

Echoes of the Sea

Profile: Building Design and Transformation

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Institution: Chalmers School of Architecture + Department of Architecture & Civil Engineering

Year of Graduation: 2026

Examiner: Mikael Ekegren

Supervisor: Filip Rem

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(MPARC)

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CHALMERS

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Abstract

As Peter Zumthor argues, when a building is loved, it acquires a kind of presence and becomes part of our emotional world.

In contemporary society, spirituality is no longer confined to religion but often found in nature and in the quiet moments that allow us to reconnect with ourselves. This thesis explores the possibility of making architecture an intermedia between nature and human. This concept intends to break the functionalism framework and instead responds to the emotional and spiritual needs of users.

The project proposes the design of a cold bathhouse on Öckerö Island, west of Gothenburg. Situated on a former recycling shoreline, the site offers dramatic rock landscapes, frame sea views, and exposure to natural forces such as wind, light, and tide. Through a site based approach, the design seeks to transform this harsh environment into a place of calmness, reflection, and sensory awareness.

By exploring the relationship between body, material, and landscape, the thesis aims to create an architecture that offers a unique spatial experience rooted in the human encounter with nature and the elements.

Background

The tradition of bathing as a ritual of purification and renewal has existed for centuries across many cultures. In Scandinavia, cold bathing has evolved from a health-related activity into a form of mental and spiritual relaxation. Besides, public bathhouses served both social and therapeutic roles, offering a shared space for meditation and reflection.

In recent decades, this tradition has been rediscovered as a response to the pressures of modern urban life. The Nordic cold bath is no longer viewed only as a physical challenge but as a practice of mindfulness—a way to reconnect body and mind through direct contact with natural elements such as water, wind, and temperature. The act of immersion becomes a ritual of humility, resilience, and inner clarity.

With growing awareness of well-being and sustainability, architecture now plays a vital role in redefining how such experiences are situated within the landscape. This project explores new possibilities for the coastal bathhouse—how it can move beyond recreation and wellness to become a non-religious spiritual space, rooted in the natural rhythms of the sea and the sensory experience of being human.

Aim and Research Questions

Aim

The aim of this thesis is to create a contemplative space that allows visitors to reconnect with the present moment and experience a sense of calm and reflection. The design draws inspiration from spiritual architecture, particularly in the use of light, interaction with natural elements, and spatial organization, to support activities such as meditation and mindful contemplation. In addition, the project responds to the local Nordic context, incorporating features familiar to residents, such as a cold-water bathing area, to create a space that is both culturally relevant and conducive to spiritual practice.

Questions

How can architectural space evoke a spiritual experience through the interplay of natural and spatial manipulation?

Delimitations

This project is limited by its speculative nature and the lack of detailed technical resolution at this stage. While the design explores spatial sequence and atmospheric experience, aspects such as structural feasibility, material detailing, and environmental performance remain at a conceptual level. In addition, the transformation of a former recycling site into a sensitive coastal landscape is proposed as an architectural intention rather than a fully resolved ecological strategy.

Theories

Nature elements integration

Tadao Ando emphasizes that architecture is experienced through the relationship between human beings and nature, created by elements such as light, wind, water, and emptiness (Ando, 2012). As he notes, Architecture is not only about physical form, but about creating places for the spirit. Through the careful manipulation of natural phenomena, Ando demonstrates that nature is not merely a background to architecture, but an active force that shapes the emotional and spiritual experience of space (Ando, 2012).



Figure 1. Azuma House (Row House in Sumiyoshi), Osaka, Japan. (Ando, 2012).

In azuma house (Tado Ando 1975), the courtyard serves in a highly artificial way, it brings a fragment of nature into the house. This represents the second theme in Tadao Ando's architecture. For him, architecture is a way of observing and experiencing nature.

Genius loci

The Romans believed that landscapes were the outer manifestations of inner living spirits, and that every place was protected by its own guardian. It can be a refinement of the site's characteristics — the very essence of the place. Architecture, therefore, should not dominate the landscape, but reveal and strengthen the spirit already embedded within it through elements such as light, material, topography, wind, and spatial atmosphere (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).



Figure 2. Can Lis, Mallorca, Spain. (ArchDaily, n.d.).

Can Lis (Jørn Utzon, 1971) grows directly from the character of the site. The project responds to the coastal landscape through its use of local stone, orientation toward the sea, and sensitivity to light and wind. Rather than dominating nature, the building allows the landscape itself to shape the spatial experience.

Spatial Sequence and Movement – Architecture as Journey

Spatial sequence and movement can be understood as a phenomenological approach to architecture, where space is experienced not as a static object but as a continuous journey. Through bodily movement, architecture is revealed as a series of spatial conditions—compression and release, darkness and light, enclosure and openness—where perception unfolds gradually over time. (Zumthor, 2006)

Compared to modern architectural approaches that often prioritise visual form, meaning is instead constructed through embodied experience. Circulation, thresholds, and framed views become key elements that structure how space is perceived, with both focused and peripheral sensations contributing to the understanding of place.

Juhani Pallasmaa describes phenomenology as a multisensory experience, where peripheral perception, touch, and sound are as important as vision, allowing the body to become immersed in space rather than remaining an observer (Pallasmaa, 2012).

This idea is further connected to place identity. Christian Norberg-Schulz argues that the meaning of place is shaped not only by its physical form but also by cultural associations, memory, and atmosphere, which together create a sense of belonging (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

Grounded in Zumthor's atmosphere, Pallasmaa's multisensory perception, and Norberg-Schulz's genius loci, spatial sequence and movement can be understood as a phenomenological framework where architecture is experienced as an embodied and contextual journey.

Project

The project aims to create a non-religious spiritual space: a coastal cold bathhouse on Öckerö Island, west of Gothenburg. The former recycling site, shaped by rocks, strong sea winds, and framed views, holds the potential for spiritual architecture and a space of retreat.

Spirituality in this space is expressed through spatial sequence and design strategies rather than religious symbols. The cold bath becomes a ritual of awareness, evoking attention to the present moment through spatial and atmospheric design. Architecture plays the role of a threshold between shelter and exposure, warmth and cold, silence and sound.

Through a moderate intervention, this project proposes transforming a damaged coastline into an everyday spiritual landscape—a place of solitude, renewal, and dialogue with nature

Methods

Theoretical exploration – studying reference projects, drawing lessons from existing built environments, and reviewing literature that clarifies the defining stages of the design process.

Site analysis – observing natural limits, climatic influences, and the unique character of the place (genius loci).

Model making (site model) – constructing a site model as a tool for experimentation and testing.

Model making (conceptual and scaled models) – translating drawings into models at varying scales, such as concept, overview, and detail models, to investigate spatial relationships.

Sketching – visualizing theories, movement patterns, and spatial qualities through freehand sketches.

Architectural drawings – illustrating the design development, from massing and volume placement to technical detailing.

Discussions – reflecting on the project's goals, challenges encountered, and milestones achieved throughout the process.

Conclusion – evaluating whether the architectural outcome aligns with the initial intentions, identifying lessons learned, and considering directions for further development.

Expexted Results

The expected outcome of this thesis is a spatial and experiential proposal that demonstrates how architecture can evoke spirituality and self-awareness through direct contact with nature—without relying on religious symbols or narratives.

A comprehensive design proposal for a coastal cold bathhouse on Öckerö Island, including conceptual, spatial, and detailed drawings.

A series of physical and digital models exploring the relationship between water, light, and topography.

Atmospheric studies illustrating how light, material, and temperature affect perception and emotional response.

Documentation and reflection connecting theoretical research, site analysis, and design experimentation into a coherent architectural argument.

Case study

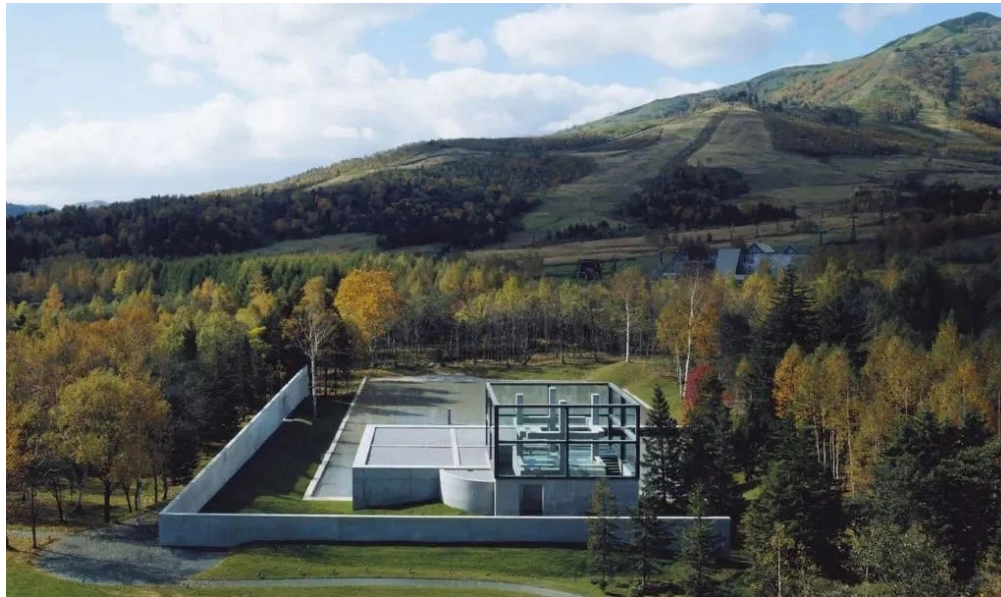


Figure 3. Church on the Water, Hokkaido, Japan. (ArchDaily, n.d.).

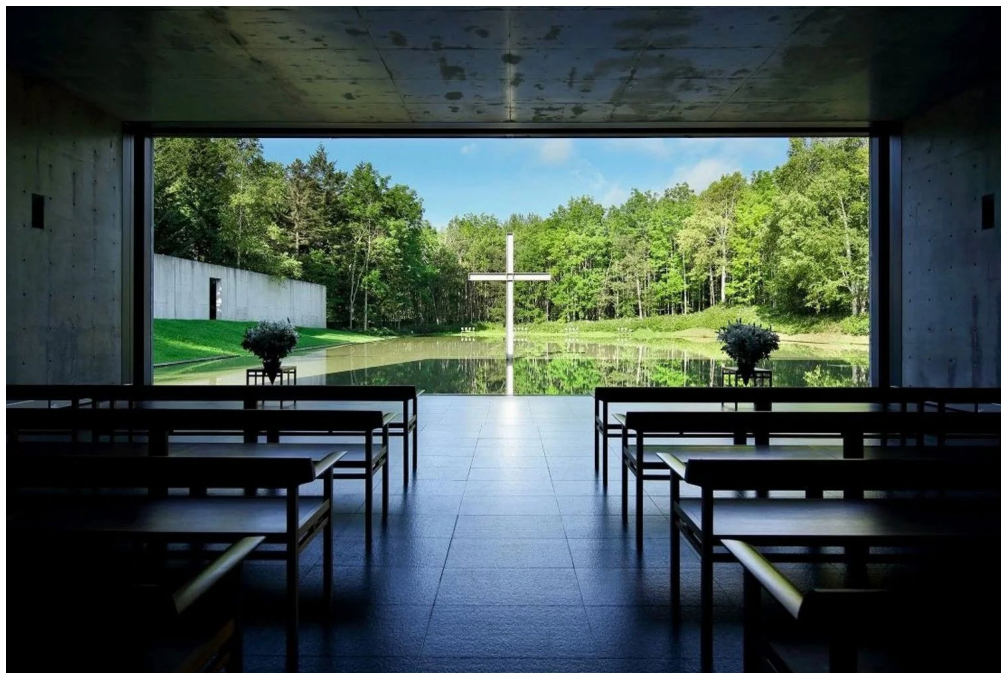


Figure 4. Interior view of Church on the Water. (ArchDaily, n.d.).

Church of water, Tadao Ando (1988)

Integration with nature: Tadao Ando aims to introduce natural elements into architecture so that people can also experience the beauty of nature while inside the church. Through large areas of glass curtain walls and the integration with the reflecting pool, the building blends with the surrounding forest, sky, and other natural landscapes.

Pure spatial experience: Creating a simple and pure space where people can focus on religious rituals and inner contemplation, free from external noise and complexity.

The experience is structured as a progression from enclosure to openness, from darkness to light, and from controlled interior space to an exposed natural environment (Ando, 2012).

Spatial sequence

Entrance compression

A narrow, enclosed, and dimly lit entrance corridor that heightens bodily awareness before entering the main space.

Linear circulation

A long corridor guides movement forward while restricting views, emphasizing the act of walking.

Transition / turn

A change in direction introduces spatial shift and begins to suggest openness.

Emergence of light

Natural light gradually appears, creating anticipation and contrast with the dark interior.

Spatial release

The space opens up to the outdoor water courtyard, creating a strong sense of expansion.

Nature + symbolic focus

Water, sky, and the cross align visually, merging natural elements with spiritual symbolism.

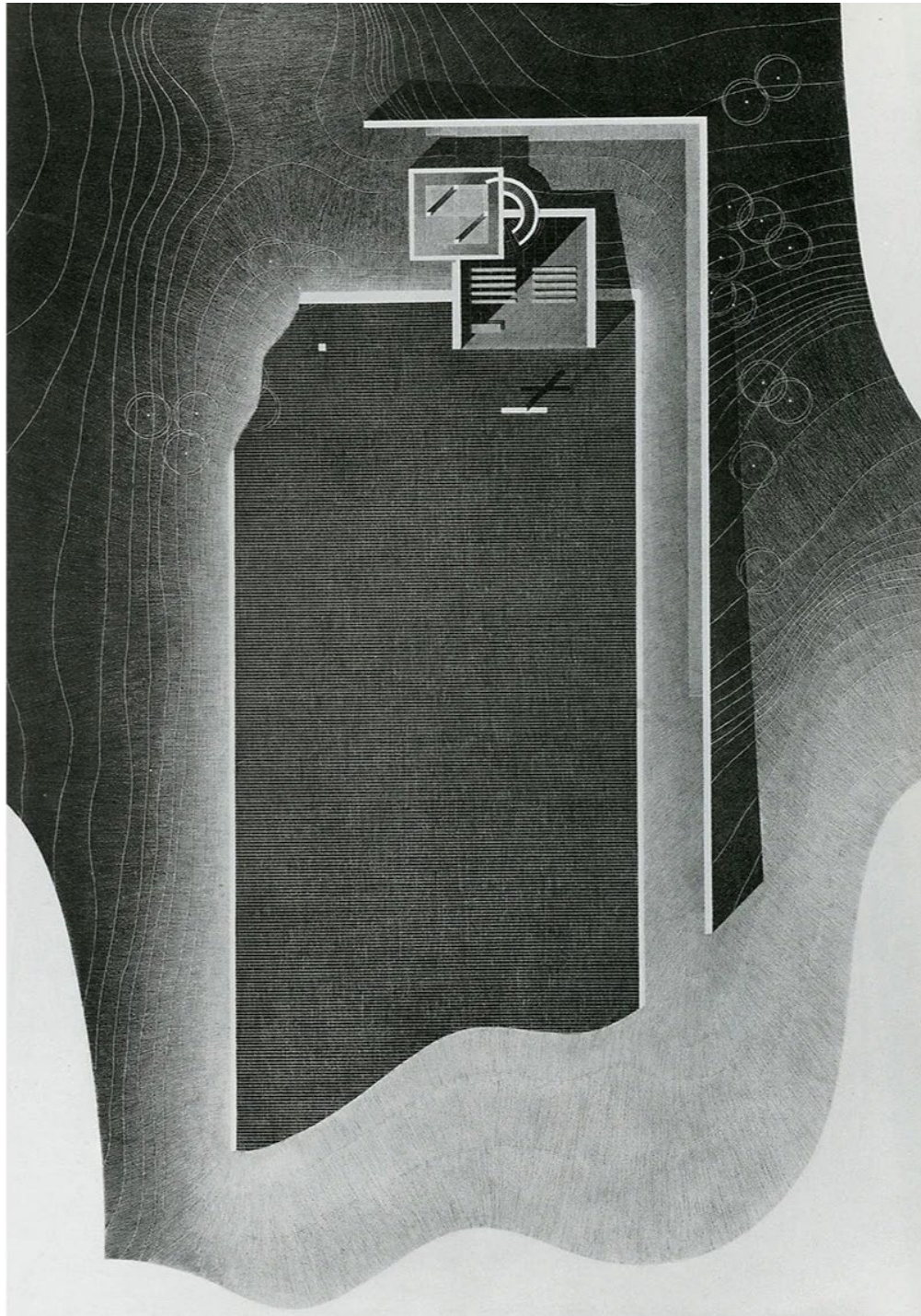


Figure 5. Church on the Water site plan. (ArchDaily, n.d.).

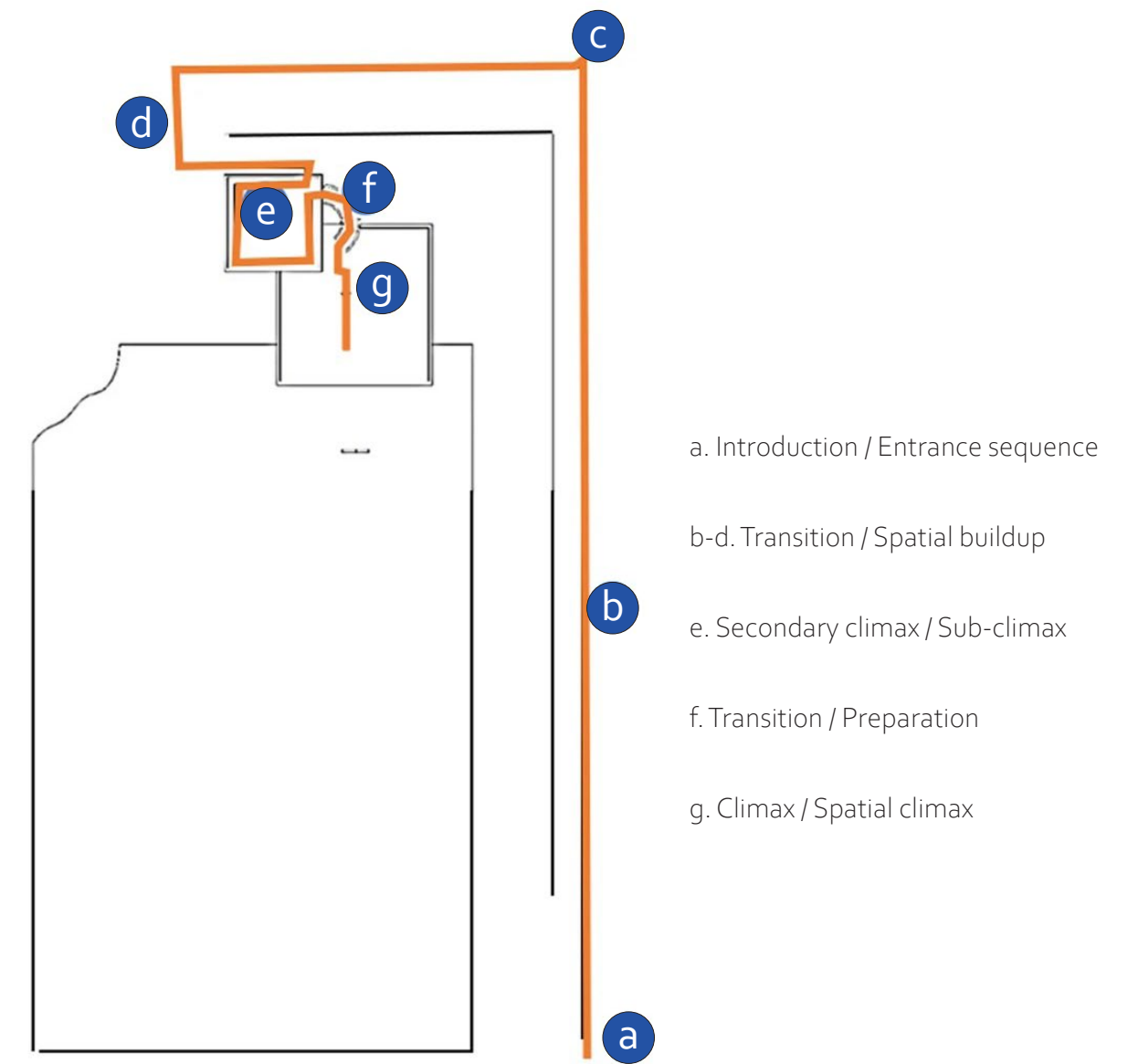


Figure 6. Spatial sequence analysis of Church on the Water. Adapted by author.



