

Lynch
mimesis
Architects





Poetry

In the same way that the mindless diamond keeps
one spark of the planet's early fires
trapped forever in its net of ice,
it is not love's later heat that poetry holds,
but the atom of the love that drew it forth
from the silence: so if the bright coal of his voice
suddenly forced, like a bar-room singer's—boastful
with his own huge feeling, or drowned by violins;
but if it yield a steadier light, he knows
the pure verse, when it finally comes, will sound
like a mountain spring, anonymous and serene.
beneath the blue oblivious sky, the water
sings of nothing, not your name, not mine.

Antonio Machado (translated by Don Paterson)

mimesis reveals the mystery of order as a tension between its potential
and actual existence

Dalibor Veselý, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation:
The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production*

The young poet... can attain a perfection without much training and experience—a
phenomenon hardly matched in painting, sculpture or architecture... *Mnemosyne*, the
mother of the muses, is directly transformed into memory, and the poet's means to
achieve the transformation is rhythm... a poem, no matter how long it existed as a living
spoken word... will eventually be 'made'... written down and transformed into a tangible
thing... because remembrance and the gift of recollection, from which all desire for
imperishability springs, need tangible things to remind them, lest they perish themselves.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

The metaphor with which I have been concerned with is more extended—a double one—in
that it involves three terms, a body is like a building and the building in turn is like the world.

