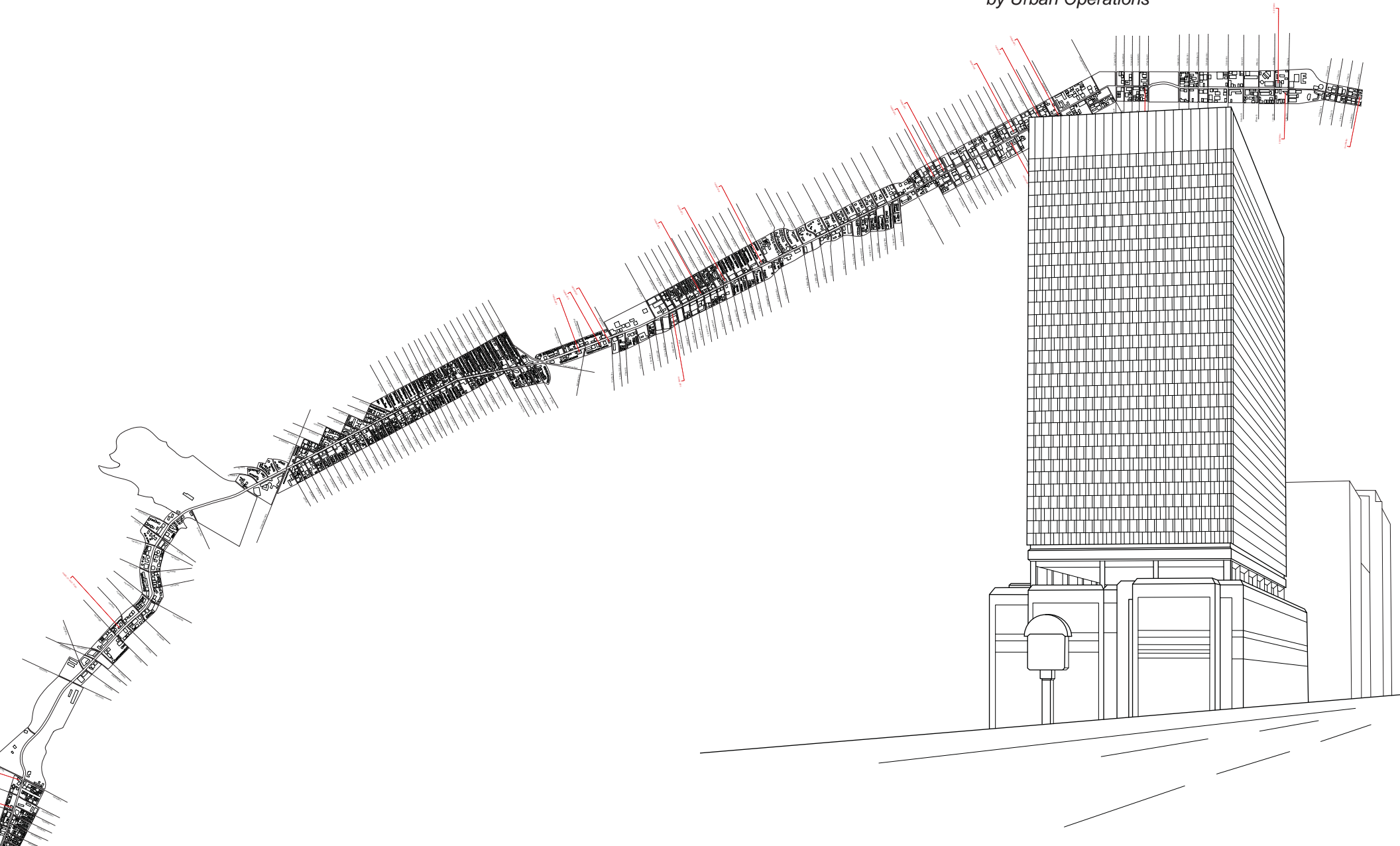


Wilshire Star Maps:

An Abbreviated Guide

by Urban Operations



Field Notes and Observations



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“We got to Wilshire where the traffic was regulated to a minimum of thirty-five. The Ford couldn’t travel that fast, but she clung to the middle lane and the big fast cars shot around us.”

-John Fante, *Ask the Dust*, 1939.

Preface:

Wilshire Star Maps

“The Skyscraper effects a brutal accumulation upon a traditional city with all its traditional components and collects them on a vertical plane. The results are shocking. The difference between the single building and the city disappears.” —Andrea Branzi, *Casabella*, #363, 1972.

In the five years that Urban Operations has proposed alternatives to the American skyscraper, worldly events have continued to demonstrate that the skyscraper remains a modernist novelty. Without exception, the proposals that have come to fruition across the globe lean more toward the glamorization of wealth and visual stature, instead of manifesting as true experiments leading to metropolitan evolution. That the Freedom Tower at Ground Zero is nearing its disappointing resurrection as a space of capital, rather than a reincarnation into a true memorial, confirms this belief, and therefore we continue our protest in earnest.

When we selected Wilshire Boulevard for this pamphlet, our original scheme was to encompass a dystopian scenario, wherein Wilshire became the solitary space of development in a dying metropolitan region. It was chosen primarily because of its tactical location (it accesses the Pacific) and its bisection of several of L.A.’s power centers that, it is assumed, would resist the shift of capital to other parts of the city, even in a state of crisis. For this environment we envisioned a manifestation of the skyscraper typology as a singular entity, stretching the entire length of Wilshire, from Downtown to the Pacific Ocean. Its structure was to grow from the clusters of skyscrapers already dotting the boulevard. Through its length, rather than its height, Wilshire would absorb, transform, and redistribute the entire city into a more sociologically performative, and thereby more egalitarian urban mutation.

Upon touring Wilshire Boulevard, however, we realized that there was much more work to be done and quickly shifted our energies from architectural speculation to anthropological investigation. Others have studied Wilshire, producing their own opinions of its value and civic substance. We believe, however, that a more thorough document is required before drawing a definitive conclusion about the possibilities of Wilshire’s urban future.

We chose the star map as our first delivery vehicle because it allows for the potent mixture of both fact and fiction.

A star map is a collection of rarely verified or updated information, a document which allows one to simulate the experience of visiting Hollywood’s various media personalities in their most intimate habitats: their homes. In the end, however, the reality delivers nothing more than a “trucker tan,” the prickly feeling of dehydration, and an empty gas tank. This is where our Wilshire Star Map diverges from the traditional model. It is admittedly a work in progress, offers little in the way of fantasy, and delivers genuine personalities from the urban stage for public consideration. Wilshire is many things to many people and, unlike the mediated space promoted by Hollywood, it promises actual self-realization, an experience only possible in a metropolitan space of urban democracy like Los Angeles.

Wilshire Star Maps: An introductory field guide.

No other place in the world has such a fantastic collection of underrecognized and underappreciated vertical architecture as in Los Angeles. In a city of mostly low-density avenues and sprawling suburban tracts, no other street in L.A. contains as many of these *Modernicus Erectus* as Wilshire Boulevard.

Stretching 16 miles from Downtown Los Angeles, to the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica, Wilshire is home to a majority of the B-List actors constituting L.A.’s 20th Century urban skyline. With only a handful of skyscrapers having made it into the guidebooks, Wilshire is the perpetual proving ground for the ugly, the ordinary, and in most critic’s minds, the vertically challenged.

These are not the nip n’ tucked *Brangelinas* of architectural culture, but instead are rough and ready stunt-doubles who work twice as hard for their place in L.A.’s urban legacy. Their stories are complex and infinitely more interesting than their pedigreed counterparts, for their lack of glamour and prestige has made them fertile catalysts and dynamic armatures of programmatic clustering beyond anything the avant garde could hope to achieve.

Containing an almost infinite programmatic menagerie ranging from high-end litigators to down-at-heal “happy ending” day spas, the skyscrapers of Wilshire, while dismissed because of their visual banality and obvious lack of height, contain both performative and social lessons for designers and planners alike.

Instead of erasing slices of urban territory from the public realm, Wilshire’s more than fifty high-rises instead expand L.A.’s public streetscapes into the sky, that unlike the front page follies of Ground Zero, have the substance and cultural endurance to give birth to real urban complexity.

-John Southern, September 2011.

Introduction:

Wilshire Blvd: A Drive-by Family



Wilshire Re-imagined (image by author)

Streets, avenues and boulevards are like members of human families. Their beginnings, recent pasts and current lives are exposed as you drive along their spine, as you walk on their sidewalks, and as you stand still and look at their walls. If one pays attention to their faces and body language, they deliver a meaning that is both literal and imagined, revealing what they have been through and how they behave towards one another.

What happens to a boulevard when its economic base fluctuates? What happens to it as another section of the city, maybe another segment of the boulevard, takes over and lures the wealth away? Abandoned segments regress, lose their economic assets and age rapidly. They go unwashed for years, dusty facades and broken business signs begin to appear, and additional A.C. units installed in the windows expose a re-distribution of program not originally intended by the architect. In contrast, a thriving section reflects its wealth in a glittering and gentrified persona and, like the citizens who inhabit it, experiences the finest care and pampering. The phrase “served” comes to mind here, though not through eviction notices, but rather through overly prepped, elaborately presented gourmet food.

