



Très Grande Bibliothèque (Very Big Library)
Paris, France
Competition, 1989



Strategy of the Void

The ambition of this project is to rid architecture of responsibilities it can no longer sustain and to explore this new freedom aggressively.

It suggests that, liberated from its former obligations, architecture's last function will be the creation of the symbolic spaces that accommodate the persistent desire for collectivity.

Weird Science: Excerpts from a Diary

April 29, 1989

Dear Diary,

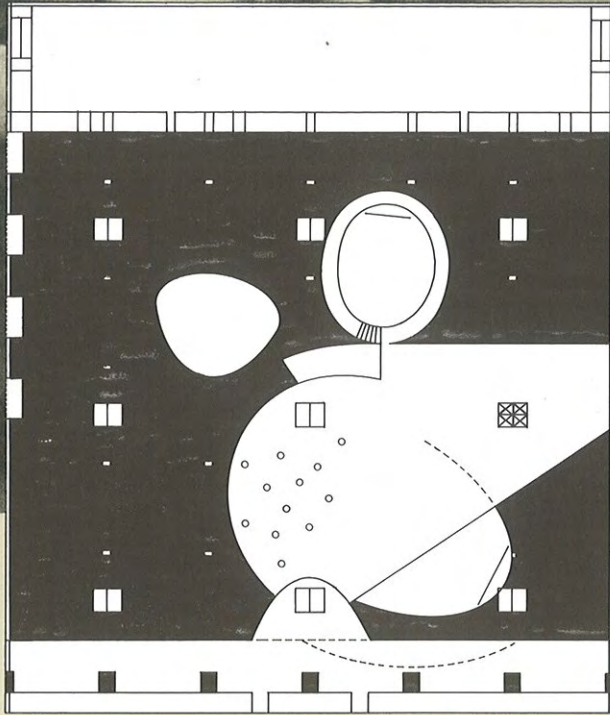
Do we want to win this competition or not?

Of course, juries, not architects, decide competitions, but first there is our own, invisible judgment: for each project there is a beyond—a domain where no jury will follow.

Greater than the total loss to all the conspiracies, political pressures, blatant corruption—all those "masterworks" that *they* didn't give first prize—is the tragedy of the even more brilliant works that we didn't dare to imagine.

Wanting to win a competition is not the same as wanting to do your best possible work.

Anyway, don't be paranoid; forget names, juries are a mere statistical sample, their "plots" just a message from the real world (you don't kill the messenger)...



level -4

Pebbles

Sound and Moving Image Library: auditoriums,
viewing booths, and acoustic cubicles for film, video,
television, and music, embedded in the socle.

At the moment when the electronics revolution seems about to melt all that is solid – to eliminate all necessity for concentration and physical embodiment – it seems absurd to imagine the ultimate library.



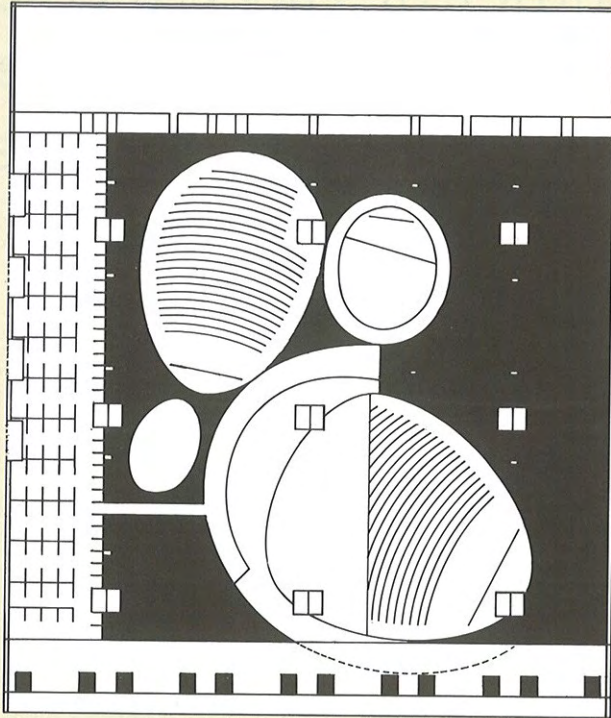
May 3, Paris

Dear Diary,

We have been here before—our proposal for Expo '89. (For that one, we didn't believe in buildings anymore...)

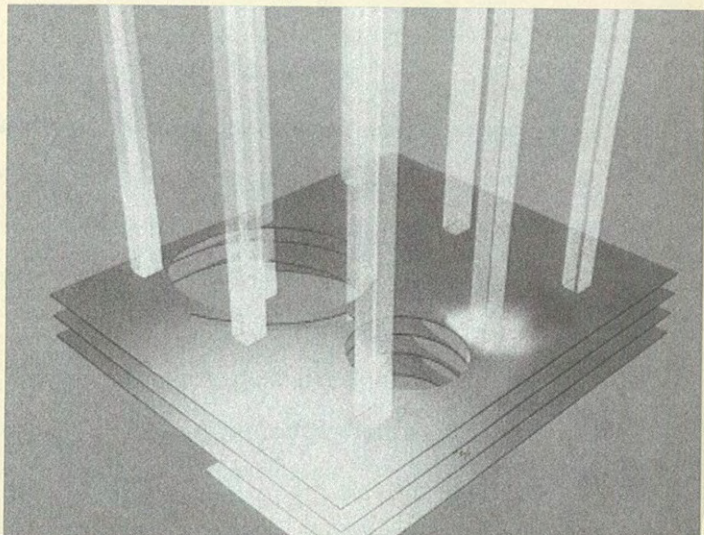
Frankly, in spite of huge architectural efforts, this part of the Seine is boring: Mitterrand's endless Bar of Finance plunging timidly into the water... the "ecological" mound of the Palais Omnisports, soon to be embedded in a "politically correct" park by Bernard Huet... Gehry hidden behind regimented trees.

Only visible excitement: irregular palisade of "bad" sixties and seventies towers (social housing?) that surrounds/encloses our site, a colossal rectangle (250 x 300 meters) completely isolated between river and railway. Only one urbanistic restriction (to make the library as Parisian as possible): a height limit (± 35 meters). Oh, and yes—there's also a pedestrian bridge that crosses the Seine to connect with the park (of course, it's "on axis," or at least it ends in the middle).



level -3

Sound and Moving Image Library: cinemas,
conference rooms, booths



0 | | | | 20m

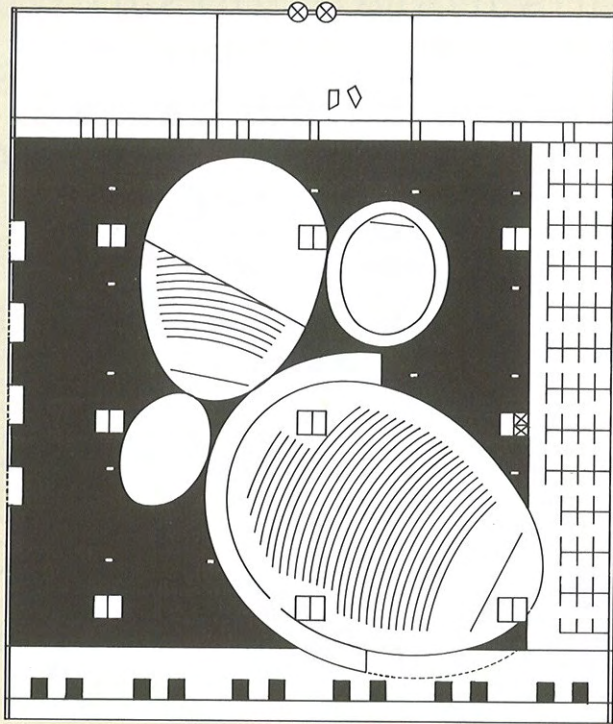
But that was exactly what the French government proposed when it organized a competition for the TGB in the summer of 1989: a colossal building of 250,000 m² on the east side of Paris on a site near the Périphérique, facing the Seine.

May 5

The program is a megalomaniac's dream: five totally different libraries for the world's entire postwar production of words and images. A bit like a flatshare: they have nothing to do with each other; each has different constituencies, yet they inhabit a single address.

The program is 250,000 m² (13 x ZKM, 10 x Zeebrugge); 75% of it is storage (in a city that's already a giant repository of history?).

Just when we stopped thinking about the masses, it is predicted to receive three to five times as many visitors as Beaubourg. A communist project in a post-ideological age?



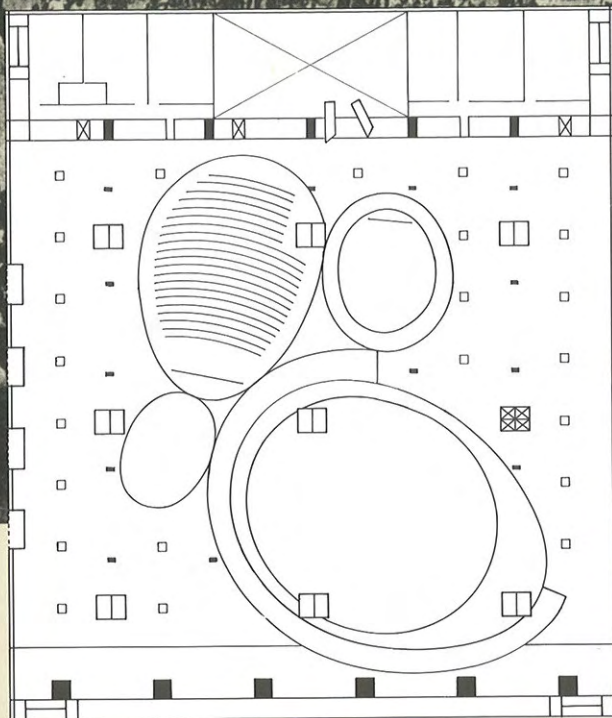
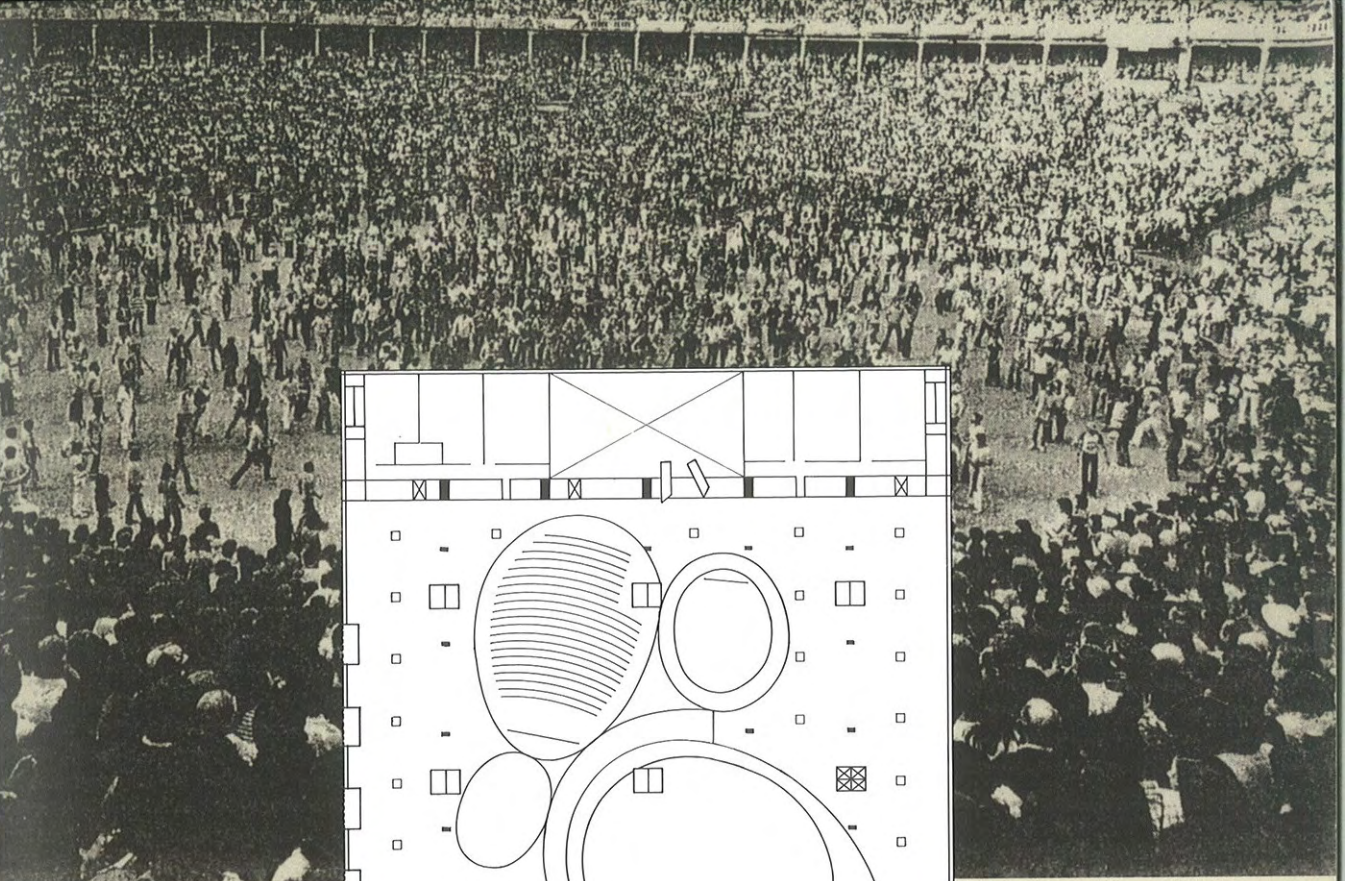
level -2
Sound and Moving Image Library: booths, cinemas
Offices: entrance lobby

Along with conference centers, restaurants, offices, etc., it would consolidate five separate and autonomous institutions in which the complete production of words *and* images since 1945 – the Bibliothèque is as much cinema as library – would be contained: a cinemathèque, a library for recent acquisitions (magazines, books, videos), a reference library, a library of catalogs, and a scientific research library.

May 7

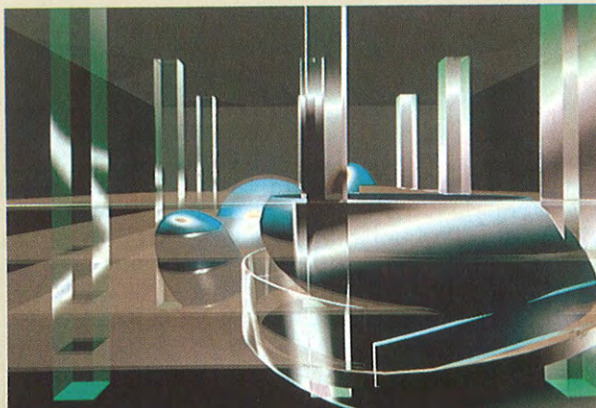
Dear Diary,

No news today. Just trying to be obedient.



level -1

Sound and Moving Image Library: "treasure" exhibition



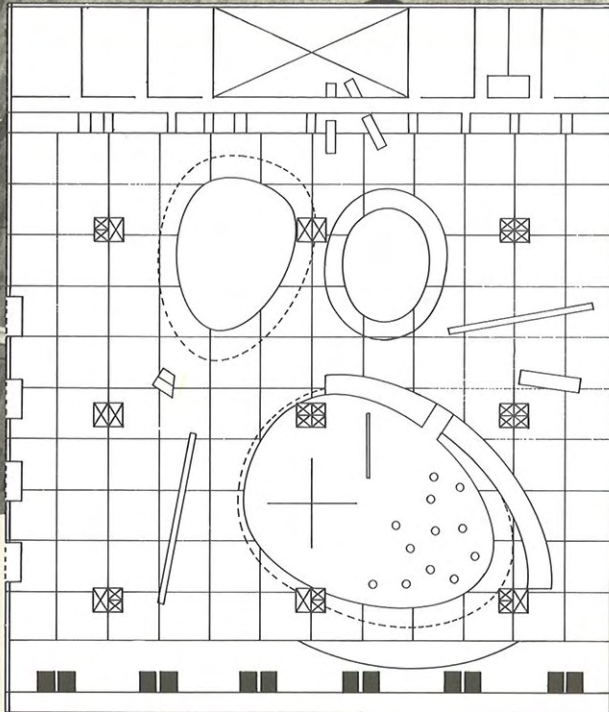
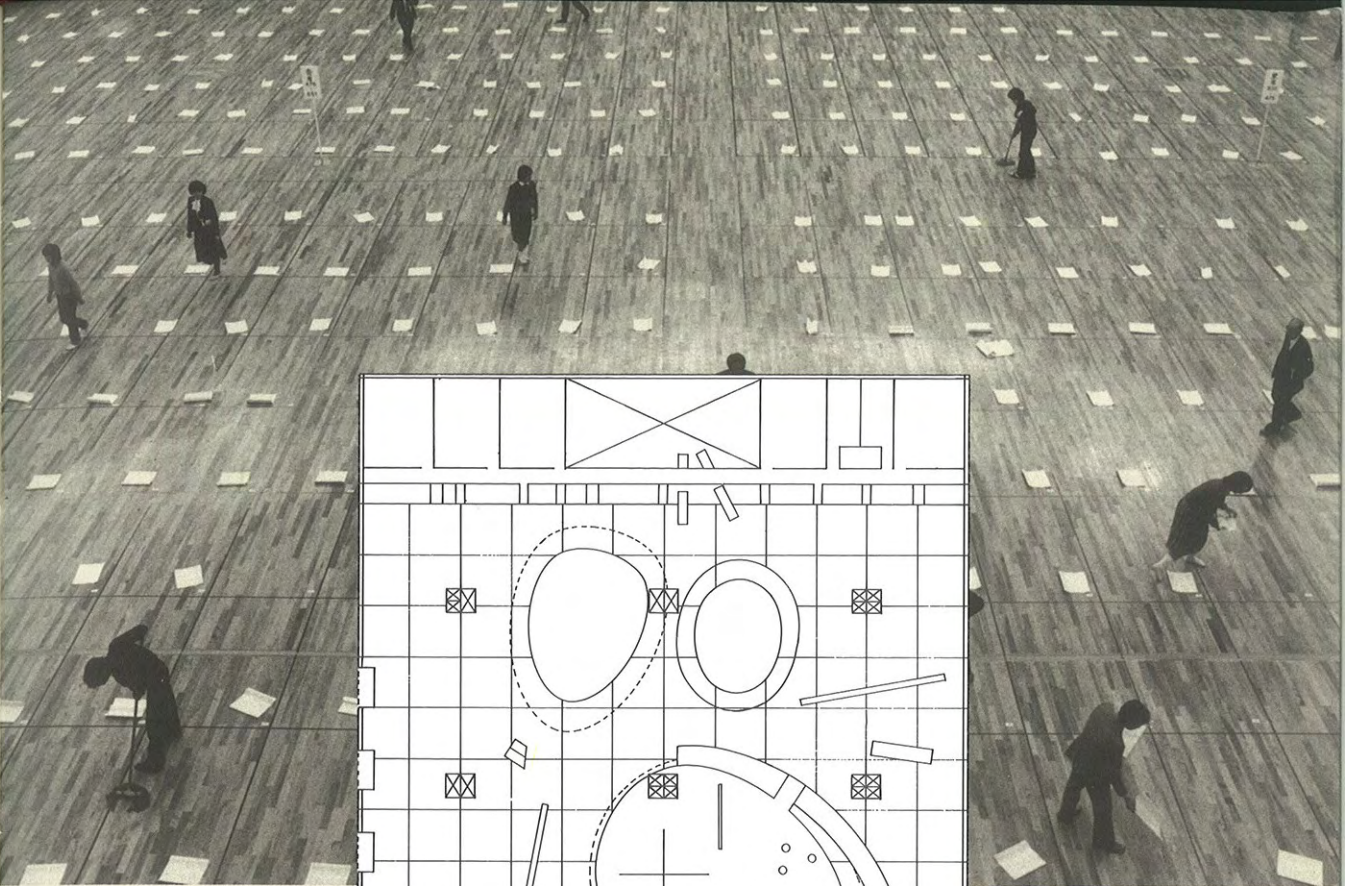
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The scheme is based on technological scenarios developed with inventors, systems analysts, writers, electronics companies. They all anticipate the utopia of fully integrated information systems to materialize before the opening of the building: books, films, music, computers will be read on the same magic tablets. The future will spell not the end of the book but a period of new equalities.

