



An Intrinsic Model for a Non-neutral, Plural National School

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AN INTRINSIC MODEL FOR A NON-NEUTRAL PLURAL NATIONAL SCHOOL

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

JACQUELINE HUEY YEAN WONG

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

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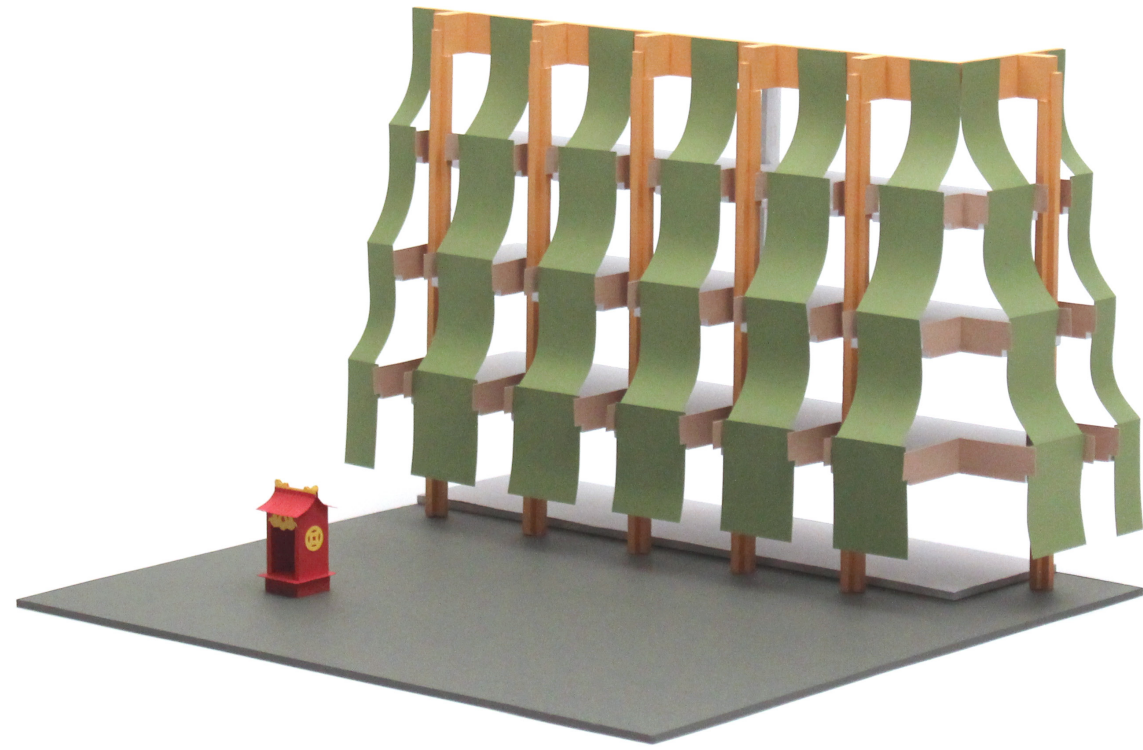
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AN INTRINSIC MODEL FOR A NON-NEUTRAL, PLURAL NATIONAL SCHOOL

*a thesis by Jacqueline Wong
advised by Sergio Lopez-Pineiro*

When Malaysia gained independence from the British in 1957, it took on a national architectural identity that was rooted in the language and neutrality of tropical modernism, which was deemed appropriate for the multi-ethnic Malaysian society. At the turn of the century, the government of Malaysia built a new capital city, Putrajaya: a singular ethnocentric construction, modeled after architectural forms of the Arab nations, that elevates Malay-Muslim identity above others in the plural nation. As opposed to the homogeneous, imposed ethnocentrism of Putrajaya, the former capital city of Kuala Lumpur embodies a hybridized, heterogeneous accumulation of multiple identities and differences.

If Putrajaya represents an extrinsic model that outwardly exhibits a Malay-Muslim identity by reproducing the architectural forms of Arab nations and turning them into consumable artifacts, Kuala Lumpur represents an intrinsic model of a contested city where confrontations and accumulation of differences produce new hybridized conditions in a constant state of flux.

In its search for a national identity, the Malaysian state has oscillated between two extremes: a singular ethnocentric iconography on the one hand and a flattening neutral modernism on the other.

This thesis asserts the relevance of iconography in producing an architectural identity in the context of a plural society. It draws on the found conditions of Kuala Lumpur to propose the intrinsic model as a technique which calls upon culturally diverse referents to produce an inclusive and plural national architectural identity. This technique is investigated against the program of the Malaysian national school: a pervasive and relentlessly banal modernist typology that serves an ethnically diverse populace but is neutralized by prescriptive government pre-approved plans and generic facades. This thesis proposes an intrinsic model for a non-neutral, plural national school.







Torre Velasca foregrounded by the campanile of the Church of San Gottardo, Milan, 1950. Monica Pidgeon, RIBA Collections.

If Torre Velasca was a building that “culturally summarized” Milan’s layered historical context—its structural members evoke the ribbing of the neighboring Duomo, its pitched roof with protruding vertical shafts echo the protruding of the surrounding domestic chimneys and its colors reference the tonalities of old Milan—this thesis similarly attempts to fit into a contextually sensitive urban area by “absorbing” and reinterpreting the formal repertoire of its surroundings.

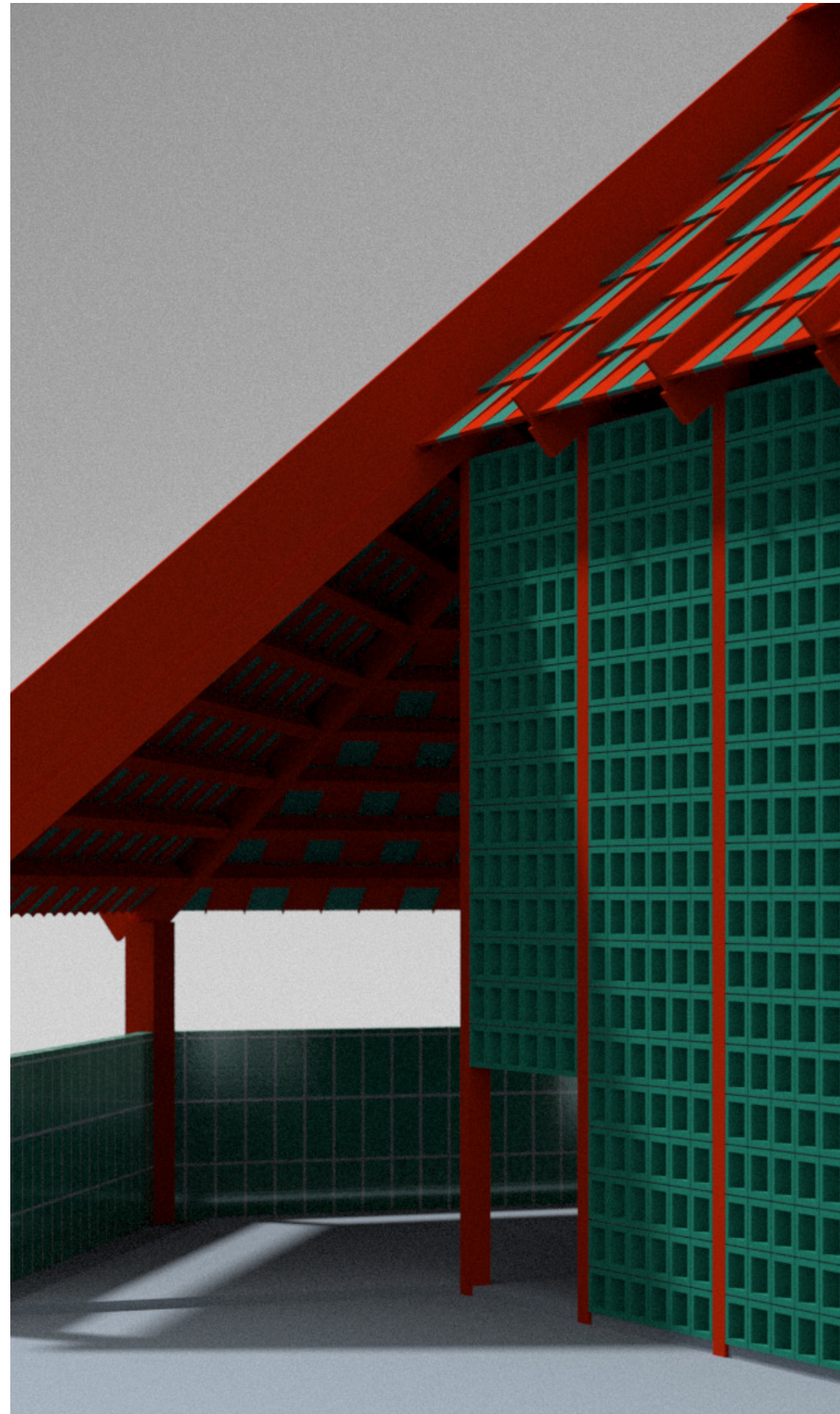
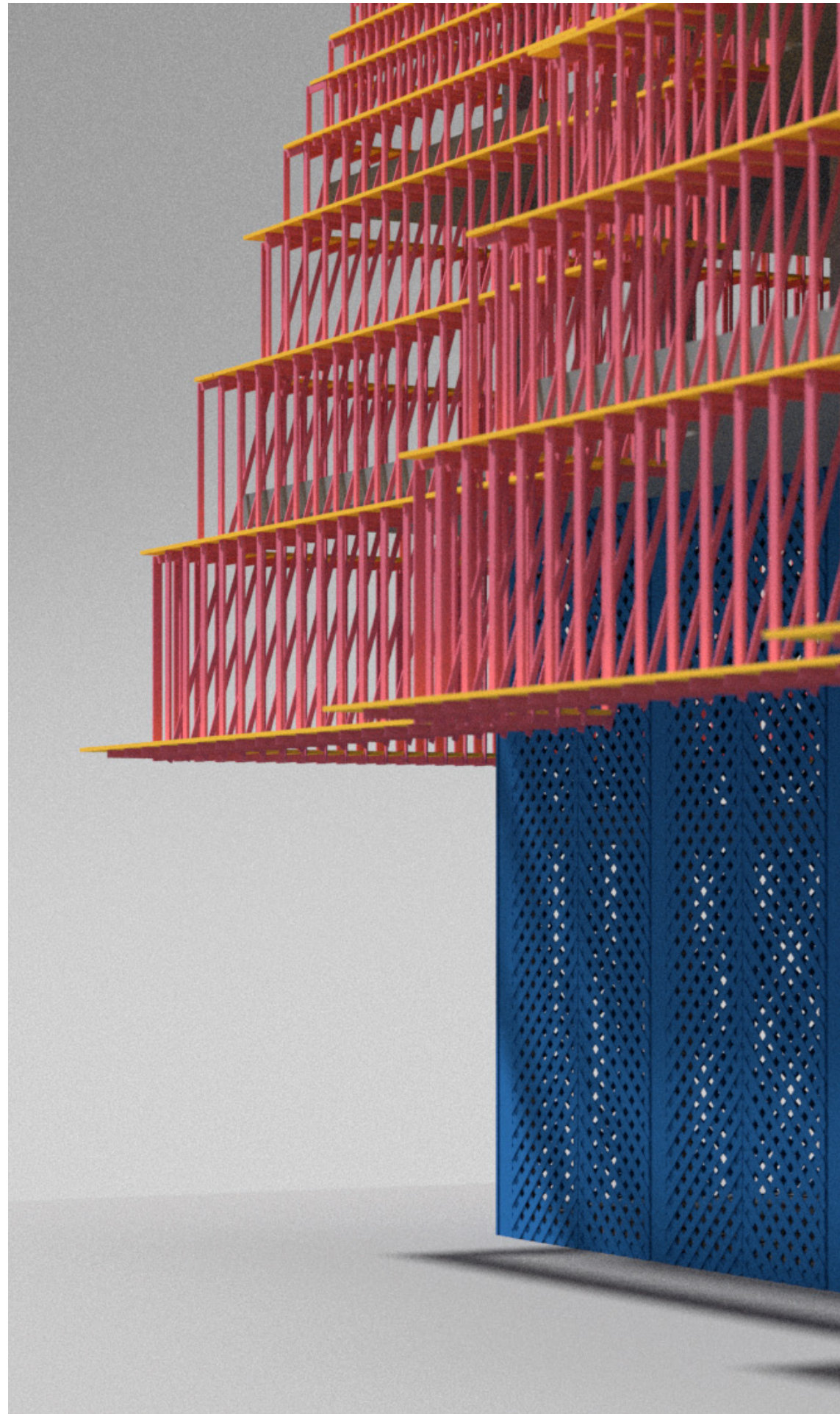
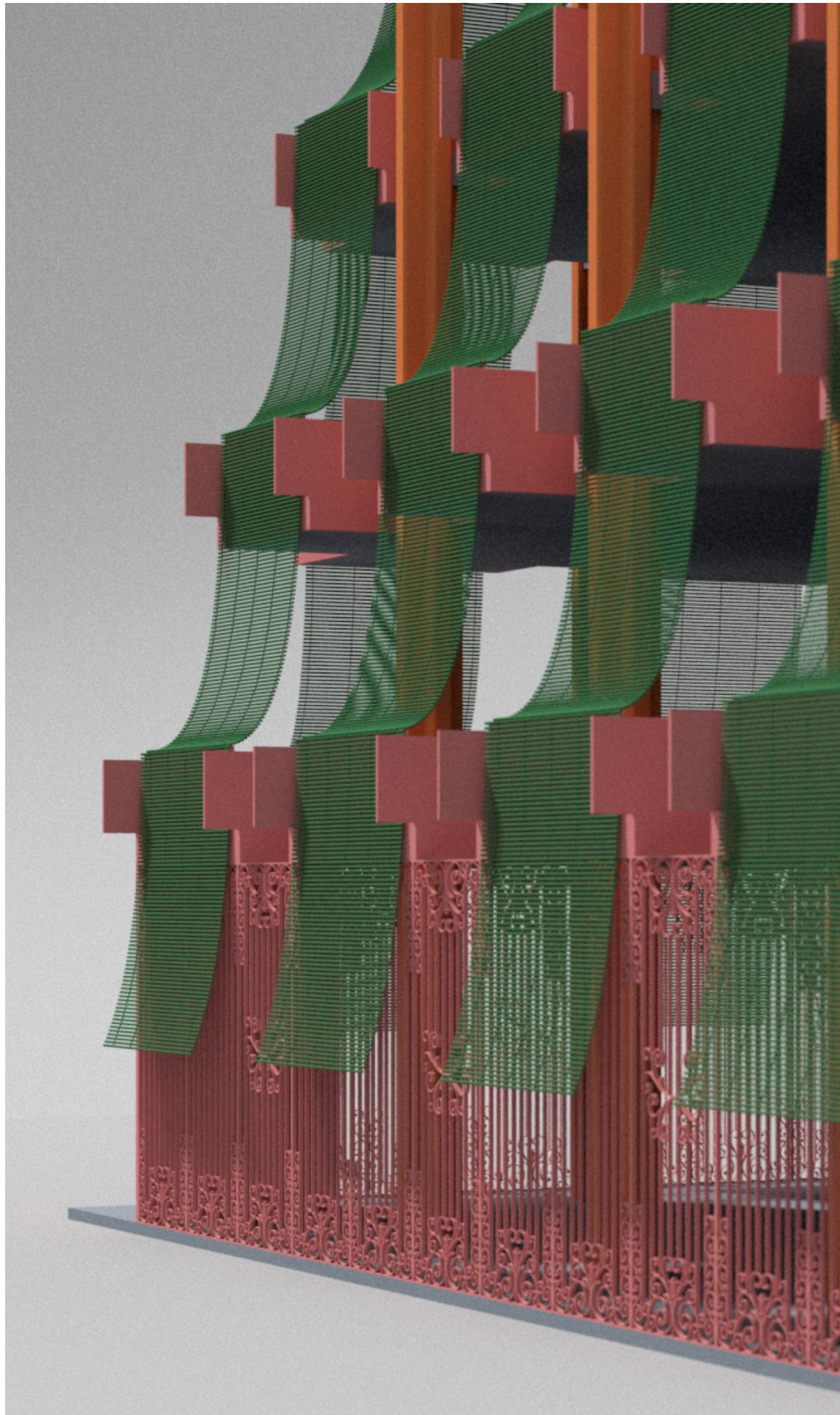
Three locations of existing national schools become possible sites to imagine this new intrinsic model.

