



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Chapter 5

Design Discourse



AGORA

Transition through information to memory.

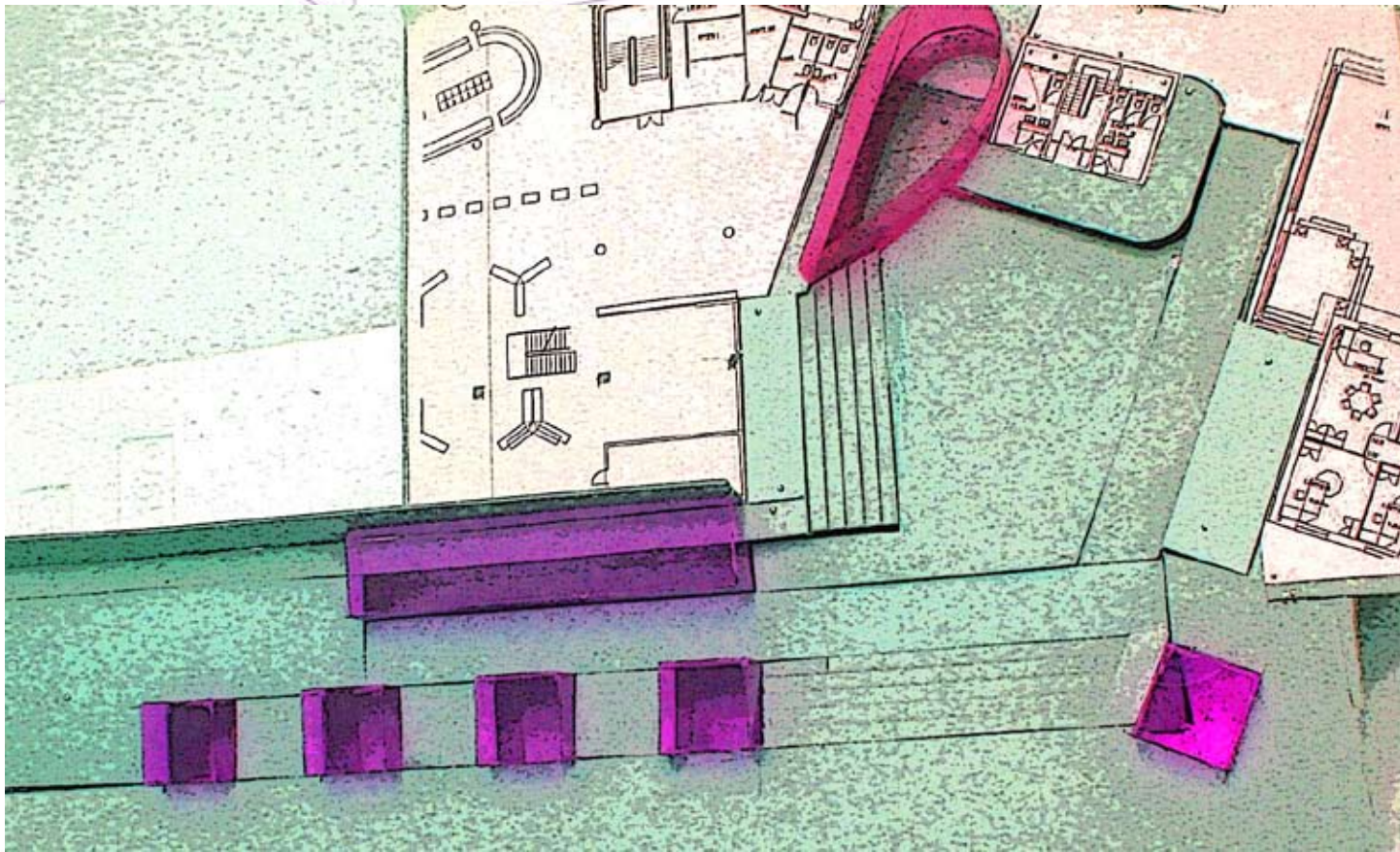


Figure 5.1: Conceptual Site development - June 2008

5.1 Introduction

The concept of an Agora has disappeared from our modern frame of reference. Instead of intellectual conversations challenging the thoughts and ideas of individuals, many public interactions happen around commercial activities where the masses become a sea of conformity. The University is a place for sharing and challenging of accepted ideas and for the subsequent generation of new information. The creation of an Agora, at the heart of the main campus of the University of Pretoria, has this concept as its goal.

Information is the main function of the Agora, the disseminating and gathering thereof to gain knowledge and create memory. The traditional static mountain of information is established in the Library right next to the space, and it serves a definite purpose. However, information is still hidden within the walls of the building, and a majority of the people on campus walk past this static mountain of information without noticing. Evoking the search

for additional information will extend existing knowledge and in so doing support the use of the Library.

The activation of the site to introduce new information to its users involves accidental contact from a completely different source. The Agora space will remain constant, as well as the medium (sound and digital); however any faculty can use the Agora as a platform to disseminate their information, thereby exposing it to the majority of the users on campus.

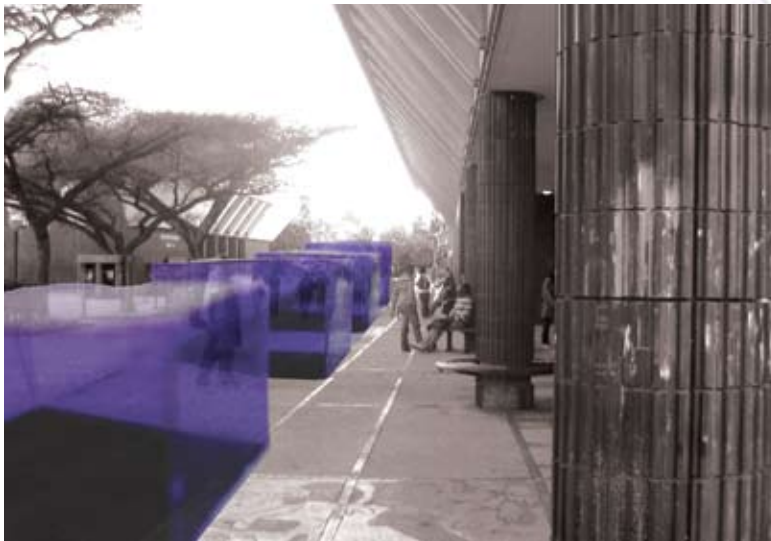


Figure 5.2: Conceptual Site development: interrupting the journey of the user with information

5.2 Ground Floor Level

Hidden underground and within an alternative interior space, the Agora announces its presence on site by means of the web-like external structure contrasted to the existing heavy and solid brutalism of the Library as well as the stylised neo-classic Old Chemistry building. The structure morphs from under the Library, seemingly having its source in the Agora itself and lightly rests on the surrounding ground. Supporting structures around the existing

columns support the ceiling and rest on the subterranean ground floor level minimising the effect on the slab structure of the Library.

