

Project: residence Phase  
1: View Silo  
Client: Ron Compertz  
Architects:  
RoTo Architects,  
Los Angeles, California  
and Livingston,  
Montana  
Principals:  
Clark Stevens, AIA and  
Michael Rotondi, FAA  
Collaborators:  
Ben Mes, Dave Kitazaki,  
Kirby Smith  
Team: Carrie D'Fire,  
Eric Meglassen  
Structural engineers:  
MT Structural, Bozeman,  
Montana, John  
Schlegelmich  
Geotechnical:  
Allied Engineering,  
Bozeman, Montana,  
Doug Chandler  
Contractors:  
Ron Compertz, RoTo  
Photographers:  
Ron Compertz,  
Clark Stevens

#### Architect's statement

The land consists of 14 acres at the edge of the cobbled alluvial fan of the Absoroka Mountains. The house sits on the edge of the only sheltering feature in a valley famous for its winds,

Marlboro Country views, and storms – an ancient bank of the now-receded Yellowstone River. The land is treeless; and the perfectly parabolic bank that dissects the property in a north-south line anchors the building.

The owner's original program was for a part-time residence to be constructed in two parts. The first scheme was defined by a mirroring of the arcing bank and creation of a hull hovering just below its crest, opened to the sun and the staggering vistas to the east and south. Both phases of that original design were massed low and horizontal.

After reviewing the initial scheme, the owner described the attributes of the place that had compelled him to move back to the valley after a five-year absence: the wind, the sky and its

storms. He described the phenomenology of climbing up to experience the sky, rather than viewing it from the earth. A part of the house, he said, needed to climb above its horizon. A neighbouring silo provided his example.

After spending some time searching for a silo that could be reclaimed as a dwelling, we determined to build one instead. We decided that although we would not mimic the horizontal character of the valley floor, we needed to avoid the massing of the other valley dwellings, which tend to have blocky proportions. Although in some sense stylistically contextual, they lack any connection to earth or sky. The silhouette of such a typical two-storey structure on a broad footprint blocks a maximum amount of sky. We speculated on the character of the region's grain silos and elevators, and mimicked their formal strategy of axis-mundi and minimal, but dramatic, skyprint.

The View Silo is designed to occupy the smallest practical footprint of earth and the narrowest possible sliver of sky. The building tapers and appears to twist in a form generated through a mirroring of the ancient river bank. Should phase 2 (the Hull) ever be constructed, it will continue this warping arc in a low horizontally attenuated mass to the south of the Silo.

The approximately 1500ft<sup>2</sup> program is organised vertically. Entry is at grade, with sleeping spaces below the crest of the bank and partially embedded in the earth. Immediately above are the work and primary living spaces. The Silo narrows above, and a mezzanine for cooking and eating is located in the tapering double-height volume. Above this space, the stair tower becomes open to the sky and terminates in a rooftop observatory; its slatted perimeter provides a filtered 360° view, but tends to force the eye upward to the sky, which is the subject of this space.

The building is clad on the south and east planar walls by a layered system of 2x2" pine slats reclaimed from pickling barrels. These verticals, which range from silvery-grey to purplish-black, are layered over a waterproofing of brick-red asphalt roll roofing. Separated from the surface of the roll roofing by a 2-inch gap so that all fasteners are invisible, the spacing between the 2x2s is typically half inch, but expands to 2 1/2" to differentiate areas of the elevations, and to provide varying amounts of

surface colour, and patterns of light and shade to openings behind the continuous surface of slats. These surfaces have the depth of colour of a faded red barn.

To protect the (often unoccupied) house during severe storms, and to present the quiet uniform silhouette of the local grain silos, the fenestration can be completely shuttered. When opened, the shutters provide a variety of sun-shading appropriate to the orientation of the facades. When closed, they unify the structure against the backdrop of mountains and sky. Our hope is that at these times of absence, the form will not be seen as an empty house, but rather a kind of geologic uplift that dissipates into, and interlocks with, the sky.