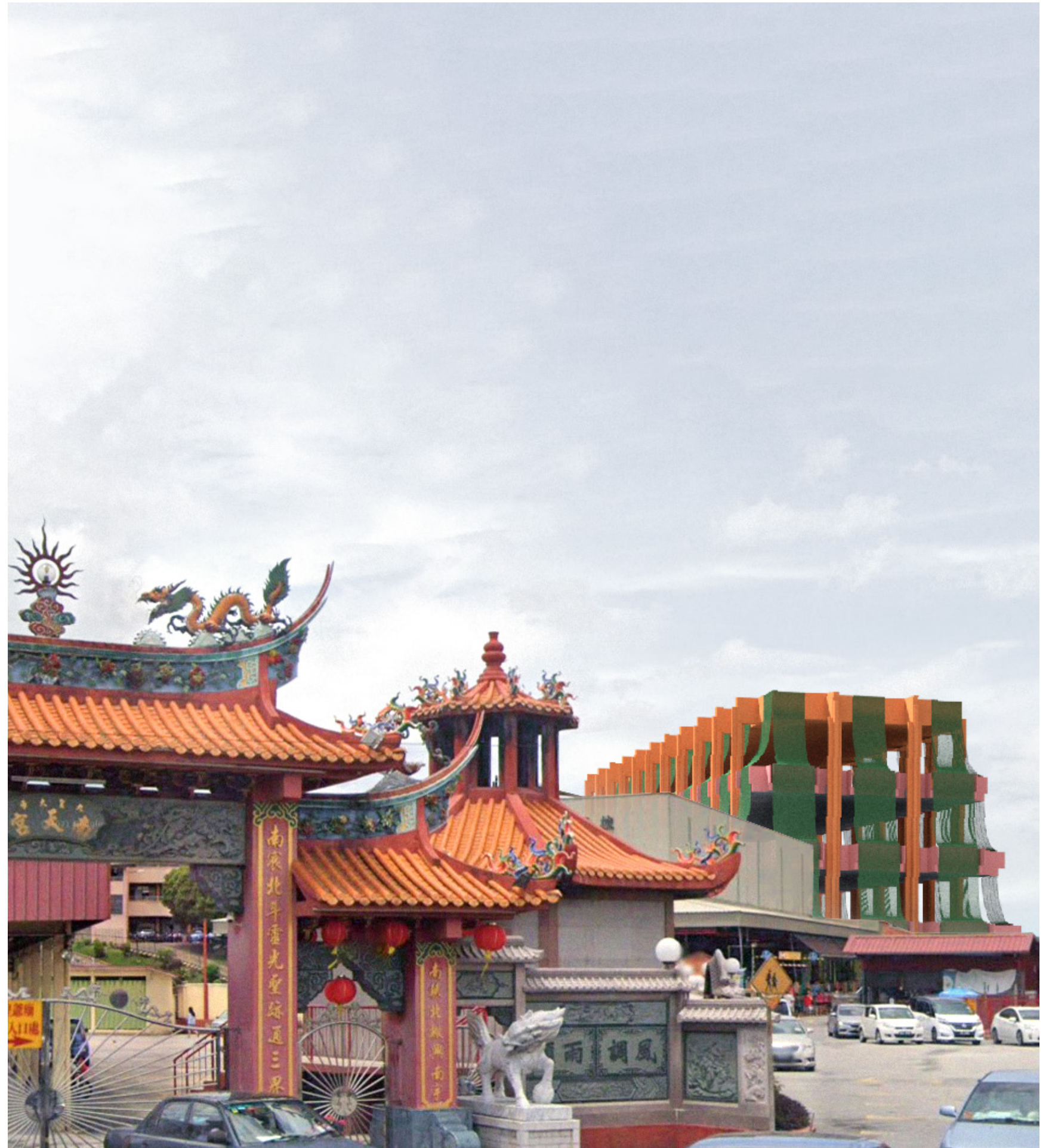
On a small street in Ampang, the neutral school building is adjacent to the Nine Emperor Gods Temple amid a dense fabric of single-family homes.

On a busy street off a major highway, the neutral school building sits next to the Sri Sithi Vinayagar Temple against a backdrop of recently constructed highrises.

In the protected Malay enclave of Kampung Baru, the neutral school building is adjacent to a traditional Malay house, loomed over by a threatening new housing development.

Three new proposals replace the primary bar building of the school at each site. The referents are sometimes explicit and otherwise ambiguous, their formal and tonal translations sometimes direct, and at other times abstracted. But in each case they produce an estrangement in the city: simultaneously embodying the contradictory character of the pre-existing environment and insisting on something distinct and new.

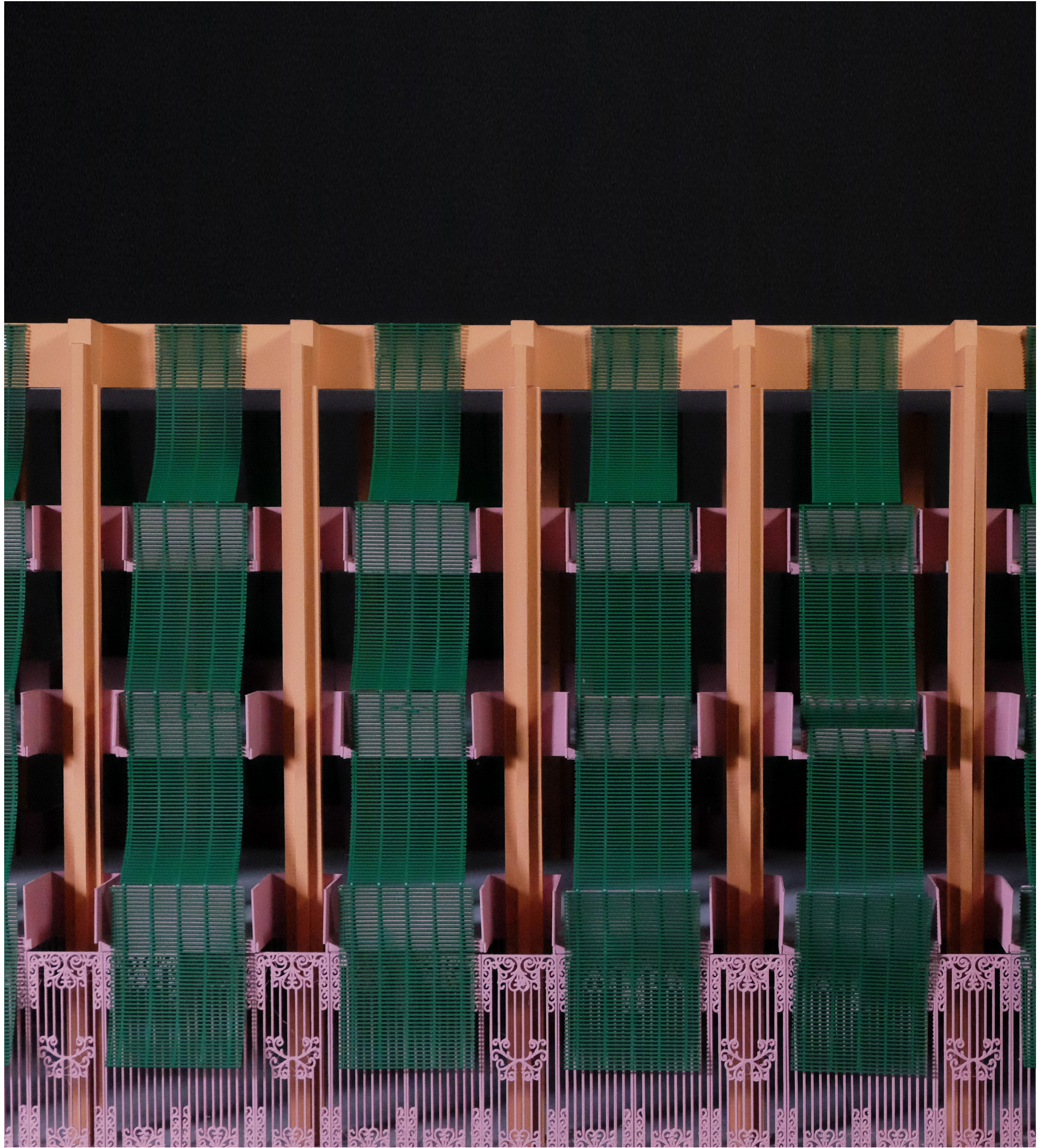
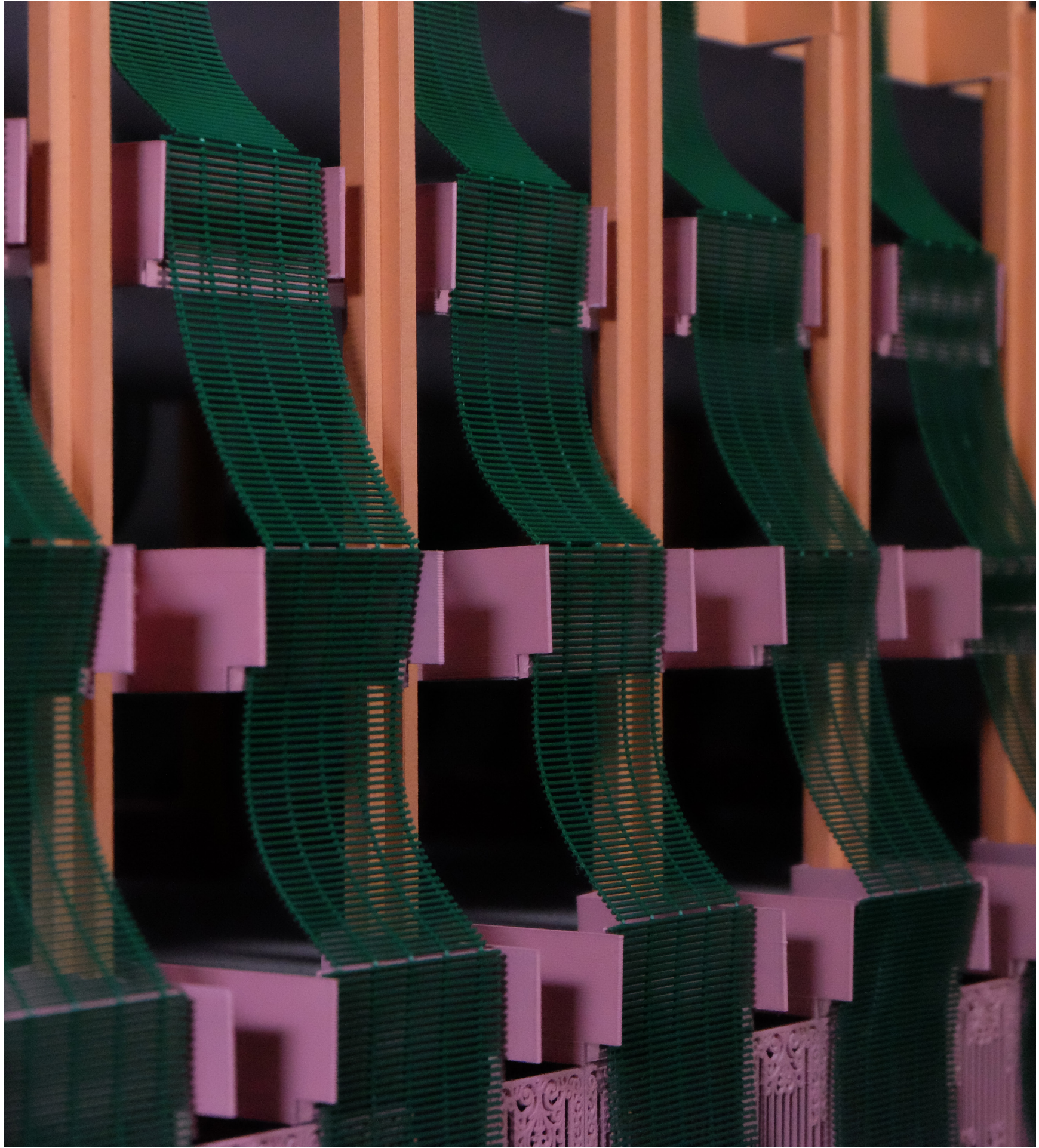


