

The Casino in the Communist City

by

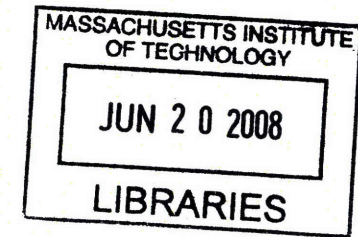
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Hon. B.A. Fine Art History and Architectural History, Theory, and Criticism
University of Toronto, 2003

Submitted to the Department of Architecture in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 23, 2008 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT

The casino in the communist city is a contentious place of hidden desires, perceived debauchery and luxury. Accessible only to foreign passport holders, casinos in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly known as Saigon) are required by law to be housed in 5-star hotels as one room establishments, tucked away on the second level. Entering a casino in HCMC is akin to crossing a border: passports are checked and photocopied and signatures must be signed.

The proposed casino re-imagines the program's entrances and the relationship between foreigners and locals, affording both populations subversive and unexpected views. This thesis claims that through separation, subdivision, and contrast, the Vietnamese can partake in the activities of legal gambling without trespassing. Gambling tourists, on the other hand, are knowingly fed through the efficient and luxurious loop of leisure, physically separated from - but visually connected to - the rest of the city

Thesis Supervisor: Yung Ho Chang
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A special thank you to my parents Tai and Hong Tran, and my sister Amy. And finally I dedicate my thesis to my grandmother, whose love of casinos will surely bring her luck one of these days!

The Casino in the Communist City

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Site and the Casino: Southeast Asia

Laos: casinos open only to foreigners
Casino resort uses lake as border

Vietnam: casinos open to foreigners only
Casino resort in Haiphong borders China.
There are slot machine casinos in 5-star hotels
in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

China: gambling is officially illegal. State and national lotteries,
however, are popular.

Macau: gambling mecca of Asia

Taiwan: gambling is currently illegal

Philippines: fast-growing casino ventures in Manila

Myanmar: gambling is illegal.
However, foreign-invested hotels may apply for gaming room licenses.
Shan State Special Region No. 4: 2 large casinos cater to Chinese.

Tachileik: resort hotels catering to Thai patrons.

Victoria Point, Myanmar:
luxury resort with large casino caters to Thai patrons flown from
Bangkok.

Thailand: gambling is banned.

Cambodia: government controlled casinos open to foreign
nationals only

Poipet: a casino enclave of several casinos that only
accept the Thai baht. Casinos are located before the Cambodian
border check, allowing Thais to gamble without leaving
Thailand and without having to secure a visa.

Bavet borders Moc Bai, Vietnam. This is an official border
crossing between the two countries.
There are about 7 casinos in Bavet that cater mainly to Vietnamese.
There have been reports of poor Vietnamese farmers
who now make their living gambling all day as casinos often
provide free room and meals.

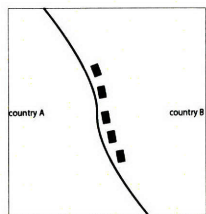
Malaysia: gambling is only permitted with licenses issued by
the government.
Genting Highlands casino resort opened in 1969. The only licensed
casino in the country, the casino is open to non-Muslims only. Most
patrons are from Indonesia, Thailand, and mainland China.

Singapore: reversed its ban on casinos in 2005. There is lots of
foreign investment to construct large Vegas-style resorts and casinos

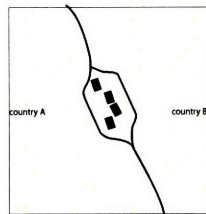
Casino cruise ships operated from this island, but gambling does
not occur until ships are in international waters.



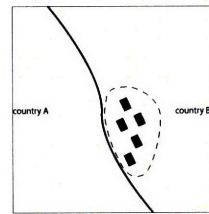
Casino Border Types



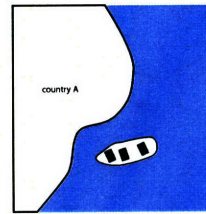
near official border



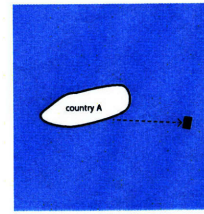
in between official checkpoints



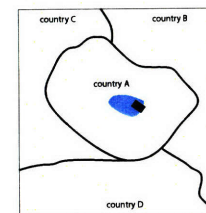
within special economic zones



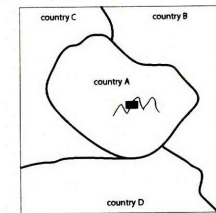
contained by an island



in international waters



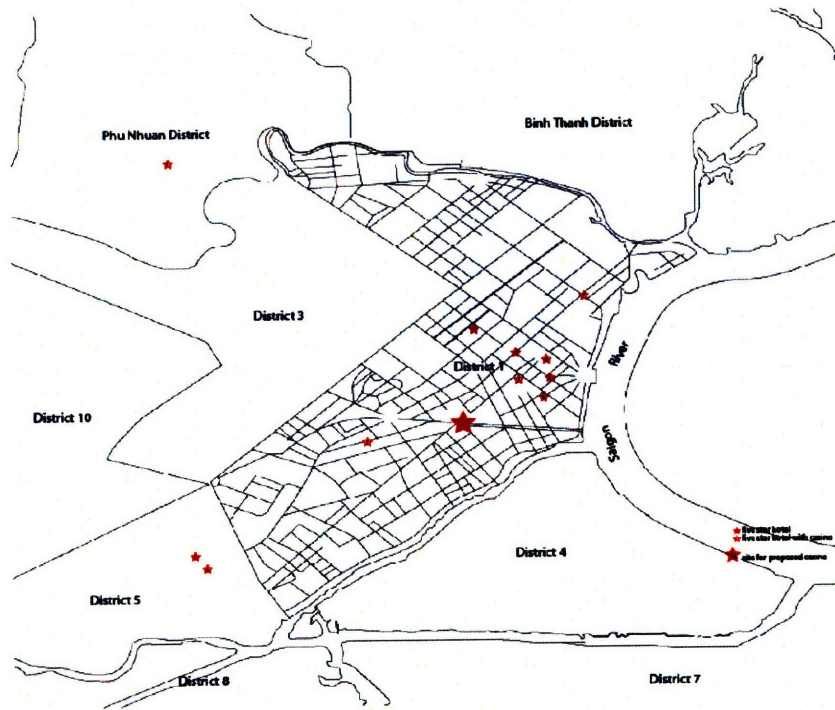
geography as border



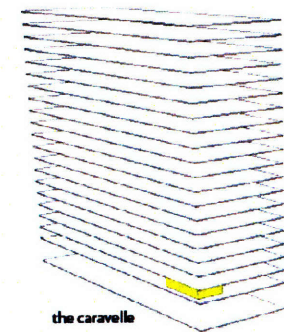
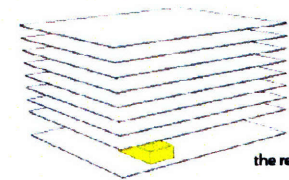
geography as border

Legal gambling in Asia occurs along borders, within special economic regions, or with other physical and economic restrictions. Viewed as economic catalysts and tourist attractions, casinos are often reserved for foreigners, creating unique transborder conditions between countries. Illegal gambling, not surprisingly, occurs throughout Asia.

Site and the Casino: Ho Chi Minh City



typical placement of casinos in 5-star hotels in hcmc.





Club Vegas at the 5-Star Caravelle Hotel in District 1



City Images



Capitalism at night



Cruising at night





The Emergence of Ho Chi Minh City and the View from Above

In a fervent race to become a world class city, Ho Chi Minh City - formerly Saigon, the capital of pre-Communist Vietnam, and formerly Cholon, the French Colonial "Pearl of the East" - now the nation's economic capital, has opted, like many other emerging cities of the globe, to build, build, and build. Currently on the city's urban plate: an extension to the airport, a tunnel below the Saigon River, highways, a subway system, office towers.

December 2007: A street vendor in the Thu Thiem district of HCMC sells her goods below a large advertisement of the area's planned redevelopment.

The new plan was devised by Sasaki and Associates in Boston.



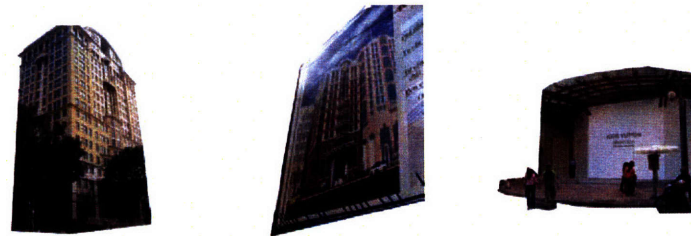
colonial icons



communist icon



capitalist icons



Ho Chi Minh City straddles a seemingly contradictory urban position in this continual effort to attract foreign investors and tourists. That is, the city must flex its architectural muscles and construct fancy skyscrapers and boutiques in homage to capital, but must also maintain the architectural “beauty” of its colonial past and upkeep its various museums in homage to history

Special report

VIETNAM

Half-way from rags to riches

Apr 24th 2008

From *The Economist* print edition

Vietnam has made a remarkable recovery from war and penury, says Peter Collins (interviewed [here](#)). But can it change enough to join the rich world?



Having observed that the condition that locals are excluded from the interior of 'riches', or of the casino, this thesis posits that newly constructed and controlled views can both attract tourists and create democratic spaces for the city's citizens.

