

**Studio Sergison**  
Accademia di architettura  
Università della Svizzera italiana

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Work/Place

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## Introduction

In the spring semester 2010 Studio Sergison considered the notion of work place within a conceptual framework. It focussed on an area where radical change is imminent — the St. Giles district in central London.

One of the striking characteristics of London is the proximity of areas with very different cultural and demographic mixes and financial standing. This applies to the St. Giles district, whose urban fabric is fractured and improvised. It is dominated by New Oxford Street, the Centre Point building and the recently completed St Giles project by Renzo Piano. Change is also underway as a result of the construction of the Crossrail station at Tottenham Court Road, which will transform it into a major transport hub, due for completion in 2017.

This catalogue documents the results of an initial exercise that involved students in making an accurate photographic record of an anonymous office space. From this image, a large scale model was made which was, in turn, photographed. The purpose of this exercise was to engender an understanding and an appreciation of the architectural responsibility that making speculative office space implies.

The exercise was then followed by a study of a number of exemplary London office buildings of the last one hundred years.

The work of the semester concentrated on nine sites in the St. Giles area that are likely to be redeveloped and densified for commercial uses. Our work considered urban sites in terms of their capacity to be reasonably transformed.

The study is intended to encourage the students to reflect on the role architects can play in making work places that respond to contemporary needs.



Stephen Street, looking towards  
Tottenham Court Road

The ubiquitous flexible office building emerged as a solution for accommodating service sector activities at the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the best early examples of this building type can be found in north America, in particular in New York City and Chicago, although not exclusively. Seminal buildings by Richardson and Sullivan were also built in more provincial cities, such as Buffalo, New York or St Louis, Missouri.

The need for densely planned multi-storey buildings is intrinsically linked to the western capitalist model and the changes it brought to the way the world is organised. Their impact on the built landscape of any major conurbation is as profound in terms of physical presence as the construction of the transport infrastructure that services a city. From afar it is clear where the financial district of a city lies because the high density of these areas can be read from the profile of the skyline. What is referred to as 'downtown' in American English is where the greatest concentration of commercial and financial activities lies. The term originates from New York, the great twentieth century city, or more precisely from the island of Manhattan, and indicates the area that lies at the bottom of the island, which was historically associated with the movement of goods and commerce.

In London, the City, not unlike many world financial centres, has historically commanded a degree of freedom from restrictive legislation and a certain autonomy. This has been the case since William the Conqueror invaded England: he took control of the country, but was careful not to impose his will on the part of it that would ensure it remained economically viable. Today, as a corporation, the City of London enjoys much freedom in terms of the planning structure it operates within: it has its own police force and, after a number of devastating bomb attacks directly linked to 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland, it controls the movement of people and vehicles in a way that is not unlike that of a walled Medieval city.

As a consequence of the astronomical cost of land and the value of property in the City of London, numerous alternative business centres have developed. These include the Croydon town centre, the area around Paddington Basin, the area to the north of the Euston Road and that around Victoria Station, amongst others. Canary Wharf was originally developed in the 1980s in a former area of industry and docks, as a way of easing pressure on the City. It is a rival to it in terms of the quantum of office space and the rental value it commands. The high cost of office space is a result of the shortage of appropriately organised contemporary work space, so that demand continues to be greater than supply. Paradoxically, this remains the situation today, at a time of economic difficulty and uncertainty.

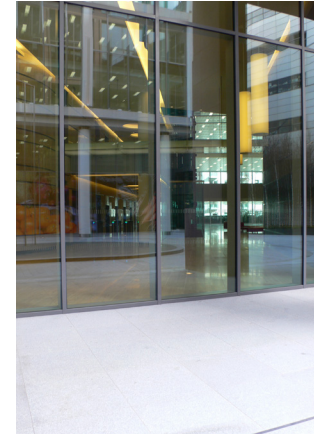


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1  
A night time view of offices in the West End of London, when workspace is more visible than in daylight.



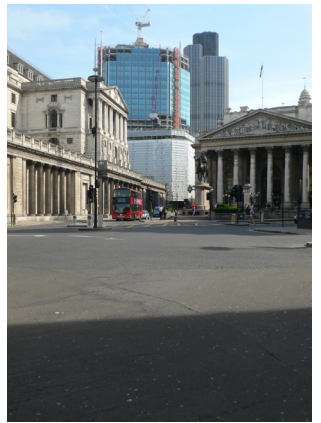
2 3



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5 6



4 5  
Districts that have historically supported employment-related activities have the capacity to rebuild themselves and increase density. They convey a sense of the imminence of transformation.  
6  
The centre of the London financial district, the City of London, an area with rich architectural heritage.

These areas of the city might be perceived as open, large, public realm spaces, but any attempt to take photographs, or act in any way that is out of the ordinary quickly attracts the attention of members of private security companies that are accountable to landlords who do not consider these as places for public use. This attitude profoundly affects the urban character of places with a high concentration of buildings that accommodate the financial and service industries. This is an issue that Anne Minton addresses in her book, 'Ground Control', exploding the myth that the city exists as a collection of public places that are open for the enjoyment and pleasure of its inhabitants.

In the last 50 years or so, the decentralisation of work has been encouraged. The New Town Acts were the embodiment of government policies aimed at developing satellite towns that would absorb thousands of families and ensure that a city like London did not continue to grow at a pre-World War II rate. With hindsight, this policy was indebted to the utopian thinking of the garden city proponents 50 or more years before. As a policy it has been far from successful. London continues to grow and offers opportunities unrivalled by any other city in the United Kingdom. Some 3 million commuters travel into the centre of London every day from the suburbs and beyond. Many national institutions and government departments have been deliberately located in economically blighted parts of the country to provide employment, while ensuring that rental values do not place too great a burden on public finances. Evidence would suggest that public and private companies and corporations are not persuaded by these arguments, as the continuing policy of development and densification in the City of London indicates. The high-rise policy the first democratically elected mayor of London put into place, later endorsed by his successor, exists as a way of dealing with the pressure the city faces to build new, dense, highly serviced commercial office spaces.

Real change has occurred in the primary place of employment: according to recent statistical information the number of people working from home is increasing as a consequence of the digital revolution of the last 20 years and nationwide access to the Internet.

It should be noted that from an environmental point of view, many of the office buildings realised in the last 100 years are damaging, despite the claims to the contrary made by their designers and builders. It is frankly risible to describe a building as being 'carbon neutral' when its floor plan is so deep that many of its users are far from any external wall, or when large surfaces of glazing are employed in the name of architectural purity rather than performance, with the consequent impact this has on energy consumption, both in construction and use. Unlike these new buildings, their nineteenth and early twentieth century predecessors were built before air handling became available, when the best source of light was the sun.

The development of the high-rise office building has been thoroughly charted, for it explains the evolution of what we consider twentieth century North American architecture. The invention of the rolled steel joint in 1870 combined with the abundance of iron - the raw material needed to realise multi-storey frame structures - to allow these buildings to significantly exceed the capacity of a tectonic form of construction. The evolution of lift and elevator systems enabled their users to move quickly through many floors. Without the combined development of both these inventions, tall buildings of such scale as those realised at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century would not have been possible. This is another historical example of technological solutions being found as a result of an economic imperative.

In time, further advances were made in the organisation and fabrication of the building envelope through refinements in facade components and the development of glazing systems capable of absorbing the incremental increases in wind loading that a high-rise building needs to be able to withstand. The incentives to such developments were both architectural and economic. In the 1920s Mies van der Rohe's drawings of taut multi-storey office buildings represented an aspiration he and his followers were able to realise in the post-war period. These buildings also satisfied developers because a tight envelope maximised the lettable floor area of a building, thereby increasing rentable income.

Further important developments in the servicing of these buildings were air-handling and the capacity to modify cable distribution easily. The area consumed by the servicing needs of contemporary buildings is significantly more compact than it was 20 years ago, although the need to adapt or overhaul cable management is ever more frequent. These are elements that have an impact on the atmosphere or spatial experience of a building, and significantly affect its functionality and usefulness. Skidmore Owings & Merrill stand above all other architectural practices for the way they designed offices as highly refined, rational and flexible buildings. Many of the leading protagonists of this practice were students of the Miesian approach, and a number of the buildings they realised in the 1950s and 60s are quite remarkable, epitomising what we now regard as the quintessential image of corporate America.

There is little doubt that office buildings are a large component of the built landscape of any major city: as a building programme part of the normative urban tissue. These buildings accommodate many hundreds of thousands of workers, and the hours spent within them represent a significant part of their users' lives. The social structure of the workplace has proved a rich source of inspiration for the popular media, as the internal landscape of a company is both a source of comedy and, at times, tragedy, as these are hermetic environments generate their own complex social structures that can seem tribal and intimidating. Furthermore, the manner in which these buildings negotiate their relationship with the wider city and create thresholds between public and private space is a complex architectural issue. It is in exploring the social capacity of office buildings that much more work is needed, as well as in considering their impact on the environment in a serious and holistic manner.

The Economist – a building which is more than itself  
Stephen Bates



There are only a few buildings I would take visiting friends and colleagues to see and experience in London these days: The Economist is one of them. I was taken to visit it myself for the first time in 1983 as a student of architecture whilst on a study trip to London and now, most days, I flash a glance down St. James Street to see the old Bank Building with the tower rising behind as I travel to my studio in the West End.

In 1983 I was told of its importance, but it was not until ten years later that, together with Jonathan Sergison, I began to understand and appreciate the work and position of the Smithsons and, in the particular case of the Economist cluster, the way that buildings (to paraphrase Peter Smithson) could become more than themselves if they charged the space around them with connective possibilities. This is something which remains a central ambition in our own work and for which we are indebted to the Smithsons.

I strongly identify with the way in which the buildings of the varied programme form a carefully composed cluster embodying classical grace and gentle gravitas, raised as they are on the slightly elevated plaza. The buildings have a family likeness and acquire a kind of neutrality, assisted, I am sure, by the intentional way the facade materials have been chosen to weather over time to a uniform colour tone of chalky stone. In the manner of an eighteenth century church, the system of gutters and cills was conceived so that the final weathering pattern over the facade would be predictable. Indeed the Smithsons' approach to weathering and the transformation of material over time consistently return in our own conversations when we design.

The space between buildings connects them, and yet achieves a separation from the surrounding urban environment. There is an intimacy to the atmosphere of the place and I recognise it as one of the familiar spaces one finds walking in central London, between blocks, through alleys, in quiet open spaces where the sound of the city is ever-so slightly muffled and the throng of people recedes. How surprisingly effective was the re-forming of the gable facade of the Boodle's Club both in opening it to the new plaza and activating all sides of the space itself: the strange but beautiful three-storey bay window with 45-degree corners compositionally connects with the three new buildings with chamfered corners.

This reminds me of the need to knit old and new together, to treat each as an integral part of the whole. The assembly of buildings has the effect of breaking the original city block, opening a pedestrian way through it, and I am surprised how few commentators mention the tree adjacent to the steps on St James Street – the only tree in the whole street – that marks the way through, and in summer shades the space between the street and the plaza.

