Layers of Change

Authenticity, Memory and Continuity in Architecture

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Abstract

This thesis examines how contemporary architectural practice increasingly treats continuity with visual seamlessness, often concealing change through cosmetic repair, absorbed additions, and the suppression of material difference. It argues that this tendency participates in a logic of abstraction: by erasing traces of transformation, architecture weakens continuity as a lived, embodied condition and reduces time to image. In response, the thesis develops an ethics of legibility as a theoretical and operative framework for retrofit.

The argument is constructed through a progressive shift of scale. The first, writing part moves from the city to the body: it begins by understanding the city as a collective artifact in which memory persists through enduring forms, loci, and urban artifacts, then turns to the sensory and material experience of architecture through Pallasmaa and Ruskin, showing how authenticity depends on material truth and how deception undermines embodied trust. These positions are synthesized into a design ethic grounded in material honesty, readable transformation, and restraint. Retrofitting, in this view, is not the production of a seamless image, but the continuation of a material narrative in which change remains intelligible and continuity is constructed rather than simulated.

The second part translates this framework into an architectural proposal for Casamatta. Conceived as a dynamic social landmark defined by constant change, the project rejects static restoration and adopts a legible design language that makes the building's evolution visible and comprehensible. Through a multi-layered analysis of its structural and aesthetic character, functional demands, and user needs, the proposal balances respect for inherited conditions with present opportunities, while establishing a flexible framework for future transformation.

A final small-scale intervention, developed collaboratively and iteratively on site, tests these principles in practice through direct engagement with material, context, and community.

Table of contents

I. Writing

The City as Layered Fabric
Material Truth & Multisensory Experience
Towards Ethics of Legibility

Introduction

Contemporary architectural culture increasingly treats continuity as a visual condition. Interventions are often calibrated to preserve an image of wholeness - additions are absorbed into seamless envelopes, repairs are cosmetically erased, and material discontinuities are minimized. This thesis argues that such concealment participates in a logic of abstraction: by suppressing traces of change, architecture weakens continuity as a lived condition and turns time into spectacle. The theoretical framework is developed through a shift of scale. Chapter I frames the city as a collective artifact, in which memory is materially embedded in enduring forms, loci, and the persistence of urban artifacts. Chapter II moves from the city to the body, drawing on Pallasmaa and Ruskin to show that authenticity depends on multisensory material truth, and that deception disrupts embodied trust. Chapter III synthesizes these registers into an ethics of legibility - material honesty, readable change, and restraint - proposed as a design method for retrofit. In this view, retrofitting is not the production of a seamless image, but the continuation of a material narrative in which transformation remains intelligible and continuity is constructed rather than simulated.

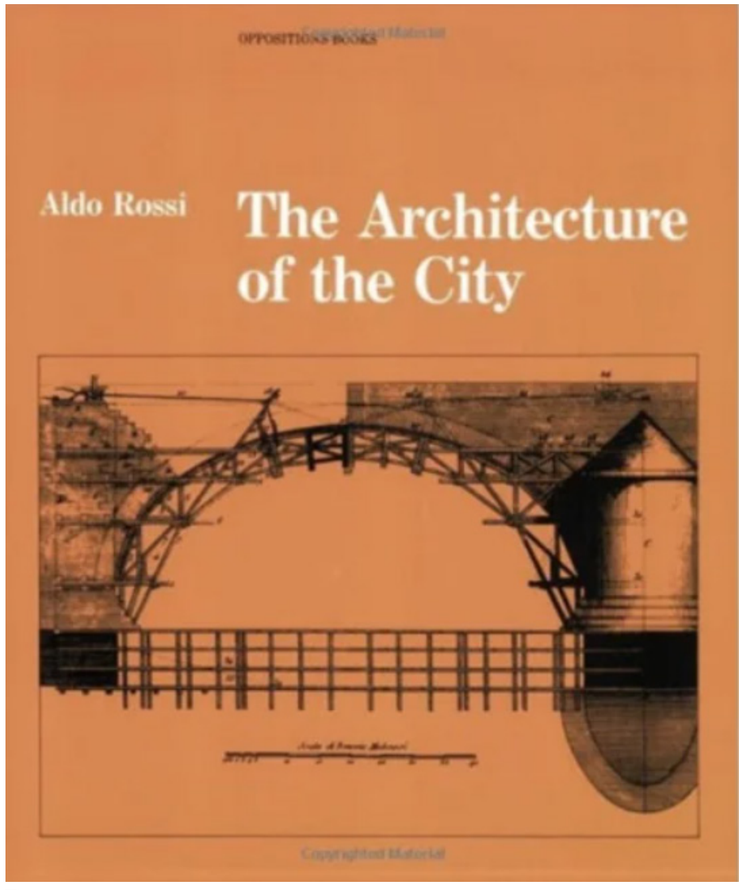


Fig. 1

1.1 The City as a Layered Fabric: Memory, Locus, and Transformation

1.1.1 The City as Collective Artifact and Memory

For Rossi, the city must be understood as a collective artifact whose identity emerges from the long accumulation of cultural memories and material traces. The city is not an abstract spatial container but a historical construct in which form and memory become inseparable. This framing moves architectural analysis beyond functional or economic logics and toward an understanding of the city as a repository of shared experience.

PLACES PREDESTINED BY HISTORY

Rossi observes that within every city there exist places that appear to be "predestined by history,"[1] sites whose meaning cannot be explained by current use alone but by the events, habits, and symbolic associations layered onto them over time. Drawing on Édouard Eydoux, he describes such places as "real signs of space," [2] where collective memory condenses into physical form. His discussion of the Italian piazza further illustrates this dynamic. Through centuries of representation and ritual, the piazza attains a symbolic status - "a general value of place and of memory" [3] - becoming not merely a functional void but a civic emblem through which the Italian city is imagined. Rossi reinforces this link between form and memory by citing Henri Focillon's notion of "psychological places," without which the environment appears "opaque or elusive" [4]. Gothic cathedrals, he notes, produce a recognizable "French humanity," demonstrating how built form anchors identity and structures spatial experience.

MATERIAL MEMORY AND ITS CONTINUITY THROUGH ARCHITECTURAL TRANSFORMATION

These passages clarify that the city's identity develops through the endurance of places and images that crystallize shared cultural meaning. Memory in the city is not metaphorical; it is materially embedded in enduring forms that outlast individual lifetimes. This conceptualization is essential for evaluating contemporary architectural intervention. If the city is a collective artifact shaped by accumulated memory, then any act of modification - especially retrofitting - must recognize the city as a pre-inscribed surface rather than a blank field.

To test Rossi's theoretical framework against architectural practice, this chapter partially steps onto a historical field where continuity was produced less by preservation and in a greater extent - through adaptation. My focus here is on the part of the architecture of the Byzantine world (from the IV and V century) - mainly in terms of the practice of transformation rather than as a stylistic category. Unlike periods governed by explicit restoration doctrines or preservation ideologies, the Byzantine era operated through systemic reuse, adaptation, and incorporation of inherited structures. Those Transformations were not an exception - but an operative norm in architectural practise. Existing temples, basilicas, and civic structures were neither erased nor turned into a heritage site, but re-inscribed with new spatial, liturgical, and symbolic orders.

Although not transforming buildings into intentionally "frozen in time" spaces for exploring the past - as it is with modern museums - was common in many civilizations of the past, the method by which a continuity of a building's life was achieved is unique it was acquired not through visual sameness or hiding the past, but through material negotiation across time - this specific aspect of that architecture may be a crucial one to examine in order to find out a rational, bold but respectful way of designing and retrofitting in present times (my attempts to develop this approach can be found in the third chapter).

The conversion of pagan buildings into Christian churches constitutes a radical test case: when belief systems shift, what remains of place? Byzantine practice shows that locus can endure independently of doctrinal continuity, sustained instead through spatial hierarchy, material reuse - which, in simple terms, seems to be an issue that is also relevant to our times, full of cultural changes and climate threats.

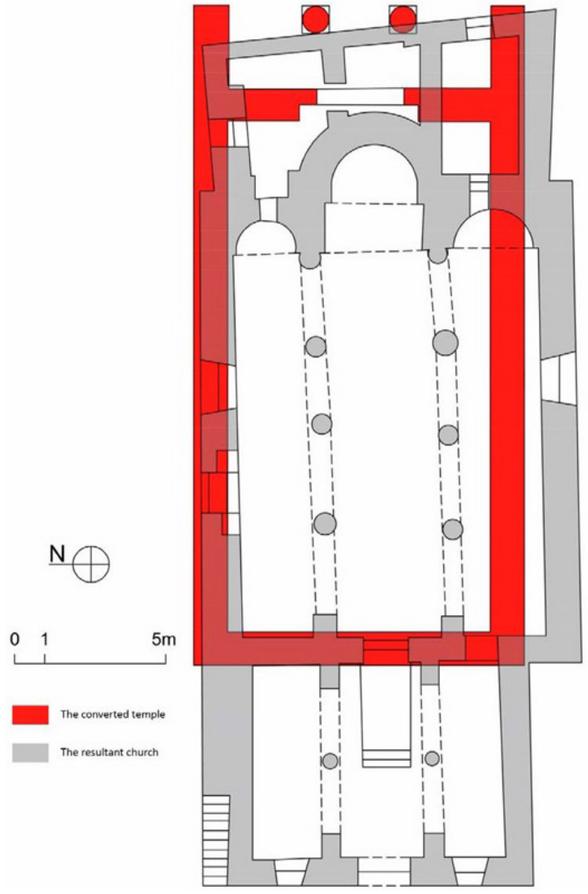


Fig. 2

However, historical evidence is needed to complete these considerations. One of the materials chosen to develop the topic is Hans Buchwald's Form, Style and Meaning in Byzantine Church Architecture - the book offers a detailed, historically grounded analysis of how existing buildings; temples, basilicas, were systematically adapted, reinterpreted, and incorporated into new spatial and symbolic orders within Byzantine architectural culture. Buchwald identifies transformation and retrofit as key design operations, allowing continuity and innovation to coexist within a single architectural artifact. Even in monumental works such as Hagia Sophia, classical capitals were deliberately retained and integrated into a radically new architectural system. Such practices reveal that memory persists through material adaptation, supporting Rossi's argument that cities evolve through cumulative transformations rather than erasures.

1.1.2 Locus:
Place, Events, and Materialized Memory

TYPOLOGY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF PLACE

Rossi describes locus as a “singular artifact” shaped by the interaction of spatial form, temporal succession, topographic conditions, and memory. He argues that architecture cannot be understood without acknowledging how buildings and events become inseparably linked within specific sites. Without this, he writes, only “outlines which evaporate and disappear”[5] remain. His discussion of typology further reinforces locus: types emerge from the reduction of contingent variations and persist over time, allowing architecture to be continuously reinterpreted without losing its rootedness in place. This concept is therefore both ecological and psychological - defined by physical conditions as well as by the cultural practices that invest it with significance.

Locus provides the conceptual vocabulary needed to describe how memory becomes spatial and how place acquires identity through the accumulation of events. A locus persists because it gathers cultural significance, becoming a reference point through which the city is understood. For my thesis, this framework is crucial: any intervention must work with the specificity of locus rather than treating sites as interchangeable. Retrofitting becomes meaningful only when it responds to the deep temporal identity of place.

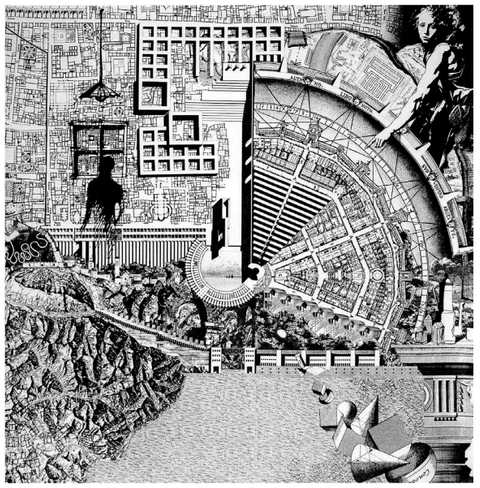


Fig. 4

SACRED SITES

While Rossi conceptualizes locus as the convergence of place, memory, and event, archaeological research allows this concept to be examined through concrete historical processes. Studies of temple conversion in the Eastern Mediterranean are particularly revealing in this regard, as they document the continuity of specific sites across radical cultural and religious transformations. A second paper relevant for the thesis is The Christianisation of the Pagan Temples of the Modern Territory of Lebanon by Christelle Wehbe, as it focuses on how sacred sites were not displaced but materially reoccupied, allowing place-based memory to persist through architectural adaptation and reuse. Archaeological evidence reinforces this understanding of locus as a site whose significance is anchored in continuity rather than form alone. Wehbe shows that many sacred examples of architecture were not abandoned after Christianization but were directly transformed into churches. At Baalbek, Niha, and Bziza, temple precincts retained their spatial centrality, and new liturgical programs were inscribed into existing architectural frameworks. Rather than constructing entirely new buildings, communities continued to gather in the same places, suggesting that the significance of the locus - not merely the structure - endured across religious transformation. These cases demonstrate locus persistence in its purest form: the continuity of place despite fundamental shifts in meaning.

1.1.3 Urban Artifacts, Permanences and Historical Stratification

ARTIFACTS AS STABILIZING ELEMENTS OF THE CITY

Rossi's notion of the urban artifact explains how certain forms endure across time, structuring the city's development and anchoring its historical legibility. Artifacts gain permanence through repeated use, reinterpretation, and incorporation into new urban contexts. Their persistence produces the stratified character of the city.
Rossi argues that urban artifacts - buildings, monuments, spatial types - stabilize the city because they embody "composition, permanence, and evolution"[6]. Roman builders, for instance, repeatedly employed the same basic spatial and formal arrangements across different sites and historical moments. This repetition was not mechanical imitation but a deliberate strategy: familiar configurations were adapted to new contexts while preserving their underlying structure. In doing so, Roman architecture demonstrates how the locus can accommodate change without dissolving form, allowing variation to occur within a stable framework. Rossi illustrates this with Adolf Loos's example of a simple mound in a forest: an intuitively readable sign that "someone lies buried here" [7]. Architecture begins, he argues, when form signifies - when it serves simultaneously as an event and as the record of that event. This logic extends to the urban scale, where artifacts participate in the constitution of a whole, shaping the continuity of the city even as they accumulate new layers of meaning. All "eras of architecture have re-propose the architecture of antiquity anew," [8] demonstrating that permanence is a dynamic process of reinterpretation rather than static continuity.

STRATIFICATION AS THE CONDITION OF URBAN CONTINUITY

Historical stratification arises from the long-term persistence and reinterpretation of artifacts. As forms endure, they gather new meanings, producing a layered urban text in which past configurations remain visible within present ones. This stratified condition is foundational for any contemporary architectural practice. Retrofitting, in particular, must work with artifacts as active historical agents, not obsolete remnants.
To provide a compelling illustration of this process, Buchwald shows that Hagia Sophia - an artifact of unparalleled scale - became a permanent reference for subsequent architectural development. Later churches did not attempt to rival its size, recognizing its permanence within the urban and symbolic landscape. Instead, they incorporated elements from earlier buildings through spolia, the deliberate reuse of architectural fragments such as classical capitals, column shafts, and masonry taken from ancient structures. This practice was not merely a matter of material economy; it often carried symbolic and ideological significance, allowing later buildings to assert continuity with the past, appropriate its authority, and establish a dialogue between historical layers. The result is a city composed of layered artifacts, where new construction coexists with inherited forms, each contributing to the historical depth of the whole.

1.1.4 The City as Evolving Palimpsest: Retrofitting as Architectural Method

RETROFITTING BETWEEN PRESERVATION AND TRANSFORMATION

If, as Rossi argues, cities are collective artifacts shaped by loci and enduring forms, then the city must be understood as a palimpsest - a surface continually rewritten without fully erasing previous inscriptions. Retrofitting becomes the architectural method through which this palimpsestic structure evolves. Rossi's framework implies that the city is neither a linear sequence of replacements nor a static museum of preserved artifacts. Instead, it is an evolving accumulation of interventions that reinterpret what already exists. Loci persist through changing uses; artifacts endure by absorbing new meanings; permanence is achieved by continual transformation rather than replication. This cumulative structure aligns with the metaphor of the palimpsest, where each layer gains meaning through its relationship with what came before.

HISTORICAL PRACTICES OF ARCHITECTURAL ACCRETION

Historical precedent supports this palimpsestic model. Byzantine retrofits, as described by Buchwald, demonstrate how architects integrated ancient forms into new liturgical and spatial systems. Similarly to the example of Haga Sophia described before, Wehbe's study of temple conversions in Lebanon reveals a multi-generational process of reoccupation, in which sacred precincts were not erased but continuously adapted to new religious, social, and spatial frameworks. At Hosn Niha, the destruction of Roman temples (a small shrine from the I century and the main temple from the II century) in the earthquake of 551 did not result in abandonment but in the construction of a Byzantine basilica within the existing temenos, aligned with the earlier sacred axis and positioned over the former altar. Built partly from reused material, the new church preserved the spatial hierarchy and ritual centrality of the site while inscribing a Christian program into an inherited architectural order. A parallel process can be observed at Baalbek (its early Christian reuse is attested from the 4th century, with a major Byzantine basilica added during the reign of Theodosius II) – where successive Christian interventions introduced churches into the vast pagan complex, often constructed from spolia taken from dismantled temples and deliberately placed within the temenos. Here, the scale of the intervention changed, but the underlying logic remained the same: new architecture operated within the enduring structure of the locus rather than replacing it. In both contexts, architecture evolves through accretion, producing cities whose identities are defined by layered temporal structures.

Retrofitting thus emerges as a historically grounded and theoretically coherent method for intervening in the city. By acknowledging the palimpsestic nature of urban form, respecting the specificity of locus, and engaging with the permanence of artifacts, retrofitting becomes not merely a technical strategy but a cultural and ethical position - one that directly informs the design approach developed in the following chapters.

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

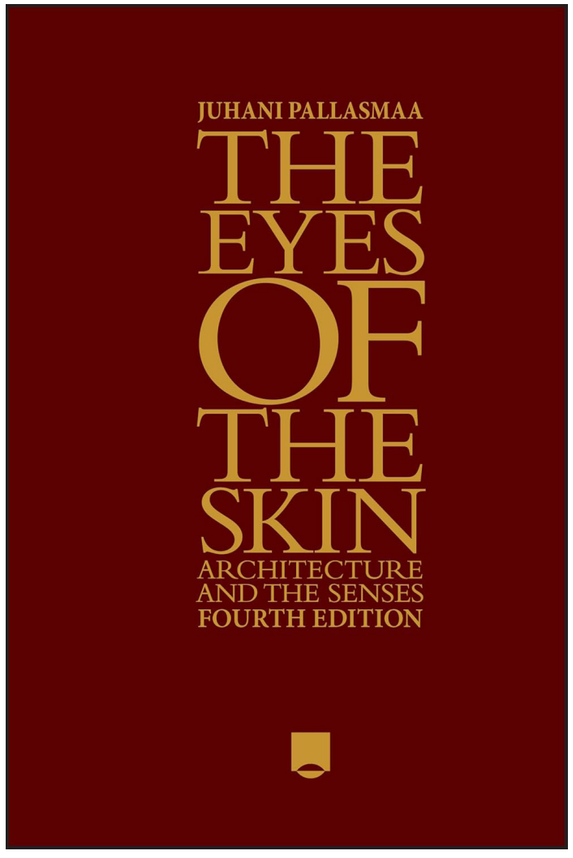


Fig. 6

1.2 Material Truth and Multisensory Experience

1.2.1 From urban memory to embodied experience

If Chapter I approached architecture as a collective artifact shaped by memory and permanence, this chapter shifts the focus toward the individual, embodied encounter with architectural space. Memory, as established through Rossi, is not an abstract intellectual construct but is anchored in material forms and lived continuity. If memory in the urban sense is materialized through collective artifacts, memory at the scale of the individual is embodied through sensory and spatial experience. This chapter extends that argument by examining how architecture is experienced through the body, emphasizing perception as a multisensory, temporal process rather than a purely visual one.

Drawing primarily on Juhani Pallasmaa's The Eyes of the Skin, this chapter argues that architectural authenticity emerges from the integration of bodily senses, material presence, and temporal continuity. Architecture is not first encountered as an image, but as an atmosphere, a resistance, and a spatial condition that engages the body as a whole. While all senses participate in architectural experience, this chapter contends that touch and hearing are the senses through which architecture most effectively resists visual abstraction and reclaims experiential depth.

1.2.2 The dominance of vision and its limits

Pallasmaa's central critique concerns the dominance of vision in modern architectural culture. He argues that contemporary architecture has increasingly privileged the eye, producing spaces conceived as images rather than lived environments. This visual bias results in a form of detachment, where architecture becomes an object of observation instead of a medium of participation.

The Eyes of The Skin book characterizes this condition "through the notions of the narcissistic eye and the nihilistic eye". [9] In both cases, architecture is detached from bodily experience and societal meaning: either reduced to self-referential visual expression or emptied of collective significance altogether. Such architecture fails to reinforce a body-centered understanding of the world and instead isolates the individual observer.

This critique resonates with the arguments developed in Chapter I. Just as the city loses meaning when detached from its accumulated memory and material continuity, architecture loses depth when detached from the bodily conditions of perception. Vision alone cannot sustain architectural meaning, because it operates at a distance, privileging appearance over presence.

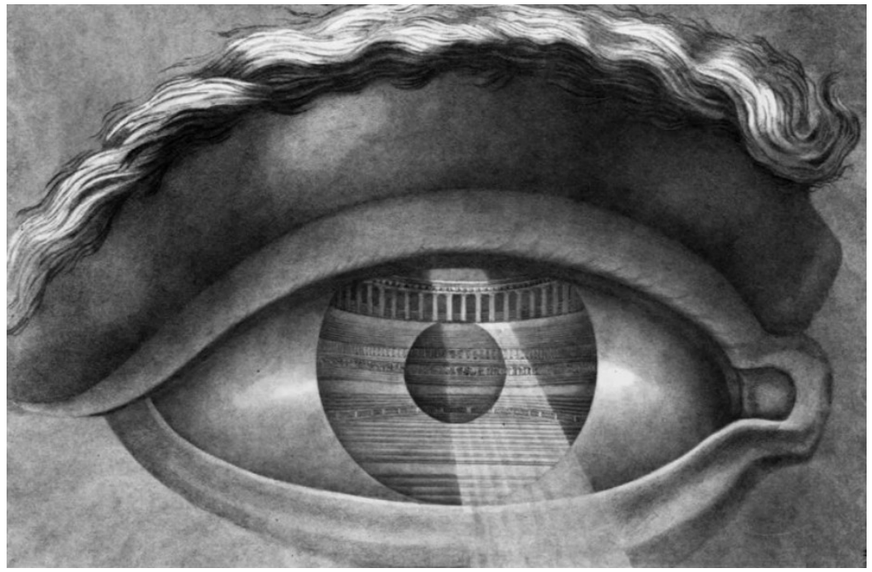


Fig. 7

1.2.3 Touch and hearing as architectural counterforces

Although architecture engages all human senses, Pallasmaa emphasizes that touch and hearing possess a particular capacity to counteract the distancing effect of vision. Unlike sight, which reaches outward, touch and hearing involve proximity, immersion, and reciprocity. They anchor perception in the body and bind the subject to space.

Fig. 8

TOUCH

Touch is fundamental to spatial understanding. Drawing on philosophical traditions referenced by Pallasmaa, vision detached from touch would be incapable of producing a sense of depth, distance, or corporeality. Touch provides awareness of weight, resistance, texture, and three-dimensional form. As Pallasmaa concisely states, "vision reveals what the touch already knows." [10]. In architectural terms, this means that space is first grasped through bodily contact with material reality. Floors are felt through the feet, walls through proximity, and surfaces through texture. Thickness, joints, and edges communicate spatial structure haptically, long before they are consciously interpreted visually. Architecture that neglects these tactile dimensions risks becoming scenographic - visually legible but experientially thin.

HEARING

Hearing reinforces the embodied relationship between body and space in a manner distinct from vision. Sound does not remain external to the subject; it envelops and returns, creating a reciprocal exchange between architecture and inhabitant. While the eye reaches outward toward objects, the ear receives space as an immersive condition. Buildings may remain indifferent to our gaze, but they respond acoustically to our presence. Through resonance, echo, and silence, architecture defines enclosure and scale. Acoustic conditions allow the body to sense volume, proximity, and boundary. Rather than being perceived visually, spatial limits are apprehended through sound as bodily traces of enclosure, as if the ear were outlining the space from within. In this way, hearing collapses distance and reinforces architectural presence as something lived rather than observed.
The suppression of these acoustic conditions - through overly absorptive interiors or acoustically neutral public spaces - contributes to sensory alienation and reinforces architecture as an abstract visual object rather than a responsive environment.

1.2.4 Material truth and honesty

Multisensory experience depends fundamentally on material authenticity. If materials deceive - if surfaces disguise their substance or construction - bodily trust is undermined. Here, Ruskin's ethical conception of architectural truth provides a useful, though carefully limited, reinforcement to Pallasmaa's phenomenological framework. Ruskin defines architectural falsehood as "a direct falsity of assertion respecting the nature of material, or the quantity of labour." [11]

Deception in architecture is not merely a visual problem but an ethical one, as it disrupts the alignment between appearance, construction, and experience. When materials pretend to be what they are not, architecture communicates falsehood through perception. Ruskin further emphasizes that "so degrading a thing is deception in even the approach and appearance of it." [12] This assertion aligns closely with Pallasmaa's critique of image-driven architecture. Deceptive appearances, even when visually convincing, erode the experiential grounding of architectural space and weaken the bodily trust through which meaning is formed. Importantly, this conception of truth does not privilege historical architecture over contemporary work. Authenticity is not a function of age, but of honesty, material clarity, and experiential coherence. Contemporary architecture can be equally authentic when it openly expresses its materials, construction, and sensory conditions.

