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THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

NORTHERN SWITZERLAND

Theo Hotz

Now in his early 60s, Theo Hotz is one of those successful Swiss architects who never studied the subject, not having had the requisite secondary school (*Gymnasium*) education to qualify for entry into an architectural or even technical draughting course. But since seeing as a boy a magazine photograph of some white Modern houses, he had wanted to become an architect. Further inspired at 19 by a lecture by Alvar Aalto he worked for a couple of months in a drawing office and also studied the exhibited entries for architectural competitions. This encouraged him to set up on his own and try his hand at competitions. Initial success came at 21, but acceptance by qualified colleagues and membership of the professional institute took decades longer. For creative companionship he turned to artists and now has a lavish collection of contemporary art.

Always interested in construction and technology, Hotz is now Switzerland's equivalent to a High-Tech architect. But his approach differs in some crucial ways to British practice. The protectionist Swiss practice of using only local consultants has prohibited a dream of working with British engineers. Unable then to exploit inventive and refined structural solutions as intrinsic to his architecture, he instead tends to treat structure merely as a mute framework. Architectural interest comes from the spaces shaped within this framework and the modelling of the outer envelope and its individual components. (This is of course a contemporary version of some of Le Corbusier's famous Five Points: the independent grid and free plan and free facade.)

For the latter, the cladding, Hotz has collaborated with local manufacturers on developing deep drawn aluminium panels that are not only technologically advanced but look it too, in a muscularly mechanistic and rather Teutonic way. He has used these panels on two mighty mechanical monuments that he built in Zürich for the Swiss PTT (post and telegraph services). Both are as expressive of the technological power of today as were the satanic mills of Britain's Industrial Revolution that were enjoyed as the aesthetic antithesis of the then also fashionable pastoral Picturesque. One is a telephone exchange that looms large beside a motorway; the other is a sorting office, half of the 300 metre long bulk of which straddles rail sidings and their unloading platforms. Despite the huge scale and heavy-metal mechanistic and macho posturing of the telephone exchange, the confidence it exudes is cheering as you whizz by on the motorway; and though the sorting office is more daunting, it self-consciously projects some of the unself-conscious majesty of engineer-designed industrial plant.

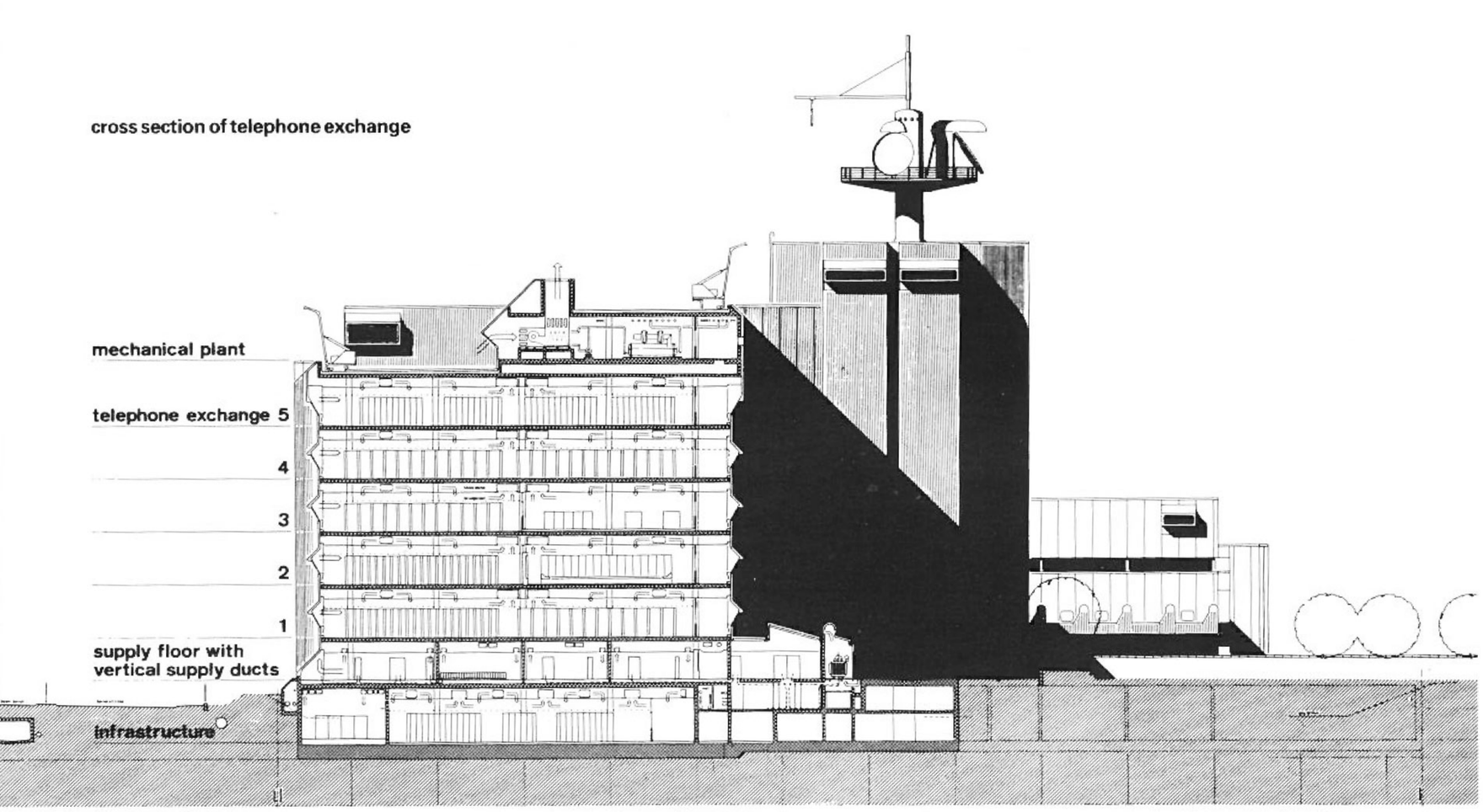
Other recent work by Hotz, though still with its High-Tech touches, is different and much less overbearing in character. His latest building is a particularly attractive, pretty even, fire station in Meilen on a hillside above Lake Zürich. Taking light through roof monitors it buries it back into the slope so as not to obstruct the lake view of the houses behind. In contrast, the simple yet stylishly composed front advertises its presence and purpose with a red logo on the curving end panels of the white enamelled steel cladding. Another recent building is the Burkhardt bookbindery on the edge of a small town industrial estate. Basically, this is a reticent and typically Swiss concrete box, the upper main work floor of which is well lit by domed and peripheral roof-lights. But giving identity and presence to the building, the angled front is curved at its approach end, and its banal off-the-peg aluminium and glass curtain wall screened by a purpose-made sunshade of aluminium louvres that lean slightly forward. This single flourish lifts an appropriately straightforward building right out of the ordinary.

