

Skyscrapers of the Dead:

A Post-Critical solution for dead Modernism

By Urban Operations



Urban Operations
2820 North Main Street
Los Angeles, CA. 90031





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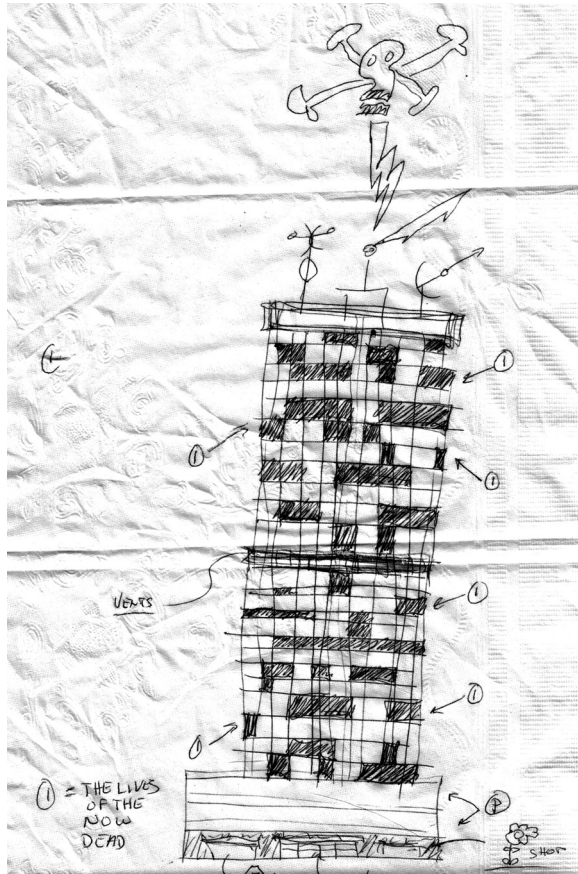
**Urban Operations Studio
817 Silverlake Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA
90026**

**t)323.644.1415
f)323.644.1814**

info@urbanops.org / www.urbanops.org

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Project Team: John Southern & Michael Manalo



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Preface:

This pamphlet is the first of its type produced by the content studio, Urban Operations. The studio was founded in 2002 and seeks to enhance the dialogue between the designer and the built world that surrounds them. It is our belief that as architects one cannot simply rely on built projects for the healthy growth of a studio. Furthermore, in a world increasingly given over to a culture of affect and commercially influenced malaise, the impact of design on the built environment is constantly running the risk of becoming obsolete. Though the office has been grounded as of late in the making of buildings, we feel it is necessary to explore other avenues. Our challenge is to produce two pamphlets per year and also extend invitations to other artists and designers in order formulate collaborations on new pamphlets that would also be produced through Urban Operations.

In 2005 an organization called eVolo proposed a competition requesting new ideas for the skyscraper typology. The office was at first intrigued, then suspicious of the competitions goals. Why? We asked would anyone want to propose a competition focused on such an arcane architectural typology? Even prior to the events of September 11, 2001 verticality had been rendered a corpse by a late 20th Century shift to dispersed, horizontal networks. The skyscraper had been left to the bombastic Sheiks of Dubai and the irrational, capital-infused desires of the Asian super-rich. The more we thought about the competition brief, the more we found it to be a fantastical proposition and one that was ripe for critique.

The Wilshire Boulevard skyscraper typology came out of a prior fascination for the corridor- a six lane auto-fest stretching from Downtown LA to the Pacific Ocean and one that had been a breeding ground for eccentric architectures since it's inception in the early 20th Century. What drew us to the Wilshire Skyscrapers as a typology was their continuity, in that most had been designed around the same time and contained many of the same features- roughly about 25-30 stories with a parking skirt above an equally opaque lobby on the street level. The facades are predictably dull, and are truncated attempts to replicate the Lever House- a New York icon of Mid-Century Modernism designed by Skidmore Owings Merrill, and completed in 1952. At its pinnacle the typical Wilshire Skyscraper is traditionally capped with an oversized penthouse, clogged with mostly obsolete, microwave-based telecommunications systems. One Sunday in November, we drove from Downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica to confirm our suspicions, we were instantly convinced we'd found our protagonist for study, and thus the Skyscraper of Death was born.

-John Southern, Urban Operations, 2006.



Introduction:

The Future of the American Skyscraper?

The American skyscraper occupied a critical position in the history of 20th Century architecture. A product of the last evolution of industrialization and a hyper-densification of urbanism, the skyscraper became a uniquely modern expression of architectural prowess and corporate power. The quest for the 'tallest building in the world' became a rallying goal for the joint interests of corporate identity and economic power, fueled by the increasing cost of real estate in the rapidly growing cities of the United States. The skyscraper further transcended merely representing corporate power and size, but actually began to exercise a formal control over the urban environment itself, extending the notion of the office as metropolis. The post World War II development of New York and Chicago were particularly wedded to the use of this type in order to develop capital and business within the city, as well as to seek a national and even international business presence through the typology's iconographic power. The cities themselves found each other embroiled in a race with each to produce ever taller buildings— not from economic pressure to maximize real estate but simply to produce the biggest, the tallest. Empire State Building. Sears Tower. World Trade Center.