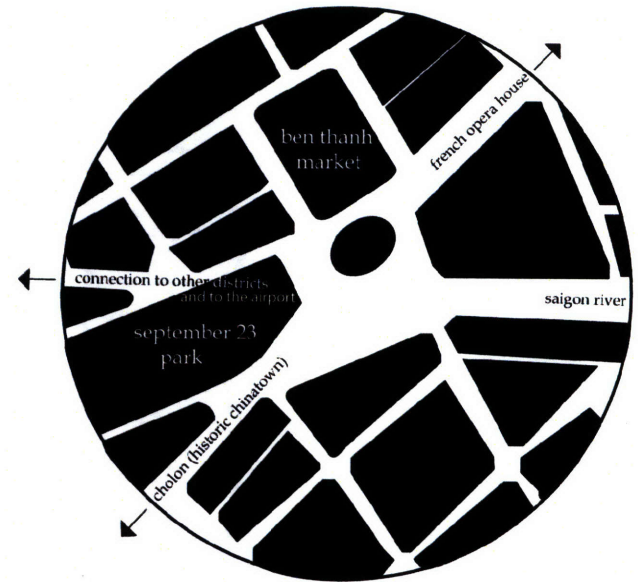
The thesis claims that architecture that is constructed with VIEWS FROM ABOVE is the ideal spatial response to HCMC's conflicting social desires, affording power structures that heighten differences between local and foreigner.

Acknowledging historical and theoretical writings regarding power, leisure and the view from above, the project subdivides and then equalizes the privileged view, re-inserting it into public consciousness.

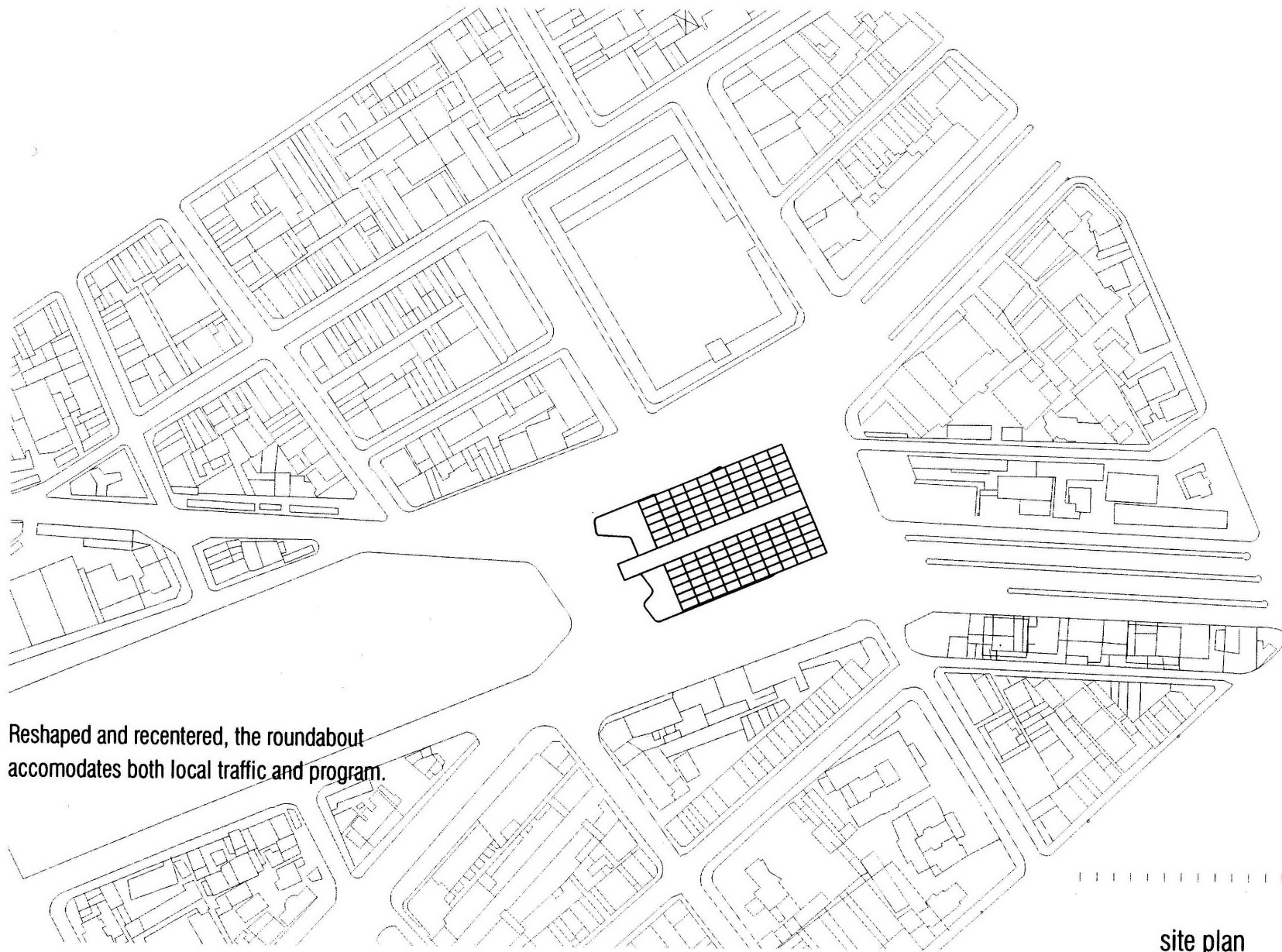
The Casino in
Ho Chi Minh City



Site: Ben Thanh Roundabout



A major intersection in the city. The Ben Thanh Roundabout is unprogrammed space used by pedestrians for crossing the intersection.



Reshaped and recentered, the roundabout accommodates both local traffic and program.

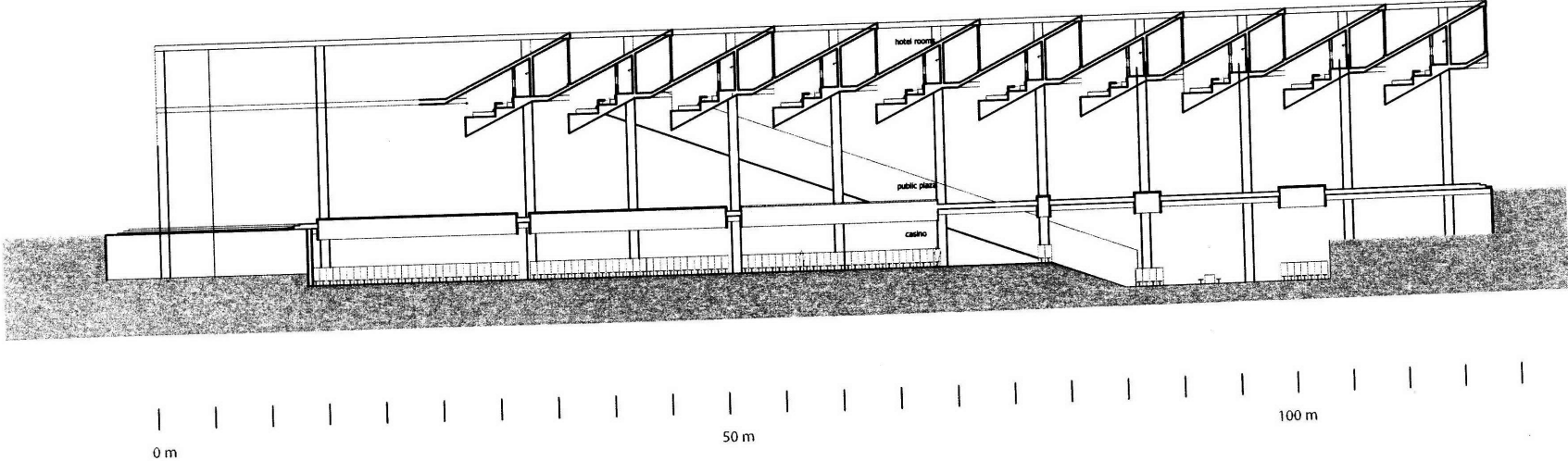
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site plan

Through subdivision, separation, and contrast, the proposed casino in Ho Chi Minh City exaggerates the spatial division between foreigner and local, revealing an urbanism of extreme capitalist desire and its satiation.

