

Varamon public bath

A vision for the future development of the former folk park area

Master's thesis by Jakob Elfström

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Year of graduation: 2025

Examiner: Mikael Ekegren

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Abstract

Since the establishment of Motala folk park and the outdoor swimming area Mariebergssbadet in 1976 in the Varamon beach area in Motala, the location has served as an important meeting place for the city's population and visitors for several decades. Here, people have gathered and socialized through music, dance, politics, play and swimming. In 2016, the Danish company Parken Sport & Entertainment initiated plans for an establishment of a large holiday resort in the Varamon area. The folk park area became one of the sites designated for the new development. In 2021, Motala municipality decided to demolish all existing buildings in the Folk Park area to free up space for the new development, but the detailed plans for the holiday resort had not yet been approved. Due to a lengthy process of appeals against the establishment, the Danish company decided in January 2024 to cancel their plans for a development in Motala.

Today, the folk park area stands empty without any clear plans for how the site should be developed in the future. The purpose of this master's thesis is to present a vision for the site's future development, based on the collective memory of the area as well as an analysis of the city's current needs. The program includes a public bath, holiday accommodations and spaces for dance, music, food, play and sports, as such a program would serve an important function for the population of Motala and contribute to increased visitor establishment in the Varamon area. The project includes an overall plan of the entire area, while the design of the public bath is the main focus where an in-depth exploration of wood construction has been used as an approach both constructively and architecturally in the design.

The focus on wood construction has shaped this project, using structure and materials to define the spatial character and create rhythm. A key challenge was organizing the complex program into a well-integrated building form. Dividing the building into multiple volumes allowed for contextual adaptation, enhanced views, and a mix of intimate and generous spaces with clear flows and dynamic spatial sequences.

Keywords: public bath, outdoor bath, swimming hall, wood construction, glulam

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Introduction

Purpose and aim

The folk park area in Motala currently stands empty due to development plans that did not materialize. The aim of this Master's thesis is to contribute to the discussion regarding the future development of the site by studying the collective memory of the area and analyzing the city's future needs, while designing a vision for a new public meeting space that draws from these aspects, where a new public bath has been the main focus of the project. The aim has been to design a building with focus on construction, materials and spatial sequences.

Thesis questions

How can the design of a new public bath located on the former folk park area in Motala be connected to the collective memory of the site, while also meeting the city's current needs and activating the area year-round?

How can wood be used both constructively and architecturally in the design of a public bath?

Objectives

The objective has been to design an architectural project located on the former Folk Park site in Motala. The goal has been to develop an overall plan for the entire area, but the main focus on designing the public bath, that will function as the area's main building, in detail. The project will be presented through drawings, diagrams, visualizations and models, supported by descriptive texts.

Method

This master's thesis is based on a research through design approach, developed through iterative sketching, drawings, physical and digital models. A study of literature, online resources, photography, and archival drawings have been conducted to find the core values of the site and its history. Literature containing theory, guidelines, and regulations have been used to gain an expanded understanding and to find strategies for solving the project's complex program. Built references have been studied and analyzed through site visits, literature, and online resources, along with supplementary literature studies in building technology.

Delimitations

Since the public bath is both large in scale and technically complex, the main focus of the project has been to reach as far as possible in the design and detailing of the bath, while the overall plan has been kept at a more conceptual level. The overall plan has primarily functioned as a way to contextualize the bathhouse and establish a relationship between it and the surrounding buildings and landscape.

Reading instructions

This master's thesis is divided into three main parts. The first part presents the contextual background as well as the theoretical framework, including built references and literature that have been studied. The second part presents the design outcome at various scales through diagrams, drawings, visualizations and physical models. In the third part, the results are discussed in relation to the thesis questions.

Background and Theory

Motala and the folk park

The idea of the folk park has its roots in the expansion of industrialism in Sweden during the late 19th century. During this time, the working class was forced to fight for its interests and therefore began to organize both in trade unions and politically. The ruling class in society feared the labor movement and its efforts to organize, making it difficult for the labor movement to find venues to rent for meetings. By owning their own house and park area, this problem could be solved, and by the late 1800s and early 1900s, park areas owned by the labor movement were established around Sweden. These areas served as meeting places for entertainment, recreation and political gatherings, where everyone was welcome (Andersson, 1991).

This was also the case in the city of Motala. Motala has a long history as an industrial town, and Motala Verkstad, founded in 1822, was for a long time one of Sweden's most important industries. The working class was strong, and in 1903 the city's first folk park opened next to the natural area of Bondebacka, built by workers from Motala Verkstad. It became a place for dance, theater, community, and socializing (Naturkartan, n.d.). When the municipality later needed this land for the expansion of a school, the folk park was moved in 1976 to a new area next to the Varamon beach, where the outdoor bath facility Mariebergssbadet was also built in connection (Wickström, 2021).

Even after the move to Varamon, the folk park continued to be an important meeting place for entertainment, culture, and politics. Dances were arranged for all ages, and popular artists and bands were booked, attracting large crowds. The area was characterized by its rich greenery and strong connection to the nearby beach. There were flower gardens, art, a mini-zoo, playgrounds, mini-golf and swimming pools for both recreational and competitive swimming, where vibrant social life thrived for many decades (Andersson, 1991).

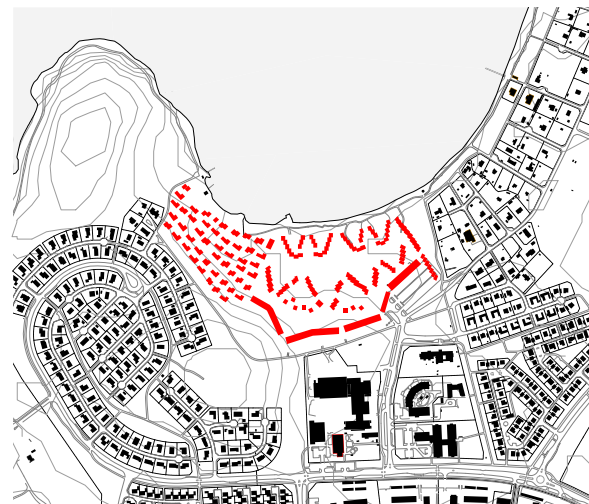


Figure 1-8. Motala folk park through the years.
Photo: Jeppe Gustafsson/Bild Östergötland/info@jeppebild.se

In 2016, the Danish company Parken Sport & Entertainment began plans to establish a new holiday resort called Lalandia in the Varamon area of Motala. The company already had three resorts in Denmark and saw the Varamon area as a strategic location for a new resort due to Motala's central position in Sweden and its proximity to the popular beach. The plans included building an indoor water park, a sports and activity center and holiday houses on various plots around the Varamon area. The establishment was expected to create 340 new jobs and attract 320,000 visitors annually (Krantz, 2024). The municipality of Motala also planned to build a new public swimming facility next to the water park, as the existing facility was, and still is, in poor condition. To make these plans possible, the municipality needed to free up the space required for the establishment. The Folk Park plot became one of the areas planned for the new construction (Handberg, 2024).



1. Location of the main Lalandia building.



The Lalandia plan for the folk park area.

2. The folk park area: Planned area for holiday houses.

3-5. Planned areas for holiday houses.

Despite the fact that the detailed plans for the establishment were not yet approved, the decision to demolish the folk park was made in 2021. The initial plan was for the company Parken Sport & Entertainment to handle the demolition after purchasing the land from the municipality, but as the process was delayed, the municipality deemed the maintenance costs for the area too high and decided to proceed with the demolition in advance (Handberg, 2024).

The reason the process for establishing Lalandia was delayed was that the detailed plans for the various areas were appealed several times, extending the process by several years longer than expected. The consequence of this, combined with the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Parken Sport & Entertainment, led the Danish company to cancel their plans for establishing in Motala in January 2024 (Handberg, 2024).



Figure 9. The demolition of Motala folk park.
Photo: Jeppe Gustafsson/Bild Östergötland/info@jeppebild.se

The Folk Park area remains vacant today, with no clear plans for how the plot will be developed in the future. The municipality has chosen to stick with the detailed plans that were created when the Lalandia project was still in progress but currently has no contact with a developer who can finance such a development (Handberg, 2024). The city is still in need of a new public swimming hall, and the municipality is currently conducting a feasibility study on the possibility of renovating the existing one. At the same time, the current swimming hall is inadequate for swimming competitions and training, due to its short length and limited potential for expansion (Motala Kommun, n.d.). Politicians in Motala have commented on the situation regarding the folk park area and are positive to public suggestions as a way to inspire new ideas for the site (Andersson, 2024).



The site today.

Reference projects

Kildeskovshallen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Karen & Ebbe Clemmensen, 1970

The building's various volumes adapt to the site and define exterior spaces while also forming interesting interior sequences. The way the horizontality of the building volumes contrasts with the verticality of the surrounding nature creates a balance and unity between the building and its environment. The interior experience is also strongly connected to the surroundings through views and light that enhance the architectural experience. There is also a logic in the building's structural design through the way the materials contrast with one another. The tiled floor forms the building's base, the wood-clad walls and steel columns define spaces and create views and support the delicate colored space frame that spans across the generous spaces.



Figure 10. Kildeskovshallen

Photo: Aage Strüwing

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark
Vilhelm Wohlert & Jørgen Bo, 1958

This building is a journey of architecture and art with sequences of spaces of varying character. Through different proportions, light, views, materiality and room sizes, the spaces gain their variation in character, where the architecture in each room contributes to a unique experience that enhances the room's function and way of showcasing art. This variation in spatial experiences surprises the visitor and evokes different emotions. This approach to working with architecture has been applied in the project, where different types of spaces will offer the visitor different experiences of bathing.



Figure 11. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Photo: Jeremy Jachym

Pontusbadet, Luleå, Sweden
Torgny Gynnerstedt, Bengt Ågren & Jan Ericson, 1957

The main bathing space of Pontusbadet has architecturally inspired the project through its abundant natural light and the generosity and spaciousness of its spatial qualities. The space is largely outward facing through its large, glazed sections, but the continuous solid wall also creates areas where one is not overly exposed. The high-set windows between the wall and the ceiling give the roof a sense of lightness and allow light to enter from above. The different levels of the floor create seating areas while also contributing to the division of the space into various zones.



Figure 12. Pontusbadet

Photo: Magnus Stenberg

Païcherou Aquatic Center, Carcassonne, France
Taillandier Architectes Associés, 2021

The reference features a glulam roof structure that has inspired the project. This structure has been studied to gain an understanding of how the building components are assembled, as well as how the structure architecturally contributes to the spatial qualities of the building. Views toward the surrounding greenery are prominent, and the straight lines of the roof structure create directional flows within the spaces, pointing outward toward the surroundings and enhancing the relationship between indoors and outdoors.



Figure 13. Païcherou Aquatic Center

Photo: Roland Halbe

Hallenbad Appenzell, Switzerland
Peter Moor Architects, 2022

This relatively newly built reference demonstrates a contemporary approach to working with engineered wood in a swimming hall environment. The reference has been studied and analyzed in combination with literature to gain deeper knowledge on how construction and details can be designed to achieve long spans, sustainable construction solutions, energy efficiency and a good indoor climate.



Figure 14. Hallenbad Appenzell

Photo: Roger Frei

Literature

Theoretical literature on modern wood construction techniques has been used to gain an enhanced knowledge in the field. The literature has been used to identify different approaches for achieving long spans, dimensioning, detailing and understanding the relationship between the indoor climate and how it affects the material.



