



# Stadsloket 't Noord

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# Stadsloket 't Noord

## I The Intimate City

Early on in the process, it became apparent that 'The Intimate City' was not easy to define. No word is precise enough to pin it down, but its concept lives in all of us. Moments of urban intimacy foster fondness for the places we frequent and are essential for the notion of proximity that is the true foundation of the city. The metropolis is not a unified entity but is composed of a collection of events that together patch an image together, sometimes overlapping. An architectural project thus operates in two layers simultaneously: the city as a frame, and the neighbourhood as context – sometimes even conflicting.

In the intimate city, these events have a stage – what in the studio we addressed as a city room. In its broadest sense, city rooms can be understood as public spaces, both interior and exterior, with the capacity to bond with its users in a way comparable to our own rooms at home. A city room is therefore an excellent architectural device to reach out. It can help embed a project in the city by making it part of its collection of events, yielding the building a significant actor in the city fabric.

Early in the research we visited Paris and Milan, seeking spaces that represent a specific idea of a city room. Upon analysis, principles started to crystalize in a way that could become applicable for future projects. City rooms are places that are embedded in the cycles of the city, hosting its events and occurrences, from the banal to the significant. They are composed of permanent agents that give its long-term character, and temporal and removable ones that allow appropriation. And yet, even when not in use, they are very valuable structures for the city. For me, these principles coincide with the market square of almost any village.

That realization nudged the research to focus on public interiors that were conceived as public squares. Per se, the principle is not new: the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, or the central shopping area at the T2 in Heathrow Airport, facades facing the interior create an artificial, idealised 'exterior'. However, these examples translate the language of a square into the interior in a literal manner.

My interest relied more on how to apply the principles of a square/city room into a significant public interior. This was done in the manner of a 1:20 scale model for the P1, which suggested a market hall in timber. The pattern that kept arising when iterating through options was the emergence of the edge of spaces as the place for occurrences.

## II Structure and society

Stemming from the charms of a market hall as a public interior, the research focused on market typologies. Governments as entities derive from the need to regulate trade, which happened in markets. Spaces of governance were thus built over spaces of commerce, resulting in a hybrid structure that was placed in a prominent place in the city, usually the market square. The town hall of Ross-on-Wye (UK), by virtue of its placement, articulated a space that would otherwise lack a hard edge

and not be contained. In Bridgnorth (UK), it divided the high street into two elongated squares, emphasizing the relationship between opposing facades rather than the direction of the path. Seeing how these gestures, although technically making spaces smaller, rendered them more valuable and significant, offered the question: is there a space that could benefit from such a structure?

In terms of public space, some squares were unlucky enough to be used as nodes, becoming huge pieces of infrastructure. The sheltered edges that make a square are gone, since the space is not defined by the buildings anymore, but by tarmac. And by losing the active frontage that fills the square with life, you analogically lose the public space itself.

By the end of the 19th Century, the city of Antwerp was undergoing a major urban reshape as the gaps the historic defence walls left behind were gradually being masterplanned and built. The city plan foresaw a triangular-shaped square north of the central station, De Coninckplein. This place was, according to contemporary news articles, a very lively part of town until the 60's. However, after that, De Coninckplein gradually became lifeless due to increased traffic cutting off all sides of the triangle from the heart square, and the rising drug-dealing problem in the area. Today, streets and tram lines intersect the space in such a way that the open area in the centre is rendered residual space, ultimately yielding little value to the public. The fact, however, that it is an open space in a rather dense fabric, is a quality that is waiting to be unlocked. After all, it is used for small neighbourhood events and festivals, but the rest of the year remains rather empty. Nevertheless, neighbours have been making use the edges, but this great display of urbanity is damped by a wall of cars and not visible in the heart of the space itself.

### III Stadsloket 't Noord

In an attempt to recover the urban life of such an important public space, my proposal encompasses a building on the Coninckplein. It would provide a facade with the capacity to interact with the square it defines, which has been lacking due to its residual character. Such an intervention points at the city of Antwerp as owner, since it is on public land. And in this context, there are several opportunities for the city government.

First, the redistribution of city resources. If you live in the Noord district (pop. 44000) you are allocated the offices in the city centre. These offices have 142000 people in their jurisdiction. Other districts like Borgerhout and Berchem, with offices similar in size, only have around 45000 people on their watch. It therefore seems desirable to build a new neighbourhood office in order to distribute administration tasks in a more efficient manner and closer to the people. Zurich for instance, uses such a neighbourhood-oriented city office model to the delight of its inhabitants, since the amount of people you interact with is overseeable.

The second opportunity is the reconfiguration of public space to the benefit of the neighbourhood. It is not about creating a square – it is already there - but about unlocking its qualities. After all, it houses the central library, several cafés and bars and boasts superb lighting due to its shape and orientation. The Permeke library

has been trying without success to cut off motorised traffic from the square. A simple measure like just prohibiting parking would already have a huge effect on the quality of the square: the boundary a line of tightly parked cars would be removed and the perceived space expanded, allowing the cafes and bars reach out further into the Coninckplein.

Thirdly, the involvement in cultural output. The municipal government in Antwerp tends to reduce itself to its mere administration tasks. This results in citizens unable to make relate the occurrences of the city to the city symbols. A city room, in its broadest sense, has the capacity to make citizens identify themselves with what happens in it. These rooms are deeply embedded in the cycles of the city, hosting events, markets, exhibits and other sorts of manifestations of local culture. By plugging into the tradition of the Burgerzaal (English: 'hall of commons'), the city could offer space to host the cultural output of the neighbourhood, that, by virtue of its diverse and dynamic demographics, is quite rich: performances, awards and exhibitions happen all around the year and are very specific to 't Noord.

In that way, my proposal would not only unlock the potential of De Coninckplein but link the public space to the local cultural output. Doing so in the frame of an official building would be part of the effort to reclaim the elements of the city, which have eroded from public identification by the passivity of the government. In a well-defined square with a government building, the central library and several bars and cafés, you can be in public, or be the public.

A competition paper for a 'districthuis' in Flanders provided a good source of program requirements, which in summary go as follows:

Ground floor - A covered open space that, following the example of historic market places, allows the occurrences of the square to happen in the shelter of a public building. The main building sits on five large legs that contain program: Main stairway, elevator, ticket booth, fire escape, and two small commercial spaces. By offering a high covered outdoor space, the building reaches out for private initiatives to appropriate parts of it, either by hosting part of the monthly market or a pop-up bar to name a few possibilities.

First floor – Counter spaces for 'Burgerzaken', where the population can do transactions (housing, identification, culture, nature) like registering a new apartment or renovate a license.

Second floor – Office area for more official meeting with city representatives. The negotiable nature of this meetings require additional intimacy that encourages a beneficial vis-à-vis. This is where building permits are negotiated for instance.

Third floor – Festive event space that can host the cultural output of the neighbourhood and host its public events of governance like town hall meetings. Historically in Flanders and the Netherlands called a 'Burgerzaal'.

#### IV Method

The nature of the graduation project, with architectural, climate, political and structural considerations, is complex. Ideally, these considerations would come together into a unified assembly, a building that is perceived as a whole. The methodology of designing was iterative, with each iteration adding a layer of complexity that slowly became an exercise in orchestration. The liberties a freestanding building entail often end up conflicting with each other.

The material choice, which was originated from P1 ambitions, proved to be crucial to hold the project together. My ambition was to make a public building in timber. With two thirds of the world's population living in urban areas, it has become increasingly urgent to build densely and resource-minded. In Europe, the construction industry benefits from the presence of sustainably sourced timber. However, timber buildings are usually ascribed a rural or domestic tone. This notion is rejected in this project. Timber can be as civic. The same way marble becomes representative when it is polished and geometrically arranged, wood can become civic when treated and arranged in a specific manner. That manner is explored in this project.

The expressive roof is the main urban gesture. The height of the eaves responds to its surroundings, resulting in an asymmetric double-pitch with two off centered columns. A fully symmetrical building would have been possible and easier to organise, but urbanistically unsatisfactory. A pure symmetry created a centre that didn't make sense, and a building too rigid for sitting on the square at ease.

However, the decision to embrace irregularity to the benefit of a good urban gestalt yielded an unbalanced structure: column spacings vary every two gridlengths. This proved to be a virtue, since the irregularity extended throughout all five facades made a unifying pattern. Furthermore, expressing the centres and the corners on all sides enveloped the building in repeating gestures, bringing the picture further together.

The media used to test the small theses that gave substance to the project was mainly models and drawings which, in their inherent abstraction, pointed at the next problem when a solution was found. Reference images underscored specific intentions with a built example, enhancing the imaginability of the building.

#### V Reflection

It is not subject of this text to be a description architecturale of how the plan ripened – the project journal illustrates it in a more precise manner. Moreover, with the ambitions now clarified, it is a good time to reflect on a number of issues that were of special significance.

##### Order and Hierarchy

The plan can be organised in five different directions, that, together with the irregularity of the structure, result in messy spaces with need for clarity. This exercise became an obsession and, when the spatial qualities were satisfactory, there was the late realisation – pointedly acknowledged by my tutors – that the spaces were lacking a concept of use. In other words, the actual use of the spaces had little re-

relationship with the space itself. If it is a benefit or a drawback is debatable, since a public building should remain universal and open-minded for future uses. Flexibility, however, is not an excuse not to do architecture. In this very moment I am considering how fixed furniture – counters and meeting spaces - further articulate the space in a sensible hierarchy. This is a realization that came later than desired. Not giving the specific user's needs attention on time was an error, since they make the vision of the building weaker, and thus the architectural intentions blurry. However, the spatial order was in place, opening up the way to create a hierarchy of uses in harmony with the building itself just in time for the P4.

#### Images and References

Over the course of the project, built projects have been very referential and helpful in the quest of finding the right image and spatial qualities. The reference library created during this year yielded a great repository that was of immense value for façade and interior appearance. However, the great error was to focus unproportionally in favour of the image, to the neglect of the topology. On the positive side, the building is touching on the issues and ambitions outlined in the beginning of the paper: It provides an ambitious urban vision, a proposal for a modern public building, a meaningful implementation of the city room and overall spatial quality. As a scheme, the building organisation works. In the finer graining, however, the concept of use is not remarkably sharp. Early studies of uses, where different concepts are studied in isolation would have provided a solid base to inform design decisions concisely – something the tutors proposed but never came to realisation. By trying to unify the building structure with its order and image, the concept of use didn't get the attention it deserved, as stated in the previous paragraph. In the future, it is helpful to train the eye to look at images in different layers of complexity: overall material harmony, spatial sequence, subjective perspective, and proposed relation of use to space.