May 8

The claustrophobia of antimodernity.

If we keep it as flat as the city demands, the thousands that now clog Beaubourg's escalators would have to be shuttled between the extremities of the site to the five libraries like cultural cattle... What a nightmare.



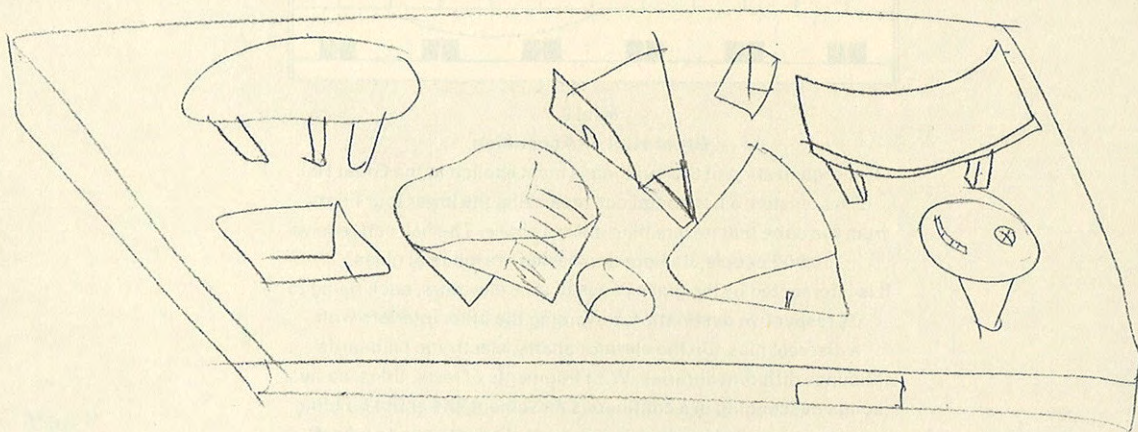
level 0

Great Hall of Ascension

The organization of the building is most explicit in the Great Hall of Ascension, a horizontal cut separating the lower four floors from the cube that hovers nine meters above. The hall can receive 10,000 people; its floor and ceiling are made of glass.

It is intersected by the glass cages of nine elevators, each rising to its respective destination, traversing the other interiors with a discreet hiss. On the elevator shafts, electronic billboards announce different libraries. With fragments of texts, titles, names, songs descending in a continuous movement, the entire building seems supported by signs in a perpetual countdown to takeoff.

The block is also cut by a system of escalators that snakes its way from one interior to the next.

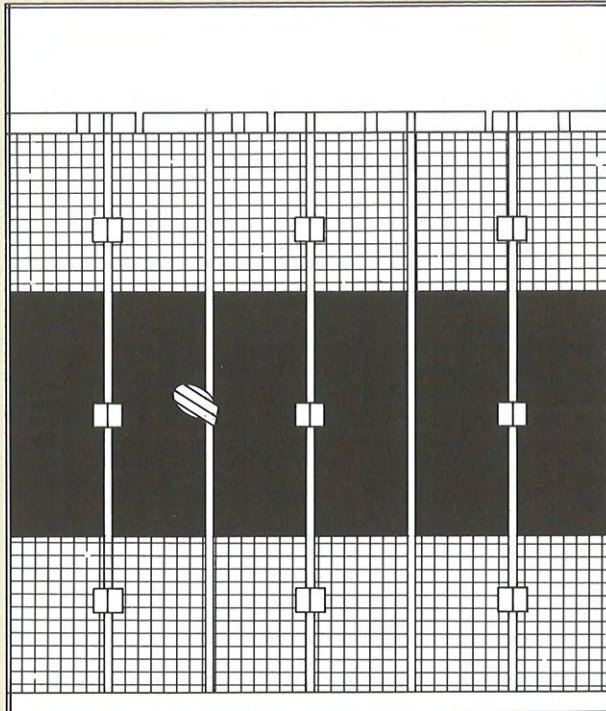


May 10

We assemble all storage in one colossal socle. In that podium, we put circulation (more than four kilometers). On the podium, we drop five different forms ... uh, libraries: some round, some square, some on sticks, some sinking into the socle, some ... etc., etc.

Offices

The north face of the building is an office zone for administrative, librarians', and complementary services, connected, where necessary, to the stacks or the major rooms.



level 1
plant, storage

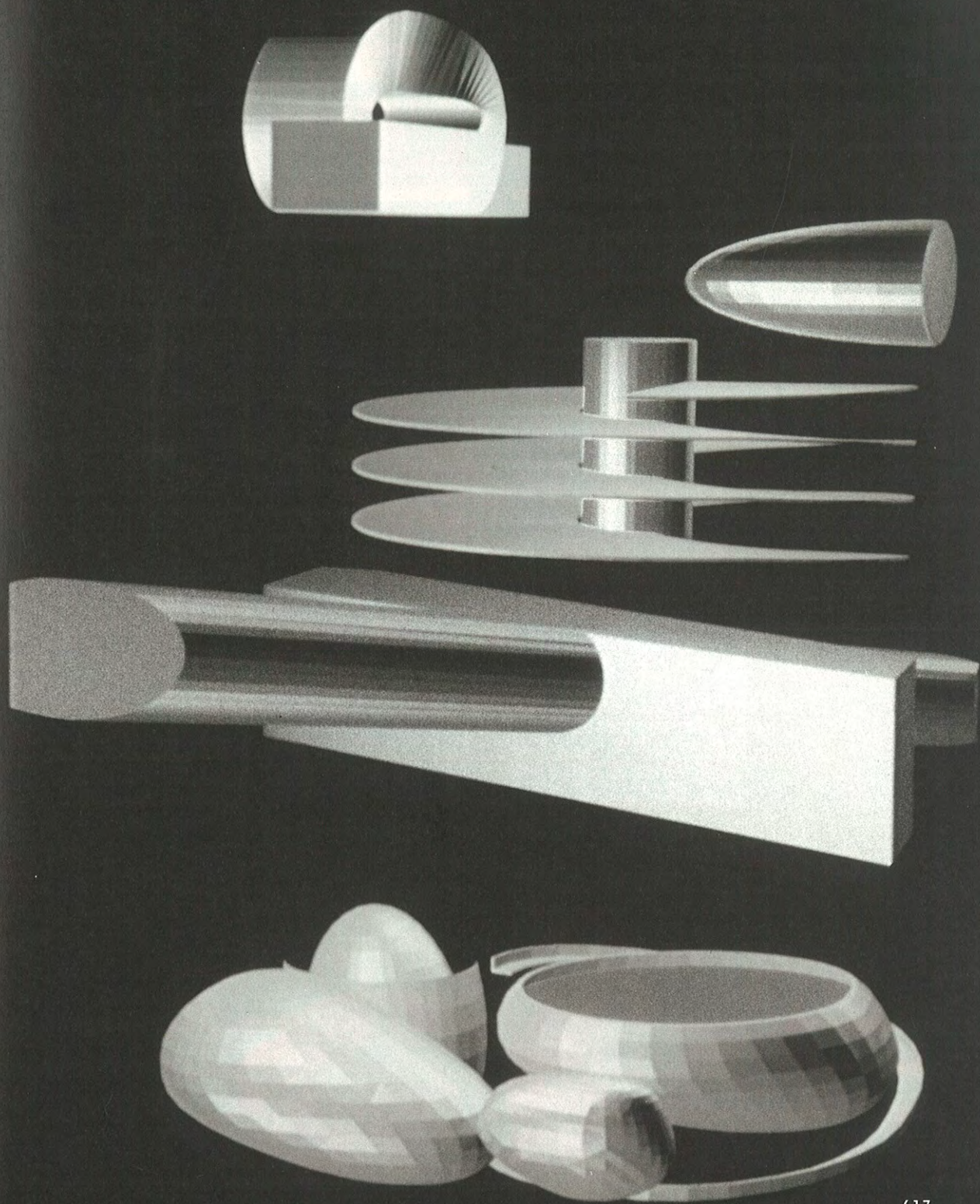
The Very Big Library is interpreted as a solid block of information, a repository of all forms of memory — books, laser disks, microfiche, computers, databases. In this block, the major public spaces are defined as *absences of building*, voids carved out of the information solid. Floating in memory, they are multiple embryos, each with its own technological placenta.

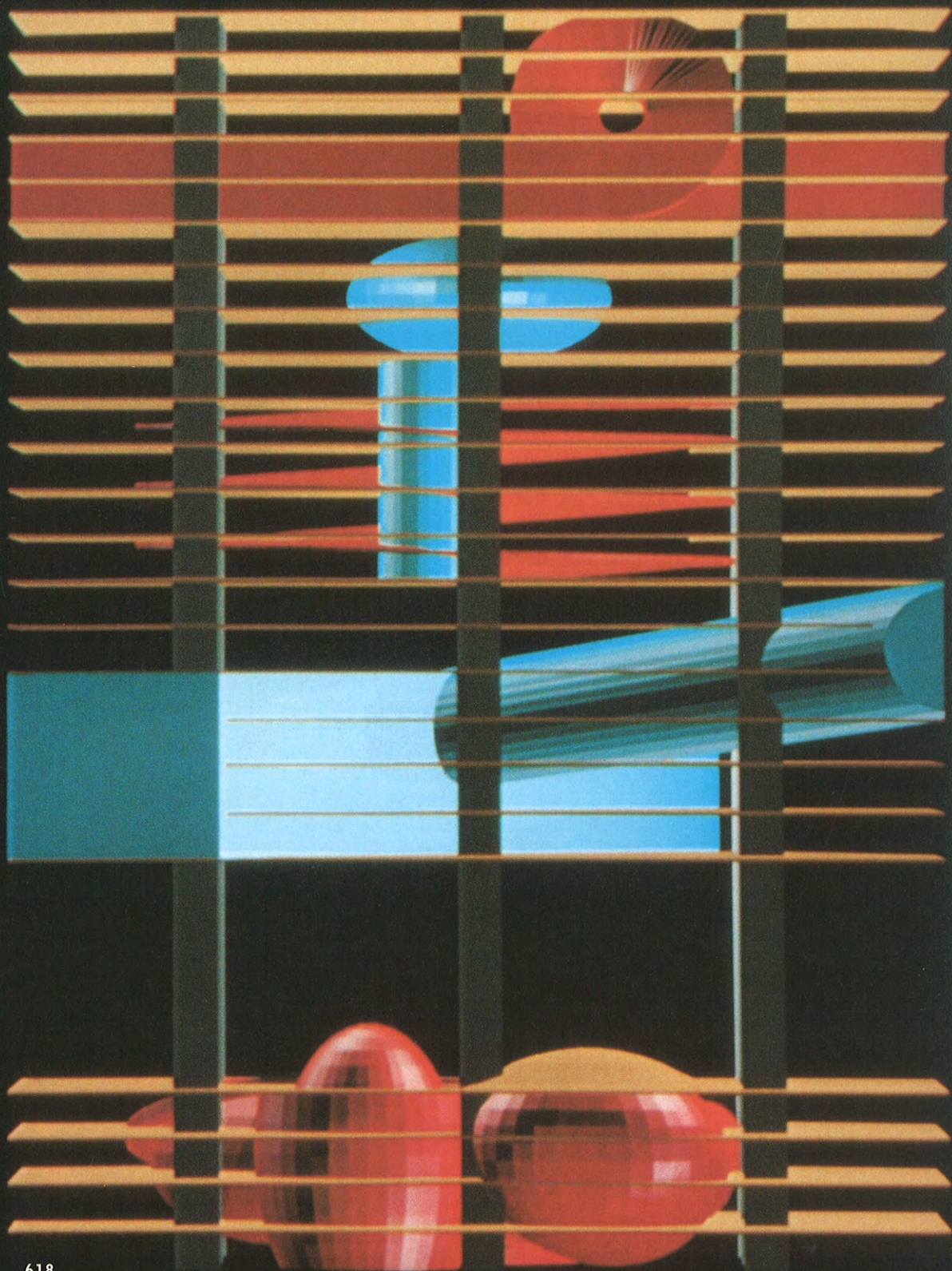
May 11

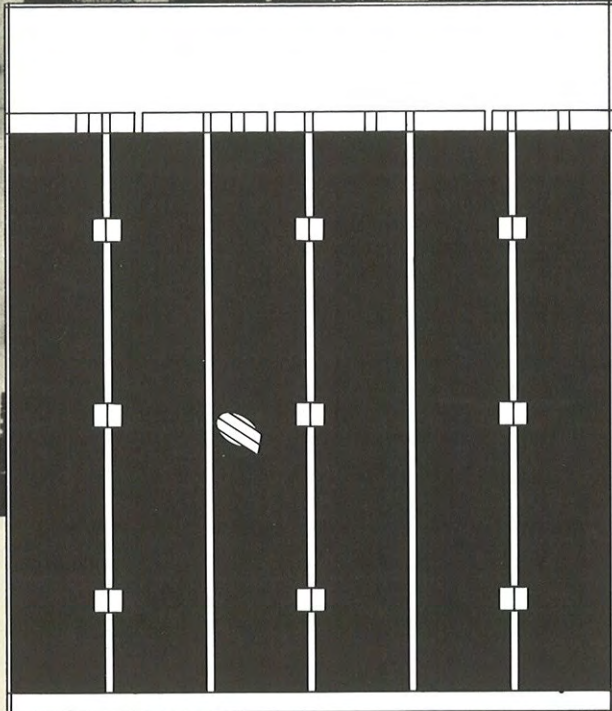
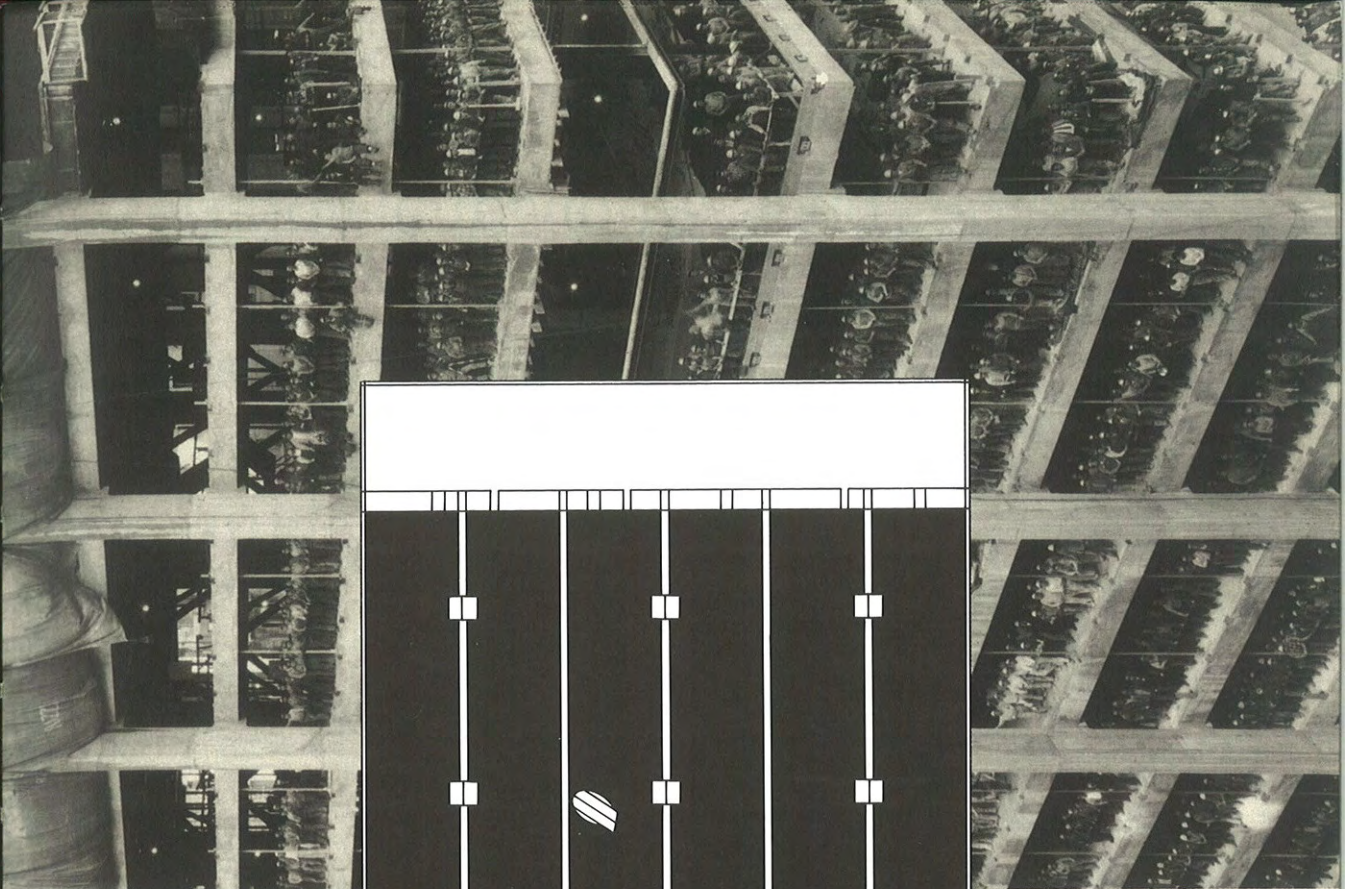
Revulsion abruptly aborts normal design procedures.

Suddenly nauseated by the apparent obligation of "my" profession to fabricate differences, to "create" interest, to deal with the apparently infinite boredom out there, to invent.

Why me? Why not everybody else?



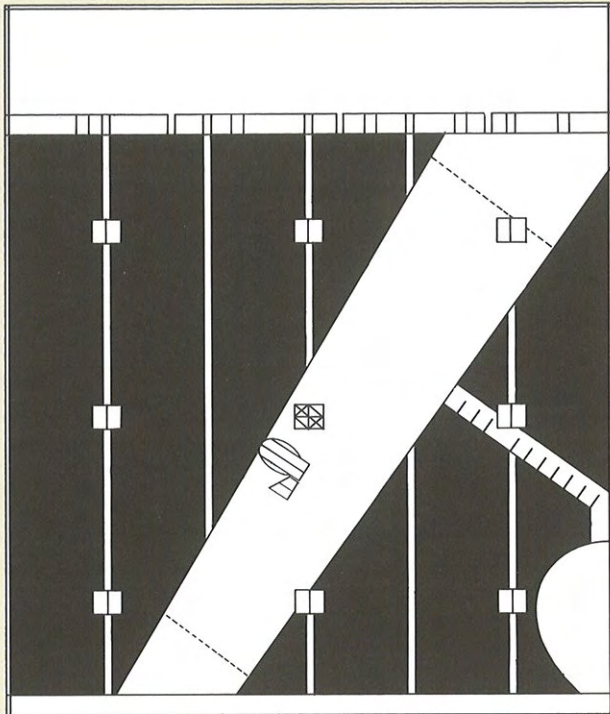




level 2
storage

Since they are voids – they do not have to be “built” – individual libraries can be shaped strictly according to their own logic, independent of each other, of the external envelope, of the usual difficulties of architecture, even gravity.



