

# **The Library of 'flesh':**

A return to bodily perception

Amy Lam, B.A.S.

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## **Abstract**

The current state of architecture is one that has turned away from materiality and is disconnected from crafted details for the scale of the human body and perception. The physicality of architecture should relate, mediate and project meaning, directing our consciousness back to the world and towards our sense of self and being. The body has a need for physicality, objects (books) and spaces, for use and for *perceptual experience*.

Drawing upon the works of Merleau-Ponty, this thesis understands perception as the facticity encounter of the lived-body, 'flesh', in this 'world', where the body is fully of the world, and the world is meaningfully given through the body. Perception does not simply end with sensations, but leads us to create (physical) forms of our understanding of the world. This thesis then uses the relation of 'flesh' in the 'world' as a concept for the relation of the book in the library, where the book and library presuppose each other and rely on each other for significance and meaning. The spatial quality of a library does not only engage the reader in the enjoyment of a book, but it can also sensually engage the totality of the body in spatial experience beyond sight.

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## Table of Contents

List of Illustrations .....	v
Preface .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
<b>Part One</b>	
The Body .....	8
Other Bodies .....	12
<b>Part Two</b>	
The Book .....	19
The Library .....	23
<b>Part Three</b>	
The Winchester Palace Wall .....	29
The Details .....	42
Bookshelf Façade .....	44
Viewing System of Visual Sources .....	48
Structural Bookshelves .....	49
“The Fragment” Reading Spaces .....	51
The Library of ‘flesh’ .....	52
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	55
<b>Appendices</b>	
A Life Drawing Composition .....	59
B Architectural Drawings .....	61
C Site Model .....	64
D Sectional Detail Model .....	65
Bibliography .....	68

## List of Illustrations

All images by author unless otherwise indicated.

Figure 1: Glass Skyscraper, model. Mies van der Rohe, 1921. (Peter 166).....	3
Figure 2: Paris vision city plan, model. Le Corbusier, 1925. (Peter 142) .....	3
Figure 3: Figures before the rendering of background. ....	16
Figure 4: Completed life drawing. ....	16
Figure 5: An imaginary portrait of Johann Gutenberg. (Manguel, 1996: 134) .....	21
Figure 6: The haptic library, Frederick Kiesler. (Oechslin 138) .....	26
Figure 7: The Winchester Palace wall fragment as it appears currently. ....	29
Figure 8: Site in surrounding context. (Google Eath).....	30
Figure 9: The Southwark Bankside from a panorama of c. 1660, looking north. (Reilly 14) .....	31
Figure 10: The Bishop of Winchester's Palace in 1640. (Reilly 11) .....	32
Figure 11: North-east view of the hall of Winchester Palace as it appeared after the 1814 fire. ...	33
Figure 12: Picturesque view of the hall looking west, with houses in Clink Street on the right, 1827. (Seeley 116).....	33
Figure 13: 'Ruins of Winchester Palace, Southwark,' showing the riverfront and Clink Street, looking east, 1828. (Seeley 117) .....	34
Figure 14: Winchester Palace remains, used as a wall between two warehouses, 1943. ....	35
Figure 15: Winchester Palace wall fragment revealed during rebuilding of a warehouse, 1960-63. ....	35
Figure 16: General view looking north-west, showing the east end of the foundations of the early 13th century hall... Excavations took place from 1983-84. (Seeley 49) .....	36
Figure 17: The Winchester Palace hall, looking west, with Clink Street to the right. (Seeley 57). 37	
Figure 18: The recreation of a perspectival view of the great hall, looking west. ....	38
Figure 19: Detail of the exterior of the late 13th- early 14th century rose window. Taken in 1983. (Seeley 58).....	39
Figure 20: A detail drawing of the rose window. ....	39
Figure 21: Preliminary study models of the bookshelf façade.....	44
Figure 22: Detail drawing of the bookshelf façade system in relation to bodily interaction and dimensions. ....	45
Figure 23: Preliminary models of the bookshelf façade system with "reading platform". ....	46
Figure 24: A sectional sketch of the central space of Exeter Library. (By author) .....	47
Figure 25: Khan's incline reading shelves in Exeter Library. (Photos by author).....	47

Figure 27: The Carleton University Library (Photos by author)..... 49

Figure 28: The London Library: showing the reading rooms on the second level and cast iron  
bookstacks on the third level. (McIntyre 36) ..... 50

Figure 29: A model of the new book-stacks that follow the same cast iron design as the old.  
(Haworth Tompkins Architects) ..... 50

Figure 30: Drawing of reading spaces attached to a wall fragment. From left to right: Interior  
elevation, section and exterior elevation. Refer to Appendix B for full image. .... 51

Figure 31: Preliminary section of the library, showing organization of spaces. .... 54

*"The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance...  
[but] as an element, as the concrete emblem of a  
general manner of being."*

*Merleau-Ponty*

## **Preface**

Perception is explored in this thesis as a facticity using the bodily experience as the starting point. Our lived body which is uniquely self-conscious, enjoys or suffers life in the first person rather than described or explained from a third person perspective. At the source of perception is the existence of a body of *flesh* that is fully embodied in a *world*.

*Flesh* (as a noun) is defined in The Oxford Dictionary as, "The soft, especially the muscular, substance between the skin and bones of an animal or a human."<sup>1</sup> This contemporary definition and understanding of flesh is the description of a material substance. The origin of the word, flesh, comes from Old English before 800 A.D.<sup>2</sup> It was used as both a noun and a verb to describe the bodies of humans and animals. However, by also originally being a verb, flesh was not only physical matter, but also took part in the inhabitation of the world. The essence of flesh, referring to the human body, is more than just material substance. We do not simply exist in the world, but we have the ability to reflect upon our surrounding. We come to intellectual understanding through a constant bodily perception of our world. Merleau-Ponty's definition of "flesh" consists of a physical body that dwells within a system of actions and reactions with our surrounding. Our bodies come in contact with the world through the sensation of our *flesh*. It is the reaching out of the body that allows for interaction and understanding of our surrounding. "Flesh", borrowing from Merleau-Ponty's definition of the "lived body", will be understood in this thesis not only as the physical matter grounding us in this world, but as the interchange, the mutual support, between subject and world.

<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (2001) and Oxford English Reference Dictionary (2002).

<sup>2</sup> The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology (1988).

*World* is used in this thesis to describe the grounding in which our bodies are anchored and where perception takes place. Merleau-Ponty describes the “world” not as a container, but as the element that subtends all things and activities, such as the sea would be for a sailor or the earth for a farmer. This elemental presence subtends the relationship between the entire horizon of the world and the existential situatedness of the body. Thus the world is not just the horizon of specific activities but of life itself. There is a constant, unconscious inter-relation and inter-play of flesh and world. The world is thus opened to the body through perception, and yet is guided by the situated body.

Just as it is impossible to deny the existence of an *I*, even the most notorious of skeptics, Descartes, accepted this one truth; it is also not possible to question the existence of the world. The facticity of the world is presupposed in all our perception and all our thinking. The body is fully of the world, and the world is meaningfully given through the body, through perception. Flesh and world are intertwined and mutually constitutive of each other. They serve as each other’s significance and formal horizons. Therefore this thesis uses the facticity of the flesh in the world to awaken our conscious understanding of the essence of being and living.

The relation of the ‘flesh’ in the ‘world’ is then used as the illustration for the relation of the book in the library, where the book and library presuppose each other and rely on each other for significance and meaning. Whether it is a person browsing or the vivid seeker of specific information, the architecture of a library, in which the book sits patiently on the shelf, can sensually engage the reader even before the book is opened. Hence the title for this thesis and design project is: The Library of *‘flesh’*.

*"Humans have the ability to go beyond mere perception, but it is through perception (of physical things) that allows us to do so."  
Kant*

## **Introduction**

Contemporary buildings have turned away from materiality and are losing their connection with crafted details relating to the scale of the human body, its senses and experience. Pallasmaa states that, "the architecture of our time is turning into the retinal art of the eye."<sup>1</sup> The built environment has the ability to give us insight and connect us with our past; instead, our contemporary buildings and structures are primarily creating objects of visual seduction.<sup>2</sup> The task of architecture should relate, mediate and project meaning, directing our consciousness back to the world and towards our own sense of self and being. Since architecture is amongst the most permanent expressions of culture,<sup>3</sup> there needs to be a return to a built environment which engages the body in experience.

How did we arrive at this state where our architecture no longer *speaks* to us? I believe it is a result of the fact that we have forgotten the indispensable role of the perceptual body for the meaningful embodiment of the world. Merleau-Ponty wrote in a letter in 1962, "we never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought— almost to the point of forgetting the contributions of perception to our idea of truth."<sup>4</sup>

The following observations are examples of events that may have culminated in our current state of architecture; one that is disconnected from the engagement of our bodies, addressing only the sense of vision. First, the development of Western thought since the Greek philosophers have valued intellectual thought over all bodily senses. Plato's dualist philosophy of

<sup>1</sup> Pallasmaa 2006: 29.

<sup>2</sup> Pallasmaa 2005: 11.

<sup>3</sup> Holl 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 3.

the realm of ideals separates the physical body from this world and body from mind.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle's rigorous record of all that is in nature, gives emphasis to the empirical and truth as what can be measured by sight. The beginning of this separation of body from world, and ultimately body from mind has led us to eventually forget and neglect the source of our bodily experience from which our abstract thoughts originate.

Another example is the invention of perspectival representation in the Renaissance. This method of representation, of our world, has placed the eye at the centre of observation and symbolic meaning; neglecting the totality of the body in perception. In the construction of a perspectival representation, "...all particulars or "orthogonals" meet at the so-called central vanishing point, which is determined by the perpendicular drawn from the eye."<sup>6</sup> The eye is placed at the centre and starting point of vision. The basis of perspectival representation also presupposes that we see with a single, immobile eye, while in experienced reality our pair of eyes is in constant movement with the body through space. By transforming the representation of space into a mathematical formula, it, "negates the differences between front and back, between right and left, between bodies and intervening space [...] The result was a translation of psycho-physiological space into mathematical space; in other words, an objectification of the subjective."<sup>7</sup>

The invention of the camera as the capturing eye of images has further lead to the flattening of space and replacing the bodily experience with an image. The printed image has enabled us to see the world from perspectives which were previously impossible, such as satellite images, aerial views, microscopic photos, etc. However, these images only satisfy the curiosity of the eye and suppress the involvement of the whole body and the other senses. Through technological inventions such as the camera, the body is not only separated from direct

<sup>5</sup> Plato's Allegory Cave in the Republic.

<sup>6</sup> Panofsky 2002: 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 66.

experience of the world but the body is further divided; where the senses are separated from the body and from each other.

The development of Modern architecture has also played a part in stripping architecture of its tactile richness. The pursuit of pure and abstract forms started off as a critique of the overly ornamented buildings more concerned with decoration rather than the creation of meaningful space. As in the work of Mies van der Rohe, his steel and glass buildings were about revealing the *bare bones* of architecture. This abstraction of understanding the 'truth' of structure was meant to be a tool for revealing spatial meaning, but has now reduced architecture to cold flat surfaces. Le Corbusier's preference for the materialless whiteness and abstract forms has resulted in space and forms that are pleasing to the eye of the viewer, but does not address how the body experience materials. Le Corbusier's conceptions

for urban settings also lack sensitivity for the bodily experience with city surrounding. His influence is still evident in the layout and dimensions of our cities plans today.

Our urban settings are no longer measured for the stroll of the bodily pedestrian, but are catered to the accommodation and convenience of the automobile. Our current cities are made for architectural and mobility machines, but has forgotten the bodily experience of the users. Our building codes and regulations devote larger sections to the specifications of parking spaces and service areas rather than the concern of how the building is encountered by the bodies of the

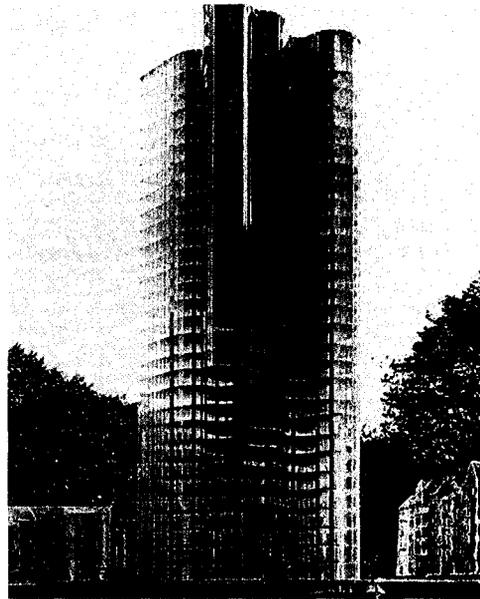


Figure 1: Glass Skyscraper, model. Mies van der Rohe, 1921. (Peter 166)



Figure 2: Paris vision city plan, model. Le Corbusier, 1925. (Peter 142)

occupants. It is not only a matter of having a sensitive building that respects the urban fabric of surrounding buildings or infrastructure, but a building that is sensitive to the bodily dimension and senses, which fully invites the experience of a lived- body. Thus, this thesis proposes to take a look at Phenomenology to understand how our bodies engage in lived experience through perception. Steven Holl claims that the, "experience of phenomena– sensations in space and time as distinguished from the perception of objects– provides a "pre-theoretical" ground for architecture."<sup>8</sup>

Phenomenology<sup>9</sup> sets aside questions about the so-called objective nature of things; it recommends instead that we explore phenomena more subjectively, from within our own human experience. Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) took Husserl's philosophy further and highlighted the role of the body as the starting point and anchor of the perceptual world, a theme previously treated only superficially and largely ignored by the philosophical tradition.

Merleau-Ponty was part of a group of young French thinkers who helped to introduce the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger into French philosophy after the Second World War. Merleau-Ponty's main contribution to a phenomenological account of perception is through his major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy strikes a middle ground between the classical thoughts of the Intellectualists and Realists. Intellectualists, such as Descartes and his famous quote: 'I think therefore I am', claim that our mind is not only distinct from our body, but our mental concepts have superiority over perception from the sensory body. While, realists take an opposite view, where perceptions of the world should be taken exactly as it is, and our minds do not organize our perception any further. Merleau-Ponty's reaction argued that our intellectual thought is grounded in the perceptual nature of our bodies that is situated in this world. Mind and body are not separate, nor is one superior to the other, but rather, together

<sup>8</sup> Holl 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Phenomenology was first developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and refined by Martin Heidegger (1889-1973).

form the totality of one body which embodies the world. Merleau-Ponty claims "I am my body",<sup>10</sup> where the lived experience of our surrounding is through the body. For Merleau-Ponty, the mental aspects of 'me' are embedded in a body; I am a body-subject, rather than a thoughtless and mechanical body. He summarizes phenomenology as, "[...] the study of essences [... But is] also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'."<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty's philosophy shifted our understanding of existence from one of problematic body-mind dualism to one of lived-experience through bodily perception.

Drawing upon the works of Merleau-Ponty's this thesis argues the importance of lived-experience through the understanding of the lived-body as the anchor and starting point of perception. With the understanding of the particular of the body, we can gain insight to our relations in the world and to other bodies. Furthermore, our perception does not simply end at the stages of sensations, but leads us to create systems to bring (physical) form and order to an understanding of the world. Since we are physical beings and perceive the world through the senses of the body, there is a need for physicality, through objects (such as books) and spaces for the full engagement of the body in *experience*. This thesis connects the study of the bodily perception with an investigation into the idea and experience of the library.

The idea and ultimate purpose of libraries is the art of making systems to bring form and order to the world of knowledge and information, through the physical presence of books. In the past, due to the time consuming and heavy manual labour of producing a physical record, only relevant and necessary knowledge and information was obtained and kept as a record. Since the invention of the printing press, information in the form of books has become available in abundance. The question now arises as the 'how' of the relationship between an internal order [of

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 231.

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: vii.

books] and external order [in architecture]; and 'how', despite the abundance and confusion of the parts, should the need to attain the whole be satisfied?<sup>12</sup>

This thesis proposes an approach that starts with an understanding of the particular and then of the particular in relation to the whole. The first section will set out to develop an understanding of the body as the anchor and horizon in which perception takes place. After developing how the individual body perceives, this will then be used in understanding the relation of our body to other existing bodies. We are able to consciously acknowledge the *existence* of the world and of other bodies, because we also experience the same world *with* our own bodies.

Part Two will proceed to use the relation of the body, of flesh, in the world as a concept for the relation of the book in the library. Similar to the importance of having a book as the physical item that can transcend us beyond the here and now, the physicality of architecture can also speak to us metaphysically. The experience of a library and its contents of books can be wonderfully tactile, engaging both bodily experience and intellectual reflection. Therefore, there is a need for "the management of knowledge, and perhaps even more, the economical use of the physical forms of knowledge preservation in books and libraries."<sup>13</sup>

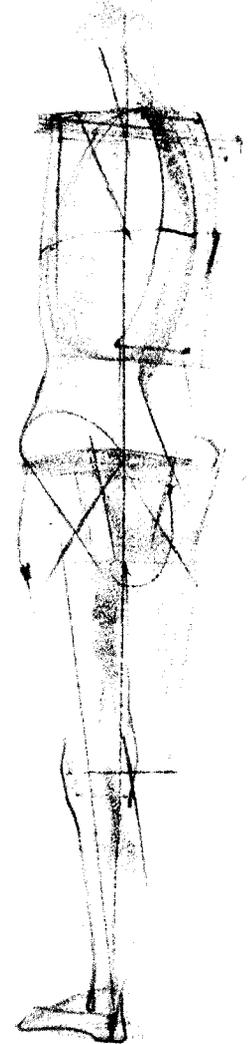
Once the theoretical background is laid in the first two sections, Part Three will propose the design of a community library in the site of the historical wall fragment of Winchester Palace located in the borough of Southwark in London, UK. There will first be an exploration into the phenomenal qualities of architectural details, using the body as the subject of perception. This approach of first designing tactile details and then the whole, will not only enhance sensuous experience of space beyond sight, but will also, "[re]connect us with time and tradition; through marks of touch we shake hands with countless generations."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Oechslin 2005: 127.

<sup>13</sup> Oechslin 2005: 123.

<sup>14</sup> Pallasmaa 2006: 33.

