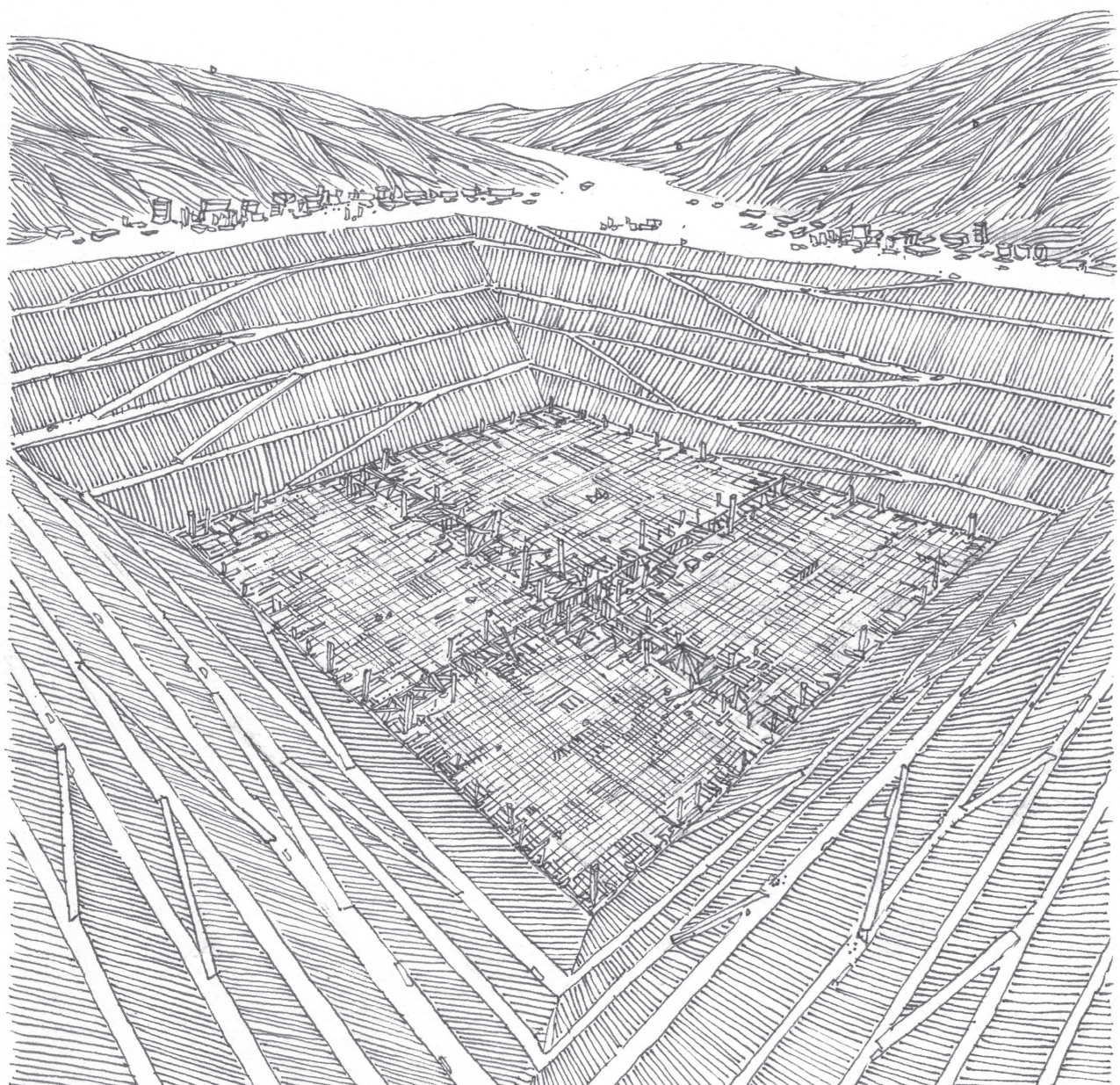


# *The Absolute Skyscraper*

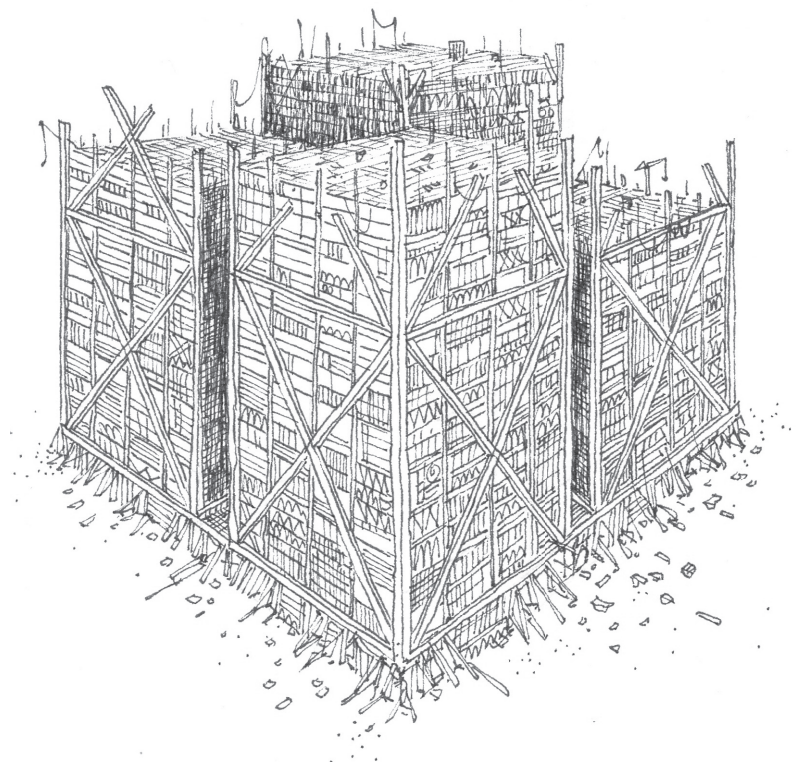