The postwar American skyscraper was a capitalist revision of the prototypical Modernist building: taking the salient features of efficiency of materials and construction, open flexible floor plans, and the economic advantage maximized real estate use as methodology for corporate representation, and a diagrammatic structure for big business. It similarly redefined the urbanization of American business, transforming the Loop in Chicago and Midtown Manhattan into corporate canyons, each building defining a distinct business identity, their massing representing the wealth and health of American Business.

By the 1960s, the growth of American suburbs fueled by postwar prosperity began to put pressure on the urban business model – the economic viability of skyscrapers was called into question. The white collar workers no longer desired to commute to the mid city for work, and the cheap land of the outlying suburbs began to suggest a different model for offices – one that was horizontal. Office parks and campuses began to replace millions of square feet of vertical urban space. As information management replaced industrial output as the measure of corporate profit, so too did the representation of that corporate power shift. The urban monolith found itself replaced by the suburban campus, the towers of commerce gave way to private park-like settings.

Urban centers in the 1980s found themselves riddled with vacant office towers and suburban flight – the economy of ‘tallness’ no longer provided for an efficient building model in the U.S – beyond a certain point a building simply became too big and expensive to lease the according amount of office space. The skyscraper found it’s only adherents in the economically younger developing cities of Asia, where it still had lingering iconic potency. As towers in Kuala Lumpur and China replaced the World Trade Center as the tallest in the world, it was becoming increasingly clear that the U.S. had given up on the race, it’s need to represent corporate and national identity through the tall building. The American skyscraper had become obsolete.

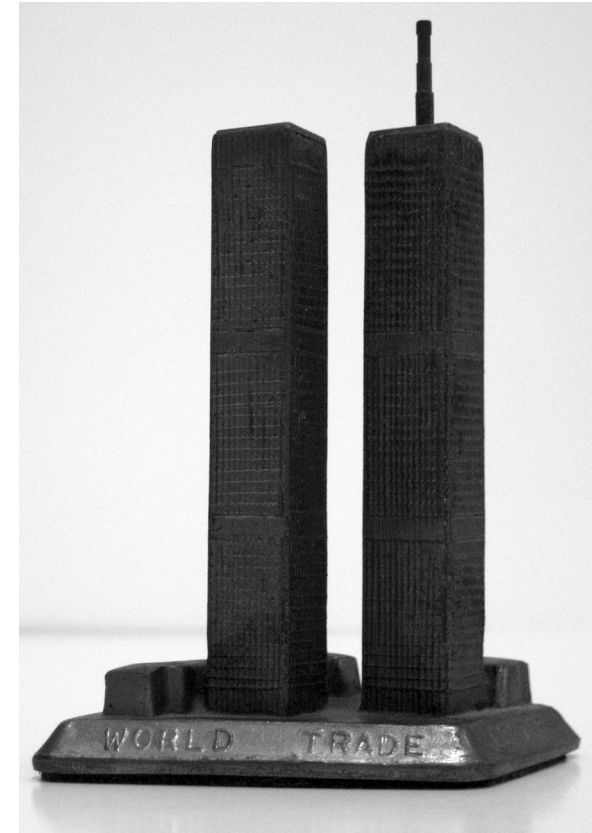
The events in the first years of the Twenty-First Century have provoked a re-reading of this history. The attacks on the World Trade Center have, ironically, made the skyscraper in the United States a viable typology once again. Though they had exhausted themselves as efficient buildings for business long before they were destroyed, their disappearance has produced the need for a new building – the ‘tallest’ building – to take their place. Once again, the skyscraper had become the most profound expression of architecture, and the world’s finest architects have vied to be the new building’s creator.

But precisely what is this next building?

It no longer embraces the programmatic or urbanistic relations of the previous generation of buildings – the very one’s that have already been proved obsolete. Rather, the new skyscraper is only an icon: not an economic, but a nationalist one, representing power and solidarity against an invisible aggressor, and scary world beyond the shores of the United States. The building serves to house and protect our National identity and values, not so much as a modernist machine for business, productivity, and economic wealth, but a more a monument to house those memories of affluence and protect them from international harm.

A radical act has in its turn radicalized the ultimate architectural expression of the 20th Century, and in doing so, has bizarrely introduced new life to an extinct typology.

William Mohline, 2006.



The Story of the Plane

On the morning of September 11th a great “sigh” was heard around the globe. Terrorist acts aside, the morning of September 11th was the day that Modernism died.

