

SOME VIEWS ON VIENNA

FITTING,
UNFITTING.

Eva Herunter

EPFL École Polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne

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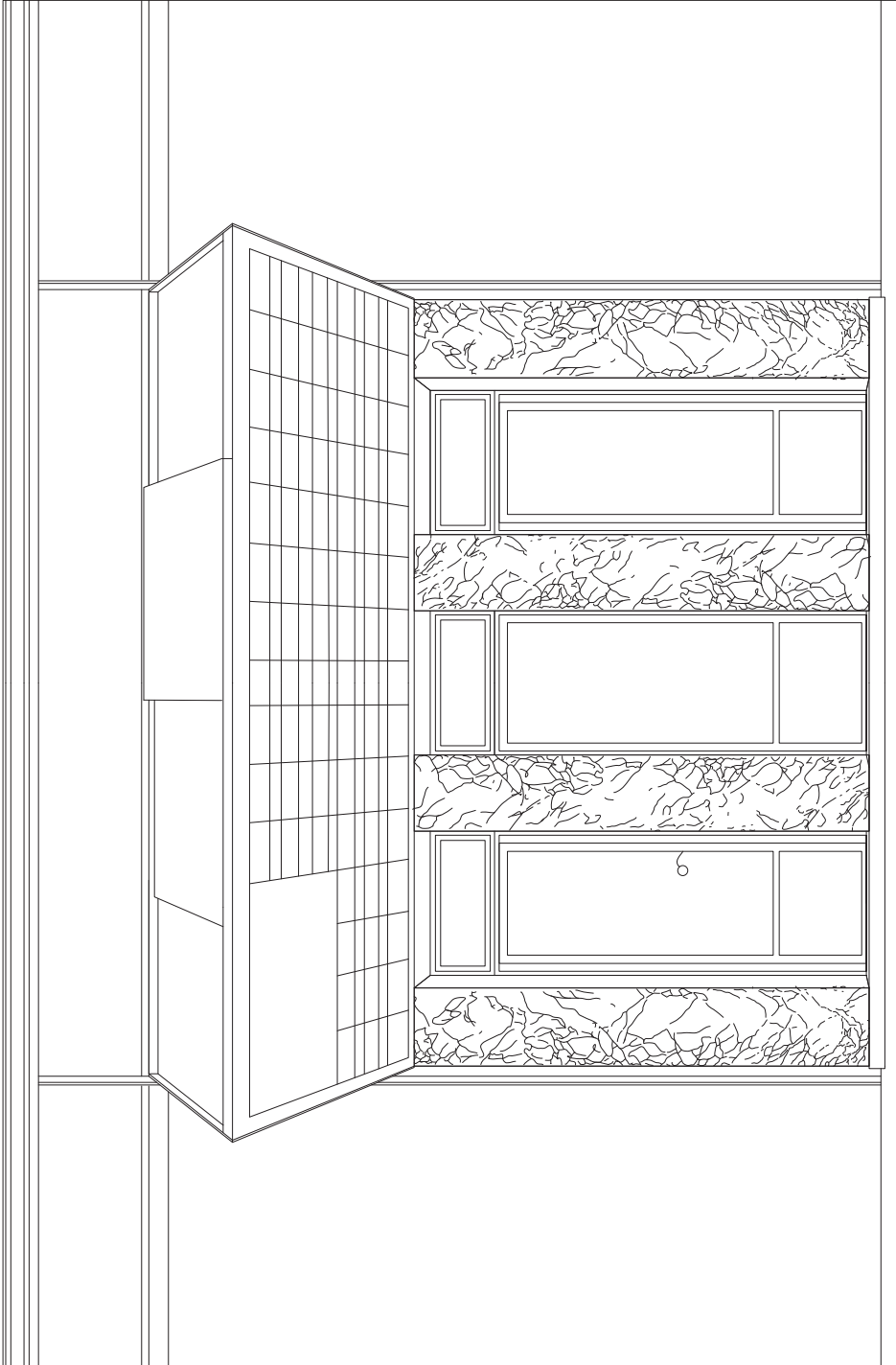
SOME VIEWS ON VIENNA

Introduction

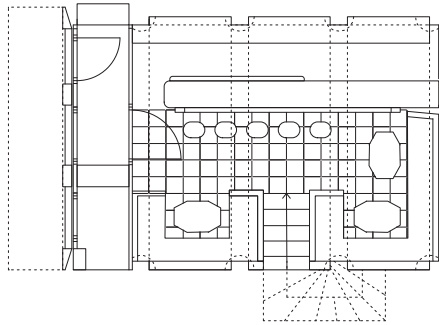
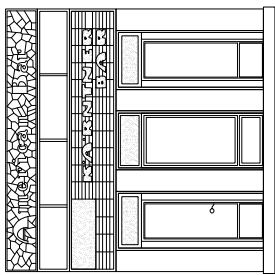
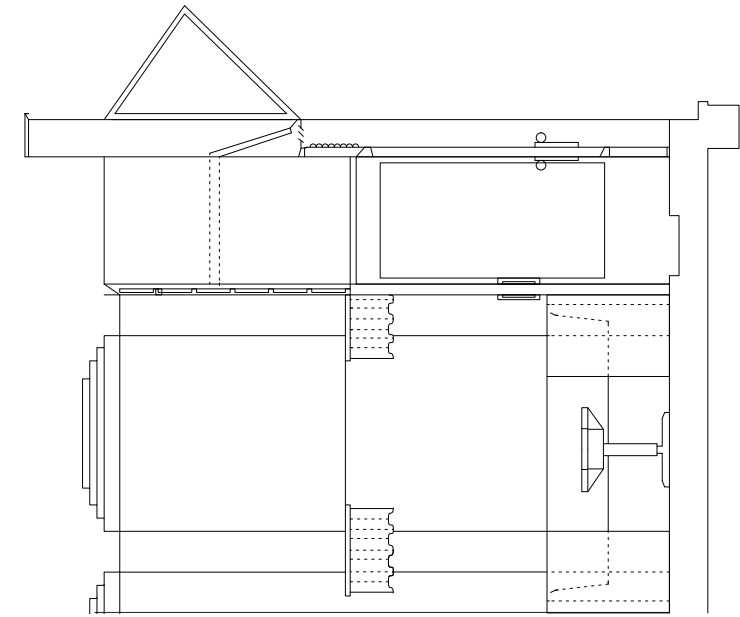
Adolf Loos' ideas for Vienna would not have been in fashion back in his times. Perhaps they are not outdated neither and "(...) might provide us with a toolbox for designing projects which stand the passing of time and are therefore 'sustainable'." ¹

On the search for strategies and a formal vocabulary on the intersection of architecture and the city, I propose to look at Vienna through the means of a hypothetical urban plan and by navigating through six unbuilt explorations on urban form.

¹ Trouble with Classicists 23, Introduction, EPFL Lausanne, 2017



American Bar. View of Entrance



American Bar, Adolf Loos, Vienna, 1908

Metropolitan Logic

Strolling into a small side street just off Stephansplatz in the historical centre of Vienna four red marble pilasters catch the eye. They support a triangular prism of glasswork that expands from the block-buildings-facades and hovers over the entrance to the American Bar, Adolf Loos' famed 1908 project barely measuring thirty square-metres. The entry sequence behind the American Bar's systematic, rhythmical presence towards the city was designed to force a shift of direction. To access the bar via the three-bayed portal is to enter through a door on the left bay into a narrow vestibule, shift to its middle by turning right and left again and finally enter the bar from the middle bay. We are immersed in the chiaroscuro atmosphere of the interior. The remaining third bay would balance the plan and house a small space between the inside and the outside. Only accessible from the street, it holds visual relationships to both sides. In a composition of the smallest possible scale, the threshold of the American Bar is working as a hinge between the interior and the exterior. The experience of a limit is thereby addressed and stretched. Contained in this early little project are explorations on the relation of the envelope and the interior world of a building that would hold the architect captive throughout his career. How - as an urban limit - is the perimeter formalized?

1 literally: "founders' period", the economic phase in 19th-century Germany and Austria

The setting

The urban project that later became known as ‚*Ringstrasse*‘ represents the large urban transformations following ‚*Gründerzeit*‘-era¹ at the turn of the last century in Vienna. In 1860 after the abolition of the existing landownership patterns and the erasure of the old city walls and bastions the suburban zone was incorporated into the city, leading to an entirely new territorial context. The void between the city’s centre and its former suburbs was developed by the city council. The primary element of the scheme was the polyedric road as an essential infrastructure for a city on the move. New public buildings like the university, the parliament or the museums in their different historicist facades were placed along the street and leftover spaces of the plan were filled with rental houses laid out on a grid.

The retroactive urban plan

Adolf Loos criticized the architecture of the boulevards for the masking of modernity in then-in-fashion historicist facades⁴. In 1912 Loos expanded his critique and re-imagined the urban space of the edge between the historic city center and its former outskirts by two pages of sketches, most of which were perspectives. He handed them over to his student and employee Paul Engelmann, who synthesized this set of drawings into a retroactive urban plan. The building stock of 1859 was taken as a point of departure and the realized scheme was lightly marked in dotted lines. The developed proposal by Loos and Engelmann undoes the limit between historical city and former suburbs performed by the road that circumscribes the old center like a canyon and instead redefines the in-between space with architectural forms. Despite the impossibility to dissect the plan into isolated parts and the complexity of Loos’ project that cannot be reduced to some simple tricks, a series of figures can be described.

2 Otto Wagner, The Development of a Great City, in The Architectural Record 31, New York, 1912

3 Camillo Sitte, der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen, Wien, Birkhäuser, 1909 (reprint)

Counterclockwise from top left: the bank-quarter, the round-church, the administrative area, the parliament, the cultural forum, Kärntnerplatz, the area around the park, the train station and harbor. The bank-quarter consists of a main boulevard, with a series of broad sub-streets or yards perpendicular to it. Their different depths respond to the urban situation as-found. More secluded spaces are established, performing together with the buildings bodies monumental fronts along the boulevards.

The round-church and the parliament are a circular and a rectangular building, respectively both set on a triangular piece of urban space on the corners of the overall polygon-figure. While the parliament is drawn identical with the realised building just repositioned, the round church replaces a cross shaped church. The centric emphasis is to mediate between two adjacent spaces of linear progression. Wings in both cases are defining the space around the free standing buildings but are also taking over the function of leading the existing main roads from the former suburbs into the historical center. Consequently, these roads are buffered by round squares and redistributed into the historical city.

The administrative area between those two buildings is elongated along the circular logic of the plan while the urban figure of the cultural forum on the parliament's right stands perpendicular to it. Both are creating voids that are breaking the one-directional movement of the overall circular sequence.

Kärntnerplatz is proposing a sequence perpendicular to the direction of *Ringstrasse* where each element is introducing its adjacent space. Karlskirche is framed by wings on both sides. The succession of spaces towards the large-semicircular square of Kärntnerplatz is reaching further into the center by taking into consideration an existing road towards Michaelerplatz. The round

4 „Whenever I stroll along the Ring, it always seems to me as if a modern Potemkin had wanted to carry out his orders here, as if he had wanted to persuade somebody that in coming to Vienna he had been transported into a city of nothing but aristocrats.