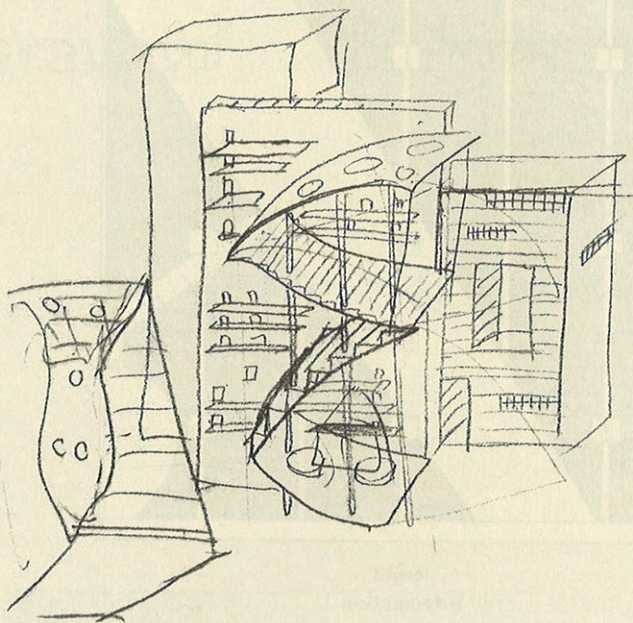


level 3

Intersection

Recent Acquisitions Library: two voids that cross—a horizontal reading room and an auditorium that slopes toward the river.

The walls are lined with transparent viewing booths.



May 12

“Scientific” day.

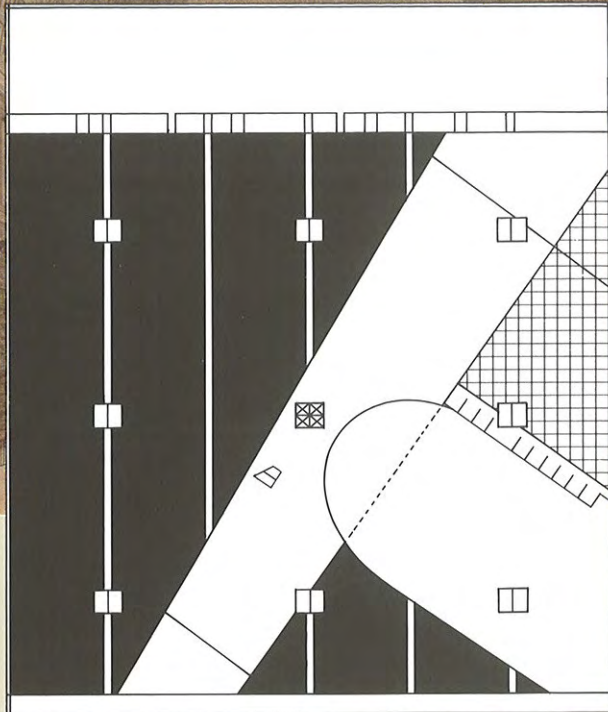
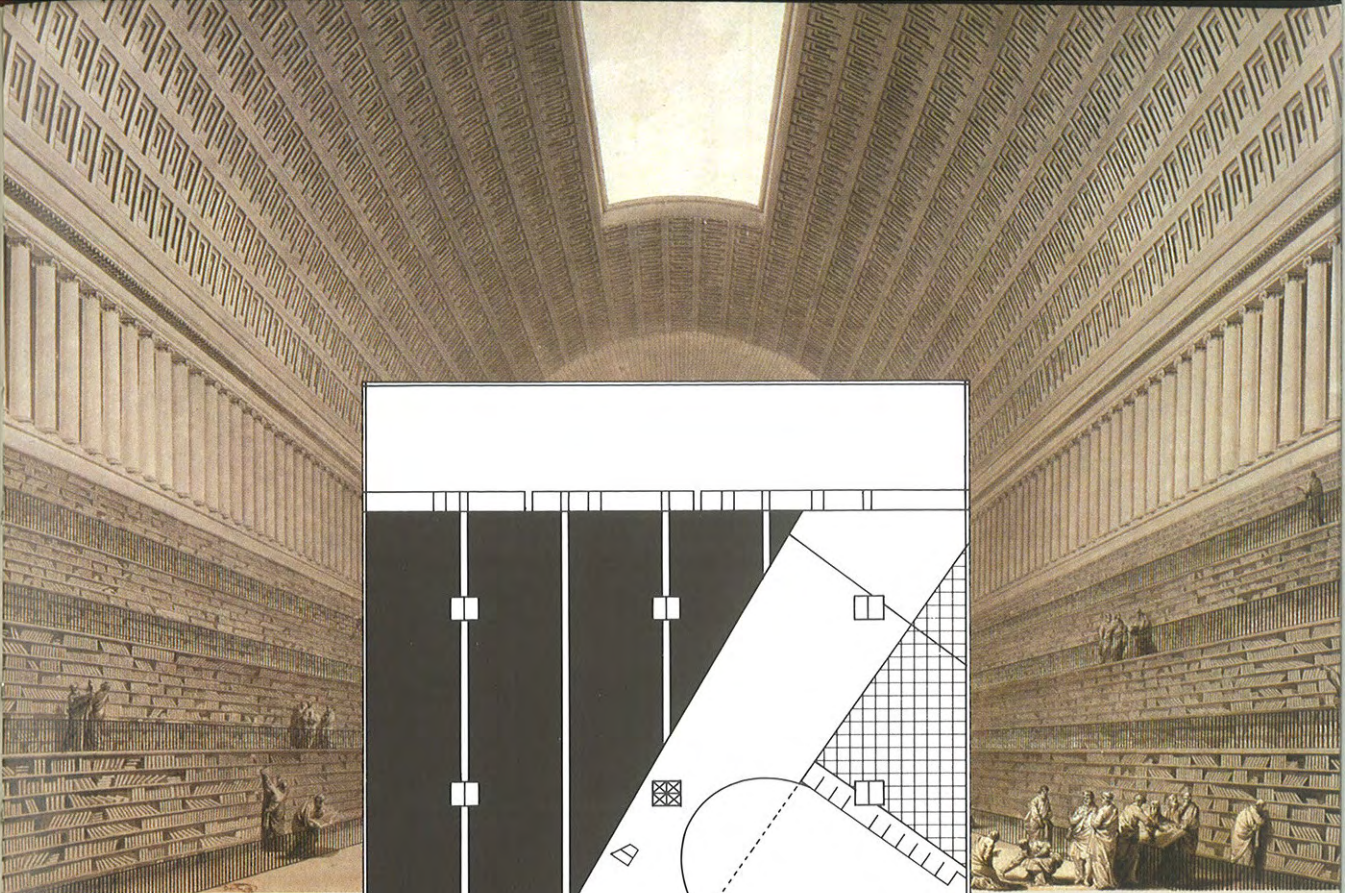
Take:

1 slab of storage

1 slab of administration/offices

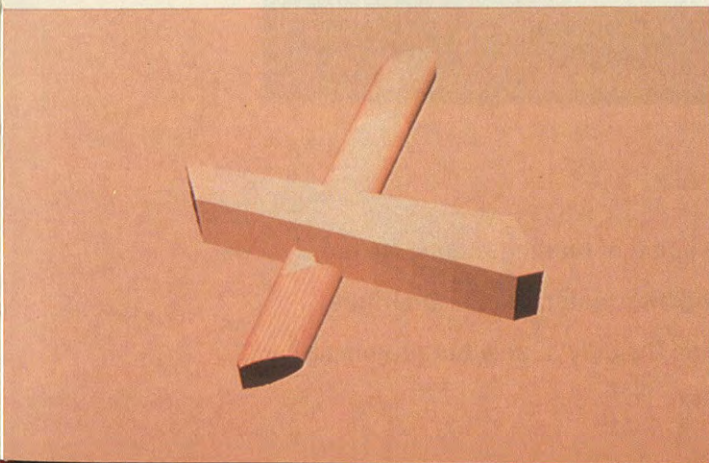
1 slab of circulation/elevators

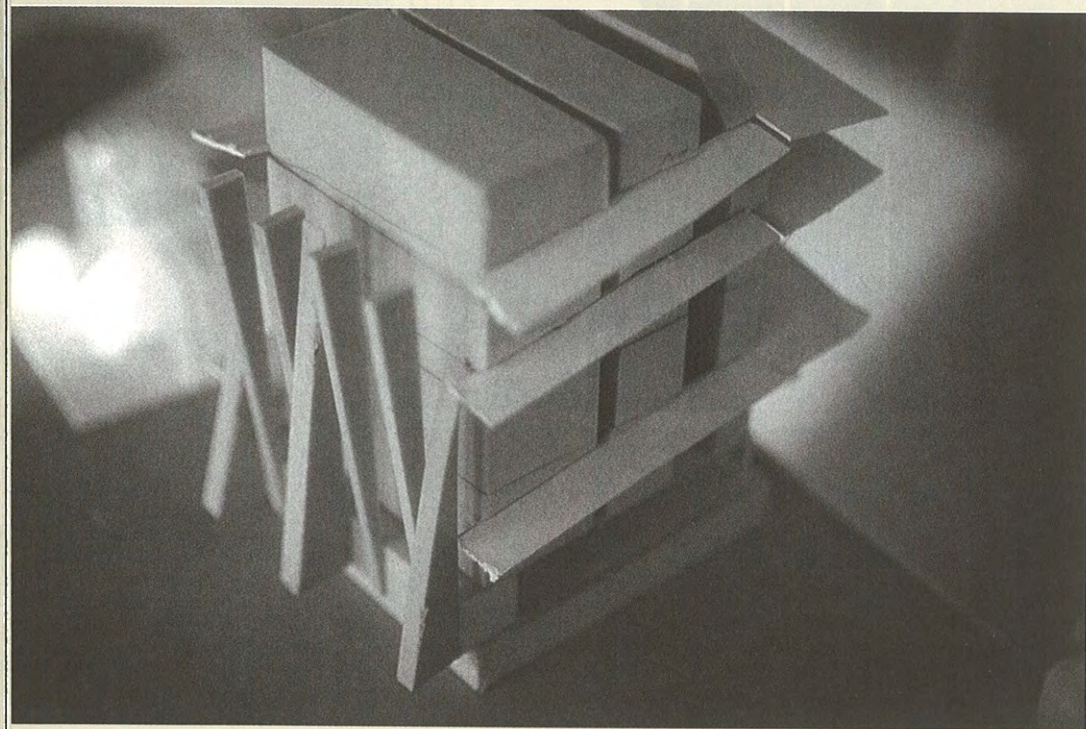
Laminate them together to form a single large block. Pull string of folded reading rooms upward like a limp Tower of Babel facing the Seine. Now slice horizontally through the block: each cut statistically mimics the program. You can't go wrong. The plan = the section.



level 4

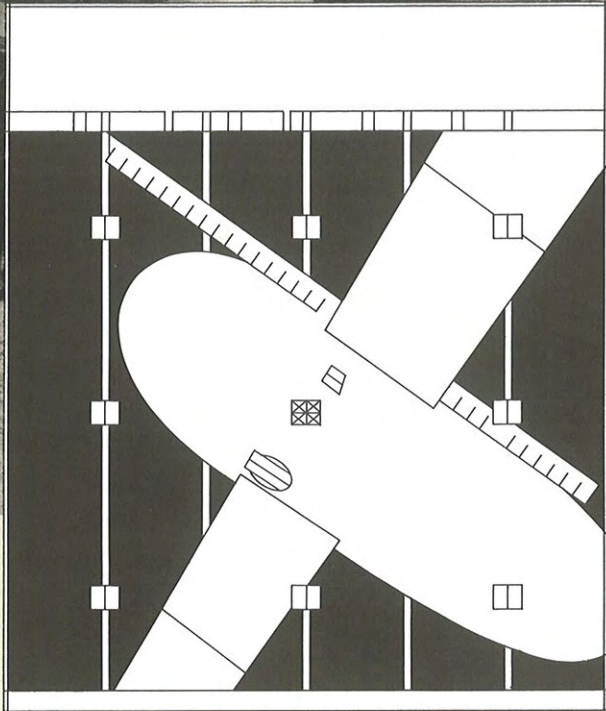
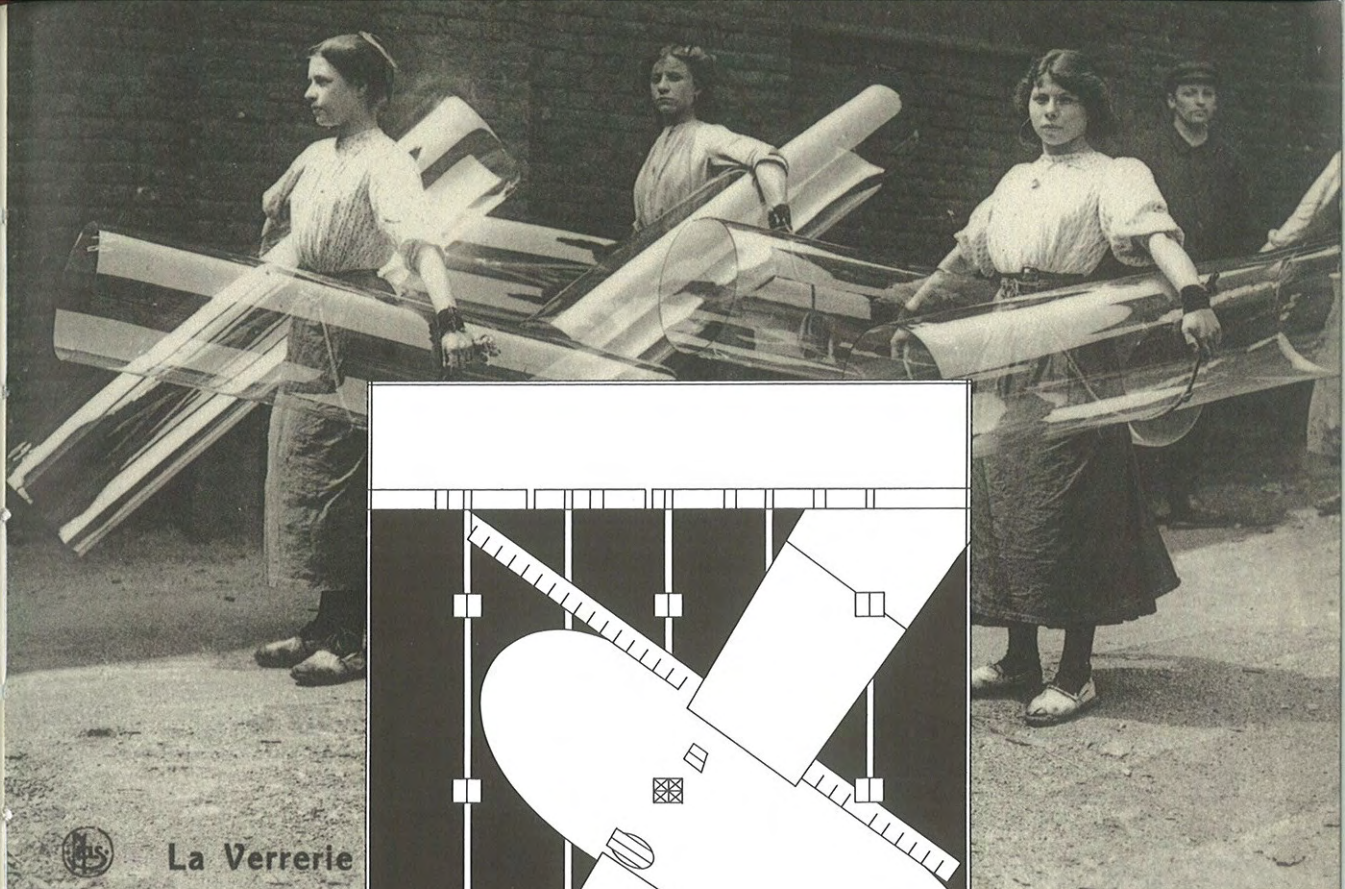
Recent Acquisitions Library: audio, booths, plant, storage





May 13

The core of three slabs now surrounded by a spiral of reading rooms. No more focus on the river; in this way they will see everything: the center, the Périphérique, the periphery, the XVIth, the good, the bad, and the ugly ... ugly but promising?



level 5
Recent Acquisitions Library: audiovisual, auditorium

marks make
also a series of a credible "formless" shape

(3)



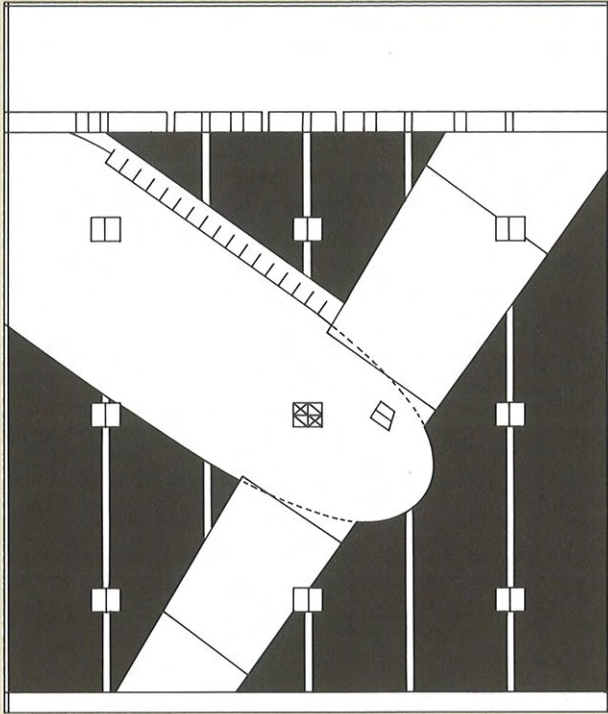
May 15

An old sketch for ZKM, suddenly pregnant.