Was it a “sigh of relief” we wonder? While politicians haggle over the socio-political and psycho-schematic ramifications of Ground Zero, the super-rich attain architectural climax in localities like Dubai and Hong Kong, seeking to erect ever-higher towers that have achieved neither the Modernist goals of egalitarianism or aesthetic restraint proposed by the Modernist projects of the 20th Century.

Post-Fordist shifts towards more dispersed, horizontal building systems and the arrival of the Internet should have allowed the skyscraper to pass into the annals of history without pause. However, the typology continues to dominate the press and is the cause of many a wet dream amongst the global development community. Even after corporations have proven that they neither need verticality nor desire it, construction cranes dot the skylines of the newly revived post-911 urban landscape. It seems as that for many the corpse is still worth saving.

What is left then but to examine the notion of the skyscraper at it's most abstract and simplistic level?

When one analyzes the architectural, historical, socio-political, and economic data one answer remains:

The skyscraper is not an architecture at all, but an analog of the contemporary condition.

This condition has resulted from a societal emersion in the digital realm, where impotent desires are played out in isolation in data streams or in WiFi chat rooms, as their authors flail about in a desperate attempt for recognition. The perceived dissolution of boundaries via the Internet has only strengthened pre-existing hierarchies, intensified feelings of paranoia, decreased security (but increased government surveillance), and ultimately has resulted in a calcification of schizophrenic behaviors on both a sociological and psychological level. Other than death or the Internet, where else can one attain authenticity without the realization that their very identity has been constructed and is but a meaningless static of prescribed data?

This project is the answer to that question.





Death and Locality:

Death is the ultimate point of self-realization for the contemporary individual. In our media-driven society death is the first opportunity for most to attain that moment of fame or recognition. Previously this might have occurred under the smeared ink of the daily paper, or perhaps the hot-lights of the morticians theater. Death is the moment where the individual becomes grounded and realized. It is the transformation before being resolved to the earth and as decay, ashes, or in all cases, data.

The memorial park has played a dual role in society. It gives one a place marker for the memory of a loved one, while simultaneously transforming large plots of land into arguably useless space. For in the age of data emersion, why would one need locality?

The contemporary cemetery is referred to as a “memorial park”, and provides many of the signs and signifiers of the natural landscape: trees, a lake, some animals perhaps? Memorial parks have become so casual in their environments that they encourage transforming the somber rites of post-mortem visitation into an act of leisure, with the whole family packing a picnic for a day with their memories.

The elimination of above ground headstones only seeks to complete the tableau- that you are not out walking amongst the dead, but are instead upon a suburban lawn. Only by looking down, will you notice the endless procession of headstones, marching off like lines of computer code into the horizon.





Contextualism:

The context for this project could not be more apparent or irrelevant. True to the nature of the contemporary skyscraper the location chosen for this particular iteration is the Mid-Wilshire corridor in Los Angeles, California- A unique geography within the city that is constructed primarily of intense contradictions, banal architectural executions, parking lots, and a flaccid collection of commercial debris. The Mid-Wilshire corridor is flanked on either side by low-density, single family housing which is protected from the urban mélange by high-density, but somewhat truncated, late 20th Century “Class A” office space. What has resulted is a landscape of urban architectures on large lots that speak neither of the complexities of Cosmopolitanism usually associated with the city, nor the spectacular verticality resulting from economic speculation.

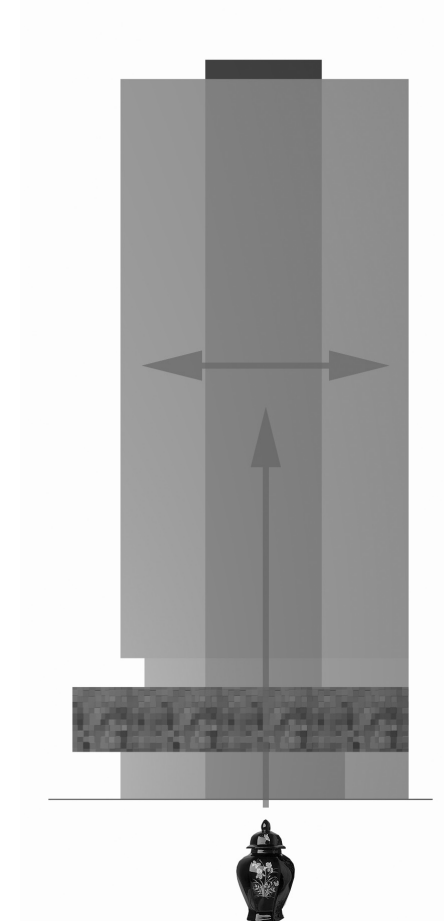
It is the perfect site upon which to examine the corpse of the Modern skyscraper.