For these Renaissance and Baroque palaces are not actually made out of the material of which they seem. Some pretend that they are made of stone, like the Roman and Tuscan palaces; others of stucco, like the buildings of the Viennese Baroque, but they are neither. Their ornamental details, their corbels, festoons, carouches, and denticularion, are nailed-on poured cement. Of course, this technique too, which comes into use for the first time in this century, is perfectly legitimate. But it does not do to use it with forms whose origin is intimately bound up with a specific material simply because no technical difficulties stand in the way. It would have been the artist's task to find a new formal language for new materials. Everything else is imitation.“, Adolf Loos, Potemkin City, in Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897-1900, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1982. p. 95

square is reversing the figure-ground relationship as it had been realised by replacing the freestanding building of the opera with a large void.

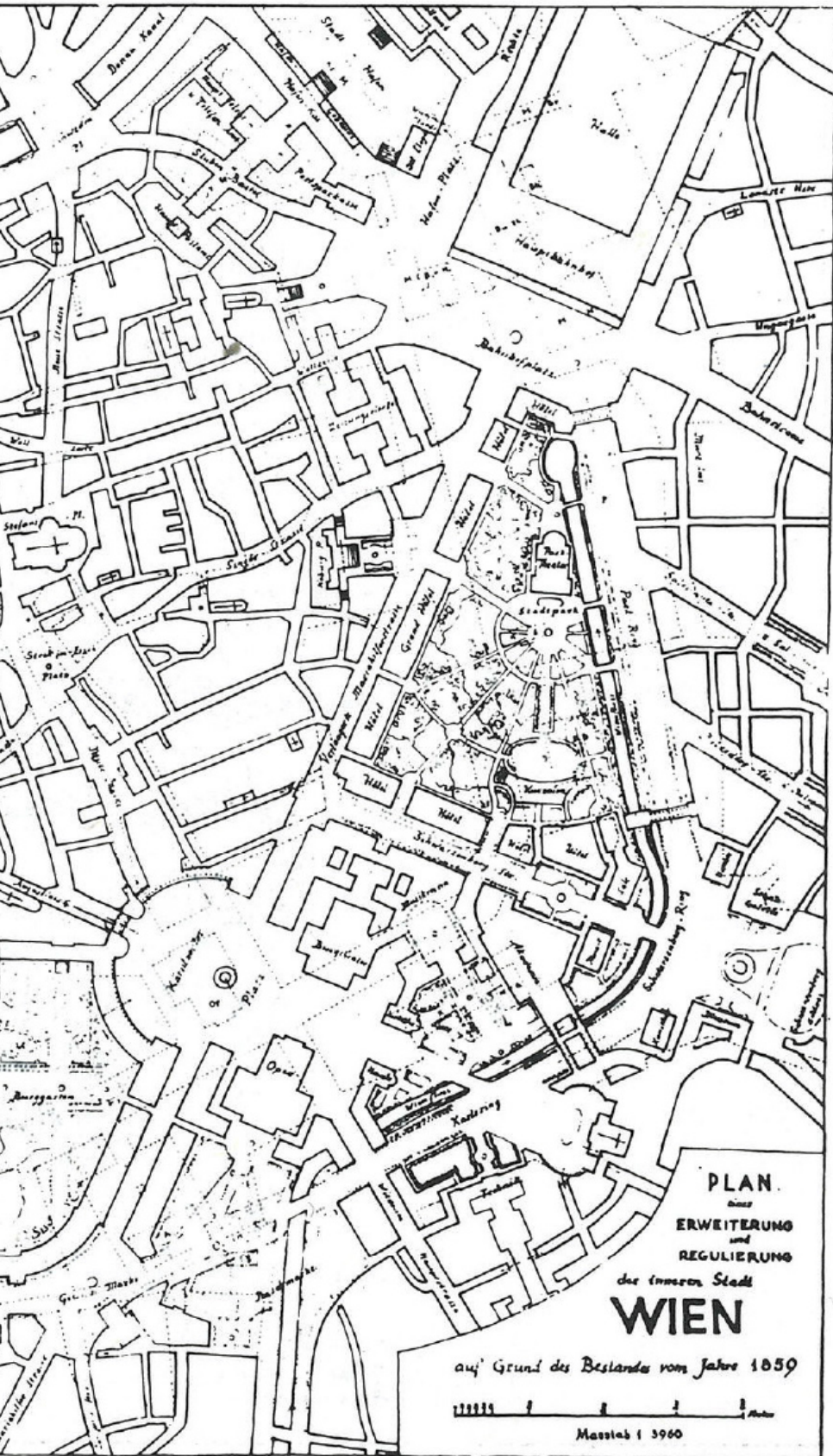
A row of hotel blocks builds up an edge where the buildings' fronts face the historical city and lead from Kärntnertorplatz to the main train station, while their back-sides seclude a park as area of recreation. One of the few interventions in the existing fabric of the historic city is a proposed new street. It is taking up a road on the other side of the canal and connects to the center. A triangle of roads is thus established that is dissecting the historical center so that it can be easily crossed.

The map as a project

Adolf Loos' consciousness of the impossibility of this architectural experiment more than 50 years after the real competition is evident. However, over a timespan of sixteen years he made proposals for six buildings in the area that he had addressed in the urban plan. Can we look at Loos's urban plan – precise, specific, yet impossible – not as a site, but as a project on the city? And can these unbuilt projects be seen as fragments of the retroactive plan?

The map is decomposing the separation established by the circular road. Instead, the urban gap is mediated by architecture. By means of forms and orientation the plan conceives of transitions between the different parts of the in-between-zone and from one side to the other. Public buildings address both historical center and former suburbs. Particular characters and autonomous objects are developed locally for different parts of the plan with respect to the existing context. A balance between object and space is achieved. Punctual intensities and internal relationships are established instead of an overarching

and all-encompassing hierarchy. The spatial qualities of this urban limit are to be appreciated as a sequence when moving through the city. Buildings appear, they are both objects and definers of space.



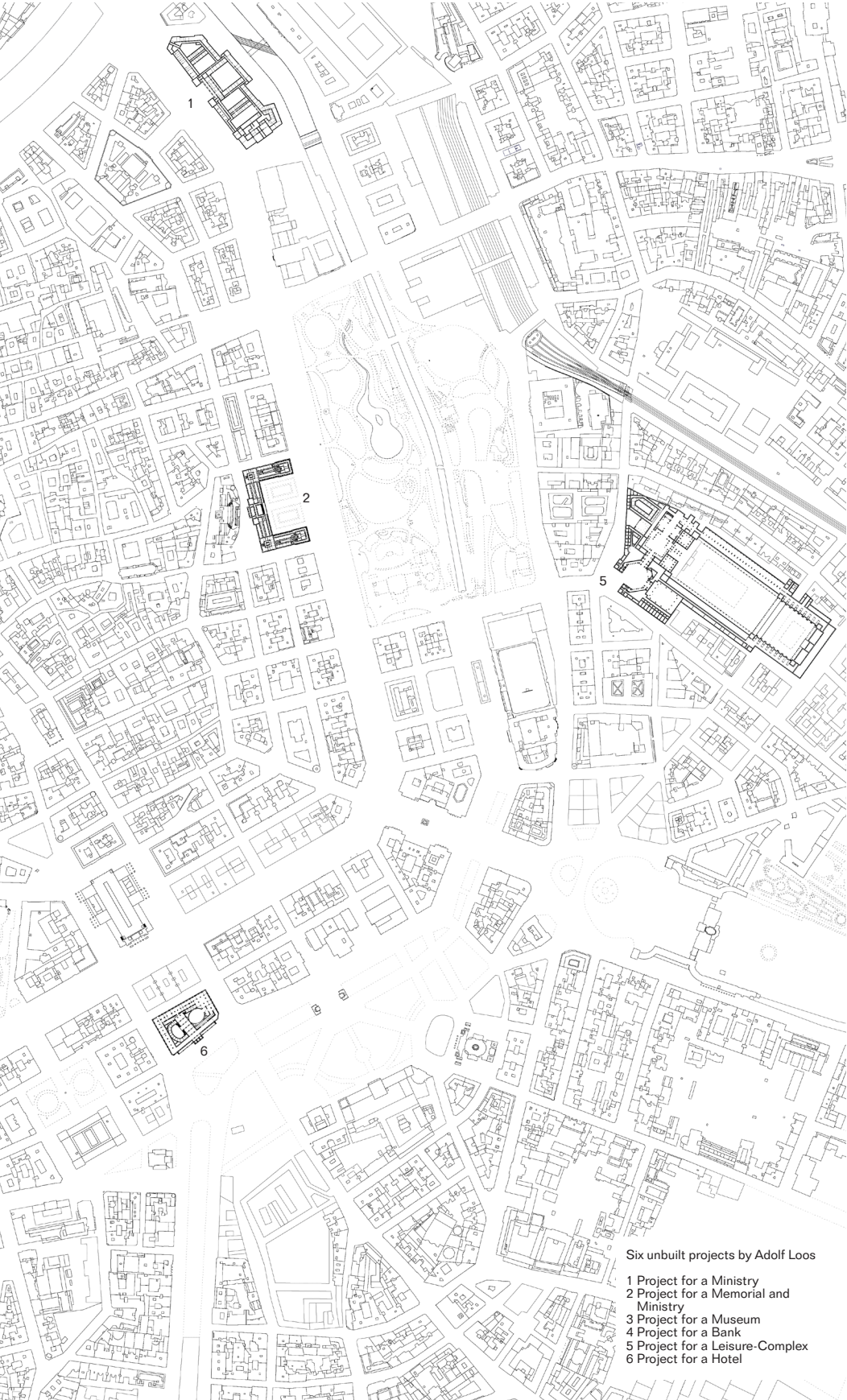
PLAN
 einer
 ERWEITERUNG
 und
 REGULIERUNG
 der inneren Stadt
WIEN

auf Grund des Bestandes vom Jahre 1859



Maßstab 1:5000





Six unbuilt projects by Adolf Loos

- 1 Project for a Ministry
- 2 Project for a Memorial and Ministry
- 3 Project for a Museum
- 4 Project for a Bank
- 5 Project for a Leisure-Complex
- 6 Project for a Hotel

Six unbuilt projects

Following the logic of the map, the following projects navigate between the form of a building and the space of the city. Their forms address a larger aggregation, exceeding the sites boundaries.

Looking at Loos' ideas for Vienna through perspectives from different viewpoints corresponds not only to his own working method for the urban plan but also counters the areas usual turn-of-century representation in painting or photography as a vast and endless space. We experience the city and its limits by moving around and through buildings.

In the *Project for a Ministry* the freestanding objects elastic perimeter is articulating and negotiating the irregular geometry of the block. On the facade facing Ringstrasse, the axes of symmetry is not centered but instead shifted slightly to its left hand side aligned with the square in front of Otto Wagner's Postal Savings Bank on the opposite side of the road. Projecting parts reestablish a local symmetry around the entrance and give rhythm to the length of the building. The floors above the plinth towards the Ring are set back behind large terraces. The facade was conceived in contrasting yellow-black stripes that render uniform the complex volume – a sequence of local symmetries where each facade is dealing with a different urban situation.