Joseph Rykwert, *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture*

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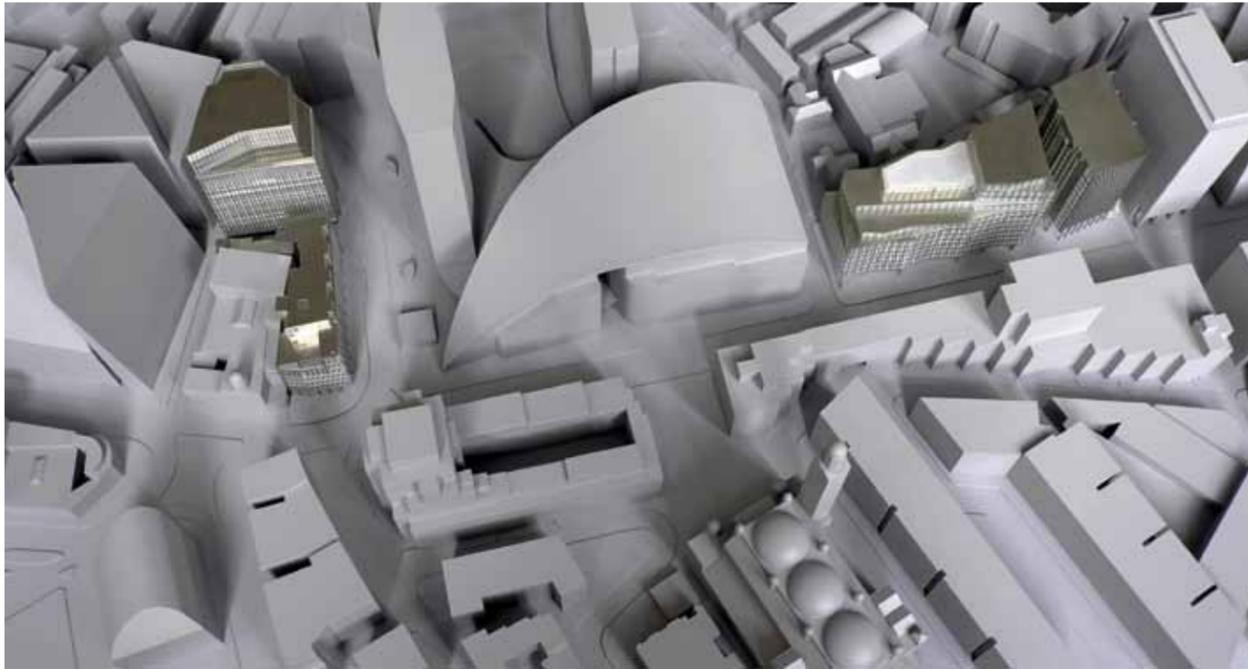
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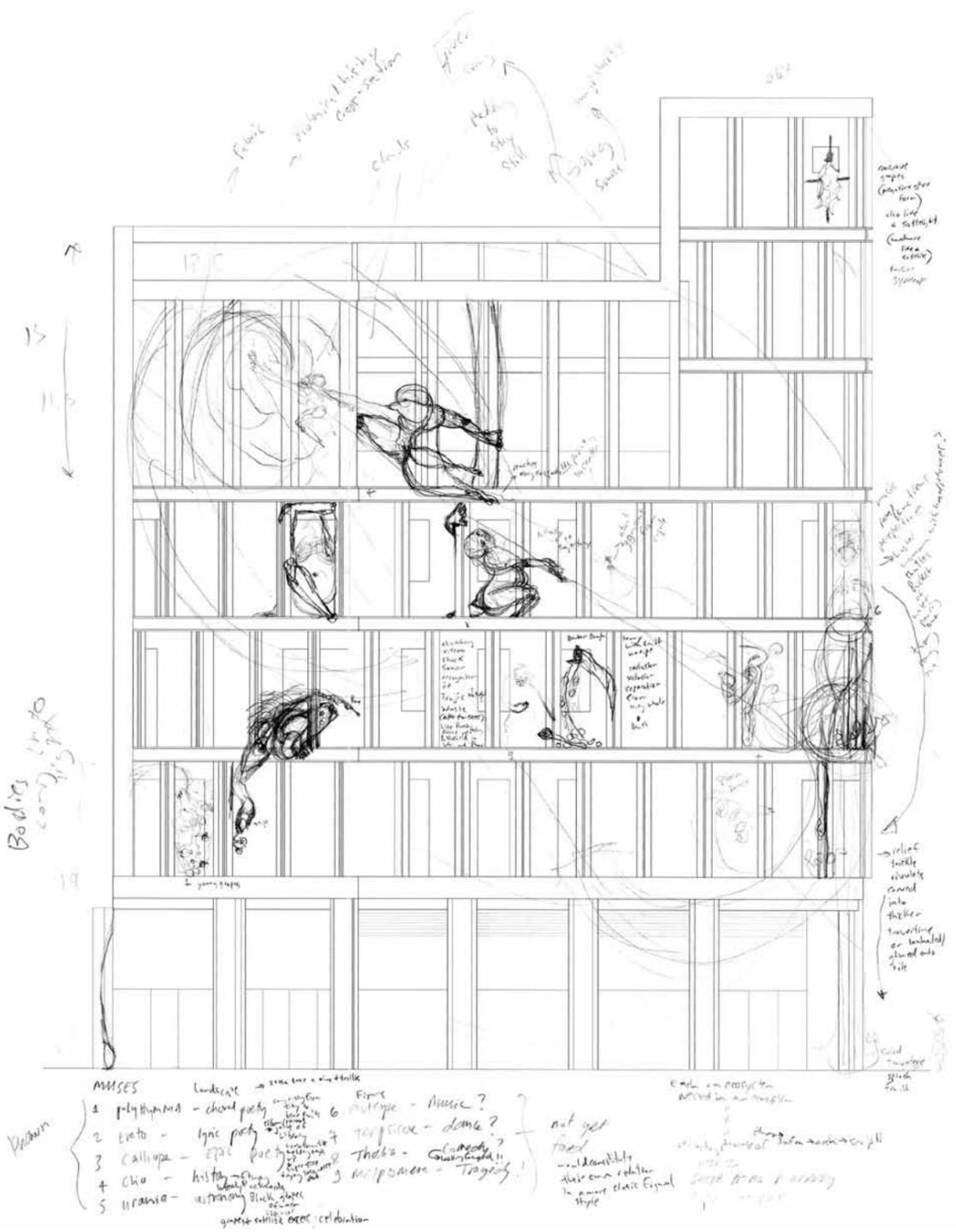
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Civic Depth
Peter Carl









