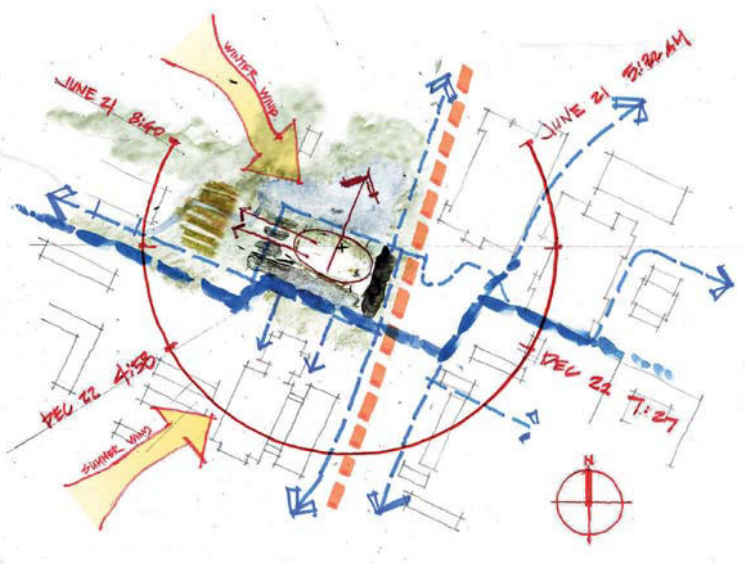


CONTEMPLATIVE
COMMONS
AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF VIRGINIA

IN PRAISE OF
SLOWNESS

CHARLOTTESVILLE,
USA



Study sketch: the project in its context and analysis of solar radiation, wind patterns, and access routes

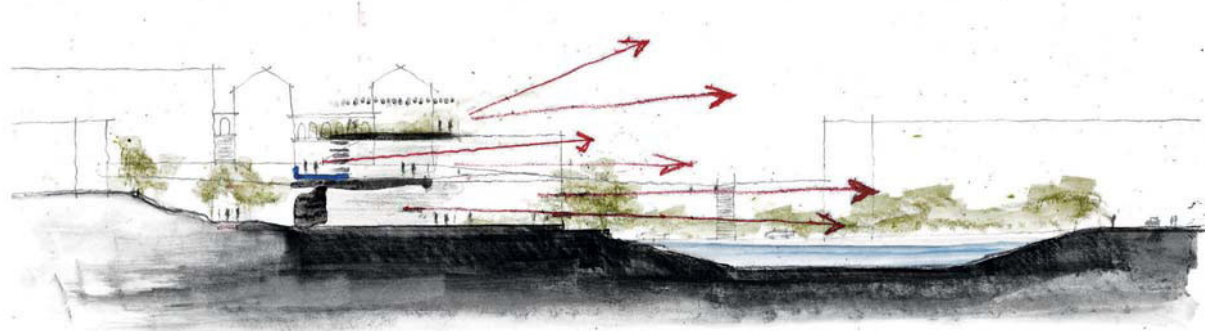
Aidlin Darling Design

VMDO Architects

Nelson Byrd Woltz



Study sketches:
views towards the outside



Today, the approach to designing a university campus is profoundly different than in the past. Previously, the primary goal of an architect tasked with designing a university was to define an image and language that reflected their vision but which also fostered social interaction and addressed students' regenerative needs by using light, atmosphere, and the interstitial spaces between buildings. Today, the paradigm and its priorities have changed. New needs have emerged, and new architectural models have been developed in response to them. To understand the context and archetype of the project under examination, certain key international references are useful, in particular, two campuses that have profoundly marked the history of contemporary architecture. Ahmedabad's Indian Institute of Management, designed by Louis Kahn, is widely studied. A homogeneous red-brick construction, its monumental geometries and central voids define spaces conceived as places for contemplation and convening. In contrast, the Otaniemi campus of Aalto University, designed by Alvar Aalto, stands as an emblematic example of the integration of architecture and landscape, the Nordic light a central design element. Today, however, as students' needs change, so too do the spaces built for them, the relentless pace often triggering a sense of detachment of their mind, body, and emotional well-being. As a result, today's university design tends to introduce dedicated spaces within campuses to provide "restorative respite" from our frenetic lifestyles. An exemplary case is the University of Virginia's Contemplative Commons project by Aidlin Darling Design, in collaboration with architect of record VMDO Architects and landscape architect Nelson Byrd Woltz. The underlying concept for this new multi-purpose facility is entirely posited on the psycho-physical well-being of its occupants. A central feature of the campus, it invites the university's 11 departments to participate in practices and research related to contemplative learning.