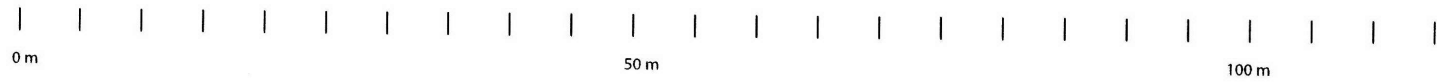
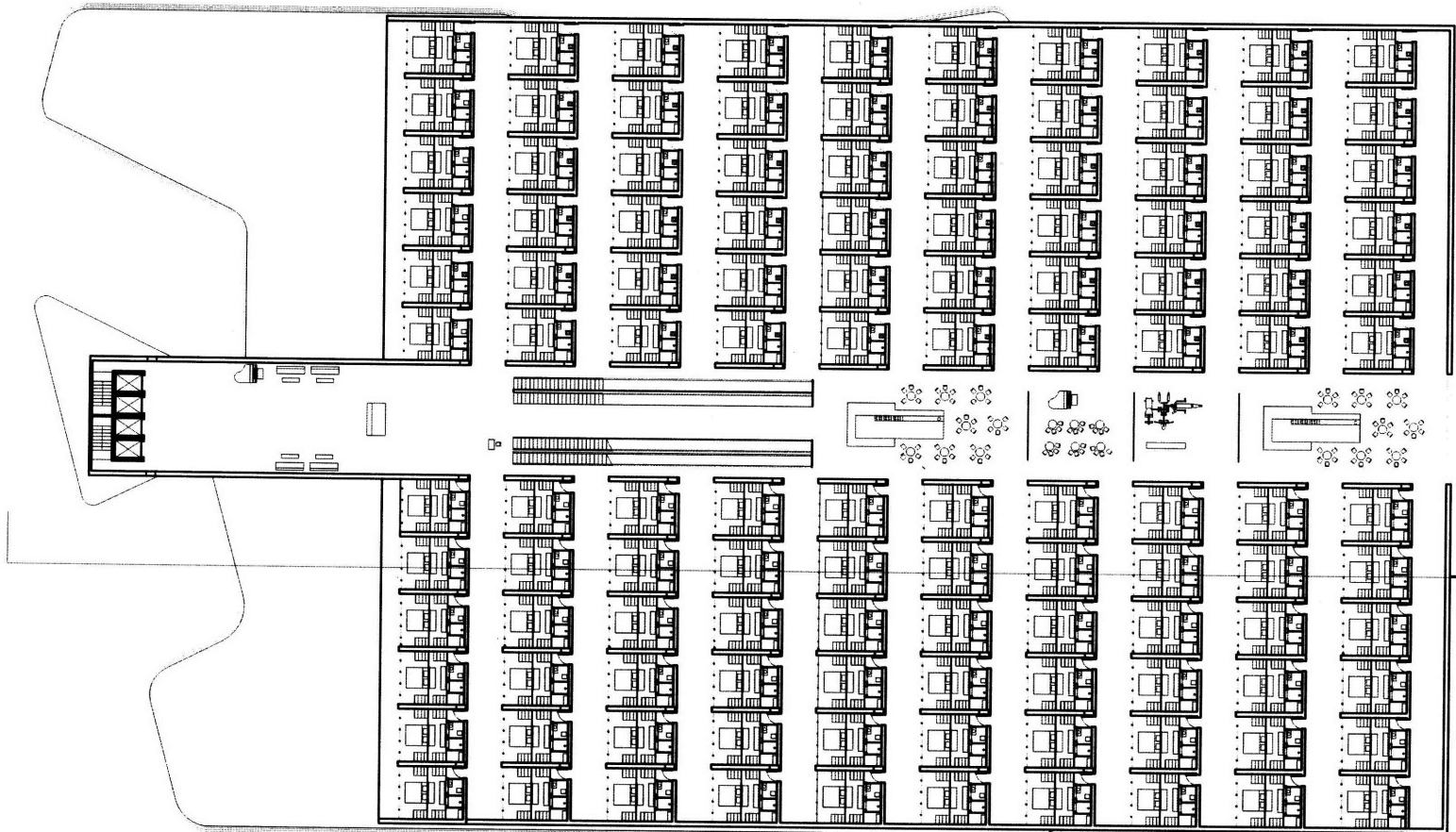
Contained underground, the foreigners' disease is hidden from the city proper. Slot machines, however, are revealed to those on the plaza, supplying the public space with entertainment and a source of light from below.

The hotel and casino are sectionally separated, and then reconnected with an expansive escalator. The plaza is sandwiched between the programs of luxury.

Hotel rooms are compact and efficient; one level containing 120 units. Luxury in this hotel is defined by proximity to the casino and the unobstructed view of the plaza and casino lights below.



longitudinal section A

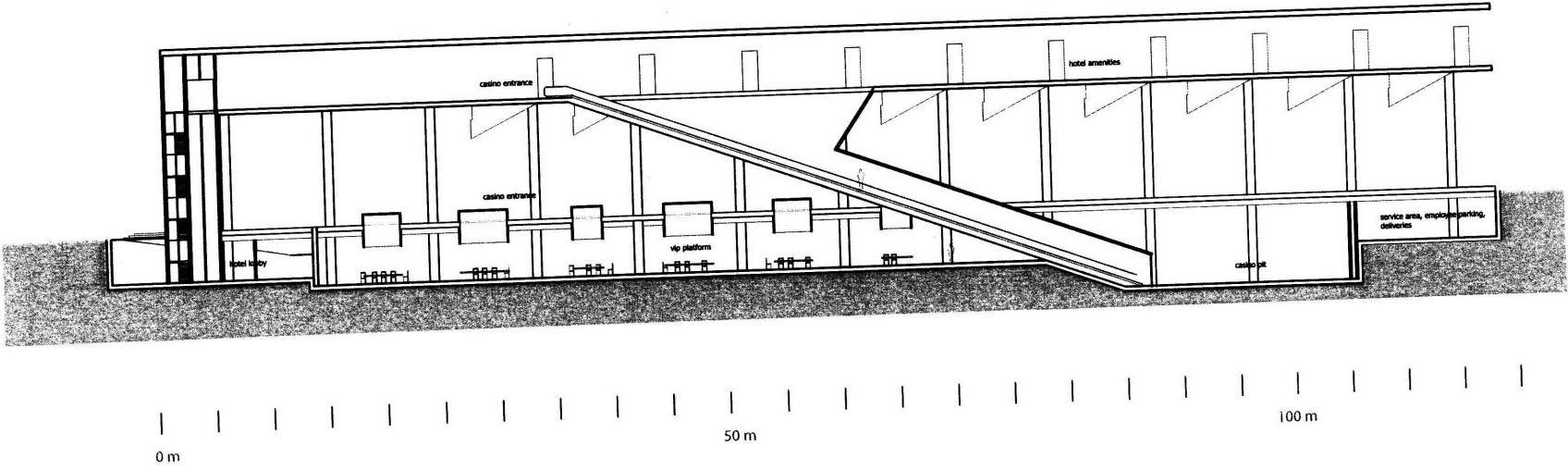


hotel plan

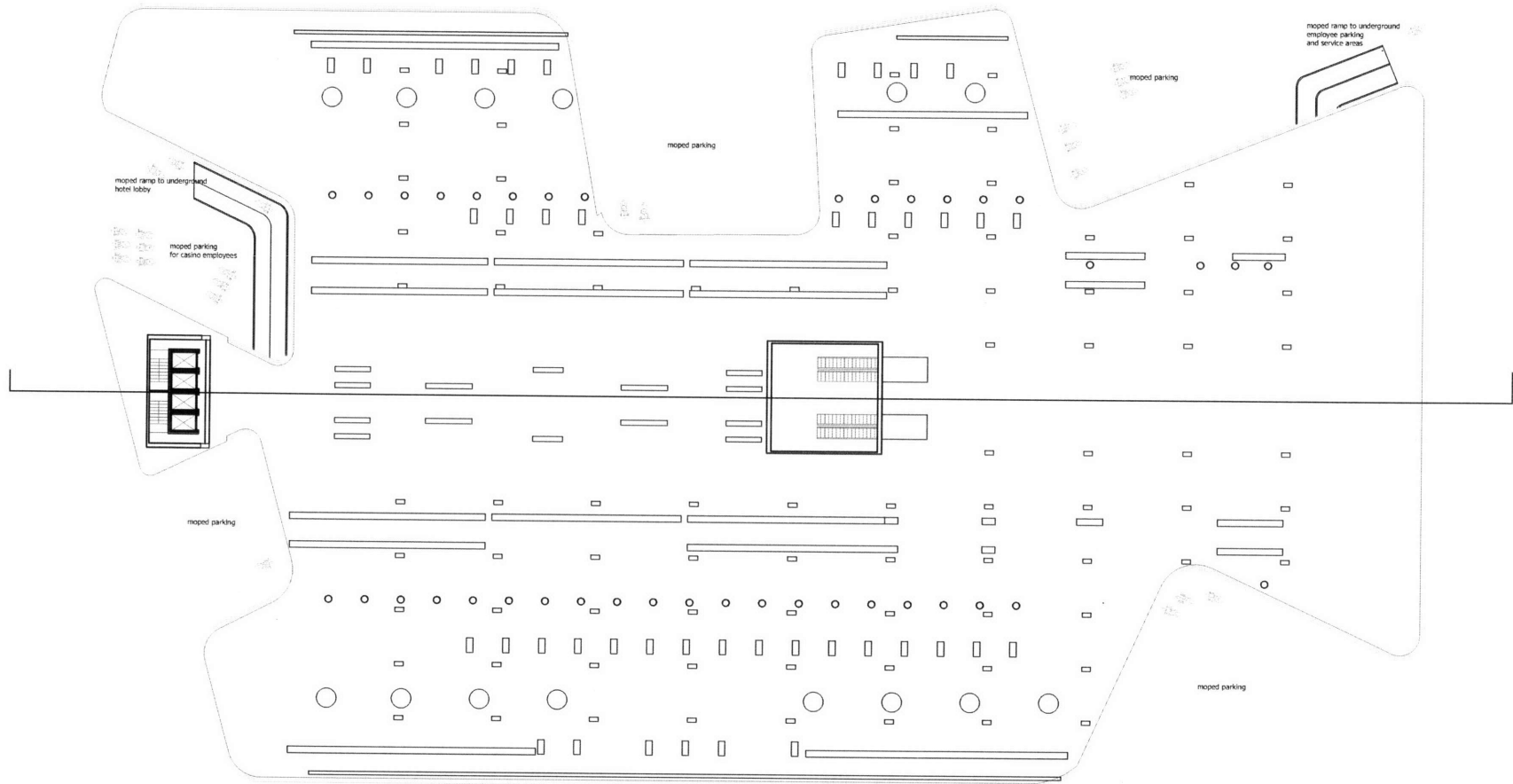
Partially owned by the socialist government and an anonymous foreign investor, the proposed casino is situated at the site of a prominent roundabout in the historic and touristic city center. While the state sees obvious economic advantages of the casino, the resultant plaza also functions as a site of leisure for locals. The customary activities of cruising and watching, of material consumption, and nightly meals occur on this lit plaza.