Figure 7. Karlshamn Cold Bath House, Sweden. (White Arkitekter, n.d.).



Figure 8. Karlshamn Cold Bath House exterior view. (White Arkitekter, n.d.).

Karlshamn cold bath house (2015)

A classic symbol of Swedish cultural heritage reinterpreted with a modern twist – the award-winning bathhouse fulfils a Swedish coastal town's dream.

A common room with an adjoining terrace are flanked on one side by the women's sauna and the opposite side is balanced with the men's sauna.

Designed to maximise the dramatic view of the bay, the saunas are located near the stairs for easy access into the cool water below. Sun terraces are designed to receive as much sun exposure as possible while simultaneously offering protection from the wind.

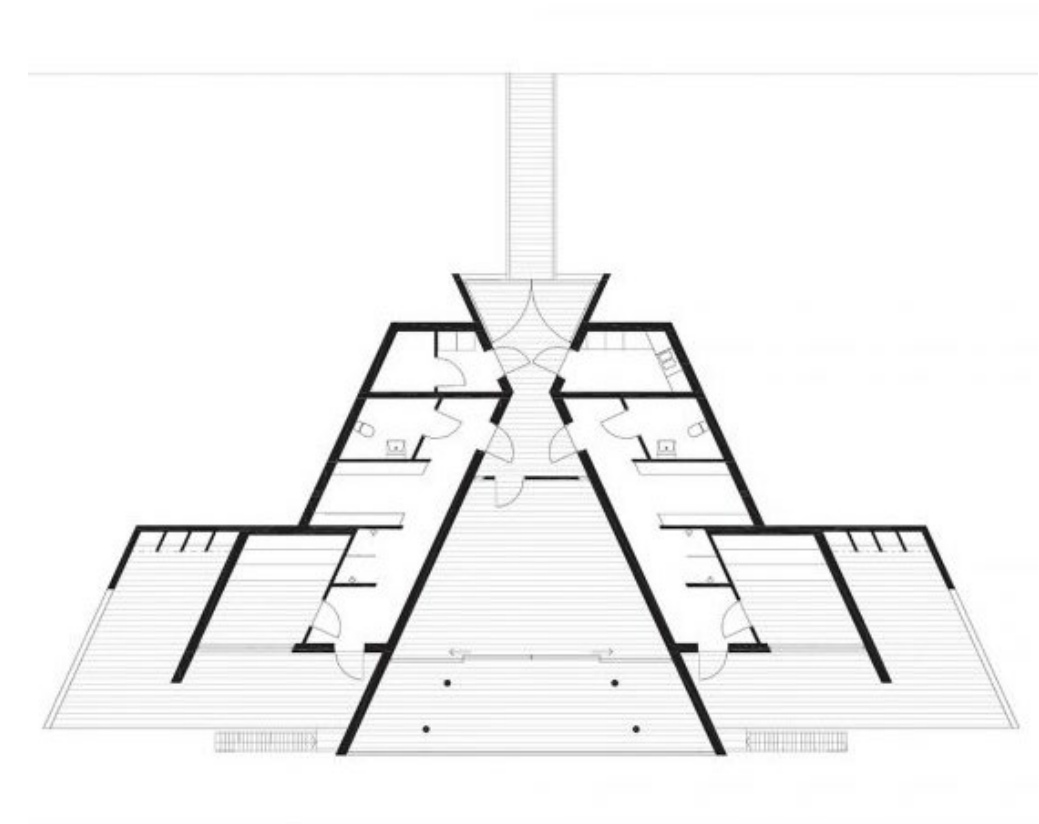


Figure 9. Karlshamn Cold Bath House floor plan. (White Arkitekter, n.d.).

Leça Swimming Pools (1966)

Álvaro Siza's Leça Swimming Pools demonstrate how architecture can operate as a continuation of the coastal landscape rather than an imposed object. By embedding the pools within the existing granite topography, the project dissolves the boundary between built form and natural terrain, allowing material, water, and geology to merge into a unified spatial condition (Ferreira & Genin, 2024).

The spatial experience is carefully orchestrated through movement and sequence. Instead of immediately revealing the sea, Siza constructs a controlled progression from land to water, using walls and angled paths to temporarily block views. This compression heightens sensory awareness—particularly sound and anticipation—before gradually releasing the body toward the open horizon (Ferreira & Genin, 2024).

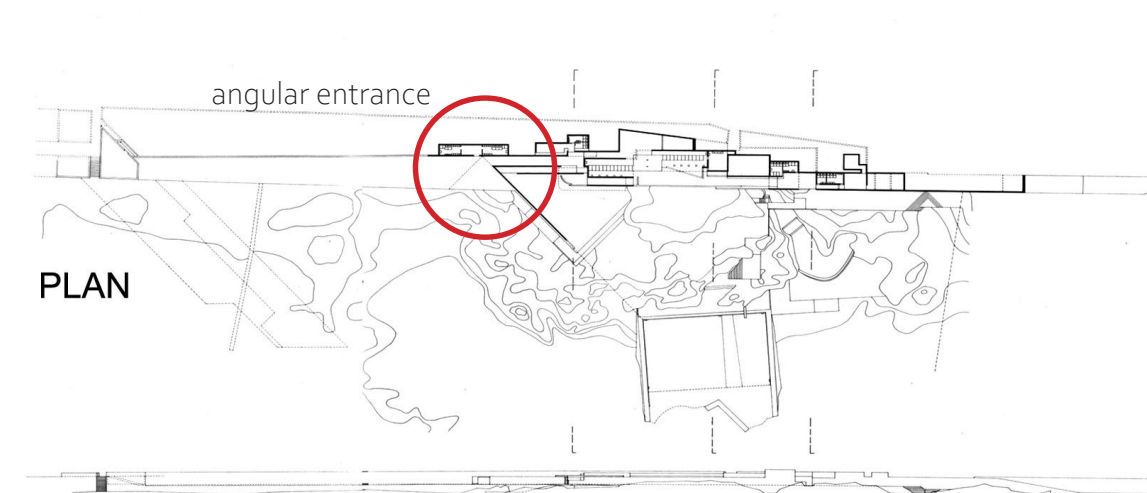


Figure 10. Leça Swimming Pools, Portugal. (Ferreira & Genin, 2024).

Before seeing the expansive view of the ocean, Siza created tension by guiding visitors to walk in a dark and narrow space.

Architecture can be integrated into natural topography rather than placed on top of it. Spatial sequence can be used to control perception and intensify sensory experience. Limiting visual access (blocking views) can enhance awareness of other senses such as sound and movement.

The transition from enclosure to openness strengthens the relationship between body, landscape, and water.

Movement becomes a design tool to construct a gradual dialogue between architecture and nature (Ferreira & Genin, 2024).

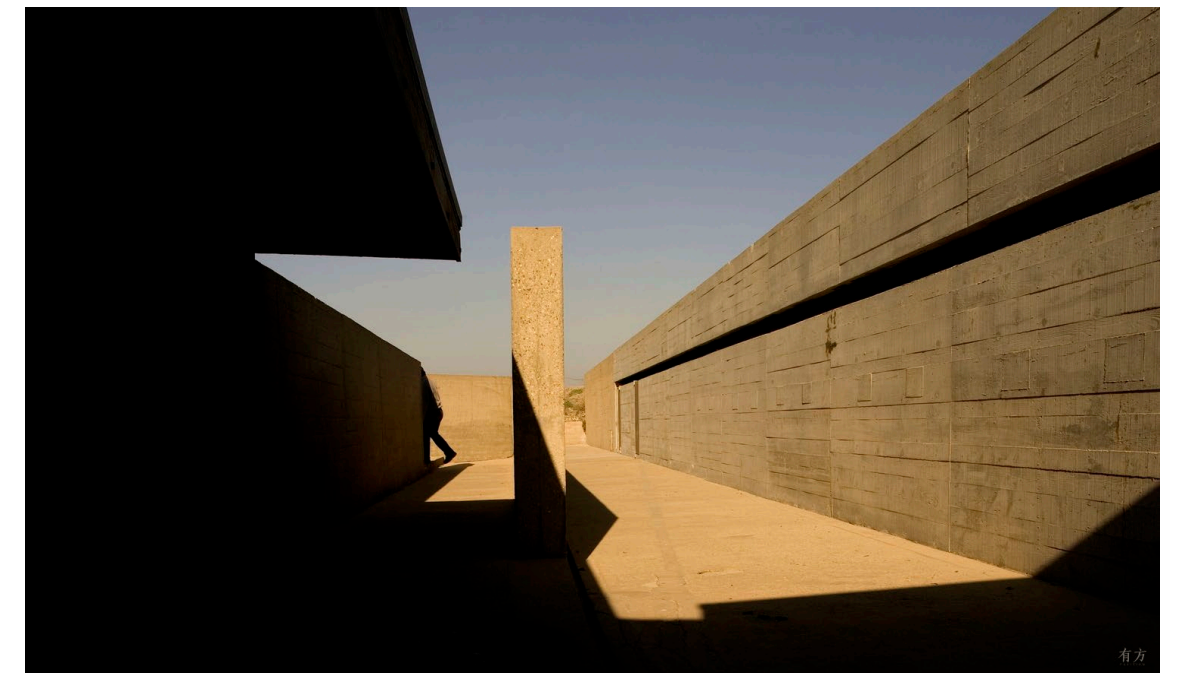


Figure 11. Leça Swimming Pools circulation sequence. (Ferreira & Genin, 2024).

Siza used a winding circulation path to create a rich sense of depth and spatial progression at the entrance. At the same time, variations in lighting—through dimly lit zones and gradually changing light conditions in transitional corridors—prepare the experience for the final, more expansive and open space.

Site Context – Öckerö Island, Sweden

This project is located on Öckerö Island, part of the northern Gothenburg archipelago on Sweden’s west coast.

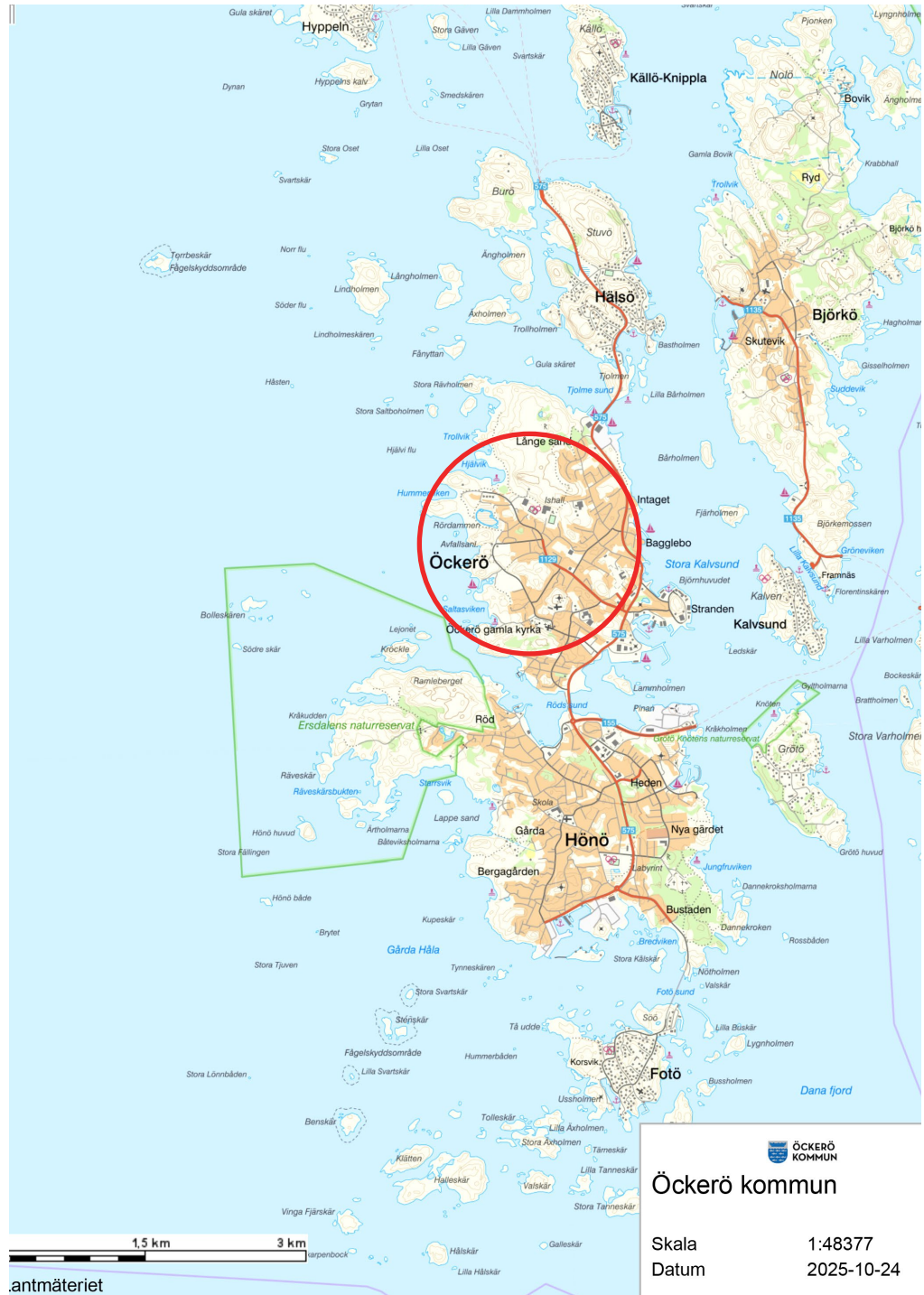
Around 3,500 residents live on Öckerö (Öckerö Municipality, 2024).

According to Swedish shoreline protection regulations, coastal areas are protected to preserve ecological and public values (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2024).

Shorelines are usually made of granite with spares vegetations.

School, church, and public facilities are usually in the middle of the island.

The site lies on the island’s western shore, where strong west winds meet granite coastal rock. Despite some terrain alterations, it retains a strong sense of place, characterized by solitude and resilience.



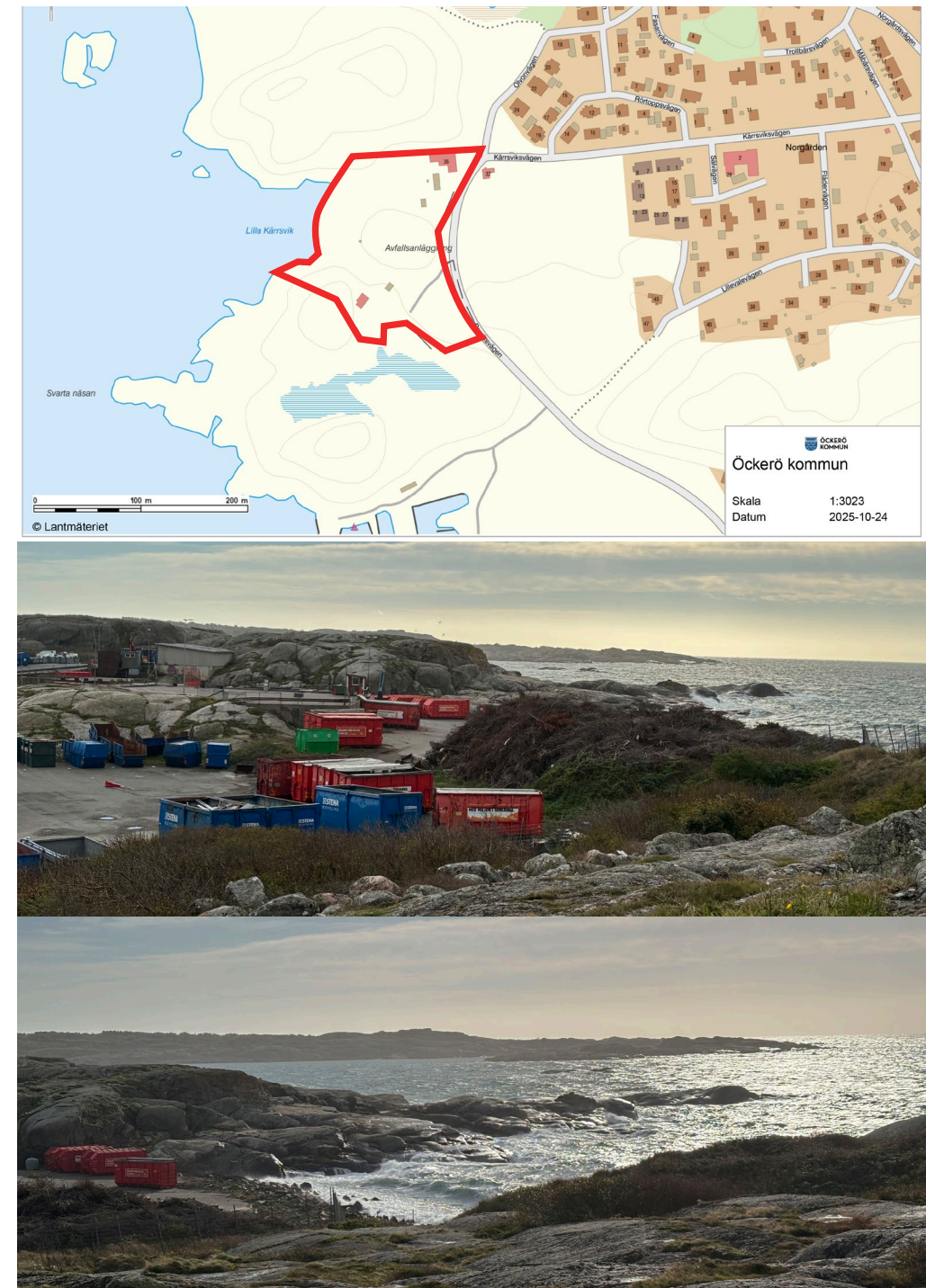
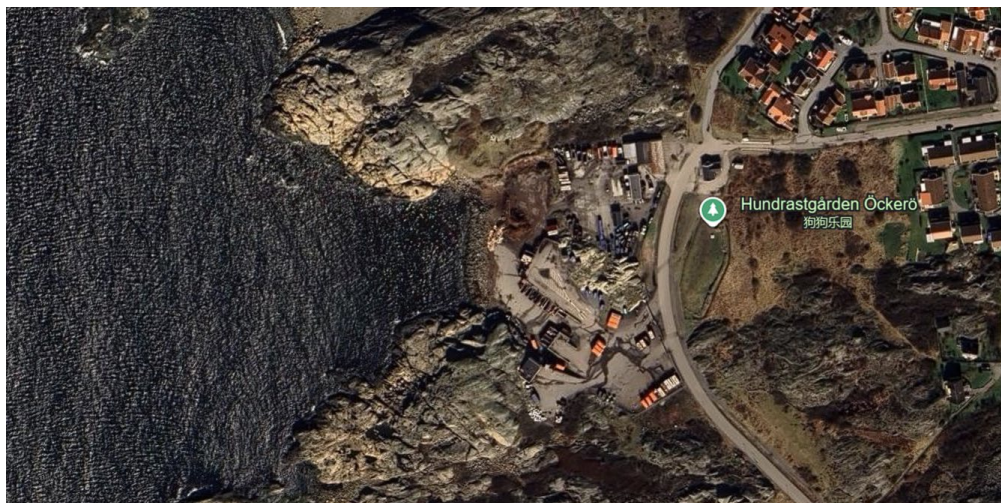
Information of KÄRRSVIK

The Kärrsvik site offers a unique opportunity for development along the west coast, opening directly to the ocean. Historically, it served as a waste disposal point, and today functions as a regulated recycling centre. According to Öckerö's plan, the recycling centre will be relocated to Hönö, freeing the site for new architectural possibilities.

