

# Reclaiming a public square

-contextual sensitivity as a design strategy



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Relatore: Giovanni Durbiano

Candidato: Runar Strømshoved

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to conduct research on a possible urban and architectural solution for the Queen Sonja's Square in Alesund, Norway. Queen Sonja's square(Dronning Sonja's plass in Norwegian) is a public square in the city center of Alesund. There is a debate revolving around the way could be utilized in the future, and at the moment it seems to be at a standstill. The starting hypothesis of this thesis is that the problems associated with the solutions already on the table, could be overcome by rethinking the premises given by the planning tools.

The premises are today regulated through a master plan for the area, but the hypothesis is that the guidelines of the master plan does not take into account the necessary conditions for developing the site in the best possible way, and even more importantly, has created a situation that at the moment does not seem to lead to any realization or transformation of the place. The approach is to enter the controversy by identifying the specific conditions that are in the way of realization of the urban transformation, and attempt to give a solution, first in the format of a volumetric planning proposal, and then an architectural design proposal. The architectural proposal is also an exploration of personal convictions and values in the act of design, and an attempt to connect these with the pragmatic goal oriented approach often associated with the design theories<sup>1</sup> that creates the foundation for this thesis.

For years the site has been subject to debate. In 2015 the city council approved a new master plan<sup>2</sup> for the seafront of the city a bit further south. Queen Sonja's Square was included in this plan. The master plan provides for a building on the site, containing "public or private services". Furthermore, the plan describes the future building with terminology like "high architectural quality" and other indications that a possible use is of importance. A formulation that created quite a stir was the description of the future building as a "starchitect monument"<sup>3</sup>. Even though the QSS<sup>4</sup> was not the main focus in the development of the master plan, the planning process brought a public debate on how the site should be used.

Many, from private individuals to politicians of the city council, expressed their opinions about the provisions given by the plan, and the preliminary renders of a "tower" on the square. Essentially the criticism revolved around the issues of building on a public square, and the aesthetic implications of constructing a building of this character in an environment of a particular architectural heritage. During the work on the new plan, the QSS kept being a topic in the local newspapers every now and then. As the municipality administration<sup>5</sup> proceeded

<sup>1</sup>A.Armando, G.Durbiano, *Teoria del progetto architettonico*(2017)

<sup>2</sup>Områdeplan(«area-plan», usually the basis for a detailed master plan that precedes the construction permit application)

<sup>3</sup>Freely translated from "signalbygg"

<sup>4</sup>QSS: Queen Sonja's Square

<sup>5</sup>The non-political section of the municipality responsible for planning and construction

with implementation of the plan they decided to recommend to the city council to sell the square/lot to a private developer.

It is and was obvious that the municipality did not possess the finances to develop this site, and the possibility of doing a larger scale construction of a courthouse or public library by the municipality is of the table. In 2021 the city council decided to sell the lot, and it was put on the market by 2022 followed by a detailed description of the obligations connected to the acquisition. The acquisition of the lot required bidders to propose a "concept for development" in addition to a bid. Three actors participated in the bidding with their projects. At this point the three proposed projects create the basis for the controversy as it stands today. After assessing the proposals, the municipality council voted to postpone the sale, as none of the proposals were found satisfactory.

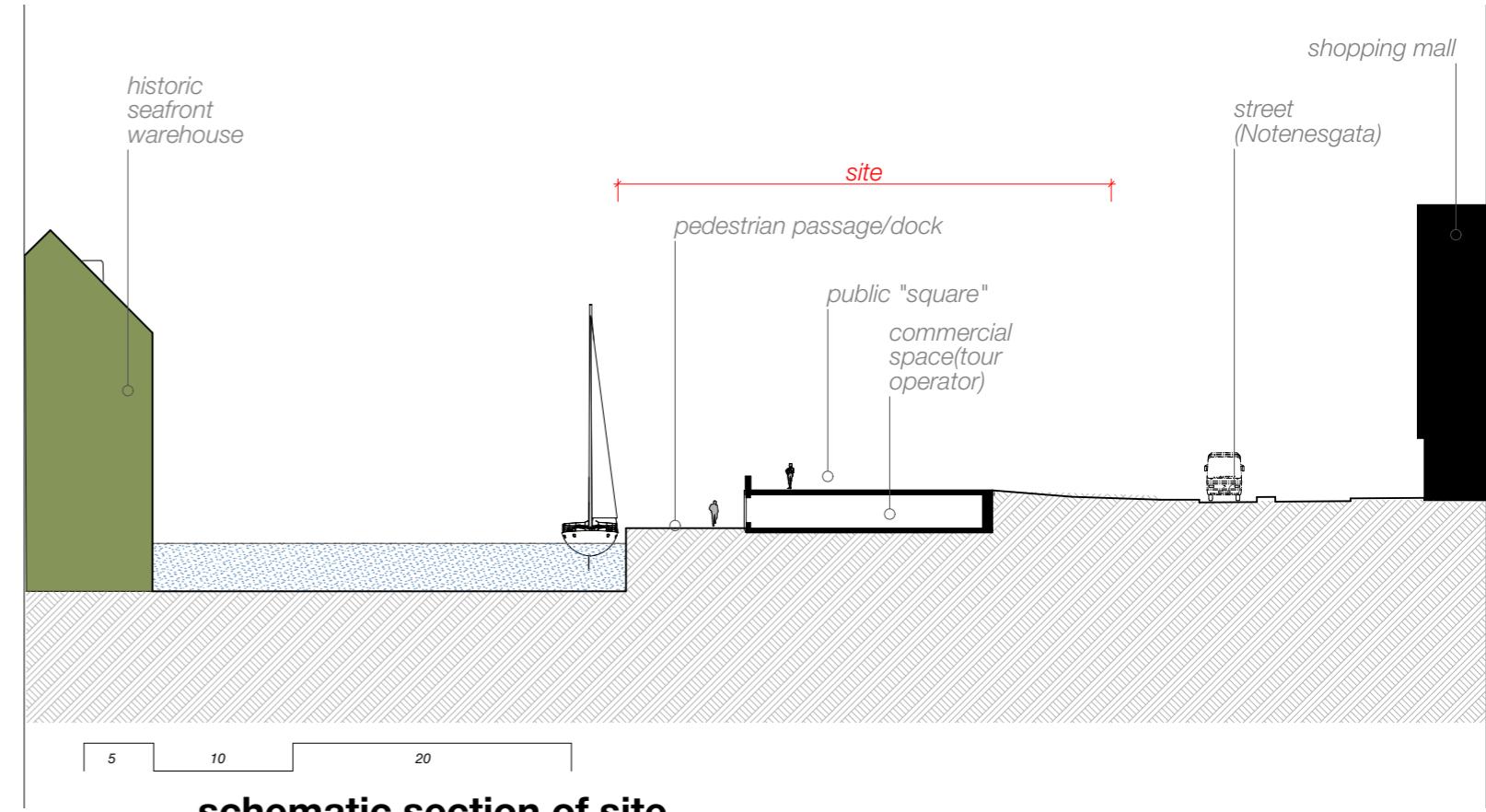
# 2 The place

## 2.1 The site

The site is what is known as “Dronning Sonjas plass” -Queen Sonja’s square in English and for practical purposes QSS in this setting. It is a public square, but is located on top of a one-story building that is the remaining basement of a building that previously stood on the site. For this reason the site is perhaps just as much a parcel of publicly owned real estate, as it is a public square. The site is located in the middle of the city center, along the canal that divides the city in two. Historically, the canal used to be the central harbor where the fishing boats delivered their catch, and the buildings that create the characteristic architecture are essentially warehouses on the docks. Today the built environment along the canal and around the site is considered an architectural heritage of great importance. As the city burned down in 1904, it was reconstructed almost exclusively in Art Nouveau-style and the result is a particular, historic environment that is important to the collective image of the place. However, the closest buildings to the site are not from the reconstruction, but are constructed and refurbished later. The result is that the site, and its immediate surroundings represents a break in an otherwise continuous historic environment. It is one of the few squares in this city, and its proximity to the water, and openness in the midst of the urban fabric, with the sight lines and views it gives, are some its most appreciated traits. The site is limited by the water and a small strip of green space on two sides, and a major street intersection on the two others.



**axonometry site and environment**



**schematic section of site**

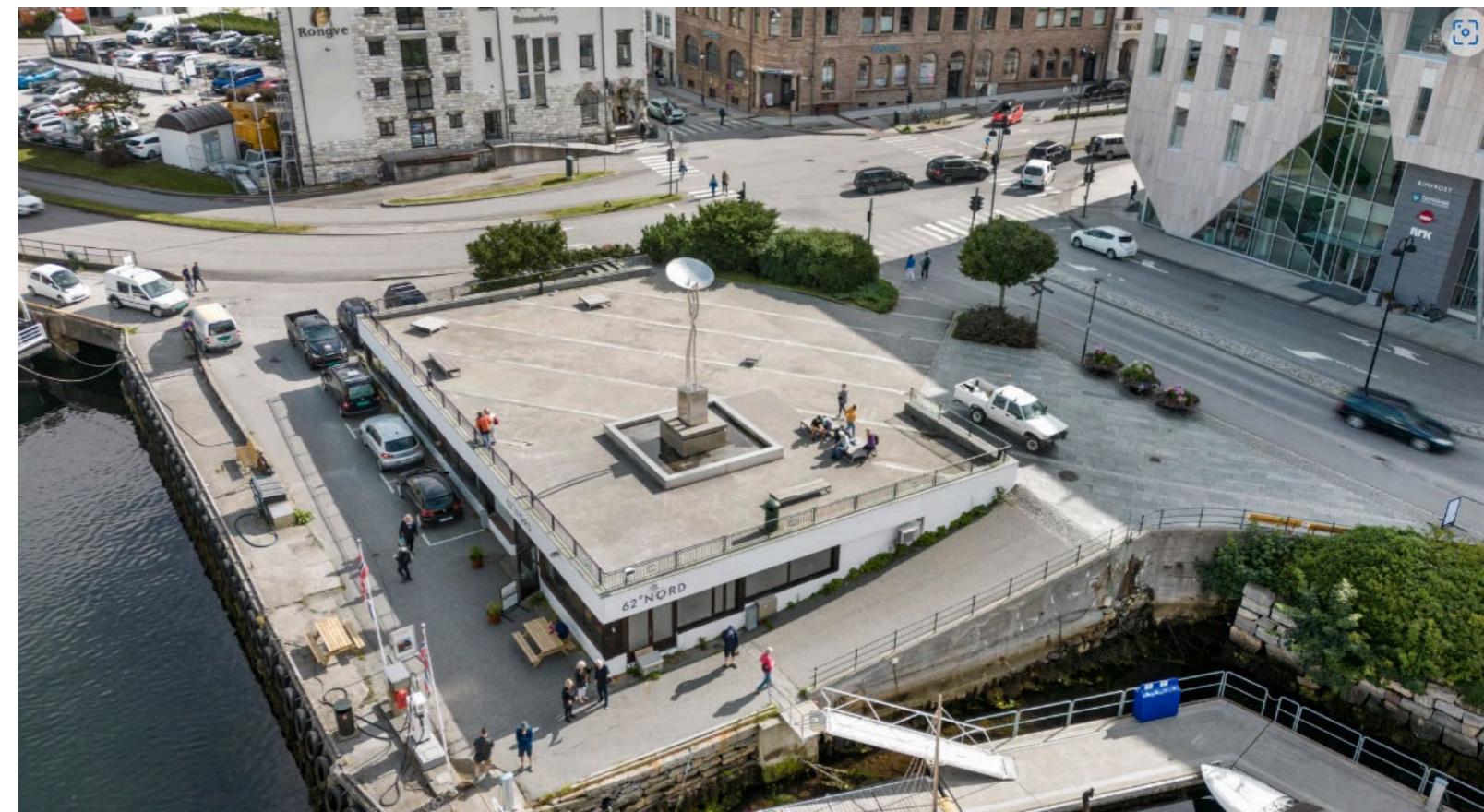
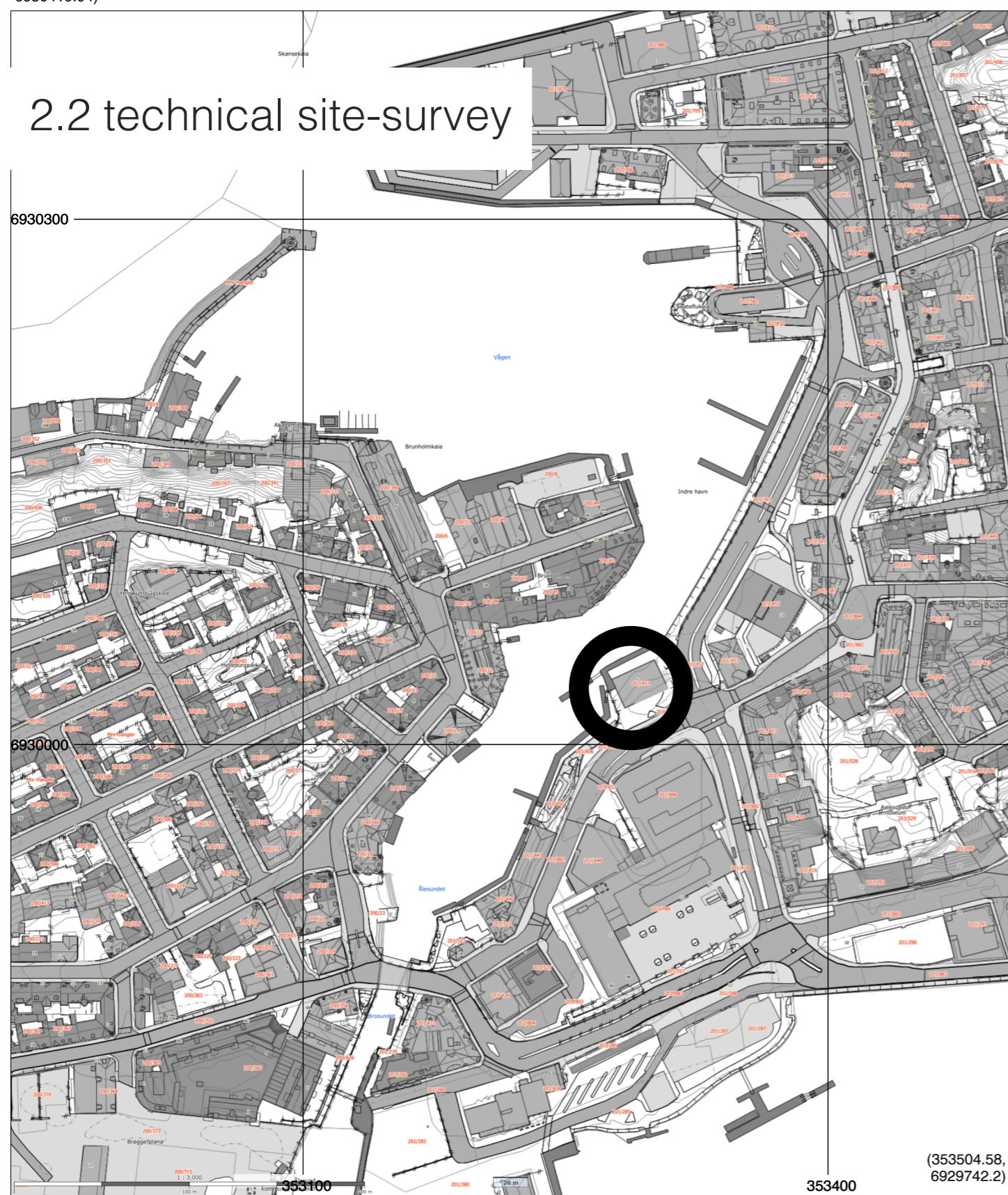


Photo of site: the square is on the rooftop of a one-story building. Photo: smp.no

## 2.2 technical site-survey



technical map of city-center, 1:3000

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Målestokk: 1:3000  
Dato: 21/11-2025  
Format A4

