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Sunset.zip Popular Preservation and Learning from Roadside Architecture in Southern California

Ethan Russell-Benoit

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Sunset.zip

Popular Preservation and Learning from Roadside Architecture in Southern California

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
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Ethan Russell-Benoit

Candidate for Bachelor of Architecture
and Renée Crown University Honors
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Capstone Project Advisor: _____
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Capstone Project Reader: _____ Carl J Schramm
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Honors Director: _____
Dr. Danielle Taana Smith

Abstract

Outside of the spaces we inhabit daily, the car is the frame through which the majority of Americans experience the majority of architecture. Most architecture, especially as viewed from the car window is mere scenography, mere image; but images are democratic, they are compressible, transmissible, infinitely reproducible, and therefore immortal[1]. Using film, animations, models, and drawings, Sunset.zip translates the experience of architecture from the car into a highly compressed architectural artifact that preserves popular cultural memory of a place as a constructed image.

This project situates itself within multiple disciplinary discourses without preferencing one over another. Sunset.zip is in dialogue with the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown with an alternative reading of the roadside landscapes they studied, and a shared post-modern spirit. Sunset.zip also borrows methods and content from an artist of the same era, Ed Ruscha, who documented the extraordinary nature of ordinary things. At the same time Sunset.zip is also a radical departure from canonical preservation discourse with an implicit critique of elite cultural hegemony over popular culture.

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[1] See Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux*, no. 10 (Nov. 2009).

Executive Summary

The automobile is a ubiquitous force in the American landscape that has shaped our settlement patterns, our cities, and our architecture; but the car changed not only how we design but also how we experience architecture. Outside of the spaces we inhabit daily, the car is the frame through which the majority of Americans experience the majority of architecture.

The seminal work of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in Learning from Las Vegas investigated the ways in which the speed and scale of the automotive landscape shaped roadside vernacular architecture into a landscape of 'decorated sheds' and signs conveying the content and meaning to the driver to attract them to pull in. While their work is directly antagonistic to the modernist dogma from which they emerged, Venturi and Scott Brown still foreground the space of roadside vernacular and presume architecture to be a protagonist in the landscape that actively engages and communicates with the driver. Despite what architects would like to believe architecture is rarely a protagonist; the vast majority of the time architecture is merely a scenographic backdrop before which life unfolds. The car further reduces the agency of architecture flattening the built environment into a mere image within the frame of the window. This is how most Americans engage with most architecture. It is simply an image passing by the car window.

The individual memory of these images that pass by the car window is the most compressed and efficiently preserved version of an urban site. The inclination of the architect or the historian will always be to document and preserve the highest fidelity version of an artifact, but non-architects do not remember buildings by their plans, sections, and details, instead people remember fragments, pieces, and generalized characters. The automobile

causes architecture to be further compressed in our memory in ways that often differ substantially from reality. The automotive tourist experiences the landscape in fleeting glimpses; due to the constant state of movement, one can only recall the most iconic or affective details rather than a hi-resolution picture. Buildings are reduced to their essential elements, figures, signs, colors, and materials, resulting in a compressed version of themselves in the memory of the tourist analogous to a digital zip file. This flawed but highly efficient memory of an urban site as experienced from the car becomes the model for an architectural proposal preserving the endangered scenography of the roadside in its most compressed and transmissible form.

The Sunset Strip in West Hollywood was our chosen site for exploring the compression of an urban site in our memory. We chose this site because it is an iconic stretch of road that is layered with meaning and complexity in its relationship to popular culture and the built environment, and it is a site experienced primarily from the car. This mile-and-a-half stretch of road was made famous by the gangsters, rockers, comedians, and movie stars who frequented its establishments, transforming the banal and grungy architecture of the Strip into an iconic tourist destination. The culture, economy, and even the people who made the institutions of the Sunset Strip famous have largely left. The dilapidated and banal buildings that remain now stand as iconic monuments memorializing that moment in popular culture, but this cultural heritage is also endangered by the pressures of economic development. This layered and complex condition makes the Sunset Strip and ideal testing ground for compressing and preserving the image of a place in popular cultural memory.

The first and most important step in this process was a detailed documentation of the most visually and culturally significant buildings from the Sunset Strip. With funding from the Crown-Wise Award, my partner and I were able to travel to the Sunset Strip, rent a car, and film and photograph the strip in great detail day and night. We borrowed the documentary methods of Ed Ruscha with car mounted camera arrays recording *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). We then faithfully documented the most notable elevations as experienced from the strip, reducing each building to the scenography that is seen by a traveler in a car in the form of 2D elevations in color and 2.5D models that highlight textures and forms. From this documentation we began to abstract, and collage the architectures of the strip in a stepwise process into an intensely compressed flat-pack version of the image of the strip that can be assembled, disassembled, and transported freely; it cheaply and efficiently preserves and transmits the image of endangered cultural heritage.

Table of Contents

(You may modify this format to suit the needs of your project.)

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1

Introduction

Tourism and popular culture are powerful forces within our cities. Far from being passive, neutral, or abstract, the image of a city in popular culture and the corresponding tourist experience begin to shape the physical reality of the city for better or worse. The popular imagination of a place and the physical reality of it are in constant dialogue, perpetually reconstructing one another. There is the postcard city with the tourist map, and there is the city where people live and work every day; both exist simultaneously in the same space and inevitably the two get in the way of one another.

For many this tourist urbanism is a nuisance (e.g. Times Square), but there is far more at stake than mere annoyance, it is a matter of progress, preservation, and authenticity. Cities will inevitably grow and change, but for the sake of tourism, cities want to preserve a character, a culture, an experience. To grow and change relentlessly is to destroy that history, to try to preserve things exactly as they are is to suffocate the city. Florence, Venice and other major tourist destinations in Italy present one cautionary tale. In their struggle to balance the needs and wants of permanent populations and the desires of vast numbers of tourists for an authentic experience of the historic character and culture, cities cannot help but to favor the tourists, whose money dominates the local economy. This preference is even codified into laws

meant to maintain the status of a UNESCO world heritage site[2]. The results are historic city cores that do not adapt to contemporary life; they lack many essential amenities and resources and are nearly devoid of permanent residents. A cautionary tale of the opposite kind is presented by the People's Republic of China during the cultural revolution in which thousands of years of cultural heritage were deliberately destroyed in the name of progress, and this legacy is continued historic villages are destroyed to build new cities. These two scenarios are the extreme manifestations of the struggle between economic progress and tourism with cultural heritage standing at center stage, but every city faces this challenge to varying degrees and with differing responses. China and Italy have thousands of years of cultural heritage to deal with, but even younger civilizations and cities have cultural heritage from the near past that poses the same challenge (or it should if this heritage is currently undervalued). Every response is inherently imperfect because cultural heritage will inevitably be lost, and "progress" will inevitably be hampered in the eyes of some by the preservation of this heritage; it is a no-win situation that must be balanced.

The flawed compromise of the moment is a case by case battle to determine which artifacts of history are worth saving and which are disposable. Some artifacts and institutions are protected with legislation and funding, others are left to fend for themselves. No one is worried about developers wiping the Pantheon off the face of the earth, but our landscape is full of culturally significant sites whose heydays have long since past. These sites are protected only by the power of their position in the popular imagination of a place and are competing in a

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[2] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Venice and Its Lagoon." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed May 05, 2019. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/394.

pseudo-free-market with each other and with legally protected sites for the adoration and dollars of tourists. In a perverse way the pressures of tourism and popular culture serve to preserve cultural heritage, but inevitably these pop cultural monuments will be lost to time.

It is impossible to preserve every architecture of cultural significance, especially when we expand our understanding of cultural significance to include popular culture. But rather than accepting the total loss of some "lesser artifacts" as societies inevitably prioritize their use of limited resources we can pursue other means of preservation that are less resource intensive, that are more democratic, and perhaps that will even allow for the loss of the original.

Chapter 2

Preservation

<u>What We Preserve</u>

Preservation of cultural heritage is generally agreed upon as important and valuable,

but what we preserve and how we preserve it has been hotly contested for centuries. The

physical artifacts of culture from the past and present that we choose to preserve as a society

embody the values and identity of the group, of a society. Before a discussion about the

methodologies of preserving cultural heritage can even begin, artifacts have been pre-

determined as having cultural value or not. Because of the vast resources that preservation

requires, this judgement is typically made by social elites, reinforcing and preserving the image

of cultural hegemony of the upper classes of a society. While a critique of preservation

practices is not the primary focus of this paper, it is implicit in my arguments that the value

systems and criteria for determining what cultural artifacts are worthy of preservation are far

too narrow and exclusionary. The popular cultural heritage of a place is rarely deemed worthy

of preservation.

The pop art movement of the 60's revealed and paradoxically embodied the hypocrisy

of elitist fine art culture by ironically representing images from popular culture as fine art

objects themselves. Mass media, advertising, comic books, and other products of popular and

consumer culture had been excluded from critical artistic consideration but were reified as valid

art forms by pop artists who represented them on the canvas (Figure 1). The content and spirit of this project is a revival of this discourse from the 1960's and 70's in architecture, art, and broader culture within our contemporary world. Simply by elevating banal artifacts of popular culture to the status of cultural heritage we are making an indirect critique of elite culture and practices, but we are simultaneously aware that this critique is made from within an institution of elite culture. After this simple yet radical curatorial decision has been made to preserve popular rather than elite culture we must grapple with what it means to preserve something, and how to preserve it.

How We Preserve

Preservation most simply entails the protection of physical artifacts of cultural significance, but academic discourse surrounding preservation is nowhere near so simple; the most debated of issues in preservation are acts of restoration, and at the heart of the matter are authenticity, authorship, and aura. Two of the most critical figures in architectural discourse on historic preservation are Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) and John Ruskin (1819-1900) as their positions established near polar opposite ends of a dialectic. Viollet-le-Duc proposed many "restorations" that combined creative modification and addition with historical fact; to him restoration was "… a means to reestablish a building to a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time… [it] is not to maintain it, repair or rebuild it, but to re-establish it in a complete state"[3]. The most famous example of this was his now

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[3] Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *The Foundations of Architecture*. (New York: George Braziller [1854] 1990) p. 195.

recently collapsed spire atop the crossing of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris which was a taller,

stronger replacement for the medieval spire that had been removed 60 years prior[4], but many

of his restorations depart even farther from historical fact. Ruskin directly decried Viollet-le-

Duc's restorations:

> "Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with a false description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture."[5]

For Ruskin the only way to preserve architecture is to maintain (i.e. conserve) and delay as

much as possible the inevitable end of the life of an architecture.

The fundamental issue at stake in this dualism between le-Duc and Ruskin is what

constitutes authenticity. For Ruskin, the only way to maintain authenticity is to maintain

continuity of authorship and with it the aura of originality. This leads to the treatment of the

physical material of an artifact as having qualities of originality and authenticity that are

independent of human perception but are given to the material in the artistic act of creation.

Viollet-le-Duc's position was that authenticity could be retained or even enhanced in his

"restorations" by echoing the architectural spirit of the work, as he did in his gothic revival work

for Notre Dame (Figure 2). Successive authorship allows the work evolve and be sensitively

revitalized in dialogue with the past and the present moment; the physical matter of the work

will change but it retains its aura as an authentic work by carrying on the spirit of the original.

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[4] Georges Poisson and Olivier Poisson, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc: 1814-1879 (Paris: Picard, 2014), p. 96-99.
[5] John Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture (London: Allen, 1906).

Le-Duc's position is founded on the perception of the viewing subject to determine whether the "restoration" is authentic or not rather than on esoteric qualities embodied by the object itself. The positions of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin establish a seminal dialectic in the discourse of preservation, but the philosophical underpinnings of le-Duc's restorative preservation open up a world of much more radical possibilities.

While le-Duc's preservation work still always operated on the original artifact, the positioning of the viewing subject as central to determining the authenticity of an artifact blows the doors off of the still quite conservative discourse of preservation. If the viewing subject's perception is central to the authenticity of an artifact then the image of the artifact takes precedence over its material reality; the authenticity of the original has the potential to degrade as its context changes and alters the perception of the artifact; and the copy, physical or digital, has the potential as a viable means of preservation.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin makes it clear that the original and the copy still are not equivalent; he argued that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be"[6]. Benjamin echoes the arguments of Ruskin in asserting that the original work of art carries the aura of aesthetic authority absent in the copy, but he also reinforces the relativity of a work of art to its context. As context changes the value and meaning of an original work of art or architecture will change too, but contextual relationships are never absolute, they are are fluid and must be perceived and determined by

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[6] Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt (ed.) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Illuminations. (London: Fontana, 1968) pp. 214–18.

the viewing subject. If a work of art's 'unique' existence and time and space is the thing that separates it from the copy and time and space continue to change around it constantly, this raises the question if even original works retain their authenticity, and closes the gap in value between the original and the copy.

In some cases the copy can even be perceived as more valuable than the original. Take Disney for example. Main street USA looks nothing like any main street anywhere in the US, but especially as the real main streets of America struggle to survive, Disney's is beloved as perhaps America's greatest main street (Figure 3). It is an eclectic mix of idealized, picture perfect architectures from around the country. It reproduces an immense array of shops and vendors and a hustle and bustle far in excess of any main street ever. Disney's Main Street USA is a completely artificial, unreal, even surreal fabrication; it cannot even be called a copy, yet it distills the essence, the spirit (as you wish Viollet-le-Duc), and even the architectures of the American main street to produce the idealized standard against which all real main streets will be compared. In the way it operates it could be considered a more 'authentic' main street than the vacant storefronts of the real things. For most architects the shameless artificiality of Disney is looked on with disdain, but it is absolutely adored by the public. As small-town America continues to decay, Disney's Main Street USA becomes a hyper condensed repository for the skin deep image of rarified cultures and architectures protected under the umbrella of Disney's commercial success; it is a stage set for commercialized cultural preservation. This is theme park preservation, where bygone eras and cultures are preserved within a protective bubble away from the economic pressures of development and disinvestment.

Institutions of cultural heritage out 'in the wild' can even be seen imitating Disney in an attempt to preserve themselves. The most poignant examples are the 1960's diners peppering the landscape of Southern California. What were once real establishments of the 60's have frozen themselves as themed time capsules, playing oldies music, and dressing their staff in costumes. These diners have become slightly sad, dilapidated versions of a Disney diner; they are artificial anachronisms that emerged out of real cultural institutions. Disneyizing themselves, or modeling themselves after the principles of Disney theme parks[7], was a means of self-preservation within a changing culture and a real estate market that ruthlessly develops and redevelops all available land. It is a brilliant sleight of hand that would likely be decried by the purist academics who preach the need for preserving authenticity, but it successfully if temporarily preserves these beautiful and beloved diners in a hostile economic environment that will inevitably destroy them.

Many academics would balk at the idea of Disney or a 1960's diner as a model for preservation, but the average person has an extremely ambivalent relationship with authenticity. Academics will passionately about the ideal of authenticity, but in times of crisis even hard-line academics will acknowledge the value of a copy. A copy, an imitation, and approximation of cultural heritage becomes much more valuable the moment the original is lost. And as the world becomes increasingly digital and interconnected online, the image of an artifact becomes the primary way the majority of the world interacts with that cultural heritage. We have very recently witnessed this shift in attitude in the wake of Notre Dame's

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[7] See Alan Bryman, "The Disneyization of Society," *The Editorial Board of The Sociological Review*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

burning. Ubisoft released Assassin's Creed Unity for free so that the world will have the

opportunity to explore perhaps the most realistic digital model of the cathedral in existence.

What once was simply an attractive feature in a video game is suddenly viewed as an important

cultural record at least in the popular realm[8]. But similar phenomena occur in academia as well.

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's famous Frankfurt kitchen design lives on primarily in the form of a

single image with only a few partial originals or replicas still in existence. Looking further back in

time plaster casts of famous sculptures were kept as important records and teaching tools in-

lieu of an expensive trip to Rome[9]. Even the academy has an ambivalent relationship to

authenticity when backed into a corner.

In practice authenticity is an extremely slippery concept, but it has been at the

intellectual center of academic dogma in preservation for the last two centuries. Viollet-le-

Duc's positioning of authenticity relative to the viewing subject's perception opens the door to

a radically populist approach to preservation. The image, the copy, the approximation, the

theme park, the souvenir, all have a part to play in the preservation of cultural heritage and

should not be undervalued. By loosening the standards of preservation and therefore the

resources required to preserve an artifact we also free ourselves to broaden how we define

what artifacts from which cultures are worthy of preservation. These are the conceptual

underpinnings for a radical and site-specific exploration of how to preserve the popular

imagination of a place that follows.

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[8] Dave Thier, "Ubisoft Is Giving 'Assassin's Creed: Unity' Away For Free To Honor Notre Dame," Forbes, April 17, 2019, , accessed May 05, 2019.
[9] Cornell University Library Digital Scholarship and Preservation Services, "A Short History of Plaster Casts," Cornell Collections of Antiquities, , accessed May 05, 2019.

Chapter 3

The Sunset Strip

The conceptual testing site for our exploration into a subject-centric popular culture preservation is the Sunset Strip on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood Los Angeles. This is a site layered with meaning in popular culture and with complexity in its current state. West Hollywood and the adjacent Beverly hills have captured the imaginations of millions through tv, cinema, and the tabloids; they're at the center of the image of the American dream. But west Hollywood was also home throughout the decades to outlaws, misfits, and countercultures including the rock music scene, a large LGBT community, gangsters, gamblers, strippers, prostitutes, and of course movie stars. The physical reality of this stretch of Sunset Boulevard is not particularly special. It is exceptional in its status as a winding road in Los Angeles and in recent decades it has accumulated an immense number of billboards, but the architecture of the Strip is mostly unremarkable. The Sunset Strip was made famous by the gangsters, rockers, comedians, and movie stars who frequented its establishments, transforming the banal and grungy architecture of the Strip into an iconic tourist destination and a mecca for American pop culture.

This disconnect between the apparent and actual cultural importance of the architecture of the Sunset Strip, as well as its status as pop culture icon rather than a high

culture one, leaves it especially vulnerable to erasure. Los Angeles has a notoriously voracious real estate market and West Hollywood has proven especially attractive to developers. Sitting on the lower slopes of Beverly Hills with expansive views over the rest of Los Angeles, the potential for profit far outweighs any impetus for preserving sites of pop cultural significance. To make matters worse, much of the culture that made the Sunset Strip famous has left or lost its luster. Sure there are still Hollywood stars all around, the comedy clubs play host to big names and emerging talents, and the hall of fame music venues still have concerts, but much has been lost.

The iconic Tower Records store that was the heart and soul of the music scene on the strip has stood vacant since 2006 and narrowly escaped demolition multiple times[10] (Figure 4). The music scene in Los Angeles peaked in the 80's; the venues on the Strip don't produce big acts like they used to and one of its most famous venues where Van Halen and The Doors got their start was lost long ago (Figure 5). The iconic House of Blues has recently been torn down to make way for condominiums as has the famed celebrity hangout of Dino's Lodge, and the iconic Tiffany theater which appeared for years in the TV show 77 Sunset Strip (Figure's 6-7). The single screen theater succumbed to economic pressures in 2004 and lay vacant until its demolition to make way for high end housing. Tower Records has miraculously avoided demolition to this point by popular resistance, but this too will change.

The iconic cultural venues and artifacts of the Sunset Strip are degrading and disappearing one by one as the culture and the economy leave them behind. These are

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[10] Paul Resnikoff, "Tower Records on Sunset Dodges the Wrecking Ball - For Now," Digital Music News, September 09, 2018, , accessed May 05, 2019.

buildings that are easily overlooked by architects and arbiters of good taste; for the most part they are not beautiful, their architecture is neither grand nor exceptional, but the events that occurred there have made these places famous, and the architecture that served as the background for these events now stands in the foreground as an image of cultural significance. The banal, grungy, often dilapidated architecture of the Sunset Strip now stands as empty icons of a bygone era; but they are still beloved icons of cultural significance and are therefore worthy of preservation.

Chapter 4

Popular Preservation

To attempt to preserve forever the degraded and vacant buildings that house(d) the famed institutions of the strip would be a futile drain on resources that can only delay the inevitable march of progress and development in the city. The authentic experience of these cultural icons no longer exists, the originals cannot be saved, but we can preserve their image and the popular memory of a place. In the case of the Sunset Strip the way most people now engage with and experience these icons is from the car in a drive down this iconic road. The challenge of this project is to efficiently capture and preserve this image of the Sunset Strip as it is experienced from the car.

This exercise of capturing the experience of architecture from the roadside also has broader disciplinary implications for architecture. The automobile is a ubiquitous force in the American landscape that has shaped our settlement patterns, our cities, and our architecture; but the car changed not only how we design but also how we experience architecture. Outside of the spaces we inhabit daily, the car is the frame through which the majority of Americans experience the majority of architecture.

The seminal work of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in Learning from Las Vegas investigated the ways in which the speed and scale of the automotive landscape shaped

roadside vernacular architecture into a landscape of 'decorated sheds' and signs conveying the content and meaning to the driver to attract them to pull in[11] (Figures 8-9). While their work is directly antagonistic to the modernist dogma from which they emerged, Venturi and Scott Brown still foreground the space of roadside vernacular and presume architecture to be a protagonist in the landscape that actively engages and communicates with the driver.

Despite what architects would like to believe architecture is rarely a protagonist; the vast majority of the time architecture is merely a scenographic backdrop before which life unfolds (Figure 10). The car further reduces the agency of architecture by flattening the built environment into a mere image within the frame of the window. This is how most Americans engage with most architecture and is how most tourists engage with the cultural icons of the sunset strip; they are simply images of banal architecture passing by the car window, but with an aura of cultural significance.

The individual memory of these images that pass by the car window is the most compressed and efficiently preserved version of the strip. The inclination of the architect or the historian will always be to document and preserve the highest fidelity version of an artifact, but non-architects do not remember buildings by their plans, sections, and details, instead people remember fragments, pieces, and generalized characters (Figure 11). The automobile causes architecture to be further compressed in our memory in ways that often differ substantially from reality. The automotive tourist experiences the landscape in fleeting glimpses; due to the constant state of movement, one can only recall the most iconic or affective details rather than

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[11] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Ienour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1977).

a hi-resolution picture. Buildings are reduced to their essential elements, figures, signs, colors,

and materials, resulting in a compressed version of themselves in the memory of the tourist

(Figure 12). This flawed but highly efficient memory of an urban site as experienced from the

car becomes the model for an architectural proposal preserving the scenography of the Sunset

Strip in its most compressed form.

Chapter 5

Sunset.zip

The title of this project, Sunset.zip, draws parallels between the way the car compresses

our memory of a place as we zip up and down the boulevard and the familiar digital file format.

Zip is a digital format named for its association with high speeds that supports lossless data

compression and transfer. The aspiration of Sunset.zip is an architecturally compressed version

of the Sunset Strip that preserves and transmits the image and the essence of the Sunset Strip.

We began by selecting 18 of the most visually and culturally significant buildings from

the sunset strip; these icons come to represent the entire Sunset Strip without the fluff of

condominiums and retail. These buildings were the sites of some of the most famous concerts,

stand-up performances, drug overdoses, hollywood shows, hollywood affairs, or were owned

and frequented by hollywood stars; and some of these buildings simply cannot be ignored.

Some are exceptional and eye catching structures, and others are quite banal, yet they all

represent an important piece of the history, culture, and experience of the Sunset strip. We

then faithfully documented the most notable elevations as experienced from the strip, reducing

each building to the scenography that is seen by a traveler in a car in the form of 2D elevations

(Figures 13-30) in color and 2.5D models that highlight textures and forms.

From this documentation we began to explore the ways in which these buildings are reduced in our memory. We explored this process in four steps, each one progressively building on the compression of the step before.

Step 1:

Step 1, "compression by building" is based on the idea that while driving down the strip each building can only be in view for a very short period of time, so the mind compresses it to its figure, materials, colors, signs, etc. To visualize this, we compressed each building in isolation into a pedestrian scaled flat totem with a fixed rule set. Each totem must fit into a 20'x30' bounding box[12], have a full scale door, and capture all of the most iconic and character defining elements of the building as seen in a fleeting glimpse from the street (Figure 31). After designing the compressed elevations, we began 3-dimensionalizing the totems, once again preferencing only the frontal information, leaving interiors and back of house out. In all these totems, forms and figures flatten, materials are reduced to graphics, scale and proportions shift, and some qualities are merged (Figure 32-49). Surfaces that are not seen from the street and offer no information to the passenger are rendered white. The result of this exercise is a series of free-standing discrete objects that are referential to yet estranged from the originals they represent, fully recognizable as zipped up, compressed versions of each building.

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[12] Inspired by the 1980 Venice Biennale exhibit, *La Strada Novissima.*

Step 2:

Step 2, "compression by proximity" builds off of the products of Step 1 and is based on associations, misattributions, and mash-ups of the qualities of neighboring buildings. There are several buildings on our list that occupy the same block, are next to each other, or face each other across the street. We identified these areas of close proximity and began to merge these neighbors together (Figure 50-55). This ensures that the resulting totems contain substantial information of the buildings they come from, but materials, colors, and architectural elements begin to slide and inter-mesh, making it increasingly difficult to tell which belongs to whom just as our memory fades and blurs.

Step 3:

Step 3, "compression by street side" arranges the products of step 2 according to their position on the strip and then compressed further into single objects per street side (Figure 56-57). Elements of the original buildings are even further estranged, blurring the lines between each original. These iconic elements, colors, and banal materials are no longer so rigidly associated with their location on the boulevard, but as a collection they come to represent the entire Sunset Strip. It is at once a fragmented and intensely compressed version of the entire strip.

Step 4:

Step 4, and the final product of this exploration further zips up the Sunset strip from step 3 into a travelling roadside attraction preserving and transmitting this imperfect image of a

place in its smallest possible form. In steps 1 through 3 the urban site of the strip has been compressed into two parallel architectural objects. In step 4 these objects are converted into a flat-pack stage set allowing the compressed image of the sunset strip to be transferred on the backs of flatbeds (Figure 58-64). Therefore, the architecture of this installation exists in service of preserving and presenting that compressed image the same way it is experienced from the car. Structure exists only to hold up primary vertical surfaces and the things that attach to them. Doors and windows go nowhere. Materials are flattened and reproduced as graphics. The memory of the Sunset Strip as experienced through the car window is reduced to a scenographic architecture of 2x4's, plywood, and paint (Figure 65).

When assembled, the installation presents the pedestrian with fragments of architecture that on the sunset strip served as the background to the events that made it famous; the banal architecture of the strip stands as a monument to that cultural history. The experience of this famous road from the car is now re-presented to the pedestrian passer-by. This compressed representation of the Strip from the car is able to be explored at low speeds and the strangeness of how we remember background architecture from the car is foregrounded in the uncanny composition and stage set construction of Sunset.zip.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The automobile is how most Americans experience most architecture and is a critical

lensthrough which we can reflect upon architecture. From the car architecture is all image,

experienced as a scenographic backdrop passing by the frame of the car window; it is flat,

graphic, shallow, and often quite banal. Even sites of cultural significance, like the Sunset Strip

are zipped up in our minds into a gestalt of architectural fragments and approximations, and

the car compresses this memory and this architecture to the maximum.

While this argument that architecture is mere background image might be upsetting to

architects and preservationists, it opens up worlds of possibility for preserving the essence, the

character, the popular imagination of a place at a moment in time. It frees us from such

reverent responsibilities to original artifacts, and understanding architecture as a scenographic

backdrop suggests an entirely different attitude towards design. The implications of this

position for conventional design are beyond the scope of this project, but it is clear that the

form, image, and meaning of architecture are not as clearly associated as Venturi and Scott

Brown suggest in *Learning from Las Vegas.* This scenographic architecture hints at a third

category beyond the duck and the decorated shed. This is stageset or billboard architecture,

like an old western movie set it is all front, all image, no interior, no "space". If this scenography

convey's any meaning at all it is not about the program inside, but rather sentiments,

memories, and cultural associations specific to the individual's relationship to the image. This is

a bottom up view of architecture that constructs a critical lens from the perspective of the

average viewing subject, rather than the elitist architect.

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Critical Statement

Our project was heavily influenced by the work of several artists and architects and architects who came before us. Our project most closely engaged with the work of conceptual artist Ed Ruscha, and especially with his book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Sunset.zip uses the same deadpan documentary method with a car mounted array of cameras documenting each side of the sunset strip and revists the same content in a different time period for different purposes. Much can be read into or from Ruscha's enigmatic work, but he was one of many artists of the period who elevated the banal and the ordinary to the level of art through his work. He challenged conventions of taste in the high culture world of art, and so Ed Ruscha in many ways is the direct forefather of this work. We echo his attitude and even his content, but the documentation of the sunset strip was only our starting point.

Ruscha's deadpan documentary style of photography presented banal subjects as art. We drew upon another artist/architect's work to go one step further and present the buildings on the Sunset Strip as monuments. Our index of elevations takes on a distinct graphic style that borrows from the illustrations in Andrew Atwood's book *Not Interesting: On the Limits of Criticism in* Architecture. He uses only color fills with no lines to represent his subjects. Architecture, forground, and background are muted and flattened by a lack of differentiation in tone and a softening of edges. Despite this flattening the banal subjects of these illustrations appear significant, and important in their careful rendering and composition while simultaneously appearing to be anything but heroic. While the content of this book is not referenced in this project, Atwood also cites Ruscha extensively; there is apparently a kindred spirit in both Ruscha's work and Atwood's graphic style that we now borrow in revisiting Ruscha's work. Our index of elevations represents each building isolated from its context in this soft graphic style, presenting a kind of mute, banal monument to cultural.

After this documentation another artist served as a critical reference yet again. Photographer Oliver Michaels creates striking digital collages of fragments of buildings in a given area or along a chosen route. These images capture the character of a large urban context using only fragments on buildings to create a highly compressed yet totalizing gestalt of the essence of a place. His collages too appear somewhat akin to the deadpan documentary style used by Ruscha. Coincidence? Maybe, or maybe not, but his collages provided ispiration for developing our way of working at a critical juncture in the project.

Throughout the project we could not escape pushing up against or referencing the work of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in *Learning from Las Vegas*. While it was not what we originally set out to do, the work we produced seems to dispute or add to one on the central dialectics of *Learning from Las Vegas* which sought to learn from the enormous speed of scale at which we experience the roadside commercial vernacular of Las Vegas. They sorted all of architecture into two categories: the duck, where the sign is the signified, and the decorated shed, where the sign is seoarate from the signified. Most architects (especially modernist architects) design exclusively ducks. A Paul Rudolph housing project does not tell you with words that it is housing; domesticity is expressed through the scale of fenestration and the

presence of balconies. It tells you it is housing by looking like housing (if only to the trained eye). A decorated shed tells you with words what it is. Pizza! On a sign would tell you that pizza is sold inside. This dialectic is about how architecture convey's what is going on inside and is used to make an argument for reintroducing ornament in architecture for semiotic purposes. What we have found or suggested in our work is that most of the time the inside of architecture is entirely unimportant to most people. Architecture, more often than not, is merely a scenographic backdrop, and image, a graphic, especially when experienced from the car. If this scenography convey's any meaning at all it is not about the program inside, but rather sentiments or memories specific to the individual's relationship to the image. This scenographic architecture hints at a third category beyond the duck and the decorated shed. This is stageset or billboard architecture, like an old western movie set it is all front, all image, no interior. This is how most architecture is experienced; that does not mean we can or should design all buildings as empty stage sets, but it provides a different critical lens through which to reflect upon architecture.

Appendices

Figure 1: Andy Warhol – Campbell's Soup Cans 1962.

Mass media, advertising, comic books, and other products of popular and consumer culture had been excluded from critical artistic consideration but were reified as valid art forms by pop artists who represented them on the canvas. Simply by elevating banal artifacts of popular culture to the status of cultural heritage we are making an indirect critique of elite culture and practices.

Figure 2: Charles Marville – Photograph of Viollet-le-Duc's spire at Notre Dame 1859-1860.

Viollet-le-Duc's position was that authenticity could be retained or even enhanced in his "restorations" by echoing the architectural spirit of the work.

Figure 3: Main St USA Walt Disney World – Photo by Unknown.

In some cases the copy can even be perceived as more valuable than the original. Disney's Main Street USA is a completely artificial, unreal, even surreal fabrication; it cannot even be called a copy, yet it distills the essence, the spirit (as you wish Viollet-le-Duc), and even the architectures of the American main street to produce the idealized main street. In the way it operates it could be considered a more 'authentic' main street than the vacant storefronts of the real things.

Figure 4: Tower Records, Sunset Blvd, West Hollywood Los Angeles, CA – Photo by John Lopez 2004

Like many institutions on the Sunset Strip, Tower Record's heyday has long since past. This iconic record store was the heart and soul of the LA rock scene in the 80's, but the store has remained largely vacant since the bankruptcy of Tower records in 2006. The fate of this iconic piece of cultural heritage is uncertain as it repeatedly dodges demolition in a notoriously voracious real estate market.

Figure 5: Gazzari's – Photo by Ed Ruscha from *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* 1966

Famed nightclub where a number of rock bands from the 80's made their name including Van Halen and The Doors. Like many other buildings of cultural significance, Gazzari's was demolished without pause to make way for new development.

Figure 6: Dino's Lodge – Photo from Vintage LA

Famed and beloved celebrity hangout demolished to make way for upscale housing.

Figure 7: Tiffany Theater – Photo by Unknown

Iconic single screen theater and early host to the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Demolished along with Dino's to make way for high end housing. Had closed even before that time as it faltered under economic pressure and cultural shifts.
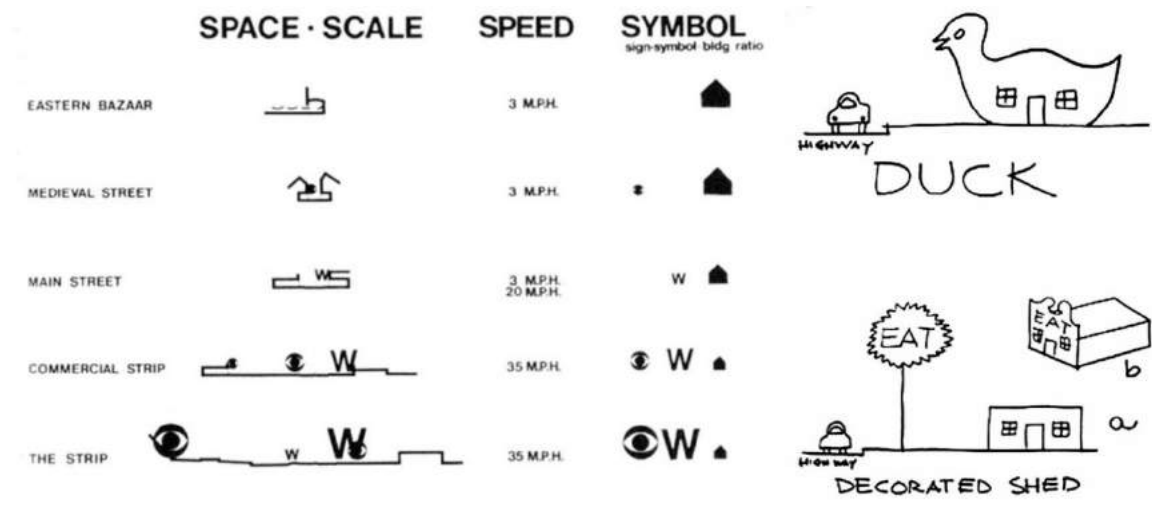
Figure 8-9: Diagrams from *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour 1977. Architecture as a protagonist in communicating with the car passenger, shaped by the speed and scale of the automotive landscape.
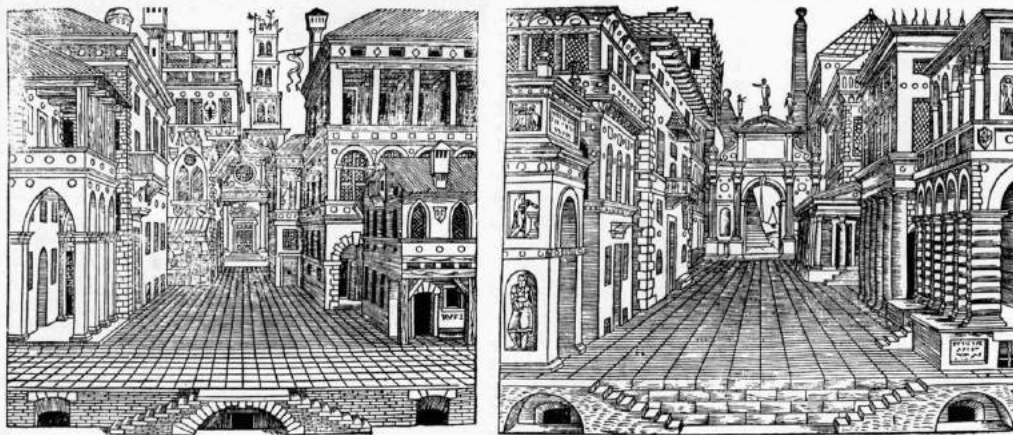
Figure 10: Sebastiano Serlio Comic (Left) and Tragic (right) stage set designs from his Second Book on Architecture 1545.

Architecture as scenography.

Figure 11: Square in Square Series – Oliver Michaels 2014

Oliver Michaels creates striking digital collages of fragments of buildings in a given area or along a chosen route. These images

capture the character of a large urban context using only fragments on buildings to create a highly compressed yet totalizing

gestalt of the essence of a place. This serves as a critical reference for developing out own working method.
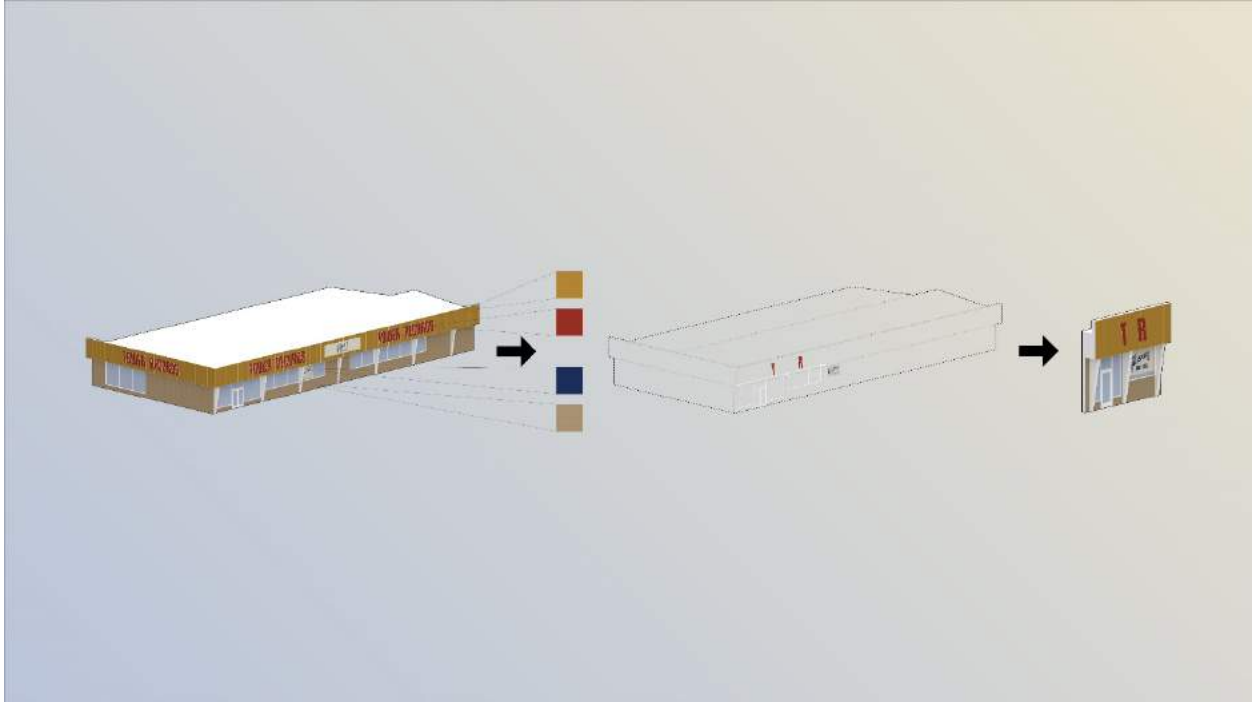
Figure 12: Compression Diagram

The automotive tourist experiences the landscape in fleeting glimpses; due to the constant state of movement, one can only recall the most iconic or affective details rather than a hi-resolution picture. Buildings are reduced to their essential elements, figures, signs, colors, and materials, resulting in a compressed version of themselves in the memory of the tourist.
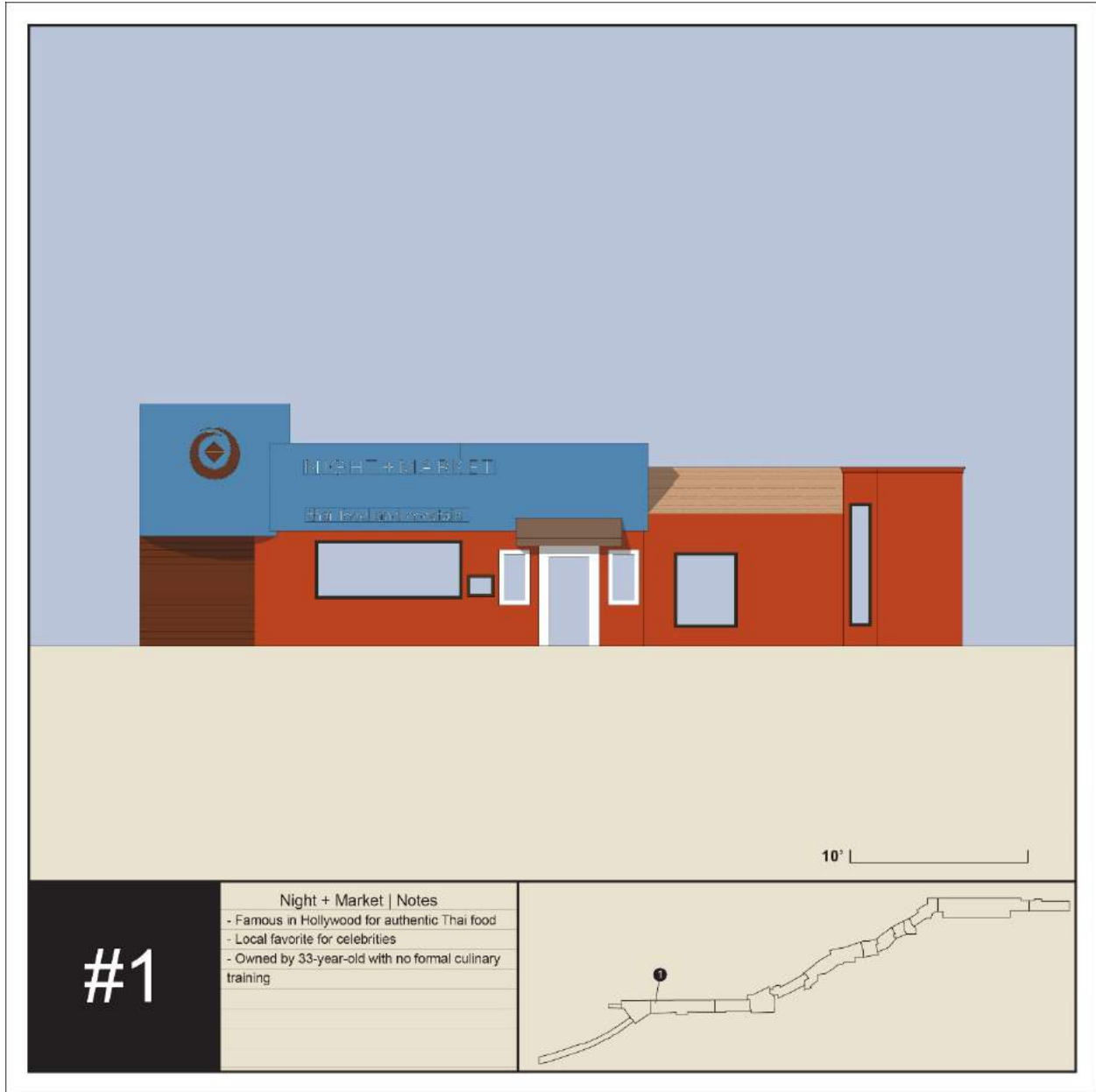
Figure 13: Icons of the Sunset Strip
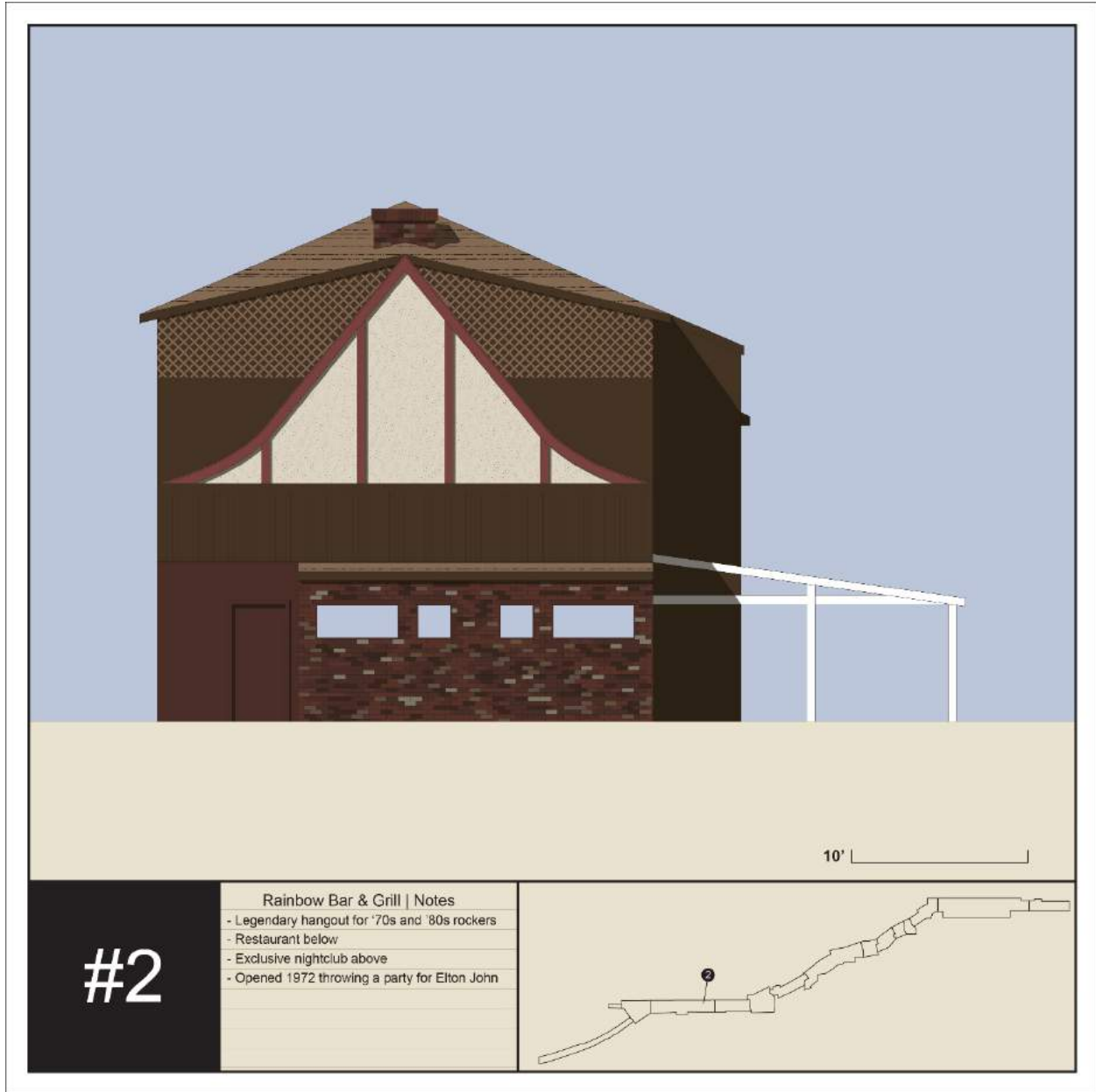
Figure 14: Icons of the Sunset Strip
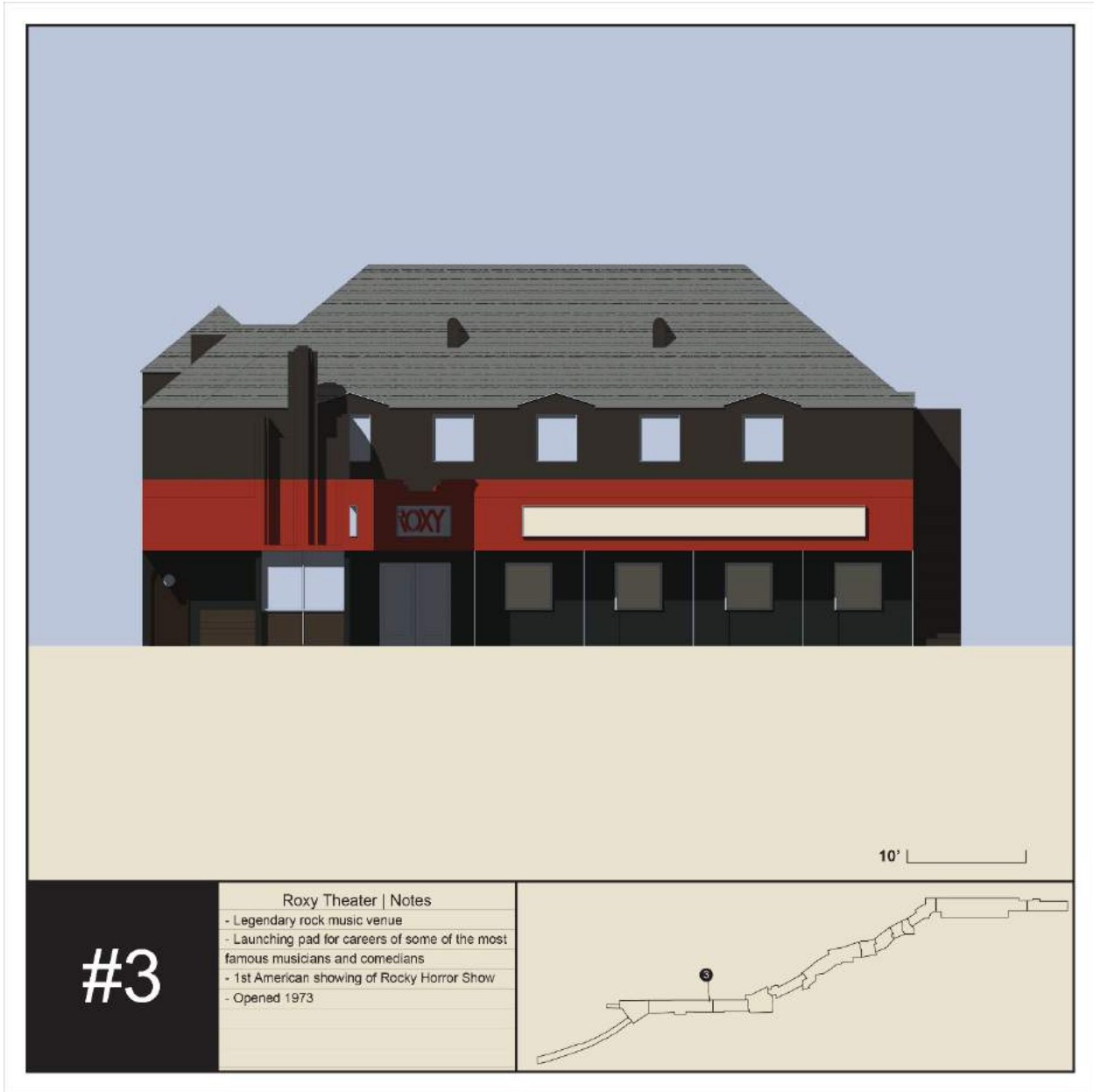
Figure 15: Icons of the Sunset Strip
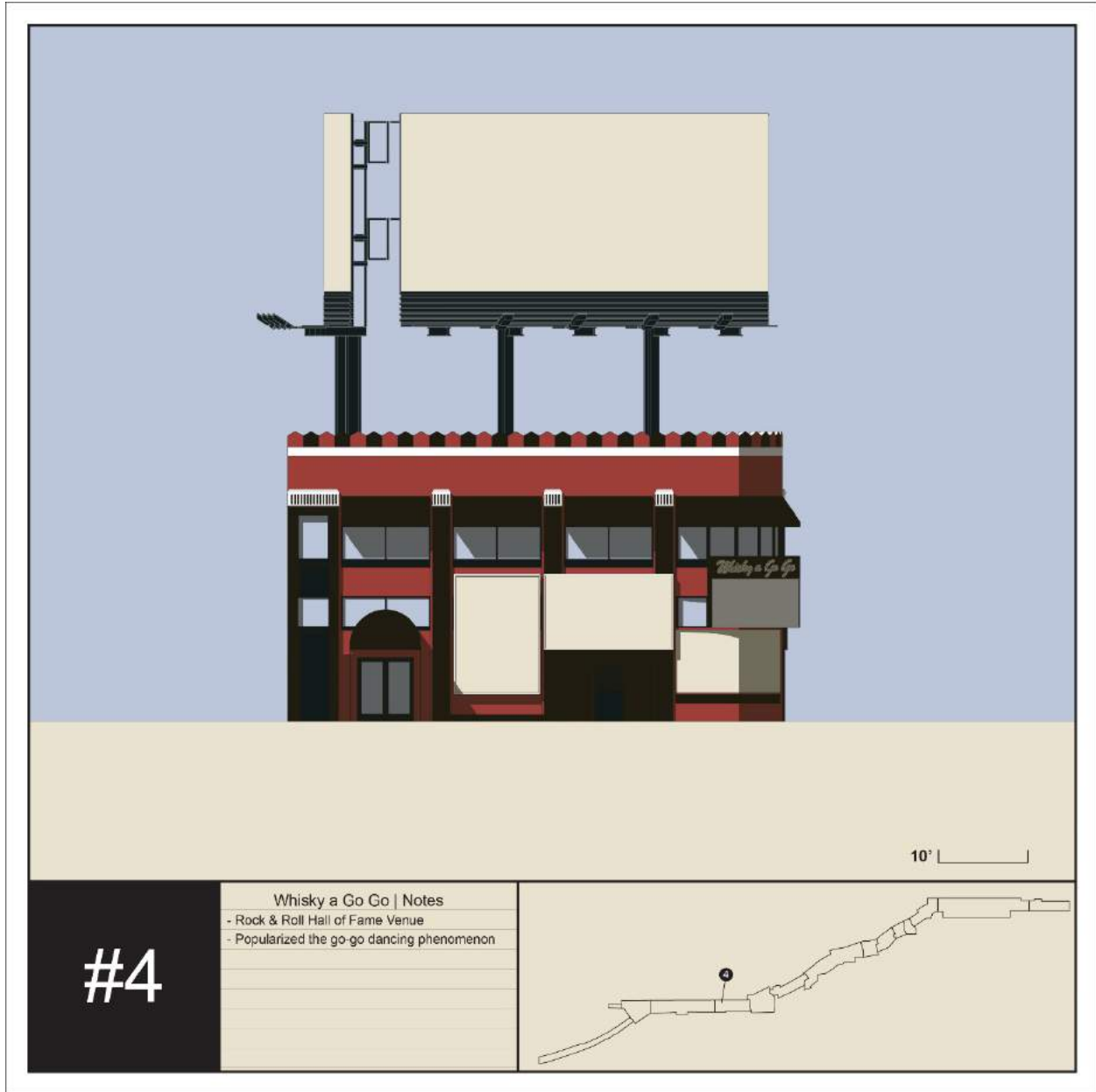
Figure 16: Icons of the Sunset Strip
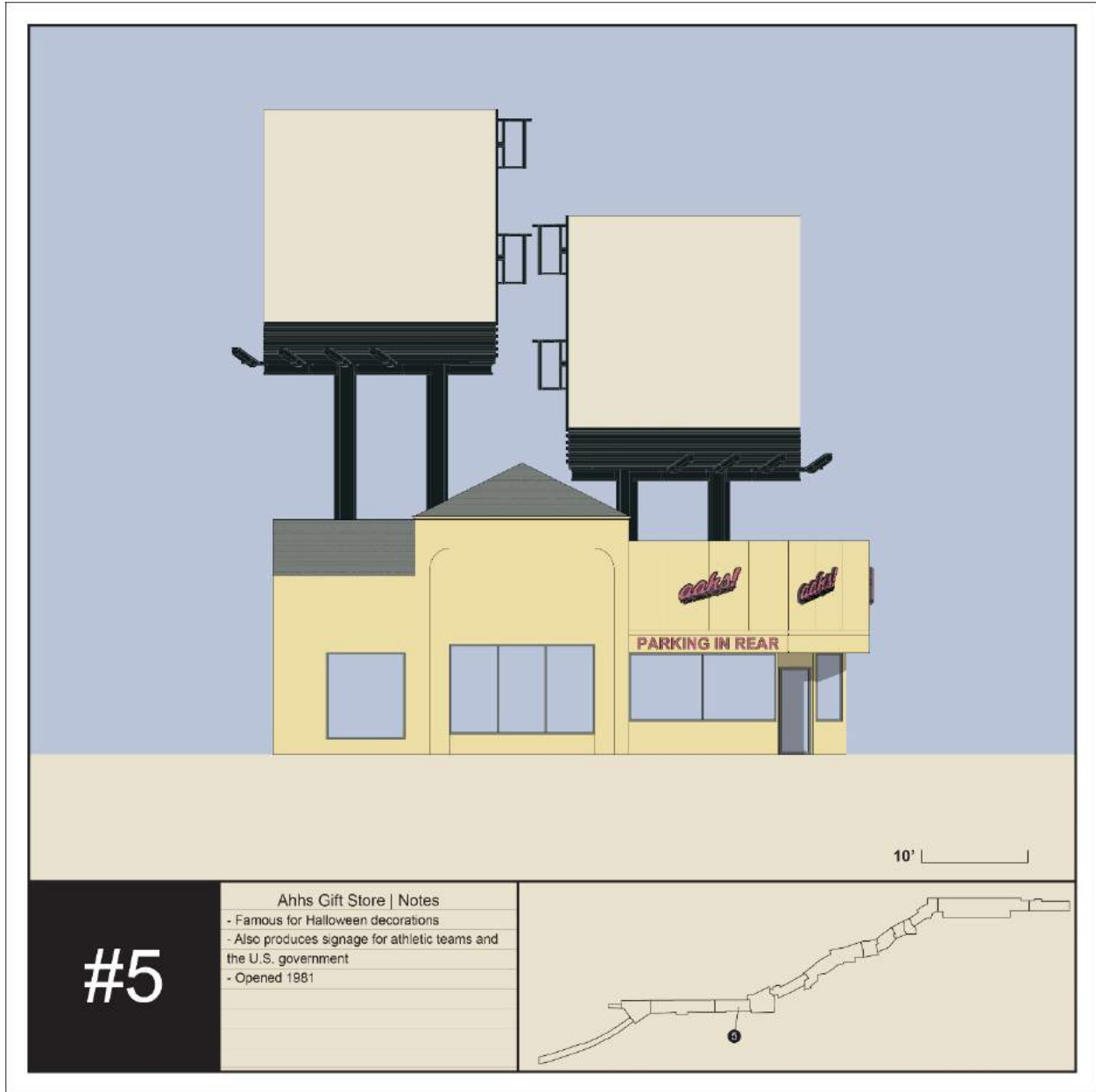
Figure 17: Icons of the Sunset Strip
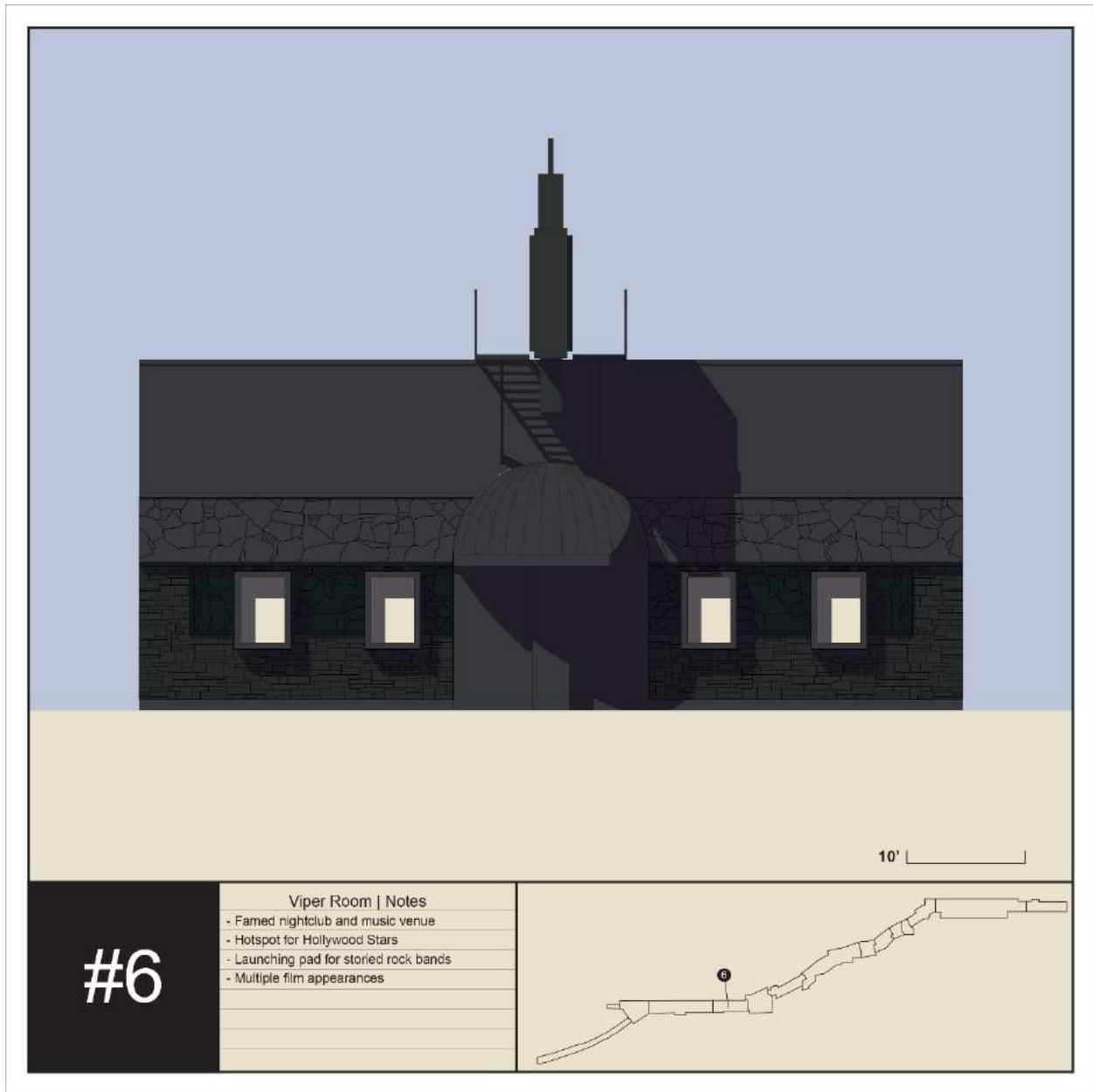
Figure 18: Icons of the Sunset Strip
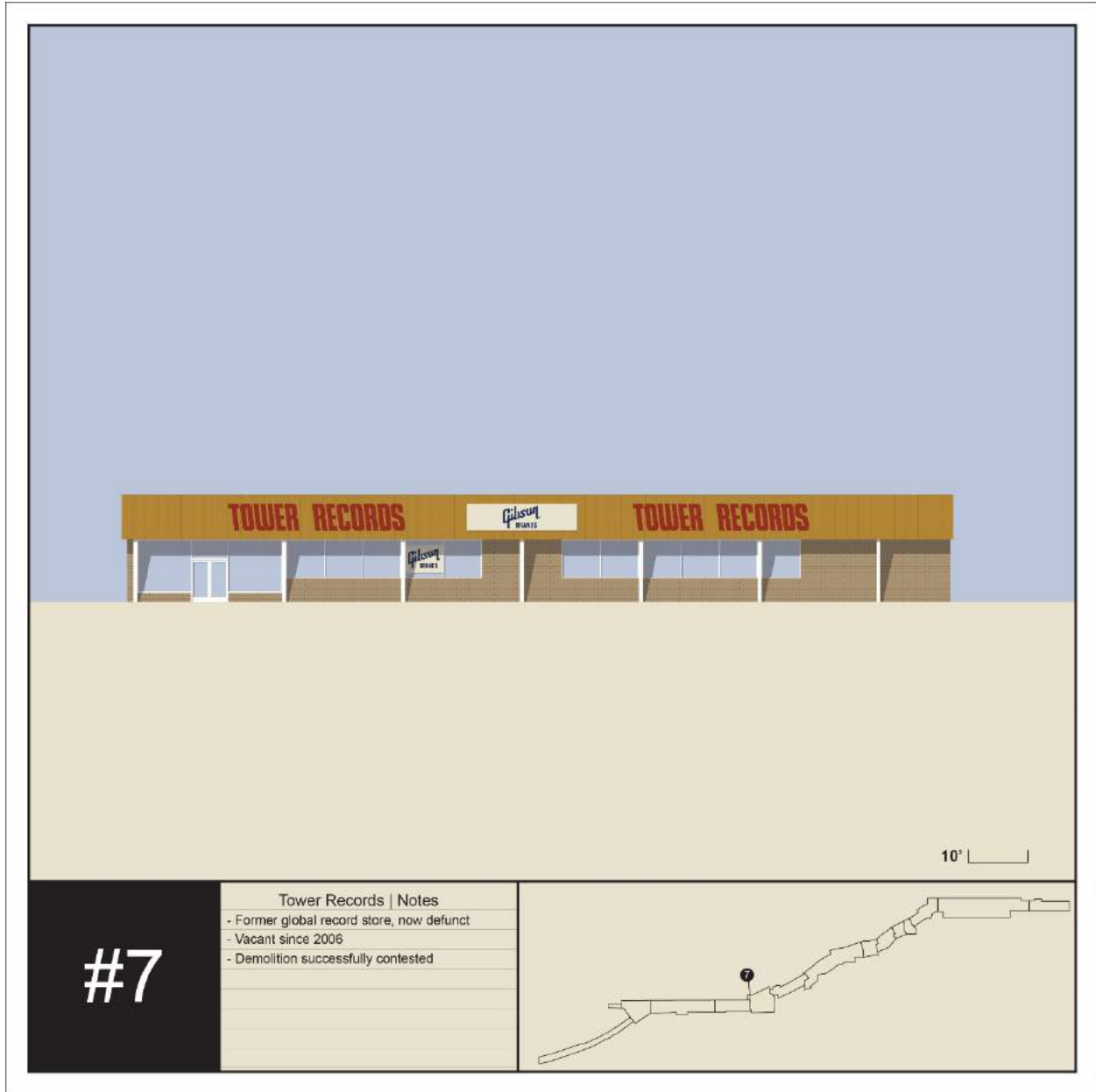
Figure 19: Icons of the Sunset Strip
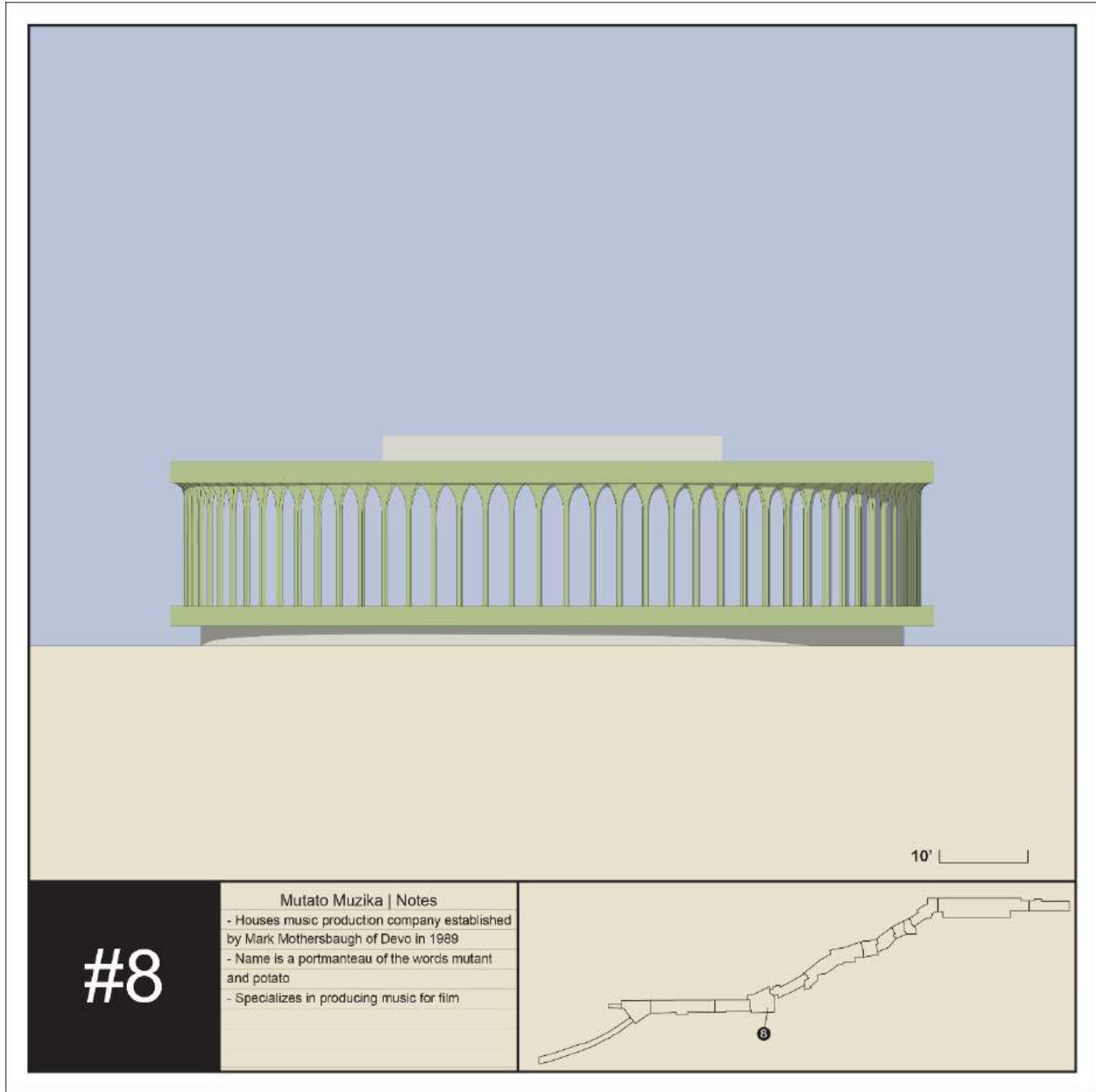
Figure 20: Icons of the Sunset Strip
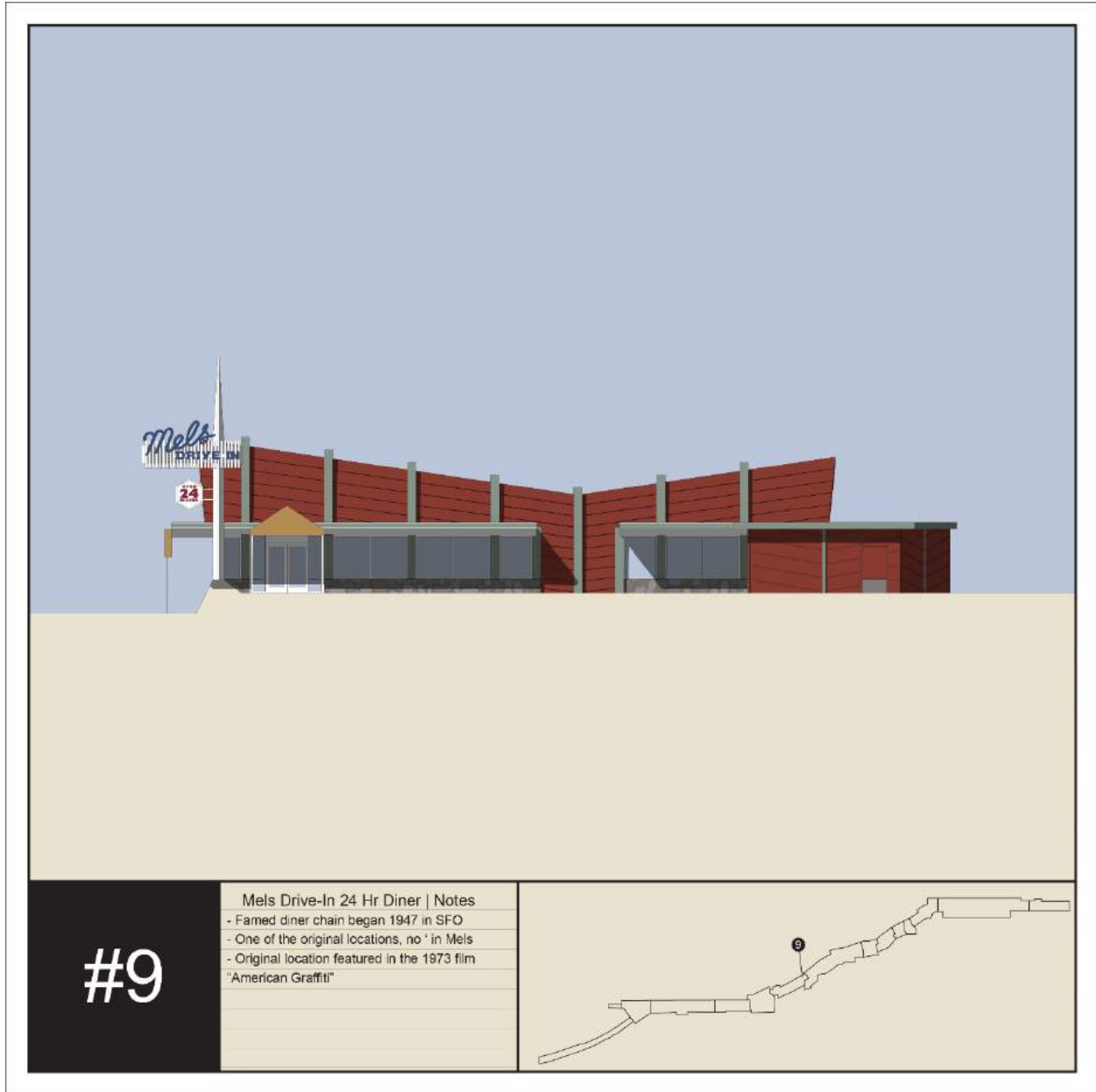
Figure 21: Icons of the Sunset Strip

Hacienda Arms Apartments | Notes
- Built 1927
- National Register of Historic Places
- 1930's became 'most famous brothel in CA'
- Bought by Rod Stewart in the 1970s

#10

10'
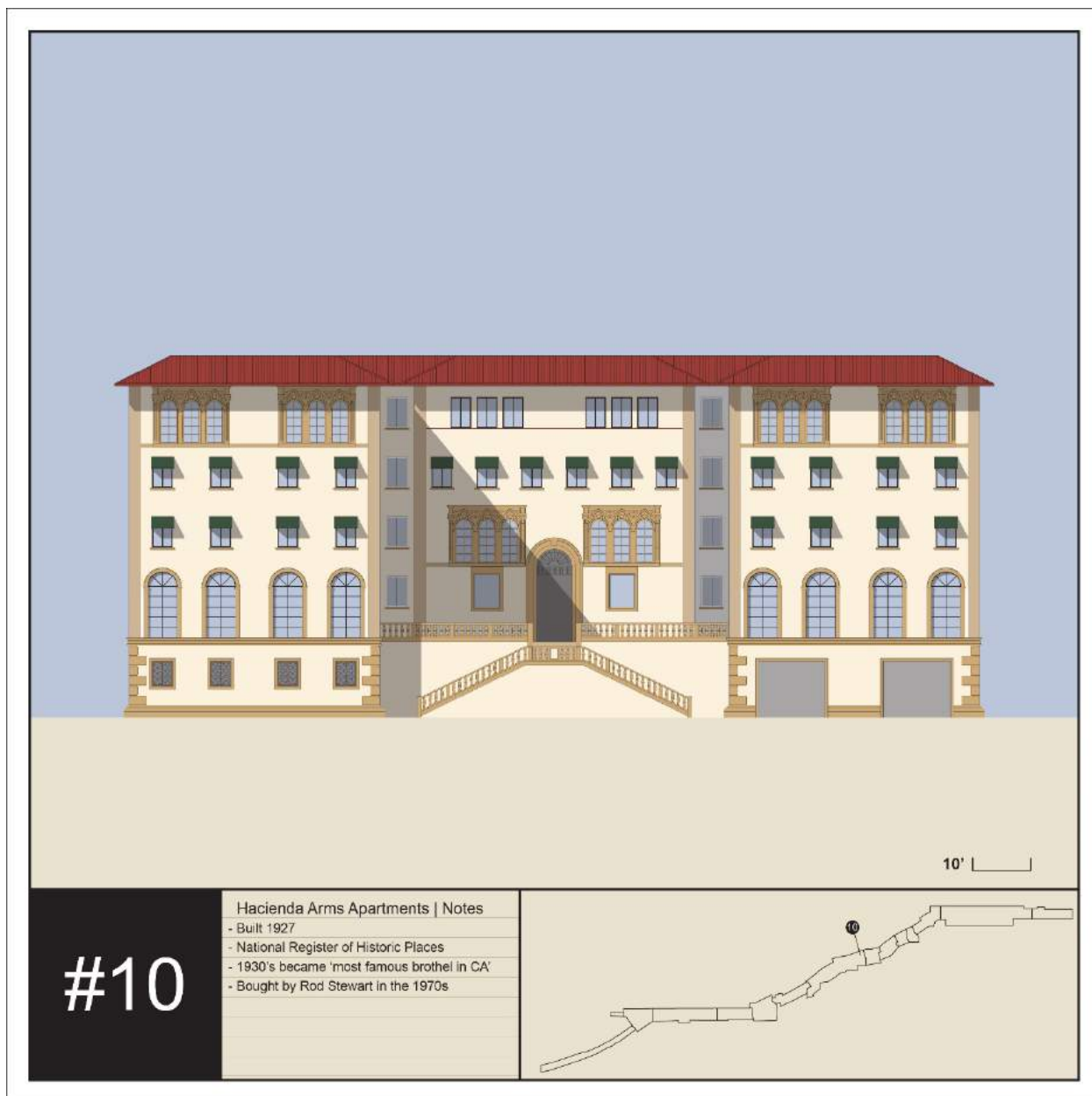
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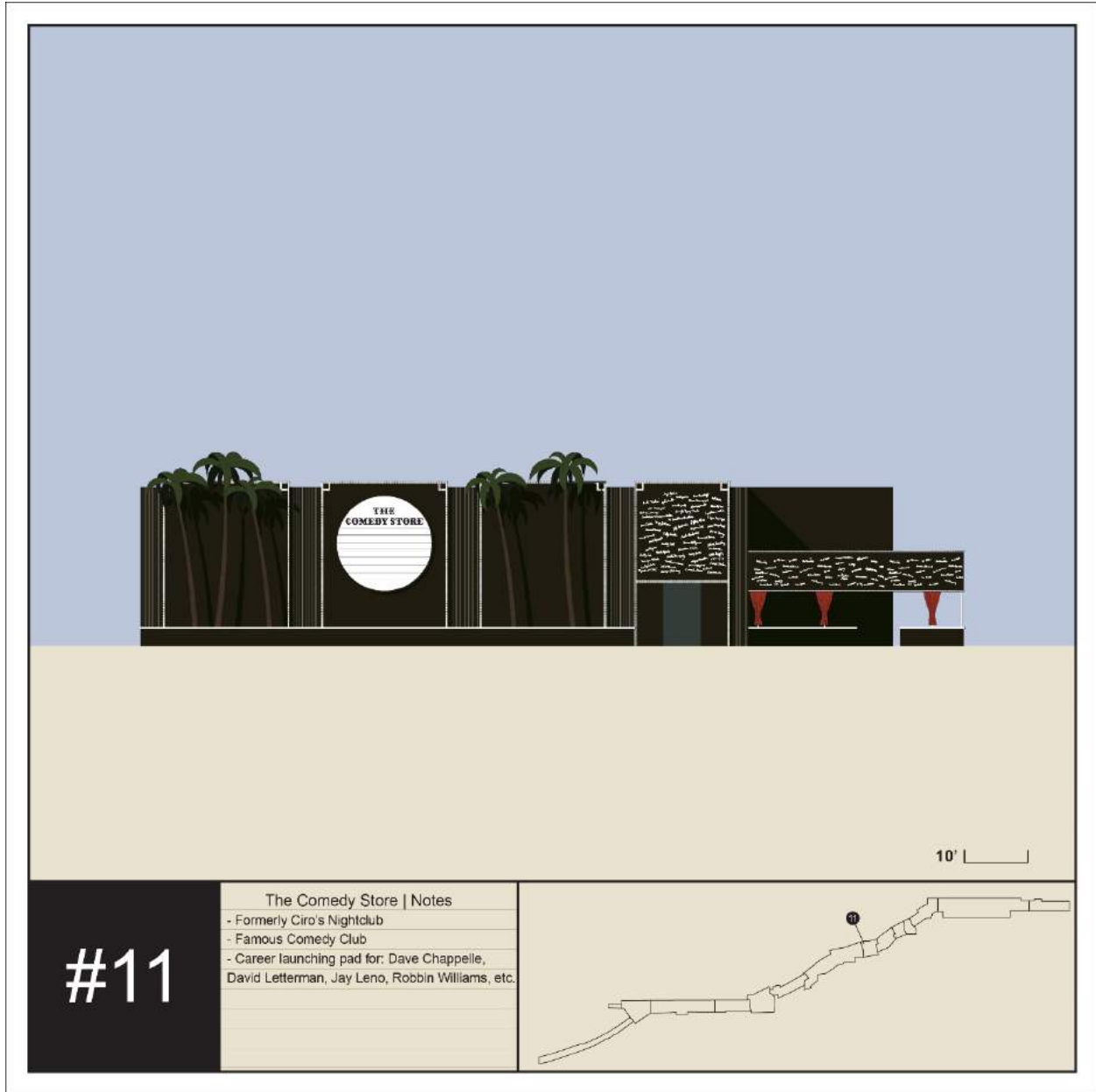
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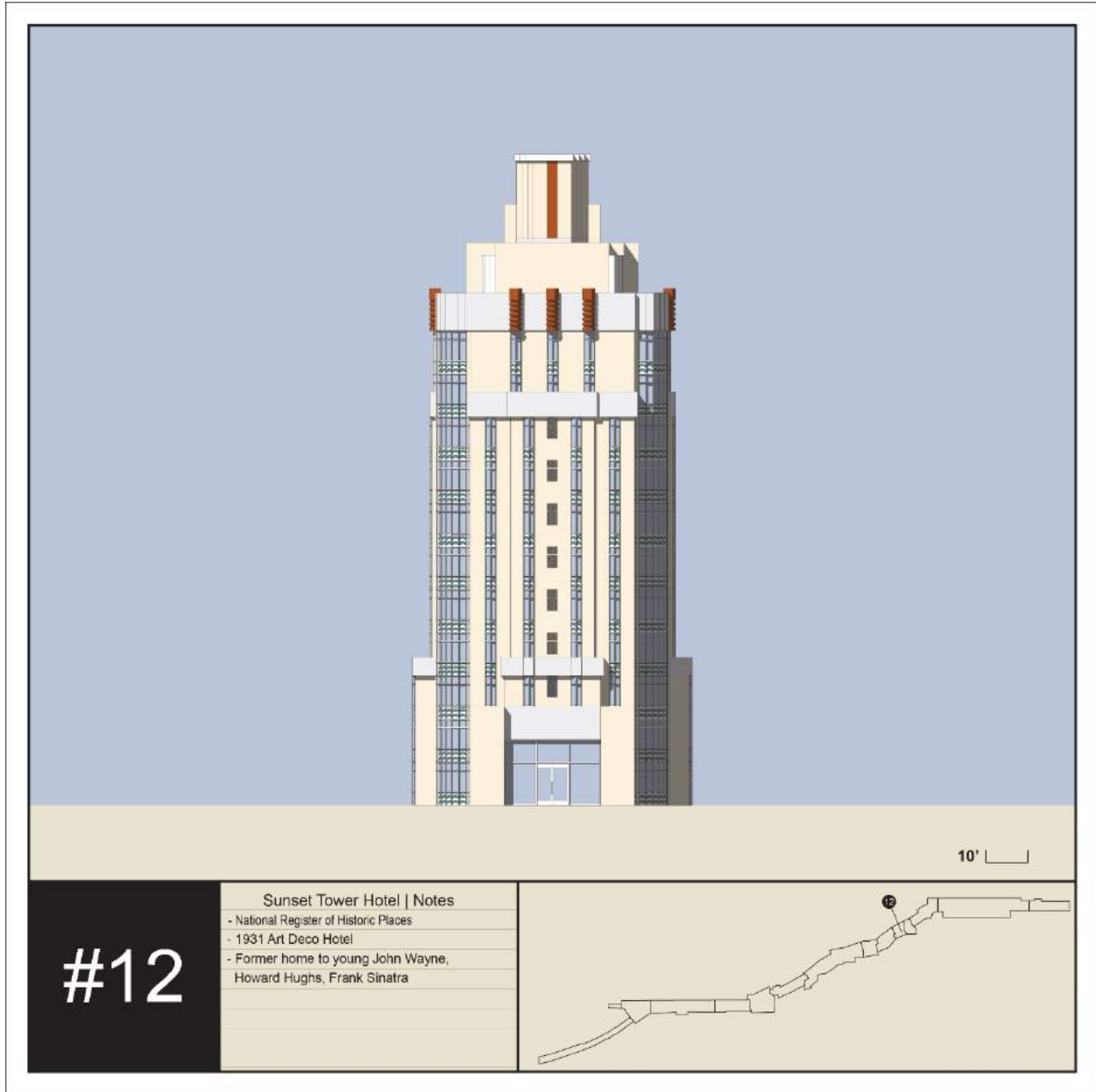
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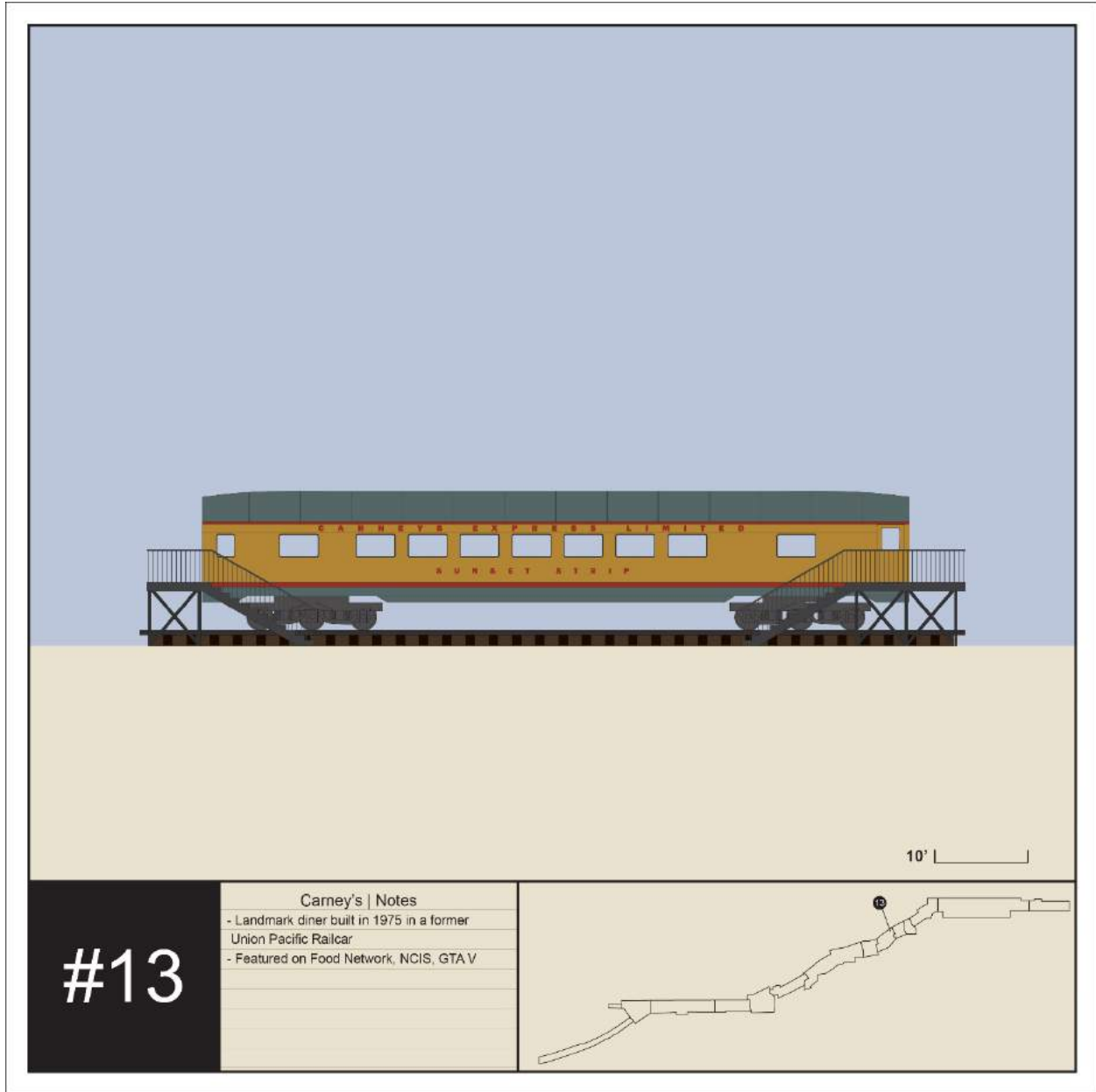
Figure 25: Icons of the Sunset Strip

The Standard Hotel | Notes
- First of five boutique 18+ Standard Hotels
- Original investors: Leonardo DiCaprio, Cameron Diaz, Benicio del Toro, D'arcy Wretzky, and James Iha
- Opened 1999

#14

10'
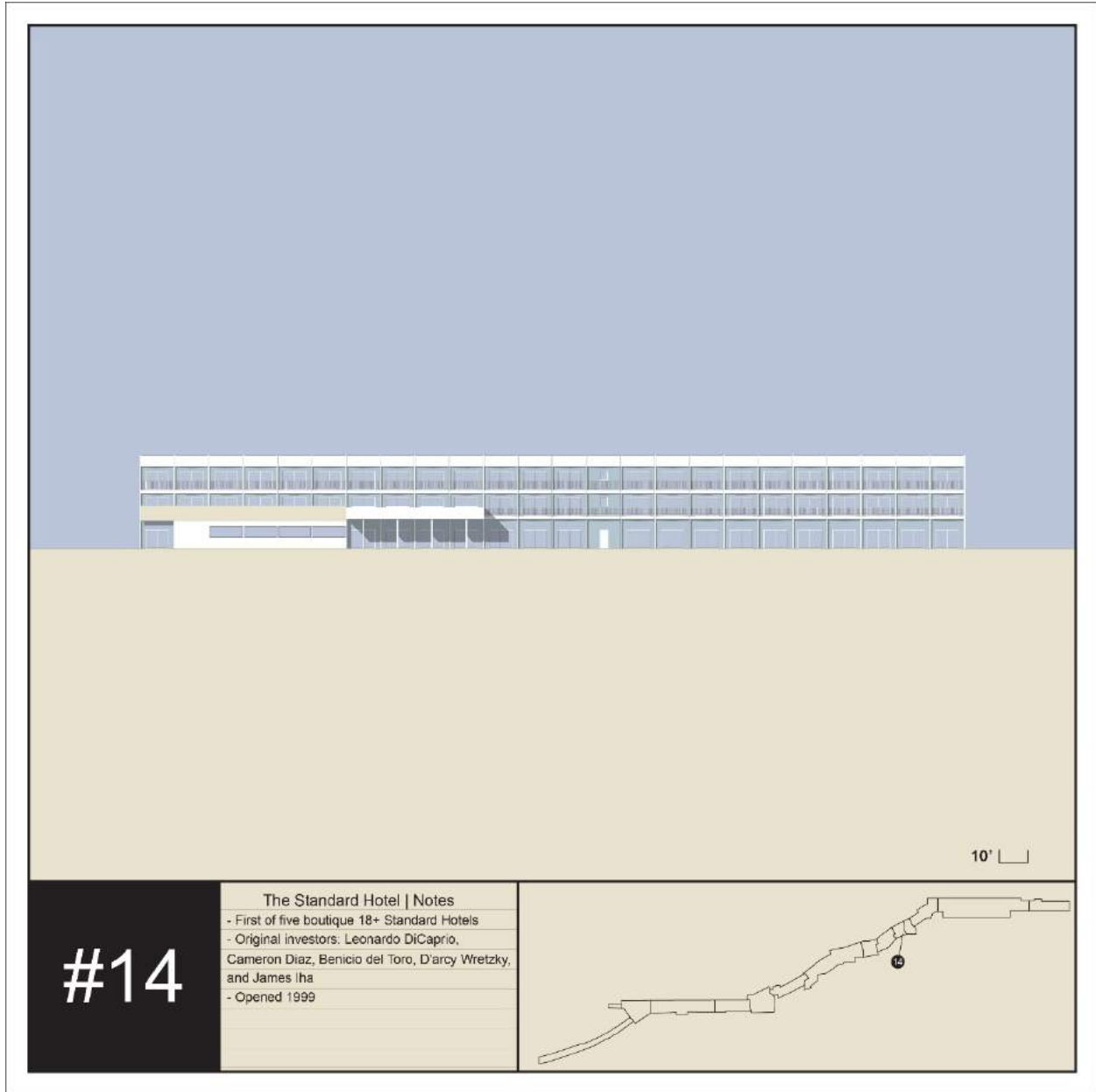
Figure 26: Icons of the Sunset Strip

46
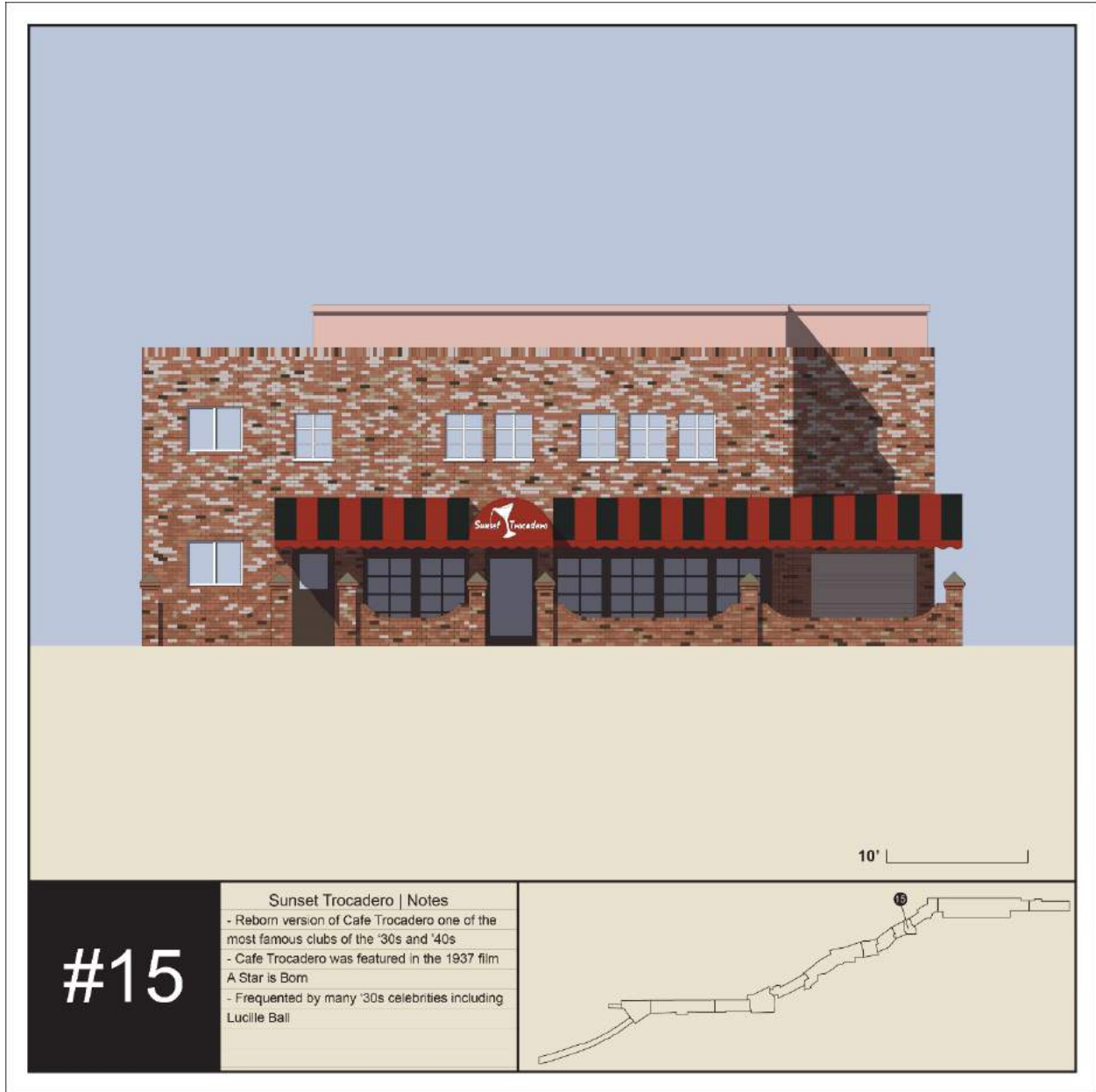
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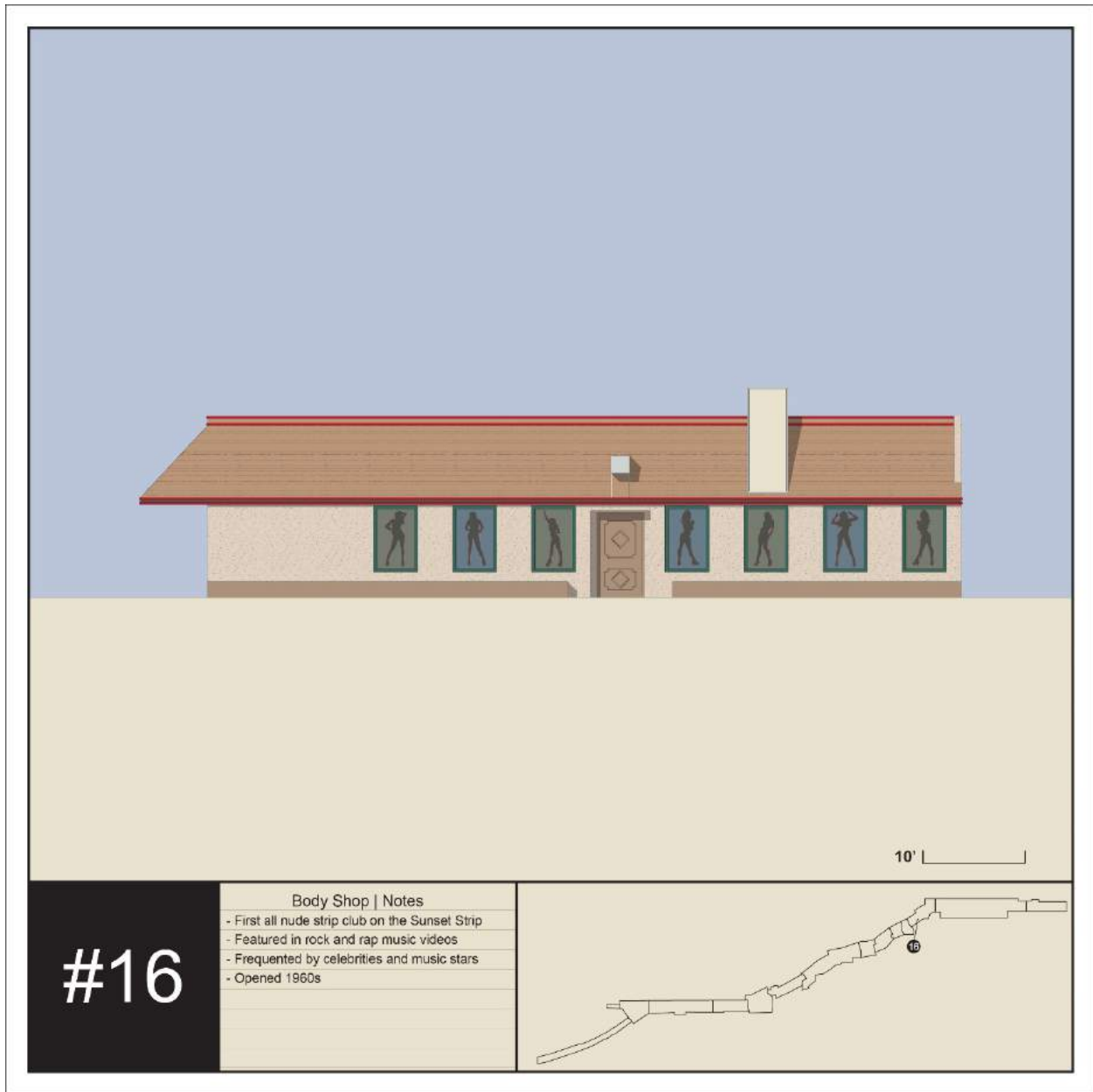
Figure 28: Icons of the Sunset Strip

Chateau Marmont Hotel | Notes
- LA Historic-Cultural Monument
- Modeled after Loire Valley Chateaux
- Opened in 1929
- Frequent setting for films incl: La La Land
- Frequently referenced in songs

#17

10'
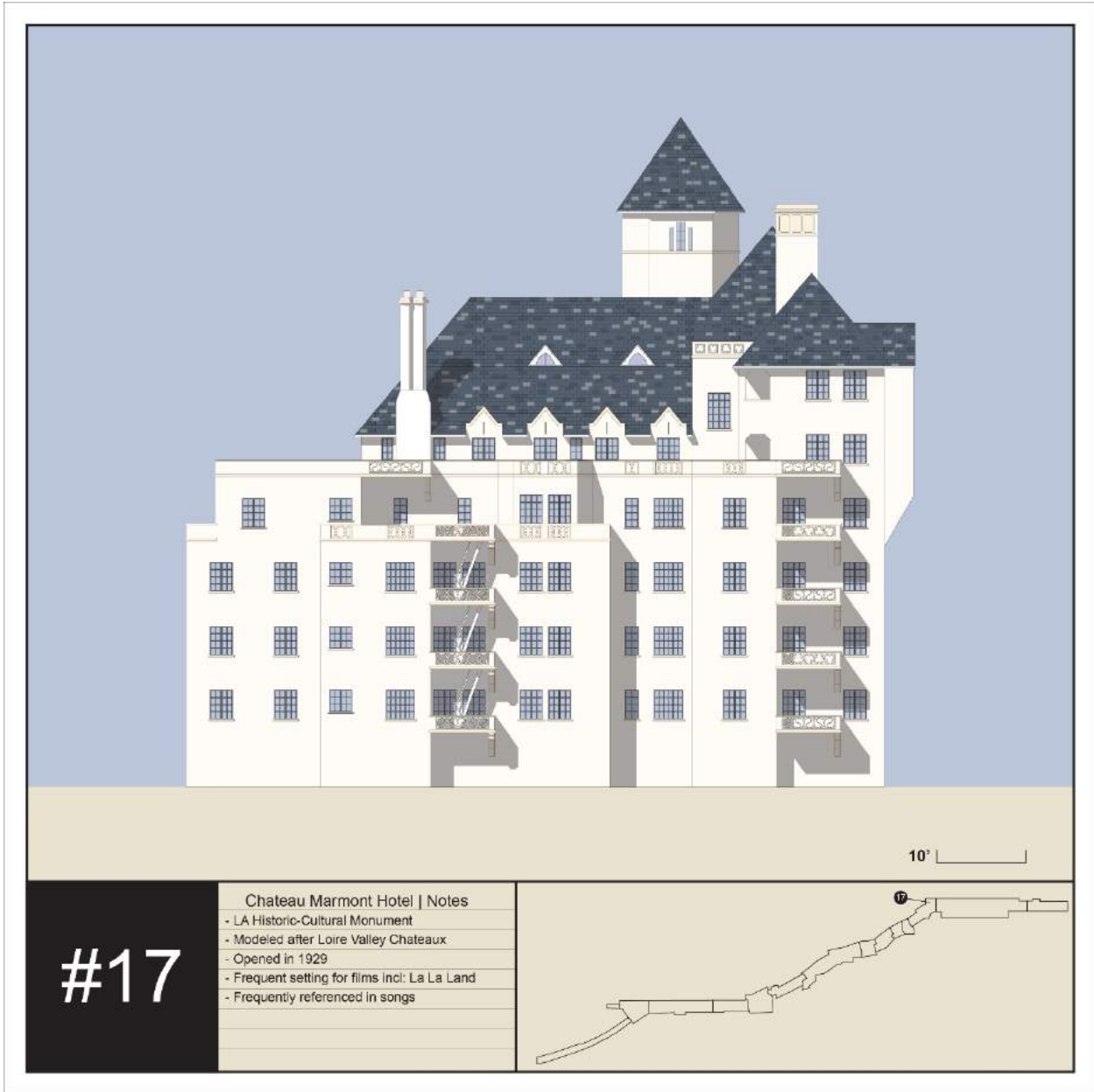
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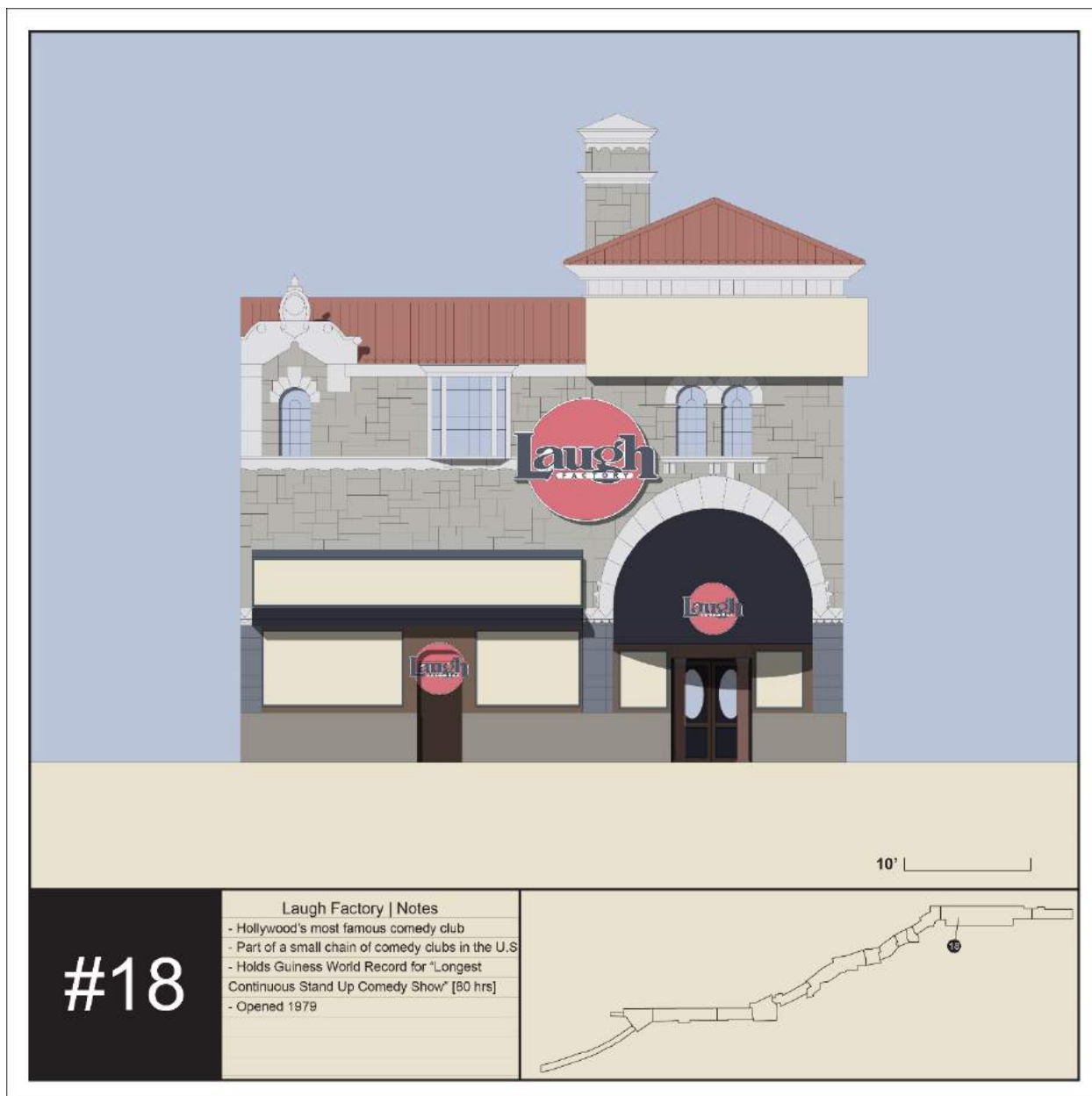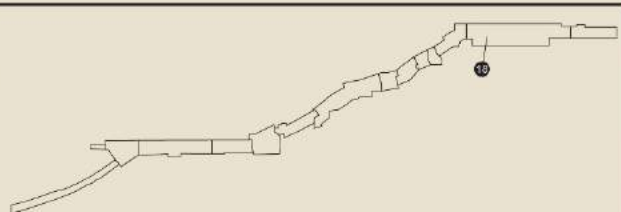
Figure 30: Icons of the Sunset Strip

50
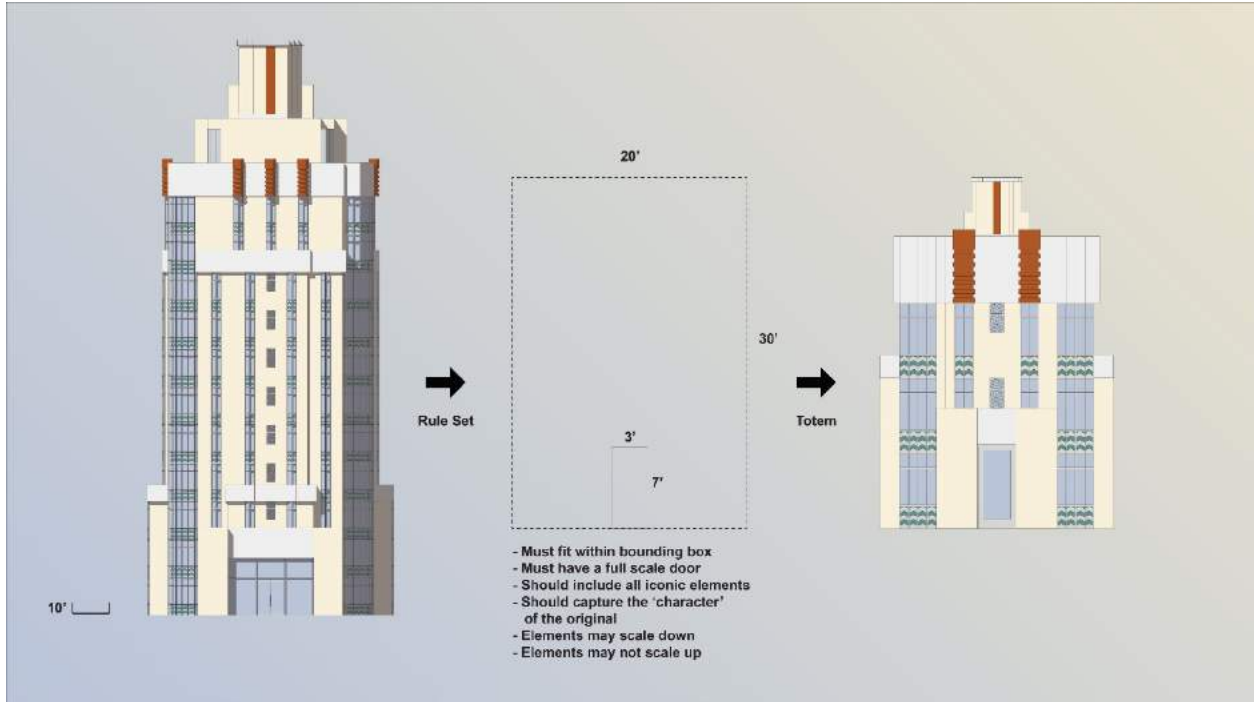
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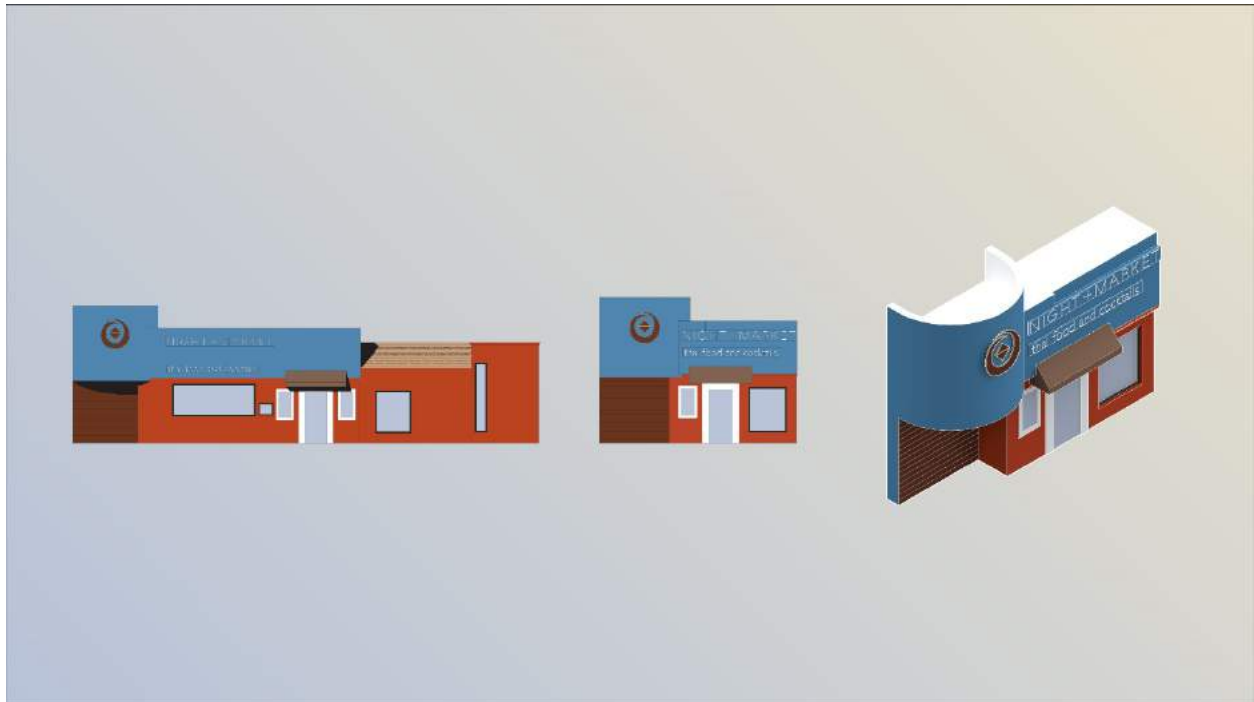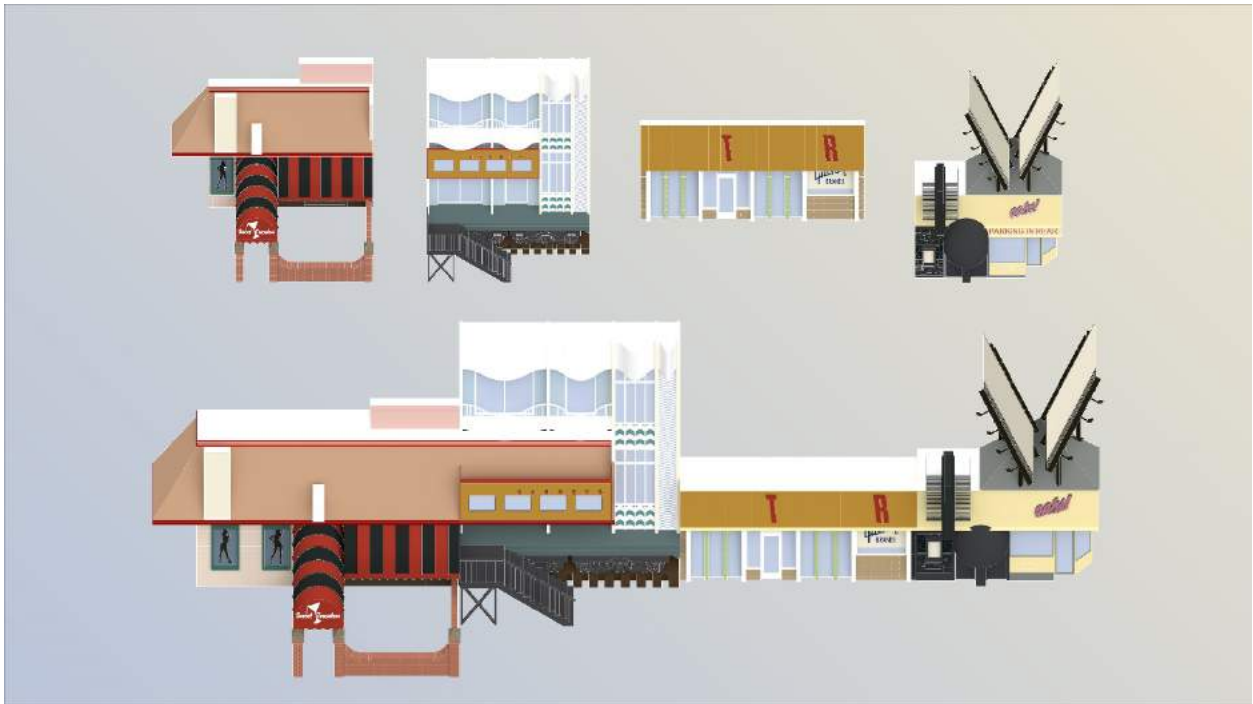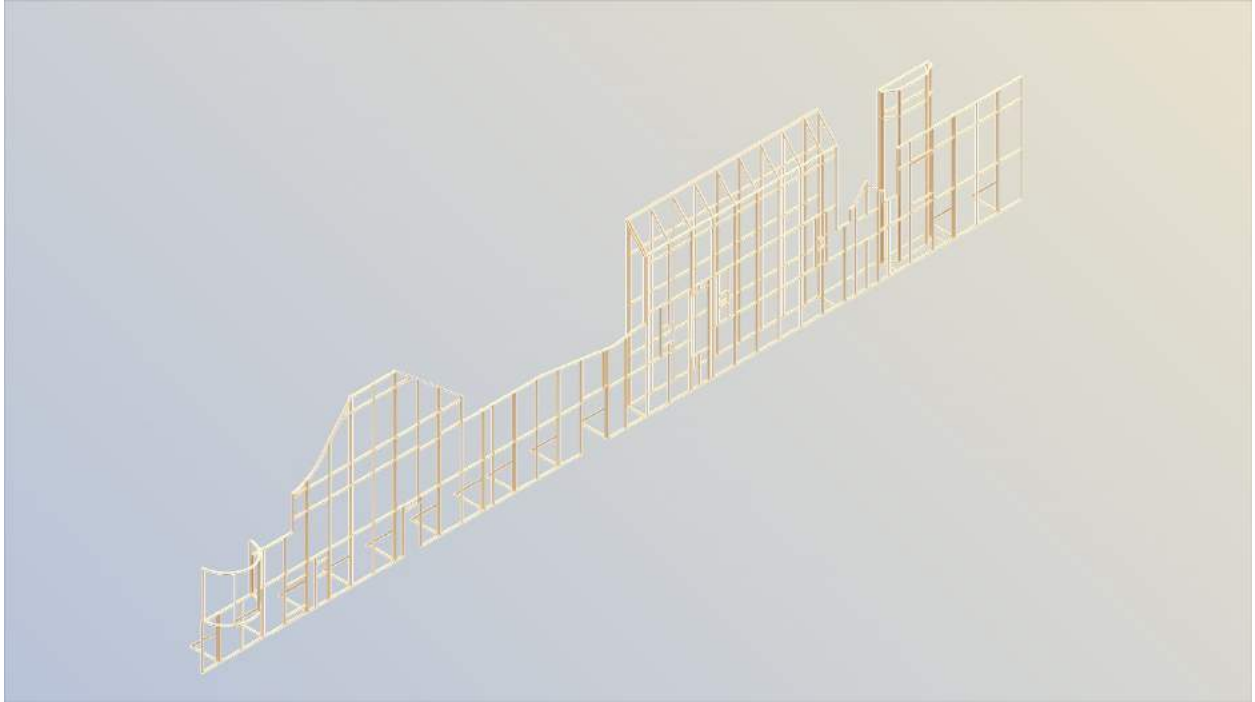

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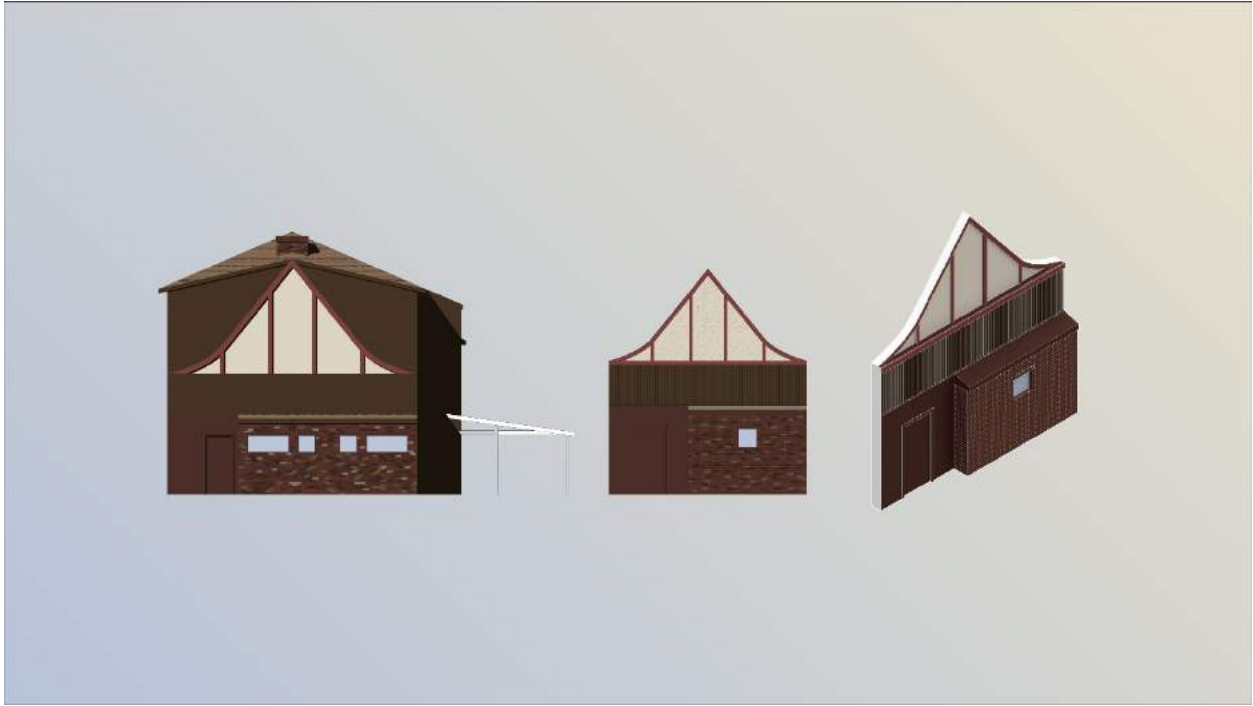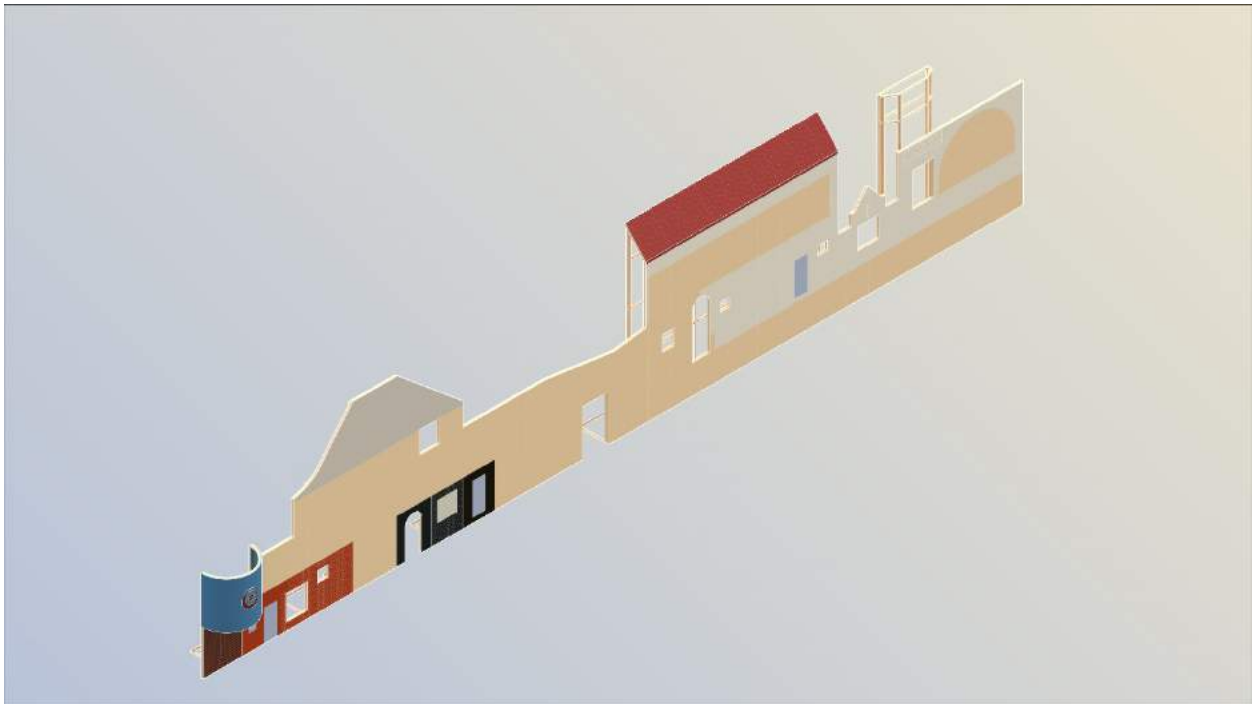
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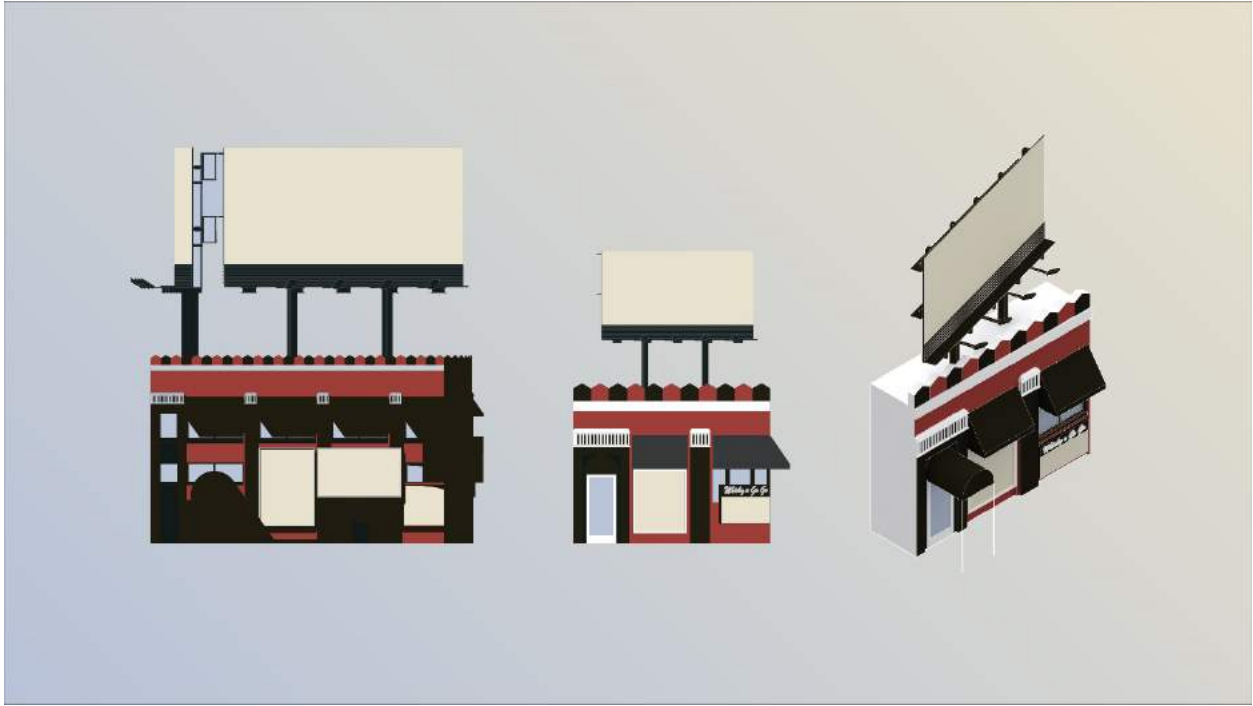
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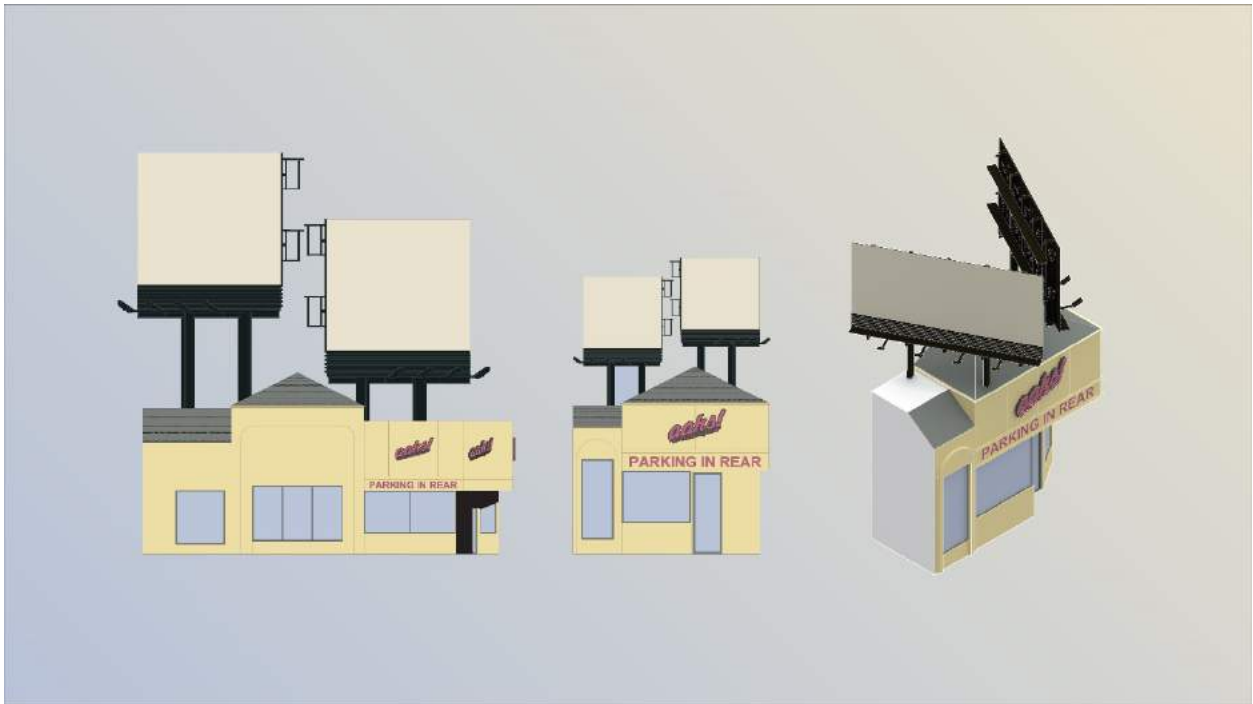
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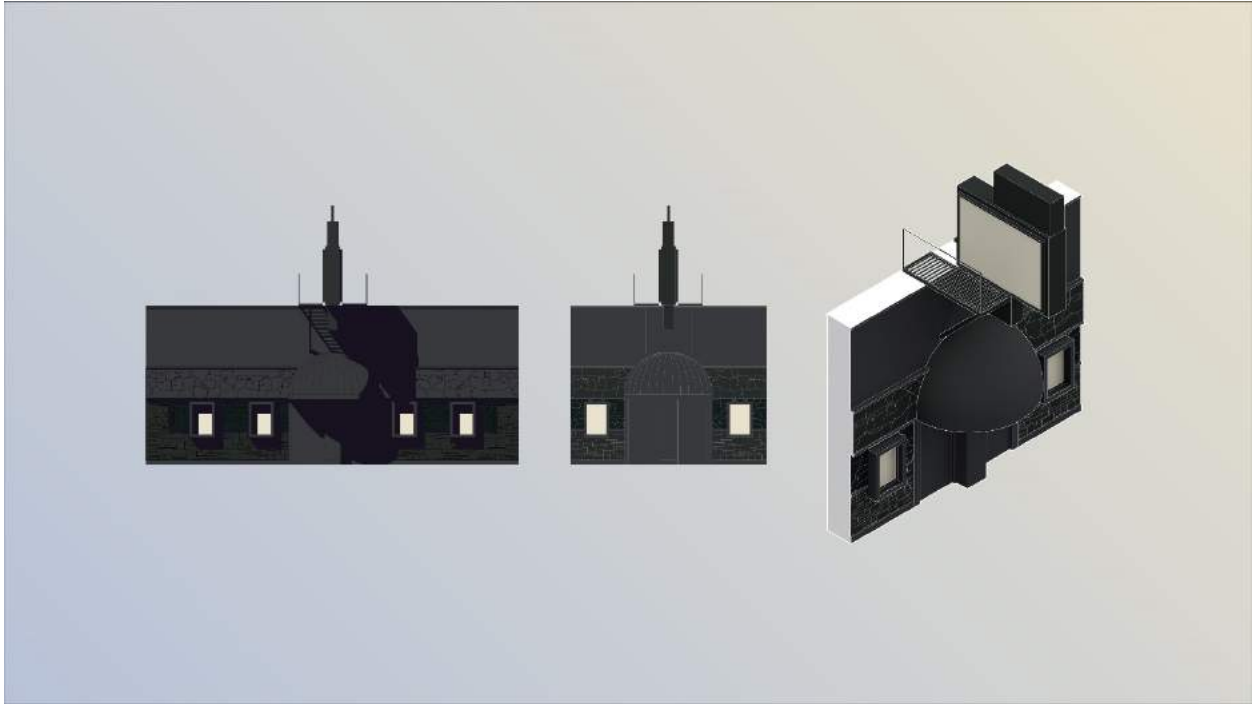
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Figure 38: Step 1 Compression

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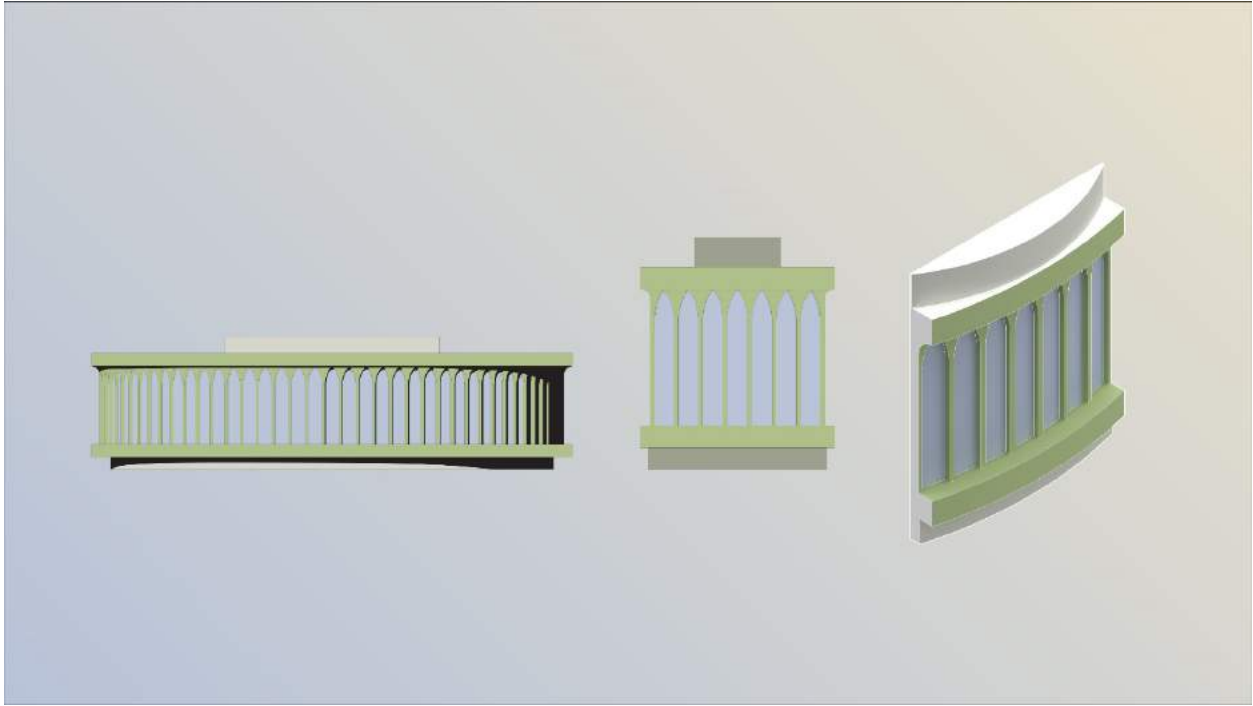
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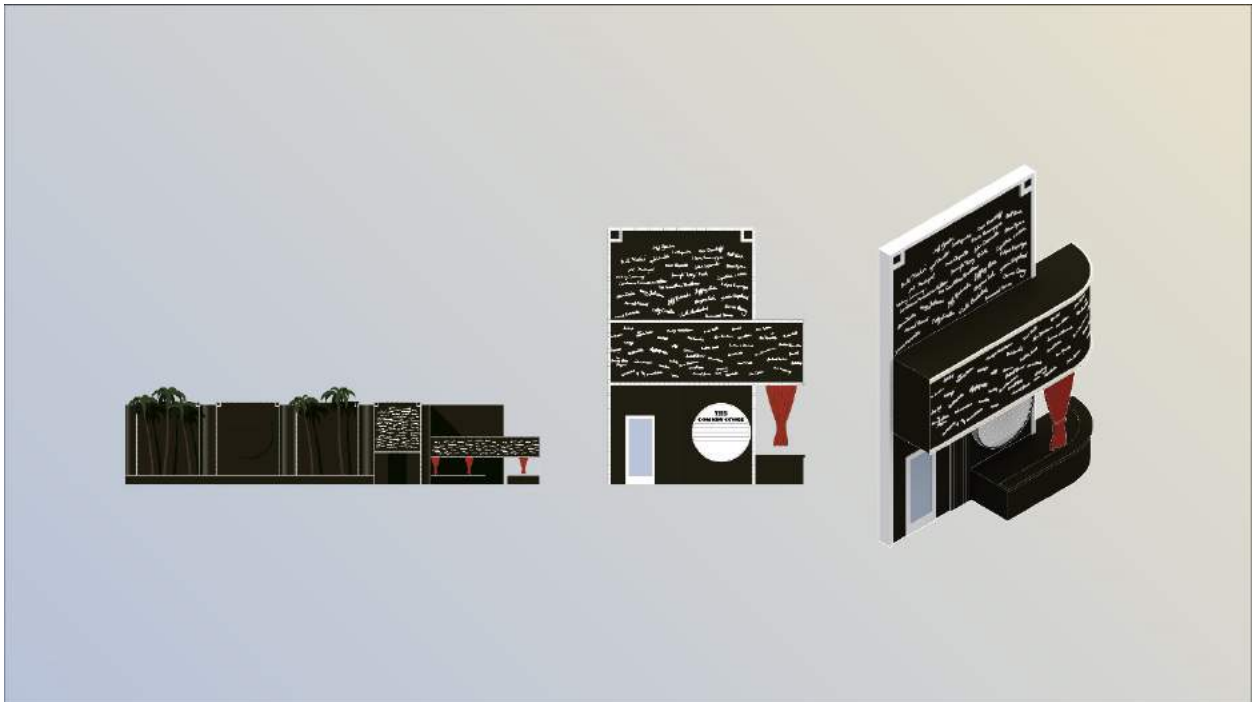
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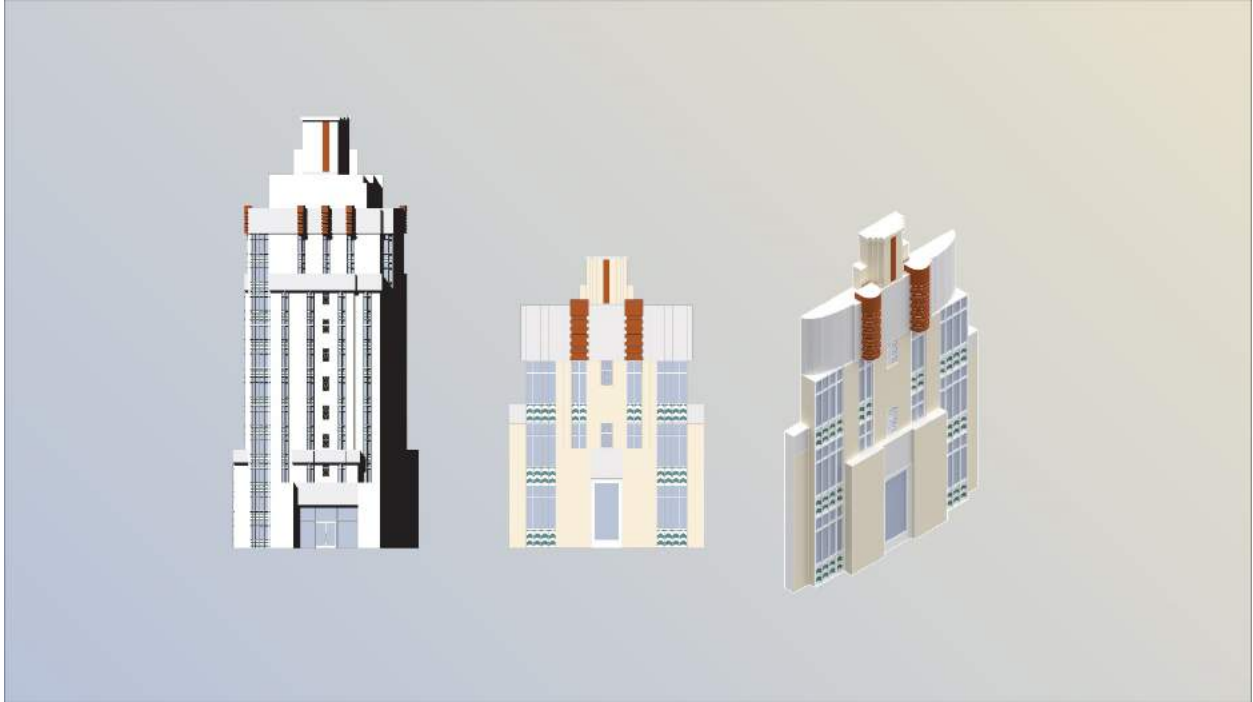
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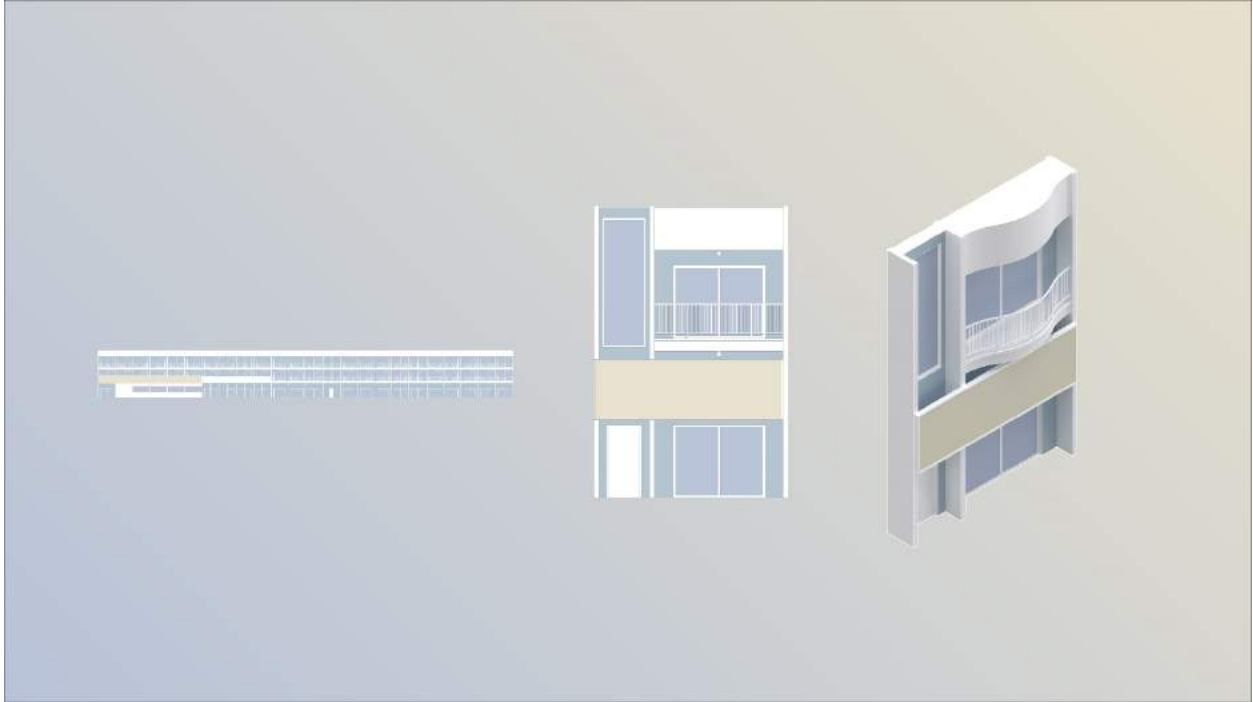
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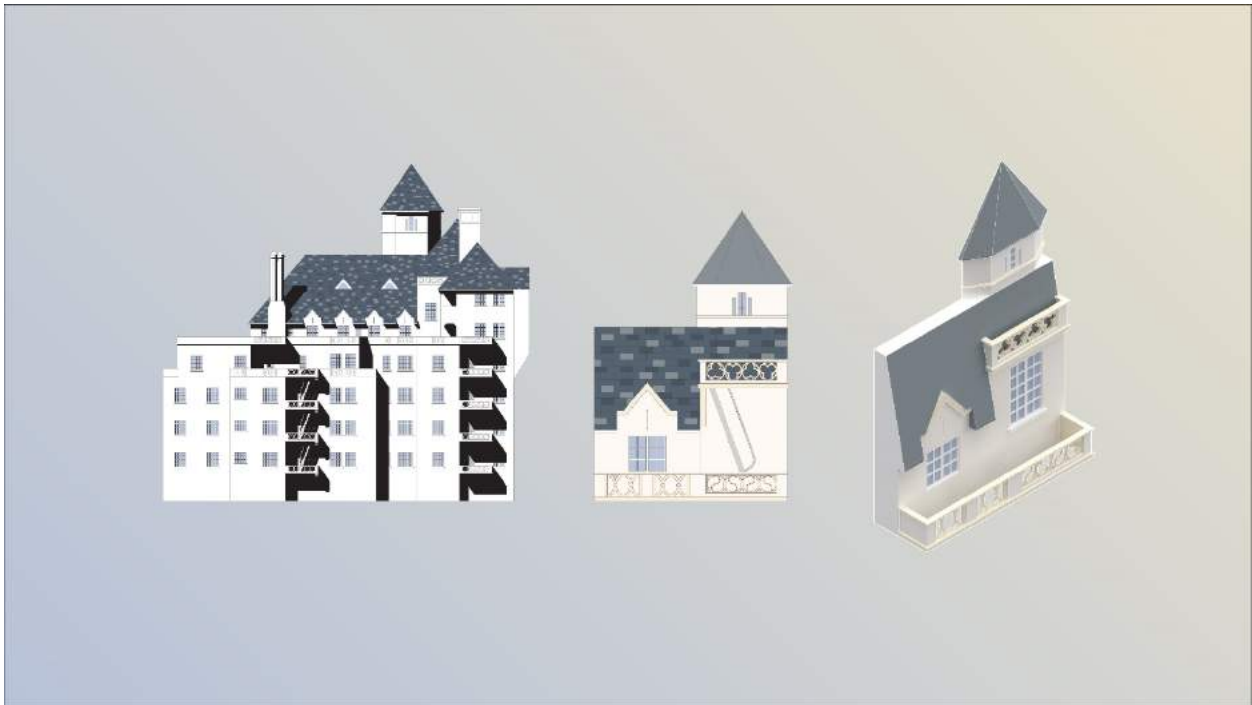
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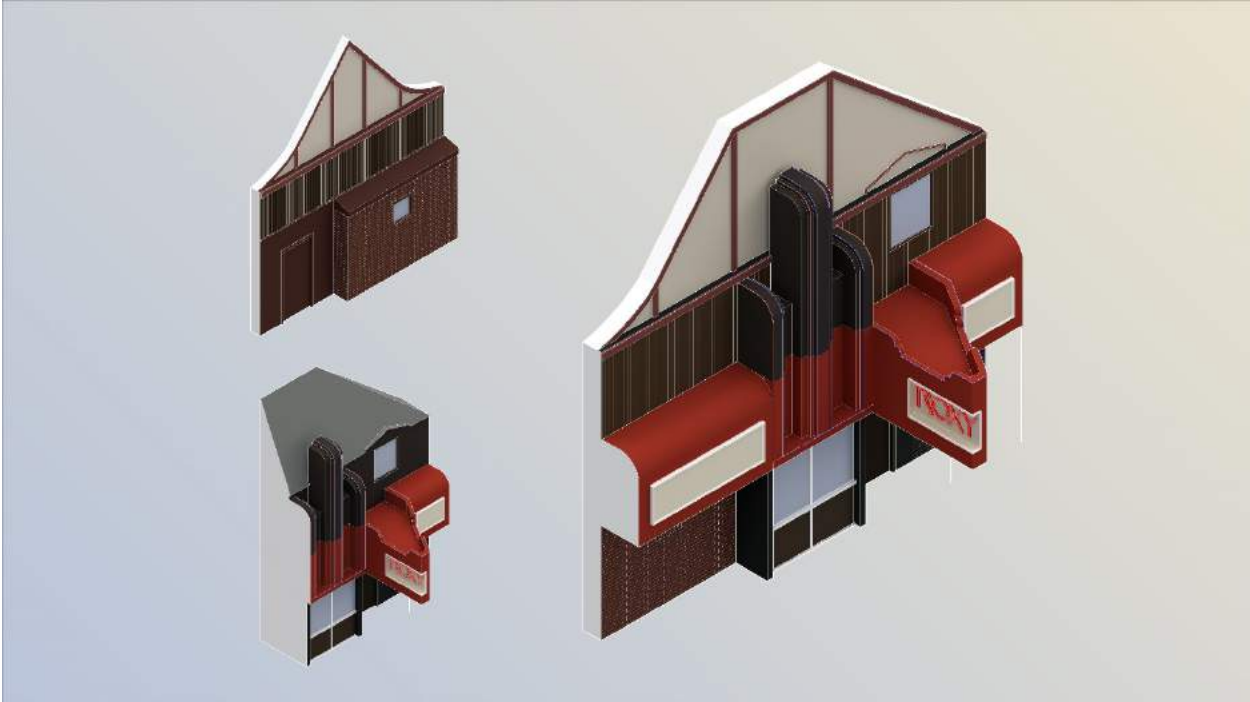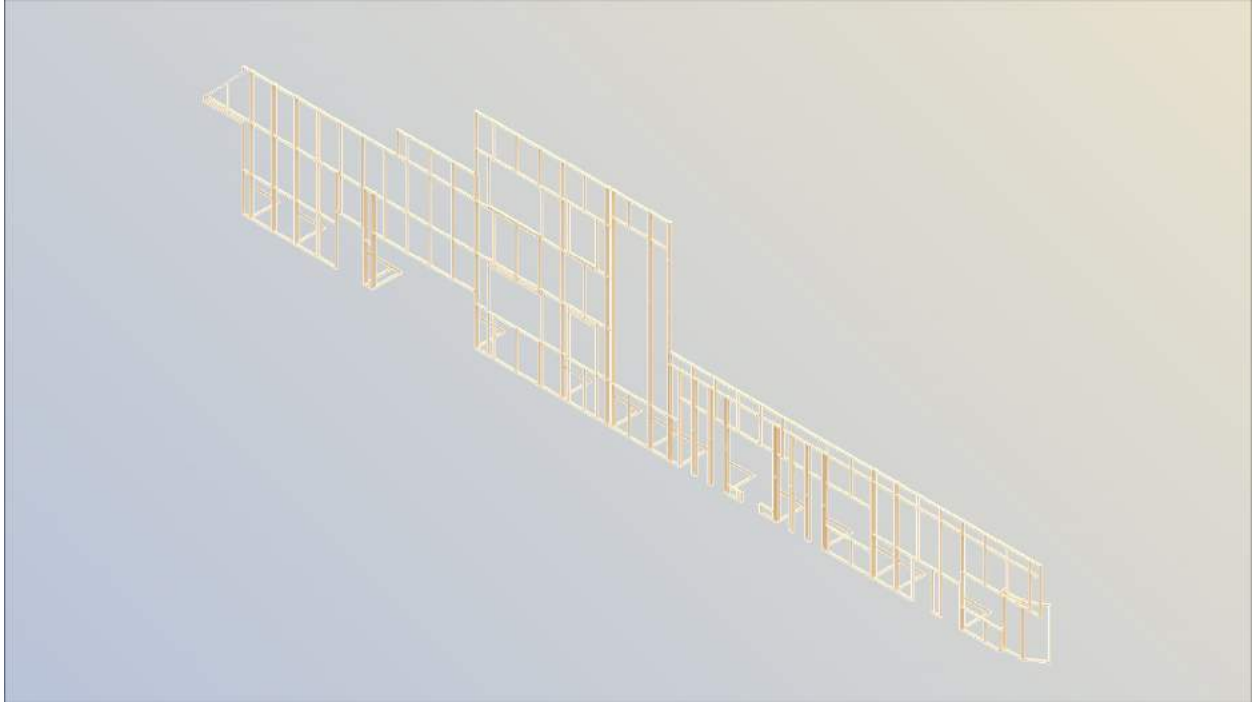
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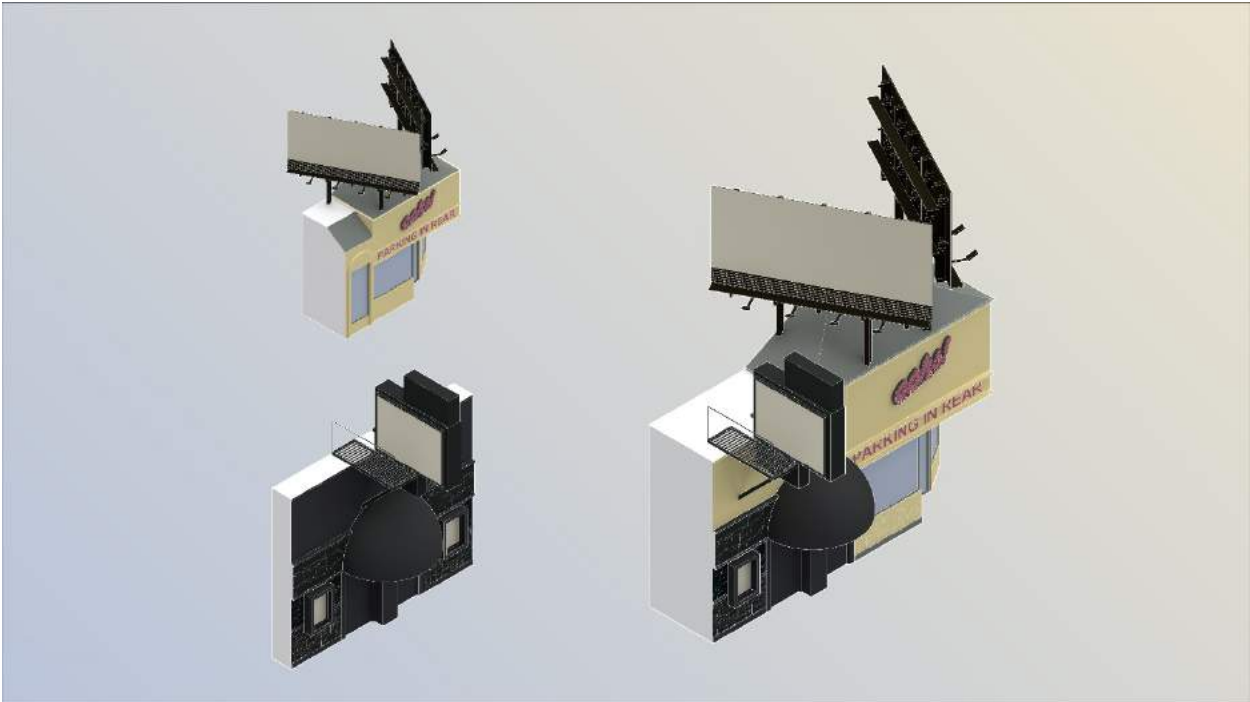
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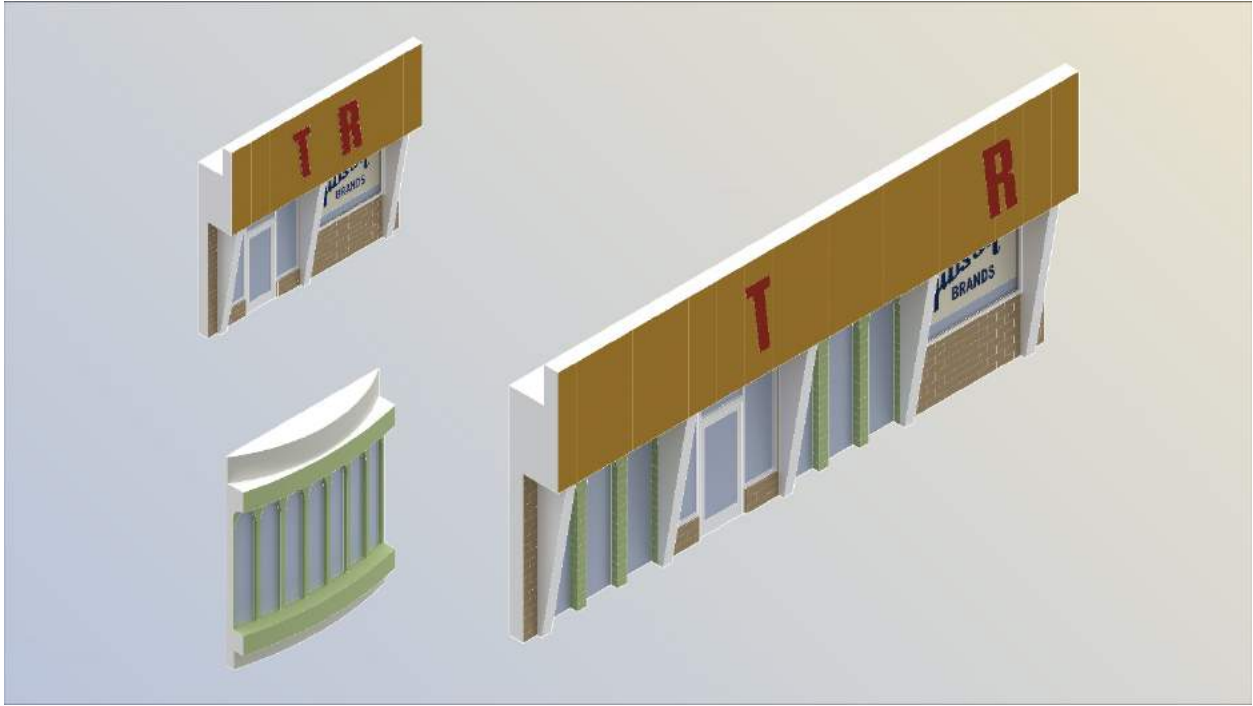
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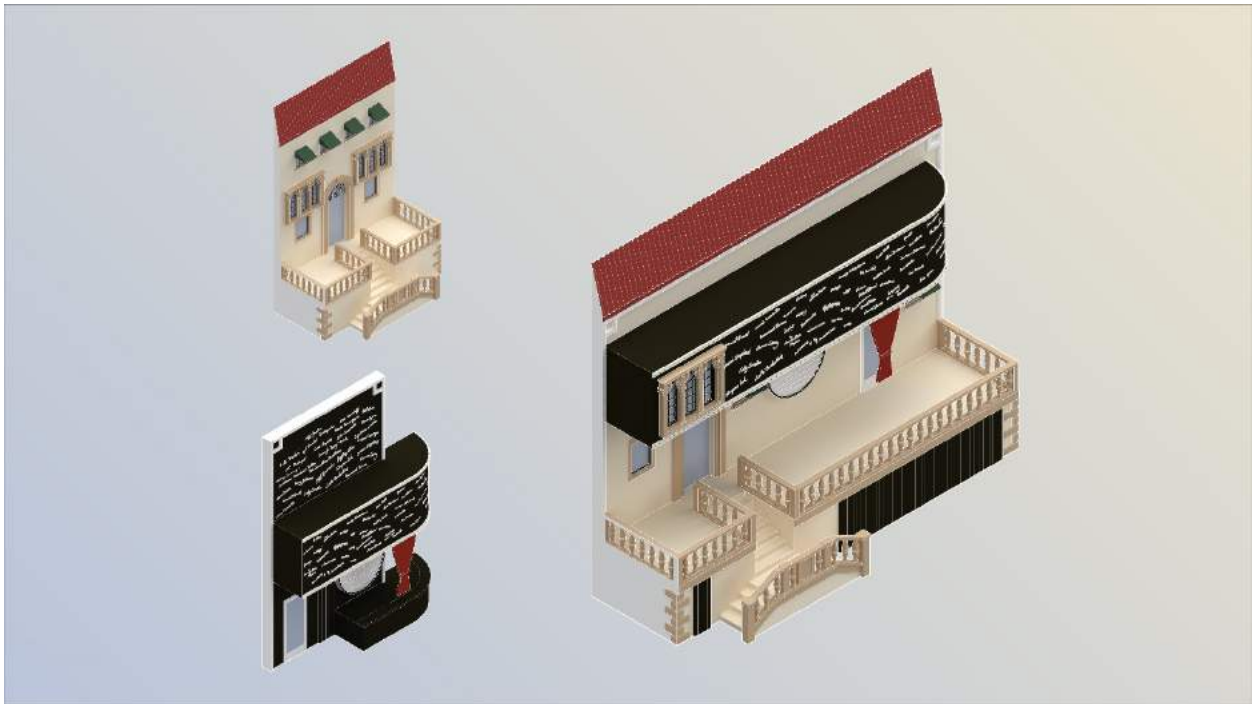
Figure 53: Step 2 Compression

62

Figure 54: Step 2 Compression
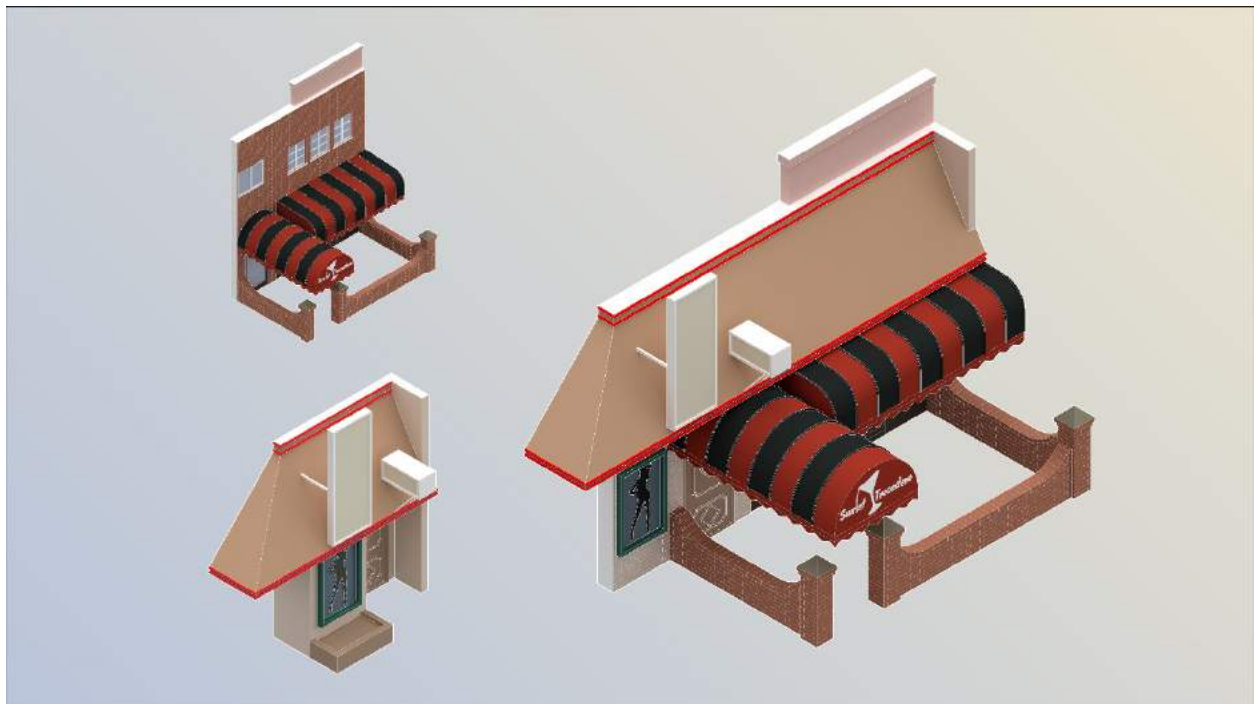
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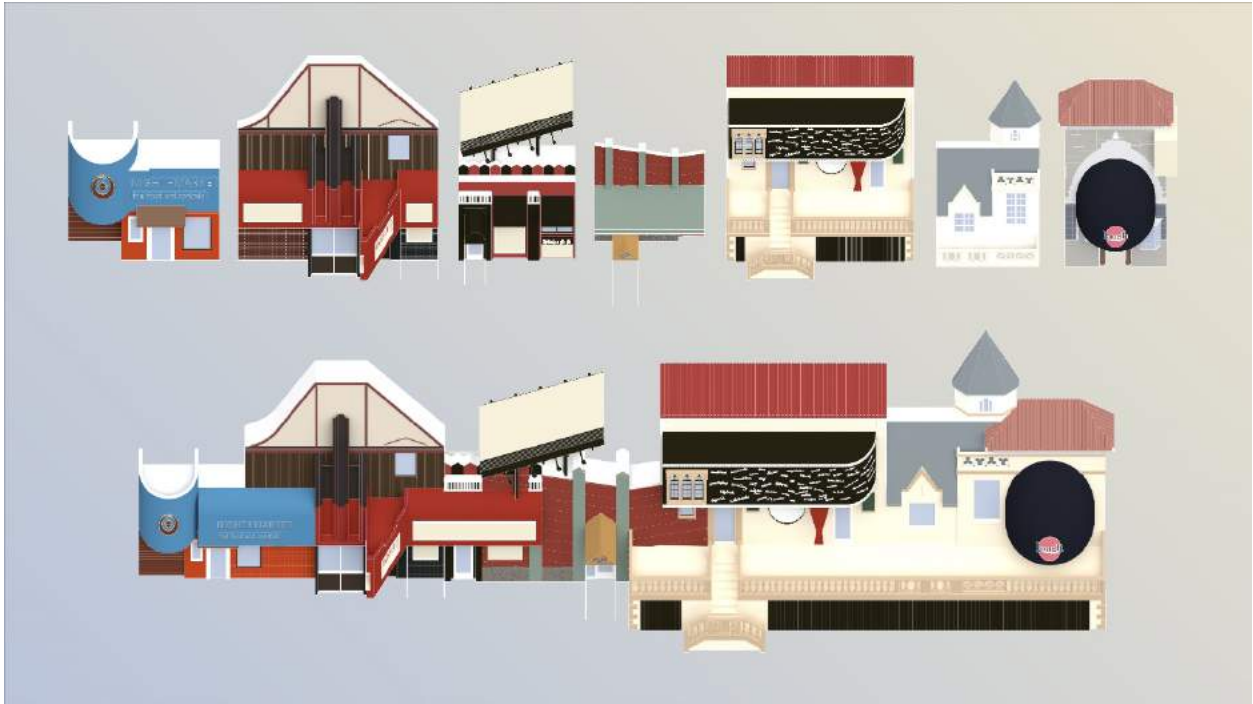
Figure 56: Step 3 Compression

Figure 57: Step 3 Compression

64

Figure 58: Step 4 Compression

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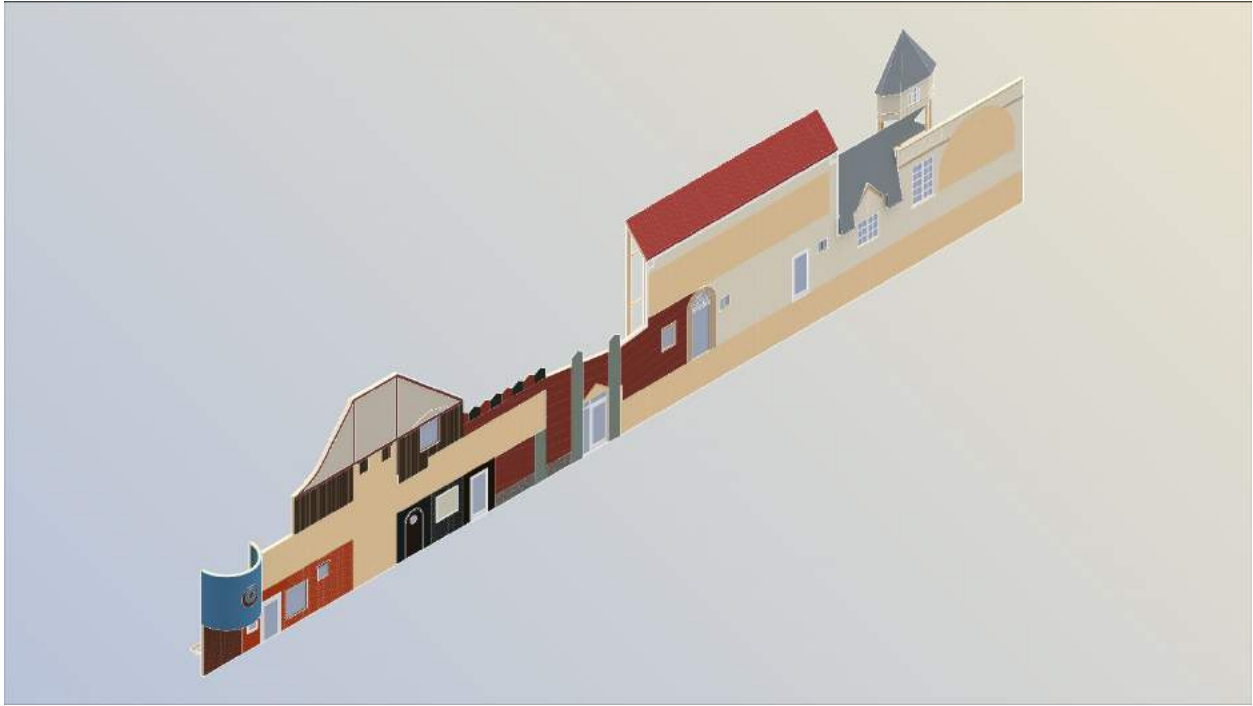
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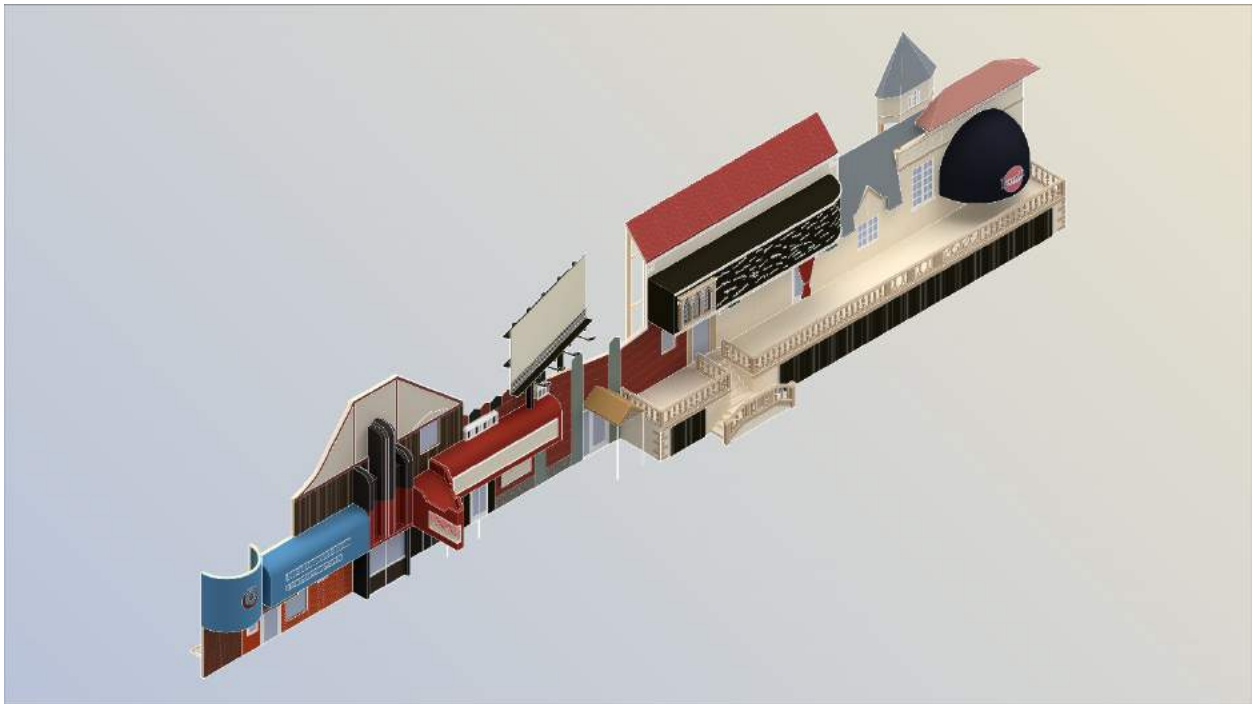
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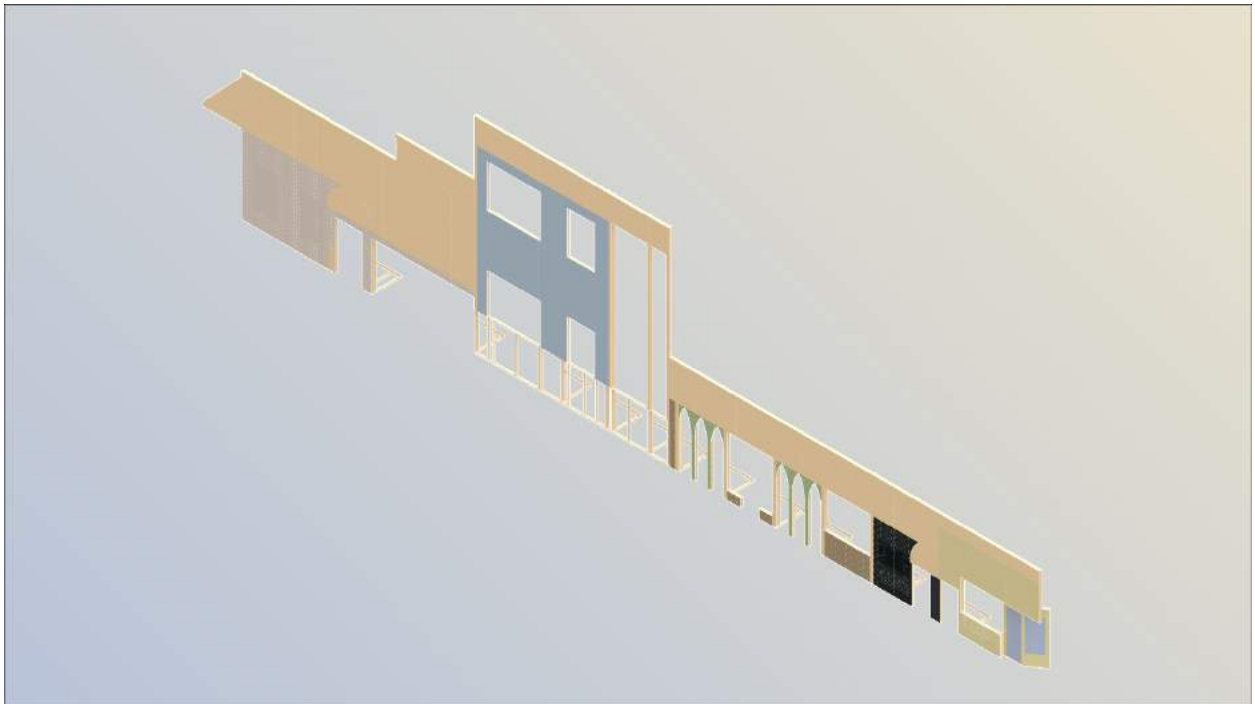
Figure 61: Step 4 Compression

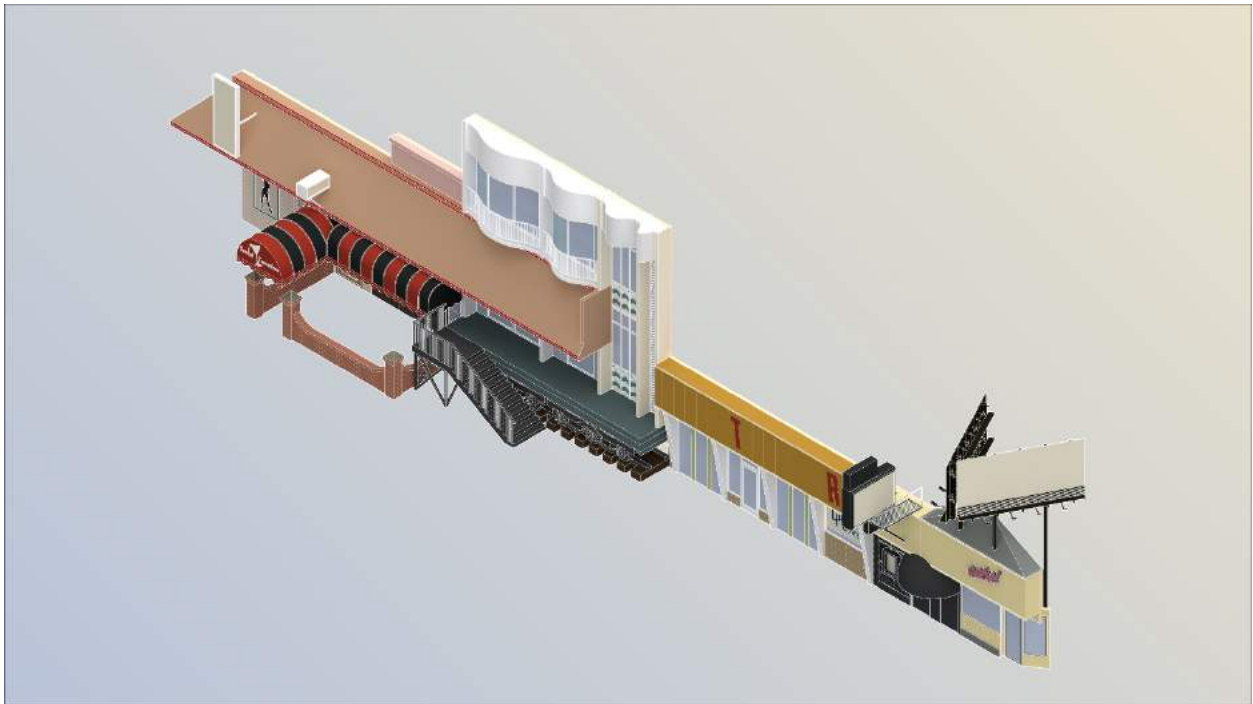Figure 62: Step 4 Compression

Figure 63: Step 4 Compression

Figure 64: Step 4 Compression

Figure 65: Step 4 Compression Details

A flat pack scenographic architecture, preserving the iamge of the Sunset Strip.