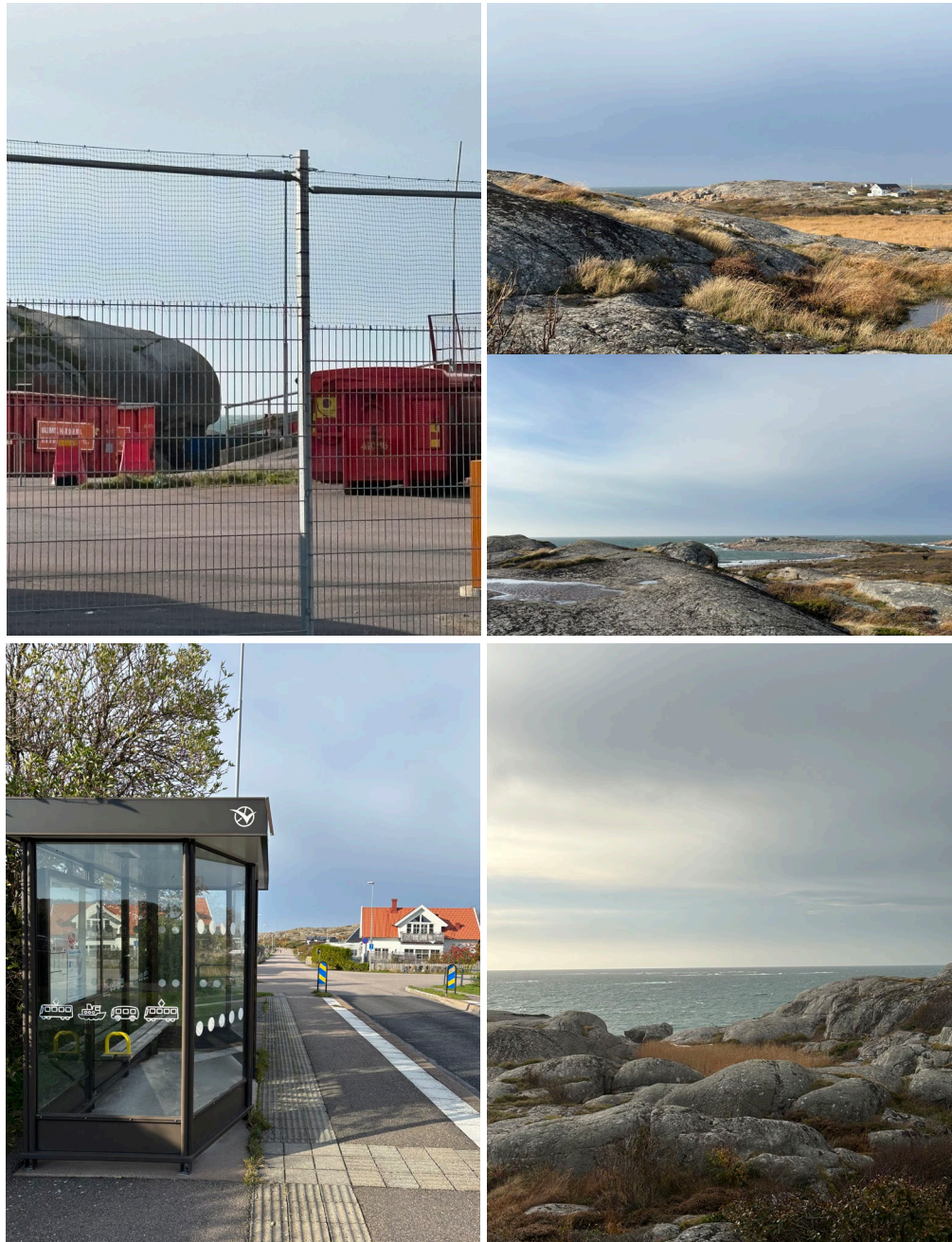
The plot is framed by rock formations to the north and south, the open sea to the west, and an access road with a walking trail to the east. A central granite rock rises above the leveled, tarred ground, remaining the site's only natural feature. Residential areas lie just 50 meters away, and a nearby bus station connects to Öckerö, Hönö, and the ferry to Göteborg.

Most natural qualities of the site have been lost, except for the central rock. The Skärgårdsleden trail runs along the opposite side of the street and does not directly connect to the plot.

Öckerö municipality envisions spaces that encourage public gathering, year-round activity, and support younger residents while reinforcing the islands' maritime identity (Öckerö Municipality, n.d.). With thoughtful architectural design, the site can become a landmark that provides a functional, attractive space throughout the year.



Impressions of infrastructure



Impressions of local community



Impressions of nature

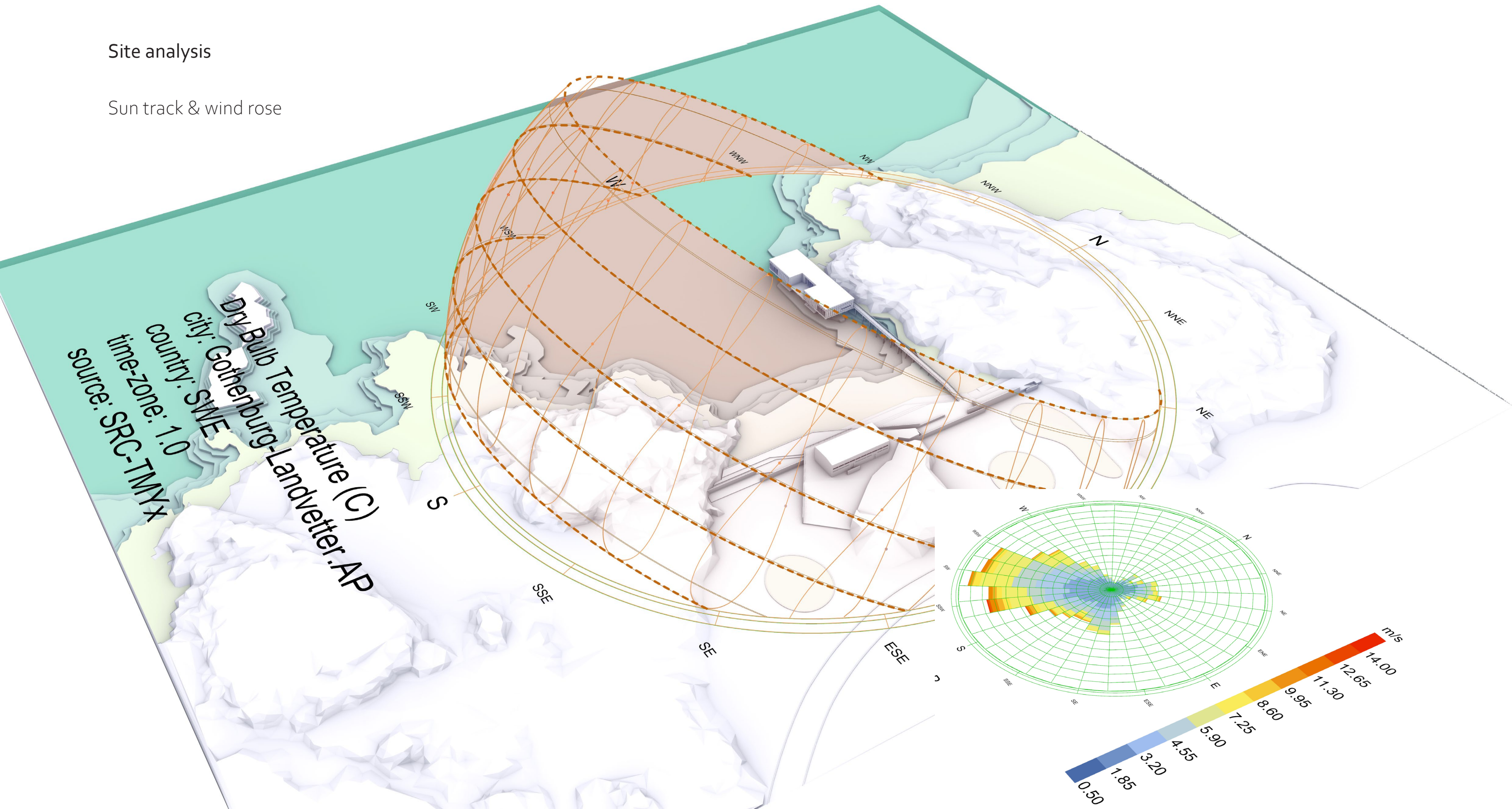


Impressions of local materials

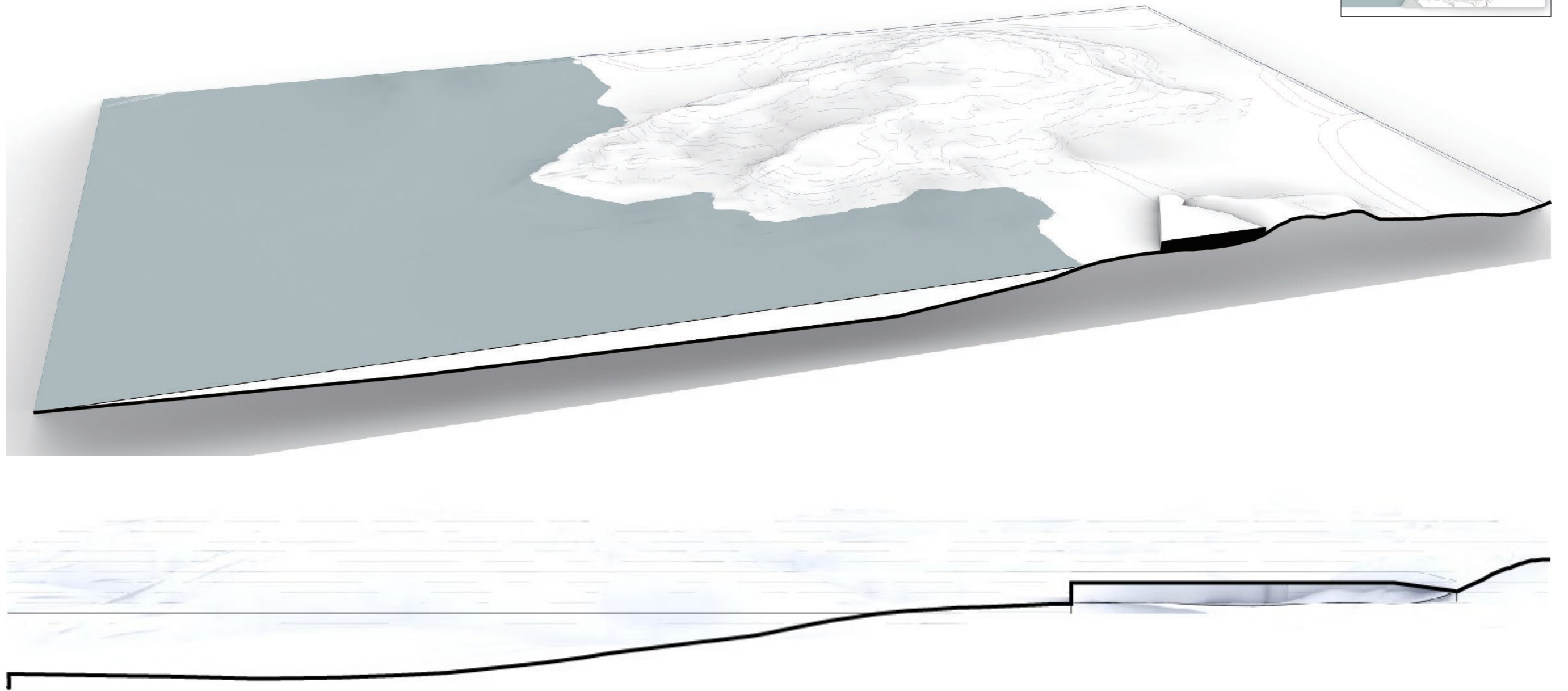
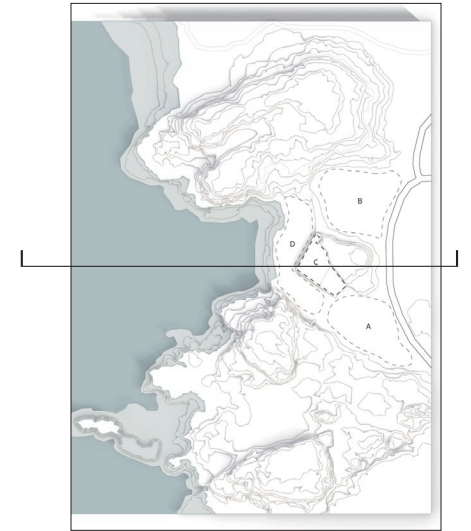


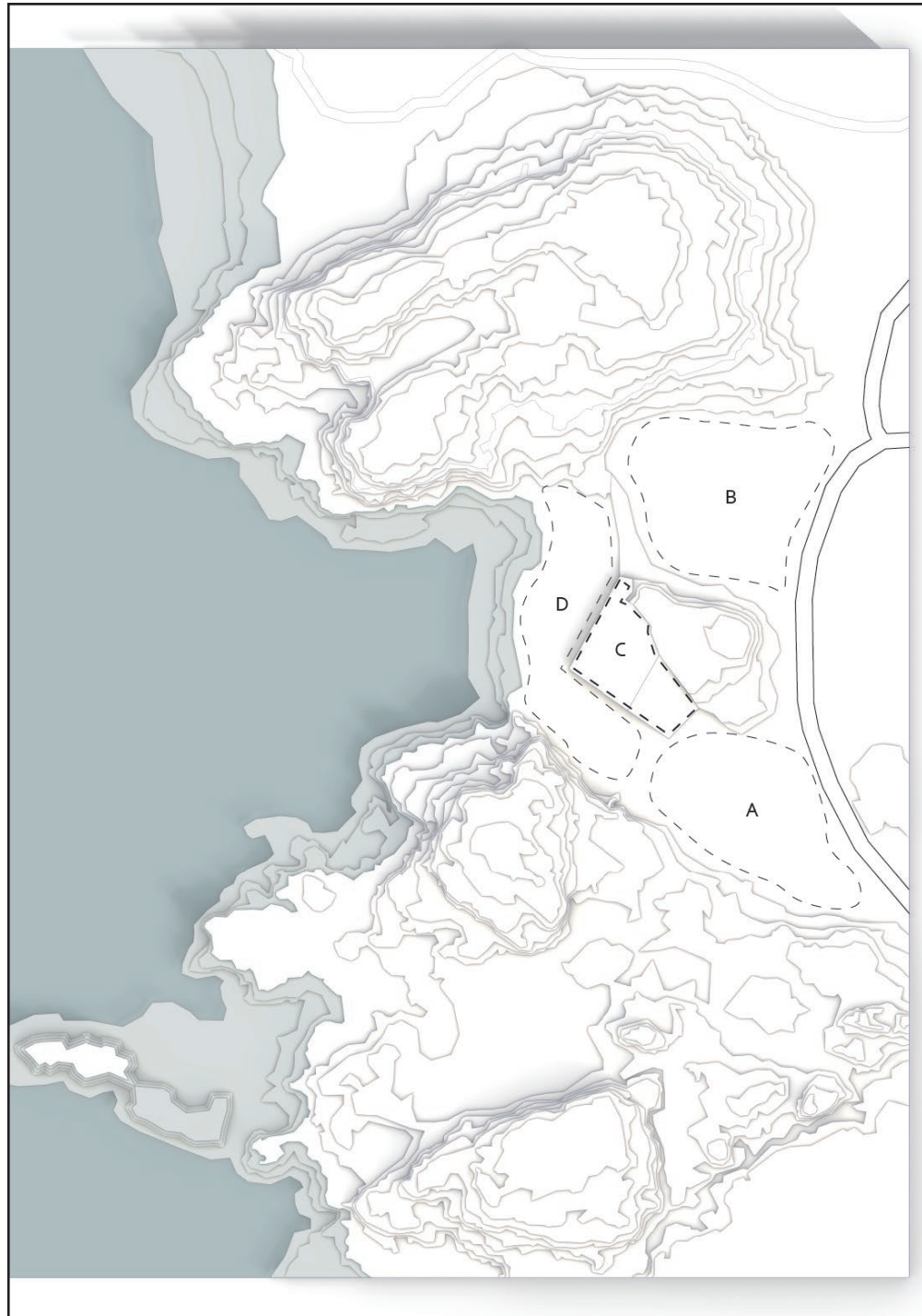
Site analysis

Sun track & wind rose



Site Section





Zone A

Zone A is the primary arrival area of the site, first encountered by visitors arriving from the Hönö ferry terminal. Functioning as a key entrance node, it provides access to both the shoreline and the adjacent parking area for vehicles.

Zone B

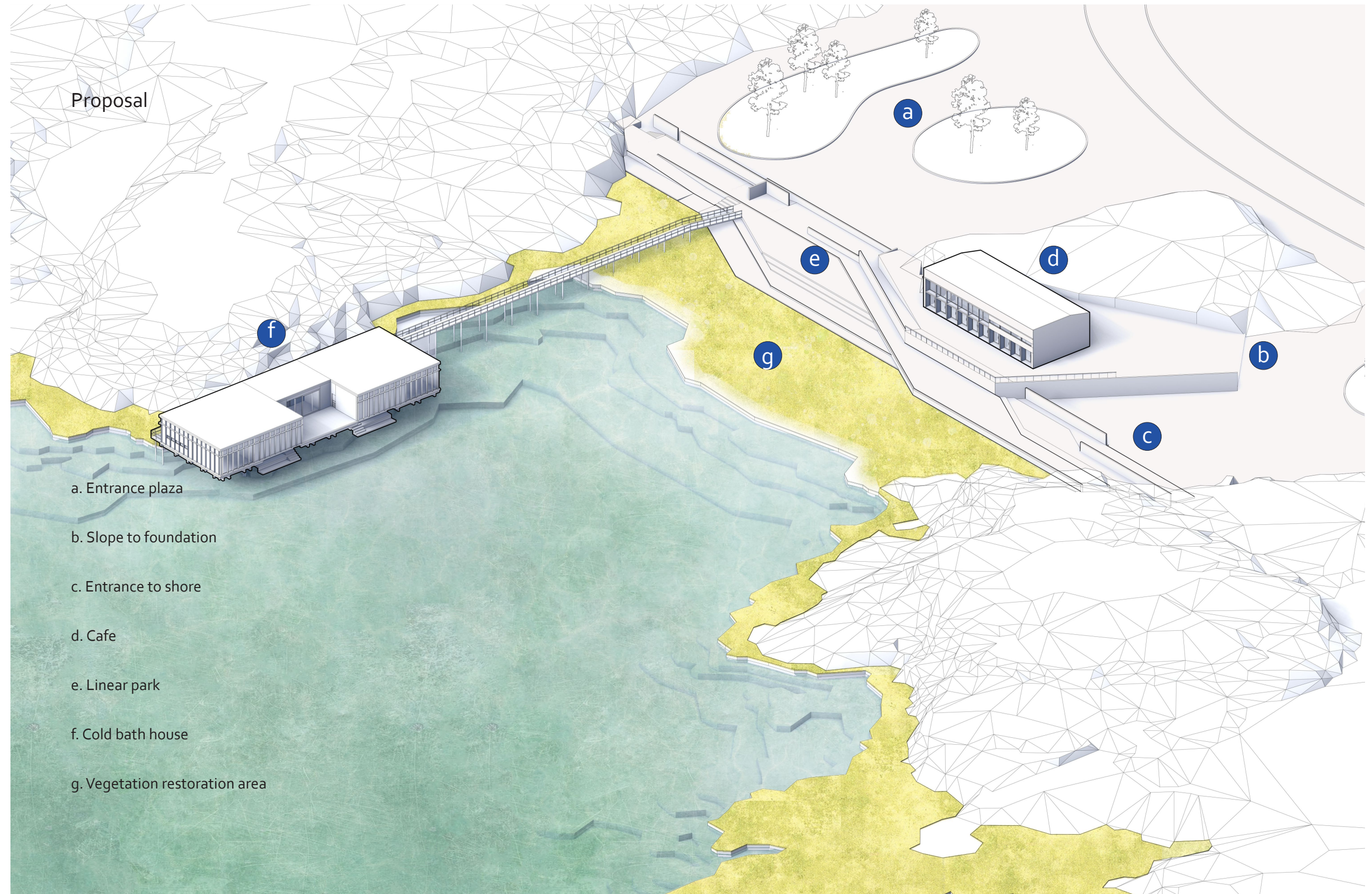
Zone B benefits from southern daylight exposure. The hills and existing concrete foundations provide protection from sea winds and create a more enclosed spatial character by partially blocking direct views of the ocean. These conditions make the area particularly suitable as a welcoming entrance zone.

