

ENCOUNTERING THE ENIGMA

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture
Harvard University Graduate School of Design, by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
[Master of Architecture]

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ENCOUNTERING THE ENIGMA

A TRANSFORMATION OF THE FULTON FISH MARKET

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THESIS S21

ADVISED BY MACK SCOGIN

THESIS STATEMENT

Architecture can through its liberated interpretation unveil an enigmatic understanding of its objectivity and experience.

ABSTRACT

With our increasingly advanced tools, we seem to be able to grasp the architectural object more exhaustively than ever in the most precise dimensions and countless components. However, this technical knowing does not give answers to what architecture is and all its excessiveness, and the infinite and immeasurable ways that we perceive and understand it.

In fact, the seemingly stable architectural objects that we know are always assemblages of unnameable fragments of amorphous matter. This alienness of architecture is often repressed but can never be completely dispelled as we always work between completion and openness, the known and the unknown. In this open realm, our judgment is suspended; architecture unveils all its enigma and becomes again open to our interpretation. Can we work within this open realm of architecture, and conceive a building that engages our faculty of understanding upon encountering it, yet eludes it with its incessant enigmatic nature?

In this spirit of a liberated interpretation of architecture, this project aims to unveil an enigmatic understanding of its objectivity and experience through a fictional transformation of the New Market Building of the Fulton Fish Market.



Site Condition.

The site is an abandoned building in the Seaport District of New York City.

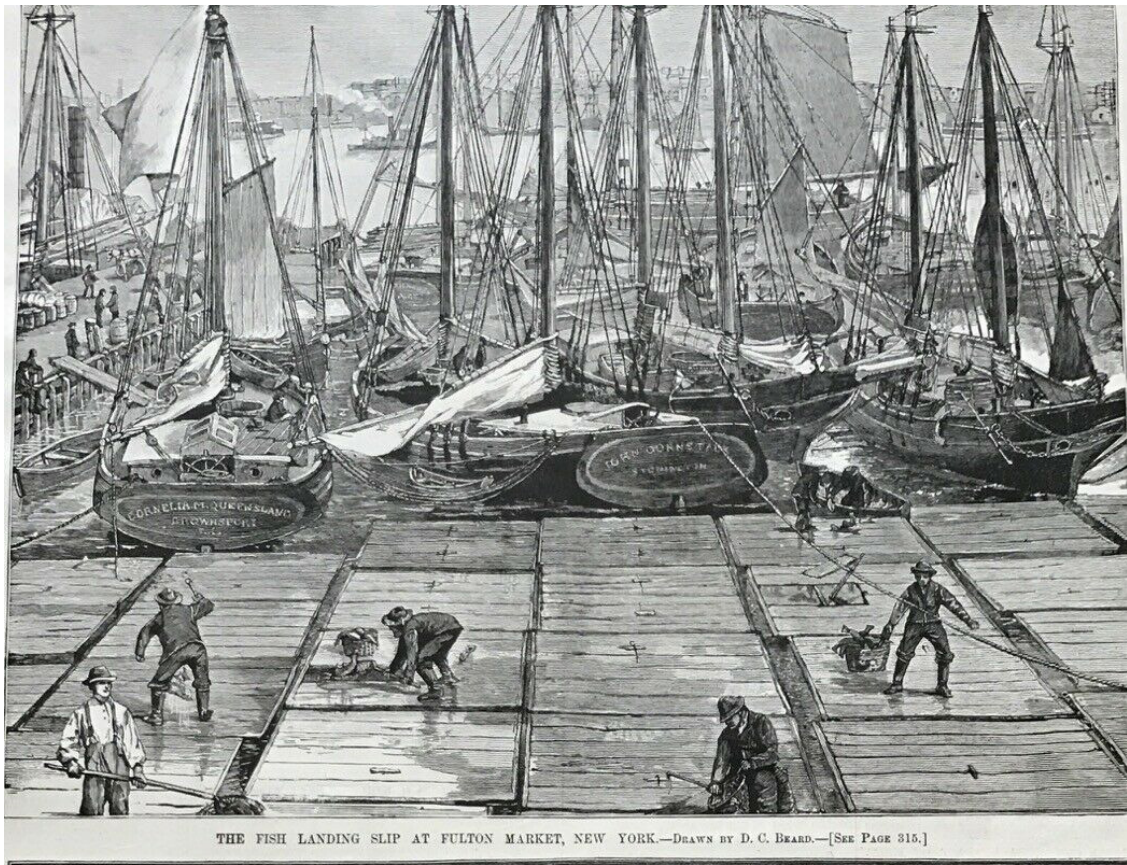
I came across the building by chance on a walk, and it immediately caught my attention - its style, size, and its homeliness, and its prominent location right on the East River next to the Brooklyn Bridge. The fact that it is fenced off makes me wonder about its mystery even more.



George Schlegel, New York, 1873.

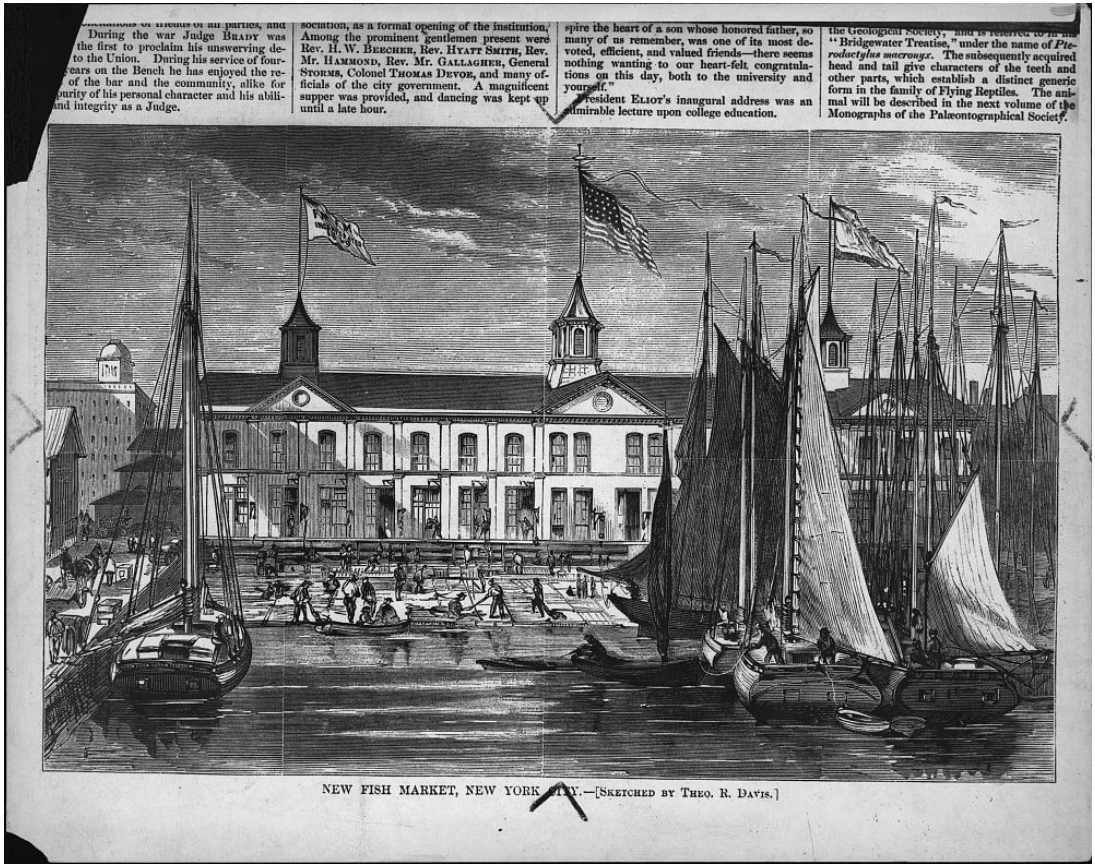
In fact, the building once had a glorious past as the New Market Building of the original Fulton Fish Market and had a profound historical significance.

The Seaport District was the center of commerce since the very early colonial history of New York City in the 18th and 19th century.



Fish Landing Slip At Fulton Market, New York. 1887.

The Fulton Fish Market had played an important role in this history since its conception in 1822. It was the most important wholesale fish market on the East Coast in the US.



Engraving of the 1868 Fulton Fish Market.

The buildings of the Market have always been the link between the Seaport District and the waterfront. They have been changed and rebuilt many times in the same area, progressing from temporary sheds to fixed and permanent structures.



Tin Building in 1951.

By 1907, the construction of the “Tin Building” was completed, which is right next to the site.



Tin Building in construction Jan. 15, 2021.

Today, it has been torn down and is being remade as a replica of the original.



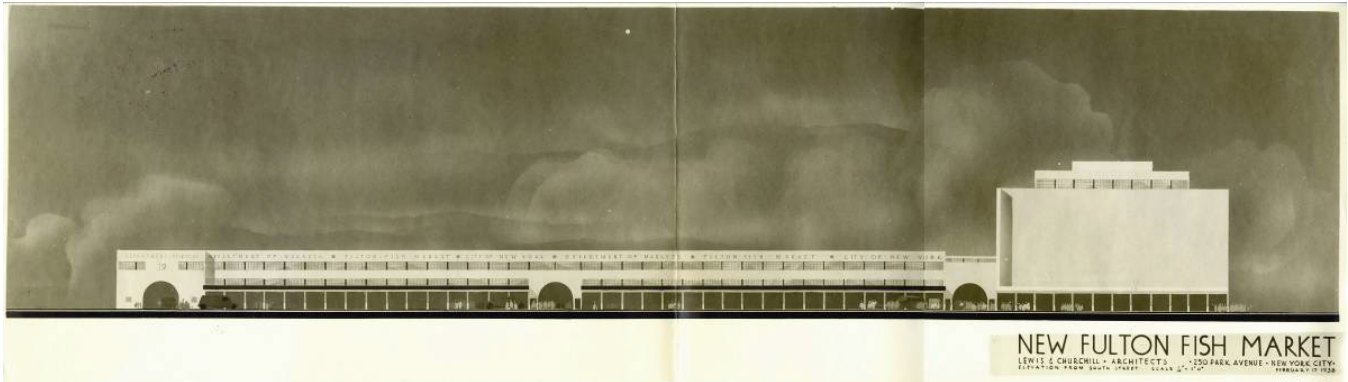
Fulton Fish Market collapse, 1936.

In 1910, a new wing of the market was built next to the Tin Building on Pier 18, but only lasted until 1936 when it collapsed into the East River.



Dedication of the New Market Building, June 17, 1939.

The "New Market Building" on the site now was dedicated in 1939 by Mayor LaGuardia.



Lewis & Churchill's Proposed New Fulton Fish Market, February 2, 1938.

Its design is best characterized as Public Works Administration (PWA) Moderne - an architectural style of many buildings built between 1933 and 1944 in the United States, that combined elements of Art Deco, the Beaux-Art, and the Streamline Moderne styles, applied in many large public buildings and civic centers. The project was to be built in two phases, only half of it was built at first. Due to the decline of wholesale fish trade and the effects of the Second World War, the rest of the plan was never realized, and the building remained unfinished in its entire life.



Fulton Fish Market New Market Building.

The New Market Building was the last building in operation before the market's final relocation to the Bronx in 2005. Despite its location within the South Street Seaport historic district, it was deemed a non-contributing element because it was not old enough at the time of the district's listing in the 1970s, thus it has been deserted for the past fifteen years after its disuse.

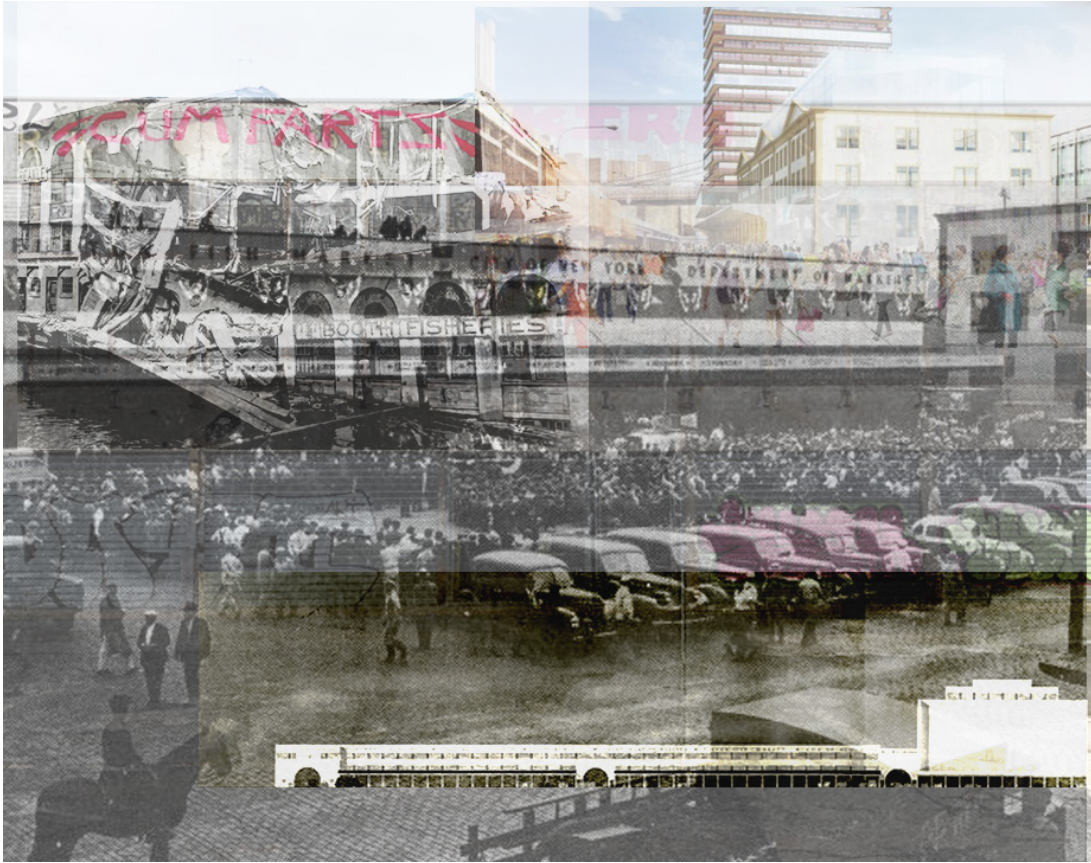


A rendering of the Howard Hughes Corporation's plan to develop the site of the former Fulton Fish Market in Lower Manhattan. The Howard Hughes Corporation/SHoP architects.