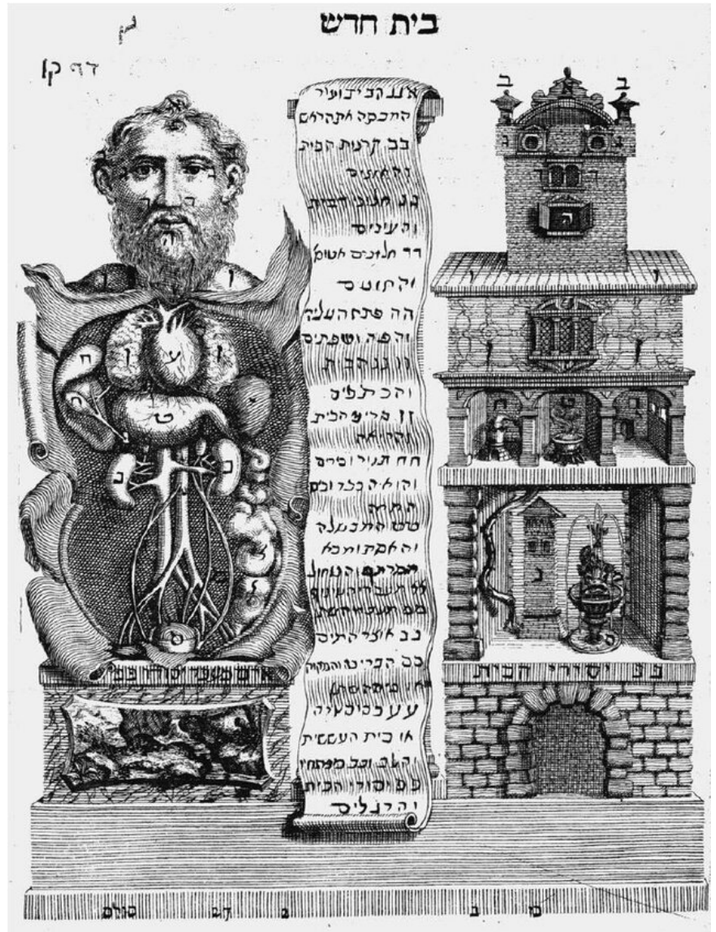


Fig. 9

1.2.5 Time, memory, and embodied continuity

Architectural experience unfolds over time, and memory plays a central role in this process. For Pallasmaa, remembering places is not a purely mental operation but an embodied phenomenon, grounded in sensory and bodily experience. Spatial memory is formed through repeated tactile, acoustic, and atmospheric encounters, which become inscribed in the body itself.
Buildings and cities thus function as instruments of time, allowing individuals to perceive continuity beyond their own lifespan. Architecture connects the living with the past not through representation, but through material presence and sensory resonance. Wear, patina, and traces of use are not defects but carriers of meaning, enabling architecture to participate in temporal continuity while remaining open to change. This understanding resonates with the notion of permanence developed in the previous chapter - not as static preservation, but as the capacity of architecture to endure through use, transformation, and time.

1.2.6 Embodiment as architectural responsibility

This chapter has argued that architectural authenticity emerges from embodied, multisensory experience grounded in material honesty and temporal continuity. By critiquing the dominance of vision and elevating the roles of touch and hearing, architecture can resist abstraction and recover experiential depth.
Material truth, supported by Ruskin's ethical framework, reinforces the trust between body and space, while Pallasmaa's phenomenological approach reveals architecture as an extension of lived experience rather than an isolated image. At the scale of the body, the architectural artifact is not encountered as an object, but as a lived condition unfolding through perception, material presence, and time.
Together, these perspectives position authenticity not as a stylistic or historical condition, but as an experiential responsibility. As the following chapter will explore, the contemporary architectural condition is increasingly marked by sensory impoverishment and experiential disconnection. Addressing this condition requires re-centering architecture on the body, materials, and time - conditions through which architectural meaning is not only perceived, but lived.

Fig. 10

Simulating continuity

Fig. 11

Constructing continuity

Concealment falsifies permanence by
simulating continuity rather than constructing it

1.3 Towards Ethics of Legibility

1.3.1 From concealed transformation to ethical legibility

Architectural intervention increasingly operates through the suppression of transformation. Additions are absorbed into seamless surfaces, repairs are cosmetically erased, and material discontinuities are minimized in order to preserve an impression of unity. These strategies appear to secure continuity, yet they function through abstraction: by masking change and erasing temporal traces, they weaken the conditions through which continuity is perceived as lived experience rather than as visual coherence. In this sense, concealment aligns with the broader cultural logic described by Pallasmaa.

The alternative developed in this chapter is an ethics of legibility, defined through three interdependent commitments: material honesty, readable change, and restraint. Legibility is not proposed as a stylistic preference, nor as a nostalgic preference for the old. Rather, it is framed as a methodological stance for retrofit: if architecture is to sustain continuity at once urban and embodied, transformation must remain intelligible. This chapter therefore translates the thesis' theoretical framework into a design approach that treats retrofit as a visible continuation of material narrative rather than as the production of seamless appearance.

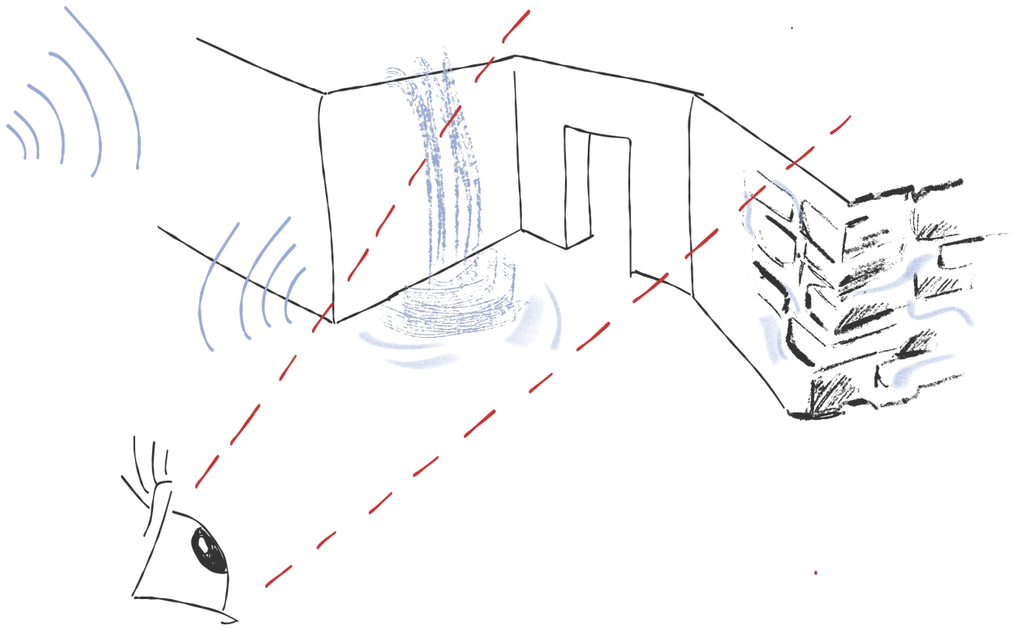


Fig. 12

The eye captures the form, but the body remembers the rest. From the cooling spray of water, tactile experience of stone and the moisture, to the resonant echoes of the waterfall, - architecture is a conversation between all the senses.

1.3.2 The design approach as a synthesis of two registers of continuity

The design approach outlined here emerges from the intersection of two registers of continuity developed earlier:

At the urban scale, continuity depends on the persistence of loci and artifacts as carriers of materialized memory. Retrofitting becomes meaningful when it operates within this inherited structure rather than treating the existing as a neutral background for a new image.

At the experiential scale, continuity depends on bodily trust in material presence: architecture resists abstraction when it remains accessible through touch, hearing, and temporal trace. Material deception - however visually convincing - undermines this trust by disrupting the alignment between appearance and construction.
Both of these claims together establish the operative thesis of this chapter: concealing transformation weakens continuity twice - by reducing the city's (or any given localization's) historical intelligibility and by diminishing the embodied mechanisms through which architectural meaning is formed. The ethics of legibility is proposed as a response to this double loss.

1.3.3 Legibility as method: design operations for retrofit

An ethics of legibility treats transformation as a constitutive architectural event rather than an inconvenience to be concealed. In complexes where traces of change already exist - where multiple textures, repairs, and adaptations testify to different moments - intervention gains coherence by continuing this temporal logic. The aim is neither to aestheticize decay nor to stage contrast as a formal agenda, but to preserve architecture's capacity to register time truthfully as an urban artifact and as an embodied environment.

LEGIBLE REINFORCEMENT AND STRUCTURAL CARE

Retrofitting often requires reinforcement, yet contemporary practice frequently renders such operations invisible in order to preserve a finished image. The approach outlined here instead treats reinforcement as a readable inscription of care. New supports, braces, or supplementary members are maintained as explicit elements, differentiated through tectonic clarity and material character. This does not turn structure into spectacle; it restores construction as knowledge, allowing endurance to appear as the product of maintenance and adaptation rather than as an illusion of untouched permanence. The tactile consequence is equally significant: expressed structural joints, edges, and thickness intensify haptic perception and resist the flattening of space into surface.

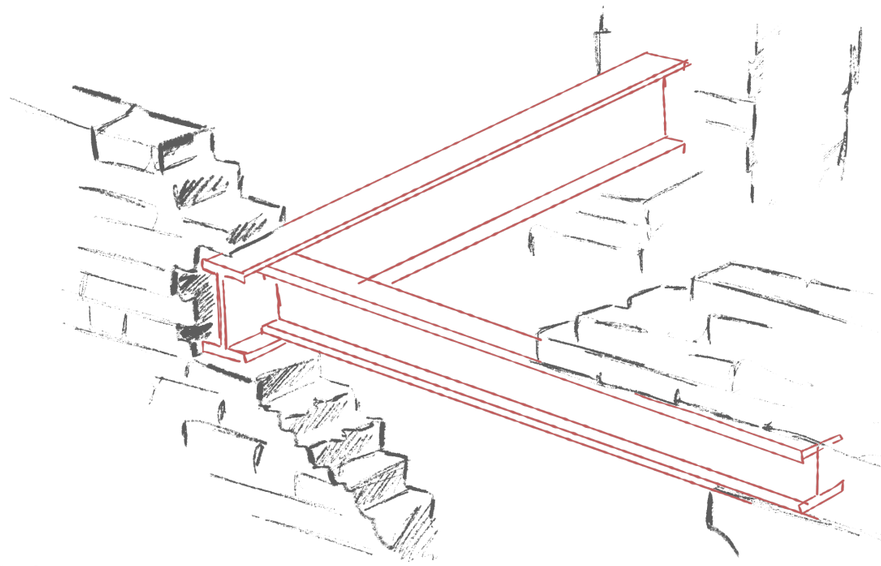


Fig. 13

An example of a legible reinforcement - the beam follows the shape of walls, revealing its supporting role in honest way yet remains distinctive in its look from the bricks

SPATIAL MEMORY THROUGH NON-ERASING ENCLOSURES AND MATERIAL MARKING

When new partitions or enclosures are introduced, the previous spatial order is often annulled. This chapter's approach treats spatial change as something that should remain readable. Transparent or glazed insertions can function as architectural memory, acknowledging earlier relations even as new programs are introduced. Such strategies preserve the intelligibility of locus by allowing the building to remain legible as a sequence of states rather than as a single overwritten condition.

Changes in use can be made explicit through distinct material zones on floors and walls. This operates as architectural information rather than decoration: transformation becomes readable as a shift in program and intensity of occupation. Material transitions simultaneously intensify tactile perception, as the body encounters thresholds through contact rather than through visual signage alone. In this way, legibility becomes multisensory, binding spatial understanding to the same embodied mechanisms through which memory is formed.

PROVISIONAL SYSTEMS AND EMBODIED PARTICIPATION

Where a site's history contains provisional spatial practices - temporary solutions, improvised arrangements, and user-adjusted configurations - retrofit can reinforce continuity by maintaining this openness. Movable systems and adaptable components do not only provide flexibility; they activate bodily participation as a mode of spatial understanding. By requiring contact and adjustment, they bind the inhabitant to the building through touch, while also allowing acoustic conditions - reverberation, enclosure, and boundary - to shift with use. This preserves architectural presence as a lived and responsive condition rather than as a stable visual composition.

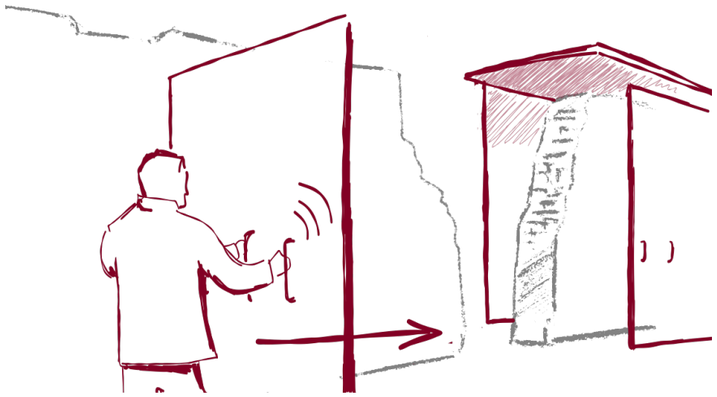


Fig. 14 Temporary changable solutions and activating bodily participation as a mode of spatial understanding

PRESERVATION WHERE TIME IS ALREADY LEGIBLE, TRANSFORMATION WHERE LIFE REQUIRES IT

Legibility is not equivalent to exposing everything. It requires restraint and selection: identifying where existing surfaces operate as carriers of temporal meaning and where transformation is necessary to allow inhabitation and function. Where exterior material already registers time - wear, patina, and accumulated trace - preservation sustains the building's temporal readability.

Interiors, by contrast, often require upgrading if the aim is renewed use. In such cases the ethical criterion is not to minimize change but to refuse falsification: new finishes should not mimic old ones, and improvements should remain readable as improvements. This position follows directly from the ethical and phenomenological argument that deception disrupts experiential grounding and weakens bodily trust.

CONTINUITY THROUGH REOCCUPATION: THE BYZANTINE AND CONVERSION PRECEDENT.

Historical precedents discussed earlier clarify that continuity can be sustained through legible reoccupation rather than through replacement. Byzantine retrofit and the conversion of pagan precincts demonstrate a recurring method: new programs are inscribed into inherited orders, often preserving spatial hierarchy and centrality while allowing material reuse and adaptation to remain visible. At Hosn Niha and Baalbek, for example, Christian interventions operated within the enduring logic of the locus rather than eliminating it, producing continuity through accretion rather than erasure.

This precedent supports a further implication for contemporary retrofit: even a precise and well-functioning project should avoid exhausting the building's future. Continuity is sustained not only by what is fixed, but by what is left open to subsequent inhabitation and reinterpretation.

CONCLUSION

An ethics of legibility treats transformation as a constitutive architectural event rather than an inconvenience to be concealed. In complexes where traces of change already exist - where multiple textures, repairs, and adaptations testify to different moments - intervention gains coherence by continuing this temporal logic. The aim is neither to aestheticize decay nor to stage contrast as a formal agenda, but to preserve architecture's capacity to register time truthfully as an urban artifact and as an embodied environment.

II. Project

Concept
Analysis
Function
Spaces
Structure

2.1 Concept

An introduction to the project

This chapter focuses on the architectural proposal for Casamatta, serving as the vital bridge where the theoretical "Ethics of legibility" transitions into reality. The design is the direct result of a multi-layered analysis-ranging from the building's structural and aesthetic DNA to the functional needs of this contemporary social hub and its target users.

Casamatta is an entity defined by constant change. Consequently, this project rejects static restoration in favor of architectural honesty. By applying a legible design language, the project seeks to make the evolution of the site transparent and intuitive. It is a strategy of balance: respecting the weight of the past, maximizing the opportunities of the present, and providing a flexible framework that allows this social landmark to continue its evolution long into the future.

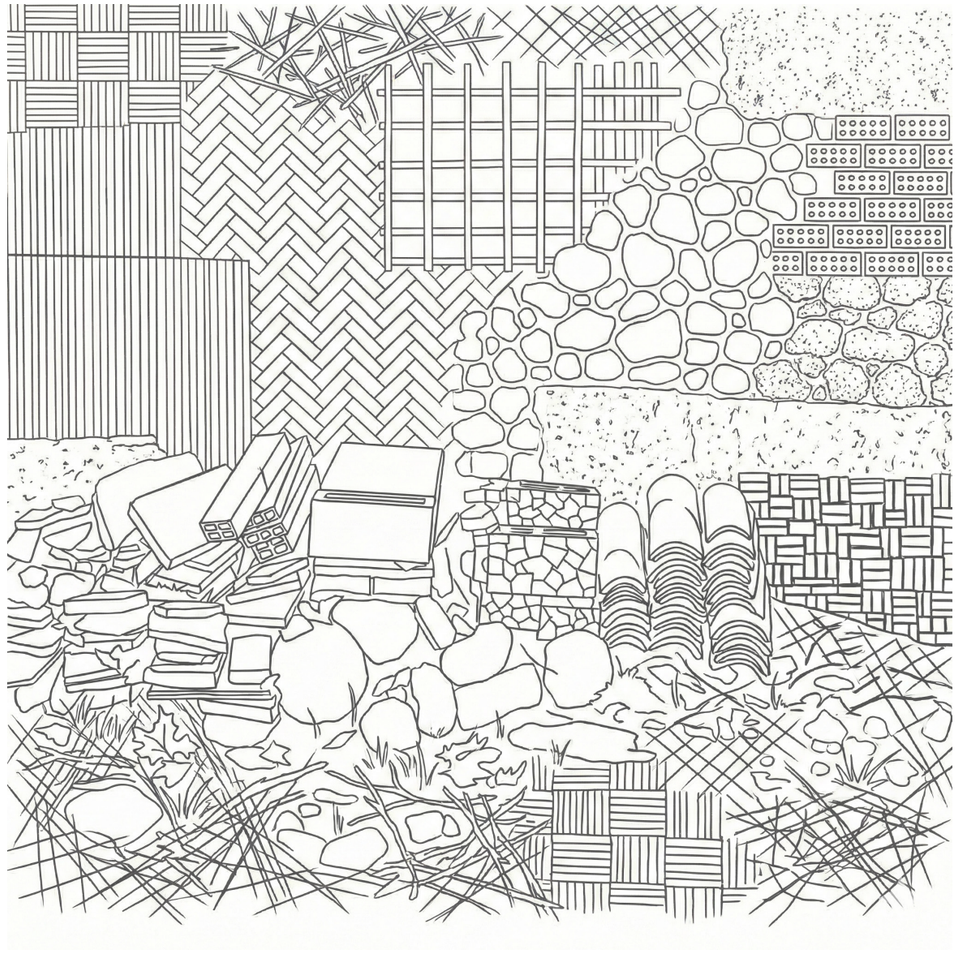


Fig. 15

2.2 Collage Patterns Analysis

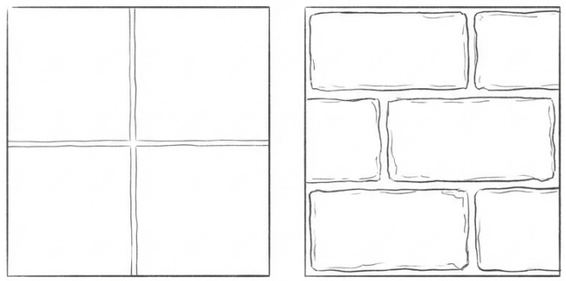
Investigating the multilayered character of Casamatta

To design architecture is, at its core, an act of problem-solving. However, to truly improve a site like Casamatta, one must first decode its DNA through direct experience. This analysis moved beyond visual observation, utilizing site visits to engage the senses - feeling the cooling touch of stone, the grit of aged mortar, and the varied weights of historic materials.

The most striking discovery was Casamatta's character as a living collage. I analyzed the site by observing it carefully, taking photos and then trying to extract patterns from them, in order to identify a complex coexistence of materials. At times, these layers appear in chaotic overlaps; at others, they form a rather ordered rhythm. This "collage" analysis provided the deepest insight into what Casamatta feels like. My architectural intervention is born from this study, seeking not to sanitize the space, but to celebrate its multilayered textures and honor the raw, tactile history that defines its spirit.

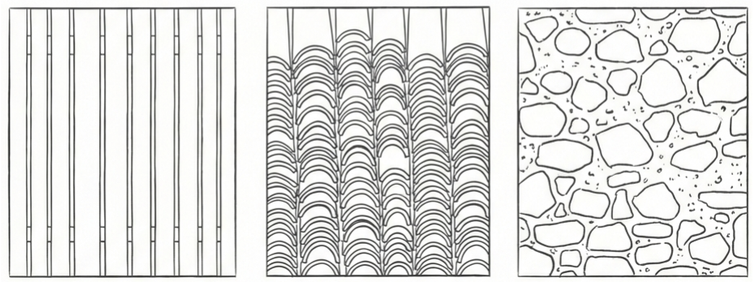
TILES JUXTAPOSITION

EXTRACTED PATTERNS



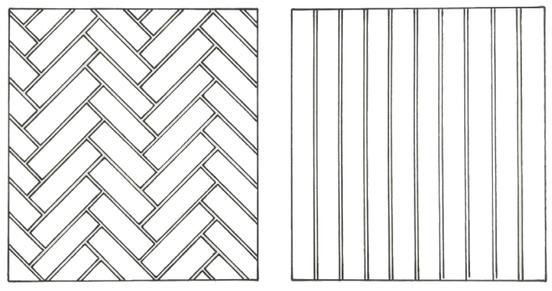
FOOTBRIDGE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

EXTRACTED PATTERNS



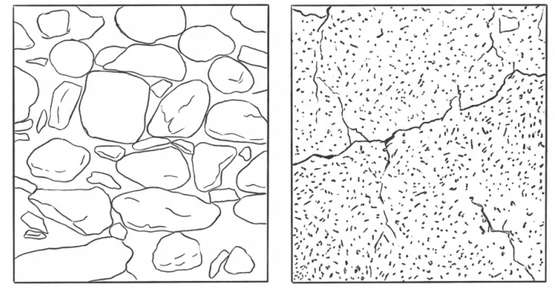
WOODEN PLANKS AND BRICK FLOOR

EXTRACTED PATTERNS



FINISHES OF A WALL

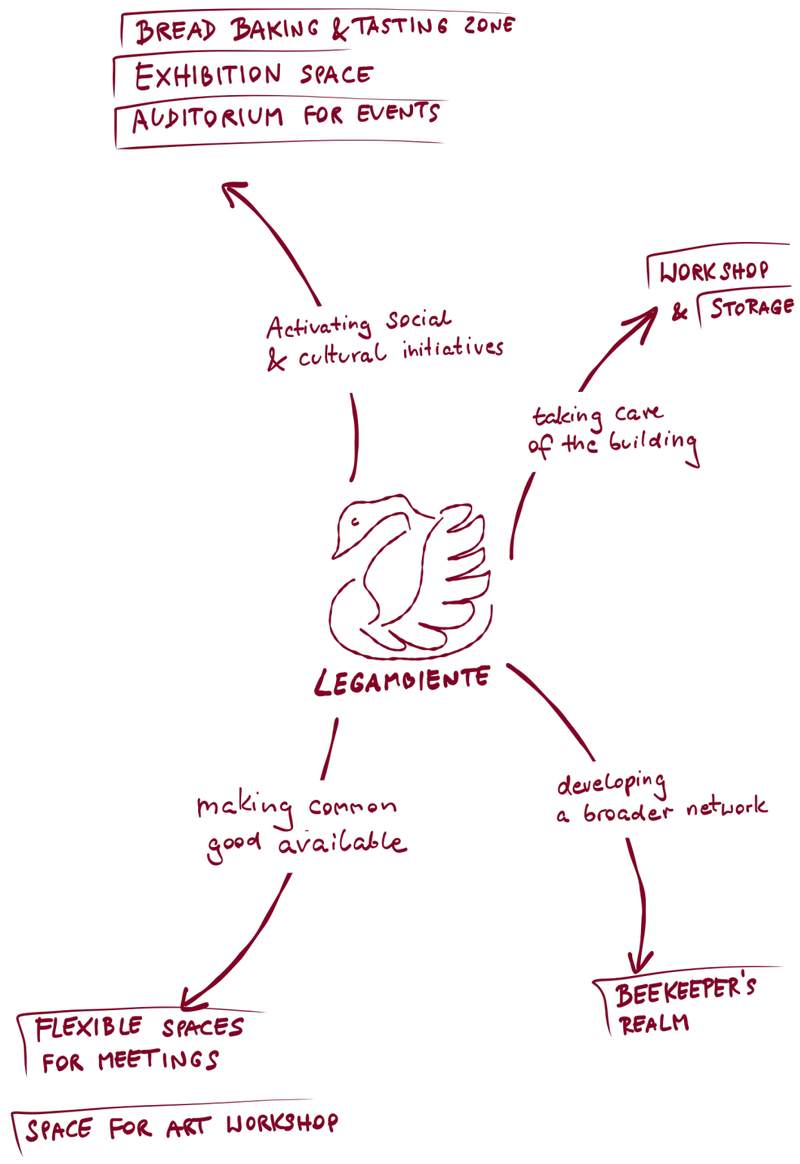
EXTRACTED PATTERNS



SURFACES OF WALLS

EXTRACTED PATTERNS

This analysis of layered patterns has put me in the direction of the right material palette and design strategy that respects the site's evolution. Rather than disrupting the narrative, these choices continue the creative "relay race" of historical interventions of Casamatta.



Legambiente goals - and how to realize them through assigning them certain spaces

2.3 Functional Programme

Target users and their needs

Casamatta is far more than a physical structure; it is a manifestation of the people and collective actions that inhabit it. The soul of the site has been defined by Legambiente, whose stewardship over the past years has not only protected these walls but also shaped their future purpose. Their mission to increase social and cultural activities serves as the foundational logic for this functional programme.

