

In the eye of the storm
transforming an iconic ruin in Beirut

by Quita Schabracq

Architecture master thesis
at the Academy of Architecture Amsterdam

feb 2019 - aug 2020



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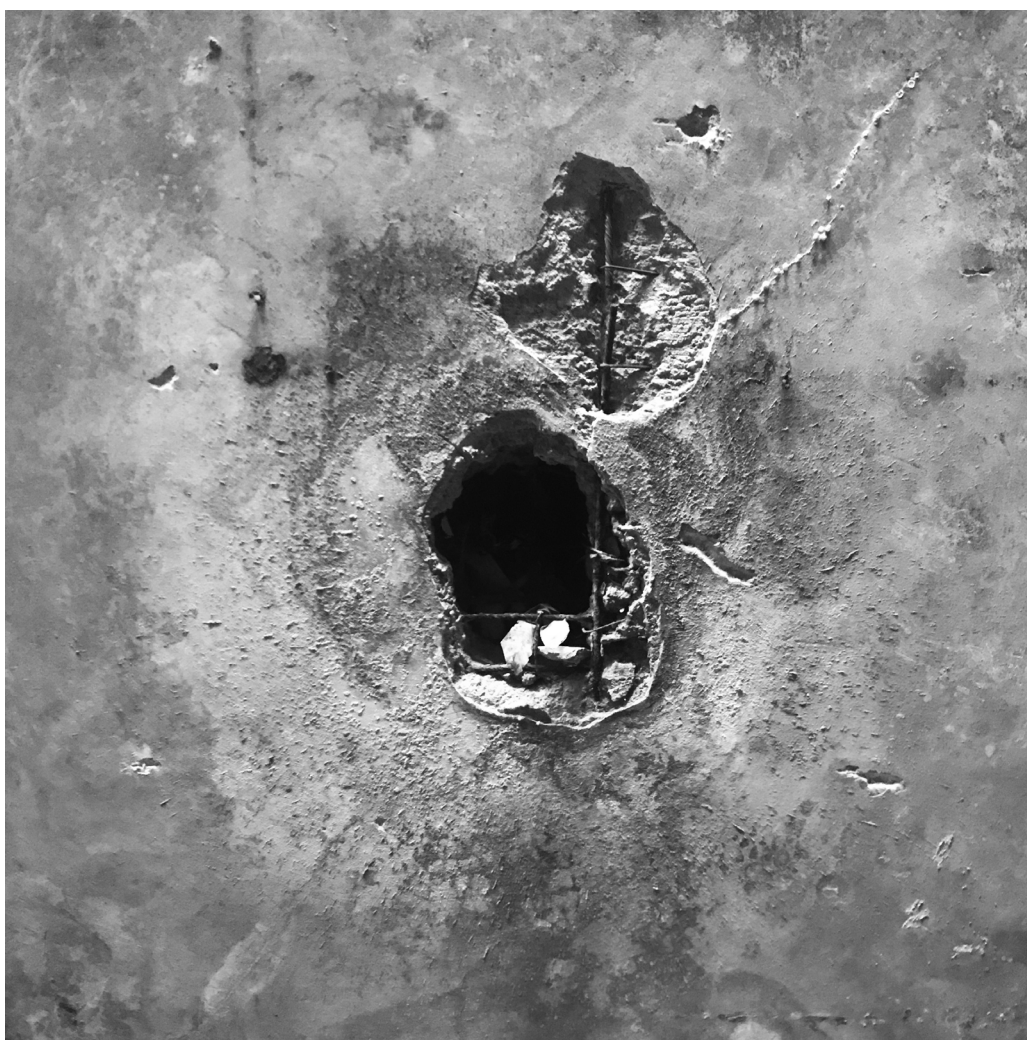
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Image source front page: Jad Ghorayeb





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In the eye of the storm

Transforming an iconic ruin in Beirut

The way we rebuild our buildings and cities show how we address, acknowledge and accept our history. Buildings with scars hold the power to communicate the stories of the past. Especially in war-damaged cities, it can be an added value to reveal a difficult history through the built environment. In the heart of Beirut stands such a building that has seen and experienced many transformations.

Built as a modernist commercial complex the ‘City Center,’ it was a symbol of the prosperous ‘60s before it was turned into a sniper hideout during the 15 years of civil war. The building was largely deconstructed in the post-war time, as well as its surrounding context, leaving just the ‘Egg’ shaped structure standing. Most recently the building was adopted as the icon of the revolution that started in October last year. My position in the treatment of heritage is to acknowledge all transformations the building has known, and use their qualities.

To revive the building I propose to add a functional program allowing different people from society to enter the building and find their personal relation to its history. To make the building truly public and accessible, which Beirut has little examples of, it will be transformed into a multi-modal transport hub, serving different economic classes. This will generate activity in an otherwise deserted part of the city, thus bringing back the former identity of lively heart of the city.

After the recent event of the explosion, it feels futile to talk about the value of one building with scars, as everything is lying in pieces and the destruction is so widespread. What it does show is that our built environment embodies what we experience as human beings. In the case of Lebanon, the explosion put deed by an already existing situation. Besides the country and city economically and politically lying into pieces, now it also literally is. Undoubtedly people will rise from the ashes of it, and rebuild their environment over time, but this wound will be present in the city for a long time.

The way we rebuild our buildings and cities show the way we address, acknowledge and accept our history. Each transformation of the ‘Egg’ building is representative for the changes that the city of Beirut has experienced. By reactivating and transforming it into a transport hub, everyone is stimulated to actively participate in its future history.

Why this project, why Lebanon?

My interest in buildings with visible scars let me to start this project. I believe that buildings embody what we experience as human beings, and help us to relate to those experiences.

Buildings with scars hold the power to communicate the stories of the past. Especially in war-damaged cities, it can be an added value to reveal a difficult history through the built environment.

Unfortunately the destruction of buildings and cities is very present in several countries in the middle-east region, like Aleppo in Syria, Sanaa in Yemen and Mosul in Iraq. The future task for architects is to reconstruct and rebuild these cities.

Within the region of the middle-east, the tiny country Lebanon can be seen as an old master of reconstruction. After fifteen years of civil war, large parts of the capital Beirut were severely damaged. Thirty years later we can study the successes and failures of this reconstruction.



Position of Lebanon in the Middle-east



Mosul, Iraq
Image source: AP, NY times



Sanaa, Yemen
Image source: Khaled Abdullah/Reuters



Aleppo, Syria
Image source: AFP

Beirut Central District

Thirty years after the end of civil war, much of the city Beirut has been repaired, replaced or demolished. Yet still many 'left over' buildings are standing fenced off on the side, waiting for their turn. They seem like 'silent witnesses' of their slowly changing environment.

The 'Egg' building, Sabouneh or City Center complex, is a building that is located in the Beirut Central District. This building and its context are significant and representative for the transformations the city has known.

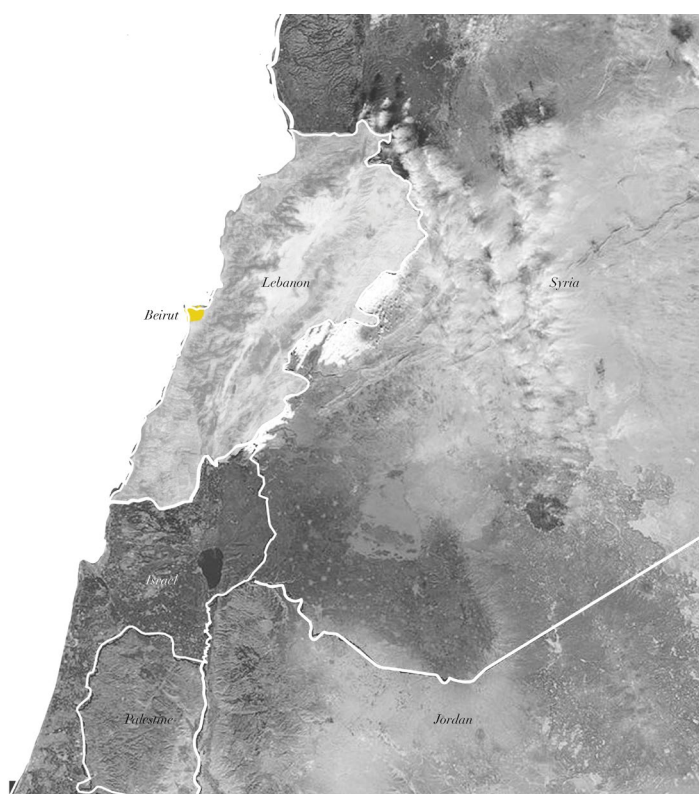
The Beirut Central District was the former heart of the city, geographically and metaphorically. The old souk created a dynamic neighborhood with a diversity of commerce and services.

As the fighting during war started in this area and along the 'green line', it very quickly became a desolated place, and went through severe damage.

Post-war it was the first area to be included in a large redevelopment plan by Solidere, the company who lead the reconstruction. During its transformation Beirut Central District changed a lot in both morphology and identity. From a fine mazed diverse district, to a more mono-culture high-end commercial area, now the streets are mostly empty.



Downtown Beirut, 1987
Image source: Fouad el Khoury



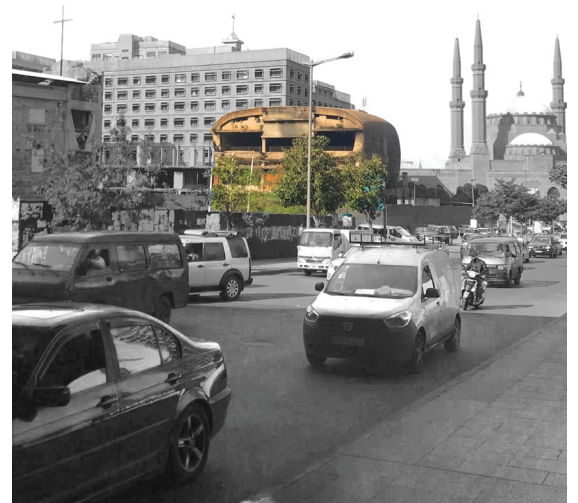
Lebanon and direct context



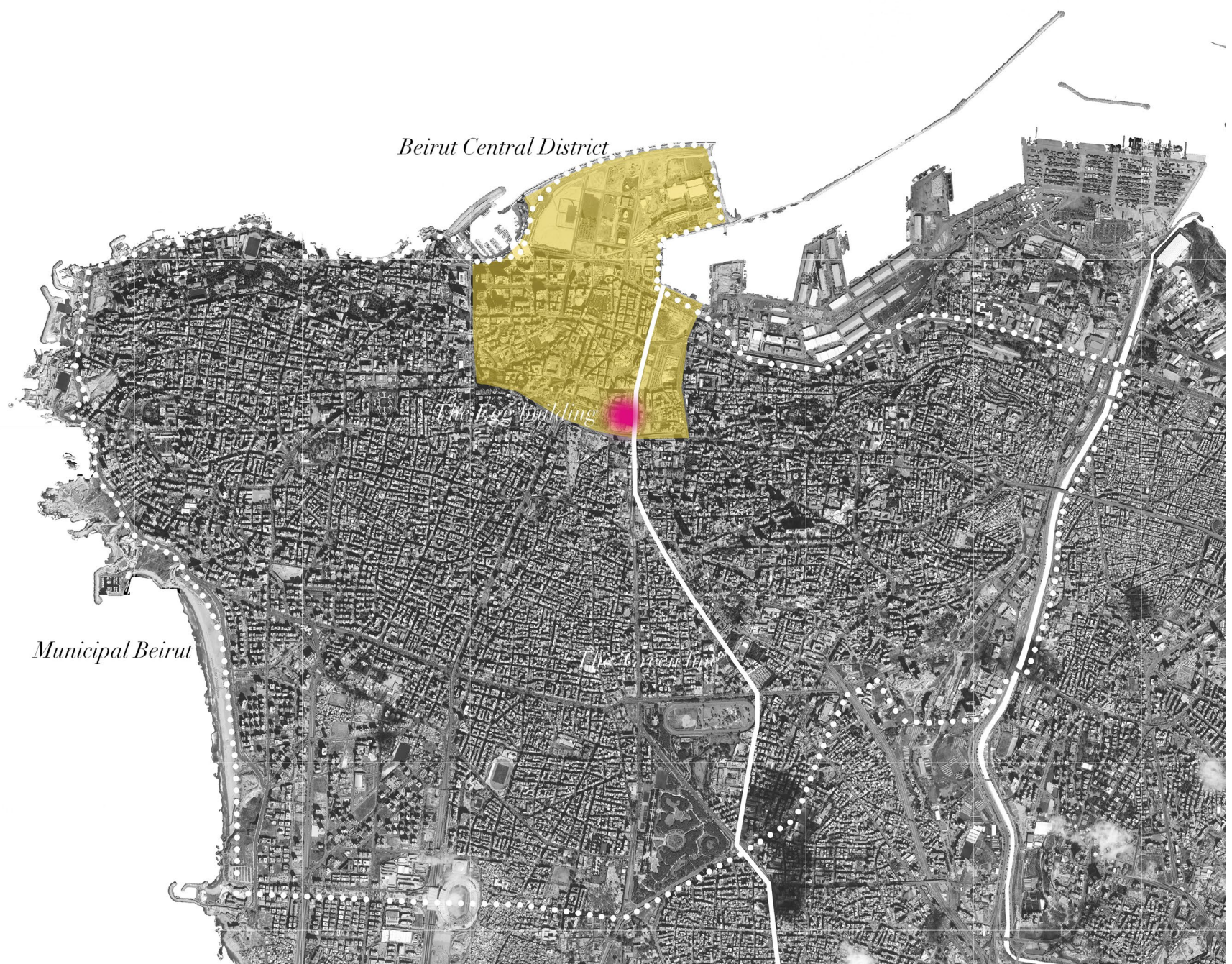
Beirut and 'Egg' building



Beirut Central District, with the Egg'building



Three 'silent witnesses'



Beirut Central District, Green line and the Egg building



Former identity lively heart of the city



Current identity empty fenced streets

Positioning in treatment of heritage

When you treat an iconic ruin, you have to position yourself in relation to this heritage. Which time is the most important to reference? Do we bring back the building to its original design? In the case of the City Center complex, the original design was never completed.

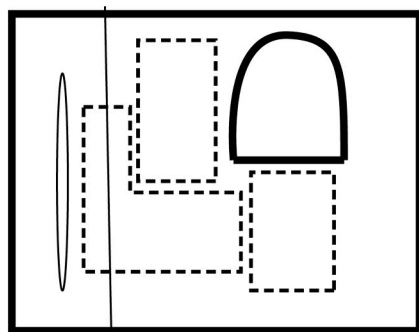
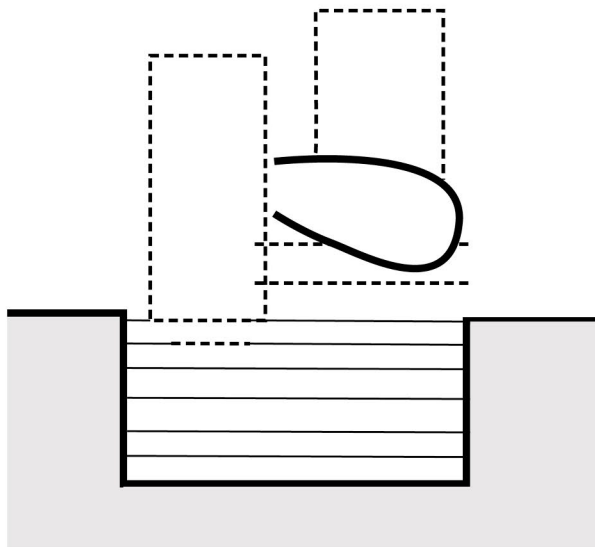
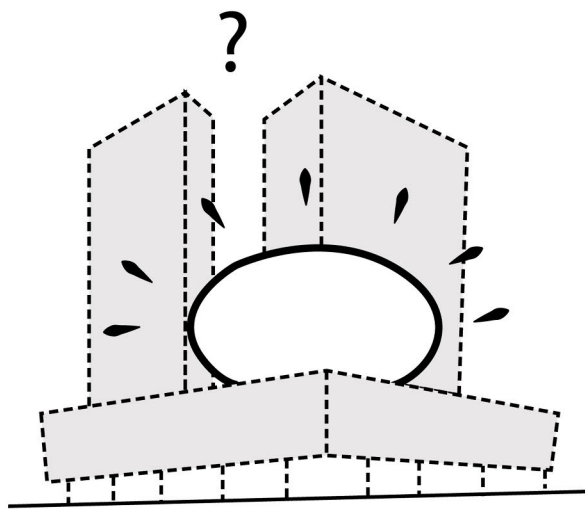
The heritage of the war could be also important to acknowledge, as it was a defining time for the city and it left a strong mark on this building.

The deconstruction of large part of the building's structure was significant for the post-war period. It left the 'egg' shaped structure standing.

Most recently the building was adopted as the icon of the revolution that started in October last year and marked by the addition of a layer of graffiti.

My position in the treatment of heritage is to acknowledge all transformations the building has known. I aim to recognize and use the qualities that each transformation has brought to the building.

