

June 12–October 11, 2026

Arch Connelly: Straighten Your Wig and Pray

Aspen Art Museum

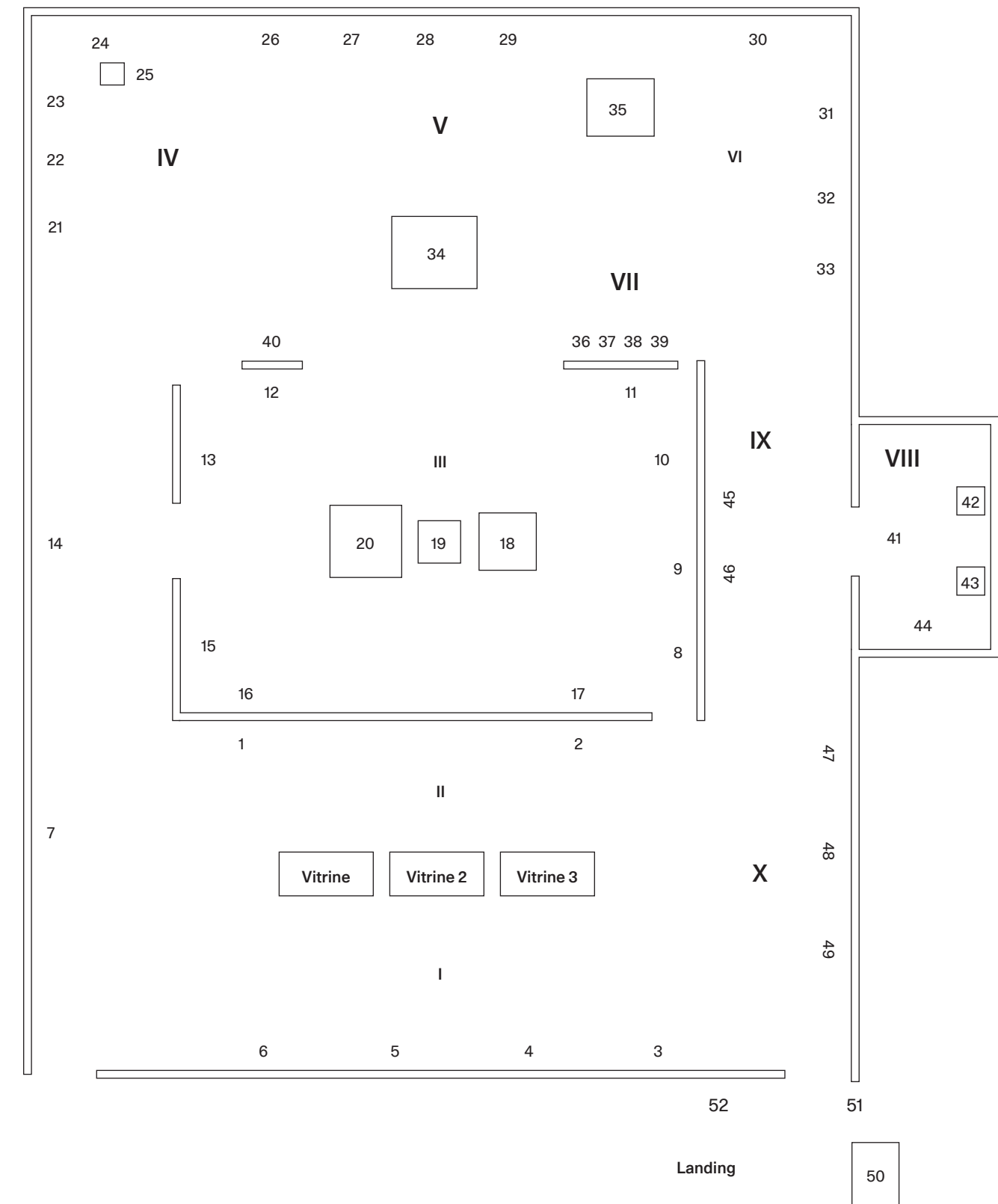
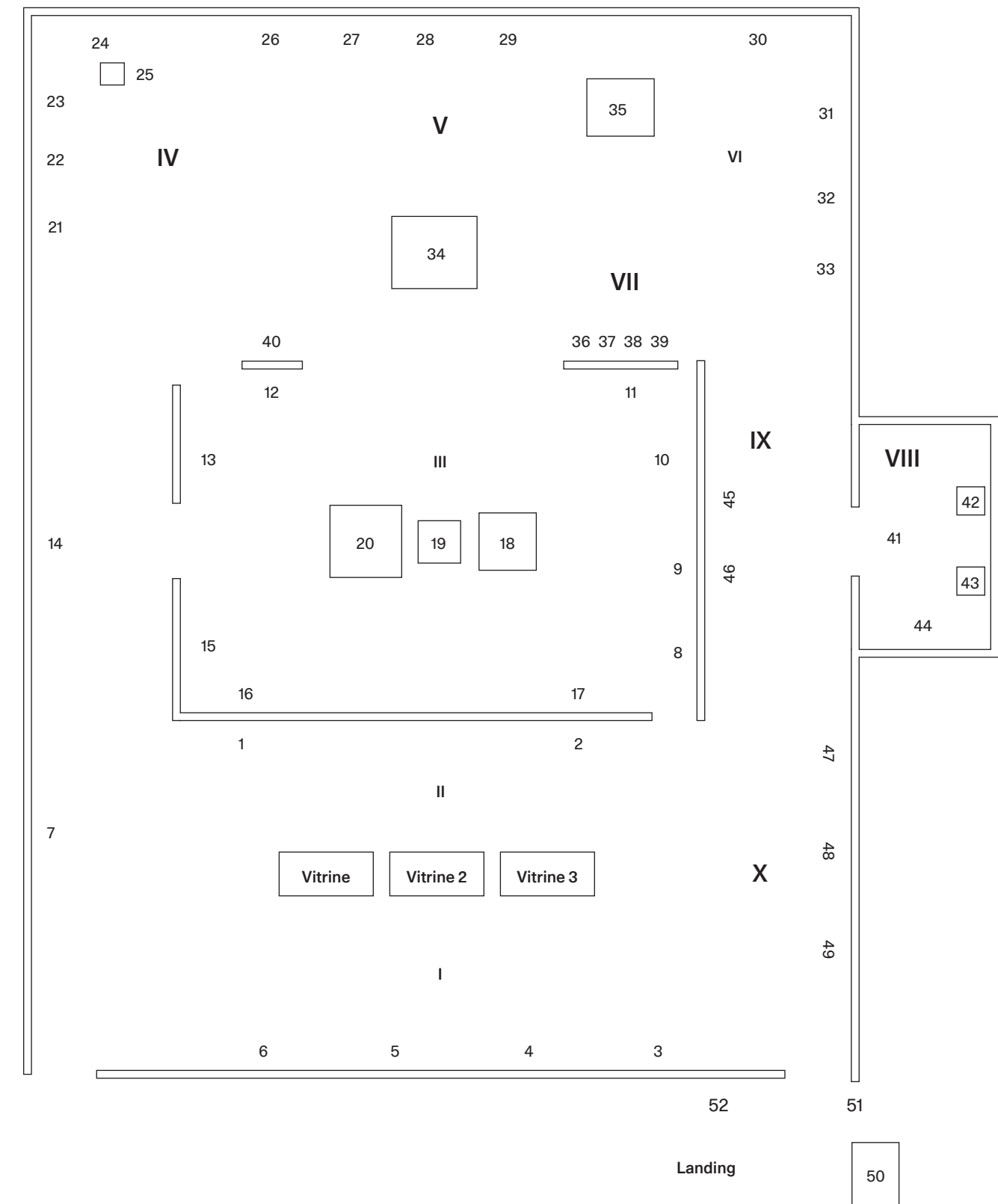
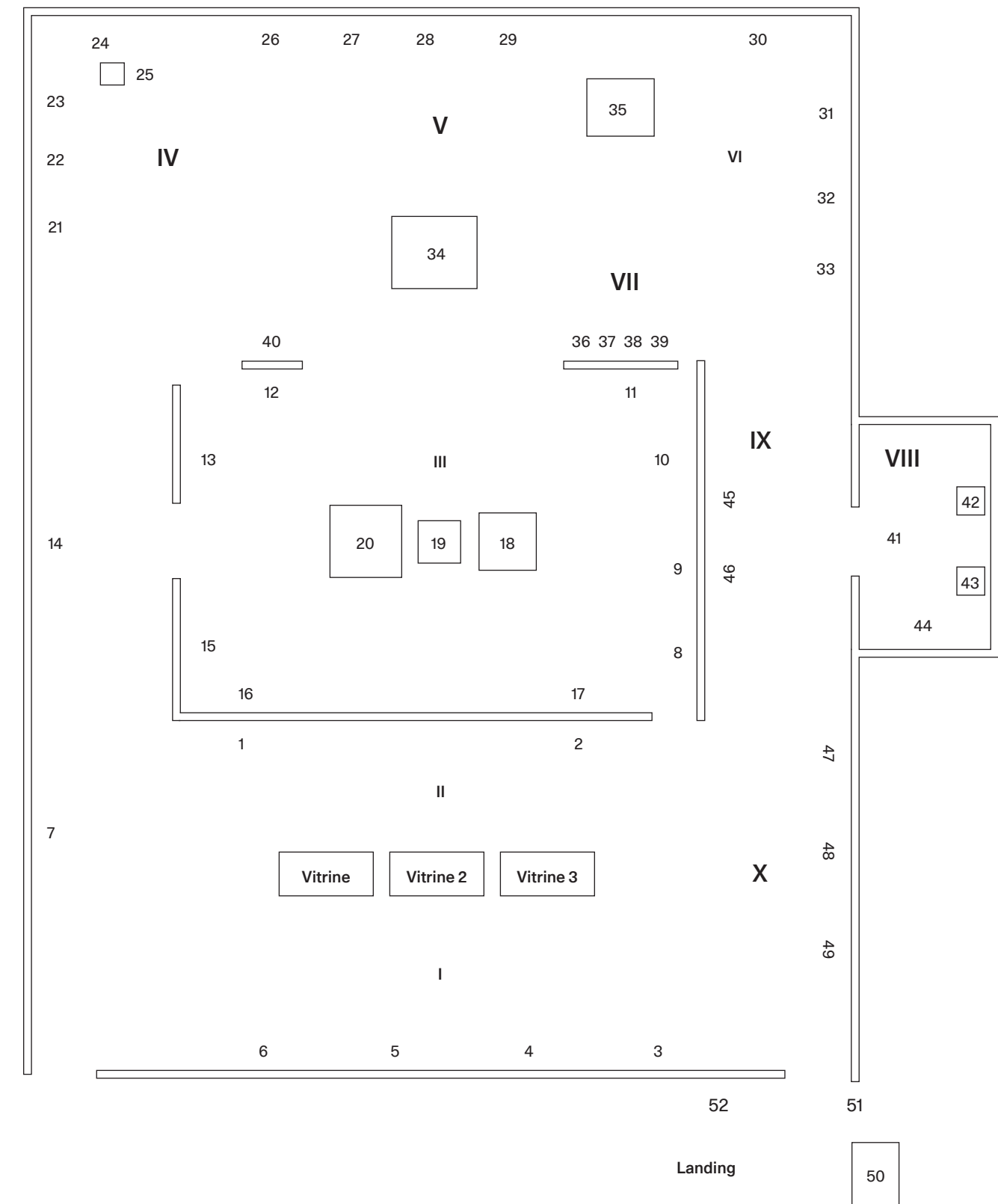
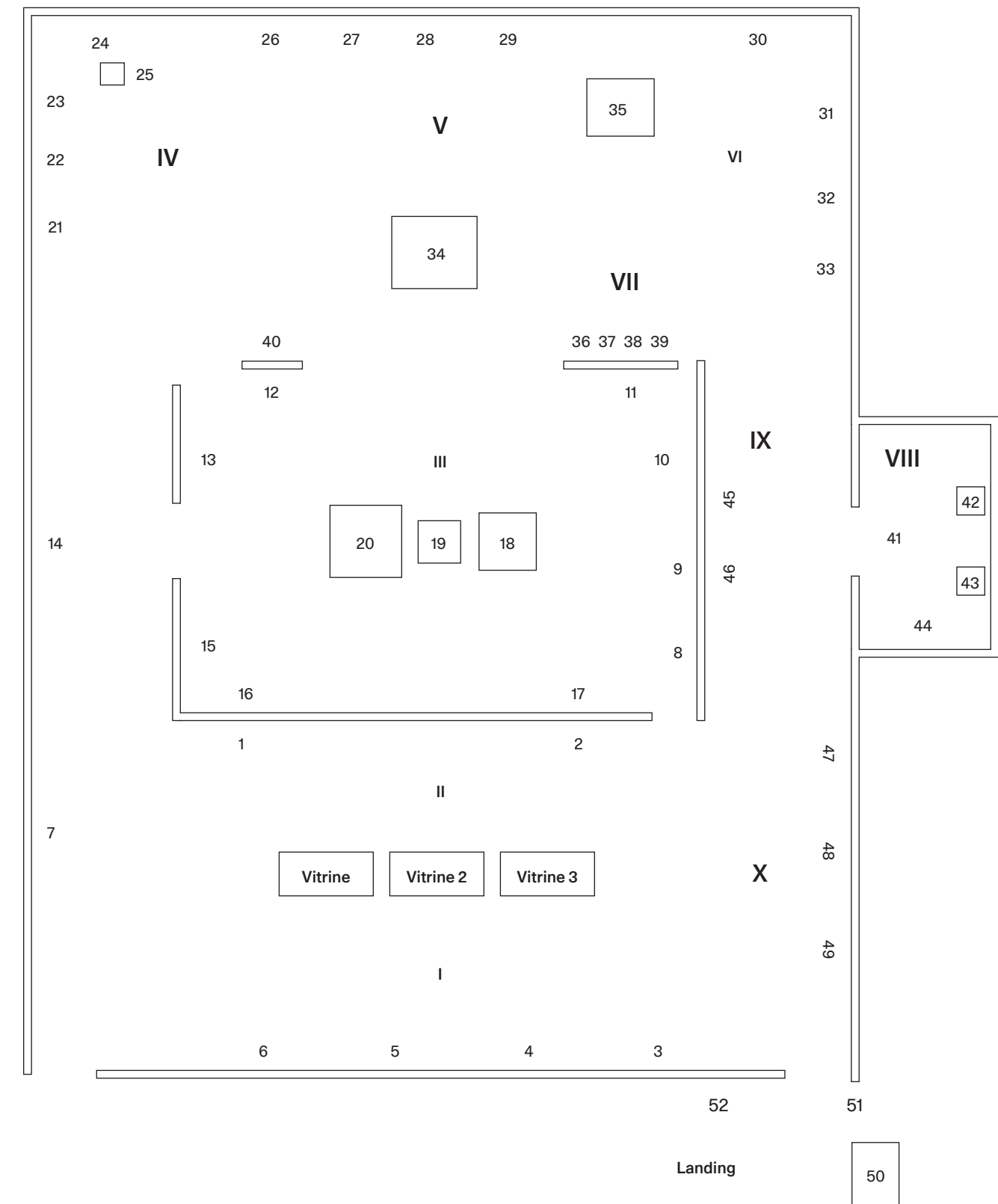
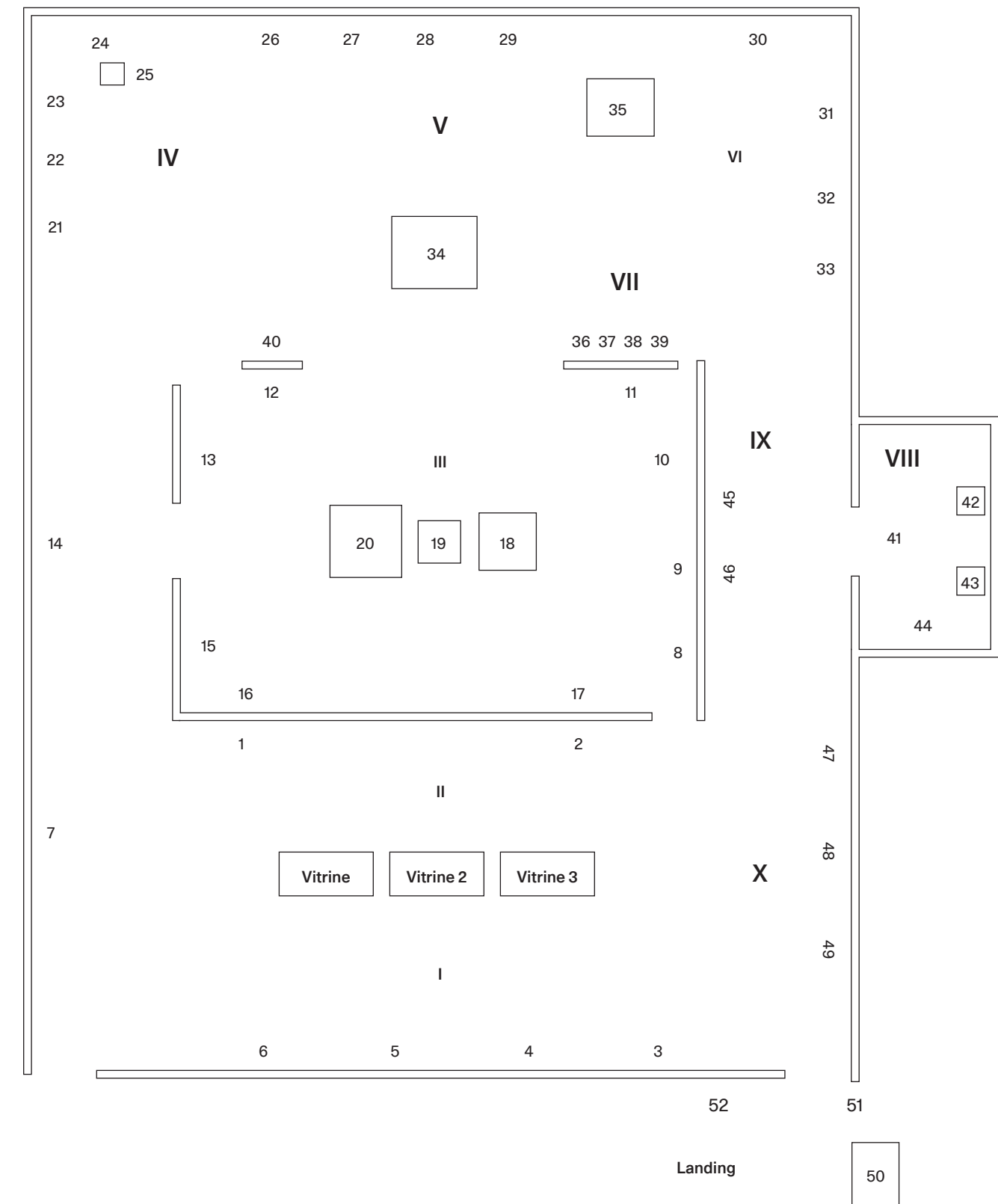
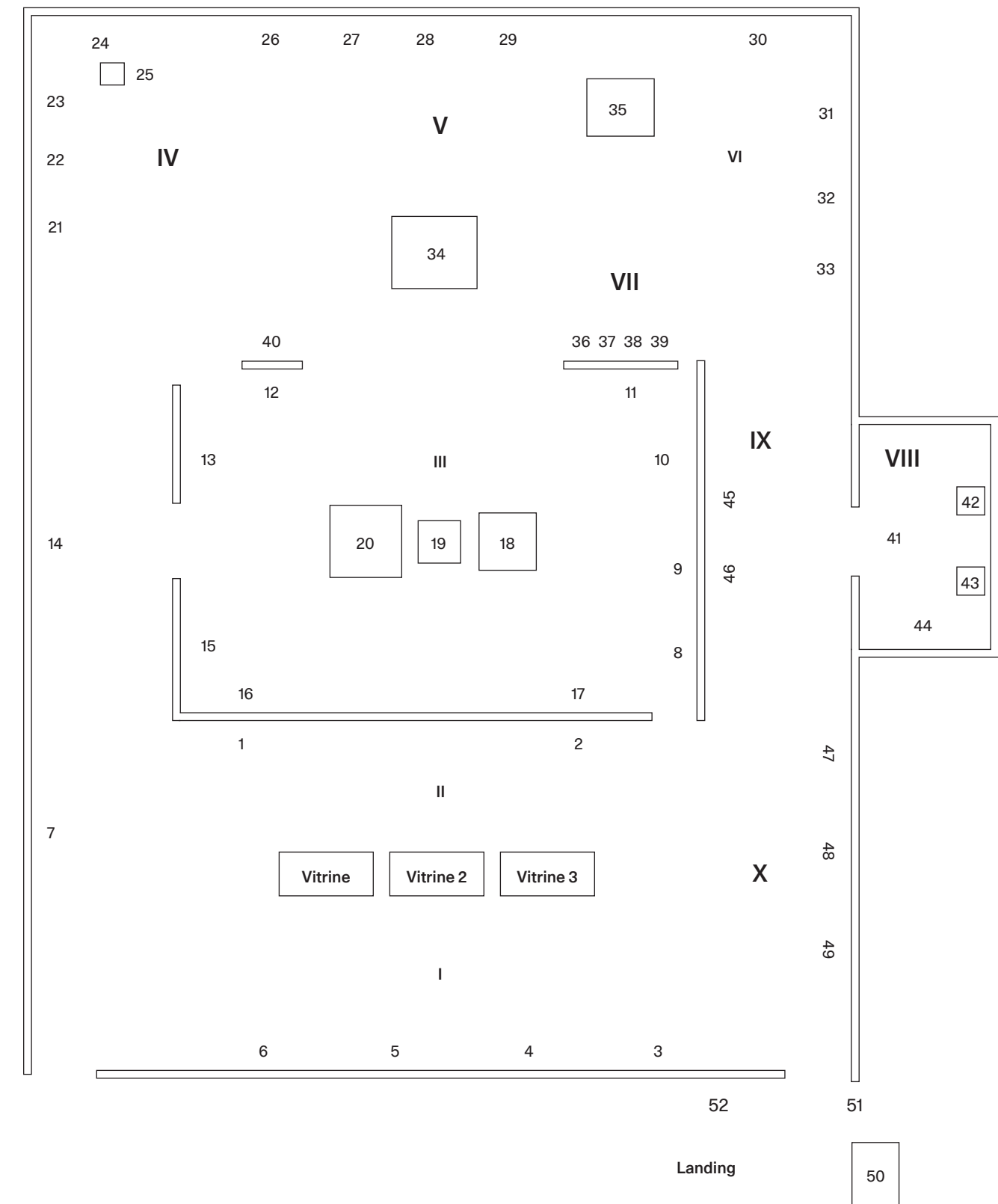
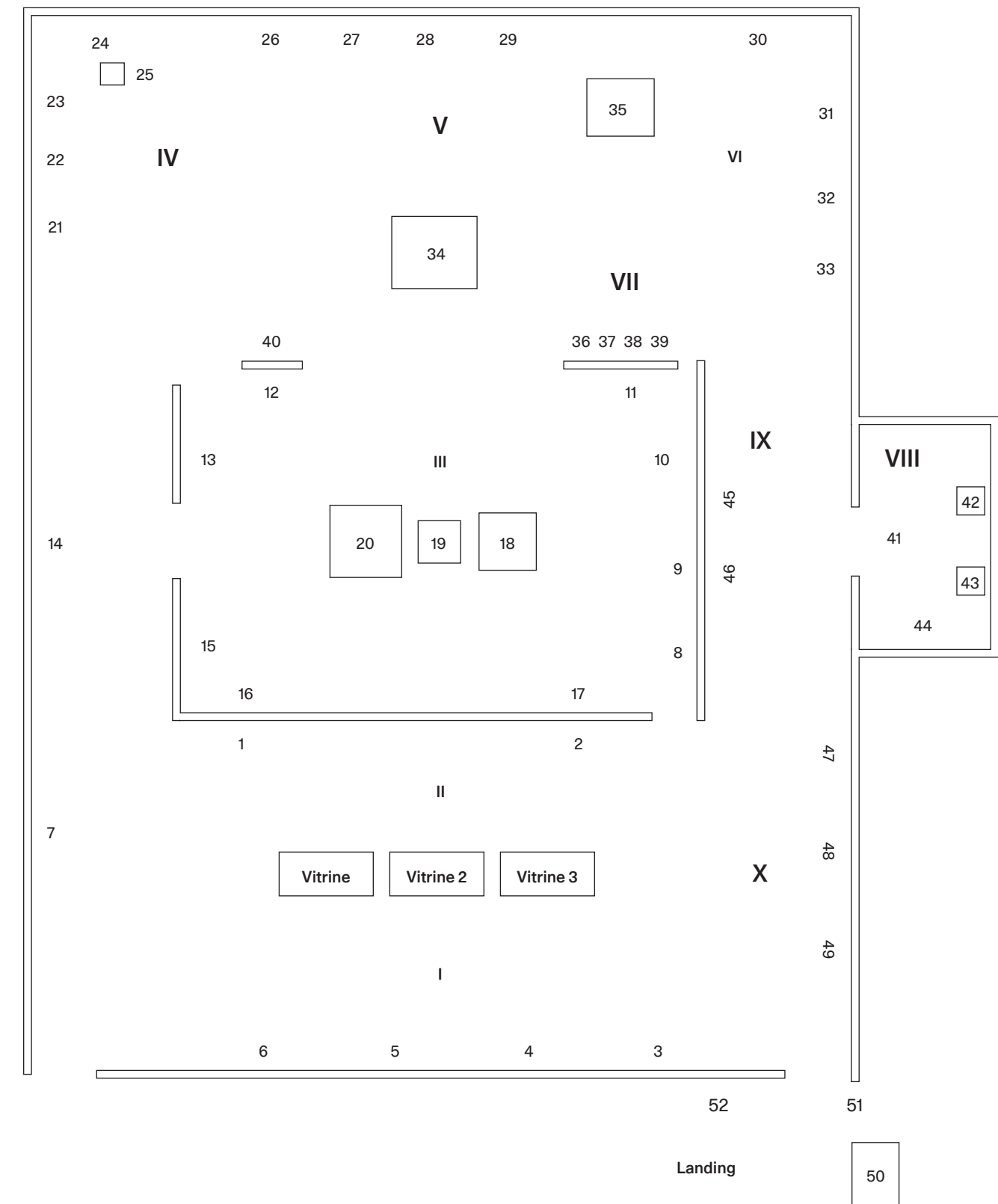
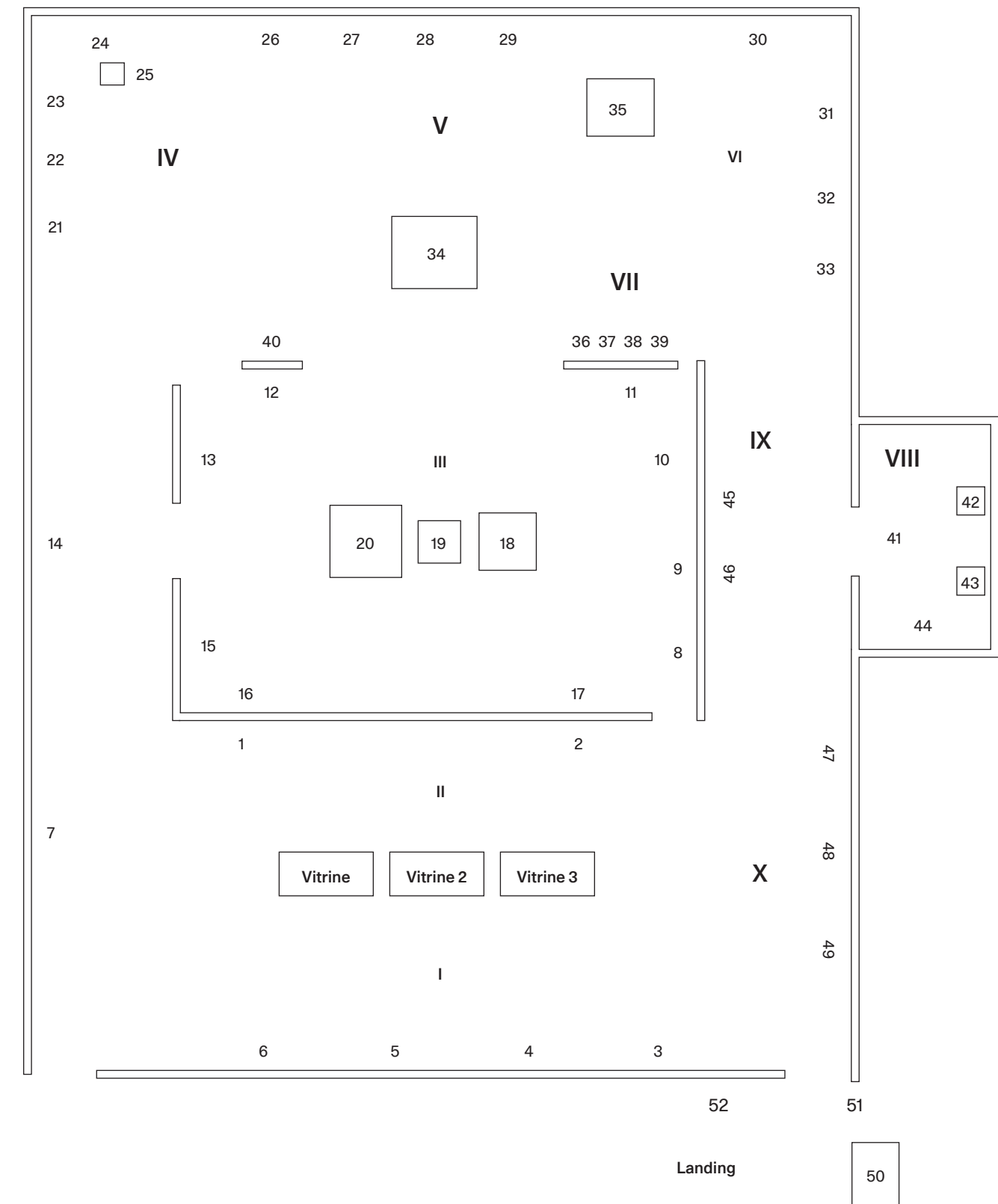
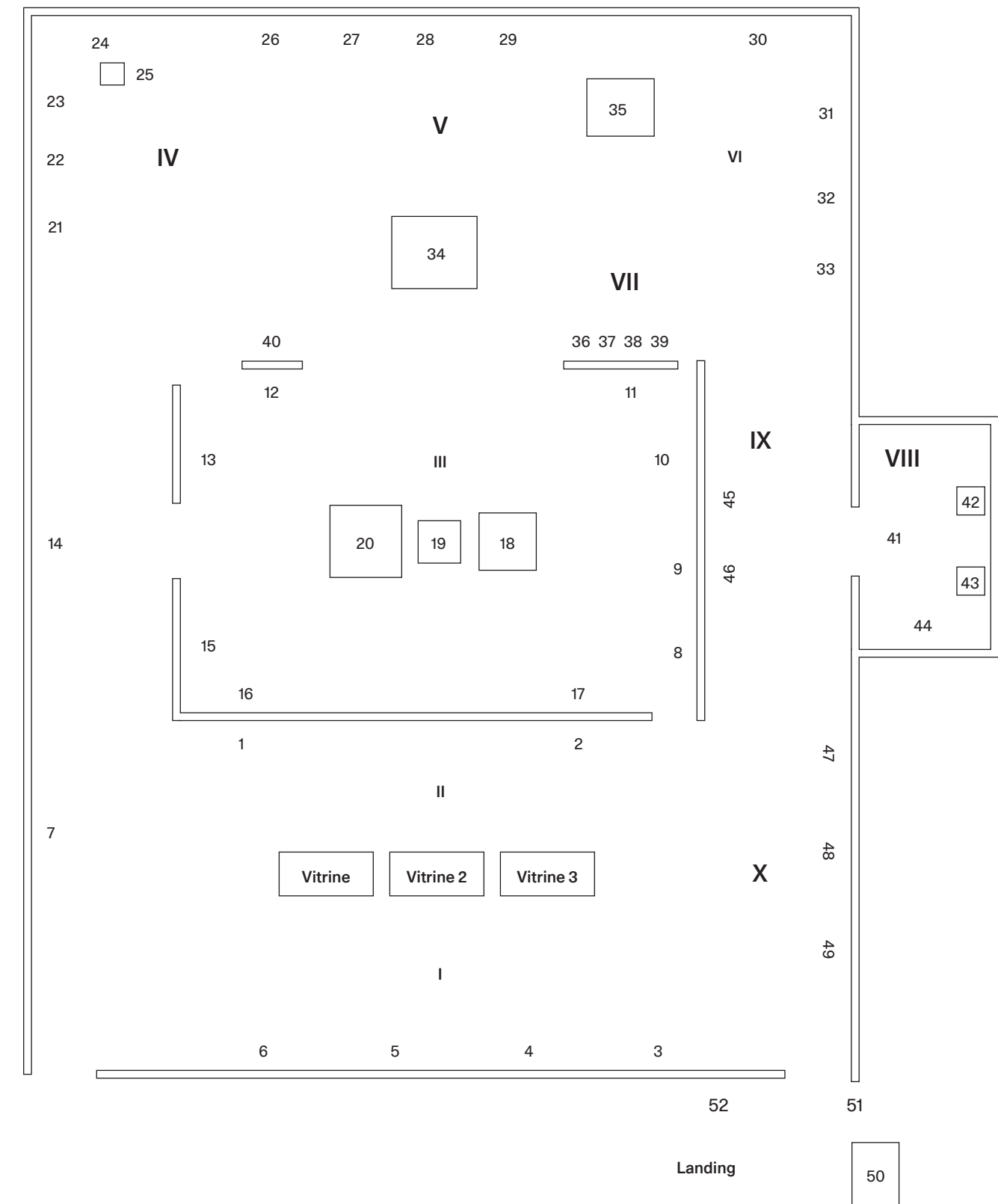
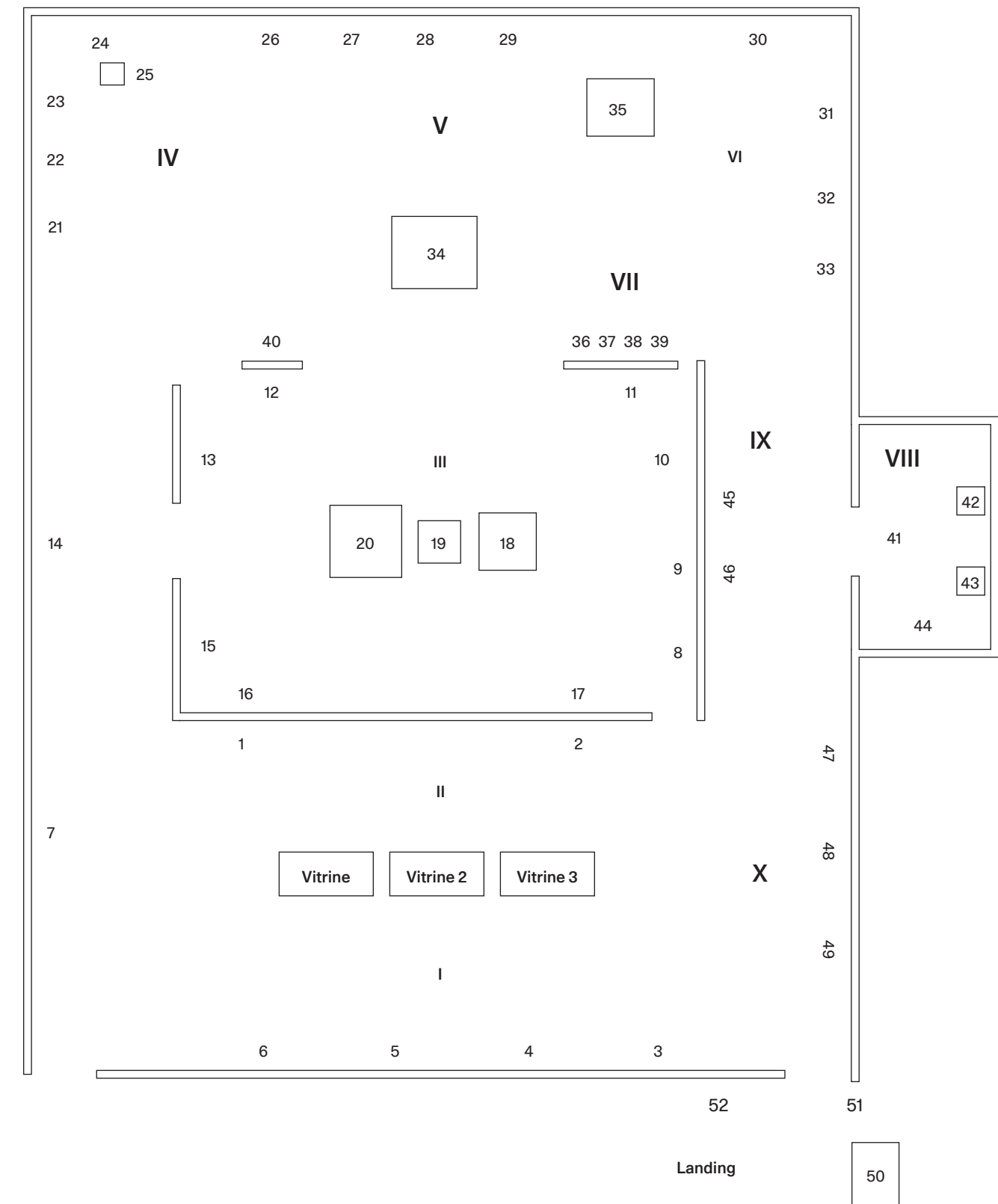