Wilshire Boulevard is the definitive urban street in Los Angeles, attracting thousands of people every day. Most dissipate into stucco walls with their dreams forgotten, while few make fortunes on fast-cash business enterprises and, upon financial success, erect buildings in their self-image, christening these edifices with their names in a vain attempt at immortality.

As the Boulevard connects Downtown Los Angeles to Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica, an east-west narrative unfolds, where almost twenty miles of forensic display featuring the city’s ups and downs, familial struggles, internal fights, divorces and growing pains, are told.

Gaylord Wilshire—a fan of Leon Trotsky, socialist businessman, gold mine owner, golfer, and eccentric political candidate who died in penury—funded Wilshire Boulevard’s initial development in 1895 in the Westlake District. Just adjacent to Downtown Los Angeles, the area was anchored by MacArthur Park, then a young upstart naturalist known as Sunset Park. This bucolic impediment initially stymied the Boulevard’s extension until 1934 when engineers chopped the park in half with one brutal, curvilinear stroke. After that, the Boulevard quickly grew in both directions.

To the east, the Boulevard struggled as Downtown L.A. declined in the postwar years. MacArthur Park himself, for a while at least, was addicted to heroin but eventually recovered, unlike his brother Lafayette Park a few blocks west, who was instead finished off by crack addiction right under the nose of the Superior Court Building and memorialized by two chain link fences, one inside of the other. This portion of the Boulevard remained bruised until an infusion of yen from across the Pacific helped revive it. Separated from its down-and-out siblings to the west by the 110 freeway, the infusion of foreign currency helped the eastern portion experience a redevelopment jackpot, symbolized in one of its most lucrative new structures: ONE WILSHIRE.

Pacific Rim investment eventually started moving westward, terminating at Santa Monica’s Palisades Park, a stone’s throw away from the Pacific Ocean. Today, that part of the family is mostly doing well, regardless of apparent latent psychological problems.

From Ocean Avenue to Westwood Boulevard, Wilshire developed modestly. Its flat personality enabled it to grow up quickly and then promptly retire, but without major accomplishments. After 9 p.m., roll-down shutters descend and storefront lights switch to “economizer mode,” rendering the poor thing lonely in his bed with no one to say goodnight to it on the street, dreaming only in black and white.

Beyond, amid the palm trees and overly watered grass of the Los Angeles National Cemetery, the Federal Government Building is fascinating at night with his stippled façade, the result of Charles Luckman and Associates’ relentless deployment of solar fins whose filtering of the interior fluorescent office lights make it appear ephemerally beautiful, while exuding all the sinister qualities of the G-man. This is a secret agent kind of a guy, an FBI architecture with stealthy sensibilities and a schizophrenic persona. It is arguably one of the most mysteriously metaphorical buildings in all of Los Angeles.

Further east, Wilshire at Westwood Boulevard is one of the busiest intersections in Los Angeles. The Westwood segment is itself a powerhouse of corporate money and polished interiors, real estate fluctuations, bankruptcies, possible welding errors, “Don’t Stop Here” signs, Ponzi schemes and other corporate secrecies galore.

The “Axis of Concierge” starts a few blocks east of that intersection. The proverbial “Park Avenue” of Los Angeles, it is the speediest section of Wilshire with fewer traffic lights and cross-streets. It is also where the Boulevard experienced some embarrassing investment issues during the economic stagnation of the mid-eighties, thereby halting the glut of hi-rise condominiums mid-construction. Consequently, the tall steel frames remained exposed to the elements and suffered some serious decay. Later, their economic woes abated and these rusty structural frames are now concealed behind banal high-rise residential facades, their past structural degradation cleansed from the public record by unscrupulous developers. These highly maintained, postmodern, multi-million dollar vertical palaces are mainly occupied by the aging parents of Hollywood’s power lawyers and producers. The kids live in Malibu by the beach, but the parents prefer a doorman, concierge, full-time medical personnel, dry cleaning services, and membership to the nearby golf course of the Los Angeles Country Club. This latter patch of manufactured landscape is the longest stretch of greenery on the entire Boulevard. It is also one of the last urban spaces in Los Angeles to evolve as it didn’t abolish a long standing gentleman’s agreement prohibiting Jews, Blacks, and Latinos from being “invited” to the club until 1978, fourteen years after the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* was signed.

After this section of dark granite luxury structures, the Boulevard enters world famous Beverly Hills. The transition is marked by an X-shaped intersection at the center of which stands an ornate circular fountain, marks a brief kiss between Santa Monica Boulevard and Wilshire. This is where and when Santa Monica Boulevard sheds its propped up image, drops off all the mean things it learned from Century City and passes the lustful greed onto Wilshire.

After that brief encounter, Wilshire, now a gold digging stud, shops at Bulgari and Bijan, mostly for his new mistress, Beverly Hills, or B.H. for short.

B.H. is powerful and doesn’t like poor people.

It is animated by its money-hungry paparazzi, jaded celebrities, and their overworked personal assistants, all of whom play their part in a theater of faux urbanity, walking and sitting on her sidewalks, eating arugula sandwiches as if they are in Portofino.

Up above, B.H.’s hairstyles are eclectic: New Orleans Revival, American Colonial Revival, Mediterranean, Spanish Colonial Revival, Period Revival, Post-war Modern, French Regency, Classical Revival, and Pomo Bitch Revival.

The buildings’ mismatched features are echoed in the faces of the Boulevard’s pedestrians.

People walk around with bandages covering their unhealed plastic surgery stitches, scaring passing drivers and their children with their zombie look. These are “mirror, mirror on the wall” types with occasional misaligned upper and lower lips and over-pulled cheeks.

Author’s note:

There, I pause in order to digest the human freak show on display, but quickly drive away as soon as the traffic lights change to green. As I am driving, I recall a poem written by Korean poet Ishle Park reflecting on the Beverly Hills Police Department’s cruel refusal to help distressed areas of the city during the 1992 Rodney King Riots, particularly by blocking entrances of Beverly Hills on Wilshire to cross-town traffic. This happened while just a few miles to the south 4,000 buildings were set alight and dozens of people were killed. In Beverly Hills, immigrant mothers who had loyally gone to work that day to clean the houses of the idle rich, spent an eternity trying to reach their families via Wilshire Boulevard, only to be redirected to other avenues which offered no public transportation and therefore no way out of what had become a war zone.

The Korean poet Ishle Park writes:

Sa-I-Gu (4.29)

*While L.A.P.D. ring Beverly Hills like a moat,
They won’t answer rings from south central
furious and consistent as rain.(1)*

Further east, Wilshire’s Beverly Hills bling starts to evaporate at La Cienega Boulevard, the intersection marked most infamously by the so-called “lipstick tower.” This is the elliptical Hustler Magazine Building with its mysterious penthouse occupant, the one and only “guts and balls” people’s hero, Larry Flynt, the controversial owner of *Hustler Magazine* and a free speech activist.

Pereira and Associates originally designed the structure, notable for its beautiful curtain wall, for the Western Savings Bank. It featured a bronze sculpture of John Wayne astride his horse in full cinematic scale and glory, riding for a financial institution that was to be a victim to hostile takeover by another bank. The company later sold the building with its fallen gunslinger, who now looks more like a low plains urban drifter on his tired, glory-starved horse.

The skyscrapers rise like truncated daisies along this section of Wilshire. Some exist as an attempt to project forward in time, like the American Cement Building, while others, like the Talmadge Apartments, remain careworn fragments of the past. Among these mid-rise ornate buildings were once elaborate department stores, offering the best fashions for the upper middle classes, but are now reconfigured to house Korean church congregations, art galleries for oversized and overrated abstract paintings, and flashy corporate signage. Unlike the billboards donning the Sunset Strip, however, Wilshire prefers to advertise directly on its buildings. Gone are the prosperous postwar suburbanites who visited Wilshire in their convertible Cadillacs for a day of school shopping at Desmond's. So too, are the rituals of these visits, when the little rascals were attended to by East European tailors and sales personnel, while their parents indulged in martini lunches at the Brown Derby or drank coffee and ate chocolate in Bullock's penthouse tea room (now a part of Loyola Law School).(2)

Wilshire Boulevard is mostly remembered for this mid-section more than any other segment. Mid-Wilshire, as it is called, is the stretch that would make Gaylord proud.

The half-full, pint-size skyscrapers along Wilshire Boulevard as it trudges eastward are the forensic proof demonstrating why it was developed in the first place: it was to be a linear city eventually, eliminating the need for verticality elsewhere in Los Angeles. Unlike other parts of the city, the Boulevard accumulates more height and density like a diligent organism, becoming a distinguished system in itself.

Each time Wilshire Boulevard appears to reach the end of his history, he has to start all over again. Perhaps this city within a city will once again start something catalytic as it did during Gaylord's time, moving further upward instead of westward, adding population as it once allowed others to find an escape from Downtown L.A. in the low-rise sprawl lining its edges.



Wilshire Re-imagined- detail (image by author)

This boulevard of the future, an urban hulk called Wilshire, is characterized by mile-high buildings, multi-level underground mass transit systems, and a self-sustaining metropolitan atmosphere all its own. Its sheer size could render the rest of sprawling L.A. back into open fields, where nature picks up where it left off over a century ago.

A linear city surrounded by feral growth.

Wild tomatoes eaten by millions of possums.