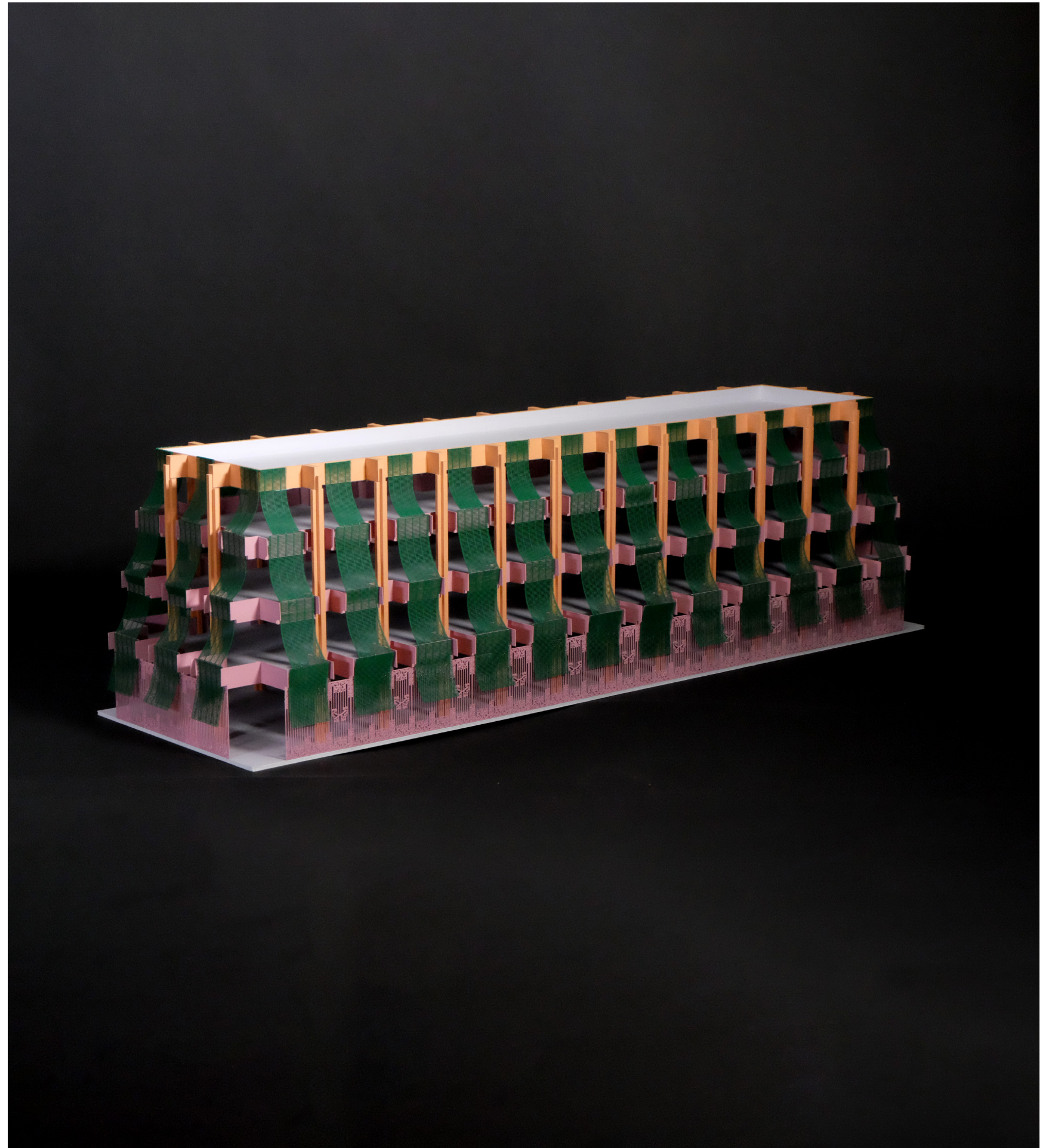
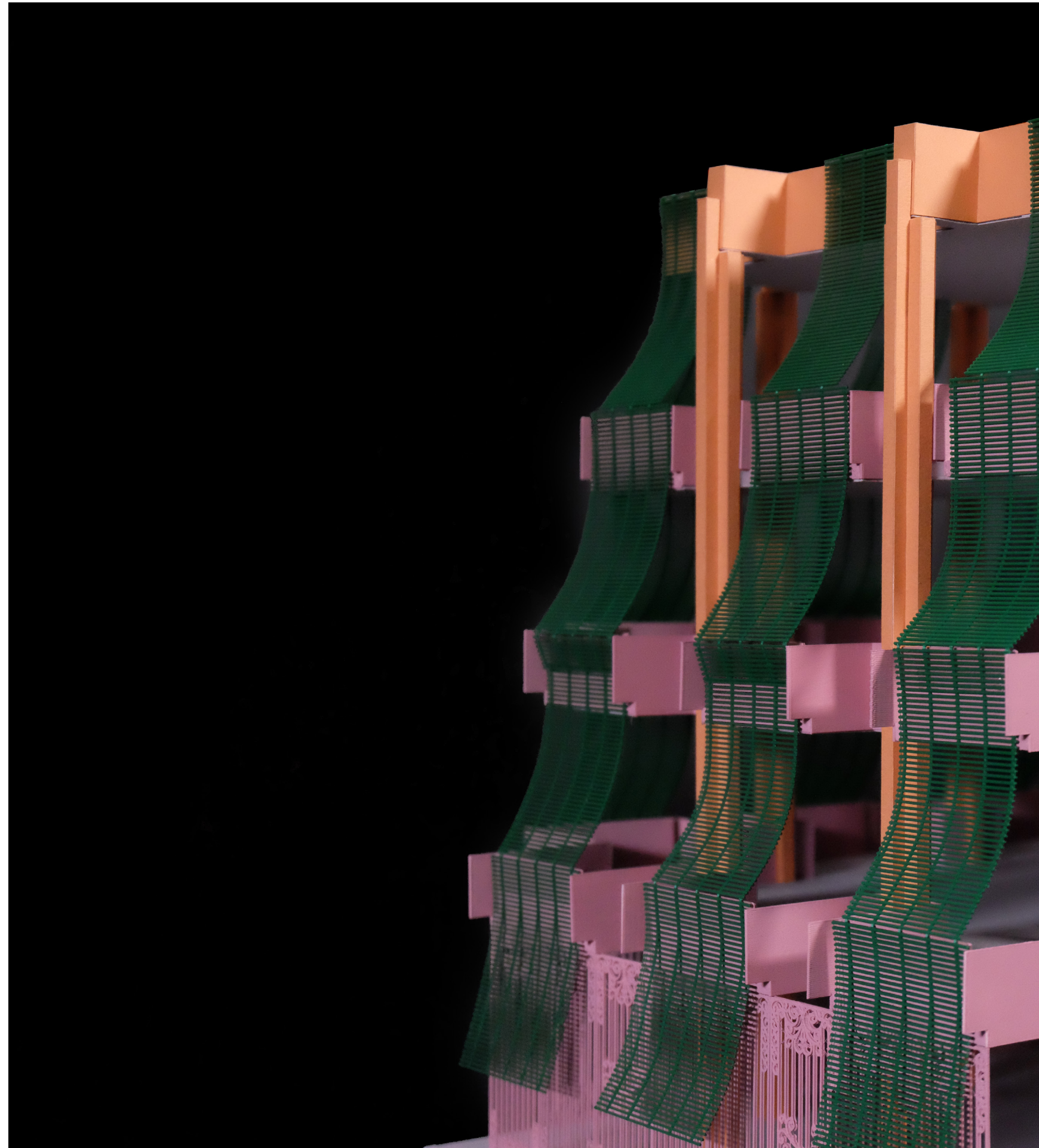


In Ampang, the green bamboo blinds functionally regenerate the chinese porcelain tiled roof.

The orange cruciform columns are derived from the rippling language in Hindu temple architecture, which also extends to the stepped profile of the building.

The columns shift from being the most expressed element of the building near the roof, to a recessed and ultimately completely interiorized member on the ground floor.



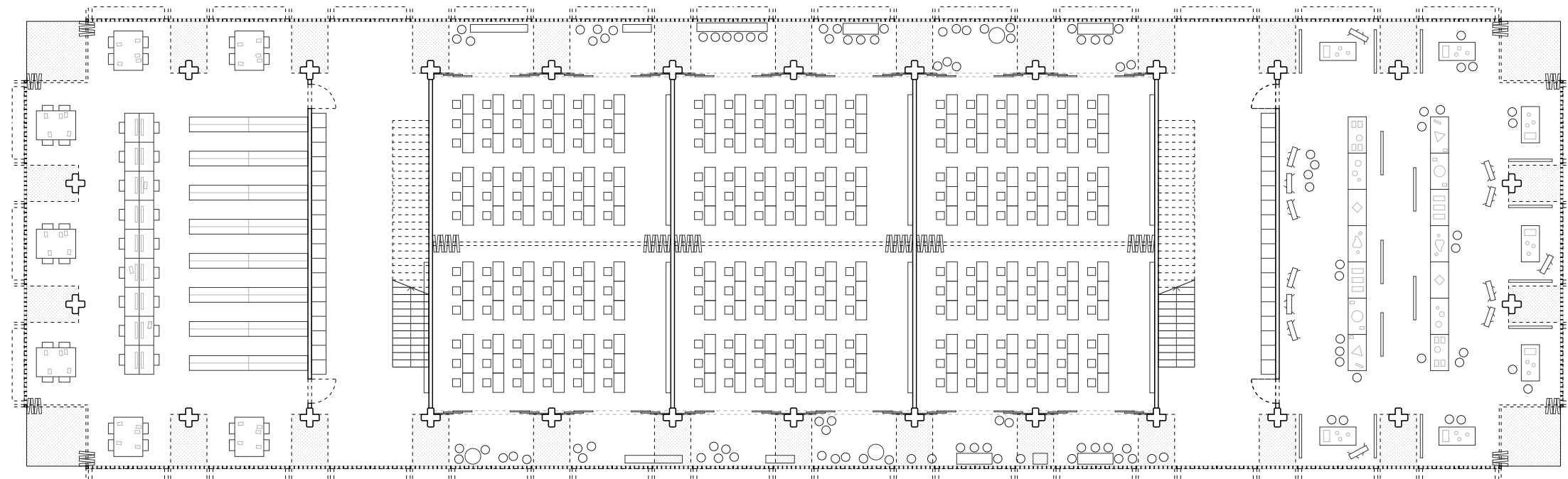


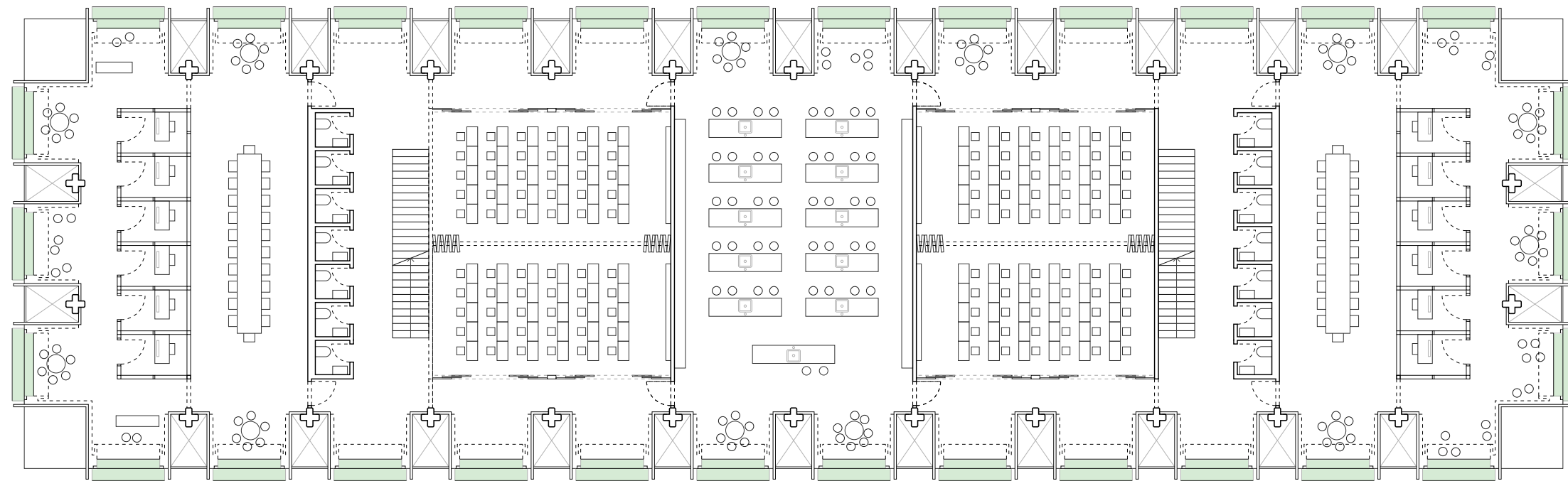
The ground floor subsumes the columns, which dictate the rhythm of the space and the classrooms. Users access the building from the four corners, and circulate around the outer perimeter of the columns, alternating between covered and uncovered space.

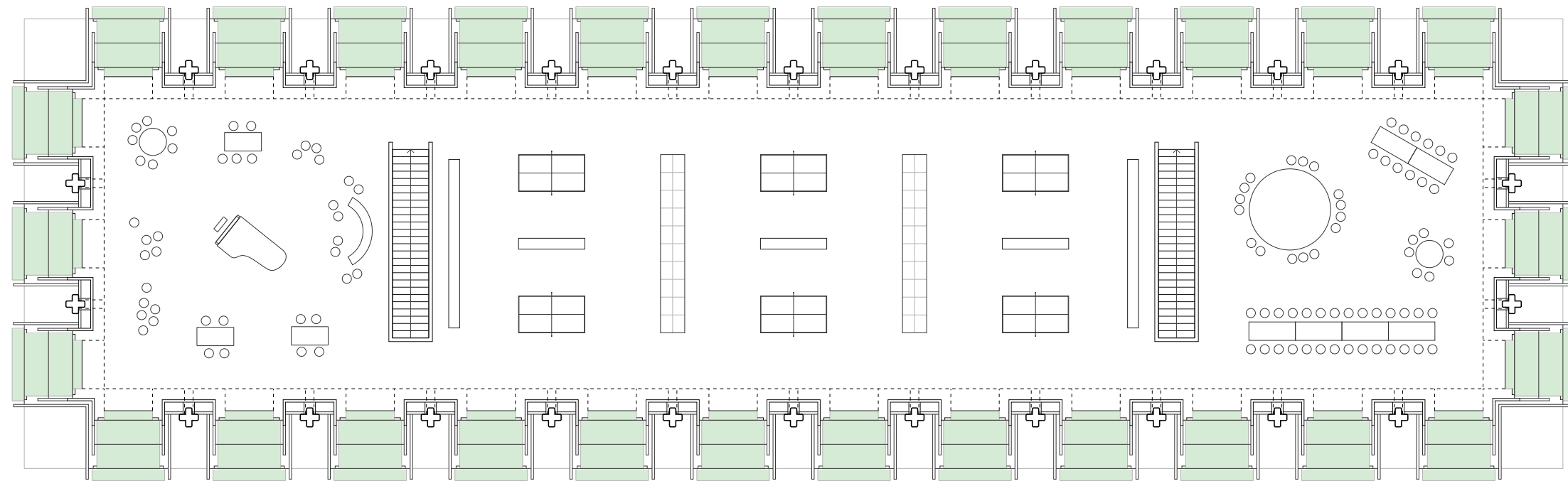
The balcony-like projections that run along the perimeter create new smaller scale spaces around classrooms: producing dedicated spaces of collectivity within the hallway.

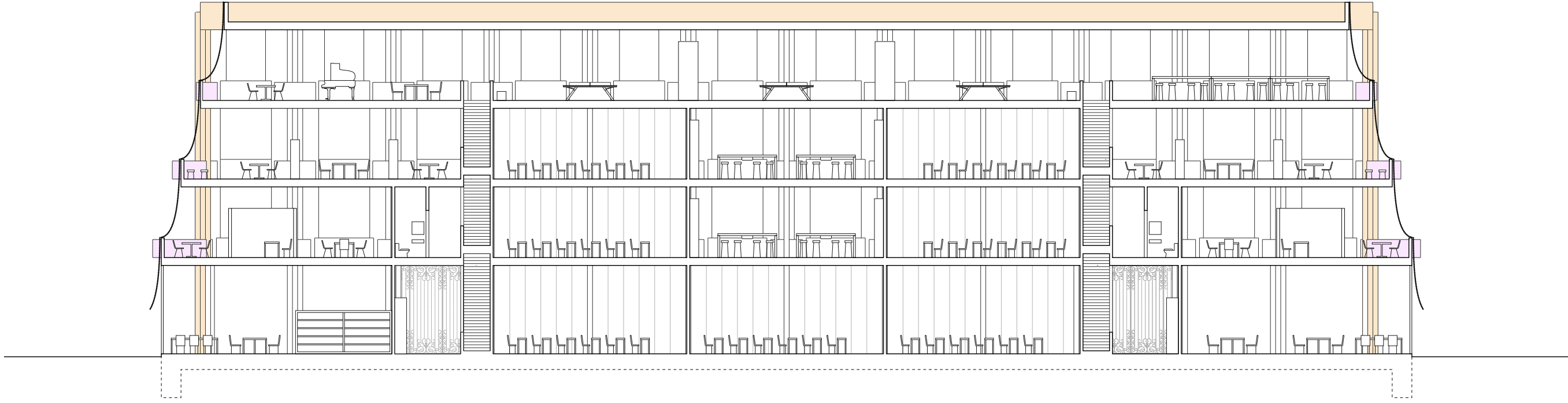
Conversely, within larger spaces, they act to scale down the collective, offering zones along the margin with more privacy and intimacy.