Clark Stevens/RoTo

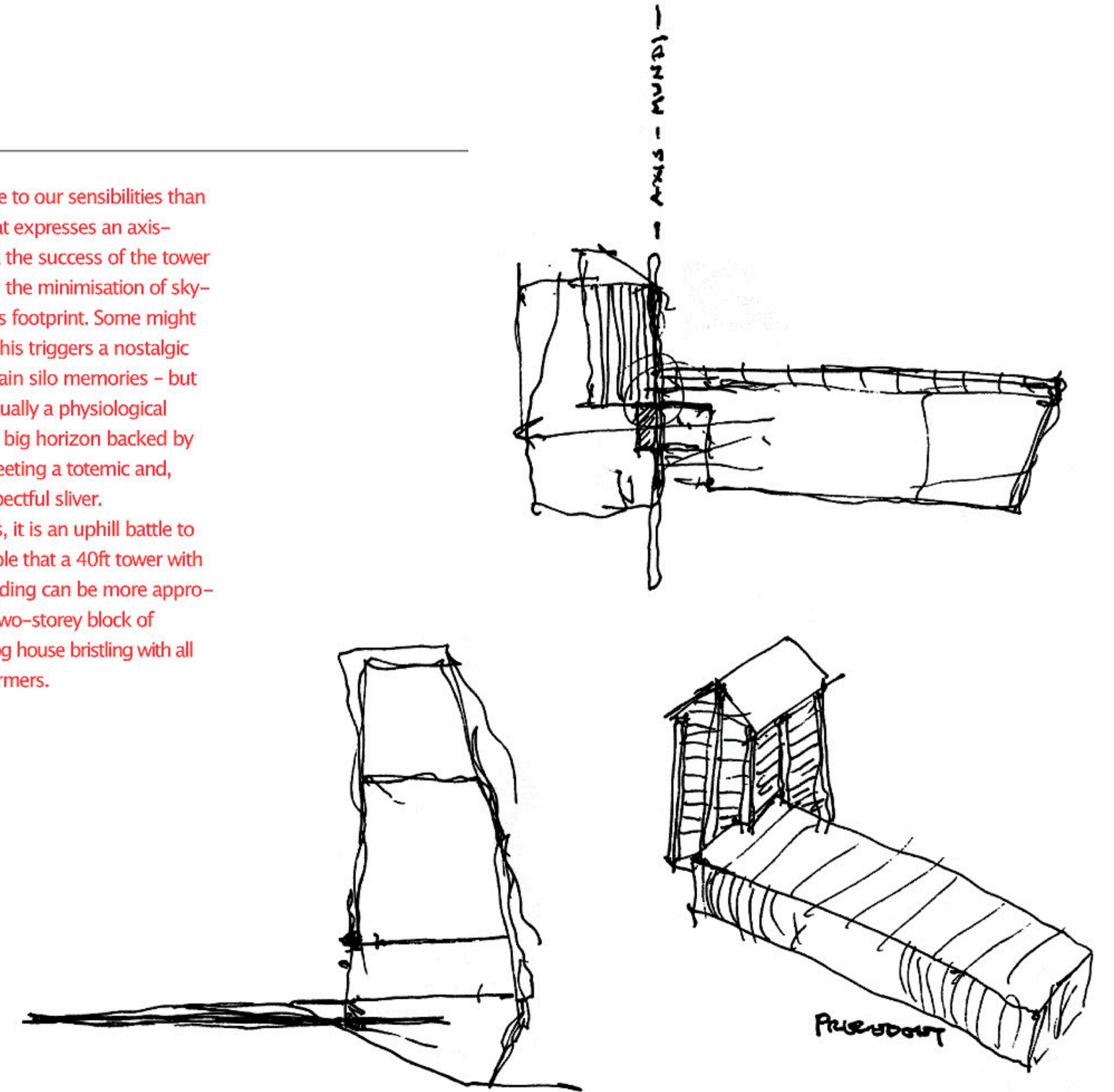
#### Addendum

Siting and massing have long been a great preoccupation of mine, whether it's planning entire campuses in a mega-landscape (Sinte Gleska University in South Dakota), or siting an individual dwelling. I take note of every natural and formal system at work in the landscape, and try to identify and extend what I think of as the intentions of the land and place. Verticality was not my initial response to Ron's site condition, but after hearing his convincing description of the difference between the ceremony of climbing to a view vs revealing a view from the ground plane, I looked for a way to make height meaningful and appropriate.

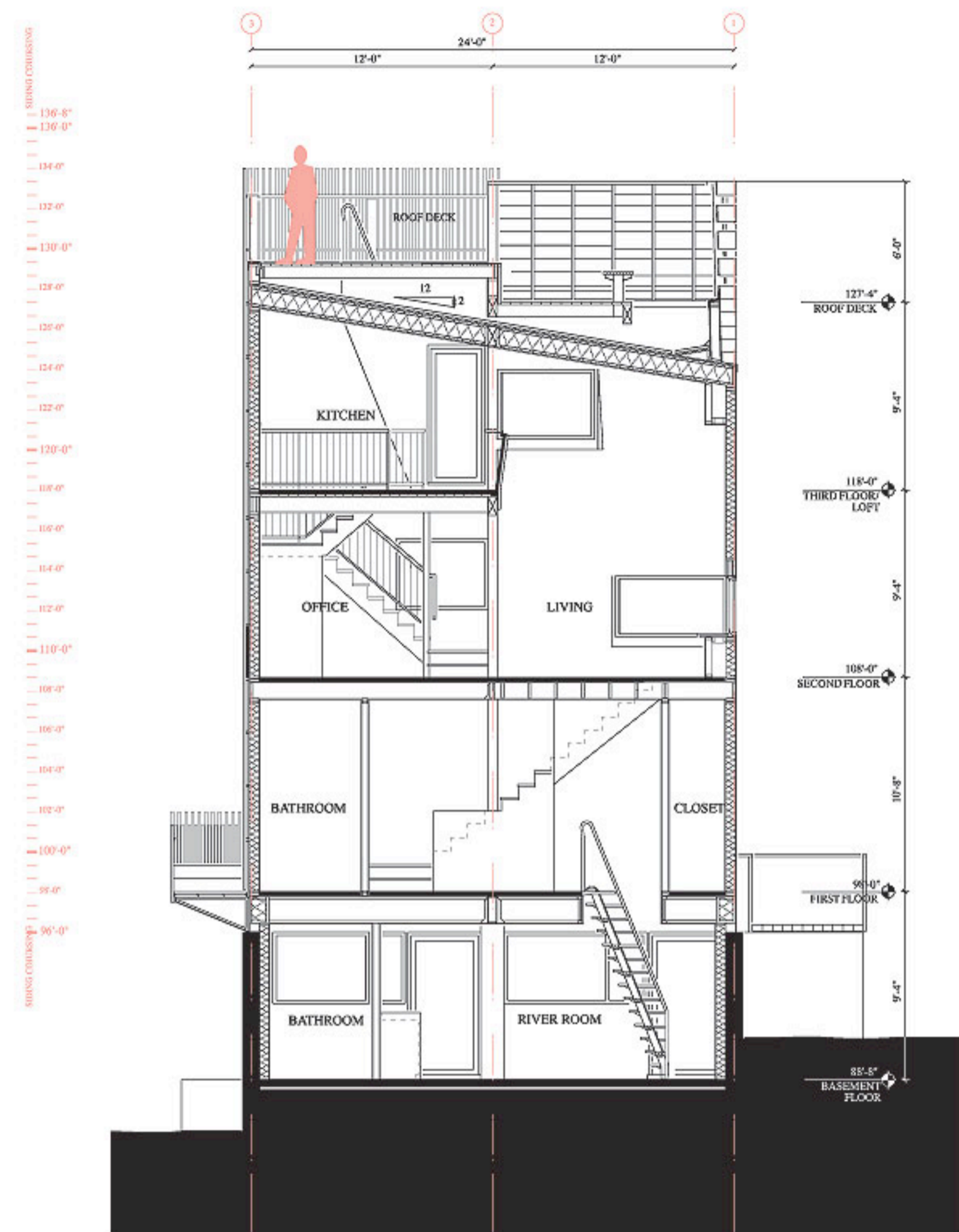
I have been surprised to have driven past Ron's tower with a number of people who are interested in the western landscape and land use practice, and yet do not take note of the tower. It has a certain quiet nature in spite of its height. It seems clear to me that the more conventional massing of dwellings in that big landscape – with no proportional relationship to earth or sky – is

more offensive to our sensibilities than a structure that expresses an axis-mundi. I think the success of the tower has to do with the minimisation of sky-print as well as footprint. Some might suggest that this triggers a nostalgic response – grain silo memories – but I think it is actually a physiological response to a big horizon backed by mountains meeting a totemic and, hopefully, respectful sliver.