-Orhan Ayyüce, September 2011.

References:

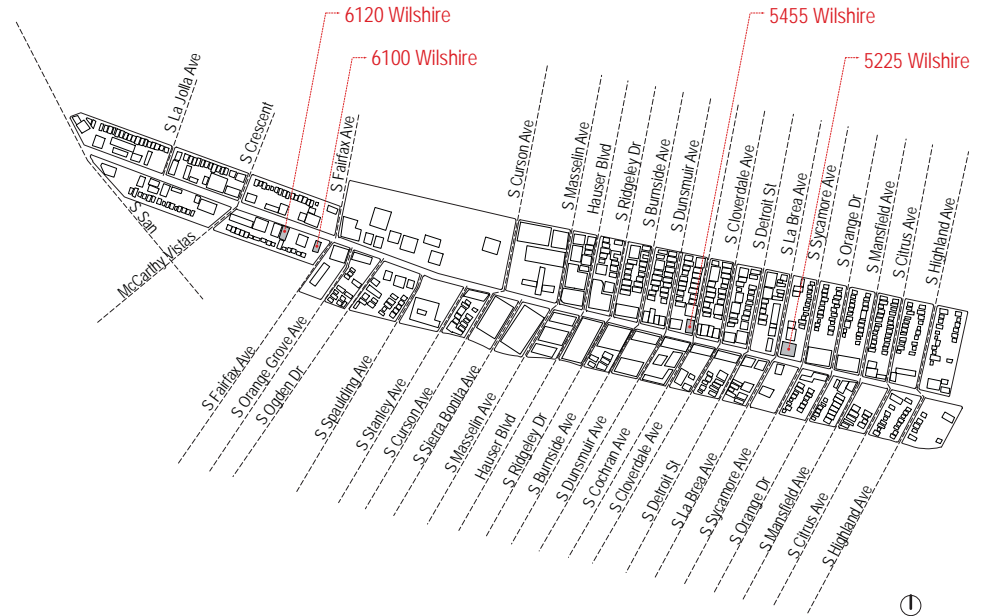
1) Christine Choy Dai Sil Kim-Gibson Director, *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspective*, 2008.

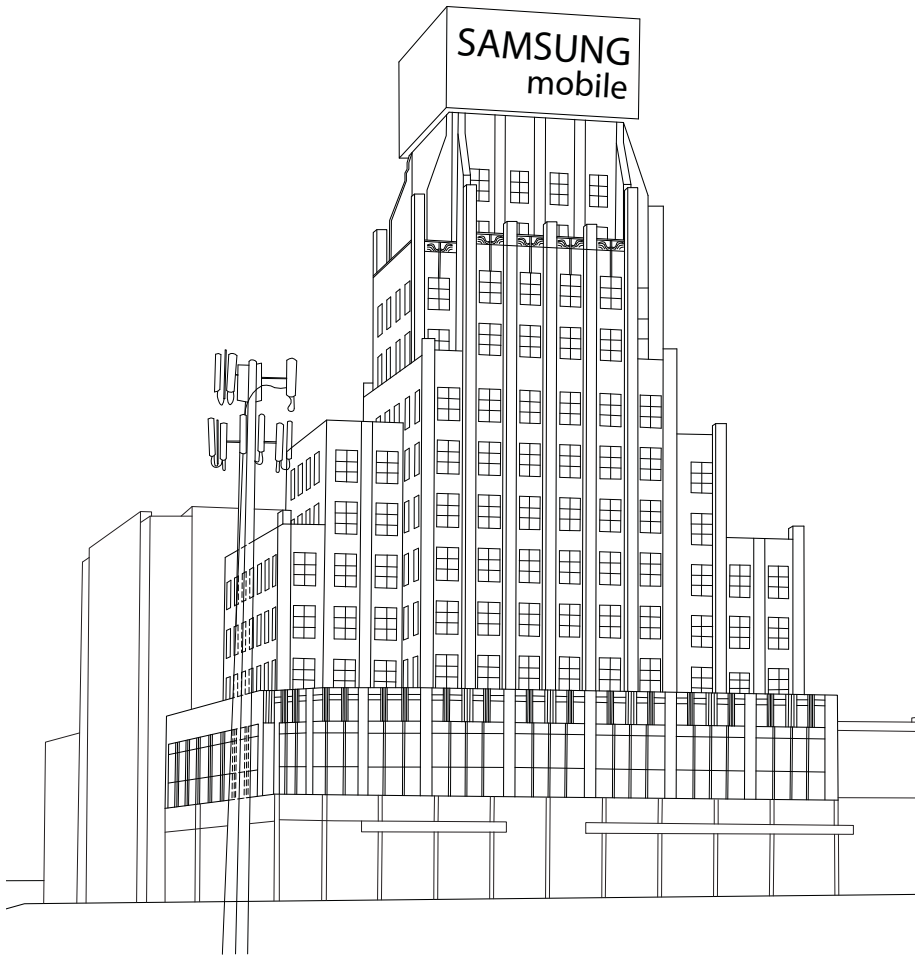
2) *Personal conversation with Denise Imhoff about her childhood in 1950's.*

Parti

“Downtown interests wanted it to be a residential avenue, not a business rival, and the city had zoned it accordingly...The result is unique transitional movement to the dawn of automobilism; the shops on Miracle Mile stand hard up to the sidewalk so that it looks like a conventional shopping street, except that it is not clogged with cars mis-parked in desperation by frustrated shoppers. All but a few of them are safely and correctly stowed away round the back, and Wilshire Boulevard is one of the few great streets in the world where driving is a pleasure.”

-Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 1971.