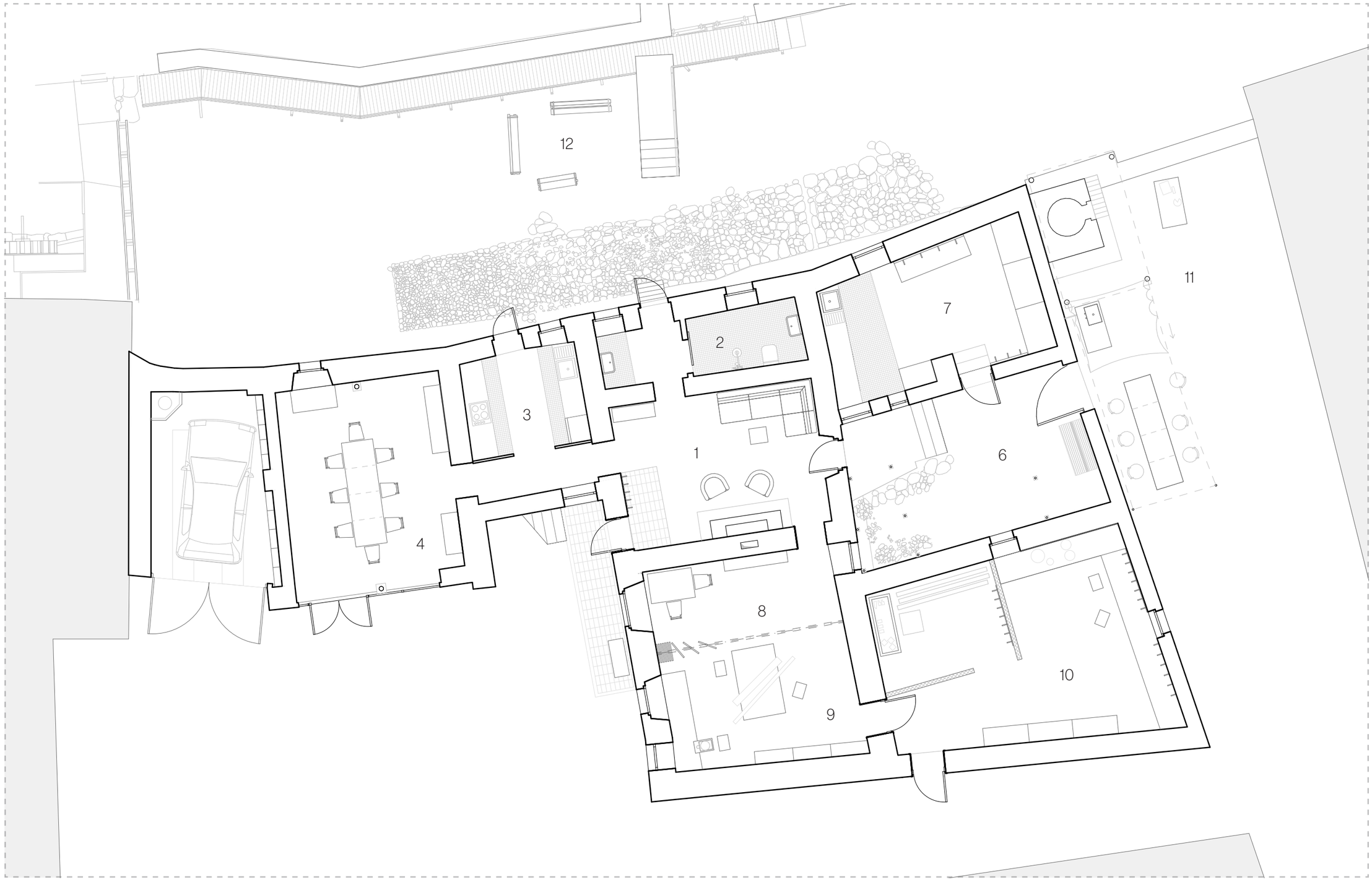
To honor this, the building's primary zones are designed for high adaptability, fostering a space where spontaneous interactions and planned events coexist.
The idea to make common good available results in the program providing dedicated spaces for art workshops and exhibitions, encouraging students (both from nearby towns and Milano - as they already became constant visitors) and locals to come to Casamatta and become a part of it.

Furthermore, the design acknowledges that preservation is an ongoing act. A dedicated area for fixing and maintenance ensures that the tradition "taking care" of the building remains a core function of Legambiente's activities here. Finally, Casamatta should look outward, integrating into a broader regional network through agriturismo initiatives, such as bee breeding and honey production. This strategic expansion could elevate the site's significance, transforming it from a local landmark into a bigger cultural and ecological node within the region.

2.4 Spaces

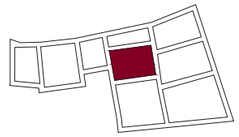
GROUND LEVEL

1:100



LEGEND

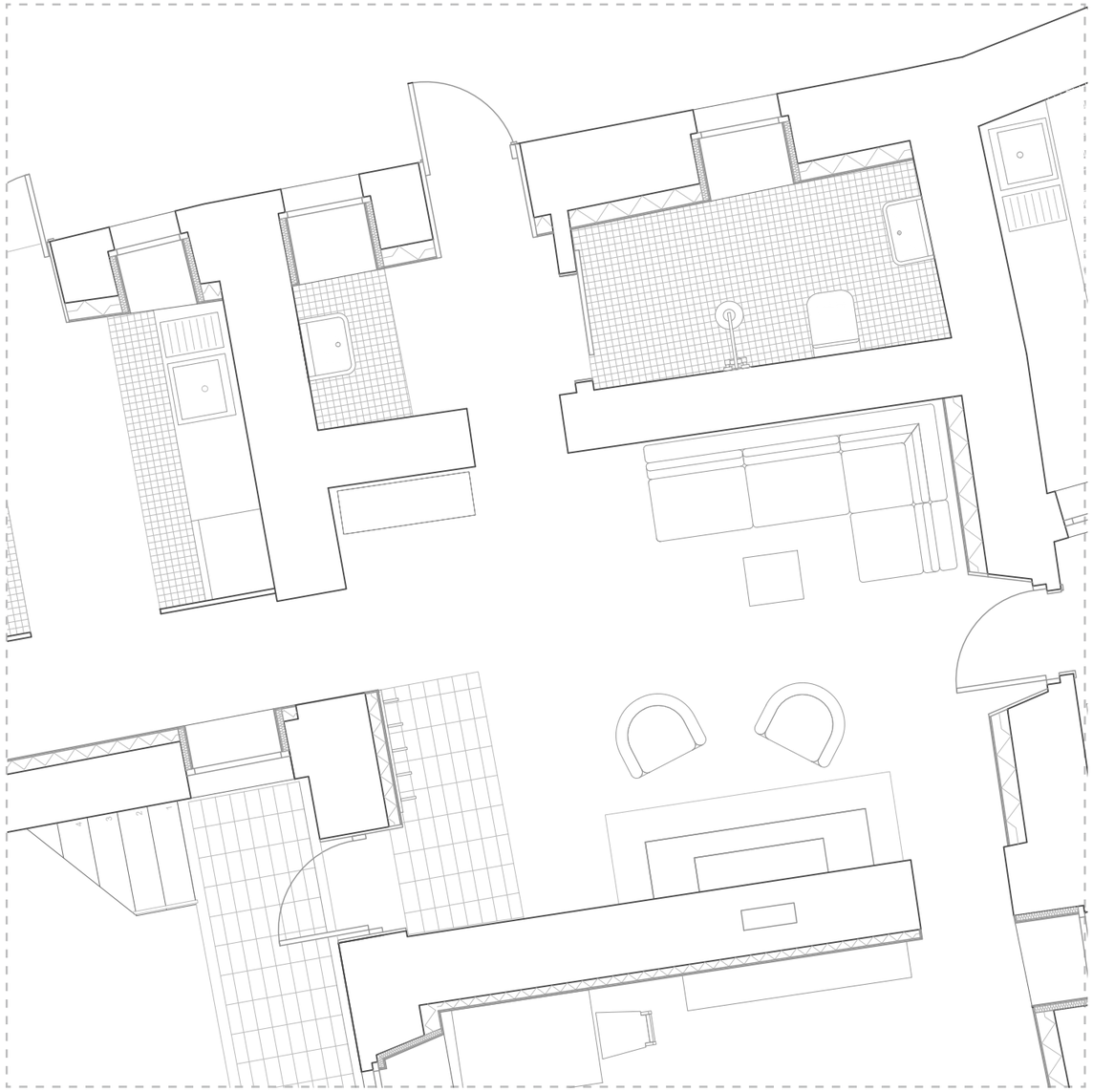
1. Entrance Room / 2. Bathroom / 3. Kitchen / 4. Main Office / 5. Garage /6. Courtyard / 7. Beekeeper's Room / 8. Small Office / 9. Workshop / 10. Storage / 11. Oven Zone / 12. Outdoor Area



ENTRANCE ZONE

The entrance zone is the starting point for discovering the building - its task is to welcome guests and provide clear orientation. Exterior tiles continue inside, creating a seamless threshold and guiding visitors into a warm and cozy space with seating by the fireplace for a brief pause.

From here, ground-floor activities transition gradually from public to operational. After the guest area - alongside kitchen and bathroom - visitors reach the Legambiente organisation spaces. Further inward, rooms become increasingly maintenance-oriented, reserved primarily for those spending time here working, ensuring a clear and functional division.



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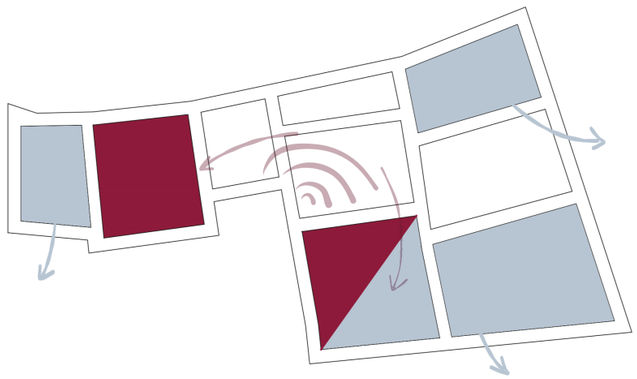
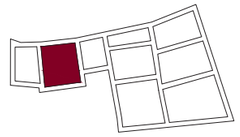


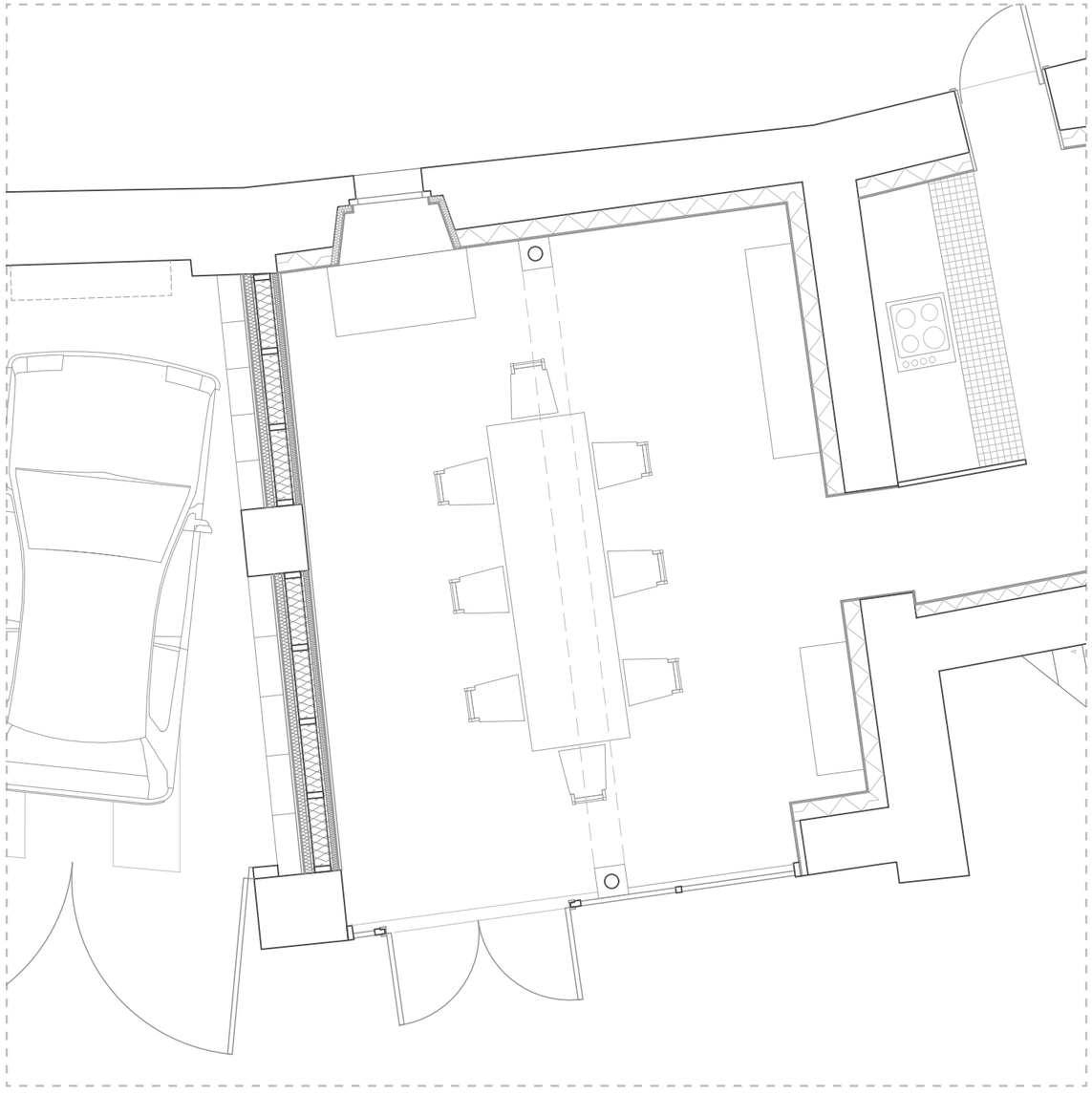
Actiivities related to Legambiente organization

Activities related to maintaining and functioning of the building



MAIN OFFICE

Occupying a formerly outdoor space, the main office is closed with a full-height glazed wall to honor the site's original footprint. This design aligns with the "ethics of legibility," ensuring the building's evolution remains visible to visitors. While a new steel beam provides essential structural reinforcement, the transparency of the glass invites new-comers at Casamatta to engage with Legambiente's activities by seeing them immediately when entering the courtyard.



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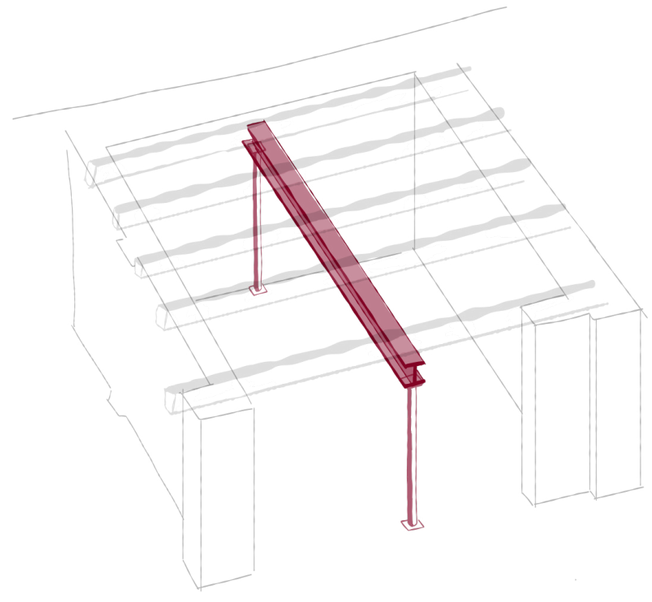
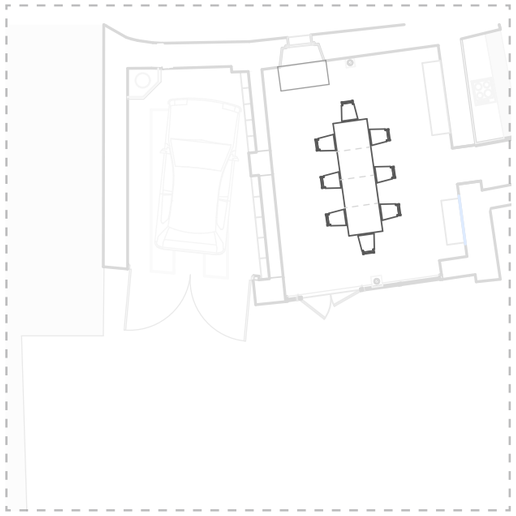


New steel beam supporting the original wooden beams of the original ceiling

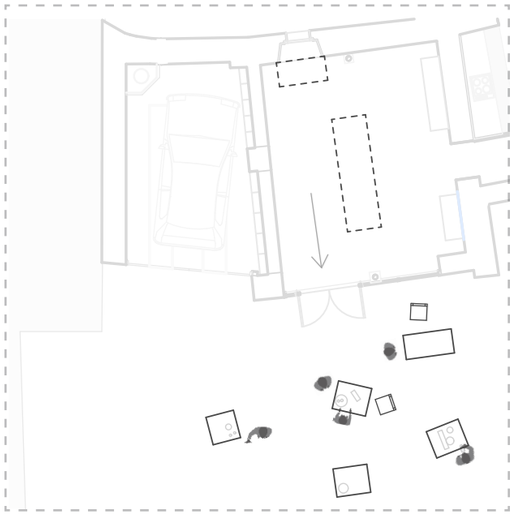
Visualization

FLEXIBLE USE

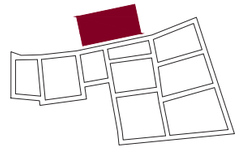
Designed for maximum flexibility, the office features direct courtyard access to make daily workflow, as well as occasional public initiatives more effective. The interior is characterized by its adaptability - eg. the long office table can be deconstructed into smaller units used for hosting outdoor social events. This seamless indoor-outdoor transition transforms the office from a private workspace into a functional extension of the Casamatta courtyard.



Arrangement 1:
Regular Legambiente office acitvity

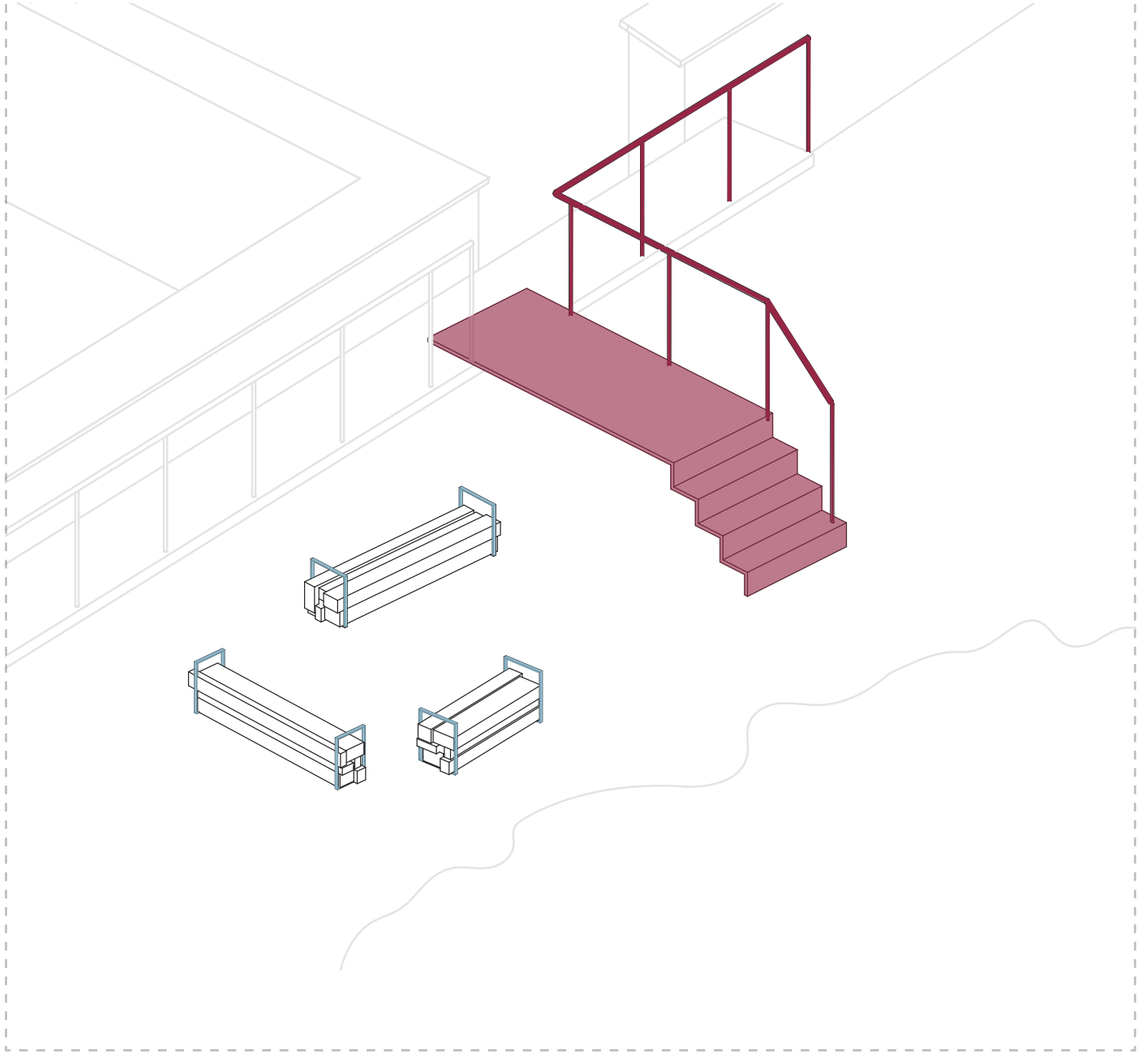


Arrangement 2
A spread of tables into the courtyard during an event

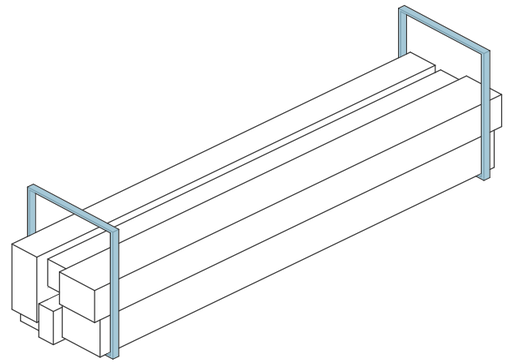


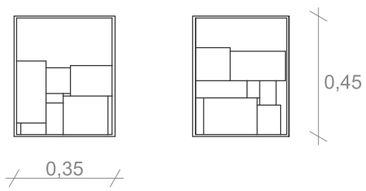
OUTDOOR AREA

To fulfill its potential, the public outdoor area introduces a footpath extension with stairs and a few benches. Their placement creates a sense of closure that encourages people to gather and chat. The simple materiality of benches (crafted from long pieces of timber tied with metal) fosters a spontaneous and welcoming vibe.

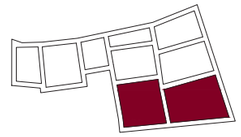


Publiic outdoor space view





Possible arrangement of wood pieces



SMALL OFFICE, MAINTAINANCE WORKSHOP AND STORAGE

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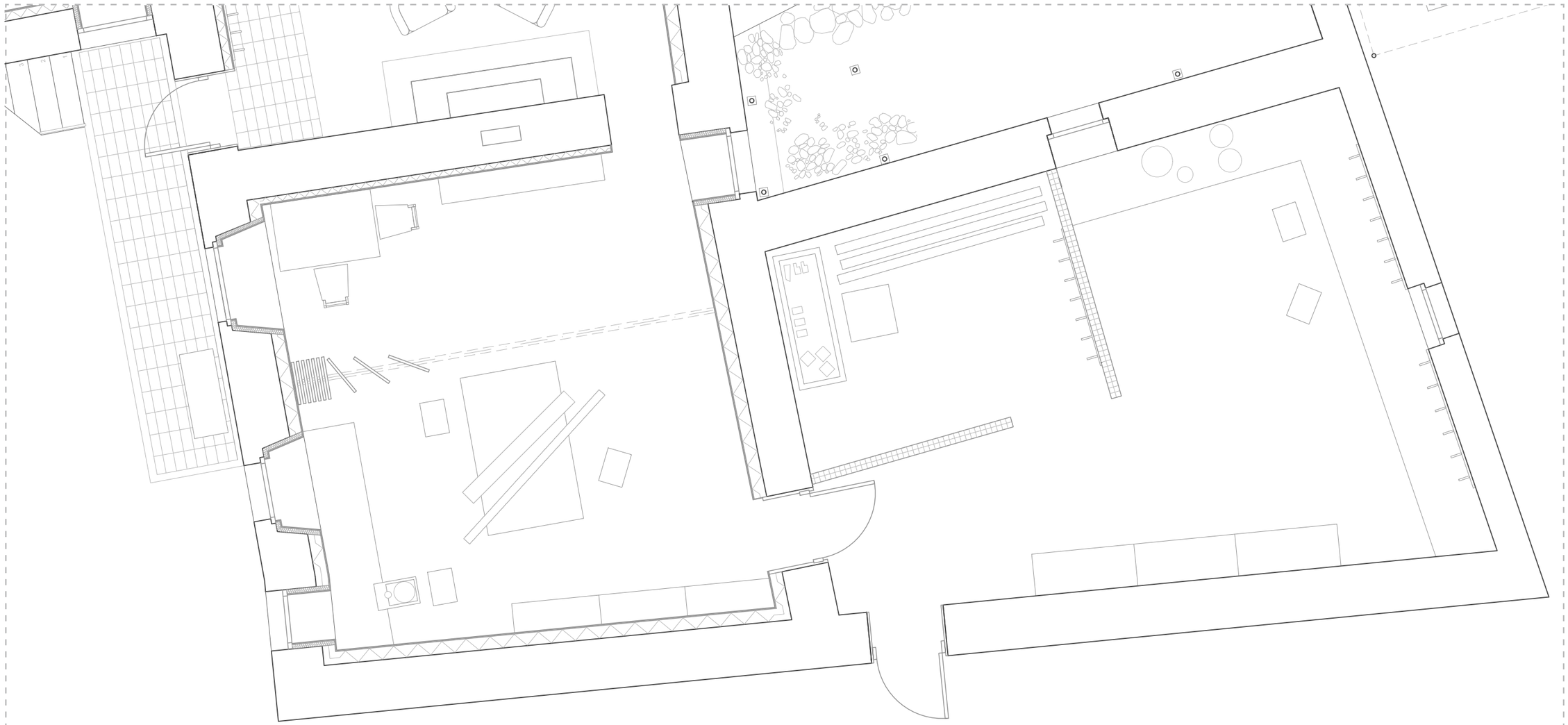
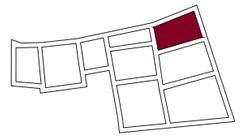
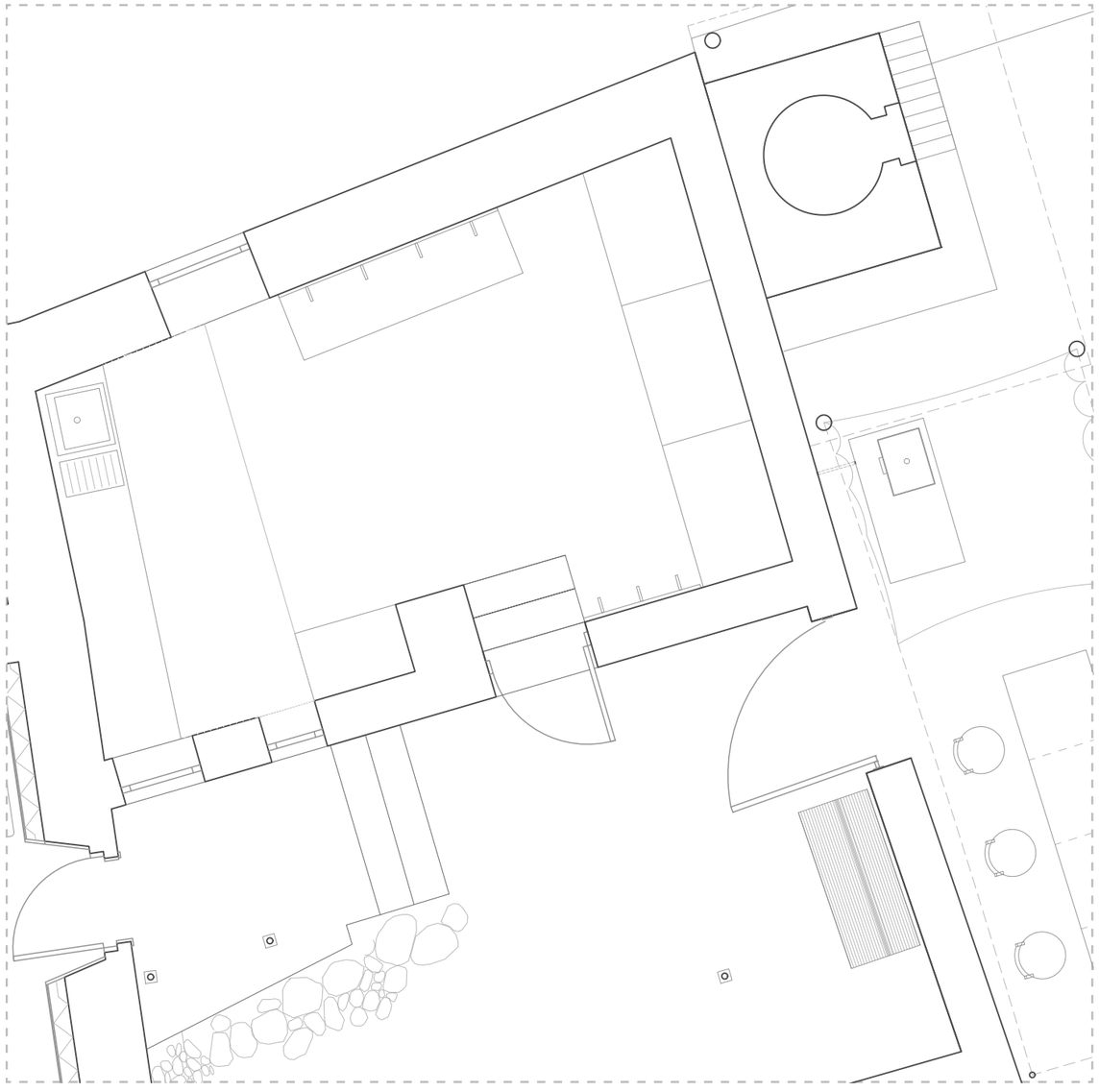


A flexible hub for Legambiente, this space features a quick-access office for meetings (hence the proximity to the entrance room), the small office is separated by a movable wall from the maintenance workshop. Dedicated to the ongoing care of the building, the workshop connects to the original storage area. Now reimagined with light mesh divisions, the storage provides an organized and airy spatial layout.



