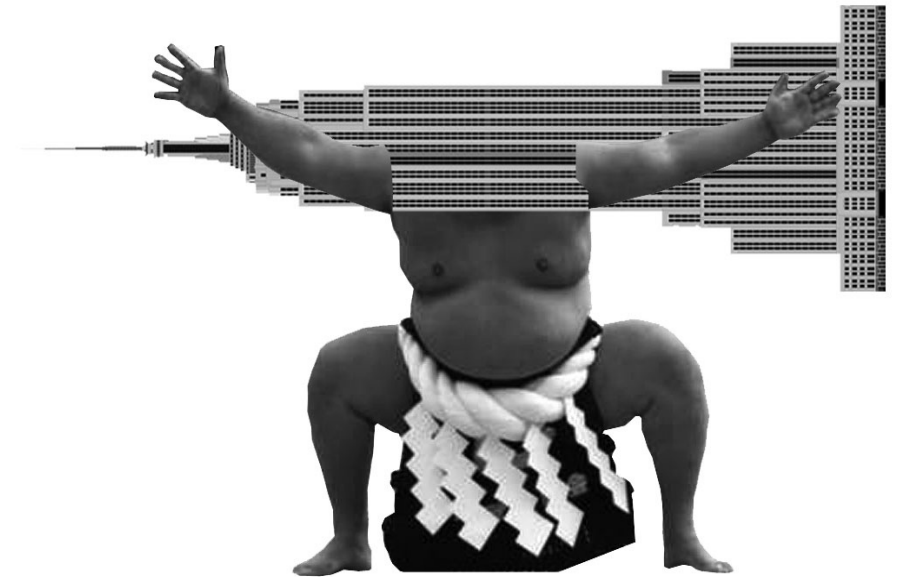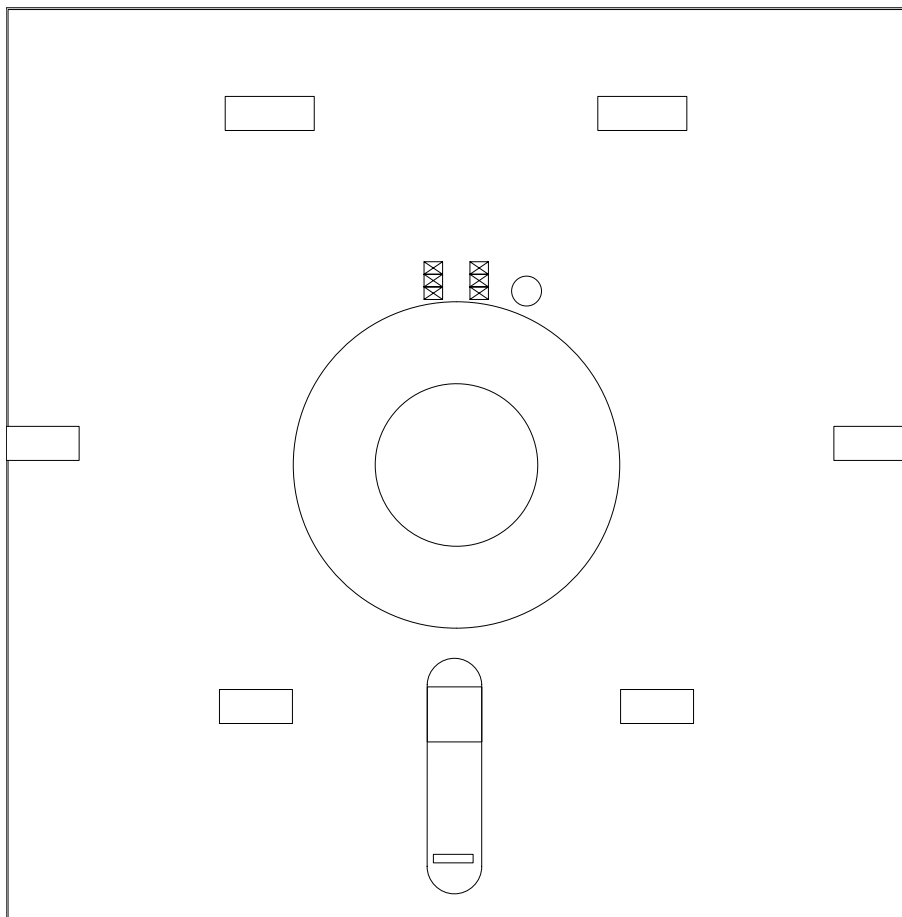# Sumoscraper:

A Cultural Content Container

by Urban Operations

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

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Project Team: John Southern & Michael Manalo

Preface:
By: John Southern
September 7th, 2008

"*Society has a passionate desire for something that it will obtain or that it will not obtain. Everything is there; everything will depend on the effort made and on the attention paid to these alarming symptoms.*

Architecture or revolution.

Revolution can be avoided."

– Le Corbusier, Toward an Architecture.