The structure envelops the space, brooding over the activities that it accommodates while still allowing these activities to spill into the surrounding area. Contrary to a traditional solid boundary, the skin provides protection from the elements yet links the interior to the exterior. As if lightly walking over the site and its surroundings the random pattern of the

structure, coupled with the lightness of the steel with glass infill, causes the structure to seem in constant motion. The fractal skin extends from under the Library, providing some shade and then evolves through elements resting on the ground to form walls. Through this structure, the left-over negative spaces are bound together as a whole, with clearly defined and celebrated entry points that bridge the scale difference of the Library overhang to the interior space. The tension created through this structure draws more attention to the



Figure 5.3: Conceptual investigation of the steel structure within the existing space.



Figure 5.4: Conceptual investigation of the steel structure within the existing space. Looking in a western direction, this corridor is the new main circulation route

surrounding site by highlighting the solid building masses of the surrounds, and in doing so emphasises the existing properties of the buildings.

The existing public space under the overhang of the Library is transformed into a multi-layered social experience focused on the dynamic interaction between people and information. The organisation of the Agora is generated from the existing circulation of students through the site. The current circulation is directed by forcing the main flow of people through defined walkways to counter the fragmentation of the space. The main thoroughfare, situated closest to the Library window, has a direct visual link to the space beyond the existing corridor, consisting of a ramp that smoothly bridges the existing slope of the site. The visual link is maintained and enhances the journey through the site by creating a window from the Agora to the spaces beyond the walkway. Eliminating the psychological apprehension of walking into an unknown space, this main walkway is intended to allow for the majority of the users to utilise it.

Due to a sewer servitude under this section of the site (see plan), very little can effectively be changed. The rest of the site is therefore quite small, not adequate to host large numbers of people as would be expected from a public space. In order to still allow for the flow of people through and past the site, as well as providing

an architectural intervention on this historical site, the project will comprise of an excavated space, with a redefined "roof", creating a public square over the space. This public square has some seating elements, linking to the space below, steps and ramps bridging the level differences.



Figure 5.5: Space that was fragmented by users of the site is redefined through the management of user movement on the site

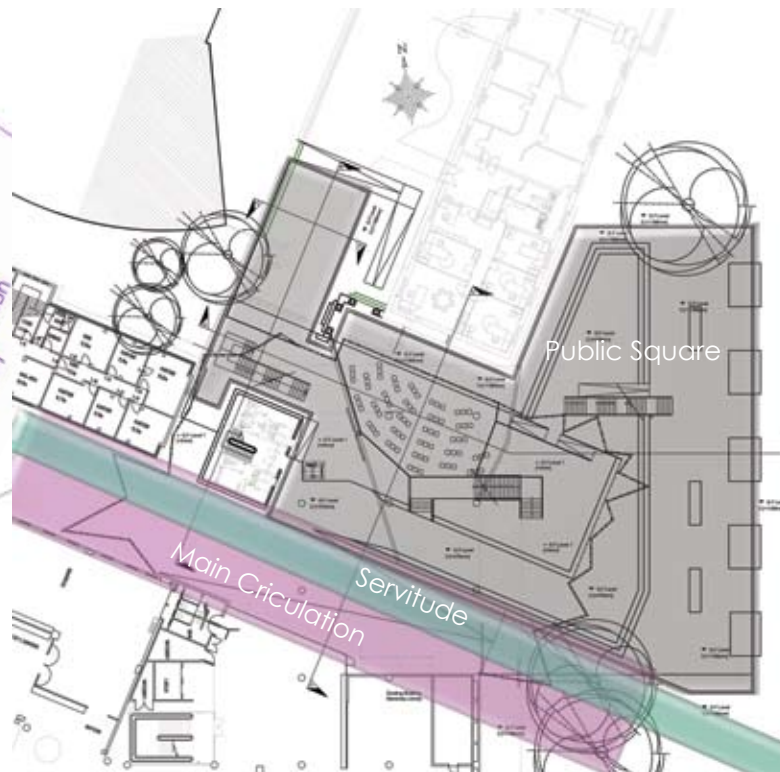


Figure 5.6: Public square over the excavated site

Two structural systems influence the aesthetics of the space indicating the contrasting memories on site. Firstly the Library was constructed on a grid of concrete columns (8m x 8m) that extends to the site under the overhang. This grid aligns with the eastern wall of the New Merensky Library that directs the main flow of users past the

site of the Agora. The second visual system is inferred by the position of the buildings surrounding the site and aligns with the Old Merensky Library (off-axis when compared to the grid). The Agora will recognise the memory of the Old Chemistry building as well as the memory of the New Merensky Library.



Figure 5.7: Structural systems that define the site: columns and buildings



Figure 5.8: Plan of structural systems that define the site: columns and buildings

5.3 Food Outlet

The first supporting space to the Agora is a Food Outlet. This concept is used instead of a coffee shop or a food outlet due to the restrictions inherent to the site and its users. The Food Outlet is excavated into the existing raised plinth area, but the roof of this space aligns with the old level, keeping to the memory of the old building. The height

differences between the levels allow for the installation of a combined window and ventilation system (See detail).