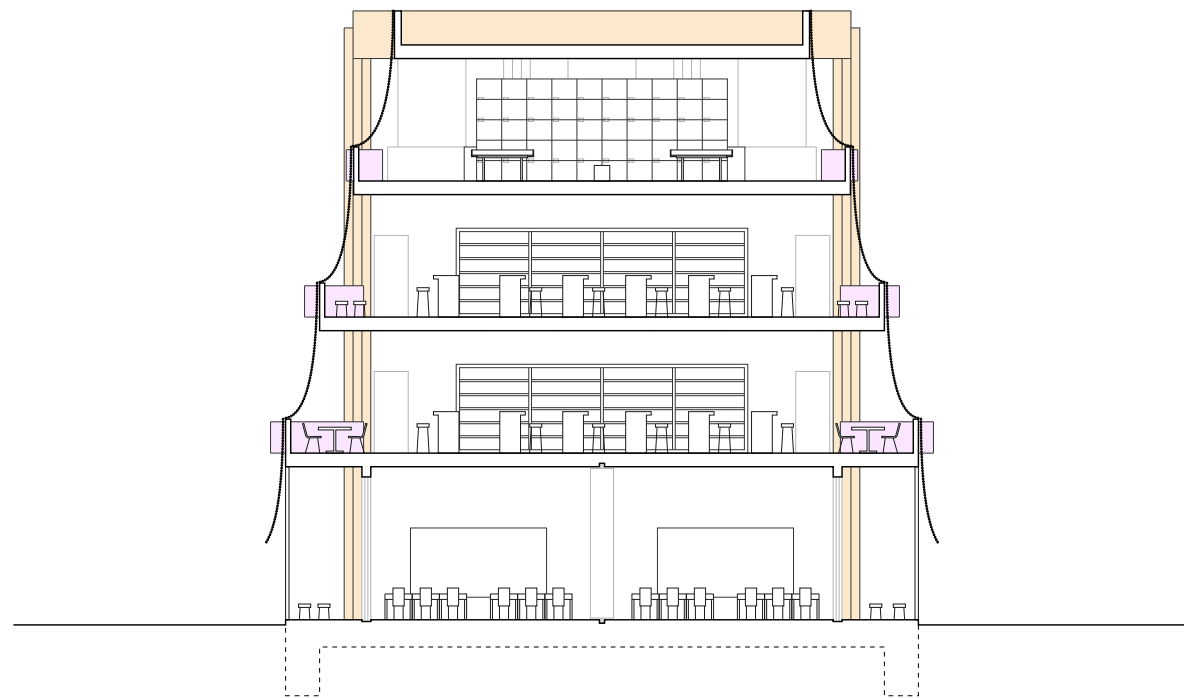
As the building steps up and contracts, the rigorous repetition of classrooms begins to dissolve, culminating in the largest collective spaces of art, music, and sport on the top floor, where the projecting balconies are shallowest in scale, and columns no longer punctuate the space.



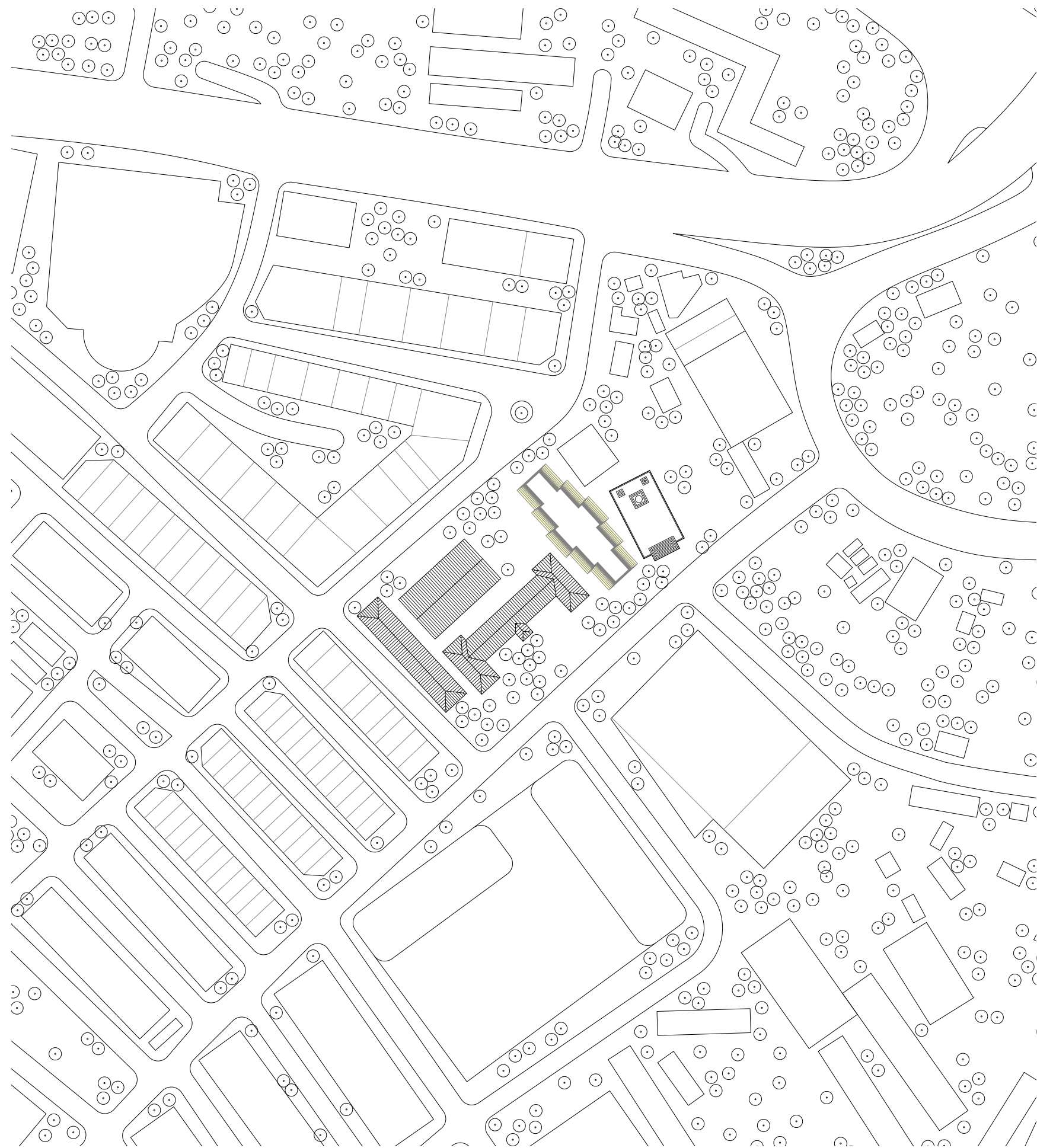








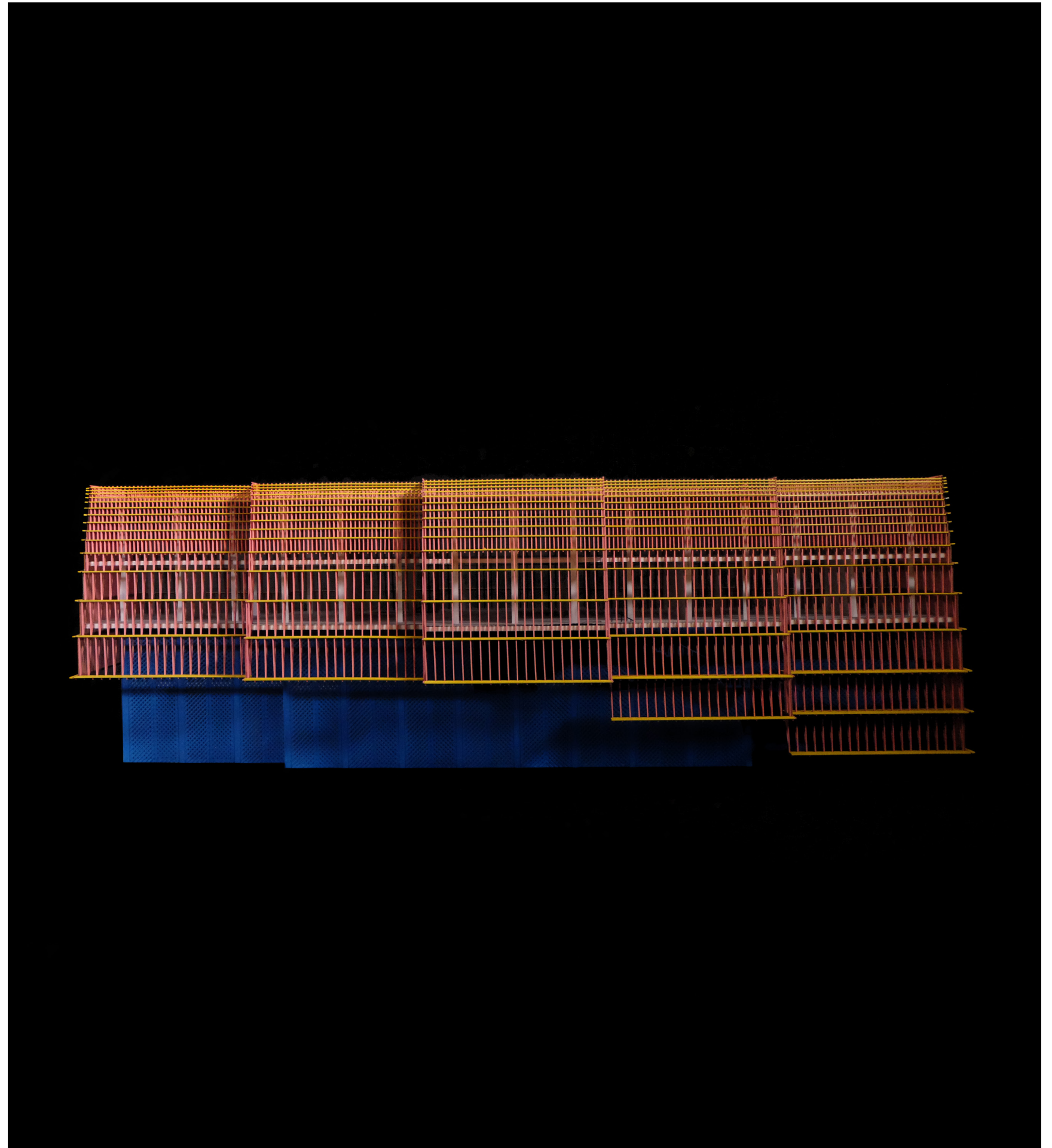
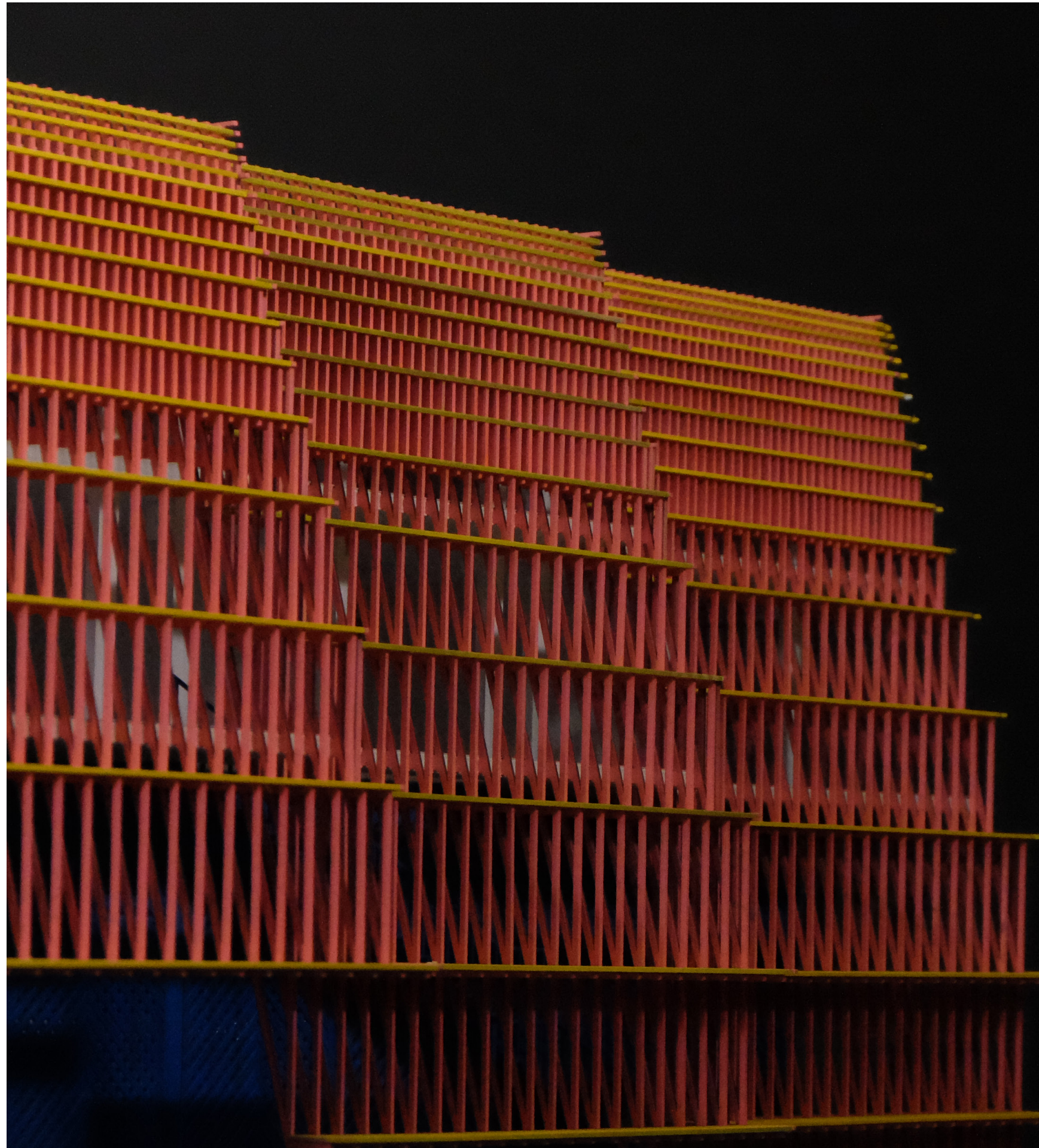