This may have been an accidental decision by the Westminster Highways Department, but it certainly contributes to the setting of the cluster and its composition, which is without doubt part of a picturesque placing of objects within space – something that appeals to me at a visceral level.

In contemporary practice we are confronted with the consistent separation of wall from structure and services, but The Smithsons' elemental approach to the design of the external walls at the Economist remains exemplary in its resistance to such tendencies. In the facades, each of which is composed of similar elements but with no two identical elevations, there is no detachment between frame, cladding and services; each is fully integrated, forming a conglomerate facade with a powerful tectonic order.

Then as now, this approach represented a shift in position from the contemporary conventions influenced by Mies in the late '50s. Supply air ducts are placed on the back of structural columns, forming deep window reveals and cills. Windows are fixed in the plane of the structural column, with aluminium channels attached to cover the exposed sides, while aluminium cills frame the panels of roach-bed stone spandrels. The whole assembly stops short of the ground to reveal the exposed concrete columns to which it is attached. The Smithsons likened this support-cladding architecture to the columns and entablatures applied to the structural frame of a Roman amphitheatre and, again, I find this attachment to the ancient culture of architecture potent and essential.

The design and construction of the Economist coincided with the building of the Upper Lawn 'solar' pavilion, which Alison and Peter Smithson used as a holiday house, and I have often speculated on how ideas for the design of The Economist would have been discussed over weekends in the garden of the pavilion, drawings rolled out on the wooden trestle tables to be marked up. The human dimension the pavilion is so redolent of is also apparent in The Economist project, as the client had very clear objectives in terms of working patterns, and the Smithsons clearly engaged seriously with the challenge of enhancing and ennobling the working environment.

The deep plan is avoided and the arrangement of rooms is reminiscent of study-like chambers, where the individual and his room remain at the centre of the interior world. Such a strategy is akin to Taylorist theory and while this may be seen as constraining for the openness and flexibility expected in the contemporary workplace, it resists the ultimate tendency for the individual to be submerged within endless space with few recognisable thresholds and little scope for meaningful interaction with others.

Despite the well intentioned changes made in 1990 by SOM, it is still possible to experience the essential atmosphere of the project, which asserts itself as an urban model and draws architects who visit its to seek to reproduce it or refine it elsewhere, remains of its London-place - an unrepeatable moment and a lesson in thinking and making architecture for us all.

p.12, p.15  
The Economist, Alison and Peter  
Smithson, 1959-1964  
Photographs by David Grandorge





Exercise 1



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2



1  
Domitille Michard  
2  
Mario Marino





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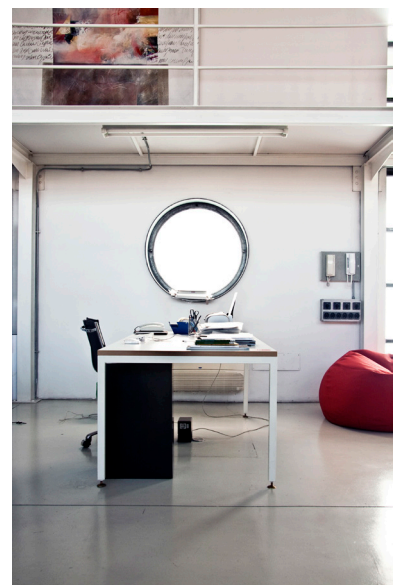
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1  
Ferran Martori  
2  
Filippo Rudelli



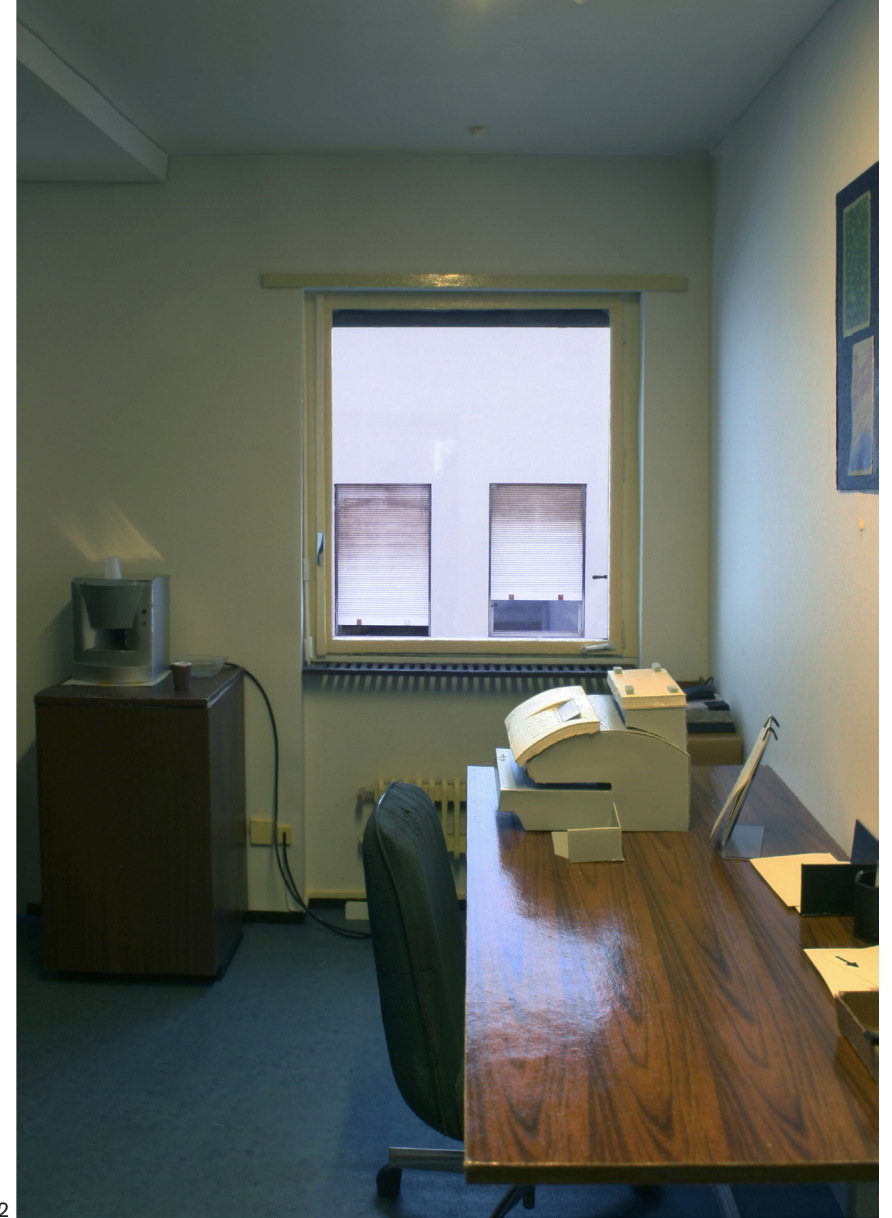


1  
Gaia Mussi





1



2



- 1  
Guillaume Dorne
- 2  
Rory Crawford





1



2

1  
Julien Correia  
2  
Andrea Romano





1



2

- 1  
Matilde de Menezes
- 2  
Marella Carboni





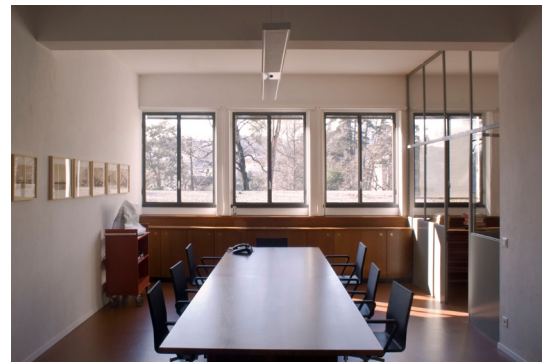
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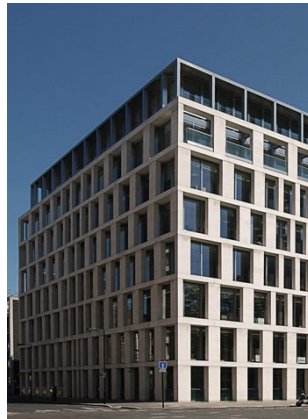
1  
Ricardo Conde  
2  
Niccolò Cozzi







Reference buildings



1, 2

3

7

8

4, 5, 6

9

10 11

**1**  
New Zealand House  
Trafalgar Square, London WC2  
RMJM, 1959-1963

**2**  
Euston Tower  
286 Euston Road, London NW1  
Sidney Kaye, renovated by Arup  
Associates, 1970

**3**  
Centre Point  
101 New Oxford Street, London  
WC2  
Richard Seifert & Partners,  
1959-64

**4**  
30 Finsbury Square London EC2  
Eric Parry Architects, 1999-2003

**5**  
5 Aldermanbury Square London  
EC4  
Eric Parry Architects, 2001-2007

**6**  
23 Savile Row London W1  
Eric Parry Architects, 2007-2009

**7**  
The Economist Building  
25 St James's Street, London  
SW1  
Alison and Peter Smithson,  
1959-64

**8**  
Holland House  
Bury Street, London EC3  
Hendrik Petrus Berlage, 1914-16

**9**  
IBM Central London Marketing  
Centre, now IBM Innovation  
Centre  
South Bank, London SE1  
Sir Denis Lasdun, 1978-84

**10**  
Broadgate City of London  
London EC2  
Arup Associates with Skidmore  
Owings & Merrill, 1984-91

**11**  
ITN Headquarters  
200 Grays Inn Road, London  
WC1  
Foster and Partners, 1989-1990

## Project Sites

- 1 Eleonora Dalcher p.59  
Gonçalo Frias p.56
- 2 Julien Correia p.41  
Ferran Martori p.44-45
- 3 Niccolò Cozzi p.42-43  
Ricardo Conde p. 57
- 4 Mario Marino p.56  
Valerio Botta p.59  
Claudia Martini p.57
- 5 Domitille Michard p.48-49  
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- 8 Filippo Berardi p.38  
Filippo Rudelli p.51  
Alexander Tochtermann p.54-55
- 9 Marella Carboni p.40  
Matthew Howell p.47





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1  
Soho Square, walking east  
towards Tottenham Court Road  
and Centre Point



