

**Back to Basilica: A Triptych of Church Unbuilding**

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture  
Harvard University Graduate School of Design, by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Architecture I

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Lisa Haber-Thomson

# **Back to Basilica: A Triptych of Church Unbuilding**

Kristine Sungyeon Chung, 2023. Advised by Lisa Haber-Thomson.







## 0 ABSTRACT

Christian churches have accumulated disproportionate real and symbolic capital in America. A result of an outdated truce between Church and State, Christian monuments, however underused, are a protected discourse—too sacred to be touched and too private to be entered. Paralyzed in inertia, the implied homogeneity perpetuates a skewed system, either urging the churches into private development or petrifying them into a slow public death.

How do we *re-form* the church to retain it within the civic realm? How can we productively deconstruct the notion of sacredness to accommodate non-discriminatory public use?

Imagining an afterlife for churches in the United States, this thesis points back to the beginning of the symbolic contest between Church and State. The medieval Church borrowed legitimacy from the Roman State in the architectural typology of the *Basilica*, a judicial and civic building. In this typological appropriation, the Church rotated the axis ninety degrees to accentuate the ritualistic single path, undermining the inherent ambiguity of the many in the original Basilica.

This thesis proposes *a triptych of church unbuilding* as an act of reclamation. The publicness is reasserted with the program of *USPS post offices*, a pervasive State network fixture, serving a non-discriminatory, secular public. Through the architectural and programmatic re-formation, the project prompts *the typological deconstruction of the sacred and the social construction of the secular public*.

## 1 THEMATICALLY

This thesis focuses on a surprising connection between Church and State—two ideological constructions at odds with each other for most of the American history.

Borrowing the term from the political philosopher Benedict Anderson, I posit that Church and State are both *Imagined Communities*. They are enacted through intangible networks—the soft power of social infrastructure to connect people—becoming *real* only through the act of gathering.

*Imagined communities* rely on *physical buildings* to accommodate gatherings and operate logistically. These buildings, in turn, gain symbolic capital in the public's mind, feeding back to the ideological construction.

Assessing the symbolic capital Church and State have accumulated in the built environment, one finds a stark imbalance. Built for the Puritan settlements, old American cities exhibit an astonishing density of Christian churches, constituting a very particular image within a city.



Vintage Postcard, Three churches on the Green, New Haven, Conn.



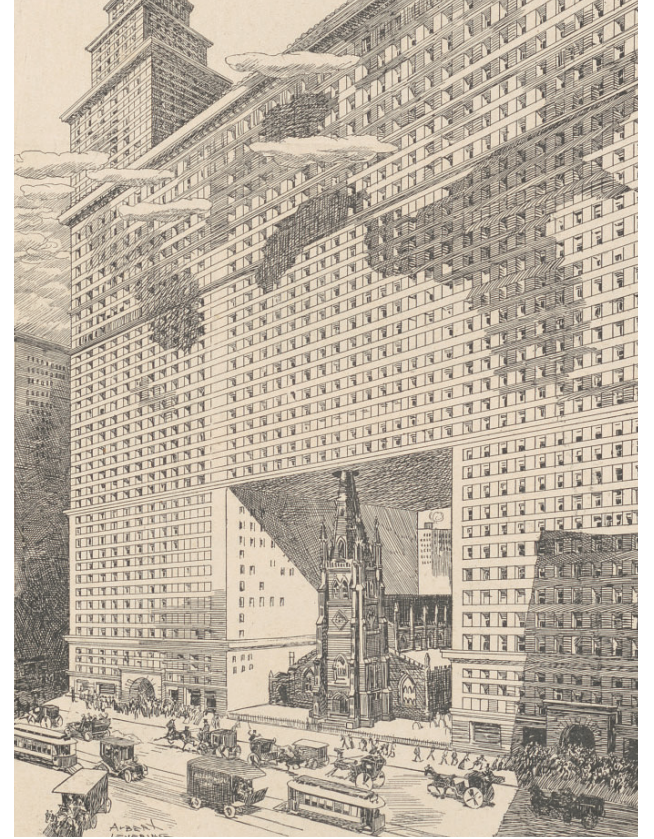
"City of Cambridge, Mass." Map. Boston: Franklin View Co., 1877.



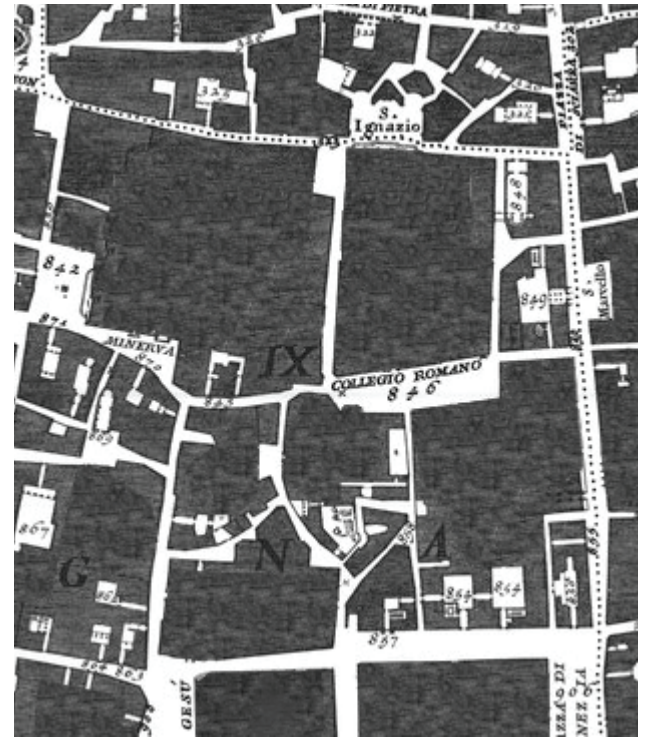
## 2 ANACHRONISTICALLY

Churches, however underused, constitute a protected discourse—too sacred to be touched and too private to be entered. With the declining religious attendance, the original intent of churches as built infrastructure for gathering is rapidly becoming obsolete, making the initially public spaces *inaccessible* to the increasingly heterogeneous, plural public.

But churches are systematically trapped in the logic of *private property ownership*. Tax laws incentivize churches to rather be empty than relinquish the tax-exempt status of a house of worship. As a result, many of them are petrified into a slow public death, or forced into the capitalist system for real estate.



Levering, Albert, Artist. *The Future of Trinity Church*. New York: Published by Keppler & Schwarzmann.



*The Nolli Map of Rome* by Giambattista Nolli, 1748. Edited by the author.



### 3 SYMBOLICALLY

The underuse of churches, in itself, is a theological *desecration* or *de-consecration*. Protestant belief does not put much weight on the ritual consecration of a space. The sacredness is not measured in absolute terms, but in *an ongoing act of gathering*.

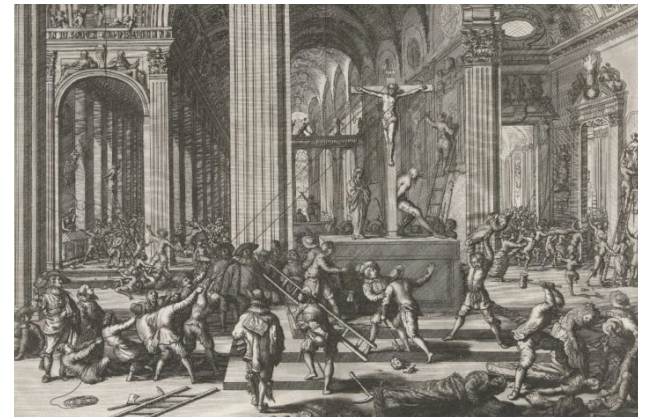
Two pieces of scripture prioritize the *act* of worship over the *space* of worship: Matthew 18:20, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them;*” and Acts 7:48, “*The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.*” As seen in the iconoclasm during the Reformation era, a church is not intrinsically sacred. This thesis reimagines the sacredness of a church not in terms of *space* but rather in *time*.



Pieter Jansz Saenredam, Saint Bavo in Haarlem, 1628.



Pieter Jansz Saenredam, Church of Saint Mary in Utrecht, 1662.

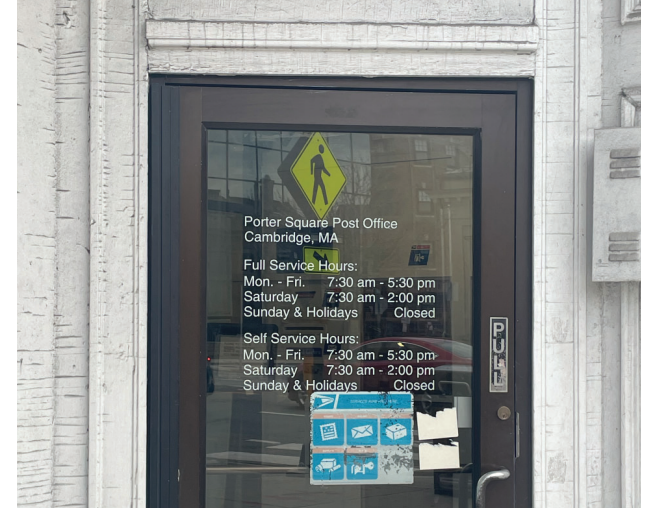


Jan Luyken, Beeldenstorm, 1566.

#### 4 TIME-LY

Speaking of time, the tradition of sacred Sunday had a very particular collision with a state fixture: *the United States Postal Service*.

Famously closed on Sundays, the USPS is frozen at a truce between Church and State: The Congress mandated Sunday mail closure in 1912, contrasting their decision in 1810, mandating the post offices to be open on Sundays. What happened during the century in between was a complex compromise between Church and State: Puritan leaders wanted to enforce the Christian Sabbath, and the government needed to keep the postal system under operation. More than pragmatism for both camps, Sunday mail was a contested ground for the *symbolic power* to influence public behavior.



Porter Square USPS Post Office in Cambridge, MA. Photo by the author.



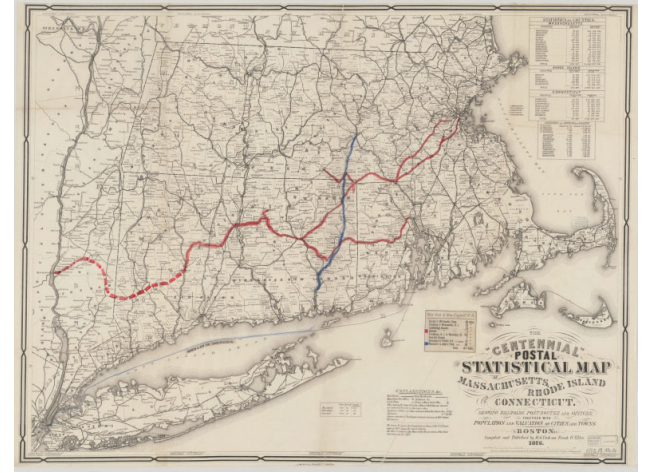
Alfred Jones & Richard Caton Woodville. *Mexican News*, 1851.



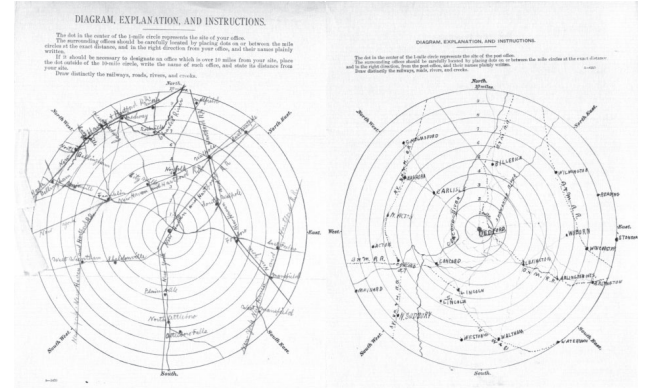
Inspired by this episode, this thesis uses the USPS as a stand-in for the State and the civic. The reason is two-fold:

First, much like churches, the USPS is a *network* comprised of *outposts*. The post was invented with the ambition to enact nationhood, with each of its outposts meticulously designed for its connectivity. While one can question post offices' longevity and relevance today, the need for *physical* connection this network enables is enduring and irreplaceable.

Second, as one of the last-standing pieces of state infrastructure operating under an explicit *Universal Service Obligation*, USPS is truly *civic*. While the institution's financial viability is often scrutinized today, the logic of a for-profit enterprise is misguided here. In the absence of social safety net and the privatization of public care, the USPS stands in as the last line of defense, the only piece of State that physically reaches and connects people.



J. Mayer & Co. The centennial Postal Statistical Map of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut Showing Railroads, Post Routes and Offices Together with Population and Valuation of Cities and Towns. M.G. Cook and Frank O. Ellis, 1876.



National Archives, Post Office Reports of Site Locations, 1837-1950 (Massachusetts, Middlesex County).

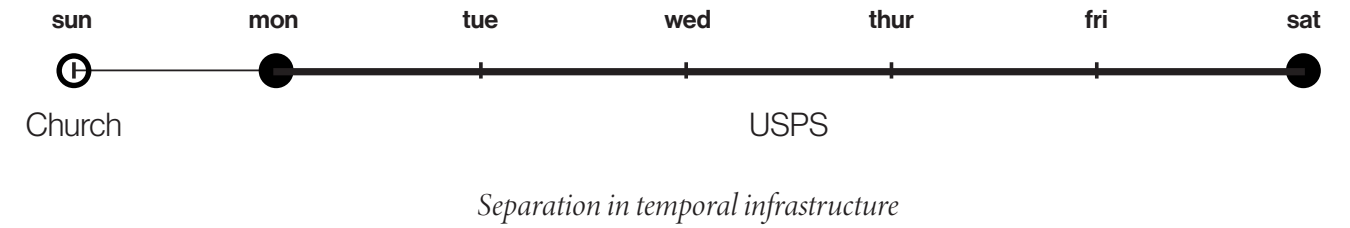
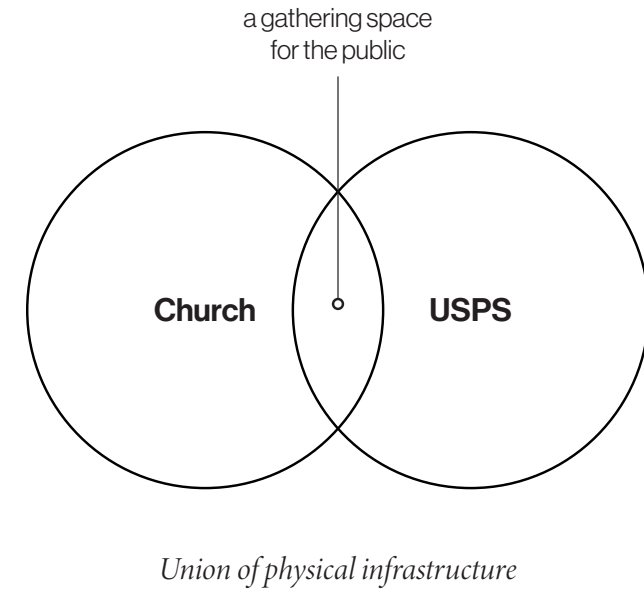


W. Endicott & Co. Post office, San Francisco, California H.F. Cox del. ; lith. of Wm. Endicott & Co., N. York. [N. York Wm. Endicott & Co] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.

5 SOCIALLY

Unlike churches with lasting symbolic capital, post office architecture is *at a loss for an image*. Today, market-rate rentals constitute the vast majority of the over 33,000 post offices nationwide, repurposing empty spaces that barely fit a counter, let alone a community.

Extending the Church-State theme, this thesis proposes *a union of the built infrastructure* of Church and State, the ideological separation of which lives on *in time*, not in space. While church and post office would maintain their distinct functions, the broader social aim is to provide *nondescript, local, and networked gathering spaces* that could accommodate civic events such as voting, town halls, protests, and vigils.

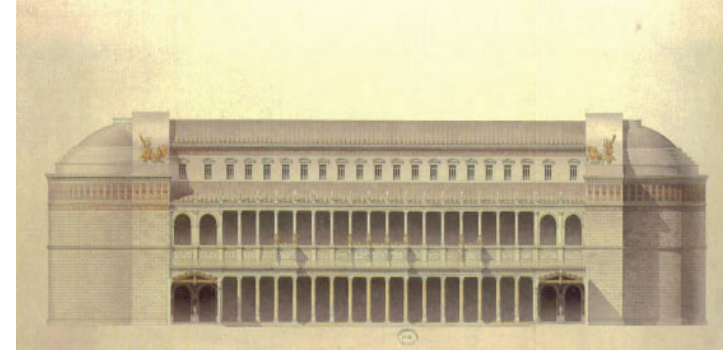




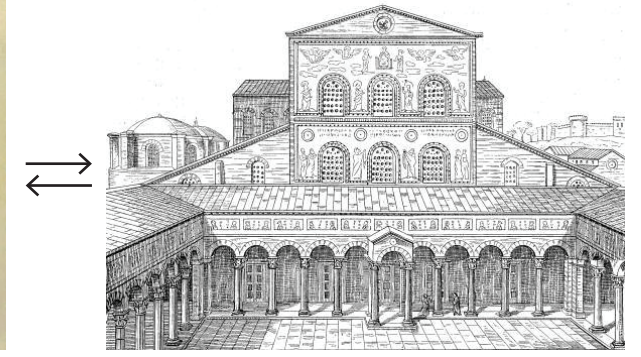
## 6 ARCHITECTURALLY

Another Church-State theme serves as a formal genesis for this project: the typology of *Basilica*. Originally serving civic and judicial functions, the basilica was a gable-shaped public building, often *opposite a temple* in every Roman forum.

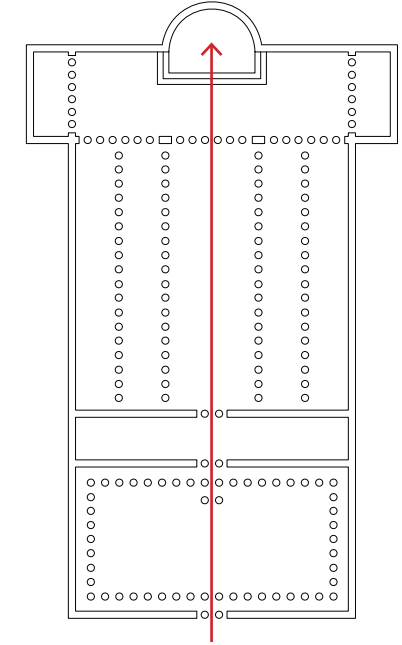
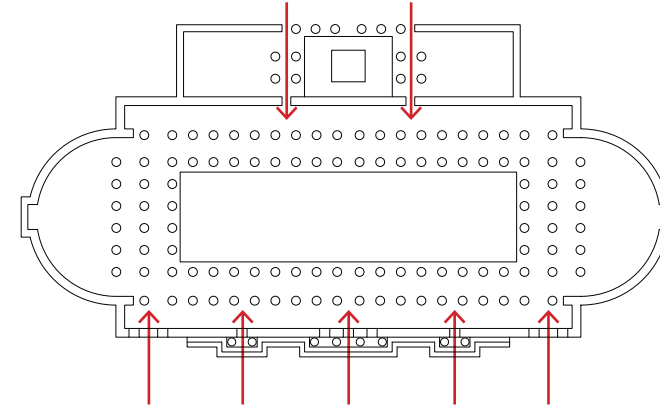
The Church appropriated this typology, *rotating its main axis 90 degrees* to accentuate the ritualistic single path. This thesis proposes to *reappropriate* the typology, to *reorient* the basilica back to its side. The process of unbuilding and the spatial outcomes of the remainder would signal the idea of intrinsic *incompleteness* to a previous whole.



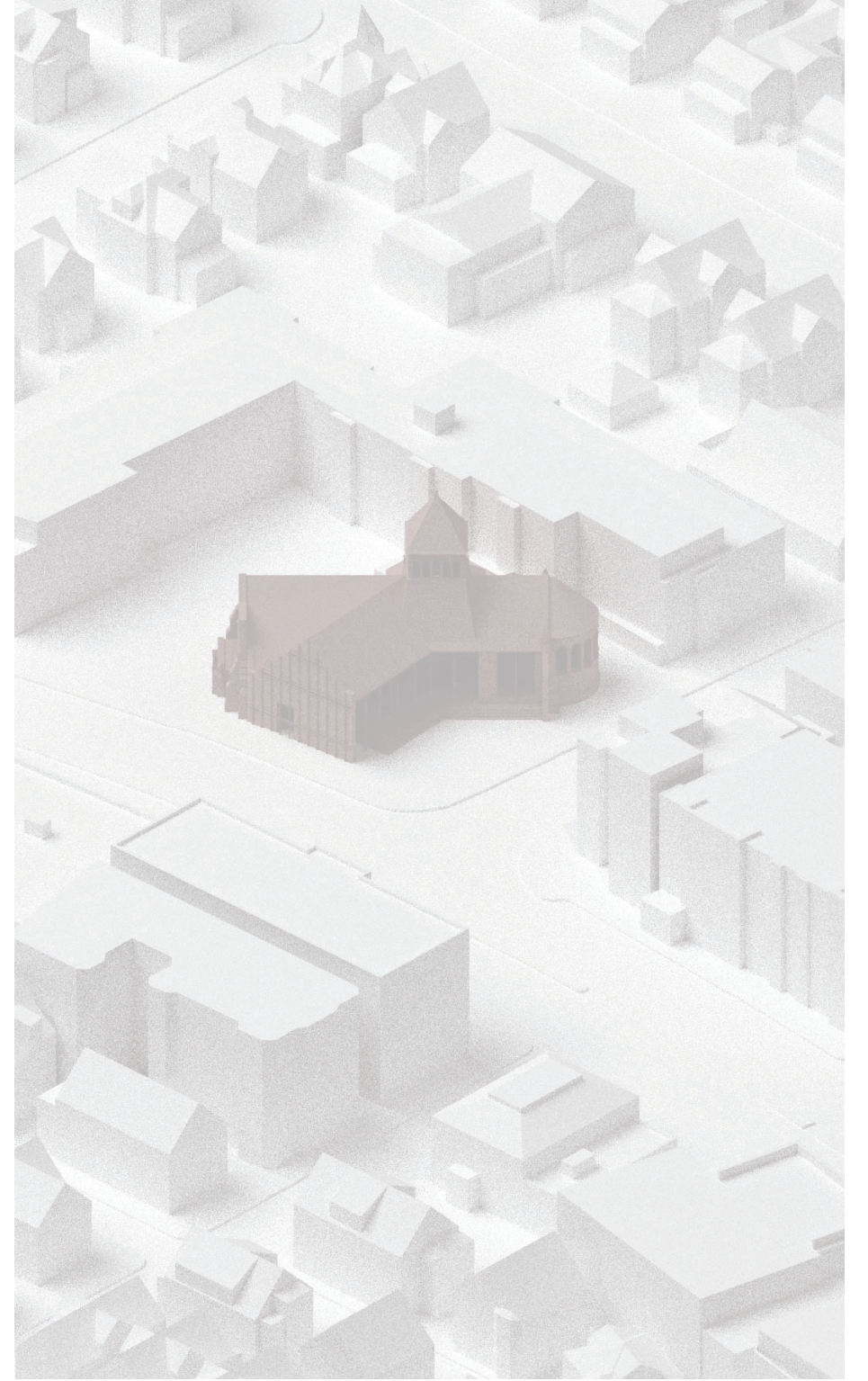
19th century reconstruction of the 2nd century Basilica Ulpia. J. Guadet (1867)



