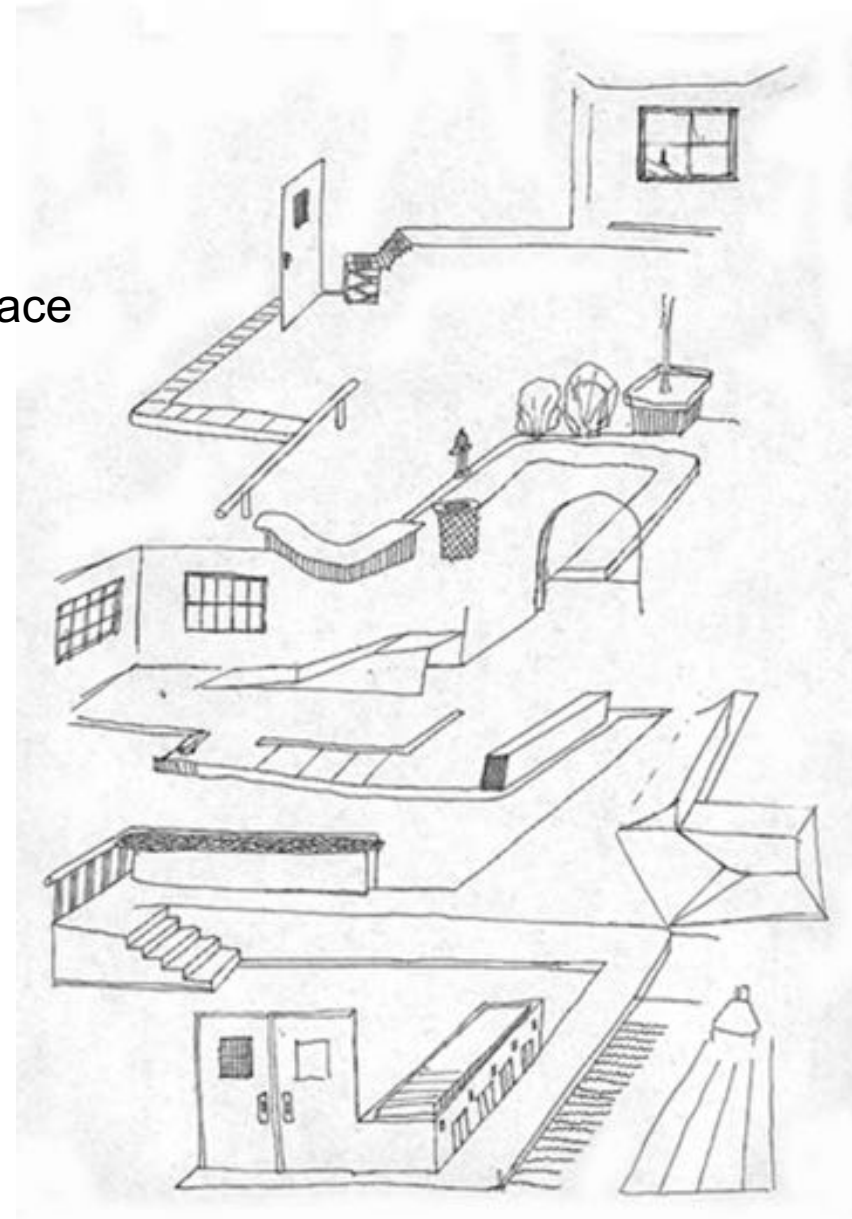
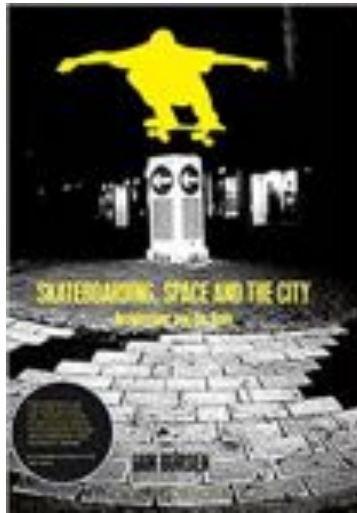


The Layered Experience of Public Space

A Study of the New York Public Library

William Mangold





Casa Pas by Francois Perrin and Gil Lebon Delapointe

“Space becomes a uniform entity, a constant layer through the city that can be utilized, in this case, as a surface on which to skate... Skaters oscillate from a macro conception of space to a micro one of the architectural element; they move from the open canvas of the urban realm to the close focus of a specific wall, bench, fire hydrant, curb, or rail.” (Borden, p187)





Stills from *My Playground*





1979 Letter from William Whyte regarding Bryant Park and New York Public Library Recommendations for Library Front

Open up the terrace. Remove the privet hedges, the floodlights, and the trees at the rear; plant new trees on the front of the terrace. This is the recommendation of the landscape architects in the Cambridge Seven proposal. To the basics of it, Amen.

Promote use of the terrace with chairs and tables and an attractive food facility.

Clean the front of the library. It would be a grand thing to do in any event, but now there is particular reason. With the cleaning of Grand Central and the new amenities in the area there is going to be a dramatic transformation in the feel of the area. It would be great if the Library could anticipate this, and strengthen it, with its own clean up. Since it would be part of a larger effort to revitalize the area it would be no cosmetic move, but an act of affirmation.



To: The Rockefeller Brothers Fund

November 26, 1979

From: William H. Whyte

Revitalization of Bryant Park-Public Library front

Gist: Bryant Park and the front of the Public Library are now dominated by dope dealers. But they are not the cause of the problem. The basic problem is under-use. It has been for a long time. It ante-dated the invasion of the dope dealers and in part induced it.

Access is the nub of the matter. Psychologically, as well as physically, Bryant Park is a hidden place, and so, to a surprising degree, is a large part of the Library's space. Relatively few people use these spaces, nor are they invited to.

It is the thesis of this report that the best way to meet the problem is to promote the widest possible use and enjoyment by people. To this end there is recommended a major program with concurrent action on four components: (1) structural changes to open up access; (2) programming to induce use and build a constituency; (3) A beefed up maintenance effort with supplementary crew; (4) A broadened policing effort to include supplemental guards and other full time personnel.

There is a great opportunity for action. The situation is bad, yes, but so bad it's good, and from this level even modest actions can have a dramatic effect on these spaces and peoples' perception of them. It's not just a matter of reclamation. Both of these spaces have potentials that have never been realized and there is every reason they should be among the greatest and most enjoyable of spaces.

First, let me document the charge of under-use.

Back in 1971 and 1972 --comparatively good years for Bryant Park-- my group was doing a comparative study of public spaces. At that time the average number of people to be found at Bryant during the noon period on a nice sunny day was about 1,000, with peaks up to about 1400. In 1974, as the very thorough Wentworth-Nager study showed, usage was at about the same level.