The new facility building is situated in a strategic location, creating a sort of inhabited bridge between the Academical Village, the original core of the University, and the student halls of residences. On the third level, an overhead walkway physically connects different parts of the campus while offering students opportunities for contemplative moments during their daily lives. Inside, the courtyard features a reflective black granite fountain that resonates with the natural landscape. A thin veil of water that can

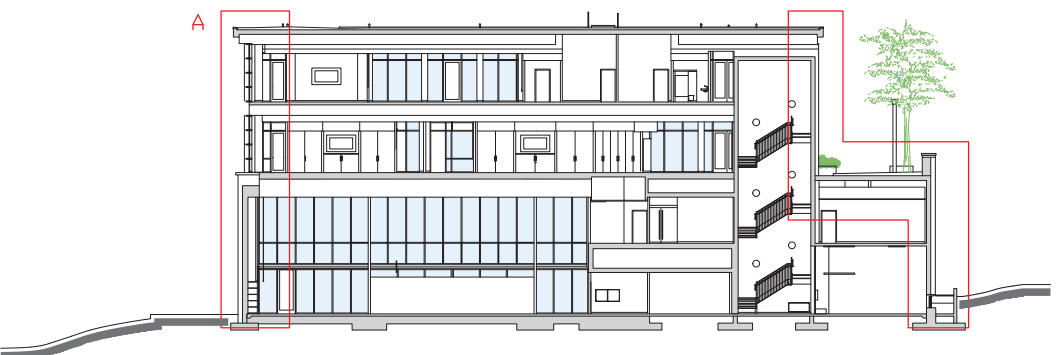
be walked across invites slowness, meditation, and connection with the elements. Albeit on a different scale, the compositional strategy echoes monastic cloisters, where empty space is key to creating a sense of suspension and reflection. Not merely serving a distributive function, these internal open areas are the hub of contemplative community life: protected, orderly spaces separated from the outside world, where the daily rhythm slows to encourage meditation and concentration. Although symbolically placed as a landmark building at the University entrance, the courtyard and outdoor spaces are shielded from a busy through-road.

While expressing a contemporary identity, the Contemplative Commons preserves a strong link with the University's past and its original architectural matrix, reinterpreting the design and original geometries of the historic campus. The proportions of the Commons align with those of the Academical Village – designed by Thomas Jefferson – establishing a clear continuity with the founding model. During his travels in Europe, Jefferson studied the works of Andrea Palladio at first hand, adopting his architectural language based on order and rationality. Palladio, in turn, had codified a system rooted in proportion, symmetry, and references to classical Roman architecture, as outlined in his *The Four Books of Architecture* (1570). The new Contemplative Commons clearly acknowledges its legacy, adopting Jefferson's intellectual and spatial principles to define open space, alternating enclosures with apertures, exhibiting a proportional rigor that silently aligns with the Academical Village. The project also establishes a porous relationship between architecture and landscape, blurring the boundary between the built environment and nature. Trees grow in the inner courtyard while native species follow the path of the elevated pedestrian walkway, bringing users into direct contact with the local vegetation on various scales. The combination of contemplation, connection, and research of this design typology stands as a novel, unprecedented concept for a university, but also as a potential model to be replicated on other campuses concerned with student well-being.

