousness of space. This in turn, creates meaning for the space. (Fridh, 2001)

This way to reflect on space has traditionally been more an exception than a convention in the West as the Western culture has a historical preference towards the visual sense established by the ancient Greek philosophers. According to them, the object is to be separated from the subjective

experience in a rational manner (Fridh, 2001, Pallasmaa, 2005). The object(s) creates the space, the subjective experience of it is secondary. We tend to let our visual sense be the crucial sense and hence the vision tends to focus on the objectification of a room, whereas in the ma-mind-set, you and your experience, is part of the room. (Fridh, 2001)

The conventional western manner of understanding a room is through letting the vision observe and frame the space. You become an observer of the room, understanding it from a distance, with a central perspective mindset. In the Japanese tradition the room becomes personified, you experience it through body and mind. The room becomes a subjective and sequential experience that engages the participant as she moves through the room in relation to the physical body, and not visually from one point. This is also one of the reasons why architecture inspired by Ma isn't designed to give you an overview of the space before you enter it. Rooms reveal themselves in a sequential horizontal flow, adding layers of understanding until one eventually grasps the bigger picture of the overall space. (Fridh, 2001)

The closest we come to Ma in the West is the idea of phenomenology, which also explores ways to enrich the experience of architecture through senses and subjective perception (Fridh, 2001).

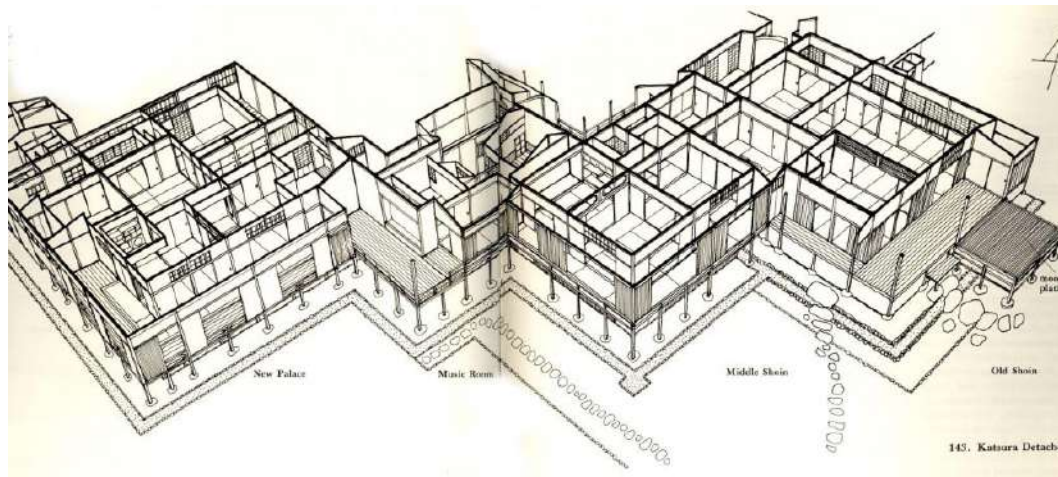




Imperial Villa Katsura Rikyu<sup>3</sup>



Imperial Villa Katsura Rikyu<sup>4</sup>

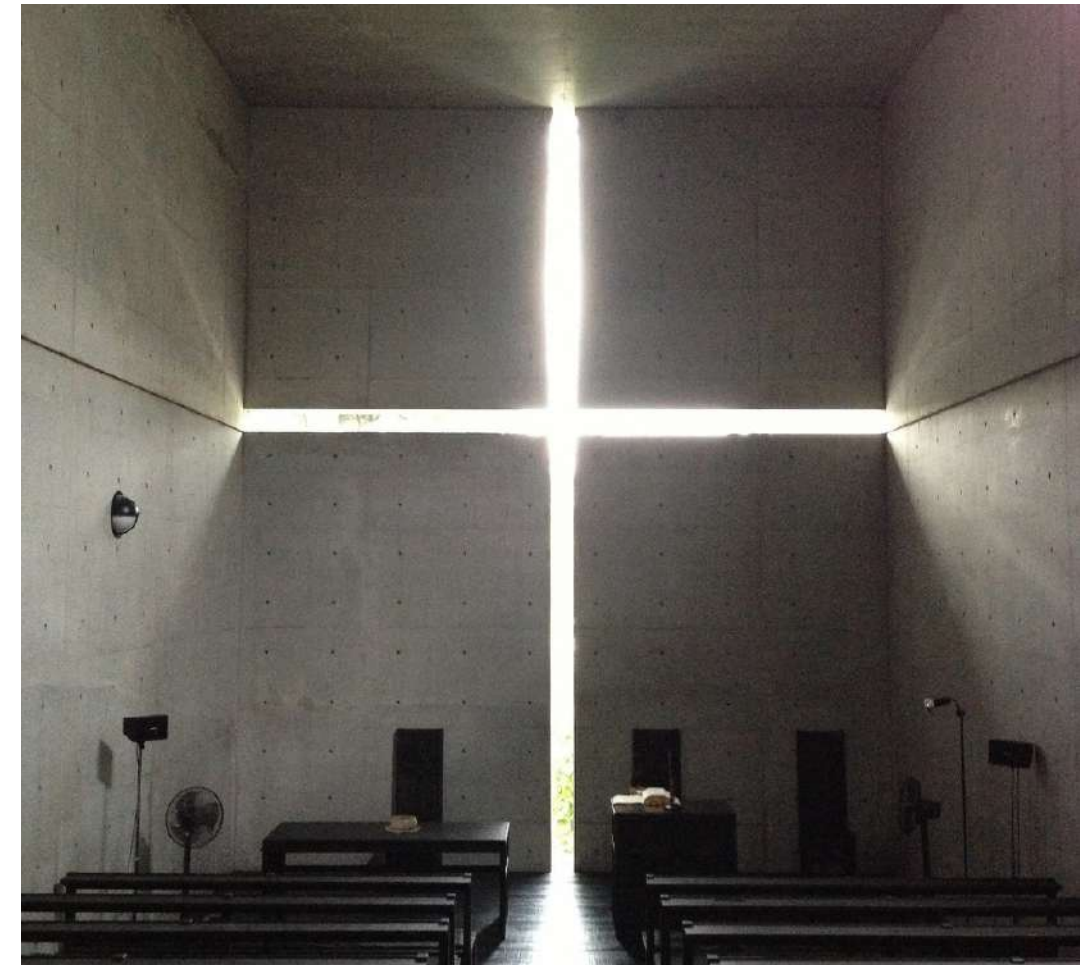


Villa Katsura<sup>2</sup>  
Kyoto, Japan. 1616

#### MA IN VILLA KATSURA

Villa Katsura is one of the most famous examples of Ma in architecture. Rooms are experienced sequentially as one room leads to another and they are a bit offsetted from each other, helping the flow in between the rooms. The neutral rooms allow the use for the rooms to constantly alter, making the happening the experience, and not the character of the room itself.

Rooms experience light in layers thanks to a gradual reveal of light. The darkest core is found in the room, the semi-transparent paper walls add another layer of light, as the sliding doors open the porch has one kind of light, and lastly the light of the open garden portrays the final layer of light.



Church of light by architect Tadao Ando<sup>5</sup>

#### MA AND SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Ma can also appear in the empty space, the negative space, framed by objects. Here in the Church of light, instead of designing a cross with a certain materiality, the cross becomes an ever changing motive due to the seasons changing, weather conditions

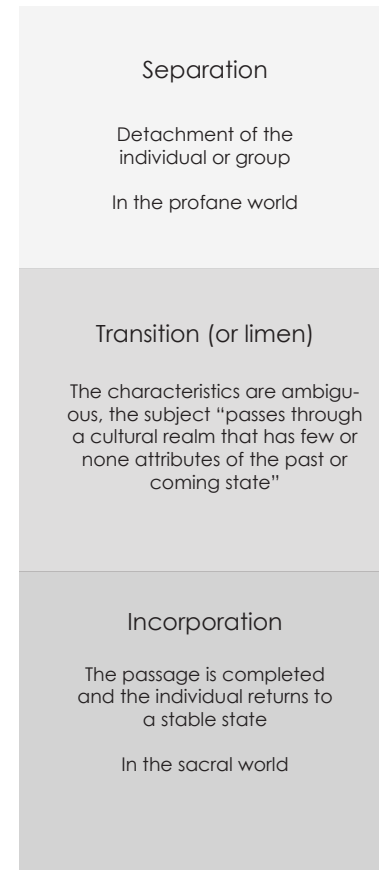
and lighting conditions, since it is the backdrop of the cross' empty space.

The empty space also leaves space for the occupant present to make a personal connection with the void.

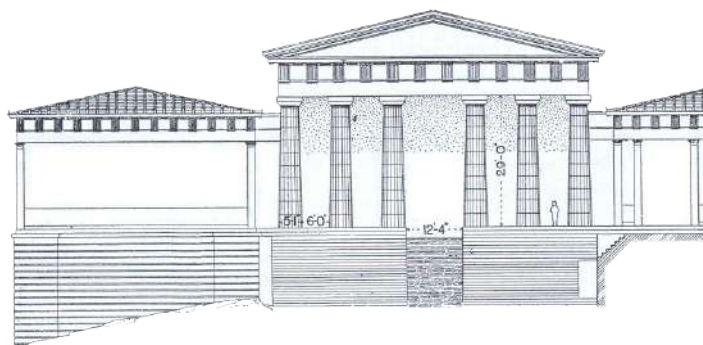
## THE ORIGIN OF THE LIMINAL

The use of the word liminal can be found in several fields such as the psychological and the spatial. The word limen derives from Latin and means "threshold" and describes the in-between state, the threshold between a point A to a point B, that can be experienced for example psychologically in the mind or in a spatial architectural context. Regardless of which field/context the word liminal is being used, it always describes a transition.

In the beginning of the 20th century the ethnograph Arnold van Gennep studied cultural rites of passage which he divided into three major phases: separation, transition and incorporation. He described this as ceremonies that accompany any individual going through "life crises" and that these transitions can be found in many aspects of one's life as a rhythmic flow of "quiescence and heightened activity" (van Gennep, 1960). A central concept in understanding the transitional phase is the dichotomy of the profane and the sacred, the before and after, and that the space in-between is where the liminal stage is found (van Gennep, 1960, Turner, 1969).

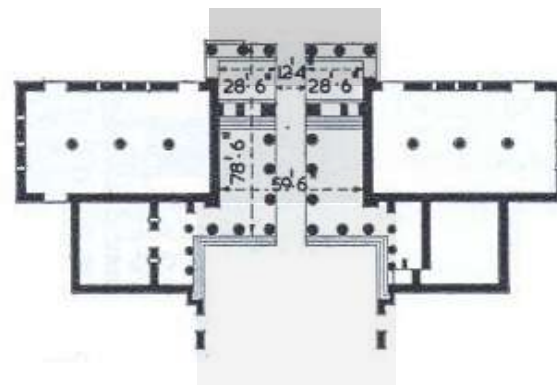


Description of the three phases according to Turner 1969



ELEVATION, Propylaea

EXAMPLE A, The Propylaea



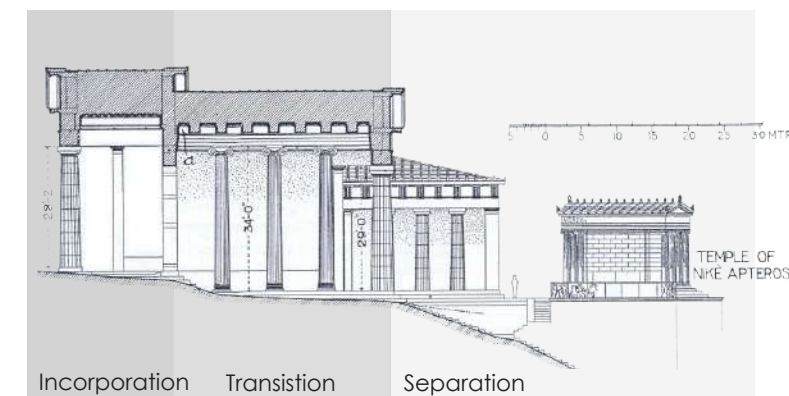
PLAN, Propylaea<sup>6</sup>

## LIMINAL SPACE IN ARCHITECTURE

Whilst in the cultural understanding of liminality, where one refers to the person, liminality in architecture refers to actual space between two more specifically defined spaces. The liminal space is an intermediate space separated from what it is in-between of, and has its own distinct ambiguous character. The liminal space creates an experience of discontinuity and as if entering a realm of something unknown, which in turn leads to a heightened awareness of the space as the occupant moves through the transformative threshold (Zimmerman, 2008).

The concept of the liminal is being used in both modern and classical examples of architecture. One classical example of the three phases of a rite of passage (separation, transition and incorporation) in architecture is to be found at the Acropolis and its entrance gateway, the propylaea. A propylaea is a monumental gateway usually leading to a temple or religious context (Cartwright, 2013).

When approaching the Acropolis you are still in the profane environment, you are in the city of Athens and in order to reach the sacred temple area the visitor will have to pass the Propylaea, a monumental gateway, the threshold between the profane and sacred, as it is the only way to enter the Acropolis (see example A). The two wings of the Propylaea and the initiating stairs belong to the separation phase, aiding the visitor to detach from the profane environment and welcoming him or her to approach the building. With a slight change in elevation the visitor moves on to the transitional stage. Surrounded by a narrow and enclosed passage of doric colonnade, setting a rhythm and vague idea of what the space is in-between of. It is only when the visitor passes a slight change in elevation again and enters the final volume, which is quickly opening up into the free space of the temple area, that the incorporation phase is reached. The rite of passage is complete (Zimmerman, 2008).



SECTION, Propylaea

Figures showing the three phases of a rite of passage, separation, transition and incorporation. Note the slight elevations and contrasting proportions between the different phases.





*"Image with elegiac auras" - a subgenre within the online liminal spaces community<sup>7</sup>*

## LIMINAL SPACE IN POPULAR ONLINE CULTURE

The online community for liminal space quickly became popular with "the Backrooms" meme in May 2019. The subreddit thread "r/LiminalSpace" was launched the same year in August and hit viral popularity through many shared images. (Knowyourmeme)

The "about" text for "r/LiminalSpace" explains:

"A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing. Liminal space is where all transformation takes place, if we learn to wait and let it form us." (r/LiminalSpace, 2019)

In the online liminal community the phase of transition, the limen, is the only

source of exploration. It doesn't have to be a passage, an in-between space where you are in transition, such as at an airport, a porch or a shopping mall are also examples of liminal space. According to the online community, so is "places that feel strangely familiar", "places you've been to in your dreams", etc (Knowyourmeme). It is a space of ambiguity, but can also be a space of wonder. One reddit user explains the liminal space experience as a "glitch in reality" ([deleted], 2021).

However, it is not unusual that the shared images have an uncanny vibe about them. The majority of the images being posted on the platforms tends to be of an abandoned character, both in the lack of human presence and the state of the architecture, and preferably awaken a sense of nostalgia to the observer (Hicks, 2021).

## THE LIMINAL, MY DEFINITION

Taking in the different understandings of liminal spaces, it is clear that they share the same core: the transition. This transition however, operates on a level that goes beyond the realm of only architecture, as it is closely intertwined with a subjective and psychological character. Regardless, one can think of the liminal as being an experience in-between a "before and after", indicating that the liminal operates within the dimension of time as well as space.

The concretizing of my understanding of the liminal, will be helpful later on in the design phase.

## GENERAL DEFINITION, SPATIAL DEFINITION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFINITION:

The liminal space is an in-between space of transition with a character different from the spaces it is connected to and in between of.