Organization: entrances to the hotel and to the casino, main circulation routes, and the casino's VIP area are located along the project's spine. The spine functions as a loop that moves foreigners through the project.

The cul de sacs around the plaza collect traffic from intersecting roads.



longitudinal section through spine

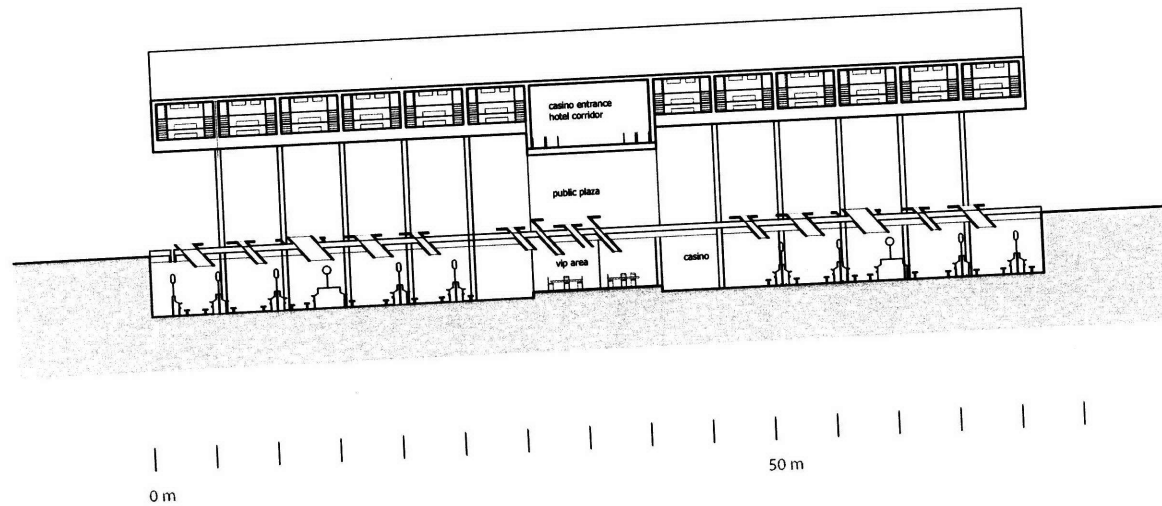


plaza plan

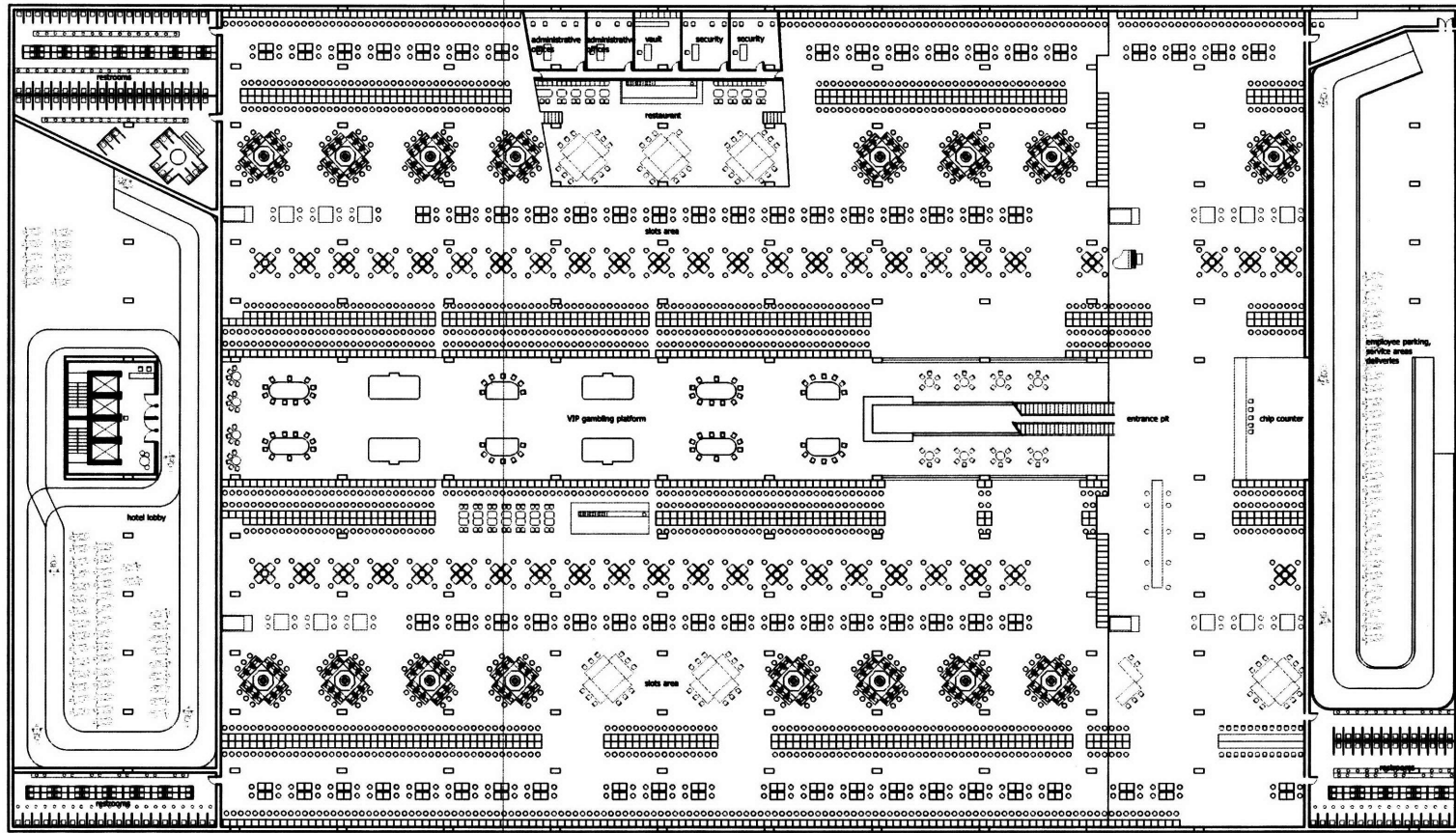
Like the hotel plan, the casino plan adheres to a linear, insistent repetition. While the hotel room is the organizational unit above, here, the slot machine organizes other spaces. Restroom stalls and sinks, service areas, and eating areas follow the arrangement of the slots.

The mechanical aesthetic of the hotel and casino plans stress the notion that the spaces of luxury are machines that cycle visitors through specific activities of rest and gambling.

Hotel rooms look onto the plaza, while viewing tubes/ street furniture allow visual access into the casino from the plaza.