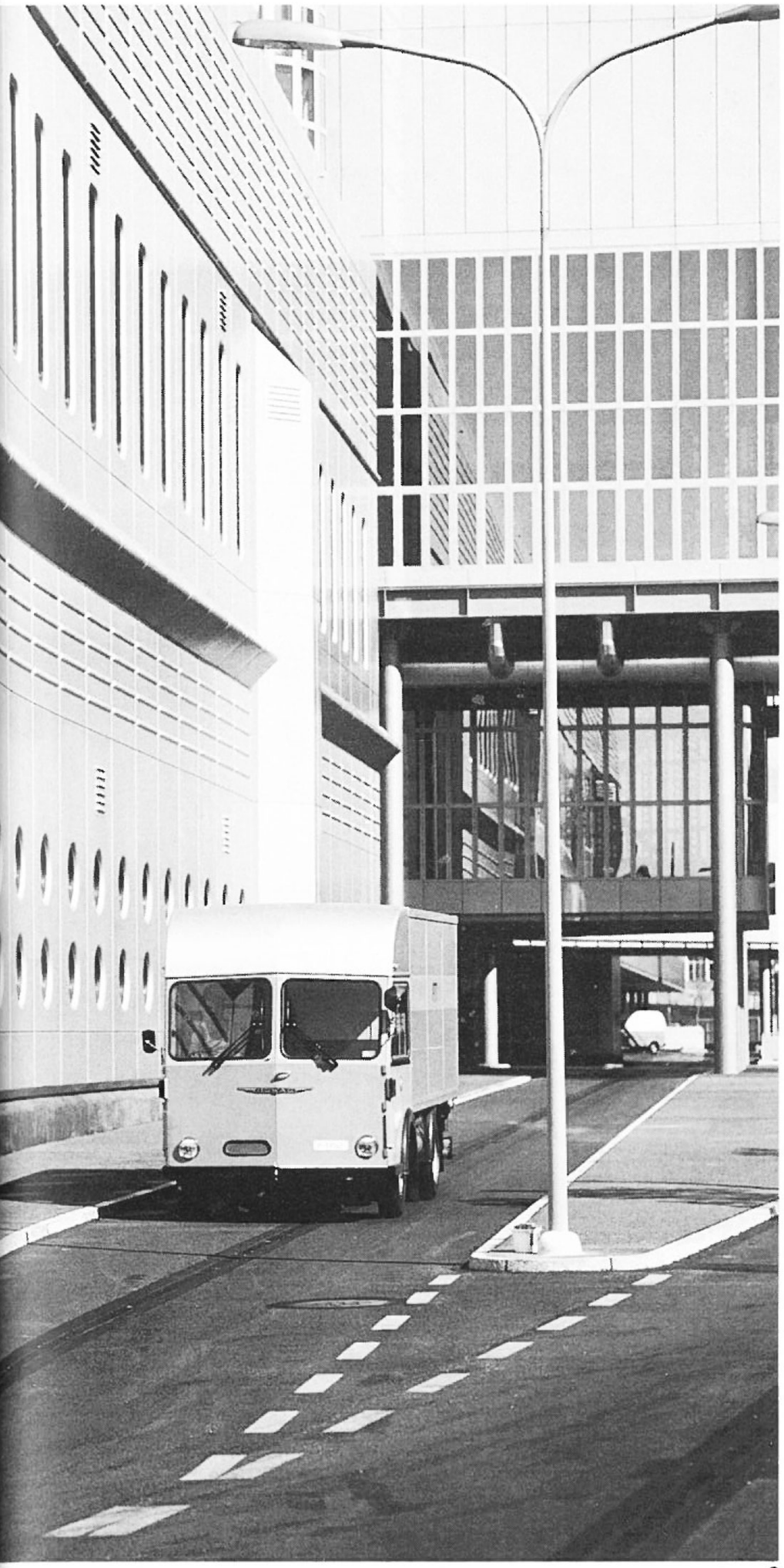
One of the most impressive of Hotz's buildings uses a similar strategy of appended sunshades in front of a mundane off-the-peg curtain wall to give distinctive character to what is just a moderate-budget speculative office building. This is the Marti office building in Zürich for which job architect Franz Romero must share much of the credit. What impresses here, in contrast to the relatively high-budget meccano-monumentalism of the PTT buildings, is the cunning pragmatism and very humane character. Less shiny and slick than they look in most photographs, the facades conspicuously display standard corrugated aluminium sheet, galvanised steel grilles and domestic galvanised half round gutters and down pipes — even the purpose-made clamps on the pipe handrails look decidedly DIY. Played against these are not only the sensual curves but also such slightly clichéd elements as the canted glazing on the penthouse floor, the portholes and spindly spiral staircases. Mixing stylishness and delicacy with an industrial ordinariness, as well as with a little of the tongue-in-cheek, the building is quite touching in its humane scale and approachable appeal.

The distinctive plan shape (which in recalling the Paris UNESCO building by Breuer, Nervi and Zehrfuss intensifies the '50s echoes that counterpoint the High-Tech) results from a rationalisation of the planning restrictions. These required broad frontages on the two streets bounding the site but allow only a narrow slab in the middle. The resulting plan is relatively efficient, not least in placing cores with entries directly on the street, and the corridors are very pleasant in their curving and contained vistas — particularly on the floors later fitted out by Hotz and Romero. However, not only visitors but even long-term tenants report that they find the curving symmetry and identical twin cores persistently disorienting.

Behind its metal outer trappings, the Marti building's conventional concrete construction is clad in an off-the-peg curtain wall of acceptable performances if not appearance — the budget could not stretch to a purpose-designed and made one. Instead the savings achieved by relatively cheap construction and curtain wall were spent on the sunshadings and claddings. These not only give the building its particular identity but lessen the heat loadings, thus eliminating need for air-conditioning, furnishing further savings to pay for these conspicuous flourishes.

Where possible too the claddings and sunshadings were assembled from off-the-peg items. Generally only the supporting brackets, louvres and their fixings and the handrail clamps were purpose-made. On the top floor there are more specials.





