

Common Place

collective housing in the bluegrass

Caleb O. Sears

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Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
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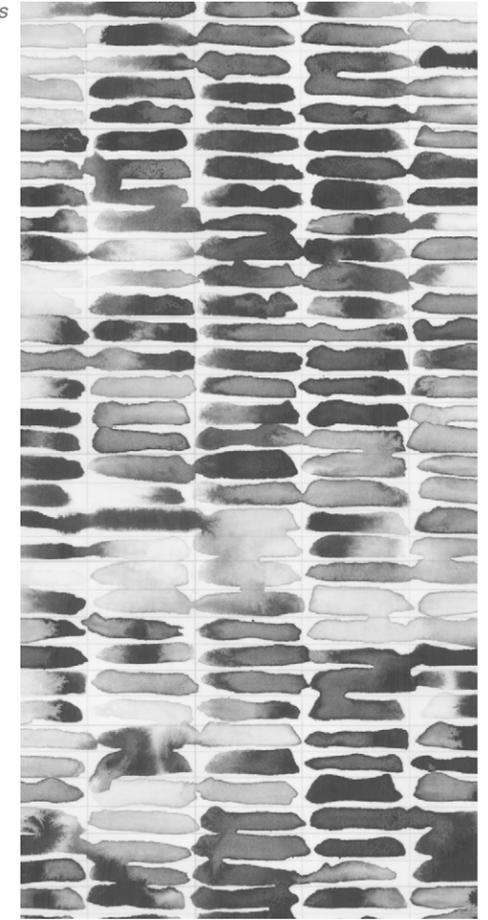
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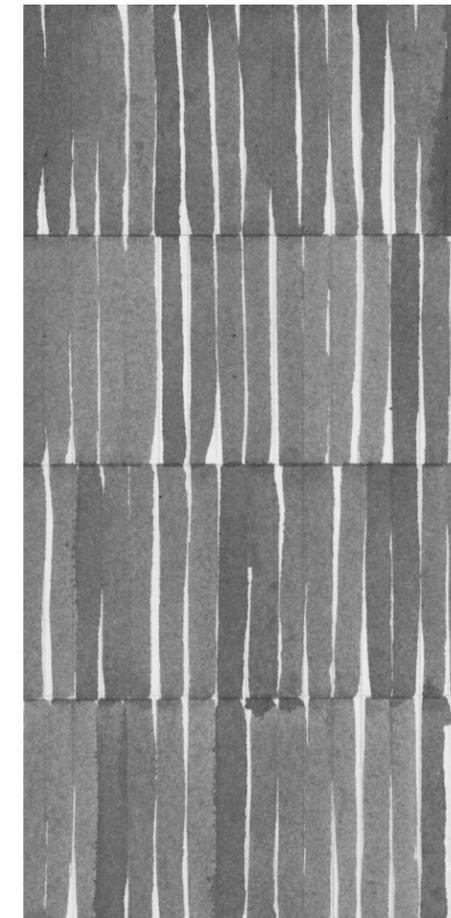
Abstract

This thesis proposes new housing for migrant farm workers outside of Harrodsburg, Kentucky. The housing complex deals with architecture's relationship to place and community while providing a dignified dwelling, imparting a sense of permanence and home to a constantly moving population. The complex deals with place through a connection to the regional built and natural context. By externally revealing programmatic relationships through massing and allowing individual housing units to assert themselves within the collective, the complex becomes an interconnected housing cluster that is neither house nor barn. It instead imparts the image of a small village or settlement, the essence of community.

*"The eye of the man who sees wide horizons is prouder, wide horizons confer dignity..."
Le Corbusier, Precisions*



dedicated to my parents
thank you for everything



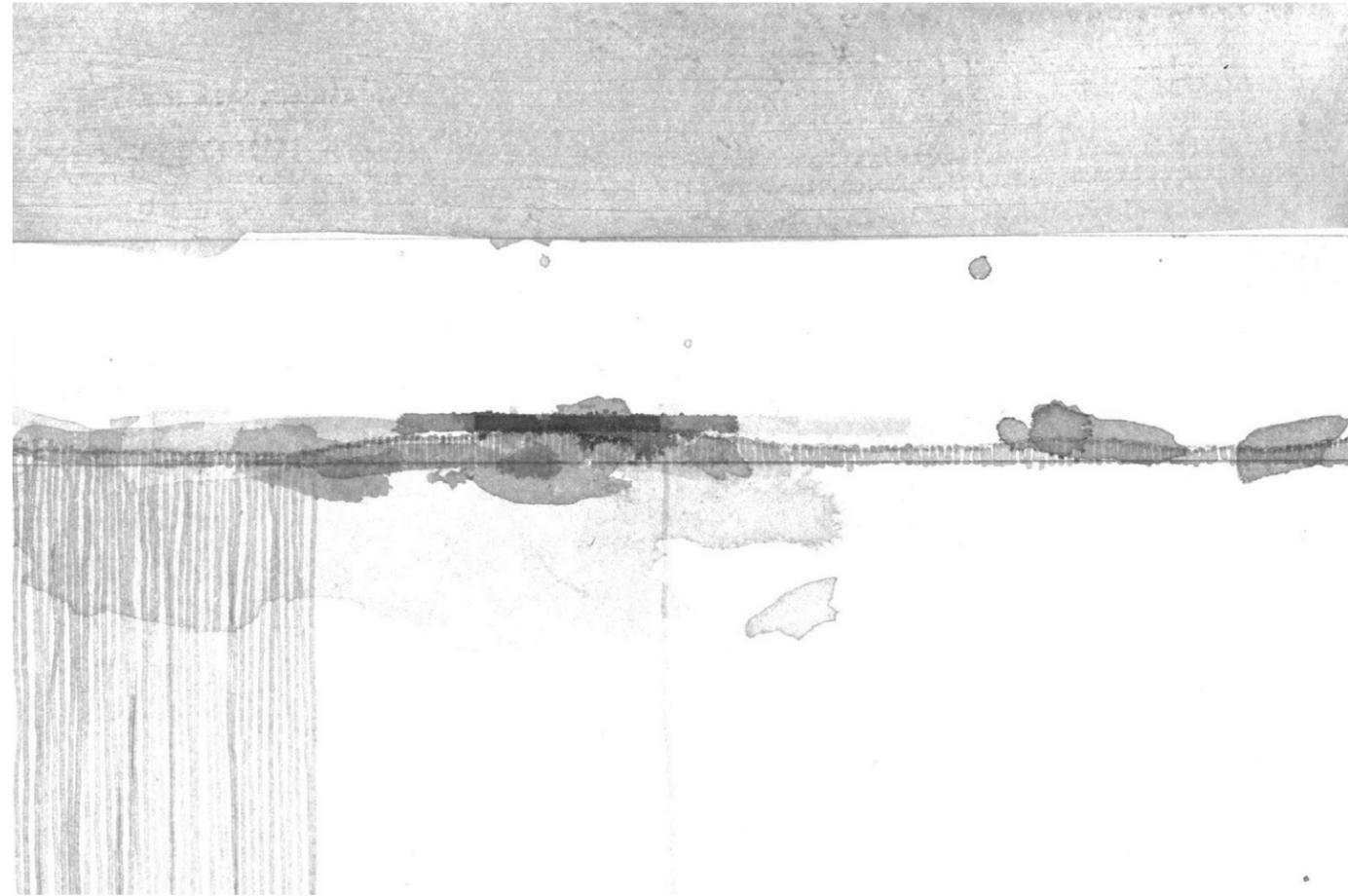
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opposite: object within horizon



opposite: complex within horizon



This thesis deals with architecture's relationship to place, the collective, and context through the programmatic filter of migrant worker housing.

The area around Lexington, Kentucky consists of gently rolling hills populated by horse farms and farms growing corn, tobacco, soybeans, and other crops. Winding roads meander through the agricultural landscape and are closely bounded on both sides by endless walls of stacked limestone and black plank fences. Barns and houses populate the landscape. Larger farms are delineated by sprawling compounds of shed-roofed outbuildings, pitched-roof larger barns, dome-capped silos, and recurrently expanded farmhouses, all at varying stages of use and decline. Most of the barns are sealed with matte black creosote, at times articulated with contrasting ventilator flaps, topped by silver corrugated metal roofs often succumbing to rust.

This thesis contends that the natural and built beauty of this topographic landscape can play an integral part in the architecture. The proposed building complex takes cues from regional vernacular formal elements such as the iconic shape of shelter conveyed by the pitched roof or the archetypal image of past human habitation seen in the lone stone chimney, and these elements' relationship to and with the landscape. The housing compound is sited on the crest of a hill to engage the wide, dynamic horizon. Thus, the thesis explores transience as a factor of both the nature of the program and the architecture itself. This thesis proposes that building in the Bluegrass region has a dual responsibility to the landscape- firstly, as an obligation to outwardly contextualize the architecture as built landscape (how one views the building from the road) and secondly, as internally connecting to the



Field
Harrodsburg, Kentucky

landscape through controlled views (how one views the landscape from the building). By using the model of the simple vernacular forms as "contextual camouflage", the building becomes part of the local context, another building cluster enveloped by the fluctuating meniscus of the horizon.

The thesis seeks a balance between communal and private spaces. One way in which this is revealed is in the external form of the housing complex. The enclave is sited on a flat plane above a pond fed by a small stream and accessed by a winding tree-covered road. When first seen from a distance, a collection of pitched roofs articulates the community when first seen from a distance, projecting an iconic image of a small housing cluster or compound. Wider roofs run the length of the complex, defining the public spaces, while smaller, steeper roofs are rotated perpendicularly to the longitudinal axis of the building, defining private spaces. This simple move differentiates individual houses within the collective. As one moves closer to the compound, the linear form of the aggregate resolves to reveal a shifted line. A breezeway connector divides the housing between the transient workers, usually single men, and the more permanent workers, families and children. At the nexus of this joint lie the main communal spaces.

The complex revolves around the basic needs of the migrant worker. It is divided into four main programs; a communal area for cooking and eating (including indoor and outdoor areas for each), shared bathing areas (for normal bathing as well as washing organic and industrial toxins and poisons off of the body), covered parking, and two types of private residential areas. One wing of the workers' quarters is designed for

semi-permanent, four-seasons occupation by a worker and his/her family. These larger apartments are adjusted for both cold and hot weather habitation. The other wing of smaller apartments is designed for temporary occupation by a single transient worker and modified for only hot weather occupancy.

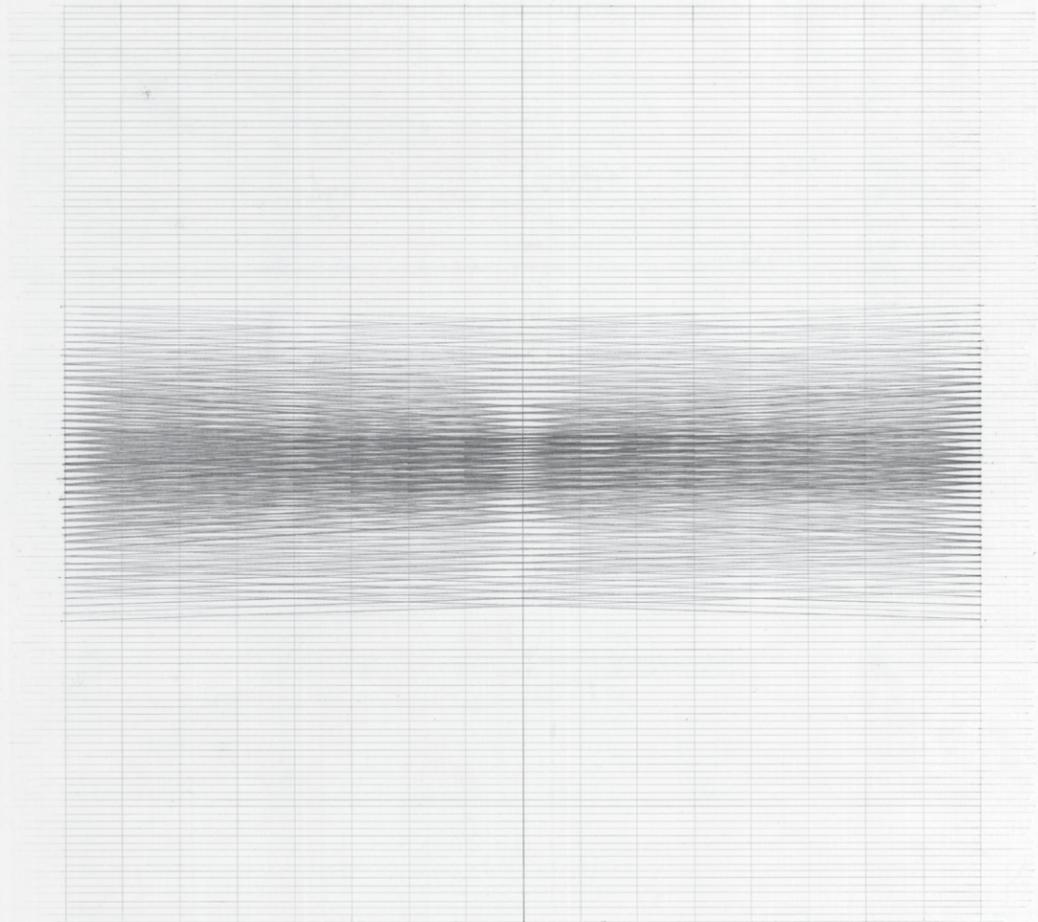
At the core of the thesis is a desire to bring a sense of permanence to the constantly changing life of the migrant worker. Areas are set aside for storage, providing an incentive to unpack one's belongings. The spaces are minimal and kept bare, with large windows to visually connect the occupant to the landscape and allow light and air. The minimal intrusion of the space upon the lives of the occupants is conducive to making one's own place, such as through the display of personal effects or other items. For example, the mantle in the permanent workers' living rooms provides space for a small television, stack of firewood, and hearth while allocating a horizontal surface and adjacent wall as space for photographs and other icons. The icons allow a connection to home while the hearth provides a connection to place.

The neutrality of the spaces also reflects the transient nature of the inhabitants, in which one occupant will move on and another will take his place. Neutrality is equally reflected in the exterior of the complex, allowing the architecture to settle quietly into the landscape. It is defined by a palette of white and gray concrete, stucco, and corrugated metal, and remains materially ambiguous when seen from afar. The complex strives to become a familiar intervention in the landscape through a mannerist approach- taking certain features, such as roofs, chimneys, and doors, from the local vernacular building stock and re-appropriating them in novel ways. The complex asserts its singularity, yet is of its place.



site panorama



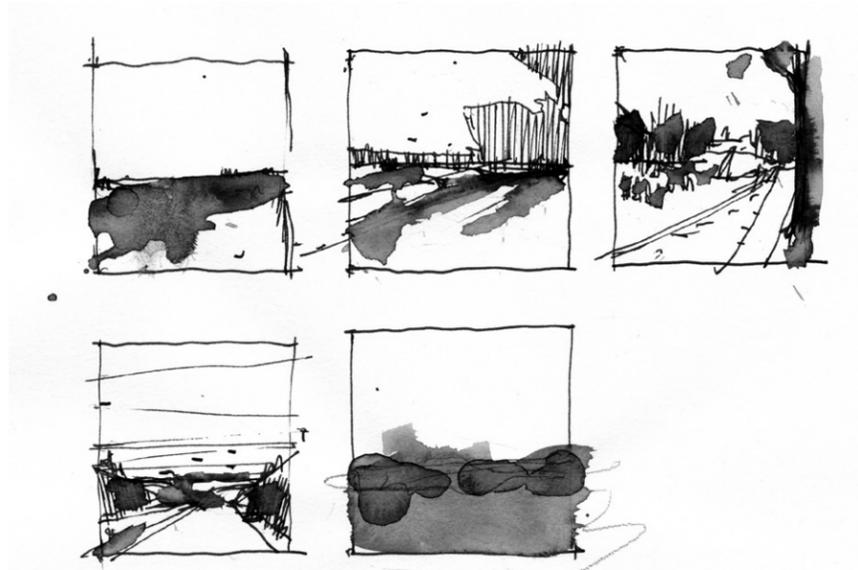


above: study of horizon
opposite: building with enclosed courtyard

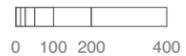
The idea of the object in the landscape has defined the thesis from its inception. The study above depicts the visual density where sky meets land, made more apparent through the effects of space and perspective in a subtly dynamic landscape. The complex was envisioned as an intervention at the meeting point of the two planes, a minimal white rectilinear mediator.

The complex becomes a stable constant in a changing landscape.

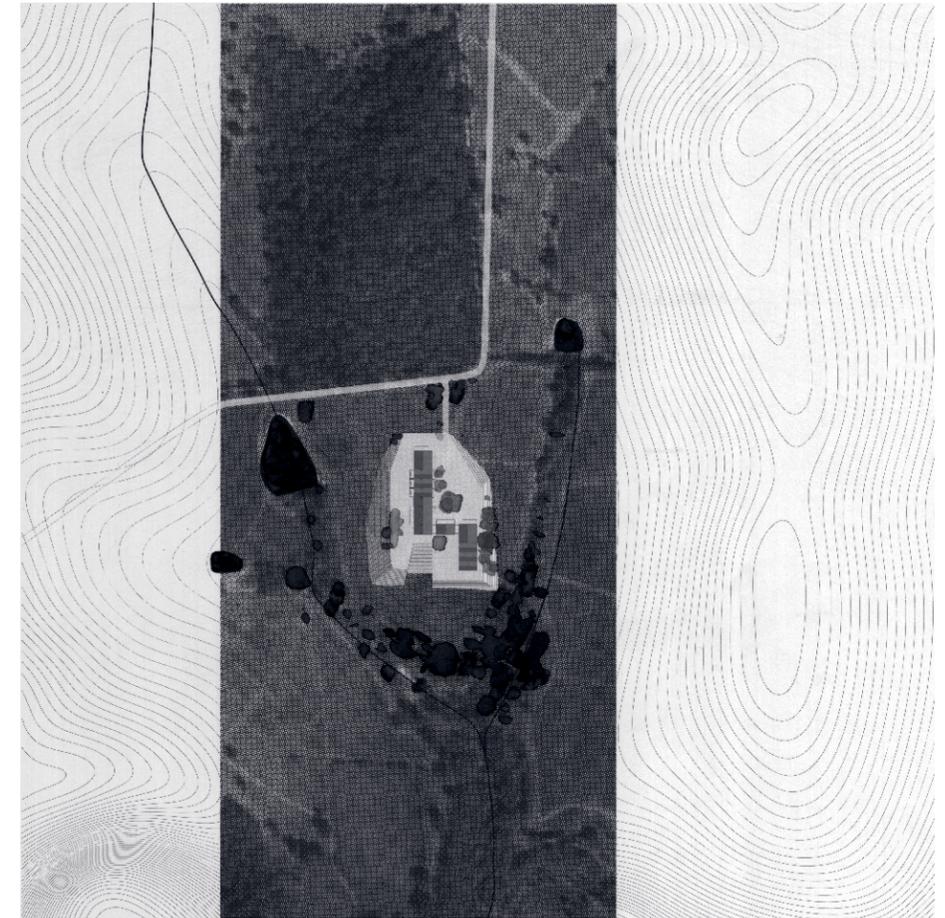


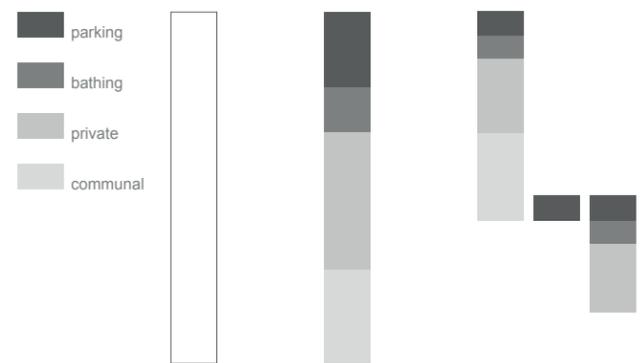


above, top: approaching site
 above, bottom: west elevation with trees
 opposite: site plan



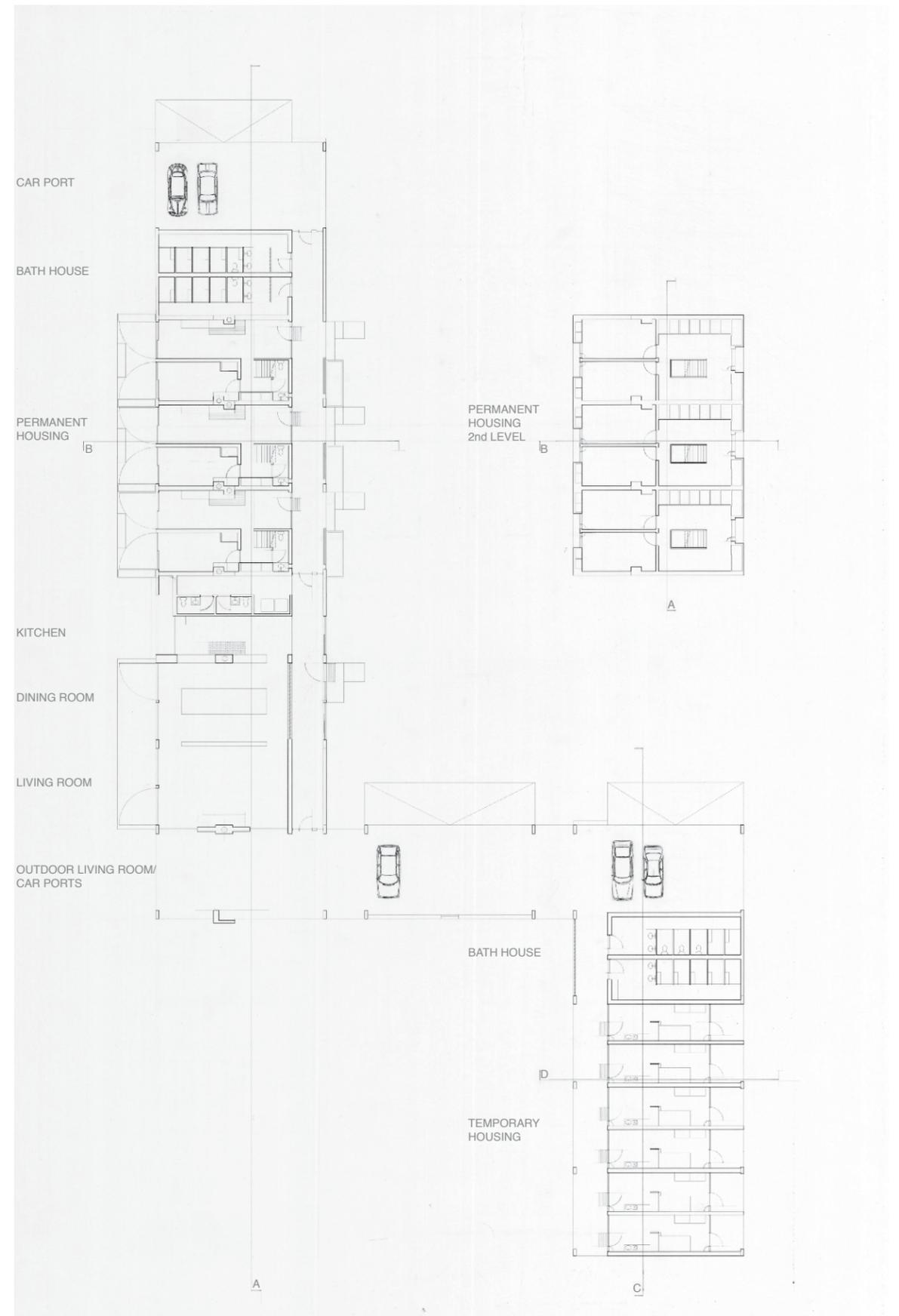
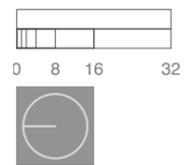
Due to the gradual slope of the site and the length of the building, a plinth is constructed to allow the building to maintain continuity from the main road to the end of the temporary worker housing. The plinth is carved away to create sloping lawns, berms, and ramps that bring the existing landscape up to the building.