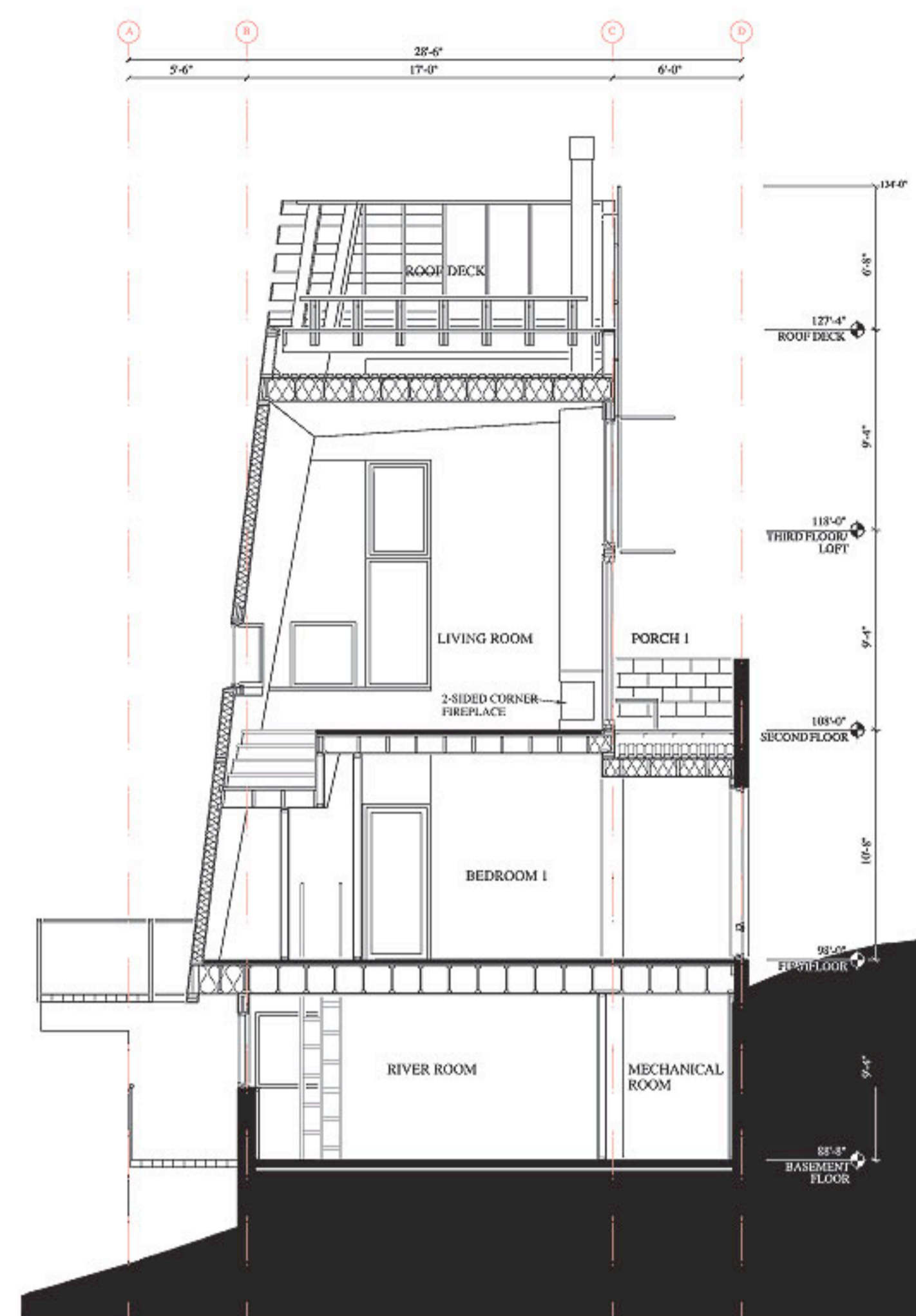
Nevertheless, it is an uphill battle to convince people that a 40ft tower with vertical 2x2 siding can be more appropriate than a two-storey block of authentic log house bristling with all manner of dormers.  
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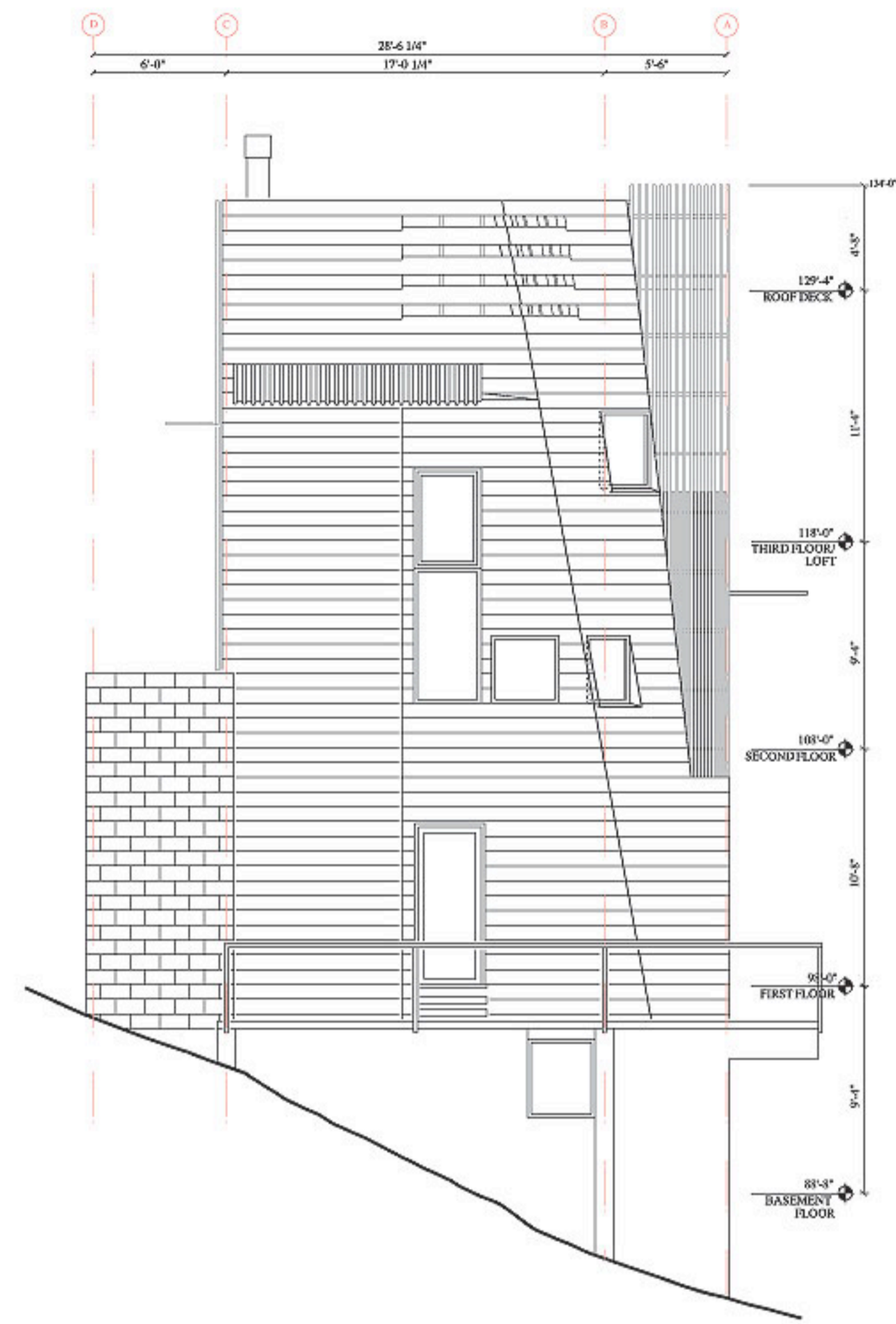