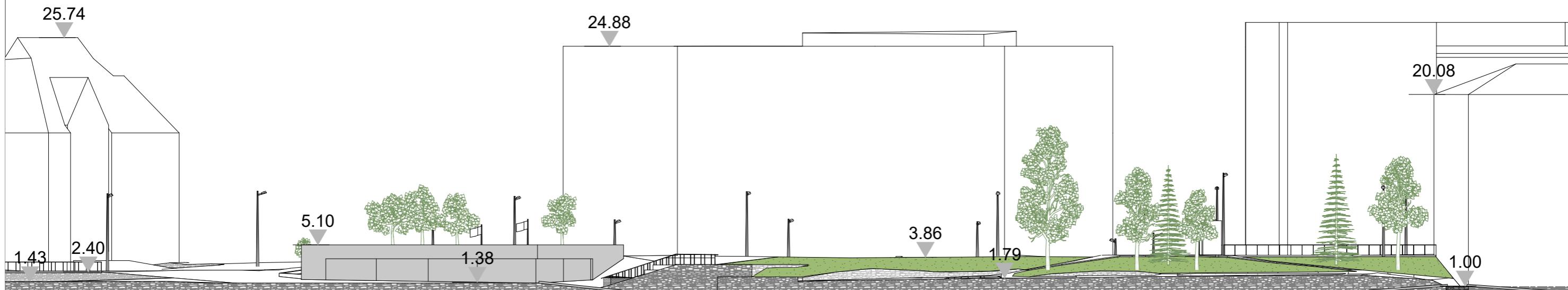


## ortofoto city center, 1:3000

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Måestokk: 1:30  
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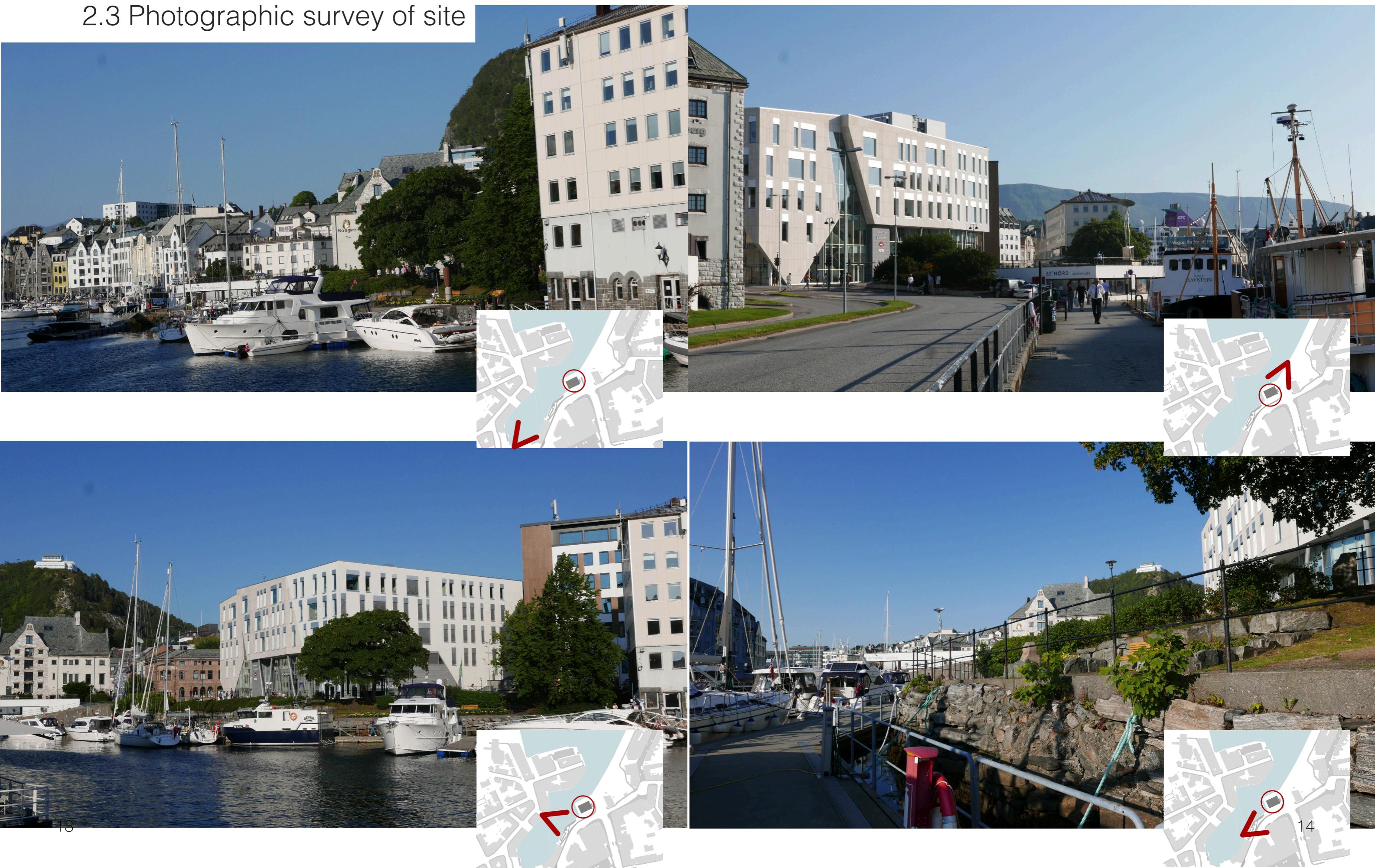




**section survey**

5m 10m

## 2.3 Photographic survey of site



## 2.4 The city and its architectural heritage

Ålesund is a city on the west coast of Norway, and with its suburbs it has a population of approximately 55.000 inhabitants. The city center spreads out over two islands that together creates a sound, (sund in Norwegian), and it is from this the city got its name. In 1904 the city burned down to the ground and left the two islands as a big smoking ruin. The most prominent benefactor of the reconstruction, was none other than the German Emperor Wilhelm II. Hearing the news of the fire, the same state of head that would throw Europe into WW1 a decade later, decided to participate in the reconstruction of Ålesund. The city was reconstructed more or less completely in the Art-Nouveau fashion, and in a very few years, the city went from being a poor Norwegian fishing village, to small city more or less completely constructed in what was essentially the avant-garde styles of continental Europe.



Photo series of the city center of Ålesund.

## 2.5 Study of the Art Nouveau environment -a personal exploration of architectural forms

As a part of the design process of the thesis design proposal(TDP), a study of the historic Art Nouveau environment has been performed. This serves two main purposes. First of all it is an act of understanding the context, in order to be able to respond to the ubiquitous topic that the historic surroundings are in any discourse on construction in this city center.

The idea is to develop an understanding that makes it easier to adapt, or strictly break with the existing. The second reason is the personal conviction that a building in a context like this, in addition to be very much a form that in a useful manner shapes the city, could also be designed by borrowing elements from its context, in order to achieve a coherence across time and typology. This eclectic approach runs on a thin line between originality on one side and syncretism (with a negative connotation) and *kitch*, pointless gestures on the other. In this case it seems like a viable approach, and perhaps the Art Nouveau is a stylistic movement that is easier to sample from than many of the other styles and eras from before the contemporary era, exactly because it is the first steps out of the classical framework, and into a freer and more eclectic way of composing architectural elements and form. As Carlo Mollino puts it:

“If Art Nouveau can be assigned to the catalog of eclectic styles and coexist with them (even though it is dead no, there is concrete evidence to suspect partial exhumation rehabilitation), on the contrary, it has a historical merit which is worth recalling once and for all: it is the first movement of taste that totally freed up space, surface, and decoration from the thousand-year canons of the classicist-style framework. And that is no mean feat.”

By creating an image of the surroundings of the site, through photos and sketches, a repertoire of solution, and a vocabulary of grammars is made. In the design this is not applied to make an architecture that bears any resemblance to its surroundings, as there are many examples of in this city. Instead the sampled architectural grammars are attempted applied through *synthesis and original rethinking*<sup>1</sup>.



The historical buildings along the canal were constructed as warehouses that received fish directly from the boats, and it was lifted directly through large openings on all floors under a lifting boom. This has influenced the characteristic shape of the buildings but also the overall form of the settlement.



Analysis of the composition of basic parts and geometric forms that make up a great part of the various buildings.

Steep roofs and tall wall dormers.

Variation in surface texture throughout floors.

<sup>1</sup>Carlo Mollino cited in M.Sabatino, N.Ferrari, Carlo Mollino -architect and storyteller (2021)

## Towers



## Textures, finishes, materiality



On a small area there is a great variation on the use of materials, textures and surfaces.

## Use of stones



The towers are typical feature throughout the city.

## Plasters



## Rustication



## Corners

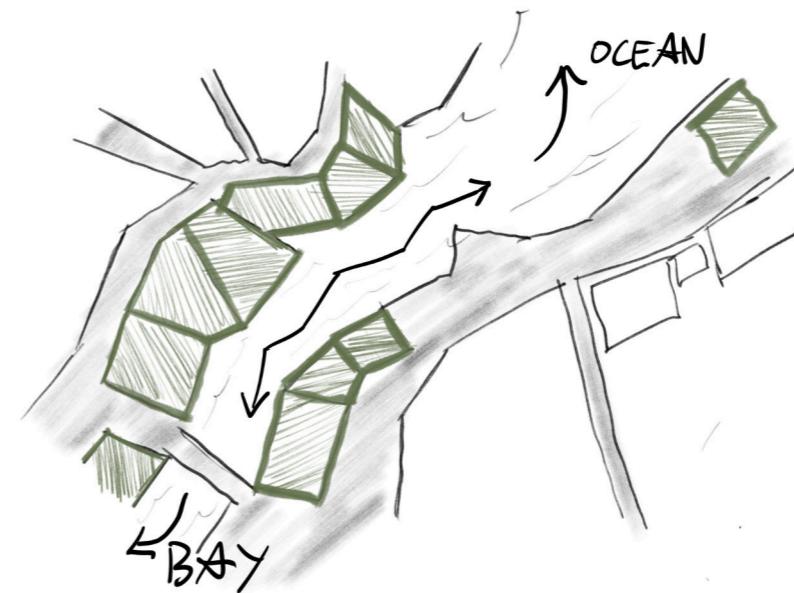


Chamfered and rounded corners rounded corners.

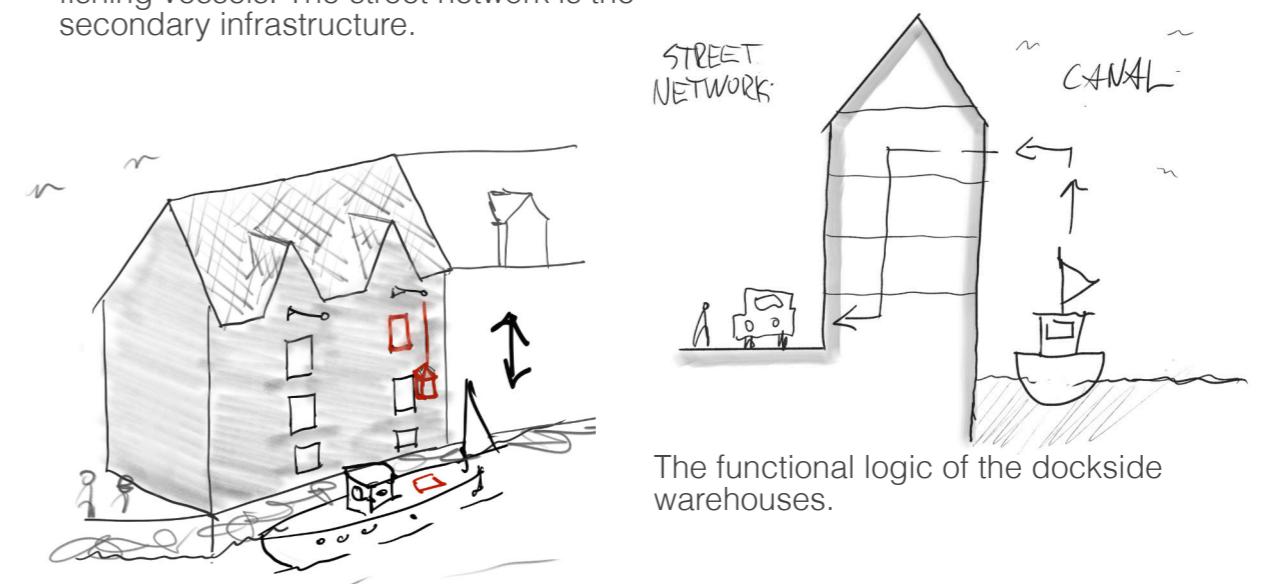
## Roofs



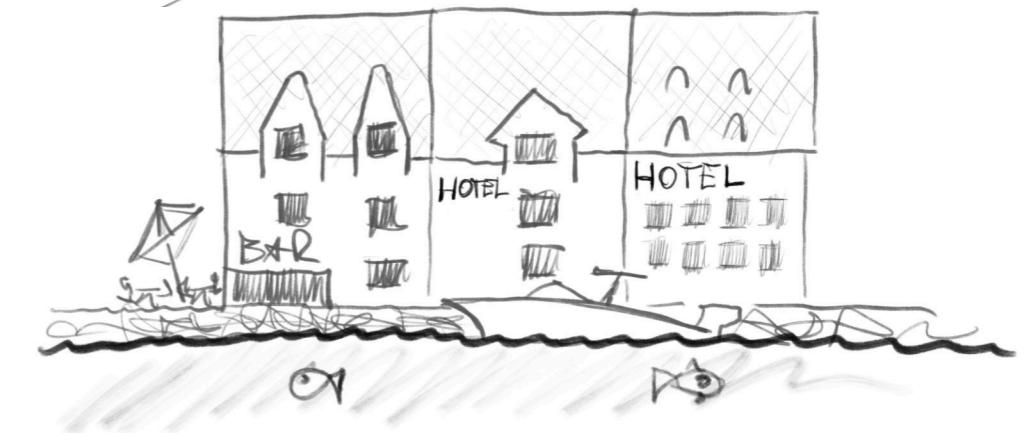
Slate stone roofs. Direct result of fire safety regulations from 1905.



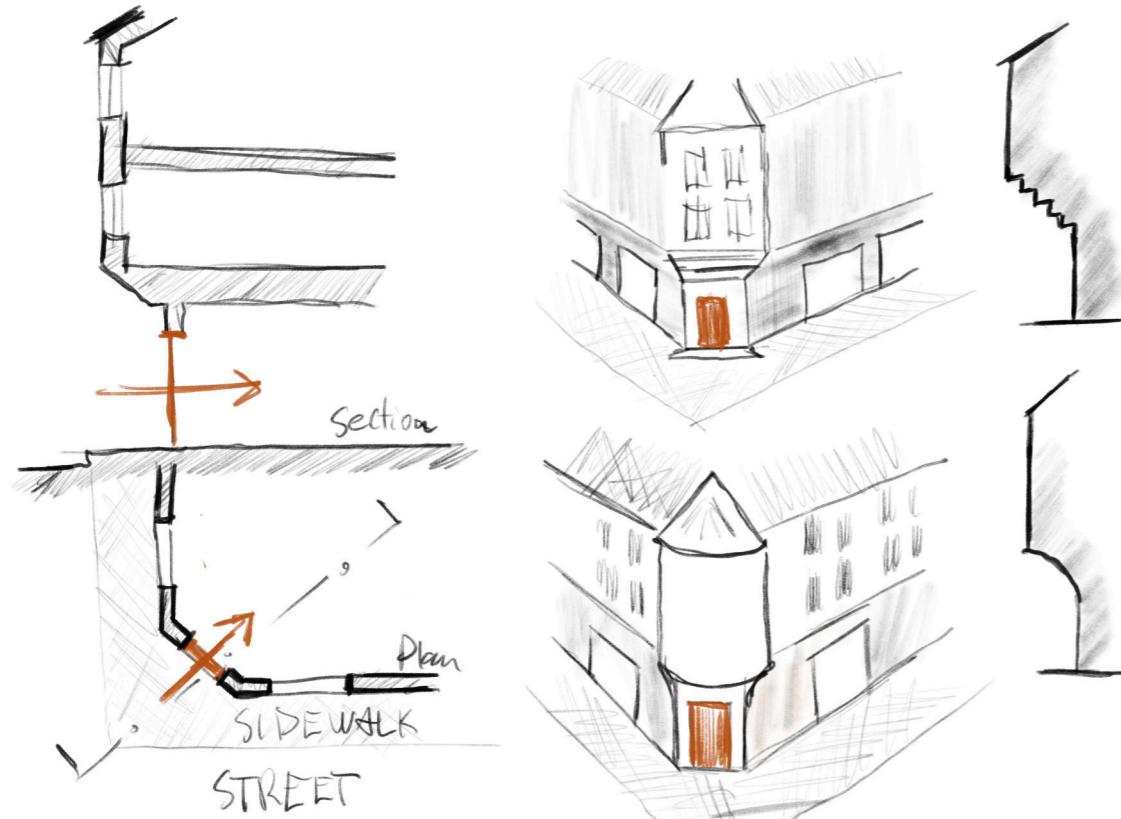
The settlement concentrated around the sound that gave a sheltered port to the fishing vessels. The street network is the secondary infrastructure.



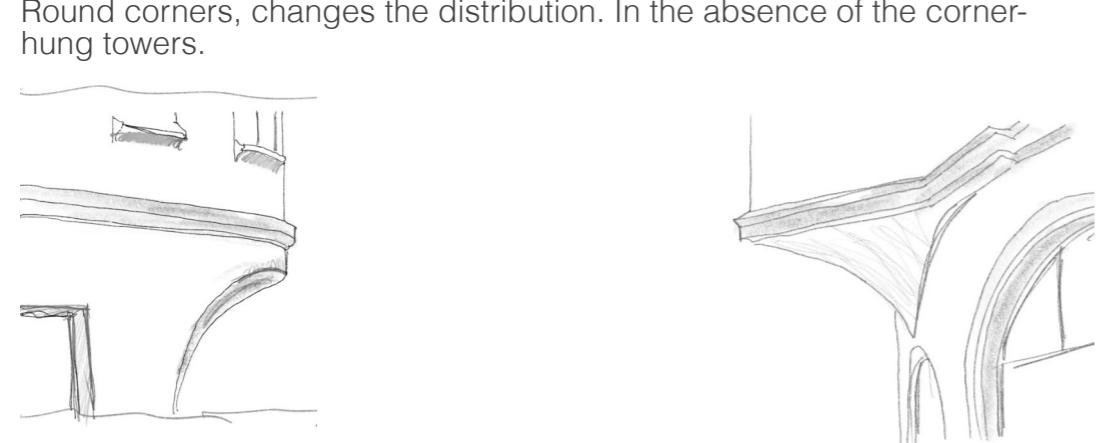
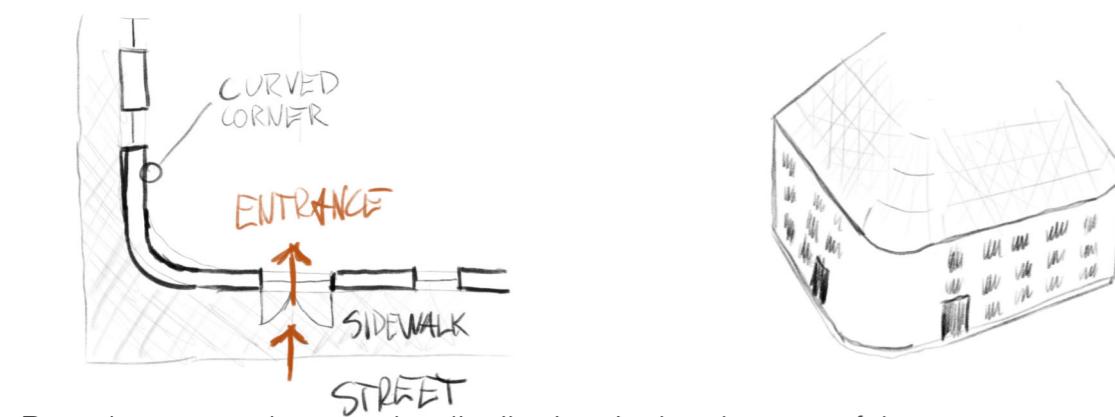
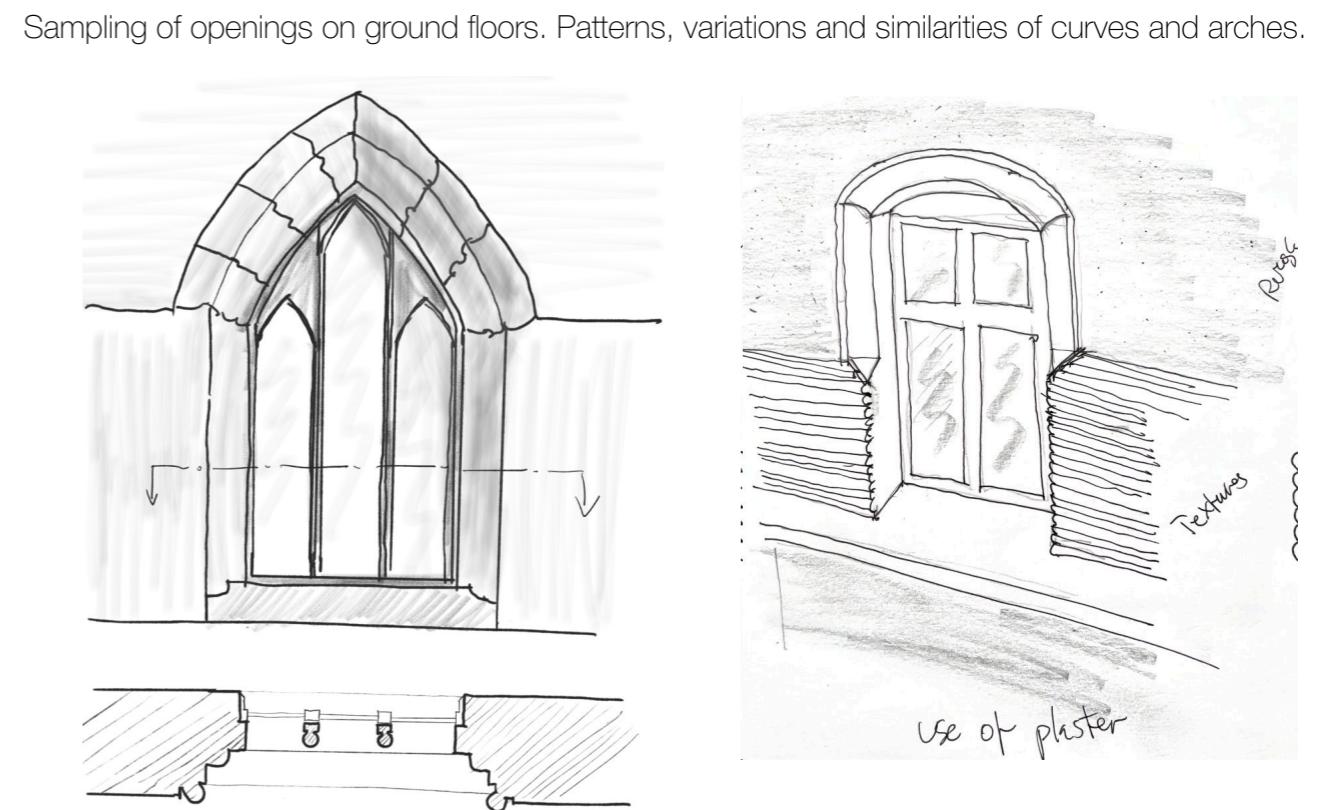
The functional logic of the dockside warehouses.