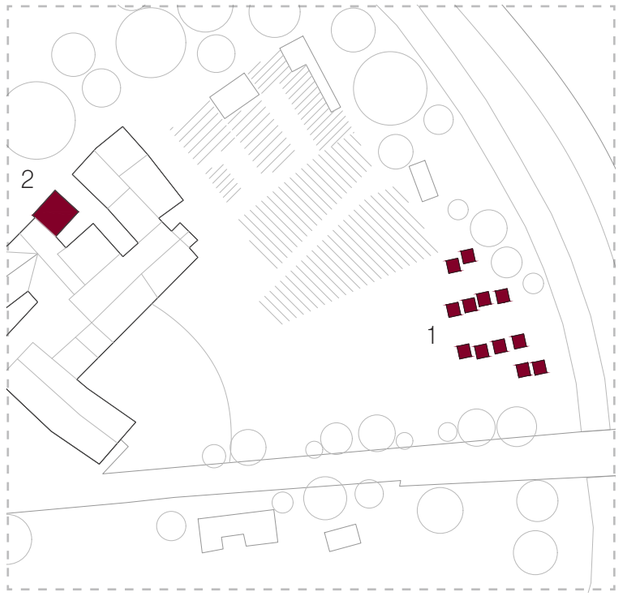


1:50

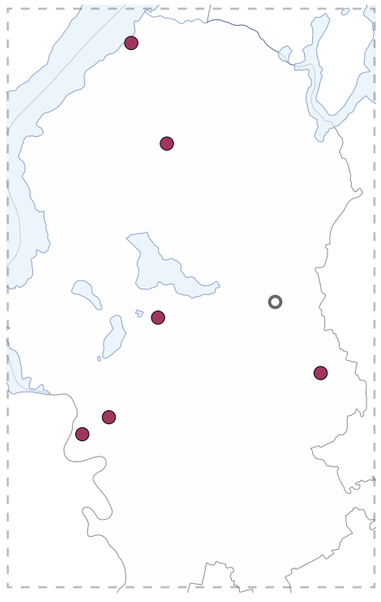
BEEKEEPER'S ROOM

Designed to enhance Casamatta's existing apiculture (in order to become a part of a broader agricultural network and to promote eg. honey-tasting events), this efficient beekeper's workshop features washable surfaces, a sink, and specialized storage. Its layout prioritizes hygiene and workflow, while its strategic proximity to the small courtyard's exit ensures a seamless connection between the indoor processing space and the external bee hives.

1. Bee Hives / 2. Beekeeper's Room

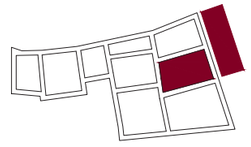


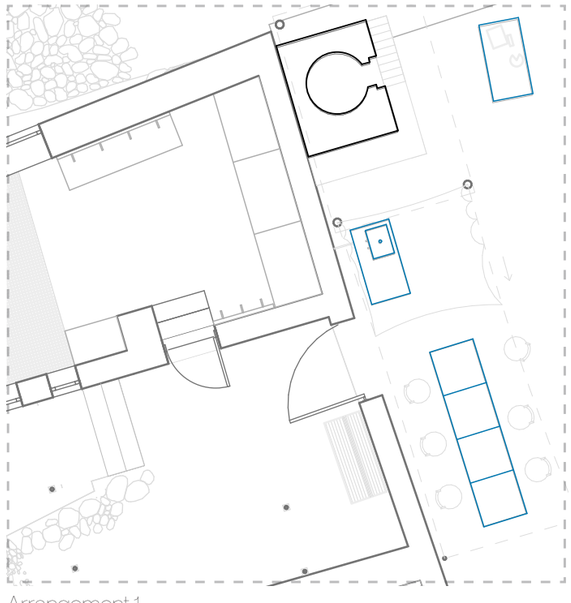
Agritourism places in Varese
Casamatta



OUTDOOR OVEN ZONE

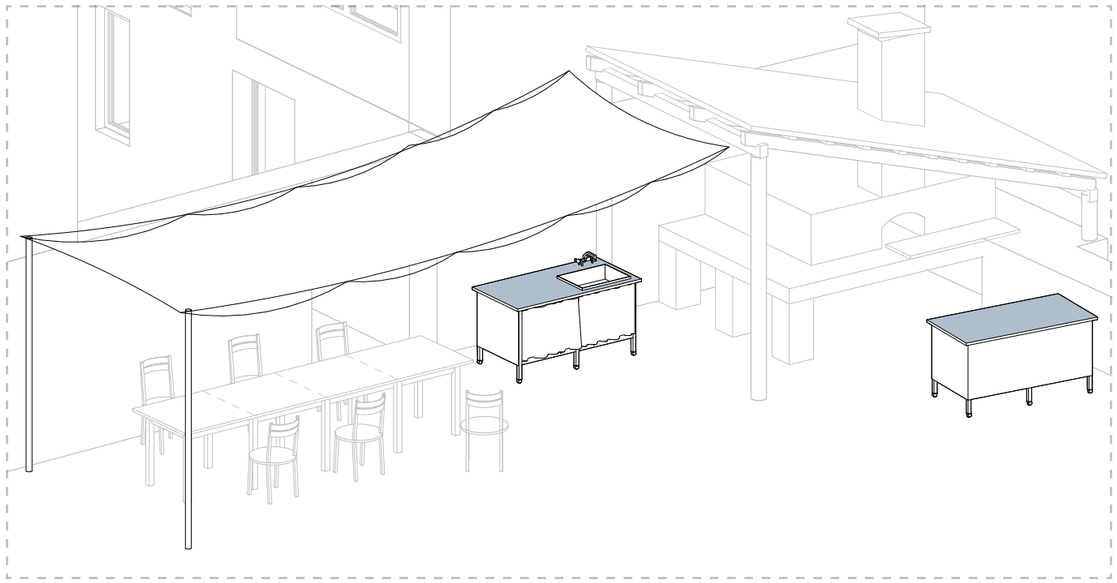
Acknowledging the importance of the outdoor oven, this flexible zone is designed for communal events like bread baking and tasting. A modular table system, just like the office one, allows for various lay-outs - from intimate social dinners to community events that spill into the small courtyard. Custom cupboards and a movable roof on racks provide the necessary support for this versatile, all-weather social hub.

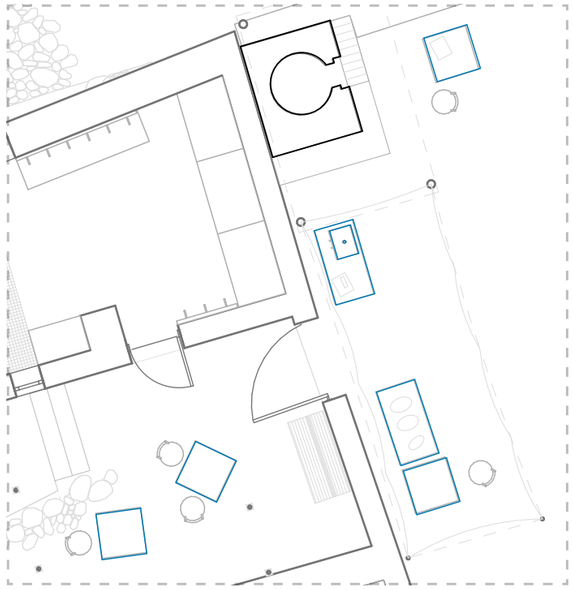




Arrangement 1:
A social dinner in the oven zone

Oven area view



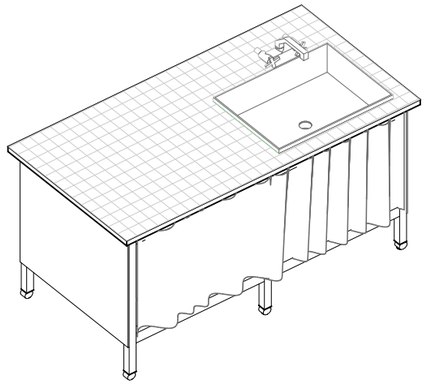


Arrangement 2:
A bread tasting event happening also in the small courtyard

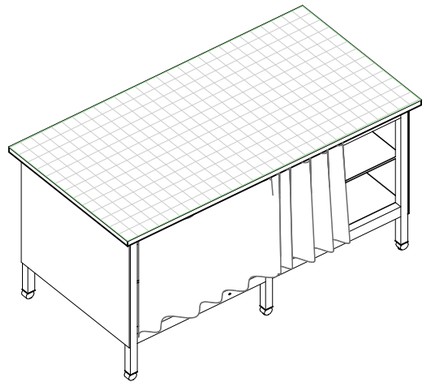
MODULAR OUTDOOR CUPBOARD

These custom cupboards on wheels feature a simple DIY aesthetic. The system includes a sink module designed for wall-side water connection, the use of those modules allow for highly flexible spatial arrangements.

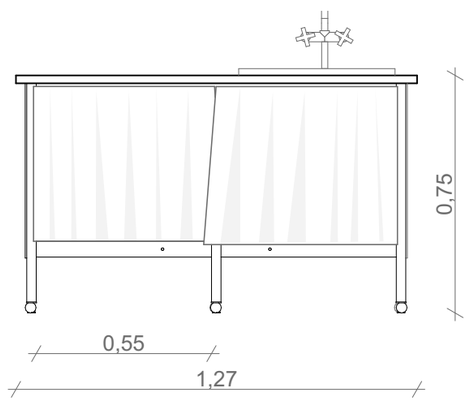
Visualization



Sink module



Regular module



Front view

UPPER LEVEL

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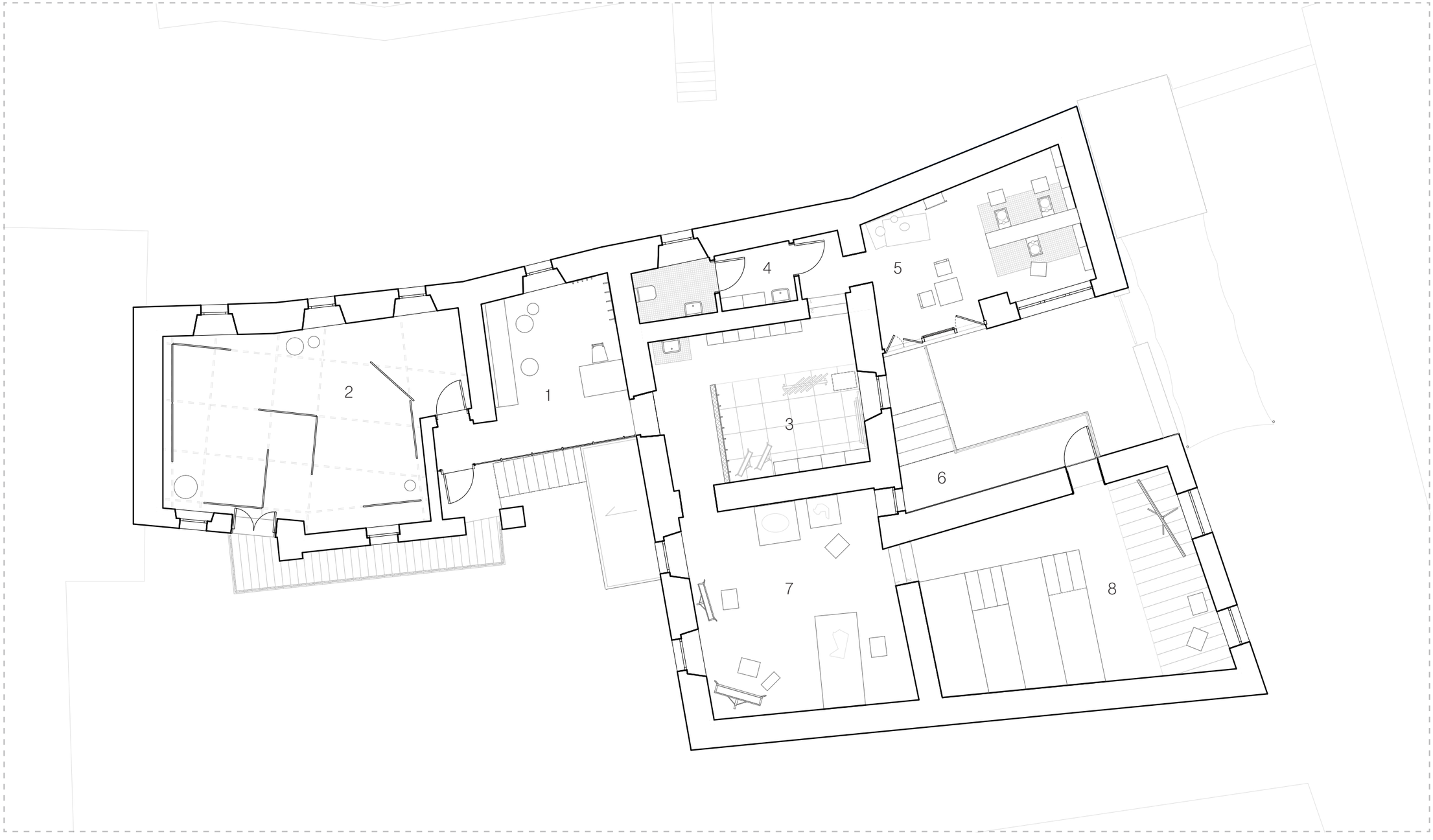
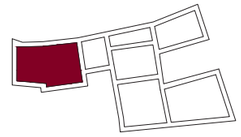


LEGEND

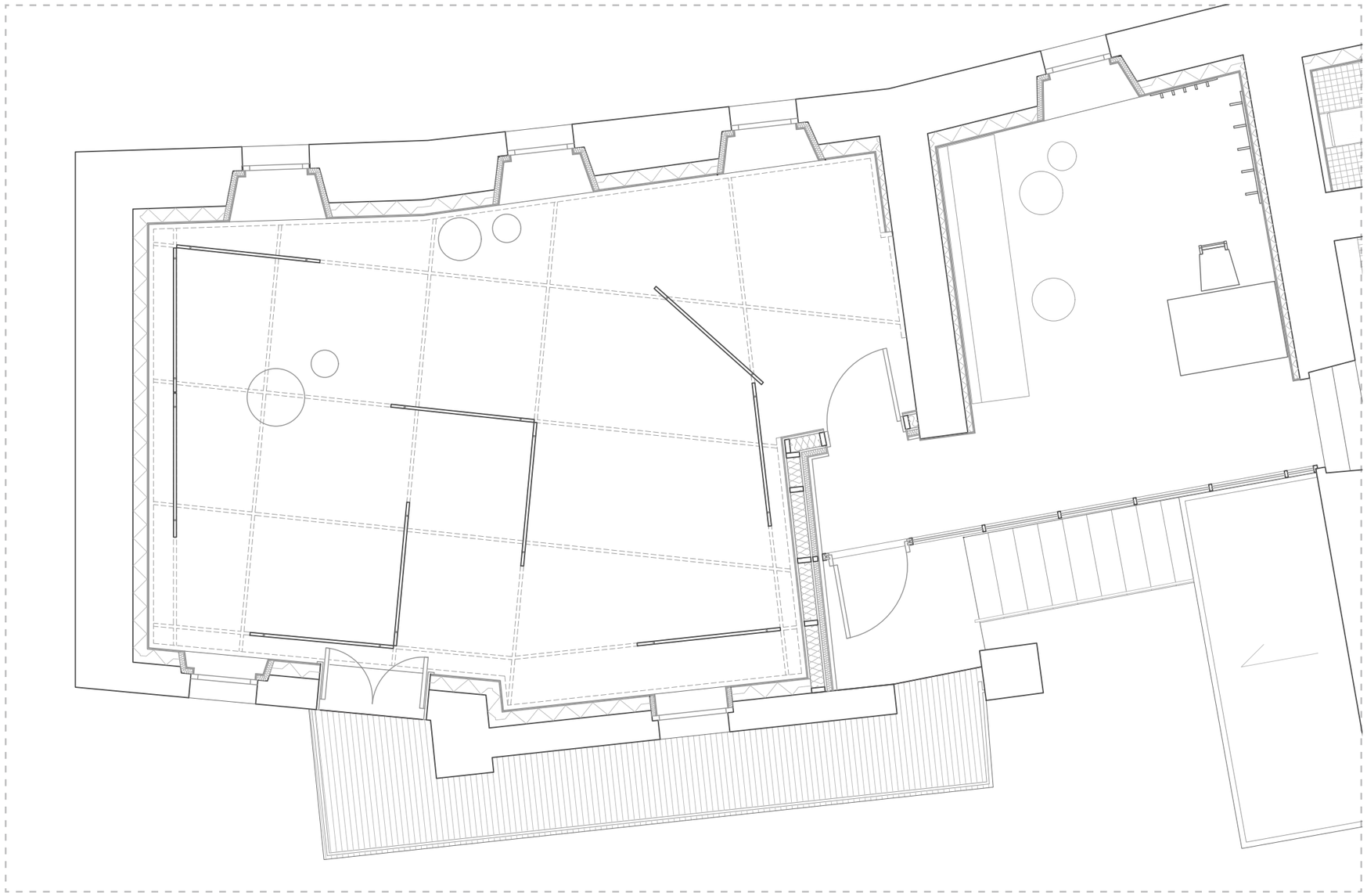
1. Entrance Zone / 2. Exhibition Room / 3. Art Storage / 4. Bathroom / 5. Ceramic Workshop / 6. Outdoor Ramp / 7. Sculpture and Painting Workshop / 8. Auditorium Room

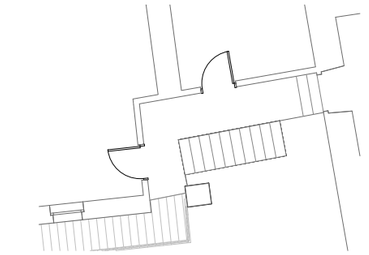


ENTRANCE AND EXHIBITION ROOM

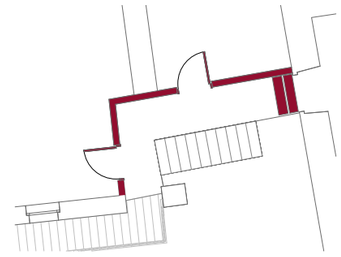
The new layout of this part of the upper floor introduces the entrance zone as a vital bridge between the exhibition space and art workshops. To honor the legacy of this dynamic, adaptable and creative place - the focus in this room is put on making a fully adaptable environment designed to showcase the work of students and locals. The room uses simple, legible systems and solutions such as the panels, to capture the DNA of Casamatta.

1:50

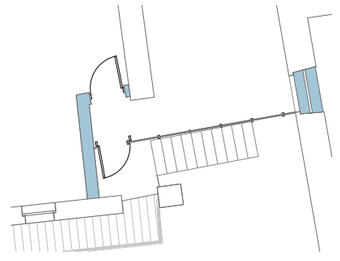




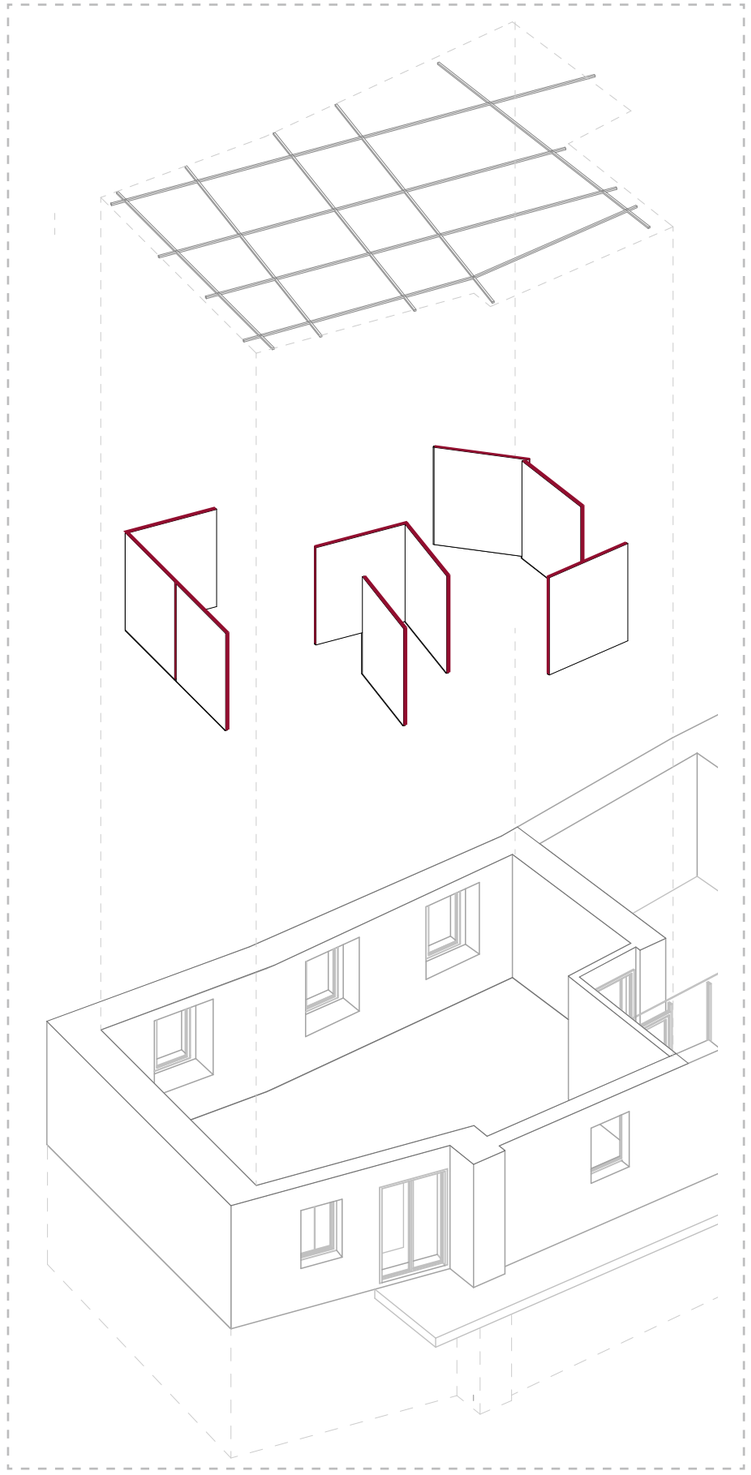
Previous (existing) state



Removal of the walls and old stairs



New spatial arrangement



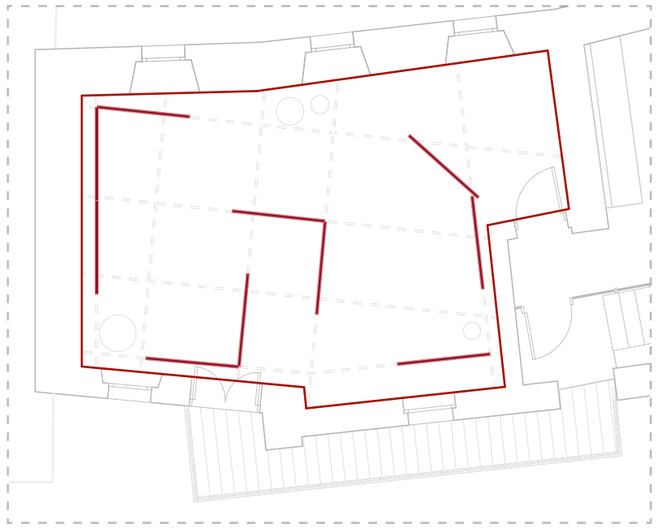
Exploded view

FLEXIBLE PANELS SYSTEM

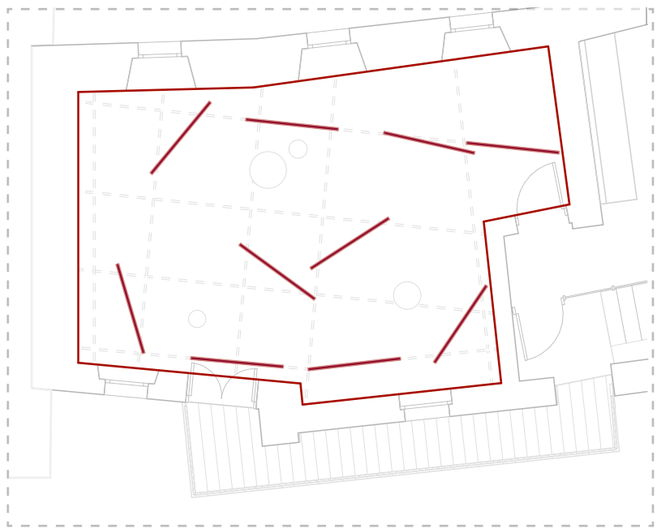
If Casamatta is a place for everyone, its exhibition room must reflect that mission with a design for total versatility. A system of flexible panels on rails enables multiple arrangements, allowing for varied artistic narratives and layouts that adapt to the specific requirements of each hosted project.