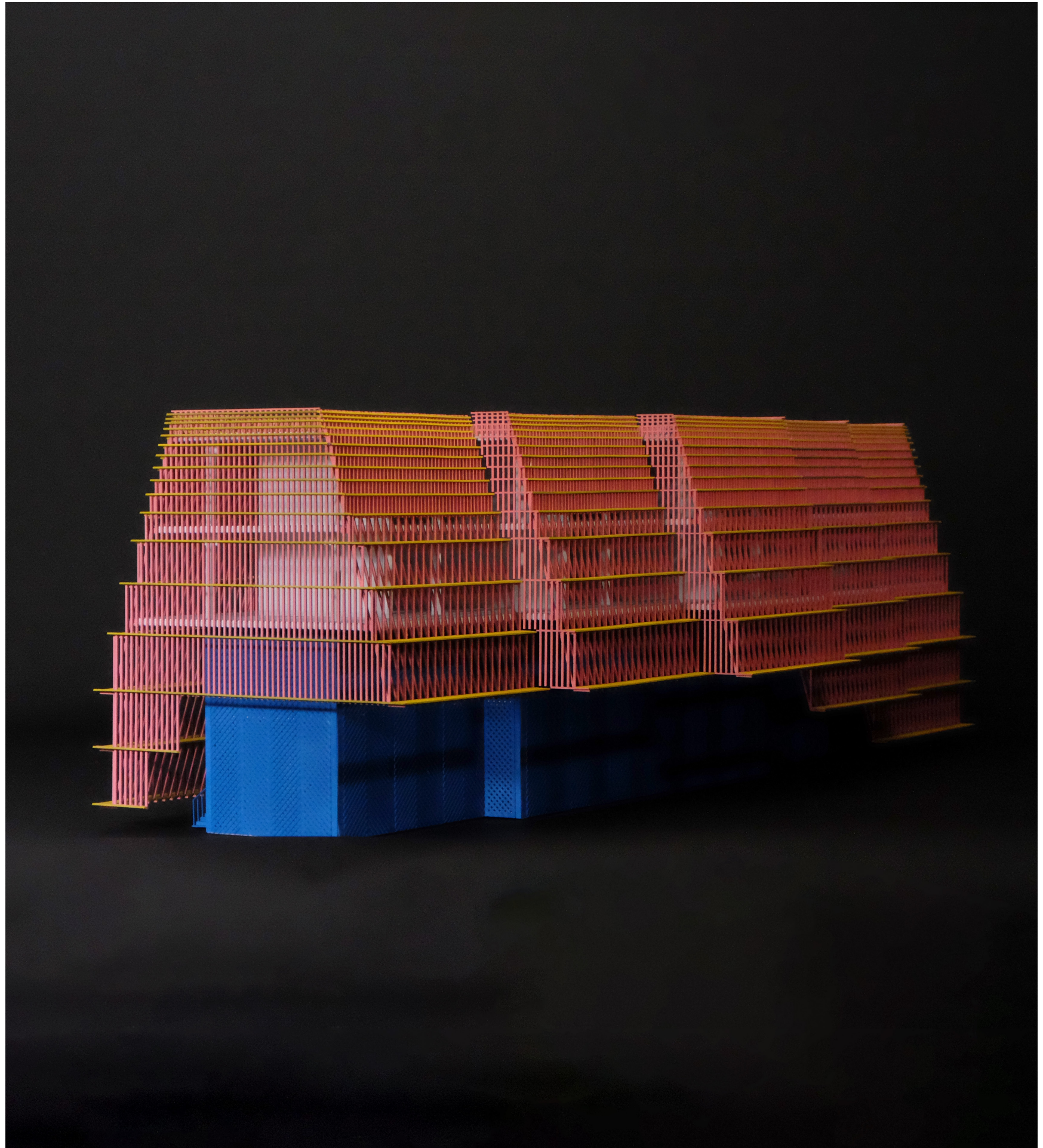
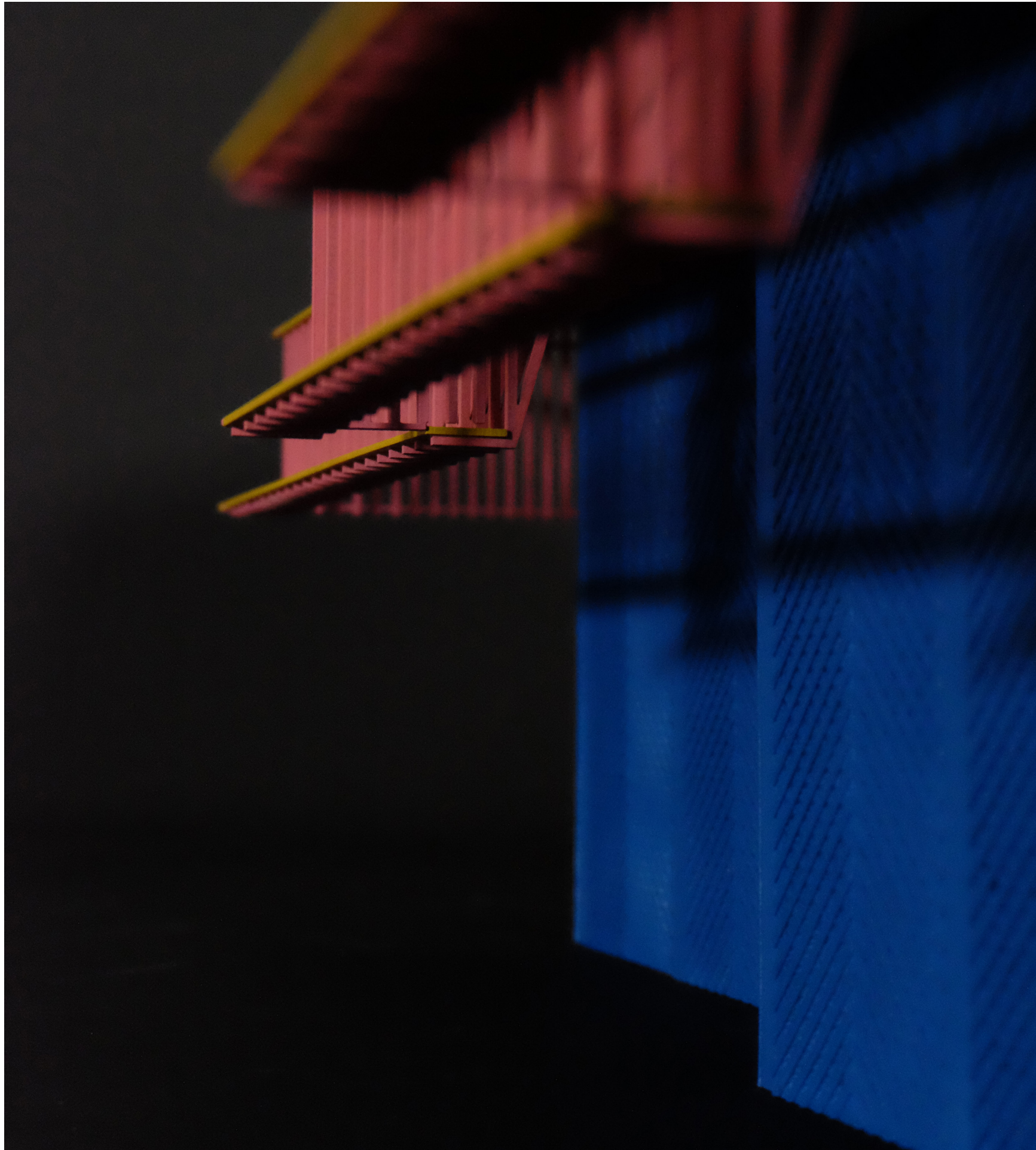


Just off the highway, the changing scale and density of the louvers evokes the figural density of the Sri Sithi Vinayagar Temple next door.

Stairs along the perimeter break the symmetry of the elevation and pull down the louvers to the zone of the ground floor.

The ground floor is given a generously tall series of blue timber panels, the crosshatched perforation pattern drawn from the screens in traditional Malay houses.

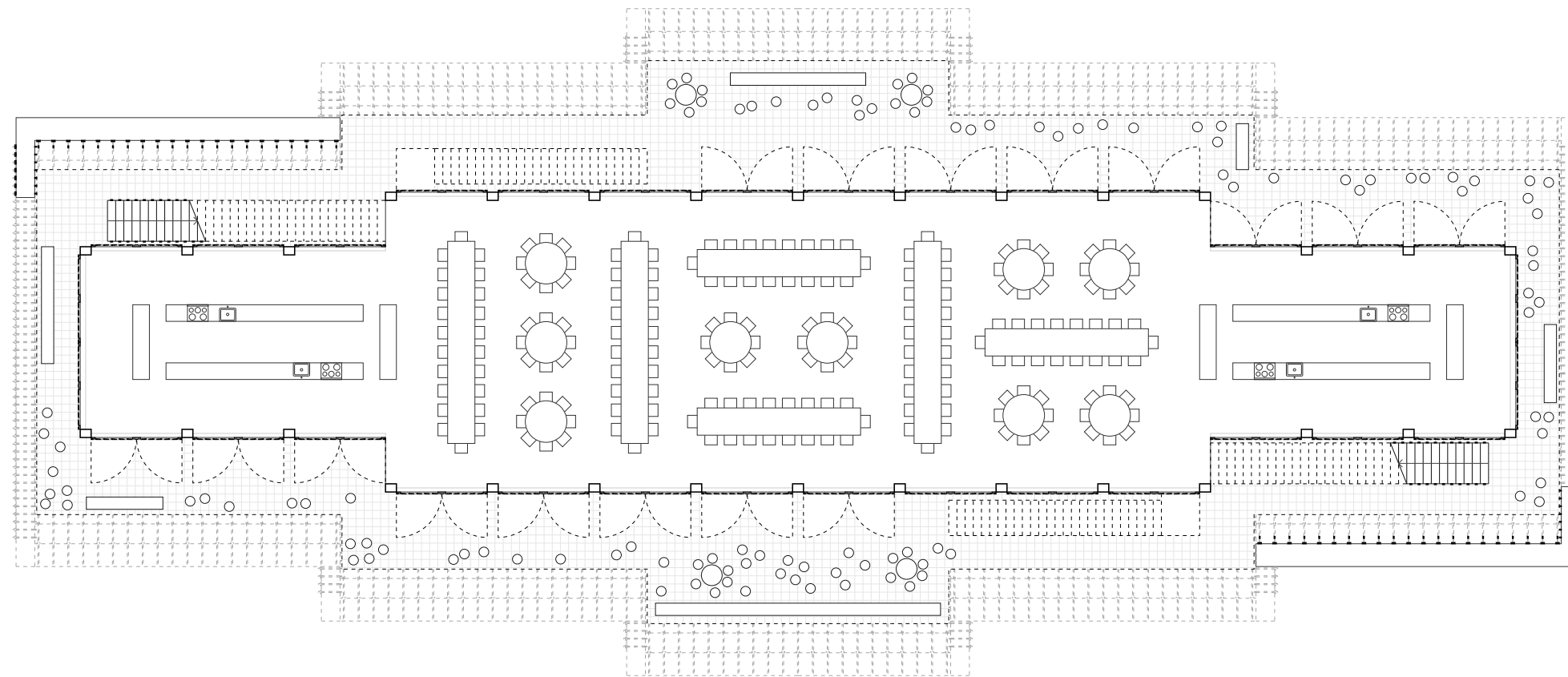


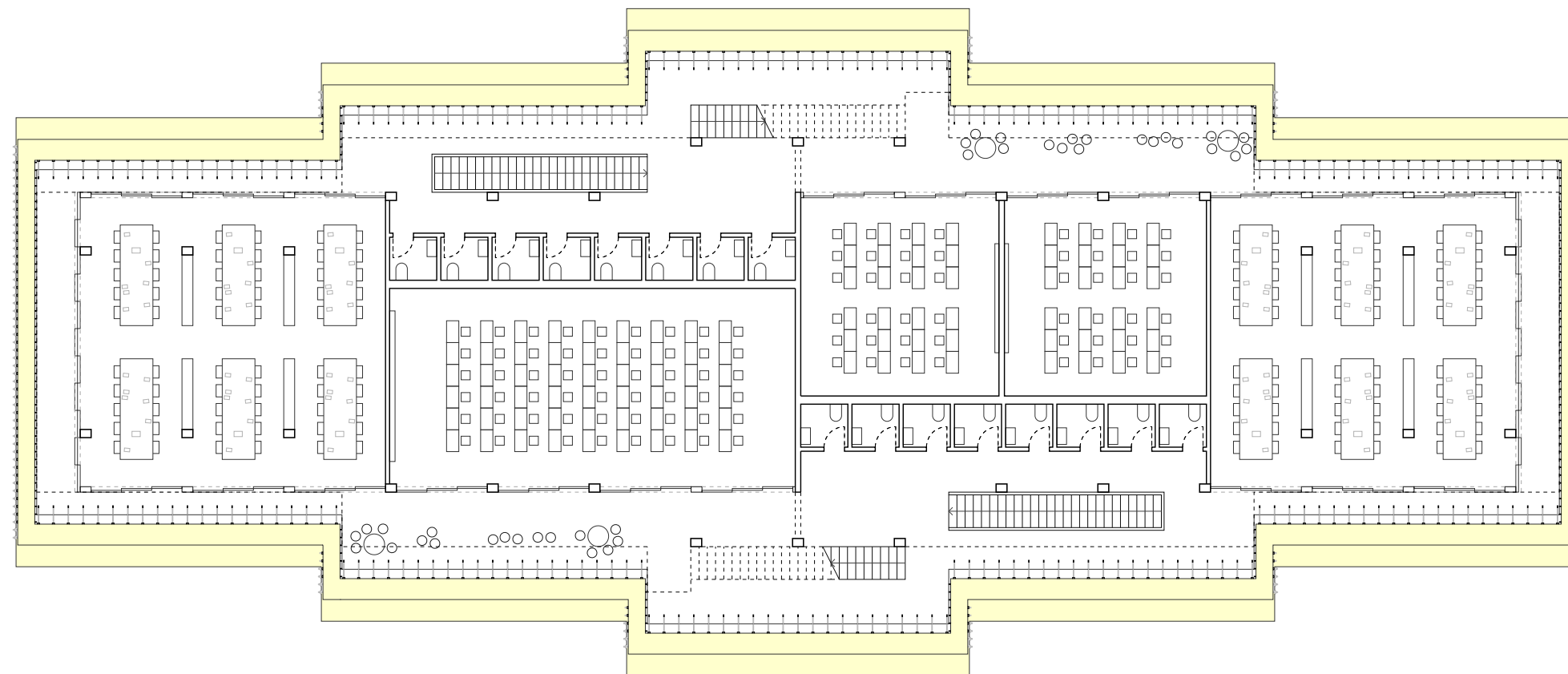


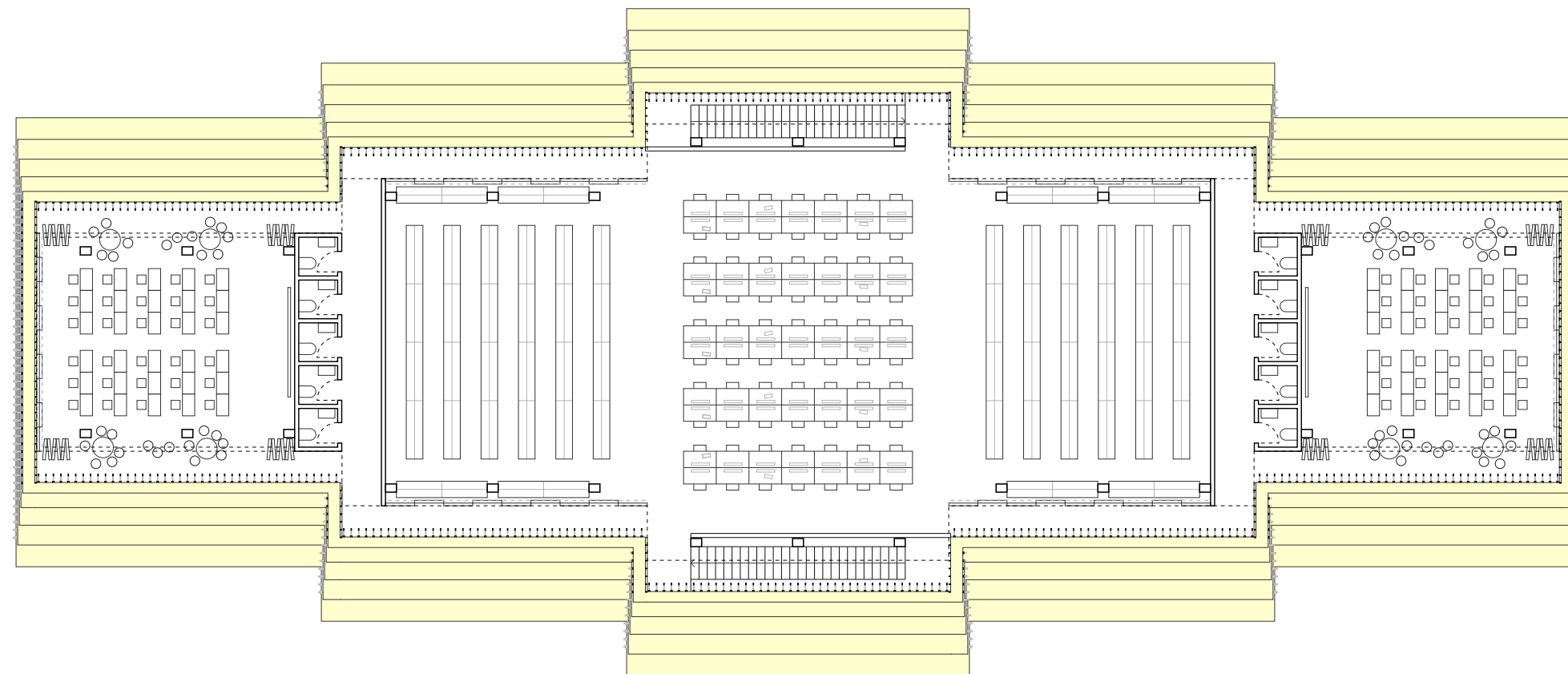
The ground floor houses a large cafeteria flanked by kitchens on either end. The interstice between the boundary fence and the operable walls of the cafeteria create a thick zone of collective activity and circulation at the ground level.