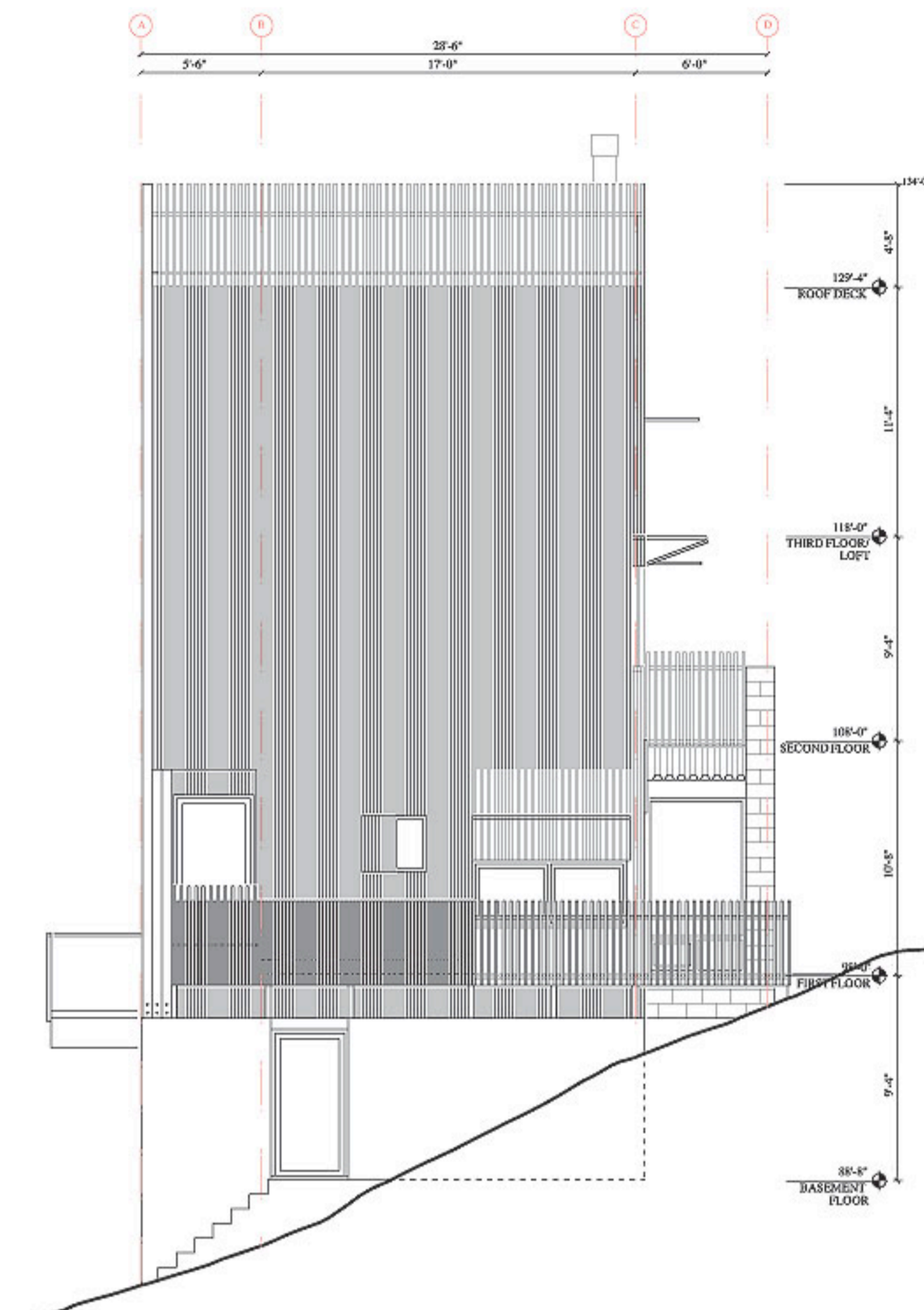
Section AA



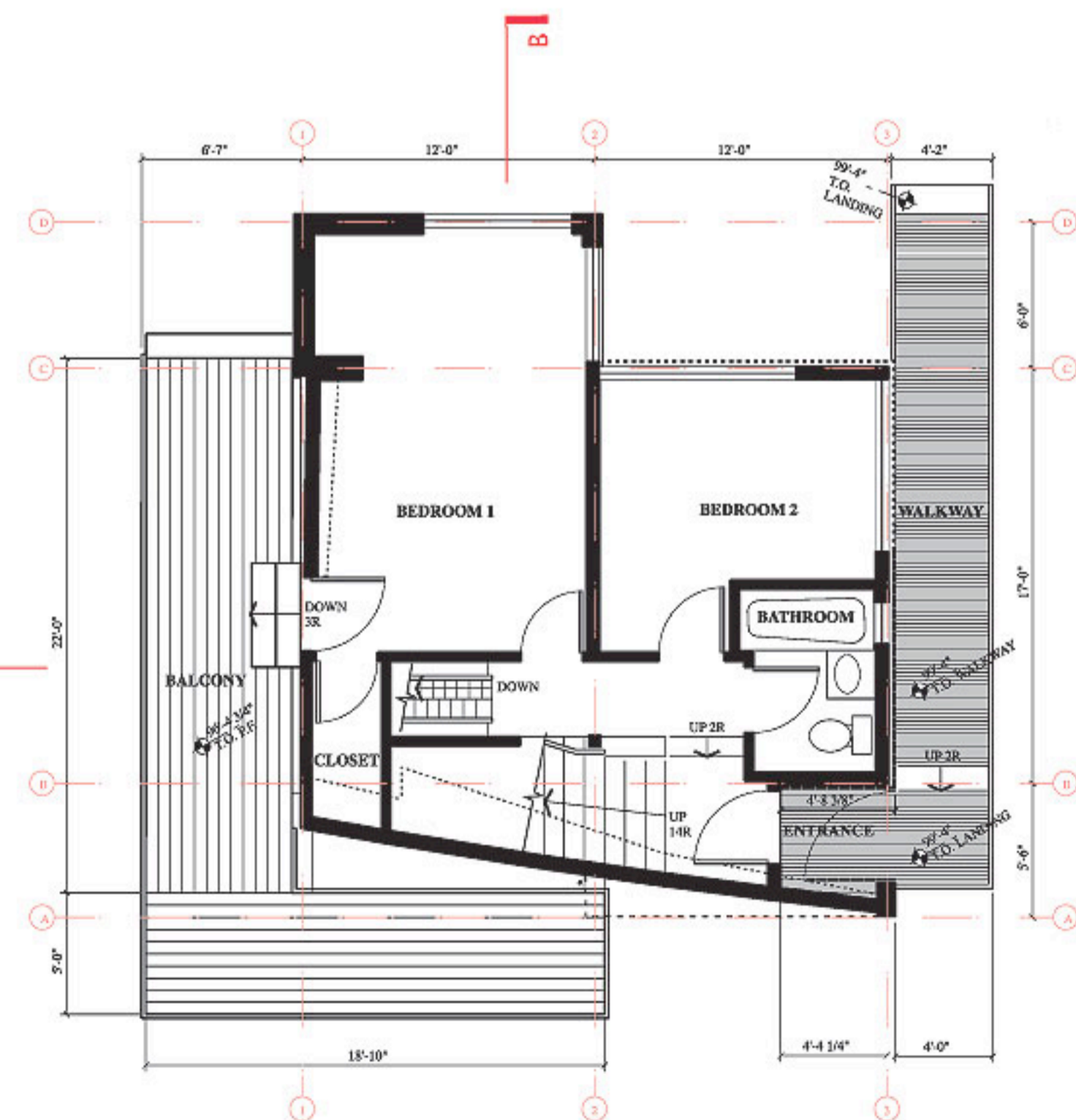
Section BB