The Old St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Encyclopaedia Britannica (1911)







### Massachusetts Avenue Baptist Church

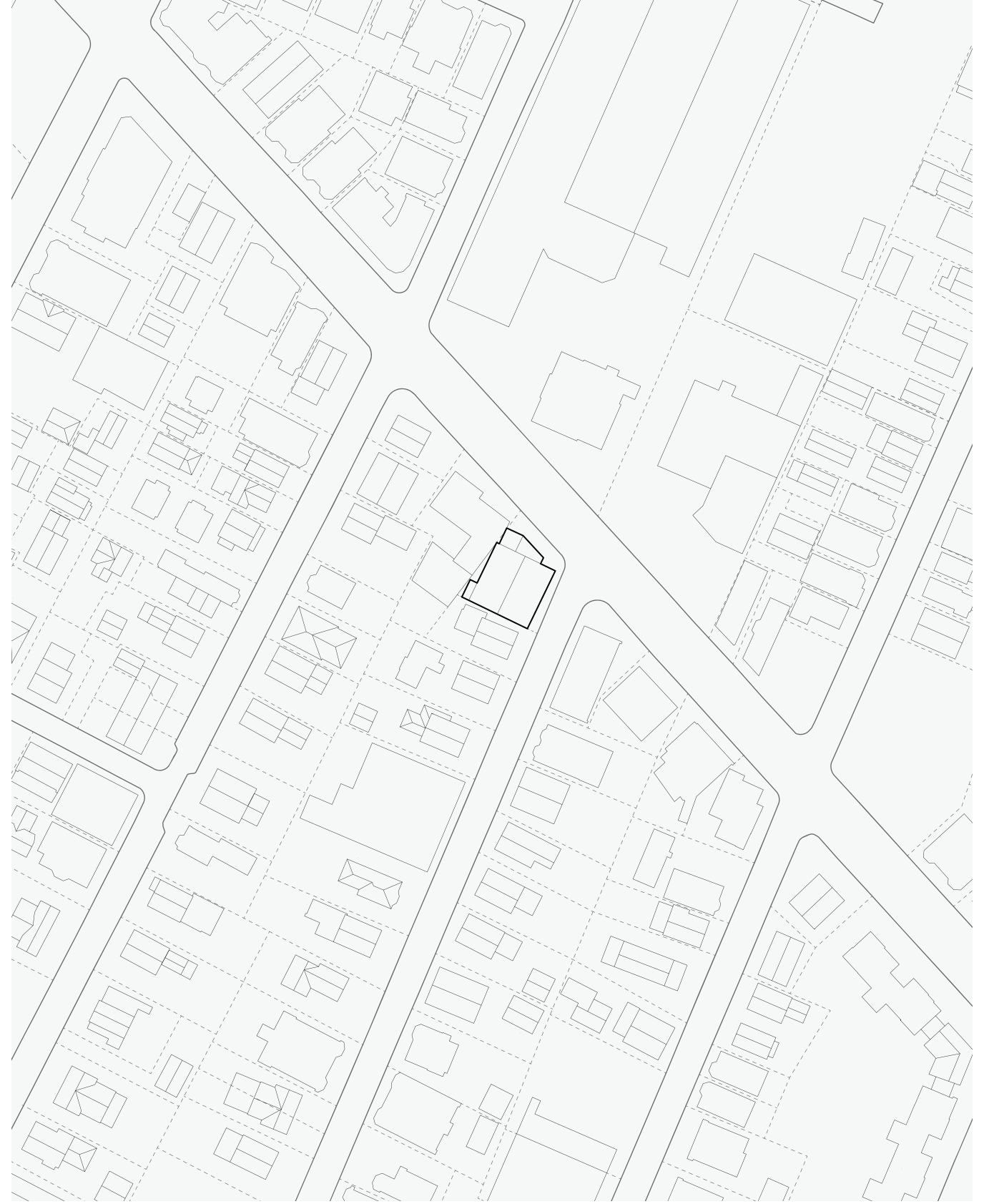
146 Hampshire St / Cambridge, MA 02139



## Massachusetts Avenue Baptist Church <sup>PUNCTURED</sup>

Fairly square in proportion, the Massachusetts Avenue Baptist Church negotiates the obtuse corner angle with an oblique entrance and bell tower. With a dwindling congregation of less than 30 regular attendees, this Baptist congregation is financially burdened by the upkeep of its 120-year-old home.

Drawing parallels to the figure of *Saint Sebastian*, who was shot with arrows under early Christian persecution and survived, the opaque mass of the brick church is *punctured* on the side. Dormer windows are added to the roof, doubling the amount of light coming into the space and challenging the gable in the front elevation.



25' 50' 100'







*St Sebastian*  
*Illustrated in Nuremburg Chronicles*







*before*

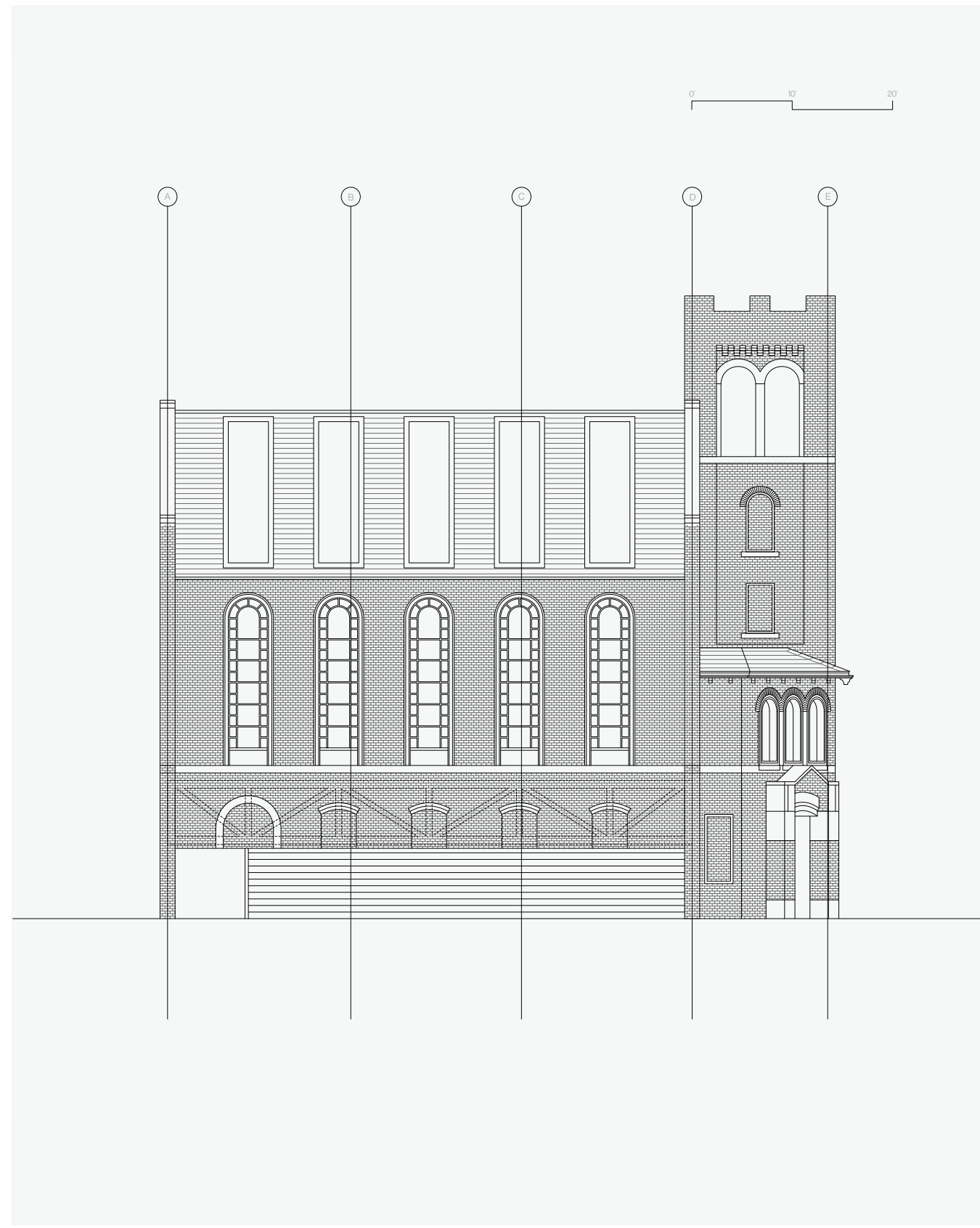


*after*

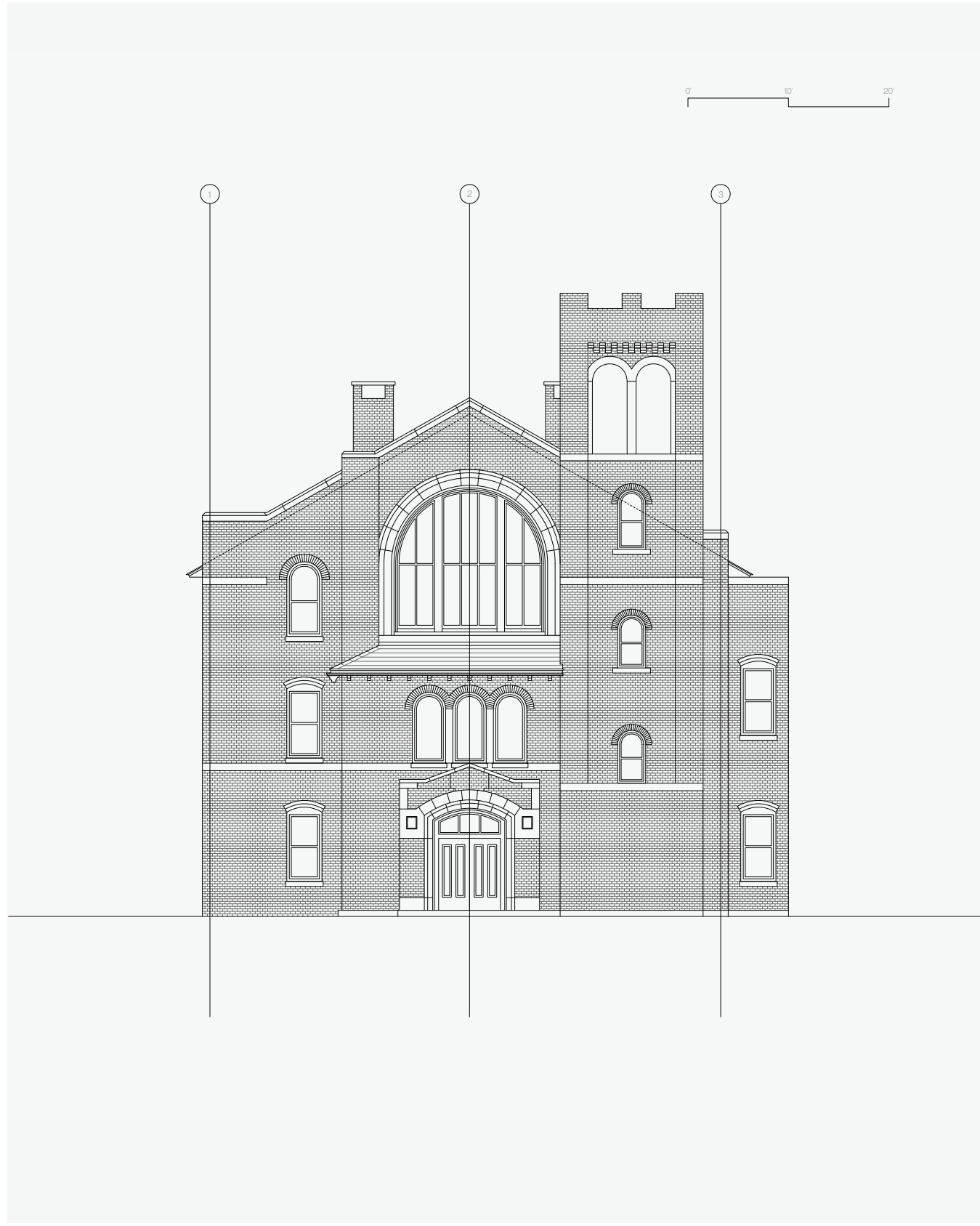




*before*



*after*



*before*



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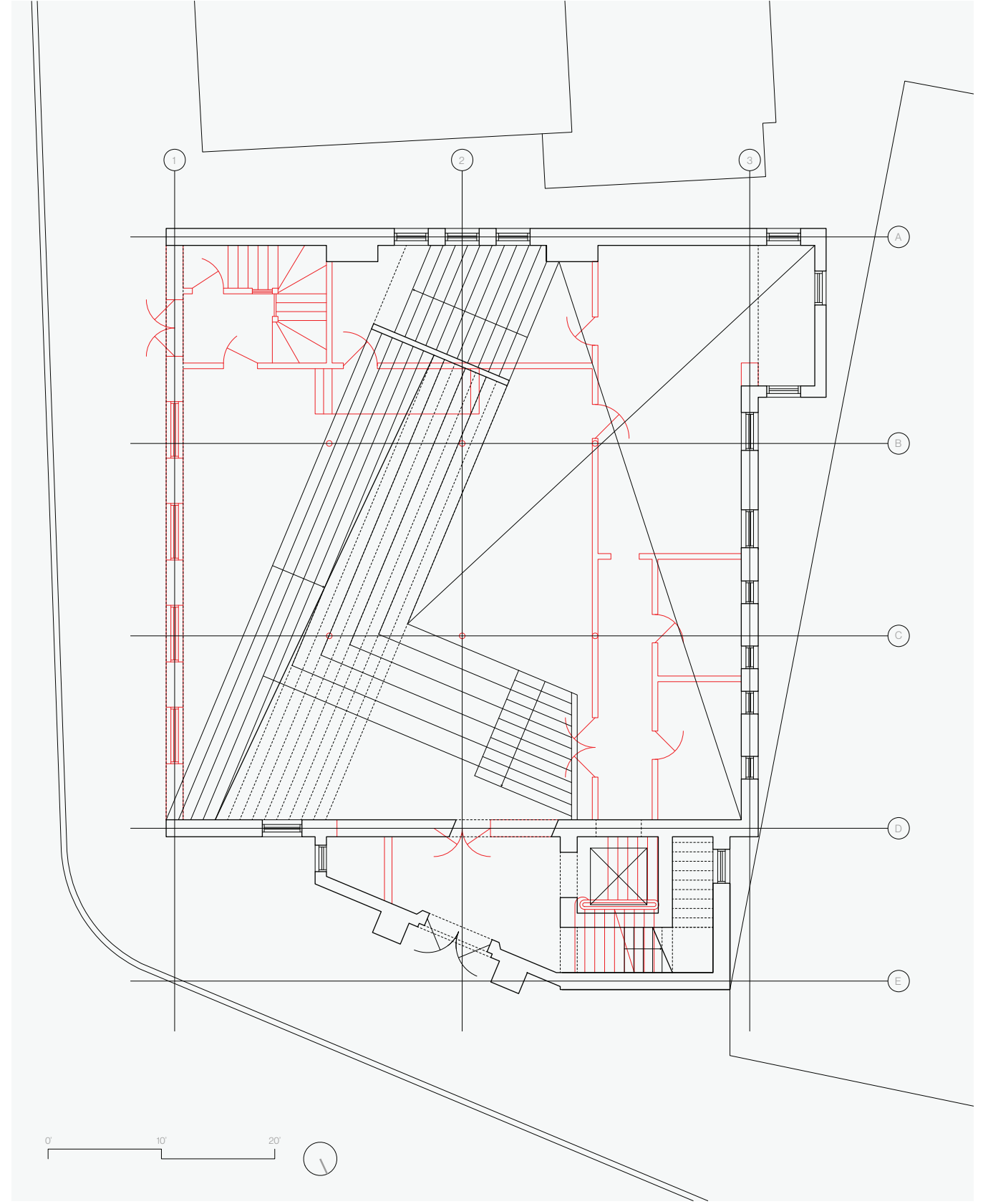




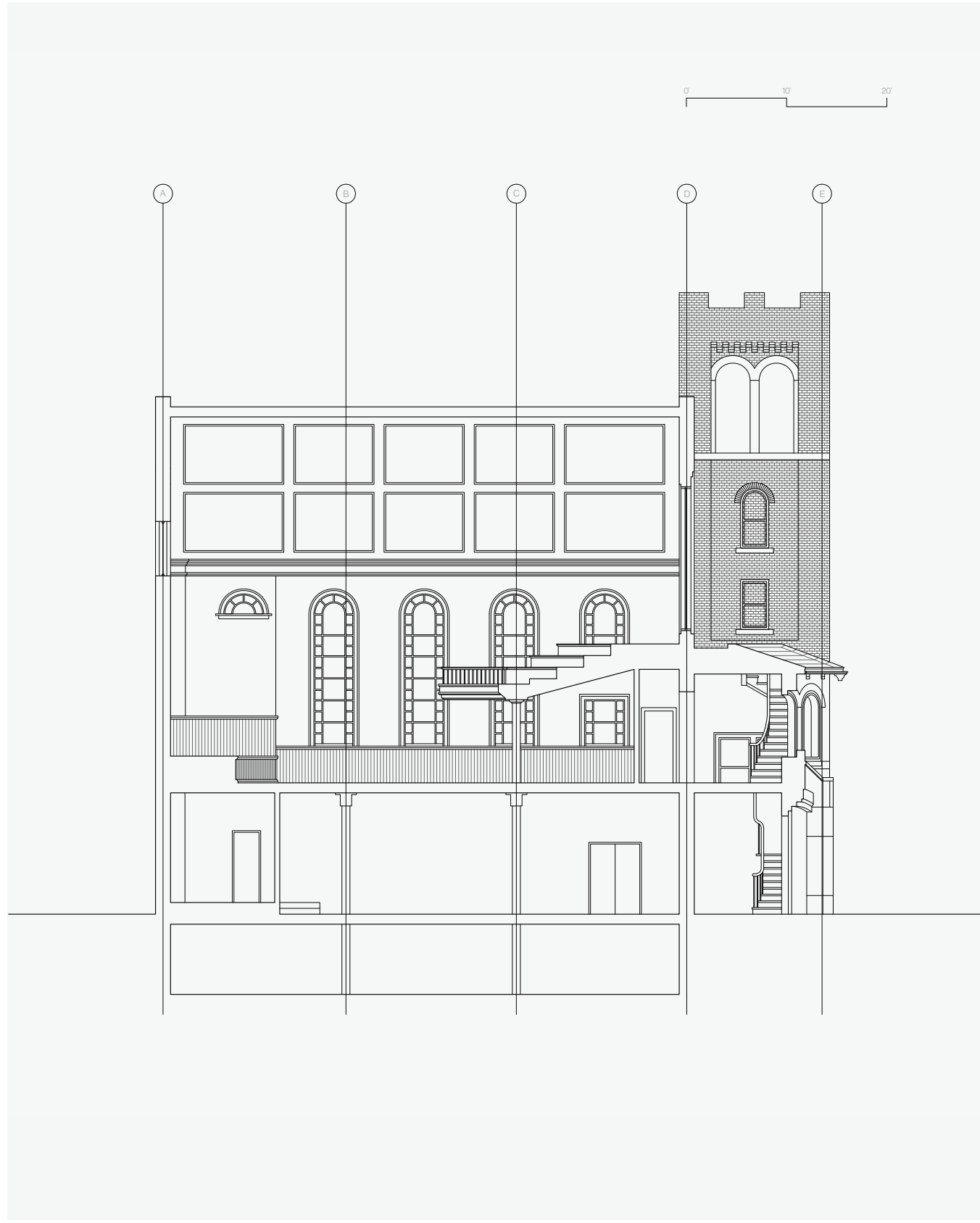


The ground level is lifted with a wide puncture, and a grand staircase is inserted at 90 degrees from the oblique entrance, creating an impromptu public space. The congregation still uses the front door, leading downstairs to a new worship space.

The previously self-contained building connects seamlessly to the street, and heightening the roof enables a flexible use of the gable space for the post office. A new balcony is created on the third floor, creating a continuous sequence from the street to the roof that culminates at the existing circle window.