Figure 15. Att välja trä (Svenskt trä, 2020)

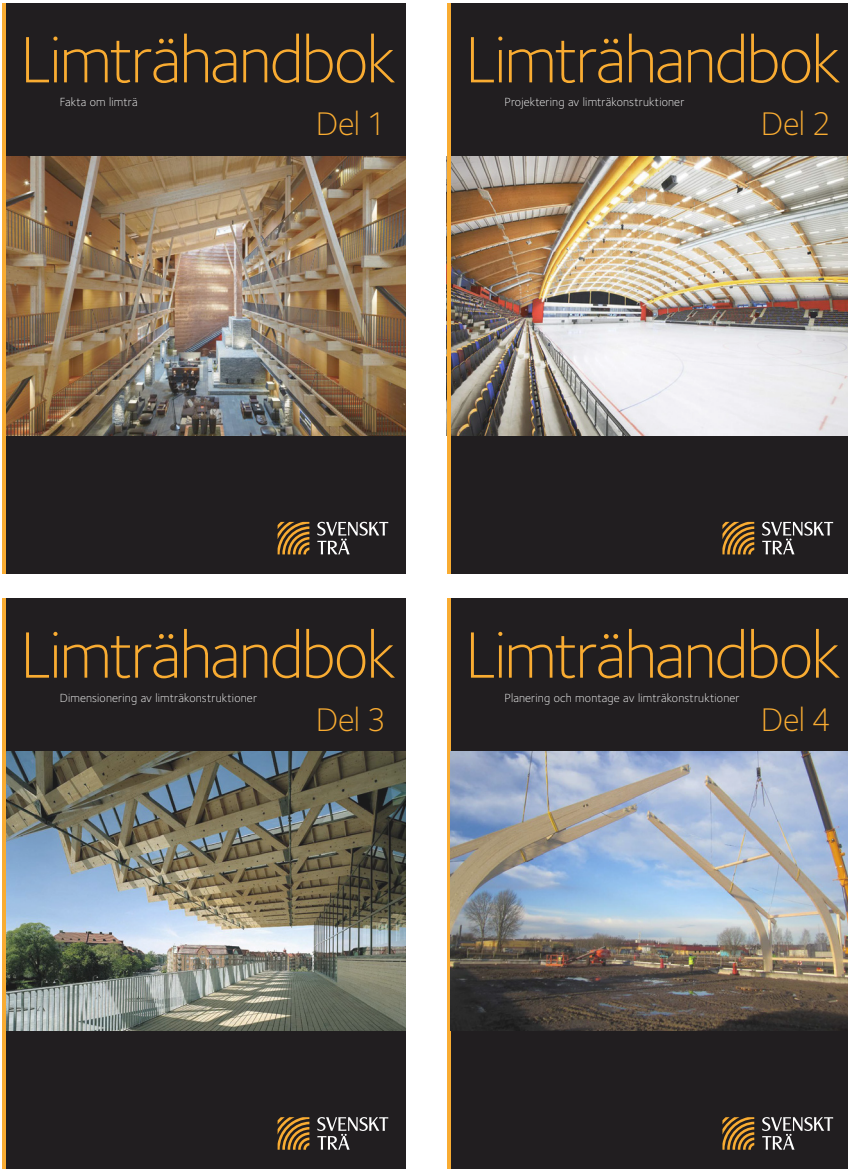
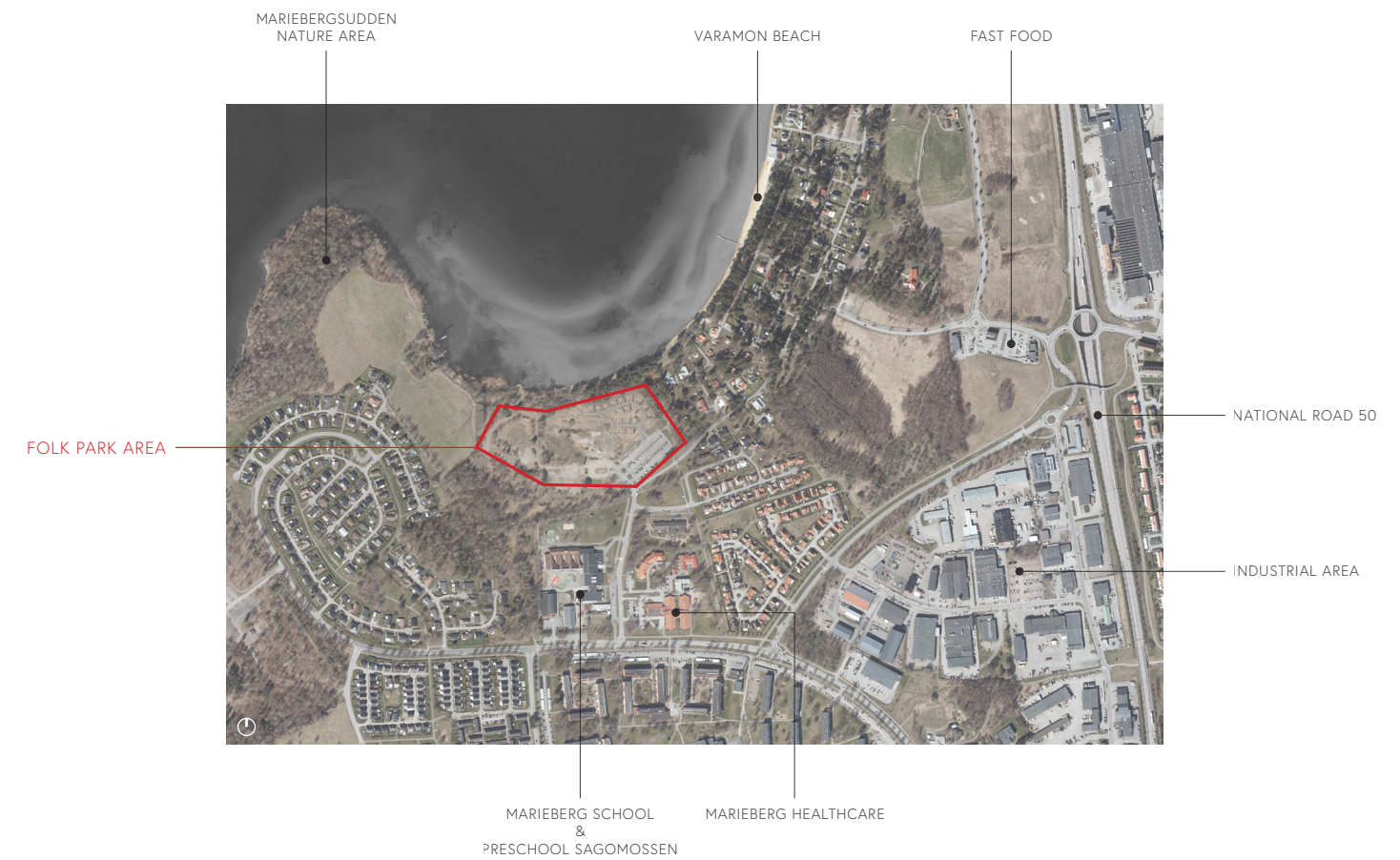


Figure 16-19. Limträhandbok del 1-4 (Svenskt trä, 2016 & 2018)

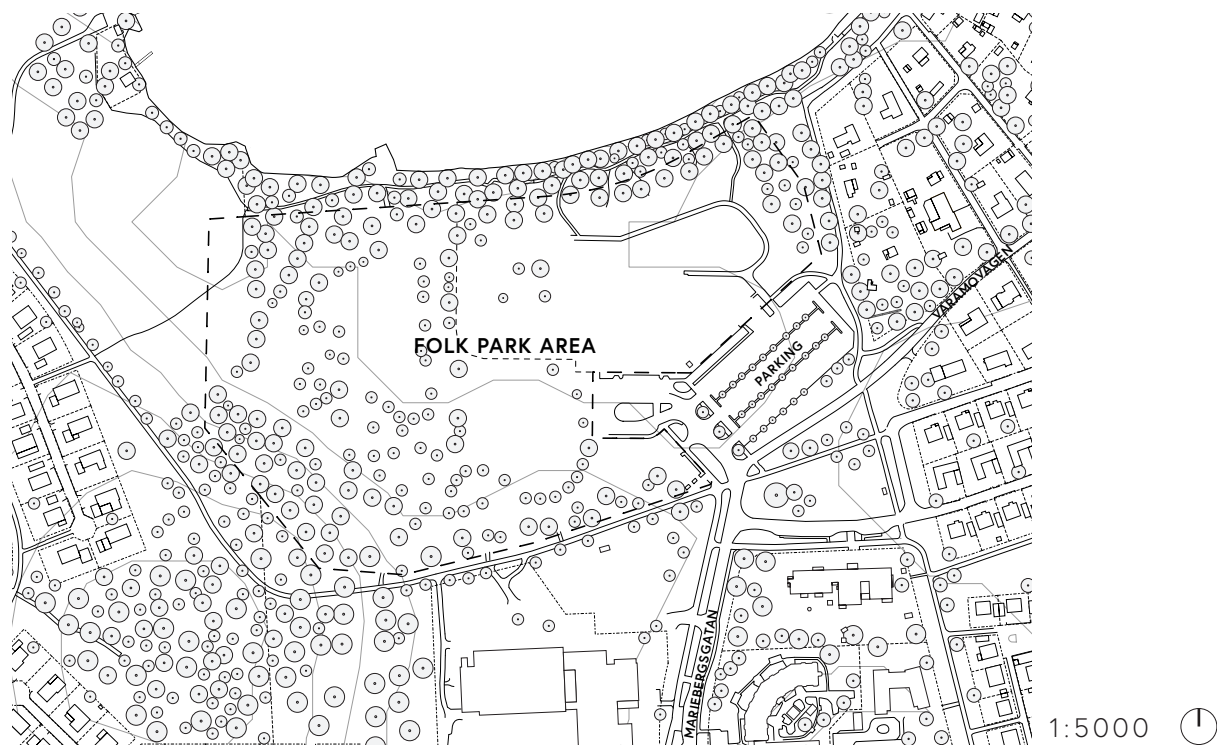
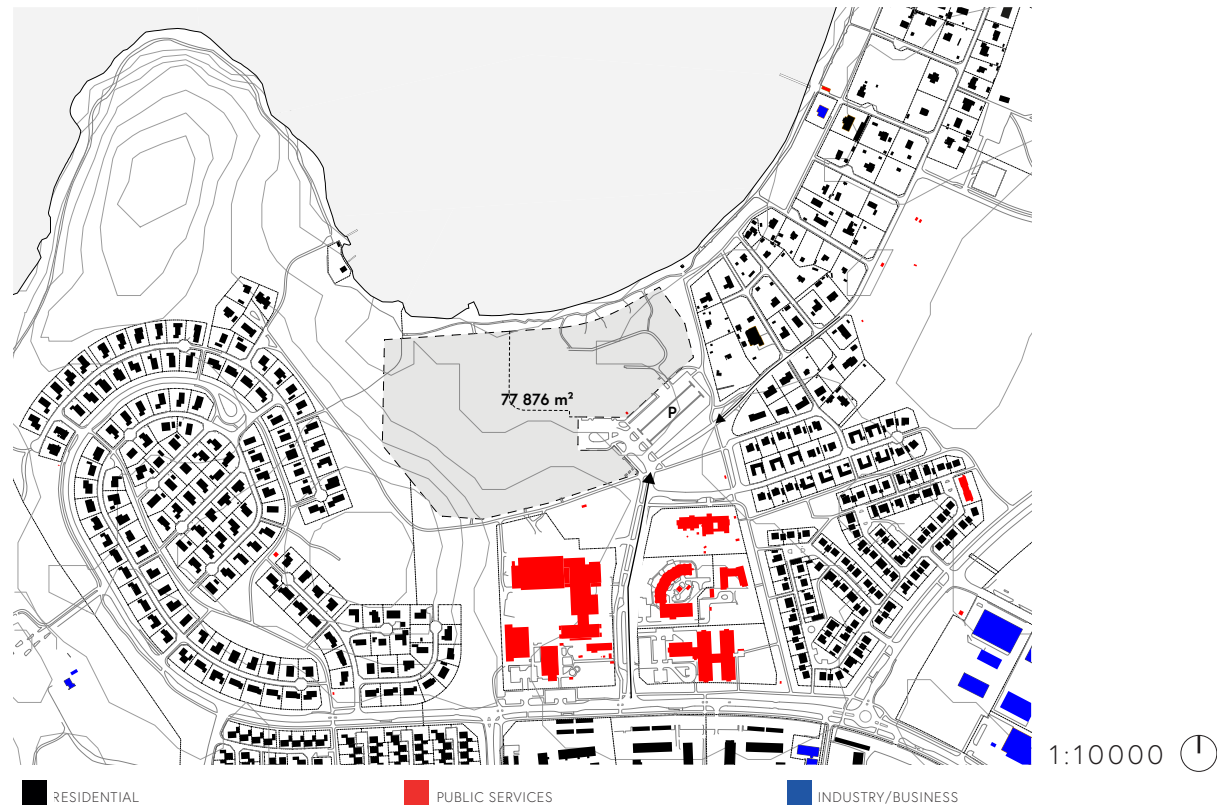
Design proposal

Site

The city of Motala is located midway between Sweden's largest cities, Stockholm and Gothenburg, next to the lake Vättern on the city's western side and the lake Boren on the eastern side. Motala is the central part of the Göta Canal, which stretches between these lakes and continues across the country. In a bay on the city's western side lies the Varamon area, with its long beach. This is a popular spot for sunbathing and swimming for both the residents of Motala and tourists visiting the city. The area is characterized by wooden houses and the surrounding pine forest that embraces the long beach. In the southern part of Varamon lies the area where Motala folk park was located before it was demolished. Today, no buildings remain on this approximately 8-hectare site, but the rich greenery and large open spaces remain, offering potential for new development with close proximity to the beach, water and greenery.