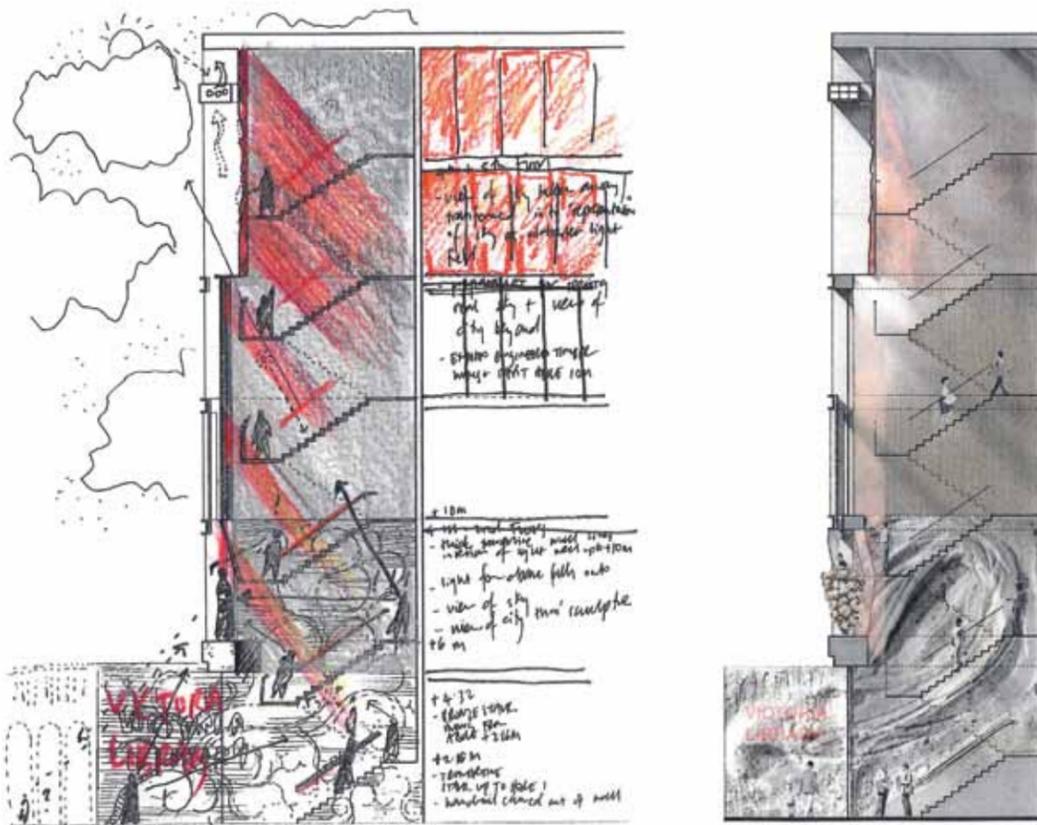
Everyone is generally in favour of 'Public Space', but it is not well understood. It tends to connote crowds going about their business or relaxing, very occasionally for protest (eg Occupy). These spaces comprise plateaux of granite, parks, streets, shopping malls, transport arrival halls (the last two often combined). Under these conditions, the public is seen as aggregates of individuals, exercising their freedom. To be sure, there is much of life that conforms to this vision of mass culture, mass consumerism, and so forth. However, the more this is the case, the more distant is this conception of public space from the political and ceremonial agora, forum or piazza, to which present-day 'public space' is often compared. We should distinguish between the crowd and the public, reserving 'public' for situations with political import.