Time has a funny way of either changing or calcifying perspective; thinking back to almost two years ago when we sent off Sumoscraper to what was to be the last eVolo Skyscraper Competition, I clearly recall the rationale for both the submission and the critical position it proposed in regards to the competition. So many things were different then. The U.S. housing market had not yet crashed. U.S. cities were still flush with cash raised on booming home sales and property taxes, and were in turn using the money to invest in vanity projects such as museums and commercial developments designed to enhance civic centers. Los Angeles was, of course, no less bullish than any other city. Hardly a week went by without the papers and blogs trumpeting a new luxury loft development, downtown residential high-rise, or lifestyle condo.   Downtown L.A. it seemed, was desirable again and entitlements for new residential projects piled up on the desk of the L.A. City Clerk at a delirious rate.

Now, as Rome burns, Sumoscraper is only more relevant as an analog for understanding the contemporary urban condition and its casualties. Examining the global architecture scene, a depressing predictability has settled over the discipline. Residential skyscrapers continue to rise in Dubai, New York, and in many cities all over Asia. Stocked with dubious collections, new museums sprout in major and minor cities alike. No one mentions that the residents of the towers hardly ever live in them, or that the blue chip artworks displayed in the new museums have more frequent flyer miles than Rem Koolhaas and are owned by mostly private entities. These new iterations of global capital are merely places for the hyper-rich to park their assets.   Yet, when one examines the effect on culture itself, these new buildings say a lot about Architecture's waning effect on society.
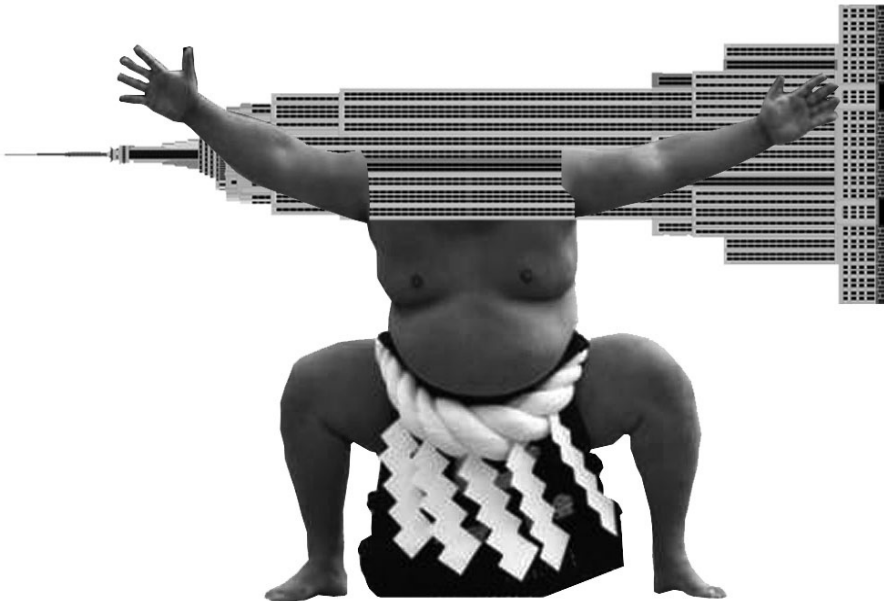
It has never been clearer that physical architecture's days as a force of resistance are over. Glamorous architectural styling has become as ubiquitous and banal as the suburban tract house, the latter now fetishized in the media to the point where its own normality is sexy. It's hard not to stifle a yawn at the course Architecture has set for itself in the coming years.

As technology and electronic media dominate our socio-spatial environment, Architecture struggles to keep up by embracing a palette of technological grandstanding, coupled with an almost dogmatic devotion to environmental sustainability. Even Architecture's traditional villains, the Modernist and Postmodernist movements have mutated into an acceptable plate of left-over urban strategies and approachable styles to be consumed by both members of the discipline and the press alike. This direction was predicted years ago by theorists like Frederic Jameson and Hal Foster who quickly recognized that with the maturity of Postmodernism comes a kind of stylistic and socio-cultural ambiguity. Social code is layered upon social code to the point of systemic collapse.

That this collapse of value and meaning would give us 9/11 and financially crippling wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was hardly predictable in itself, but Architectures recent retreat into a room of mirrors of its own making was perhaps not predictable so much as it was a disappointing reaction. As American television viewers became obsessed with themselves (or their neighbors "selves") on reality television shows in the years following 9/11 to the point where reality is now the fiction of daily existence. Starchitects like Daniel Libeskind create monuments to this new urban reality couched in paranoia, cultural nihilism, or simply aesthetic narcissism, leaving a disturbing silence in their wake. When asked to inspire, Architecture it seems, just fixed itself another drink.

To say that Architecture's future is hopeless would simply be a cynical response to a desperate situation, a situation that requires our attention as designers and thinkers. While resistance is dead in the Postmodern sense, perhaps it's time to give resistance another try using the filter of Post-Criticality as an artifice. Logical? No. However, it is contradiction pregnant with possibility none-the-less. While it might not help rescue architecture's dying voice, it will at least preserve its language for future use.

