When In Rome: Draw

During the Covid-19 quarantine in 2020, I became very invested in the game Animal Crossing: New Horizons. In this game, you design an island for animal villagers to live on using placeable items and terraforming tools to create mountains, rivers, and waterfalls. I've always had an affinity to classical styles of architecture, so I chose to design my island after Venice, Italy. Complete with winding rivers throughout the island, walkable riverside marketplaces, a bathhouse, sculpture garden and museum, and building facades that came right up to the water, my "Little Venice" aimed to emulate the city experience I was so desperate to know. The layout of all of these elements and decorations were based on pictures, so as I worked, it became a struggle to really grasp how each of the areas should look and feel within the context of each other.

Fast forward a year to when I began applying to college, I was struggling to decide on a major that I felt would be engaging, encourage creativity, and allow me to build a career I was proud of. Then I thought back to my time working on my Animal Crossing village and knew that architecture would be the perfect field of study for me. Because of my love for classical Greek and Roman architecture, I knew I wanted the opportunity to study abroad in a place where I could explore that architecture in person and gain the experience I did not have when designing Little Venice.

Although this opportunity is not centered around Venice, a trip to Rome would fulfill the same desire. Being able to experience and draw the spatial and urban qualities of an ancient city like Rome would give me a better understanding of how classical, dense architecture interacts with itself and its inhabitants on a large scale. In turn, I would gain valuable insight into how I could apply this design thinking to my career. I can observe Roman architecture from pictures and understand the aesthetics of the style, but I cannot truly grasp the scale and majesty of the architecture itself without seeing it in person.
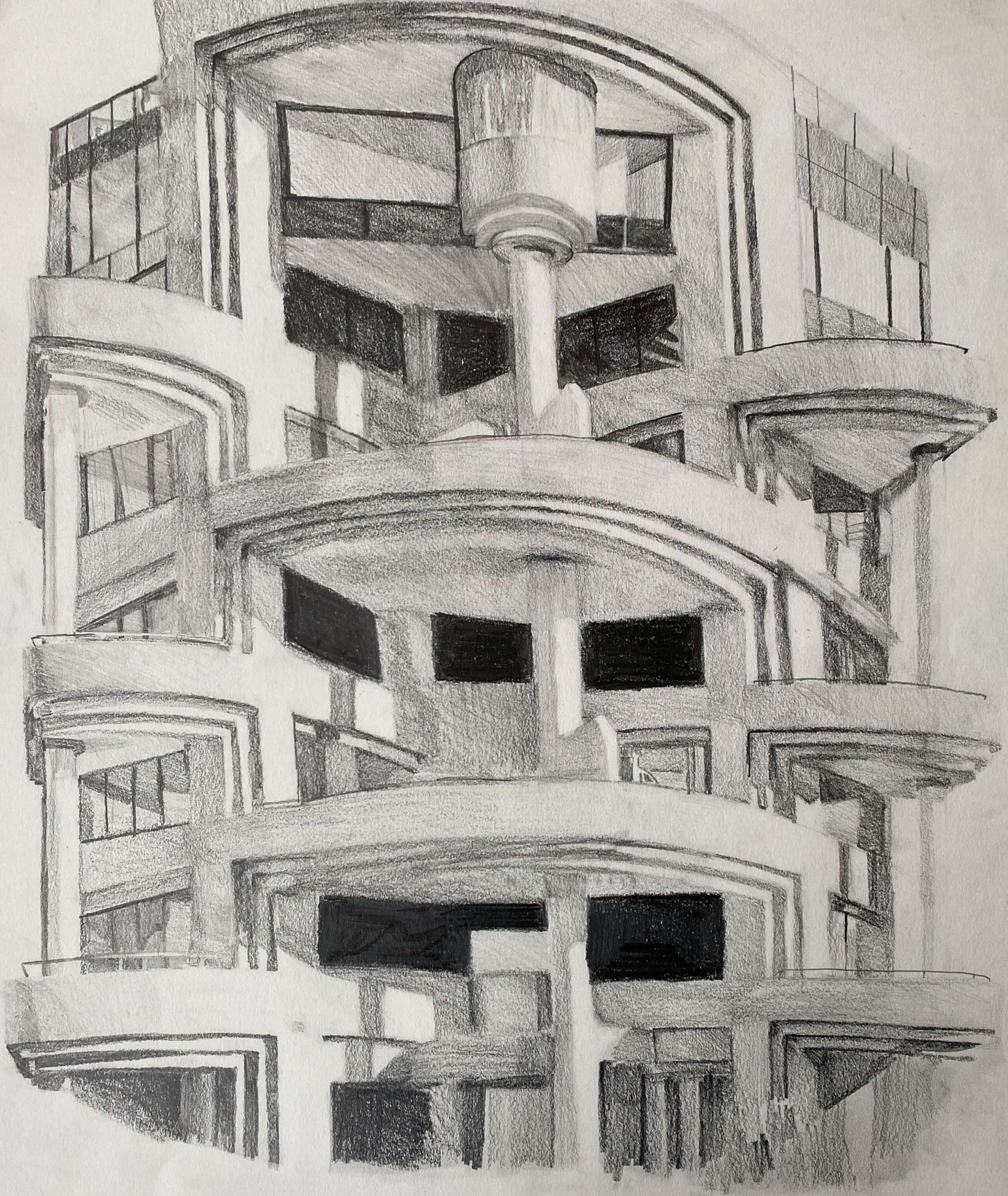
Another important aspect that would have helped improve my understanding of Venice would have been the ability to draw examples of the areas I was trying to design in Little Venice.