# ***Part One***



*"Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism ... and with it forms a system."  
Merleau-Ponty*

## The Body

The presence of our body is central to our *embodiment* of the 'world'. We have an understanding of the *world* and objects that are part of it, because we live in and amongst them through our body. Our existence is profoundly different from that of objects because besides having a physical presence, we are also actively conscious of our surrounding through our sensual perceptions. The following chapter will look at the role of the body in perception through its physical and *lived* presence in the world. The purpose is to recognize the essential role of perception in our reflection and intellectual consciousness of the world. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

"Left to itself, perception, forgets itself and is ignorant of its own accomplishments [...] without reflection life would probably dissipate itself in ignorance of itself or in chaos. But this does not mean that reflection should be carried away with itself or pretend to be ignorant of its origins [in the body]."<sup>1</sup>

Our physical body adheres to the world through a unique perspective and temporality; it is within this system of subject to object relation that we have interaction with the world. Perception of the world originates from and is anchored by our body; it is the primary mode in which we engage our surrounding. Merleau-Ponty says, 'It is through my body that I perceive 'things'.<sup>2</sup> We perceive because we *are* and have a body, with senses, that directly experiences the world and is involved in it. The body is grounded in the world, and has a *grip* of our surrounding and other objects through the bodily senses. As Heidegger suggests, "living among things is the basic principle of human existence".<sup>3</sup> The totality of our physical and knowing body contributes to the understanding of our surrounding, revealing a different piece of the complete picture of the world with each new perspective.

<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 19.

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 216.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger 1993: 101.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of classical thought was that it made a distinction and separation between the mind and body, resulting in the hierarchical ranking of the mind over the sensory body. The Cartesian view states that the body and world are not intrinsically connected, that the human being is a spectator rather than an actor in the play of existence, an autonomous mind contemplating a mindless "external world." When in actual experience, we depend on our sensual perception to provide the information in which to validate the world. The presence and role of the body allows us to perceive our surroundings, but also allows us to be fully part of it. "We experience a perception and its horizon "in action" rather than by "posing" them or explicitly "knowing" them."<sup>4</sup> That is to say, before we realize with our intellectual consciousness that our world is true, it already exists and continues to exist through the presence of our body in it.

The understanding of our surrounding, the world, arises from the convergence point of our body. Since perception is manifested through our body, it is not a private or purely mental condition. Instead, it is a result of us being a body, and the body being in the world. Merleau-Ponty believes what is essential to all aspects of our existence is our concrete finite perspective of the world in which we live. What makes any viewpoint concrete and finite is that it is rooted in our bodily presence. All human experience and understanding originates from a bodily grasp of the world that results in a bodily orientation. The bodily point of view is not just one more arbitrary appearance of the world among others, but it is *our* origin point of view. As Merleau Ponty says, "every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception."<sup>5</sup> Perception occurs from the reference point of the body; therefore my body constitutes my view and my experience of the world. The body, although at times unaware of the act, is constantly adjusting to integrate our experience and maintain a *grip* onto the world. This on-going re-orientation of our bodies sets up the perceptual horizon where sensory particulars take place.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 12.

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 239.

At a basic and primordial knowledge of the world, we simply experience and learn of it by the very presence of our bodies through its senses. We are able to further discover and understand an object by examining it through an extension of our body. Merleau-Ponty says, "I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject."<sup>6</sup> We can walk around the object, examine it with our eyes, pick it up, feel it in our hands, smell it and at times even taste it. For example, upon viewing a cube, the actual geometric properties of it can never fully be understood simply by our visual experience. Intellectually we know that a cube consists of six sides and eight corners, but during our visual experience of a cube in our situated body, we cannot at the same time see all six sides or all eight corners. "Statements such as, "It is true," do not correspond to what is given to us in perception. Perception does not give us truths like geometry but rather, *presence*."<sup>7</sup> The unity and our understanding of objective truths, such as a cube, is an abstract notion that has a unity through an indefinite number of views experienced by our body. It is the result of our direct contact with and our bodily involvement in the world that gives us the ability to gain reflection of objects and our own bodies.

Therefore, our perceptual experience is not just sensation of our surrounding, but we have the ability to construct and rearrange our perception resulting in a meaningful embodiment of the world. The body is not simply a unified group of organs that then confront things around itself; rather, the body can be itself only by going beyond itself. Like a constant dialogue, perception leads the subject to draw together understanding of the object, while simultaneously the object solicits and unifies the intentions of the subject. Our conscious body not only has the ability to perceive our surrounding environment, but also allows us the ability to be aware of ourselves. Merleau-Ponty incorporates this physiognomic perception into his notion of "flesh".

The body of flesh has the ability to turn back upon itself, sees and touches itself, by dividing itself into the "flesh of the world" and "flesh of the body," into the "sensible" and the "self-

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 215.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 13.

sensing". Merleau-Ponty characterizes *flesh* in terms of "chiasm" or "reversibility," that is, an always "imminent" coincidence between the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touched, self and other selves. This notion of flesh and its chiasmic structure of reversibilities establishes a balance between intimacy and alterity<sup>8</sup> (as well as between identity and difference and between unity and plurality). "The flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself."<sup>9</sup> Flesh is the identity of perception and perceptibility, even below the threshold of conscious awareness. The active bodily moments of perception are not sharply distinct, self-sufficient states, but are interwoven and inseparable aspects of a unified phenomenon, like two sides of a coin or two dimensions of a figure. As bodily perceivers, we are necessarily part of the perceptible world we perceive; we are not just *in* the world, but *of* it. There is a constant openness of the body to the world and world to the body. The totality of the body in perception is always both passive and active, situational and practical, conditioned and free. Therefore, perception "[...] is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality."<sup>10</sup> With the realization of the importance of the acts of perception through our situated body in the world, we bring meaning and validation back into our intellectual consciousness.

<sup>8</sup> The recognition of "the other".

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1968: 146.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 25.

*"Between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another...there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system."*

*Merleau-Ponty*

## **Other Bodies**

Our physical body in the world exists in relation to other bodies, similar to the interwoven threads of a piece of fabric. Other bodies do not merely appear as visible objects or invisible subject, not as material bodies or immaterial minds. They exist as persons, bodily agents, that we immediately and involuntarily identify within our own sensitivities and behaviours. The previous chapter explored the idea of perception from an individual bodily perspective; the following chapter will use it as grounding for the understanding of our relation with other bodies that occupy the same world. Moreover, it is because we have this personal bodily experience that we are able to understand the existence of other conscious bodies. This interpersonal convergence of perception on the world is possible only because we experience each other not as isolated minds, but as cohabiting bodies.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional philosophy and psychology has always struggled with the confirmation and acknowledgments of consciousness in other bodies. How can I know there is a mind just like my own in other bodies? Merleau Ponty uses his theory of the body and how we are bodily agents in this world to resolve this difficulty. He suggests that, "What we have said about the body provides the beginning of a solution to this problem".<sup>2</sup> Merleau Ponty further argues that I and others exist in bodies and in the world as bodies, "If I feel this inherence of my consciousness in its body and its world, the perception of other and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty".<sup>3</sup> For the problem of other *minds*, takes for granted a distinction between the mind and

<sup>1</sup> Carman 2008: 143.

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 406.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: 408-9.

body that has no echo in our most basic experience of ourselves and others.<sup>4</sup> We come to see the body of the other as being linked to their consciousness, similar to the way I experience my mind, and the awareness of my surroundings, being linked to my body.

Each body-subject converges to a unique bodily orientation in the world while being engaged in it. Yet, each body-subject has a different viewpoint of the same world. We do not initially know or learn of the world in isolation, in self-contained spheres of private awareness, but of a common openness onto one and the same world. When we are in the act of perceiving, our body is fully involved in the act of perception, we cannot at the same time observe ourselves perceiving. Therefore, Merleau Ponty suggests that:

“We must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world. In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because the perspective itself has not definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other’s, and because both are brought together into the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception.”<sup>5</sup>

Through a similar body we are able to learn of our own bodies like seeing ourselves in a mirror. Merleau Ponty’s explanation for our phenomenological experience of other bodily agents is an extension of his theory of the body and its relation to the world. We are able to acknowledge the existence of others, because we also experience the same world with our own bodies. Another similar body is necessary, because we learn about ourselves through the observations of others, similar to the way infants learn by imitation. Since the understanding and experience of the world comes from our bodily experience, it can be further confirmed when we see a body, with similar organs, which is also orientated in this world in the same way as ourselves. The limbs of others and their actions become an extension of our own intentions in the world. We do not live in this world in isolation, but we experience it by being part of it, and other similar bodies with us. We are able to understand our surroundings and objects by extending into it with our bodies:

<sup>4</sup> Carman 2008: 149.

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 411.

"It is precisely my body which perceives the body of another and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together compromise a system, so my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of the one and same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously."<sup>6</sup>

Our most primordial and basic experience of perception is not an experience that is separate, mutually closed, private or self-contained, but it is of a common openness into the same world where other bodies also exist. Merleau Ponty makes the argument that this social recognition is not of the mind, but of the body:

"From the depths of my subjectivity I see another subjectivity invested with equal rights appear, [...] I espouse his thought because this other, born in the midst of my phenomena, appropriates them and treats them in accord with typical behaviors which I myself have experienced."<sup>7</sup>

The lived-body experience is not a representation of the body, but our ability to anticipate and (literally) incorporate the world prior to applying concepts to object. Perception of objects is already structured by your body and its sense of intentions. It is our direct contact *with* and *in* the world that in turn gives us a reflection of our own bodies: "I know indubitably where my pipe is, and thereby I know where my hand and my body are."<sup>8</sup> A young child is able to acquire specific bodily and social skills simply by watching others perform these skills. This is not because the child could discretely analyze these observations and draw influence from those around him, but because the body, "ensures the immediate correspondence of what he sees done and what he himself does".<sup>9</sup> Other bodies that are at the same time inhabiting the world as we do, appear not just as targets of judgment or observation, but as persons, bodily agents that I can and immediately identify within the senses of my own body. We come to relate and identify other bodies when we both experience our surroundings and the world in the same way. "The thing

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 412.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 18.

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 115.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 412.

imposes itself as true for every intellect, but as real for every subject who is standing where I am [...] our first movement is to believe in an undivided being (v.) between us.”<sup>10</sup>

The argument has now been established that we, as physical bodies, inhabit the world in relation to other bodies and objects. What makes us unique is that we do not simply exist, but we are consciously and physically aware of the world and other objects. However, this bodily consciousness of objects and subjects is both passive and active in our perception. Our perception of the world and objects is not just the sum of all experience data gathered by our body, our experiences are a result from the world as a field that provides the grounding, or as Merleau-Ponty calls it, a *phenomenal field*, in which we are able to focus and distinguish between figure and ground. All perception happens through the realization of a figure/ground relationship. The world is not and cannot be experienced as a separate entity, but is the field in which our body is orientated. It provides the grounding in which we can perceive through our body. Thus the world must not be imagined,

“[...] as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected.”<sup>11</sup>

This elemental presence of the world subtends the relationship between the entire horizon of the world and the existential situatedness of the body, creating this figure/ground relation. Perception happens with a conception of the whole (ground) and then the conscious awareness of the particular (figure). This inter-relation of bodily embodiment and conscious awareness is what grounds our perception back to the horizon of this world. As Merleau-Ponty says:

“I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1964: 17.

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002: 285.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 354.

It is the constant bodily involvement in our surrounding that allows us to experience and understand the concreteness of the world, including objects and other bodies that occupy in the same field. In the act of perception the wholeness of the world is presupposed by the body, and then conscious reflection brings to focus the particulars of the part (of the world).

The following composition of a large life-drawing<sup>13</sup> (by the author of this thesis) is an exploration into the perceptual idea of figure/ground relationship. The idea of part(s) in relation to the whole is not only revealed to the viewer as one journeys through the various areas of the piece, but was also explored during the act of drawing the composition.

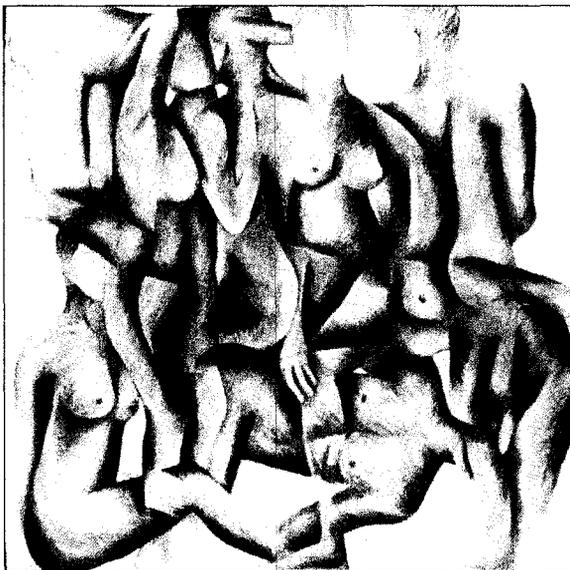


Figure 3: Figures before the rendering of background.



Figure 4: Completed life drawing.

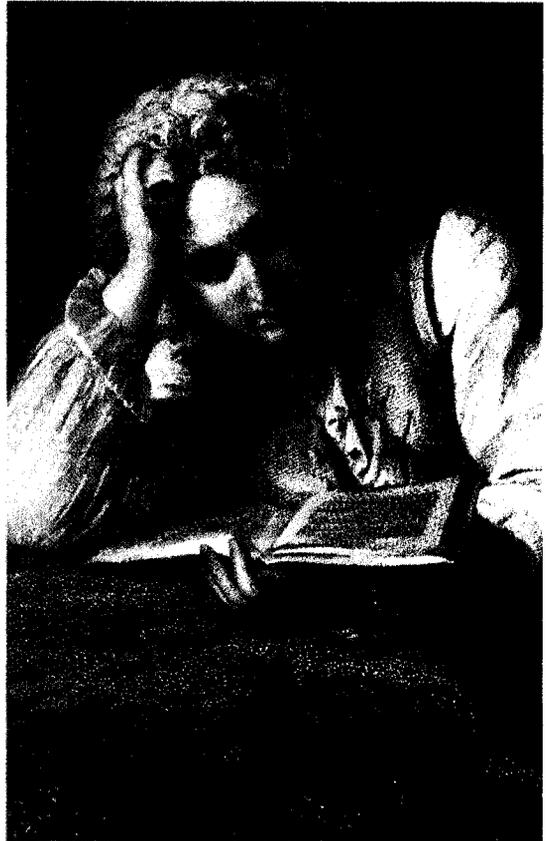
The ambiguity of the parts and the whole of human figures were first drawn, layered and merging in and out of each other. There is no one central point of view in the drawing, but rather requires the viewer to be involved in the layering and merging of the figures. With the application of a background surrounding the figures, the figure/ground relationship becomes less distinct and somewhat homogenous, suggesting a spatial and temporal reconciliation of subjects and space. Colour is used to bring various points of foreground and background into focus. Warm colours

<sup>13</sup> Refer to Appendix A.

are used to highlight different figures and parts, while cool colours create contrast and spatial depth between figures and background. As in our perception of the world, the totality it simply exists. We come to understand it when we consciously bring parts (in and of) the world to focus in the foreground of perception.

In this section, we have explored perception through the medium of our body and our relation to other bodies. Our bodily perception does not simply terminate at the stages of sensations, but leads us to abstract reflection and conscious awareness. We originally encounter others, that is, not just as minds, but as fellow flesh-and-blood bodies with which we share a common material world. The totality of our (bodily and conscious) perception of and in the *physicality* of this world allows us to come to a common understanding of it. Furthermore, when understanding is manifested in physical form (such as texts or images), the engagement of the body (in acts of reading or viewing) is able to transcend the 'here and now'.

## ***Part Two***



*"Forms of knowledge therefore, enter into the field of vision in a special way."*

*Werner Oechslin*

## **The Book**

As established in the previous section, we do not exist as separate entities of body disconnected from mind or from world. We are a lived-body situated in the world and consciously aware of our surroundings. Since we are limited and bounded by our physical body, we adhere to location and temporality. With the capability for abstract thought through bodily perception, we also have the capacity to accumulate knowledge. We need to rely on the knowledge of others to increase and build our own. Therefore, books have become the medium to resurrect the silent voices of accumulated knowledge from the past. In addition, the, "horizon of boundless knowledge [can be] assured by the book which outlives its author, and by the library."<sup>1</sup>

To a certain degree, once the content of the book is written and recorded, it is permanent in its physical form. However, the ideas within the book are always dynamic, since it is the interaction of the reader that gives texts its meaning. "The power of readers lies not in their ability to gather information, nor in their ordering and cataloguing capabilities, but in their gift to interpret, associate and transform their reading."<sup>2</sup> The physical presence of a book does not mean it is immutable and restricted, but it is always dynamic with the ability to inform and intrigue (promoting discovery).

The book exists in physical form which preserves and passes on memory. Each book holds a purpose, a piece of wisdom or voice waiting to be heard, becoming a reminder of the past. It becomes a tool that leads in a dialogue with the author who is no longer here to make the argument in person. Like many aspects of contemporary culture, the abundance of information has become fragmented and overwhelming. At times, refuge within a tangible book brings

<sup>1</sup> Oechslin 2005: 123.

<sup>2</sup> Manguel 2006: 91.

comfort. The book is the physical form for what exists in thought and hope, making our dreams tangible; becoming our extension into the past and the future. We are able to learn the lessons of those who already walked the paths we ponder, and building on that, further discoveries and interpretations can be made.

Since antiquity, philosophers have seen their task as consisting of the formulation, examination and deciphering of the questions of life. The ephemeral realm of thought and mind need a physical manifestation in order to be recalled. These ideas could not solely be dependant on the capacity of our memory or the oral tradition. This resulted in findings, journeys and discoveries to be recorded in writing. What started off as unseen (imagined) becomes seen in the physical form of a book. Through the act of reading, the book then leads us back into the realm of the unseen through intellectual reflection. "Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world,"<sup>3</sup> the act of reading a book, gives us the power to visit and revisit experiences beyond our situated and temporal body.

The contents of a book provide in physical form the object that leads the subject into a world that is beyond the tangible. The reader can become both observer and creator; piecing together texts of the past from memory. "Interpretation, exegesis, gloss, commentary, association, refutation, symbolic and allegorical senses, all rose not from the text itself but from the reader"<sup>4</sup> The act of reading invites the engagement of the bodily senses; the eyes scrolling across the pages of words, the nose smelling the scent of the paper, the ear hearing the turning of the pages, and the touch of the weight and texture of the book, even taste can be involved when the reader's fingers contacts the tongue. Reading is a learned and experienced act that promotes understanding. Readers have a special relationship with their books. The readers' gestures, their craft, the pleasure and power they derive from the book is enchanting, but not foreign. Each of us at some point has picked up a book, read from it a story, a poem that provokes, in us, an emotion.