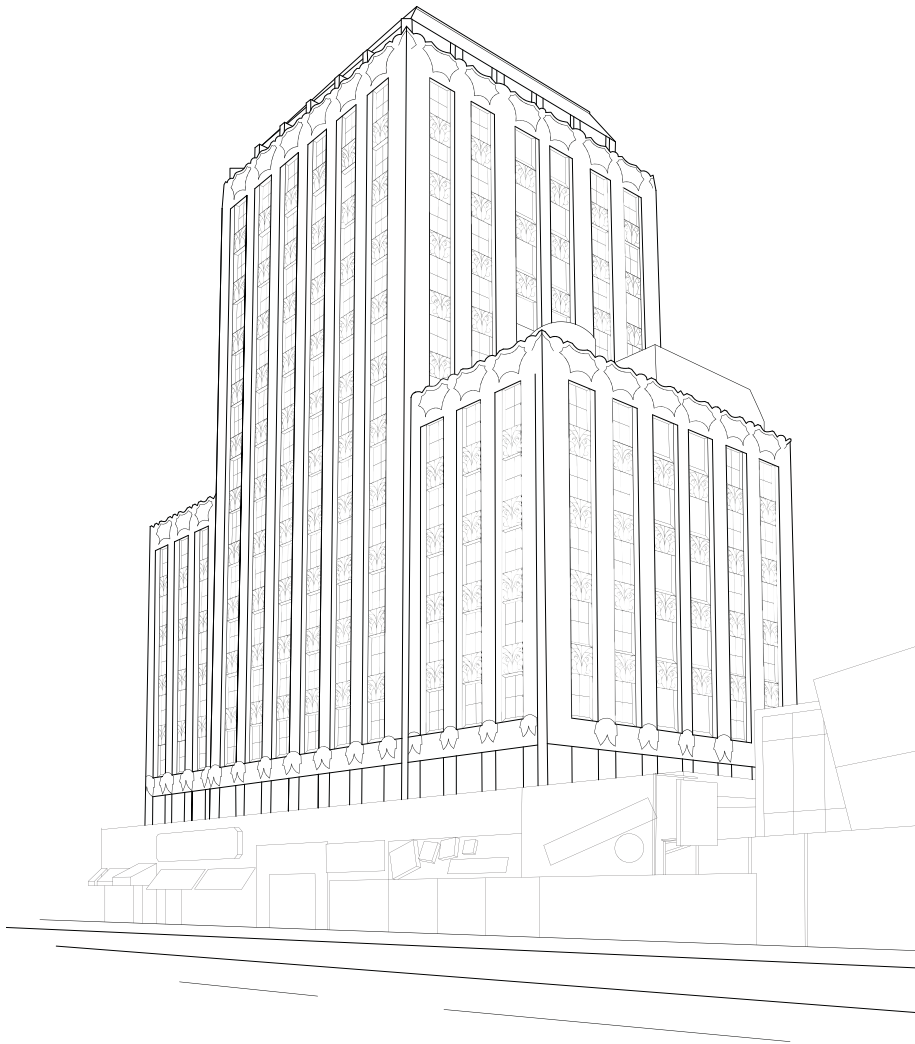




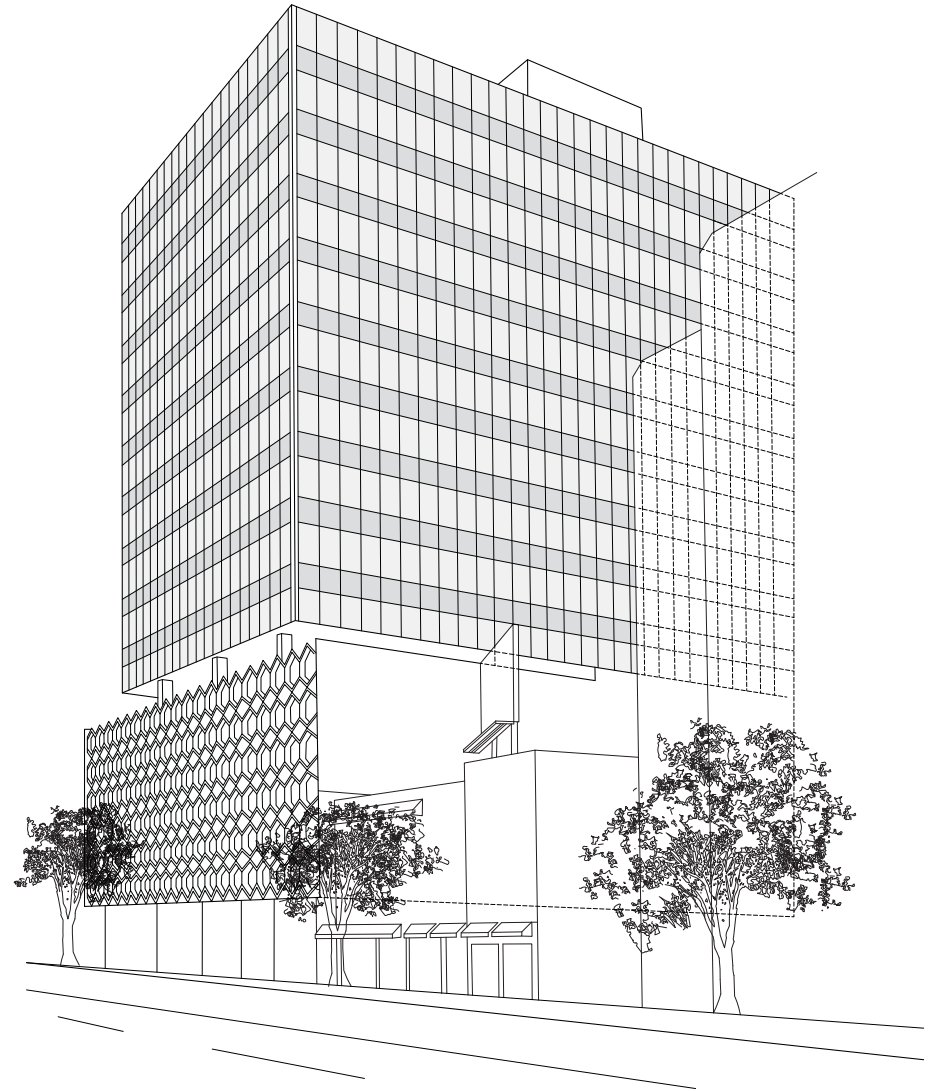
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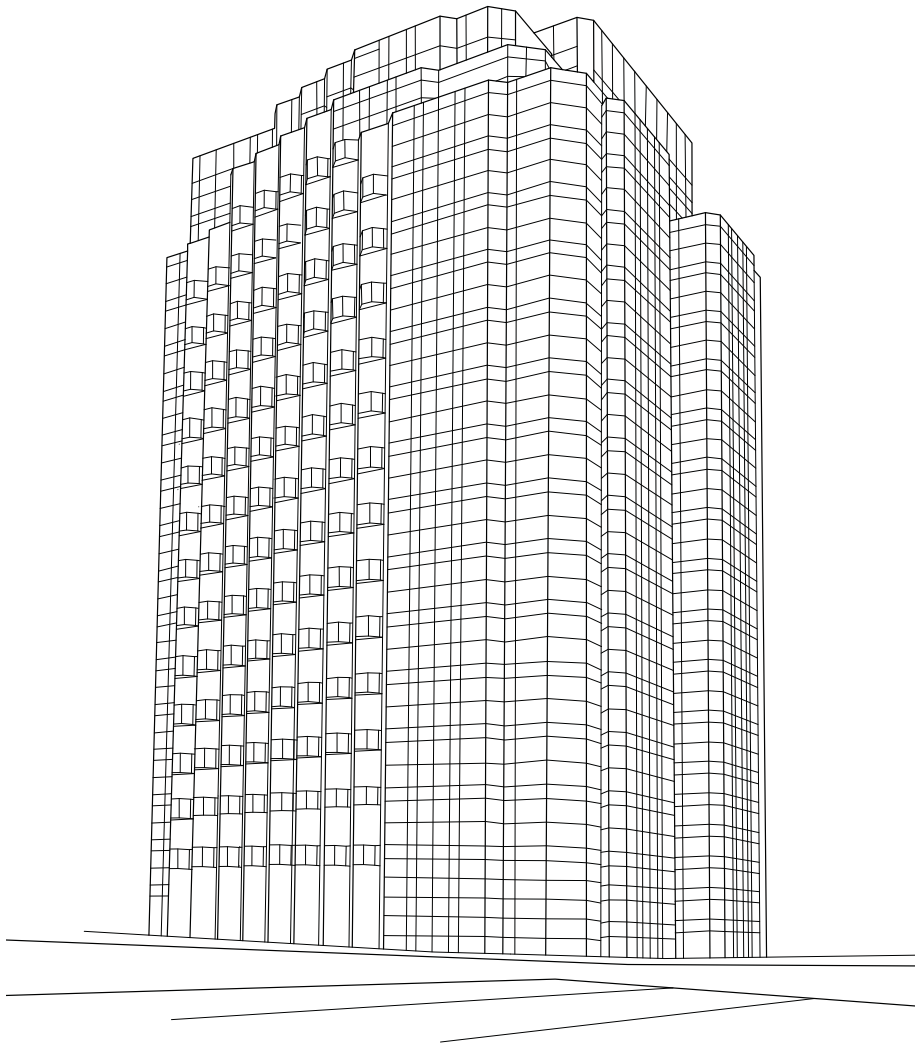
5455 Wilshire Boulevard