*Spatially*, the transition refers to the act of having to pass through one space in order to get to another, whether it is a passage or for example being in transit at an airport.

*Emotionally/psychologically*, the transition is a subjective experience; It is a state of mind, a feeling of ambiguity and disorientation.



*"The Backrooms" meme from 2019<sup>8</sup>. Wallpaper, flooring and ceiling all merge through colour. The yellow rooms are repeated without a clear end point, potentially repeating themselves infinitely.*

Posted by u/LeKrispyKreme

The world's longest tunnel seems a bit...off. **Classic Liminal**



*Spaces for transport are commonly shared and discussed in the Liminal community.*  
Post<sup>9</sup>

## NON-PLACES, TERRAIN VAGUE AND JUNKSPACE

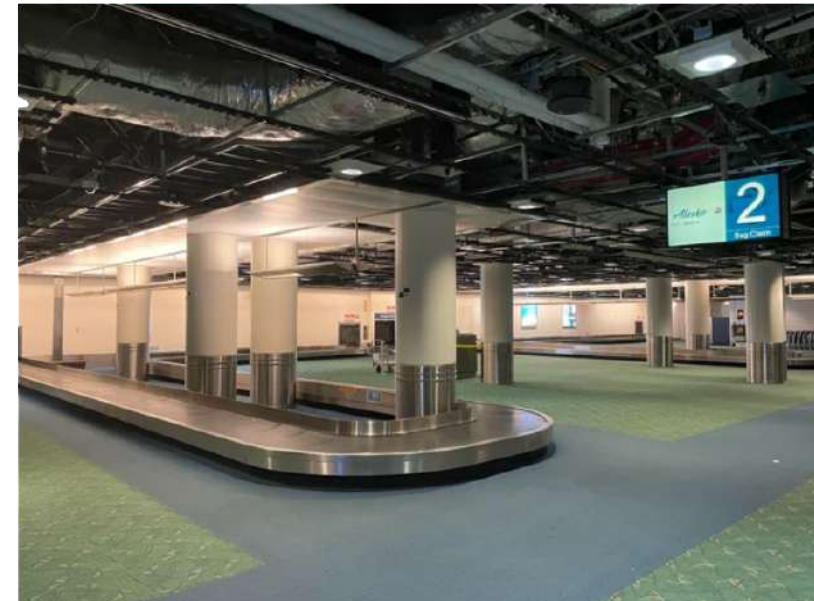
The french anthropologist Marc Augé speaks of "non-places" which one can argue has remarkable similarities to the in-between character of liminal spaces. The non-places are places of a very anonymous character which, according to Augé, lacks identity. Augé argues that these non-places, such as motorways, hotel rooms, airports and shopping malls, are the result of our supermodern society. These non-places are not integrated in their surrounding context and promote a place of transit and temporarity, a sense of detachment and loneliness since the non-places don't create a common ground for references in a group. However, Augé emphasizes that what defines a non-

place is subjective depending on your relation to the place/non-place (Augé, 2008).

Another common term relevant to the understanding of liminal spaces is Terrain vague, coined by Ignasi de Solà-Morales. A space of terrain vague refers to abandoned areas in the cities or in the periphery of cities with undefined limits and unspecific character (Hicks, 2021, Barron, 2014). In the book Terrain Vague these spaces appear as somewhat forgotten in the urban context as they exist under the radar of cultural, social and economic circuits. This in term emphasizes their ambiguous vibe (Barron, 2014).

Posted by u/johnych\_no 5 hours ago

PDX **Classic Liminal**



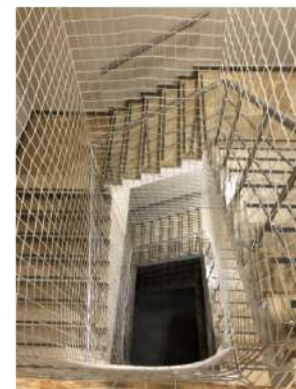
*Finding yourself in transit at an airport, an in-between space for arrival and departures before reaching your final destination.*  
Post<sup>10</sup>



In the manifesto "Junkspace " (2002) the dutch architect Rem Koolhaas strongly criticizes the supermodernism which has followed the modernist movement. He states that Junkspace, the architecture emerging from the supermodernism, is an endless celebration of technology where the spaces we design are practical and problem solving. Technological solutions, such as air conditions and large glazed facades dictate the design rather than letting the art of architecture create a place of detailing, belonging and meaning. Koolhaas writes that Junkspace "makes you uncertain where you are, obscures where you go, undergoes where you were." (Koolhaas, 2002).

The places created belong to nowhere in particular and "cannot be grasped, Junkspace cannot be remembered" (Koolhaas, 2002). Often in the liminal spaces-thread images of abandoned or empty malls and commercial buildings are shared. Shopping malls, offices and airports are typical examples of supermodernism according to Koolhaas, and he compares these Junkspaces to "radioactive waste" since the materials and techniques don't age until they all suddenly turn into "a slum overnight without warning" (Koolhaas, 2002).



Took a photo of this weird hallway. The first thing that came to my mind when I saw it was Liminal Space. [Classic Liminal](#)

 $a^{11}$ Echos **Classic Liminal**b<sup>12</sup>fools weird **Classic Criminal** $C^{13}$ 

The Northern line  

 $d^{14}$ 

Posted by: [L. Carstairs](#)

storage spaces are eerie af [Classic Liminal](#)

e<sup>15</sup>

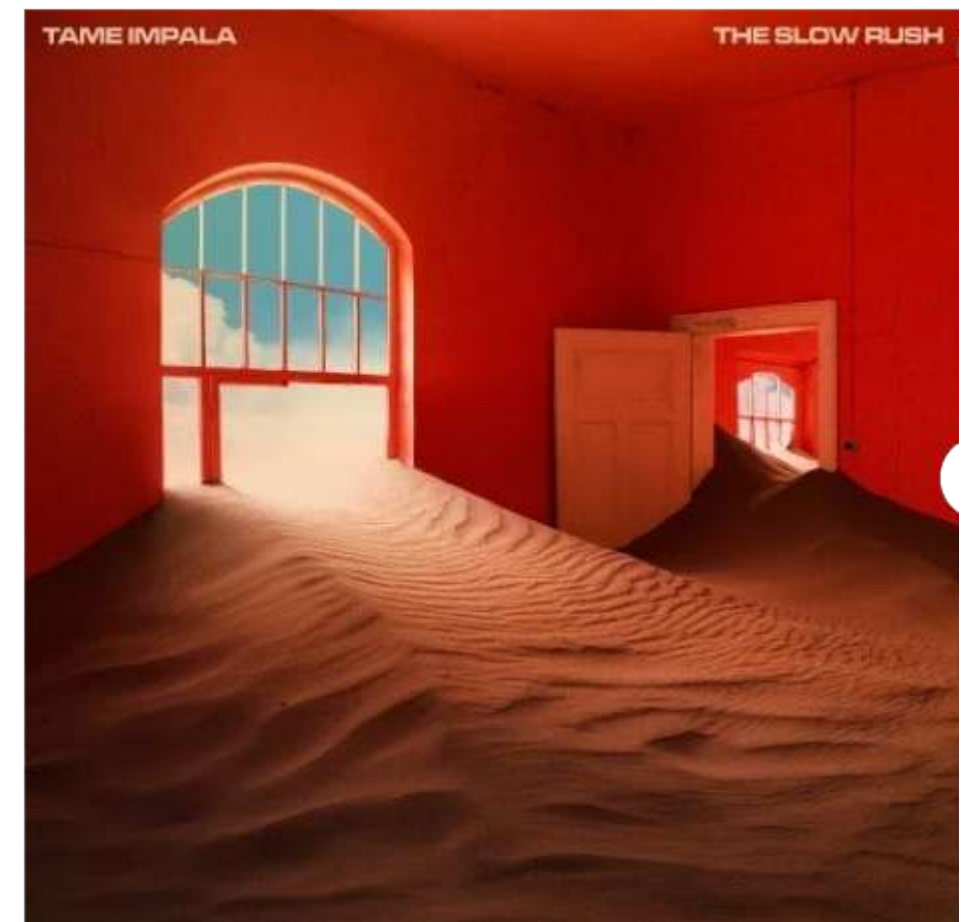
some orange to juggle with **Classic Liminal**



$f^{16}$

Posted by u/SirLemonLimeIII

Does anybody else think that Tame Impala's albums give a liminal vibe? **Pop Culture**



Posts from the "r/LiminalSpace" reddit thread

 $g^{17}$

## MA AND THE LIMINAL, REFLECTIONS

Looking at the identity of Ma and the Liminal, their similarities are surprisingly striking, although expressed in different spaces and methods. While the liminal captures a heightened awareness when moving between one space to another, Ma offers an in-between space of consciousness and presence in rooms of stillness and reflection. The created heightened awareness of space in Ma is usually intentionally created, while the examples raised by the online liminal community shows unintentionally designed spaces of heightened awareness.

The subjective experience is primary in both the Ma and the liminal, and the western gaze of objectification of a room is not the driving force when experiencing a liminal space, something the online liminal culture verifies.

The feeling of wonder, awe and mystery concerning these spaces are very useful for architects when designing environments with certain effects. However, for the architect, it is important to demystify in order to understand what factors that together help create a space which triggers the heightened awareness in this way, and how.

Important areas that I have identified, which provide the foundation for the architectural strategies I have established and used in the creation of my final design proposal, revolves around light, time, movement and sequential spatial experience.

Light can tell a lot about a space, its shape, its size, its depth, whether it has a gradient of light intake, i.e. Does it hold room for both light, shadows and darkness? What's the hue of the darkest spot and what is the hue of the lightest? The gradient light experience can also be enhanced by materials, if it is a semi-transparent material, like a traditional Japanese wall sheet, it will

transmit some light to the room, but not as much as a glass window. It will also showcase a texture from the sheet, as well as portray silhouettes from the outside, layering the perceived depth of the initial space.

Time is relative in a conscious experience of space. The perceived time to travel through a space has little to do with what the watch says. A straight narrow passage with for example a narrow rhythmic pattern (i.e. accentuated beams or doors) will be perceived very differently from a large round room where you are tempted to dwell. Equipment for setting a pace or rhythm can be achieved through the architectural design of a space or through added objects, such as a stone path setting a rhythmic flow depending on the size of the stones and the distance between them. Stones far apart from each other will set a different pace compared to stones distanced in a comfortable walking pace. Sticking to a rhythm, i.e. repeating the same phenomena in the same way over and over gives one atmosphere, while changing rhythm will give another atmosphere. In the liminal long passage, the repetition of for example a vault can give an infinite vibe of a never ending space with an almost hypnotising even repetition.

Architectural tools can also be used to direct movement and flow through a space. Light can lead the way into another space, a sliding door can change one space into another, a physical threshold can work as an accent or for example a blockage when entering a space, an added freestanding object can manipulate how you otherwise would move in that space. A freestanding row of pillars could for example offer an alternative way of moving in the space as you could move on one side of the row, or the other, or you could zig-zack between them. The height of the pillar can give you an im-

pression of the height of the room, especially in relation to the height of your own body. An added centrepiece can lure you into exploring the inner parts of a space instead of staying safe in the corners of a space, while it also can awaken your curiosity of the object itself. Not having an object, and letting the negative space engage on a subjective experience as the cross in the Church of Light, can be an equally powerful tool. These tools help the sequential experience of spaces, creating a push and pull effect of movement, setting a sequential narrative of the spaces experienced through a subjective and physical perception.

The sequential experience is evident in the rite of passage's three phases. Emphasised through for example elevation and contrasting shape/size of space creates clear spatial thresholds between the three characters of the phases i.e. the separation's ability to welcome, detach and create a sense of expectation, the transitional narrow and closed shaped space reluctant to revealing anything about where it's heading hence creating a vibe of disorientation, ambiguity and perhaps even self-doubt, and finally, the incorporation space embracing you back into a context and allowing you to regain visual control.

Posted by u/Buffbigw76



The Salk Institute, architect: Louis Kahn for scientist Jonas Salk in La Jolla, California. Est. 1965

Classic Liminal

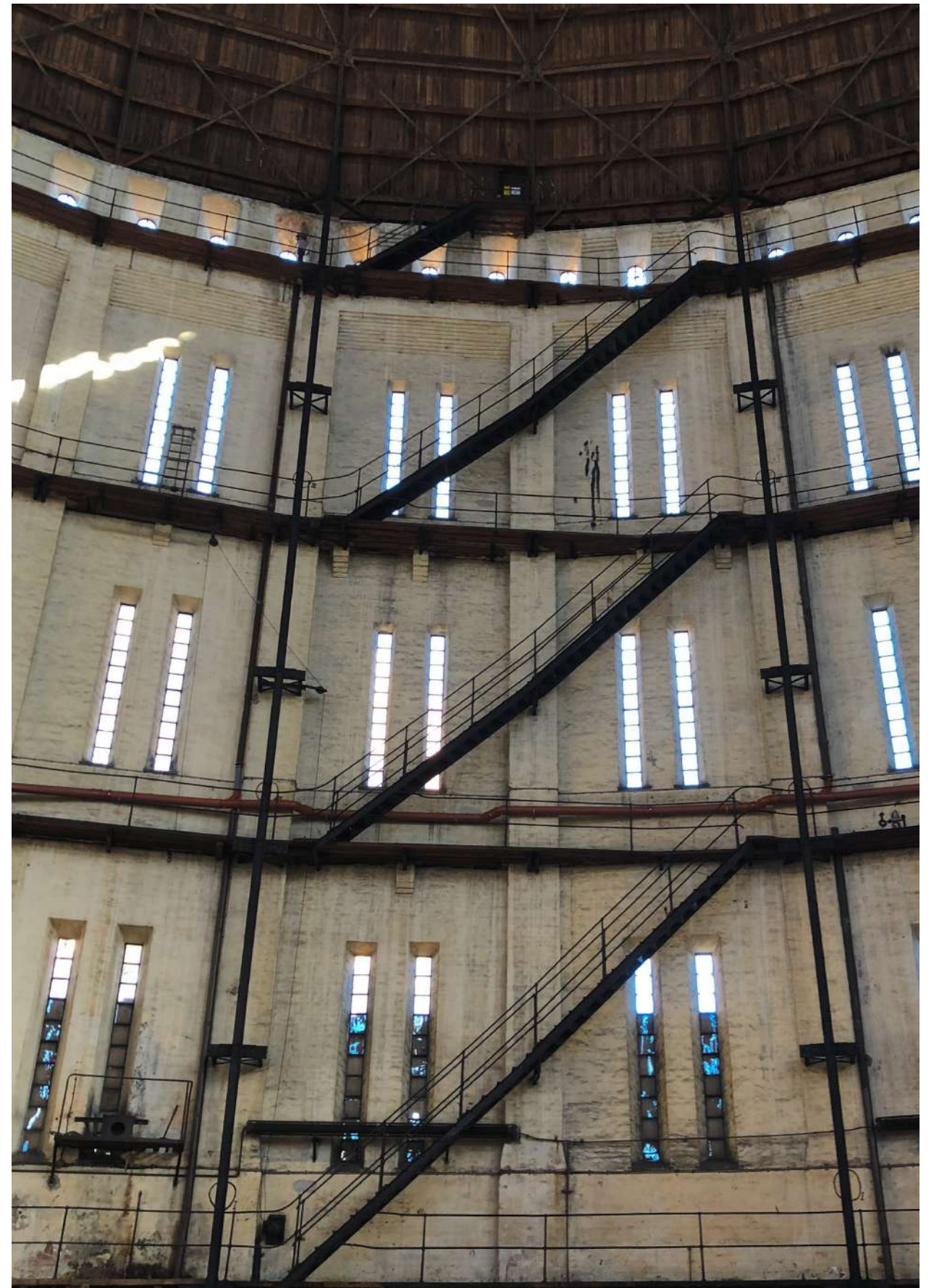


*The courtyard of Salk institute by Louis Kahn<sup>18</sup>. It was designed to be experienced as an architectural mandala through the movement and flow within and in-between the buildings. The courtyard is lifted in the Liminal spaces community.*



## METHOD , TOOLS AND REPRESENTATIONS

To the right:  
The insides of "Gasklockorna" at  
Hjorthagen, Stockholm.  
Architect: Ferdinand Broberg.



