

"The time has come for the lyricism of control, for calm as an ideal, for bringing the Virgilian dream, the peace of the countryside enjoyed with the self-consciousness of the city dweller, into the notion of the city himself."¹

ARCHITECTURE AND THE VOID: PERCEPTIBLE FORMLESSNESS

Douglas Hindley

Project Intent

The massive and monumental Old Chicago Main Post Office, in disuse since 1995, is, in its very uselessness, a very intriguing building. In attempting to conceive a new use for the structure, there is the challenge to create something functional without sacrificing the building's essential distinct qualities that were essential in its original use as Chicago's central post office. By rejecting bland solutions such as mixed-use reassignments, it becomes possible to consider that the Old Chicago Main has potential as more for Chicago than simply another real estate location. The building as it stands may hold some intrinsic value.

For all of its wonderful park spaces and iconic structures, Chicago lacks a single great interior space as can be found in the great cities of Europe. The Old Chicago Main, made open to the public, could serve that purpose, without aping the expected public uses of Chicago other civic spaces. Through the simple act of erasure, reducing the interior of the Old Chicago Main to its most basic parts, a canvas can be created so that the public may enter and use the building as best fits them. It can become a refuge from the spatial qualities of an urban setting, where its very size and scale can mingle with formlessness in a way unseen in regular urban existence. The Old Chicago Main's value in this conception does not come from standard measures of beauty, but from a notion of the sublime that is more connected with empty space itself. With this building we hope to explore the void, vacancy, emptiness as qualities in their own right. At its most ideal, this project aims to define a possible use and appreciation of built space that is alien to the standard notions of architecture.

¹Alison and Peter Smithson, "The Charged Void: Urbanism," pg. 93
2005, The Monacelli Press, Inc., New York, NY

Overview

The project's ultimate form engages extensively with notions of the void and emptiness. However this is not the place to start our investigation, in order for those ideas to have their fullest impact. Rather, this is the rare project where the final ideas become clearer when the entire thought process leading up to them is examined. This begins at the most basic level, recounting the rich history of the Old Chicago Main itself, followed by my own interim proposals. Once these issues are firmly established, the true task of laying out and elaborating our unique spatial concerns will commence. The importance of emptiness will be justified, leading to an explanation of how it impacts our proposal for the Old Chicago Main. Our hope in this organization is to slowly lead the reader to sense the importance of these notions, rather than simply proclaim that importance. We wish to comprehend the void.

A Brief History of the Old Chicago Main

The Old Chicago Main Post Office was initially built in 1921 by the architecture firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. The building, situated in the Near South Side of the Chicago Loop between Harrison and Van Buren, was a six storey facility meant to serve all of Chicago's postal service needs.

A major expansion took place in 1932, finalizing the building in its present form. At the time of this expansion, the building was hailed as the largest post office in the world, and for decades it remained the largest active post office in North America. While the site reads as a single building, which for all purposes it is, in technicality the Old Chicago Main is in fact three buildings.² The Old Building from 1921 was dwarfed by an office building to the north, and more notably by the massive southern sorting building. As a visual statement, the building is a combination of Art Deco and Classical Revival styles, serving as a governmental monument to its function. The great moment of the building occurred once a patron entered its grand lobby, standing witness to a series of murals depicting the history of the U.S. Postal Service.

Despite the significant hugeness of the Old Chicago Main, by some accounts nearing 3 million square feet, it would by no means remain the largest structure

²Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. "Old Chicago Main Post Office, 2007 Critical Examination Program Report"
2007, Hines GS Properties, Chicago, IL
(From the Rick Levin & Associates Old Chicago Main bidders packet)

even within Chicago. In 1930, Graham, Anderson, Probst and White designed the similar Merchandise Mart, a building with a volume 20 times that of the Old Chicago Main's. There is very little about the Main that is superlative. What it does have, though, is a certain significance of site. In 1952 the Eisenhower Parkway was constructed passing directly underneath the building's foundation. Eight lanes of freeway hurtle directly through the structure, as traffic moves from the city outskirts into the Loop. The building's notoriety comes largely from the fact that many people interact with it on a daily basis. The mere presence of such a massive structure in the dense, valuable Loop area is also striking. Its short, squat form sits in contrast to the near Willis (nee Sears) Towers, while having a comparable interior square footage.

Rail was the primary means of transporting mail throughout the U.S. at this point in the Postal Service's history, though newer transportation technologies were constantly added. The Main's siting reflects the importance of rail. This building occupies the air space of Union Station, allowing multitudinous rail lines to pass directly underneath the structure, with several lines branching off to directly feed the building. Being centrally located within Chicago, the Main could service automobile traffic quite successfully, especially once the expressway was connected to the building.

The Main's primary purpose was distribution of the mail throughout a larger geographical region than simply Chicago. Its interior organization reflects that. Mail not intended for the city would be reorganized within the building, then sent back down to different trains in the basement for delivery elsewhere. Each floor had its own separate purpose:

Main floor –	Customer services
Second floor –	Receiving platforms
Third floor –	Distribution
Fourth floor –	Primary separation
Fifth floor –	Secondary separation
Sixth floor –	Canceling
Seventh floor –	Special delivery
Eighth floor –	Mechanical section
Ninth floor –	Repair ³

In its way, the Old Chicago Main could be considered to be an architectural reflection of the scale of regional distribution. The building's size, height and location are physical manifestations of mail services throughout the greater

³Ibid.

Midwestern region. The very notion of mail distribution is ultimately essential to the Main's form.

Changing technologies and business practices would lead to an end of the distribution system in the 1960s. By this time mail service, once the primary means in the United States of personal correspondence, was 80% business mail. Mail loads were increasing. In 1966, the Old Chicago Main was inundated with over 10 million parcels, clogging the region's mail service to a standstill.⁴ This is but an example of the organization-wide problems that led the U.S. Postal Service to adopting the ZIP code format in 1963.⁵ Soon the Main was no longer a regional distributing center, but a post office dedicated solely to serving Chicago. Still, the ever-increasing amount of business mail (especially junk mail), and the needs of newer mail sorting technologies, led to the Main eventually proving inadequate yet again.

In 1995 a new central post office facility opened directly to the south of the Main. This site presently serves as the central Chicago post office. From this point on, the Old Chicago Main would be effectively uninhabited, unused, a greying monument to its former purpose. With the building's addition to the National Registry of Historical Places in 2001, officials made a token effort to prevent the Main's aging. Still, the building fell into disrepair, with windows breaking, concrete crumbling, and the machinery inside going to rust. For a while the building's only function was as a filming site, most notably when the Joker robbed it at the start of *The Dark Knight*.

While the building itself remained mostly inactive for well over a decade, developers and architects would often consider what could be done with such a structure. Countless proposals have been made, with the majority of them falling under predictable patterns. The obvious solution to many has been to transform the building into a mixed-use structure, providing a combination of residential units, office spaces, shopping facilities, and so forth. These efforts have never made any real-world impact, despite their practicality, for the very fact of the building's size. Floorplans of individual floors stymy efforts to assign traditional housing units, for the floors are too deep and too wide for most purposes. The Main's distinct qualities that likely draw many designers to consider it also prove to be the elements that hold them up. "In a building beyond a certain size, the scale becomes so enormous and the distance between center and perimeter, or core and skin, becomes so vast that the

⁴<http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/pubs/pub100.pdf>

⁵U.S. Postal Service Official History
<http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/welcome.htm>

exterior can no longer hope to make any precise disclosure about the interior...Within such a building, the distance between one component and another, between one programmatic entity and another, also become so enormous that there is an autonomy or independence of spatial elements.”⁶

Other, more unique, proposals were made. Among them were ideas to turn the space into a casino, a water park or a convention center. One of the most interesting and aesthetically sublime notions was a proposal by architect John Ronan to turn the Chicago Main into a mausoleum. In his conception, the vast building could go from housing mail to housing bodies, a monument to the human scale of Chicago. A large ceremony surrounded the use of the reimagined building, with mourning barges traveling south down the Chicago River by candlelight. Processions would head from there into the building, where the former division of sorting systems would instead determine the ultimate resting place of the deceased.⁷ Much of this proposal’s beauty comes from how it asks the user to reevaluate the site’s vastness in far more challenging ways than a mere mixed-use development could.

As the building fell into ever-greater disrepair, the economic viability of quick redevelopments lessened. The mere cost of upkeep, not to mention upgrades, provided a major deterrent to any potential investors. Finally in August of 2009 the building was auctioned off by Rick Levin, with an opening bid of \$300,000. The London-based firm of International Property Developers North America Inc. won the auction with a bid of \$40 million. Their ultimate payment, made in October of that year, proved to be \$17 million. While the firm has remained frustratingly silent about their plans for the building’s reuse, this event suggests the possibility that something very concrete may happen to the building sometime in the foreseeable future.

⁶Rem Koolhaas, *Conversations with Students*, pgs. 15 - 16
1996, Architecture at Rice, Houston, TX

⁷John Ronan Architects “The Old Post Office”
<http://www.jarch.com/>

Foundations of My Own Project

My real interest in the Old Chicago Main started while the auction was taking place. The building's site and vastness, with their potential, were intriguing, a challenge to design. While considering what specific things could be done with such a building, I was eternally aware of what probably *will* be done with it. It will become a mixed-use property, much like nearly every other structure erected in the Near South Side during the recent economic booms. There was no particular appeal to this solution – it was too sanitized, too obvious, too separate from a true response to the building's history. But what could be done with the building?

Initially, my thoughts ran towards what specific programmatic needs Chicago was lacking.

Coming from the West, Illinois has always struck me by its flatness. Only the built elements provide any verticality. And while the park space is generous, it offers very little of the rugged, mountainous environment one takes for granted elsewhere. And though the parks are world-class, for many months during the wintertime they become far less usable, and the inhabitant of the city finds himself unable to escape the very urban fabric he finds himself in. A set of urban spatial anxieties, such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia, will be discussed later, providing greater justification for the uniqueness of the Main. Suffice to say that the Old Chicago Main provided, in my mind, a possibility to do something unique in the urban context that could alleviate those anxieties.

The Old Chicago Main Indoor Park

At first my exploration involved defining my project as an indoor park. Part of this park's intent was to be functional year round, especially in the wintertime, while the other (outdoor) parks of Chicago could not. An immediate theoretical difficulty presented itself, where the concept of what a park is proved a challenge to what I was trying to do. This project was to be interior, created in the large indoor space of the Old Chicago Main. It could not be the form of the park as we see it elsewhere in Chicago, simply transplanted indoors. There had to be something distinct about it. This project had to be a Great Indoor Space for Chicago.

“With this project, in contrast to contemporary city parks, the massive interior space suggests creating an escape from the business of the city. There should be variation to the indoor experience, ranging from busy to sparse, open to

enclosed, all of this as befits the programmatic uses and the users' experience."⁸
This is how the project was conceived at the time.

One of my primary theoretical efforts at this stage was to list the variety of programmatic uses that such a building could house. This listing was a little disorganized, a little freeform, where distinct activities were considered, such as picnicking, water activities, biking, horse riding, sports facilities, transportation, community uses, et cetera, et cetera. My hope was to use the former framework of the building's use, the manner in which mail was divided and sorted, as a way of determining how people would enter and experience the building; it would turn from a way of sorting mail to a way of sorting people.

The challenge was to distinguish this use from an exterior park. One difficulty was in defining how this building was a park without falling back on presumed notions of a park as a collection of plant-based landscaping features. As a result, I started developing rules for myself. There would be, at least in broad conception, no green space, no commercial space, a free-floating program filled with unprogrammed leisure space, and so forth. The piazzas of Italy and other exterior spaces not commonly thought of as parks became a major inspiration. Throughout, there was the idea that this building, though not hugely tall, allowed for a possibility of *vertically* oriented park space unlike can be found almost anywhere else.

An Essay of Interior Spaces

As design development took place, certain facts became apparent. Take too much away from the building, and it loses the purpose that was initially behind it. There is too much freedom in committing old sins of design. Leave too much, and it has not been appreciably transformed into a new use.

The concept of public space evolved in my mind, to the point where I stopped thinking I was creating something called a "park." Rather, the building was to be "an essay of interior spaces." The primary focus was no longer at all focused on defining what activities could take place, but defining different areas in which various activities *could* take place. This new title indicates the intended method of doing this. A great variety of differing interior spaces, all possible within the existing confines of the Old Chicago Main, would be assembled to explore the different experiences they could each convey.

⁸Douglas Hindley, "Old Chicago Main Indoor Park"

An earlier precis developed for this project, February 2010.

The simplest mean of understanding what my intents were at the time is to see how I expressed them. The scope of the project, as it stood then, is best stated in this compressed proposal:

The contemporary concept of public space⁹ is quite well established. Thoughts immediately turn to a park - outdoors, landscaped, horizontal. By thinking instead about a public space that has been removed from these associations, placed indoors and reduced to its most basic level, perhaps it could be possible to imagine public space in an entirely new way.

This project proposes looking at the disused Old Chicago Main Post Office in Chicago as a concrete location for examining these issues. In order to accomplish this, it will be necessary to form a means of clearly discussing the problems we seek to explore. A major aim of this project is to reconsider the Old Chicago Main as a public interior space, largely divorced from previous concepts of either the building itself or public space as a whole. Ideally, the project aims to examine possibilities for reuse of a building *as a building itself*, purely as an interior, without reference to extraneous uses. We define this *an essay of interior spaces*, a collection of the greatest possible amount of interior spaces and their differing experiences amassed in one location for public consumption.

Since this project's proposed aim is to create a essay of pure interior spaces, the programming should be organized around how the public may best use these spaces in and of themselves, with the various spaces becoming the new focus. As the Old Chicago Main should suggest certain interior spaces, it will provide the guide for deciding what kind of spaces will be possible.

By reducing the building to its barest structural elements - floors, exterior walls, structural elements, elevators and stairs - we can see how much of it is opened up to reinvention. In one sense, the building reads stronger in this reduced, minimized state, removed from the more obvious interior indicators of its prior specific use or future specific uses. The spaces we hope to define inside the building should retain this characteristic. As such, our first step is to

⁹For some time I had some confusion in regards to the difference between "public space" and other notions such as "civic space." Here I mean, in fact, "civic space." I have preserved my earlier error.

define potential spaces through further removal of materials such as floors whenever possible, to see what else can be created solely with the building as it stands.¹⁰

Various different spatial configurations were considered, all possible within the vertical and horizontal framework of the Main. Different single-floor spaces were listed, including entire floors, narrow hallways, enclosed rooms, and mazes. Likewise vertical arrangements considered included large great halls, stepped rises, tiered rises, narrow shafts, tall hallways and light wells. Complex amalgamations of these spaces were also contemplated, as well as uses of distinct elements such as the Main's expansive flat roof.

The more I explored these arrangements, the more complicated this conception became. This proposal was conceived to simplify design decisions. Instead it was taking precedence over the project's central issue, to convey the actuality of the building's potential. It seems any attempt to impose my own design wills upon the Old Chicago Main turned it into the very thing I wished to avoid. Perhaps the strongest statement was to devise the building with an absolute minimum of design.

An Introduction to Spatial Concepts

Forgoing extensive design is not the normal decision for an architect, but in the case of the Old Chicago Main it seems the *correct* decision. There was greater strength in a minimal approach. That also means that there is a greater need to justify this approach. What seemed obvious to me at the time, at least on an instinctual level, would not necessarily be apparent to an uninformed observer.

The intent of this project is to explore and create an architectural effect that has little precedent. The primary purpose is spatial, but not merely spatial, for all architecture is spatial. Rather, space itself is the central motive, with space functioning as a void or emptiness. Such a concept is alien to much architecture, and is difficult to define besides. For this reason, it is useful to explore concepts of space, obvious and obscure, in both their architectural and non-architectural contexts.

¹⁰Douglas Hindley, "An Essay of Interior Spaces"

An earlier precis developed for this project, March 2010.

Horror Vacui

“No fear without void, no calm without the appearance of a semblance of protection.”¹¹

A fear of empty space has long gripped mankind. This notion was first put into writing by Aristotle, announcing inaccurately but tellingly that “nature abhors a vacuum.”¹² This is a believable suggestion concerning emptiness. Still, thinkers over time would rephrase Aristotle’s conception into other realms, ultimately devising concepts to explain art, psychology, and other arenas.

The specific term *horror vacui* (the fear of empty space) was coined by Italian art critic Mario Praz in the 17th century. This idea was meant as a means of defining artworks which felt compelled to remove all moments of empty space from their frames. Praz conceived of the term specifically to describe qualities he saw in contemporary Victorian art, but it can be used to describe visual works from any time, before or after. “By their nature, artists fill space, whether they are covering a canvas from edge to edge, building volume in sculptural form, or creating environmentally scaled installations.”¹³

A quick history: Examples of *horror vacui* visuals can be found in Celtic manuscripts such as *The Book of Kells*, in Islamic miniatures, Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, and much modern outside art including the graphic art of Vaughan Oliver, the comics of Robert Crumb, and psychedelic artwork of the 60s and 70s. Indigenous cultures throughout the world practice such a style in their independently created styles, seen in scrolls, clothing, hieroglyphics, and so on. Such an approach has even been institutionalized, with the Greeks from 900 to 1100 A.D. declaring it a fundamental aesthetic concern.

This visual notion has close ties to psychological concepts. Cenophobia is most closely related to the specific idea of *horror vacui*, though other spatial fears such as agoraphobia (or even claustrophobia) are related. Architectural theorist Anthony Vidler makes this the focal point of his work *Warped Space: Art,*

¹¹Legrand du Saulle, *Etude clinique sur la peur des espaces*, pg. 6 - 7
1878, V. Ariene Dalahaye, Paris

¹²Aristotle, “Physics”

¹³Nancy Spector, “The Museum as Catalyst: Artistic Installations at the Guggenheim”
2010, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, NY

Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture.¹⁴ He sees the development of the modern urban city environment as directly increasing our sense of *horror vacui*, changing the way people innately perceive their immediate physical environment. He thinks of man's fear of open spaces as being dictated by a "need to fill," an act of altering every element of our environment in order to control it better.

As a result, it is often uncommon to find creative works in whatever field that employ emptiness or the void as one of their central features. "The artistic embrace of emptiness is the exception to the rule."¹⁵ To many, the very purpose of the arts is to exert further control, making the use of emptiness not just an unusual aesthetic approach, but a notion many see as fundamentally opposed to many of the principals of the creative endeavor.

A History of Spatial Concepts

Man has always experienced space, long before he had the societal capacity of exploring it. On a purely physical level, man must interact with his environment, developing the hand-eye coordination necessary to cope in three dimensions. It has been hypothesized that man's original way of understanding space came about from a need for survival. Our feelings of safety or danger come about from spaces which would have one time been dangerous. Out in the open, for instance, early man would lack protection from hungry predators. Indeed, the need for architecture itself came about from the protective qualities of controlled, enclosed spaces.

For the majority of Western history, space in itself had very little importance, as a huge tradition following Aristotle was fundamentally opposed to exploring the vacuum. It was a concept unworthy of further exploration. Leibniz's philosophical thoughts suggest a standard Western concept of space. For Leibniz, space had no actuality, but was simply an abstract thought.¹⁶ Space functioned as a way of separating physical objects from each other. For space to have any meaning at all, there must be objects to define it; space could only be thought of in negative terms. This is the notion of an absence, a negative, which functions intellectually as the opposite of that which is true. The result of

¹⁴Vidler, Anthony "Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture" 2000, The MIT Press, MS

¹⁵Spector

¹⁶Gottfreid Leibniz, "Discourse on Metaphysics"

this mode of thought is that, even for someone like Leibniz, space was not often considered at all, as it would be of greater purpose to consider objects which actually exist and are palpable.

A change in this standard mode of thought occurs with Isaac Newton. His experimental and scientific inquiries into physics and the world yielded a need to think about space and dimensionality differently.¹⁷ In Newton's study of forces acting upon each other, he famously identified gravitational force. Gravity, however, proved fundamentally distinct from other forces in that it, unlike them, did not affect other objects directly. For the gravity of an object such as the Earth to have an effect upon a bird not in contact with it, the space in between them must be real. For a period of time there was debate about a substance called the aether, a physical entity which could account for this gravitation effect. Further scientific examinations would invalidate this notion, showing through observation that lack of such a phenomena.

As Newton applied his spatial theories upon the model of the universe, this changed the scientific conception of Earth's relation to the cosmos. Infinity became concrete. No longer was there simply a lack of objects outside of the Earth. There was a profound *emptiness* in the space in between. It is natural that a certain terror would accompany these discoveries. Seventeenth century thinker Blaise Pascal was perhaps the most eloquent in his fear, expressing a *sacred horror* in what he saw. "The silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me."¹⁸

One century later would see a different thought about how to read this emptiness. Immanuel Kant finds ways to discuss both the positive material qualities of objects and of their opposites, the formless: "The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a *formless* object, which consists in having no boundaries, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented."¹⁹ This is a central notion that will define our own exploration into a certain kind of architectural void. The benefits of a lovely object are in its beauty, its pleasure. The benefits of a lovely non-object are subtler and deeper, and are best appreciated by a completely different set of aesthetics. A means of reading the world defined through objects cannot be the most effective in examining something which takes no part in being an object.

¹⁷Isaac Newton, *Principia*

¹⁸Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

¹⁹Immanuel Kant, "The Critique of Judgment"

Scientific and mathematical advancements into the twentieth century would bring new technical means of contemplating space. Another fundamental truth concerning space, namely Euclidean geometry, was toyed with, creating hypothetical non-Euclidean mathematics with different fundamental rules. In an emerging science such as quantum mechanics, there appears to be a greater validity to a non-Euclidean framework. The notion that space is essentially curved is a radical one.

In Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity, he suggests that not only is space tied in with materiality, as Newton suggested, but it is also tied in with time - the famous space-time. This creates the notion that the qualities of a space change given how fast that space is traveling.

As Einstein's thought experiment for exploring these ideas involved a train, so did the public's spatial understanding also evolve due to the train. Authors such as Wolfgang Schivelbusch²⁰ and Paul Virilio²¹ suggest that, by trains reducing the time needed to pass from Paris to Berlin, people started to think of the space between those two cities differently. Distances appear to compress, to have less importance. Means of perceiving both space and time would grow more rapid throughout the twentieth century. Trains gave way to cars and to supersonic vehicles. Letters gave way to telegraphs, telephones, and eventually to the internet.

Up to this day, science continues to puzzle over new ways of understanding empty space. The hypothetical substance dark matter cannot be directly observed, but appears indirectly in unaccountable effects on gravity and light. Dark matter and related phenomena such as dark energy potentially occupy the vast percentage of matter in the universe, somehow accounting for much of the observed emptiness of space. The ongoing challenge of science is to create a language to discuss such *perceptible nothingness*.

All these means of understanding space combined with the prevalence of urban living, a means of existence quite distinct from the initial hunter-survivor model. In this context, people still perceived space largely by their old instincts, and so spatial sicknesses already noted such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia developed.

²⁰Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "The Railway Journey: The Industrialization and Perception of Time and Space"

1987, University of California Press, CA

²¹Steve Redhead, ed. "The Paul Virilio Reader"

2004, Columbia University Press, NY

Space in Architecture

"The history of architecture is the history of the sense of space."
August Schmarsow.²²

Since architecture by necessity exists in three dimensions, it is eternally tied to notions of space. One assumed essential element of architecture is the division between interior and exterior. The very beginning of theoretical architectural thought concerns itself largely with this division, and with the spatial focus it creates. "To enclose a space is the object of building; when we build we do but detach a convenient quality of space, seclude it and protect it, and all architecture springs from that necessity."²³ This can be seen in Western architecture formally as starting with the architecture of the late Roman period.

Nonetheless, since architecture developed parallel to philosophical and scientific thoughts concerning space, there was little need during the pre-Renaissance era for architects to concern themselves with the aesthetics of space as such. For instance, Gothic architecture was the work of various craftsmen, typically focused upon their own individual handy work, on a distinct *horror vacui* approach to building.

Simultaneous to Newton's discovery of space *qua* space, Western architecture began to think more specifically in terms of not just, for instance, the walls themselves, but of what went on in between individual walls. "The architect models in space as a sculptor in clay. He designs his space as a work of art."²⁴ The form of interiors, of passage from one space to another, took on greater importance.

Astoundingly, architectural and spatial thought in the East, so far unexplored, shows earlier moves towards Western science would later adopt. The Japanese spatial model is the easiest to explore, so it will be our focus. Fundamentally, Japanese architecture does not conceive of the distinction between inside and outside in the same way as Western approaches do; in Japan it is not a question of binary, of absolutes, but of degrees. A building may be designed to have varying levels of interior and exterior which change over the course of the day. Walls are added and removed so that a private bedroom space may become

²²August Schmarsow, "Theory of Raumgestaltung"
1991, The MIT Press, MS

²³Vidler, pg. 5

²⁴Ibid., pg. 5

opened to nature in the middle of the day when that is preferred.

An underlying element of Japanese architecture is the concept of “ma.” The best translation defines “ma” as a combination of space and time.²⁵ This is a fundamental cultural notion, and greatly predates Einstein’s scientific. Still, it points to a way of understanding how Einstein’s scientific theories may yet be explored aesthetically. Of course it is impossible to get a true grasp of “ma,” as it comes from a culture and language with a very different base set of notions than our own. Experiences of the same space differ. In visual terms, if a Japanese and American were shown the same image of a fish in a pond, the American would define it as a picture of a fish, while the Japanese would say it is a picture of a pond. The very nature of the image changes.

And so new aesthetic notions arrived in the West, coming not only from Japan, but from all over the world. At first, the adoption of their styles was purely decorative at first. It is no accident the Occident Oriental was ornamental. A Westerner could not see the essential qualities of Eastern architecture in the same way an Easterner could.

The fundamental change to Western architectural thought came about with the Modern era, when new building techniques and materials gave rise to the possibility of cities, which gave rise to new problems to be solved. All of a sudden architecture and theory became fundamentally entwined. The history of modernism can be written as a history of competing ideas of space.²⁶

Amongst these various modernist ideas, one of the most interesting for our purposes is Les Corbusier’s idea of *espace indicible*. A 1948 review of Corbusier’s work, *New World of Space*, describes Corbusier’s earlier overpowering visit to the Acropolis in Athens. Corbusier describes a sublimity very similar in feeling to Kant’s, where the very notion of architectural space changes:

Aesthetic emotion is a special function of space.

ACTION OF THE WORK on its surroundings: vibrations, cries or shouts, arrows darting away like rays, as if springing from an explosion. ... REACTION OF THE SETTING: the walls of the room; its dimensions, the public square, the expanses or the slopes of the landscape even to the bare horizons of the plain or the sharp

²⁵Michael Benedikt, “For an Architecture of Reality”
1992, Lumen Books, Santa Fe, NM

²⁶Schmarsow

outlines of the mountains – the whole environment brings its weight to bear on the place where there is a work of art. ... Then a boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, *accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space*.²⁷

Corbusier's description of the Acropolis, and of the Parthenon in particular, sees it afresh not simply as an object in and of itself, but inextricably entwined with the overall preexisting landscape. Something in Corbusier sees architecture as actualizing the potential of a landscape. Architecture acts as the essential ingredient to bring out nascent spatial qualities already there. Here, the exterior space surrounding the Parthenon, though outside, becomes in some way an interior. The Parthenon is but one part of this interior. There are elements here that are neither entirely of the setting or of the architecture, but are subtly and sublimely brought out on their own – a new way of reading an old building.

In considering our own investigations into the void, it is important to consider further how time itself plays into one's conception of space. Understanding how our sense of a space can differ over time is essential. Over the course of a day, the qualities of light, color, climate, and other immaterial factors can change significantly. Even the amount of time spent in a space alters our appreciation of it. Consider a location where one has the leisure to examine it, as opposed to a space one speeds through. The reading of such an area changes significantly, though nothing in the space itself is different. How time in its various permutations plays a part in our experience of space will play a major role in how our project develops.

Artistic Explorations of the Void

Our particular interest is in the void, that arena of space that is so often neglected in favor of the object. In fact, there is such a dearth of artworks where void is the primary focus that it becomes useful to consider a variety of different media and works where void *has* been explored.

To get a complete grasp of what issues are of greatest concern to this project, it is useful to think linguistically about the various words concerning void and their evocative impact. What follows are our areas of interest:

²⁷Le Corbusier, "New World of Space," pg. 9

- Void
- Vacuum
- Emptiness
- Blankness
- Nothingness
- Formlessness
- Erasure
- Abyss
- Absence
- Silence
- Ambiguity
- Vacancy
- Vortex
- Black hole

With these various terms all piled together, it is important to differentiate between some of their various meanings. A quick review of the dictionary reveals numerous differing, often contradictory meanings. For the first few terms on our list, we have provided the most pertinent dictionary definitions below:

Void – 1. an empty space; emptiness

2. a vacancy, vacuum

Vacuum – 1. a space entirely void of matter

2. an enclosed space from which matter, esp. air, has been partially removed so that the matter or gas remaining in the space exerts less pressure than the atmosphere (opposed to plenum).

3. the state or degree of exhaustion in such a closed space

4. a space not filled or occupied; emptiness; void

5. *Physics*. a state of lowest energy in a quantum field theory

Emptiness – 1. containing nothing, having none of the usual or appropriate contents

2. vacant; unoccupied

3. destitute of people or human activity

4. destitute of some quality or qualities; devoid

5. without force, effect, or significance; hollow; meaningless

6. *Mathematics*. (of a set) containing no elements

Among these terms, “void” is the one of greatest concern to us. Its definitions directly point to the need to understand vacuum and emptiness as well. In order to avoid confusion due to these words’ mathematical and scientific meanings, it is best to focus on what our ultimate goal in relation to voids is. Primarily, we hope to discuss artworks that evoke the Kantian and Corbusian notions of sublimity, works that achieve this end through the specific use of

emptiness as a tool. For now, it is best to keep these meanings in mind as we proceed to examine the void in art.

“Aspiring to (or seeking) the void and immaterial things, formless form works in reverse. Instead of starting with a conceptual nothing (blank sheet, *tabula ras*, vacant lot) and adding something, formless form begins with something and moves toward nothing - emptiness.”²⁸

For most architects, as indeed for most artists, the immediate thought when presented with something empty is to ask what may be done with it. To a painter, an empty canvas is not a work already, but a base for their own work. Modernism, for all that it wished to strip away the pointless and functionless elements of a building, too often retains a certain baroque *horror vacui* aesthetic.

Not unlike the malls, much contemporary high-style architecture lacks emptiness by being quite literally full. Full, if not of people and goods and pushy displays, then of Design. Ramps and catwalks, columns and rails, steps and grids and stepped grids, skylit crevasses, small things too big, big things too small, nineteen colours, composed furniture, art and more art, rotunda, little pyramids, pediment pieces, Arcadian tableaux, spaces within spaces within spaces overlaid and layered four deep with thin walls and theories, architectural origami... no room is left for us to enter. ... For these buildings are not only full of things coming and going, they are full of themselves and their cleverness.²⁹

So what works, in whatever medium, truly seek emptiness? This is not to mean simply works that engage a certain emptiness as their subject – Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” comes to mind – but works that use emptiness itself as an aesthetic mode. This is perhaps most easily understood in the visual arts, where it is simplest to frame the emptiness in terms of existing notions. Consider the various blank canvases, or white canvases, or otherwise plain paintings that provoke a response for how much they are unlike our concept of what a painting should be. More concretely, René Magritte is among those artists

²⁸Gary Paige, “Notes on Emptiness”
http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/cumulus/e_programs/posterpdf/s2_2.pdf

²⁹Benedikt

capable of actually painting a void.³⁰

Rauschenberg's erasure of de Kooning's drawing is a unique and valuable example of emptiness in art. While originally a work of illustrated art in itself, Rauschenberg uses it as its base canvas, adding nothing but taking away. The entire original sketch is eliminated, leaving only a blank, erased composition where something else once stood. Suddenly de Kooning's work is elevated too, since it ceases to be an object. Instead it becomes something which functions *within time*. This is similar to experimental film artists who have projected old movies that have since degraded, allowing the abstractions of physical degradation themselves become the art.

The most essential work of musical silence is John Cage's *4'33"*, a piano piece where the piano is never played. The pianist simply sits at the instrument for the duration of this three movement piece. Apart from the silence, however, such a work contains all the qualities of any other piano performance. The music comes from all other sounds heard during a performance, but not from the instruments themselves. Additional variations include the addition of stereo systems, meant to feedback the sound of the concert hall and audience itself. As with all works of emptiness, time is essential component. Though this is true for all music, it is so much more essential to *4'33"* that the title itself refers to the time it takes to play. For as much as it lacks musical notes, *4'33"* is still composed, with Cage making very distinct decisions about movements, duration, instruments, and so forth. Later performances have upped the work's ante, employing entire concert orchestras in a way that encourages new ways of understanding the piece.

Before we go any further, the notion of *medium* must be addressed. Since emptiness can be examined in many different artistic mediums, it becomes interesting to notice how each medium independently addresses the medium. Having just discussed music, it is very easy to picture a lack of music; the expression in a work like Cage's comes from how this removal emphasizes the other, arguably more arbitrary, elements of a musical performance. A visual medium such as painting likewise can emphasize the often-overlooked features of traditional painting, such as the canvas itself. In another format such as the stage play, it is harder to imagine emptiness in this way. Perhaps a "play" could be staged with a complete lack of set dressing, actors, dialogue, and so forth. The fact that nothing this radical has apparently been attempted suggests that

³⁰A work such as "Time Transfixed", depicting a train emerging from a fireplace, suggests a concrete surrealism of reinterpreting space, the train treating a solid wall as a traversable emptiness.

such an exploration could be less fertile in a field such as drama. On the other hand, it may simply have never been attempted, yet remain worthwhile.

So do we understand emptiness in a work of art entirely in relation to what we already know or presume to know about its medium? If this is true, it makes emptiness in art an essentially reductive notion, like self-negating post-modernism. But such a reduction cannot answer to the sublimity in pure emptiness as noted by Kant and Le Corbusier. The reductive viewpoint defines emptiness in preexisting terms, comparing it against the beauty of standard art. But if we start to consider emptiness as its own thing, we can begin to compare separate emptinesses against each other rather than against form.

Architecturally, the modern era has been interested in removing the pointless elements of building. Despite this, there are relatively few buildings that wholly, unequivocally embrace emptiness – perhaps because it is difficult to build a void from scratch. The first truly empty work that exists, at least partially, in the architectural realm is Yves Klein's 1958 bare exhibition at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void*. The result was not architecture, for Klein is not an architect, but an artist's commentary upon architecture. The decision in this exhibition was to add nothing, making the exhibition instead about the preexisting gallery space itself. For the exhibition, Klein in fact stripped the gallery empty save for a single cabinet, painting every surface white. "My paintings are now invisible and I would like to show them in a clear and positive manner."³¹ The grand opening was a carefully orchestrated affair, with intelligentsia queuing up to be led through a blue curtain, only then to discover how little was physically present. By couching the work in the ceremony of high culture, Klein could create a provocation much like Cage did.

Vacant gallery spaces have become common enough in the art world that a 2009 exhibition at the Pompidou in Paris called *Le Vide (The Void)* is an empty exhibition of empty exhibitions (including Klein's), 12 in total. What becomes interesting here is how the void can be used to champion totally separate ideas in the different galleries. The void can function as minimal art (Robert Barry), to question the understanding of exhibition spaces (Art & Language), to modify the user's experience (Stanley Brown), to experience the qualities of an exhibition space (Robert Irwin or Maria Nordman), as radicalness in saying "I quit!" (Laurie Parsons), to highlight the architecture (Bethan Huws), or for

³¹Yves Klein, *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void*
1958, Galerie Iris Clert, Paris

economic reasons (Maria Eichhorn).³² The mere fact that different artists can use the same tool of emptiness to state distinct obvious points suggests that there is greater possibility in the artistic uses of void than most people would consider.

It becomes harder in true architecture to identify genuine works of vacancy or void. The suggestion has been made by the curators of the New York Guggenheim, in regards to their recent "Contemplating the Void" exhibition, that the Guggenheim as designed by Frank Lloyd Wright offers up an example of an architectural void.³³ The Guggenheim's interior gallery space is dominated by a multi-storey emptiness, a now-iconic design that was initially greeted with questions by reviewers who considered it invalidated the function of a gallery as a viewing space. While Wright's approach was, in architectural terms, a fairly radical approach to standard spatial concerns, it is not *pure* in its embrace of emptiness – an element essential to draw out the sublime qualities we seek.

So why do we even bring up the Guggenheim? The "Contemplating the Void" exhibition mentioned is a project, on the museum's 2010 fiftieth anniversary, where 200 separate architects have been asked to add their own design insights into Wright's void. The majority of the proposals currently on display are dishearteningly standard in their response. Most architects, as Rem Koolhaas would say, apparently feel the need to somehow fill this vacuum, using it as a canvas to explore their own ideas which often have very little to do with void itself. As the museum more favorably puts it, these various notions include "the return to nature in its primordial state, the desire to scale the building, the interplay of light and space, the interest in diaphanous effects as a counterpoint to the concrete structure, and the impact of sound on the environment." One of the more unique proposals suggests transporting a copy of the void into a balloon hovering above the museum's exterior. Despite the generally obvious series of suggestions on display, the notion of this endeavor is inspiring. In conception, the possibility of working in the medium of the void has been opened up to a multitude of artists, giving them the opportunity, at least, to respond to it. The idea that the void can become a canvas for further artists to use, not to fill, but to emphasize, points to what I hope the Old Chicago Main project could achieve.

³²Various artists, *Le Vide(The Void)*
2009, Le Pompidou, Paris

³³The Guggenheim Museum, *Contemplating the Void: Interventions in the Guggenheim Museum*
http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/exhibition_pages/void/index.html#/museum-as-catalyst

The *Mine the Gap* project in Chicago suggests how concepts of the void may apply to practical architectural concerns. Here, the void in question is both physical and economic. This contemporary competition considers the present foundation hole left by the unfinished Calatrava Spire project. While that building, or some other, may ultimately be moved into the gap, as it stands Chicago is marred by a prominently located chasm that demands a response. Proposals for this competition will concern the economic realities of a situation where previous architectural projects are no longer viable. "Once the motor of real-estate speculation has stalled, what can we use to propel ourselves, and the discipline, forward?"³⁴ Architects will have to respond to such conditions in a truly creative manner, discovering architectural solutions that have rarely been considered in this day and age of mega-projects.

Our Project as it Stands – Architecture and the Void

Having now briefly examined space and emptiness in all their multitudinous forms, we must return to the Main. The motivations to apply emptiness to this grand building become clear, as do the issues of dealing with void. The Old Chicago Main can become our canvas for formlessness.

The act of driving underneath the Main is a far more intense experience when one is aware of its use, or non-use. In the setting of downtown Chicago, it is bizarre indeed to consider one of the largest and most prominent structures is serving no purpose. Slightly rephrasing this set up, a similar sense must come about when one thinks that this building is *empty*.

A city is an intensely dense place. One's assumption when observing a building is to consider what it does, or what to do with it. There *must* be a point to that building, there must be something taking place in there that is the reason for that building. A building cannot exist for its own sake, it cannot be what we would consider to be empty. In Rem Koolhaas' assessment, "blankness is an important quality that is completely ignored, especially by architects...Our profession is indoctrinated to never allow something remain empty, or undecided, or undetermined. That goes from the large scale to the small scale."³⁵

³⁴Chicago Architectural Club, "2010 Chicago Prize Competition: Mine the Gap"
<http://www.chicagoarchitecturalclub.org/competitions/competitions.aspx>

³⁵Koolhaas, pg. 63

The scale of the building alone is of itself of great value, quite divorced from architectural notions. Leaving the Old Chicago Main pure in its immensity, rather than toying with its qualities, preserves the indefinable qualities inherent in its size. Koolhaas would again agree with this assessment, defending it against the standard architectural impulses to design further:

The most confusing index of this enormous scale is that the building is impressive simply through its mass, through its appearance, and through the dumb fact of its own existence. It appears impressive, if not beautiful, whether the architect influences it or not. The amoral position of such a building, the effect of the scale alone and its intimidating volume, is something that is very disturbing to architects, who always think that only they can make the uniform substance of a building beautiful.³⁶

Now this conception of “empty” does not mean entirely without purpose, it is just that this purpose is different than that one would normally consider. The Old Chicago Main, as we envision it, would cease to be shut off. Rather, it would be opened up to them, a publically accessible area, even if it is no longer a “park.” As a response to the urban spatial anxieties discussed above, this empty building open to all would serve as their alternative. For those afflicted by agoraphobia, distraught by open spaces, much of this terror comes from the essential *wrongness* of certain open spaces in the urban context. “Unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity, oversights, these areas are simply *un-inhabited, un-productive*. In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much as a critique as a possible alternative.”³⁷ But if the building is presented as an escape, an oasis from this sort of urban system, the potential Kantian sublimity of such voids is drawn forth.

One programmatic use of a public Old Chicago Main I have always been inspired by is the notion of the private meditation space. This could be standard meditation, or it could be a large area set aside for an individual to read, relax, move at his own leisure. “Amongst the din and cacophony of the city, blankness is a pause or interval that gives rise to a particular form of lucidity in a landscape otherwise populated with messages, stuff, and ‘content.’”³⁸ The

³⁶Ibid., pgs. 17 - 18

³⁷Ignasi de Sola-Morales, “Topographies of Contemporary Architecture”
1996, The MIT Press, MS

³⁸Koolhaas, pg. 64

building no longer engages the user at the same scale as the city does. It is a very large space, but that large space, say a single 2-block wide floor, could be set aside for a use far out of proportion with that size. There is a value in a building existing at a different spatial scale than the rest of the city.

The specific act of design, such as it is, that brings the building to this state is through the simple act of erasure. Like the collaboration of Rauschenburg and de Kooning, this imagines the Old Chicago Main both as its own work of art and as a canvas where an artist of the void can create a new work of art. "Erasure is fundamental to the concept of emptiness. It is, quite literally, an act of removal. Whereas sublimated form making often gives rise to the preeminence of objects in space, erasure dematerializes form and gives primacy to the space of an object. ... It is not reductive. More often, it is an affirmation, revealing or creating something previously unseen. Erasure is also a form of editing. Along with cropping and masking, erasure selectively obscures imagery or excises form in order to foreground empty space."³⁹ The essential qualities of the Main can be brought to the fore, eliminating the clutter.

The act of erasure that I have explored with the Main is the act of removing every building element on the interior which is not absolutely essential. As a result, obviously the sorting machinery must go. So too must go the various interior walls and divisions, everything which further divides the building. What we are left with are the most basic elements of this building, such as its structure, its exterior walls, and its floors. Nothing is added to the building at this point, nor is nothing else taken away. In the interest of the building's preservation status, none of its essence has been changed, but a newer, simpler version of the same building has been revealed. (Naturally, repairs will be performed as needed.)

And so the question again emerges. In what way would the public actually use this building? Is their use of it essential? Again the threat to become preoccupied with pointless new concerns arises. Defining specific activities for the public within the Main, or simply allocating specific unrefined spaces for use, is in itself an act of design at odds with the ideals of this project. Perhaps it is suitable to consider that *any and all* activities might take place within this building. As a civic facility, perhaps certain floors could be reserved by one or more users. A group could use the space as they see fit, then vacate the space when the time comes. The building's potential to serve any purpose becomes an actuality, and this remains the fact for any given floor the instant it again opens up. The beauty, or rather sublimity, of this comes partly from how it is

³⁹Paige

used, but more so from the *potential* of how it may be used.

It is somewhat silly in these conditions to consider what specific activities might take place inside the building, except as a way of imagining the variety of uses that are possible. On one end, a single user could use a floor much like the artists of the void have used their galleries, as a means of directly contemplating the void. The spaces could also be used for large rally meetings, areas for public forums. More bizarre uses can be thought of, such as mass weddings of cult members, or roller derbies, fashion shows, discotheques, cookouts, camp outs, sweat shops, farming... The possibilities are endless, and not all of the possibilities are savory.

On a note of realistic programming, we should note that this conception is meant to be civic. The building is operated by the city, with management revolving around the building's upkeep and safety. The bare minimum of programmatic supports will be established in the interior to ensure users do not misuse the structure or endanger themselves. For the essential sublime qualities of the project to come out, it cannot be a privately operated building with direct economic needs. Attempts to include minor new money-generating elements *equivalent to standard real estate development* remove the very nature of sublimity we are interested in. Once such equivocations are introduced, the building as it is conceived becomes truly meaningless.

One intriguing thing about this setup is that it transforms the public as a whole into the same sort of hypothetical artist as those who contributed to the Guggenheim's exhibition on the void. In this sense, the building again becomes a canvas for another user, and the potential beauty of an empty building becomes the actual beauty of its use. "A communicating vessel becomes meaningful when viewers freely deposit into it their ideas and wishes."⁴⁰

One of this project's hopes is that, by redefining the interior uses of a building in a way such as we have, it loses its essential interiority. Though one inside the Old Chicago Main would be unmistakably, distinctly indoors, perhaps a truer sense of "outdoors" could come about, similar to Le Corbusier's *espace indicible* at the Parthenon. If this is in fact the case, it would not be a factor that is obvious to everyone, just as Le Corbusier says his own profound sense of deeper spaces is only open to those worthy of seeing it.⁴¹ Still, for the moves we have made in erasing and arranging the building to make sense, there is a

⁴⁰Koolhaas, pg. 61

⁴¹Le Corbusier, pg. 9

need to develop a certain new language for what has been created, something neither interior nor exterior.

This is an incredibly difficult task, developing a new language, since our minds are naturally drawn to think in terms we already know. As it stands, this attempt has proved most effective when thinking initially in landscaping terms. Since we are trying to think of this new interior space as something other than a building, as an exterior, it makes most sense to employ criteria used to assess exterior space.

Elements of landscaping

1. Living elements
 - Flora
 - Fauna
2. Natural elements
 - Landforms
 - Terrain shape
 - Elevations
 - Water
3. Human elements
 - Structures (buildings)
 - Sculpture
 - Fences
4. Abstract elements
 - Weather
 - Lighting

Elements of architectural erasure

1. User elements
 - Users (public)
 - Staff
2. Preexisting built elements
 - Floor plan
 - Horizontal elements
 - Vertical elements
 - Utilities
3. Added elements
 - Essential user facilities
 - Decoration
 - Divisions
4. Abstract elements
 - Weather
 - Lighting

Obviously the terms used in our new column on the right are not unique, but gain whatever strength they have by standing in contrast to the landscaping terms. This is not a perfect one-to-one change, sadly. It also becomes useful to think of certain elements, such as the structural columns, as pillars such as might be found outside. It does little good to think of them as trees, since this confuses the issue.

One further term which seems necessary is dealing with the ceiling. While there is little outright in the language of landscaping that relates, there is the sky. To think of the built space overhead as that *essential* covering, or instead as a canopy, suggests a change in that one element which is most fundamental in defining an interior.

Having explored this project from a great number of theoretical angles, some architects (or others) could still question the purpose of such an enterprise. They would ask for a means of measuring the new building's success, a means

familiar to preconceived architectural notions. If the building remains completely empty, does it still have value?

Yes. In an urban context, is it necessary for those moments of relief, such as the parks, to remain constantly occupied? If there *were* constantly occupied, operating on by the same measure of success as an economic enterprise, then their purpose as moments of relief vanishes. Within a city realm where spatial anxieties can thrive, it is essential to maintain areas of openness that do not have to answer to the city's busy demands. The mere existence of a building such as the reconceived Old Chicago Main, empty but available, creates a counterpoint to the rest of the city. It gains value *through its location*. There is value in its potential. This value cannot be measured directly against the actual values of other city ventures. It must be judged on its own terms, and by those terms found wanting or satisfactory.

A Reexamination of Spatial Concepts

Since the stated underlying goals of this reevaluation of the Old Chicago Main Post Office are so fundamentally different from the goals of most design projects, it has become necessary to use other means to examine these goals. As this project was initially conceived in spatial terms, research was done primarily in that field. A final guiding notion drawn from philosophies of the void was this notion of the sublime versus the beautiful. This has guided our thoughts, and yet sublimity itself never became our driving principle. In reviewing the project, both the reconstituted Main and the inquiry into void, new notions concerning both sublimity and emptiness come to light.

Kant's aesthetic examinations in the *Critique of Judgment* are most responsible to defining the need for the sublime in our project. His work, in turn, has been greatly influenced by earlier inquiries into beauty and the sublime. This is most notable in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a work that concerns spatial concepts only secondarily. To start, it is worth considering exactly how Burke defines the sublime. "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."⁴²

⁴²Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," pg. 39

The central notion of sublimity for Burke is inextricably tied in with terror. "Terror is in all cases whatsoever the ruling principle of the sublime."⁴³ Time and again Burke makes certain to distinguish between dangerous terror and pain, and that felt from a distance. The sublimity comes from a more abstract conception of terror, such as that felt from contemplating the tragedies of great men, real or fictional. At certain points in his work, the terror Burke speaks of approaches the Biblical notion of terror, that is, terror of God. This is not the fear one gets from a cheap horror film or roller coaster, but a deep and profound disquieting. Except for a distinction of goodness or worth, this is not unlike Pascal's discomfort of the infinite heavens.

Indeed, infinity is one of the chief qualities responsible for this terror. Burke takes note of what graspable objects, natural or manmade, in manmade objects, infinity can be suggested, in Burke's assessment, through the continuous repetition of like components – such as the endless structural columns of the Old Chicago Main. Many of the Main's other aspects, such as its size, repetition, power and emptiness, are those attributes Burke ascribes to infinity and the sublime.

Considering sublimity's connection to terror, and the facets Burke states lead to terror, there are other modifications we could make to the Main beyond those already suggested which could improve its sublime potential. Darkness and silence are chief among them. Slight modification of the reduced interior could promote these qualities without sacrificing our overall conception for the Main. A single vacated sorting floor, made mostly empty, silent and underlit could create a great user reaction while remaining safe. By reducing those elements that have a sensory impact, that which the user experiences will have a greater suggestion of infinity.

Here we have the impression that what we see goes far beyond our sensibilities and we are thus induced to imagine more than we see. We are led to this because our reason (the faculty that leads us to conceive ideas such as God, the world, or freedom, which our intellect cannot demonstrate) induces us to postulate an infinity that is not only beyond our senses but also beyond the reach of our imagination, which cannot manage to harness it to a single

1958, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., Humanities Press, Inc.

⁴³Ibid., pg. 58

intuition.⁴⁴

In further discussions about emptiness and the void, and how they relate to the Main, the very notion of void has been questioned. For as much as I have touted this new version of the Main as “empty,” it is not, nor ever can be, truly empty. This is not only true in mathematical or scientific terms. The intellectual notion of void that drives its deepest creations – such as Burke’s terror of sublimity – cannot exist in the physical realm.

This Romantic notion of sublime is more directly connected to nature than to the arts, hence it is difficult to tie it in artistically. Still, this has been the attempt of other artists and ourselves. For artists attempting to use their works to reach the void, or sublimity, what is the point then? Works of art can still *approach* the void. The void can be suggested indirectly, through more immediate sensory means. The steps taken by the receptive reader/viewer to then contemplate the void will be all the greater, for a true appreciation of the sublime comes from grappling with it intellectually. We can see this in certain artworks which refuse to directly reveal their greatest concepts. Others have suggested the works of author H.P. Lovecraft, with their embrace of vast cosmic horrors. For my own part, I prefer to think of Dante’s *Paradiso*, which, unlike his visceral and fleshy *Inferno*, is able to portray Heaven only in terms of indescribable lights, each more indescribable than the last.

The criteria for evaluating how successfully a work engages with sublimity are difficult to assess. Burke attempts to dictate a criteria by listing certain qualities that might indicate the sublime – terror, magnitude, obscurity, power, emptiness, solitude and silence. Some of these qualities, such as emptiness and magnitude, are already present in the Old Chicago Main. Our design efforts have intended to introduce other elements, such as emptiness and solitude. That the Main already possesses so many of these qualities suggests that treating it as an object of sublimity rather than beauty is the proper response.

⁴⁴Umberto Eco, ed. “History of Beauty,” pg. 294
2004, RCS Libri, New York, NY

ARCHITECTURE AND THE VOID: PERCEPTIBLE FORMLESSNESS

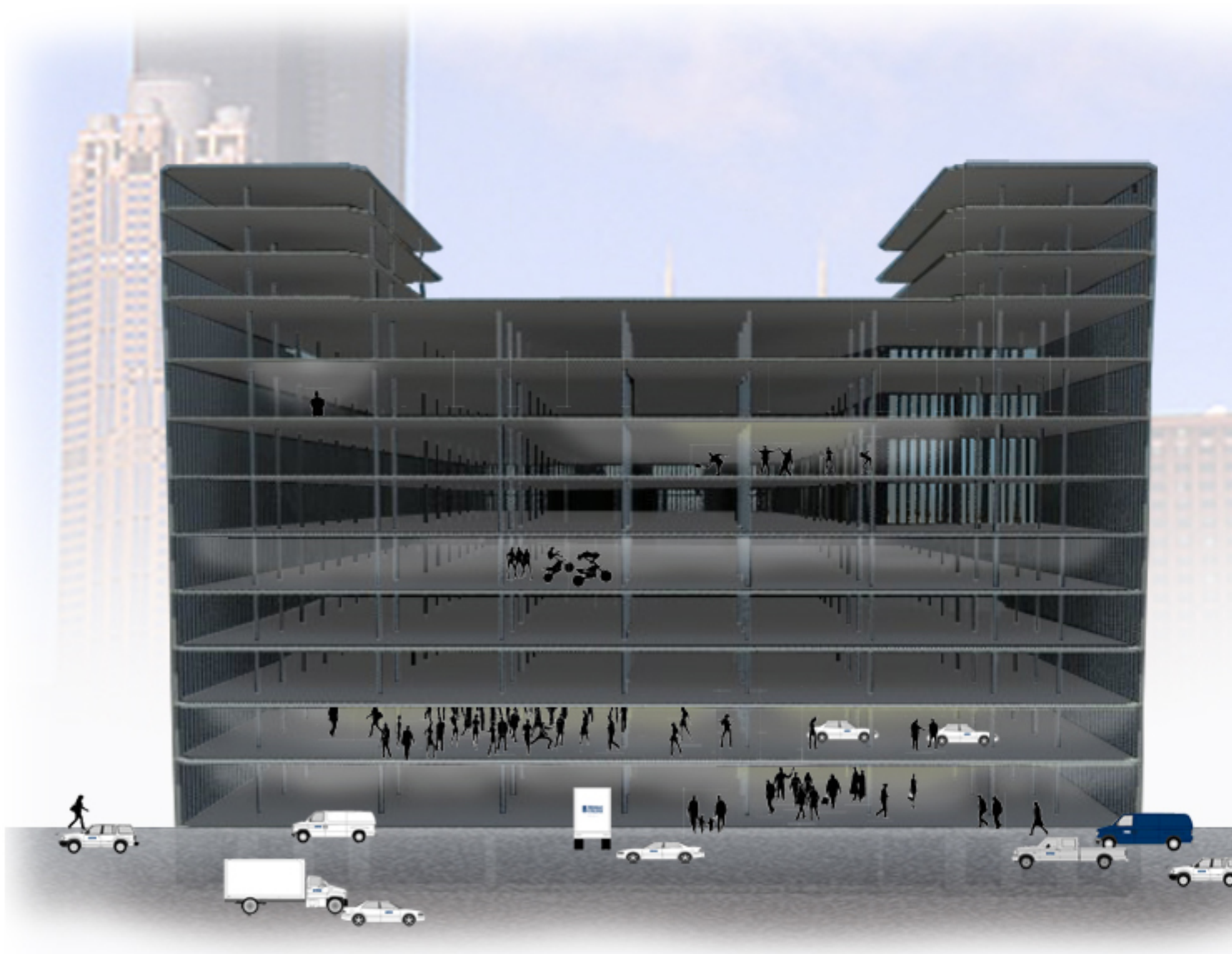
Douglas Hindley

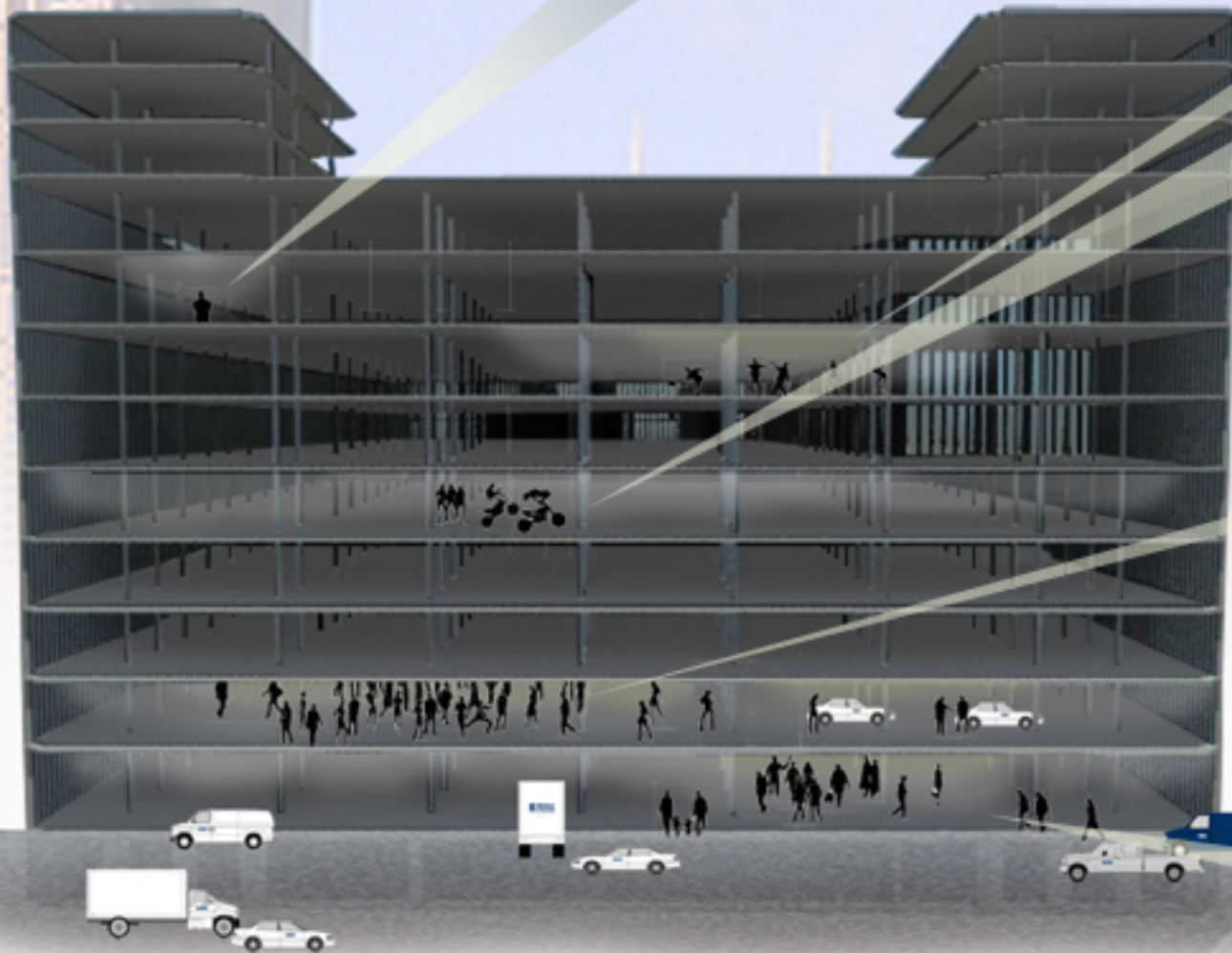
What is the value of an empty building? There is a fundamental otherness inherent in works exploring the void – the effect is sublime rather than beautiful. In Rem Koolhaas's assessment, "blankness is an important quality that is completely ignored by architects...Our profession is indoctrinated to never allow something remain empty, or undecided, or undetermined. That goes from the large scale to the small scale."

This is not a design project. It is primarily a written exploration of notions of void and architecture. Our platform for examining these ideas more concretely has been the Old Chicago Main Post Office. This is a fascinating building, nearly 3 million square feet near the center of Chicago that has still remained vacant for over 15 years.

In examining this building, we reduce it to its most basic elements – structure, outer walls, and open, vacant floors unadorned with non-structural details or new designs. The building is a civic space made open to the public. People may inhabit the interior free of programmatic elements, using it in any way they see fit. Staff ensures safety, but does not dictate use. This is not an indoor park, nor an exploration of interior spaces. It simply is.

Here the void is a positive element. Emptiness is encouraged. In the urban environment this absence has a great value as a counter to the complexity around it. The arts and sciences have been slow to embrace void as an area worth studying. More and more artistic efforts across the mediums suggest how void may become a more important part of the architectural discussion. Man has often feared emptiness because it is not beautiful; man can come back to the void by realizing it is sublime.

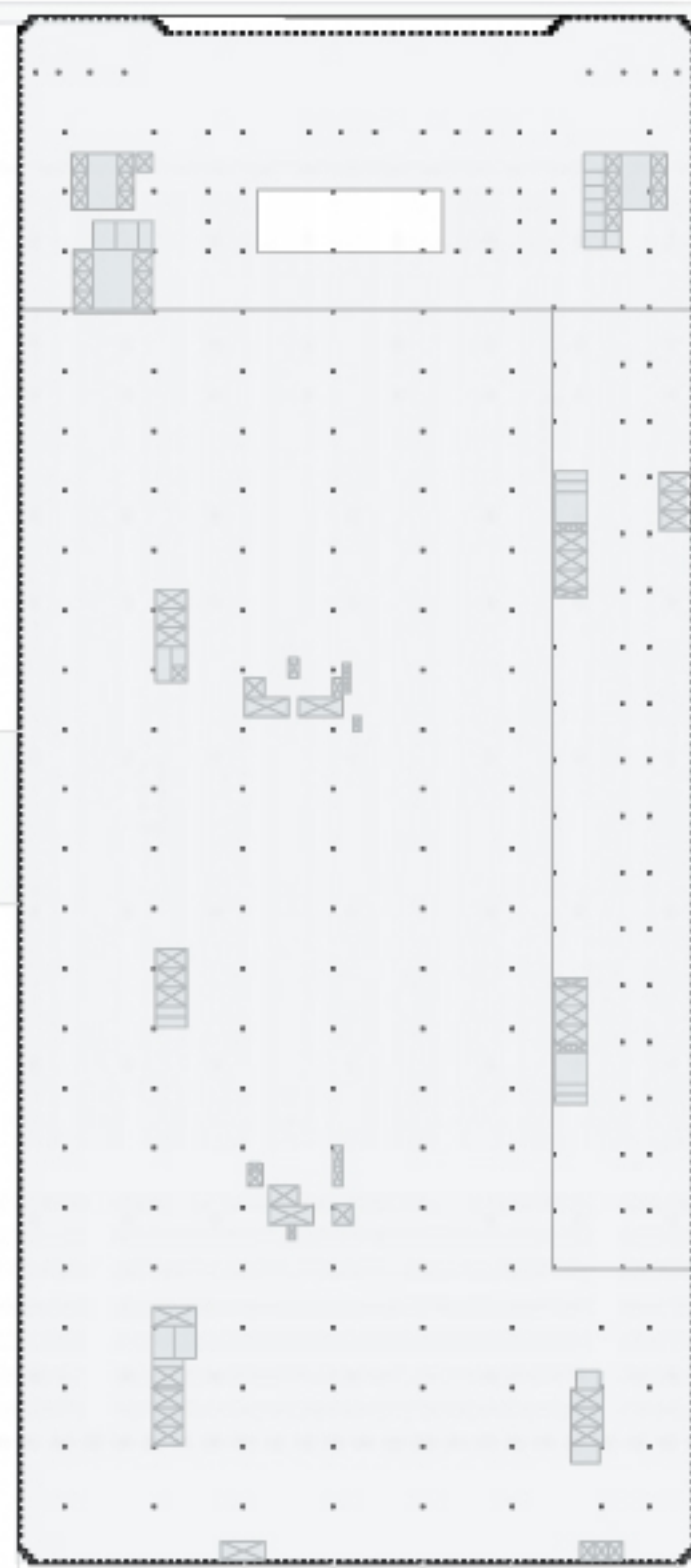




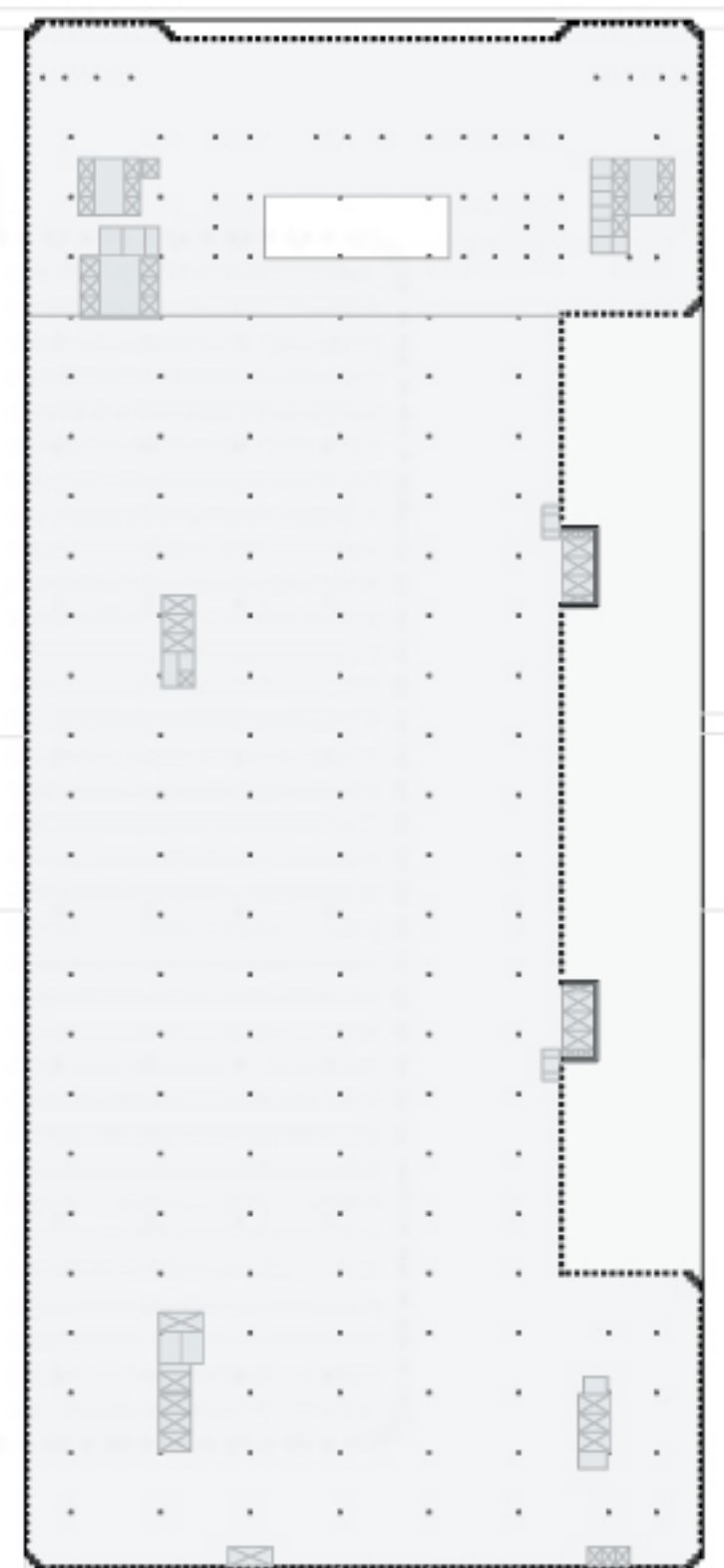
The public is invited to use the building free of assigned programmatic elements. People are welcome to reserve portions of the interior to use in any way they like, appreciating the void or filling it.



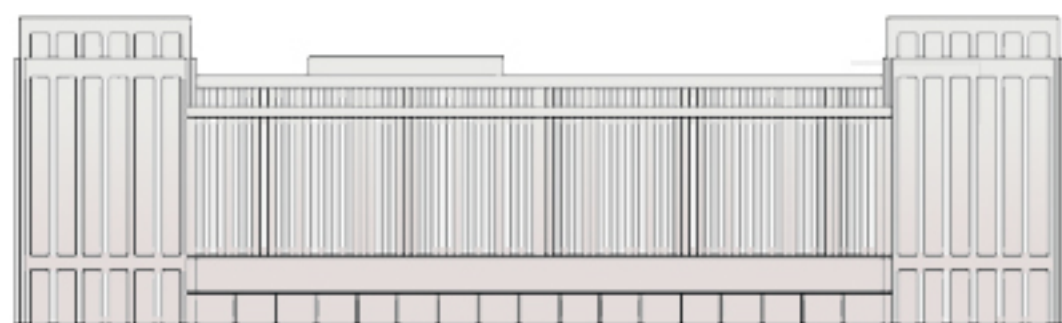
Ground Floor



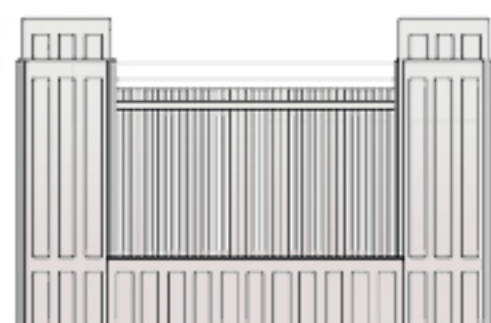
Fourth Floor



Eighth Floor



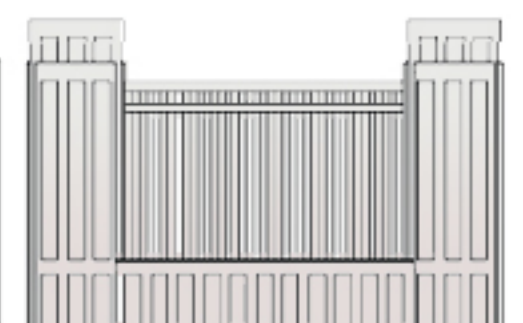
West Facade



North Facade



East Facade



South Facade



2:00



4:00



6:00



8:00



10:00



12:00



14:00



16:00



18:00



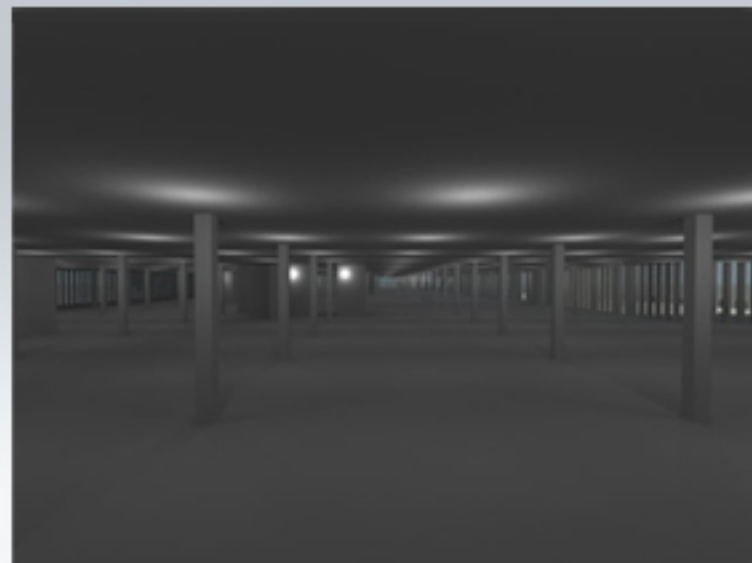
20:00



22:00



24:00



2:00



4:00



6:00



8:00



10:00



12:00



14:00



16:00



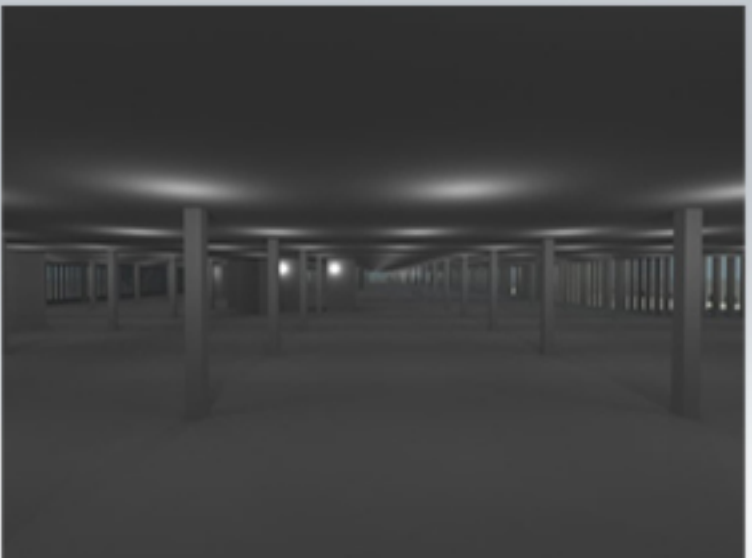
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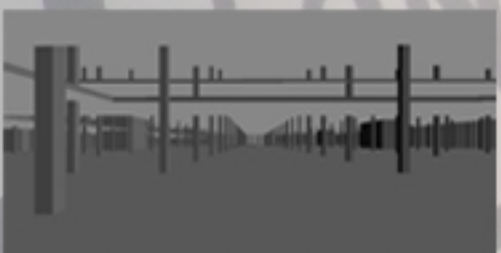
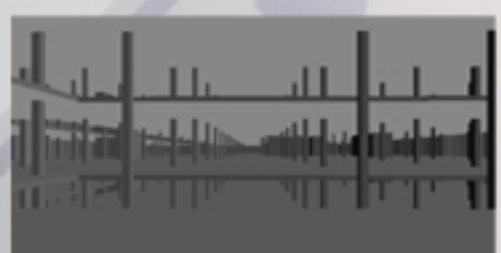
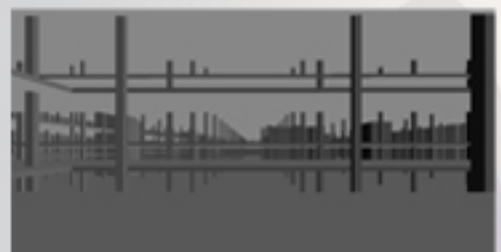
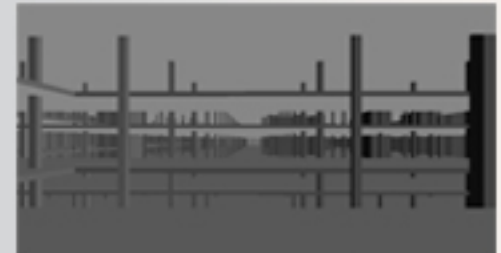
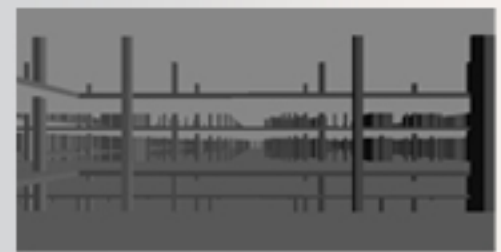
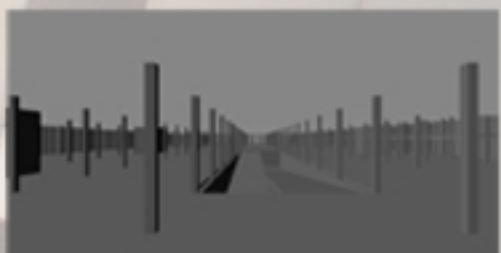
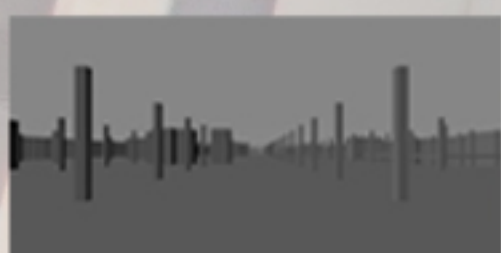
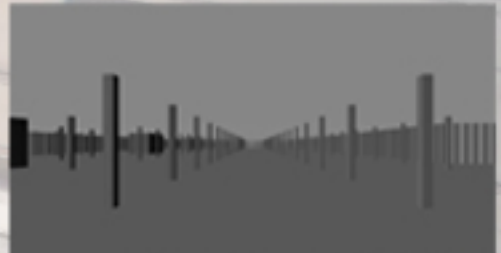
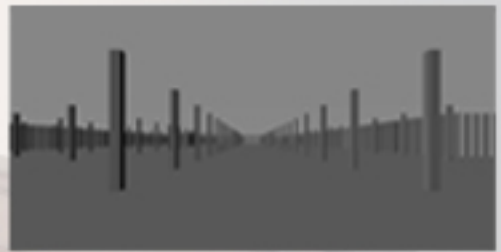
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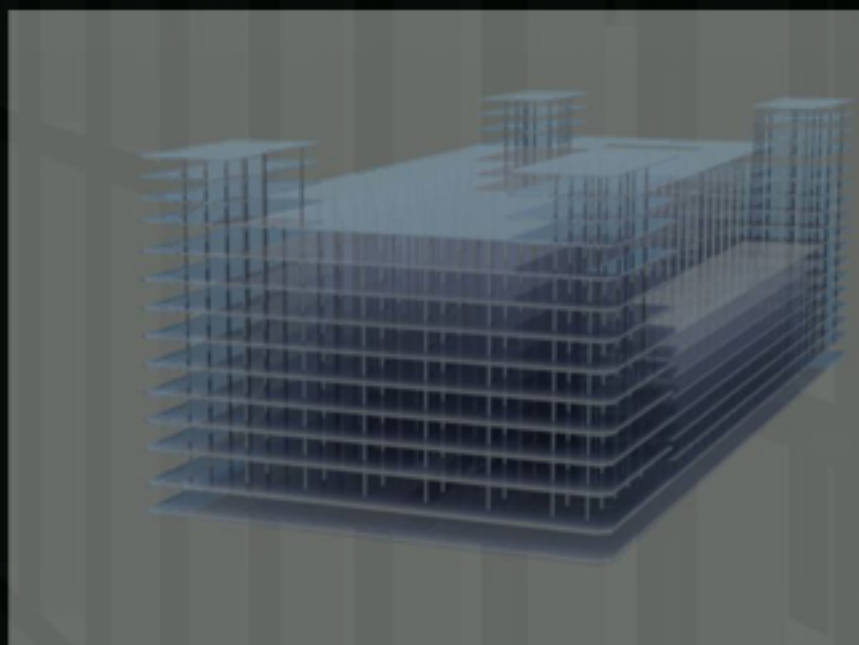
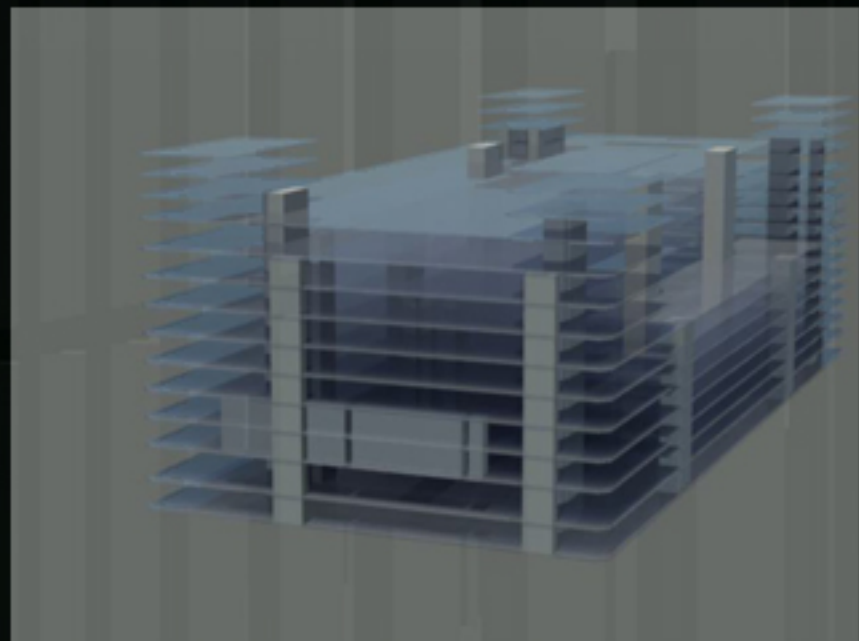
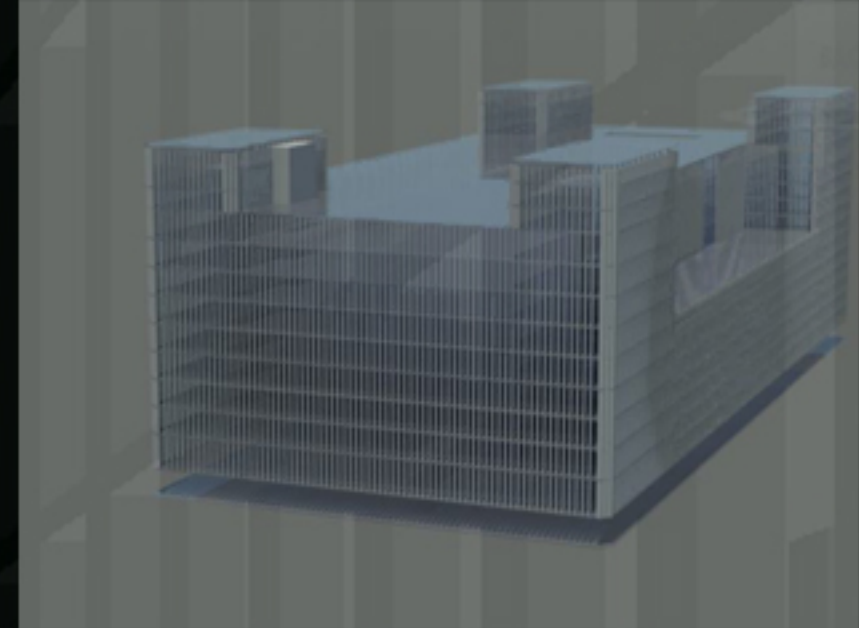
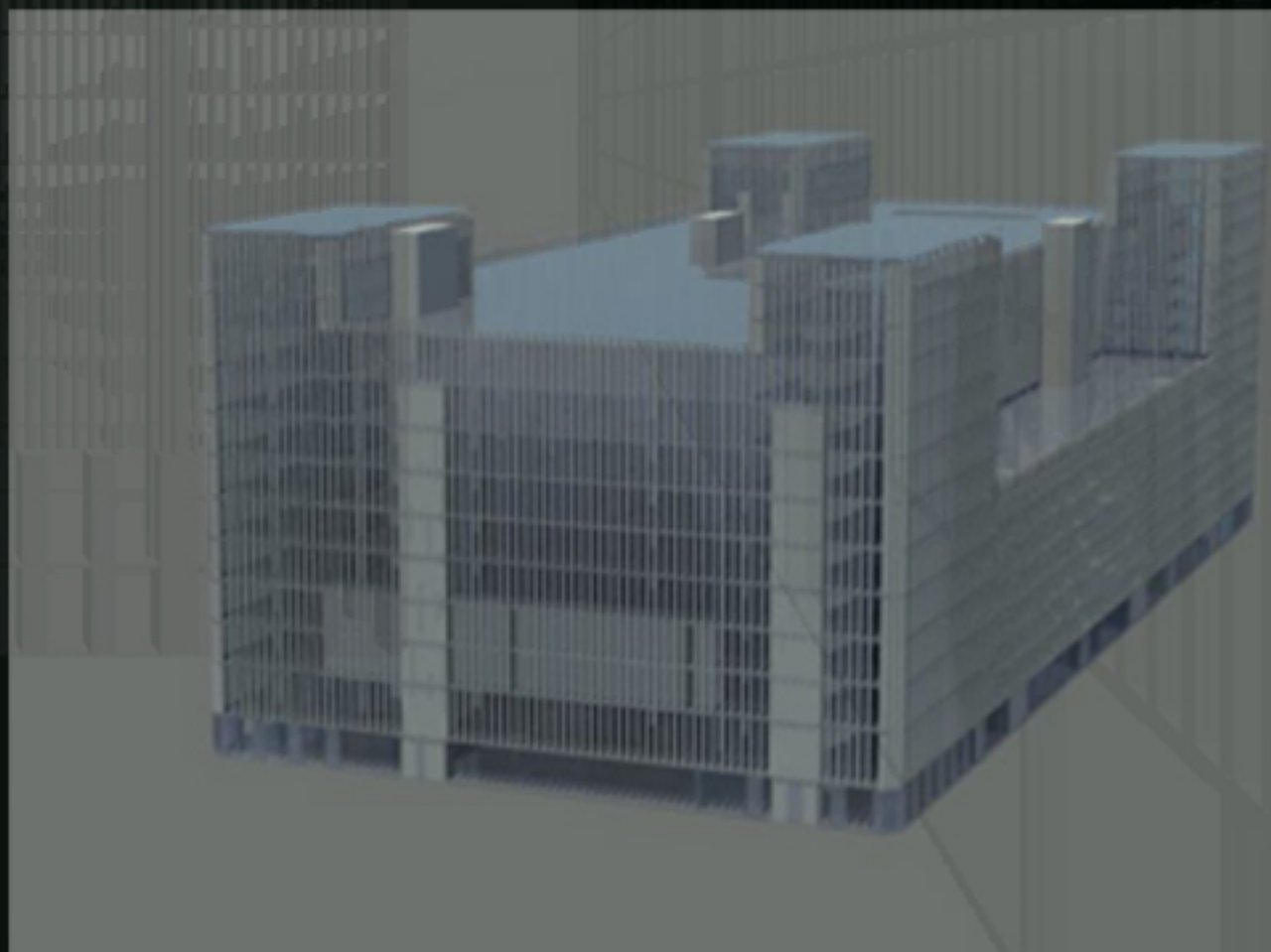
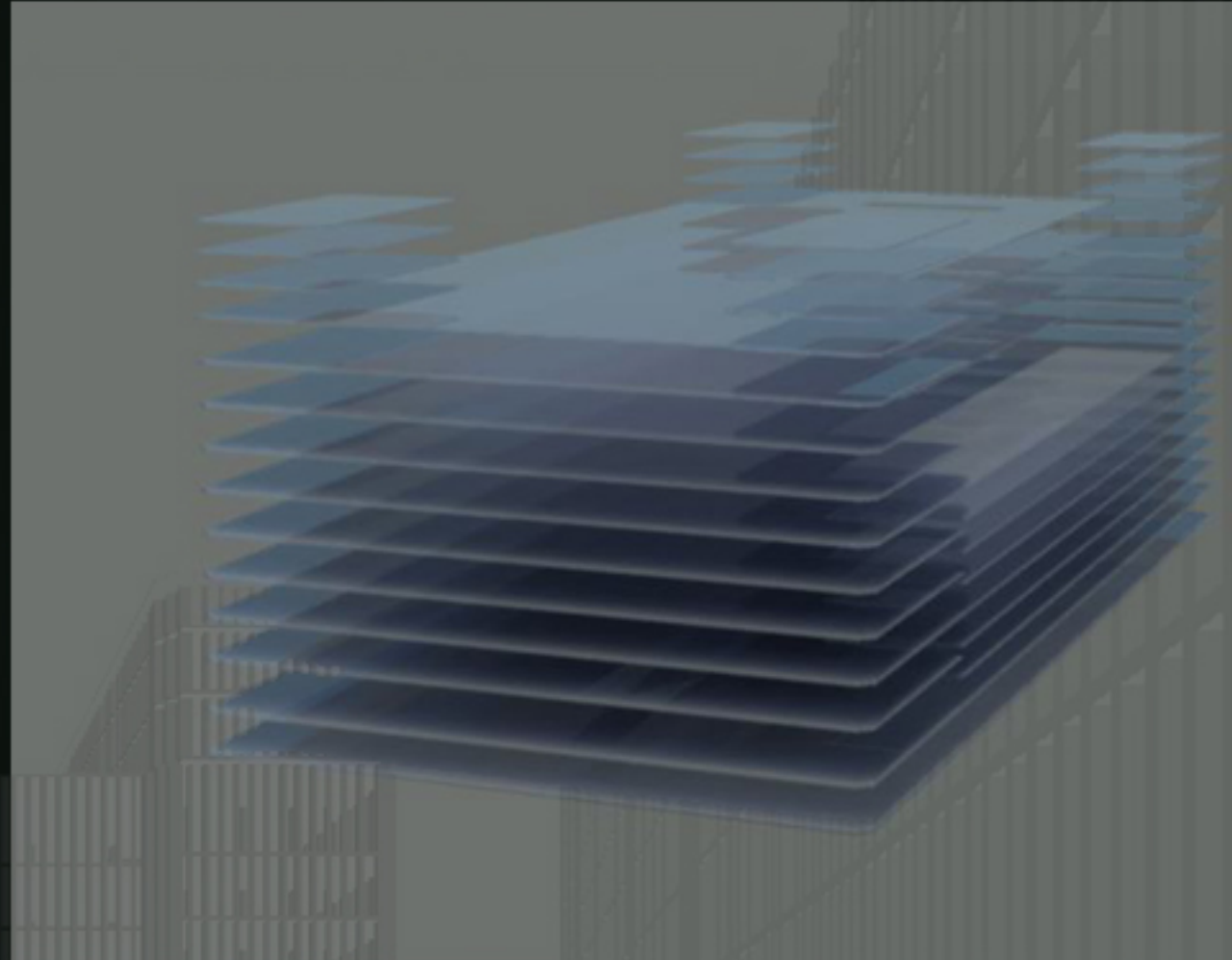
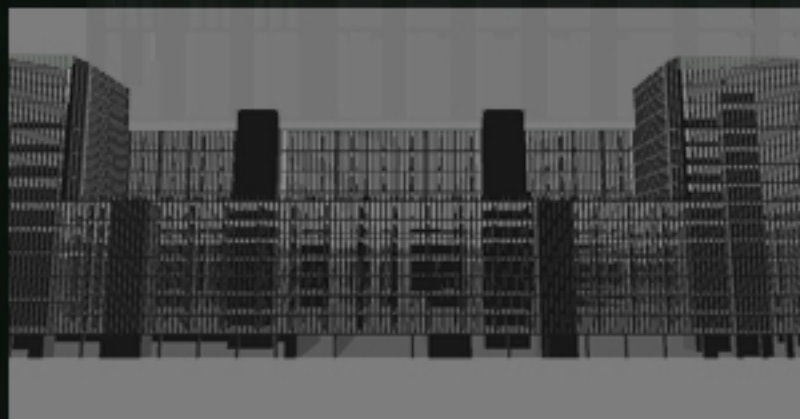
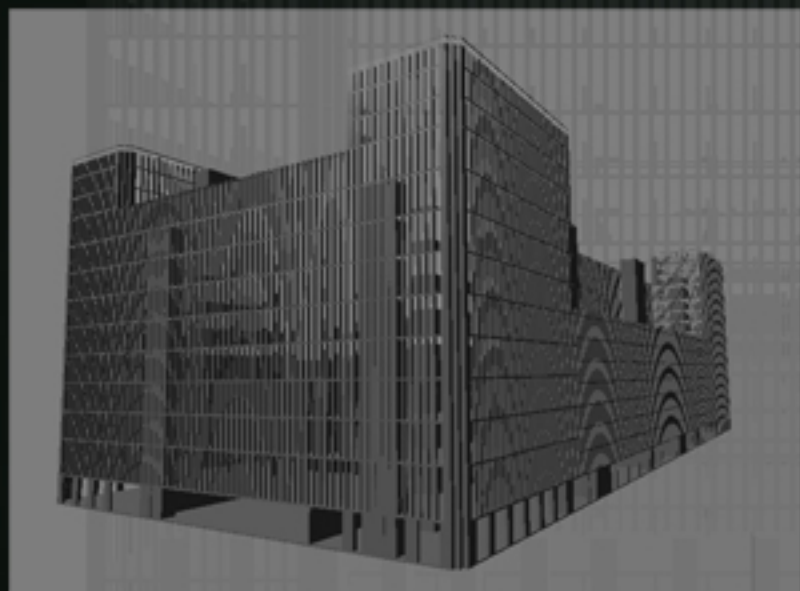
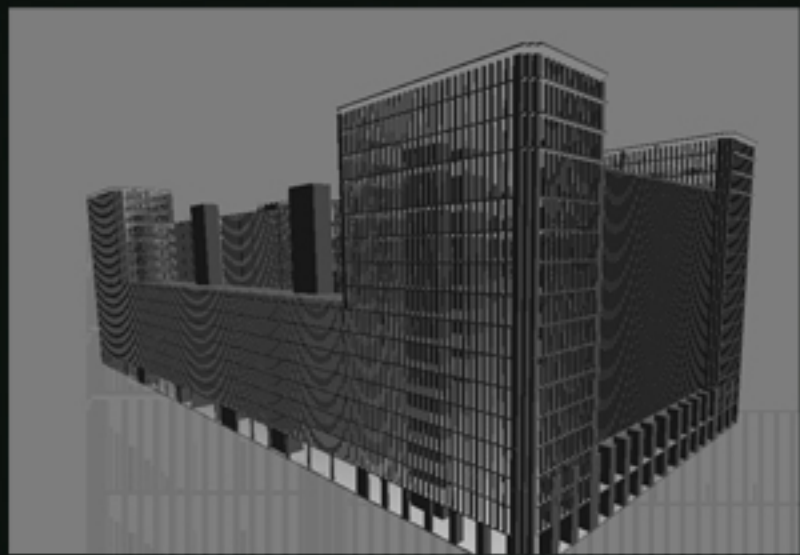
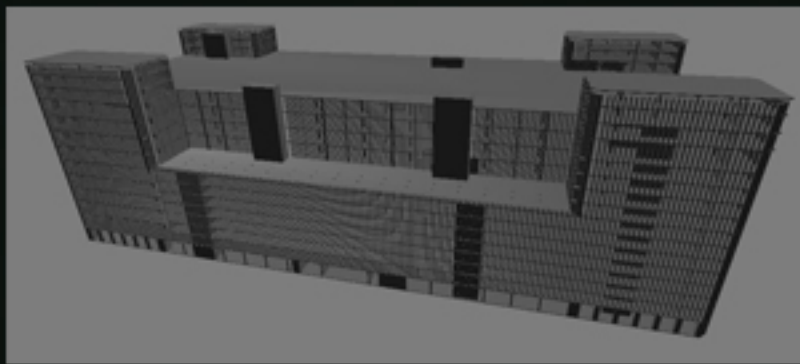


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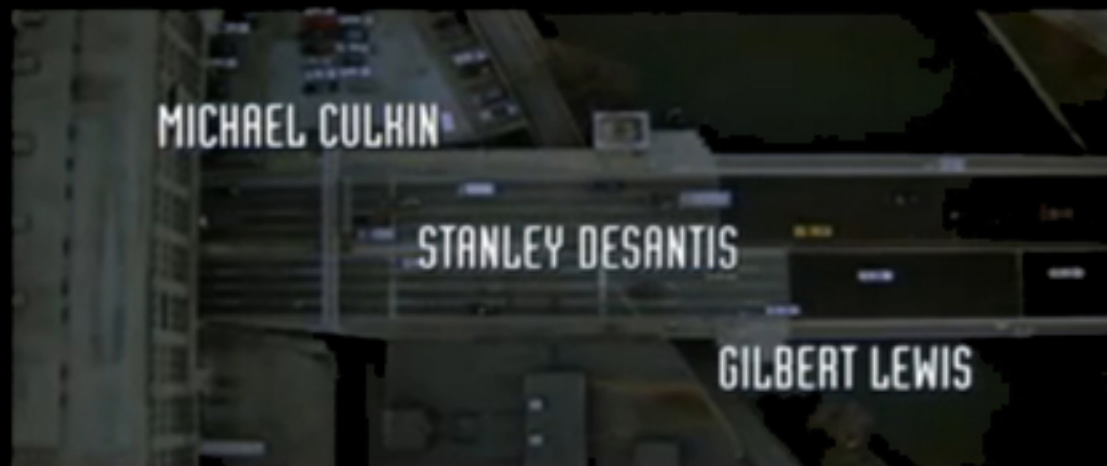
“Blankness is an important quality that is completely ignored, especially by architects...Our profession is indoctrinated to never allow something remain empty, or undecided, or undetermined. That goes from the large scale to the small scale. ... The artistic embrace of emptiness is the exception to the rule.”
Rem Koolhaas



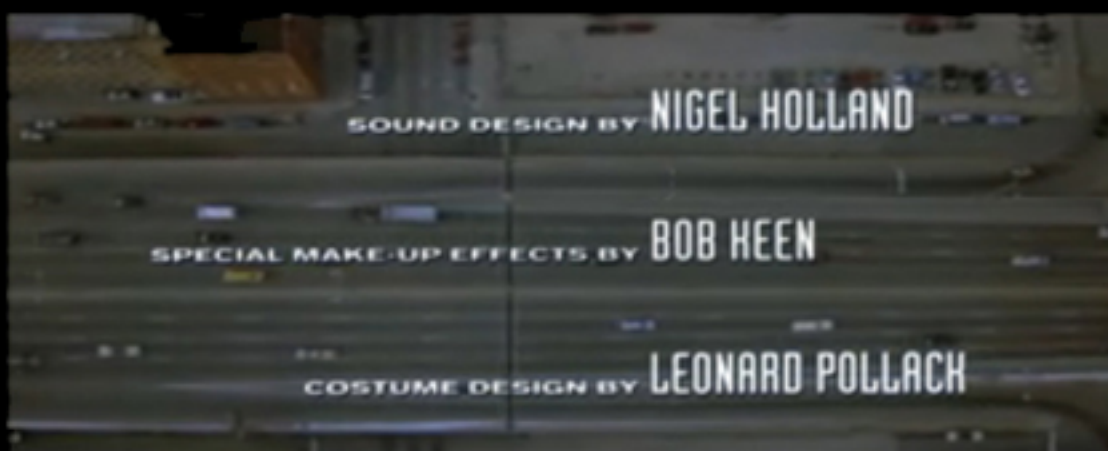




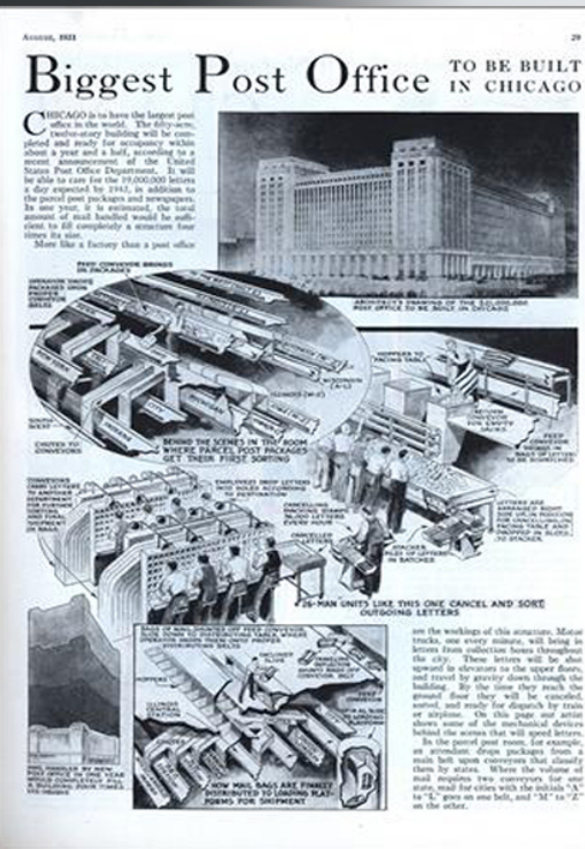
"In a building beyond a certain size, the scale becomes so enormous and the distance between center and perimeter, or core and skin, becomes so vast that the exterior can no longer hope to make any precise disclosure about the interior..."



Within such a building, the distance between one component and another, between one programmatic entity and another, also become so enormous that there is an autonomy or independence of spatial elements." Rem Koolhaas



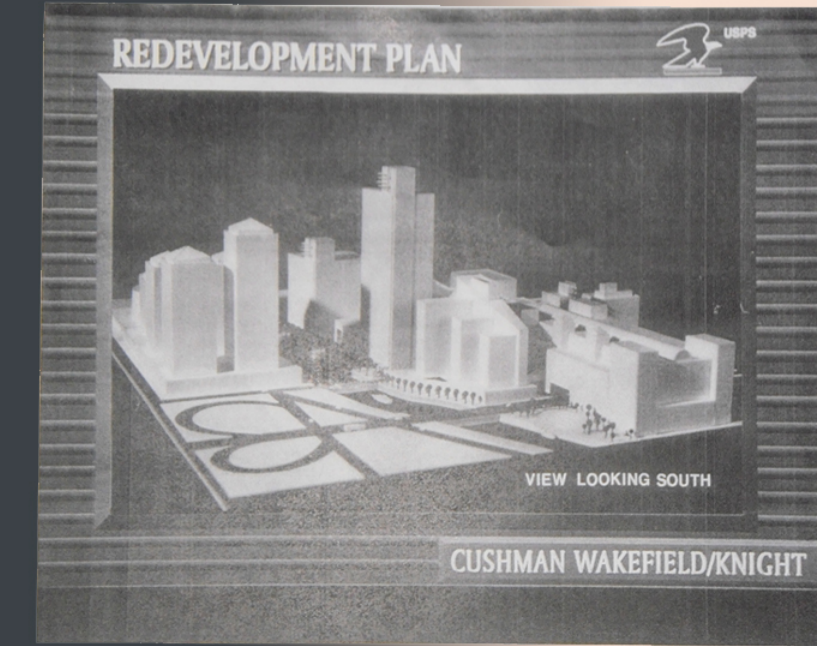




Original building design



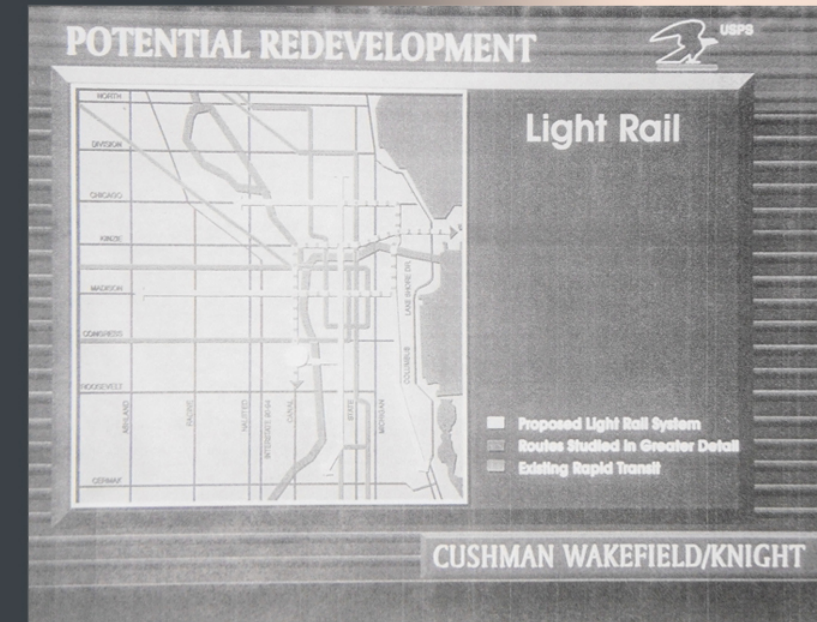
Redevelopment proposals



CUSHMAN WAKEFIELD/KNIGHT

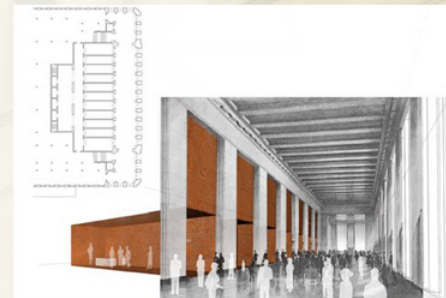
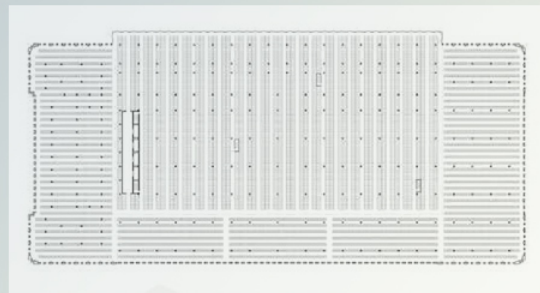
"The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a formless object, which consists in having no boundaries, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented."

Kant

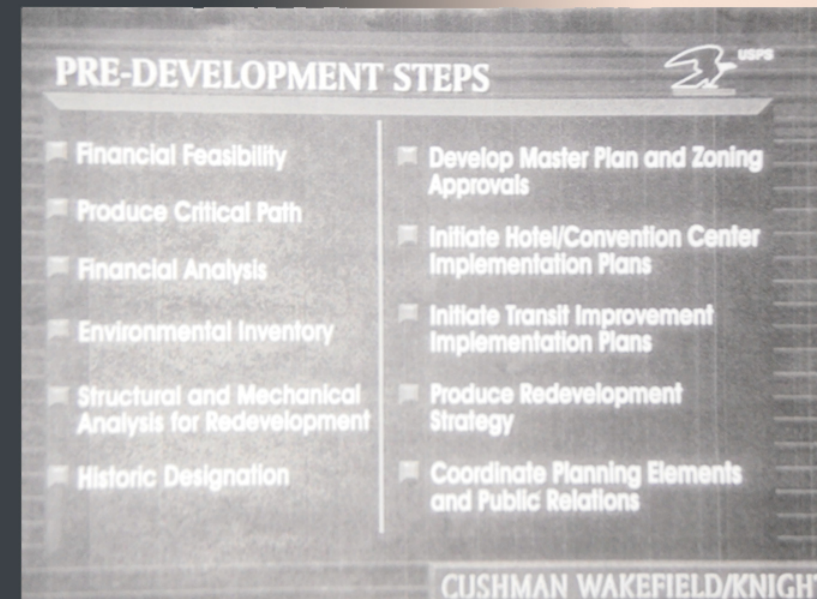


CUSHMAN WAKEFIELD/KNIGHT

What is the value of an empty building? There is a fundamental otherness inherent in works exploring the void – the effect is sublime rather than beautiful.



John Ronan - mausoleum proposal



CUSHMAN WAKEFIELD/KNIGHT