1. How to treat an iconic ruin?
Positioning in treatment of heritage



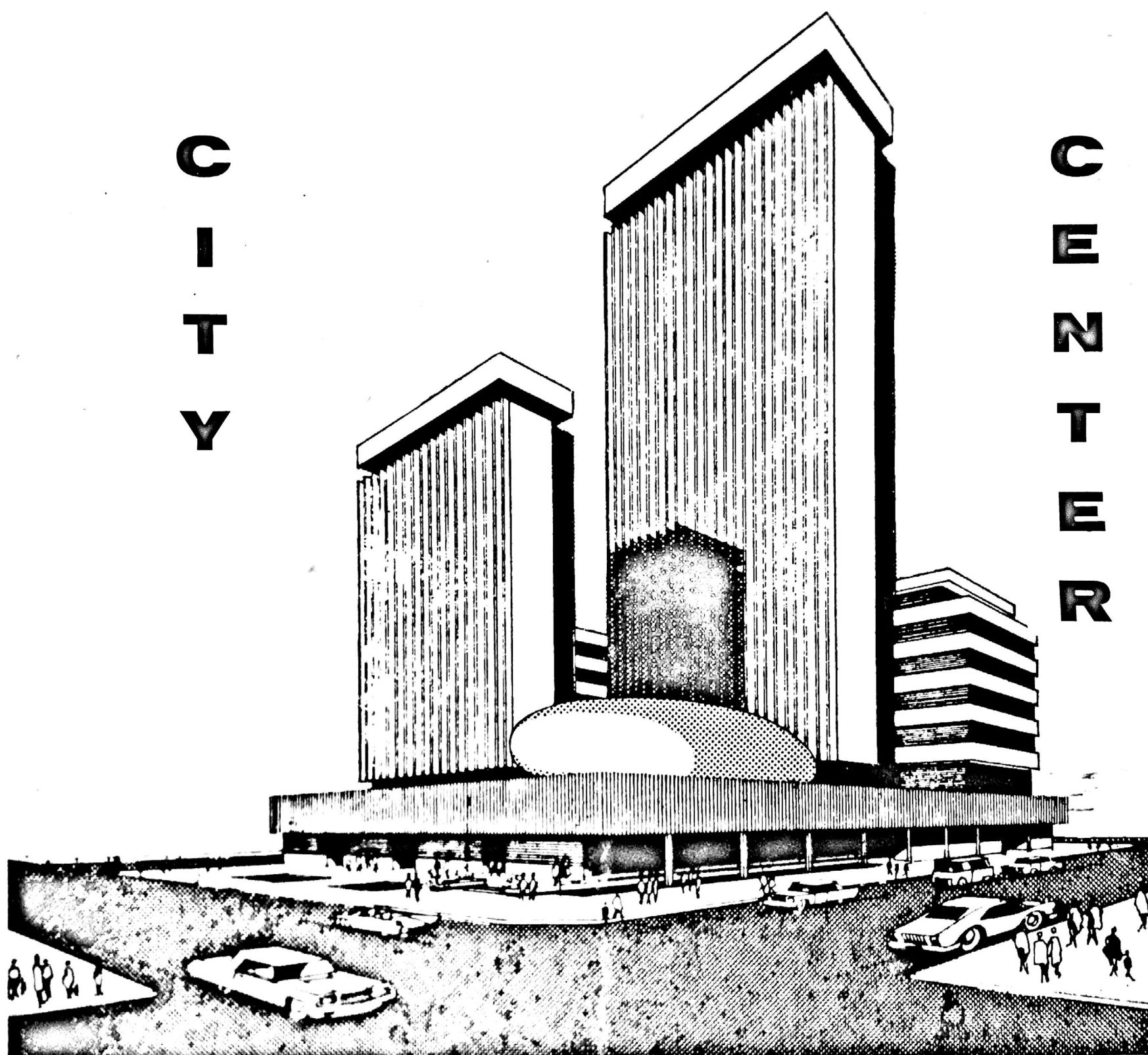


Image source: Arab Center for Architecture



Cinema culture

The '60s

The 'City Center' was a commercial complex, designed by the architect Joseph Philip Karam in 1963. It included commercial spaces in the plinth, offices in the towers, a supermarket in the first underground level, a five layer underground parking garage and a cinema in the domed structure.

The building was a first of its kind and size in the middle-east region, and was a symbol of the prosperous times that the city Beirut had in the '60s.

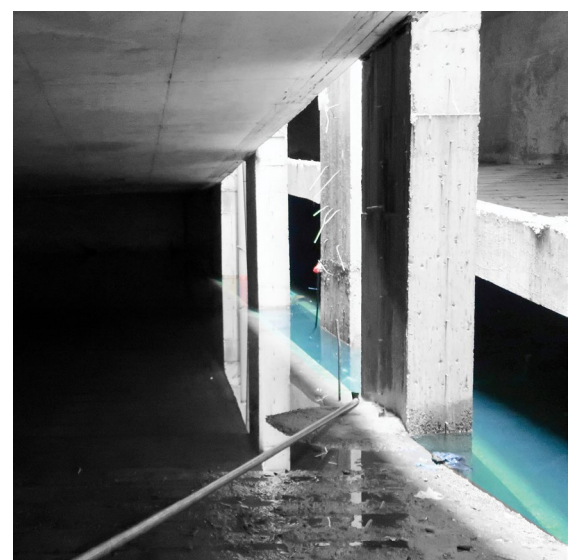


Image source: Arab Center for Architecture

The '80s

During the civil war, the building had a strategic position along the 'green line,' over which was fought. It became a snipers hide-out and received a lot of damage from bullets and heavier artillery.

The building was unique in having an underground parking garage, during war-time. Many people with expensive cars brought their cars to this garage as they thought it was the safest place to keep their cars. Soon enough the underground waterpipes broke and overflowed the building.



Overflowed with water



Image source: Arab Center for Architecture



Deconstruction

The '00s

The deconstruction of large part of the building's structure was significant for the post-war period. The large tower and plinth layer were demolished. As well a big pit was cut into the underground layers, creating a new ground floor level.

The 'egg' shaped structure was difficult to demolish, and therefore left standing. This solitary concrete dome structure emphasized its iconic value in the city.

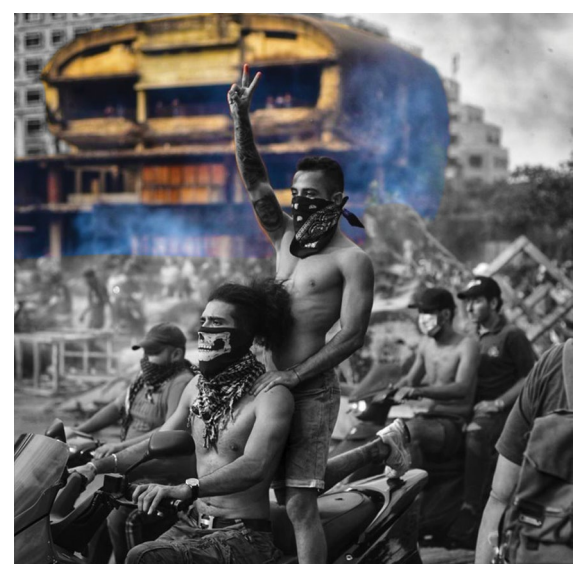


In 2019

Most recently the building was adopted as the icon of the revolution that started in October last year.

During the revolution the fences were torn down that closed off for such a long time, making it accessible to the public.

The building was marked by the addition of a layer of graffiti, and used for public events and screenings, parties and viewing platform.



Icon of revolution

Image source: beirutwalls/wordpress.com

Adding public program in Beirut

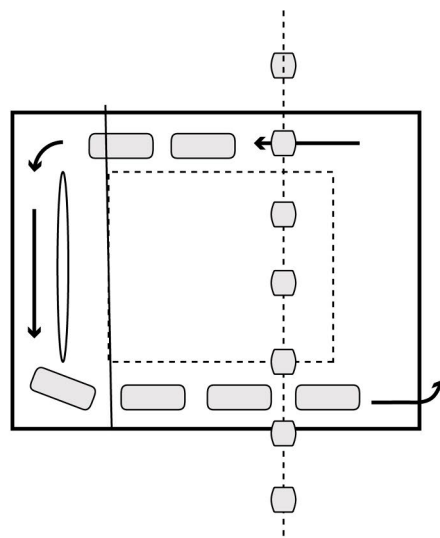
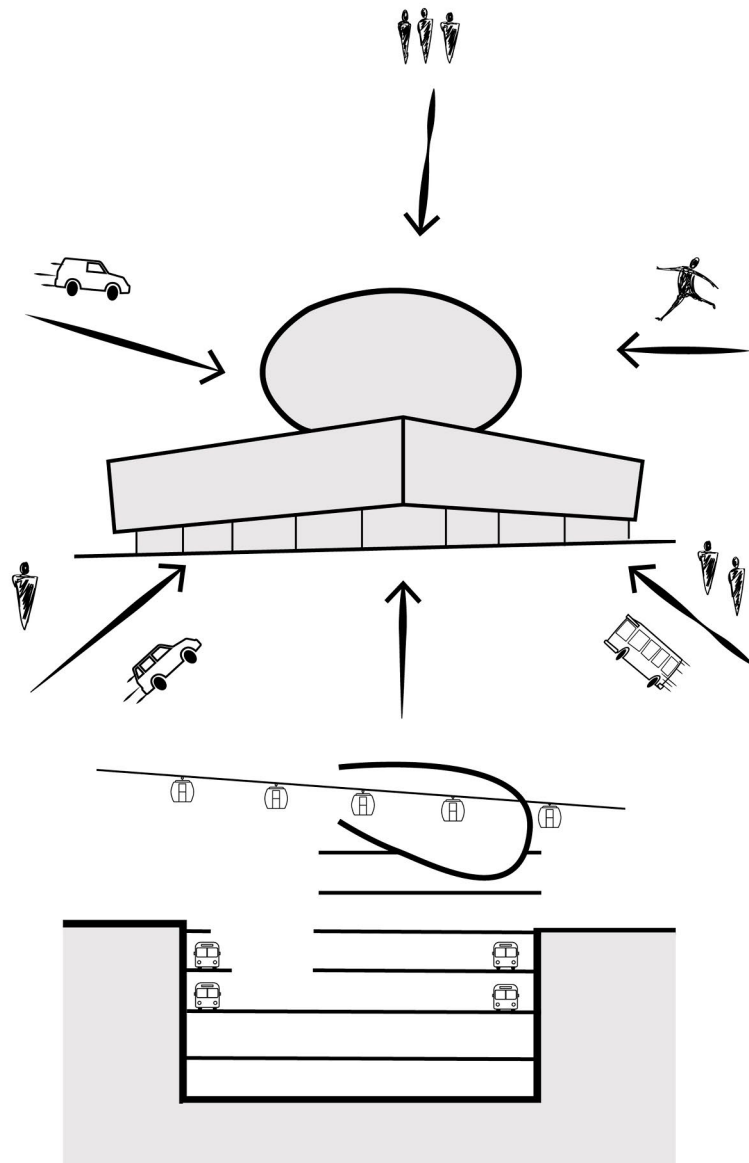
In order to allow anyone to find their own relation to the history of the building, I propose to add a functional public program. By doing so one is allowed a personal experience that is not defined by behavioural codes.

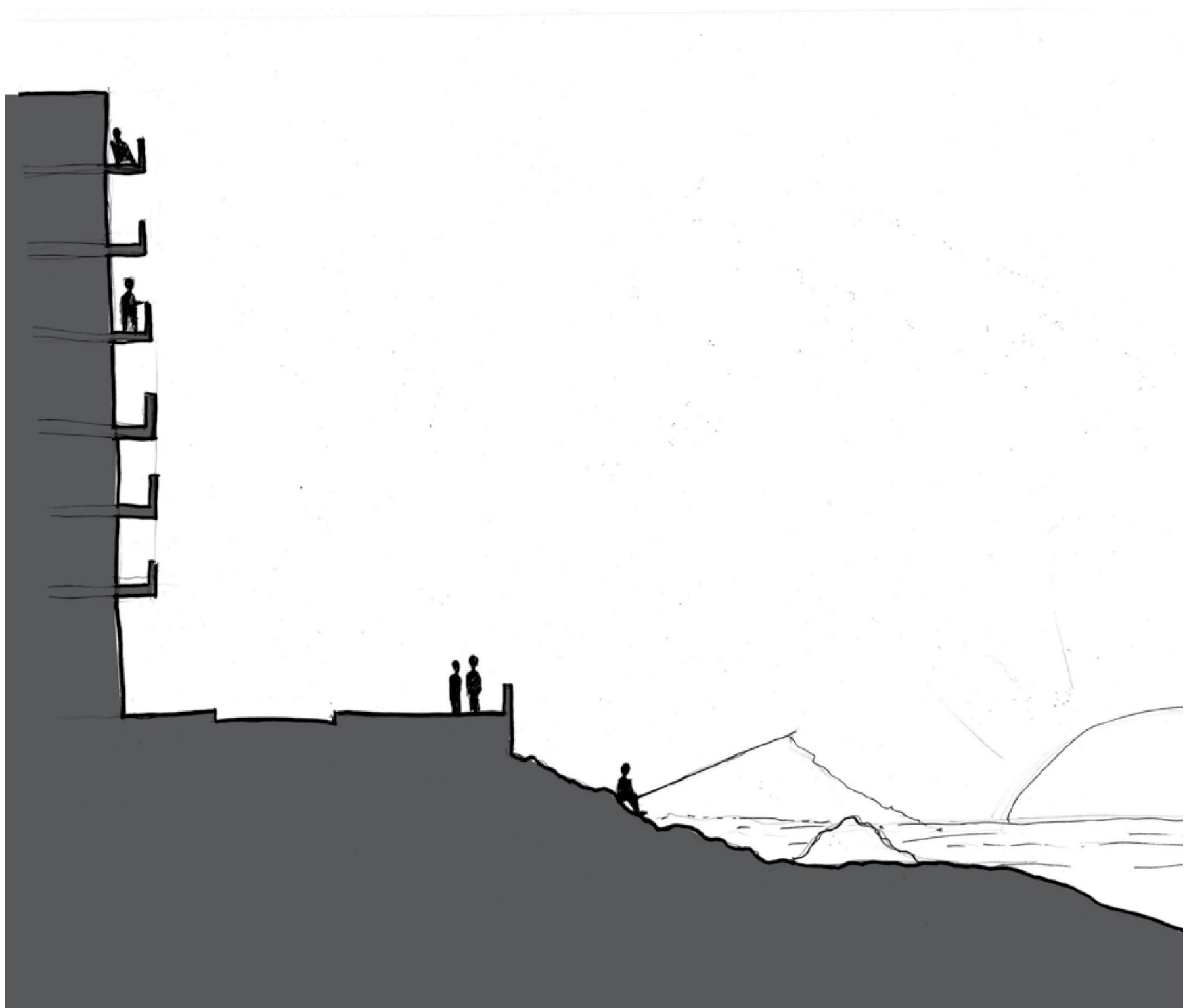
To make the building truly accessible is a complex task in the Beirut context. Most of the public program in Beirut is segregated in different options for different economic classes, for example markets for the poor and malls for the rich.

One of the few types of spaces that is used democratically is the transport hub. The transport hub is a traffic square where many buses depart and arrive and other vehicles pass through. Even though buses itself are mostly serving the less fortunate, the squares are places where also people with private cars will stop to meet to have a coffee.

I propose to transform the building into a multi-modal transport hub serving different economic classes. This will generate activity in an otherwise deserted part of the city, thus bringing back the former identity of lively heart of the city.

*2. How to make the building publicly accessible?
Adding public program in the Beirut context*





Spatial division in public space

Spatial division in public space

One example of a public space in Beirut where all economic classes make use of is the Corniche coastline. Even though many different people come here to enjoy the sunset there is still a spatial division in the use of space. The rich can view the sunset from their balconies high up, the middle class walks on the boulevard, and the fisherman are on the rocks closest to the sea.

Result of absence of public transport

With the absence of a publicly run transport system people are dependent on their own measures. Everyone who can afford a private car, owns one. For the rest of people there are mini-van busses.

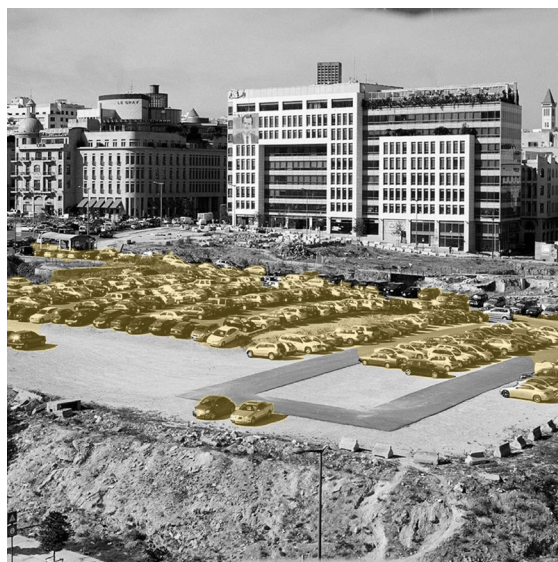
The number of private cars in the city causes a lot of problems like major traffic jams, occupation of public space for parking and air pollution.