2

2  
New Oxford Street, looking west  
towards Centre Point



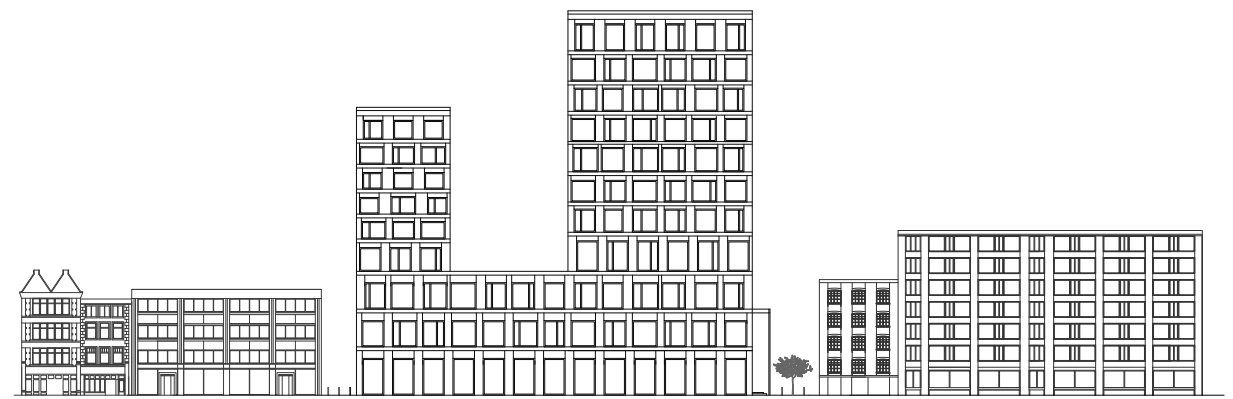
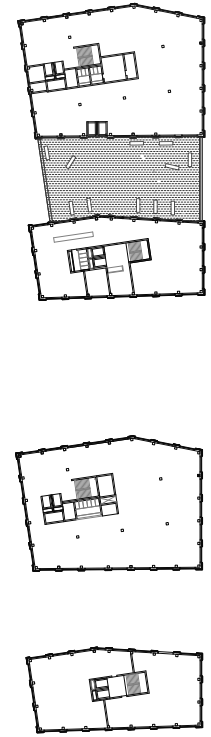
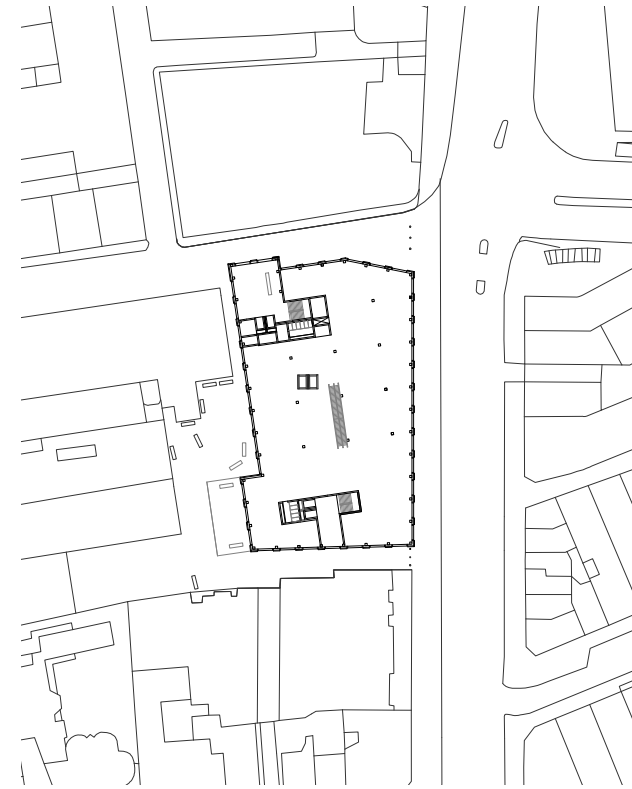
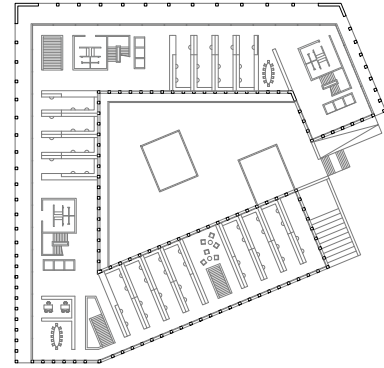
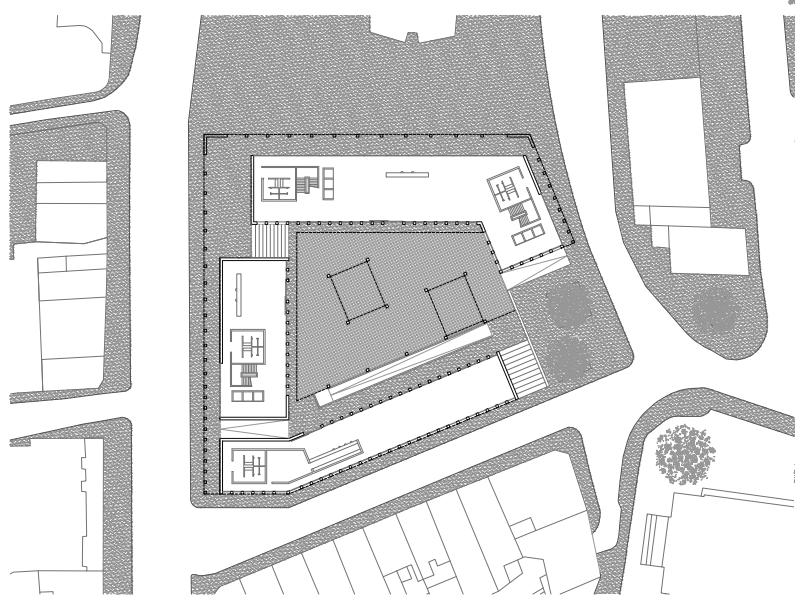
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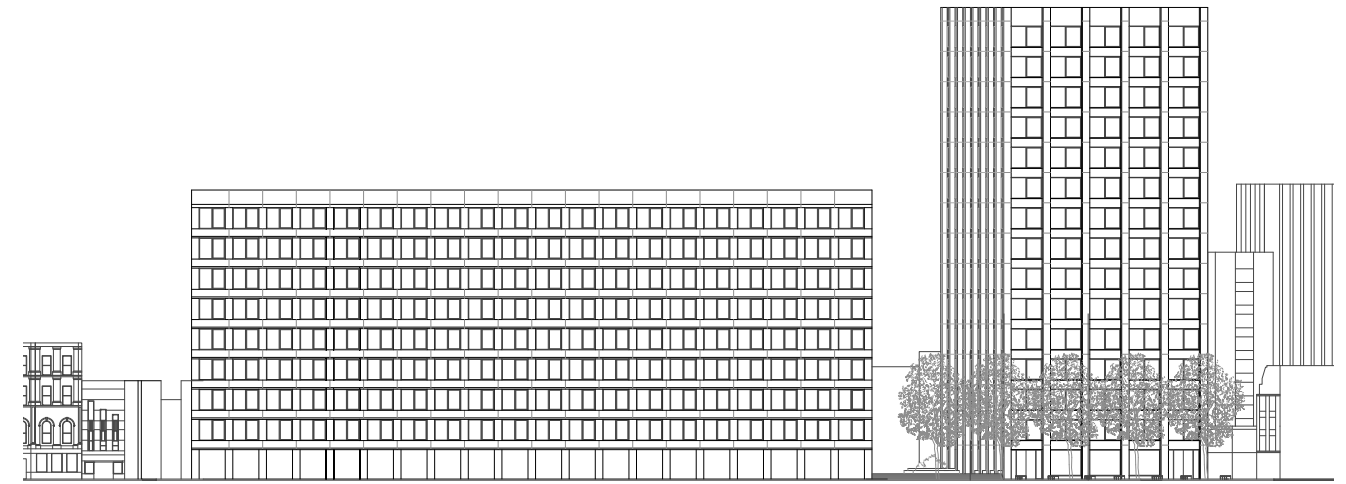
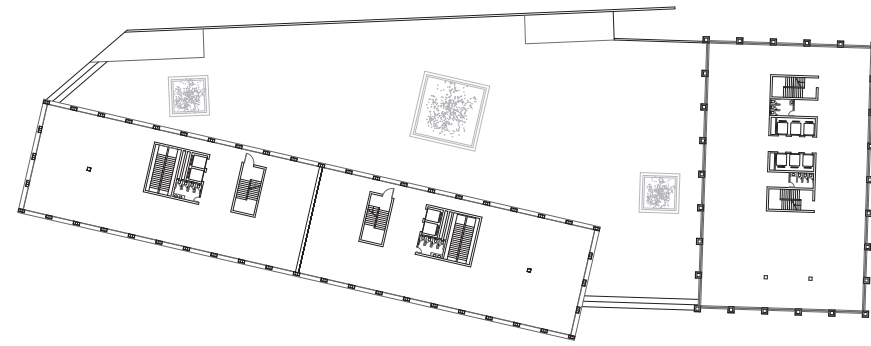
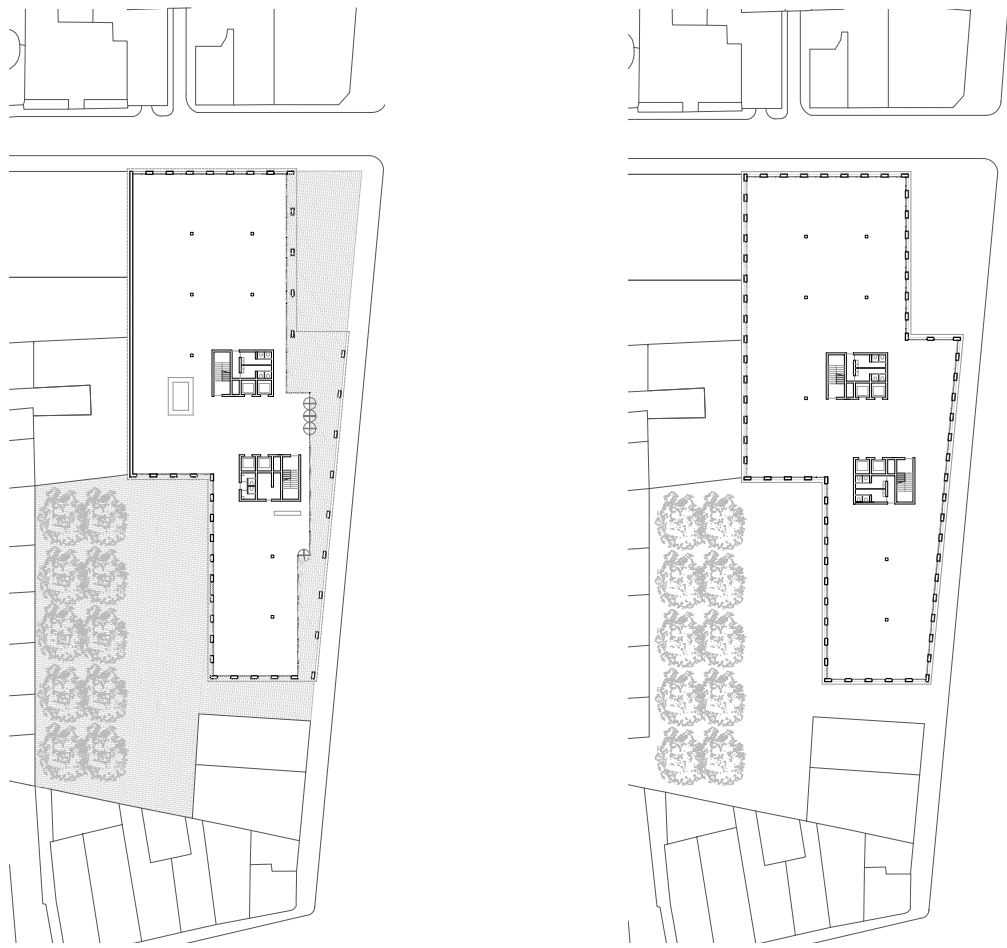
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Tottenham Court Road, looking  
south towards Centre Point