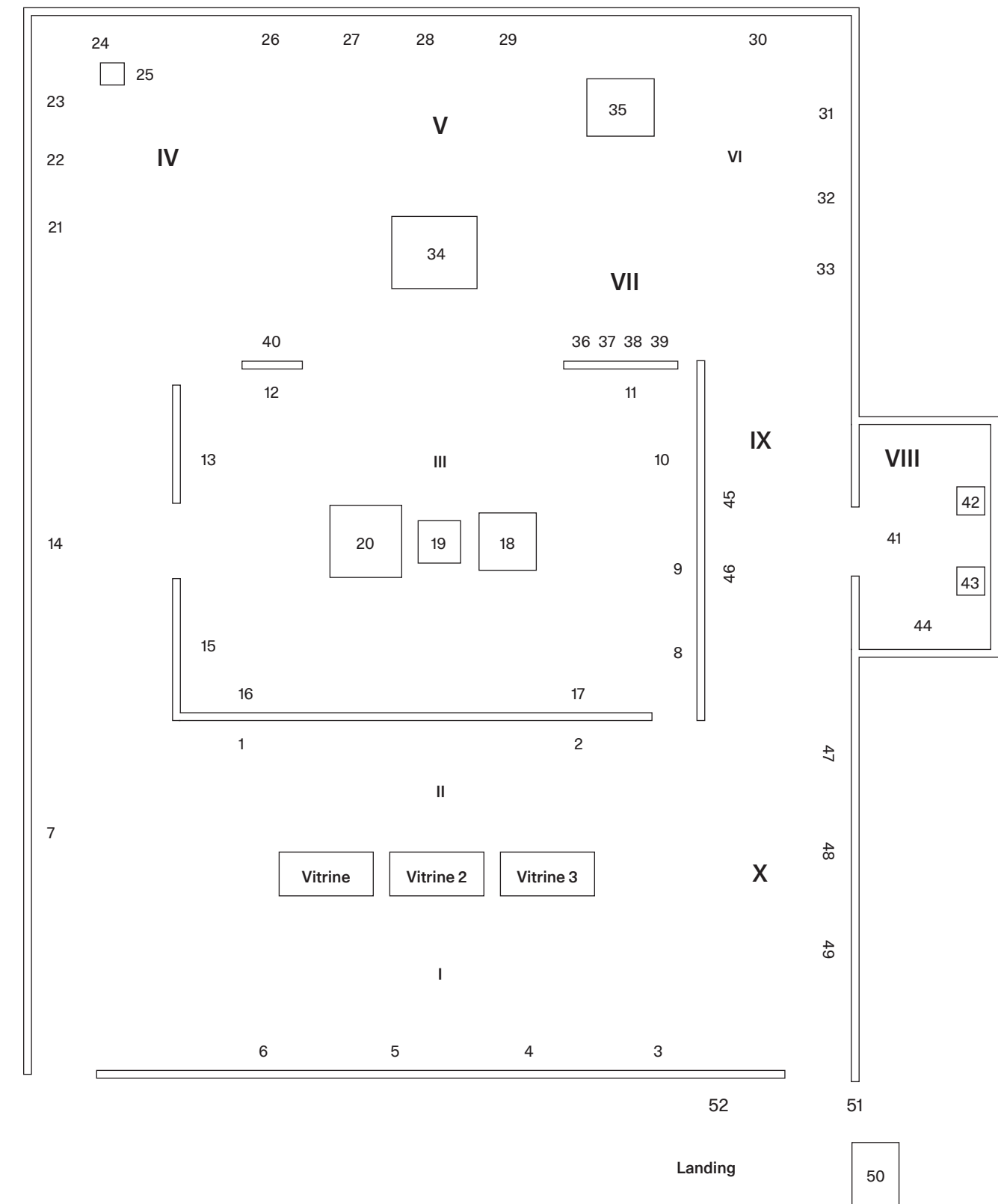
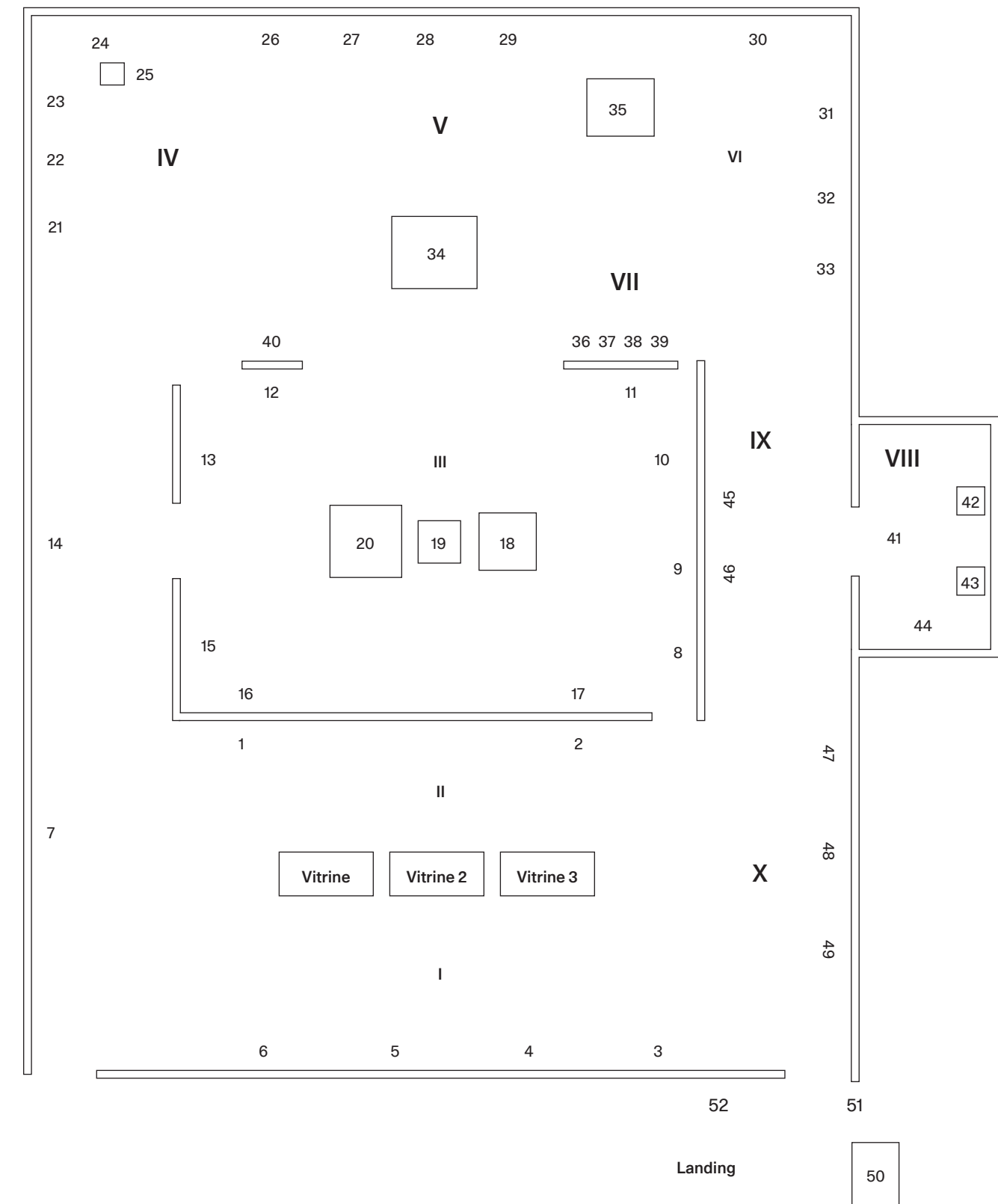
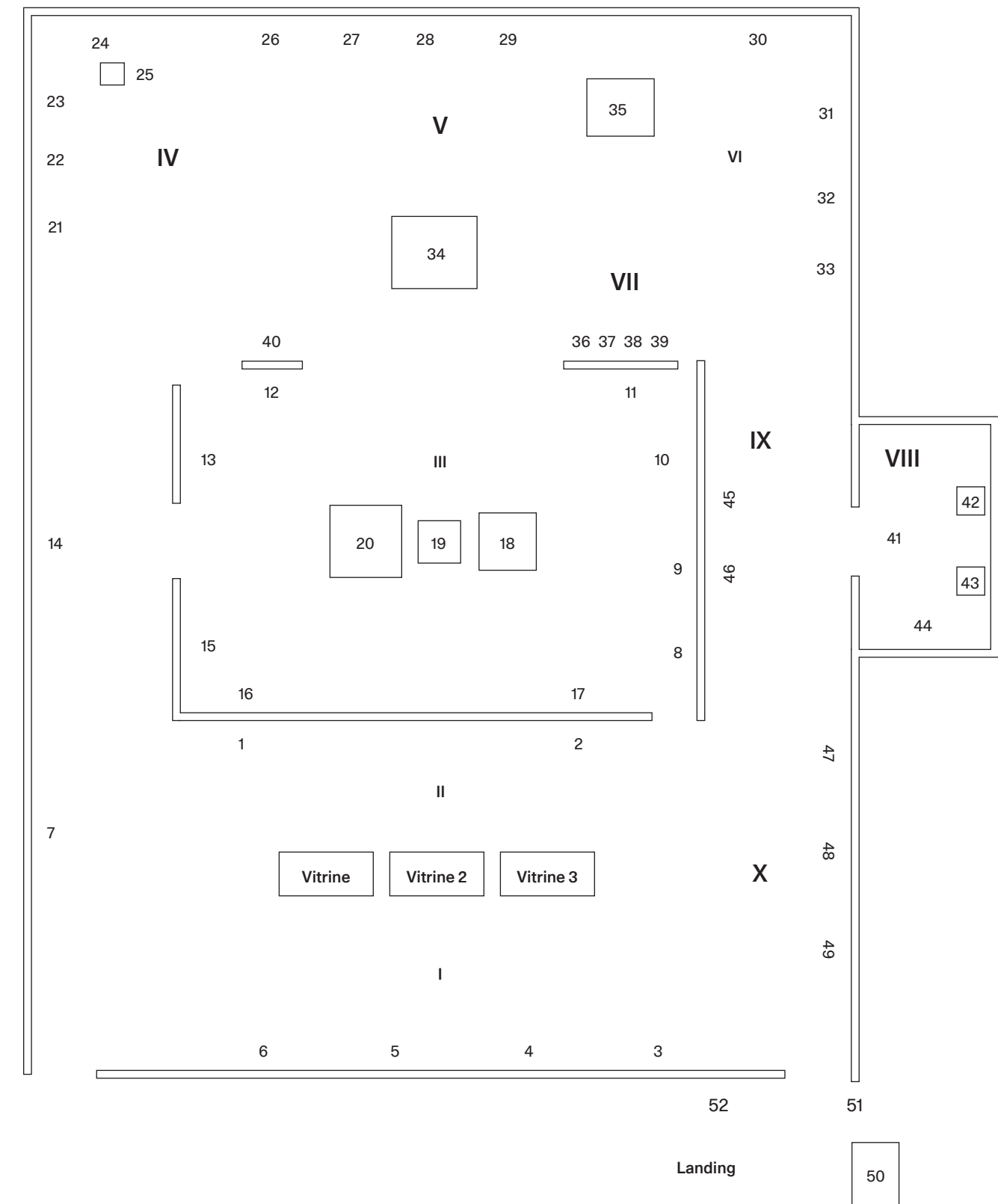
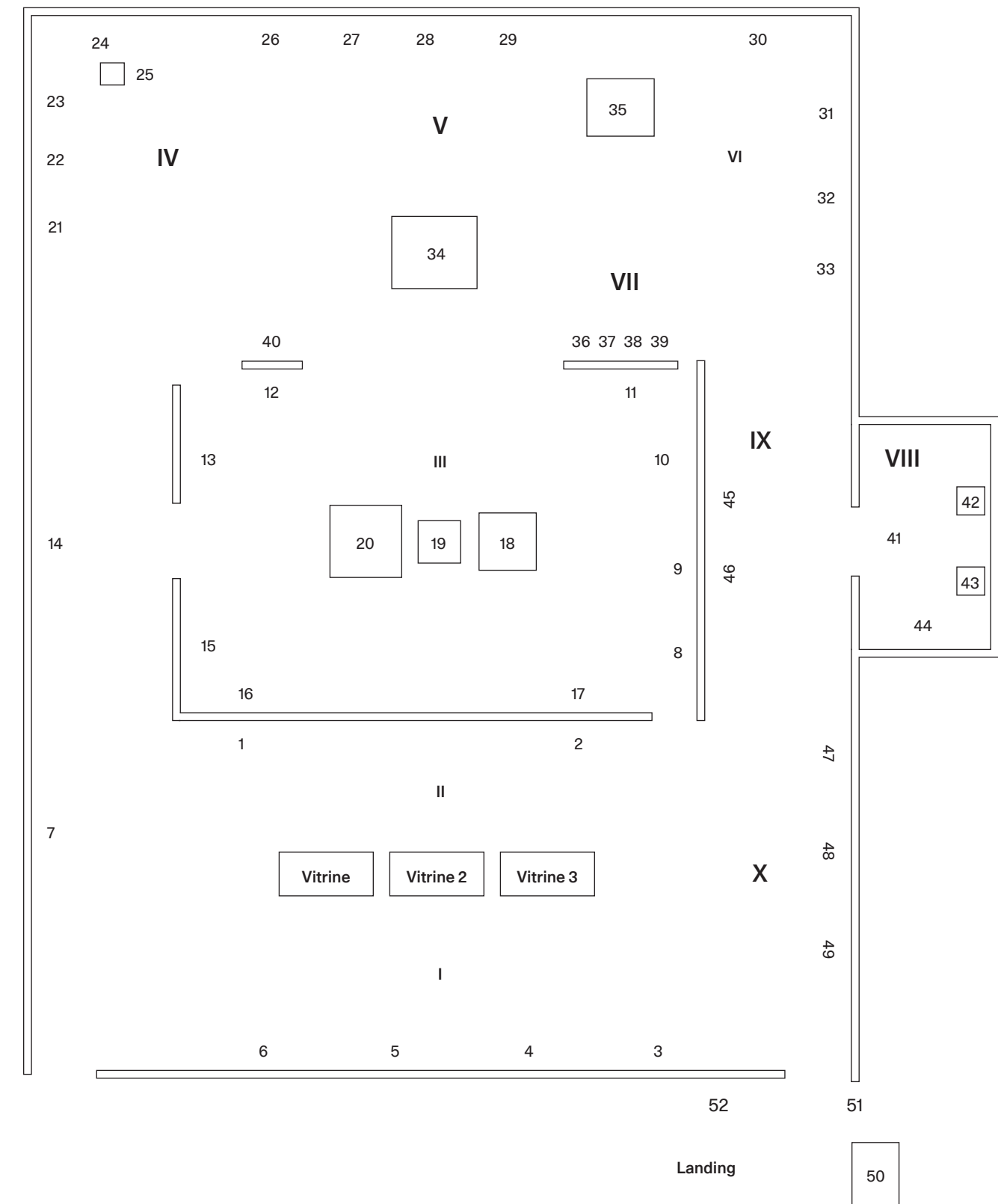
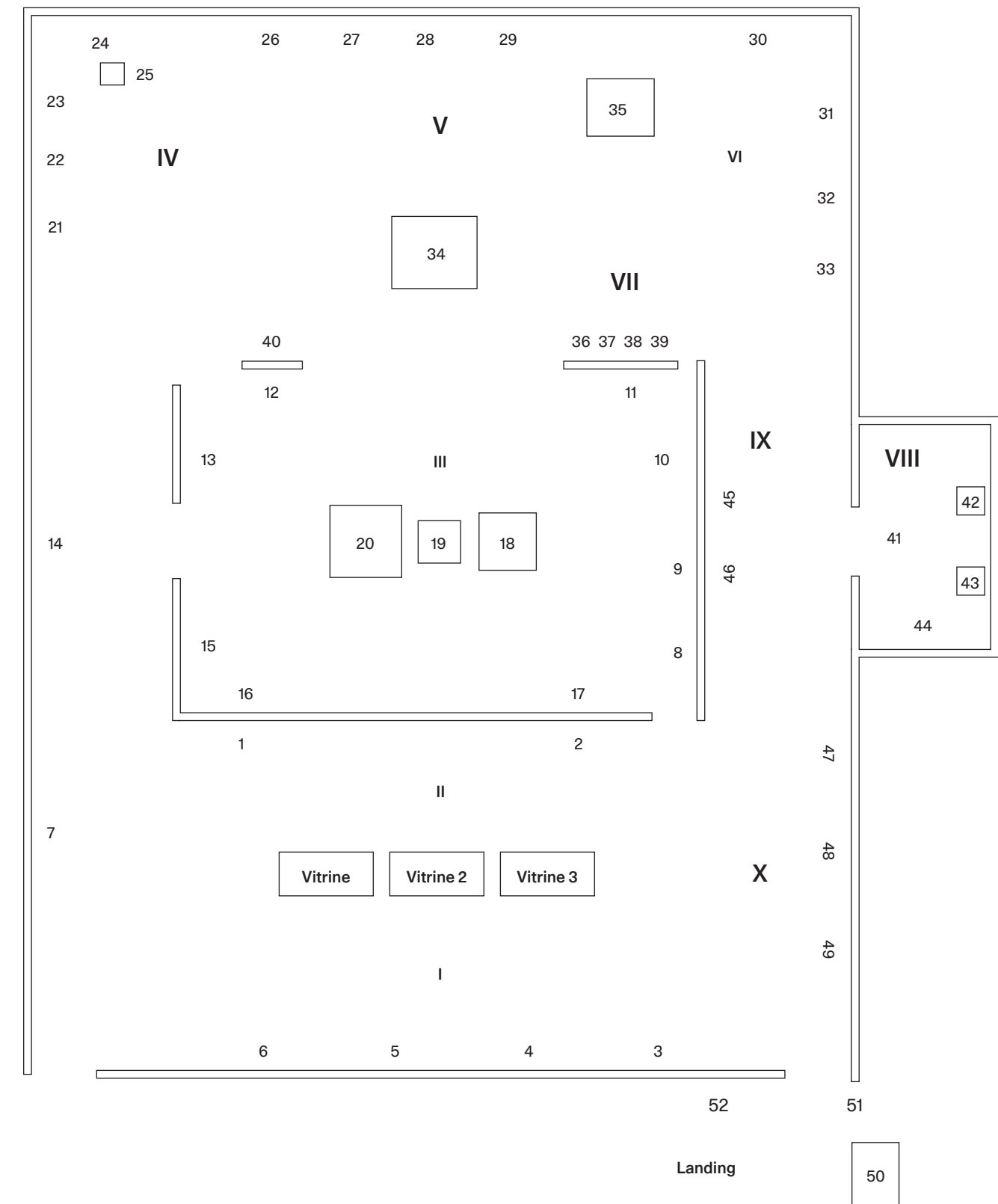
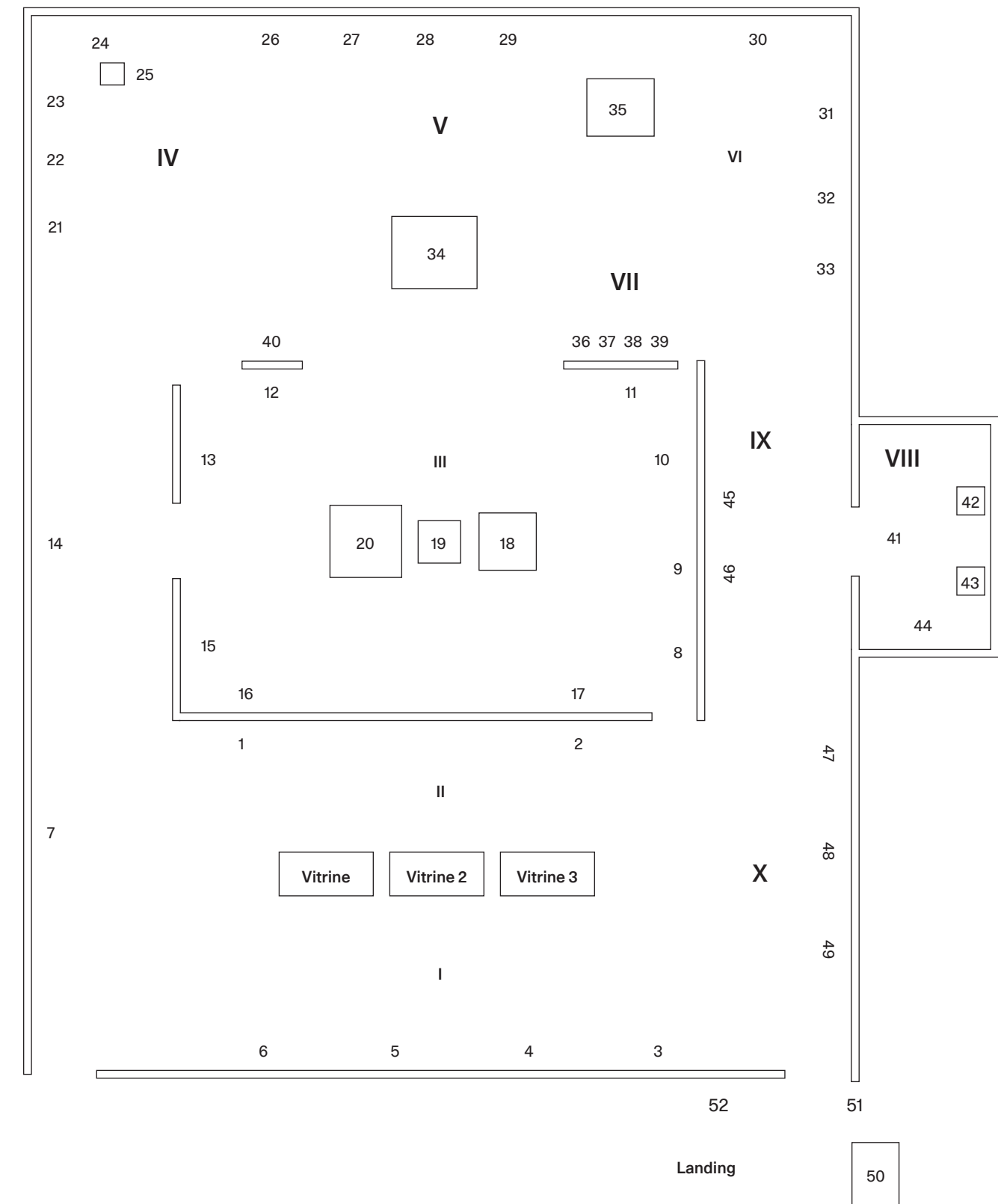
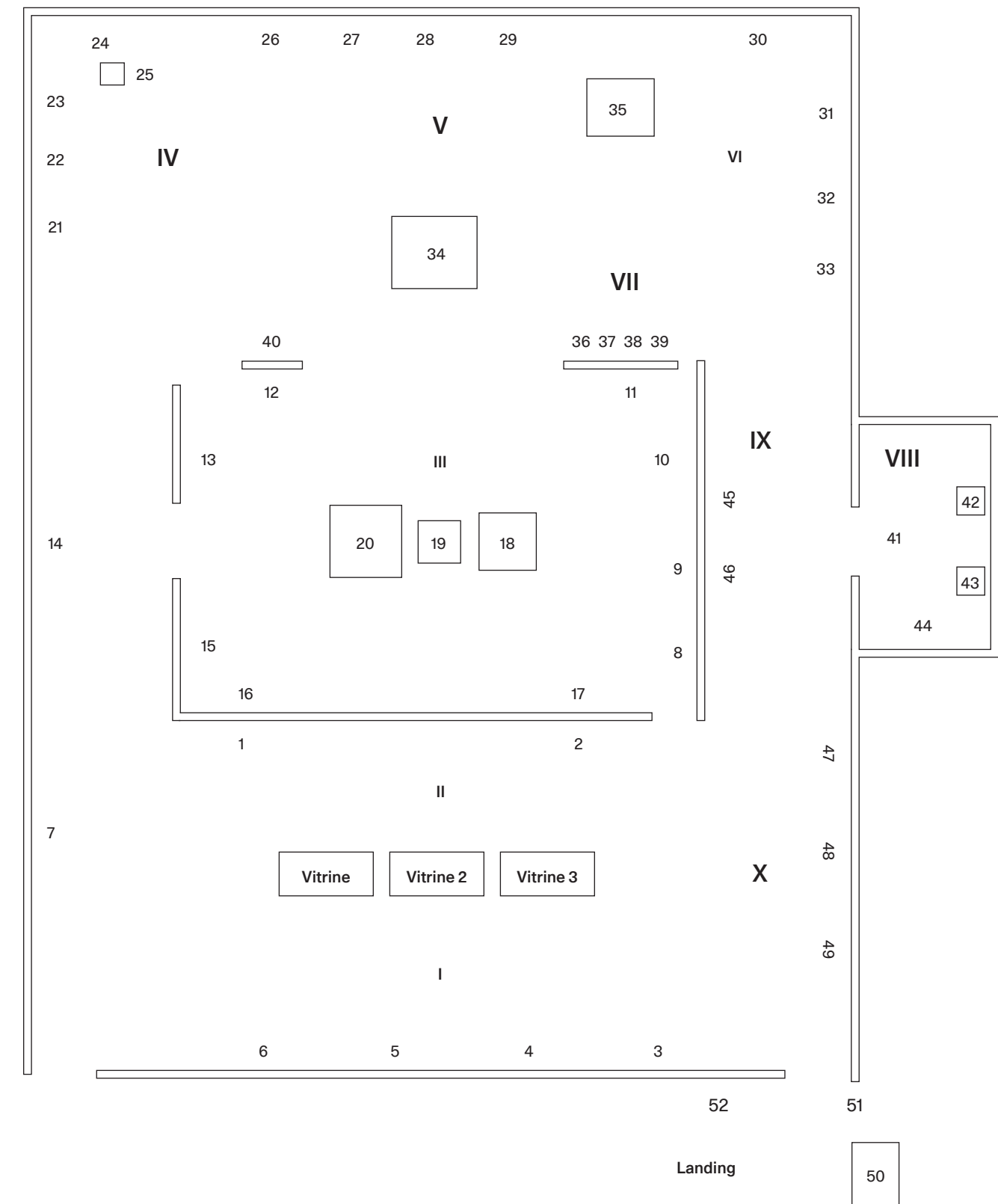
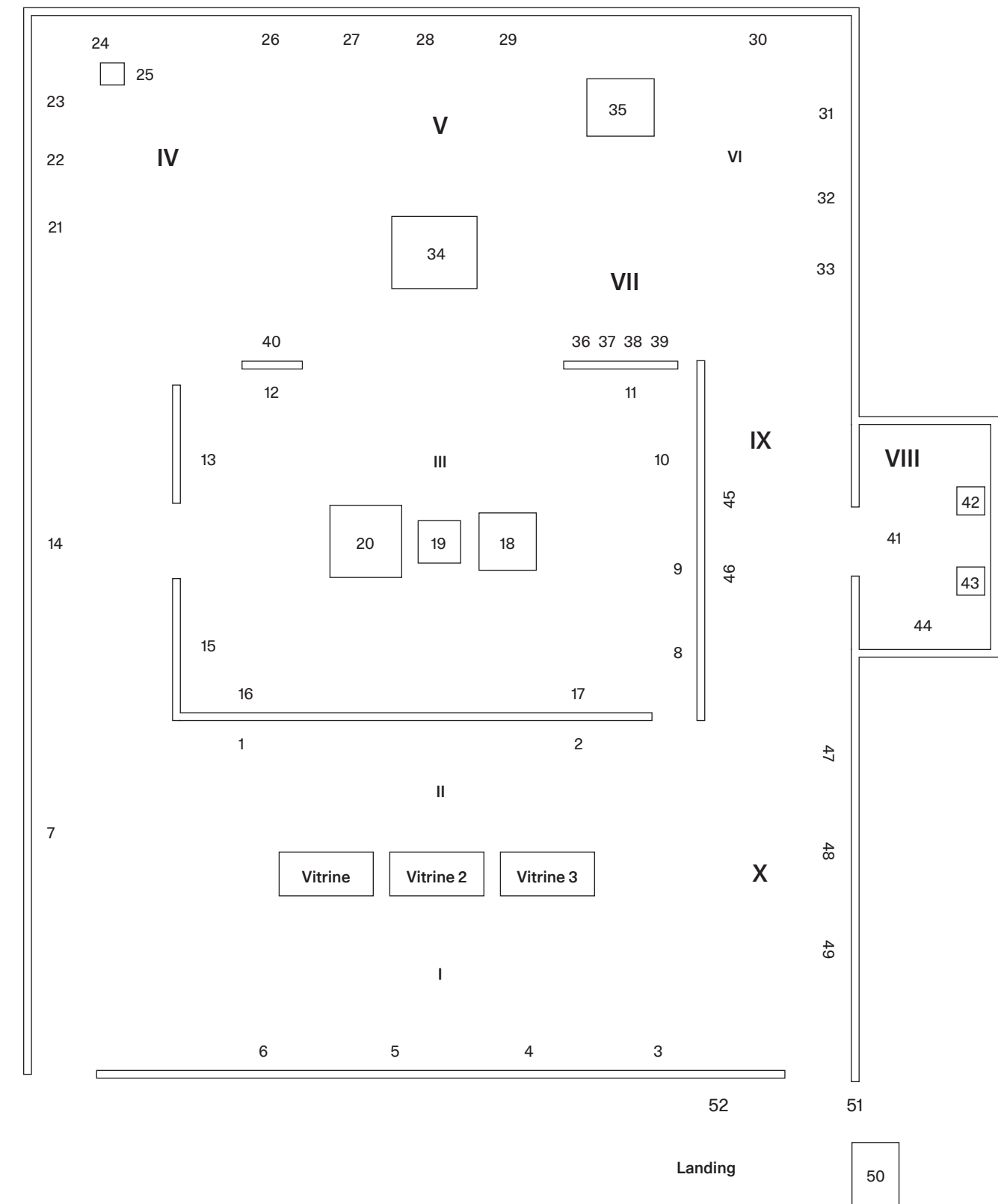
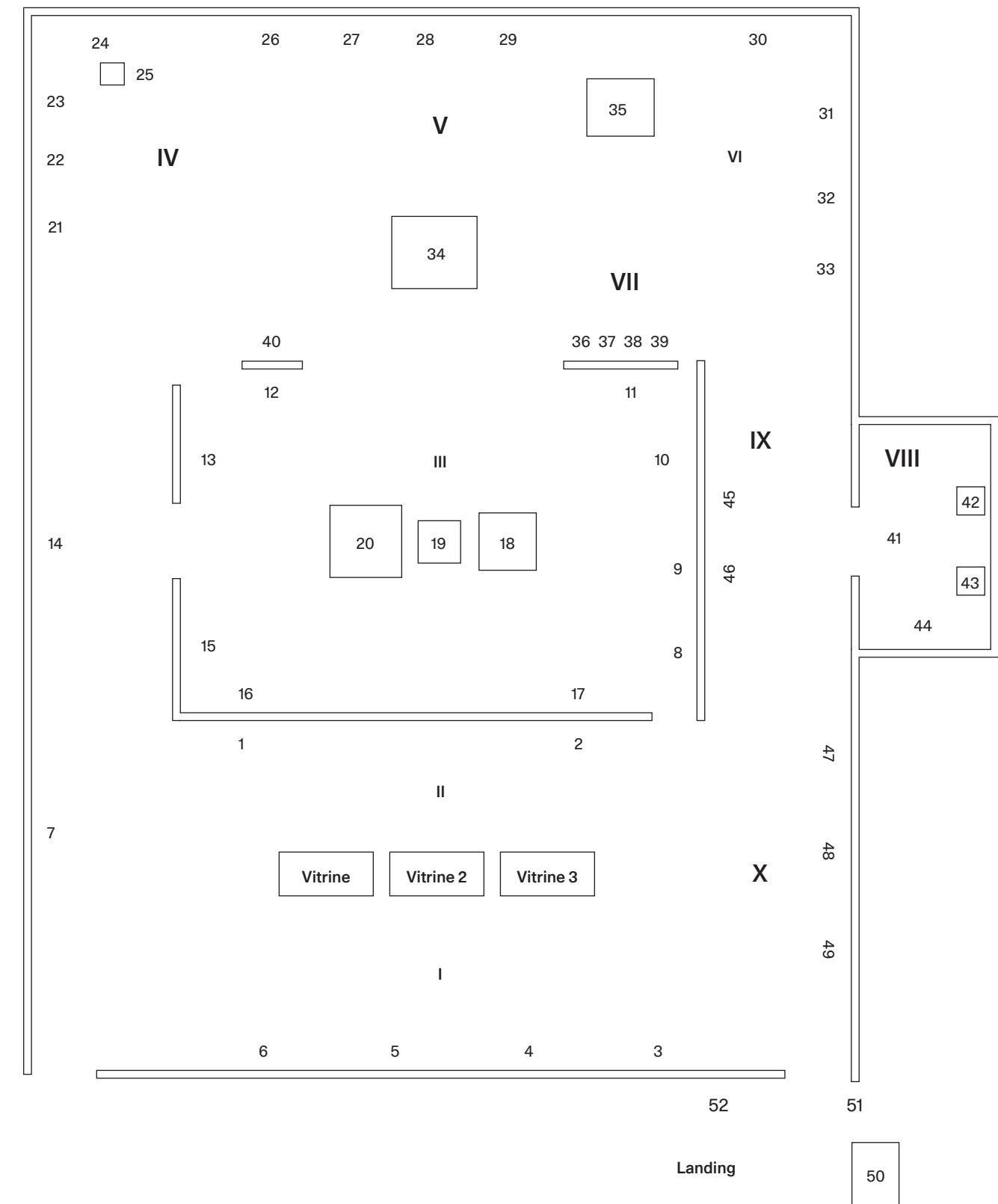
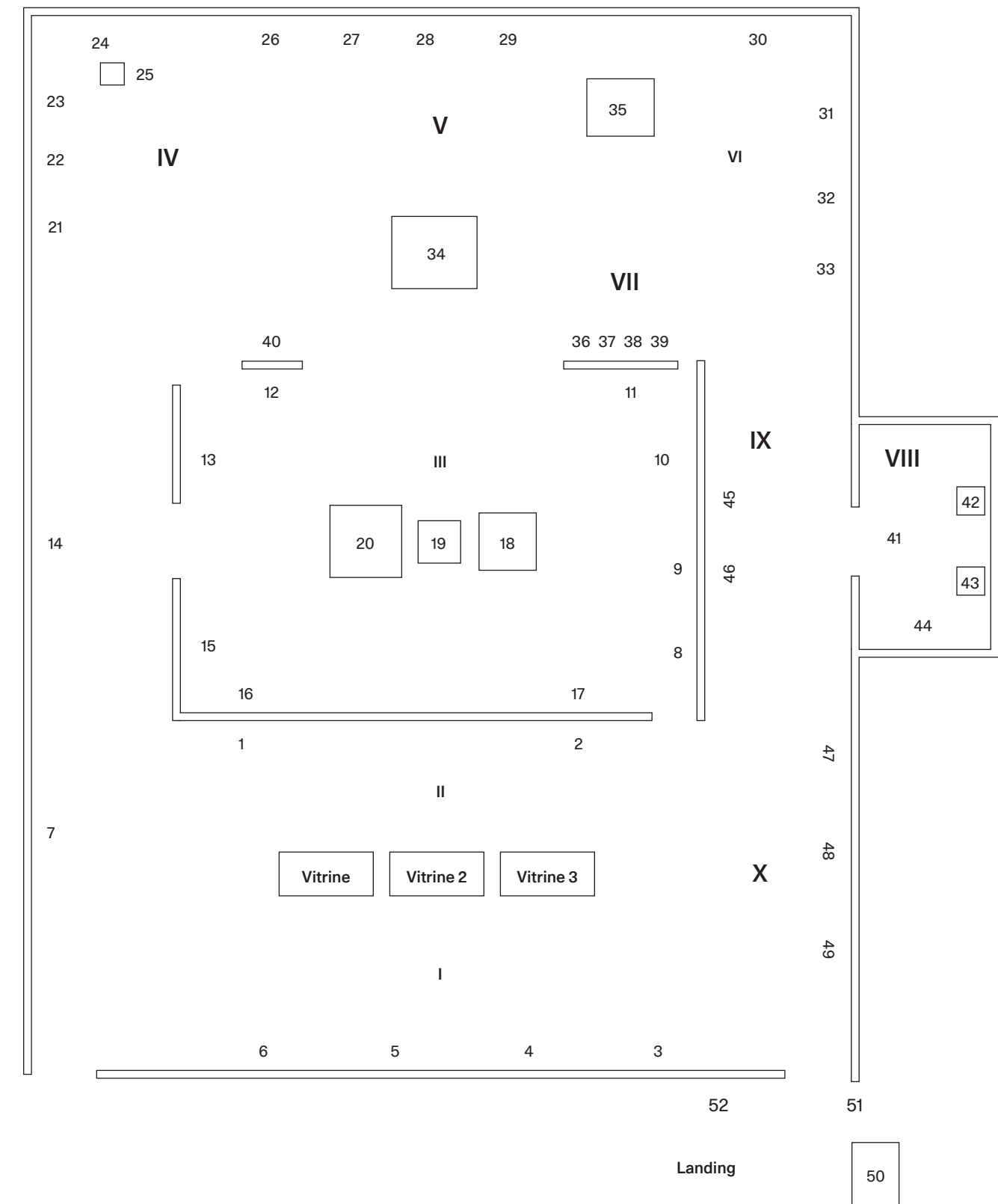
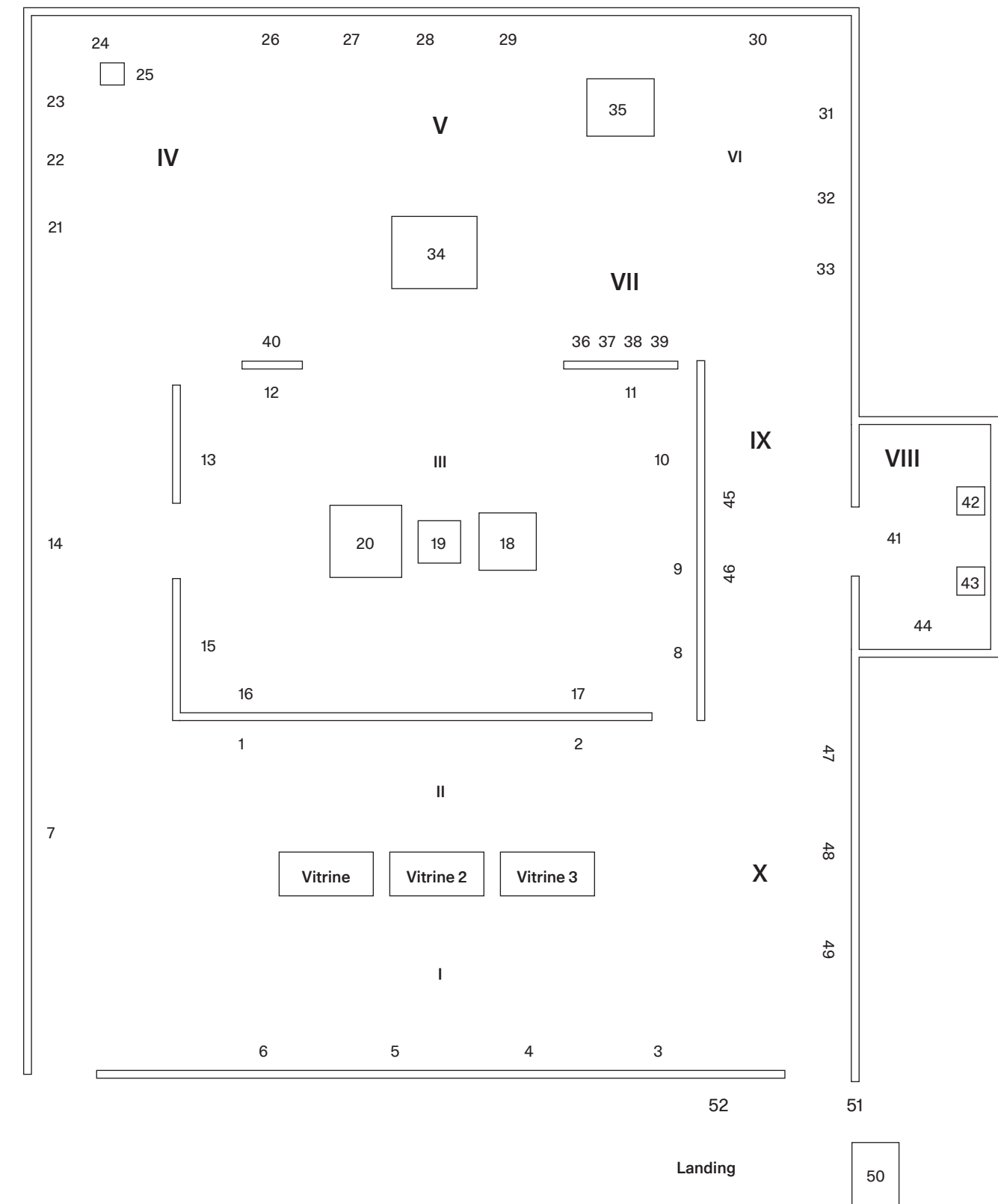