Existing transport hub Dora
Image source: Nora Niasari



Daily traffic jams

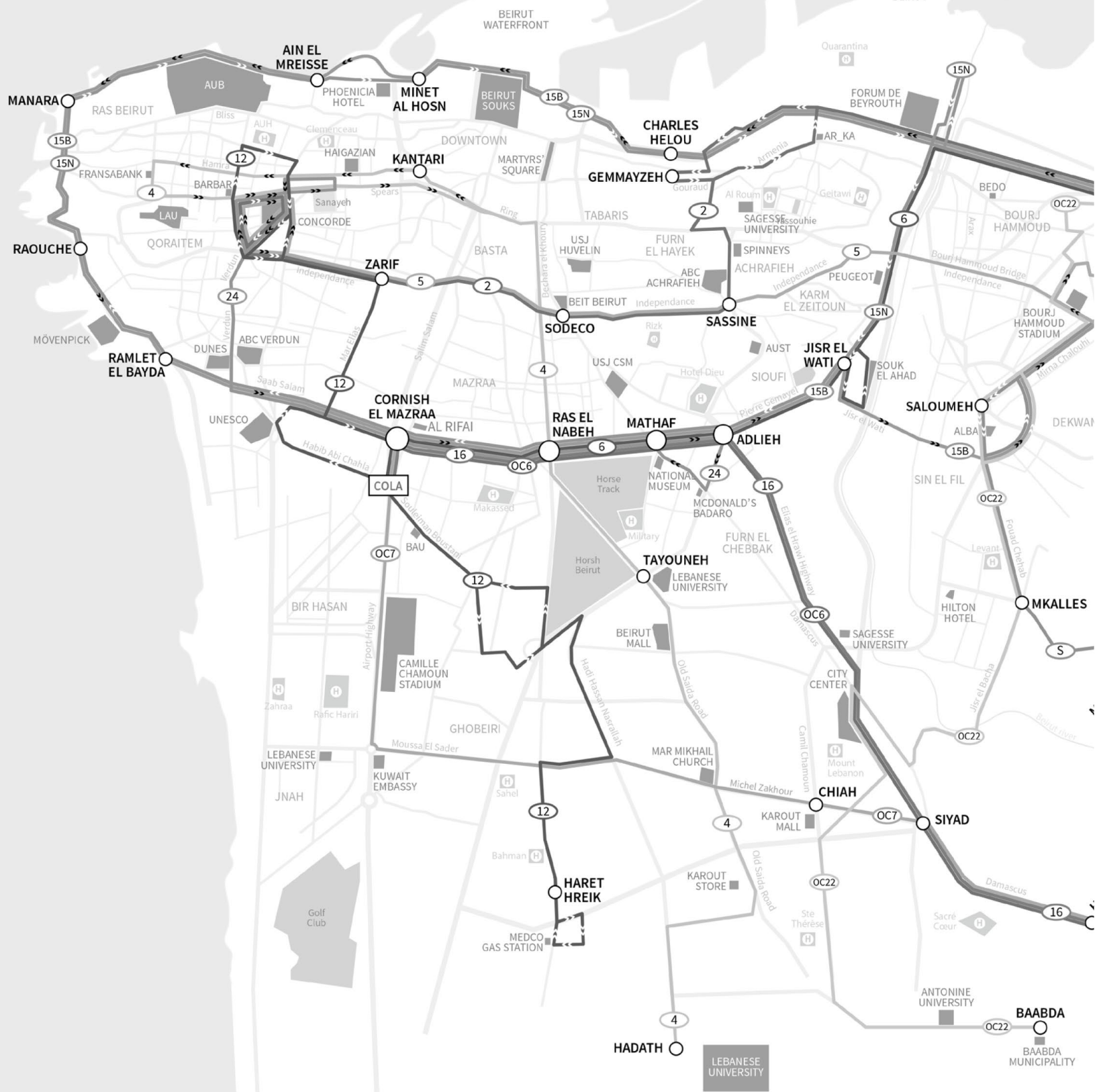


Public space used for parking
Image source: Fouad el Khoury



Pollution

YallaBus



Existing mini-van system
Image source: Yalla Bus

Mini-van bus

One type of shared transport in the city is the mini-van bus system. Passengers stand on the side of the road of the routes that the different buslines take. They can hop on and off at any given point. This results in a little delay in traffic every time the bus needs to stop. The quality of the seemingly chaotic system is that it drives on the demand of the people using it. Most of the routes are focussed on north south connectivity as they serve people commuting from the suburbs into the city.

Multi modality upgrade

My proposal is to upgrade the current system in phases and diversify it with other modalities, serving people from different economic classes. The first phase is the current mini-van system with it the three existing transport hubs Dora, Cola and the Charles Helou busstation. In the second phase the cable car line and the ferry line connect the inner city with the airport, Jounieh and a regional network. This creates a new hub in the heart of the city. The last phase is to replace mini-van bus that drives the inner and outer city ring with an electric busline.

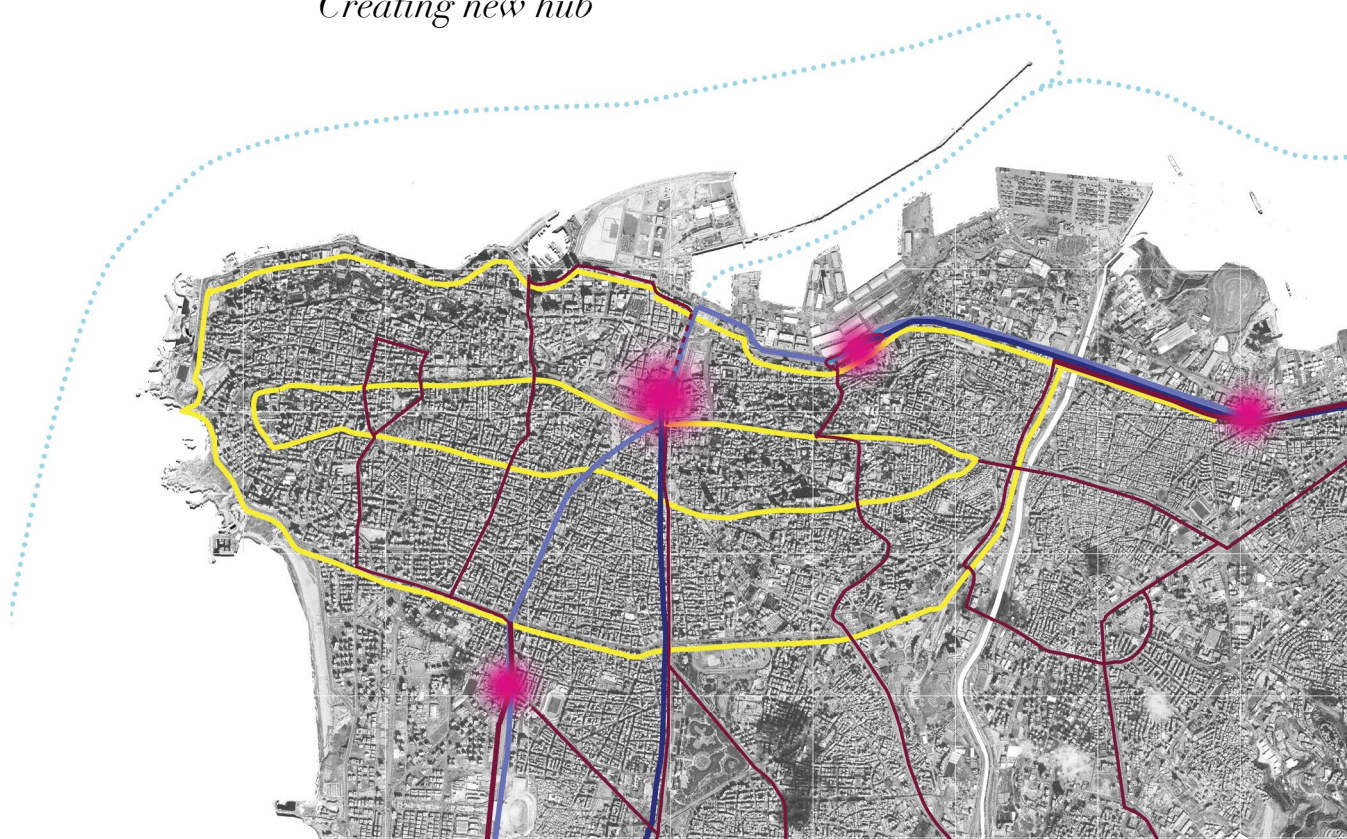
Upgrading the transport system in phases



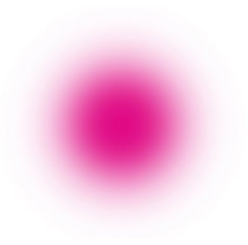
*Phase 1
Existing system*



*Phase 2
Addition of cable carline and ferryline
Creating new hub*



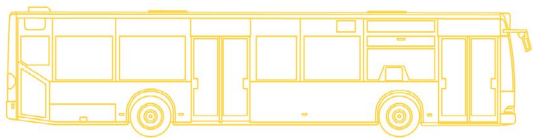
*Phase 3
Addition of regional busline
Replacement of mini-van by electric bus*



Transport hub



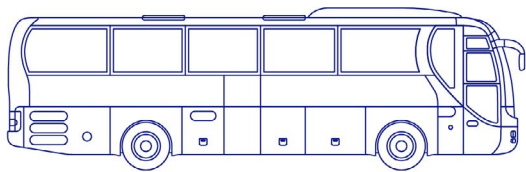
Cable car



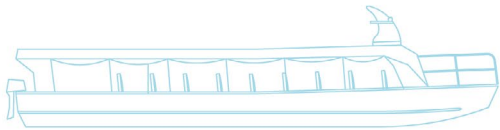
Electric city bus



Mini-van bus

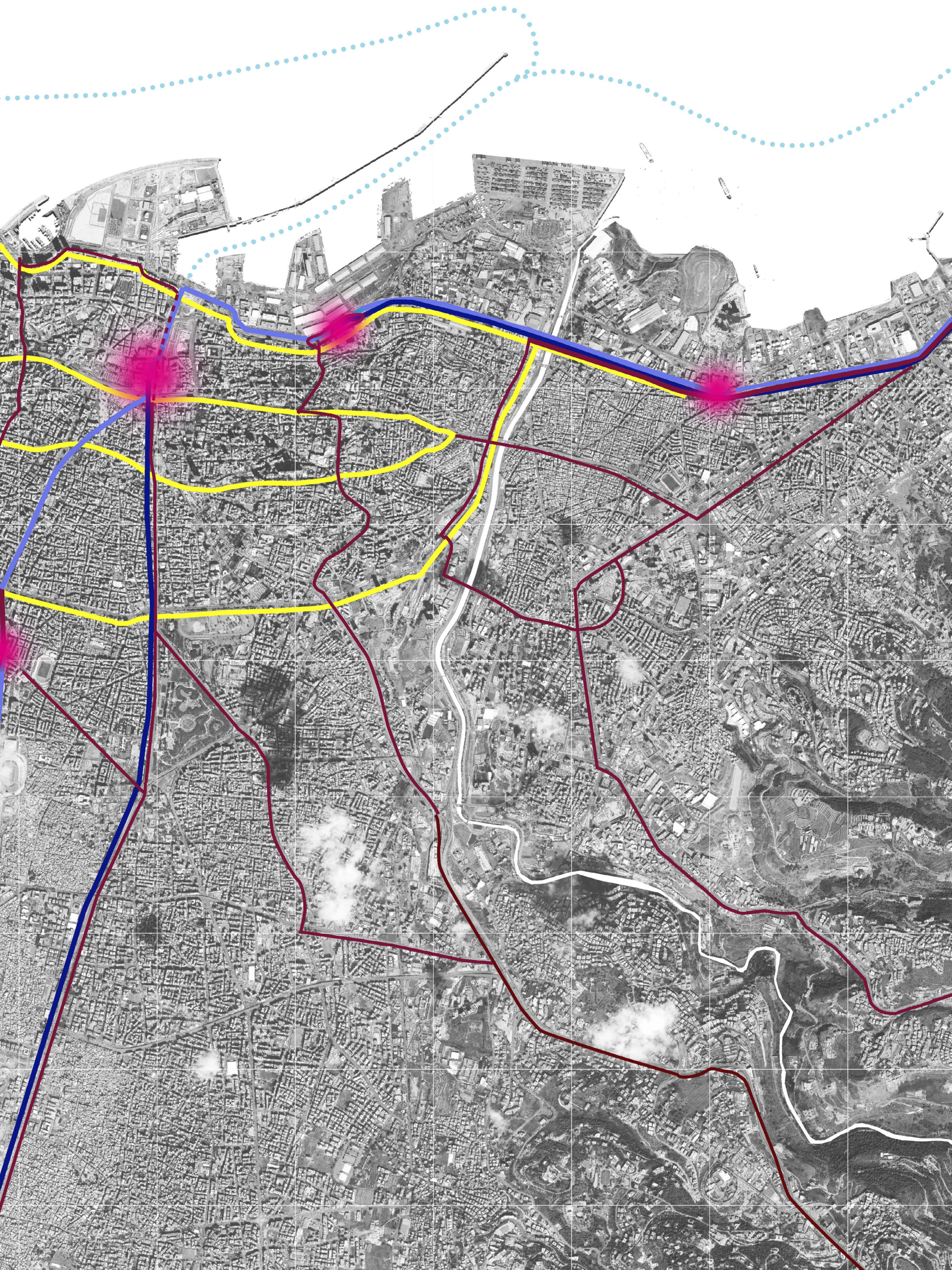


Regional bus



Ferry



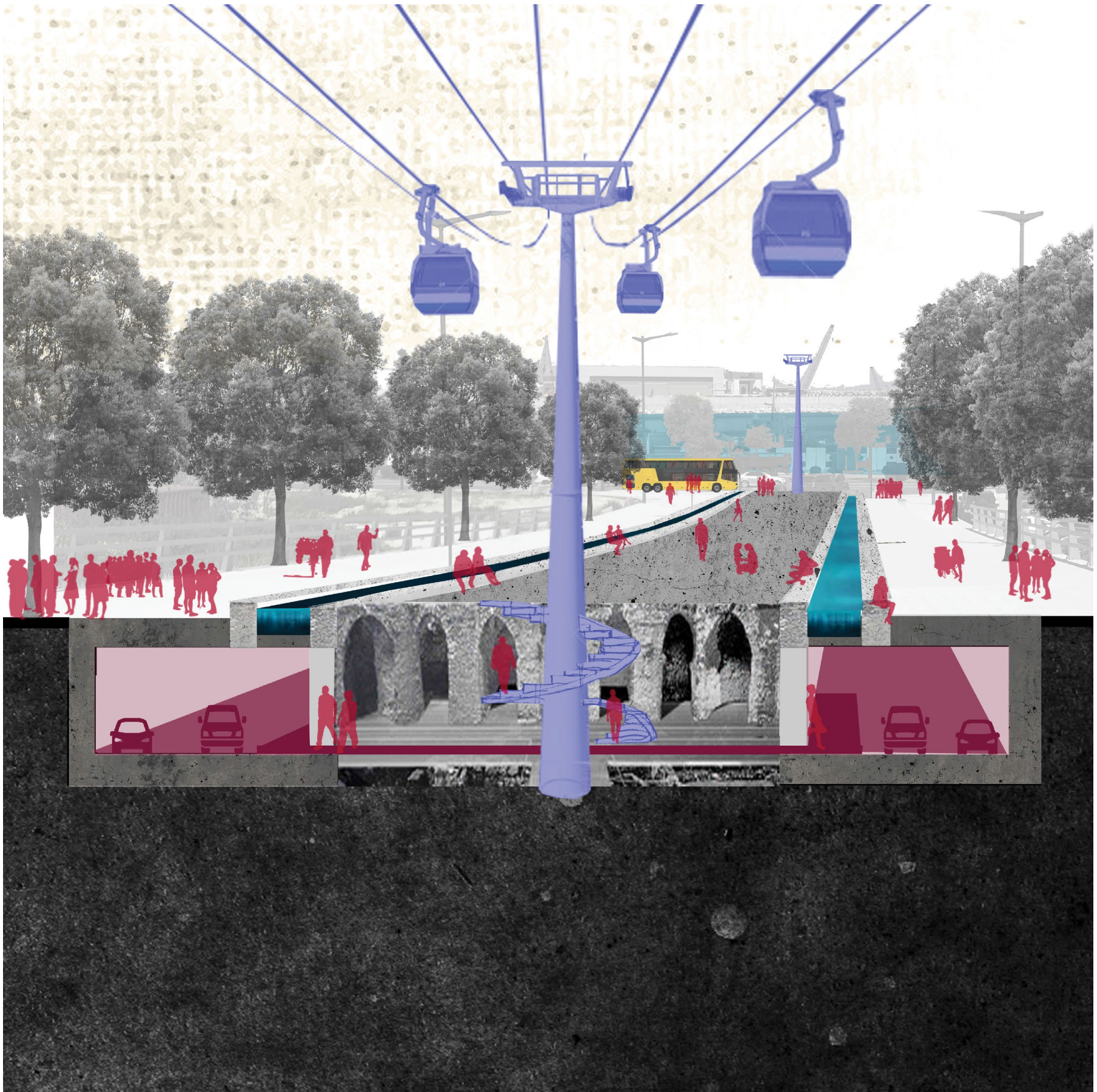




Reactivating the urban area

By placing the main transport hub at the start of the urban area, and a smaller stop for the cable car and ferry line at the waterfront, the urban area is reactivated. Commerce and leisure will arise in the public space of Martyr's square between the two stops.

By placing the mini-van traffic underground, and the cable car going over, the urban area is freed from traffic and becomes a qualitative space for the pedestrian.



Activating heritage

In the area of martyrs square, the ground is filled with ancient heritage of Roman or Phoenician times. Much of this heritage is excavated, but used passively as it is not accessible.

My proposal is to include the heritage into the daily use of this area. The place where you find ancient arches could be used as an access station for the underground mini-van.

Removing and adding

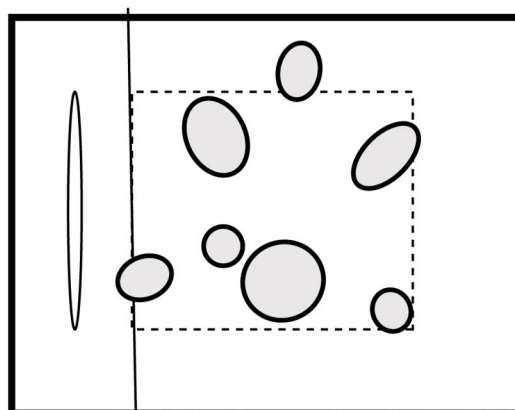
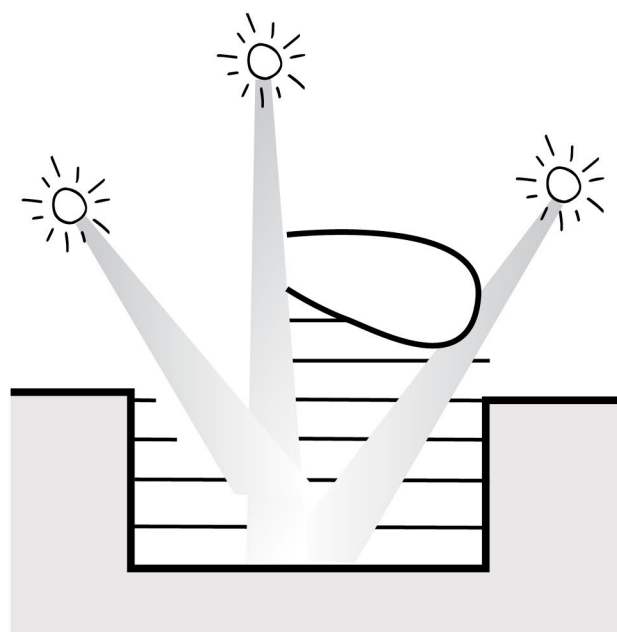
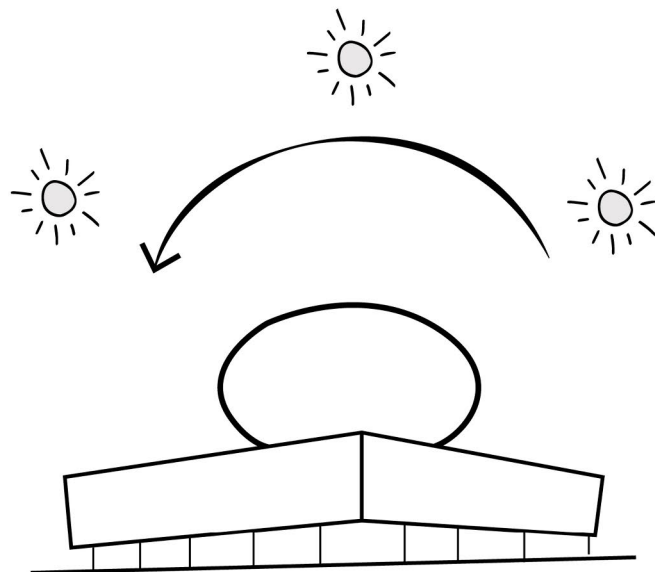
In what language do we treat the architecture, so that the intervention is a readable transformation of this time?