Damiano Di Mele

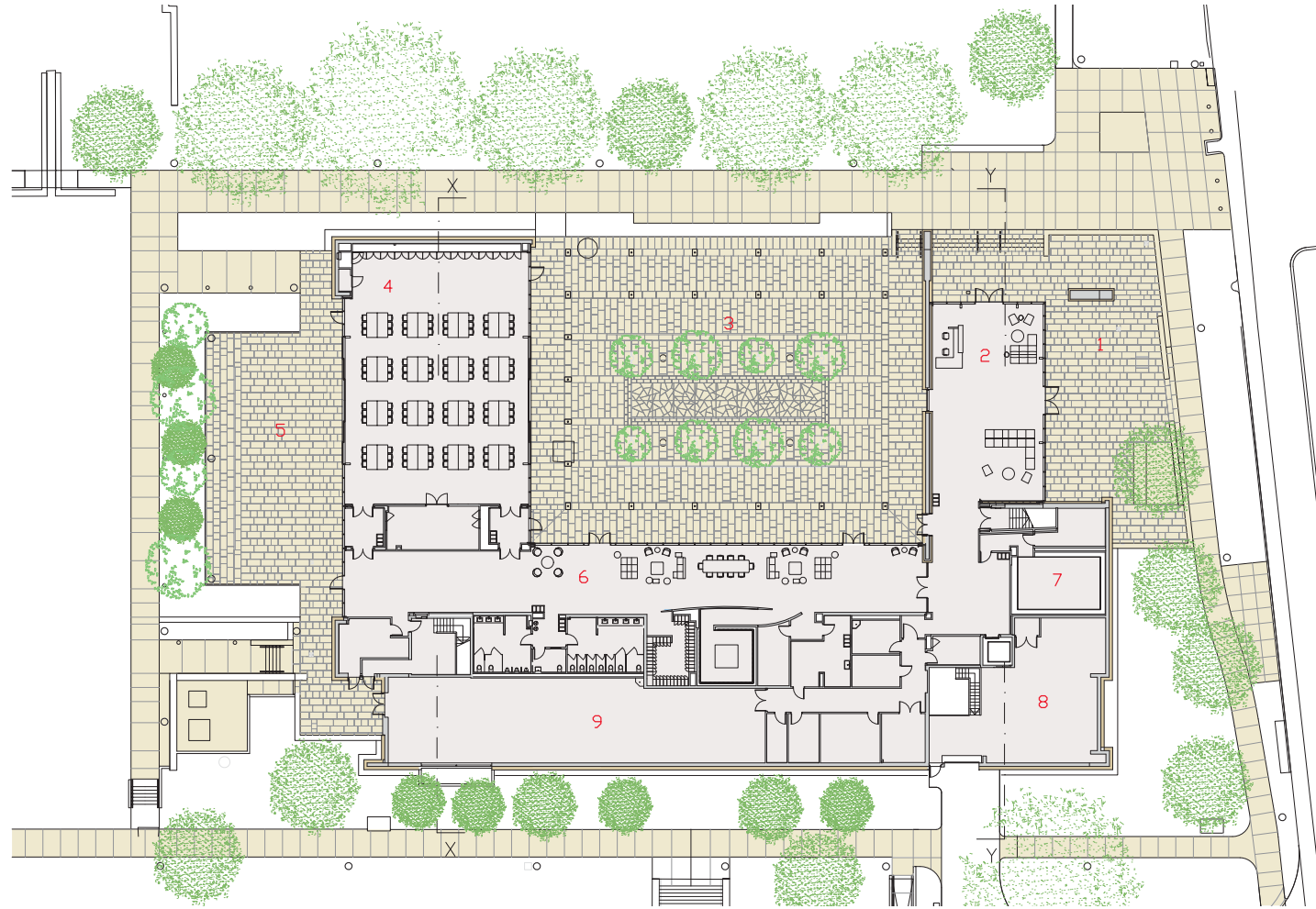


YY section – Scale 1:500