It is common to oppose 'public' with 'private'; and the use of figure-field plans by architects and planners suggests that public is outdoors and private indoors. Accordingly, urban life is often wrongly understood to prevail between these two modalities. In fact, there is very little of a city that is purely private—perhaps the domestic loo. This is even truer of the cities of less developed countries. We should think in terms of a spectrum of public situations that penetrates the whole of urban life. Firstly, domestic affairs should not be thought as a refuge from urban conditions, but part of them. Beyond family politics (never simple), we meet our neighbours in living rooms, kitchens, doorways, yards and streets. At a next level of public meeting, we encounter friends, colleagues and new acquaintances at pubs or cafes, at clubs and associations and at places of work (which would range from hair-salon gossip through shop floors and offices to board rooms). At the most ceremonial level—therefore the most profound in terms of civic self-understanding, at least potentially—would fall law courts, parliaments and religious settings. When they are not simply flows of anonymous individuals commuting or shopping (lost in their mobile phones), crowds offer ephemeral moments of intensity—rallies, marches, sit-ins, riots and events like football matches or New Year's fireworks. However, it is the deeper institutional structure of public involvements that accounts for the persistent civic ethos. This ethos is not the wandering and relaxing under blue skies favoured in the renderings of 'public space' by architects and developers but proper involvements: conflict, negotiation, accommodation, collaboration.

It is therefore necessary to rethink 'public space' as a continuity of different settings; and rather than the bald distinction between private and public, we should think in terms of an urban depth. This is most obvious in the understanding of street, and in particular the High Street. Instead of thinking of it as a canyon between facades, filled with vehicles and crowds, we should imagine it as part of the institutional order of the city, as the seam between the depth of what lies behind the facades. This depth is marked by narrow streets and courtyards, which serve the diversity of lower-rent activities such as ateliers, clinics, educational establishments, libraries and archives, galleries, travel agents, eateries, speciality shops, churches, mosques, synagogues, dwellings, the semi-legal entities and so forth. These are also the settings whose architecture entertains happy and unhappy accidents, as well as material and spatial phenomena that tend toward gardens (there is more 'garden' in Paddington Station than in the lawn of the average housing-estate). On this depth-order a proper urban life depends, meaning a proper spectrum between social life, commercial affairs, political and legal debate and opportunities for reflection.

'Reflection' may seem to be a fragile or even elitist concern. Aristotle was the first and is still one of the few to ask what is the ultimate purpose of a city (not simply a place for transaction of goods and prevention of crime). He argues that a city grants the possibility of profound understanding of one's collective place in reality. The rites and ceremonies, which persisted until quite recently, accomplished the same thing, reconciling history with the cosmic conditions. Aristotle elevates this kind of insight, via tragic drama, to philosophical contemplation; but this is only the most articulate end of a spectrum that has its origins in the primordial spatiality of the civic topography.

Facade drawing of Victoria Street Library by Lynch Architects with iconographic drawings of sculptures of the 9 Muses by Hillary Koob-Sassen



This depth-order is, at present, virtually powerless against the monofunctional developments ("mixed-use" is generally a euphemism for shops) and their wind-blown plazas. The fuss about high-rise proliferation in London is less about the banality of translucent phallos, an aesthetic problem, than it is about the loss of the depth-structure that gives proper place to, and therefore empowers, the manifold activities too easily generalised as SME's and affordable housing. Their inclusion in the spatial order of a city is a civic responsibility, for which there doesn't appear to be any institution capable of understanding, preserving or cultivating it, despite the advent of 'localism'. Accordingly, it is wholly commendable to see at Victoria Street this sort of understanding emerging from the initiative of Westminster Council, the developer Land Securities, the architect, Patrick Lynch, and beautifully captured in the photographs of David Grandorge.

The Victoria Street designs of Lynch Architects develop this depth both horizontally and vertically. Along the ground, the proposition establishes sequences of 'urban rooms' that penetrate the blocks and subtly adjust the decorum of public life from the crowd of the relatively neutral (and traffic dominated) Victoria Street to settings that acquire their character from the more differentiated block interiors. In this way such institutions as Westminster City School attain a presence upon Victoria Street. These mediating sequences are often oriented about garden metaphors, such as the forest photographs of Rut Blees-Luxemburg that appear as if engraved into concrete windows and develop analogies with shadows and an arcade. Particularly when illuminated at night, the setting suggests conditions propitious for the sort of urban chthonic reverie evoked in Max Klinger's etchings, *A Glove*, from late nineteenth-century Vienna.