#### Civic purpose

Who profits from the building? Does it add value? Would the city be better off with or without it? The nature of the intervention was very political from the beginning. It was imperative to keep the civic purposes in mind and see the building as an investment in the neighbourhood. This was achieved by engaging with an open-minded urban narrative where the public engages with the buildings that represent their city. The imbalance of local government resource distribution created the need for such a building somewhere in the neighbourhood. The spatial and social opportunities of the Coninckplein provide that site as fertile ground for a working program. The Burgerzaal as a stage for the cultural output and the porous ground floor as enrichment to the square make the case for the social potentials of the building. The office part of the building underlines the importance of proximity and strengthens the relationship to the citizen. Although the spatial issues of the square could be solved by banning cars to circulate and park there, an objective the Permeke library has been pursuing but the government rejected for infrastructural reasons, the opportunity arises to seek an architectural solution. This, I believe, was accom-



plished. In summary, several parties would profit from the Stadsloket 't Noord: The government by distributing resources in a more efficient and fair manner and the neighbourhood through an unlocking of its resources

#### Timber

The ambition of liberating wood from its current adscriptions of rurality and domesticity comes from the necessity of embracing it as universal building material. Sustainable forestry in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France and the Scandinavian countries is a valuable resource in the European area. A resource the future dense and sustainable city will need to make use of. It is therefore of special interest for the building industry to come to terms with all its possibilities. However, the intention was not to overstate or celebrate timber. Rather to encourage creative solutions by limiting the material choice early on. One way it became civic was by contrasting different engineered timber solutions. By weaving linear columns and beams (glulam) with planar CLT panels for bracing and partitioning, a civic flat architectural order is created. Alberti's façade of the Palazzo Rucellai follows the similar principle of flattened tectonics. Also, the richness of the wood texture adds a fine graining that changes with the distance, like it would with a stone or a brick building, but not with industrial claddings. The fine treatment of partitions and furniture contrasts the unadorned rawness of the primary structure, creating a delicate weaving of different finishes, all reflecting light in their own rich way. In that sense, a thoughtful interlacing of timber products yields an abundance of surfaces and finishes that enrich the space, with the material and its finer graining as unifying element.

## References



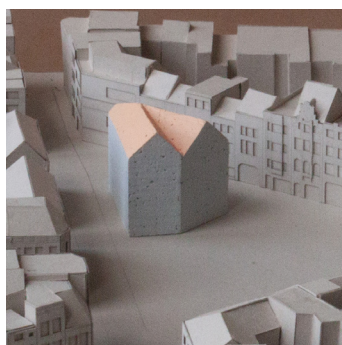
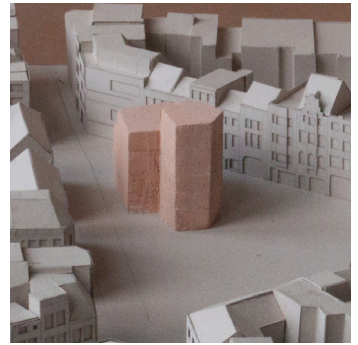
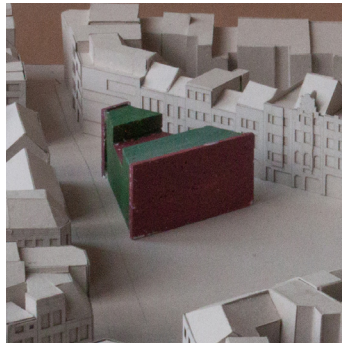
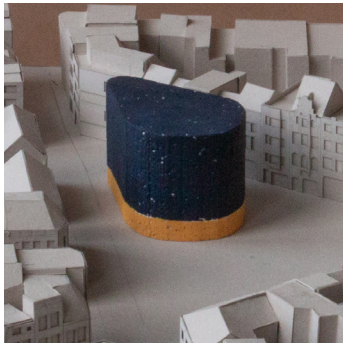
Une fête à Gennazano  
Oswald Achenbach