Liquid Crystal Life Wall:

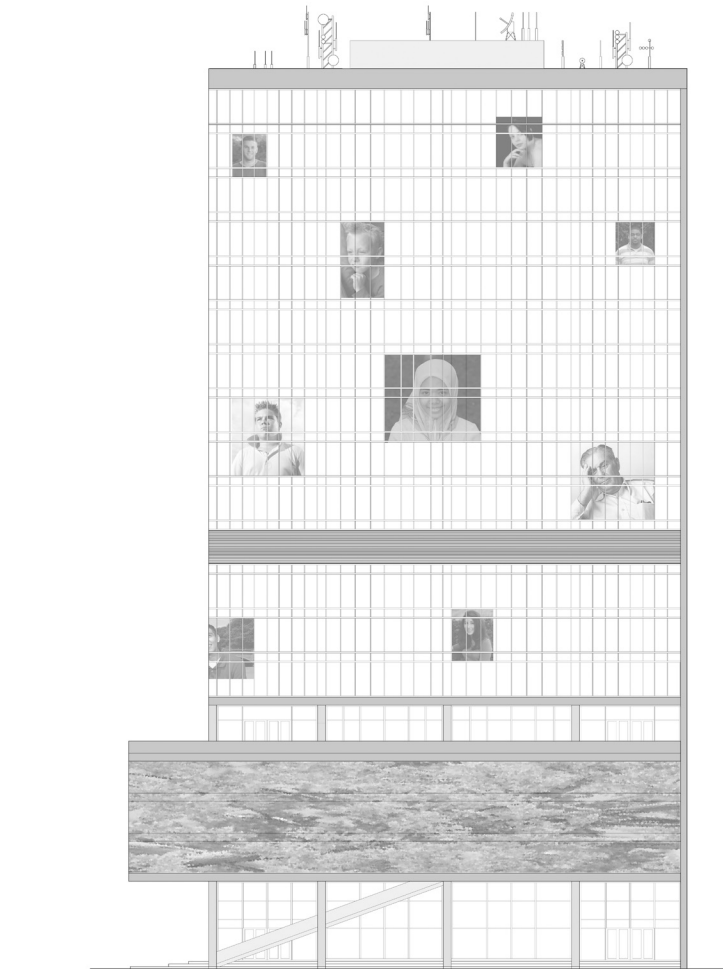
The entire structure is clad in a liquid-crystal display that has a constantly changing program of the dead and their past lives.

Only on the liquid crystal façade are the true humanistic intentions of Modernism achieved, with socio-economic overlaps occurring every minute and with the rich and poor mingling in a shared plight: that of the inevitable moment in contemporary life when grieving and the clarity of memory dissolve into the vacuum of simulation and nostalgia.

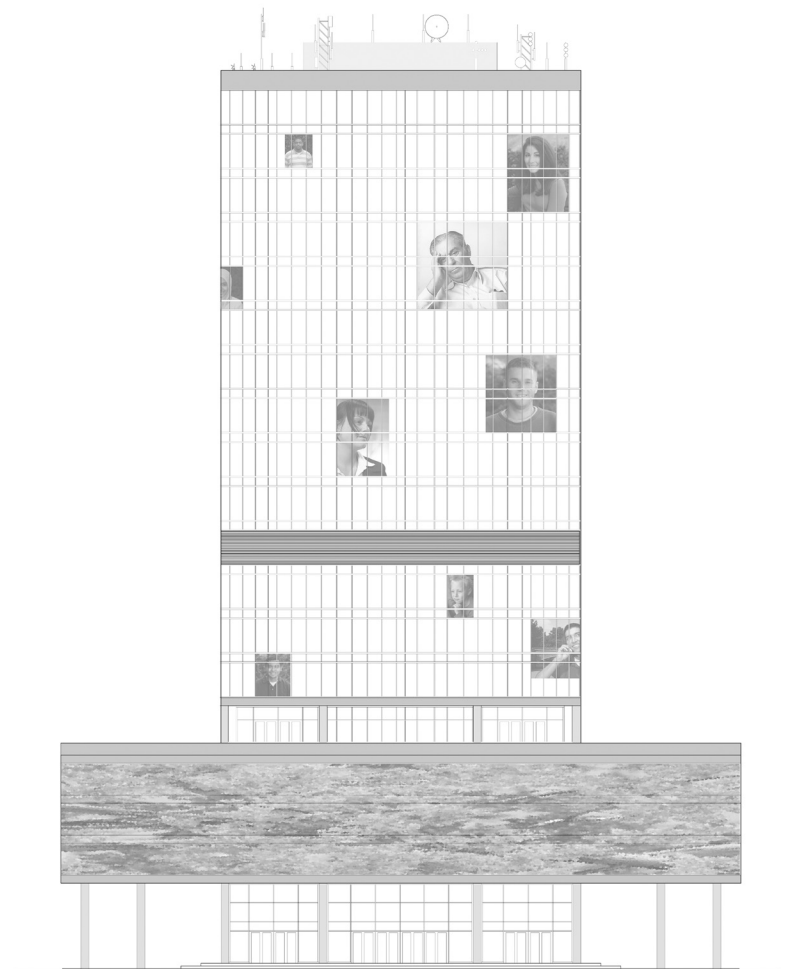


Urn Delivery:

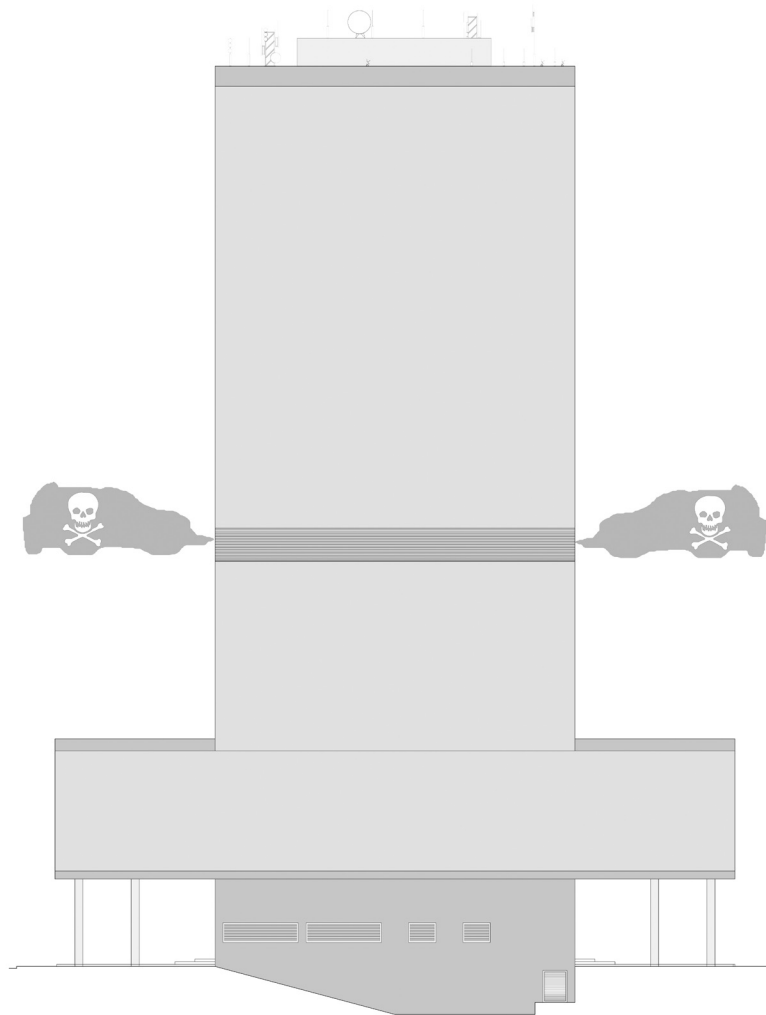
Resident deliveries are made through the use of a high-pressure pneumatic tube system that radiates upward from the storage area in the basement. Orders are placed via computer and a team of “retrieval specialists” send the urns containing the departed upwards at high velocity into the awaiting arms of family and friends. After the grieving session is over, staff return the deceased to the storage area, using the same pneumatic system, where their location is tracked via an RFD tracking device buried in the ashes contained within the urn. Occasionally mix-ups are made, but because every urn is identical and even the deceased’s ashes are not particularly unique, no one seems to notice. In the contemporary city distinctions between geography, identity, and authenticity are continually displaced- both in experience and memory.