A MAGICAL REALIST EPIC

CARLOS TEIXEIRA

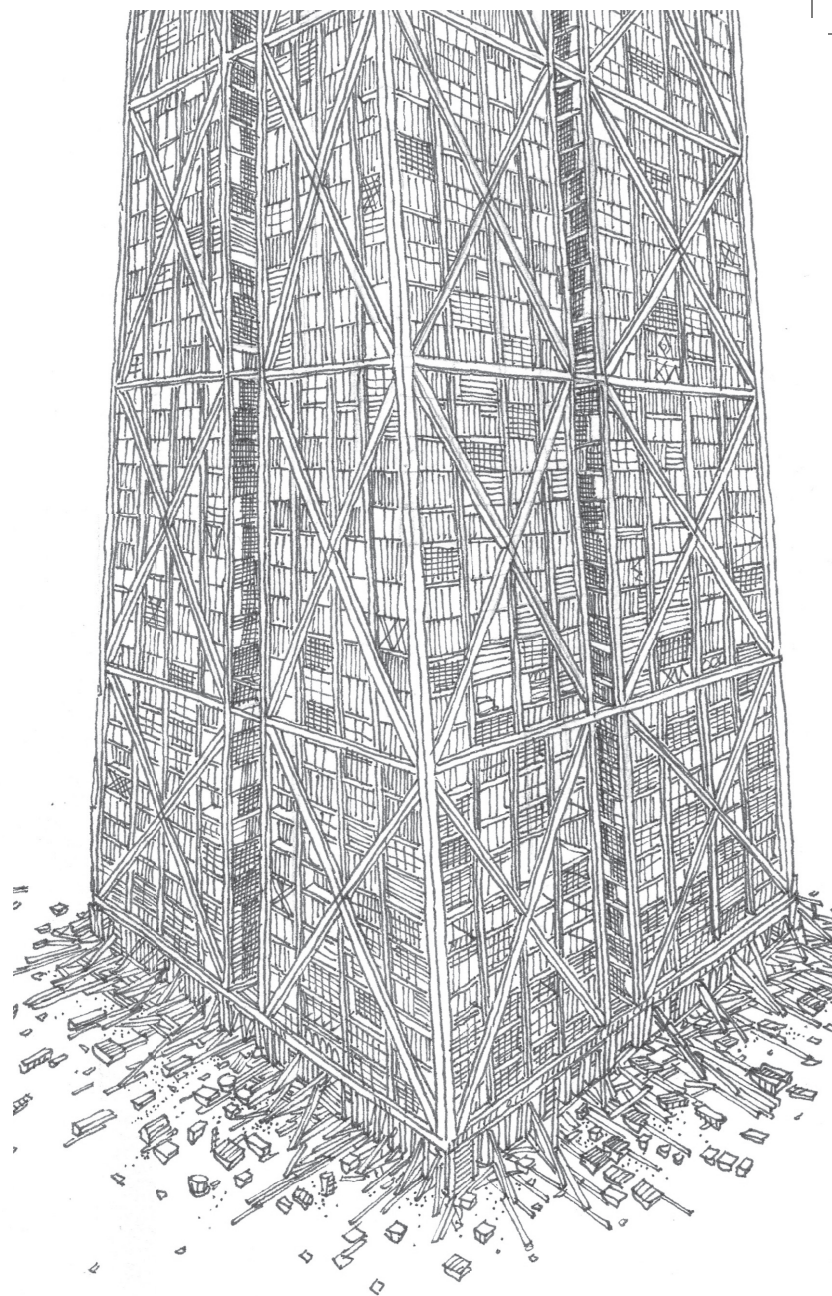
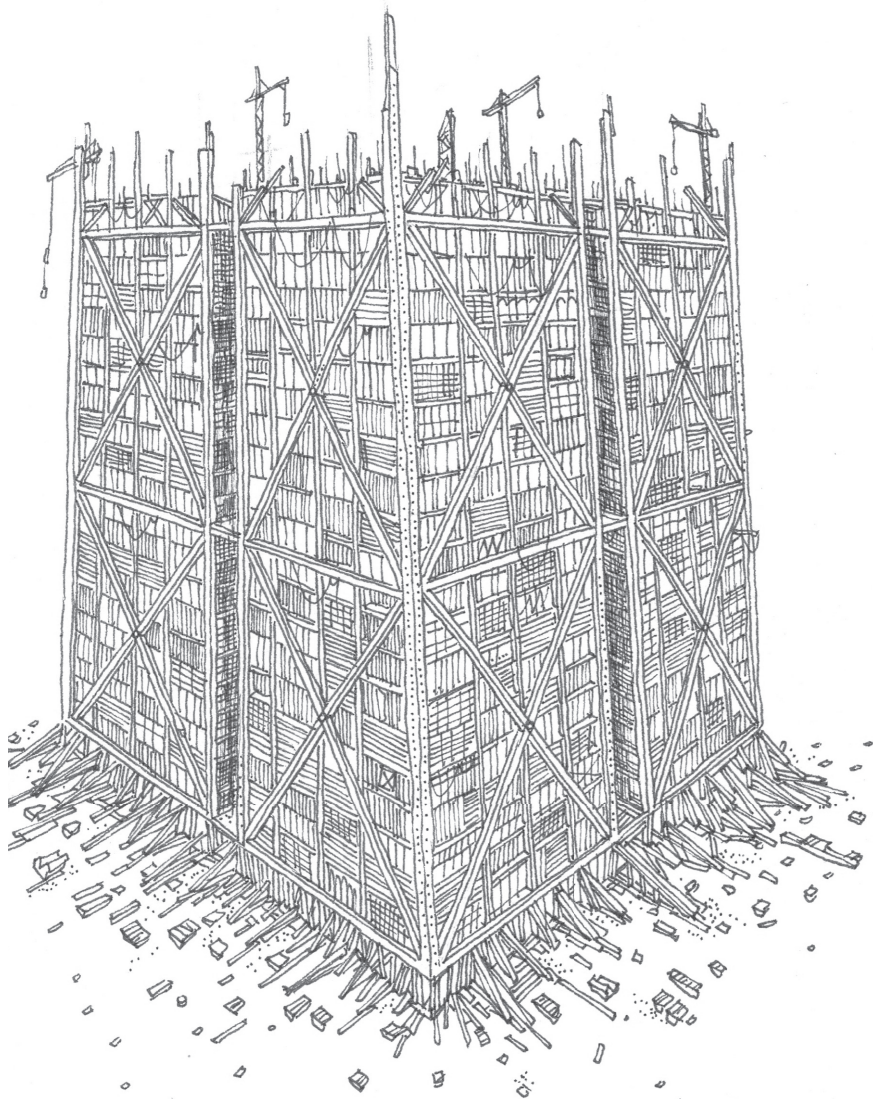