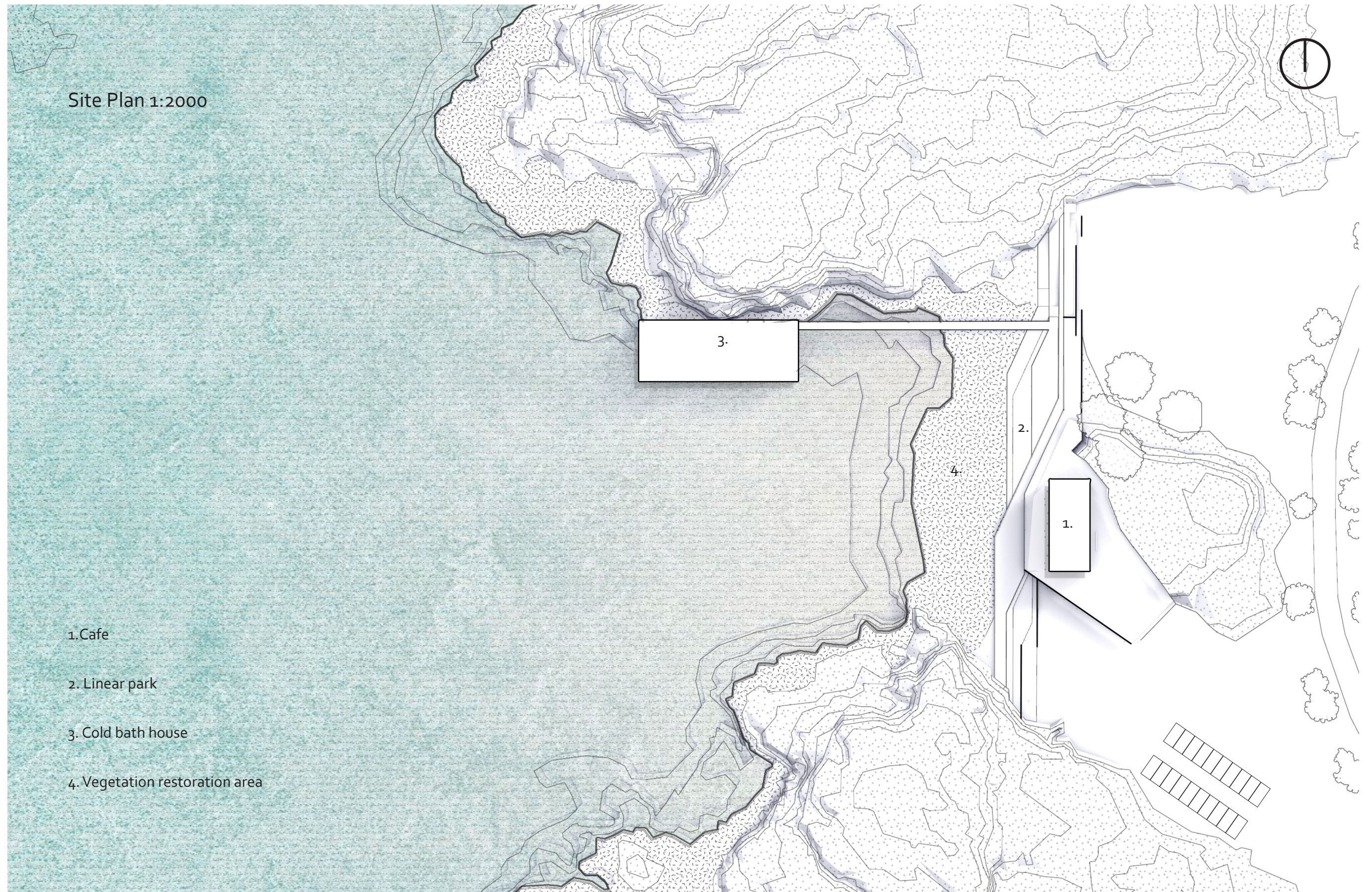
Zone C

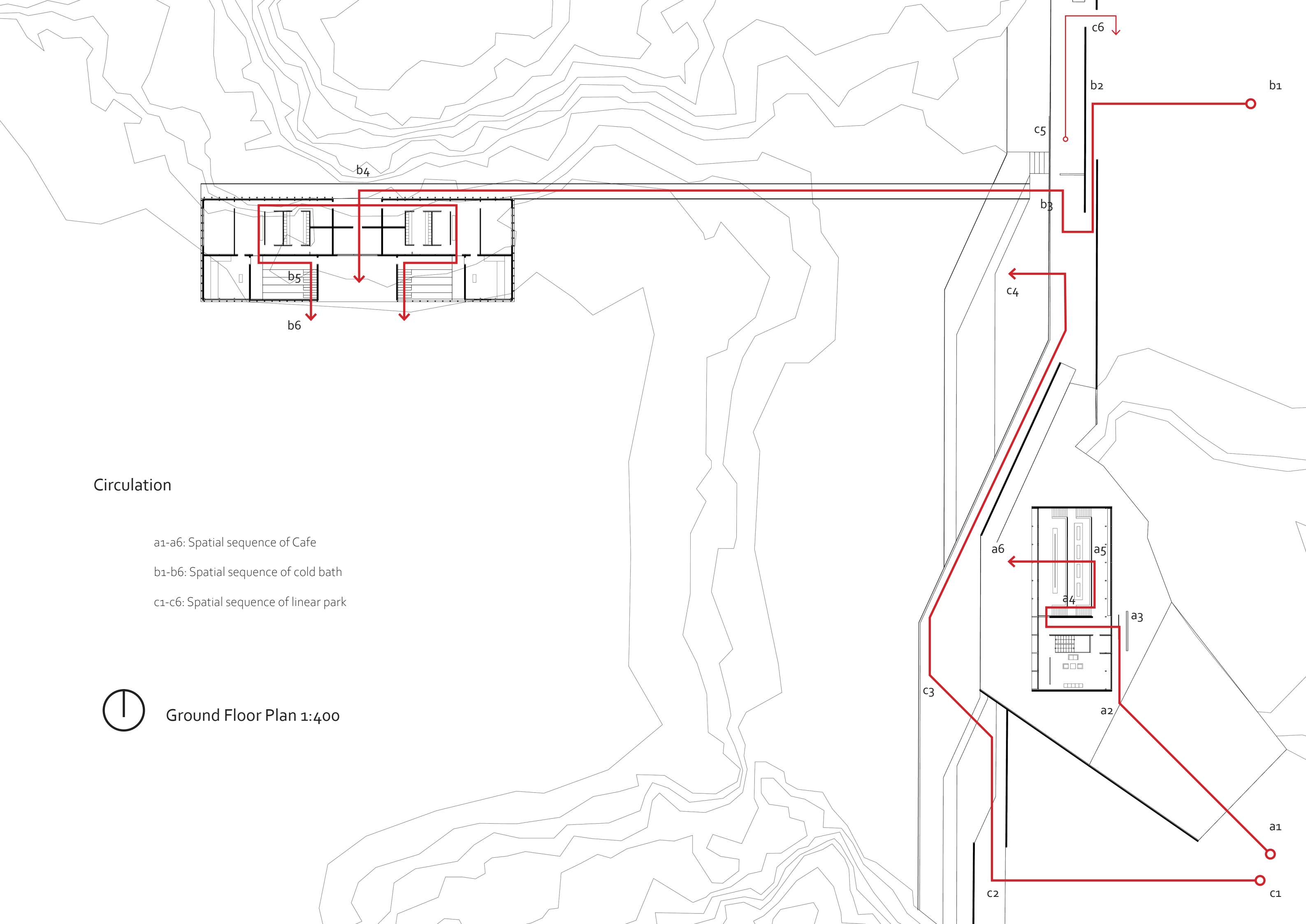
Zone C is a concrete and stone plateau that occupies a prominent position overlooking the site. Due to its exposed location, strong winds can be experienced on the foundation. However, a small rocky hill interrupts the physical and visual connection between this plateau and Zone B.

Zone D

Zone D has been impacted by asphalt paving, reducing its natural qualities. However, it enjoys outstanding views of the surrounding rock formations. The area presents an opportunity for landscape restoration, where vegetation can be re-established to match the ecological and visual character of the neighboring shores.







Circulation

a1-a6: Spatial sequence of Cafe

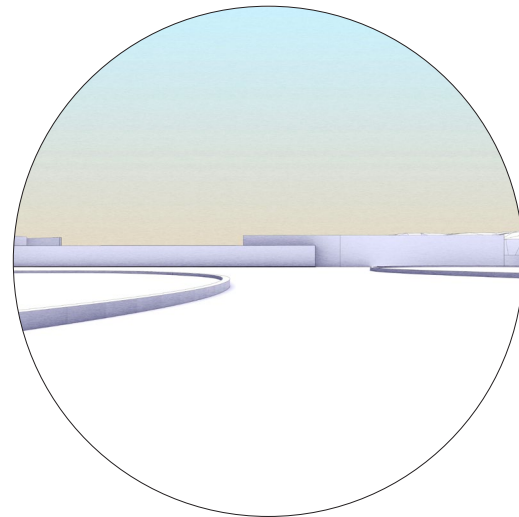
b1-b6: Spatial sequence of cold bath

c1-c6: Spatial sequence of linear park

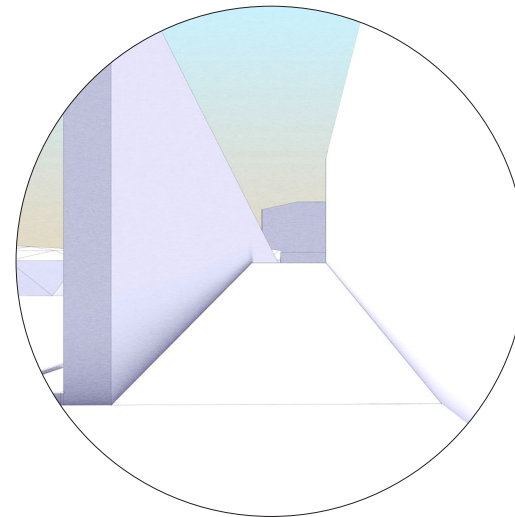


Ground Floor Plan 1:400

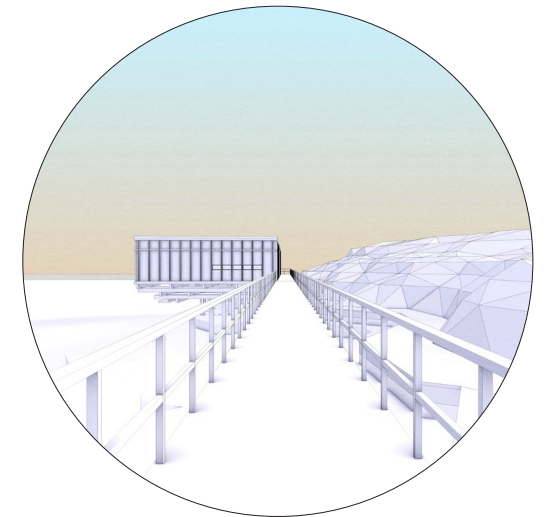
Sequence - Cold Bath House



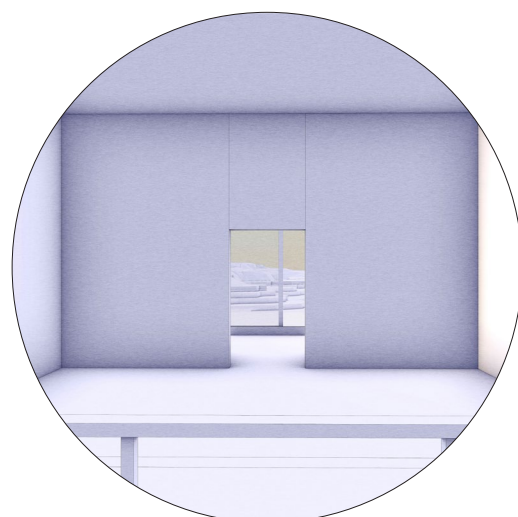
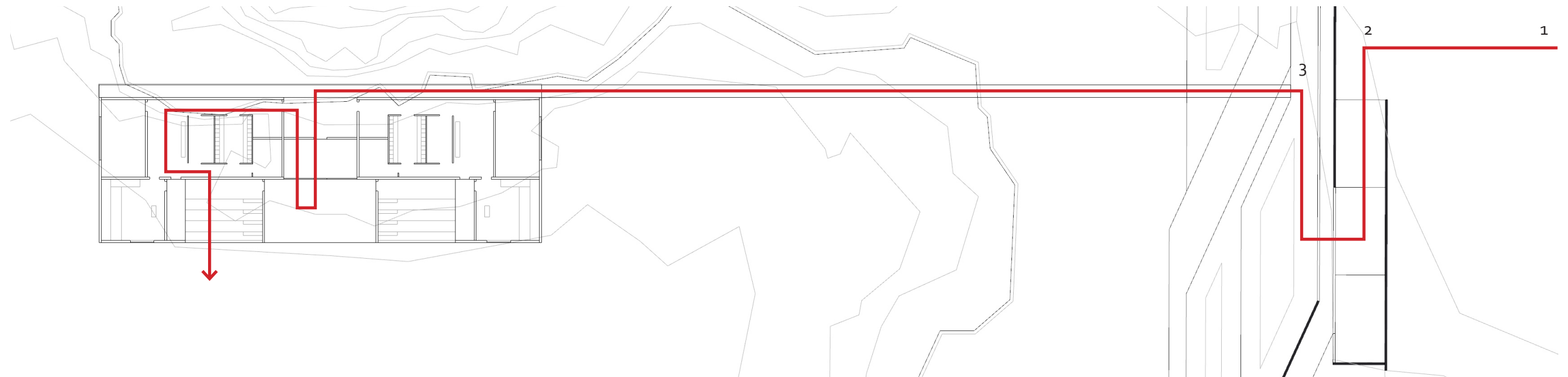
1 Entrance Plaza