Summer day in Varamon.



Space program

The selection of the program for the project is based on the intention to activate the site year-round, with the goal of expanding Varamon as a tourist destination, while also considering the city's current need for new municipal services and the collective memory of the site. Motala is in need of a new swimming hall, as the current one is in poor condition. The municipality has explored potential locations for a new swimming hall but has decided to look into the possibility of renovating the existing one, which is housed in the same building as Motala sports hall. The municipality is currently conducting a feasibility study on this. However, the sports hall lacks sufficient space to accommodate all the sports clubs and the current swimming hall is not suitable for training or hosting competitions due to the short pool length, which is not ideal for the community sports clubs.

A better solution would be to transform the existing swimming hall into additional space for the sports hall and build a new public bath at the folk park site, along with activities reminiscent of those once held at the old folk park. This would create a unified location for swimming, music, dance and play next to Varamon. For tourists to extend their stay, accommodations in various forms are necessary. The program therefore includes a camping and a hotel as part of the program. Additionally, there is an opportunity to further link the area to the water with a cold bathhouse, adding another form of bathing to the site.

Varamon is highly dependent on the weather, with people mainly visiting on warm summer days. By building a public bath on the site, an activity is offered that will attract visitors year-round, both from Motala and tourists, which would also be financially beneficial.

The main focus of the project has been to design the public bath in detail, while the other parts of the program have been designed at a conceptual level.

Program full area

Public bath (indoor & outdoor)

- Full size swimming pool: 50 m (with jumping tower & seating)
- Play pools (with waterslides etc.)
- Relax area (saunas, pools & seating)
- Gym
- Outdoor exercise pool
- Outdoor children’s pools
- Space for sunbathing/play/sports

Food service (indoor & outdoor)

- Kiosk/Cafeteria
- Restaurant

Outdoor program

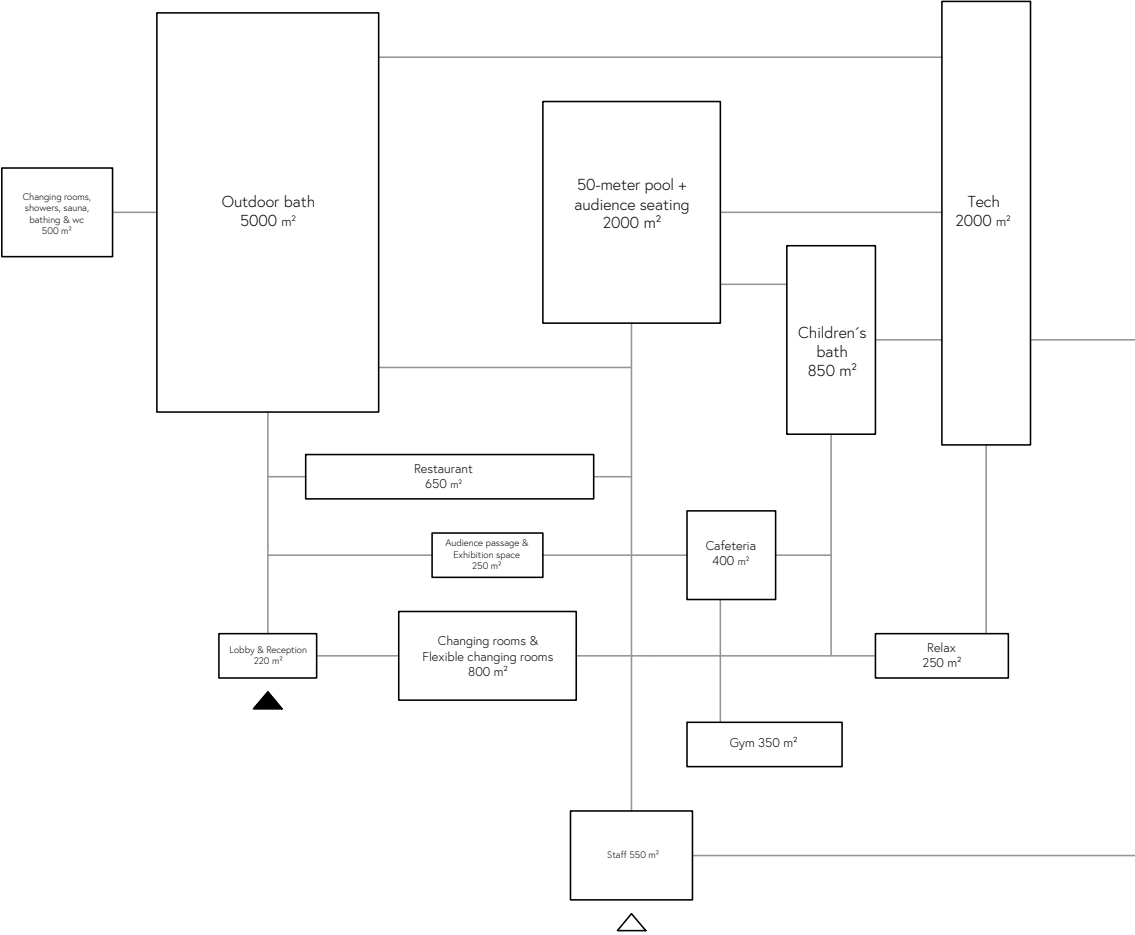
- Stage for concerts
- Space for audience (Park when not used)
- Playgrounds
- Sports
- Park
- Parking

Tourist accommodations & Entertainment

- Hotel
- Camping
- Indoor space for music and dance

Cold bath house

- Saunas
- Relax area
- Lake bathing
- Boat berths

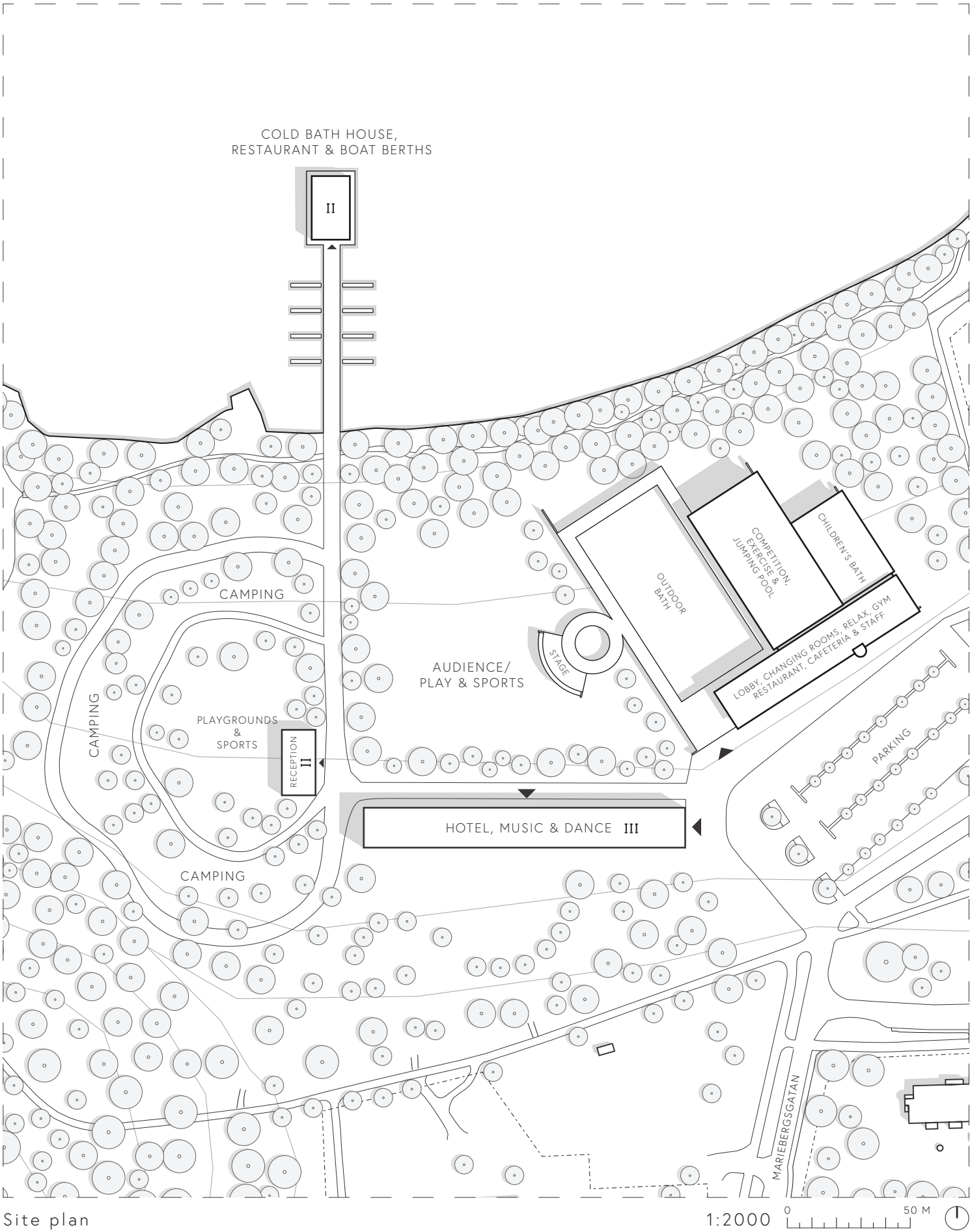


Public bath: Program connections and sizes

Note: The program parts and their sizes have been developed through studies of multiple built references as well as previous master's theses with similar program.

Overall plan

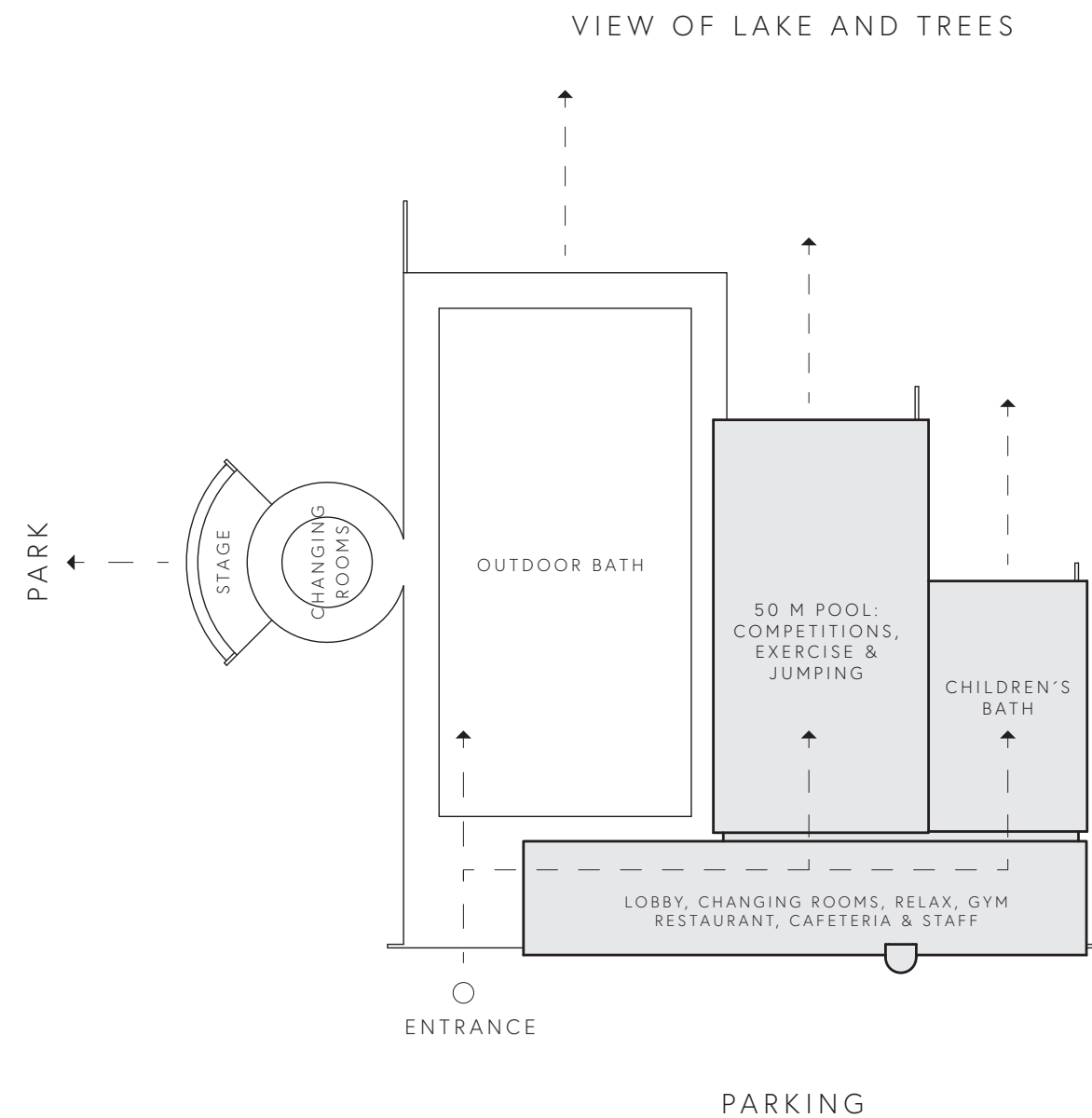
The aim of the design of the overall plan has been to preserve as much as possible of the greenery that characterizes the area and to strongly connect the site to the water. The public bath is placed at the plot's most public point, adjacent to the existing parking area. The public bath together with a building volume containing the hotel and spaces for music and dance define a central and open green space, allowing for play, sports, and performances. In the westernmost part of the area, where the richest greenery is found, space is created for a camping within this natural green environment. The site is further connected to the water through a pier with a cold bathhouse, restaurant, and boat berths.