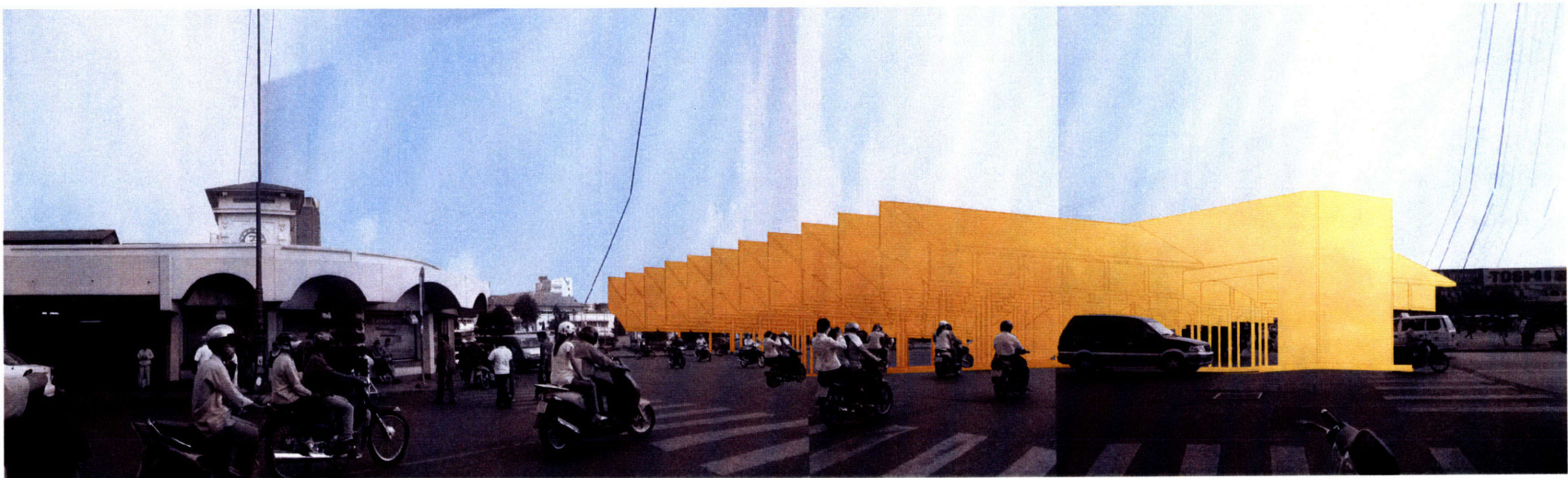


transverse section



casino plan

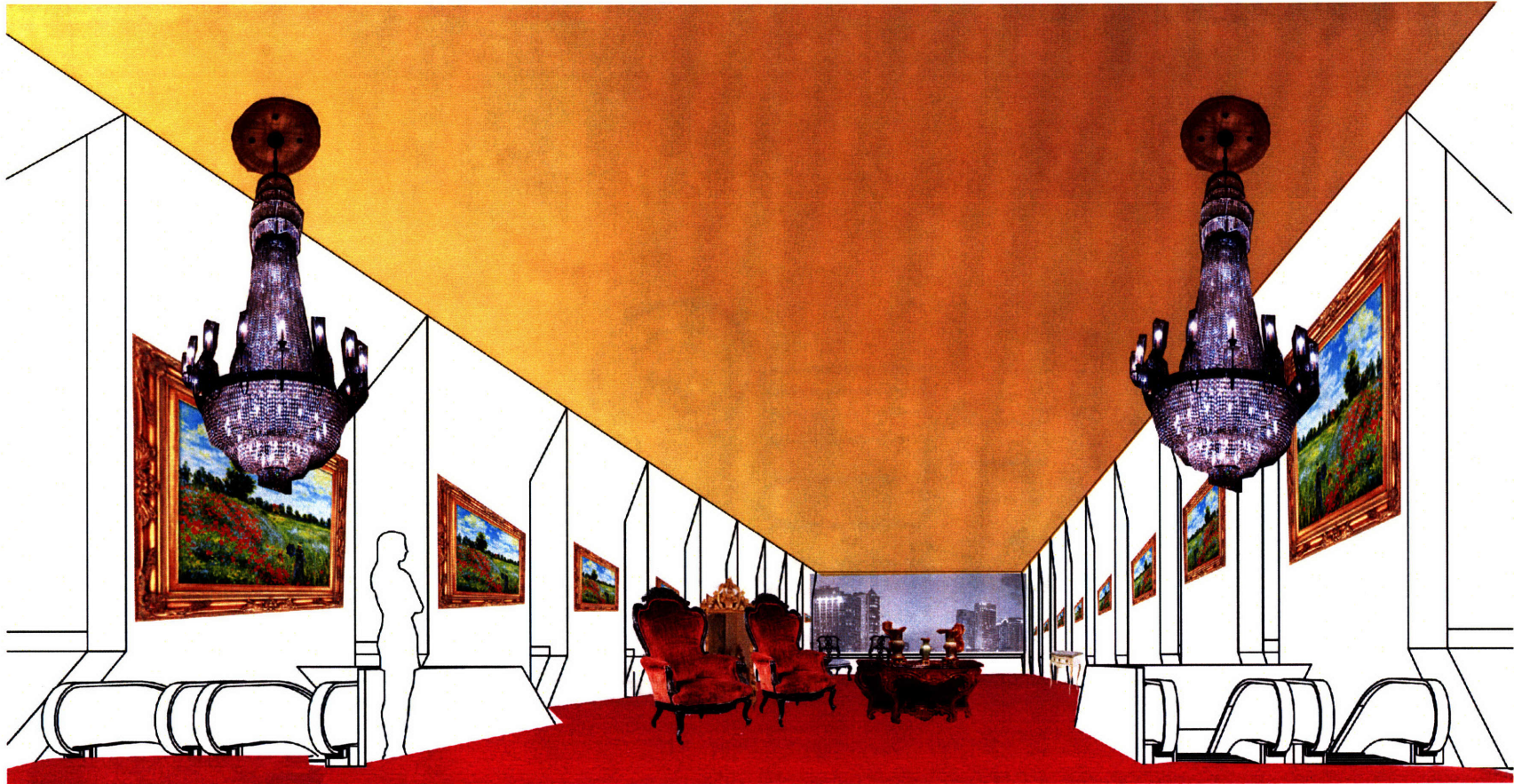
Perspectives



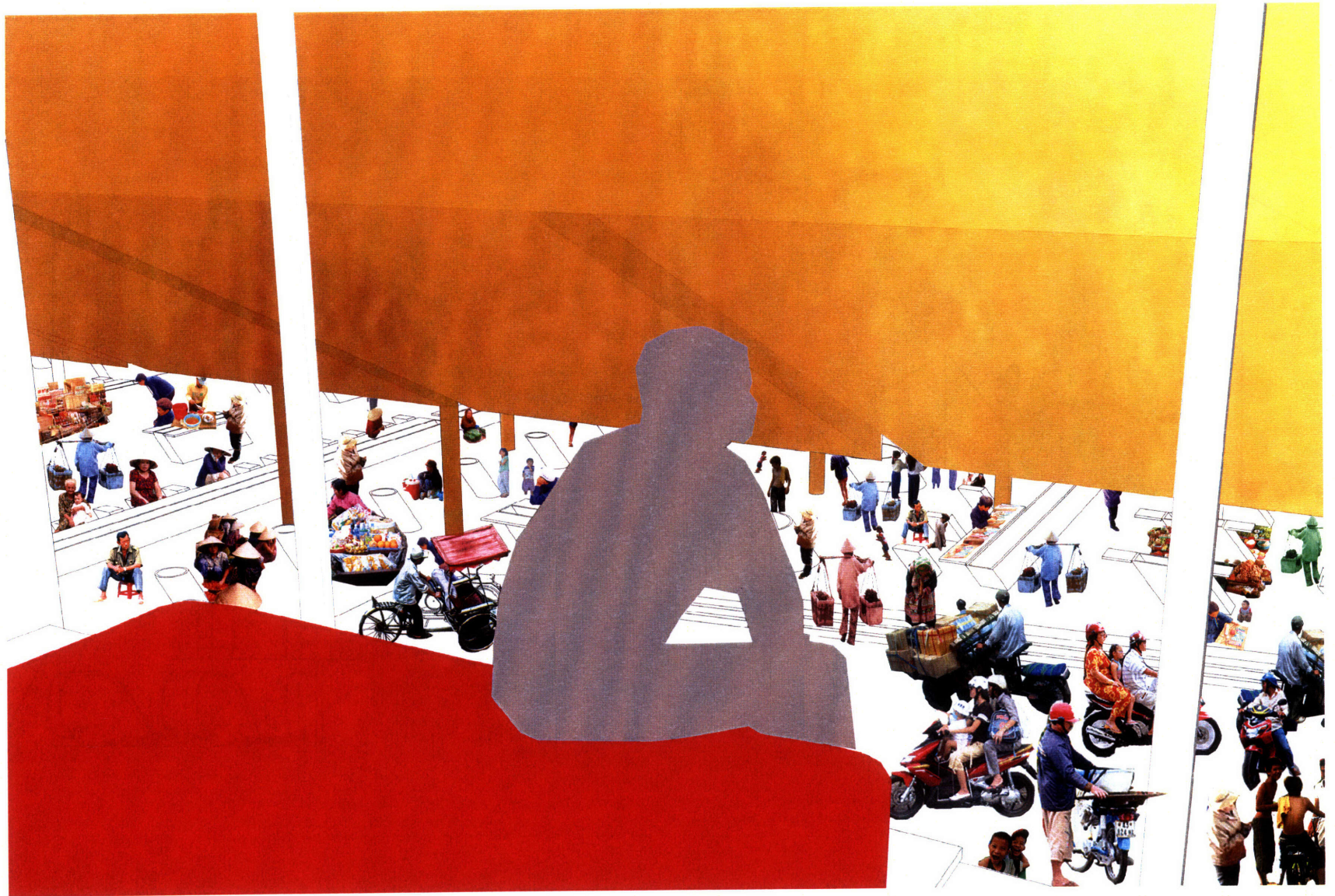
A new icon in the city that visually relates to the Ben Thanh Market across the street. The project's concrete exterior is gilded in gold.