Howard Hughes executive listens to supporters of the New Amsterdam Market, who protest the developer's plan for a 50-story building in November 2013. Photo: Carl Glassman/Tribeca Tribune

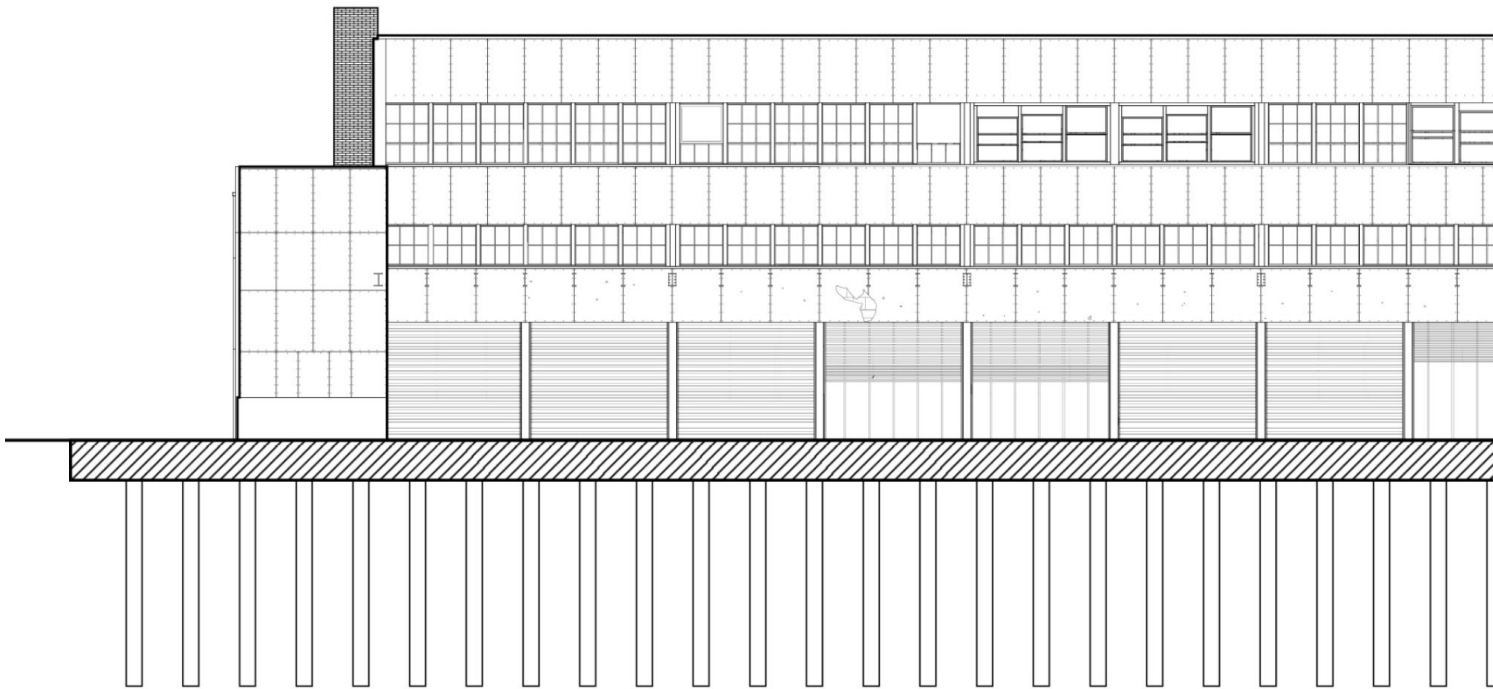
Caught between the petitions to preserve it for its important role in the city's maritime history, and the desire to maximize its economic value being in such a prominent location, the building's fate is still unknown.



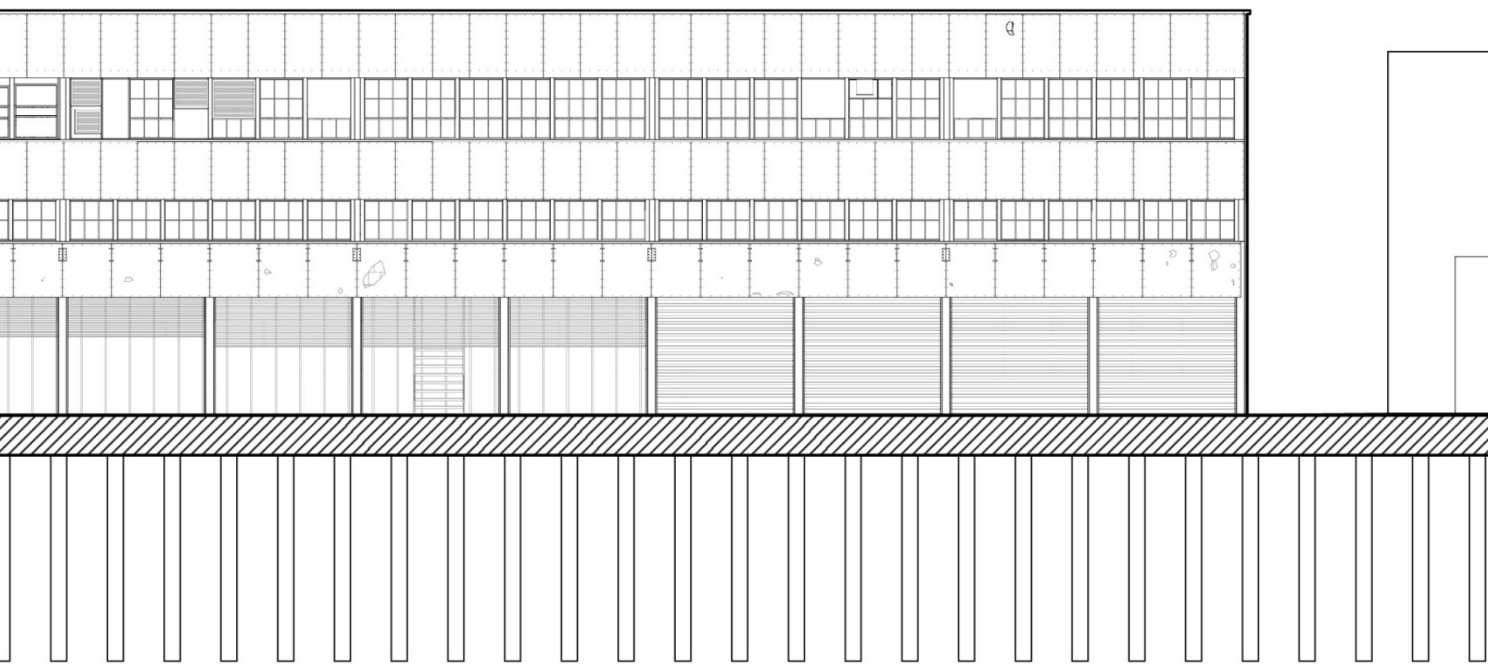
The building's fascinating past does not give any answers to the questions of its possible future, but only further suspends it - its origin, its meanings, and intentions - by transcending all our understanding of what is the past, the present, what is complete, or incomplete.



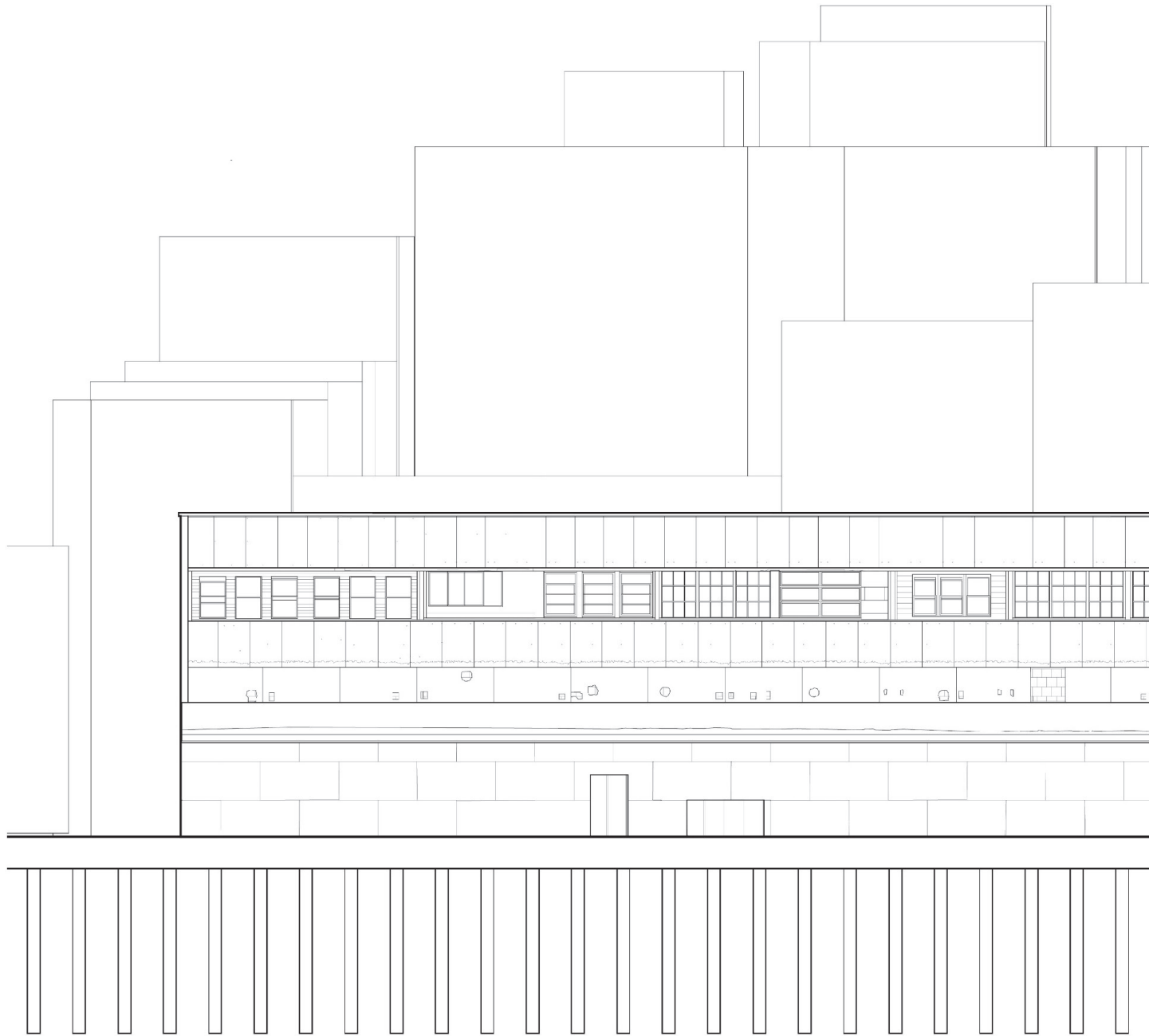
And frankly, none of that knowledge can really compete with the mere presence of the building in front of my eyes, which is so strange and enigmatic, that speaks a thousand words, with its makeshift claddings and windows, the ordinary asphalt ground that is just a surface suspended over water, a reality that's so unexpected along the recreational East River Esplanade. After all, it was this innocent encounter that sparked my curiosity which set off my exploration, a series of imaginative transformations of the site, toward certain possible realities - a workshop, a boat house, a performance venue, and perhaps more.