Visualization

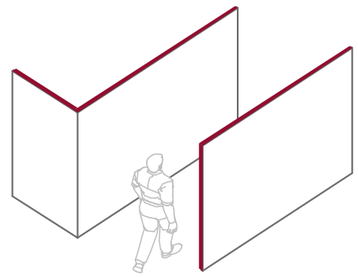
FLEXIBLE ARRANGEMENTS



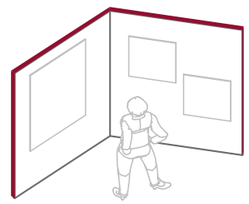
Possible arrangement 1



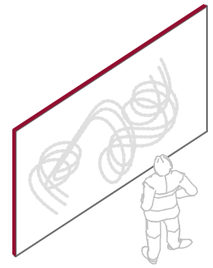
Possible arrangement 2



Division wall

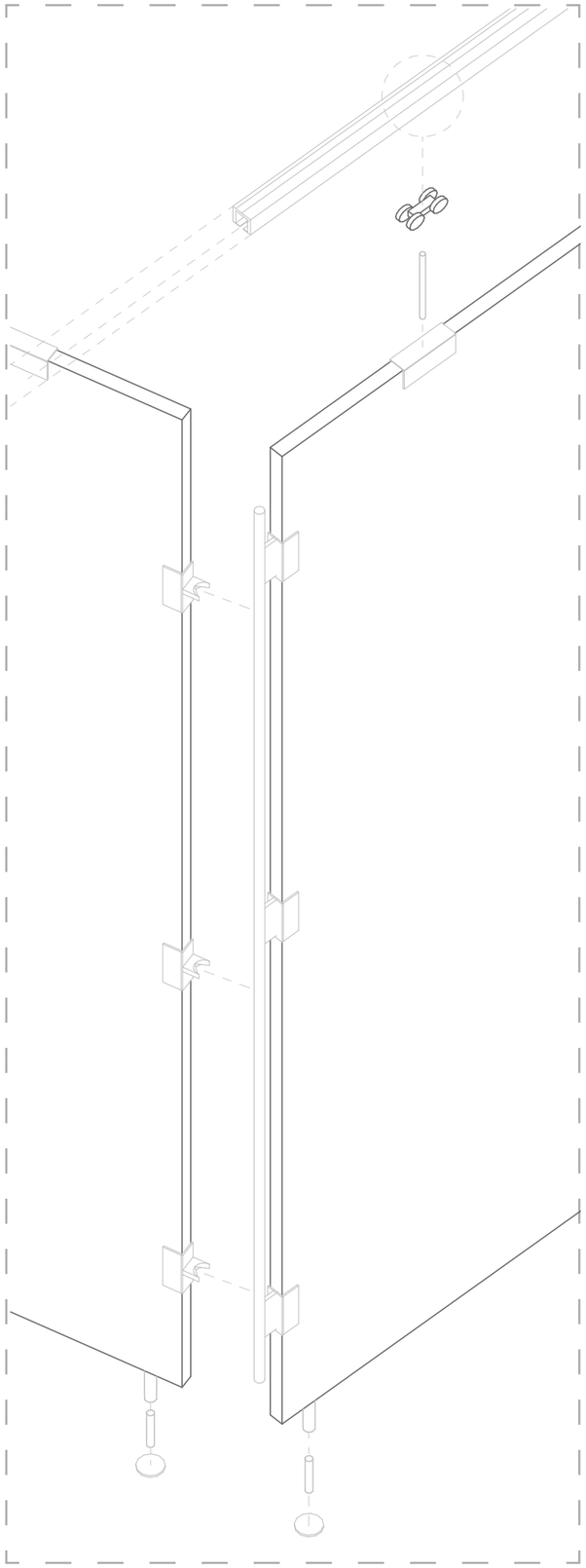


Display board



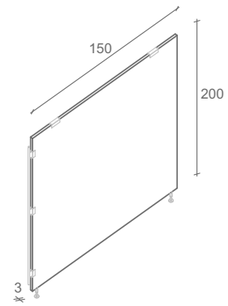
Canvas

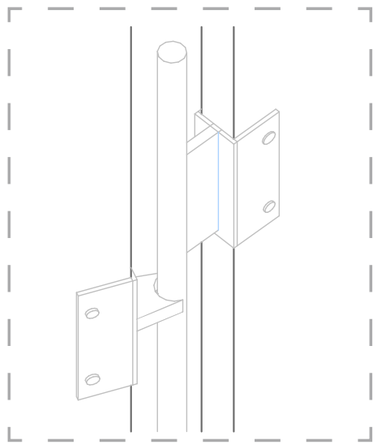
The panels can work in different roles, enabling completely different narratives, from a classic exhibition layout to a labirynth through which visitors walk, experiencing the given topic



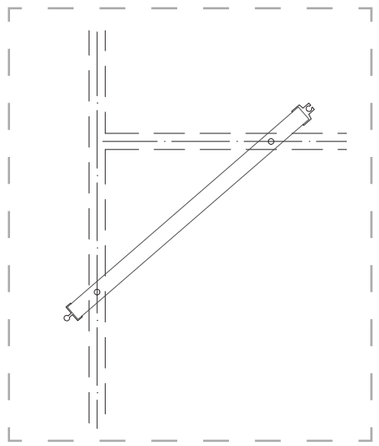
PANEL STRUCTURE

Mobile chipboard panels on overhead rails offer easy movement and modular connection. Exposed metal elements highlight a legible, honest, and functional aesthetic.

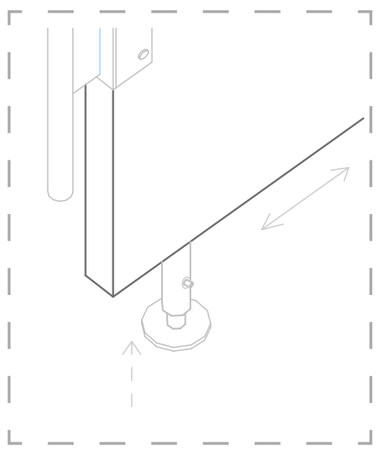




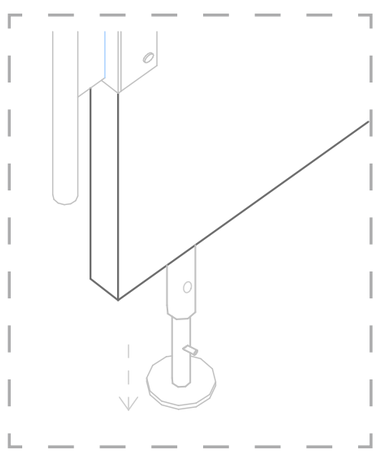
Ends enabling modular connections



Panel's behavior on angles



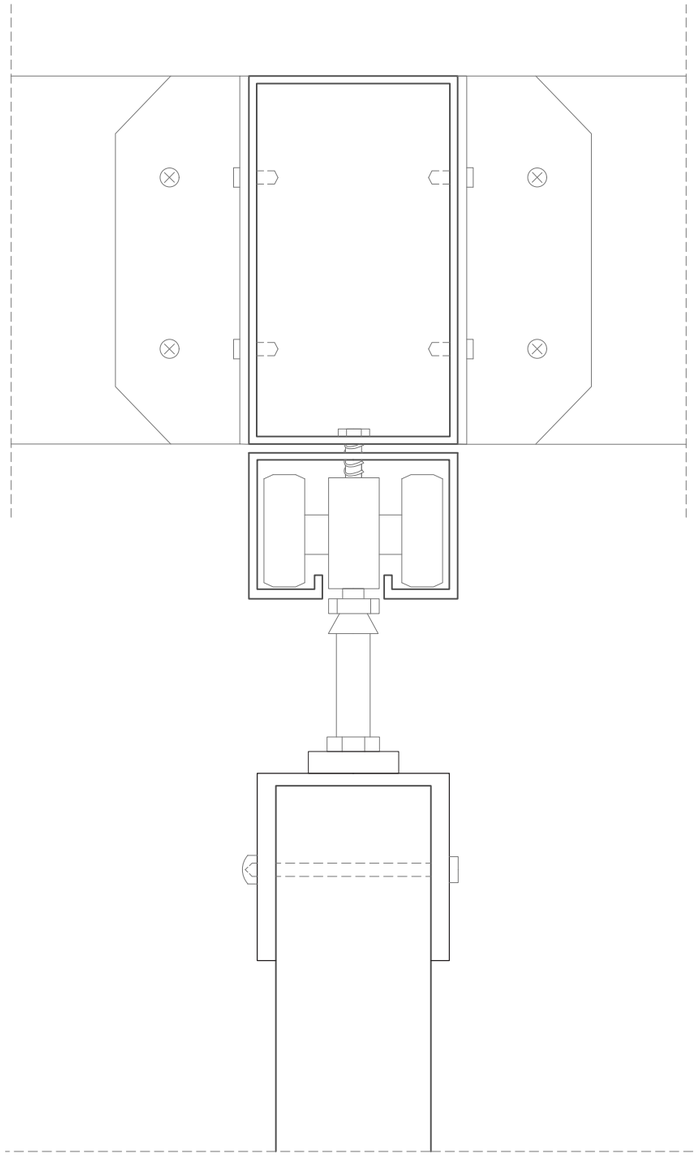
Base folded when moving the panel



Base fixed on the ground to avoid swingin of the panel when standing

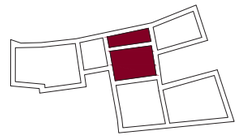
RAIL SYSTEM SECTION

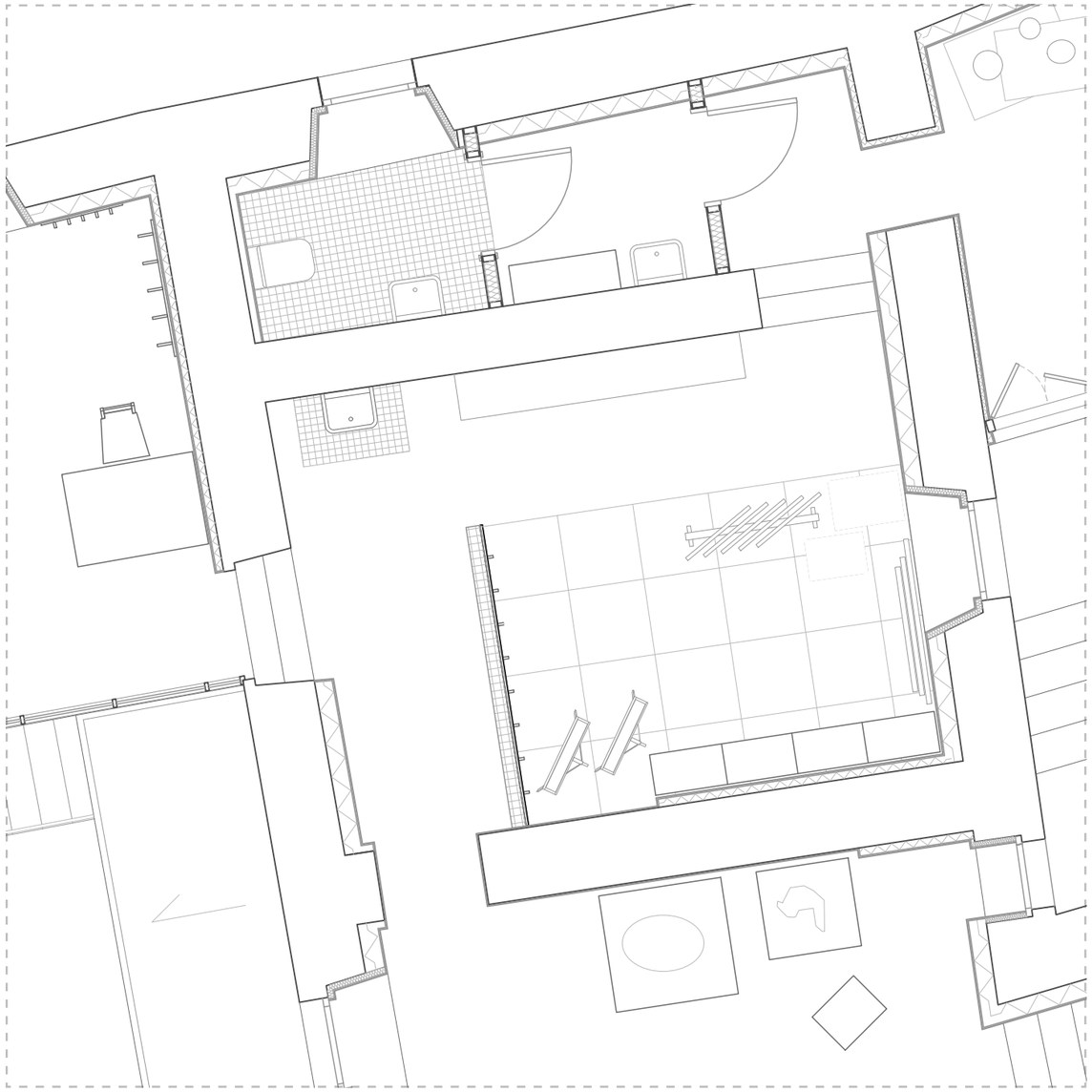
Fragment showing the connection between the panel and the rails system



1:2

Visualization





1:50

ART WORKSHOP STORAGE

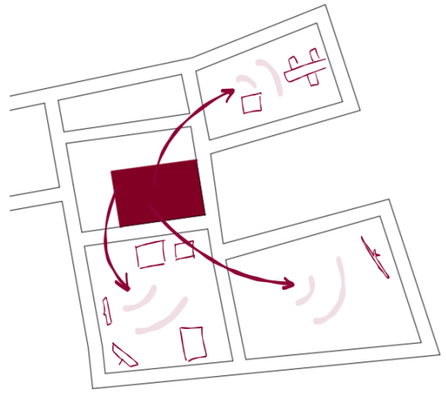
A mesh surface with tools hanging greats people entering this part of the building. This light wall and distinct flooring define the storage zone. Equipped with a sink, it provides all the essentials for sculptors and painters to begin creating.

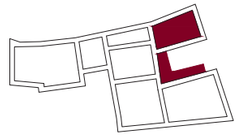
Visualization

Visualization

IN THE CENTRE

Positioning the storage not in the backrooms but in the centre forms a statement that this wing of the building is all about creativity and taking action. It creates a logical flow - entering, gathering tools, and creating.





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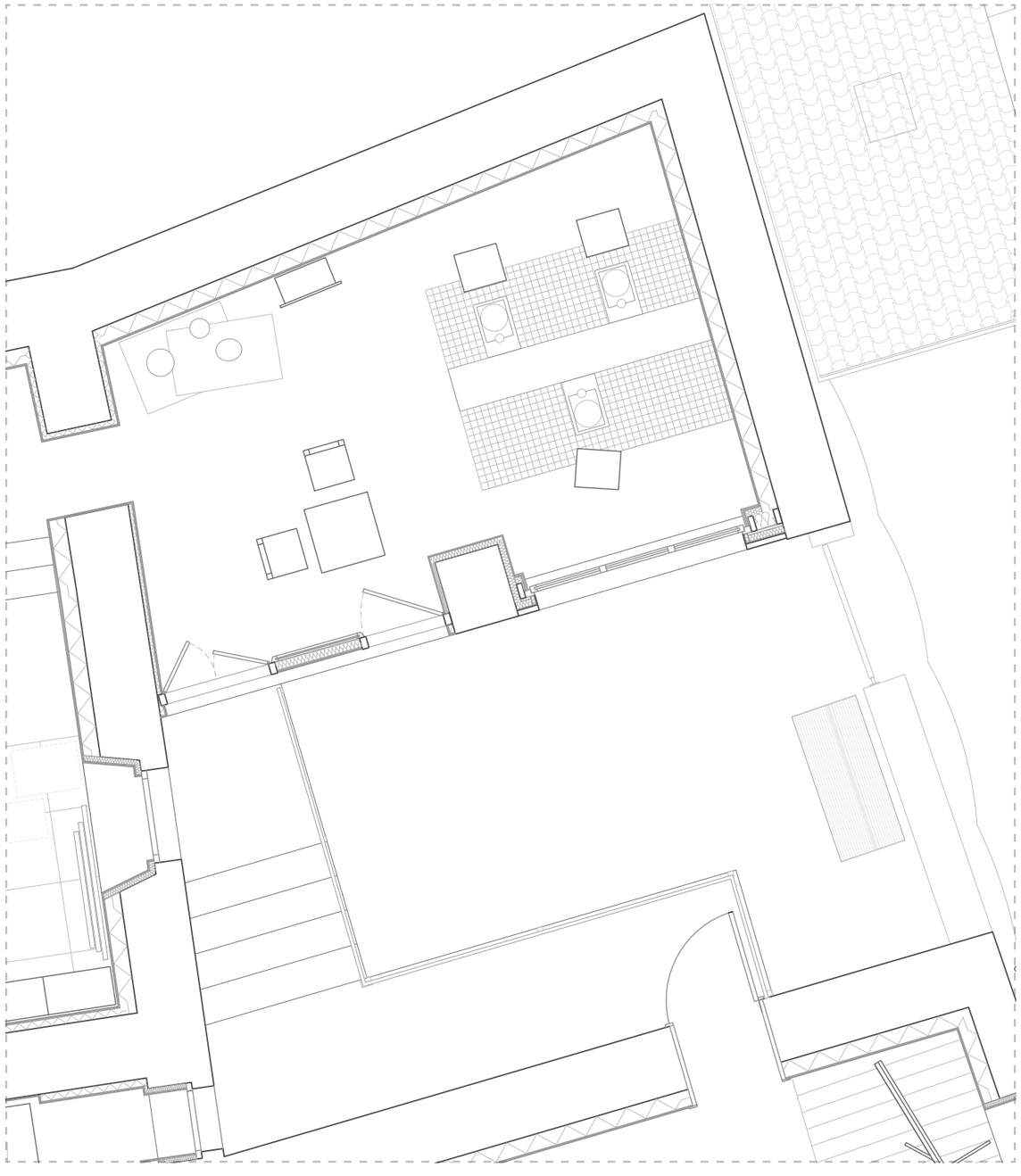
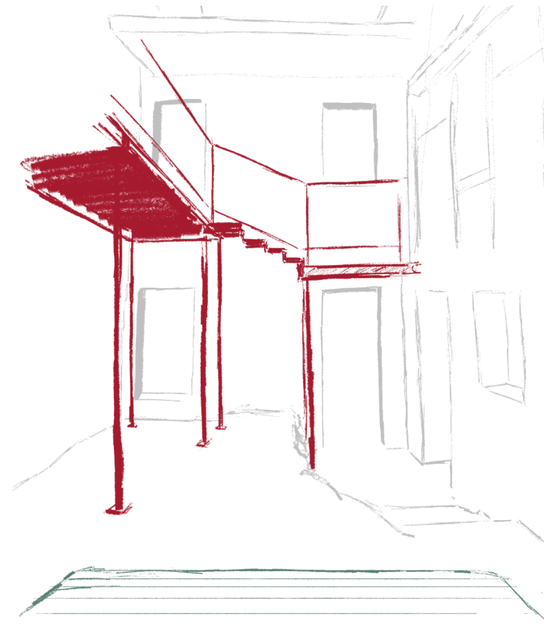
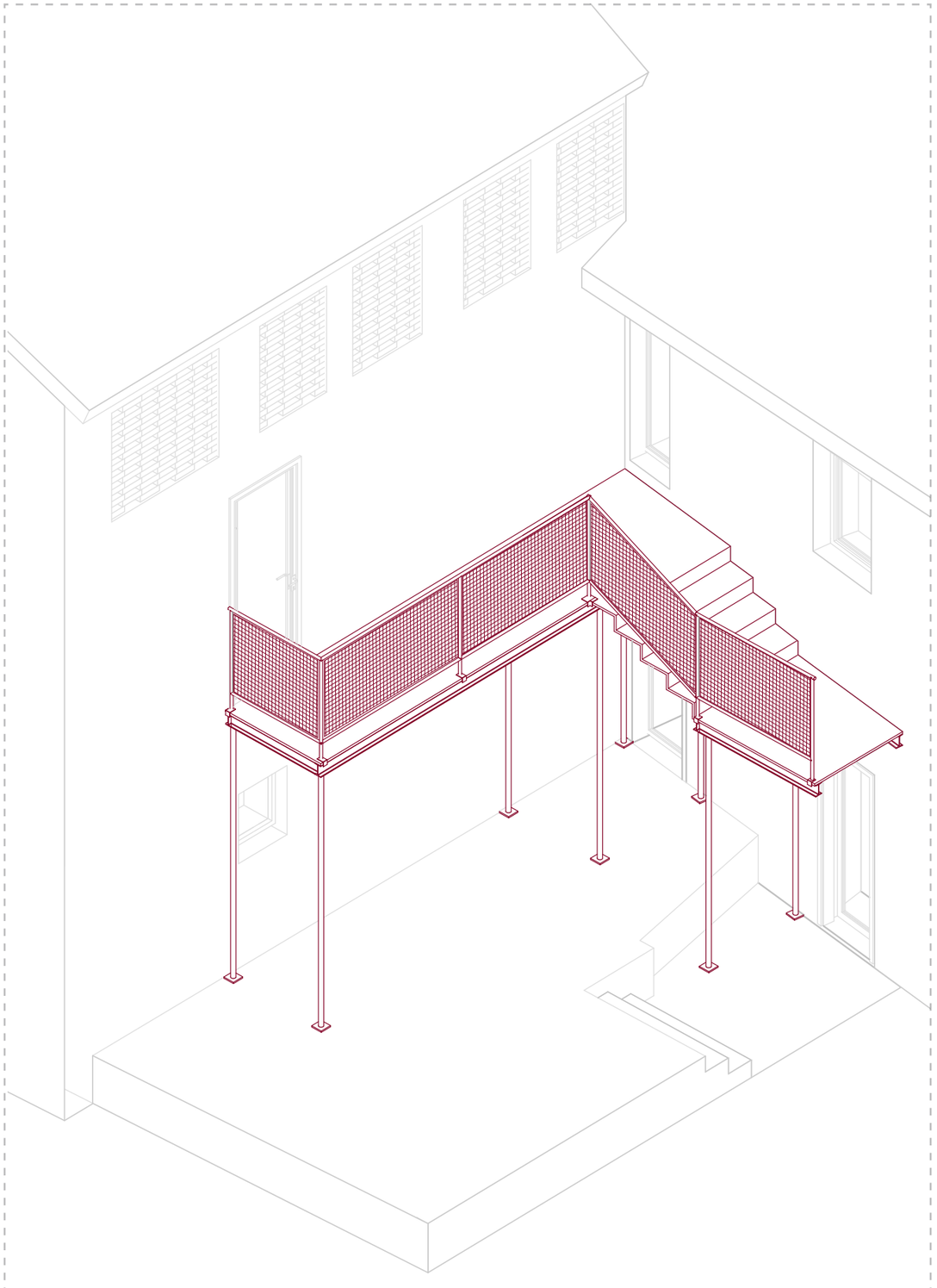


CERAMIC WORKSHOP AND OUTDOOR RAMP

Formerly semi-outdoor, this ceramic workshop is equipped for learning pottery. Openable elements ensure natural ventilation, while a bridge with stairs provide a direct link to the opposite side of the small courtyard.



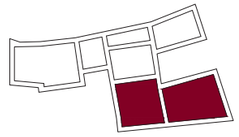
The steps are positioned on the viewing axis of the courtyard bench so they can guide people away from staying and leaning against the barrier there.
This ensures passersby on the upper floor do not disrupt the intimate atmosphere on the ground level bench.



Outdoor staircase structure

Visualization

Designed to connect the building wings to the auditorium, this structure improves circulation for larger crowds. Its simple, color-highlighted design adheres to the ethics of legible additions, maintaining a clean and honest aesthetic.



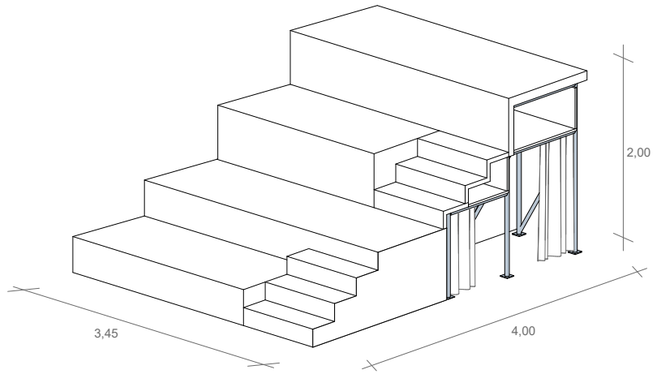
AUDITORIUM AND ART WORKSHOP

The first room is dedicated to painting and sculpture, providing a focused creative environment. The adjacent auditorium is designed for versatility, hosting social, formal, and entertainment activities. This multi-use space is also fully equipped to support and showcase visual arts.