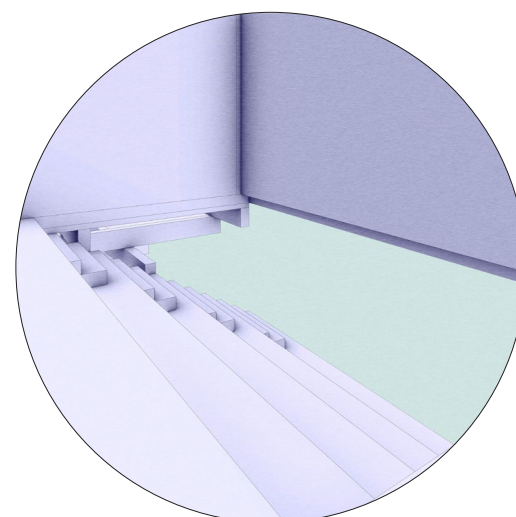
2 Entrance



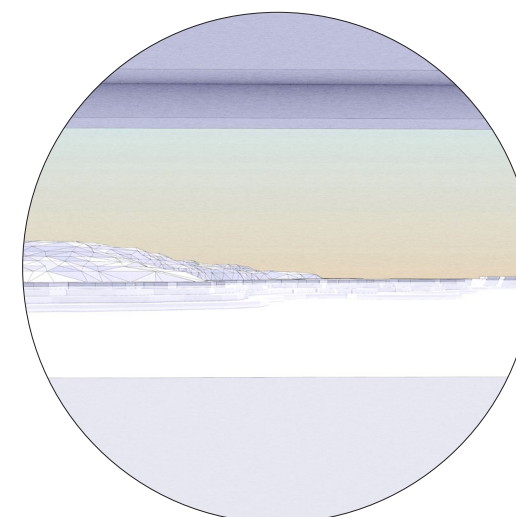
3 Bridge to the House



4 Building Entrance

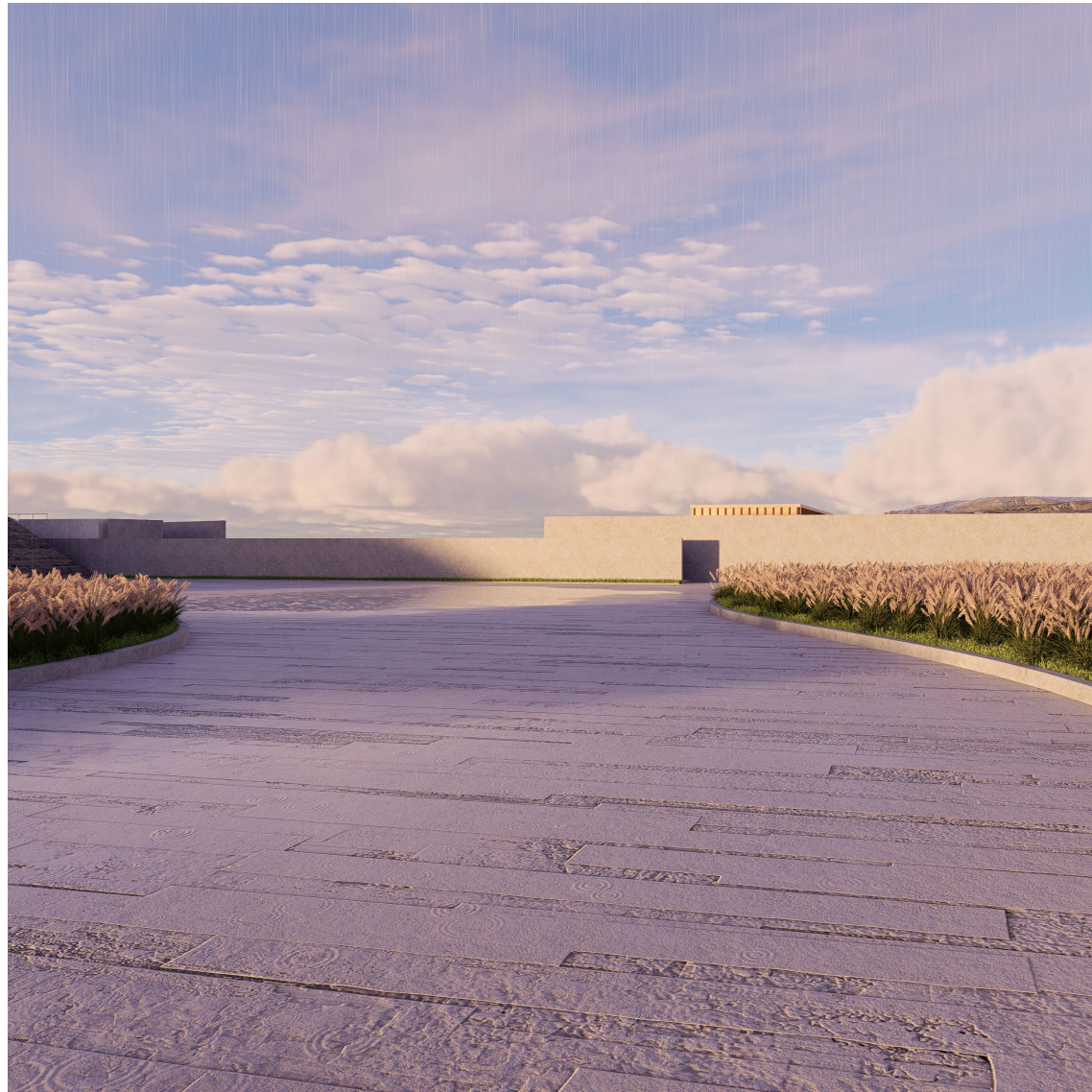


5 Steps to water



3 View through the Long Window

Entrance Plaza



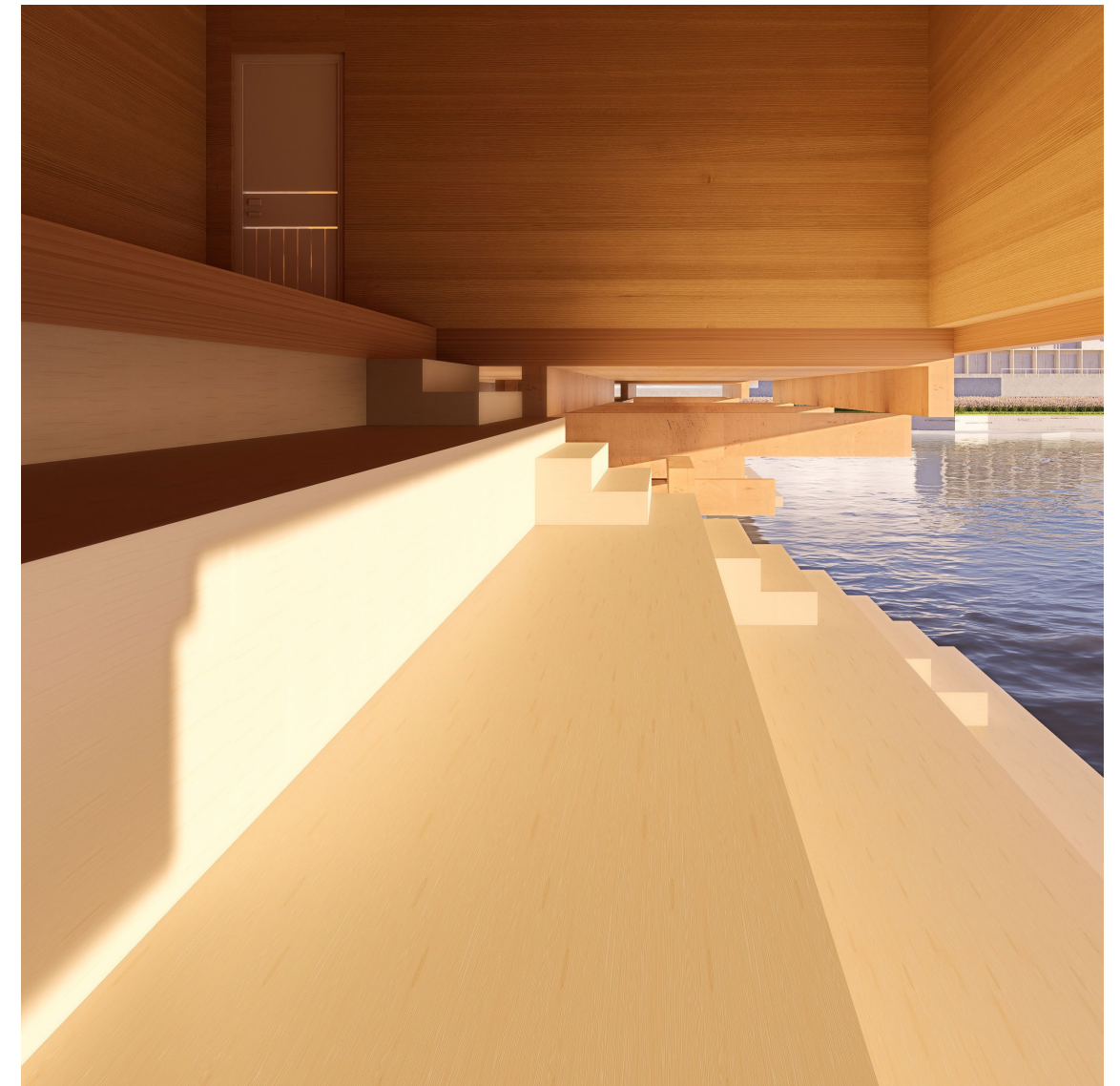
Bridge to the House



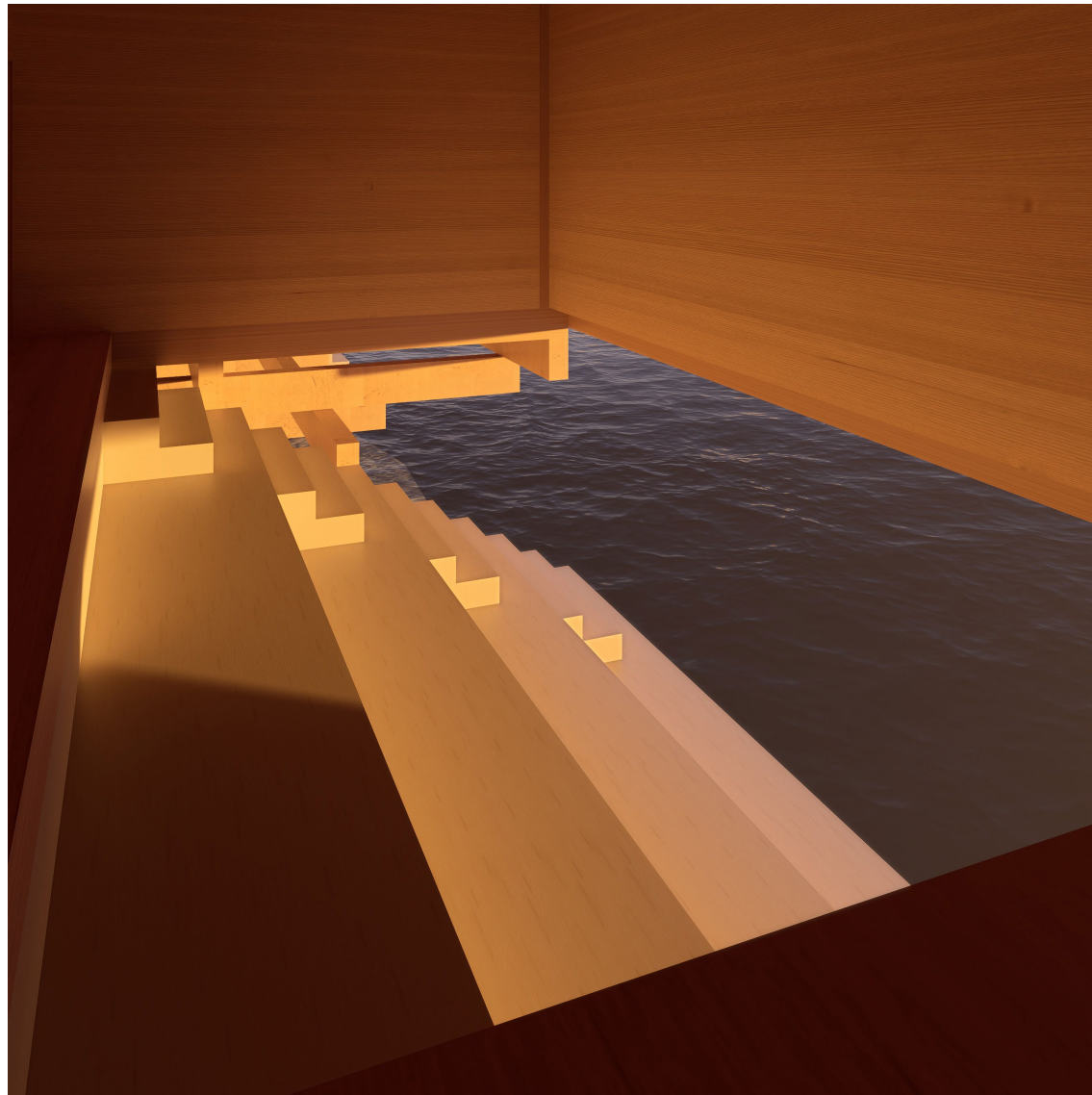
Entrance Lounge



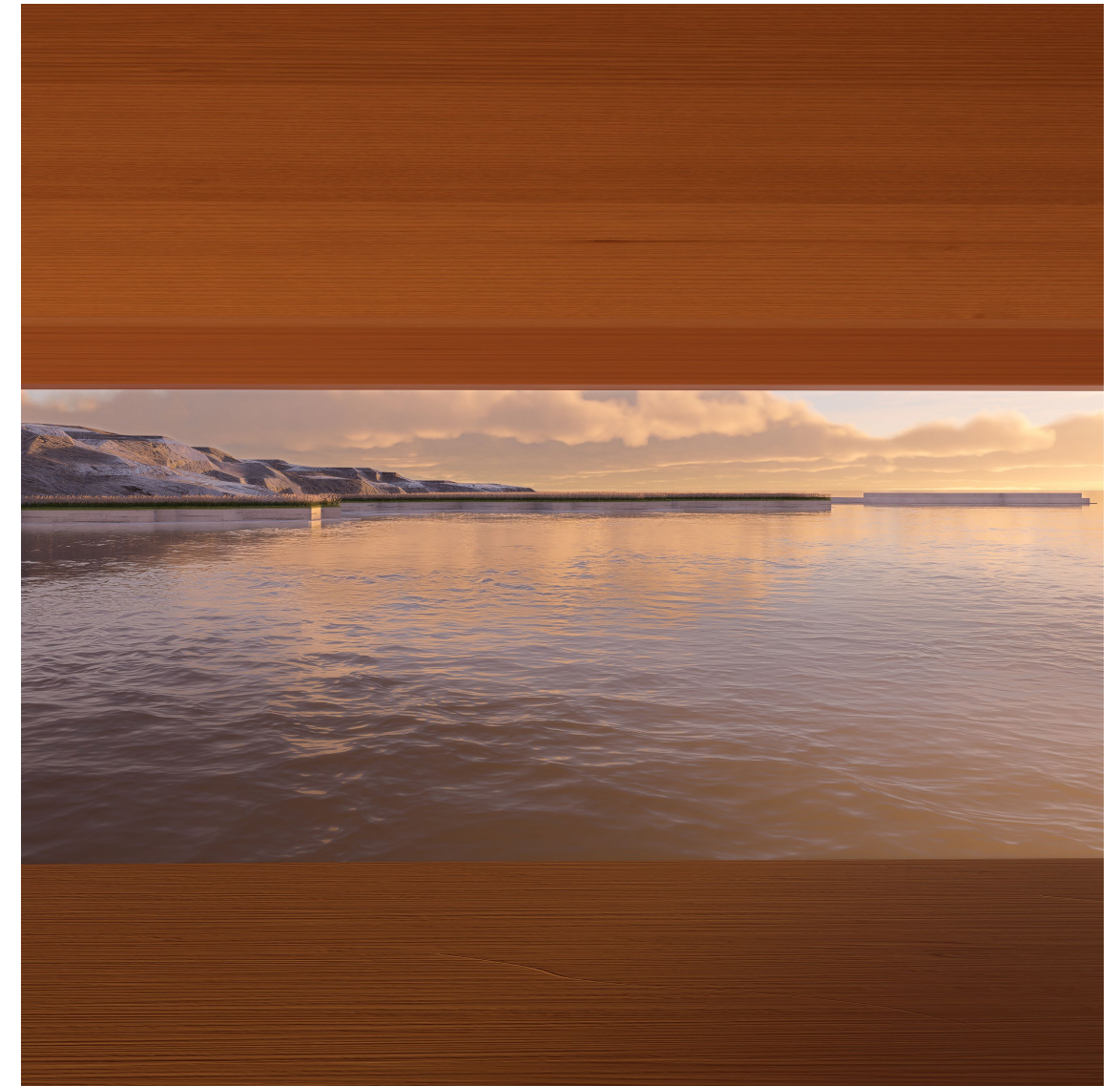
Steps into Water



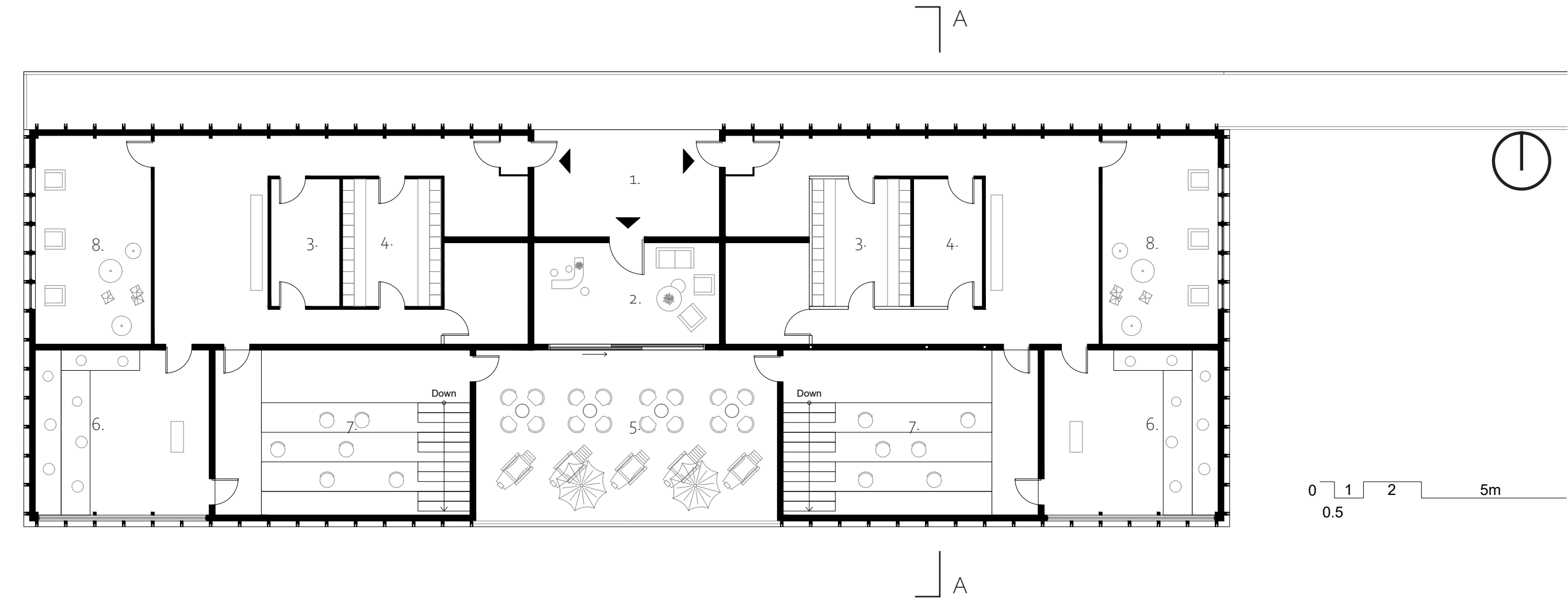
Steps into Water



Views through the Long Window

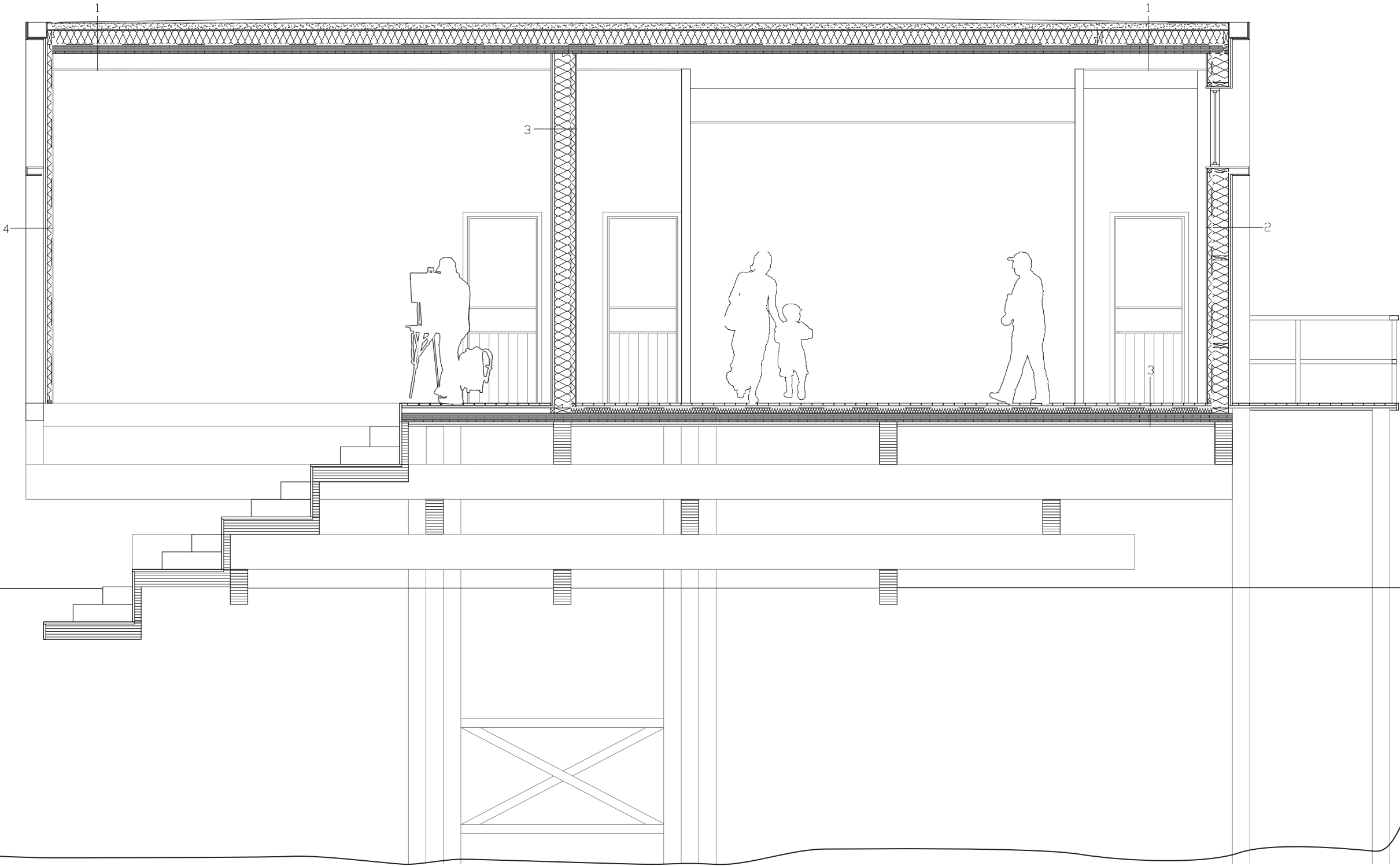


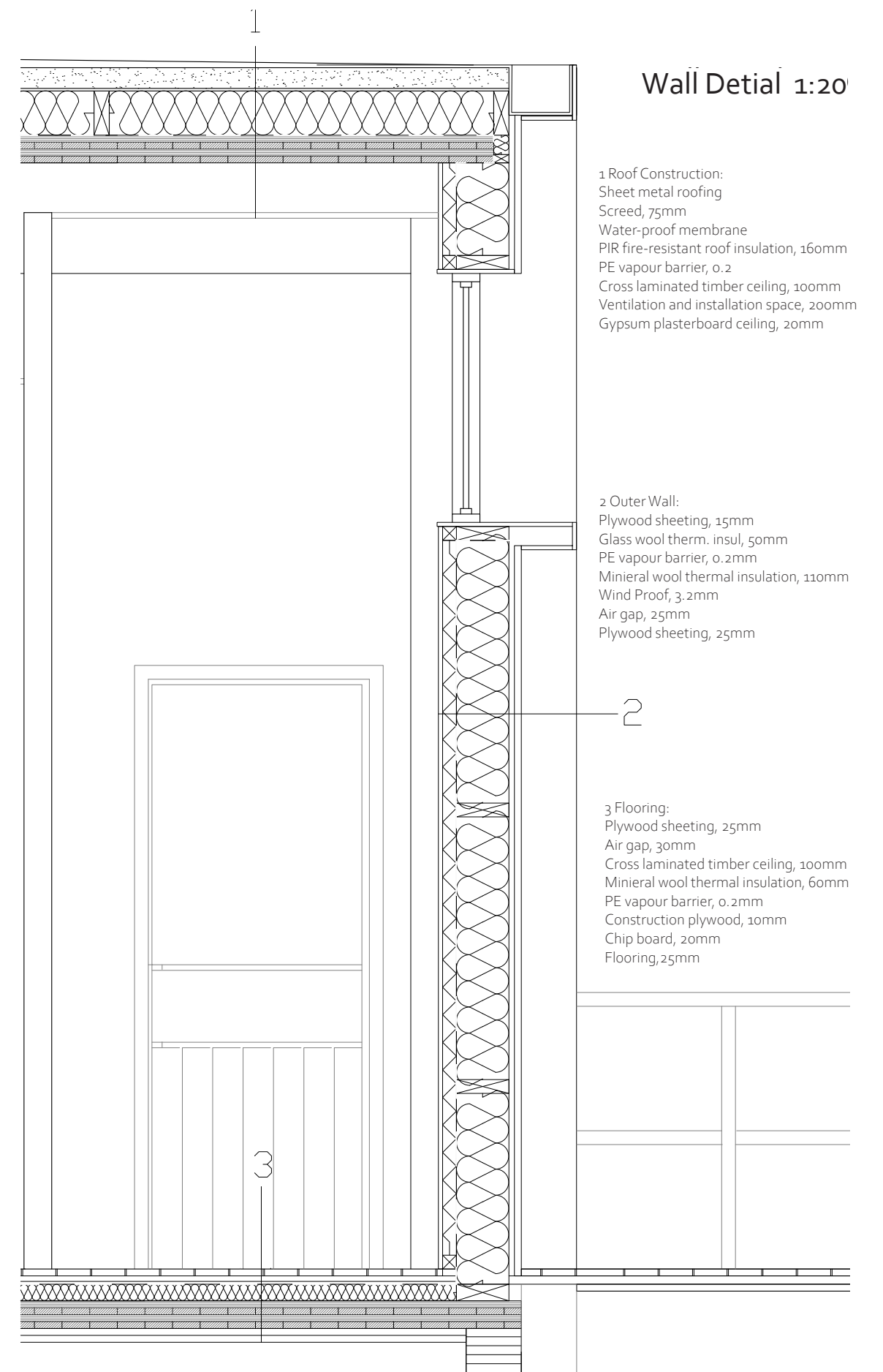
Cold Bath House - Plan 1:150



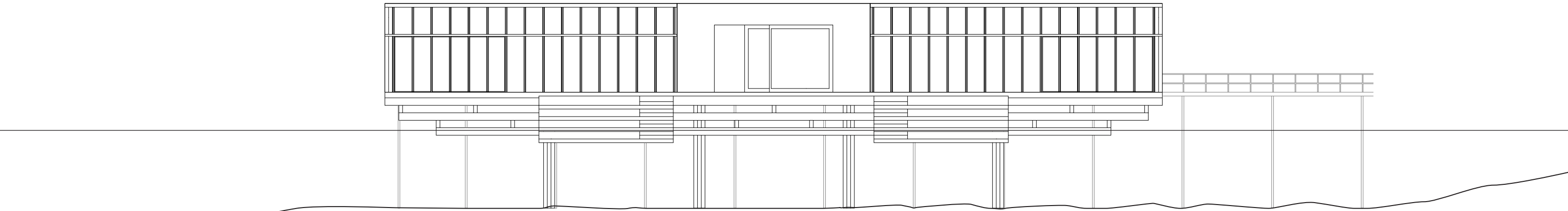
- 1. Entrance
- 2. Lounge
- 3. Changing room
- 4. Shower
- 5. Public sun deck
- 6. Sauna
- 7. Stairs into water
- 8. Meditation room