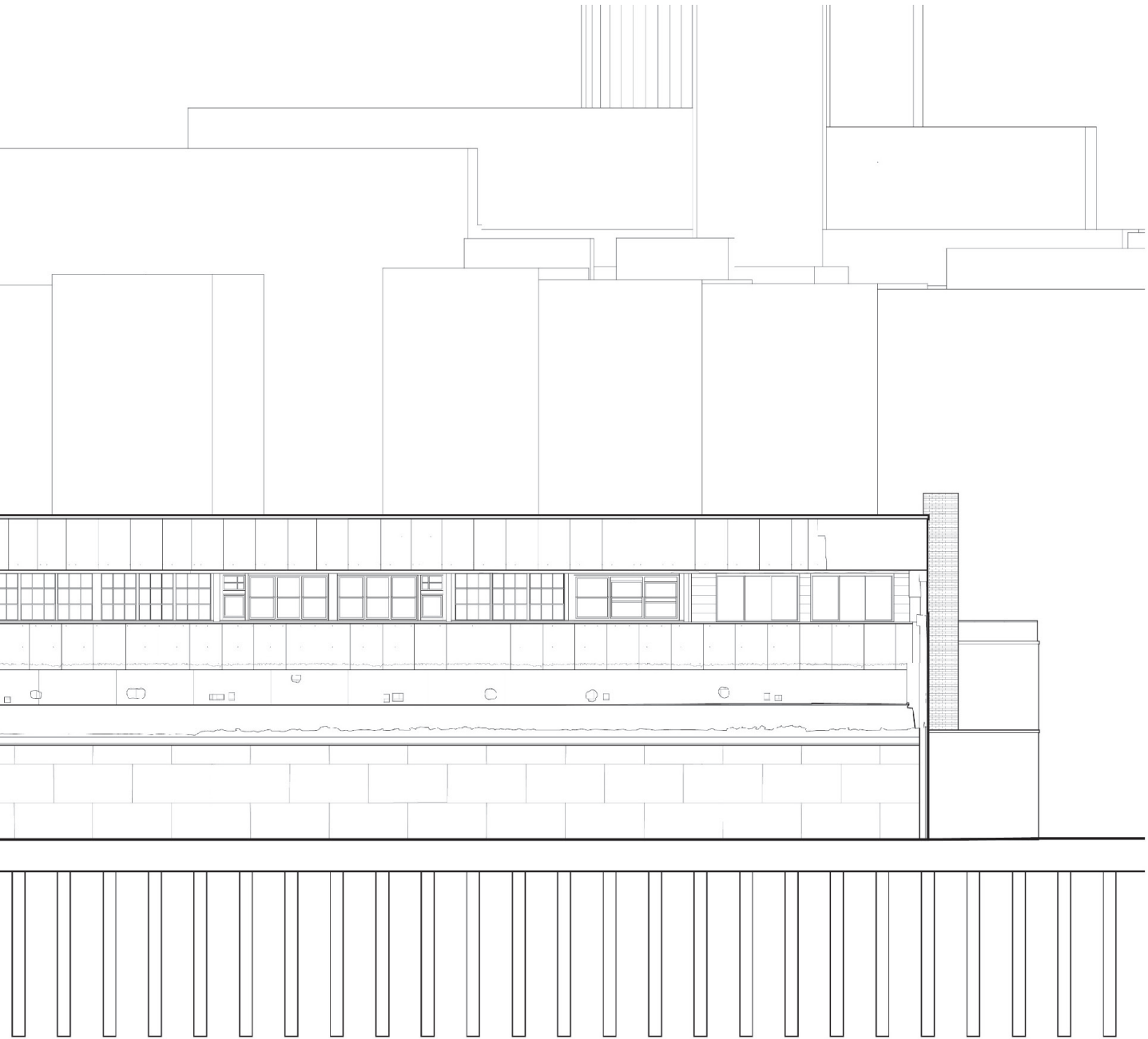
North E



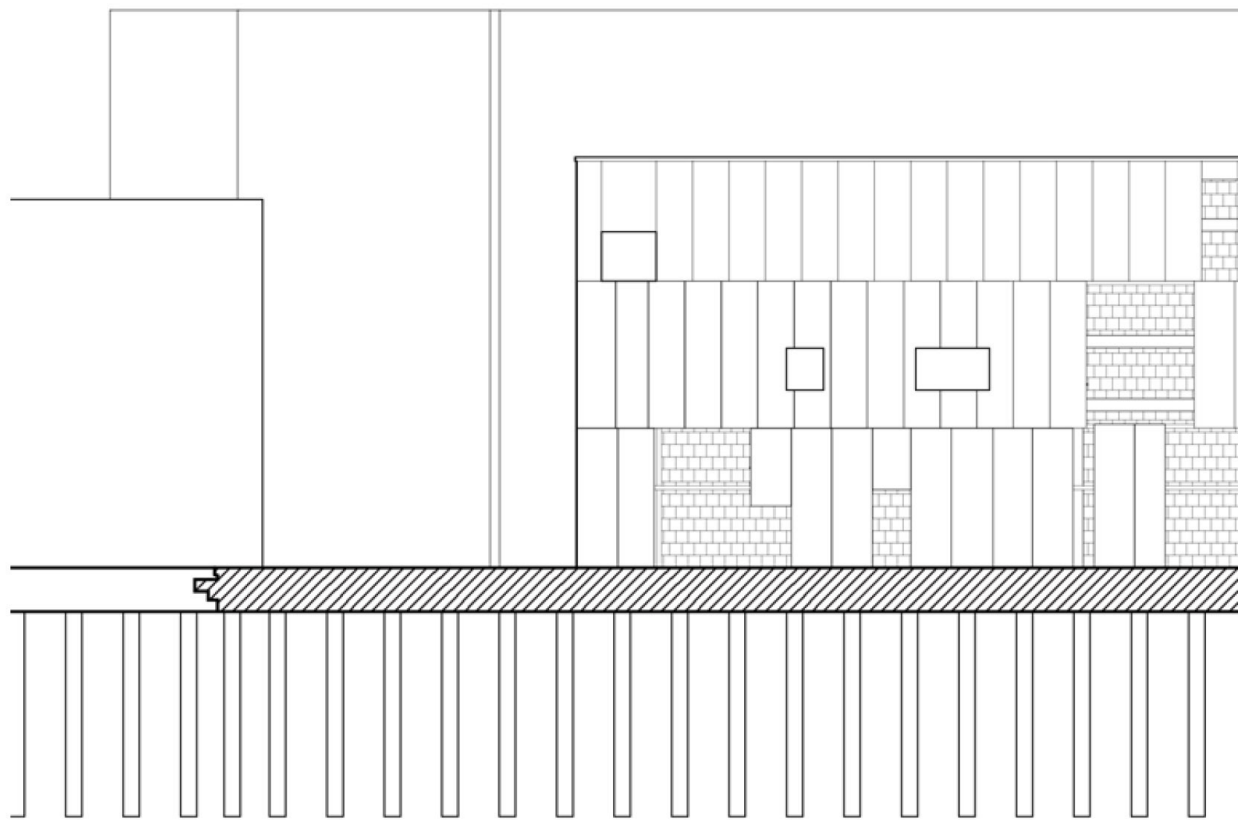
levation



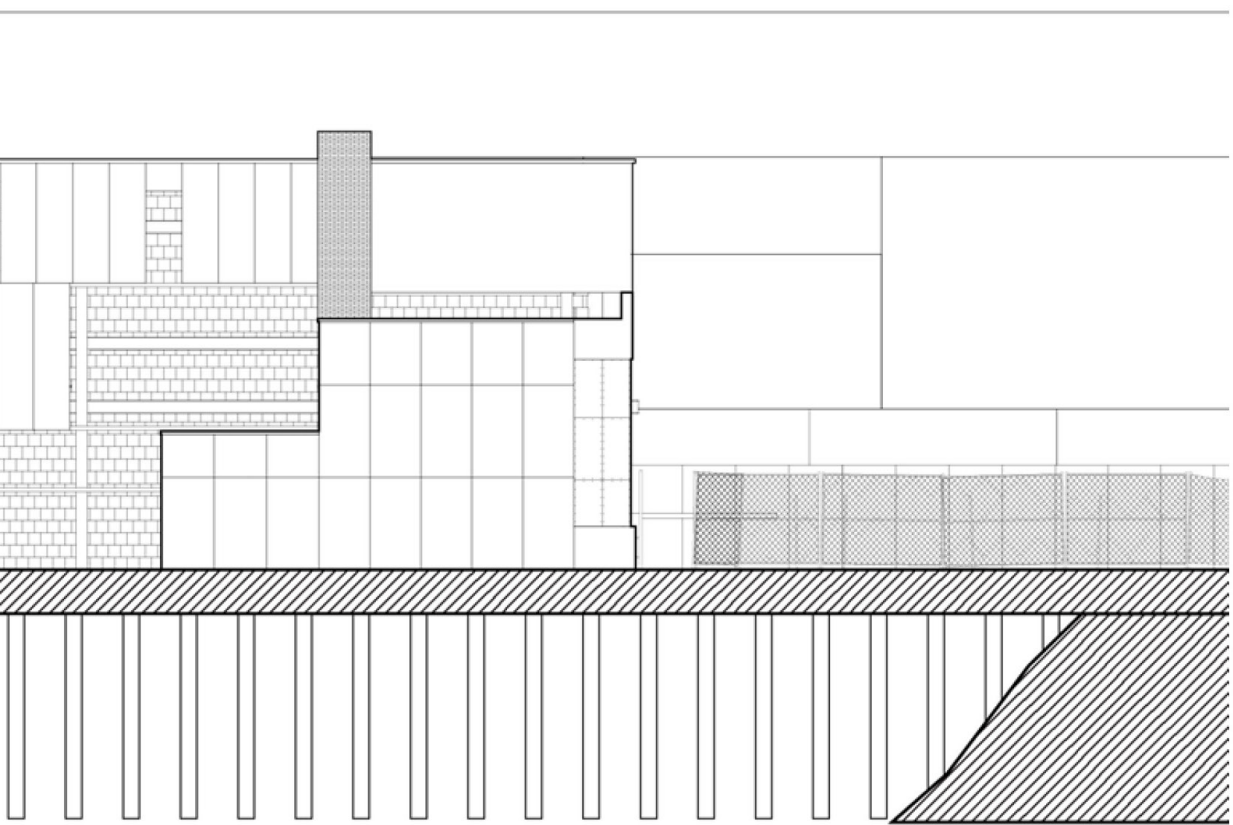
South E



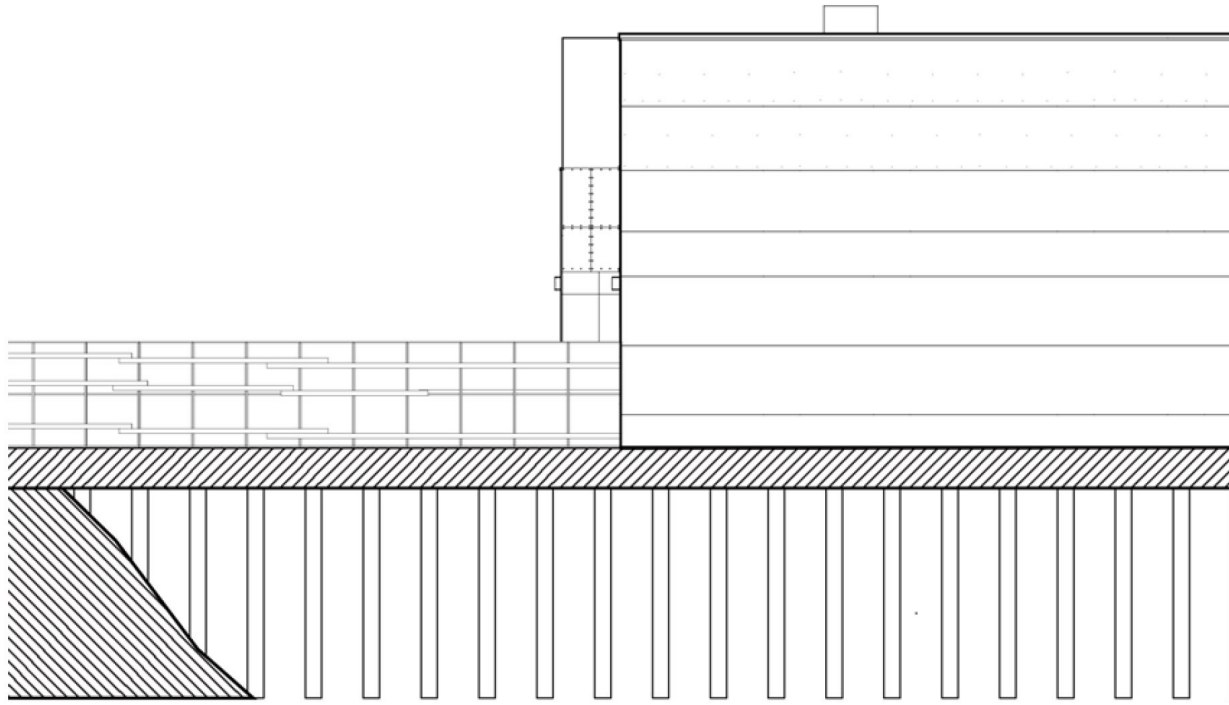
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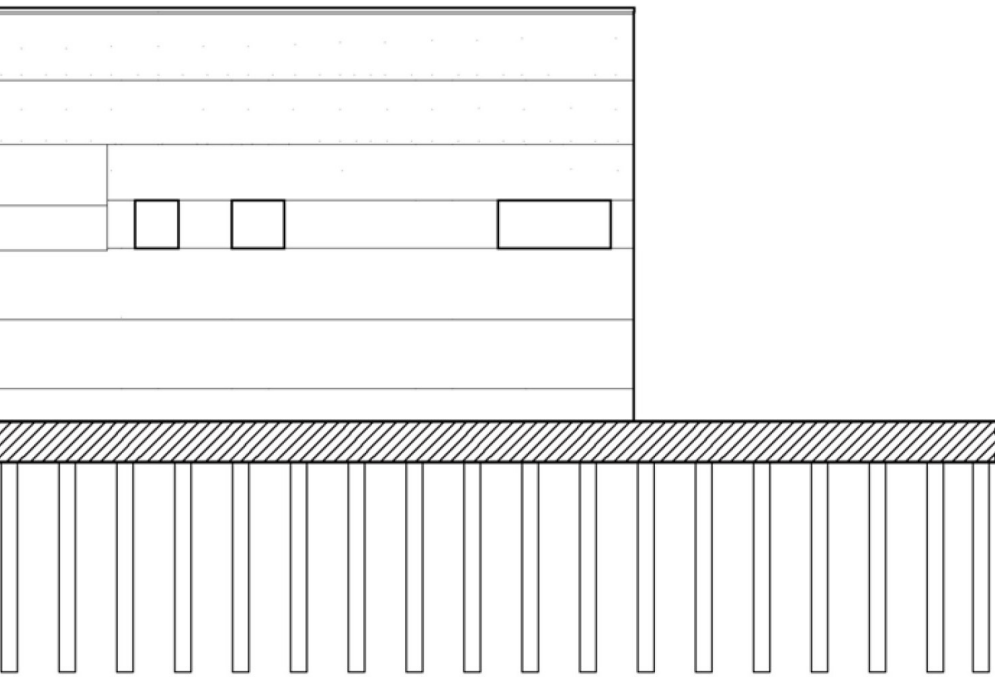
East Ele



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West El



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Fulton Fish Market Interior.

Very little information about its interior condition can be found.

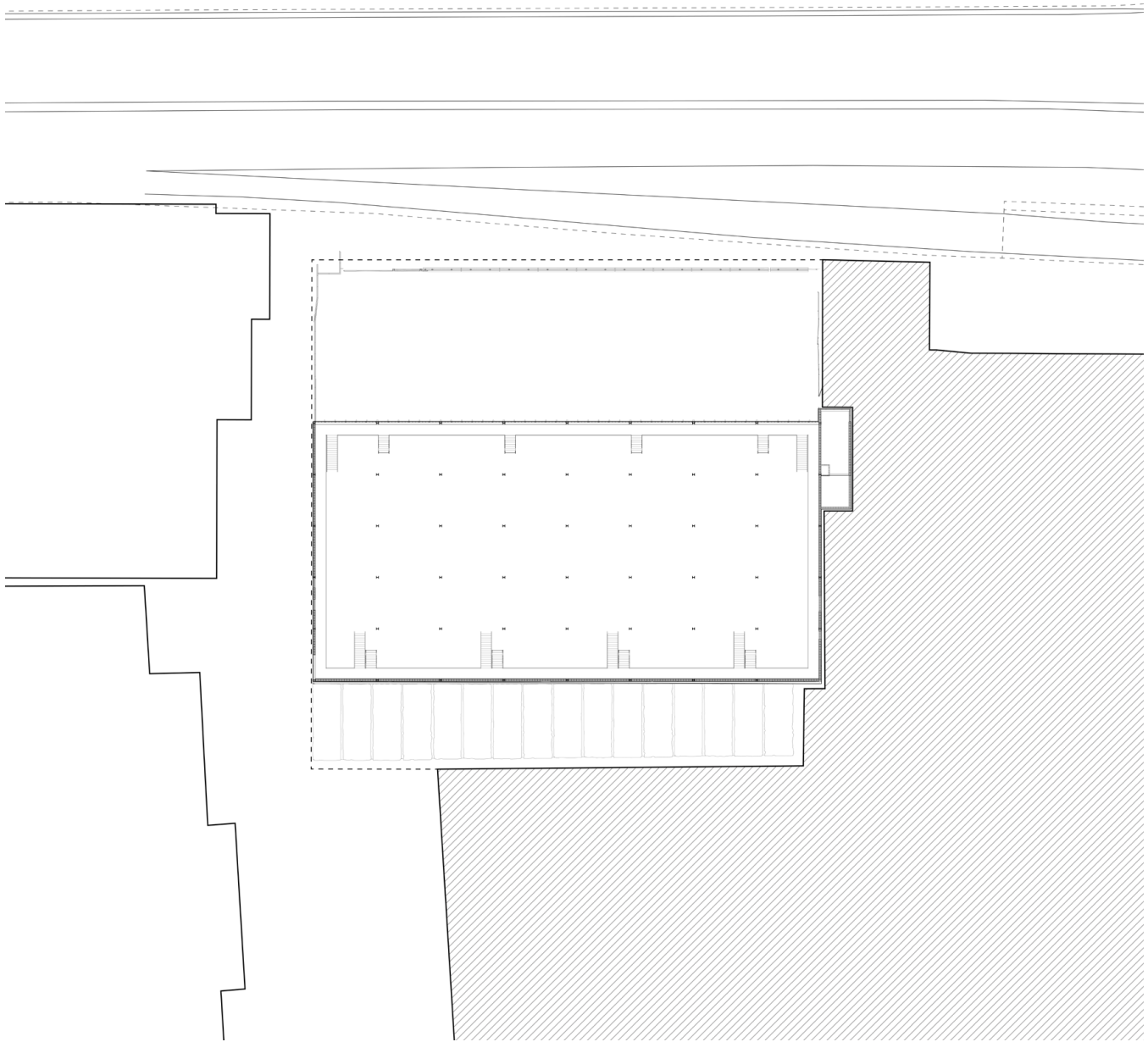


Fulton Fish Market Interior.