Introduction: End of Architecture
By: Mimi Zeiger
December 28, 2007

In the Fall of 2006 I found myself unemployed. The shock was less a full body blow than "Okay, what now?" I had just moved from San Francisco to Brooklyn and since July had commuted from that borough to the editorial headquarters of the now-defunct Architecture magazine located in the Wanamaker Building in Manhattan, former home of the Wanamaker Department Store—its 1,100,000 square feet designed by Daniel Burnham.

The building on Astor Place had a giant K-Mart on its ground floor and the fact that you could enter the store from the downtown 6 subway line was the only artifact left that tied the historic commercial structure to the under-ground network. But I didn't catch the 6. I took the C, got off at West 4th, and wandered over to security entrance on Wanamaker Place (otherwise known as 9th Street, but changes for just the one block), I would then flash my ID badge, take the elevator to the 4th floor, and then be among a sea of beige cubicles. Some of which housed the magazine's staff. Billboard magazine was (and still is) on the 11th floor. I heard tales of how they had a recording studio on their floor and multicolored carpet in the offices. Little luxuries like a café and not just a line-up of vending machines.

But I digress into snacks and interior design.

When the magazine was abruptly sold, I found myself jobless. One of the termination "perks" provided by human resources was a six-week session with the corporate career counseling agency Lee Hecht Harrison. I went four times. What did I have to lose in reworking my resume? Simulating 9-to-5 office conditions, the meetings were early (before 10am) and required "business casual attire." Bleary-eyed, I'd don my careerwear and, joining the commuting throngs, take the 4 or 5 train uptown to Grand Central. From there I'd weave my way up through the subway maze, across the grand hall, its constellations glittering above, then catch an escalator into the lobby 200 Park Avenue. Lining up at security, my photo was snapped and I was handed a temporary badge before I was directed into a golden elevator and up to the 26th floor.

Once I descended into my Brooklyn subway station, the entire excursion was enclosed. From train to walnut-veneer office, I never had to go outside, just transfer from one encapsulated space to another. My coat was arbitrary and stifling, the trip an extended illustration of network culture scored to an iPod soundtrack.

I can't recall what I was listening to that fall as I humbly shuttled, resume in my bag, like a packet of data along the lines.

What isn't obvious in this narrative, and certainly wasn't clear to me until I glanced out a window of the office tower, a western view down the canyon of 43rd street, is that 200 Park Avenue is Grand Central City. Yeah, the Pan Am (alternately the Met Life) Building, completed in 1963 and designed by Emery Roth and Sons with Pietro Belluschi and Walter Gropius. Mole-like, I'd unwittingly burrowed into one of New York City's most famous skyscrapers.

At 59 stories (808 feet), it isn't spectacularly tall. It comes in number 12 in a list of the city's tallest buildings. (The Empire State Building fills the top slot, an honor it regained with the destruction of the WTC towers. But it is broad: The bulk of its 2.8 million square feet blocks the view down Park Avenue.) The façade encloses the curtain-walled avenue, separating the glassy towers from the lower half of Manhattan. But what's the use of a façade when you are tucked inside? There was no gaze upward at the looming edifice. No was to contextualize the height within the city grid. The Pan Am Building, a structure so iconically understood, is average from this interior perspective. Girth and height are irrelevant. S.M.L.XL? Size doesn't matter.

Madelon Vriesendorp's *Flagrant délit*, the illustration made famous by Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* embeds 'scrapers Empire and Chrysler horizontally in the Commissioners Plan gird. But this doesn't go far enough. The grid is only one navigatable stratum. Conditioned spaces descend deep into the earth and reach their networks far and wide.

"*The Metropolis strives to reach a mythical point where the world is completely fabricated by man, so that it absolutely coincides with his desires. The Metropolis is an addictive machine, from which there is no escape, unless it offers that too….*
Through this pervasiveness, its existence has become like Nature it has replaced: taken for granted, almost invisible, certainly indescribable. This book was written to show that Manhattan had generated its own metropolitan Urbanism—a Culture of Congestion." (p.293) Writes Koolhaas in the appendix of the same volume. He points to a larger realm—the word "pervasiveness" perhaps a stand-in for networks to come.

The career counselor tells me I am being too creative with the layout of my resume. She asks for bullet points while she repeatedly kneaded Nivea cream into the back of her hands. I nod along and take notes. I keep mentally checking out the skyline and the reflections of the buildings opposite. Bullet points, yes. Action verbs, okay. *Pioneered* not *performed*, got it.

I leave her office and return home, retracing my pneumatic tube route. The skyscraper is no longer an accumulation of floors, but a latitudinous entity. The Pan Am Building is an expanded field. It stops where the subway steps exit in front of Yafa Deli on my Brooklyn corner.

Sumoscraper: A Cultural Content Container.


Photo: Michael Manalo

In the contemporary metropolis cultural content has long since replaced industrial content as cities have sought to re-invent themselves as generators of culture. "Culture" in the age of digital networks has become synonymous with the ephemeral, the fleeting, or the vague as new tides of content wash over the vast shore of the World Wide Web. As streaming content and Wiki-style databases become more prevalent the ability for ideas to hold their power and stability diminishes and, as a result, multiple voices struggle for validity in the informational orgy that defines the Web.