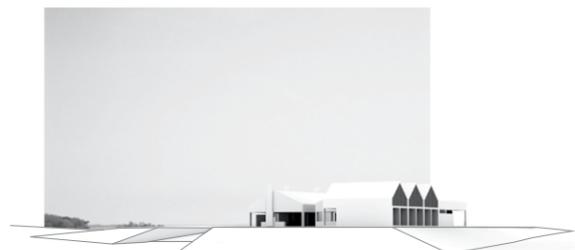
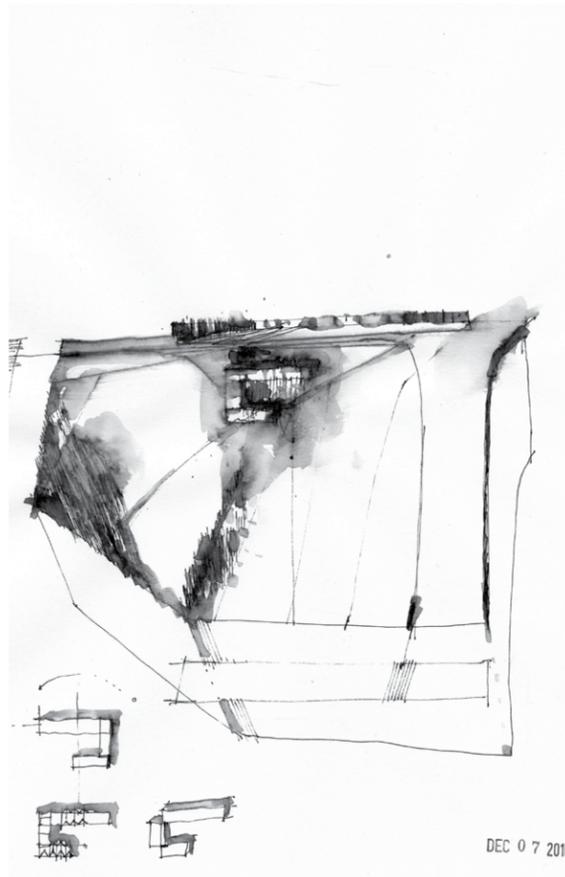




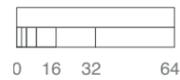
above: diagram of functional layout
opposite: ground floor plan of public and private organization

The complex takes its linear offset form from several factors- separating the temporary and permanent workers, creating accessible covered parking, and producing a settlement-type form in the landscape. A single linear form (a stretched barn form) was first explored, along with an enclosed "u" shaped courtyard layout, but these iterations did not provide the mix of privacy and community required for the intended program.





above, left: preliminary site
 above, right: west ramp
 opposite: garden plan



On the north face of the plinth, a lawn leads from the permanent worker housing to the lake. The western face is carved away to provide a large ramp that allows access to a creek from the communal rooms and creates a more private lawn for the temporary workers. The southern face is carved away to create a steeper berm, allowing large shade trees to passively cool the temporary worker housing by filtering breezes through canopies.

The plinth is dotted by areas of shade. From the road, one enters a large courtyard, open to the south. A large central tree defines this main communal open space; smaller trees shade the facades of the building. The south facade of the permanent worker housing is allowed extra shade by these trees which also defines individual front yards for each of the tenants. The north facade produces its own shade and is kept clear to allow views of the lake and natural light to penetrate the interior of the living spaces. Each house has its own yard.



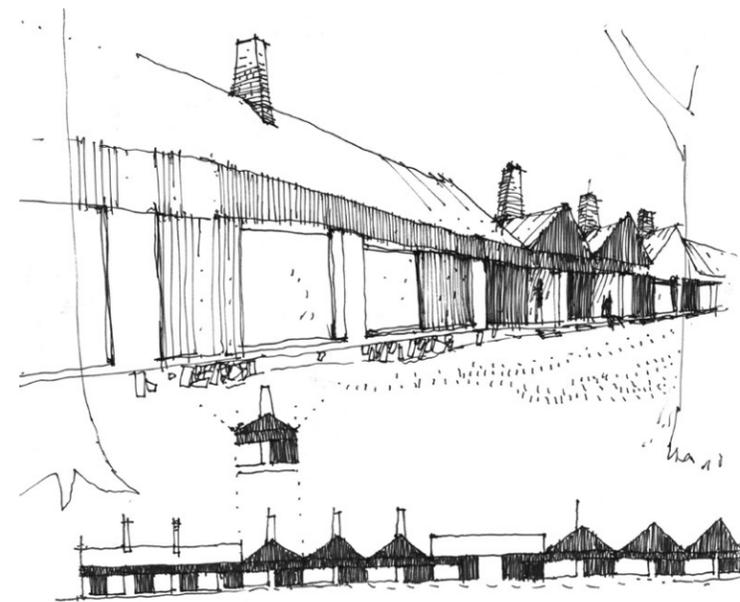
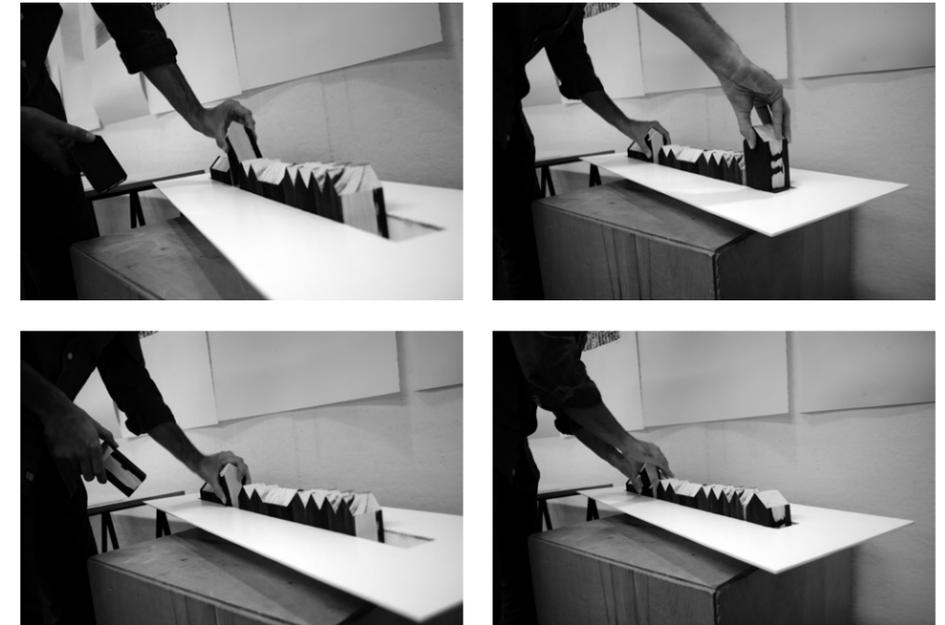


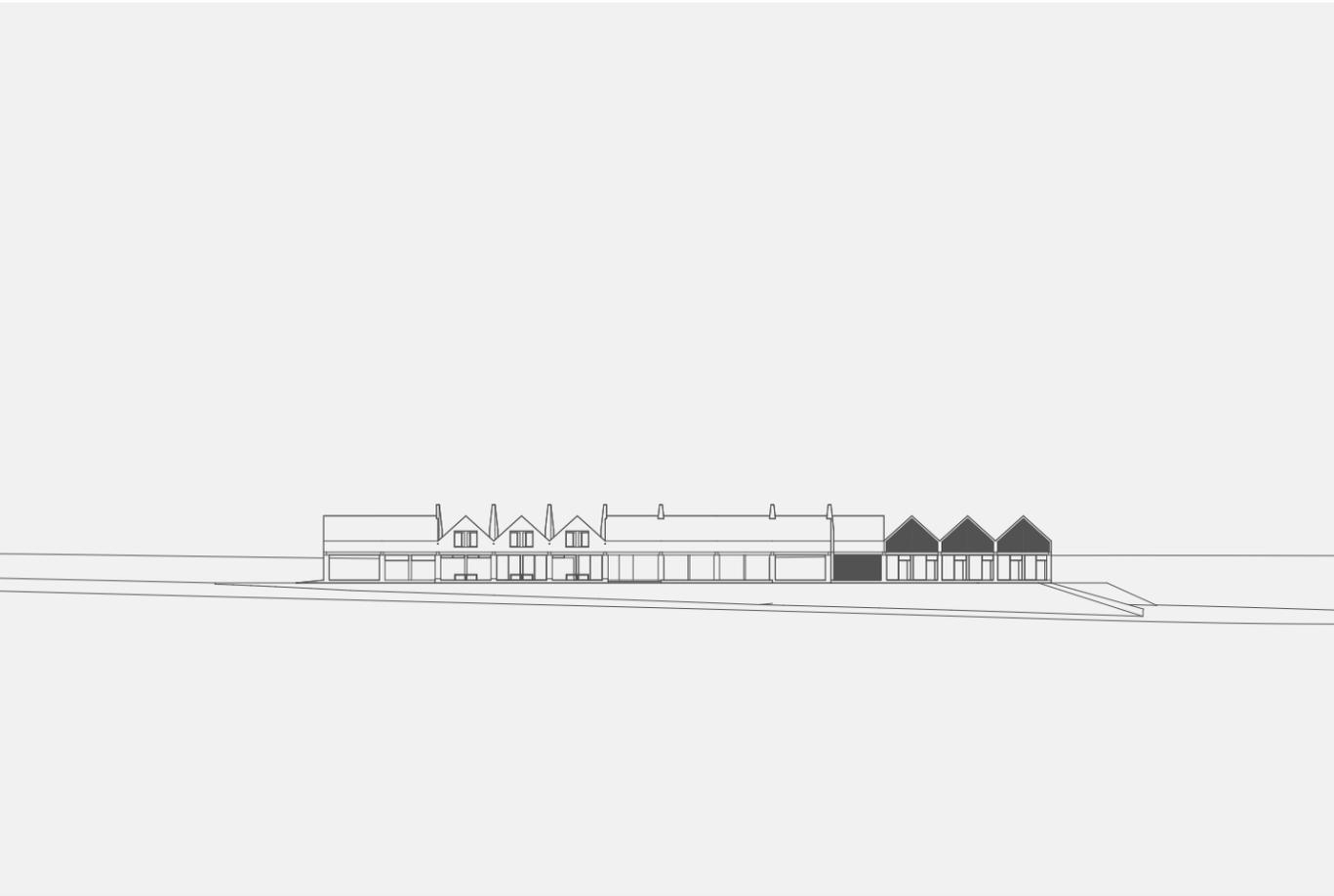
above: modular study model

opposite, top: modular study model used to test programmatic adjacencies

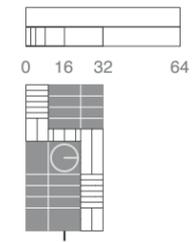
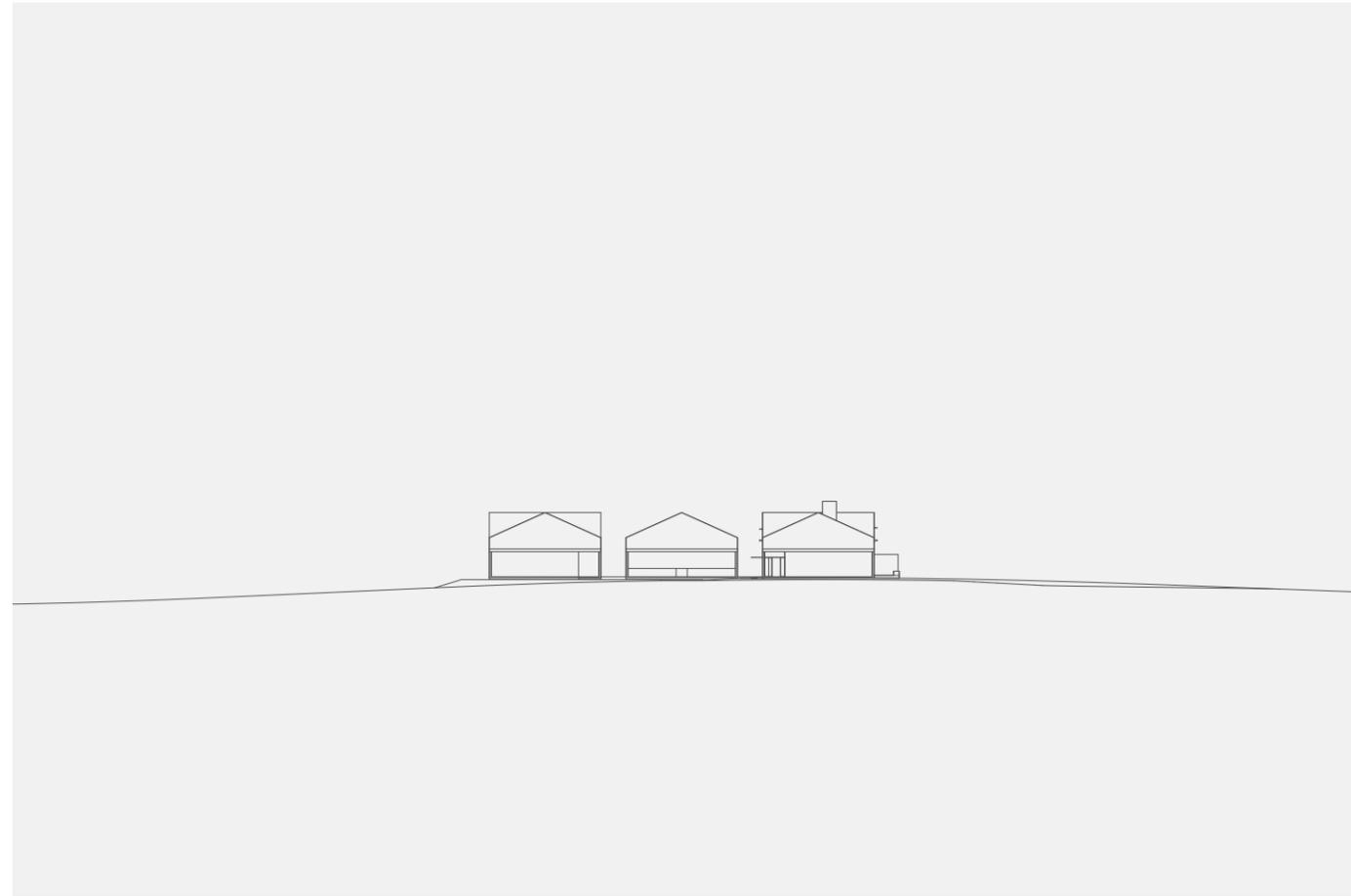
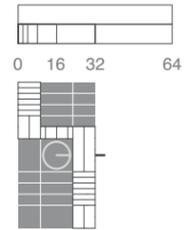
opposite, bottom: preliminary sketch

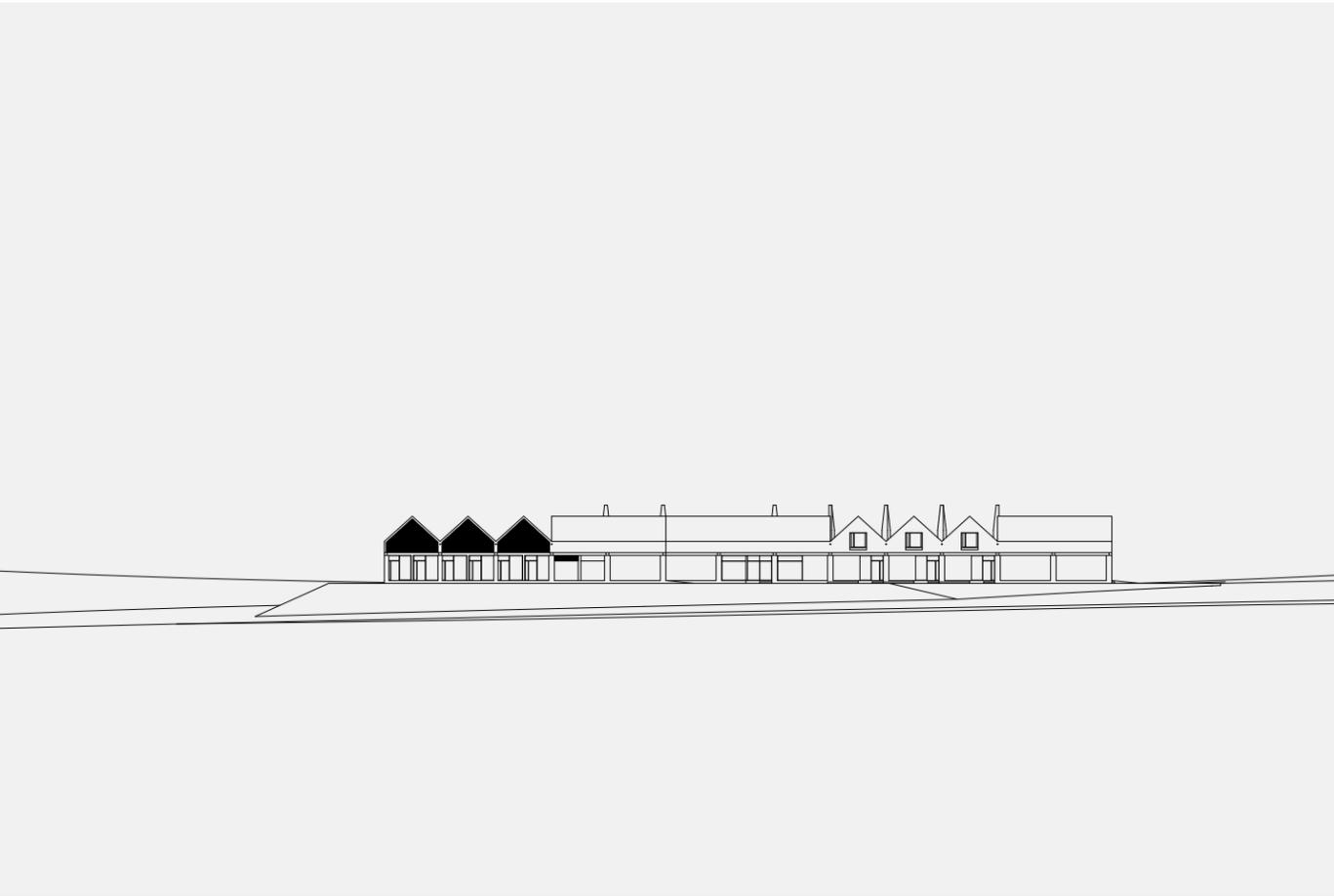
Envisioned as a single, unbroken line of housing units cloaked in creosote camouflage, the model mimicked the context- the building fits in with the local vernacular, but who wants to live in a barn?
By manipulating the roofline and discarding the traditional color palette, the complex distances itself from purely agricultural connotations while sharing basic forms with the vernacular.