Section A-A 1:50



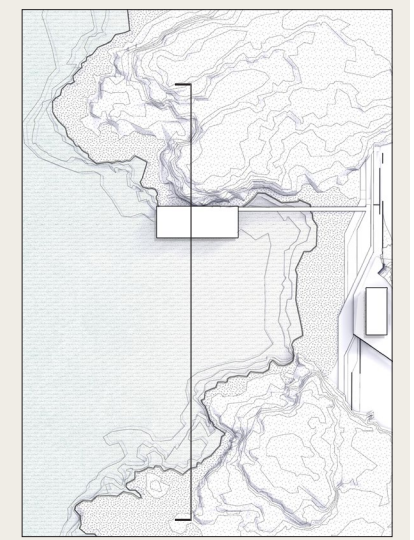
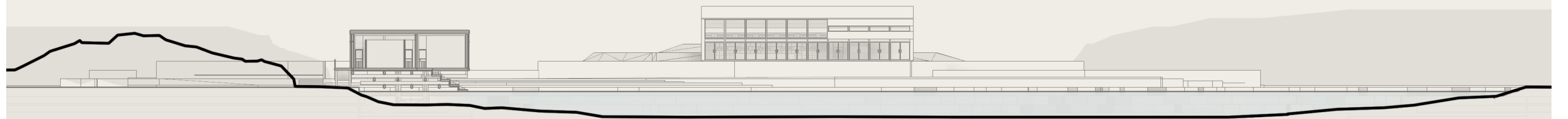


Cold Bath House - South Elevation 1:200

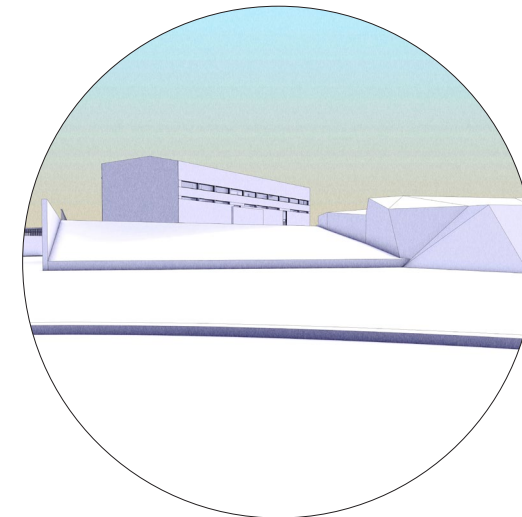
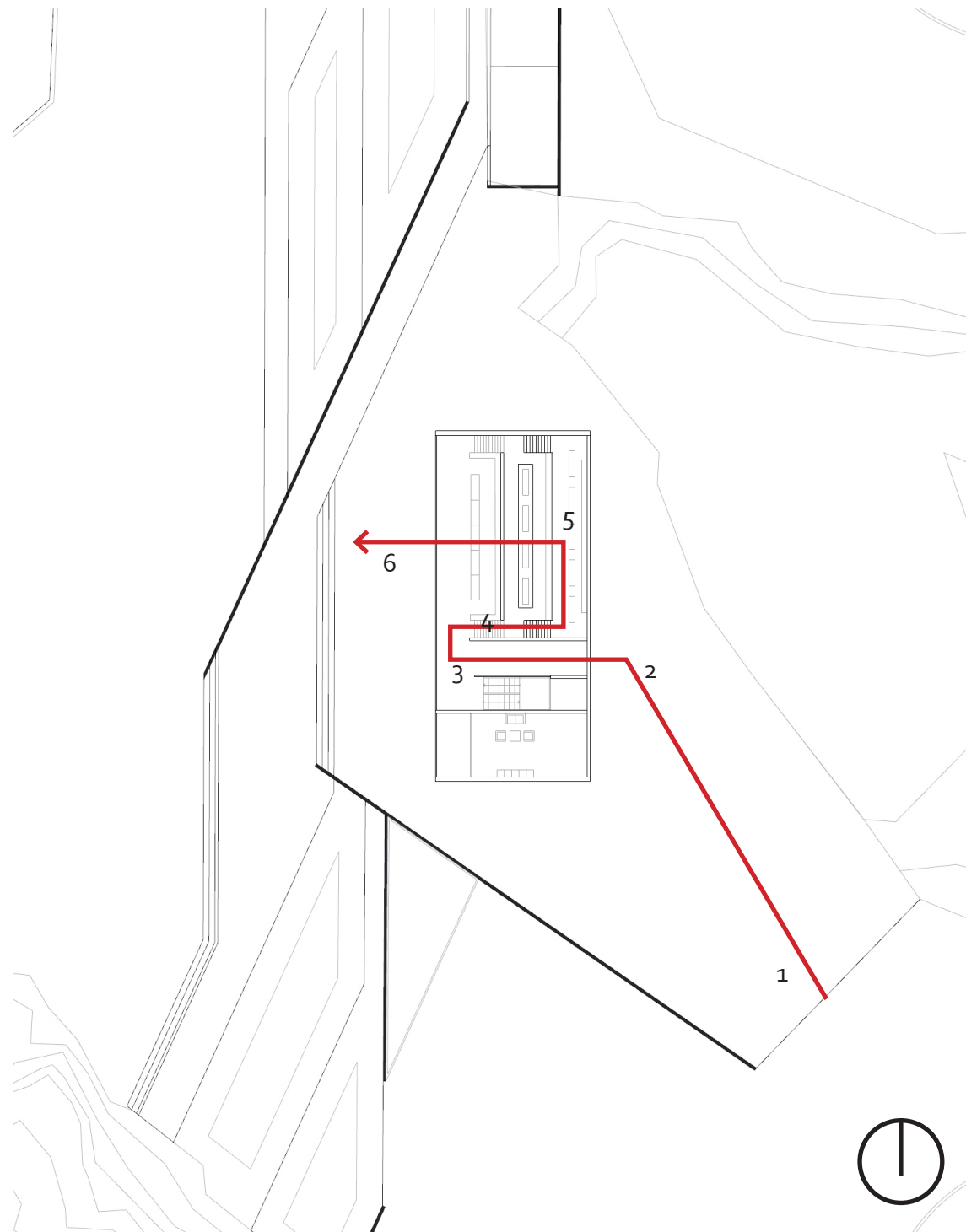




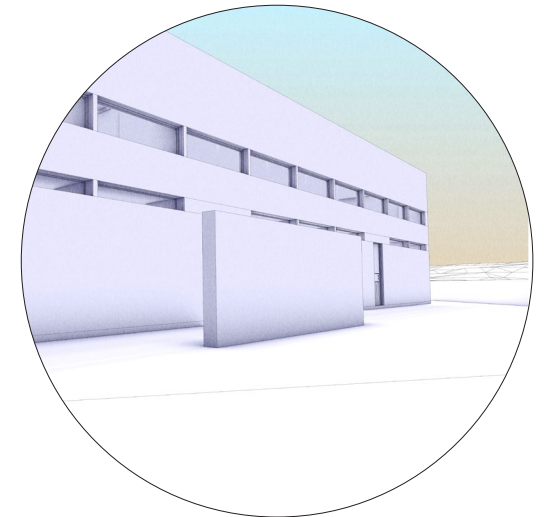
Site Section 1:50



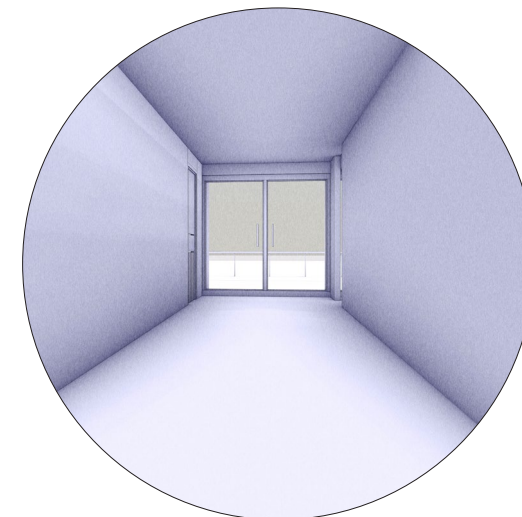
Sequence - Cold Bath House



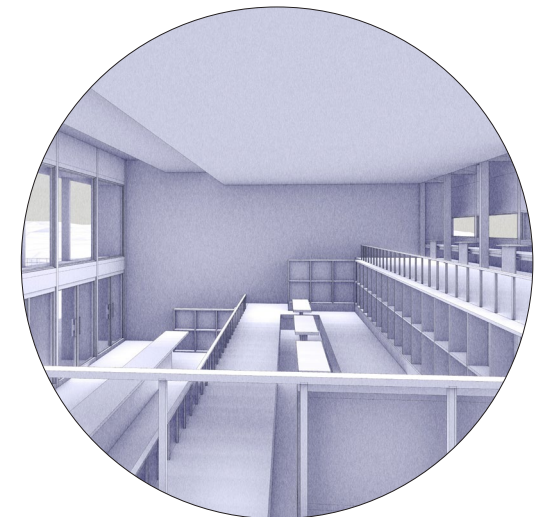
1 Entrance Plaza



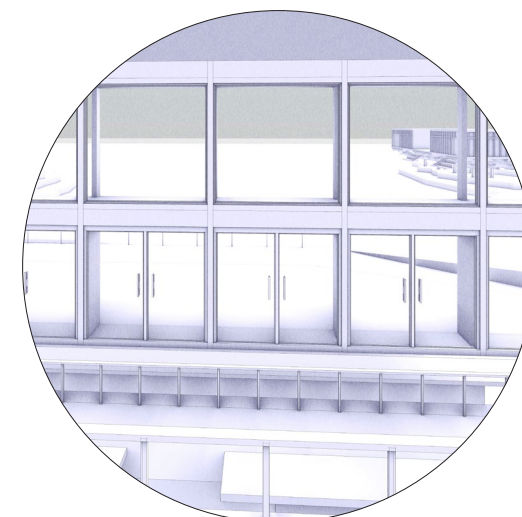
2 Entrance



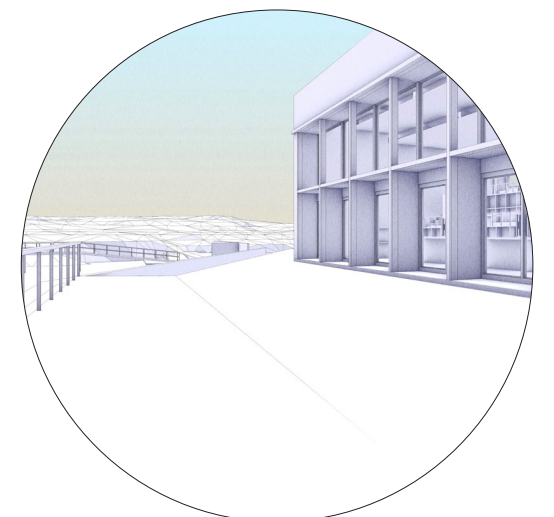
3 Entrance Hall



4 Sitting Area



5 The Second Floor



6 View from the platform

View from the Cafe



Dining Area



View from the Cafe

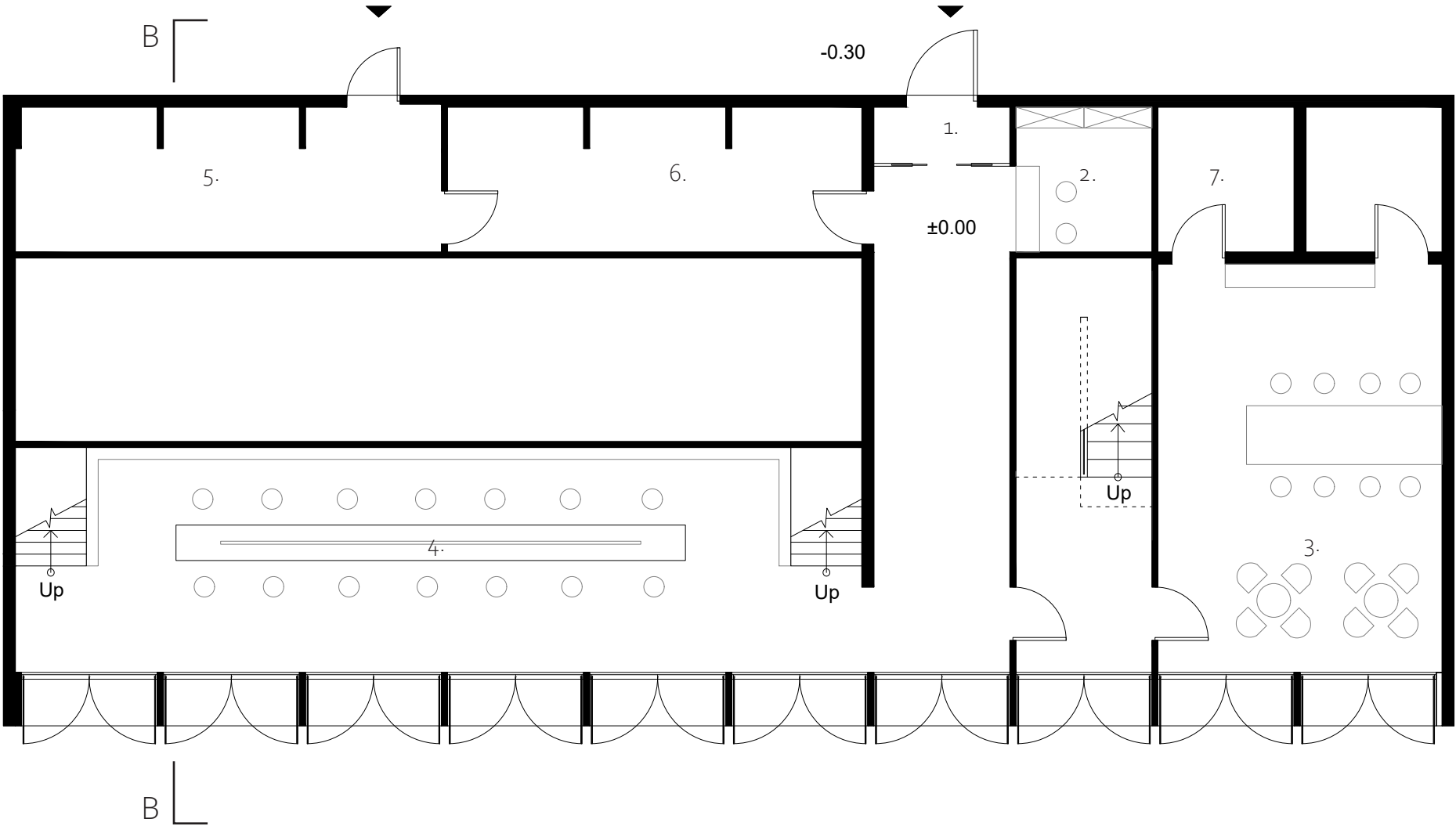


Overlook from the Platform



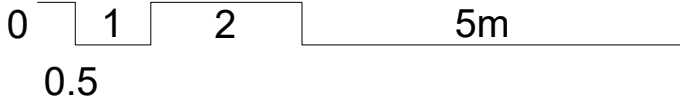
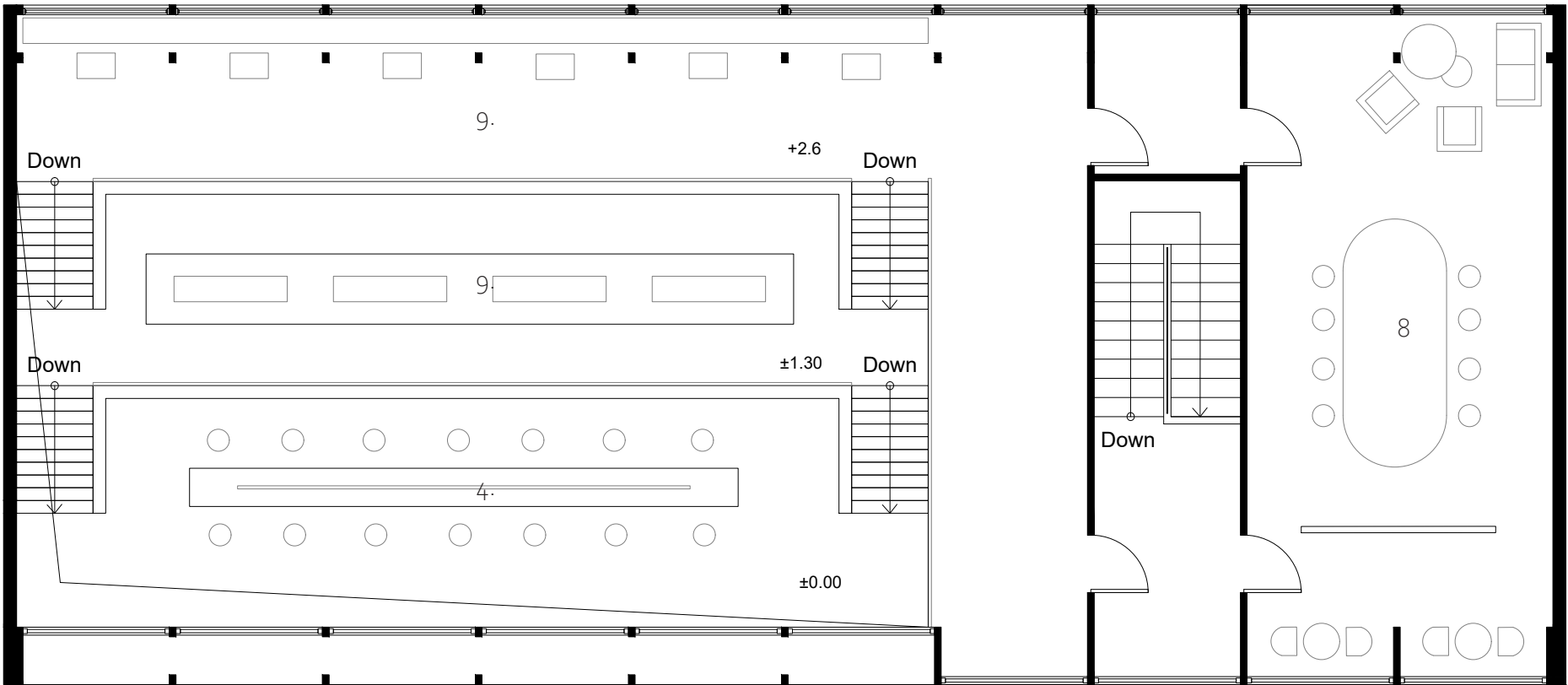
Ground floor 1:100