Architecture has grappled with this problem in the physical world for a long time, resulting in new building technologies and materials that are already rendered "old news" by the time they are put to use. This cannot be more apparent than in the case of architectural style. The concept of style is most fleeting in the design world and thus requires one to maintain an exhaustive vigilance over an infinite matrix of periodicals, RSS updates, and Blogs. In addition to this problem, the dependence of cities to exploit architecture for the purposes of urban renewal and cultural cache, also known as the "Bilbao Effect," has only increased since Frank Gehry completed the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain in 1997. However, while building commissions pertaining to cultural monuments have increased in previous years, their overall effect on the global perceptions of urbanism has decreased, allowing one to conclude that the cultural relevance and overall power of these works is waning as well.

In a world where design is ubiquitous, design no longer matters. Sumoscraper is both the result and the solution to this problem. Its presence in cities everywhere is an approaching manifestation of stylistic ambivalence marking a rejection of the unique. It gains relevancy within planning circles by its shear functionality, not its aesthetic presence or cultural affect. It is completely democratic in that it gathers the masses rather than dispersing them through aesthetic preference. It recognizes that beauty lies in the operations of daily life, not in the pursuit of stylistic relevancy. Because the Sumoscraper is functionally simplistic, yet programmatically complex, it will endure dynamic changes in the restlessly mutating urban fabric.

Sumoscraper recognizes that what urbanity needs more than anything isn't more cultural cache, but more parking.

Sumoscraper is a high-rise parking garage with attached mini-storage serving the automobile dependent individual and the pedestrian as well. However, size and height are inherently flexible as the form of Sumoscraper relies on architectures simplest shape- the box. With city centers becoming fashionable again, this typology is ruthlessly effective at solving the storage problems of the contemporary city. It understands that as suburbanites re-occupy urban domestic environments they will be forced to make a terrible choice: cleave oneself from the culture of over-consumption and suburban hoarding, what one might call the "Costco Effect", or face smothering from the shear lack of storage space and parking inherent in urban developments.
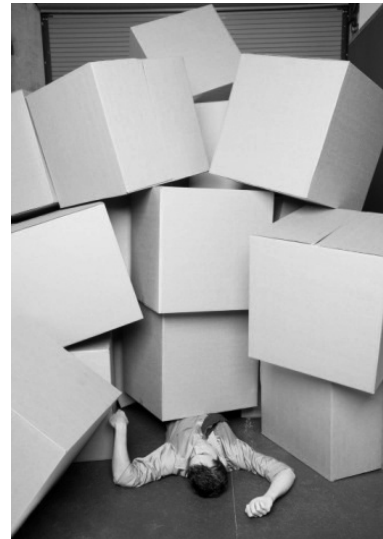
Photos: Getty Images

Sumoscraper is not architecture.
It is infrastructure.

In the contemporary city, infrastructure matters more than buildings do. As web content usurps physical content, the glamour of physical architecture will fade. Sumoscraper inevitably fills the void left by the demise of aesthetics because it provides a solution, rather than a distraction. Its sheer functionality lends itself directly to this purpose. Users enter the structure and proceed up a series of circular speed ramps to their unit. Once there the possibilities are endless as one is faced with the blank container of the storage unit. As one moves higher in the structure the Modernist dogmas of vertical hierarchy are inverted and sale prices of the units diminish as altitude increases. Likewise, inhibition diminishes as well, leaving what units are occupied on the upper stories to be "hacked" with an abundance of non-intended activites.