The space between the rooms and the façade contains a thick zone of circulation and collective activity.

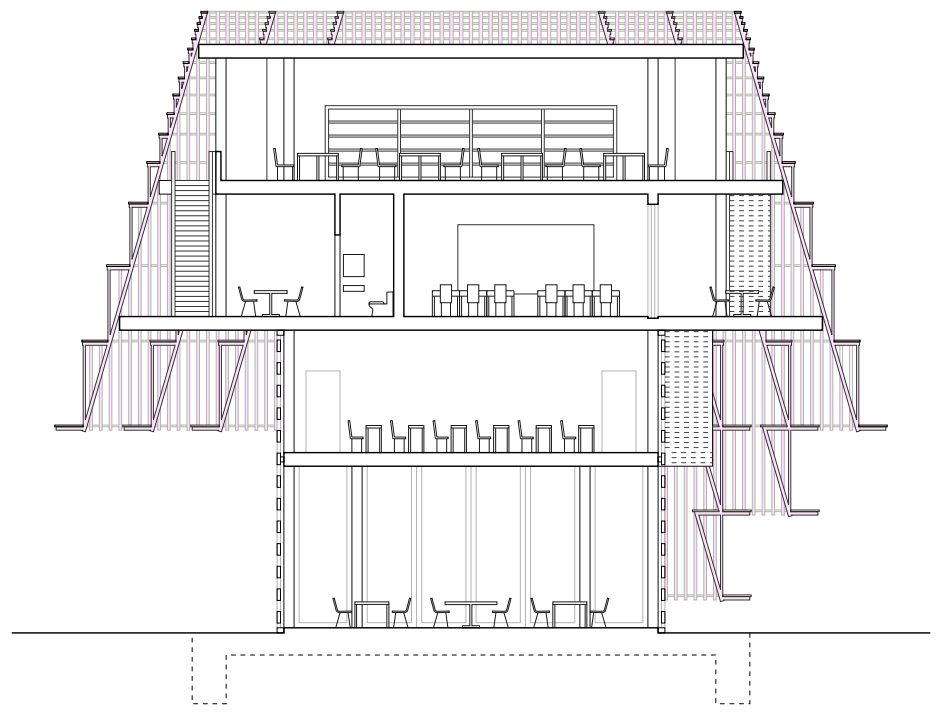
The figure of the plan steps and bulges to its greatest width at the center, producing on the top floor a reading room against the grain of the bar, flanked by bookstacks, and two classrooms at the ends.