Approaching the site from the western side, where a large portion of the users come from, the distinct aroma of coffee will constantly be present due to the ventilation grids along

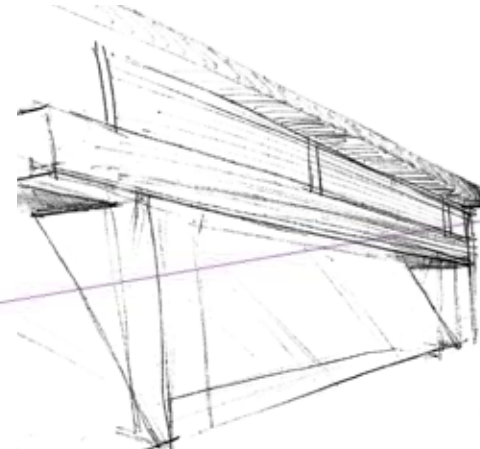


Figure 5.9: Window at Food Outlet

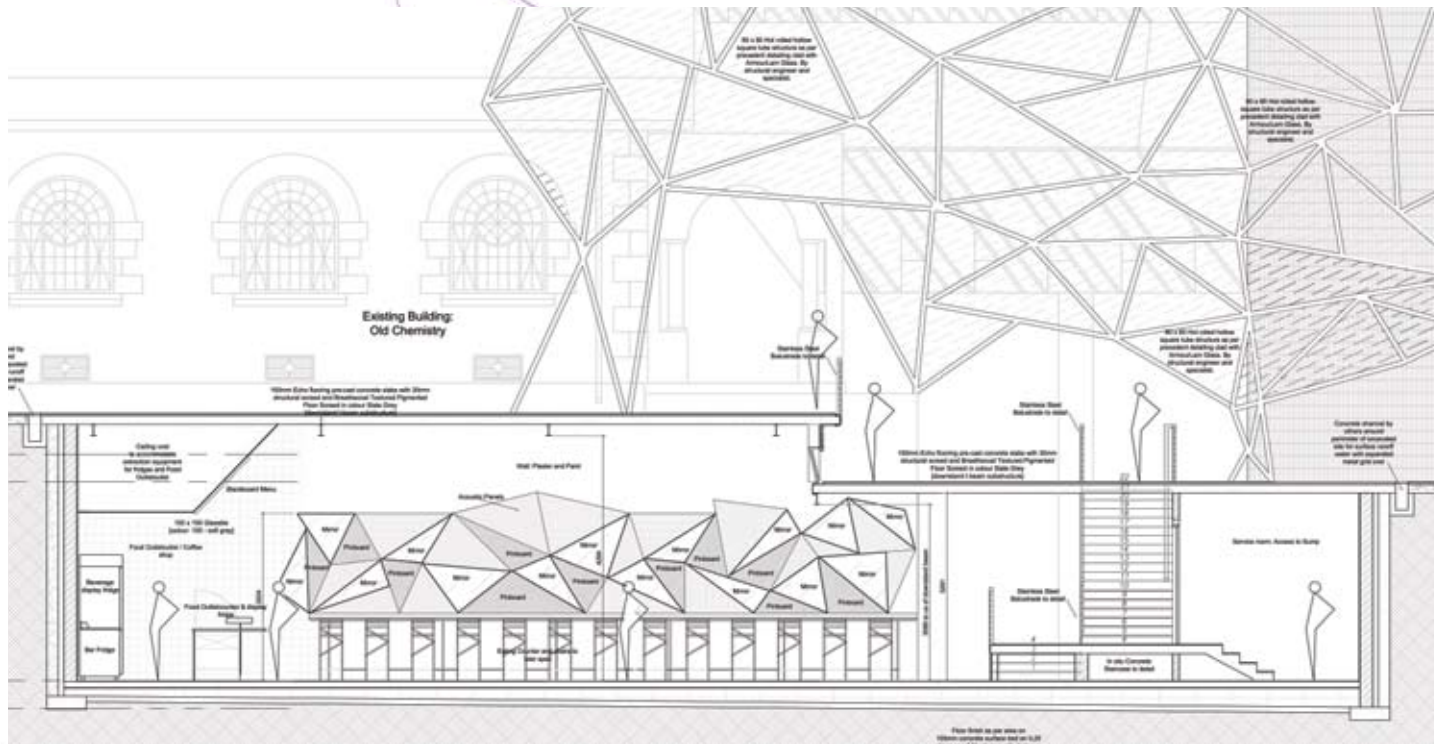


Figure 5.10: Section through Food Outlet

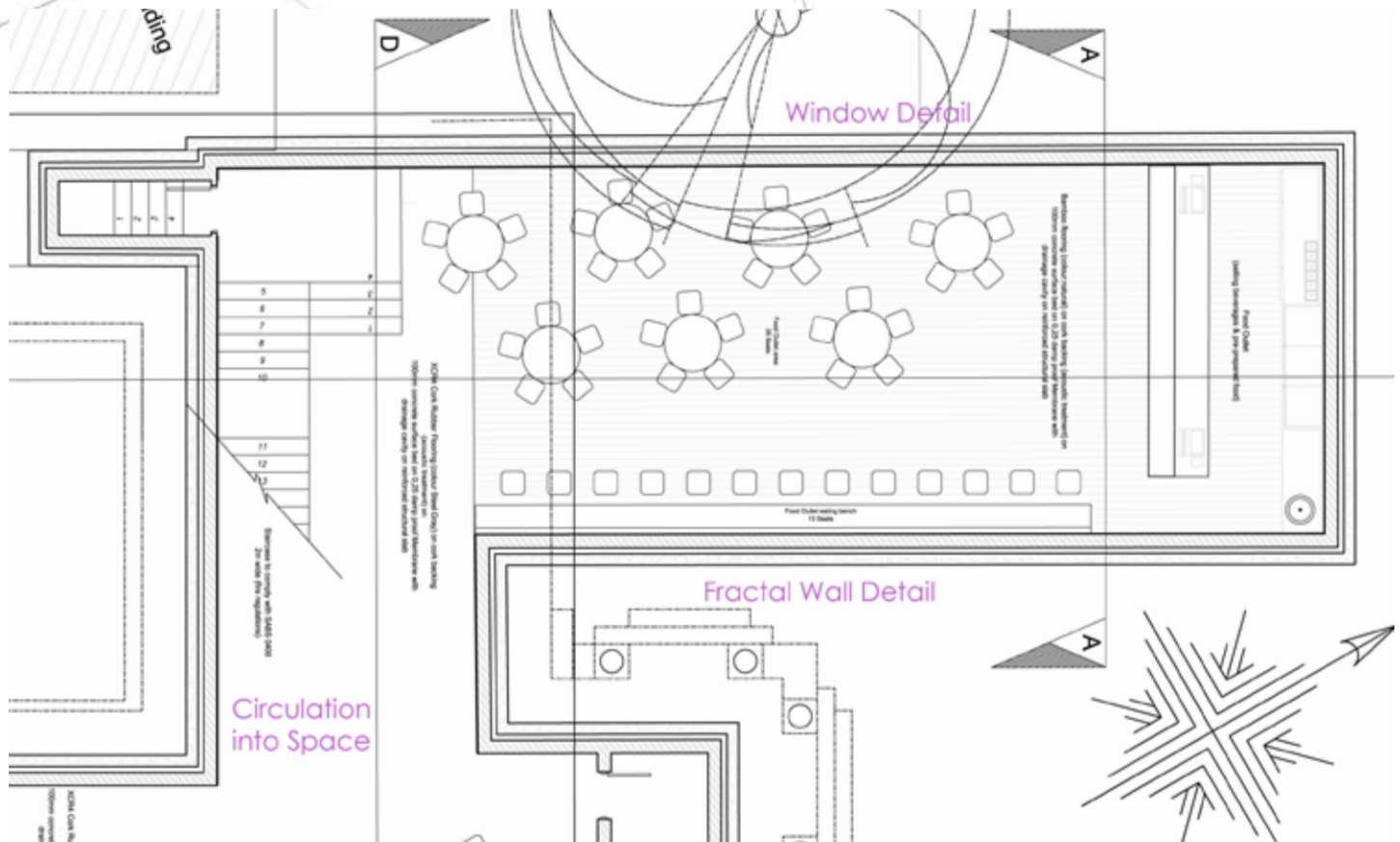


Figure 5.11: Plan of Food Outlet

the side of the window that look down into the Food Outlet. Food and drink in this space need to support interaction between people by being accessible by any person within the user-group. This would imply that a person on his or her own should feel comfortable to venture into the space. Supporting this concept, the outlet will sell pre-prepared food that can then be taken to a table or the

seating bench (resembling a fast food outlet). This bench, facing the wall detail, offers the person on his or her own in the space some privacy as well as a seat to consume the food. Within the theoretical framework (c.f.2.1) the Food Outlet disseminates information, supplying news on television screens, and information as shared between individuals and maybe even strangers.

