



# CHAPTER EIGHT

## Occupying the Void

Design Development

*Chapter Eight explains the design of the Women's Forum as a process of translating theory into architecture. The design process is to be understood not as a linear process but rather as an exploratory journey, moving back and forward as architectural expression of the concepts are tested and refined.*

*Notions of the feminine within architecture are abstract and subtle and this chapter documents the search for appropriate architectural expressions of the feminine within the particular context.*

## DESIGN DRIVERS

*'All spaces are socially regulated in some way, if not by explicit rules (no ball games, no loitering) then by the potentially more competitive (more market-like?) regulation which exists in the absence of explicit (collective? public? democratic? Autocratic?) controls. 'Open Space' is [therefore] a dubious concept.'*

Doreen Massey, *For Space* (2001:120)

As a primary design focus, the interstitial is explored as the space of feminine expression. Space can never provide a neutral place of occupation but interstitial or in-between spaces, through their very lack of defining identity, provide the spatial dimension for unplanned social interaction. The interstitial provides the space for subverting traditional social structures, allowing women to define the nature of their spatial relationships on their own terms.

Primary Design Drivers were determined as responses to the conceptual, programmatic and contextual requirements for the building.

The Void is used as an architectural expression of the interstitial. It is approached as a positive space of occupation and

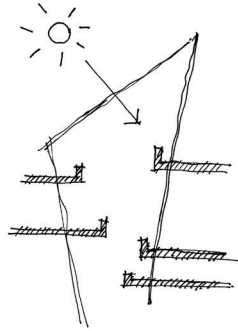
presents opportunities for the creation of a non-hierarchical space for interaction within the building.

Spaces between the offices provide secondary interstitial spaces that accommodate chance encounters and unplanned interaction between women from different organisations.

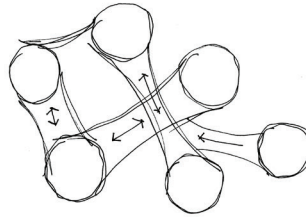
The facade is used as a mediator between interior and exterior. Expanding the facade with the use of screens creates exterior spaces of privacy.

The ground floor is separated from the rest of the building and is treated as a continuation of the public realm. A connection to the existing pedestrian arcade is made which creates opportunities for negotiation between the public realm and the building interior

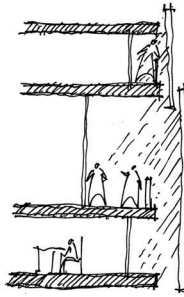
## OCCUPYING THE VOID



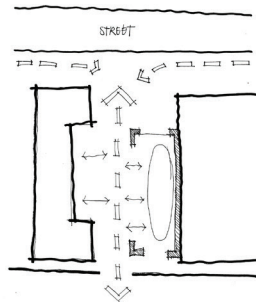
THE VOID AS POSITIVE SPACE OF OCCUPATION



SEPARATE OFFICES FOR EACH ORGANISATION,  
WITH IN-BETWEEN SPACES ALLOWING FOR  
SPONTANEOUS INTERACTION



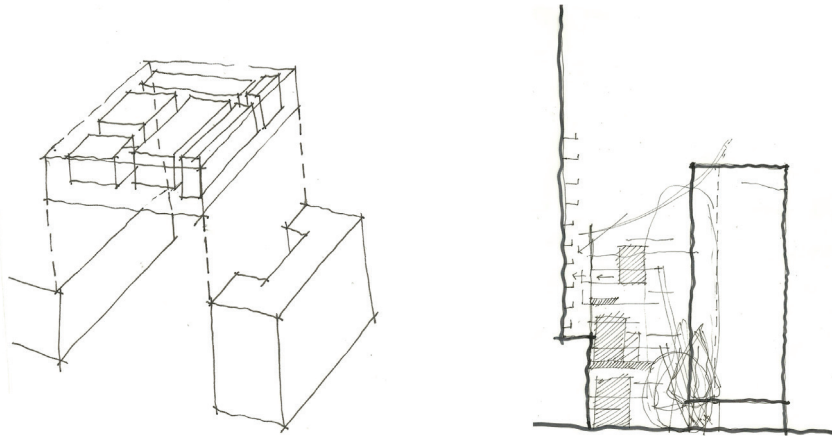
FACADE CREATES INTERSTITIAL ZONE  
BETWEEN INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR



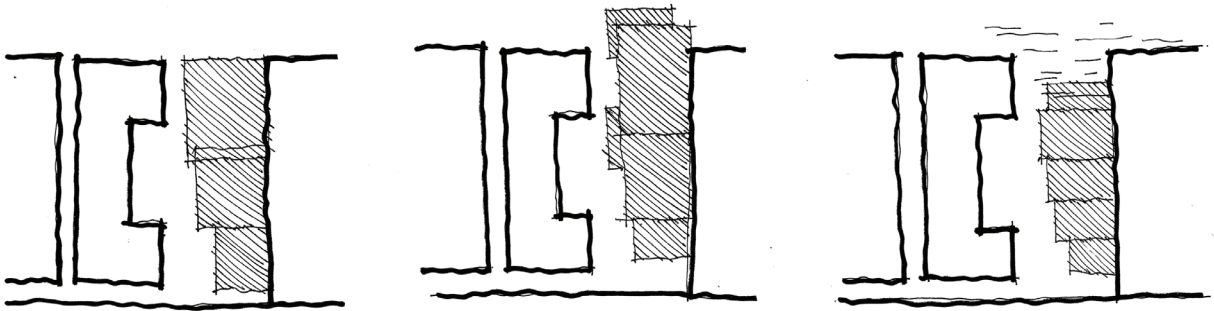
NEGOTIATION BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE:  
GROUND FLOOR AS CONTINUATION OF PUBLIC REALM



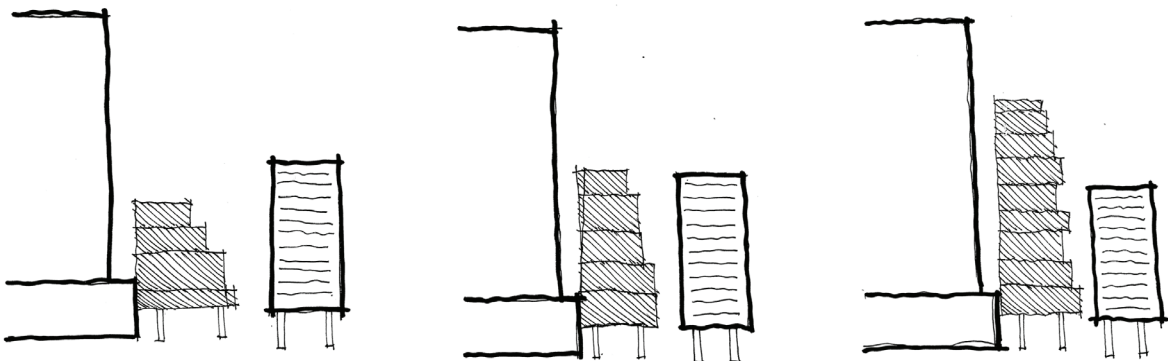
## OCCUPYING THE VOID



### Filling the Void



### Street Edge Condition



### Height Exploration

## INITIAL CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

### **The Urban Void Massing and Dialogue**

The initial design decisions addressed the nature of occupation within the site. This involved developing a response to the way that the building occupies the urban void as an ‘Other’ space. Volumetric studies through models provided a deeper understanding of the qualities of the urban void and how the massing of the building should respond to these conditions: A conventional approach that makes use of a solid mass to simply ‘fill the gap’ could not be used. For the building to convey the notion of occupying the ‘Other’ space of the void, the massing of the building should instead read as a series of loose elements that are placed within the space. This allows in-between or leftover spaces to be created between the existing buildings and the new insertion, allowing the site to still read as a void.