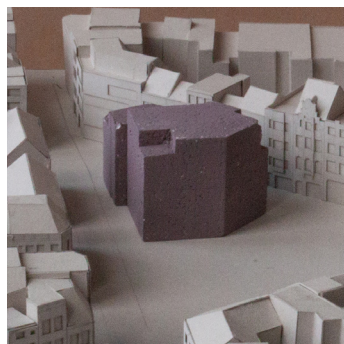




## Massing and urban gestures

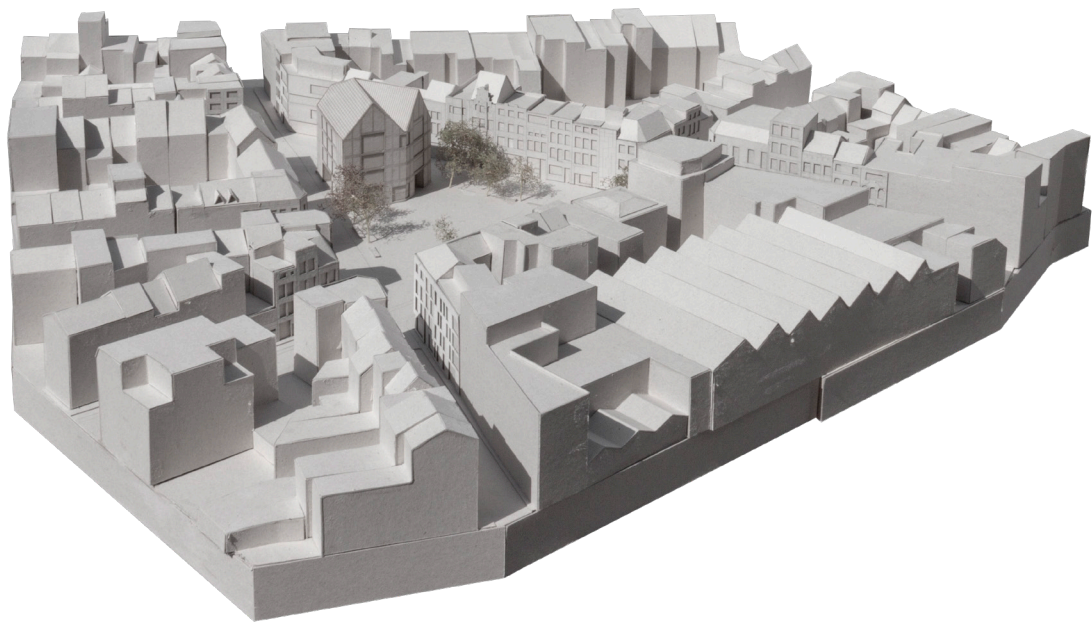


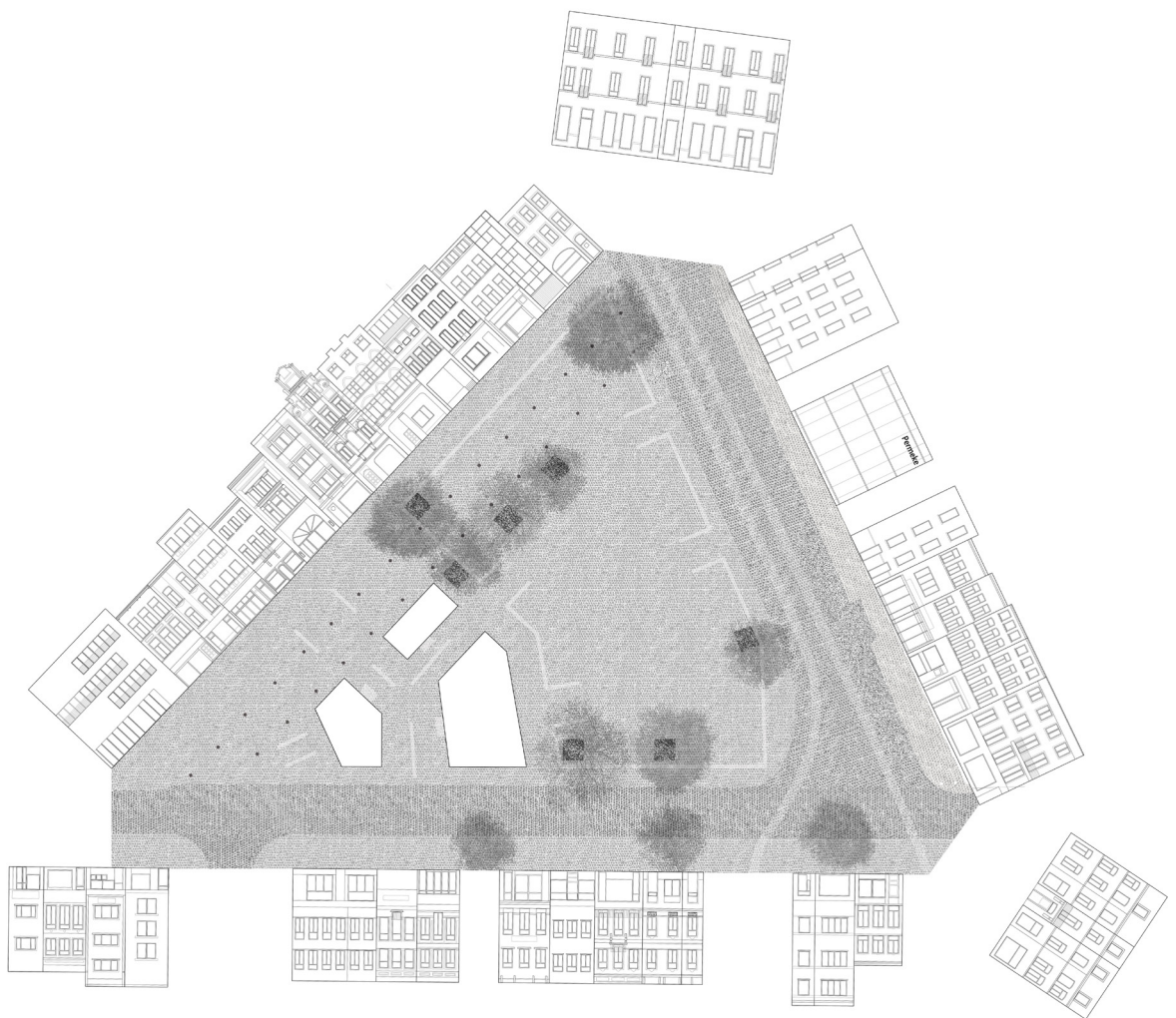
Massing iterations  
Models 1:200







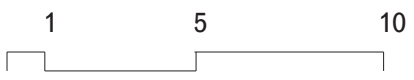
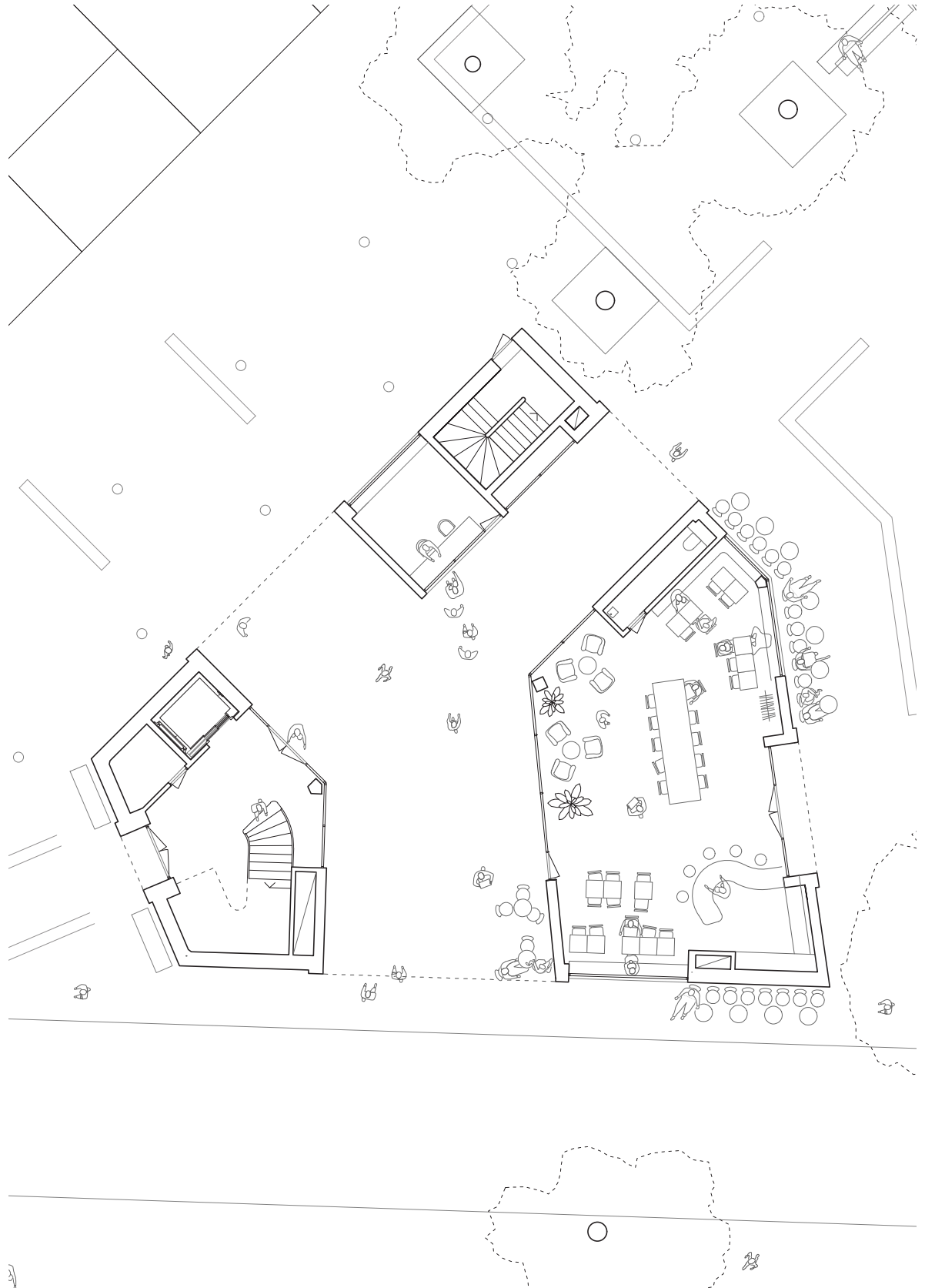




Approach from the north in the morning



# Drawings and Images



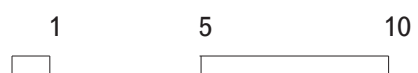
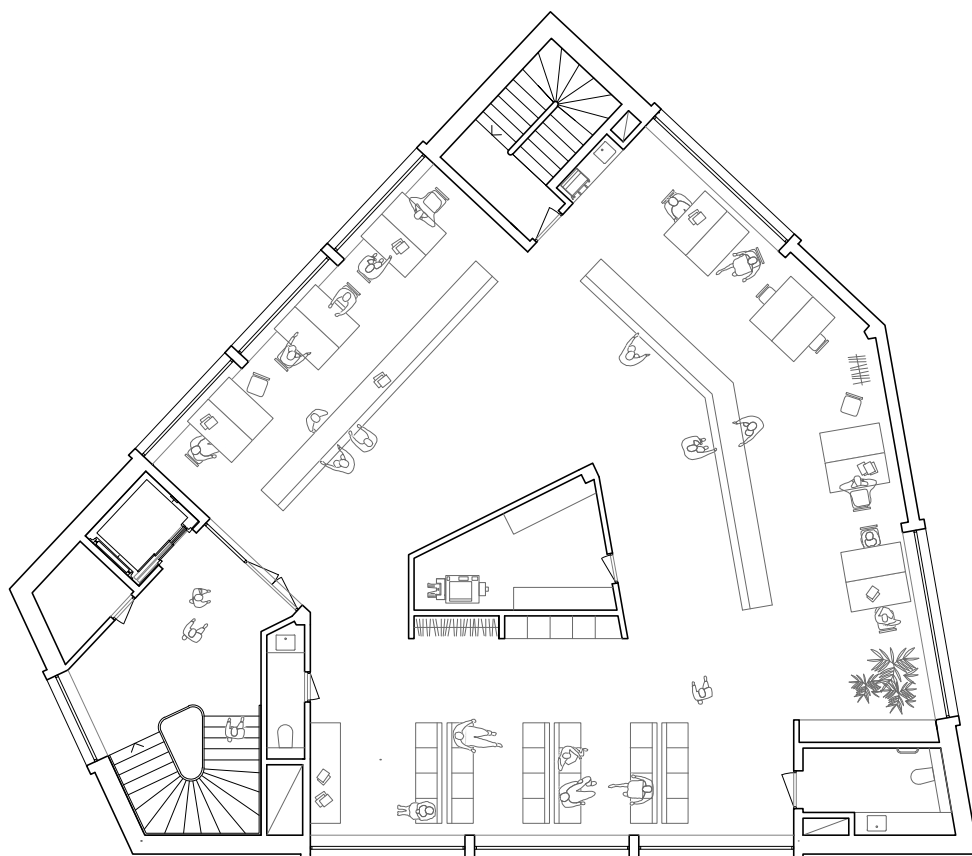
View of the passage and café