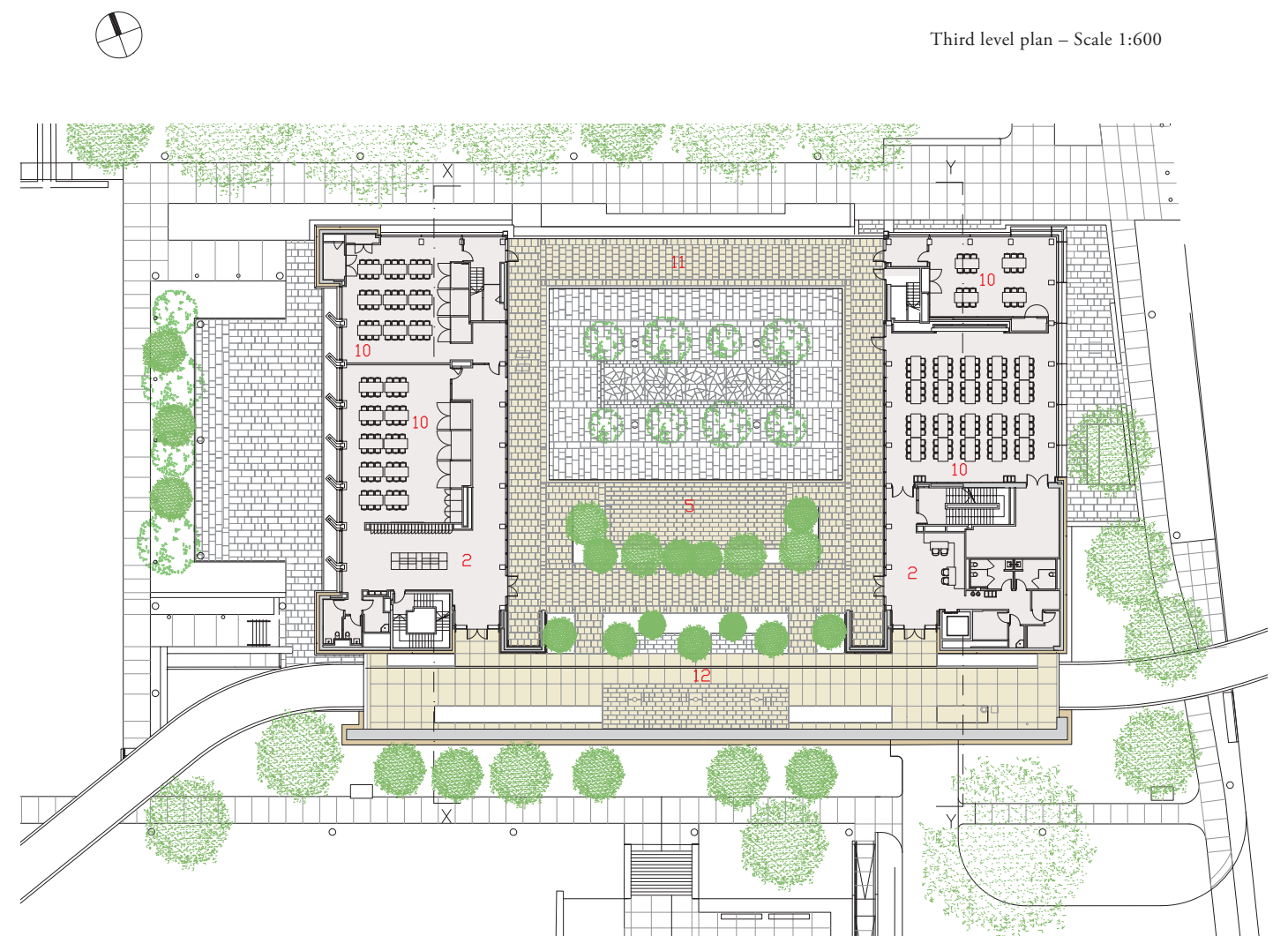
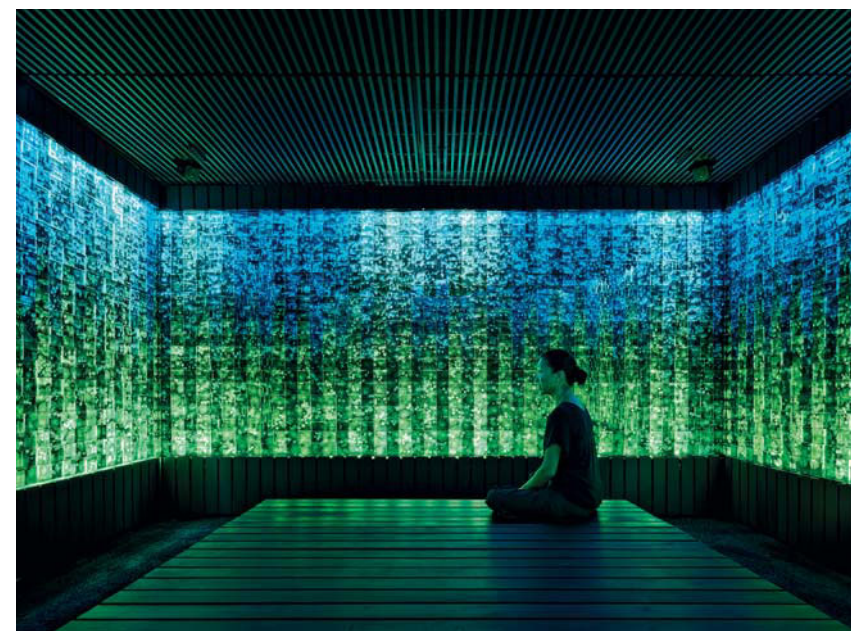