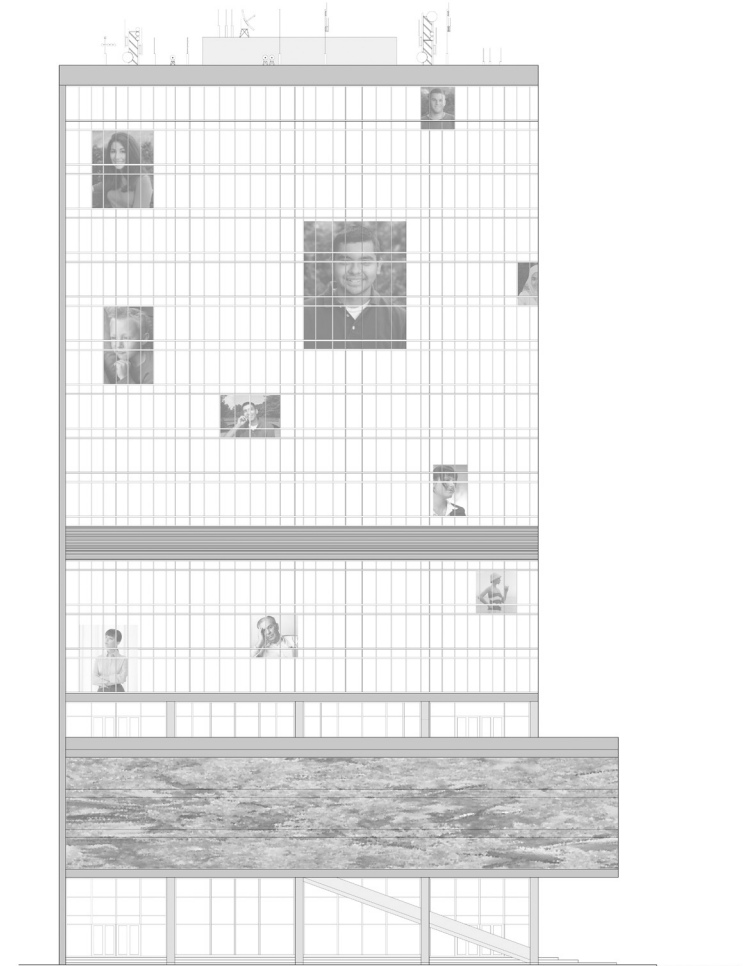
Side Elevation



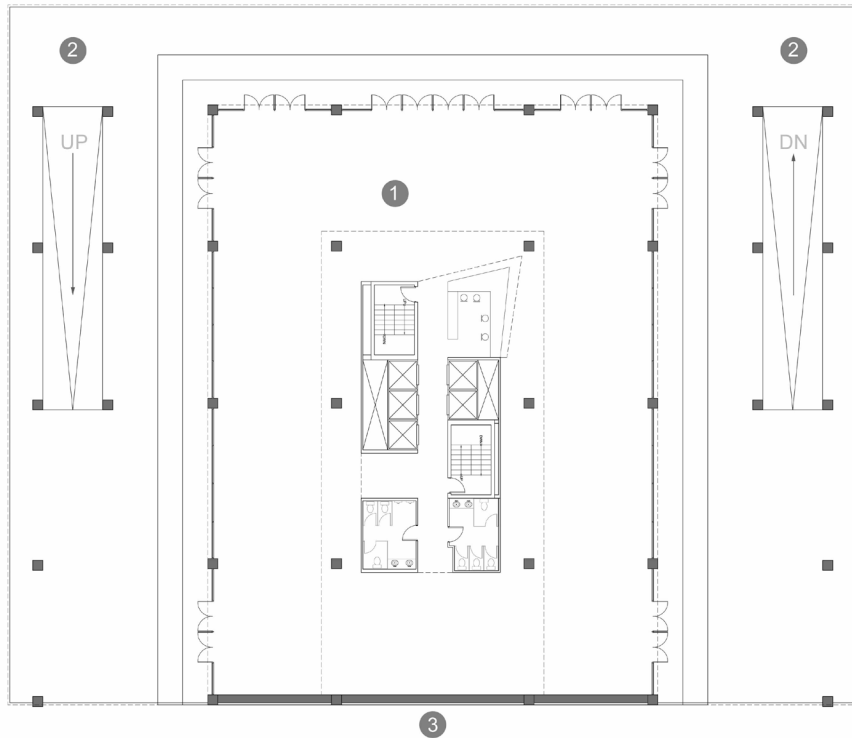
Front (Wilshire Blvd. facing) Elevation



Rear (residential neighborhood facing) Elevation



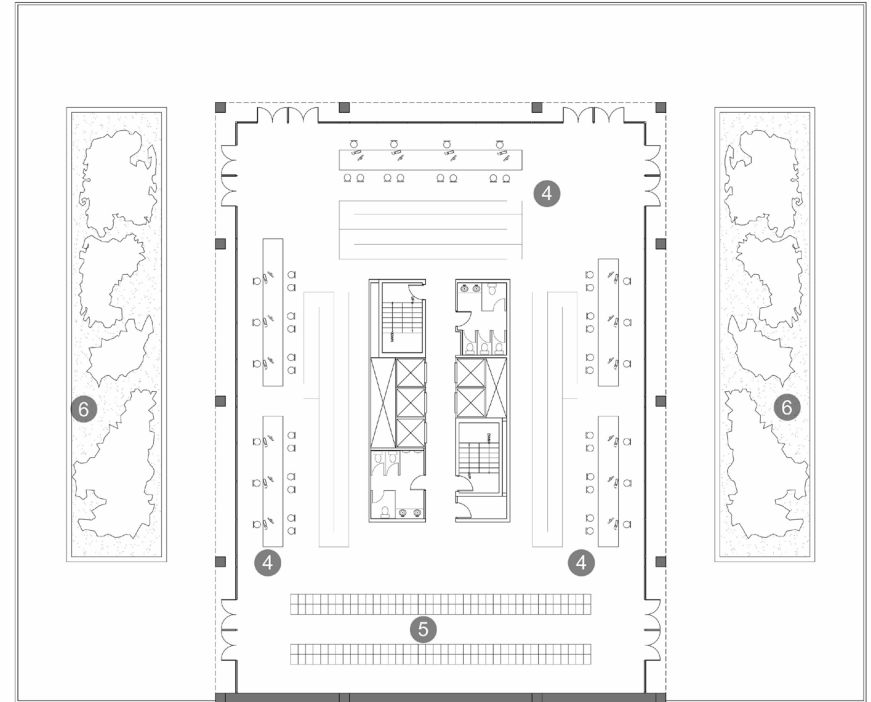
Side Elevation



Typical Lux plan: 1. Shopping Lobby 2. Motor Court 3. Resident Delivery

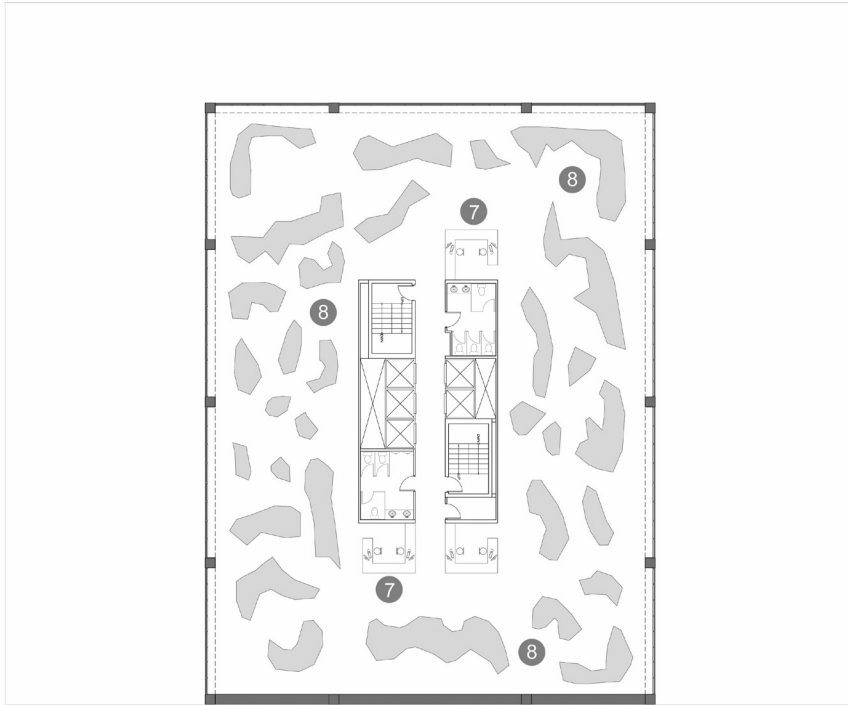
Program:

The program of the vertical memorial park is simple. All facilities present are designed to either handle the remains of the deceased, or the desires and nostalgic impulses of the living. For the recently departed a full service crematorium is