View of the main facade

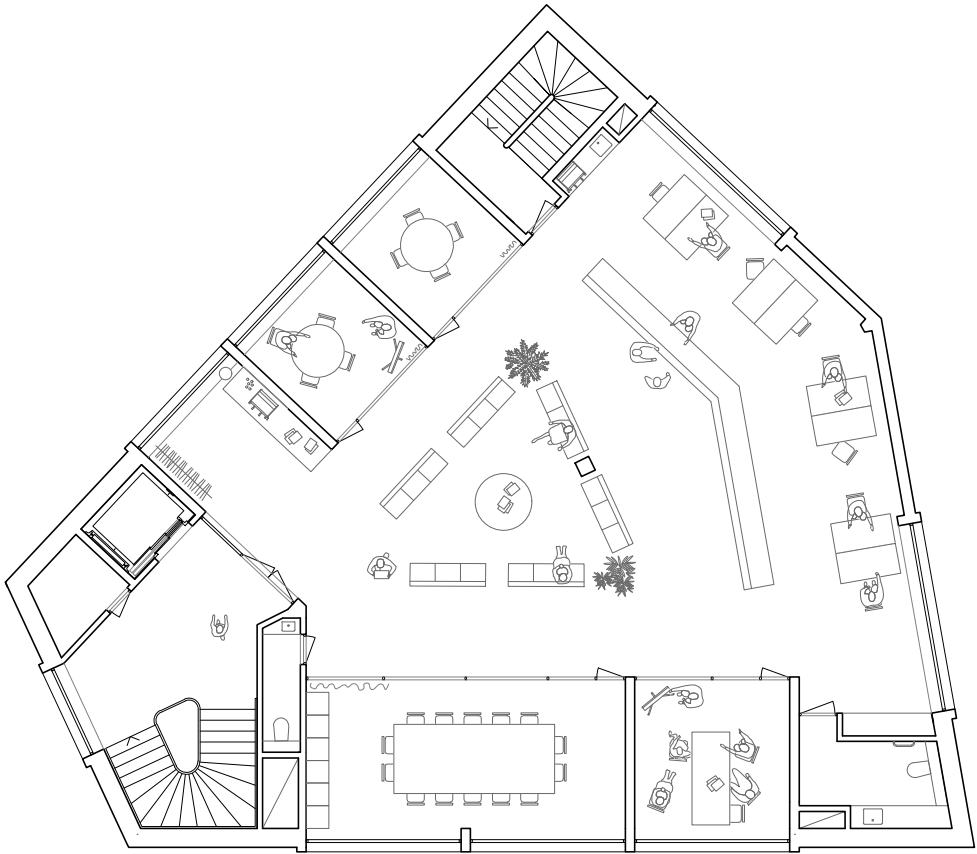






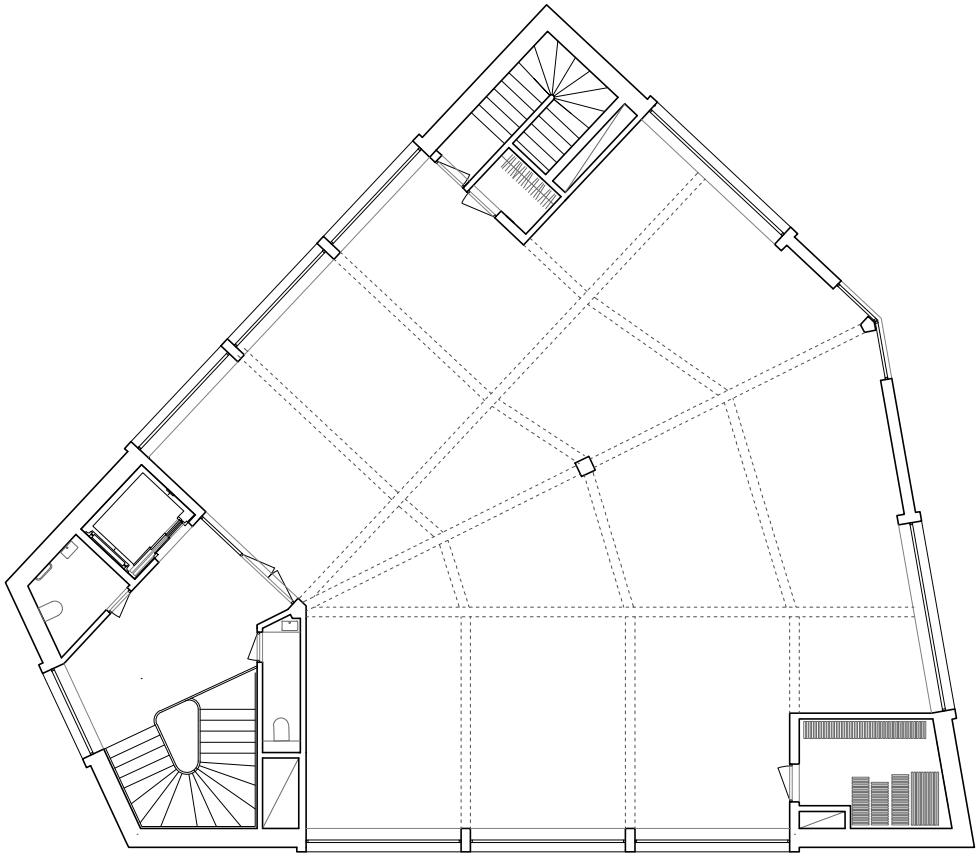
View of the counter area





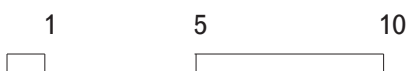
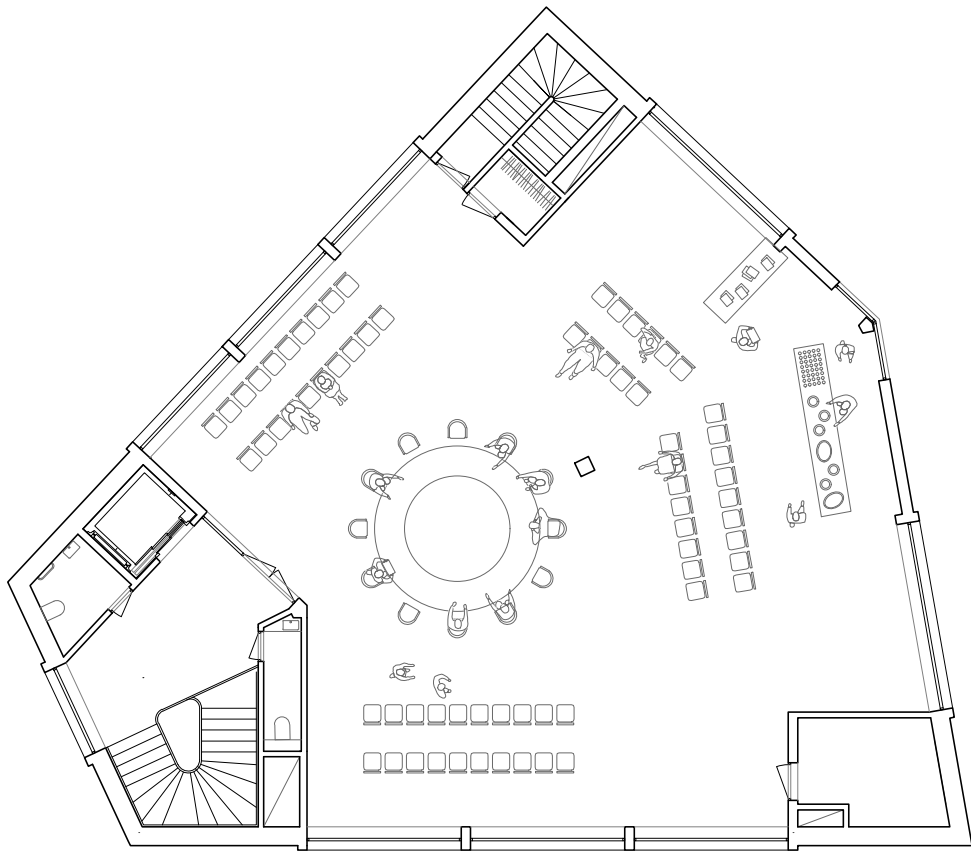
View of the meeting rooms