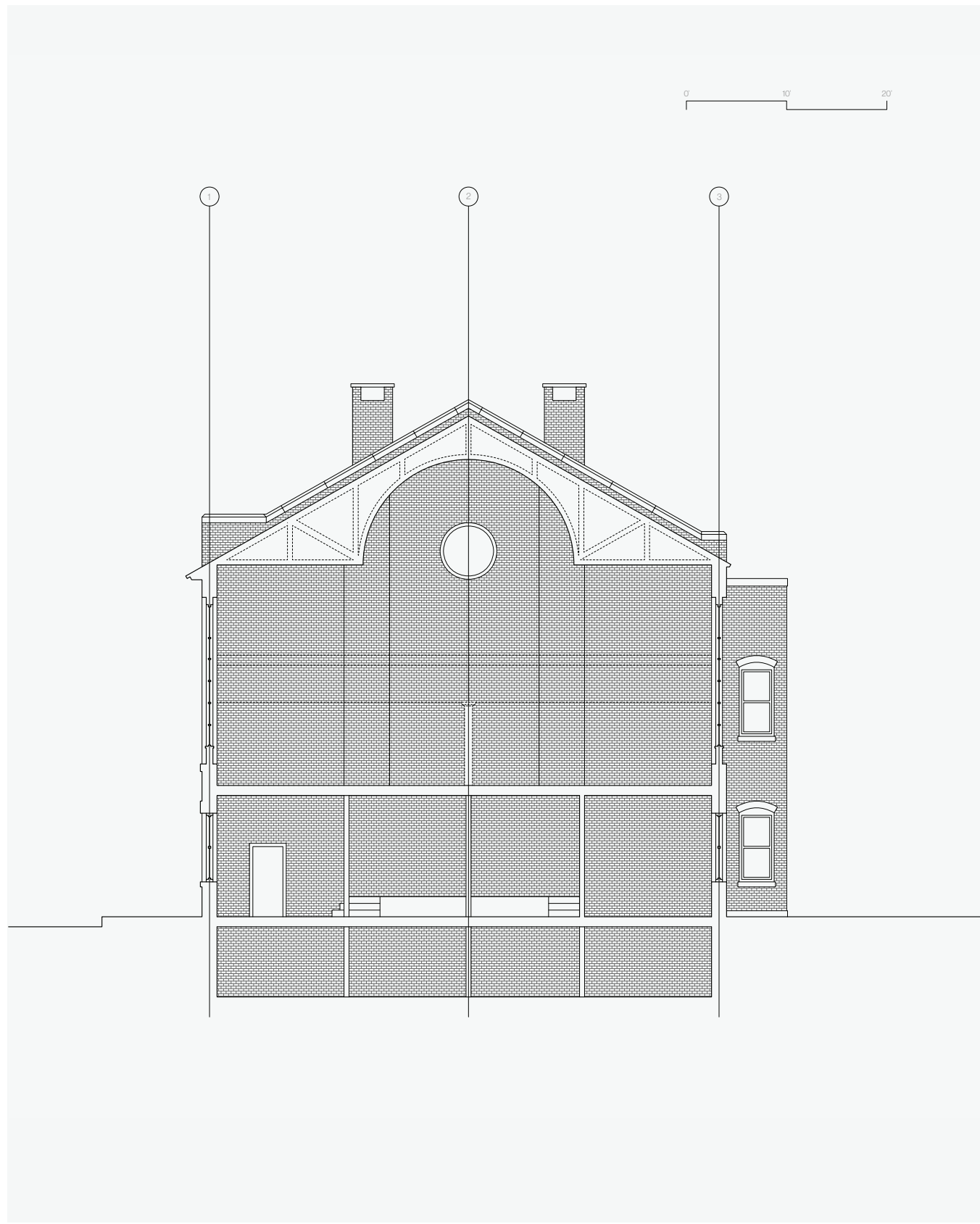
*First Floor Demolition Plan (Demolition in Red)*



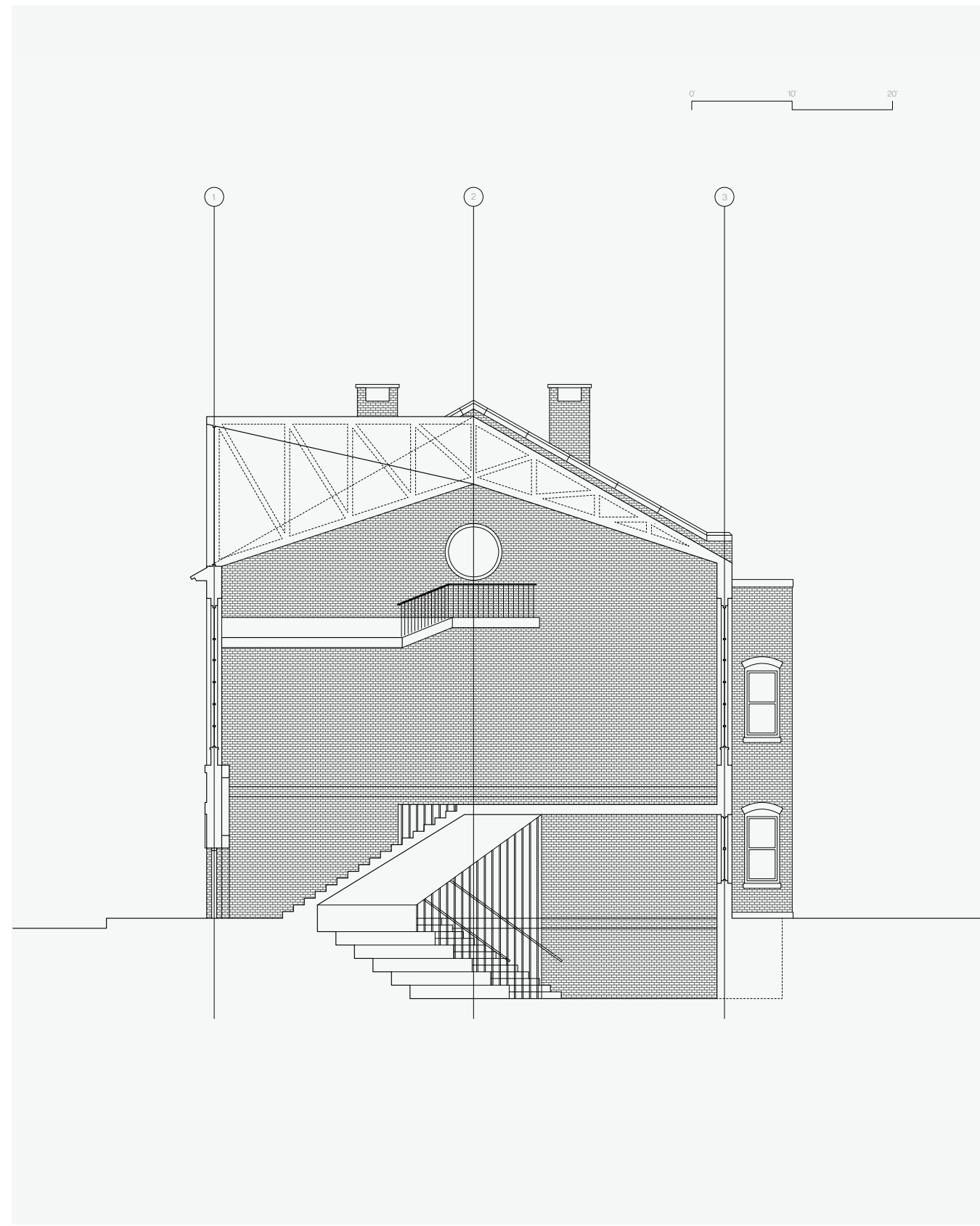
*before*



*after*

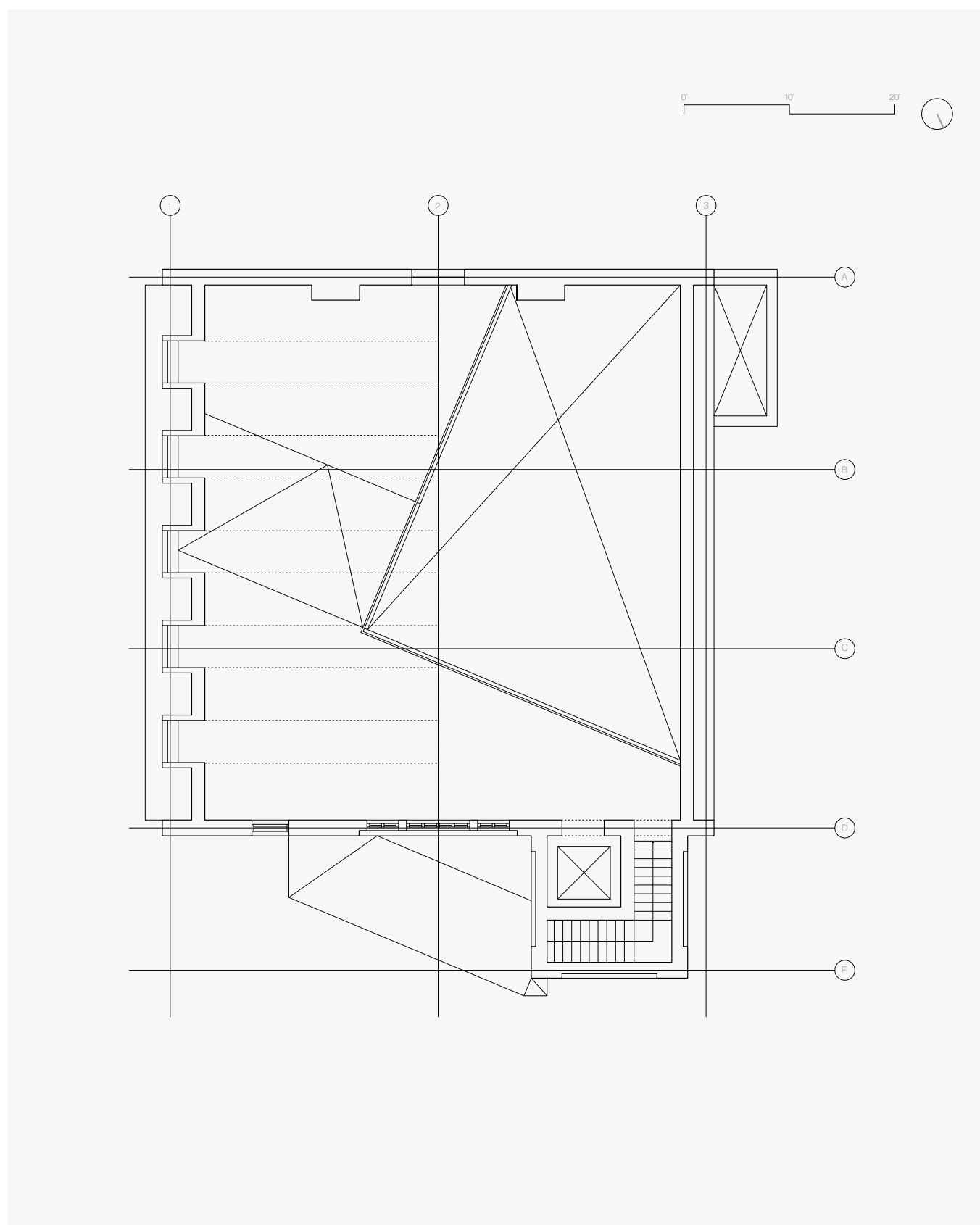


*before*



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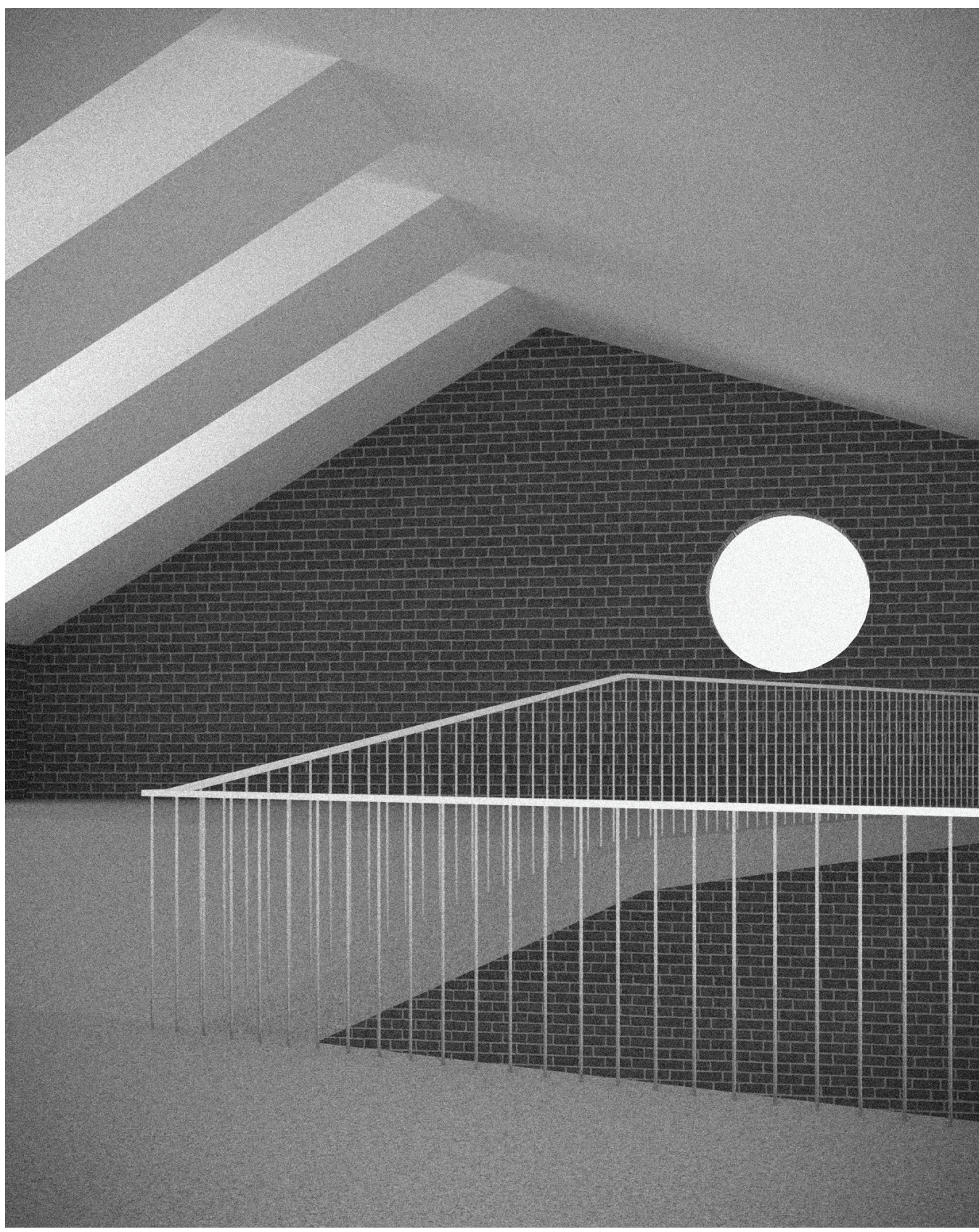




*Third Floor Plan*











**St James Episcopal Church**  
 1991 Massachusetts Ave / Cambridge, MA 02140

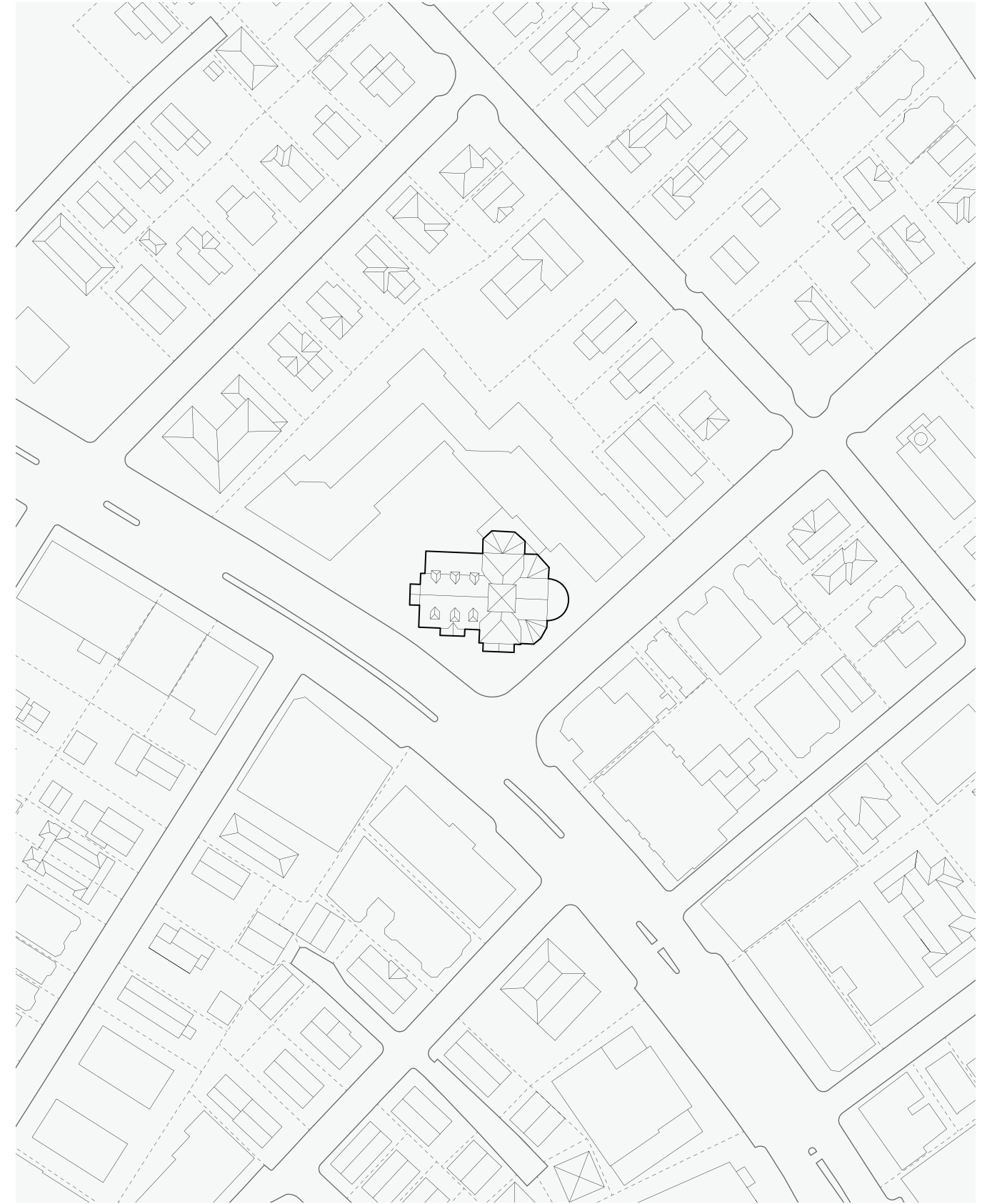


## *St James Episcopal Church* AMPUTATED

On the opposite panel of the triptych, the second site is the St James Episcopal Church. Initially claiming a lot of parcels around it, the church is oriented cardinally to the South.

Looking at *St Jacob*, the amputated saint, the church is *amputated* and brought back to the grid of the surrounding urban fabric.

The front façade is doubled at an oblique, questioning the axuality in the original. The amputated section gives back the unused transept back to the street, framing the corner urban lot and making transparent the entire South façade.

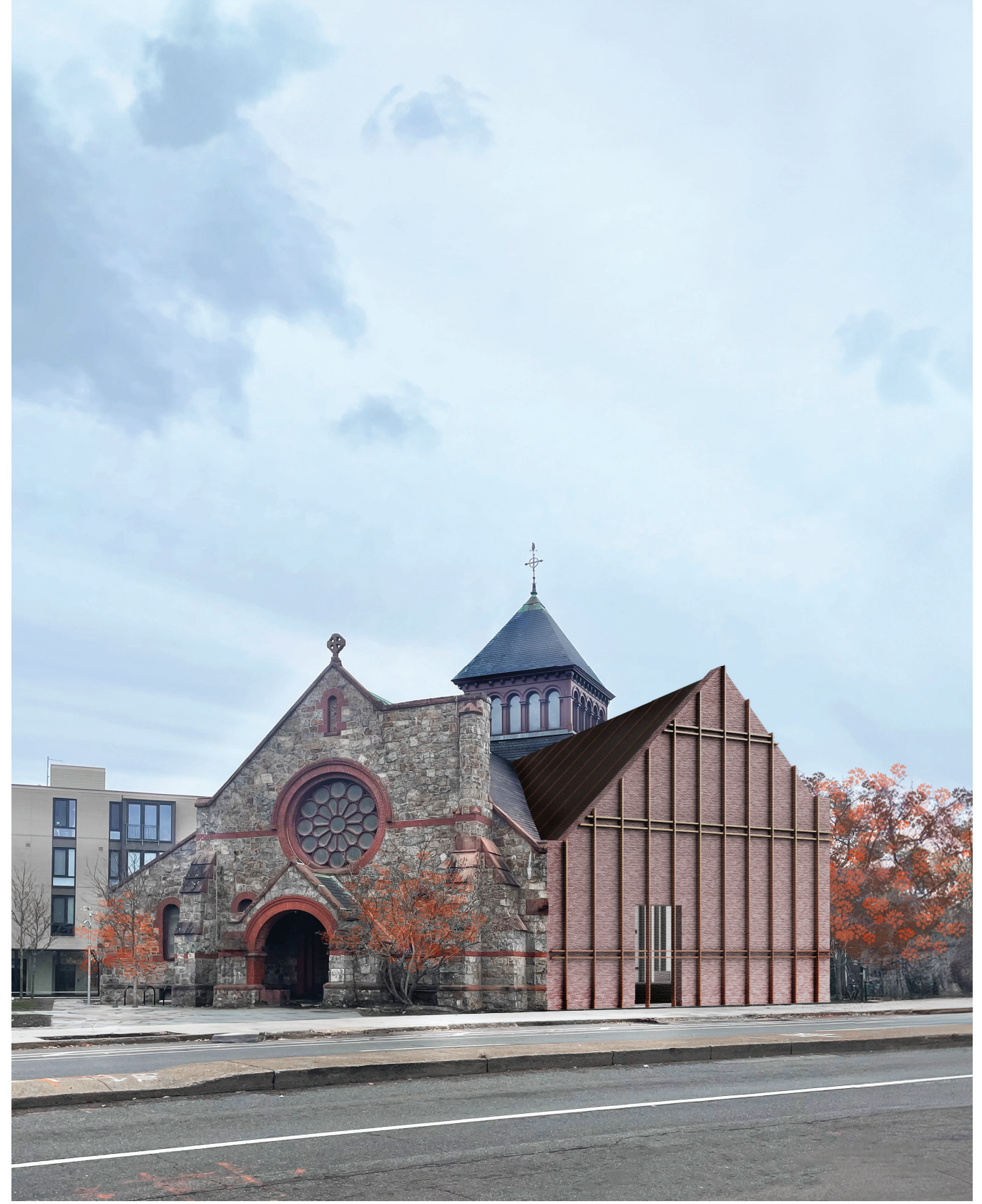


25' 50' 100'