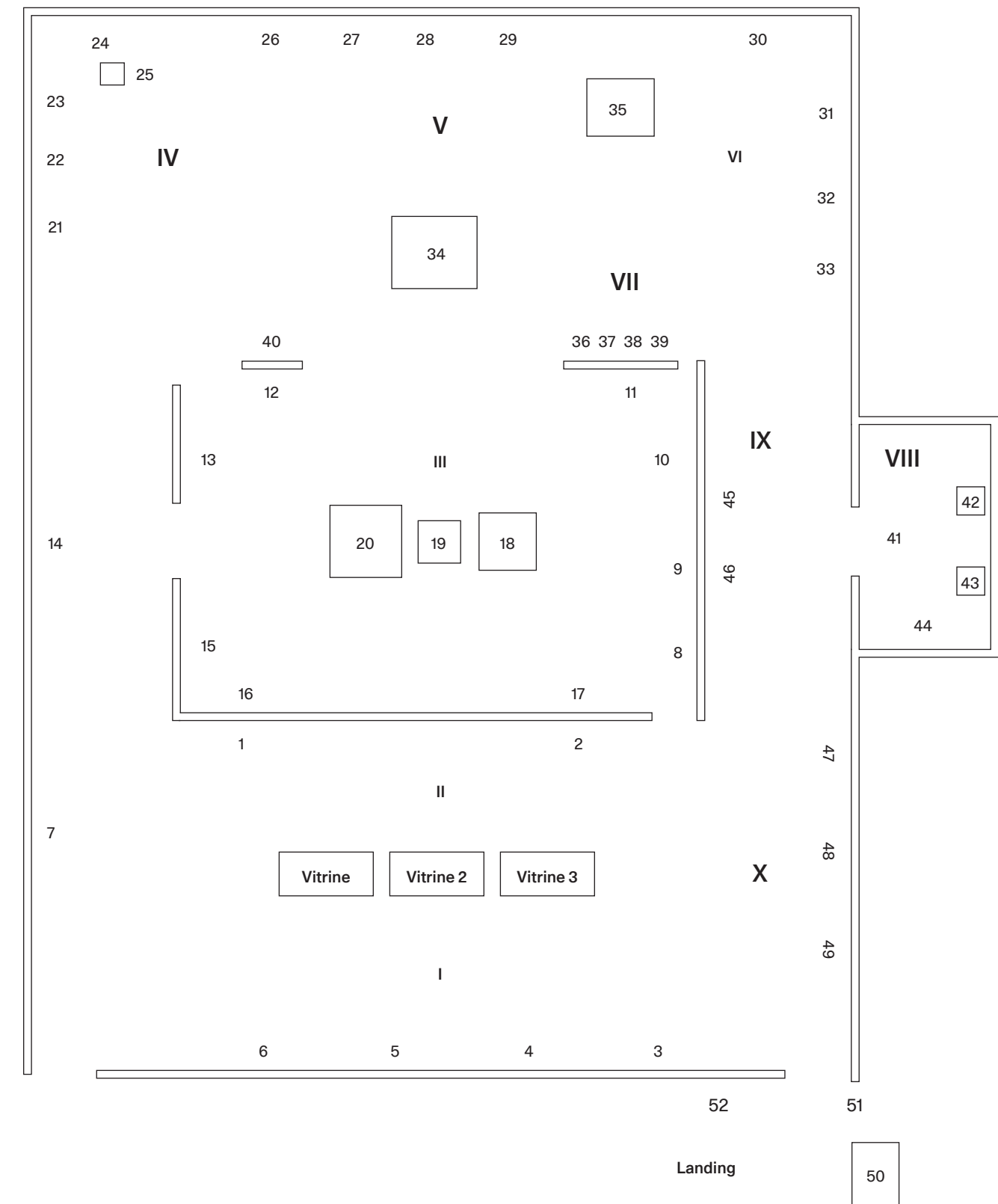
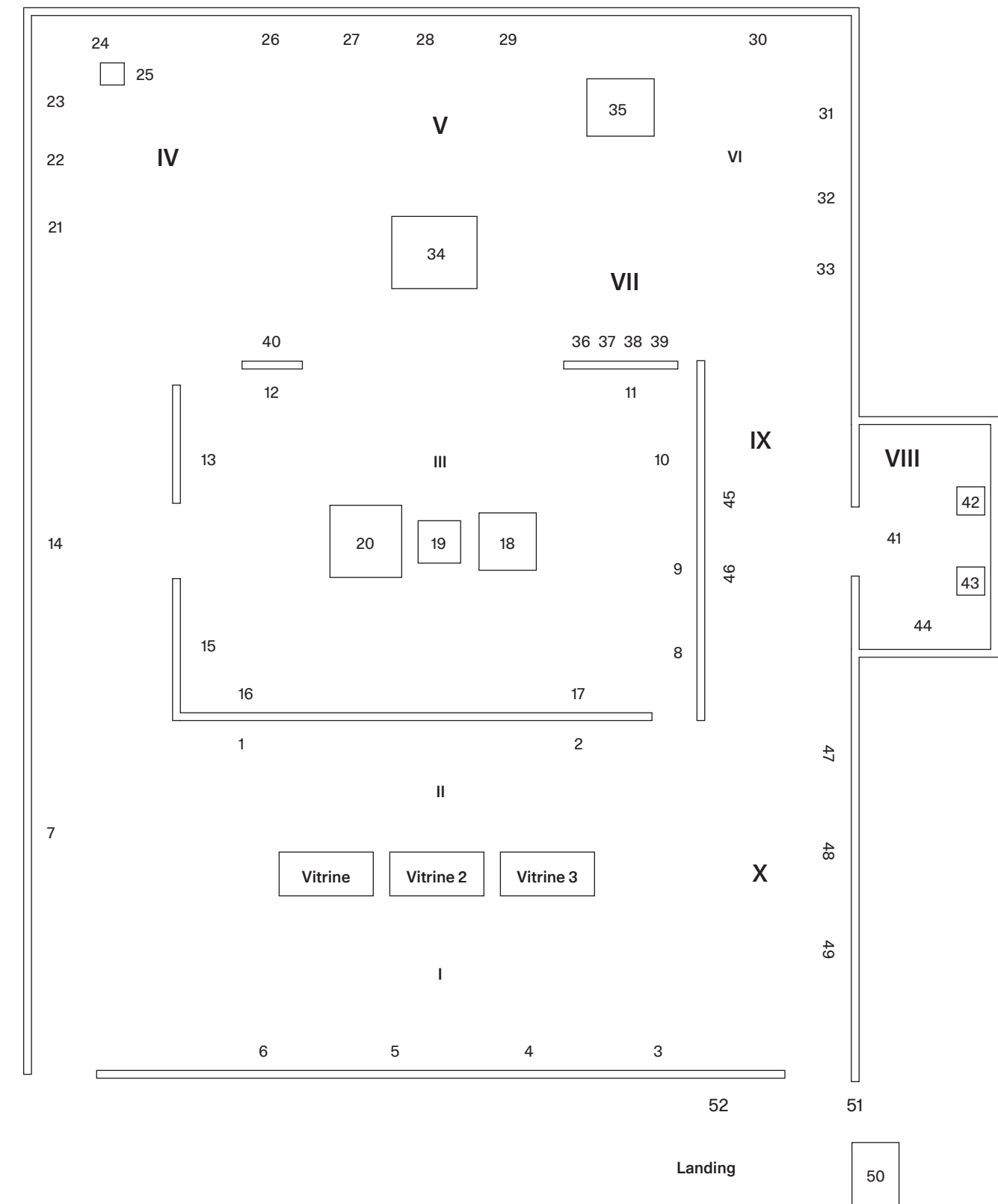
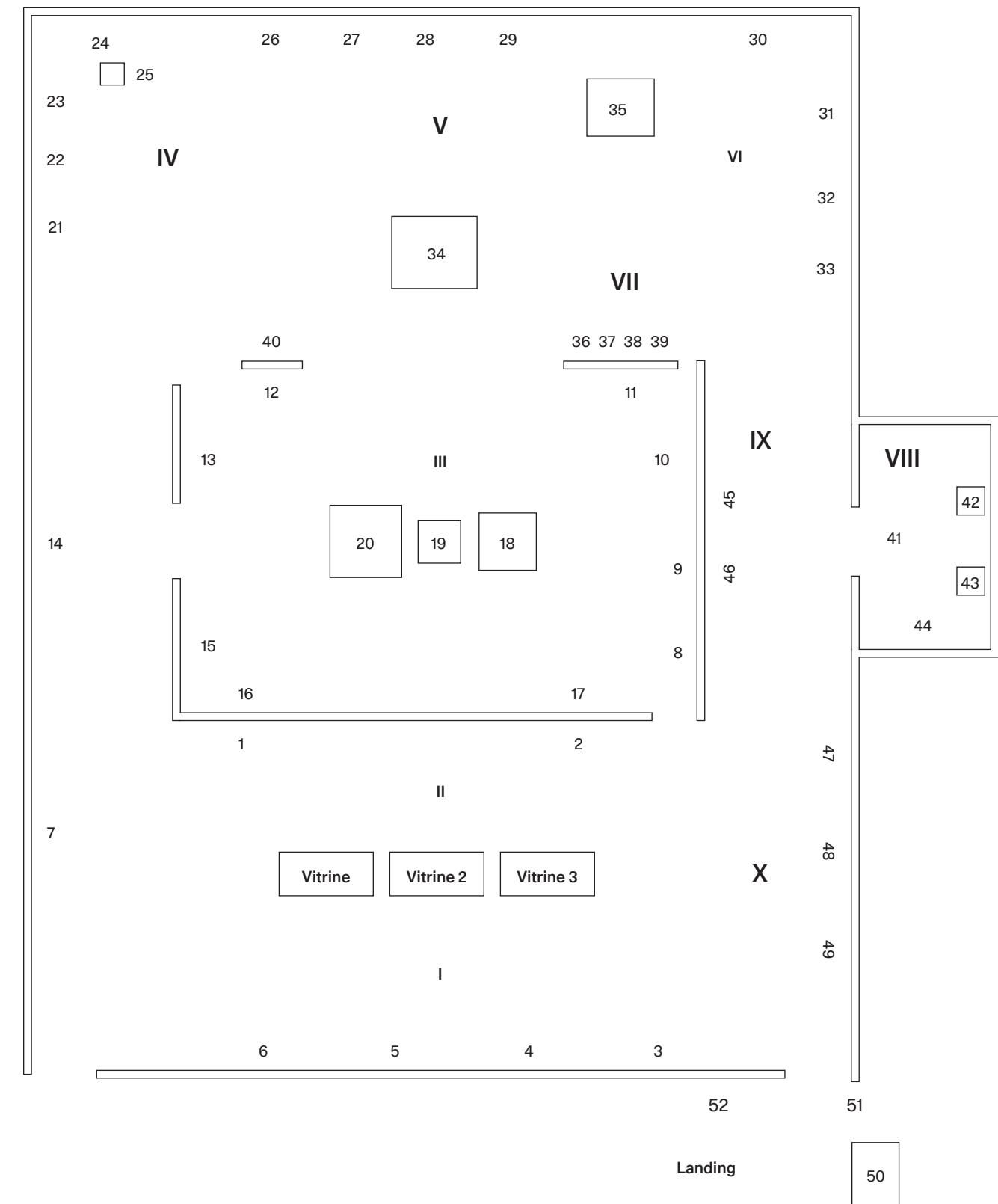
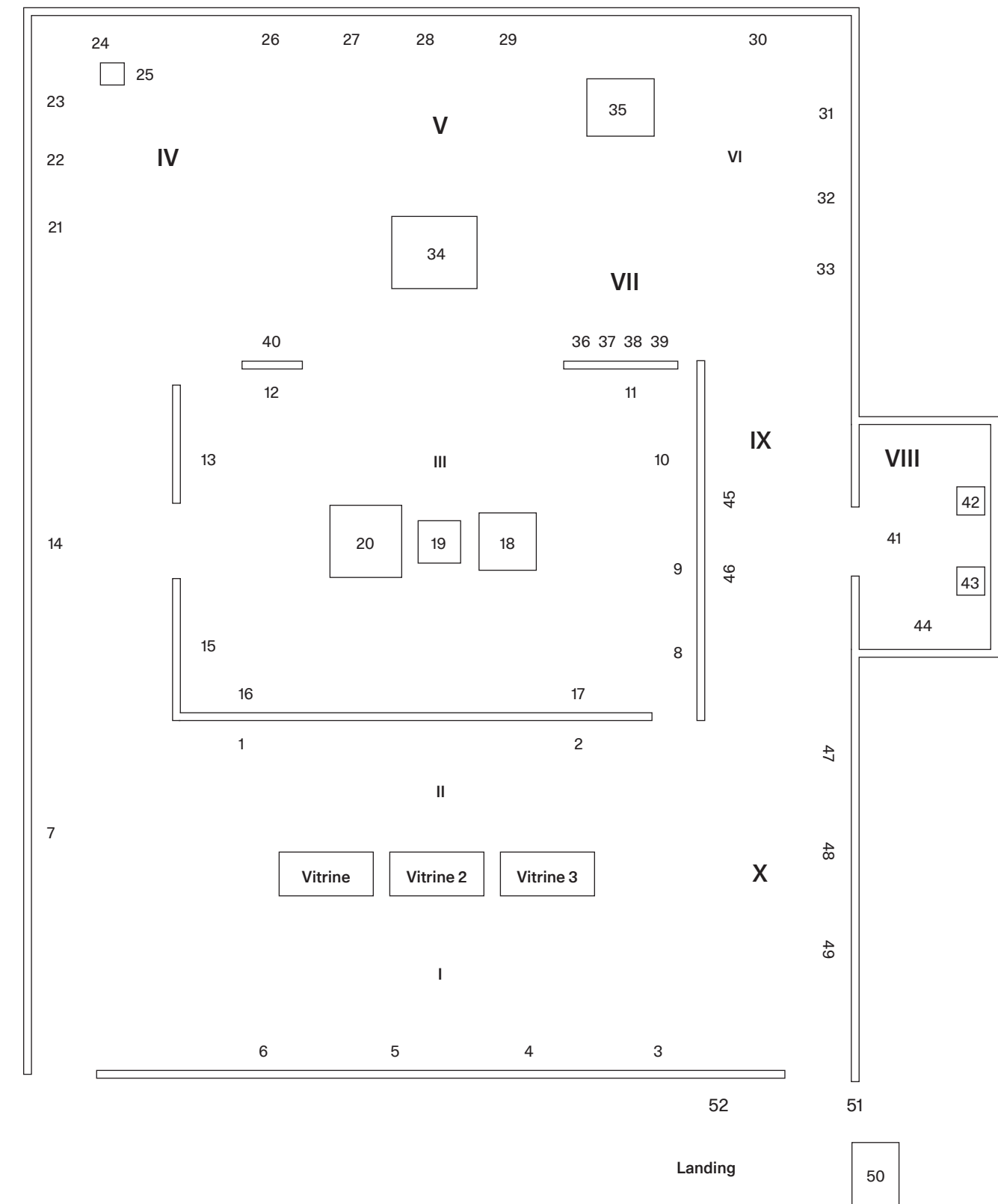
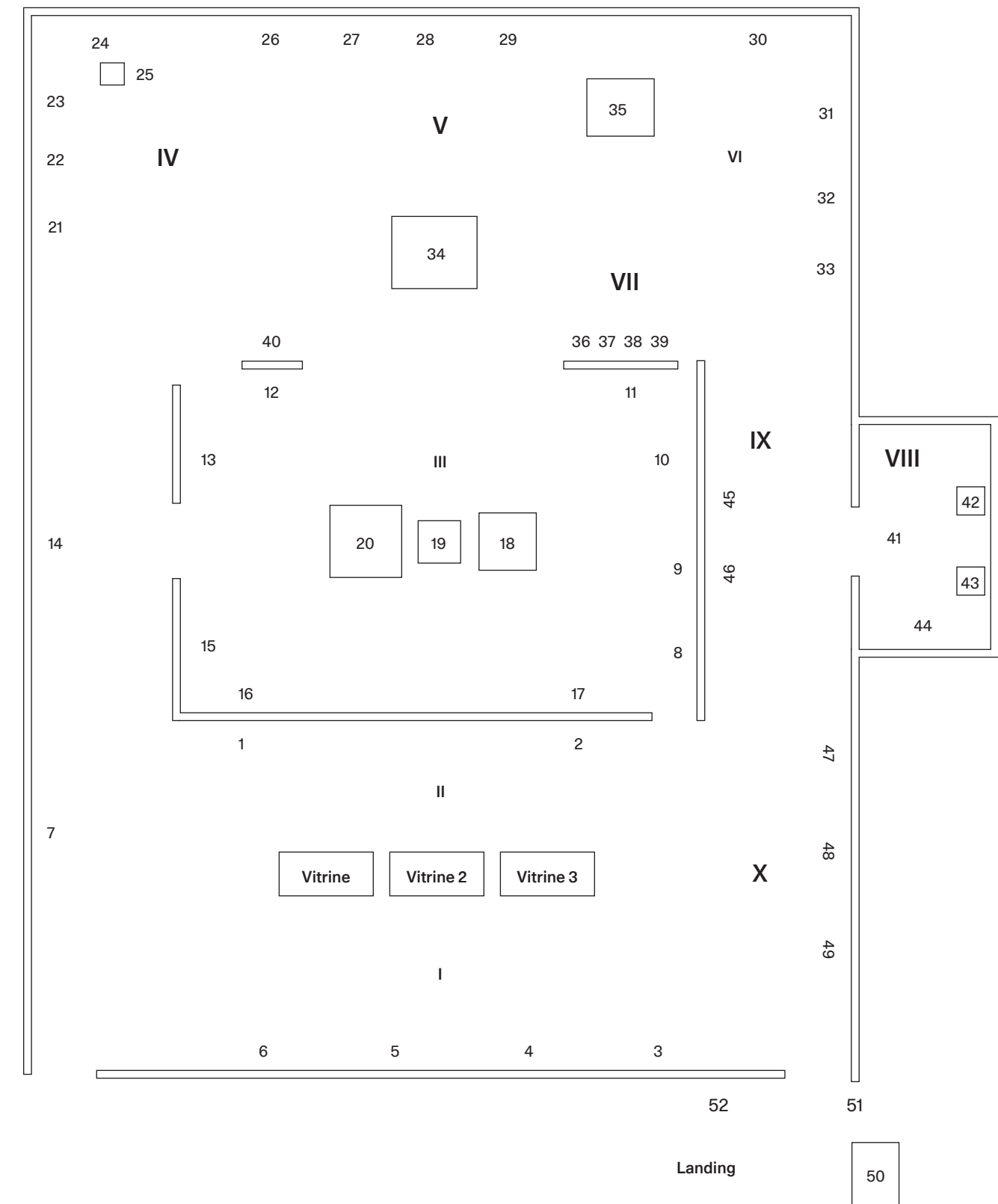
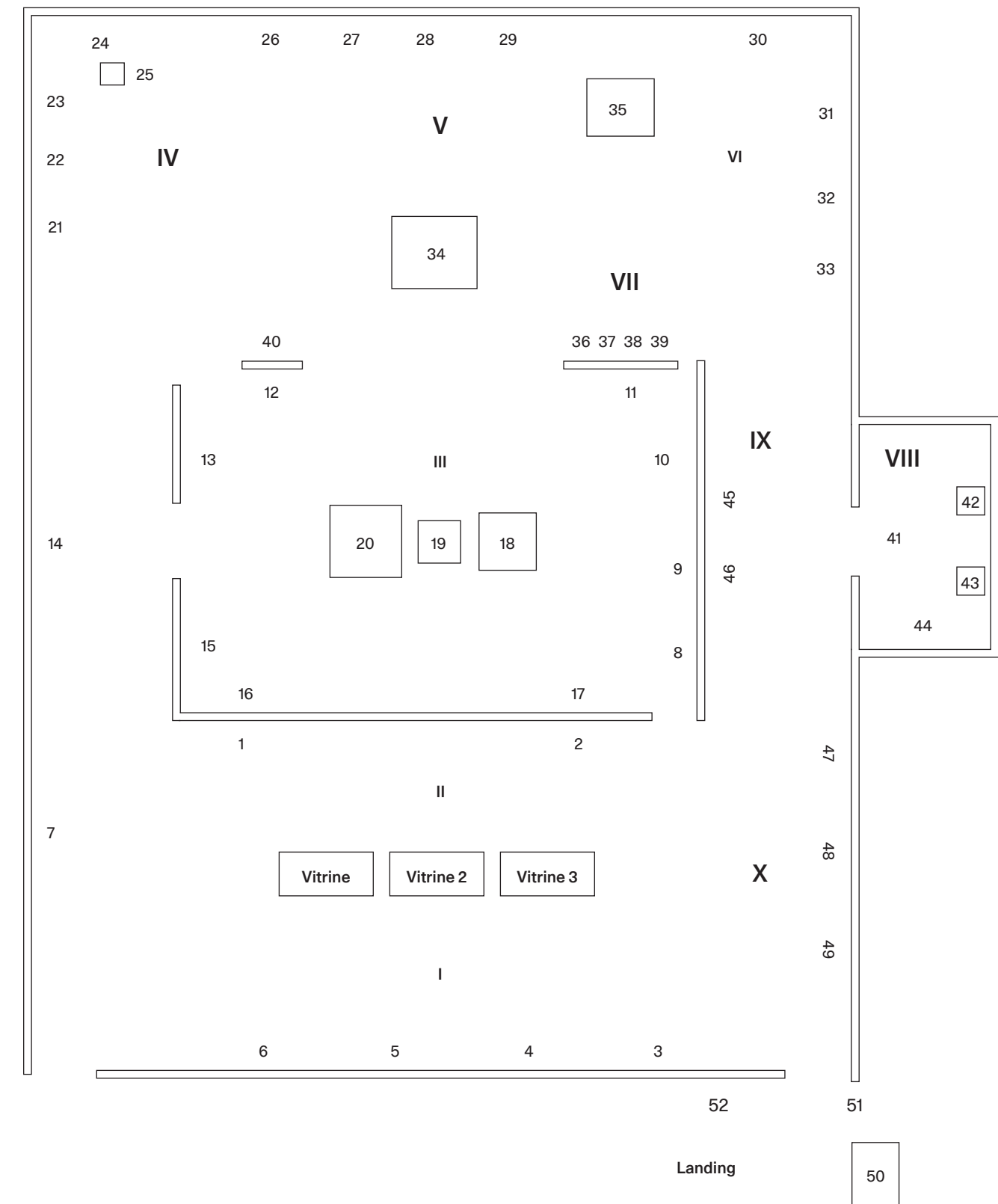
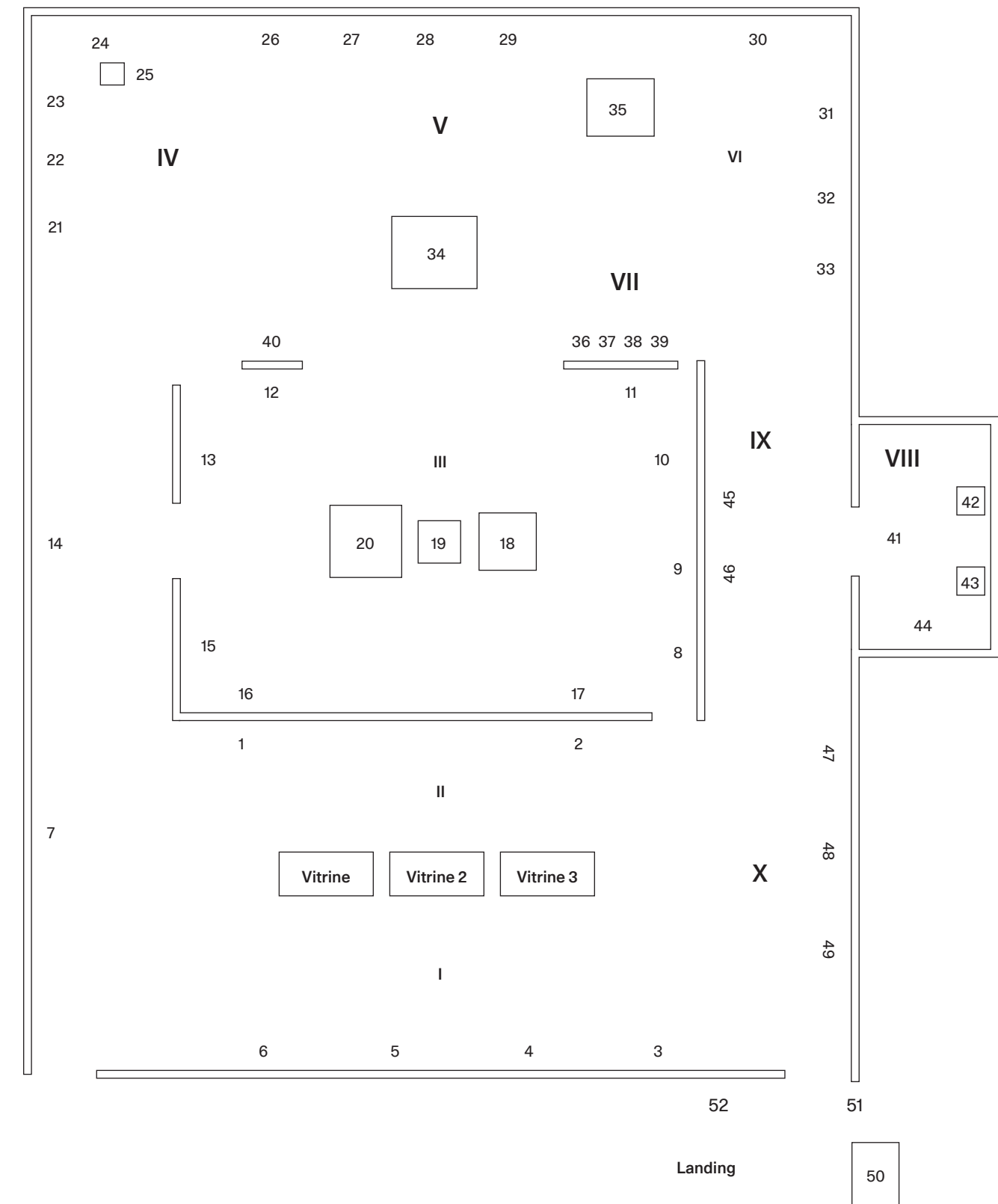
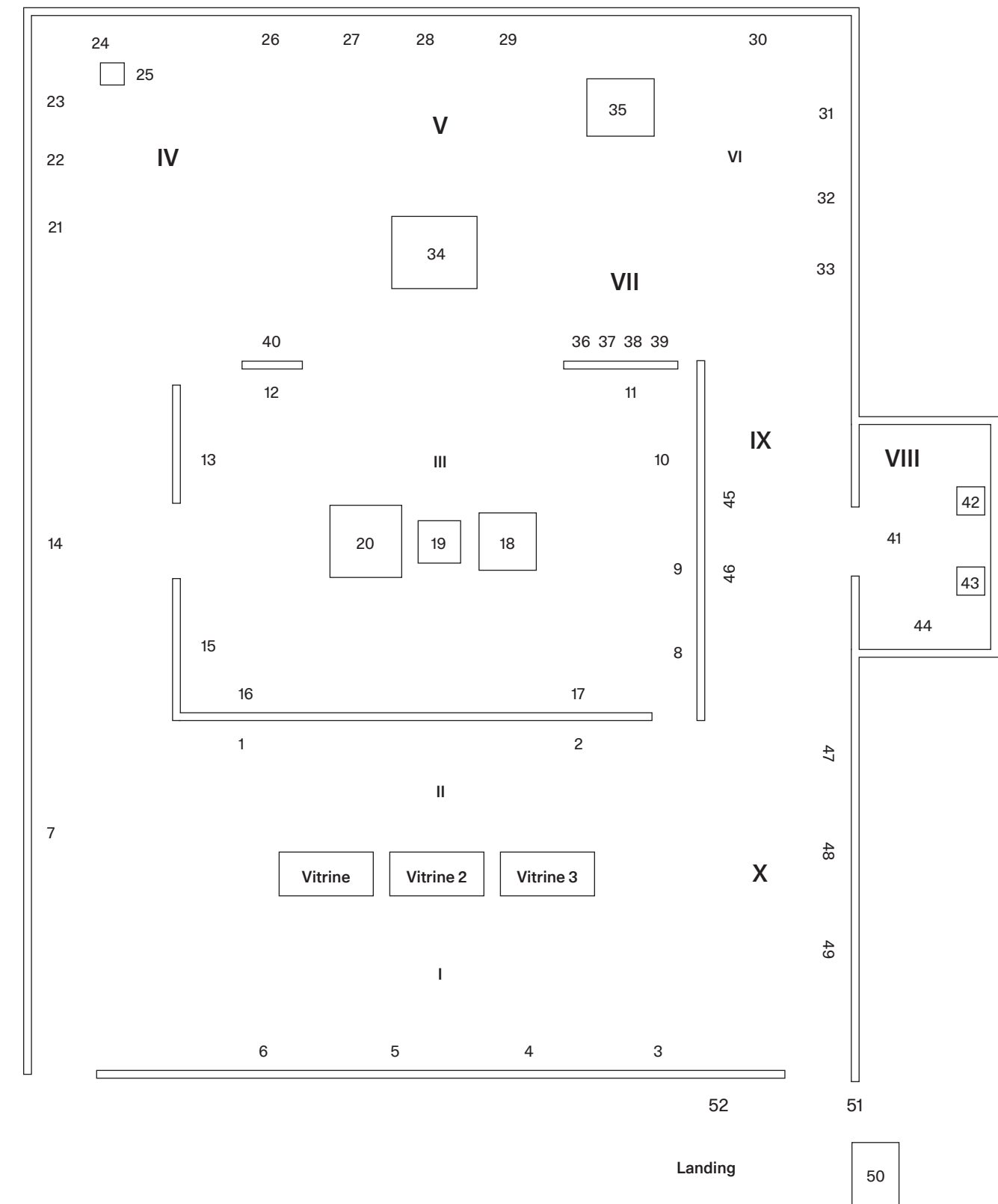
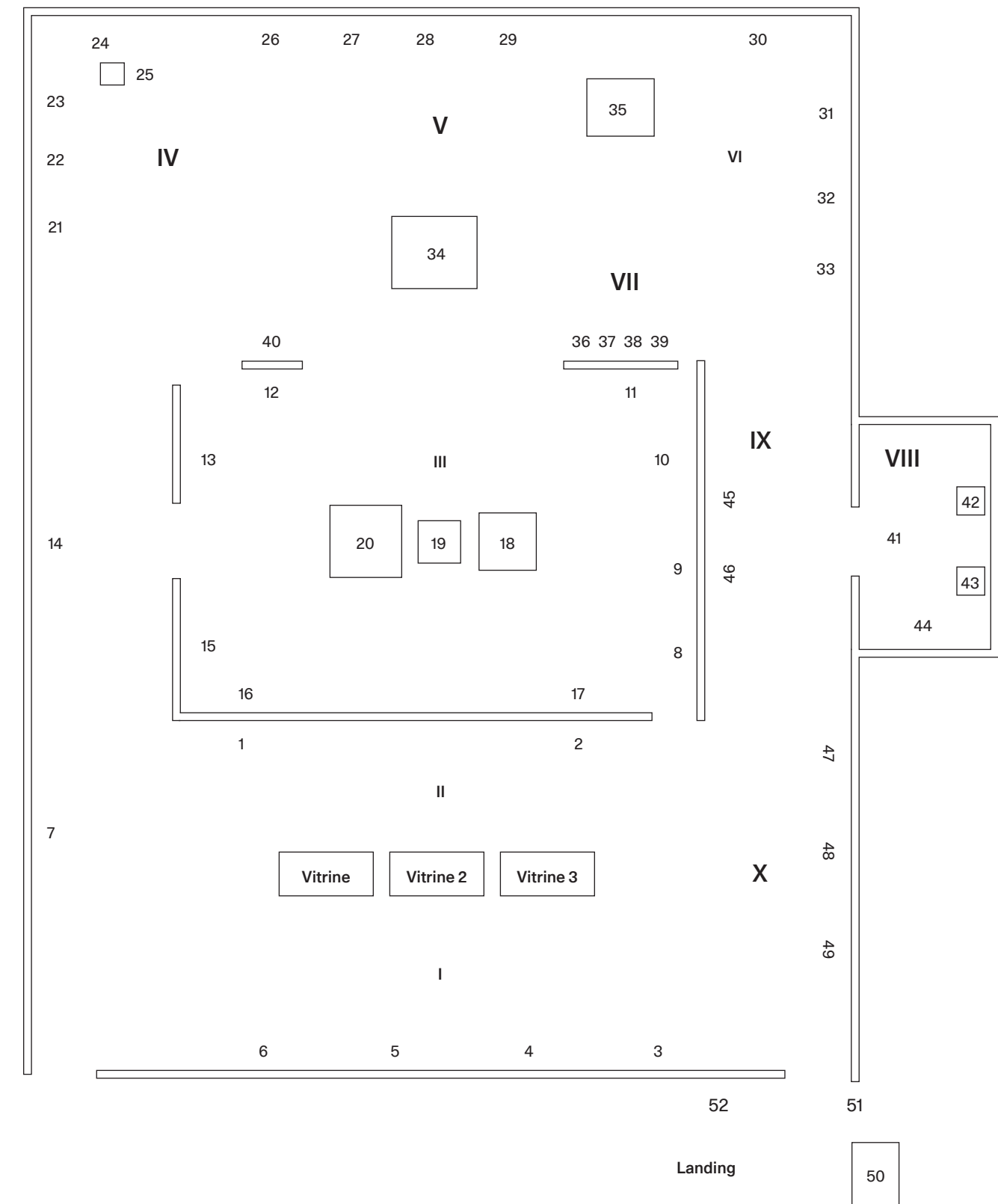
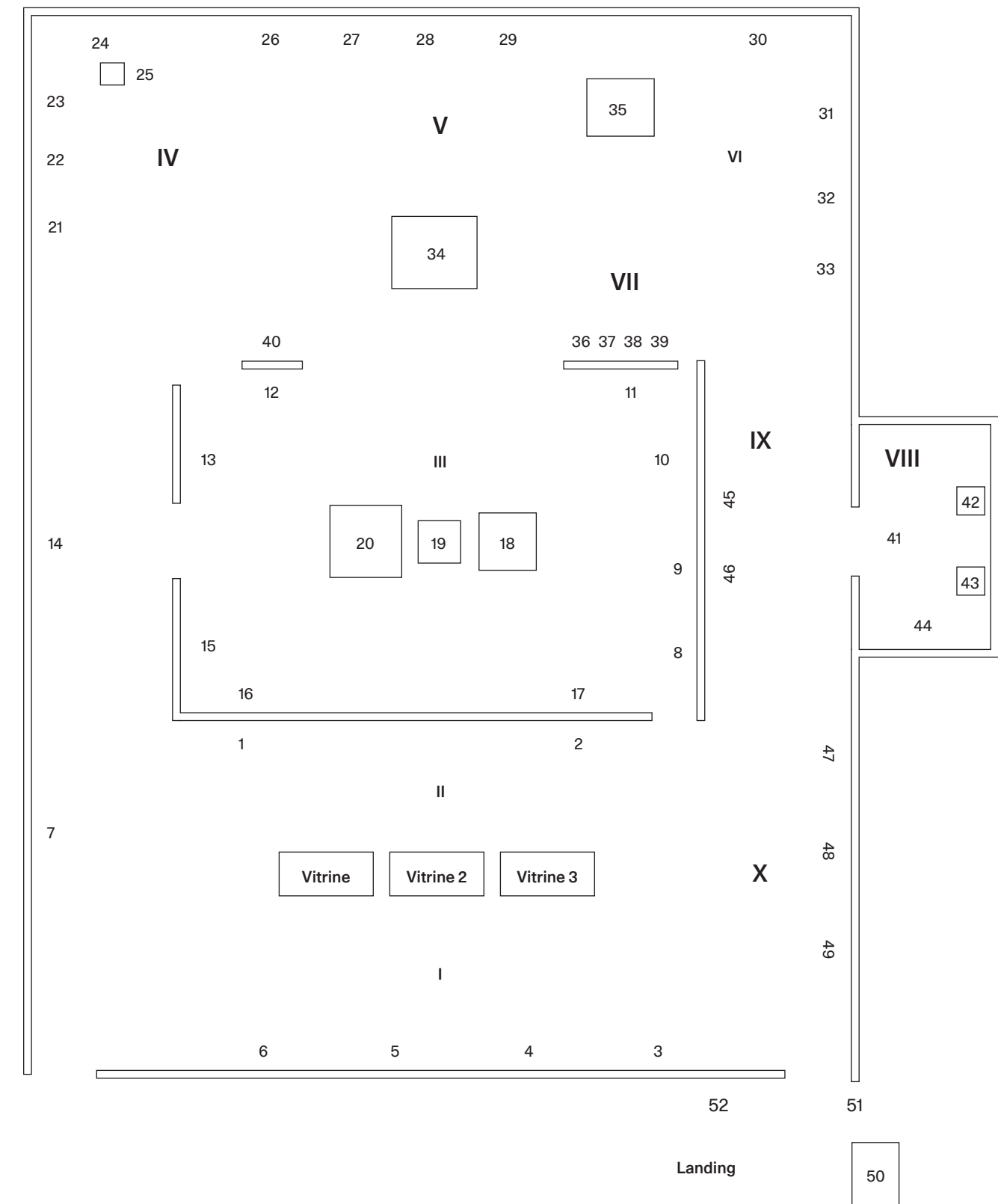
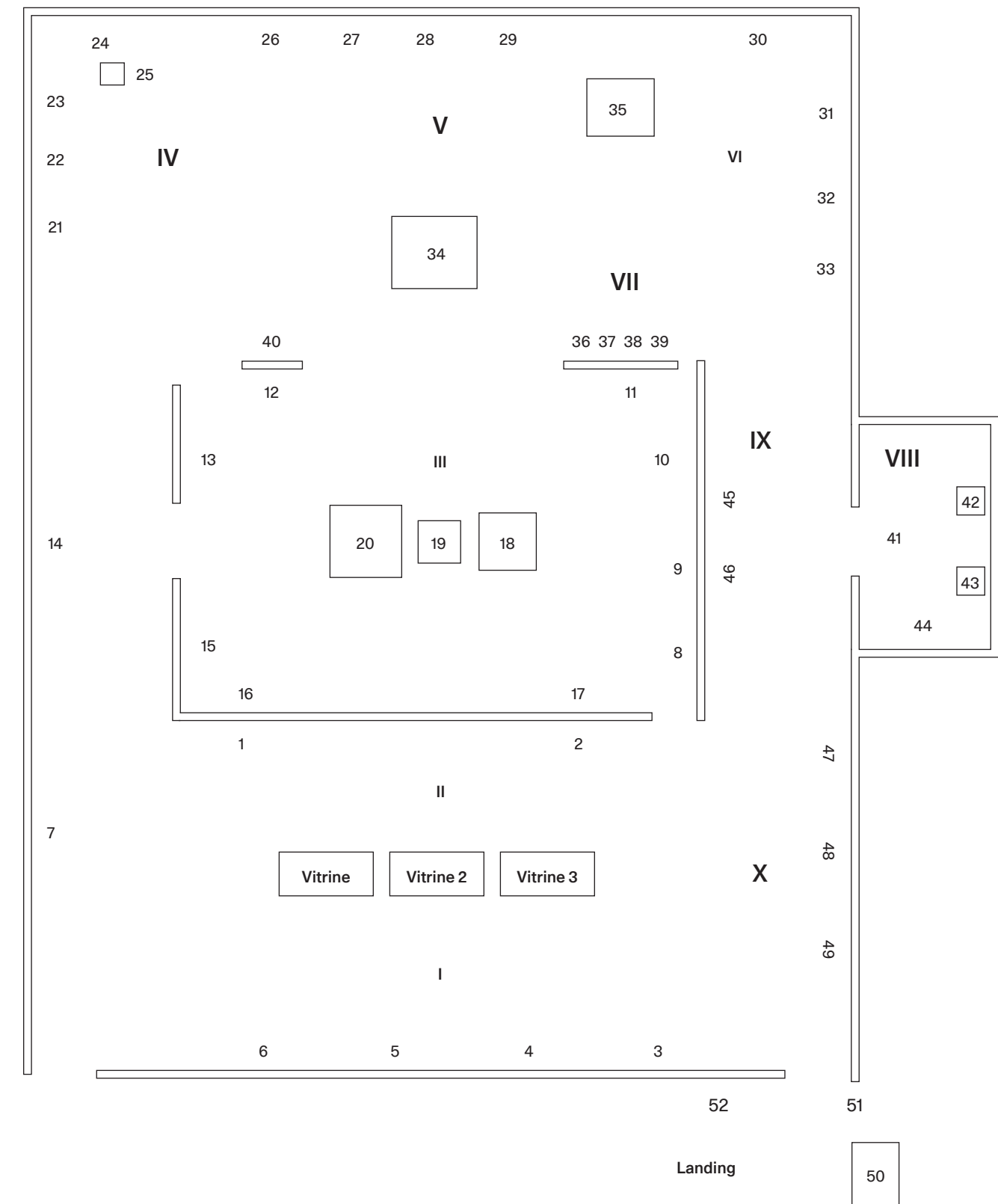
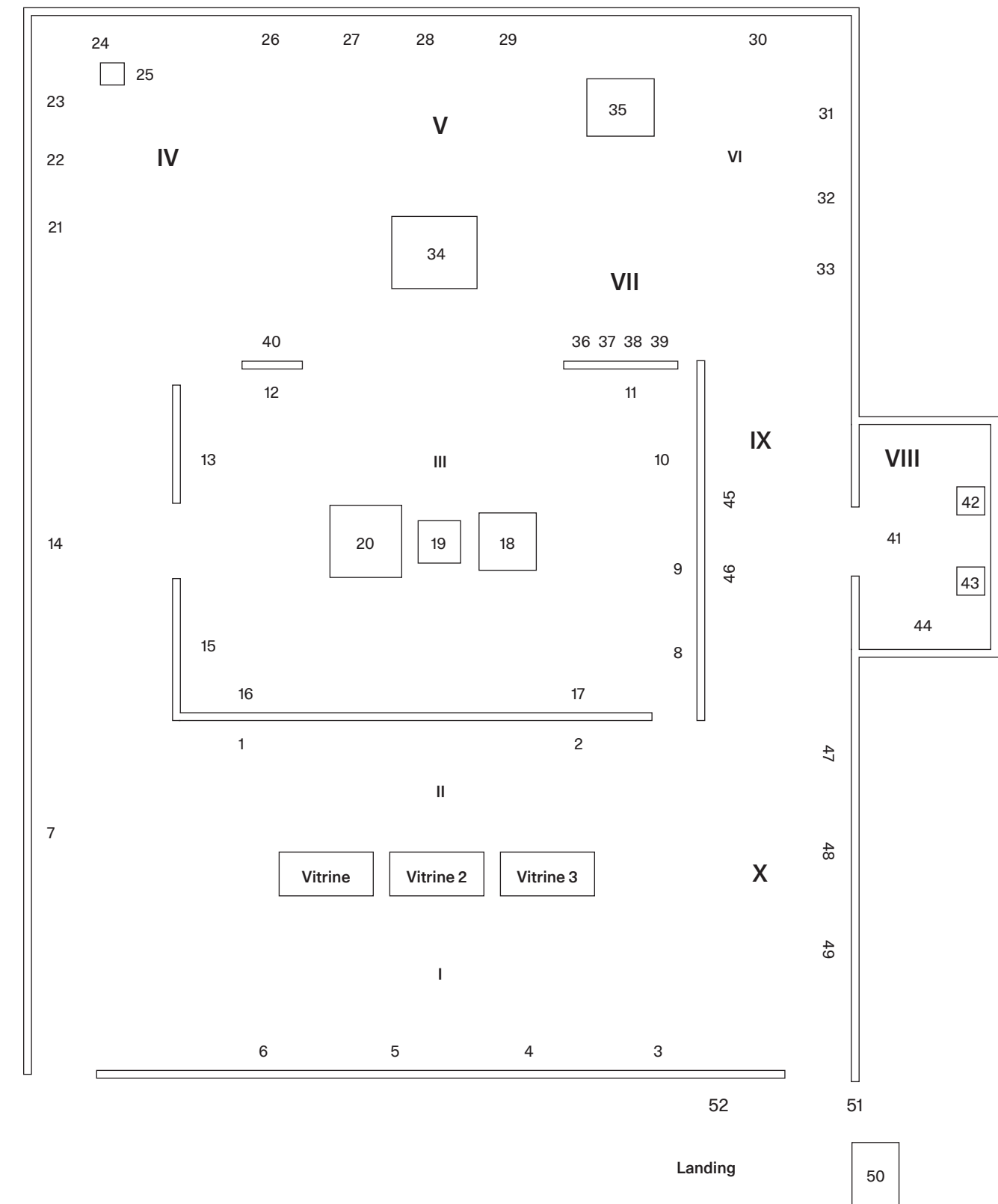
