UN2: Reconfiguring the World City

by

James D. Graham

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Abstract

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of the United Nations' "permanent headquarters" in New York City was hailed as an epochal triumph: the era of post-war internationality— in terms of global politics and architectural modernism—was to be continuous and encompassing. Sixty years later, however, the UN's physical and governmental infrastructures find themselves desperately out-of-date and decreasingly relevant on the world scene; the decay of the original complex has necessitated a complete renovation, which is in turn an opportunity to rethink the architectural expression of international governance while recognizing and reinforcing the existing iconicity of the present structures. This thesis is a proposition to expand and reconfigure the UN (taking into account the increased prominence of Non-Governmental Organizations and decentralized agencies), ultimately reshaping its organizational apparatus as well as its urban identity. In reflecting on the UN as both site and subject, this project considers the realities of contemporary bureaucracy and reinterprets the tectonics and organistic rhetoric of the original complex's designers.

Thesis Supervisor: Nader Tehrani
Associate Professor of Architecture

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Team Tehrani (Damian, Fabian, and Michelle); it was a pleasure sharing office space, conversation, and pinup time.

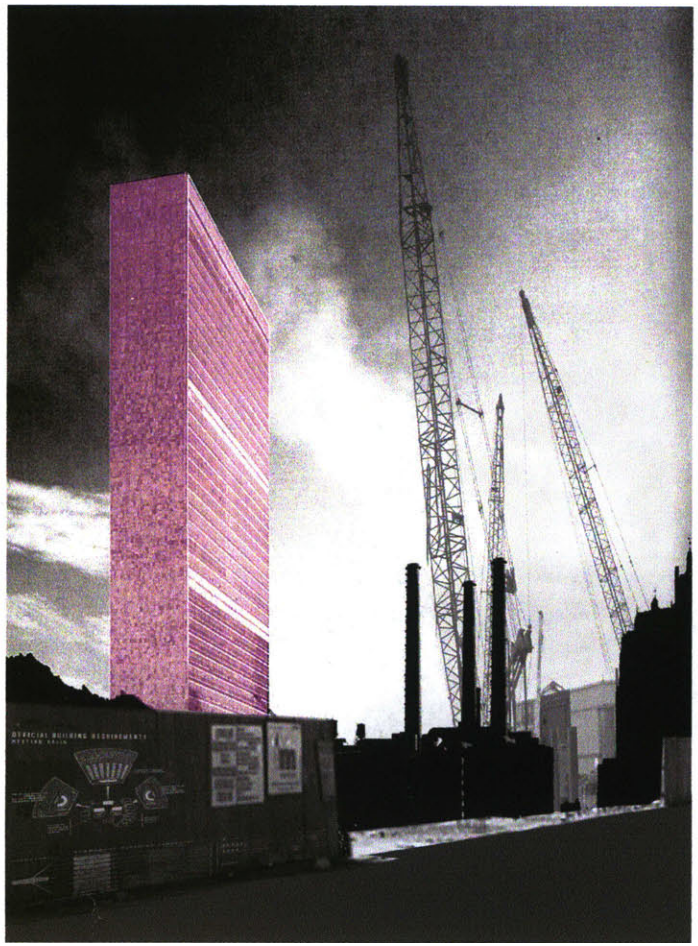
The very forthcoming Werner Schmidt at the United Nations Capital Master Plan Office, who is full of obscure UN-related knowledge (like the fact that they use the East River for air conditioning, which I always meant to integrate into the project but never managed to).

My parents and brother, whose interest and support is never less than unconditional.

And, of course, Meredith Miller, who really kept the wheels on the wagon.

UN2: RECONFIGURING THE WORLD CITY

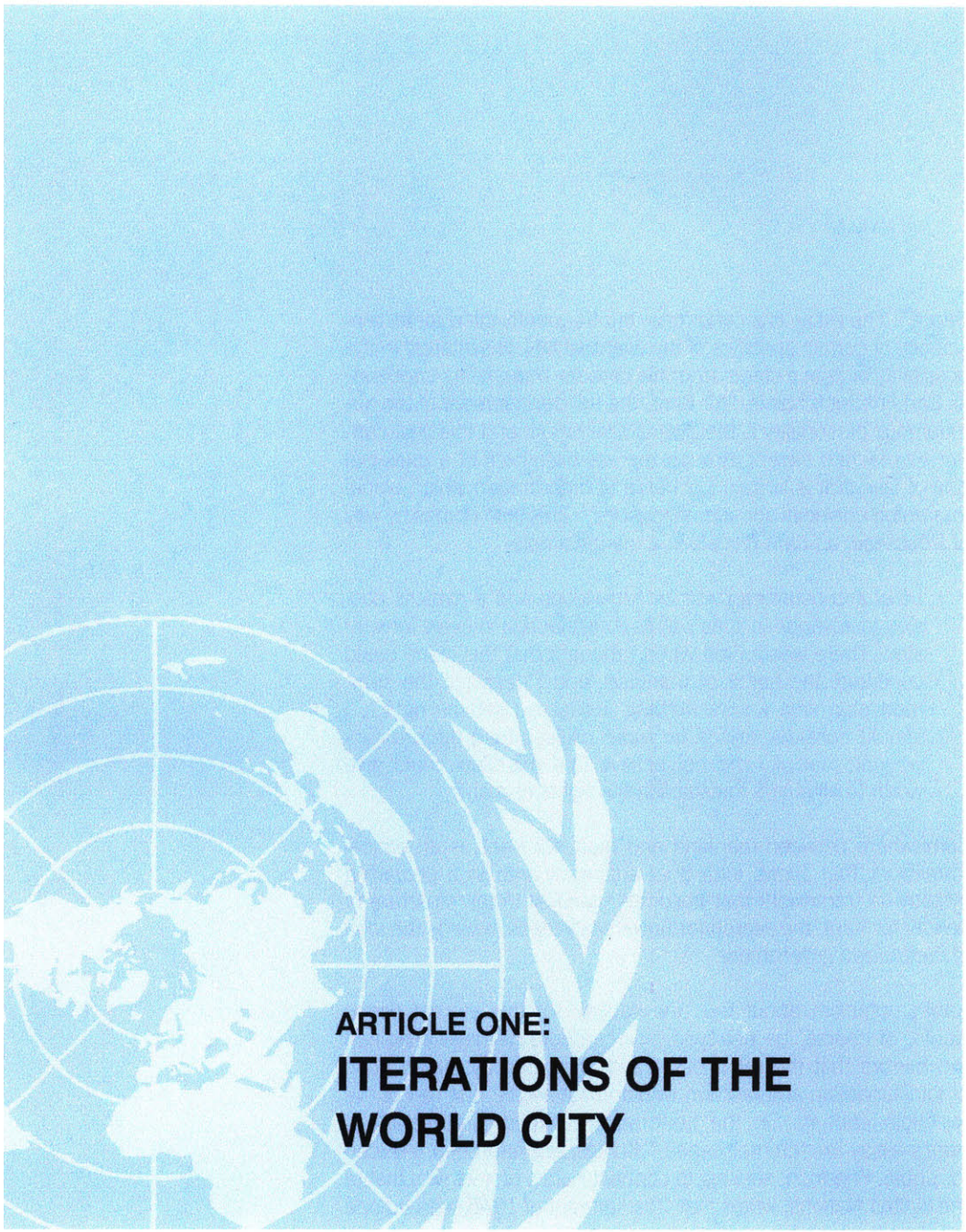
JAMES D. GRAHAM



The United Nations complex was, famously, a design by committee; its compositional singularity somehow arose from an atmosphere of vigorous debate, diverging ambitions, and monumental egotism. What is ultimately most remarkable about the design process was that the lingua franca of Modernism (with its particular material, aesthetic, social, and "hygienic" dialects) rose to the moment, in its own problematic way, occasioning a many-layered framework upon which the later-named International Style's architectural and ideological apotheosis was ultimately constructed. That sentence can be read as literally or as metaphorically as you like, because it holds at almost any level of abstraction, from the UN's conceptual rhetoric to its mullion spacing. Obsess over the UN for a year, and you'll keep coming back to its central struggles: the very thorny notion of systematized plurality and the utopian vision of an organistic and homeostatically flexible world order that bears no traces of anything but its own futurity.

Out of deference to the UN's spirit of bringing disparate narratives under one roof (and out of the impossibility of forging a single linear path through the project at hand), the following book traces four conceptual threads that constitute the reconfigured United Nations of this thesis; historiography, bureaucracy, accessibility, and iconicity each take their turn as the locus of inquiry. If the original design process was defined by its aggregation of talent and ideas, then its reimagining should at least attempt to do some justice to its many-headed origin.

Sven Markelius pointing to a model at a meeting of the design committee.



ARTICLE ONE:
ITERATIONS OF THE WORLD CITY

That a United Nations can exist at all is remarkable in and of itself. At its inception, it was heralded as a new, permanent world order that, having been established, would be continuous and encompassing. What is most intriguing about the idea of international governance— which in fact was a preoccupation since the enlightment development of liberalism— is its existence outside of a concept of the state; a "United Nations" is by definition trafficking not in questions of sovereignty but of governmentality, to use Michel Foucault's phrase. The idea that there could be an organizational apparatus (and its associated physical manifestation) for the management of global politics places us squarely in an episteme of late-governmentality.

What is critical for Foucault—and this thesis—is that governmentality concerns not the proprietary rights and teleologically prescribed systems but rather the sets of techniques by which governance happen:

> Whereas the end of sovereignty is internal to itself and possesses its own intrinsic instruments in the shape of laws, the finality of government resides in the things it manages and in the pursuit of the perfection and intensification of the

> processes which it directs; and the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics.[1]

As Machiavelli's prince learns, as read by Foucault, governmentality necessitates externality: rather than being entangled directly with the state, it concerns rather the management of methods. This same logic (and indeed, Foucault argues that there is "no methodological or material discontinuity between... microphysical and macrophsyical approaches to the study of power")[2] can be seen in the United Nations as a juridical entity— stateless and perpetually external but tactically engaged, on its good days— and even in the extraterritorial status of its headquarters in New York City. Outside the city but imbricated within it, this thesis regards the UN complex not as an architectural artifact so much as a set of constraints, processes, and systems that aggregate to make up the infrastructure of internationalism.

Notions of international governance have manifested themselves repeatedly throughout history. Imperial Rome—which saw its own extents as total and globalizing—may qualify as the most grandiose of territorial amalgamations under a single umbrella of power; the post-Napoleonic Quadruple Alliance of 1815 and its system of international congresses can be seen as the first confederacy of nations whose precepts were participatory rather than hegemonic; the organizational systems of colonial powers established constellatory nodes of power spanning disparate regions and connected by the threads of material and cultural movement, necessitating new concepts of statehood and overlapping levels of governance.

The year 1785 produces a text that is frequently pointed to as an example of the global optimism of the era: Kant's essay "Eternal Peace". The essay is a minor one, but frequently cited for its prescience of certain specifics of the eventual UN. His interest in the possibility of peace stems from his broader humanistic impulses; as Carl Friedrich has is, "for Kant, the full development of the autonomous personality is the goal of civilization, and this goal cannot be reached except through the establishment of a universal rule of law, that is to say, a scheme of organization which would guarantee universal and eternal peace."[3] This faith comes by way of Rousseau, as Kant reveals in a marginal note:

> I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge and a restless passion to advance in it, as well as a satisfaction in every forward step. There was a time when I thought that this alone could constitute the honor of mankind, and I despised the common man who knows nothing. Rousseau set me right... I should consider myself far more useless than the ordinary working man if I did not believe that this view could give worth to all others to establish the rights of man.[4]

Somewhere between mankind and man, for Kant, is an ethical framework that allows individual autonomy with in a prevailing system—a framework that becomes manifest in the structure of peace; for Kant, the search for universality leads towards the idea of centralized government.

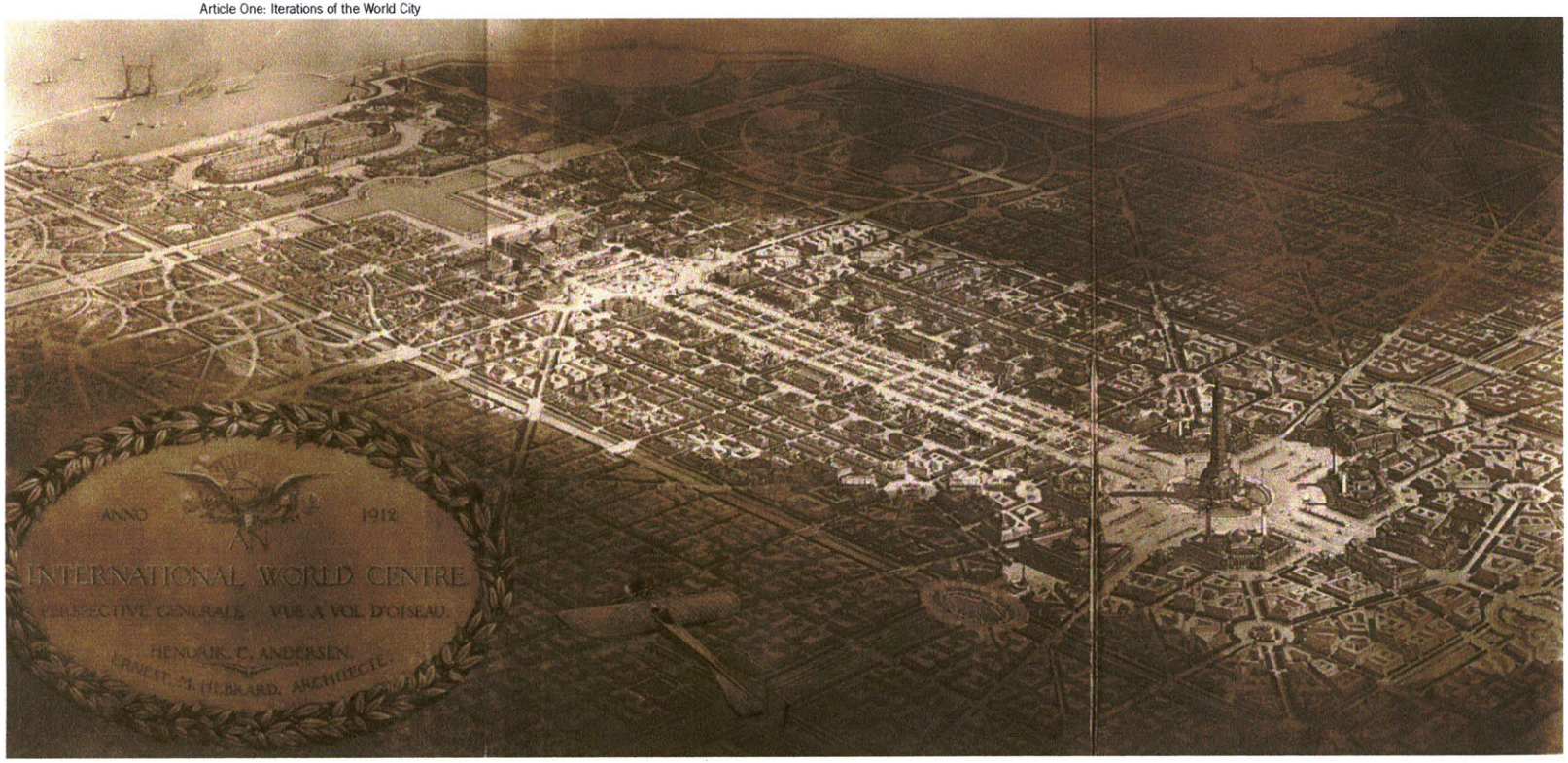
Kant's optimism about the "inevitability" of this eternal peace would, of course, be betrayed; scarce could he have imagined the horrors that the relentless "rationality" and systematization of totalitarianism and fascism would inflict on the first half of the twentieth century. On the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Kant's essay on "Eternal Peace," Konigsberg had been reduced to rubble. Friedrich, seeking to connect Kant's project with that of the United Nations, writes that "the summer of 1945 seemed one

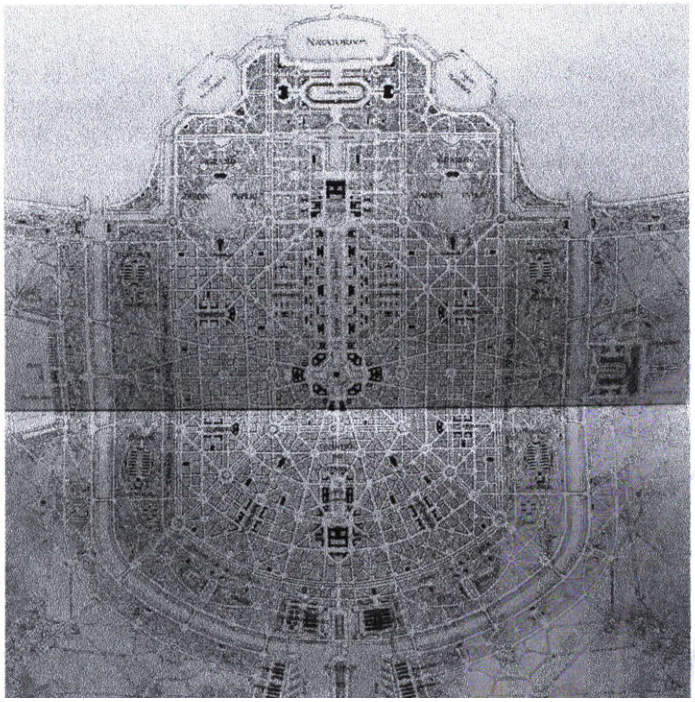
of those dramatic moments in history which like a flash of lightning throw into sharp outline and perspective the dark panorama of human history." Beyond the similar scope and architectonic quality of their respective documents, Friedrich argues that Kant's writings and the Wilsonian ethic that led to the original League of Nations both demonstrate a certain bourgeois Puritanism and that the eventual United Nations grows out of these outlooks: "Its emphasis on law, on peaceful progress, on civil liberties, on judicial methods—these and many other features are unmistakable tokens of the Charter's ideological ancestry."[5]

More architecturally immediate to the origins of the contemporary World City (that we now take almost for granted) was Hendrik Christian Andersen's "World Centre of Communication", which proposed the first truly international and idealized institution of global governance. Lavishly published in 1913 with highly detailed drawings by the French architect Ernest Hébrard, the project stands among the most grandiose expression of Beaux-Arts totality. As Andersen writes with characteristically utopianist effervescence, "the whole earth is eagerly searching for truth and justice, and the boundary lines of states cannot hold the energies of people... the human race grows with increasing rapidity and tends to become a world-embracing unity."[6] Beyond the boundaries of statehood, Andersen projects not only a building or a complex but an entire territory dedicated to the ideal of internationalism made manifest in the concourse of artistic, scientific, and physical culture. What makes this project especially intriguing is its timing; not borne out of war, it was developed (especially in its nascence) at a time of relative peace and prosperity, making its nobly feverish sentiments less contingent on militaristic determinants.

The novelist Henry James, who was one of Andersen's harshest critics while being one of his fondest friends, was aghast upon receiving Andersen's pamphlet; recognizing the hubris and impossibility of the task, he tries to warn him away from the utopian and encyclopedic scope of his world city. He writes in a letter:

> Your mania for the colossal, the swelling & the huge, the monotonously & repeatedly huge, breaks the heart of me for you, so convinced have I been all along that it means your simply burying yourself & all your products & belongings, & everything & Every One that it yours, in the most bottomless & thankless & fatal of sandbanks... when your write me that you are now lavishing time & money on a colossal ready-made City, I simply cover my head with my mantle & turn my face to the wall, & there, dearest Hendrik, just bitterly weep for you.[7]


ANNO
1912
INTERNATIONAL WORLD CENTRE
PERSPECTIVE GENERALE VUE A VOL D'OISEAU.
HENDRIK C. ANDERSEN.
ERNEST M. HEBRARD. ARCHITECTE.



James goes on to admonish that "cities are living organisms, that grow from within & by experience & piece by piece; they are not bought all hanging together, in any inspired studio anywhere whatsoever"—a critique that will follow the project throughout its discursive life.[8]

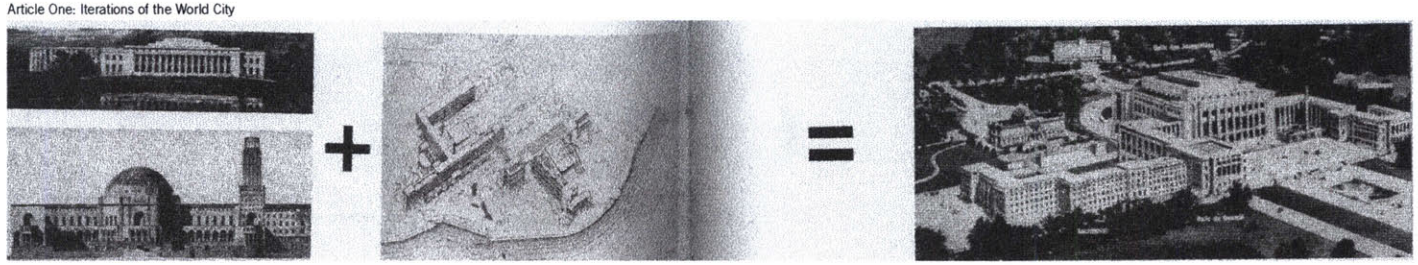
Indeed, the question of totality is a constant paradox within theories of governmentality. Foucault was fond of the latin phrase "Omnes et singulatim", which translates to "all and each." As Colin Gordon puts it,

> Foucault saw it as a characteristic (and troubling) property of the development of the practice of government in Western societies to tend towards a form of political sovereignty which would be a government of all and of each, and whose concerns would be at once to "totalize" and to "individualize".[9]

And yet, what would the eventual League of Nations or the UN be if not a colossal ready-made? Can one expect to "grow" such an infrastructure? Does urban differentiation work for or against the concept of internationalism? Such questions continue unabated.

Governmental plans of any sort were checked by the advent of the first World War, although its conclusion and the establishment of the League of Nations brought the question of housing internationalism to the forefront again. To that end, in December 1919,

LEFT: Hendrik Christian Andersen's "World Center of Communication" in aerial perspective and plan; a totalizing and teleological approach to government, arts, sciences, religion, and recreation. RIGHT: The frontispiece to Andersen's book. Note the uncanny similarity of his logo to that of the eventual United Nations.



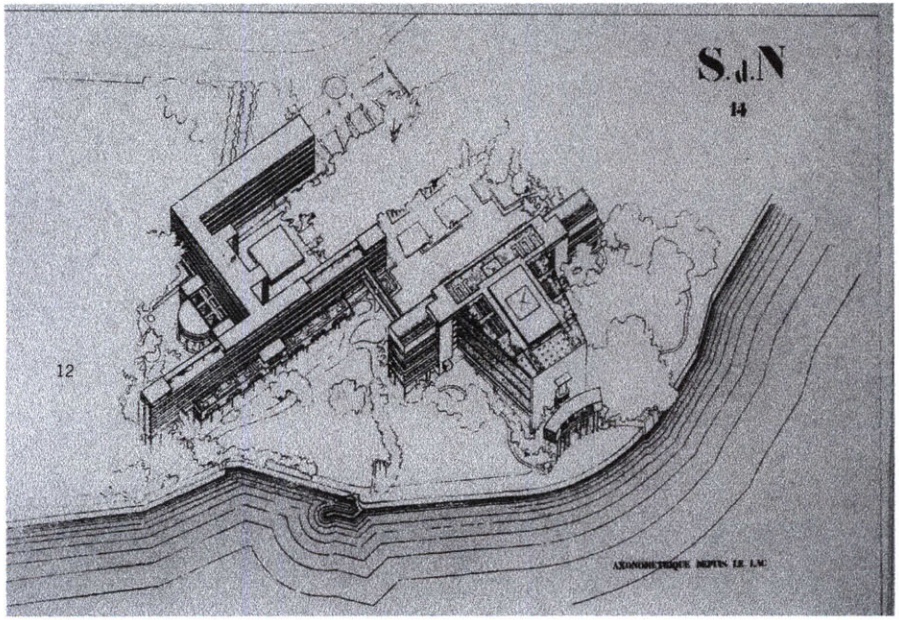
the British Architectural Review put out a "Peace Commemoration Number" whose foreward explicitly argues for the role of the architect in this new world order: "Architecture being the Mistress Art, and pre-eminent among the arts of Peace, it is beyond question fitting... to commemorate the great Peace."[10] The excitement was unbridled; one writer in Review argued that "architecture is among the first fruits of war; it is the child of victory...the art of architecture comes as a crown to momentous national enterprises that have achieved for their people a full and spacious reward."[11] Another contributor effused the following:

> It is a great point in time. If one could visualize the whole movement recorded in the history of the world, whether in that great book whose leaves are strata, whose pages are marked by the ages, or that greater book of papyrus and parchment, of tablet and vellum, it would be seen converging on this point... What is that State to be?... Here on this threshold we await its coming; we lay its foundation; we plant its gardens. That, in rough, is the story of the world.[12]

Many believed that Andersen had already laid that foundation with his project; several contributors to the issue reference it and two deal specifically with the merits of the proposal and possible sitings. Its timeliness was almost uncanny; at the time of its publication, there was little need for such a project, although six years later, the need for it had become urgent. "Prophetic as such a scheme was then," wrote Sir Aston Webb, "it is prophetic still, for the fate of the League of Nations itself still hangs in the balance."[13]

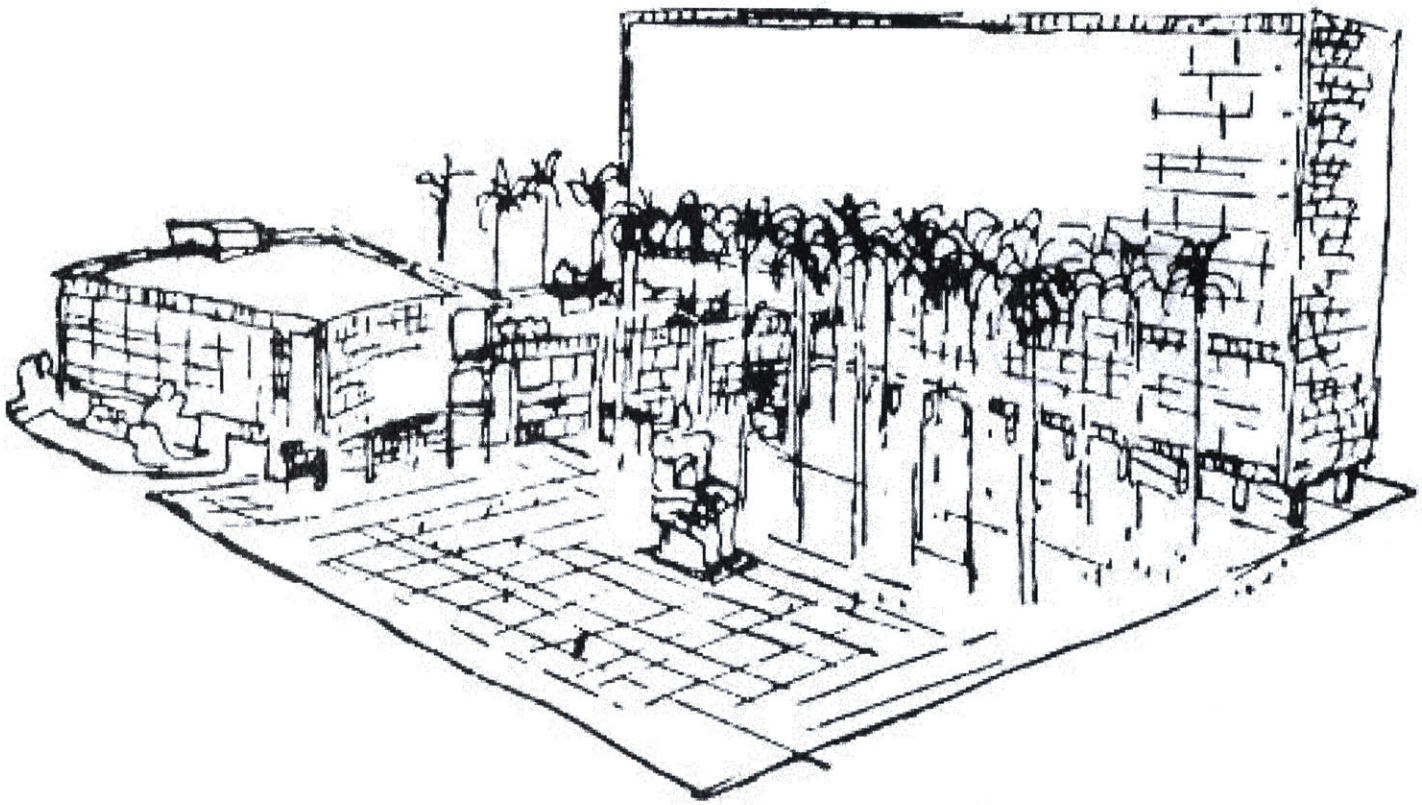
A competition was held for the League's headquarters in Geneva; Le Corbusier produced an entry that is today among the best known; an early experiment in his ongoing project of governmental centers, his thoughts on organicism and programmatic form were already in place. Corbusier lost:

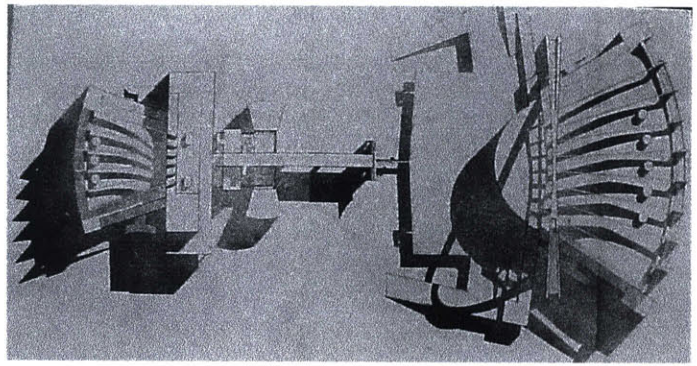
> In 1936 a jury of nine architects threw away the opportunity to select a significant design as winner of a competition for the League of Nations headquarters. Stodgy classical designs, expressing in no way the aim for a saner world, predominated in the submissions. Evading its assigned responsibility, the jury awarded nine first prizes... A monument to architectural compromise, the final building was not significant. It typified a world organization which also hesitated, compromised, and died.[14]



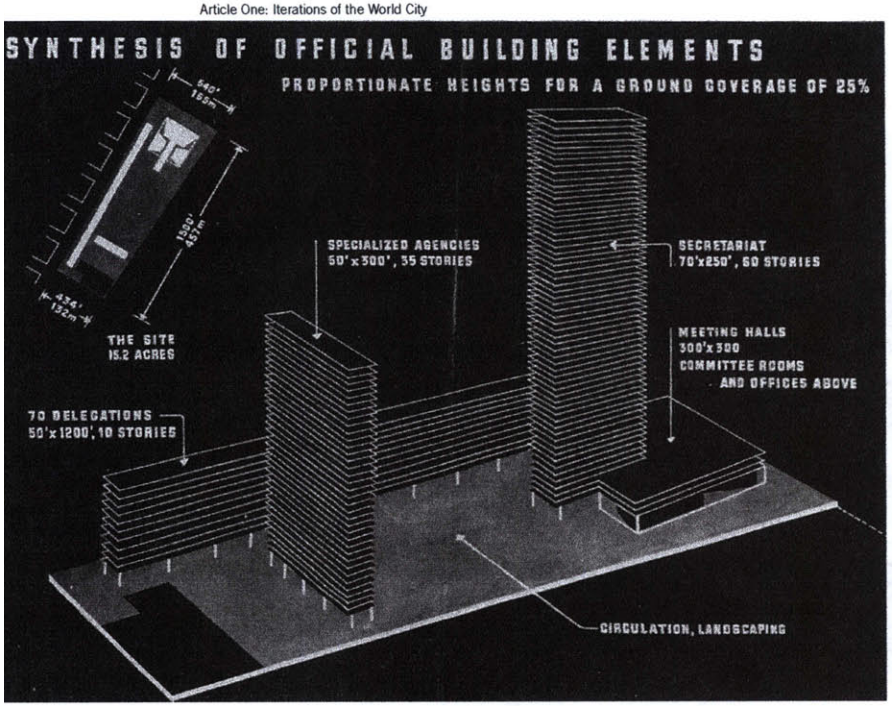
12

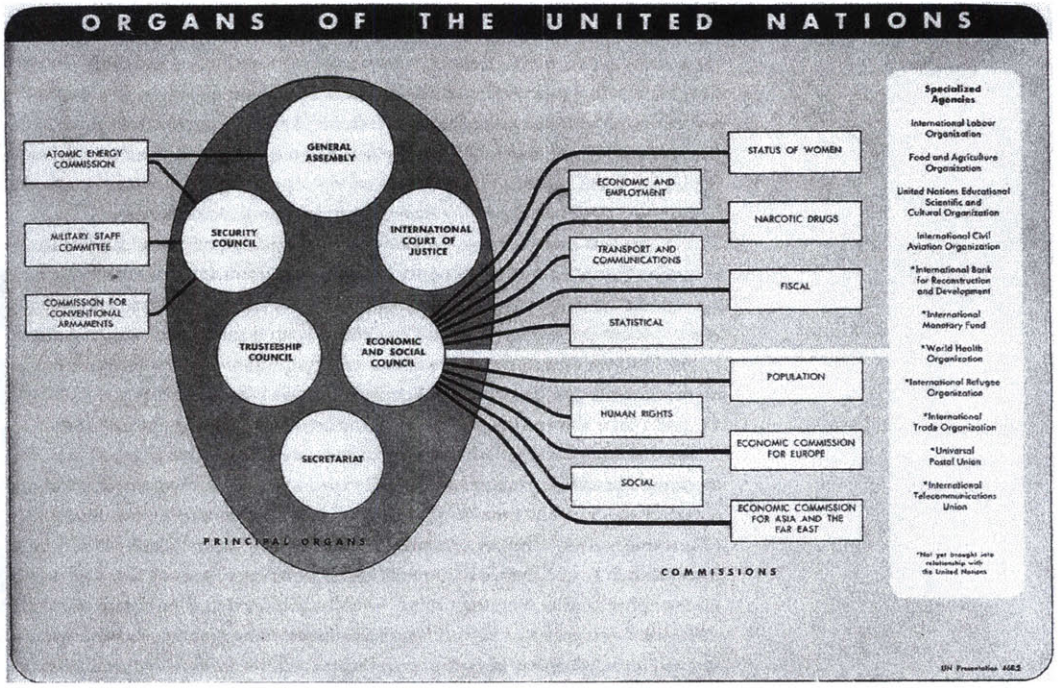
Le Corbusier's potentially megastructural League of Nations competition entry of 1927, the first of his major thwarted governmental complex. Although the volumetric clarity of the later programmatic form was not yet in place, its seeds had been sown.





ABOVE: Le Corbusier in Brazil? A 1936 sketch for the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio De Janiero, later completed by Niemeyer and others; the organistic governmental project was well underway. BELOW: Le Corbusier in Moscow? A 1933 entry to Stalin's competition for a monumental government center; Corbusier's approach, as ever, was through the method of programmatic form (though symbolic form would eventually carry that competition).





A failure well before World War II, the League of Nations was more than ready for replacement. But what went wrong? The fate of the world body can certainly not be blamed on its architecture. One problem that is particularly instructive in the eventual formation of the United Nations is the "Omnes et singulatum" paradox. The Assembly is the voice of the many; the Secretariat is the monolithic action of a unified body. The fundamental discord between those two scales of action, between the multiplicity of the former and the singularity of the latter, was a downfall of the League.