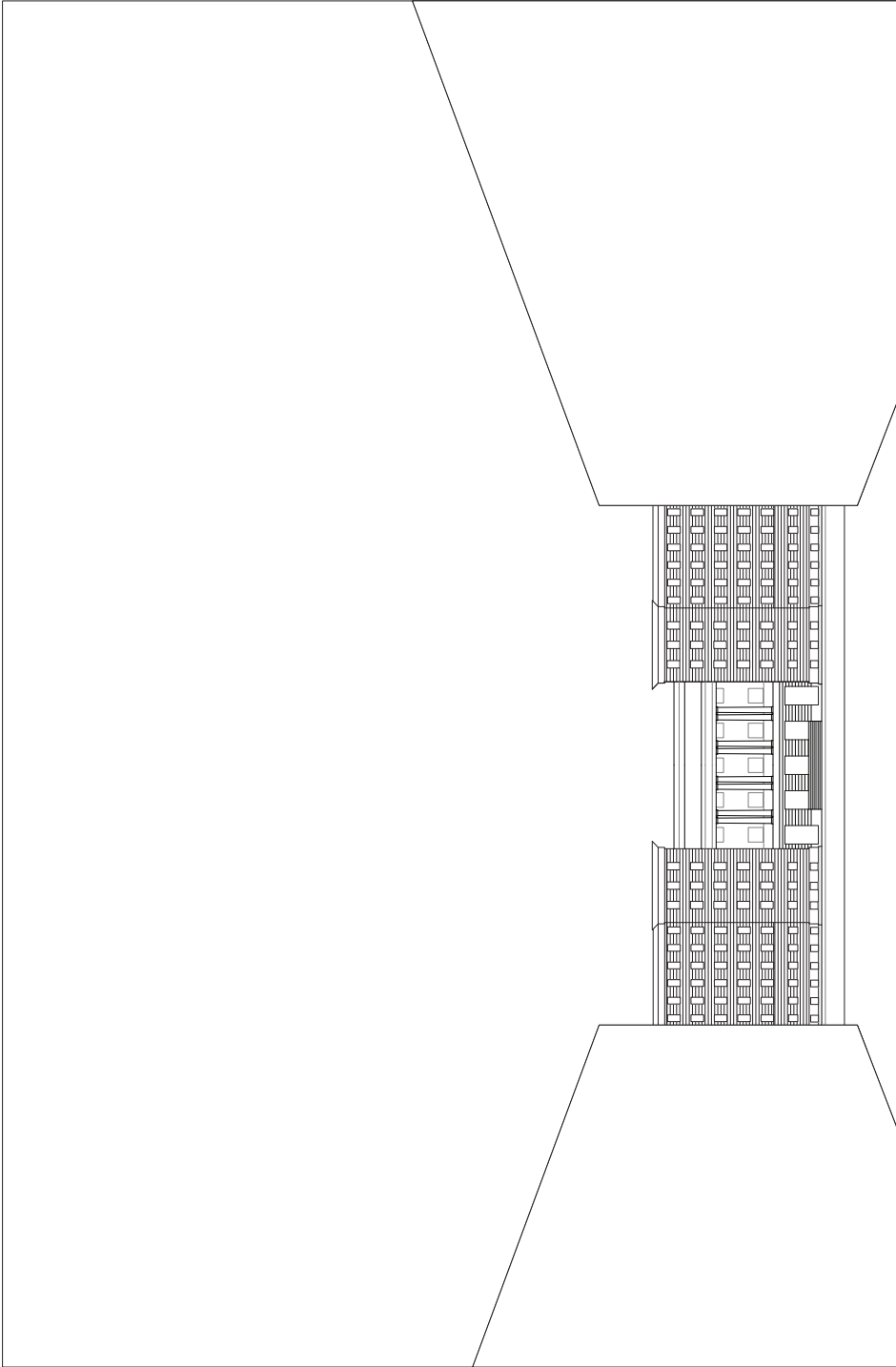
The *Project for a Memorial and Ministry* reverses the Viennese blocks figure-ground relationship, resembling strategies in the urban plan like Kärntnerplatz. The buildings U-form is to define not only the void it embraces but also to address the park in front of the site across the street. The overall low building height is due to an existing palace on the neighboring plot that has an easement for its view to the park. Loos' project is aligned to the road, which is slightly shifted in relation to the palace, resulting in a dynamic relation of the two figures. A double height colonnade wraps around

the building, creating an intermediate space with a facade in the scale of the city, independent from the scale of the window-pattern of the multiple floor building behind. In order to house the required space for the ministry, towers are proposed to the buildings corners. The *Project for a Museum* on a square with a park surrounded by the city hall, the university, the theatre and the parliament on its four sides consists of two large and two smaller courtyards connected by a bar. Double-columns leave the ground floors empty and carry the spaces of the museum which are all located on the first floor. The existing park is retained and remains accessible to the public. Framed by the large squares it is delimited from its context and turned into more intimate gardens. In-between four monuments, the building is working as a hinge establishing new relationships between the existing buildings.

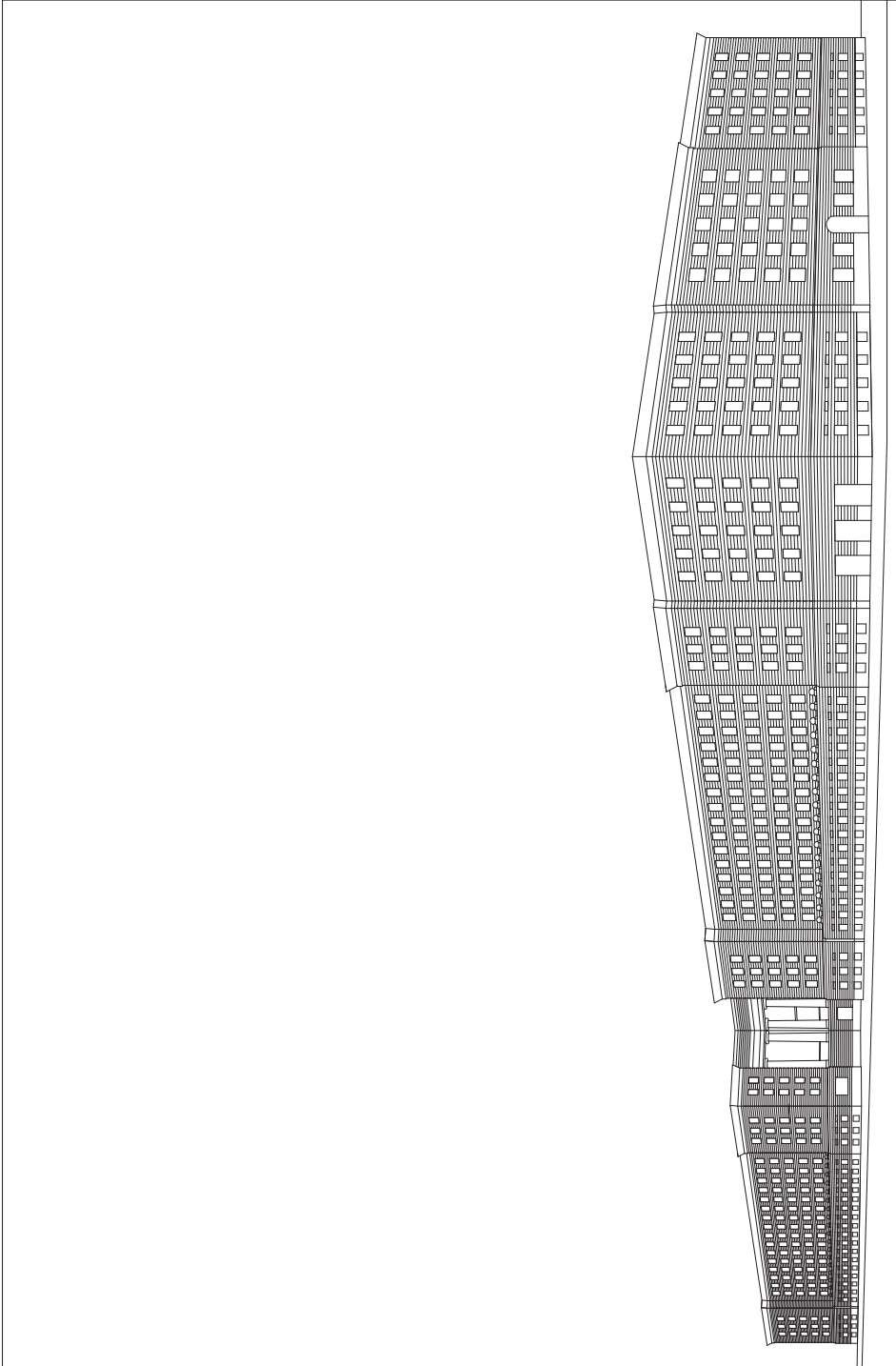
The *Project for a Bank* on the corner of a square in the historical city proposes a tower flanking the buildings corner with recessing and projecting parts to its sides which emphasize its verticality.

In these proposals Loos was not only concerned with the design of a built object, but also with the redefinition of its surrounding.

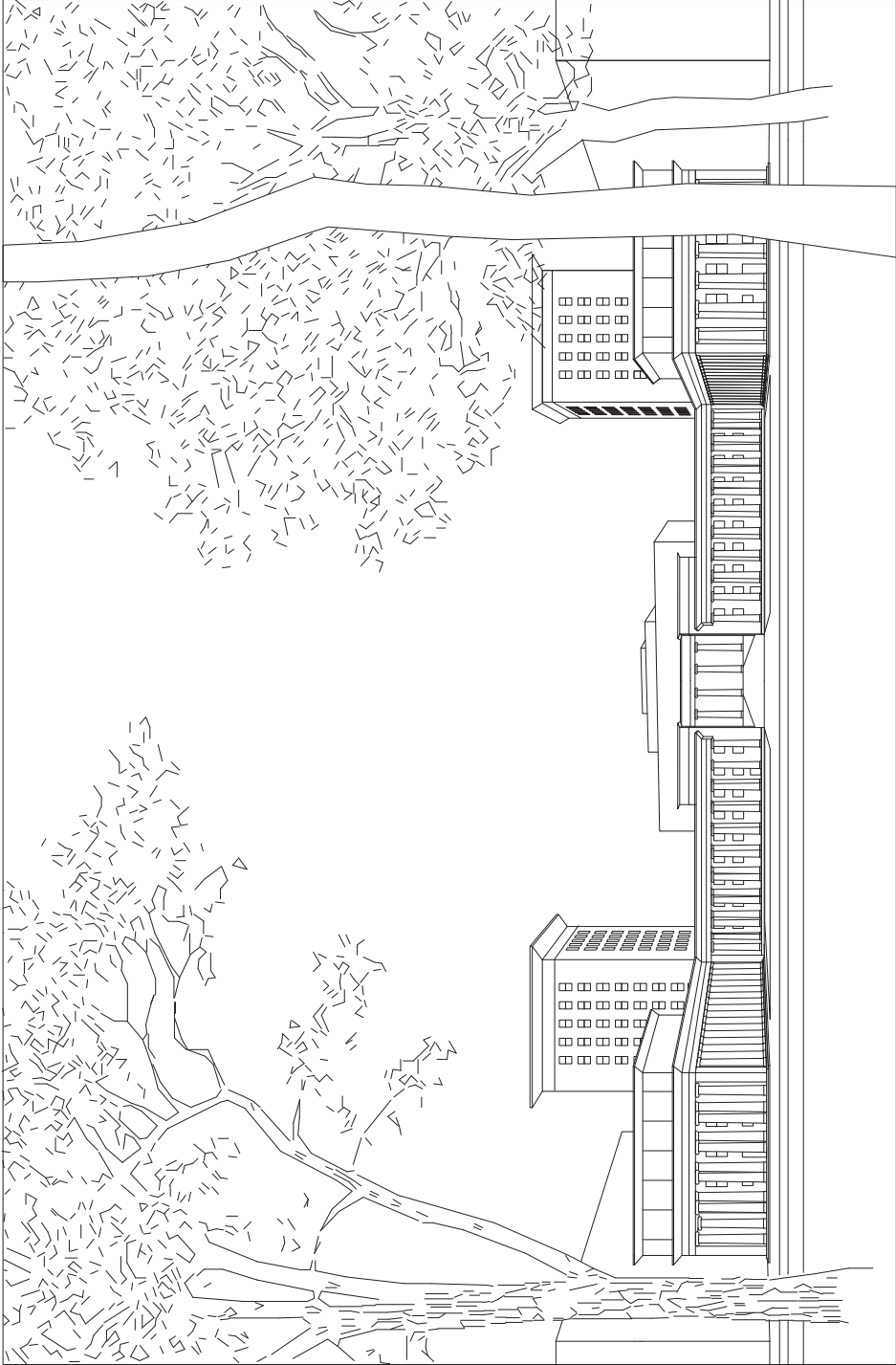
His architecture is engaged with the city. Acknowledging the metropolitan complexity and diversity as indispensable part of any project, the individual building contributes as clear and crystallized form. The richness of the urban experience might find its echo in the interior, as in the *Project for a Leisure-Complex* or in the *Project for a Hotel* where local concessions meet articulations of total independence from the site and a great interior freedom. Buildings both collaborate and assert. They fit in their locations and give them a twist.