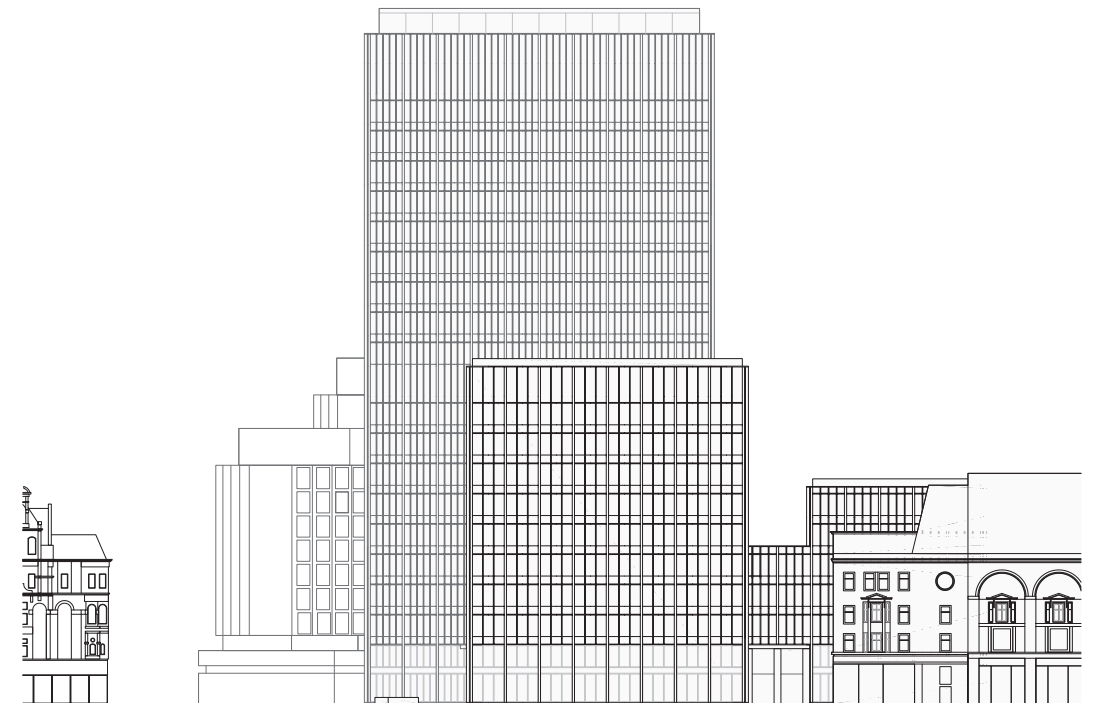
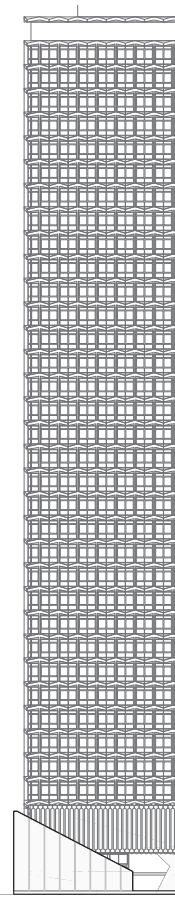
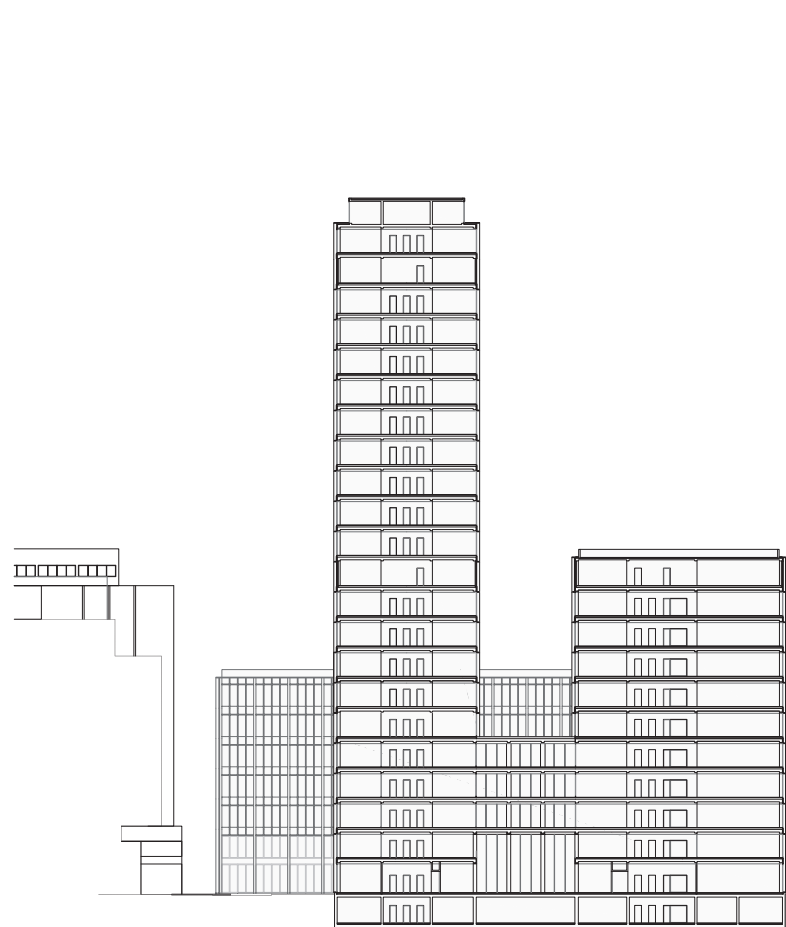
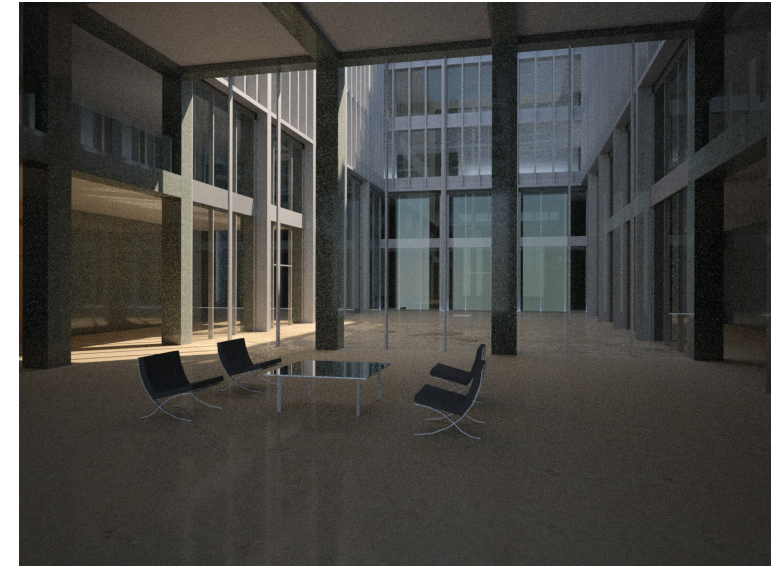
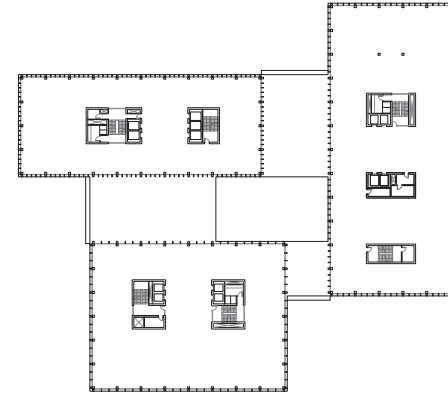
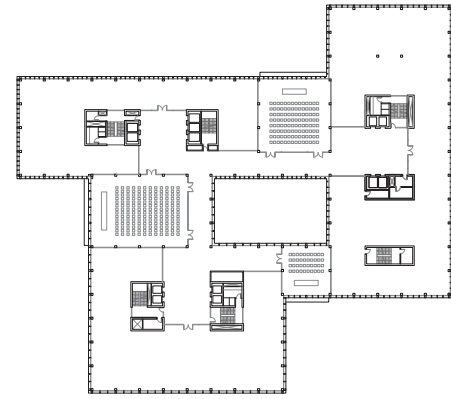
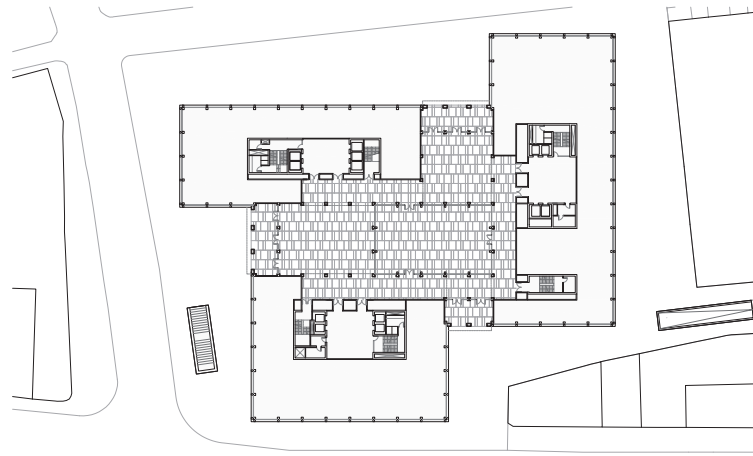