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134.

<sup>4</sup> Manguel 1996: 59.

The engagement with a book is also highly intimate and personal. I know I can be carried away by a book, I can only start to understand by my own experience.

There are examples where the cultural development of a community is based on the influence of texts. Particularly, "Jewish, Christian and Islamic societies developed a profound symbolic relationship with their holy books, which were not symbols of God's Word but God's Word itself."<sup>5</sup> The Holy Book was just not simply a container of a heavenly message, but the physical presence of God's Word. The interaction and reading of the Holy book was a direct encounter with God. The physical presence of the book and the act of reading has the ability to transcend the reader beyond the boundaries of our bodies. The invention of the printing press in mid-fifteenth century, forever altered the relationship of the reader and the book in the sense it was no longer an exclusive or unique object crafted by the hands of a scribe, but slowly became available in abundance and to the masses.

The inventor of the printing press is credited to Johann Gutenberg (1394-1468), a young engraver and gem-cutter from the Archbishopric of Mainz. By the end of the fifteenth century, printing was well established in Europe. However, "while books were becoming more easily available and more people were learning to read, more were also learning to write [...] the sixteenth century became not only the age of the printed word, but also the century of the great manuals of handwriting."<sup>6</sup> It is interesting how technological developments, such as Gutenberg's printing press, promotes rather than eliminates that which it is supposed to supersede. Often times, a technological advancement will make



Figure 5: An imaginary portrait of Johann Gutenberg. (Manguel, 1996: 134)

<sup>5</sup> Manguel 1996: 168.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: 135.

us more aware of old traditional virtues that we might otherwise overlook. Like in our current age, with recent inventions such as the digital book, there are many who still prefer the experience of a physical codex book. With each reading encounter, the experience of a book can become an extension of our bodily intentions:

"We read intellectually on a superficial level, grasping certain meanings and conscious of certain facts, but at the same time, invisibly, unconsciously, text and reader become intertwined, creating new levels of meaning, so that every time we cause the text to yield something by ingesting it, simultaneously something else is born beneath it that we haven't yet grasped."<sup>7</sup>

The book can be seen as a metaphor for our relationship with the world. Like the body which is situated in and of this world, the physical form of the book is not a restriction to knowledge, but its presence enhances our understanding. This is reinforced by in Merleau-Ponty's explanation of the flesh in the world, where he states that, "There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible."<sup>8</sup> By the physical presence of the book, the reader is able to rescue experience from the page and transform it again into experience; in books are the reflections of the reader in the world. Furthermore, the body's engagement in the leafing through the pages of books and the roaming through the shelves and space of a library is an intimate part of the craft of reading.

<sup>7</sup> Manguel 1996: 173.

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134.

*"The idea is thrilling, that everything we know of this chaotic world might be reflected in an orderly way on the open shelves of a library."*

*Alberto Manguel*

## **The Library**

With the physical presence of the book collection, a library is the collected reservoir of knowledge. A library can become a reflection of our creation of order and systems to make sense of our complex world. However, the collection of knowledge that a library holds is not a closed or static system, but one that is constantly dynamic as we re-discover, clarify and document our evolving understanding of our world. The previous chapter argued that knowledge inhabits physical space in the form of books. The assemblage of scattered fragments of knowledge is grounded on a page, and the pages between the covers of a book, and the book on the shelves of the library. The library can never be satisfied simply by filled shelves, but requires the interaction of the searching reader with the books.

As mentioned previously, the architecture of our time is often built and designed neglecting the recognition of our full bodily experiences. A similar issue is evident in the architecture of our libraries, which are no longer designed for the significance of the book. The current architecture of libraries are often grand civic buildings that merely appeal to the eyes, but neglect the systematic relationship it has with its occupants; the body and the book. Our need for social interaction and collective experience will always exist, that is why libraries continue to be built and existing ones are being expanded.<sup>1</sup> The allure of a sensual experience while holding and reading a tangible book is too great to be replaced. New technologies and the convenient internet access to information have not cancelled out the need for libraries. Instead, these new systems of information add another layer of sophistication to existing systems and provide users with

<sup>1</sup> Hastings and Shipman 2008: 112.

another point of access for discovery.<sup>2</sup> The ambition to build a library that houses all forms of knowledge has been around since Antiquity. "We dream of a library of literature created by everyone and belonging to no one, a library that is immortal and will mysteriously lend order to the universe."<sup>3</sup>

One of the earliest attempts, in Western culture, to build a universal library was the construction of the Ancient Library of Alexandria founded circa 295 BC.<sup>4</sup> The library had the ambitious goal of gathering in one place all the knowledge of the world (as it was known to the Ancient Greeks at that time), and to create a central hub for research, learning and cultural exchange. It would have differed greatly from our contemporary idea of the library; which is typically comprised of a discrete building with a central information desk, helpful librarians, open stacks, reading rooms and public access. However, the ultimate purpose of the Alexandria Library remains similar to our contemporary goals of libraries; to create a place for the storage of the physical documents of knowledge.

The task of creating and organizing the vast volumes of Alexandria was authored by Callimachus of Cyrene, who was born in North Africa around the beginning of the third century BC and lived in Alexandria for most of his life. Callimachus arranged the collection into eight subjects: drama, oratory, lyric poetry, legislation, medicine, history, philosophy and miscellany. The organization system Callimachus chose for the scrolls of Alexandria seems to have been based on a contemporary formulation of the world at that time. The categories he set up followed the system of thought accepted by the intellectuals and scholars of his time, inheritors of the Greek view of the world.<sup>5</sup> Within each category of subjects, Callimachus is credited with subcategorizing the volumes into alphabetical order.<sup>6</sup> In the example of the ancient Alexandria Library, the hierarchy of the understanding of the universe was used as a form of order and organization.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Manguel 2006: 107.

<sup>4</sup> Hastings and Shipman 2008: 12.

<sup>5</sup> Manguel 1996: 191.

<sup>6</sup> Manguel 1996: 192.

“Once a category is established, it suggests or imposes others, so that no cataloguing method, whether on shelf or on paper is ever closed unto itself.”<sup>7</sup> There are no concrete surviving records of the amount or exact volumes the Alexandria Library held, however its mandate, the ambition for creating a library that houses all knowledge is one that is still being pursued today.

The entity that is the library grows continuously, with the constant addition of books. Therefore a system of organization has to be established, one that would combine both practicality and common sense. The common classification system of books for most contemporary libraries is the Dewey Decimal System. Since Melvil Dewey conceived of the classification system for libraries during the 1870s, it has been variously revised, simplified and adapted, but the basic principles of the system are unchanged. The advantage of the Dewey Decimal Classification System is that, in principle, each division can be subject to countless further divisions. Every conceivable subject can be given a number, “so that the infinity of the universe can be contained within the infinite combination of ten digits.”<sup>8</sup> Dewey’s system, a reflection of his time and place, is simple and can be easily memorized since its pattern was repeated in every subject. Therefore, it is not surprising that today it has been adapted for most library systems around the world. Although it is an ingenious system of organization into categories, subjects and sub-categories are still ultimately arbitrarily assigned numbers. This has eventually lead to the meaningless arrangement of all books onto library shelves. Whether it is a public or private book collection, every library has a need, for retrieval’s sake, to translate the chaos of discovery and creation into a structured system of organization. Along with the spatial qualities of the library, the way in which books are organized can enhance the experience of the reader to a book and vice versa. Our contemporary libraries seem to be disconnected from such a task, and are simply shells that house books within. “A room determined by artificial categories, such as a library,

<sup>7</sup> Manguel 2006: 39.

<sup>8</sup> Manguel 2006: 60.

suggests a logical universe, a nursery universe in which everything has its place and is defined by it.”

The imaginary experiences we construct when we lose ourselves in the pages of a book can be confirmed or refuted by the physical space of the library. These experiences can be affected by the bodily experience of the reader, perceiving the distance of the shelves, the crowding or scarcity of books, by qualities of scent and touch and by the varying degrees of light and shade of the library. Therefore a library space designed for the sensitivity of perception through the body will richly engage the bodily reader.

The Austrian designer, Frederick Kiesler, conceived of a mobile-home-library in relation to the dimensions of the human body as a way to engage the reader in the act of seeking a book. He sought not only the redesign of bookshelves, but attempted to invent or evolve something new. “Knee shelves,” “torso shelves,” “head shelves,” “overhead shelves,” “step shelves,” and “top shelves”, as he named them, indicated that it was designed in response to the human body, its given movements and measurements of perception. Kiesler charted these movements in the form of semi-circles to mark the interaction of the hand, eye, torso and head pivot. All these had a formative or constitutional role in

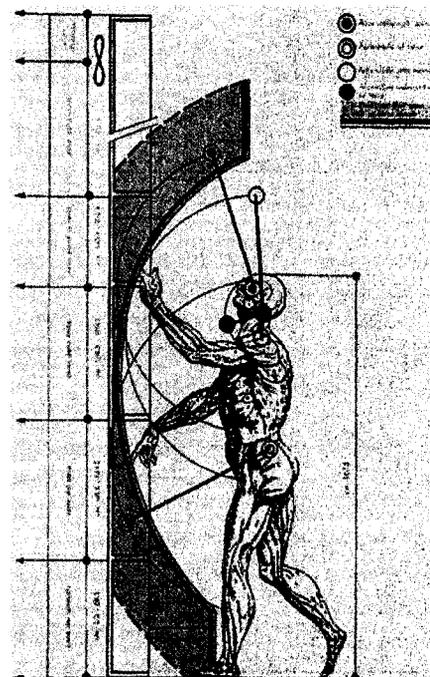


Figure 6: The haptic library, Frederick Kiesler. (Oechslin 138)

developing a tool, taking the burden off man, and thus helping to control fatigue and increase efficiency of health.<sup>9</sup> Kiesler’s recognition, “[...] of a man in the center of a sphere extending

<sup>9</sup> Sagan-Cohen 1989: 303.

himself but not beyond the reach of his extremities,"<sup>10</sup> allowed him to be responsive to the dimensions of organization. Furthermore, Kiesler's exploration has shown the notion that access into knowledge is according to the capabilities of the body's sensory perception in spatial experience:

"One yearns for a firm foundation and a solid edifice of ideas on which one can build further. With this conception of implementation in a library, "architectonics" as the science of systems becomes entirely concrete, physical, and capable sense-perception."<sup>11</sup>

This brings us back to the ambition to compile and build a physical space for a 'Universal library'. When considered in a different way, the 'Universal library' does exist. It is not established between the confinements of walls, but is the *world* itself. The way it silently exists, the world waits for the reader to call upon it for discovery. With the act of perceptual 'reading', through the physicality of our bodies and the world, we are able to realize that,

"Knowledge is not static but dynamic, changing endlessly; this is also an inevitable result of the expectations inherent in a model of knowledge which transcends individual and natural limitations."<sup>12</sup>

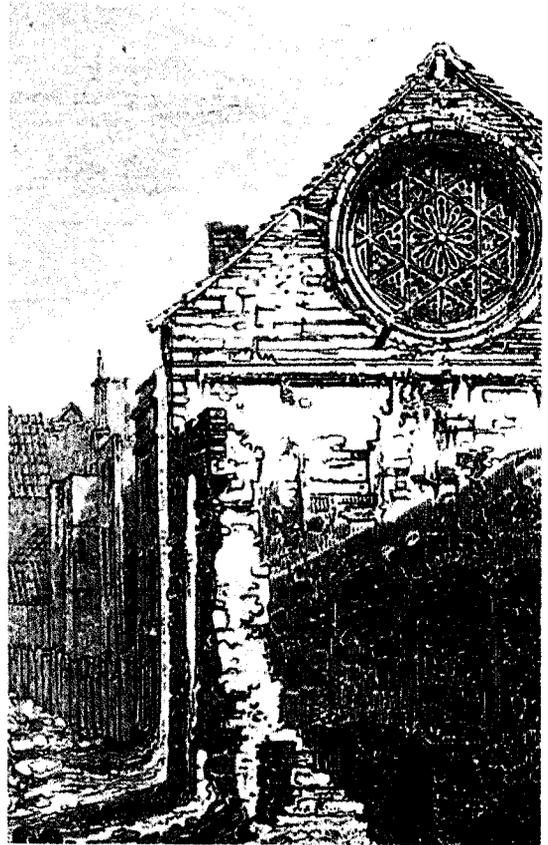
Our bodily physicality is not a restriction or limit, but our situational existence is the potential in which to realize ourselves and the world we are in. The establishment of libraries, therefore, is our spatial reflection of the interpretation, of systems and order, which we have discovered through the perception of our world.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: 304.

<sup>11</sup> Oechsli 2005: 126.

<sup>12</sup> Oechsli 2005: 125.

## ***Part Three***



*"The ambiguous nature of ruins represents a transitional stage in the formation of the fragment as an aesthetic phenomenon."  
Dalibor Vesely*

## The Winchester Palace Wall

The ruins of a large stone wall with rose window currently sits in a tightly enclosed streetscape on the southern banks of London's riverside. Located in the area known as Southwark, the wall fragment is surrounded by markets, brick railway viaducts and warehouses that have been converted into offices and apartments. The wall fragment is all that remains of the former medieval palace of the powerful Bishops of Winchester,<sup>1</sup> which at that time, was one of the most prominent buildings in London. The wall fragment was discovered after a fire in the

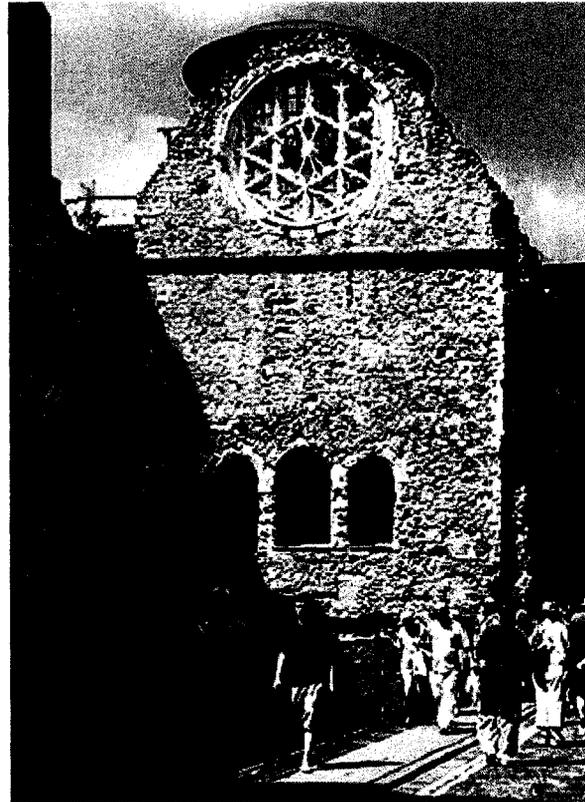


Figure 7: The Winchester Palace wall fragment as it appears currently.

mid-19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>, and was finally revealed before the development of surrounding buildings. Like a forgotten gem, the Winchester Palace wall fragment sits untouched and isolated from the rich historical fabric of the surrounding area. It has been in its current state since the late 1980's. The story of how this wall fragment has come to its current state is one that is closely tied with the development of the Southwark area.

<sup>1</sup> The bishops built and used this palace as their London residence from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This remaining wall was once part of the palace's great hall, which was used as a dining hall to entertain guests and royalty. It is believed that the great hall was built c.1136 and that the elaborate rose window was added 200 years later. The wall formerly separated the great hall from the buttery, pantry and kitchen.

<sup>2</sup> Powell 2004: 124.

In terms of current topography, the wall fragment is located about 150 metres upstream of present day London Bridge, between two buildings at the intersection of Clink Street and Stoney Street. Winchester square on the west side of the wall is a forlorn spot used for parking and enclosed by a utilitarian warehouse block from the 1960s. A large bank headquarters frames the south east side of the Winchester wall fragment, with blank facades that do nothing for the interaction of people at street level. On the east side of the wall is a sunken gravel-covered area of no practical use, which has become a trap for litter.



Figure 8: Site in surrounding context. (Google Eath)

The site is located in the core of Southwark borough, also known (confusingly) as The Borough. This area has been influential to London's history since the Roman times; it had the first bridge to provide a foot path that connected the north and south banks of the Thames River. In

the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Borough centered around the approach to London Bridge; which was rebuilt in stone by 1209.<sup>3</sup> Inns and restaurants were built in the area to provide rest and accommodation for travelers going into London. The bridge remained the only river crossing into central London until the 1750s, when other bridges were built at various points along the River Thames.



Figure 9: The Southwark Bankside from a panorama of c. 1660, looking north. (Reilly 14)

Southwark was not an official part of London until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore remained separate from the strict and regulated legal jurisdiction of its northern neighbours. Laws were not officially established by a regulating authority, resulting in the crowded streets of Southwark to be lined with brothels and stews. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the area was known to be London's 'underground' entertainment scene and red light district.<sup>4</sup> It was home to a variety of public theatres, animal baiting arenas and a haven for those hiding from the authority of central London. The bishops of Winchester, who were major landowners in the area, made spirited but largely unsuccessful attempts to regulate these unseemly activities.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Reilly 1998: 8.

<sup>4</sup> Powell 2004: 15.

<sup>5</sup> Reilly 1998: 9.