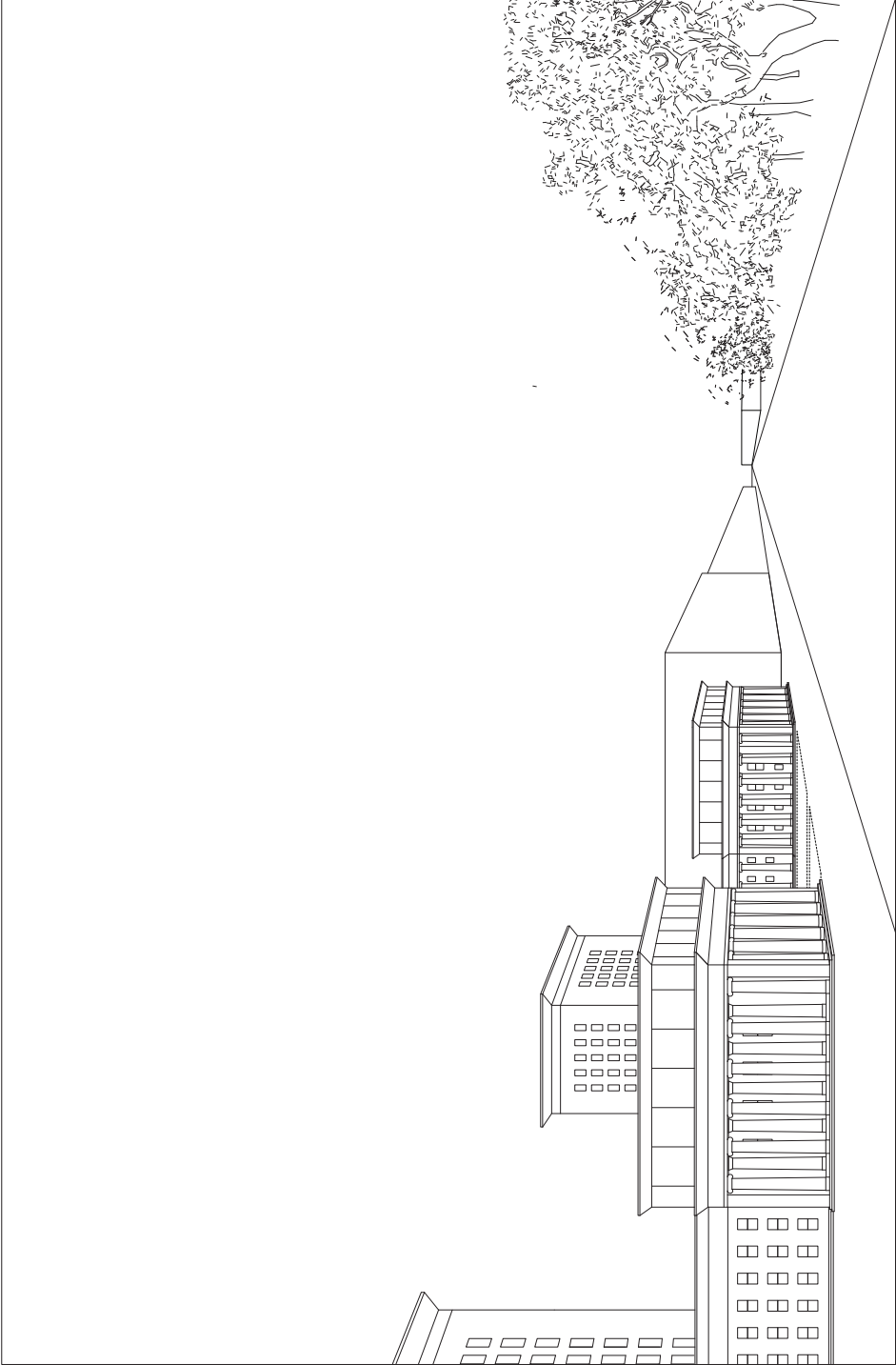
Project for a Ministry. View from Postsparkasse



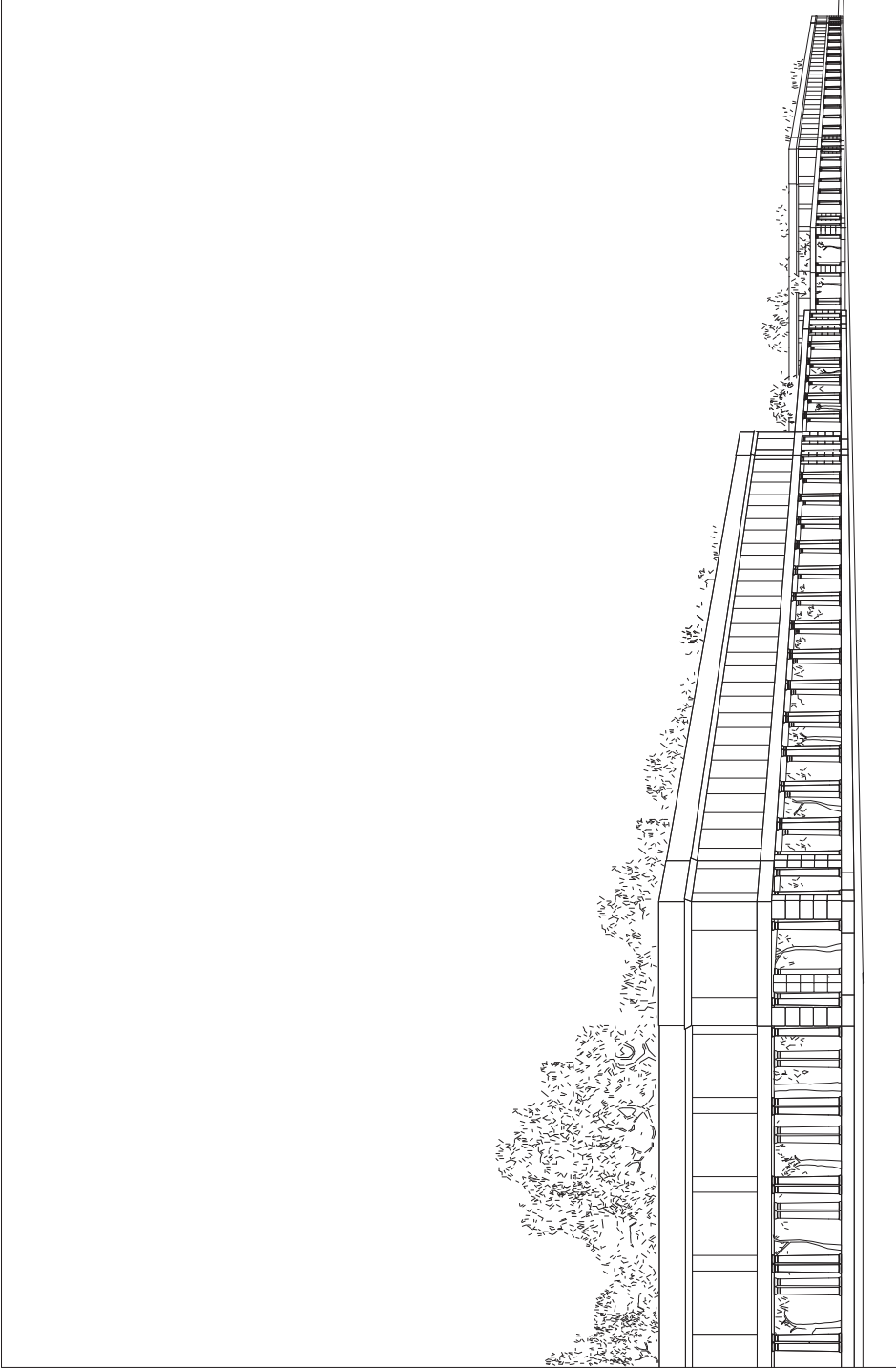
Project for a Ministry, View from Ringstrasse



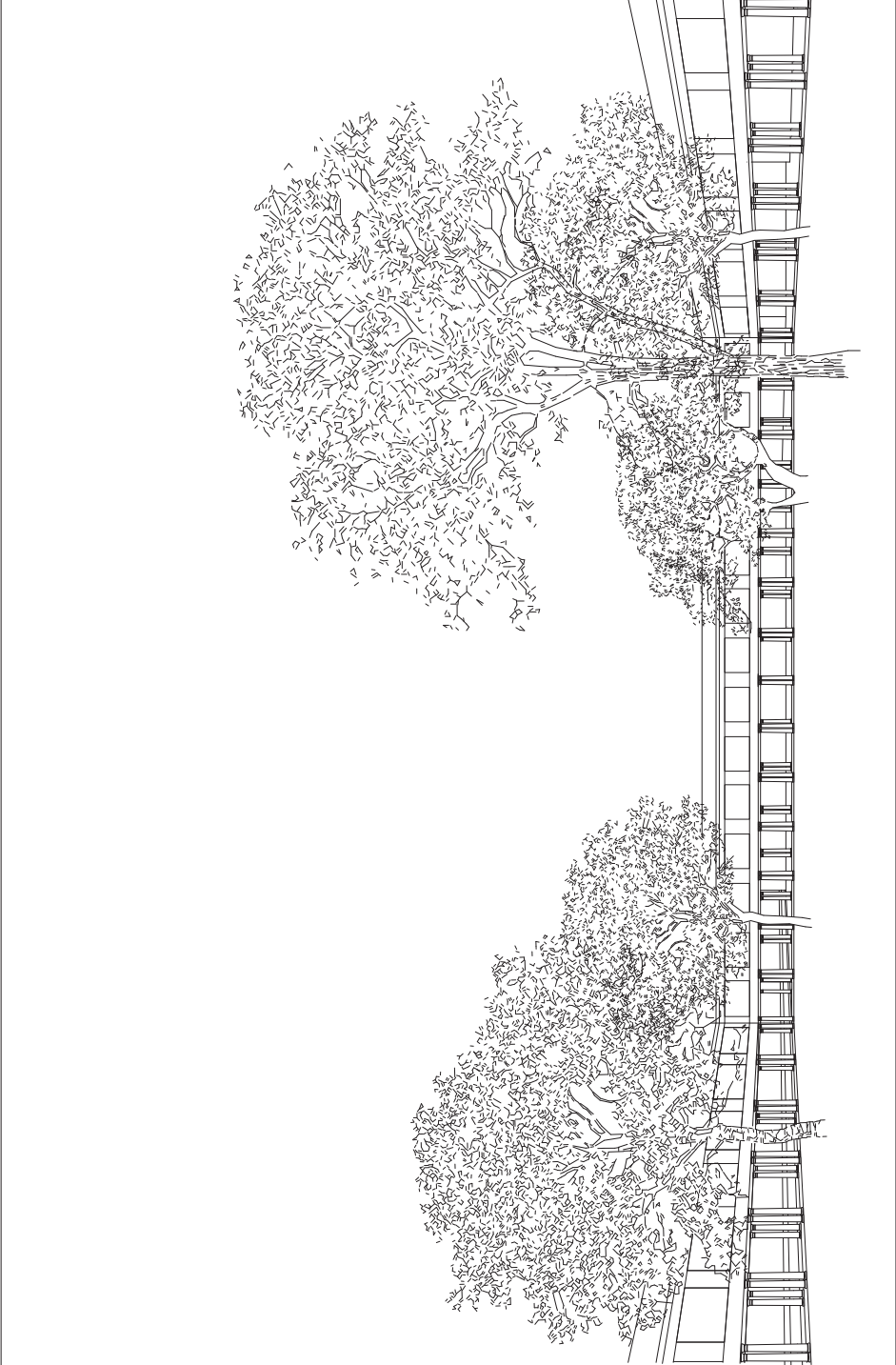
Project for a Monument and Ministry, View from Park