### OCCUPYING THE VOID

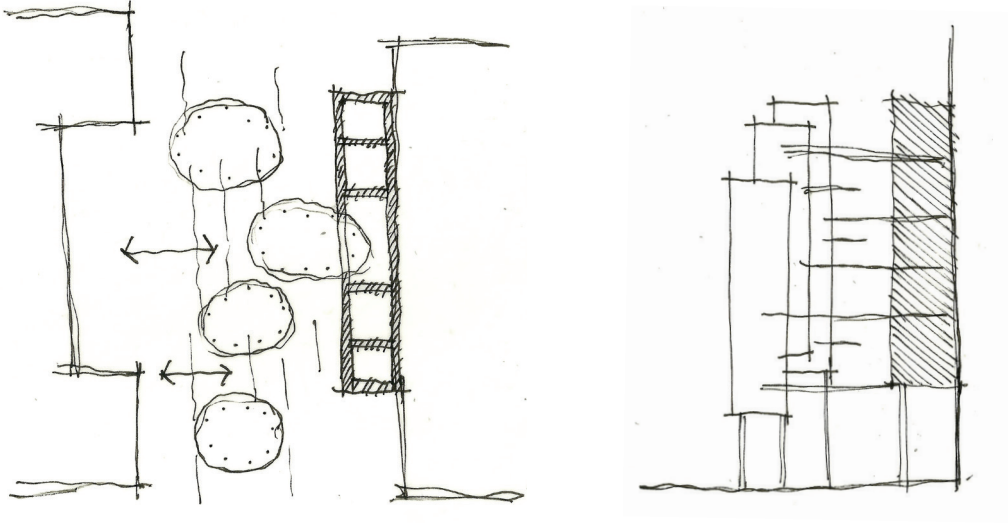


Figure 8.1 Early proposals for placement of solid volumes against eastern wall of site. (Source: Author, 2015)

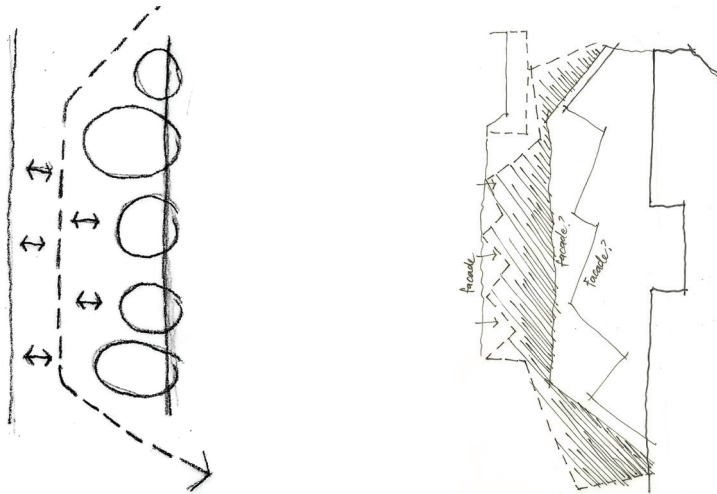


Figure 8.2 Conceptual diagrammes exploring 'Splitting the Wall' (Source: Author, 2015)

## INITIAL DESIGN PROPOSALS

### The Interstitial Space

*'Communication systems are primarily associated in our minds with words'* (Ardener, 1981:13) but there are other implicit social codes other than language that govern human interaction.

*'We might visualise a semiotic system that depends, in the absence of power of speech, upon the appreciation by the human participants of contextually defined logical relationships between themselves in space. Let us say: the relevant position of each participant to another... and to items in a fixed environment'* (Ardener, 1971:xlili-iv).

An exploration of the the architectural representation of the Interstitial within the building was undertaken. Various concepts were explored and tested within the constraints of the site.

As taken from the literature reviews of feminist readings of space, initial conceptual ideas explored notions of 'Splitting the Wall' as an expression of breaking through harsh boundaries between the private interior, associated with the feminine, and the public exterior. This found architectural expression through layering of the

facade so as to allow for graded negotiation between interior and exterior.

Stemming from the approach that was adopted for the massing of the building, it was decided to use the solid masses to contain the fixed, programmed spaces of the offices of the organisations, while allowing the in-between spaces to provide the interstitial social spaces for interaction between women.

The initial concept placed these solid volumes against the eastern edge of the site, freeing up the circulation and social spaces towards the western edge, allowing them to interact with the dialogue space through the layered facade. While conceptually strong, this posed problems during detailed resolution due to the proportional constraints of the site. The narrow width of the site meant that vertical movement cores as well as ablution cores fill up almost the entire width of the site, making it difficult for placing the office spaces up against the eastern edge and thus leaving little room available for social spaces.

## OCCUPYING THE VOID

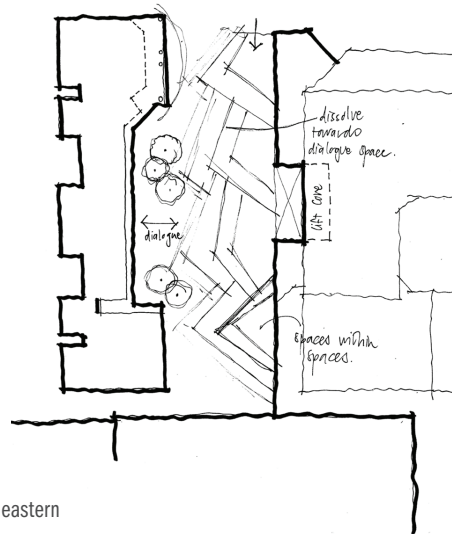


Figure 8.3 Building anchored against eastern edge with dialogue space created with Pretmed Building. (Source: Author, 2015)

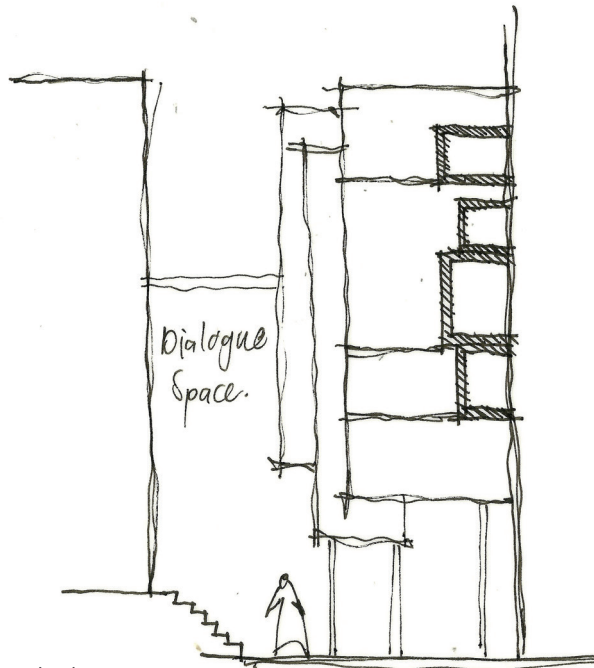


Figure 8.4 Early proposal for sectional relationship between the Women's Forum and the Pretmed Building. (Source: Author, 2015)

## OCCUPYING THE VOID

### **The ‘Second’ Facade**

As the intention for the building is to create positive spaces for dialogue between women, the building itself needs to represent an aspect of dialogue with its context. The unusual condition of a ‘secondary’ facade exists on the Pretmed building which faces into the western edge of the site and this facade presents an opportunity for dialogue between new and existing. A sensitive approach must be adopted in response to this facade so as to not block out all light and connection to the windows and balconies. Through creating a ‘secondary’ facade of the Forum, a Dialogue Space is created. This also provides the opportunity for more natural light to penetrate the Women’s Forum, as little opportunity for this is provided due to the narrow northern face of the site. While creating dialogue within its context, the Women’s Forum must also assert its own presence within the context and contend with the dominant surrounding structures. The surrounding buildings have considerable differences in height. The Pretmed building is 9 storeys tall and the Momentum building is 22 storeys tall. The new building should mediate between the heights of the two buildings, so as to not disappear within its context while also not overpowering any of the buildings in the context either.

OCCUPYING THE VOID

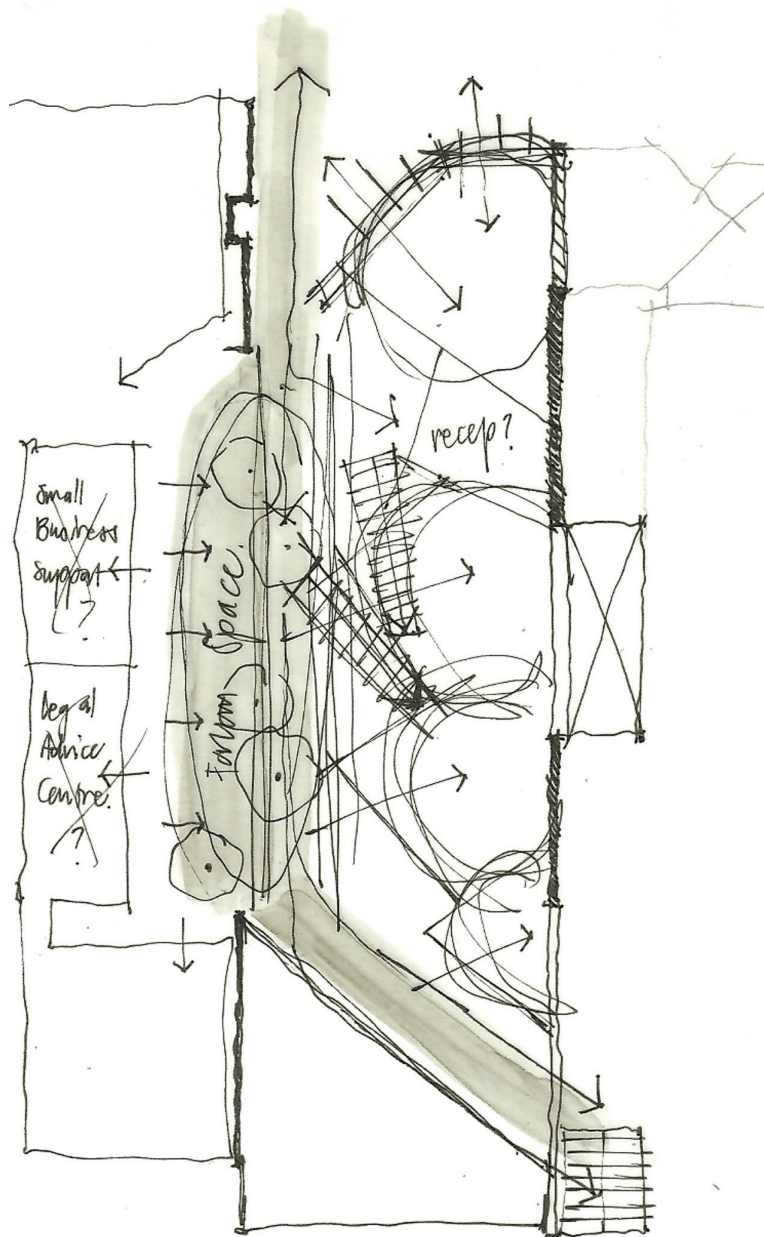


Figure 8.5 Early plan exploration. (Source: Author, 2015)

## OCCUPYING THE VOID

### **May - June Critique**

During the design crit, it was questioned whether 'Splitting the Wall' was the only means of addressing the feminine. This concept didn't explore notions of the feminine at a deep enough level. While the building occupied the urban void of the site, the building itself and the arrangement of its spaces did little to acknowledge the concept. The building itself therefore needed to address the figurative void within society that women occupy. It was suggested that further conceptual investigations be explored that would give better expression to the primary concept of the interstitial as the space of unplanned social interaction between women.