Imagine a building consisting of regular and irregular spaces, *where the most important parts of the building consist of an absence of building.*

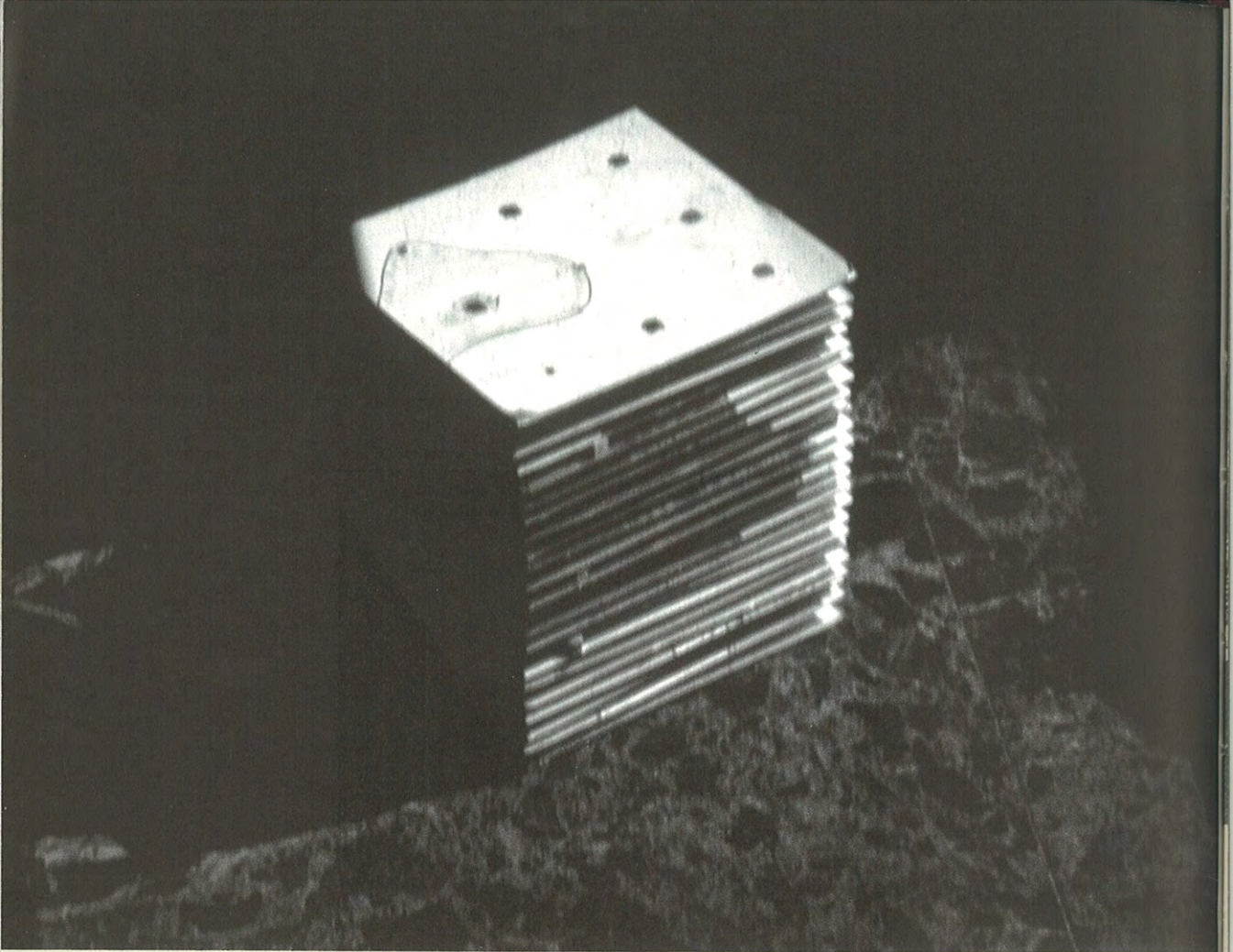
The regular here is the storage; the irregular, reading rooms, not designed, simply carved out.

Could this formulation liberate us from the sad mode of simulating invention?



level 6

Recent Acquisitions Library: video, booths, storage



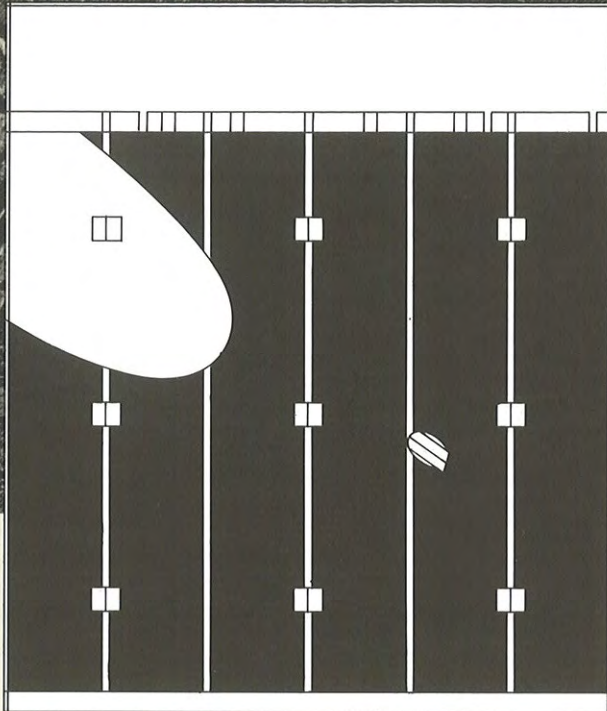
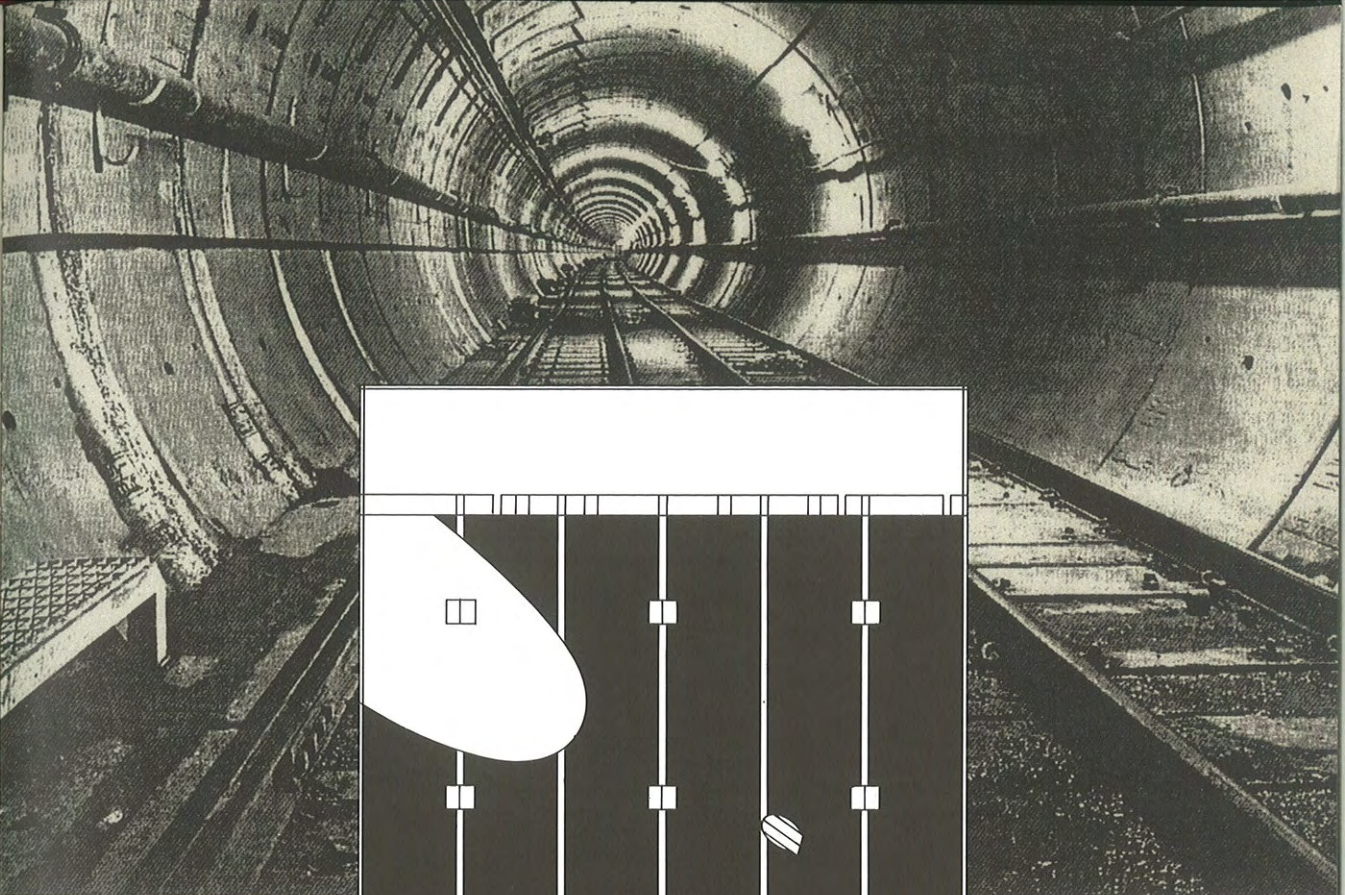
May 19

The TGB is a cube.

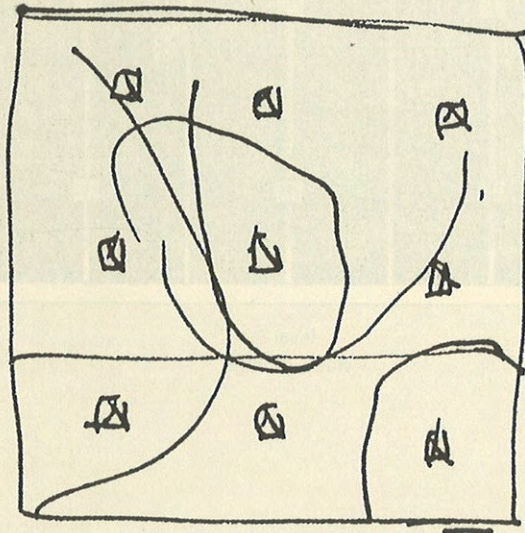
It is solid storage with the reading rooms — voids — excavated where efficient.

Dark in the center, daylight on the perimeter.

Crowds below, empty chambers above for reflection.

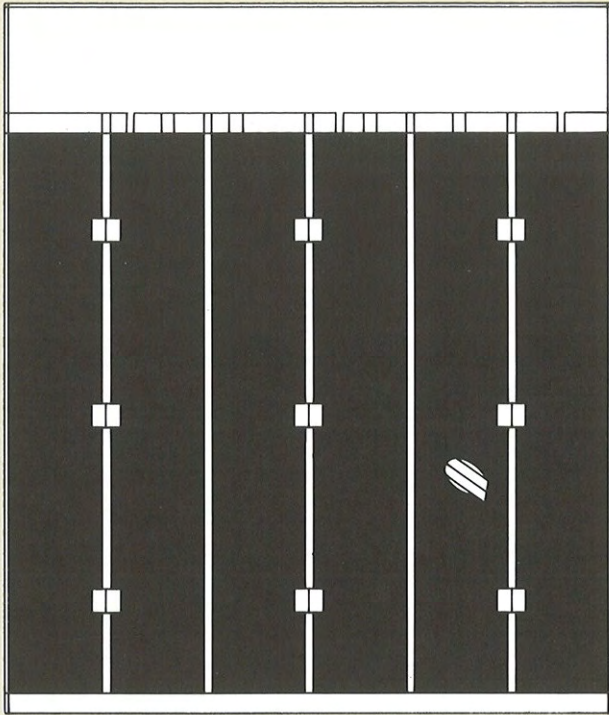


level 7
video, storage

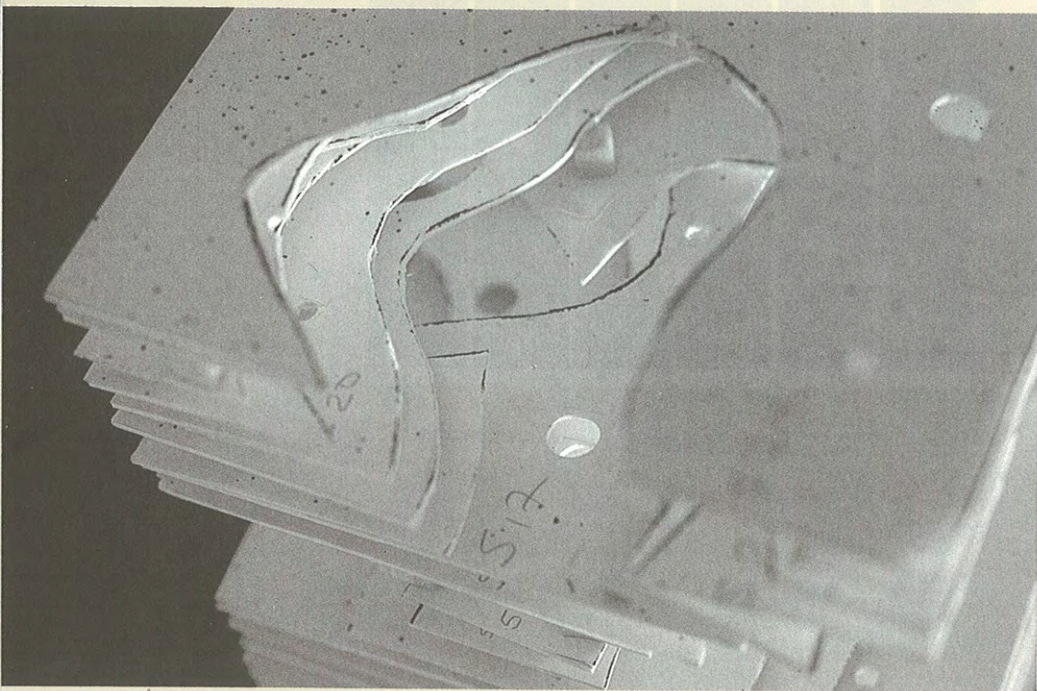


May 20

Cube pierced by nine shafts of vertical movement. As long as a void surrounds one of the elevator squares, it's accessible.



level 8
storage

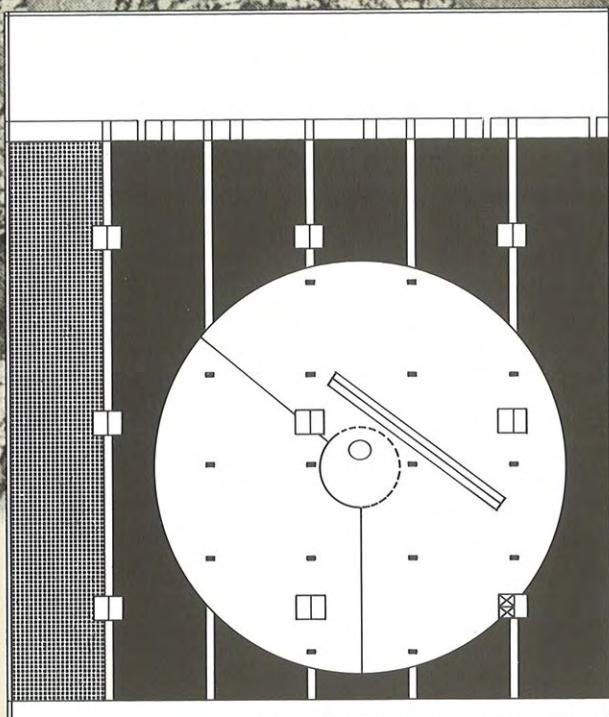
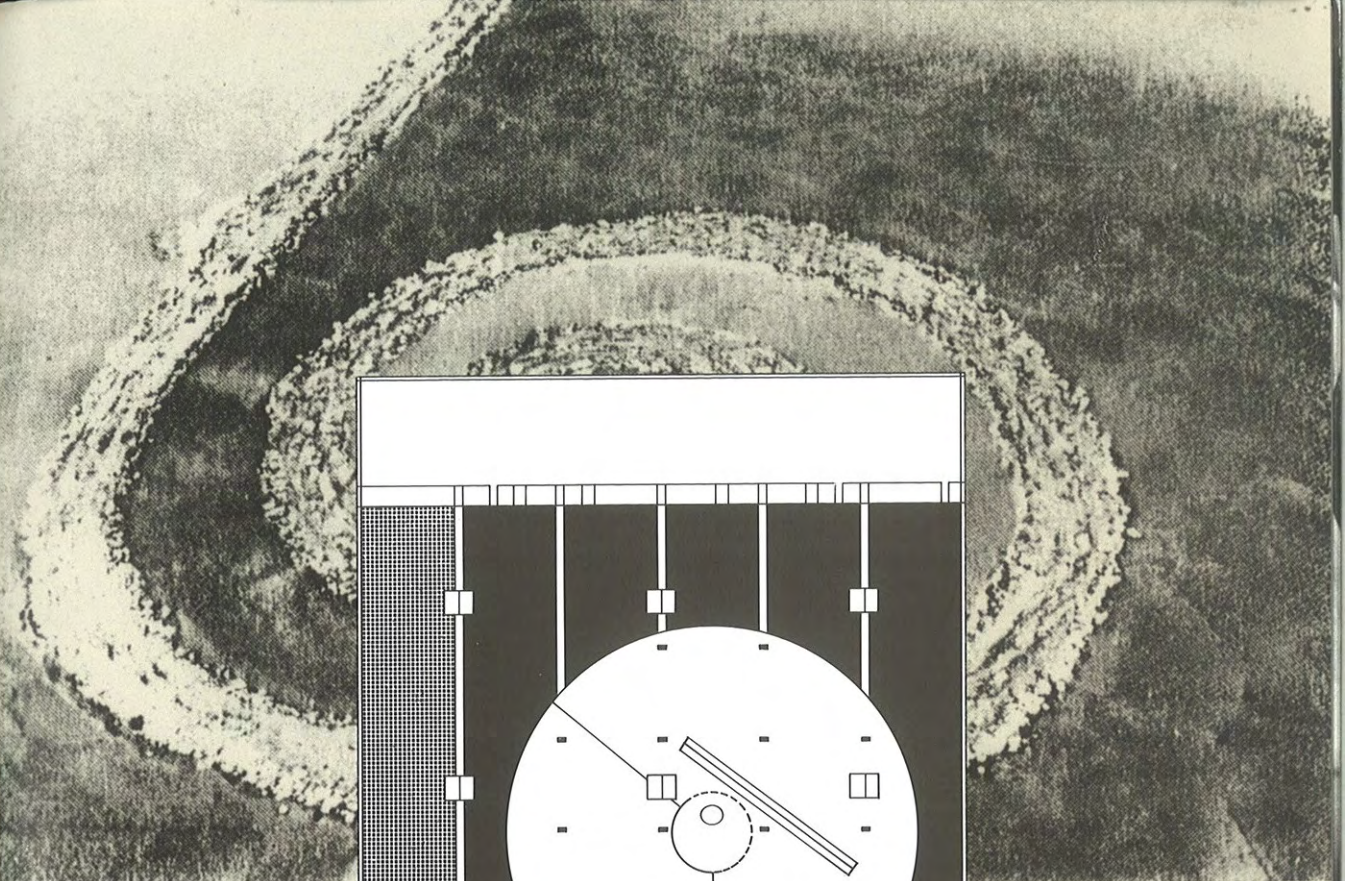


May 23

Dear Diary,

The creation of difference, the unbearable task, becomes pleasure.