The wall detail was designed to facilitate three aspects of the Food Outlet Space. The three dimensional fractal wall panels consist of three different materials, mirror, acoustic panels and pin-up boards. The mirrors at different angles reflect the opposite wall and window, relating the user to the space outside as well as the screens installed on the walls. When looking into the Food Outlet by means of the angled window the users

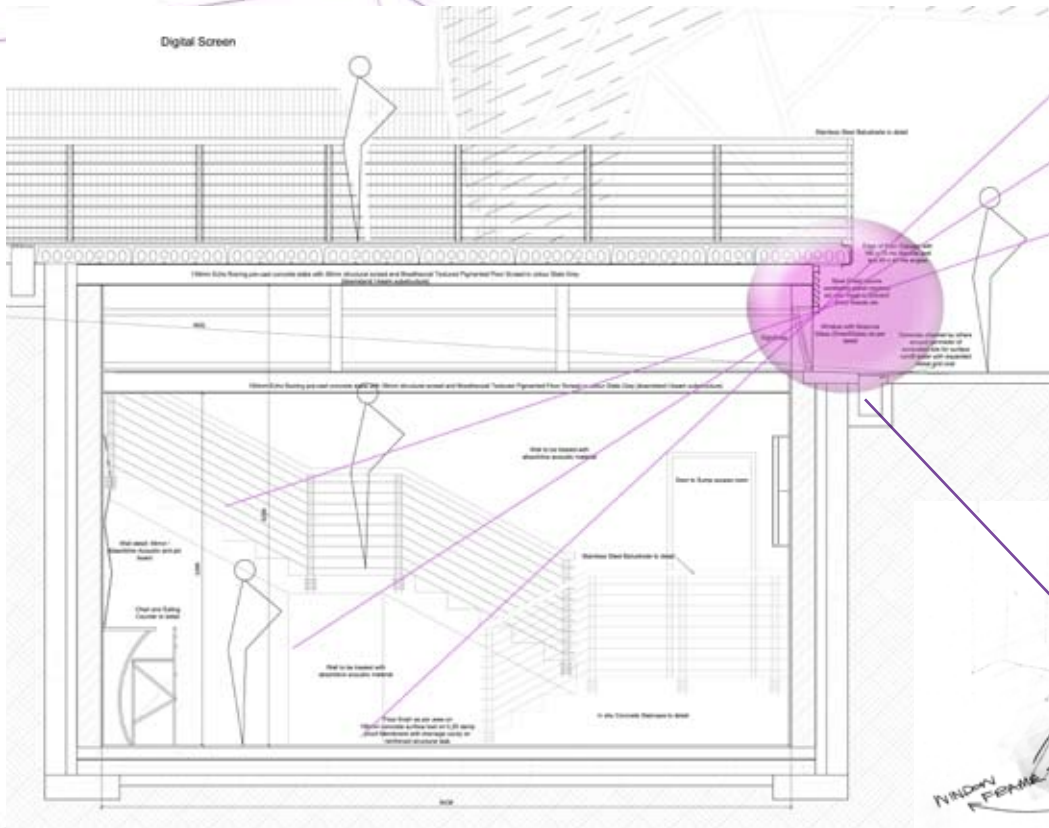


Figure 5.12: Section through Food Outlet

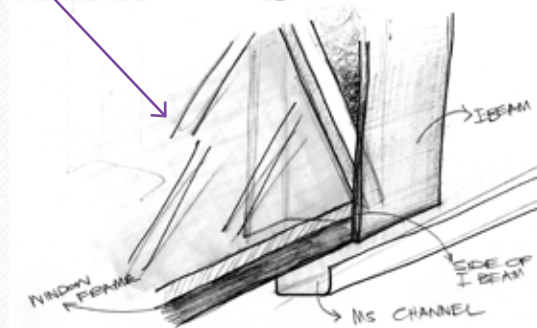


Figure 5.13: Detail of window at Food Outlet

on the ground floor level will catch fragments of what's going on inside the space through the reflection of the angled mirrors. Visual and physical links between the outside level (ground floor level) and the sunken interior are important so as to maintain a connection with the rest of campus and prevent the Agora from becoming a dungeon-like island separated from reality.