OCCUPATION

HACKING

CIRCULATION

10 MPH

DEPARTURE

EXIT
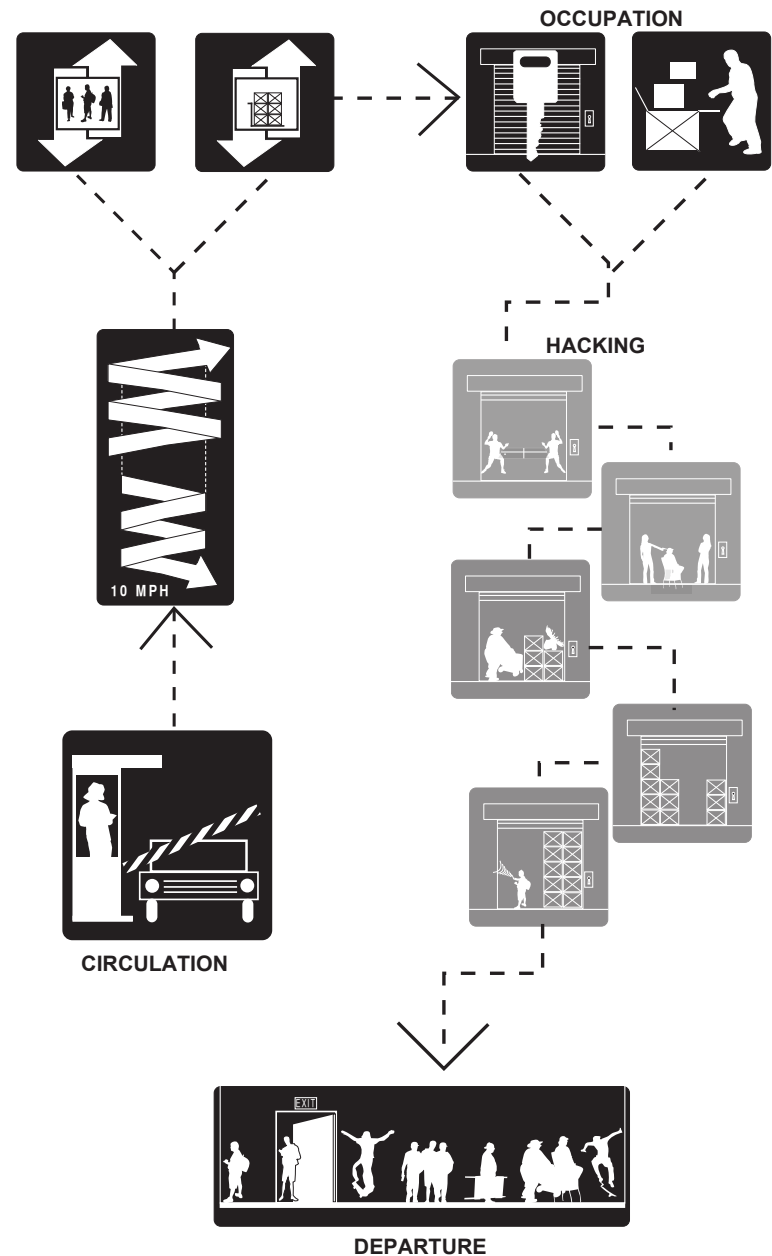
Programmatic parti of Sumoscraper showing a mixture of intended uses coupled with the inevitable 'hacking' of the architecture.

Sumoscraper rejects visual difference in favor of functional presence.

Sumoscraper ignores the fickle aesthetic desires of the metropolis by remaining visually oblique. Its heavy concrete and steel structure is clad in black mirror glass, allowing little light to penetrate or escape. All the outside observer might see is the barely perceptible hodge-podge of consumer debris coupled with the distorted reflection of the surrounding city; its cultural cache reduced to visual molasses.
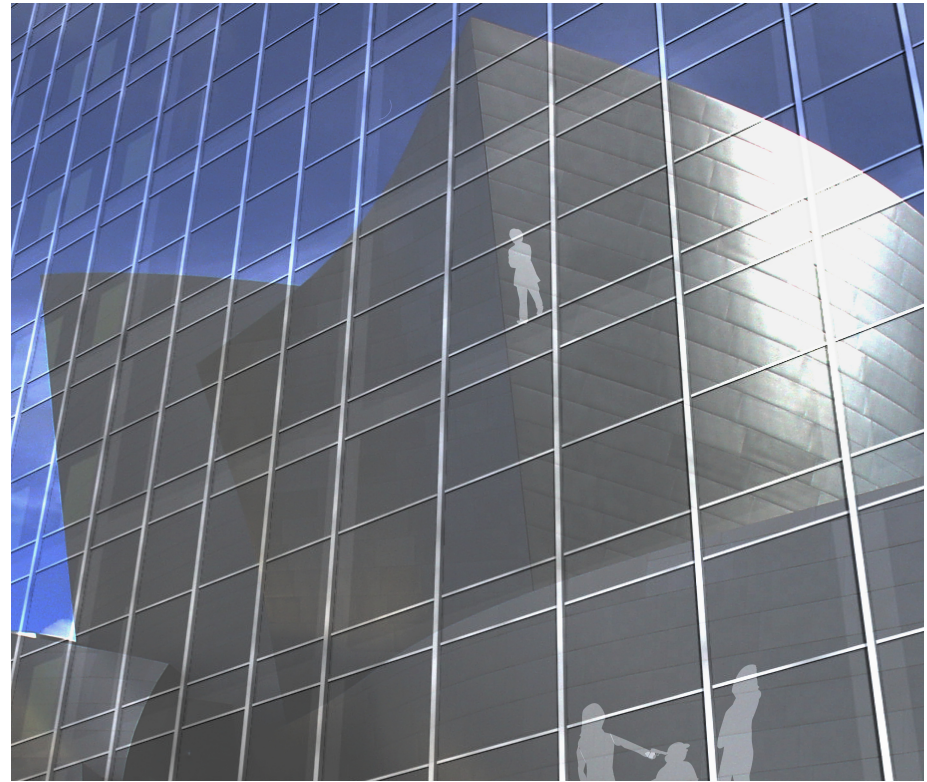
Detail of the Sumoscraper facade with cultural context reflected in its surface.