CONCEPT AND METHOD

The concept of Ma and the liminal has provided me with summarized strategies for an architectural toolbox when exploring and constructing the design of my liminal space.

In other words, the toolbox is my method for how and why the spaces I've constructed are created, whilst the variation of representation techniques I use for different kinds of drawings is the method I use to narrate my design.

The choice of site will be based on some key properties such as space, light, and flow, as they are part of what characterises the liminal and Ma. Therefore it is important to find a site with an existing organic flow of people and of a certain size that allows for a variation of these characteristics, such as a public space. Now, a public space that is already highly programmed in its movement through for example defined paths, elevations, and added objects limits my ability to design freely. Therefore I will look for a public space with a natural flow of people that is fairly unprogrammed. The site will act as a speculative testbed for my design.

AIM AND PURPOSE

The process and final design of this master thesis is to encourage discussion about space, atmosphere and architectural potential concerning the liminal and Ma in a speculative design.

REPRESENTATION TECHNIQUES

As the project operates through engaging with the user, communicating this through architectural representations can become a challenge. However, the representation becomes a perspective and a way to outline how to read the project.

The conceptual drawings mean to introduce the narrative of the conceptual design.

Zoomed-in chronological sequences and situations of the experienced journey reveals closer details of material and architectural blueprints and communicate the "from one room to another" experience.

The section enhances the atmospheric character as well as its conventional relation to its context.

The illustrative plan becomes a hybrid narrative tool, illustrating setting in relation to unfolded facades and axonometric structural design for depth.

Hence, the representational drawings show a wide range of getting deeper and deeper acquainted with the project.

DELIMITATIONS

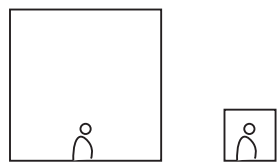
My perspective and contributions will be influenced by my Western background, whether I like it to or not. Unfortunately I have never been to Japan, and the exposure to the concept of Ma comes entirely from literature, photos, documentaries and personal reflections.





These are the tools that I have defined, which will be used in my design process. They can be combined freely to compose specific spaces.

A common liminal passage can for example consist of a combination of tool 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12.



1. Open vs narrow spaces.
- An effectful strategi is to contrast size of negative spaces, ie. wide open space - narrow space - big open space



2. Transcperancy in materials
- e.g. a half-transparent material can indicate a depth beyond the space itself



3. Gradient of light exposure



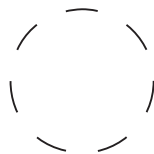
4. Sequential experience
- i.e. the route unfolds as you move through one space to another. The route is not a clear from the beginning of the journey.



5. Elevations
- To for example direct movement. A possiblity to create a sensation of expectation Affects the sequential experience of spaces (can have threshold-like qualities)



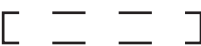
6. Transition
- i.e. An in-between space with a clear movement direction. You are not meant to be hold up here, it is a transition space to get to a more dwell-friendly space.



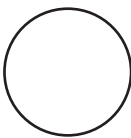
7. A "still room"
- e.g. A space with an atmosphere where you are tempted to dwell



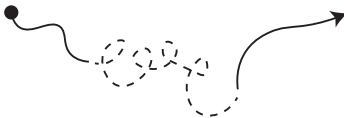
8. Rhythm
- Sets a pace through e.g. distance between rhythmic indicators (e.g. beams, doors, etc) and the repetition pattern



9. Threshold
- i.e. an indicator of a new space formation - creates heightened awareness



10. Objects
- An object can steer direction, create atmosphere, work as a relational measurement tool, help the occupant subjectively experience/contemplate the space



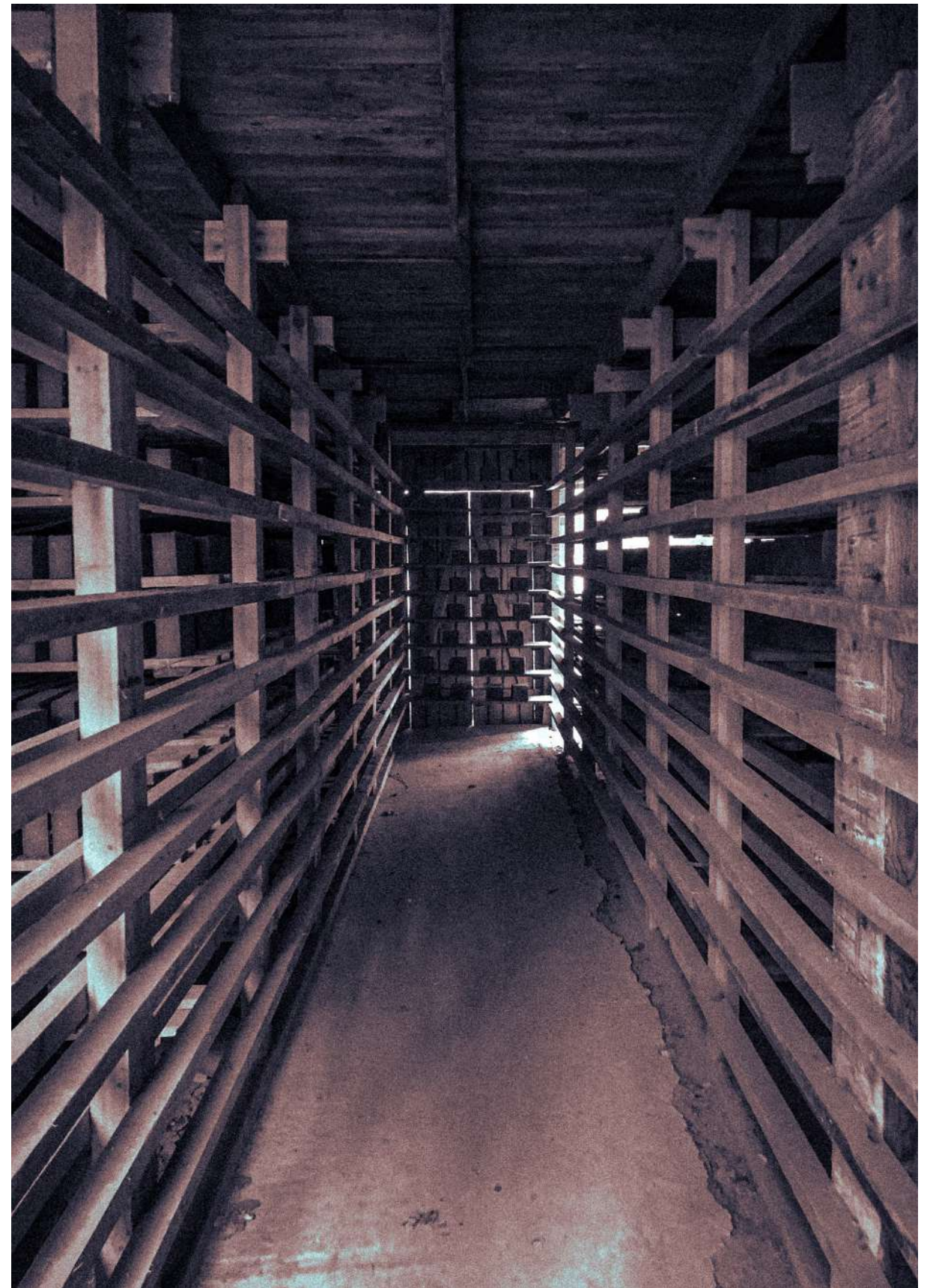
11. The rite of passage's three stages: seperation, transition and incorporation
- A dramaturgical effect to sequantially move thorough individually characterised spaces



12. Colour
- With the possibility to accent e.g. a rhythm or create (subjective) atmosphere

## DESIGN PROPOSAL

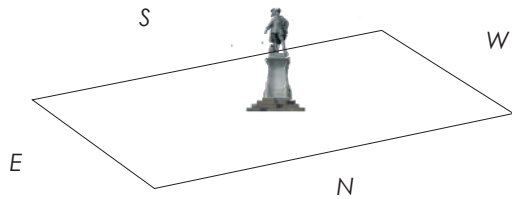
*To the right: Shadow and light working  
with the half transparent walls at the  
drying process of bricks at Horns brick-  
yard, Skövde.*





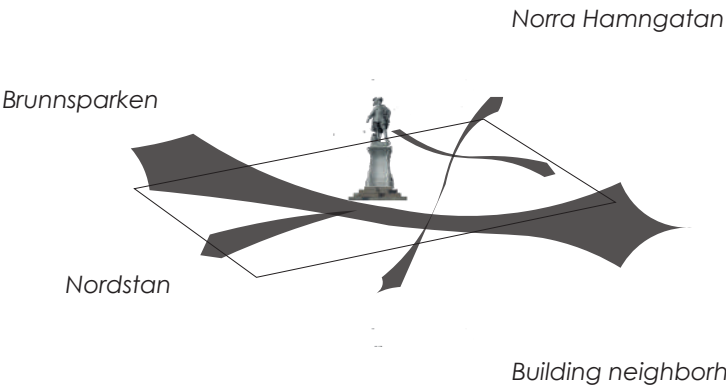


*Gustav Adolf's square, a site with a historical and symbolic past for the city of Gothenburg.*



*Open, fairly unprogrammed square, with even conditions in materiality and few obstacles that could indicate you to walk in a certain direction.*

*A flat space that doesn't steer movement in any particular way across the square (apart from the statue).*



*Observations from how people move at Gustaf Adolf's square.*

*Some areas of the square have movement and flow, while others don't. Some spots are so unused that one could think a solid object stands there.*

THE SITE

The choice of site is based on the conditions found at Gustav Adolf's square. It is rare to come across a large open square as the one at Gustaf Adolf's square which is flat and with a fairly free program of space. The defined square, which is marked out with a cobblestone grid pattern, measures 70x50 metres. In the middle of the square you find a large statue of Gustaf Adolf. Apart from the statue you have no other objects steering the movement across the square, and there are no elevations or natural landscaping features to influence the movement. Benches, flag posts and city lights are found in the edges of the large square, meaning they don't interfere with the use of the square either.

However, the site is of historical and symbolic value as this is the spot where Gustaf Adolf founded the city of Gothenburg over five hundred years ago. The square was then used as the market square but stopped being used for that when the statue of Gustaf Adolf was erected in 1848 (Wimarson, 1923). Today the square functions as a meeting spot and a place for occasional demonstrations. It is also an important site from a city establishment perspective, as the Town hall, the City council and the Bourse are situated facing this square. The facades of these buildings are often visited and admired for their aesthetics.

The square is also situated in the centre of Gothenburg, and therefore part of a city pulse. Although the space might not be used as intensely as its neighbour, Brunnsparken, it is frequently used as a way to take a short cut across the

square from one corner to the other between Norra hamngatan - Nordstan and Office area - Brunnsparken.

Studying the movement at this space during different times of the day I've noticed an interesting pattern in how people move across this square. As the square has few limitations or indications on routes to take across the square I was surprised to see that the flow of movement could be narrowed down to the paths shown in the figure to the left. The paths pass almost exclusively the statue's North side in both main path movements which is somewhat peculiar as similar spatial freedom exists on the south side of the statue.

In relation to the movement across the square, the space becomes an interesting spatial experience when moving from the East and the West areas. The square becomes an in-between space, not part of the destination nor where you came from. The wide open space of the square does not remind you of the office area's narrow roads framed by building blocks, nor the hectic infrastructural junction at Brunnsparken/Nordstan. The architectural setting and atmosphere of the square therefore displays liminal characteristics.

As the design is of a speculative character, I borrow Gustaf Adolf's square as a testbed for exploring the potential of the liminal and Ma. In my design proposal I will integrate existing details and features found in the facades and square. My intervention will also turn up the volume of the already existing liminal character of the square.

DETAILS FROM THE SITE

The site offers great detailing and features found in the facades and in the square. As I in my design proposal will work with directing movement, I intend to echo these findings from the site to appear in my constructed liminal space as an intentional spatial ingredient. The object will affect how you move in the space and contribute to individual atmospheres. Here are some of the objects I can work with:



*The statue of Gustaf II Adolf*



*Foundation to flag post*



*Relief*



*Columns*



*Balustrade*



*the extracted column of the balustrade*



*Sculptures*



*Stone stairs*



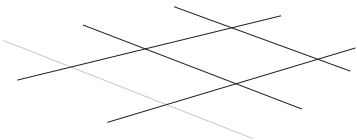
*The free stone brick*



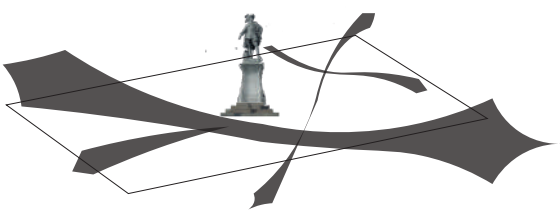
*Vaults*



*City lights*



*The visual grid from the white and gray cobblestones*



*The movement*

CONCEPT INTERVENTION

The concept for the site is to turn up the volume of the liminal experience here using the already identified paths of movement across the square. The design will apply the rite of passage's three stages, with an emphasis on the transitional (liminal) phase.

In order to involve the typical ingredients of the liminal and Ma, such as the gradient of light, transparency in material, elevations, the sequential experience, rhythm, the accentuating and atmospheric effects of an added object, and other consciousness-creating factors, I have lowered my structure into the ground. This way I can work with a gradient of light exposure and elevations. It also gives me the dramatic effect of separating oneself from the city pulse through gradually descending stairs along the outlines of the excavated volume which has a different kind of soundscape, another visual language and a new spatial context.

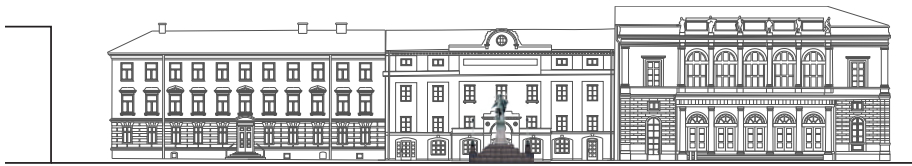
Lowering the structure also gives space to the authoritarian buildings at the site, visually leaving the square intact. It also allows me to design more freely and lets the details from the site echo into my design through added objects.

When you are descended here you will enter a grid consisting of a three dimensional layered rebar structure. This represents the liminal stage and inside

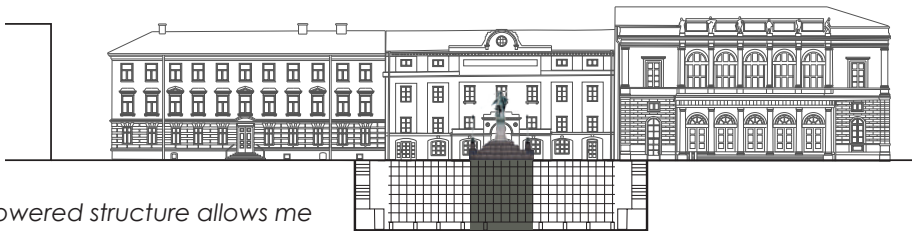
this structure a series of sequentially experienced contrasting and consciousness-creating spaces will unfold to the occupant. The added objects will help with this direction of movement and add to the sensation of a heightened awareness. Some spaces will be designed for you to move through quickly, others for you to dwell in. The half-transparency of the rebar will help create a sense of depth, a thick layer of rebars will create a darker and more solid expression, while sometimes the sky will be clearly visible through only one or two layers of rebar.