Site plan

Spatial strategies

The public bath is divided into three main building volumes. One building volume faces the parking lot and contains the lobby, changing rooms, relaxation area, gym, cafeteria, restaurant, and staff facilities. This building volume connects the three main bathing zones: the outdoor pool, the 50-meter pool space, and the children's bath. It allows these spaces to be spatially enhanced by the views of greenery and water. The division into different building volumes also provides greater possibilities for varied spatial sequences and allows the different bathing zones to be separated so that high-activity and low-activity areas do not disturb one another.



Building

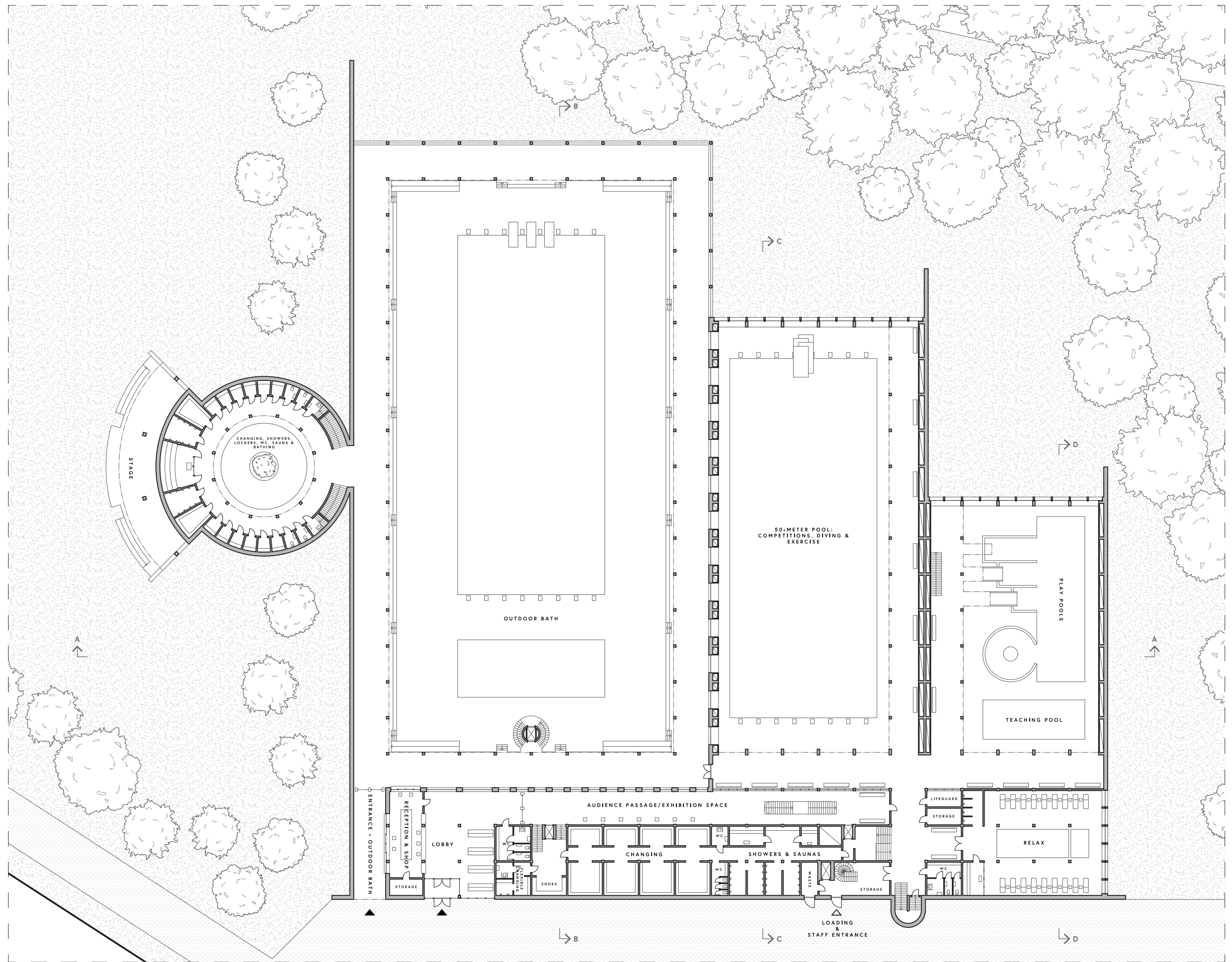
The building has been designed with a strong focus on making the public flows as natural and architecturally rich as possible. Structural elements such as pillars and continuous walls are used to create rhythm and direction, guiding visitors through the building. The division into different building volumes - separating functions that require long versus short structural spans - results in sequences of both intimate and generous spatial experiences.

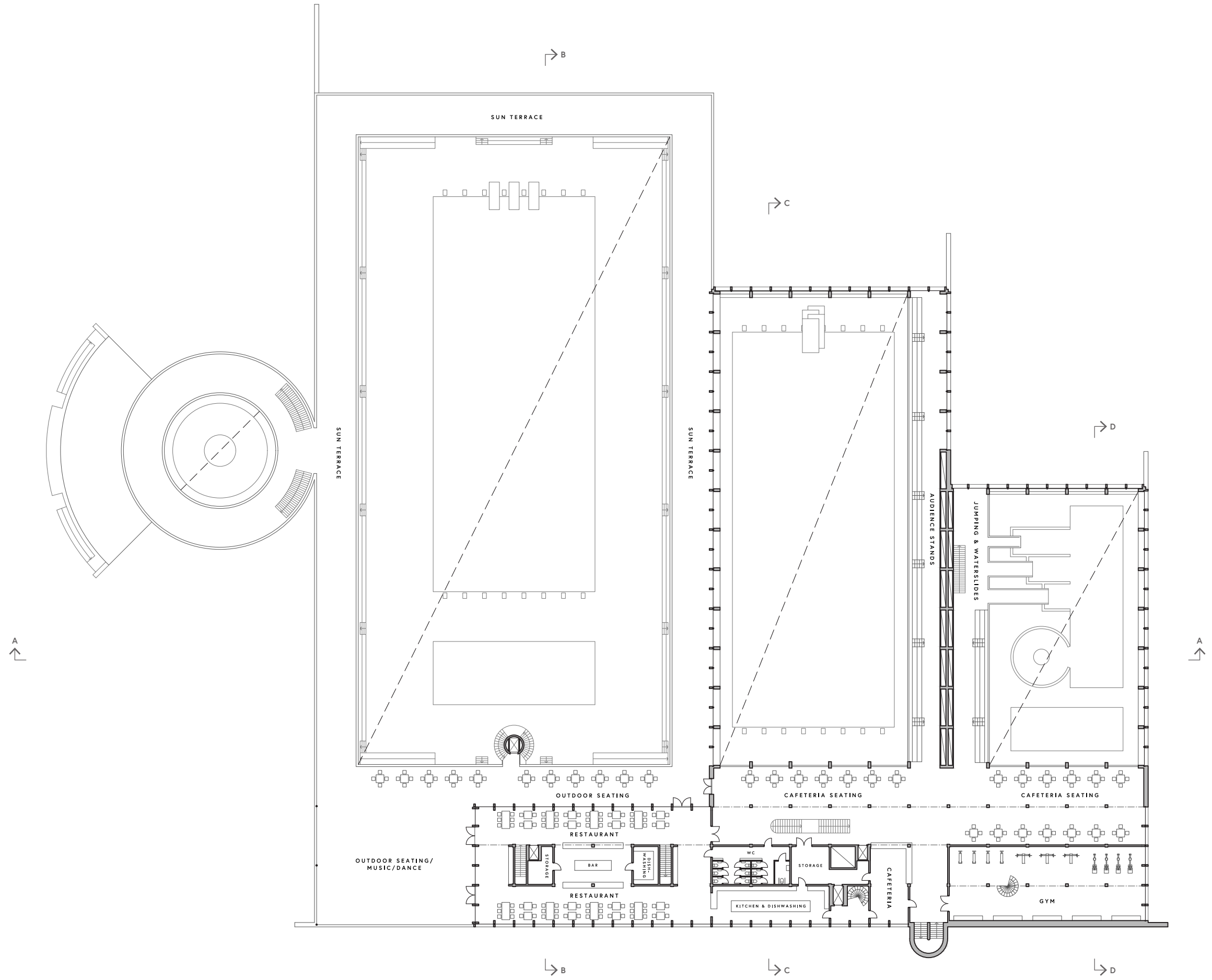
The outdoor bath has a direct exterior entrance connection, as the reception is oriented toward both the indoor bath lobby and the entrance to the outdoor bath. Changing rooms for the indoor and outdoor bath are also separated, allowing the outdoor bath to remain open during hours and seasons when the indoor bath does not have as many visitors.

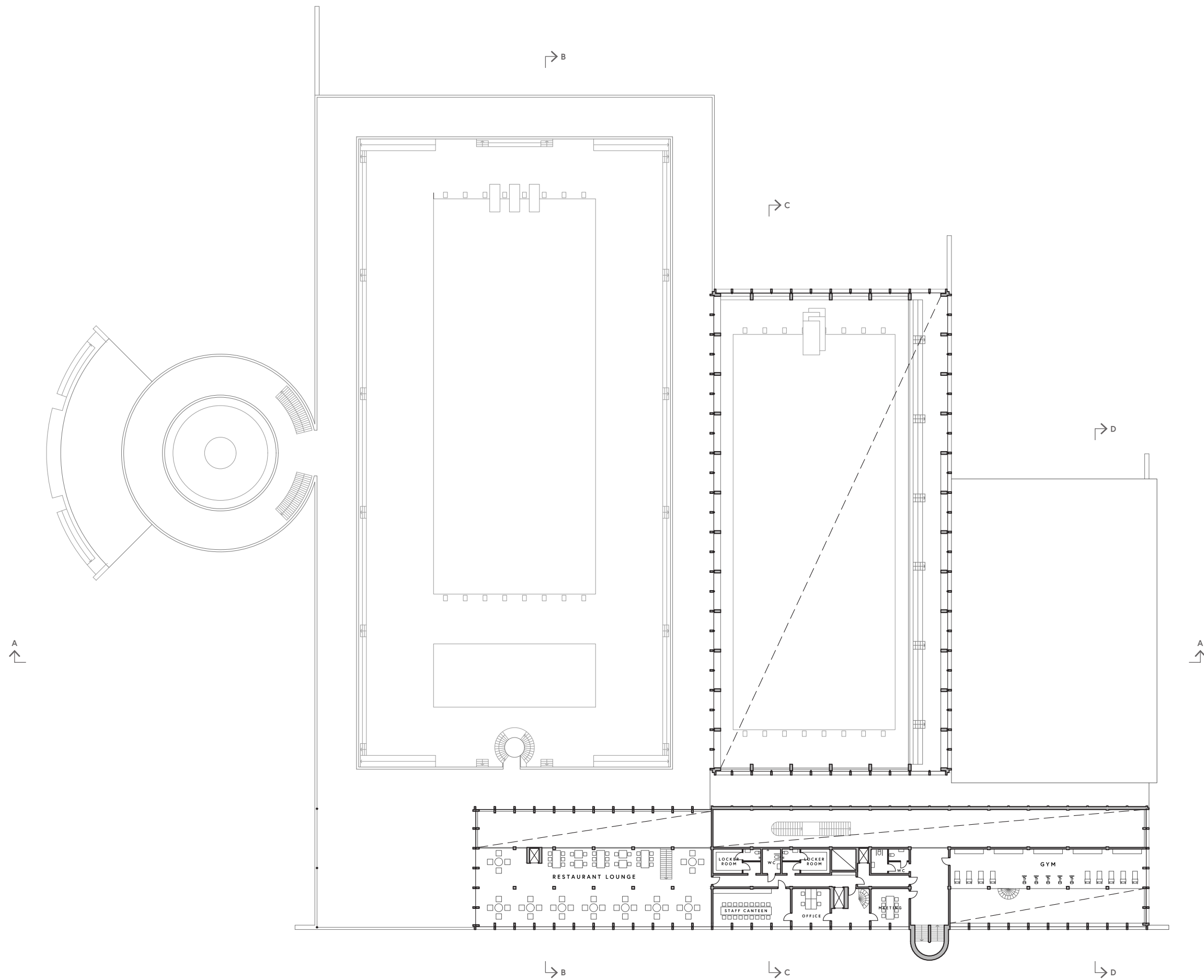
The flows within the indoor bath are designed to function well for both swimmers and spectators at swim competitions, as well as for visitors to the restaurant and gym. The indoor pool offers various types of bathing experiences, including: a 50-meter pool for competitions, exercise and diving; a children's bath with play features; and a relaxation area, all of which can be accessed directly from the changing rooms. The building's cafeteria and restaurant with outdoor seating are located in close connection to both the indoor and outdoor bath.

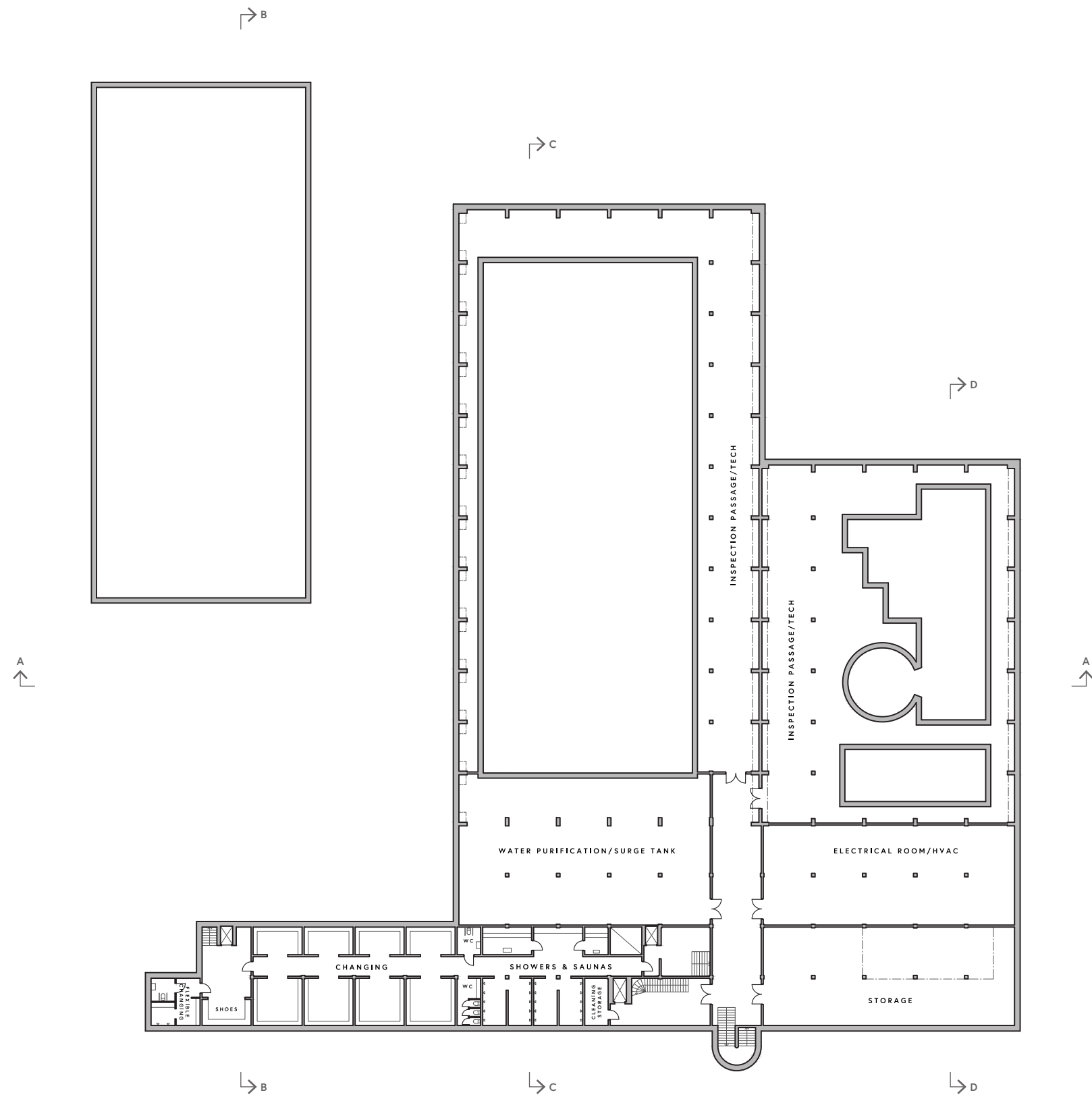


Entrance.



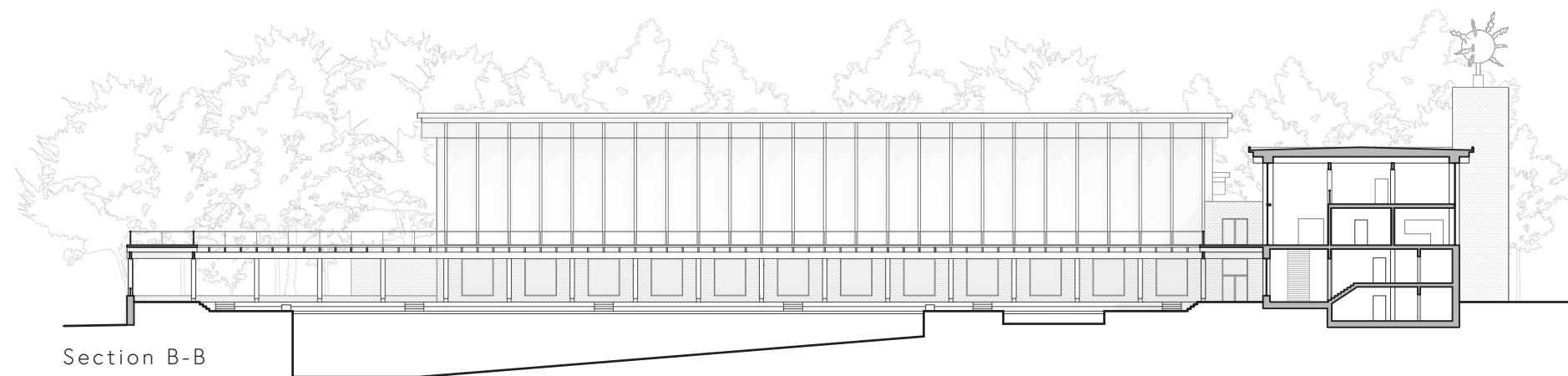
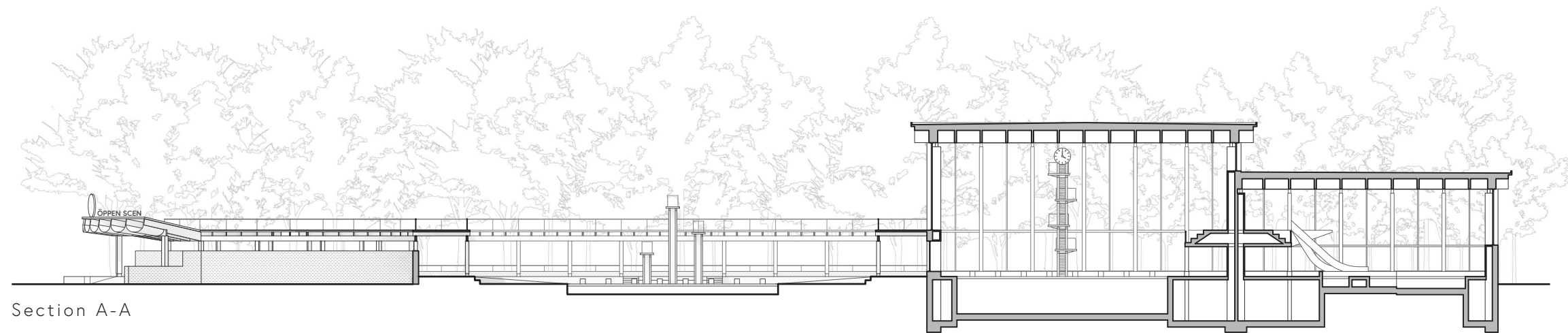


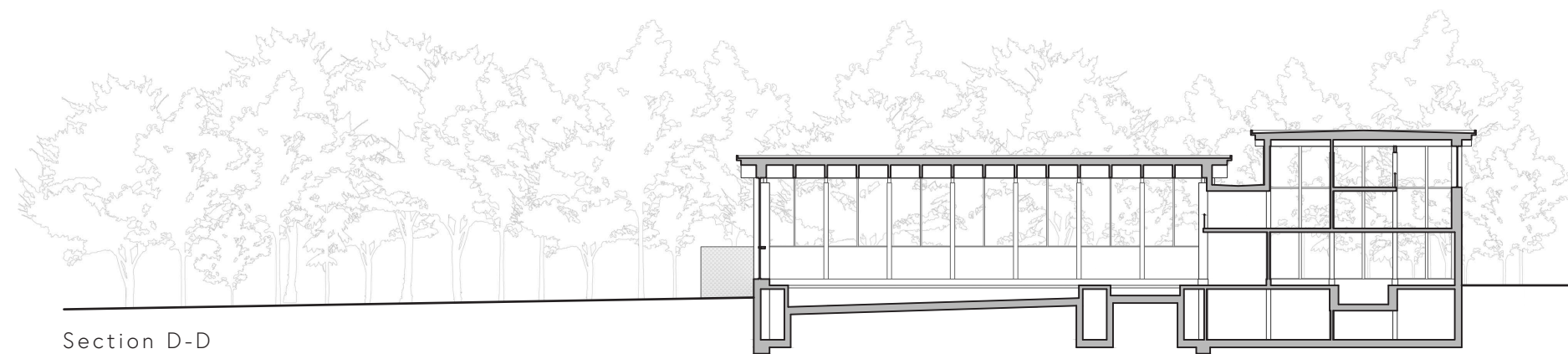
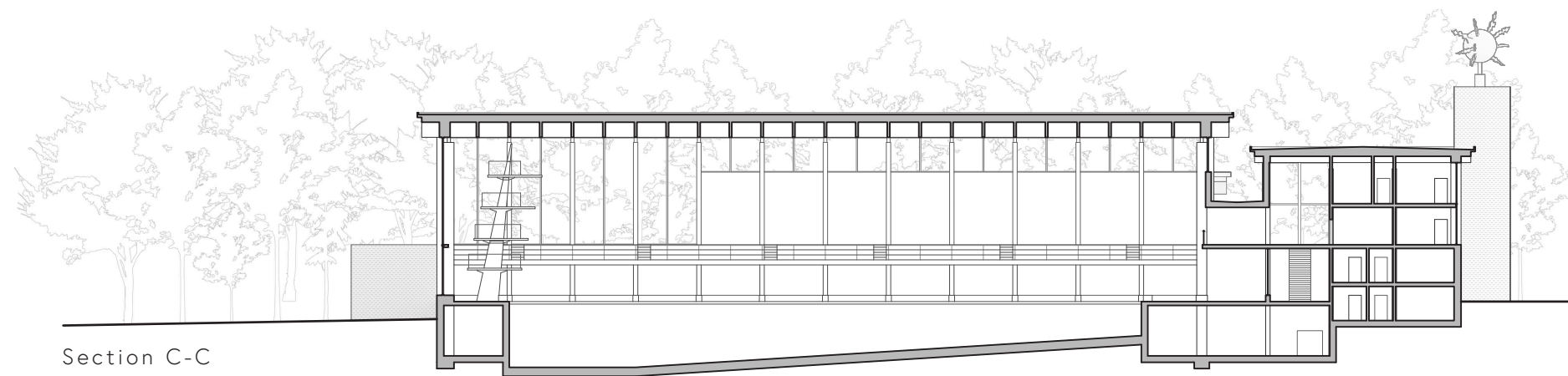


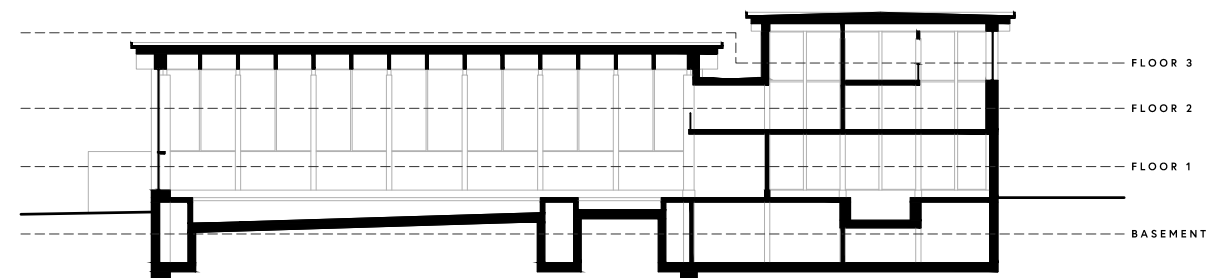
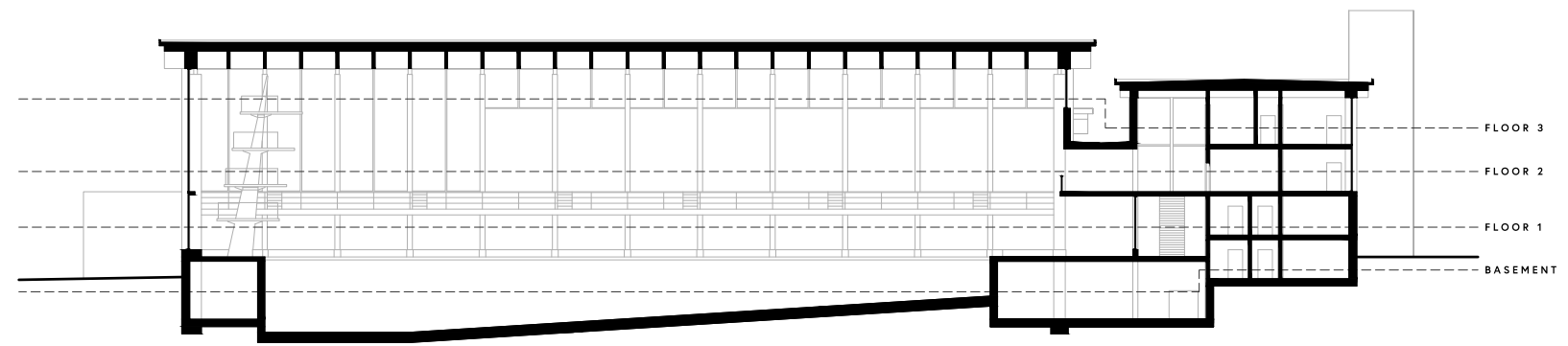
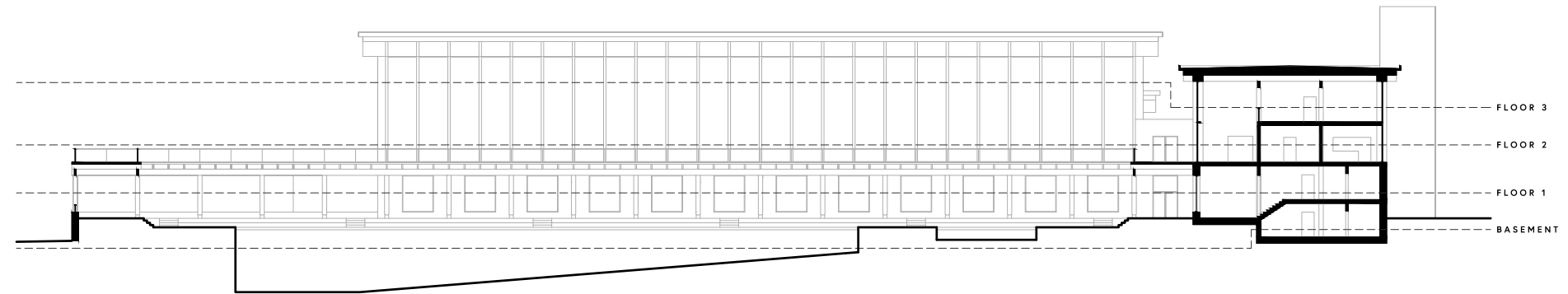
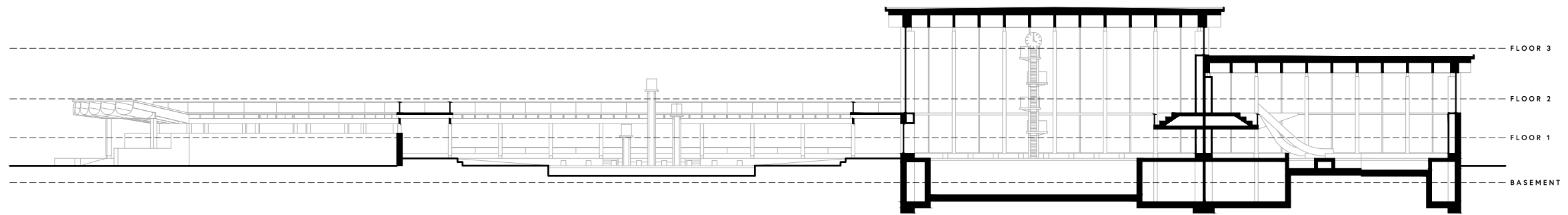




50-meter pool.







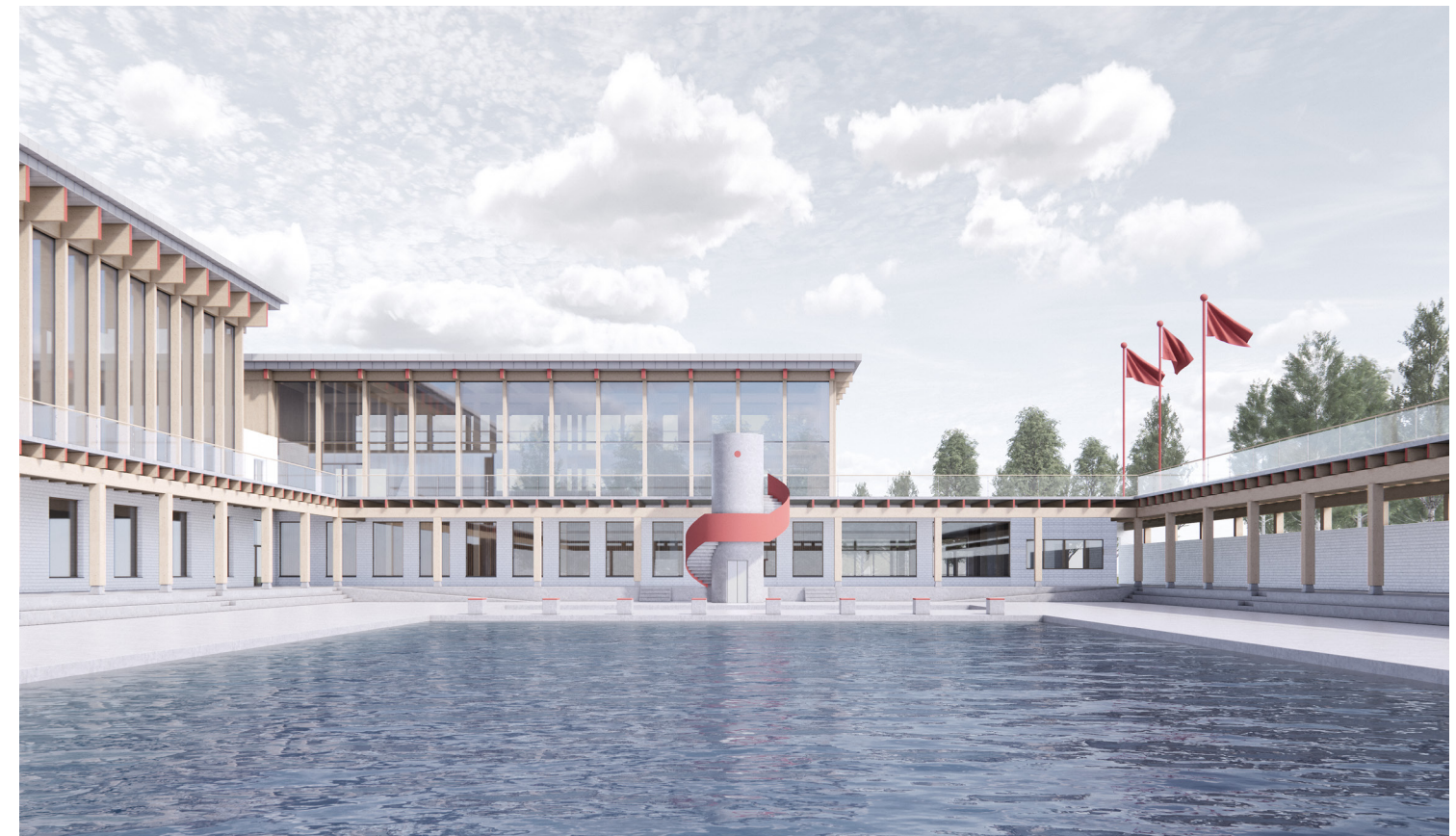


Children's bath.

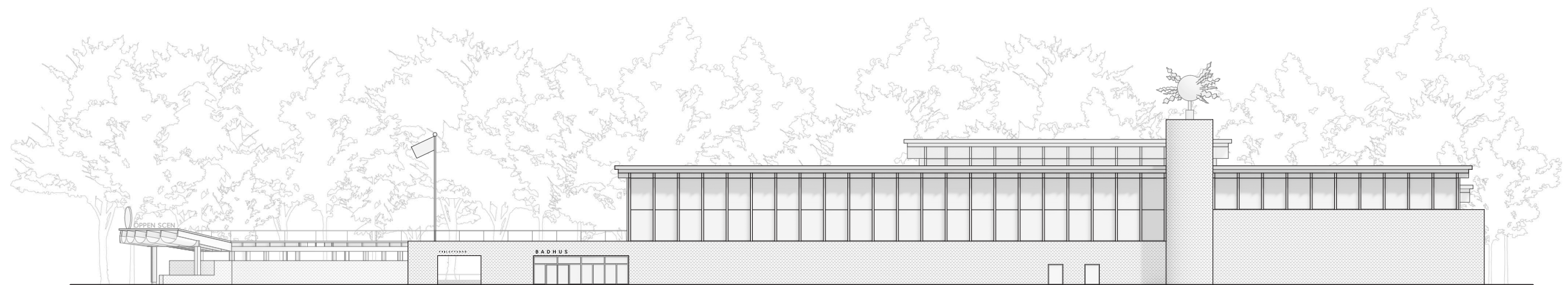


Gym.