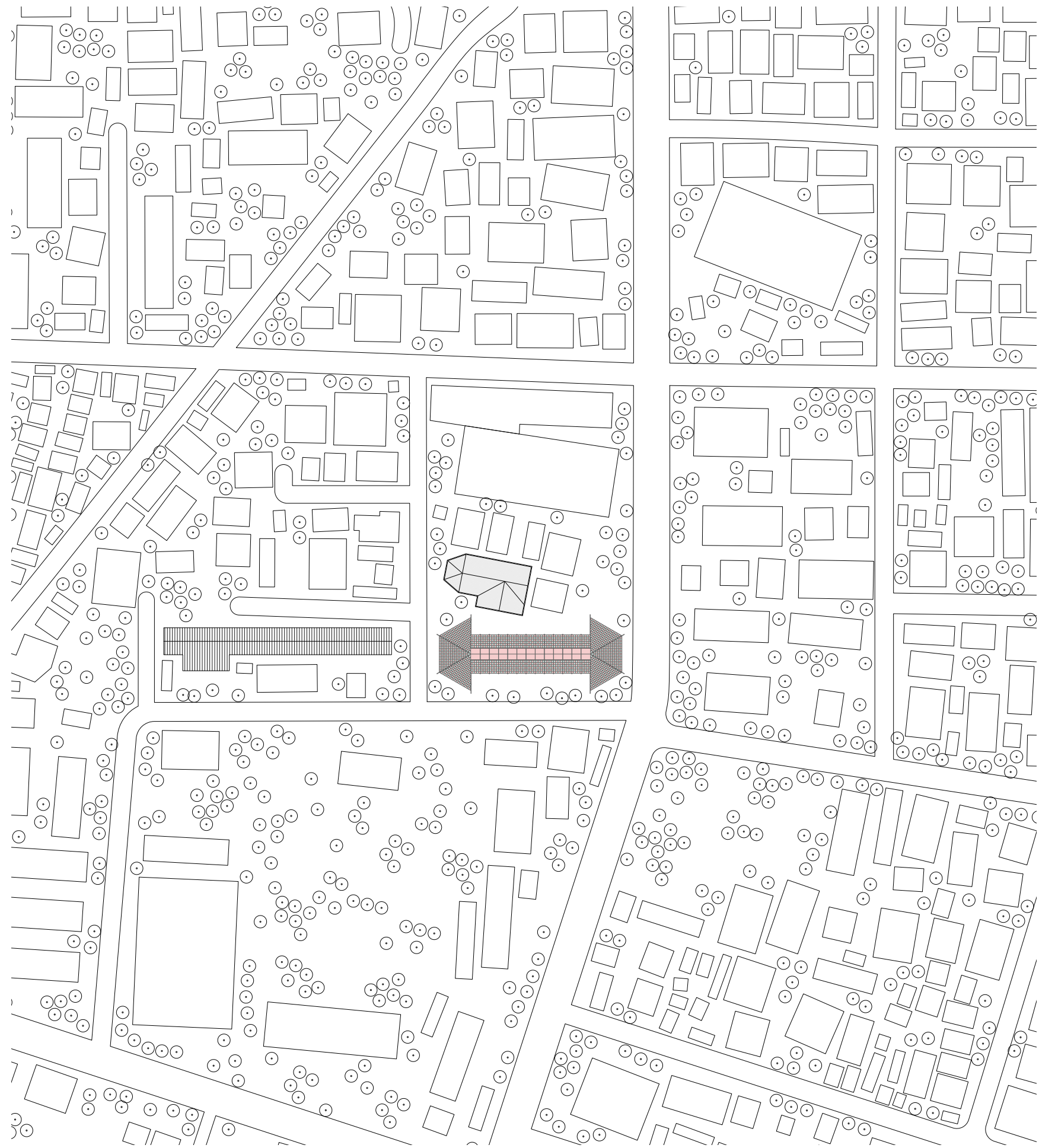








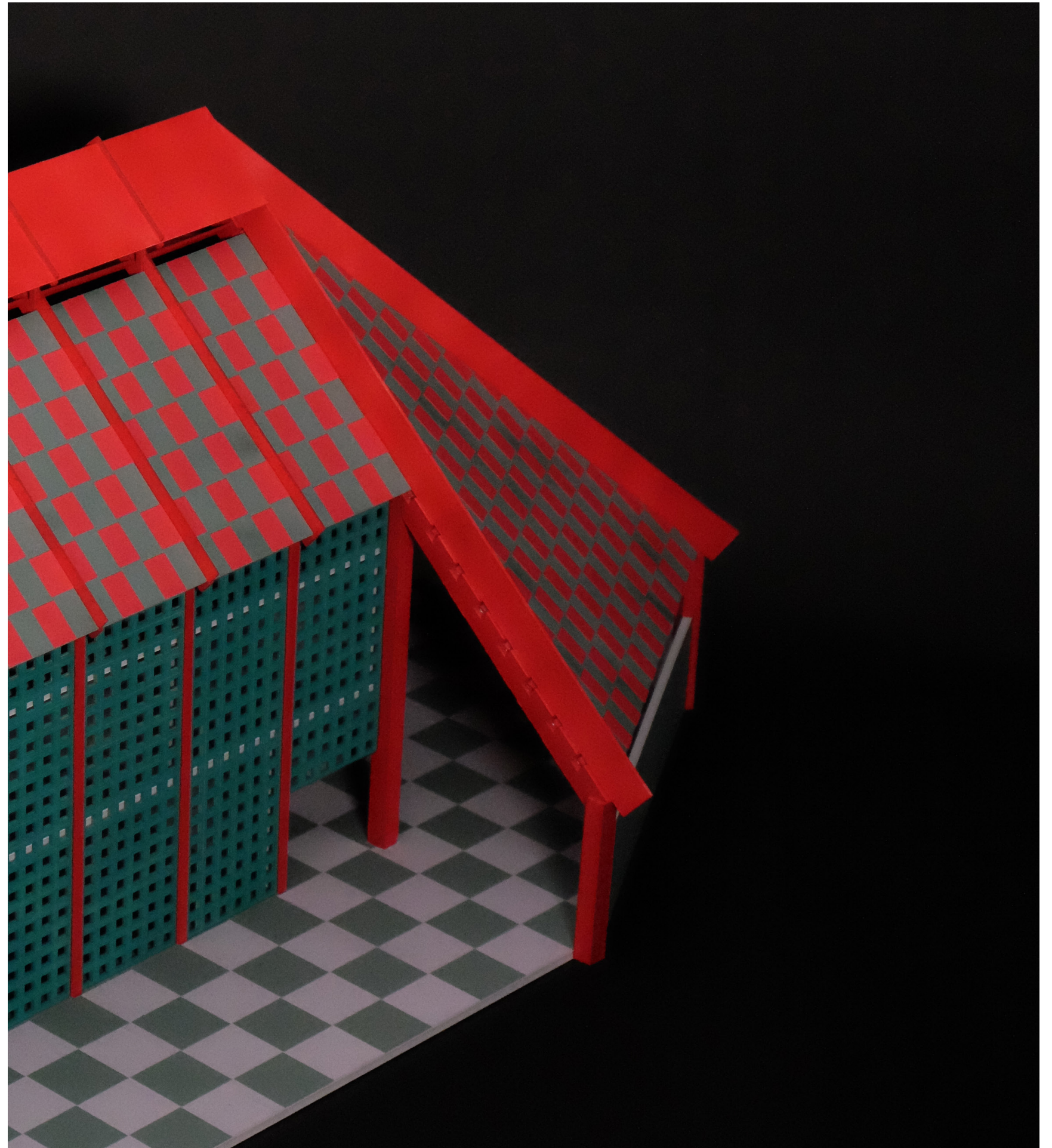


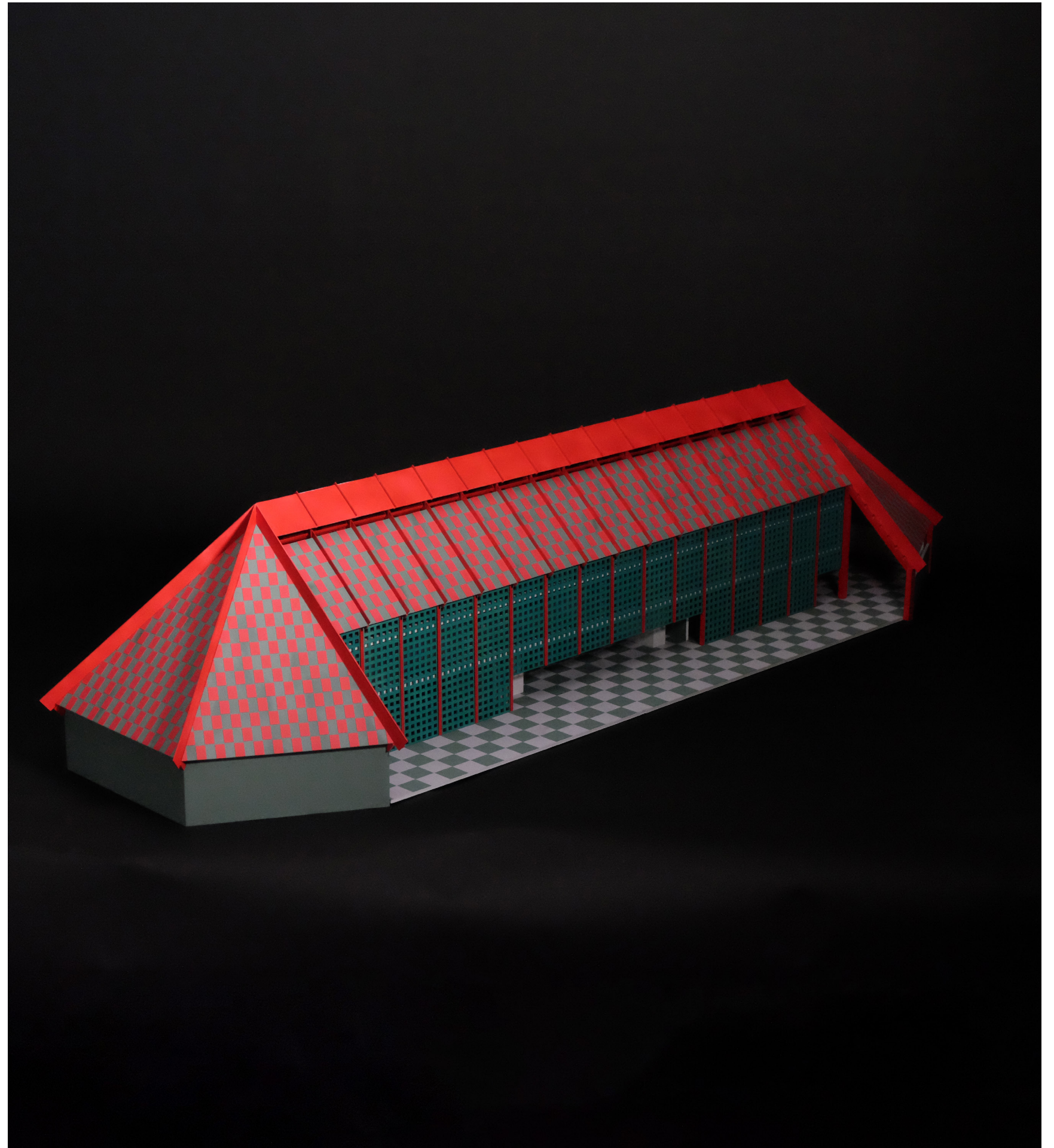
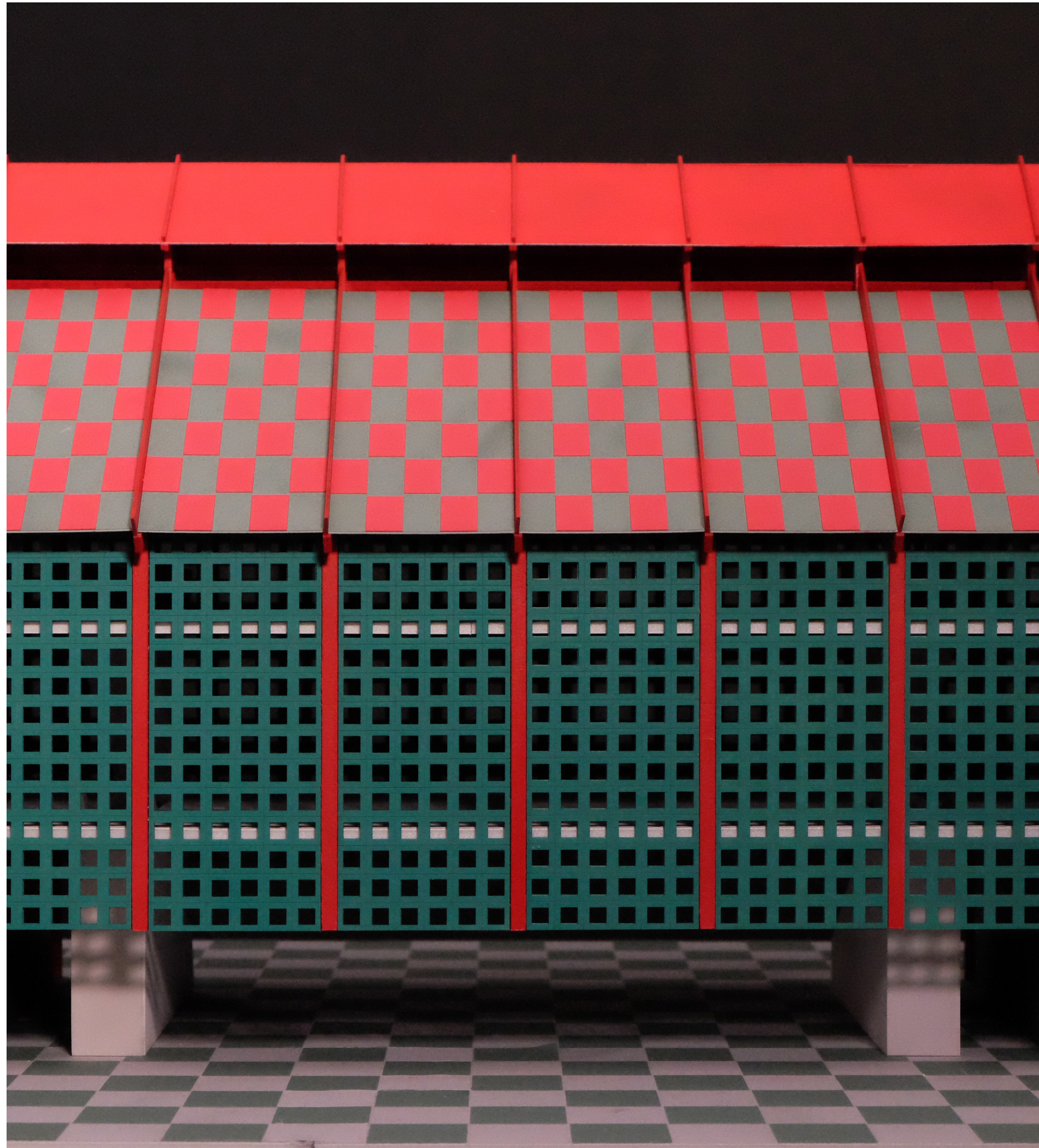


At Kampung Baru, the ubiquitous concrete breezeblock is dyed green and runs along the long elevation of the building.

The roofs evoke those of the Malay kampung house, scaled up to accommodate the program of the school.

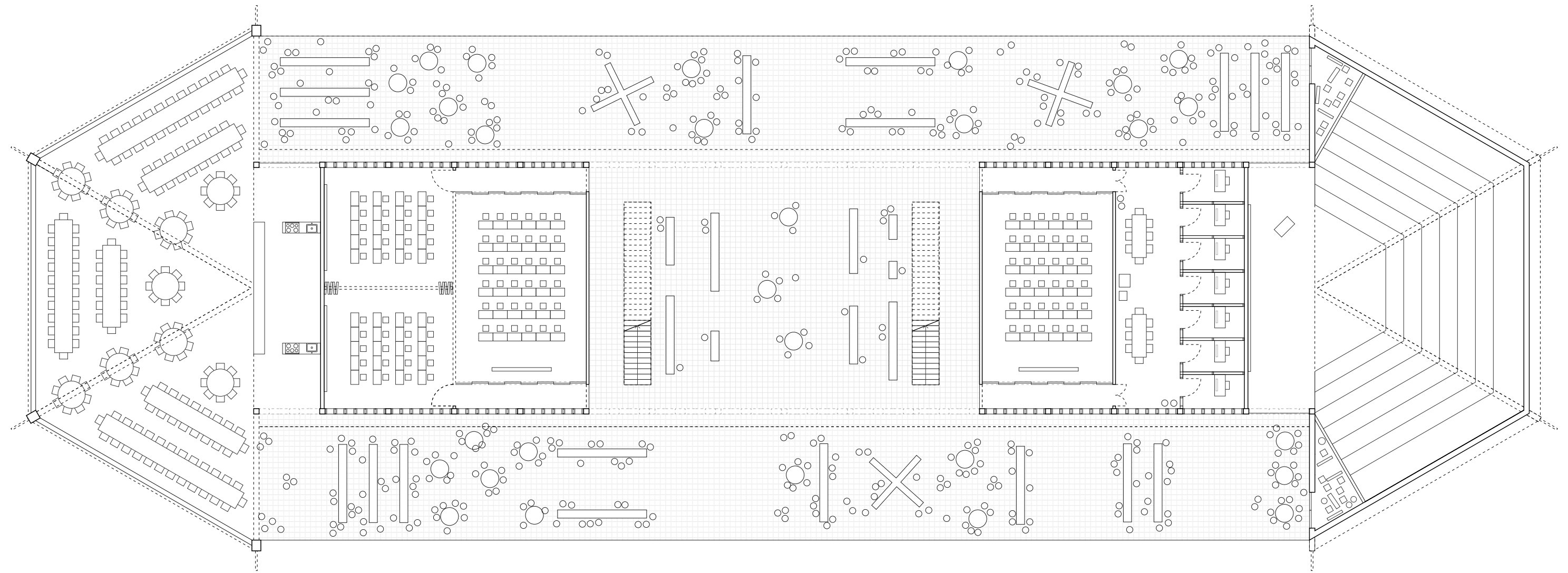
The red and green strongly reminiscent of colors of the Chinatown gate.

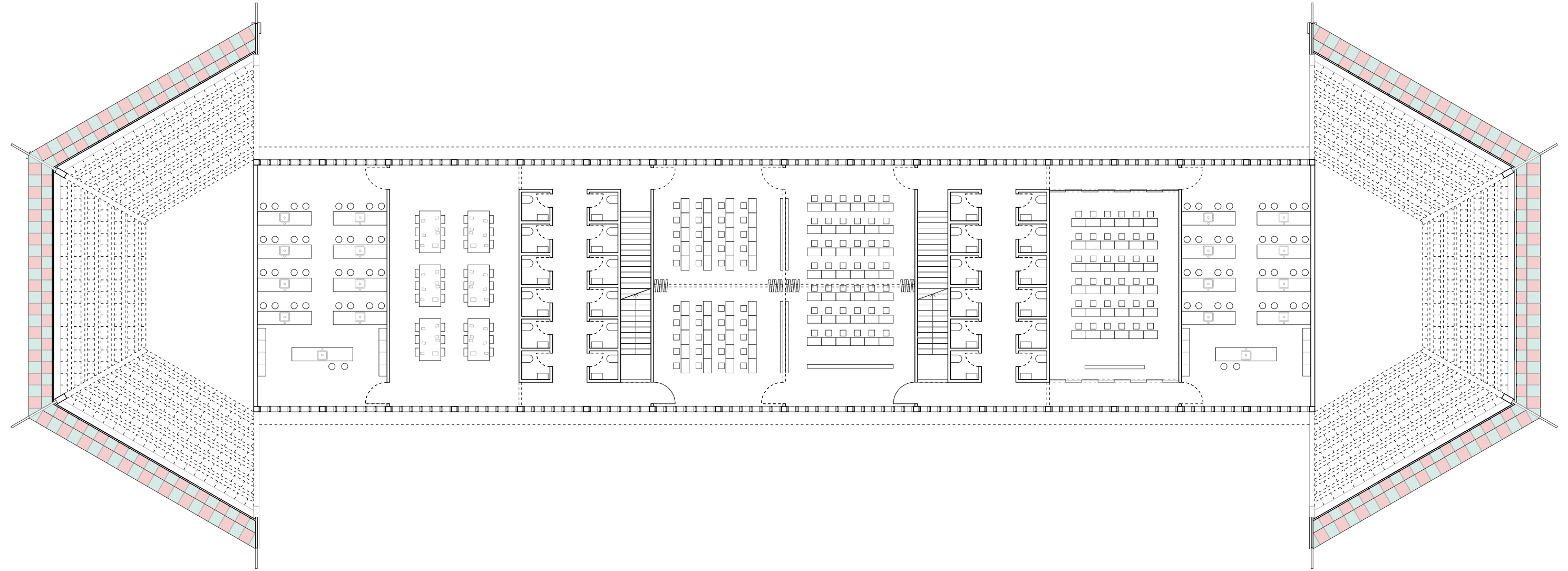


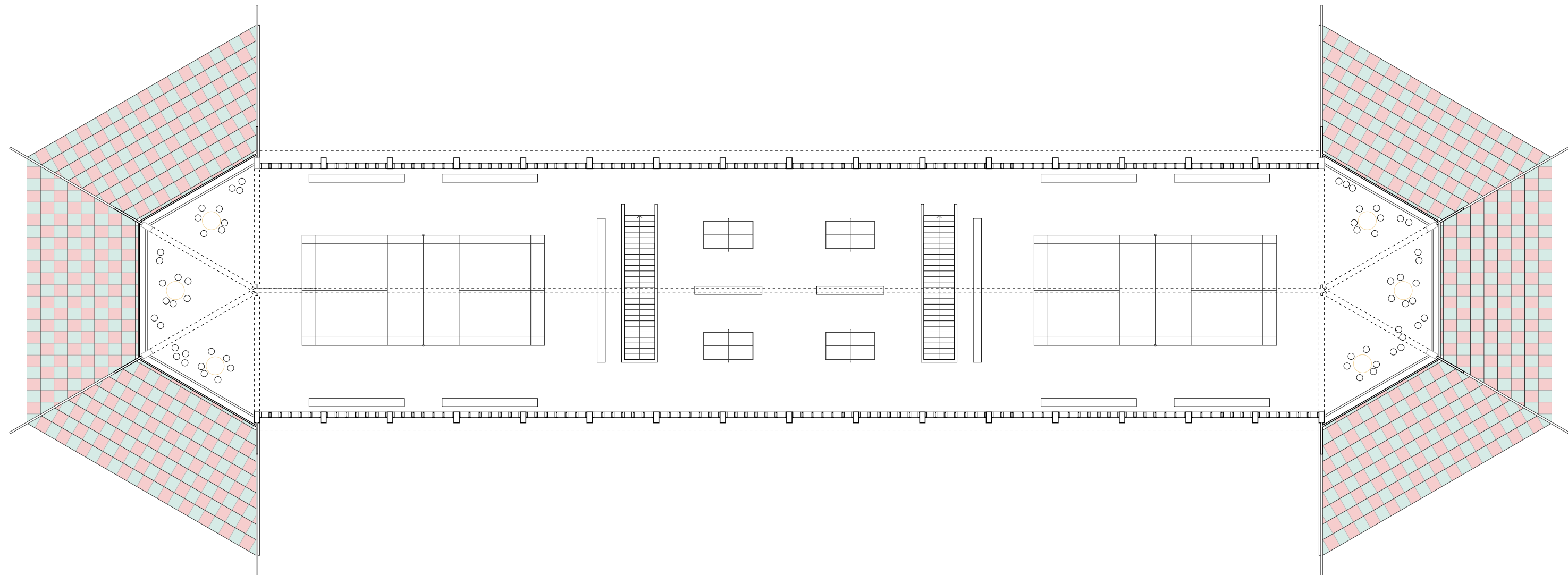


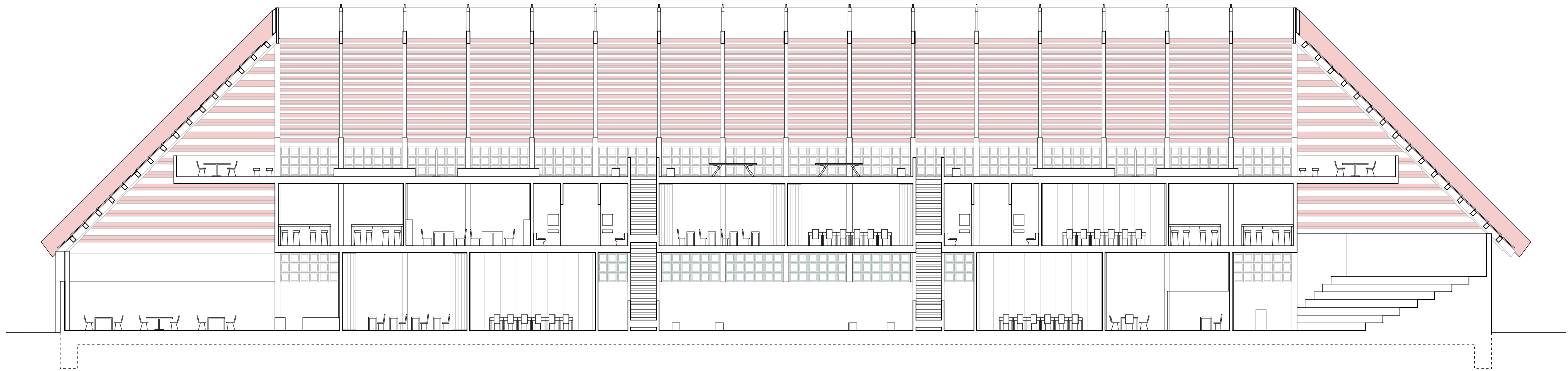
The two large endcaps contain an auditorium and a cafeteria on the ground floor. The exterior completely penetrates the center of the ground floor where the two primary staircases land.