Today the warehouses host hotels and bars can be considered an architectural scenography.



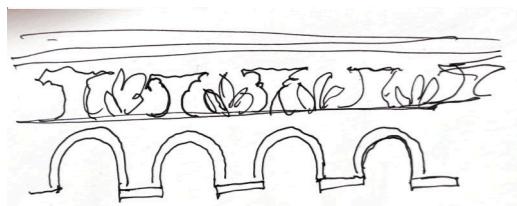
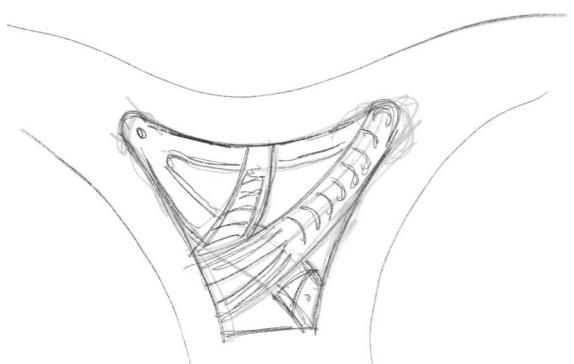
Studies on the characteristic corners and how they are solved with curves or chamfers and the functional differences in plan.



Transitions of roof overhangs, sleek curves.

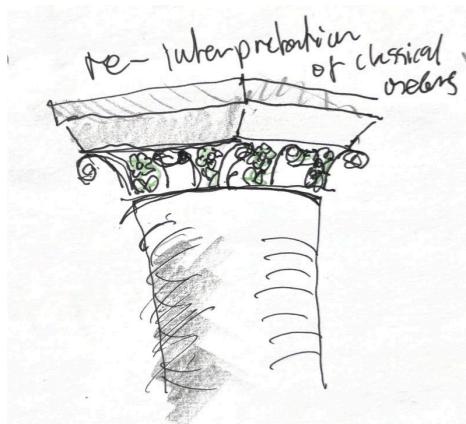
profiling of window reveals and frames.

Decoration with variations of cladding, exemplified with plastering in patterns.



Archibanc - 1906  
re-interpretation

Sampling of decoration. Flowers, organic forms, and local ancient mythology.



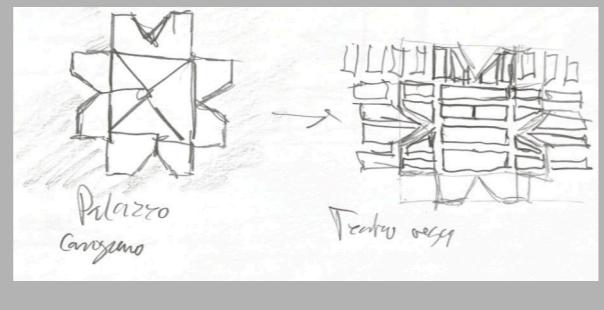
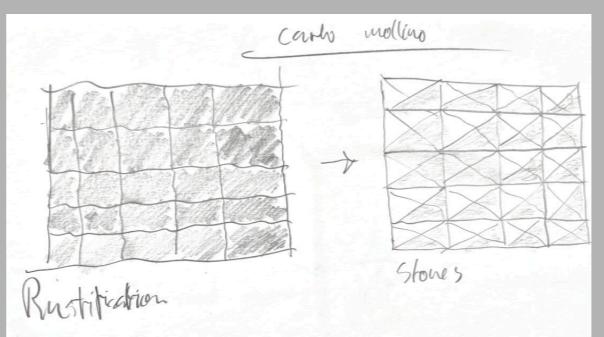
Re-interpretation of the classical column as an interruption of the classical tradition. Eclecticism in its simplest form.



Typical motive of decoration.



Other examples of re-interpretation



# 3 The controversy analysis

## 3.1 The project as a controversy

As the bread and butter of this thesis is to propose a solution to a controversy, the following section containing the “problem” analysis, is a description and analysis of the social conditions that makes up what is now considered “the project”. It is therefore not a site-analysis in the traditional form, nor is it an analysis of the urban needs, as often performed before urban transformations. Instead, it is a study of the social conditions, problems, agencies, and hindrances that prevent something from happening at this site. However the approach isn’t to perform a full flagged mapping<sup>1</sup> of the controversy as such, but rather to see this pickle through the glasses of actor-network theory<sup>2</sup>, with the ambition of feeding the black box of the design process with information that is fruitful to generate an effective design, not necessarily the best possible solution from the value-set of the designer.

This is not a controversy of complex technical or economic factors(yet), but a relatively public discourse on feelings attached to the city as a whole and a place that some people holds dear, and most see a bigger potential for. These tensions of the controversy can be studied in the local newspapers. At the same time, this controversy can be said to emerge from a series of documents that makes up the backbone of both discussed topics, and the chronology of events. In the aftermath of publication of what is here considered the central documents of the thesis, public debate follows. The documents brings out reactions, and are the expression of other agencies and intentions. As stated earlier, the starting hypothesis of this thesis is that there are issues with the existing premises(documents in form of planning tools). This is derived, and further explored by studying these documents, and the associated public discourse.

## 3.2 The social conditions that drives the development of the site

An important aspect to understand, is why this site is relevant for the development of a project, and in short why there is a shared sensation and possibility *doing something* with this place. The intuitive answer could be that the place it is just not good enough the way it is, e.g not living up to its potential. The main factor that makes this site a relevant topic, that takes it from a piece of land and makes it into a project, is the fact that it was designated as a site for construction within specific parameters by a master plan approved in 2015. We don’t know exactly how the configuration given by the master plan was derived, but in any case the

responsible figures took a position when they decided to draw a building the outline of the building, and even so on a public square. The present situation is that the site, which is now a lot owned by the municipality (at least for the time being), is decided sold to private developers. This means that the site now presents itself as a site where one could develop real estate from scratch and over a high total surface, in contrast to most of the city center which is already constructed land, and to a great extent historical buildings. If this master plan is the event (and document) that enabled this site as a site for a development, then the political and administrative decision to try to sell the lot is what brought it in the direction the story is heading now. The current state, is the standstill in the wake of the submissions of design concepts by the bidders for the lot, as a response to the sales listing published by the municipality. In the following paragraphs are the synthesis of these important chronological developments in the form of documents, and associated debates and issues.

<sup>1</sup> Alben Yaneva, *Mapping controversies* (2012)

<sup>2</sup> Albena Yaneva, *Latour for architects* (2022)

### 3.3 The main documents of the controversy and their implications

#### 3.3.1 The new infrastructure plan: "Bypakken" -city deal

Bypakken, directly translated into the "city-package" or "the city deal" to put it in Rooseveltian terms is a series of interventions in car, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, as well as public transportation. This is important as some of the works already executed, affects the intersection and road next to the square, and any possible reconfiguration of the street network in connection to the square (immediately very tempting to a designer's eye) must be confronted with these interventions.

#### 3.3.2 Sørside-planen -the new Southside district

In 2015, the municipality approved a new regulation plan for the south side harbor district of Alesund, with the aim of making a new city-district in what is now a just a port. The elaboration of this plan was launched after it became clear that the existing plans was not in line with the ideas of a modern urban city center. An architectural competition was launched, which was won by a Danish studio, Jaja architects. After the competition the legally binding masterplan was developed by Jaja, a local studio, PLOT Arkitekter and the planning department of the municipality. Queen Sonja's Square falls under the area of this plan, but more as a passenger than the main focus. The implementation of this plan is the source of various controversies and the main topic in the city-planning discussions of the city.

The fact that the QSS was included in thesis plan seems to have resulted in it getting much less attention that it deserved, with two consequences: 1) many of the spaces that must have been considered together with the lot in order to design the spatial premises for a successful development, are left outside the area, as it sits on the boundaries of the plan.

2) Despite a relatively thorough planning process in general, the result for QSS is still very general requirements, and the more architectural descriptions are mere guidelines.

The area-plan labels the lot G1<sup>1</sup> here, and the adjacent park P3. In the so called "plan description" it says the following: *-The square has a total area of 2000m<sup>2</sup>, sufficient for a combination of a square and a building. The square has a prominent location along Brosundet, and is central on the city's east-side, but appears today empty and desolate.*



Re-elaboration of axonometric view of the site taken from the master plan of 2015



Existing masterplan of 2015 illustrated.

<sup>1</sup>This denomination is also used here

Today's configuration does not exploit the full potential of the place, and creates instead an open and undefined urban space, heavily influenced by the traffic intersection next to it. The plan foresees a re-configuration of volume, square and landscape. The master plan proposal defines a tall volume center on the square, with strips of public space on all sides. The design must comply with the end of the promenade (designed along the eastern banks of the sound, see fig.), and the adjacent park, (Notenesparken P3). The volume shall be designed "with world class architectural quality".

#### **The provisions that defines the guidelines for a possible development:**

§ 3.8.1 – G1 - queen Sonja's square, use.

"The area marked with G1 on the map includes the square and the structure under the square(the remaining basement). The area is regulated to public services(later abandoned). The building on G1 shall be executed with particularly high architectural quality and choice of materials. The space around the building must be include in plan and site drawings, and a exterior plan drawing must be created, and approved by the municipality. The design must comply with guidelines of fig\*\* fig 4. The design, including proposed volume, roof shape, and materiality should be resolved with international planning and architectural competition. Detailed regulations must be implemented, and must include areas G1, P3, GV3"

Trying to put this in relation to the synthesis of the positions seen in the media, we can observe how it is painted a picture of a lot that as an open wound, that can be mended with relatively abstract remedies. The master plan claims the lot is big enough for both a square and a building, but even though all the proposals display various interpretations of public space, these issues is still up for debate in the public discourse. We can also observe how the master plan is very focused on connection with the planned promenade along the canal, a connection and relations that seems to be conceived only in the southward direction.

The master plan also takes for granted that Queen Sonja's square is and should be a square when, in reality it is only almost a square, and in the same spirit the lot is treated in a very disconnected fashion, with the new proposal being still only almost a square, together with a building, within the same rectangle of a lot. All the proposals that came out of the following bidding round naturally responded to this notion of creating a free-standing building more or less in the middle of the lot, with a high degree of attention to the landscaping of the surrounding space.

In the aftermath of the planning process, both political and administrative representatives was explaining in the media the intentions for the square. After the approval of the plan a couple of columns were written expressing concerns about the planned "tower" on the square, this was usually opinions from nowhere and anyone, but also politicians of the city council expressed strong doubts about occupying the public "square" with a building. At the same time, there was a broad understanding among the involved figures of the ongoing processes. that the lot would be occupied with a public function. The chief of planning is quoted on the possibility of the square "*could become the new courthouse*".

More connected to urban form are those that are concerned about how a possible building would also block the views, or "sight lines".

The loss of sight lines is even harder to swallow for the critical voices since the planned building would be "a modern monstrosity"(freely translated). An interesting voice in the debate is an architect that occasionally puts his ideas forward in the local newspapers. His observations and ideas are in many ways in line with the hypothesis of this thesis. He claims that it is not too late to "save" the square, and also criticizes the way the area-plan seems to neglect a couple of conditions that should be important to how it is treated; the dockside walkway going north and how its parallel road together could create a whole promenade along the water, seriously altering the need and requirements for and of a public square on the lot. This can be also connected to the potential for placing a square right nearby in a different empty space in the midst of the historic fabric(today parking lot), not to mention how the existing intersection that frames the square is over-dimensioned, and not "compatible" with urban pedestrian activity. This architect also makes what is from the point of view of this thesis two fundamental errors in his proposals: He proposes to build a *food/fish court*, which is a proposal that celebrates "nice to have" and neglect that the real instruments of urban transformations are actual needs. It seems to be very optimistic take on the commercial market for such a service, not to mention the possible risk of having a shed standing unused on the "best lot in town".

Secondly, he shows drawings of said food court and justify the architectural proposal as being the same volume as a coal shed that once stood on the site up until 1970. This is a good example of a story that *is doomed to not be taken seriously*<sup>1</sup> and through cemented vocabulary that conveys values that are implied to be useful/correct, but are not capable of resulting in the effects that are wanted. The point here is to illustrate a design perspective that is the opposite logic of the one the thesis follows in the act of design.

<sup>1</sup>A.Armando, M.Bonindo, G.Durbiano, C Forina, E.Bruno A story of a section(2022): " In short: this separation between idea and reality pushes the architect into a corner, where they are doomed to tell stories without being taken seriously" This is an important to the working hypothesis, as it seems clear that these "stories" are a digression for a fruitful discussion about the site, but still they become a very typical way of speech

### 3.3.3 The sales listing

Queen Sonjas square was put out on the market in july 2022. The property management division of the municipality published a 21 pages long listing describing the lot and the obligations connected to the acquisition. In order to find a suitable buyer, the document describes a sort of a concept-competition as a part of the bidding procedure. The requirements (better word) were to propose a concept for the lot, with illustration of activities and architectural solution. The concepts had to be in line with the planning requirements, but it was highlighted in the listing that the municipality had left the requirement of public services as land use. In addition, the document contains a list of suggestions on features that could "improve the experience of the area as a whole". The list conveys a vision of a "living" space, with all the features you can think of in a city district. In addition to the technical value-estimation, the municipality also puts forward a less sober analysis: "The location of the property makes it possible to build a monument with good views, ad possibility for exposure in several directions. What is constructed could be an important part of the character of the city-scape, as well as contribute in a positive way to the special characteristics of Ålesund". This can't be seen as anything else than an invitation to put great effort into architectural design. What is interesting to note is that whereas the regulation foresees an international planning and architectural competition to find the correct solution, the municipality instead make a shortcut and asks directly the bidders to propose their architectural solution. Furthermore, the documents contains an interpretation of density a bit different from the one in the regulation plan, and proposes the following calculations: Max density is 5000m<sup>2</sup>, including underground parking, which leaves a total of 3500m<sup>2</sup> to be constructed above ground level. Density and heights must be clarified through detail regulation. The G1 being 975m<sup>2</sup> can in the opinion of the technical department of the municipality host a maximum of 500m<sup>2</sup> of built surface on the ground which would result in a 7-story building.

### 3.2.4 The submitted concepts from the bidders



Hofset, Maksymilian Sawicki Arkitektur og Skalér Arkitektkontor



Apartment Invest, PLOT Arkitekter



Flakk-gruppen, Lund Hagem arkitekter and Atelier Oslo

After the municipality puts the square on the market, three bids are received. All the the bids were from local investors, with design concepts developed by national and local firms hired by the respective investors. This is a very different pool of input, and angles on the issue than what would have been the case if the prescriptions of the master plan would have been followed, as the plan prescribed an international design-competition. The amounts of the bids are kept undisclosed, but the use concepts in form of architectural renders where published in the local newspapers. The concepts are all variations on the theme of a building on the square, developed over 6-7 stories. It is outside the scope here to enter a review of the submitted proposals, especially since the premise of this thesis is that the planning provisions, that also these proposals are based on, are the starting point for the issues that are exposed in the development of this controversy. It should be commented however, that a lot of the friction these projects meet are related to the way they are perceived as ill-adapted to the site and the environment.

The proposals that came with the bids for the lots received a lot of criticism in somewhat refined forms in journals, as well as Facebook groups etc. These are of lesser importance, but it can be assumed that they represent a public opinion that is again represented by the decision makers; the politicians. As can be read from the media, the politicians are generally not convinced about the content of the proposals, however it is not unanimous, as some sees the proposals for what they are; proposals in line with the master plan that was approved in 2015. A lot of the debate revolves around the importance and question of whether to sell what is often referred to as the crown jewel of lots in the city center. This is challenged by one of the prominent and historically informed politicians in the council. He stated the "*lets not make this space into something it is not, we have to remember that it is only 25 years ago that there was a building there, it is a nice site, but it's not a diamond, at some point we have to proceed*" Effectively pointing out how the accepted narrative is of "selling a nice square in the middle of the city" is not true, because it is not a nice square. It is just a lot for sale, like every other lot. In essence he is right, and the sale and development of this lot, should be conceived not as letting go of a central public square, but for what regards the square, a missed opportunity for such a thing.

Another city council member expressed that he was "*still standing behind building something on the square, but the space is special, and even though the architects are skilled, I must admit that I was disappointed, for this one, we need to be on the mark*". Again we can read that the politicians stands behind the intentions of the planning, (many elections ago), but are not convinced about the outcomes presented. We can only guess why, maybe they feel a responsibly towards public opinion, maybe they care about how the city looks like. However, in the interpretation of this, we can imagine the seeds for possible design solutions: the proposal must architecturally be different, more sell-able, but also have characteristics that conveys care for the image of the city. Second; the guidelines in the master plan are not the best to produce an architectural solution that can be swallowed. The ending of this round of debate was that the city council decided to postpone the sale.

# 4 The design process

## 4.1 Framework

As has been shown through the description of the controversy, and the existing master plan(EMP), the destiny of the site is moving towards the municipality selling it, in order to let private developers build something that is more or less in accordance with the master plan for the area. The friction that stops the project from going forward is connected to the resistance against giving up a public square to a development, and that the proposals that are on the table are not very tempting for the politicians, and their voters.

Starting from this, the design-task is to research how the site in question could be utilized within those conditions. This is divided into two steps. In the first operation the objective is to attempt a rethinking of the urban morphology, going outside that of the EMP in order to find a configuration that has a better potential for realization. This means to address the conditions and agencies found in the controversy analysis, and hypothesize that the planning provisions given by the EMP simply isn't the best option and at that designing something that is better integrated into the existing urban morphology of the area, will be a more tempting solution for the decision makers. Specifically this means to address the discussion on the problems of putting a building in the middle of a square, and the radical interruption of the existing urban fabric that follows.

Based on the TDP<sup>1</sup> planning scheme, the objective is to develop an architectural project that could work within the proposed urban scheme. The idea is not to invent a best possible solution for this site, and invent an architectural program in such a direction, but to find a form that due to its sensitivity to both social and physical conditions can be realized. Not much creativity has been put into the program and functions, the project is approached as if this was "any building" that is part of the city. Instead the focus is on form in the urban environment as an aspect that long outlives any commercial or public activity that one can imagine.

The main conditions and premises the architectural project addresses revolves around the architecture itself as piece of the city, the architectural language relative to its surroundings, and the shaping of public space. As mentioned, it seems vital to a project on this site to be better integrated into the existing fabric, and the importance of the form to be very sensitive to this. In the same way the architectural language is developed as an attempt to make something that has a strong relation to the existing(see chapter on the study of context).

One of the key takeaways from the analysis of the controversy is that there is an issue with aesthetics. The debate isn't revolving around very concrete architectural issues, but the friction is related to notions of "to tall, to ugly". These aspects of the case, creates the basis for the hypothesis that a project with a strong "intrinsic beauty" could be crucial to its

realization. In this situation, that is to achieve a certain harmony with the surrounding area. With this in mind, the idea is to unite the pragmatic approach of resolving urban renewals like this, with a strong emphasis on how the architectural authorship is a part of that dynamic. Authorship in the sense that the project is a result of a personal "artistic expression"(in lack of a better term) that is in itself the solution to the practical problem.

### 4.1.1 What to design and for who?

So far the description of the design task is pretty open ended, and this is of course in the nature of the self commissioned thesis-project. The topic of this thesis is to do a proposal for the site, to hypothesize what could resolve some of the issues related to its development. As stated in the previous paragraph, the approach has been to accept a reality of a situation where the lot is sold to private developers. The consequence of this, is that the project, and the project program is necessarily something that someone could hypothetically construct with a commercial upside. Economic feasibility and construction cost is kept outside of the design, and the remark on economic sustainability is made to arrive on the a few guidelines for what regards the program.

The principal takeaway is to design something with a comparable floor surface to that of the EMP 35000, and as a matter of fact, the TDP manages to exceed this. In addition to the guidelines on square meters, the accepted premise of a hypothetical realization points in a direction for the functions to design for: apartments, commercial/retail spaces and offices. This might seem like an arbitrary choice, but has its roots in the simple observation that these types of spaces make up our built environment, they are the city around us. Places to live, work, and trade, and consequently the kind of spaces one builds when developing new lots. There is also an element of taking a position in the landscape of opinions on urban planning and development issues baked into this choice. The position and approach to the urban regeneration taken here is that of giving a form that is the envelope for a myriad of activities that the designer doesn't control, not much at the moment of design, even less in the years that follows an intervention in the built environment. So, instead of suggesting that a specific concept for urban renewal would be the right recipe, that could be a food court, public library or concert hall, the hypothesis is to make an urban morphology and an architectural expression that could make something happen on the site.

What separates a real project designed for the hypothetical developer that could purchase and develop this lot, and an academic project made to answer to the above mentioned guidelines is of course that one could propose a design that is more sensitive to the better good. The term and concept of the better good in architectural design is outside the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, despite the aim of proposing the right project that might actually give a hint to the criteria for a transformation of the site, the design has been developed with attention to how the project *should be* from the perspective of a student of the craft. This both in how the designs finds its place in the hierarchy of urban morphology, and by experimenting with certain generosity in the architectural expression.

<sup>1</sup>TDP: thesis design proposal

## 4.2 The urban

### 4.2.1 A design strategy for the urban scale -the lot swap

The proposed design strategy, consist of selling and developing the lot P3(Notenesparken) in order to maintain G1(Queen Sonjas Square) as a square(see fig.). The takeaway from the controversy analysis is that the possibility of removing the site as a public square is one of the main hindrances for realizing a transformation of the site. It is also perfectly possible to argue that the site is a good location for a public space, and preserving it as such, would be a good move from the perspective of good city planning. One only has to pay a visit to understand that there is a potential for a interesting space, with the the good views and special location.

The area-plan dictates a free-standing building on G1 but the TDP is instead to invert the built and un-built sites, and continue the row of buildings from G3 through P3. This strategy sacrifices the green strip in favor of both a high density commercial development and the realization of a public square on the actual site. The hypothesis is that this configuration allow for a “better” urban morphology

Continuing the row of buildings completes the sound, that today suffers from a interruption at the P3 site, that exposes the buildings of the other side of the street, to dominate the city-scape. These buildings belongs to a completely other environment and follows other logic of layout and expression. The proposed lot swap opens for a more natural way of constructing a “lost piece” of the city puzzle. This sort of reparation or mending, is considered a favorable strategy from the conservation authorities

However the main reason for proposing the swap is the that if one think it is necessary to provide a public square on G1, then sacrificing the P3 as green space should be a small price to pay, when the sacrifice can;

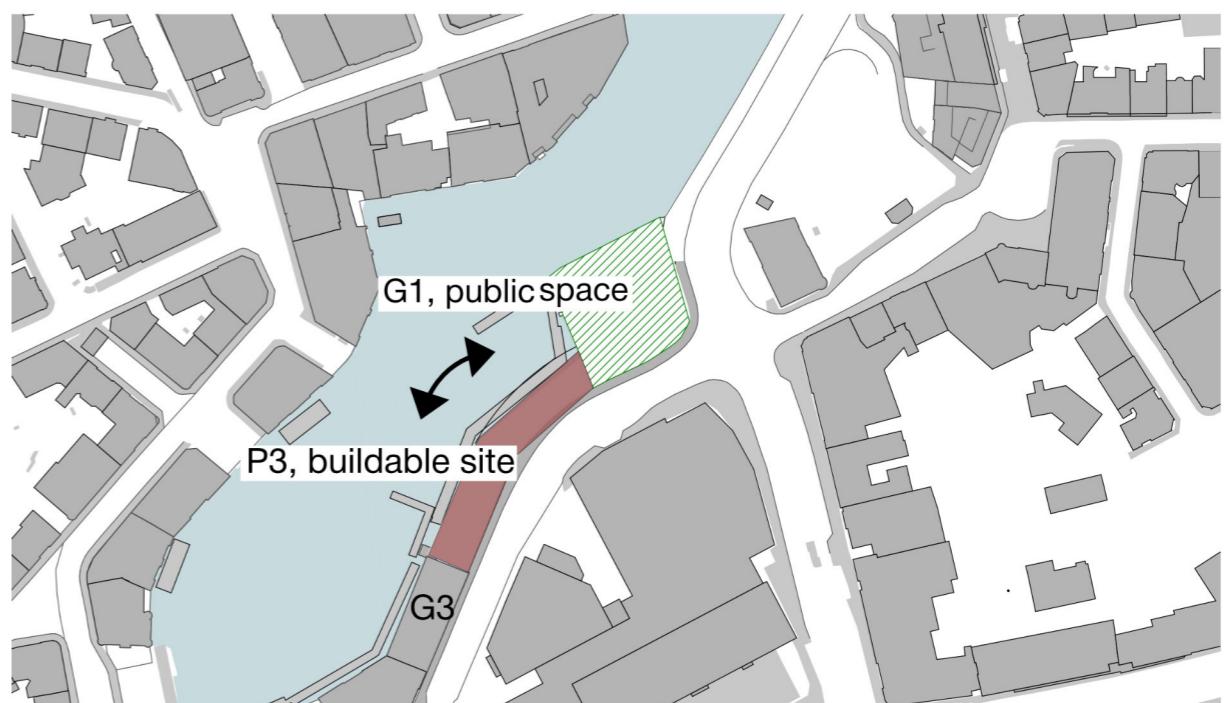
- 1) provide the funds to transform the G1 into a square.
- 2) a possible building on P3 could shape and define the square that today is characterized of being in an urban no-man’s land, with the highly trafficked intersection as its nearest neighbor. It is also exposed to cold wind as it sits on a pedestal without protection(see survey sections).

The beauty of the lot-swap strategy is that the municipality is the owner of both lots, and if they decide to pursue such a solution, it is viable to proceed with a detail regulation on top of the existing planning scheme from the area-plan, and put P3 on the market in the same way as was done with G1. Some alterations of the lot border could be necessary.

The solution is also scale-able in the sense that a possible swap doesn’t mean that the G1 lot as has to remain completely un-built. The protrusion of a building from P3 onto G1 can be managed in order to achieve a favorable condition for commercial activities, and perhaps also



**building site existing master plan**



**the proposed swap of lots**

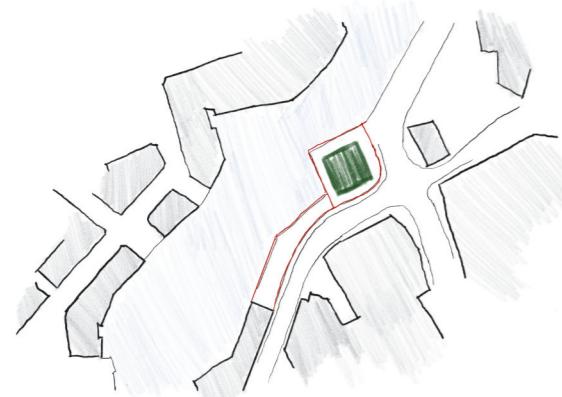
"molding" the square in a better way. Strictly speaking about the urban form, the main argument for swapping the lot is that it permits a very different urban morphology that works better with regards to the quality of the spaces as a whole, as is attempted to demonstrate through the following diagrams and later by drawings of the architectural project. The viability of this proposal rests heavily upon the assessment that the existing green space(P3) could be sacrificed. The position taken in the development of the TDP is that the green space presents itself as not so valuable. In subjective terms, it is barely a park, it doesn't invite much to use, and doesn't see much. In objective terms, it is a strip of greenery with some paved paths over a surface of approximately 800sqm. The photos below illustrates the space as it is today.



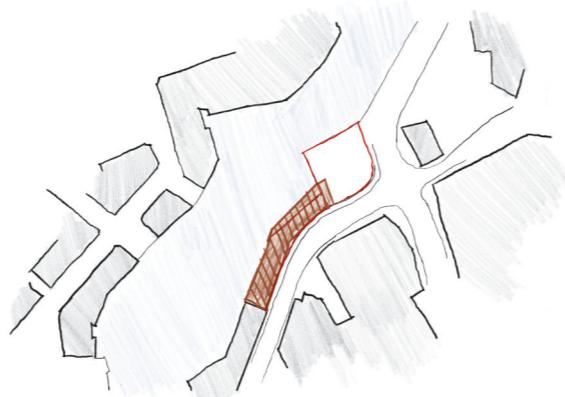
Photos of the green space (lot P3)

## 4.2.2 The outline of a building

The design strategy of inverting built and un-built between the P3 lot and G1, results in a very different condition than the one given by the existing master plan. Whereas the master plan proposes a tower of 7 stories and a total of 3500sqm the proposal presented here is instead a building that develops along the narrow lot, but over a much greater length, due to the difference in lot sizes. This result in the possibility of a building of 5000sqm distributed over four floors. The objective being to develop something commercially viable and at the same time leave the original site open as a public square, it becomes clear that this represent a best of both world solution. Initially it was stated that the square as it stands today, is not very convincing as an urban space, and even more importantly, the configuration that is proposed by the EMP does not seem to resolve these issues in a much better way either. Seeing beyond the inversion between built and un-built lots, as a strategic move to allow the realization of a project, this move allows for a different way of building that gives a different urban spaces, and a different relation between the building and the city around it. The claim of this thesis is that this improvement will provide for a better integration of an architecture on the site, and in the city as a whole, as well as being a crucial factor to build something in this delicate environment. In short, the urban pattern is what is seen as a trait that could be applied on a building of a different day an age, as a first and important step to arrive at an architecture that is connected to a place, in visual appearance and spatial presence.



Building placement existing master plan



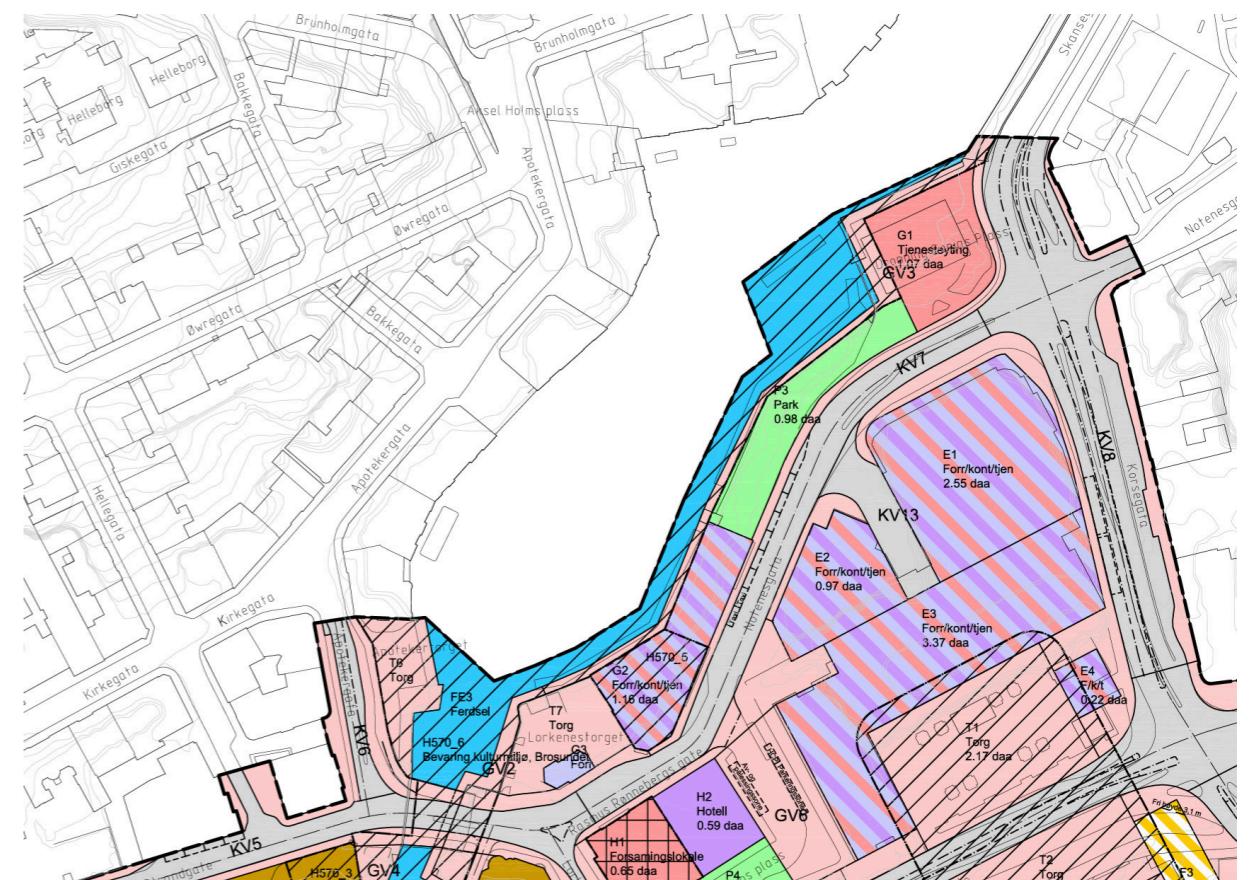
Proposed placement



Render from master plan



Volume-sketch



Extract zoning map existing master plan(2015)