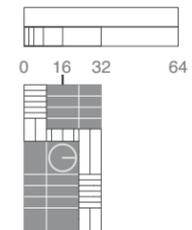
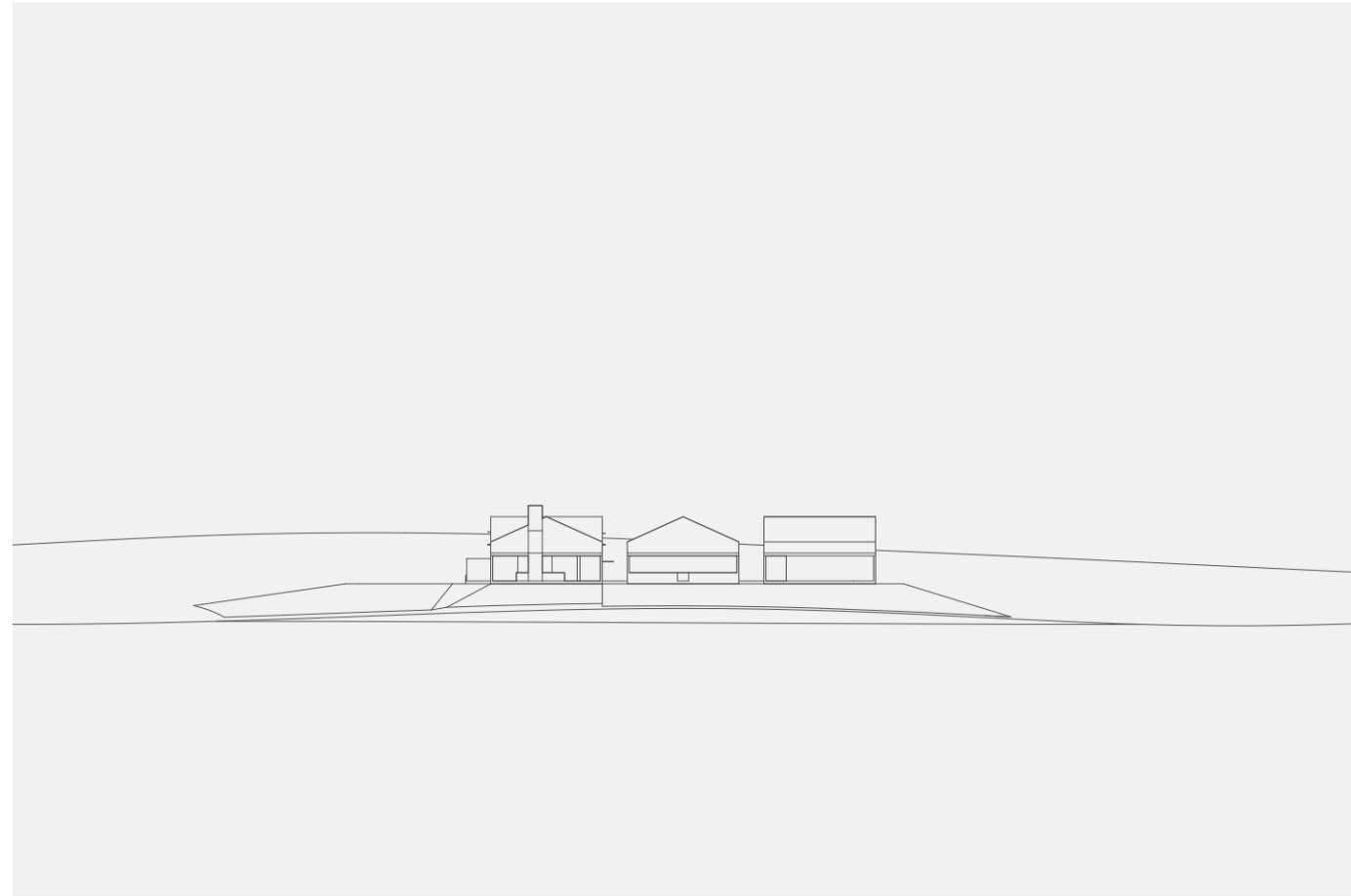
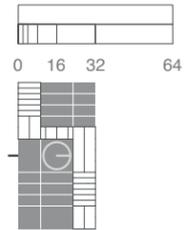


above: north elevation
opposite: east elevation





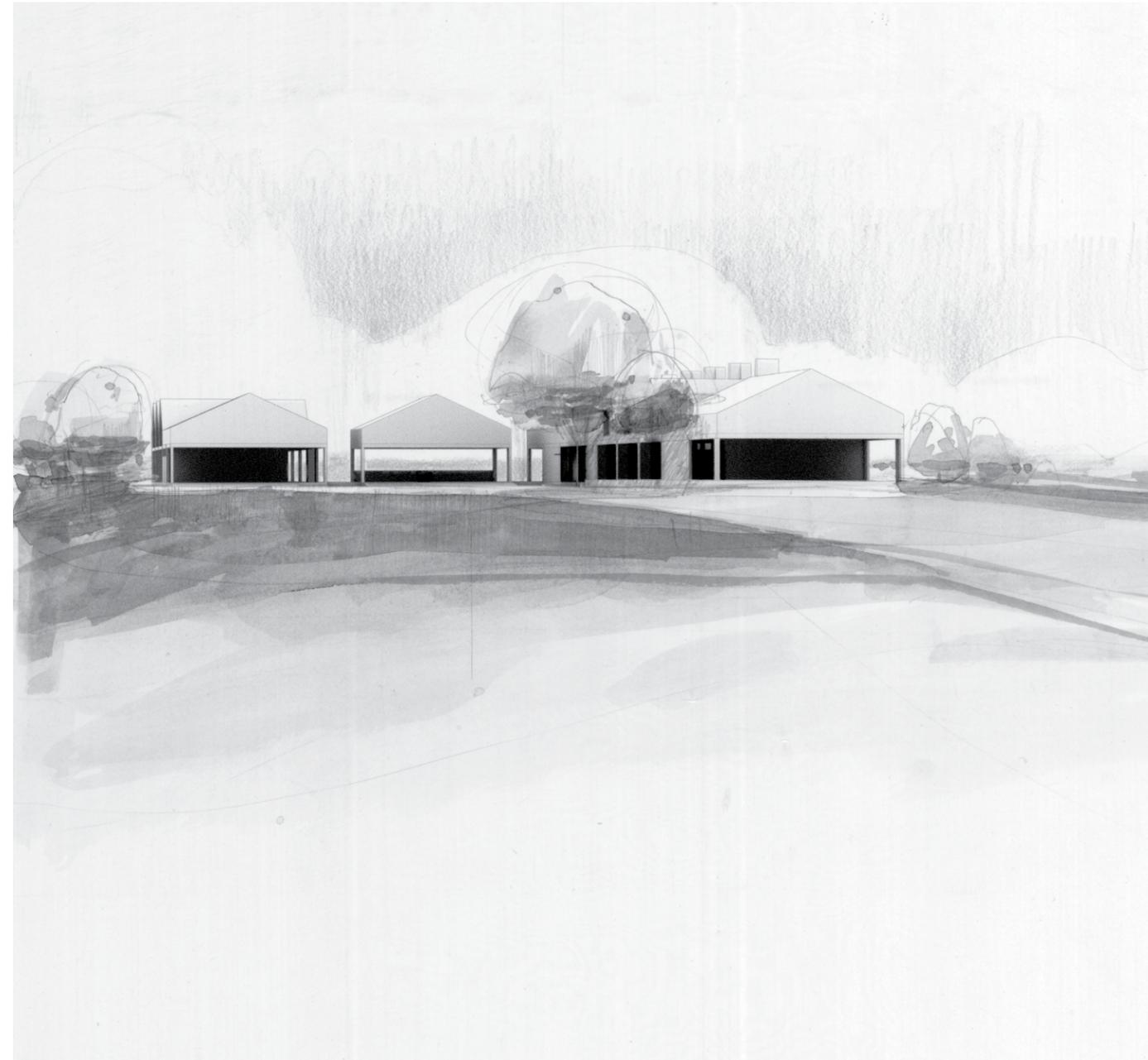
above: south elevation
opposite: west elevation





above: the complex becomes a hinge between sky and earth
opposite: view from A.T. Dean Road

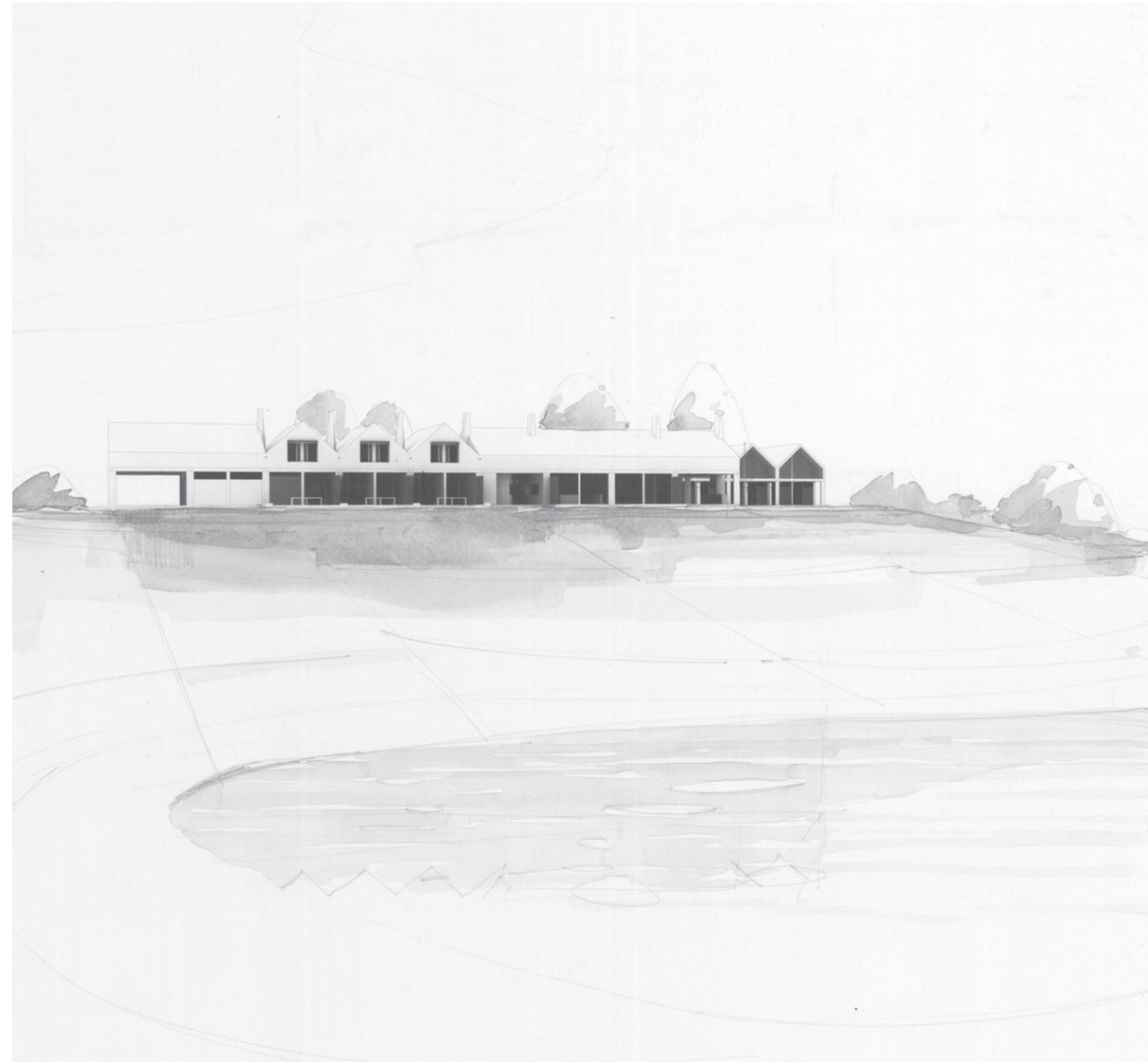
A small village or housing cluster perched on a hill.
The complex is at first defined from the entrance by large shade trees and the three large pitched roofs that cover the parking areas.





above: existing site, view across pond
opposite: view from across pond

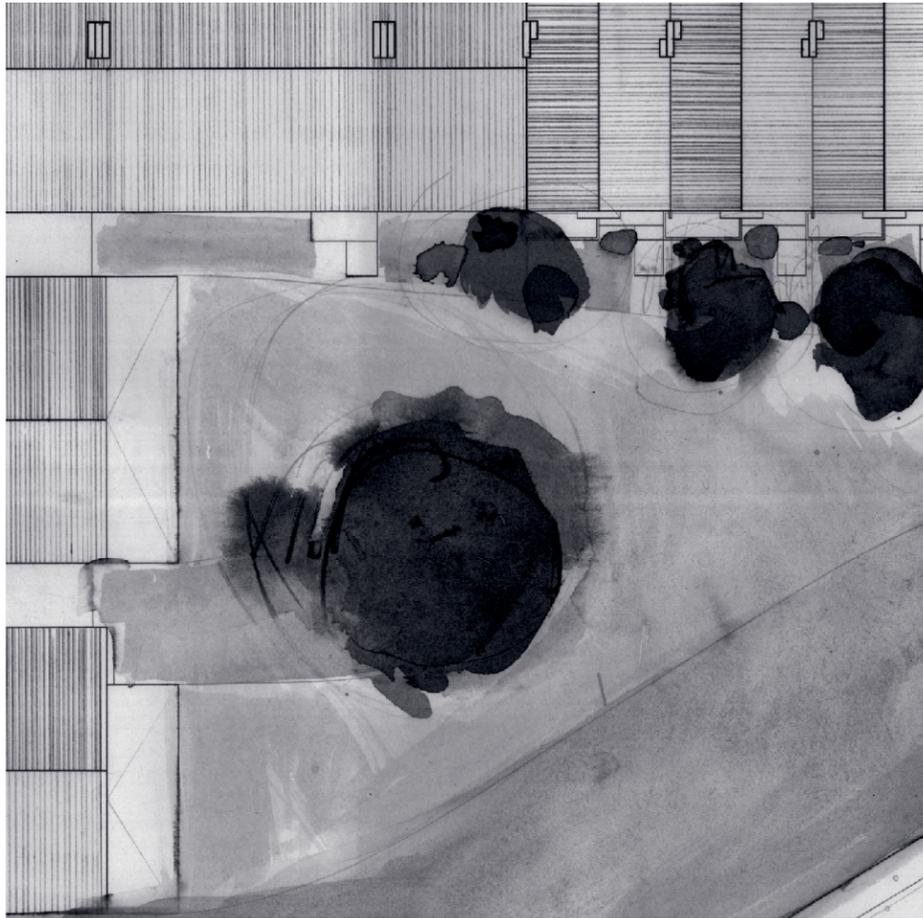
The south and north facades present themselves much differently than the village-like east and west facades. The idea of the communal and private becomes manifest- the smaller houses become more assertive within the longitudinal communal roof.



opposite: view from across pond

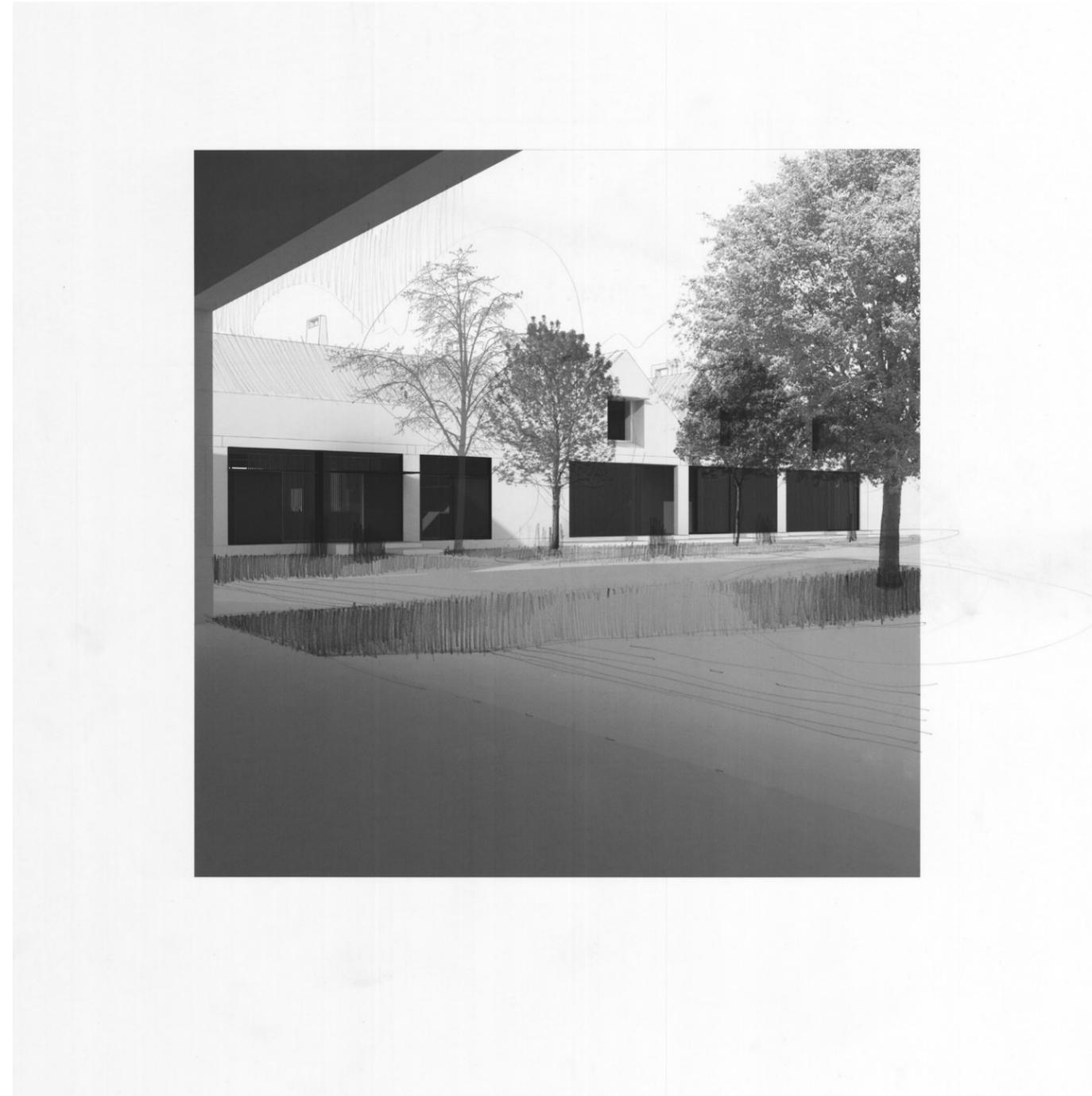
At night, the building becomes a strip of light.
The pitched roofs disappear. The regular pattern of square-faced modular bays becomes more evident.





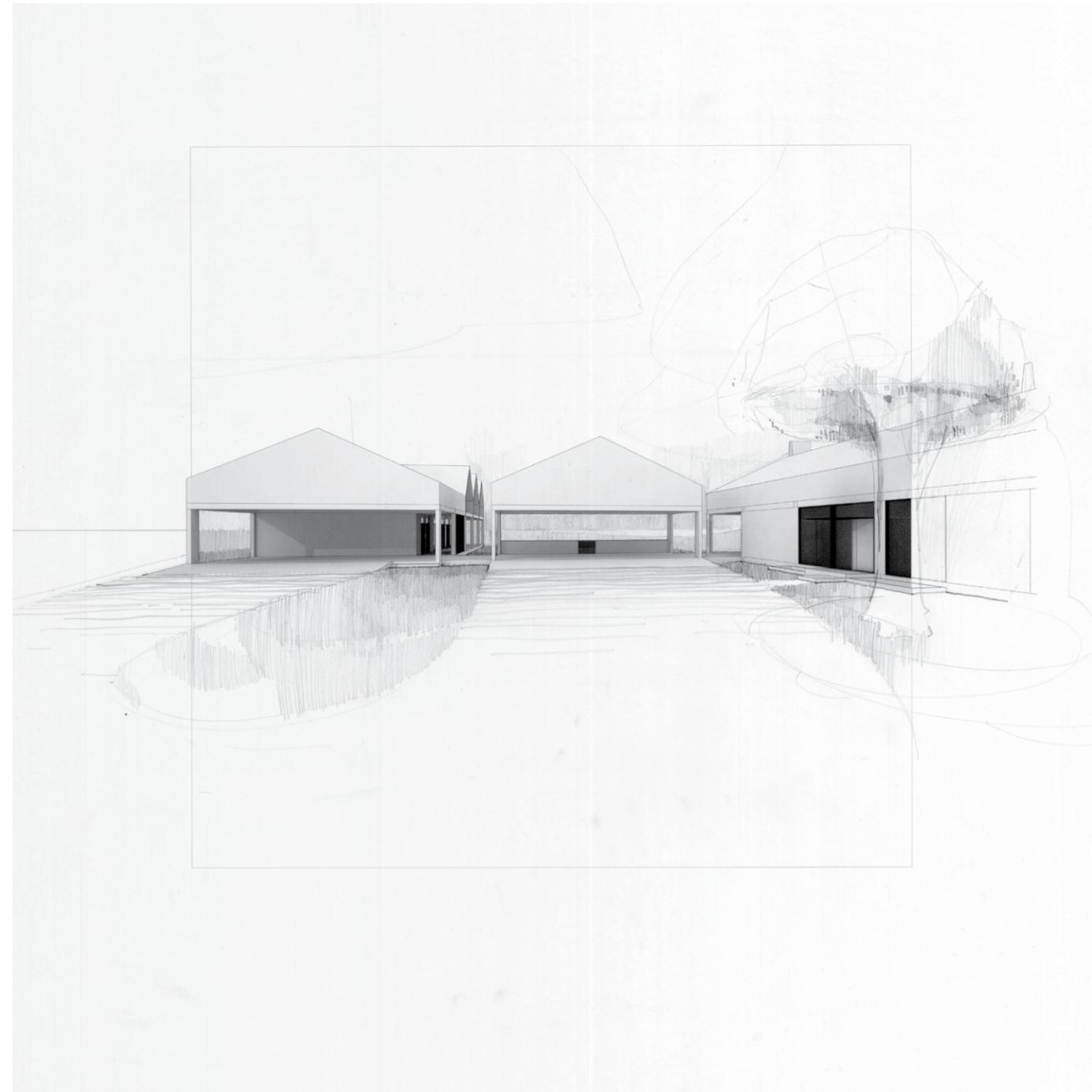
entrance courtyard

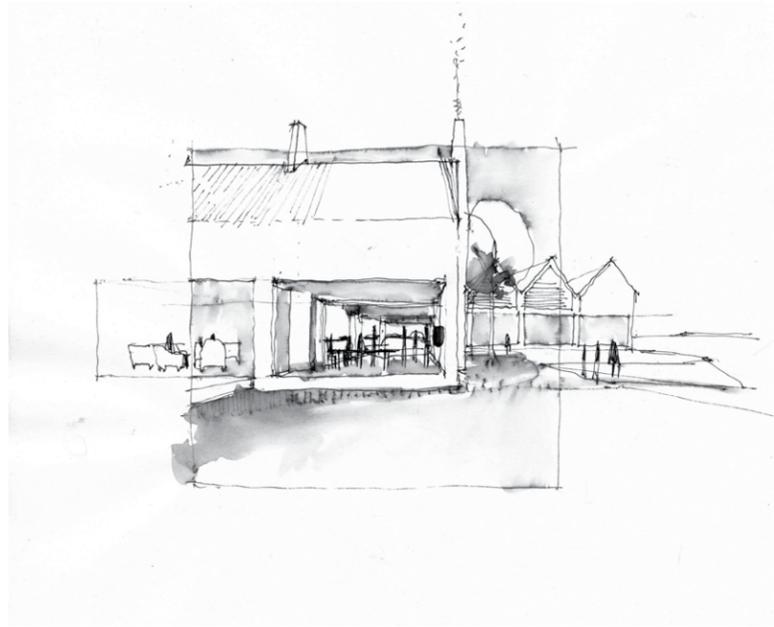
The main courtyard is shaded by large trees, defining a communal green and smaller individual front yards.
The courtyard becomes a place to wash cars on a Sunday, a place for visitors to park, a place for kids to play while parents watch from front stoops or the kitchen.