As the UN came into being, the solution to this fundamental dichotomy of governance was the establishment of a series of mediating "organs" that would buffer the relationship between the Assembly and the Secretariat and take on particular roles with particular sets of involved countries; the Security Council, Trusteeship Council, and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) were the critical additions that differentiated the UN from the failed League. These councils were all carefully constructed to preserve the global power structures of colonialism (since their membership was heavily Western and limited to a few seats, mitigating the one-vote-per-country impact of the quickly balkanizing globe) and bridged the scale of the singular Secretariat with the pluralism of the Assembly.

It's no coincidence that Foucault's lectures on governmentality were delivered as a series entitled "Security, Territory, Population".[15] Indeed, these topics precisely align with the UN's Councils; the Trusteeship Council dealt with territorial disputes, and the problem of population becomes even more evident in relation to ECOSOC when one considers that Foucault divided the question of population into that of social and economic order. The United Nations, then, had the potential to be an exceptionally direct expression of governmentality (despite its many failings at acheiving its desired ends over the course of its existence).

ABOVE: Conceptual diagrams for the formation of the UN as drawn by the design committee.

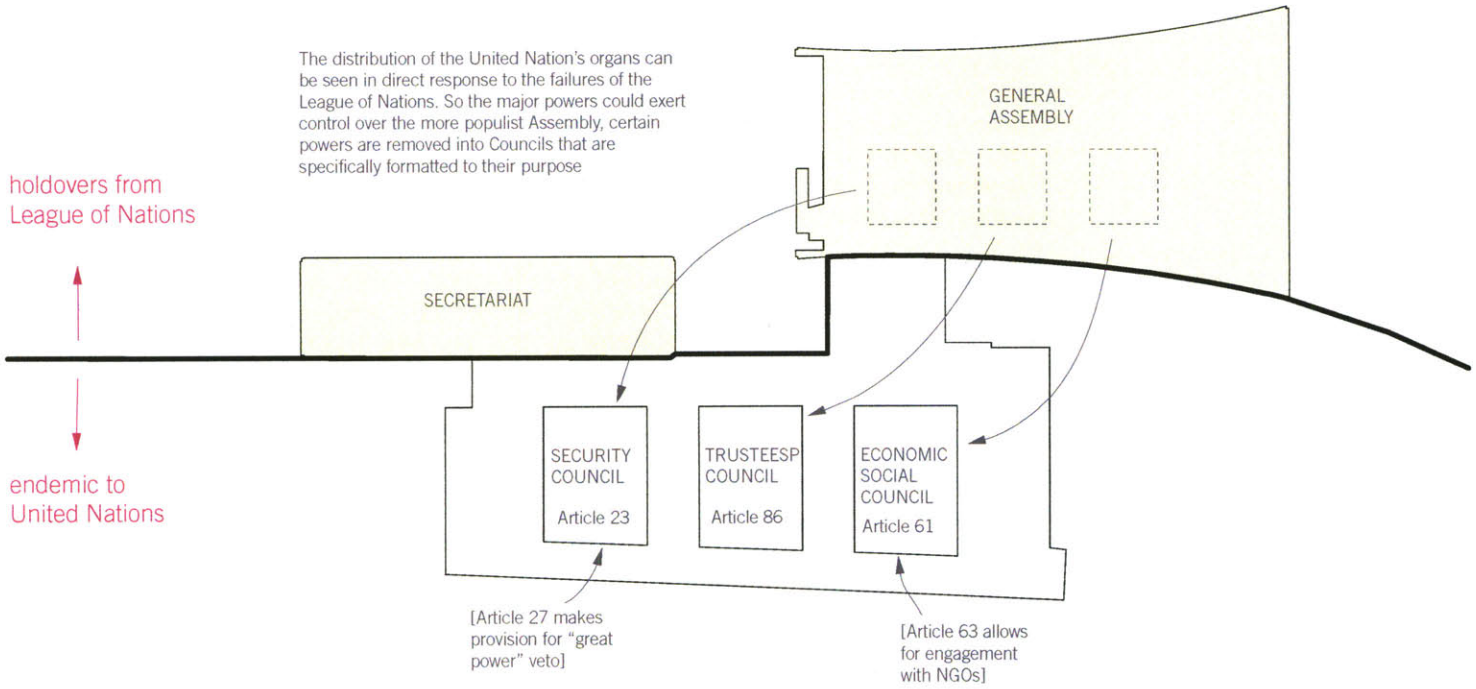
NEXT SPREADS: The spatial and programmatic evolution of the United Nations complex.

In short order, New York was decided on as the new capital of the world, possibly because, as E.B. White quipped, "New York is peculiarly constructed to absorb almost anything that comes along (whether a thousand-foot liner out of the East or a twenty-thousand man convention out of the West) without inflicting the event on its inhabitants."[16] Le Corbusier was against the New York site—calling the city "terrifying" and "menacing"—but reconciled himself to its inevitability. "Here you can work out the solutions for our modern world without a single day of delay... avoiding what might have been too dangerous and too long an interval, were you to have attempted prematurely to build an ideal World Center," he wrote, going on to paint the situation as something temporary: "It is too soon for a World Center. Therefore, accept in the meanwhile this Battle-Post which is offered to you."[17]

This thesis takes on Corbusier's notion of the UN as a Battle-Post; despite having a fixed physical infrastructure, and despite being impotent during most of the catastrophies of its six decades, it has nevertheless undergone a tactical evolution that has allowed it to discover new approaches a changing international situation. Those organizational changes are traced on the following pages; especially notable are the decreased functionality of its councils (the Security Council is trapped by the mutually-cancelling vetoes of its "great powers", the Trusteeship Council hasn't met since 1994, and most importantly, the ECOSOC has taken on a sort of middle-management role between a series of agencies and the UN), the rise of ad-hoc conferences, and the increased presence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Rather than pretending that all's well with the embattled UN's current international presence, this thesis seeks out those moments of efficacy and persuasive jurisdiction (those moments where the UN's utter lack of sovereignty is outweighed by its potential governmentality) as a starting point for a reconfigured United Nations (organizationally and architecturally) that allows it to retain relevance in the twenty-first century.

SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY Original Complex

The distribution of the United Nation's organs can be seen in direct response to the failures of the League of Nations. So the major powers could exert control over the more populist Assembly, certain powers are removed into Councils that are specifically formatted to their purpose

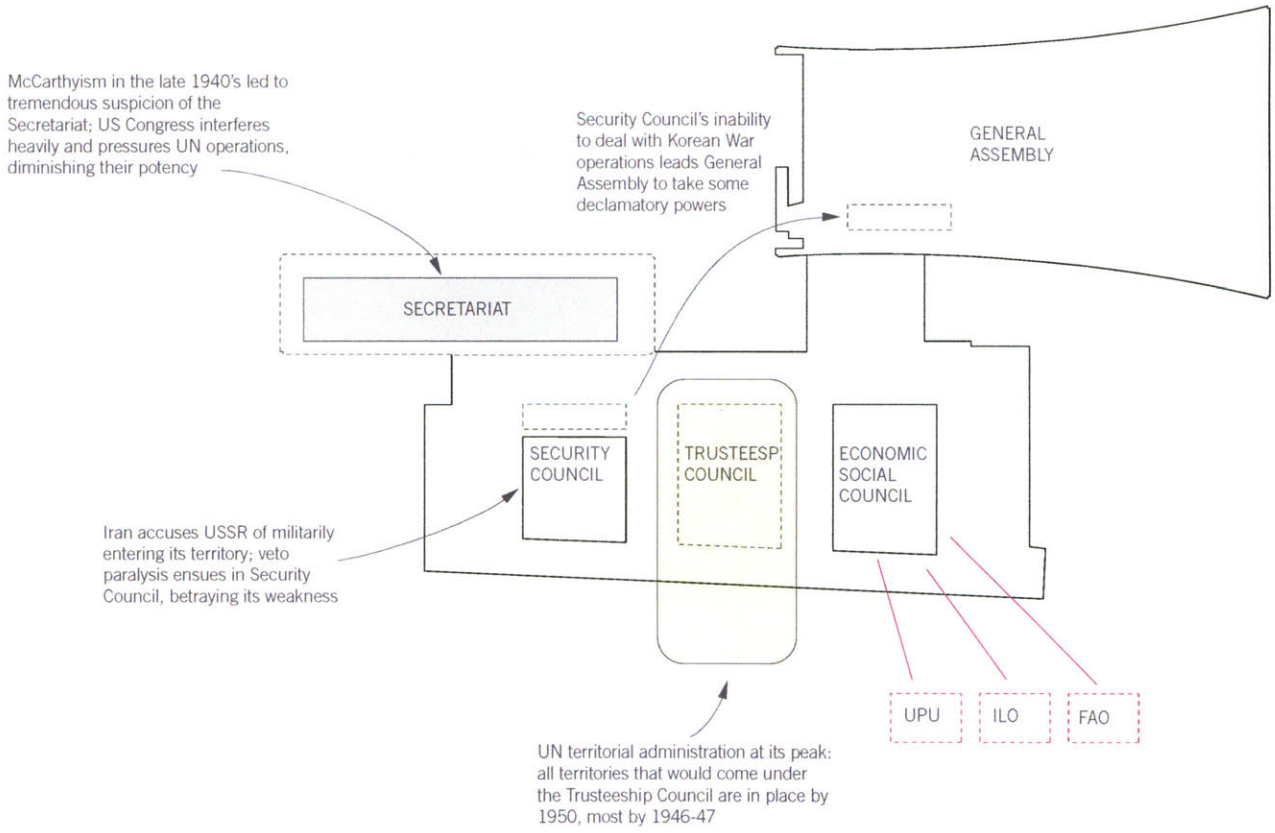


Extra-state bodies predating UN

UPU	ILO	FAO
1874	1919	1905

SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY 1946 - 1953 _ Trygve Lie

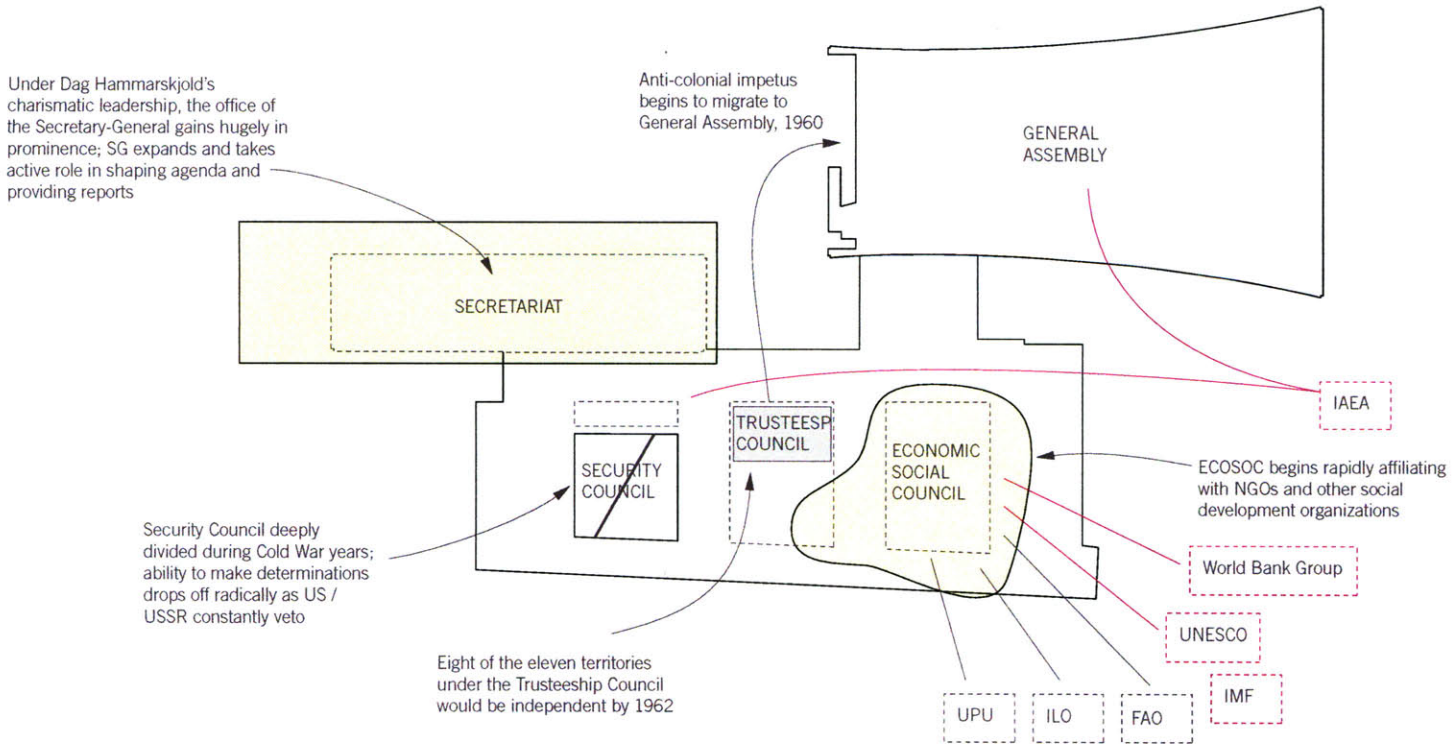
Critical issues: European reconstruction



48 affiliated NGO's in 1948

SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY 1953 - 1961 _ Dag Hammarskjold

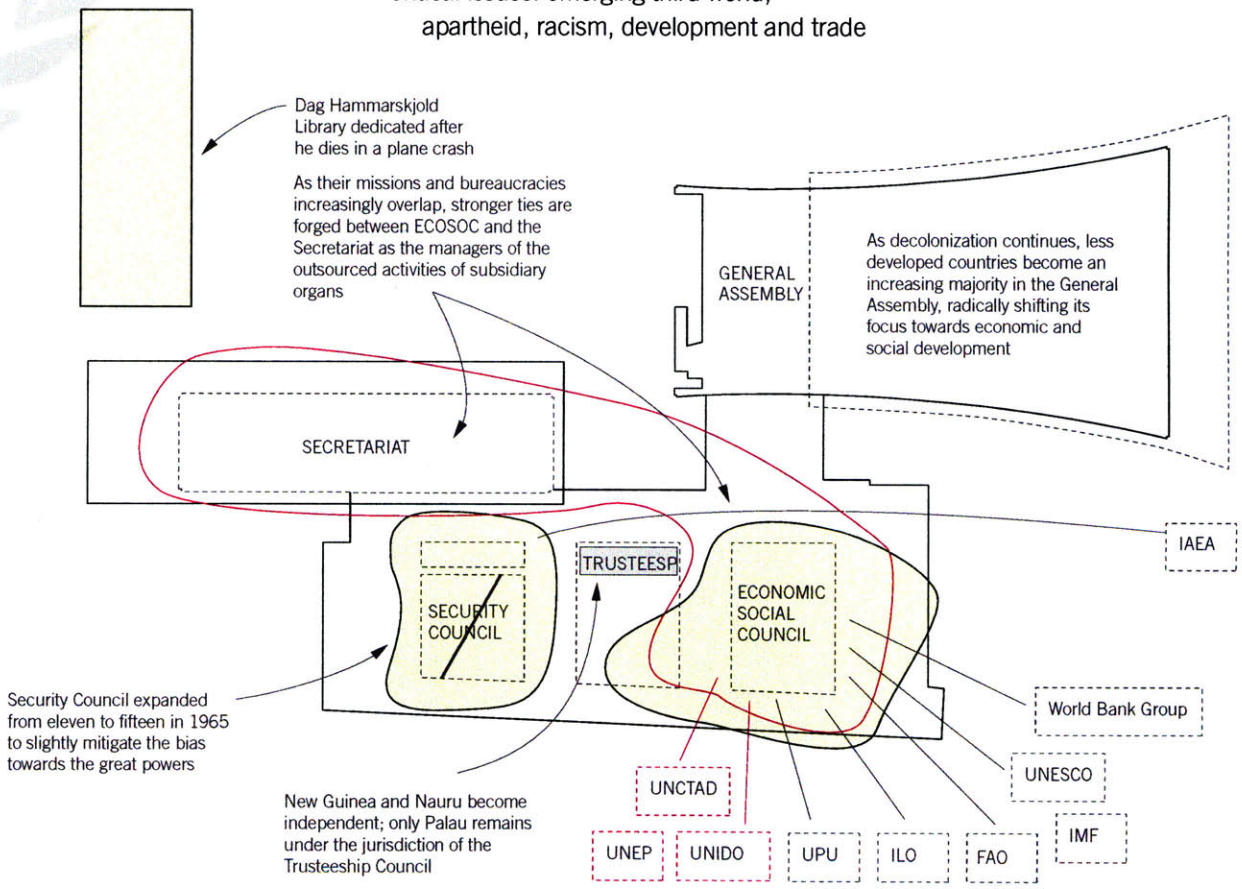
Critical issues: Decolonization,
burgeoning Cold War



150+ affiliated
NGO's in 1958

SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY 1962 - 1971 _ U Thant

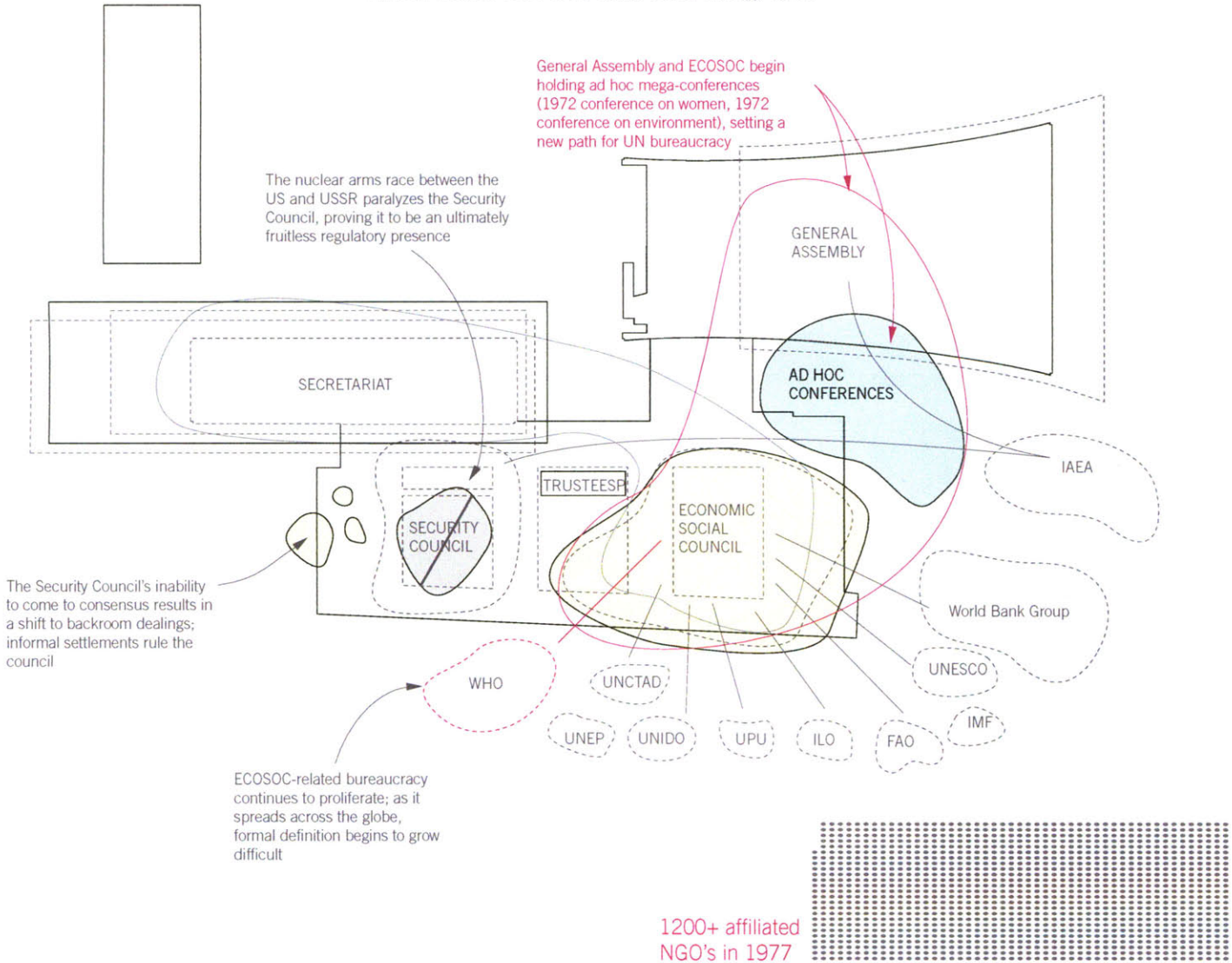
Critical issues: emerging third world,
apartheid, racism, development and trade



377 affiliated
NGO's in 1968

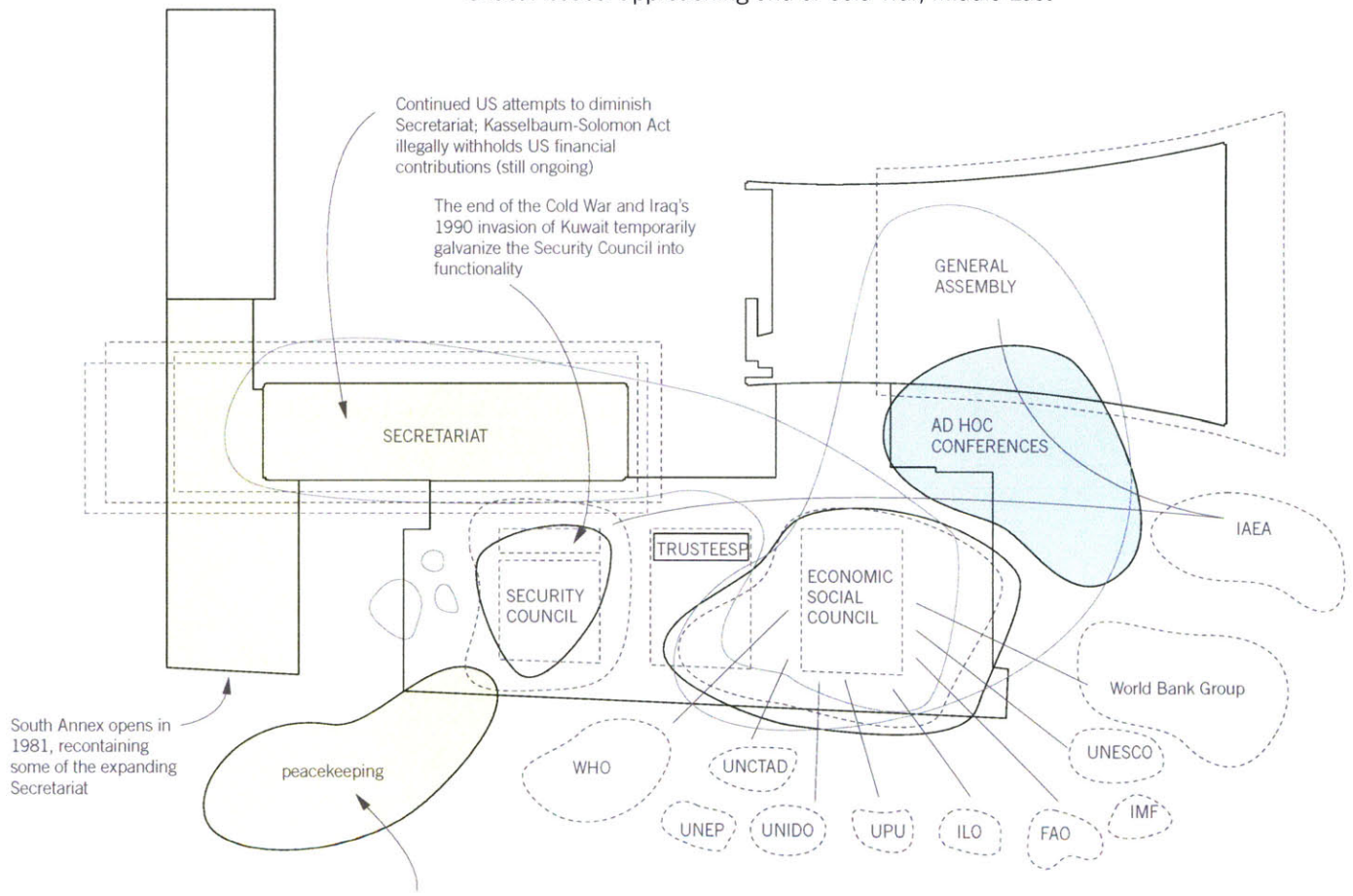
SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY 1972 - 1982 _ Kurt Waldheim

Critical issues: Cold War, arms race, energy crisis

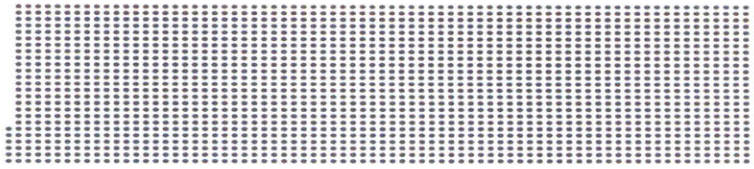


SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY 1982 - 1991 _ Javier Perez de Cuellar

Critical issues: approaching end of Cold War, Middle East

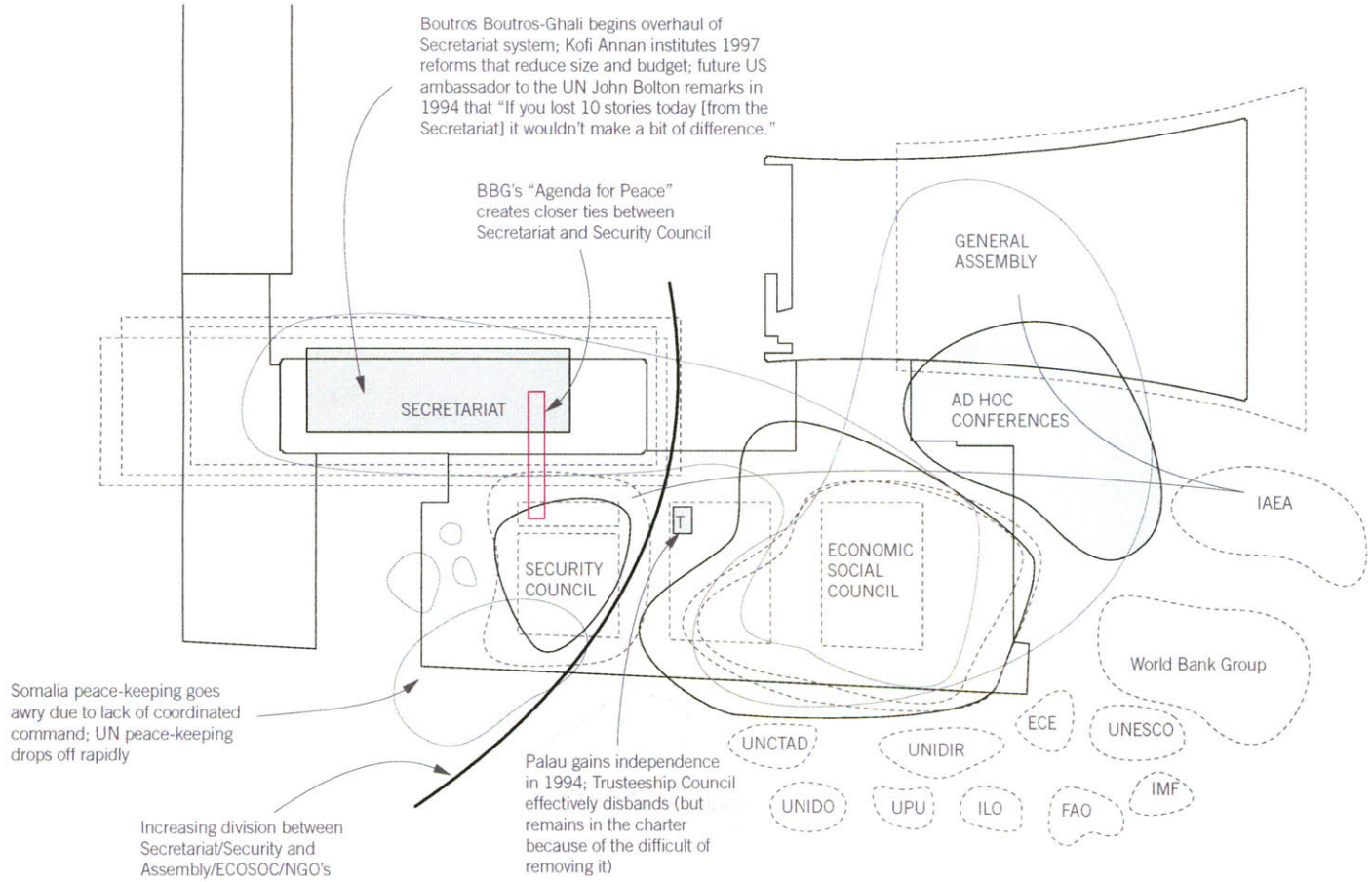


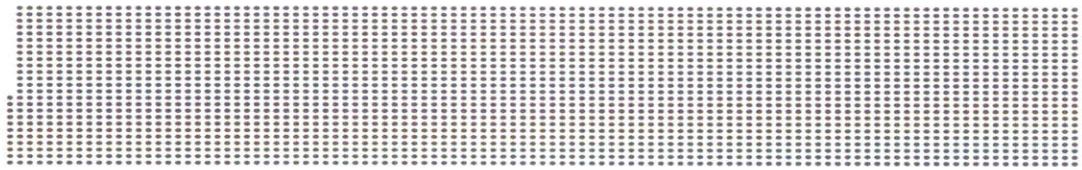
1900+ affiliated NGO's in 1990



SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY 1992 - 2006 _ Boutros Boutros Ghali, Kofi Annan

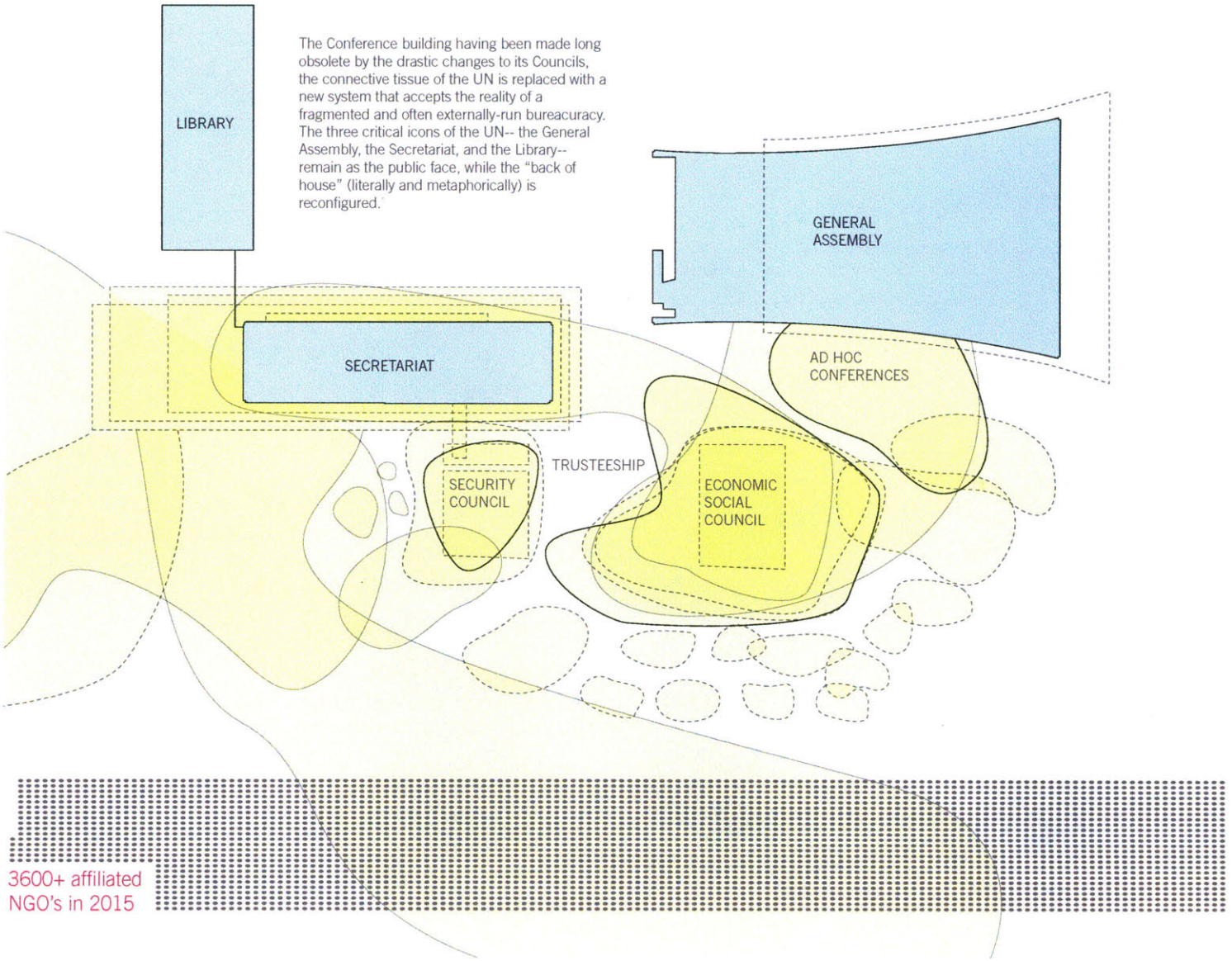
Critical issues: Cold War, globalism, Middle East, terrorism