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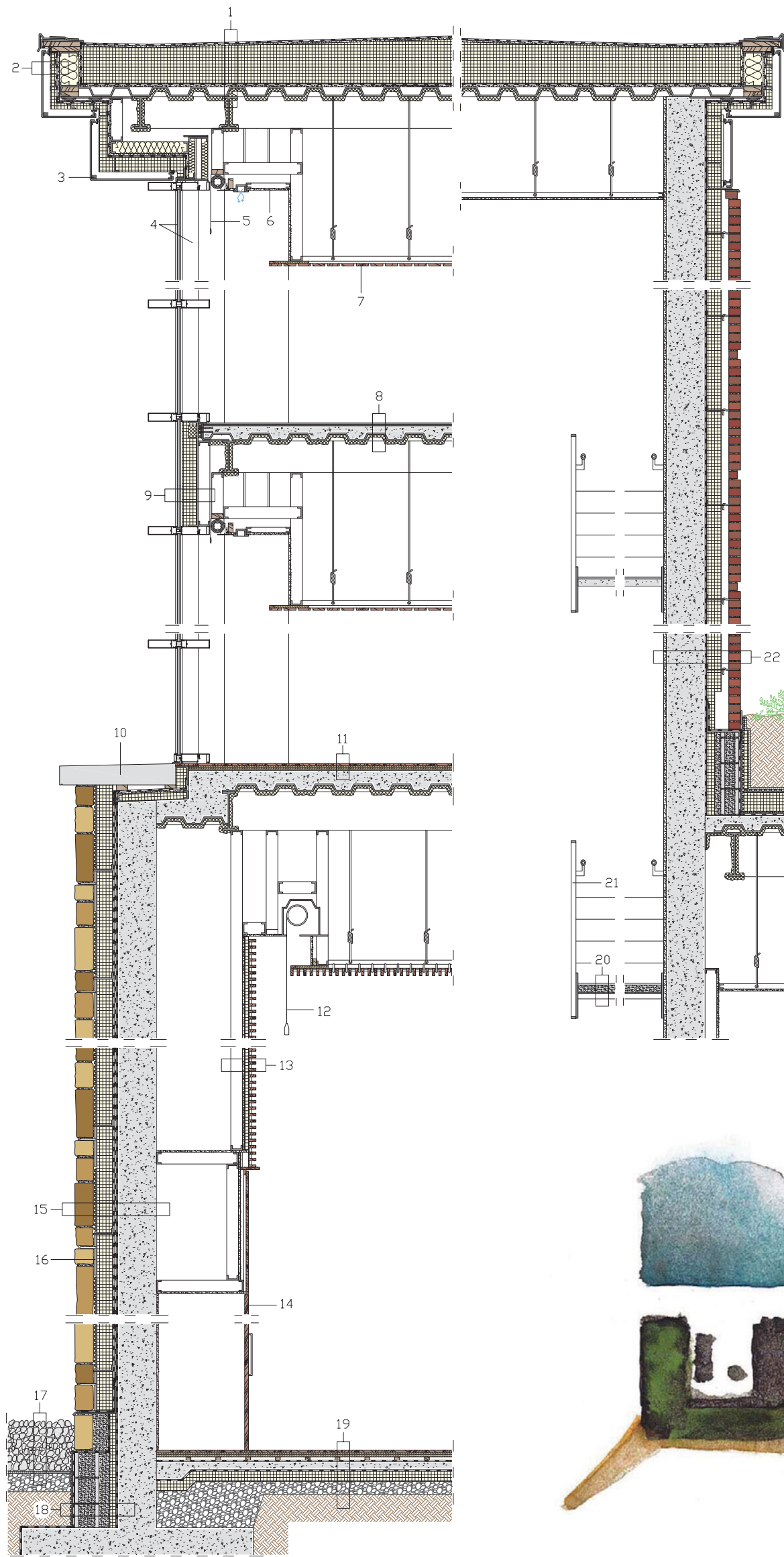