### OCCUPYING THE VOID

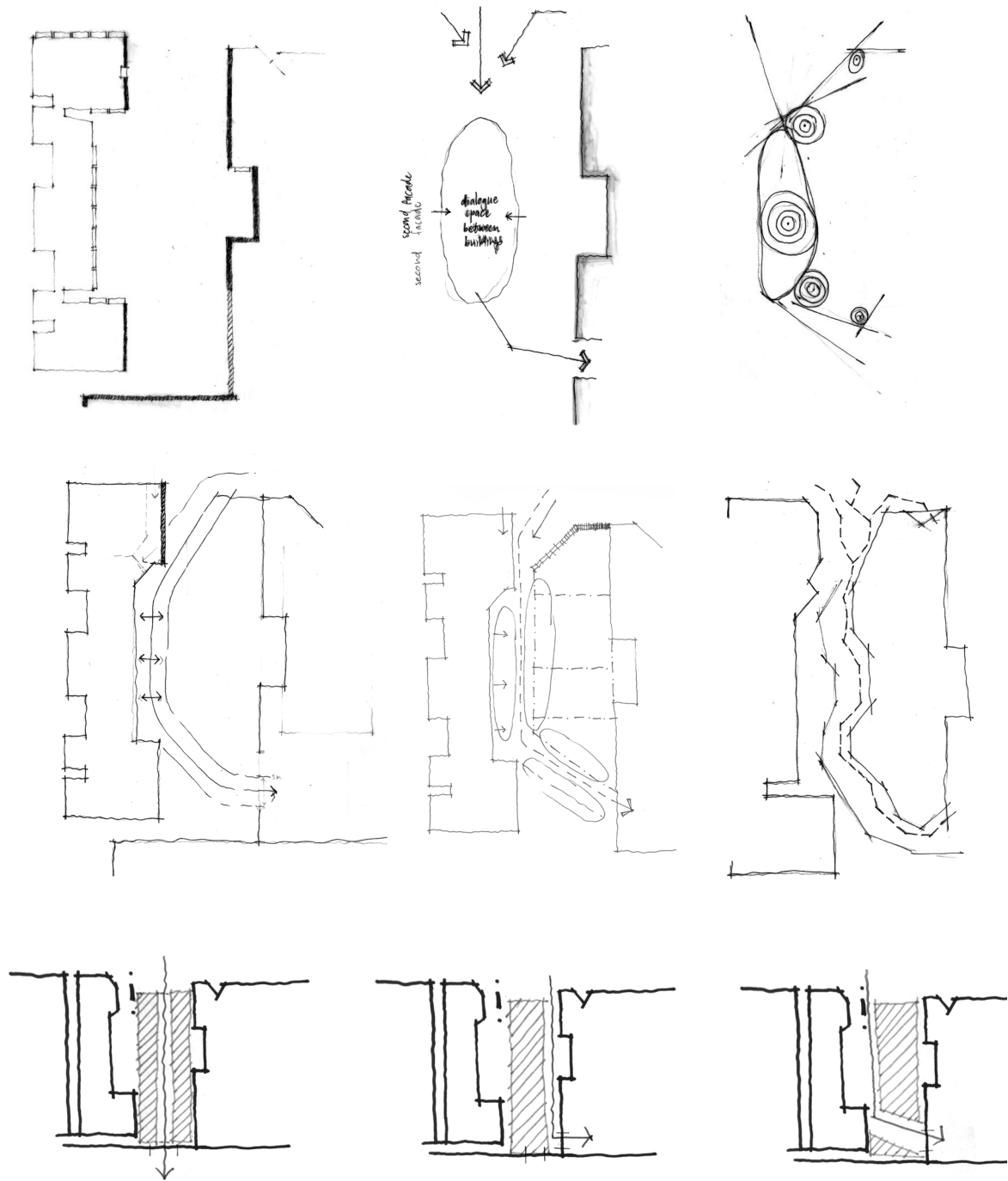


Figure 8.6 Exploration of ground floor movement paths for the arcade and placement of programmed spaces. (Source: Author, 2015)

## The Ground Floor

From the onset, the ground floor of the building required a public aspect which would allow the private and specific functions within the building to connect with the public realm.

In *S,M,L,XL* (1995), Rem Koolhaas rejects the architect's fixation on the objectivity of a building, which disconnects it from its responsibility to the greater urban context. Where a figure ground map indicates the 'fabric' of architecture that is woven together to create an urban environment, Koolhaas claims that many buildings do not consider this aspect, creating the ubiquitous, disconnected urban environments that are evident in many of our cities. It is with this approach that cities become collections of objects that have no relation to one another. In his book *Collage City* (1978), Colin Rowe presents similar theories by calling for a transcendence from space and object fixation in order to create cohesive urban environments with a balance between solid and void.

A public ground floor for the Women's Forum allows for programmatic mediation between public and private. The building is raised off of the ground in order to allow a continuation of the public realm into the site. As explored in the site analysis, the nature of the context along Pretorius street presents harsh and inconsiderate conditions for users of the city. Few social spaces or places of rest are provided along the pavement. The ground floor of the building presents the opportunity for spaces of dialogue and public occupation for women and for negotiation between the private interior of the building and the public realm. In order to accommodate public occupation and movement through the ground floor, a new arcade is created in the dialogue space between the Women's Forum and the Pretmed building. This arcade connects to the existing network of arcades on the block through a new opening into the Tramshed building.