The half-transparency will also allow you to see beyond the space you find yourself in, and perhaps in the periphery, you will see another human exploring another part of this liminal experience.

The rebar-structure is also meant to give you a hovering surreal experience, you are neither on the bottom nor at the top of this structure, you are moving around in an in-between space. This sensation is further emphasised by the half-transparent rebar material.



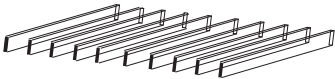
Leaving the site visually intact, giving space to the buildings and history of the site.



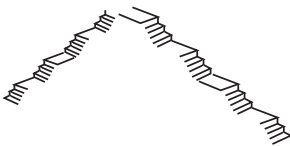
A lowered structure allows me to work with characteristics of the liminal and Ma, ie. lighting, elevation, etc.



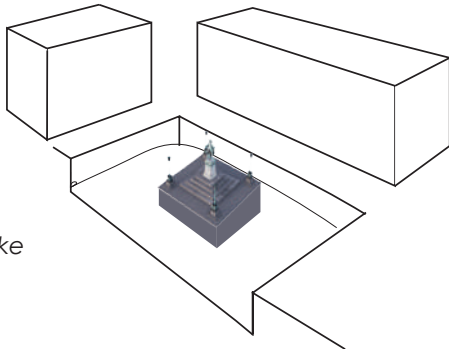
A rebar grid containing a variation of spaces to sequentially unfold in different ways which will create heightened awareness and subjective experience.



A set of beams separates the structure from the ground for a hovering sensation.

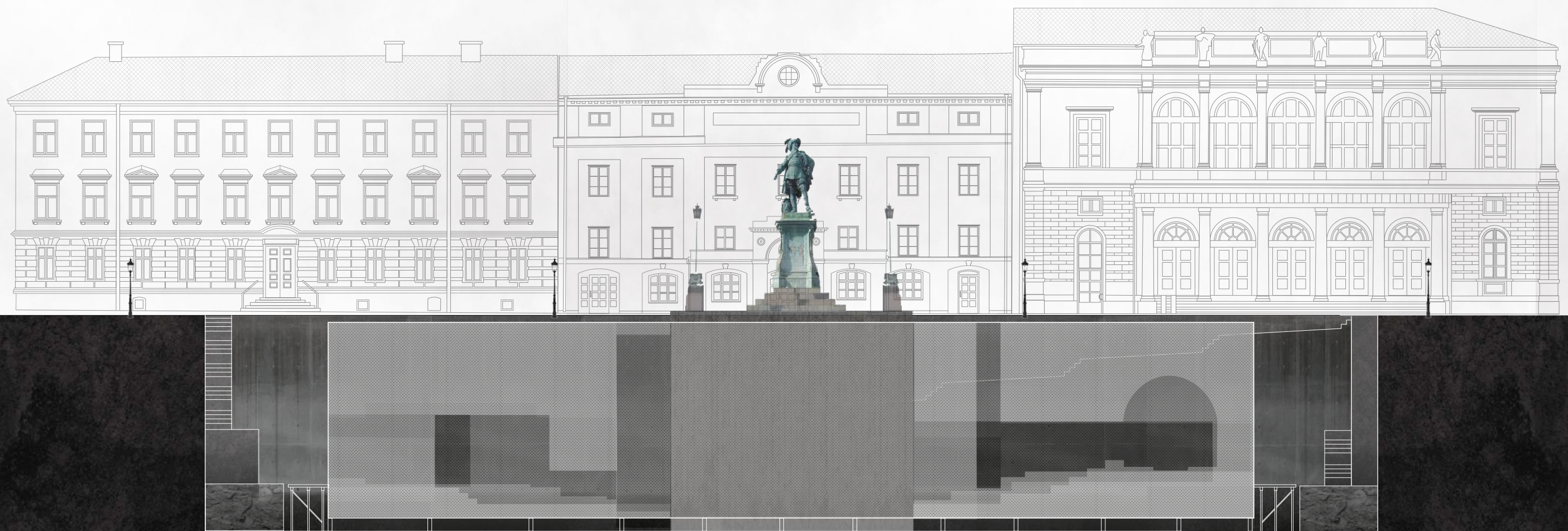


A long stair separating the occupant from the city pulse, leading you down into the liminal structure.



The excavated volume where the design construction will take place.





SECTION A-A, 1:200

0 5 10 20m



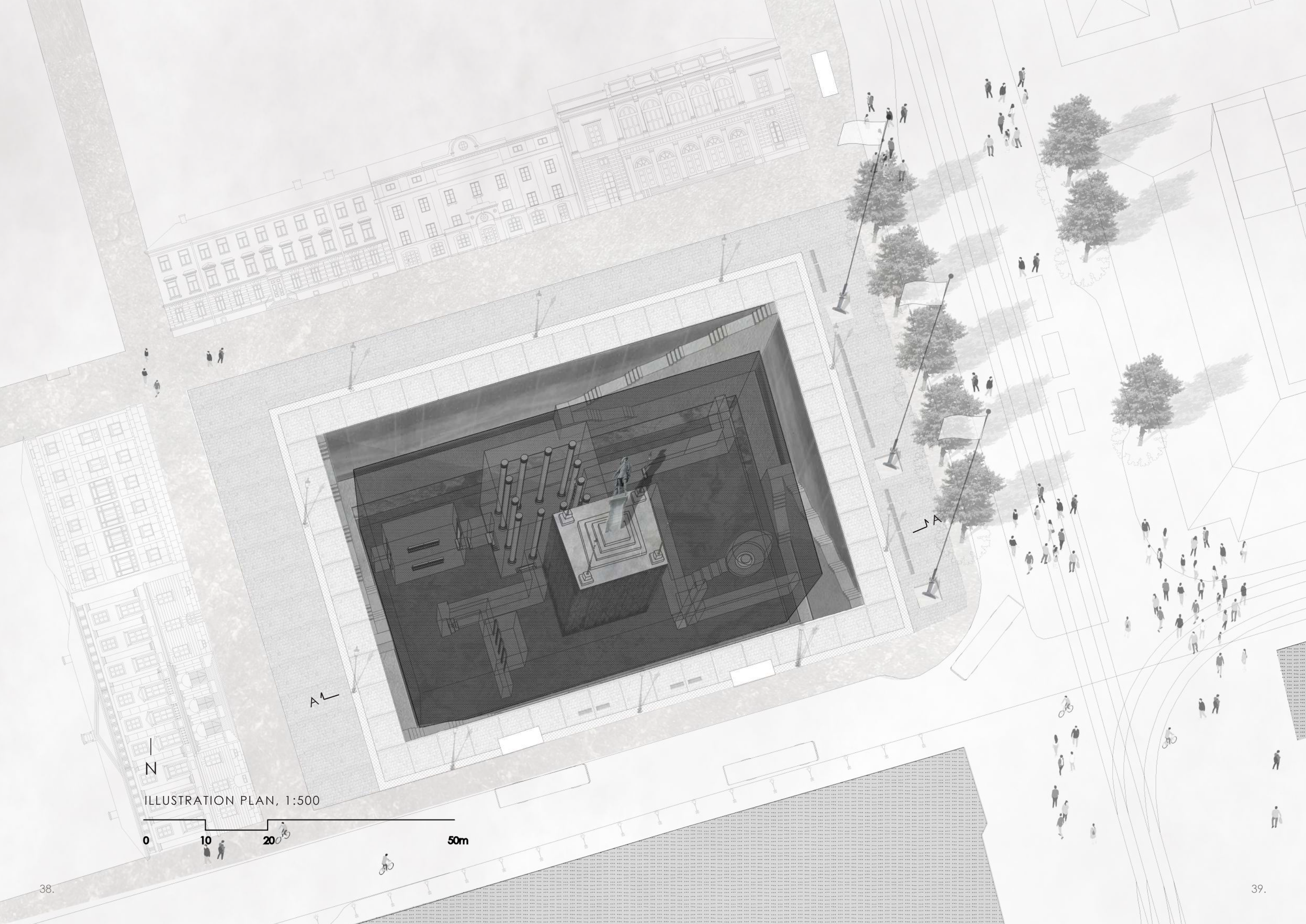


ILLUSTRATION PLAN, 1:500

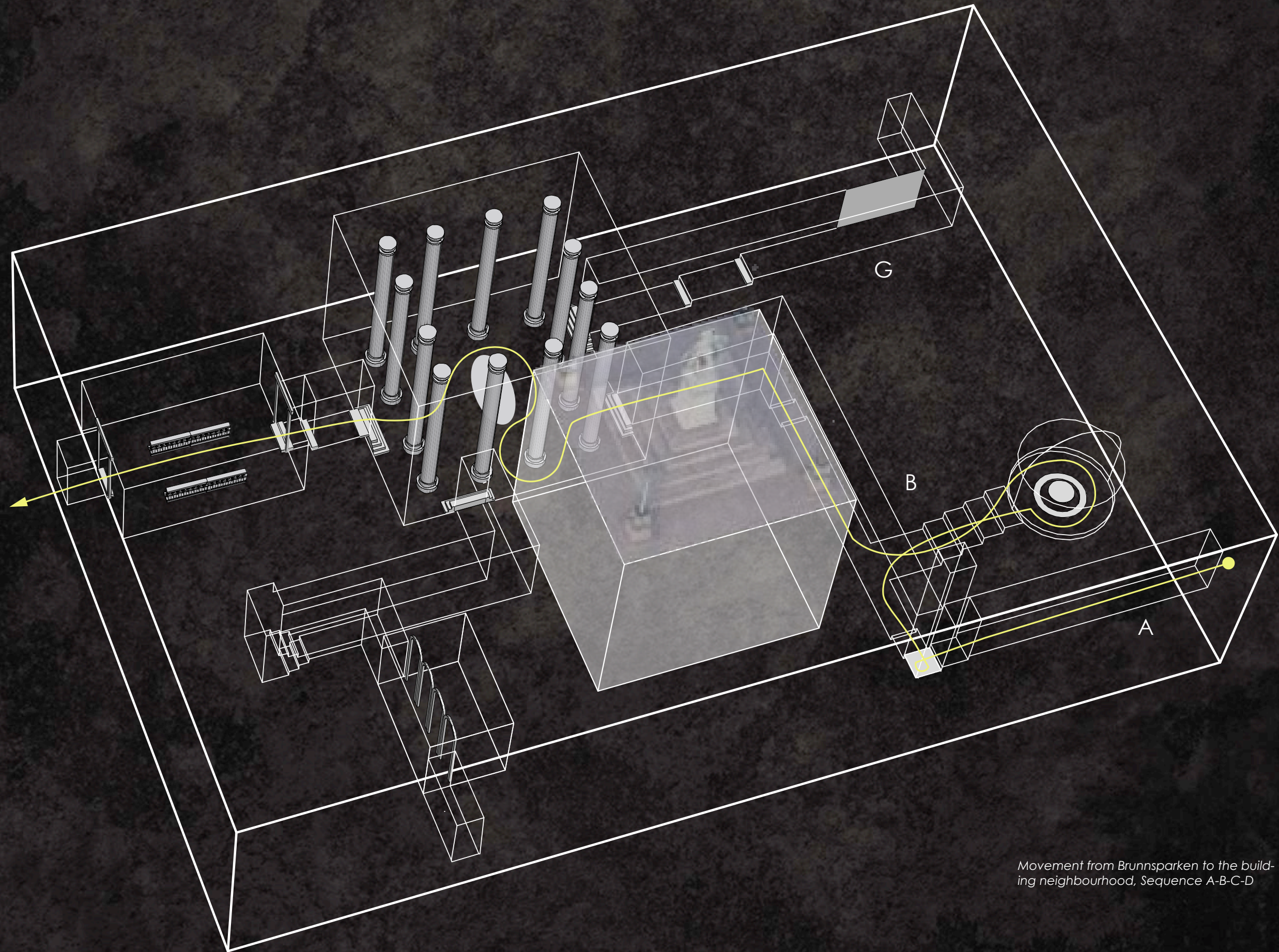
0

10

20

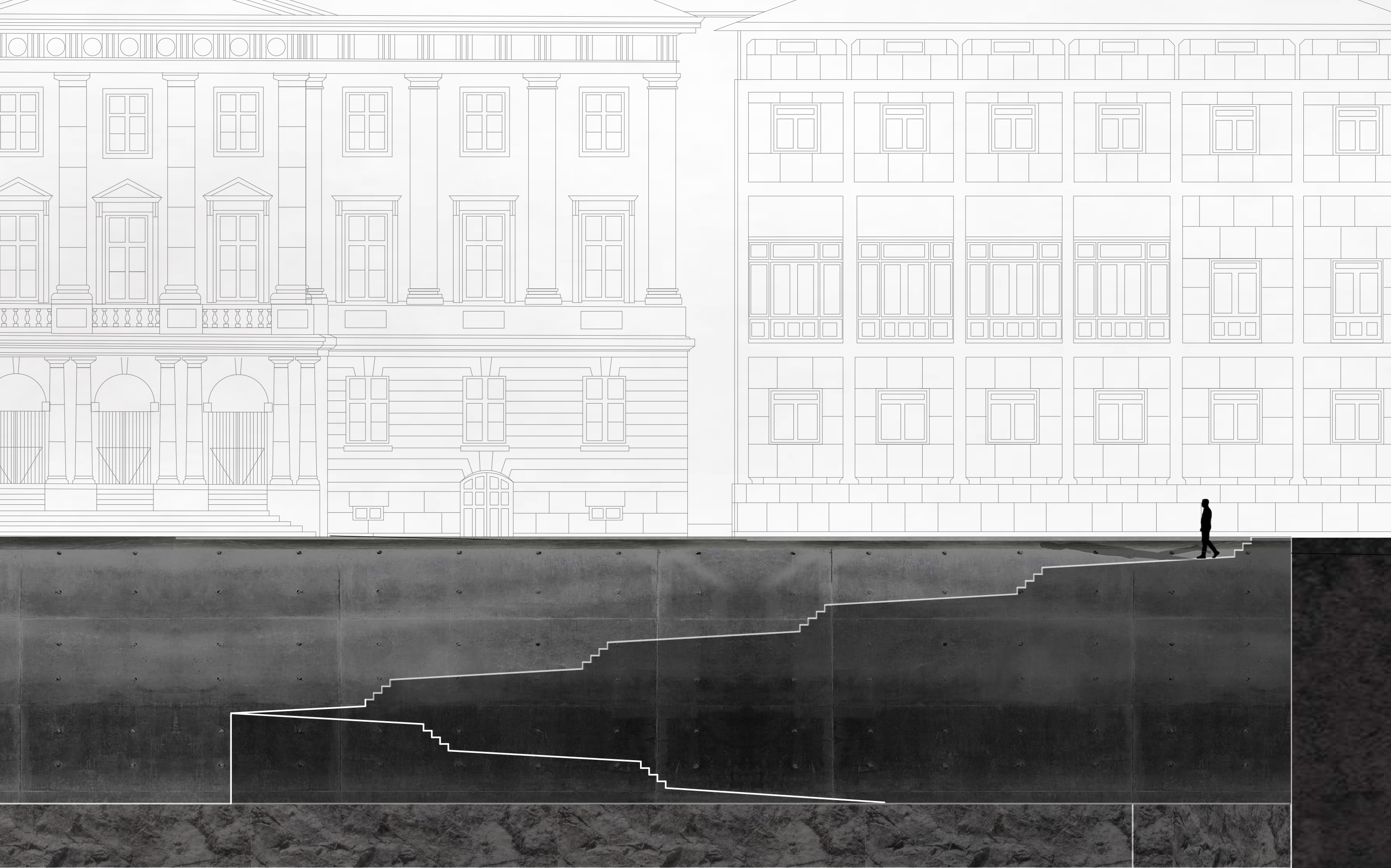
50m





Movement from Brunnsparken to the building neighbourhood, Sequence A-B-C-D





ELEVATION B-B, 1:100

0 1 5 10m

*Descending while separating oneself from the city pulse,  
Visually, audibly, spatially.*