Sumoscraper: Program

The program of Sumoscraper consists of a parking garage coupled with attached storage to each space. Occupants rent both the parking space and the storage unit. For the newly transplanted suburbanite the configuration parallels the driveway/garage typology found in suburban tract homes and serves as a coping mechanism for "life in the big city". Beyond this simple spatial configuration however, the program becomes inherently more complex. Since the architecture itself is formally and aesthetically neutral, there are no suggestive cultural "signs" for users to follow. When presented with blank space, the temptation towards acts of personal expression becomes irresistible.
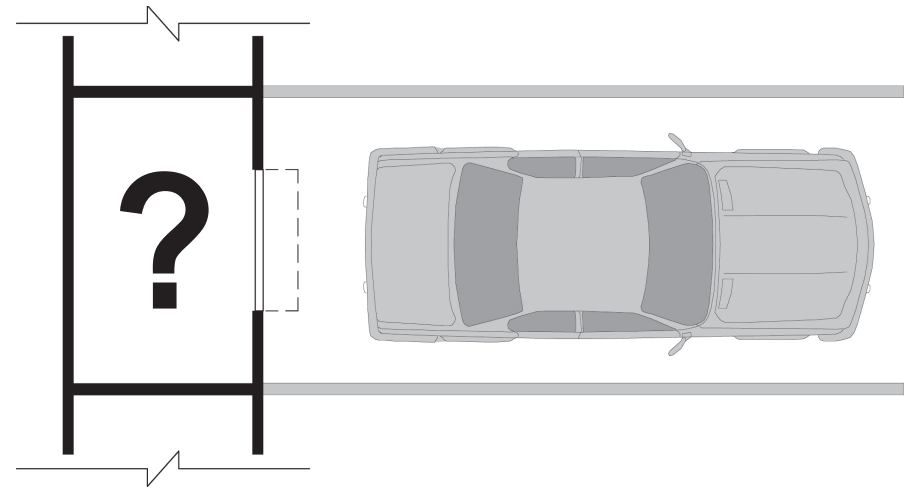
Plan diagram of parking + storage
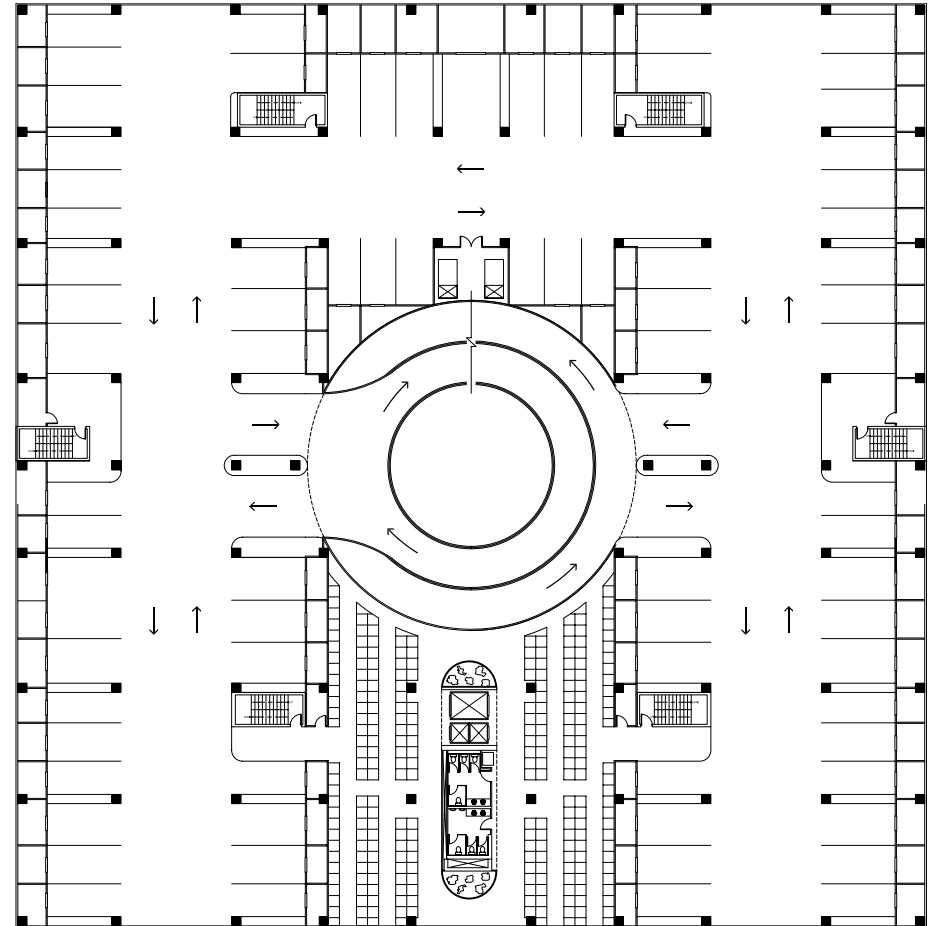
Entrance
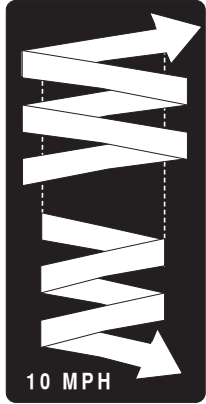
10 MPH Ramp