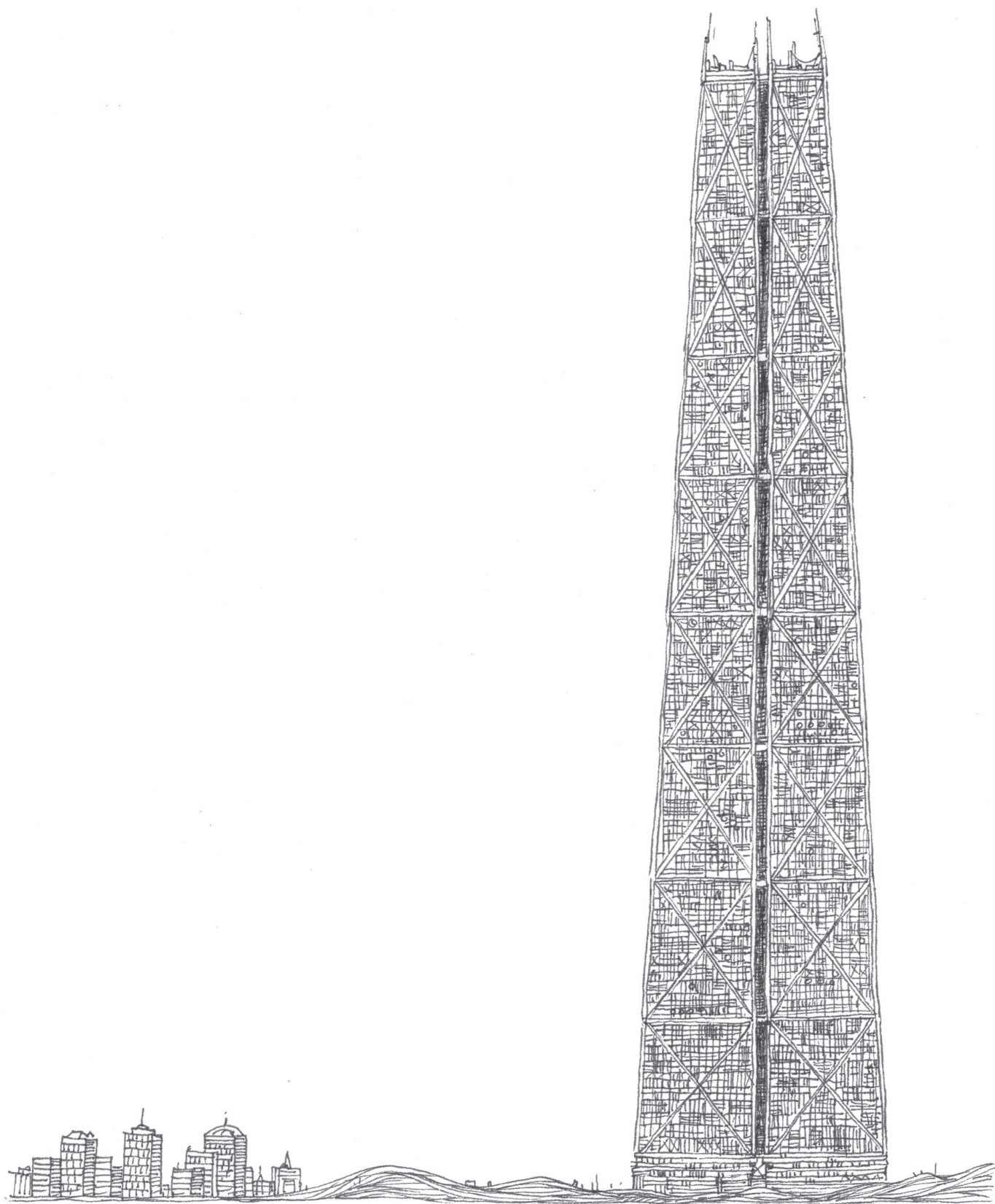
IN 2000, THE SÃO PAULO TOWER PROJECT, WHICH WOULD HAVE become the largest building in the world, was put forward by the onetime Beatles guru Yogi Maharishi, in partnership with Mário Garnero, the Brazilian businessman and developer. Amid protests from journalists, urban planners, and architects against the building, the Municipality of São Paulo did everything so that the colossus could be built—it welcomed the guru with open arms, rewrote laws, and ignored critics. However, due to a lack of funding, the project did not go forward. The “Absolute Skyscraper,” or “Condomínio Absoluto,” is a magical realist epic that narrates the unfolding of the construction.