above, left: farmworker housing, somerset, ky
above, right: main building entrance
opposite: entrance courtyard from car port

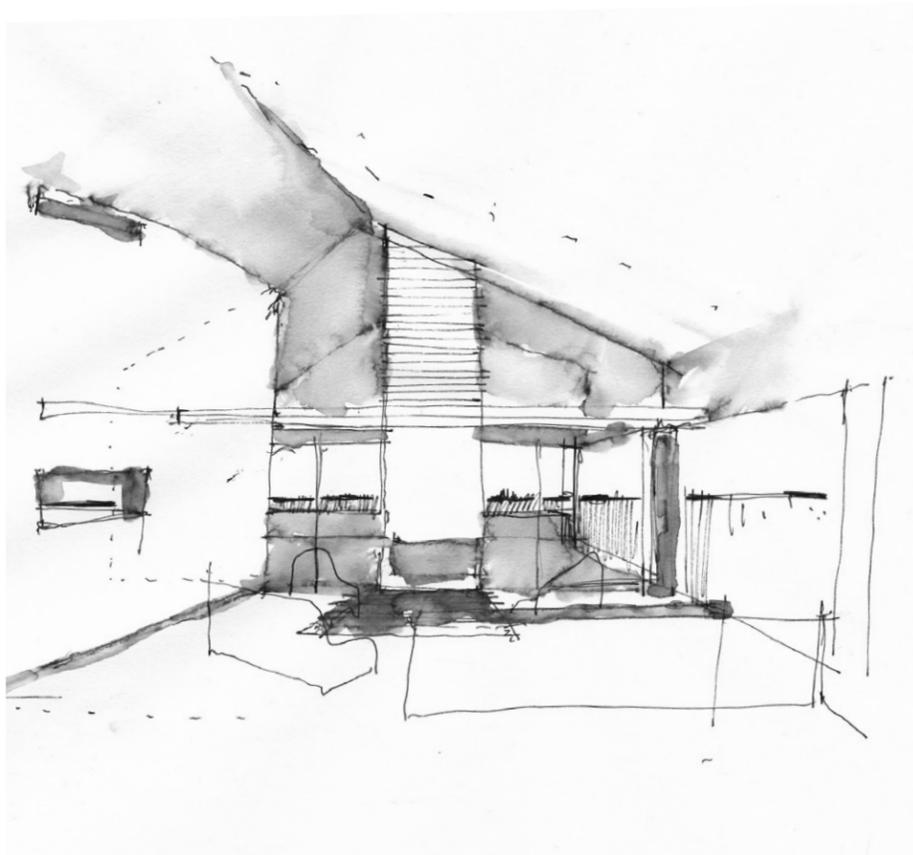




above and opposite: outdoor cooking area

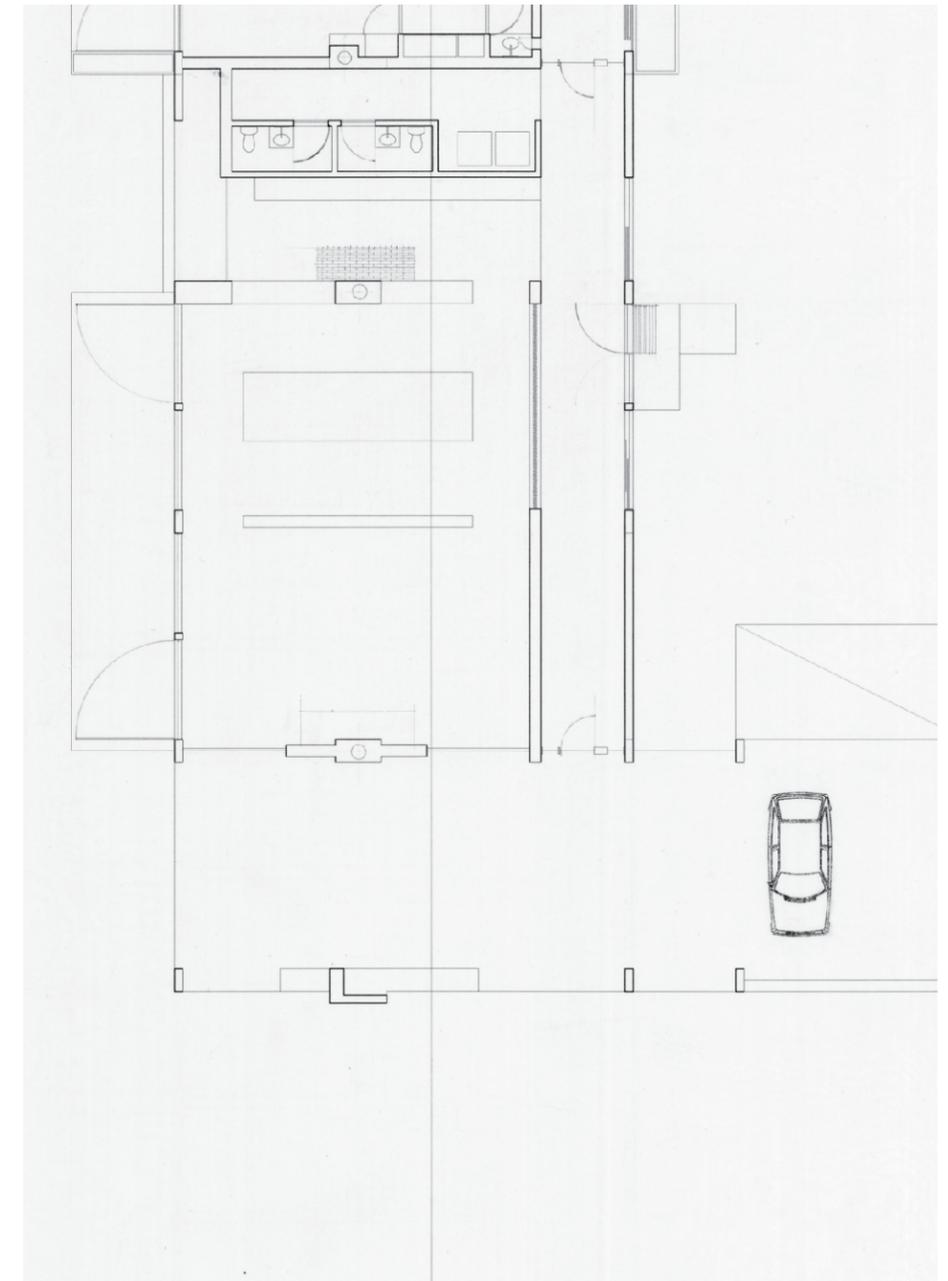
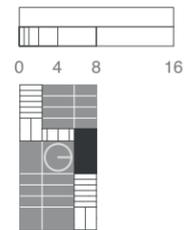
The complex's nexus divides the temporary and permanent workers and provides a covered parking and an outdoor cooking area. For larger gatherings, cars can be moved out to the entrance courtyard to allow for more covered space. The indoor living space serves as a winter gathering area, while the outdoor living space is more conducive to warm weather gatherings. The outdoor access hall leading to the temporary housing units and bath house faces a small courtyard.





above: interior of living room
 opposite: plan of living room/dining room/kitchen

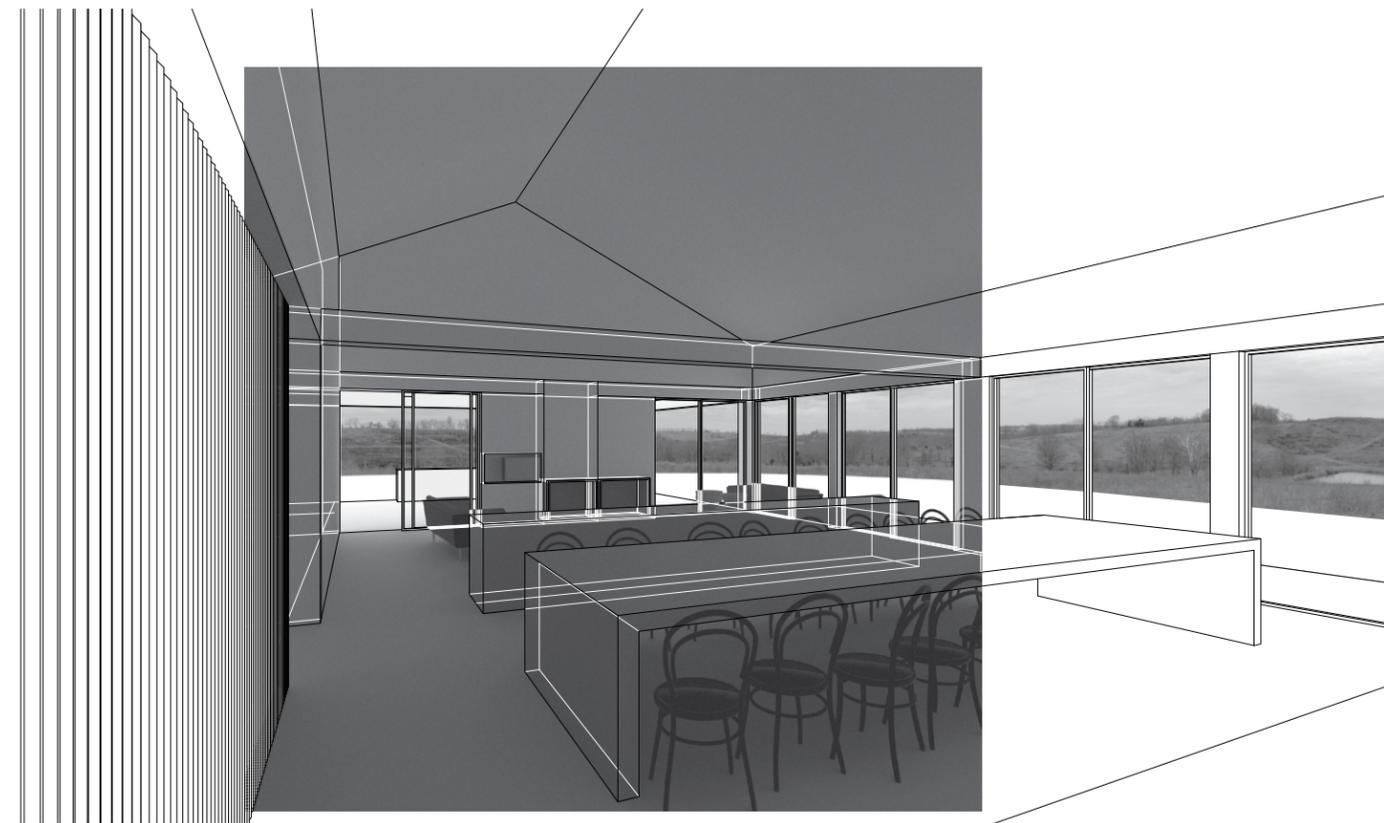
The kitchen, dining room, and living area are located in one large, open room with broad views of the landscape.
 A single large table defines the dining room, emphasizing its communal nature.

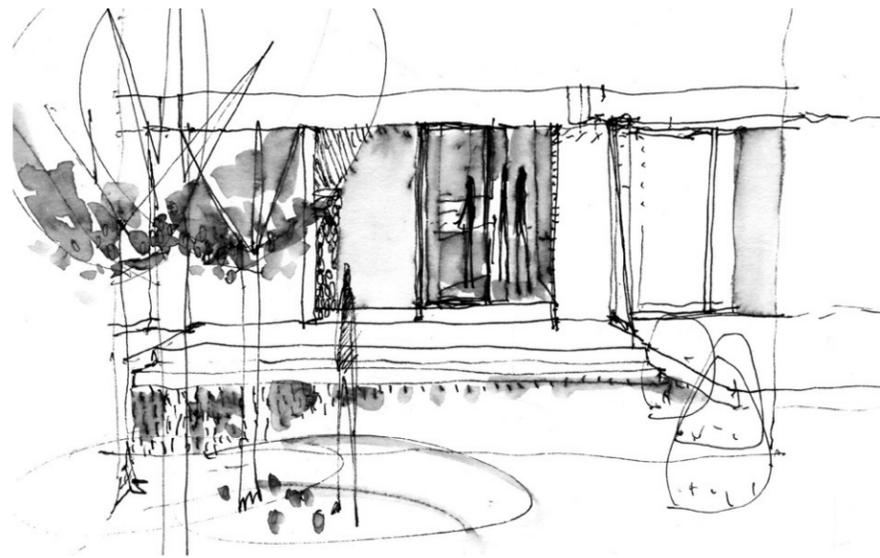




above: view of landscape and lake
opposite: interior of living/dining room

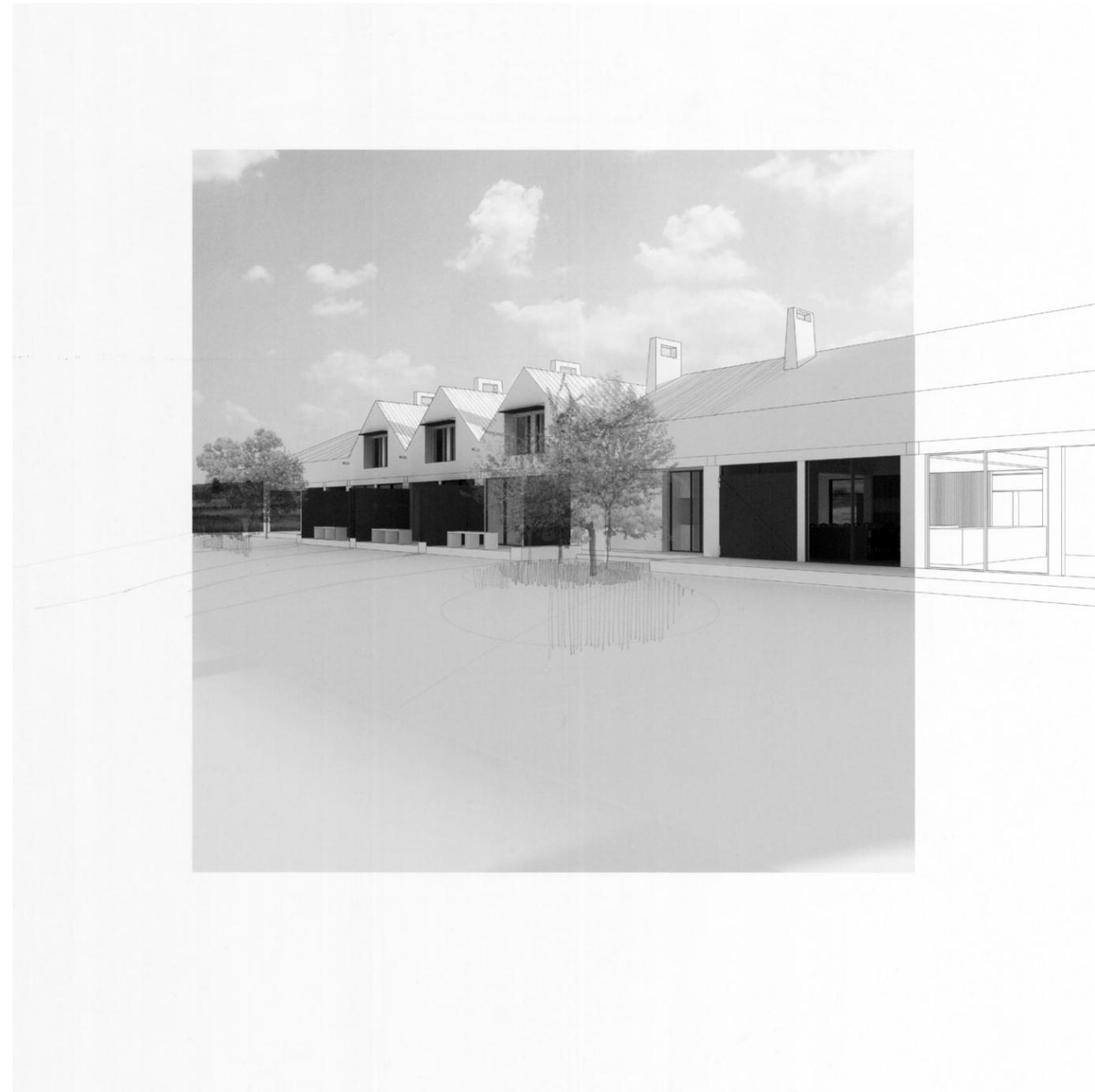
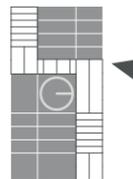
The dining room table dominates the center of the room. The large table anchors the communal space.
The landscape wraps itself around the building providing a constant visual connection to place.

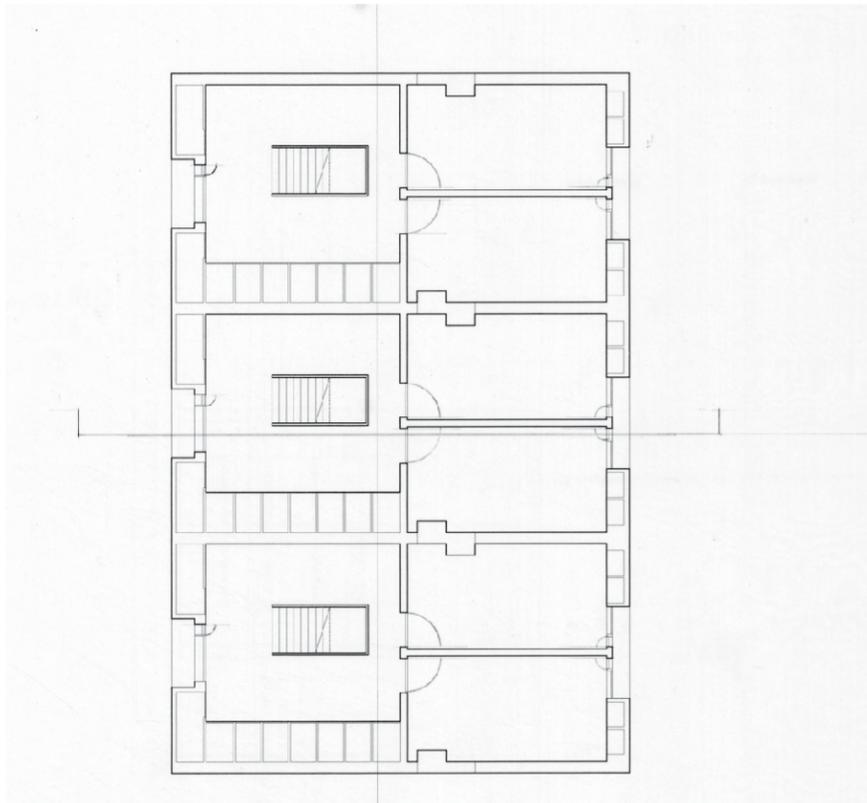




above: exterior of kitchen
opposite: north facade

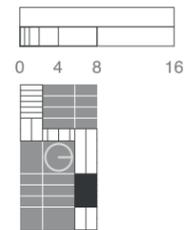
The kitchen door opens out to a small garden and orchard, while the permanent housing opens out to private porches that face the lake. Glazing is pushed to the skin of the building to allow the northern light through.



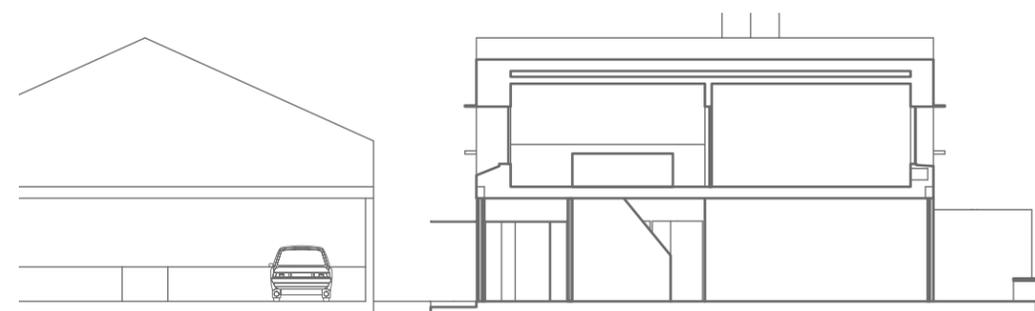
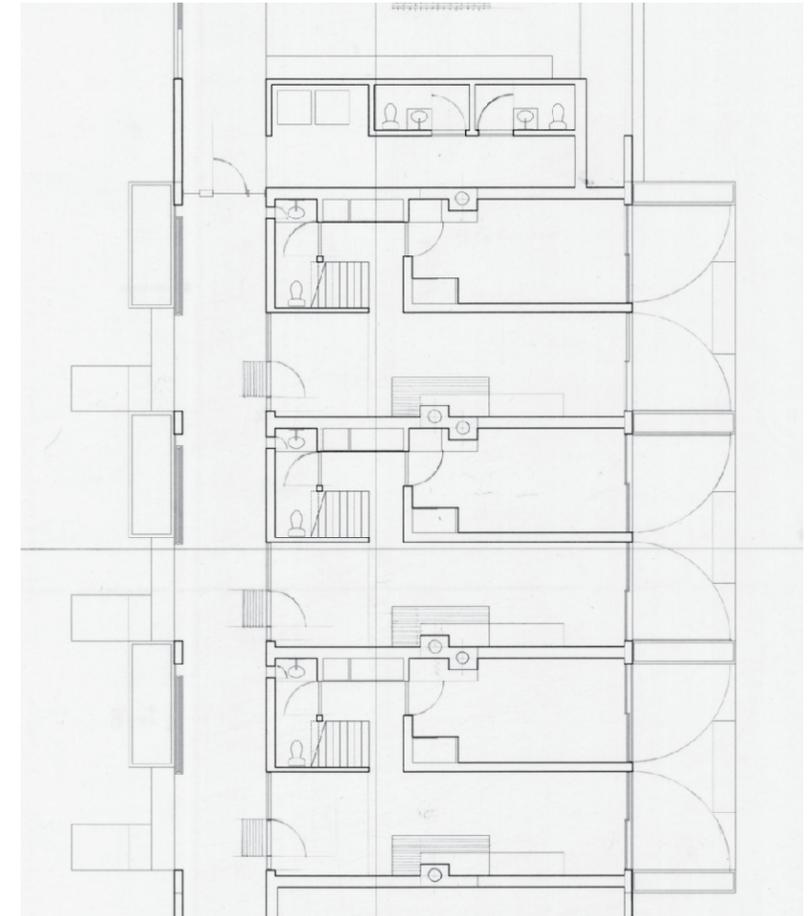


above: permanent worker housing detail, 2nd floor
 opposite: permanent worker housing detail, ground floor

A common walkway runs along the south facade behind a system of moveable shutters. One enters into a small living room occupied by a hearth, with a view of the lake to the north. On the other side of the living room lies a bedroom with a hearth, a small bathroom with a wash basin, and stairs leading to the second floor. The second floor contains two bedrooms and a large built in storage area with plenty of space to unpack and settle.