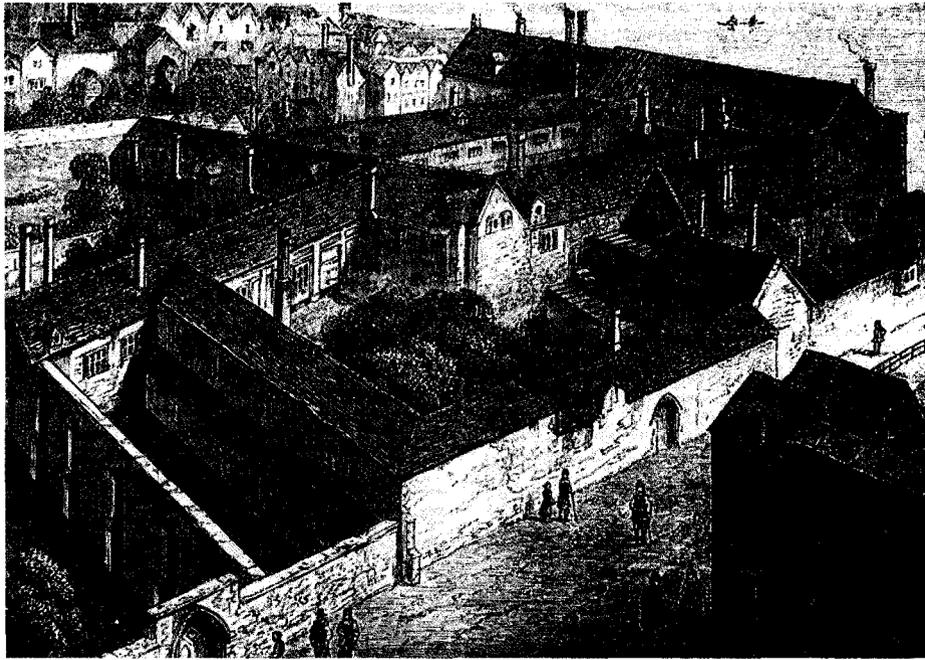


Figure 10: The Bishop of Winchester's Palace in 1640. (Reilly 11)

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Bishop Henry of Blois (1101-1171), brother of King Stephen, regularly needed to be in London on royal or administrative state business. For that purpose, he built the Winchester palace on the southern riverbanks as his comfortable and high-status London residence. The palace remained in use by the bishops of Winchester until the 17th century, when they lost control over the property in the early stages of the English Civil War (1641-51). After the Civil War, Parliament appropriated all episcopal property, and a commission of Parliamentary Trustees was set up to oversee its sale. The whole of the bishop's manor was sold to Thomas Walker of Camberwell in 1649.<sup>6</sup> Walker left the palace buildings intact but divided them up into small tenements, shops and warehouses. However, most of the prominent palace, along with much of the surrounding area, was destroyed by a devastating fire in 1814.

<sup>6</sup> Seely, Phillpotts, and Samuel 2006: xii.



Figure 11: North-east view of the hall of Winchester Palace as it appeared after the 1814 fire.

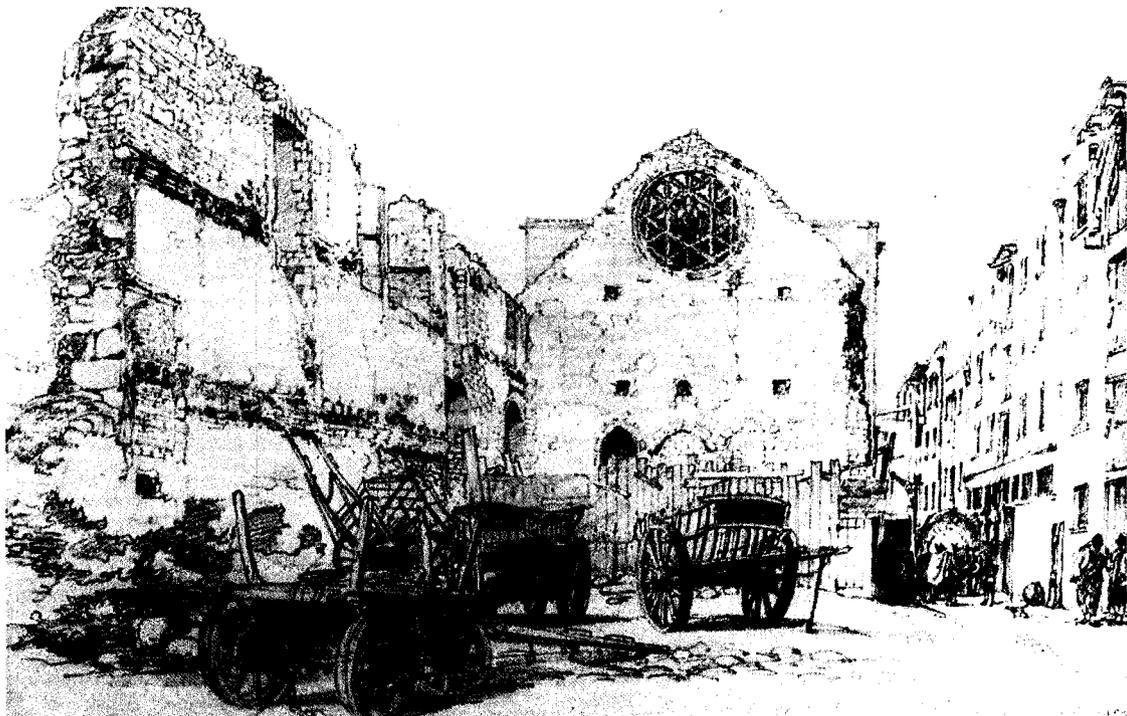


Figure 12: Picturesque view of the hall looking west, with houses in Clink Street on the right, 1827. (Seeley 116)

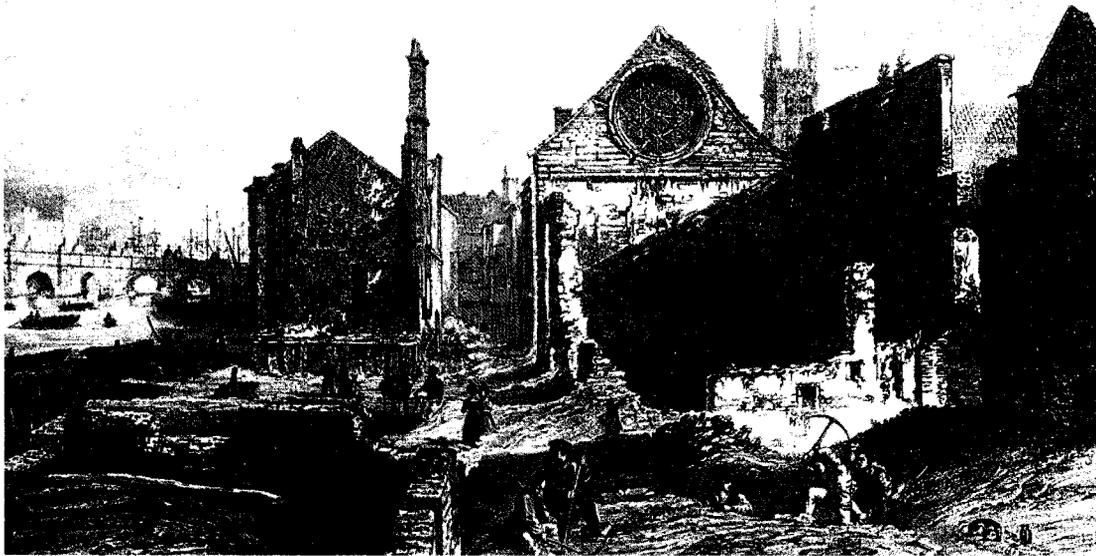


Figure 13: 'Ruins of Winchester Palace, Southwark,' showing the riverfront and Clink Street, looking east, 1828. (Seeley 117)

After the fire in 1814, in conjunction with the development of the over-sea trade along the River Thames and the industrialization of the area<sup>7</sup>, warehouses and factories were built on the site. Remaining pieces of the Winchester Palace were integrated into the rebuilding of the area. Particularly, the west gable wall, of the palace's great hall, with the rose window was plastered over and used as the separating wall between two warehouses. The dense cluster of sturdy warehouses, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, became a way to hide and protect the remains of the palace from the elements and demolitions for about 150 years.

By the late 1960's and early 1970's certain warehouses along, what was Clink Street and Winchester Square were demolished and rebuilt. During the redevelopment of the area, it was required that developers give archaeologists both time and funds for excavations prior to any new construction. Therefore, only relatively recently have many archaeological finds of Southwark's early history have been made.<sup>8</sup> With the rebuilding of the area, the hidden ruins of the palace was once again revealed.

<sup>7</sup> Southwark particularly specialized in hat making, iron founding and brewing. Reilly 1998: 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 2.

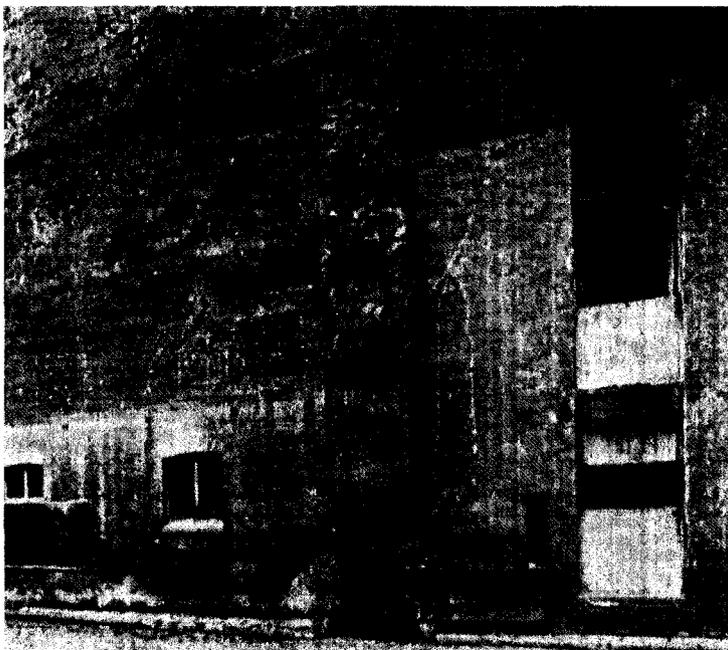


Figure 14: Winchester Palace remains, used as a wall between two warehouses, 1943.

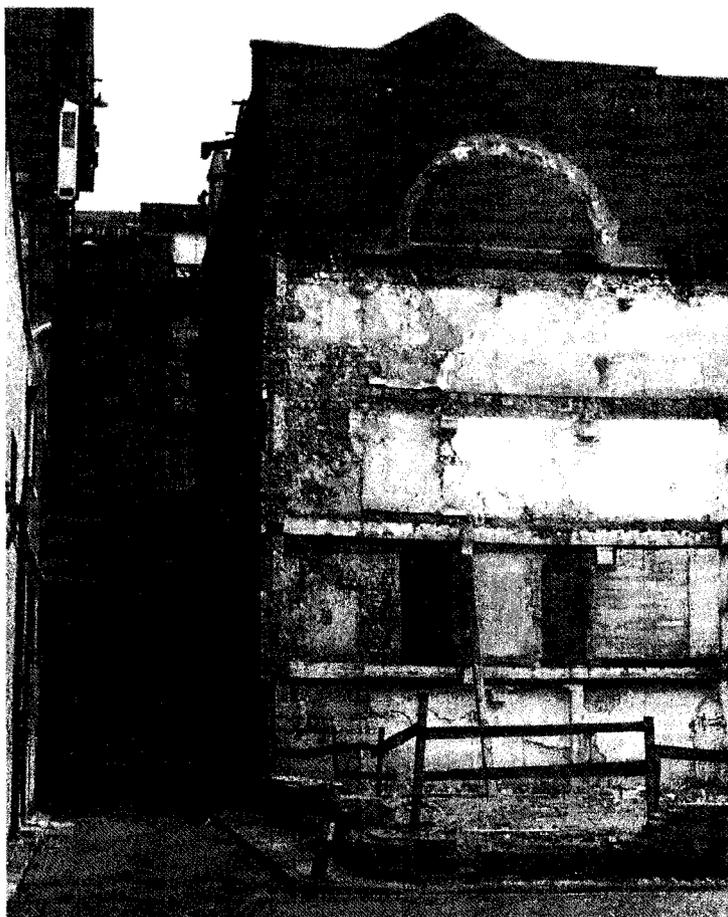


Figure 15: Winchester Palace wall fragment revealed during rebuilding of a warehouse, 1960-63.



Figure 16: General view looking north-west, showing the east end of the foundations of the early 13th century hall under excavation in the foreground and, in the background, the extant wall of the west end of the later 13th- 14th century hall.  
On the right side are 19th century warehouses are being refurbished.  
On the left is the preserved staircase of St. Mary Overy warehouse.  
Excavations took place from 1983-84. (Seeley 49)

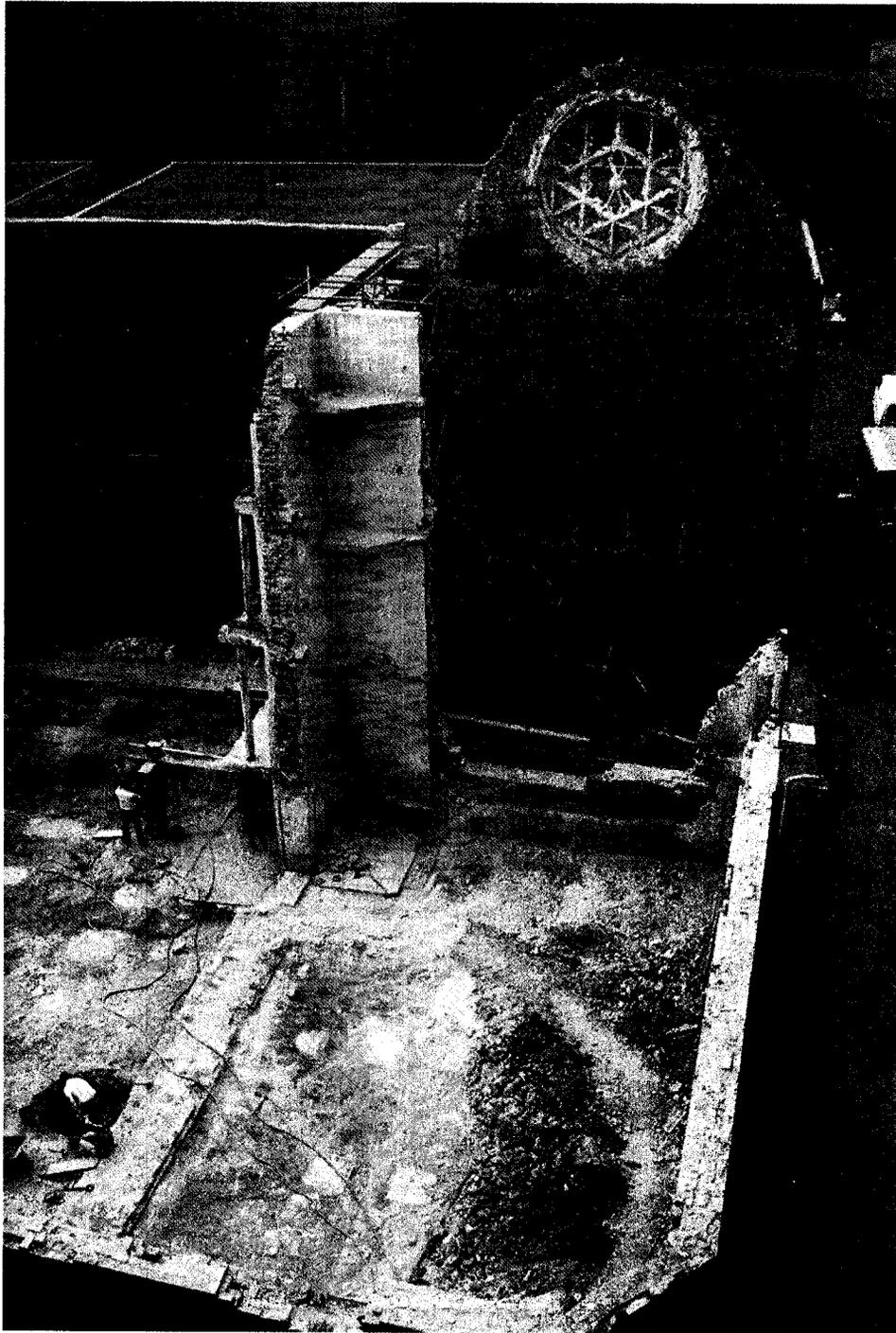


Figure 17: The Winchester Palace hall, looking west, with Clink Street to the right. (Seeley 57)

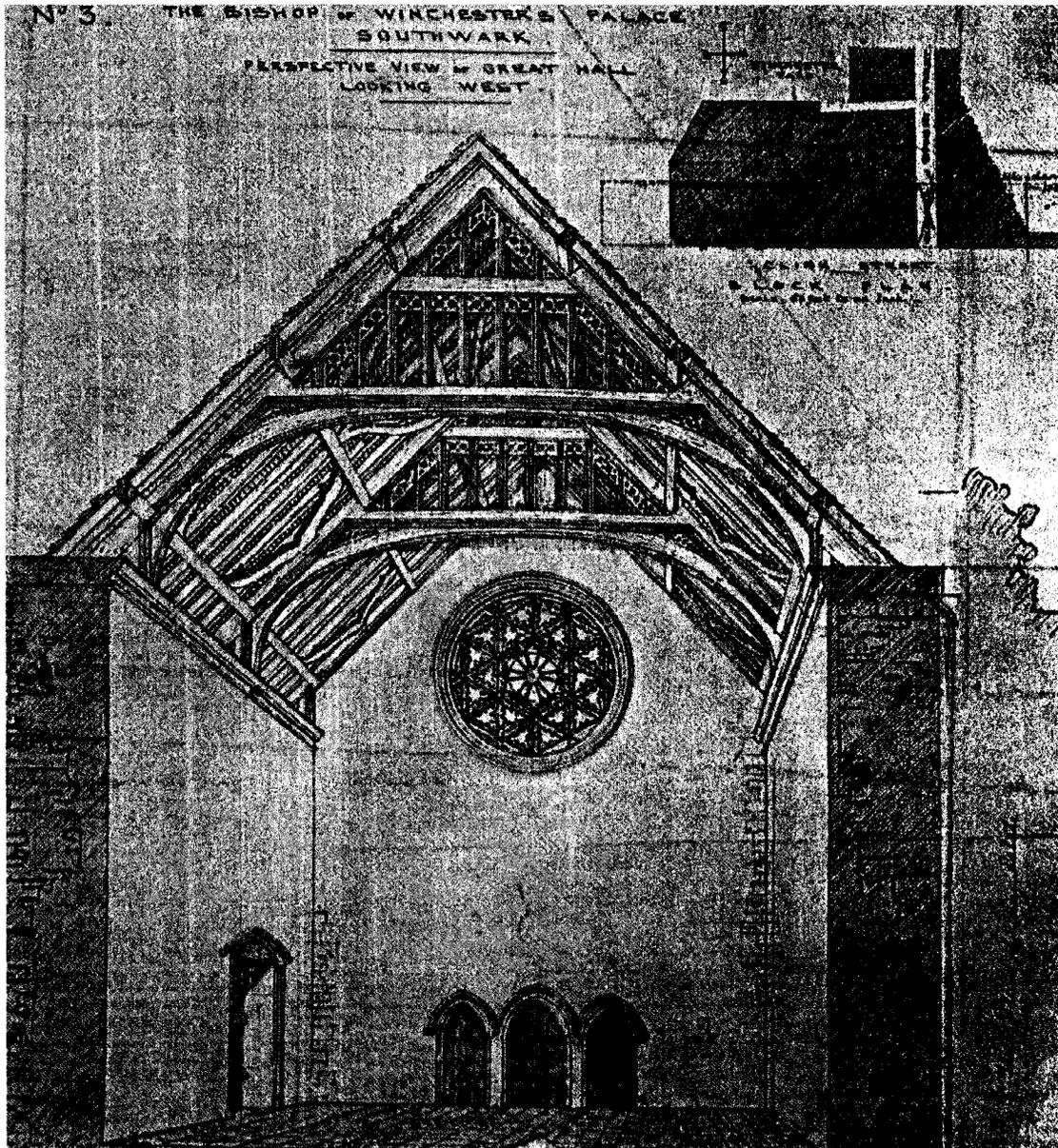


Figure 18: The recreation of a perspectival view of the great hall, looking west. The hall was once roofed by an elaborate gabled roof, but was destroyed in the 1841 fire.