Extract illustration existing master plan (2015)



public spaces



footpath



restaurant/bar



commercial



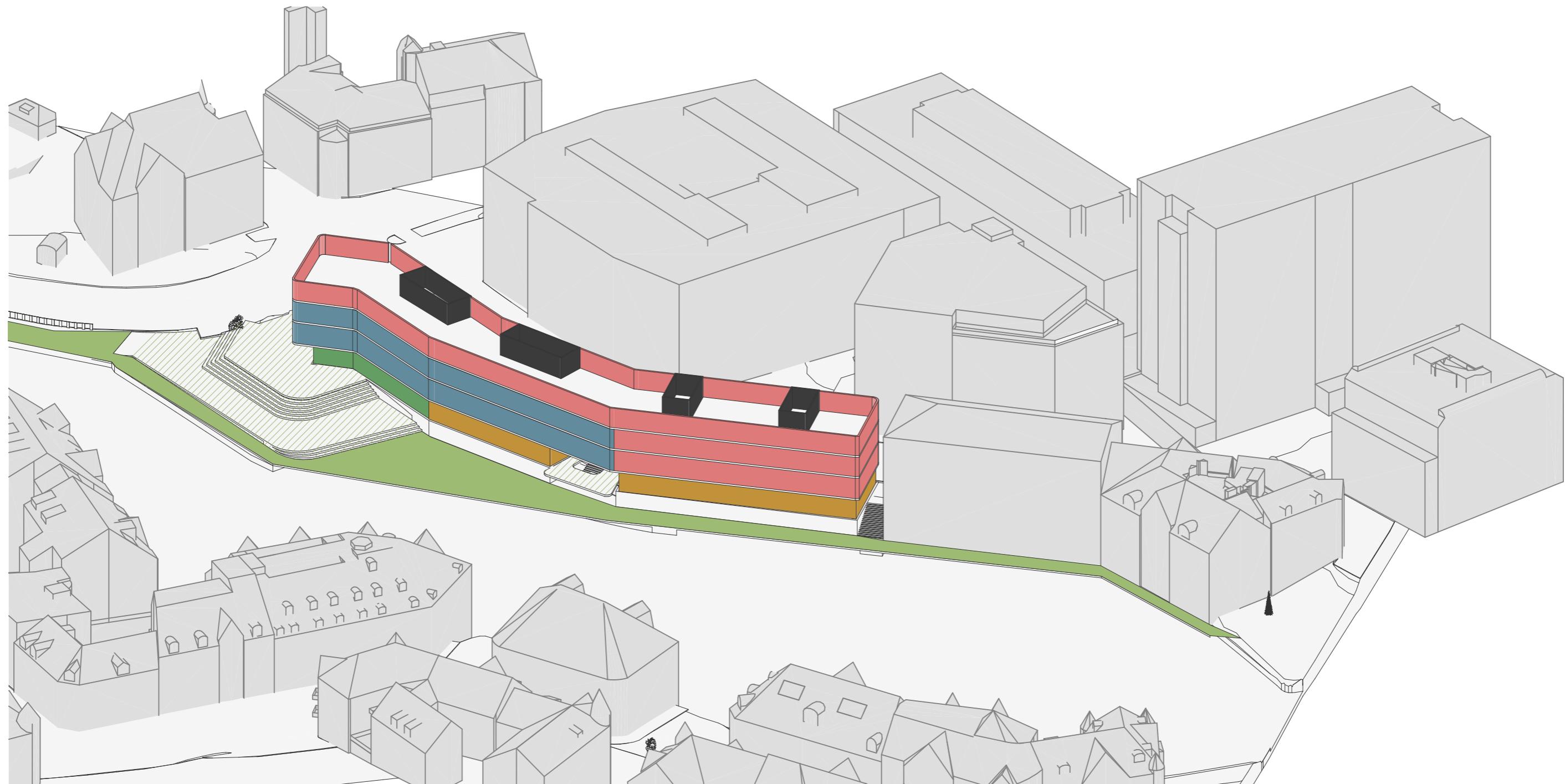
office



apartments



vertical distribution



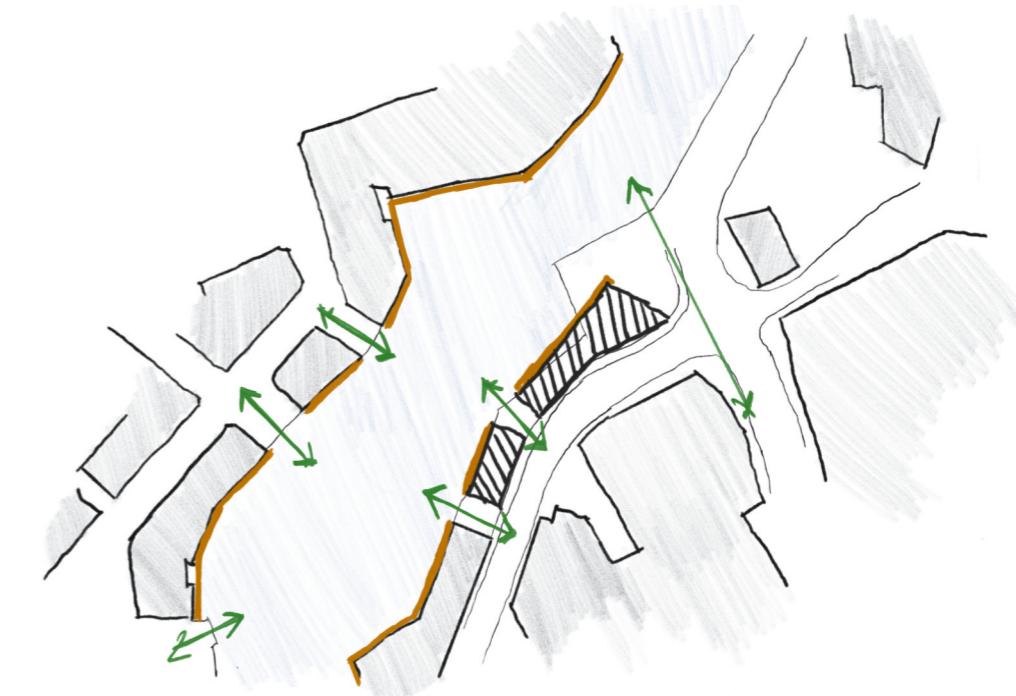
**masterplan axonometry**

#### 4.2.3 Arriving at an urban configuration



##### The issues of the existing master plan proposal

The EMP places a low tower in the middle of the square, thus removing the public square, and creating leftover strips of “public space” along the sidewalks and towards the water. What remains is a building in the middle of a traffic intersection with all aesthetic and spatial issues that come with such a situation. It is a way of building that resembles more of that we see in the suburbs than in the city.



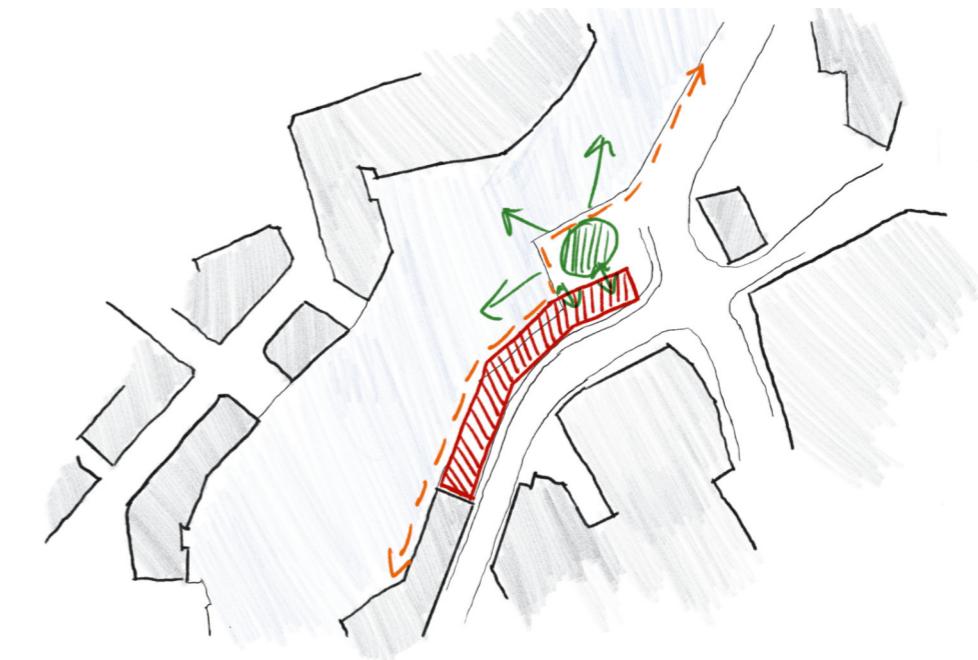
##### Creating connections and lines of free sight

A seemingly banal idea, but a very important topic of discussion, especially in a country that lacks the urban culture of continental Europe. An open view is seen as a right, and getting all the sun and daylight one can get, is deeply rooted in culture and people.



##### Continuity - restoring the urban patterns around the canal, barrier between the different types of buildings

The TDP (black) restores a sort of continuity in the urban fabric, and creates a barrier, a layer of architecture that works better in dialogue with the architecture of the canal than the recent refurbished commercial use buildings highlighted in red, essentially hiding them from one side, as well as creating a defined space from the now so utterly sad strip of street.



##### Shaping a useful piece of public space with the building

It follows with the placement of the building in the TDP that it's not just a matter of leaving the site of the square un-built, it seems crucial that the building extends into the lot, in order to shape and create a space and a place. In the present situation the square is defined by the absence of buildings, it is a leftover empty space, not a public square.

## 4.3 Architecture and construction



### 4.3.1 Project description

The design proposal is a building stretching along the lot, divided into two main volumes, interconnected by a third volume suspended between the two, creating an open passage between the walkway along the water, and the street on the other side of the building. The suspended volume is connected to the southernmost volume in terms of distribution. The southern volume is drawn with a relatively open ground floor, adapted to commercial activities with apartments of sizes ranging from 55-125sqm in the three floors above. There are in total five apartments on each floor, reached by two separate staircases. The northern volume has a similar ground floor, but opens up to the square in the north. This space is conceived for commercial activities with a high degree of exposure to the street. A space for restaurant or bar is imagined on the northwestern corner, where there is also a ledge on the outdoor space, above the walkway along the water, that can house outdoor serving with sun exposure and open view to the canal. This is an extremely important feature in a place that has limited amount of good weather. Outdoor space with good sun exposure is fundamental. In the stories above, open office-like floor plans are applied. It is possible to imagine this as separate spaces with two separate stairs, or if necessary, all the floors of the northern volume can work as one unit. The staircases of this volume are open towards the street, and connects the upper floors with the life on the city street. After all, the building is quite narrow. As a result the apartments receive daylight from both sides, so do the commercial spaces at all floors.

In total the building arrives on 4480sqm, compared to the 3500sqm provided by the existing master plan proposal in the original configuration. This increase in area through the swapping of lots, while still gaining a proper public square should be a good motive to transition to the planning scheme proposed here. The layout as showed in the TDP provides for 15 apartments in the range of 55-125sqm distributed over 1035 sqm and commercial/office space arriving at 2325sqm.

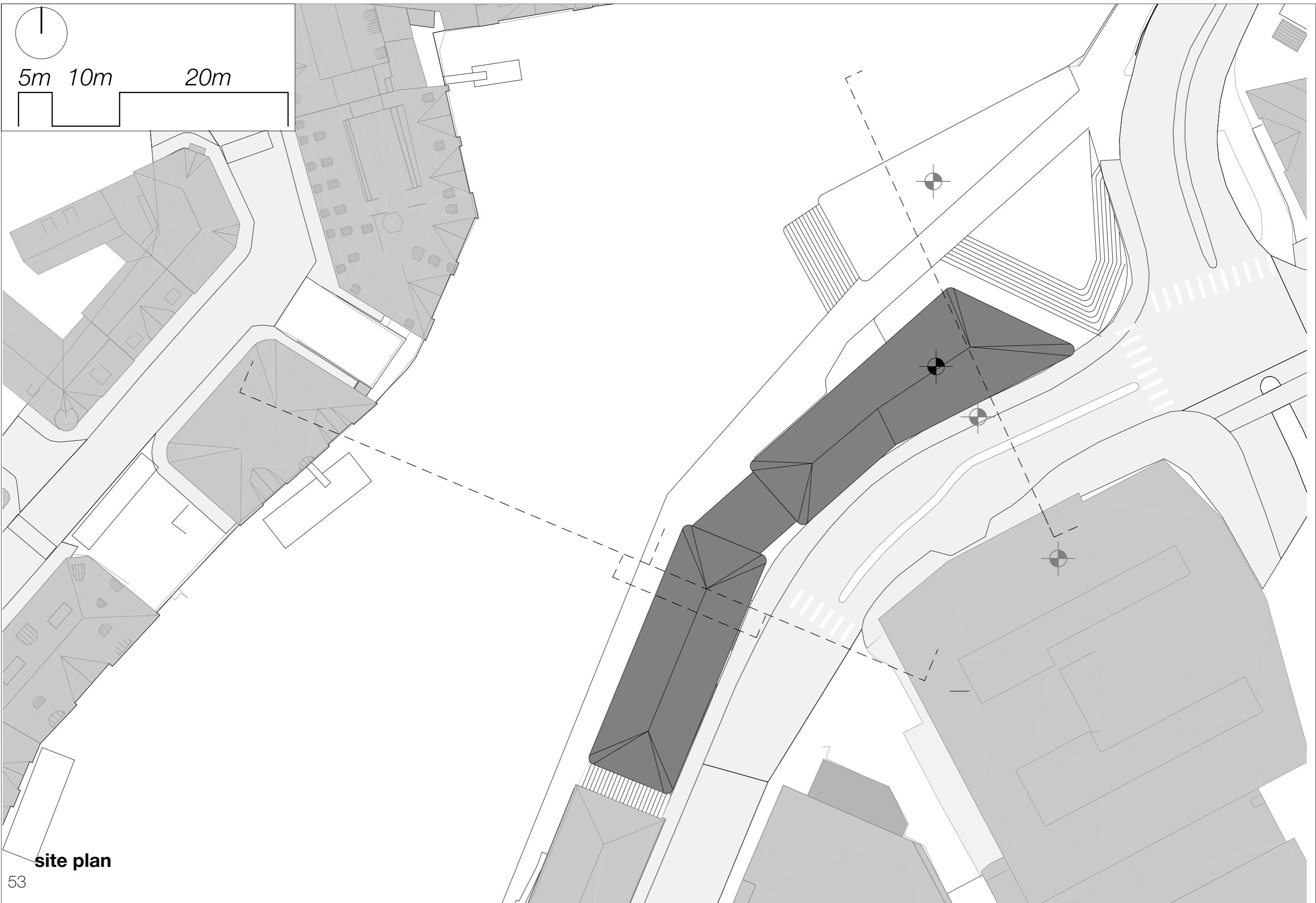
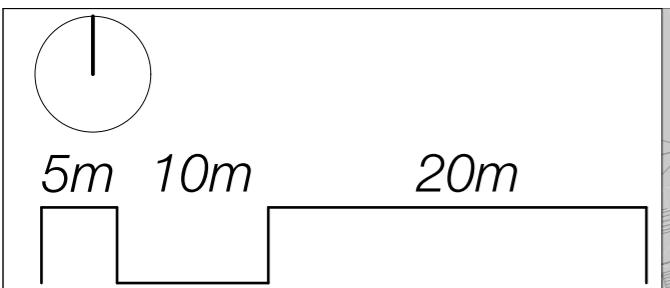
Due to the irregular shape of the site, also the building footprint is somewhat irregular. It widens up towards north, where the facade is angled towards the promenade along the dock in order to frame it properly in the architectural scenography, when observed from this very important angle. As a consequence, the corner towards the street intersection, hovers over the sidewalk and into the view. The rounded corner, with a slight overhang is a way of reinterpreting the corners found in the Art Nouveau of the place. The zigzag shape of the building naturally follows the site, but also creates a continuous, but not monotonous facade along the street, shaping the anonymous space towards the neighboring building to the west. As many of the historic buildings around, the TDP is constructed with a solid and tactile base, and a different body on top of that. This traditional composition and division across floors, is a way of emphasizing the ground floor of something that belongs to the street, and give it presence on the street, after all the ground floor is the walls of the space on street level. Both in the way the effects of the design are attempted to be achieved, and its pure expression of the “right” design coincide at a design ethos that could be synthesized into being an attempt to sustain direct comparison with the existing, but at being true to its contemporary needs and construction techniques.

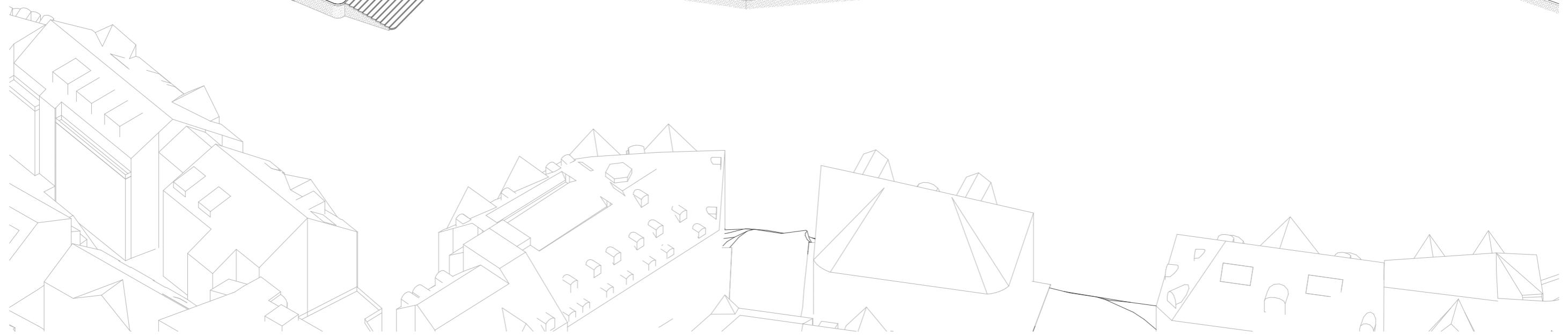
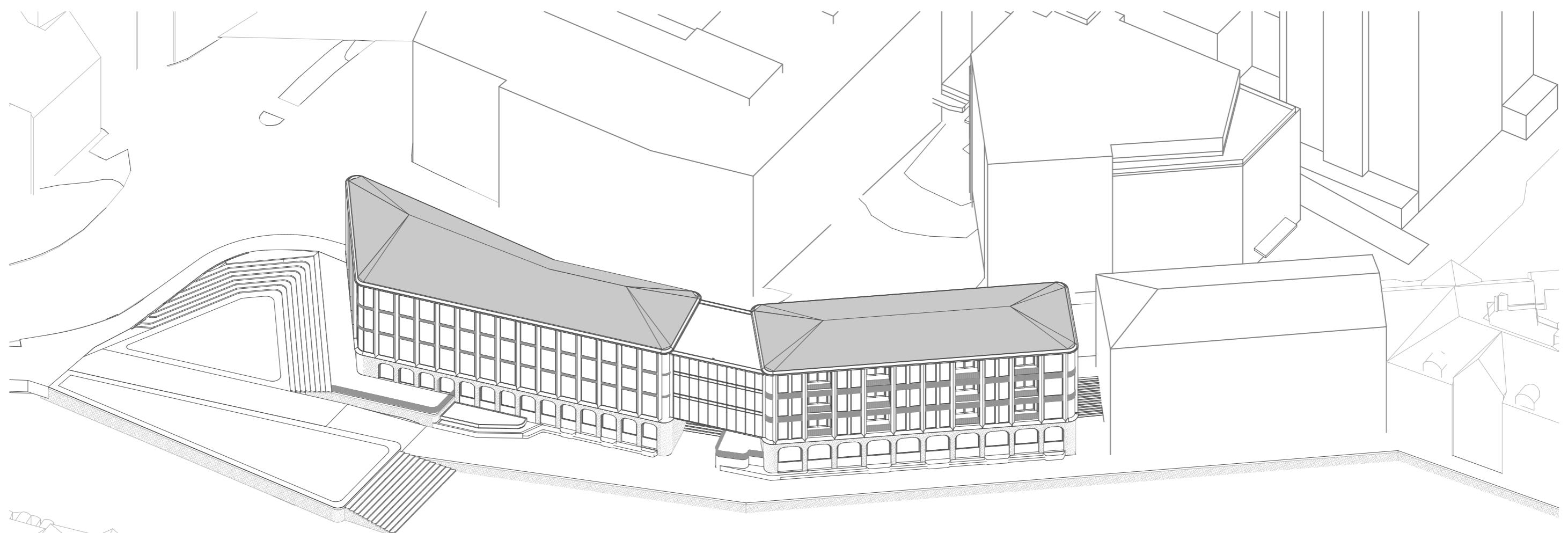