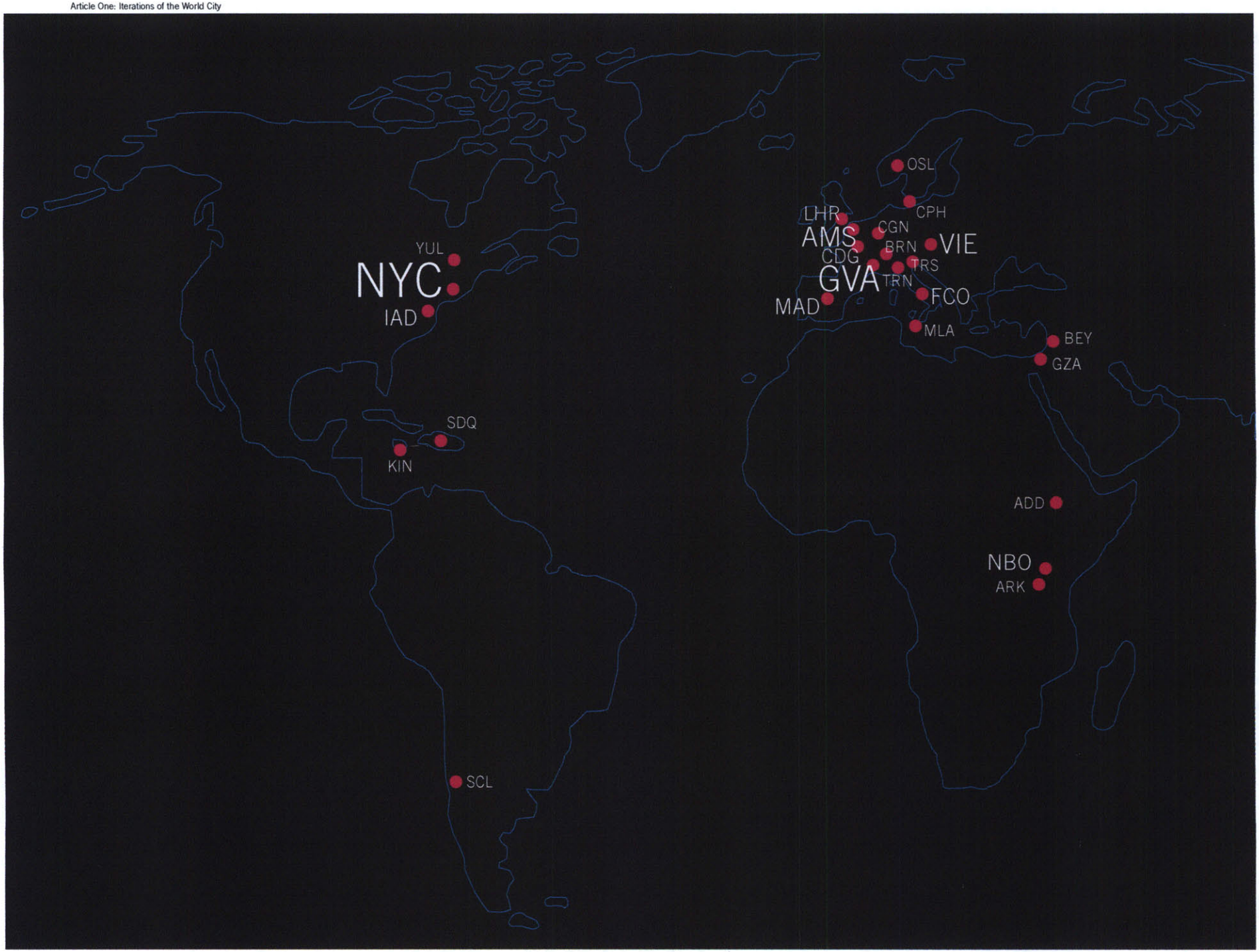




2700+ affiliated NGO's in 2005

SPATIO-PROGRAMMATIC HISTORY 2007 - 20XX _ Ban Ki Moon




OSL
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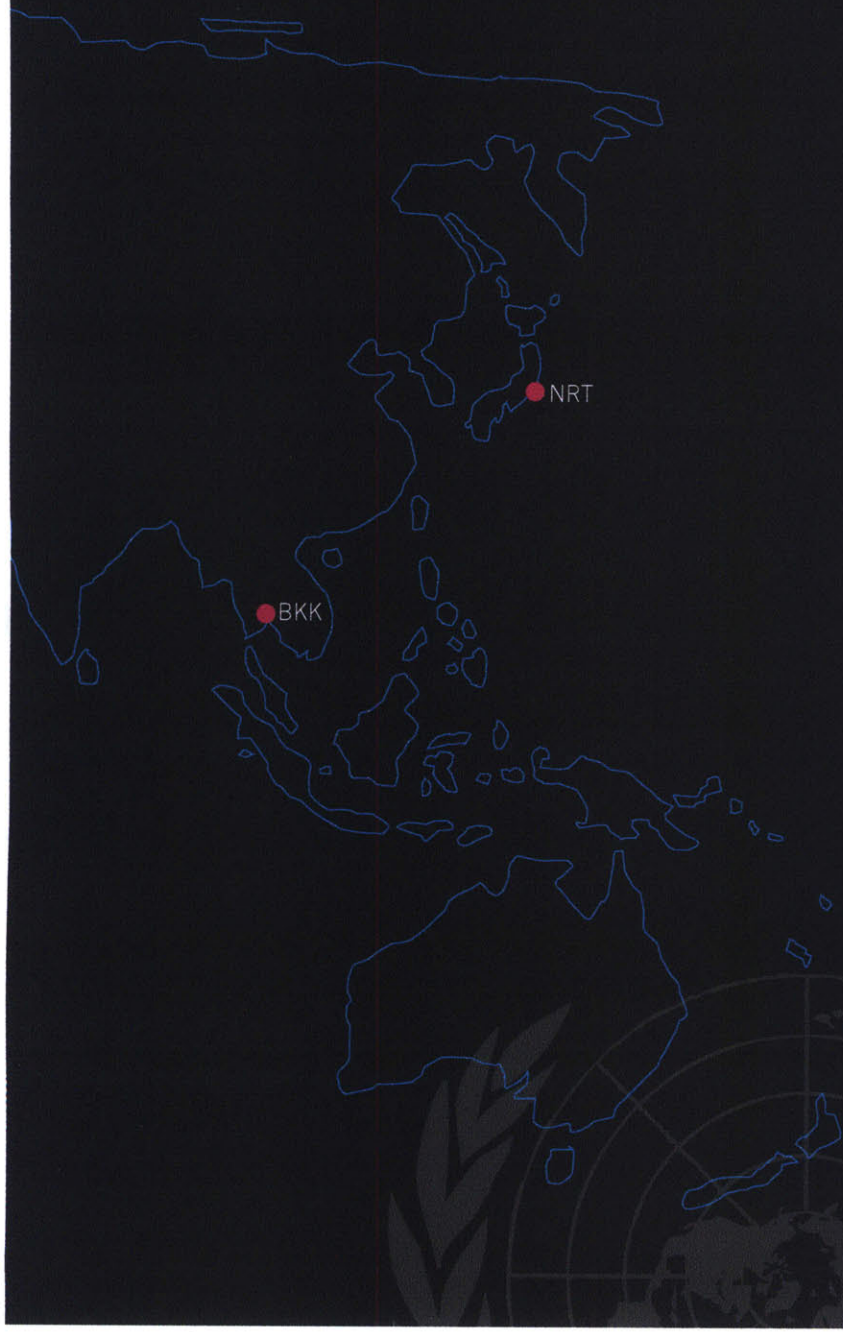

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WIPO
WMO
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ECE
HLCM
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IBE
ICC
ISDR
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JIU
JIAMCATT
UNAIDS
NGLS
OCHA
SCN
UNCC
OHCHR
UNIDIR
UNITAR
UNRISD

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UNOV
IAEA
UNDCP
UNIDO
CTBTO
OOSA
UNCITRAL
UNODC
UNPA
UNSCEAR

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UNON
UNEP
UNHABITAT

AMS
ICJ
ICTY
OPCW

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IMF
World Bank
IBRD
ICSID
IDA
IFC
MIGA
UNAOO

CDG
UNESCO
IIEP

FCO
FAO
IFAD
WFP
UNICRI

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ADD
ECA

ARK
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BKK
ESCAP

BEY
ESCWA

CPH
IAPSO

KIN
ISA

OSL
UNCSD

SCL
ECLAC

SDQ
INSTRAW

NRT
UNU

TRN
ITC/ILO
UNSSC

TRS
UNIDO
ICTP

MLA
INIA

MAD
UNWTO

BRN
UPU

GZA
UNRWA

YUL
ICAO

NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, "Governmentality" in The Foucault Effect, 95

2. Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction" in The Foucault Effect, 4

3. Carl Friedrich, Inevitable Peace, 29

4. Carl Friedrich, "Introduction" in The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings, xxiii

5. Carl Friedrich, Inevitable Peace, vii

6. Hendrick Christian Andersen, Creation of a World Centre of Communication, xii

7. Henry James, Beloved Boy, letter 68, 14 April 1912, 101

8. Ibid

9. Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction" in The Foucault Effect, 3

10. Foreward to "Peace Commemoration Number", The Architectural Review, 127

11. Walter Godfrey, The Architectural Review, 160

12. Major H. Barnes, The Architectural Review, 137-138

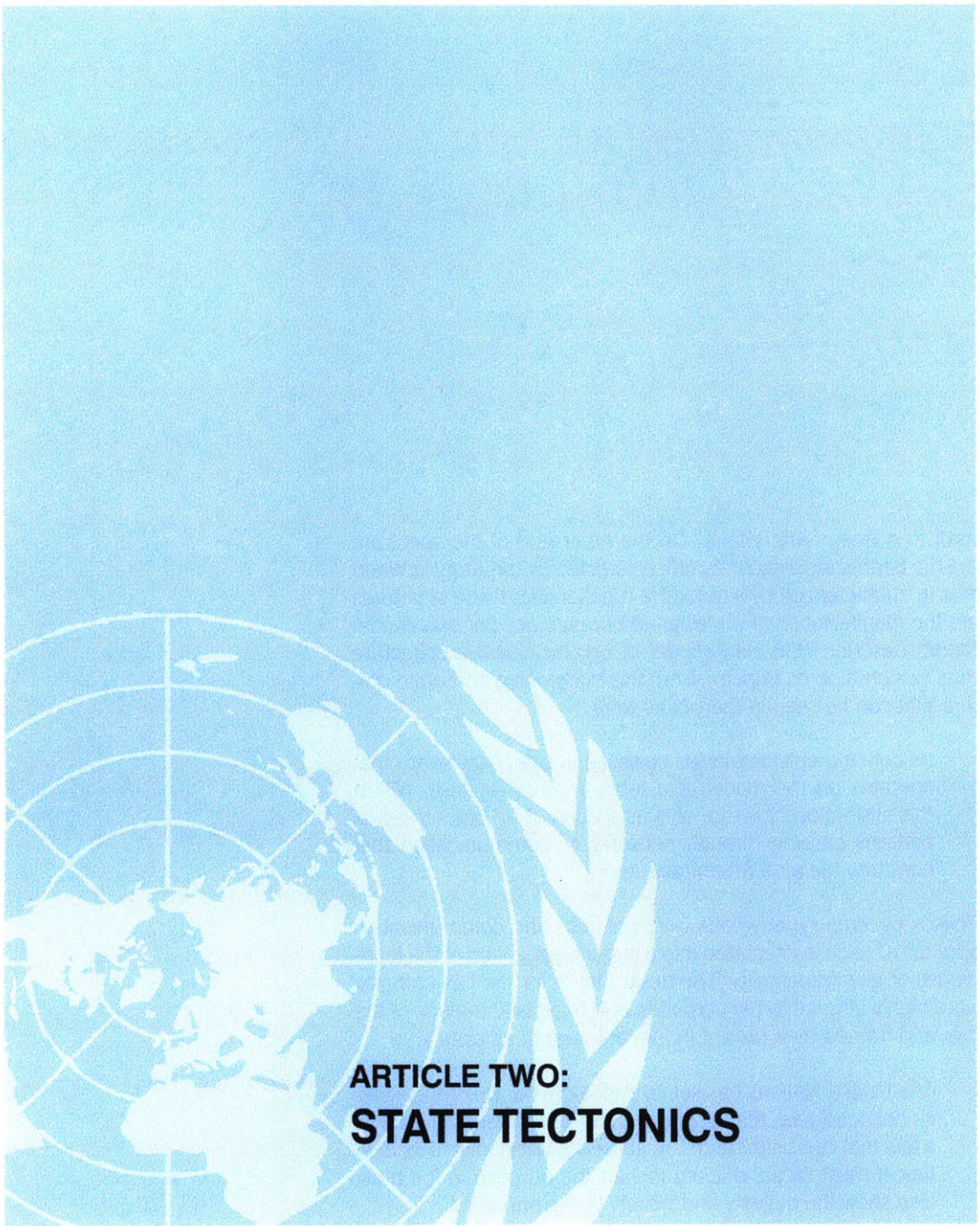
13. Webb, The Architectural Review, 135-136. Webb goes on to suggest Malta, Crete, or perhaps Cyprus as a location for this newly formed League owing to their climates and, in the case of Cyprus, its geographical non-adjacencies: "It has no railway approach, it is true; but railway approaches are apt to become railway reproaches."

14. "A Home for the UNO", Progressive Architecture, 98-99

15. Michel Foucault, "Governmentality" in The Foucault Effect, 102

16. E.B. White, Here is New York, 23-24

17. Robert Stern etc, New York 1960, 609, referencing Corbusier's speech at the closing session of the Permanent Headquarters Committee (December 1946), quoted in Sanders "Books: UN Headquarters"



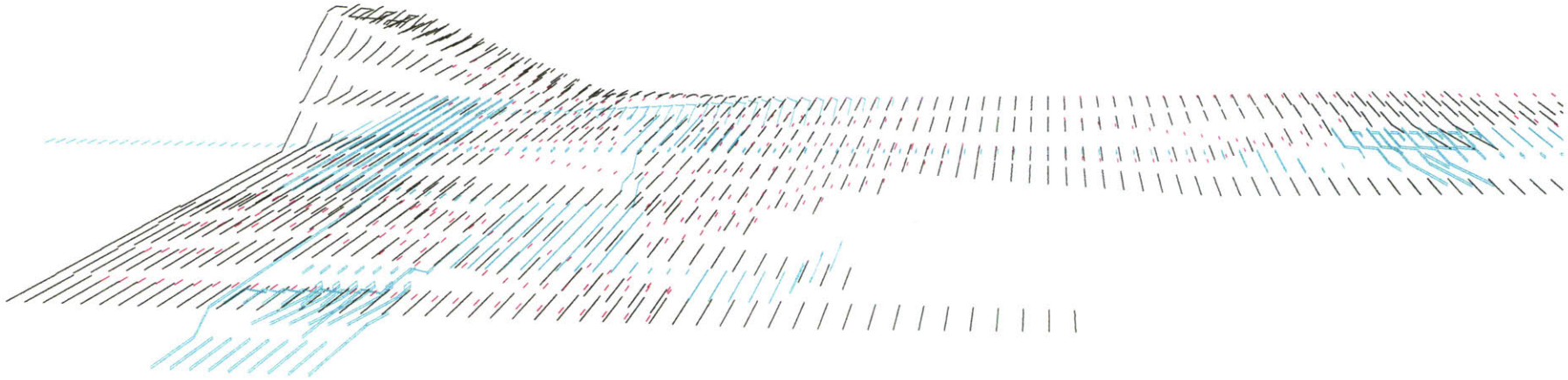
ARTICLE TWO:
STATE TECTONICS

As the notion of bureaucracy develops alongside mid-century modernism, it begins to take on characteristics that are beyond the purely architectural: as institutions expand in scale, they begin to exhibit symptoms more akin to urbanism than to buildings. The rise of what Reinhold Martin terms the "organizational complex" is marked by the simultaneous development of relentlessly systematic construction and singularly iconic "identities" for an emerging corporate culture: an architectural "omnes at singulatum."[1] The UN is a calcification of this mode of thought, a rigidly described picture of a particular mode of architectural logic.

In an early report to the UN's General Assembly on the design teams progress, the architects laid out their methodological and terminological tenets:

> Once the various organs of the United Nations have been classified in terms of building elements—each with its own form, dimension, and system—the next planning consideration is their interaction as functioning parts of a single coherent organism.[2]

This positivistic and pseudo-scientific language functions in many ways; it taps into the holistic rhetoric of totalized and monumental



planning, it sympathetically echoes the language of the United Nations Charter (article III is simply titled "Organs" and lays out six basic programmatic divisions), and finally, it lends an air of inevitability to the result, as though there was an unassailably rational "inquiry into the problem" without a designerly hand attached to the logistical mind. There is a unity; its parts are differentiated like the parts of a body; their spatial flow is organic and dynamic.

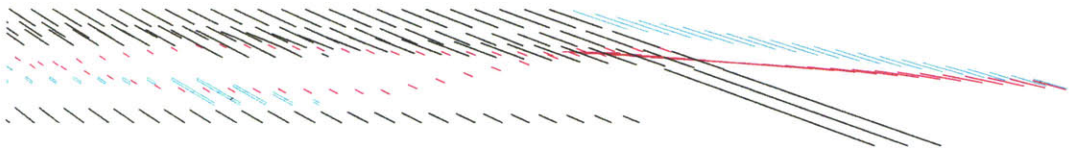
Several previous or roughly conteporaneous projects share an interest in the organistic urbanism of bureaucracy and offer case studies for a renewed United Nations. The campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, designed in 1916, can be read as a prototypical megastructure; flexible and expandable, it grows and evolves with the institution. The RAND Corporation building—a lattice-work of research corridors— was designed with a similar intention of cross-polinization. These examples can be contrasted with the Pentagon of the same era, which, though it does incorporate some elements of the new network architecture, confines itself to a Beaux Arts totality. On the other end of the spectrum are the haphazard temporary offices erected by the Army in World War II; characterized by a reductive functionality, these structures are the manifestation of undesigned bureaucracy par excellence. Martin describes this new model of organizational architecture thus (which took its impetus from the burgeoning corporate culture that can be seen in the UN as well):

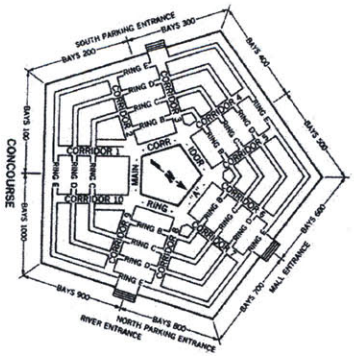
> Its defining epistemologies coalesce into an organicism that operates on the model of a total, if pliant, system. Within this system architecture acts as a conduit for organizational patterns passing through networks of communication that consitute the system's infrastructure.[3]

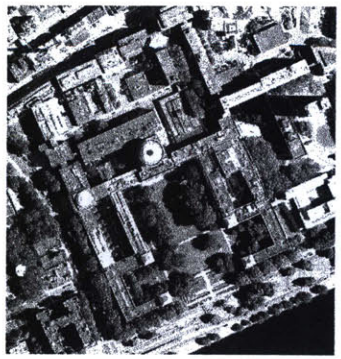
Politics become synonymous with tectonics and communication apparatus: each is integrated into a larger aggregation of the techniques of governmentality. The design team for the UN complex were highly attuned to the corporate and organistic rhetoric of the day, and framed their project in the language of efficiency:

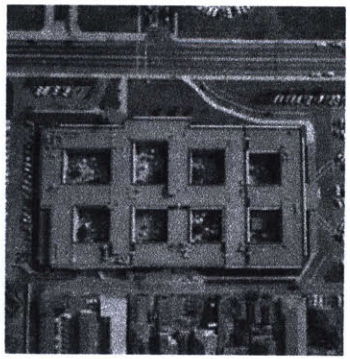
> The United Nations has set its architects the task of building its headquarters, that is, of providing its representatives with a tool that can help them... to guide the world toward its destiny. It must be an efficient tool for the purpose, but it must also show the majesty and beauty of the purpose.[4]

ABOVE: The organizational topography of a reconfigured UN, sliced according to the site's existing column grid. OPPOSITE: Four case studies of bureaucratic urbanisms.









THE PENTAGON

symbolic, iconic legible form
hierarchical organization

MIT CAMPUS

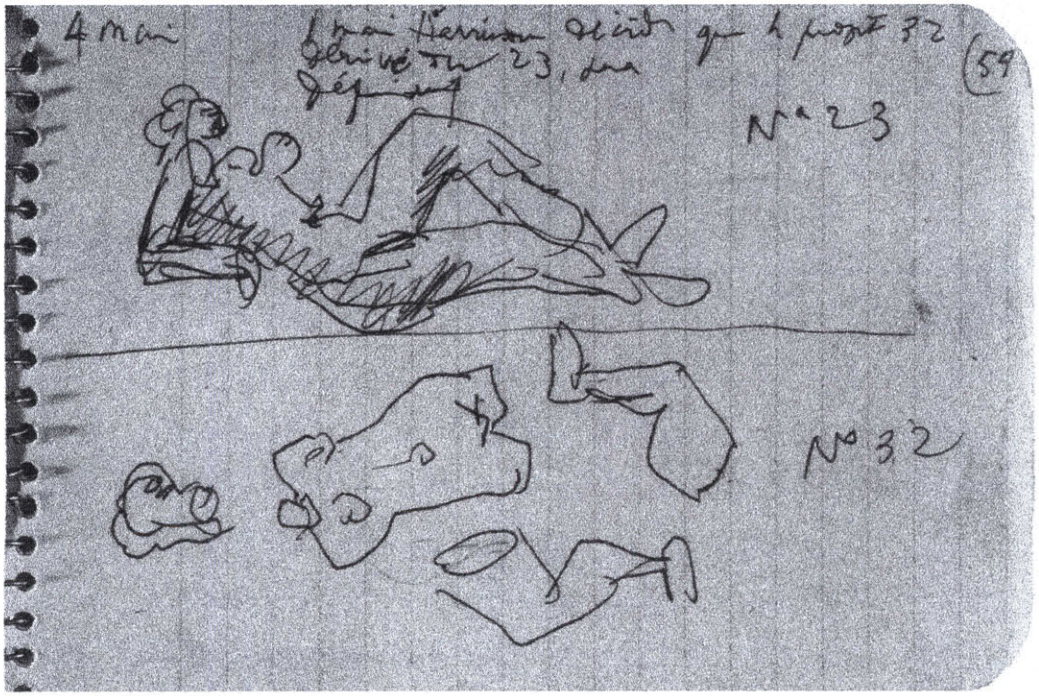
interconnected and cross-disciplinary
open framework, programmatic insertions

RAND CORPORATION

redundancy and synergy
open framework, expandability

TEMPORARY WARTIME ARMY OFFICES

default patterning, strictly codified
maximizes perimeter over circulation



This efficient tool, then, is the built manifestation of bureaucracy. The worth of bureaucracy and its monumentalization stirs sympathy and antipathy alike. Rem Koolhaas, for one, argues that this organizational focus is able to shift the rhetoric of modern forms: "As Le Corbusier tried to drain Manhattan of congestion, so Harrison now drains Le Cobusier's Villa Radieuse of ideology... Manhattanism has choked on, but finally digested, Le Corbusier."[5] No longer containing a social agenda, the so-called International Style, in one of its most defining projects, rests rather on the bedrock of its logistical diagram.

Corbusier repeatedly used the metaphor of the human body as an architectonic system that had to be regarded as a whole and not a series of fragments. Whether the design team lived up to this sort of rhetoric is another question altogether—one that Mumford answers firmly in the negative.

> The report uses all the right words to describe the architecture; it emphasizes integration, organism, flexibility, expansion, and so on. But in the plans themselves one too often sees just the opposite—rigidity, confinement, lack of sound provision for growth.[6]

The charter was mechanically translated into diagrams, which were arrayed in plan, given formal boundaries, and extruded: the design process, which this thesis refers to as "programmatic form", is a hardened record of a particular set of analysis rather than a flexible system as described by its designers. The networked character of their original diagrams was set in steel and concrete, naturally, but was also fixed compositionally, less of an organism than a machine.

Corbusian organicism in action: as he scolds Niemeyer for the alleged incoherence of one of his design proposals, Le Corbusier sketches the body of a woman, whole and fragmented. This total-body rhetoric would later be developed in his design for Chandigarh.

CHARTER

CHAPTER III

ORGANS

Article 7

1. There are established as the principal organs of the United Nations: a General Assembly, a Security Council, an Economic and Social Council, a Trusteeship Council, an International Court of Justice, and a Secretariat.

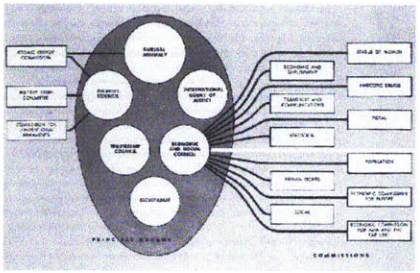
2. Such subsidiary organs as may be found necessary may be established in accordance with the present Charter.

Article 8

The United Nations shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs.

&c

DIAGRAM



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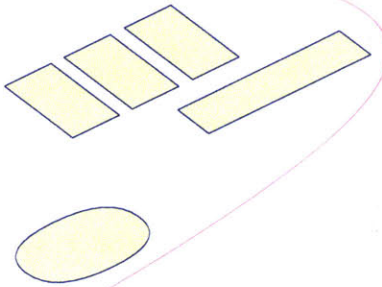
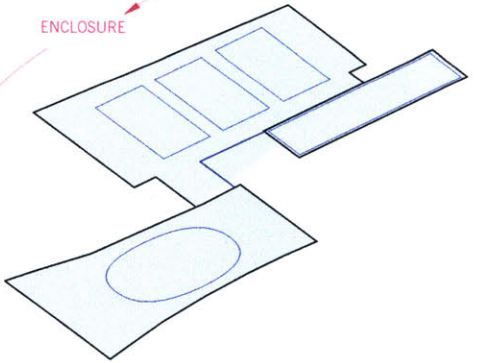
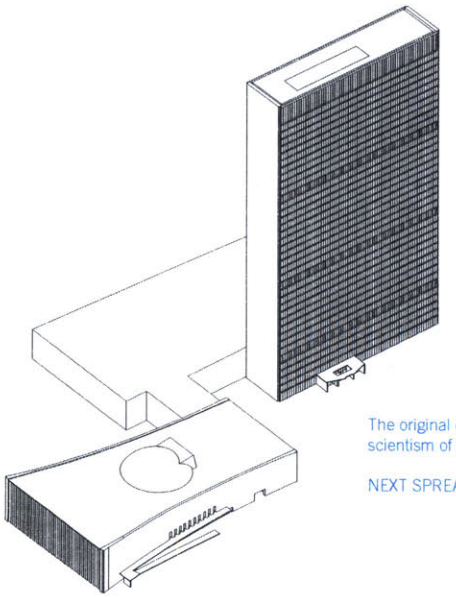


ENCLOSURE

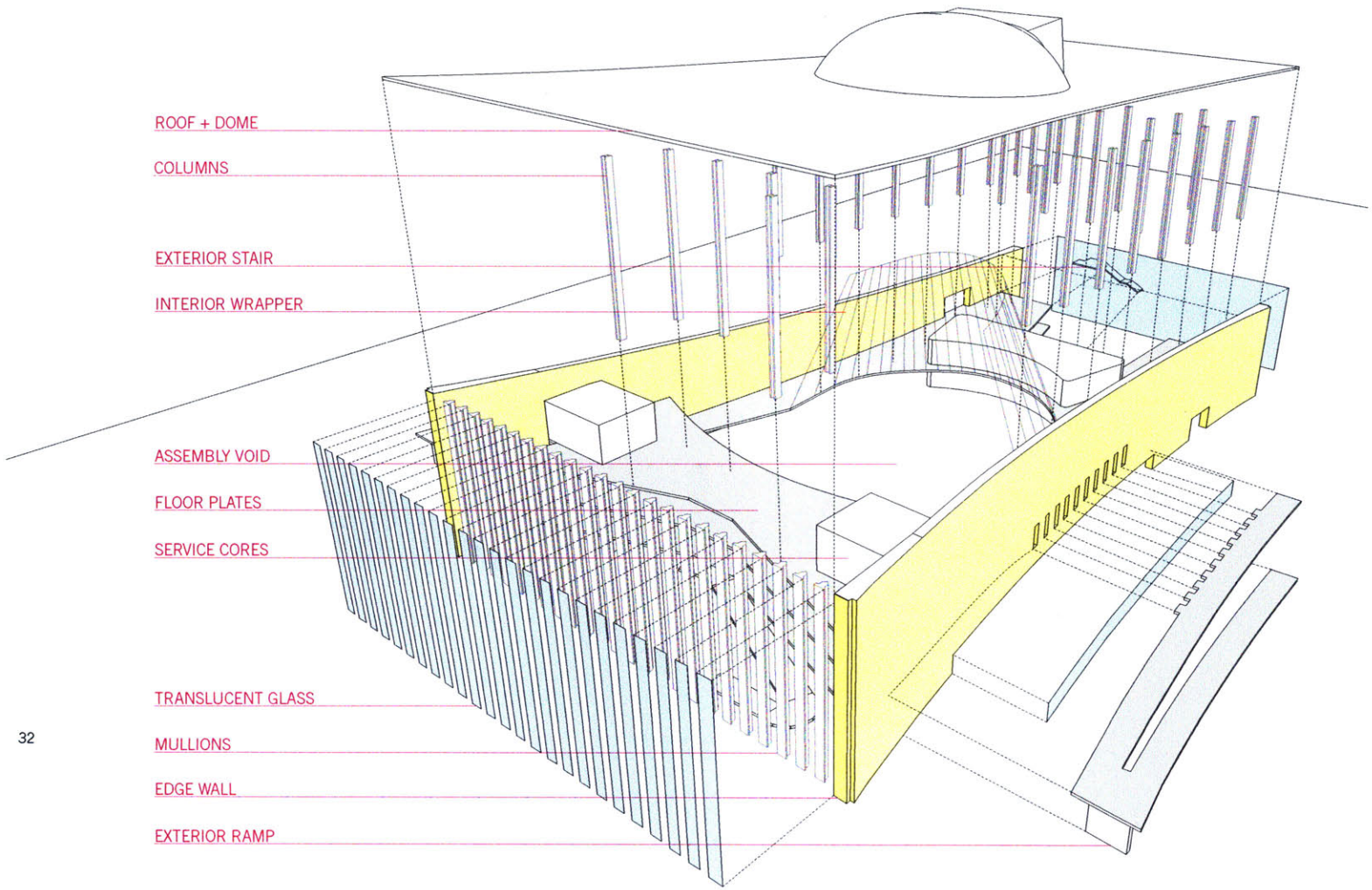


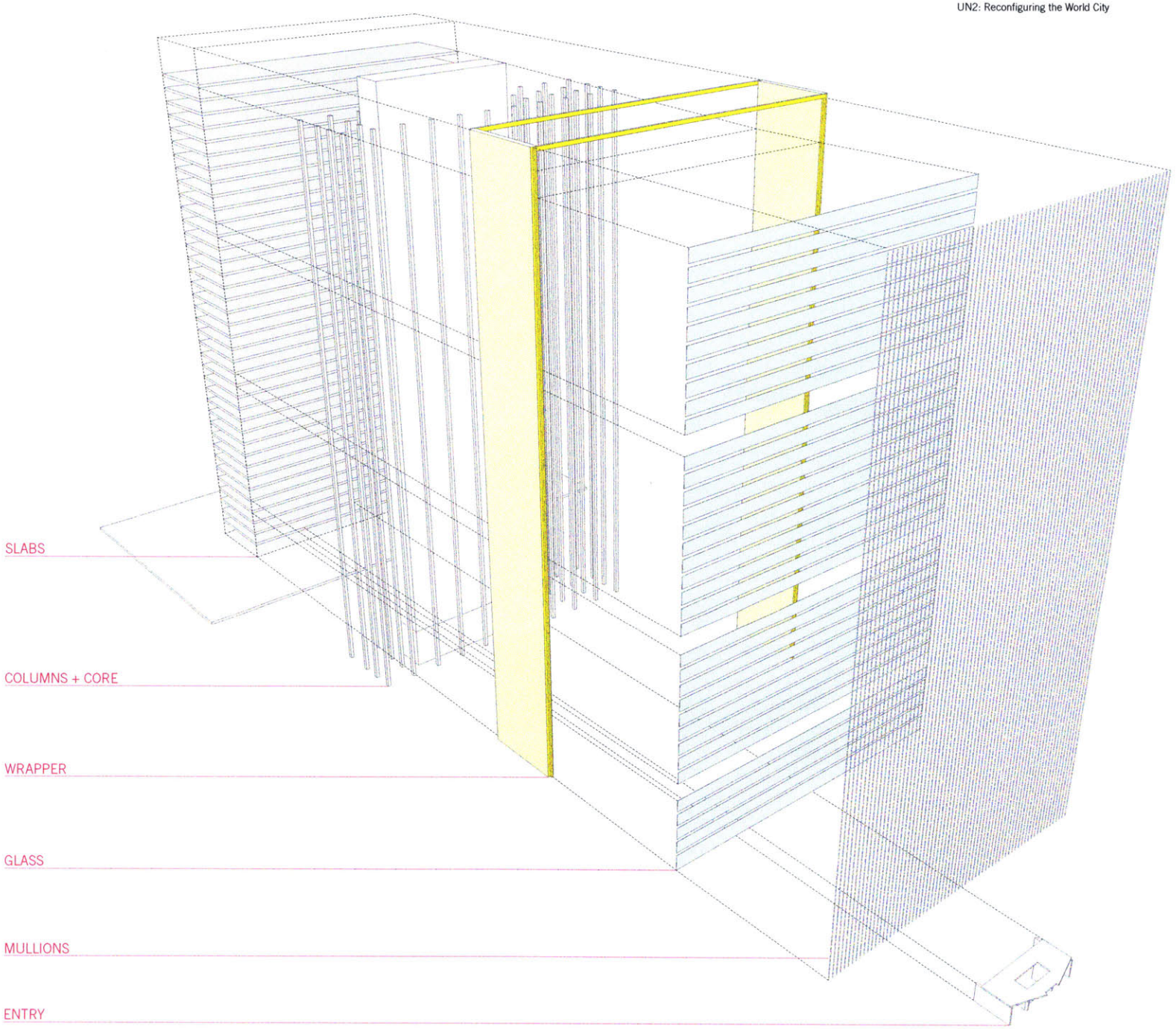
EXTRUSION

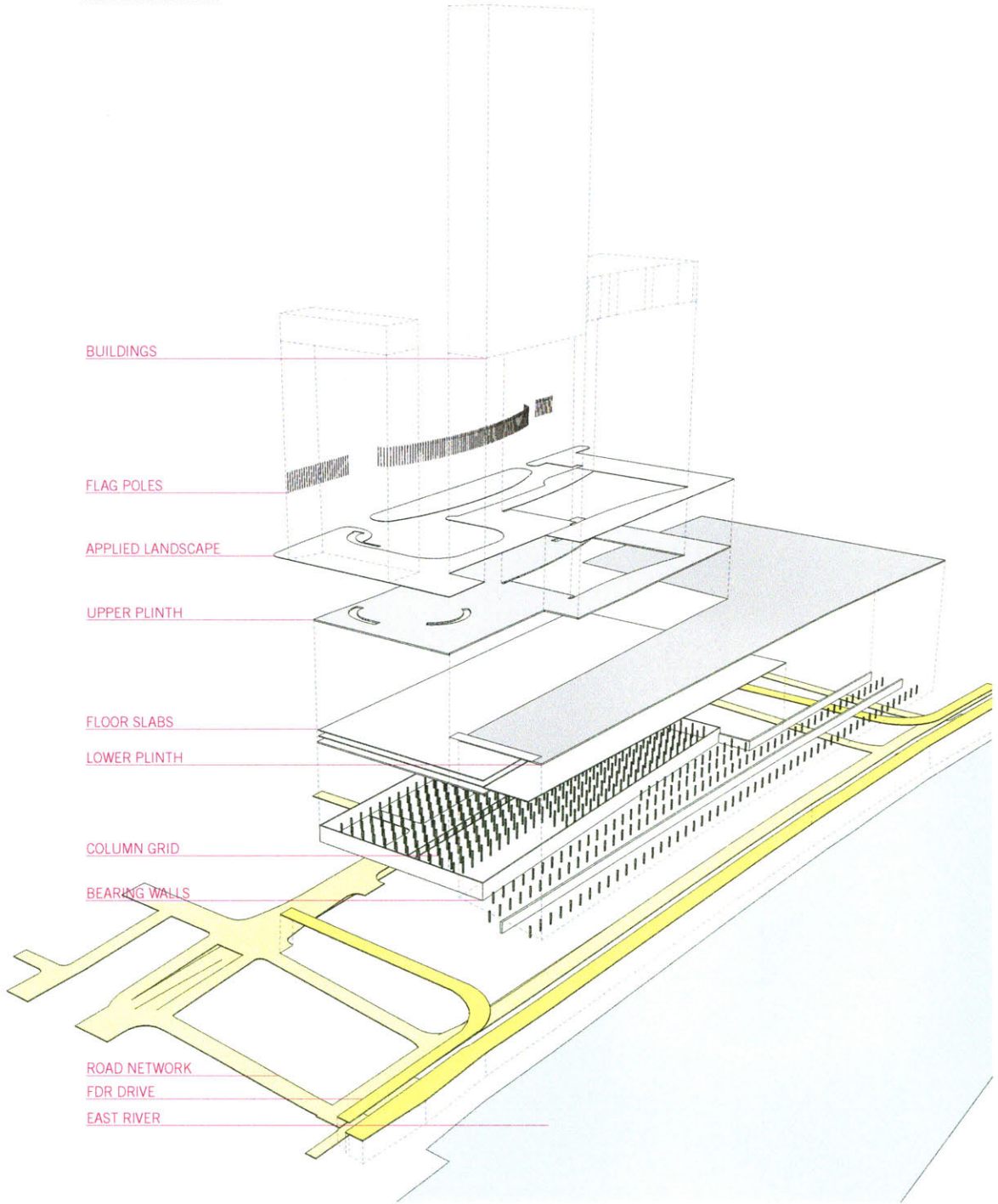


The original design process: the invention of programmatic form brings with it a pseudo-scientism of transformations from concept into actuality that produces an "unauthored" result.