Victoria Street Library sections through the staircase

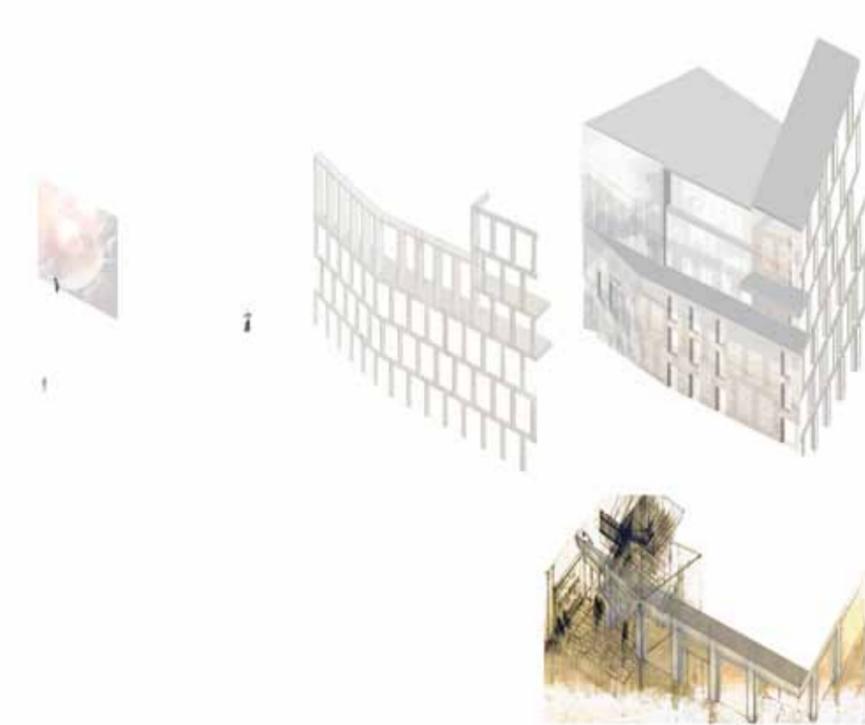


Too often a simple by-product of systematic construction techniques, the rhythmic order of the edifices registers the movements of the sun both daily and seasonally (not only tempering solar gain but also providing conduits allowing the buildings to breathe). Rhythmic spatiality is, of course, one of the defining characteristics of architecture; but its meaning veers between the extremes of expediency and ritual. All aspects of ritual—speech, sound, movement and gesture, spatial articulation, ornament—are marked by rhythm, which in turn helps to situate the time-out-of-time of the rites within the deeper temporalities of origins and natural cycles. If we are no longer in the presence of rites at Victoria Street, and only the intimation of drama tragic or comic, there remains the fundamental reciprocity between volatile history and the primordial conditions to which we are also obliged. We encounter in Victoria Street a spectrum of social decorum which hides some of the darker shades of civic life evoked, for example, in Aragon's *Paris Peasant*; however, the attunement to metaphor in the design provides a context for reflection that is more profound than its neighbours' apparently more 'exciting' forms, hallucinatory glass and opulent capitalism.

Indeed Lynch Architects' scheme finds itself carving a properly civic order out of its more banal and noisy counterform. Not surprisingly, the nineteenth century topography—even including its transport and drainage networks—provides a more congenial reference to the full richness of a civic order than do the nominally imposing edifices more recently completed. The Lynch scheme's mediating sequences reach into the still-existing parts of the earlier topography in order to capture its analogical aspects, not for the sake of 'history' as such. As a result, the scheme is both more inclusive socially and also able to draw upon the earlier order's metaphoricality of earth in the extensive brick walls, the ornament and the light which pools within dark and hidden courtyards (in contrast to the uniformly glazed, maximum footfall 'transparency' favoured by capitalism's anxiety to secure returns by dressing itself in Scheerbart's expressionist crystal).