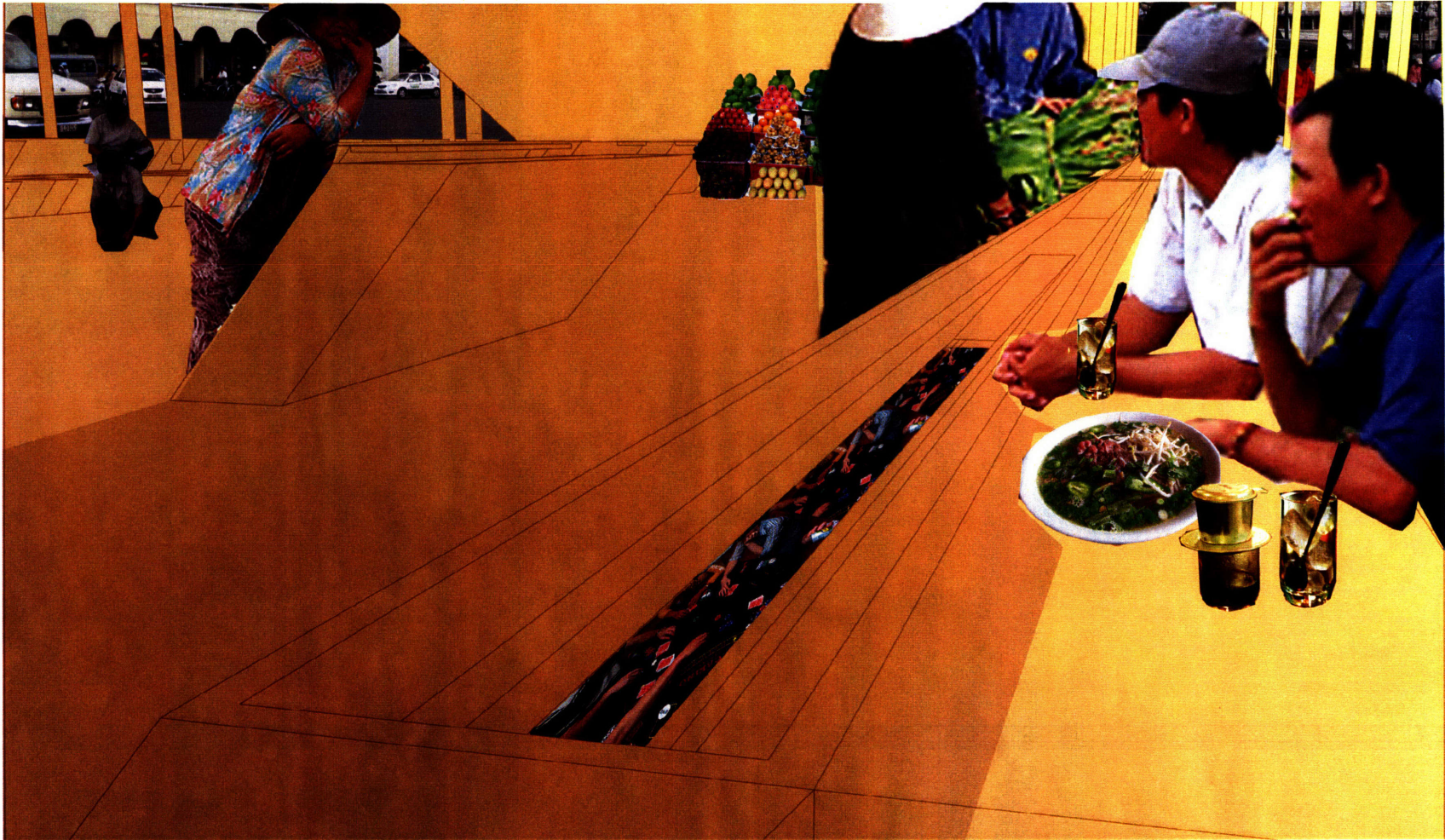


At night, slot machines underground provide light to the plaza. Groups gather to eat and watch the activities below. Foreigners, always in silhouette, enter the casino via the escalator or can be seen through their hotel window.



The hotel spine consists of escalators leading to the casino. A long passage, the space culminates in a view of the city. In contrast to the rigid and monastic form and arrangement of the hotel, the interior of the hotel is kitschy and lush. Socialist efficiency is softened and domesticated.



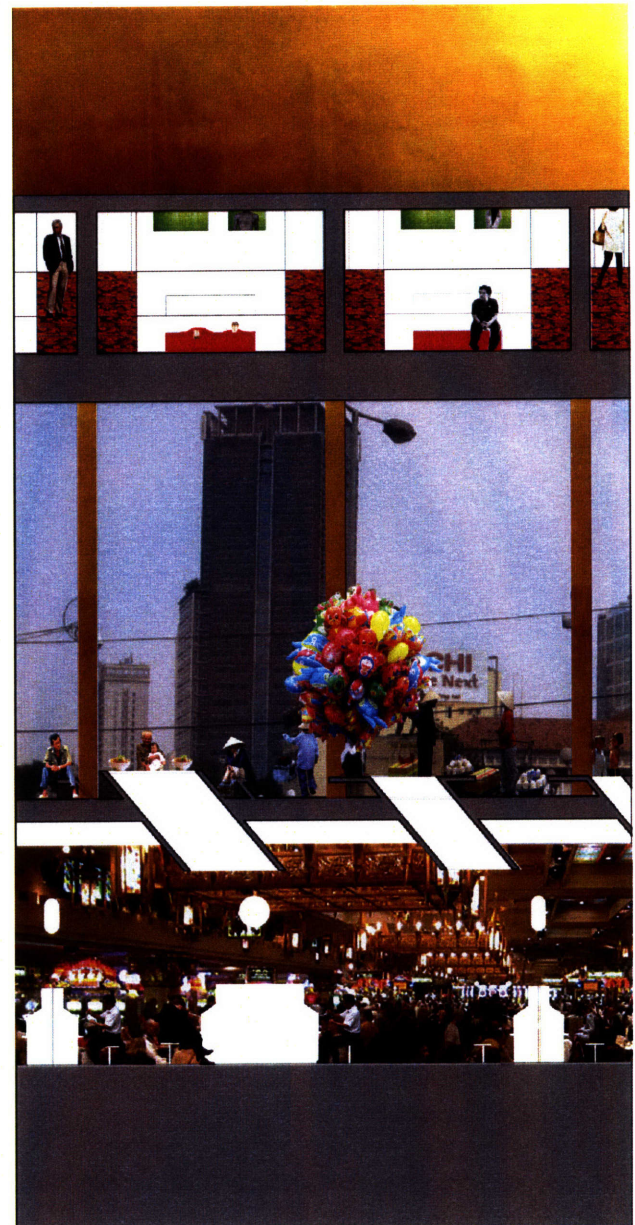


Left: the foreigner ensconced in his viewing box awakens to the activities of the plaza. Does he decide to join the locals or head straight down to the casino?

Above: locals enjoying beef noodle soup and Vietnamese iced coffee watch poker hands below. The faces of foreigners are shielded from view and inspection.

Three distinct layers of activities.

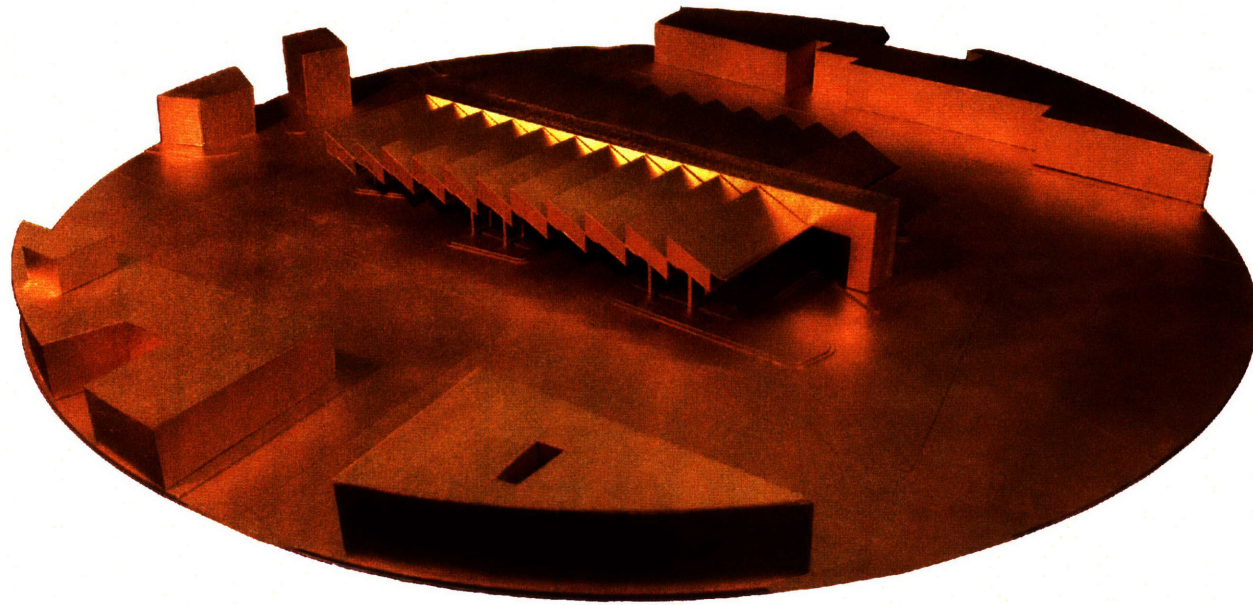
The project frames the city. Hotel windows frame activities of the plaza. Viewing tubes/ furniture frame activities of the casino.

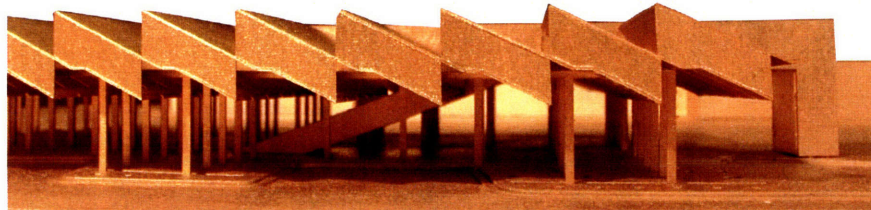
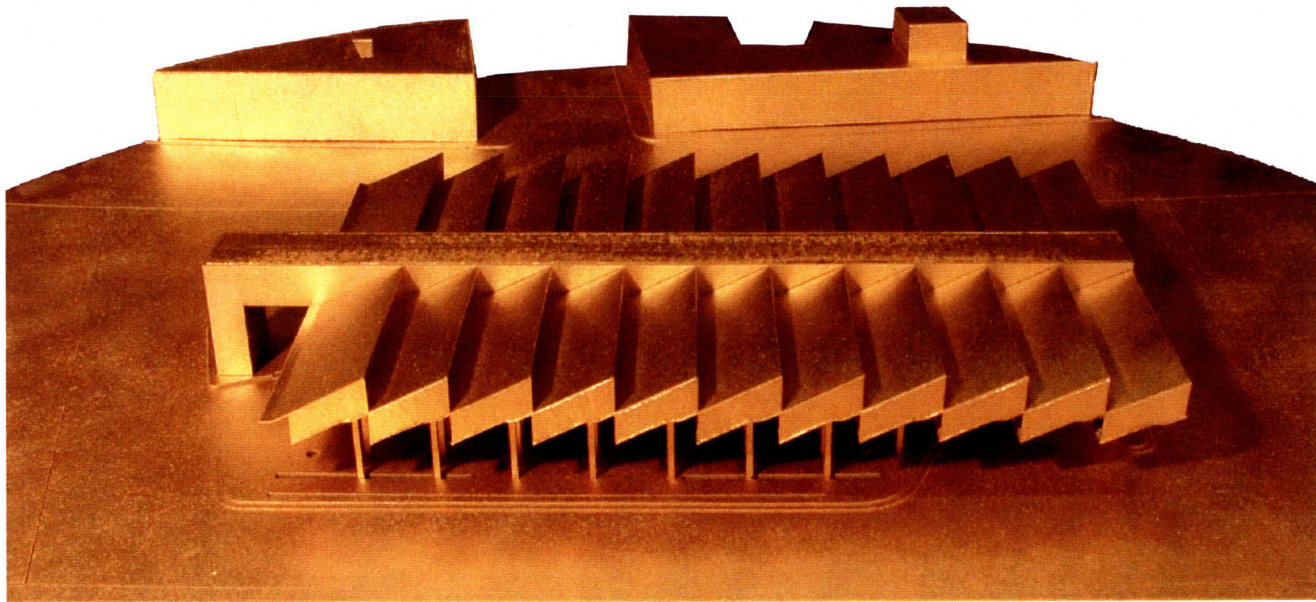


Locals peer curiously into the casino.