NEXT SPREAD: The tectonic inventions of the General Assembly and Secretariat.


ROOF + DOME
COLUMNS
EXTERIOR STAIR
INTERIOR WRAPPER
ASSEMBLY VOID
FLOOR PLATES
SERVICE CORES
TRANSLUCENT GLASS
MULLIONS
EDGE WALL
EXTERIOR RAMP


SLABS
COLUMNS + CORE
WRAPPER
GLASS
MULLIONS
ENTRY

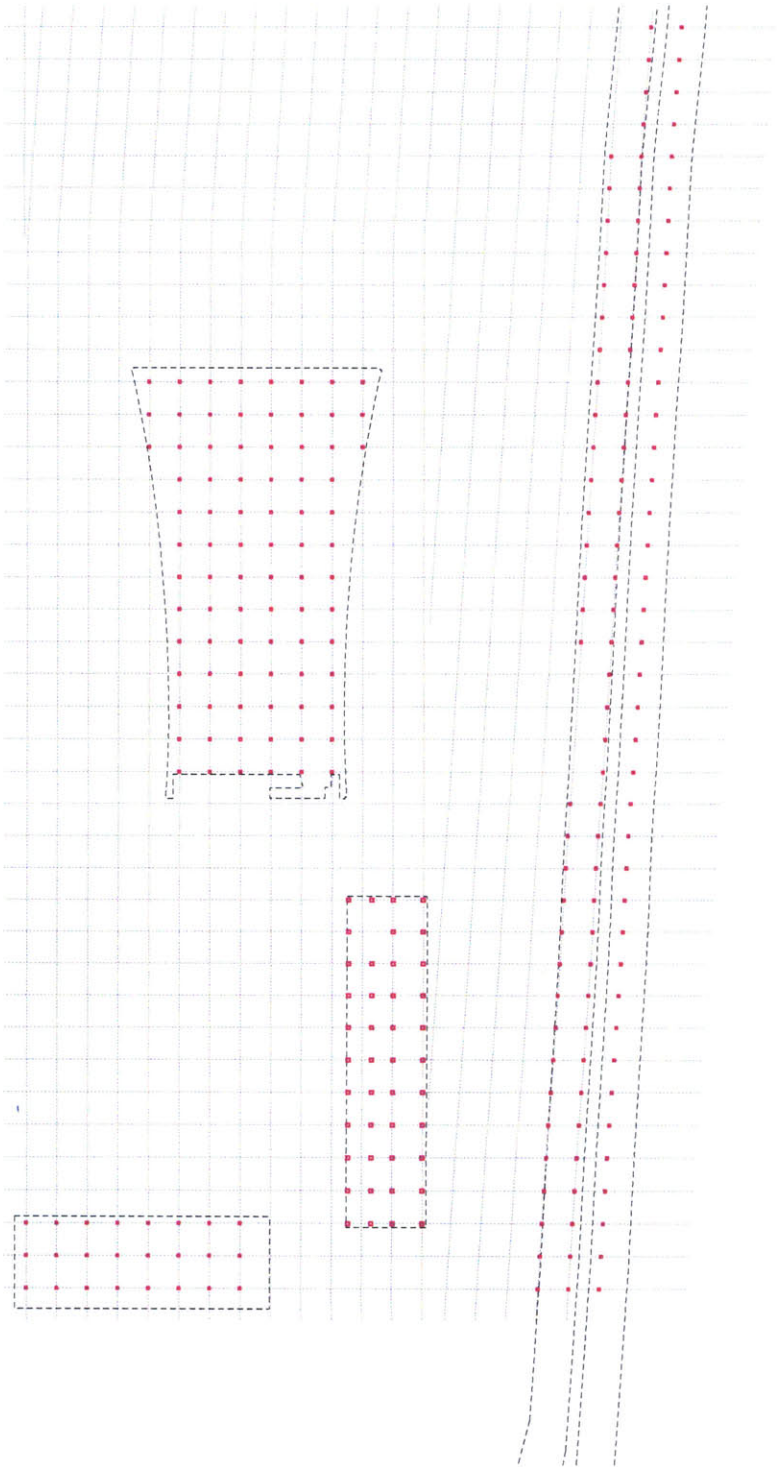

BUILDINGS
FLAG POLES
APPLIED LANDSCAPE
UPPER PLINTH
FLOOR SLABS
LOWER PLINTH
COLUMN GRID
BEARING WALLS
ROAD NETWORK
FDR DRIVE
EAST RIVER

And yet, this ultimately inflexible and inorganic complex finds itself nevertheless in need of addition and reconstruction, not only in terms of the architecture but at the level of its fundamental organization. Despite the compositional totality of the existing site, an analysis of its tectonics offers clues about a potential future.

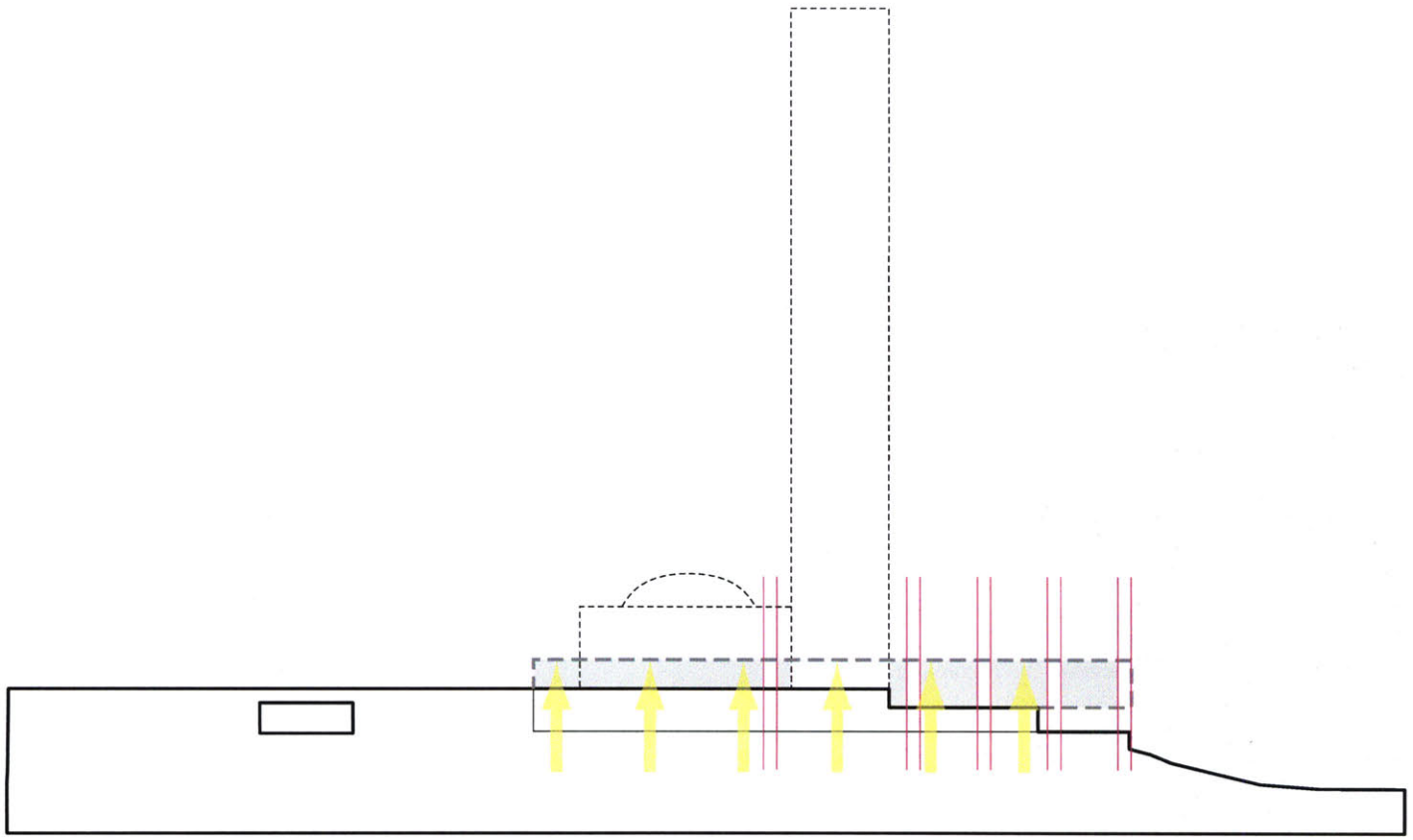
- PLINTH. Though the on-site appearance of the plinth is that of a false datum, a landscape populated by auxiliary services, it presents itself as a logical point of entry into a redesign of the complex, allowing the alterations to refunctionalize the site without competing with the same outmoded compositional logics of the original. Weaving together infrastructure, program, and the existing buildings is at the heart of the reconfigured UN.

- COLUMN GRID. Moving relentlessly through the site, a 28' x 26'-6" pattern of columns defines the overall layout. Despite the radical differences in building type, the Secretariat, General Assembly, parking garages, and even the FDR drive all conform to this singular system: it enables verticality, horizontality, and sculptural form within the same base layout (even where the Secretariat's columns misalign, the grid is picked up by the shear walls of the circulation core). This project extends that logic to regard the plinth as a columnar topography, accomodating all types of massing within a singular system.

- FRAME AND MULLION SCREEN. One of the oddities of the Secretariat building is spacing of its mullions; while the efficiency



OPPOSITE: The plinth, arguably the most important (and least observed) part of the original design. RIGHT: The nearly mystical column grid (28' x 26'-6") that provides the framework for the entire complex; despite their radically different architectural forms, all buildings on the site (even the FDR Drive) conform to its properties.

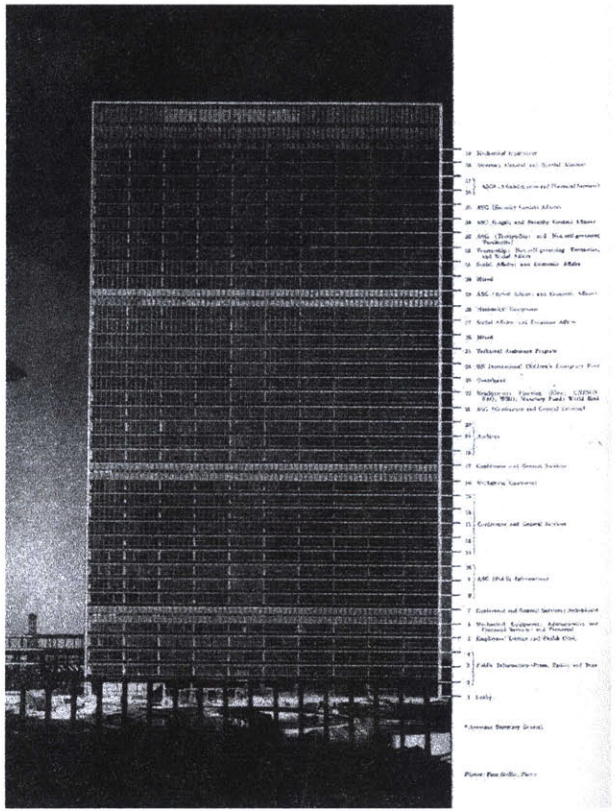


of 5'-on-center spacing had already been established at New York's RCA building, the Secretariat places them on 4' centers (in keeping with the 28' column grid, allowing seven mullions per structural bay, which resulted in "a significant reduction in interior planning flexibility" because of the oddity of the spaces left behind. As Martin puts it,

> Already here, a central tension that was to characterize the office building... becomes evident. It was a tension between the twin imperatives of flexibility and standardization, which, though not mutually exclusive, do not necessarily imply one another, even in modular planning.[7]

But the mullions perform more than the simple task of standardization: the regularity of the system is used to mask the continual differentiation of the project's interiors. Despite the purity of the project's diagram (and the building's monolithic name, "Secretariat", the buildings actually contain heterogeneous programs that violate the supposed sanctity of the programmatic

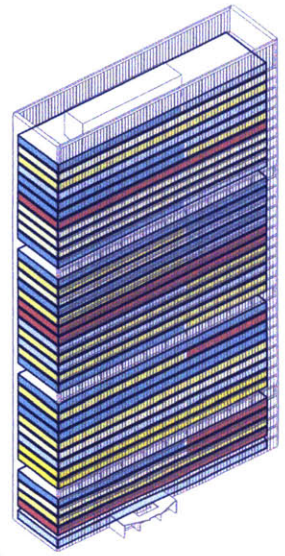
THE RECONFIGURED UN: The lower "landscape" plinth is raised to become an upper plinth, defining a perimeter to the project; that terrain (which is then striated according to the spacing of the column grid) becomes the programmatic infill of the new UN addition.

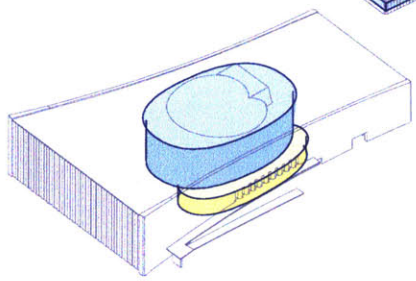


FRAME :: by exerting a boundary condition on the bureaucracy, it is defined singularly despite the multiplicity of function within

MULLIONS :: by extending uninterrupted across even areas without glazing, the mullions provide a fiction of programmatic form, binding the discrete volumes into the screened appearance of a whole

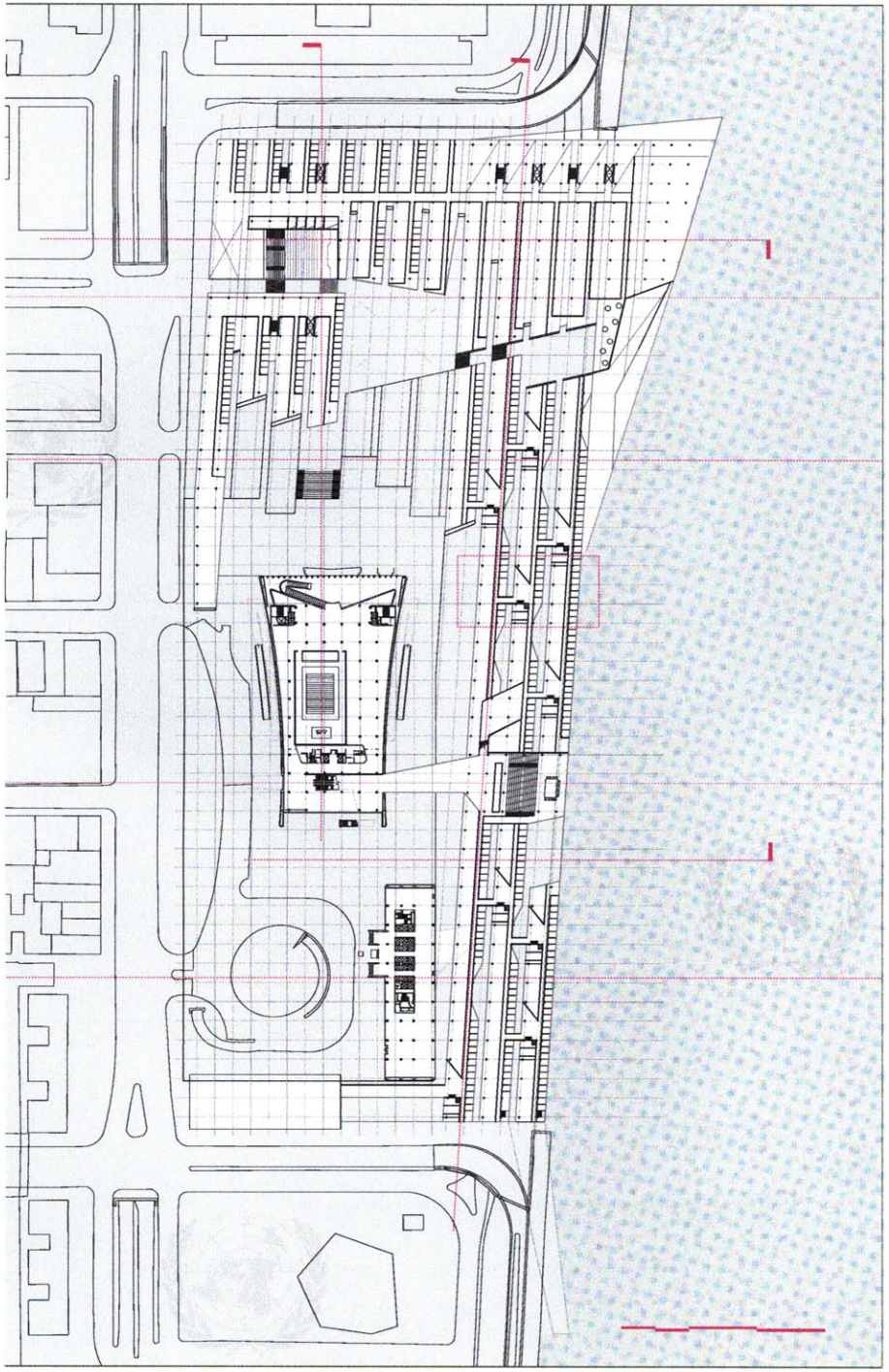
SHELL :: interior volumes are almost haphazard in their relationship to the exterior envelope. the assembly can be seen to have three programmatic forms nested within the shell: program, public, and poche

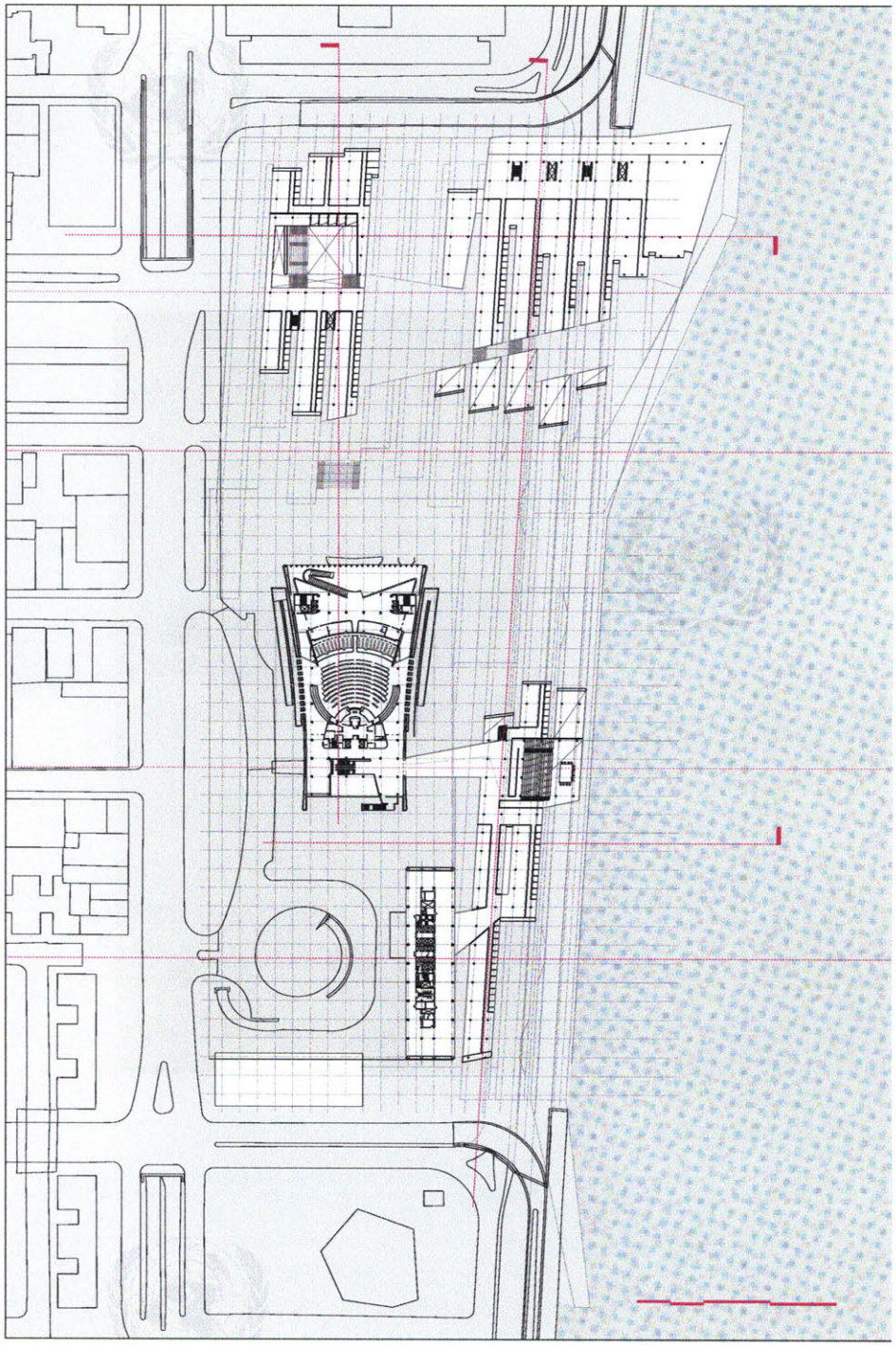


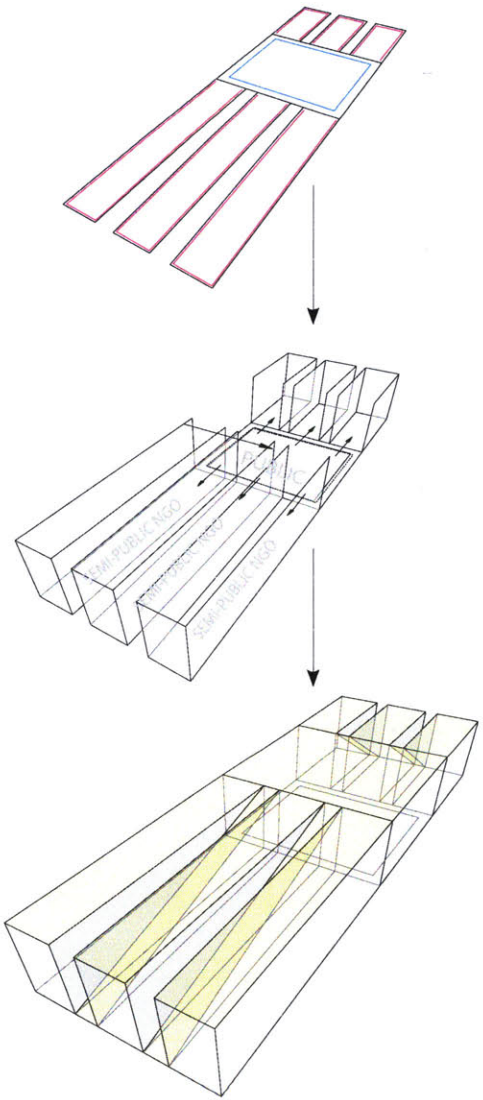


The breakdown of programmatic form. Despite the visual rhetoric of clean separations between functions, this Architectural Forum analysis of the Secretariat shows the variability of its contents.

The principles of tectonic form: architectural techniques of frame, skin, and shell are used to bring heterogeneous spatial needs into a desired volumetric clarity.







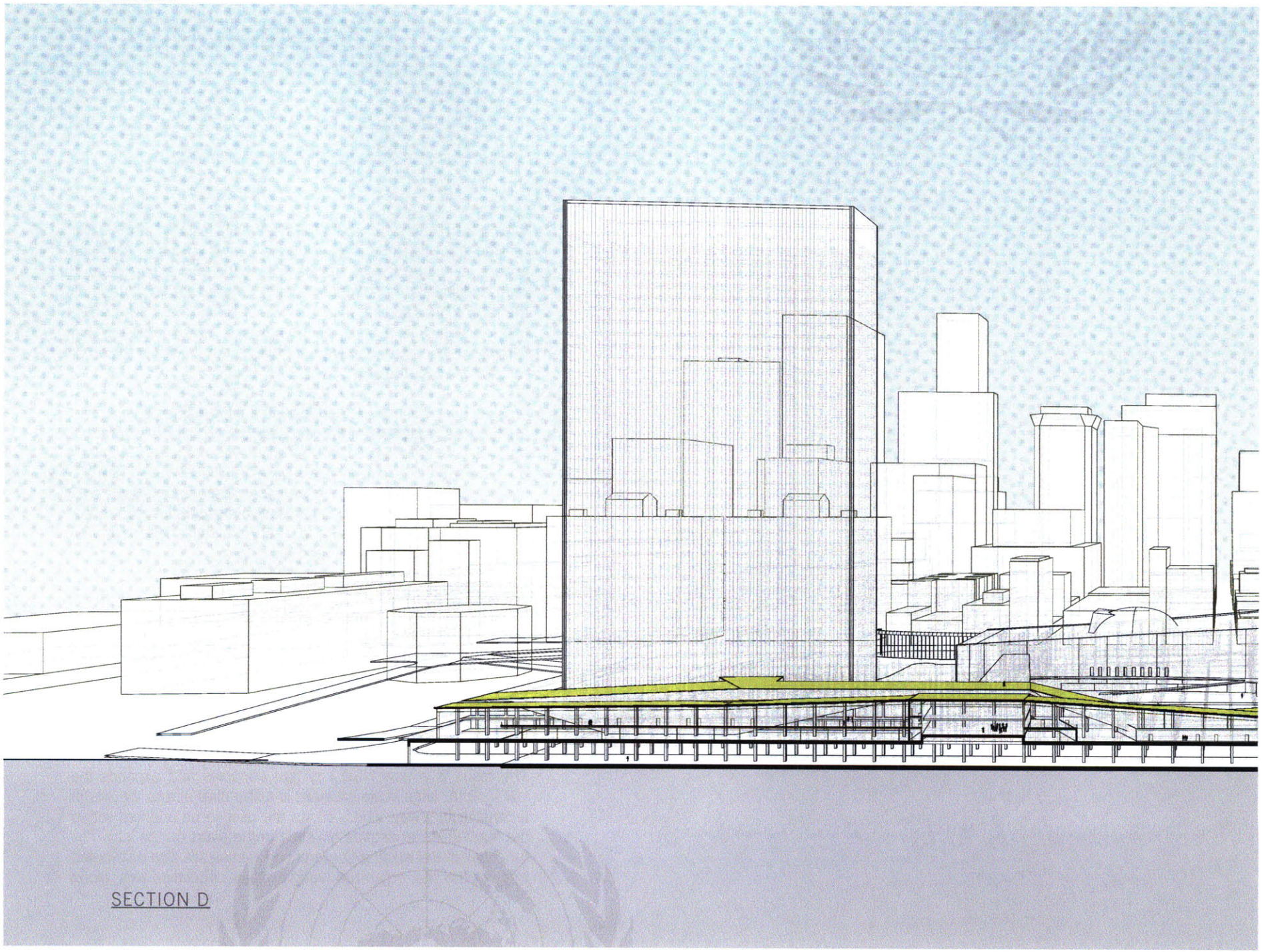
OPPOSITE: Floor plans of the reconfigured UN; at left, the upper plinth level (+0' with First Avenue as the benchmark), at right, the assembly level (+16'). ABOVE: The reconciliation of public program (which requires large volume) and bureaucratic program (which requires perimeter).

form (thus resulting in what one might call "tectonic form"). The mullions provide the unifying skin that unites offices, conference spaces, even unenclosed mechanical floors; they are an agent of form-making that is no longer specifically tied to the interior, as the logic of the building might immediately suggest. This project takes this ethos as a possibility for new systems of enclosure that variably respond to the interior conditions they relate to (a sort of mutable standardization).

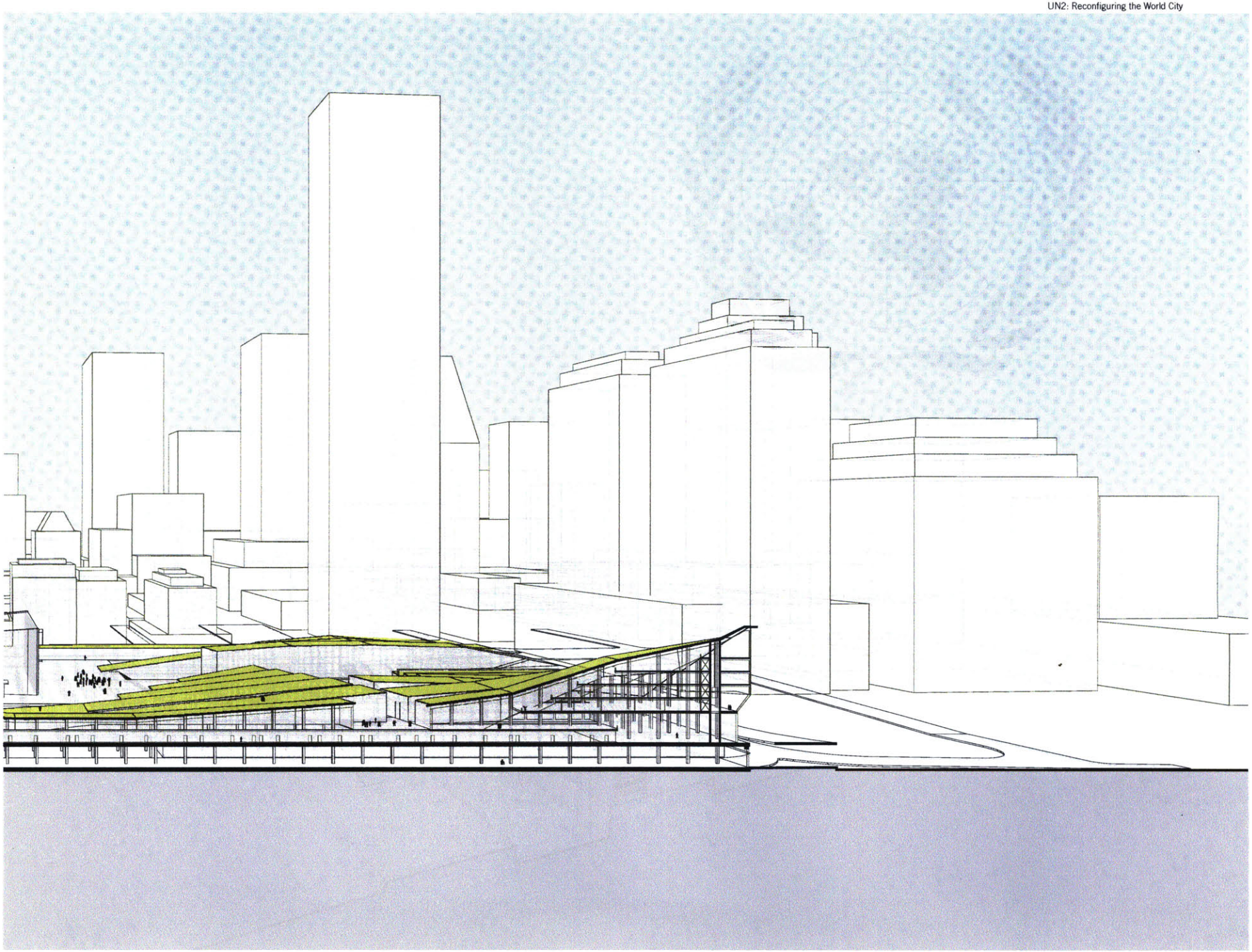
A series of operations are performed on the existing plinth to create the new landscape of bureaucracy below. What was formerly the lower plinth is raised to the +16' level, creating a continuous streetwall; this glazed perimeter is infilled with topographic surface that encloses the new addition. A series of regular cuts (keeping within the existing dimensions of the column grid) striate the site, creating a series of bands that contain the new programs: an aggregation of a bureaucratic landscape.

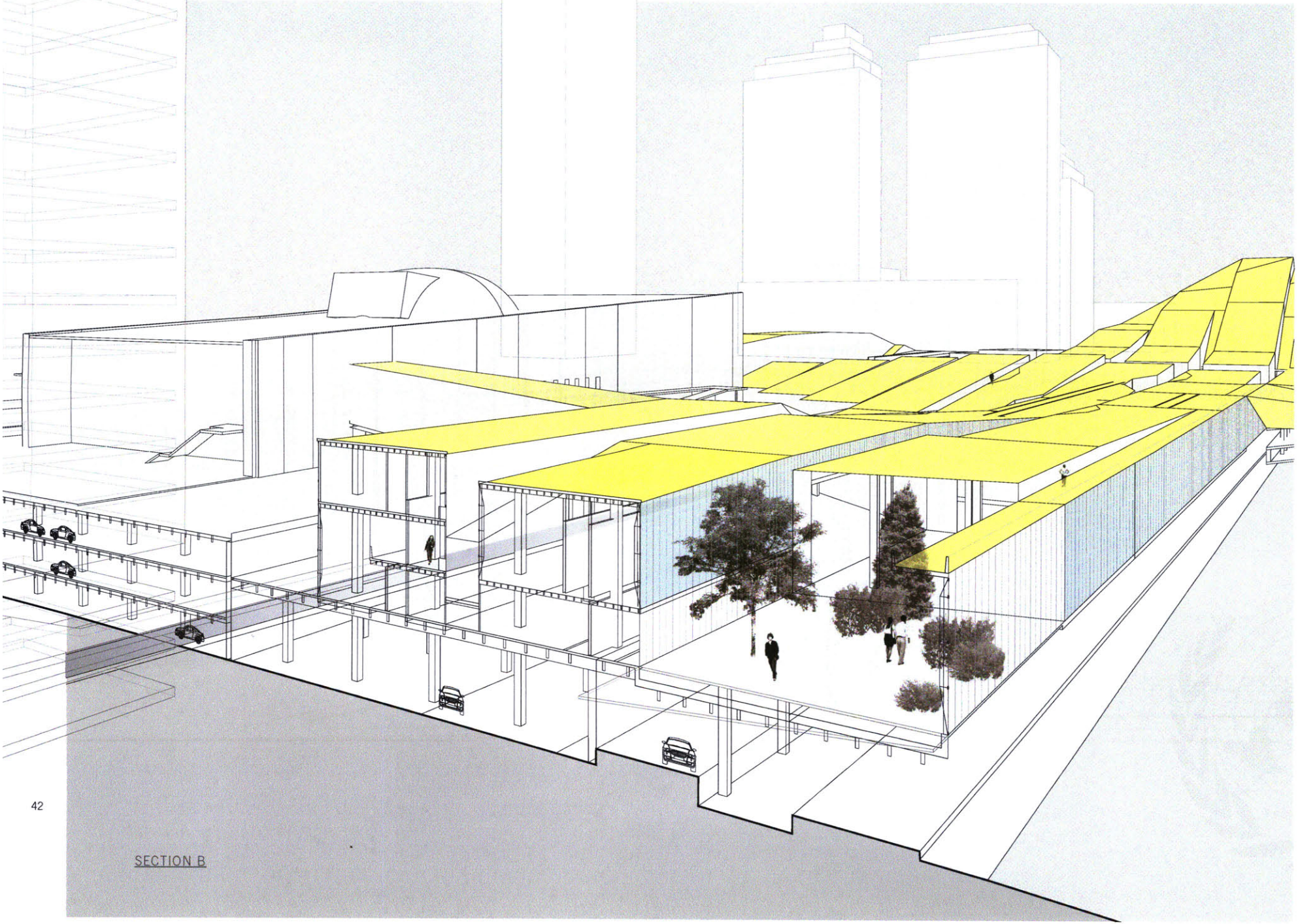
The Secretariat and the General Assembly show the two essential typological conditions of governmental programs: large programs (like meeting halls) require enclosed volume, while bureaucractic spaces (offices &c) require glazed perimeter and access to daylight. This project enables those two necessities by creating large volumes out of aggomerated strips; the sectional slippages between the slabs of office program reconnect to the upper surface, enabling the creation of larger spaces beneath.