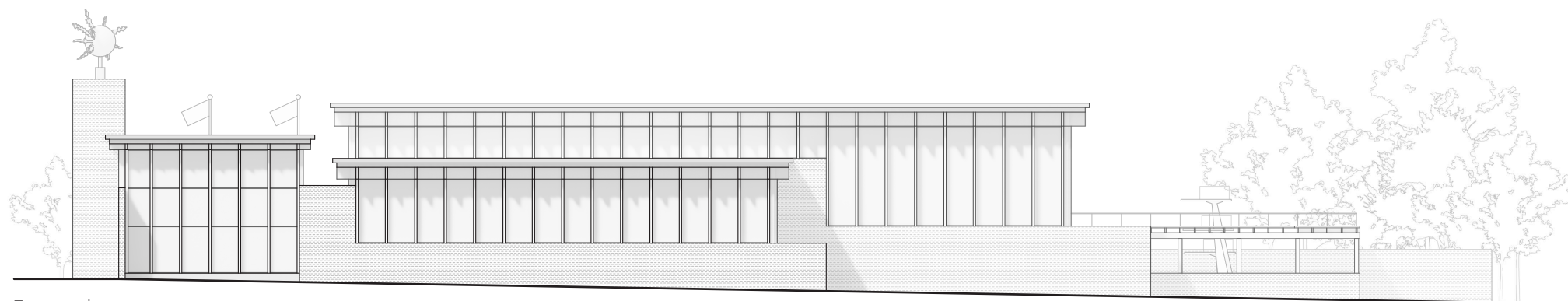
The continuous walls defining the spaces of the building are clad in whitewashed brick on the exterior, creating a sense of solidity. These walls are contrasted by light wooden structures and glass that rise above them. The intention has been to expose this construction both in the interior and exterior, allowing the tectonics to shape the architectural character of the building. The horizontality of the entrance facade is contrasted by a vertical element housing the main staircase of the indoor bath. This vertical element also lifts the sculpture by Björn Selder that has served as a strong symbol of the folk park and is currently in storage awaiting a new placement. Color and sculptural objects such as diving towers, slides, and staircases bring a playful character to the composition, creating contrast with the building's clear sense of order.



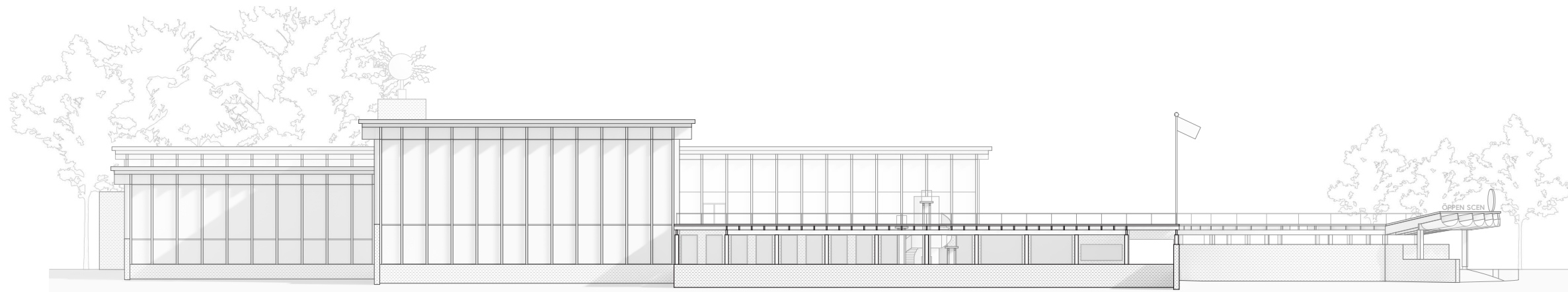
Outdoor bath.