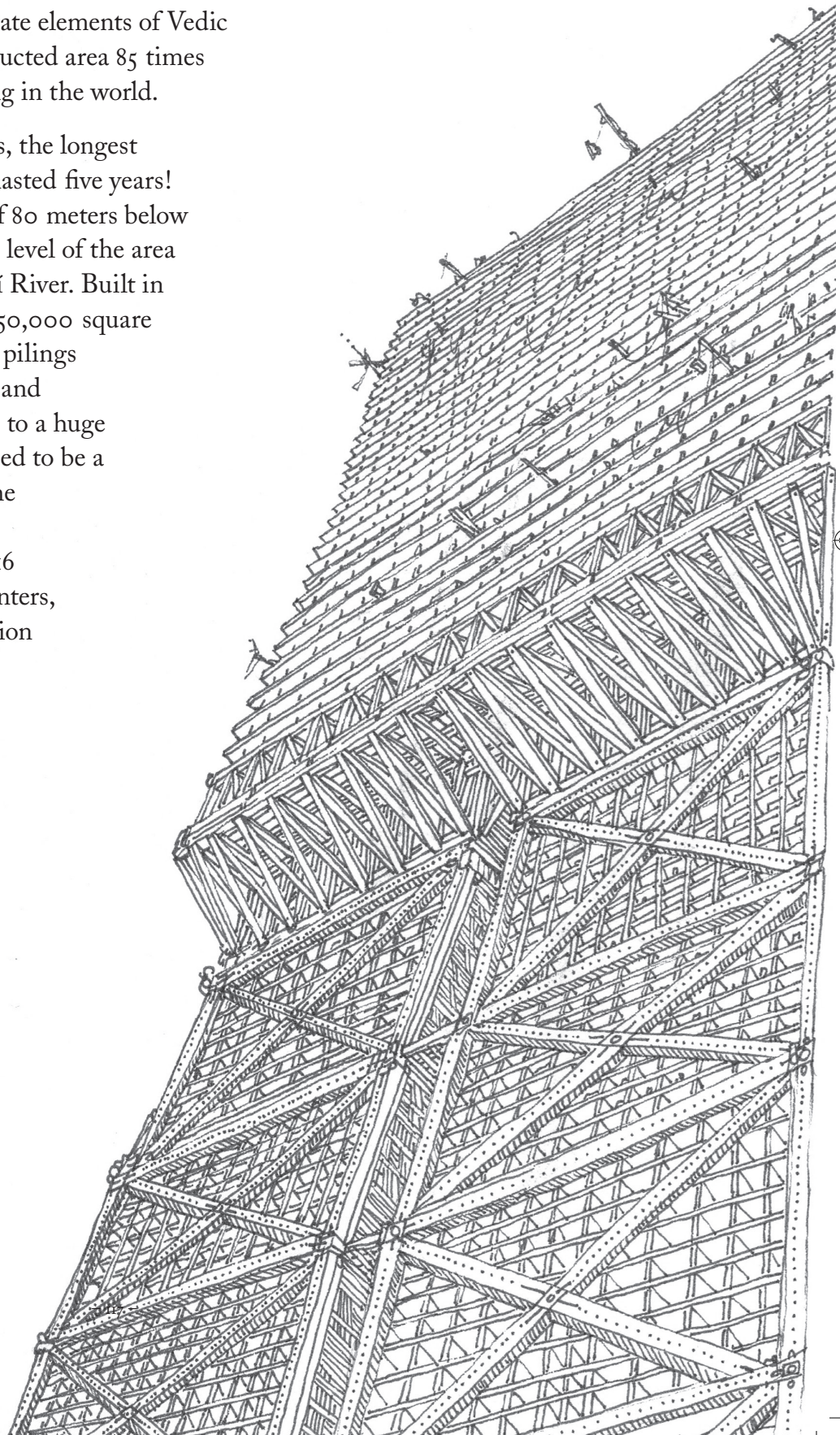




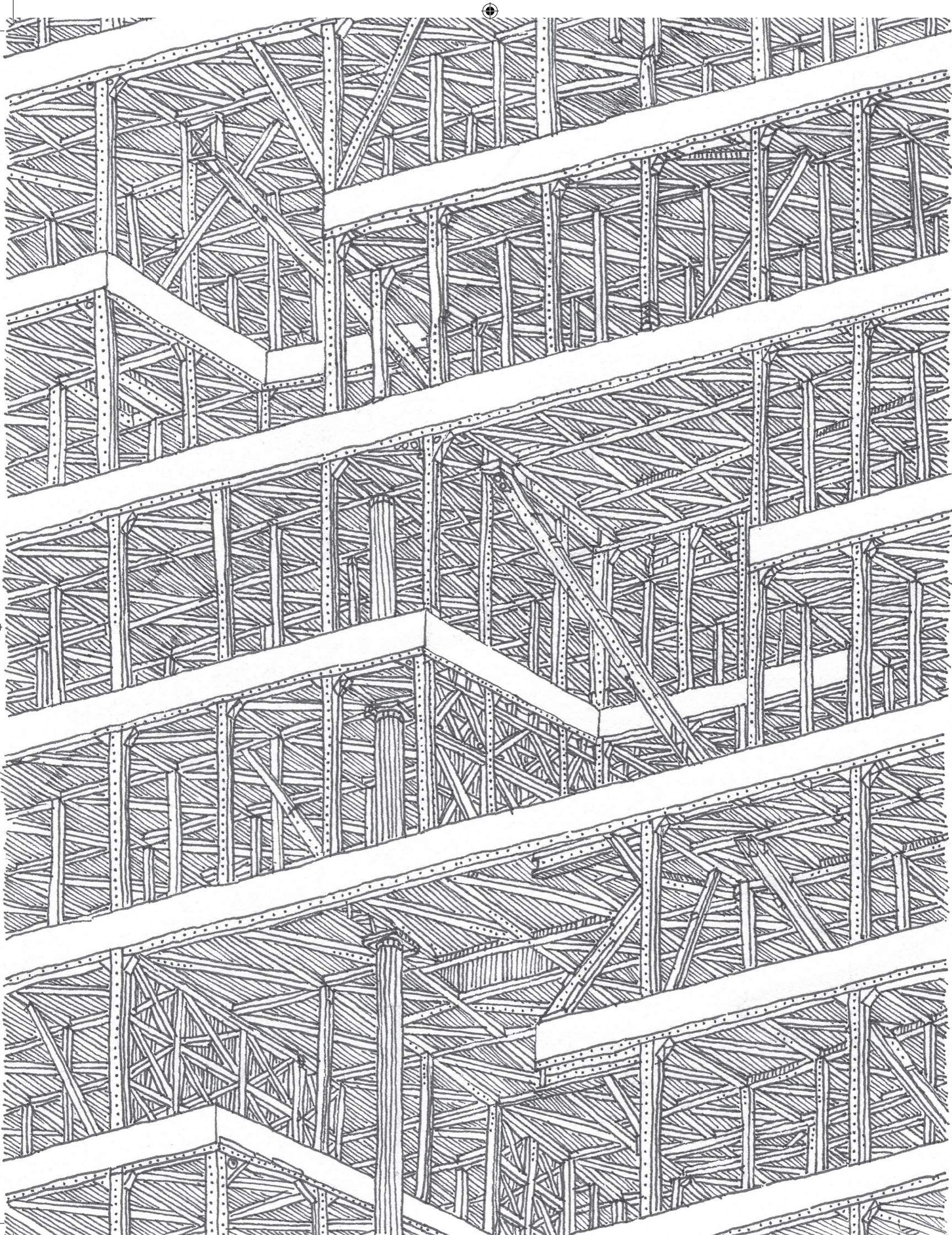


1. The guru Yogi Maharishi, known as “the great wise man and scientist of the conscience,” had the idea for the largest building in the world, the Maharishi São Paulo Tower. The building was intended to be an elegy to Vedic science and Hindu teachings; it was meant to incorporate elements of Vedic architecture and have a total constructed area 85 times larger than the then-largest building in the world.

11. Of all of the construction phases, the longest involved laying the foundations: it lasted five years! The foundations reached a depth of 80 meters below the level of 300 meters, the average level of the area along the shore of the Tamanduateí River. Built in a 60-city-block area over roughly 750,000 square meters (8,073,000 square feet), the pilings required the removal of mountains and mountains of earth that were taken to a huge landfill over a park that was supposed to be a part of the development. Beyond the 50-hectare park, other advertised amenities included two museums, 16 shopping malls, four convention centers, five hotels, seven spas, and ten million square feet of constructed area distributed among 22,230 offices, 3,400 shops, 65,500 apartments, and everything else that a city contains.









iii. The Tower would in fact be four towers: one at each corner of a square. The space in between would be reserved for public spaces between each of 108 floors. This pyramid trunk shape, typical of Hindu architecture, would bring to São Paulo the power inherent to the divine forces capable of putting an end to human afflictions such as fighting, avarice, envy, and greed.

iv. So, with the foundation completed, the time came for the superstructure, which was inspired by Chicago's John Hancock Center, built in 1969. Inserted in the building's perimeter, a tubular matrix would absorb all the forces of the fantastic, structure, eliminating the need for internal columns. All the forces pulling, pushing, and bearing down on the building would be borne by its outer skin. The architect chosen to develop the project was the Japanese American Minoru Yamasaki. The reaction from the city against the monstrosity was quick: local architects, intellectuals, and artists strongly opposed the project and incited all the newspapers and television networks against it, but as the polemic dragged on, on the horizon appeared the first signs of the pyramid rising...