Added objects:  
square stone step

*Descended and about to enter the unknown. A slight elevation shift and threshold-creating gap between stone edge and warf*

SEQUENCE Aa, 1:50

*edge. The solid flooring will allow a relaxed foot placement, but in the grid structure you will have to balance your step consciously.*

*A narrow passage with frames defining the long corridor with a pace and rhythm*

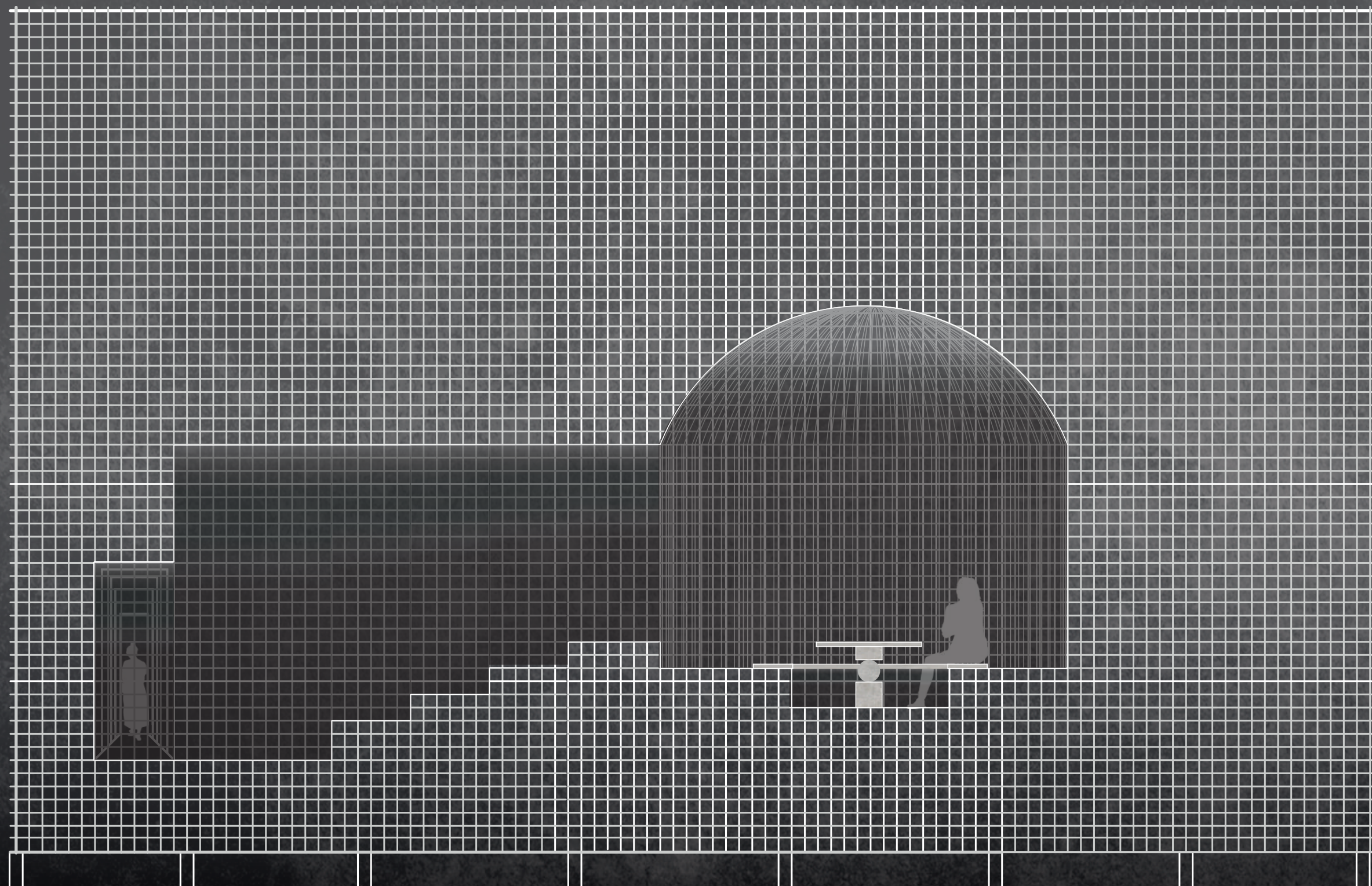
SEQUENCE Ab, 1:50

*The step is of stone giving you a safe space to rest your balance at while lifting the gaze to the clear view of the sky through the long lantern.*

SEQUENCE Ac, 1:50



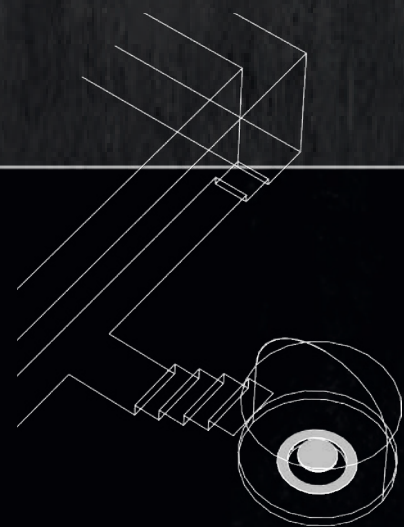
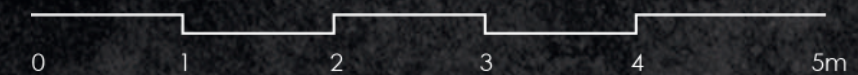




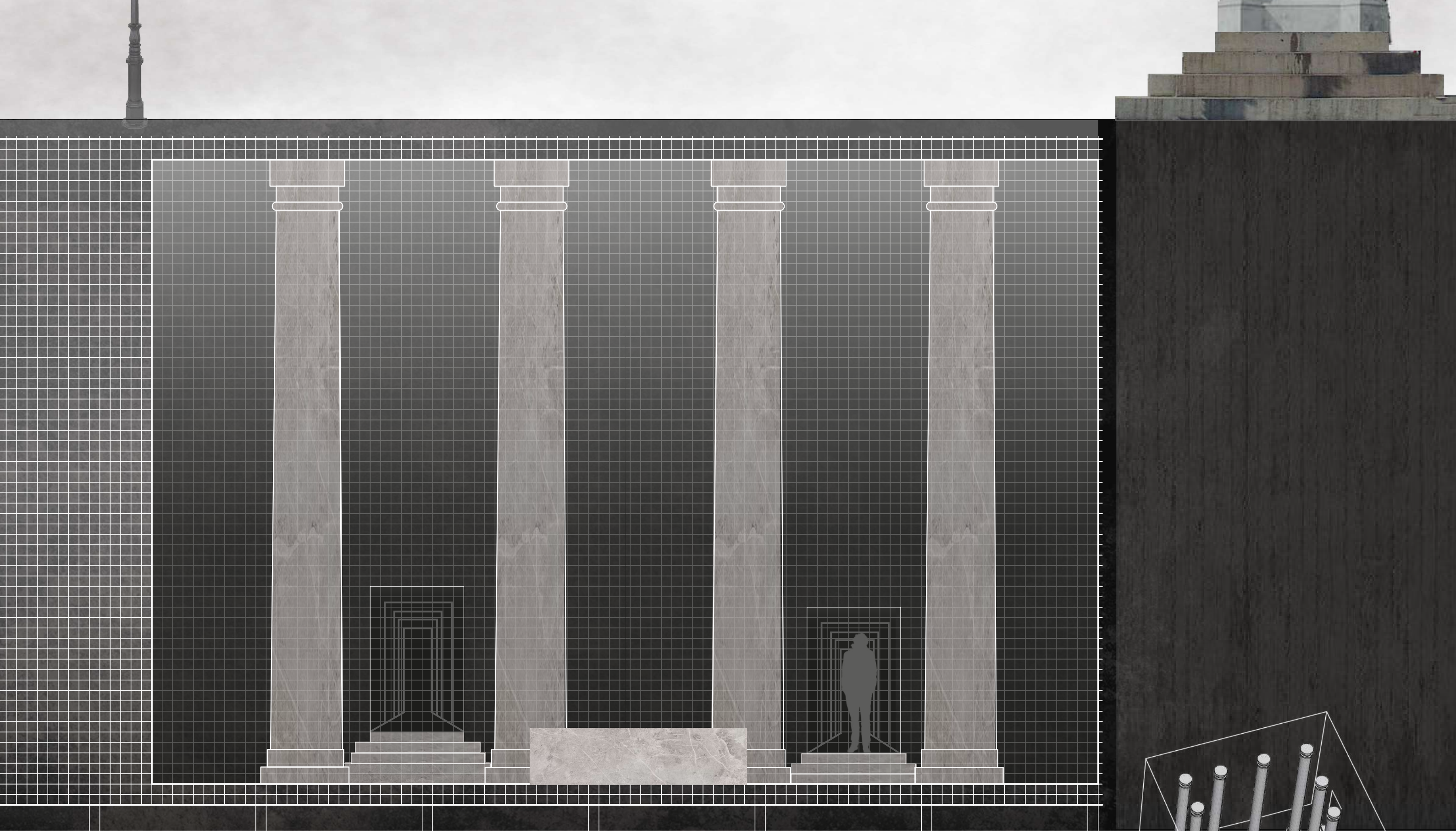
Added objects:  
stone seating and table arrangement

A change in space height to the right leading to a dead-end-space. The elevation build-up of curiosity of what is to come, which eventually incorporates you with a rounded room with a round table and sitting arrangement.

SEQUENCE B, 1:50







*The passage leading to the largest room where all passages interlink. High columns, stairs and an oval object sets the tone in this*

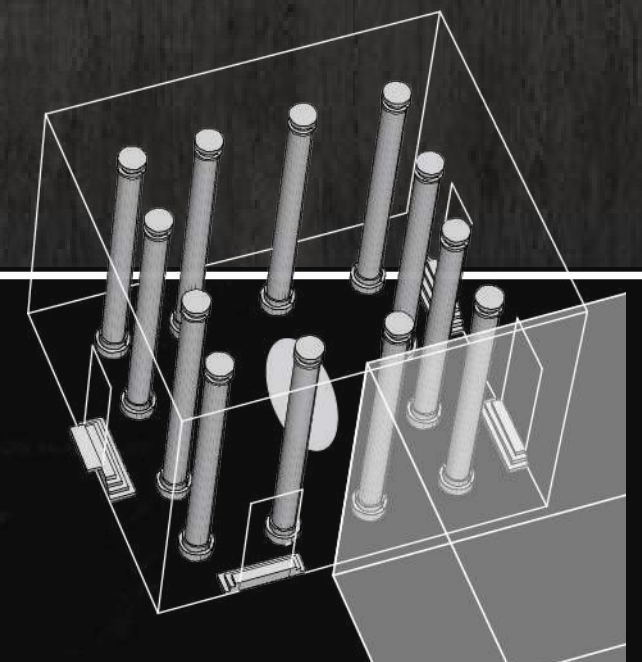
SEQUENCE Ca, 1:50



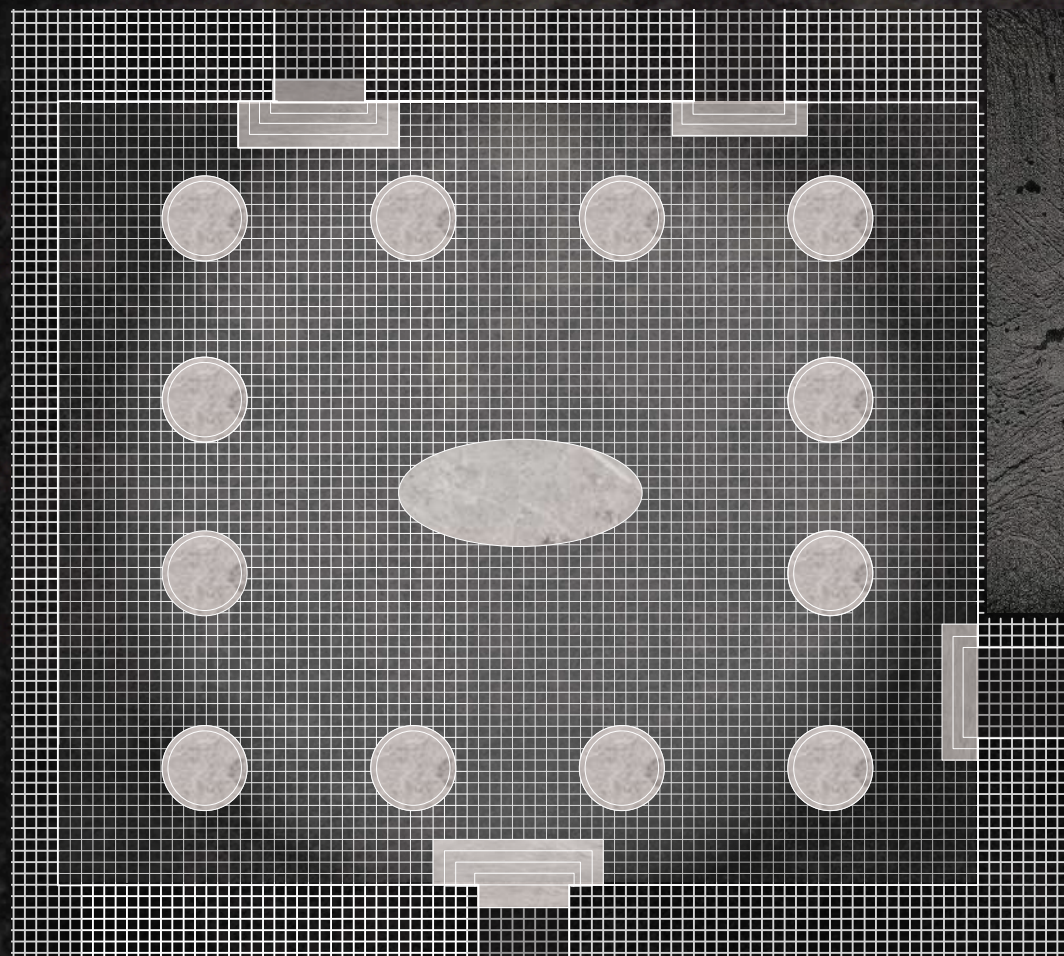
*majestic room. While passages connect at different levels giving it an odd expression.*