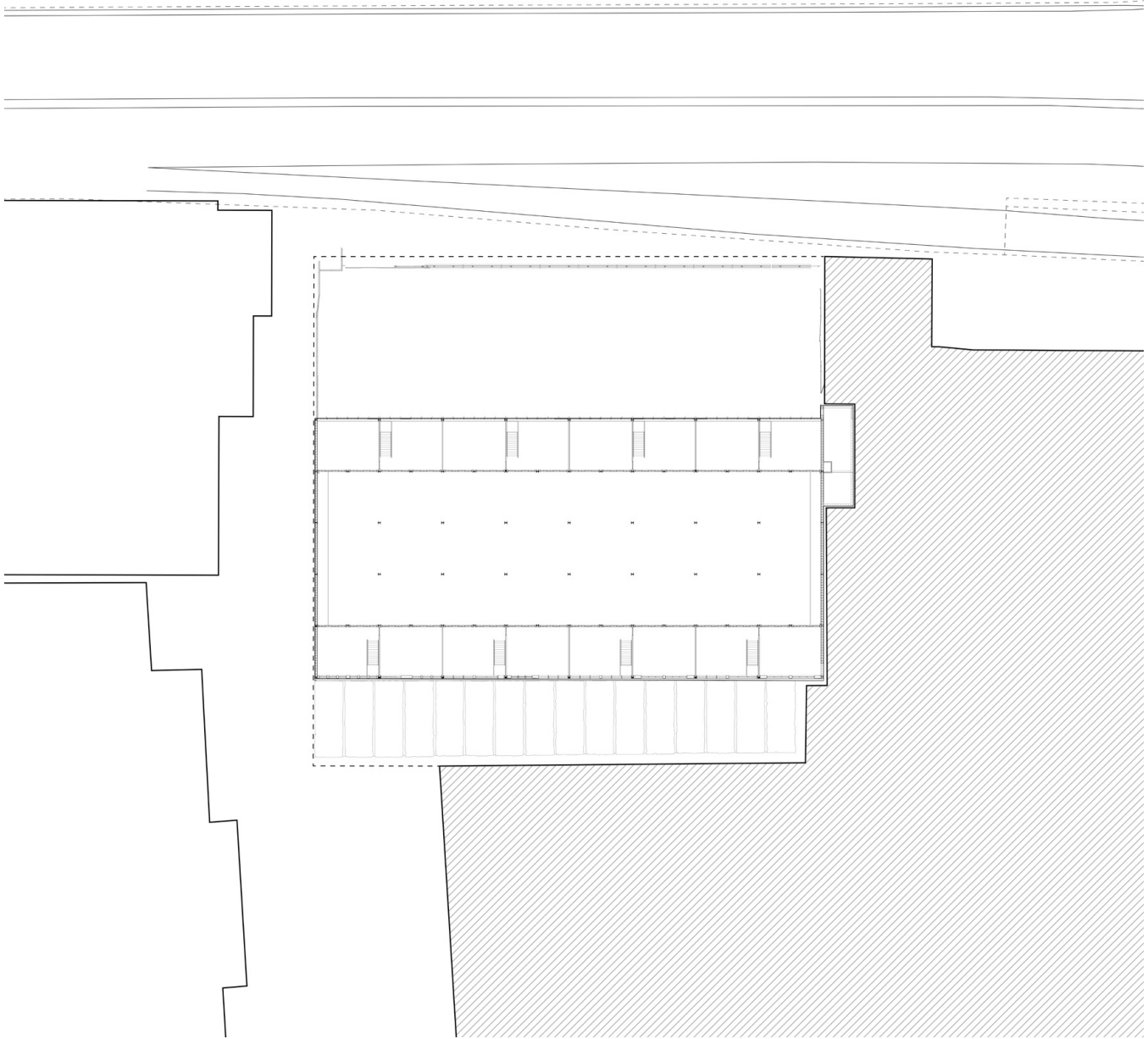
From the few photos, we can only infer about what it possibly could be – a grid of columns supporting a large open space of the market with hanging lights and various unknown fixtures, and a row of rooms on the upper floor with windows looking into the interior.