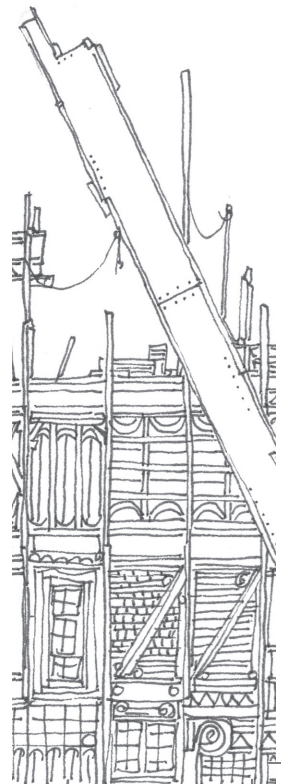
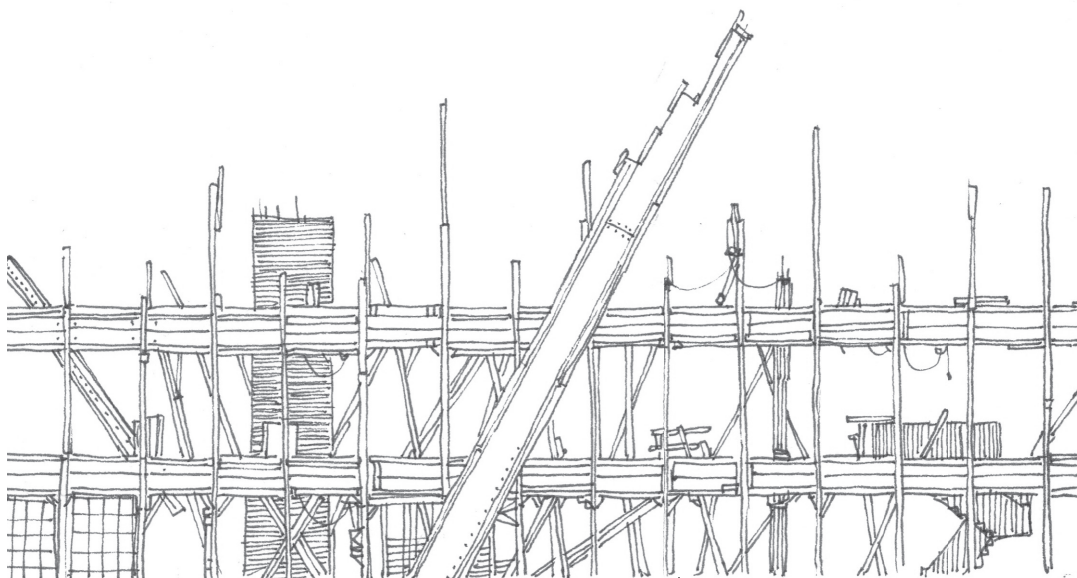
v. The construction work proceeded at a thundering pace: in a year and a half they had reached the 80th floor. This is when the first disagreements arose among the developers, the Maharishi Global Development Fund (or "the endless world treasure for peace and happiness on Earth") and Mário Garnero's Brasilinvest. The latter showed that the foundations were overbuilt and could support a load three times greater than originally projected, which allowed the number of floors to increase to 324. The controversy continued throughout the project, up until the last floor of the pyramid was built.



vi. During conversations at the work's inauguration party, it was decided that the Brasilinvest group would be responsible for the construction of 216 new floors. The liability would be solely taken by Brasilinvest, which would be also responsible for the rest of the construction, including the insurance for the first 108 floors. Yamasaki was consulted to continue the planned extension, but aware of the frightening destiny of two of his better-known buildings—the Pruitt-Igoe residential complex—which when demolished marked the end of modern architecture—and the World Trade Center in New York—his office declined.

vii. The new structure could not be just an extension of the original structure: it would have to be adjusted in its perimeter so that the new loads would not damage the structure already erected which was built only to support 108 floors. Specialists were consulted, and the conclusion was reached that the best solution was to adopt another type of structure, which would alter the original structure of the building.

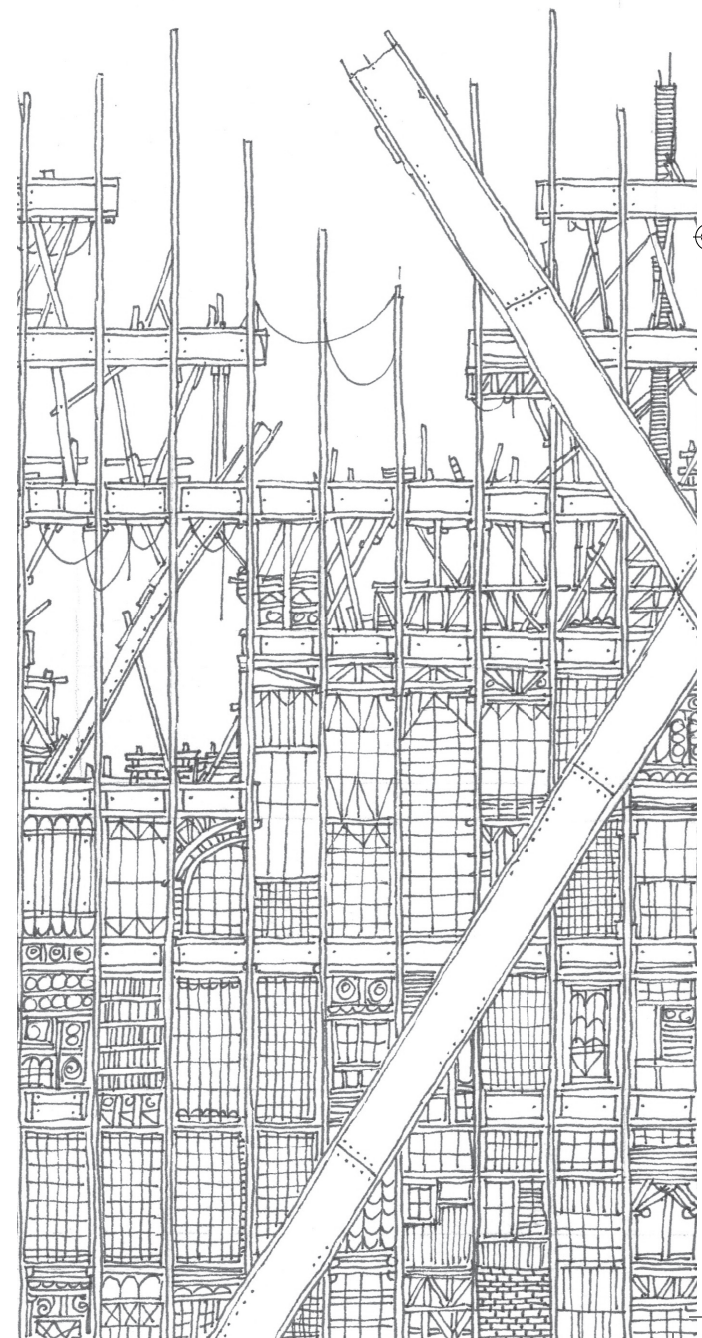
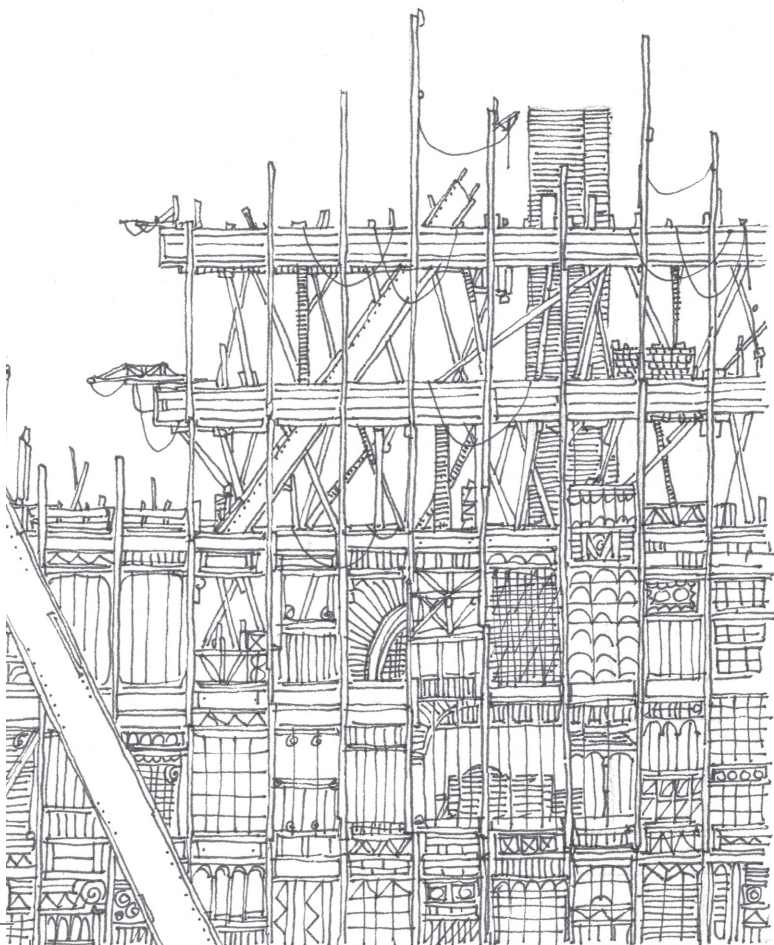
viii. The guru's protests did not prevent the perversion of the original conception of the pyramid. An engineer specializing in reinforced concrete—the mainstay of Brazilian architecture—decided to insert a traditional mesh—with traditional columns and orthogonal supports to reinforce the structure, in keeping with practices prevailing in the country. Huge beams would support a mesh of 124 columns, now located at the core of the building and no longer on the facade.