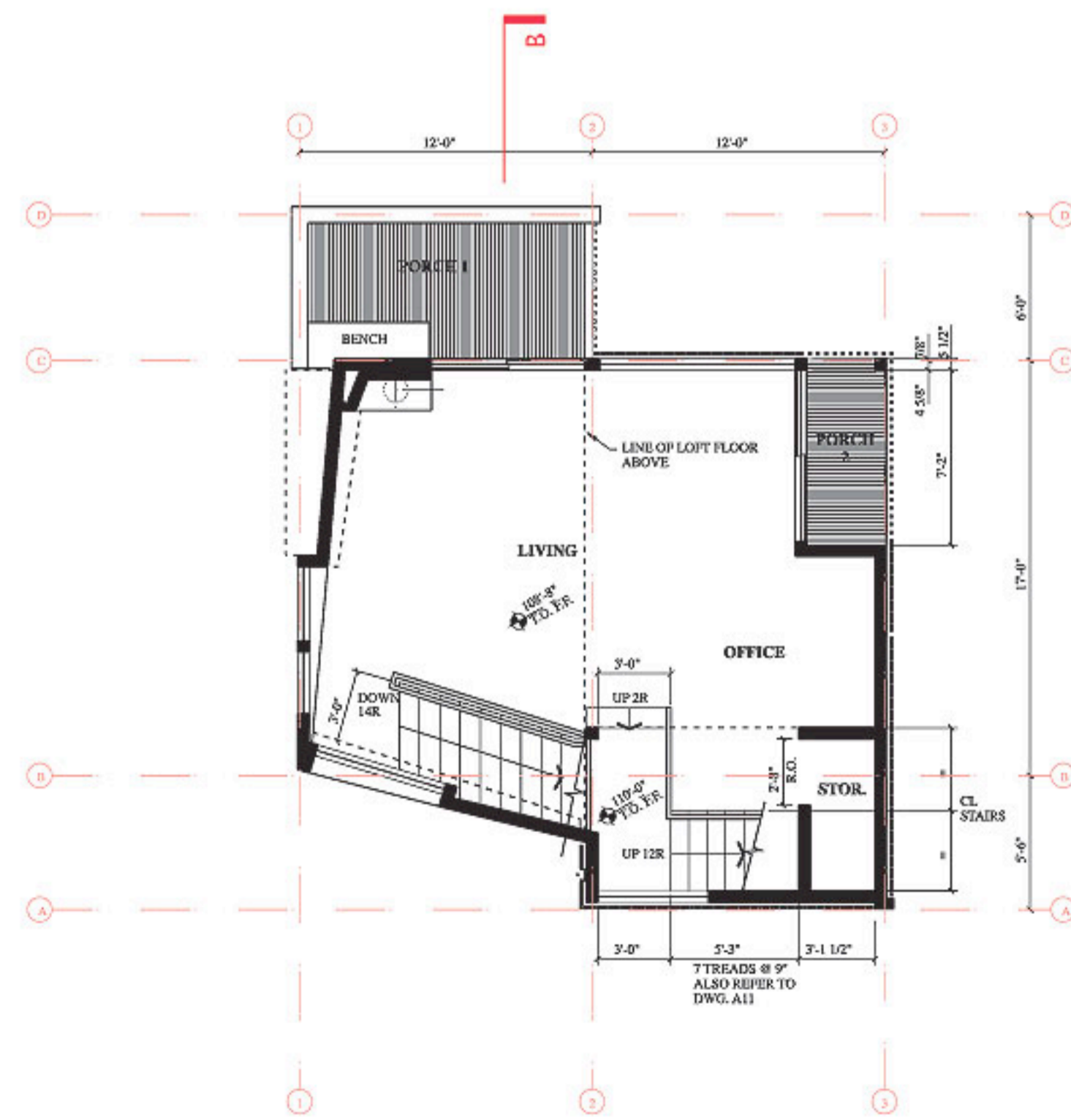
North elevation



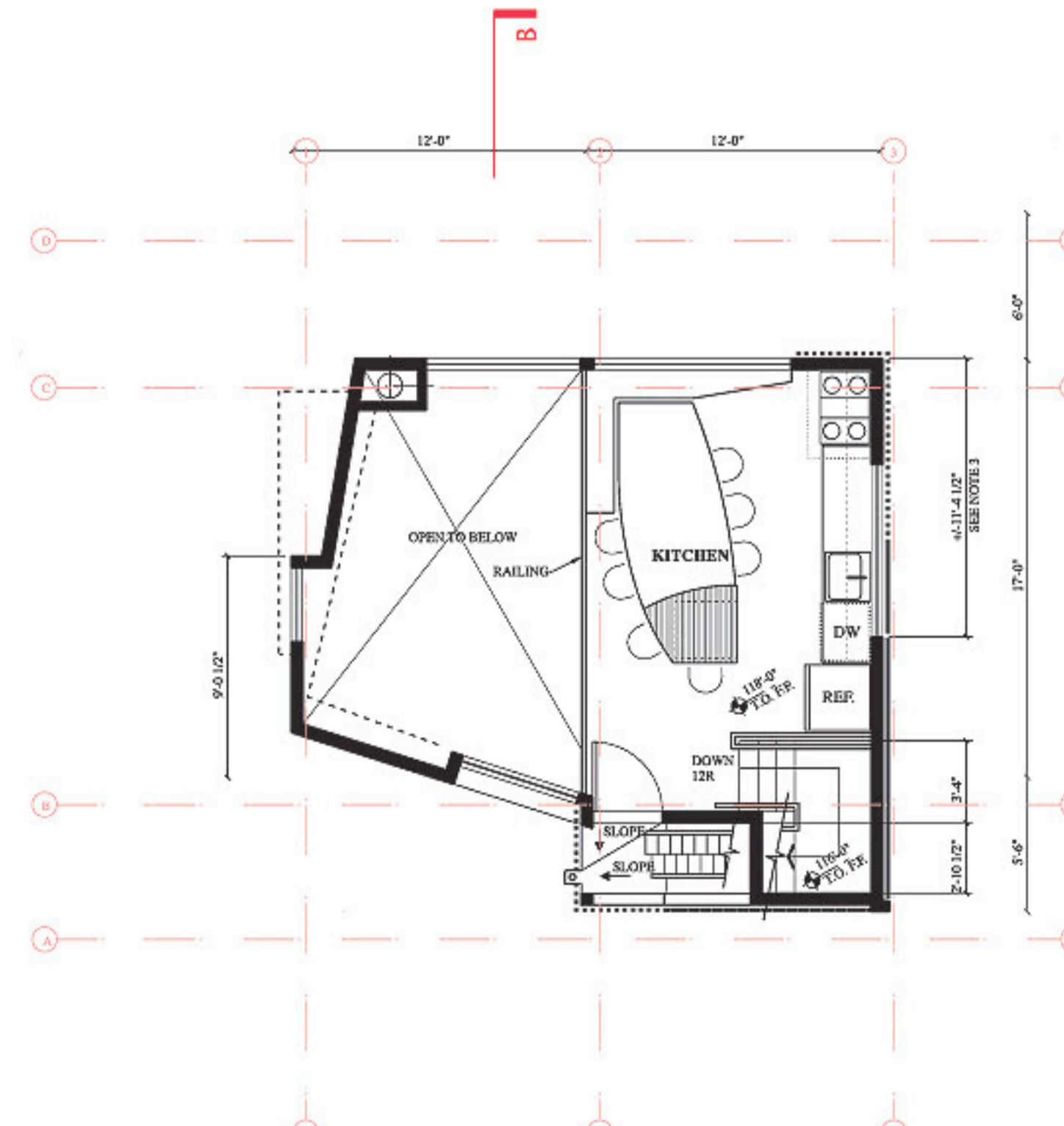
South elevation



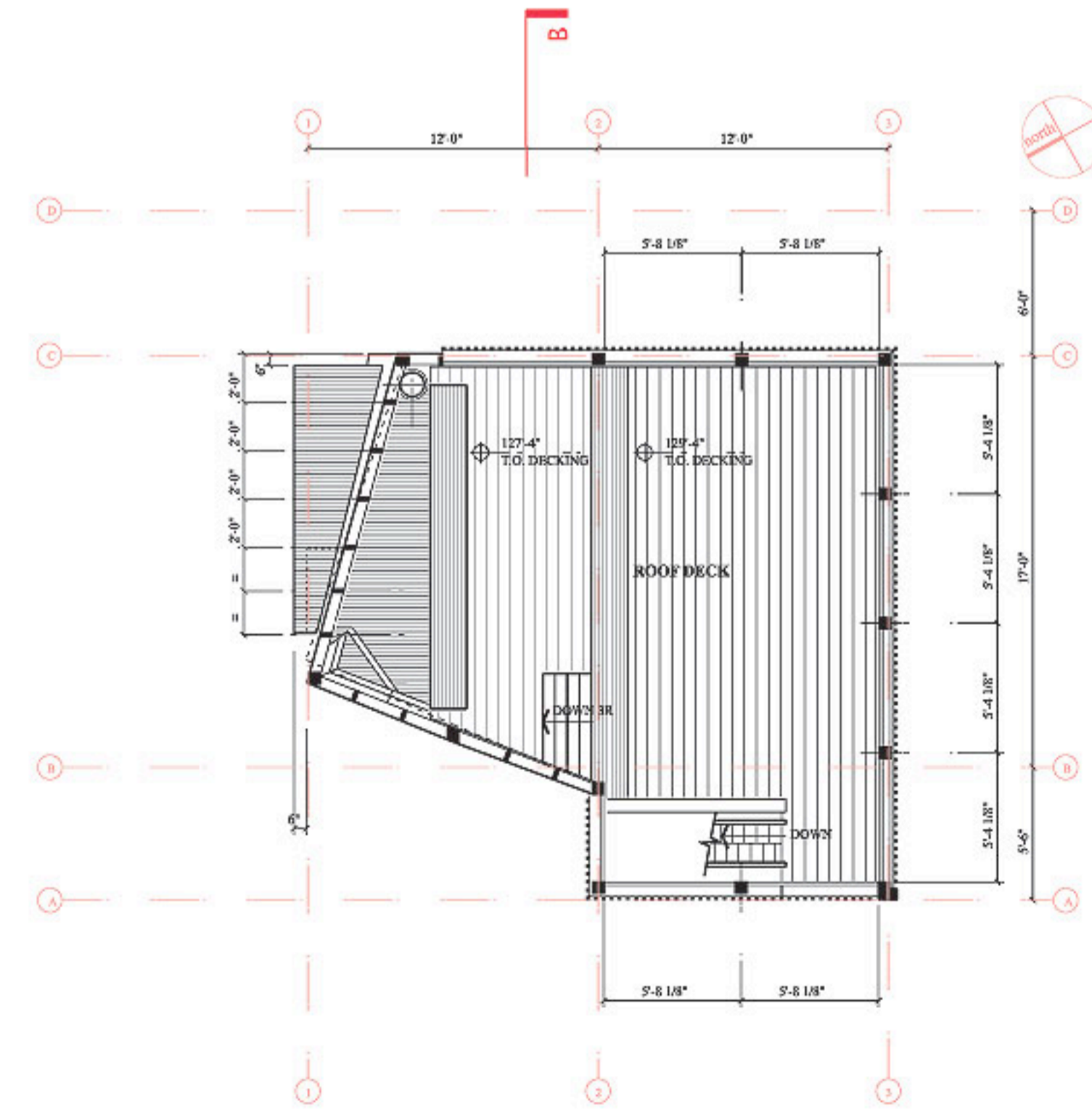