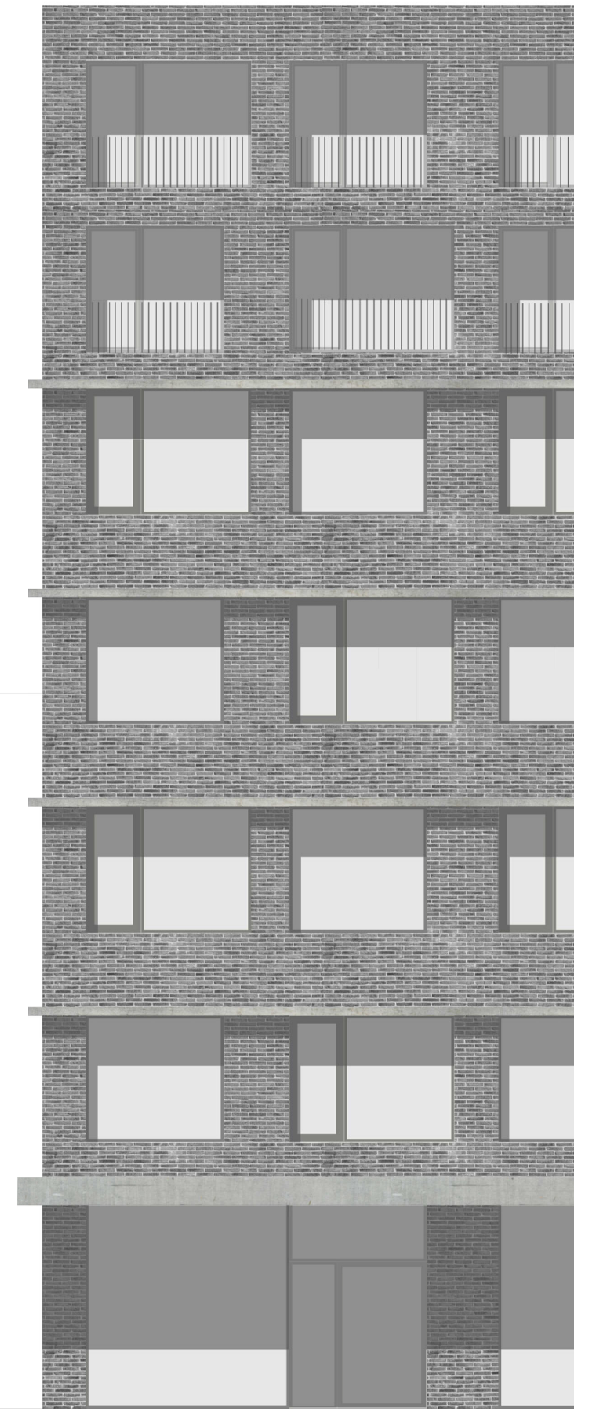
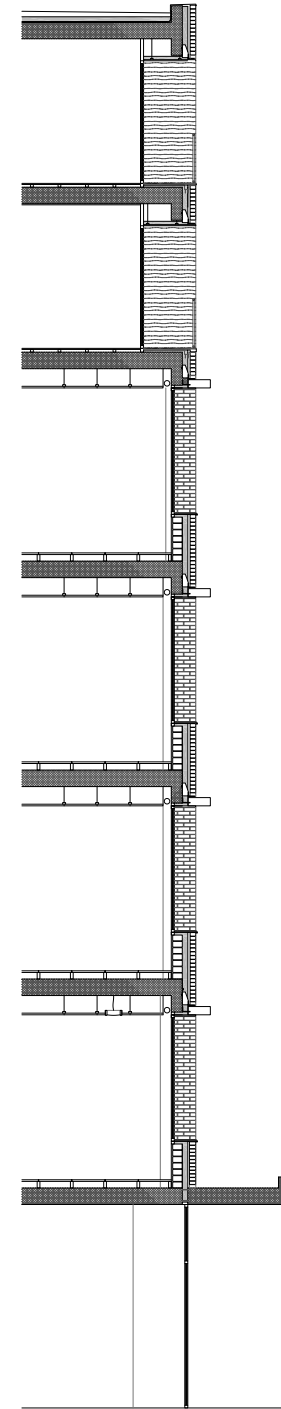
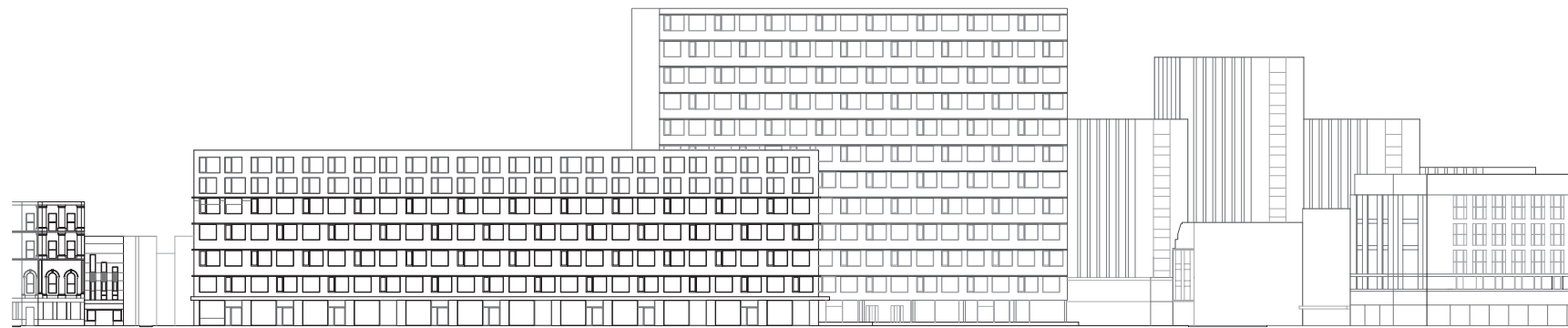
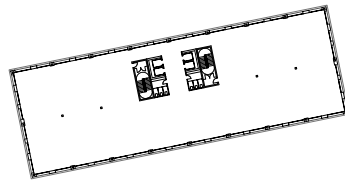
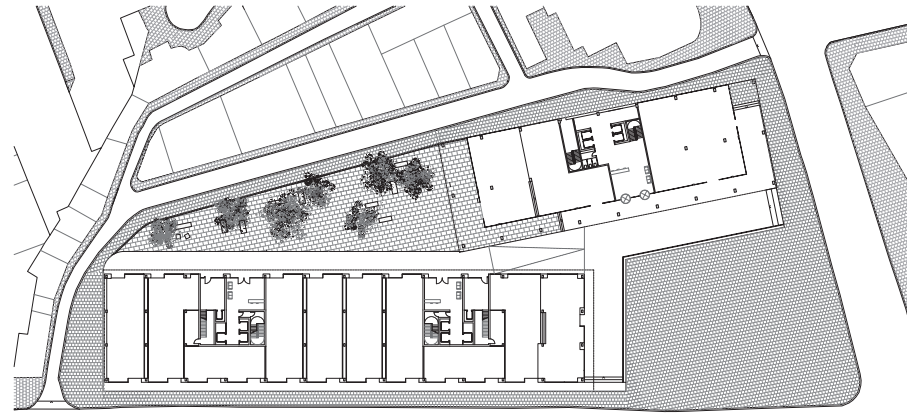
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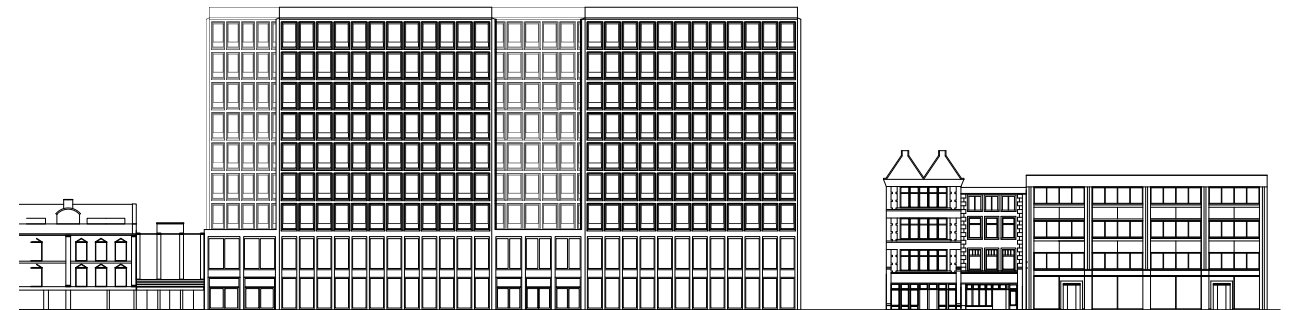
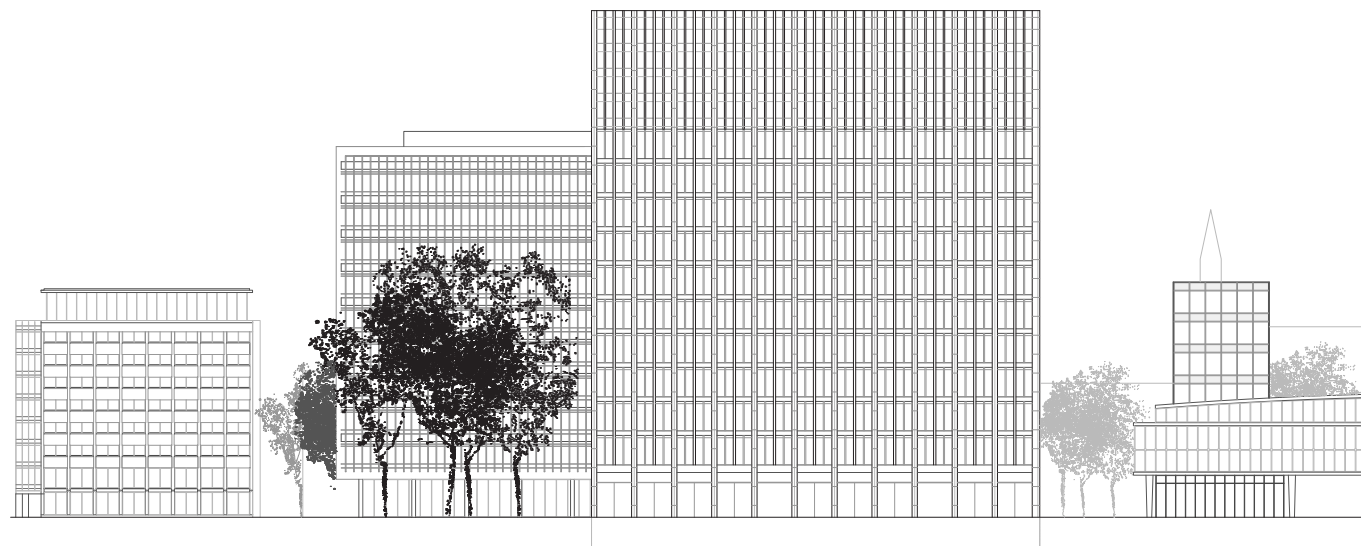
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View of St.Giles from the rooftops