Ground Plan



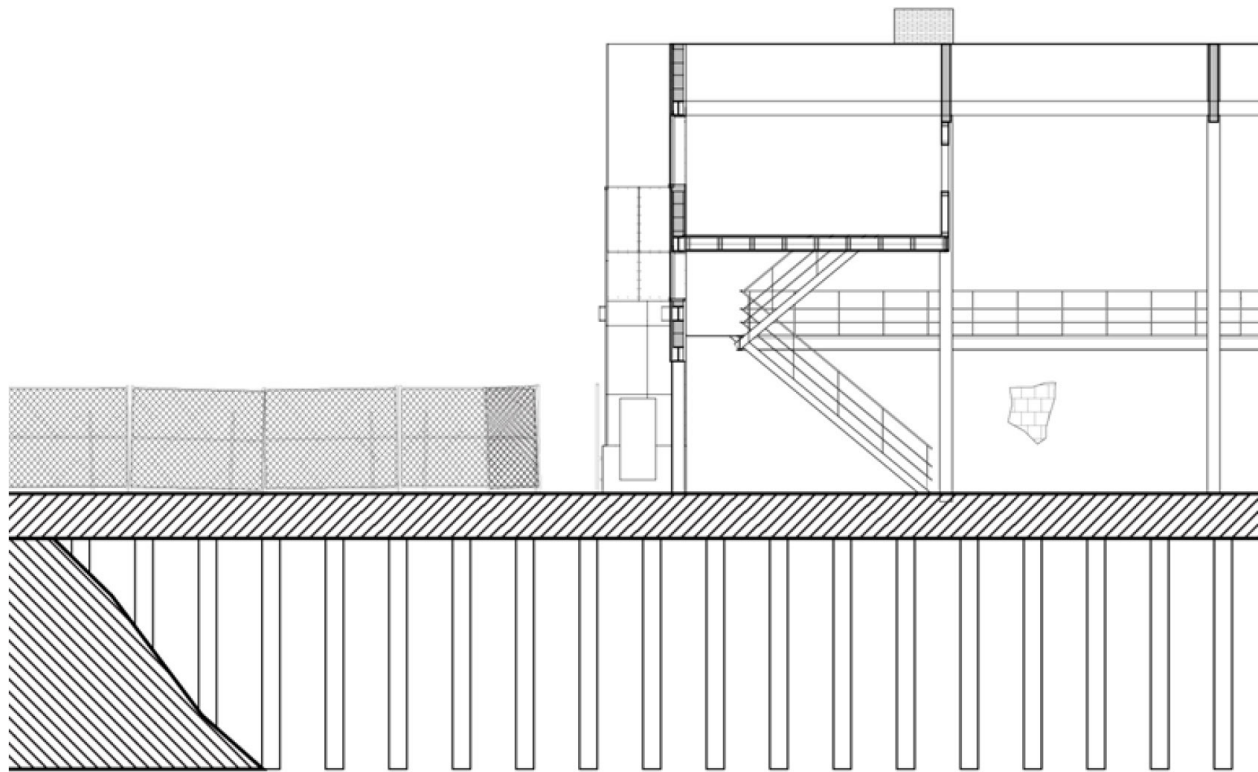
Mezzanine Plan



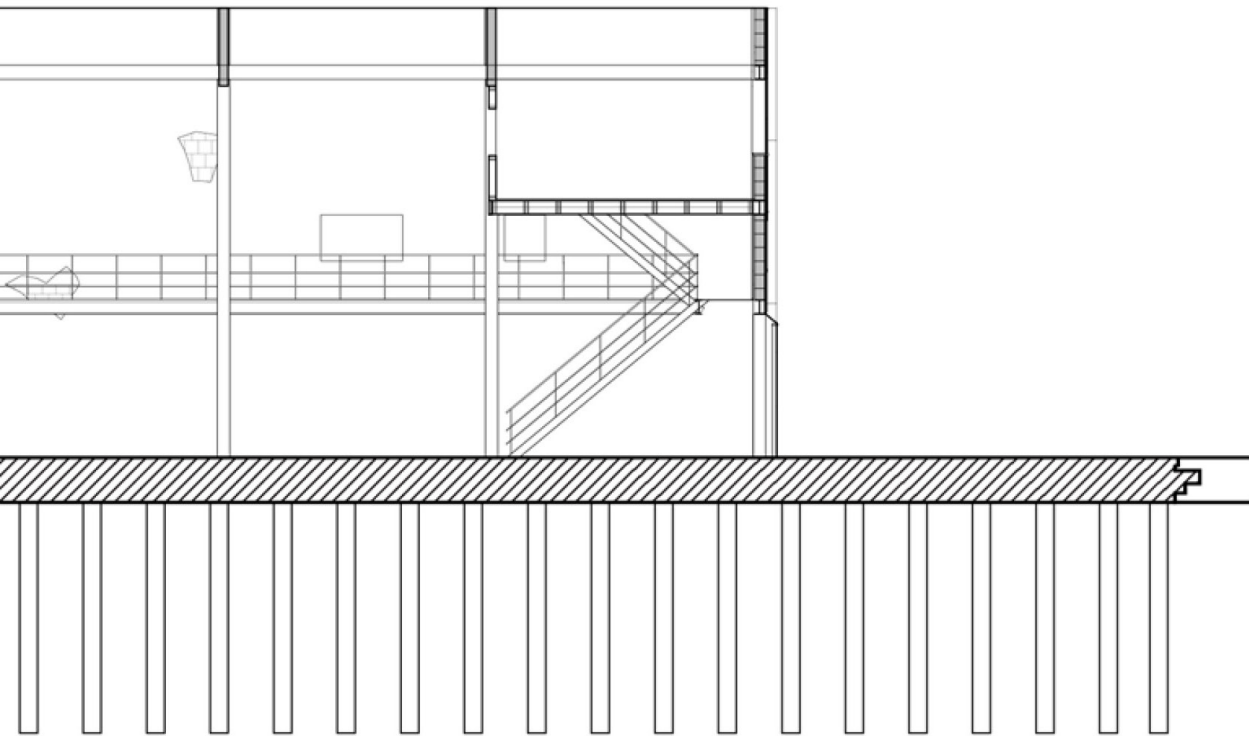
Upper Floor Plan



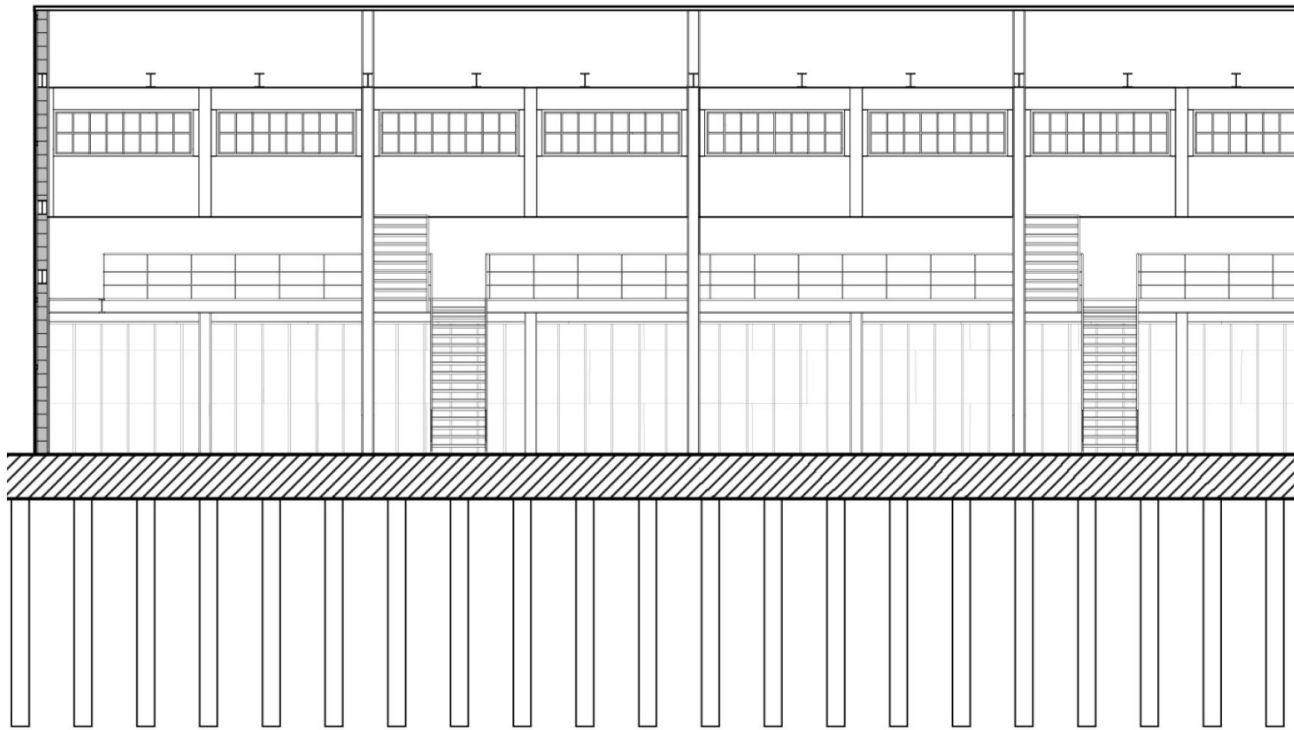
Roof Plan



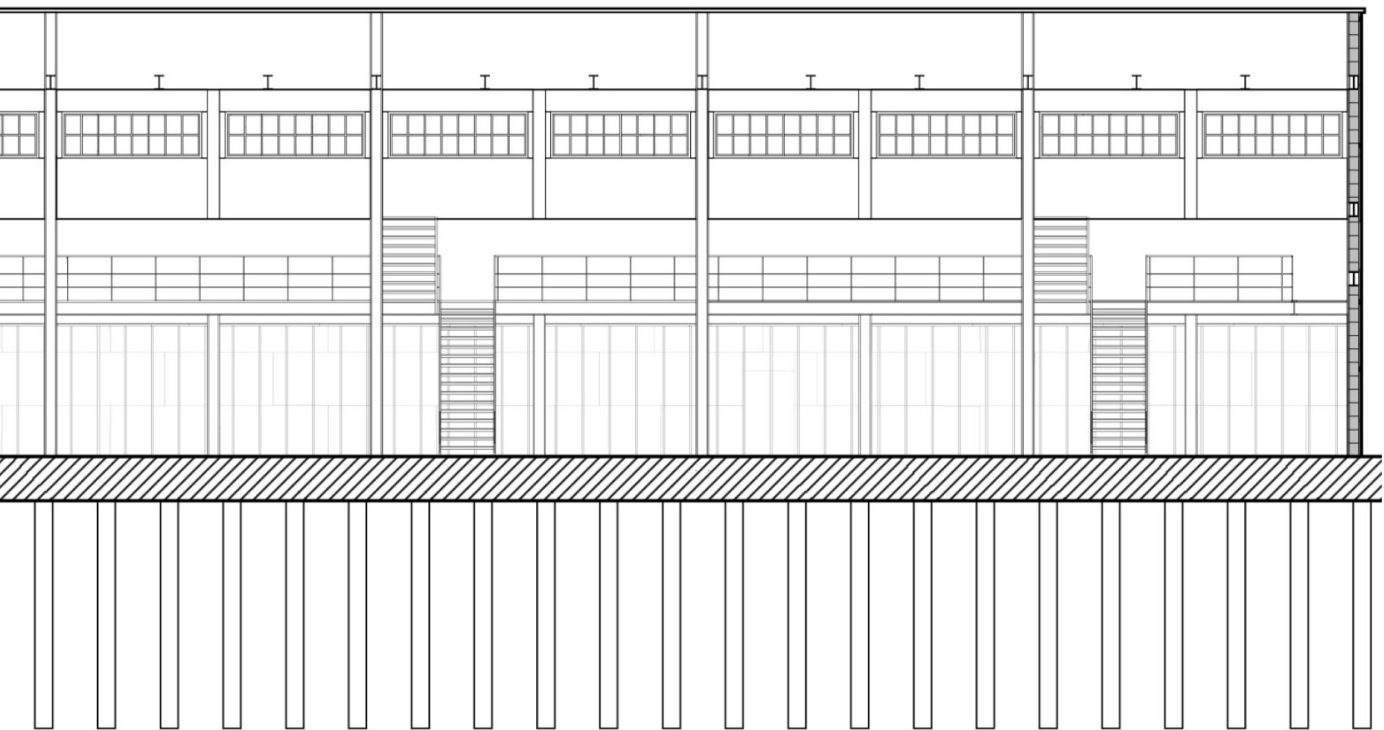
Site S



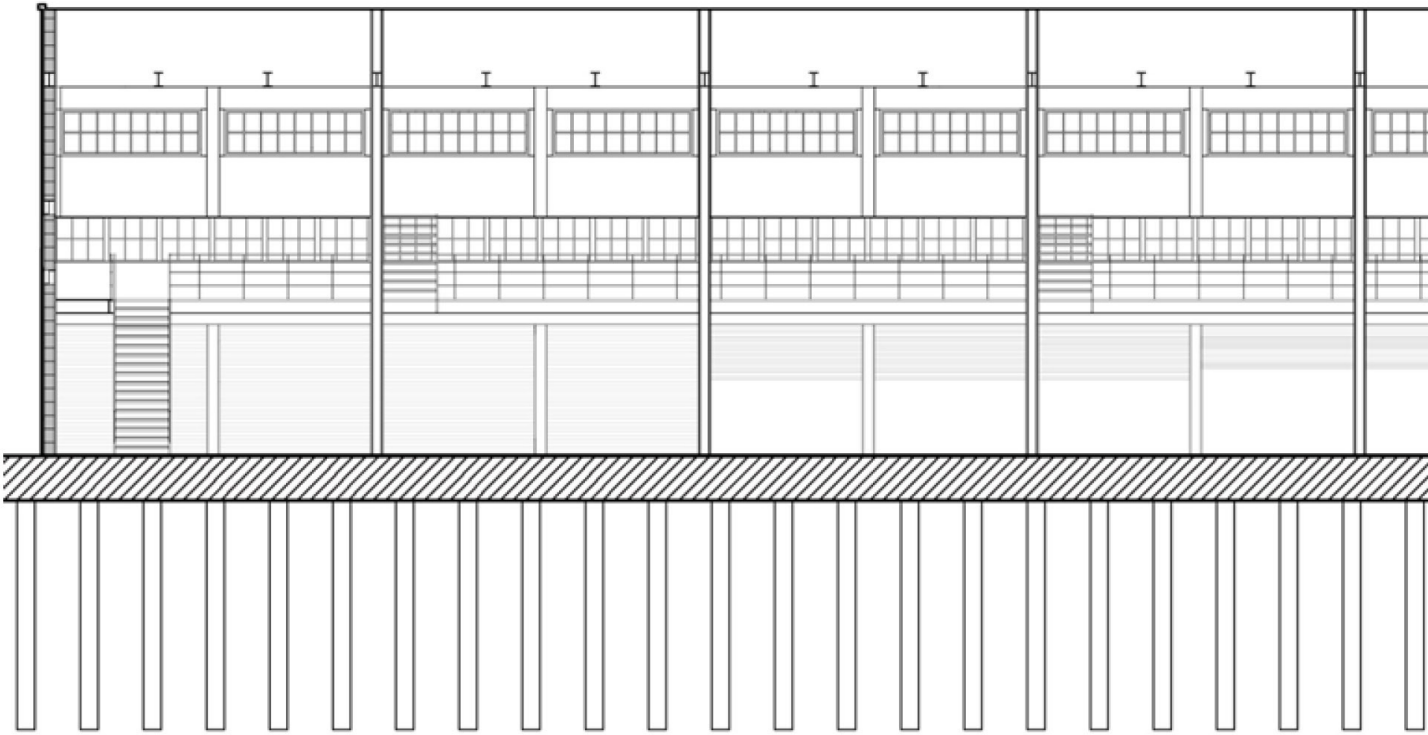
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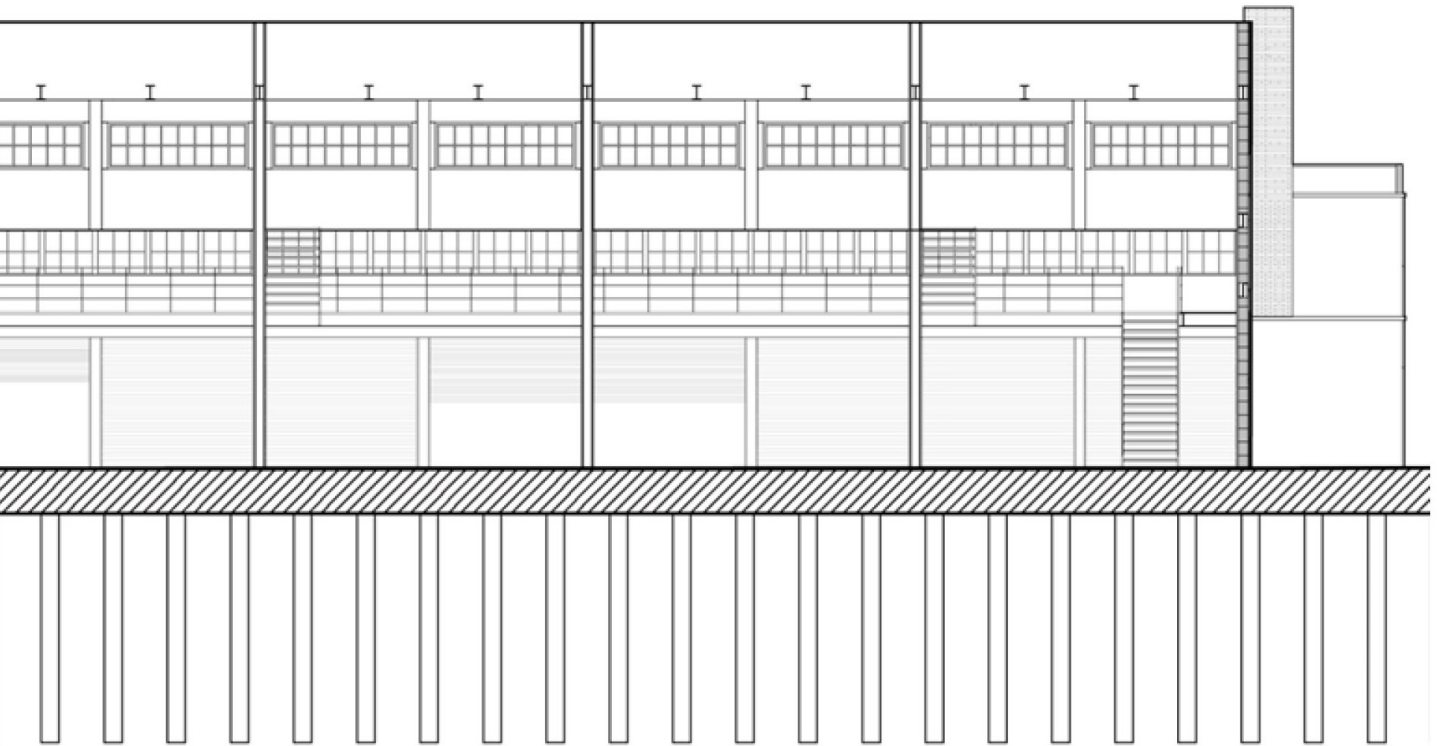
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Site S



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In its abandonment and uselessness, the building becomes an enigmatic thing that resonates with its infinite possibilities of interpretation and transformations upon each encounter, both in reality and in fiction.



I entered the building for the first time.



Wires, pipes, ducts run across the ceiling.

The lights, still hang.



Light falls in from the broken roof.



There are some hanging metal cages of unknown purpose.





Cracked concrete floor.



Sounds of dripping water.







Smell of rusted metal.



Nobody is here.







Then I walked around the building.



Looking up,



at the corners, where all the wires meet.



On the walkway,



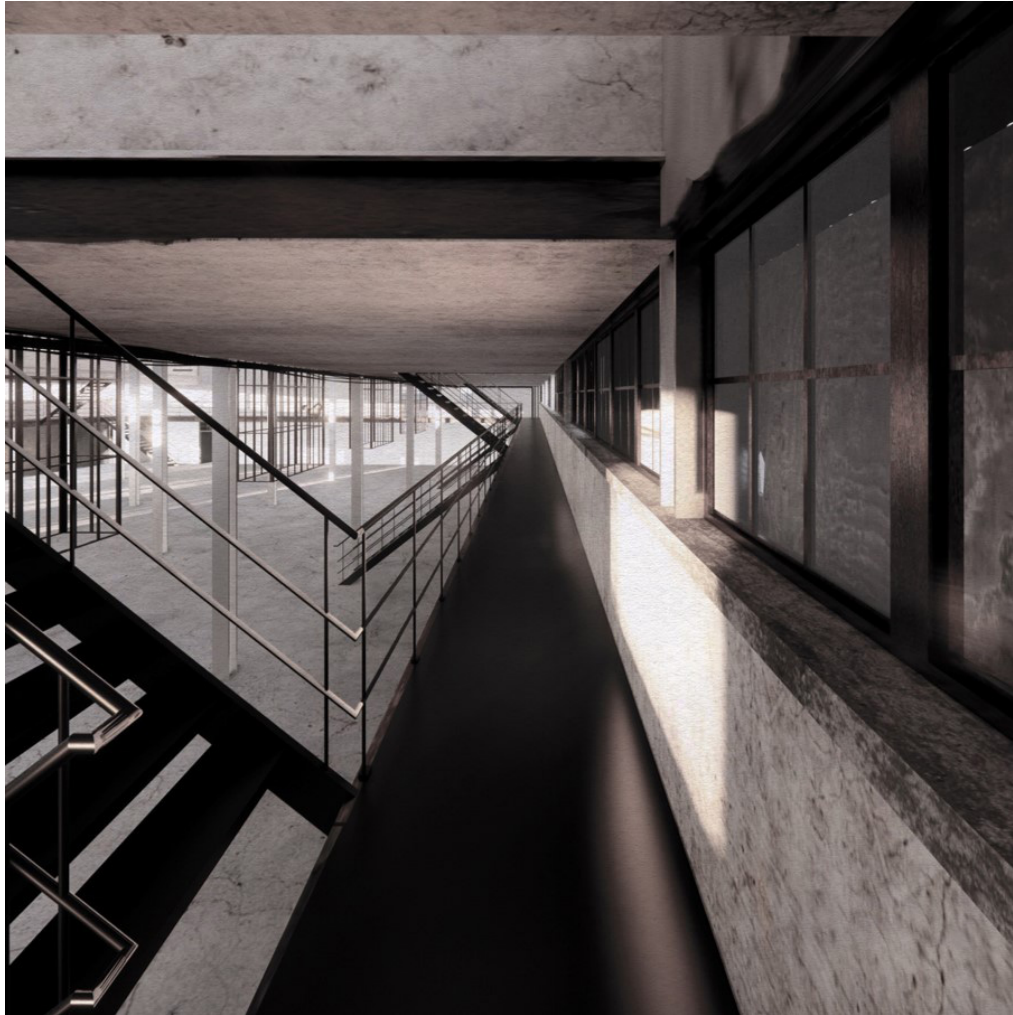
and around,



at sunset,



with dusty air.





Approaching the stair,



I explored one of the second floor rooms.





Broken ceiling tiles,



a rusted radiator,





and dirty windows.



After all the furniture removed,



the rooms look quite generic and repetitive.



Then I walked around the exterior.



Within the generic modernist façade, differences and particularities have emerged over time.

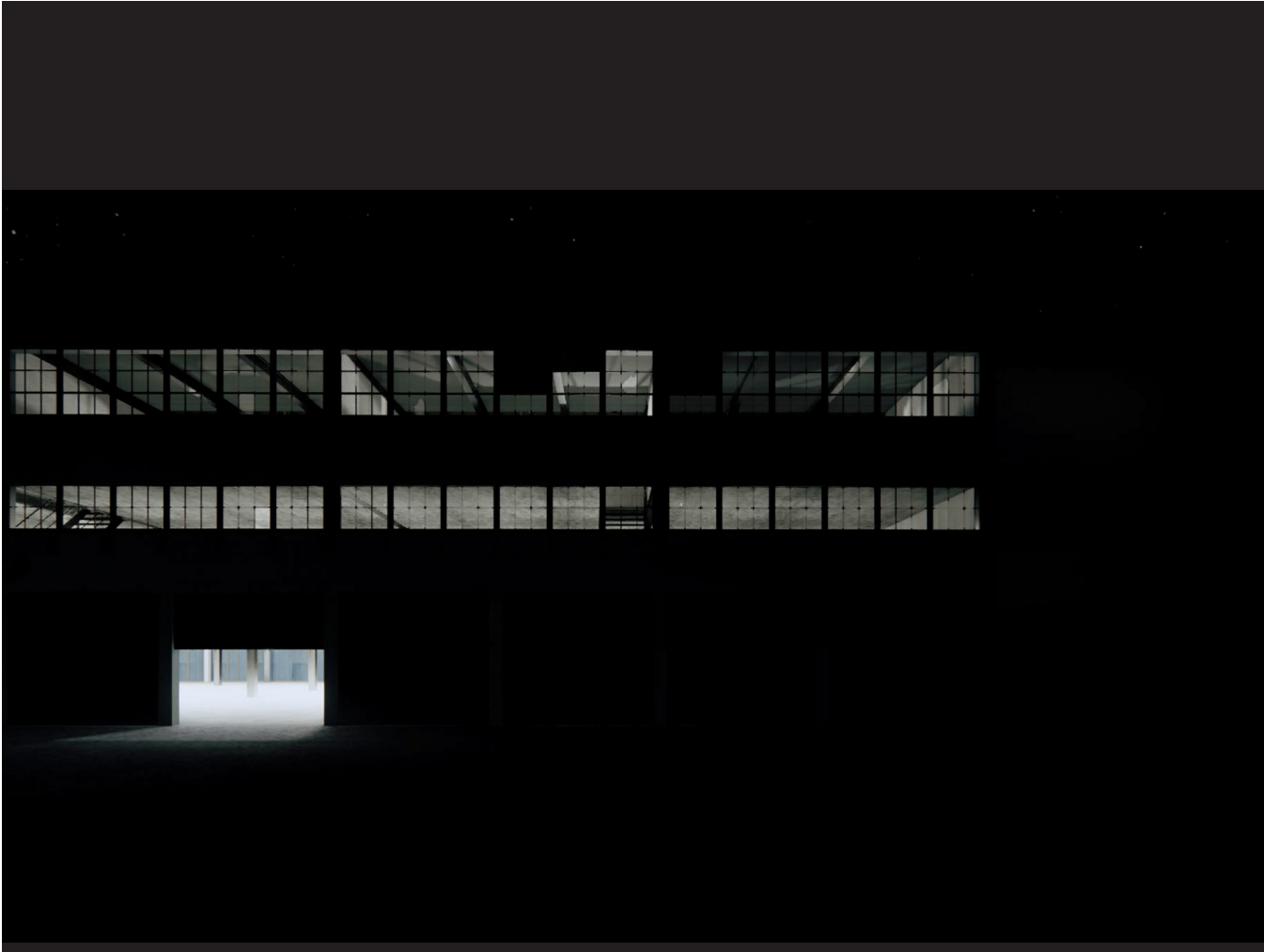


There was a canopy on the façade facing the street,



now only the tips of the I beams are left, and their shadows.





Night falls.



Night is the time for dreams,
for encounters with places in their imagined state of being,







where the reality transforms, and is reconstructed our projective interpretation,
or the revelation of a latent reality.



The reflective surface takes away, but also adds back in by its reflection.





Sunrise,
in the same place, that is also completely different.





And a week later, on a sunny afternoon.



What is it like on the other side?



And looking out?



Looking back.



Water has gone inside the building on the ground.



The reflection follows me to the outside,



and takes me back inside.