3875 Wilshire Boulevard



6120 Wilshire Boulevard



6100 Wilshire Boulevard

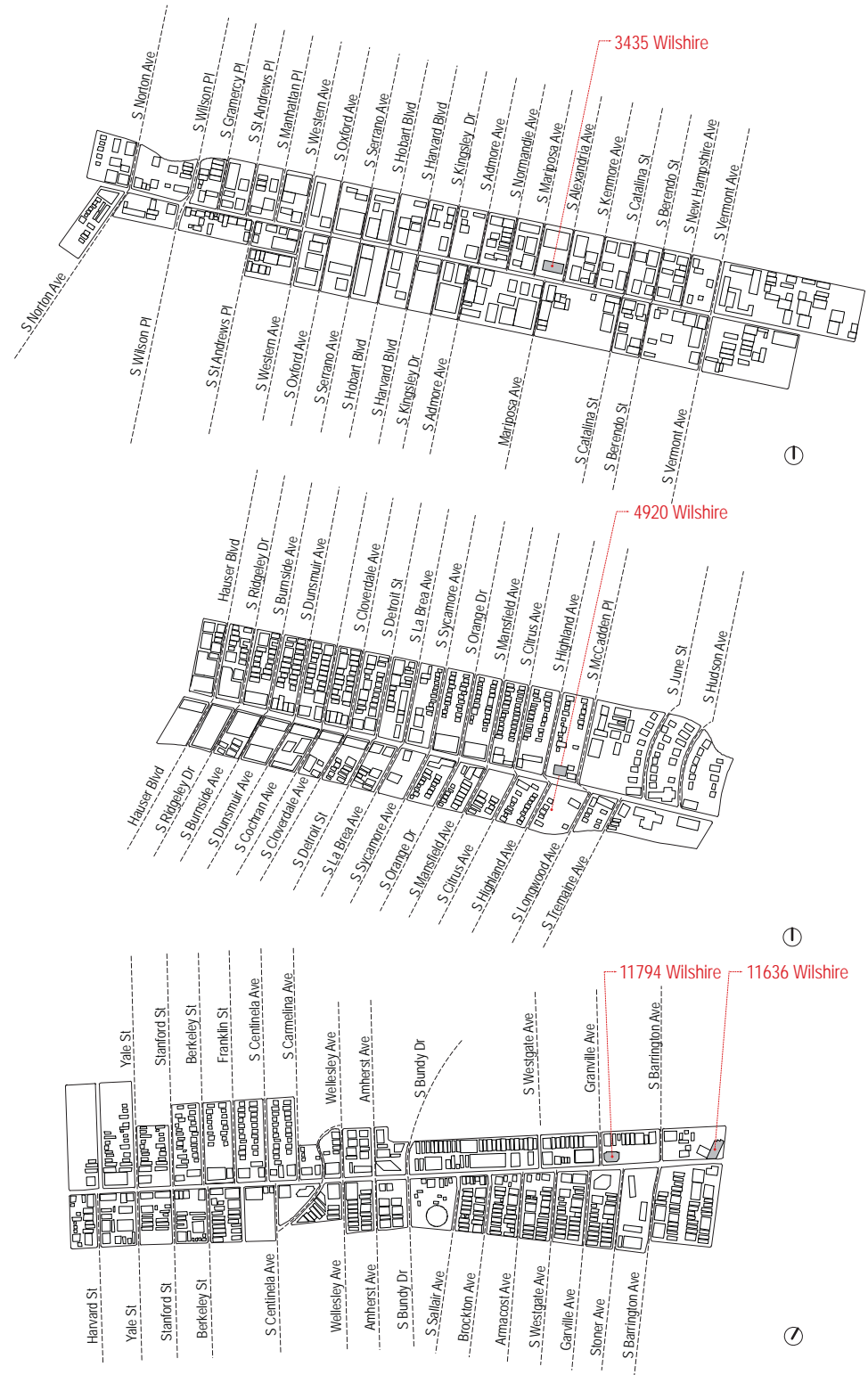


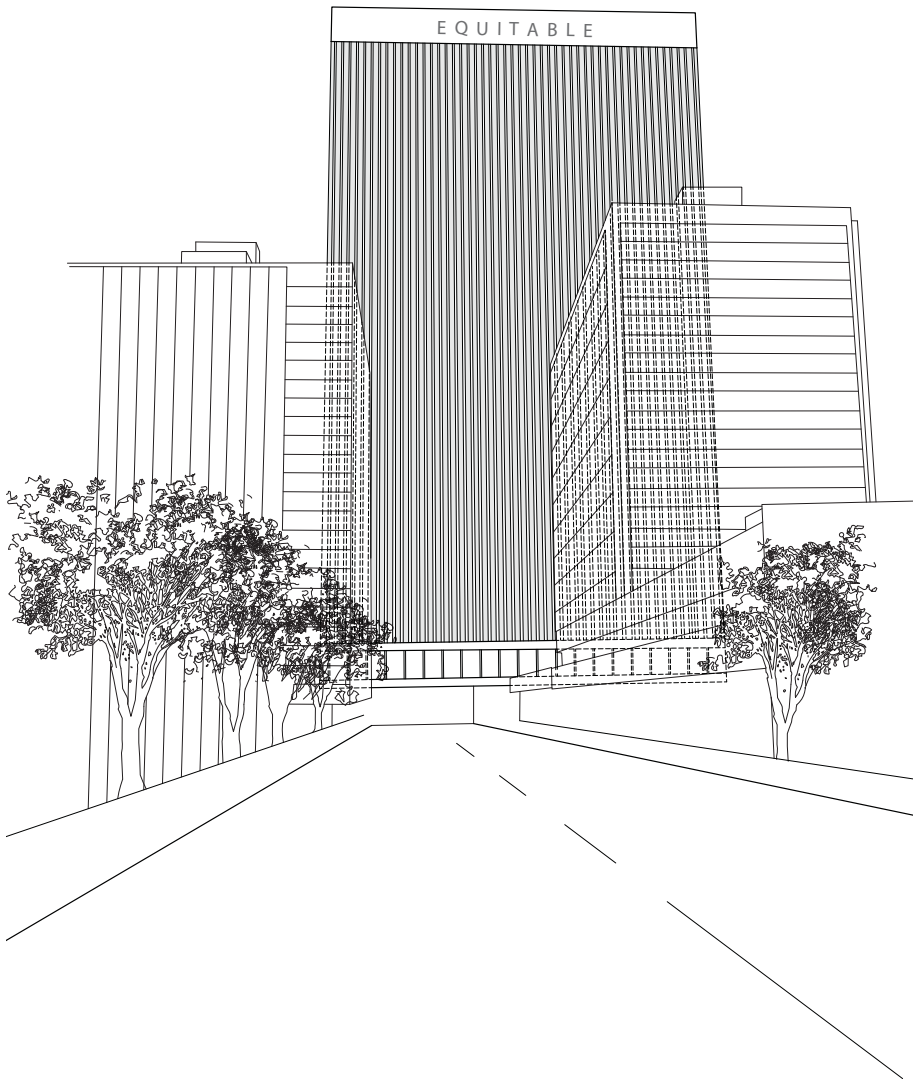
3440, 3460, & 3480 Wilshire Boulevard

Context

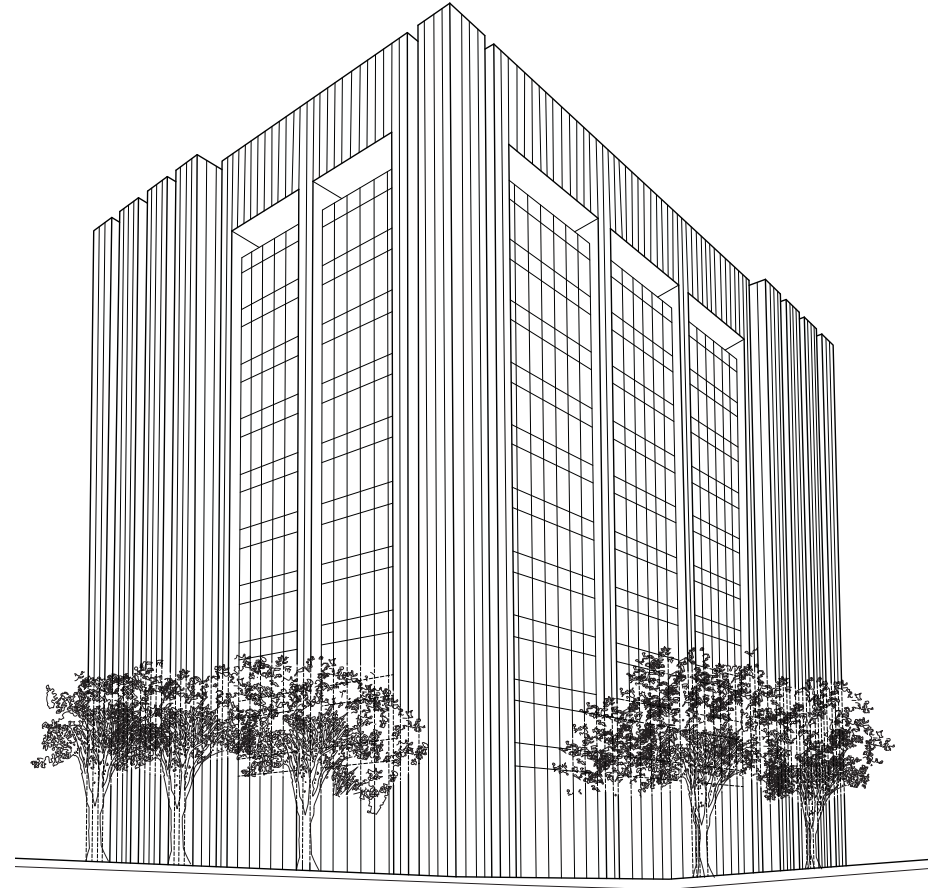
“Wilshire Boulevard, anyway, is certainly thickly settled. It is said to be the longest, widest boulevard in the country, intersected by 202 streets; one of them, Veteran Avenue, creates within Wilshire the busiest intersection in the world not on a superhighway. The first experiments with synchronized traffic lights were conducted here, as were the first Christmas street decorations and the first parking limits.”

-Charles Moore, *The City Observed: Los Angeles*, 1984.