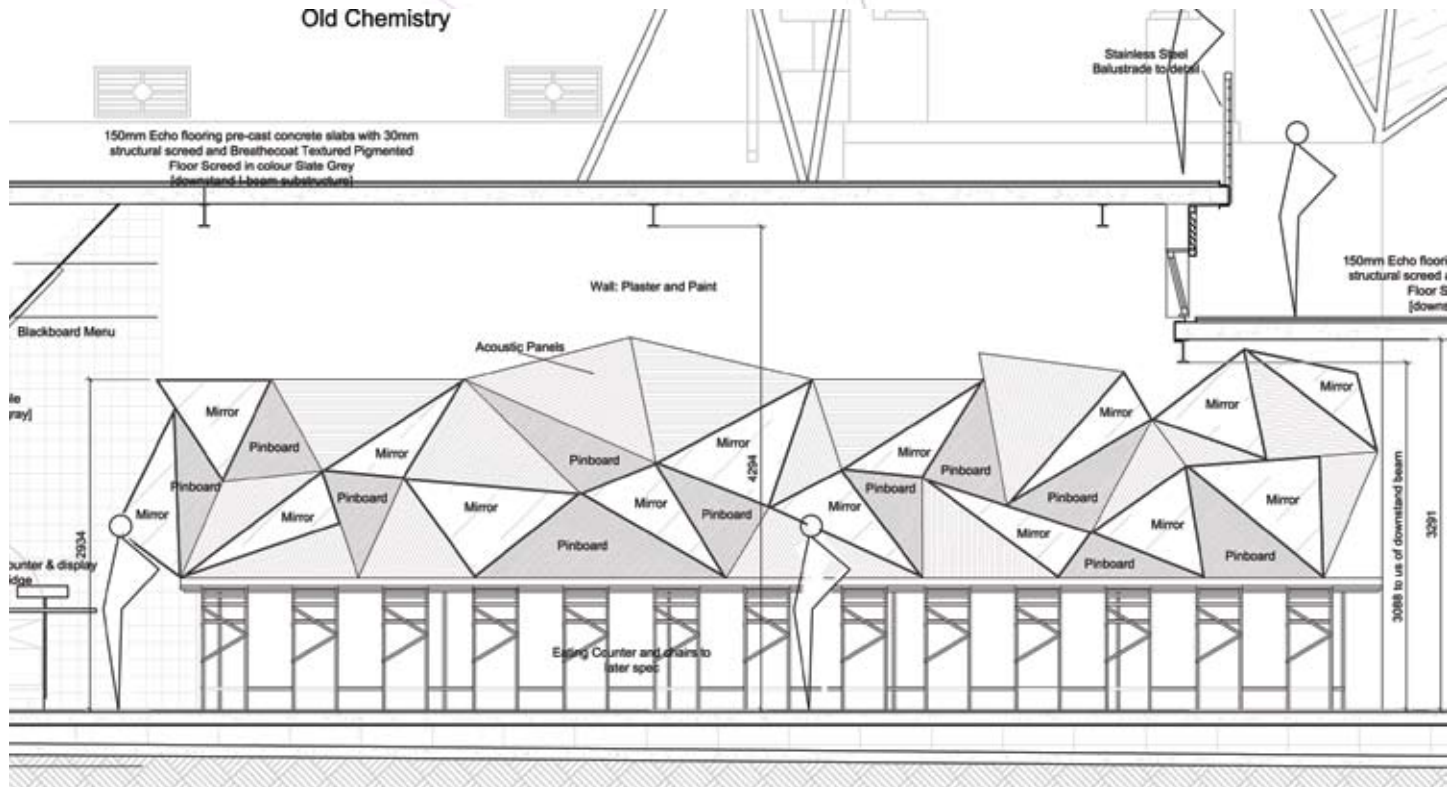


Figure 5.14: Fractal Wall Detail elevation

5.4 The Open Lecture Auditorium

To supply alternative and supporting information to the Library, dynamic teaching and learning will be the main attraction of the site. Other than supplying necessities to the users, the Agora needs to offer new and exciting information to the passers-by, to involve them in the generation of new knowledge

and memory. The Open Lecture Auditorium, accessible to any of the passers-by, becomes the anchor to the subterranean space. Referring back to my theoretical discourse (c.f.2.1), currently Open Lectures regularly take place at various departments on campus but contrary to their classification, these are usually held within buildings, hidden from the public. Open lectures on campus provide needed information on new developments outside of the

scope of curriculum, and have the potential to interest more people than present in the faculty. The Open Lecture Auditorium will offer these open Lectures to a large majority of students that walk through the space on a daily basis. The Agora will provide the ideal space to host these lectures thereby exposing a larger number of students to the information. It also greatly increases the percentage of accidental student interaction with information. The users will now walk

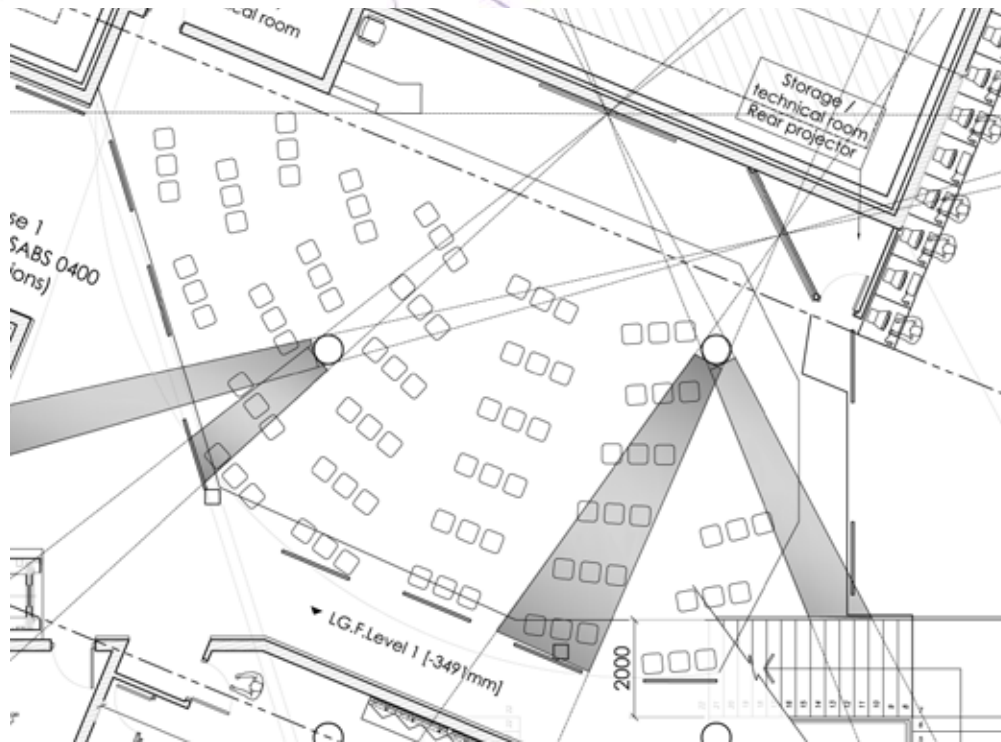


Figure 5.15: Plan of Open Lecture Auditorium

through a transitional space that introduces new information to them. These lectures will take information to the next step within the analogy (c.f.2.1), by imparting academic information (relevant to the current happenings in the world) to students to further their knowledge.