OCCUPYING THE VOID

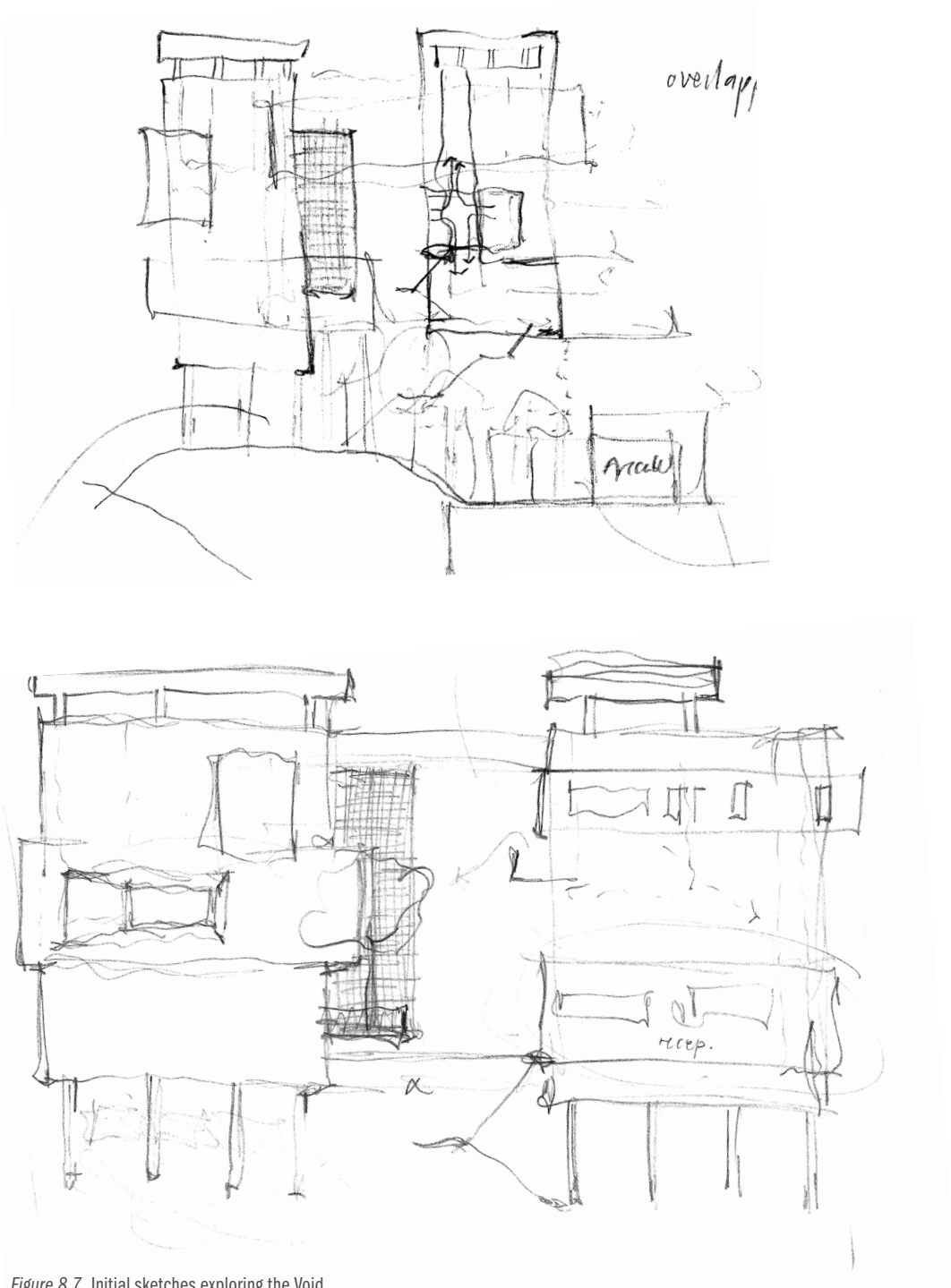


Figure 8.7 Initial sketches exploring the Void  
(Source: Author, 2015)

## DEVELOPMENT AND FORMALISATION

### **The Void**

The notion of the Void therefore emerges as an architectural means of creating interstitial space. The Void presents the opportunity for an undefined space of positive occupation by women. Notions of ‘Splitting the Wall’ were not discarded but rather added to. A graded negotiation between interior and exterior must be created, while allowing the Void to act as the primary conceptual driver.

Conventional associations of the Void and the interstitial as ‘left-over’ and as ‘Other’ spaces are challenged by the design and the focus placed on the Void rather than the solid. Various arrangements of the volumes were explored in order to create the inner void space. Instead of placing design focus on the solid volumes, they are instead treated as elements that shape the void space.

## OCCUPYING THE VOID

### Evolution of the Void

Throughout the design refinement of the Void, various other aspects of the building evolved and matured alongside. These elements will be discussed in tandem with the discussion of the primary design element of the Void.

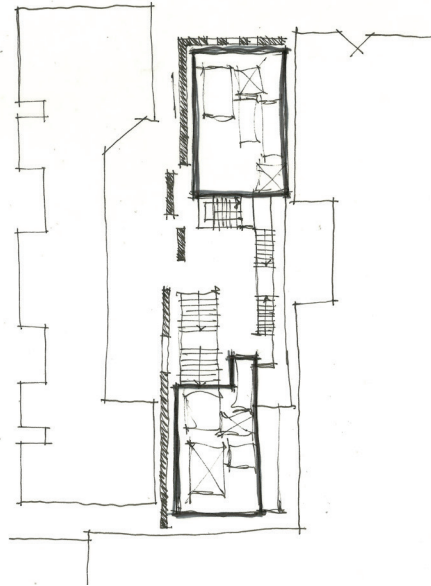
#### First Iteration

From the conceptual diagrammes, the evolution of the void is explained.

Initially, the building was split into two vertical volumes. The first containing the public programmes of the Small Business Support Centre and Legal Aid Centre, and the second containing the private offices of the organisations. The ground floor was also divided into two spaces, with a restaurant run by local women placed at the front of the site and an exhibition space at the back. The facade of the building made use of layering of solid walls over the walls of the volumes. Holes were punched into the walls at strategic spaces, adding to the layered effect of the building facade. The intention was for the walls to create a heavy, protective exterior to the private interior, while relating

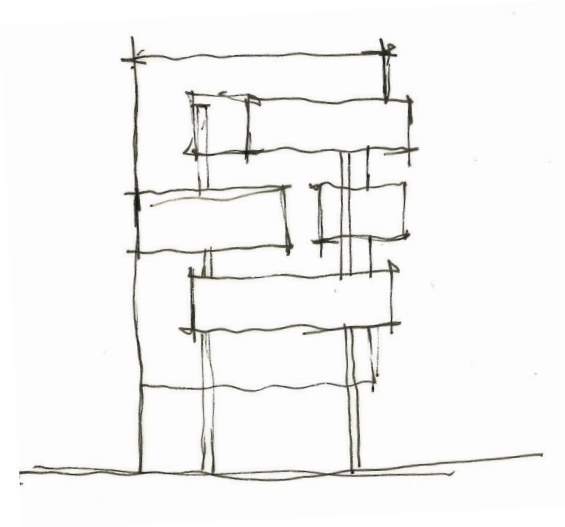
to the existing materiality of the context. This approach created a heavy aesthetic for the building and it was decided that a light and contrasting aesthetic was needed instead. The Void was defined as a vertical in-between space between the public and private components of the building. A grand staircase leading into the building was positioned on the ground floor of the Void which led into the reception of the building on the first floor. Vertical circulation that connected the two components ran through the Void. But this interpretation didn't allow for any actual occupation of the Void other than through the transitory use of circulation and the reception space of the building felt hidden away when placed on the first floor and in the middle of the building.

## OCCUPYING THE VOID



*Figure 8.8* Initial sketches for the Void as mediating space between public and private sections of the Women's Forum.  
(Source: Author, 2015)

## OCCUPYING THE VOID



### Second Iteration

The second iteration sought to develop the singular, vertical nature of the Void into a more dynamic space. The solid, vertical volumes were broken into smaller horizontal volumes, each one providing a separate space for the offices of an organisation and allowing each organisation to occupy its own space, creating space for individual identity. This allowed for a variety of void spaces to be created which changed the nature of the void from a singular vertical space to a range of various horizontal spaces which could become occupiable social spaces with varying privacy levels and characters. While this iteration brought more dynamic character to the interstitial spaces, the Voids had become disconnected due to their horizontal nature. Further adjustment was needed.

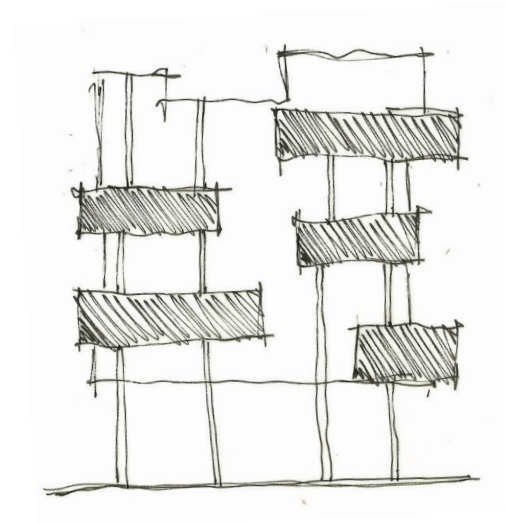
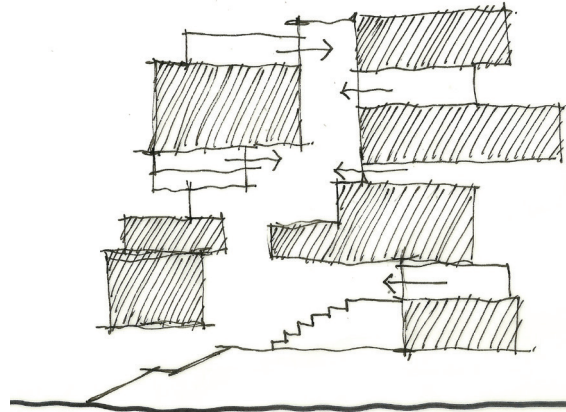


Figure 8.9 The Void is broken into various horizontal spaces. (Source: Author, 2015)

## OCCUPYING THE VOID



*Figure 8.10* Evolution of the Void in order to create a network of connected social spaces. (Source: Author, 2015)

### Third Iteration

The Void was readdressed in order to connect the various interstitial spaces and begin to create a network of social spaces rather than a collection of disconnected spaces. The programmed boxes were rearranged and broken apart in order to allow for a central void within the building to connect the smaller voids. In retrospect, this arrangement can be understood as a combination of the first two designs of the Void. During this time, the ventilation strategies for the building were being addressed and it was suggested that the Void could provide the opportunity for stack ventilation to assist the mechanical ventilation in the building. Arrangement and programming for the ground floor was then

finalised. The entrance to the building was moved out of the arcade and placed at the front edge of the site and the reception moved to the ground floor, allowing it to directly address the street front and be immediately accessible to the public. For this reason, the restaurant was reprogrammed as a sandwich and coffee shop. Without direct access to the street front, a restaurant would not be able to draw enough business for it to remain a viable option. The coffee shop and reception space therefore simultaneously occupy the front facade of the building, removing a level of formality from the reception space while creating activity on the street front, inviting people into the arcade.