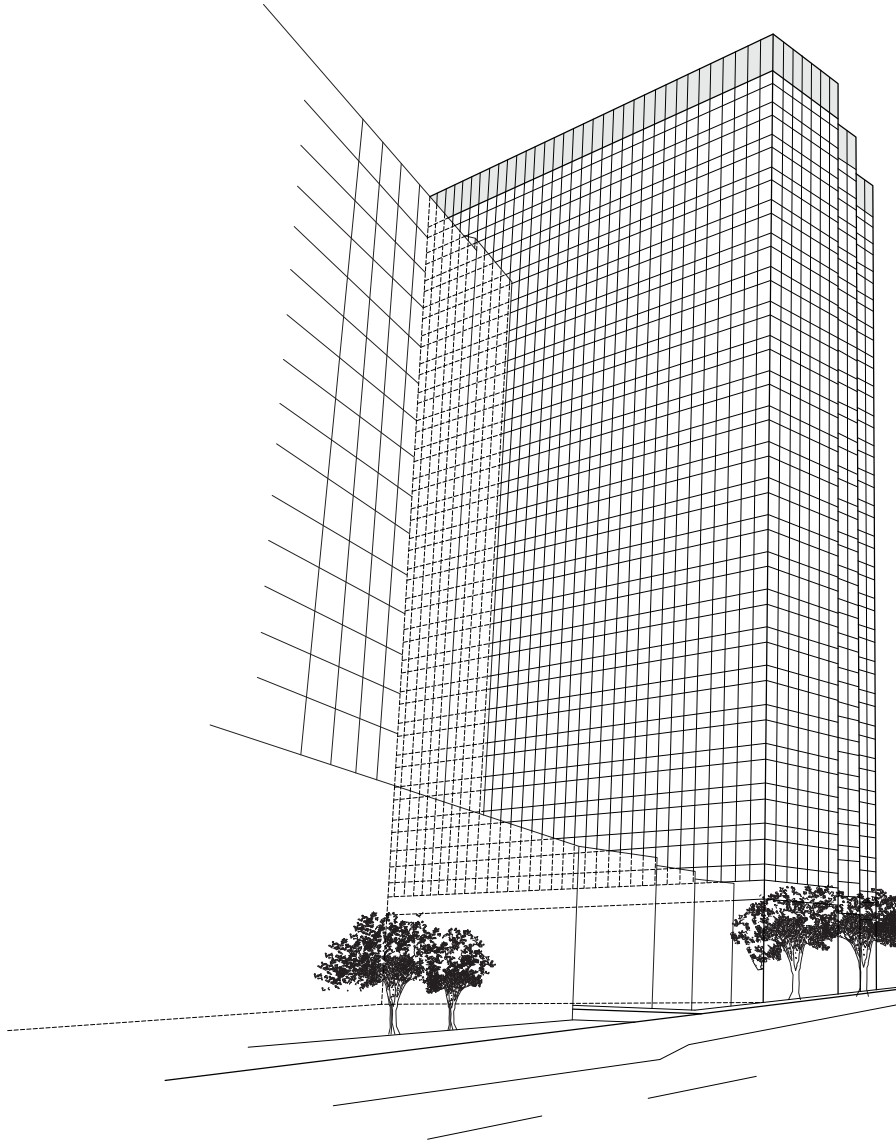




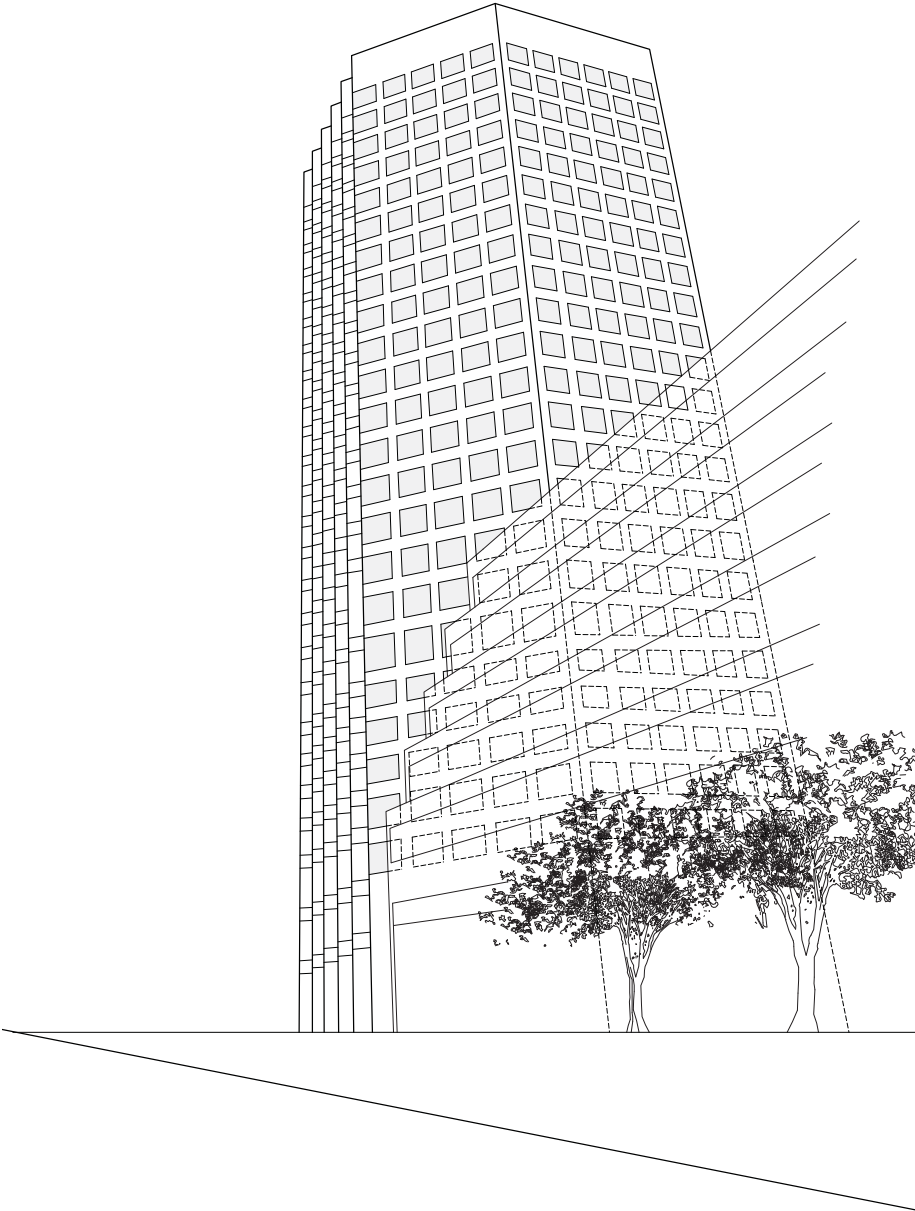
3435 Wilshire Boulevard



4920 Wilshire Boulevard



11636 Wilshire Boulevard

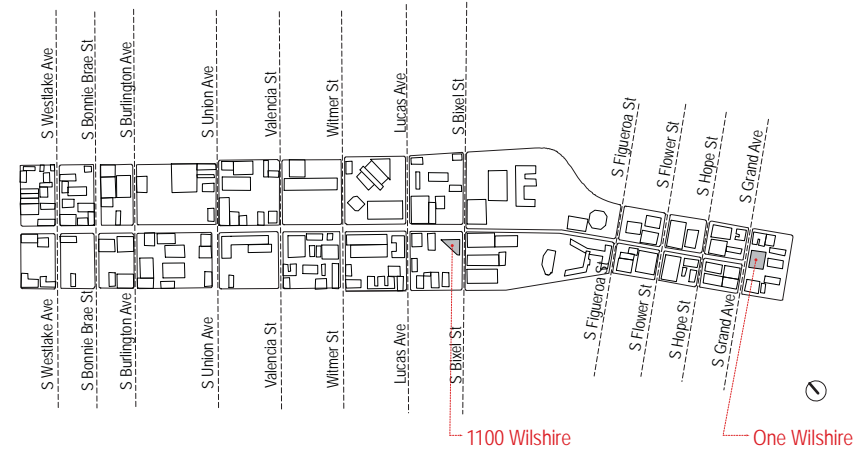


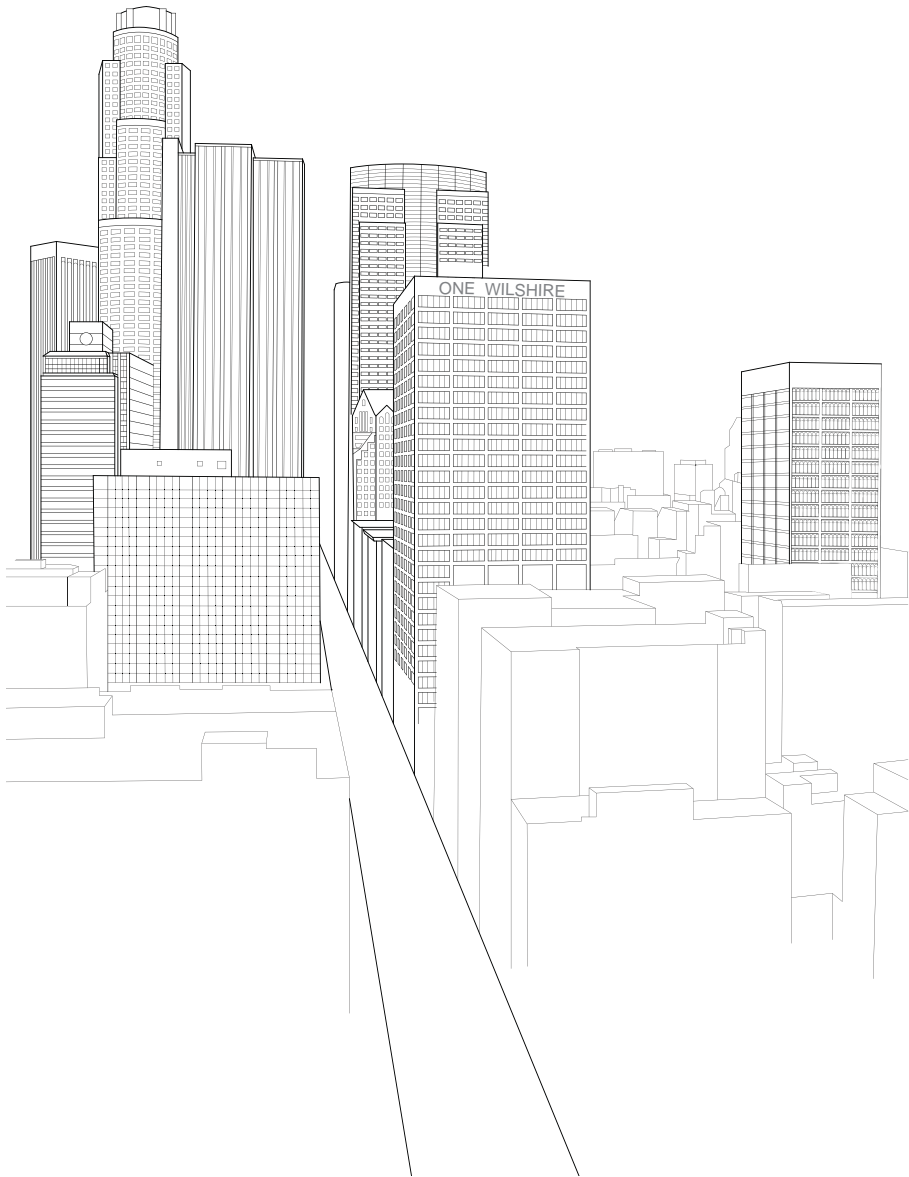
11794 Wilshire Boulevard

Program

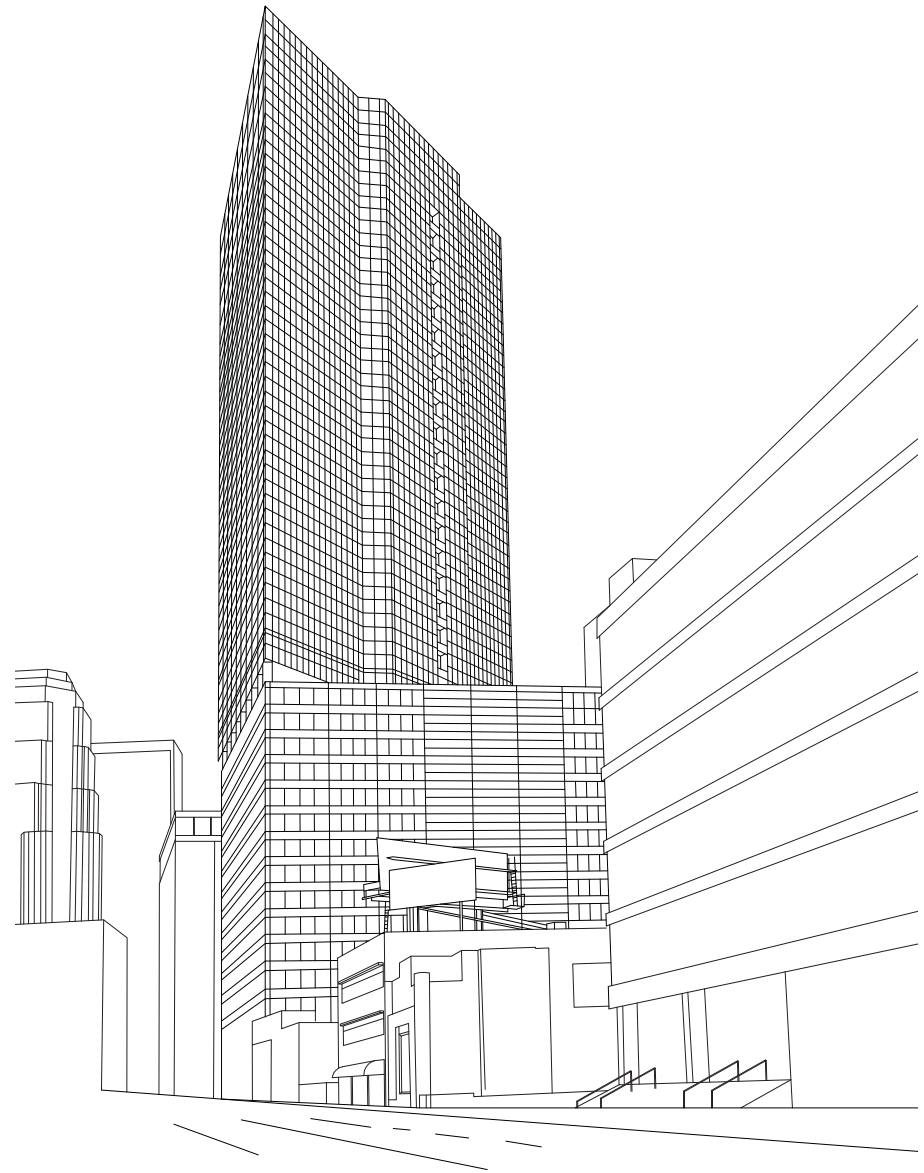
"The finest stores still aspire to be on Wilshire, and most foreign consulates in Los Angeles