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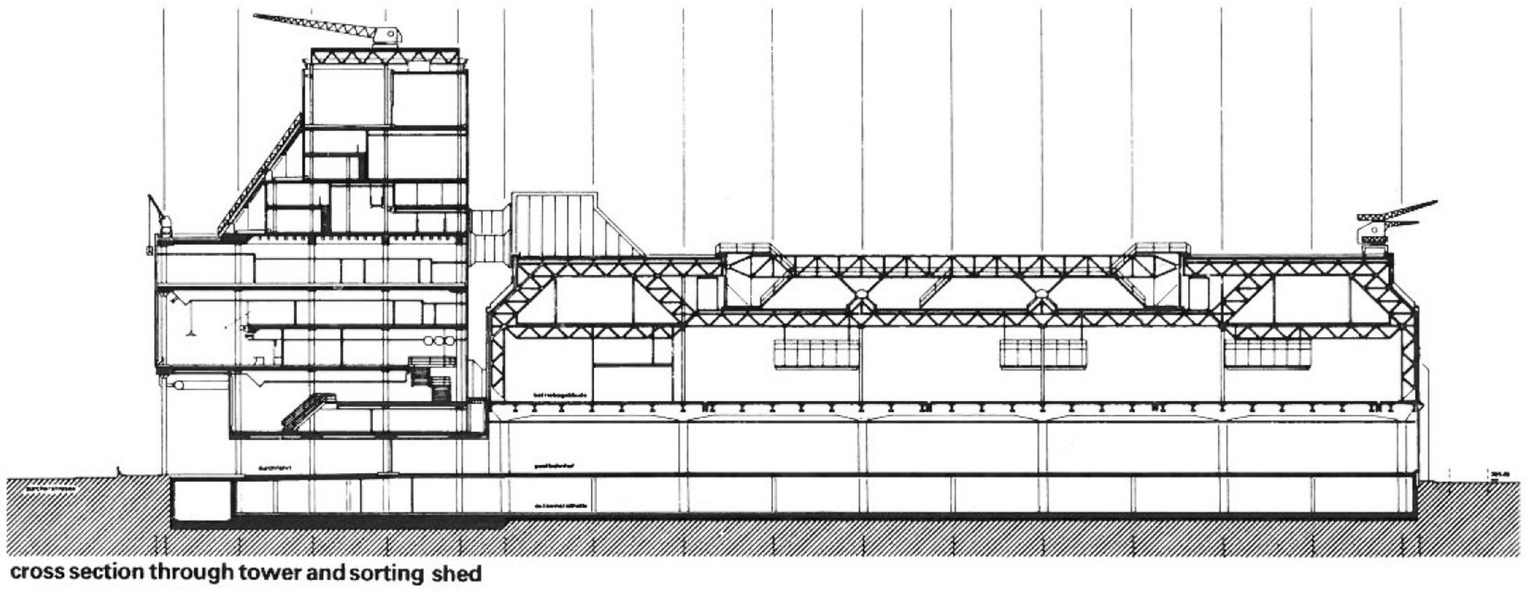
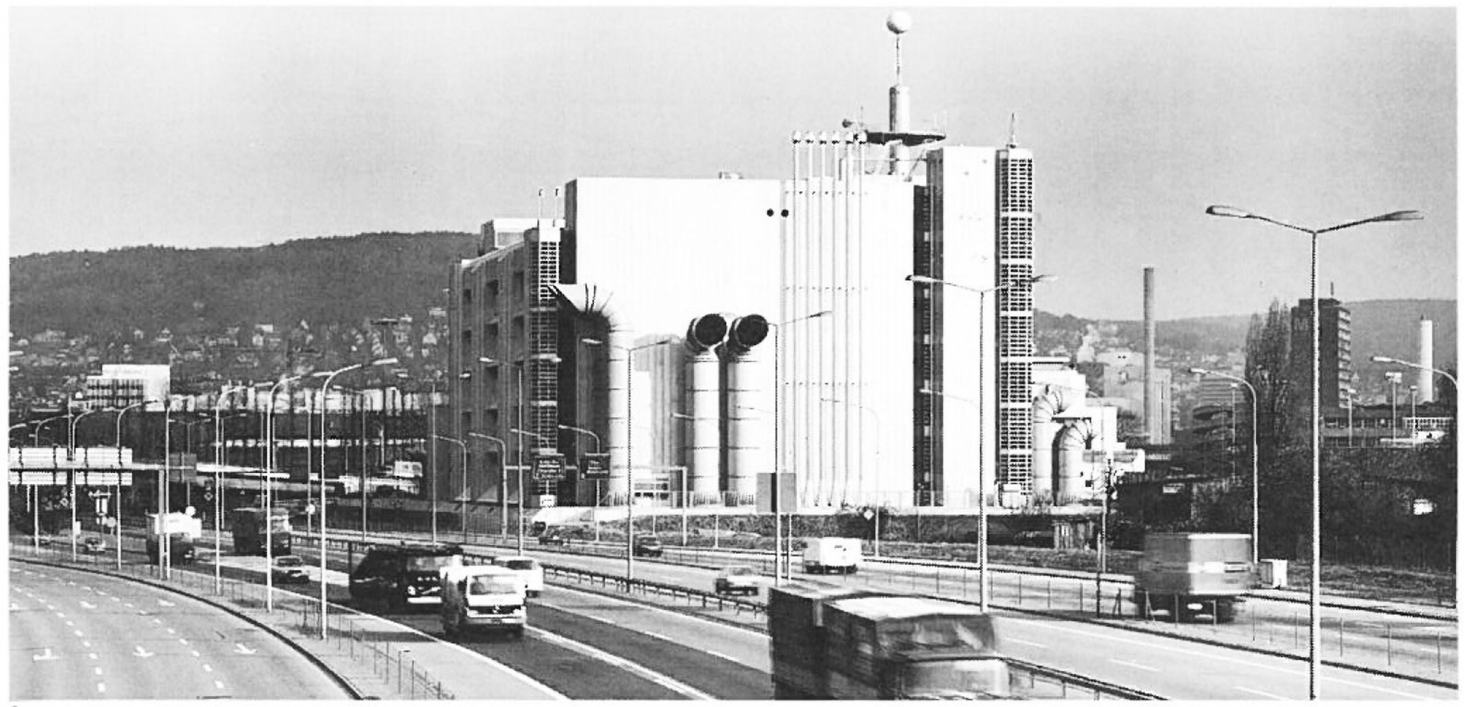


cross section through tower and sorting shed



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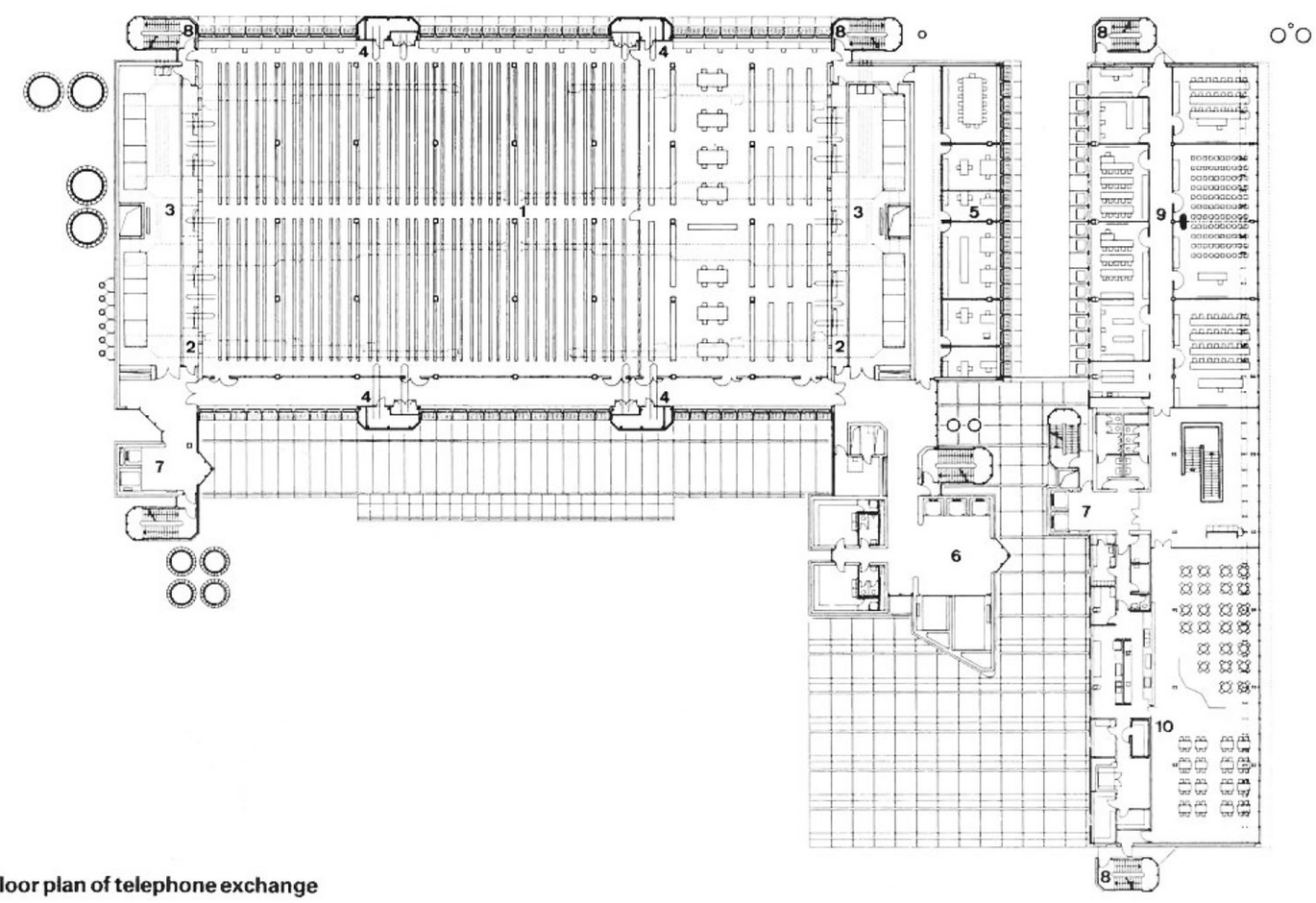
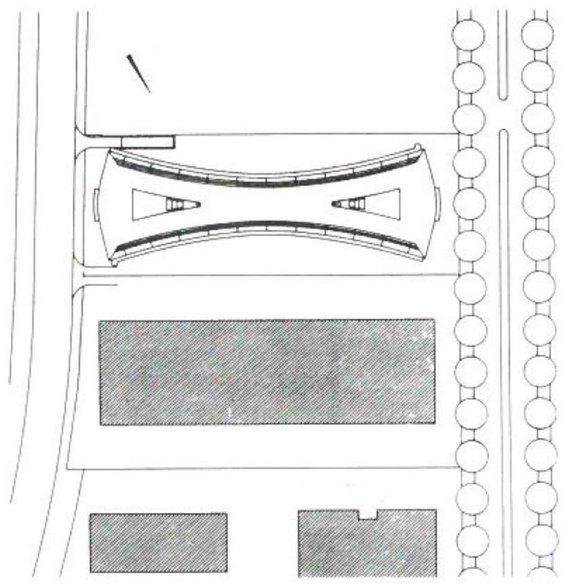
1&2
Postal sorting office, Zürich.
1
General view. Central tower houses local post office (entered by covered ramp), staff cafeteria and caretakers' flats.
2
Close-up showing deep drawn aluminium cladding panels developed by architects and local manufacturer.
3
Telephone exchange, Zürich.