In line with the transformations that the building has known, the removal of matter is the main method for intervention.

In order to contrast to the orthogonal design of the building, the most important removing of matter was to cut into the structure in trajectories of the sun at different times of the day and year. This creates round and oval shapes into the concrete slabs.

In contrast to the expressively different architectural language of removing, the added elements in light steel are naturally different from the original structure. They can be seen as ‘plug-in’ structures and blend in with the other steel elements of the building.

3. How to architecturally treat the object?
Removing and adding



Removing

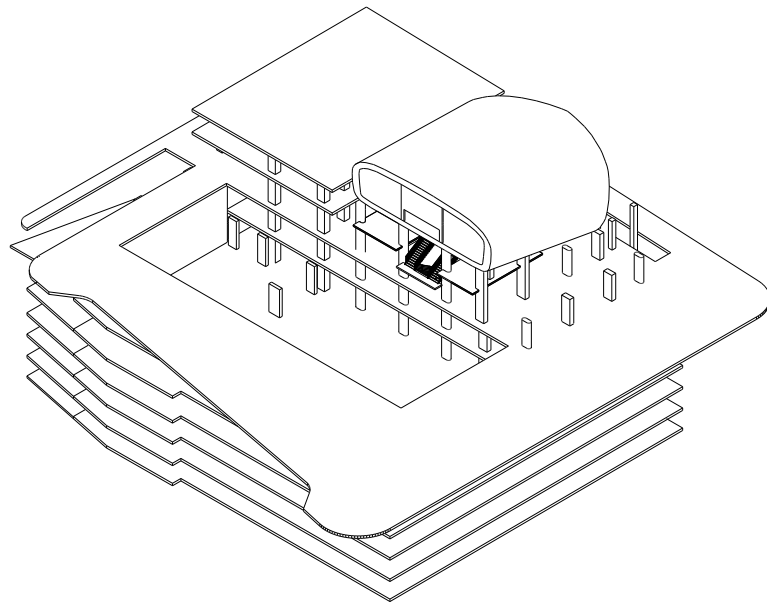
In line with the transformations that the building has undergone, the removal of matter is the main architectural method for intervention.

First the removing of two underground layers create space for the transport.

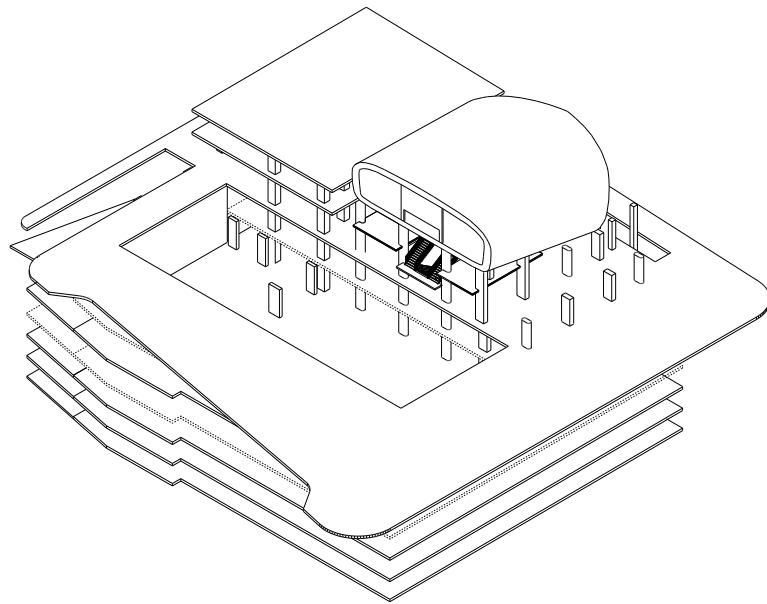
Cuts in the shape of the trajectories of the sun, bring in light deep into the building and create visual connections between the different layers.

Lastly ridges are cut into the large concrete surfaces to guide visitors through the building.

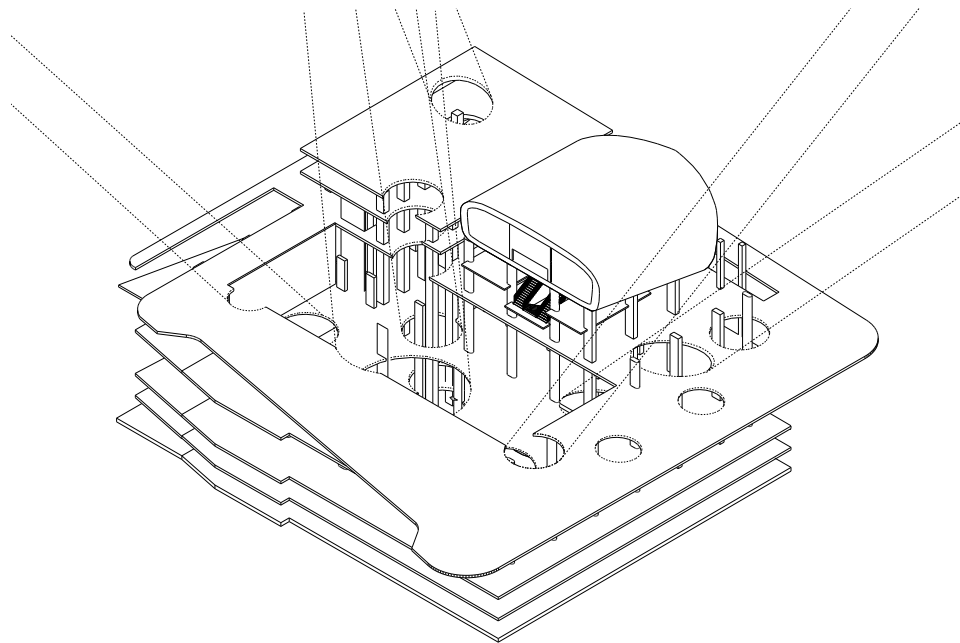
Existing situation



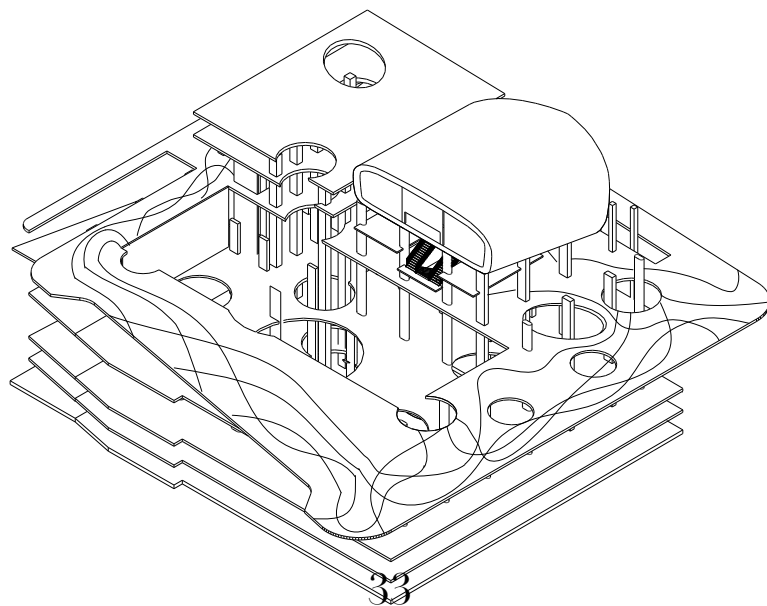
1. Removing floors to create space for transport

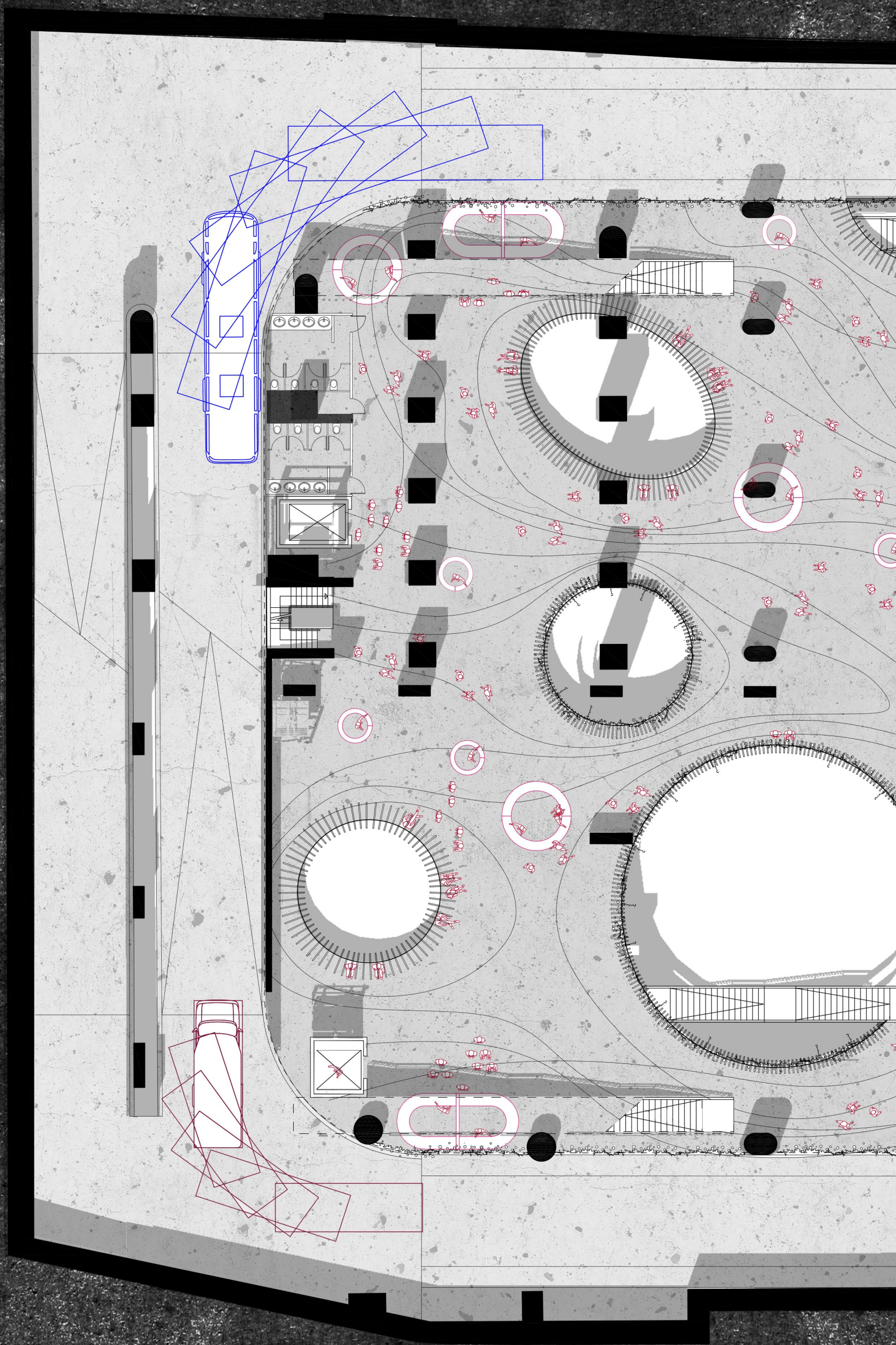


2. Cuts in trajectories of the sun

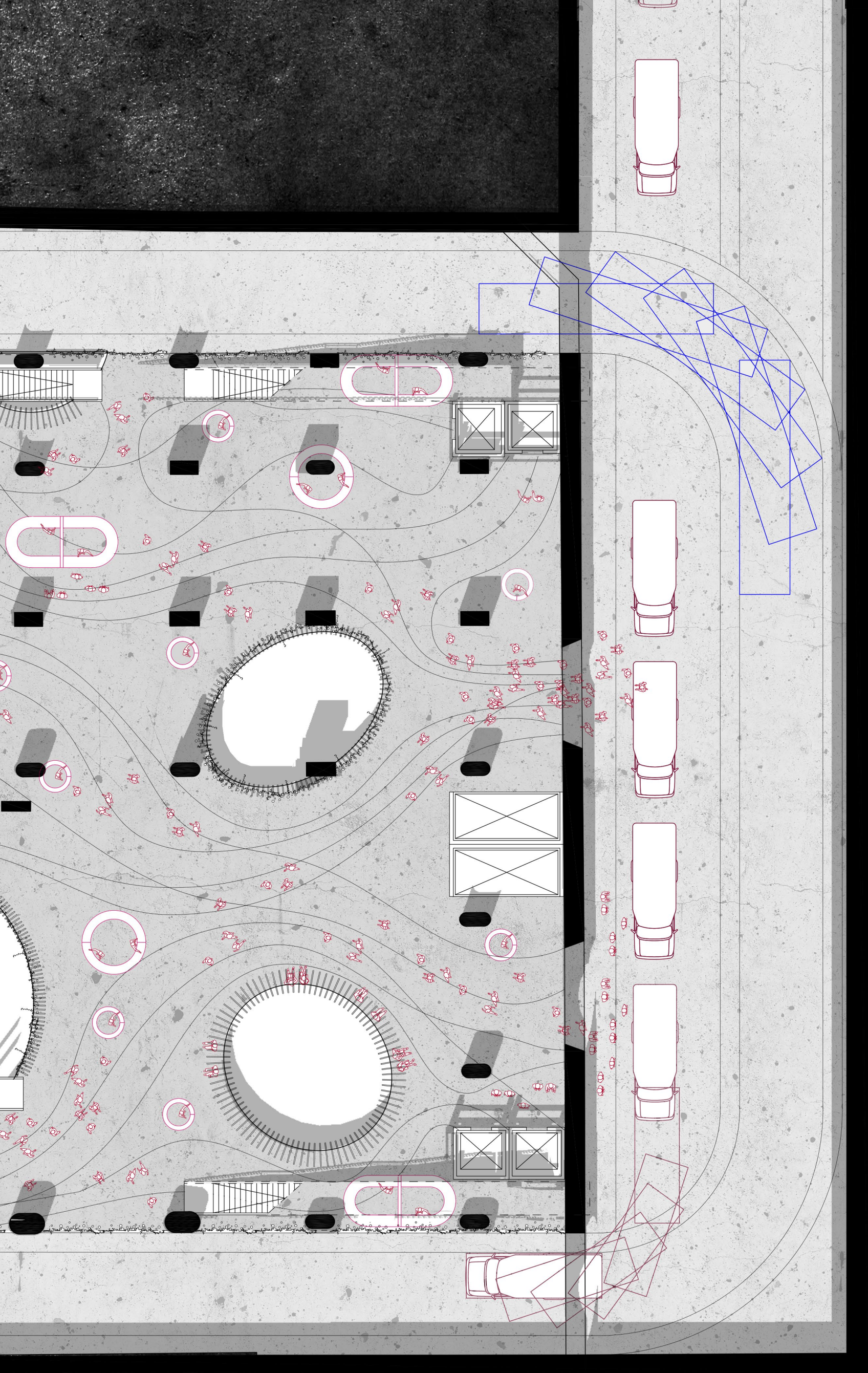


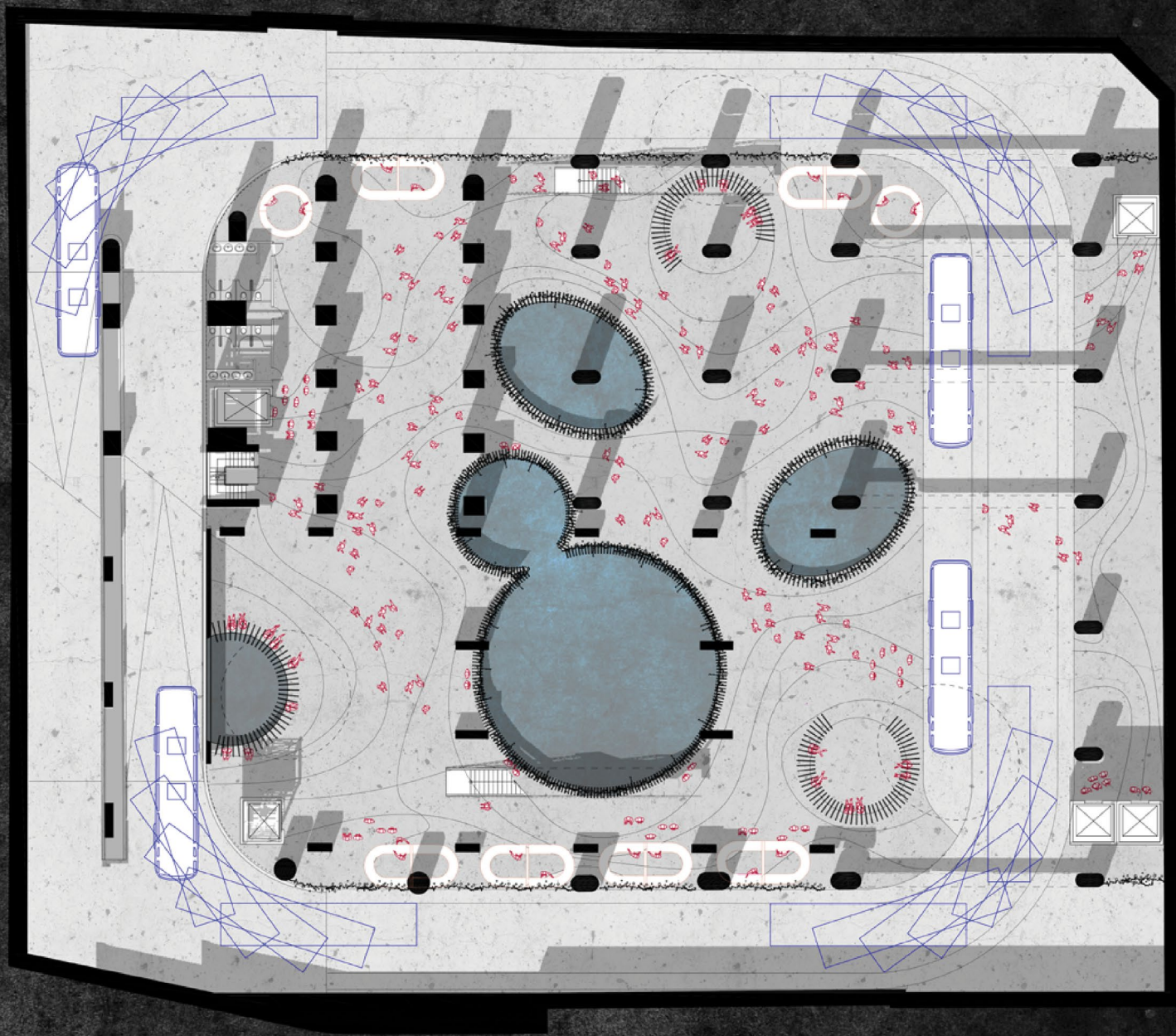
3. Cutting ridges in the surfaces for wayfinding