Then, up on the walkway,



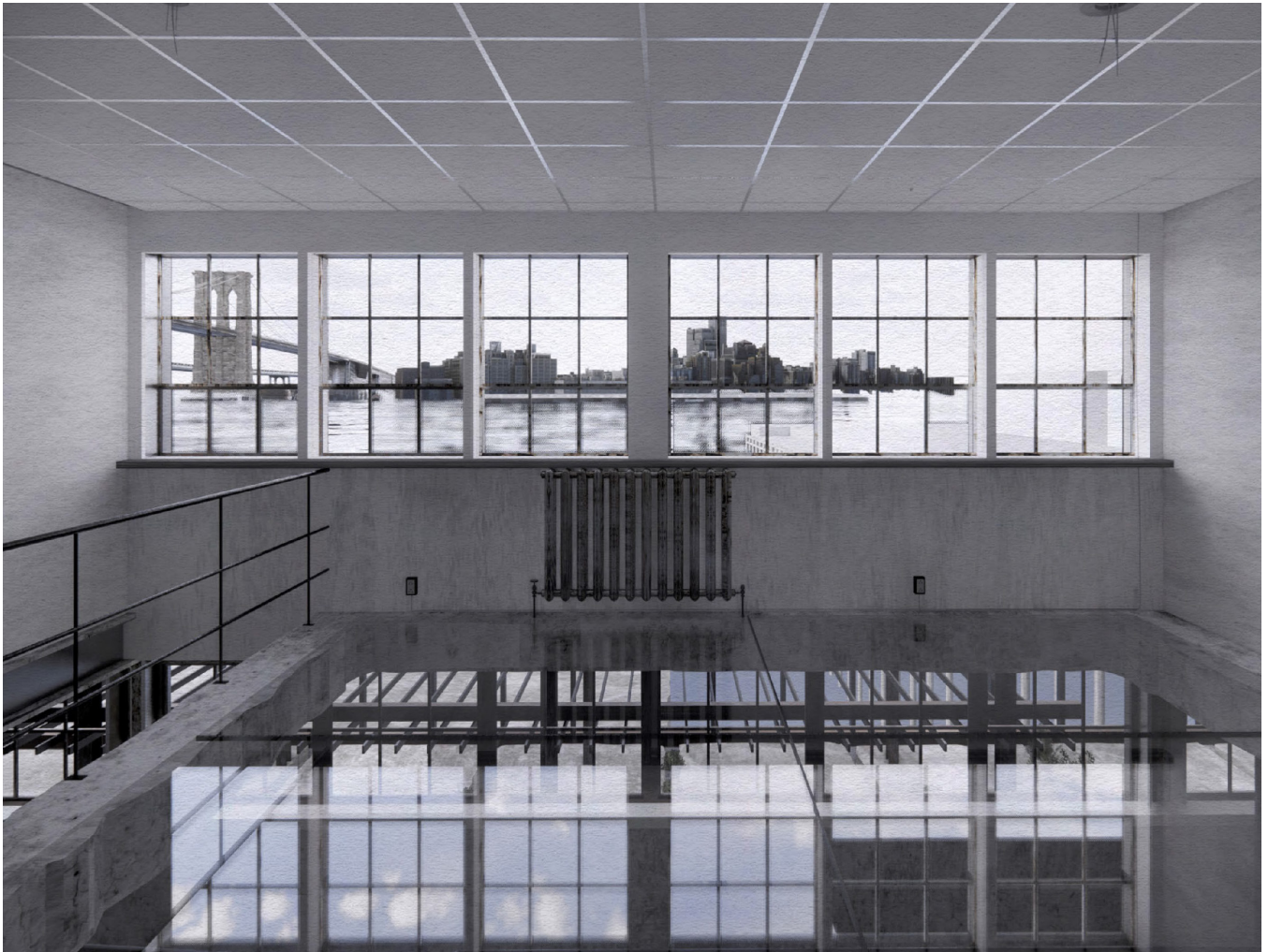
with new sources of light,



to the rooms that is now gone,



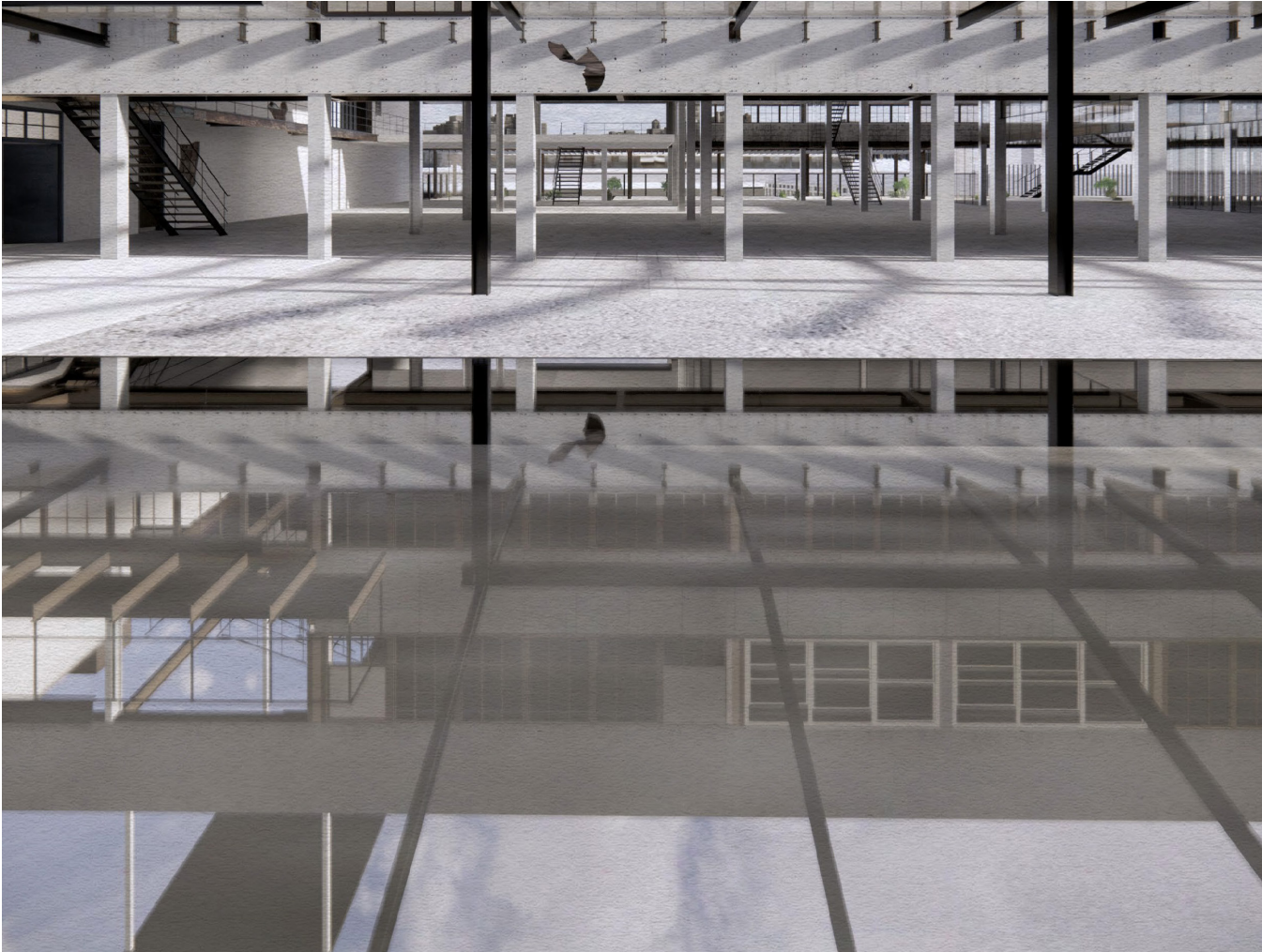
or transformed,



into a new room.



And to the outside, a place to stay



along the water,



and the sky,



in the city.



There is a canopy



that leads me inside the building,



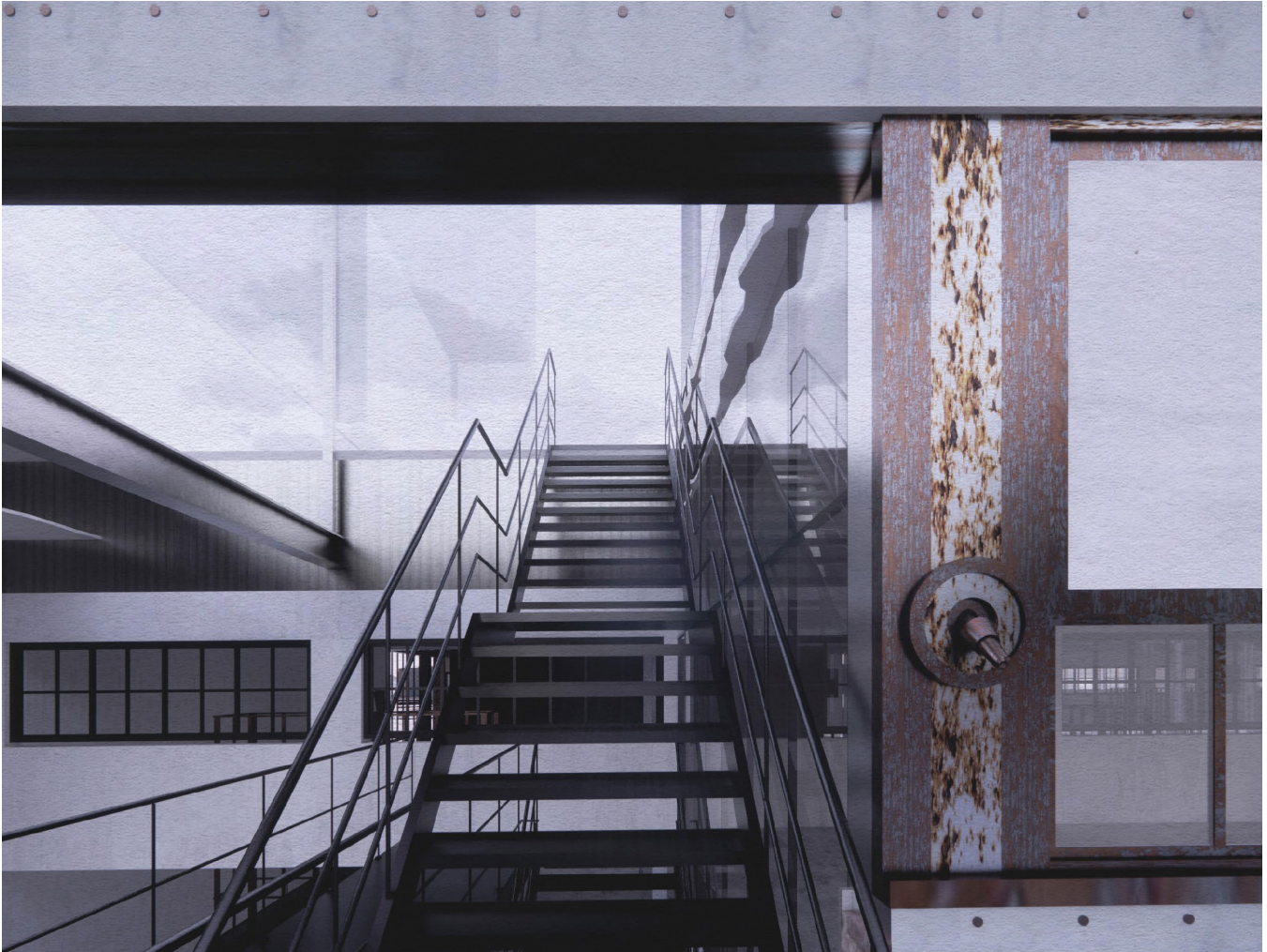
and traverse it



to the other side.



And upon the platform, you find a strange fixture on the rusted mullion,



that is a remnant from the cables that held the canopy that was there.



To the left, a bridge to another space



that is filled with water,



where you can look back to the building's interior,



that is also now filled with water,



and strange objects,



objects of reflections,



and objects transformed,



in a reality transformed.



In between objects,
looking one way,



or both, when the back is reflected in the front,





the ground reflected above.



Inside, a suspended passage connects the two rows of rooms.



Behind its surface of reflection is another latent reality,



that self multiplies



upon each encounter,

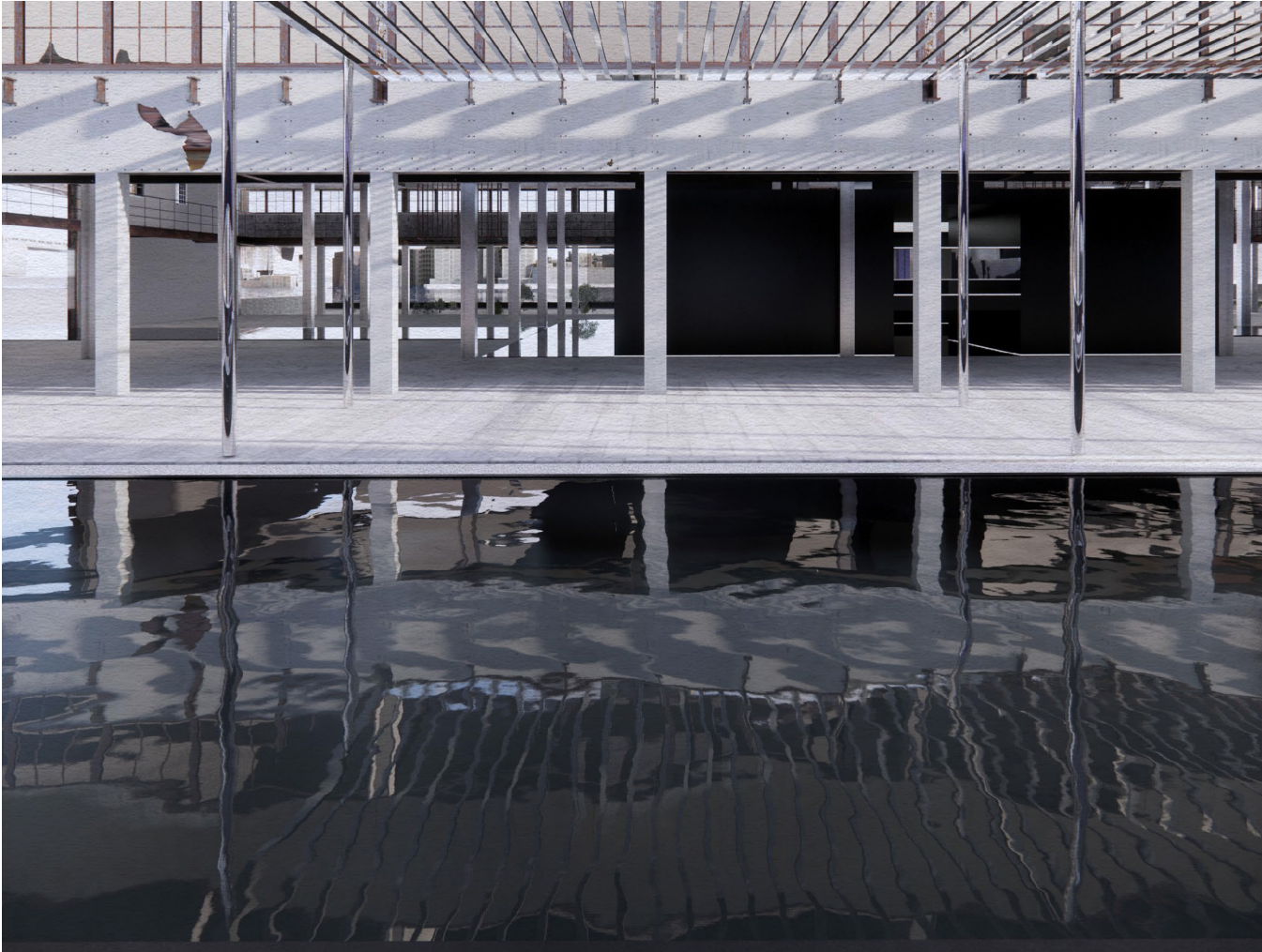


and another.