OCCUPYING THE VOID

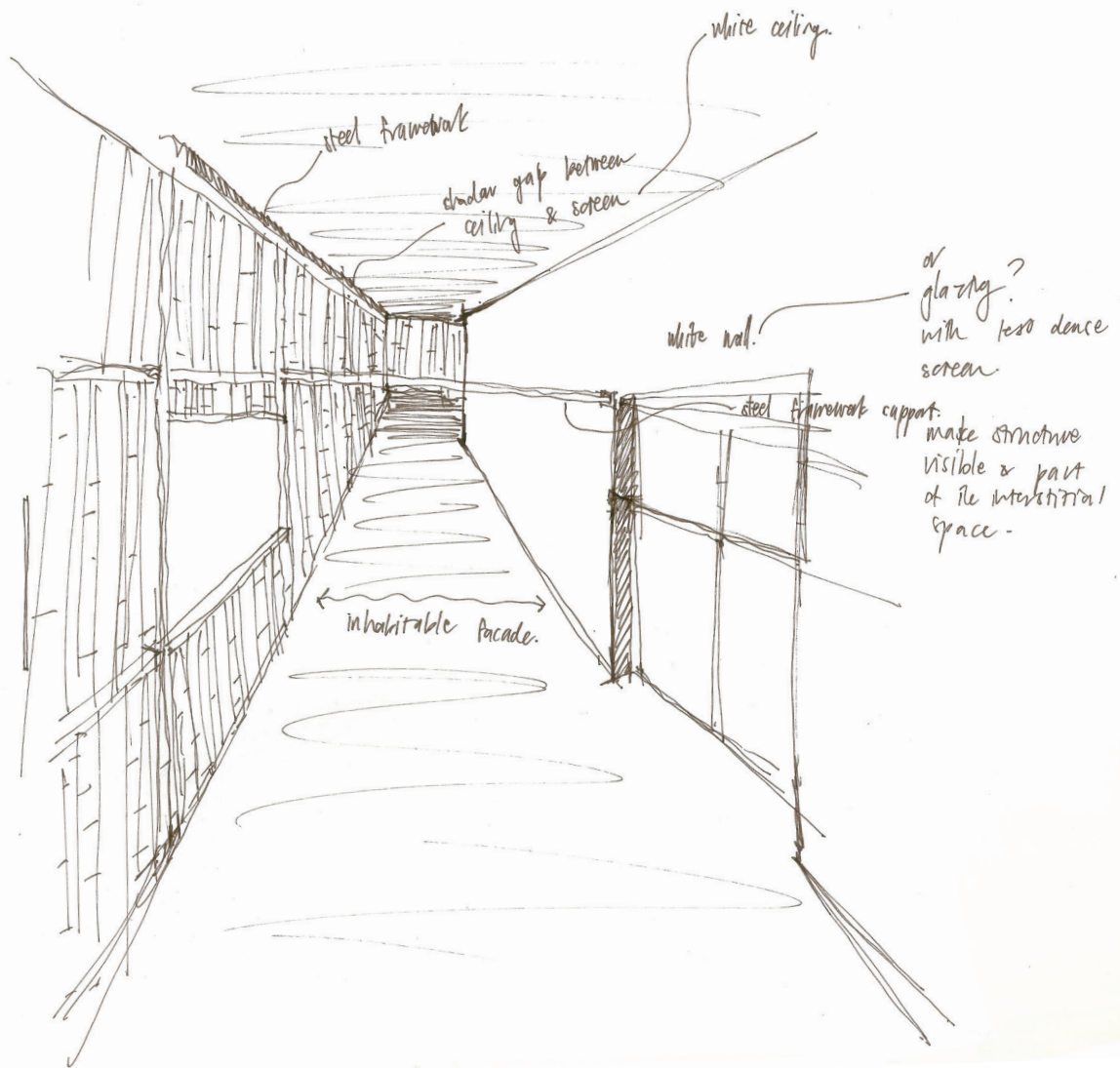
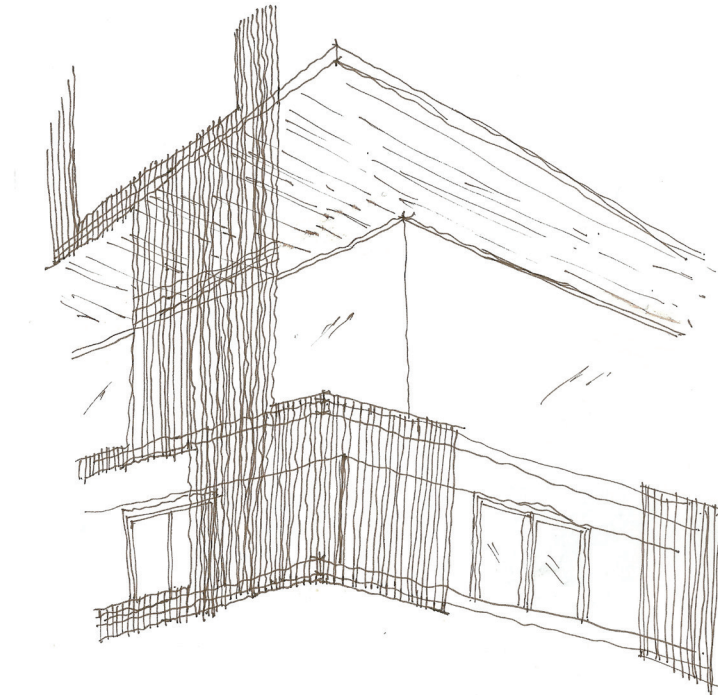


Figure 8.11 Exploration of facade materiality and form.  
(Source: Author, 2015)

## OCCUPYING THE VOID



The last aspect of the third iteration involved readdressing the facade. Aside from the massing arrangement within the site, the materiality of the facade would provide an important method by which the Women's Forum is able to contrast its surroundings. Timber screens would provide privacy while still allowing light penetration and an aesthetic that would contrast that of the context. The concern could be that privacy screens would limit the amount

of light entering the building. But due to the proximity of the 'second facades' of the Forum and the Pretmed building, privacy is needed. Without the use of screens, fenestration openings would have to be relatively small, controlled and covered. But by using moveable privacy screens, fenestration openings on the western facade of the building can be much larger, allowing more light in, with the screens providing privacy when needed.





## OCCUPYING THE VOID

The building has begun to compose itself as a unified whole of the various components that encompass the Void. The various components of the building are discussed in their finalised conditions.

### The Women's Forum Space

The Forum space is located on the first floor of the building and at the base of the central void. Amphitheatre stairs play host to a range of different activities while forming part of the main movement path on the first floor. Daily social interactions are accommodated while also providing seating for lectures or forums to occur when needed. Floors at higher levels and the central staircase look into the void, providing additional connection to the forum space.

### Into the Void

The Void in the building has finally found a form of expression. All of the solid volumes for offices connect to smaller void spaces creating opportunity for interaction between various organisations and between women. The ground floor staircase from the Reception forms the main entrance point into the building and it is from this point that the journey into the void begins. From the Main staircase, one enters the Forum Space which

sits at the base of the Void. An unoccupiable central void creates a cavern-like space within the building, connecting the smaller social voids within the building and to the forum space below. The social spaces form a network, linking to the void, creating a social space of connection throughout the building. The smaller social spaces provide various forms of publicness. These intimate spaces branch off to the sides of the central void space. Connections to the outside through balconies are also provided. More public spaces of appropriation are provided where people feel comfortable to appropriate for a limited space of time in order to have a conversation. A meeting or take a break between classes or from work.

OCCUPYING THE VOID



Figure 8.12 Ground Floor Plan with Arcade NTS. (Source: Author, 2015)

### **Places of Publicness and Places of Invitation: The Ground Floor**

*'Architecture is not simply about space and form, but also about event, action, and what happens in space.'* - Bernard Tschumi, The Manhattan Transcripts, 1976-1981

The public ground floor creates a space for identity and dialogue. Places of publicness and places of invitation are created. Cross-programming of spaces allows for a variety of events to occur. Paving used on the ground floor within the site extends outward onto the pavement, making the first announcement of the building's presence. Low, wide steps combined with seating space as well as planters are positioned inside the site. This open space provides the opportunity for public gatherings or marches to assemble on the steps of the Women's Forum.

There is no hierarchy between the reception space and the coffee stand, adding to the informal, welcoming nature of the entrance. The interior extends into the public realm. An exhibition space

is able to be arranged according to a variety of needs, ranging from exhibitions to lectures to outside movie screenings. The ground floor is therefore able to accommodate public discussions in the exhibition space as well as the space for gatherings for marches or rallies at its entrance. At specific points, the facade is able to open up completely or close up while still allowing views into the interior, depending on the time of day, weather conditions or the nature of event occurring in the space. This also allows spaces on the ground floor to maintain a level of security while providing possibility for interaction with the public realm.

The southern end of the site is where the connection to the Tramshed is made. It allows for continued movement through the site yet is not boldly visible or announced from the pavement. This allows for a level of privacy and seclusion from busy city life.