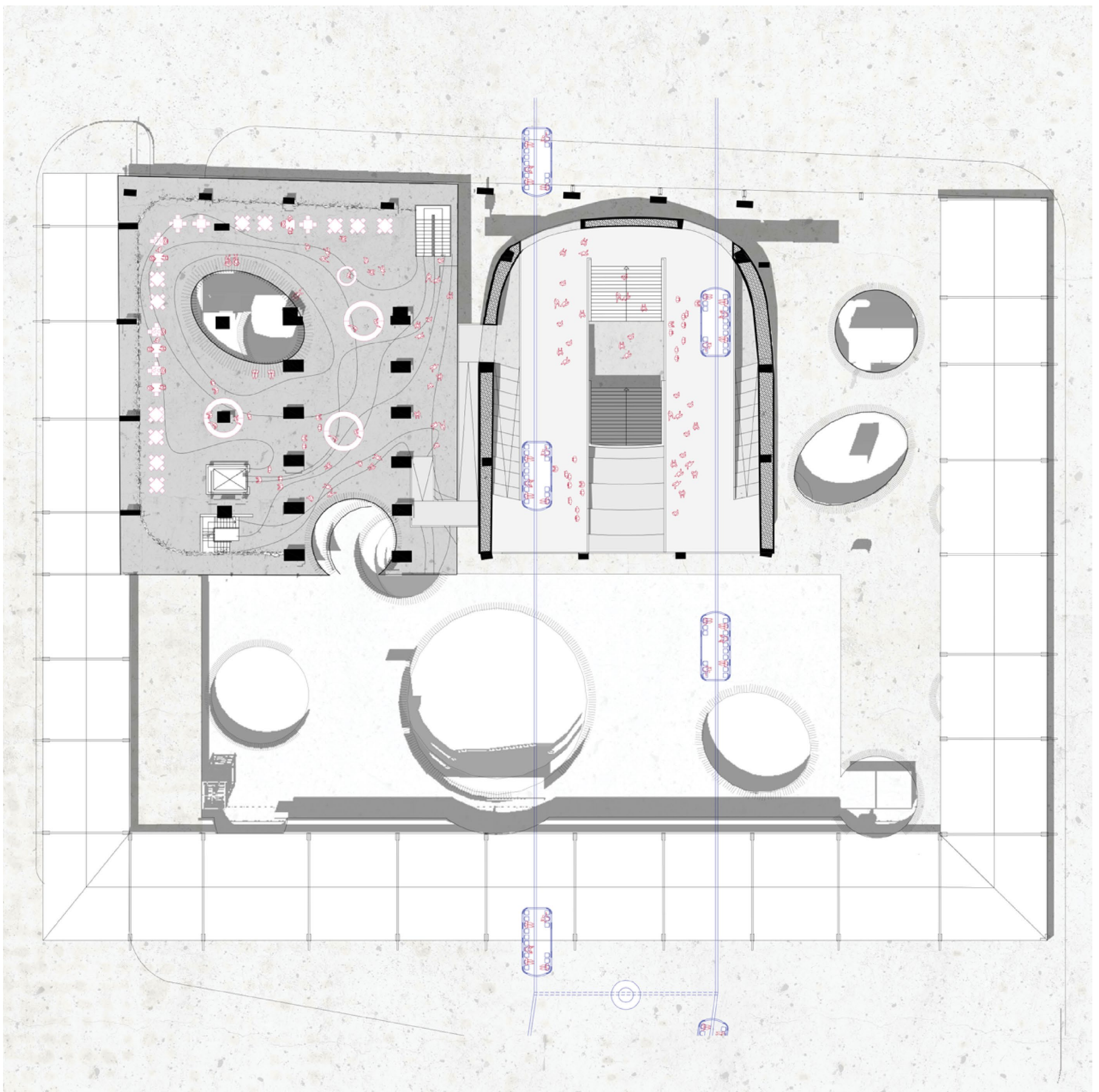


Plan level
Arrivals

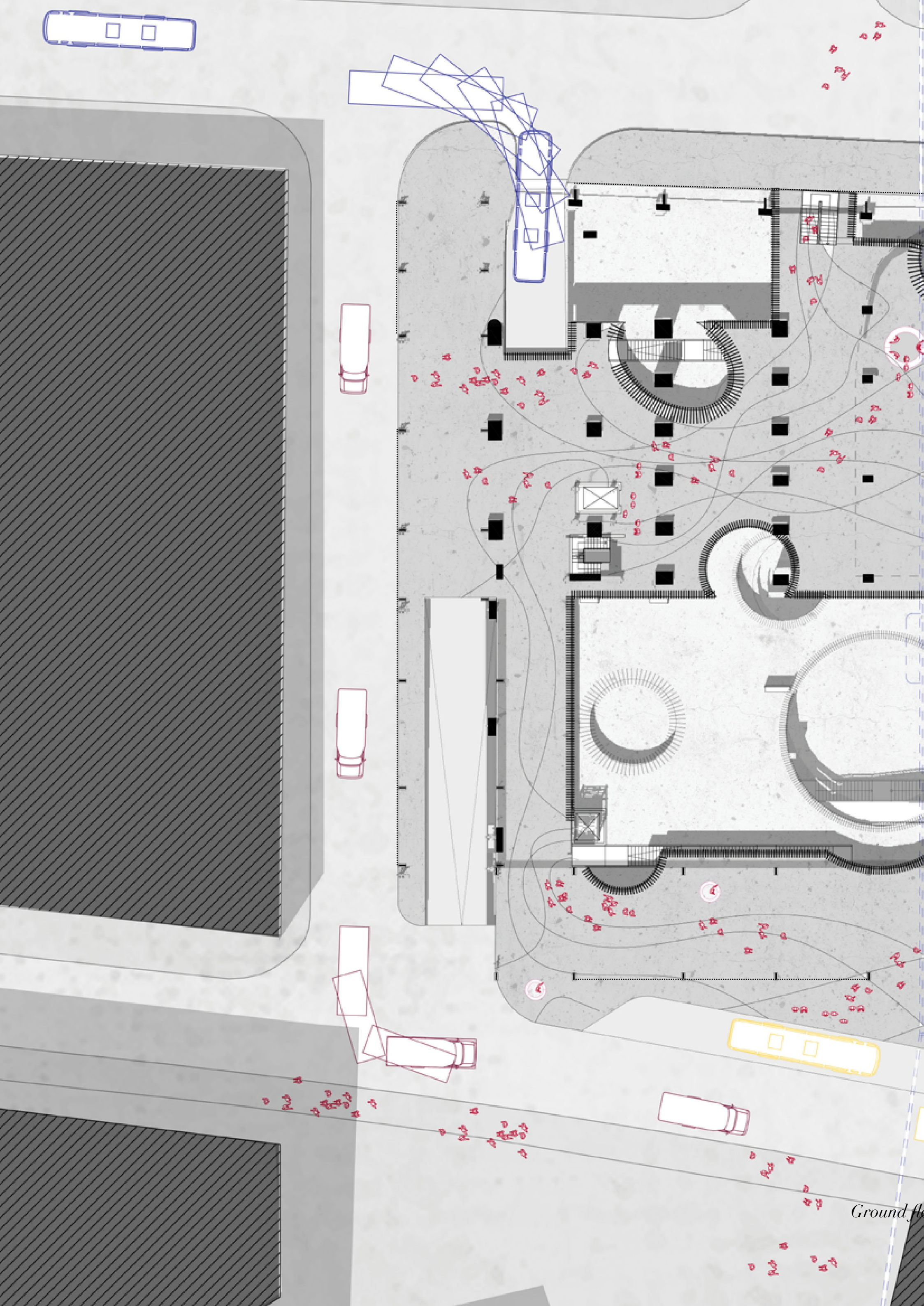




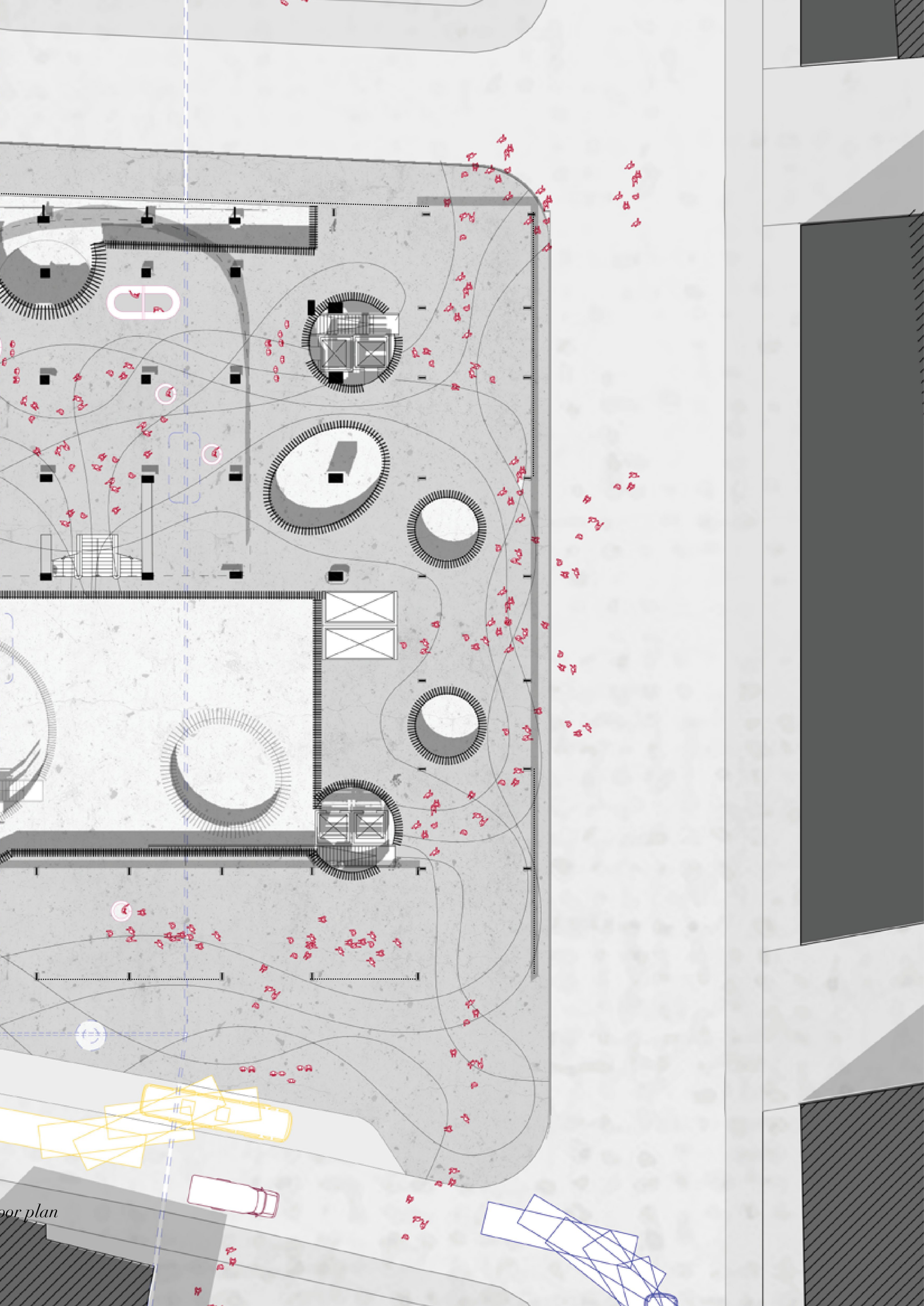
Plan level -4
Regional busline



Plan level +2
Cable car platform

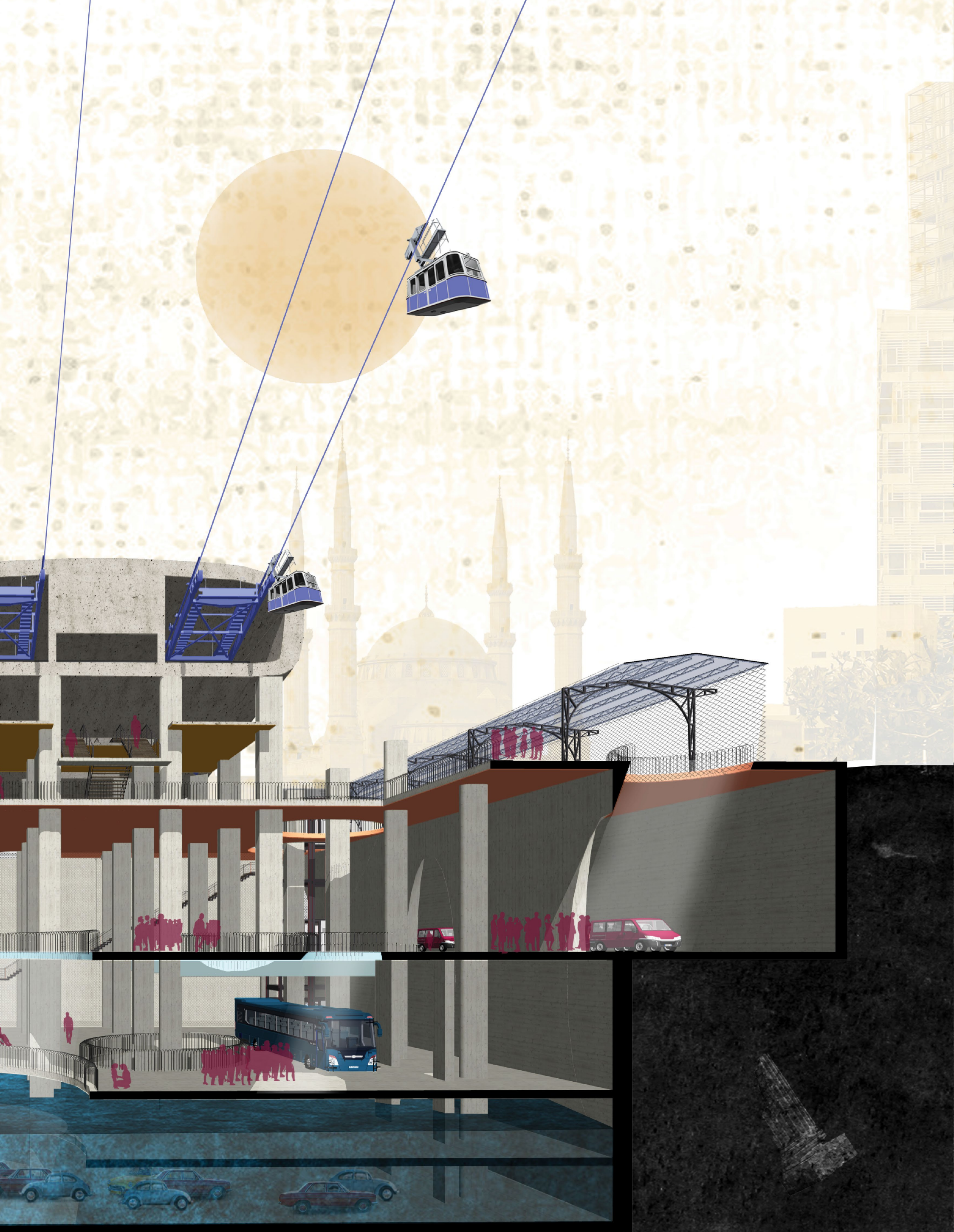


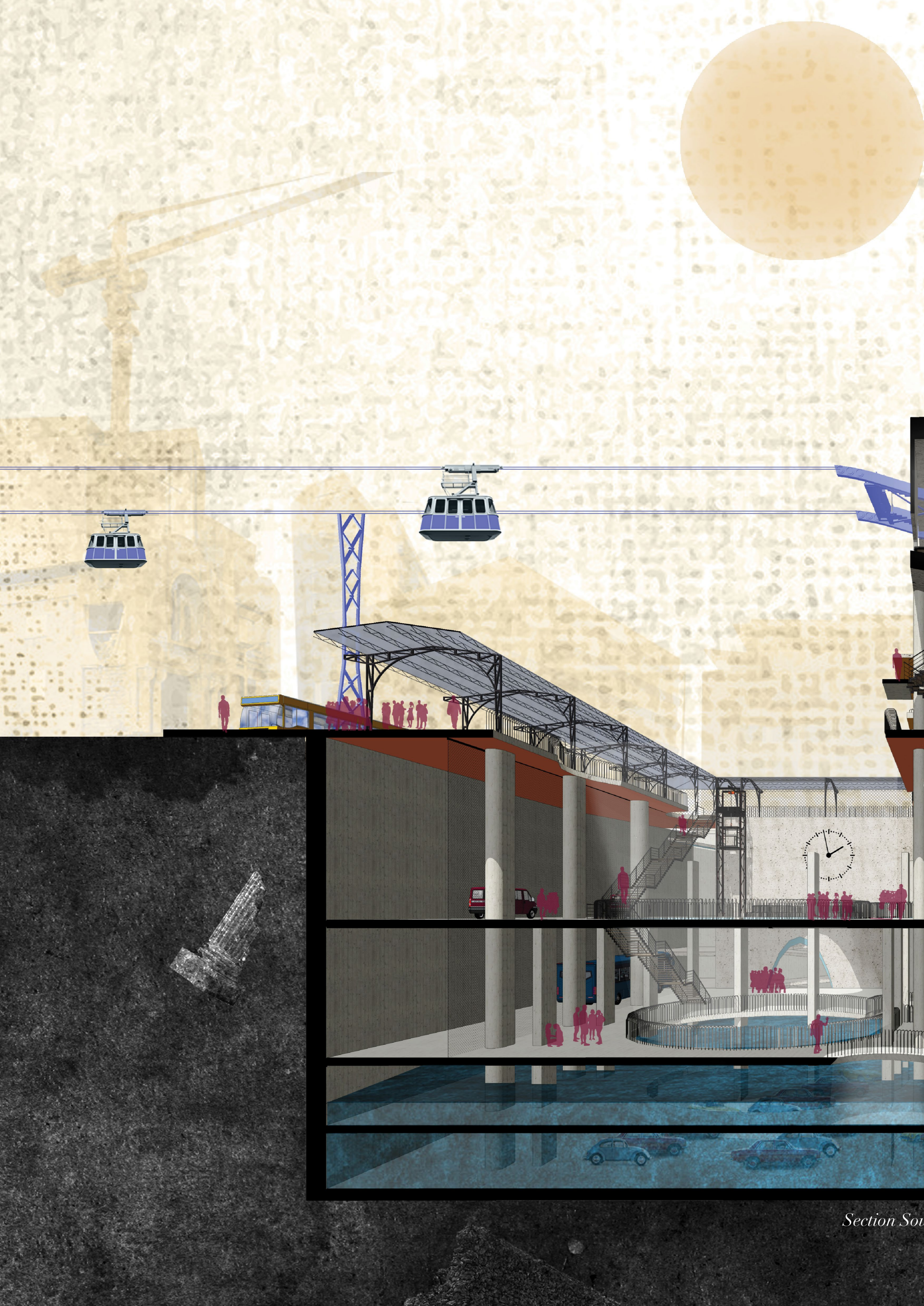
Ground floor

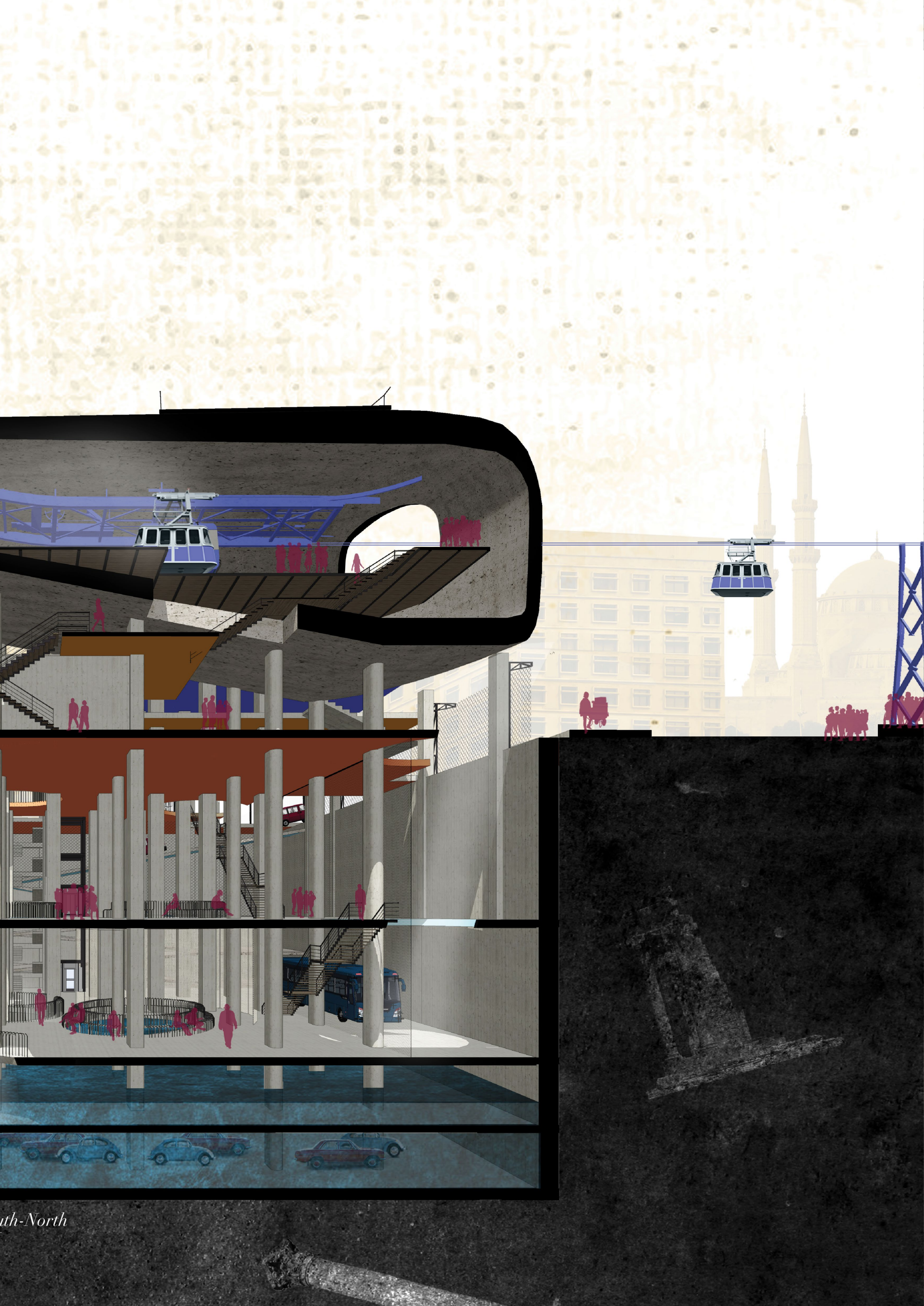


oor plan









Adding

In contrast to the concrete mass that most of the buildings consists of, the added elements will be light and steel and can be seen as ‘plug in’ structures.

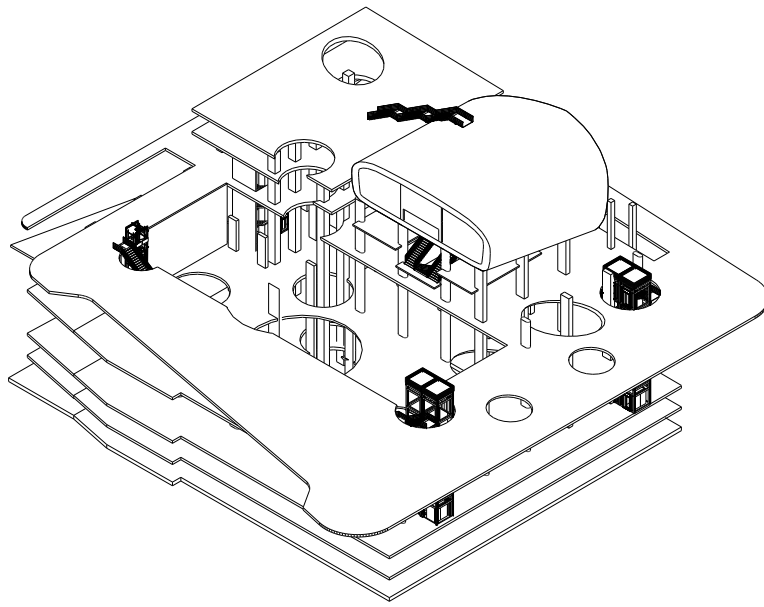
First there are staircases and elevators added for the functionality and accessibility of the transport hub.