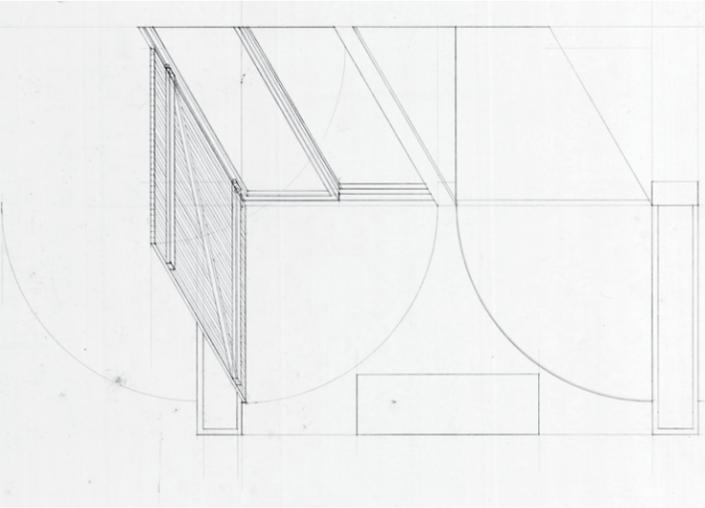
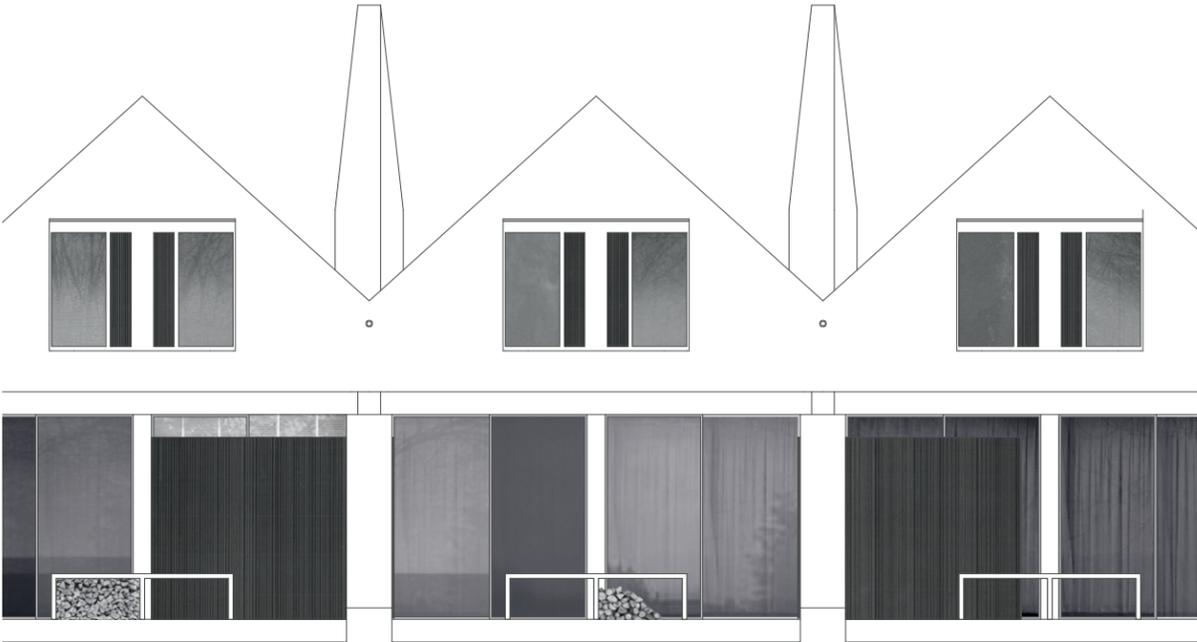
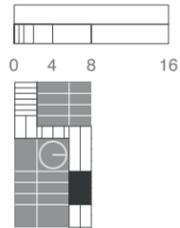
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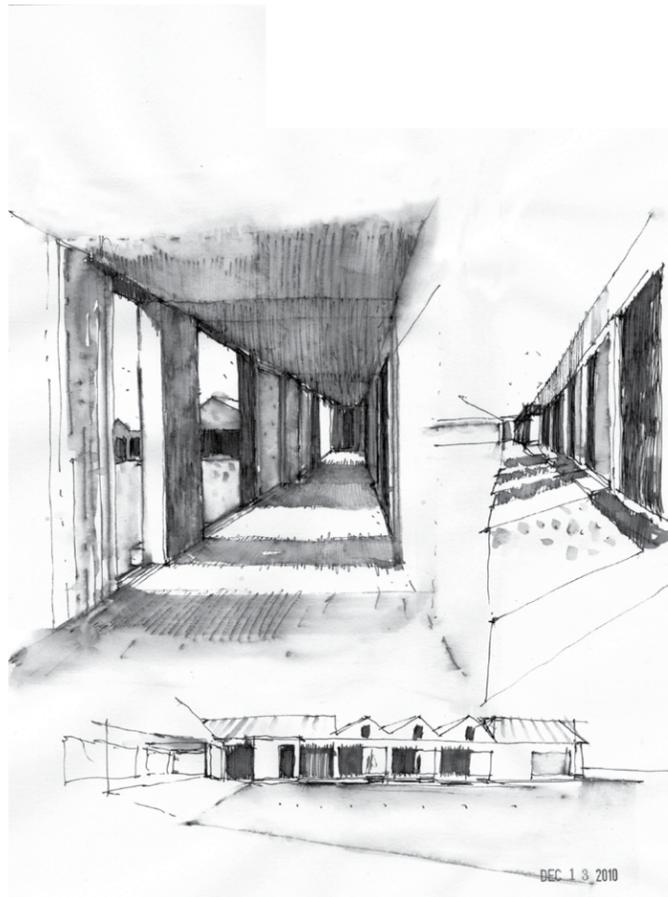
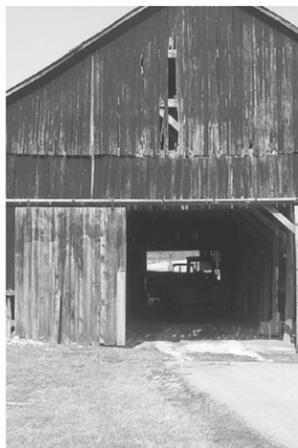




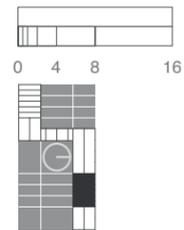
above left: tobacco barn doors, somerset, ky
 above: north porch
 opposite: north porch door detail

Large swinging doors on the north facade can be closed to block the north wind, or opened to allow the northern light while providing a private "back porch". The doors do not reach to top of the apertures; even when closed they will still allow a small amount of light. A small bench sits on the edge of the porch. The space under the bench furnishes enough covered space to store a small supply of firewood.

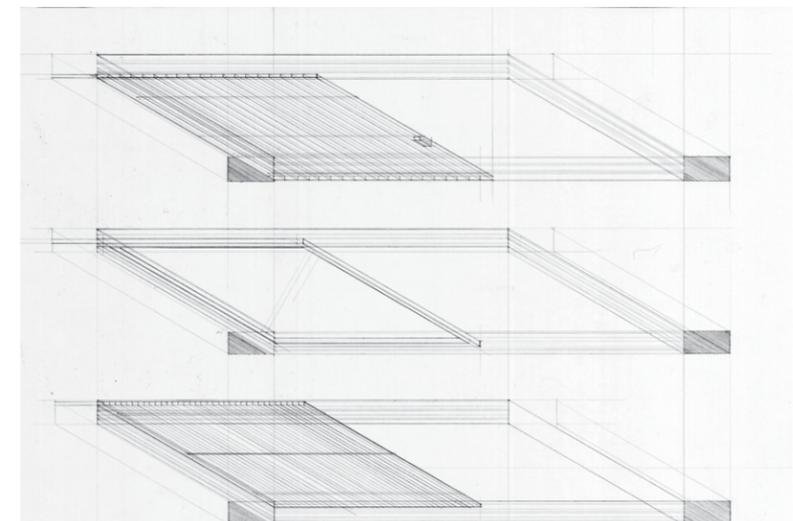
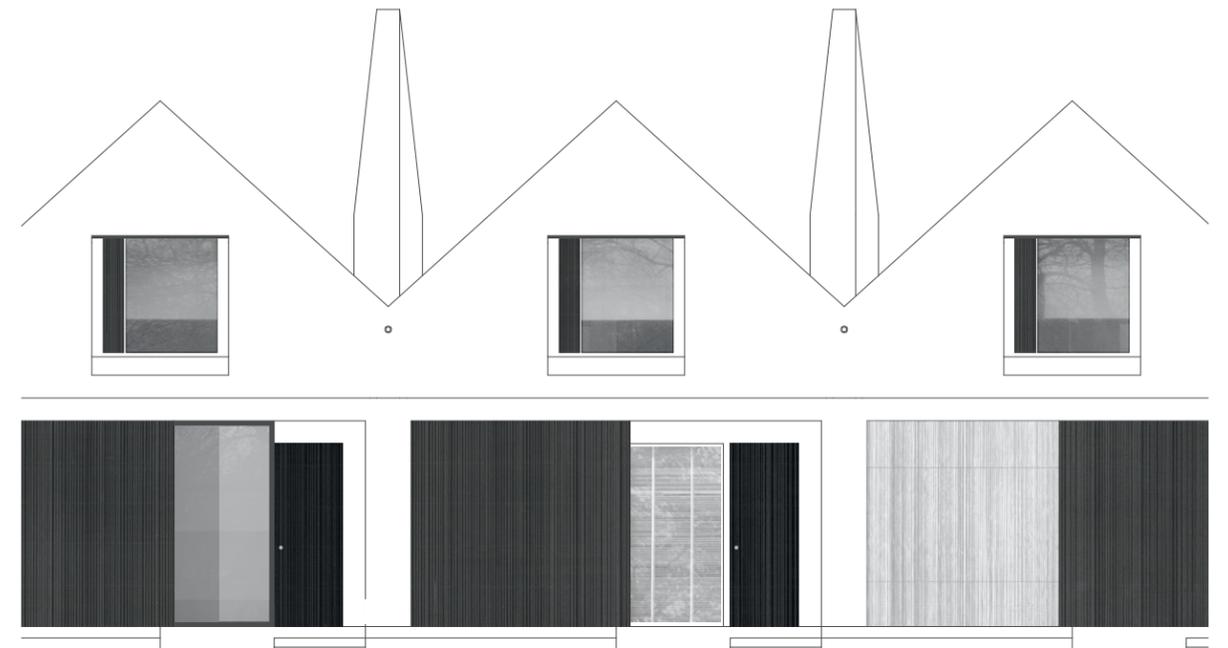


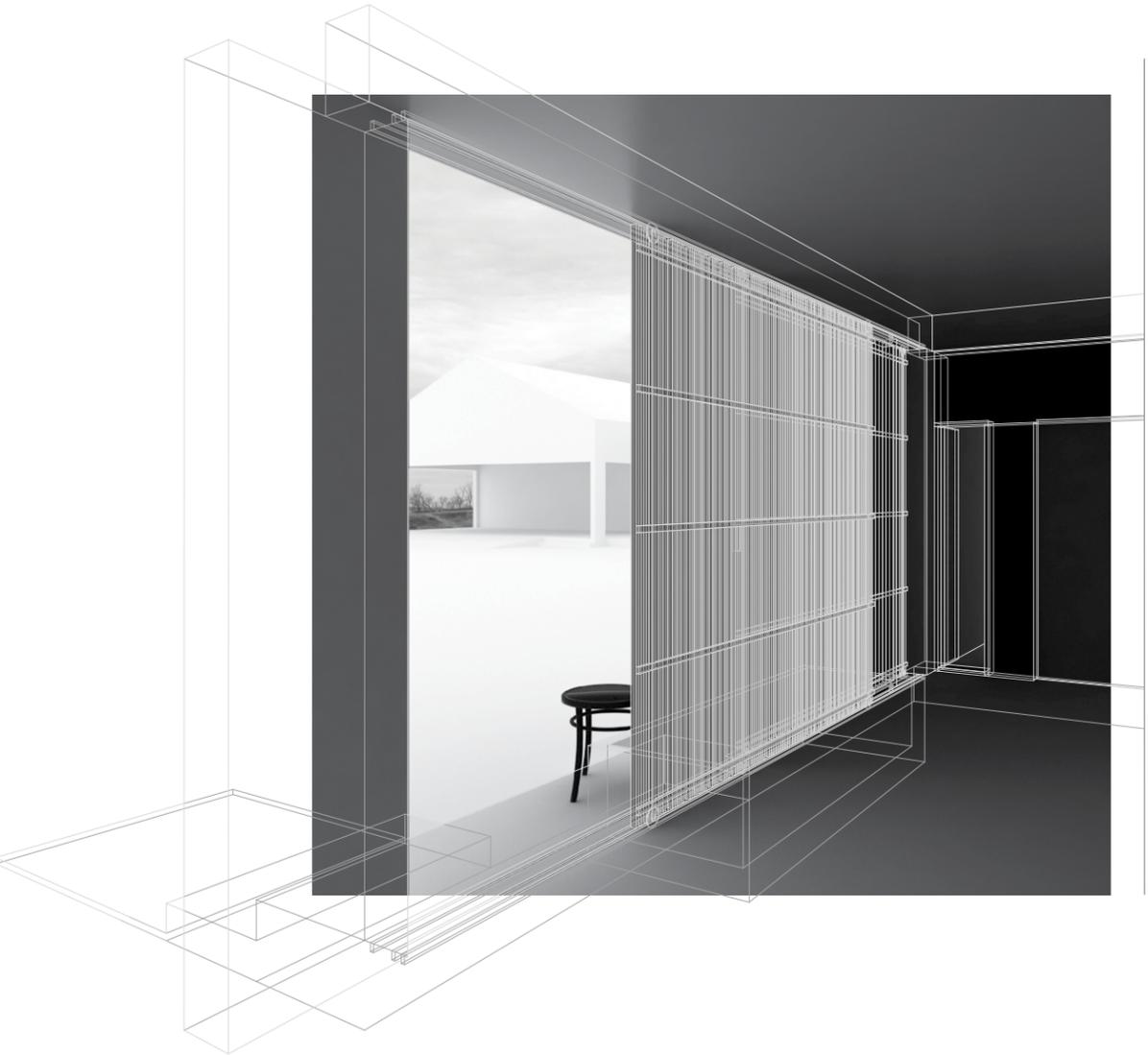


above left top: porch, yellow sulfur springs, va
 above left bottom: sliding door, clay's ferry, ky
 above right: south porch
 opposite: south porch door detail



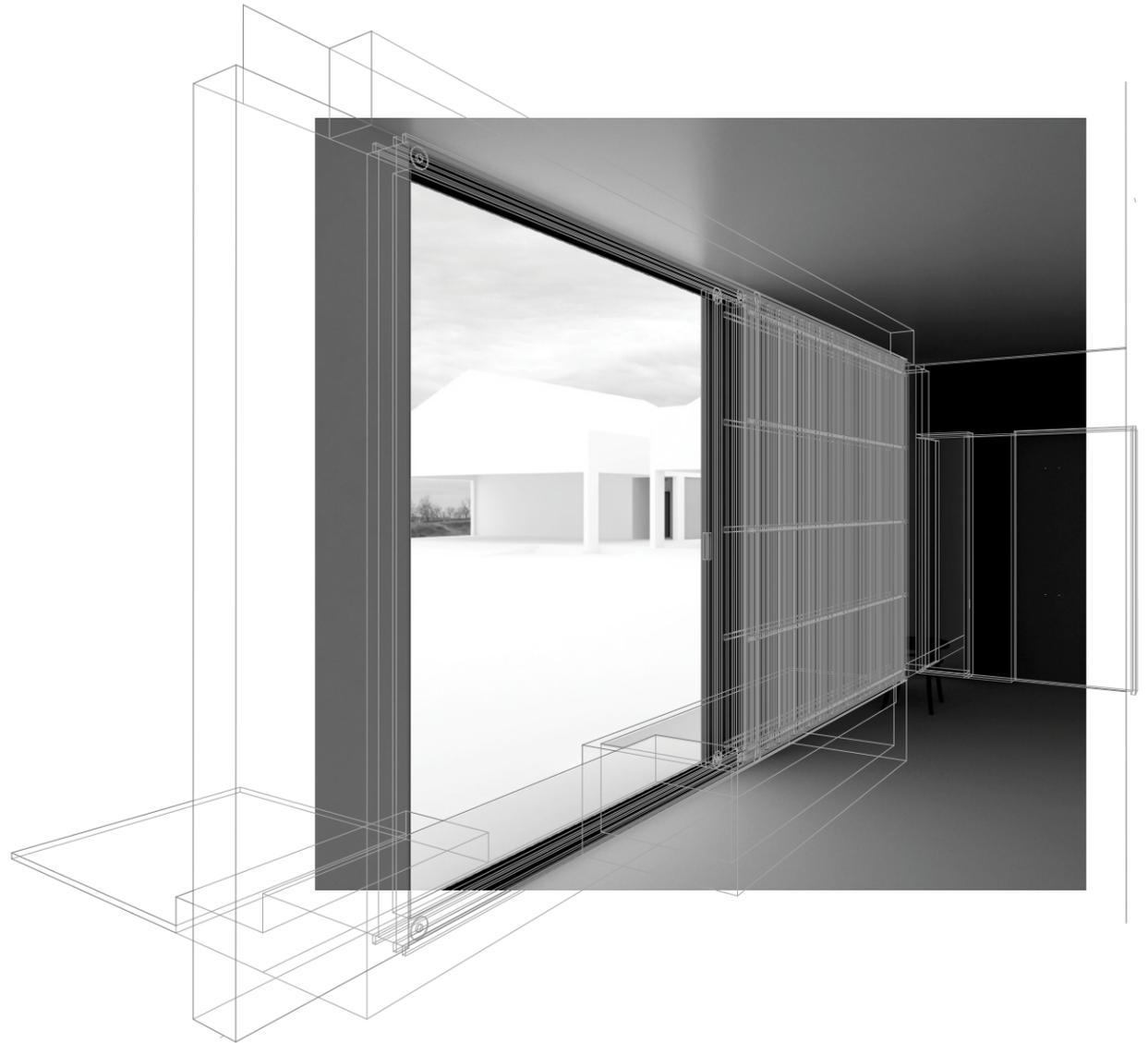
The south porch provides deep shade to the sun-drenched facade. The system is comprised of a series of three doors- one glass (to allow sunlight in winter), one black-out shutter (to block sun in summer), and one perforated (to allow breezes to pass through while blocking light). The doors slide in bays along the public corridor, but correspond to the interior facades of the individual houses.
 The doors take cues from large sliding barn doors.

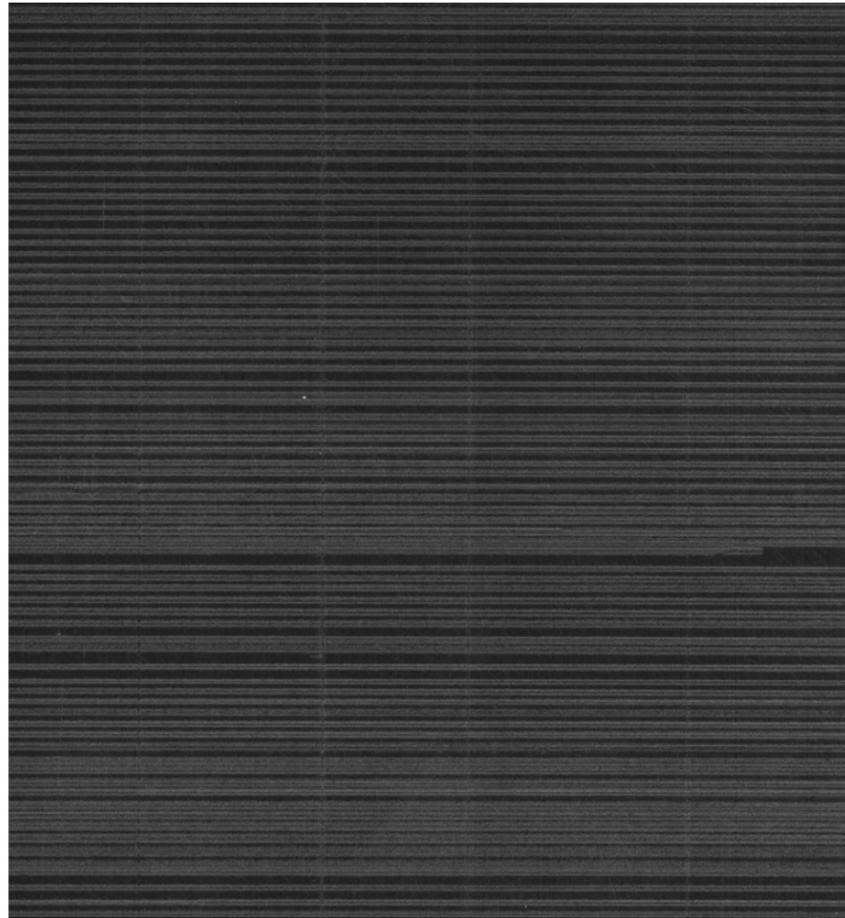




above: summer, all doors are open
opposite: winter, glass door is closed

The doors can be opened to allow for a deeper seating area, chairs can be set up in the deep shade. The porch faces a small, private front yard and the entrance courtyard, allowing children a space to play where parents can watch. A private resting spot in a long access hallway, the porch mixes public and private uses.