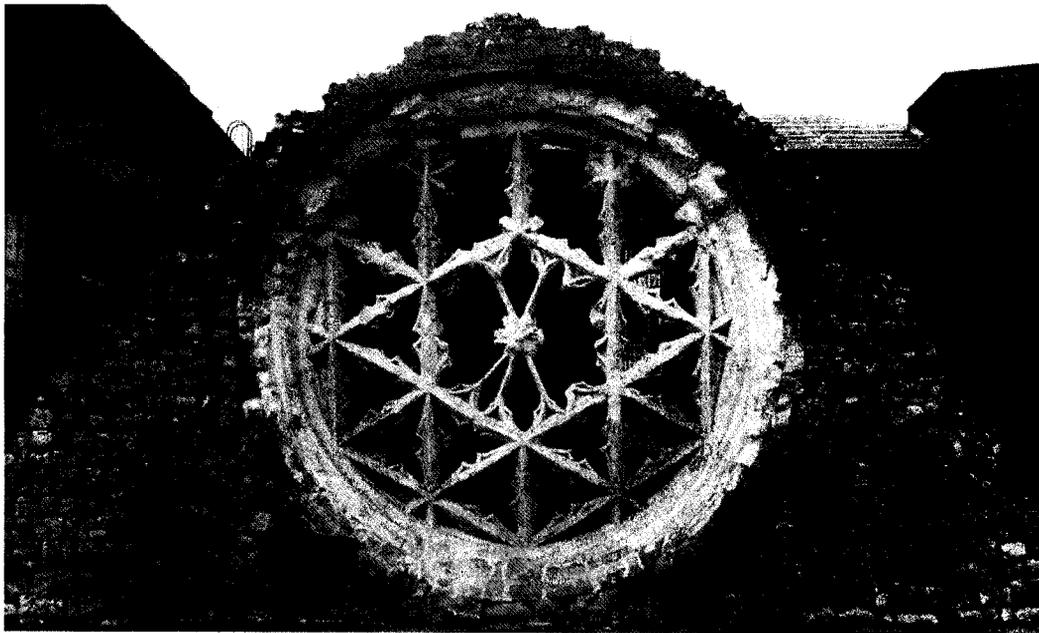


Figure 19: Detail of the exterior of the late 13th- early 14th century rose window. Taken in 1983. (Seeley 58)  
The diameter of the rose window is 5.6 metres and set on the central axis of the hall.<sup>9</sup>

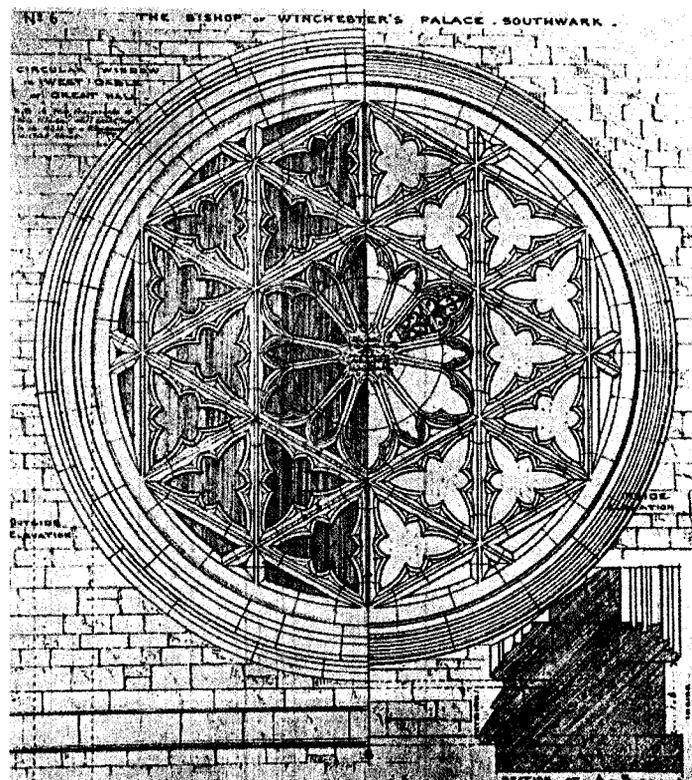


Figure 20: A detail drawing of the rose window.

<sup>9</sup> Seely, Phillpotts, and Samuel 2006: 59.

Regeneration of areas along the southern banks of London continued into the 1980's. However, by this point the industrial development of Southwark (into warehouses and factories) was in recession. The regeneration plans of Southwark, by this time, aimed to build a sense of community and to conserve its historical identity. There was a need to create new businesses, as sources of income for local residents, and residential buildings, to replace deteriorating housing complexes. "Between 1983 and 1990 more redevelopment in Southwark along the south bank of the River Thames, near London Bridge, entailed the demolition of 19<sup>th</sup> century wharves and warehouses."<sup>10</sup> Various warehouses, such as Pickford's Wharf and the Winchester Wharves on the north of the site (figure 8), were converted into apartments with pubs, cafés and commercial units at street level. However, the regeneration of the area has neglected historically rich architectural fragments, such as the Winchester Palace wall. Although the wall has been revealed (for viewing), it remains forgotten and disconnected from its body, the neighbouring urban fabric. There is a need for the design of a building that allows the users to have tactile contact with the wall fragment, recognizing the relation of the bodily perception as the source of reflection. The proposal for a local history library in this historically significant site will once again integrate the wall fragment into the surrounding community.

The collection of historical records of the borough of Southwark is in need of a distinct and permanent home. Each borough of London has a local history library, with a collection of its own historical records in the form of maps, newspapers, photos and books.<sup>11</sup> However, for the borough of Southwark, there is no permanent home for their historical records. Previously, Southwark's historical collection was situated in the backroom of a public library on Borough High Street, not far from the Winchester Palace site. The collection is now kept temporarily at Peckham Library until a permanent location can be confirmed. Southwark's rich history and the area's

<sup>10</sup> Seely, Phillipotts, and Samuel 2006: xii.

<sup>11</sup> A detailed description of the specific collection will be given in the last chapter, The Library of 'flesh' of this section.

contribution to London's conurbation, is one that has not had the recognition that it deserves. Southwark is an area of relentless change; it has undergone scores of rebuilding, additions and demolitions.<sup>12</sup> Having the local history library integrated with the physical presence of the Winchester Palace wall fragment, will allow one to recall the memories of change that this borough has undergone. The physicality of both the collection and the architectural fragment will provide the grounding that relates us back to our consciousness of time and spatial reality.

<sup>12</sup> Reilly 1998: 87.

*"An architectural whole is seen as a phenomenon composed by details unified by a "device," a structuring principle."*

*Marco Frascari*

## **The Details**

The approach to the design portion of this thesis began with the design of specific architectural details for different components of a library. Details are to be understood as the essence of a design approach through its physical presence, rather than a sign that points to something 'other'. The underlying intention is for the detail to inform the overall design process. As Frascari writes,

"Details are much more than subordinate elements; they can be regarded as the minimal units of signification in the architectural production of meanings."<sup>1</sup>

This design approach explores the role of architectural details at the particular moments of experience with materiality and space. 'Meaning' in details and space is given through the perception of the body. With the bodily interaction of physical details, this projects will look at, "[...] the structural unit as the irreducible essence of architectural form."<sup>2</sup> This chapter will introduce specific design details along with the precedents that inspired them. The precedents are libraries that have been visited by the author of this thesis, therefore allowing an experiential account of the library spaces and book browsing experience.

Sight gives the first incentive for a bodily interaction with objects and our surrounding. Our initial visual sense of objects intrigues us to further experience through our bodies, which is our extension into the world. However, when one approaches contemporary buildings and realizes there is no experience beyond sight, there is nothing for the other bodily senses to engage. Instead of engaging the users of the space through a discovery of details, it leaves them with an

<sup>1</sup> Frascari 1984: 23.

<sup>2</sup> Frampton 1996: 519.

unsatisfied reading of the building and parts. There becomes a disconnection between the viewer and user, which is one and the same body. Similar to our bodily experience of other subjects and objects in the world, which gives us reflections of our own body, we are able to experience architectural space through the composition of detail parts and materials. The carefully designed architectural details allow us to better relate to the overall scheme of the building. The physicality of architectural details, allows the body to experience spatial qualities as it reconnects us with the materials of which it is made. The location in which the details are located in relation to the bodily scale will also inform the way the body responds to it:

“The location of those details gives birth to the conventions that tie a meaning to a perception. The conception of the architectural space achieved in this way is the result of the association of the visual images of details, gained through the phenomenon of the indirect vision, with the geometrical proposition embodies in forms, dimensions, and location, developed by touching and by walking through buildings.”<sup>3</sup>

The physicality of tangible details can aid in the interaction of the reader with books as well as the spatial quality of the library. The philosophy of detailing for the following components is one that alludes to the sense of gravity, as in the way a book sits and is positioned on a bookshelf. The main feature of the details reveals the structure and entails the perception of material elements 'sitting' on top of each other. Elements of detailing are similar and repeated throughout the library to give a constant reading and re-reading in order to understand the whole (of our world); a moving out from the focus of the detail to its surrounding; of the figure to its ground. Thus, “perception is the ideas or signs of objects resulting from an interpretation of sensations that is carried out by processes of unconscious geometrical inference.”<sup>4</sup> The following details are designed and explored in such a way that it is sight that first intrigues the viewer's curiosity and as they slowly approach the building and the details, the layering of materials will engage the totality of their body in perception.

<sup>3</sup> Frascari 1984: 28.

<sup>4</sup> Frascari 1984: 28.

## Bookshelf Façade

The design of a semi-transparent façade wall will act like a beacon of light to the surrounding area. The glazed façade is at the same time a bookcase, therefore the transparency and opacity of the façade is determined by the volumes of books that are stored on the shelf. The changing façade will entices the viewer from the exterior, drawing the viewer into the building to further discover the multi-layering of the detailing of the bookshelf system and the books that it holds. It visually intrigues the visitor, but then provides further discovery and engagement of their body with the books and the shelving detail, which connects to the overall building structure of the library.

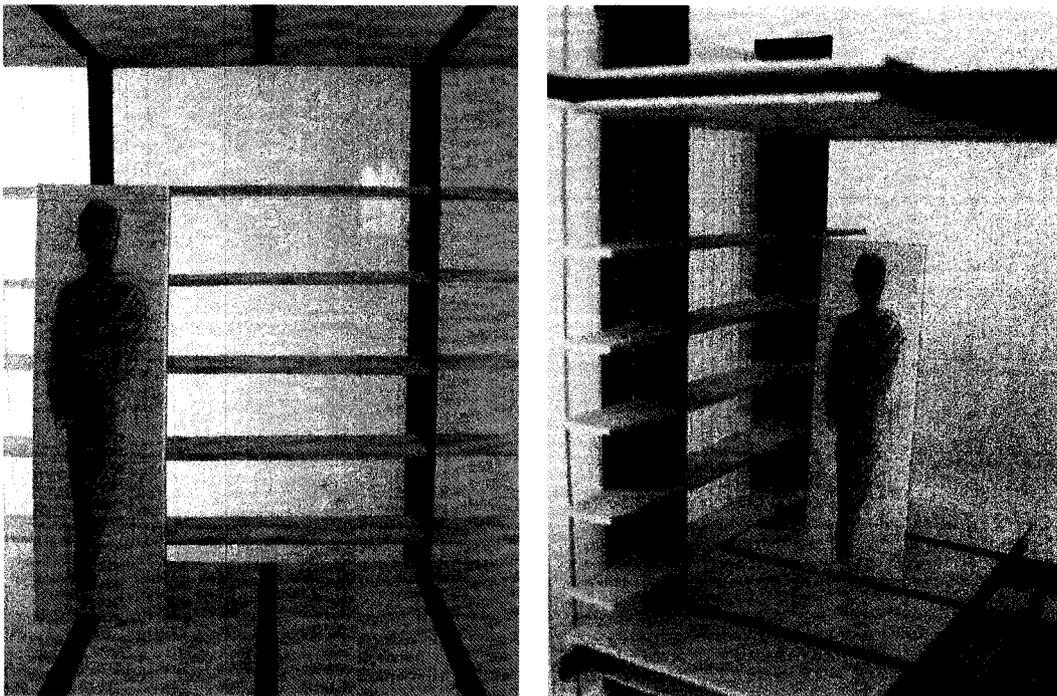


Figure 21: Preliminary study models of the bookshelf façade.

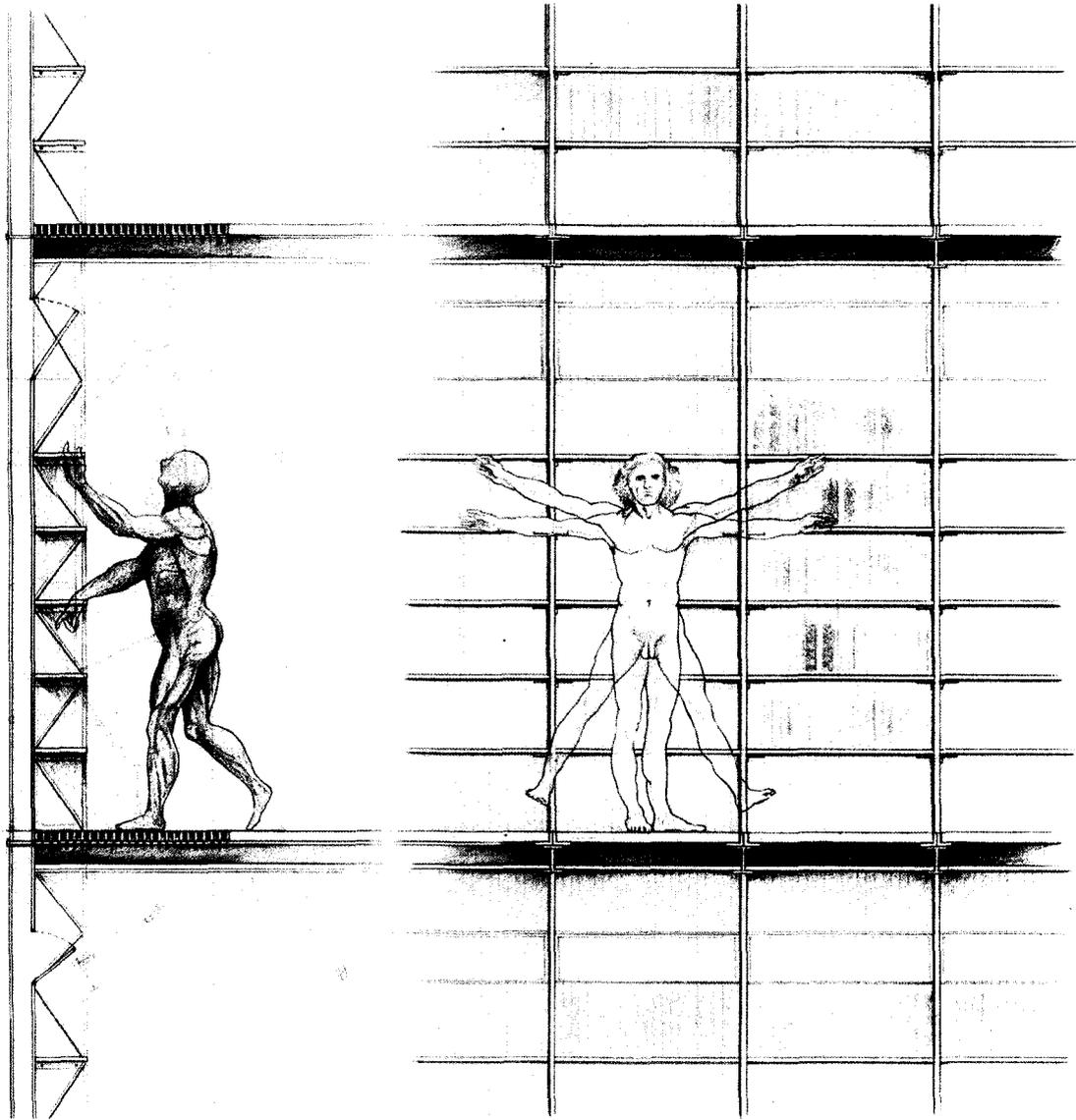


Figure 22: Detail drawing of the bookshelf façade system in relation to bodily interaction and dimensions.

Besides storing the books, a modification of the façade system will allow the book to be placed for reading while browsing the book collection. This modification of the façade system will have a reading platform for the placement of books.

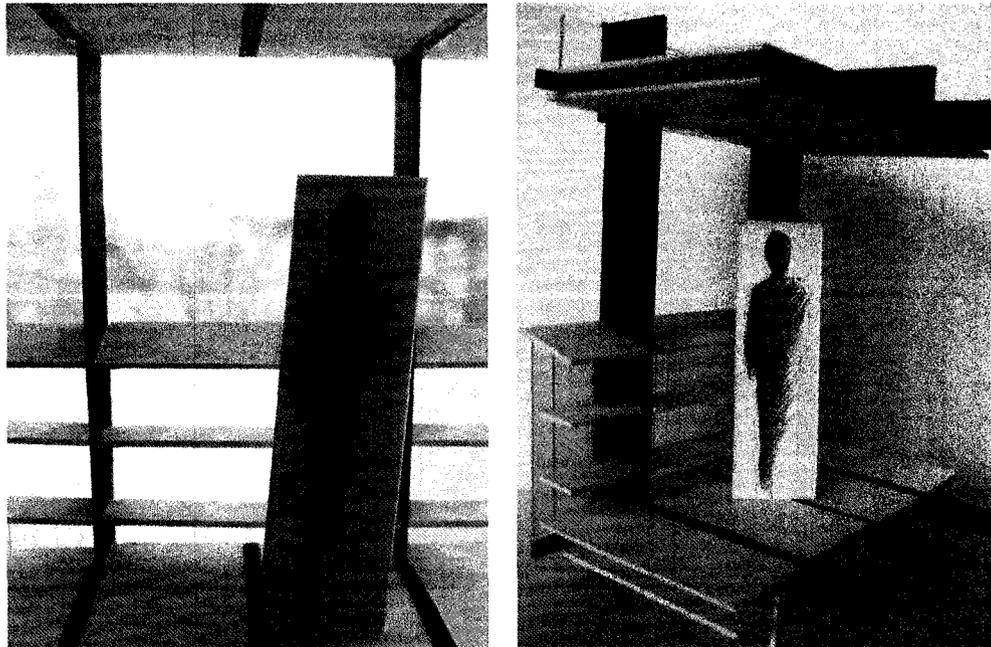


Figure 23: Preliminary models of the bookshelf façade system with "reading platform".