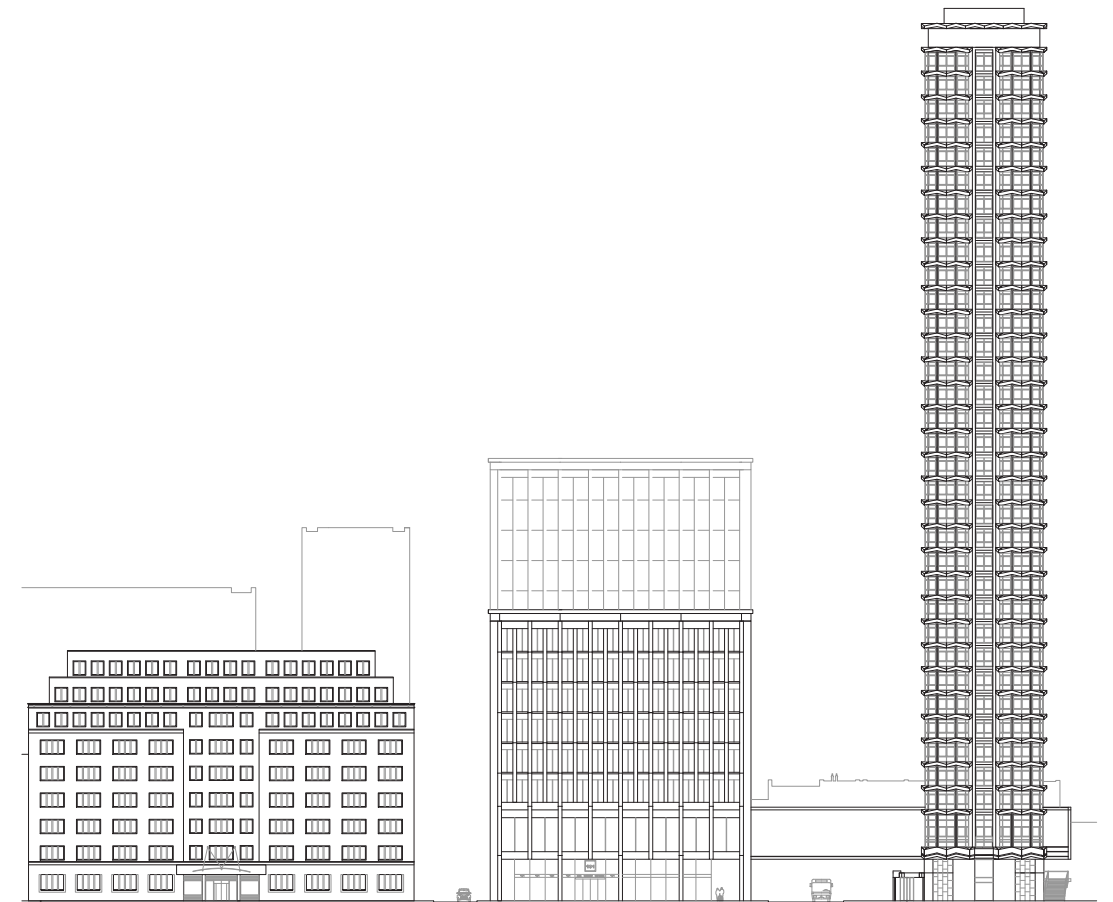
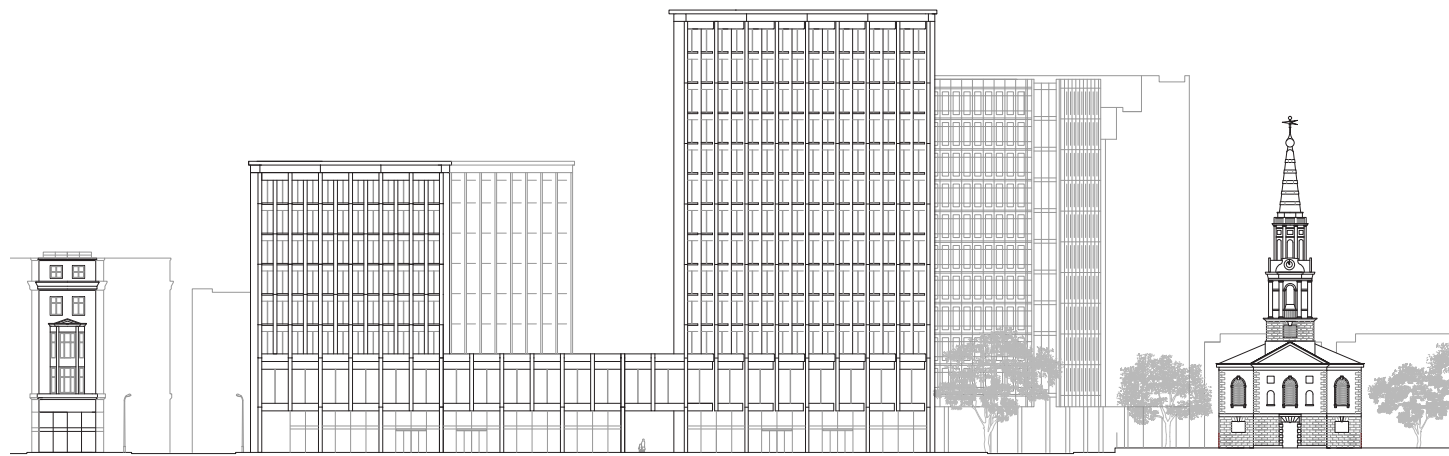
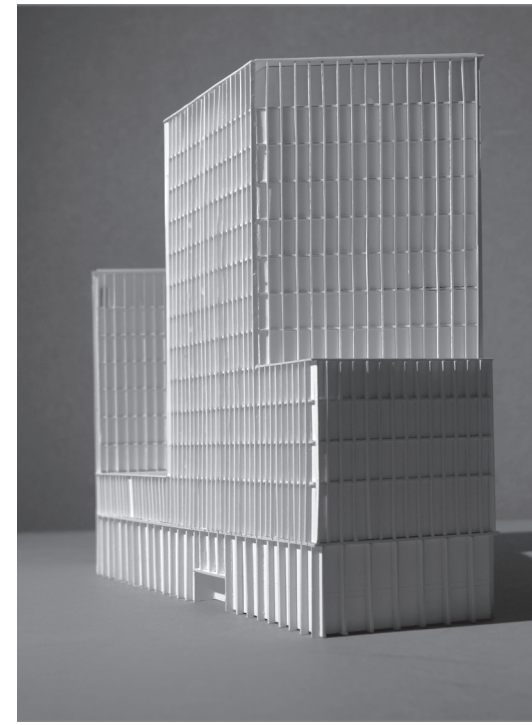


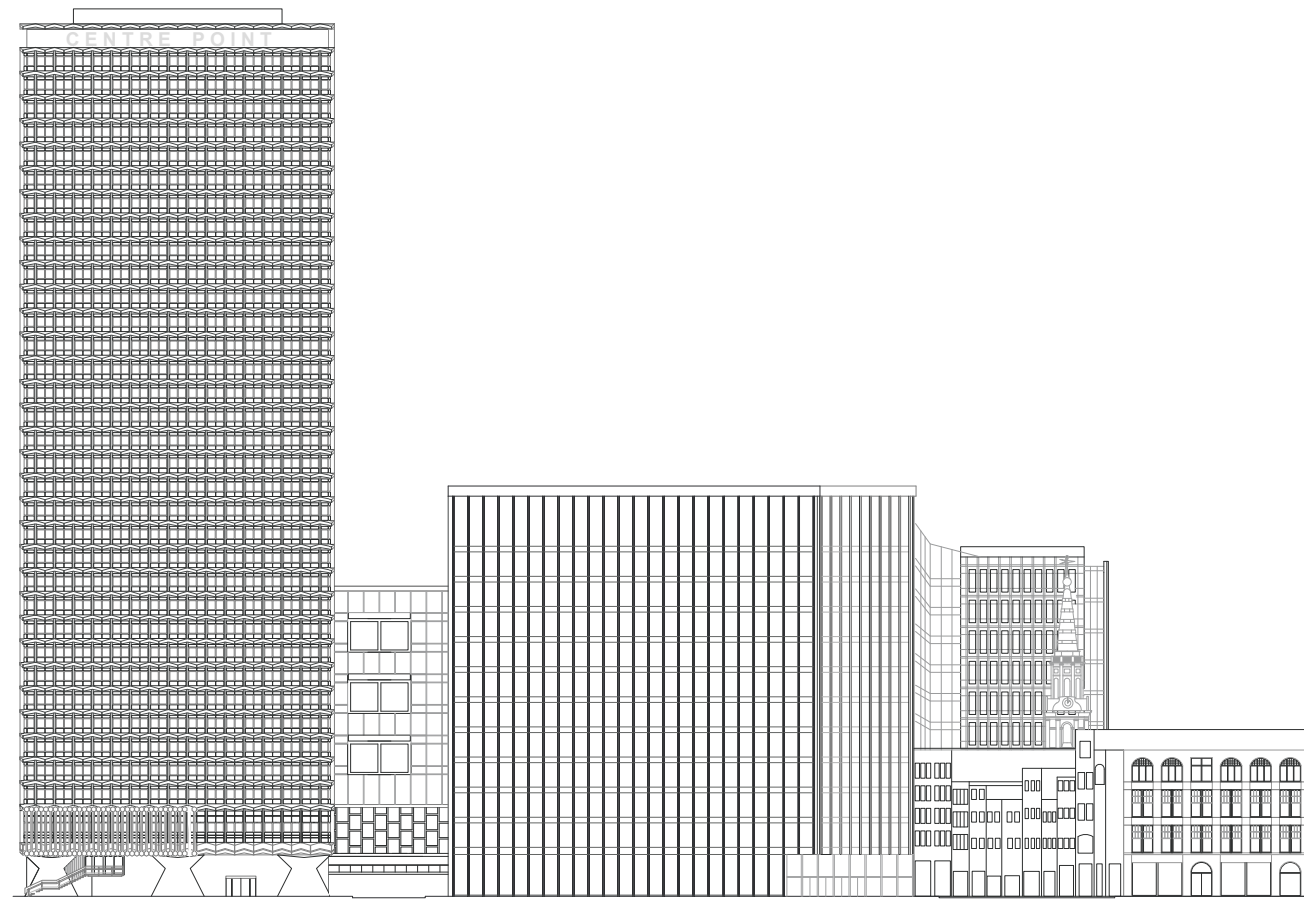
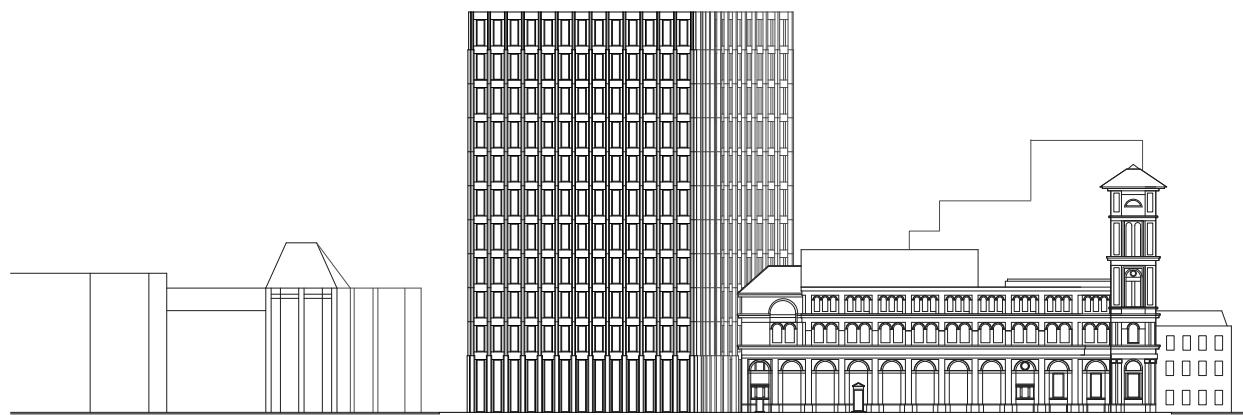
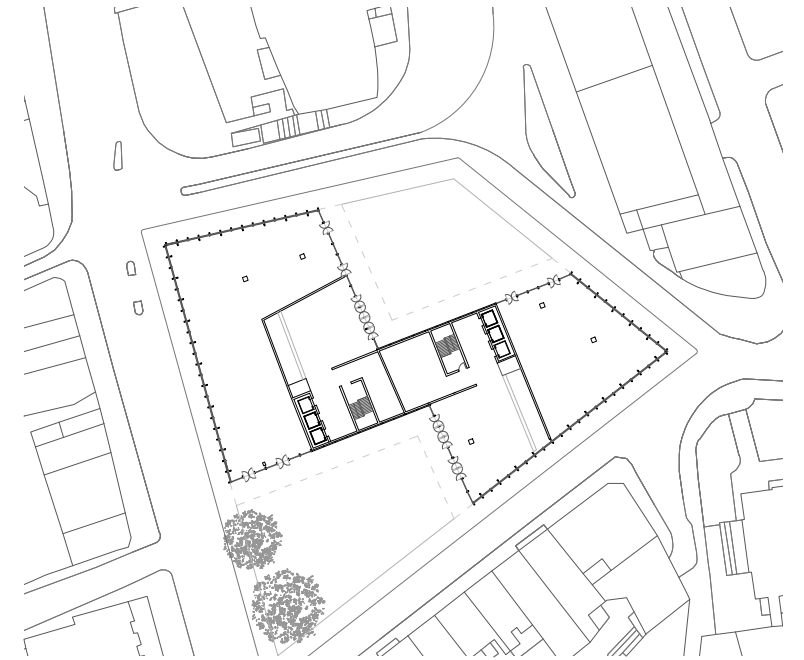
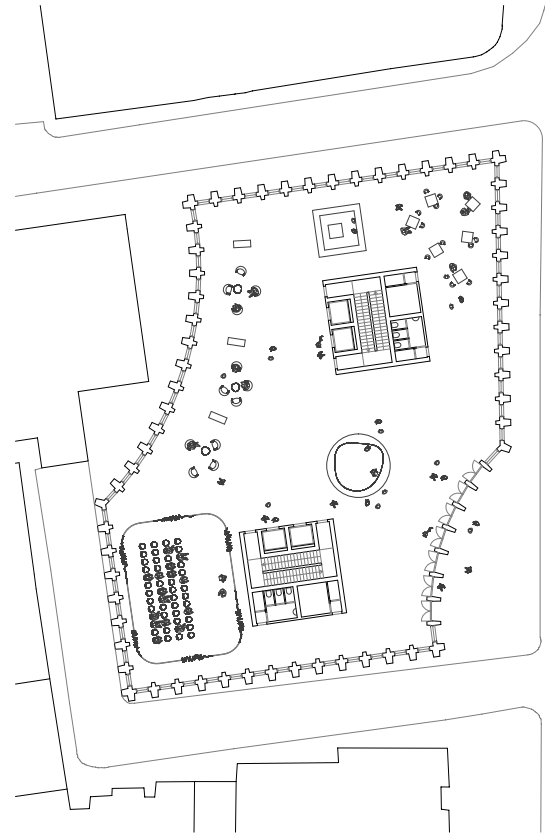