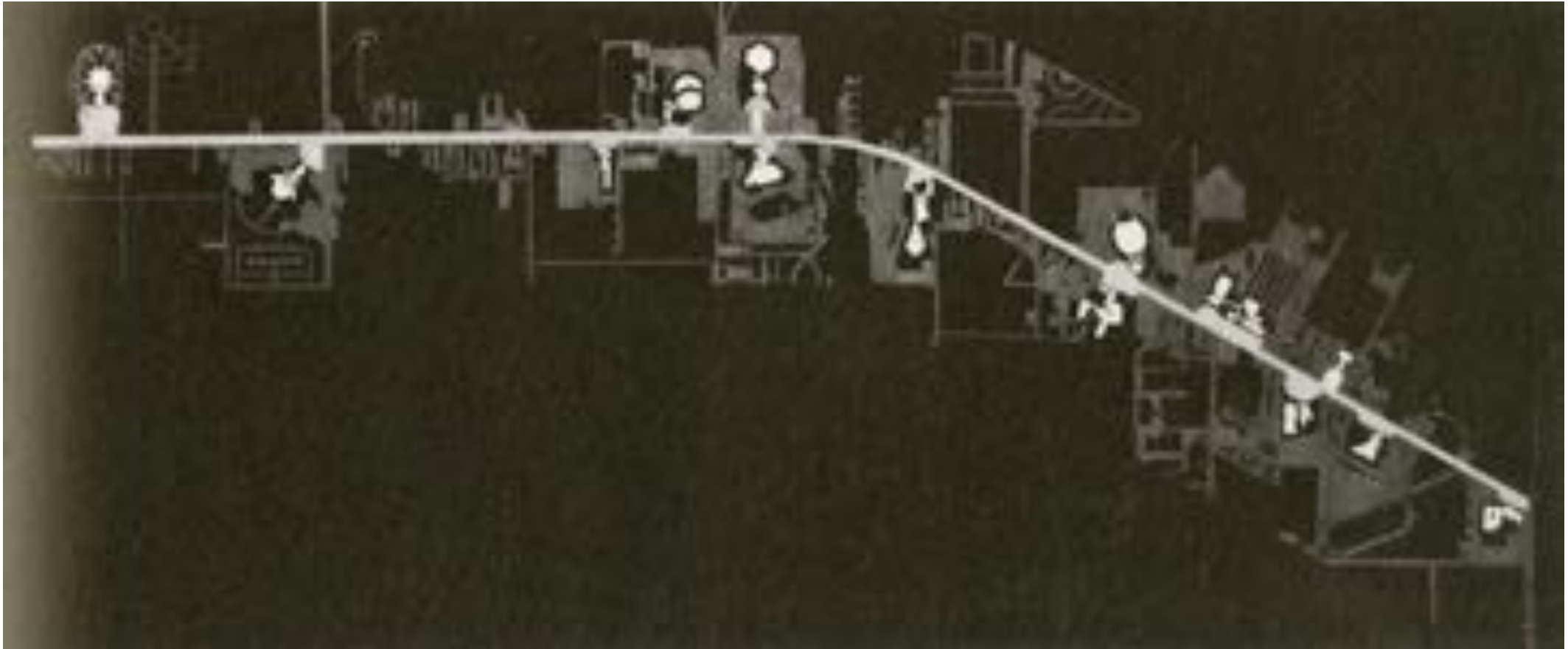
The figures are lower today. I have no summer counts but to judge by the sightings over a number of very warm and pleasant days in October, usage is off by a third to a half. Interestingly, so is the proportion of females--always a valuable indicator. In the early and mid seventies it was



Flourishing happens at the smallest scale.



Even though these activities feel so small on the scale of "plans," this is the scale that is so often overlooked.