10 MPH
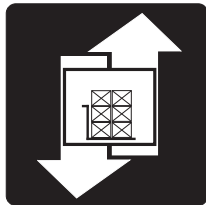
Main Elevator
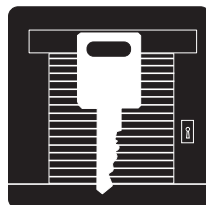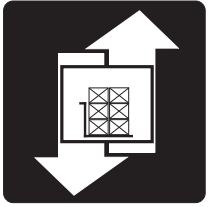
Service Elevator

Key Register

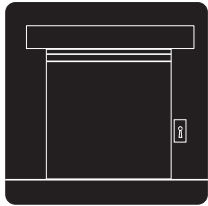*Typical floor plan showing the layout of parking and storage units.*

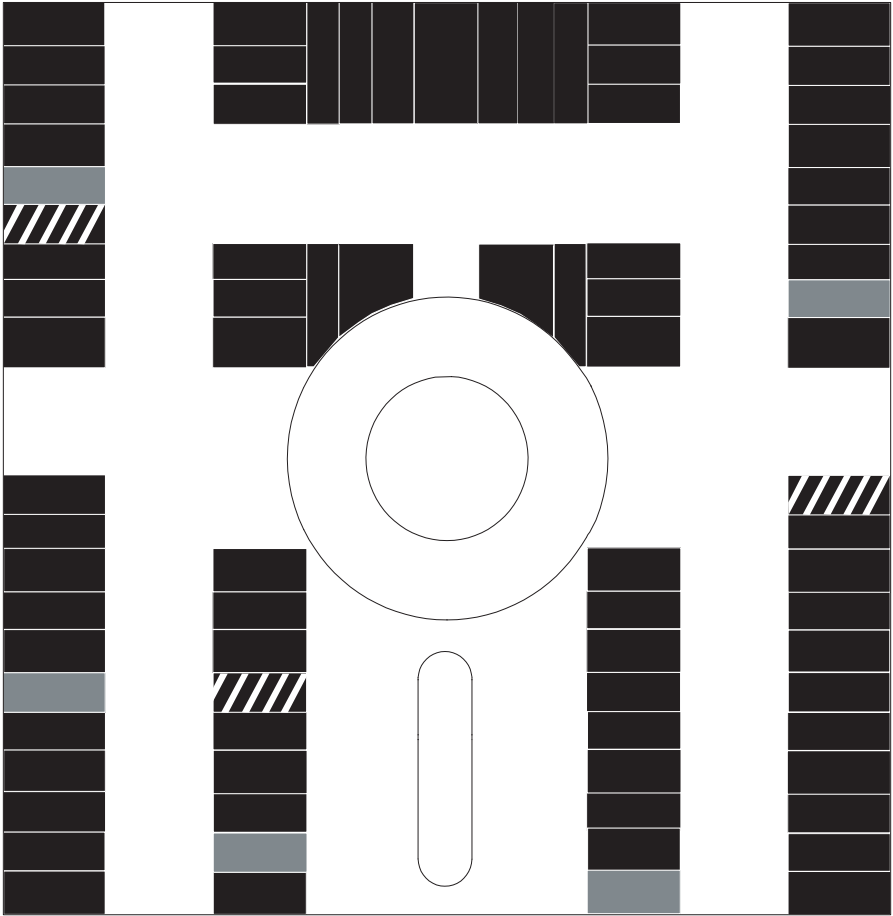**Main Elevator**

Service Elevator

Storage Unit

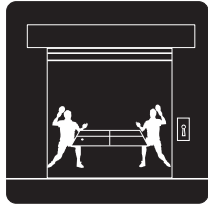**Packing and Storing**

Parking with Unit

Typical foor plan diagram showing floors 1-10.