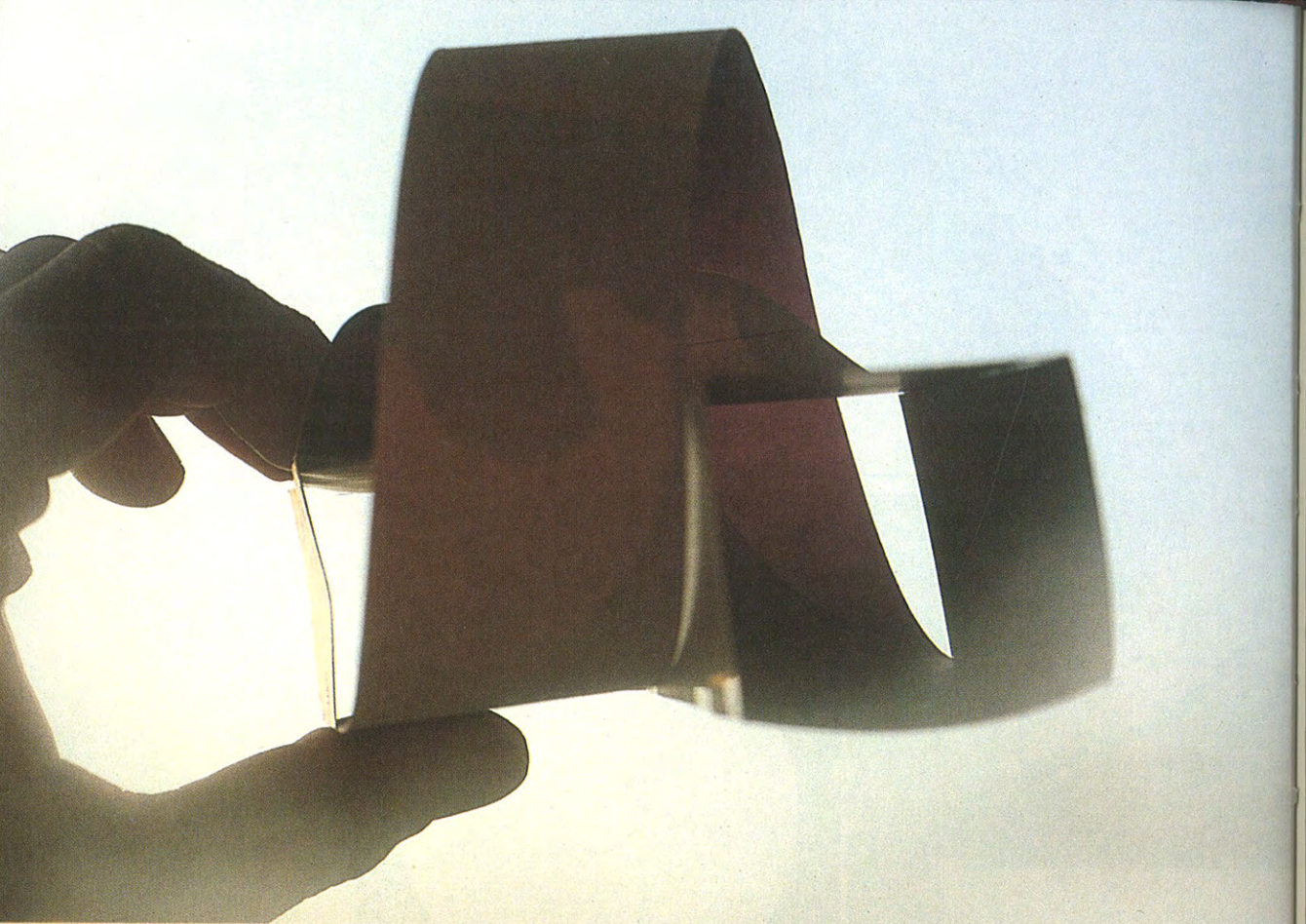
Easy, too. Forms only have to be "left out," not constructed.



level 9

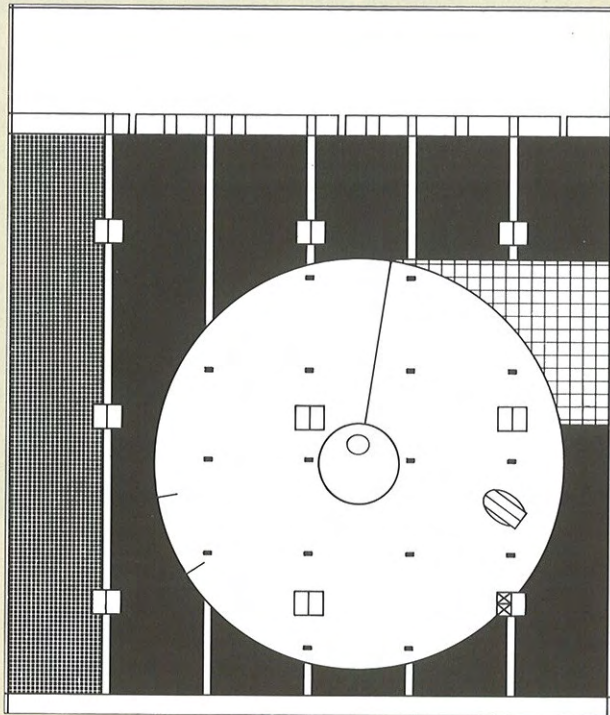
Spiral

Reference Library: a continuous spiral that connects, in three turns, five floors of partly open storage, carrels, study booths. Each engagement gives access to different subjects and themes.



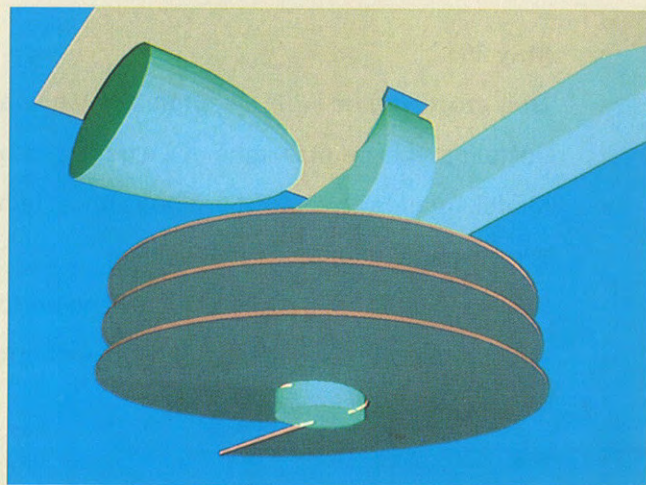
May 24

Imagine a room where floor becomes wall becomes ceiling becomes wall, and floor again ...
Room loops the loop.

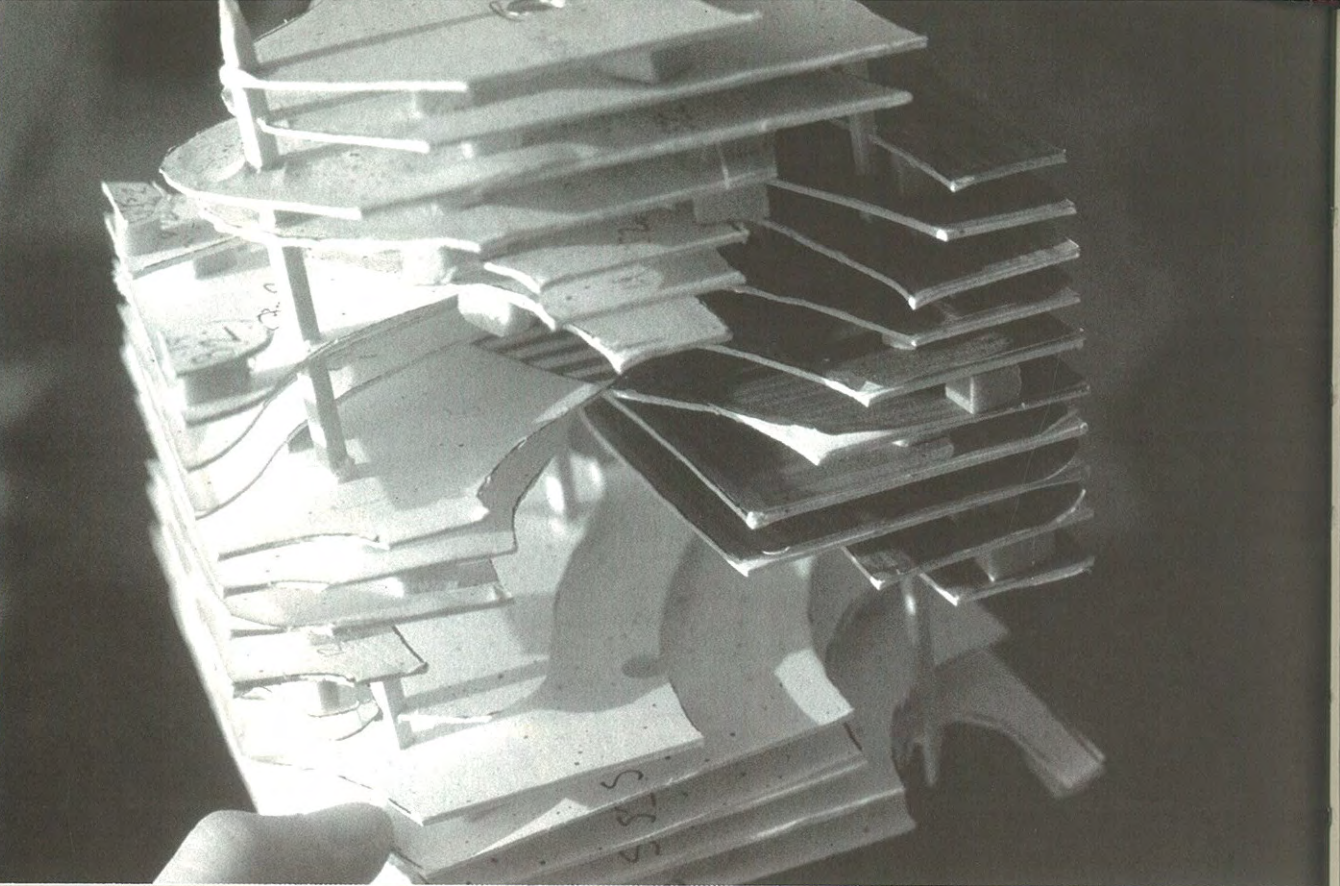


level 10

Reference Library: reading room, open storage, carrels,
robotized storage, plant



0 | | | | 20m



May 25

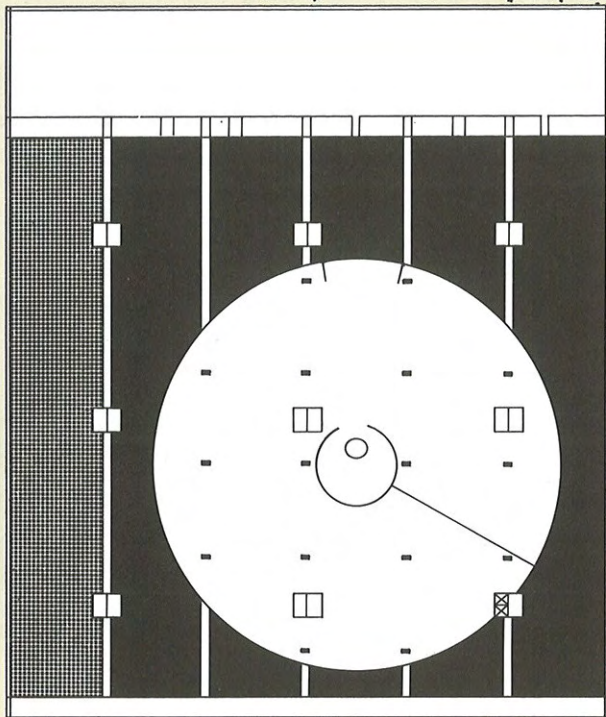
Only anxiety, amid early symptoms of exhilaration: it's an idea, we know, but it is absolutely unclear at this point whether it's a good or a bad one.

Model, intended to clarify, prolongs uncertainty...

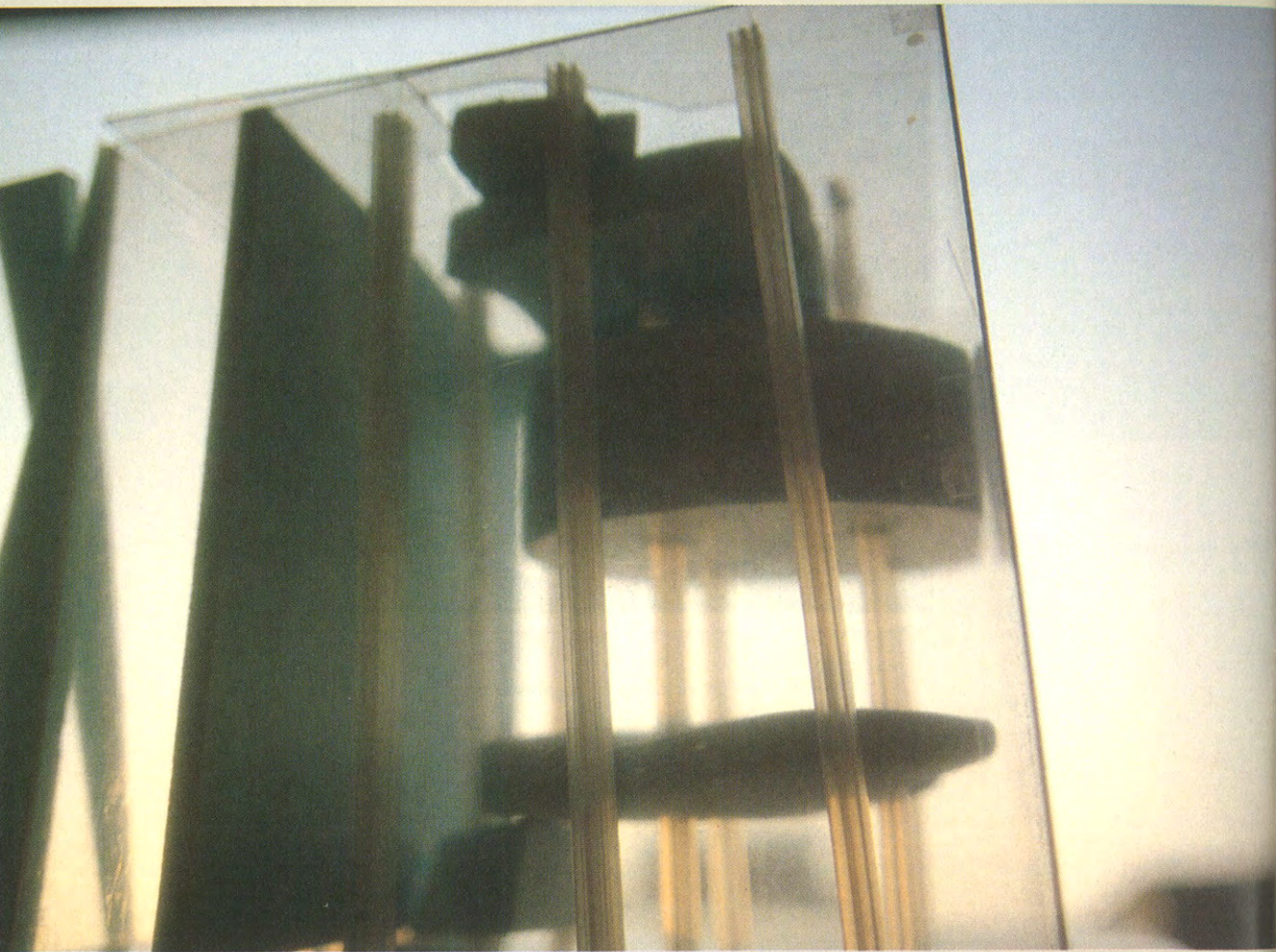
We suspend judgment; it needs time.

A cube. All the "deductions" have been performed: the building as residue of process of elimination. We are dealing not with aesthetics here, but with quantities.

We only add and subtract.



level 11
Reference Library: reading room, storage

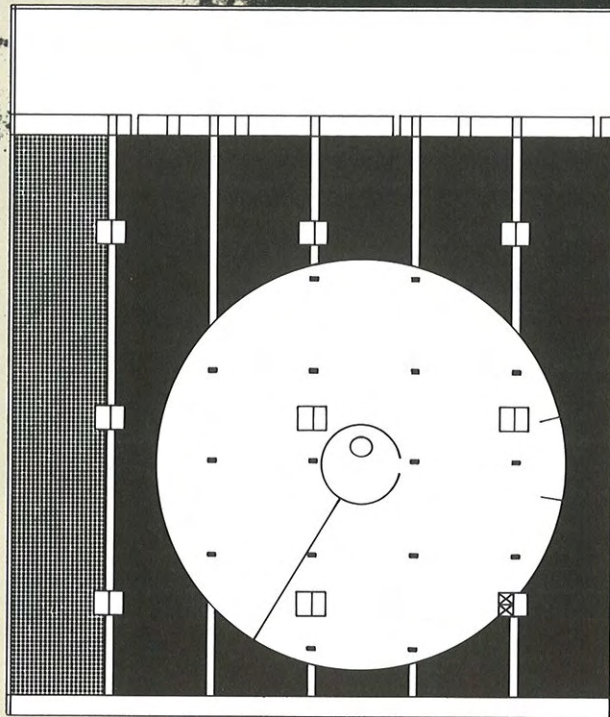


May 26

Portrait of all the libraries the way they will never be seen: as shapes, as objects.

If all goes according to plan, we will have taken that status away from them.

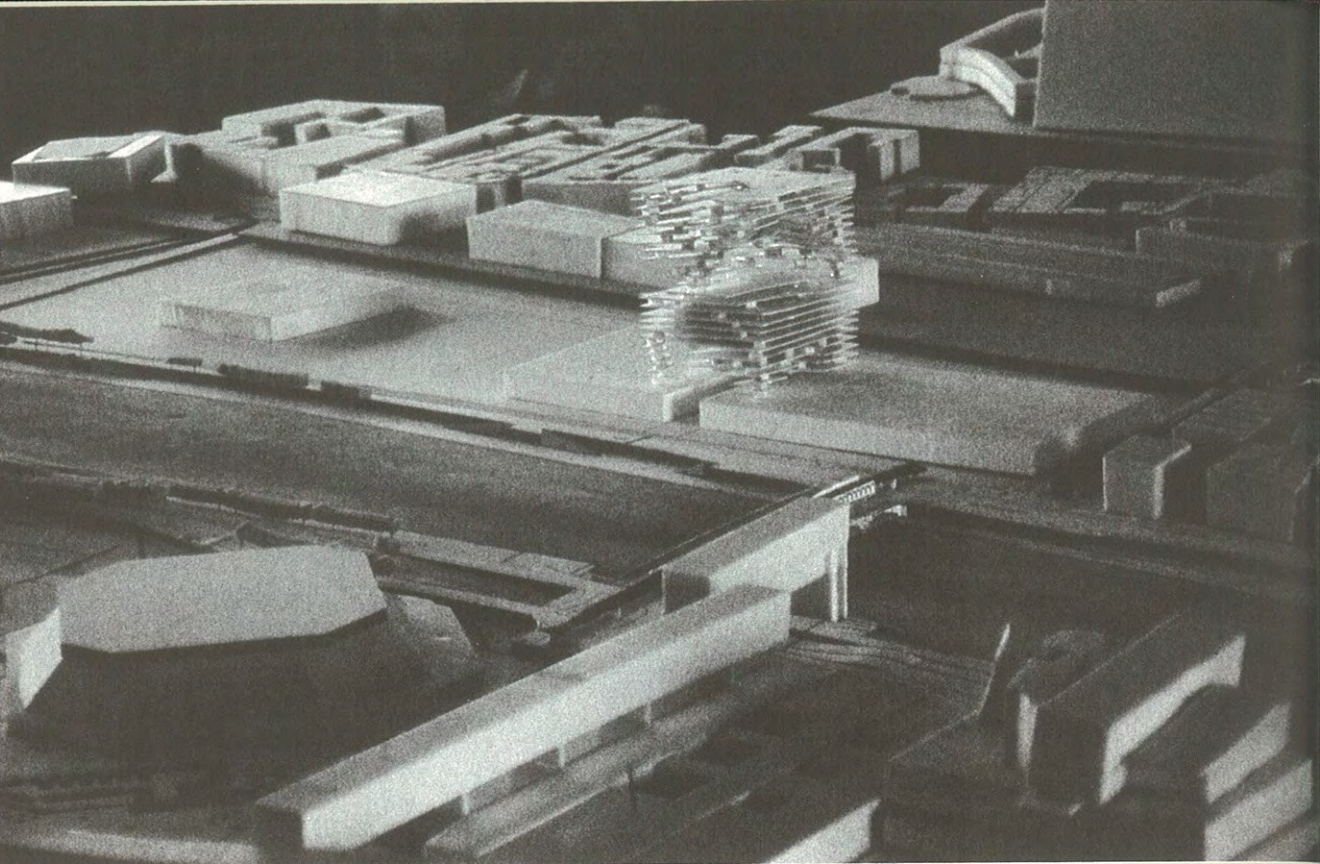
Formless architecture.



level 12

Reference Library: reading room, plant, storage

0 | | | | 20m



May 30

Not looking for differences, the project has become “different.”