are located there. The boulevard functions as a media row for magazines, television producers, and the entertainment industry, as well as the home of the Academy of Motion Picture Sciences, Living space along it is always in high demand."

-Kevin Roderick, *Wilshire Boulevard: Grand Concourse of Los Angeles*, 2005.





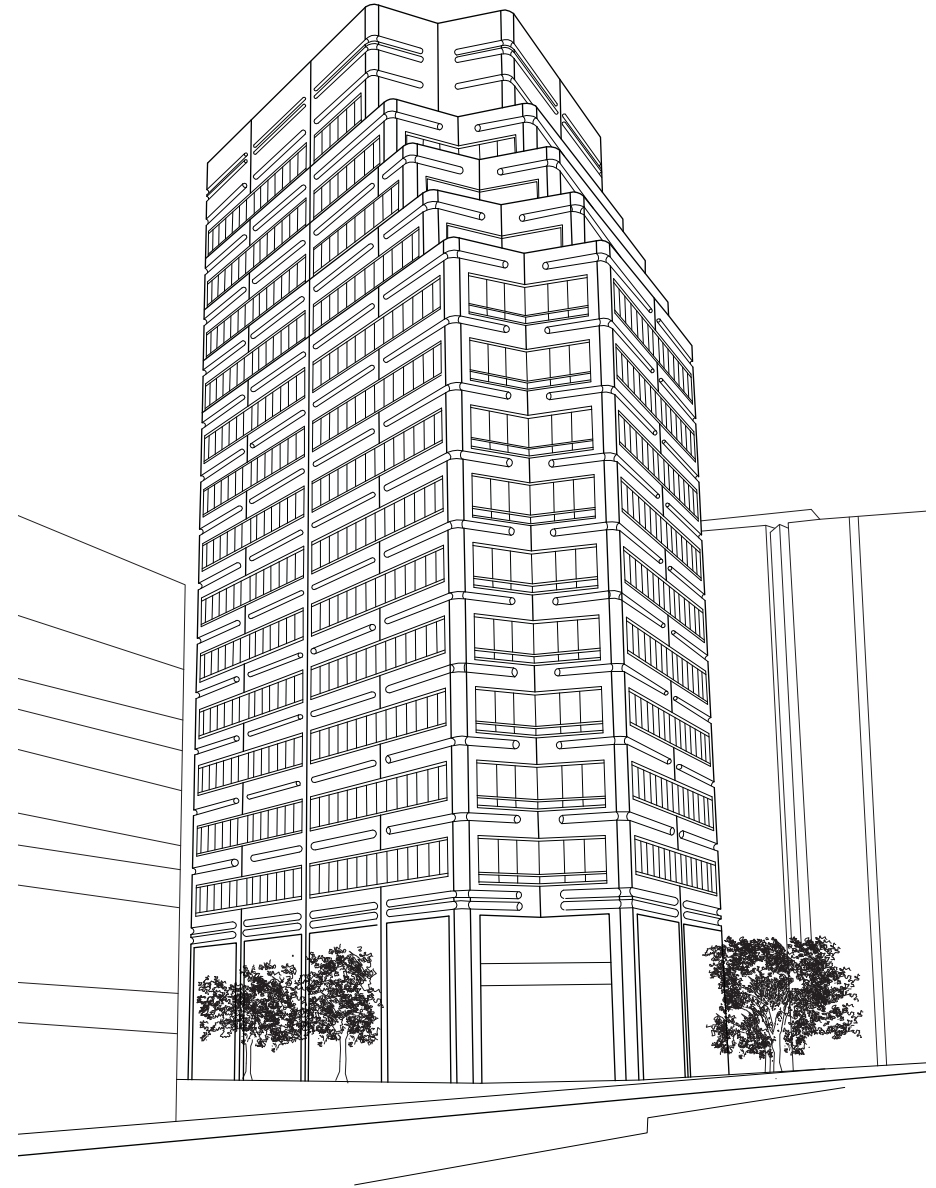
One Wilshire Boulevard (Listed as 624 South Grand)