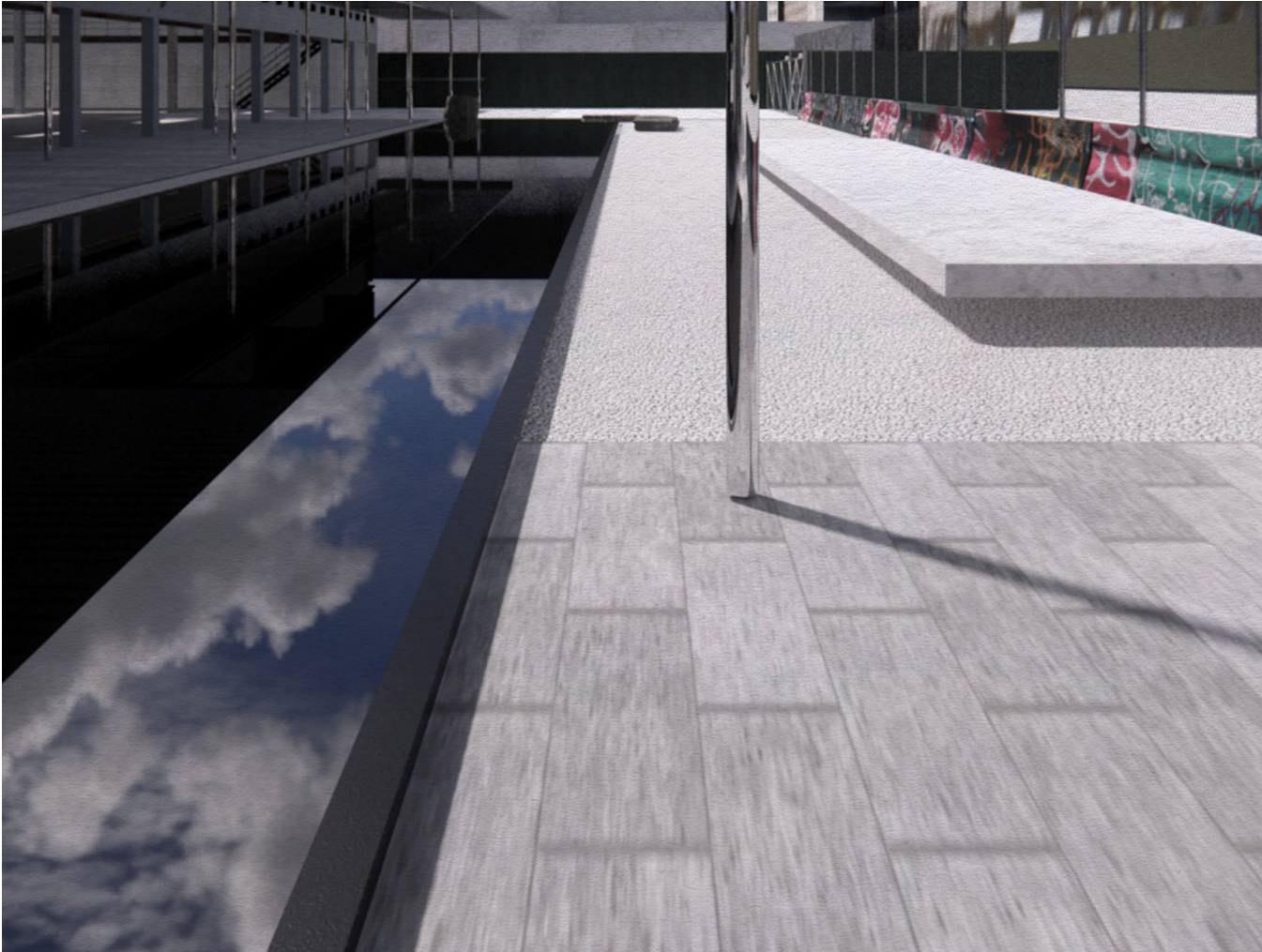




We see the city in the sky,



The building in the water,



the water in the city.



During the day,



and at night,



it could be a place to gather,



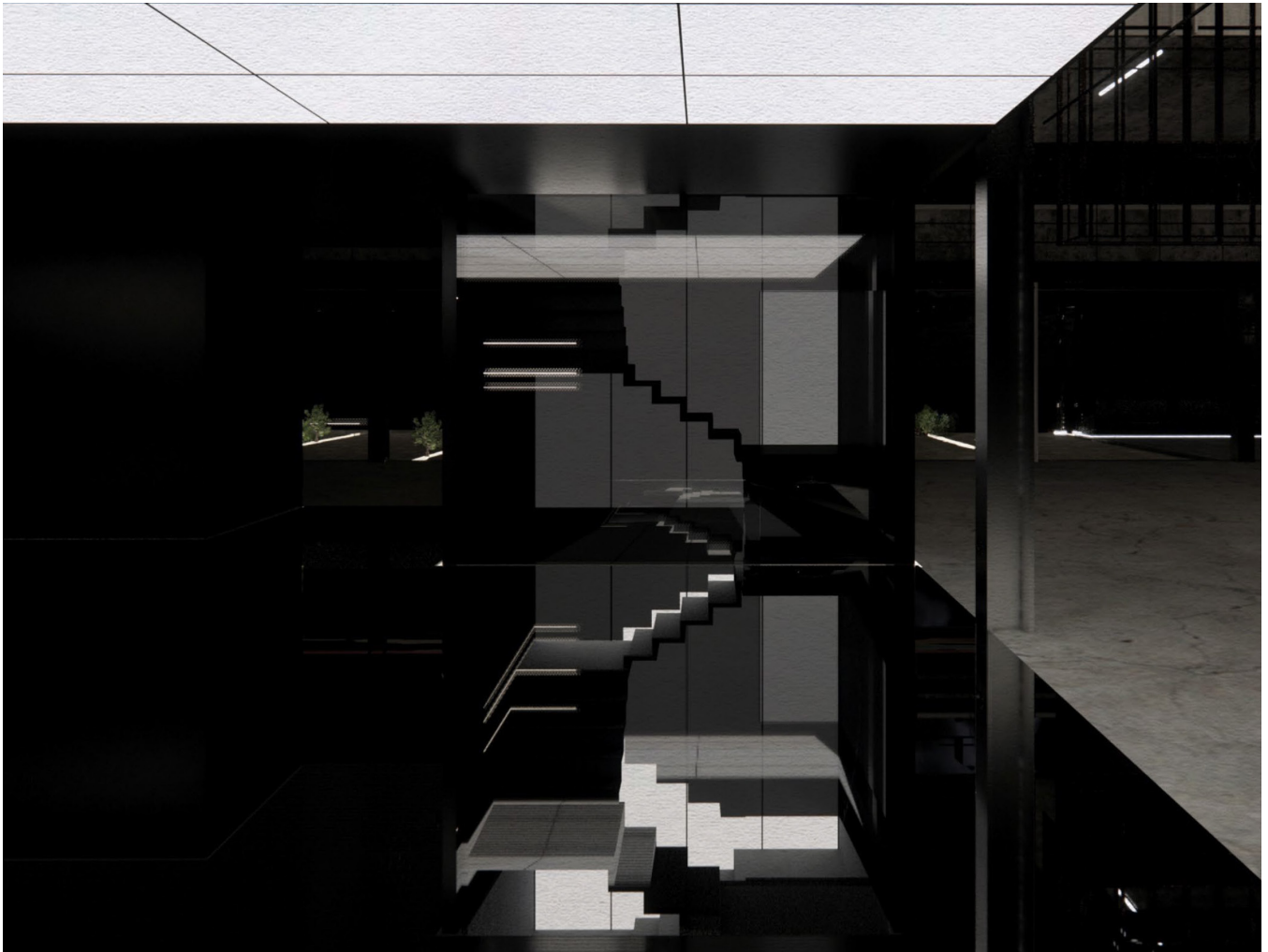
to stay,



and to get lost in exploration.



To find nameless objects,



that are reinterpreted as they become appropriated for our use,
and thus receive their new names.