View of the empty room





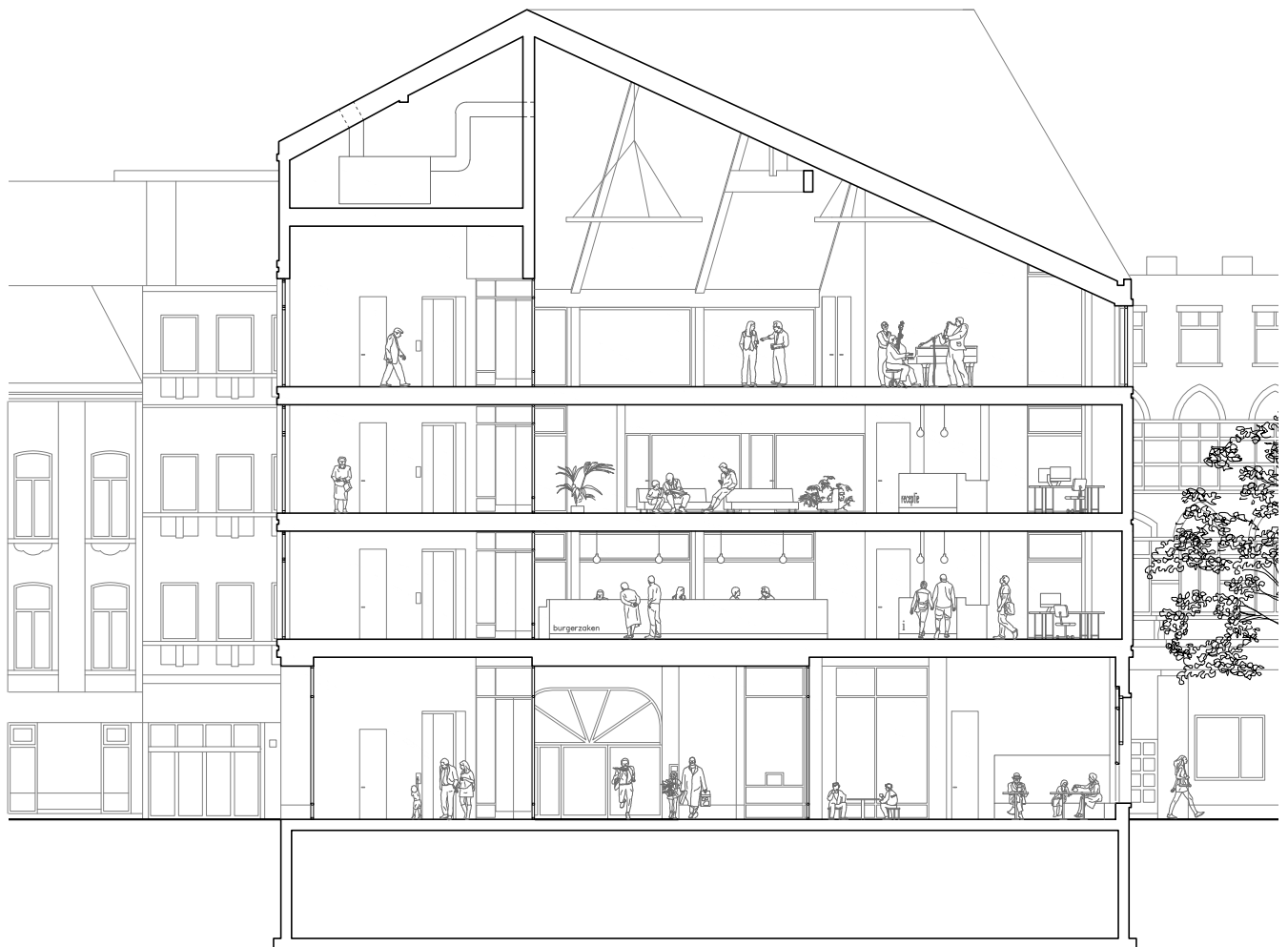
View of the town hall meeting

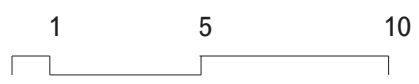




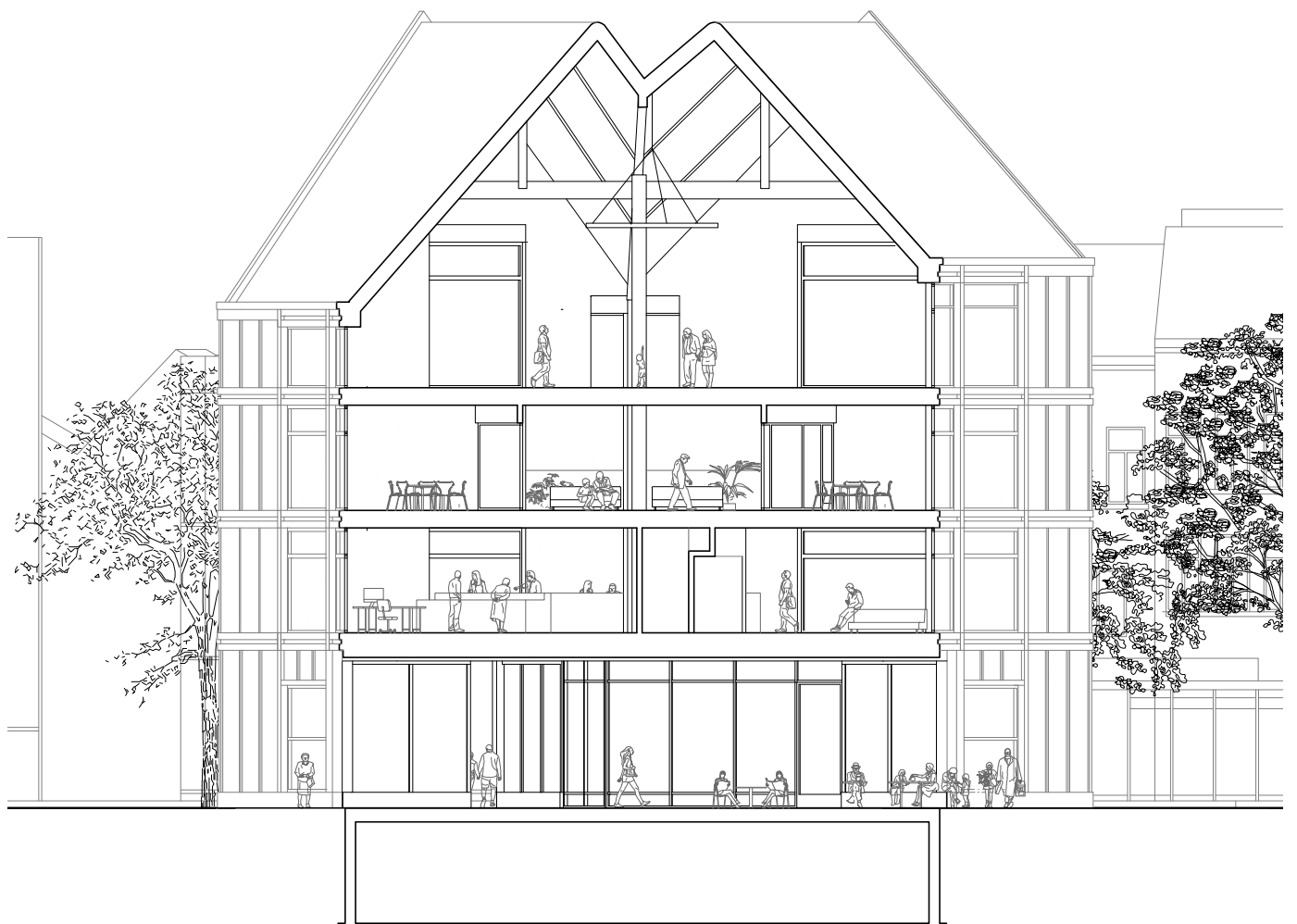


Longitudinal section  
1:200



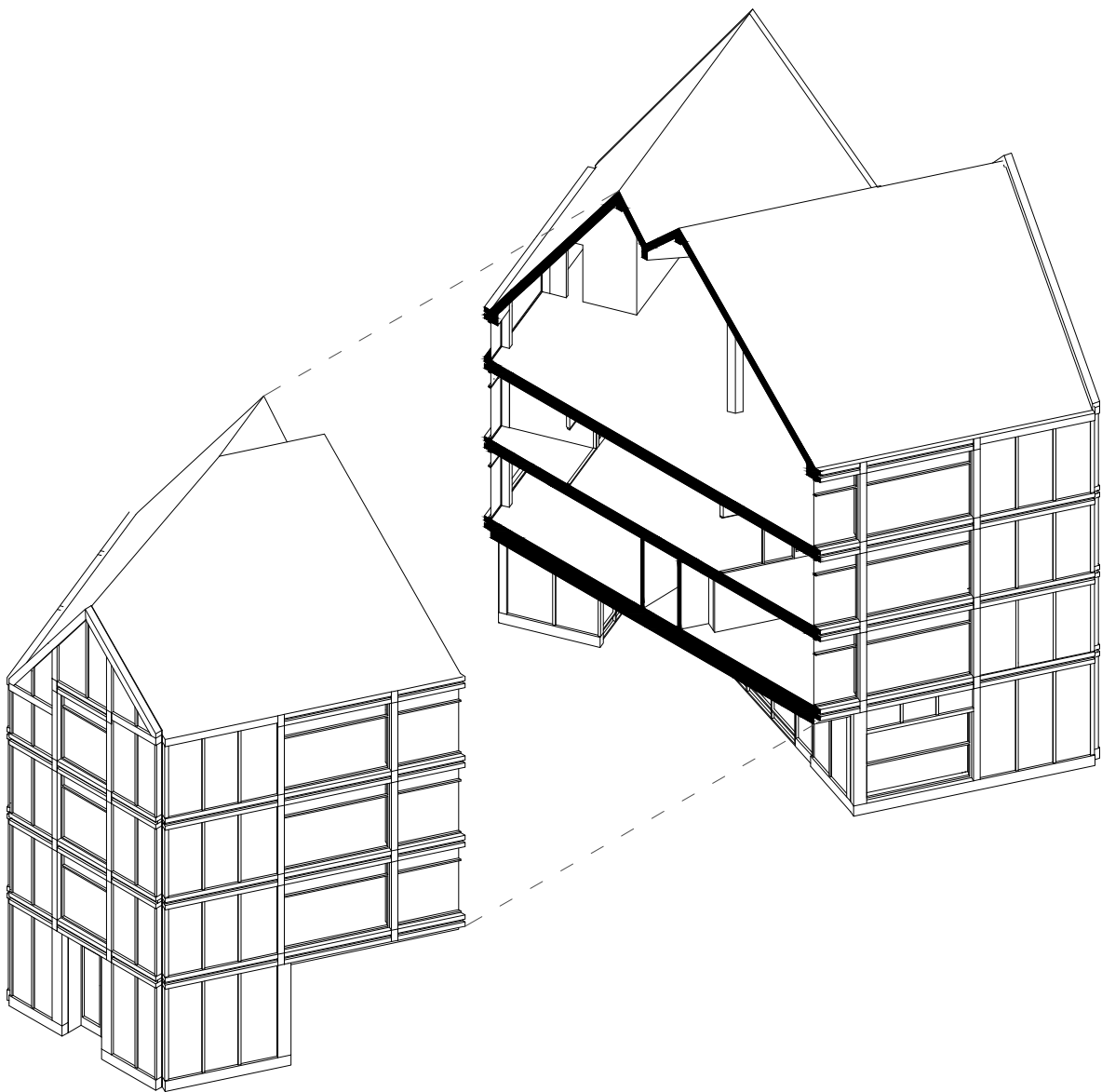


Cross section  
1:200

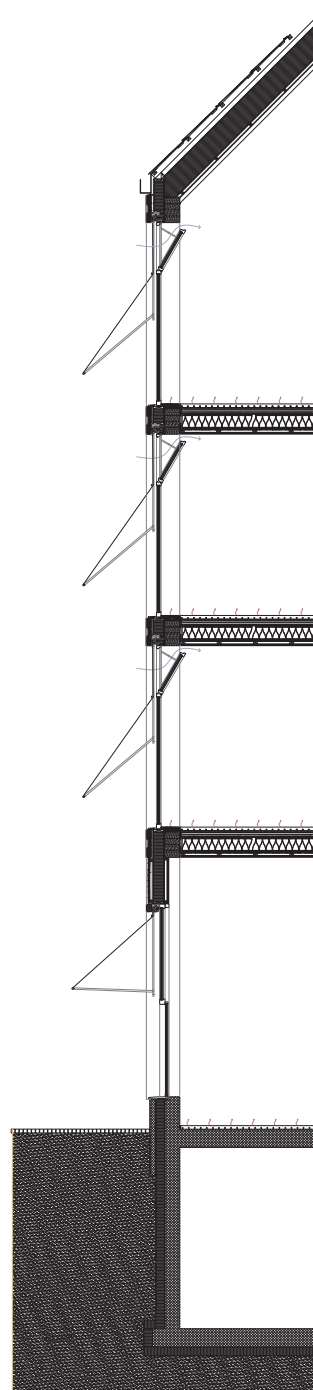
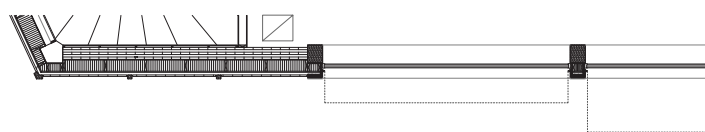