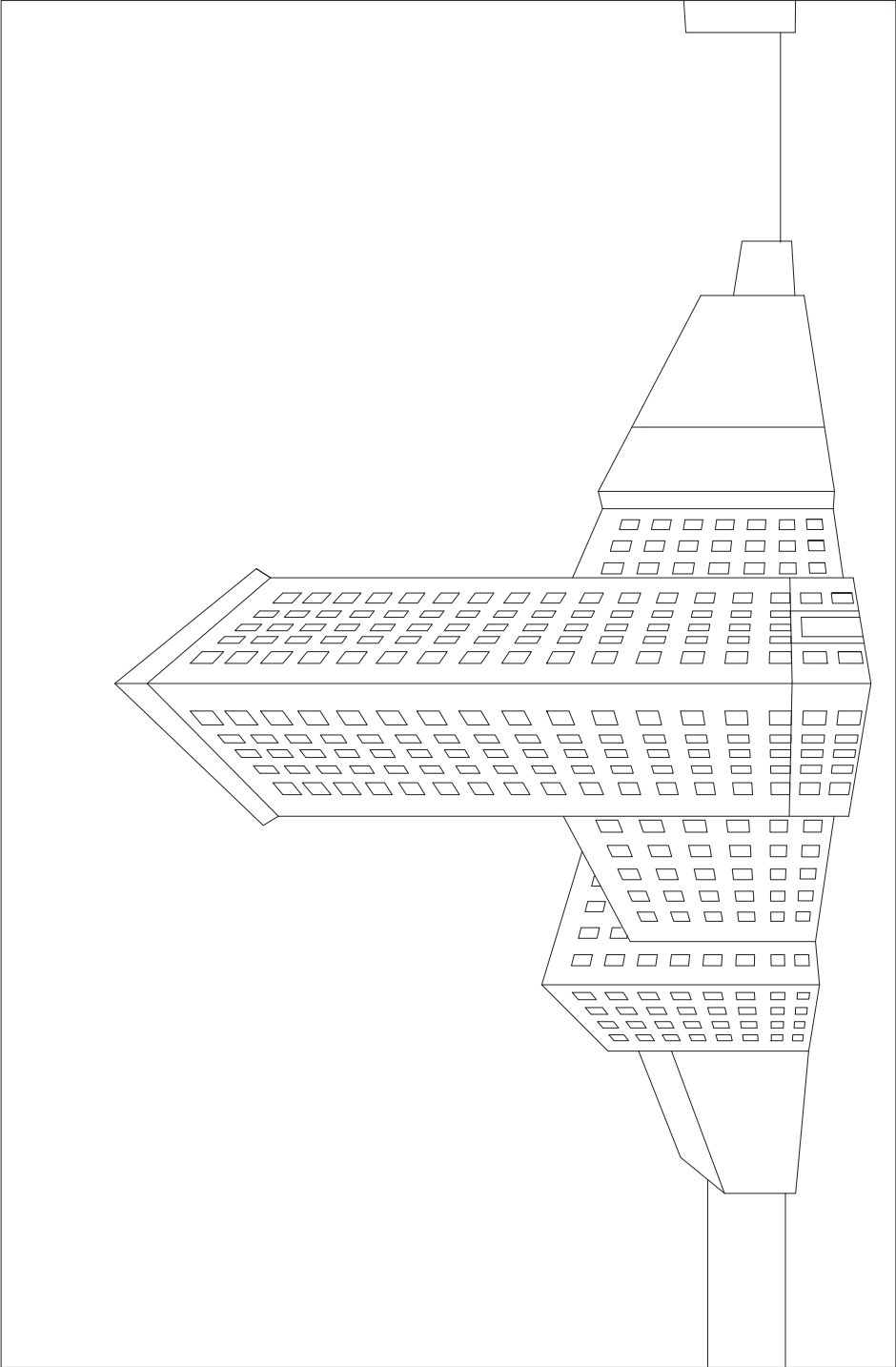
Project for a Monument and Ministry. View from Ringstrasse



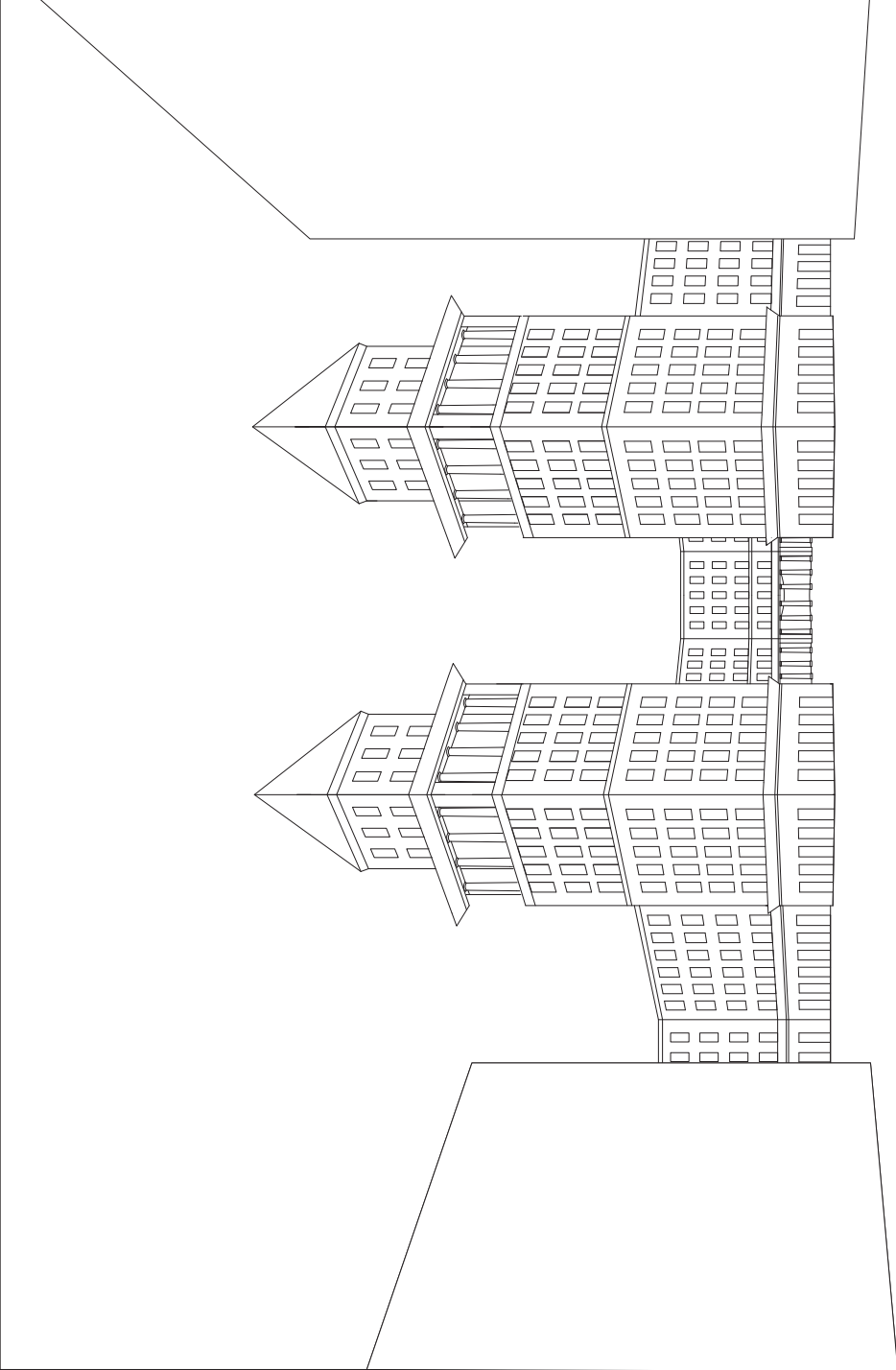
Project for a Museum, View from Ringstrasse



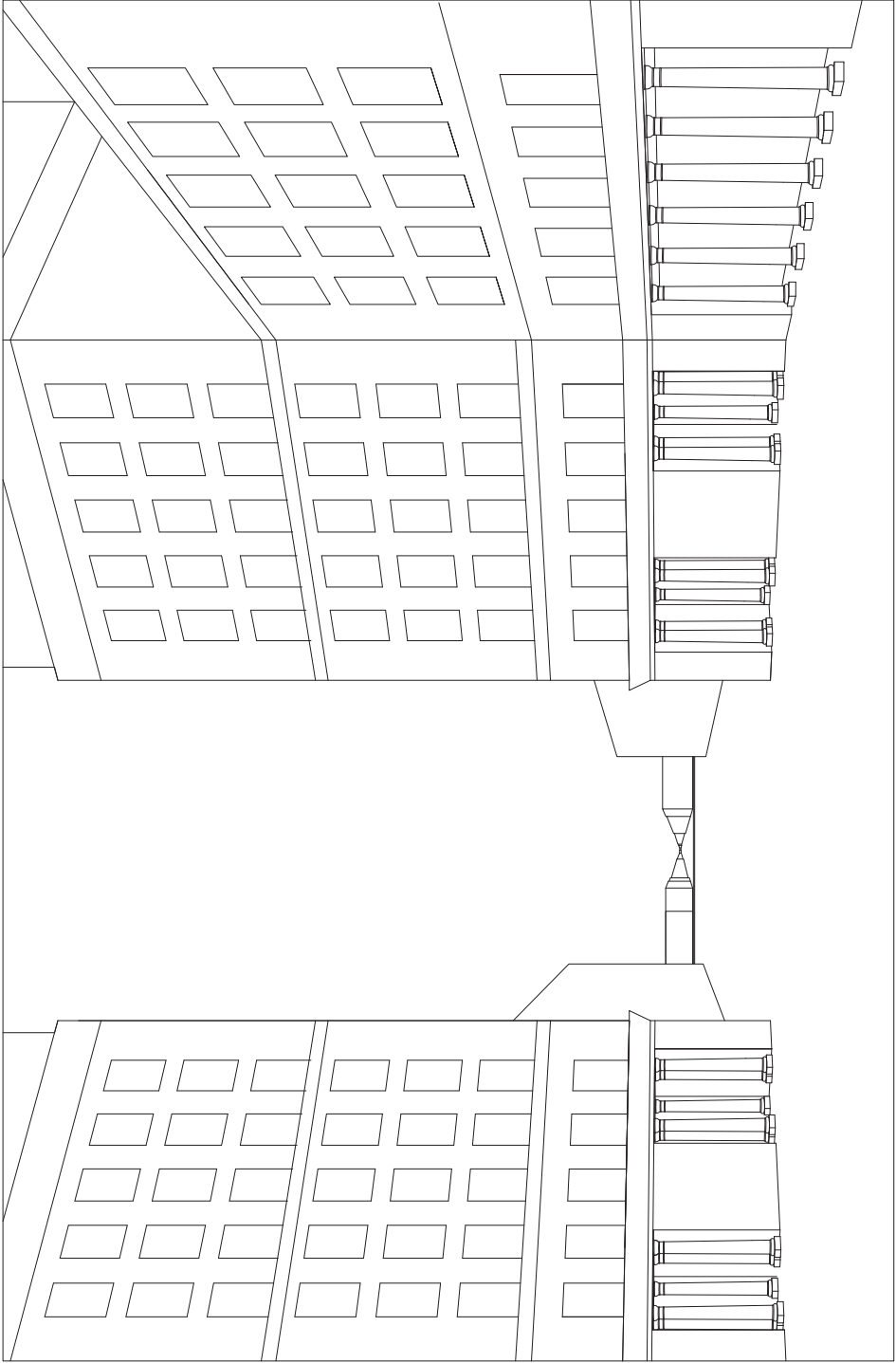
Project for a Museum, View from Interior Garden