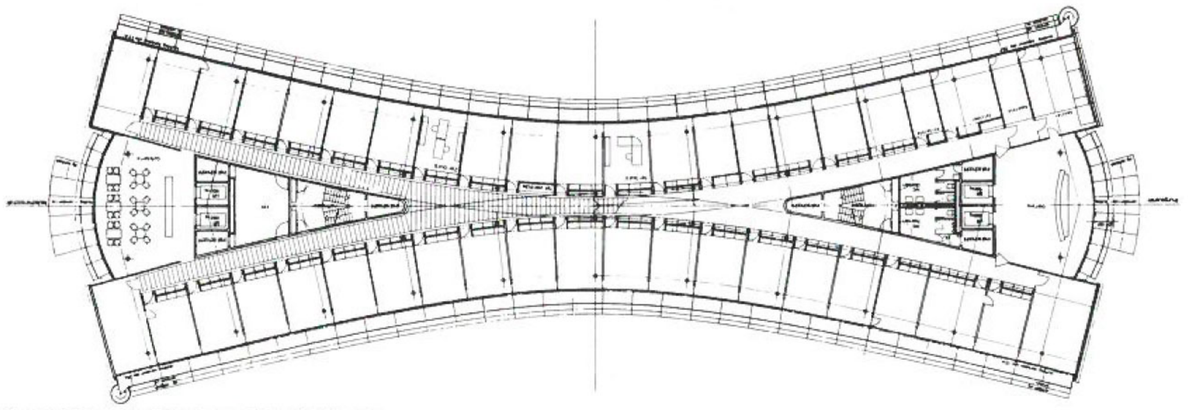
1. telephone exchange
2. cable ducts
3. air-conditioning plant
4. vertical supply ducts
5. office zone
6. main vertical circulation
7. secondary vertical circulation
8. escape stairs
9. instruction and training
10. personal restaurant



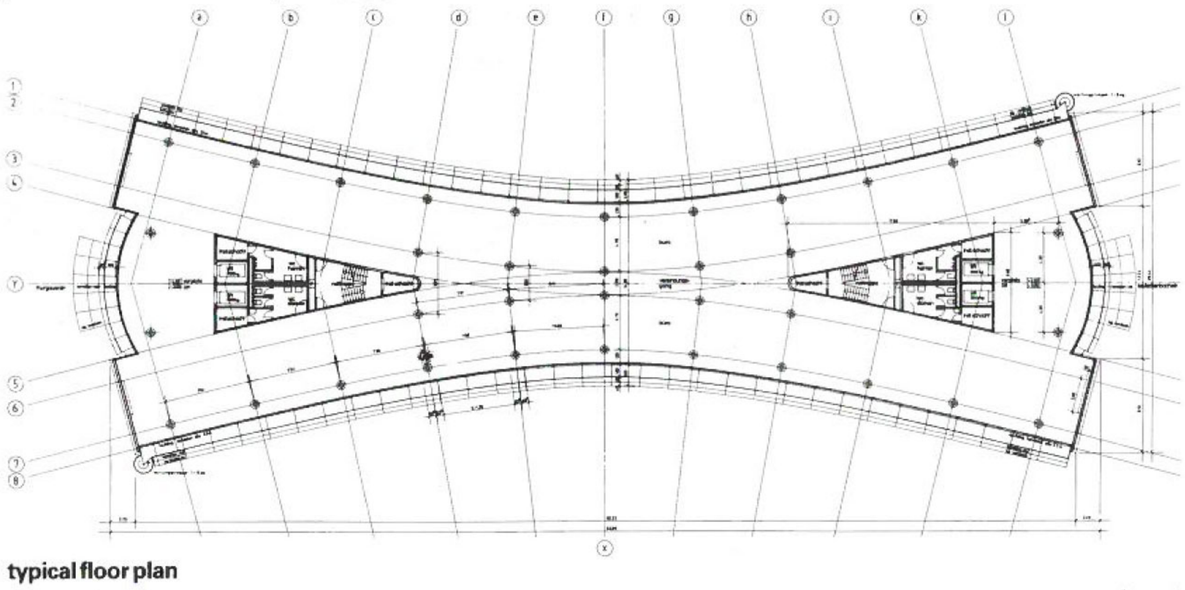
typical floor plan of telephone exchange