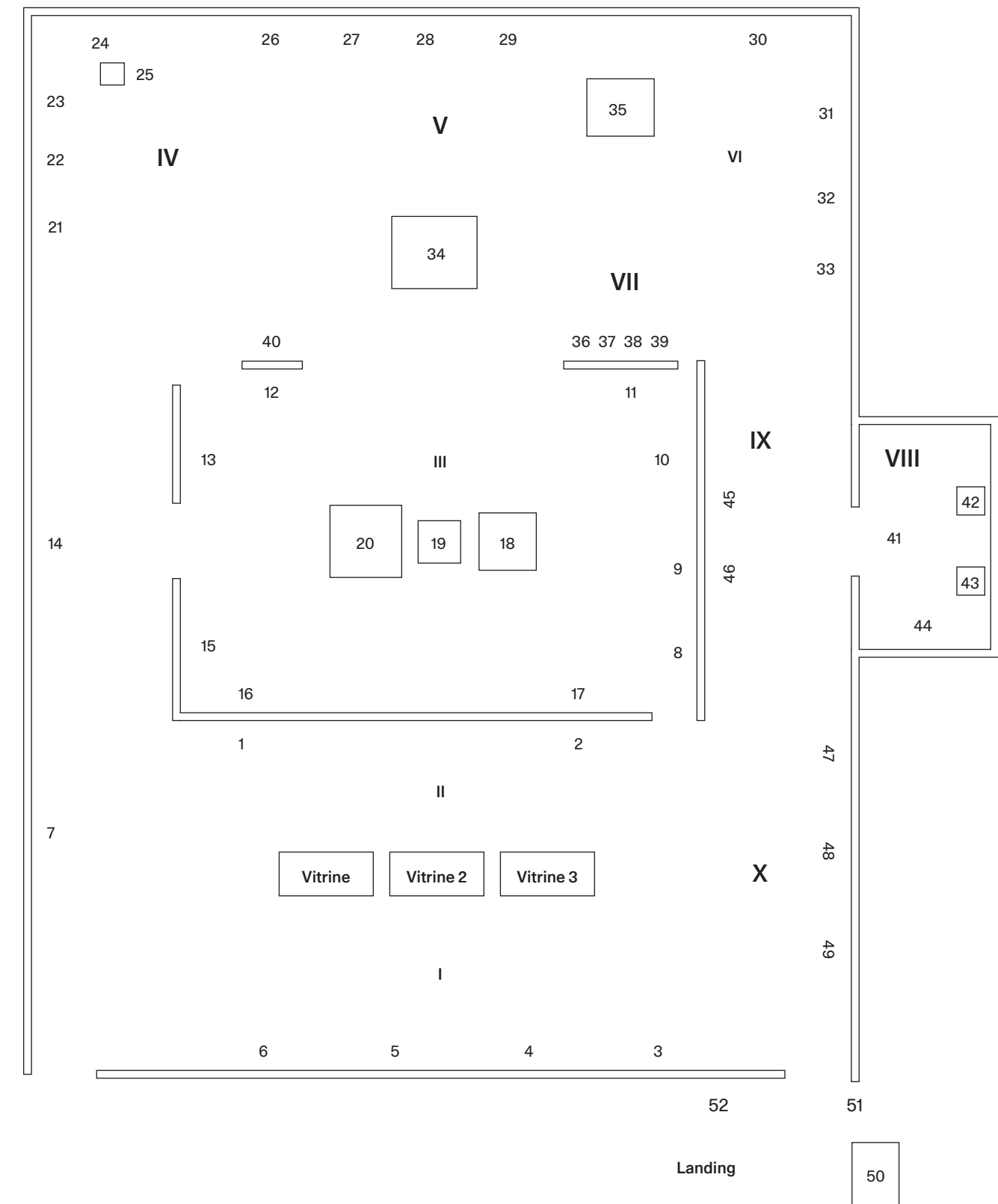
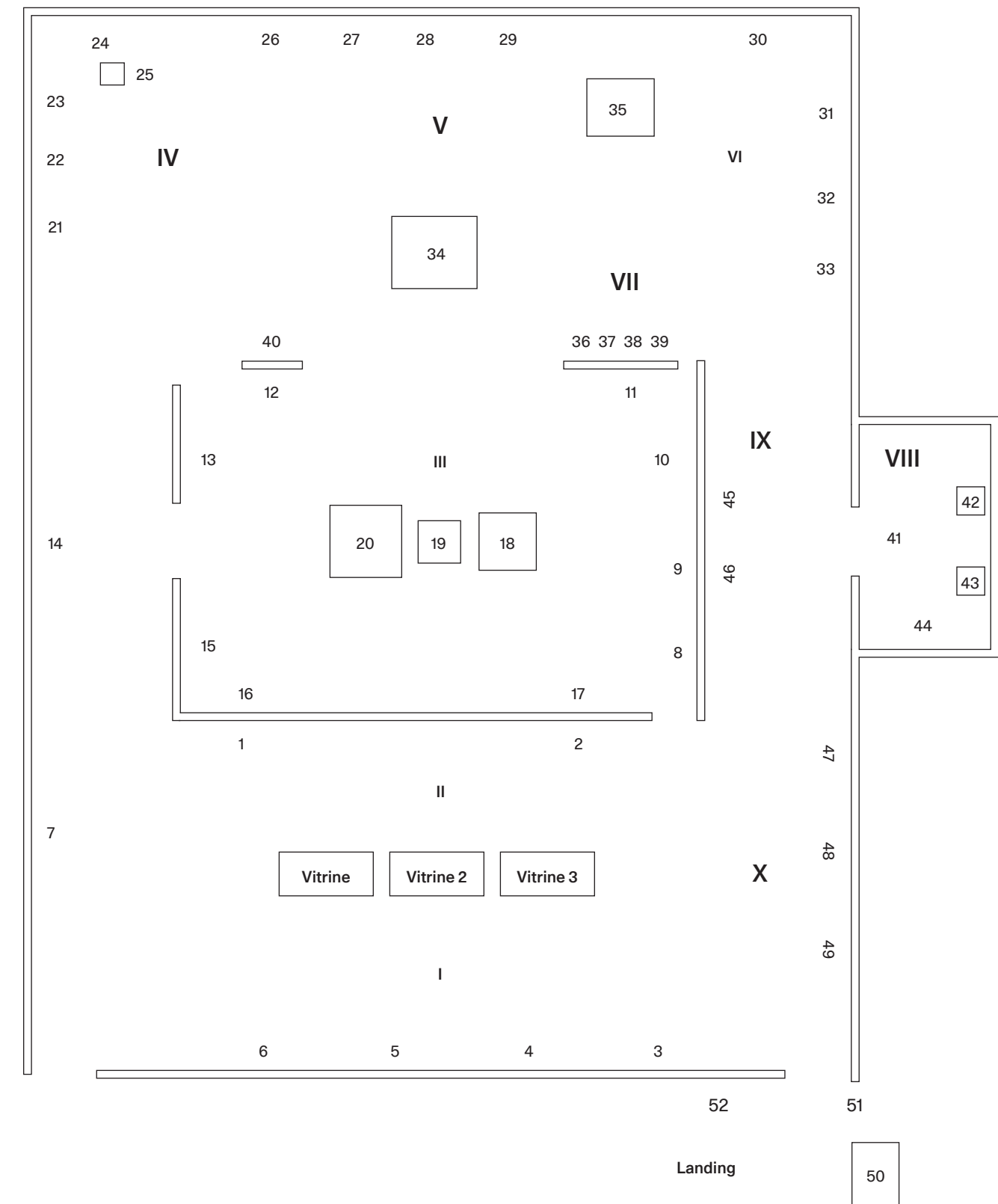
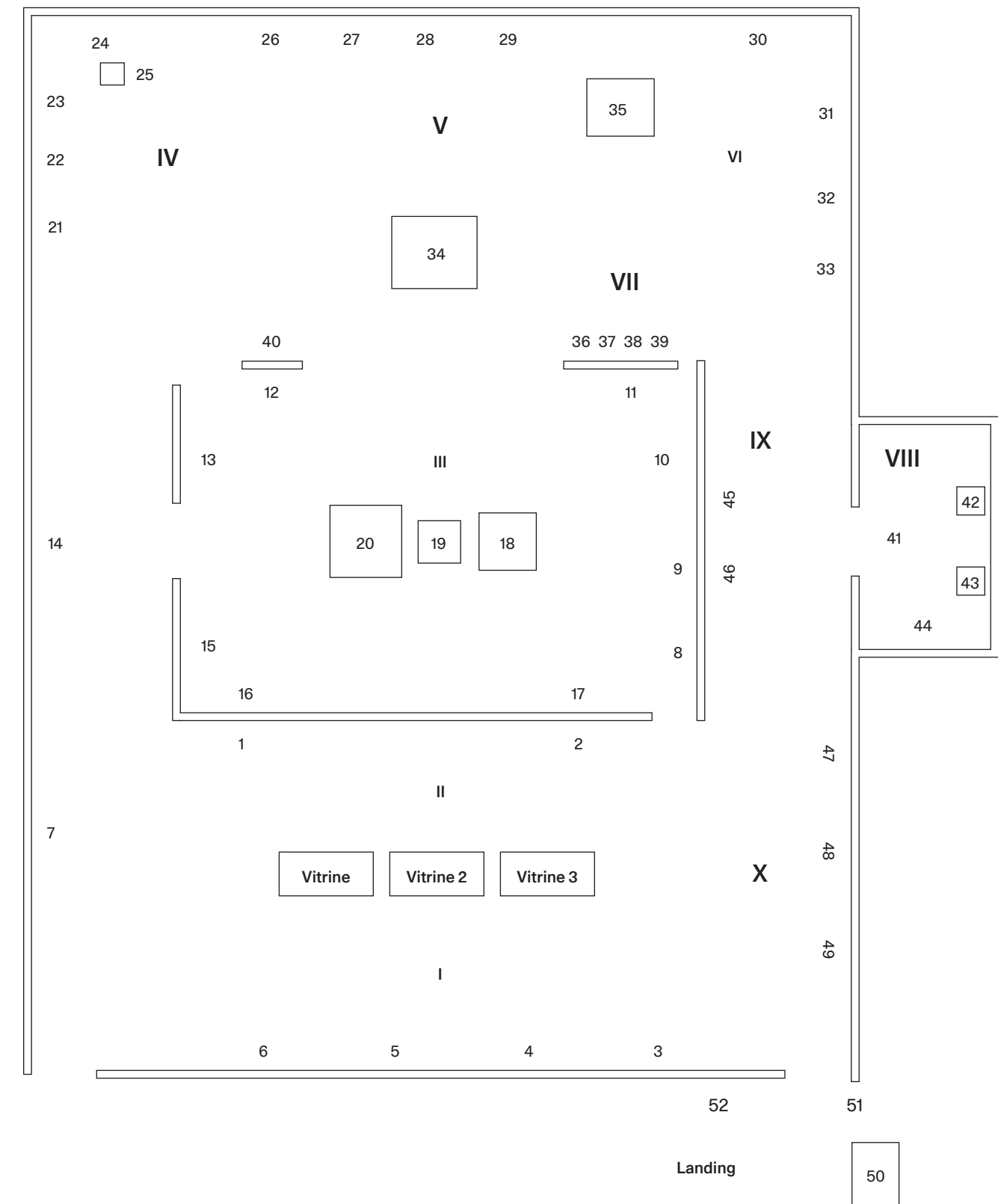
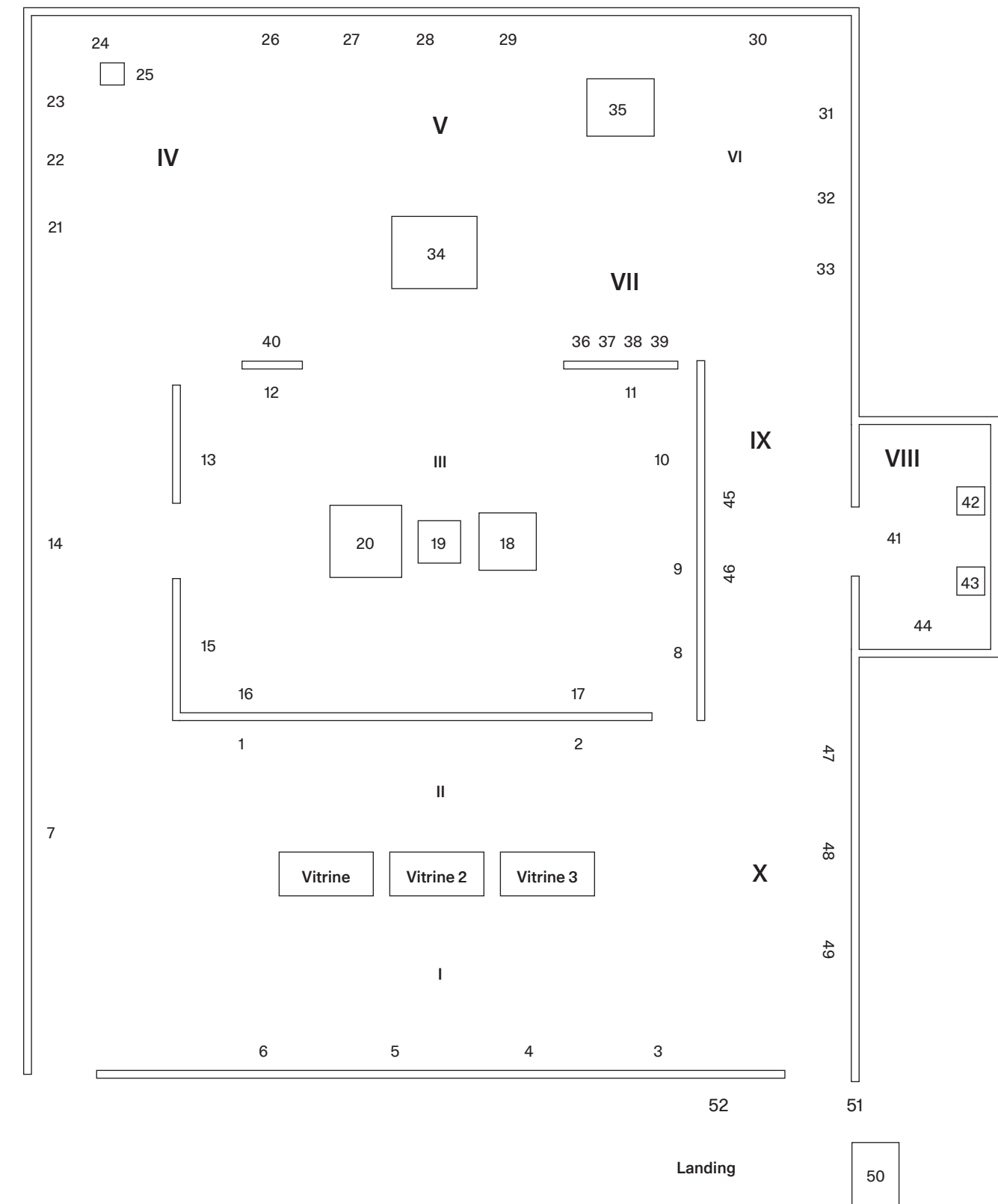
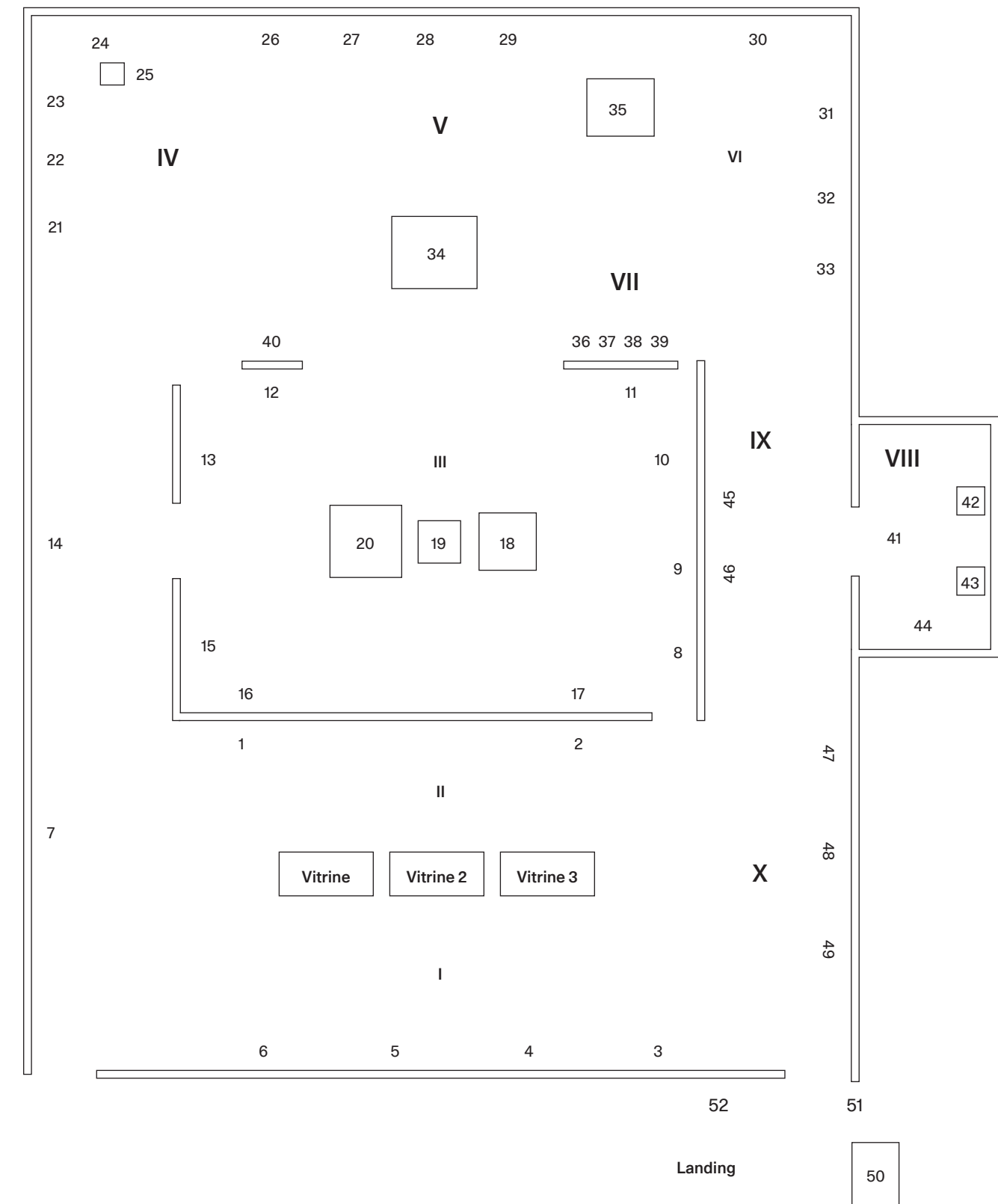
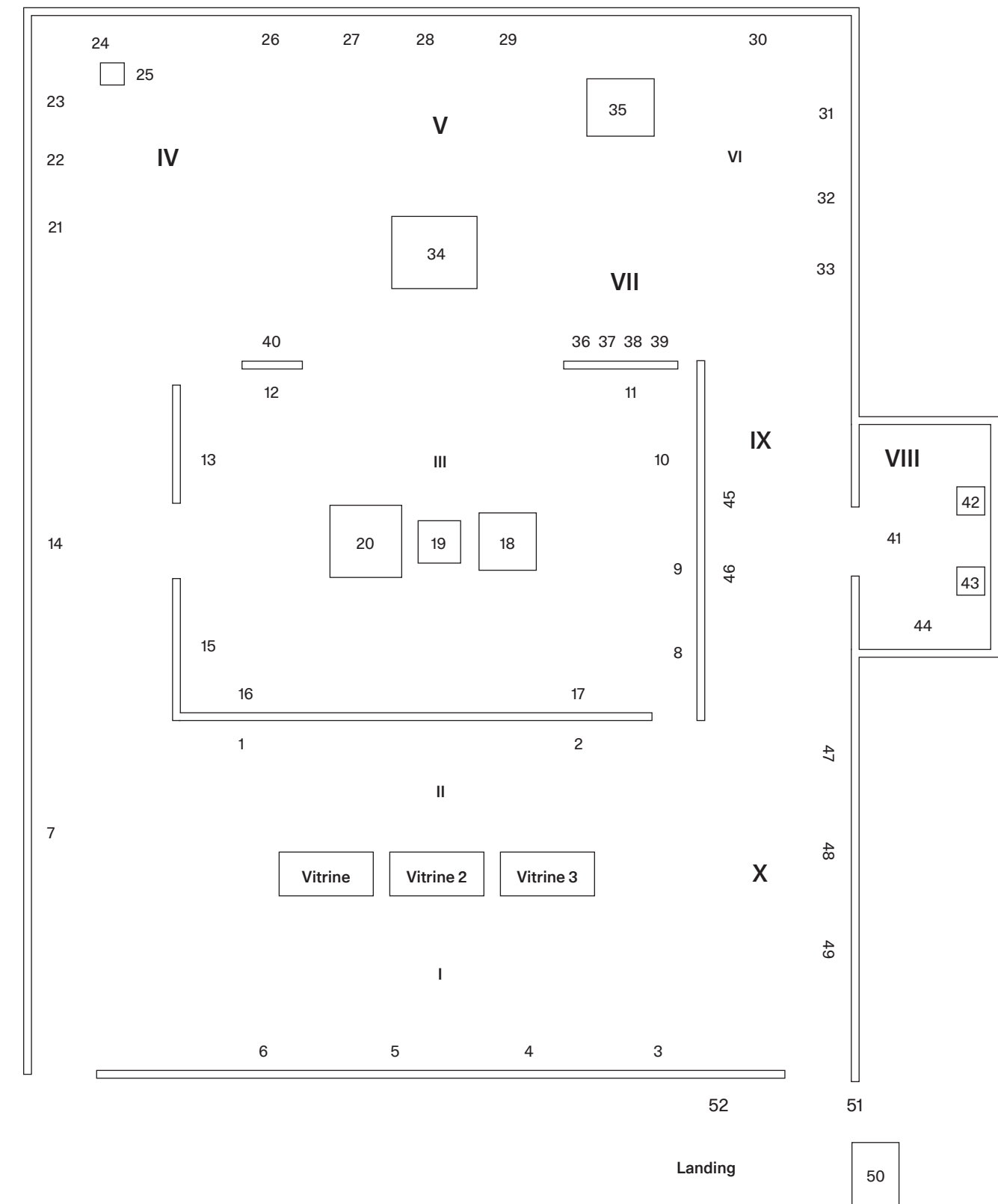
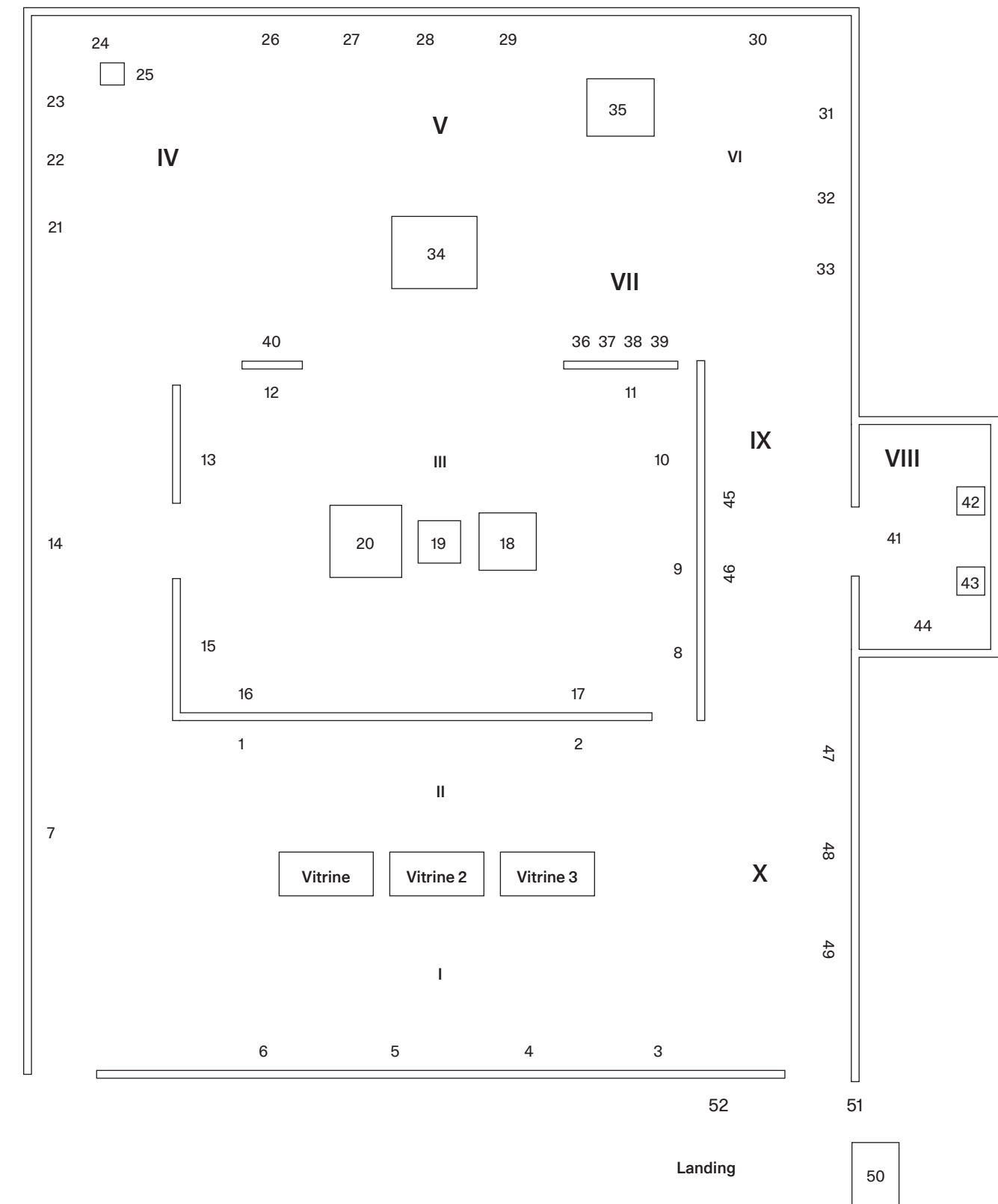
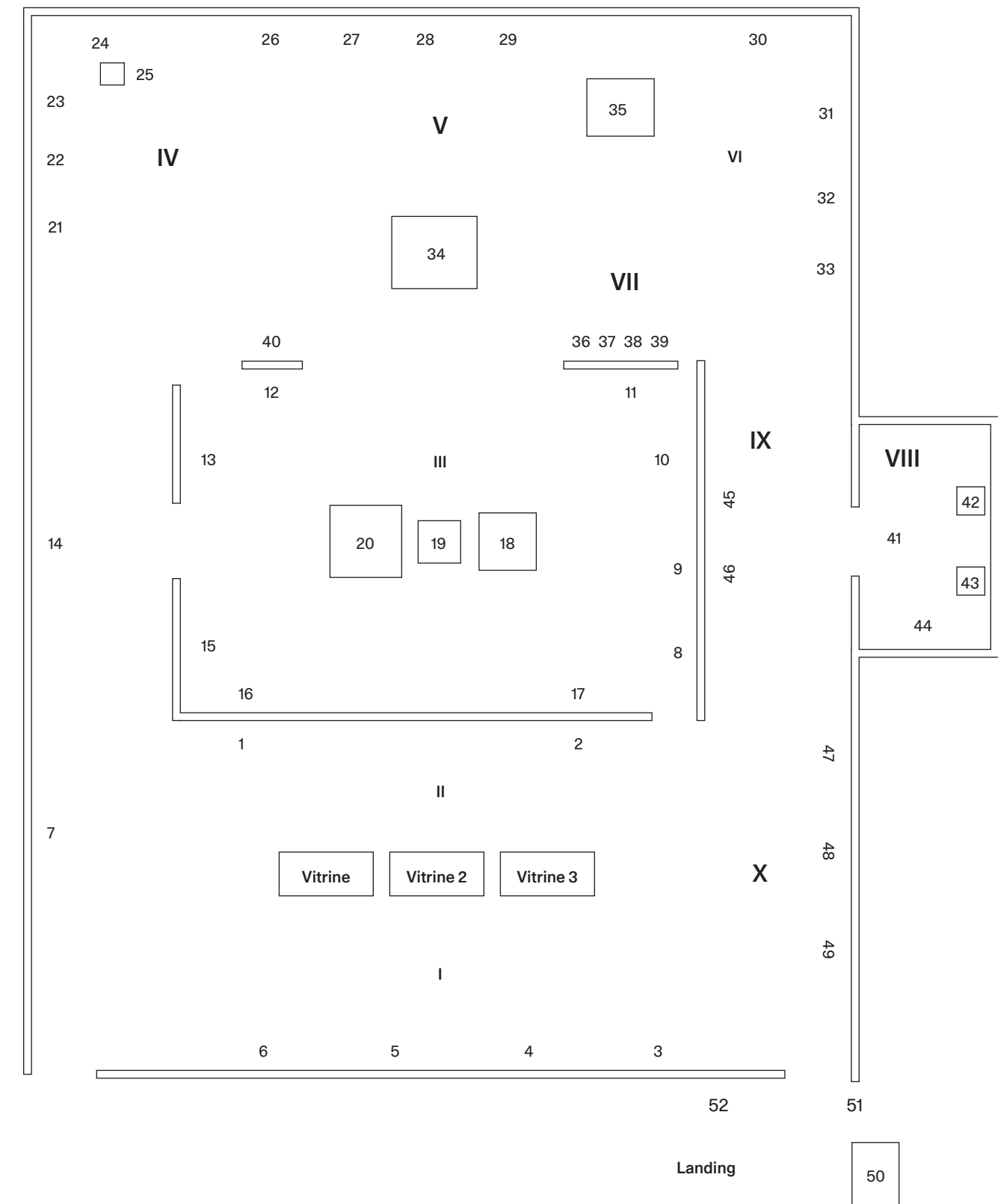
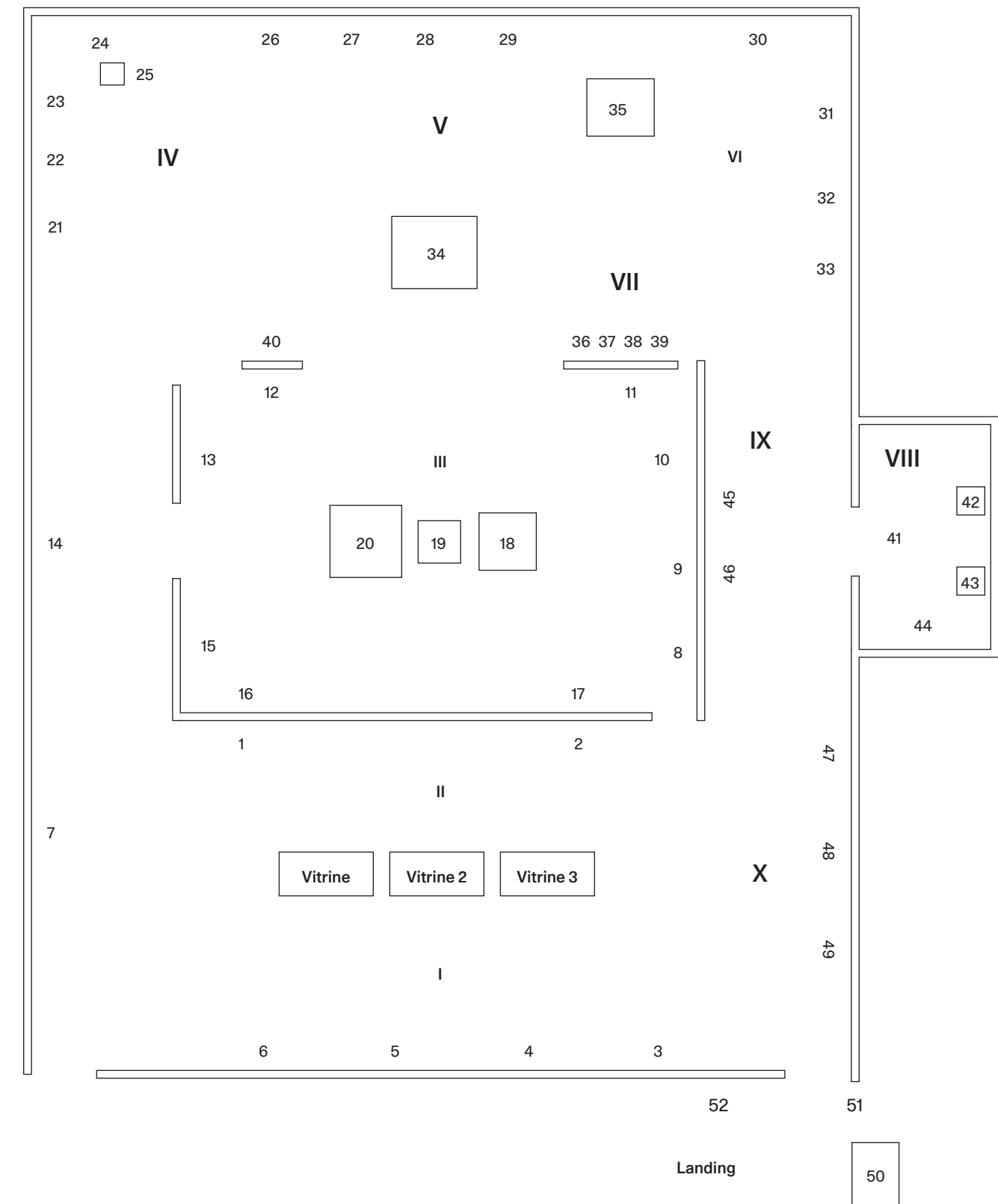
Straighten Your Wig and Pray is the first museum survey dedicated to the work of Arch Connelly (1950–1993), a Chicago-born artist who emerged in the 1980s as a distinctive figure within New York’s East Village art scene. Spanning the late 1970s through 1993, the year of the artist’s death from AIDS-related complications, the exhibition brings together works across collage, sculpture, and painting, including several that have not been publicly exhibited in nearly forty years. While Connelly’s work often reflects the fragility and darkness of that era, it is equally animated by humor and charm.