Consequently, and as against the neurotic futurism of its neighbours, the Lynch schemes supports a greater range of temporalities. This is particularly true of the western part of the street, and their two buildings that form part of the 'Nova' development, whose residences form a corner addressing Bressenden Place to the east; the grand undercroft of a new office building to the north; and, on Victoria Street, cradle a civic library adjacent to the existing Victoria Palace Theatre. The vertical topography of this library begins in the foyer with a stair

Victoria Street Library 1/50 scale bas relief sculptural models in travertine and alabaster by Hilary Koob-Sassen for the base and top of the staircase

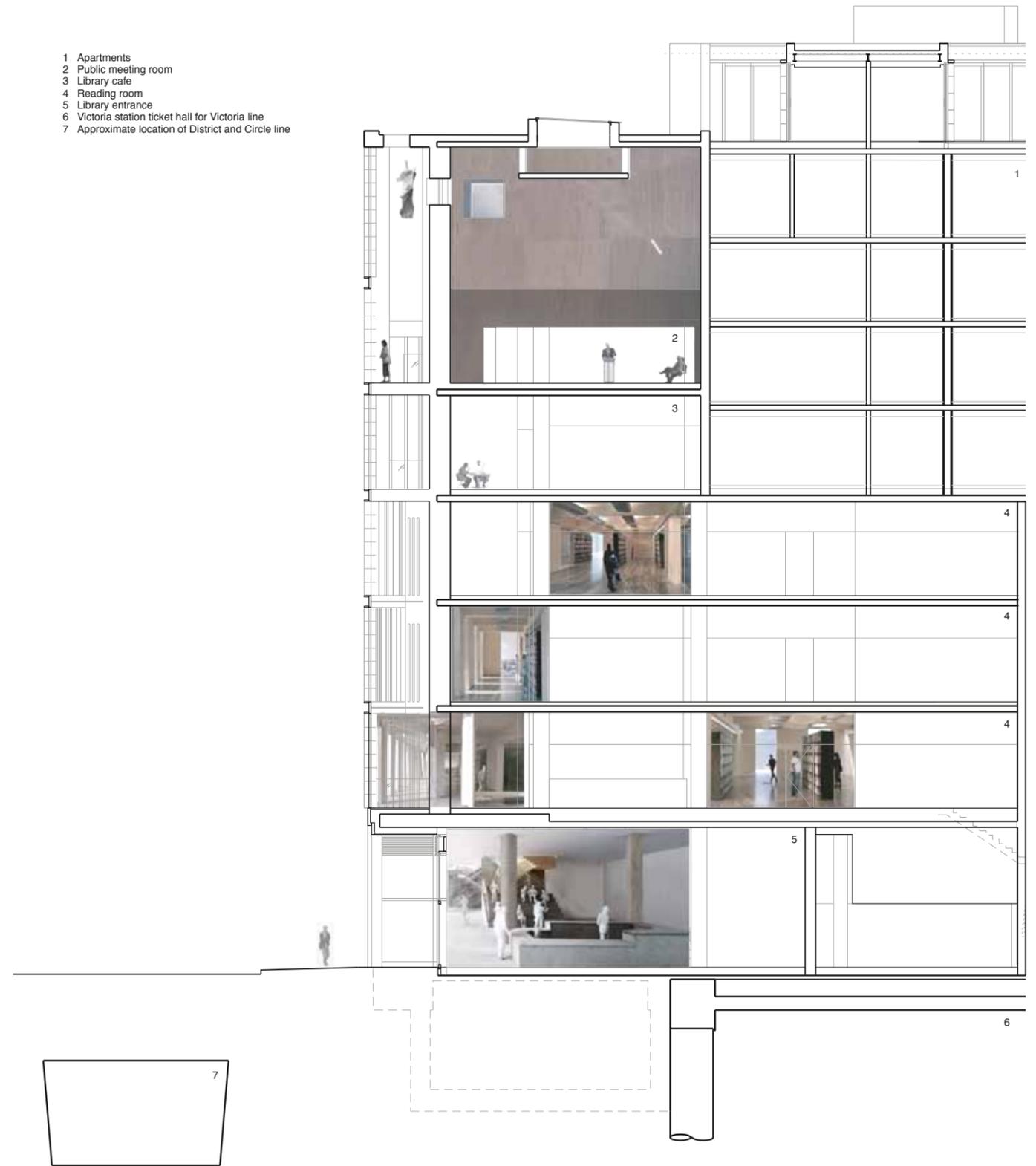


that doubles as amphitheatre-seating, complementing the chthonic reverie of the theatre next door and Victoria Station across the street with an explicit transformation of the glass wall into a *scenae frons* for actual performances. Hilary Koob-Sassen ornaments the ascent past the book stacks (memory) with bas relief sculpture that mediates between underground infrastructure and the theme of The Muses (knowledge, skill, the arts—diverse aspects of culture that are housed in a library). At the apex of the ascent one arrives at a species of celestial cave, suitable for use as a reading-room, dining