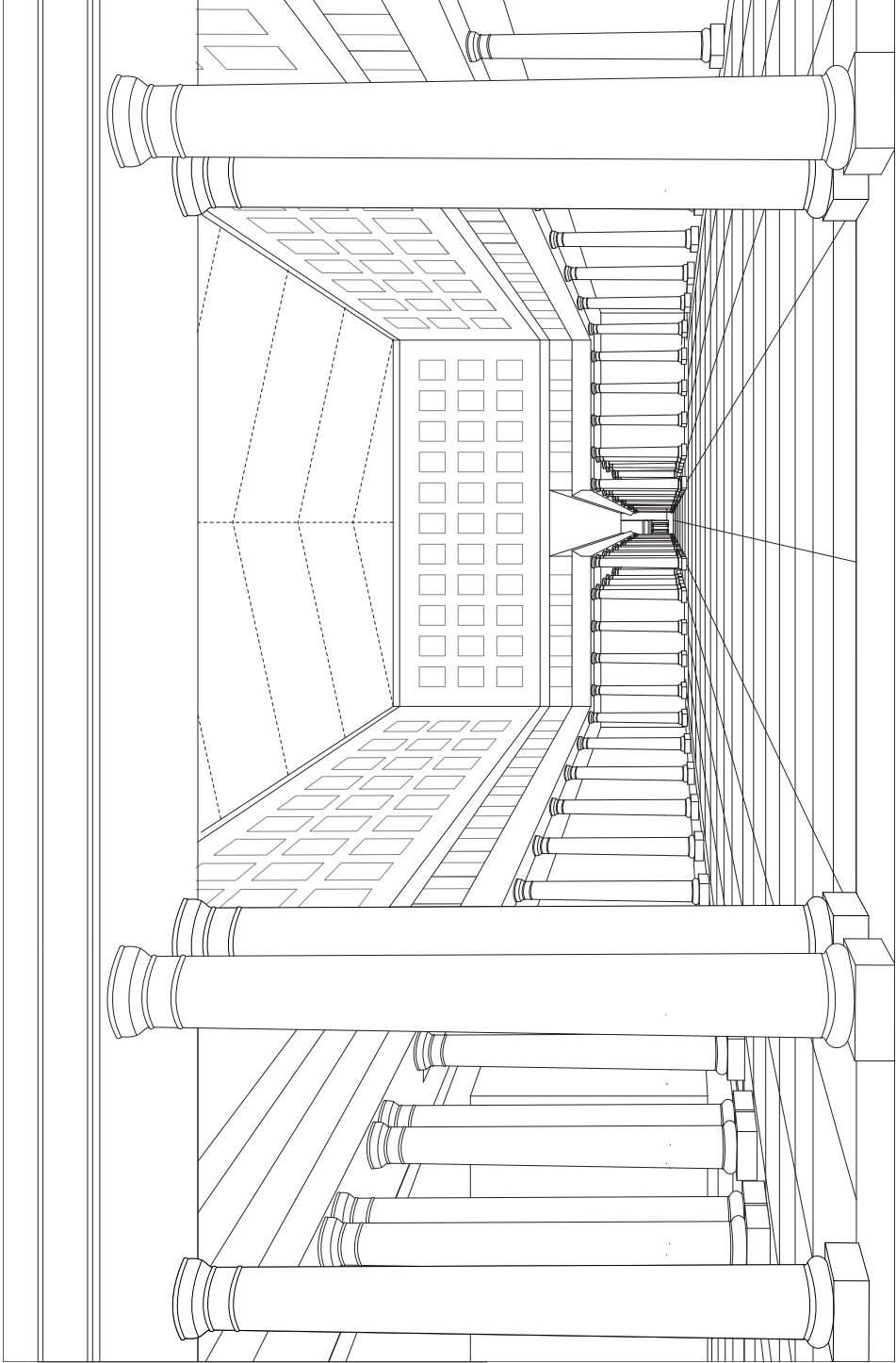
Project for a Bank, View of Tower



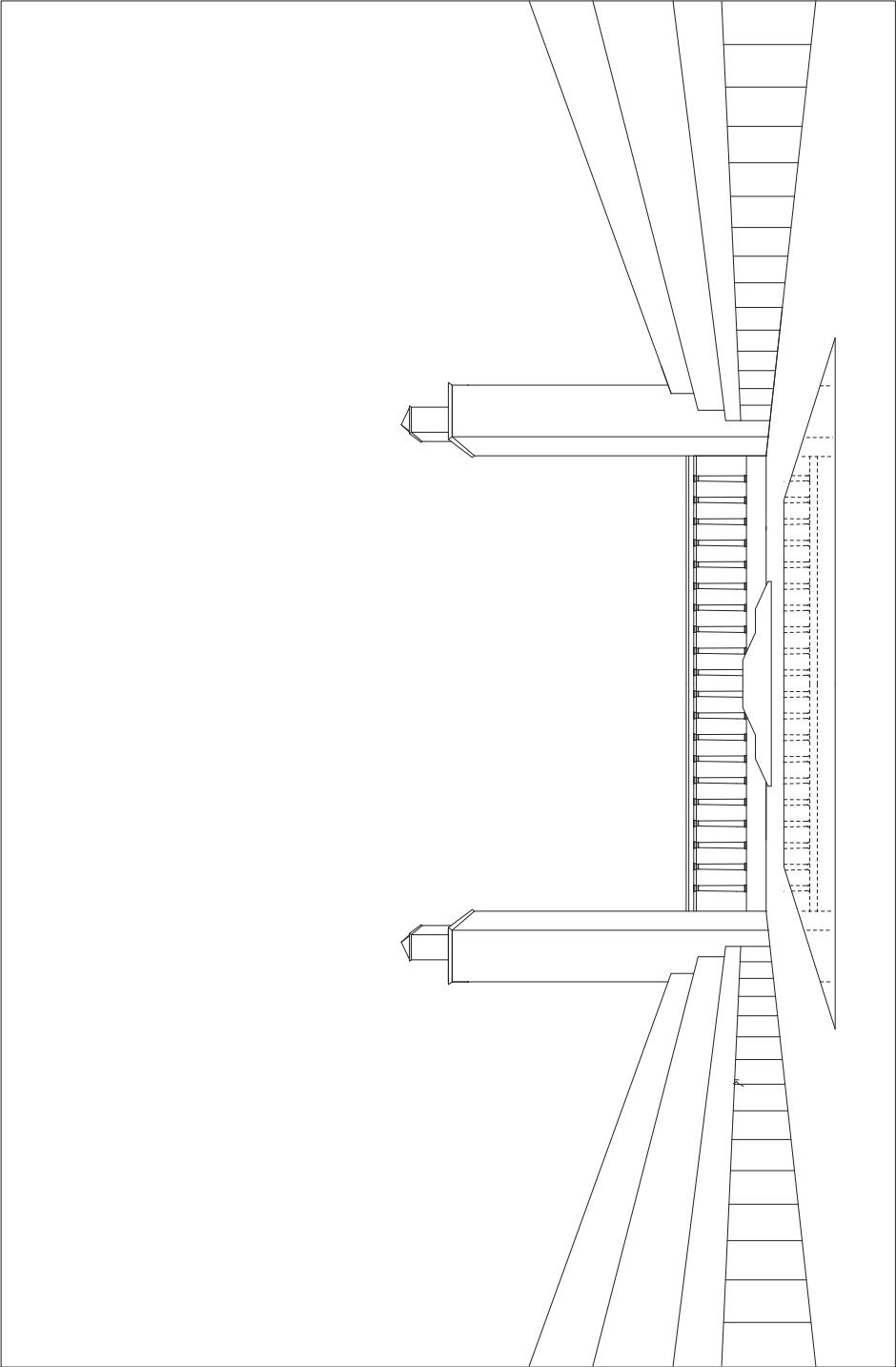
Project for a Leisure-Complex, View from Ringstrasse