First level plan – Scale 1:600

- | | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1- Entry forecourt | 4- Multifunctional hall | 7- <i>Ninfæo</i> art installation | 10- Studio |
| 2- Lobby | 5- Terrace | 8- Loading dock | 11- Loggia |
| 3- Courtyard | 6- Gallery | 9- Back of house | 12- Living Bridge |



Third level plan – Scale 1:600

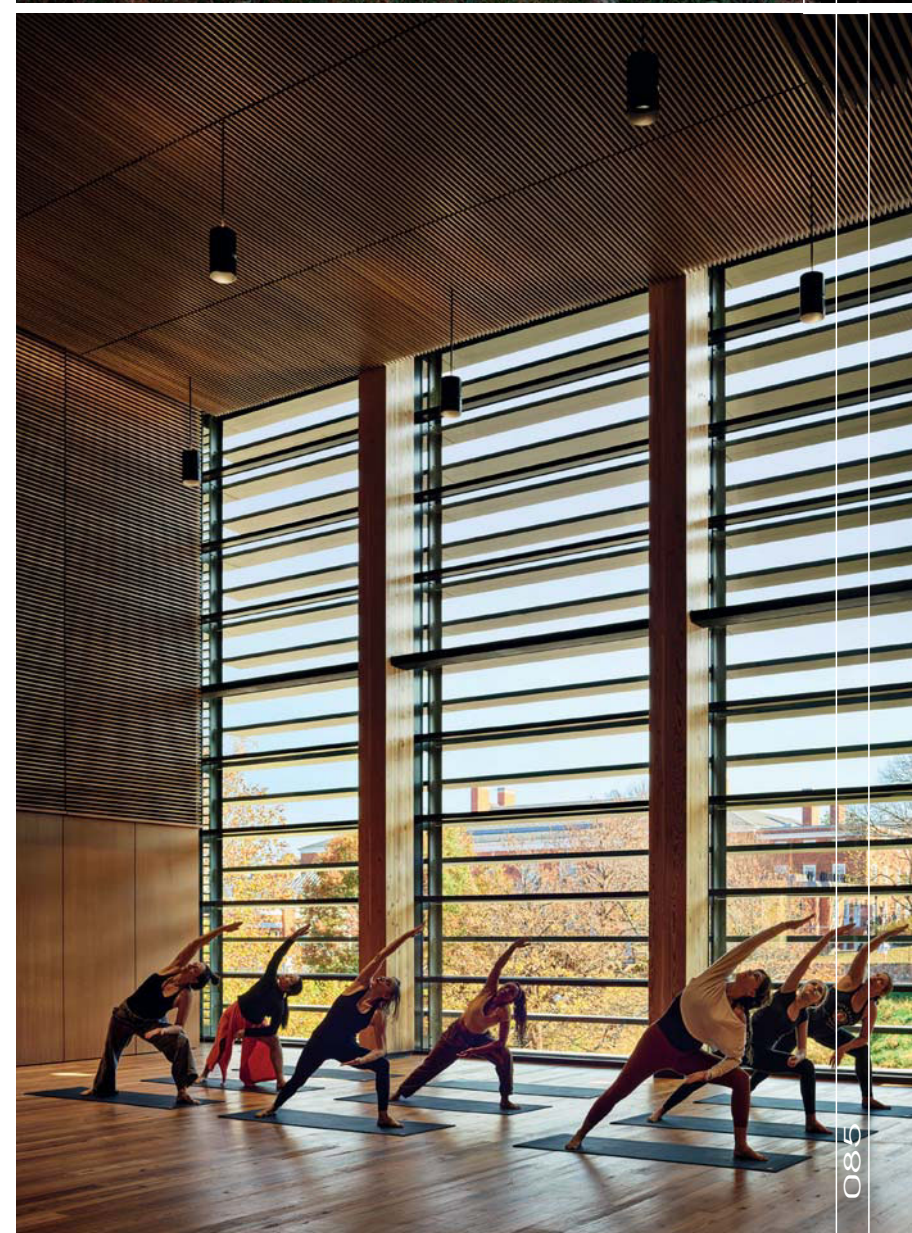
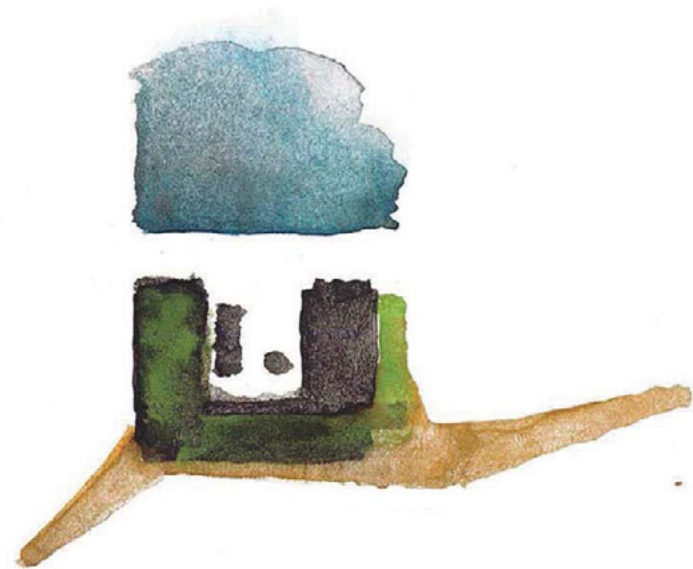