Secondly there is a light steel portico structure added on the ground floor layer to define the building in the urban space.

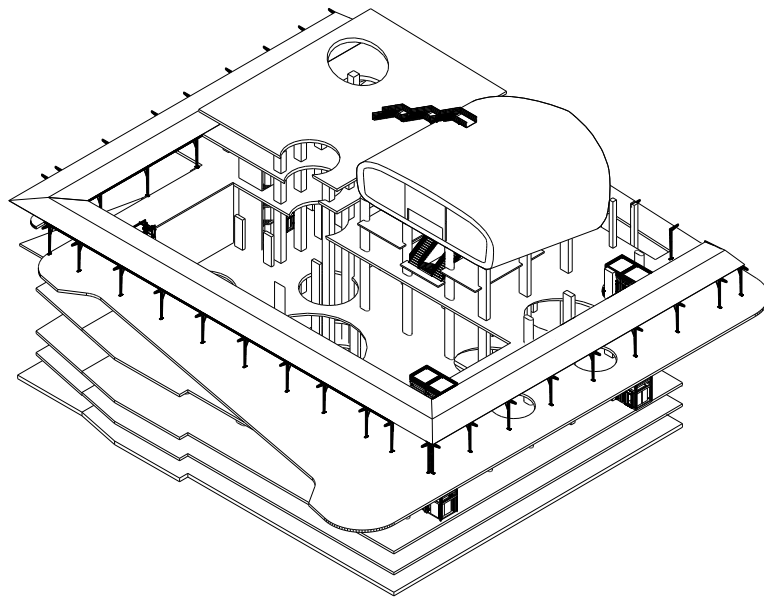
Steel mesh curtains are added to create a sense off inside and outside, and on the interior of the building to create intimate space.

On all edges of the cuts, the reinforcement steel is transformed into balustrade that sometimes allows to sit on, or for plants to grow.

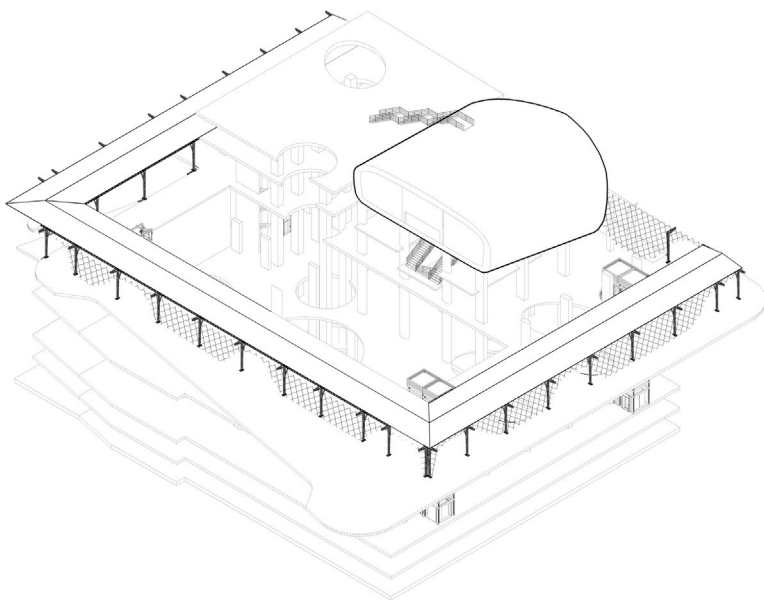
1. Stairs and elevators for accessibility



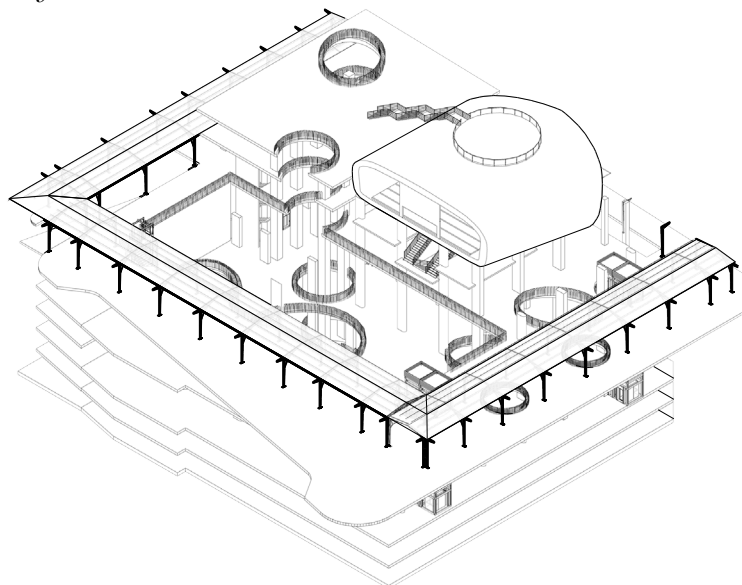
2. Roof to define building in urban space