Ground floor level



Upper floor level



Upper floor mezzanine level

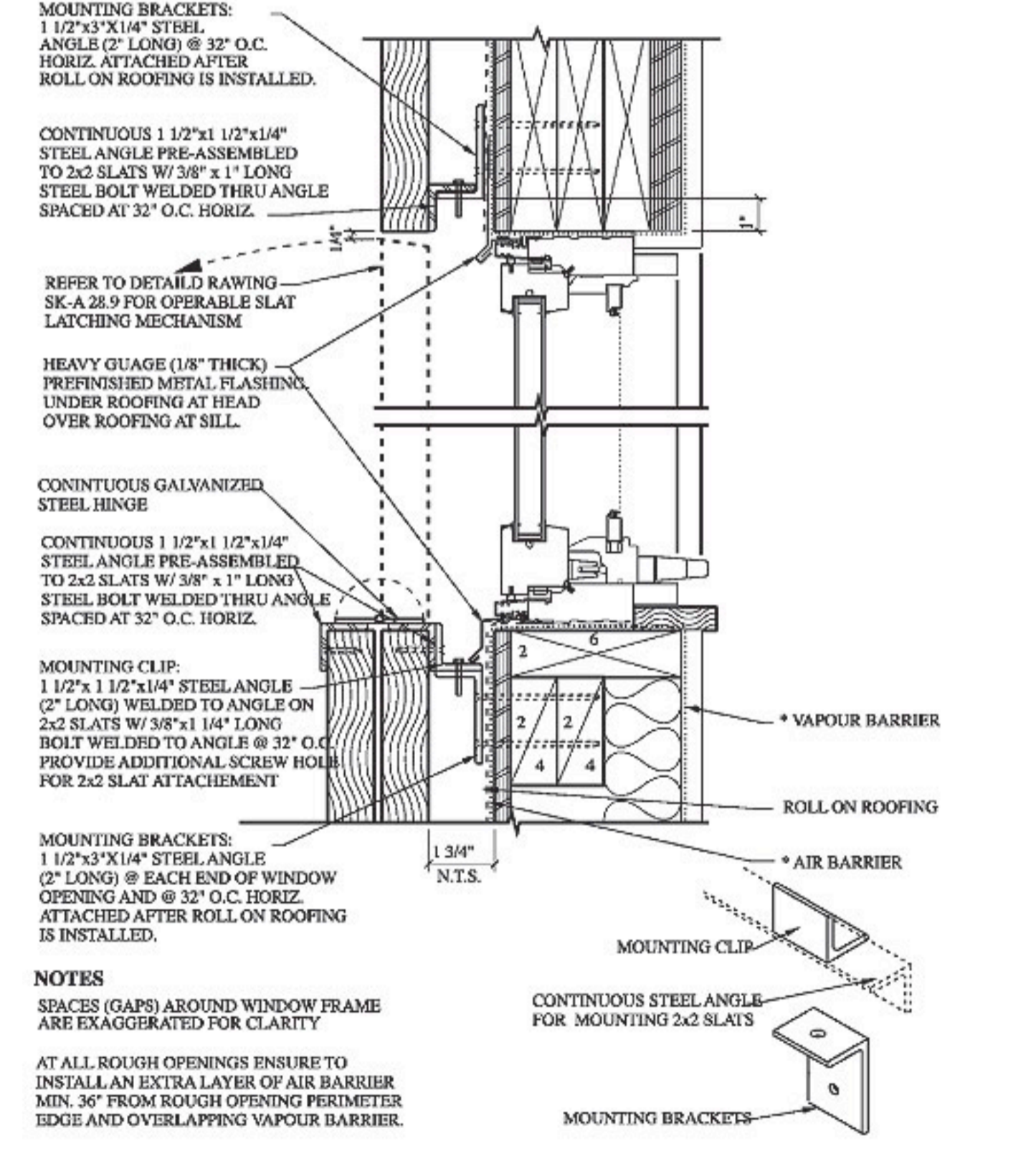