Sectional axonometric



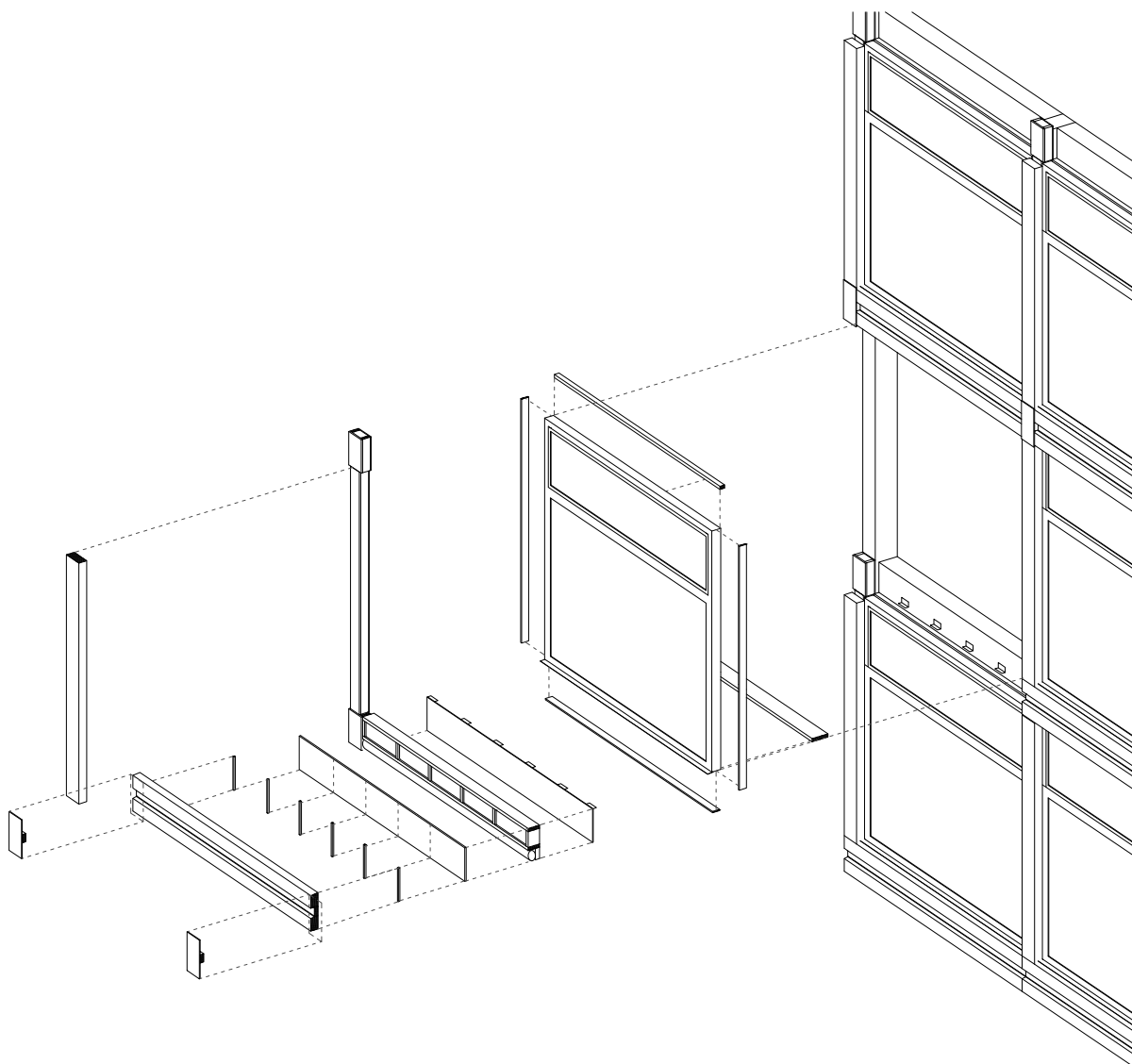
# Facade construction



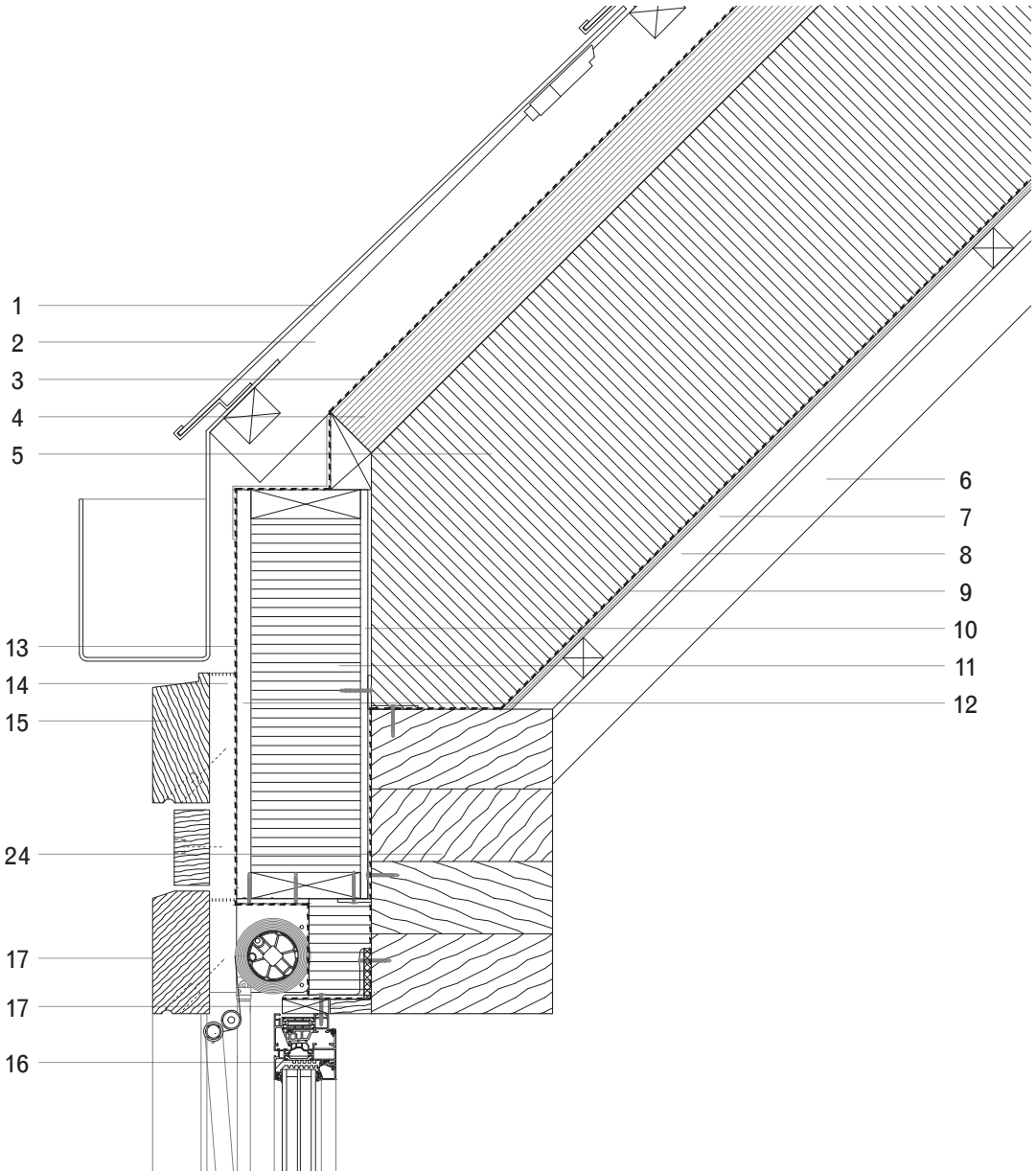
1 2m



Facade explosion



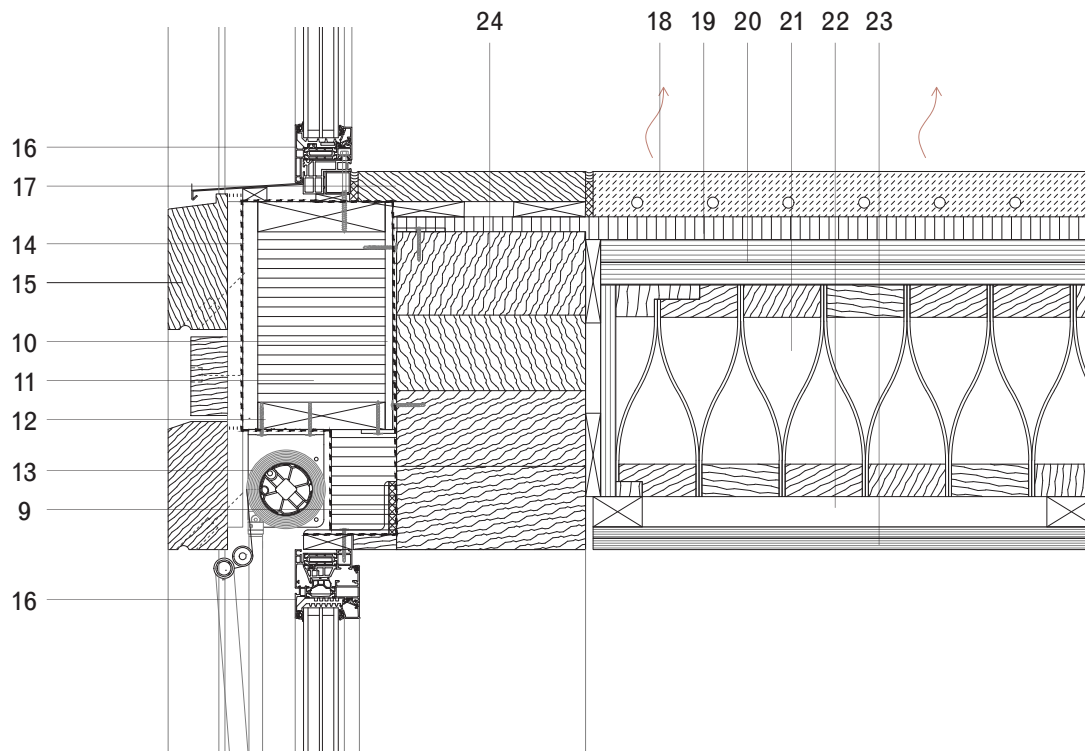
# Detailing





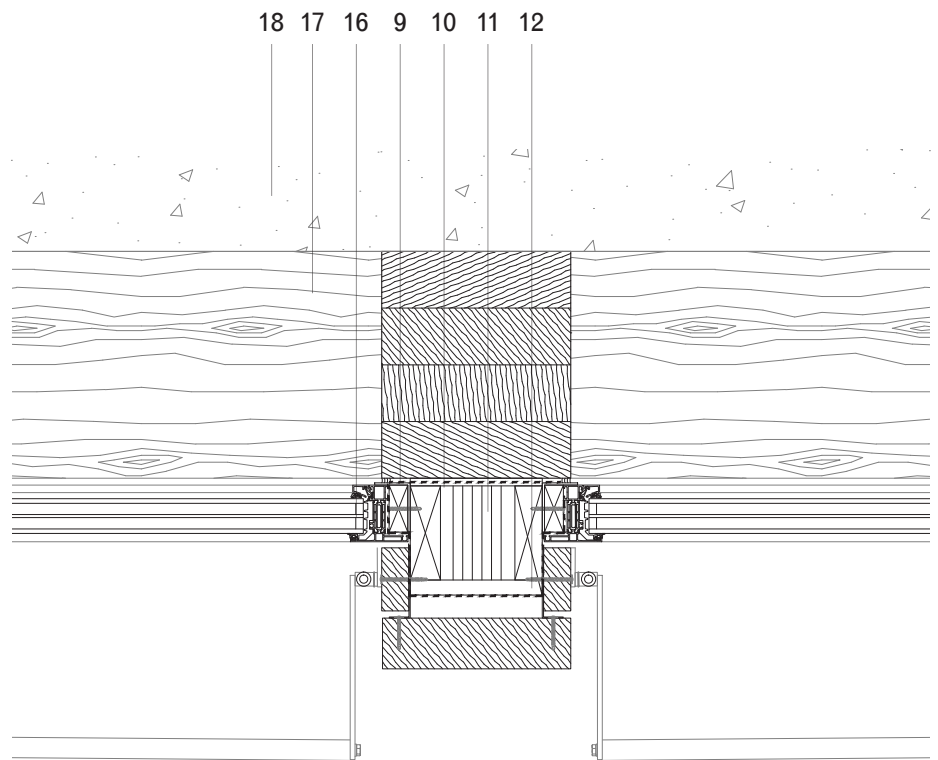
Typical facade connection





Typical facade connection

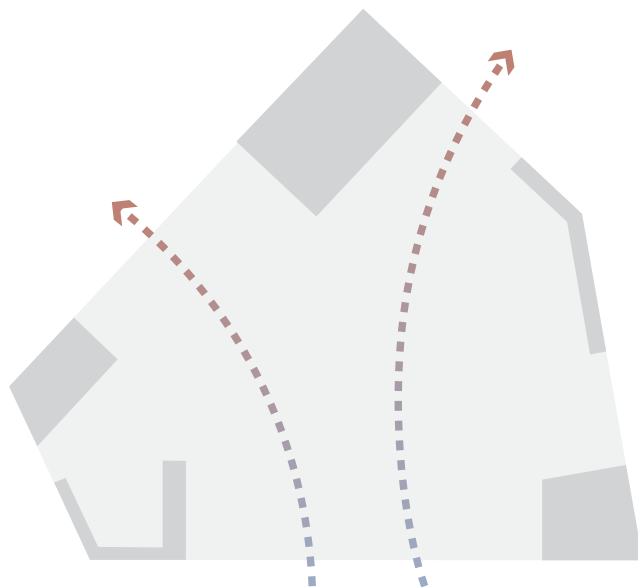
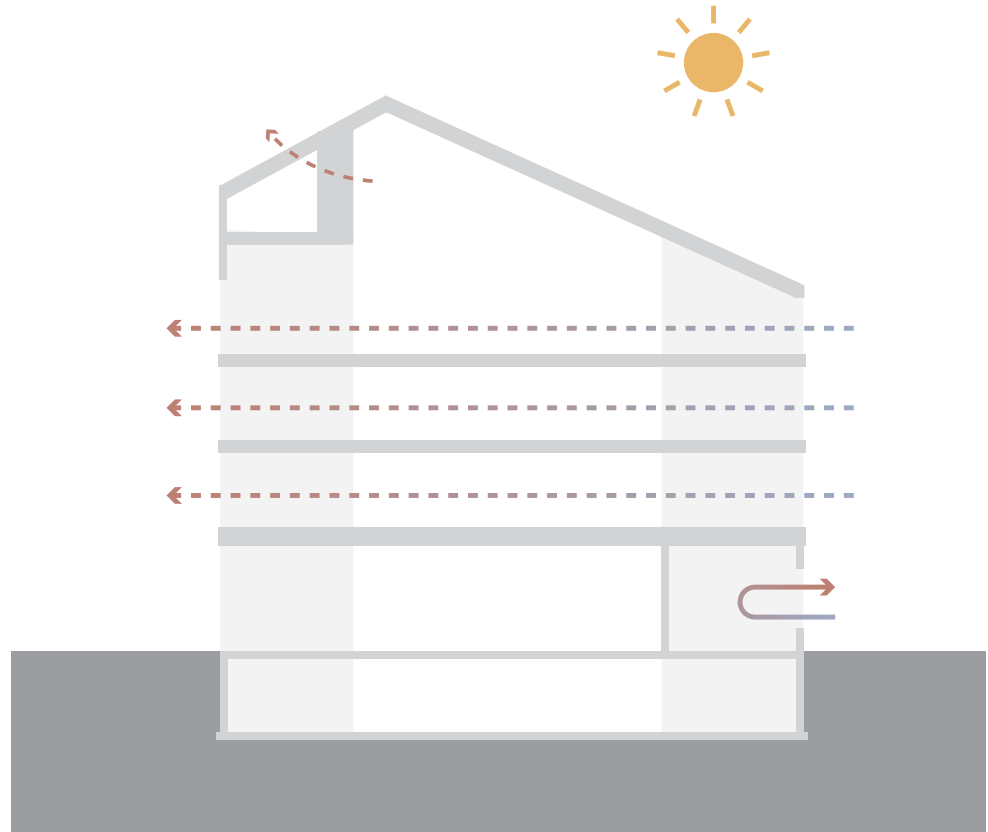




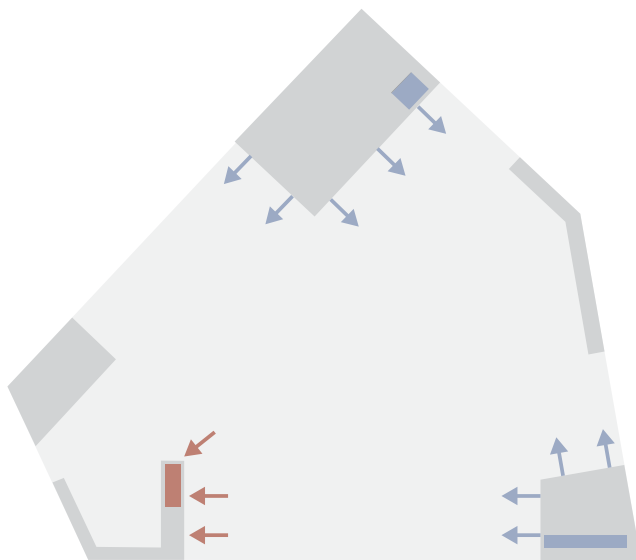
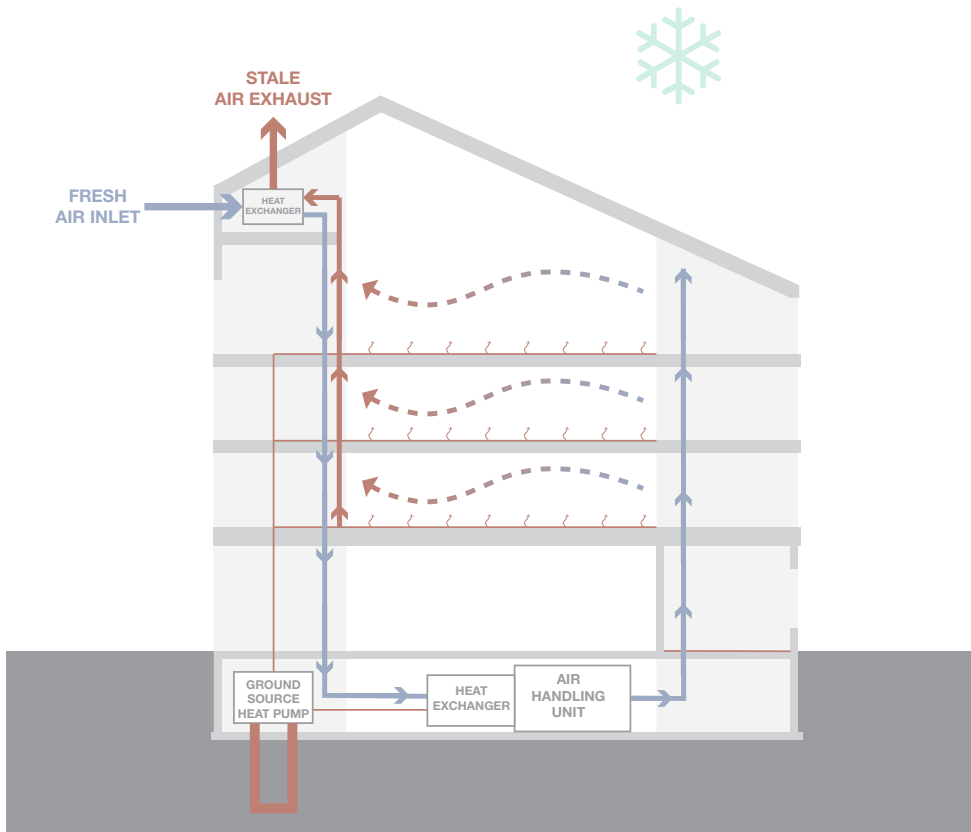
## Legend

- 1 PV Panels *60mm*
- 2 Batten support / ventilation *40mm*
- 3 Waterproofing *1mm*
- 4 Hardboard *80mm*
- 5 Insulation (between rafters) *370mm*
- 6 Rafters *500x250mm*
- 7 Batten support / cavity *40mm*
- 8 Brushed plywood finish *15mm*
- 9 Vapour barrier
- 10 OSB-panel (vapour tight) *12mm*
- 11 Insulation *200mm*
- 12 Bitumen-impregnated fibreboard *18mm*
- 10-11-12 Insulated timber platform element
- 13 Waterproofing
- 14 Battens/ventilation cavity *20mm*
- 15 Oak (untreated)
- 16 Schüco window (triple glazing)
- 17 Oak reveal
- 18 Terrazzo screed heating *60mm*
- 19 Footfall insulation *30mm*
- 20 2-layer plywood bracing, seams overlapping *60mm*
- 21 Kielsteg 280 slab element *280mm*
- 22 Installation cavity *50mm*
- 23 Double gypsum plaster board with brushed calico finish *35mm*
- 24 Glulam beam *420x250mm*
- 25 Glulam column *300x25015mm*
- 26 Awning