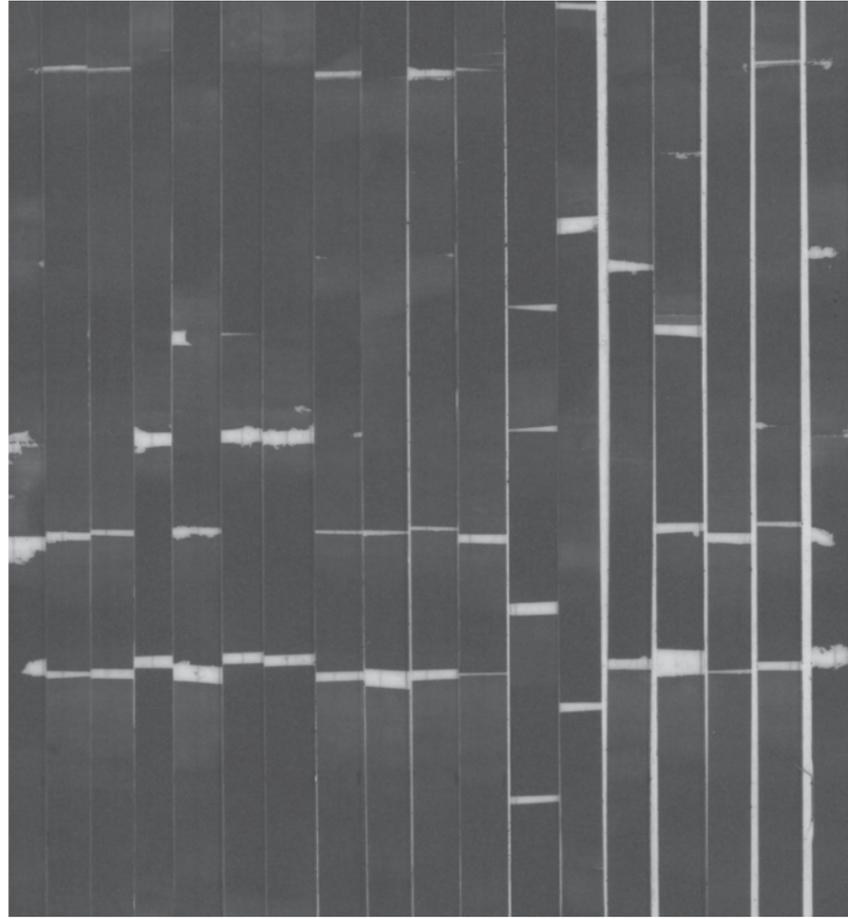




above left: shed detail, versailles, ky
above right: detail, untitled, ink and graphite drawing
opposite: south facade

Running along a communal corridor, each house has its own small front porch and yard. An image of home is created through providing a sidewalk, a few trees, small garden, and stoop.

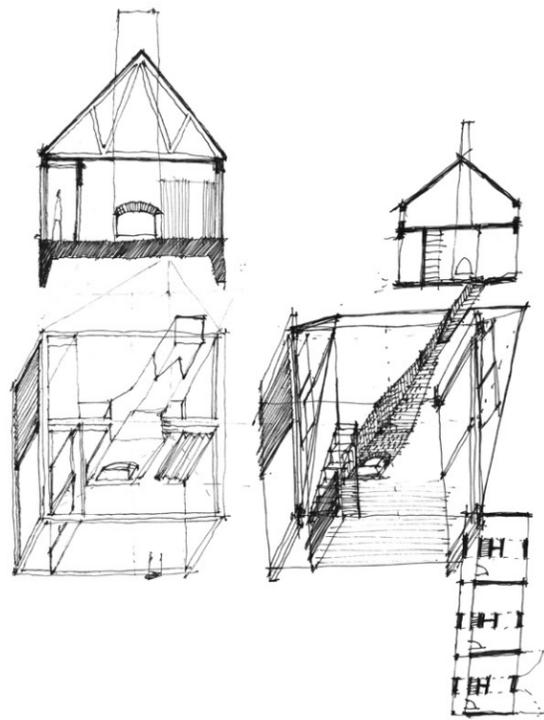




above left: slats on outbuilding, pulaski, va
above right: detail, untitled, mylar collage
opposite: south facade

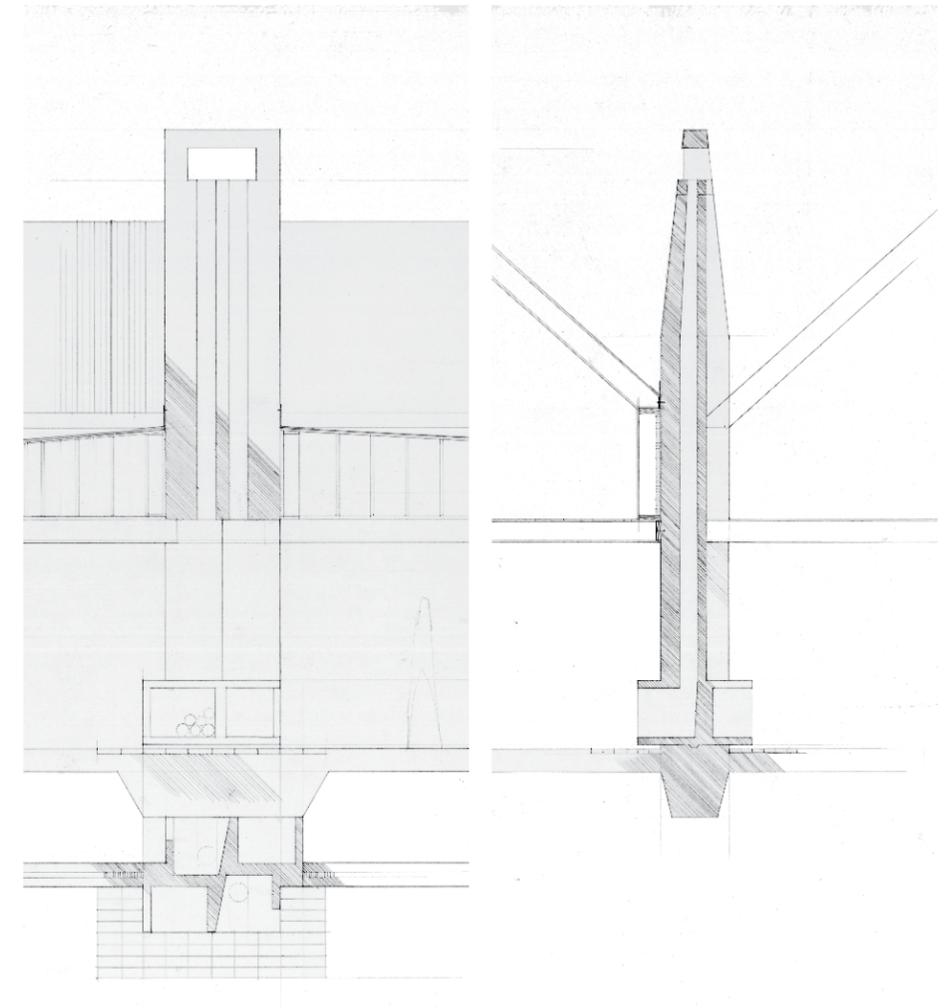
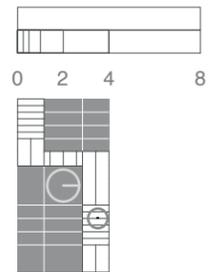
The perforated door consists of a series of slats allowing air and filtered light to pass through.

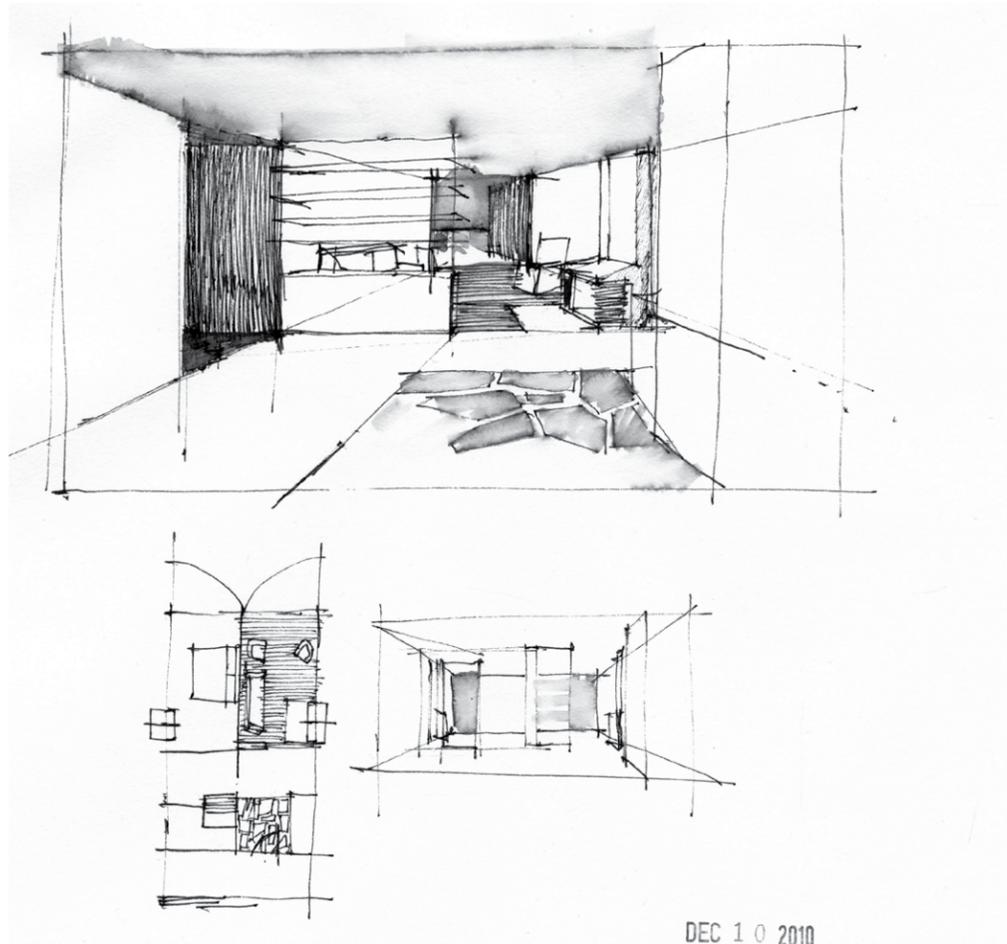




above: preliminary chimney
opposite: chimney sections

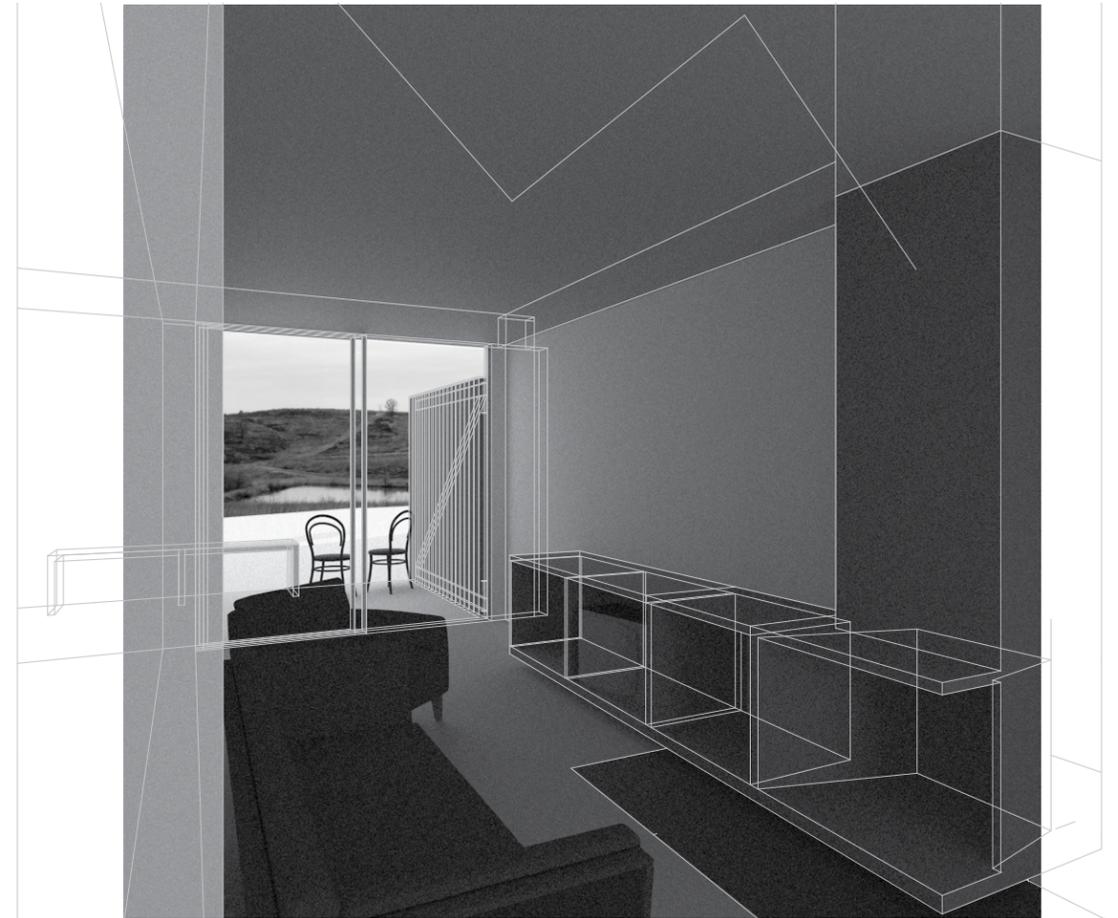
The chimney is an important external marker to the function that lies within, signalling use. The chimney becomes the focal point in the living room. The bases of the chimneys are pushed slightly off-center to create a pinwheel in plan, while in section two chimneys bend towards each other to share a single chimney stack.

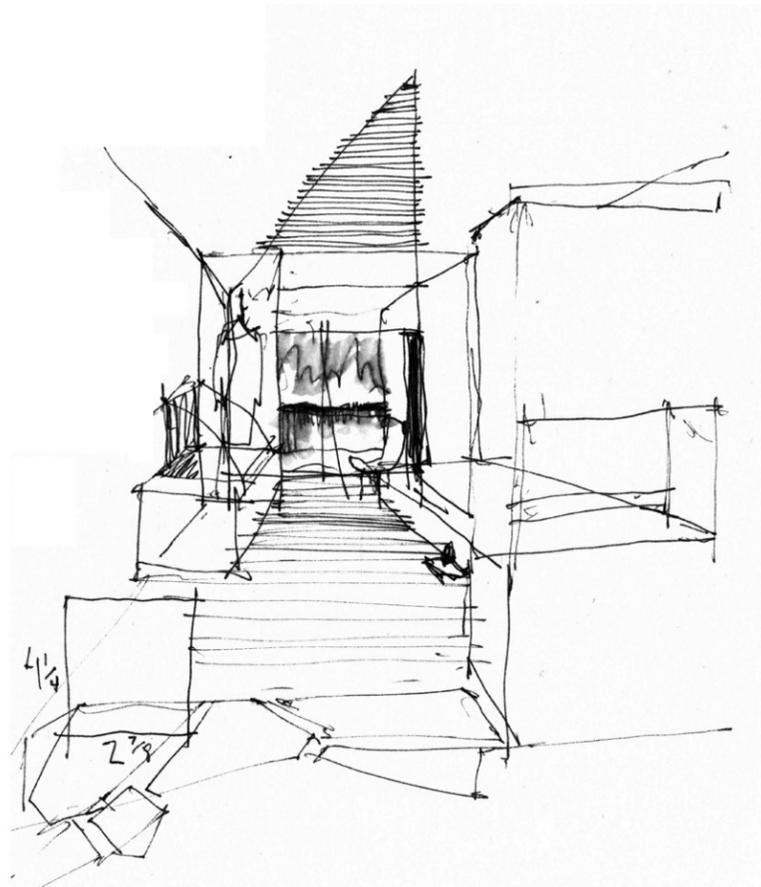




above: sketch, interior of permanent worker housing
 opposite: interior of permanent worker housing

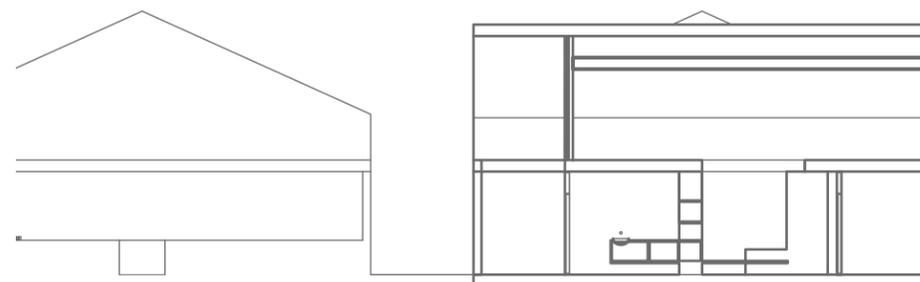
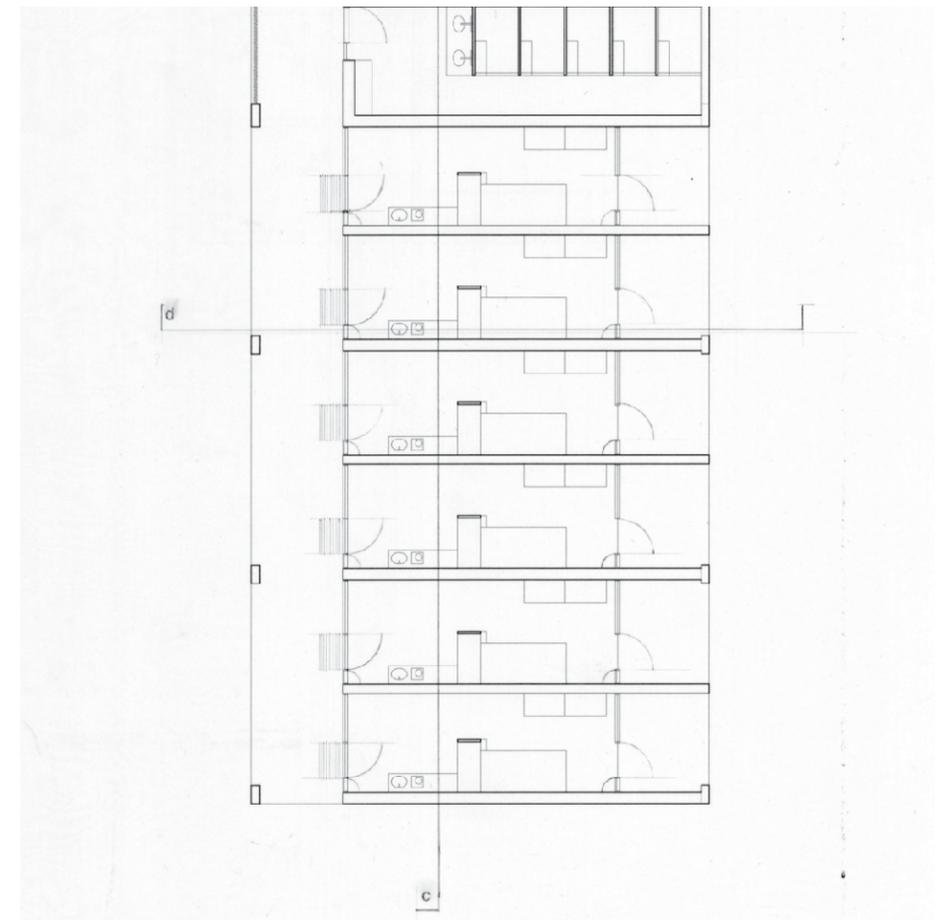
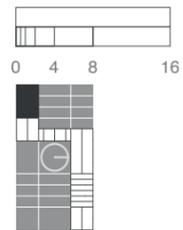
The living room contains a fireplace, a small cubby for firewood, and room to hold a small television. The extended mantle allows plenty of room for family photographs and mementos. The room is cool and dark in the summer, warm and bright in the winter. The view extends north towards the pond.

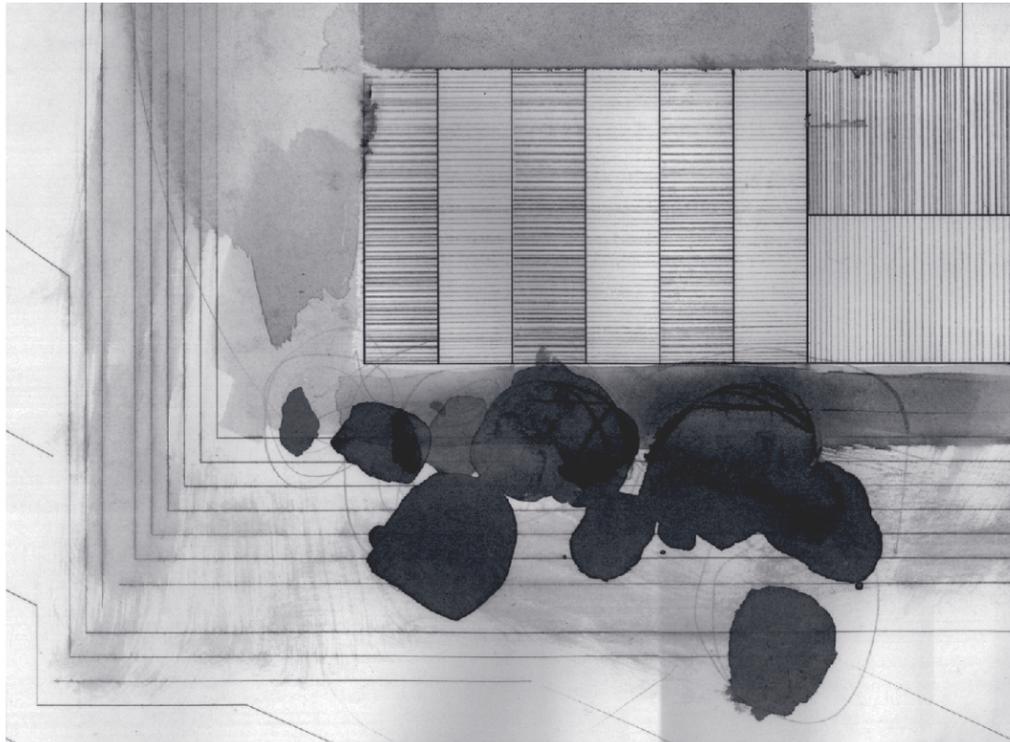




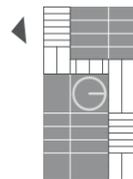
above: interior of temporary worker housing
 opposite, top: plan
 opposite, bottom: section

Much simpler than the permanent worker housing, the units consist of one long room containing a sink, hot plate, storage, bed, and private south-facing porch. The units are spare, but allow one a semblance of permanence. A screen of tree canopies shields the south facade from the sun. Doors and windows can be opened to allow for air movement; the facade is also slatted to allow heat to escape.