Project for a Leisure-Complex. View from First Courtyard towards Ringstrasse



Project for a Leisure-Complex. View of Second Courtyard



Project for a Leisure-Complex, View of Interior Garden

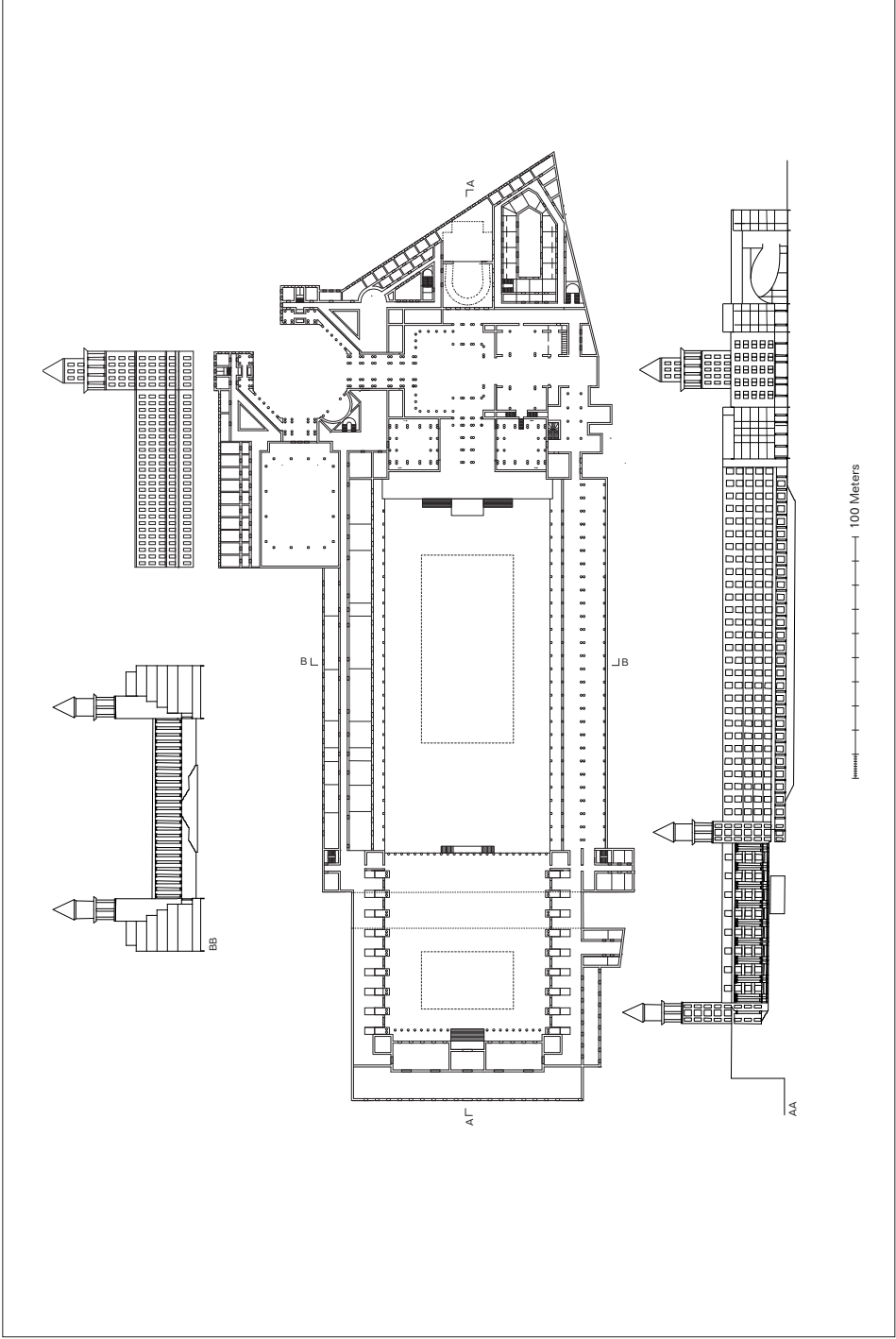
Interior independence

Instead of a fragmentation of the area the *proposal for a Leisure Complex* puts forward a large-scale structure encompassing a variety of programs. Amongst them are a theatre, a hotel, restaurants, gaming halls, an icepalace, a post office, a skating rink and a Grottenbahn.

An octagonal square flanked by two towers is aligned with a street leading to the city center. Arrival and departure to the complex is signified and mediated by this square. One has to shift axis twice when proceeding from the octagonal entrance courtyard to a second interior courtyard and to finally reach the main courtyard and the main axis of symmetry: an interior park, seeking isolation by the surrounding terraced building with another two towers to its corners. A 'perfect' geometry is embedded in the 'imperfect' shifting perimeter.

On the main courtyards end, another courtyard with a double height ordered facade is elevated on a higher level as a road is tunneled below the building. The whole complex is filling a block of partly existing buildings, resulting in a fragmented appearance from the surrounding streetscape while in its interior a uniform and isolated state is perceived.

In the *Project for a Hotel* several public programs are encompassed and nested in one another on the street level: a café and a tea room with elevated terraces all along the buildings main facade, an American Bar and a restaurant on two of the corners, and shops to be rented out to its sides. While the overall layout is allowing for great flexibility, each of these spaces is specific to its use and position within the whole. An elaborate sequence of interior volumes is to be found behind the rather austere outer appearance. A portico is linking the exterior and the rectangular hallway, that is visually stretched by a mirror at its back. On one of its sides, two flights of stairs introduce a counter axis and lead to the hotel lobby in a

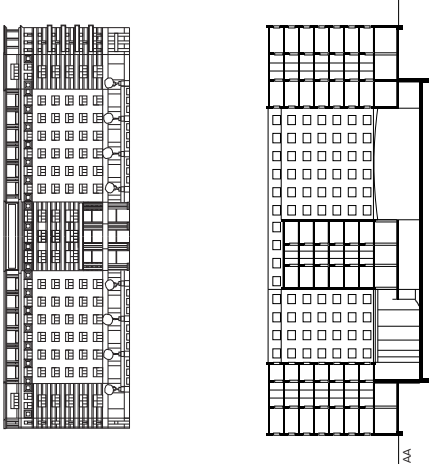


Project for a Leisure Complex, Adolf Loos, Vienna, 1922

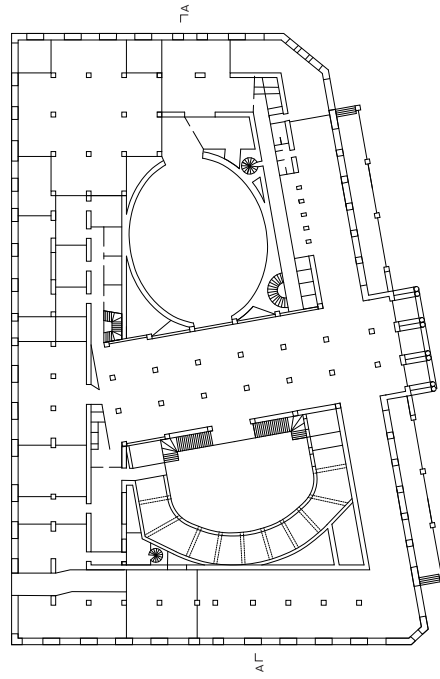
wintergarden below ground level. A round geometry is inscribed into the trapezoid courtyard. By crossing underneath the hallway the ellipsoid dining room can be reached which still holds visual relationships to the entrance hallway diagonally above. A cross-shaped restaurant is fitted into the buildings corner.

The American Bar and a retroactive urban plan for the center of Vienna are understood as his manifestos for an urban architecture. Like the different parts of the urban plan, the bars vestibule is careful in both delimiting and suggesting the spaces behind. By means of architectural spaces and sequences Loos had exploited possibilities of first introducing and then revealing a building. The distinguishment of exterior presence and interior world and the experience of forms and limits in the urban scene is key. Despite the plainness of the Loosian facade, it is not merely a thin layer veiling the buildings core, but a space with its own physiognomy.

The American Bar's exterior entrance has been shifted to the middle bay to enable smooth and direct entry. By their capability to negotiate, Loos's unbuilt ideas seemed to have allowed for specificity, complexity and coexistence as fundamental values in the city.