Drawing is not only an artform but also a way to document and analyze information to gain a better understanding. Through the process of drawing, I find it allows me to better visualize spaces in my head in order to better explain my concepts to someone else. I'm forced to focus on the proportions and materials of a given space to be able to draw an accurate form with accurate texture and intent. This action is similar to an architecture studio, in a sense, because you learn the appropriate ways to think about space and design context, but at your own pace and without the stress. Because of this, I find drawing more enjoyable to investigate and learn about the architectural spaces I'm in, rather than simply observe in person or analyze from a picture only.

I find drawing so critical to understanding architecture, like the architecture and designs of Venice or Rome for example, because I gain a better architectural appreciation of what I'm drawing. By sitting down and viewing the same thing for an extended period of time as you sketch, you start to find the little details that you otherwise would not have seen through other means: facets in tiles, the warping of glass, or the deliberate proportions of decoration. All of those things become unconsciously inherent to our built environment because we're exposed to them so often, and they end up becoming unnoticed in our everyday lives. But having to study and document them through drawing opens our eyes to the naturally beautiful and unique qualities of architecture and architectural materials.

If I had had the chance to visit and draw in Venice three years ago when I designed my Animal Crossing village, I know I would have had a much easier time trying to express my architectural ideas. Experiencing the fundamentals of architecture that are present in places like Venice and Rome are important to being able to understand how design and modern architectural trends affect the overall sense of space we feel as humans. I hope to gain this experience and knowledge through the SPQR Fellowship award and would be 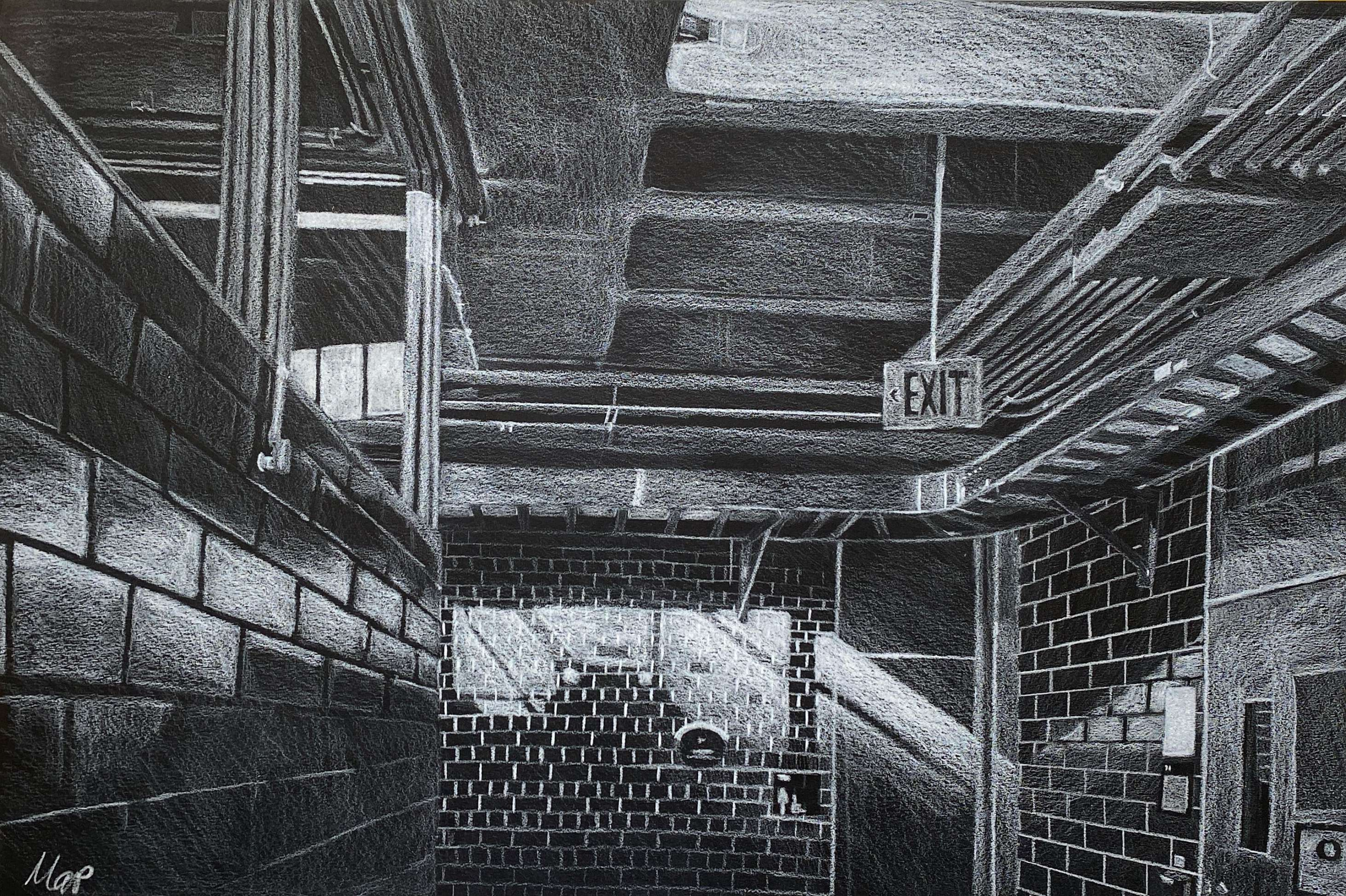honored to learn in and draw Rome, Italy.