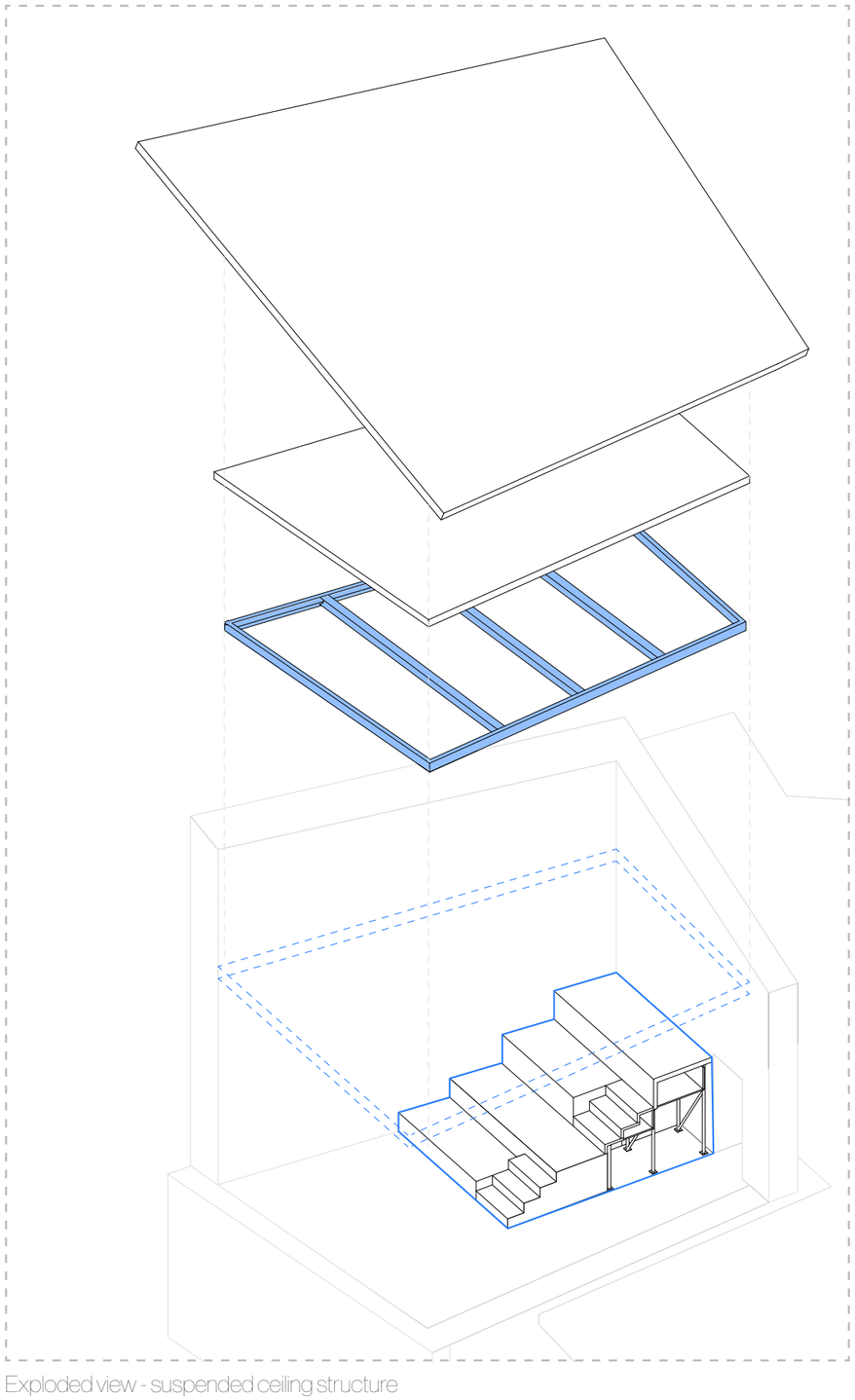
1:50

Visualization

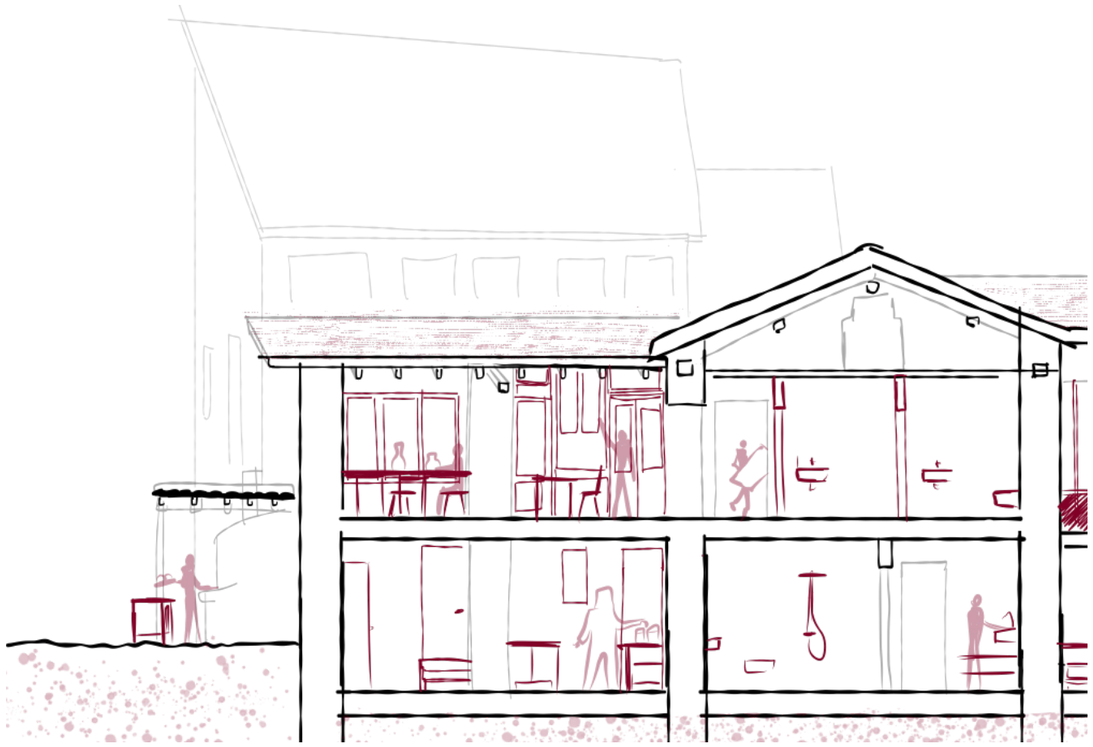
Simple seating steps signal the room's function, enriched by a playful use of color and flooring. A suspended ceiling and HVLS fan ensure comfort, reflecting a sensible, well-rounded design.



Auditorium seats structure



Exploded view - suspended ceiling structure



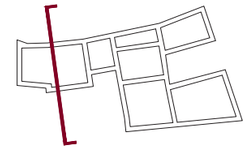
A sketch of the building structure

2.5 Structure

The building, materials and solutions

The design approach should not only result in thoughtful spatial layout of functions but also in precise material and structural choices. Prioritizing sustainability and site adaptation, the project addresses the building's demanding state with entirely new roofing layers and carefully selected wall insulation, implemented to optimize thermal conditions. The following pages present technical sections, scaled details, and U-value calculations that validate these architectural interventions.

SECTION A-A



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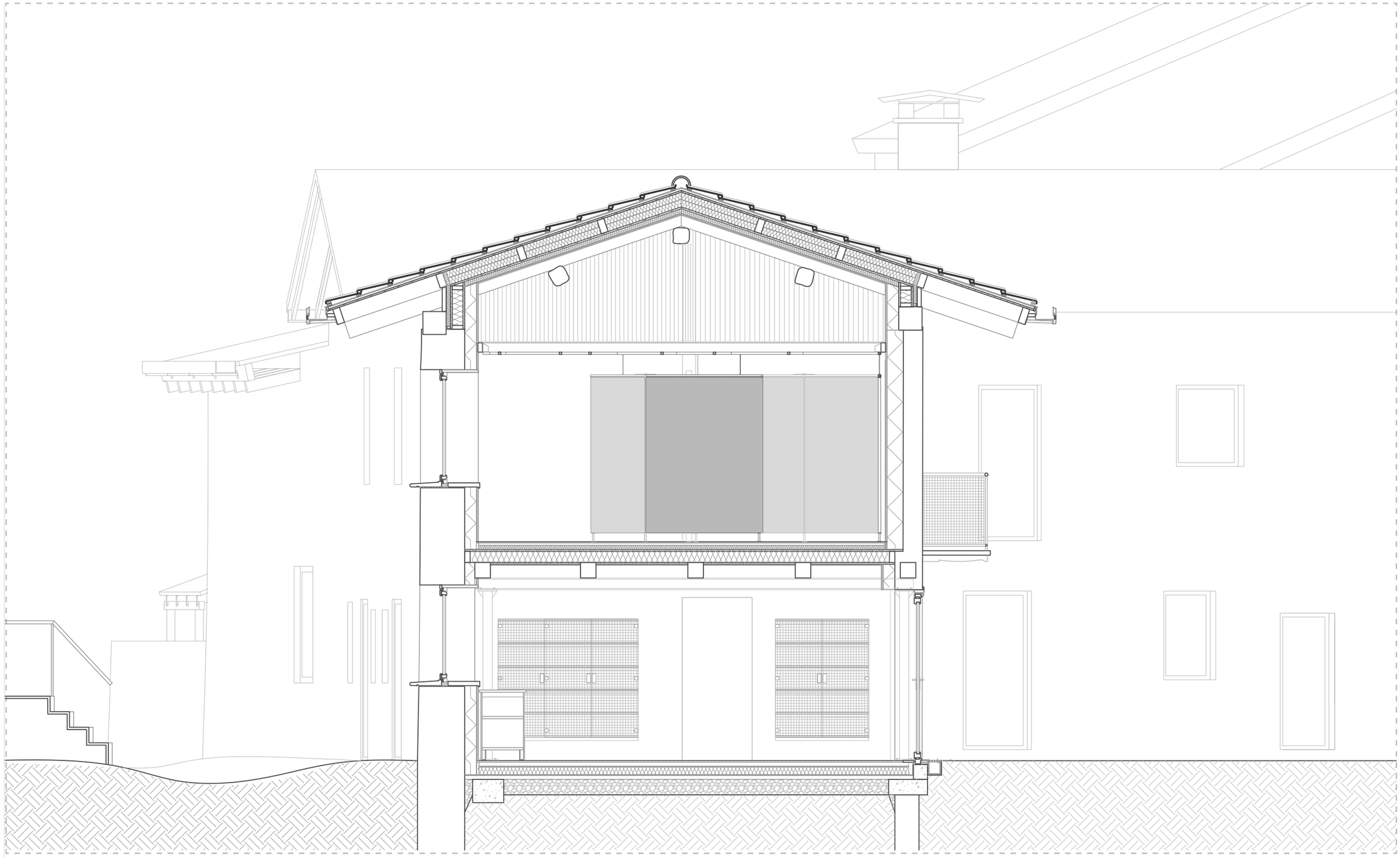
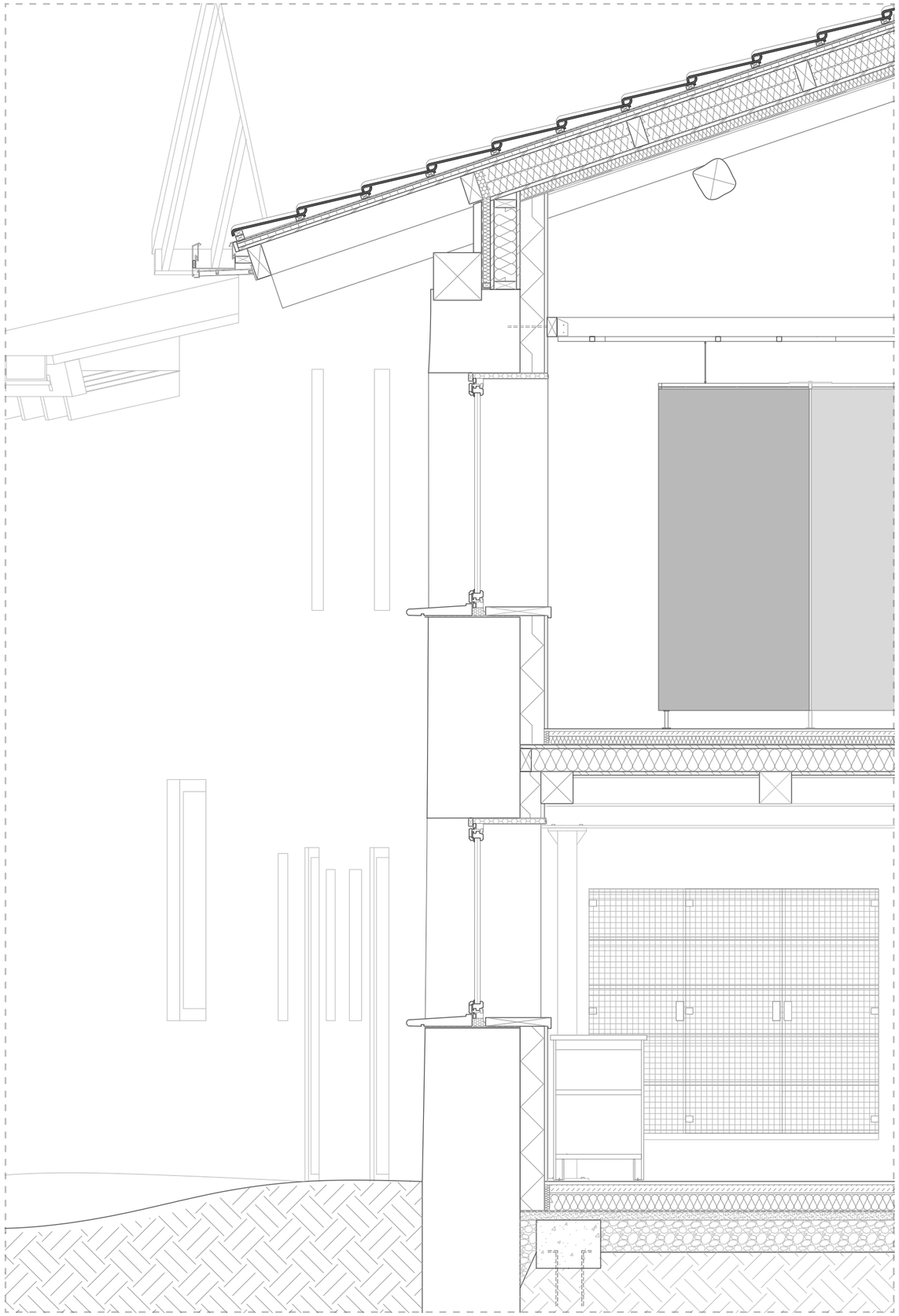
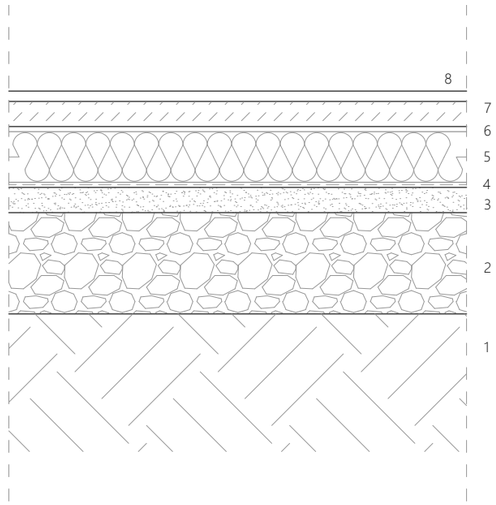




GROUND FLOOR

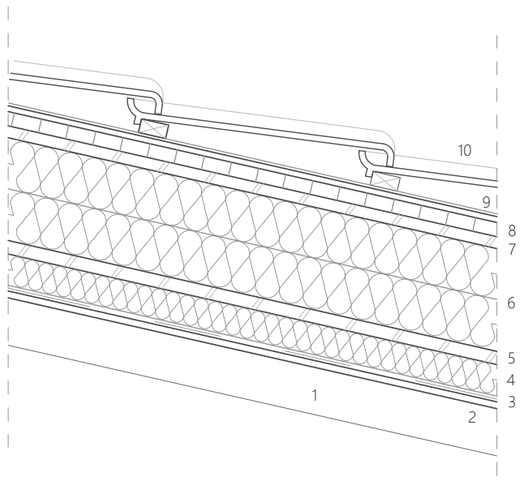


1. Soil
2. Gravel
3. Sand
4. Damp-proof membrane
5. Foam glass boards
6. PE foil
7. Concrete screed
8. Engineered timber flooring

0,1 0,5 1

ROOF

1. Rafters (half-exposed)
2. Gypsum board
3. PE foil
4. Kenaf fibre insulation
5. OSB 3
6. Soft wood-fibre boards (2x9cm)
7. MDF
8. Spruce boarding
9. Waterproof membrane
10. Roofing tiles



Layer	d (m)	λ (W/m·K)	R (m²K/W)
Rse	-	-	0.04
Roofing tiles (clay)	0,1030	0,75	0,13733
Waterproof membrane	0,0005	0,2	0,00250
Spruce	0,0250	0,13	0,19231
MDF	0,0200	0,09	0,22222
Soft wood fibre insulation	0,1800	0,044	4,09091
OSB 3	0,0220	0,13	0,16923
Kenaf fibre insulation	0,0600	0,040	1,50000
PE foil	0,0002	0,40	0,00050
Gypsum fibre board	0,0125	0,25	0,05000
Rsi	-	-	0,10

CALCULATIONS

R_{tot} = 0,13 + 0,00286 + 0,04286 + 3,40909 + 0,88235 + 0,04 = 4,50716 m²K/W

U = 1 / R_{tot} = 1 / 4,50716 = 0,22187 W/m²K

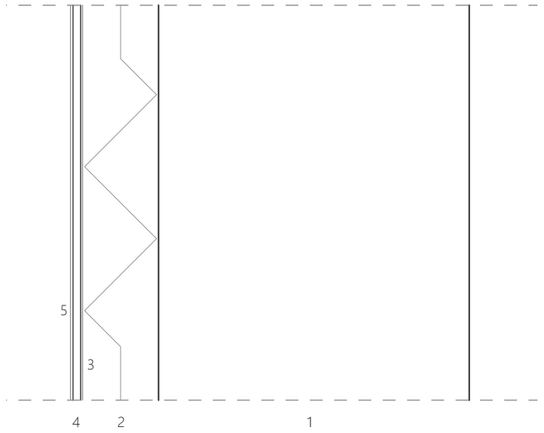
ZONE E LIMITS COMPARISON

0,222 W/m²K < 0,26 W/m²K

The wall's U value meets the referenced requirement

WALL

1. Existing wall
2. Soft wood fibre insulation
3. Vapour retarder membrane
4. Gypsum fibre board
5. Silicone resin plaster



Layer	d (m)	λ (W/m·K)	R (m²K/W)
Rsi	-		0.13
Silicone resin plaster	0,0020	0,70	0,00286
Gypsum fibre board	0,0150	0,35	0,04286
Vapour retarder	0,0005	-	-
Soft wood fibre insulation	0,1500	0,44	3,40909
Existing wall	0,6000	0,68	0,88235
Rse	-	-	0,04

CALCULATIONS

R_{tot} = 0,04 + 0,13733 +0,00250 + 0,19231 + 0,22222 + 4,09091 + 0,16923 + 1,50000 + 0,00050 + 0,05000 + 0,10 = 6,50500 m²K/W

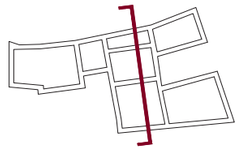
U = 1 / R_{tot} = 1 / 6,505 = 0,15373 W/m²K

ZONE E LIMITS COMPARISON

0,154 W/m²K < 0,24 W/m²K v

The roof's U value meets the referenced requirement

SECTION B-B



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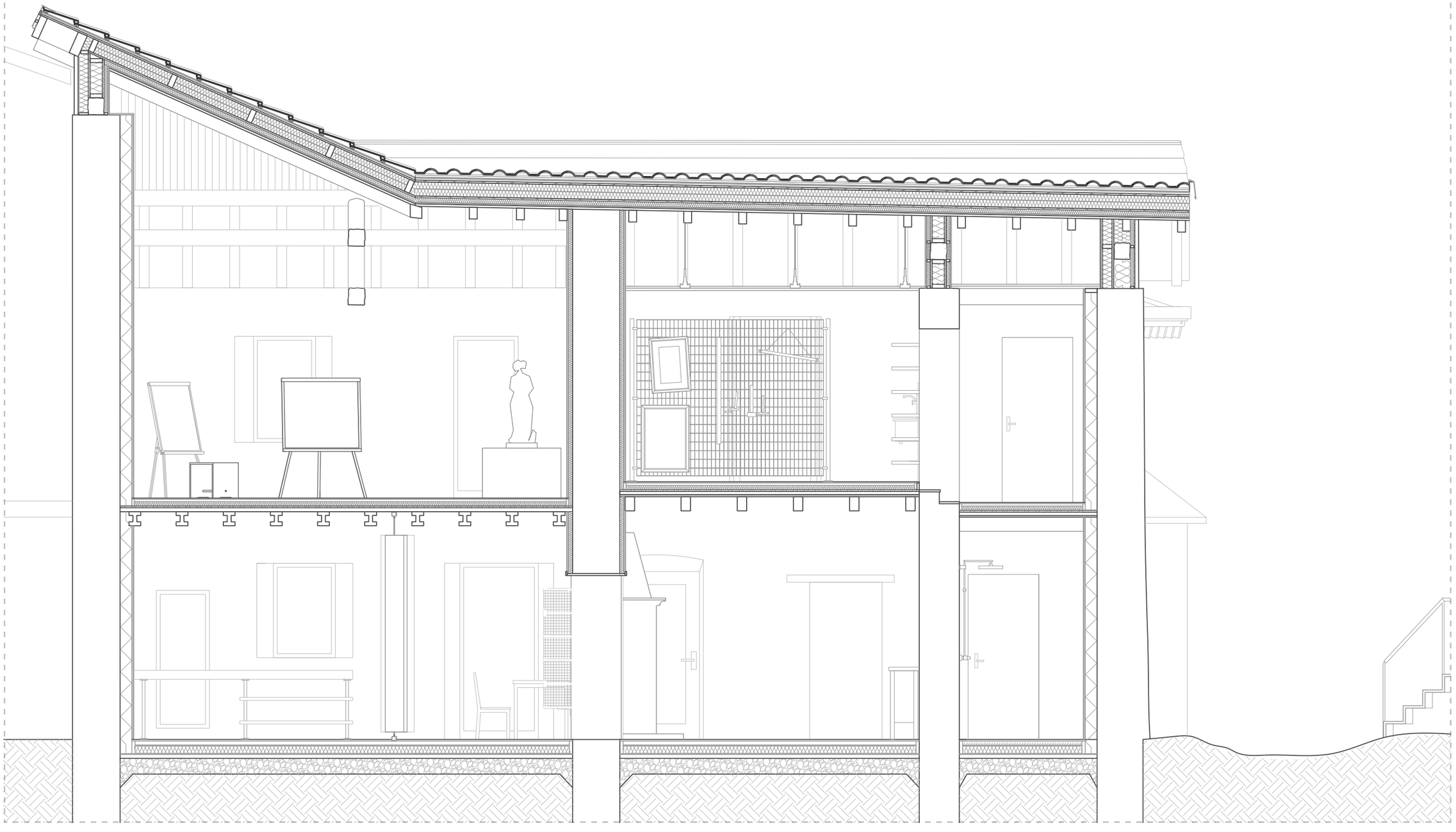
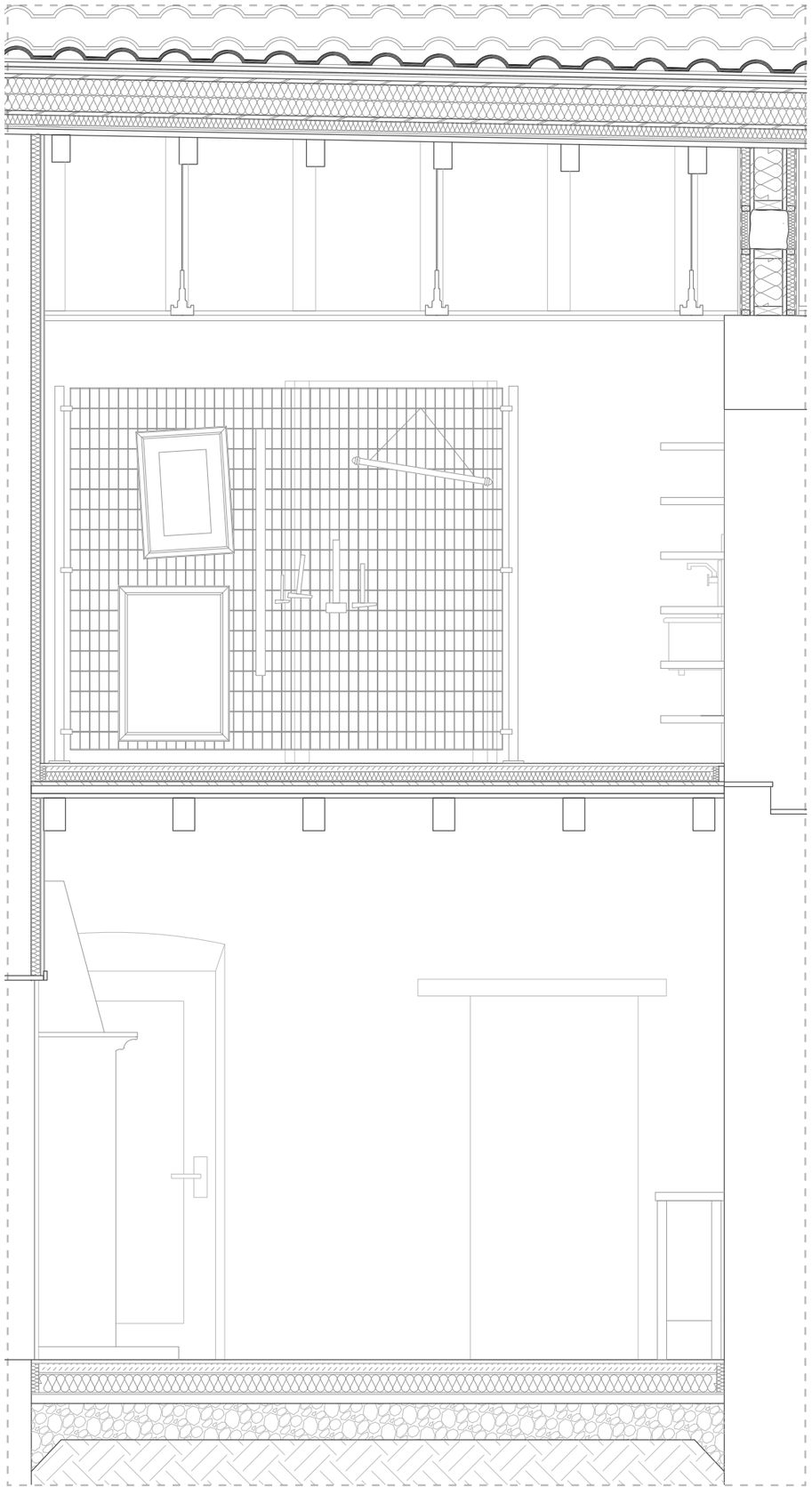
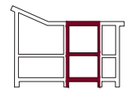
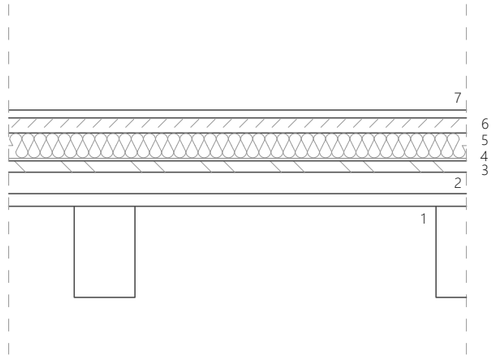