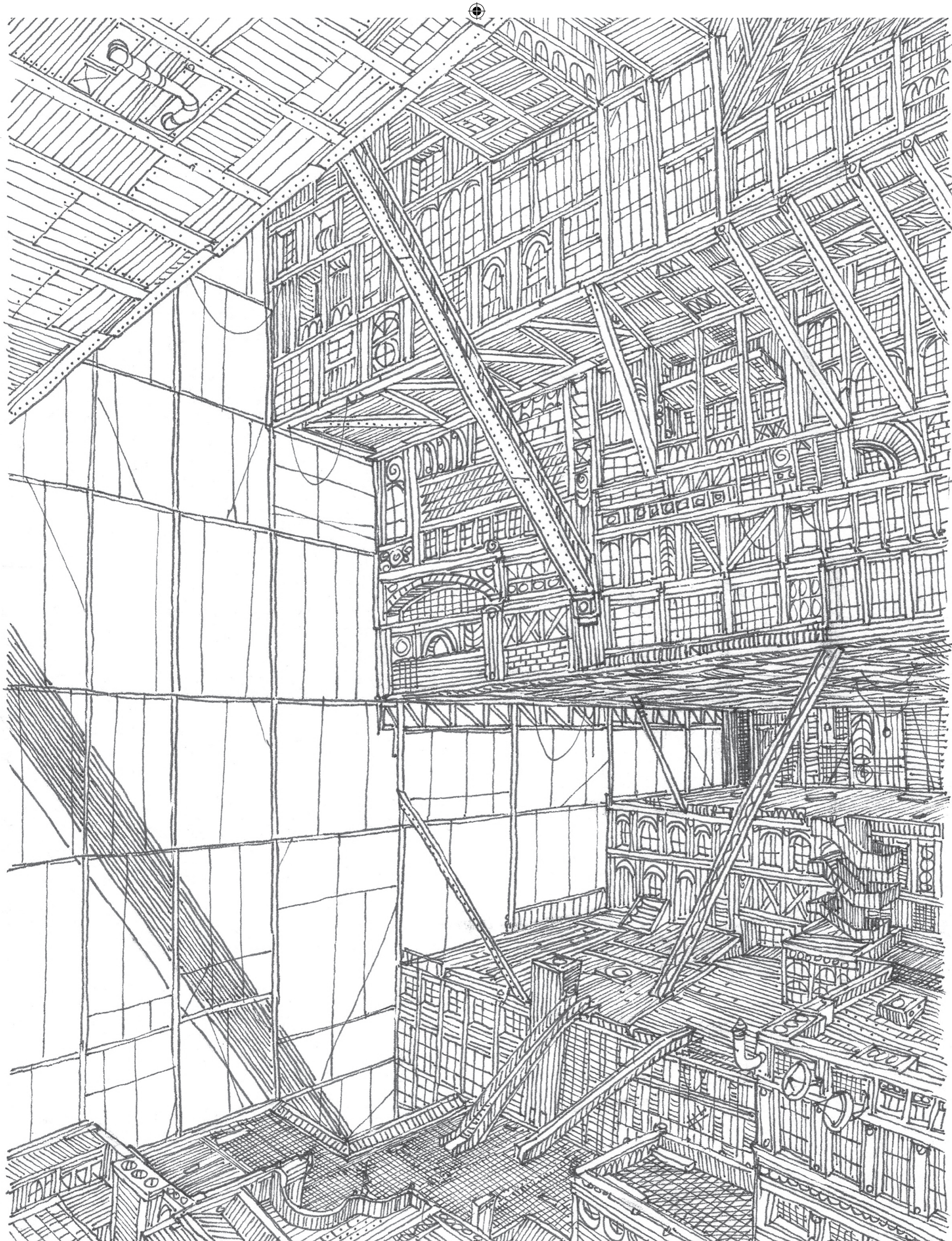
ix. Once the construction had reached the 147th floor, the developers themselves started to fear the height of the building. Swaying of more than three meters from side to side on the top floors made workers descend desperately to levels less vulnerable to the winds. Frightened, the developers consulted architects and engineers of famous skyscrapers and came up with the idea to revert to a metallic structure through the insertion of huge cylindrical columns in the middle of the building, which would reinforce the structure of the skyscraper and maximize the use of its foundation.

x. That was how the construction proceeded up to the 184th floor.

xi. Suddenly, the developers ran out of funds. Swings in the Brazilian economy, rumors about the building's uncertain destiny, and the reluctance by the Mayor of São Paulo to bail out the project with government funds—all of these factors led to the announcement that construction would cease, at least temporarily. Everything was halted for over three months.