Oscillating between abstraction and figuration, Connelly’s art is characterized by lavish surfaces and meticulous ornamentation. Throughout his life in cities, from San Francisco to New York, Connelly remained drawn to motifs from the natural world. Leaves, trees, and mountain silhouettes are reimagined as fabulous stand-ins. Collage underscores much of Connelly’s making, as he gathers and layers varied materials of high and low culture, including moiré fabrics, glitter, couture faux pearls, magazine clippings, eggshells salvaged from his weekend job as a cook, and pennies turned into embellishments. Connelly’s titles are poetic and further a sense of enchantment, mystery, and wit. Describing himself as a “Midwestern drag queen,” the artist channels subversive ideas of glamour, transformation, and desire into his art. Webs and reflective surfaces abound throughout the exhibition, alluding to acts of allure and entrapment.

Titled after one of the artist’s pieces in the exhibition, *Straighten Your Wig and Pray* offers an unprecedented overview of key bodies of work, situating Connelly within, and in tension with, dominant artistic currents of the late twentieth century. Structured thematically, the exhibition traces the artist’s early experiments with material and functional forms, his opulent use of plastic jewels as both subject and pattern, through to his innovative confrontation with self-portraiture. The presentation, itself something of a collage, unfolds within an architectural environment that allows multiple artworks and perspectives to overlap and converge into a single field of vision. Reimagining the visual vocabularies of Minimalism and Pop through a camp, craft-based, and surrealist sensibility, Connelly’s work challenges these established artistic canons, shifting the possibilities of artmaking toward a new exploration of beauty.