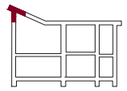




UPPER FLOOR



1. Existing beams
2. Wooden planks
3. OSB 3
4. PE Foil
5. Miineral wool
6. Concrete screed
7. Epoxy resin floor coating



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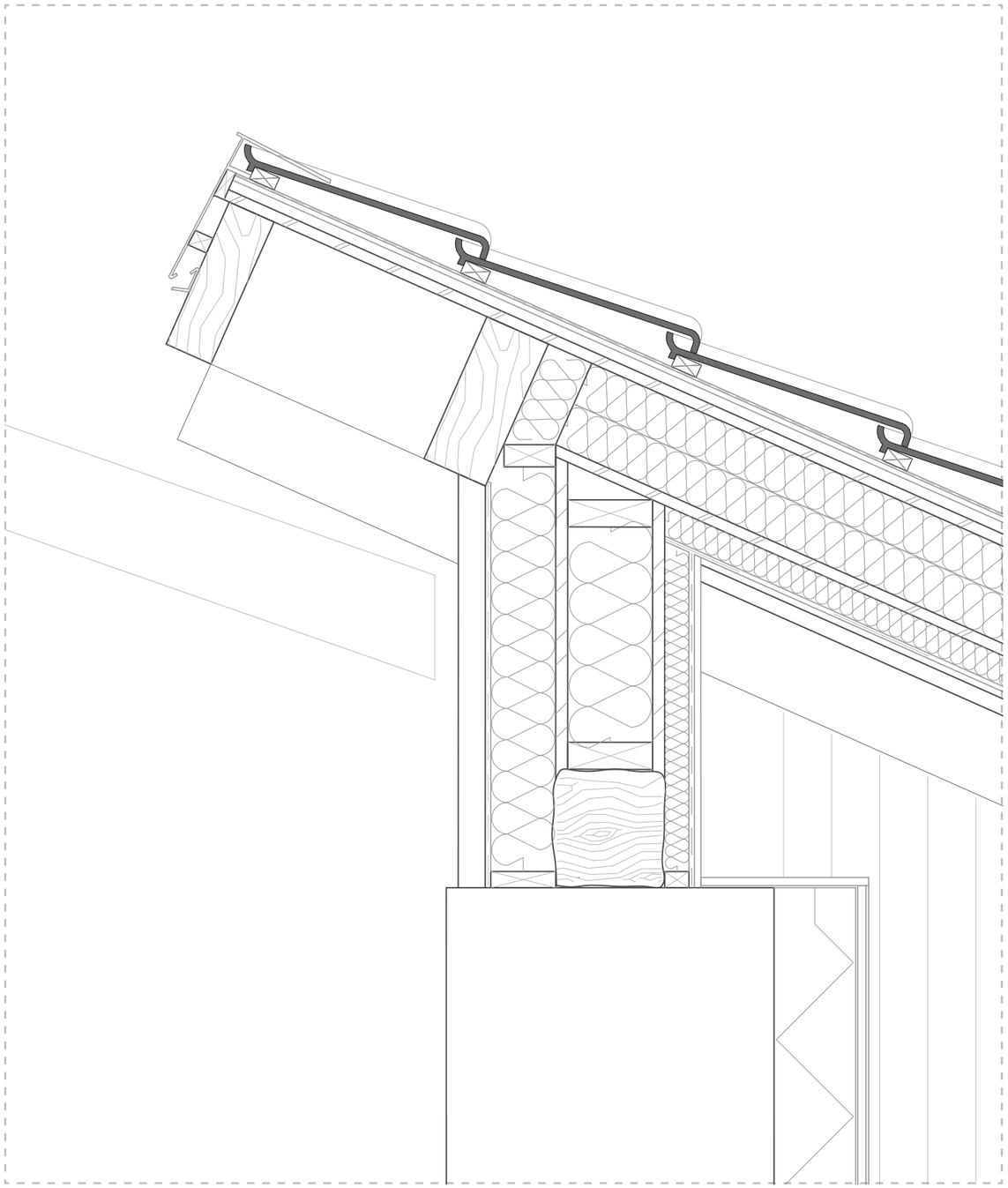

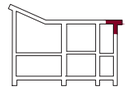

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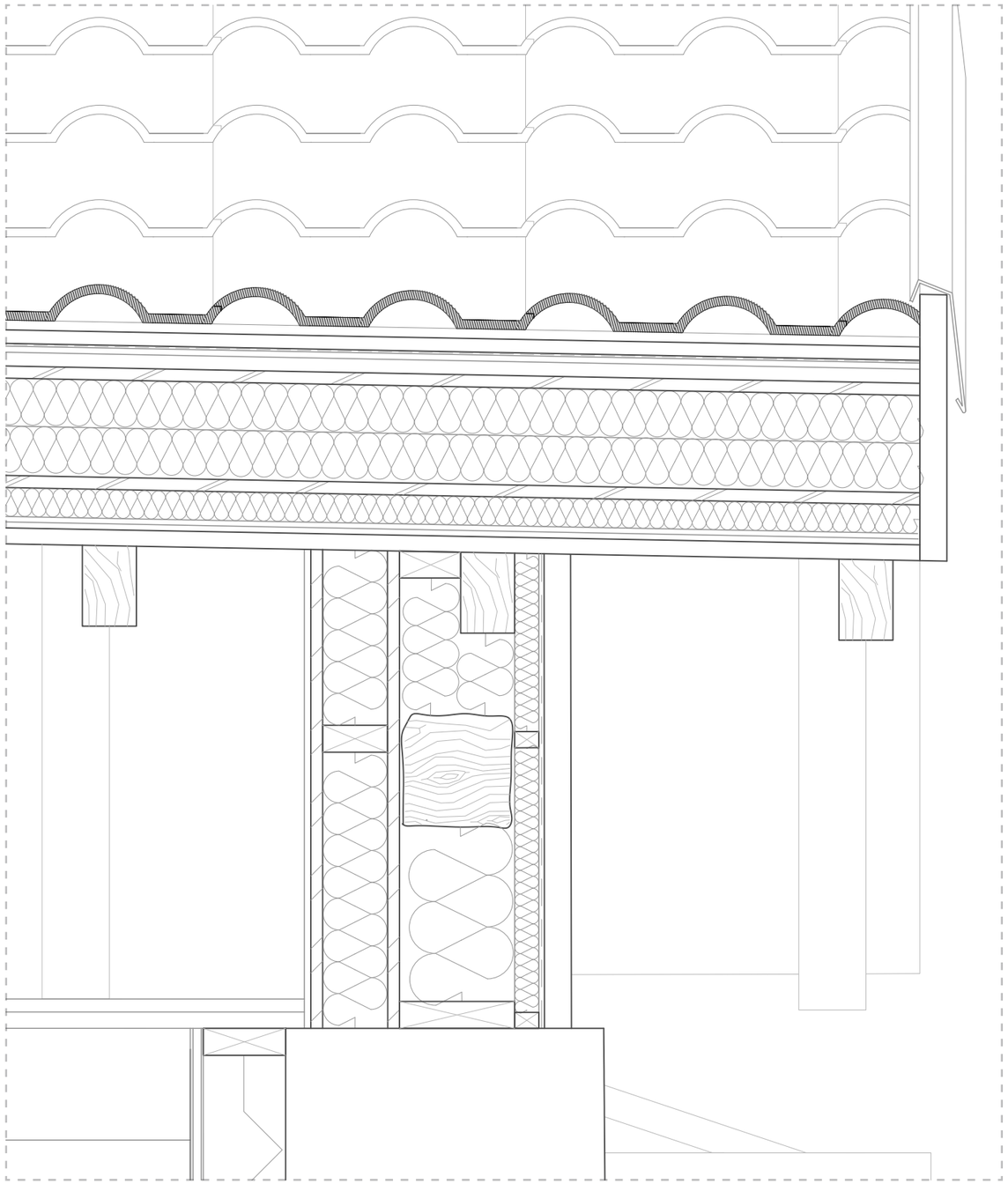

SECTION C-C

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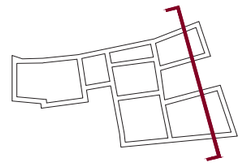
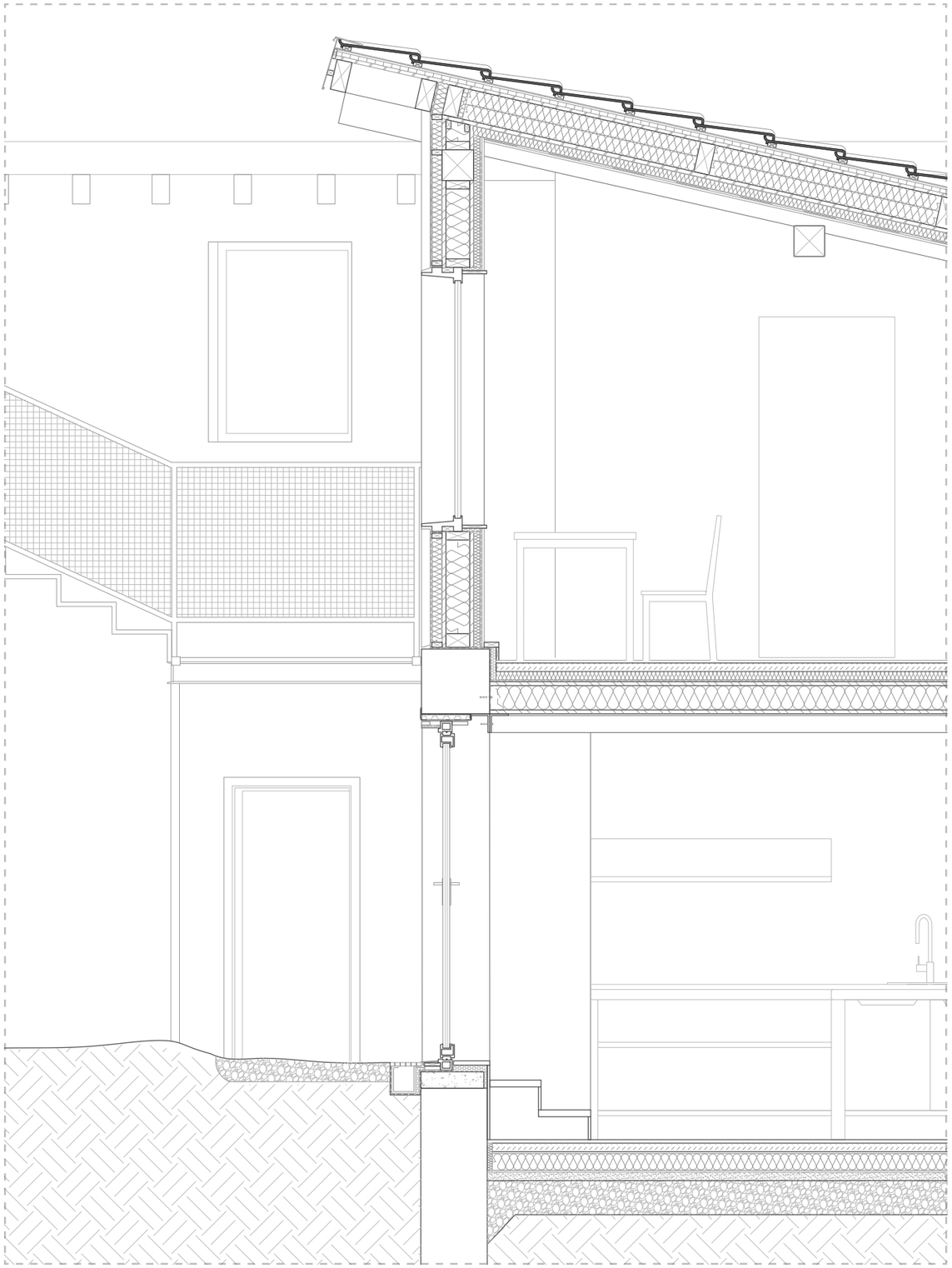


0,1 0,5 1



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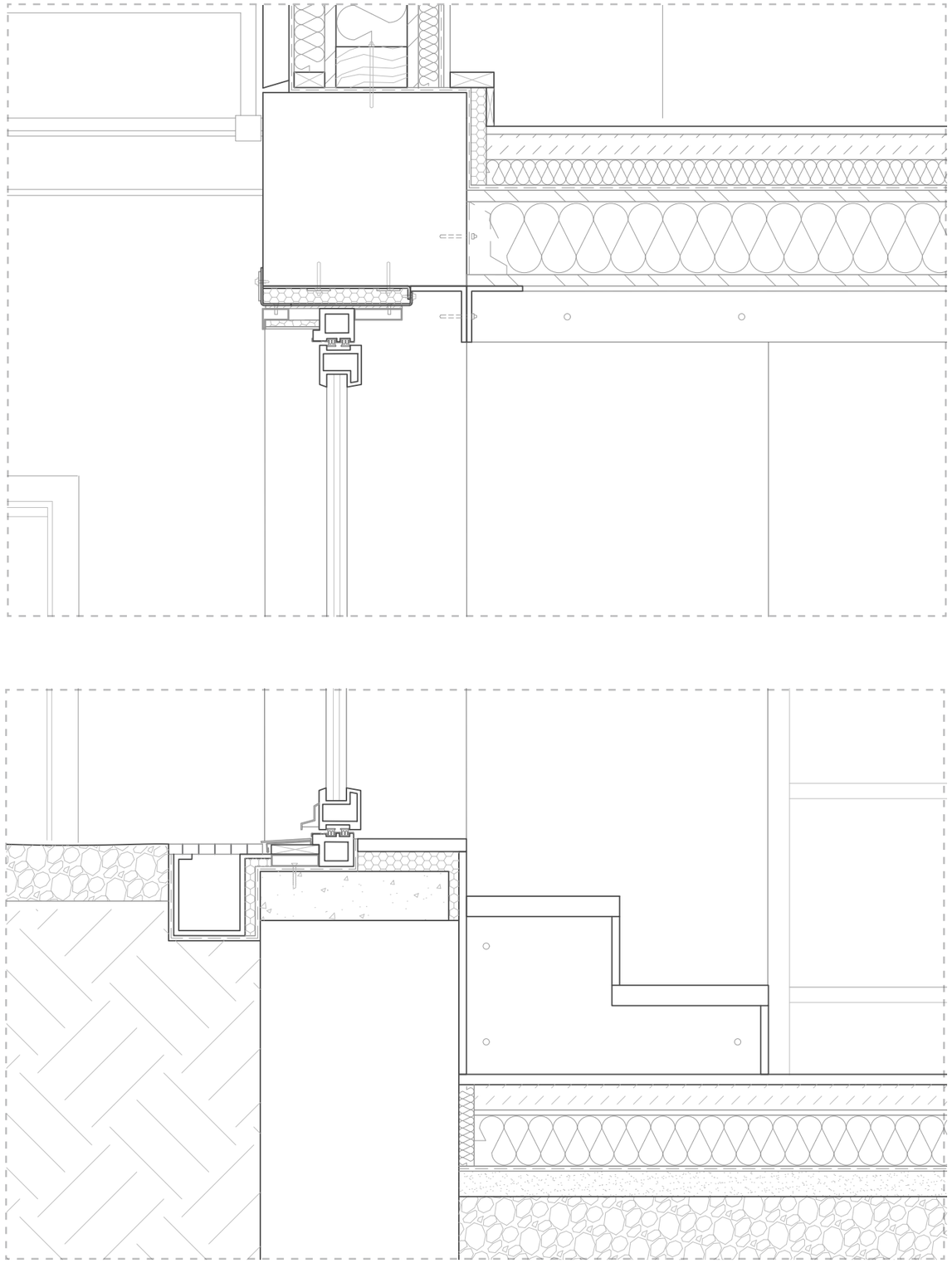
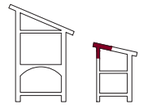
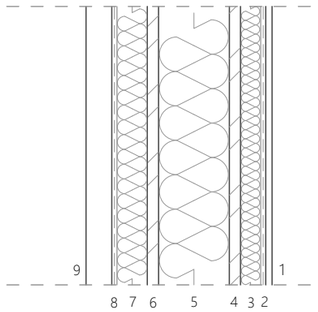




TIMBER WALL

1. Gypsum board
2. PE foil
3. Knauf fiber insulation
4. OSB 3
5. Mineral wool
6. OSB 3
7. Knauf fibre insulation
8. Breather membrane
9. Spruce



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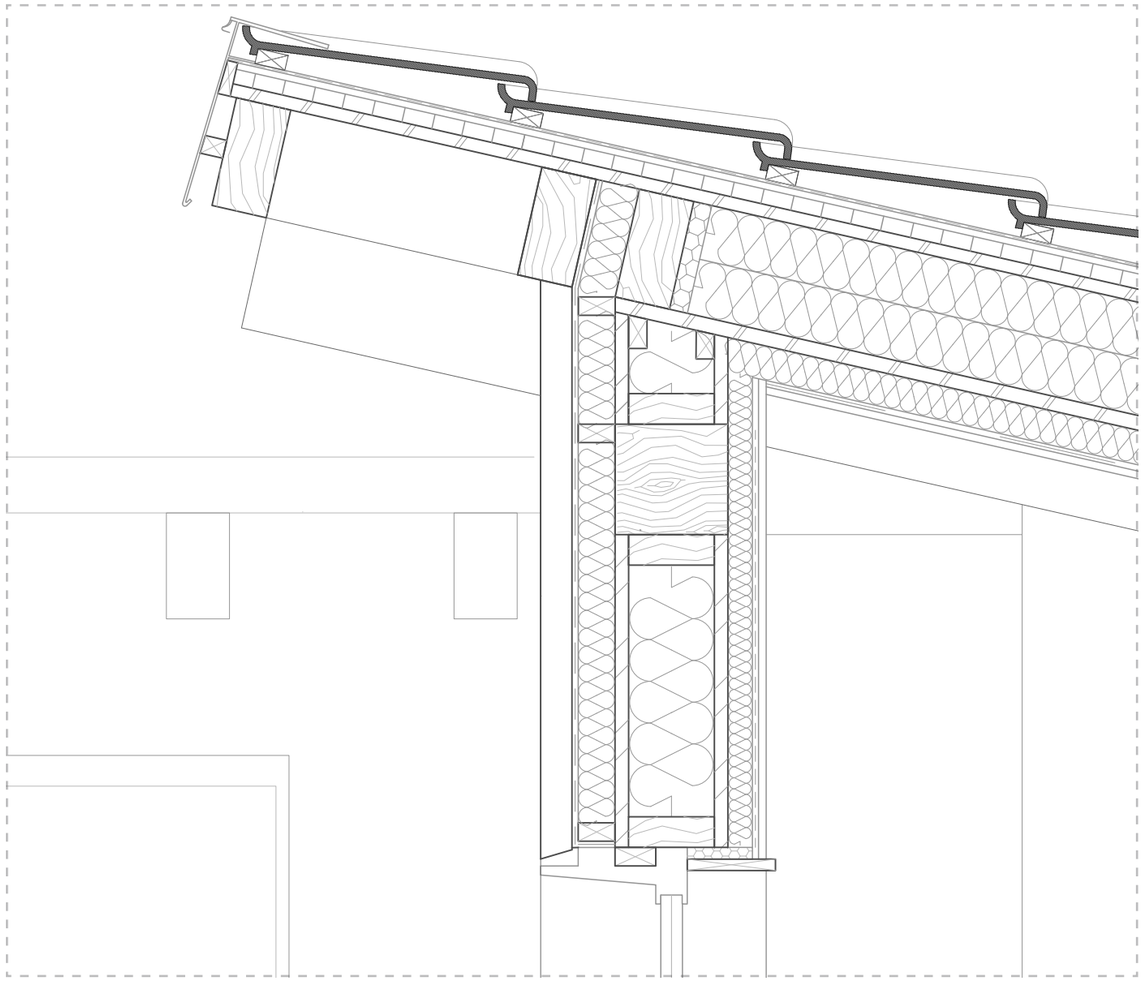

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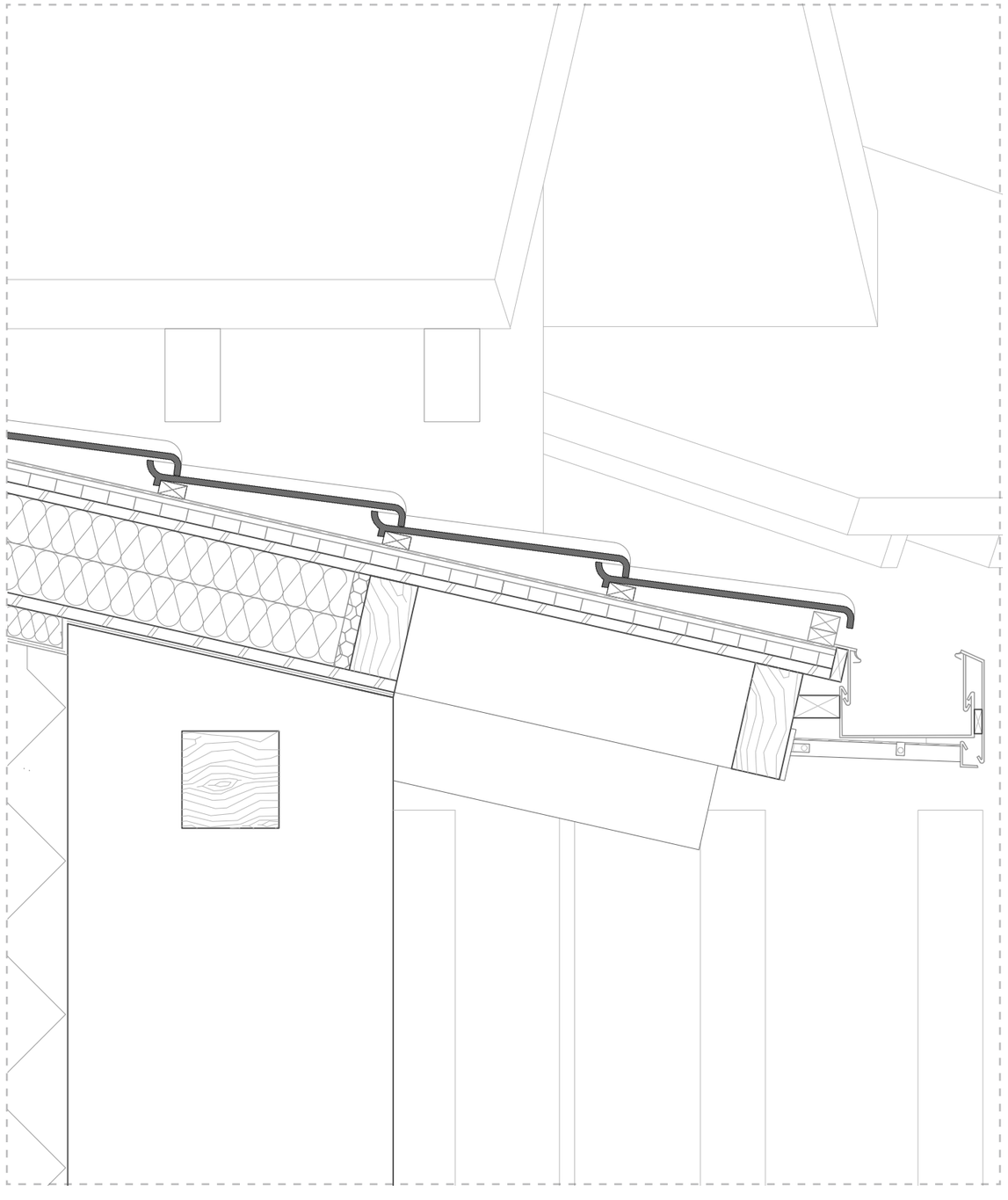
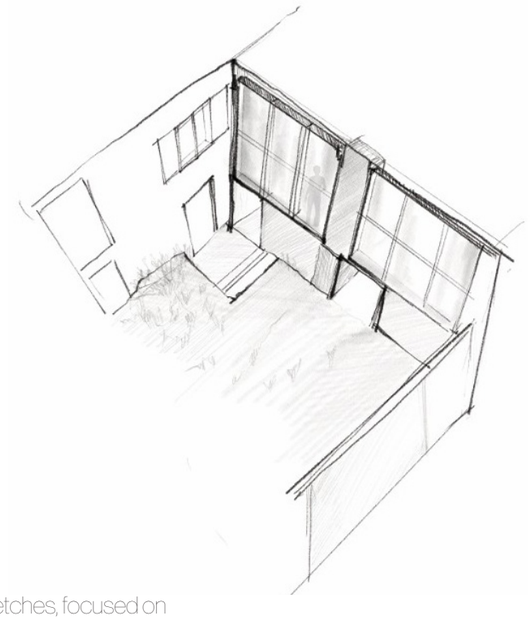


III. Intervention

Concept
Design
Construction

Introduction

This chapter details the evolution of a small-scale intervention, tracing its journey from initial conceptualization to physical execution. Developed in close collaboration with Maria Sangeorzan, the project represents a synthesis of theoretical design and practical application. While the foundational ideas are outlined in the following pages, the project's final form was not dictated by the drawing board alone. Instead, it emerged through an repeated process of frequent site visits, careful material selection, and an active, ongoing dialogue with the Legambiente association. This collaborative approach ensured that the intervention remained responsive to both its physical environment and its social context



One of the intitial sketches, focused on
the relation with the context

Two drafts of the digital-collages that helped us to find the right direction

3.1 Concept

Choice of the place and the search for the idea

Selecting our area of intervention was about embracing the unconventional. In search for the right place we were early on interested in this upper-floor space that feels suspended between the interior and the outdoors. Overlooking the small courtyard, this room offered a perfect “field” to help visitors truly bond with the Casamatta’s unique vibe.

The expansive opening was a clear invitation to experiment with light in our project, leading us to focus on the concept of architectural framing. It wasn’t just about a room; it was about capturing a perspective. On the left, our sketches and digital collages document this search for the final form. Soon, the site’s raw energy finally met our design intent.

The subtle play of light between the semi-transparent panel and the shadow of the original railing

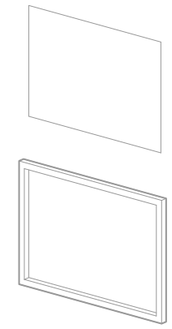
3.2 Design

Collage composition

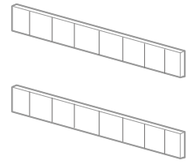
The design prioritized two equally vital components: selecting materials that capture the essence of Casamatta and its multi-layered character, and finding the perfect composition. Creating a satisfying collage was the core of our creative process. After finalizing the arrangement, we carefully planned the assembly using brackets, screws, and nails, ensuring the connectors remain discreet. This allows the primary objects to “speak” for the project without visual distraction or mechanical interference.