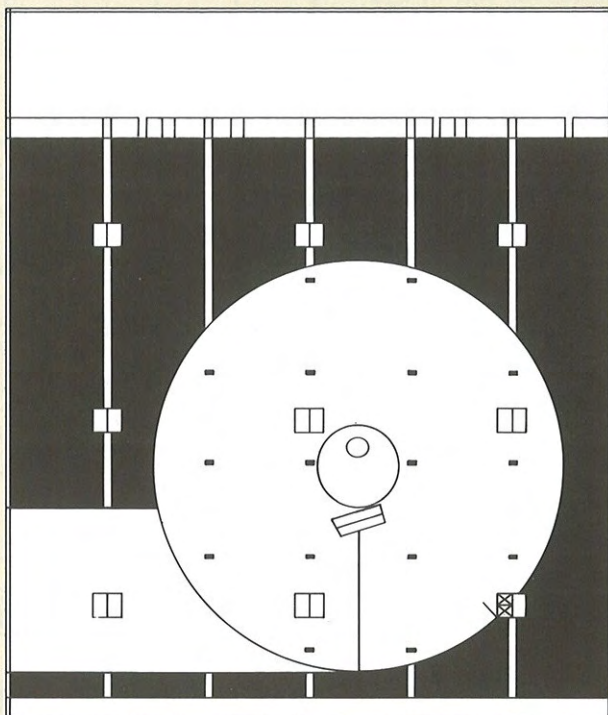
First “ghost” of the eventual project, on site.

Somehow, presence of cube—unstable through its multiple erosions—seems only way to respond to the surrounding “neatness” of the new architectural landscape (nothing older than ten years).

But can such a container still have a relationship with the city? Should it? Is it important?

Or is “fuck context” becoming the theme?

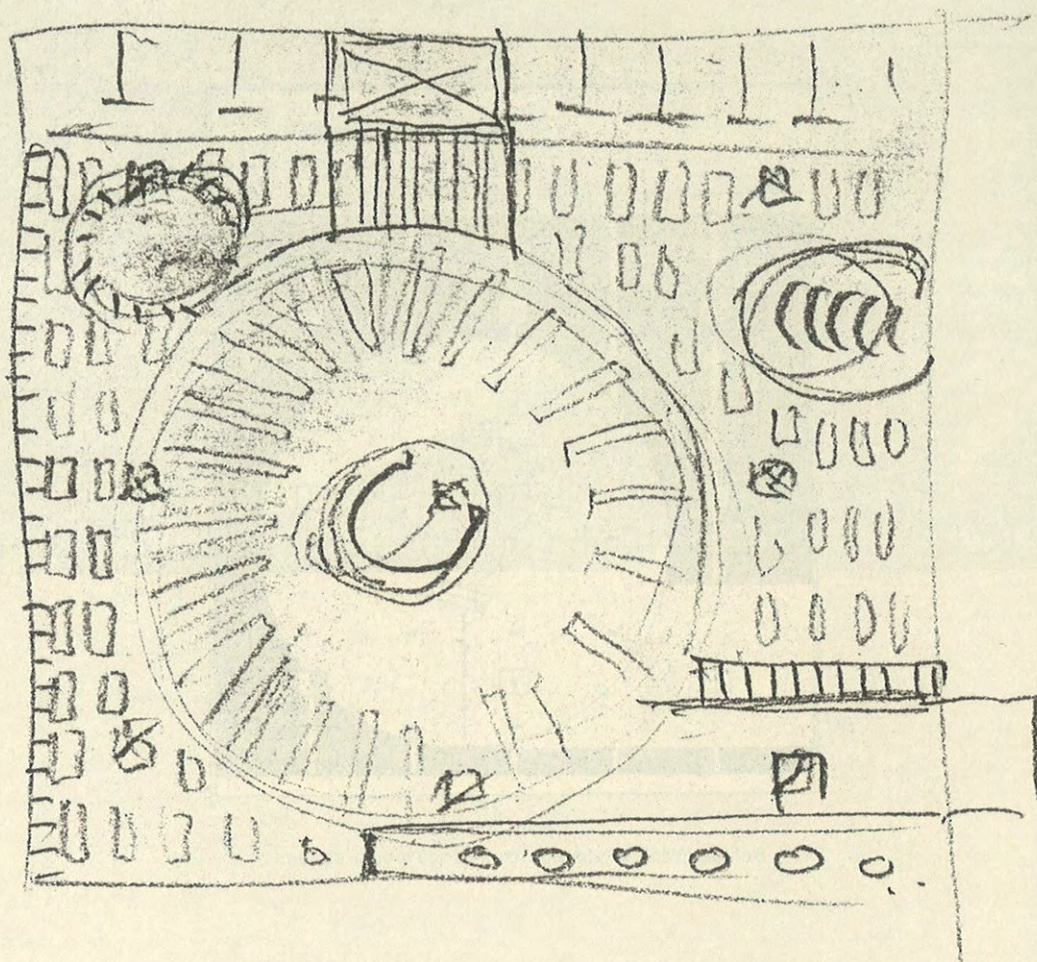
Beginning to note signs of conviction.



level 13

Reference Library: lounge, conference rooms, storage

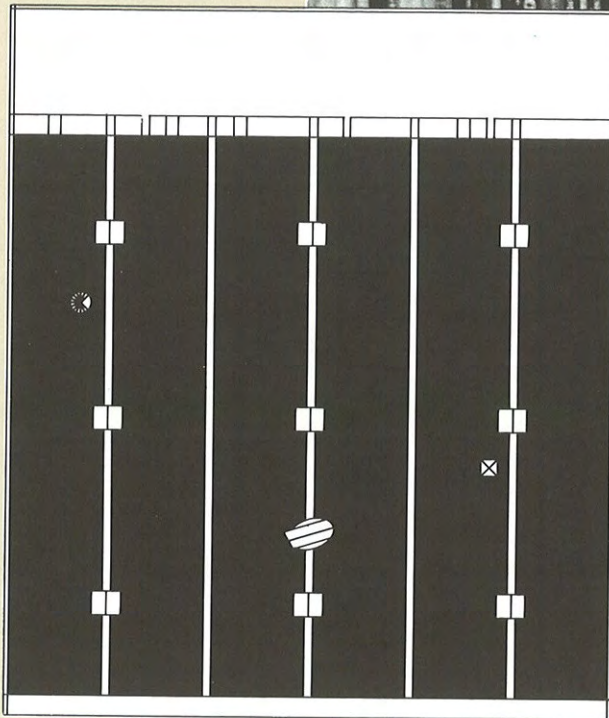
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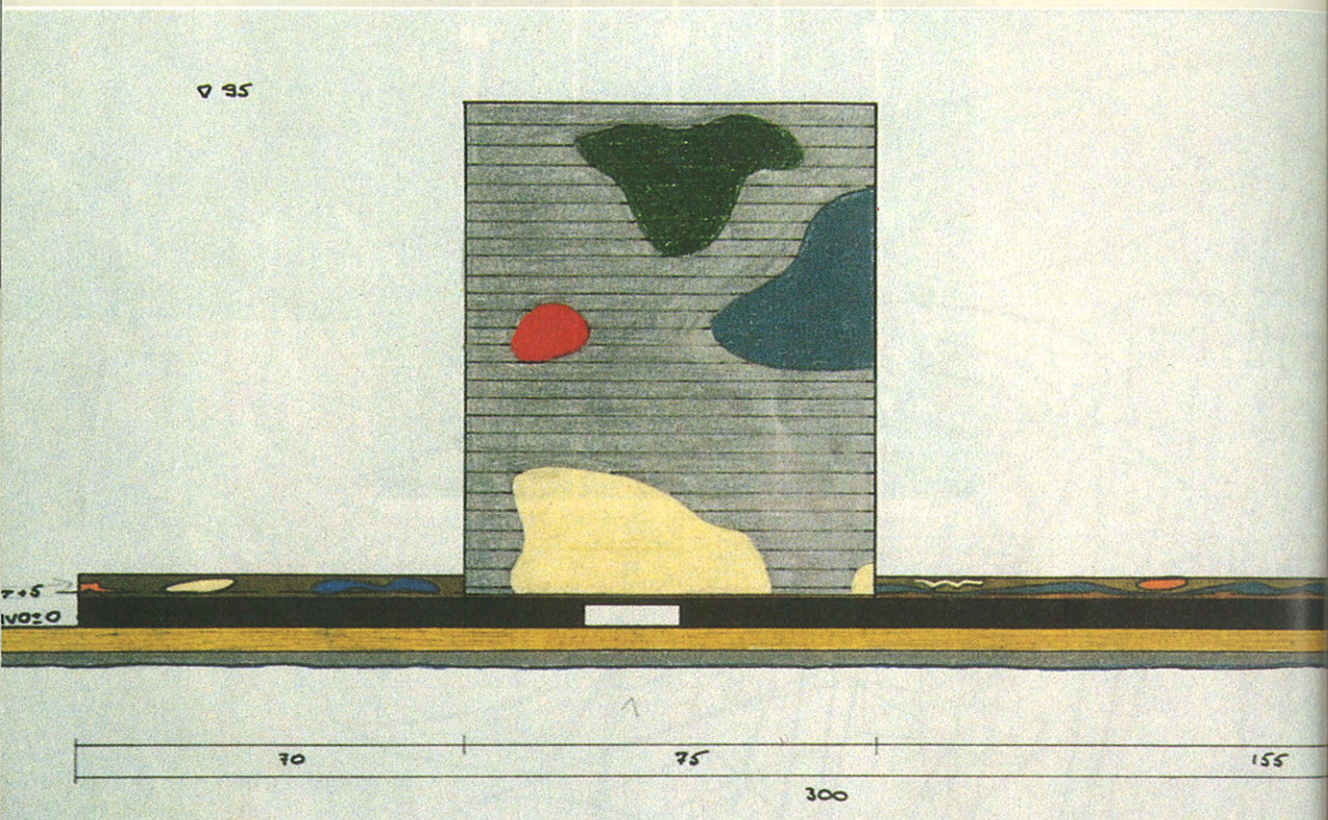
May 31

We begin to "think" the plans. There is nothing to think.

Is it that Bigness alone makes everything easy to the point of automatism? If the storage pattern is wallpaper, planning is like tearing the wallpaper off the wall.



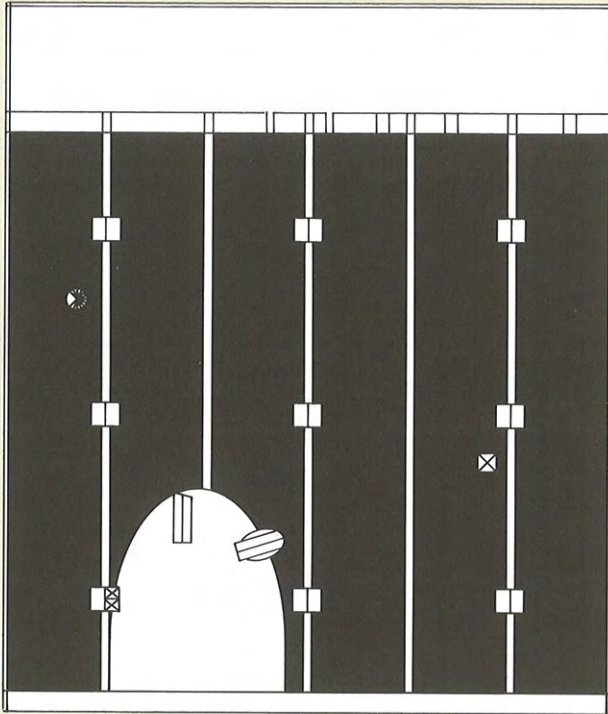
level 14
storage



June 1

First formal drawing (Georges Heintz). Astonishingly absurd, astonishingly beautiful.

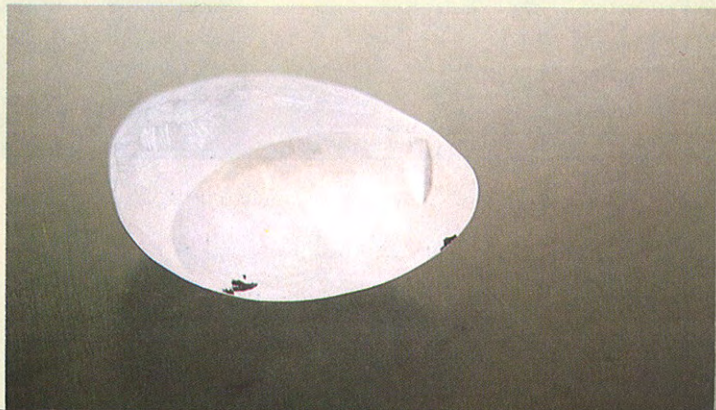
Beyond all exploitation, there is also altruism at work: OMA — machine to fabricate fantasy — is structured for *others* to have the eureka's.



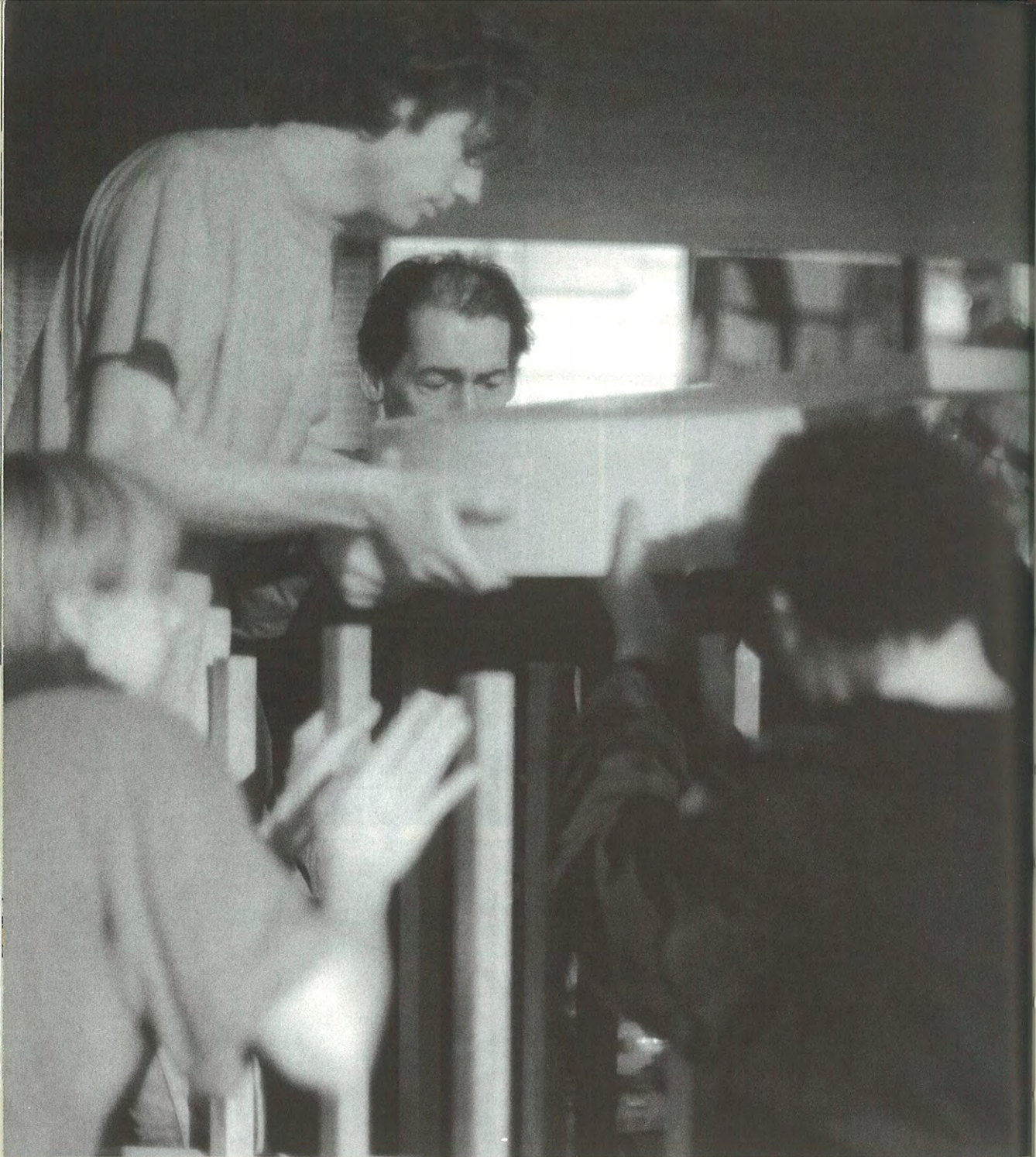
level 15

Shell

Catalog Room: appearing on the exterior as an eye, it provides a panoramic view of Paris, a catalog in itself.



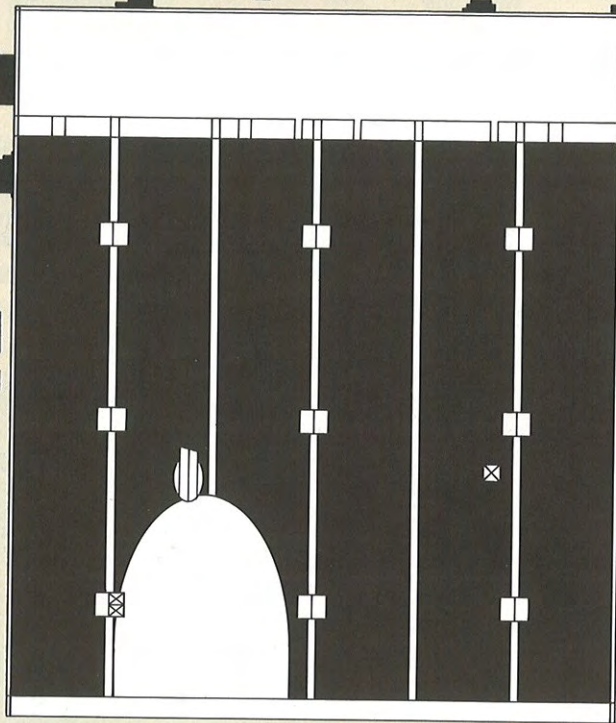
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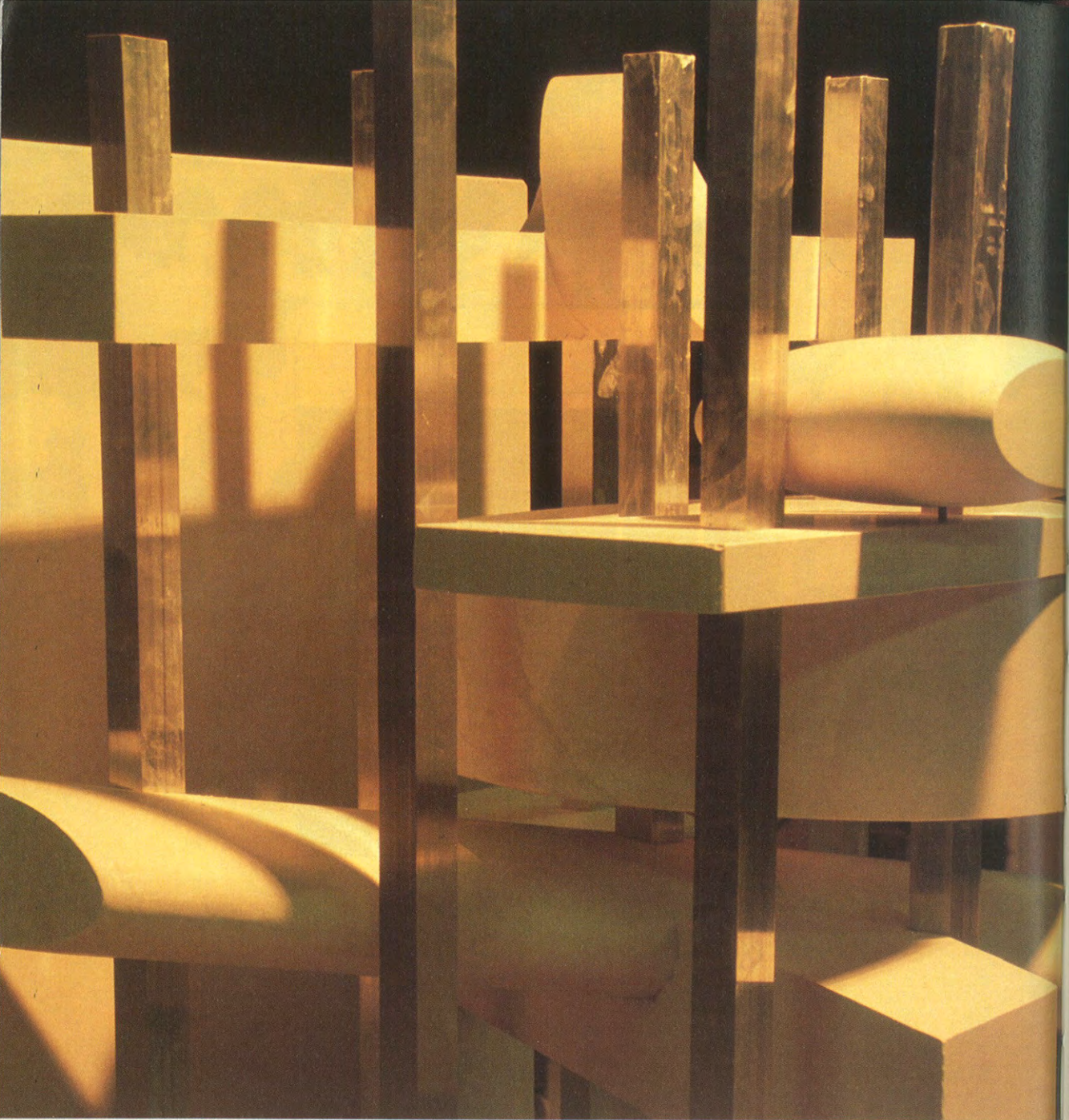
June 4