Venturi and Scott Brown, Noll's Las Vegas from *Learning from Las Vegas*



PLACE ANALYSIS, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

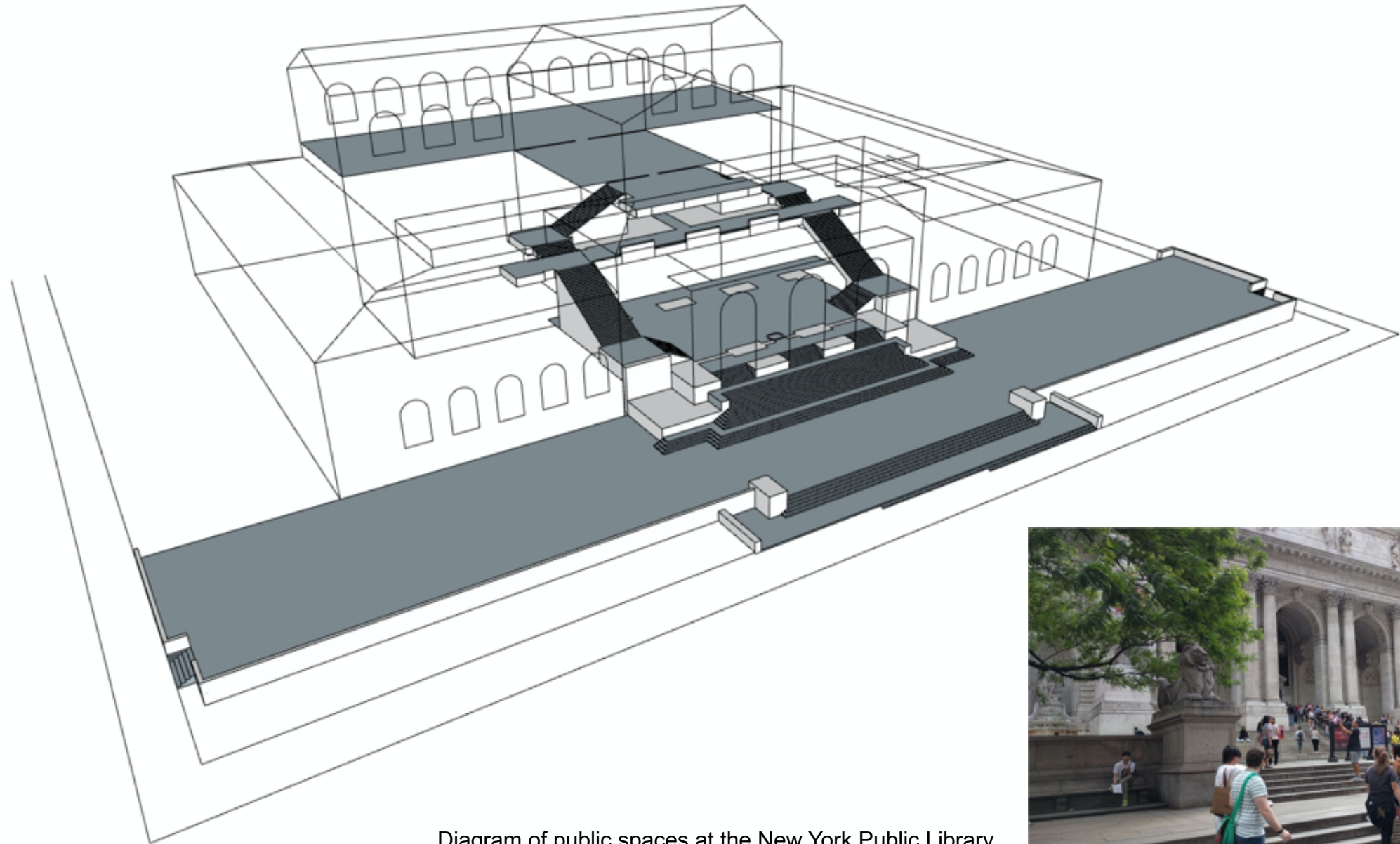
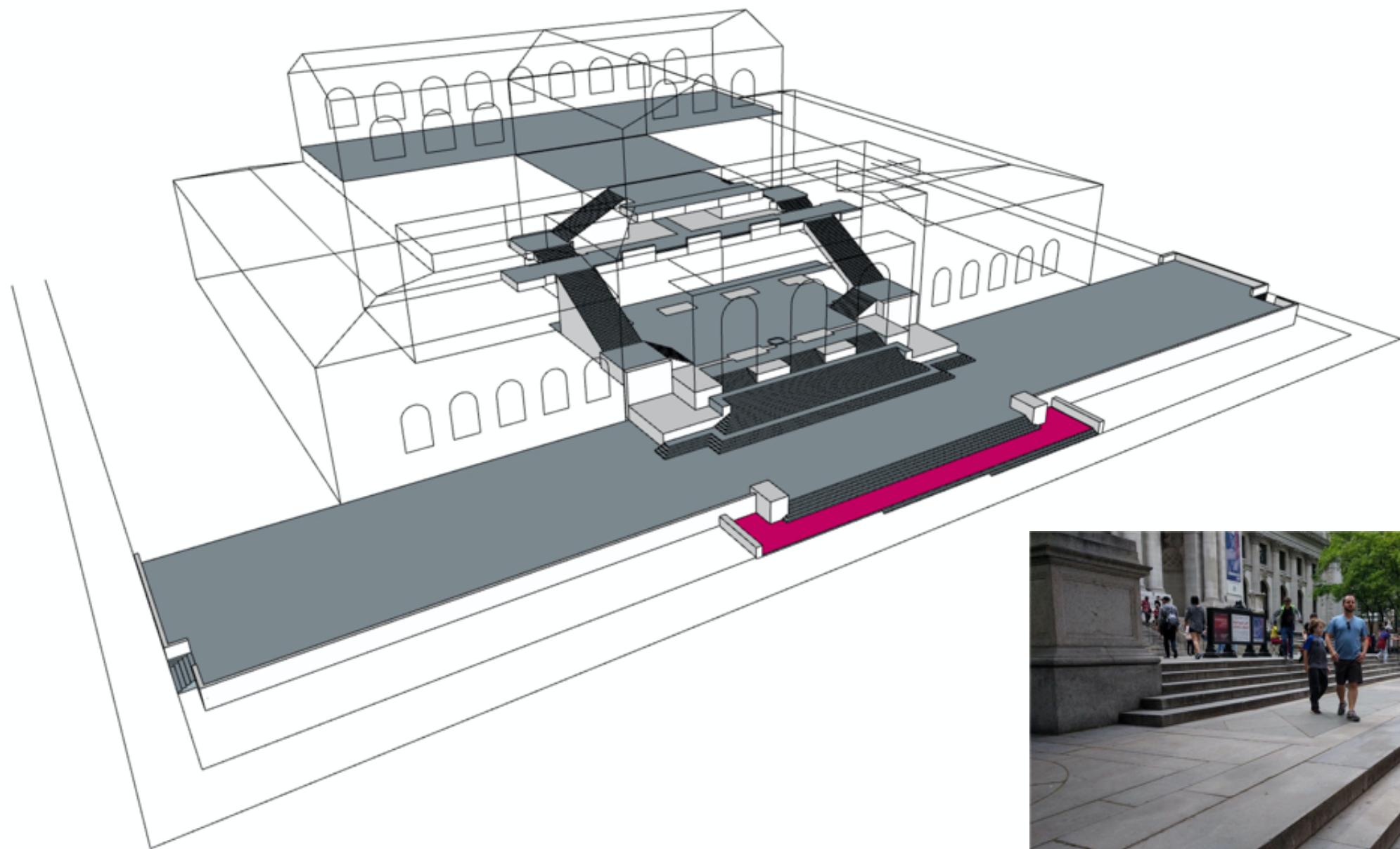
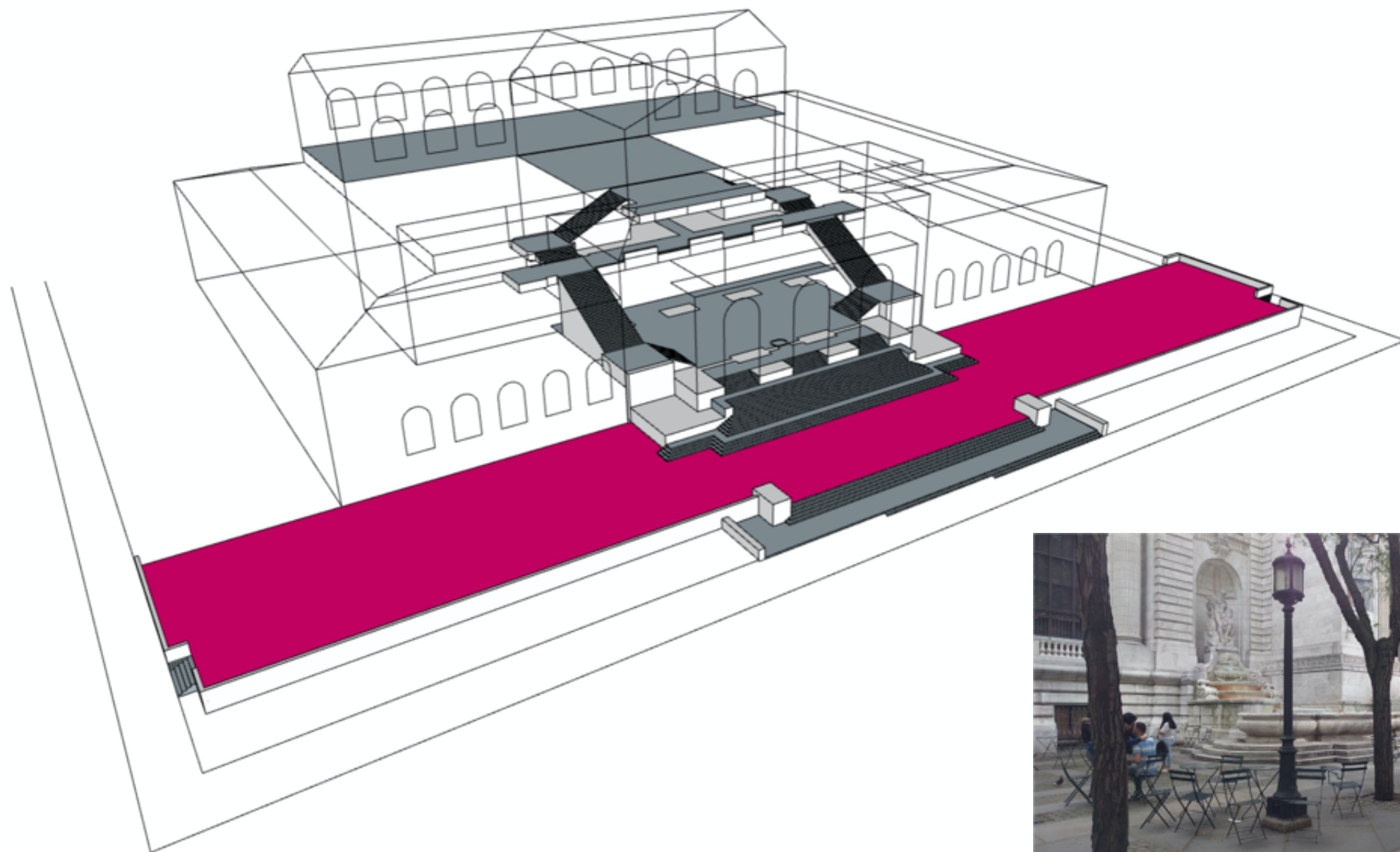
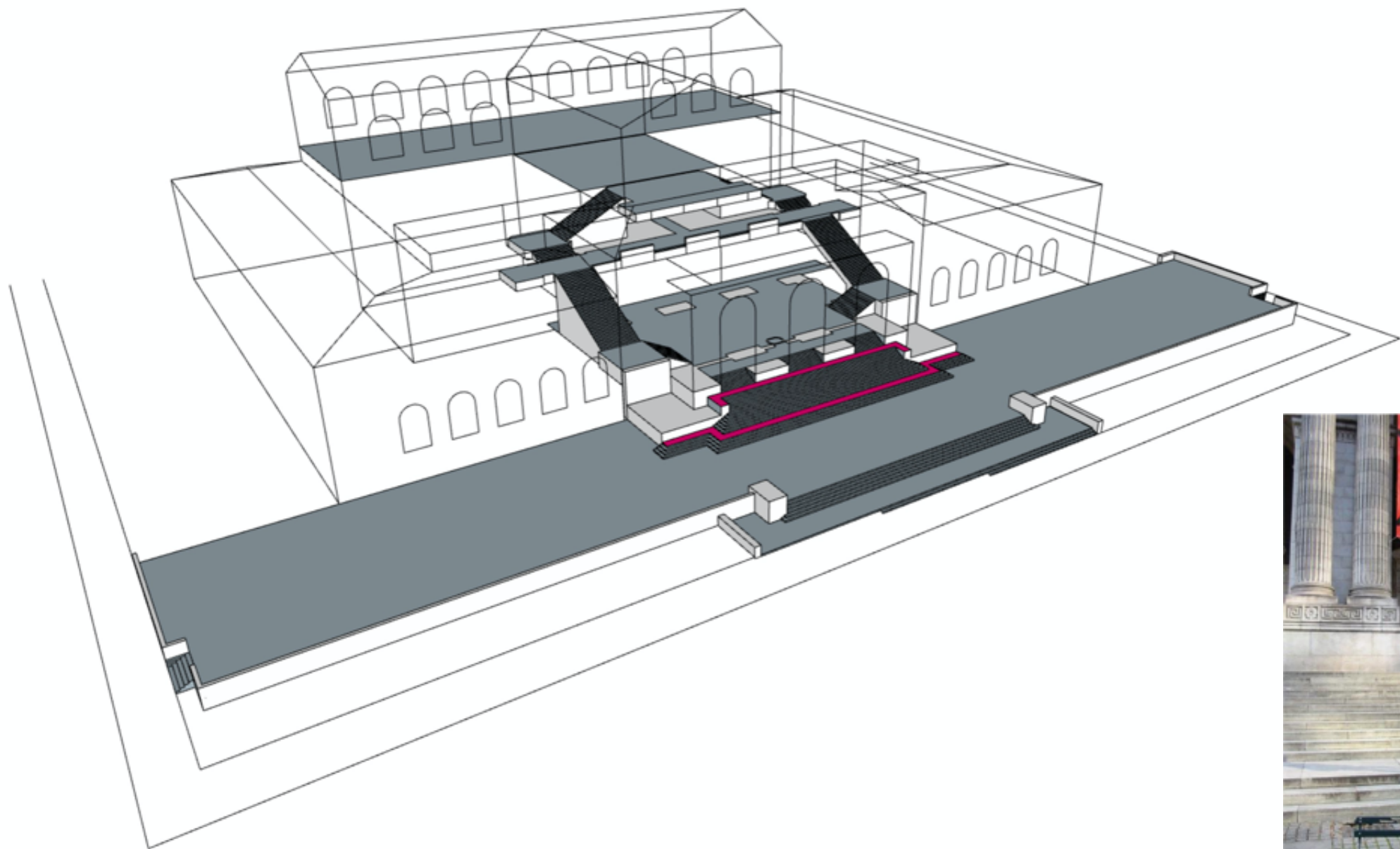