The result is a new NGO city that occupies and expands the UN's plinth; large-scale program is distributed across the site in a constellatory way, which allows the user to be oriented within the regularized landscape (as seen in the plans on the left). The functions of the existing Conference Building are also distributed through the site, organized along a major circulation axis, along



SECTION D





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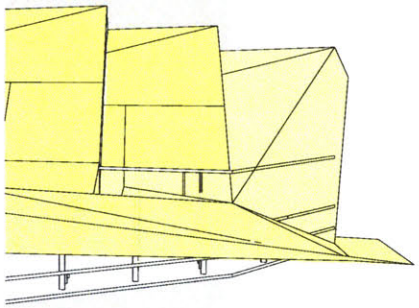


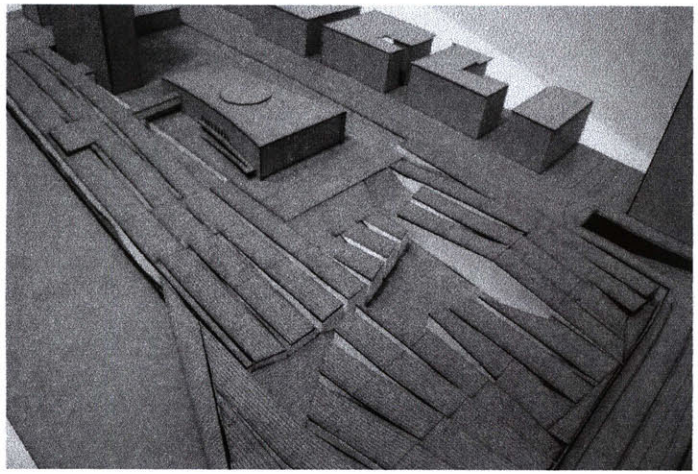
Section through Secretariat, NGO offices, and internalized garden that serves the Council Chamber visible behind it. All conditions are brought together by the mullion system.

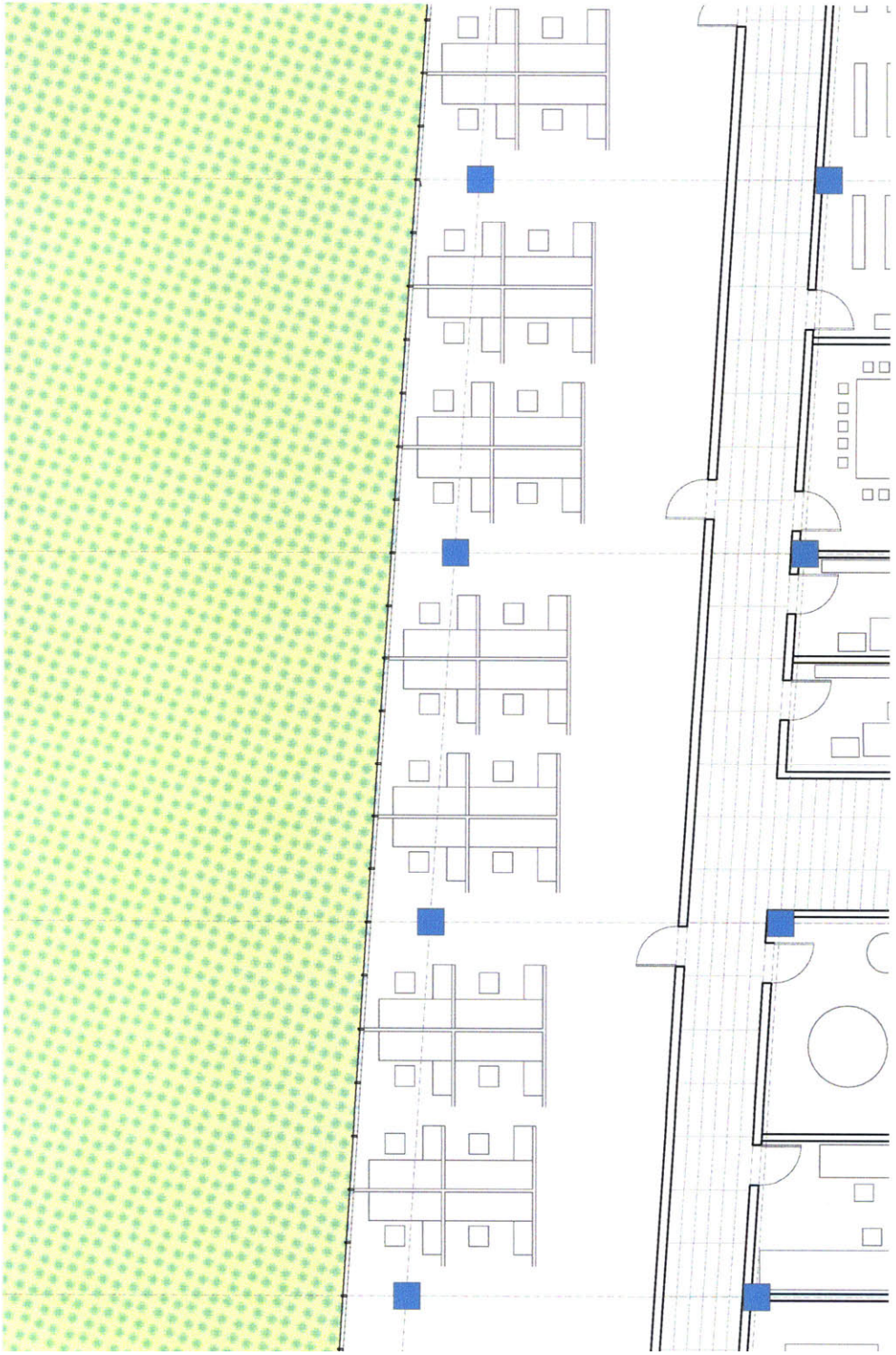
with a major auditorium for periodic conferences, media productiona and broadcast facilities, dining and other support services, and the mechanical operations that were dispaced by the new plinth.

The inclusion of the UN's affiliated agencies in this NGO city creates a new set of relations between the existing governmental infrastructures and the more effective and tactical approaches of the twenty-first century dispersed bureaucracy. Shared facilities and meeting spaces allows for cross-pollenization between different programs and users; moreover, it architecturalizes the possibility of productive encounter. The phrase "lobbyist" is a political term that finds its origins in architecture; to accomodate those sorts of interactions, the scheme is perforated with a series of lobbies that act as informal gathering spaces between the disparate offices.

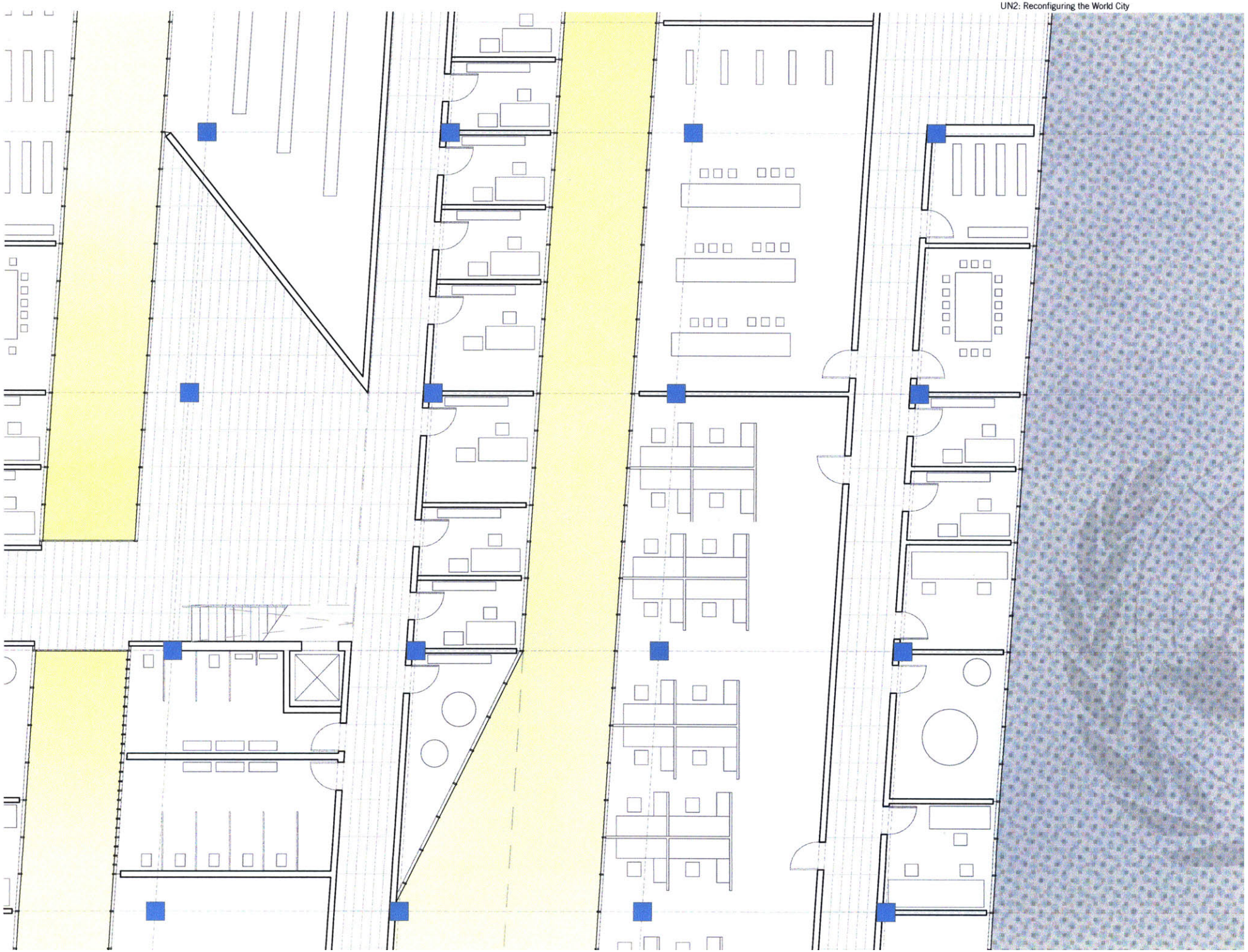
The striated slab structure of the site (seen on the following spread) allows spatial variability (something sorely lacking in the Secretariat) through the recombination of structural bays. In taking the fundamentally isolating condition of the vertical tower (where the only space of informal interaction is the circulation cores) and redistributing it in a horizontal pattern creates its own sorts of issues; the mat building type has long been explored for its organizational capacities but weighed down by issues of daylighting and wayfinding. This project takes the approach of striation precisely to deal with those issues.

For Corbusier, the site was an exhilirating display of the tectonic potency of the International Style as well as an expression of the organistic order that he championed. In a letter to his mother, he is simultaneously exhilirated by the Secretariat (and the irrepressible American City), frustrated by the design process and the





ABOVE: The striated plinth of NGO City. RIGHT: Detail plan showing the spatial and systemic variability of the NGO slab system, including offices, meeting spaces, internal lobbies, restroom facilities, and a library.

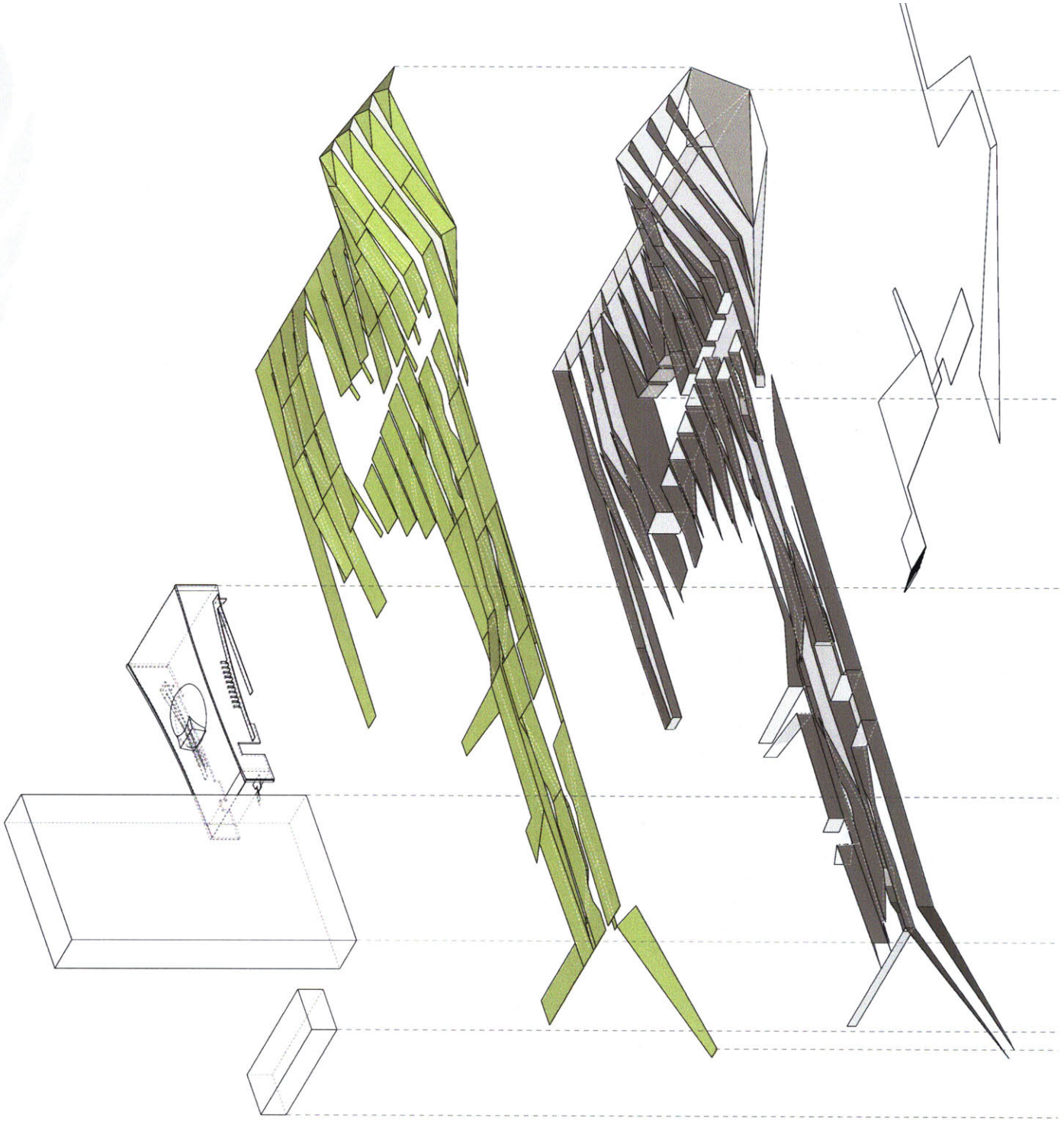


Assembly building (which he classifies as a mere "annex"), and terrified of the future of the UN's host city:

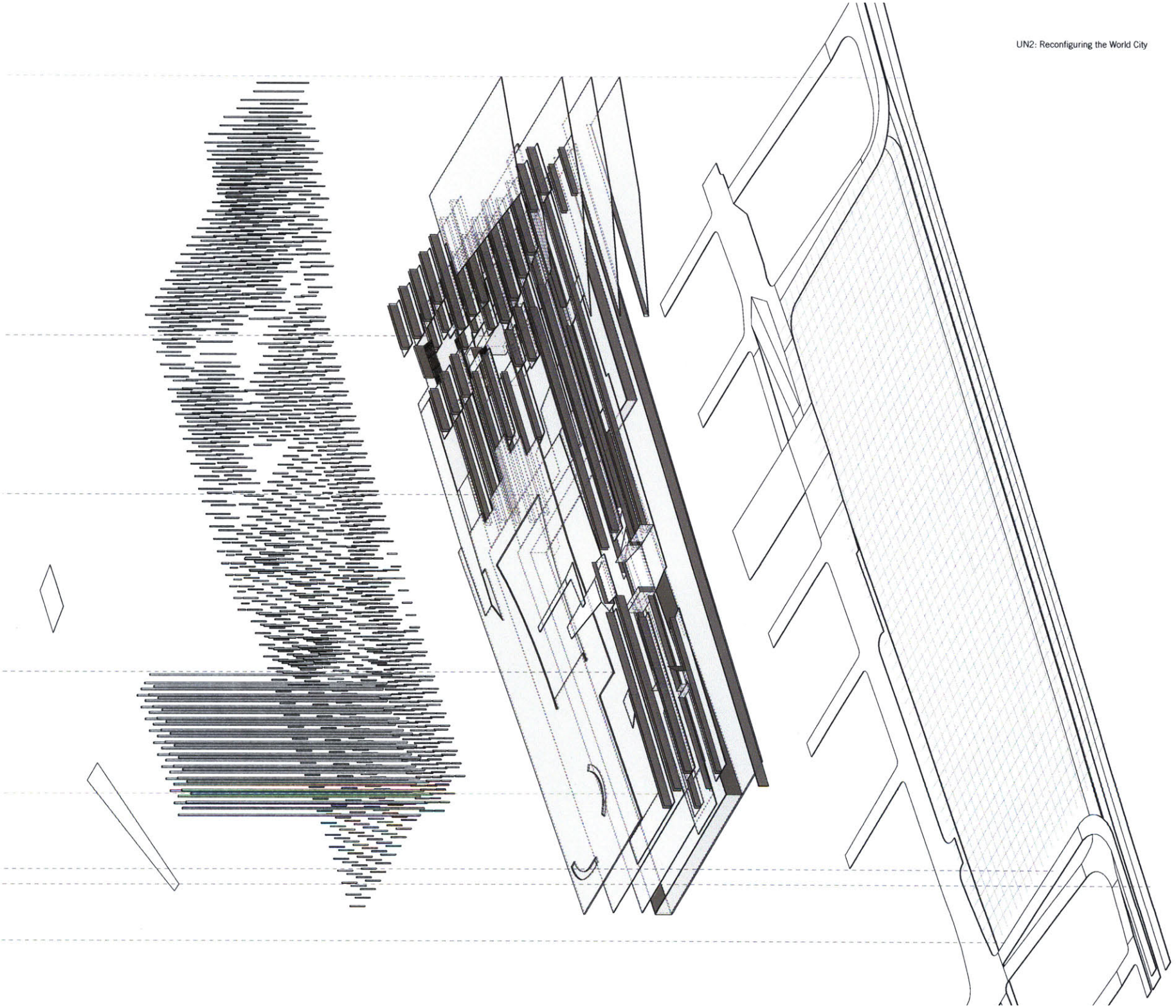
> At the UN in New York, the skyscraper is an event in the sky. The annexes (great hall + committee rooms) = soap box! I've concluded:
>
> No head
>
> No heart = Harrison
>
> No balls = American
>
> This amazing country is a machine out of control, gigantic, titanic: a runaway horse. Dangerous.[8]

The NGO City of this reconfigured United Nations is instead an event on the ground: this thesis recasts bureaucracy not as a monolithically relentless mechanism but as an agile and effective dispersion of functions brought together by a common framework. In reorganizing the spatiality of the UN around the contemporary realities of its methods and systems, the building again becomes an active player in the ongoing work of international governance.

LEFT: NGO corridor with lobby below. RIGHT: Detail model of NGO lobby.

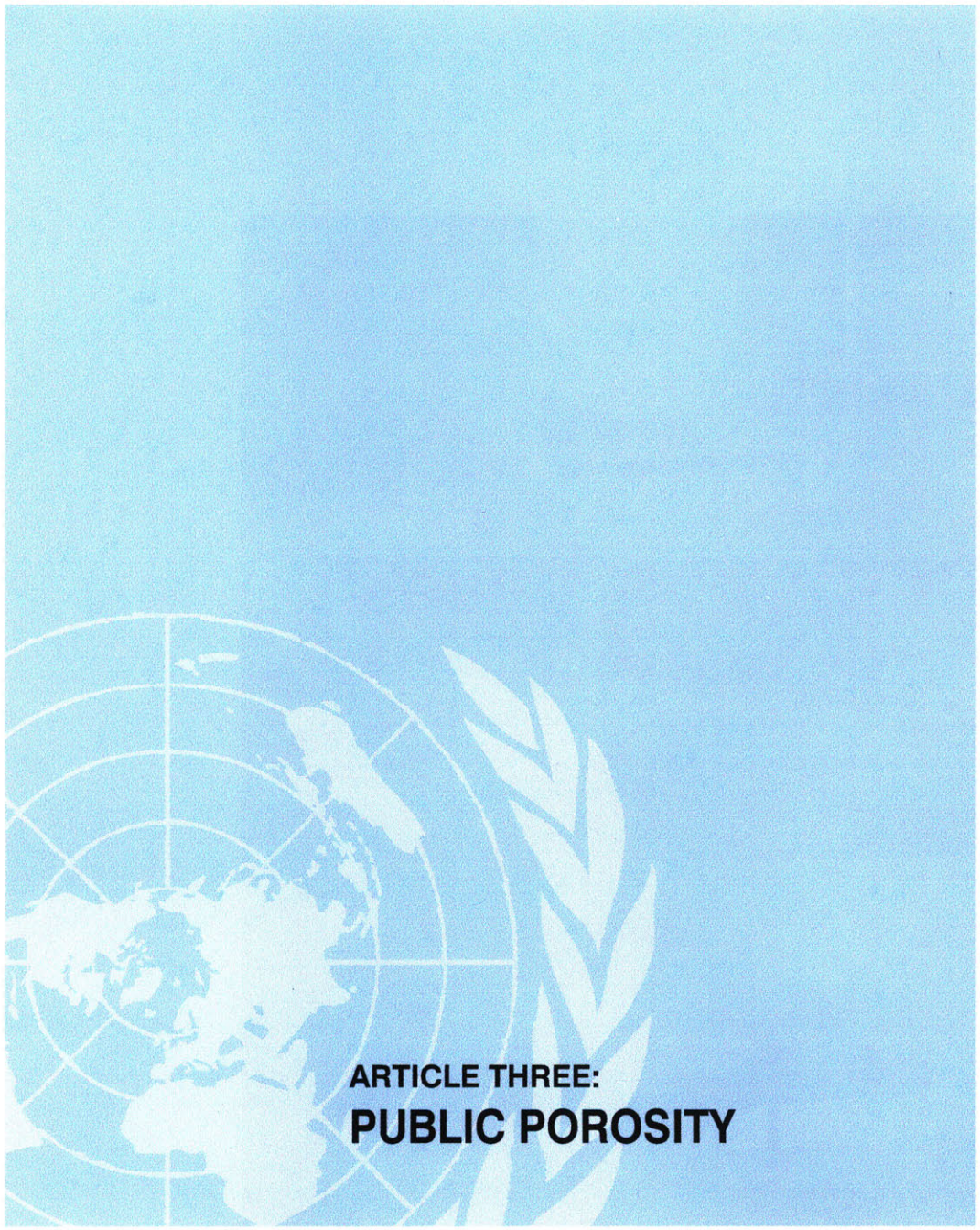


Exploded Axonometric of systems.



NOTES

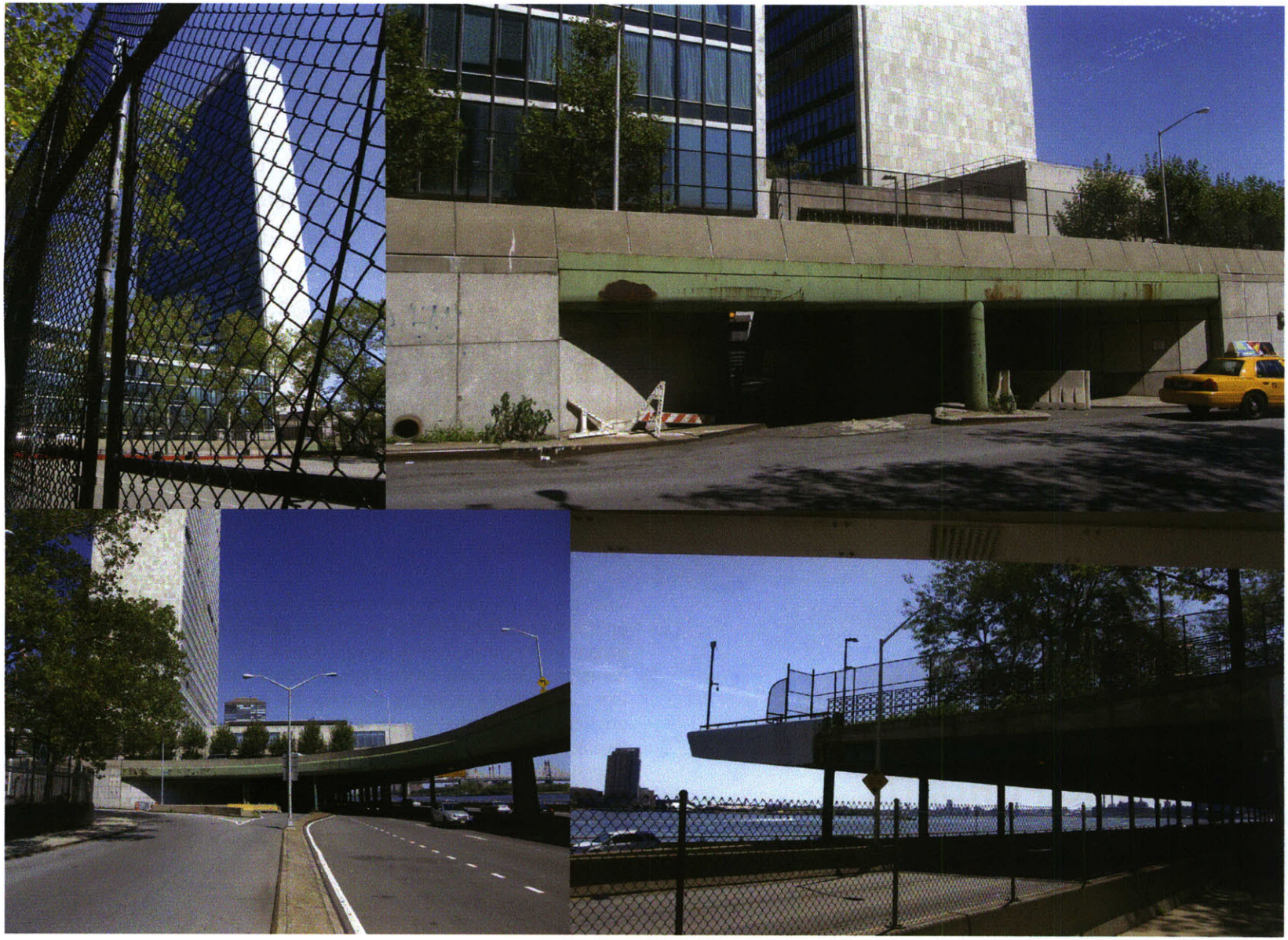
1. Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality" in The Foucault Effect, 3
2. "Report to the General Assembly", 27
3. Reinhold Martin, The Organizational Complex, 4
4. "Report to the General Assembly", 74
5. Rem Koolhaas, Delirious New York, 281
6. Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line: United Nations Headquarters: Buildings as Symbols", 108
7. Reinhold Martin, The Organizational Complex, 95
8. Nicholas Fox Weber, Le Corbusier: A Life, 553

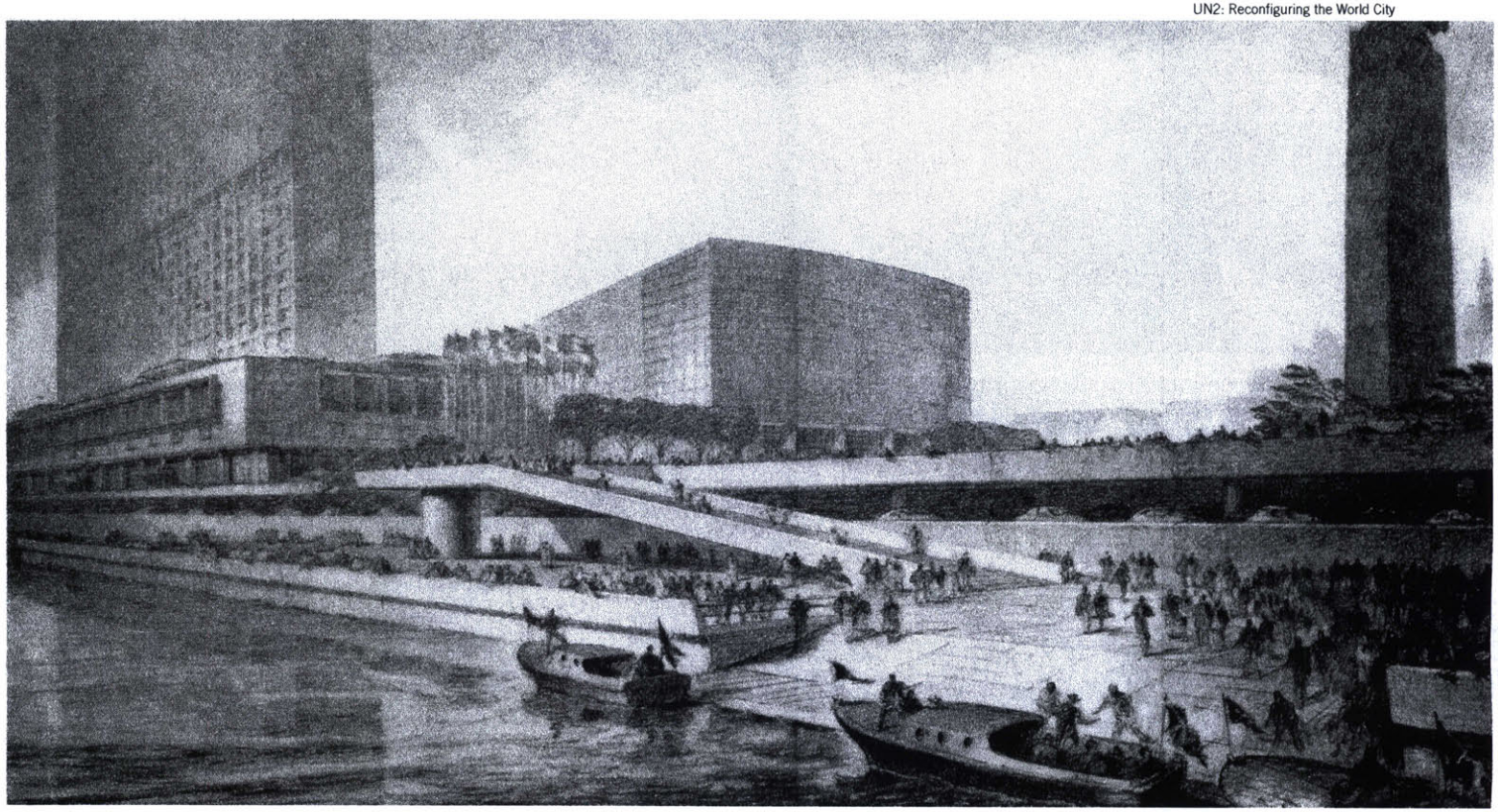


ARTICLE THREE:
PUBLIC POROSITY

The fiction of a plinth condition is that of infinite extensability, of unfettered access and free movement across an endless surface; early renderings of the UN complex depict its constructed terrain as just that. The reality on the ground, however, is that United Nations plinth is ultimately a device of forbiddence, of necessary security and unnecessary blockage of public view and access. This is another of the UN's paradoxes: as an extraterritorial entity, it needs a defined and controllable sense of separateness, but as an institution devoted to the service of all constituents, bar none, its actual ability to engage its urban public is sorely lacking.

Take a walk around the UN complex; the First Avenue side is entirely fenced, while its side streets are blankly monolithic walls, except where punctured by service access. The river side of the complex is dominated by the highway infrastructures of the FDR expressway. Once inside the complex, the casual visitor is taken on a carefully scripted tour of entirely empty public spaces; the feeling is one of visiting an empty husk, historical site that has long since been abandoned. Security is, obviously, an essential component to the UN complex that cannot be ignored; it can also be a design opportunity, whereby the interface between institution and public can take on more nuance. If the single power of the United Nations is that if its own persuasiveness and the swaying





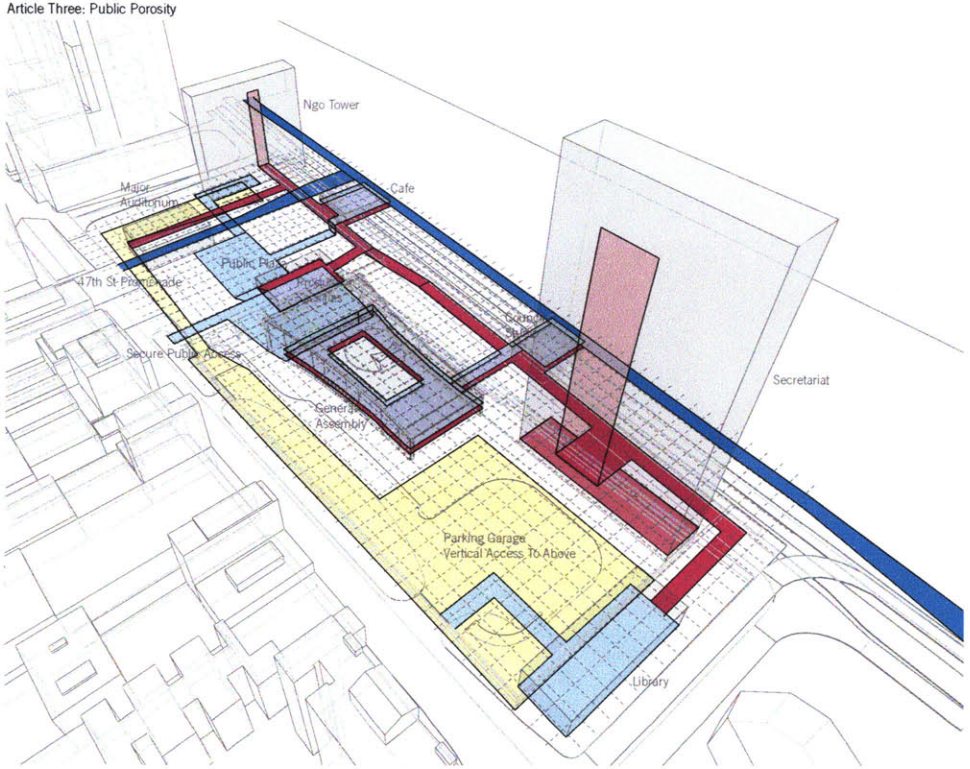
of public (thus governmental) opinion, then the access to the institution itself is paramount in its mission.

Many of the early schemes for the UN had a broader urbanistic ambition that included the general public in a significantly more participatory way. The 47th street corridor was originally intended as a welcoming promenade to bring the visitor onto the UN's grounds; today, it sits as a pleasant-enough tree-lined road, but hardly the grand amenity it was conceived as. Sven Markelius' proposal for the site included bridges that connected Manhattan to what is now Roosevelt Island and Long Island City; the UN, for Markelius, was a catalyst for infrastructure. On a smaller but no less critical scale, one relatively late scheme included a boat lauch on the east side of the FDR; rather than a forbidden coastline, the river was seen as a potential part of the ceremonial arrival sequence and was included in the public experience of the site.