provided to expedite the passage from the physical world to that of the abstract. Because space is a commodity residents are stored in urns which can be retrieved and delivered to the appropriate floor through the use of a state of the art data retrieval system, which is complimented by a team of concierges and "guest specialists". The dead are handled with the same world class care bestowed upon vacationers in a four-star spa. After all, why surrender the good life even if life has left you?

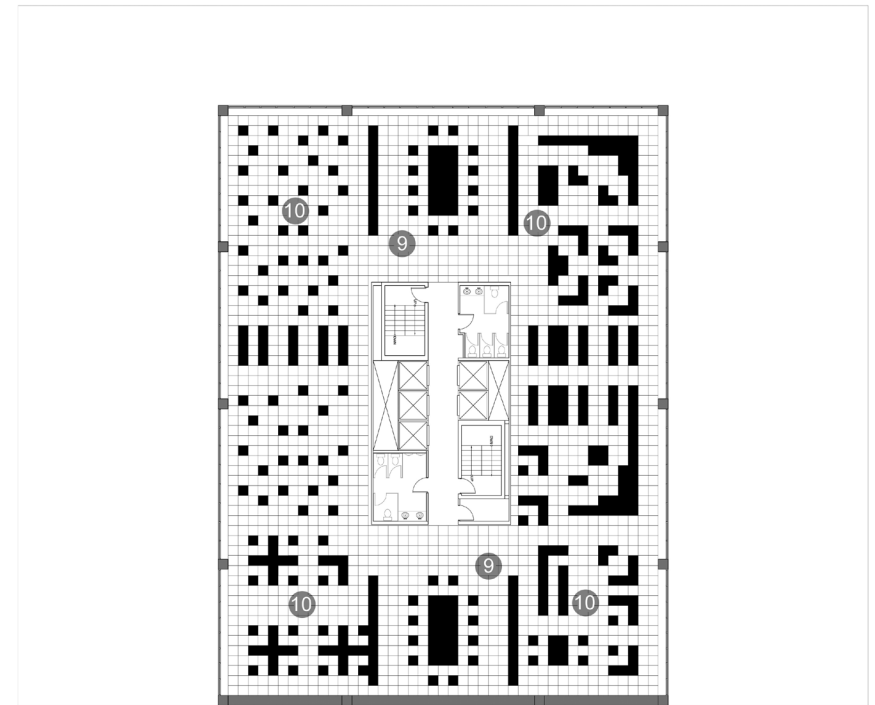


Administration Level plan: 4. Reservations and Check-in 5. Guest Records 6. Nature