render from north

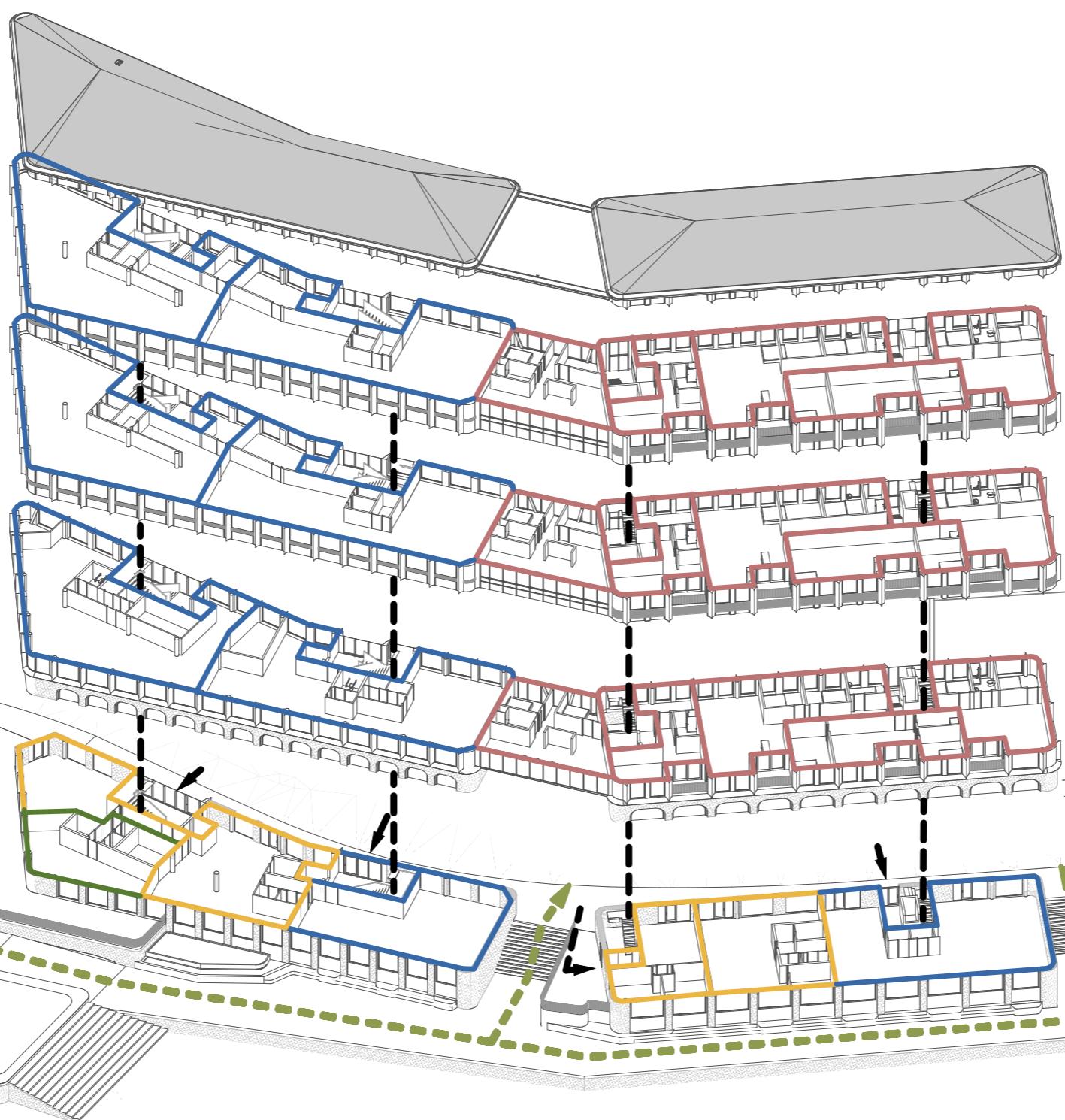


facade towards street





**the building in its environment**

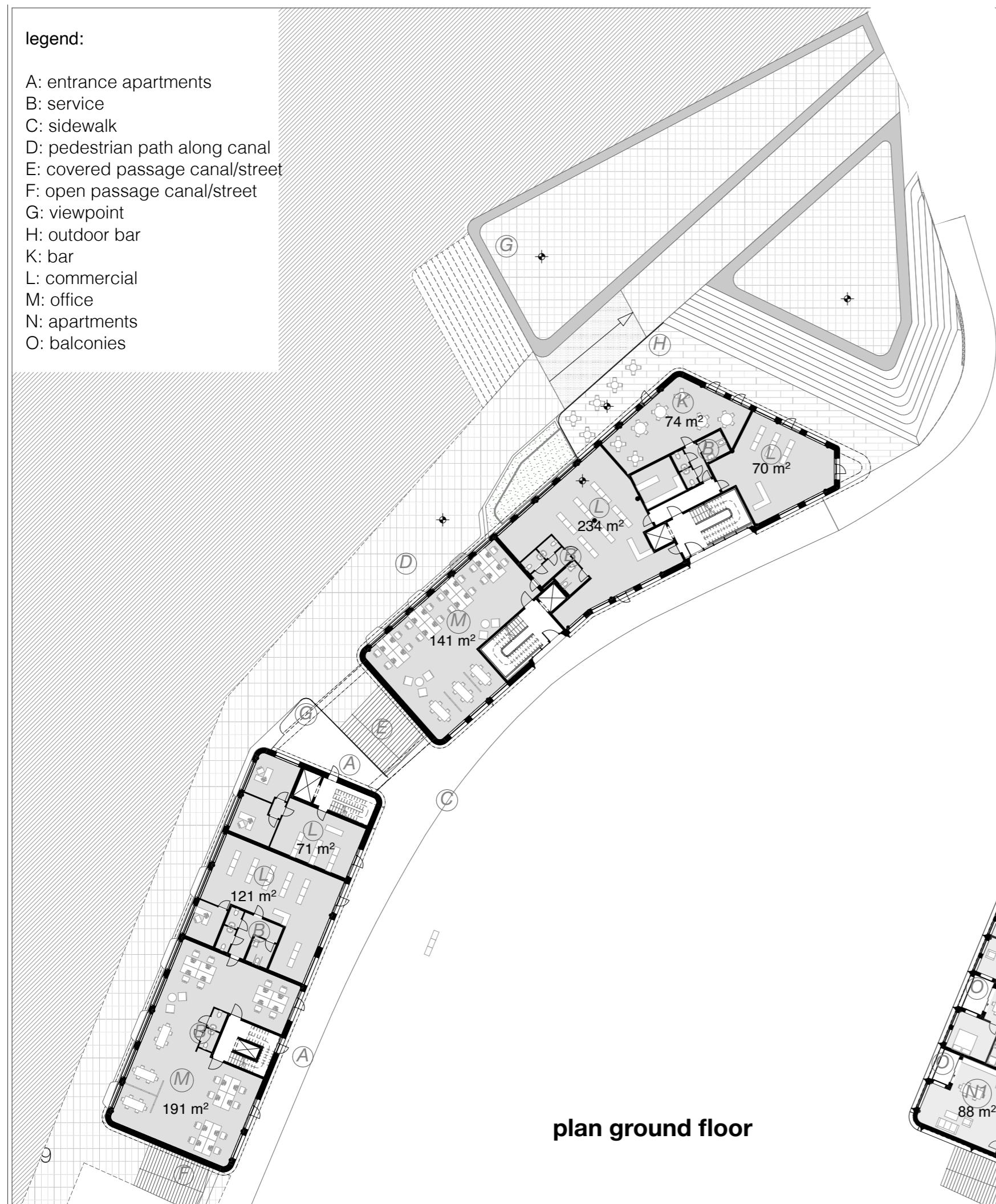


- commercial*
- restaurant*
- office*
- apartments*

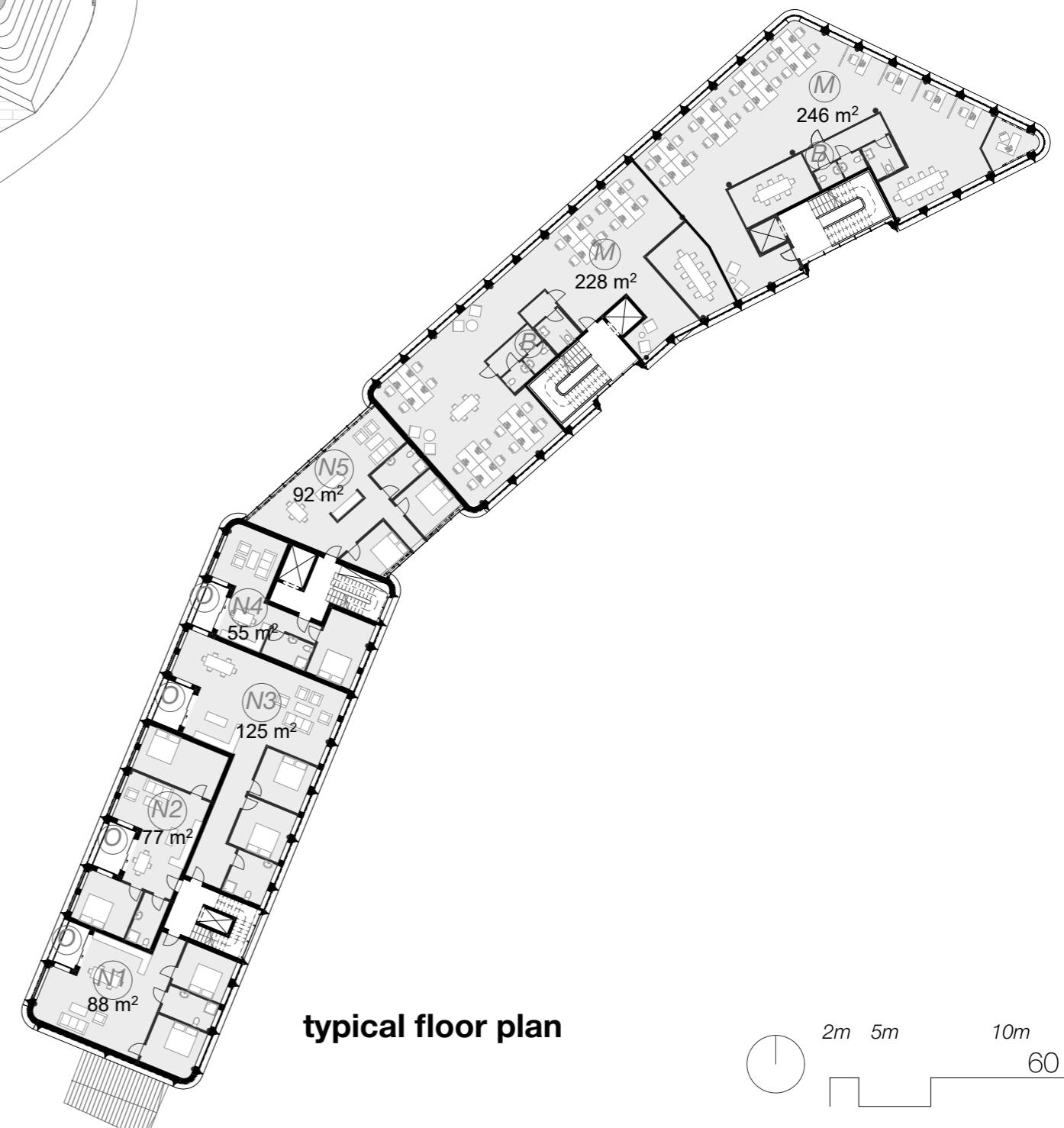
**exploded axonometry**

legend:

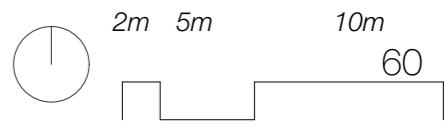
- A: entrance apartments
- B: service
- C: sidewalk
- D: pedestrian path along canal
- E: covered passage canal/street
- F: open passage canal/street
- G: viewpoint
- H: outdoor bar
- K: bar
- L: commercial
- M: office
- N: apartments
- O: balconies

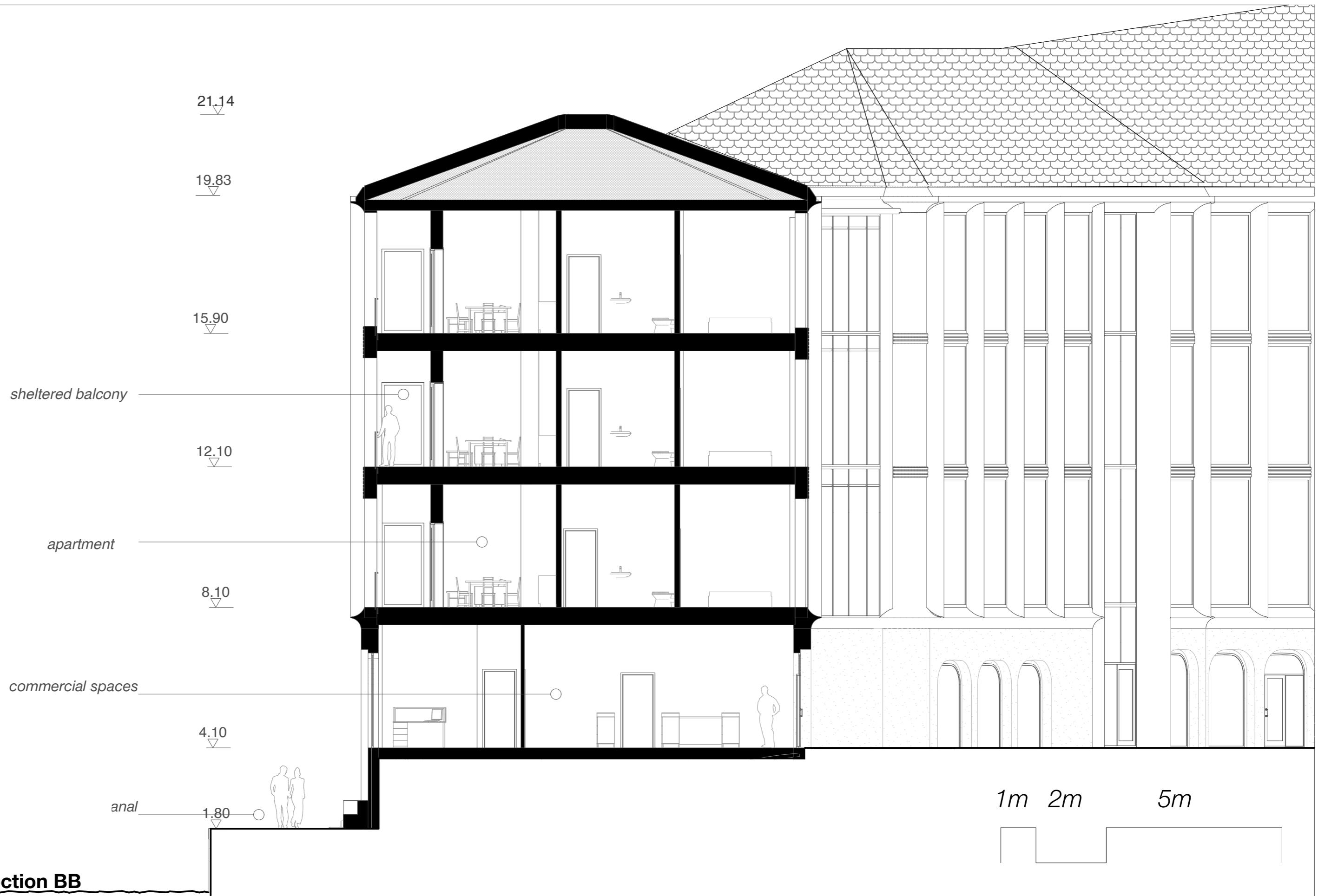


plan ground floor



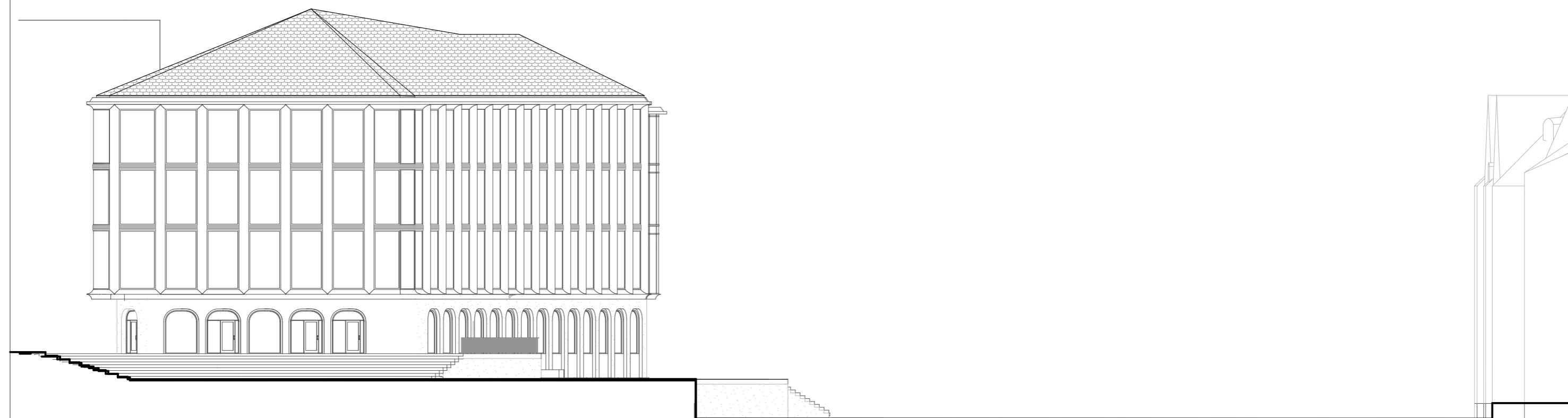
typical floor plan







**section DD**



65 **elevation north**



**elevation east**



**elevation west**

### 4.3.2 The architectural form as an urban question

In the chapter on the urban design strategy, it is highlighted that the morphological development of the building is both a strategic one in terms of responding to the social conditions surrounding the controversy. The proposed solution is also presented as a “better” solution for the city space, in order to achieve to a greater extent, certain effects that are often considered beneficial to the use of the city. In this case this means for instance that the building shapes a public square, so that it becomes a square, not only a piece of un-built land. It is a gesture to *the better good*, and a design action that carries the intention of making a good space for the sake of making something good. In the same way, the building follows the urban patterns of the existing, in such a way that it can be said to fit in. All this being somewhat intangible terms, but still something that can be reasoned around, and confronted. Just as importantly, these design intentions are useful responses to typical questions of any public discourse related to a transformation of this sort, and therefore pretty obvious “goals” to set out for when proposing a design.