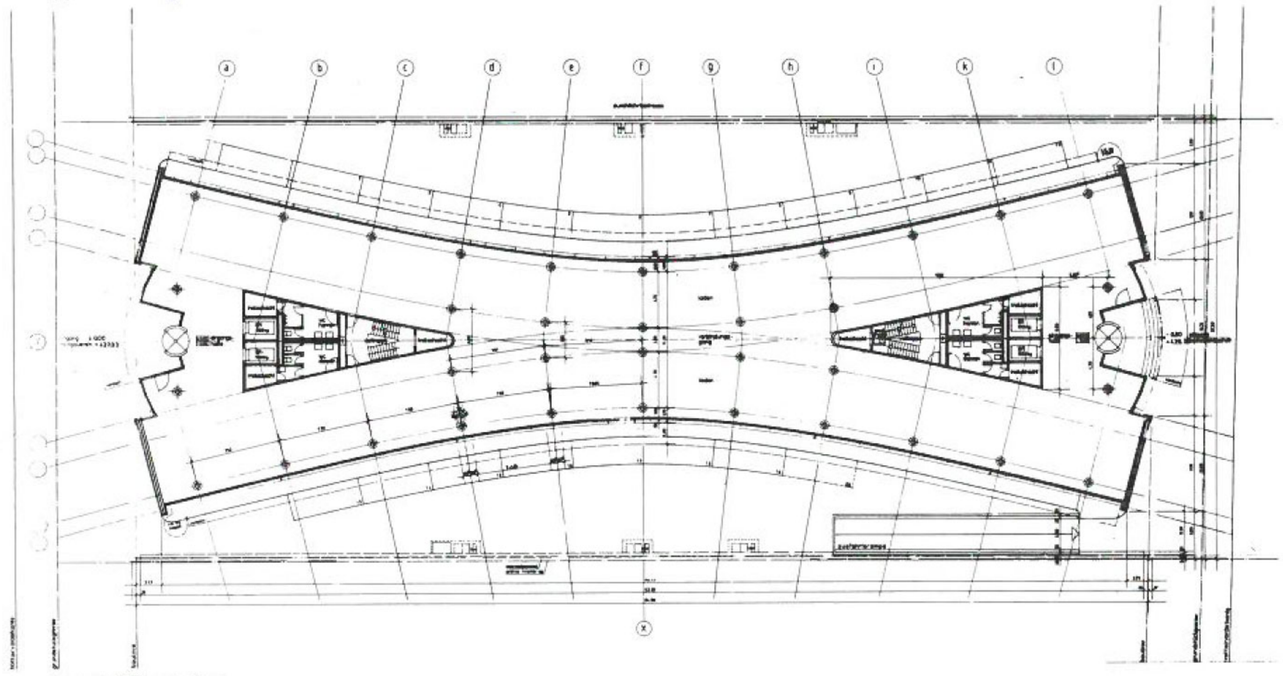
site plan



plan of floor as fitted out by architects



typical floor plan

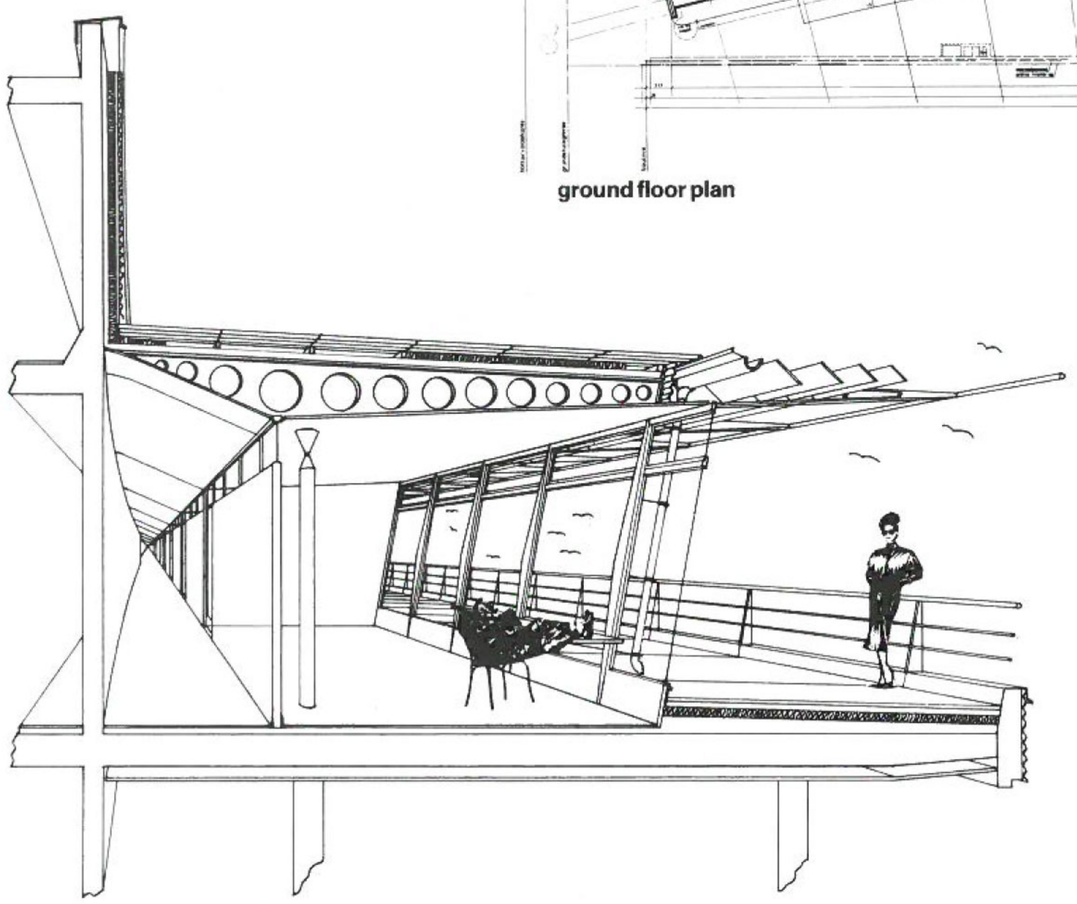


ground floor plan

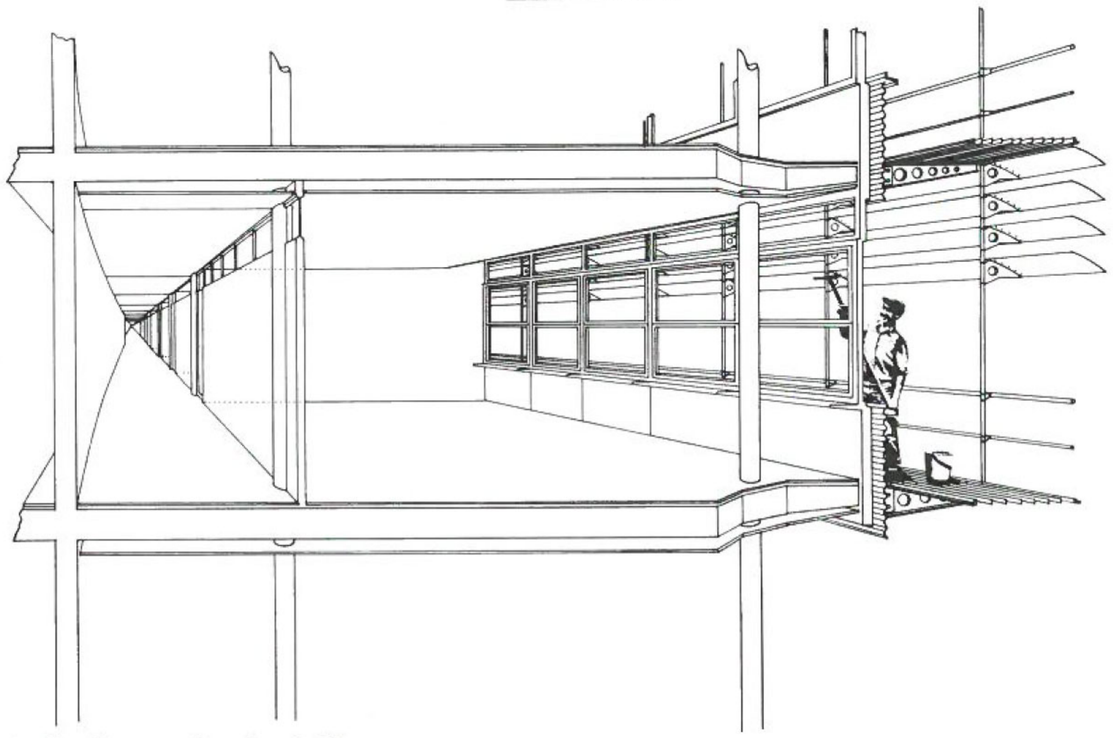
4

Marti office building, Zürich

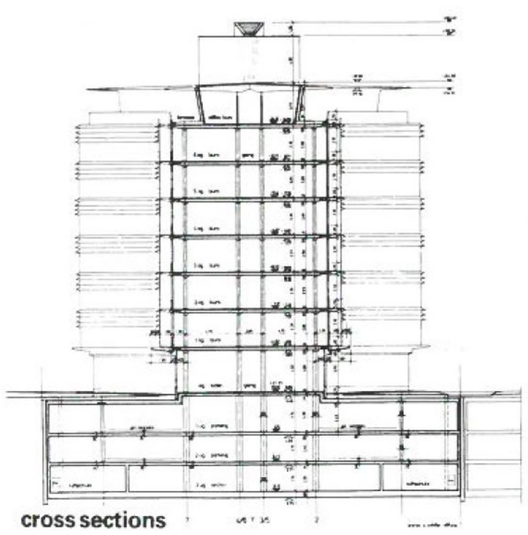
4-9
Marti office building, Zürich
4
Close-up of sunshading louvres and mesh catwalks.
5
Corridors curve on either side of core on floor fitted out by architects.
6 & 7
Close-ups of corner and base show distinctive delicate character given by hanging simple elements on outside of mundane building.
8
General view. The inward curve of the long side allows light down to a future building on the right.