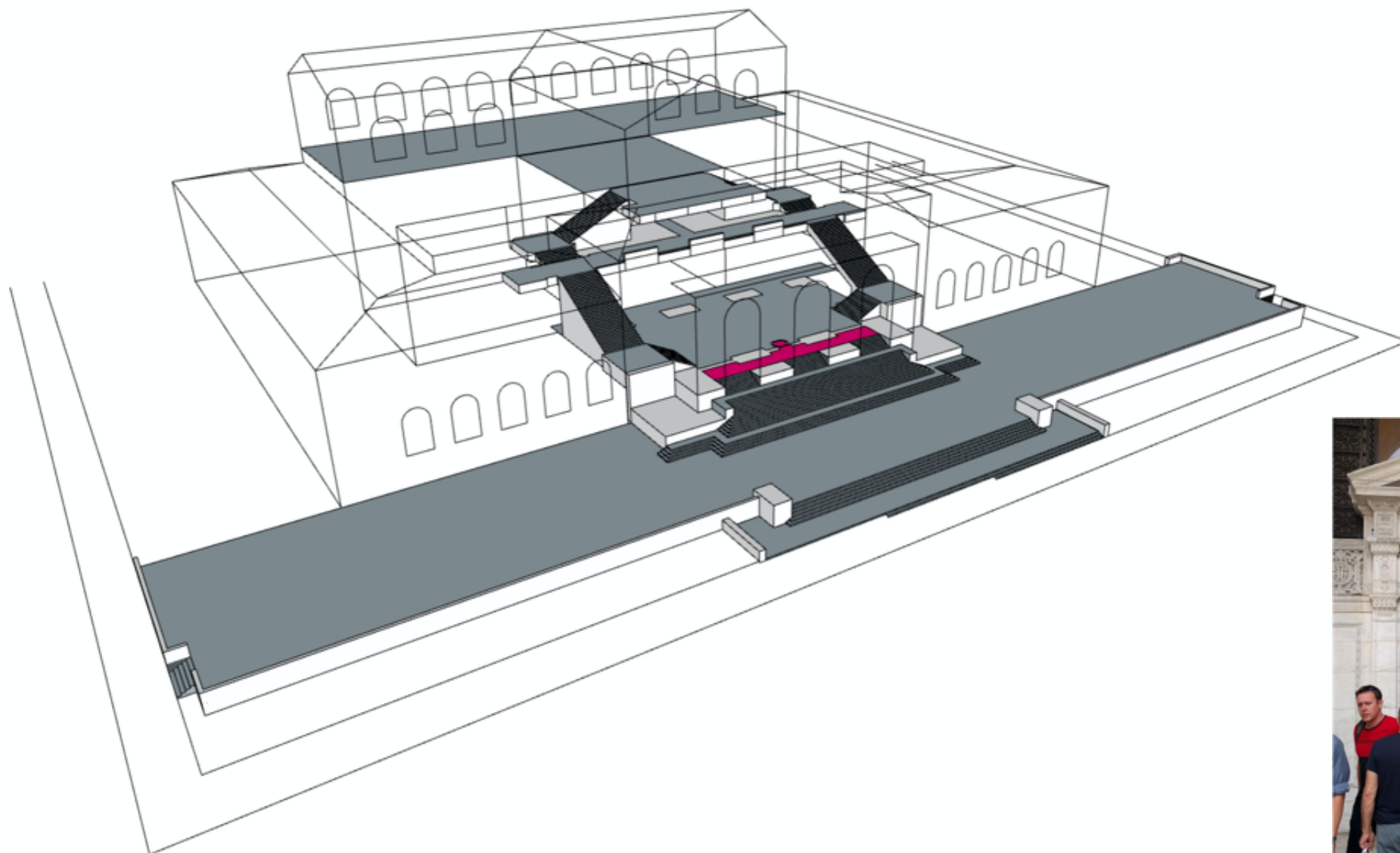
Diagram of public spaces at the New York Public Library