OCCUPYING THE VOID

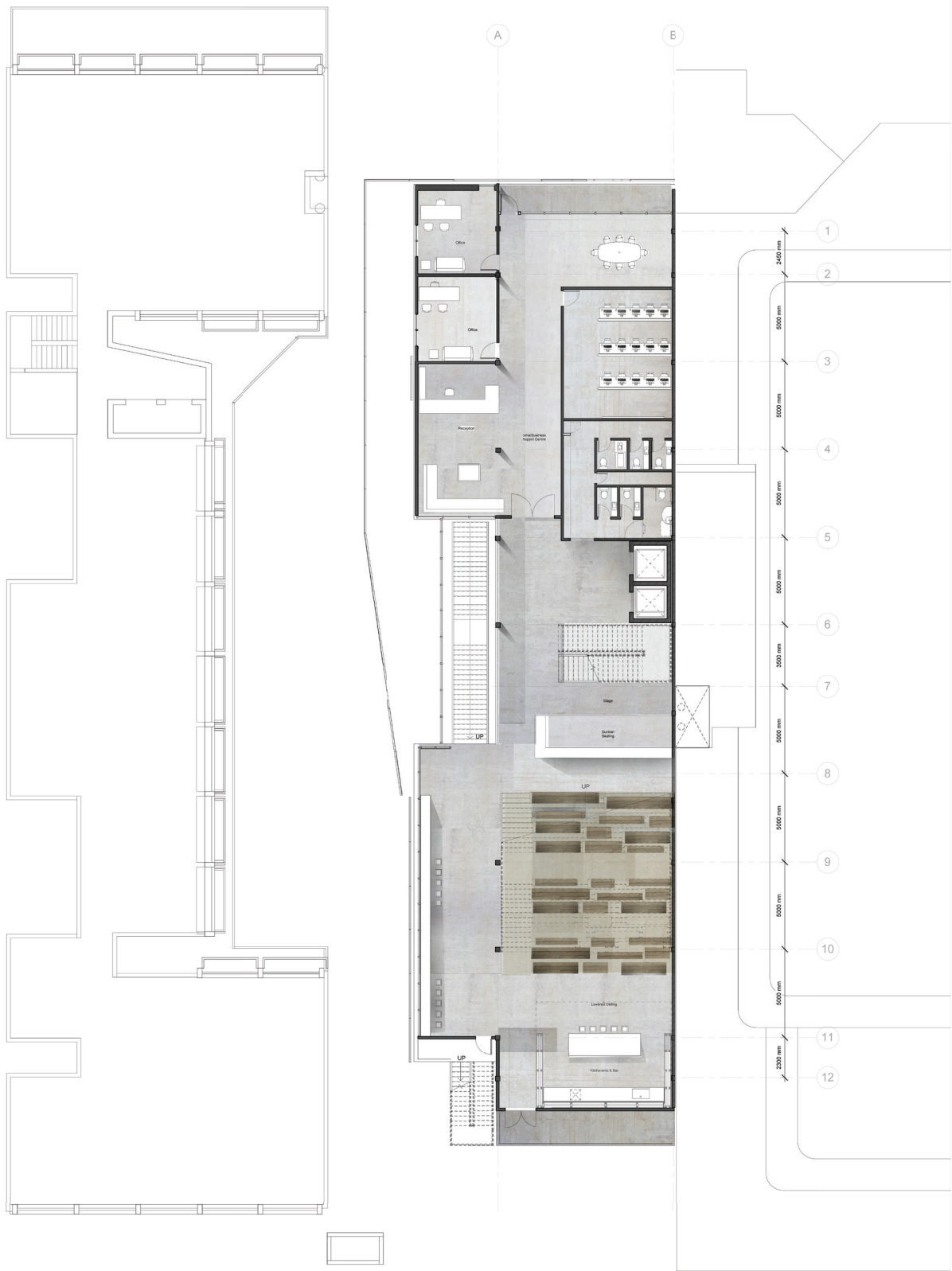


Figure 8.13 First Floor plan with Small Business Support Centre and Forum NTS. (Source: Author, 2015)

OCCUPYING THE VOID

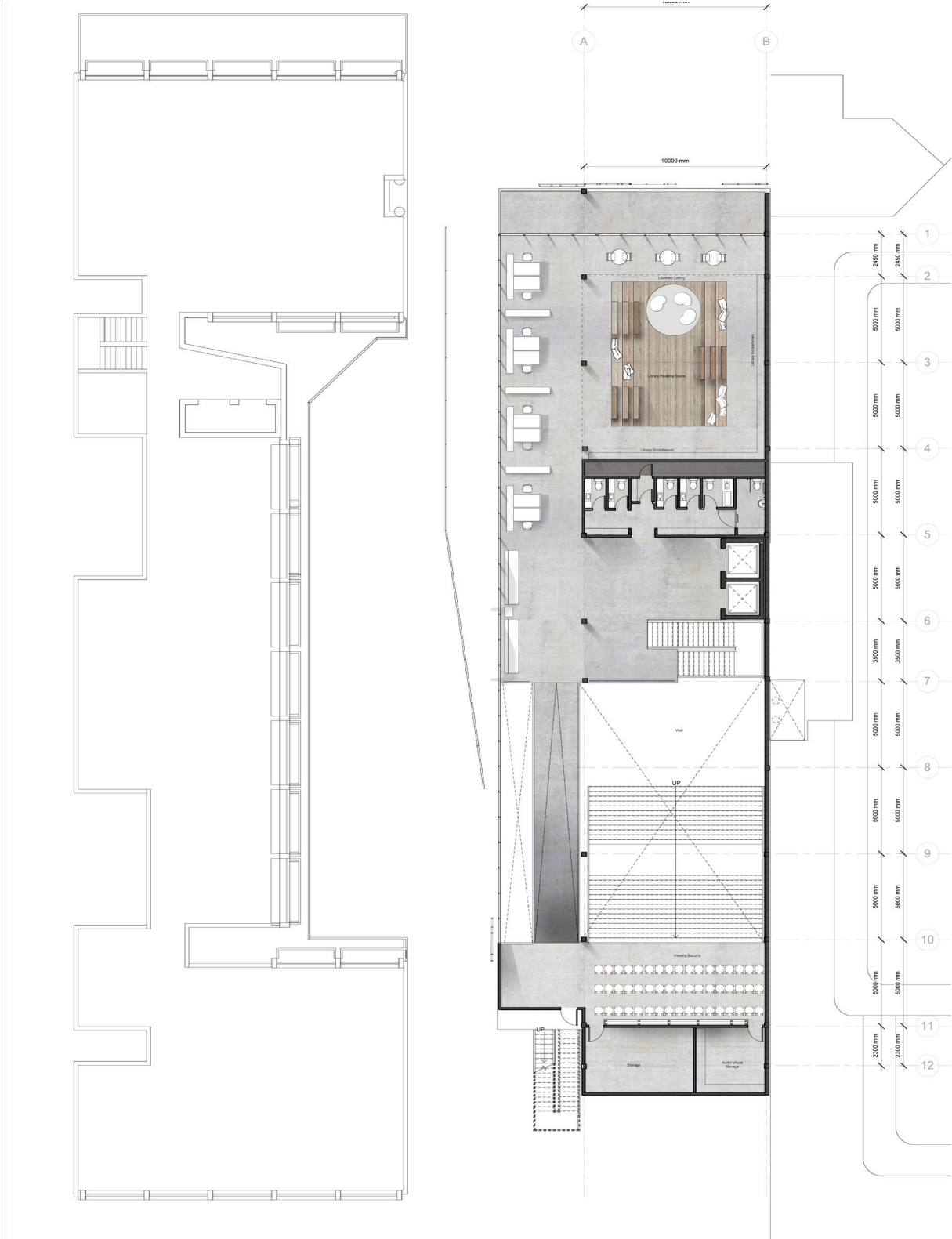


Figure 8.14 Second Floor plan NTS. (Source: Author, 2015)