*St Jacob Intercisus*  
*Painting of James the Persian (Menologion of Basil II)*





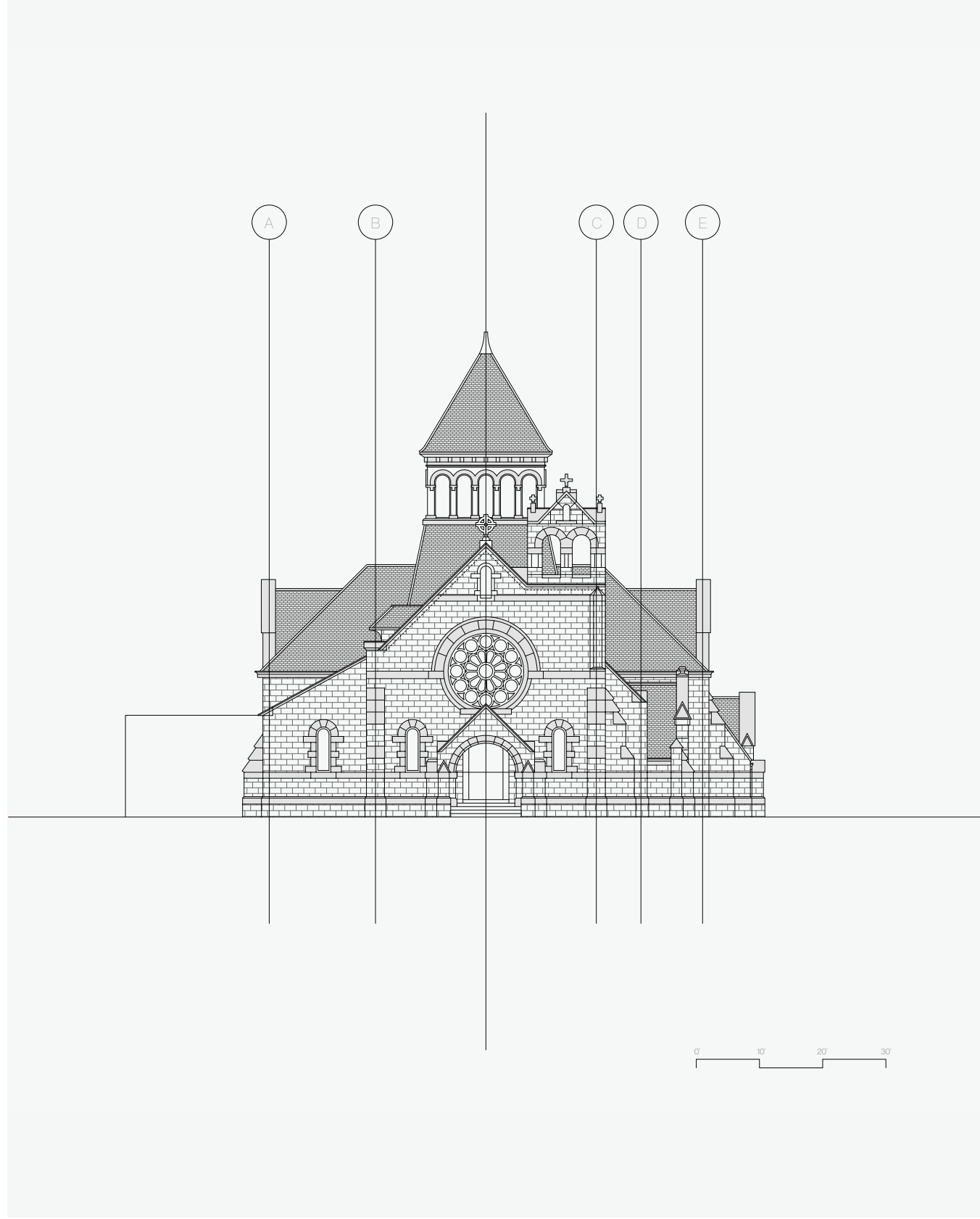


*before*



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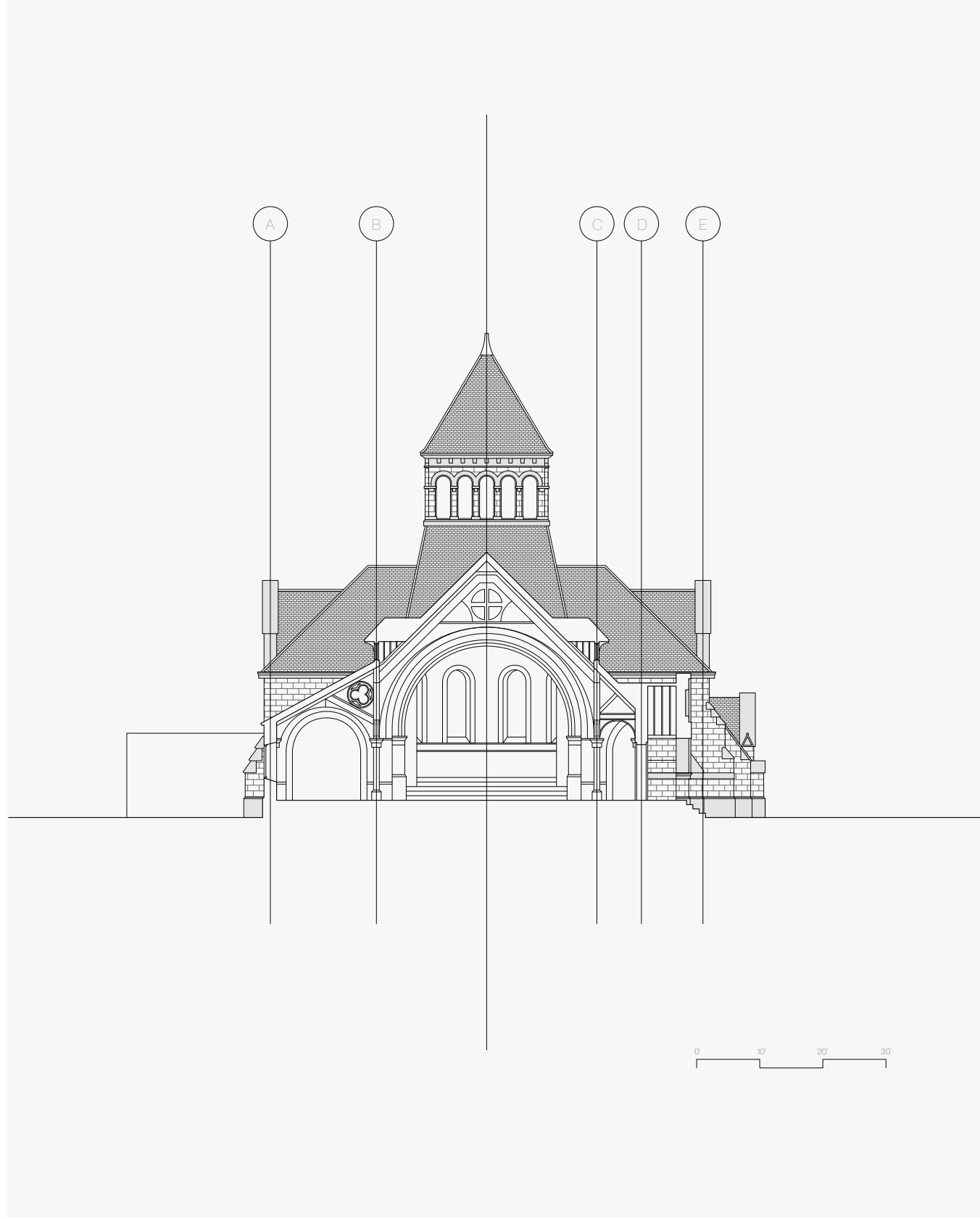