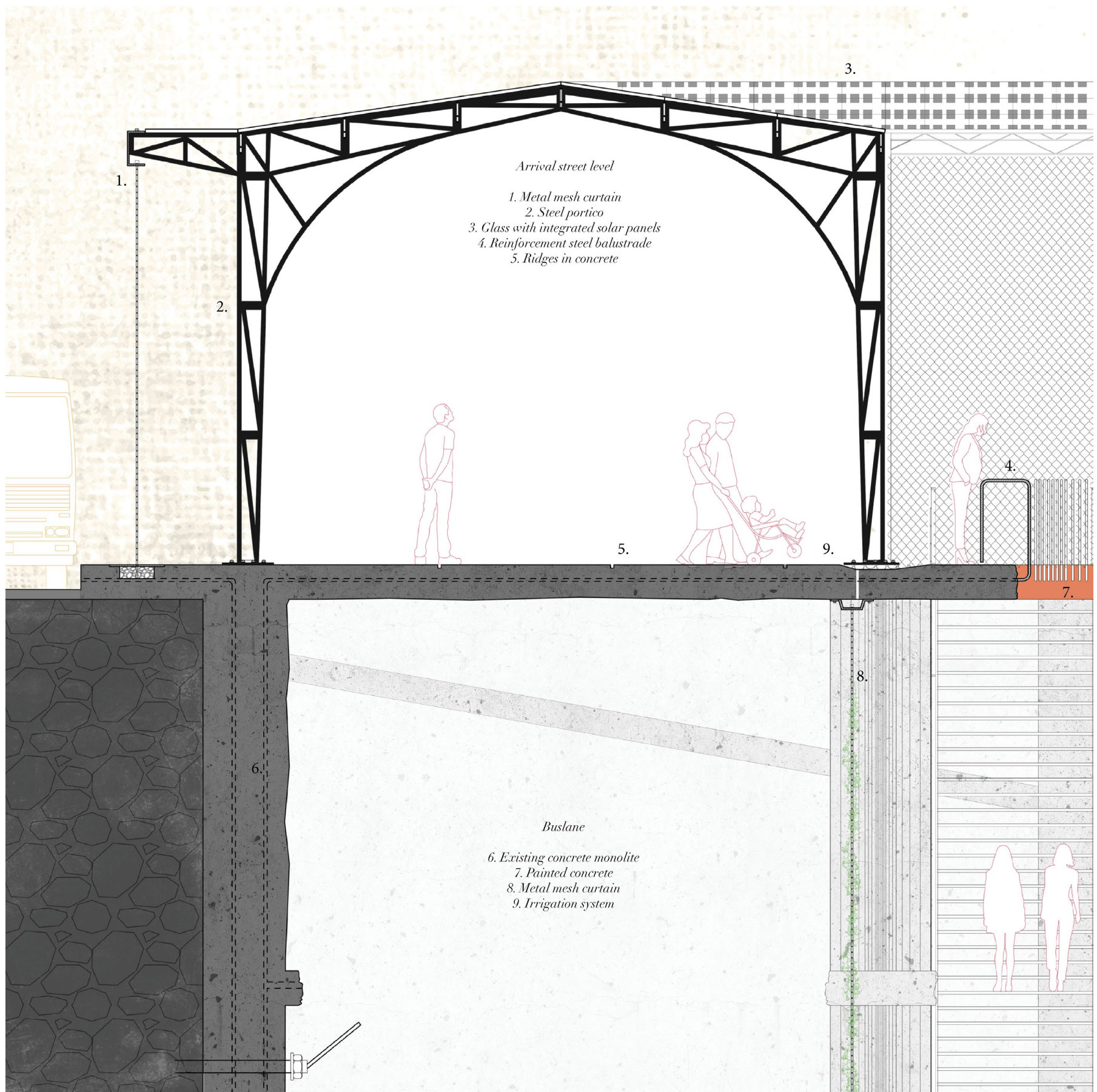


3. Metal mesh curtains to create a soft barrier

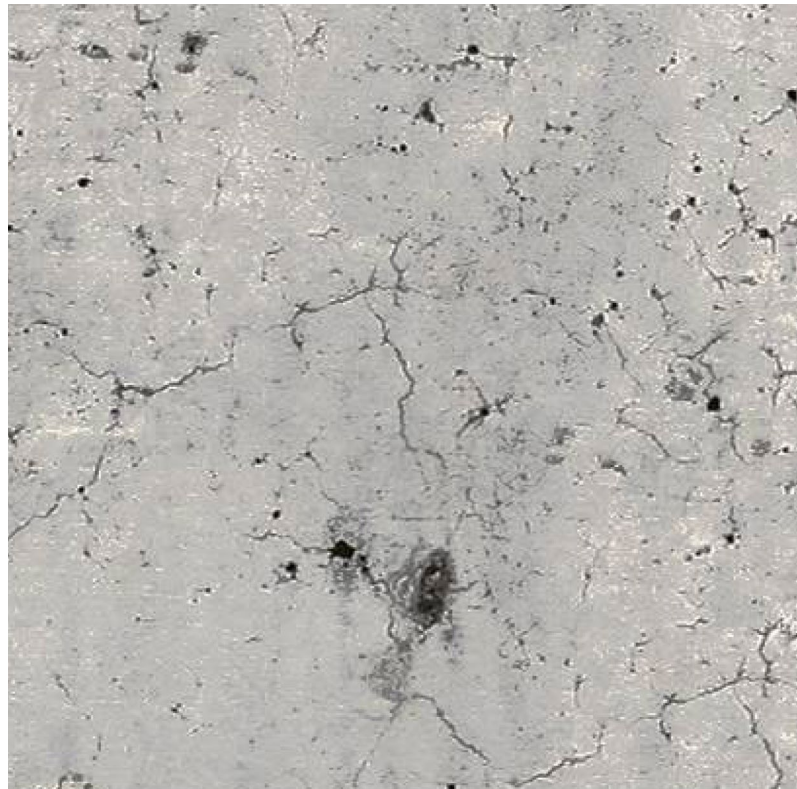


4. Create ballustrades and benches from reinforcement steel





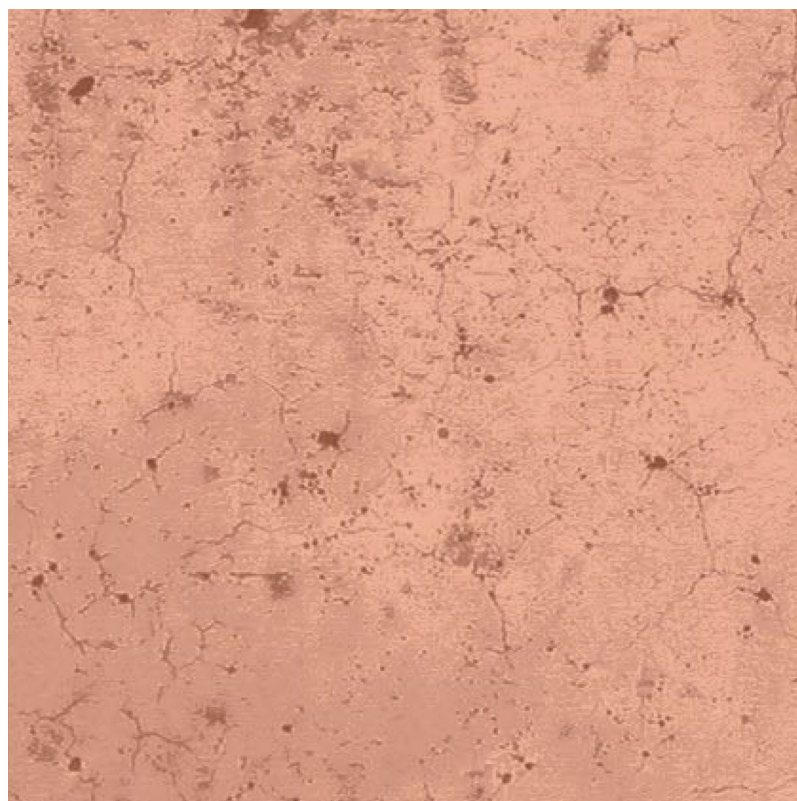
Detailed section ground floor



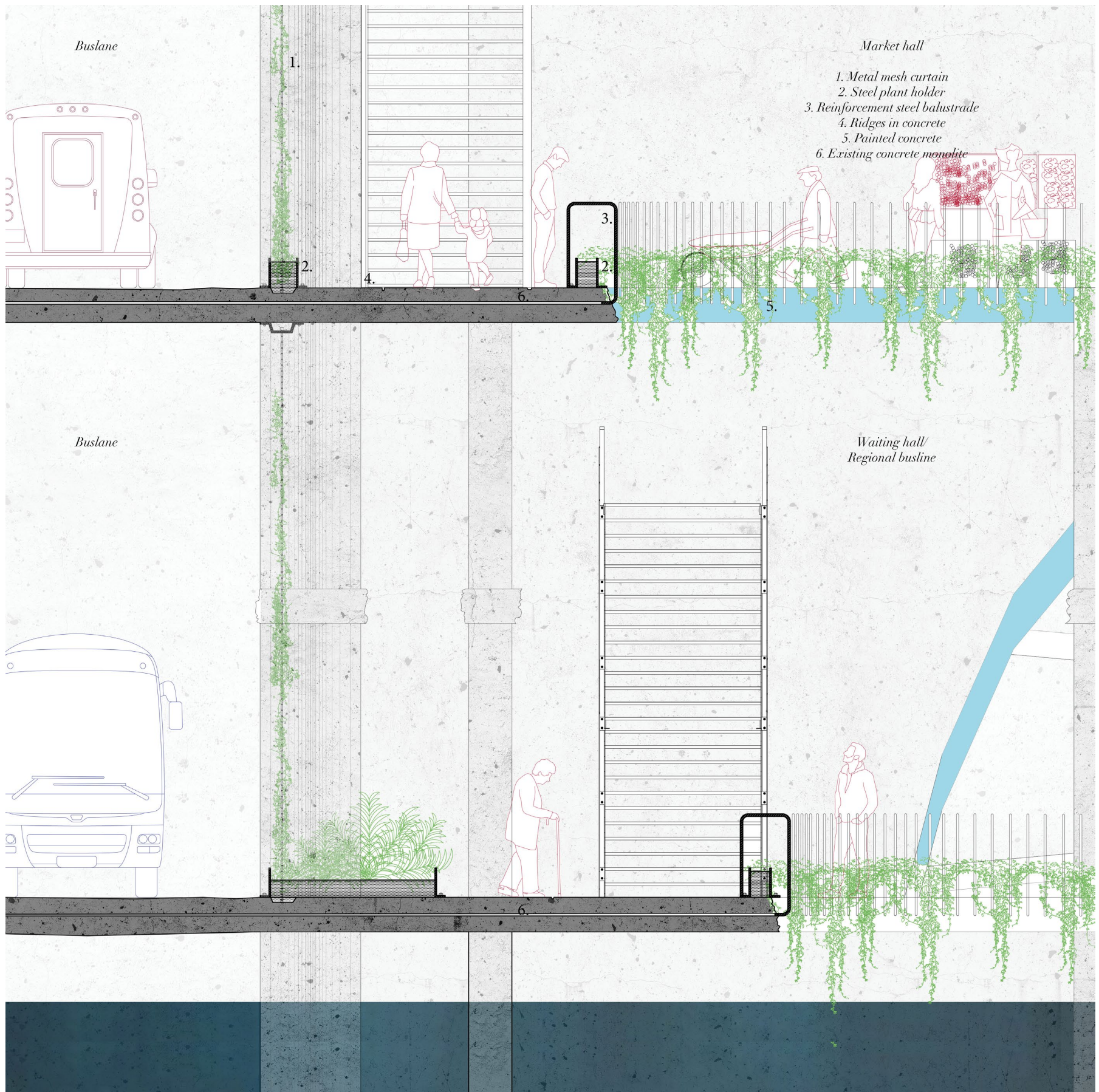
Existing concrete



Ridges in concrete



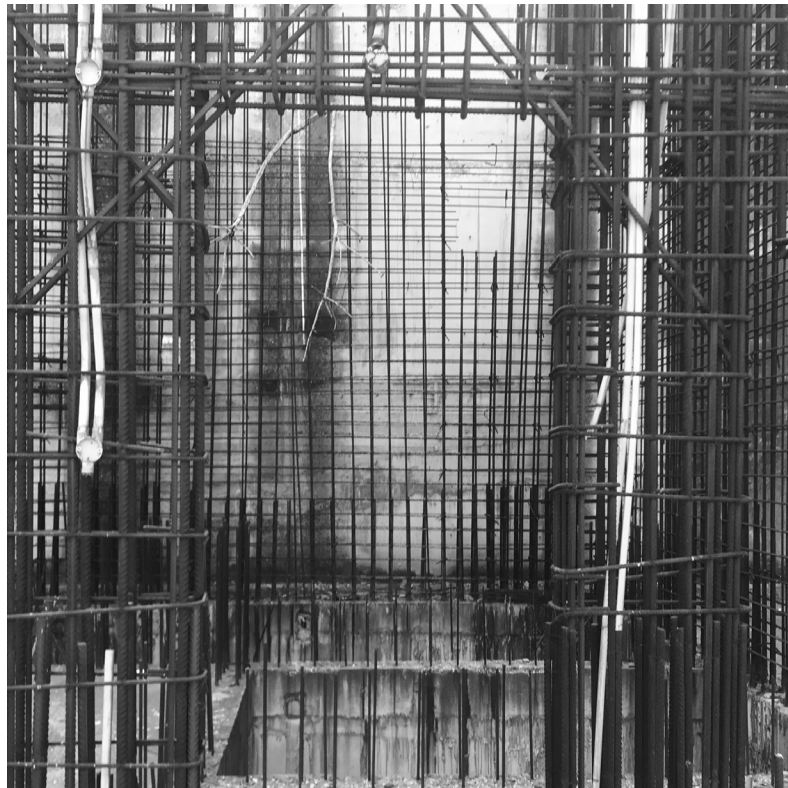
Painted concrete



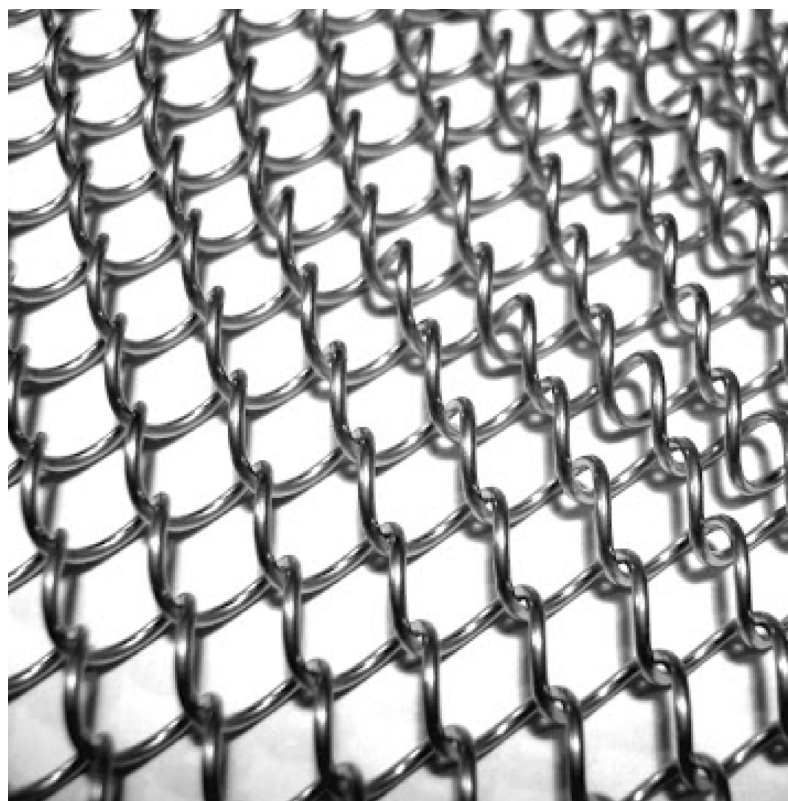
Detailed section underground layers



Bolted steel construction



Reinforcement steel



Metal mesh curtain

Different layers, different atmospheres

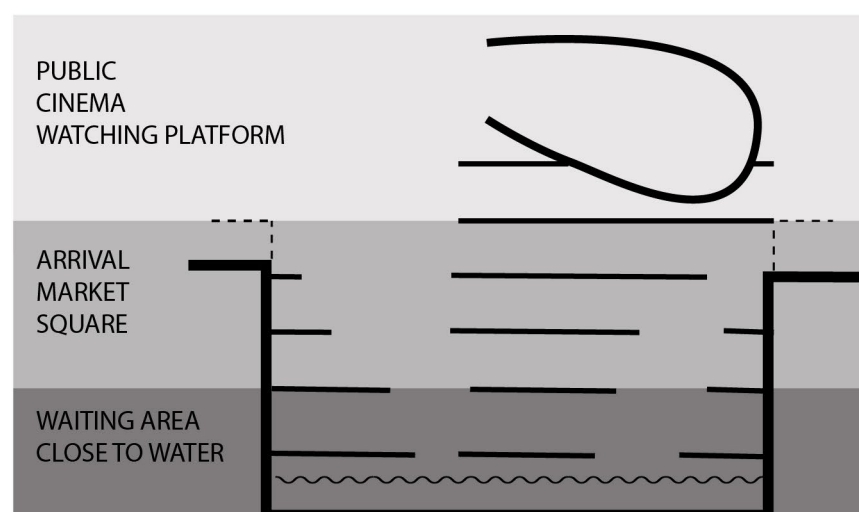
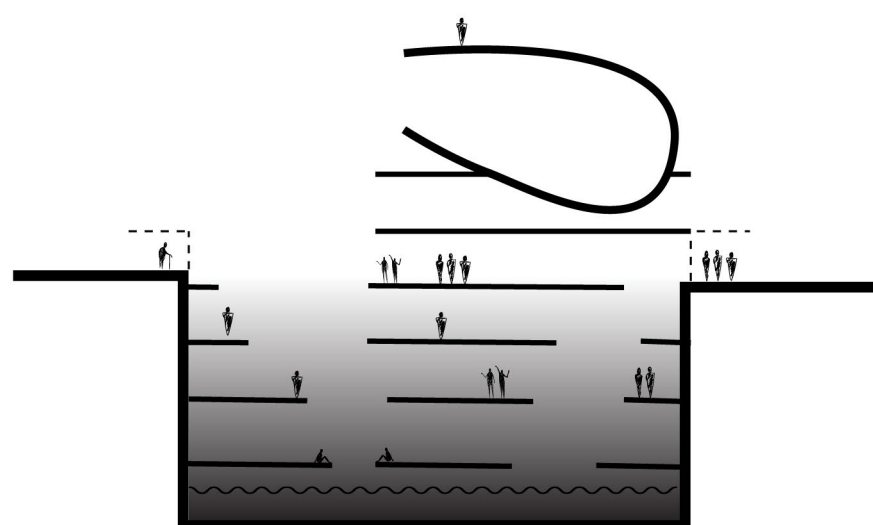
A travel through the building, is a travel through different atmospheres.

The ground floor and layer below are active, and function as arrivals hall and market square. They are accessible for street vendors and small commerce with a carriage elevator.

The level below is more calm, has more shade and cooler temperature as it is close to the water basin below. Waiting spaces with benches are encircled by curtains, creating intimacy.

High up, the egg is the arrival station for the cable car system. From the floors besides one can enter the viewing platform on top of the egg structure. The exterior of the egg will serve as a public cinema. The structure will function as a screen on which possible dreams and futures can be projected.

4. How to experience the building?
Different layers, different atmospheres



Three people, three experiences

Three characters will have three experiences when they pass through the building. They each enter with a different transport, make use of the building in different ways, and resume their travel differently. On their way their paths might cross.

Ahmed is a market seller who lives in Bourj Hammoud on the east side of the city. He is going to the hub with his food cart to sell on the market square.

Nadine is a lady that lives in Jounieh, a connected town north of Beirut. She works in the banking sector and travels with the cable car system to reach the downtown area.

Abdul is the owner of a shisha cafe in Hamra where he lives, and will travel to visit family in the South of the country.

Ahmed

*Lives in Bourj Hammoud
Works as market seller
Going to work in downtown hub*



Nadine

*Lives in Jounieh
Works in banking sector
Going to work in downtown*



Abdul

*Lives in Hamra
Owner of a shisha cafe
Going to visit family in the south*





Ahmed

Ahmed is a market seller and will go to the hub in downtown, to sell his products.

1. When he arrives in the morning the lights fall already deep into the building.
2. When he enters through the large arge-way, he tries to find a spot in the already crowded main hall, where all the sellers try to get each passengers attention. (3)
4. During the day he takes a small break and wonders around the big voids in the building
5. When the light makes a dramatic play on wall, the building empties and Ahmed knows its the end of his working day.