The main function of the space is public lectures and the auditorium

design therefore lends itself to stage-based performance. The space can also be utilised as:

- A meeting room for groups of people
- A public discussion space and other related uses such as student court currently hosted elsewhere on campus,
- The Drama Department and the Music Department.

In order to accommodate different activities, the seating of the

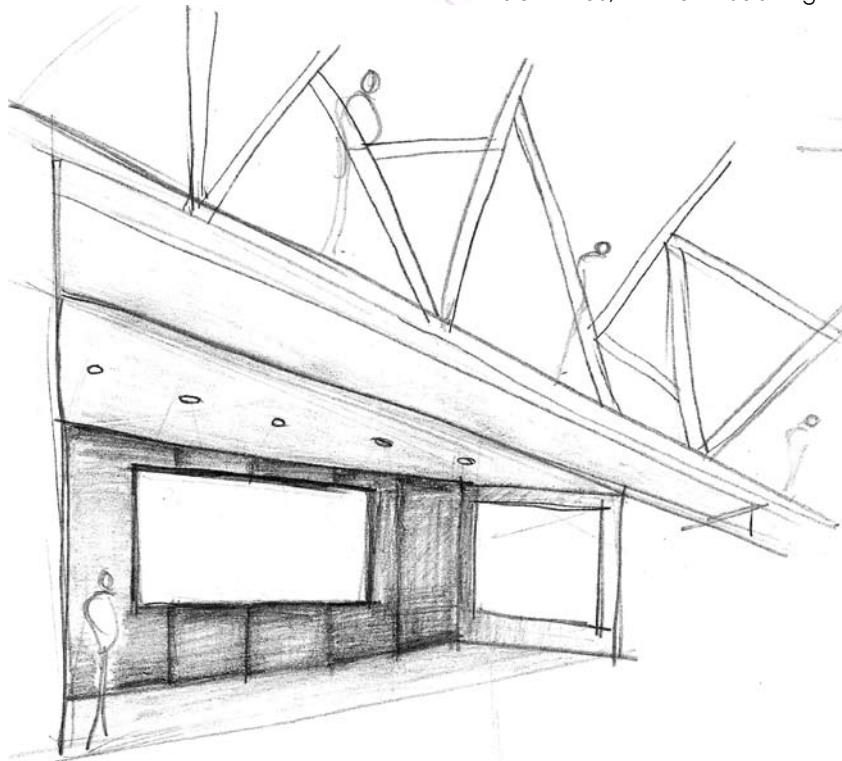


Figure 5.17: Stage of the Open Lecture Auditorium, Secondary circulation corridor above

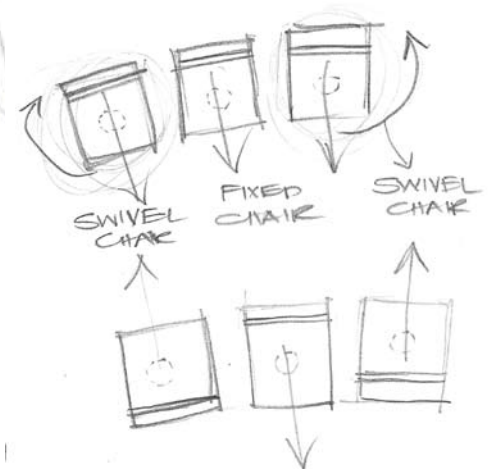


Figure 5.16: Fixed Chair configuration of the Open Lecture Auditorium

auditorium is fixed and the side chairs of each trio can swivel around (180°) to accommodate different settings.

Moving from the public square into the space below happens through one of two ways: firstly an elevator into the corner of the space below, opening to the back of the Auditorium and secondly the main staircase (also leading to the back of the Lecture Hall).

The elevator is not as prominent a design feature as the staircase, but provides the adequate vertical circulation for the disabled user. A screen will guard off most of the noise of people entering the Agora, as well as provide wayfinding information about the Agora.

The staircase is the first element in the space reflecting the grid which the rest of the space also adheres to. Reminding of a sweeping staircase

in a great public hall, the staircase celebrates the entry into the Agora. Motion up and down the staircase should stay within the parameters of public space, feeling wide and open with the user maintaining contact with the Agora throughout use. Linger between the spaces enhances the sense of being in a single space even though the user travels between different vertical levels. The staircase therefore is 2m wide (building regulations only require a width of