OCCUPYING THE VOID

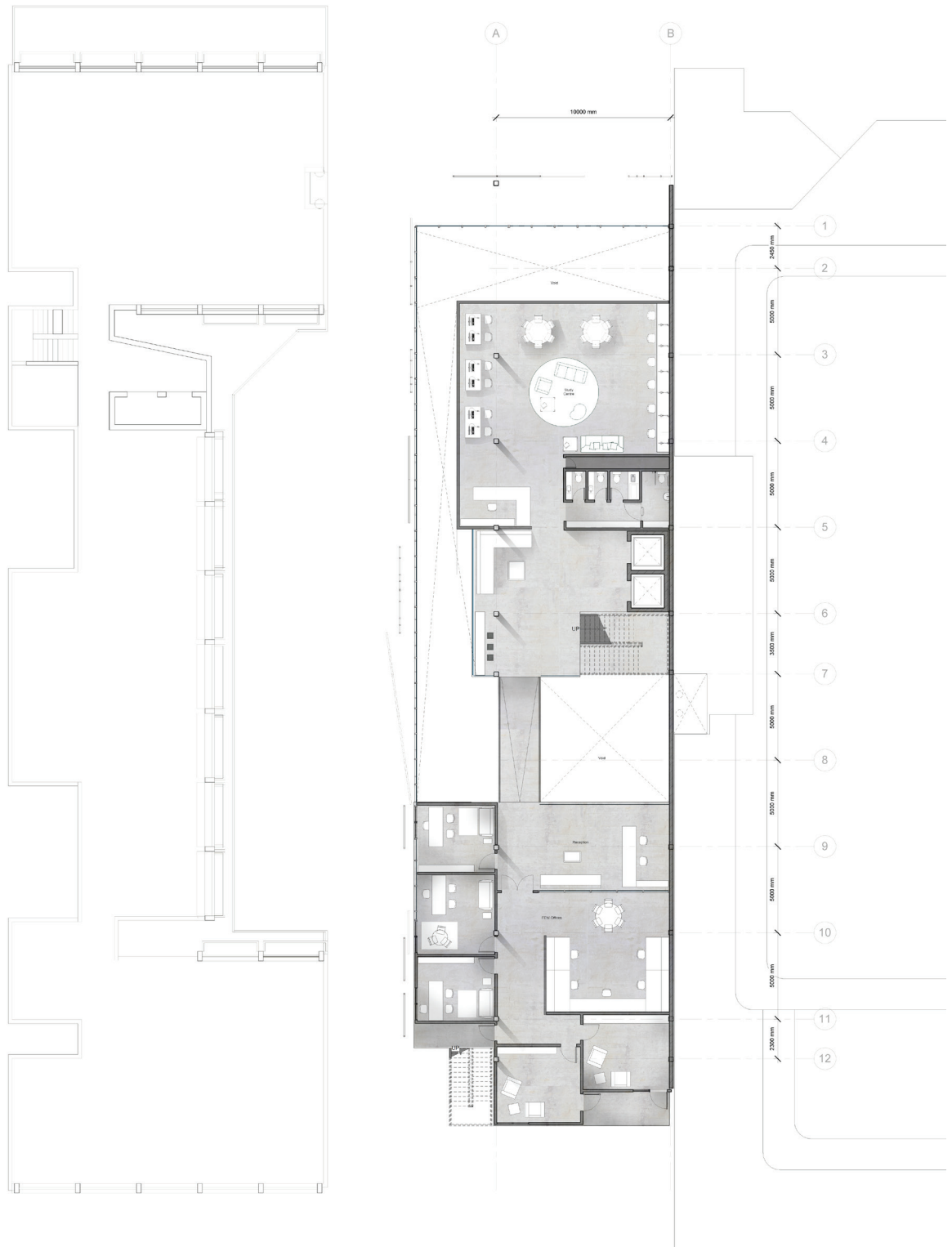


Figure 8.15 Third Floor Plan. NTS. (Source: Author, 2015)

OCCUPYING THE VOID

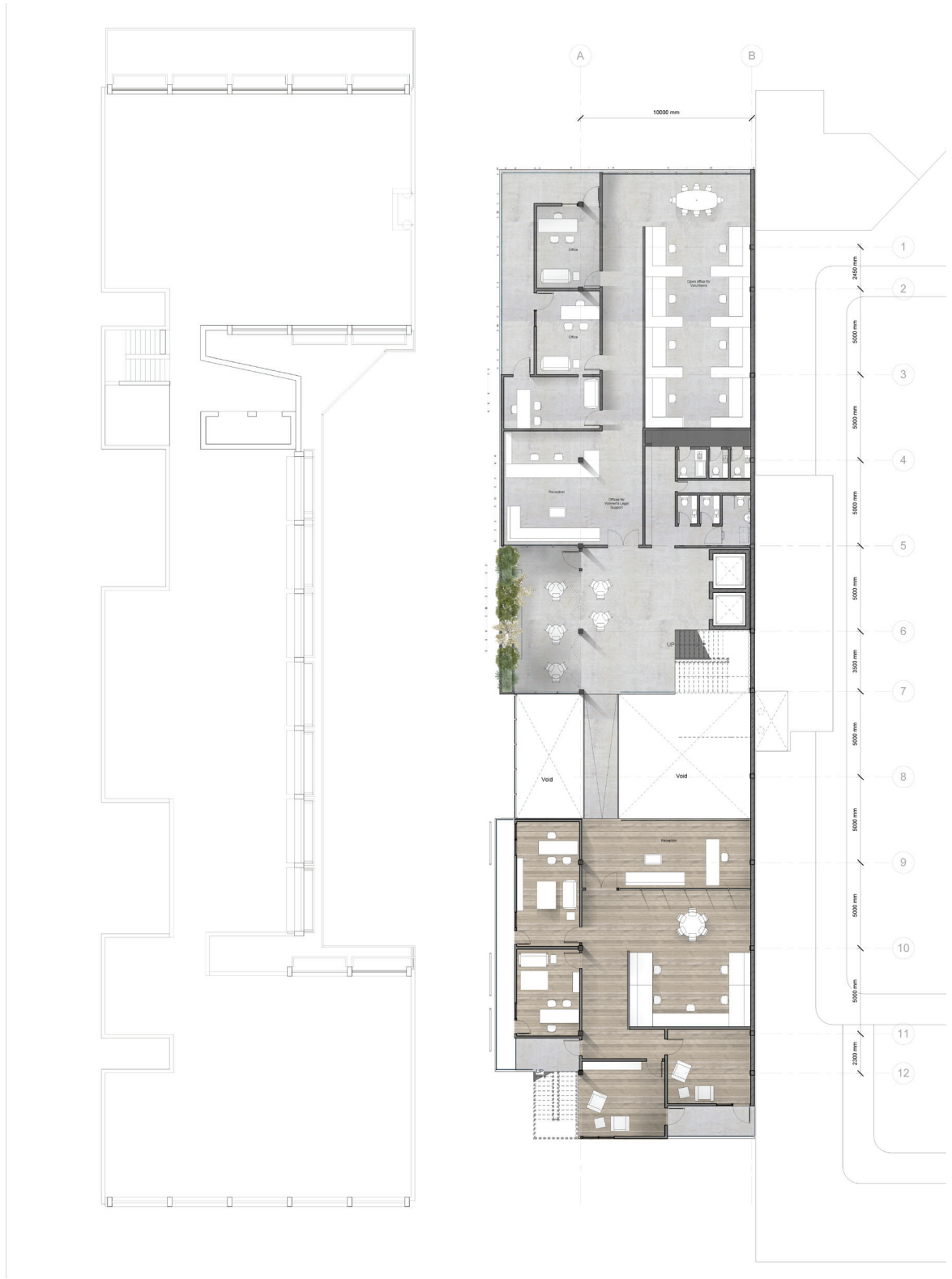


Figure 8.16 Fourth Floor plan. NTS. (Source: Author, 2015)

OCCUPYING THE VOID



Figure 8.17 Fifth Floor Plan. NTS. (Source: Author, 2015)

### OCCUPYING THE VOID

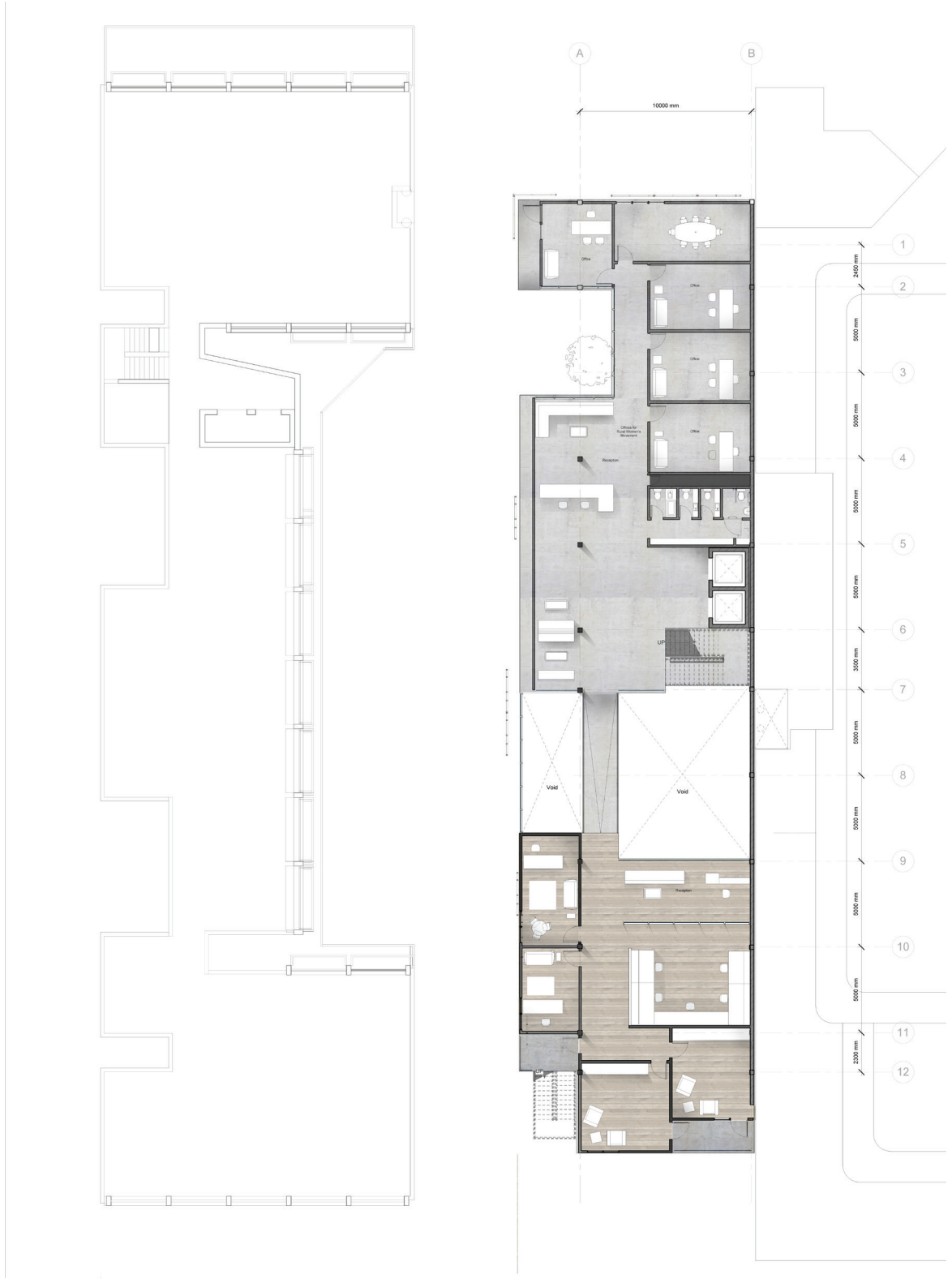


Figure 8.18 Sixth Floor plan. NTS. (Source: Author, 2015)