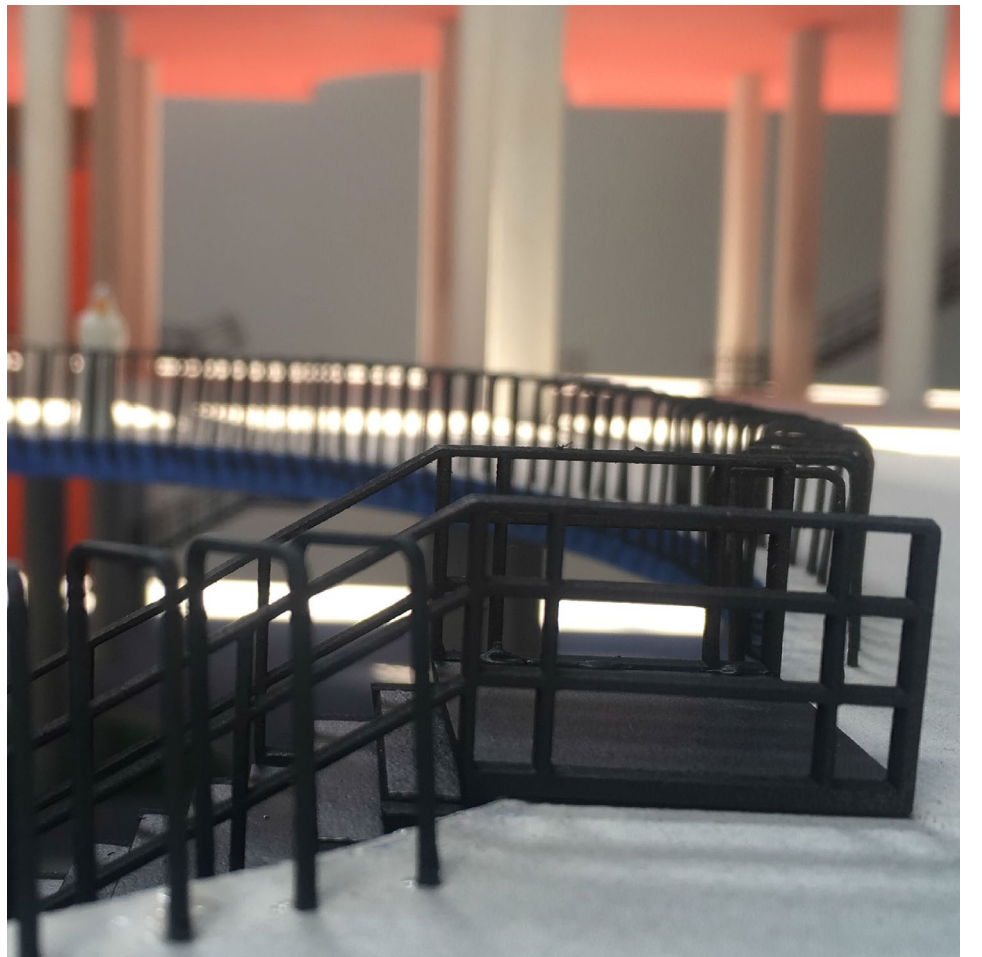
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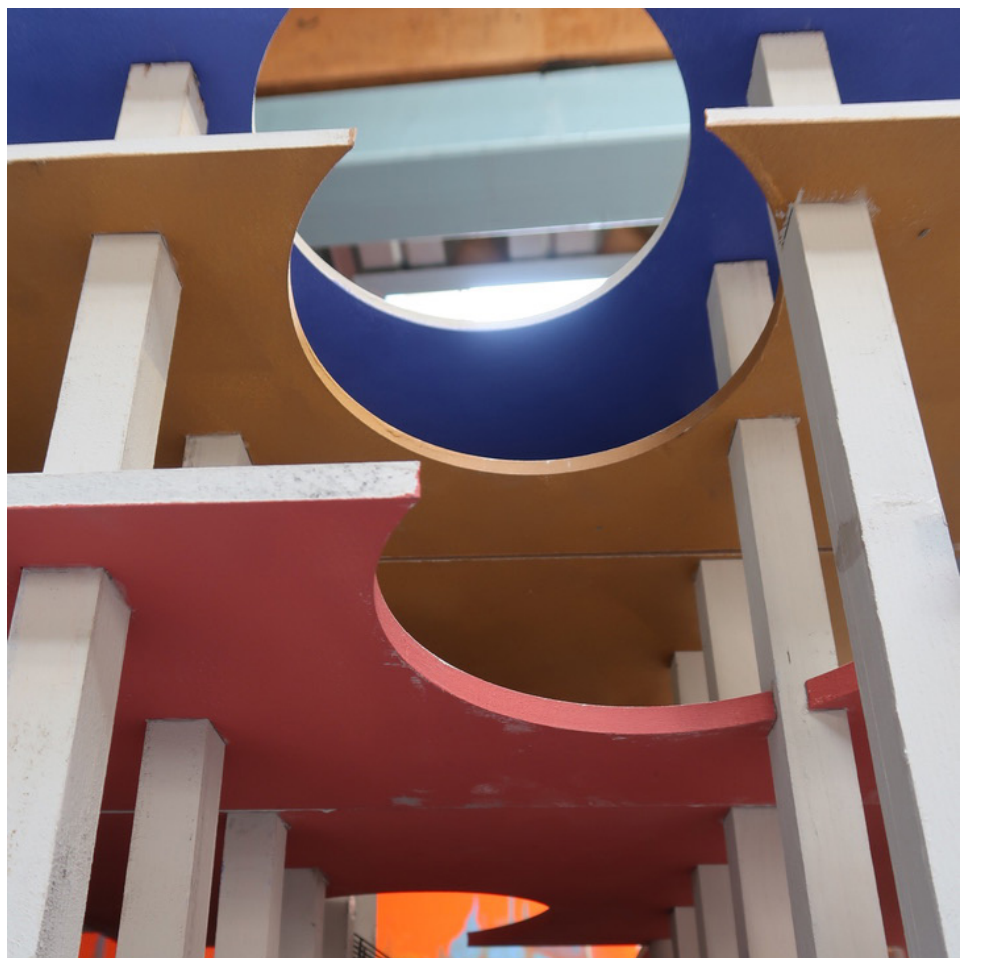


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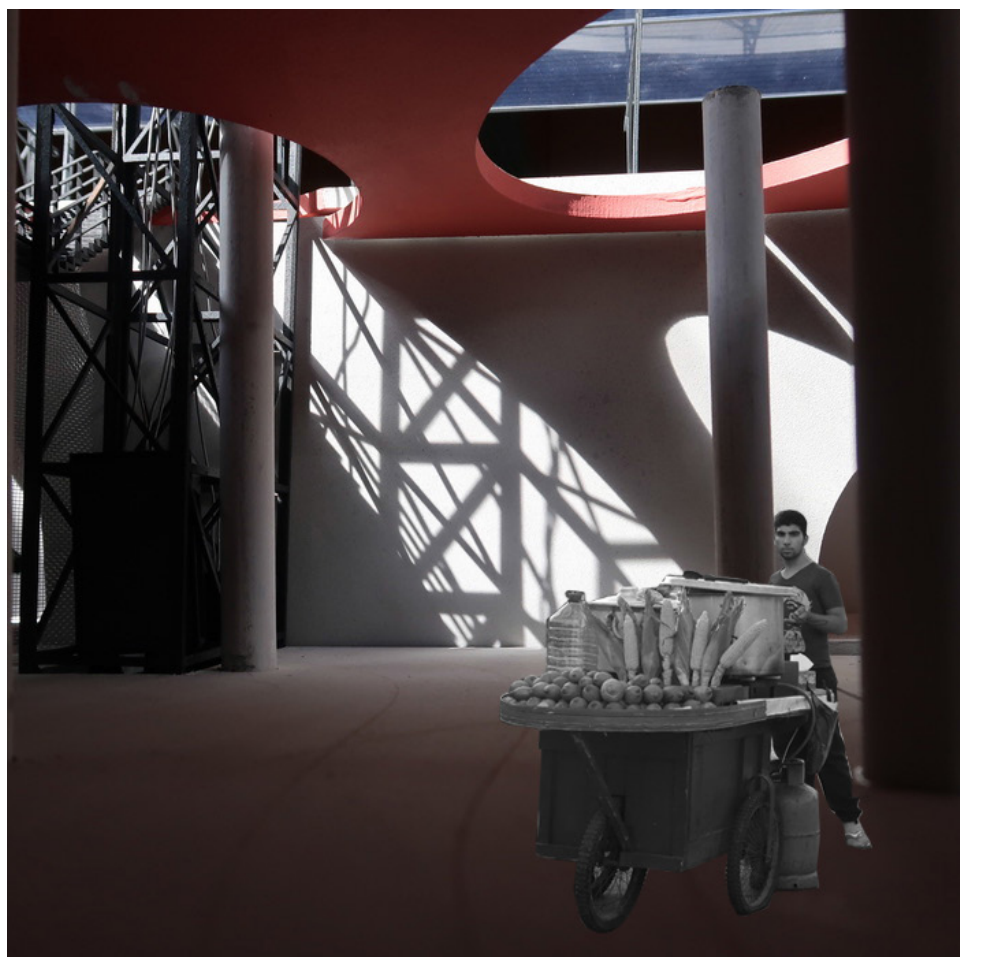


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5.





1.

Nadine

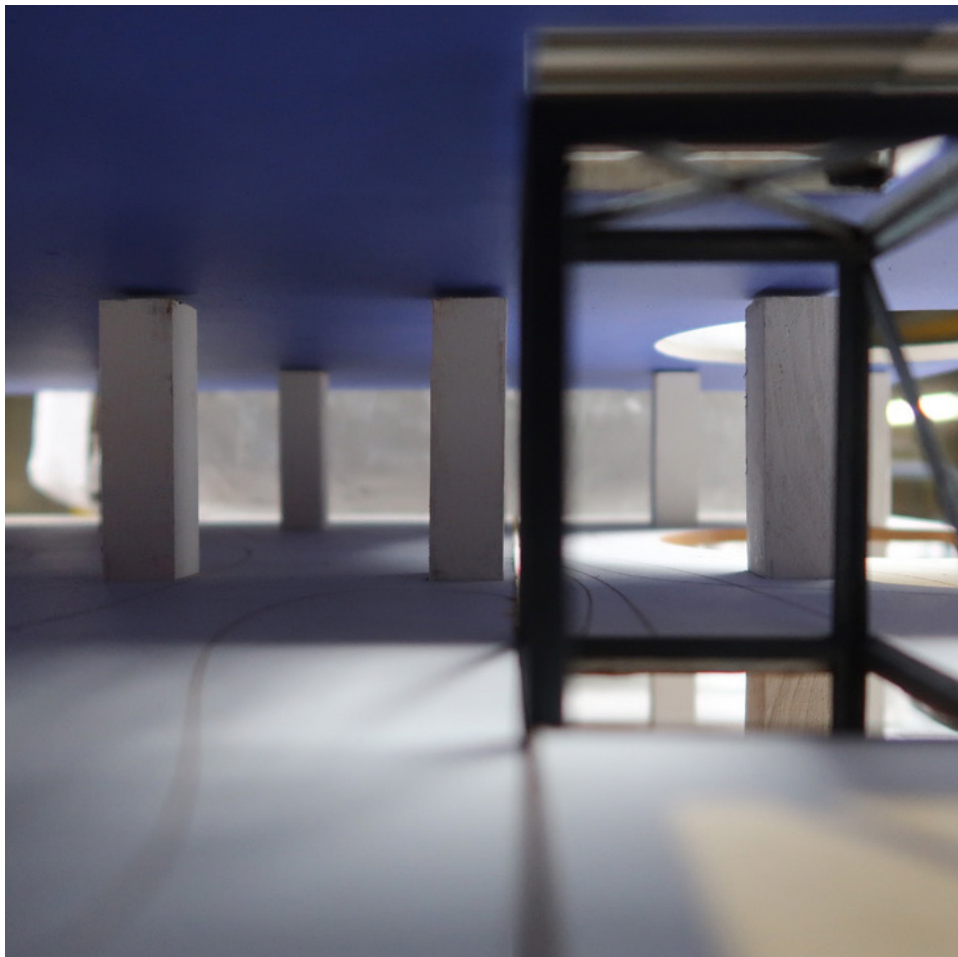
Nadine is going from Jounieh, where she lives, to her office in downtown Beirut with the new cable car line.

1. She arrives in the cable car station in the Egg structure with view over the city.

2. When she takes the elevator to a floor below, she stops to look at the dramatic play of voids in the building, (3) from where she tries to spot her friend who she agreed to have a coffee with.

4. She's searching in the crowd, but does not see her friend yet.

5. When she takes the staircase down, on her way out, (6) she suddenly sees her friend and waves!



2.



3.



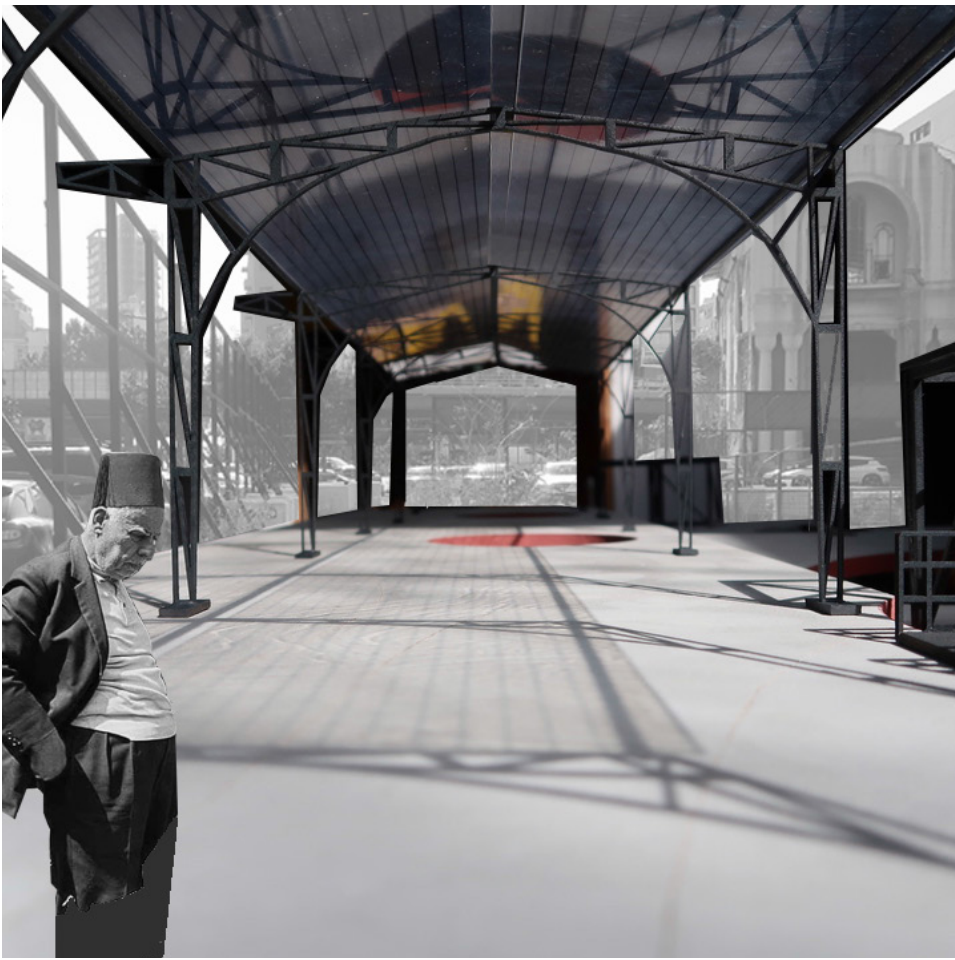
4.

5.



6.





1.

Abdul

Abdul is living in Hamra and going to visit family in the South of Lebanon.

1. He enters in the shaded archway when he steps out of the electric bus.
2. When he walks through the main hall, he notices that that he needs to be one floor lower to take the regional busline.
3. The dramatic staircase brings him to a more calm floor, close to the water.
4. Different people take time to smoke a shisha in the intimate spaces encircled by mesh curtains.
5. He looks one more time up through the voids at this strange building before he gets into the bus (6).



2.



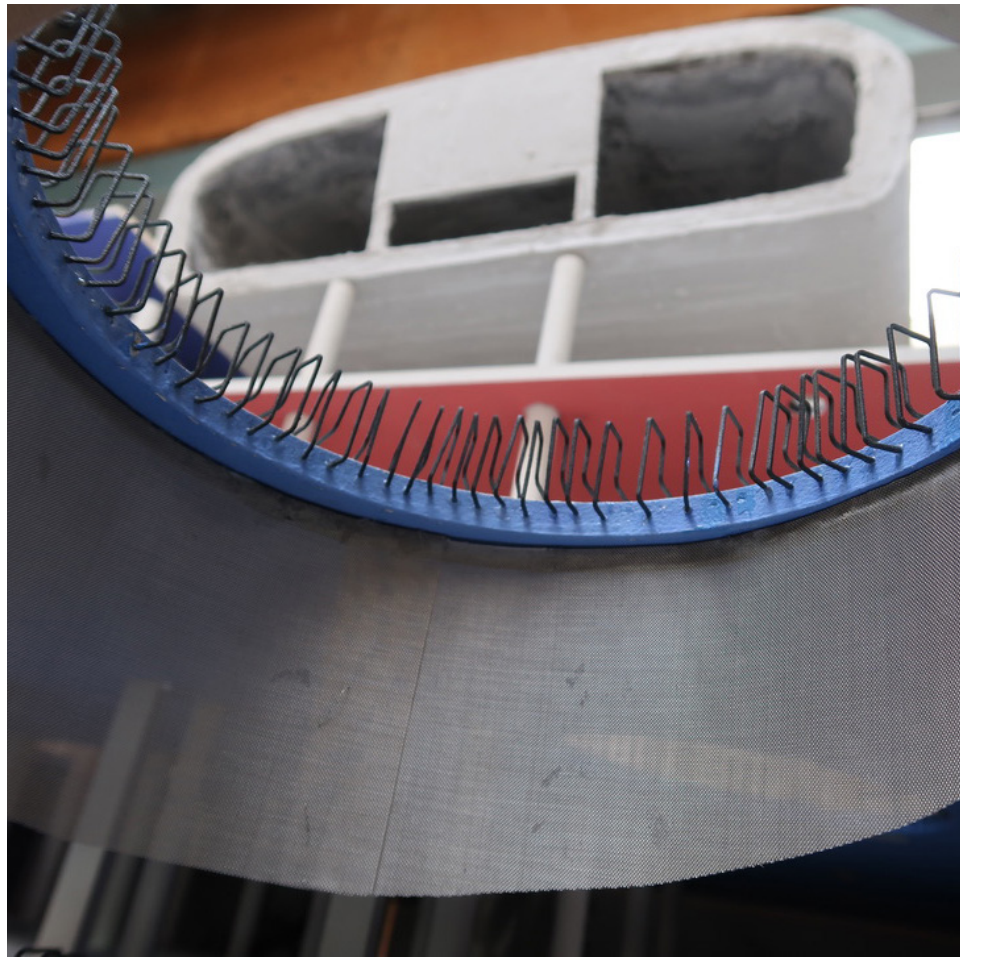
3.





4.

5.



6.



Reflection

Since my first visit to Beirut in January 2018, the context and atmosphere of the city has dramatically changed.

At my arrival I felt a positive attitude, and with a growing tourism sector, there was possibility for dreaming of an improved future. So the project was grounded in the possibility for change.

Unfortunately, the failing government has led the country into a deep economic crisis, ultimately leading to the population to revolt in October 2019. Whereas the revolution proved that people need and use buildings and public space as their platform to unite in/on, I did feel that the merely positive attitude was gone. The need for change was present evermore.

The explosion in the Beirut port on August 4th, was the ultimate breakdown of the positive moral, and the city and people were devastated. Briefly I lost the drive to work on this project, as it seemed so pointless to talk about only one building with scars if everything was lying in pieces. Ultimately, I understood that it was more relevant than ever to keep interpreting and putting energy into damaged and scarred buildings, as it proves that we do not give up upon our cities nor on ourselves.

Quita Schabracq, August 2020



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