Through them, we encounter other conditions,



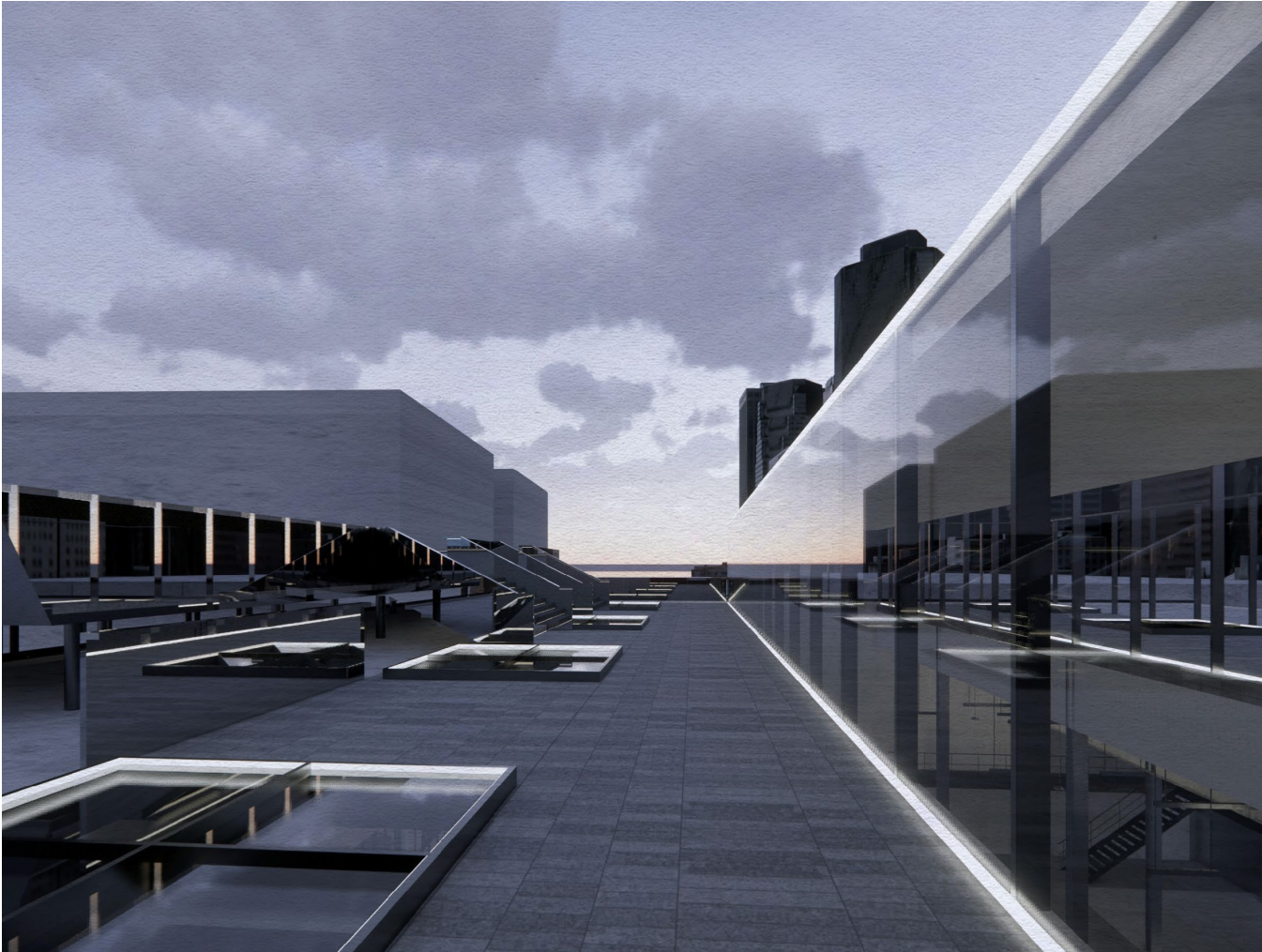
may be the end of a show,



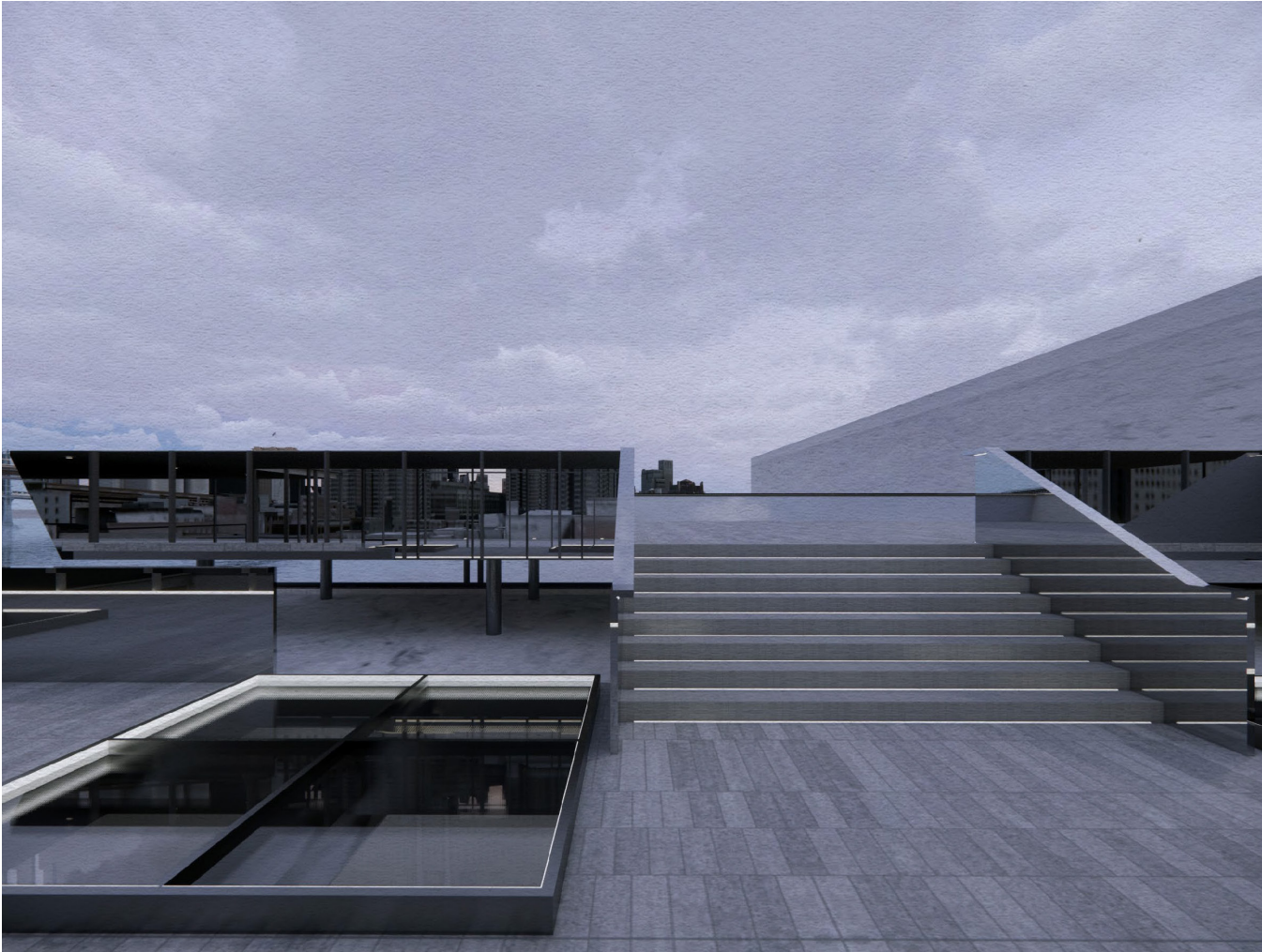
a different position of seeing,



or finding a new place, that leads us



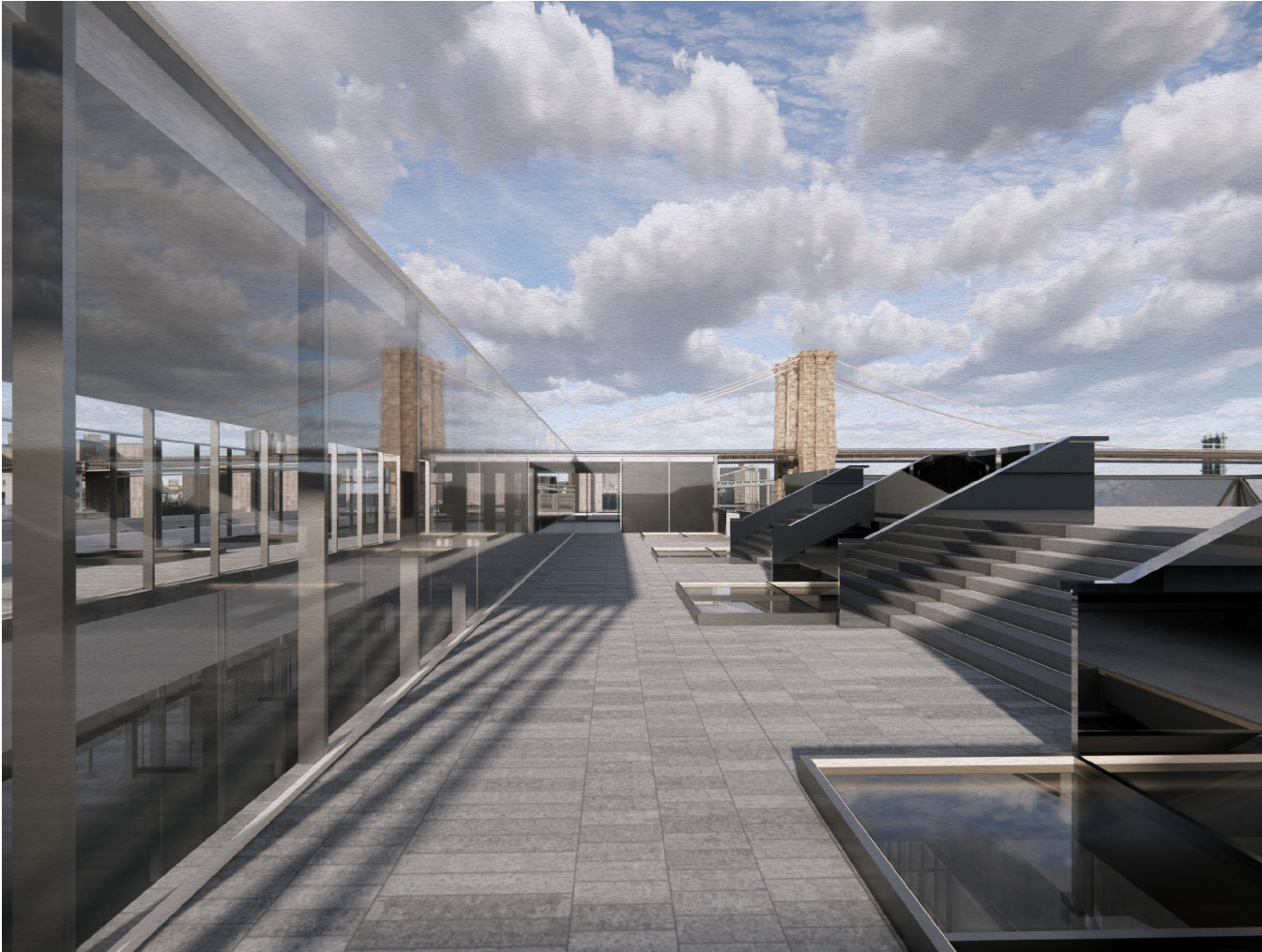
to the outside. At daybreak,



on the edge



between the city, the water and the sky.



In the afternoon,



when an event has just ended, or is about to take place,



where every piece of material takes on a golden hue,

but



only for a short moment,



as the night falls.



Coming back on the following day.



We come forward to the opening,



where on the other side, we find a room full of colorful kayaks and boats.



that are being silently displayed, as if in an exhibition,



and waiting to be sent off to the water.



Then come back, and start waiting again.



Above the kayak storage is a small room



that could be a place for gathering.



Looking toward the river,



and heading back



to the building, on the suspended passage,



and encountering new conditions.



Or is it just one that perpetually re-interpretes itself,
one that can take on anything,



such as a workshop for making musical instrument.

In the same room with the rusted radiator,



but with new meanings



perpetually.









And that is its enigmatic nature.



Part of the ground floor is now a place for working with larger pieces of materials



to prepare for the making of violins and guitars



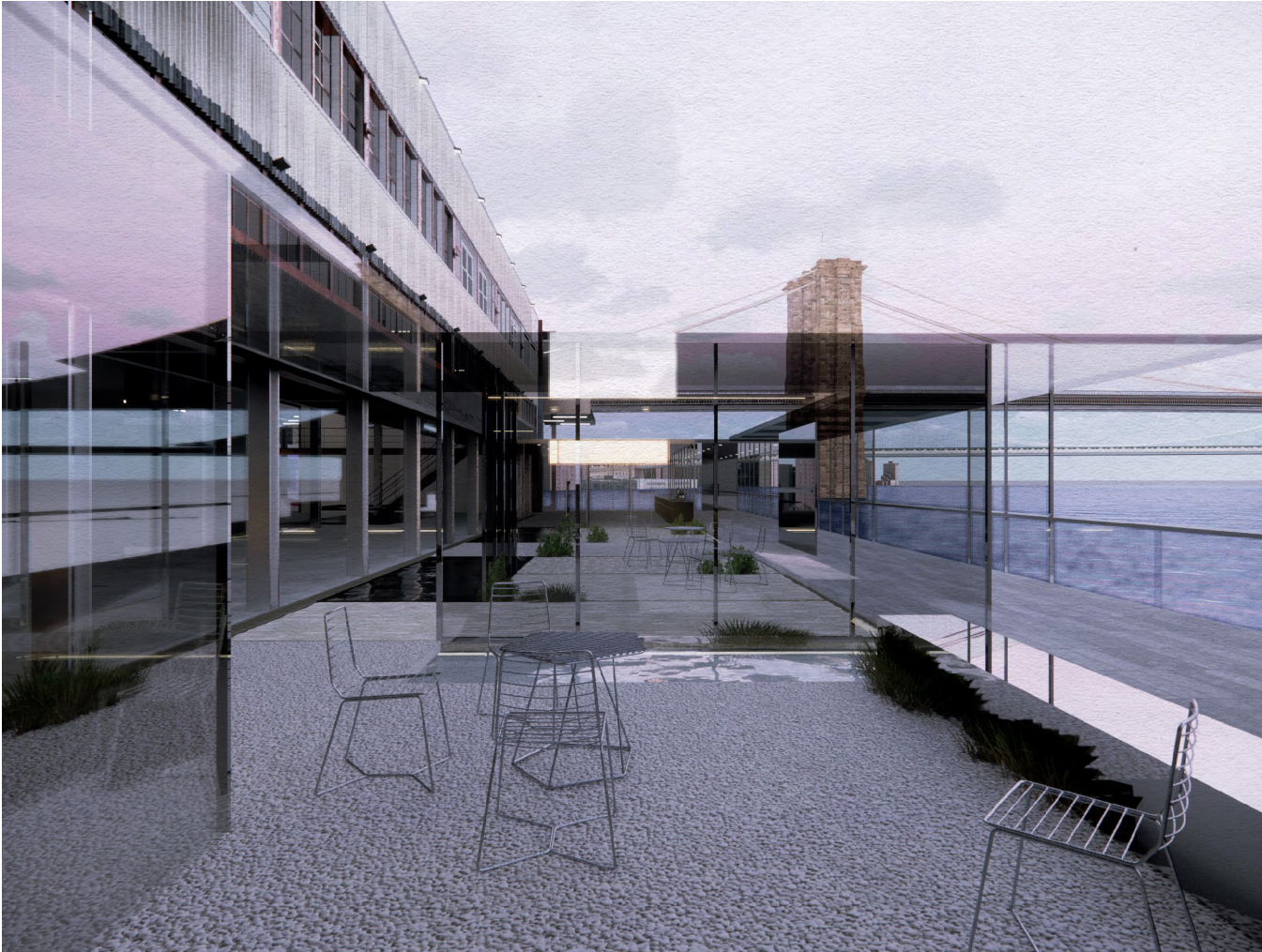
or for making and repairing boats



that will then be stored with the rest.



Sometimes we take the boat to paint it outside,



that is also a place to stay



in the sun,



or in the shade.

And we find another space taken



for making,



Perhaps only for the spring and summer,
when the weather is temperate.



The empty space is always open, and in anticipation of encountering its enigma,



which unveils momentarily, a transient understanding of its potential



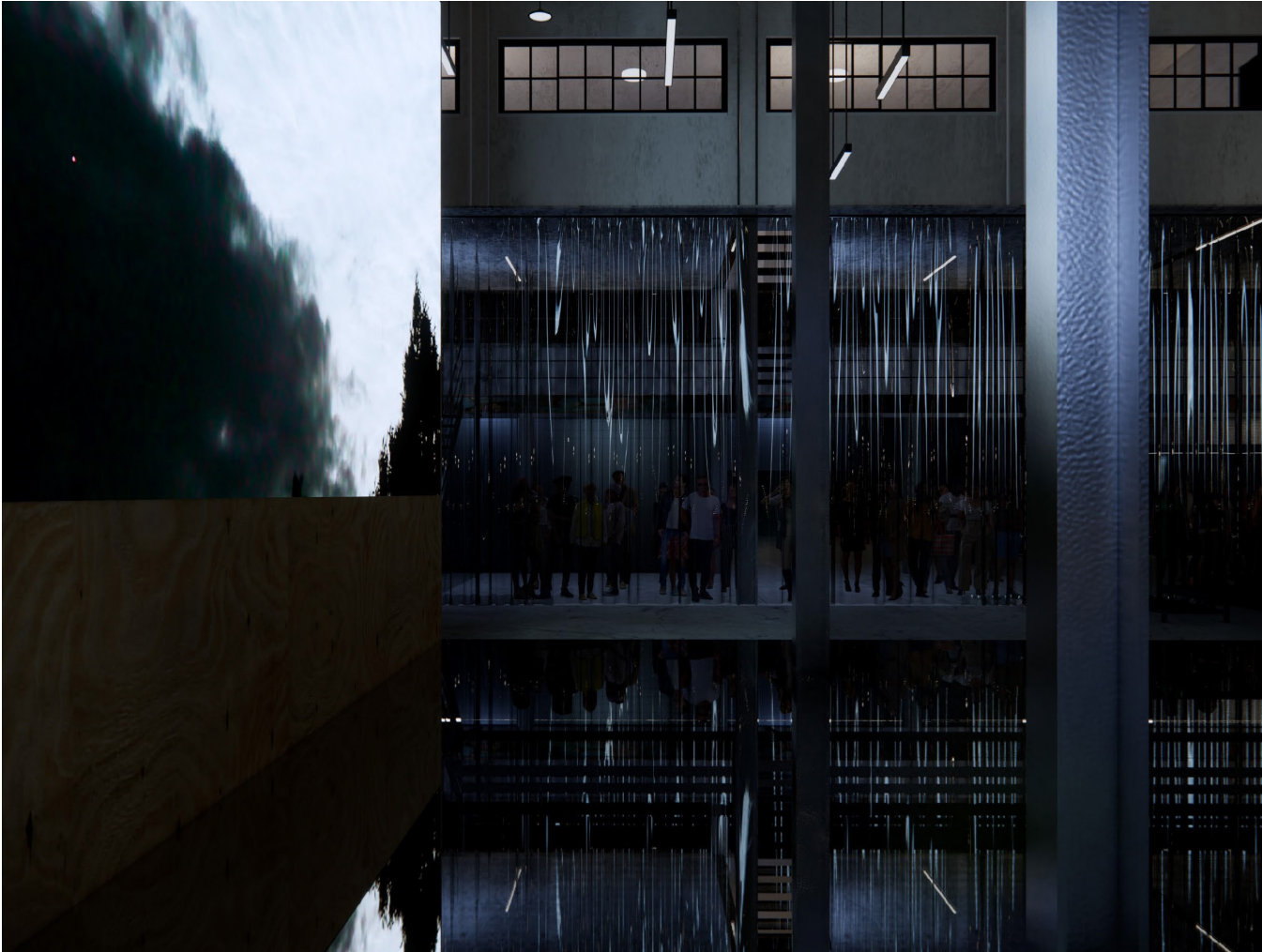
in the form of a space for exhibition,



or at other times, a performance hall,







or even a cinema at night.





A small night market,



those coming for the event,



and their reflections,



behind the closed fence,
that is both the beginning and the end of my journey.

This project has been a process of continuous transformations in light of a liberated understanding of architecture.

The building is reinterpreted, and reconstructed over and over, in each image, that captures the encounter of a possible reality.

In the attempt to better grasp the building and its potentials with our subjective projections of objects, reflections, natural and artificial light, and programmatic intentions, it becomes, however, defamiliarized and more enigmatic.

And it is in this process of withholding our preconceptions, we encounter the inexhaustible and the incessantly enigmatic nature of architectural objects and experience.

Thesis Credits and Attributions

Zoey Cai

Spring 2020

Credits and attributions are listed below for any work shown in the thesis project that is not exclusively my own.

Citations:

Text

Glassman, Carl, and Aline Reynolds. "CB1 Committee Shoots Down Tower in Seaport Development Plan." Trib Online. Accessed May 19, 2021. <http://www.tribecatrib.com/content/cb1-committee-shoots-down-tower-seaport-development-plan>.

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Wikipedia contributors, "PWA Moderne," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=PWA_Moderne&oldid=1015847530 (accessed May 19, 2021).

Images

A rendering of the Howard Hughes Corporation's plan to develop the site of the former Fulton Fish Market in Lower Manhattan. taken from New York Times' Duel at the Old Fulton Fish Market. Library of Congress. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/nyregion/duel-at-the-old-fulton-fish-market.html>.

Dedication of the New Market Building, June 17, 1939. taken from The Municipal Art Society of New York's Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building. The Municipal Art Society of New York, Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building, (2008), 12.

Engraving of the 1868 Fulton Fish Market. taken from The Municipal Art Society of New York's Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building. The Municipal Art Society of New York, Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building, (2008), 7.

Fish Landing Slip at Fulton Market, New York. 1887. taken from Harper's Weekly. D. C. Beard, The Fish Landing Slip at Fulton Market, New York. April 1887. <https://www.ebay.ie/itm/FISHING-BOATS-FULTON-MARKET-NEW-YORK-FISH-LANDING-SLIP-/400079686713>.

Fulton Fish Market collapse, 1936. taken from The Municipal Art Society of New York's Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building. The Municipal Art Society of New York, Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building, (2008), 7.

Fulton Fish Market Interior. taken from Scouting New York's New Fish Market. Scouting NY, New Fish Market. January 9, 2009. <http://www.scoutingny.com/rip-fulton-fish-market/>.

Fulton Fish Market Interior. taken from Wikimedia Commons' Fulton Fish Market. November 17, 2008. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fultonfishmarket.jpg>.

Fulton Fish Market New Market Building. taken from The Soup Peddler's Fulton Fish Market Photo Essay. June 22, 2008. <https://www.souppeddler.com/blog/2008/06/fulton-fish-market-photo-essay>.

George Schlegel, New York, 1873. taken from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division. G. Schlegel, New York. Published by Geo. Degen, c1873. <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/pgs.04129/>.

Howard Hughes executive listens to supporters of the New Amsterdam Market, who protest the developer's plan for a 50-story building in November 2013. taken from Tribeca Trib's CB1 Committee Shoots Down Tower in Seaport Development Plan. <http://www.tribecatrib.com/content/cb1-committee-shoots-down-tower-seaport-development-plan>.

Lewis & Churchill's Proposed New Fulton Fish Market, February 2, 1938. taken from The Municipal Art Society of New York's Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building. The Municipal Art Society of New York, Fulton Fish Market: New Market Building, (2008), 11.

Tin Building in 1951. taken from New York Times's Duel at the Old Fulton Fish Market. Library of Congress. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/nyregion/duel-at-the-old-fulton-fish-market.html>.