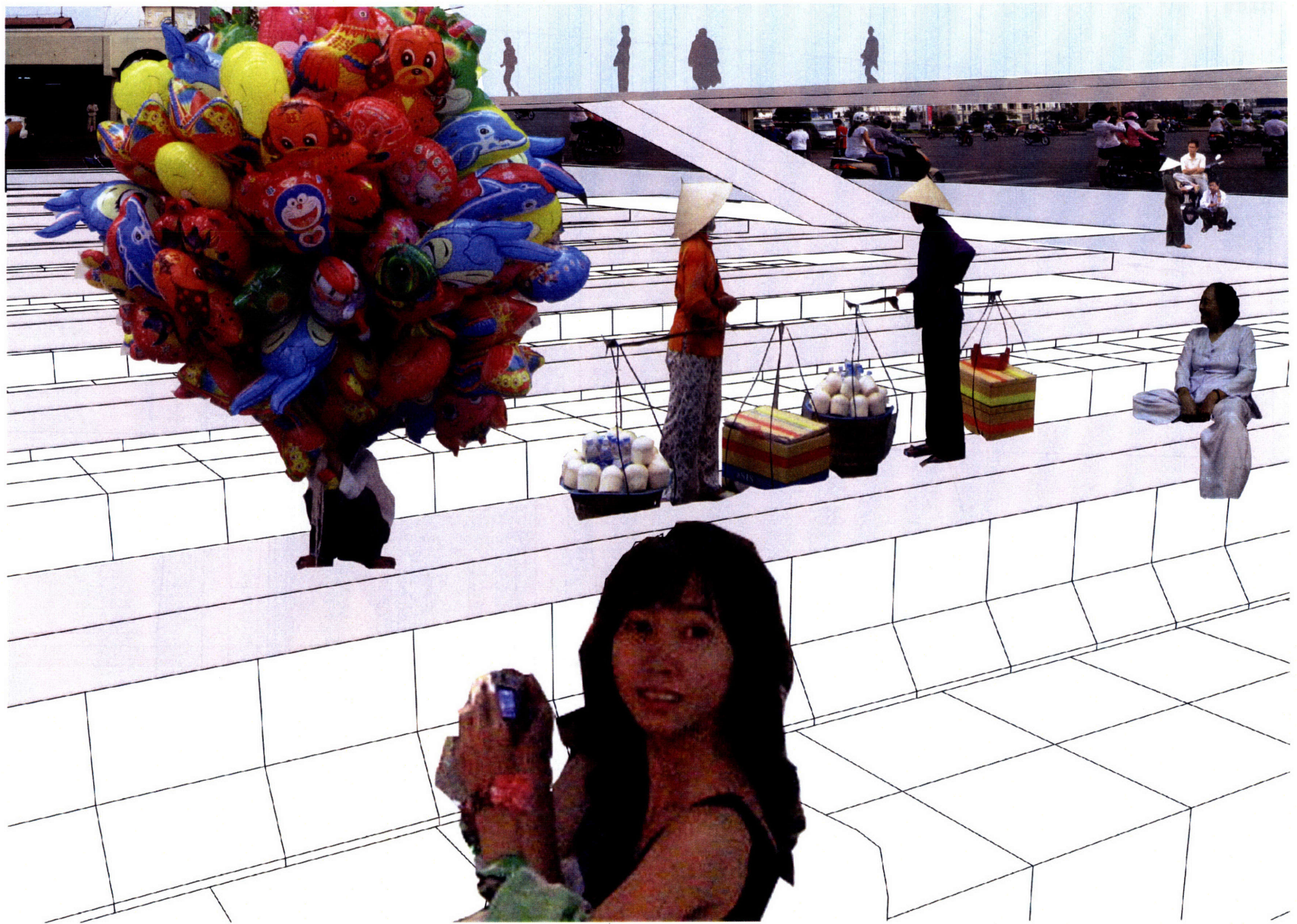


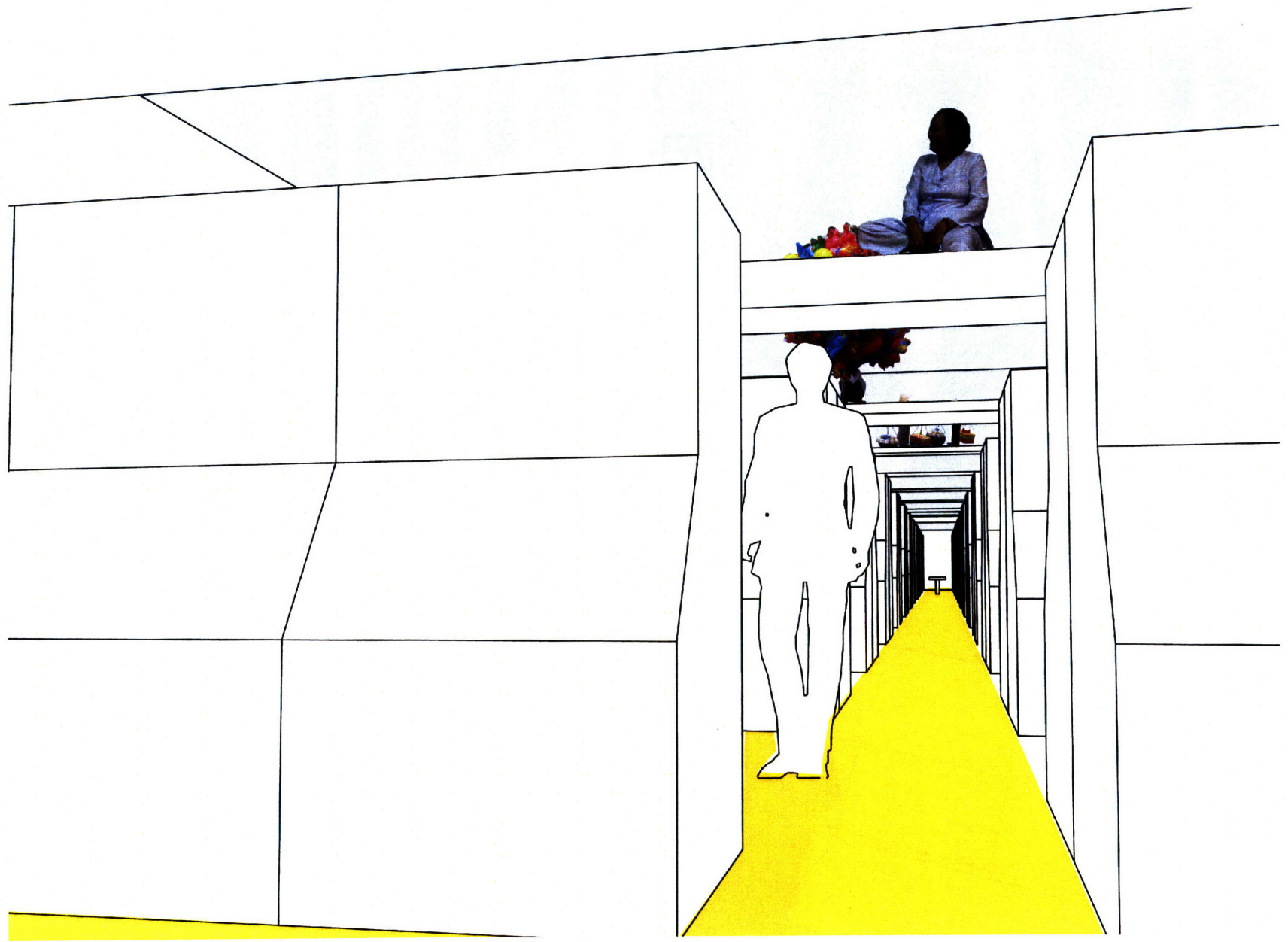
Model

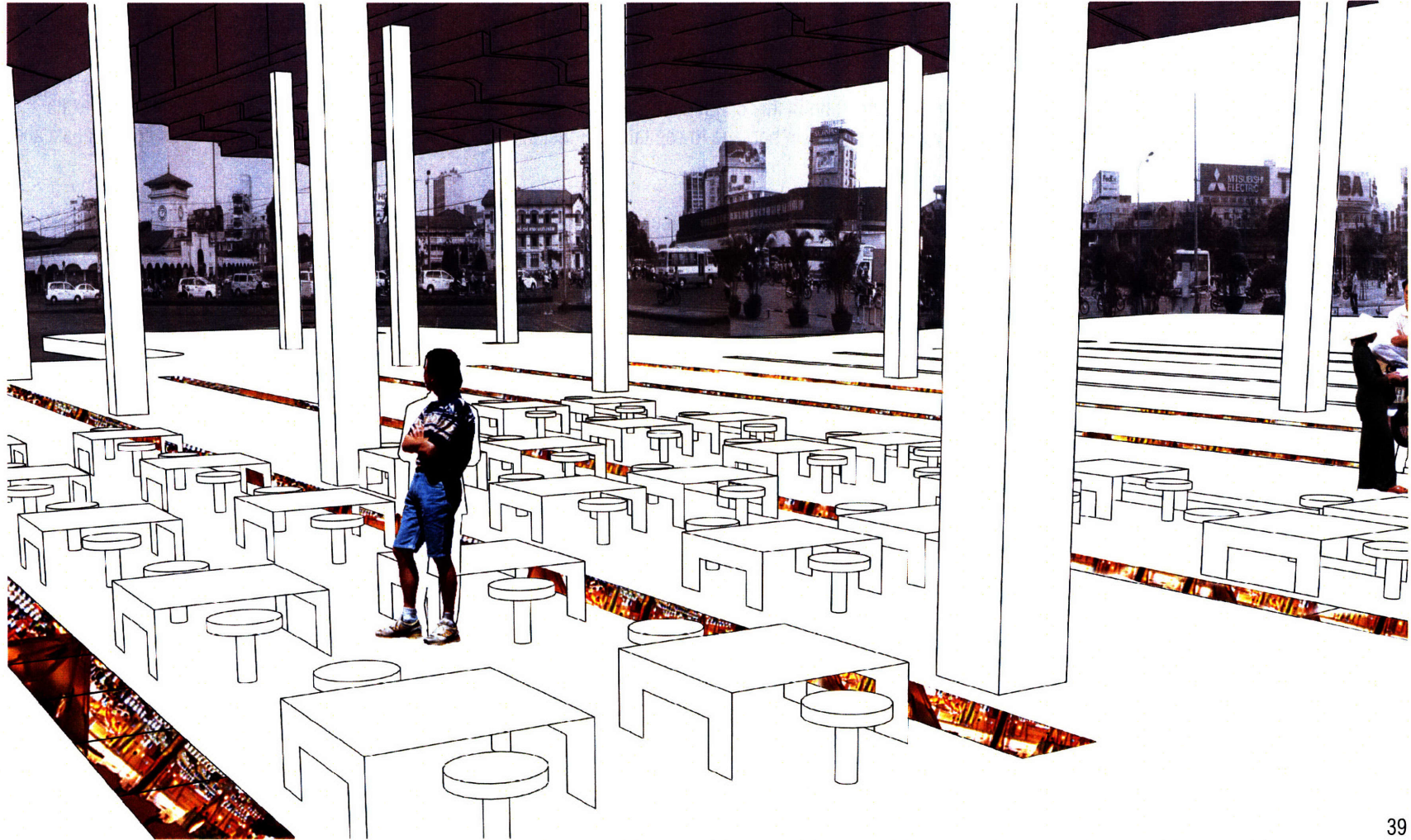




Early Perspectives







Thesis Prep Essay

07 April 2007

Ho Chi Minh City, Aerial View, Second Rate

In a fervent race to become a world class city, Ho Chi Minh City - formerly Saigon, the capital of pre-Communist Vietnam, and formerly Cholon, the French Colonial "Pearl of the East" - now the nation's economic capital, has opted, like many other emerging cities of the globe, to build, build, and build. Currently on the city's urban plate: an extension to the airport, a tunnel below the Saigon River, highways, a subway system, office towers.

Ho Chi Minh City straddles a seemingly contradictory urban position in this continual effort to attract foreign investors and tourists. That is, the city must flex its architectural muscles and construct fancy skyscrapers and boutiques in homage to capital, but must also maintain the architectural "beauty" of its colonial past and upkeep its various museums in homage to history.

My thesis posits that a newly constructed all-encompassing view of HCMC, one that celebrates the city's designed aeriality can both welcome investors/tourists and become democratic spaces for the city's citizens. More precisely, I will design architecture of the aerial view of a selected part of the city as a spatial response to HCMC's conflicting desires. Although this thesis relies on the historical and theoretical writings regarding the aerial and panoramic views, it will attempt to avoid the literal translation of these theories into form. For instance, instead of literally taking the masses to the top of a building to view their beloved city, perhaps the city can be brought to them.

There often exist in cities stark financial differences between properties that sit on ground level and those that occupy the hills or the air. In most cosmopolitan urban areas of the world like New York or London, penthouse units of skyscrapers are coveted luxuries. In Rio de Janeiro slums occupy the hills - heightened physical positions - isolated from the city's wealth. My thesis will investigate two specific architectural questions: who owns the privileged views of the city. And how can architecture re-insert the aerial view into public consciousness.

Architectural Elements

Ho Chi Minh City lacks the aerial and panoramic view of global economic players like Shanghai and Hong Kong. Thus for this Vietnamese upstart, the eye toward the future is directly related to the creation of the view from above. No doubt the city requires an instantly recognizable image in order to compete economically.

An additional premise is that HCMC will never be (or at least not in the next ten years) a "world class" or "first-rate city." I will argue that it is pointless for the city to compete with places like Shanghai for such a title. To court economic success HCMC should market itself as the "best second-rate city". What does this entail? What is an appropriate architecture for such a city? More specifically, what is the relationship between space, program, the elevated position or view, and second-ratedness?

The final product of my thesis will be a programmatic "view" of the city turned on its side: a plan made into an elevation. This building or series of buildings and embedded infrastructures will house spatial elements required to give citizens of Ho Chi Minh City and visitors an understanding of their rapidly changing city.

The Aerial View, Politics, and Leisure

Historically, the expansive and realistic architectural features of the built panorama compressed the multiple views of a city into a single image. Robert Barker's Panorama of London of 1793, displayed on the upper level of a two-story rotunda in Leicester Square, gave viewers a 360 degree view of the city. Orientation guides of the panorama were then sold to visitors as souvenirs. This accompaniment – which followed the form of the circular panorama – numbered, named and located significant landmarks. In other words, it mapped a mapping of the city.¹ Like the map, the panorama, or all-encompassing city view, establishes a pattern for arranging visual experience. Both act as surrogates or stand-ins for actual space. They are powerful tools of information, and when made accessible to citizens of a city, should democratize the experience of a place. (The city, the replica of the city, and the map of the replica of the city).²