Arch Connelly (1950, Chicago – 1993, New York City) was the subject of solo presentations at Artists Space, Fun Gallery, White Columns, Holly Solomon Gallery, and Castelli Graphics. Posthumous solo exhibitions include *Trajectory*, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (2024); and *Arch Connelly*, La MaMa Galleria, New York (2012). Other notable exhibitions include the group shows *Shifting Landscapes*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2024–25); *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–*

2019, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019–22); *East Village USA*, New Museum, New York (2005); *Less is a bore – Exuberance Now*, Groninger Museum, Groningen (1989); *The East Village Scene*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (1984); *Extended Sensibilities*, New Museum, New York (1982); *Lighting*, P.S.1, New York (1981); and *New York/New Wave*, P.S.1, New York (1981).



10. *Photograph of Arch Connelly and Roberto Juarez in San Francisco*, c. 1975.
Chromogenic print; 3½ × 4½ in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.14

11. *Arch Connelly to Jimmy Wright correspondence, November 17, 1976*, 1976.
Ink on paper, two sheets; 11 × 8½ in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.21a-b

Working as “this thing called a chef” at a local café in San Francisco, a “sort of a pillar of café society,” Connelly wrote to Wright of needing greater financial security to support his “HABIT,” as he put it, of making art. The letter is candid about longing and loneliness, yet never relinquishes its humor: “My macaroni is magnificent, my photo’s fabulous and my painting positive. What more could a blond ask for?” The correspondence functioned as both lifeline and creative outlet, a space where Connelly could hold together the competing pressures of financial precarity and artistic ambition, without abandoning the ironic self-fashioning that characterized his voice.

12. *Arch Connelly to Jimmy Wright portrait photocopy as Troy Donahue correspondence, January 21, 1975*, 1975.
Felt-tip pen and ink on paper; 14 × 8½ in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.16

13. *Arch Connelly “Leopard Painting” exhibition invitation at Temporary Gallery to Jimmy Wright*, 1974.
Felt-tip pen and pencil on paper; 8½ × 14 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.12

Vitrine Two

14. *Warped Floors Performance Leaflet*, 1974.
Offset lithograph; 5½ × 8½ in.
Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly

Under the pseudonym Archie de la West, Connelly contributed set designs to *Rickets*, “a New Musical from Warped Floors”—one document from his immersion in San Francisco’s experimental theater scene, where he worked alongside the Angels of Light, the Cockettes, and Warped Floors, the company behind this production. The leaflet captures a post-Cockettes theatrical ecosystem: camp, psychedelic, DIY, and sharply satirical, its sets handmade, ephemeral, and built on almost no budget. Connelly’s years in San Francisco proved formative, as he surrounded himself with a community who treated spectacle, costume, and decoration with a profound commitment that he would later carry into his studio work.

15. *Arch Connelly to Jimmy Wright correspondence from the Ranch, December 12, 1975*, 1975.
Gelatin silver print with felt-tip pen and ink; 3½ × 5½ in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright

collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.19

“The Ranch” was the colloquial name of a Victorian apartment in San Francisco’s Haight neighborhood where Connelly lived communally with many of the participants of *Rickets*, among them Joe Morocco, Candida Royalle, Janet Planet, and Janice Sukaitis. At the time, the Haight was a dense concentration of cheap apartments, underground theaters, bars, cafés, costume shops, and informal artist networks, where visual art, performance, fashion, sex, and nightlife converged into a sustaining countercultural ecosystem. Connelly is second from the left in this picture.

16. *Warped Floors’ Priventorium performance handbill*, c. 1975.
Offset lithograph; 8½ × 5½ in. (closed), 8½ × 11 in. (open).
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.15

17. *Arch Connelly to Jimmy Wright correspondence, March 31, 1975*, 1975.
Ink on paper; 11 × 8½ in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.20

18. *Arch Connelly to Jimmy Wright Christmas correspondence, December 25, 1980*, 1980.
Collage with watercolor, crayon, and ink on paper; 9 × 6 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.23

19. *Clock a Style, Fashion Notebook*, c. 1980.
Notebook, mixed media; 10½ × 8½ in.
Courtesy Gigi Ferrante

On the first page of this notebook, Connelly writes: “my wardrobe, I owne n owned all these so there.” The sketches that follow document a shared wardrobe—his and that of his life partner Abhe, who would also later pass of AIDS-related complications. Gigi Ferrante, Abhe’s sister, was a designer working in high couture with the likes of James Galanos, and would bring Connelly faux pearls and other materials home from work. Among the items sketched are cowboy boots, a blue leopard belt, and experiments with holographic reflective material, which Connelly explored for making pants.

20. *Pink Manifesto, artist statement for Artists Space solo exhibition, September 20–October 18, 1980*, 1980.
Ink on paper; 11 × 8½ in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.22

Written in place of a conventional artist statement for his first ever exhibition at Artists Space in TriBeCa, New York, the *Pink Manifesto* is one of the earliest and most vivid documents of Connelly’s artistic vision. Typed out on pink paper, the statement operates at once as a personal declaration of aesthetic values and a provocative disruption of normative expectations in regard to art and its materials. Theatrically animated by rhythmic

alliteration and exclamation marks, the text wraps genuine conviction in camp and wit, setting foundational language for his ensuing body of work.

21. *Arch Connelly as Monique by Roberto Juarez*, early 1980s.
Polaroid; 4½ × 3½ in.
Courtesy Roberto Juarez

22. *Arch Connelly holding Travel by Air (1984)*, c. mid-1980s.
Polaroid; 4¼ × 3 in.
Courtesy Mary-Ann Monforton

23. *Drafts Sketchbook*, c. 1980–82.
Notebook, mixed media; 8 × 6 in. (closed), 15 × 6 in. (open).
Courtesy Chris Tanner

Open to what is assumed to be a preparatory sketch for *Cocaine Mesa* (1980), this sketchbook offers a rare view into Connelly’s process. Its pages include studies for pearl webs like *Murnau* (1981), pearl vases, and wall-based sculptures related to works such as *Leaf* (1982).

24. Invitation card, *Arch Connelly*, May 31–June 24, 1984, Fun Gallery, New York.
Two cards; 4¾ × 6¾ in.
Courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. Private collection

Fun Gallery, cofounded by Patti Astor and Bill Stelling, was one of the defining spaces of the East Village art scene, showing Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Kenny Scharf alongside Connelly. It was here that Connelly held his first solo exhibition in 1981, and the gallery remained a consistent home for his work throughout the early 1980s. Works including *The Future Reflected* (1984), *A Form of Levitation* (1984), *Travel by Sea* (1984), and *The More* (1984) were among those shown by Stelling and Astor, who affectionately referred to Connelly as “pearl man Arch.”

25. *Arch Connelly Fun Gallery exhibition broadside, 1981*, 1981.
Color photocopy; 11 × 8½ in.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.24

26. Invitation card for *Arch Connelly*, early 1980s, Fun Gallery, New York.
Kodak paper; 4 × 5 in.
Private collection

27. Invitation card for *Arch Connelly*, c. 1984, Fun Gallery, New York.
Kodak paper; 5 × 3⅞ in.
Courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

28. Bill Stelling (left) and Arch Connelly (standing, right) with *Candelabra* (early 1980s) at Fun Gallery, 1984.
Gelatin silver print; 3 × 5 in.
Courtesy Michael Kohn

29. Photograph of *A Form of Levitation* (1984) and *The Future Reflected* (1984), at Fun Gallery, 1984.
Gelatin silver print; 3 × 5 in.
Courtesy Michael Kohn

30. Photograph of *Just Now* (1984), at Fun Gallery, 1984.
Gelatin silver print; 3 × 5 in.
Courtesy Michael Kohn

31. Photograph of *Travel by Sea* (1984), at Fun Gallery, 1984.
Gelatin silver print; 3 × 5 in.
Courtesy Michael Kohn

Vitrine Three

32. *Pearl Web installation for corner of New Museum*, May 1982.
Graphite and colored pencil on paper; 7½ × 7¾ in.
Courtesy Dan Cameron

A preparatory sketch for Connelly’s proposed contribution to *Extended Sensibilities*—the landmark 1982 exhibition at the New Museum curated by Dan Cameron, and among the first institutional surveys in the United States dedicated solely to artists who identified as homosexual. The sketch proposes a pearl web spanning the corner of a room, the architecture of the space itself becoming part of the work—an environmental installation that was never realized.

33. Three-fold pamphlet for *Ecstasy*, 1984, curated by Nicholas Moufarrege, Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York;
Offset lithograph; 6 × 9 in.
Private collection

34. Invitation card for *Arch Connelly*, 1986, Cowles and Solomon Gallery, New York;
Card; 7 × 5 in.
Courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

After years showing at Fun Gallery, Connelly was jointly invited by dealers Holly Solomon and Charles Cowles to exhibit across both of their galleries simultaneously—a significant step that brought him a new level of visibility within the art world. The dual presentation attracted considerable critical attention, with one reviewer naming Connelly the “Coco Chanel of Canal Street.”

35. Invitation card for *Lighting*, 1981, group exhibition at P.S.1, New York; Card; 4¼ × 6 in.
Private collection

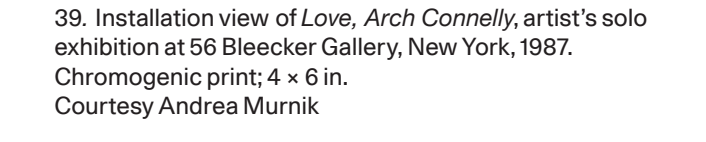
36. Invitation card for *Arch Connelly*, 1990, La Giarina, Verona, Italy.
Card; 4¼ × 8½ in.
Courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

37. *Portrait of Arch Connelly*, photograph by Andrea Murnik, c. 1980s.
Chromogenic print; 4 × 6 in.
Courtesy Andrea Murnik

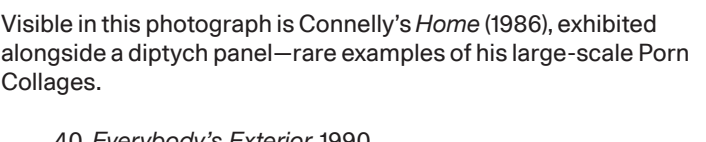
38. Reproduction of exhibition sketch by Arch Connelly enclosed with his letter to Marie-Hélène Cornips, curator of his exhibition at the Groninger Museum, Groningen, 1989.
Facsimile; 8¾ × 7¾ in.
Archive of Groninger Museum. Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly

This sketch, sent directly to his curator, maps out the installation Connelly would realize at the Groninger Museum in 1989–90, a significant moment of international recognition for the artist. Set against black walls, the arrangement placed large abstract glitter paintings alongside his oval “faces,” the masks of comedy and tragedy flanking one another as they would in Italian theatrical posters, a source Connelly had drawn on since a formative trip to Italy.

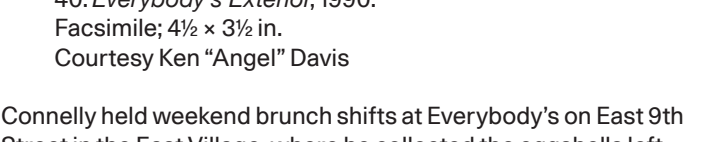
39. Installation view of *Love*, *Arch Connelly*, artist’s solo exhibition at 56 Bleecker Gallery, New York, 1987. Chromogenic print; 4 × 6 in. Courtesy Andrea Murnik



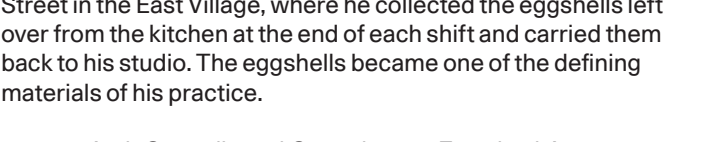
Visible in this photograph is Connelly’s *Home* (1986), exhibited alongside a diptych panel—rare examples of his large-scale Porn Collages.



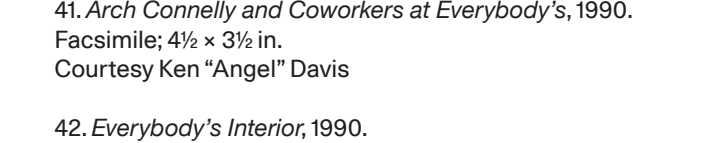
40. *Everybody’s Exterior*, 1990. Facsimile; 4½ × 3½ in. Courtesy Ken “Angel” Davis



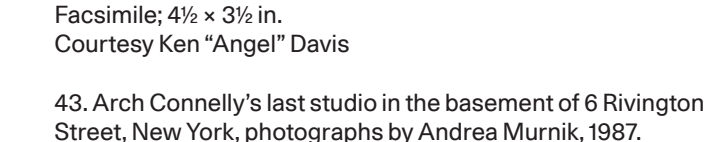
Connelly held weekend brunch shifts at Everybody’s on East 9th Street in the East Village, where he collected the eggshells left over from the kitchen at the end of each shift and carried them back to his studio. The eggshells became one of the defining materials of his practice.



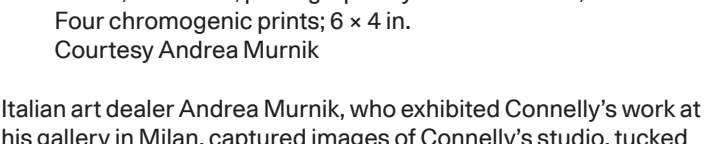
41. *Arch Connelly and Coworkers at Everybody’s*, 1990. Facsimile; 4½ × 3½ in. Courtesy Ken “Angel” Davis



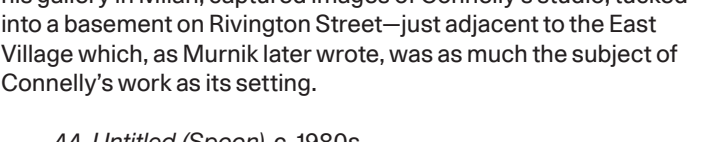
42. *Everybody’s Interior*, 1990. Facsimile; 4½ × 3½ in. Courtesy Ken “Angel” Davis



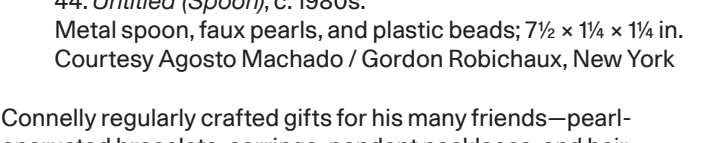
43. Arch Connelly’s last studio in the basement of 6 Rivington Street, New York, photographs by Andrea Murnik, 1987. Four chromogenic prints; 6 × 4 in. Courtesy Andrea Murnik



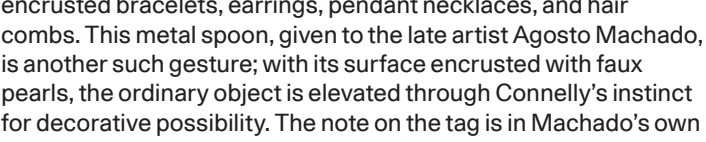
Italian art dealer Andrea Murnik, who exhibited Connelly’s work at his gallery in Milan, captured images of Connelly’s studio, tucked into a basement on Rivington Street—just adjacent to the East Village which, as Murnik later wrote, was as much the subject of Connelly’s work as its setting.



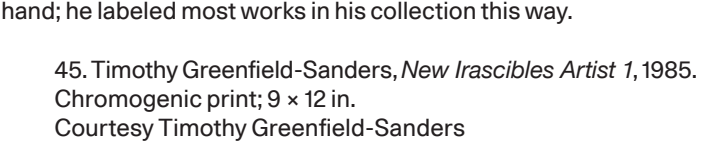
44. *Untitled (Spoon)*, c. 1980s. Metal spoon, faux pearls, and plastic beads; 7½ × 1¼ × 1¼ in. Courtesy Agosto Machado / Gordon Robichaux, New York



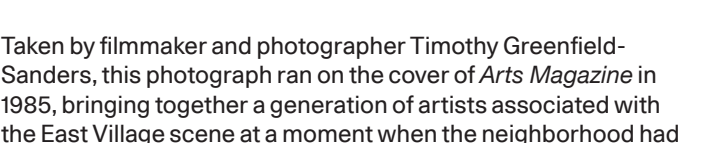
Connelly regularly crafted gifts for his many friends—pearl-encrusted bracelets, earrings, pendant necklaces, and hair combs. This metal spoon, given to the late artist Agosto Machado, is another such gesture; with its surface encrusted with faux pearls, the ordinary object is elevated through Connelly’s instinct for decorative possibility. The note on the tag is in Machado’s own hand; he labeled most works in his collection this way.



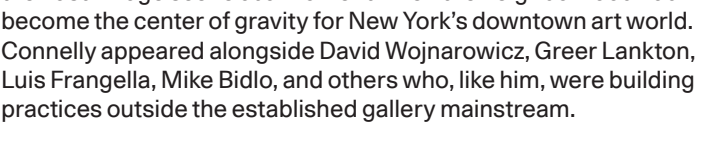
45. Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, *New Irascibles Artist 1*, 1985. Chromogenic print; 9 × 12 in. Courtesy Timothy Greenfield-Sanders



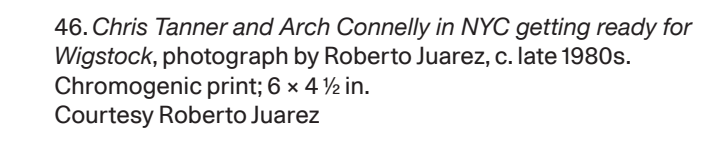
Taken by filmmaker and photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, this photograph ran on the cover of *Arts Magazine* in 1985, bringing together a generation of artists associated with the East Village scene at a moment when the neighborhood had become the center of gravity for New York’s downtown art world. Connelly appeared alongside David Wojnarowicz, Greer Lankton, Luis Frangella, Mike Bidlo, and others who, like him, were building practices outside the established gallery mainstream.



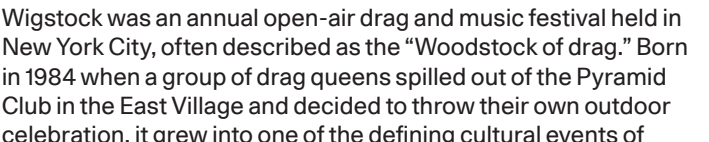
46. *Chris Tanner and Arch Connelly in NYC getting ready for Wigstock*, photograph by Roberto Juarez, c. late 1980s. Chromogenic print; 6 × 4 ½ in. Courtesy Roberto Juarez



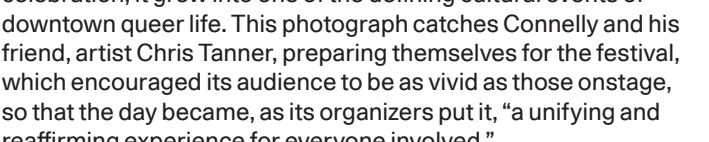
47. *Arch Connelly and Jeff Perrone in a cab to Wigstock*, by Roberto Juarez, 1991. Chromogenic print; 4 × 5⅞ in. Courtesy Ken “Angel” Davis



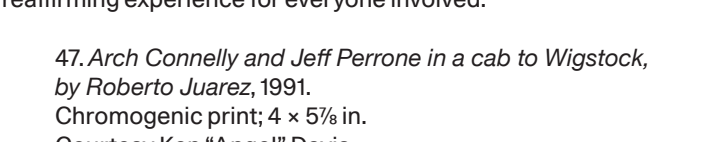
47. *Arch Connelly and Jeff Perrone in a cab to Wigstock*, by Roberto Juarez, 1991. Chromogenic print; 4 × 5⅞ in. Courtesy Ken “Angel” Davis



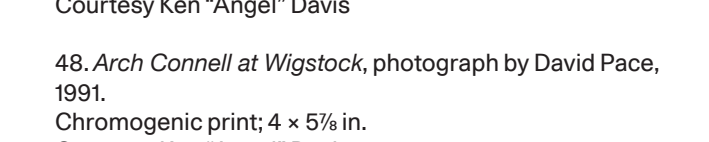
48. *Arch Connell at Wigstock*, photograph by David Pace, 1991. Chromogenic print; 4 × 5⅞ in. Courtesy Ken “Angel” Davis



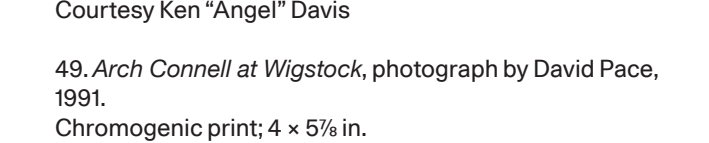
49. *Arch Connell at Wigstock*, photograph by David Pace, 1991. Chromogenic print; 4 × 5⅞ in. Courtesy Ken “Angel” Davis



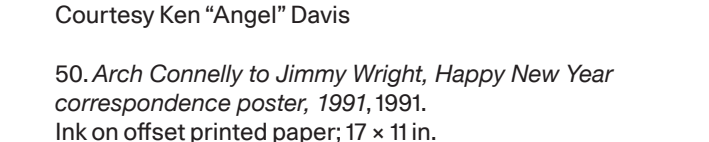
50. *Arch Connelly to Jimmy Wright, Happy New Year correspondence poster*, 1991, 1991. Ink on offset printed paper; 17 × 11 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.26



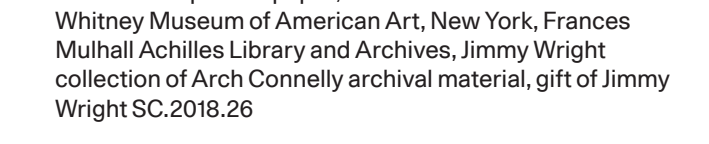
By the early 1990s, Connelly had spent over a decade building a life in downtown New York—among artists, drag performers, lovers, and friends. The hand-drawn faces on this card echo his glittering round portraits, each one, as he puts it, a rendition of “the expressions you’d see in a gay bar.” Sent during a period of failing health, the card’s cluster of varied expressions—cheerful, wary, wistful—reads less as decoration than a portrait of a community bracing itself for an uncertain year ahead.



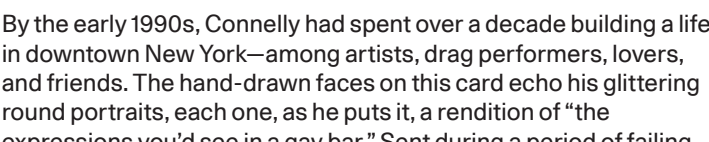
51. *Arch Connelly posing with two glitter faces*, photograph by Andrea Murnik, c. 1987. Chromogenic print; 6 × 4 in. Courtesy Andrea Murnik



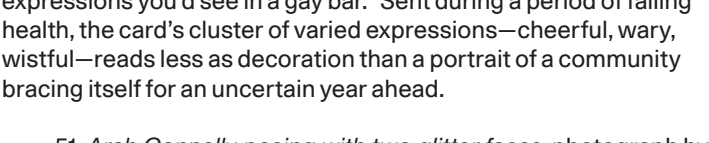
52. *Shop Window at 210 West 42nd Street*, photograph by Dan Connelly, July 1993; 6 × 4 in. Chromogenic print. Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly



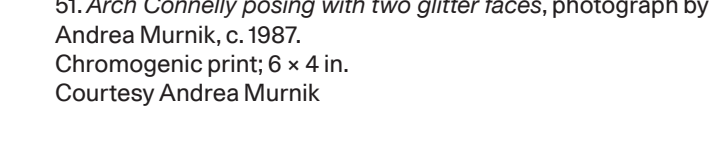
In the summer of 1993, Connelly was among a group of artists—including Jenny Holzer, Glenn Ligon, and Lyle Ashton Harris—commissioned as part of the 42nd Street Art Project to transform the streetscape between Times Square and Eighth Avenue. For the occasion, Connelly took over the shop windows at 208 and 210 West 42nd Street, filling them with *Faces* in varying sizes and conflicting expressions. This would be the artist’s final project.