Dear Diary,

Do we want to win this competition or not?



level 16
Catalog Room, storage



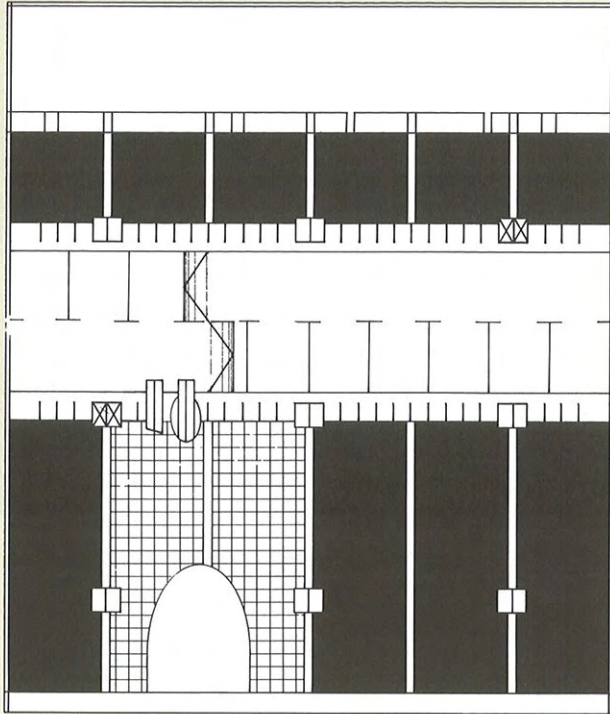
June 9

Prepare intermediate presentation for colleagues, critics, intellectual friends.

Make a reverse model: what is solid has melted, what is void floats as object in nothingness.

Sparkling explanation followed by uneasy silence.

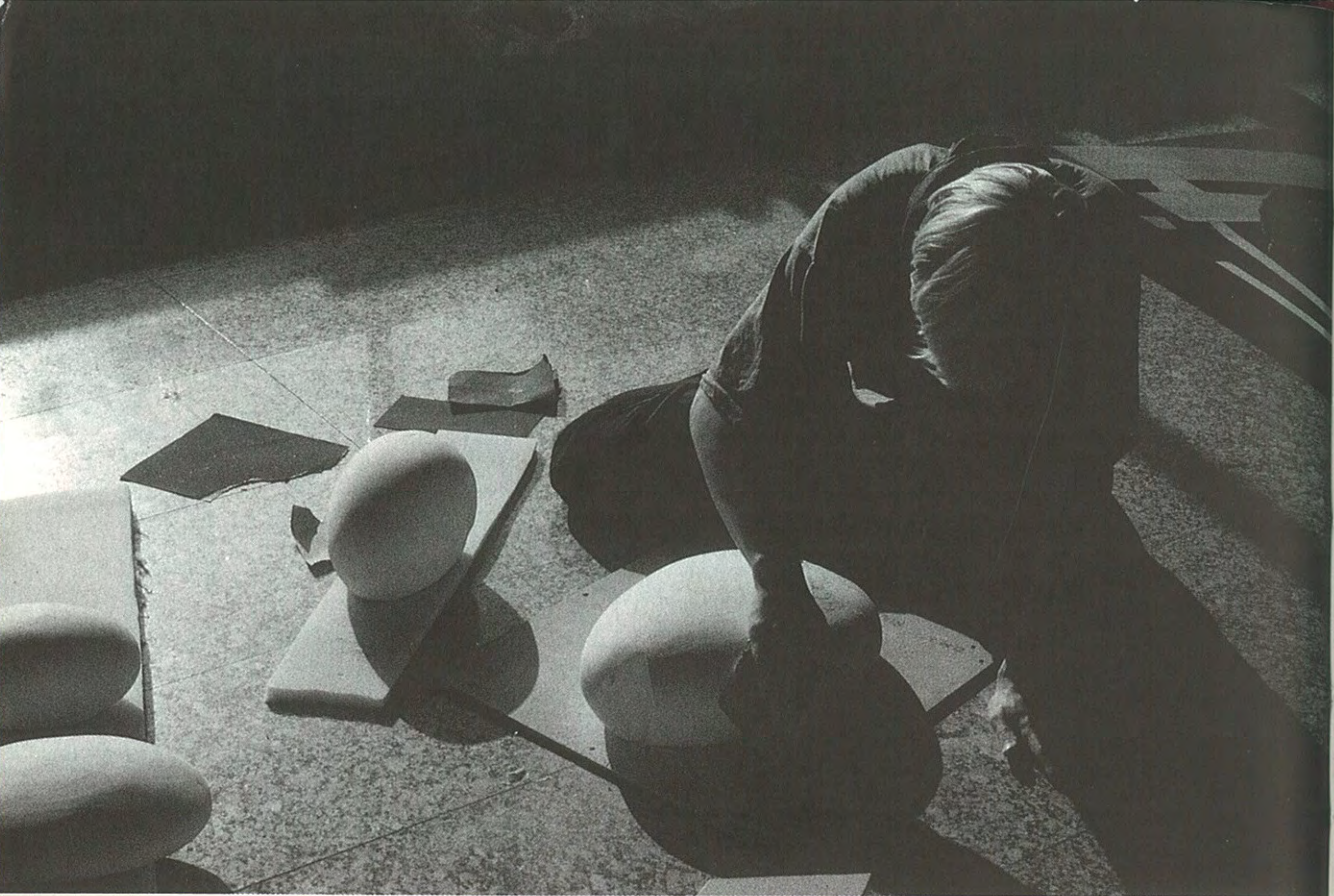
Is this the "beyond"?



level 17

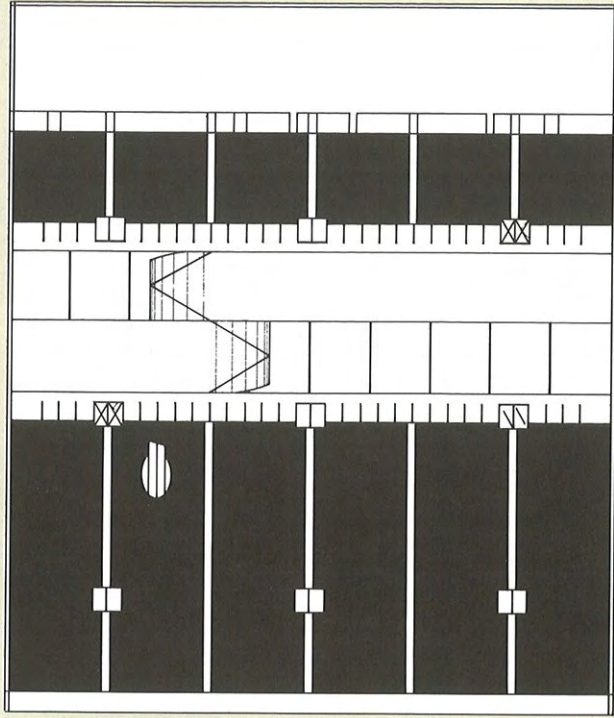
Loop

Research Library: a "scientific" interior where floor becomes wall becomes ceiling becomes wall—a Möbius strip that performs a loop-the-loop across the depth of the building.



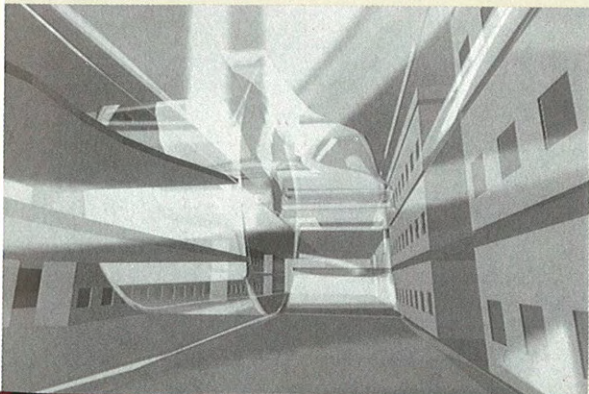
June 24

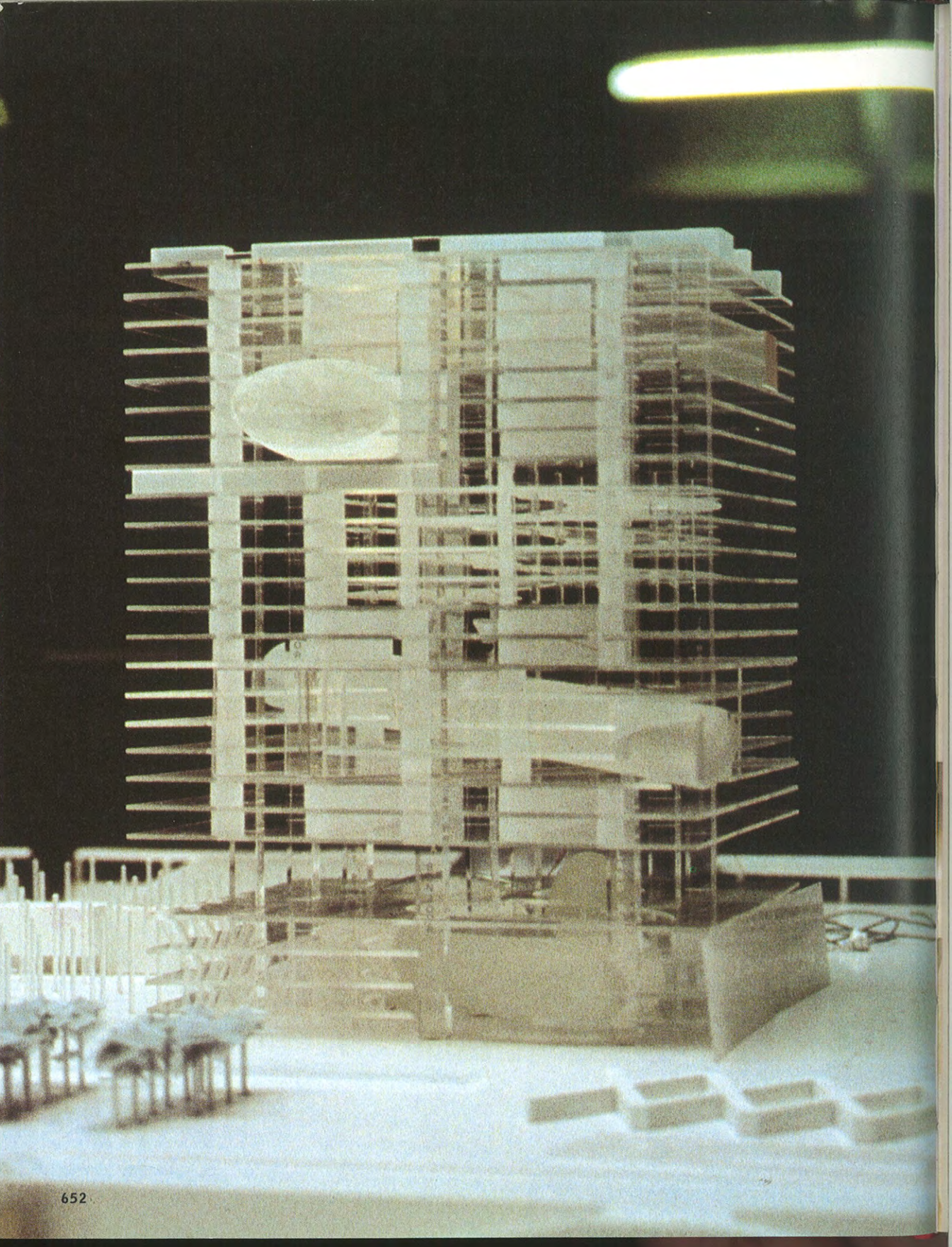
Have to go on. We have no choice.

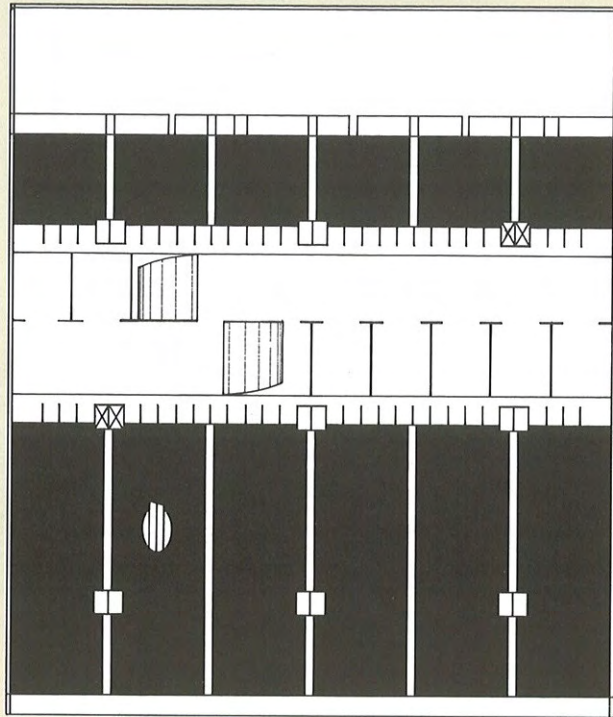


level 18

Research Library: conference rooms, storage



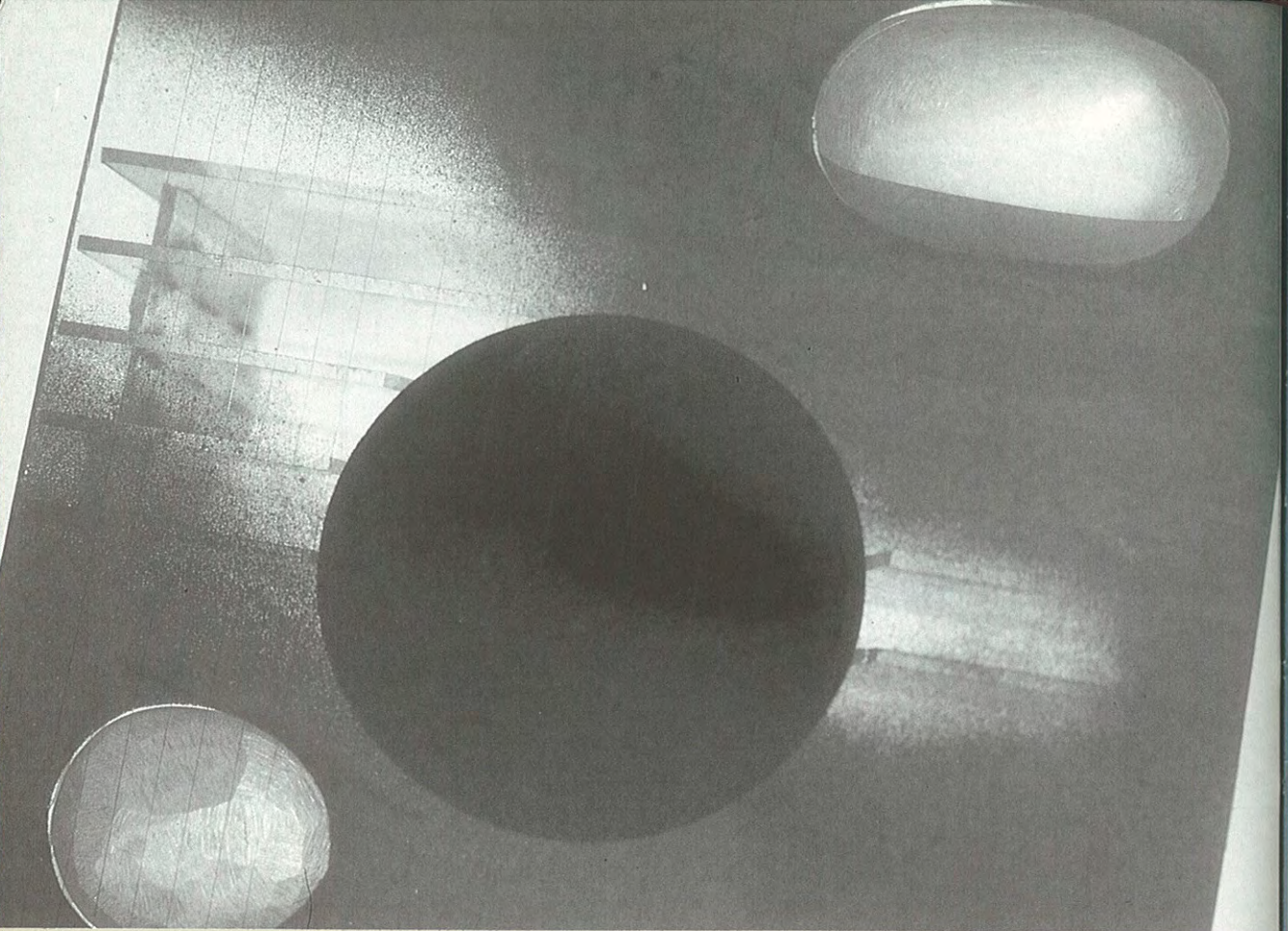




level 19

Research Library: reading room, storage

0 | | | | 20m



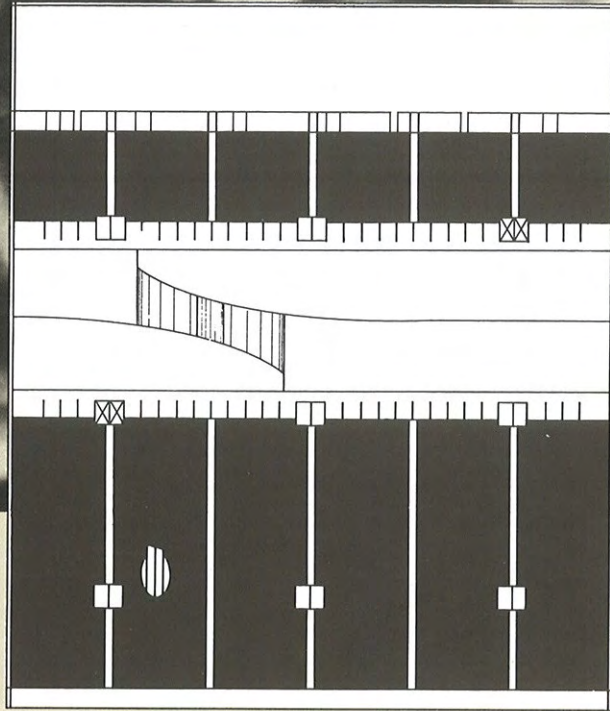
July 2

Dear Diary,

Final moment of relief: first test for facade... simulating the impossible.