1100 Wilshire Boulevard



10805, 10790, 10754 Wilshire Boulevard

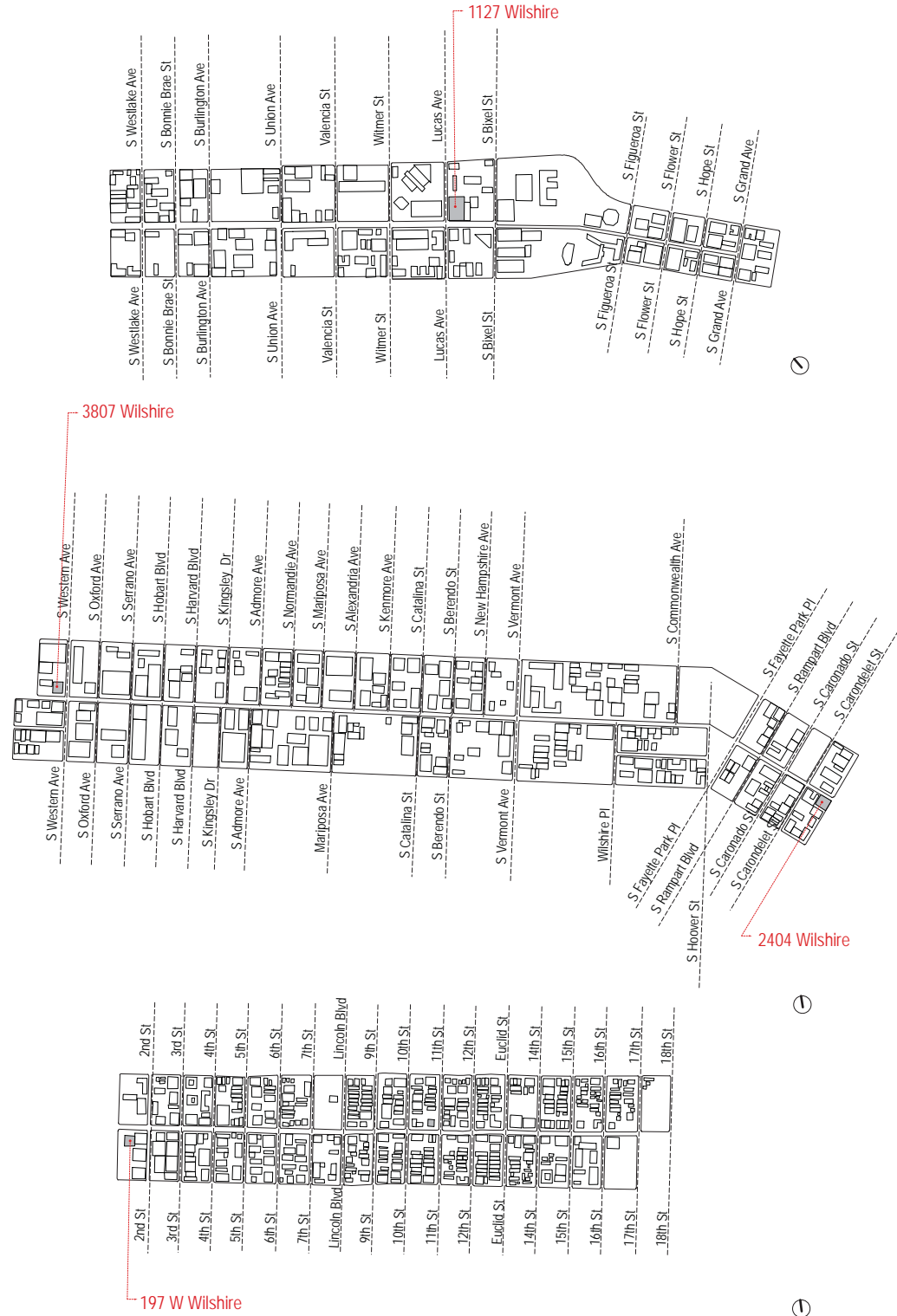


12352 Wilshire Boulevard

Facade

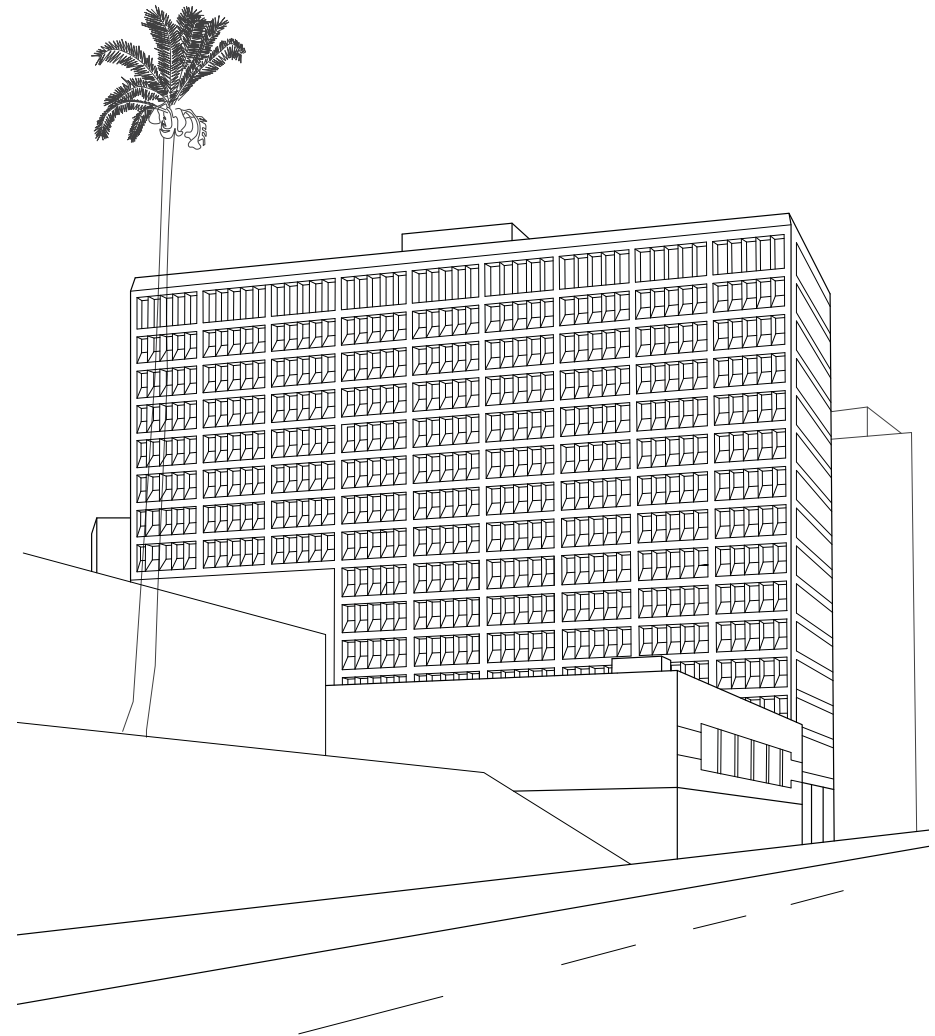
“No matter how banal, One Wilshire is the product of modernism and through its curtain wall grid, partakes in the movement’s blanket promise to deliver democracy through technology, visibility, and neutrality.”

-Kazys Varnelis and Robert Sumrell, *Ether: One Wilshire*, 2007.

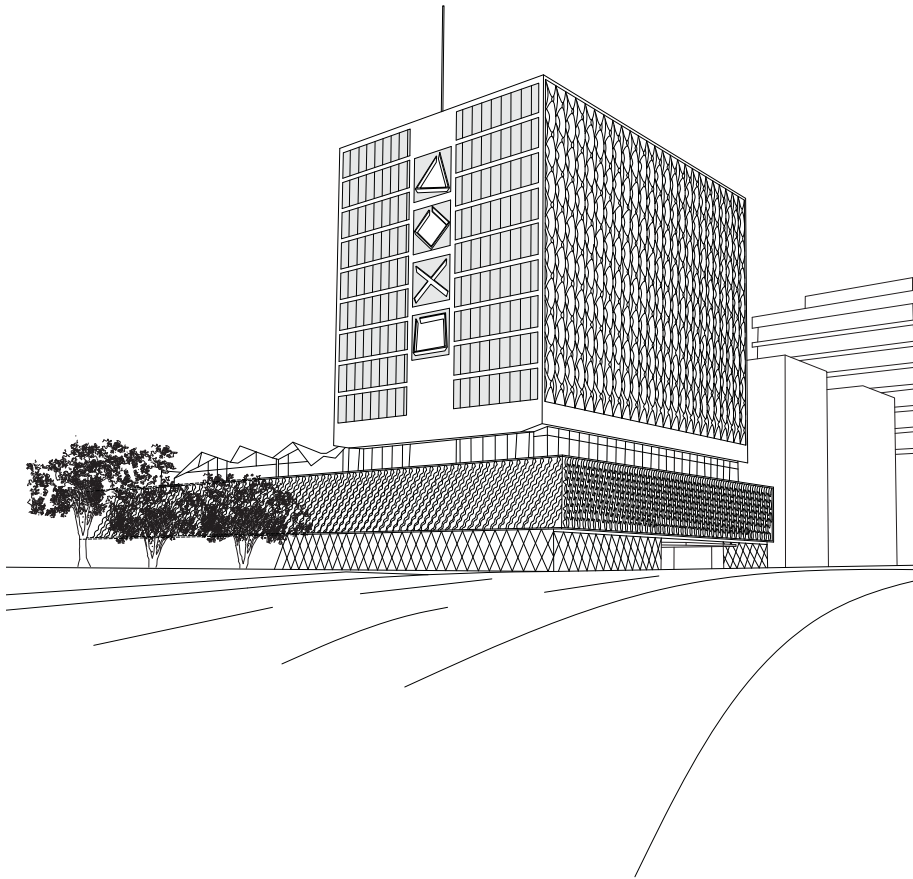




197 West Wilshire Boulevard



1127 Wilshire Boulevard



2404 Wilshire Boulevard



3808 Wilshire Boulevard

Epilogue

"Energy costs, and the fallout from environmental malaise will eventually trump the short-term thinking of a city heedlessly streamlined for the economy of real estate profit and the automobile. How that change will happen is yet to be seen; but surely Wilshire Boulevard, like the Los Angeles River, will remain."

-Lane Barden, *The Street: Wilshire Boulevard*, 2008.

Despite the global follies of the Post-9-11 architectural academy in Dubai, China, Manhattan, and beyond, we at Urban Operations still believe in the typology of the skyscraper, and embrace the latent potential within its ability to absorb and redistribute the sociological and psychological ephemera of capitalism into democratic terrain.

Wilshire Boulevard is only the beginning.