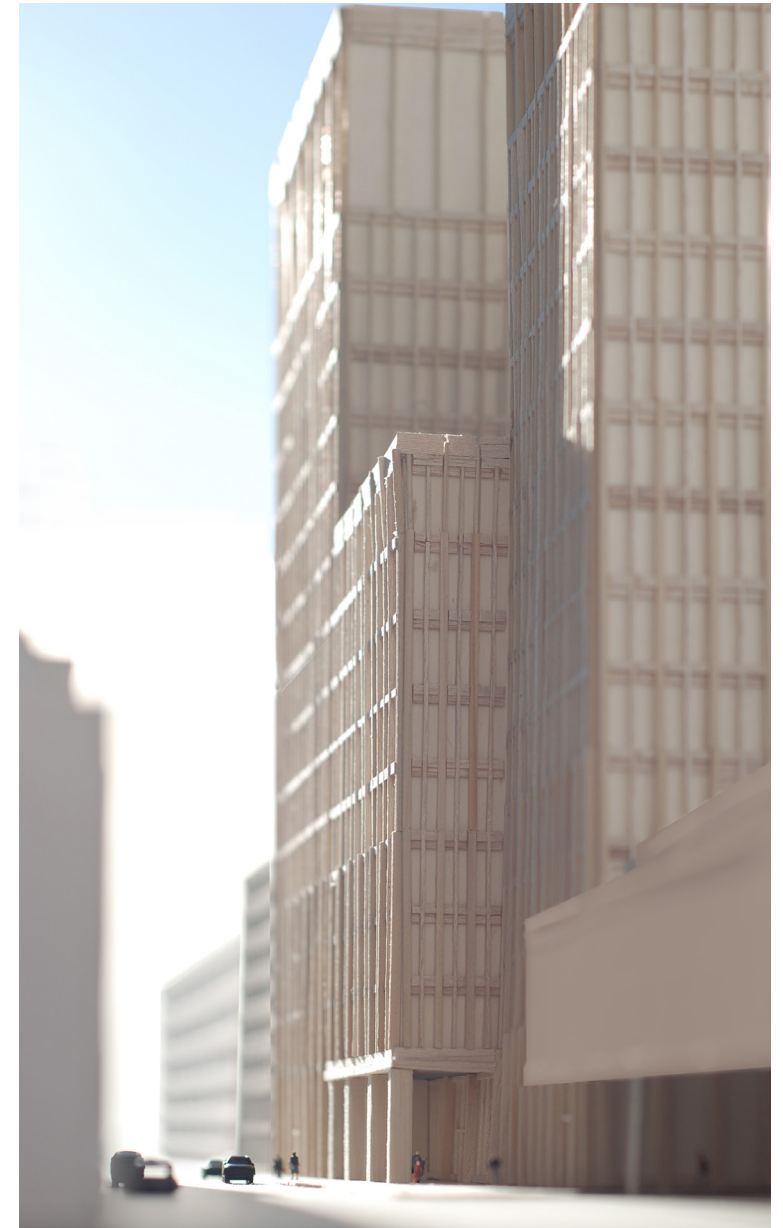
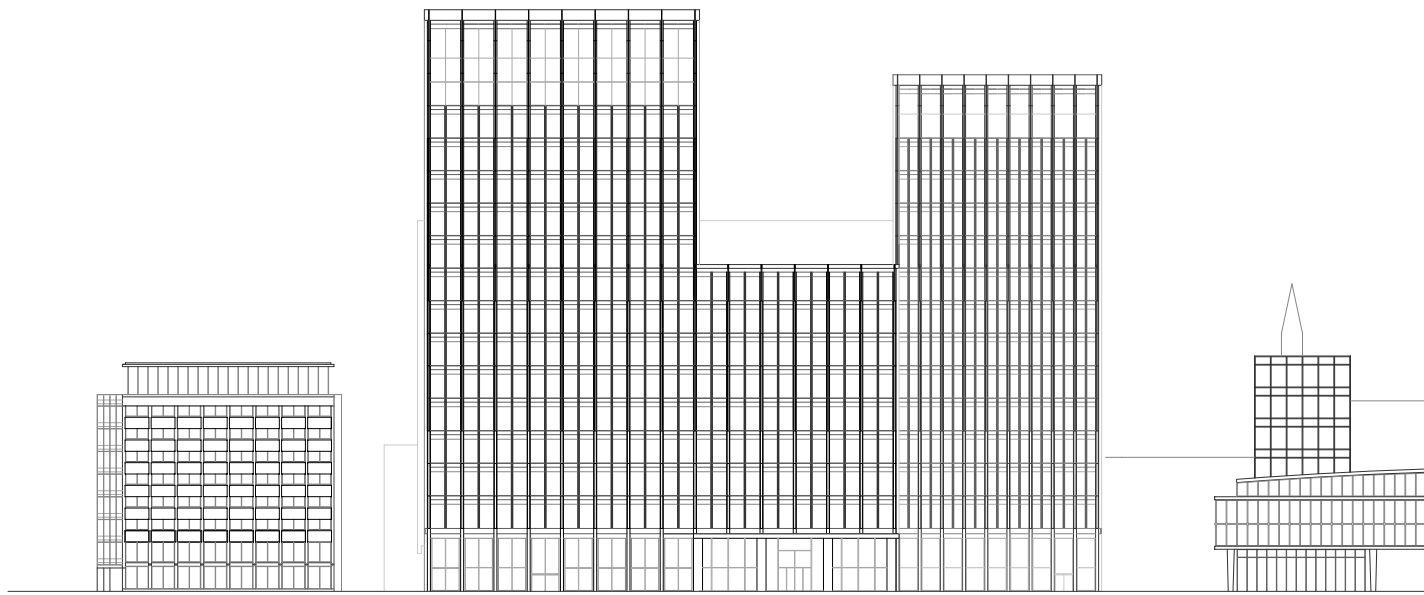
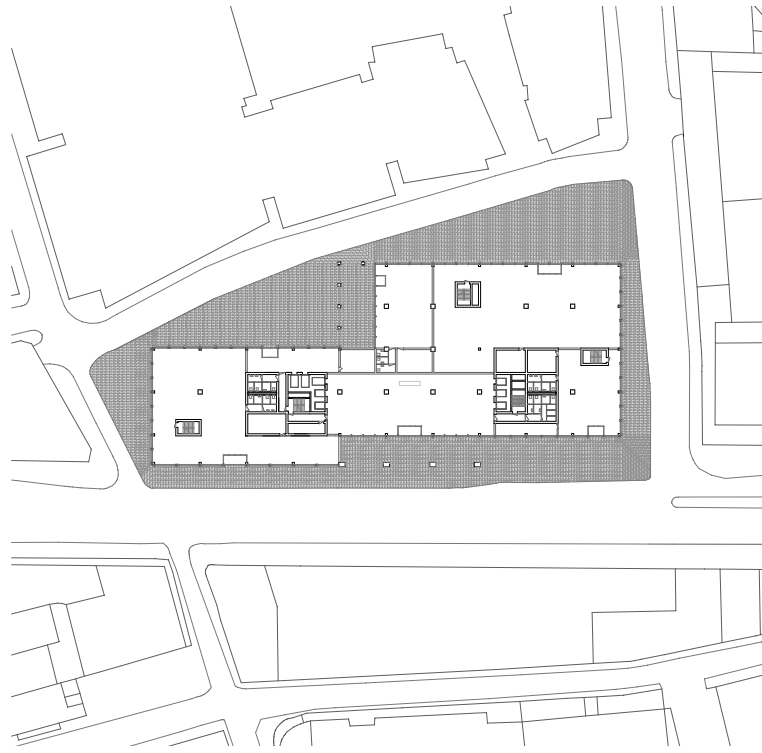


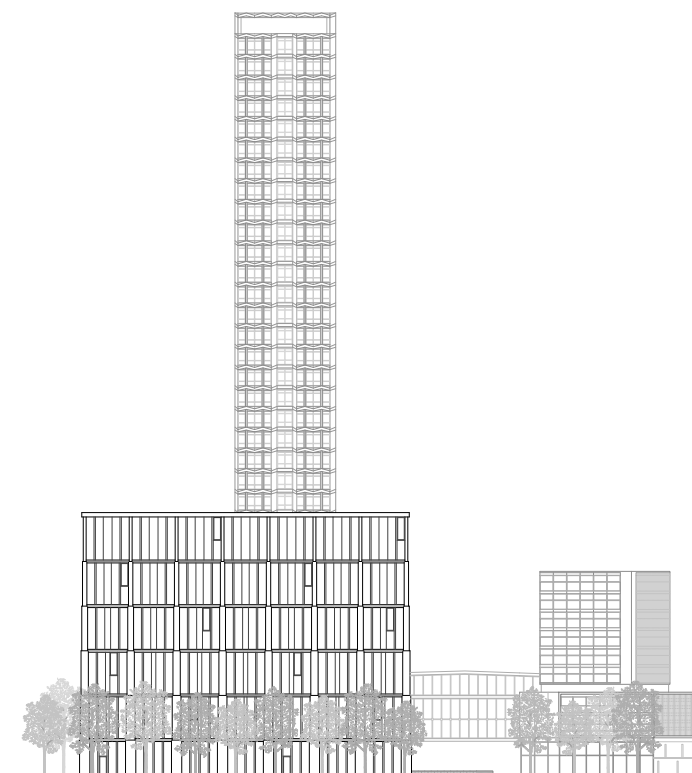
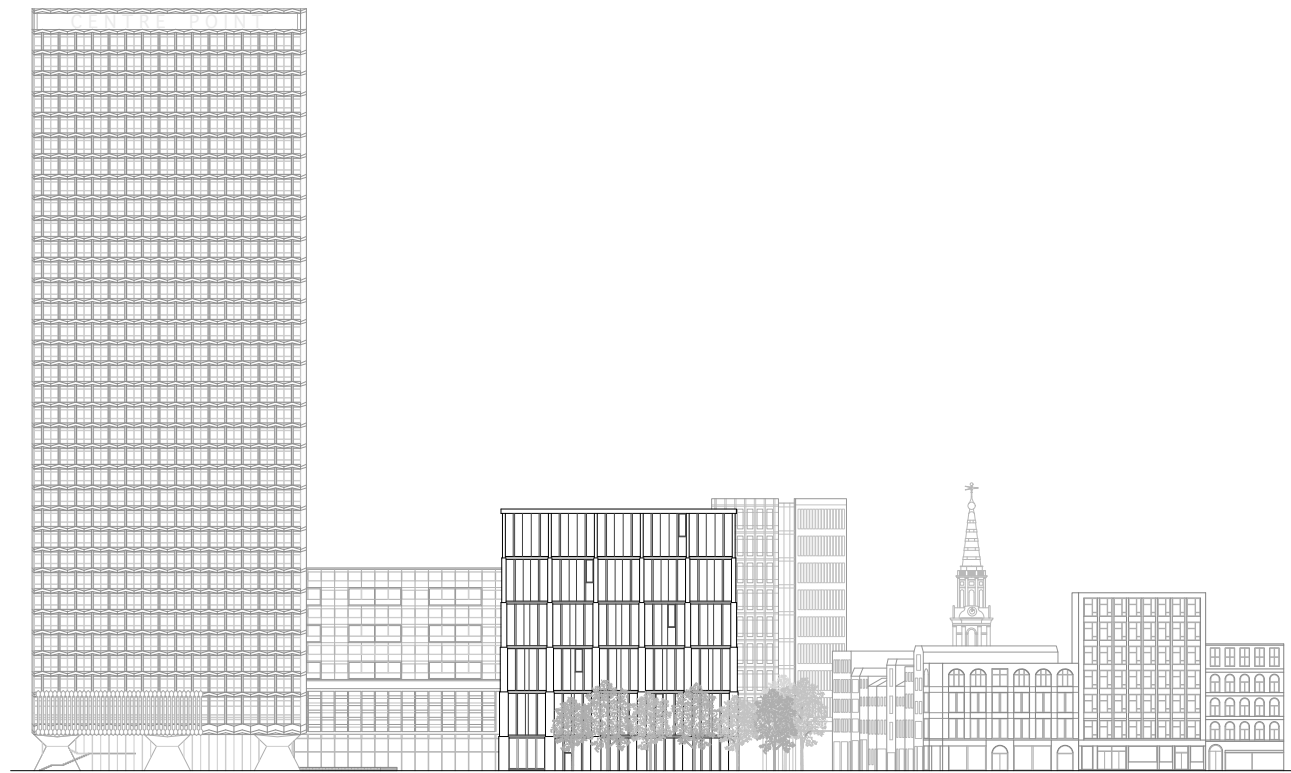
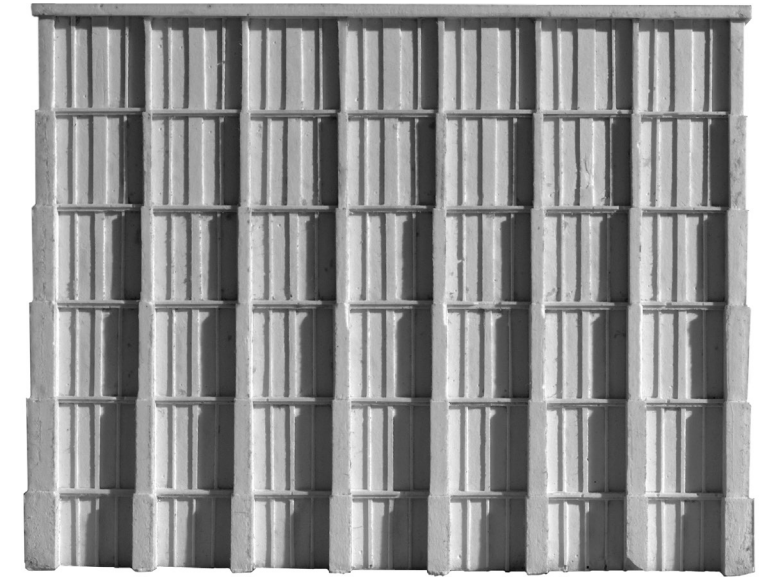
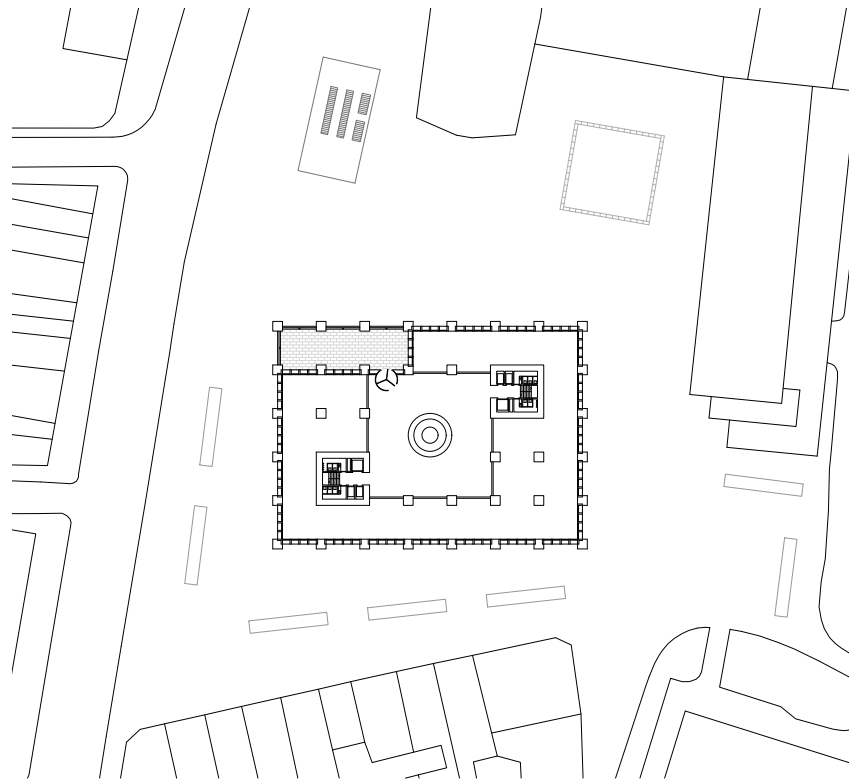














Mario Marino



Andrea Scotti



Claudia Martini



Niccolò Cozzi p.42-43



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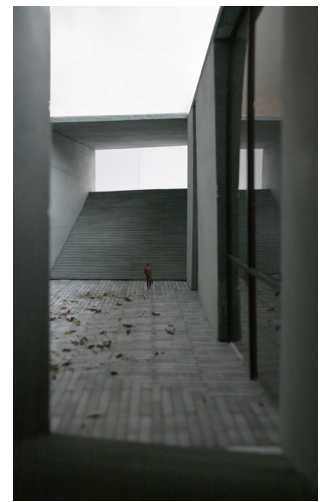
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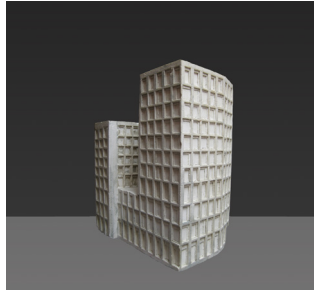
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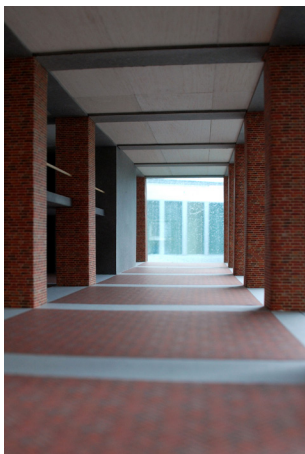
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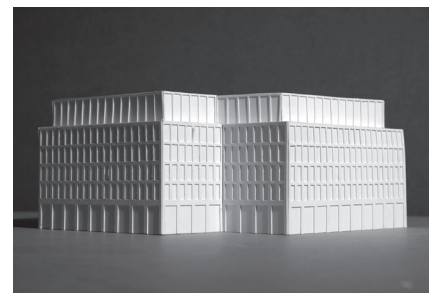
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