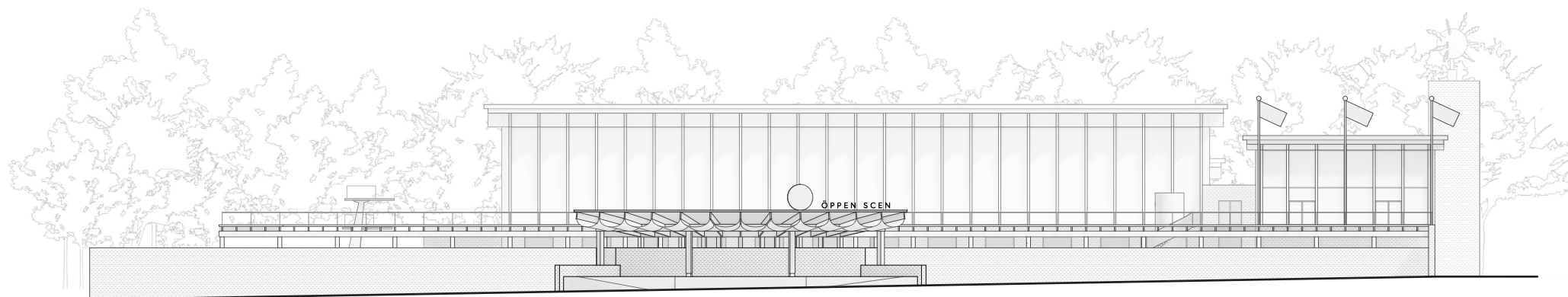
South elevation



East elevation

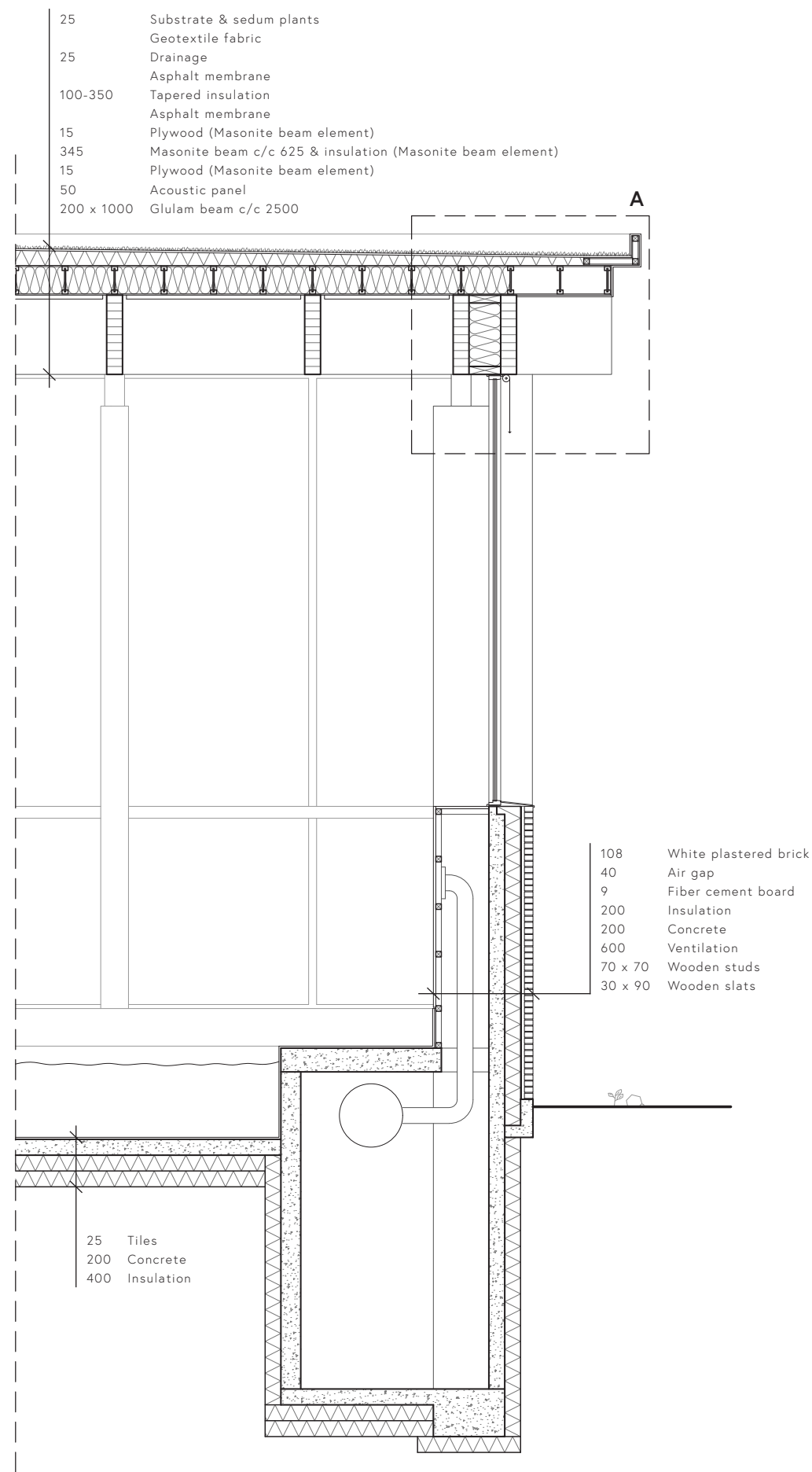


North elevation

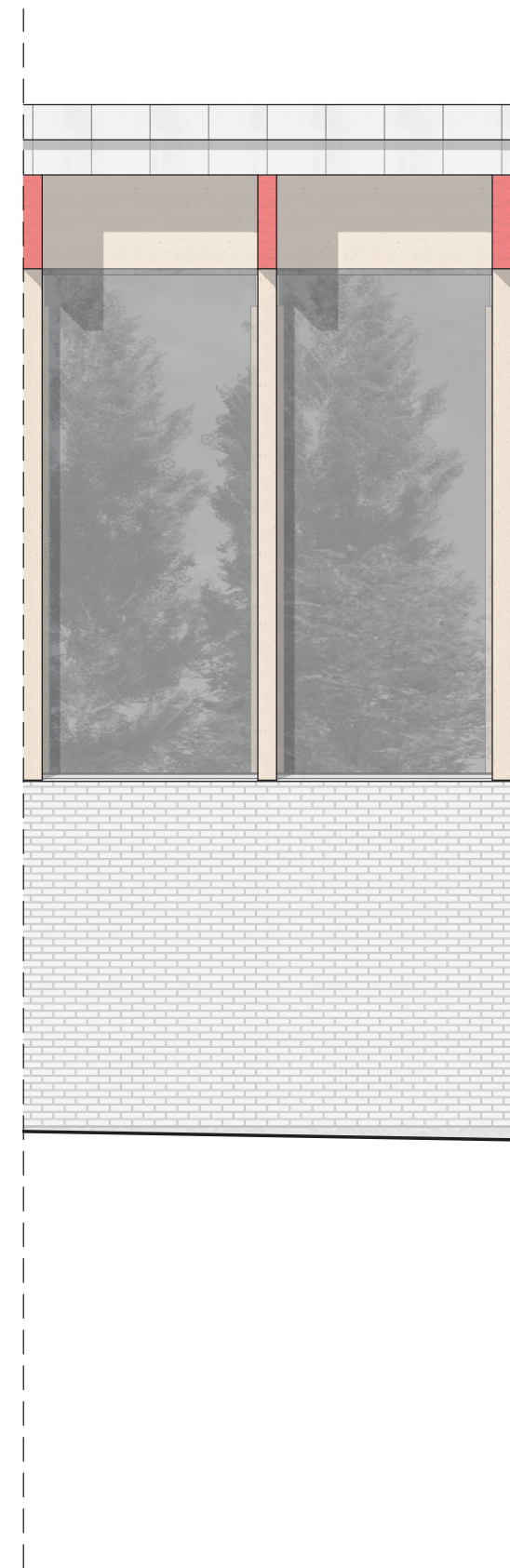


West elevation

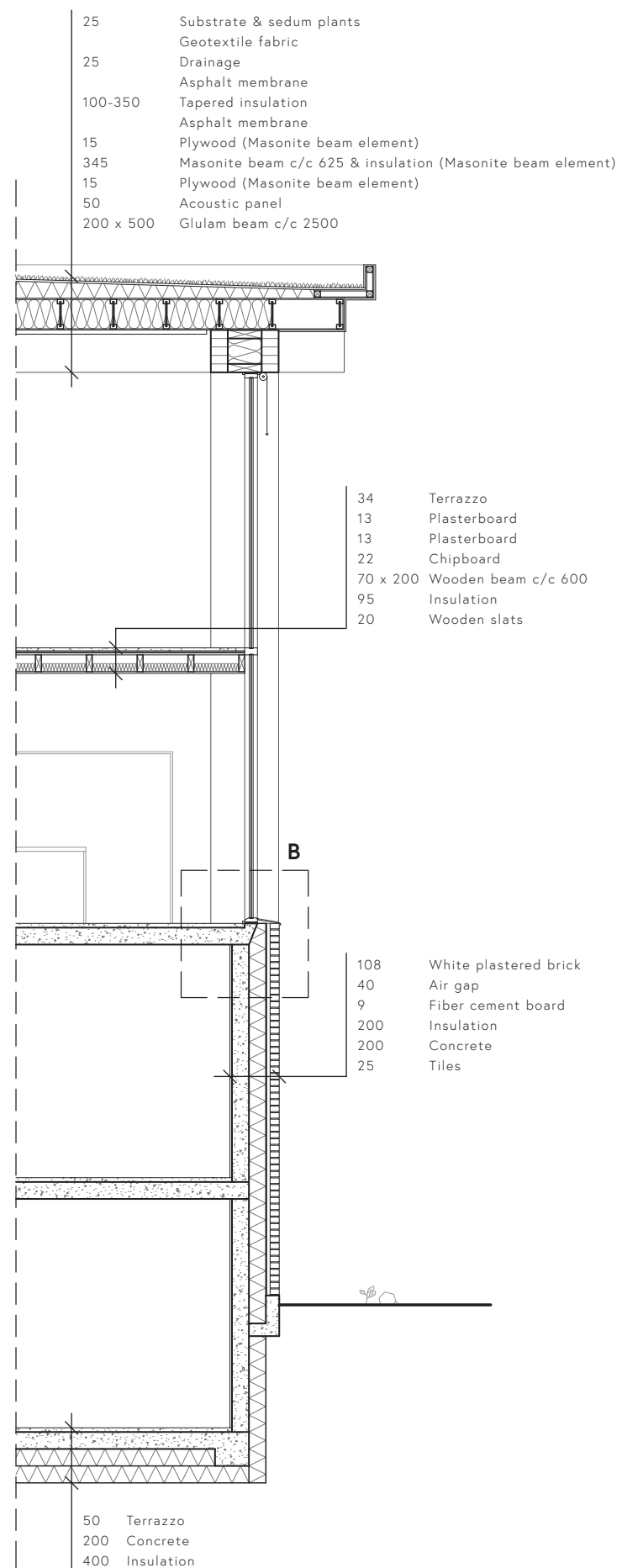
Details



Section detail



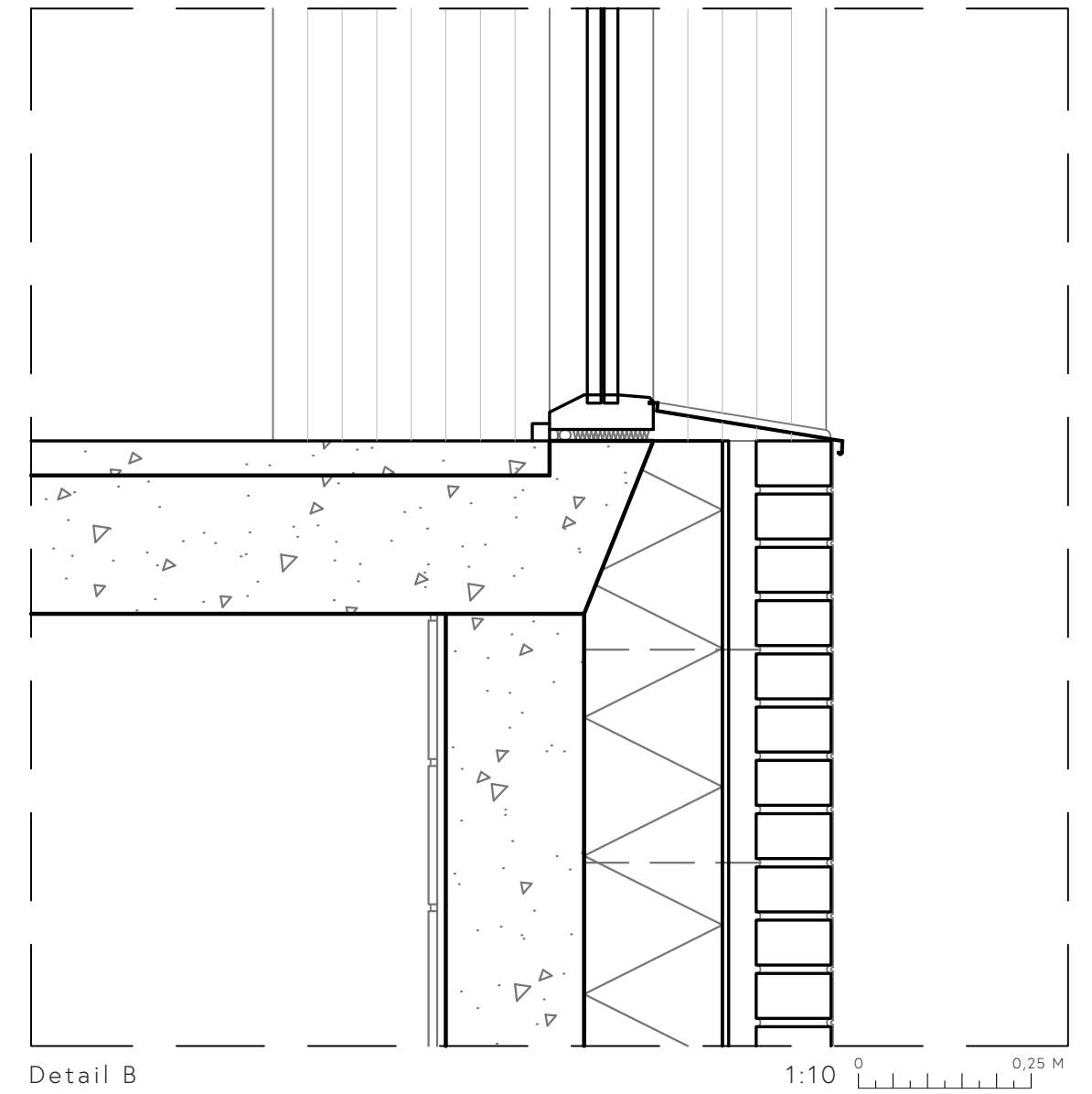
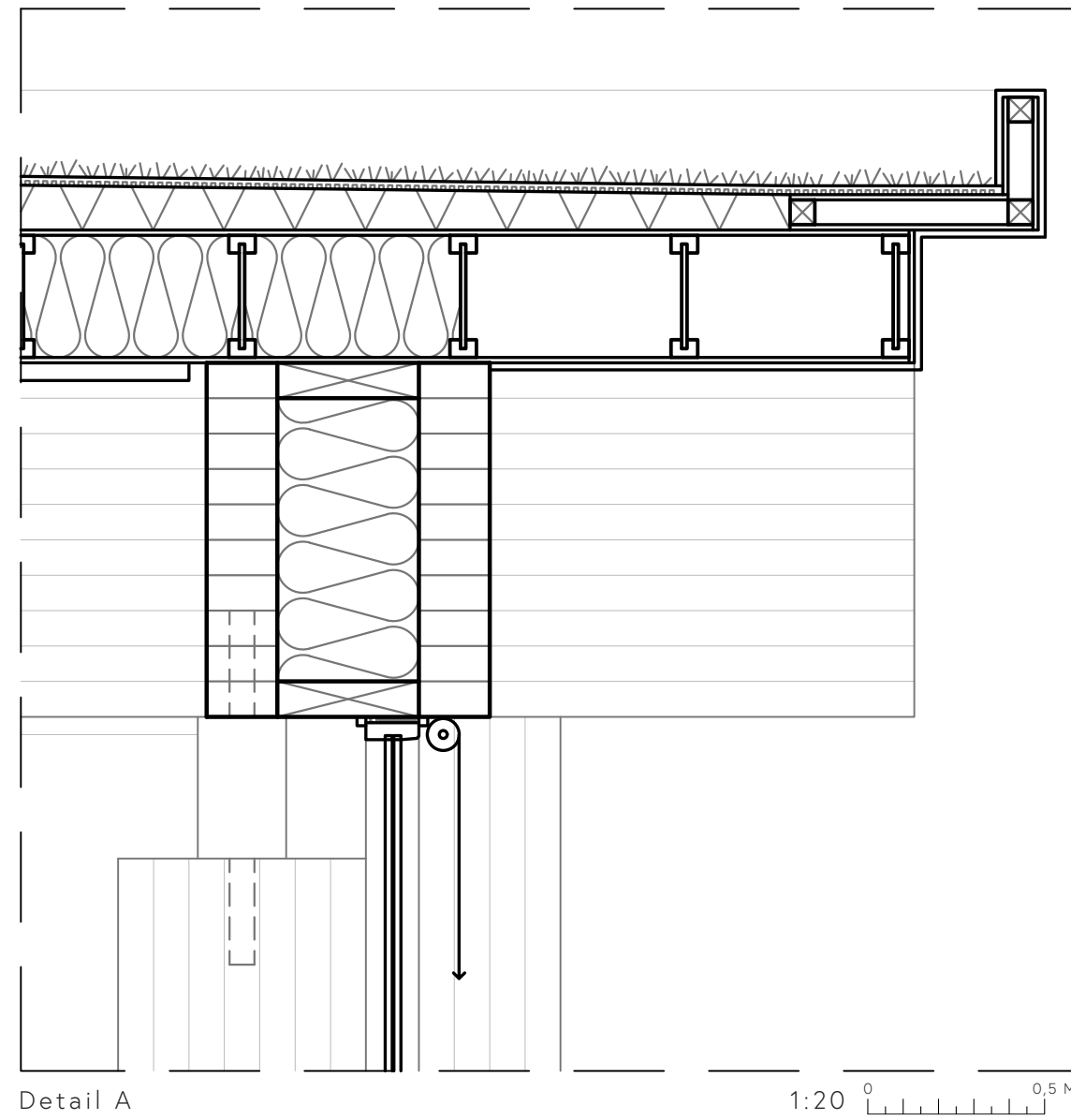
Elevation detail



Section detail



Elevation detail



Models



Site model

1:1000



Building model

1:250



Detail model

1:50

Discussion

The purpose of this master's thesis has been to design a vision with the hope of contributing to the ongoing discussion about how the former folk park area in Motala can be developed in the future. Discussions in the city are constantly ongoing, with many different interests regarding the future of the site. I believe this project has successfully combined and accommodated a wide range of functions that have been part of the debate, and that the design outcome would both benefit the residents of Motala and contribute to increased year-round visitor activity in Varamon. At the same time, many of the activities that once took place in the folk park would be preserved. I see the decision to design a public bathhouse as the main building of the area as an effective way to create a year-round perspective, where the outdoor part of the bath becomes the main attraction during the warmer months, while during the colder seasons, the indoor bath offer a variety of functions that are suitable to a broad audience.

The in-depth focus on wood construction has guided and shaped this project. The structural design has been present from the very beginning, and the goal has been to let the materials and structure define the character of the spaces. The structural elements shape the building's spaces and at the same time contribute architecturally by creating a rhythm that guides visitors through the building.

The biggest challenge in this project has been managing the complex program and translating it into a building volume that feels dynamic and well-situated in its context. I believe the decision to divide the project into multiple building volumes - separating spaces with long spans from those with shorter spans - was successful, resulting in a building that adapts to the site and offers views that enhance the spatial experience. At the same time, clear flows and spatial sequences are created, combining both intimate and more generous spaces.

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Images

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AI appendix

Chat-GPT 4 has been used in helping me translating Swedish text into English and used to grammar, and spell-check text. It has not been used to generate text.

Student background

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06.2025	Awarded scholarship in Architecture Carl Larsson Foundation
08.2024 -	Master of Science in Architecture ACEX35 Master's thesis in Architecture ACE515 Building tectonics 2 ACE425 Master's thesis prep course ACE370 Master's thesis prep course ACE530 Prototypes & Assemblages ACE360 Nordic Architecture ACE420 Architectural competitions ACE480 Building tectonics 1 ACE400 Architecture in the Anthropocene ACE380 Sustainable development and the design professions
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CHALMERS
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