The precedence that inspired this detail is Louis Khan's library for Phillips Exeter Academy located in Exeter, New Hampshire. Khan's deeply personal appreciation for books and learning drove the design of the library at the deepest level. "Exeter was to be about contemplation... This was to be a place where respect for learning was to be instilled through built form".<sup>5</sup> The exaggerated concrete members at the four corners revealed the construction joinery of the building, making it easy to identify how the building stood up. In addition, by cutting enormous circles out of the concrete walls, he made the book stacks visible from almost every part of the building. At the edges of the balconies, he added inclined reading shelves, inviting students to spread books out, but also encouraging them to survey the activity going on in the stacks across from them, and in the internal "piazza" below.

<sup>5</sup> Wiseman 2007: 188.

Upon entering the building, the journey into the central space of the core is almost magical. Once the hidden entrance is discovered from the exterior, the entrance is met with a low ceiling. However, once arriving at the top of the entrance staircase, I suddenly felt like I had flown up to the top of the building lifted by the grandeur of the enormous concrete circles within the central area. The intimacy of the book shelves facing the core of the building was wonderful for examining a book while overlooking the activity of other students down below. All the levels are visually connected by the openings in the central space and by the detail of reading platforms at each level.

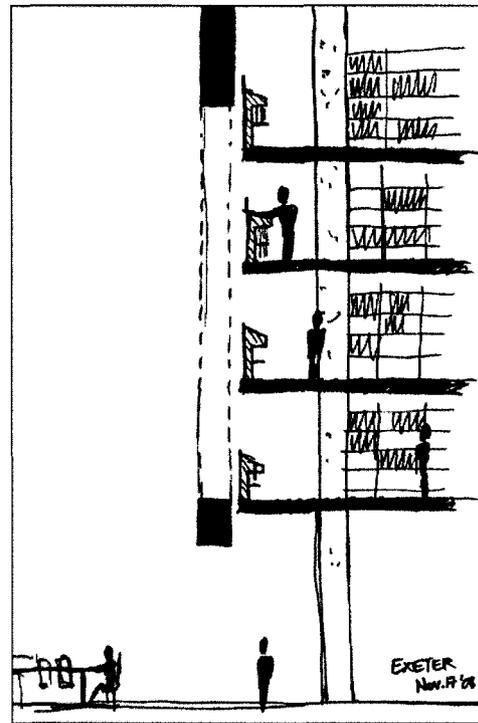


Figure 24: A sectional sketch of the central space of Exeter Library. (By author)

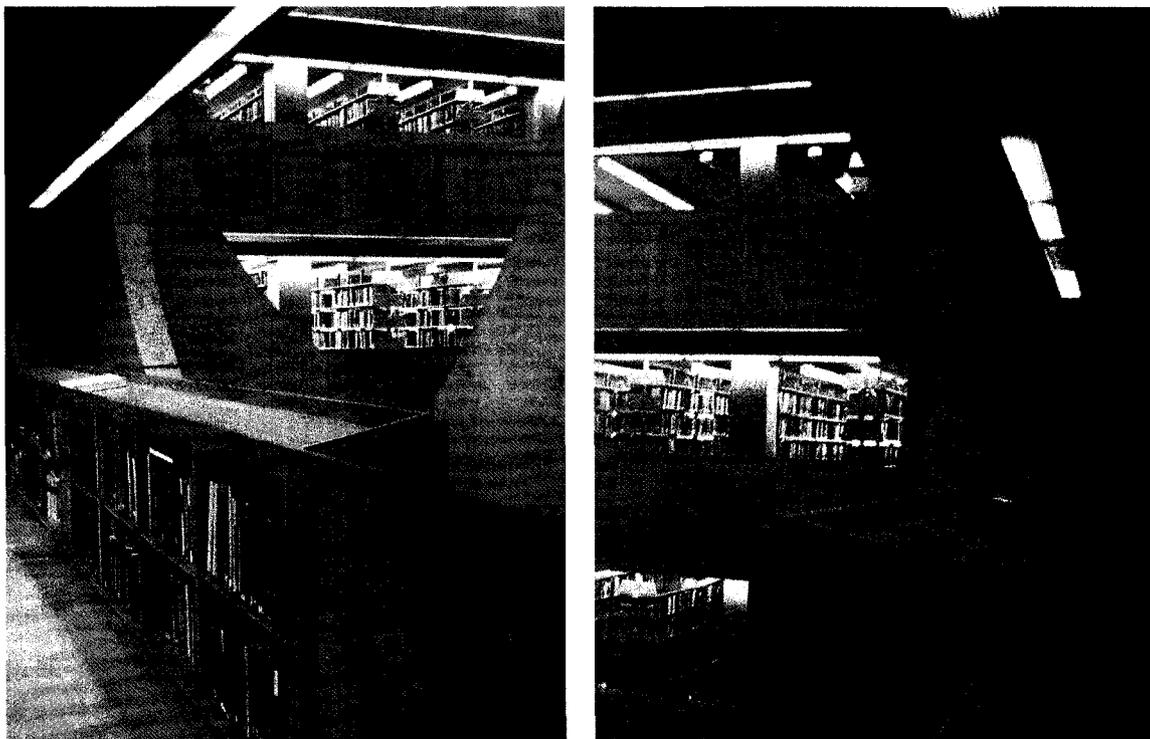


Figure 25: Khan's incline reading shelves in Exeter Library. (Photos by author)

## Viewing System of Visual Sources

A major part of Southwark's historical collection is not text based, but consists of visual sources. These include maps, drawings, paintings, etchings and photos. Maps and illustrations are to be stored by being stacked vertically on sliding tracks that connect with the structure of the building. This viewing system fosters a play with foreground/background focus as one retrieves the desired image or map. The sliding panels can also act as partitions that create separation between various spaces in the library.

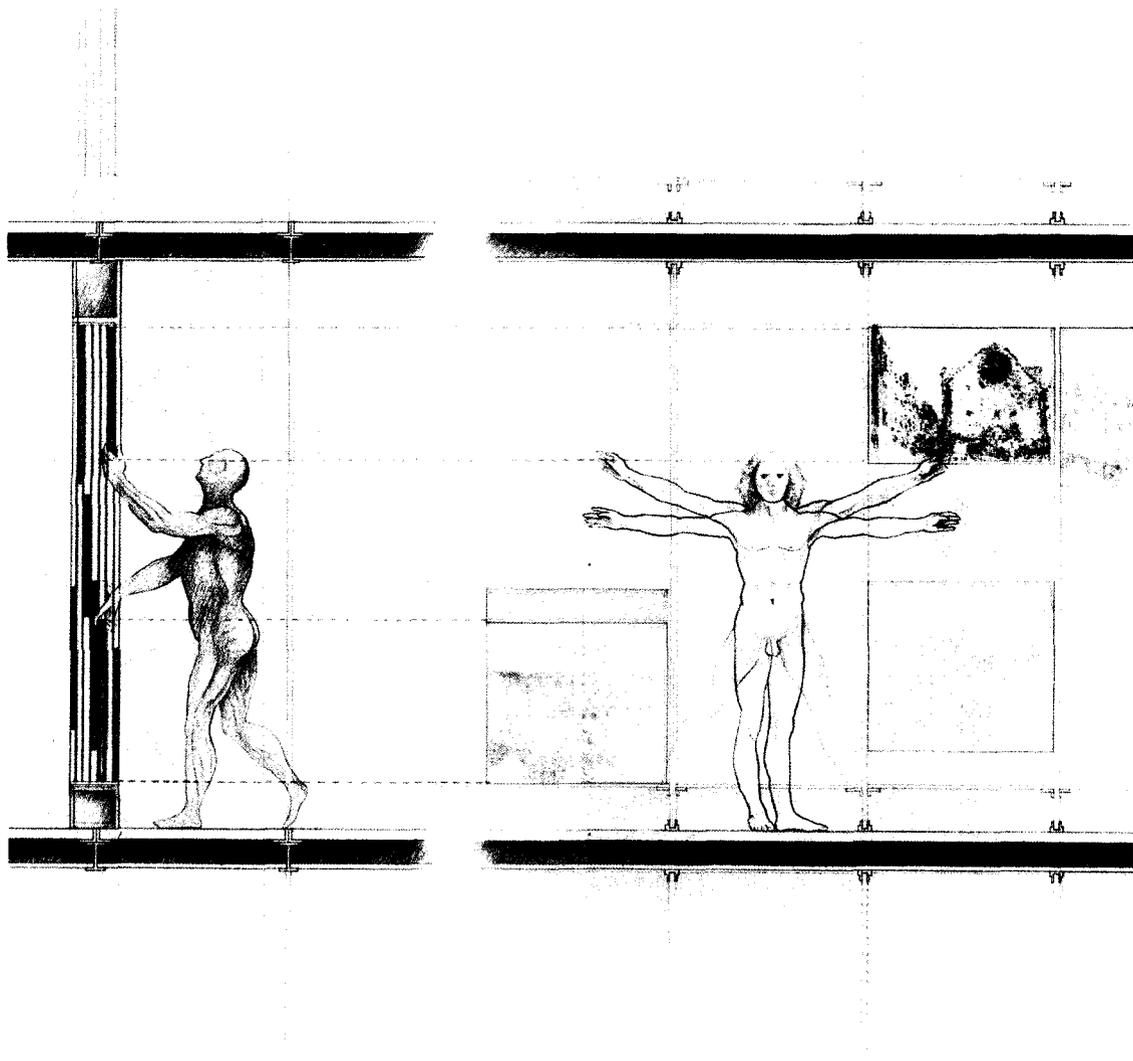


Figure 26: Detail drawing of the viewing system of visual sources in relation to bodily interaction and dimensions.

## Structural Bookshelves

A common factor that determines the dimensions of rooms are the structural columns, often applied in a grid-formation without concern for their impact in the resulting spaces. The weight of books is a crucial factor that determines the extra weight the structural components of a library must carry. This has resulted in the large and bulky columns of many of our contemporary libraries. An example of this inefficient spacing of columns is the Carleton University Library. Although efforts have been made to conceal the columns by lining the bookshelves against them, the large columns are still distracting and out of place. The books and bookshelves should be the main concern of the library, rather than the structural columns dictating the layout of the bookshelves and collection

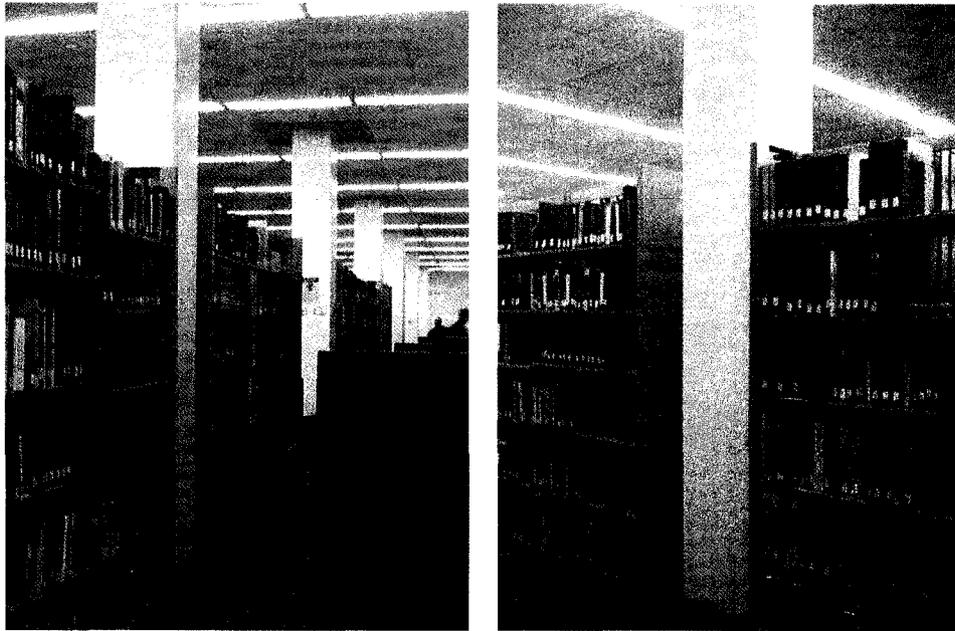


Figure 27: The Carleton University Library (Photos by author)

A precedent project that makes an efficient use of the structural support for both the building and the books is the *London Library*, located in St. James Square in Central London. The London Library is currently the world's largest subscription lending library, containing some one million books and periodicals available to all members. Since its inception, in 1841 by Thomas

Carlyle, the London Library has evolved into a complex amalgam of spaces that originate from a residential building. The building was entirely reconstructed in 1896-98, as one of the first steel-frame buildings in London,<sup>6</sup> in order to support the weight of the accumulating book collection.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the common layout of libraries defined the bookstacks and reading rooms as separate spaces. The steel-frame bookstacks in the London Library was seen as a machine for the storage of books whereby the reader retrieves the books and then takes them into the adjacent reading rooms. Currently, the London Library is undergoing intensive renovations to gain more space for the accumulating books and materials. Following a competitive selection process, Haworth Tompkins Architects, a London-based firm, was commissioned to analyze the building's physical and cultural needs in order to clarify patterns of use, and increase available capacity. Working with Price & Myers Engineers, they recognized that the old bookstacks were effectively self-supporting structures. The historic book stacks, consisted of closely spaced but elegantly thin cast iron members, which allowed for the structural support of both the

<sup>6</sup> Haworth Tompkins Architects.



Figure 28: The London Library: showing the reading rooms on the second level and cast iron bookstacks on the third level. (McIntyre 36)

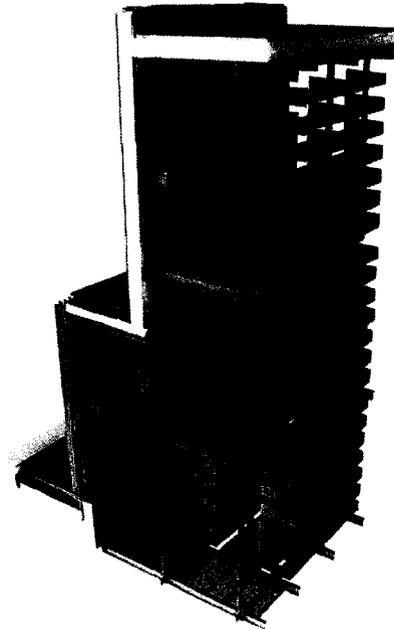


Figure 29: A model of the new bookstacks that follow the same cast iron design as the old. (Haworth Tompkins Architects)

books and the building. Critical renovations enabled the use of the original book stacks to be maintained. A similar structural concept is being used for the new expansion of the library.

The proposed project in this thesis will also be designed while considering the weight of the books as part of the building structure. When the structure of the bookshelves is also the structural components of the architecture, it allows the users to not only enjoy the books, but also to be aware of the integrity of the building.

### "The Fragment" Reading Spaces

The reading spaces against the interior side of the wall fragment will introduce direct interaction of the user with the historical wall. Studs that hold up the floor of the reading spaces on the exterior side of the wall, will intrigue the viewer's curiosity to later discover the purpose of the studs once they enter the library.

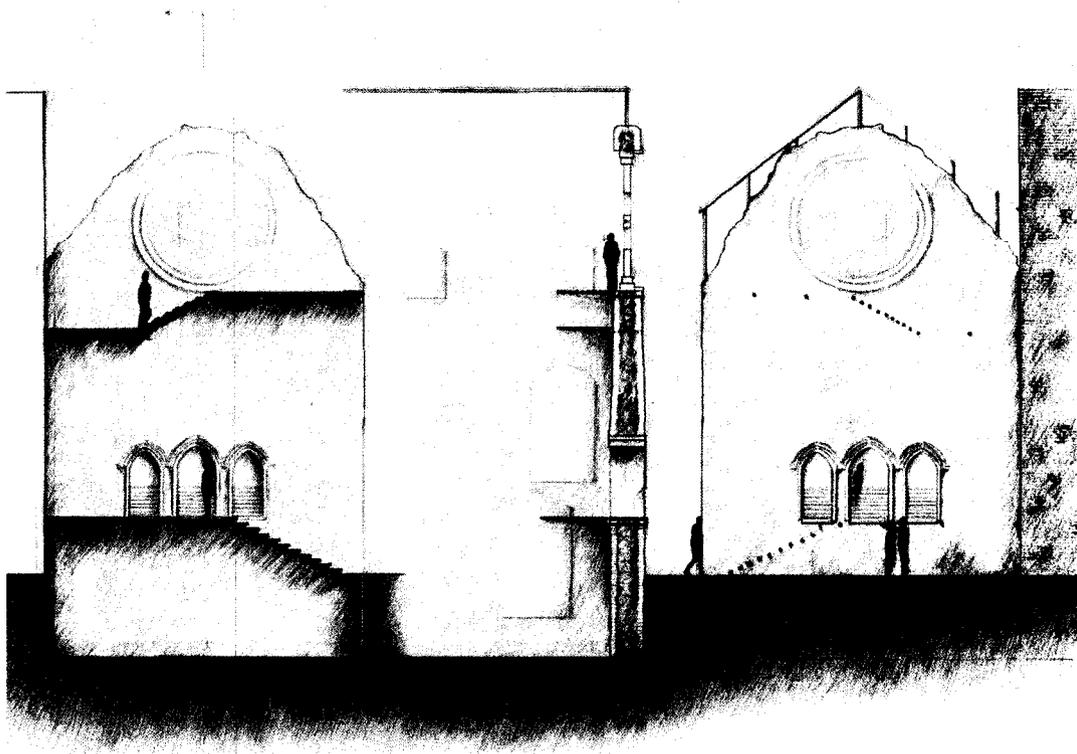


Figure 30: Drawing of reading spaces attached to a wall fragment. From left to right: Interior elevation, section and exterior elevation. Refer to Appendix B for full image.