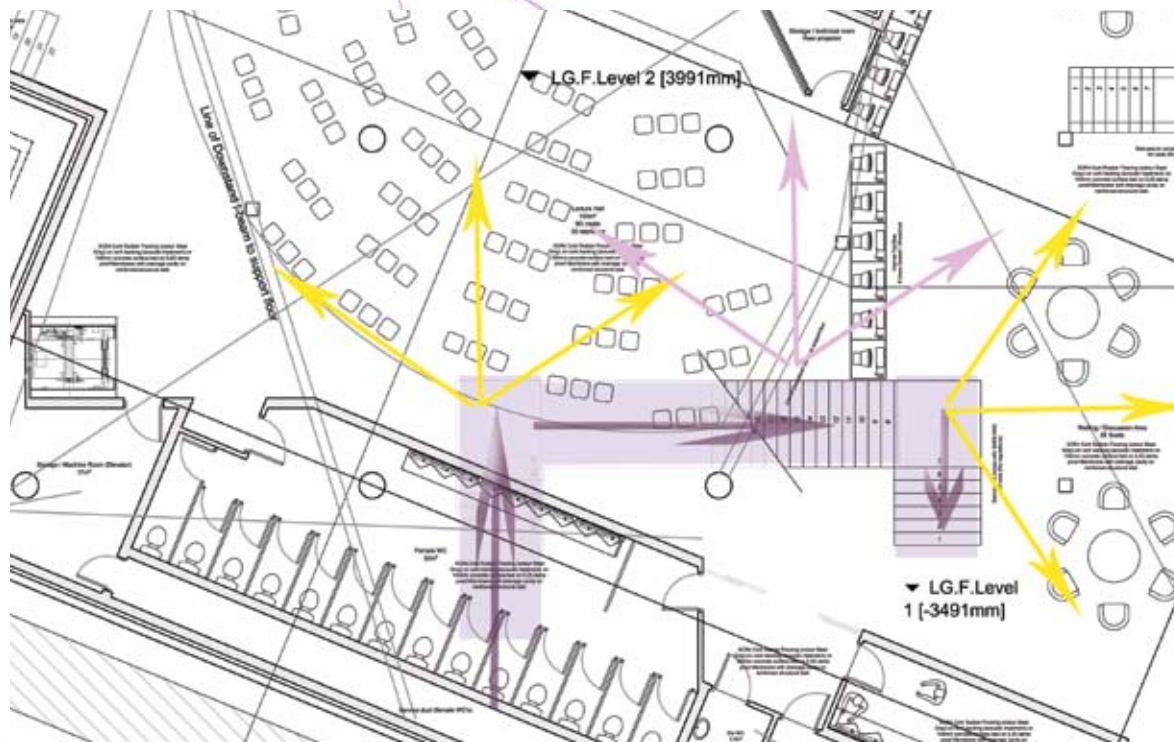


Figure 5.18: Circulation into the Agora behind the Open Lecture Auditorium

1,1m) and changes direction twice, leading the user to view specific parts of the space. Stepping onto the first (extended) landing, the user is brought closer to the Open Lecture Hall, acting as a type of viewing balcony. The direction of movement from this point onwards leads the user to face the Meeting Areas (Pnyx) as they travel down the stairs. The last change in direction is also where the staircase terminates (against a wall);

this wall will have information on what is happening at the Agora as well as signage explaining the use of the space.

One of the major elements defining the Open Lecture Auditorium is the double volume space that it occupies, creating a sense of openness. This space is important to connect the ground floor level with the subterranean space. Users standing

on the ground floor level, looking down into the space should feel as much a part of the seated audience in the auditorium as possible. The external structure originated from the idea of adding another skin under the Library to accommodate the necessary acoustic and weather treatment of the space.

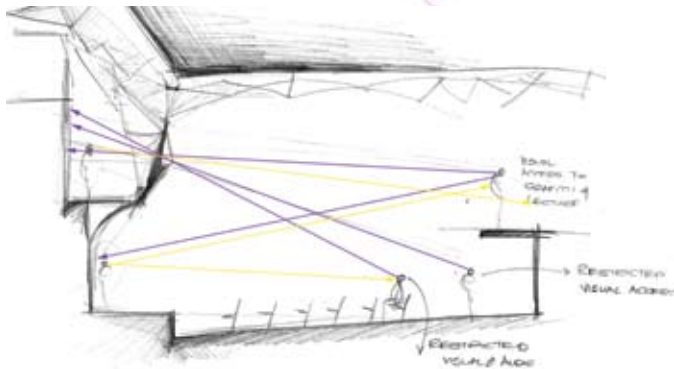


Figure 5.19: Double Volume Space that is utilised as Open Lecture Auditorium

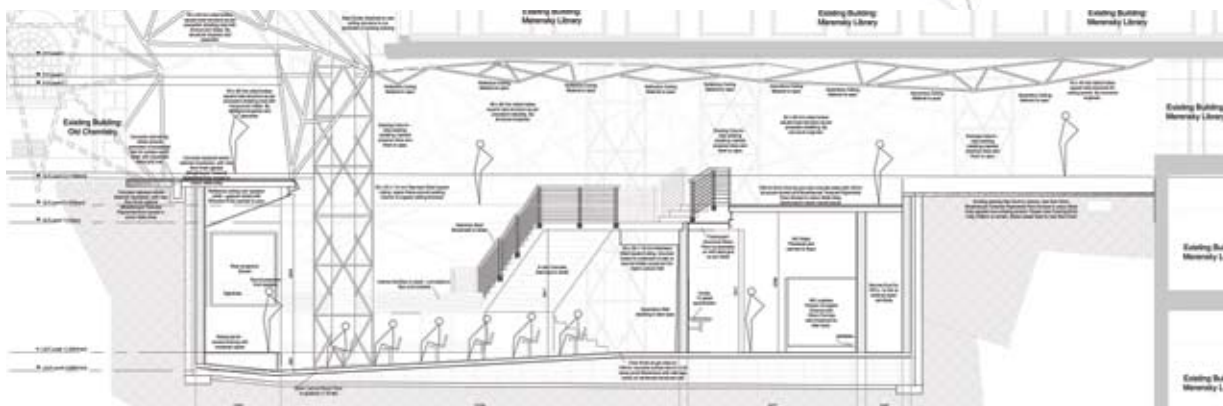


Figure 5.20: Section through Double Volume Space that is utilised as Open Lecture Auditorium

5.5 Pnyx (Meeting Rooms)

The word Pnyx was used to describe some meetings that took place in ancient Greece. It's understood that the meetings that used to take place in the Agora later moved to another location called (Pnyx). (Website – Glowacki: The pnyx).

This space is very important to the functioning of the Agora. Supporting

the Open Lecture Hall, it involves reception facilities, internet facilities and the meeting areas and rooms, it is here that knowledge infuses memory. Discussion is such a big part of learning and this sharing information as well as practicing others skills (public speaking, debating and forming opinions) are some things that are lost in the scope of a Library (another collaboration of information and its subsequent

users).The meeting areas have the sole purpose of generating new knowledge and exposing students to other fields of information.