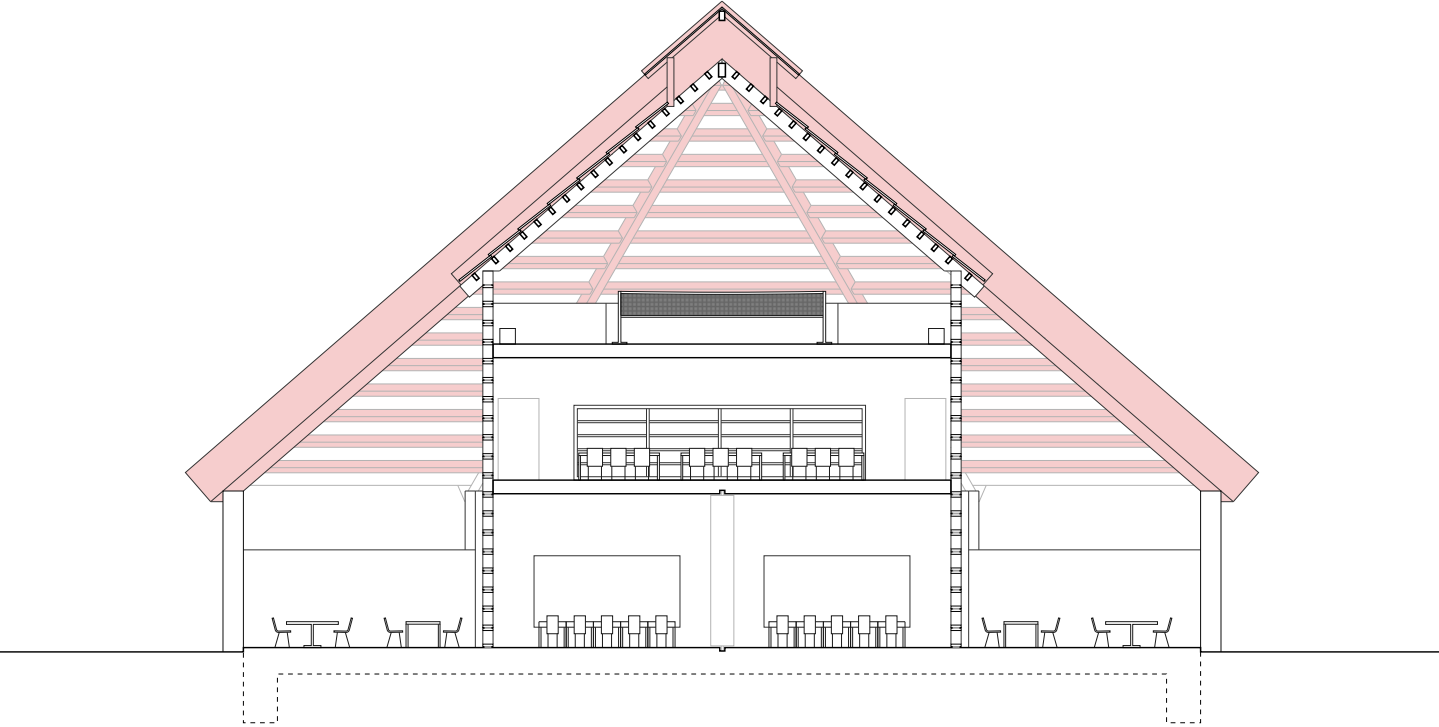
The intermediate floor contains a dense row of classrooms and the top floor becomes the largest and least prescribed collective space, absorbing the perimeter of the roof as part of the figure of the bar itself.



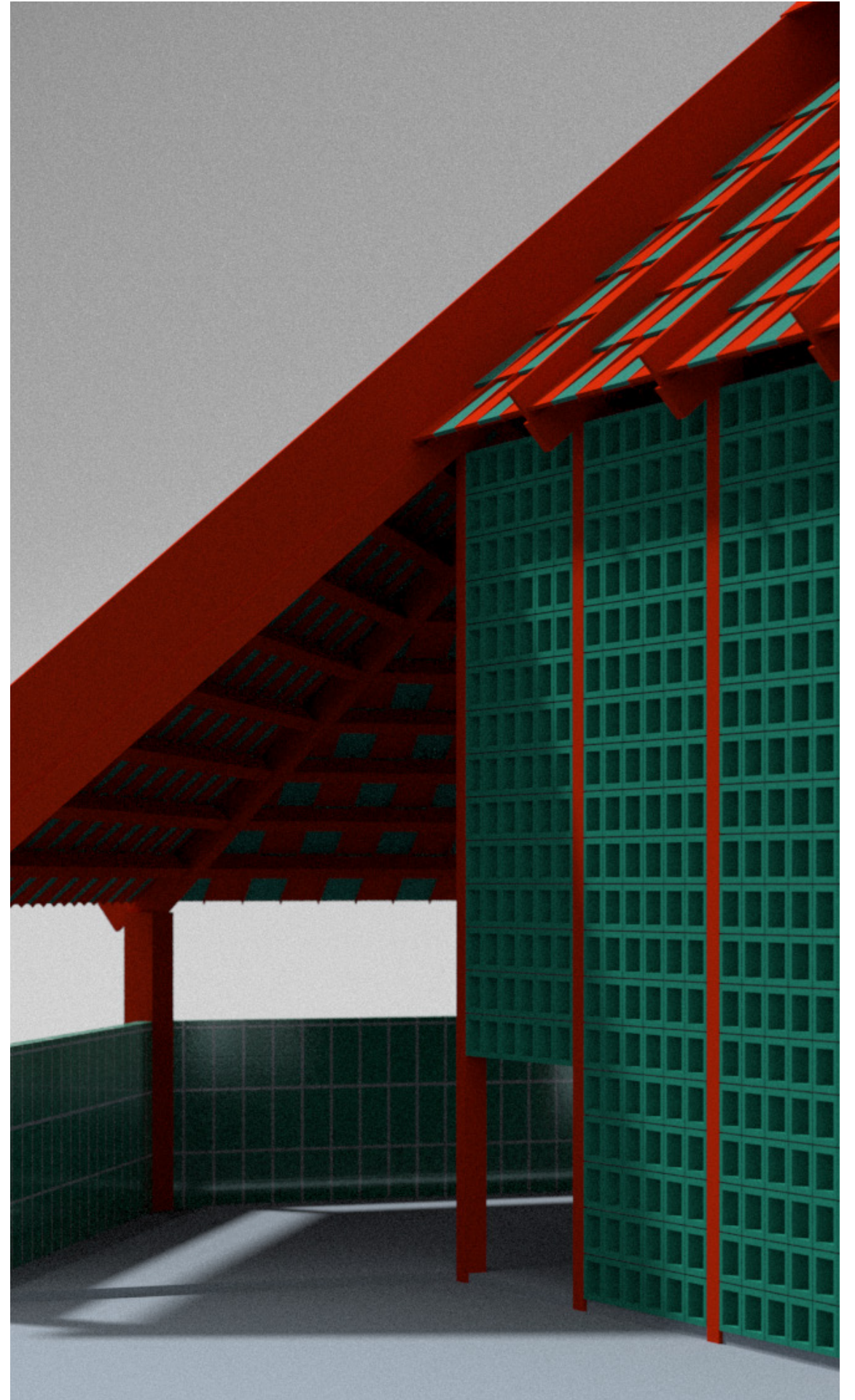
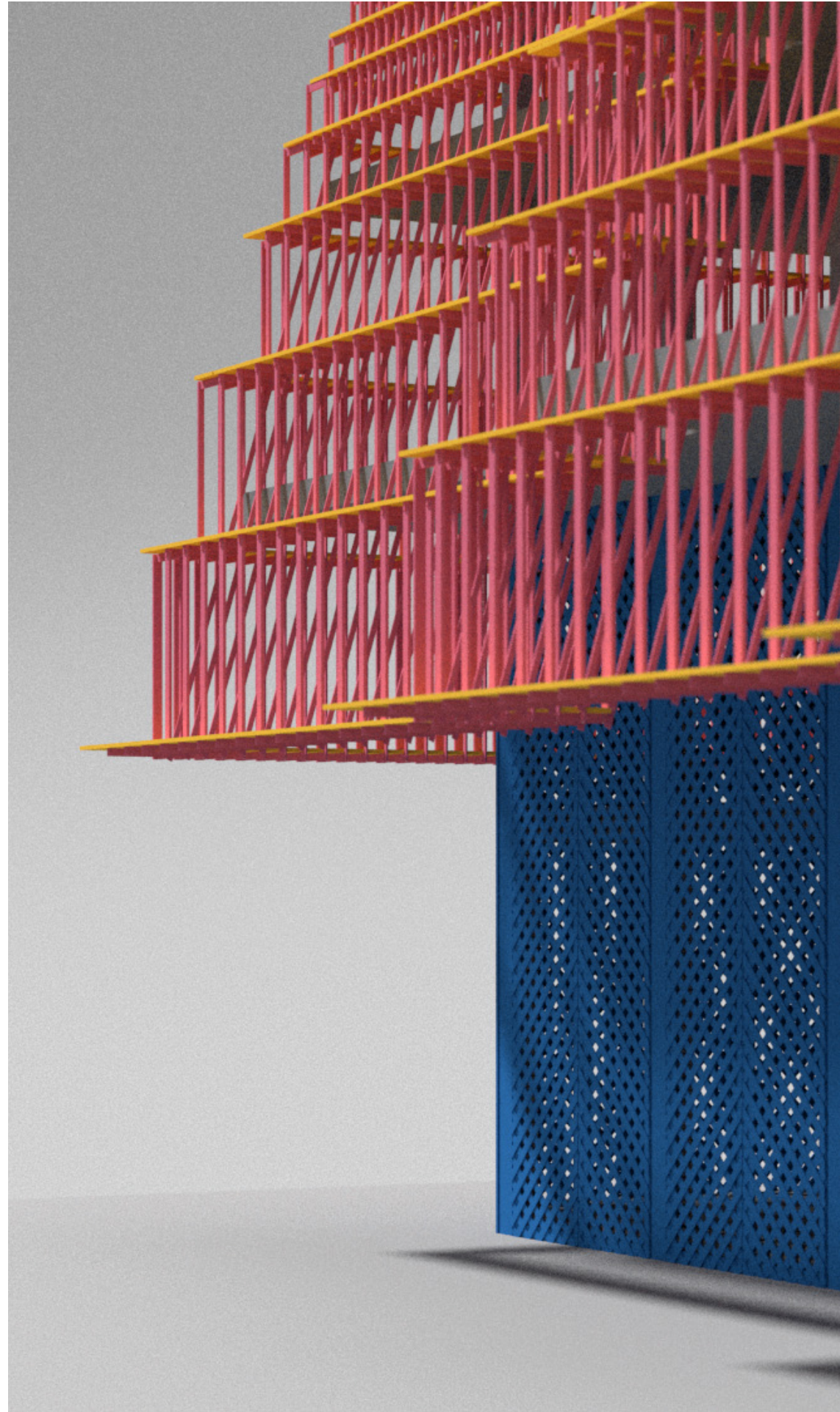
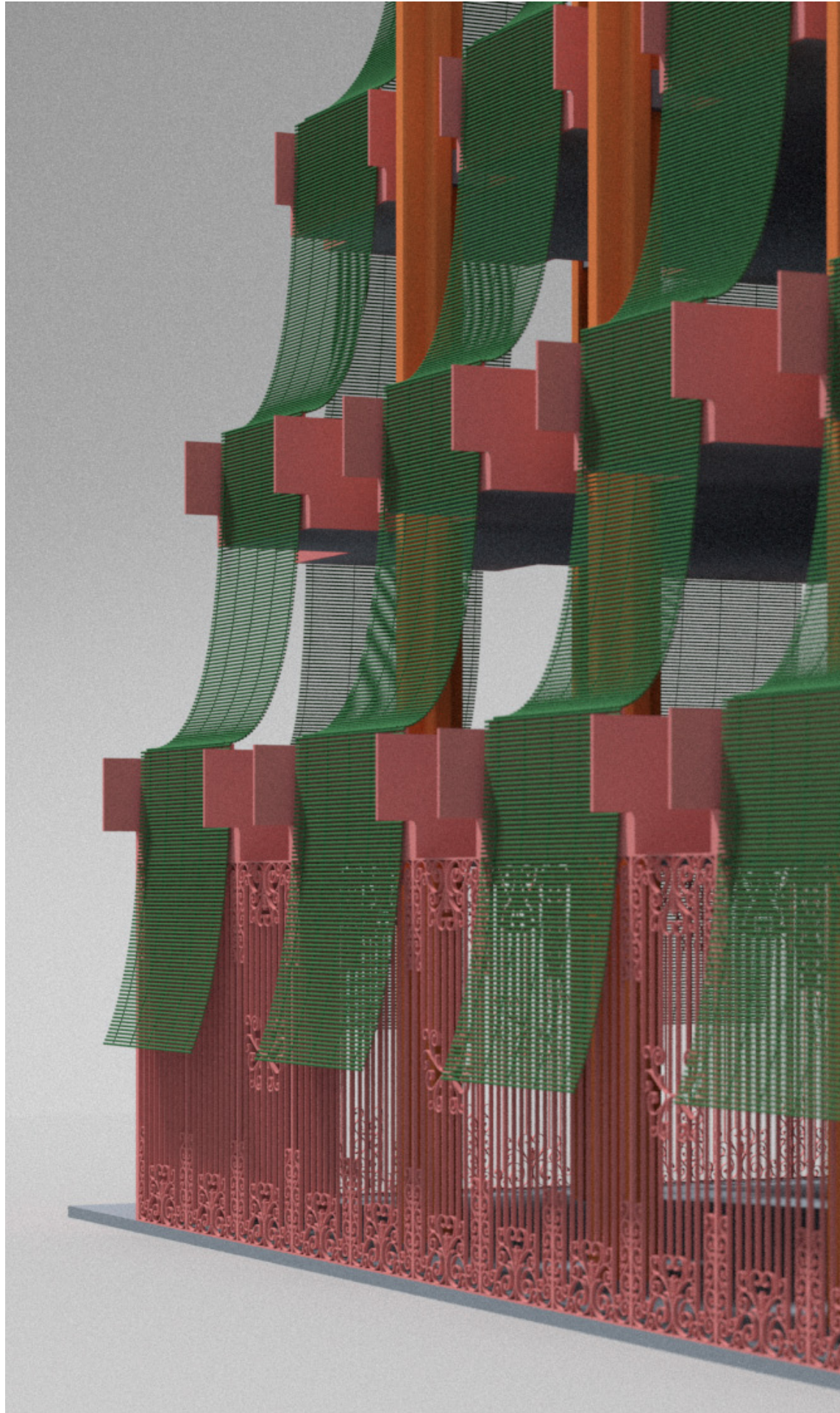












This thesis employs a system of formal production rooted in the context of iconographic architecture, that works as a receptacle for multiple constituencies, and generates outcomes that are sensitive to the urban context, beyond outward appearances.

Through their manipulation of the perimeter, their scaling of interior space, and reconfiguration of rooms, they disrupt the neutrality of the existing national schools and the assumptions of the pre-approved plans.

The operation, although represented as somewhat formulaic, is in equal part subjective and intuitive; it relies on an iterative process and is largely guided by instinct and an intimate familiarity with the local context.

The resulting buildings mask the process of calibrating the tension between different referents and the ability to do so without producing a dominant singular image.

It is the means to a new end: a non-neutral, intrinsic model of a plural architectural identity.

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