THE SELECTION

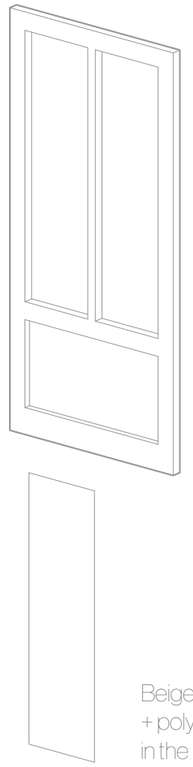
Focusing on vertical application, we curated objects of various typologies - from old doors to timber planks. To play with light and transparency, we incorporated glass, polycarbonate, and mirrors, balancing solid structural elements with translucent, reflective surfaces.



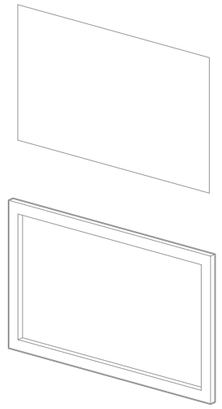
Mirror in a blue frame



Wooden planks
nailed together

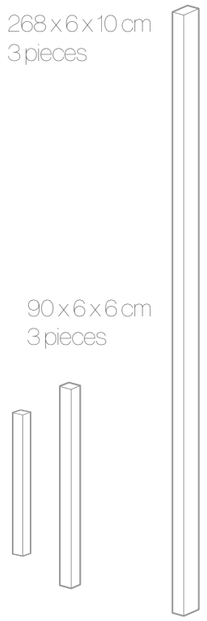


Beige door
+ polycarb. panel
in the left opening



Custom timber frame
painted in dark-red
+ polycarb. panel

TIMBER PILLARS

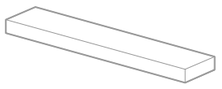


268 x 6 x 10 cm
3 pieces

90 x 6 x 6 cm
3 pieces

60 x 6 x 6 cm

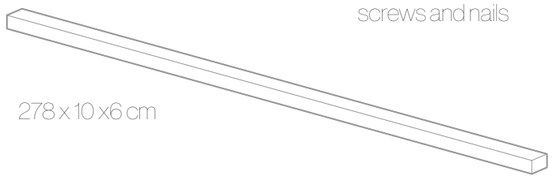
TIMBER BEAMS



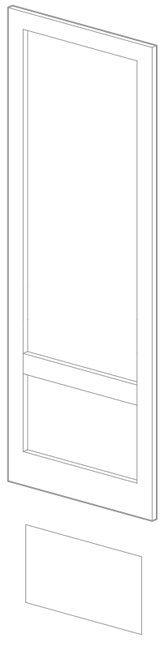
95 x 18 x 6 cm

70 x 10 x 6 cm

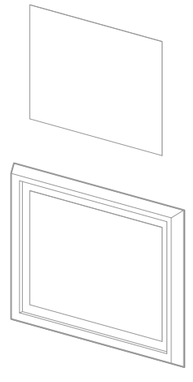
Various brackets,
screws and nails



278 x 10 x6 cm



Light-gray door
+ polycarb. panel
in the lower opening



Golden painting frame
+ polycarb. panel

Double dark-brown door

3.3 Construction

FROM THE FLOOR

The project's scale - nearly three meters high and wide - required us to move beyond paper and digital sketches and onto the floor. Laying out elements physically together allowed nuances of width, texture, and thickness to guide the final arrangement. This was critical when selecting polycarbonate panels; juxtaposing different hues helped us decide where to put the panels of warm and cold tones, ensuring the visual weight and composition felt exactly right in the space.

Comparing the elements to find the best colour and tone variations of the polycarb. panels

Checking the configurations directly on the floor, allowing small nuances to help us improve the arrangement

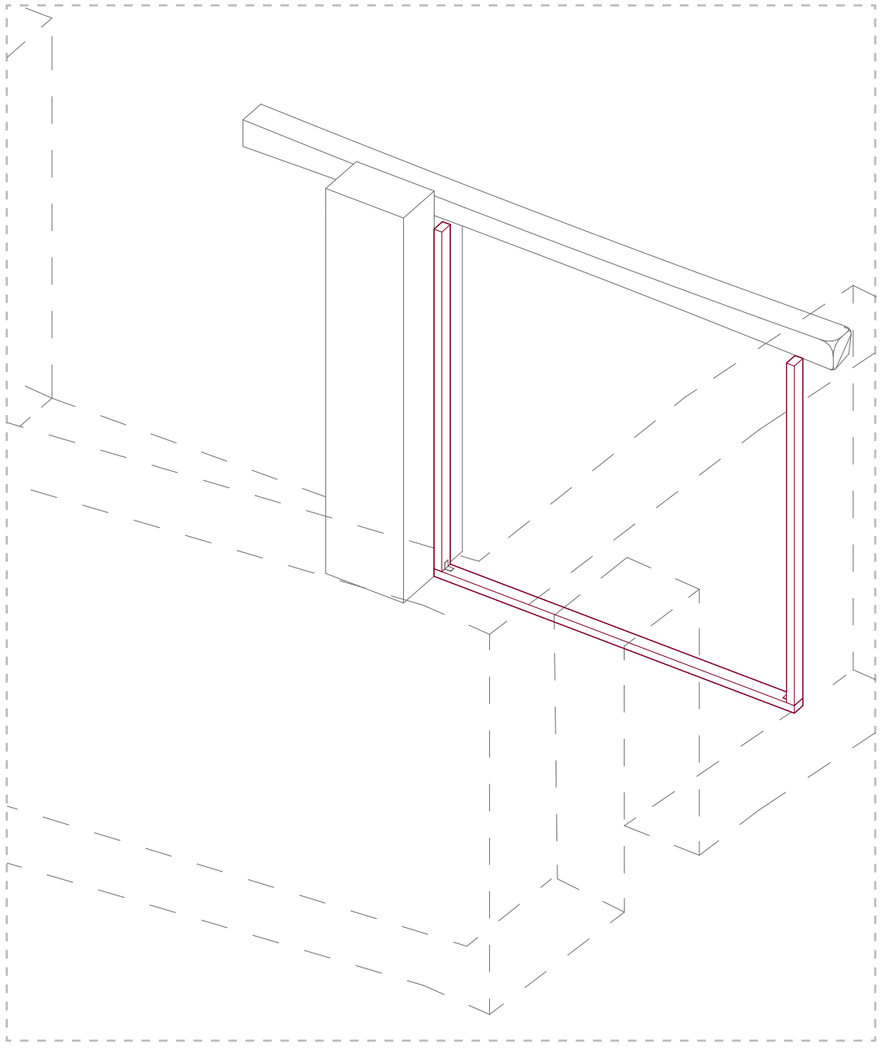
Painting the frame
with mirror inside

Begining of the construction

Painting the wooden planks

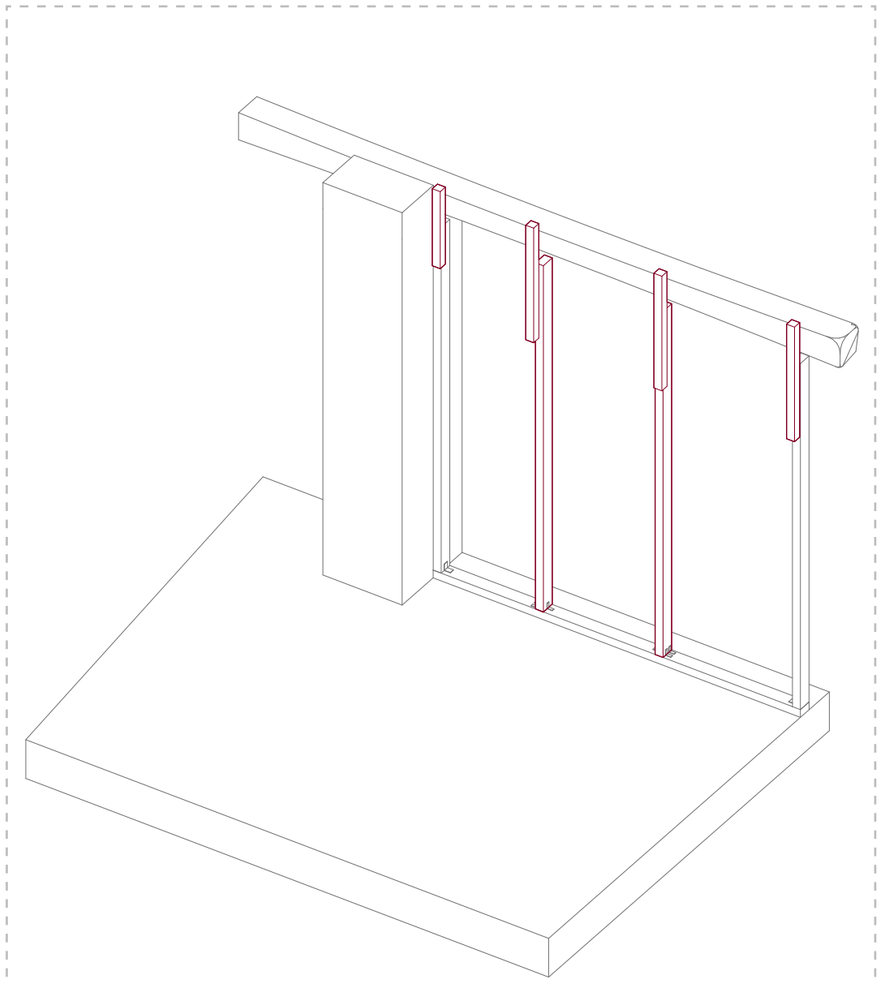
Double-checking
the measurements

STEP 1



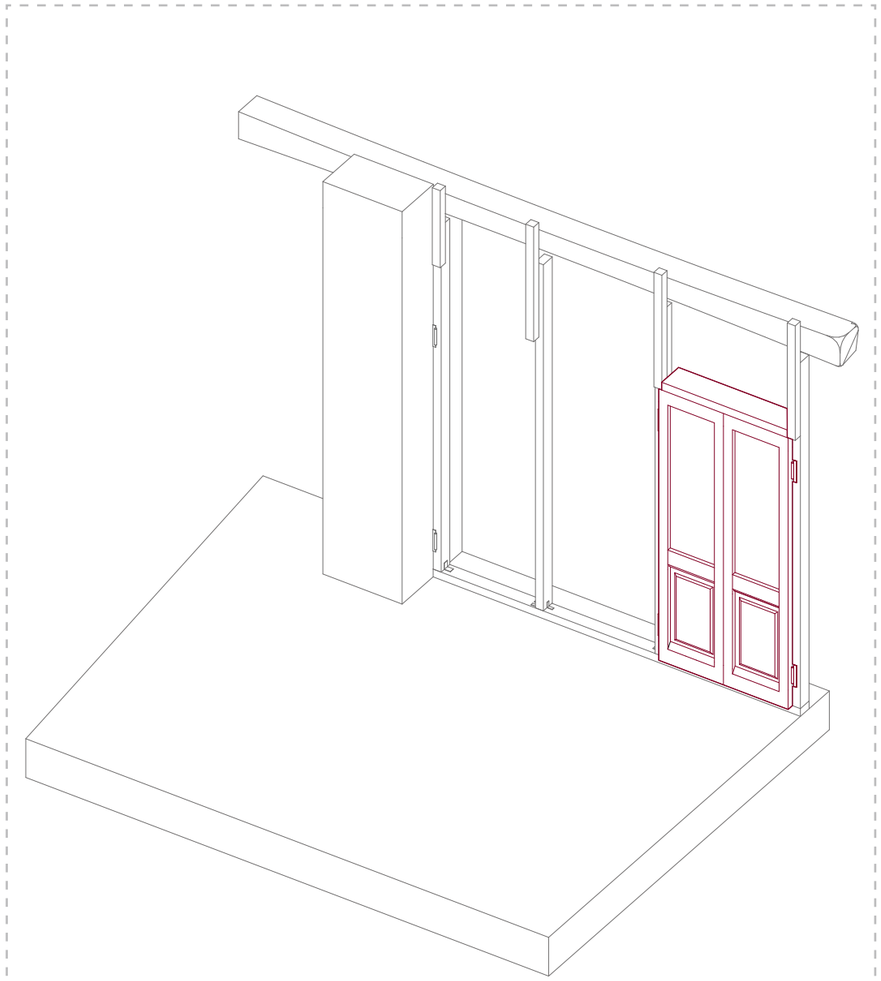
Constructing the outer frame, supported from
both sides by fixign to the exisitng walls

STEP 2



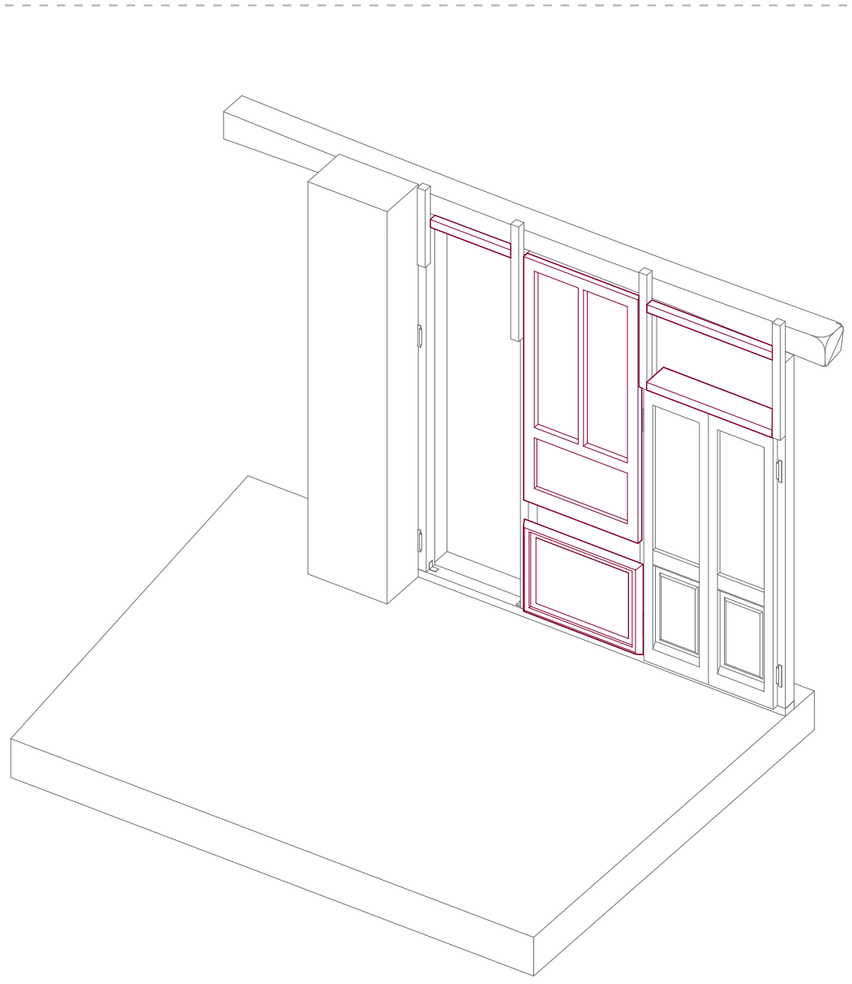
Addiing beams in the middle with the use of L-brackets and screws. Adding vertical connection to the beam above, enabling the structure to withstand the weight of the elements attached later

STEP 3



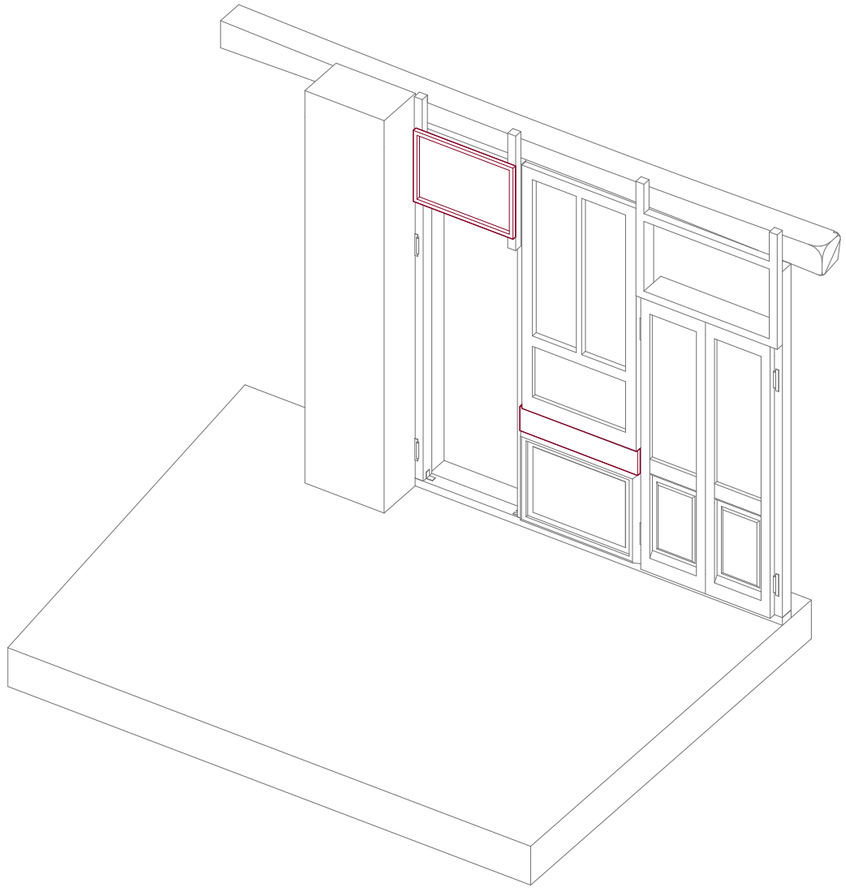
Fixing the first elements, brown double door with hinges, so that they remain openable

STEP 4



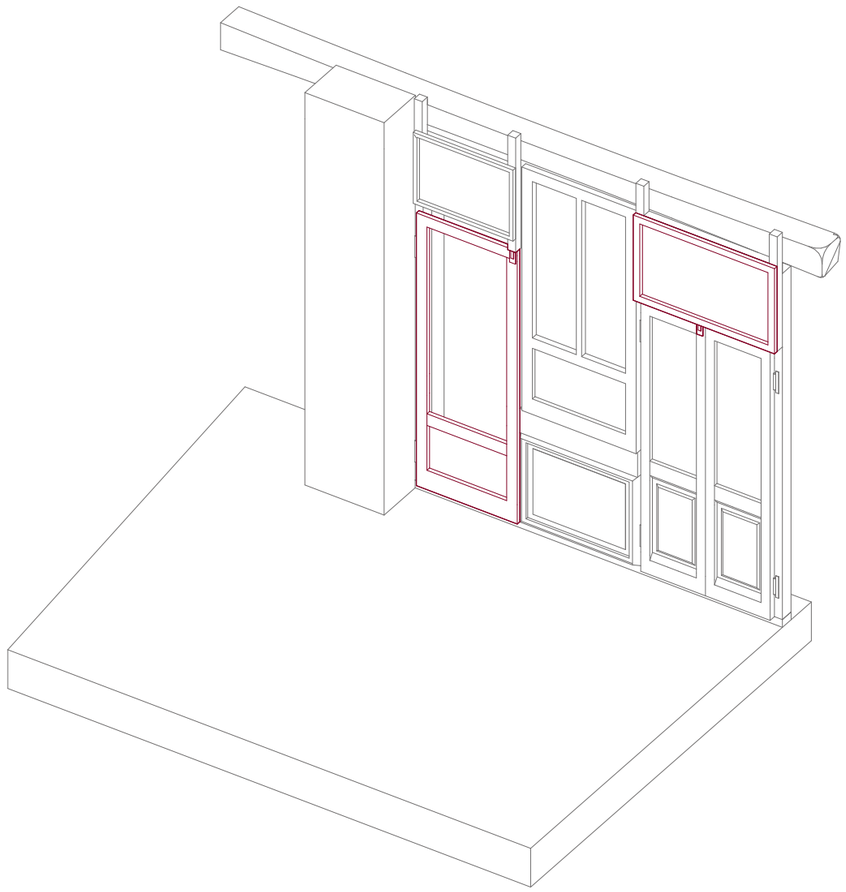
Adding the beige door and golden paiting frame to the structure, previo-siously implementing polycarbonated panels in them. Mounting a beam above the brown door, making a closure and protection from the outiside

STEP 5



Adding the wooden planks panel in the miidle (previously nailed together).
Fixing a mirror with a blue frame in the top left corner.

STEP 6



Adding the last parts: the gray door (with polycarb. panel impemented in its) and dark red frame in the top right corner (naiiled before fixing it to the structure). Adding the wooden planks panel underneath the mirror, and ahieving proper closure to the gray door by fixing a beam above them.

LOOKING AT TO FEEL

The project possesses a dual nature. By interacting through touch and observing the play of light through varied transparent materials, we experience the "skin" of the Casamatta. This sensory engagement allows the interplay of color and texture to bring the architectural surface to life, making the visitor truly understand and "feel" the place..

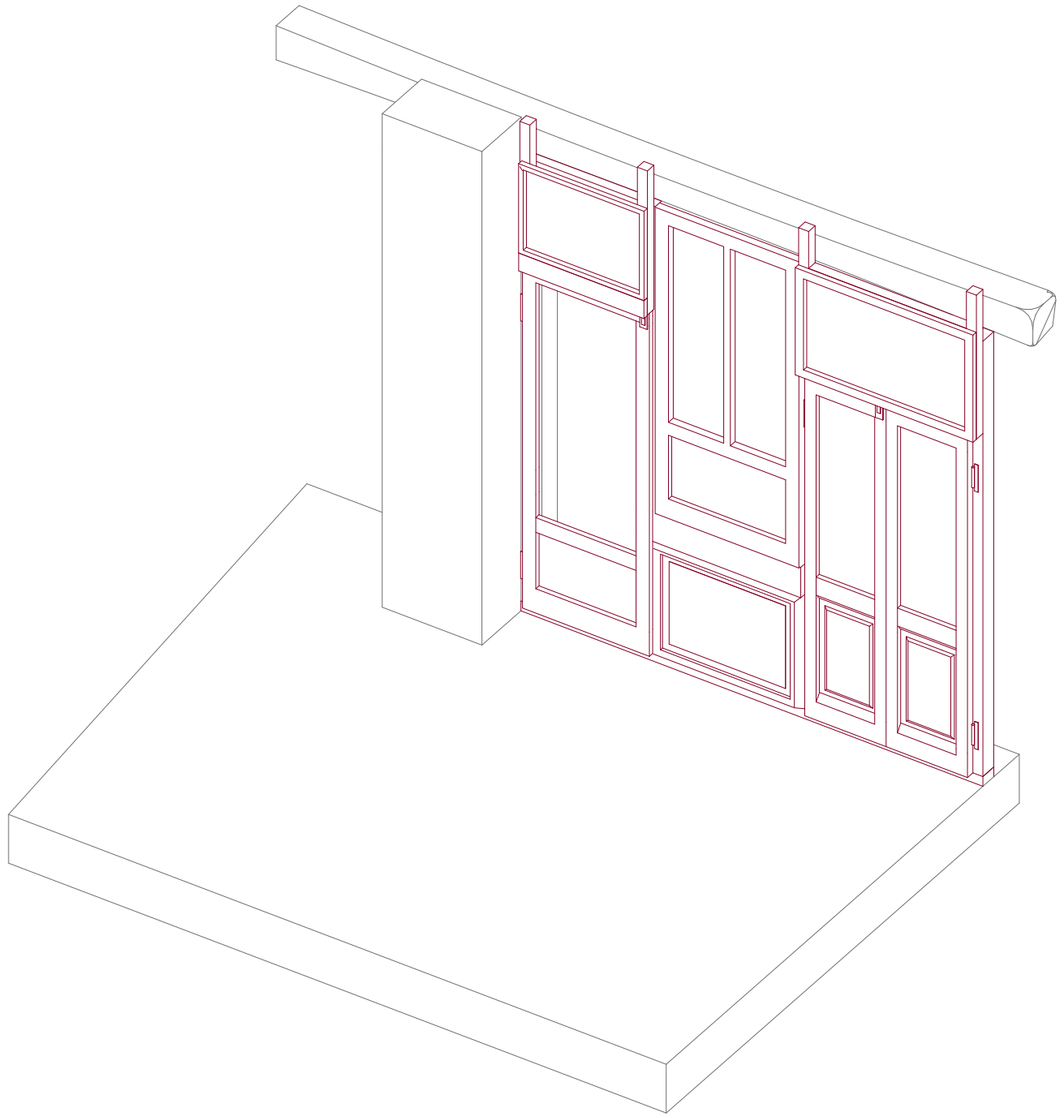
LOOKING THROUGH TO DISCOVER

The project's second nature lies in its relationship with what lies beyond. It emphasizes context by using transparent materials and strategic openings to frame new perspectives. These "visual filters" draw the eye toward forgotten site details, encouraging visitors to rediscover their surroundings from previously unseen angles. By looking through the intervention, the background becomes the foreground, turning the act of observation into a process of discovery.

The open arrangement

The closed arrangement

The final form - view from the side



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Cittation list

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2 - Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 105.
3 - Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 105.
4 - Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 106.
5 - Rossi, The Architecture of the City, 107.
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https://www.researchgate.net/.
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List of figures

Fig. 1. The Architecture of the City (1966), book cover. Design by Massimo Vignelli.
Fig. 2. The inverted temple church in Maad (2016), architectural drawing. Plan and temple reconstruction by Hany Kahwagi-Janho; edited by Christelle Wehbe.
Fig. 3. La Citta Analoga (1976), collage. By Aldo Rossi, Eraldo Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin, and Fabio Reinhart.
Fig. 4. Saint Elias spolia church of Bziza, Northern elevation (2023), photographic 2D scan. By Christelle Wehbe.
Fig. 5. Saint Elias spolia church in Blat, Southern elevation (2023), photograph. By Christelle Wehbe.
Fig. 6. The Eyes of the Skin, book cover. Design by Wiley (publisher design team).
Fig. 7. Eye Reflecting the Interior of the Theater of Besancon (1804), engraving and pointelle on wove paper. By Claude Nicolas Ledoux.
Fig. 8. Lonely Metropolitan (1932), photomontage. By Herbert Bayer.
Fig. 9. The human body as a house (1708), illustration. By Toviyah Kats.
Fig. 10. Continuity 1, digital sketch. By Szymon Kazirod.
Fig. 11. Continuity 2, digital sketch. By Szymon Kazirod.
Fig. 12. Dominance of vision, digital sketch. By Szymon Kazirod.
Fig. 13. Reinforcement, digital sketch. By Szymon Kazirod.
Fig. 14. Bodily movement, digital sketch. By Szymon Kazirod.
Fig. 15. Collage patterns, digital sketch. By Szymon Kazirod.