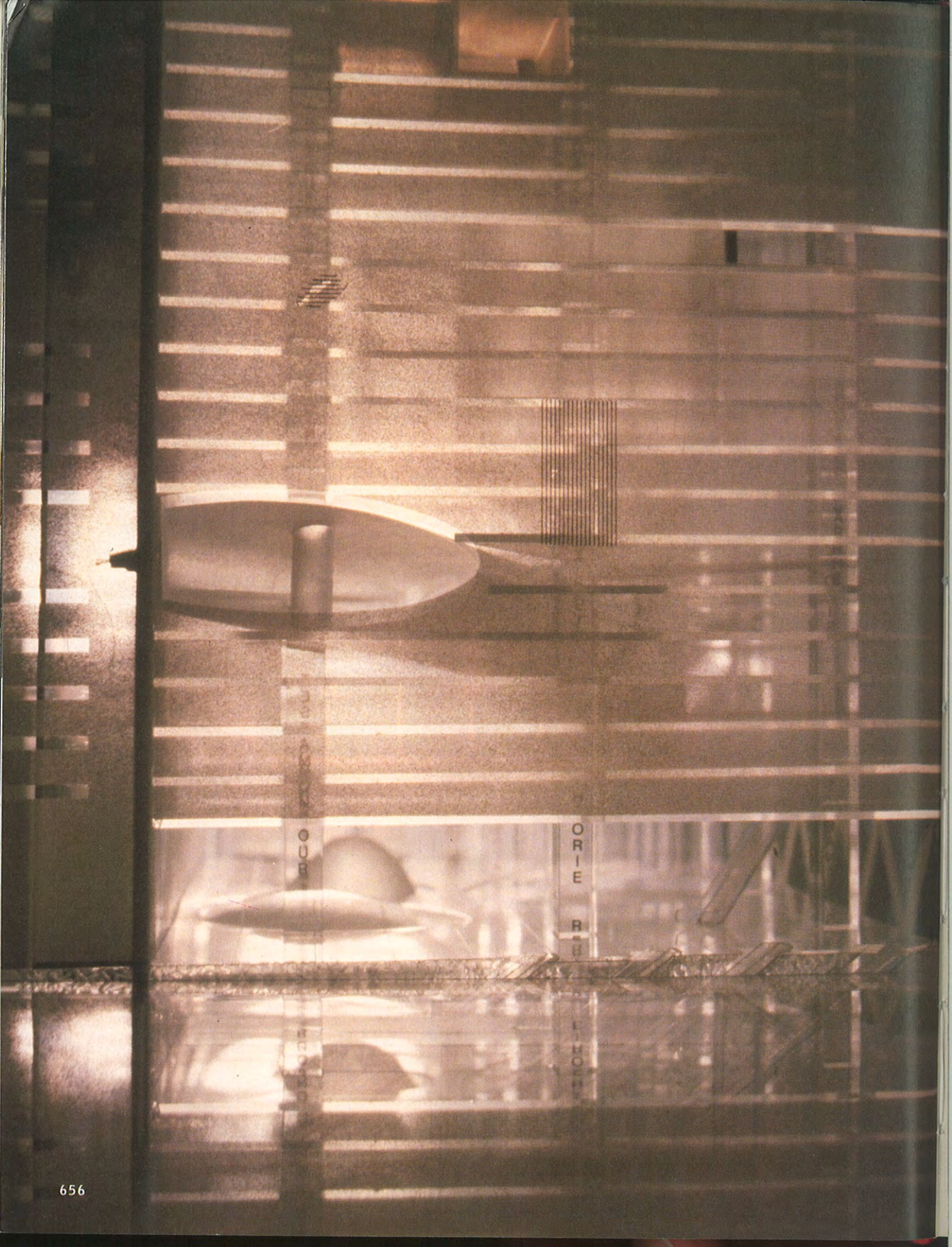
A plane, sometimes transparent, sometimes translucent, sometimes opaque; mysterious, revealing, or mute...

Almost natural—like a cloudy sky at night, like an eclipse...



level 20

Research Library: café, lounge, storage,

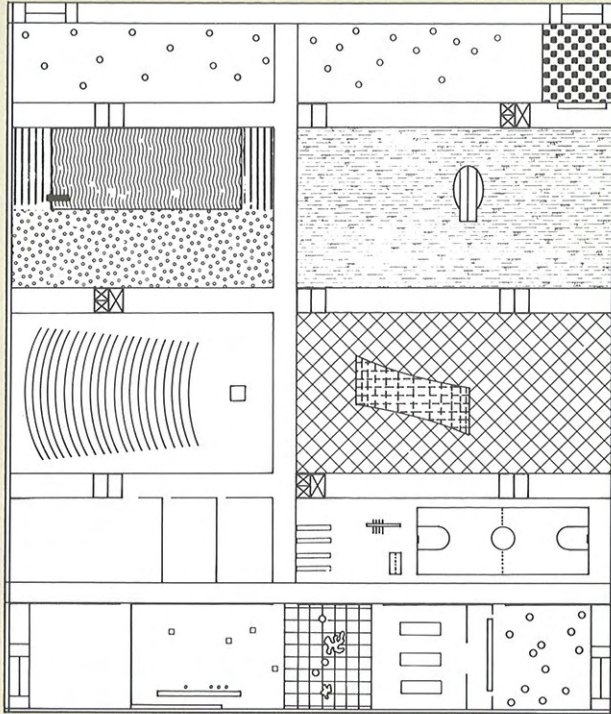


OUR

ORIE

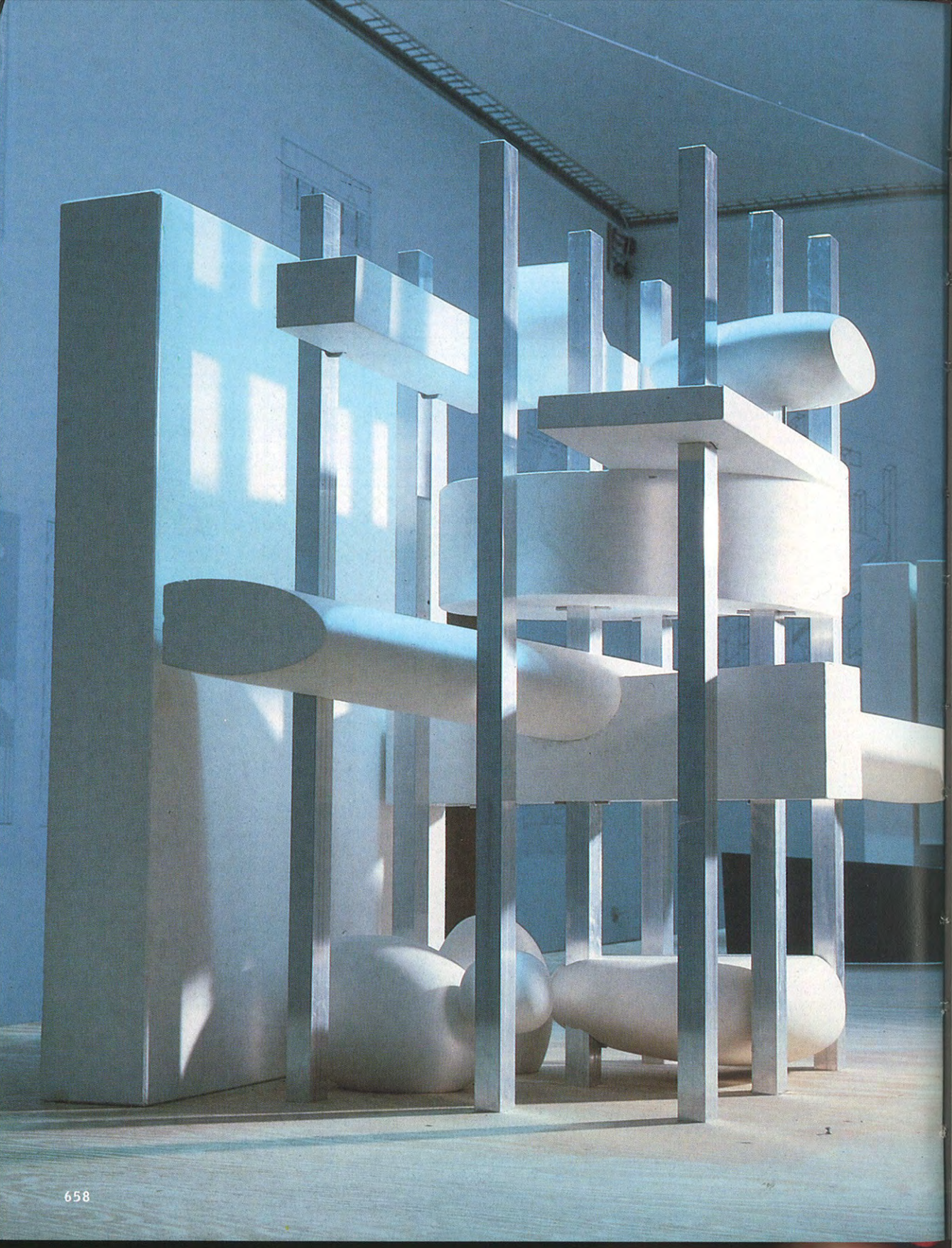
REB

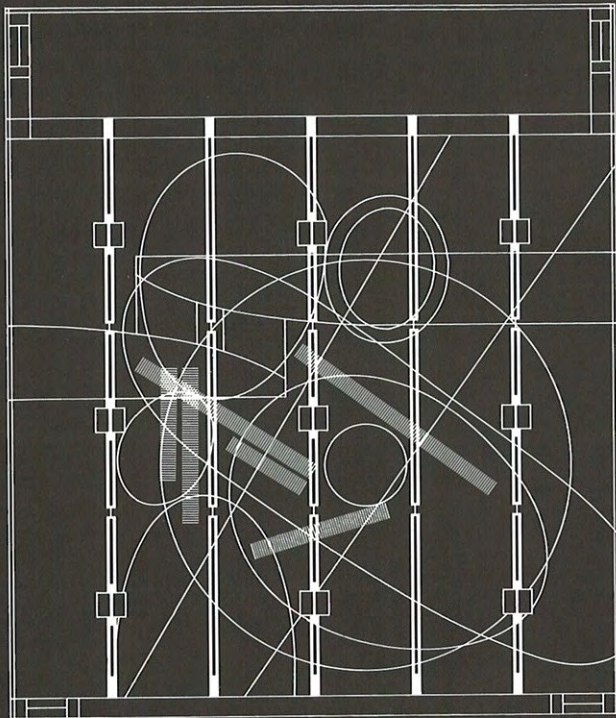
FINCH



roof

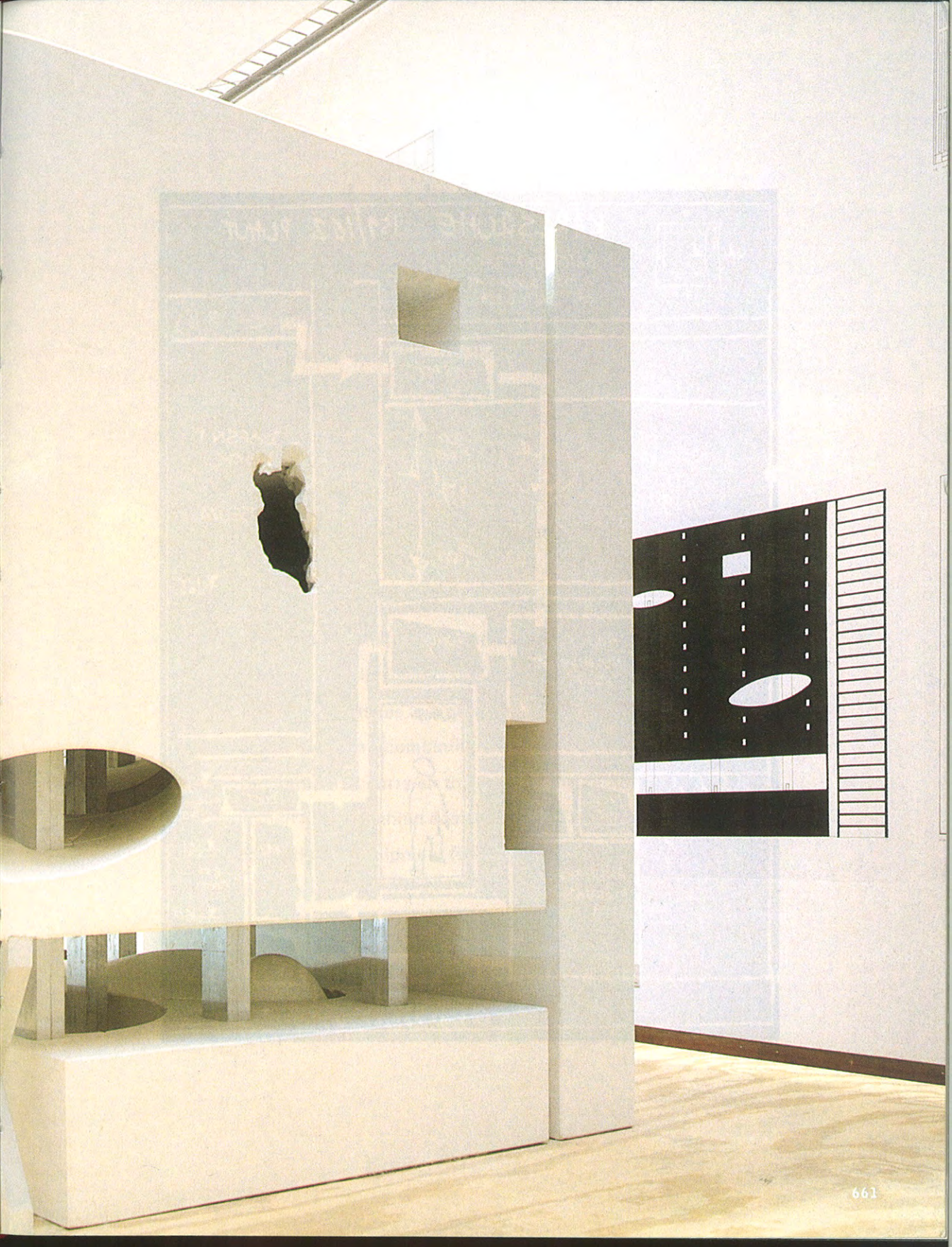
restaurant, gymnasium, garden, swimming pool

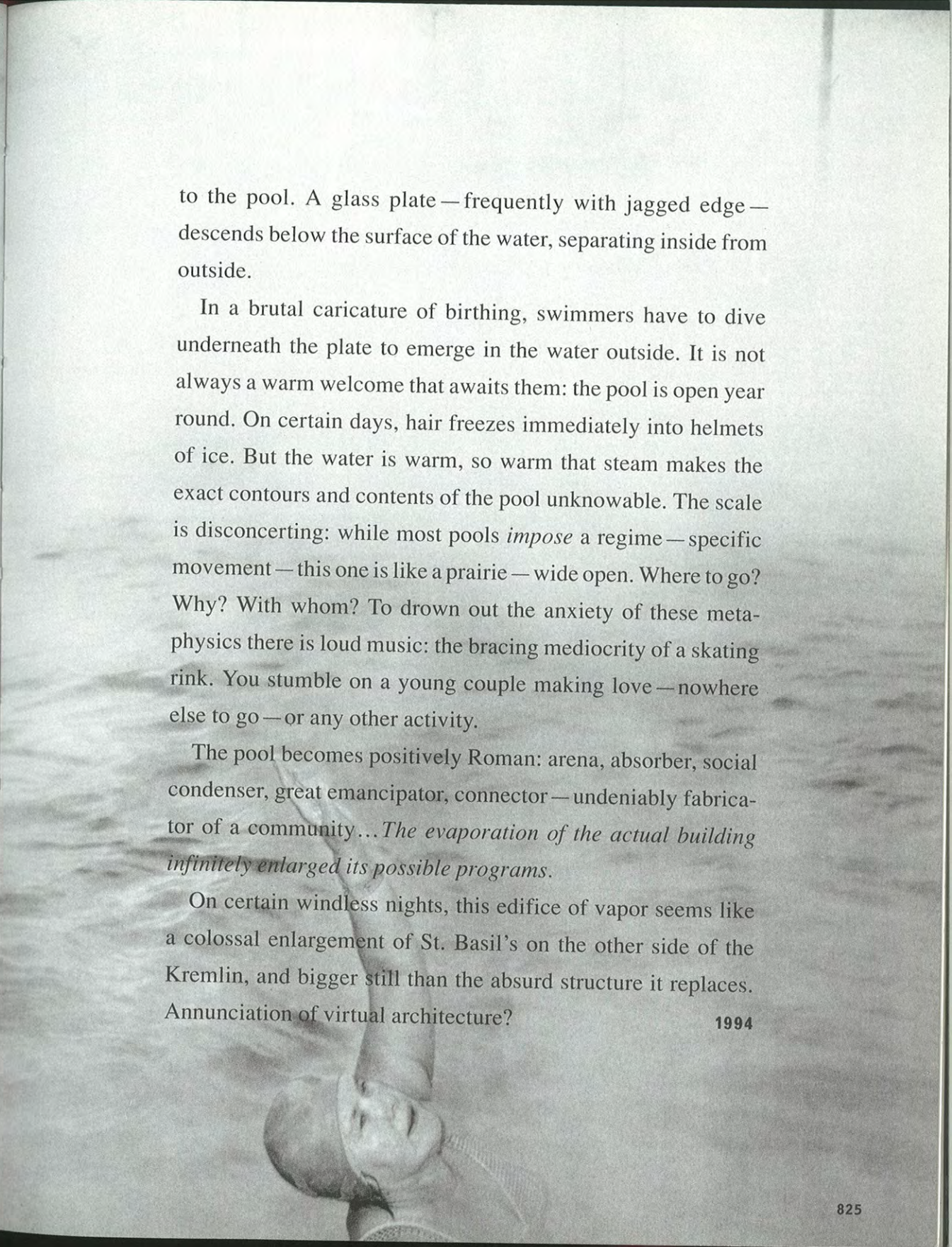




superimposition of voids







to the pool. A glass plate — frequently with jagged edge — descends below the surface of the water, separating inside from outside.

In a brutal caricature of birthing, swimmers have to dive underneath the plate to emerge in the water outside. It is not always a warm welcome that awaits them: the pool is open year round. On certain days, hair freezes immediately into helmets of ice. But the water is warm, so warm that steam makes the exact contours and contents of the pool unknowable. The scale is disconcerting: while most pools *impose* a regime — specific movement — this one is like a prairie — wide open. Where to go? Why? With whom? To drown out the anxiety of these metaphysics there is loud music: the bracing mediocrity of a skating rink. You stumble on a young couple making love — nowhere else to go — or any other activity.

The pool becomes positively Roman: arena, absorber, social condenser, great emancipator, connector — undeniably fabricator of a community... *The evaporation of the actual building infinitely enlarged its possible programs.*

On certain windless nights, this edifice of vapor seems like a colossal enlargement of St. Basil's on the other side of the Kremlin, and bigger still than the absurd structure it replaces. Annunciation of virtual architecture?

1994