room or civic meeting room. The room therefore embodies the discursive—social, political—and reflective possibilities of the scheme. Just as it receives the light in its dignified proportions and materiality and delivers it to the table, so reciprocally is the inhabitant granted views which summarise the civic horizon of London: to Victoria Station (southwest), to the River Thames (south), to Westminster Cathedral (southeast), to Buckingham Palace (north); to Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament (east).

Above
Victoria Street Library exploded axonometric drawing showing the various layers of the south facade

Opposite
Victoria Street Library section south–north

- 1 Apartments
- 2 Public meeting room
- 3 Library cafe
- 4 Reading room
- 5 Library entrance
- 6 Victoria station ticket hall for Victoria line
- 7 Approximate location of District and Circle line



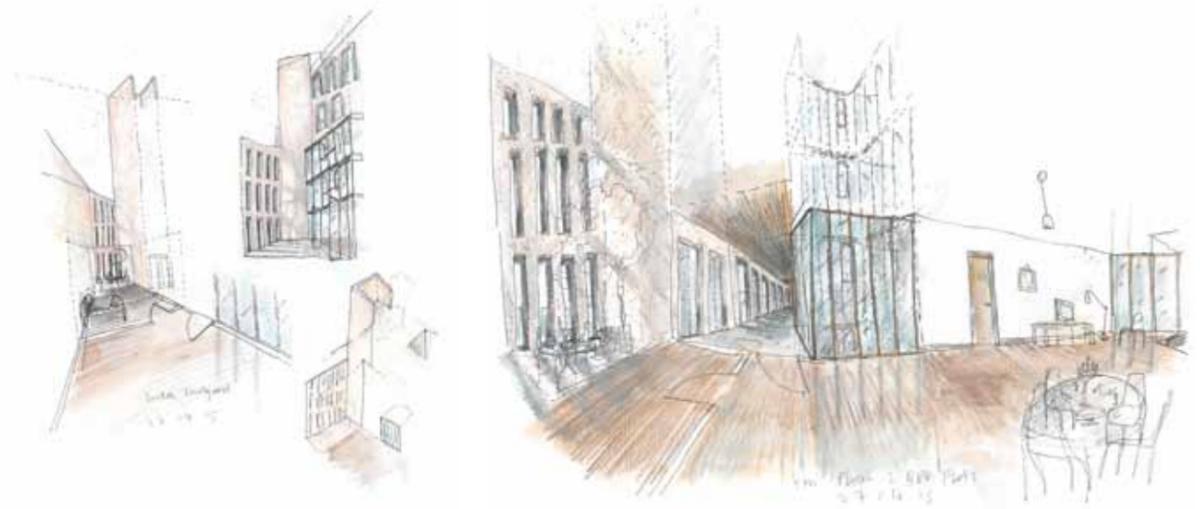




Above
Photographs of Inhabitable Models,
Lynch Architects 1:3 scale model of
Victoria Library, "Common Ground",
Venice Architecture Biennale, 2012

Opposite
Collage showing southeast corner of
Victoria library, housing and offices





Opposite
Study collage of Victoria Street Library
and housing with Nova East office building
behind

Above
Sketches of housing courtyards sat behind
Victoria Street Library