## OCCUPYING THE VOID

### The Facade

*“The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside.”*

Deleuze – Foucault p.96-97

By inhabiting space, we separate and order it. Through this, we categorise people and objects as either within these borders or outside of them; as either ‘x’ or ‘not x’. The inhabitation of space is the process of including and ‘othering’. Architecturally, walls are seen as the boundaries between the inside and the outside: elements that hold or maintain the tension between interior and exterior. Therefore, the facade is expanded and graded in order soften this boundary. This creates inhabitable spaces within the the interstitial spaces between

the facade and the building walls. Latticed timber screens create the facade of the Forum. Timber gives a tactile nature and contrasting the materiality of the context. The screens relate to the functions within, leaving large gaps where public activity occurs on the interior, while providing visual protection for more private functions on the offices. Screens are moveable, creating an animated, living character on the facade.

The screens create an animated, living character on the facade and wrap around the building, continuing into the site and articulating the ‘second’ facade in the Dialogue space.

The timber elements of the facade continue into the building, bringing exterior elements inside, softening the distinction between inside and outside.

Figure 8.19 (Previous Page) Long Section through building showing central vertical Void and smaller horizontal Voids (Source: Author, 2015)

OCCUPYING THE VOID



Figure 8.20 Arcade with Second Facade above (Source: Author, 2015)



OCCUPYING THE VOID



Figure 8.21 Arcade with Second Facade  
(Source: Author, 2015)

OCCUPYING THE VOID

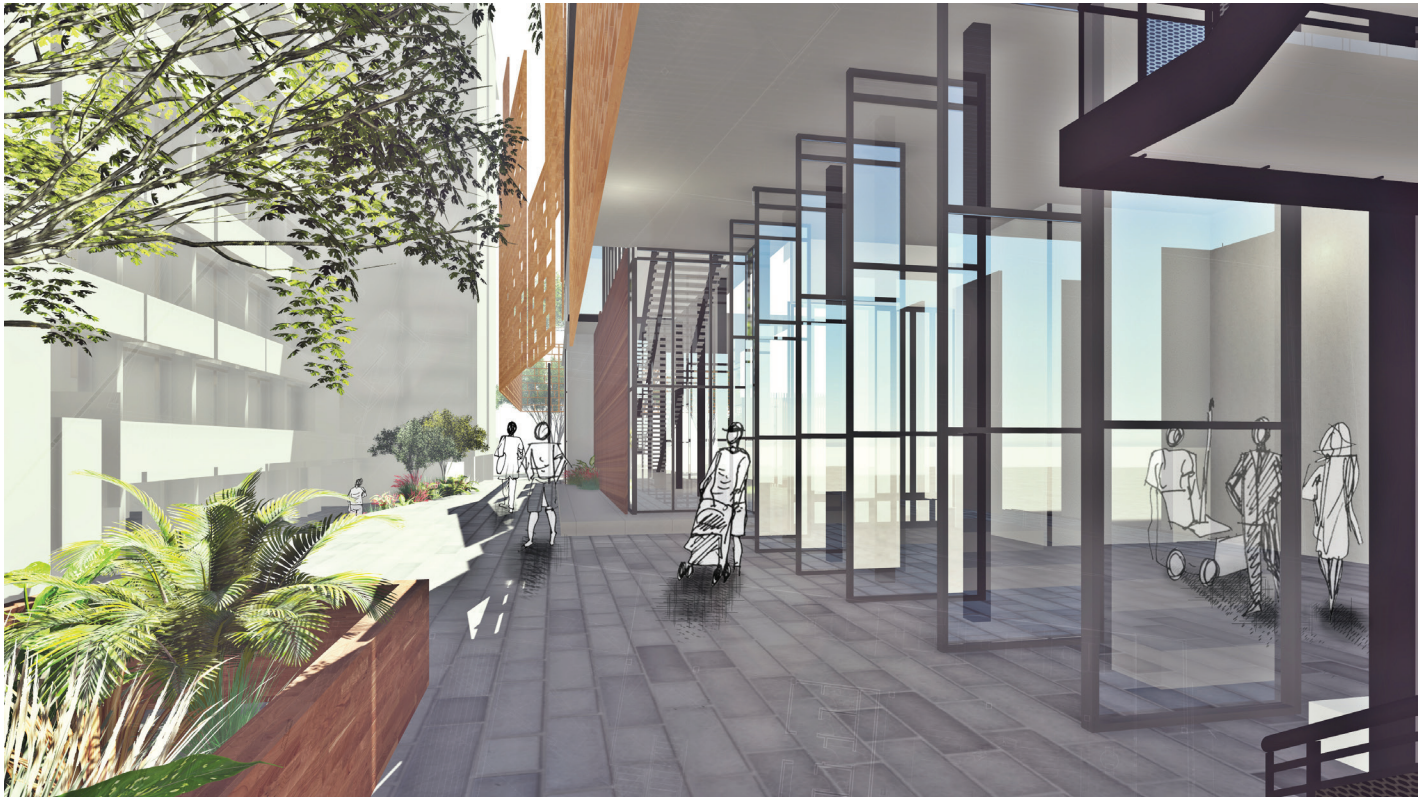


Figure 8.22 Arcade with Second Facade  
(Source: Author, 2015)



OCCUPYING THE VOID



Figure 8.23 Arcade with Second Facade  
(Source: Author, 2015)

OCCUPYING THE VOID



Figure 8.24 North Elevation (Source: Author, 2015)



OCCUPYING THE VOID



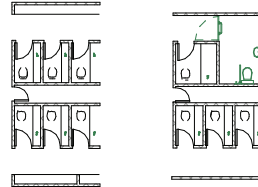
Figure 8.25 Reception with Coffee Bar (Source: Author, 2015)

OCCUPYING THE VOID



Figure 8.26 Void viewed from Forum Amphitheatre (Source: Author, 2015)

## OCCUPYING THE VOID



### Ablutions in the Building

Architecturally, the ablation facilities in a building present a subtle way in which architecture forces its users to conform to preconceived structures of society, in extreme cases, creating architectures of exclusion. While this doesn't have an effect on the majority of users, for those who struggle with gender identity, such as people in the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender) community, explicitly gendered ablation facilities can be problematic. Due to the smaller levels of occupation in the Women's Forum, as well as to the specific type of visitors and occupants of the building, unisex ablation facilities are provided that do not require specific decisions to be expressed regarding gender. Sufficient facilities for baby changing are also provided in gender-less cubicles.

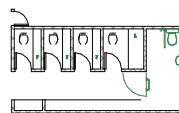
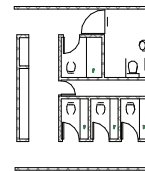
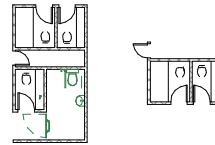
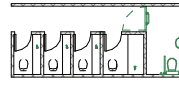


Figure 8.27 Iterations of unisex bathroom layouts.  
(Source: Author, 2015).



## Conclusion

The design development that was documented in this chapter sought to explore the architectural representation of the feminine within architecture. Through conceptual investigations, the Void was identified as a space that creates a dimension for rewriting existing structures of social interaction. This inherent characteristic can only be explored if the Void is understood as a space that lacks strict definition in which it creates the dimension of possibility, providing women with the space to define the nature of their spatial relationships on their own terms.

It is not the intention of this dissertation to argue that one can design spaces that are inherently feminine as opposed to those that

are masculine. This is a shallow interpretation of the notion of femininity in architecture. Instead, the notion of representing the feminine in architecture is done through an analysis of relationships and social codes. To acknowledge the multiplicities that are evident within (social) space is to acknowledge 'the other' that has been ignored. Through occupying 'the void' that is represented by the site, and by placing focus on the interstitial and in-between spaces in the building, a place is created for negotiation of spaces as well as a place for identity and discussion within the building through the opportunity to rewrite the relationships between occupants.