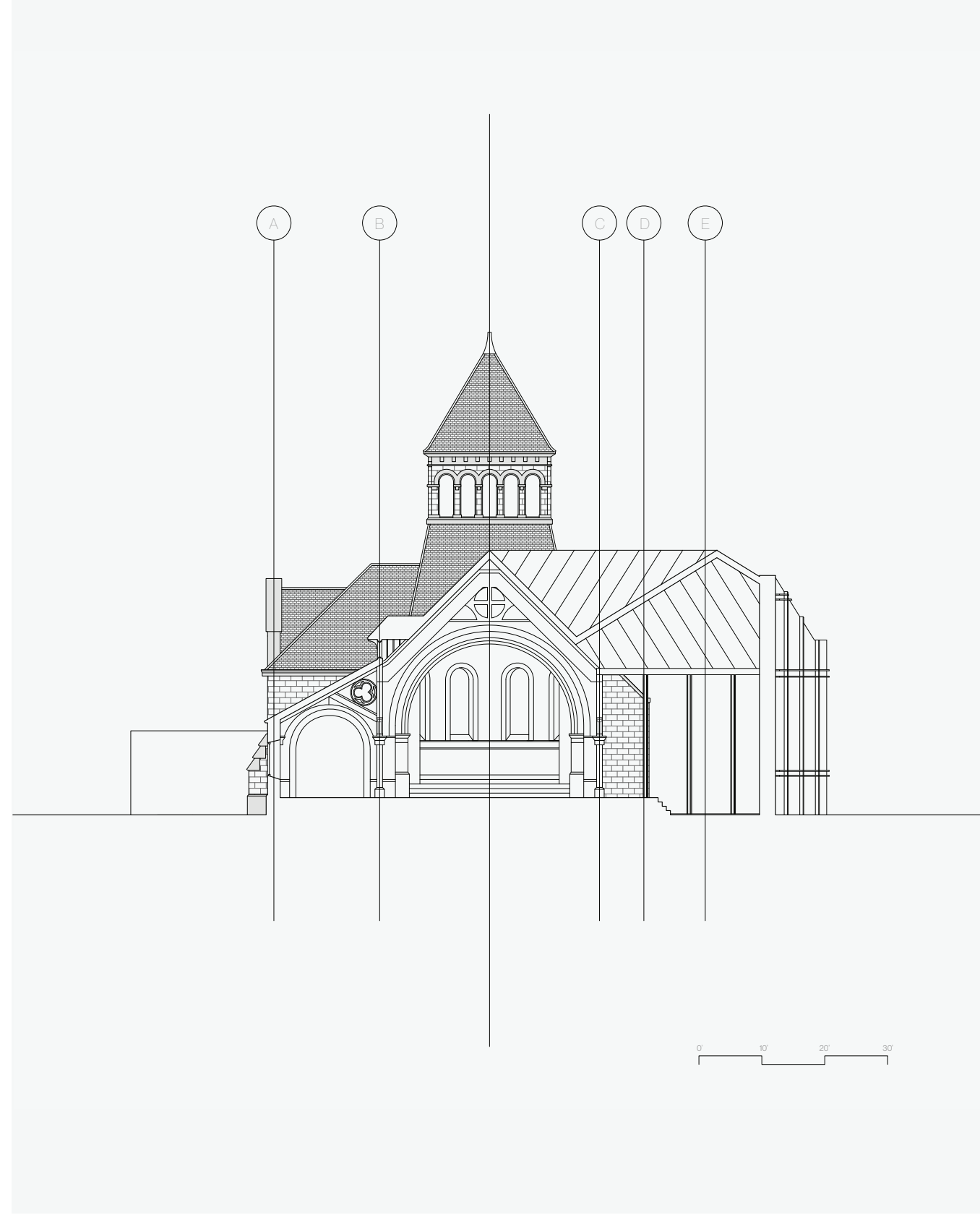
*before*



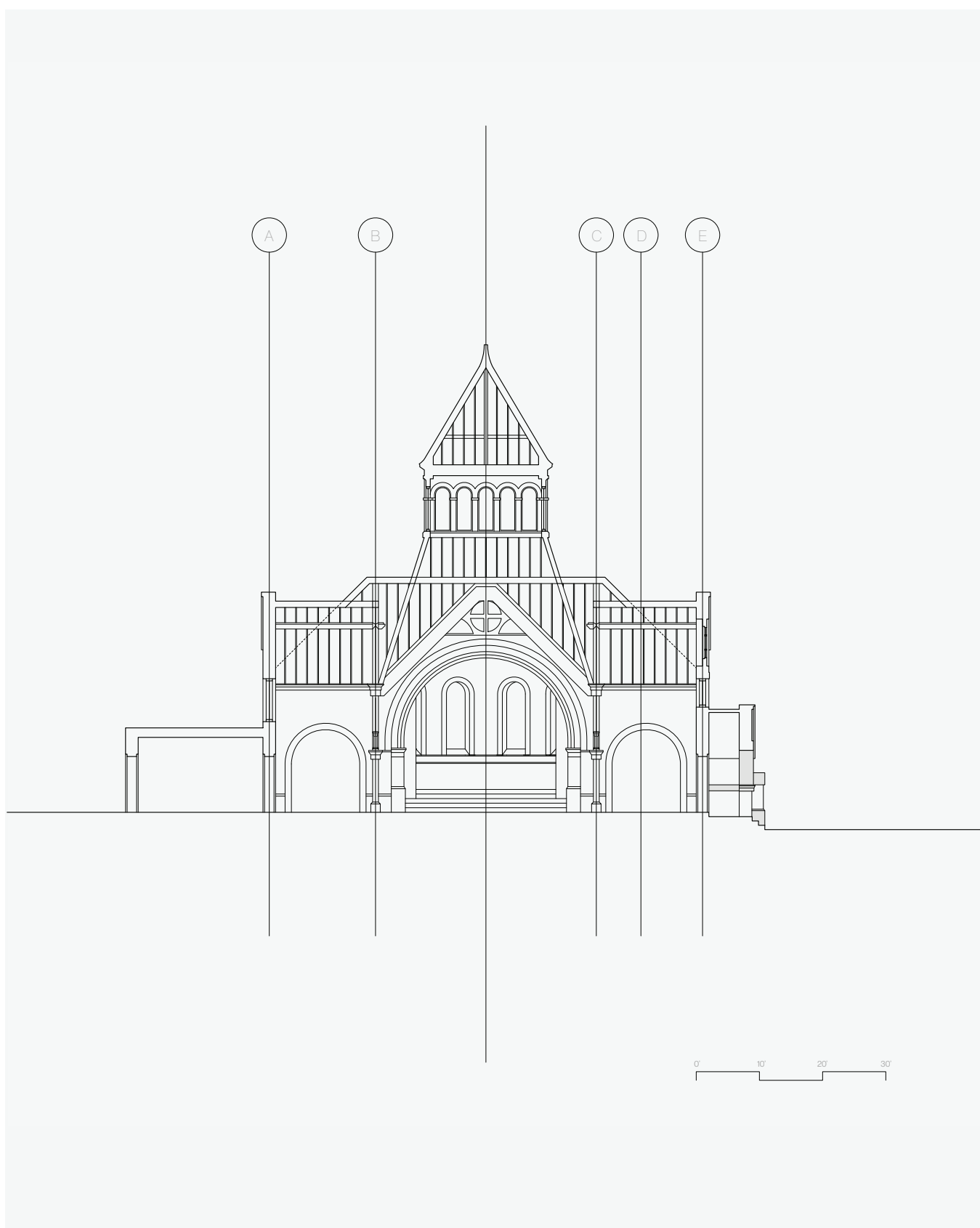
*after*



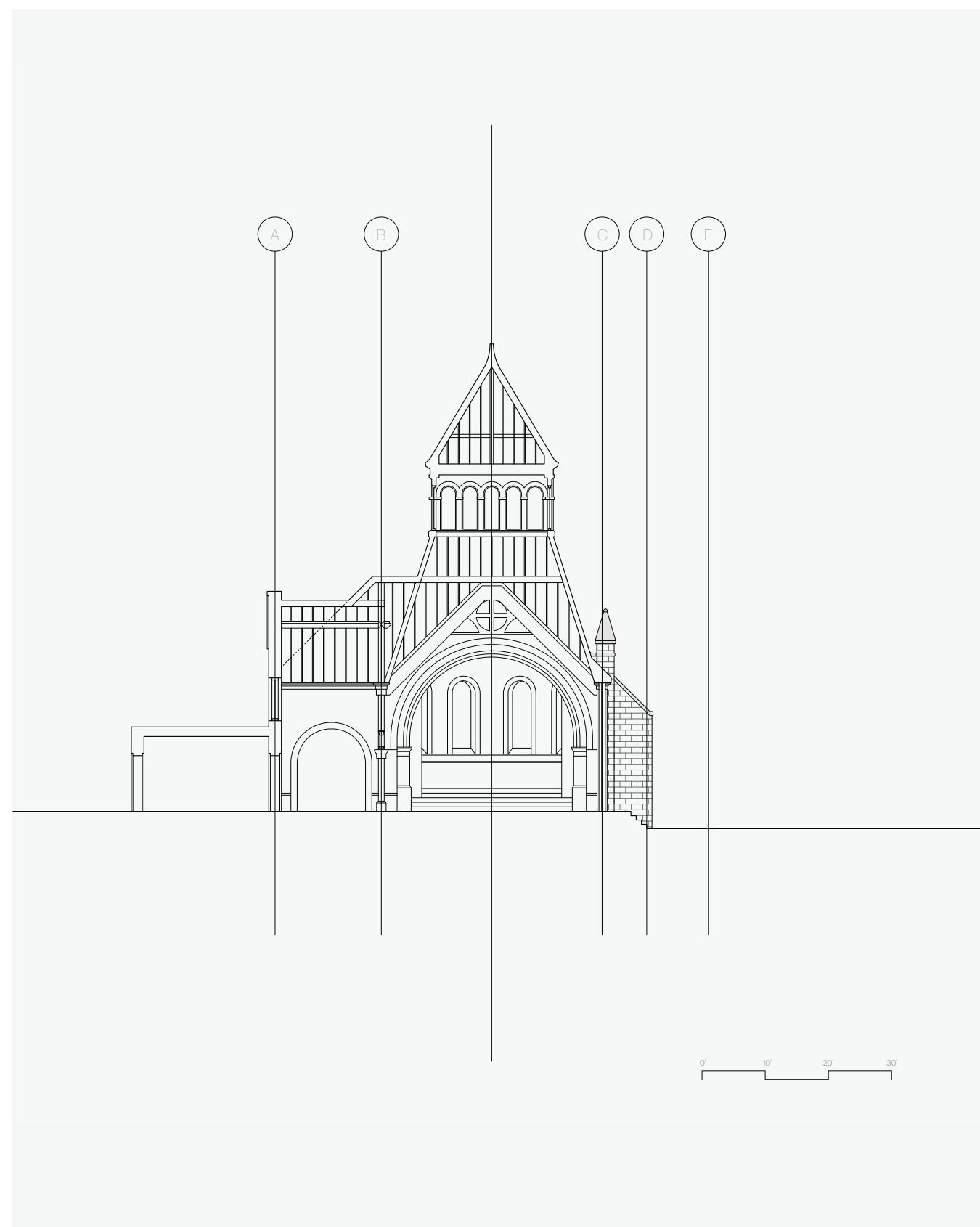
*before*



*after*



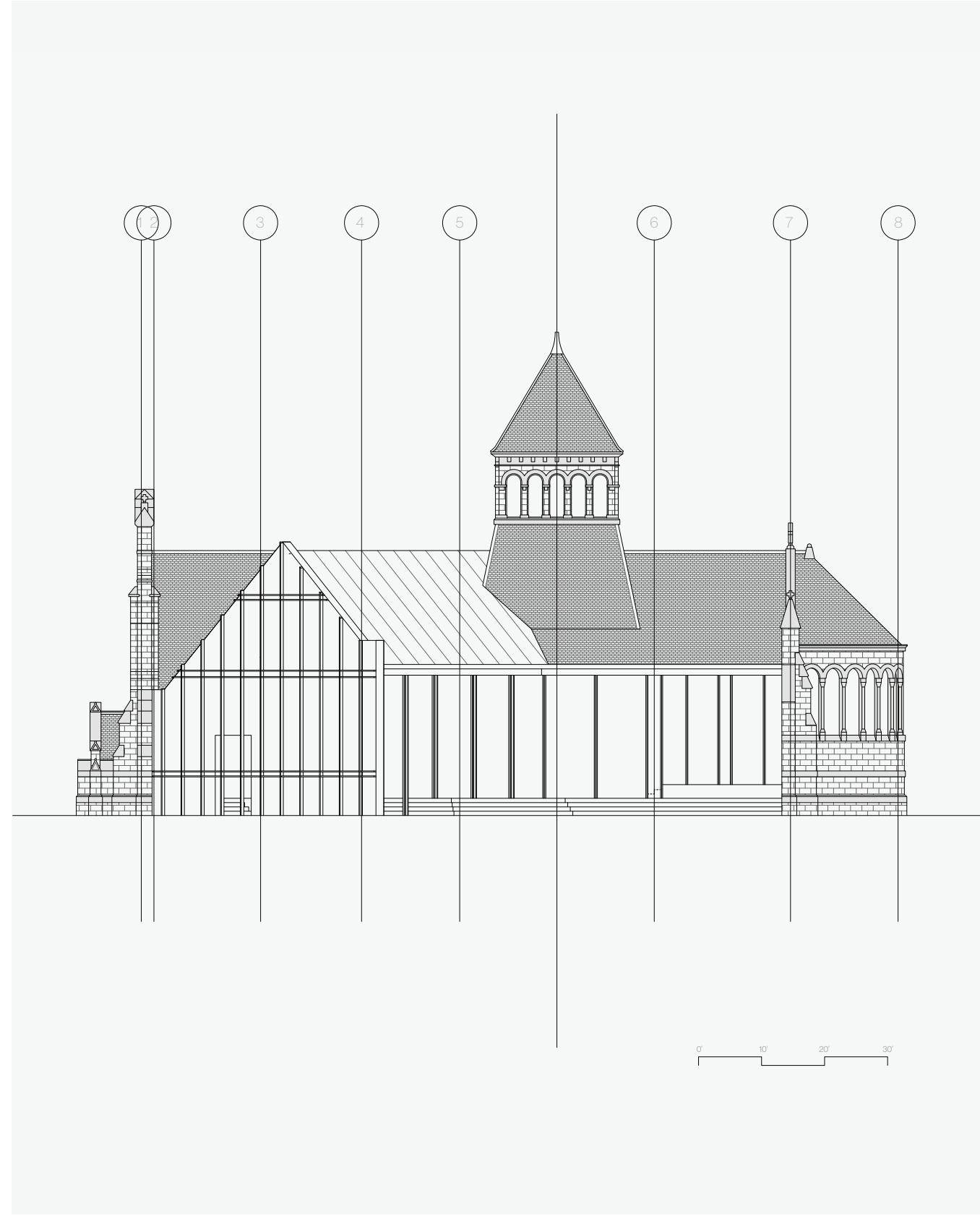
*before*



*after*

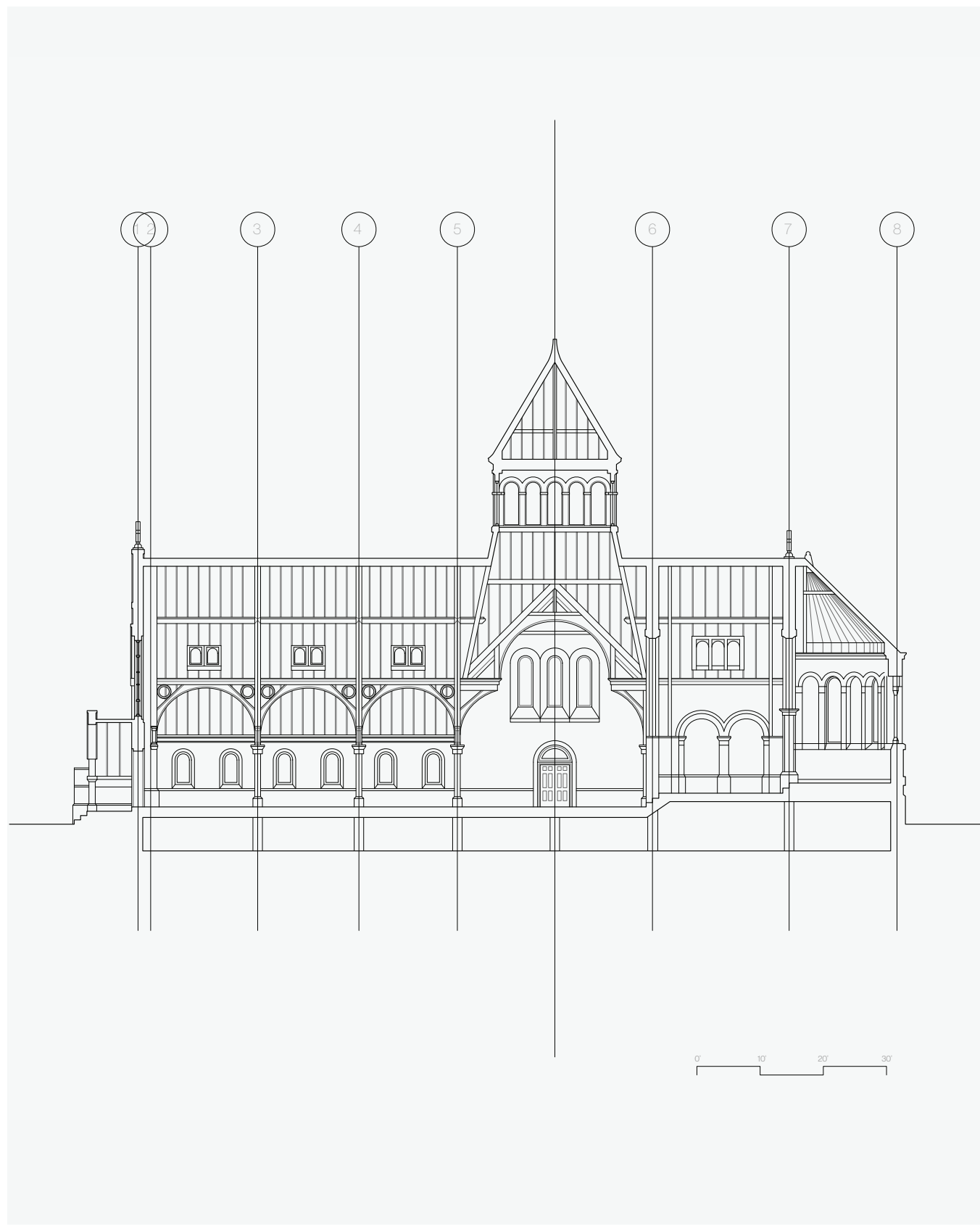


*before*



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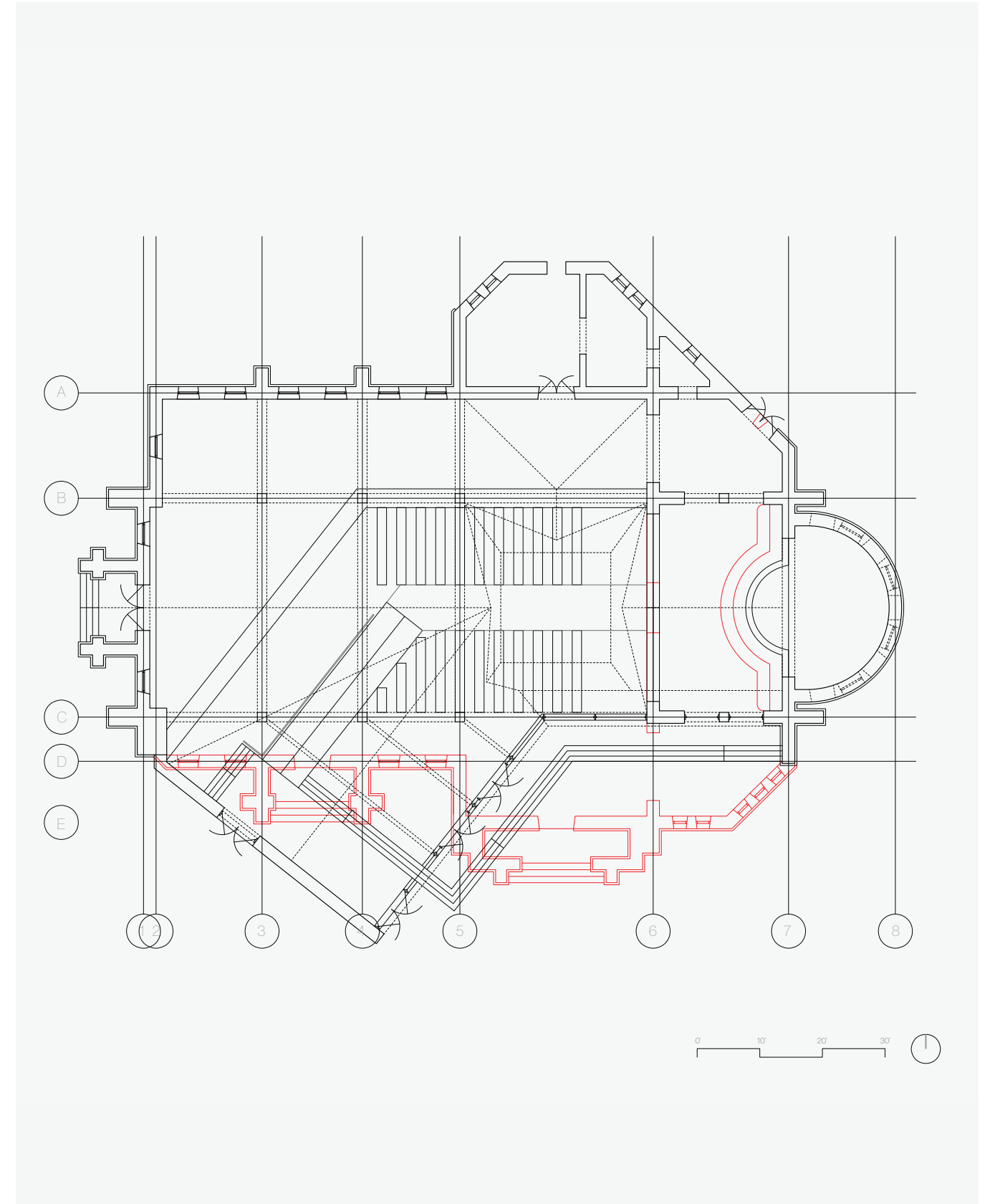




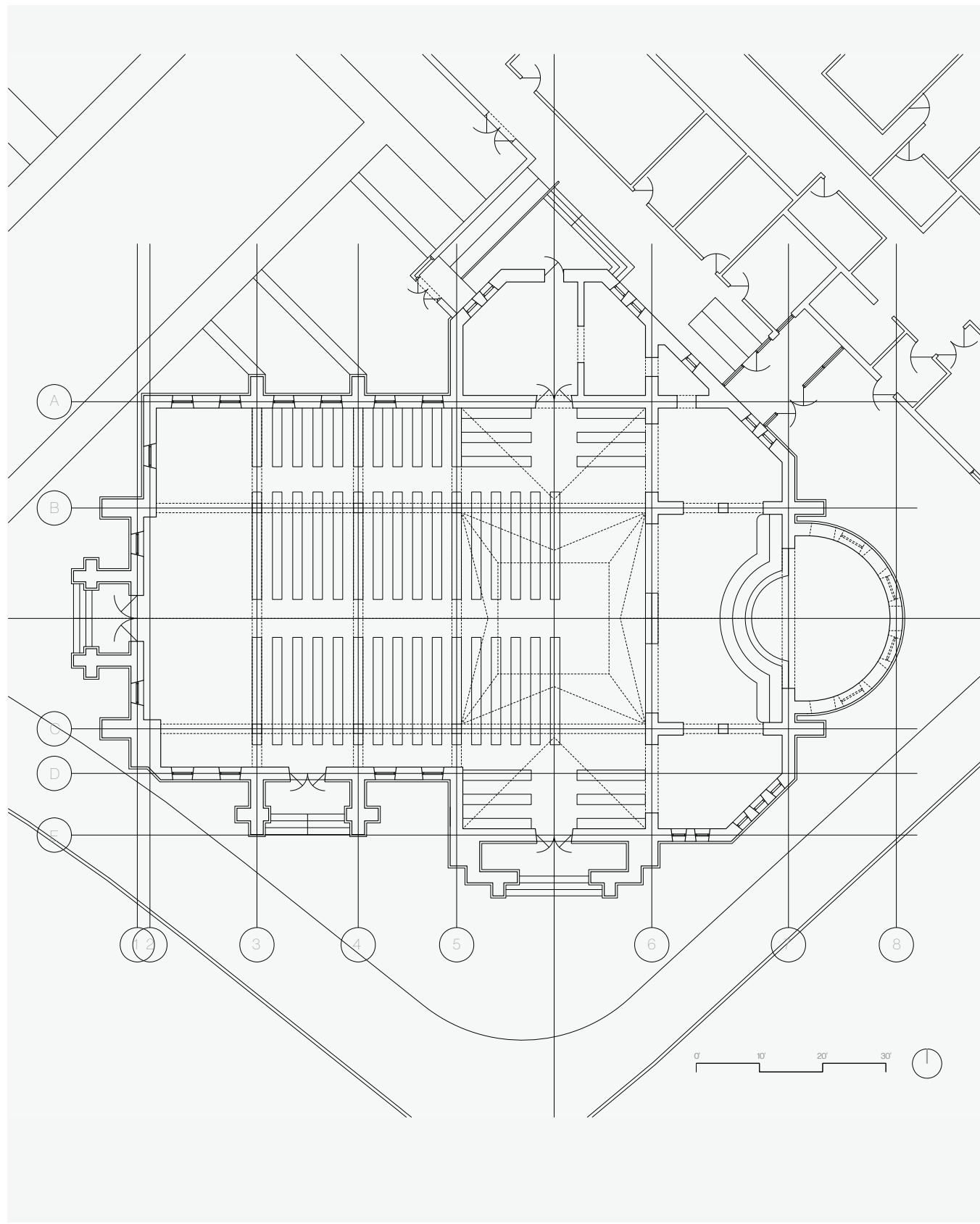
As an Episcopal Church, the service format is regulated and ritualistic, starting and ending with a procession of a cross down the main aisle and demanding a clear focus on the altar throughout the service.

While this project negates the intended axuality of this procession, the new oblique creates a similar path that takes a turn under the skylight, compressing the worship space towards the altar to right-size the space to its 40-person congregation.

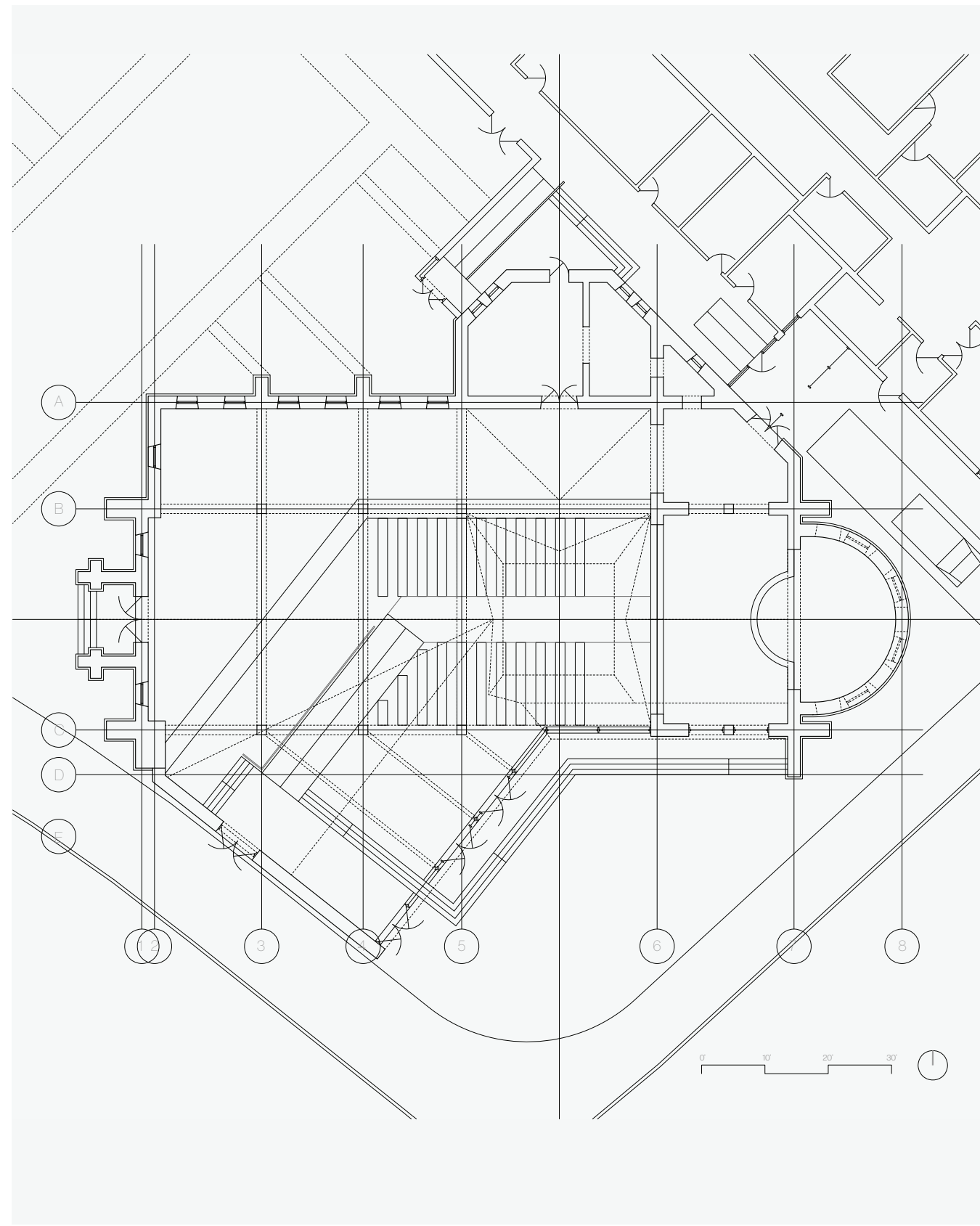
The original main entrance and the North transept are given to the post office workers and back-of-house logistics. The new gable entrance offers a respectful twist to the original, making Church and State co-exist spatially.



*Demolition Plan (Demolition in Red)*



*before*

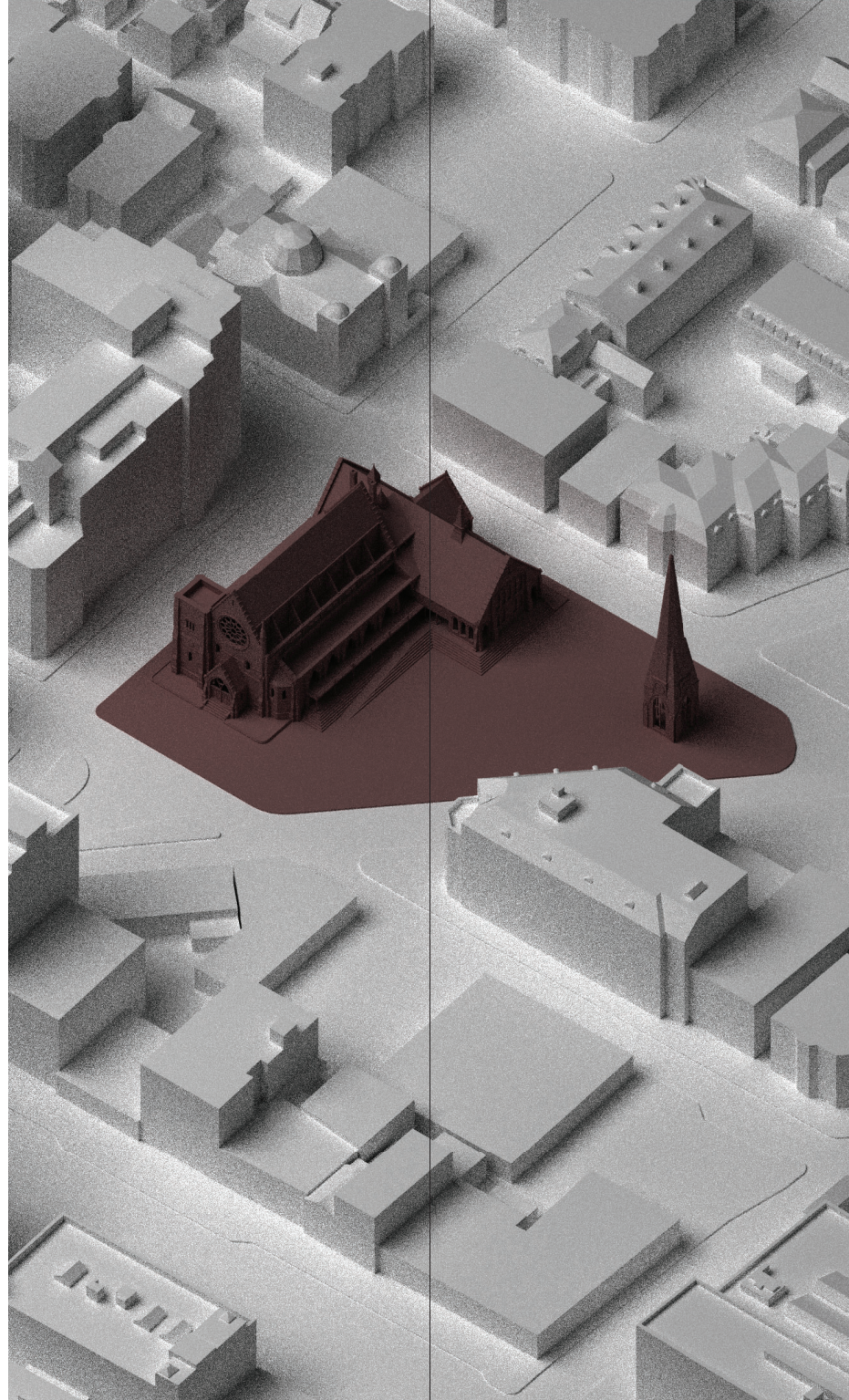


*after*









**Central Square Church**  
 5 Magazine St / Cambridge, MA 02139



## Central Square Church <sup>DECAPITATED</sup>

Lastly, the centerpiece of this triptych is the Central Square Church. Claiming an entire block to itself, the church occupies a prominent spot in the Central Square neighborhood.

The church has an iconic clock tower, which was recently diagnosed with severe structural damages. The repair is calculated to cost \$1.3 million over a 15-year time span.

Looking at *Cephalophores*—“*head-carriers*” in Greek—referring to martyrs depicted carrying their own severed heads, this thesis proposes a symbolic and literal *decapitation* of this tower, and a subsequent repositioning or *carrying* of that head, to create a new urban plaza.



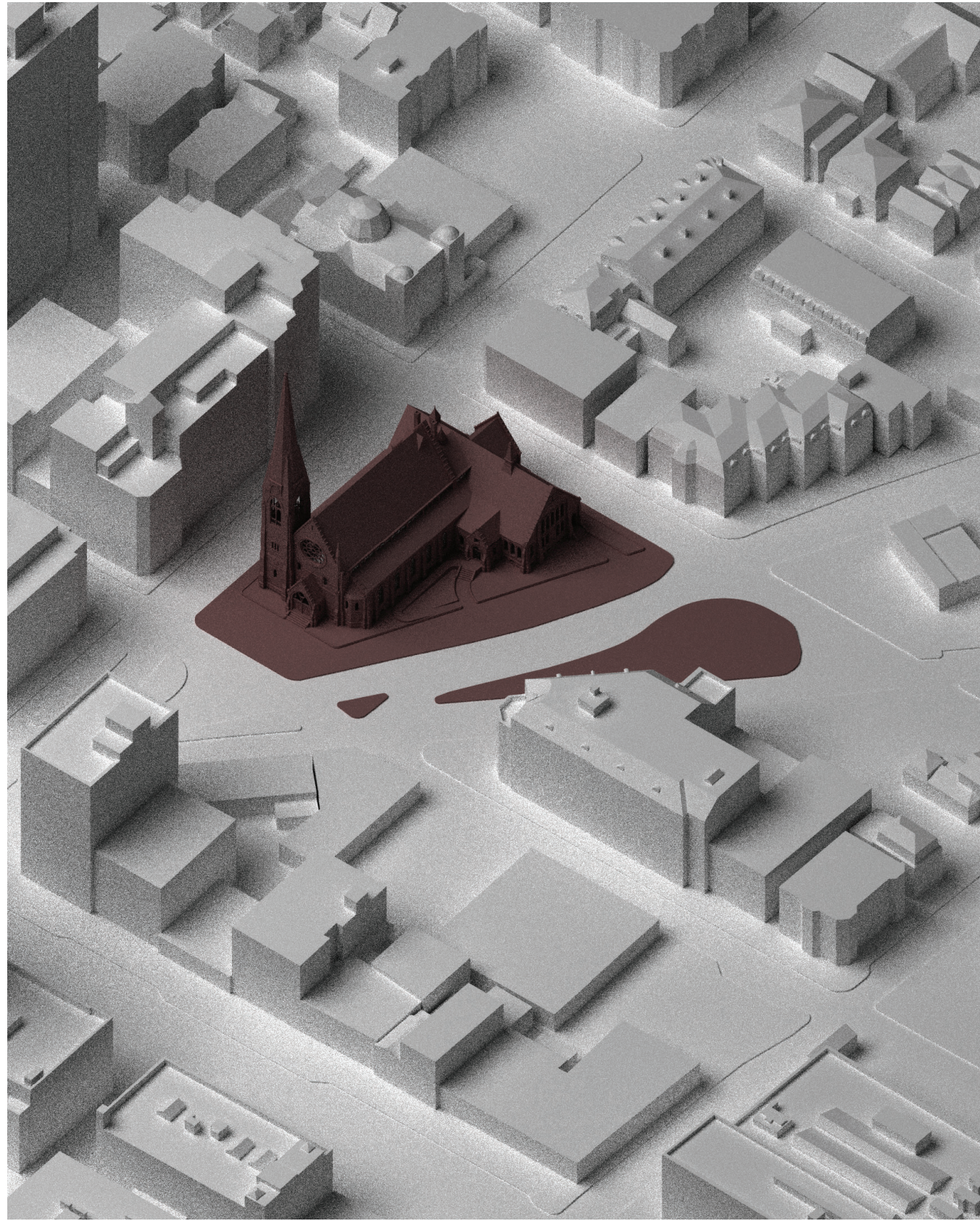




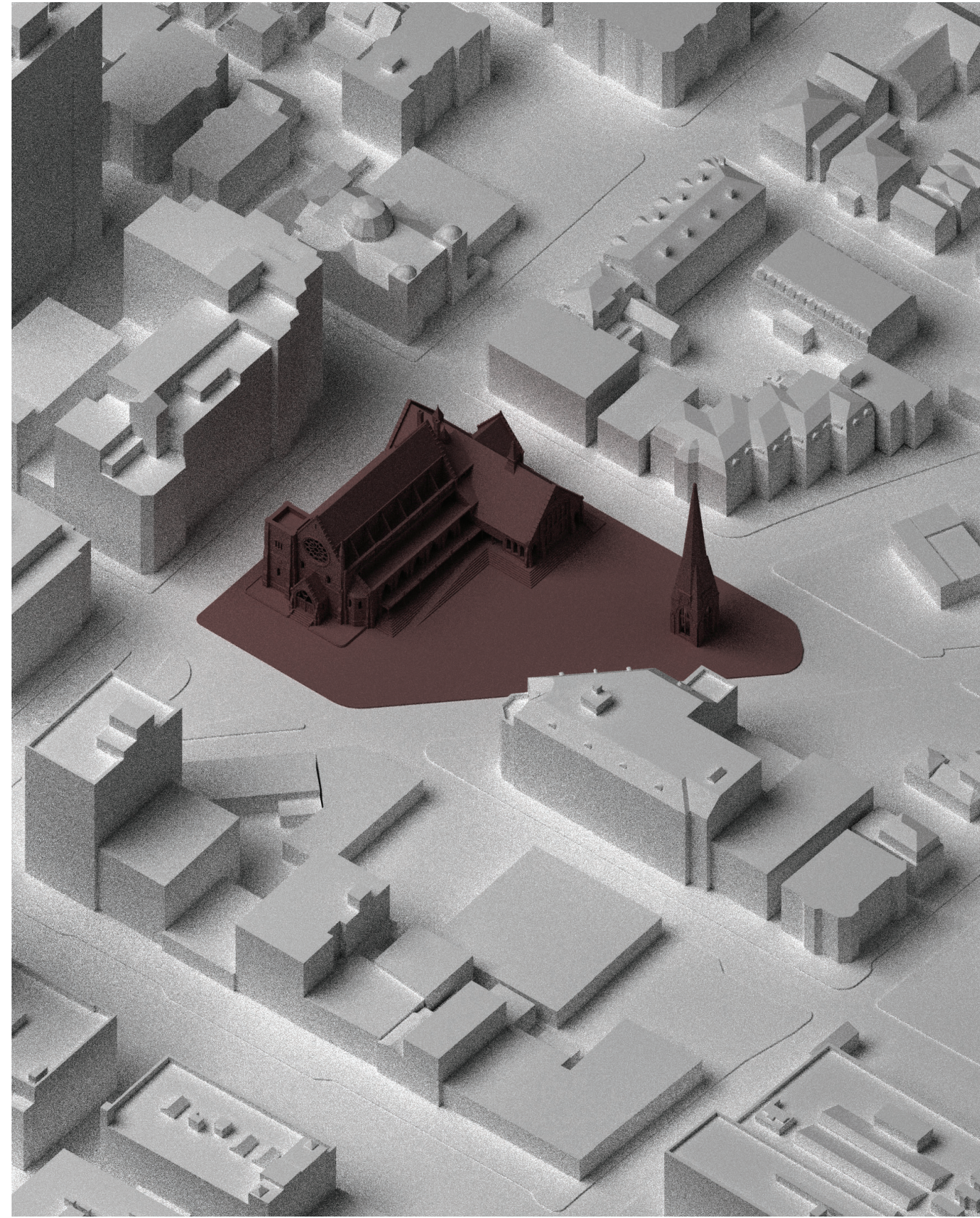
*Cephalophores, Saints Martyred by Decapitation*  
Alterpiece by Zürcher Veilchenmeister (1506)







*before*



*after*

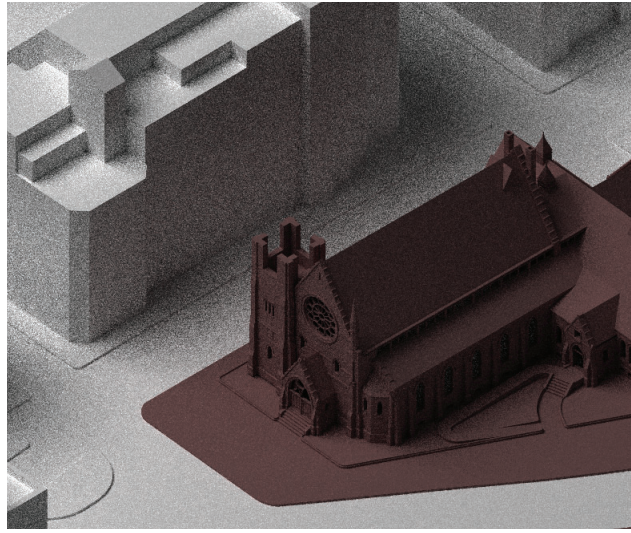


The tower is brought down to the ground and made inhabitable for the many at eye level, while retaining its symbolism for the congregation in its alignment. An extended staircase connecting the church and the tower delineates a new urban plaza. This *reorientation* from front to side is followed by the infill of the street, rerouting the traffic on River Street around the block.