The eventual UN project, generated from an exhaustive set of conceptual diagrams, paid careful attention to the vectors at work in the buildings (the movement of staff, delegates, and public; the flow of mechanical systems; even the methods of document production and distribution were thoroughly mapped out). What arises from these studies is a complex set of sectional relationships whereby each constituency of the building is channeled to a particular floor level; in the General Assembly especially, there are ample sectional views that allow the public to encounter the space of the delegate, which is one embedded tactic that this

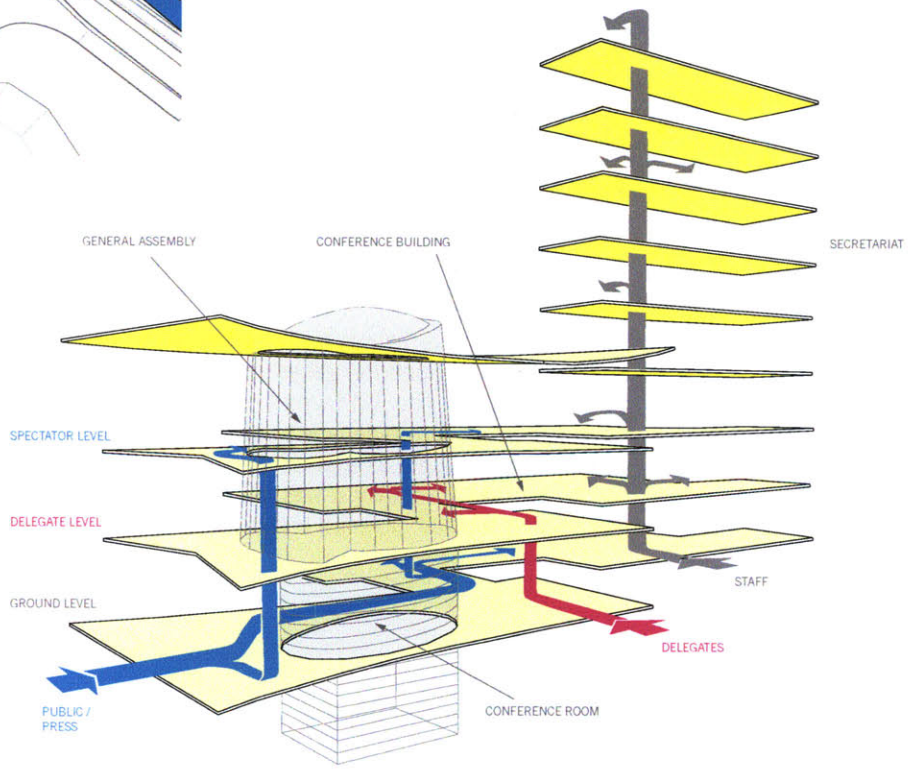
OPPOSITE: Site conditions of the plinth. The public experience is characterized by fences, blank walls, infrastructure, and access roads.

ABOVE: A Hugh Ferriss rendering for an early scheme for the UN's waterfront.

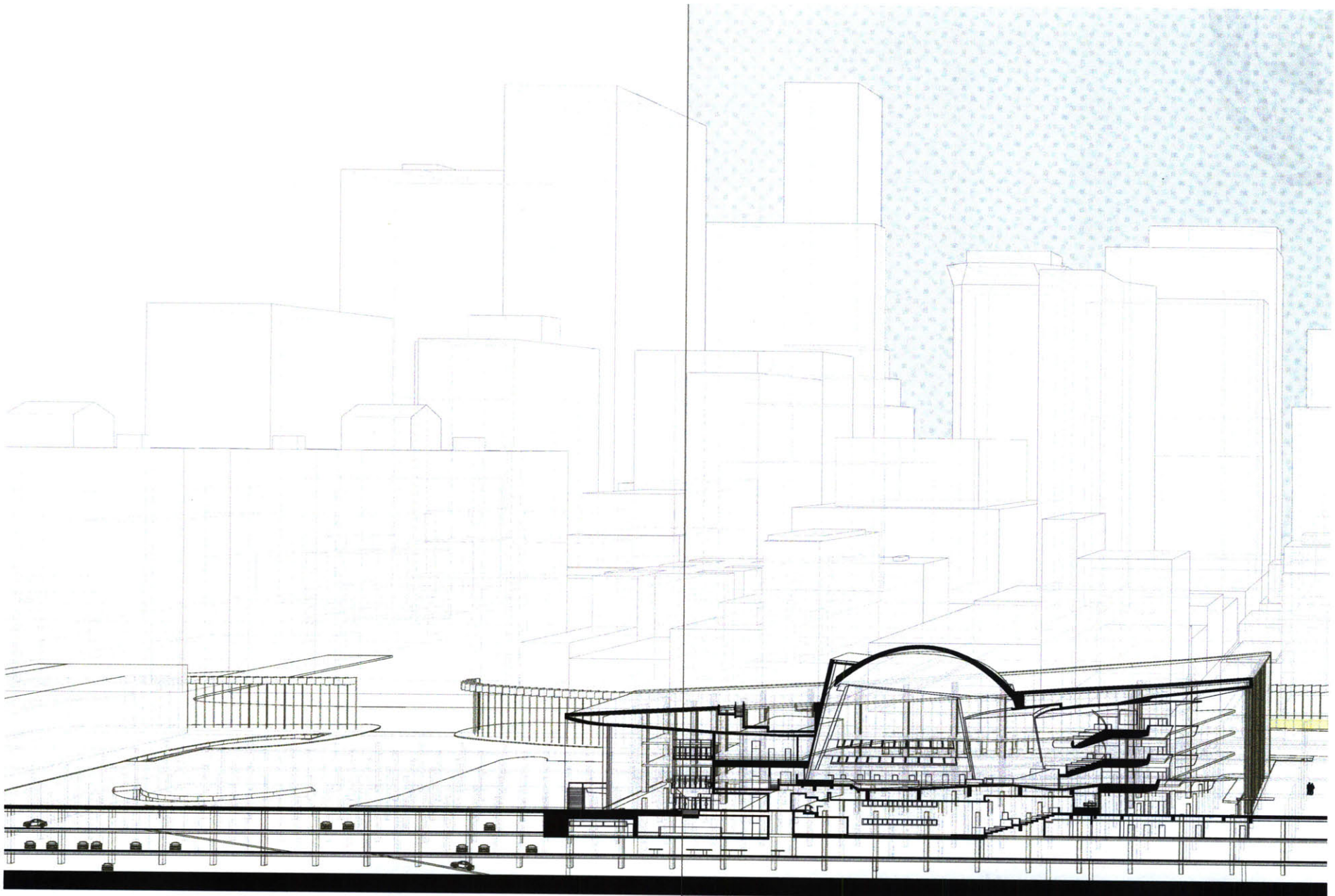


thesis adopts from the original. Notable points of overlap are found in the Assembly Hall itself and its foyer; these sectional relationships are largely lacking through the rest of the complex.

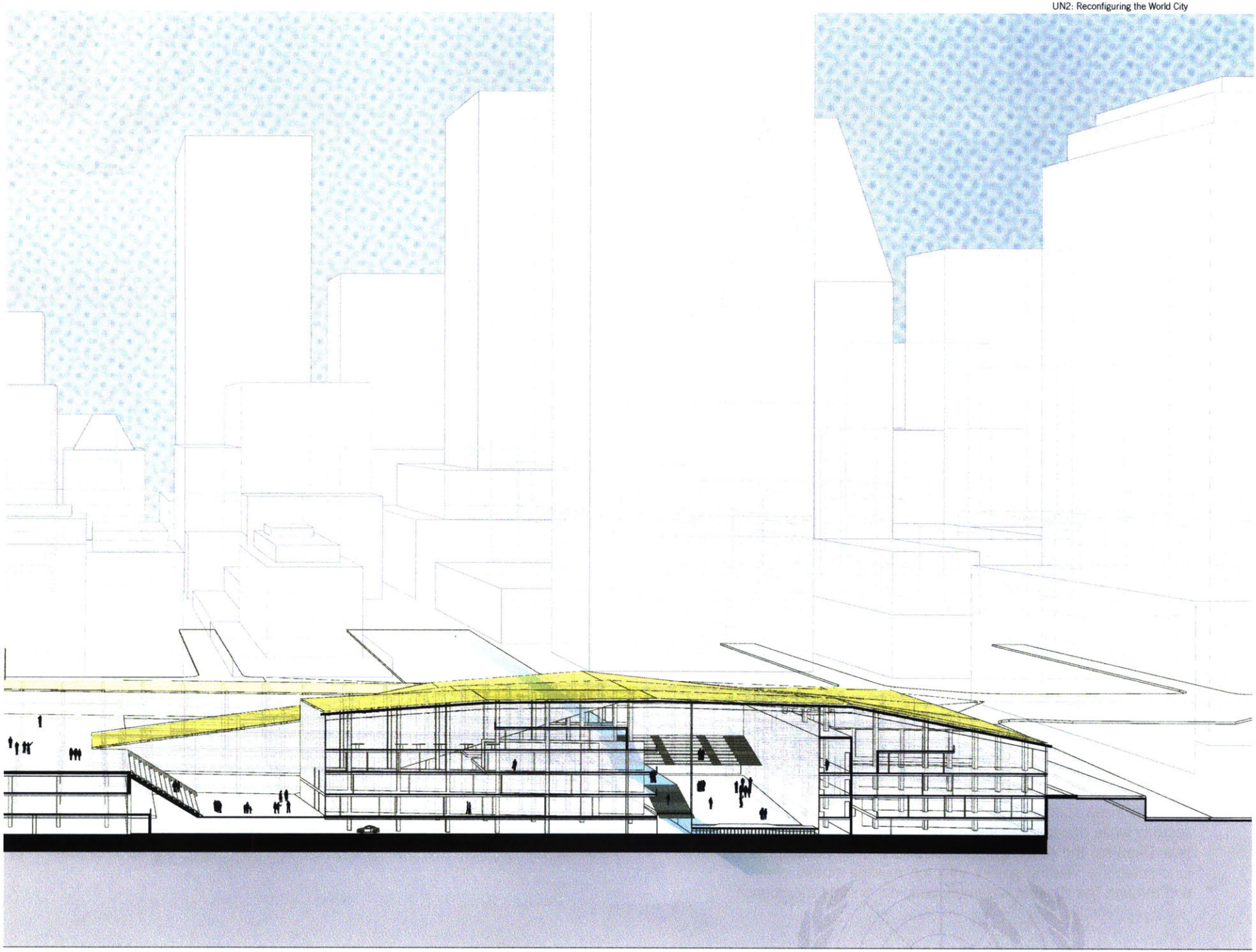
Along with the internal commingling of constituencies, this project reframes the UN's urbanistic engagement with the surrounding city. The riverfront promenade (which runs continuously along the east side of Manhattan except at the UN's superblock) is reconnected, allowing a different public view onto the complex. A circulatory spine that connects the Secretariat to NGO City runs throughout, paralleling the public circulation; this is then overlaid

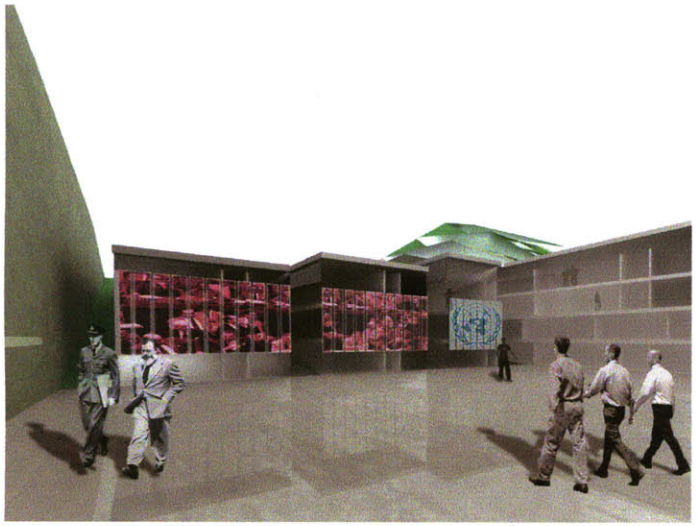


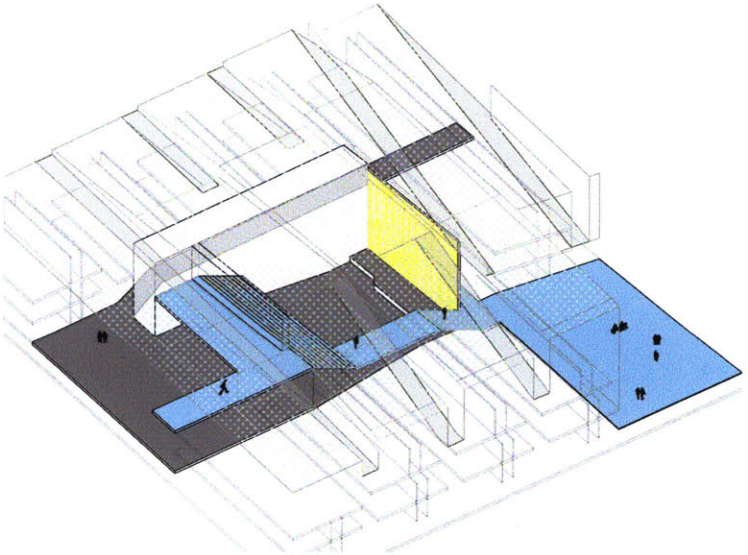
RIGHT: The circulatory divisions of the original UN complex, with different publics carefully kept in particular sectional relationships. ABOVE: The circulation of the reconfigured UN, allowing public porosity alongside institutional security. OPPOSITE: Site plan of the new UN complex.



SECTION C



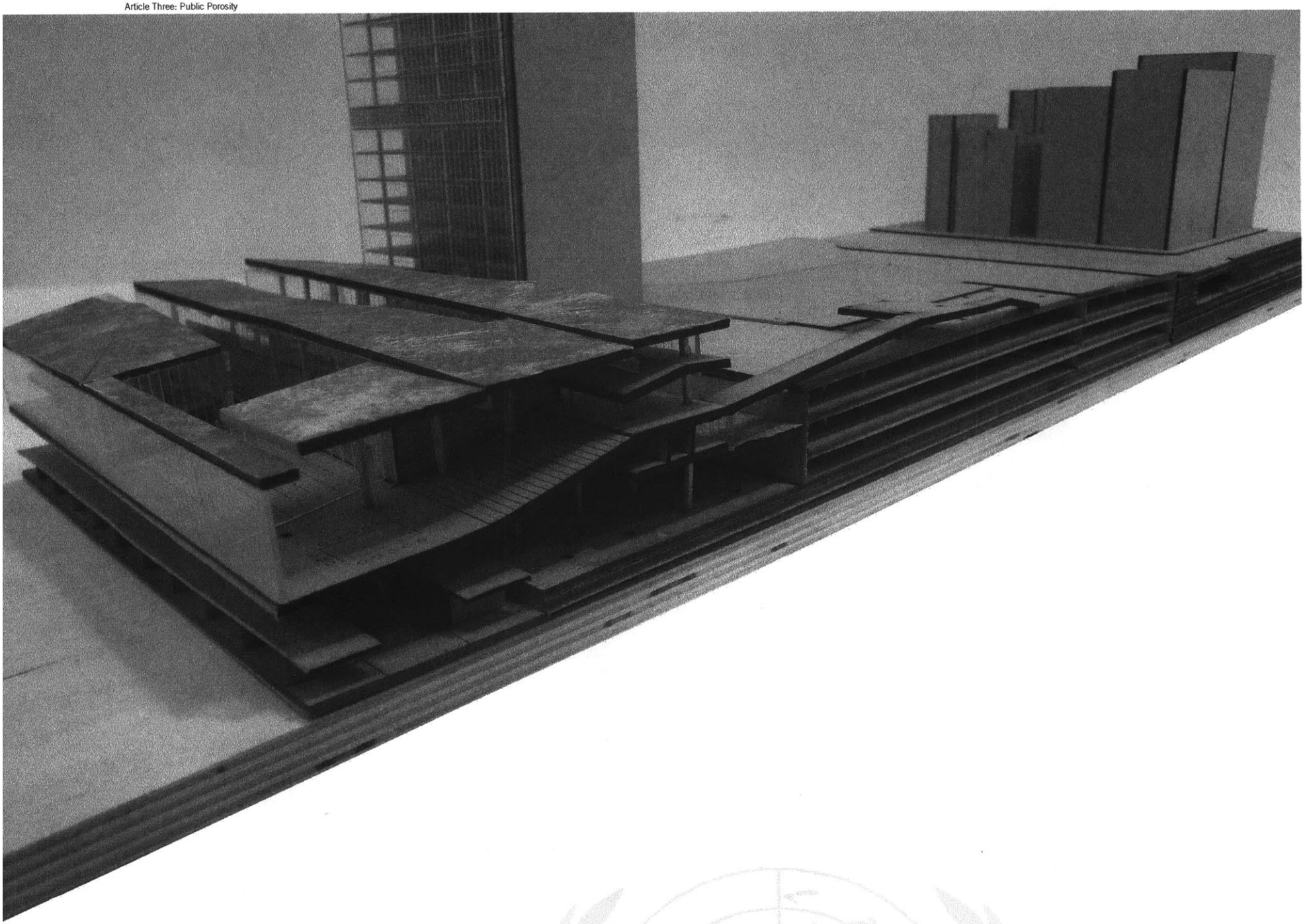


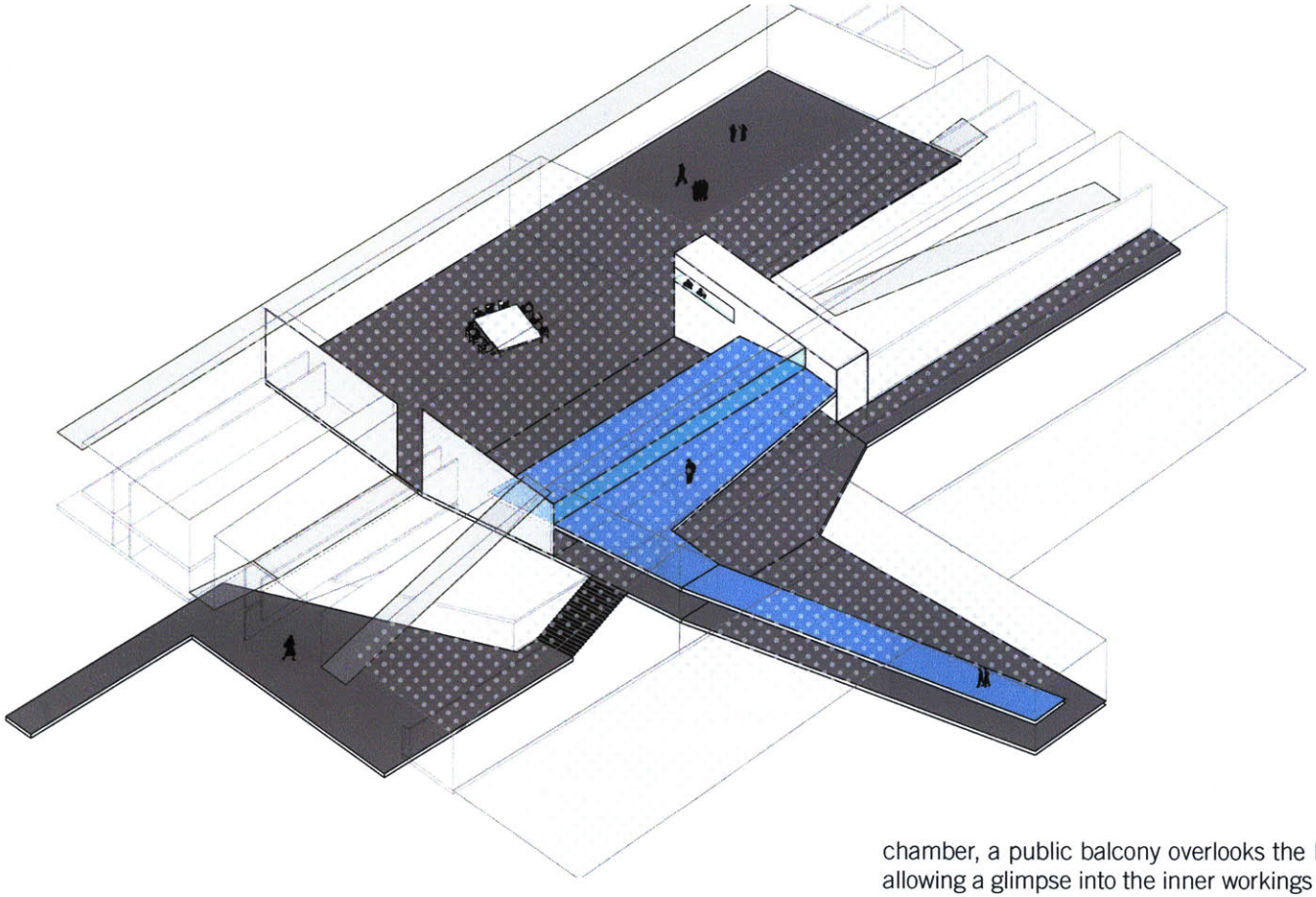


by a series of semi-public outdoor spaces that make their way through the project, providing a level of organization and also public engagement.

Public circulation is also incorporated into several of the critical large-scale programs that occupy the site. The new NGO auditorium (seen at right) is oriented adjacent to the 47th street promenade; the public sidewalk is brought through the auditorium (stepping down in alignment with the public balcony of the auditorium) and provides direct access to one of the public plazas below. The curtain wall system allows a sense of visual continuity between these spaces, preserving the necessary organizational security while opening the insides of the project to public scrutiny. Likewise, the reconfigured council chamber (next spread) incorporates a viewing gallery into the existing public circulation through the General Assembly building; outside the council

ABOVE LEFT: Public plaza within NGO City, allowing views onto the workings of the NGO's and surrounded by media screens that serve as a broadcast device for the ongoing work of the building's interior. ABOVE RIGHT: The integration of public space and auditorium access (blue) with secure NGO space (grey). OPPOSITE: View from NGO offices across public circulation corridor into auditorium. The curtain wall allows consistent visibility between programs.

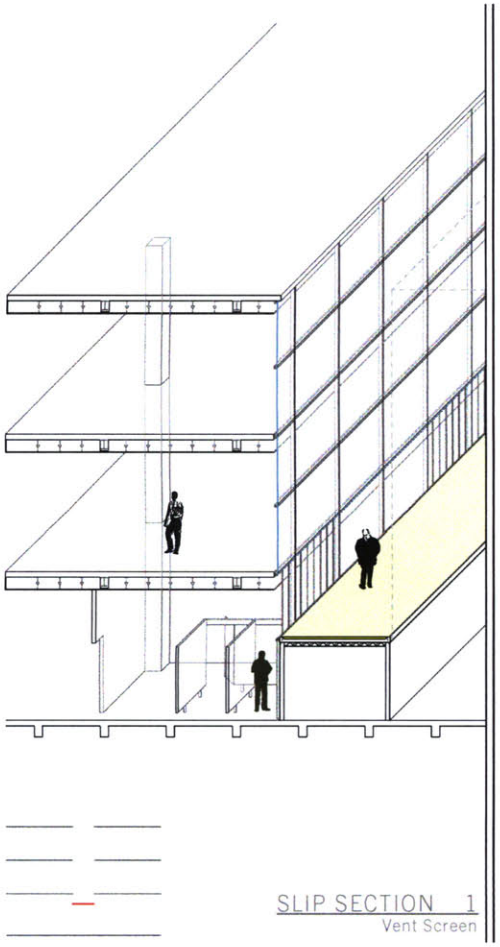




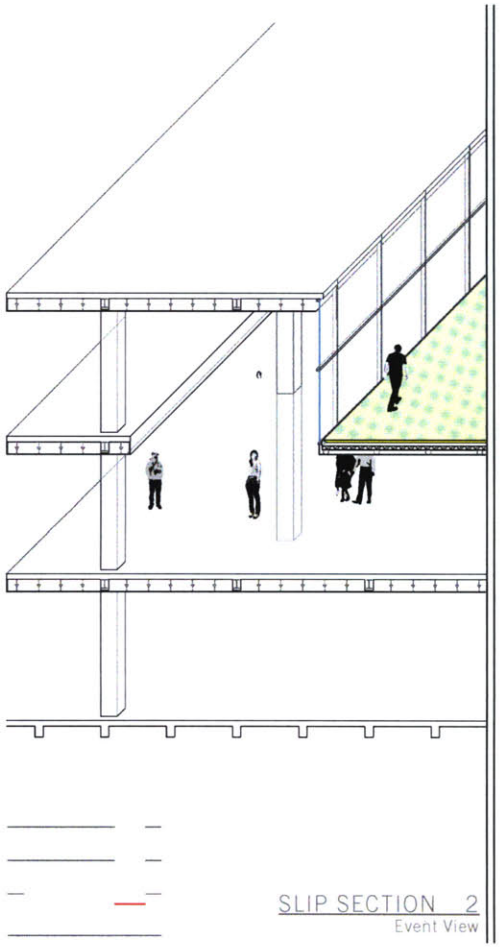
OPPOSITE: Detail model of the Council Chamber's layers of circulation. ABOVE: The integration of public viewing (blue) into the bureaucratic apparatus of the Council Chamber (gray).

chamber, a public balcony overlooks the NGO circulation below, allowing a glimpse into the inner workings of the UN and its affiliated organizations.

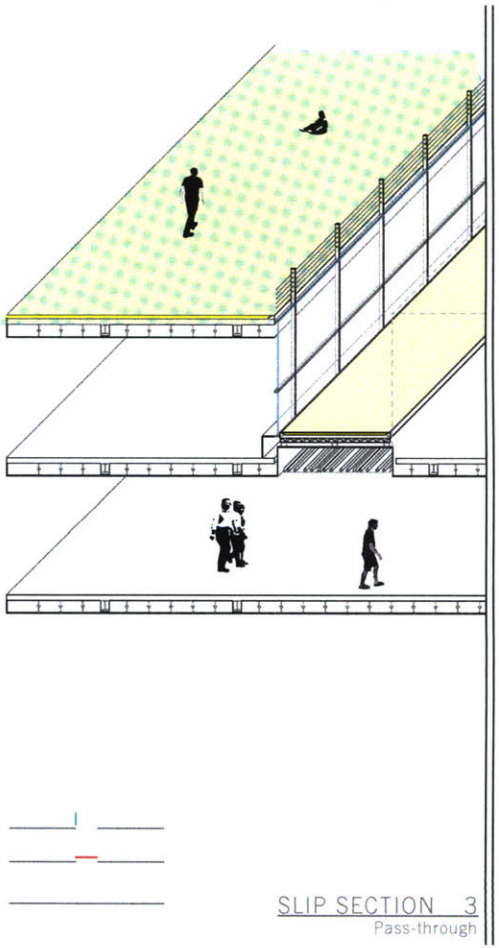
On a more fine-grained scale, the topographic surface of the NGO city provides ample opportunities for the interface between the public exterior and the private interior. The sectional slippages between the NGO slabs can be configured as light wells, as security gaps, as public pathway, as private circulation, and as exterior spaces adjacent to the NGO programs. Mullion spacing can be varied to adjust the visual opacity as well as the literal permeability of the skin; ventilation of mechanical systems and other facilities is enabled through a mullion screen like that of the Secretariat; the depth of the slippage can be calibrated to allow access underneath, access from the surface, and particular viewpoints from outside to in. The NGO lobbies are housed in double