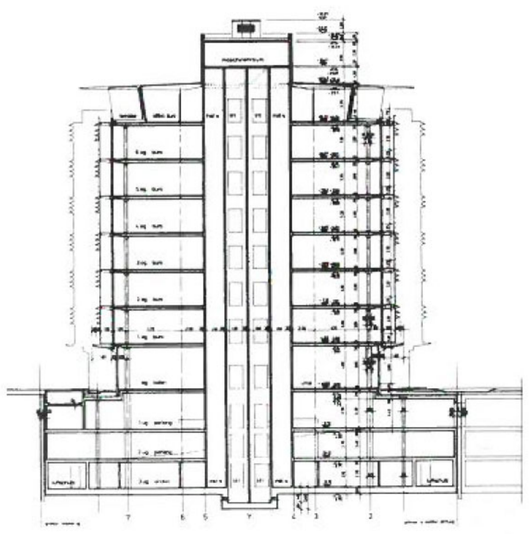
sectional perspective of top floor



sectional perspective of typical floor



cross sections



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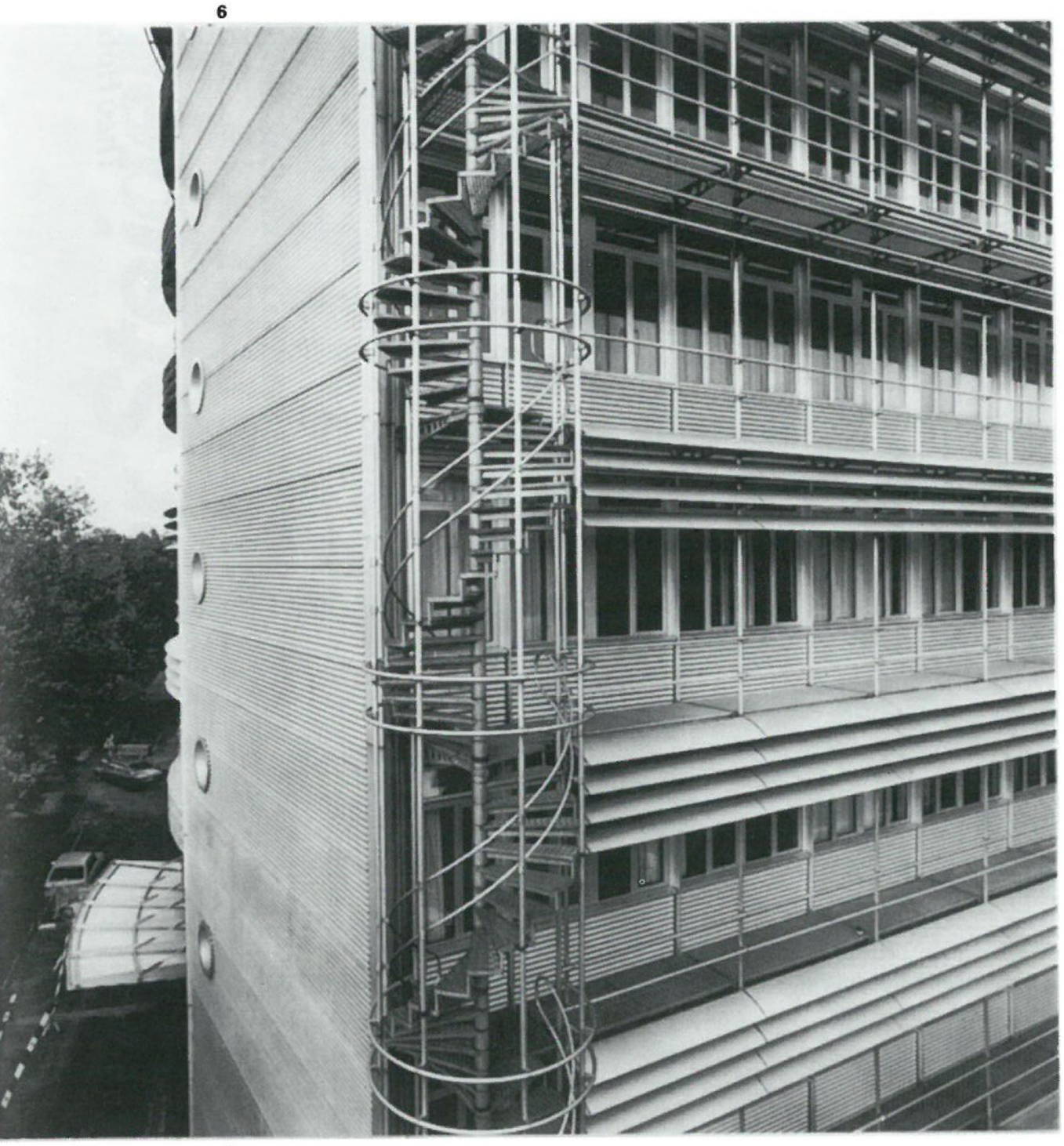

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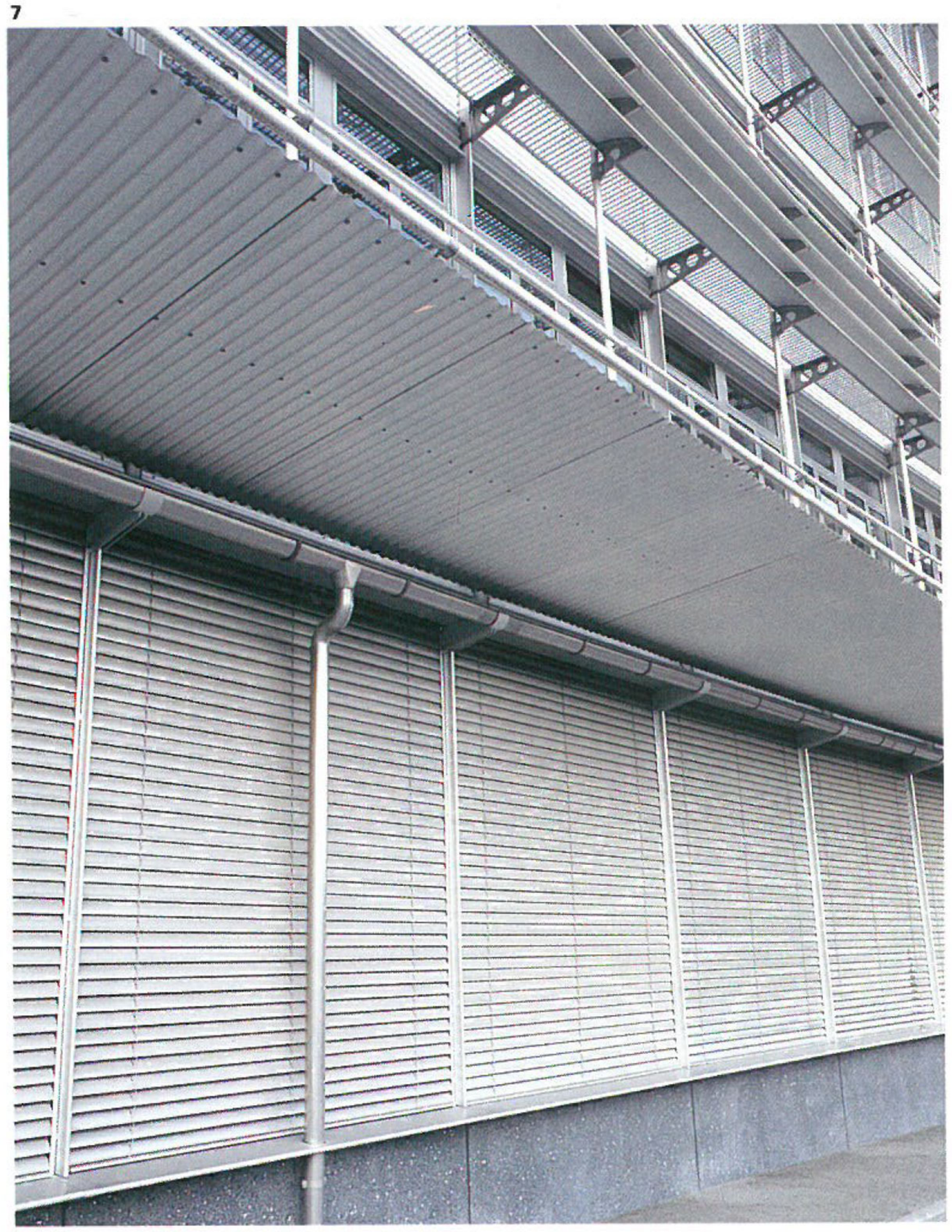