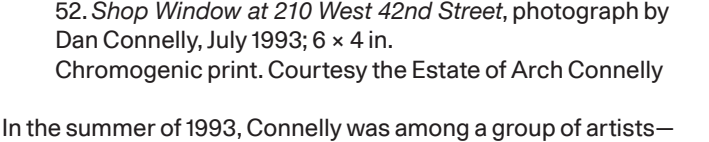
53. *Arch Connelly exhibition review newspaper clipping*, *New York Native*, September 23, 1989, 1989. Newsprint; 6 × 5½ in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library and Archives, Jimmy Wright collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.25



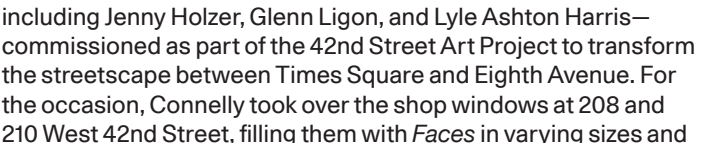
54. *Arch Connelly exhibition review newspaper clipping*, *New York Native*, April 6, 1992, 1992. Newsprint; 14 × 5¼ in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.27



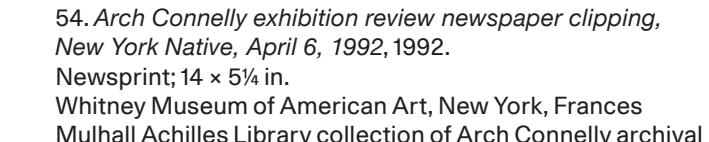
55. *Artforum Cover, November 1991*, 1991. Coated paper; 10½ × 10⅝ in. Courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey



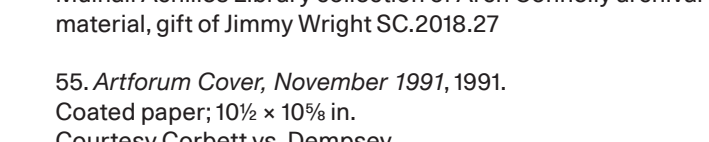
The November 1991 cover of *Artforum* features Connelly’s collage *Local Boy* (1990), from his Porn Collage series. For an artist who spent years building a practice largely outside institutional recognition, appearing on the cover of the art world’s most prominent magazine represented a significant moment of wider visibility. Connelly’s friend Agosto Machado shared an oral account in regard to the popularity of this issue, which allegedly sold out as people outside of the art world mistook it for a porn magazine. Connelly passed away in 1993, just two years later, at the height of his career.



54. *Arch Connelly exhibition review newspaper clipping*, *New York Native*, April 6, 1992, 1992. Newsprint; 14 × 5¼ in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library collection of Arch Connelly archival material, gift of Jimmy Wright SC.2018.27



55. *Artforum Cover, November 1991*, 1991. Coated paper; 10½ × 10⅝ in. Courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey



The November 1991 cover of *Artforum* features Connelly’s collage *Local Boy* (1990), from his Porn Collage series. For an artist who spent years building a practice largely outside institutional recognition, appearing on the cover of the art world’s most prominent magazine represented a significant moment of wider visibility. Connelly’s friend Agosto Machado shared an oral account in regard to the popularity of this issue, which allegedly sold out as people outside of the art world mistook it for a porn magazine. Connelly passed away in 1993, just two years later, at the height of his career.

List of works

II.

Natural motifs recur throughout Connelly’s work of the 1980s—leaves, branches, and organic forms that function less as representations of the natural world than as vehicles for memory, atmosphere, and personal association. Among his named influences, Georgia O’Keeffe’s series of redwood trees held particular significance, not for its depiction of nature as such, but for what Connelly understood as its emotional and constructed evocation of landscape. He described his own engagement with such forms as embodying “the whimsy of Rococo,” in which ornament constituted their entirety. “I consider myself a sculptor,” he wrote. “Even when I paint, I think of my work in terms of objects. I amass elements, and they stay around the studio for months until I understand how best to utilize them and what kinds of associations I want.” Materials arrived with their own histories, new and upcycled, assembled with a spirit of excess and irreverence that owed more to the radical material excess of West Coast Funk Art than to the austerity of modernist traditions. In several works, three-dimensional elements such as golden chains extend beyond the picture plane entirely, hanging from the lower edges of frames and insisting on their own physical presence in the room.

1. *Vista*, 1983

Oil and acrylic on plywood

24 × 96 × ½ in.

JPMorganChase Art Collection
2. *Personal Explosion*, 1984

Acrylic and plastic beads on plywood

48 × 24 in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Jimmy Wright 2018.91
3. *The Sex Life of Salt*, 1985

Faux pearls, eggshells, newspaper, acrylic paint, and silver leaf on wood

40 × 41 in.

Collection of Anthony Rocanello
4. *How to Miss the Boat*, 1985

Faux pearls, plastic jewels, acrylic, and chain on moiré silk

36 in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly
5. *The Most Important Place on Earth*, 1988

Faux pearls, beads, jewels, chain, and paint on moiré silk

36 in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly
6. *The More*, 1985

Faux pearls, acrylic on moiré silk

48¾ in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago
7. *Ideal Variable*, 1985

Mixed media, wooden cutouts, pennies, sculptmetal, acrylic, eggshells, and pearls

31¼ × 25¼ in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

III.

Connelly favored dramatic exhibition design, often painting spaces entirely black and draping walls and furniture in black velvet. The round painting *Lens*, a dense and frenzied landscape, was featured in the landmark exhibition *Extended Sensibilities* at the New Museum in 1982, among the first to feature a group of gay-identifying artists. Curated by Dan Cameron, it placed Connelly alongside figures such as Scott Burton and Gilbert & George. Cameron’s assessment was unequivocal: “Connelly’s work represented something entirely new and potentially disruptive, looking unabashedly fabulous.”

Affinities with the Pattern and Decoration movement (P&D) of the mid-1970s carry throughout Connelly’s oeuvre: like its practitioners, he reacted against the stringent philosophies of Minimalism and Conceptual art, embracing instead ornament, decoration, and craft traditions. His references, however, extend much further, reaching into the chiaroscuro and emotional drama of the European Baroque. Faux pearls, a recurring material in his work, functioned as a glamorizing ornament imitating luxury—sometimes accentuating an image, at other times overwhelming it entirely. Their alluring luminosity belies a more somber mood, where beauty was entwined with a sense of precarity and dissolution.

8. *Fog*, 1983

Wood, acrylic, faux pearls, and plastic gems

20 × 14 × 10 in.

Collection of Matthew Nichols and Sebastian Li
9. *Lens*, 1982

Acrylic, faux pearls, and costume jewels on canvas

48 in. diam.

Courtesy Michael Kohn and Caroline Styne, Los Angeles
10. *Leaf*, 1982

Wood, acrylic, laminate, plastic beads, and plastic gems

14 × 7 × 9 in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Jimmy Wright 2018.90
11. *Last Two Million Years*, 1984

Acrylic paint, faux pearls, bracelets, and brooches on wood

70½ × 40 in.

Collection of Gigi Ferrante
12. *The V Shape*, 1983

Oil and acrylic on wood

48 × 23 in.

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg
13. *The Future Reflected*, 1984

Faux pearls, plastic jewels, and acrylic on moiré silk

40 × 40 in.

Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College
14. *Travel by Sea*, c. 1984

Acrylic on papier-mâché with costume jewelry on wood

31 × 37 × 21 in.

JPMorganChase Art Collection
15. *A Form of Levitation*, 1984

Faux pearls, plastic jewels, and acrylic on moiré silk

40 × 40 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly

16. *Just Now*, 1984–85

Faux pearls, acrylic paint, and wood

40 × 40 in.

Collection of Brooke Adams and Tony Shalhoub
17. *Lamp in Other Light*, 1982

Faux pearls, acrylic, and rhinestones on canvas

16 × 20 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago
18. *June*, 1982

Faux pearls, costume jewels, glass, and acrylic on papier-mâché

17½ × 19 × 22 in.

Collection of Michael Kohn and Caroline Styne, Los Angeles
19. *Taurus (Pearl Homes)*, 1984

Faux pearls on wood

12½ × 15 × 12 in.

Collection of Jay Farina and Michael Lighty. Courtesy Pavel Zoubok Fine Art
20. *Cocaine Mesa*, 1980

Mixed media on wooden frame

55 × 46 × 29 in.

Collection of Bill Stelling and Bill Siroty
21. *Icon Uncut*, 1990

Collage on canvas

14 × 11 in.

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg
22. *(Icon) Perfect Curve*, 1984

Collage on canvas

11 × 9 in.

Collection of Jimmy Wright

IV.

In the late 1980s, an invitation to exhibit in Milan brought Connelly into direct encounter with the devotional, often erotic imagery of ancient European painting, prompting the artist to reimagine the “icon” as a living, contemporary form. Connelly began publicly showing a series of collages he had been developing privately, featuring explicit imagery pulled from pornographic magazines. He referred to these pieces as his “modern-day religious art”—a designation that held the sacred and the profane in deliberate, charged proximity. Connelly’s friend, the late artist Jeff Perrone, recalled the raw materials used for these elaborate, collaged compositions, writing of multiple yard-high piles of file folders in Connelly’s studio, with thousands of clippings from flower-seed and jewelry catalogues.

These works were, by all accounts, eagerly sought by collectors and equally refused by institutions, given their unabashed and indulgently explicit content. One of the collages exhibited here, *Local Boy*, appeared on the front cover of *Artforum* magazine in 1991. In her editor’s letter accompanying the issue, Ida Panicelli condemned the growing censorship campaign led by senator Jesse Helms against publicly funded art.

23. *Local Boy*, 1990

Collage on panel with wooden frame

14 × 10 in.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Second Century Acquisition Fund for Contemporary Art, 2025.44
24. *Porn Collage*, 1989

Collage of found magazine, sequins, and glitter

10¾ × 8¼ in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Jimmy Wright 2018.92
25. *Home*, 1986

Collage on wood

15 × 16 in.

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg

V.

The pearl-web works occupy a precise position within the artistic currents of their time. Stringing together white pearls in configurations that deflate the geometric grid, repeatable structures refracted through what Connelly himself described as abstraction “with homosexual ideas”—these works claim Minimalism’s visual language while fundamentally subverting its logic. At times the strings exceed the frame altogether, hanging loose, surrendering to gravity in a gesture Connelly explicitly linked to Eva Hesse’s hanging sculptures for their dissolution of rigid form into drooping, bodily matter. The pearl webs combine the construction of a recognizable image with its undoing, drawn from Connelly’s sustained interest in the seductions of luxury, a force which attracts and ensnares in the same motion. At a moment when the HIV crisis was approaching its peak, these works read as a memento mori, and a reflection on the entrapping nature of desire.

26. *Ashes and Diamonds*, 1982

Pearls, strings, acrylic, and wood

36 in. diam.

Collection of Donald Capoccia
27. *Murnau*, 1981

Faux pearls, strings, acrylic, and wood

23¼ × 9½ in.

Cherňajovsky Collection
28. *Luxury (Web)*, 1982

Mixed media on canvas

31 × 25¼ in.

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg
29. *Luxury Web*, 1991

Faux pearls, string, gesso, and wood

27 × 23 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly

VI.

Throughout the late 1980s, Connelly worked weekend brunch shifts as a chef at Everybody’s, an East Village café, known for its lively communal atmosphere. At the end of each shift, he collected the eggshells left over from the kitchen and carried them back to his studio, where they became one of the defining materials of his artistic practice. Eggshells appear throughout

his work in subtle accumulations, scattered across frames and dispersed over surfaces, but their most concentrated presence emerges in a series of geometric wall works where they overtake the picture plane entirely, coating the canvas in a second skin. Reduced to the natural white of the shell against black or cream backgrounds, these compositions are precise in form and charged in symbolic value, conjuring the fragility of life’s early stages, the shattering of protections and the potential for new life.

30. *Untitled*, 1989–90

Acrylic and eggshells on canvas

15 × 28 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly
31. *Untitled*, 1991

Acrylic and eggshells on canvas

48 in. diam.

Collection of Marc B. Porter
32. *Nightfall*, 1990

Acrylic, gesso, and eggshells on canvas

62 × 16½ in.

Collection of Domenico and Eleanore De Sole
33. *Sex with Monkeys*, 1990

Eggshells and acrylic on plywood

48 in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly
34. *Untitled*, c. 1990

Faux pearls, silver leaf, glass, and acrylic on papier-mâché

24 × 36 × 24 in.

Private collection
35. *Chip*, 1982

Acrylic, faux pearls, and costume jewelry on papier-mâché

28 × 29 × 24 in.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Jimmy Wright, 2016.76a-b

VII.

As Connelly moved to shed the “pearl artist” label that had begun to define him, he embraced glitter and sequins in a series of oversize, clichéd smileys that borrow freely from the graffiti visual lexicon circulating through Fun Gallery in the early 1980s. Where pearls glamorize and accrue, demanding patience and precision in their placement, glitter and sequins move more freely across a surface—lending the faces an expressive looseness. Each work carries a distinct character, named for a specific mood or person—*Pissed*, *Not Envy*—which Connelly described as reflections of specific members of his community, though their exact identities remain unknown.

36. *Moan*, 1991

Acrylic and glitter on canvas

20 × 20 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly
37. *Not Envy*, 1991

Glitter on canvas

16½ in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly

38. *Pissed*, 1991

Glitter, sequins, and glue on canvas

16½ in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly
39. *Untitled (Square Smiley)*, 1991

Acrylic, glitter, and gesso on plywood with wooden frame

15 × 15 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago
40. David Hirsh

Interview with Artist Arch Connelly, c. 1993

Video displayed on monitor

David Hirsh Tapes, Visual AIDS Archive, New York

VIII.

Vehicles are a recurrent motif in Connelly’s oeuvre. Working with both ready-made forms, such as toy cars, as well as hand-built papier-mâché substructures, he subjected their surfaces to the same obsessive accumulation of faux pearls and gems applied elsewhere in his practice. Surreal in their anti-functional, excessive decor and design, these objects speak not only of Connelly’s pursuit of beauty in everyday items, but also of a symbolic attachment to velocity and travel as stand-ins for moving between places, ultimately a form of transformation and self-reinvention. *Helmet* is a unique sculpture among the works in this section, commissioned as a gift to publisher and editor-in-chief of *Forbes Magazine*, Malcolm Forbes, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday.

41. *Travel by Air*, 1984

Acrylic on papier-mâché with costume jewelry on wood

10 × 40 × 49½ in.

JPMorganChase Art Collection
42. *Helmet*, 1989

Mixed media on motorcycle helmet

13 × 10 × 11 in.

Chicago Collection of Dr. Daniel S. Berger
43. *Untitled (Barbie Dream Car)*, c. 1980s

Faux pearls on toy car

6½ × 18 × 8 in.

Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

IX.

By every account, Connelly was consummately stylish with a flare for captivating attire. He attended drag parties, including Wigstock, as a blonde—Monique—and it was common for him to liven up a party by improvising an outfit pulled directly from the host’s closet. Unsurprisingly, that same instinct carried directly into his studio. Whereas the moiré silk of his early pieces was approached as a background in the construction of figurative pictures, the lace and voile that feature in his work of the mid-’80s assume a complex, layered pattern, foregrounding the material itself as subject. Within the Renaissance form of the tondo, Connelly invokes his Mannerist forebears, including Jacopo Pontormo, whose compositions were characterized by lush, billowing fabrics that fold and envelop.

44. *Pleasure*, 1986

Lace, beads, and glue on wooden frame

47 in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Agosto Machado
45. *Formal Garden*, 1986

Faux pearls, eggshells, jewels, beads, fabrics, acrylic, and wood

70 × 30 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly
46. *What a Life*, 1986

Faux pearls, plastic jewels, magazine clippings, fabric, and chains

42 in. diam.

Courtesy the Estate of Arch Connelly

X.

Connelly described his oval self-portraits as formal devices which engage both the elliptical abstractions of Larry Poons and the chromatic geometries of Sonia Delaunay. The two self-portraits presented here belong to different moments in Connelly’s career, yet within the sequence of this exhibition they function as a single concluding gesture. Portraying no face, it is as though Connelly’s own image has been absorbed into the eternal shimmer of his art.

47. *Self-Portrait*, 1981

Acrylic and faux pearls on canvas

20 in. oval

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Michael Connelly and daughters, 2012
48. *Blurry Self-Portrait*, 1987

Sequins on wood

20 × 26 in.

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg
49. *Straighten Your Wig and Pray*, 1987

Faux pearls, acrylic paint on wood

21 × 8 × 1 in.

Collection of Matthew Nichols and Sebastian Li

On landing:

50. Arch Connelly

International Style Seating Arrangement, 1985

Pennies on wood

49 × 24 × 9 in.

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg
51. Roberto Juarez

AC, 1975

Music by Norman Morgan, 2025

Video displayed on monitor

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg
- Richard Goldstein

Gigi Ferrante in Remembering Arch Connelly, 2012

Video displayed on monitor, 3 min., 8 sec.

© 2026 Richard Goldstein

- Lisa Rovner

Arch Connelly: Art in Drag, 2026

Video displayed on monitor, 5 min.

Commissioned by Aspen Art Museum

With thanks to Roberto Juarez and Visual AIDS Archive
52. Roberto Juarez

Archie with Blue Hair, 1977

Polaroid

3½ × 3½ in.

Collection of Roberto Juarez and David Freberg

ARCH CONNELLY AND DAVID HIRSH IN CONVERSATION

Arch: Carbondale, Illinois. 1968 was when I went to college. I liked to cross-dress from a very young age. When I was in high school, I would wear my mother’s fur coat from the ’40s, with big, big sleeves and shoulders. My mom didn’t freak out. She questioned it, but I was pushy enough, I guess.

David: Who made an impact on you in art school? Warhol? After school in the Midwest, you transplanted yourself to San Francisco for almost a decade, where you did a lot to bring out and sharpen ideas of a drag aesthetic.

Arch: I specifically wanted to move to San Francisco and not make art for a while because I figured that I was really not ready to make professional art yet. I fell in with a crowd that turned out to be the Angels of Light, the Cockettes, and a bunch of other nutty drag queens. I would make their costumes, their sets, and I learned a great deal. It made me realize that sculpture is furniture. Paintings are sets. Once you break down the high art-low art continuum, this constant bickering, it doesn’t matter.

Everything had to be free. Free. Period. The costumes had to be taken out of a dumpster. We knew where to find all the best garbage. The only thing we invested in was glitter and paint. I remember when they had a ton of glitter delivered to the Winter Palace. The women who lived upstairs were complaining about getting glitter in their cunts. Scenes like that are really, really beautiful, and they’re really good.

Woolworth’s was an integral part of [our] society. We used to shoplift in Woolworth’s, and we all got welfare checks, and there was a checking-cashing place in the back of the store. You’d say, “meet me at Woolworth’s,” you’d meet your friends [there], and you’d go to coffee somewhere and have pastries. This is before everything closed at four or five in the afternoon, when you’ve just gotten up. Somebody would get a prescription for Quaaludes, and then we’d all go to the Stud, which was the bar of choice at the time.

David: A good share of the artists of that generation who were living in New York seemed to wind up at Studio 54 on a regular basis.

Arch: This was pre-Mudd Club, which is where it all turned on, I think. Where it became downtown. It became funky. The Super 8 scene came out of that; the whole East Village [scene] came out of the Mudd Club. It was very different from Studio; smaller, more personal. You want to have a show here? What day? Your band wants to perform here? Fine. All the big artists, all the really great artists, came out of the Mudd Club.

David: A lot of people showed there. Zoe Leonard showed there, I think, for a while. David Wonjarowicz, Martin Wong.

Arch: Keith [Haring] curated the “Beyond Words” show, which was key for the graffiti movement. It was just a big mix. That’s where Ann Magnuson was hanging. It was very, very important, though nobody knew that at the time. Nan [Goldin] showed *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* there. Duncan Smith did his voiceovers explaining *Sunset Boulevard*. Becky Johnston and all these semiotics people would leave their brains at home and have a good time.

David: Let’s go back a tiny bit. Within a year after arriving in New York in 1980, you had your first New York solo show at Artists Space. I’d like to talk a little bit about your statement that you Xeroxed on pink paper. It was basically a declaration of gay art, declaring that your art was gay, gay, gay all the way.

Arch: What’s the quote? “Gay art for gay people.” If straight people are interested in it, that’s fine, but I’m basically making it for gay people. It defined what I wanted to do.

David: What was the Fun gallery like? Who were the personalities?

Arch: Well, Patty Astor and Bill Stelling. That was it. If you were a friend of theirs, you were in the East Village. It was on 11th Street in a basement. Jane Dixon showed there the first season. Also Fred Brathwaite (Fab 5 Freddy) and Zephyr. Kenny [Scharf] showed there. Keith Haring showed there. I showed there, Jean-Michel [Basquiat] showed there. It was very much like an extension of the Mudd Club to me because it was completely democratic. You wanted to go to the Fun Gallery? You could go and talk to Bruno Bischofberger, even if you were a 12-year-old graffiti writer. That was cool. Fun Gallery had that over everybody else.

David: When you started to make artwork as a professional in New York, were you beginning with an idea that there was such a thing as a gay aesthetic, such a thing as gay art, or is that something that developed as you did the artwork? How do you define camp?

Arch: It’s impossible to define. Camp is an amorphous concept, but it has to do with saying, “you think this is ugly? I think this is pretty. I’m going to show you that this has other ideas.” It’s surrealistic in the way it turns things around.

David: Correct.

Arch: I think there was a lot of rampant homosexuality in the surrealistic movement. To couch it in our historical things is, I don’t know, I guess it goes back to Prince Ludwig, overdoing things.

David: One of the interesting things about the net, in the context of when it was created, is that it’s almost like a take on all of the minimalist grids.

Arch: By ’79, ’80, we were coming out of Minimalism, the final art of the 20th century. Well, break down the grid, make it in pearls, let it hang there.

David: Let me ask one more question about the East Village. As the media became more and more entranced with it, how did you start feeling about all the attention the East Village began getting?

Arch: All of a sudden, there were television cameras everywhere and people interviewing you. Holly [Solomon] and big 57th Street gallery owners coming over to your studio and wanting to buy work, bringing collectors over. It was very exciting. In retrospect, I think that none of us should have gone with any of those galleries. We should have stayed there, because very few people came out of the East Village that were really successful, I think. If we had stayed there, we could have developed even more, whereas I think we lost a great deal because the big-time art dealers did exactly what they wanted to do. They hated the East Village. They came in and they destroyed it.

David: Did you start getting museum shows in Europe during the course of those years?

Arch: Oh, yeah. There were a lot of museum shows all over America that were basically about the East Village scene, big group shows, because it was a hot property.

In Italy, I saw a lot of religious paintings, and they’re very simplistically done. Early Catholic paintings show the Madonna and child ascending into heaven with the moon, the stars, and a bunch of *putti*. I thought, oh, I should make modern-day religious art.

David: Icons.

Arch: Icons. Canonize the saints we have today, which would be in porn. [In collage], the complete image is being stolen, and all you’re doing is putting it together. You’re assembling it. And it worked.

David: Were they ever shown?

Arch: In Paris, but other than that, no. Well, then there was the *Artforum* cover.

David: That famous cover.

Arch: It’s not a full-frontal nude, but certainly had the punch of one in the media. That was a bit of a scandal. I think that was probably one of the reasons why one of the editors, Ida Panicelli, was fired, though the issue sold out.

David: In fact, didn’t that issue sell more than any other issue?

Arch: Tony Corner, the publisher and owner of *Artforum*, was very nervous about it. Then he went to Germany. People were raving to him, “This is the best thing you’ve ever done.”

They’re looking at this thing in the magazine stands in the airport. Nothing came of it. I didn’t become famous, I didn’t become rich. I still have the piece; it hasn’t sold. Nobody’s been running over to buy the work. I didn’t get a show. It’s what it was, and that was very satisfying. It helped to create a historic moment when gay and lesbian representation in art was opened for the first time in Western history. ■

This conversation between David Hirsh and Arch Connelly is an edited transcription from an original recording, c. 1993. The full version is located in the David Hirsh Tapes, Visual AIDS Archive, New York.

David Hirsh was a prolific art critic from 1990 to 1994, writing about gay and lesbian art for the *New York Native* and the *Bay Area Reporter*. A collection of 600 audio and video interviews he recorded during this time are preserved in the Visual AIDS Archive in New York, which Hirsh cofounded in 1994 with the artist Frank Moore.

Aspen Art Museum

637 East Hyman Avenue
Aspen, Colorado 81611
aspenartmuseum.org
(970) 925-8050

Hours
Tuesday–Sunday, 10 AM–6 PM
Closed Mondays

Admission to the AAM is free courtesy of Amy and John Phelan.

Arch Connelly: Straighten Your Wig and Pray is curated by Stella Bottai, Senior Curator-at-Large, with Daniel Merritt, Chief Curator. Archival research organized by Gemma Goette, Curatorial Assistant, and Simone Krug, Curator. Exhibition design developed in collaboration with director and set designer Fabio Cherstich. Special thanks to Kevin Haynie, Adam Voss, Sarah Lili Frey, and Andrea Colombo.

Exhibition guide texts by Stella Bottai, Daniel Merritt, and Gemma Goette.

This exhibition was developed in close collaboration with a wide community of individuals who knew Arch Connelly and have contributed to the preservation and legacy of his work.

Special thanks to the Visual AIDS Archive, New York.

Arch Connelly: Straighten Your Wig and Pray is made possible by generous support from Maison Valentino.

VALENTINO

Major support is provided by Aspen Art Museum Exhibition Circle, with special thanks to Daniel English, Nancy Magoon, H. Gael Neeson, Cecilia and Ernesto Poma, Katie and Amnon Rodan, Allison Rose, Gayle Stoffel, and Mary Zlot.

Additional support is provided by J.P. Morgan Private Bank.

General exhibition support is provided by the Toby Devan Lewis Visiting Artist Fund. Additional support is provided by Aspen Art Museum National Council. Support for artists is made possible by the Beckmann Kotzubei Artist Residency Fund. Aspen Art Museum exhibitions are made possible by the Marx Exhibition Fund.



Download the Bloomberg Connects app to view our digital exhibition guides.