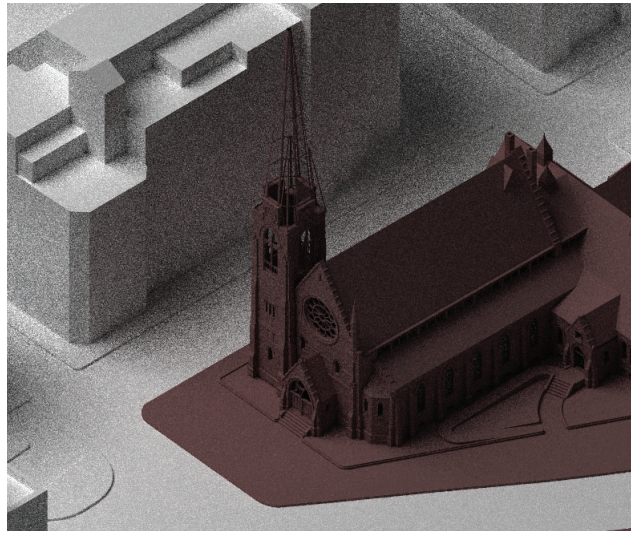
The West side of the gable is selectively removed to externalize parts of the sanctuary, exposing the original structure. The inserted floor slabs subdivide the sanctuary asymmetrically and create occupiable urban terraces, spanning the interior and the city.



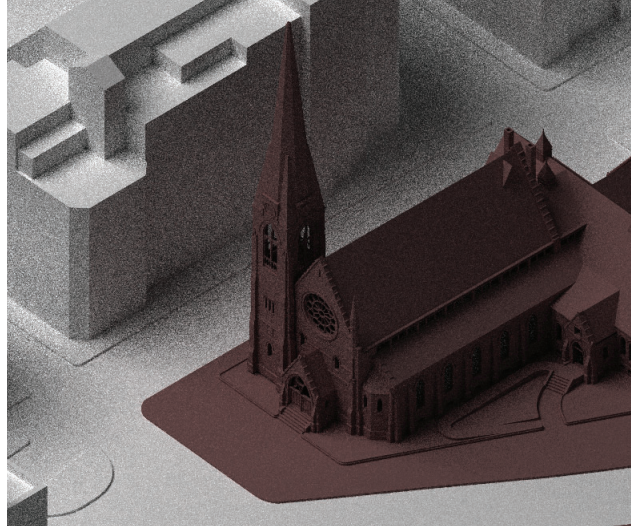




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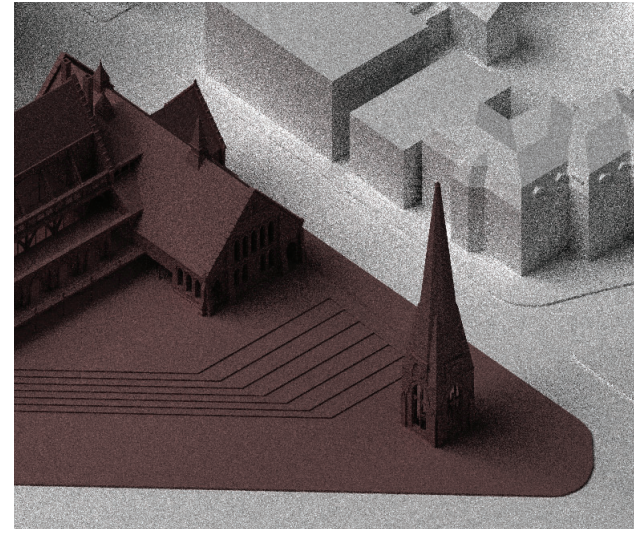


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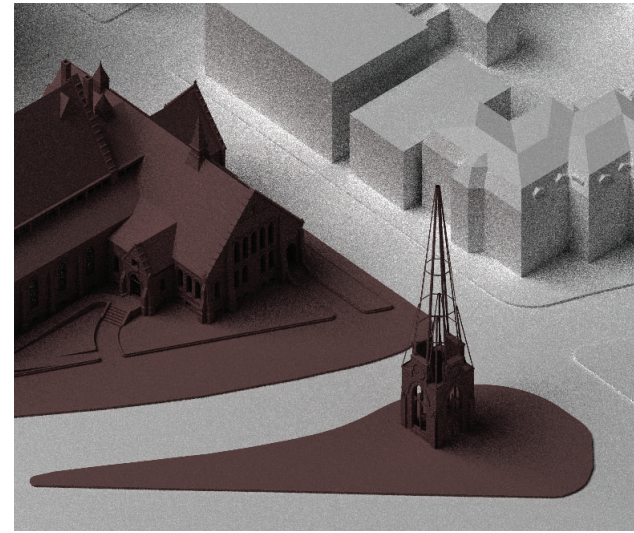


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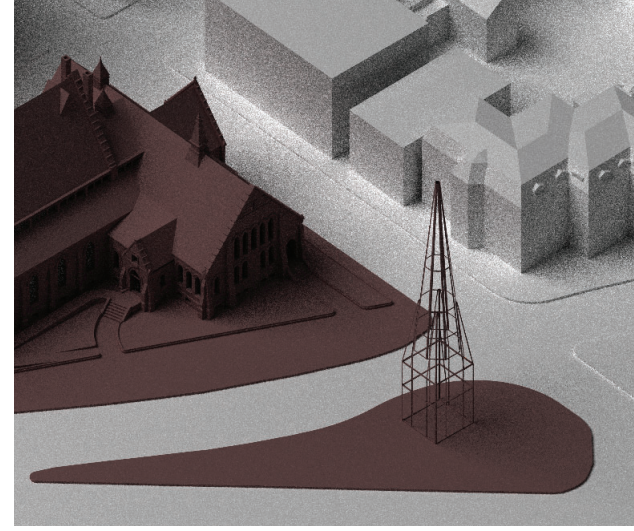
*unbuilding*



6



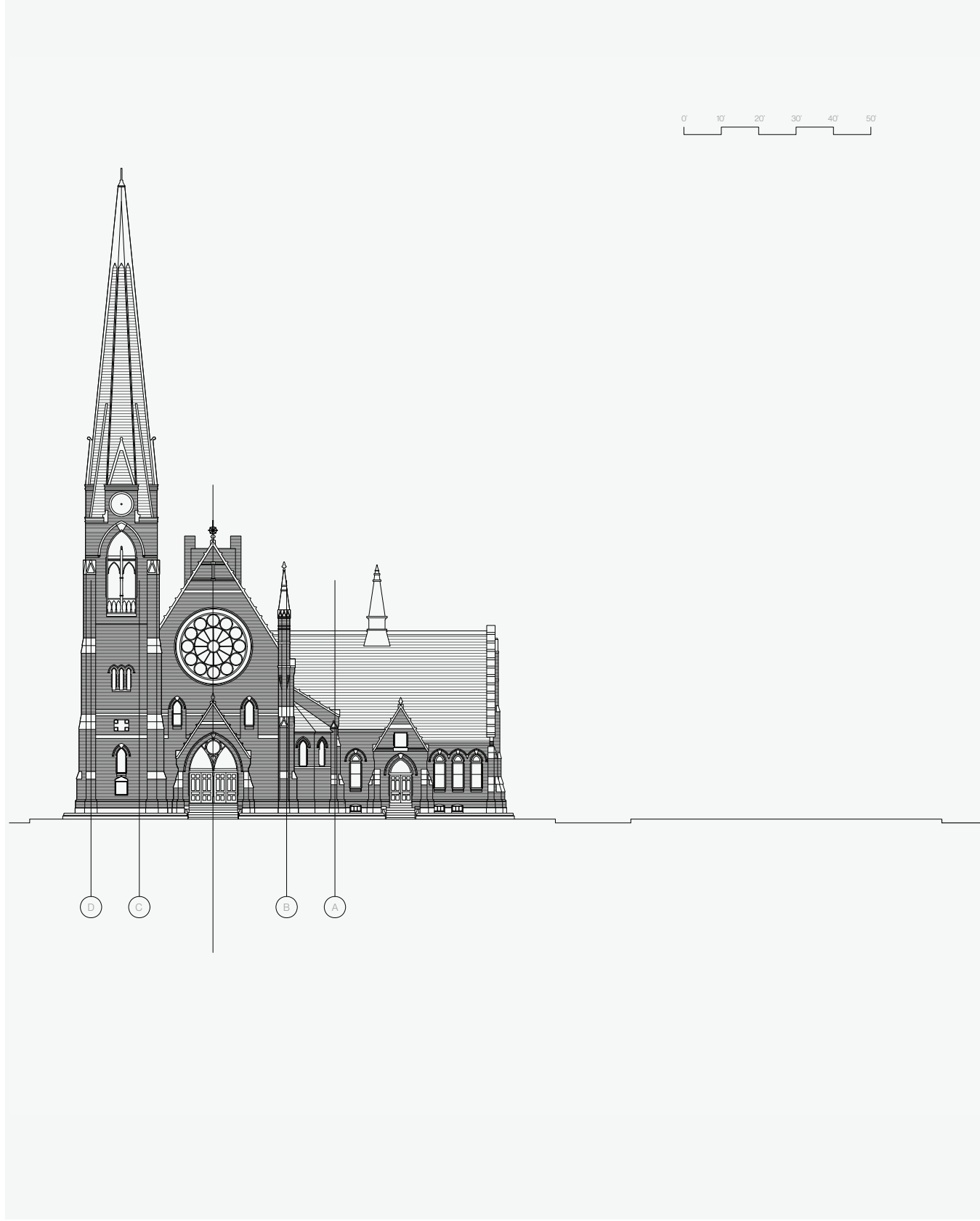
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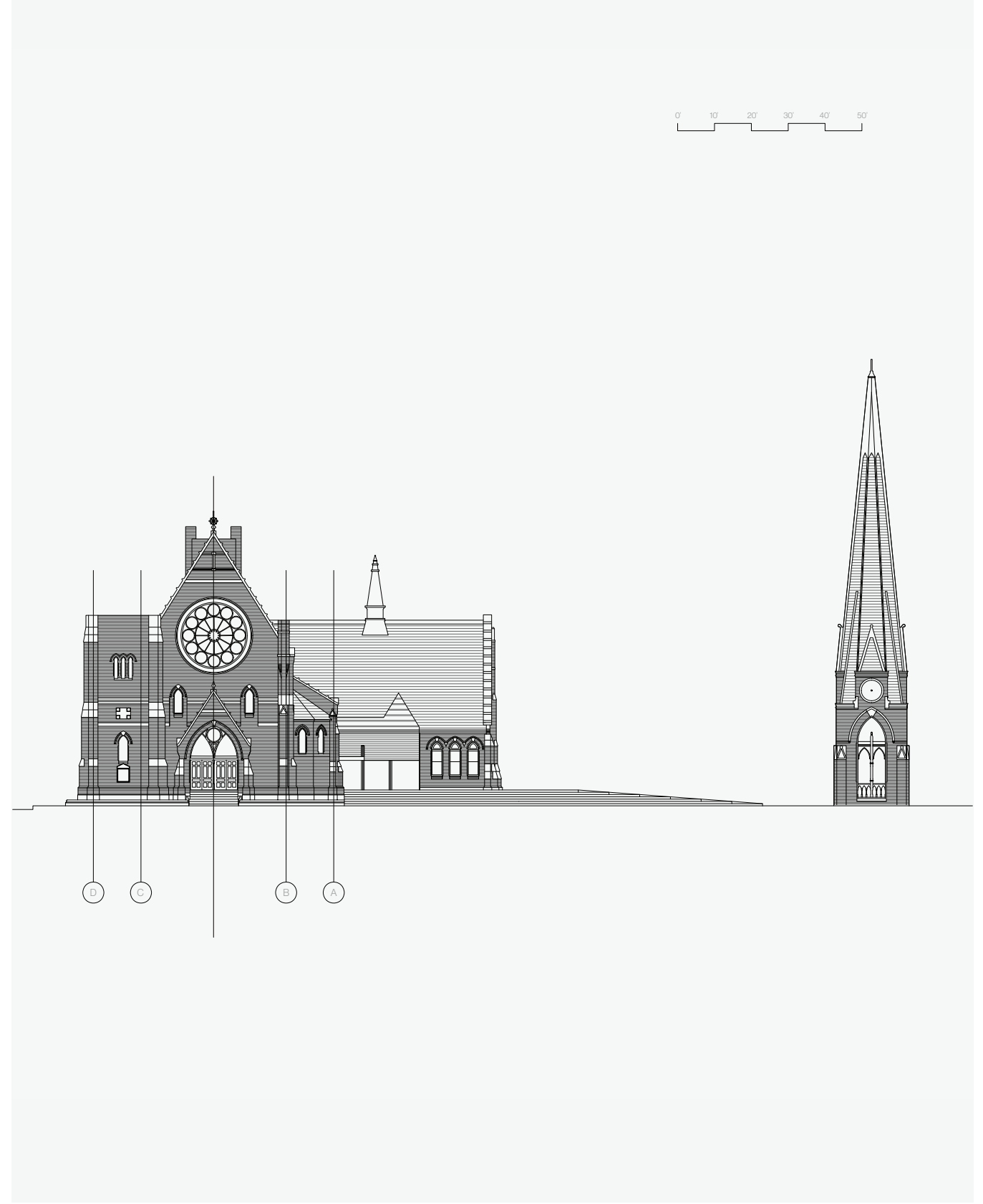
4