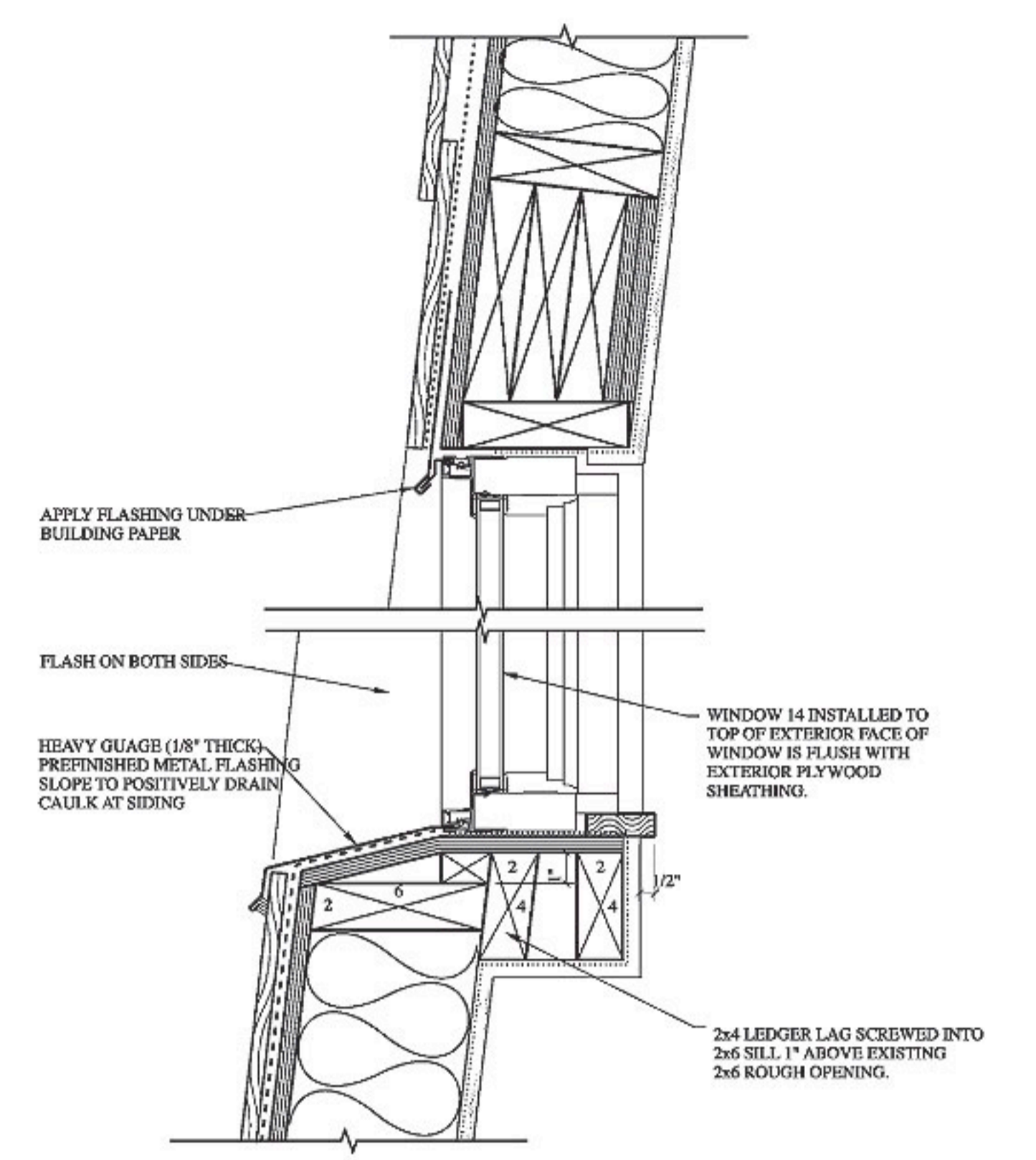
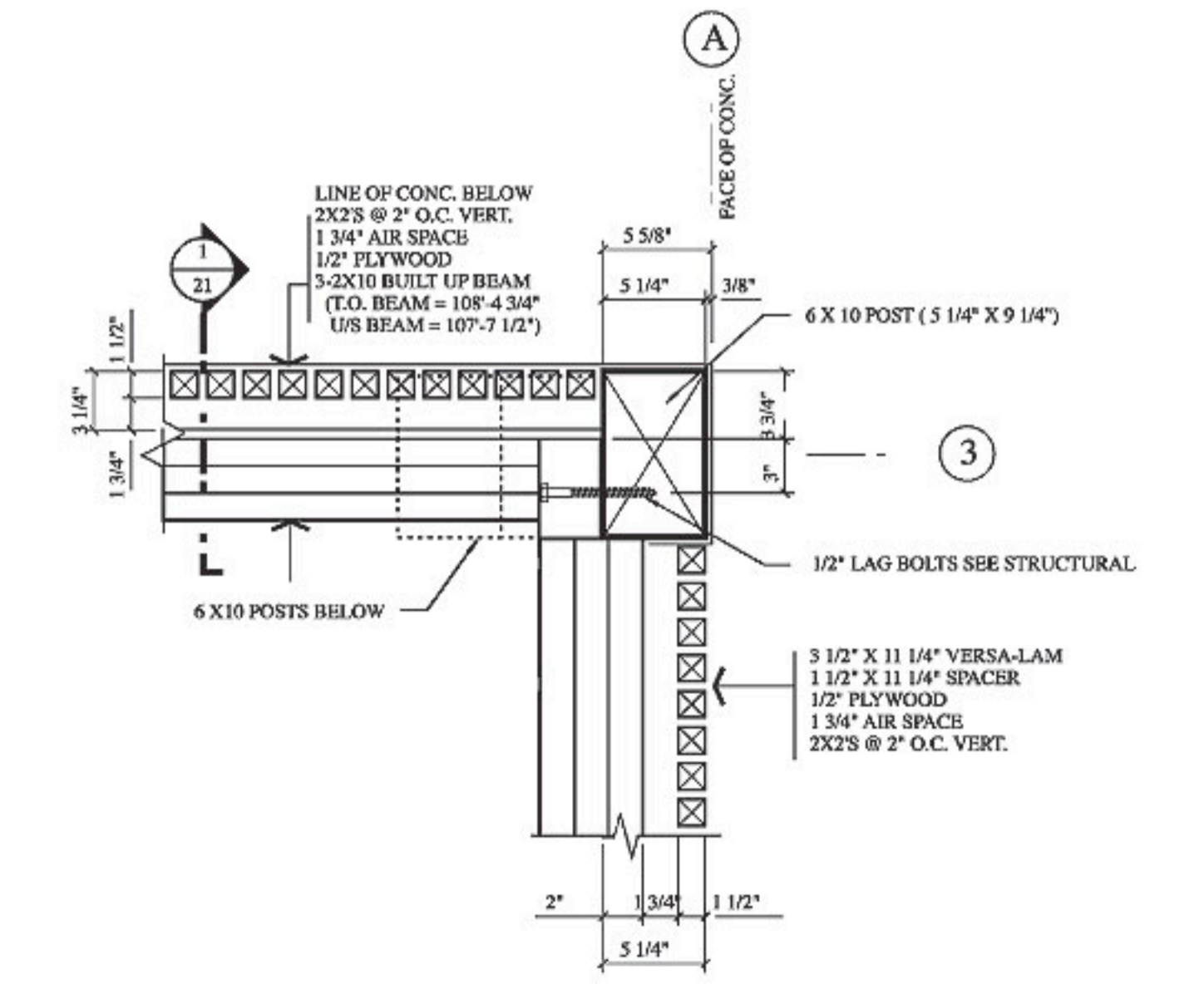
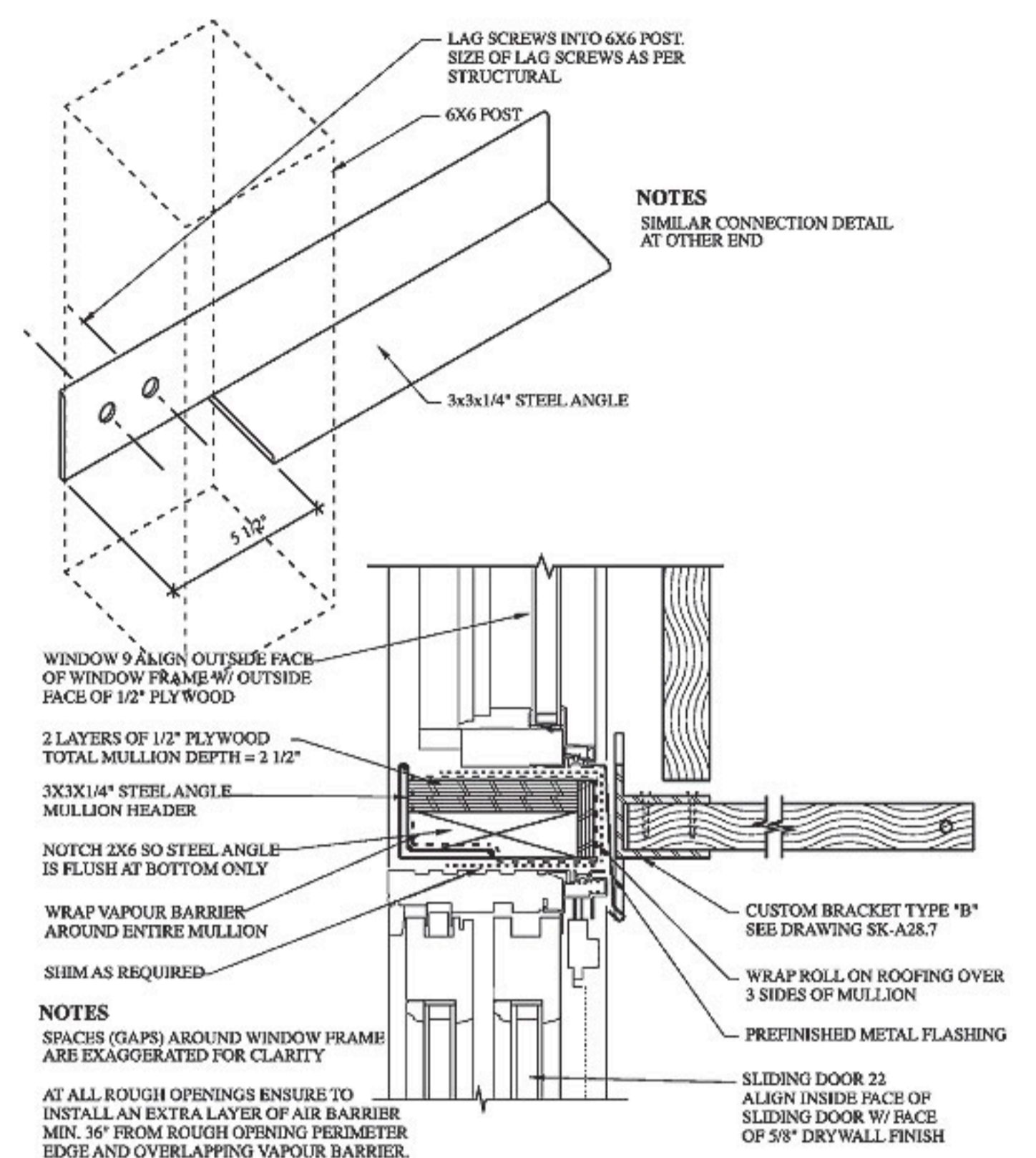