*Added objects:*

*stone stairs  
columns  
oval stone in the centre*







PLAN SEQUENCE C, 1:50

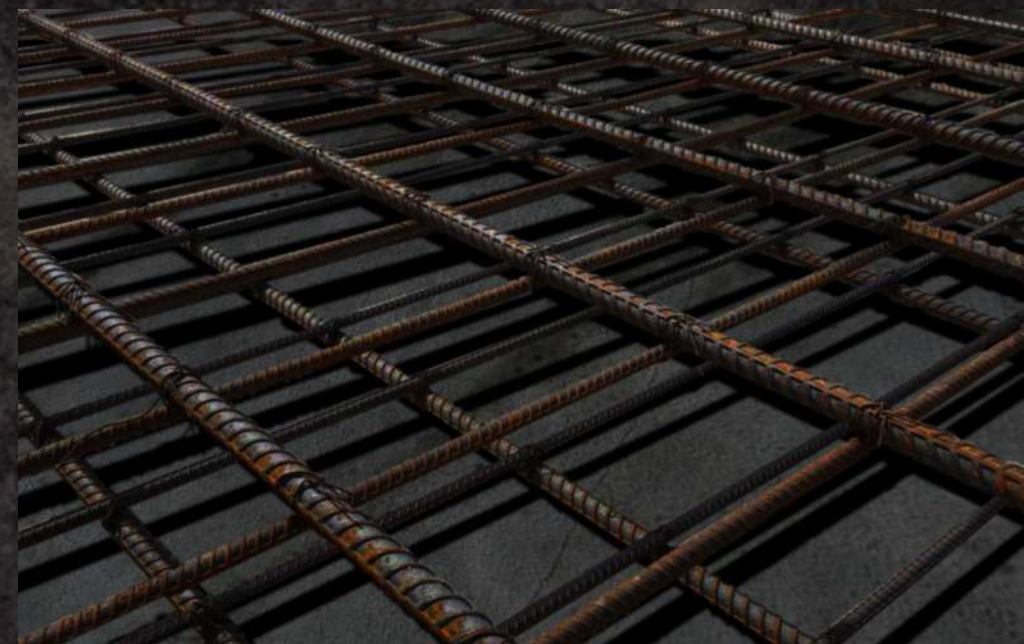
*The rebar has unveiled an almost clear view of the sky, and the ground foundation of the excavation has never been this near. The statue's foundation is visible and clear, as it is completely unmasked from rebar layers.*

*The columns divide the space in layers, an outer layer, an inner layer, and a possibility to move in-between them. The centre-piece, a polished rock will awaken your curiosity to physically tove to the centre of the space as well.*



SKYVIEW

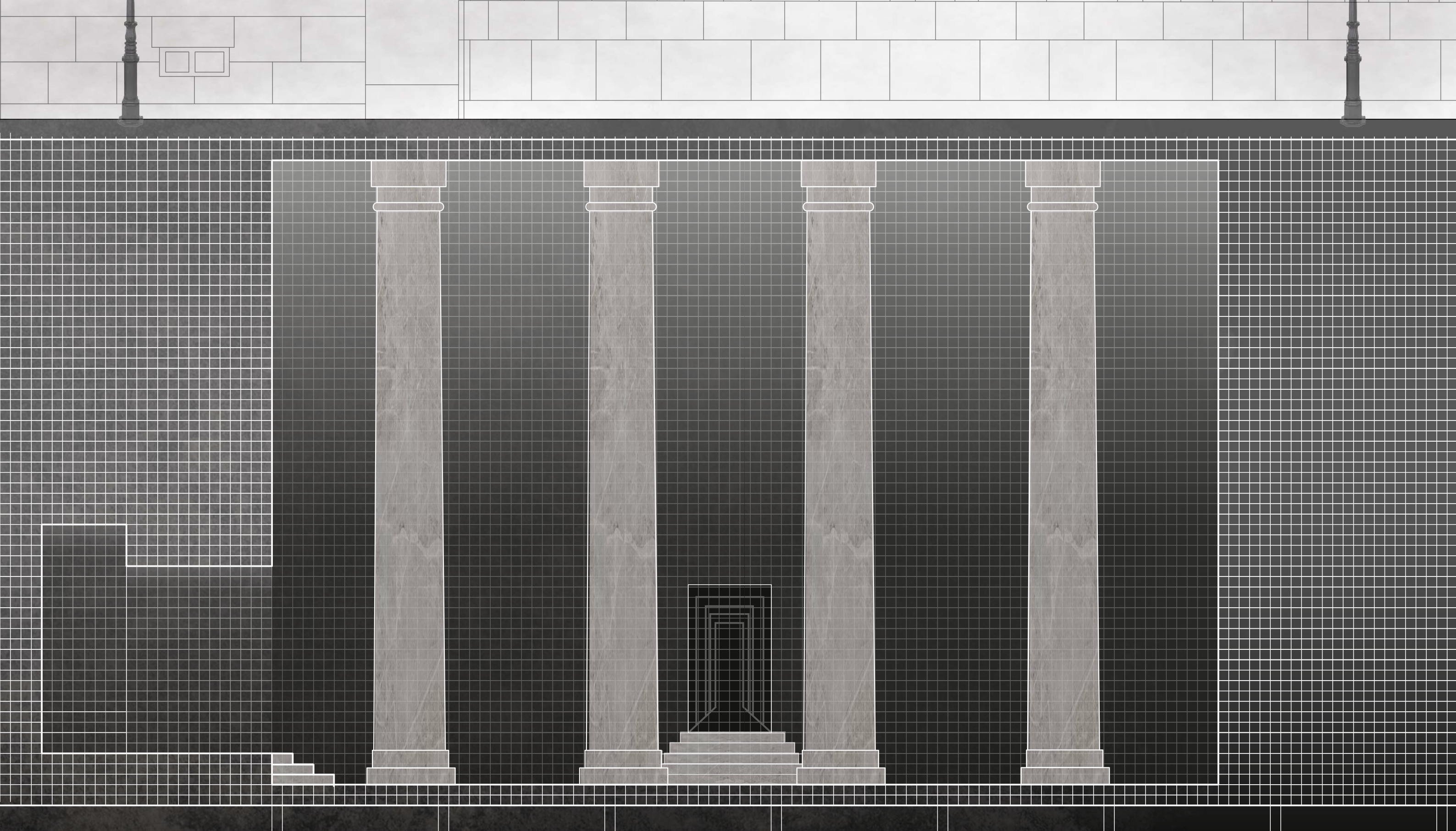
*The view of the sky is only a single rebar layers away.*



VIEW REBAR FLOOR

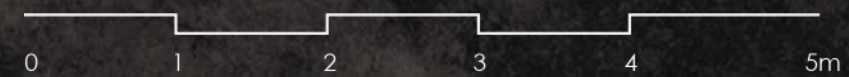
*As is the bottom of the space flooring. The subject has never been so close to the bottom of the excavated space as now.*



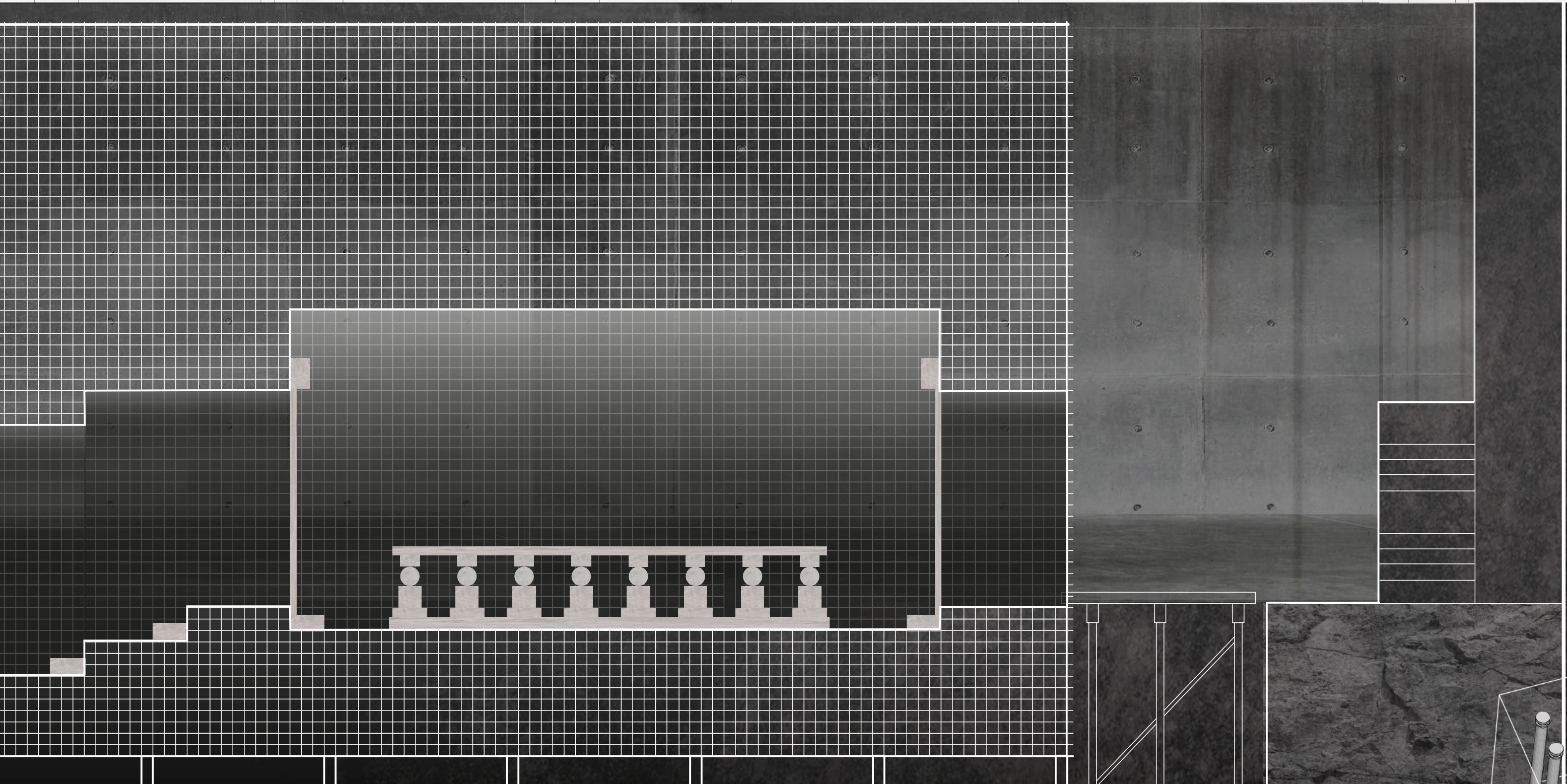
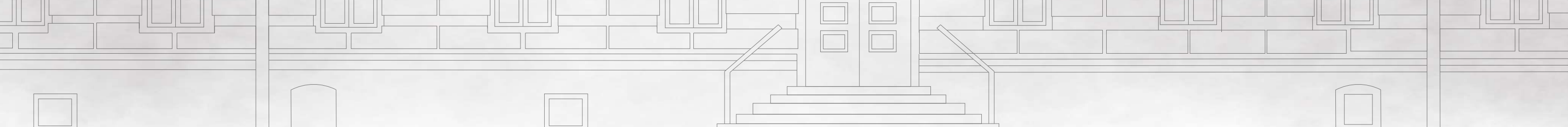


*Elevation from other side of the room. The path continues straight ahead.*

SEQUENCE Cb, 1:50







The stone steps accentuates certain steps of rhythm when moving through the passage to the room to come. When entering a larger and rectangular room with the balustrade

SEQUENCE D, 1:50

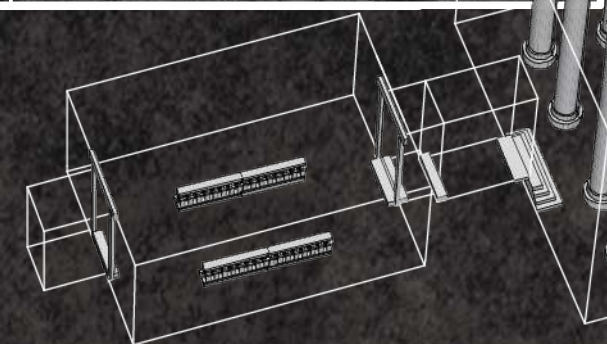


similar to those found at the Town hall, one could continue in the same pace as before through the room, or walk parallel with the main movement, or why not stand on the oth-

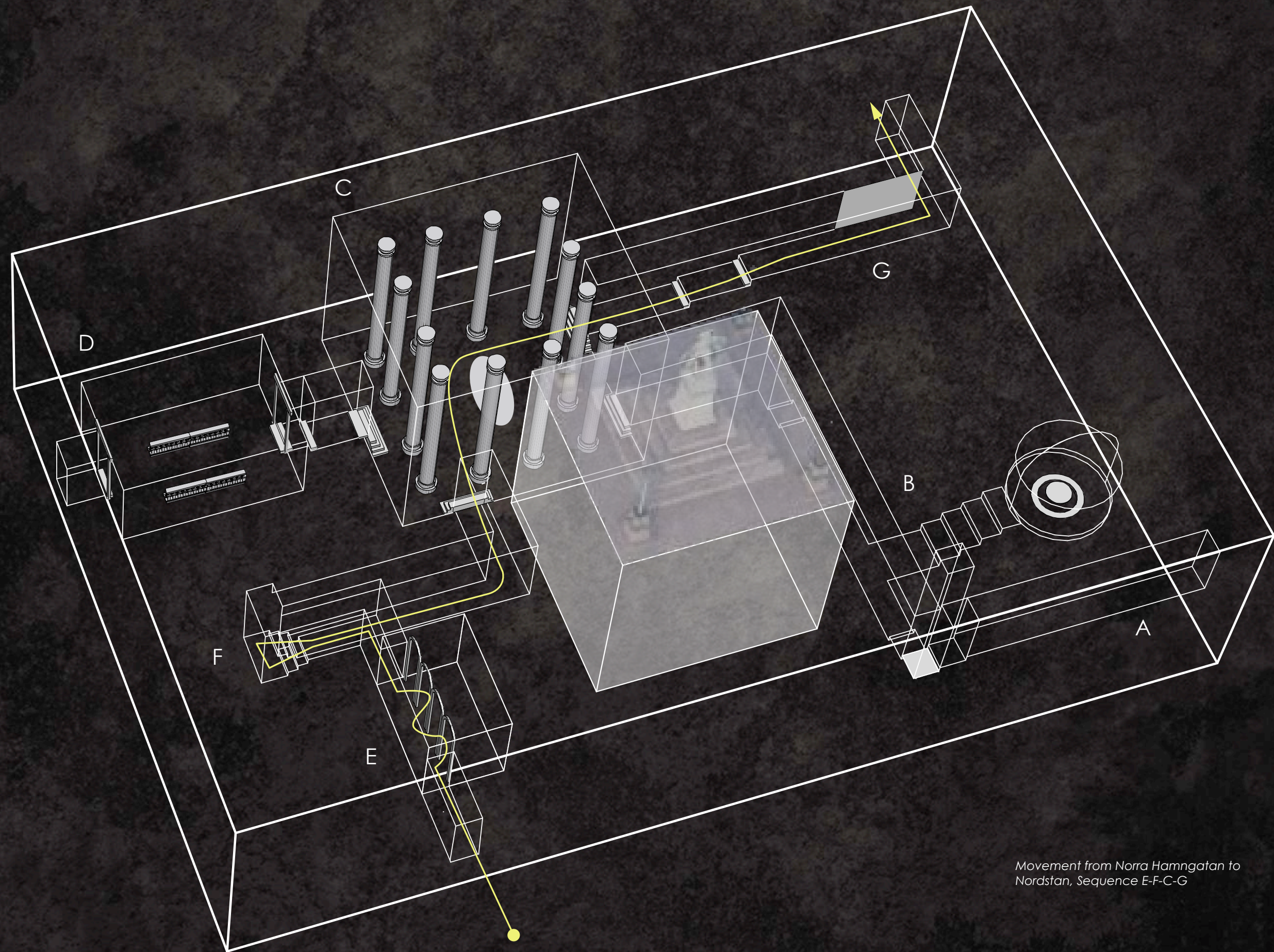
er side of the balustrade and await how the atmosphere changes as someone else enters the space.