*rebuilding*



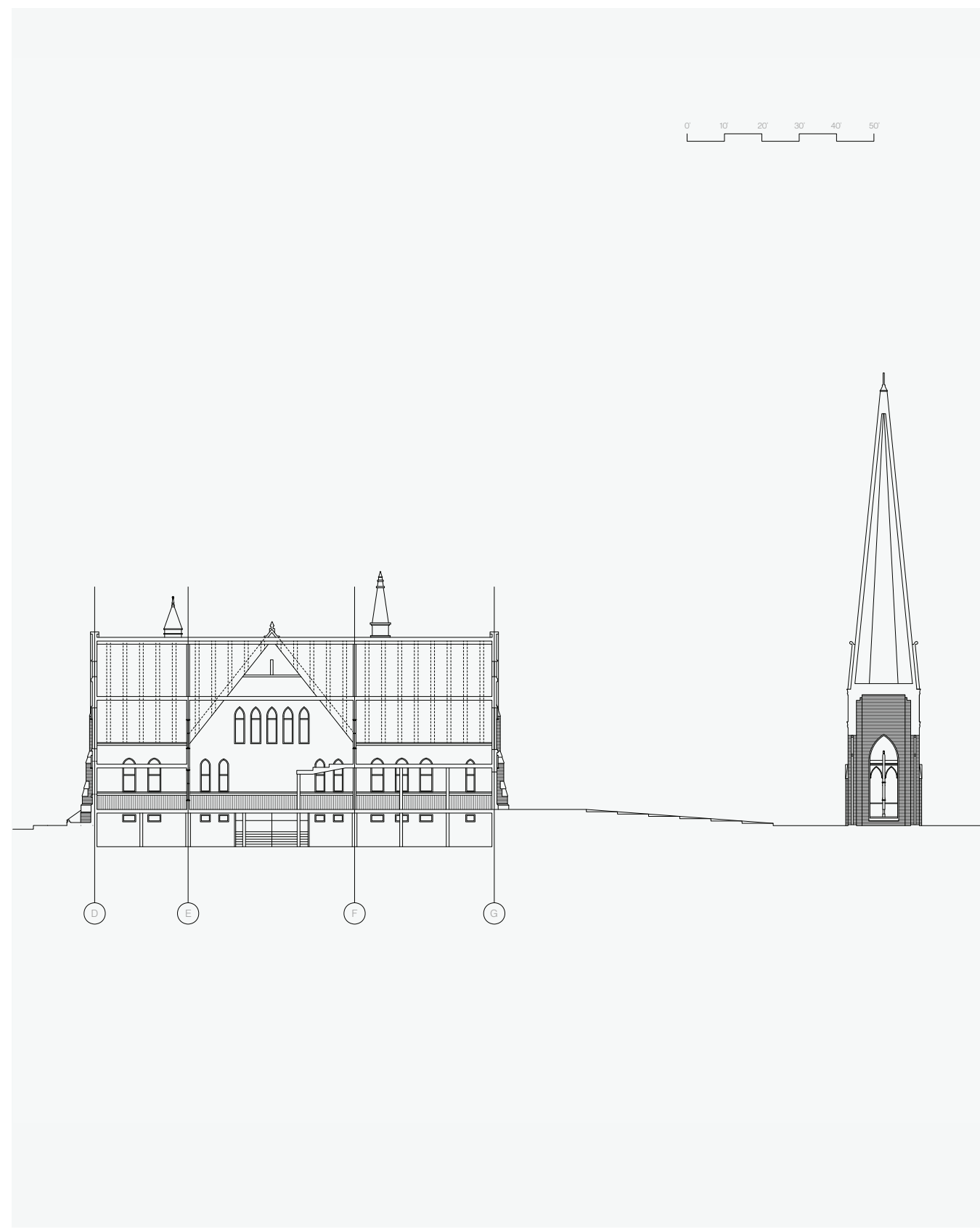


*before*

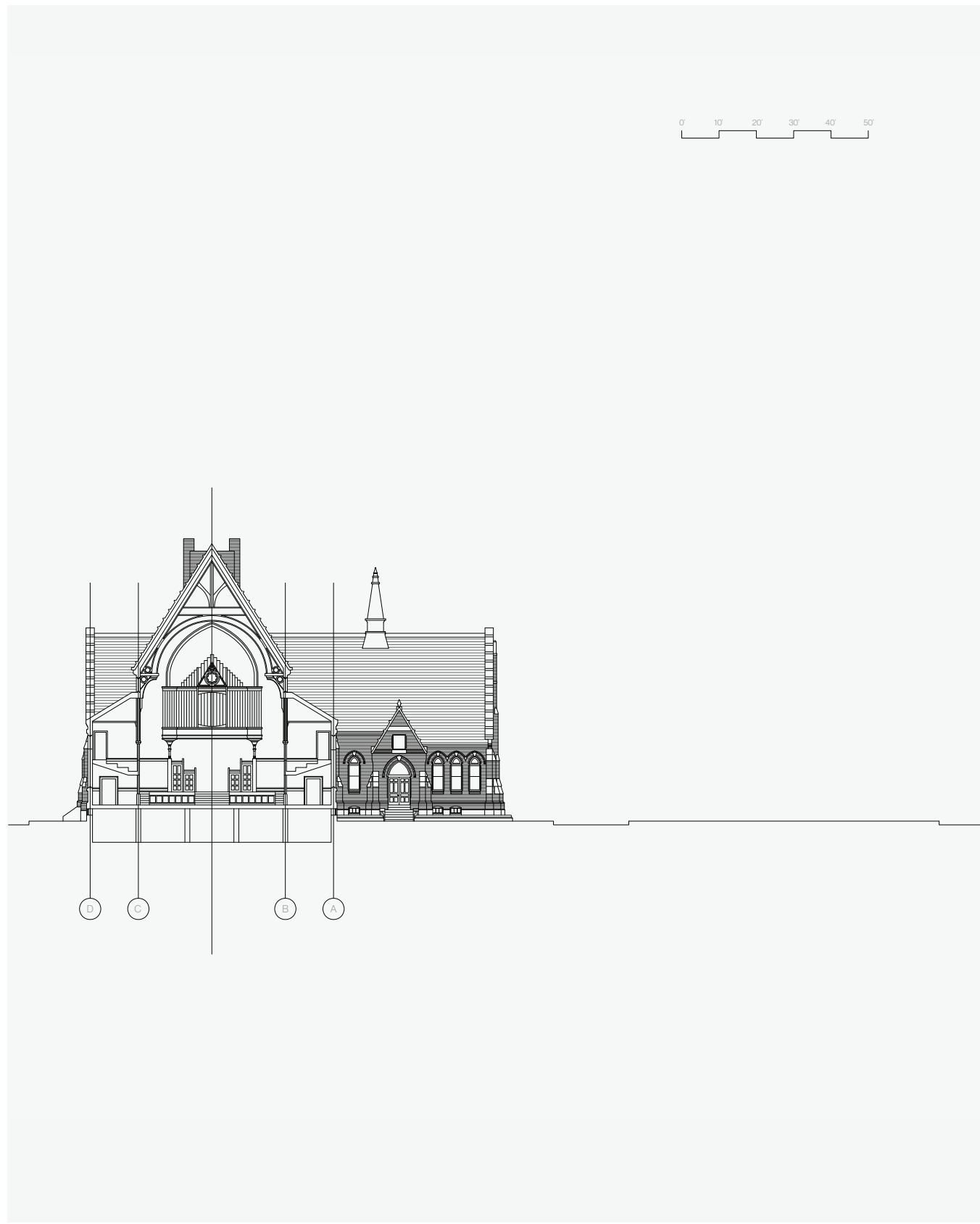


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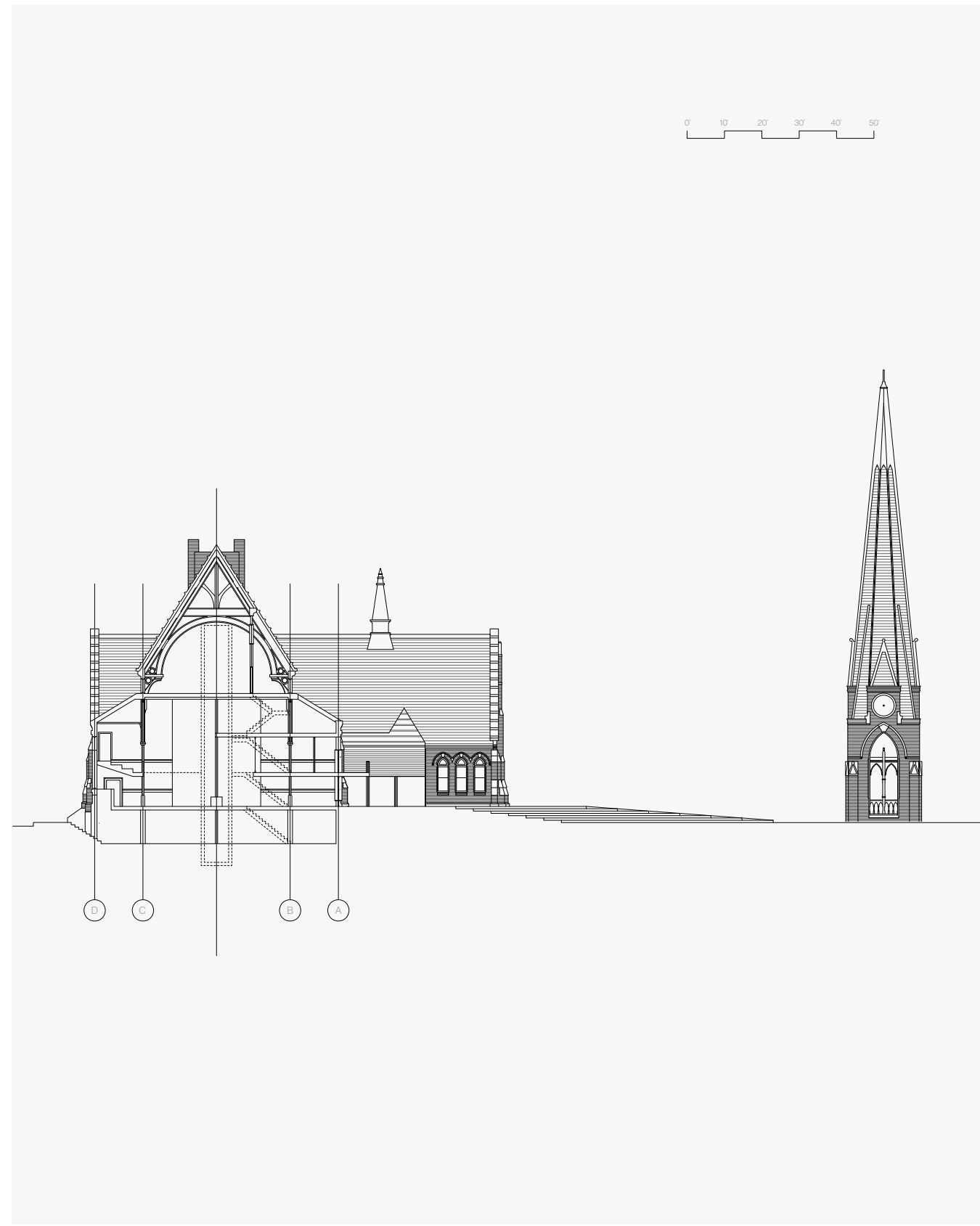






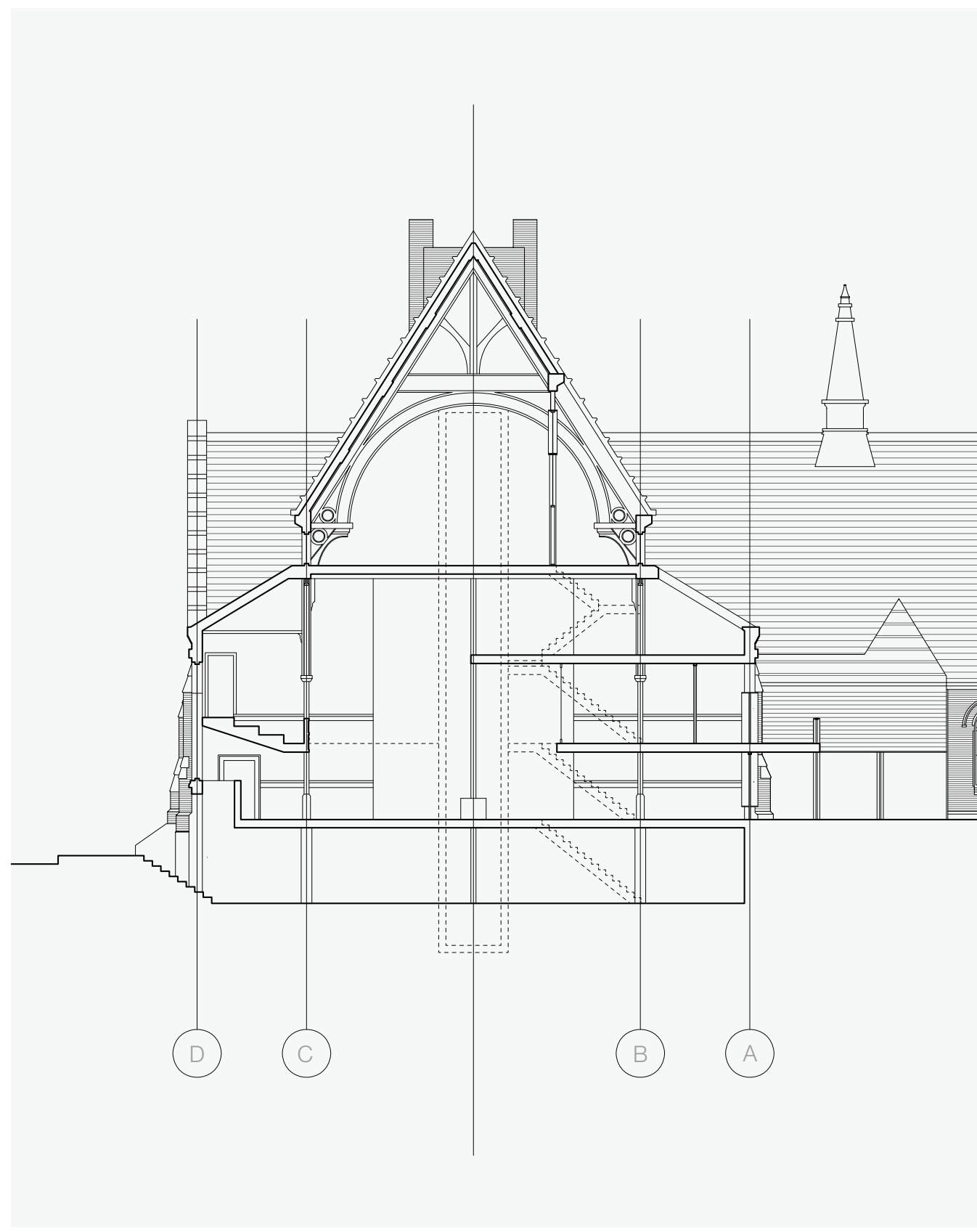


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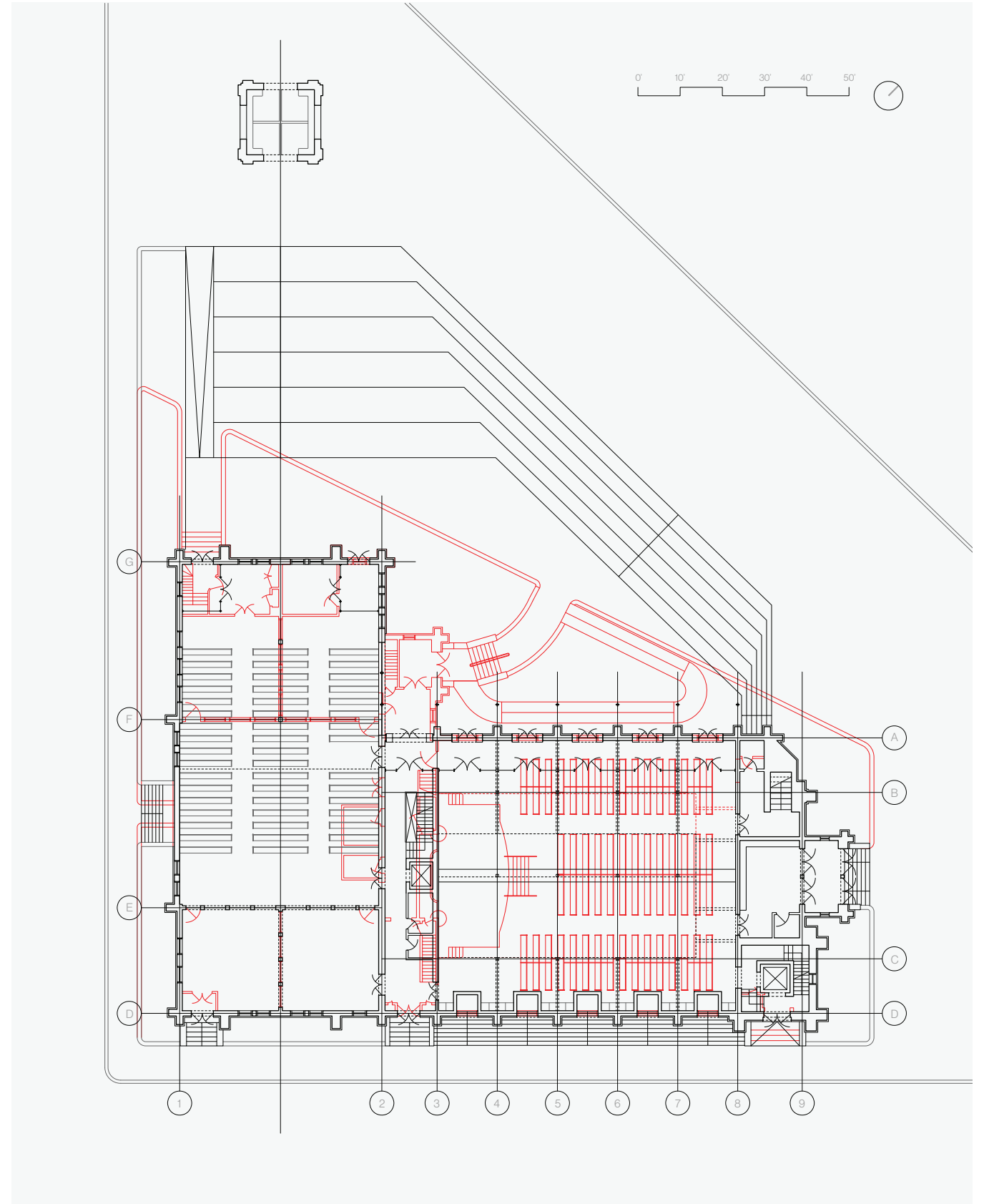




The large sanctuary space becomes a post office and the back-of-house fellowship hall becomes the new right-sized worship space. The front entrance is given to the USPS workers and the cut tower is repurposed as a freight elevator, while the public enters on the reoriented long side from the plaza.

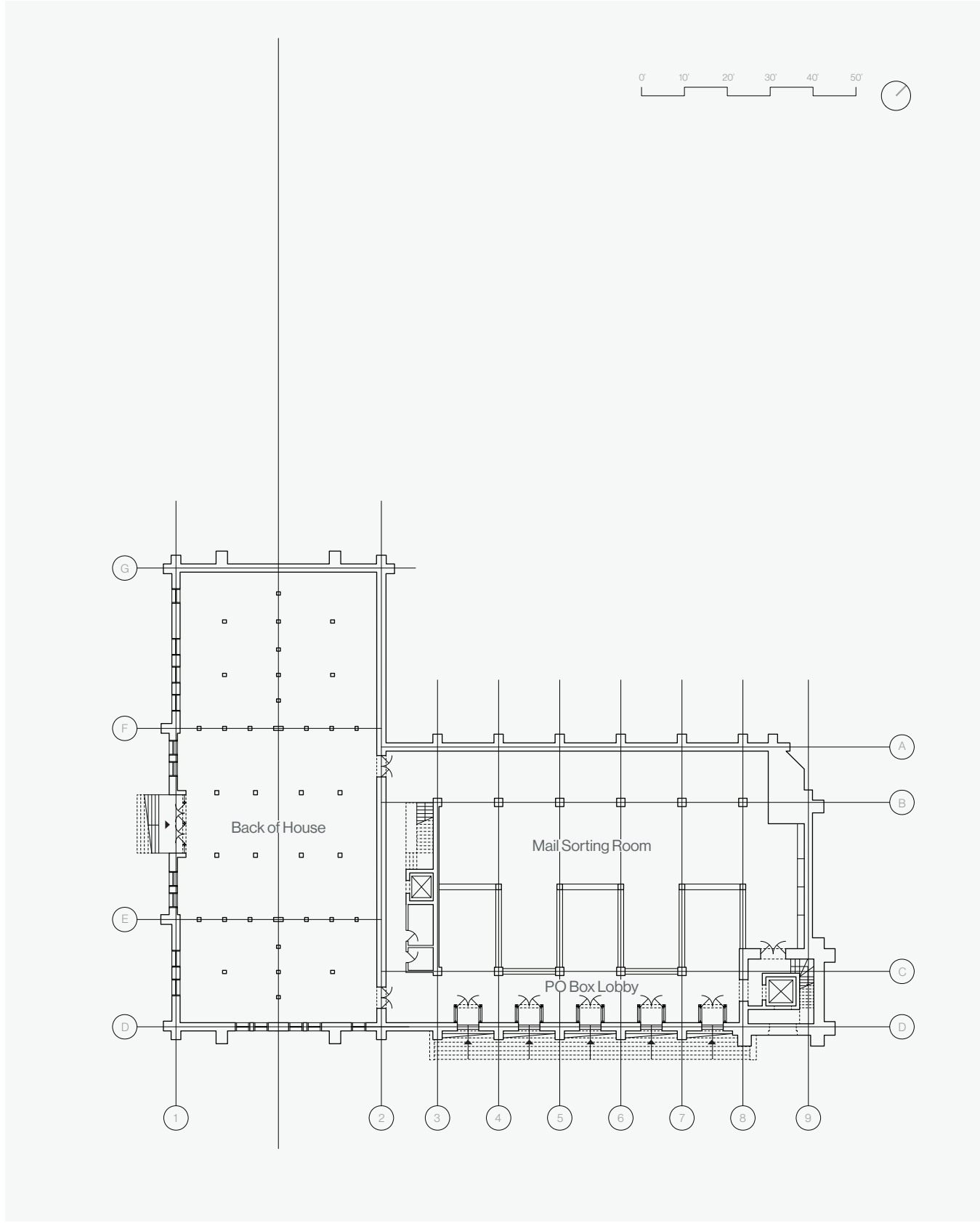
Replacing the organ room, a new elevator bay is inserted into the narrow corridor, making legible the two distinct spaces. But because of the temporal separation, there is a programmatic overlay between them: the Sunday school and various church fellowship meetings can infiltrate into the post office, while the programs supporting USPS workers can use the empty church spaces during the week.

Activating the large building to its full extent, this project aspires to create a vibrant civic space that is always in use, envisioning a symbolic separation that would *reorient* us back to the inclusive public.

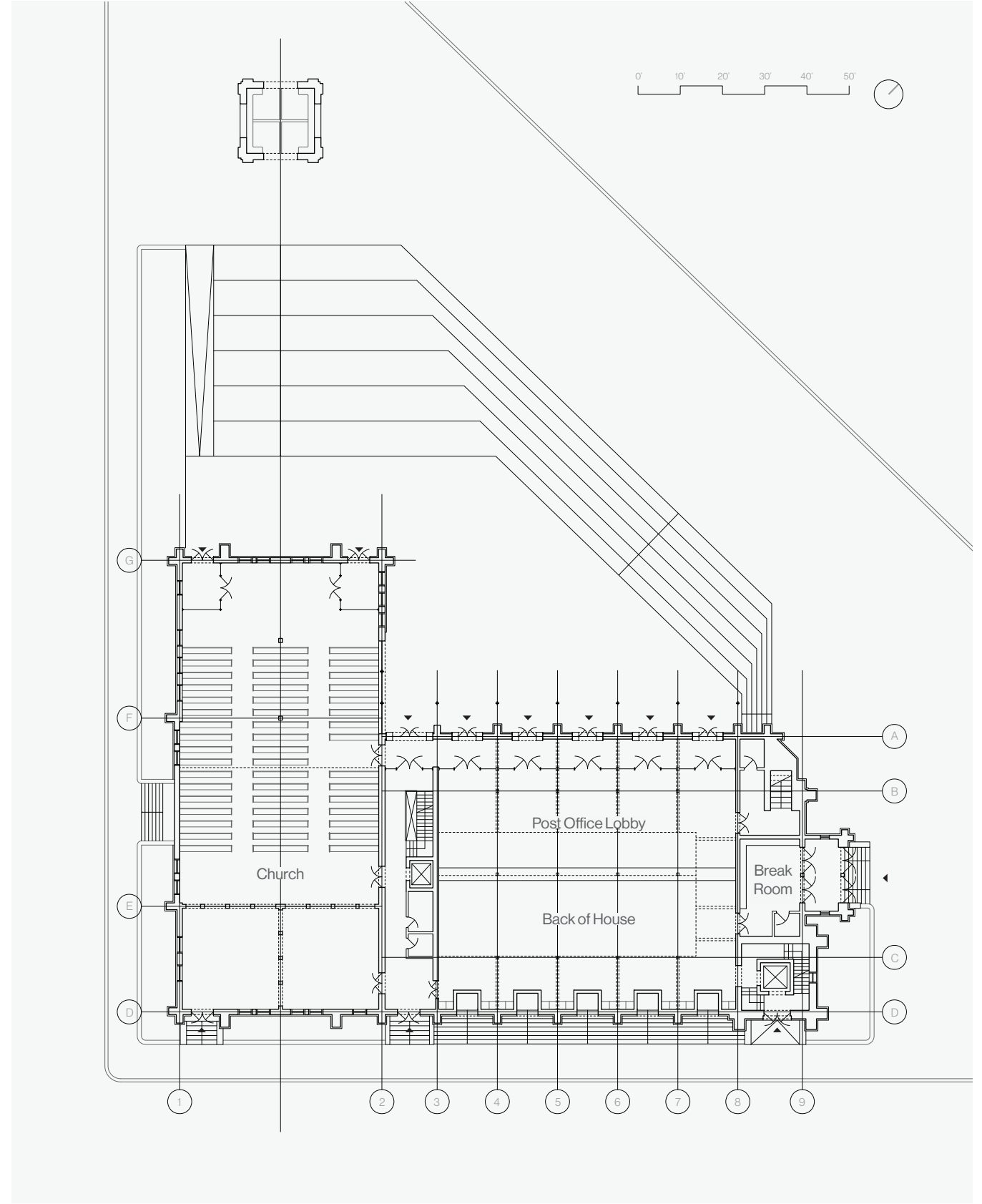


Ground Floor Demolition Plan (Demolition in Red)