- 1. Entrance Area
- 2. Reception
- 3. Lounge
- 4. Bar
- 5. Storage room
- 6. Kitchen
- 7. Toilet



First floor 1:100

- 4. Bar
- 8. Activity room
- 9. Dining Area

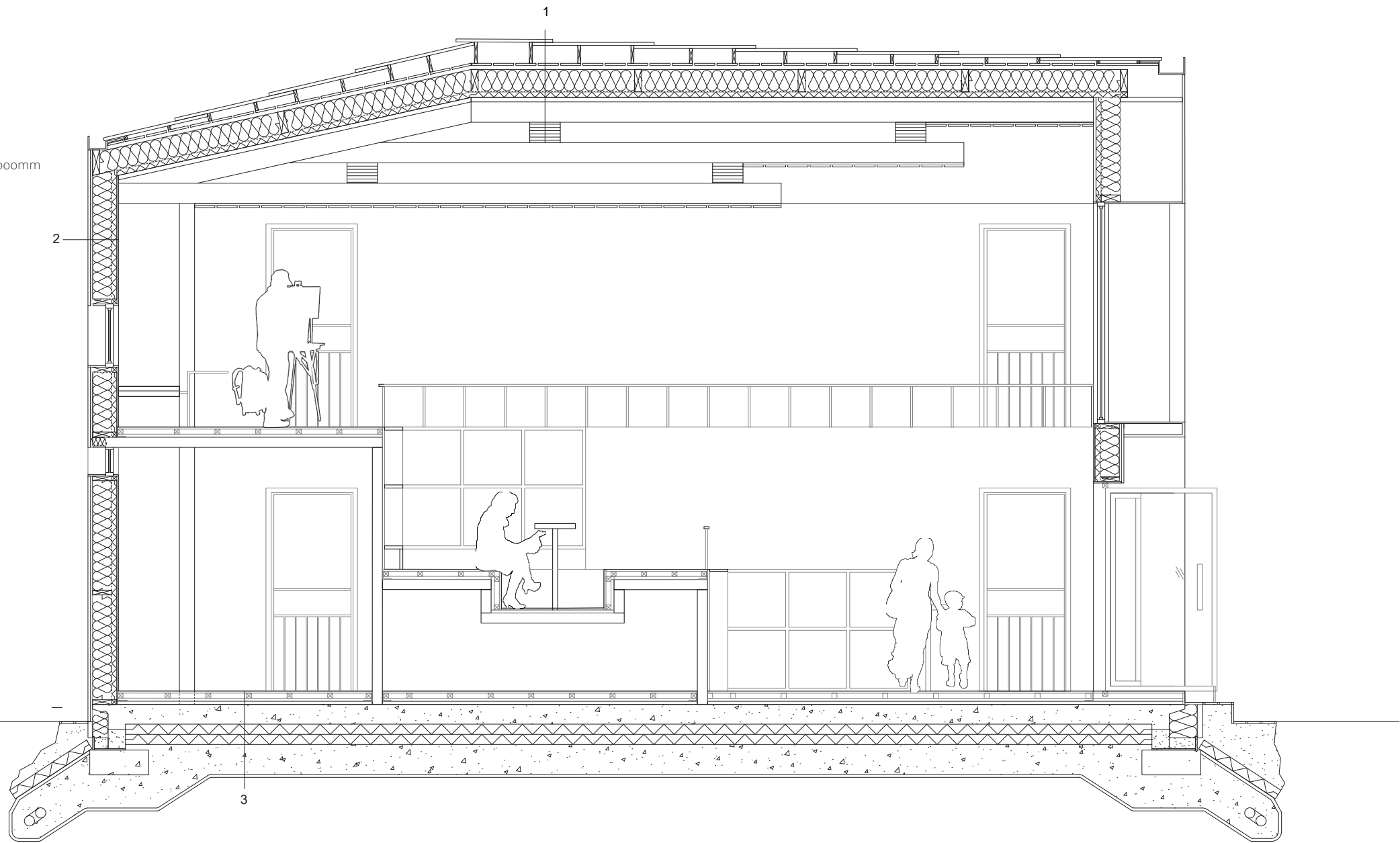


Section B-B 1:50

1 Roof Construction:
Standing seam metal roofing
Air gap, 40mm
Water-proof membrane
Mineral wool insulation, 160mm
PE vapour barrier, 0.2mm
insulated installation layer, 55mm
Timber roof structure and service cavity, max.1000mm
Gypsum plasterboard ceiling, 40mm

2 Outer Wall:
Plywood sheeting, 15mm
Glass wool therm. insul, 50mm
PE vapour barrier, 0.2mm
Minieral wool thermal insulation, 110mm
Wind barrier board, 3.2mm
Air gap, 20mm
Plywood sheeting, 25mm

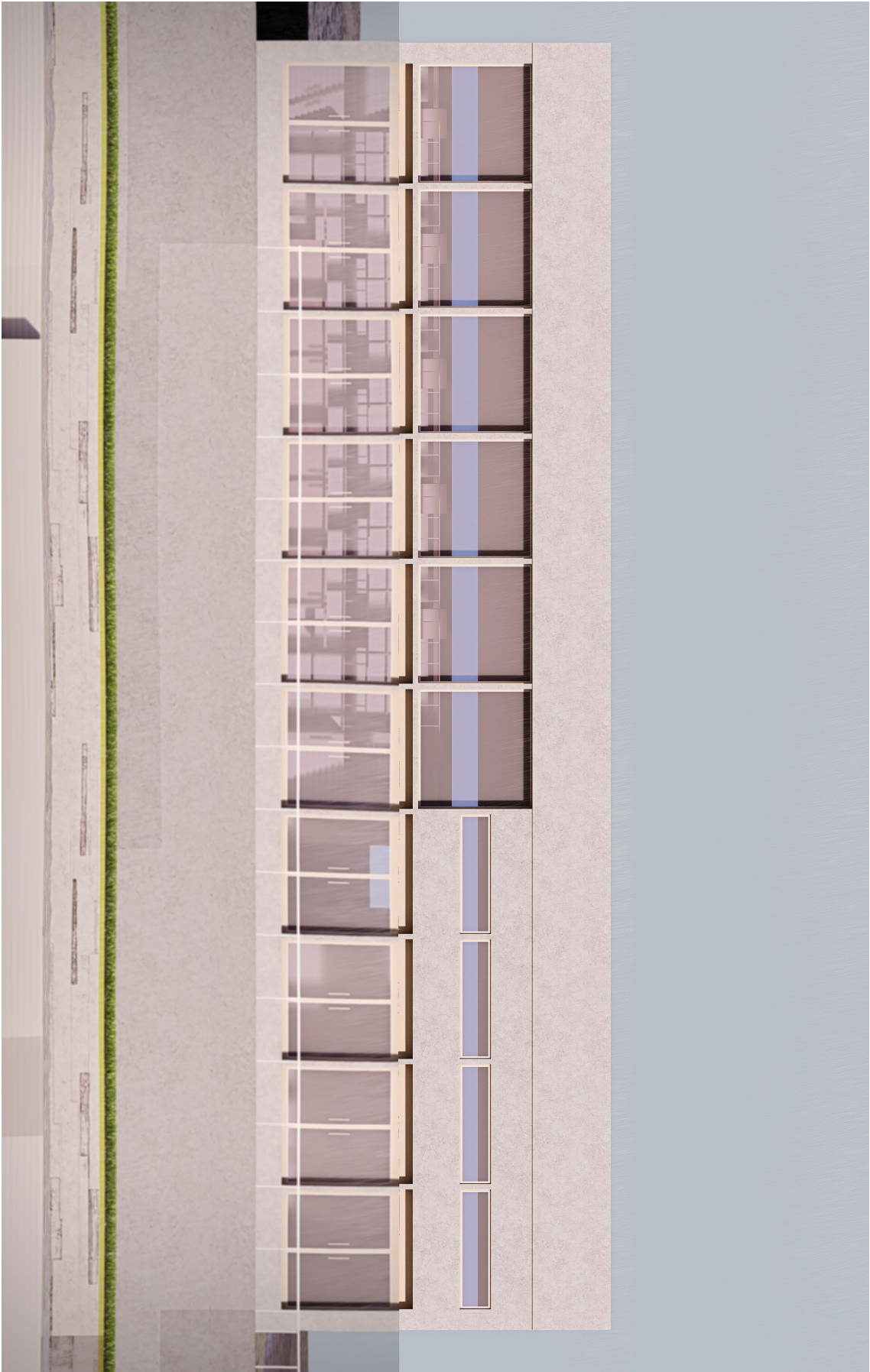
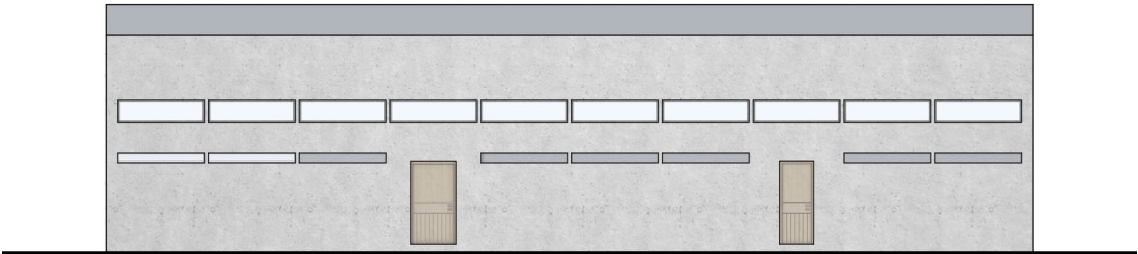
3 Flooring:
Floor finish, 70mm
Blinding concrete,30mm
screed, 30mm
Reinforced concrete slab, 200mm
Thermal insulation,200mm
Damp proof membrane (DPM)
Compacted gravel fill, 300mm



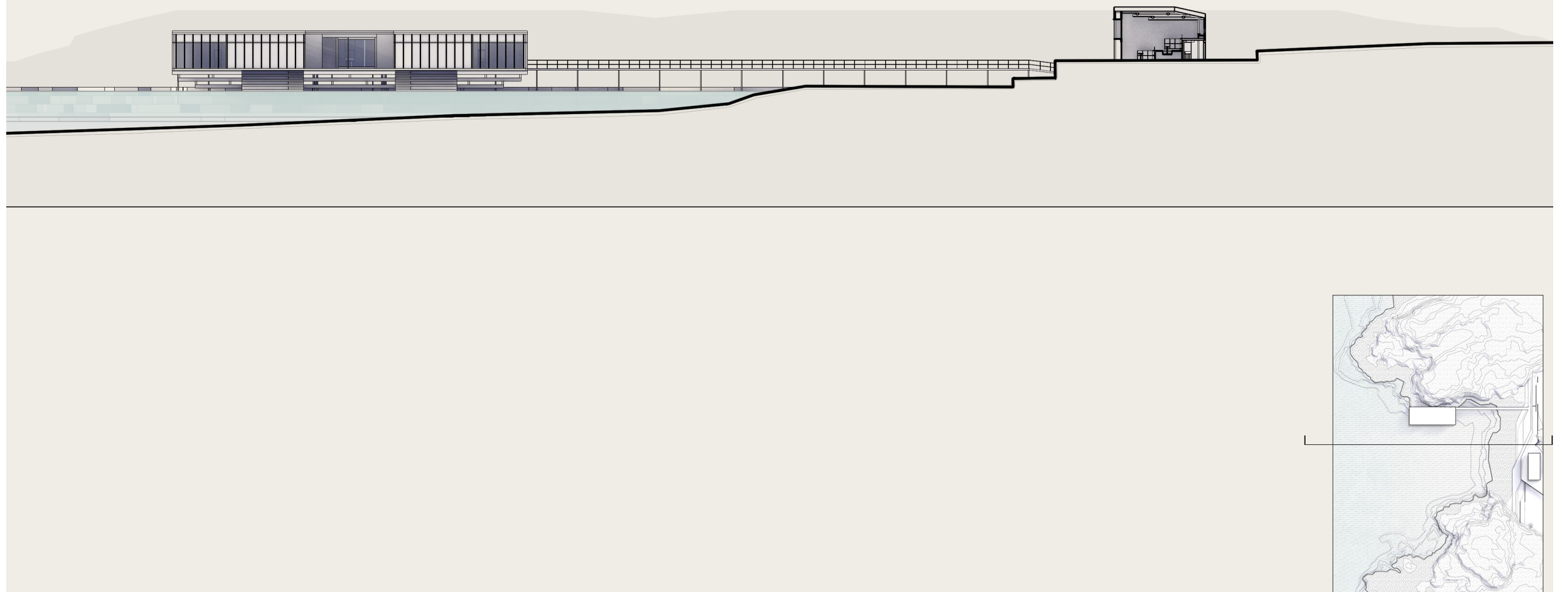
Cafe - West Elevation 1:200



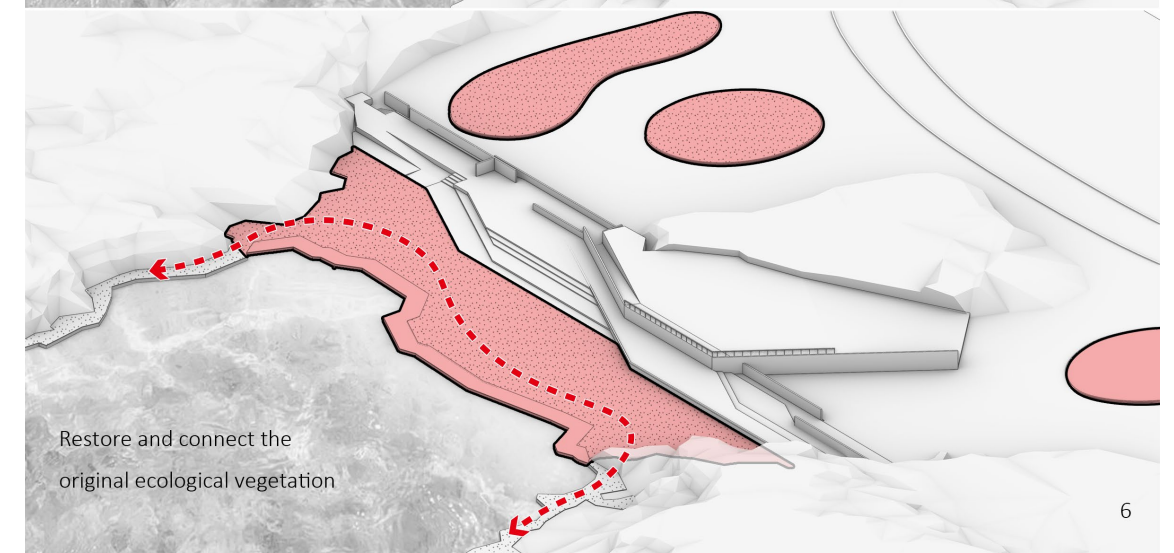
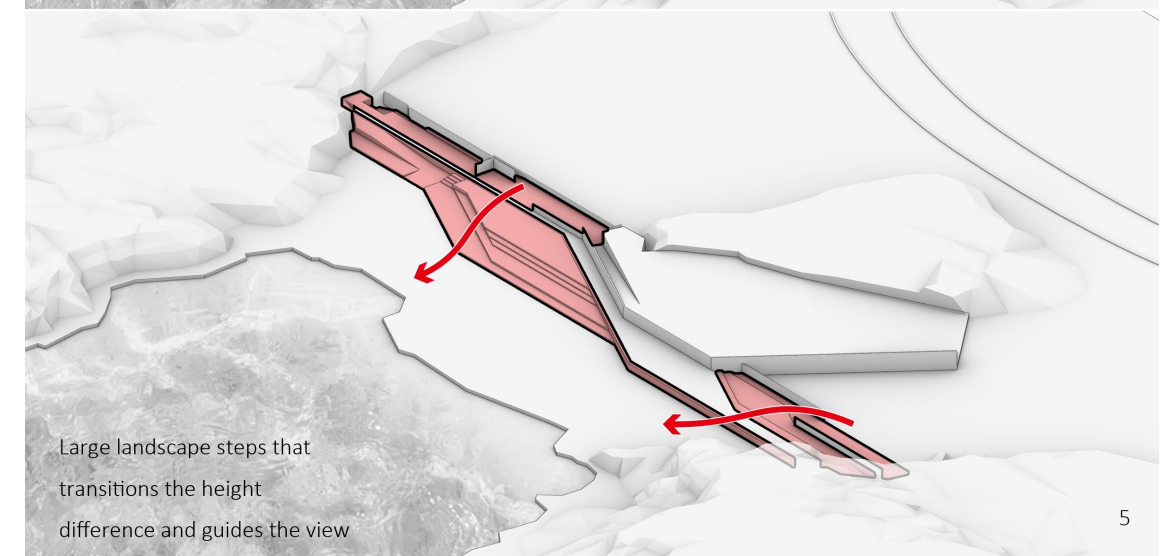
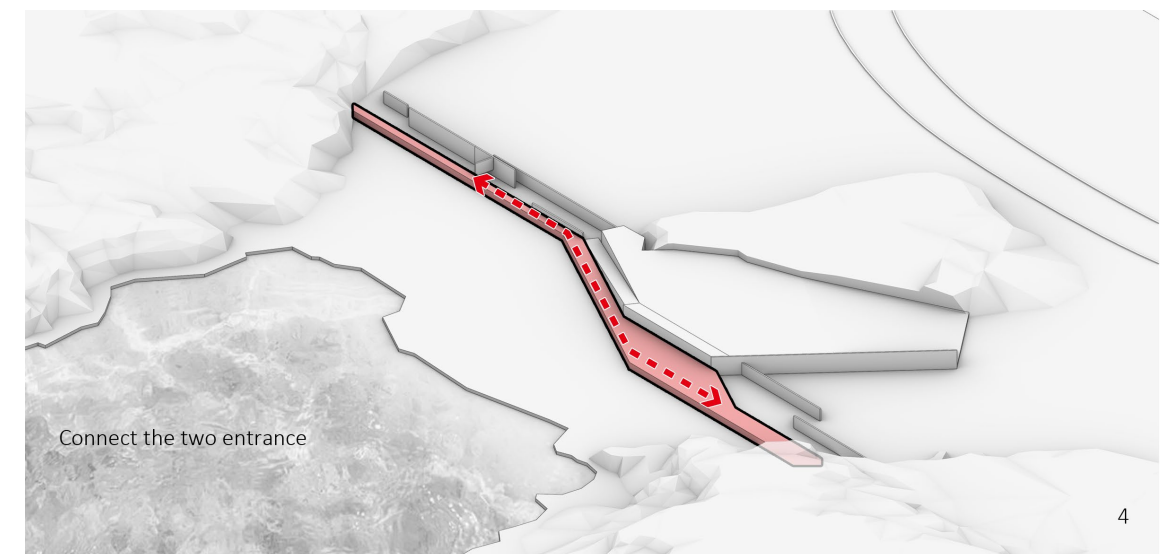
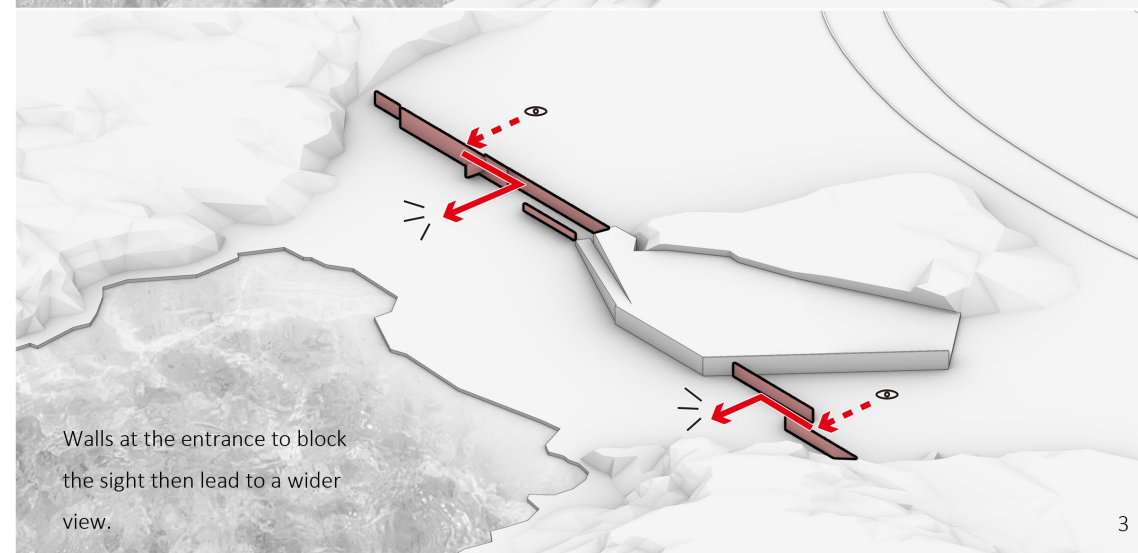
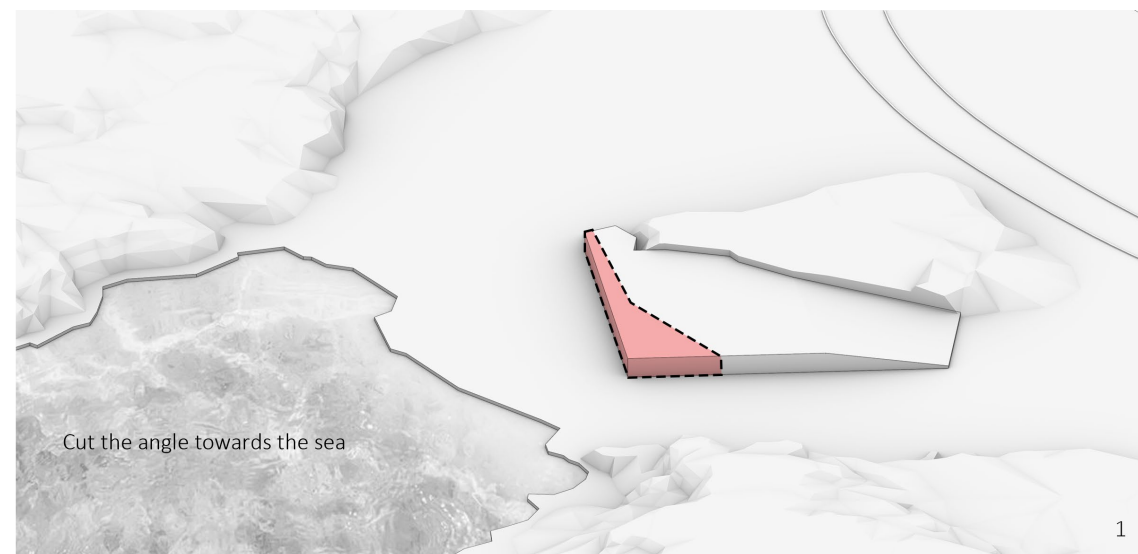
Cafe - East Elevation 1:200