Whereas the EMP proposes a archi-star tower, developed through an international competition, the TDP is designed more as a piece of the city. It is as an organic extension, or perhaps densification of built land, a growth pattern much more similar to that of the medieval cities, and quite the opposite of the archi-star tower. The form is a result of creating a the outline of an urban form, and in next round an architectural language, that could work on the site. It is not a design of a particular architecture for a particular function -it is the design of an urban morphology and an architectural expression that is first and foremost a piece of the city. In the trade-off following the removal of the public green space, the great promise of the TDP is that the accessible public space, and in particular that of the square that touches the water is improved with the new configuration.

To achieve this; three lines of reasoning is followed.

- 1) the building must shape the square so that it becomes a space, with satisfactory sun conditions(important on this latitude), protection from wind, traffic, and connection with the water.
- 2) It must be designed so with attention to the relation between activities going on inside the building, and the city life out side.
- 3) The building must relate to the architectural scenography of the place, not only the canal, but in its very defining position on sideline of a central intersection of the city.

The result is now a public square that is connected to the ground floor of the building, but with a difference in elevation, making the square “more”public, but still allowing a dynamic between whatever is going on inside with the city-life on the outside. Whether this is window-shopping, a restaurant with outdoor tables or a public entity accessible to its population. The

square is also directed southwards in the canal, forming a viewpoint that allows observation of the characteristic canal, and the essence of the architectural heritage of the city. The square slopes down towards the walkway, designed along the canal, as directed by the EMP. The walkway substitutes the floating docks that today creates a pedestrian walkway along the canal, in addition to the primary purpose of being the mooring for boats.

In terms of the visual appearance of the morphological shape, it is created along the same lines as the existing fabric. As shown in the analysis of the built environment, the essence of the settlement form is building squeezed in between the street network and the waterline. This together with older property divisions resulted in the irregular footprints, and continuous but jagged lines of buildings. The TDP follows a similar logic, in order to weave the building into the urban fabric, and of course maximize the built surface on the lot.



render building-public square intersection

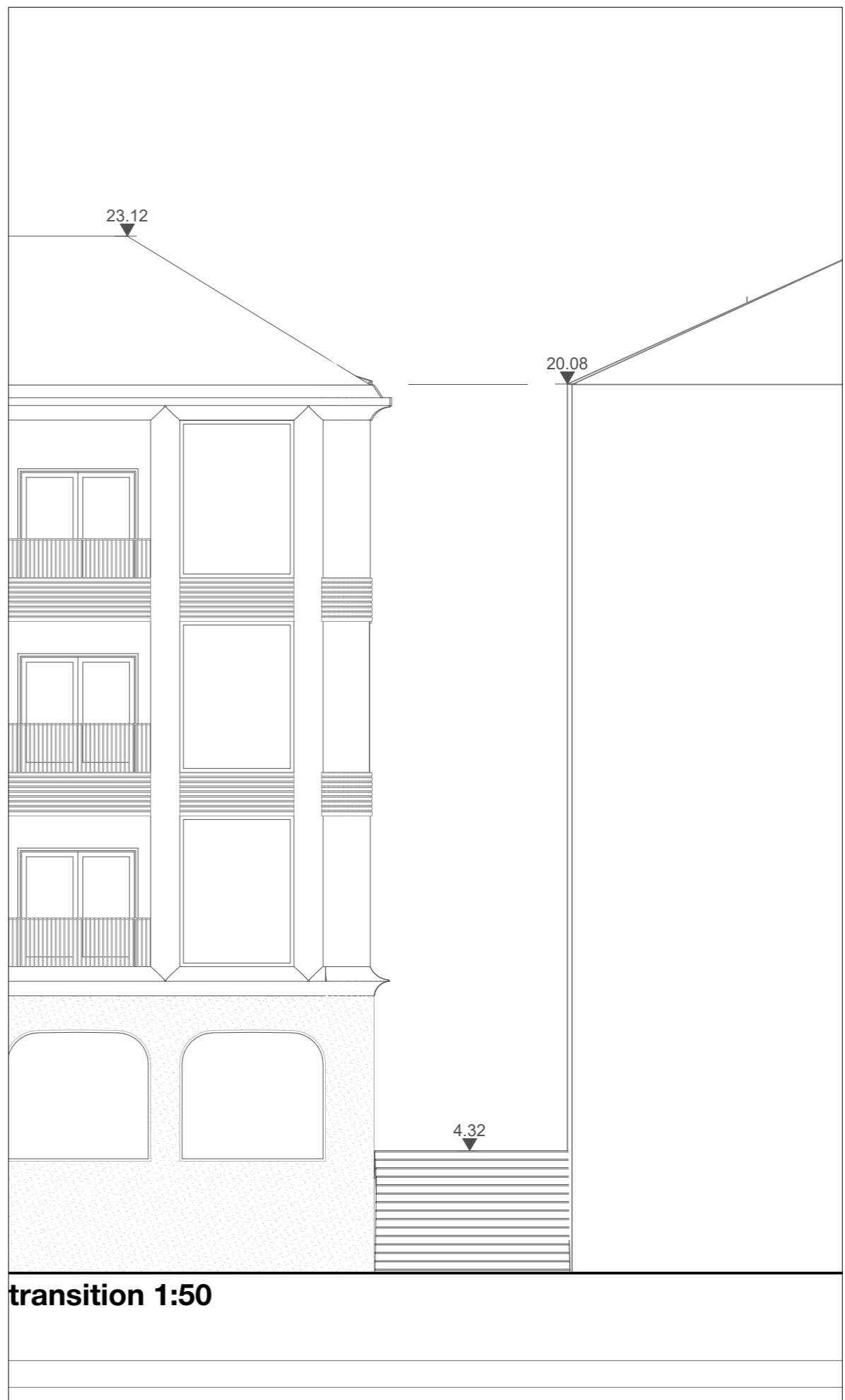
### 4.3.3 Fitting the building on site -heights and roofs

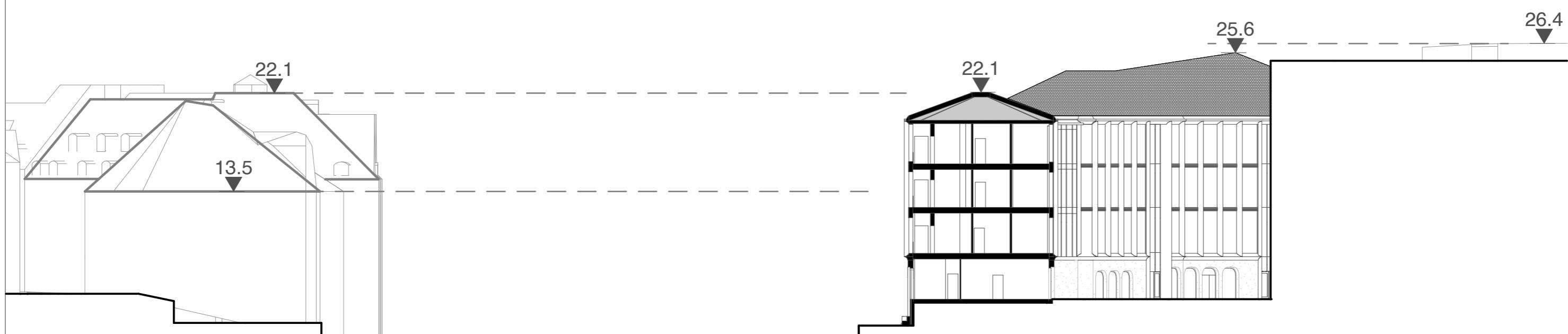


#### render of the building in its environment

It is in the spirit of the design proposal to mold a building that takes a shape coherent with the surrounding urban fabric. Essentially the bargain of the design strategy for the urban configuration is to trade a bad park for a better urban fabric. The adaption in this case is largely a matter of controlling the heights, and roof shape, at least for the purposes of presenting the project to decision makers. Roof shape and heights are tangible terms that usually needs a specific answer. The preliminary design analysis shows how the existing Art Nouveau warehouses are characterized by steep roofs, and adopting the roof shape of these building could be a feasible strategy to deal with this environment. This is a solution that is used by many of the newer constructions nearby, and the jargon “the shape of an old building with a modern language” is ubiquitous in any sort of debate on this topic.

For the TDP a different approach is chosen. the TDP seeks to create a good transition between the next building in the street, although it is not a part of the historic city fabric, nor a piece of architecture worthy of any mention. The gutter line is continued, same with the sleek roof angle. By not imposing this restriction of imitation, that a “historic roof” would give, a whole extra floor is gained, and the result is a building that is not an imitation of something it could never be, but instead becomes part of the city by filling out its lot in an effective manner with a shape coherent with its use, and construction methods, just as the dockside warehouses were in their way a century earlier.





**section BC -heights and roof shape with respect to surroundings**

#### 4.3.4 Constructing the grammars of a building

The main focus in the composition of the building has been to create a building that is recognizable and understandable in the sense that the elements of an architecture; roofs, overhangs, doors, windows, etc. are utilized in a deliberate way and together compose a building that resonates with traditions, but are no imitation of anything. This is also sought through a richness of forms and articulation of elements. Instead of accepting the historic buildings as the golden age that the contemporary buildings must only stand in the background of, the relative richness of elements that has its roots in the existing, but reinterpreted for the contemporary construction techniques and needs. This means making the TDP a building that is connected to its environment in spirit and expression, but does not bear any obvious resemblance, and this is also how it differs from all the Art Nouveau impressions that is found throughout the city, many of them from the eighties and nineties.

The drawings shows a building characterized by the division in materiality between ground floor and the upper floors. The lower floors is a reinterpretation of the rusticated bases of the surrounding Art-Nouveau buildings, opened with arched windows, with sizes suitable for commercial activities. The upper floors are constructed in similar prefabricated and pigmented concrete elements, with deep profiles of curved-triangular cross section, giving depth and life to the facade. In the span between the vertical profiles big openings are placed, that creates abundance of natural light on the inside but still speaking a form-full tactile language. For every apartment the openings contains a sheltered balcony.

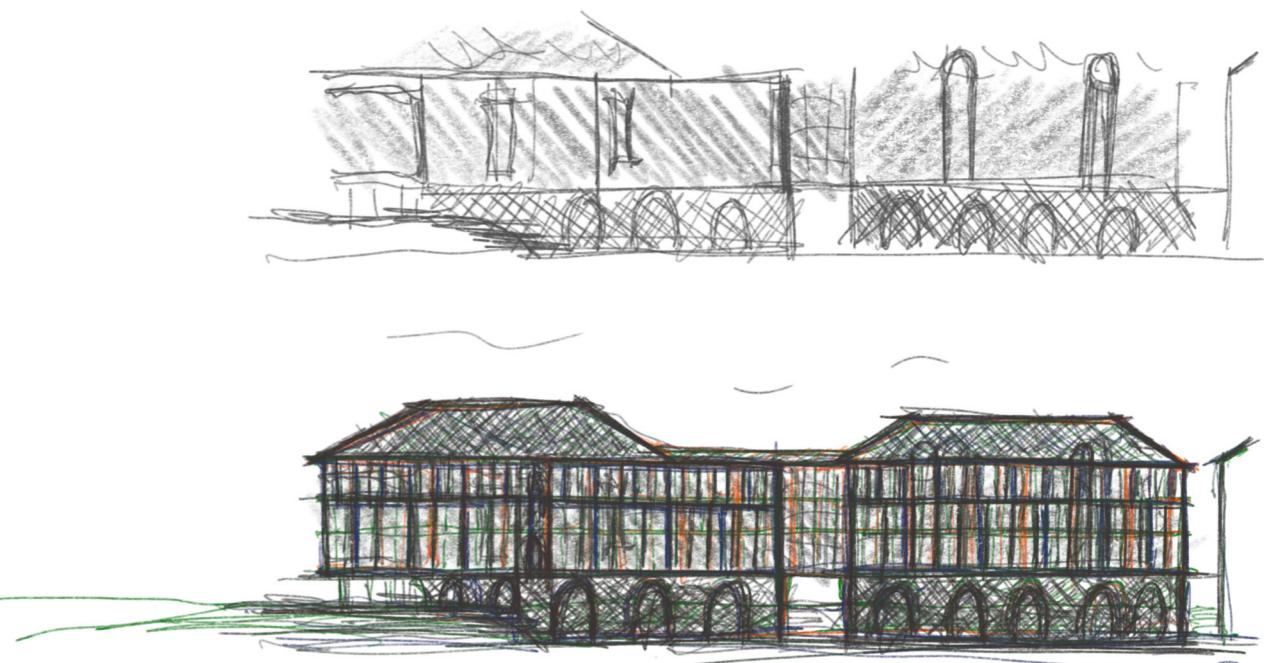
The two volumes differs from each other in the patterns created by the profiles, the southern volume being more dedicated to residential units has smaller windows with the result that the profiles has a larger spacing, and two windows between the two of them, that is again separated by a strictly decorative profile spanning only one floor at the time. This profile covers the joints between the concrete elements.

The scale of detailing, and decor is a direct rethinking of the detailing found in the study of the existing Art Nouveau. This involves shifts in planes, the curves in connections, and a free use of patterns in cladding. Transitions and cornices are important elements here. The historical Art Nouveau environment is a study of different transitions, often solved with light parabolic curves, or other non-classical profiles and cornices. In the TDP, these solutions are *synthesized and rethought* in the transition between the ground floor and the upper floors, where a parabolic curved cornice connects the prefabricated elements of the ground floor with the overhanging profiles. This type of transition can also be found in the vertical profiles and under the gutters. A similar reinterpretation of arches are found in the non circular three centered arches of the commercial spaces in the ground floor

The differentiation between the two main volumes, both in their separation but also the nuances in their envelope, is an action to adapt the scale of the building to the environment.

It is a common trick to take down the size, and adapt over-sized buildings to a different environment. This off course opens the question on whether it is a truthful way of designing. In this case, the differences between the volumes naturally follows the functions that differs throughout the building, and remain so subtle that they only break monotony, but never hints to two different buildings. It is obvious that it is a much longer and bigger building than the neighbors with which is sought to create a connected urban fabric with, but it is still of a comparable scale. The rounded corners are a direct reference to the Art Nouveau buildings, as it is a trait many of them share, as well as a trick that softens the presence of the building.

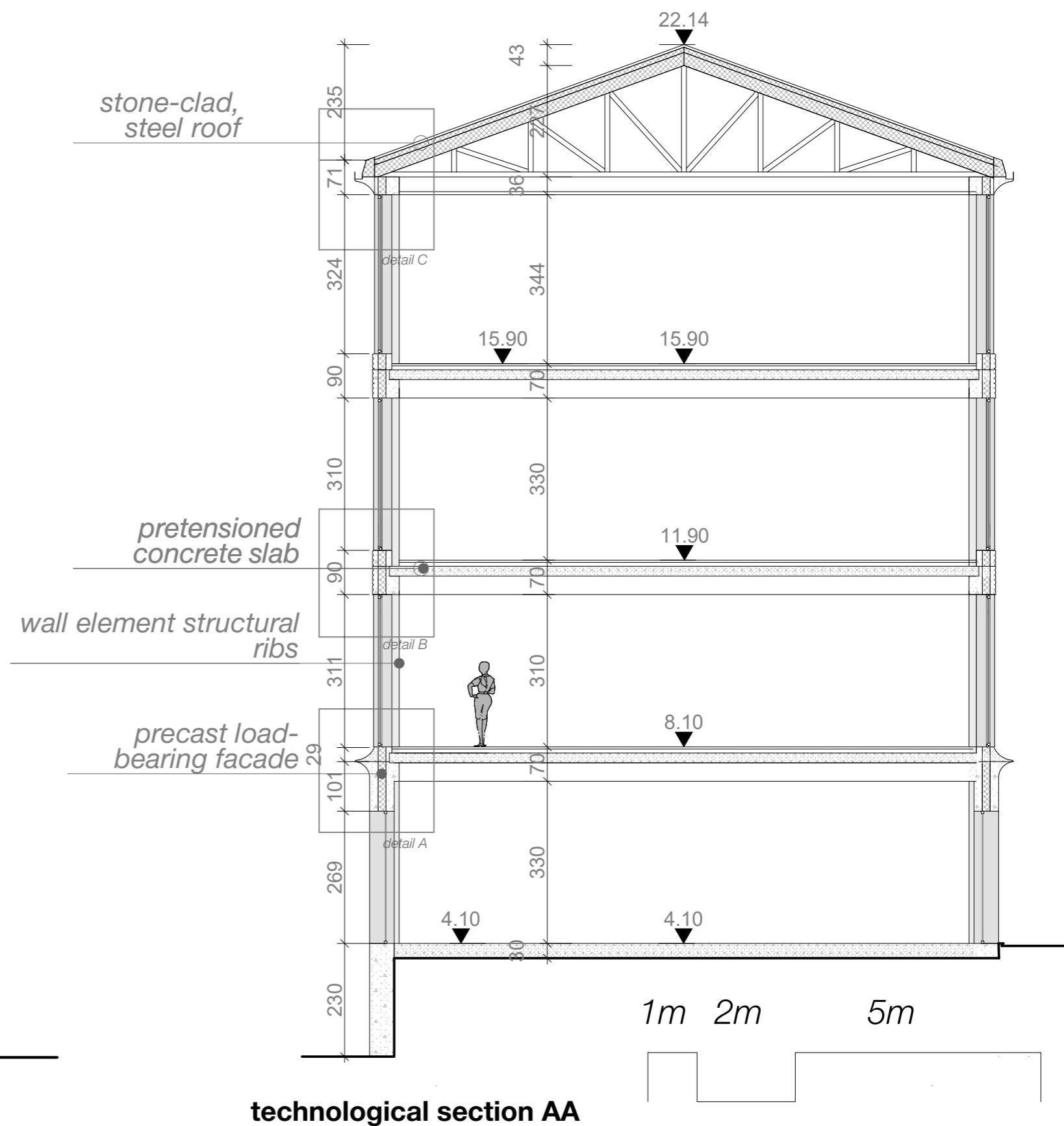
As has been underlined already, the fundamental idea is to do a design that is compatible and comparable to the surrounding historic fabric in the way it appears to be more elaborated, and richer on form and intention that much of what is created the later years. This approach is a result of recognizing the qualities of the historic environment from an architectural point of view as much as at it is a design strategy in order to achieve the urban transformation that is sought. In any case, it is the opposite of nostalgia in the sense that it is an honest attempt to find the right forms through the aforementioned *rethink and synthesize*. The ruling principle in this search, is to find out how the relevant and modern construction techniques can have an expression that is a function of exploiting their potential, rather than adapting them to a language they were not born for. The use of pre-tensioned concrete slabs allows for a different level of flexibility of distribution. Prefabricated load bearing facades are attempted as a way of designing something that ages well, and with a robustness similar to that of old masonry under the hypothesis that this is a useful trait for future use cases and transformations.