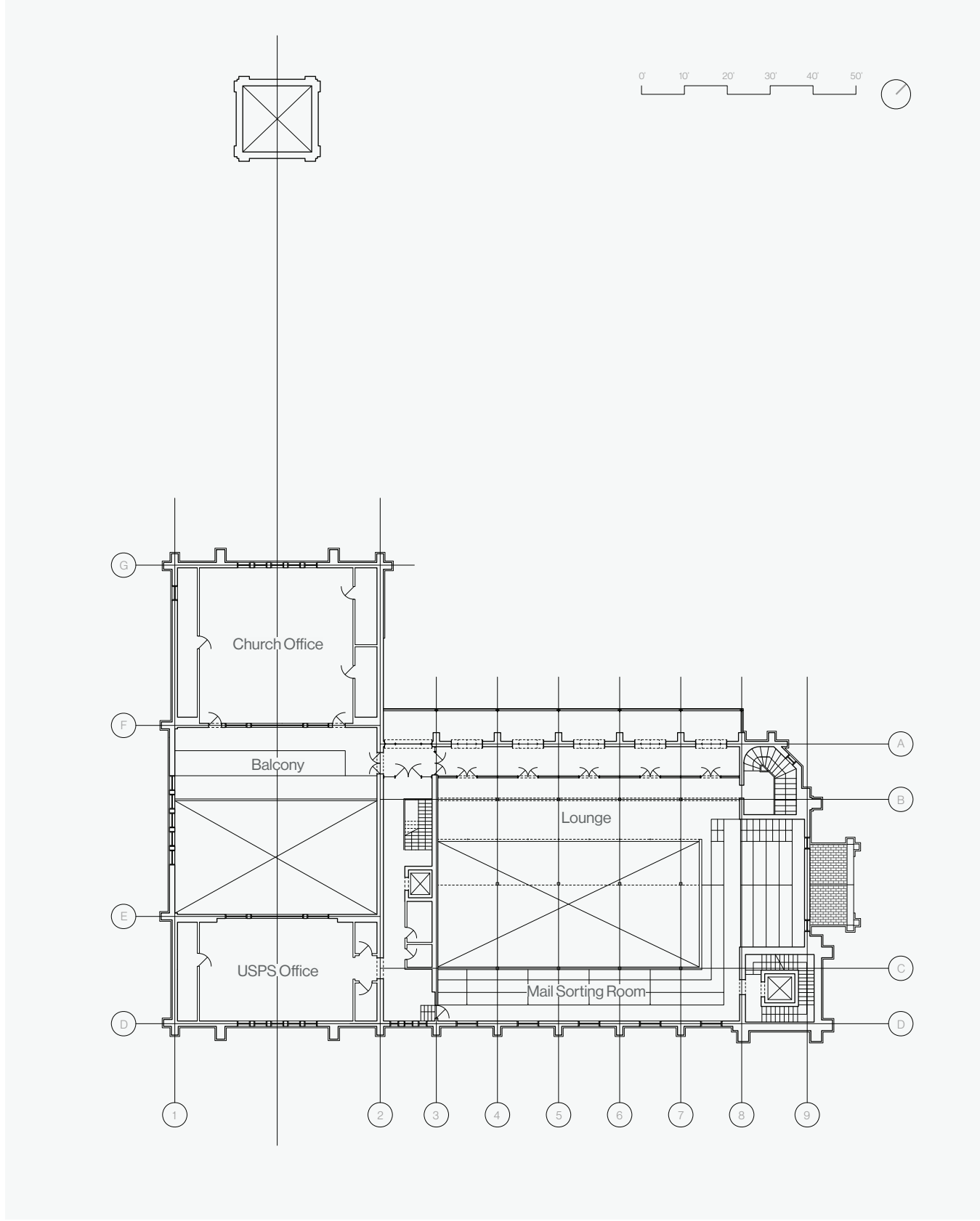


*Basement Floor Plan*

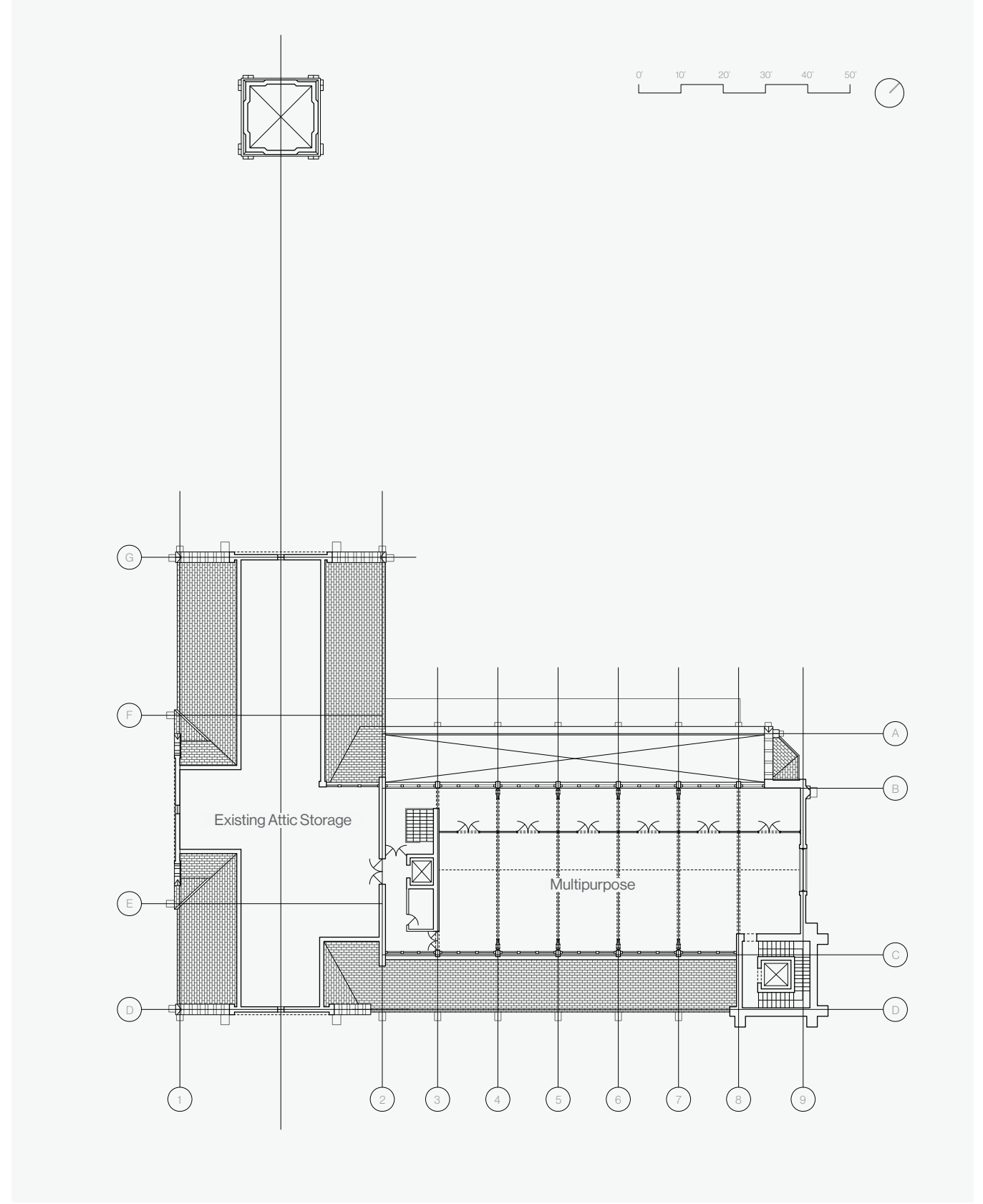


*Ground Floor Plan*



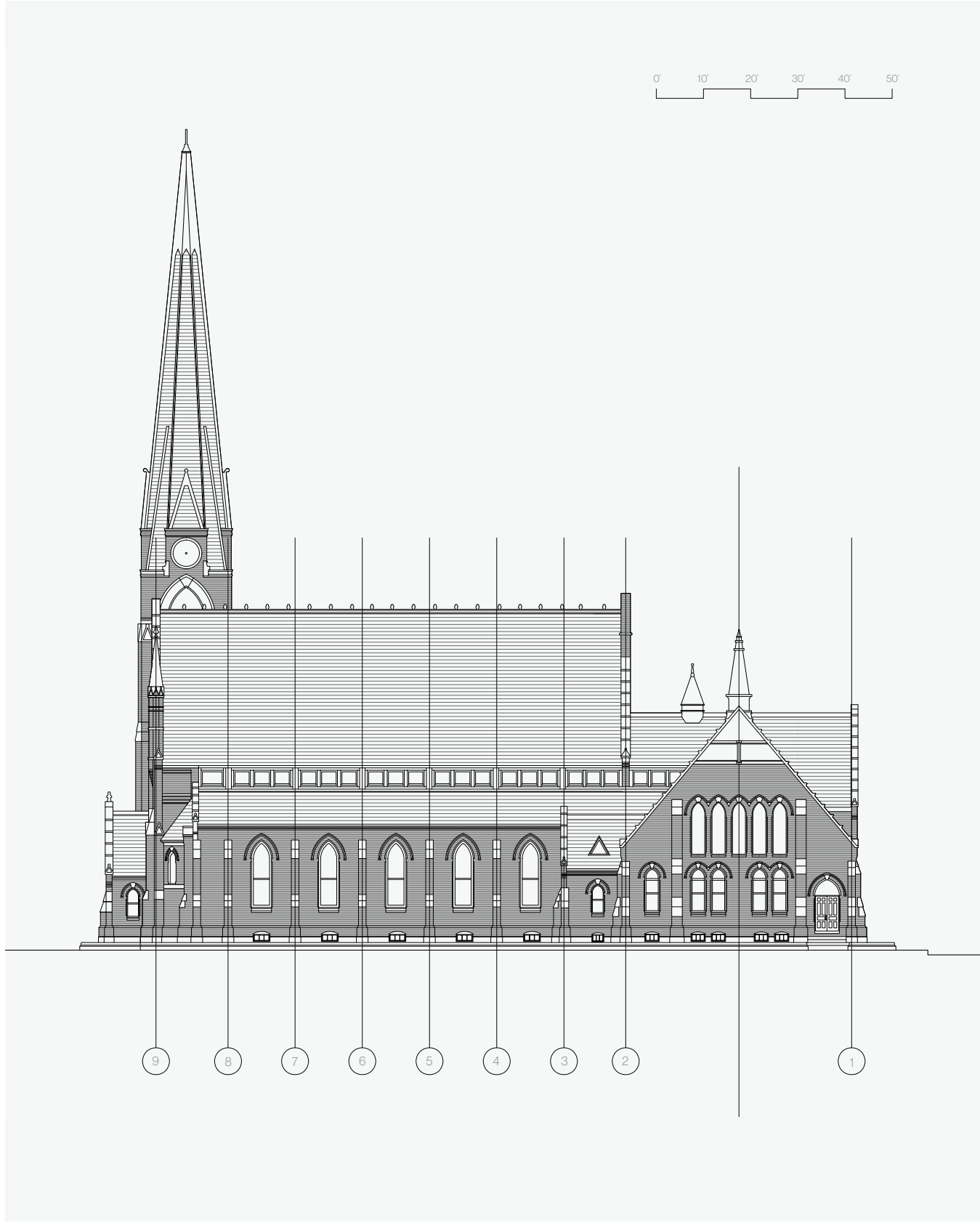


Second Floor Plan

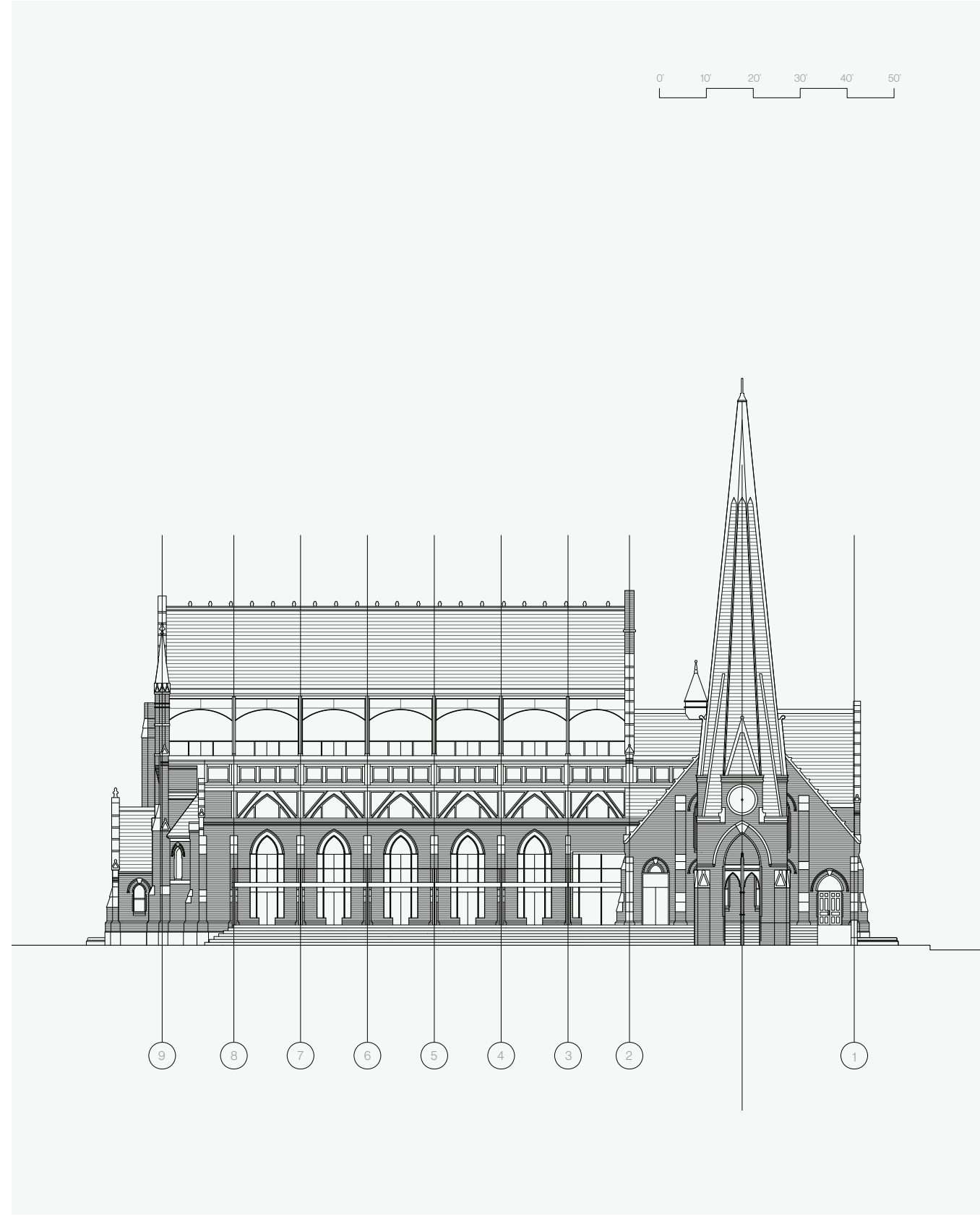


Third Floor Plan



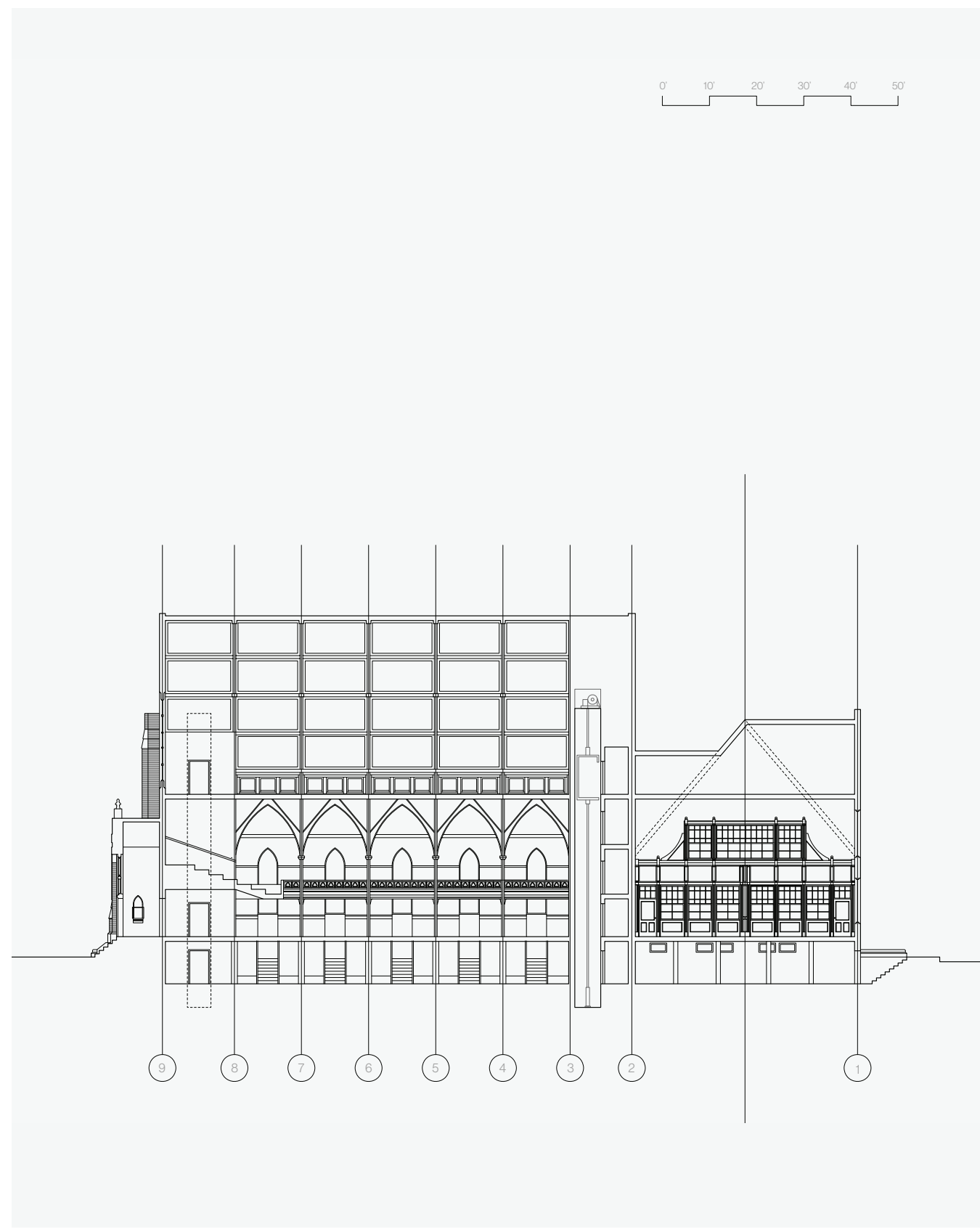


*before*



*after*













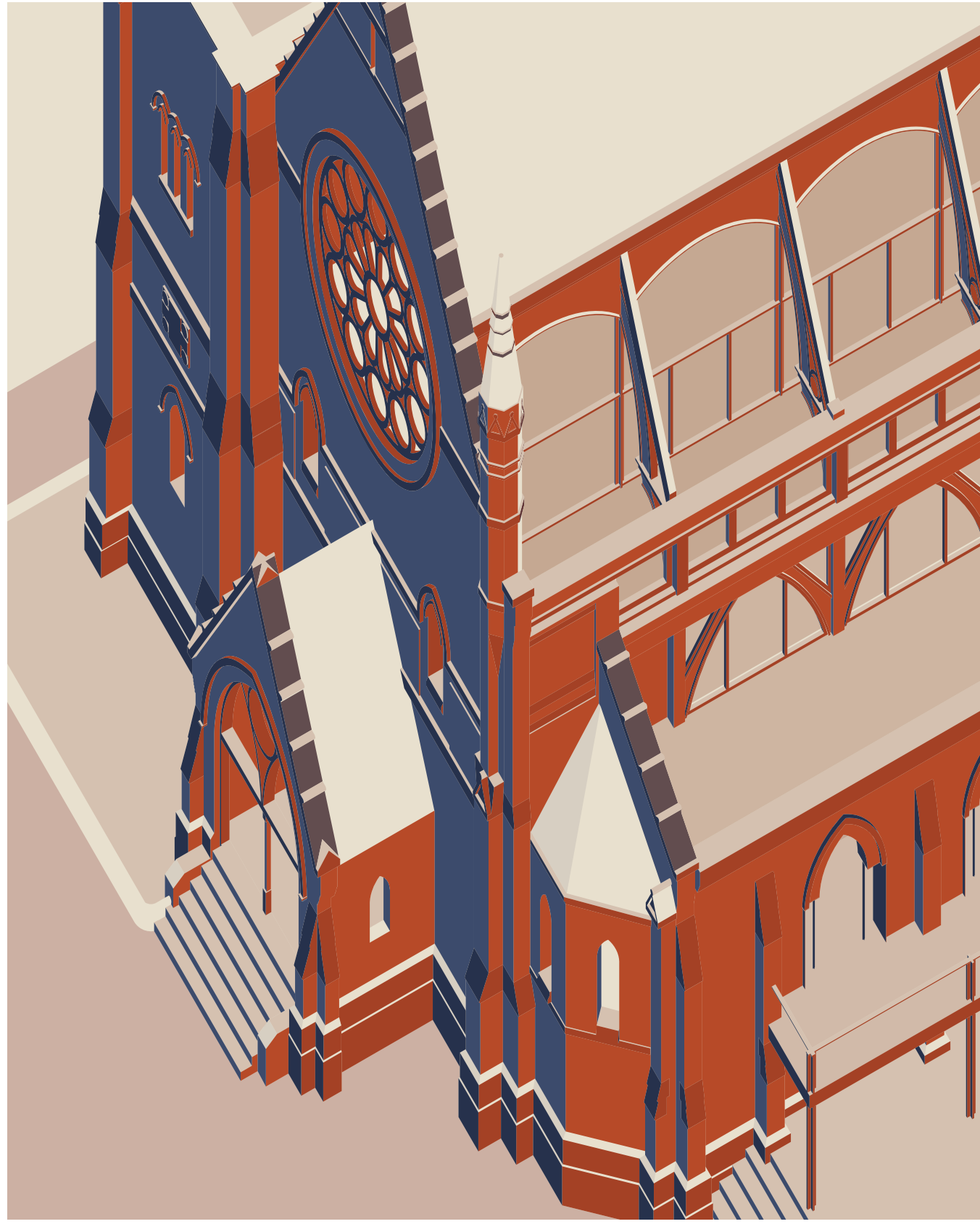




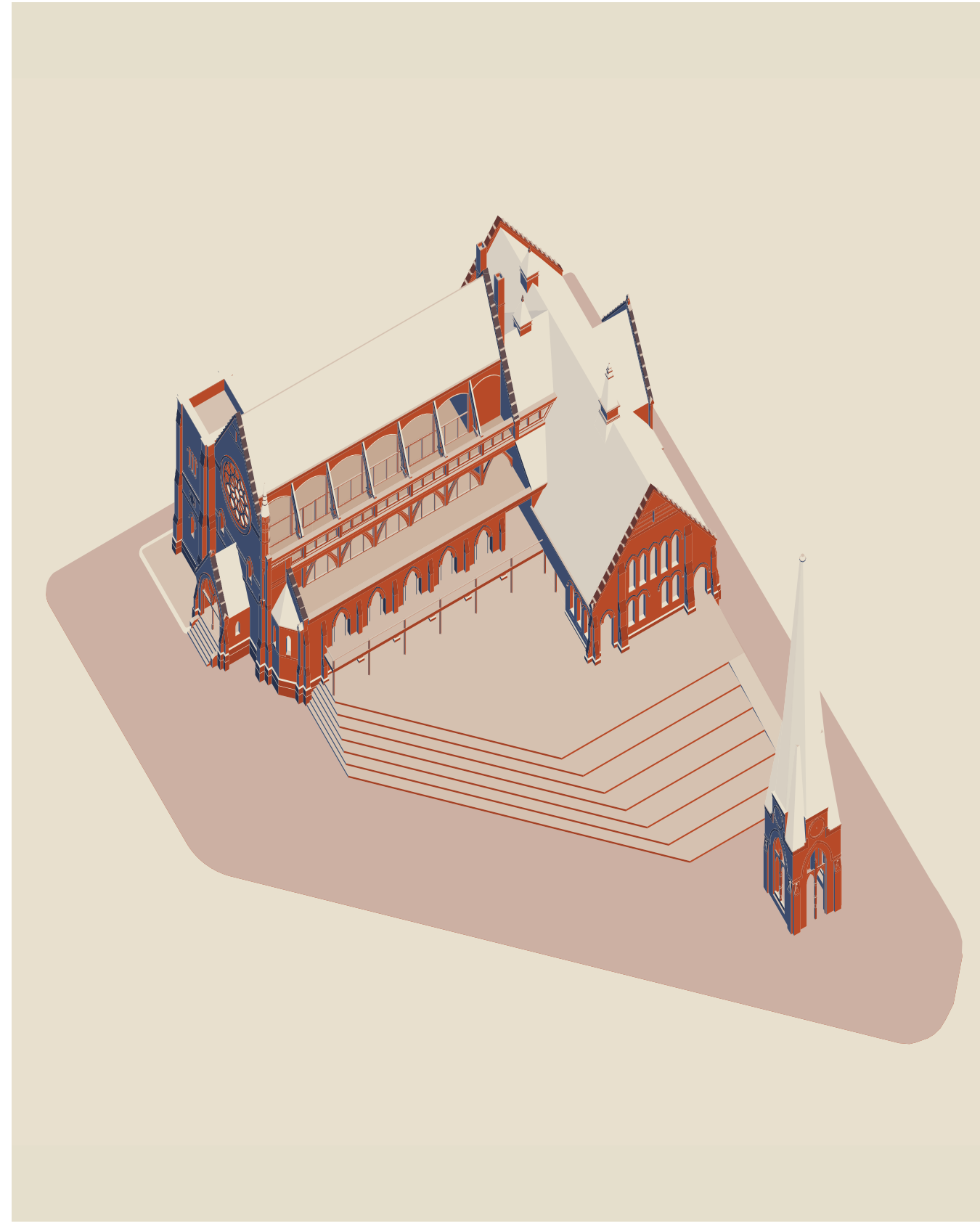














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