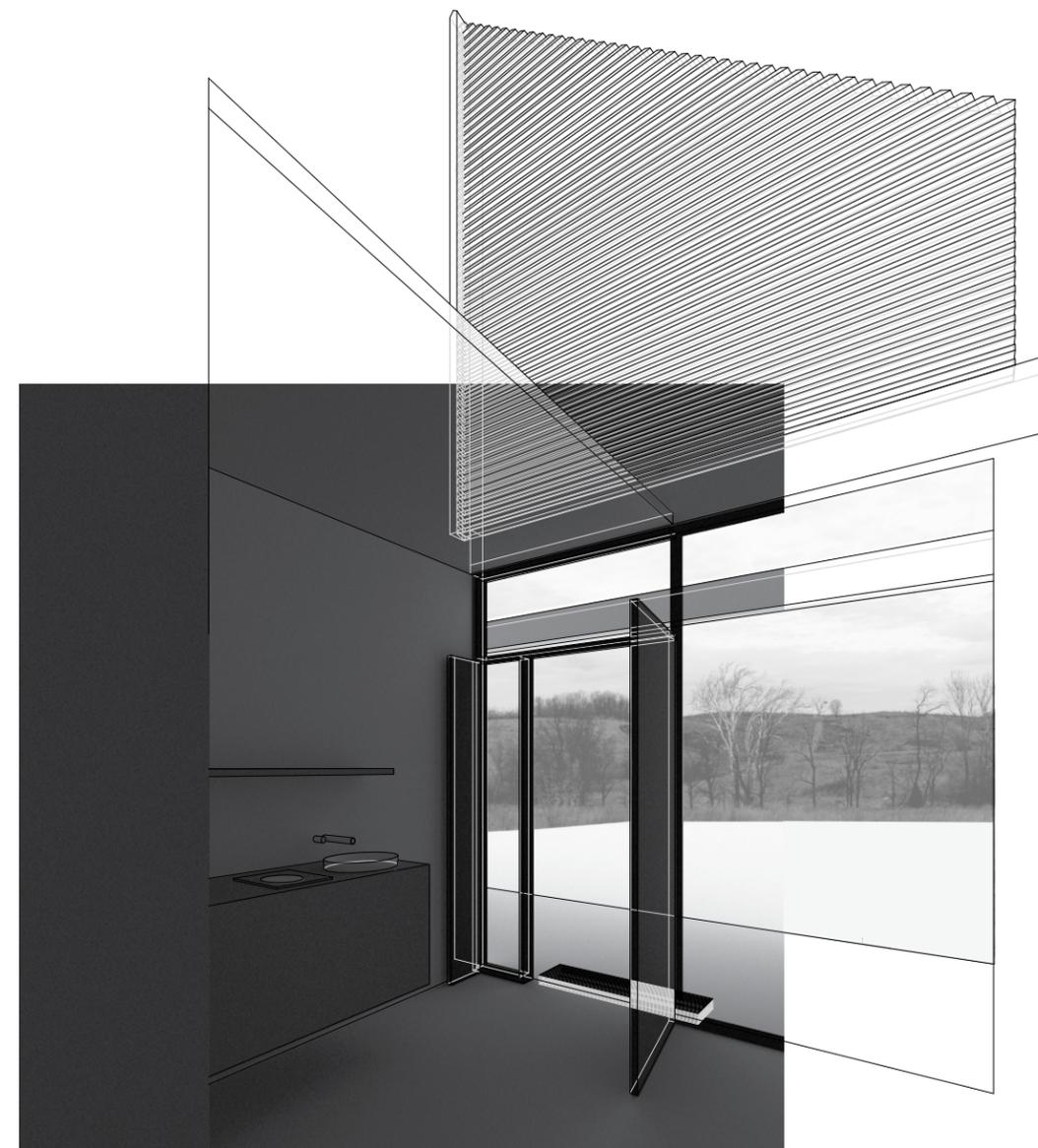




above, top: site plan detail
above, bottom: plinth
opposite: south facade



opposite: interior of temporary worker housing

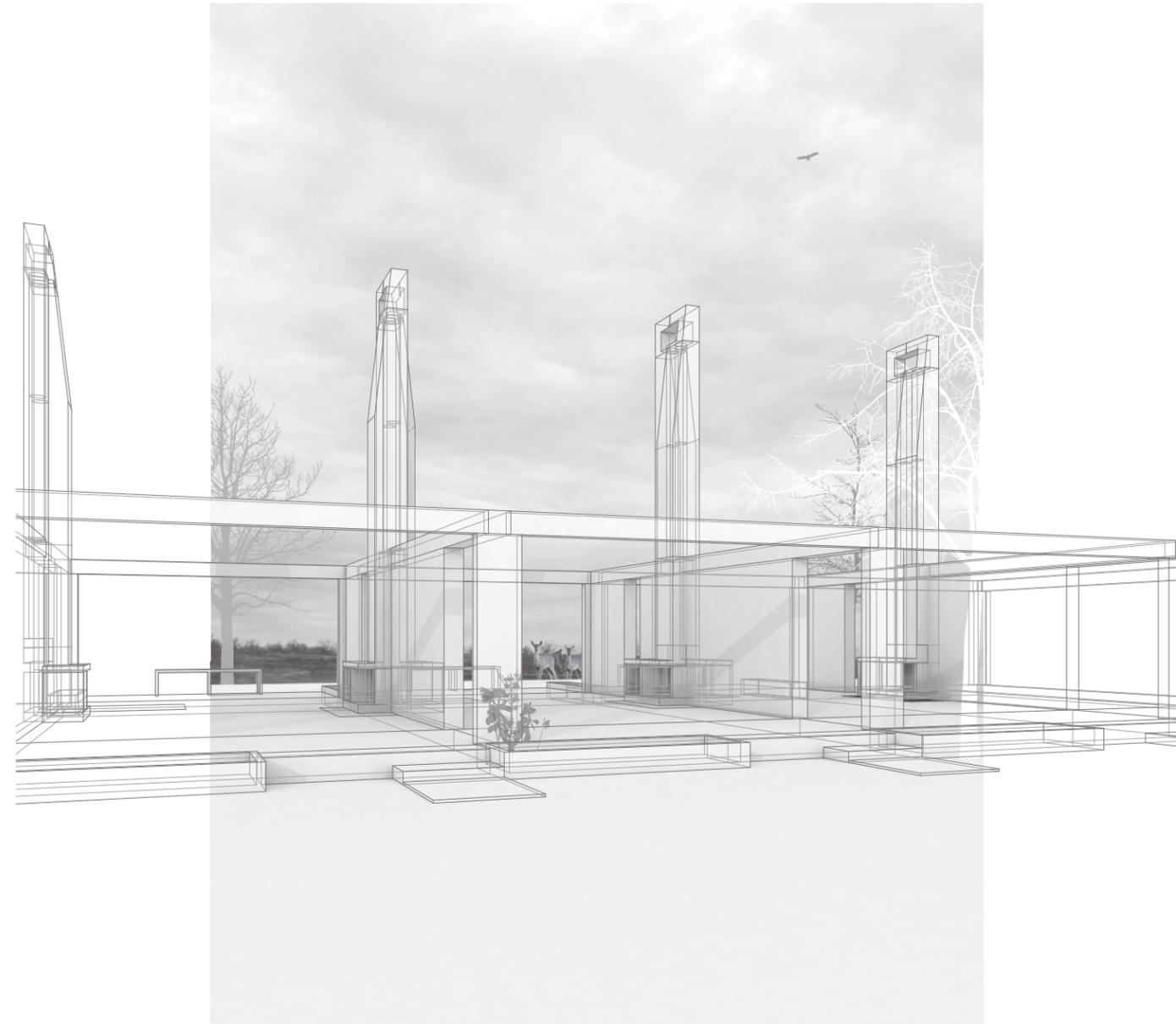


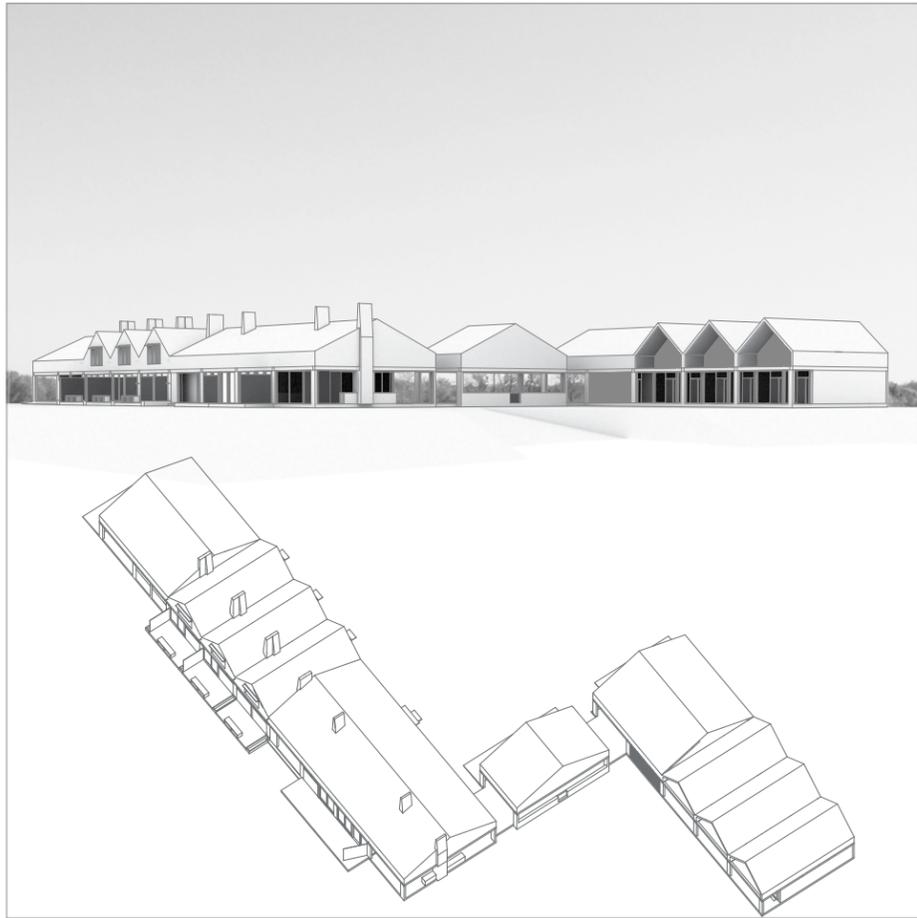
Epilogue



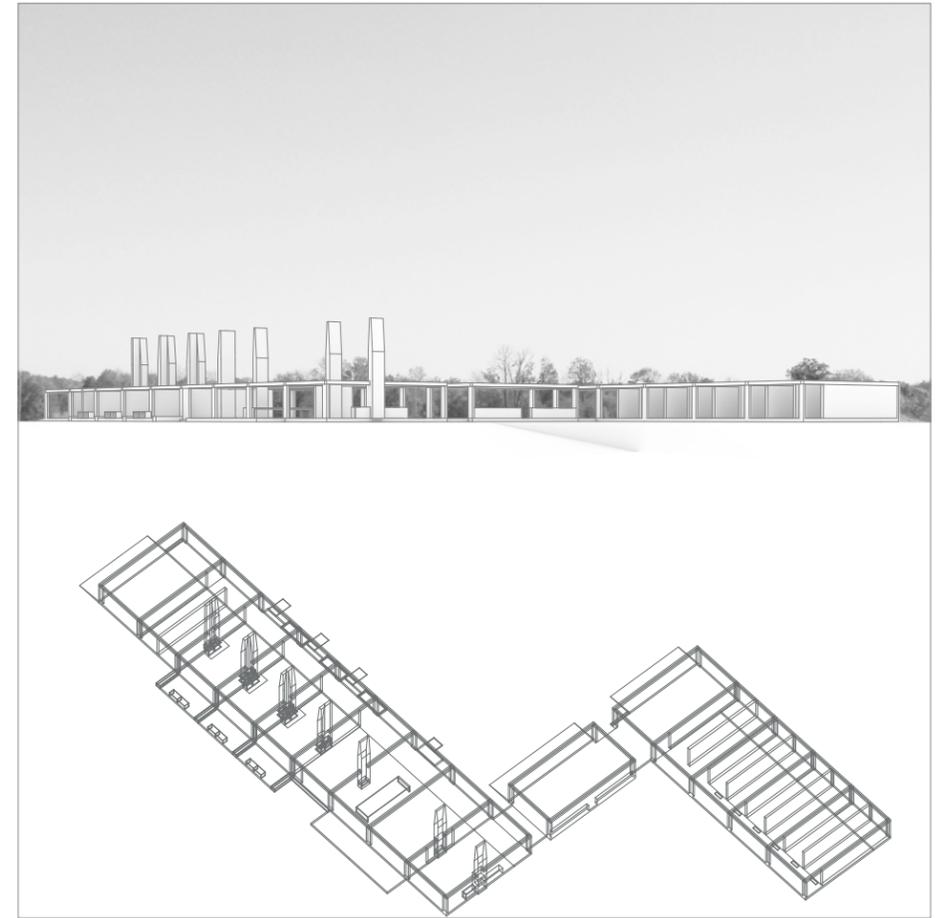
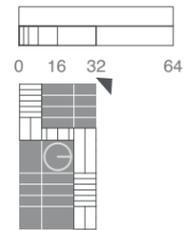
above: ruin, pembroke, va
opposite: ruin

The skin of the building falls away, leaving an anonymous concrete ruin.
The chimneys become the only sign of its former use.





above: current building
opposite: ruin



In ruins, where the intended use of the building has departed, it is often unclear whether the structure is landscape or architecture. Conditions are reversed and a missing roof allows sunlight and vegetation inside and the building becomes a garden.

W.G. Clark, *Lost Colony*.



Appendix

My primary means of experiencing the rural landscape usually takes place in a car going fifty-five miles an hour or more, pulling over on the side of the road from time to time to take pictures of rural buildings. The structures are at times hundreds of feet away or barely distinguishable. Within the disconnect of both speed and distance it is easy for one to hold romanticized notions about these structures. When I lived in Lexington, Kentucky, my friends and I would pile into an old green Plymouth Acclaim and pick any road leading out of the city. Both the car stereo and air conditioning were broken. Empty soda bottles were stuffed into a half-full case of hot beer in the back to make room for our feet. We would drive for hours, sitting in the car and watching the rolling fields go by. The sun flashed like a single strobe light as we passed from open sky to dark blue shade and then back bright sky again, flashing black and blood red if you had your eyes closed. Bands of road, fence, hill, horizon, and telephone lines wobbled at different frequencies.

These drawings have come about as a way to try to distill the material irregularities found in these structures while exploring a larger format outside of the sketchbook. Working within the same 16' by 16' square, they can be divided into two groups. One series focuses on a manipulation of a single line that becomes repeated, often through a simple set of rotations. Through repetition, irregular moments begin to appear in an otherwise strict construct through the use of hand drawing (fatigue, inebriation, distraction, etc.). The second series focuses on the "weathering" of the physical elements of the buildings, and is less strict than the line set, often employing brush and ink in multiple layers. The drawings do not intend to replicate existing moments.

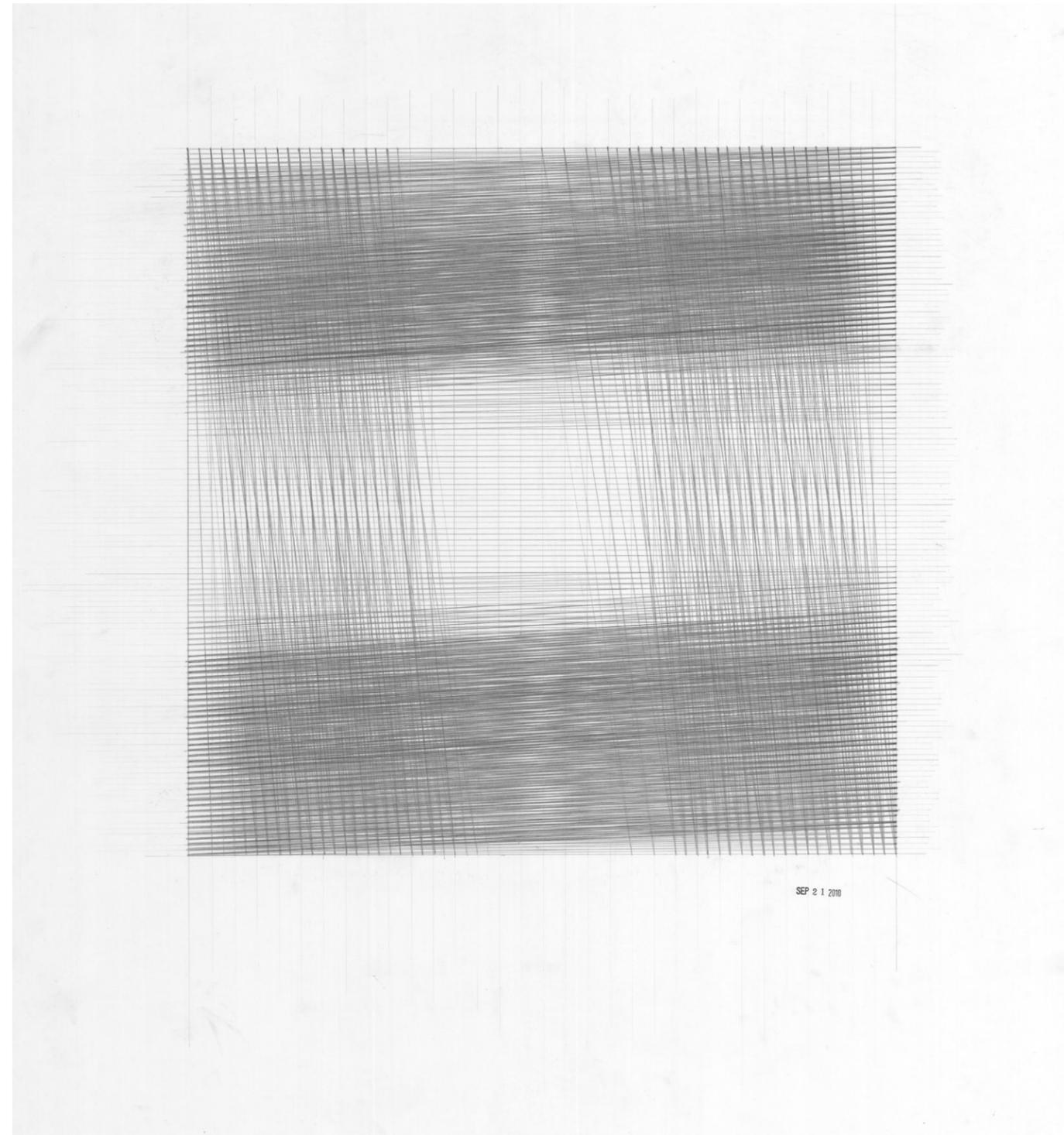
Through abstraction, the drawings are freed from direct representation.