And yet the democratization of views is often coupled with the fear of the misuse of maps. Widely available on-line, Google Earth, for instance, combines satellite and aerial images to give users the most up-to-date images of the topography of the world. The naysayer would wonder: what if images were seen and studied by an enemy in war? Advertised as a progressive educational and navigational tool, Google Earth celebrates instead the “value of high-resolution flyover images of the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben and the pyramids.” Users zoom into any parts of the world with simple clicks of a mouse, insert, and share their own architectural designs in situ. Manipulated in “real-time,” cartographic images are tactile. Personal computer users have the power to rotate a bird's eye view to enter the city three-dimensionally, to “fly-over” the landmarks of city streets, obtaining an infinite panorama: “When you have multiple eyes in the sky, what you're doing is creating a transparent globe where anyone can get basic information about anyone else.”³

Trepidation concerning the militaristic potential of the aerial view is rooted in the history of cartography itself. Cartography “is marked by the appropriation, control, and administration of power.”⁴ A useful tool for the propagandist, the map can be milked for its symbolic values, exploited, and turned “geographically into a kind of magic.”⁵ Writing about the aerial reconnaissance pilot of the First World War, Paul Virilio describes the skillful coordination of his hand and eye. The pilot was required to navigate, film and fire all at once. According to Virilio, “[i]n principle, there was no longer an above or below, no longer any visual polarity” as the pilot was able to make offensive decisions from the sky that would immediately affect the course of war on the ground. In Virilio's description, however, Michel de Certeau argues that the bird's eye-view of the city was highly privileged and empowering. It situated viewers as detached voyeurs, no longer fixed to the rigid and pre-determined physical boundaries of the city-on-the-ground.⁶ De Certeau writes that for the “voyeur-god” surveying the city from above, “[t]he ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins.”⁷ This dichotomous optical and spatial concept draws attention to the differences between the Icharian perceptions of the world from the ‘spatial practices’ of the urban dweller.

Kevin Lynch theorized that the “legibility” of a city depended on people's “mental maps” of their surroundings. These highly individual maps were comprised of the various paths from which the city was observed. Landmarks acted as points of reference on these mental maps, “stable anchor(s) for the perception of the complex and shifting urban world.”⁸ My thesis project will explore the spatial relationship between the above and the below.

Notes

- 1 Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*. trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider. (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 103-4.
- 2 See Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, p. 175 on the interrelationship between the artistic development of the bird's eye view and the scientific developments of cartography.
- 3 Hafner, Katie and Saritha Rai. "Governments Tremble at Google's Bird's-Eye View," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2005.
- 4 Tom Conley, *A Map in a Movie: A Study of Cartography and Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Forthcoming Fall 2006), p. 5.
- 5 Hans Speier, "Magic Geography," *Social Research* 8, September 1941, p. 313. This is an interesting article that discusses the use maps in the military, and propaganda films of the Nazis.
- 6 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: the logistics of perception*. trans. Patrick Camiller (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p 18. In fact, Virilio writes that it was common for aviation war heroes to join the film industry as stuntmen or even movie stars.
- 7 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, c. 1984), p. 92.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.92.
- 9 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: The Technology Presss and Harvard University Press, 1960), p. ____.

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