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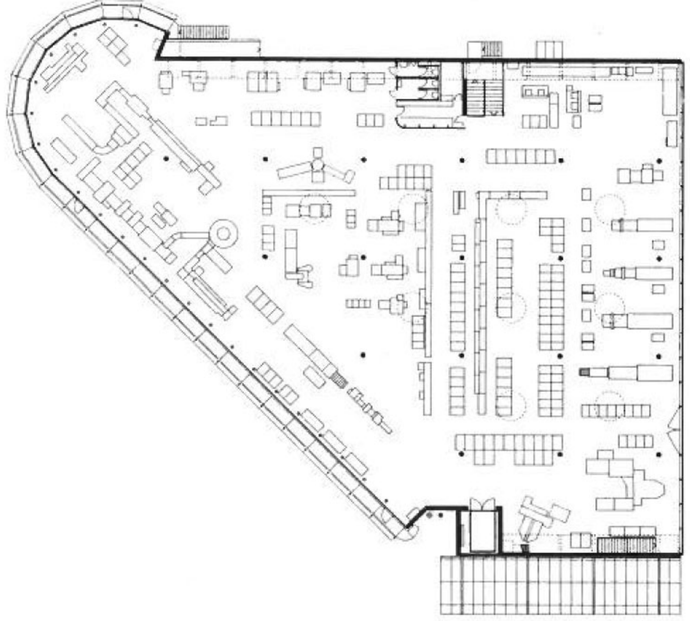
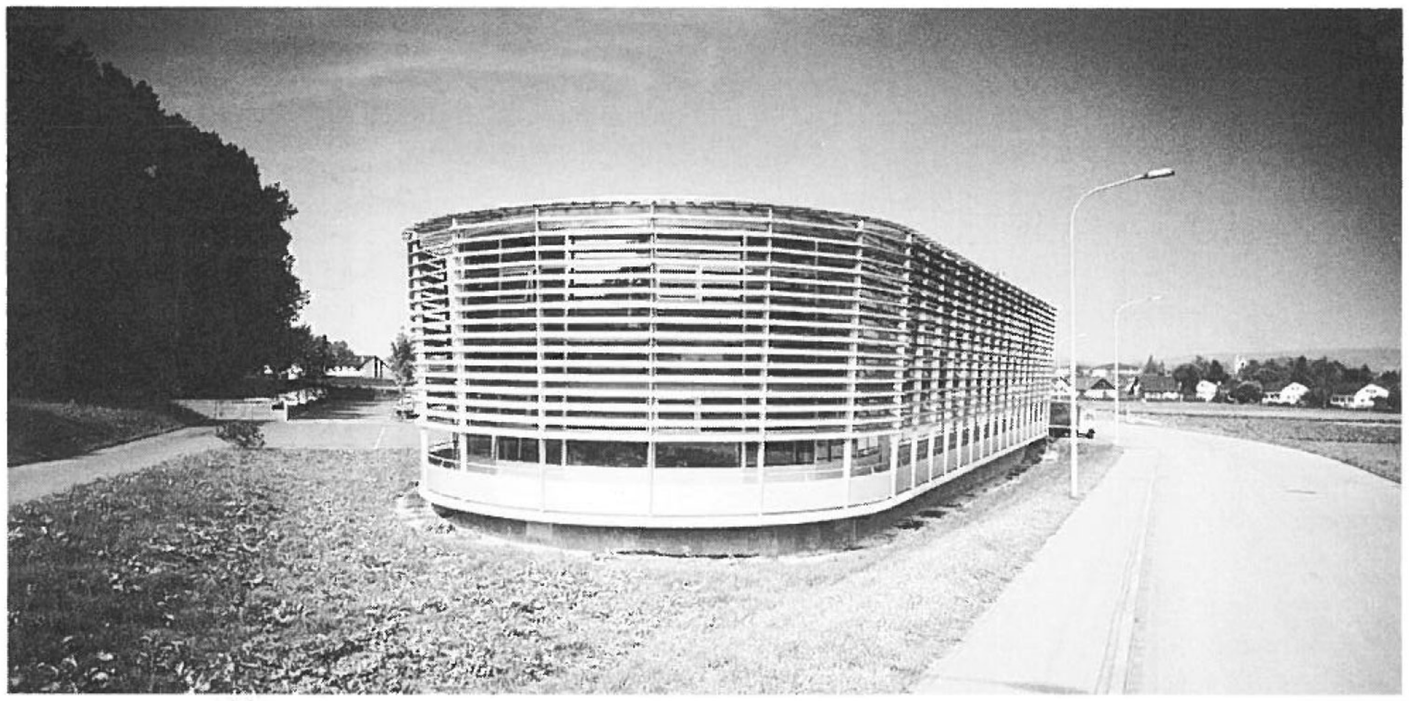


upper floor plan



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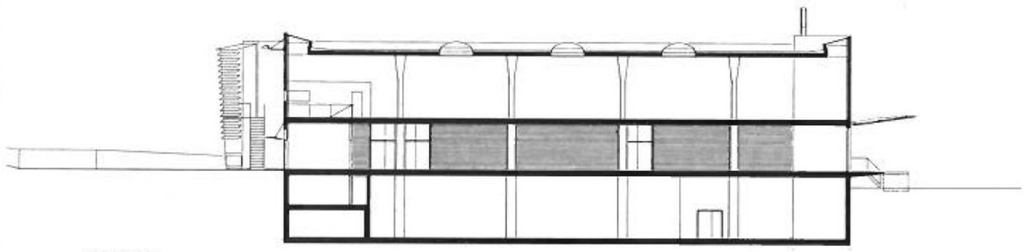
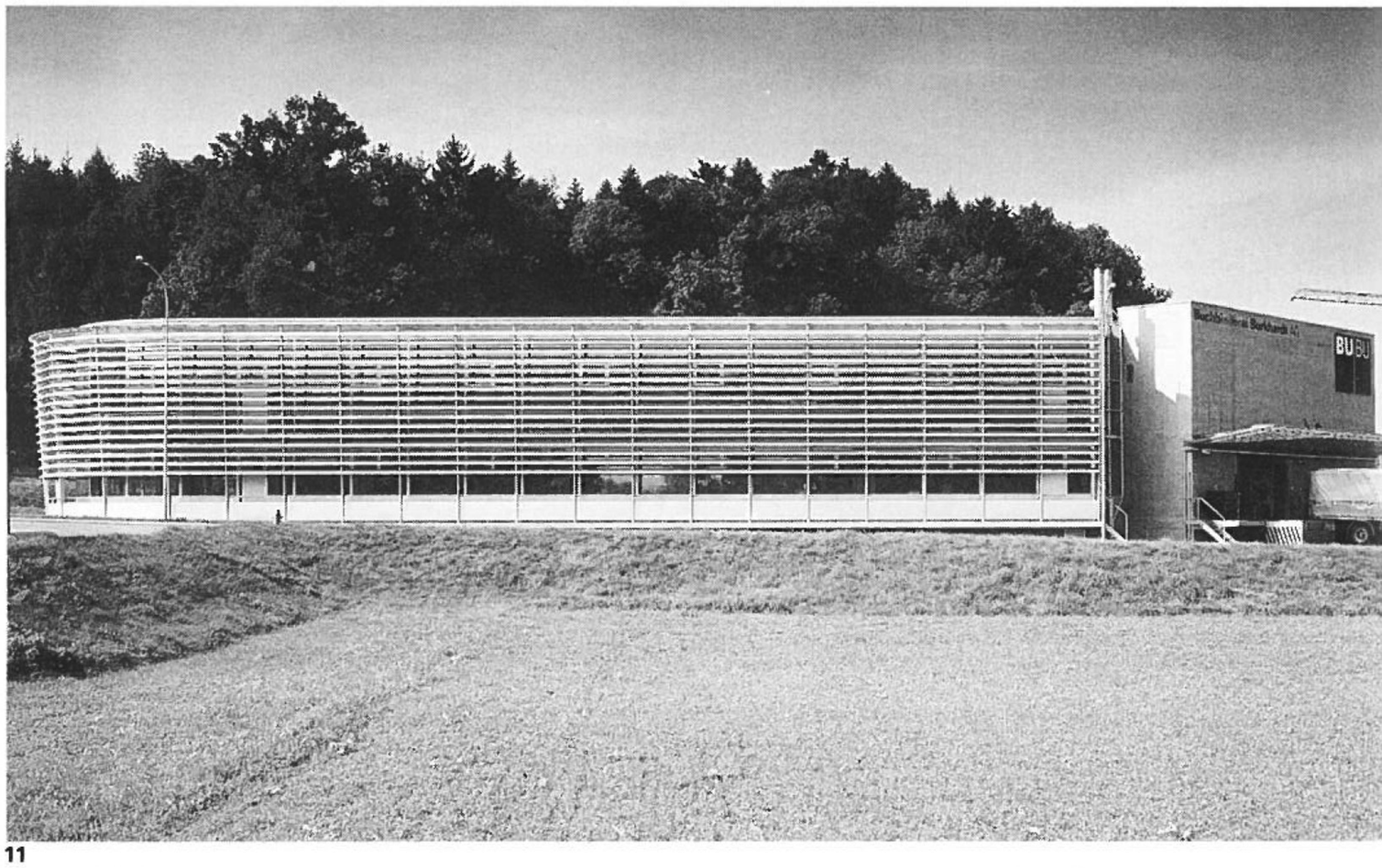
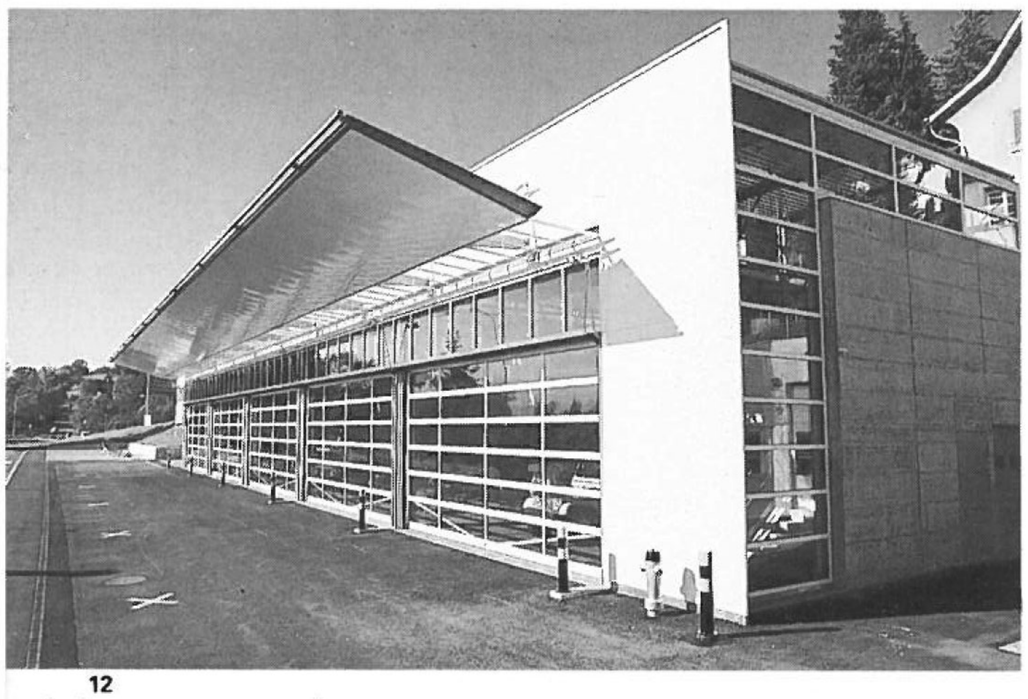