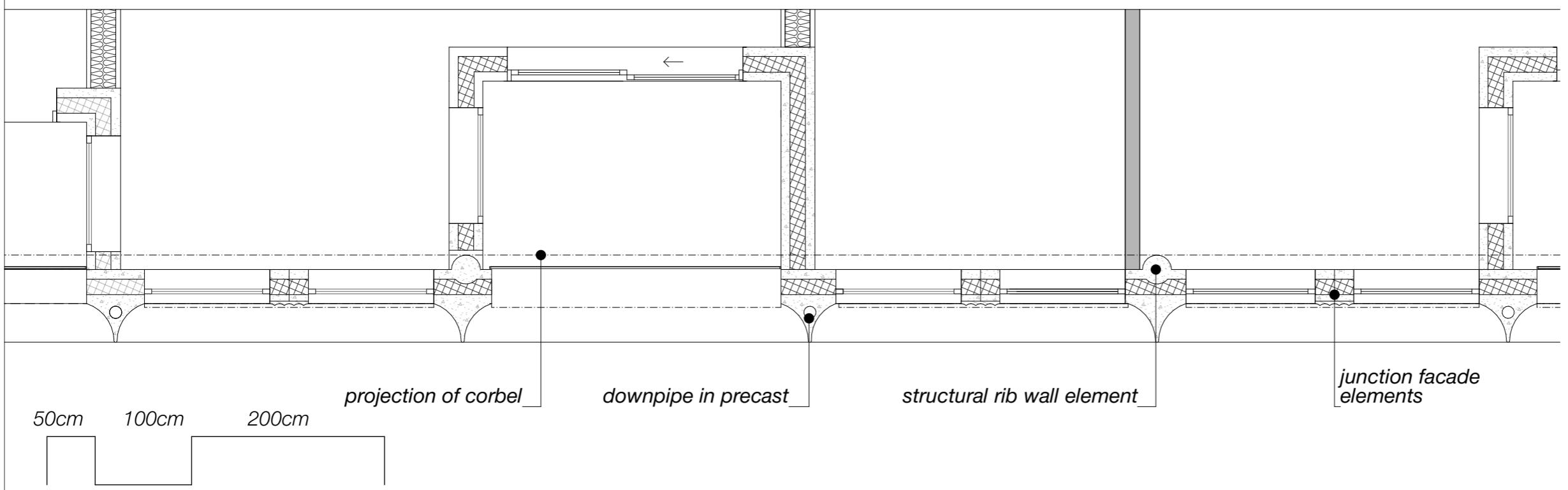


**facade studies**

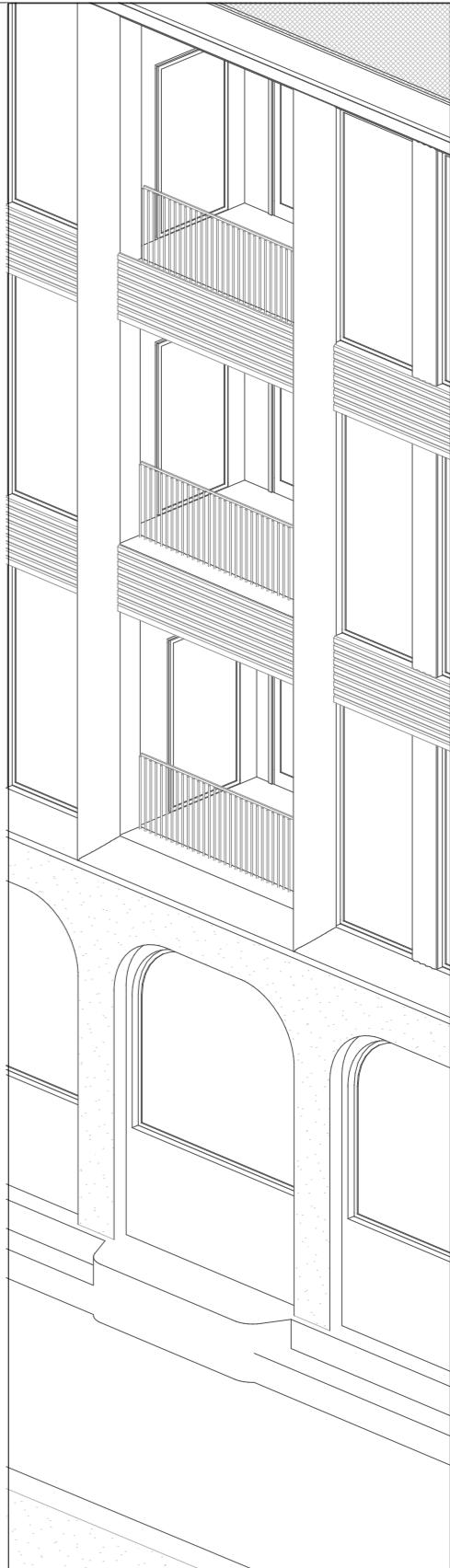


**elevation zoom in**

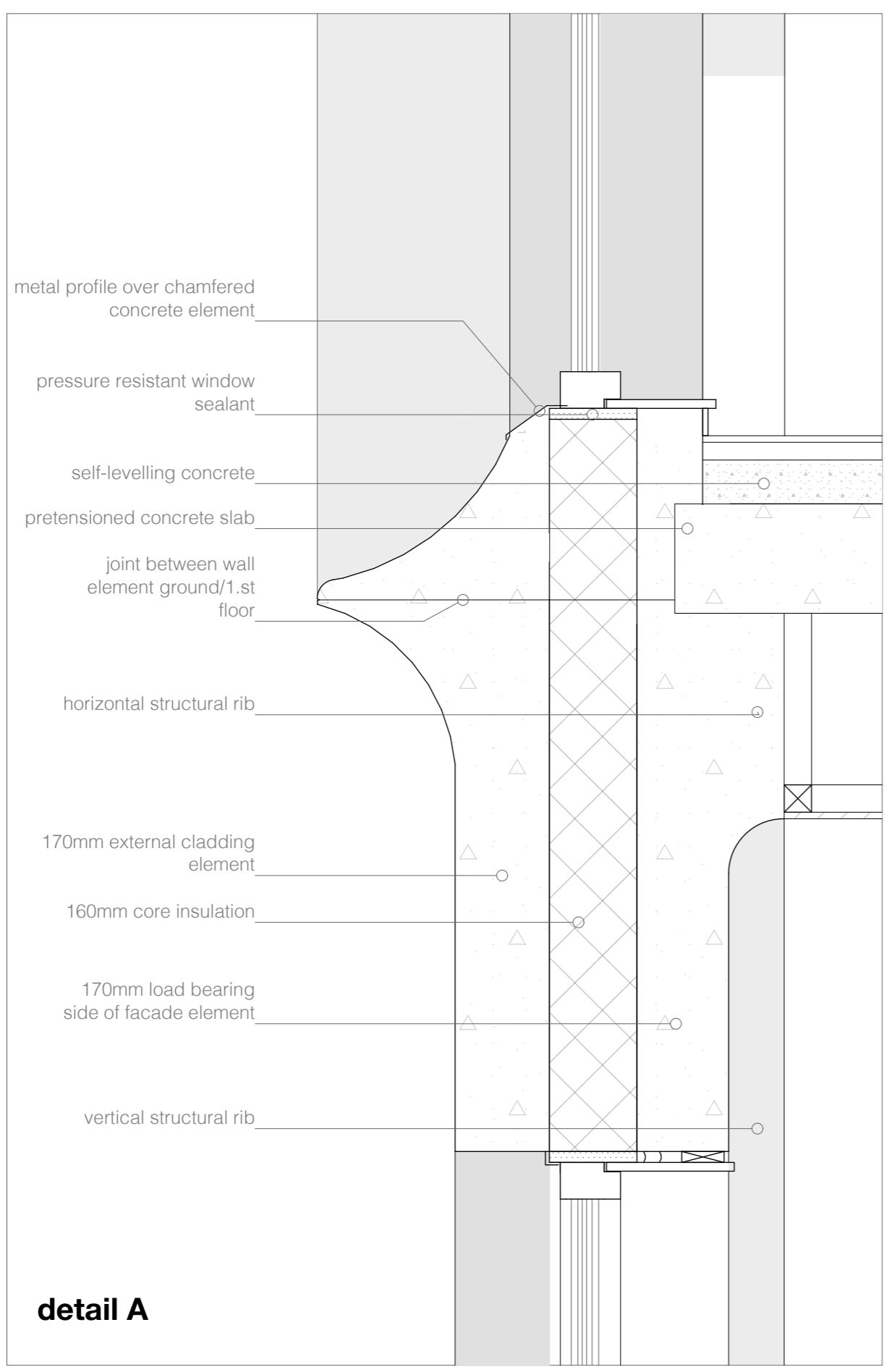




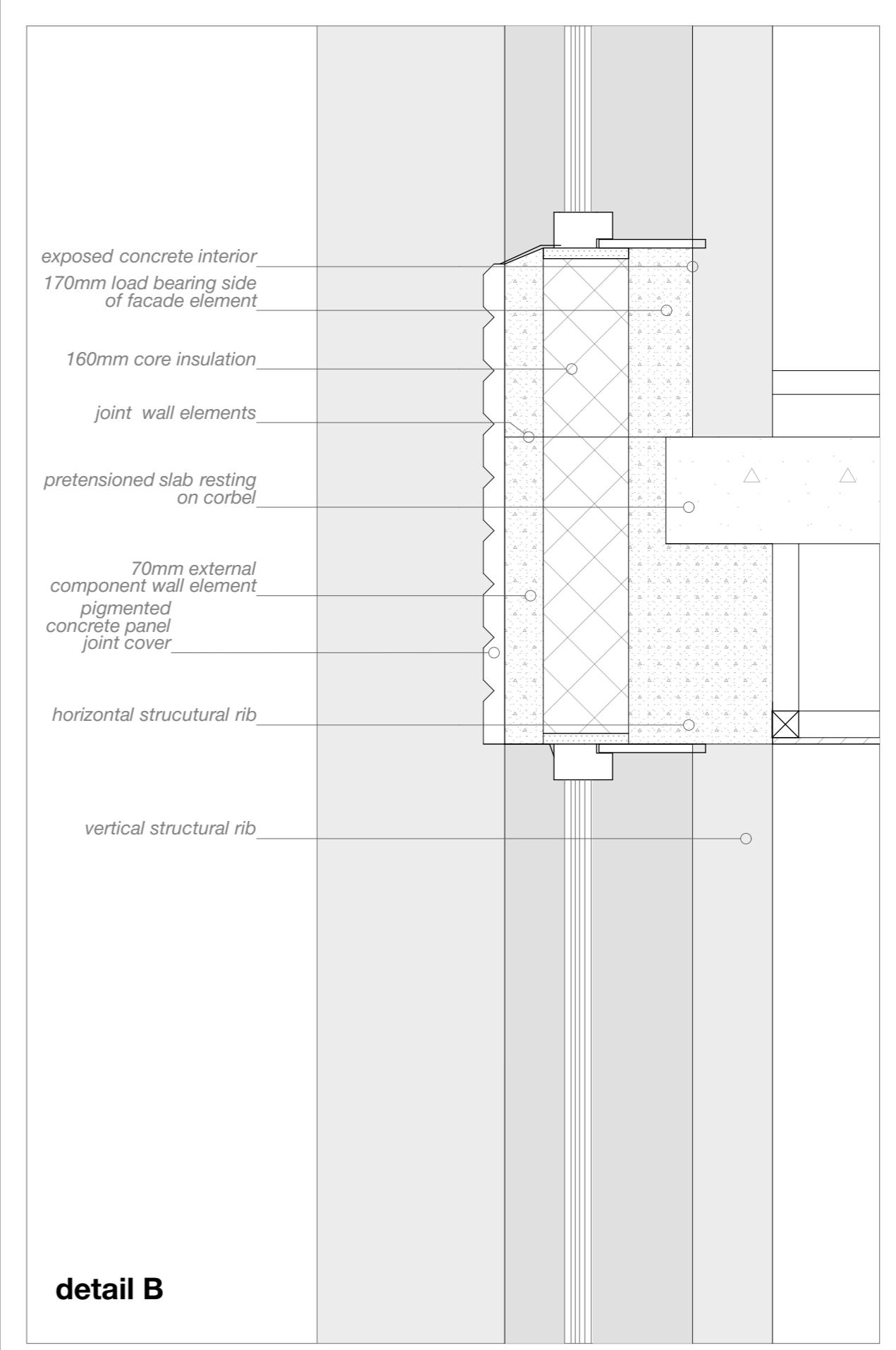
79 elevation, and horizontal technological section



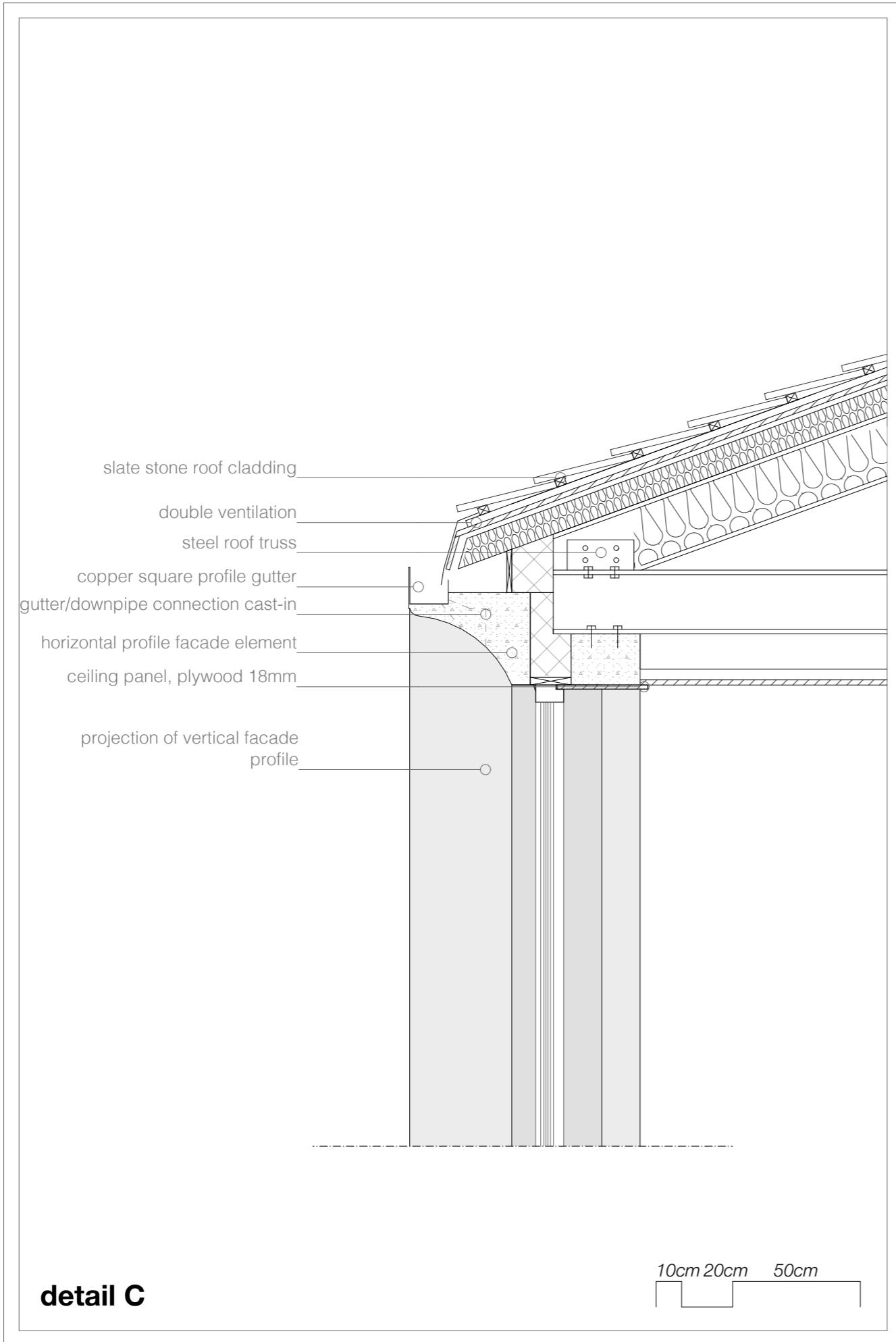
facade axonometry



**detail A**



**detail B**



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