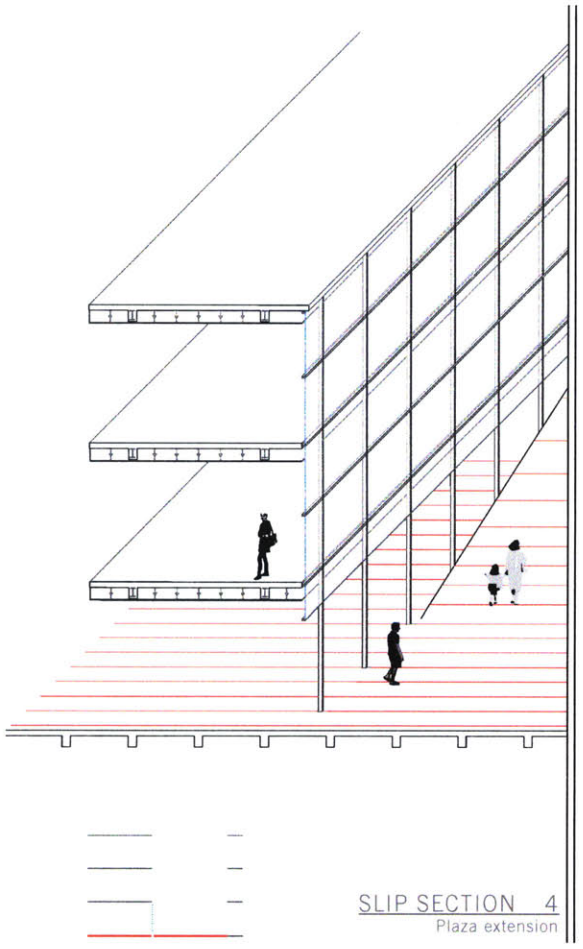
SLIP SECTION 1
Vent Screen



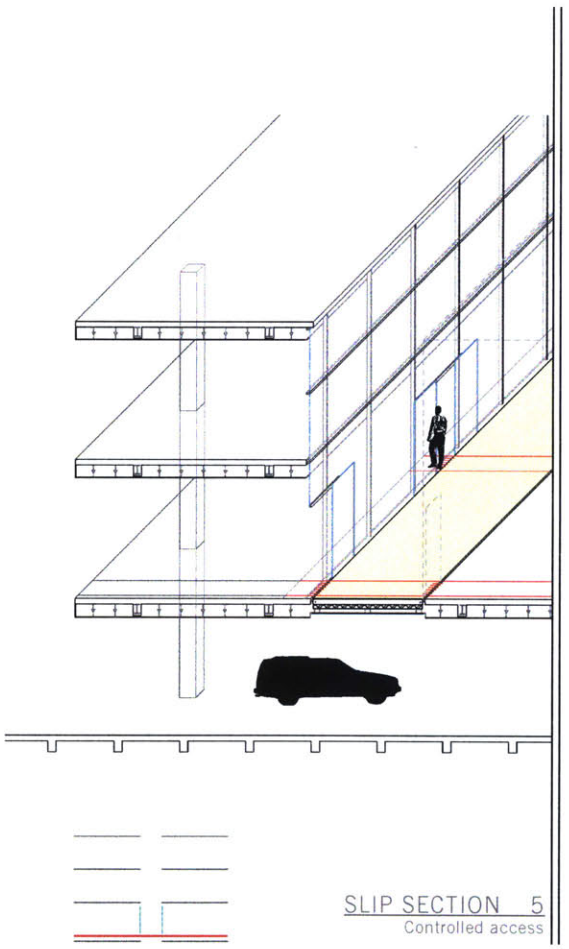
SLIP SECTION 2
Event View



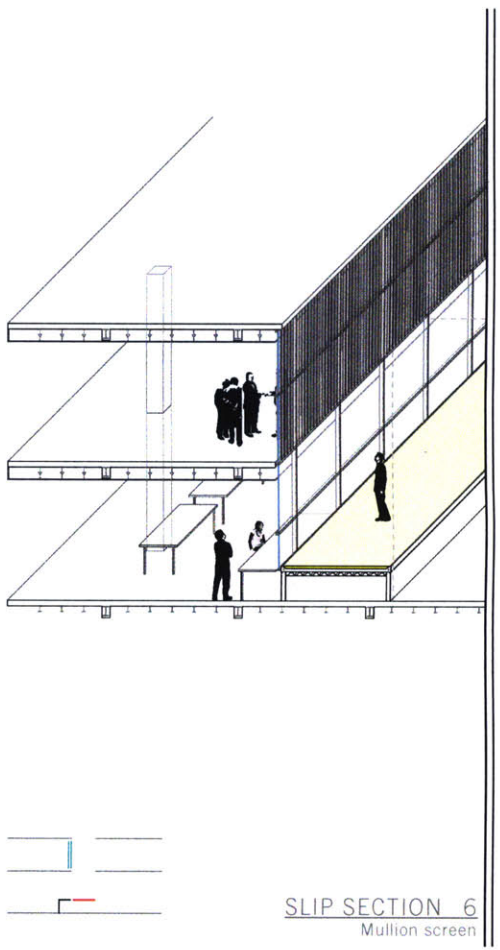
SLIP SECTION 3
Pass-through



SLIP SECTION 4
Plaza extension

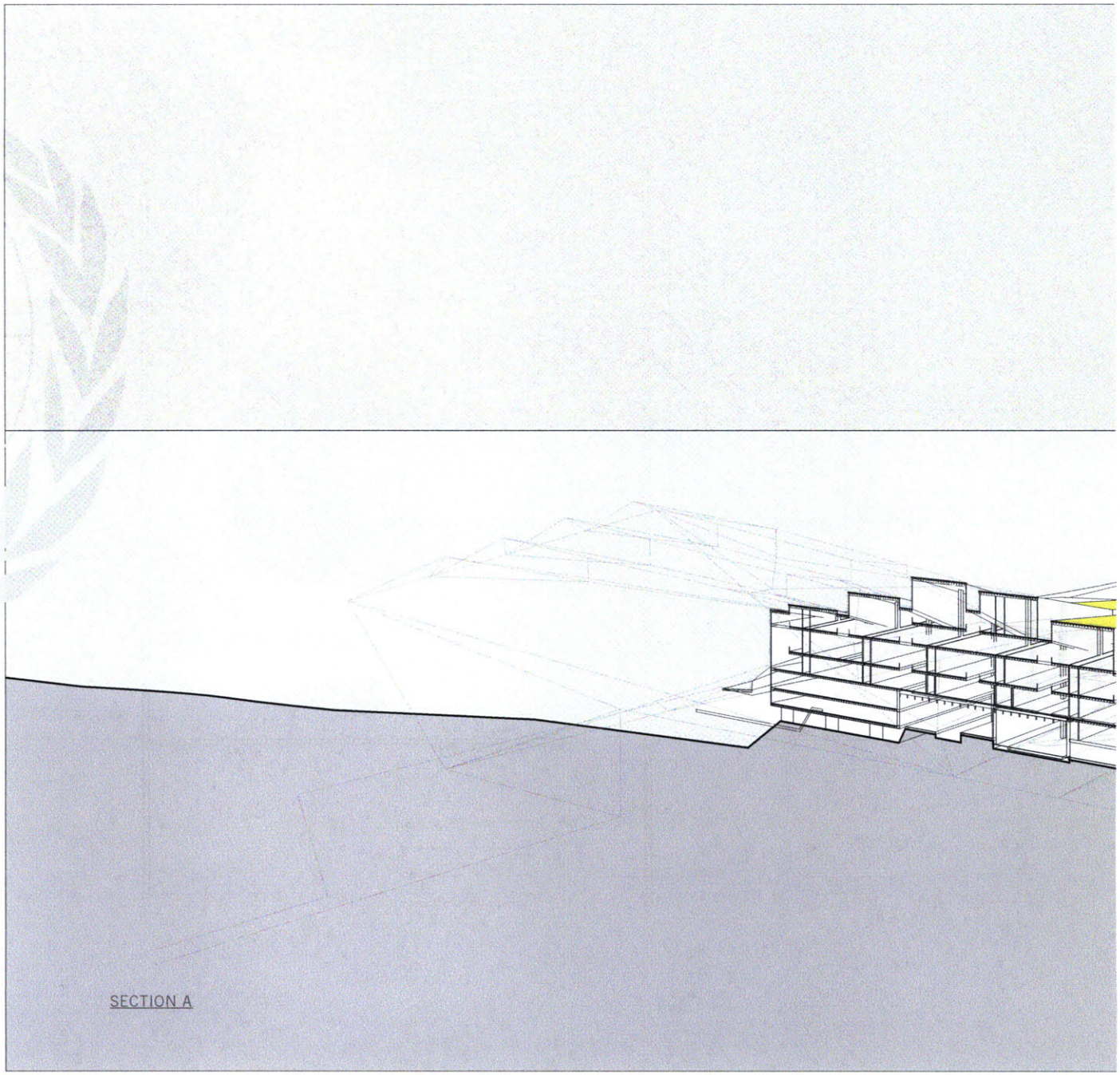


SLIP SECTION 5
Controlled access

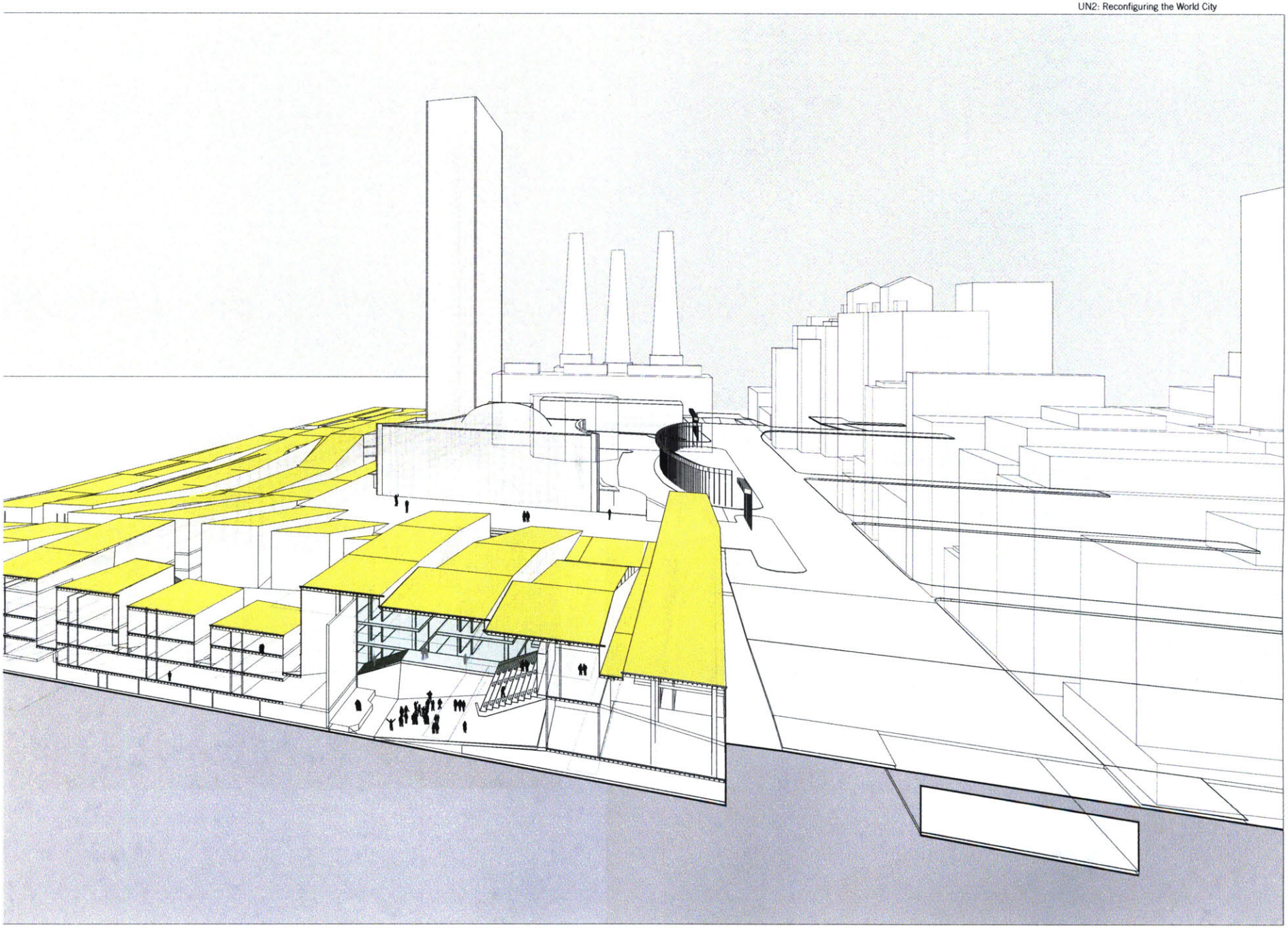


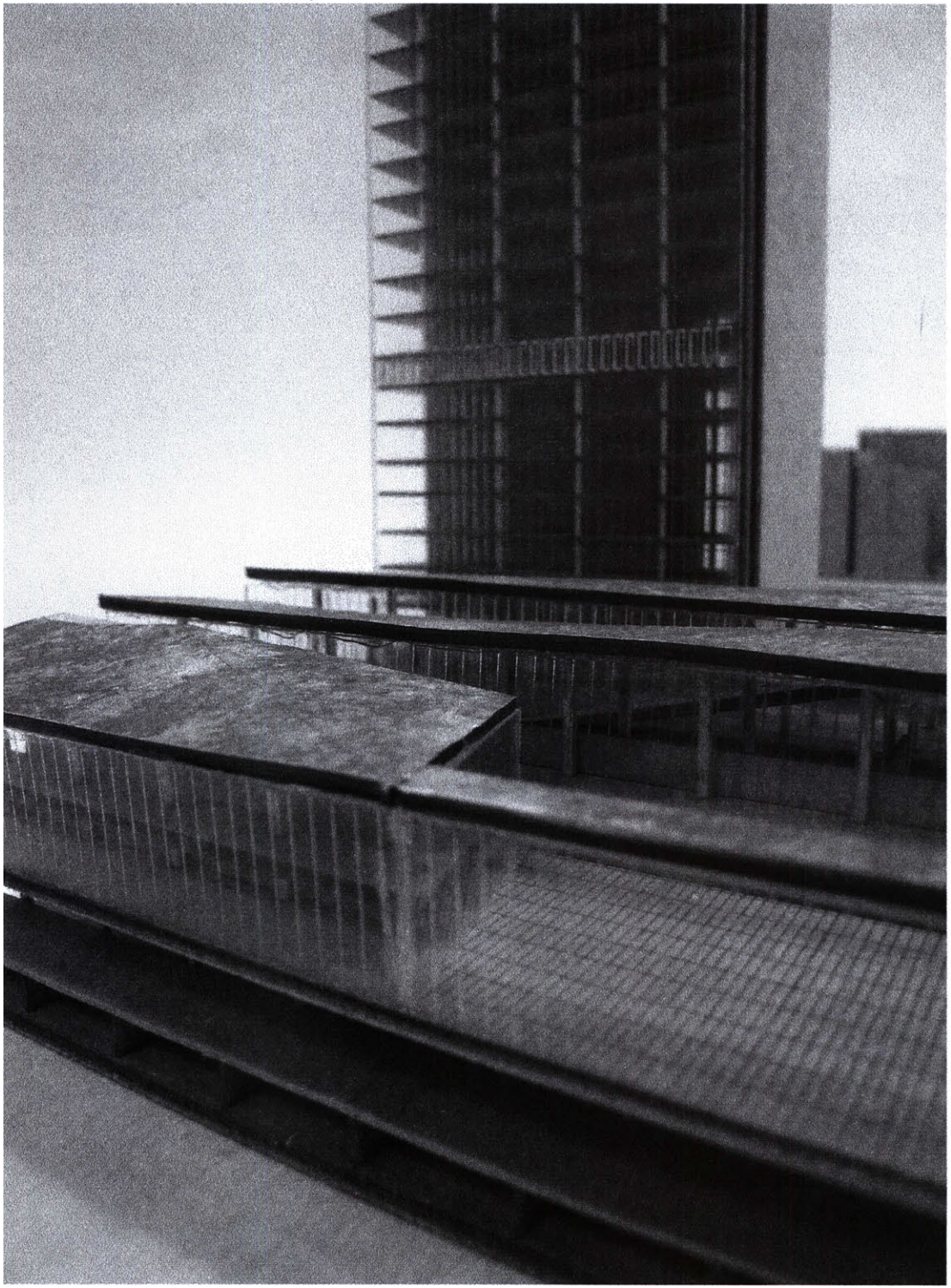
SLIP SECTION 6
Mullion screen

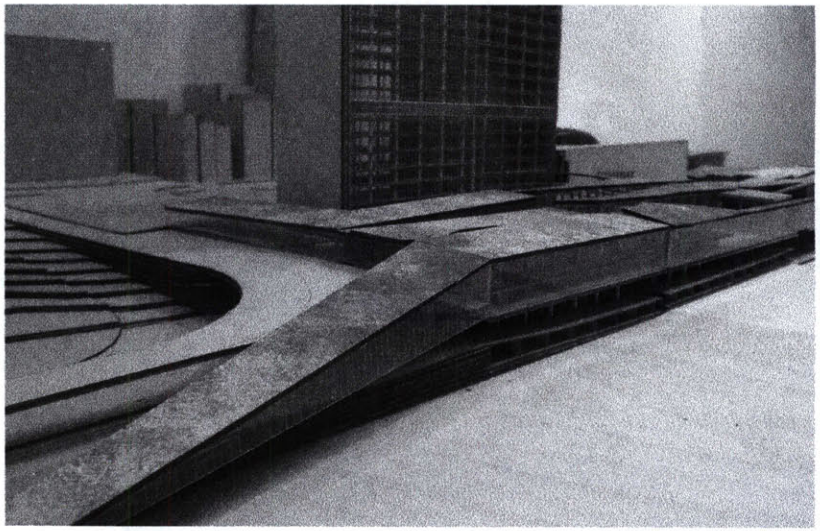
Slip Sections: a typological study of how the surface cuts engage the NGO slabs, allowing different levels of access, visibility, and permeability.



Section through auditorium and NGO City.



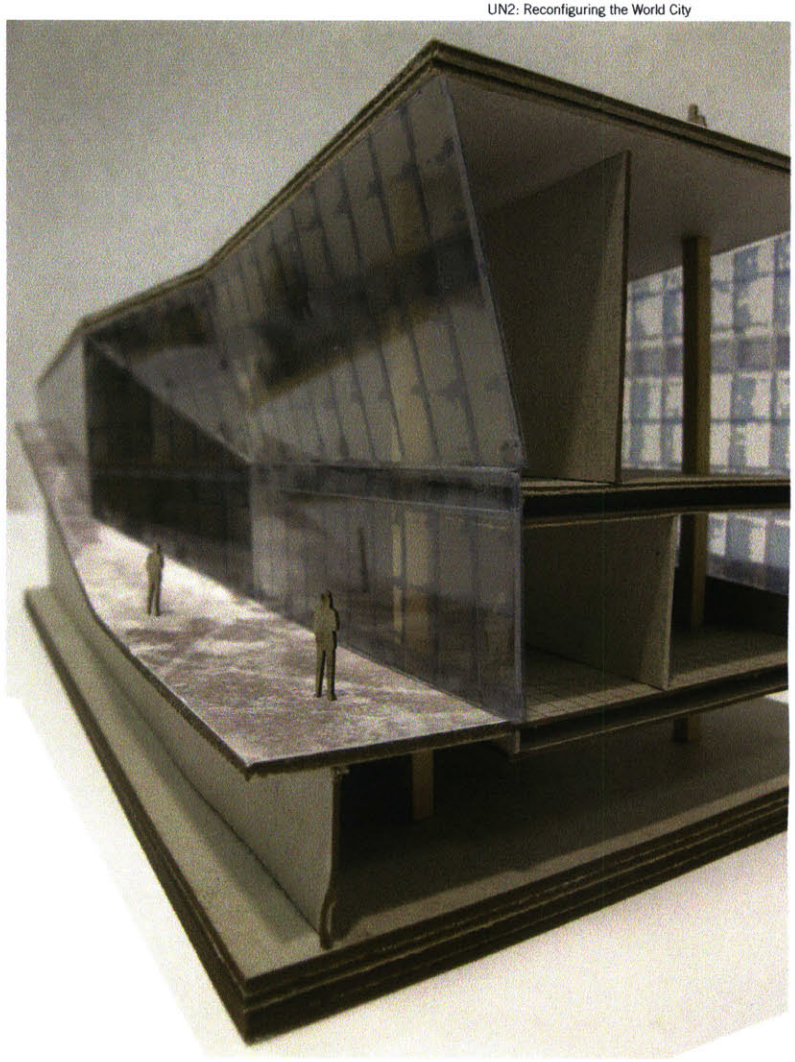


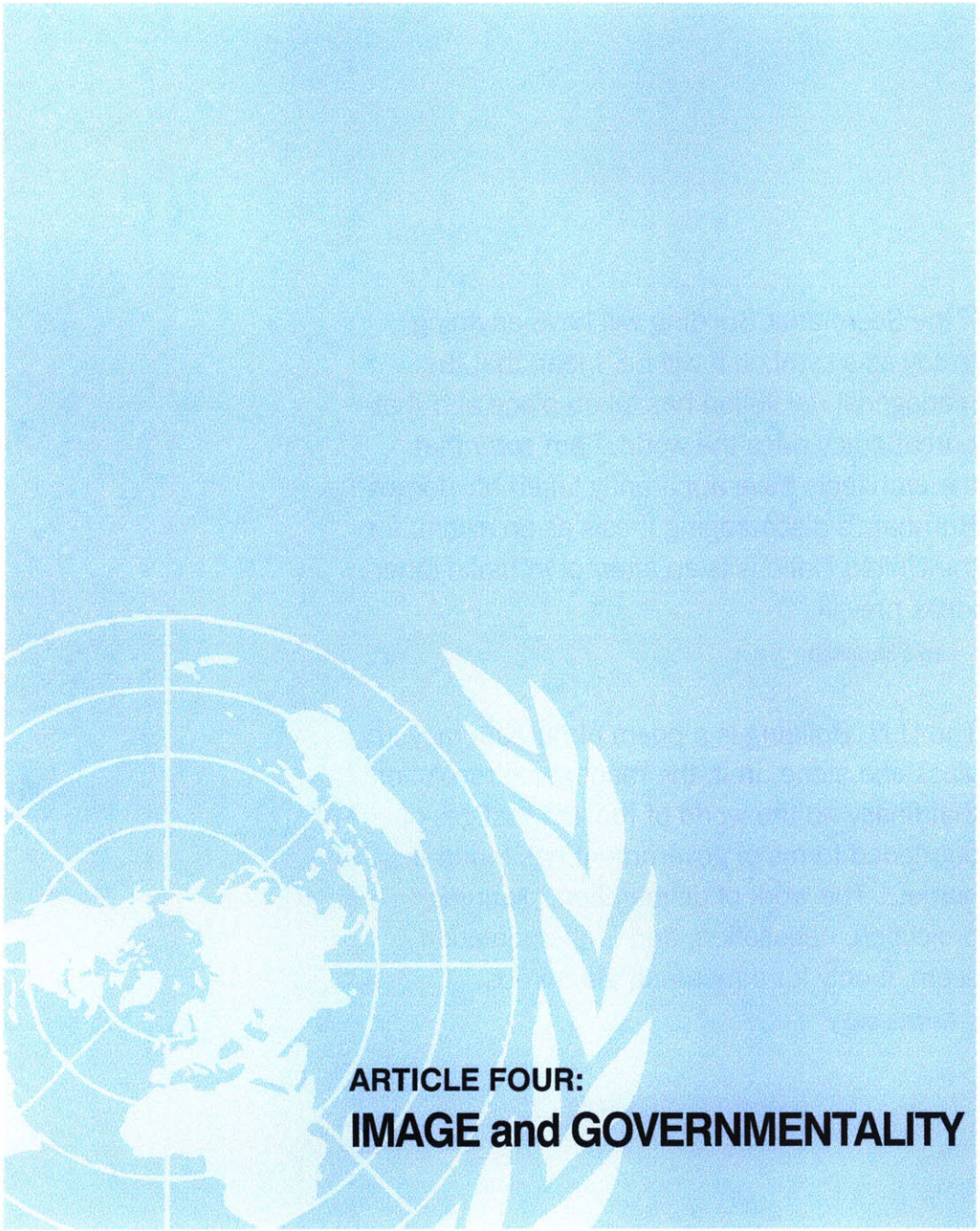


Public landscape: The project uses the sectional divides between the strips of program to create a secure but visually uninterrupted public path through the complex.

height spaces that enable public view from the outside. Rather than creating a pure surface/volume dichotomy between the new plinth landscape and the NGO bureaucracies, the cuts and folds of the project's sectional slippages brings them into close contact with each other.

From the scale of the urban-scaled site to the detail-scaled architectural conditions, this new United Nations rededicates itself to the integration of the public into its functional interior; the preceeding series of tactics attempt to establish a new sort of interface between the governmental institution and the populus it serves, especially as the UN's task is increasingly retooled towards the support of locally effective and decentralized agencies that rely on public participation.

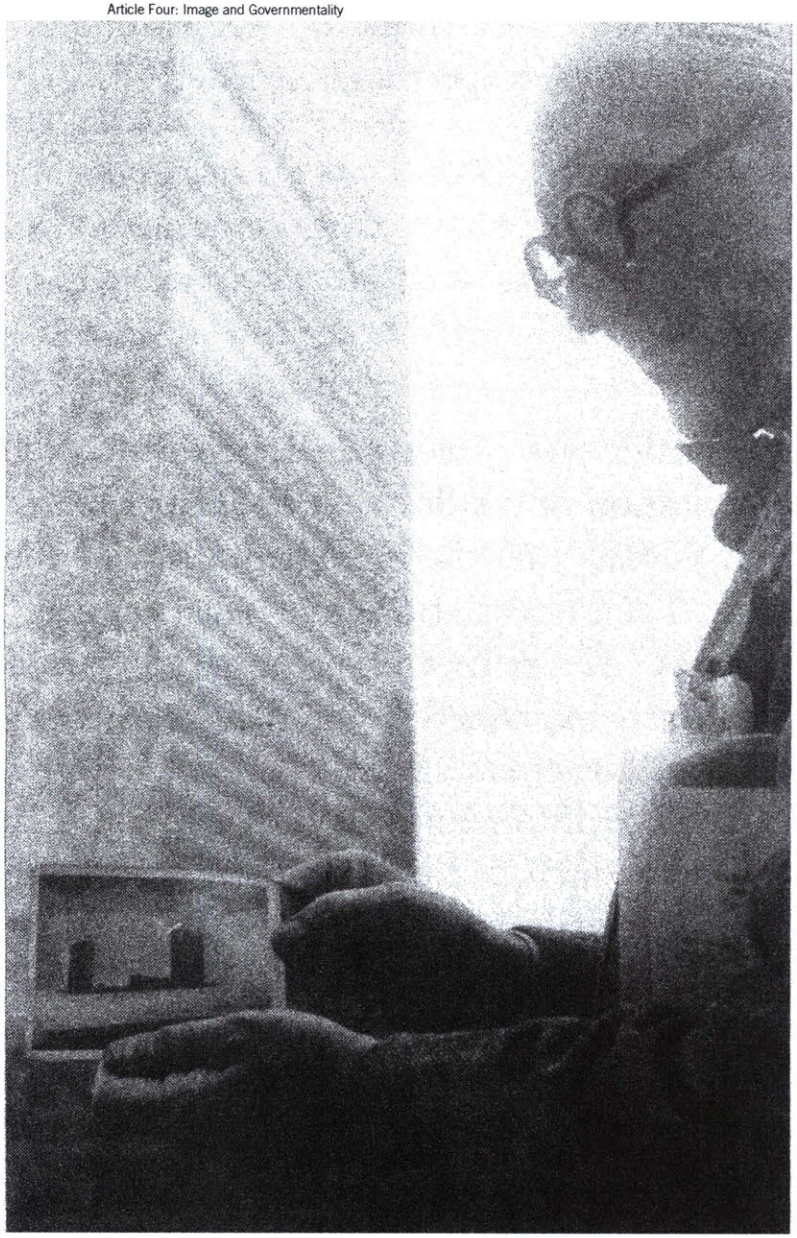




ARTICLE FOUR:
IMAGE and GOVERNMENTALITY

Acts of government find their roots in acts of political speech—the United Nations in particular is constituted not by direct engagement as much as by performative utterances. The word "jurisdiction" is a linguistic conflation of the concept of "sphere of influence" with the ability to "speak of the law"; the former reading of the word implies cartographic parceling or a sense of territorial control, while the latter reveals governmentality as an exclamatory sleight of hand. "Jurisdiction" hints at the way in which broadcast radius acts as critical bridge between performance and power, and the iconicity of the United Nations complex is a critical component in this, as a physically persuasive surrogate for the jurisdiction that the UN, as a stateless entity, ultimately lacks.

For although Le Corbusier would shudder at the thought, the UN in New York is, in the end, picturesque: not in the stylistic sense of the word but rather in its charismatic resonance—its radiance, if you will—through world media. Its image is reproduced on postage stamps and postcards, cable news and periodicals; its asymmetrical plan arrangement (an ethos intended to undermine the static axiality of the monumentality of ages past) allows it to be photographed on a towering oblique—becoming a rather fetching backdrop. Its interior, however, is where the effect is most



Le Corbusier comparing the actual Secretariat to a photograph of a model of his scheme.

If the Secretariat Building will have anything to say as a symbol, it will be, I fear, that the managerial revolution has taken place and that bureaucracy rules the world. I am sorry that the architects have apparently taken Mr. James Burnham's discouraging thesis as an axiom, for the United Nations is an attempt to make other ideas prevail.

—Lewis Mumford[1]

The U.N. Building is a poem of bureaucracy in glass and stone. In it, the managerial revolution that finally rid the world of the last vestiges of outmoded forms of government has found a home... The work of deliberation, planning, projection, negotiation, and implementation seem, if only for a moment, glamorous.

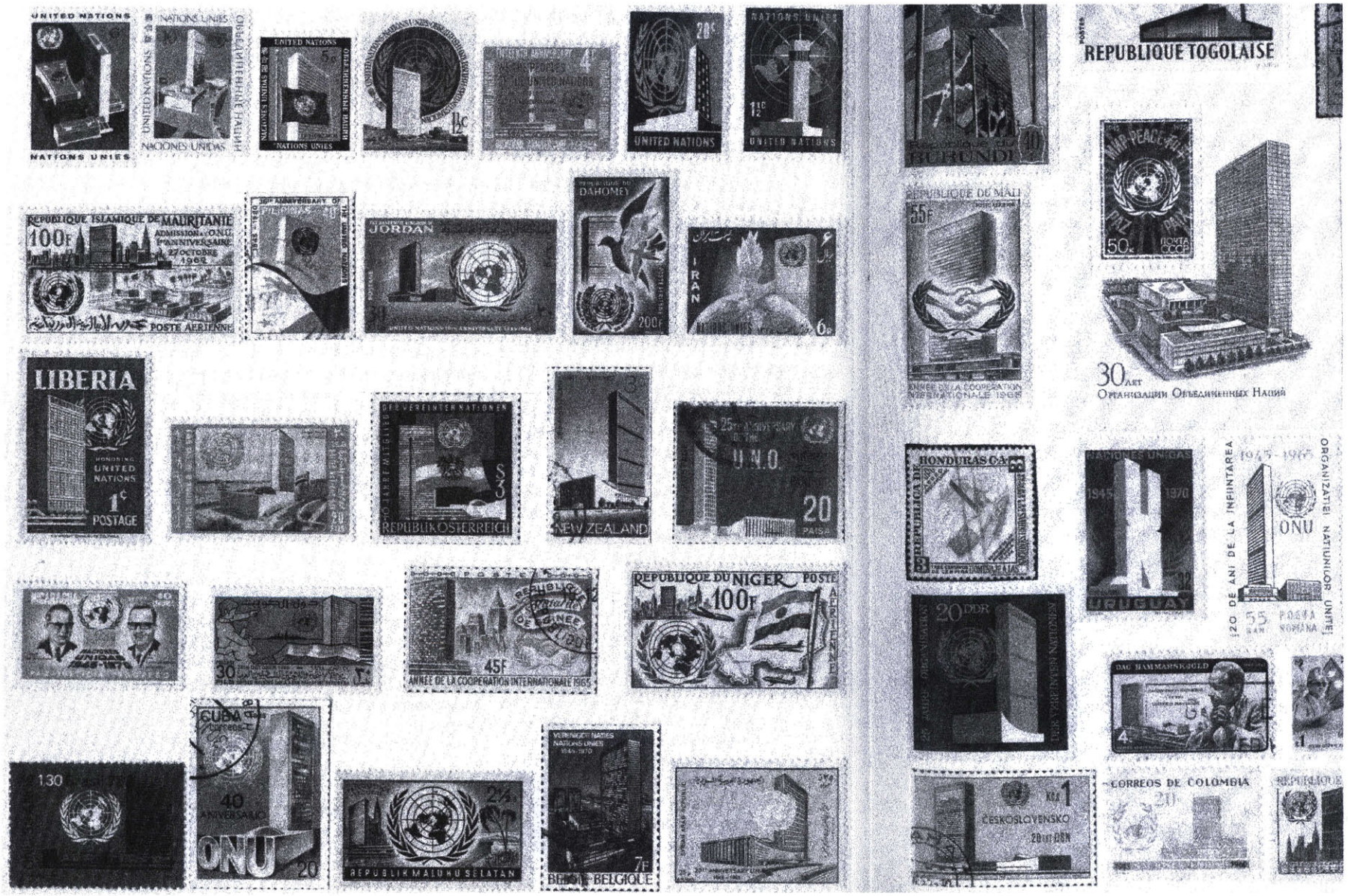
—Aaron Betsky[2]

pronounced. Architectural Forum's description of the General Assembly, as executed by Wallace Harrison and others, could not be more terminologically acute:

> He emerged with what was basically a "theater in the round." He did so for the same reason that theater managers do: for a greater sense of intimate observation. Here the delegate "actors" were to be a great crowd, 850 of them; and Harrison decided to ring them with the "eyes and ears of the world," the press and television booths that would radiate messages from this circle to the ends of the world and that could practically be accommodated in no other way. (The live audience, though welcome, was relegated to a low-ceilinged bleacher section and comfortable mezzanines.)[3]

If the hierarchies embodied in the overall complex are indicative of the organizational principles behind the United Nations, then the hierarchies General Assembly hall are indicative of its true operative powers—the law is more acted than enacted. The pilgrims of the participating public are "relegated"; it is the technology whose accommodations come first. And indeed, the interior treatment of the hall is dictated not by the aesthetics of appearance but rather concealment: as Architectural Forum notes, the walls are constituted by "a maze of wiring surrounded by a dramatic shell."[4] The General Assembly is a two-way performance: also concealed are systems of sound reproduction and recessed movie screens, allowing the hall to be transformed from the cinematic set to the cinema itself.

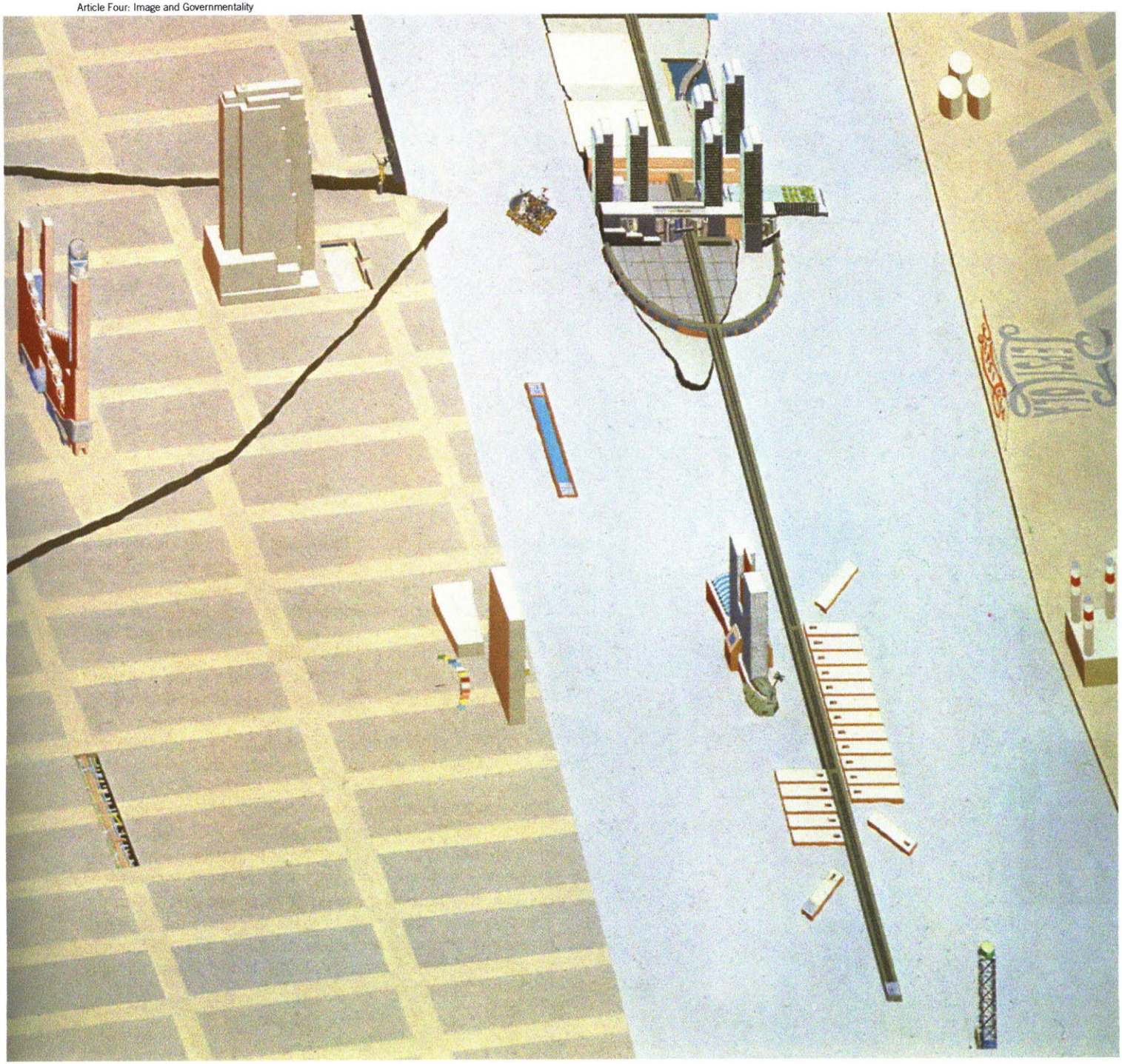
But the most critical aspect of the UN's production of image is its own architectural presence. An important document of the era was Wilfried Jenk's book on the headquarters of global institutions, which established a few precepts about international



The transmissibility of architectural form: a collection of United Nations-related postage stamps. Representing the actual function of the UN can only be done through symbolic terms: doves, flames, and the iconic building itself.

governance; foremost among these was that there should be a clear center that stands in as a visible surrogate for its ongoing work. He argues that "the contribution to the public understanding of the work of international institutions made by the mere fact of their being located at a particular place will always be of relatively secondary importance";[5] this point in many ways legitimates the idea that where such an institution is located is less important than the fact that it is located. Returning to Reinhold Martin's description of the "organizational complex", this is in keeping with the new corporatism of the 1950's on which much of the UN's design methology was based:

> The system's phantasmagorias— with built architecture also counted prominently among these— likewise constitute an indelibly real system of images, with indelibly real consequences. Far from simply staging a spectacle that screens out the structural logic of corporate power by coaxing the spectator-user into a state of passive distraction, architecture works here actively to integrate spaces and subjects into naturalized organizations, specifically to the degree that it is "reduced" to corporate image.[6]



Along with physicalizing the ambitions of the United Nations, the complex takes on other layers of meanings through the historical impetus that its construction is acting against. Throughout the debates about the housing of the UN, Mumford was among the most outspoken voices. His view of the World Centre is not of starry-eyed idealism; rather, he sees the UN in the imperative context of the atomic age. "If the menace is as overpowering and terrible as I have pictured it… our conclusion must surely be that the means of answering this challenge must also be conceived on an equally heroic scale," he exhorted in a lecture. "This is no time for small plans, for grudging half-measures, for future projects that will be indistinguishable, in either scale of purpose, from past precedents."[7] Seen as such, the UN complex is not only an emblem of itself but a statement against the possible futures that it has assigned itself to prevent.

But how, exactly, is this iconicity conferred? Early in the design process, Lewis Mumford made the argument that government was differentiated from the everyday by a scalar shift:

> There is no question in my mind but that the headquarters for the United Nations should be in the heart of a metropolis. There is also no question but that an organism that is bound to grow and to attract to is neighborhood other institutions fostering international activities should be a real city within a city, dominating its site even more conspicuously than Vatican City does. The site for such a headquarters should eventually embrace around a thousand acres, or at least not be less than the size of Central Park, which is around eight hundred and fifty acres.[8]

Mumford argued that the entire Washington Park neighborhood (then a site of immigrant tenemants) would be the "best, and the ripest (that is, the rottenest)" site for such an urban intervention. Once the waterfront Turtle Bay site was selected (shown at left as reinterpreted by Rem Koolhaas), however, a different set of tactics had to be employed. The designers consoled themselves that the site and its surrounds were good enough:

> The East River site…has sufficient scale for applying the fundamental elements of modern urbanism—sunlight, space, and verdure. Protected by the wide expanse of the East River, the site has breadth enough to be made into a living unity of strength, dignity, and harmony.

Mumford's rejoinder was predictably biting: "Those are brave words, but they unfortunately recall the observations of our first city-planning commissioners when, in 1811, they apologized for the lack of parks in their plan for Manhattan and suggested that the 'large arms of the sea' would provide the open space necessary."[9]

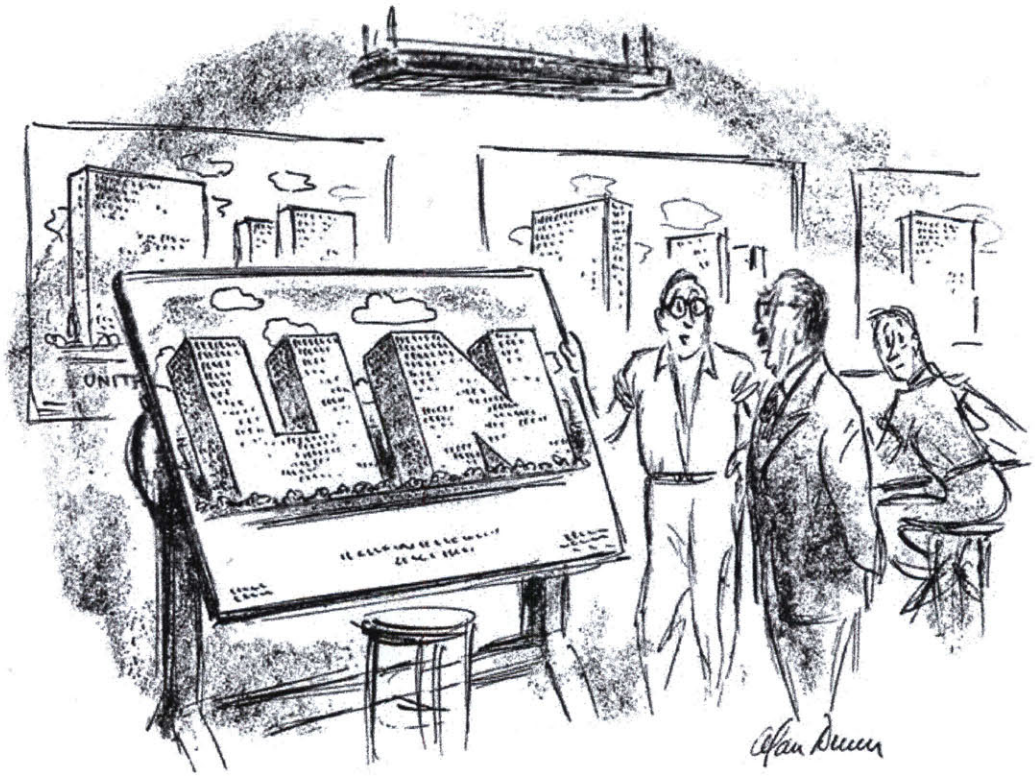
This discussion of openness is telling, because it opens up a useful reading of the UN's monumentality. On first glance, the United Nations established its presence through verticality. The Secretariat was famously called a "cliff of glass", and the sheer curtain wall was at its time an unknown presence in the city. Within a decade, however, new skyscrapers with equally dramatic curtain walls were sprouting in the skyline to the point of banality; the vertical presence of the Secretariat was no longer impressive.