*"A library can reinforce civic pride and breathe life into aging and neglected districts, which is the current situation in the area where the Winchester wall fragment is located."*

## **The Library of 'flesh'**

This library is proposed to hold Southwark's historical collection, which contains records in the form of maps, newspapers, and books. The purpose is to display and educate the public and researchers on the richness of this borough's historical background and its relation to the development of the whole of London. This will be a community library, one that engages the passerby, the users and readers. This library will be in 'contact' with people that come to enjoy the area and will not be restricted to scholarly purposes. Libraries are places where we can be simultaneously alone and part of a community. They are public spaces that allow for private contemplation where people can spend their time largely as they please. With the right combination of factors—engaging architecture, central location, a properly displayed collection—a library has the power and the tools to actively and positively affect both individuals and the community as a whole. By its placement in this neglected site of the former Winchester Palace site, the borough's historical library will reintegrate the memories of the area and become a relevant place to nurture new ideas.

### **The Collection**

Documentary sources start in some quantity for the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and expand greatly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and particularly the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The documents consist principally of records of local governments. Some of the most interesting sources are not text based, but are visual sources, in the form of drawings, maps and photos. Southwark has been recorded on many of London's panoramas providing a lively and detailed foreground to views of the City; comprehensively illustrated by artists such as Hogarth and Turner. Although Southwark was not officially part of the City of London until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, fortunately most map-makers have

not heeded the niceties of administrative boundaries and consequently Southwark is shown in many of the most important maps of London. The collection includes works of Shakespeare, which were originally performed in the Globe Theatre in Southwark. There are also the fictional works of Chaucer and Charles Dickens. Dickens stories are especially valuable, since a lot of them were based in Southern London thus, vividly recreated the townscape, people and atmosphere of the Victorian period. The collection is currently organized in accordance to the Dewey decimal system, and located in a temporary location in Peckham library. The following lists the specifics of the collection<sup>1</sup>:

#### **Books and other printed published material**

- Copies of most printed books on the history of the area
- Pamphlets and periodicals produced by local organizations.
- An extensive run of directories
- On microfilm, local newspapers from 1856 to the present
- Press cuttings and ephemera

#### **Illustrations**

- There are some 20,000 photographs and prints, a collection of slides and also of watercolours. They provide a vivid visual record of Southwark over the last 200 years.

#### **Maps**

- The collection contains over 600 maps, ranging from copies of 16th century London maps to the most up to date large scale ordinance survey plans.

#### **Videos, tapes and CD-ROMs**

- Films, videos and tapes reflect life in the borough from the 1920s to the present.

#### **Family history**

- On CD-ROM is the Mormon Church's International Genealogical Index, a nationwide index to parish registers.

#### **Archives**

- The core of the collection contains the local government's records of the area, the civil parishes and the Metropolitan Boroughs. Some of the records of the former civil parishes go back to the 16th century.
- These include vestry minutes, taxation records and poor law records. They also hold copies of London County Council, and London School Board minutes. Some local organizations have also deposited their records including businesses, some non conformist churches and early schools. On microfilm, copies of records held elsewhere, most notably census returns and parish registers.

<sup>1</sup> Listing of collection retrieved from the Southwark Local History catalogue.

This library proposal is designed to create spaces that recognize and promote the understanding of the contents of the collection. The pieces of the collection will be arranged in such a manner that reflects its identity. Therefore, when the viewer is 'reading' the material, they are also engaged by the way the collection is organized and located.<sup>2</sup>

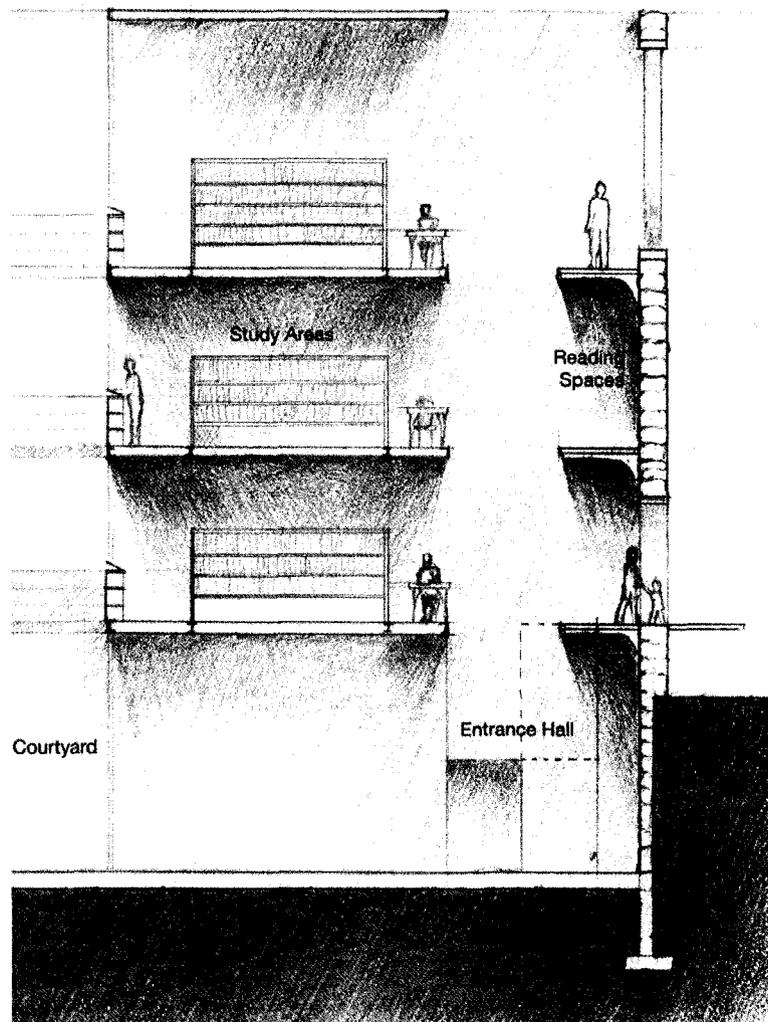


Figure 31: Preliminary section of the library, showing organization of spaces.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Appendix B for library proposal.

*"The 'perceived world' is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth."*

*Merleau-Ponty*

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has discussed that the lived-body, flesh, is the locus for our perception of the world. Our existence is profoundly different from other objects, because we have both a physical presence as well as a perceptual body that is consciously aware. The body engages in perception of this world which involves an openness not only to the realm of the sensory, but also to the potential revelation of truth.

Since Antiquity, the task of philosophy has been the quest for the revelation of truth and certainty. A majority of philosophers from the classical schools of thought, starting from Plato, did not believe that the revelation of truth could be achieved through this tactile material world; which seems to be in constant change, and uncertain. However, as this thesis discusses, certainty does have an origin in this situated world. Knowledge of the boundless can be obtained through the capabilities of the body's sensory perception of the world. It is through our embodiment of this world that there is a validation of our body, of the world and the objects within it. At the same time, perception does not simply end at the realm of sensations, but leads us to reflect and bring (physical) form and order to an understanding of the world.

With the onset of Modernity and the advancement of technology in all fields, boundaries are disappearing and becoming vague. Often times we are lost in the boundless, fragmented and abundance of ideas and information. Our current times value the virtual and the visually seductive, where our environments and objects are becoming removed from the direct contact and interaction of bodily perception; "In privileging the visual... [it] has impoverished our understanding

of space [and this world].”<sup>1</sup> The act of perception demands receptivity of the full ontological potential of the lived-body experience. Perception is, in effect, a self-referential system; there is nothing outside of the ‘lived-body in world relation’ to legitimize its ‘claims’. Since the human experience is taken as its locus, the facticity of human experience is its reference point; one that none of us can empirically prove, but all have experienced. The act of ‘reading’, books and architectural details, in which our body can physically interact, leads to metaphysical reflection and tactile connections to the whole of our world. Since we are physical bodies situated in this world we adhere to a bodily limitation and temporality. Upon the death of the body, the discoveries of knowledge continue to exist and speak through the presence of a book. The creation of a library to house these pieces of information has the purpose of making this complex world understandable:

“The management of knowledge, and perhaps even more, the economical use of the physical forms of knowledge preservation in books and libraries, proves to be the true task and presents itself as mediator between the desire for total, boundless knowledge of everything, individual experience, and— much more precisely— the finite length of an individual human life.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, although physicality is at times our restriction, it is not our limit for understanding. Knowledge and the systematization of knowledge into physical form are not separated but intermeshed and related to each other. Order in the library, of the system of the objects, is essential and universal but, yet at its core, is personal and ultimately subjective. It is the finite bodily subject that creates the interpretation of systems and order. However, with the understanding that perception involves the subjective whole of the body, this will reawaken the importance of architecture to engage the physical dimensions and totality of the perceptual body. The physicality of this world, of our bodies and of objects, is a tactile and personal interaction which leads us back into a conscious understanding of the origins of knowledge. Through the

<sup>1</sup> Leach 1997: 83

<sup>2</sup> Oechslin 2005: 123.

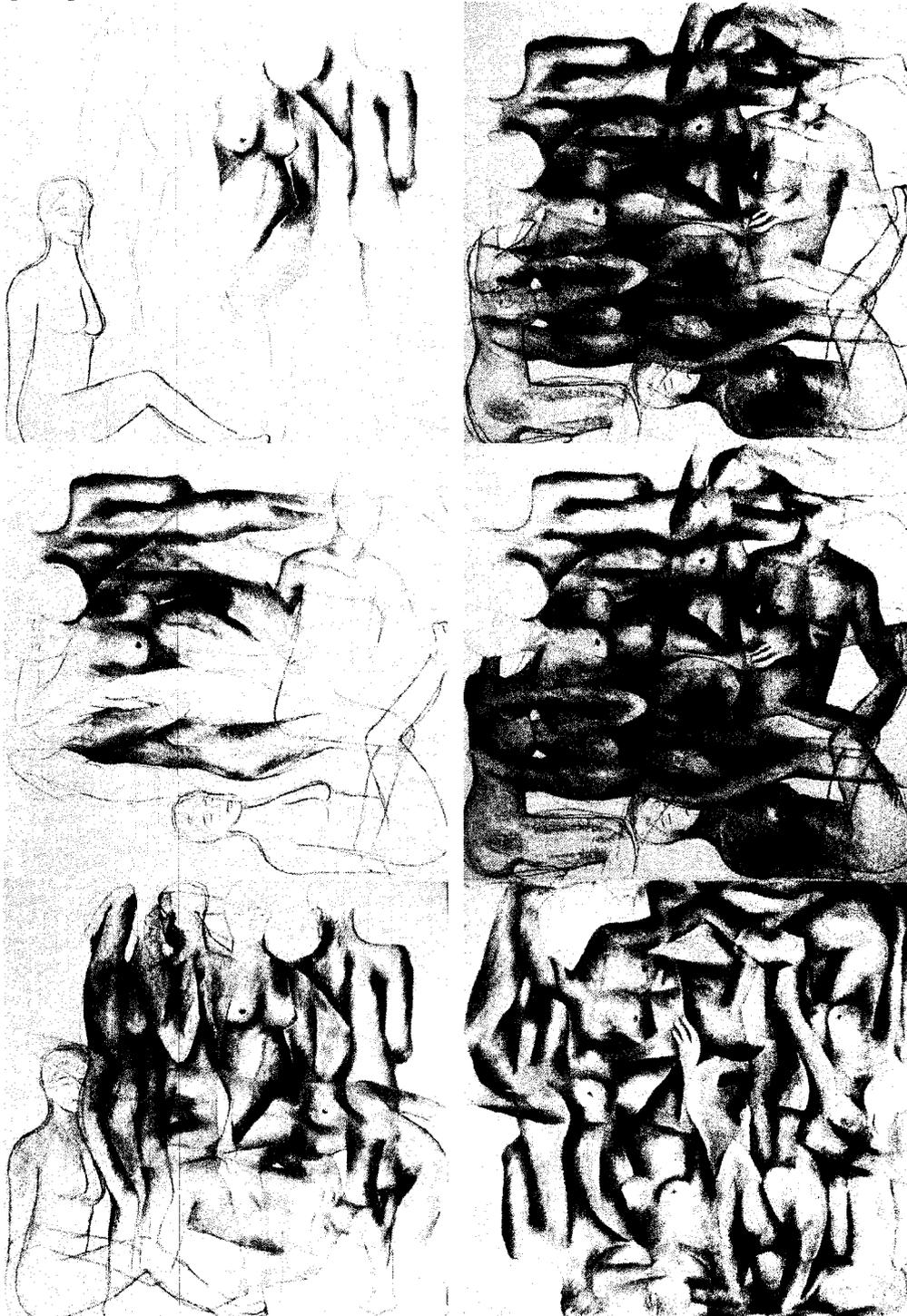
limited we can become limitless. Physicality leads us into experiences that are metaphysical. Through the particular we understand the order of the universal. The presence and totality of the body in perception cannot be ignored when addressing our experience of architecture and our experience of the world.

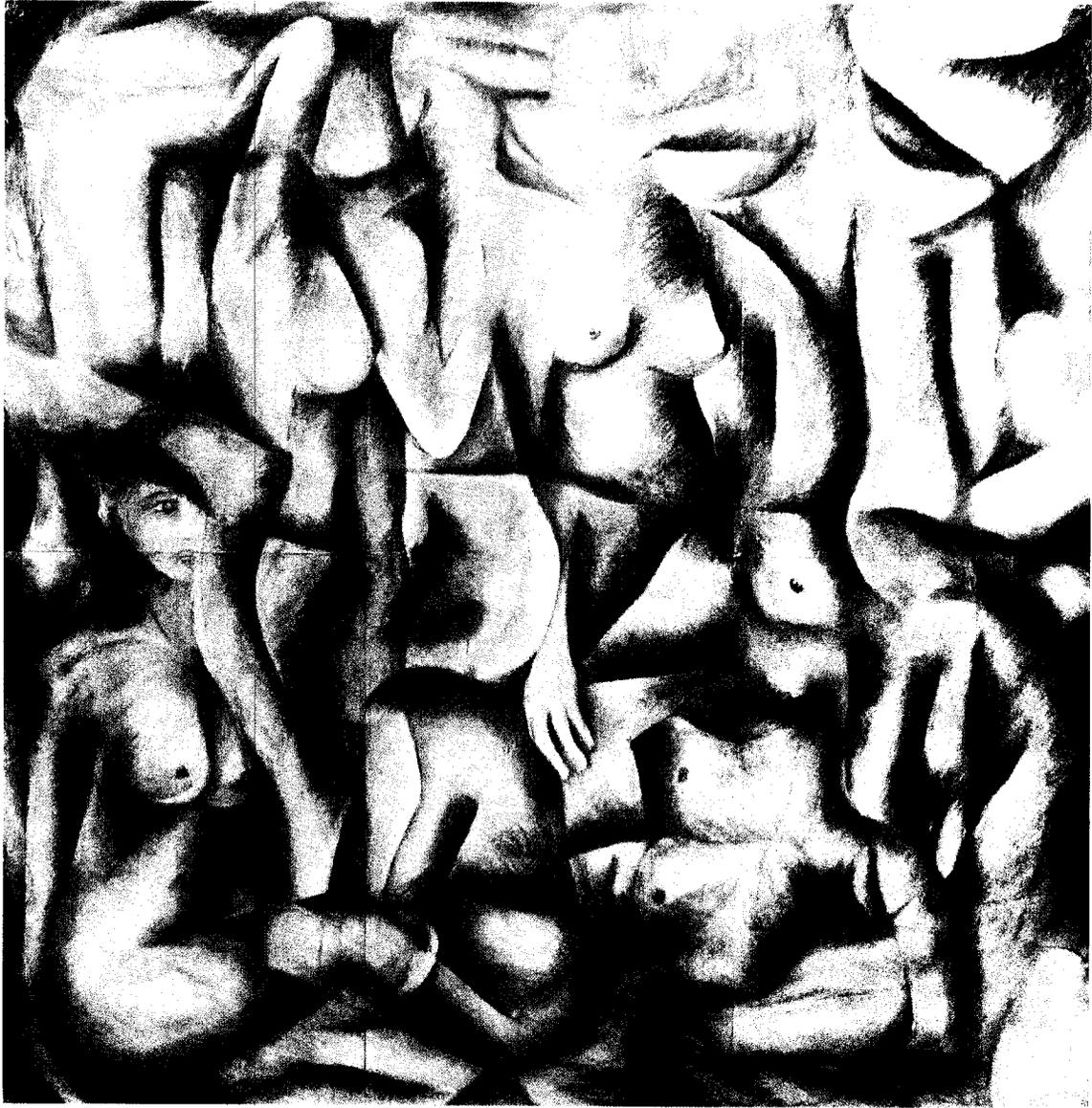
# ***Appendices***

## Appendix A

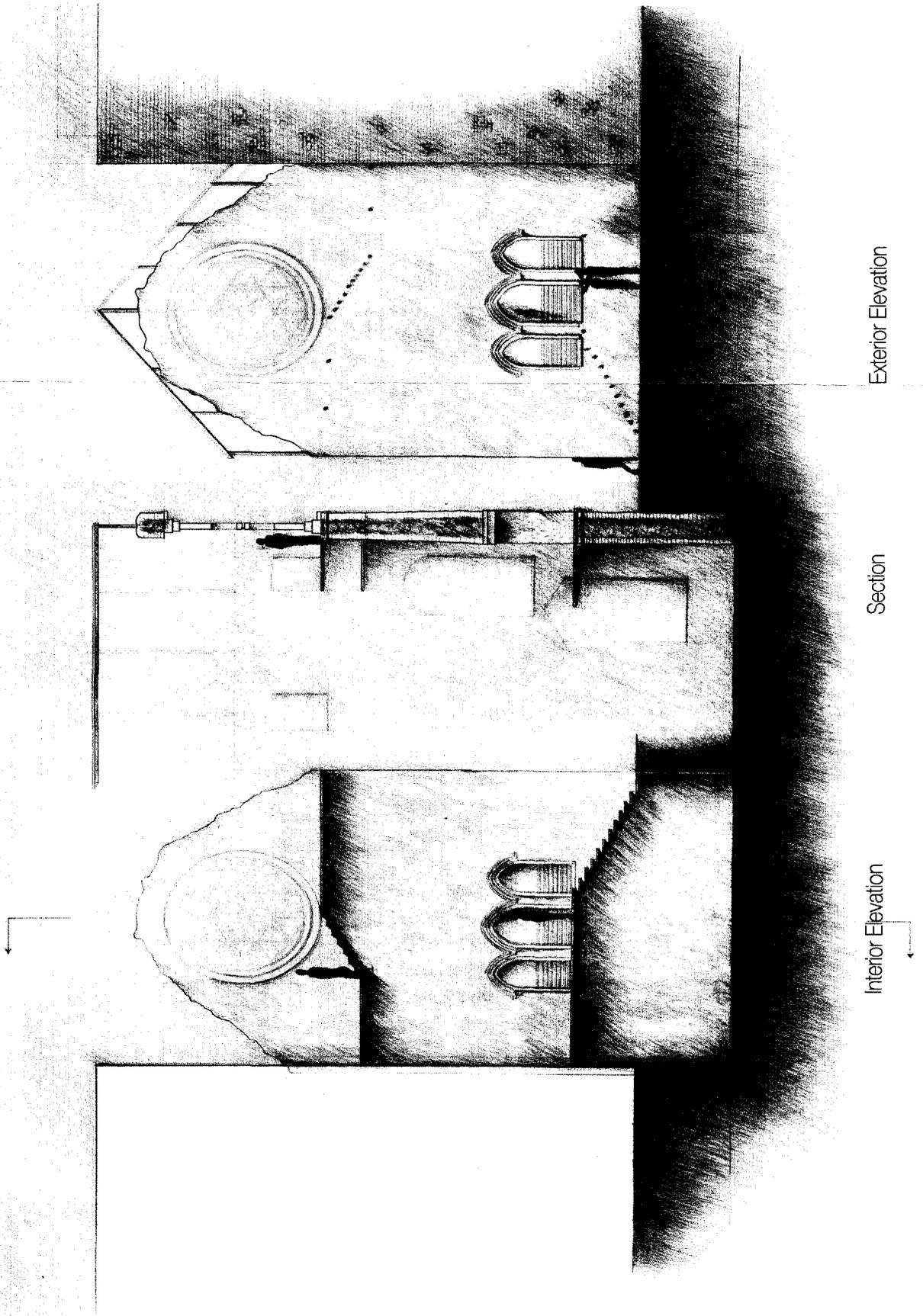
This life-drawing composition is drawn on six pieces of Mayfair drawing paper, combined to be the size of approximately 5' x 5'. The medium used is coloured conte sticks.