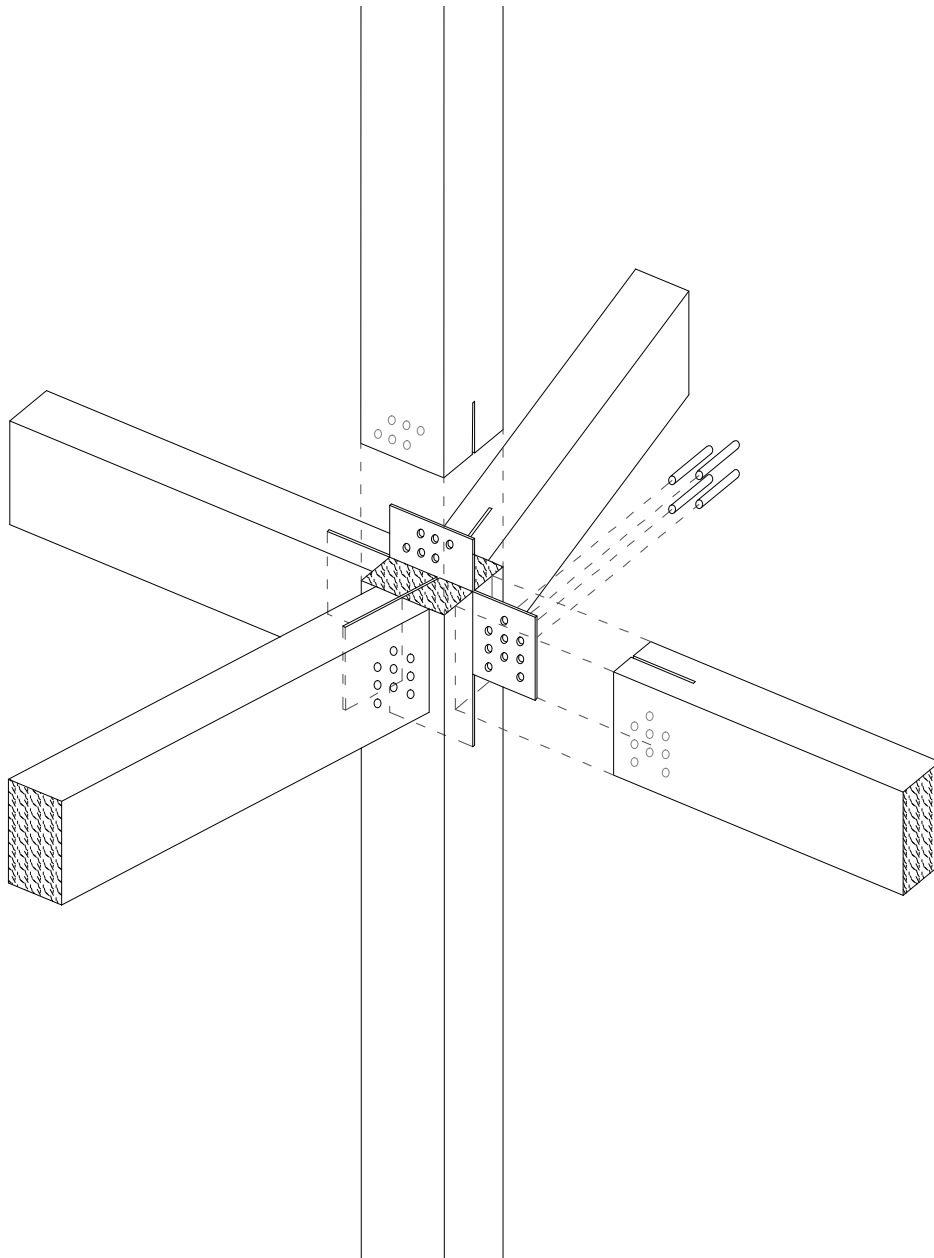
# Climate



Heating and ventilation  
Winter

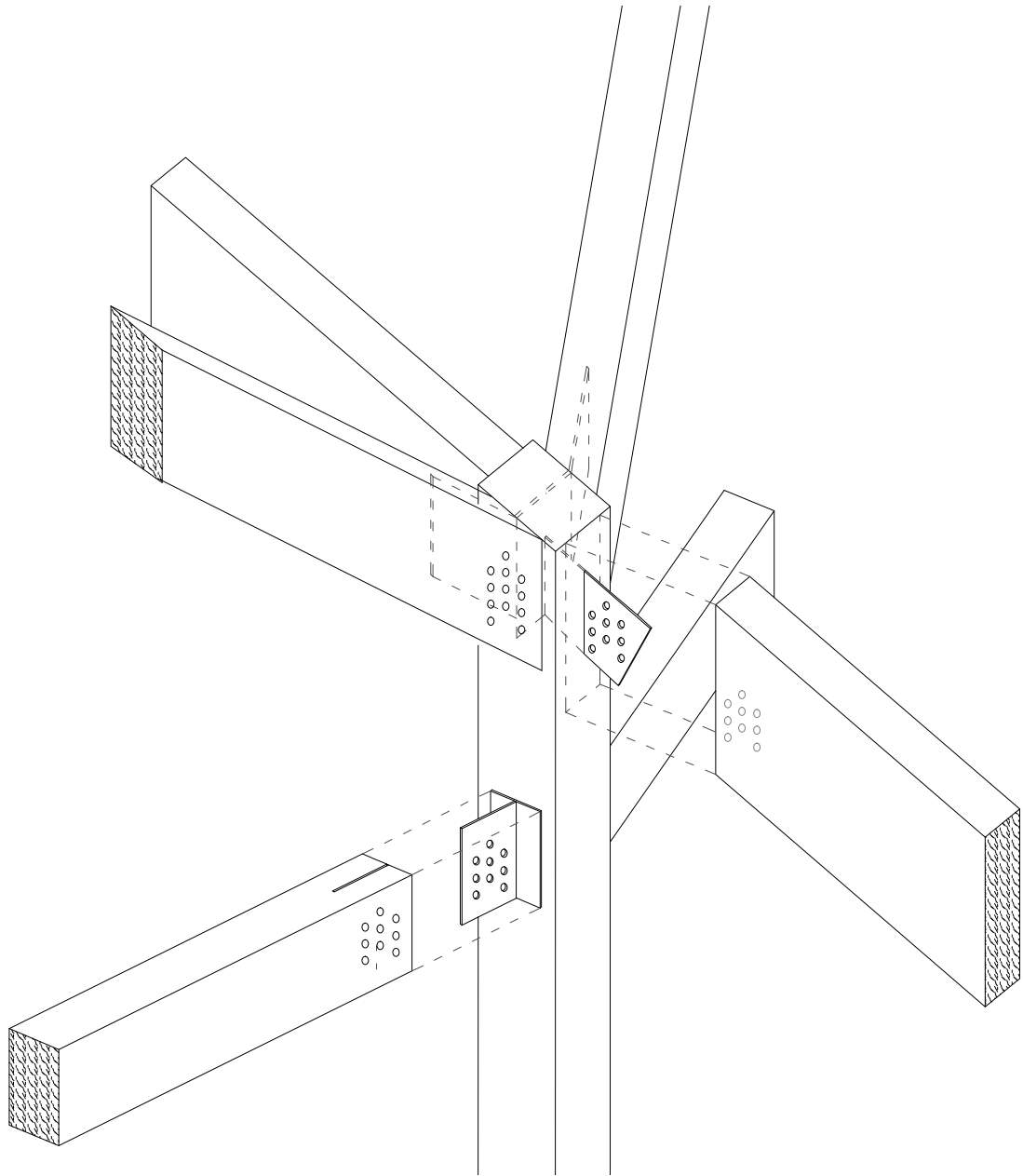


# Structure

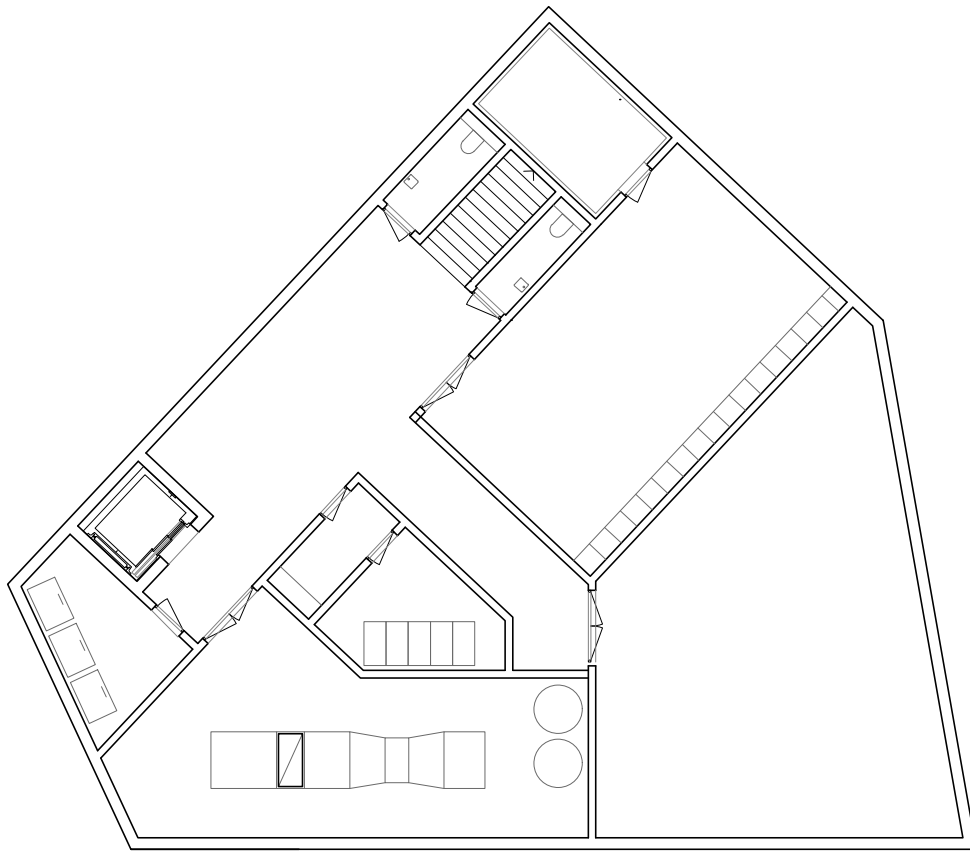




Roof connection



# Basement







Model  
1:50





Model  
1:50







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*Master of Science Thesis, Summer 2019*  
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