Roof deck level



The outer cladding of timber battens acts as an environmental screen against the extremes of the Montana climate, ranging from dry, hot summers to blizzards in winter. The slats filter harsh sunlight, buffer the skyviewing platform from wind, and help to frame the landscape. The immense view is inescapable, even a form of tyranny. The inhabitant, discomfited, needs somewhere to retreat into and withdraw from the scalelessness of the land. The slats withhold and focus views. Windows frame specific areas of the site, the views to the east (where the Marlboro Man ads were filmed), and the cottonwoods along the river. Windows were located during the computer modelling stage; however, the need for more windows became apparent when it came to construction, and they were pragmatically added.

The big hoppers open and shut. The house is a part-time residence, closed down when the owner is away. In this closed condition, the building endavours to be as near as possible to the iconic agricultural structures of the region. The slats are reclaimed cedar. The patterning they form varies from half inch spacing to missing teeth. Spacing is densest at the base, progressively opening towards the sky as the cladding of slats and infill panels rises up the building. The slats, not sealed with UV protection, will fade to chocolate brown. The primary structure is inside. A solid foundation rises from the poured concrete piers and anchors the four corners. The stick (stud) framing twists to form angles in the wall planes (in plan and in section) that shift as the tower rises. In this windy place, the shifting planes of the facades arise from a mapping of the site topography. This is a very cheap building, comparable with a kit house cost of US\$90 per square foot.







The original scheme was low and horizontal, responding to the concern about imposing an intrusive form on the landscape. This issue was not only contextual but also ethical: should any building be permitted in such a place? However, the integrity of the landscape is already breached by the subdivision of 14-acre parcels and existing neighbouring houses perched inappropriately in the scaleless terrain, mostly expressing a faux log cabin aesthetic. Responding to and accommodating the pre-existing is part of the ethical framework of the

design, along with its contextual, connecting grounding. The basic issue is anchoring: how can I stick here – physically, psychologically, emotionally? The project took several years, during which the architect gained a deeper understanding of the landscape. The 40ft tower, with its 24ft<sup>2</sup> footprint – generated by the client's poetic aspiration for an elevated view – enters into a dialogue with the rectilinear prismatic solids of silo forms of the region. As well, it is an axis-mundi, expressing the relationship between earth and sky.