Drawing Progression:

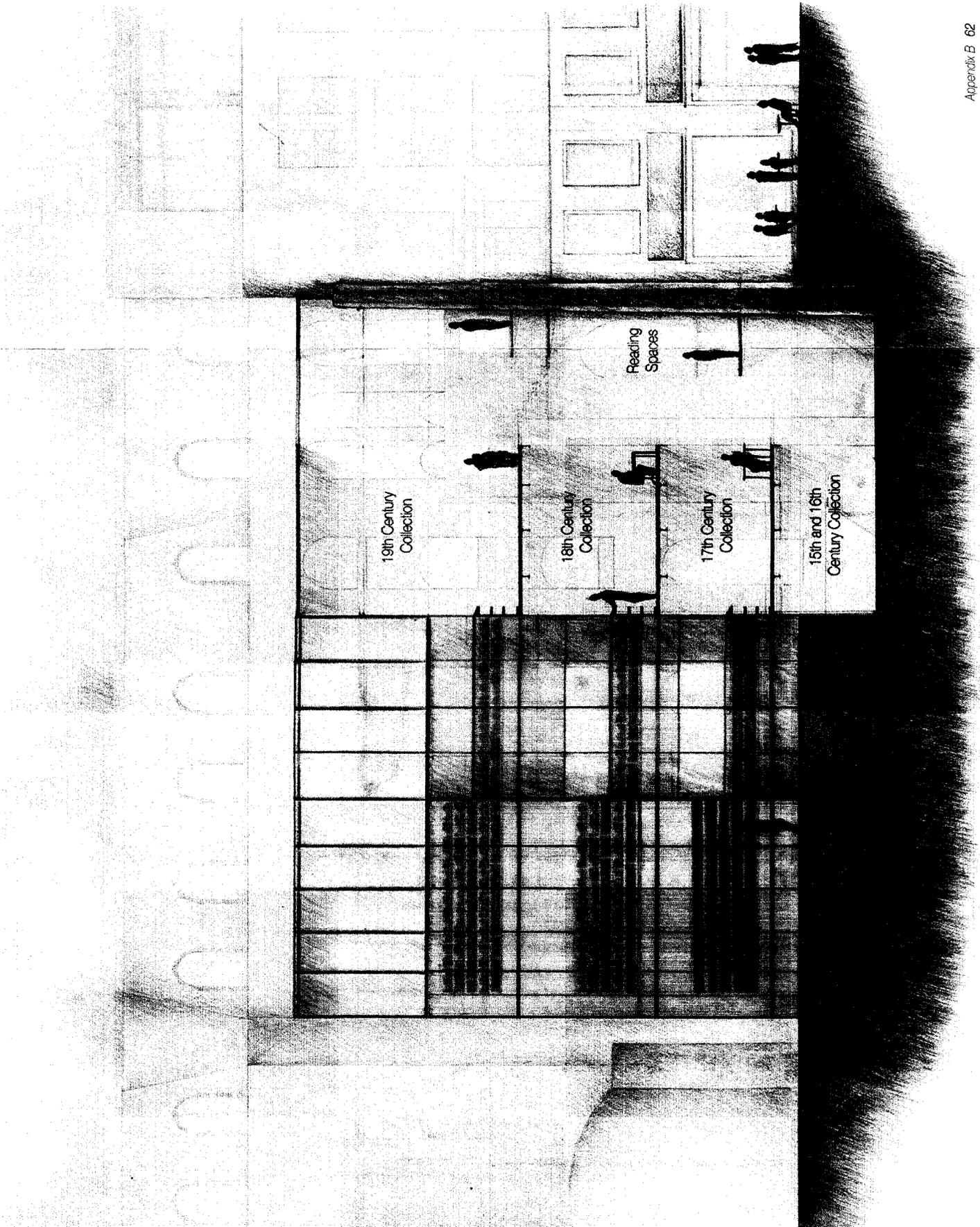


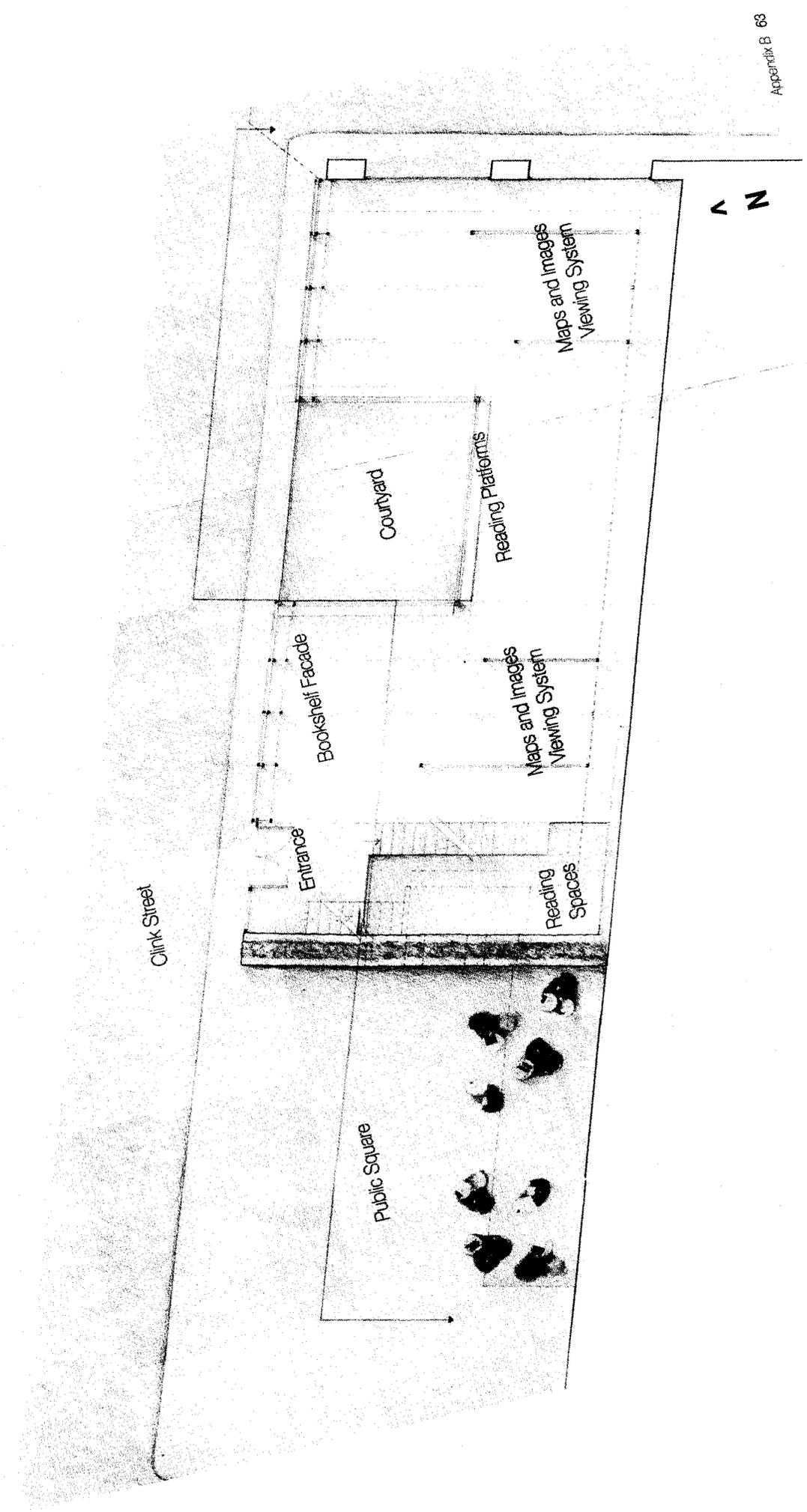


Complete life-drawing.

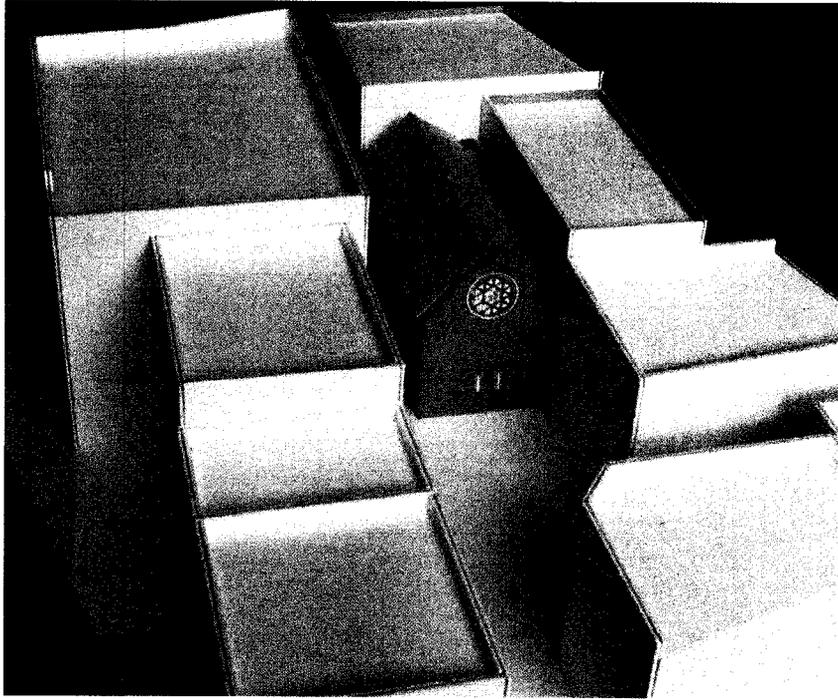


Appendix B  
Architectural Drawings





## Appendix C



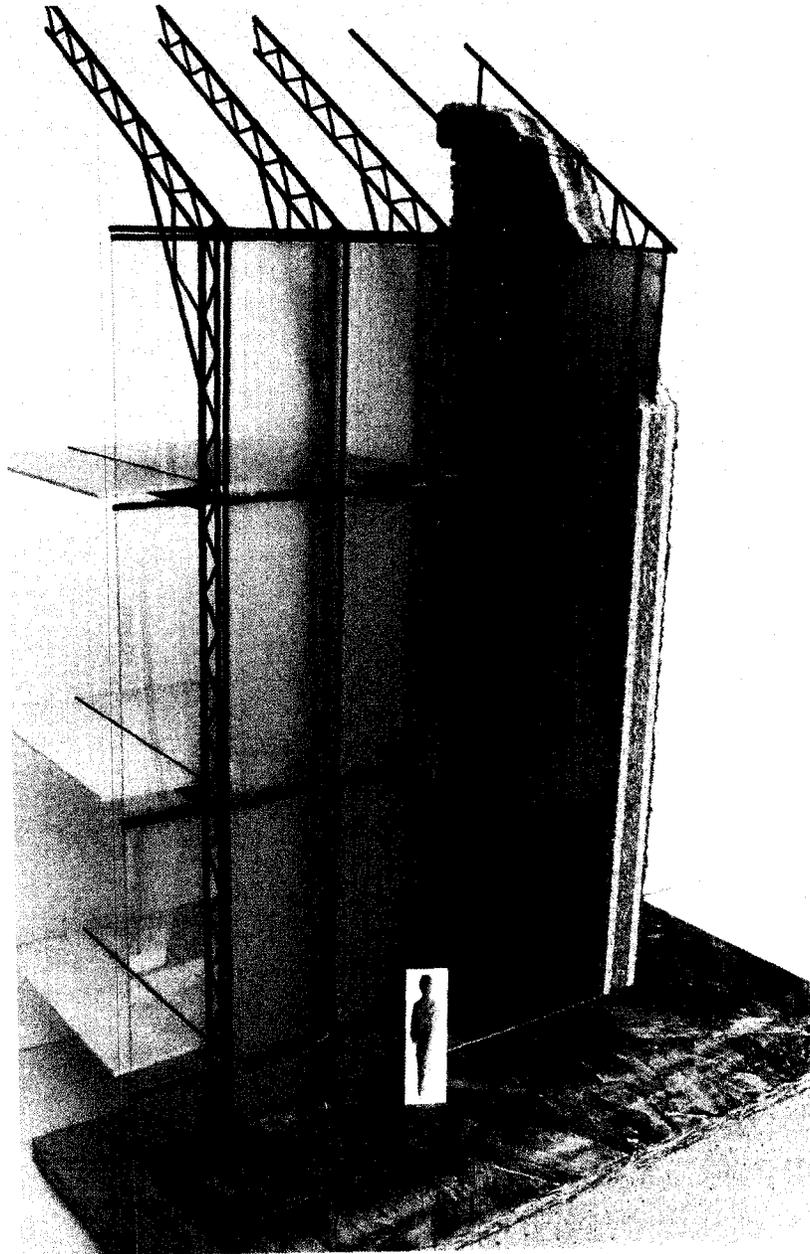
Massing model in site context.

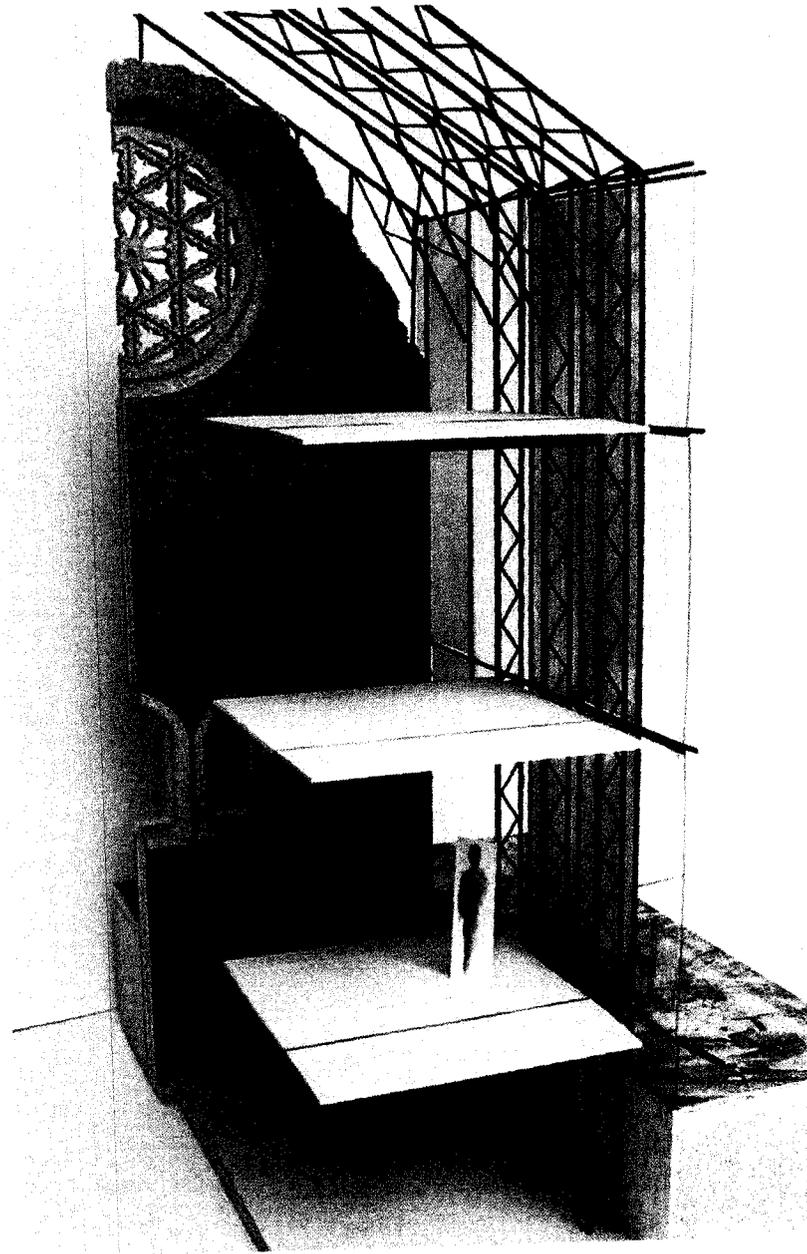


Street level experience of proposed library.

## Appendix D

### Sectional Detail Model







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