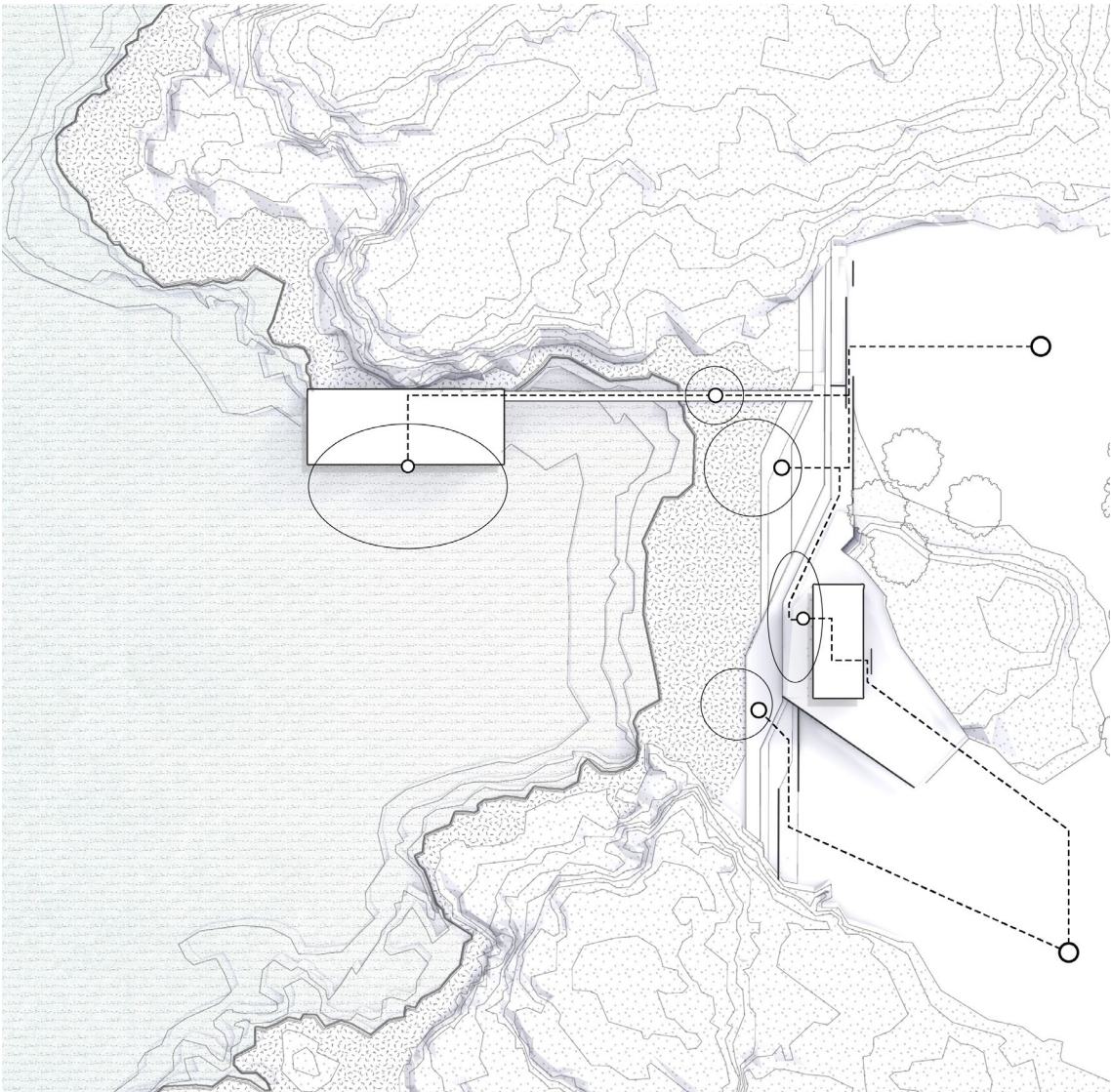
Site Section 1:50



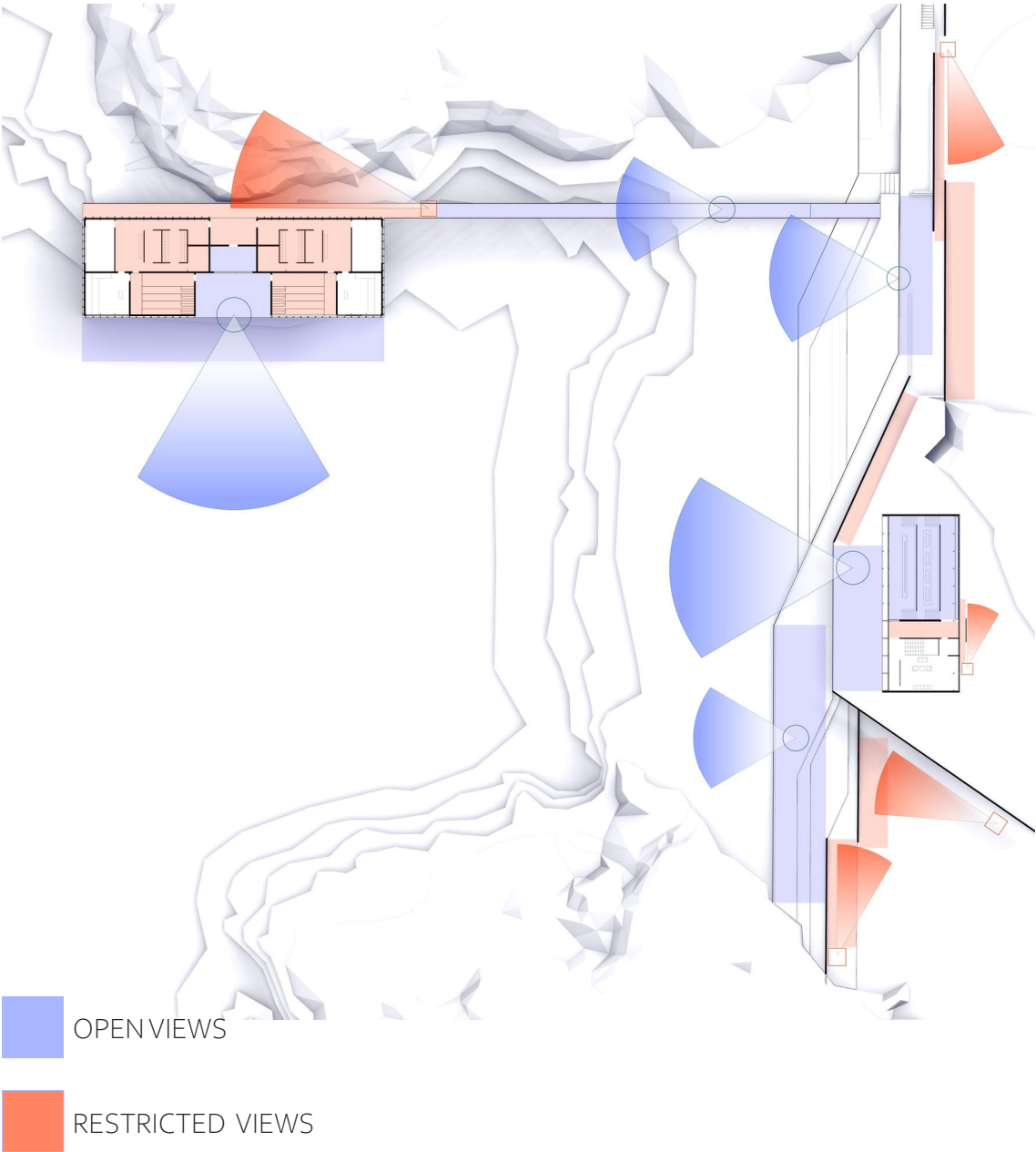
Topography and Landscape



Circulation to Open Views



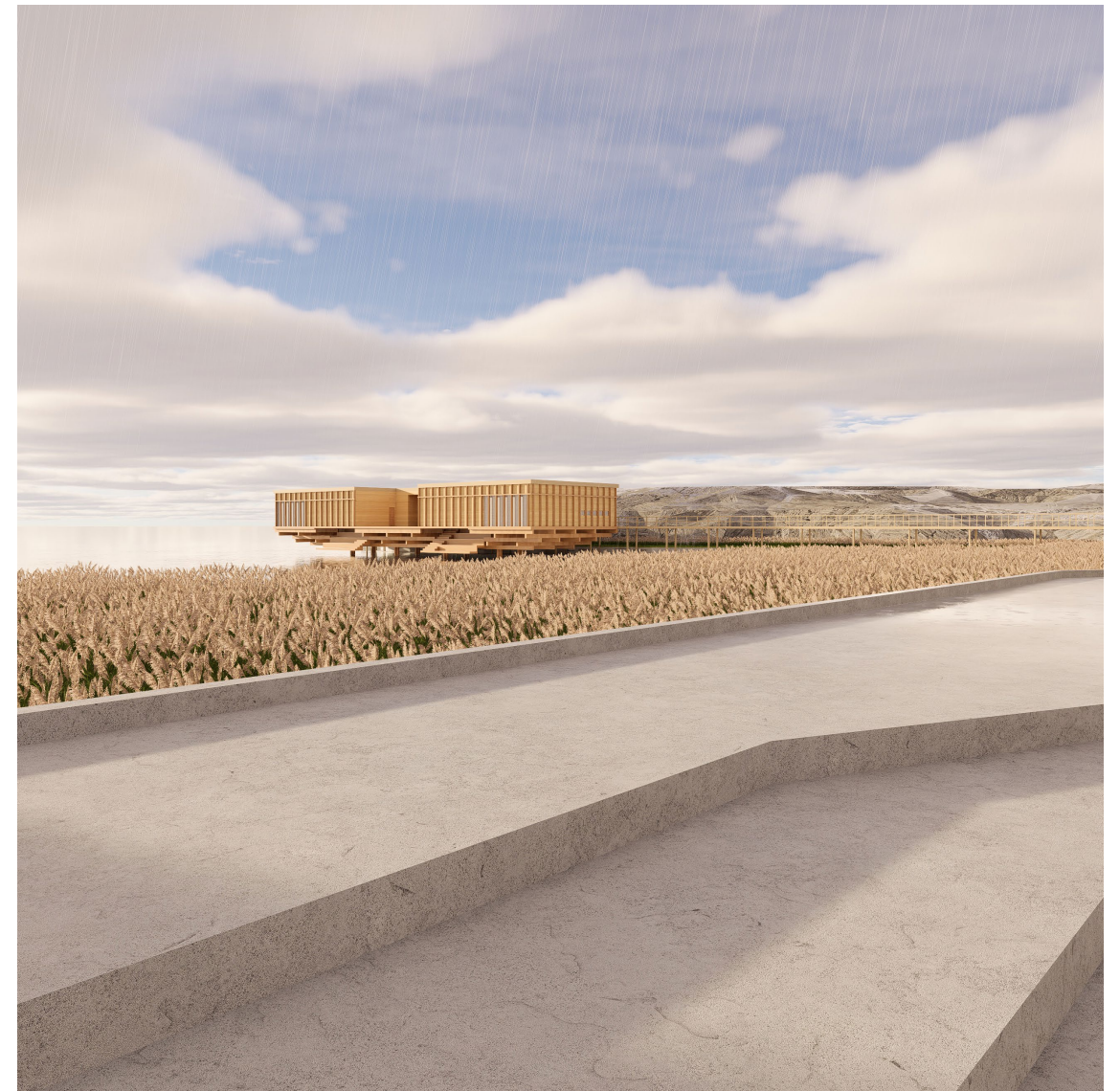
Open & Restricted Views



Entrance of park



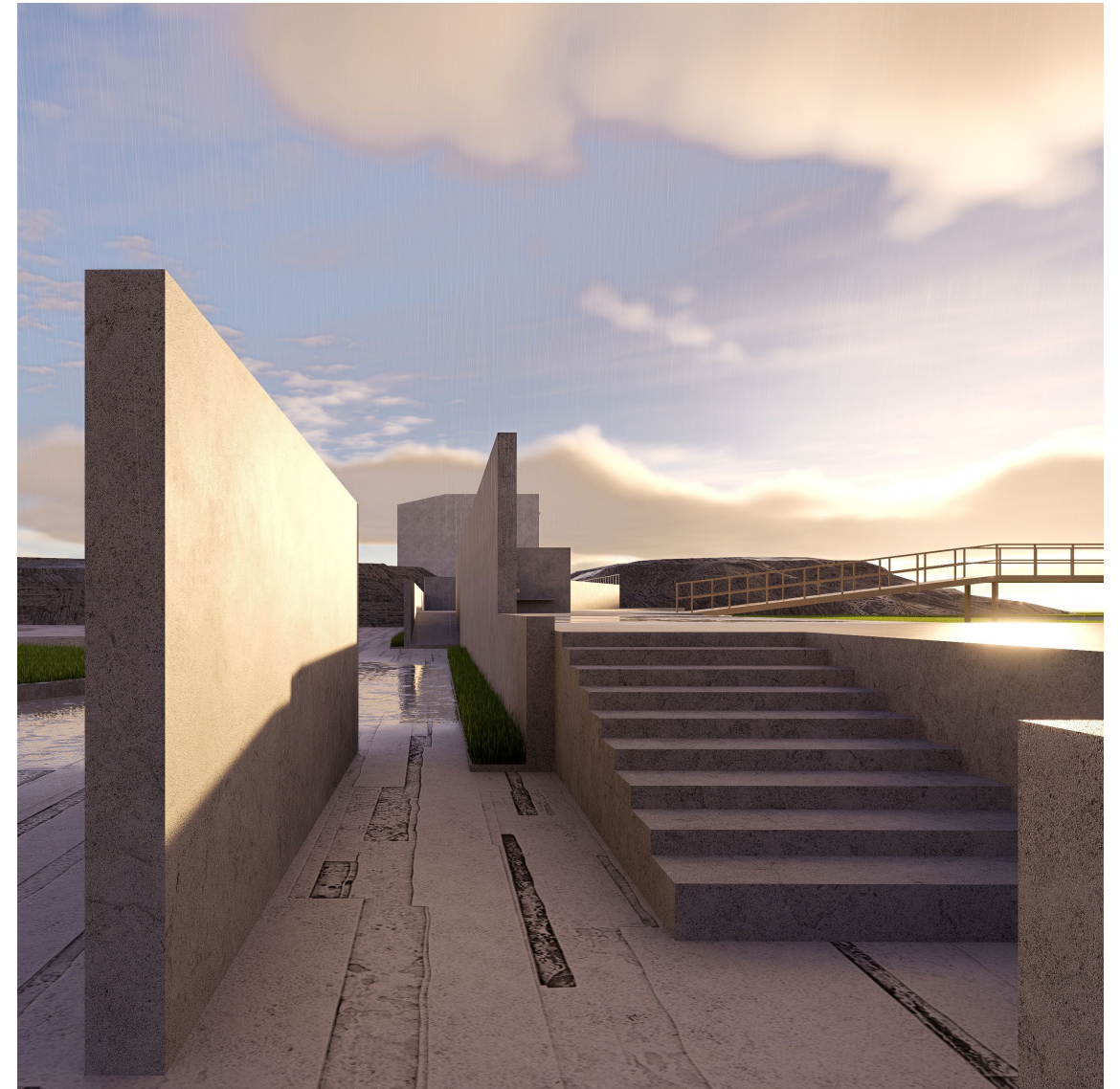
Open Views After entrance



Linear park



Exit of park



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Discussion

One of the key design intentions of this project was to create a gradual spatial transition from enclosure to openness. Visitors move through darker and more protected spaces before arriving at the sea, where views slowly unfold and the surrounding landscape becomes fully visible. This sequence was designed to encourage anticipation, reflection, and a heightened awareness of the environment.

However, the project also raises questions about comfort and accessibility in relation to the cold-water bathing experience. While the progression from darkness to openness can strengthen the emotional impact of reaching the sea, it may also increase uncertainty for some users. Entering cold water already requires a degree of psychological preparation, and moving from an enclosed interior directly toward the water could feel intimidating rather than welcoming for certain visitors.

This highlights an important tension within the design. The architectural sequence aims to create a memorable and atmospheric experience, yet it must also support different levels of comfort and confidence. Future development of the project could further explore how spatial design can balance anticipation with reassurance, allowing visitors to feel both challenged and supported throughout the bathing journey.

Rather than providing a single experience, the project suggests that architecture should accommodate different emotional responses to nature. The transition between shelter and exposure, darkness and openness, therefore becomes not only a design strategy but also a subject for further exploration.

Profile connection

This thesis aligns closely with the Architecture and Urban Design – Building Design and Transformation profile, as it explores how architecture can transform a recycling coastal site into a meaningful and experiential public space. The project investigates spatial atmosphere, sensory perception, and environmental transformation as key components of sustainable architectural practice.

By designing a non-religious spiritual cold bathhouse on Öckerö Island, the work connects to the profile's focus on contextual sensitivity, material expression, and the integration of landscape and architecture. The design process emphasizes how minimal, site-specific interventions can renew both the physical environment and human experience of place.

This project not only transform a building but a site together with landscape. the project contributes to the programme's ambition to link architectural theory, environmental awareness, and cultural continuity—showing how architecture can foster emotional well-being and a deeper relationship between people and nature.