Added objects:

stone steps  
"balcony railings"  
accentuated gateway

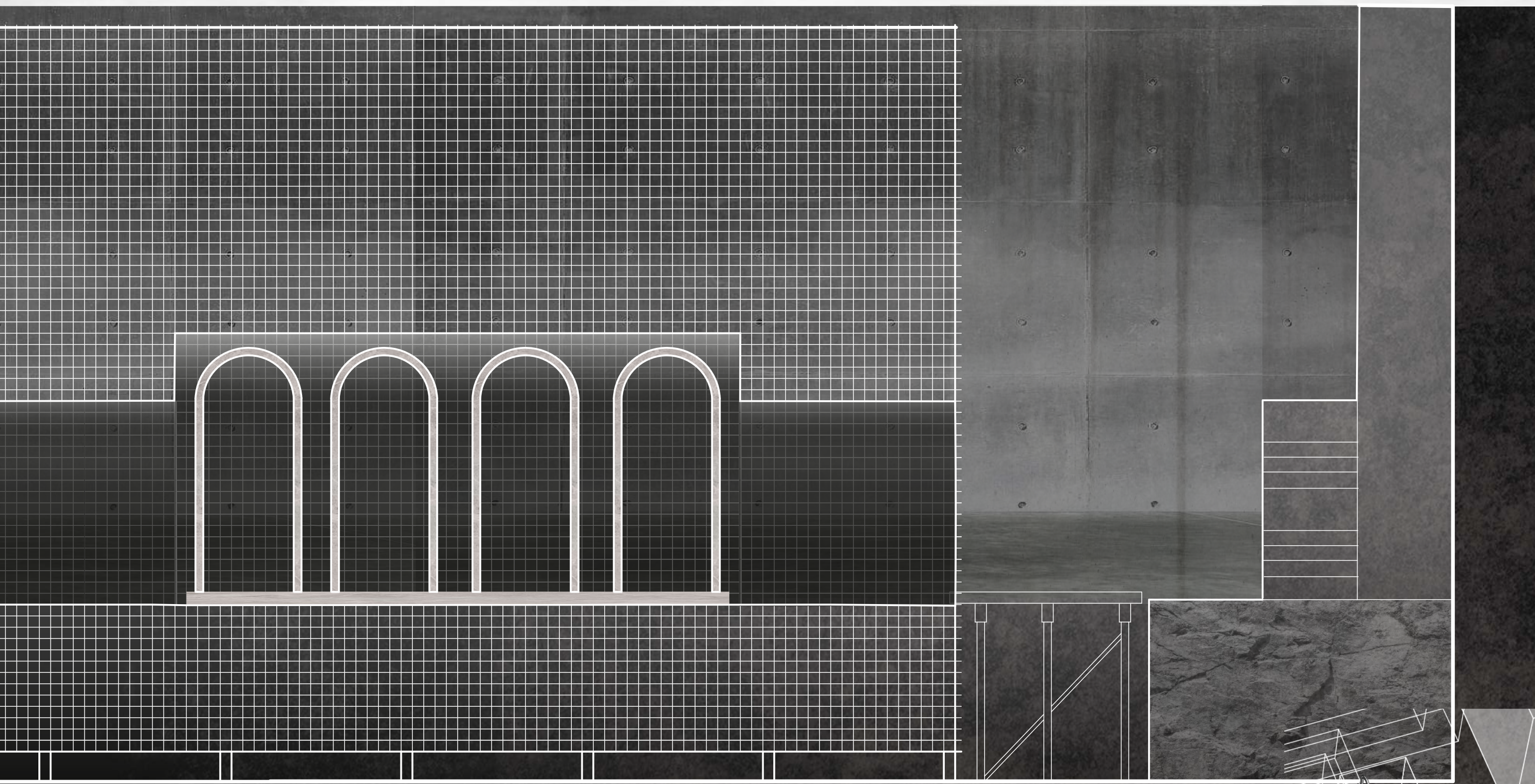






Movement from Norra Hamngatan to  
Nordstan, Sequence E-F-C-G





*A line of vaults opening up to a parallel room. Embody the atmosphere of this still room in relation to the focused movement of the passage.*

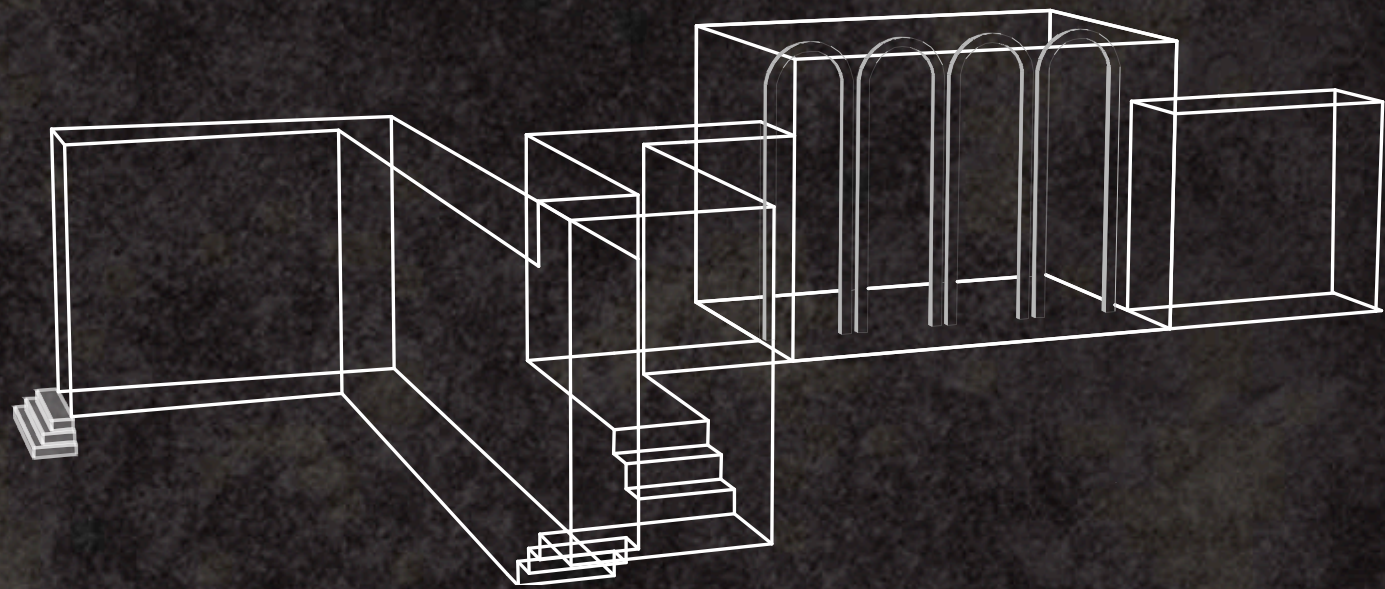
SEQUENCE E, 1:50



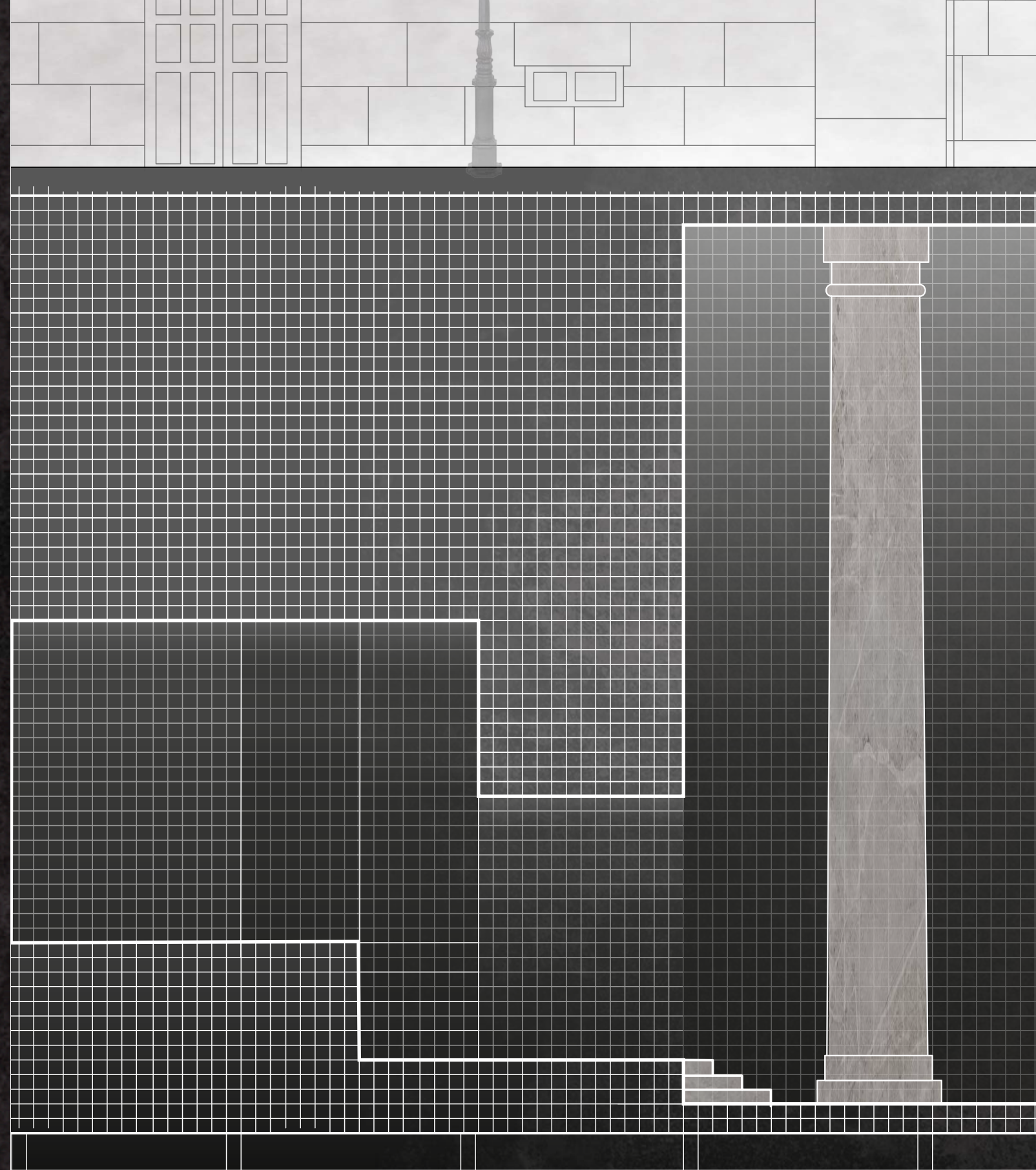
Added objects:

Vaults

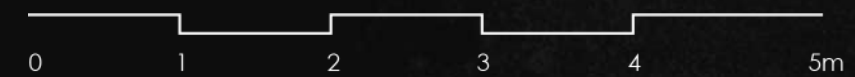




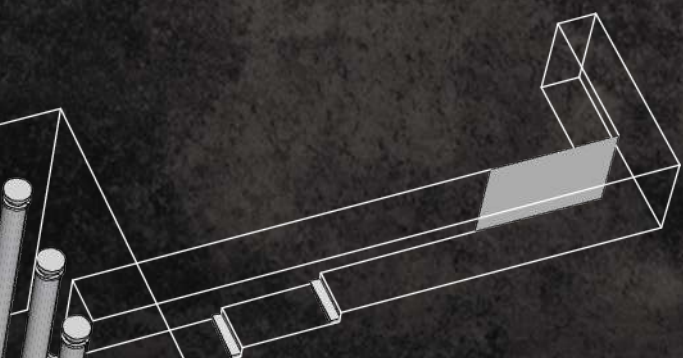
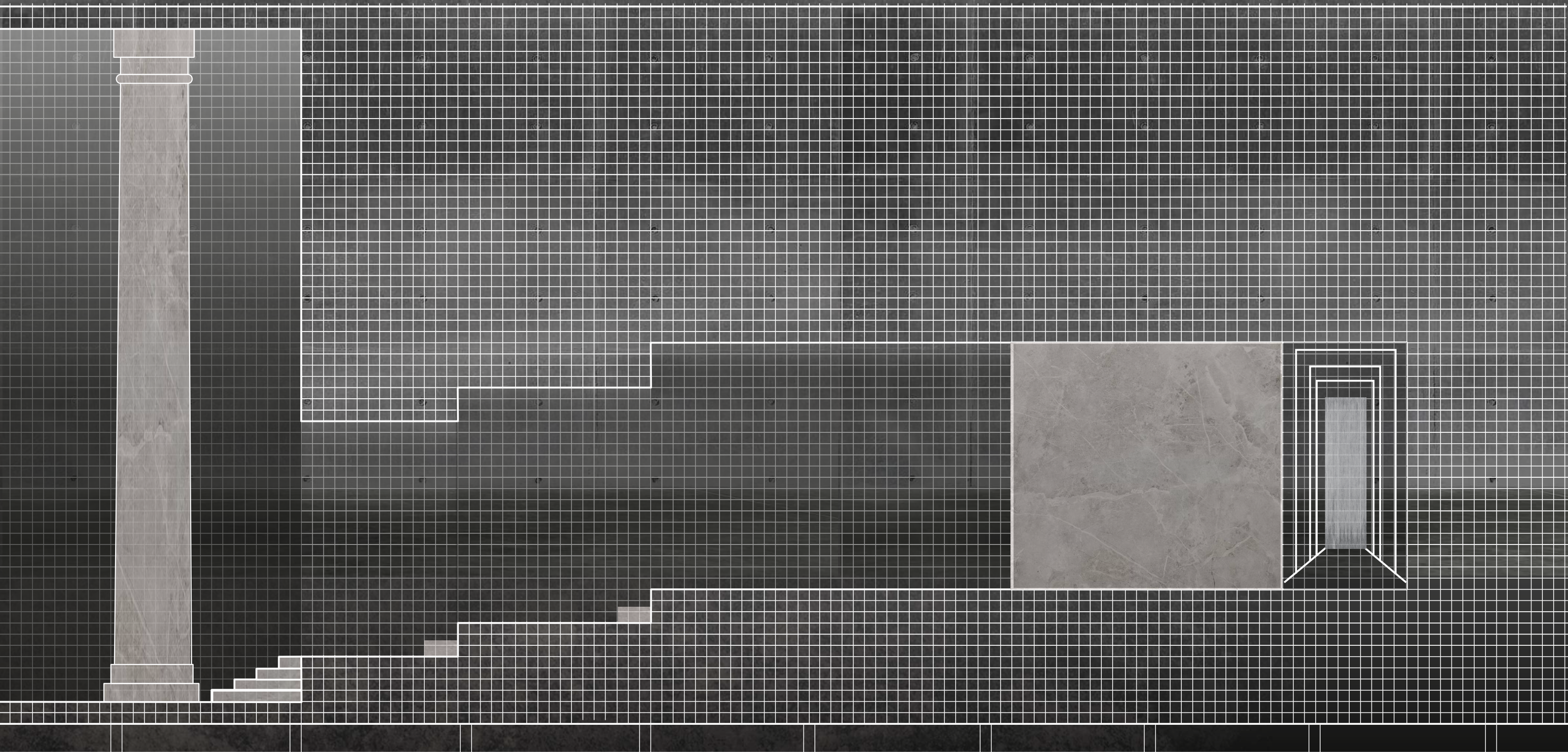
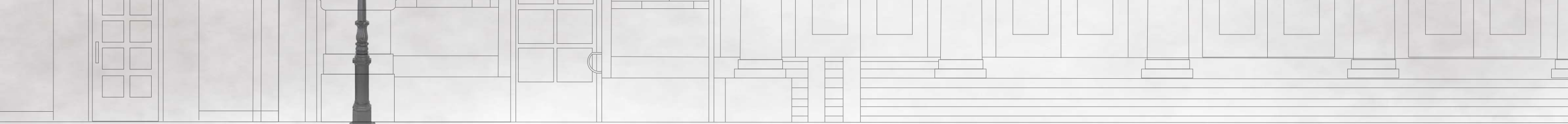
*From situation H a sick-sack passage suddenly reveals itself and leads you into the largest room.*



SEQUENCE F, 1:50







*Stone steps added in-between the rebar elevations creates tempo and an awareness of elevation. It can also help the eye navigate through the spaces following the objects.*

*Added objects:*

*Relief, (solid, non-transparent)  
Stone steps*

*A relief on the side works both as a wall hiding the passage direction but in a transitional space like this, one might not be in the mind-*

*set to stop and contemplate its motive. However, the artwork can portray horizontal movement, and hence, enhance the pull through the transitional space.*

SEQUENCE G, 1:50





## DESIGN REFLECTIONS

The choice of the rebar material, with its in-between voids, in combination with being layered three dimensionally in a relatively large volume, can at first glance seem to only add to the design thanks to its visual transparency, depth-creating, and light/darkness-encouraging qualities, in contrast to what solid walls would. The rebar also allows for a natural rhythm and repetition, and thanks to the designed space formations, movement has been directed through the three dimensional grid.