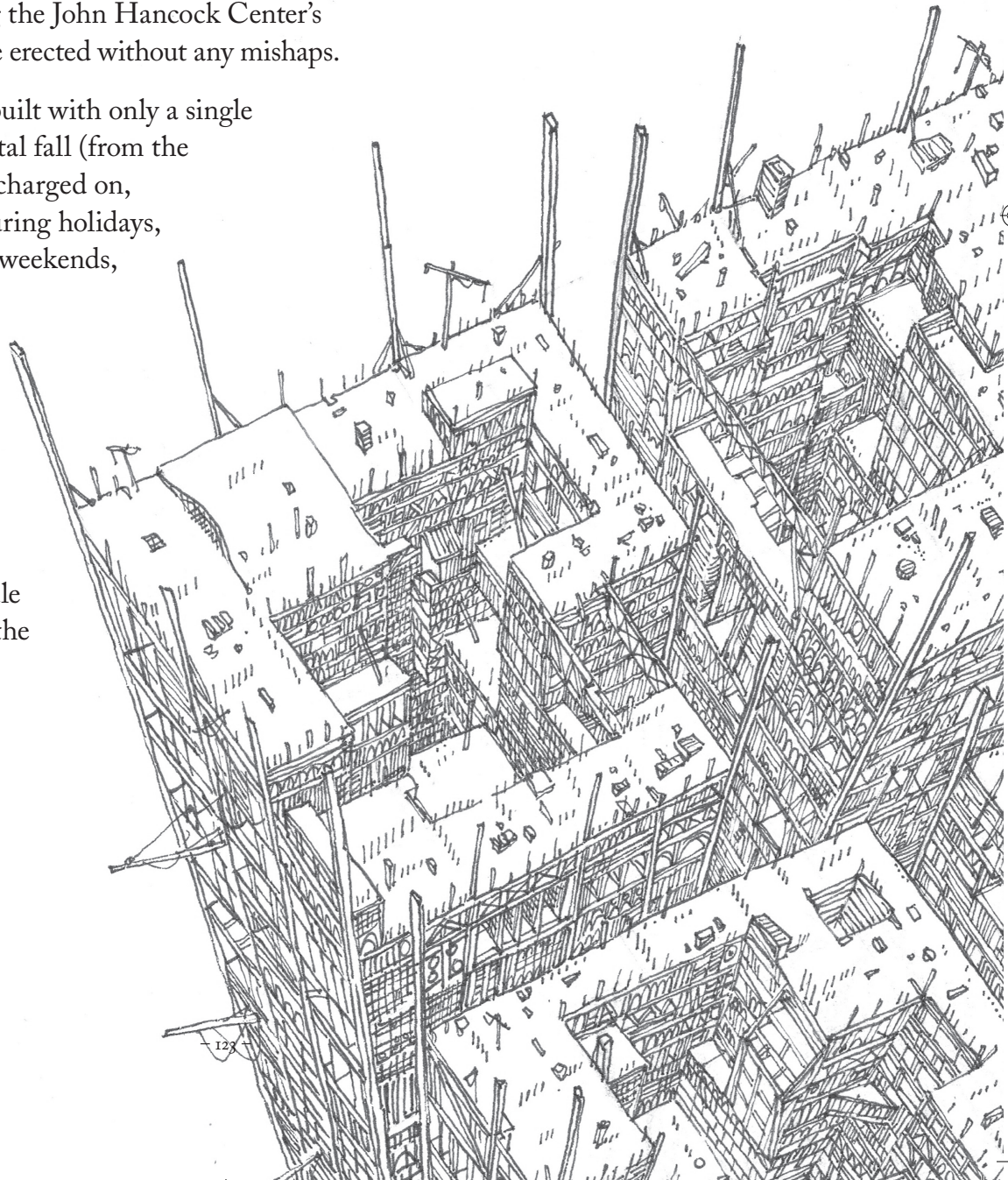


xii. Yet the workers found the sight of the incomplete colossus unbearable; they decided to continue the work on their own. They simply said: “We want to continue the work ourselves.” With no experience and no salaries, foremen and workers substituted metal trusses with wooden overlays and created their own concrete masterpieces—bridges and overpasses linking the four buildings together. The engineers, once subordinate to others, now had the chance to put their ideas into practice.

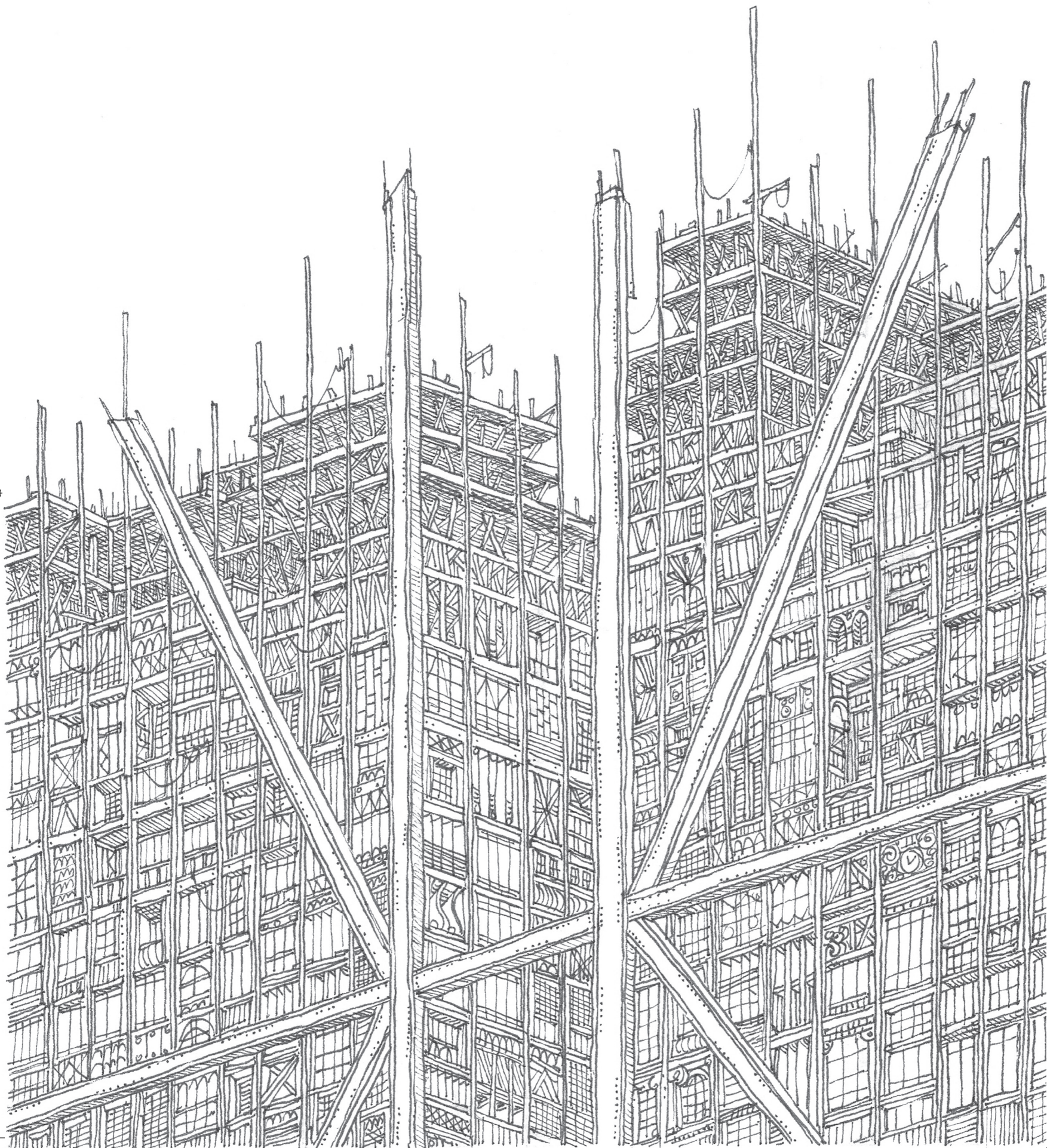
xiii. While engineers and interns forged on with energy and self-confidence in the herculean project, the tireless developer Mário Garnero secured new loans through connections at state-owned banks. Back salaries were finally paid. The precarious and improvised last floors got metal columns, following the initial structural design of the facade. And so, another 143 floors—now following the John Hancock Center’s construction system—were erected without any mishaps.

xiv. Over 40 floors were built with only a single work-related accident, a fatal fall (from the 217th floor). The workers charged on, building at a crazy rate, during holidays, during the week, over the weekends, day and night, endlessly.

xv. The venture’s cash flow no longer seemed to show strain: the demand for apartments and offices became greater than the availability. This drove up prices per square foot, resale spreads, and anxiety over the building’s completion.