section



11

10,11
Bookbinder.
10
Curved end and sunshades that give distinctive character as seen on approach.
11
Main elevation to street.
12-14
Fire station, Meilen: views of front.



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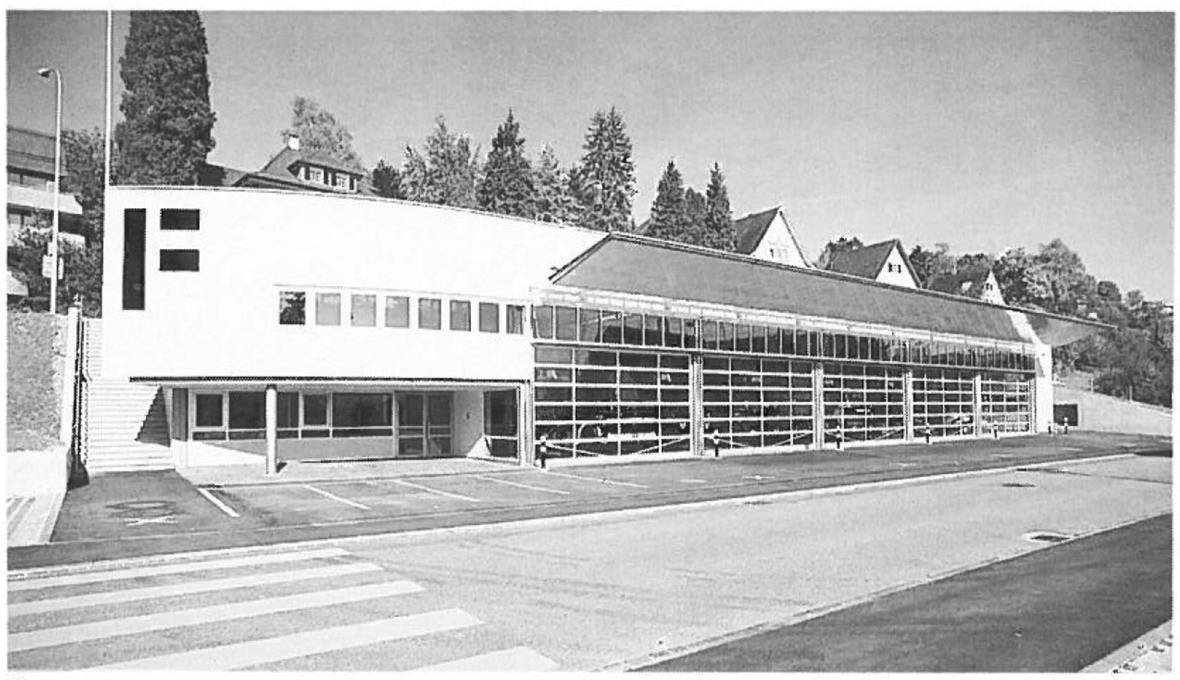

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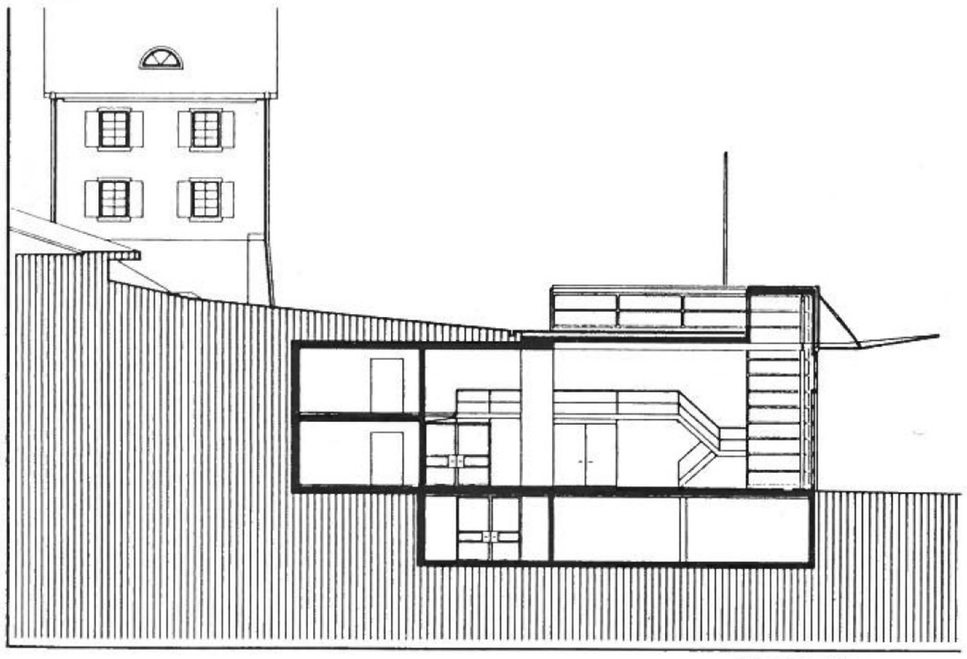

cross section

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