However, where is the beginning and the end for the spaces created? The material is, like in the Backrooms meme, merging together at all angles, in similar colour and pattern and with no clear overview to orient oneself with. Is the space defined by its outlined manipulated formation, or does the space continue beyond these borders? After all, the material consists of in-between voids. Perhaps the empty spaces in the rebar structure makes for a constant flow of space, especially since similar spatial elements, such as the formations manipulated by me, exist in the untouched three dimensional rebar grid, only on a much smaller scale that you can't physically move through.

Hence, the flow of space only reorganises depending on the rebar constellation.

The uninhibited spatial flow through the structure is echoed in how people can travel through the structure. At a distance it will appear somewhat fascinating how people move around in a hovering-looking way at different heights and in different corners of the grid structure. The void-rich structure makes it harder to determine where "the floor" is and where "the wall" is. We all become like particles moving in and through voids. The objects will also hover, although at a fixed position.

There is a roughness and rawness to the design created by the potentially claustrophobic spaces and the rusty and cold rebar material. Liminal spaces can be ugly and intimidating, just as a liminal stage could in a cultural rite of passage. A "life crisis", as van Gennep called them, can be traumatic or not at all, however always life changing as you come out on the other side as a new version of yourself. This is something my architectural design tries to capture.



## DISCUSSION



*The walk to Gunnar Asplund's chapel at Skogskyrkogården.*

Last autumn my question concerning Ma was to see if this concept could be applied to a western setting, since the Ma-perspective differs from how we in the west perceive empty space. I was surprised to stumble across the liminal community and to realize that although Ma and the liminal are not related, they have interesting similarities.

It is interesting how the term liminal space and the theory of the rite of passage has emerged parallel to the architect's role and terminological knowledge. As already shown, the dramaturgical effects of contrasting spaces of clarity with ambiguity, as in for example the Propylaea, has been an architectural design tool for centuries. The online liminal spaces of transitions bring out the same sensation although probably unintentionally designed to create this reaction.

This consciousness of space is something we as architects can use to our advantage and be aware of when designing. Through disassembling the different ingredients of a liminal space one quickly identifies that traditional architectural tools such as materiality, light, visibility, rhythm, elevations and shape of negative volume plays a great role in the liminal space's DNA. It is a specific kind of space where for example the popular liminal passage, with its rectangular narrow volume, is not a place where you dwell, hence the spaces often or occasionally, tend to be empty of people. Factors such as enhancing and rhythmizing the shape of the volume with color, beams, or regularly occurring doors creates an intensely projected sensation compared to an open and dwell-friendly place.

The odd vibe and character of the liminal triggers an awareness of space which adds to the debate when de-

signing public spaces, contemporary architecture, densification of cities, and the much valuable democratic discussion around architecture. I find it interesting how many online liminal examples are liberated from the discussion of designing in a certain architectural style, or if the architecture is ugly or beautiful, rather the discussion is about the character of a liminal space.

Although my design proposal is just one out of a million takes on how to merge Ma and the liminal, the design is meant to start a discussion around space. In my design I have removed distractions such as the materiality of the wall or advertisement found in an ordinary urban space, so that the empty space in relation to its space framing borders and carefully chosen interior objects come forward. The rite of passage's three stages are integrated in the design as I believe that the transition between spaces becomes more smooth for the experiencer when the three stages are accompanied, instead of using only the transitional stage. The three stages offer the design a sequentially directed experience, which I think holds great potential in being present in the design.

One could ask, if Ma is about the emptiness of space, then why create the rebar-structure and add objects into the void? The way I see it, I have created a space that frames and directs the experience of Ma and where the additives in form of an object are meant for you to stop and contemplate the space that you find yourself in. Were you to imagine the passages and rooms of my design in a city setting, you would soon realize that the spaces I have created are directly applicable onto our everyday spaces and perhaps it would encourage conscious spatial awareness in our familiar habitats as well.

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## IMAGE ENDNOTE REFERENCES

In order of appearance. All other images included in the booklet belong to the author, Julia Brandberg.

### Endnotes

1 Vindarnas Tempel, copyright Julius Pettersson

2 Villa Katsura. Accessed from <http://hiddenarchitecture.net/villa-katsura/>

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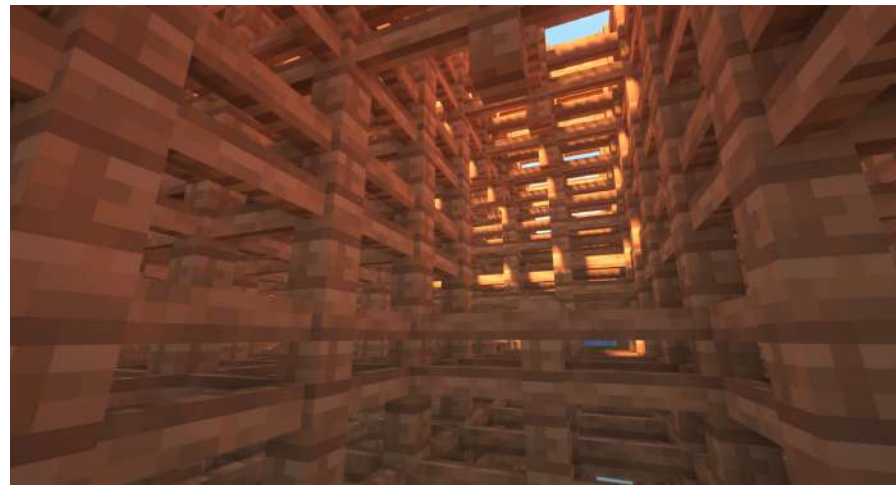
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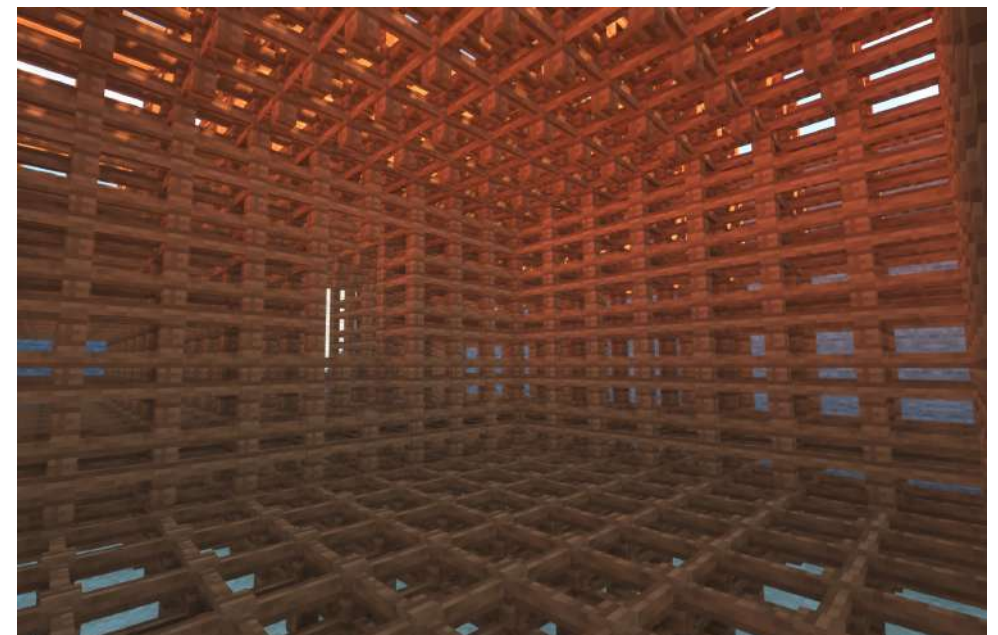
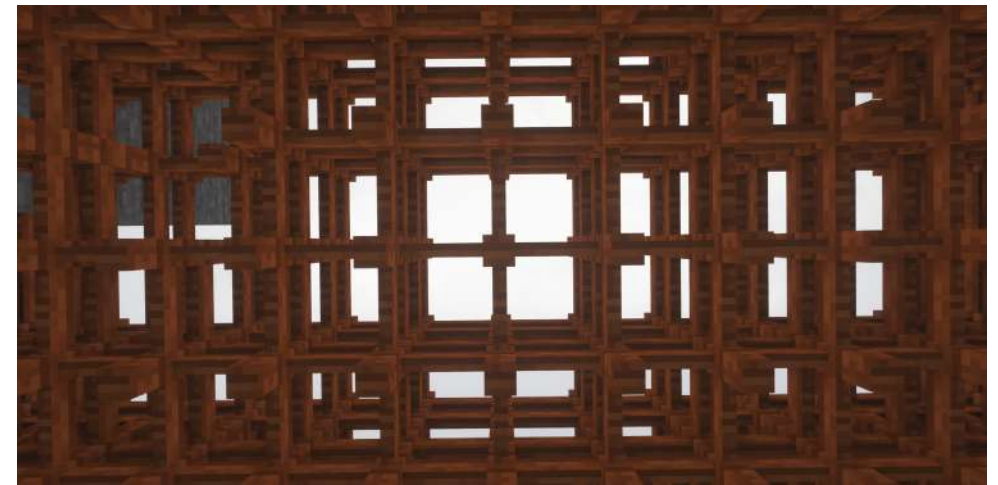
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## EXTRAS from process



*Printscreens from my minecraft modell, been using it like a sketchmodel*

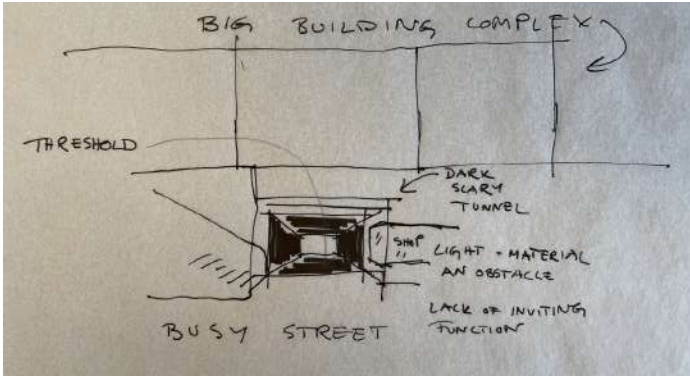




EXTRAS - early investigations  
ÖVRE HUSARGATAN AS A TESTBED



Seeing the passage from the street. Ap-  
pears dark and uninviting.



A parallell space in hectic city life, only  
used as a passage in-between street and  
garage.



Front view. Ap-  
pears much light-  
er. Many hard  
materials. A grey  
+ mustard colour  
palette

Materiality subtly indicating  
the start of something else.

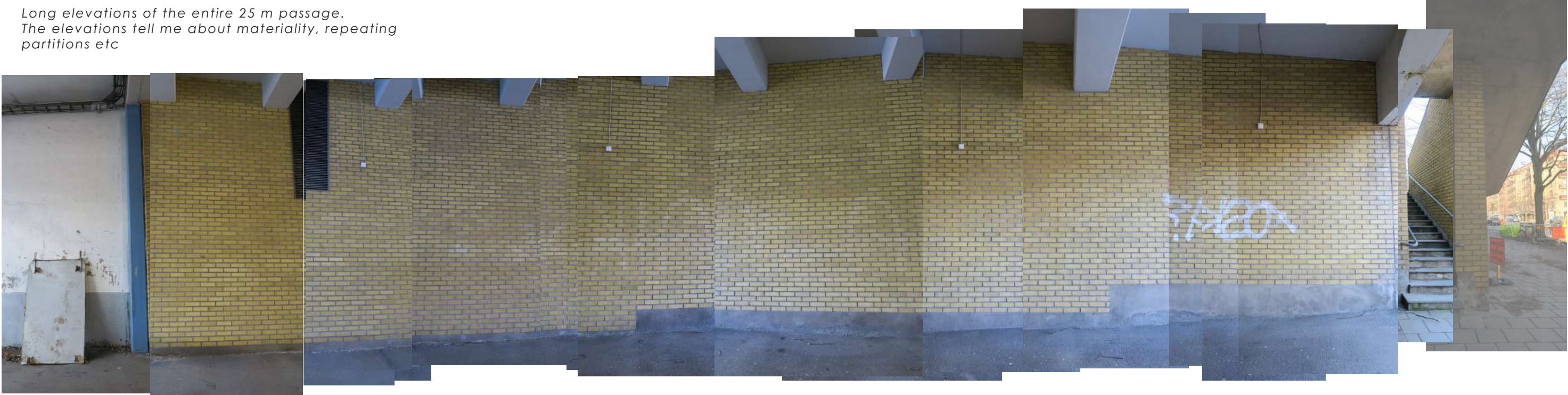
In the back-  
ground you  
see a hint of  
the garage.



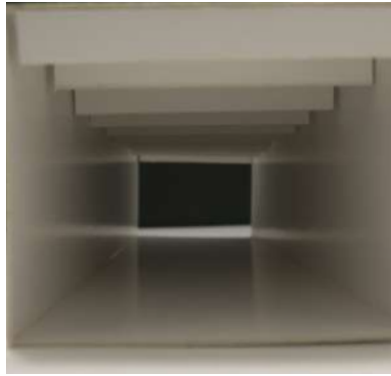
Ceiling consists of a beam rhythm.  
Some parts feels dirty and damaged.



Long elevations of the entire 25 m passage.  
The elevations tell me about materiality, repeating  
partitions etc





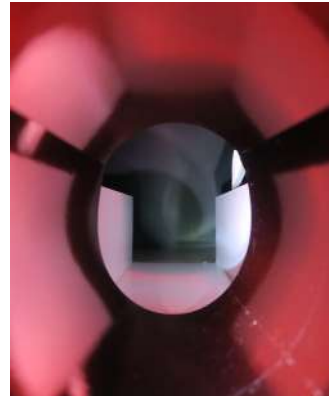


Model of the space of Övre Husargatan

Note the central perspective as the observer stands outside of the tunnel. Does it serve your subjective experience? Do you feel part of the room?



Soft texture, soft feeling. Trying to get inside of the model to get a engaged experience of the space.



Exploration with form, glossy paper and colour



Red string, dissolving the roof and with a soft feeling



Big obstacle, do you pass or take a detour?

Spot the traces of my finger print



At last, the rite of passage is complete

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