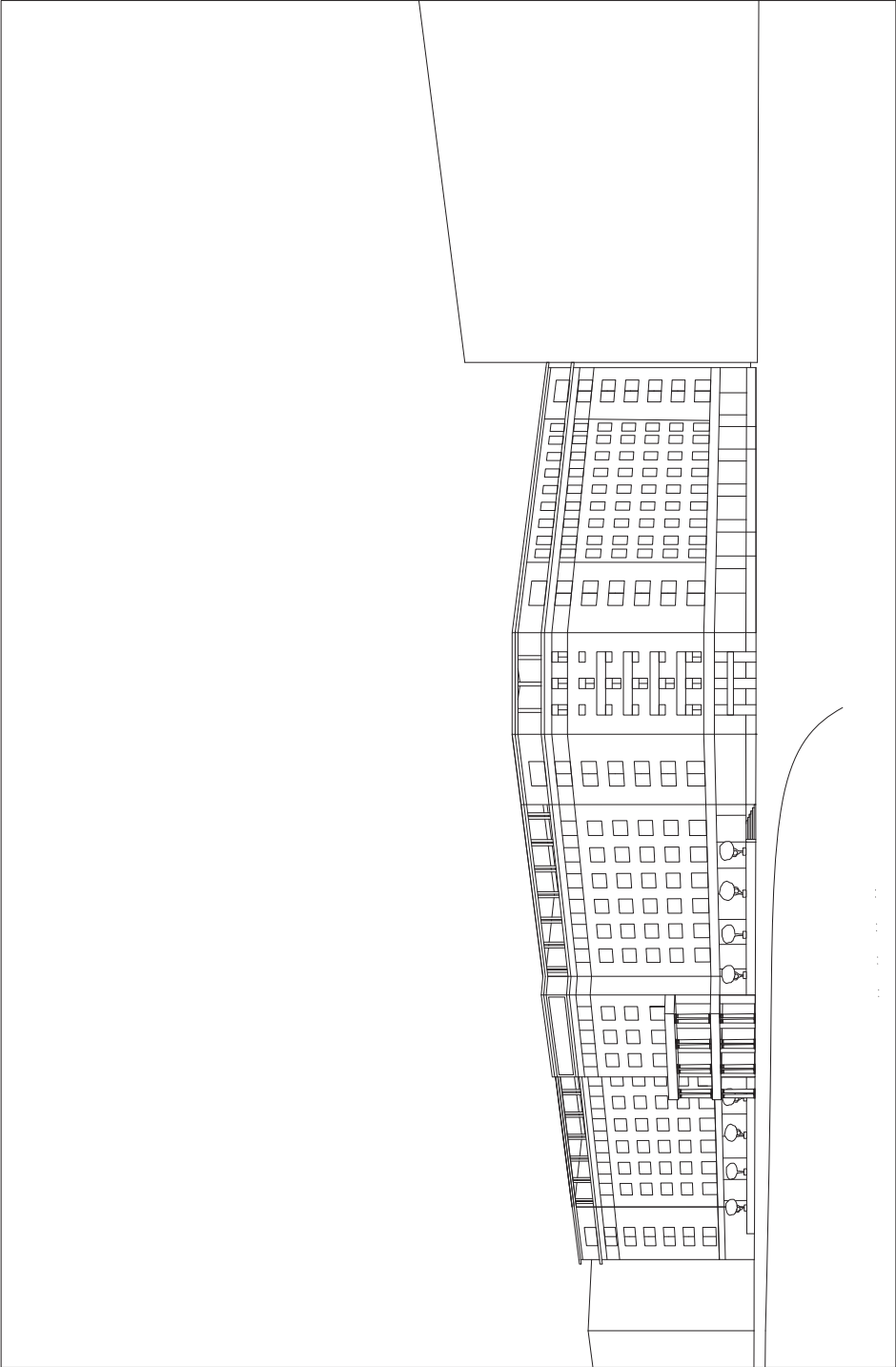


100 Meters

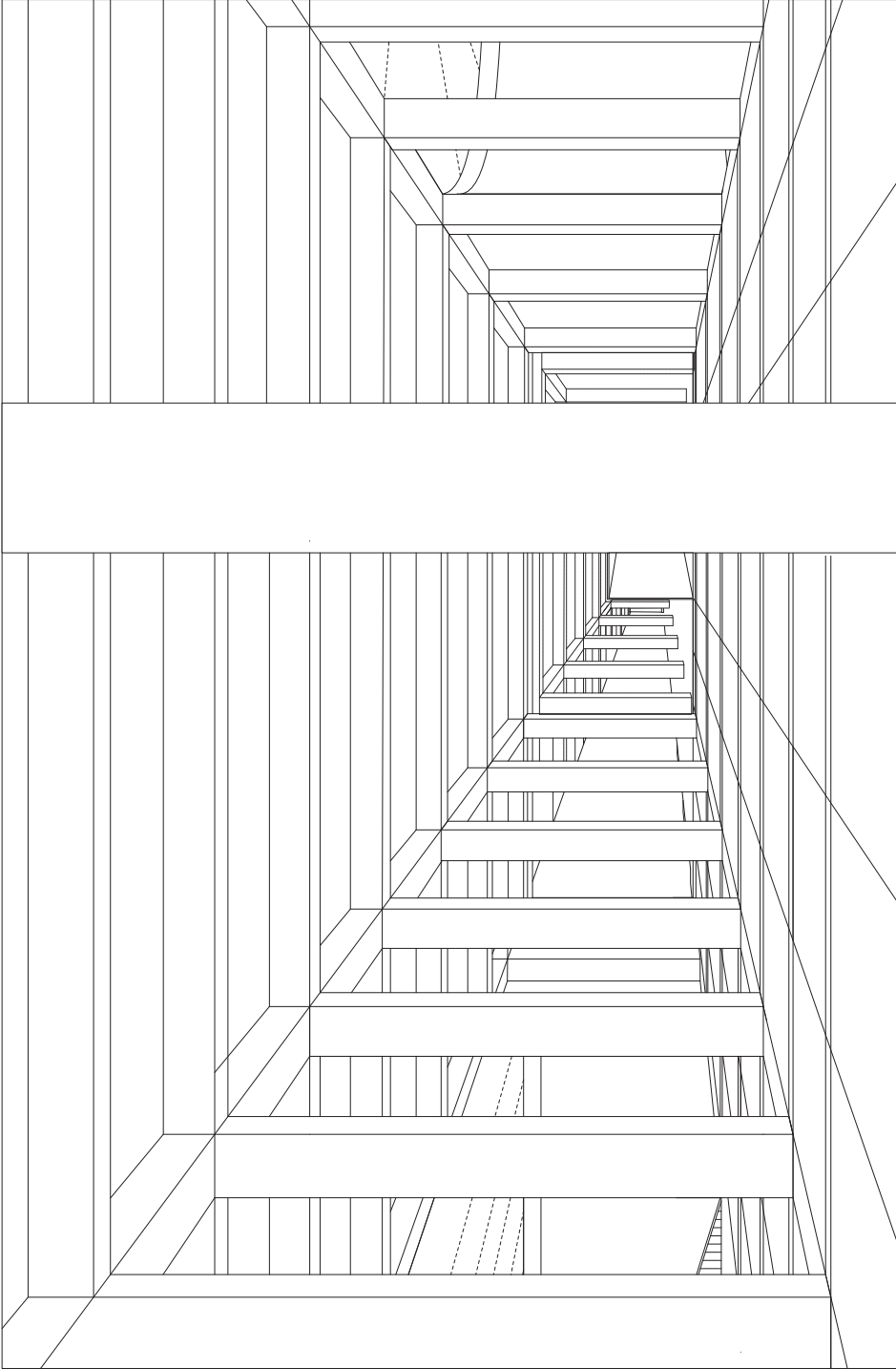


50 Meters

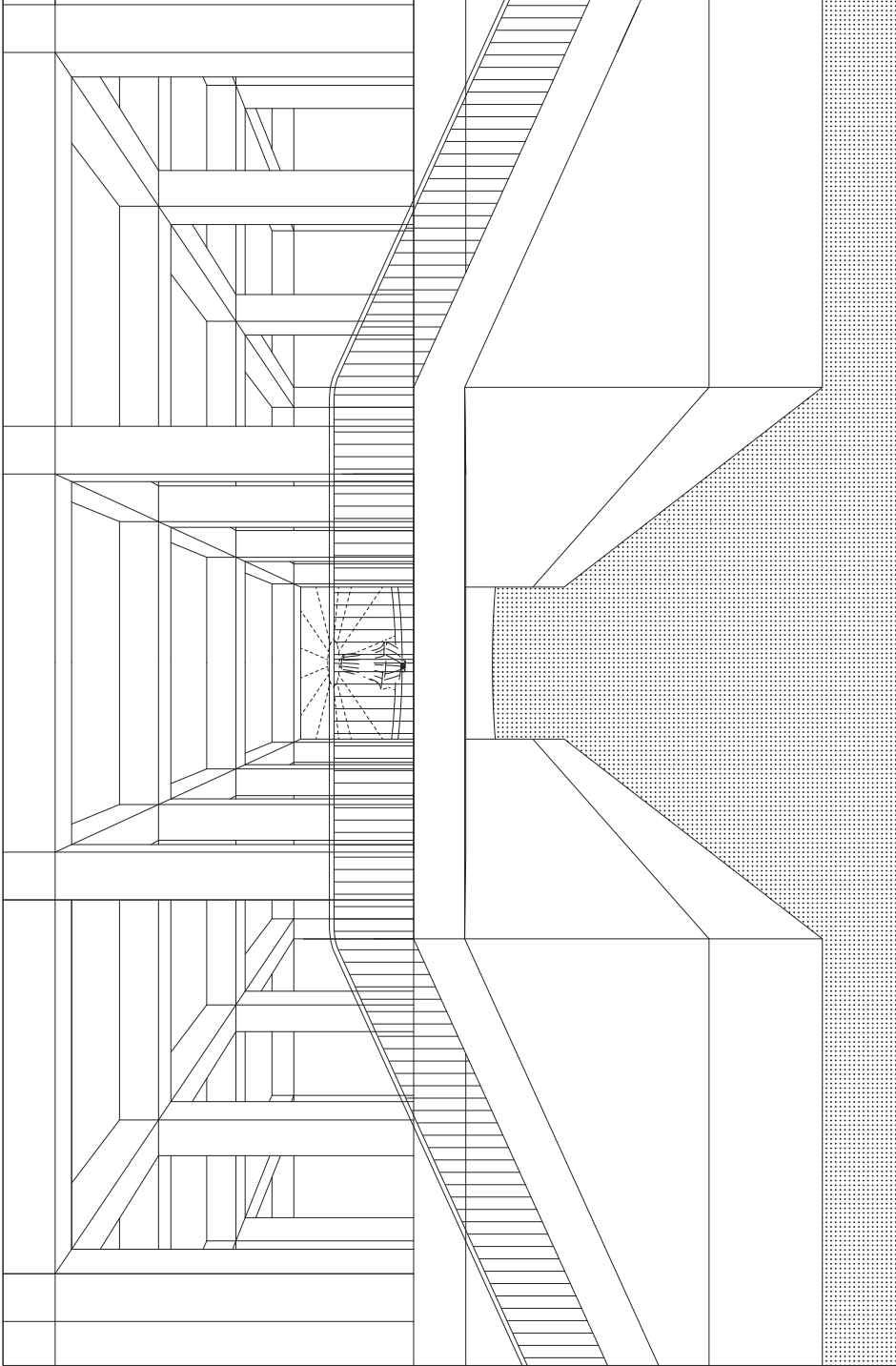
Project for a Hotel, Adolf Loos, Vienna, 1906



Project for a Hotel, View from Karlsplatz

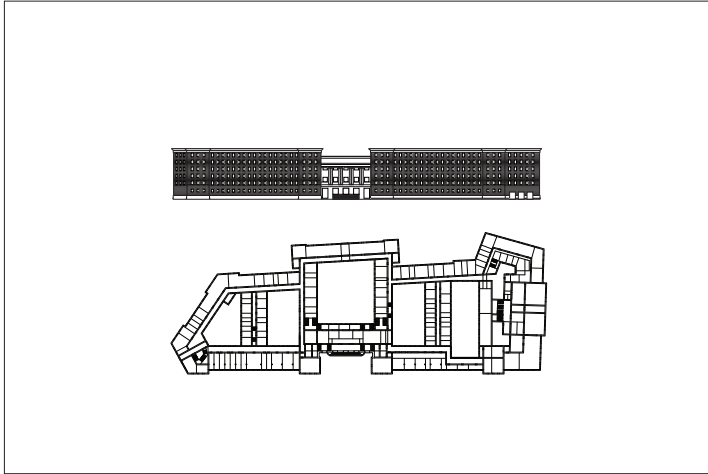


Project for a Hotel, View from Entrance

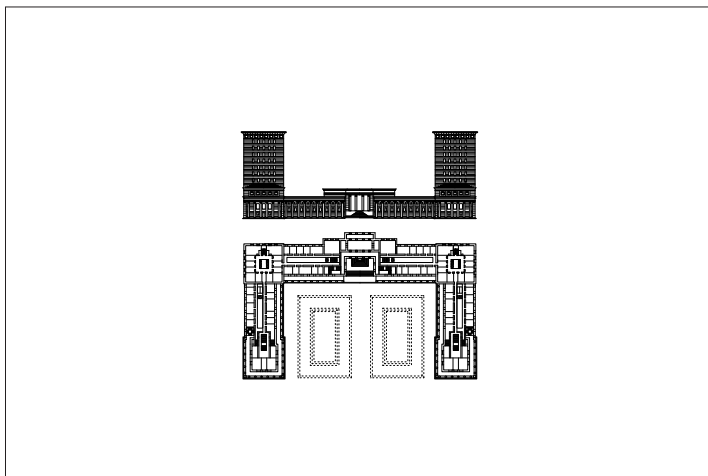


Project for a Hotel. View from Wintergarden into Dining Room, through Entrance Hall

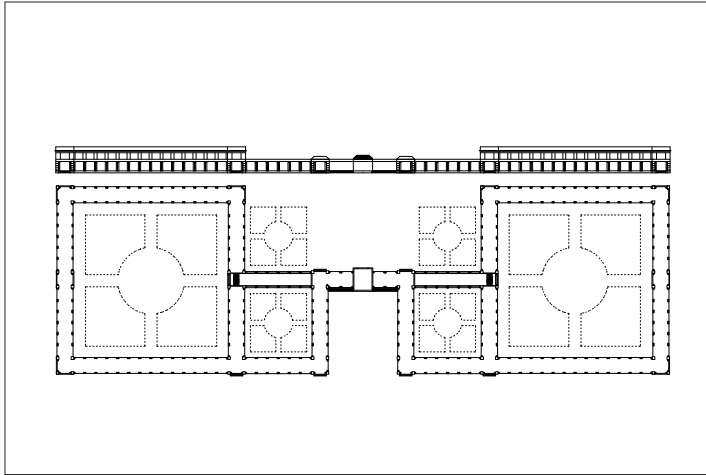
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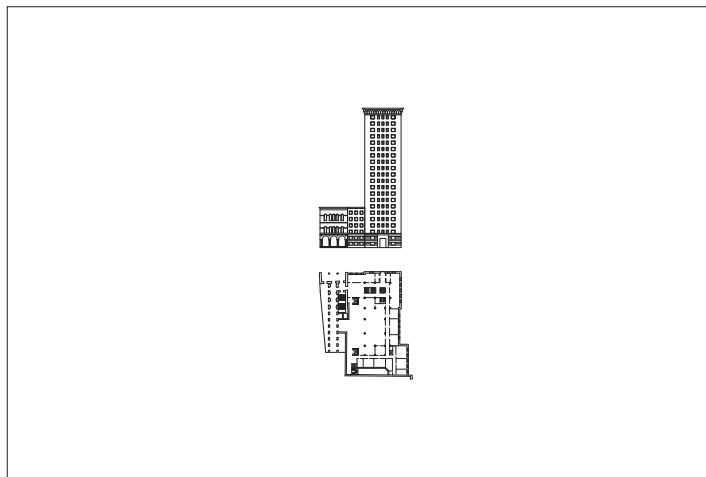
Project for a Ministry, Adolf Loos, Vienna, 1907



Project for a Memorial and Ministry, Adolf Loos, Vienna, 1918



Project for a Museum, Adolf Loos, Vienna, 1917



Project for a Bank, Adolf Loos, Vienna, 1919

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