Detail A: construction system
Vertical section – Scale 1:40

- 1- Roofing membrane, 1/2" (13 mm) substrate board, tapered polyisocyanurate insulation, vapor retarder, 5/8" (16 mm) coverboard, corrugated steel deck, wide-flange steel beam, sprayed fire-resistive material
- 2- Metal panel, fiberglass Z-girts, 2" (50 mm) mineral fiber insulation, vapor retarder, 1/2" (13 mm) glass-mat gypsum sheathing, steel C-channel framing, 5 7/8" (150 mm) insulation
- 3- Weep and baffle
- 4- Aluminum curtain wall, 1/4 - 1/2 - 1/4" (6/13/6 mm) IGU

- 5- Roller shade
- 6- Gypsum board soffit
- 7- Suspended acoustical wood ceiling assembly
- 8- Carpet, adhesive, concrete slab on metal deck, sprayed fire-resistive material
- 9- IGU spandrel, rigid insulation, sheet metal, steel channel framing
- 10- Precast concrete panel
- 11- 5/8" (16 mm) engineered heart pine flooring, double 1 3/8" (36 mm) OSB panels
- 12- Retractable projector screen
- 13- Acoustical wood slats, rigid insulation, metal supports, gypsum board, steel C-channels
- 14- Oak-veneered door panel
- 15- Local stone blocks, drainage

- board, mineral wool insulation, 2-ply waterproofing membrane, vapor retarder, 11 3/4" (300 mm) reinforced concrete wall
- 16- Adjustable masonry anchor
- 17- Gravel, filter fabric, drainage gravel
- 18- Backfill, drainage board, waterproofing membrane, solid-grouted CMU, rigid insulation, vapor retarder
- 19- 5/8" (16 mm) engineered wood flooring, double 1 3/8" (36 mm) OSB panels, wood sleepers, vapor retarder, 2 1/2" (65 mm) reinforced concrete topping slab, waterproofing membrane, 3 1/8" (80 mm) rigid insulation, gravel base, subgrade
- 20- Porcelain tile stairs, concrete treads, steel structure
- 21- Steel guardrail
- 22- 3 1/2" (90 mm) brick veneer, ventilated cavity, 4 3/4" (120 mm) rigid insulation, vapor retarder, 11 3/4" (300 mm) reinforced concrete wall, interior plaster finish
- 23- Steel planter
- 24- 3 1/2" (90 mm) concrete paving, radiant snow-melt piping, aggregate base, filter fabric, drainage board, 5 1/2" (140 mm) rigid insulation, drainage board, waterproofing membrane
- 25- Suspended gypsum board ceiling assembly
- 26- Gypsum board furred wall assembly, steel channel framing
- 27- Concrete flooring
- 28- Fixed metal louver
- 29- Air intake grill





CREDITS

Location: Charlottesville, Virginia, USA – **Gross Floor Area:** 5,295 m² – **Design Architect:** Aidlin Darling Design – **Architect of Record:** VMDO Architects – **Landscape Architect:** Nelson Byrd Woltz – **Main Contractor:** Hourigan

Consultants

Structural: Springpoint Structural – **MEP:** AEI/Affiliated Engineers – **Civil:** TRC – **Lighting:** Apeiro Design, Pivotal Lighting Design – **AV:** Apeiro Design – **IT and Security:** NV5 – **Programming:** Brightspot Strategy (now a part of Buro Happold) – **Code Compliance:** Jensen Hughes – **Food Services:** Tipton Associates – **Sustainability:** RE:4M – **Specifications:** Long Green Specs – **Hardware:** Brown's Lock & Safe – **Vegetated Roof:** Studio Sustena – **Ninfeo Installation Artist:** Wolfgang Buttress

Outdoor lighting: BEGA
Classroom tables: Knoll
Furniture: Herman Miller

Photography: Matthew Millman
All images courtesy of Aidlin Darling Design