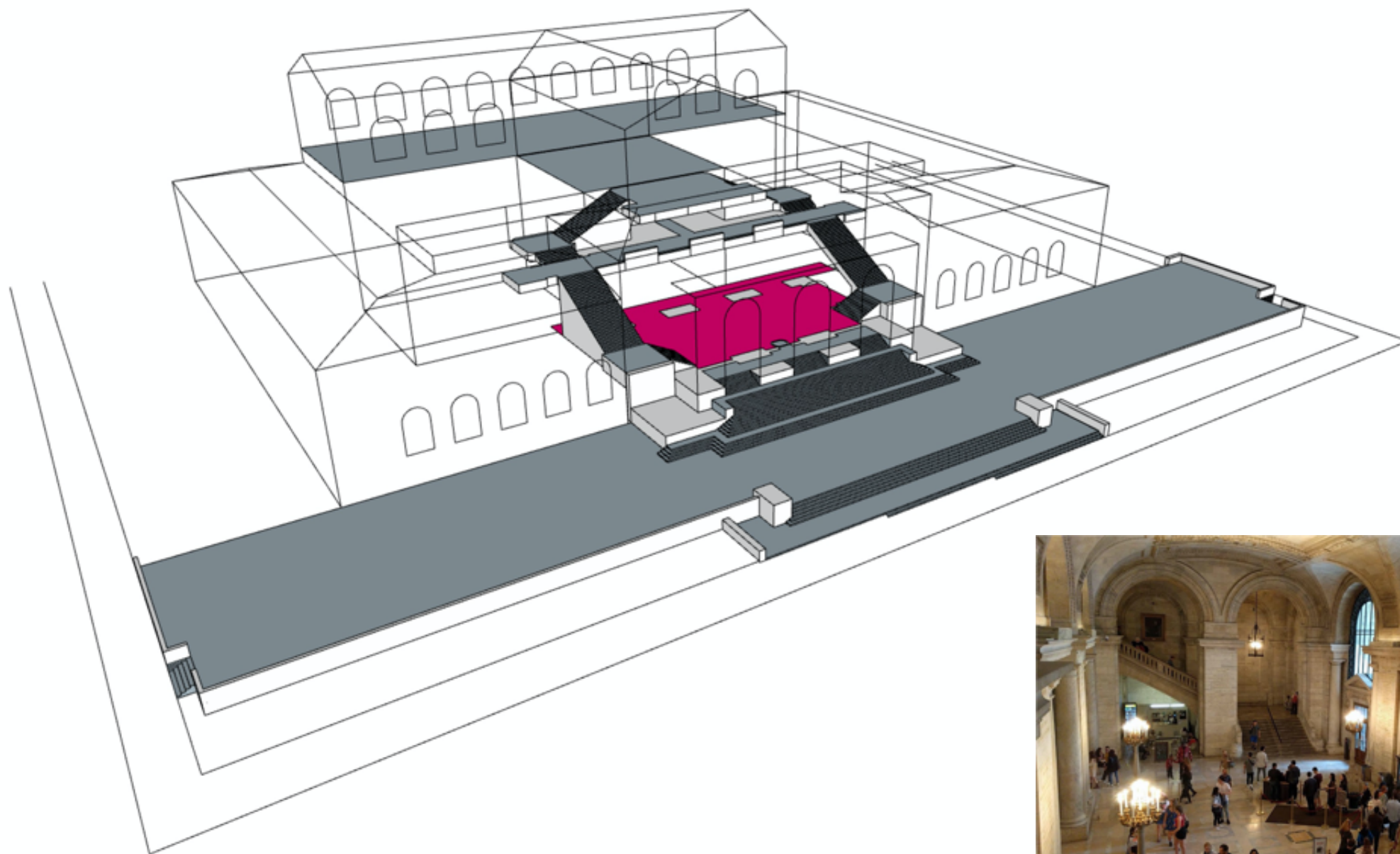


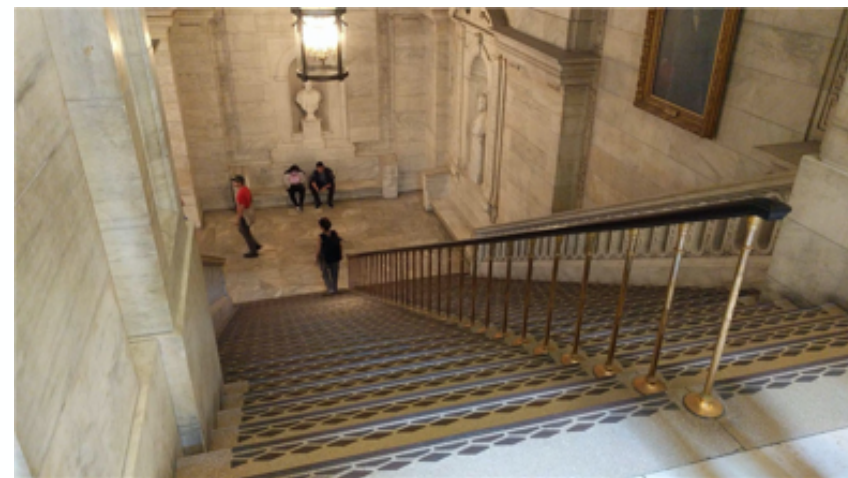
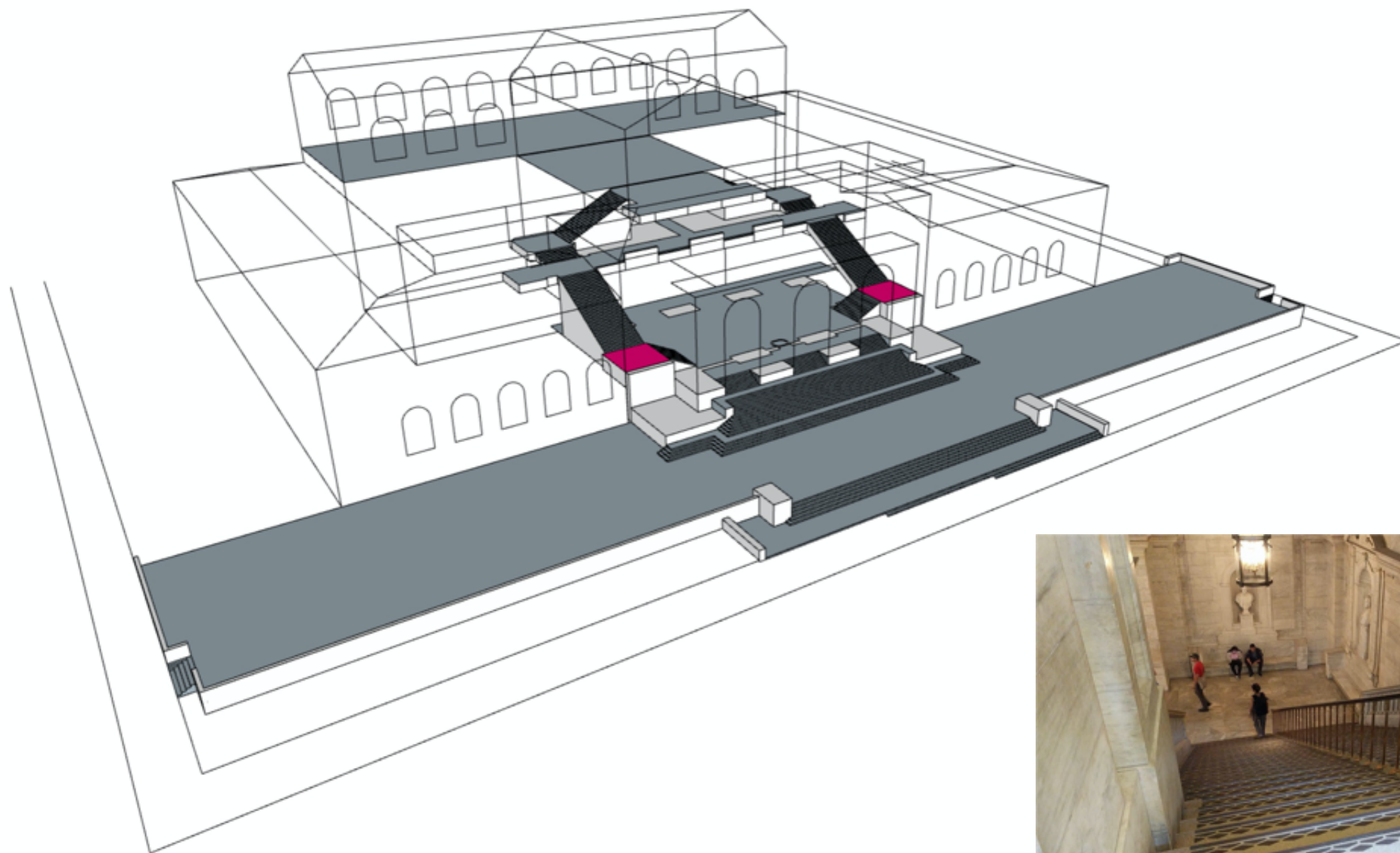


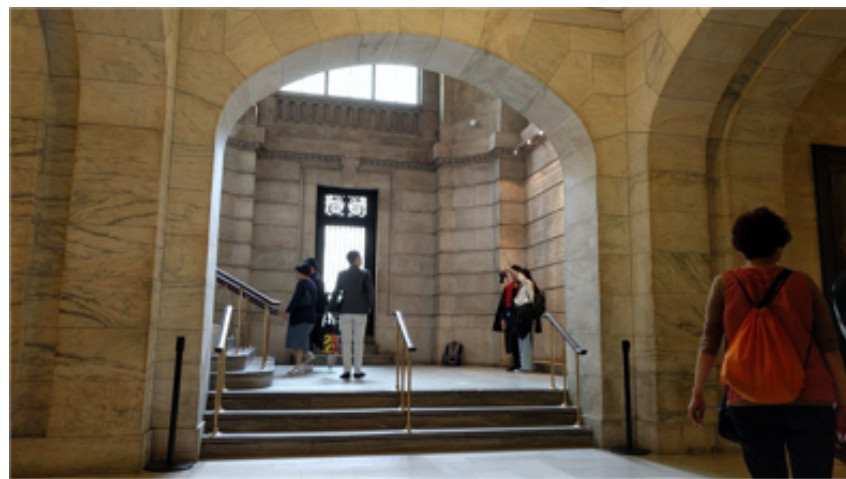
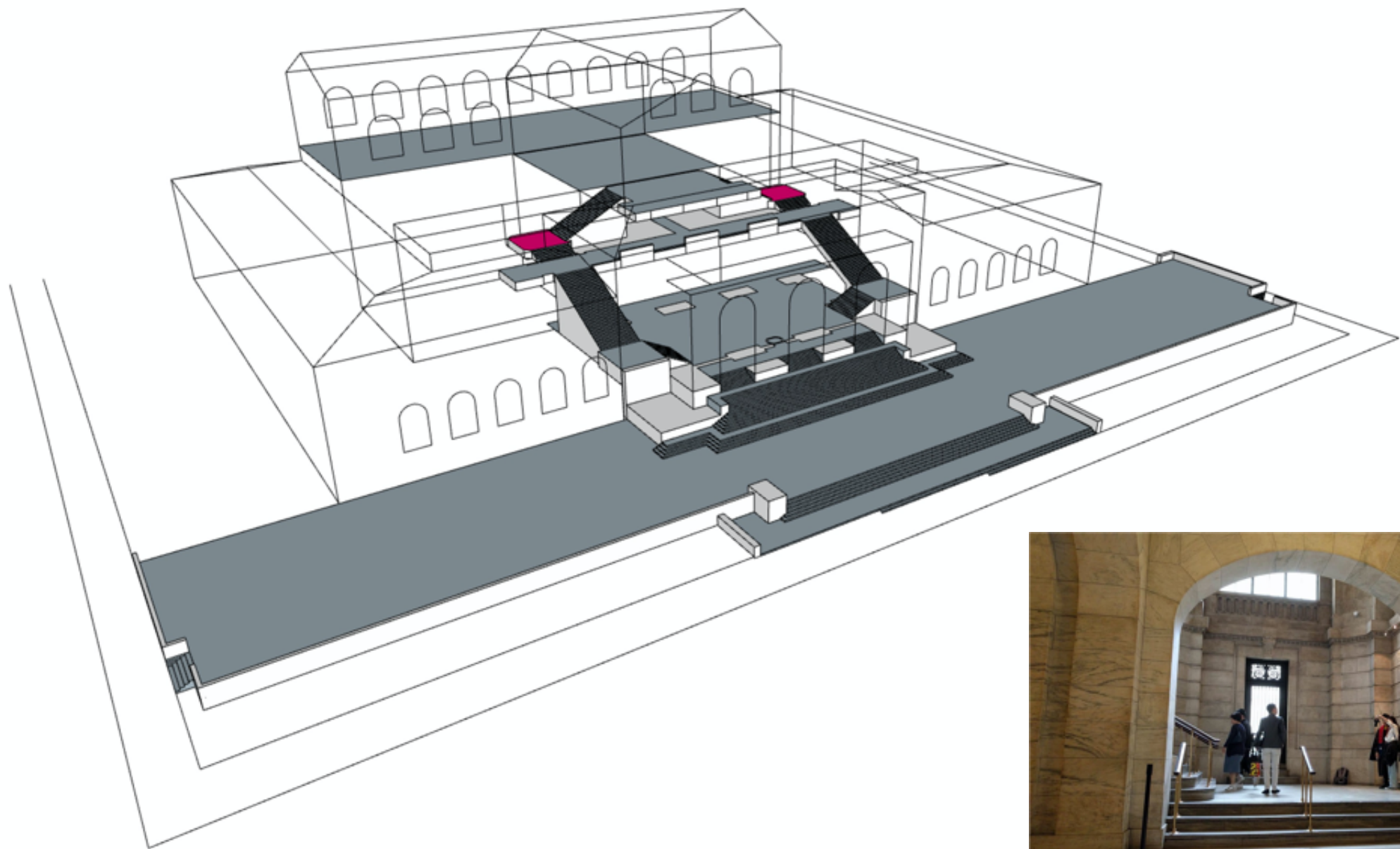


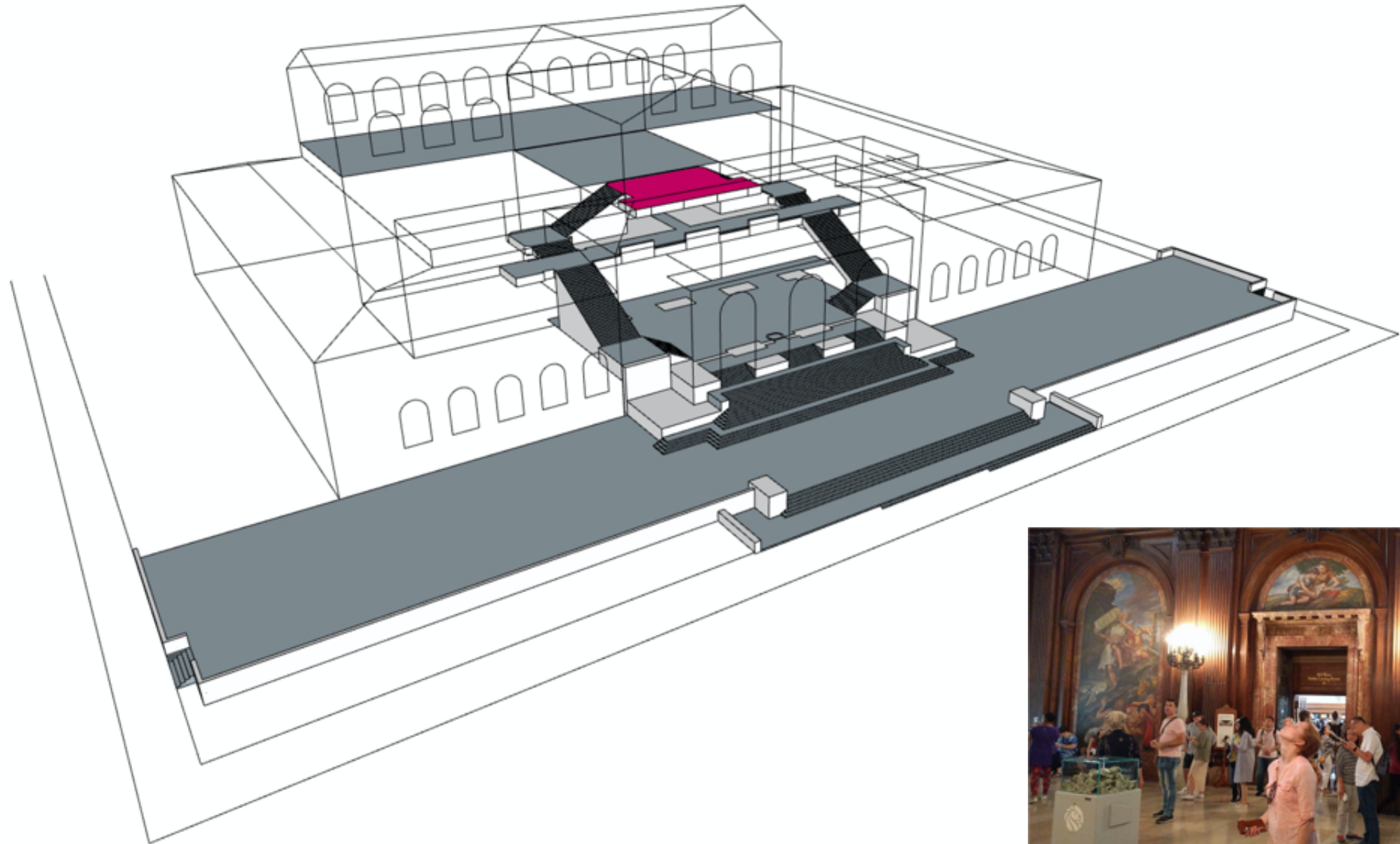


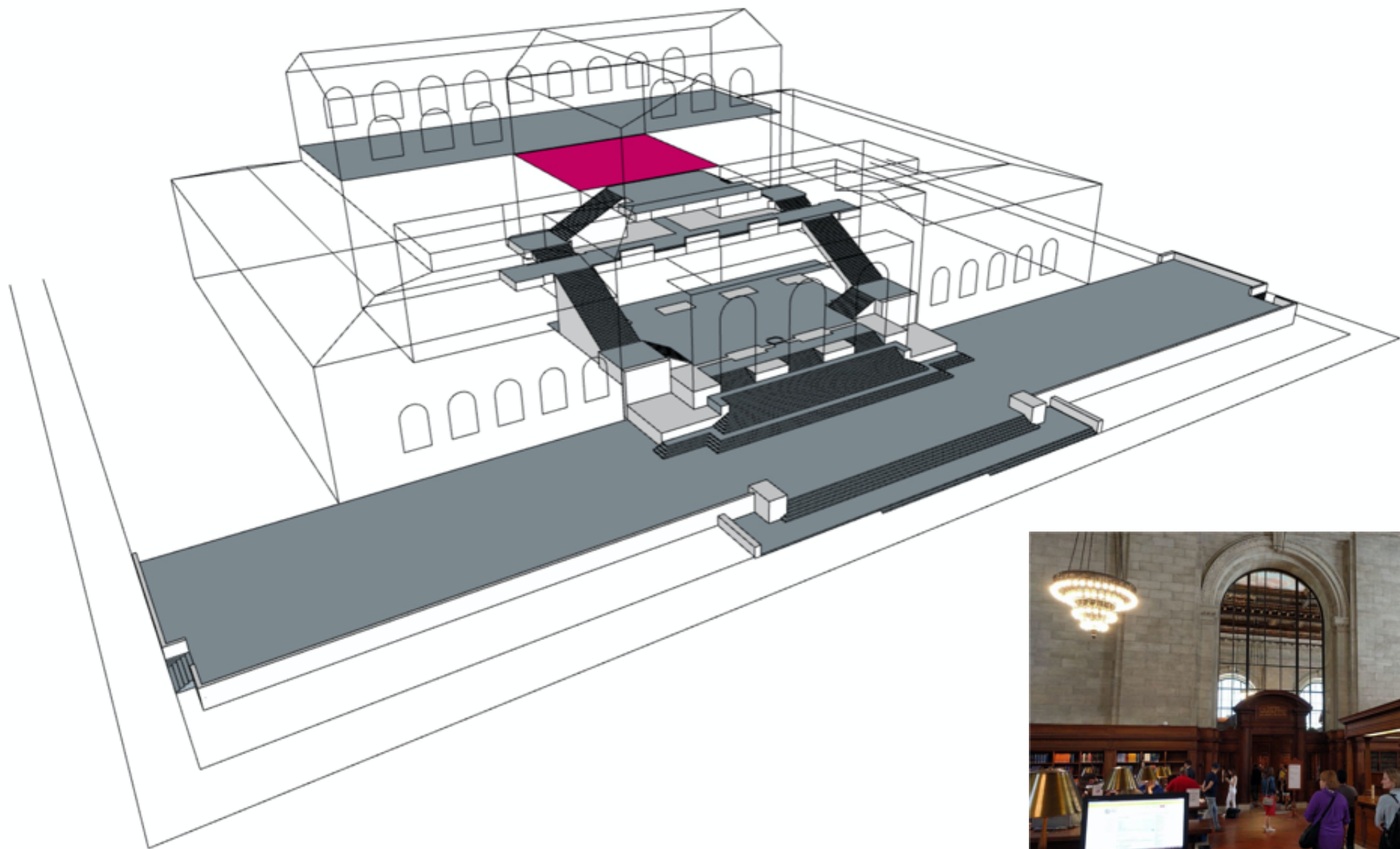


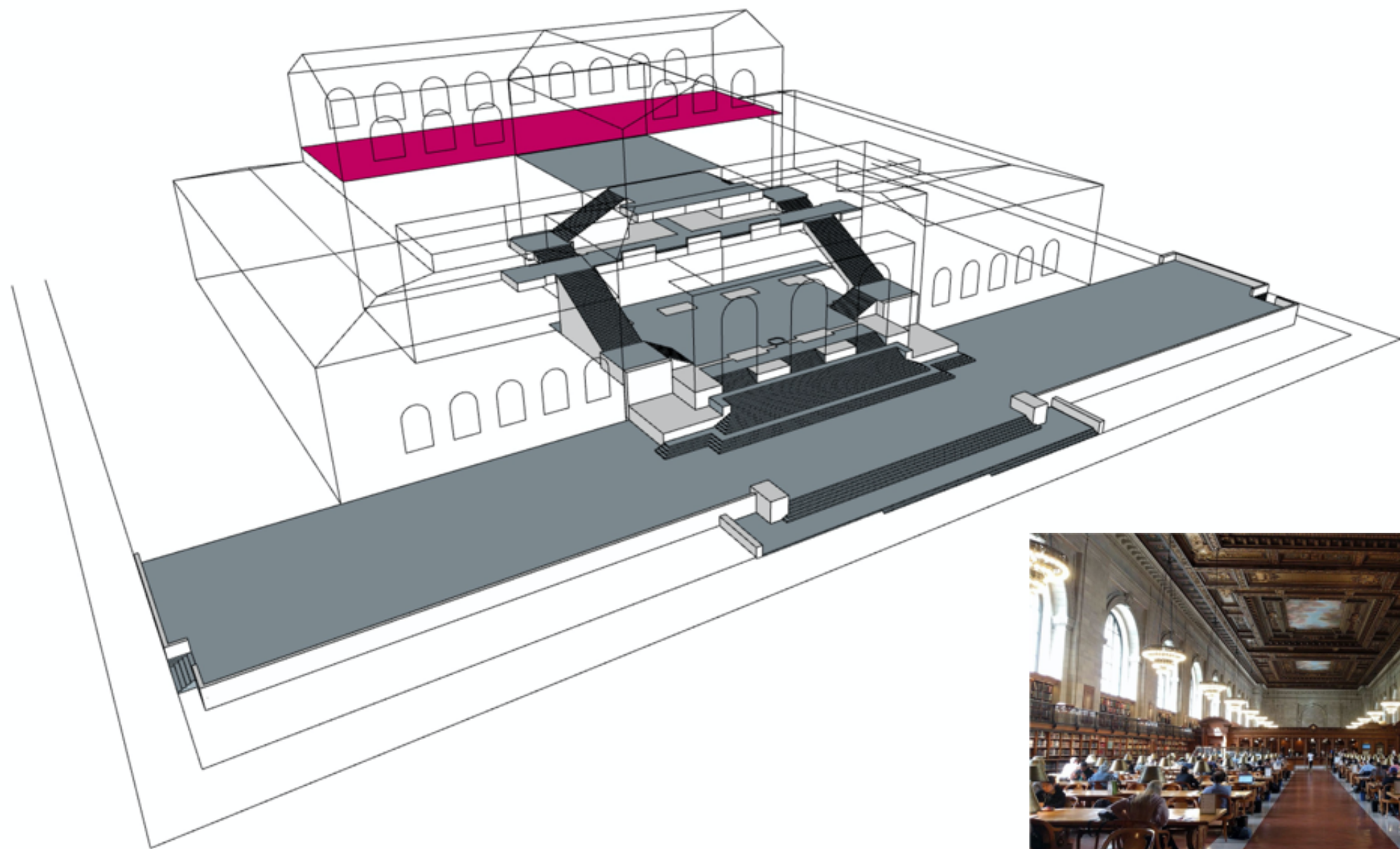


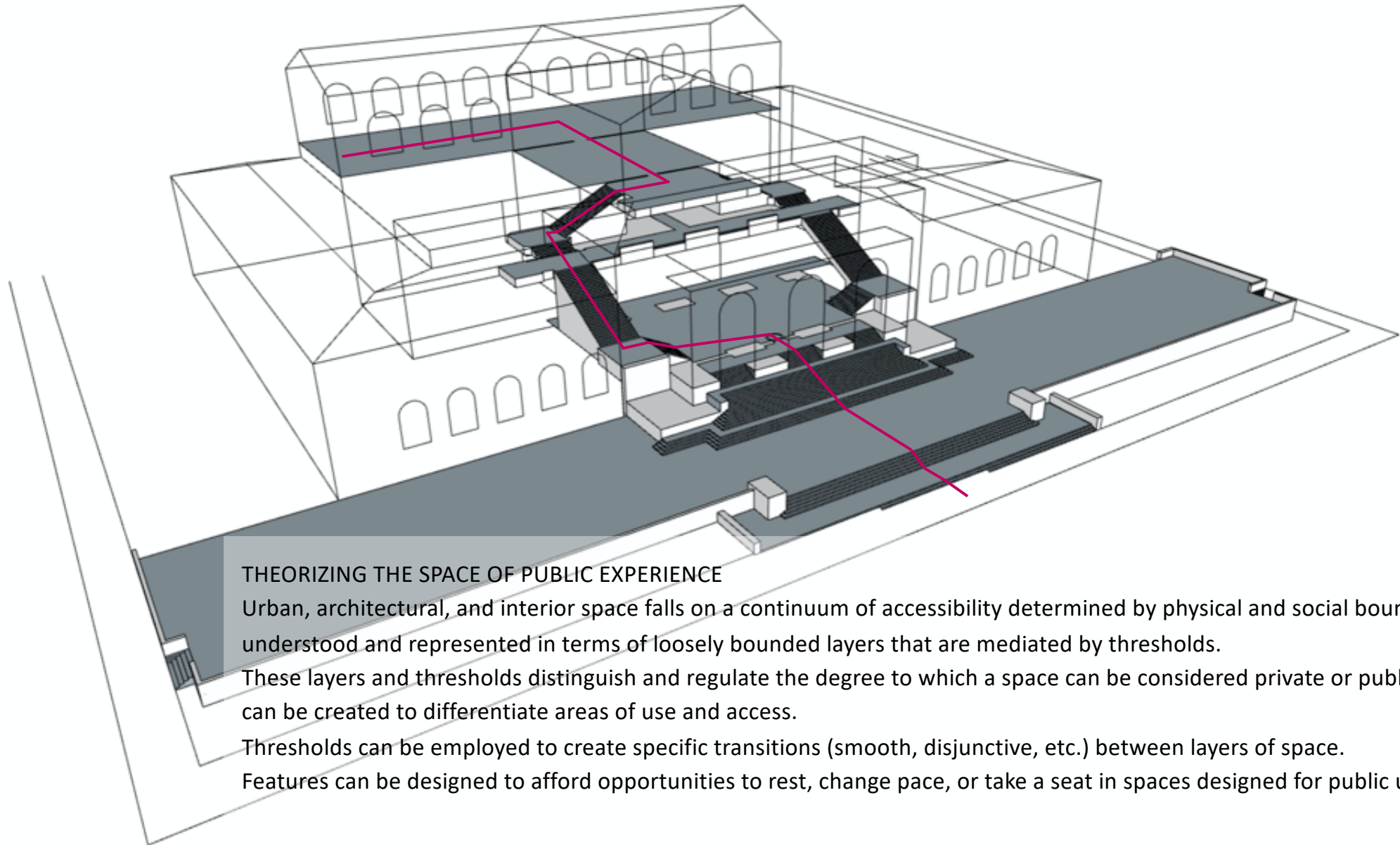












THEORIZING THE SPACE OF PUBLIC EXPERIENCE

Urban, architectural, and interior space falls on a continuum of accessibility determined by physical and social boundaries. Space can be understood and represented in terms of loosely bounded layers that are mediated by thresholds.

These layers and thresholds distinguish and regulate the degree to which a space can be considered private or public. Spatial boundaries can be created to differentiate areas of use and access.

Thresholds can be employed to create specific transitions (smooth, disjunctive, etc.) between layers of space.

Features can be designed to afford opportunities to rest, change pace, or take a seat in spaces designed for public use.

Public space is the age's master signifier, a loose and elastic notion variously deployed to defend (or attack) architecture, to decry (or celebrate) civic squares, to promote (or denounce) graffiti artists, skateboarders, jaywalkers, parkour aficionados, pie-in-the-face guerrillas, under-ground capture-the-flag enthusiasts, flash-mob surveillance busters and other grid-resistant everyday anarchists.

[BUT]

We observe the conceptual negation of publicness itself because of presuppositions of proprietarian individualism. A shopping arcade or street is a public space only in the sense that in it each one of us pursues our own version of production and consumption... Private individuals enter into the so-called public space as floating bubbles of private space, suspicious of intrusion by strangers and jealous of their interests. On this model, "public" space is not public at all; it is merely an open marketplace of potential transactions, monetary or otherwise, between isolated individuals.

....

We imagine that we enter public space with our identities intact, jealous of interest and suspicious of challenge, looking for stimulus and response. But in fact the reverse is true. We cannot enter the public because we have never left the public; it pervades everything, and our identities are never fixed or prefigured because they are themselves achievements of the public dimension of human life.

Mark Kingwell, 2006, 'The Prison of "Public Space"'