Rem Koolhaas' "New Welfare Island" project. The United Nations is augmented by a counter-UN in the East River; the thinness of the iconic slab is made spatial by its doubling and the singularity of the original complex is subverted.

But that overshadowing simultaneously allowed the real nature of the UN complex to be revealed; no longer known for its verticality, its latent attributes of horizontal monumentality could be revealed.

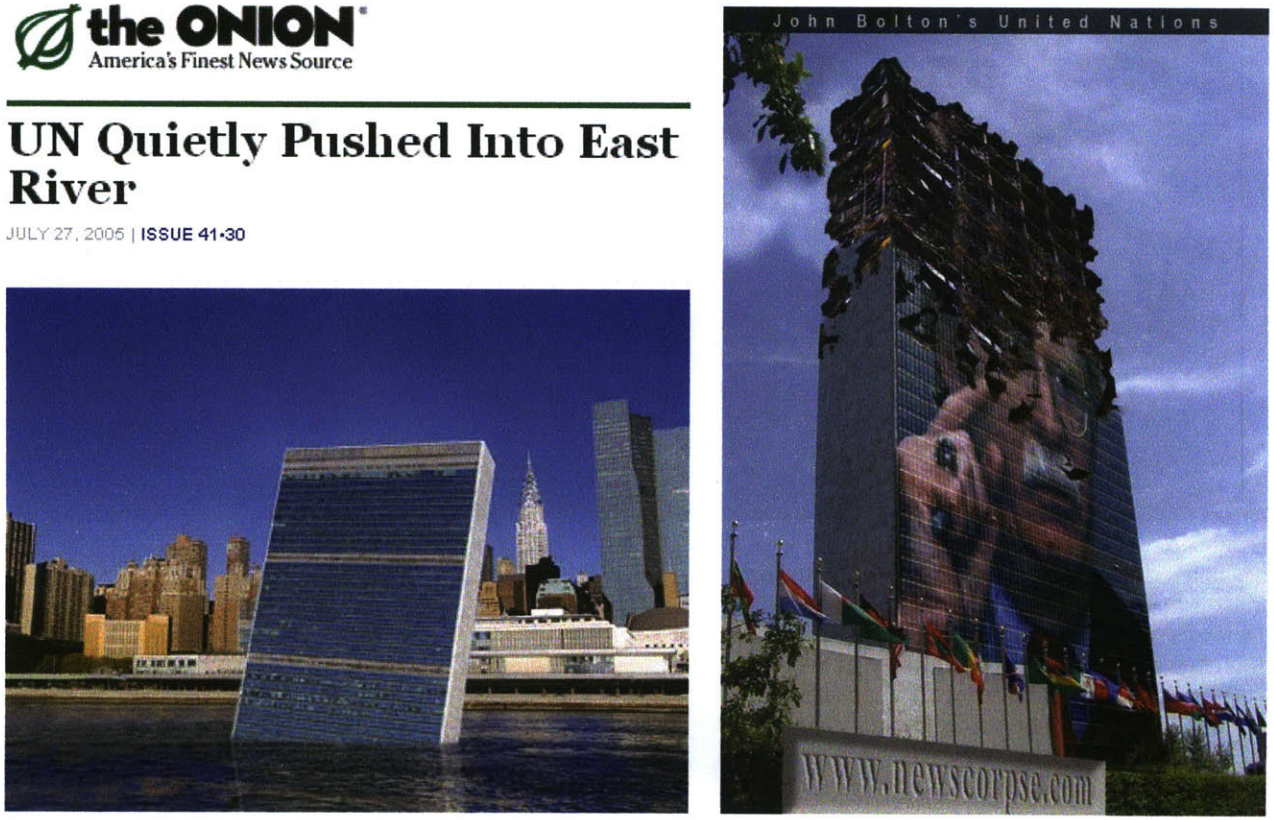
This thesis has previously dealt with the nature of the plinth as an organizational device and the column grid as a fundamental tectonic condition endemic to the site; equally important, though, is the compositional use of the megablock to promote a type of iconography that is otherwise unfamiliar in Manhattan. From the city side, the horizontal sweep of the site enables internal vistas and unobscured obliques; not conforming to the block structure of the surrounding city also enabled the termination of street axes. But the question of horizontal monumentality becomes especially apparent when examined from across the East River.

For Corbusier, one of the critical aspects of the project was the taming and regularization of the shoreline. The UN's plinth strikes a datum across the face of the city; the shadows beneath its cantilever give the sense of a city floating above the river. From 42nd to 47th street, Manhattan perimeter is given a crispness not evidenced elsewhere. Likewise, the river elevation showcases the voluptuous sweep of the General Assembly (which is something of an optical illusion; the walls curve while the roof is flat, although the effect is of a more three-dimensionally fluid structure). Most essential, though, to the iconicity of the UN, is the breadth of the Secretariat foregrounding the vertical wildness of the city behind.



"They never said what they had against it."

The literality of iconic architecture: a cartoon from the New Yorker, June 7, 1947 exposes the critical importance of the East River vista as an emblem for the larger complex.

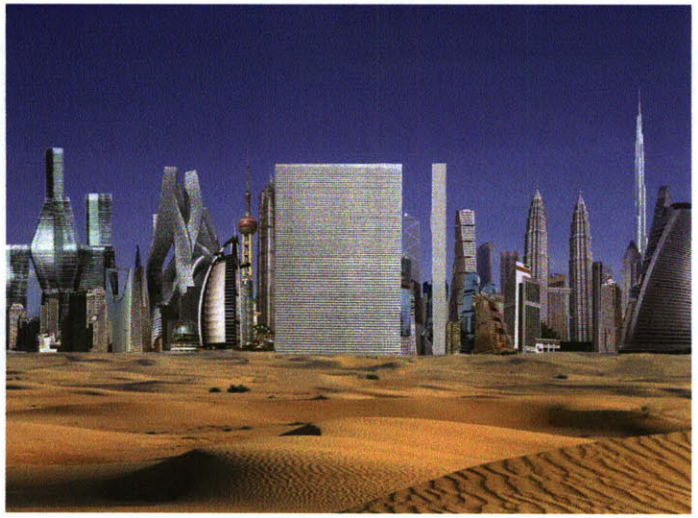


the ONION
America's Finest News Source

UN Quietly Pushed Into East River

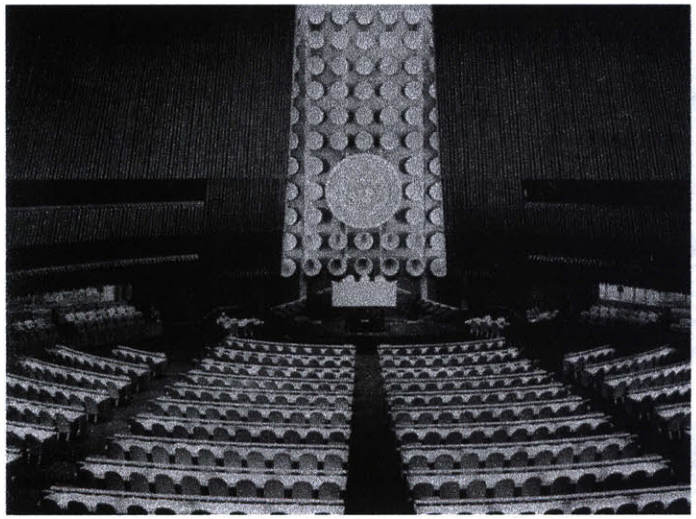
JULY 27, 2005 | **ISSUE 41•30**

Architecture as a surrogate for institutional identity. At left, the Onion's take on the UN's peripheral relationship to Manhattan. At right, a blog image responding to UN ambassador John Bolton's famous comment that "If the U.N. secretary building in New York lost 10 stories, it wouldn't make a bit of difference".



Against the vast heterogeneity of "Manhattanism", as Koolhaas terms it, the United Nations stands as a visual respite whose staid and unshowy tectonics set off the variability that grows unchecked behind it. At the edge of the water (echoed eerily by the liquid desert of Koolhaas' own "Dubai Renaissance" proposal), the remarkable block-spanning breadth of the Secretariat remains its most distinctive attribute; what had once been what Corbusier called "an event in the sky" is reframed as a non-event horizon, a constructed ground of monumental scope. This horizontality offers itself as an embedded logic of the site to be capitalized on for the UN's reconfiguration.

Peripheral horizontality in the vertical city. LEFT, the United Nations complex. RIGHT: Rem Koolhaas' Dubai Renaissance project.

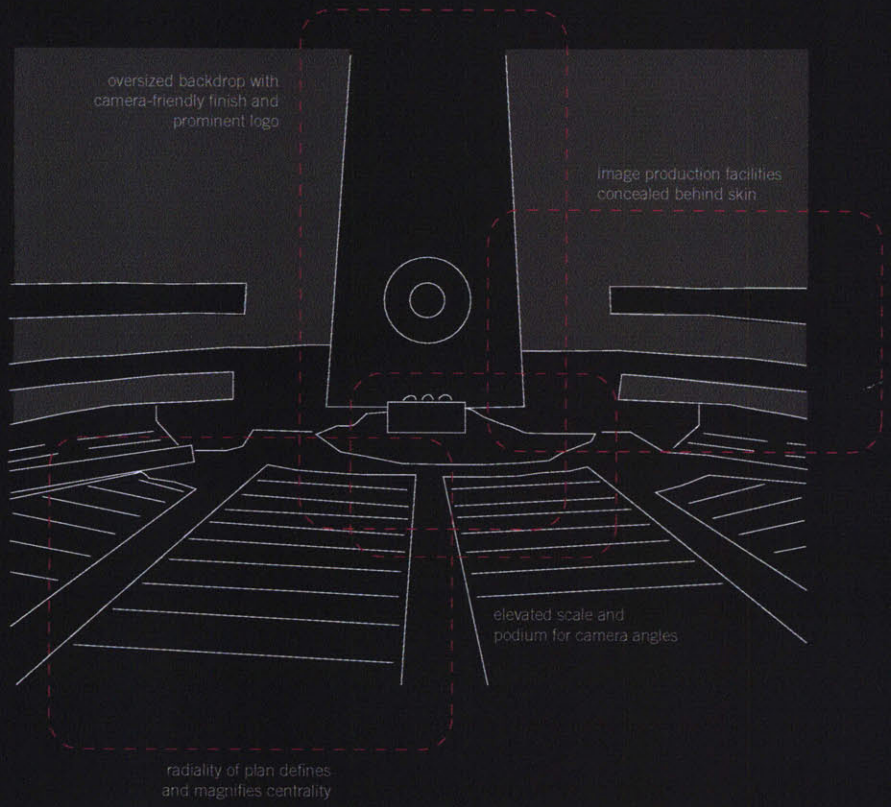


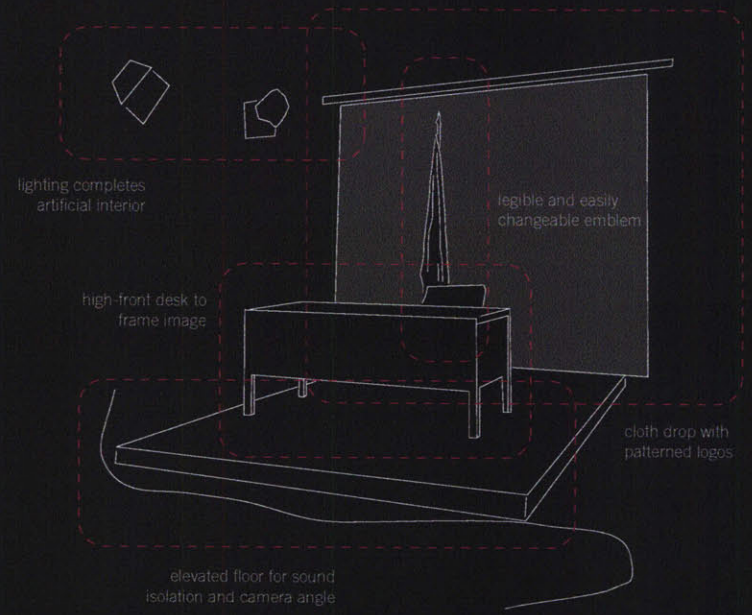
All will be held together in a flood of soft indirect light, reflected from the shallow dome, emphasized in a dramatic slot reaching to the ceiling behind the speaker, and capable of sudden intensification for television... Under the UN's shaft of light will be the technical mobilization for the hopes of the world.

—Architectural Forum editorial[10]

The UN's public interiors are machinery not for governance but for the production of governmental imagery— juris / diction in the purest sense. At left, the original background of the General Assembly, including a bank of round lights; at right, the renovated version to reduce glare for television cameras.

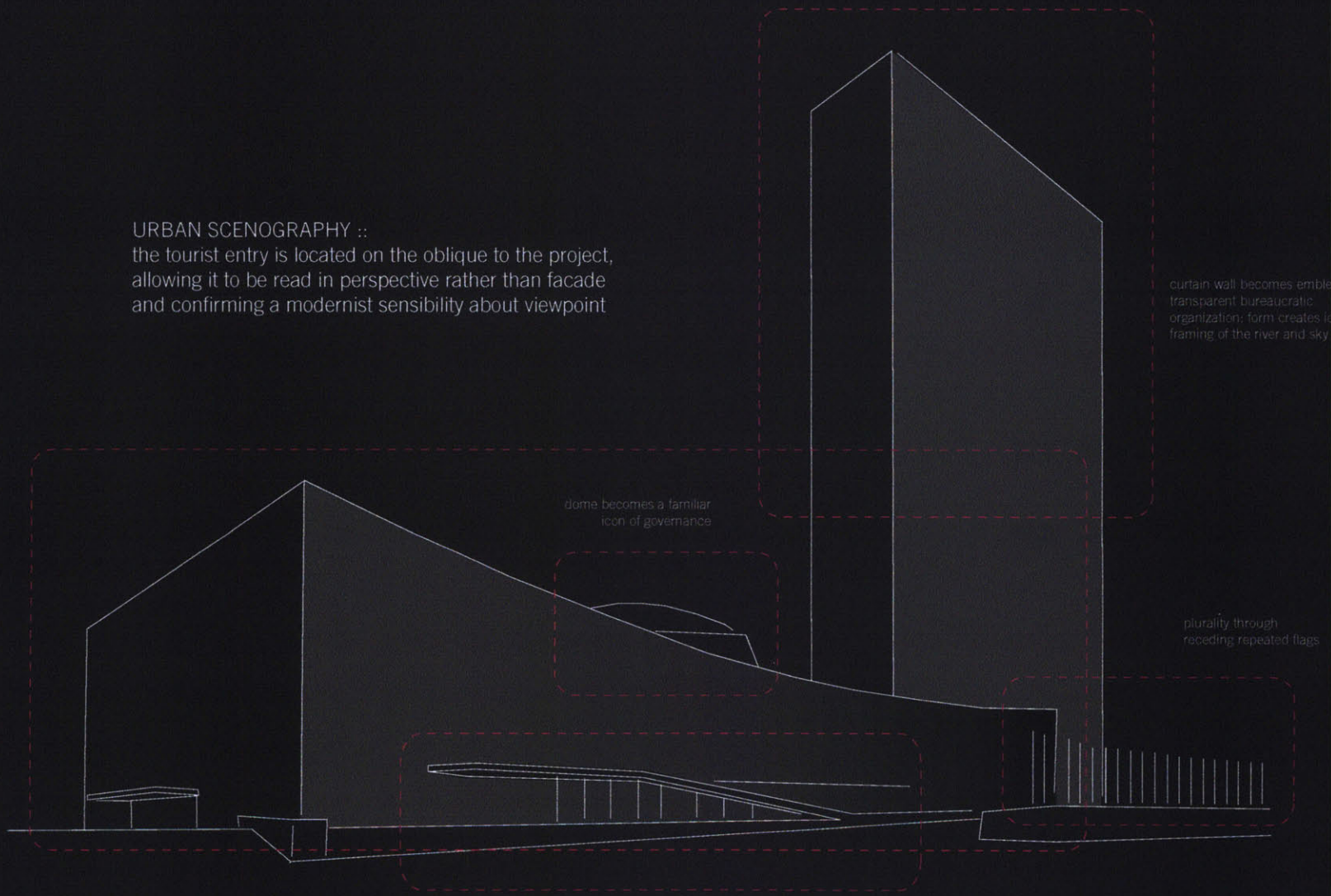
SCENOGRAPHY OF ASSEMBLY ::
the general assembly literalizes the notion of jurisdiction– "speaking the law"– by being designed specifically for televisual broadcast (the medium of modern speech acts)





PORTABLE SCENOGRAPHY ::
legitimacy can be confered by as little as a backdrop or a soundstage; government becomes a function of broadcast radius

URBAN SCENOGRAPHY ::
the tourist entry is located on the oblique to the project, allowing it to be read in perspective rather than facade and confirming a modernist sensibility about viewpoint



ICONIC IMAGE SET #1: First Avenue. The experience of most tourists is that of riding past the United Nations in a sight-seeing bus. Those that do enter still approach the project on the First Avenue oblique.

ICONIC IMAGE SET #2: The aerial view. Institutional publications and news reports repeatedly use views that capture the entire complex.

ICONIC IMAGE SET #3: The East River facade. Its location at the edge of the East River prohibits purely frontal views of the United Nations, so the view across the river stands in for a monumental facade.

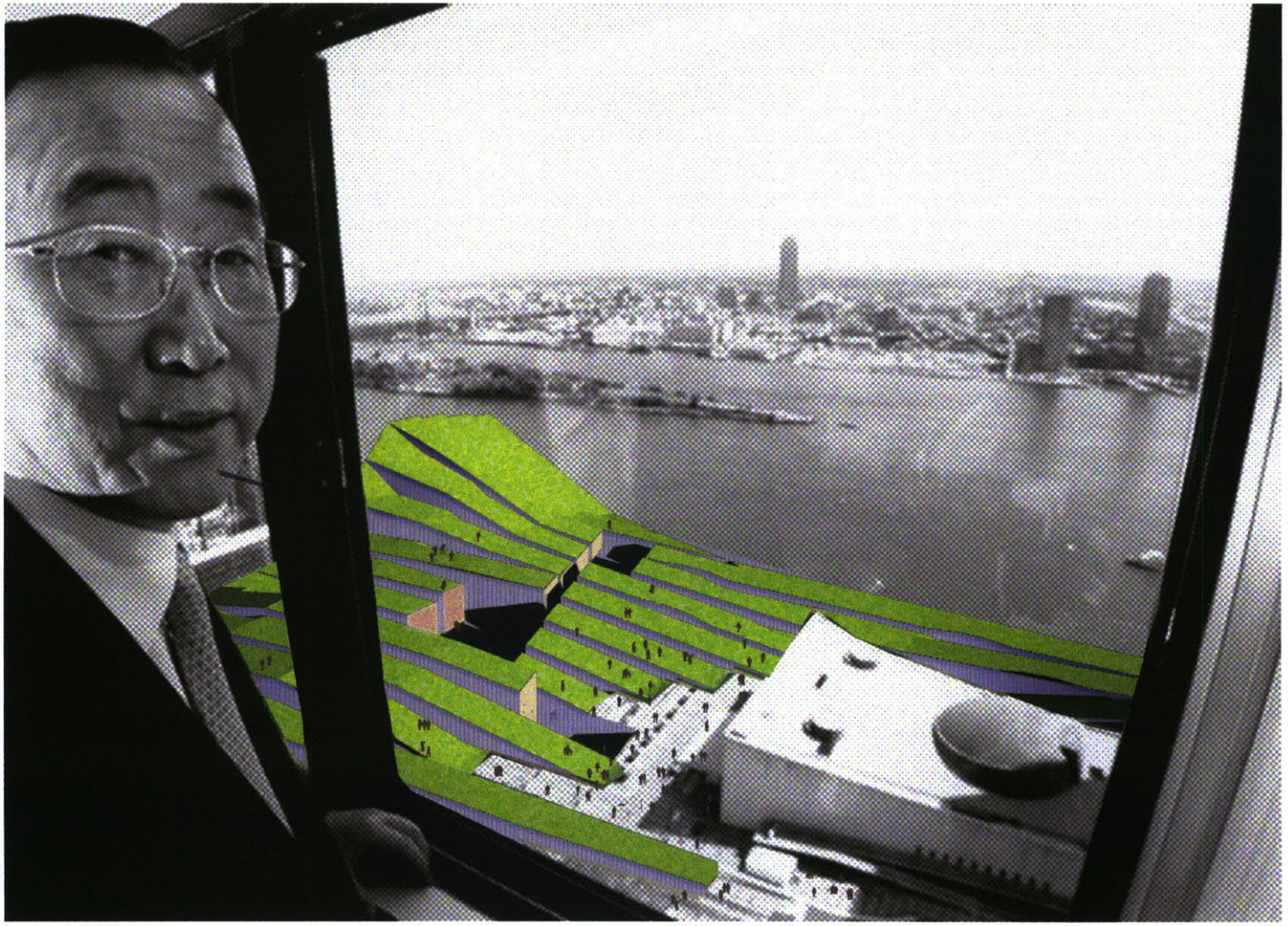
A Google image search for the UN Headquarters brings up three types of image: the First Avenue pedestrian view, the aerial view popular with institutional marketing, and the East River waterfront view. In the case of the existing United Nations, these three images are in many ways equivalent; the complex reads largely the same no matter what the angle. Its coherence, however, is also a limitation, in that it engages with the city unwillingly, always an object aloof from its context.

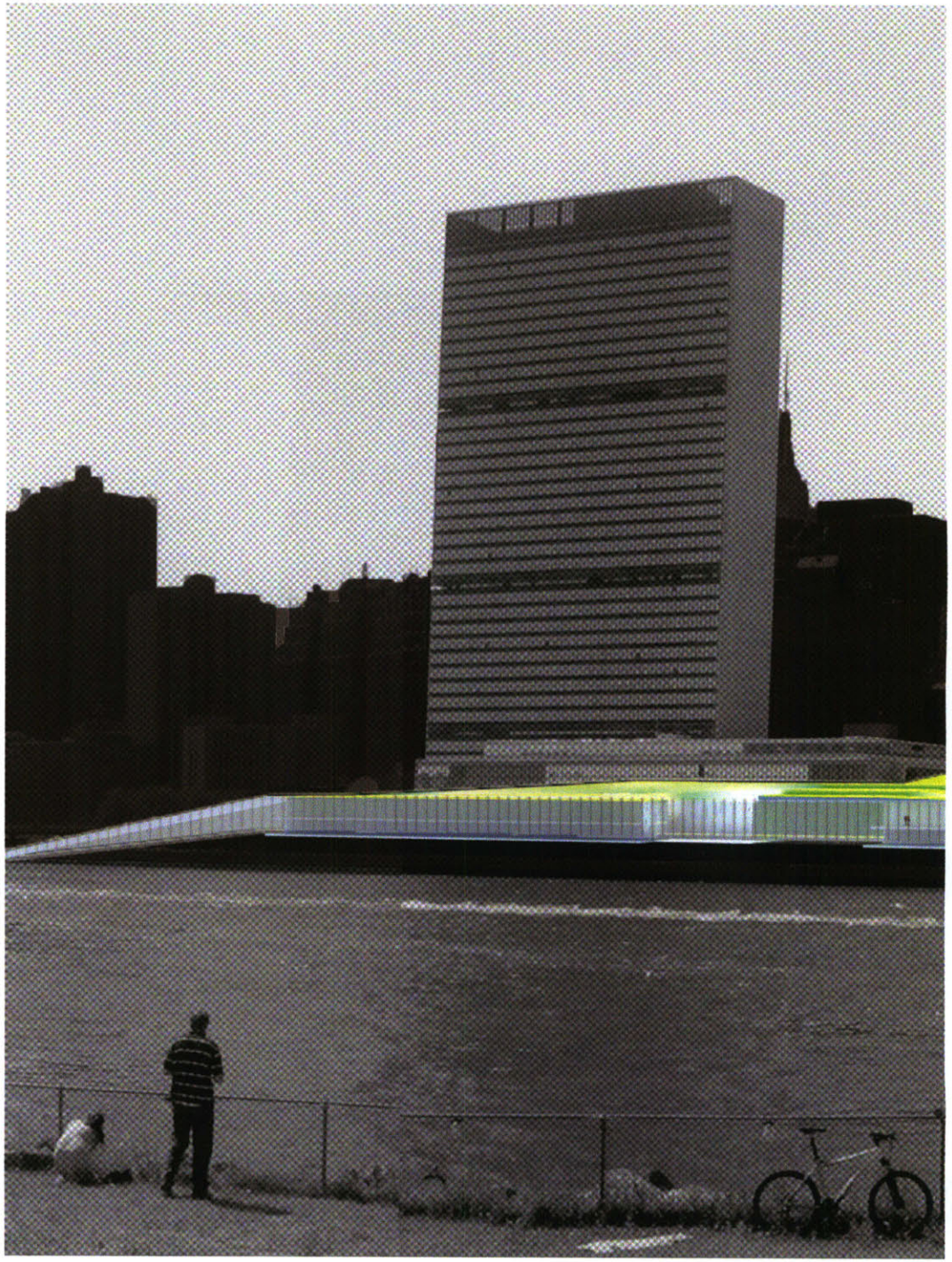
The reconfigured UN offers instead a series of readings that operate across the spectrum of image-making, from the preservationist to the provocative. The First Avenue elevation, which is by far the most personally experiential of the iconic views, is comparatively unhindered; the new topographic plinth of the reconfigured UN creates a streetwall that folds up from the base-level surface, which alters the public access to the UN complex (which currently passes through a makeshift tent) without disrupting the overall iconography of the complex. The aerial view, by contrast, offers a planometric reading of the UN's new organization; the NGO City and its internal public plazas read as legible and separate additions to the original complex.

The most active moment of reconfiguring not only the UN's functionality but its visual identity comes with the East River waterfront, which traces the edge of the context like the old plinth but allows access to the river, bringing the public riverside promenade through the site. It also offers distinct shape to the repurposed plinth; as the topography of the surface crests, the underbelly is opened up to the public view and allowing the plinth not to rest entirely in anonymity but to join the Secretariat and the General Assembly as a critical third component in the larger complex. The essential horizontality of the complex is reinforced but made more engaging and functional through the new plinth.

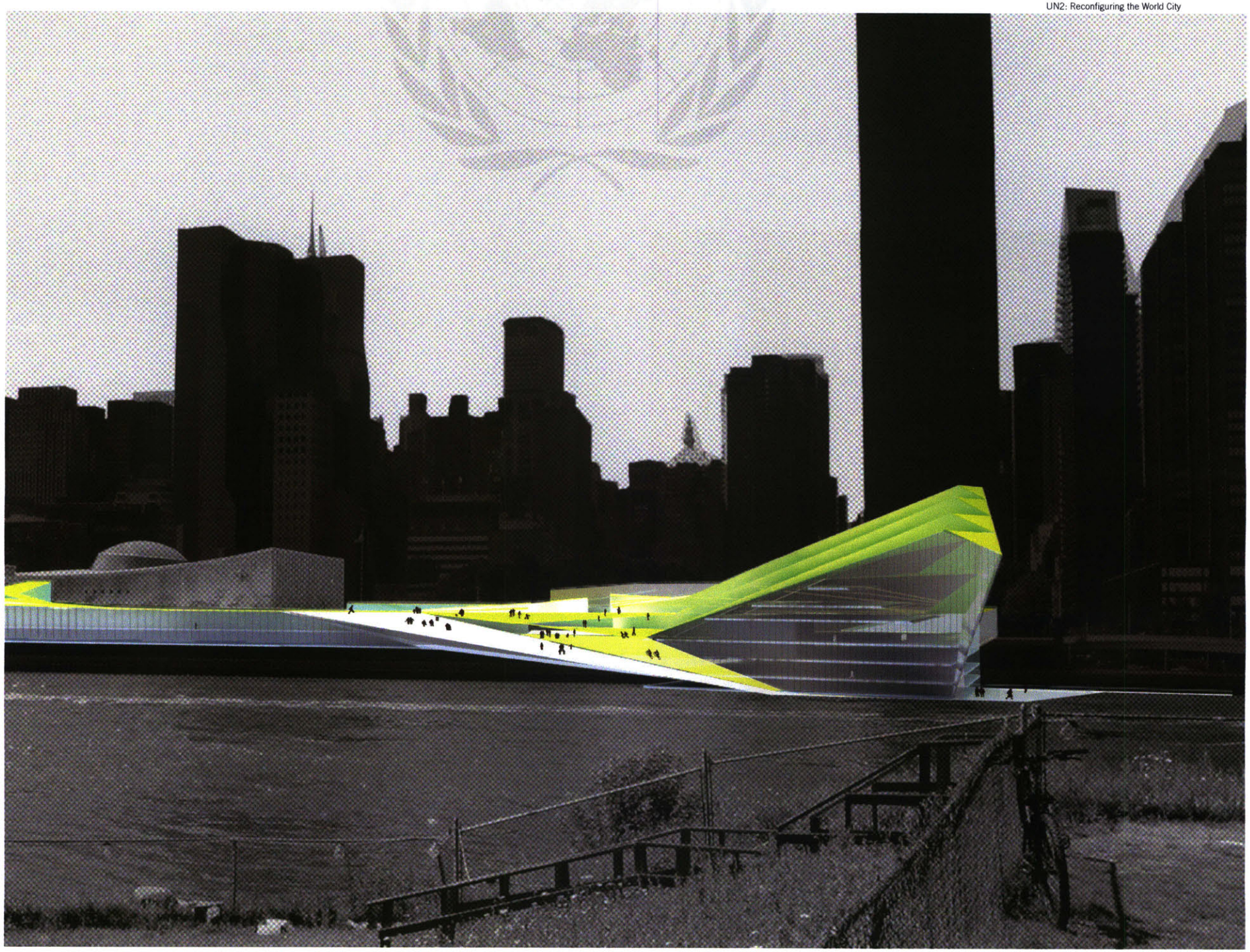
PREVIOUS SPREAD: The First Avenue facade of the reconfigured UN subtly folds out of the plinth, reconstructing the visitor access while preserving the iconic view.

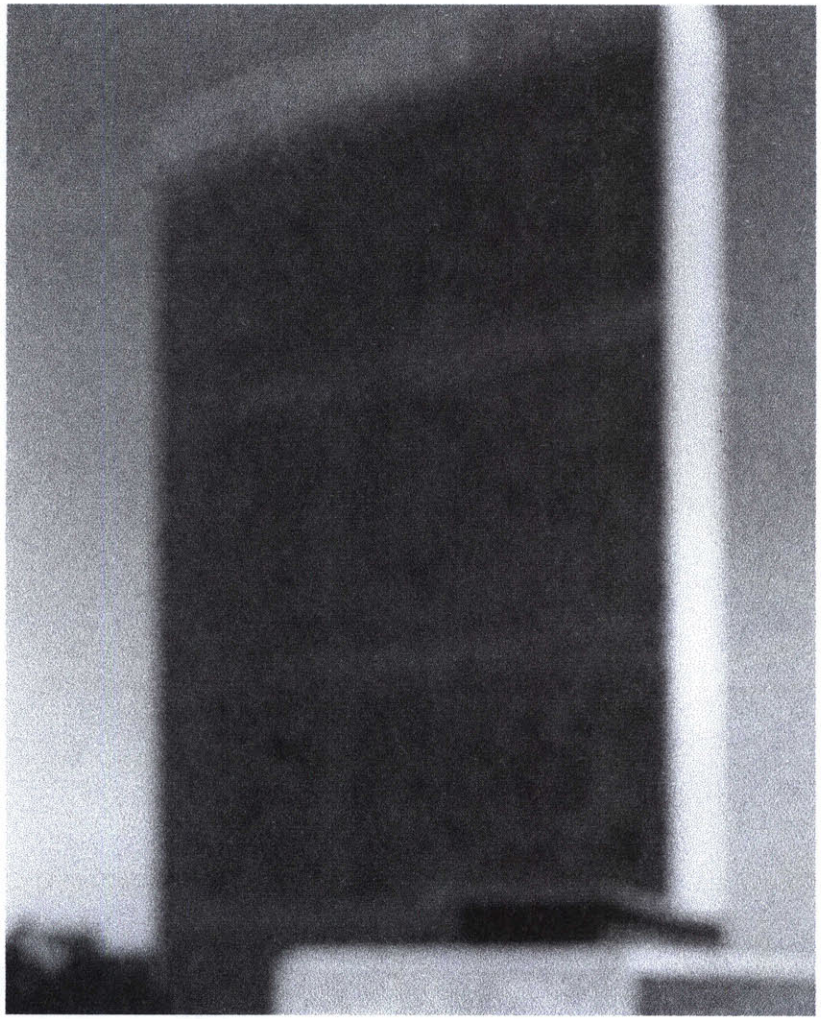
OPPOSITE: The aerial view of the UN expresses the heterogeneity and reorganization of the new complex.





The river view of the United Nations offers a revised iconic form, balancing the original complex with the new involvment of NGO's and creating a silhouette that retains the existing legibility while complementing it with a more contemporary form.





A photograph of the Secretariat by Sugimoto.

In a passage from Here is New York that now seems oddly prescient, E.B. White considers how immensely contingent the existence of this world body— and especially its iconic home— truly is:

> It used to be that the Statue of Liberty was the sign-post that proclaimed New York and translated it for all the world. Today Liberty shares the role with Death. Along the East River, from the razed slaughterhouses of Turtle Bay, as though in a race with the spectral flight of planes, men are carving out the permanent headquarters of the United Nations—the greatest housing project of them all. In its stride, New York takes on one more interior city, to shelter, this time, all governments, and to clear the slum called war... This race—this race between the destroying planes and the struggling Parliament of man—it sticks in all our heads. The city at last perfectly illustrates both the universal dilemma and the general solution, this riddle in steel and stone is at once the perfect target and the perfect demonstration of nonviolence, of racial brotherhood, this lofty target scraping the skies and meeting the destroying planes halfway, home of all people and all nations, capital of everything, housing the deliberations by which the planes are to be stayed and their errand forestalled.[11]

This indeterminate and ambiguous expression of the United Nations— similarly evoked by Sugimoto's photograph of the Secretariat building at the left— in many ways captures the deeply ingrained paradoxes of the UN and governmentality itself. The very things it was founded to prevent, crises on the world scale, are the very things that justify its existence; its creation is at the same time its own eventual downfall. It is an emblem of what Heidegger would call "ongoingness": continually recreating its own purpose, it is an institution in permanent crisis, always growing but always two steps behind its own potential, an image of the world that never entirely comes into focus.

NOTES

1. Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line: United Nations Headquarters: Buildings as Symbols", 104

2. Aaron Betsky, "Staging the Future", The UN Building, 10, 26

3. "UN General Assembly," Architectural Forum, 144

4. "UN General Assembly [preview]", Architectural Forum, 101

5. Wilfried Jenks, The Headquarters of World Institutions, 17

6. Reinhold Martin, The Organizational Compex, 4

7. Lewis Mumford, "World Centre: A Lecture", 428-429

8. Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line: United Nations Headquarters: The Ground Plan", 56

9. Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line: United Nations Headquarters: Buildings as Symbols", 102

10. "UN General Assembly [preview]", Architectural Forum, 101

11. E.B. White, Here is New York, 54-56

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