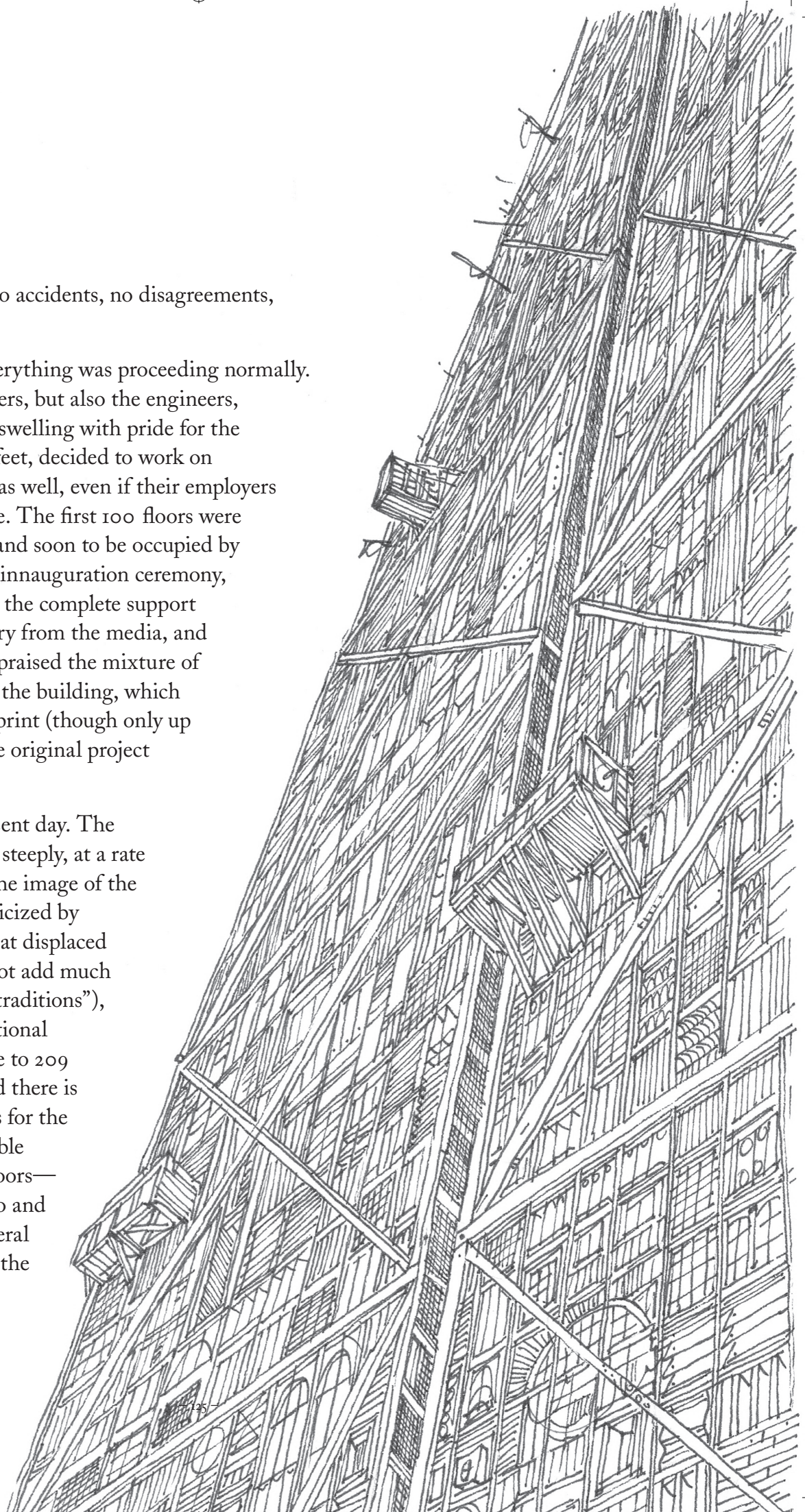
xvi. 33 more floors.

xvii. 12 more floors.

xviii. 81 more floors. No accidents, no disagreements, no problems.

xix. 23 more floors. Everything was proceeding normally. Now, not only the workers, but also the engineers, architects, and brokers, swelling with pride for the monument under their feet, decided to work on Saturdays and Sundays as well, even if their employers did not pay the overtime. The first 100 floors were about to be completed, and soon to be occupied by the first tenants. At the inauguration ceremony, an unexpected reaction: the complete support of the population, flattery from the media, and newspaper articles that praised the mixture of programs and shapes of the building, which were following the blueprint (though only up to the 108th floor) of the original project laid out by Maharishi.

xx. 78 more floors. Present day. The building keeps growing steeply, at a rate of 20 floors a month. The image of the building, previously criticized by Brazilian architects ("that displaced architecture that does not add much to our solid, modernist traditions"), has become a daring national symbol. Floors from one to 209 are already occupied and there is a long wait list of buyers for the space that will be available through the next 100 floors—all of them sold long ago and resold at a premium several times over, with almost the same liquidity as cash.





xxi. By means of an open-ended real estate fund, Maharishi Tower's square footage is now traded on the São Paulo Stock Exchange (BOVESPA), a first for the Brazilian real estate market. Rumors that the Tower is approaching its maximum height drive up the share price; whispers that the building has serious structural flaws send the share price crashing down; a rise in robberies, murders, and kidnapping sends the shares back up, and the sharp swings continue.

xxii. Initially a cacophony of buildings on top of buildings, now the internal space between the towers has become complex and surprising: improvised shacks line up against modernist fantasies, radical formalisms aggressively break into the x-shaped façade, and structural fantasies (metal and reinforced concrete) allow for the unexpected use of space between the four towers of the Tower. Rooftops become terraces that become bridges that are taken over by houses that become buildings built upon works of art, and so the building evolves.

xxiii. 55 more floors. Now everyone fights for a spot in the Tower, and the city of São Paulo starts to empty. In the center of the city and on the outskirts, houses, schools, office buildings, hospitals, malls—virtually, every building in every neighborhood of greater São Paulo is abandoned.

xxiv. The Tower—in an amazing horizontal growth at the base of the colossus—starts to embrace the main buildings of the city: the São Bento Monastery, the Oca, the MASP museum, the Copan Building, the Unique Hotel, and the BANESPA Building—hardly a symbol of the city is spared from the growing amalgamation of the building, leaving the city with little in the way of architectural memory.

xxv. Someone realizes that the total number of floors (how many are there now?) vastly exceeds the number allowed by the foundations. Nobody cares, and they keep building, buying, speculating, and moving to the Tower.