Rented storage for intended use

Available units

Rented storage for unintended use
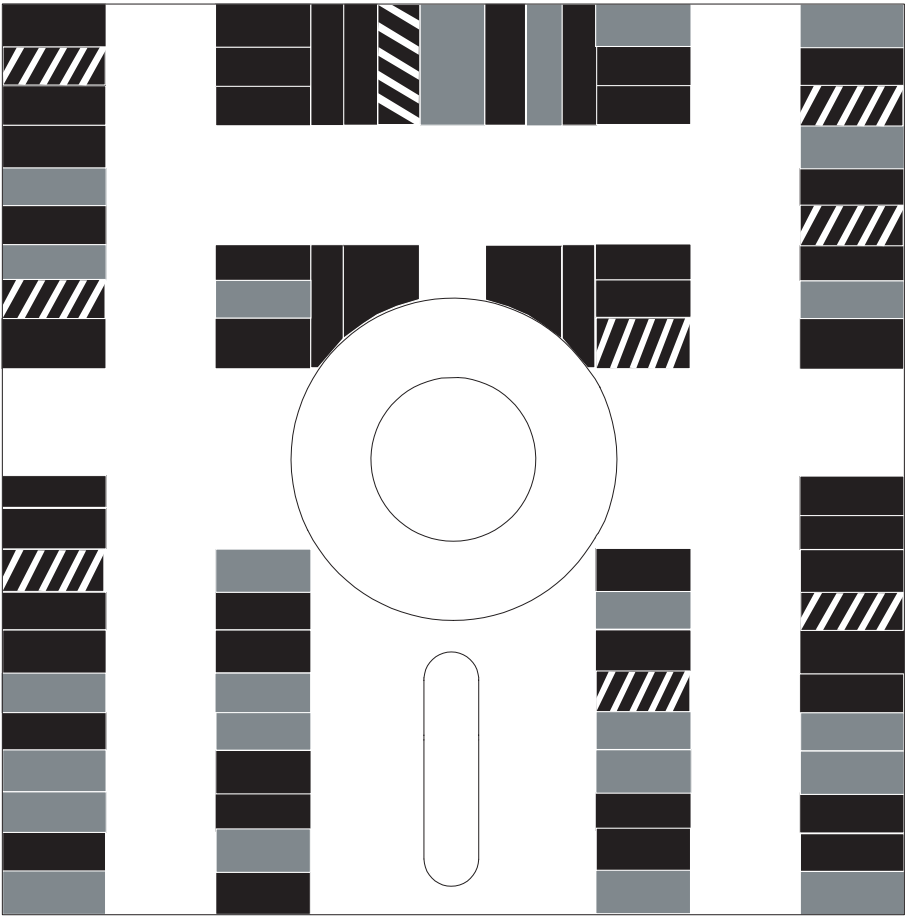
Intended Use

Getaway Recreation

Adopted Skate Ramp

Cheater

Snooper

Private Interrogation

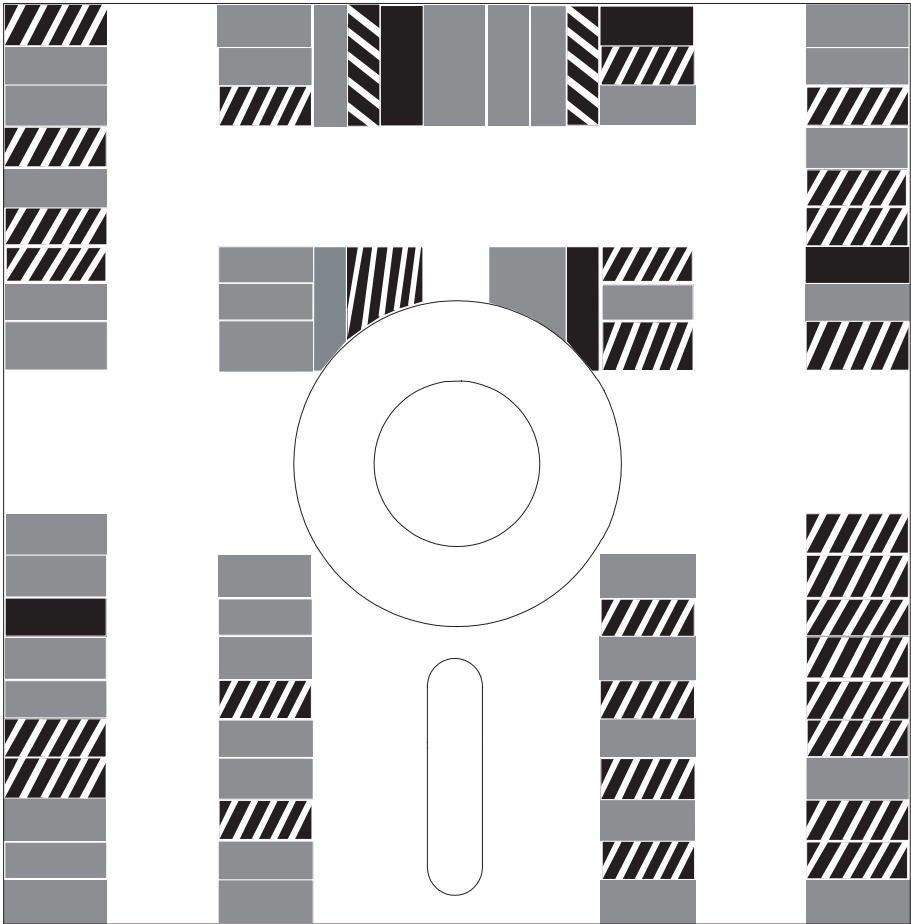*Typical floor plan diagram of floors 10-30 showing the invasion of 'hacked' space.*

Rented storage for intended use

Available units

Rented storage for unintended use

Sumoscraper as seen from the corner of Grand Avenue and 1st Street in Downtown Los Angeles.

Typical floor plan diagram of floors 40-50 showing the completed 'hacked' spaces.

Rented storage for intended use

Available units

Rented storage for unintended use

Afterword: