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# Interview with Richard Rogers

**P49 What role do you think reference and influence play in your work and in the architectural profession?**

RR Let's start by saying: I don't believe that ideas suddenly come out of the blue. Projects are not like Greek gods that rise out of your head. It doesn't quite work like that.

I think you are strongly influenced by what you see and what you do, by the people around you. Then it's in your mind, and the mind is a filing system. For instance, with the Pompidou Centre, lots of people say, "The sloping square looks rather like the Campo in Sienna." And it does. Had we studied Sienna very carefully? I hadn't, nor had Renzo [Piano]. But there's no question that we did know it. It was in our minds—it was part of our vocabulary.

**P49 And yet the Pompidou doesn't look like any other building before it.**

RR I wouldn't say it's original. If you look back at the Eames House and the California case study houses, or Bucky Fuller, you can see the inspiration they provided. In England, I was never interested in neo-Roman, neo-Greco, or neo-anything. When it comes to the England of the nineteenth century, for people like myself, like Norman [Foster], our interest was much more in the Crystal Palace, railway stations, and industrial buildings, because there you can see the beginning of structure, of open-ended structures. And they're open-ended because they had to deal with changing situations.

**P49 So what makes your projects original or distinguishes them from their precedents?**

RR In the case of the Pompidou, a powerful note can be found at the beginning of the concept report, "A place for all people, all ages, all creeds." And then it goes on and says, "a cross between the British Museum and Times Square."

In other words, we were looking for an open-ended form, not a static monument. At the time, everybody was looking for change—and very militantly.

Improvisation was very important to us. Think of modern jazz: if you have a beat, you can change the parts inside. The idea was that the Pompidou would be a machine which would respond to changing needs.

**P49 Architecture stores ideas, but also transmits them across time and culture. The original Pompidou scheme had displays and screens on the facade. Were you using these media devices to magnify architecture's ability to broadcast information?**

RR The original concept was all about communication. Those days were the beginning of a digital world.

The idea was for the building to actually show what was on at MoMA or at the British Museum. We wanted to make the building a useful tool for our client, the French Ministry of Culture.

Actually, we wanted it to go beyond that. We were in a moment of tremendous change: the intellectuals and the unions were just about to pull France to pieces and the U.S. was about to collapse with the Vietnam policies and so on. It was a crisis. If you look at the images on the concept elevation, it shows an image of Vietnam, it addresses the student revolution, it signals an intellectual turn. And we wanted it to. So you could use the screens in either way.

In the end, when everything was organized and we'd gotten the *Electricité de France* to pay for it, Pompidou died, and Giscard [d'Estaing] took over our building (as he was President) and he asked, "Who's going to control it?" I replied, "Oh, of course it will be controlled by culture."

"Yeah? Which kind of culture? Left or Right?" In other words, he immediately saw it as a political communication system. In some ways, we were devastated about the loss but we hadn't accounted for how amazing the French are about their *promenade*. They started walking all over the "streets in the air." In other words, the facade became what it was always supposed to be: an extension of the *piazza*. The screens were replaced with people—with real people.

**P49 It's interesting to think of architecture not as a formal statement, nor necessarily as a building itself, but as the design for a pattern of behavior.**

We are all different individuals with different views, which allows us to develop our ideas for ourselves. For example, I am very interested in architecture's ability to communicate one's visions.

Architecture operates for two clients: the user, primarily concerned with the function of the building, and the passer-by, attuned to its larger role. I am interested in what I call “democratic buildings”: buildings that communicate their role to the public and engage with the larger context. Look at court buildings: these are actually schools for understanding what is right and what is wrong.

Architecture is a mixture of many different things. It's a mixture of different influences, different points of view, and different beliefs; it isn't static, it incorporates activities and time. At first, the Chairman of Lloyds had said they wanted [their new building] to house them for another century. They gave us a very detailed program to that effect, but this collapsed the day after we completed the project because the digital era set in and changed the whole idea of insurance. So we said (only half joking), “It's okay, you can always turn the building into a university.”

It's a very flexible space: the service towers, which have a shorter life span, are on the outside and can be adapted, while the base of the building, which is more permanent, has uninterrupted floorplates and can be reorganized at will.

In the 1990s, I was a key defendant for a project by Mies van der Rohe that Peter Palumbo, a property developer, was trying to build. And the reason it didn't get anywhere was that it was too tall, it didn't fit with the historic heritage. Twenty-five years later, that criticism is no longer valid. Looking back now, it would have been too low! Today, there is not one single “original” building in the city of London, fifty percent of all the buildings in the City have been radically changed. So what are you trying to relate to?

With Lloyd's of London, we built the lower part to line up with the existing buildings around it and we used the uneven spaces of the medieval site boundary to locate our towers. Today there's nothing left: the context to which we responded in those days is no longer there.

Now, obviously, there's a medieval road pattern, and you still get some of the views from the hills on the periphery of London. I just want to point out that the context itself isn't static. History is not static.

When we built the towers on Lloyd's, we thought, why would all modern buildings have flat roofs when the church spires, turrets, and towers all around break up the skyline? I don't think you can say that our buildings don't have a sense of place, and you can't say that our buildings are not influenced by all the things we [the architects] are interested in. My point is that there is architecture that isn't influenced by place but it is still influenced by language. Language is very much about receiving ideas in your mind, and interpreting those ideas into form.

**P49 You speak about language and, in many ways, the Pompidou was a development of your own language as a designer —**

**a language that you continue to use and develop in your career.**

RR We all have some kind of signature. I don't think there is such a thing as architecture with no signature or art with no signature. Of course, architecture has to work, it has to stand, but also it has to have the magic of art. That's, in a way, your signature.

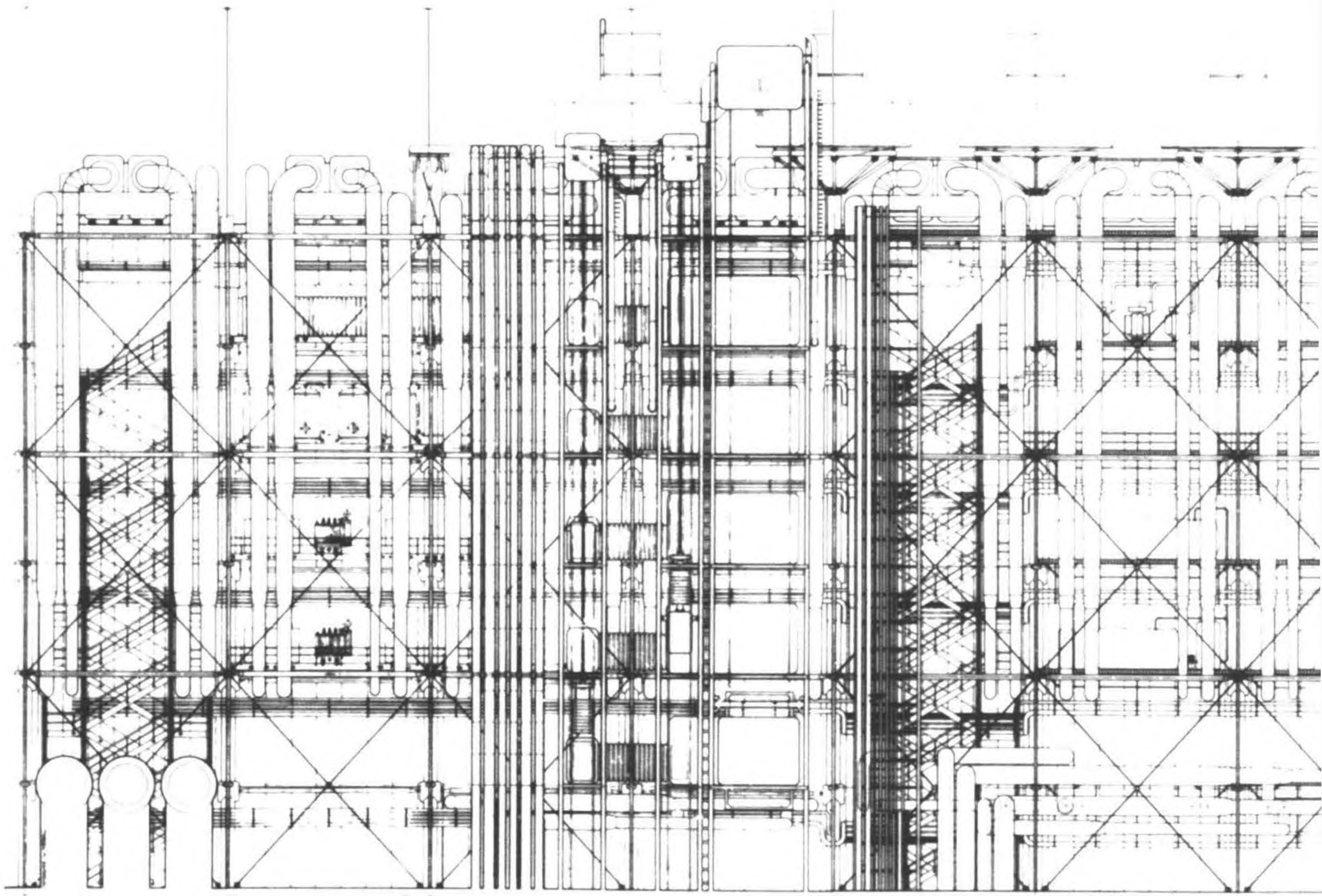
**P49 Could you talk a little about the collaborations that have marked your career?**

RR I am a good collaborator, and I enjoy having a team. I met Norman at Yale, and we made up Team 4. Renzo, Norman, Ivan Harbour and Graham Stirk, Peter Rice, Laurie Abbott, and many others! They were all immensely influential in the work we did together, and even afterwards. So it is very much a joint effort, isn't it? I am very much a team person, I have always believed in it. It covers up some of my weaknesses!

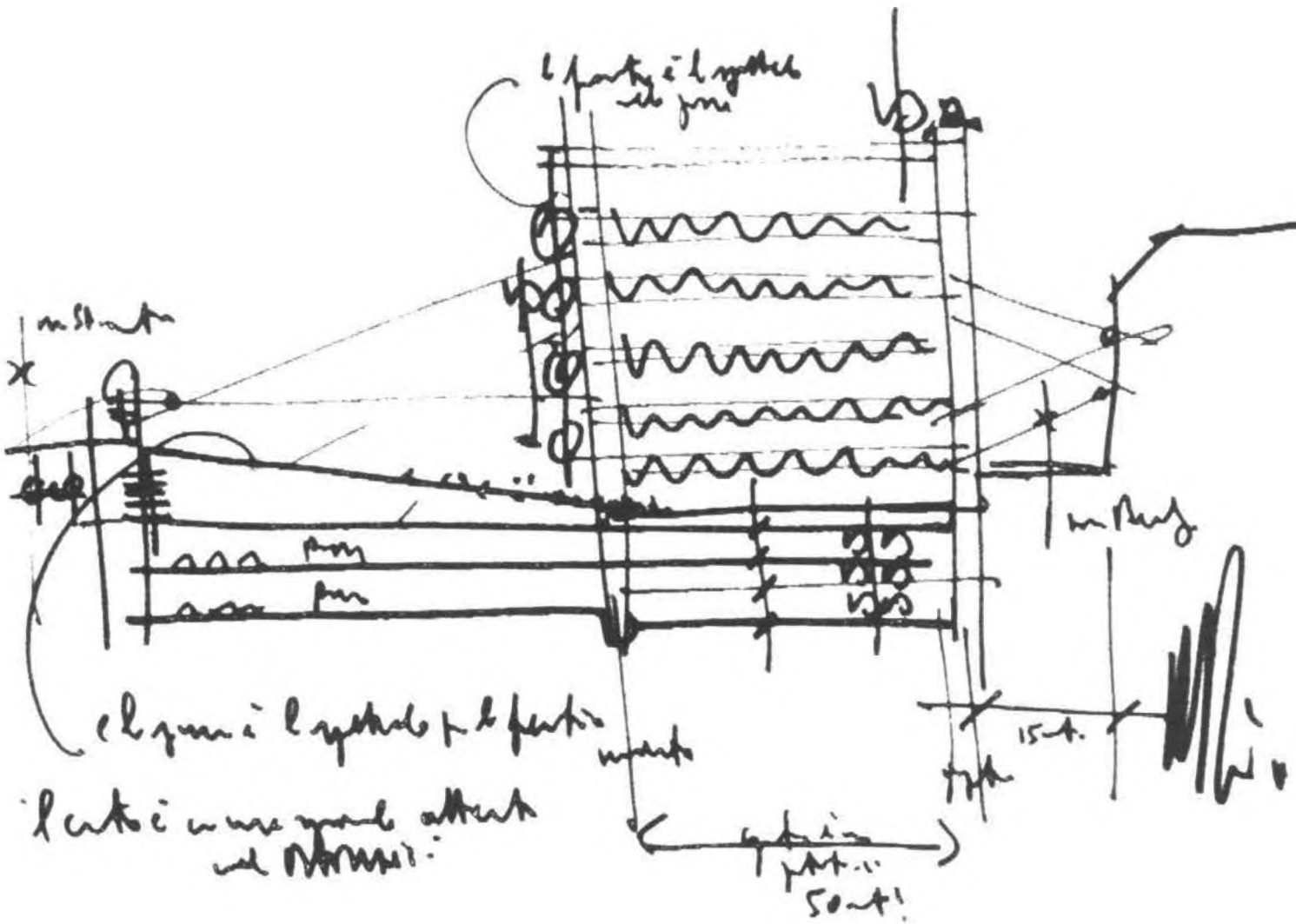
Architecture is not about starting with a blank piece of paper. If you want to scare me, give me piece of white paper! You have to absorb and analyze influences. That begins in my opinion by having other people around you, and not just architects. There are still architects who think that architecture is about architecture. There's much more to architecture than architecture.

**P49 Your work has been tremendously influential to us and an entire generation of architects. Do you ever think about that when you design?**

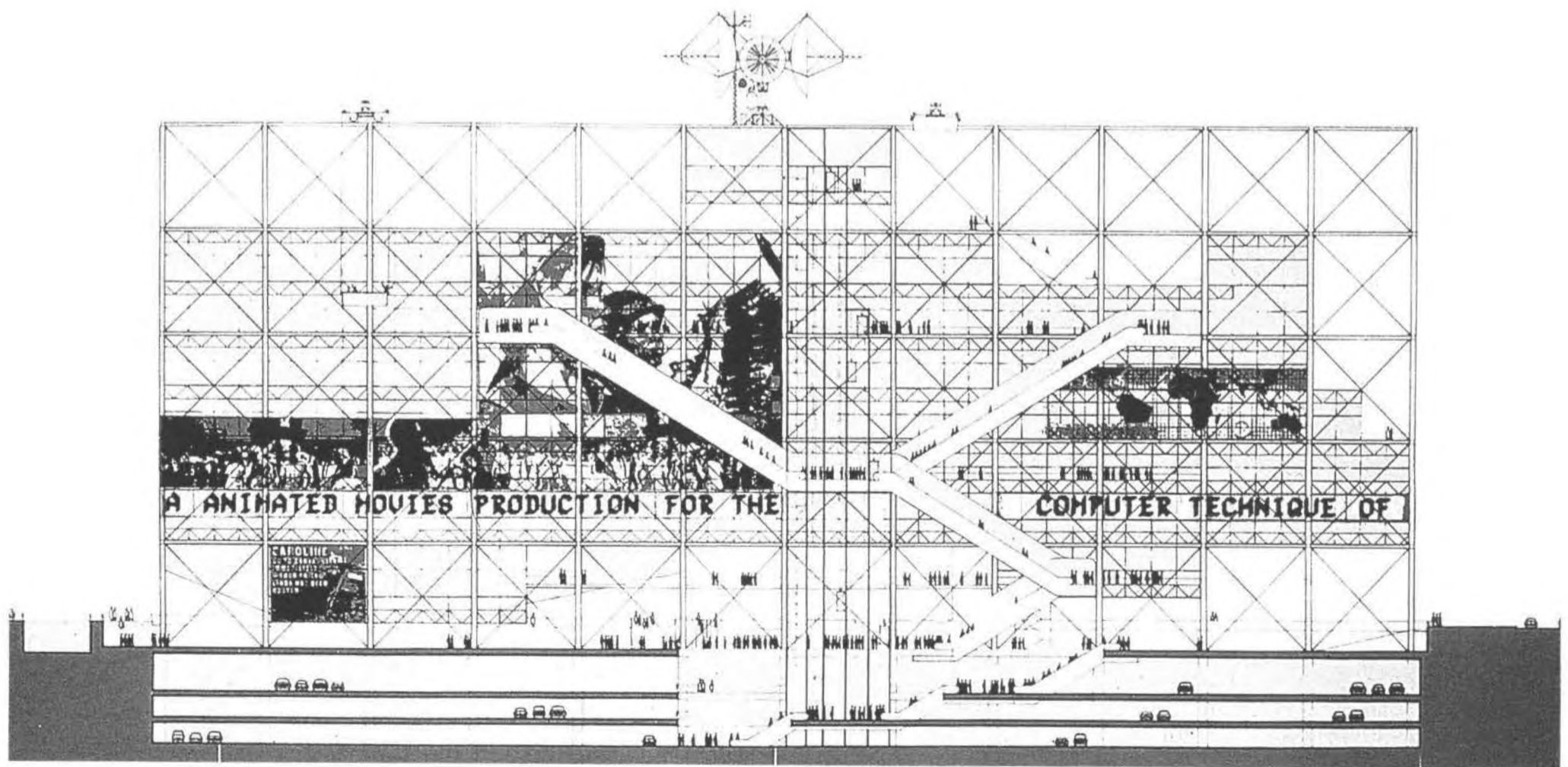
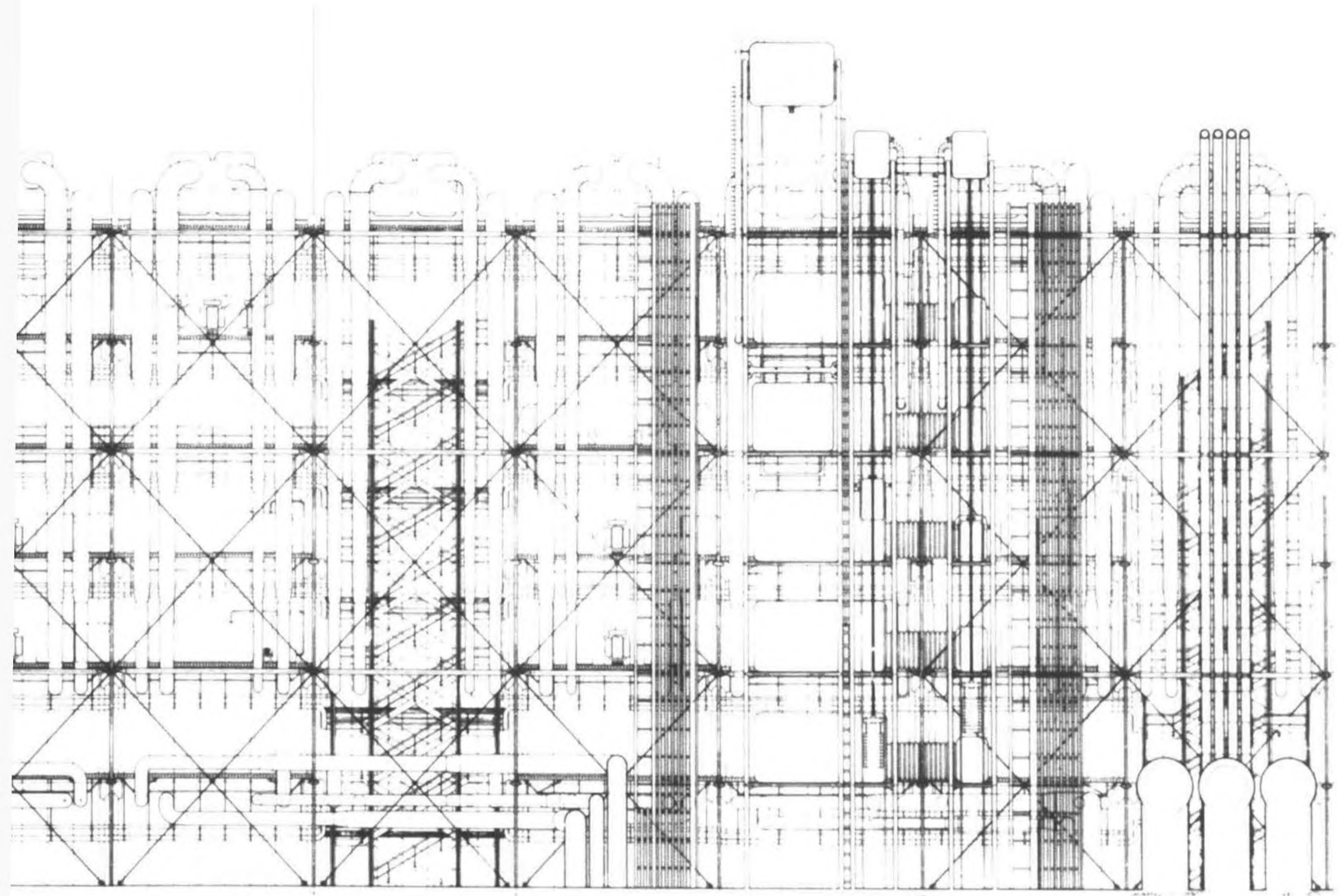
RR Not really. I do love talking about architecture. I love arguing about architecture. So in that sense, I absorb some of your points, and you absorb some of mine. I like that conversation, that exchange. Teamwork: I love that word.



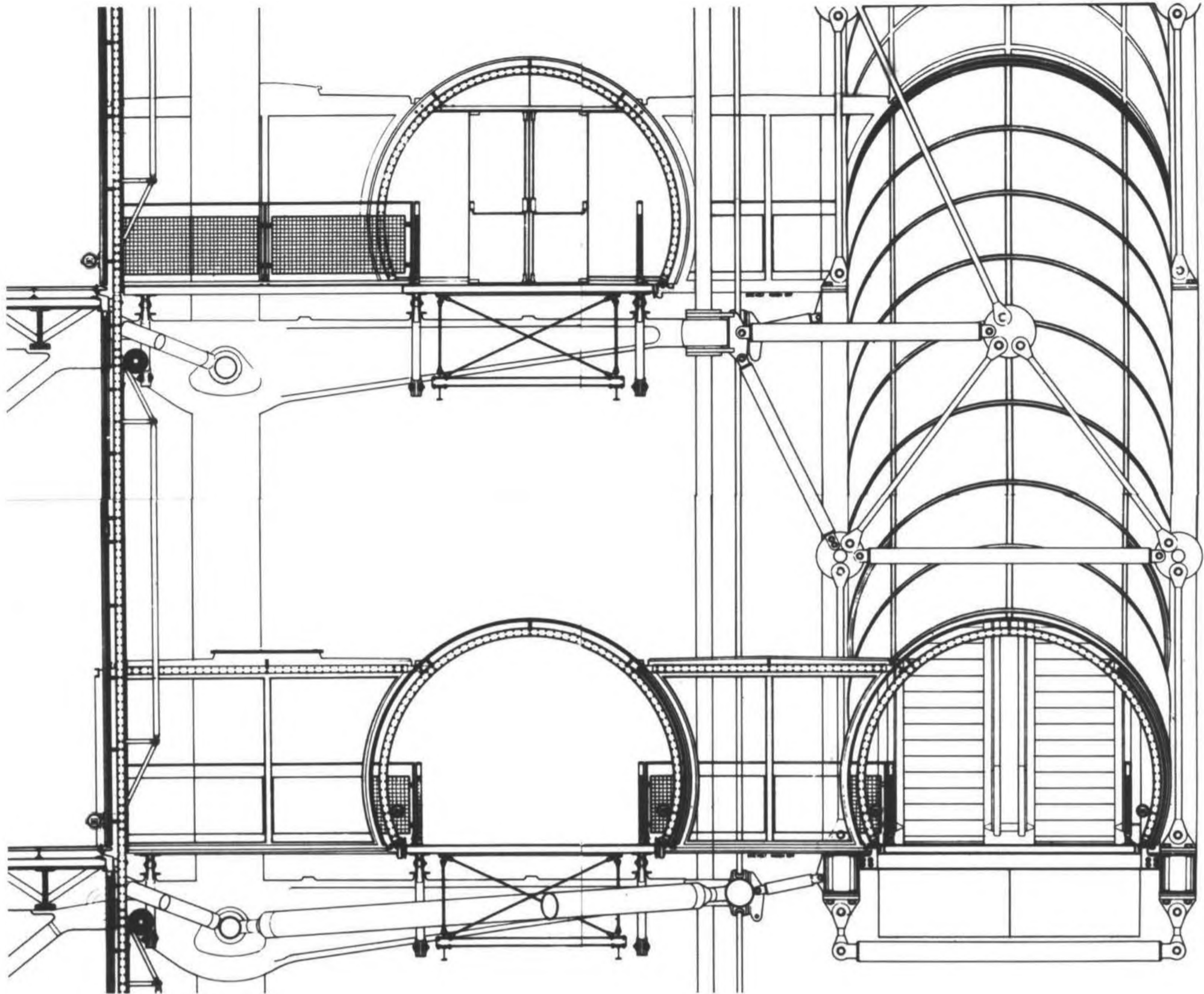
1 Building services are expressed on the facade. Elevation on the Rue du Renard: Piano + Rogers. The Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1971-1977.



2 Concept sketch for the Centre Pompidou. Piano + Rogers.



3 Elevation for the Centre Pompidou competition submission. Piano + Rogers.



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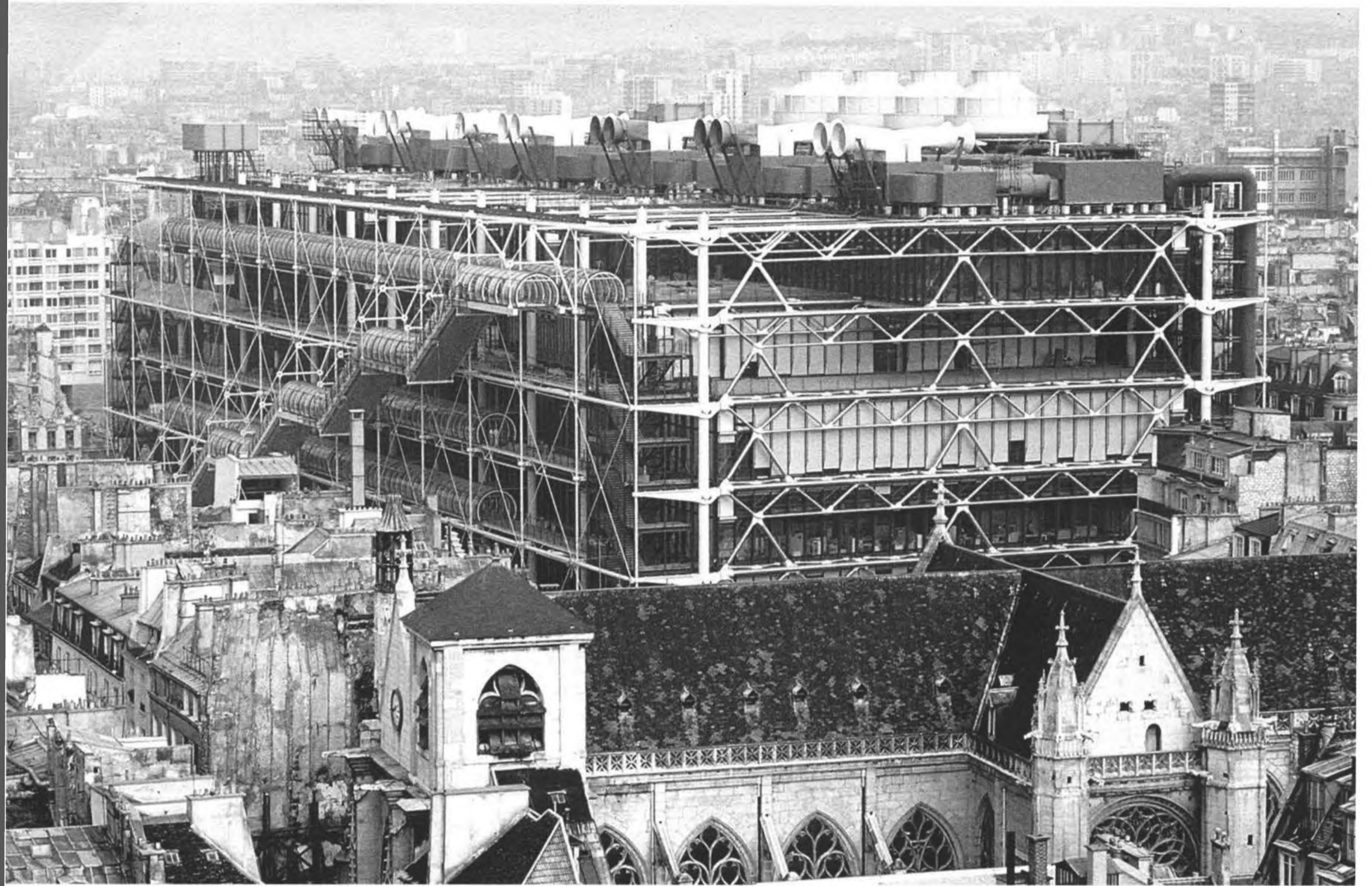


4 The Centre Pompidou's "street in the air." Section through the principal facade of glazed galleries and the escalator system. Piano + Rogers.

5 Collaboration. Press conference for IRCAM. (Left to right: Pierre Boulez, Robert Bordaz, Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano.) 1971.

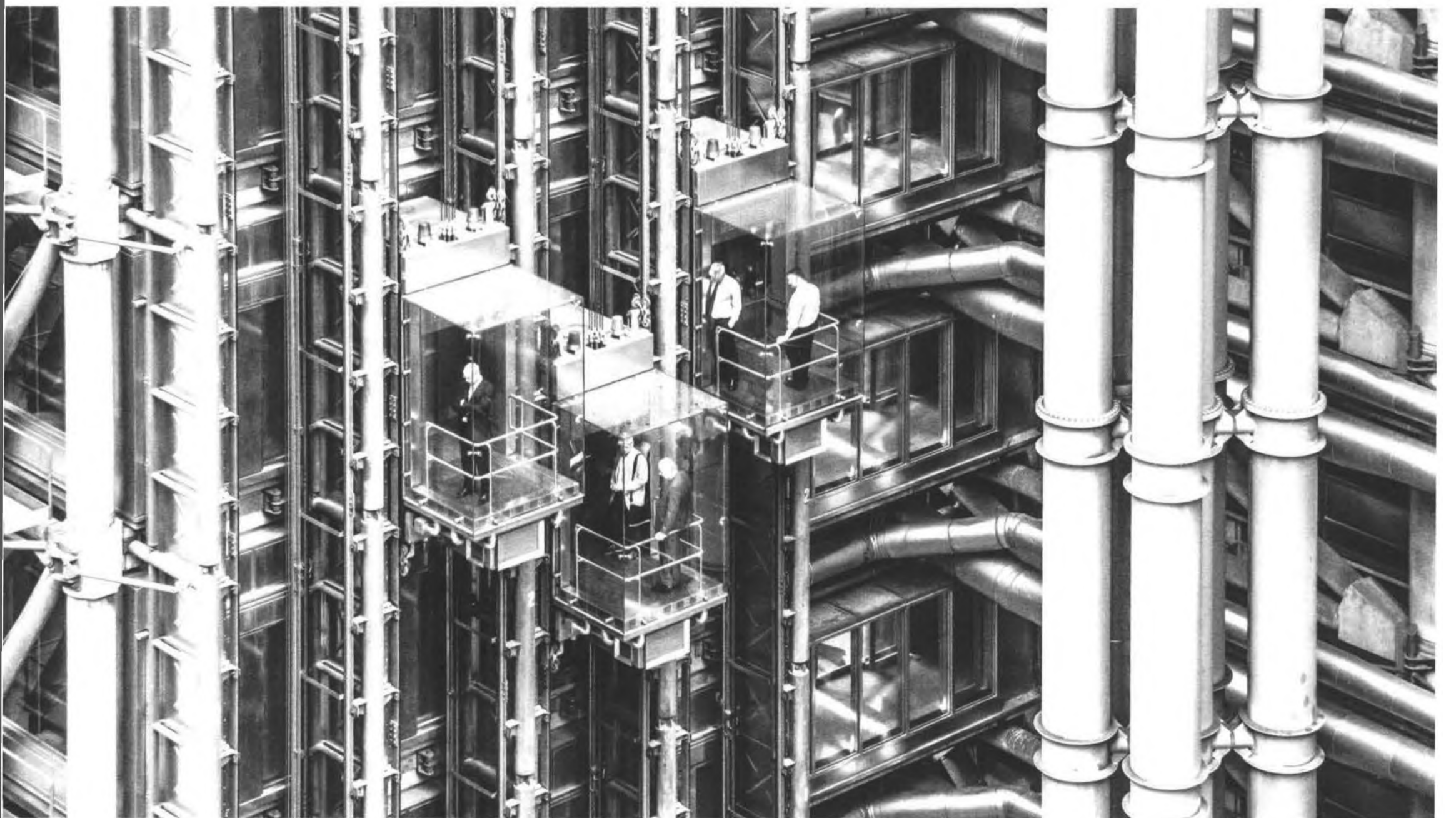
6 The Centre Pompidou. Piano + Rogers.

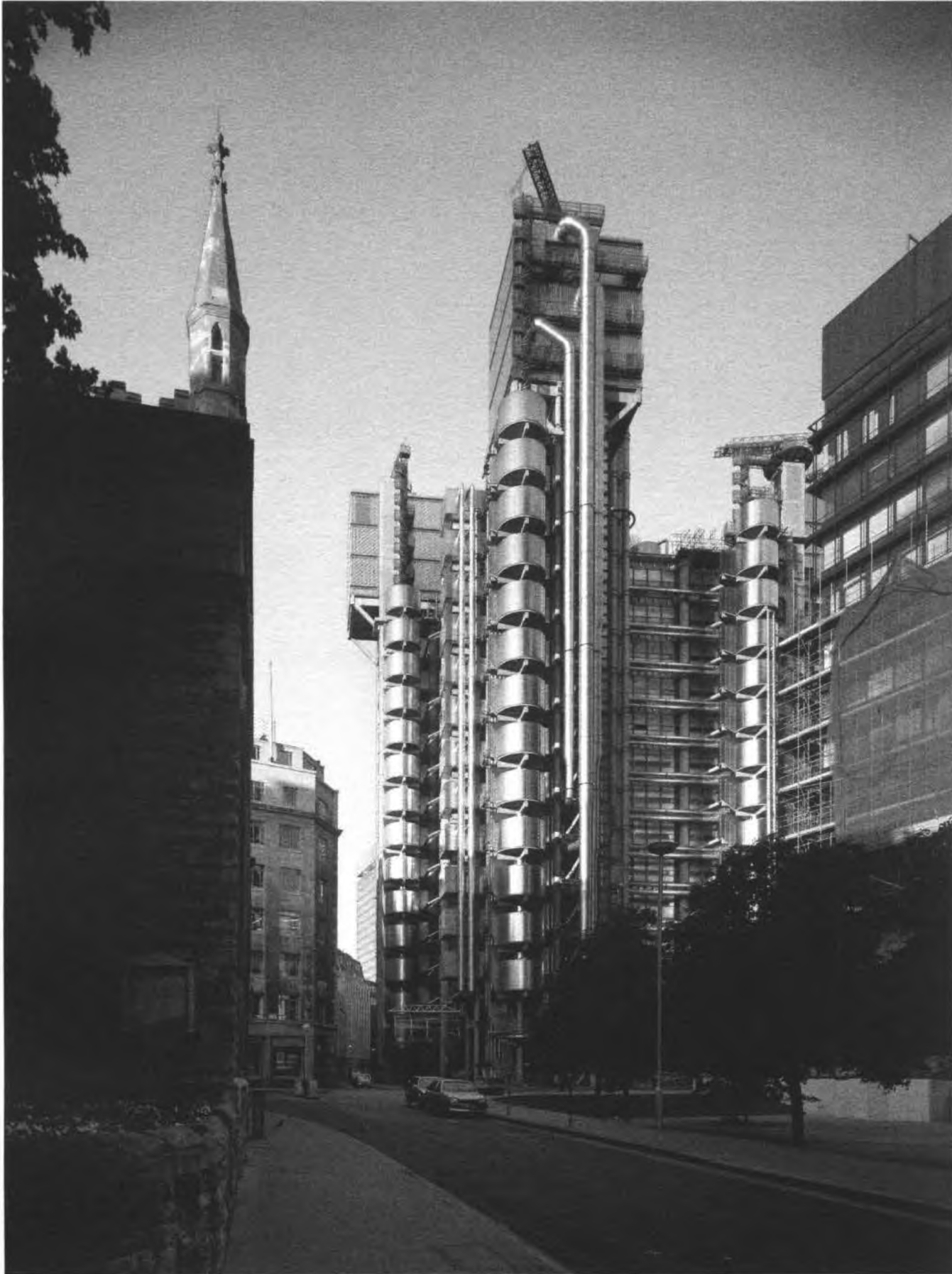
7 Lifts and services on the exterior of the building. Richard Rogers Partnership. Lloyd's of London. 1978-1986.



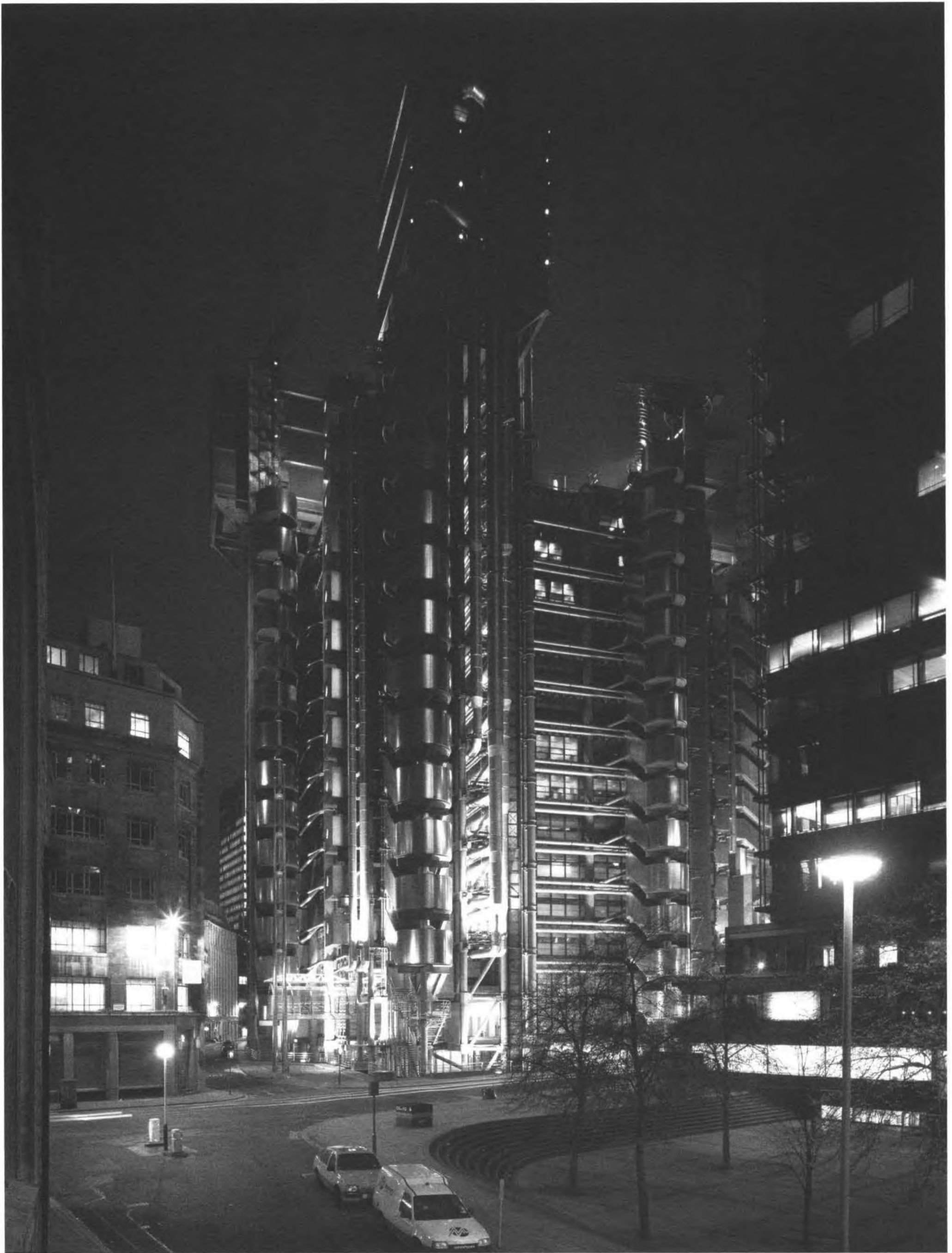
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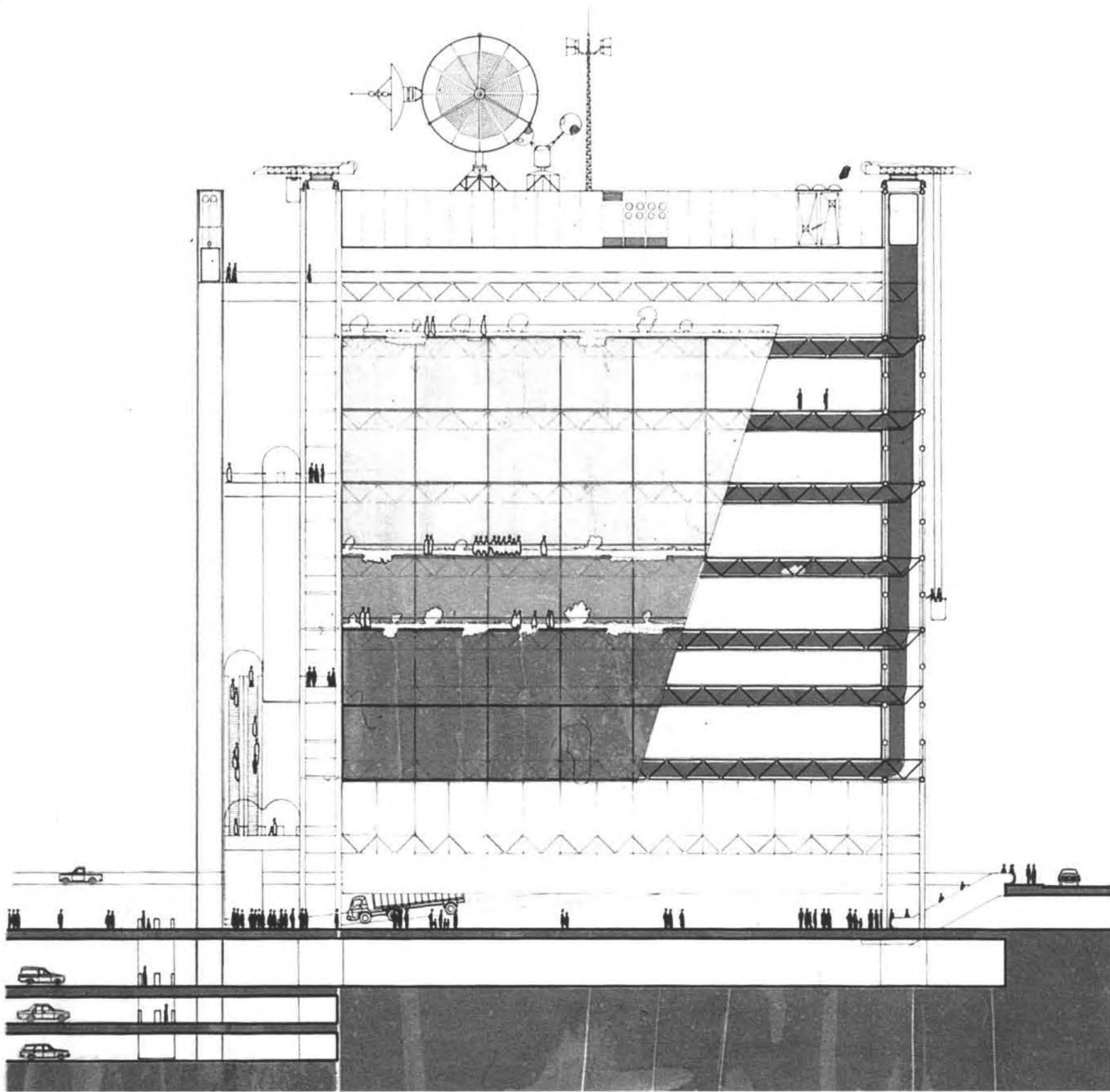




8 Lloyd's of London viewed from St. Mary Axe in the sunlight. Richard Rogers Partnership.



9 Nighttime view of Lloyd's of London. Richard Rogers Partnership.



10 Wide spans allow for flexible spaces. Elevation of the Centre Pompidou on the Rue Saint Merri. Piano + Rogers.