Amenities await all those who are clients, regardless of income or social status. However, the availability of these amenities is stratified according to a "Memory Package" pricing list. Guests of the residents are provided the opportunity to purchase anything from floral arrangements, contraceptives (you never know who you'll meet), "mourning clothing", and other memorial supplies in the lobby which has been fashioned in the same vain as a "swap meet" so as to eliminate spatial hierarchies and allow for a maximum of competition between the vendors. Free parking is provided in the "skirt" of the building with a drop-off at the lobby level. A café and bar on the top floor provide a place of refreshment, as well as a gathering space for multi-denominational services. A garden outside the administration wing serves to remind the bereaved of Man's tenuous position suspended between the extreme rationality of Science and the schizophrenic urges of Nature.



Typical Lux plan: 7. Concierge 8. Visitation Lounge



Typical Povera plan: 9. Resident Pick-up 10. Visitation Lounge

Program:

The “Memory Rooms” are divided into different socio-economic floors with four “Lux” floors devoted to the wealthy who have chosen to pay for a “Platinum Subscriber Package”. The remaining floors are devoted to the “Povera” levels where for a nominal fee subscribers can reserve dedicated “grieving” space without the worry of being cut out by over crowding and poor social decorum by their peers.

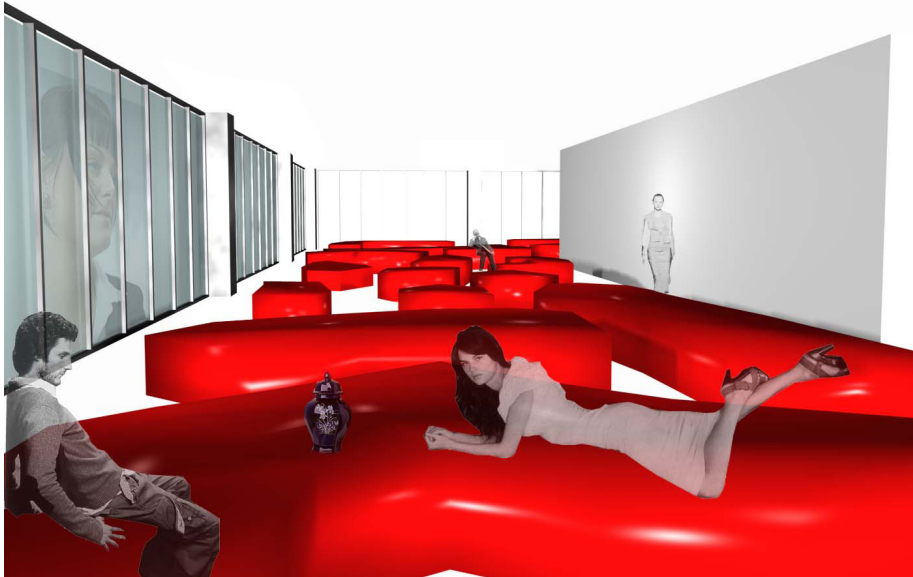
For the “Lux Platinum Package” a concierge will order the deceased in advance from the storage areas below and have them waiting for the bereaved upon arrival. Complimentary cocktails are served and space is never a problem. Normal subscribers on the Povera Floors must utilize the computer terminals and filing provided on their particular floor and everything is self-service.



Administration Area



Povera Space



Lux Space

Administration Area: Visitors can stand on line, sign-in, secure visitation reservations, check account status, and upgrade their loved-ones membership level. Gardens are available outside for those who wish to contemplate nature in an absurd compromise between the 21st Century urban agitation on the street below and the surrounding banality of the late 20th Century metropolitan landscape above.

Lux Space: Fashioned after flight lounges typically found in European airports, this space provides Platinum level members with an exquisite spot to re-connect with the deceased. The visitation couches are finished in Italian red leather and drinks are served by cheery, but respectful wait-staff. A concierge is available at all times to handle guest's needs.

Povera Space: Executed in white resin, the Povera Space is available to all membership levels and features an abundance of surfaces for any number of individuals to congregate. Assistance is provided by wait staff who are summoned by intercom.



Afterword:

Death is the ultimate realization that we are essentially just data. Contemporary digital culture has proven that the transition from life to death is simply a restructuring of this data. Our buying patterns on Amazon.com will long outlive any permanent mark we leave in the physical world. The internet has proven that we do not need religion to find immortality, as our lives will be permanently chronicled and celebrated in ones and zeros until the end of time.

As for the Skyscraper? Consider this document its epitaph- Sincere words for a dear, departed friend who will never be forgotten.