The area allows different levels of interaction, from the completely open comfortable chairs to the more structured tables and chairs, to the specialised meeting rooms. These rooms are mainly for use by

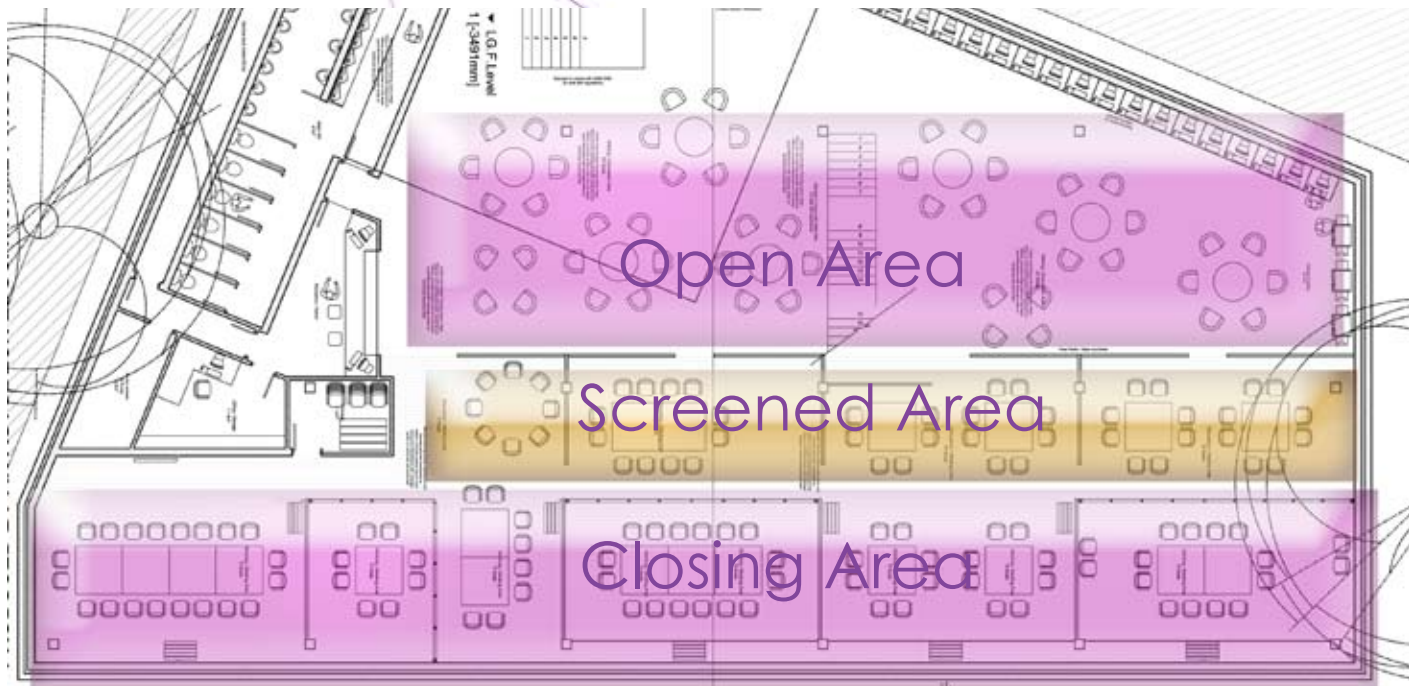


Figure 5.21: Pnyx indicating different configurations within the space

post-graduates doing research into a certain field but can be utilised (without the digital workstation) by anyone on campus. This creates a neutral platform where students from different faculties, undergraduate as well as post-graduate and lecturers can all interact – whether on purpose or not. Three of the four walls consist of glass writing surfaces and pin-up surfaces to facilitate the flow of

ideas. The fourth wall incorporates an electronic workstation (that is otherwise locked) where ideas and research can be captured and reproduced (see detail).

To suit a variety of scenarios, some of the panels between the rooms stack against the walls allow for larger groups.

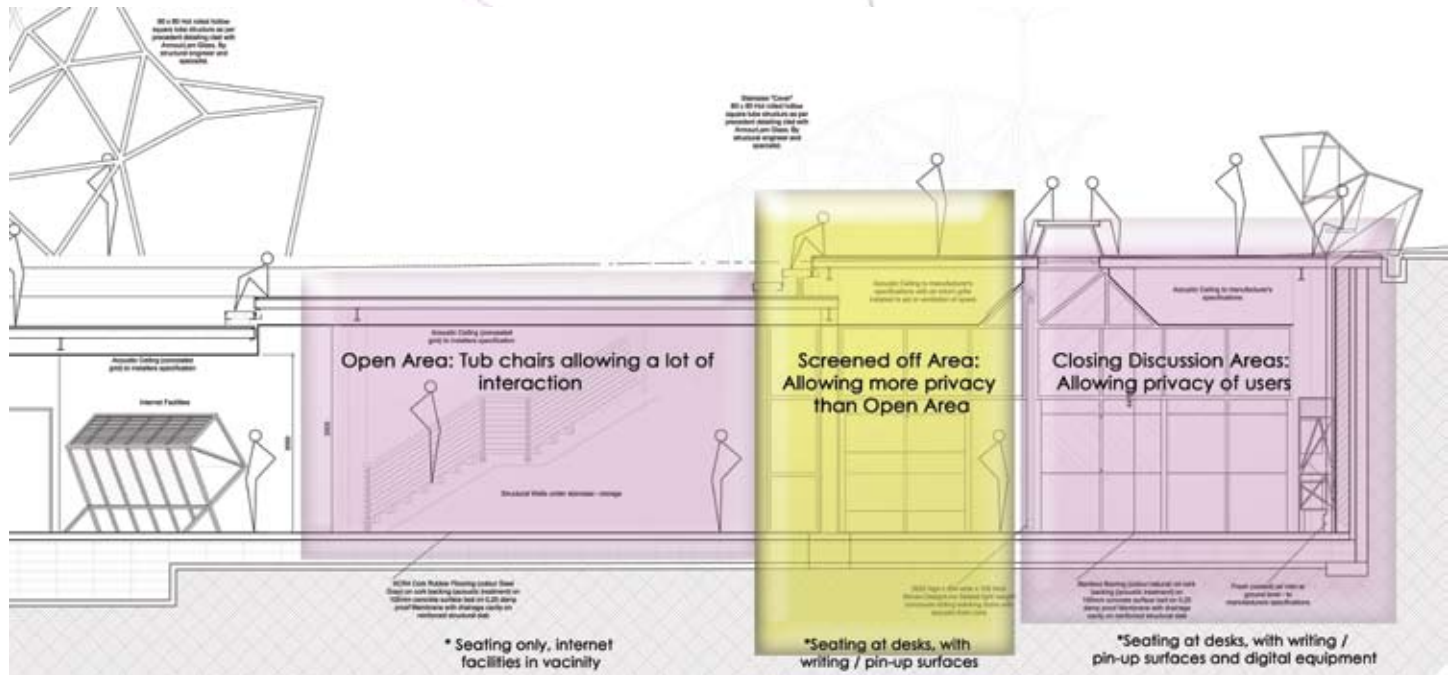


Figure 5.22: Section through Pnyx