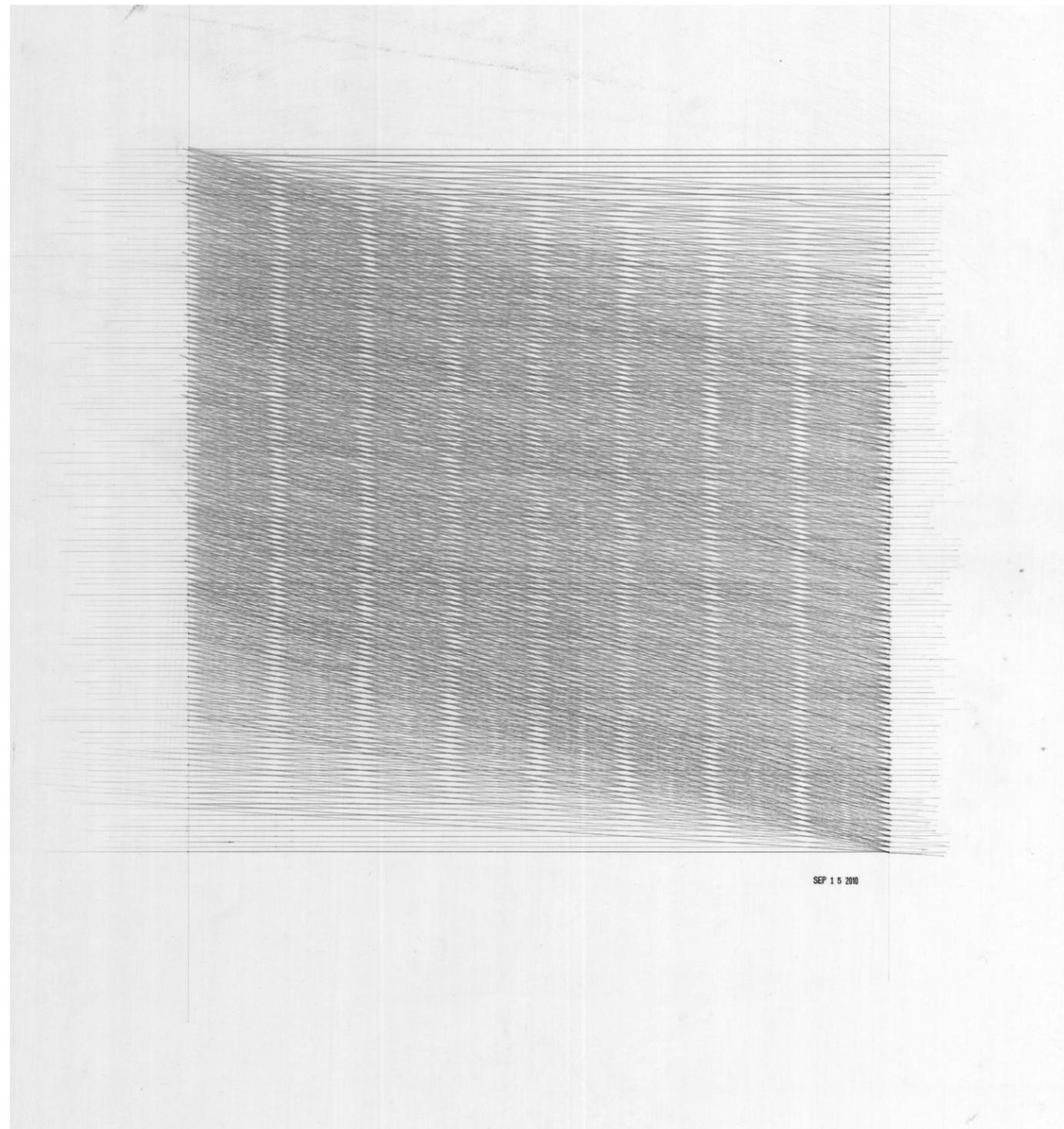
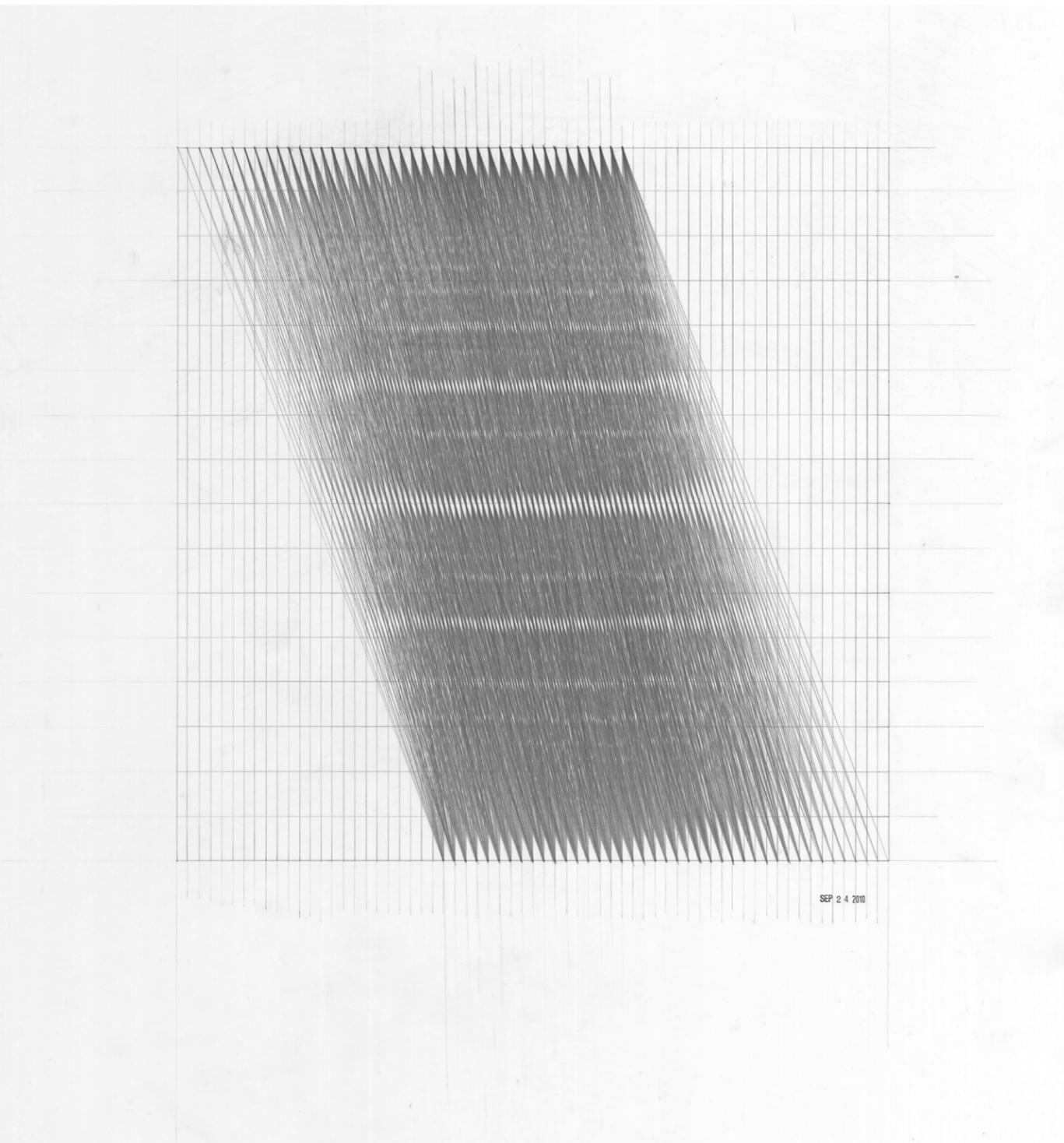
In a conversation with John Cage, Roger Shattuck describes Erik Satie's daily walks to and from Paris as "the source of Satie's sense of musical beat--the possibility of variation within repetition, the effect of boredom on the organism--may be this endless walking back and forth across the same landscape day after day . . . the total observation of a very limited and narrow environment."

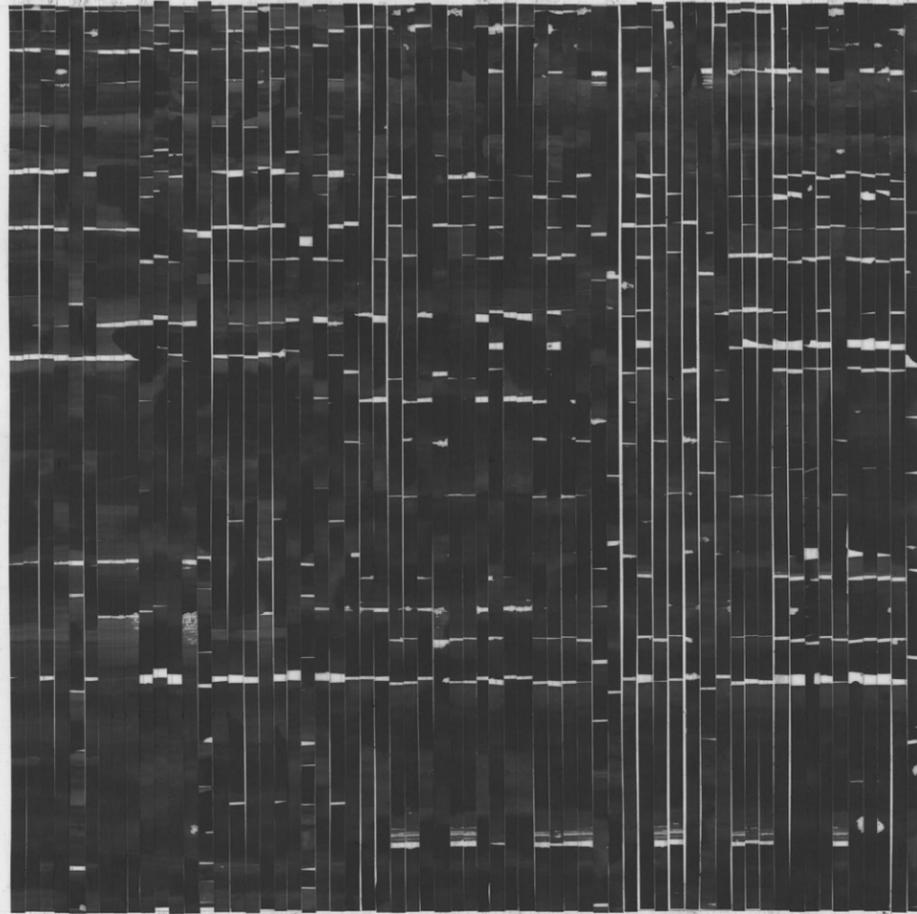
Out of an inherently rigid and monotonous structure, small imperfect moments are found that softly disrupt the sterility of the grid.

"...The truest representation of the searching mind is just to 'follow the brush'."

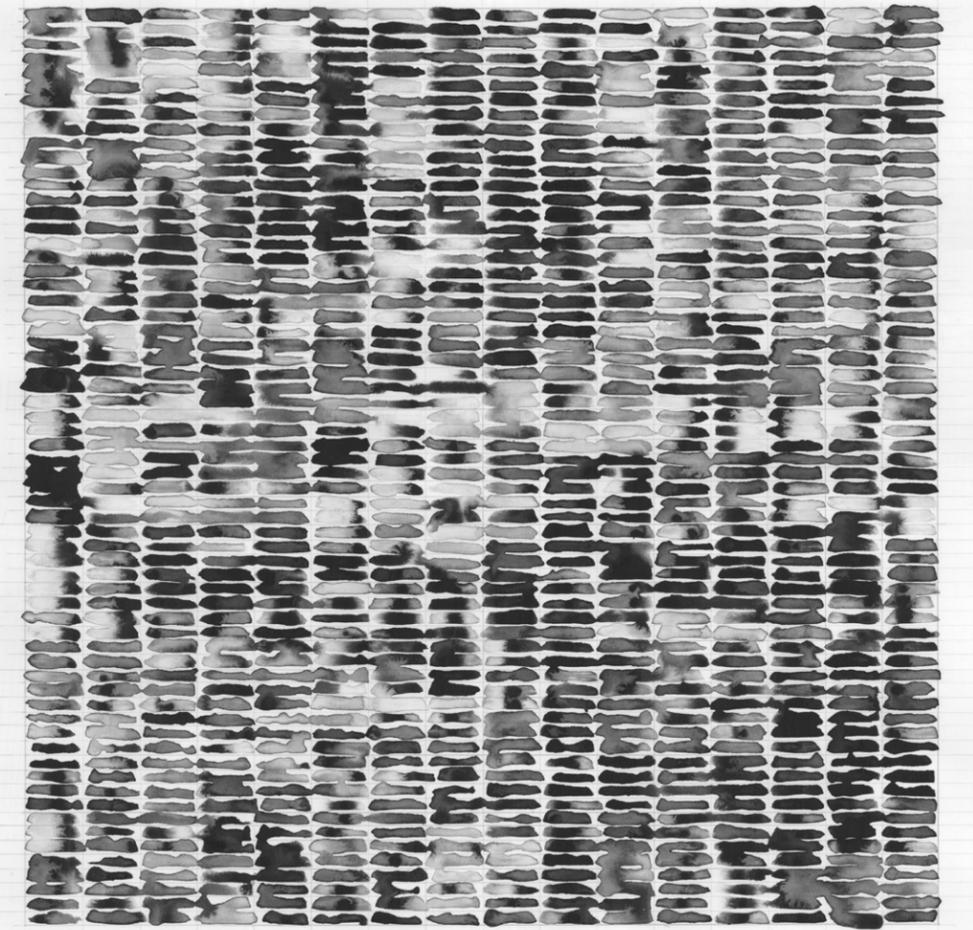
Junichiro Tanizaki, "In Praise of Shadows"



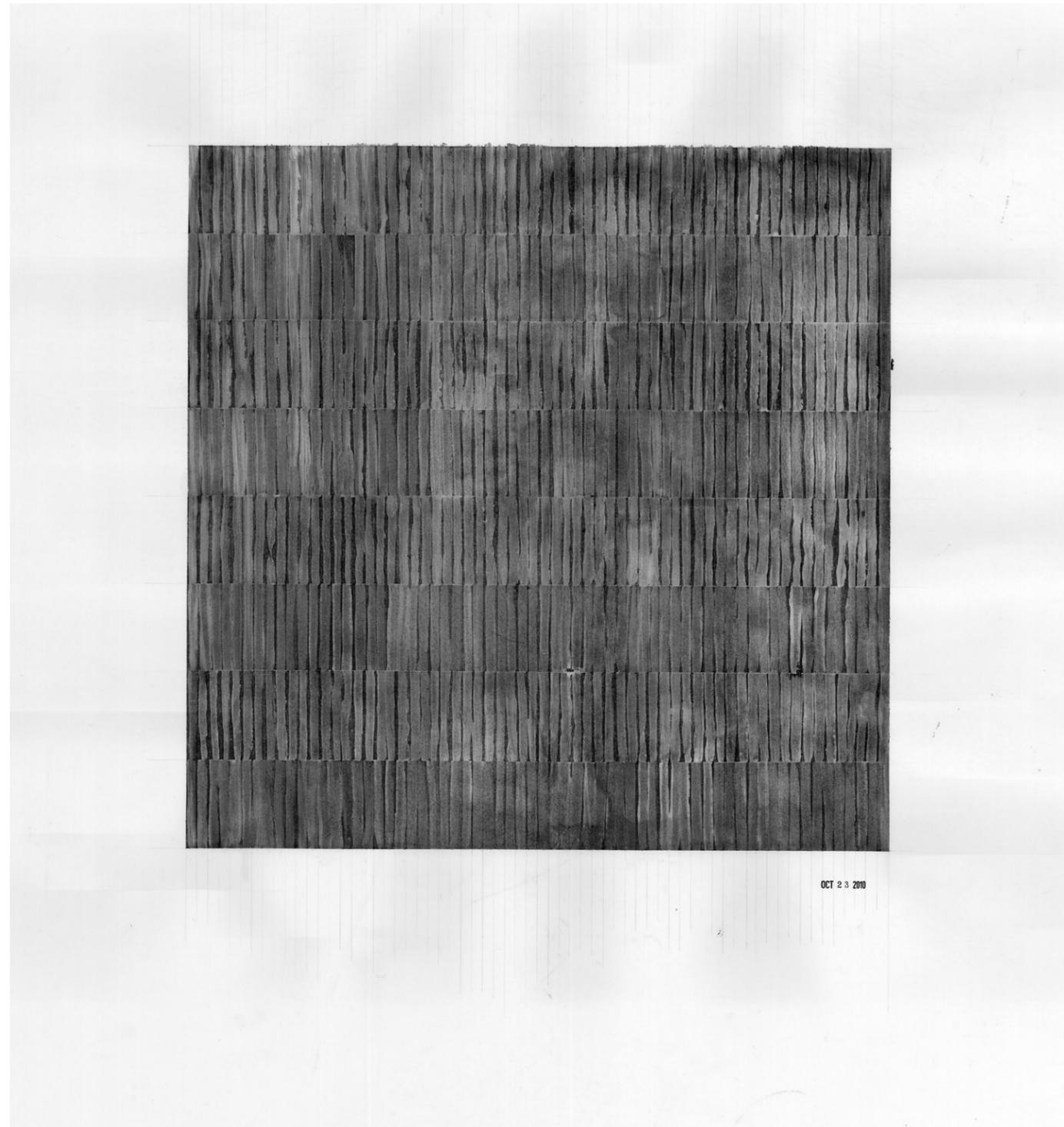
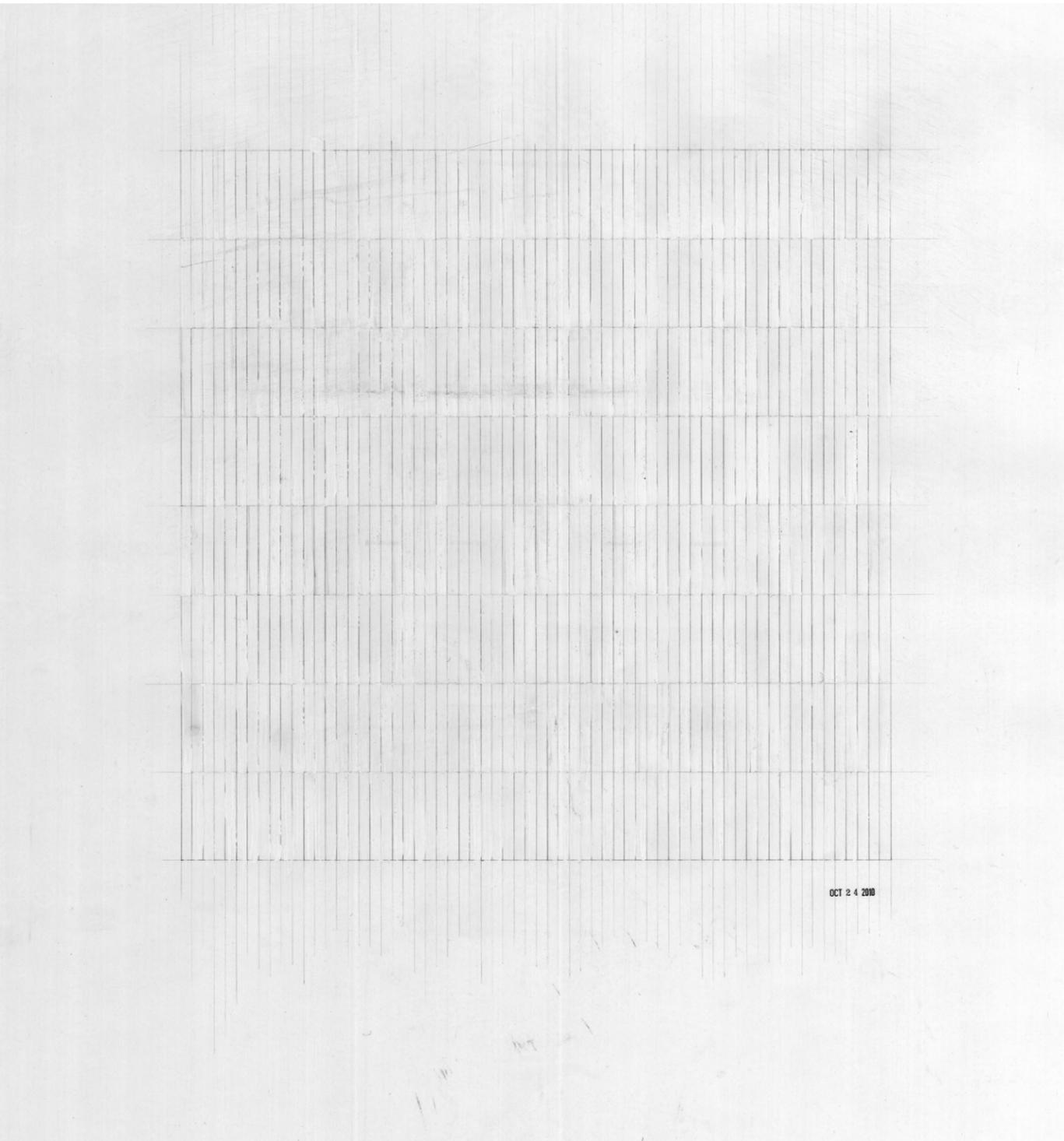


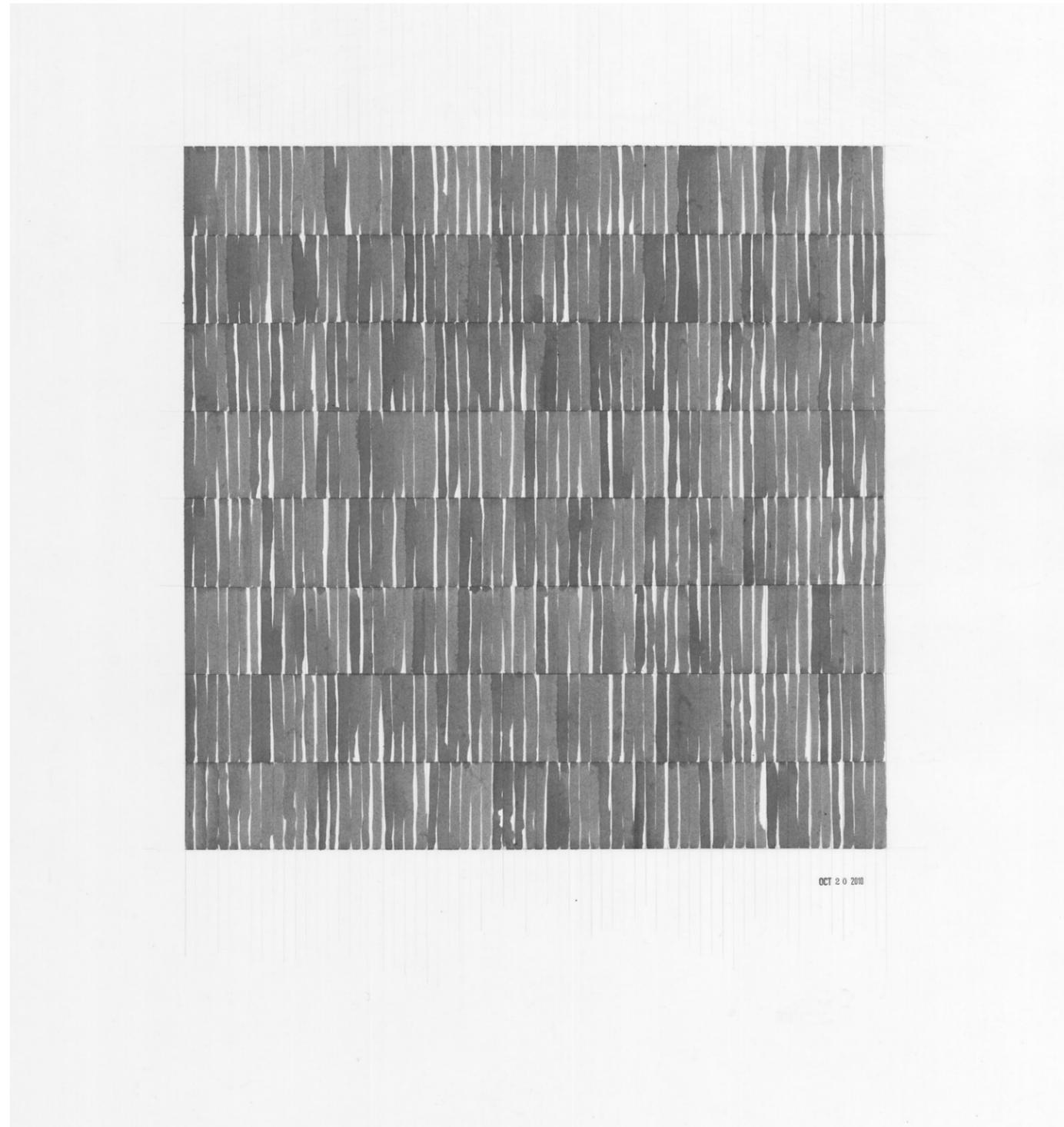
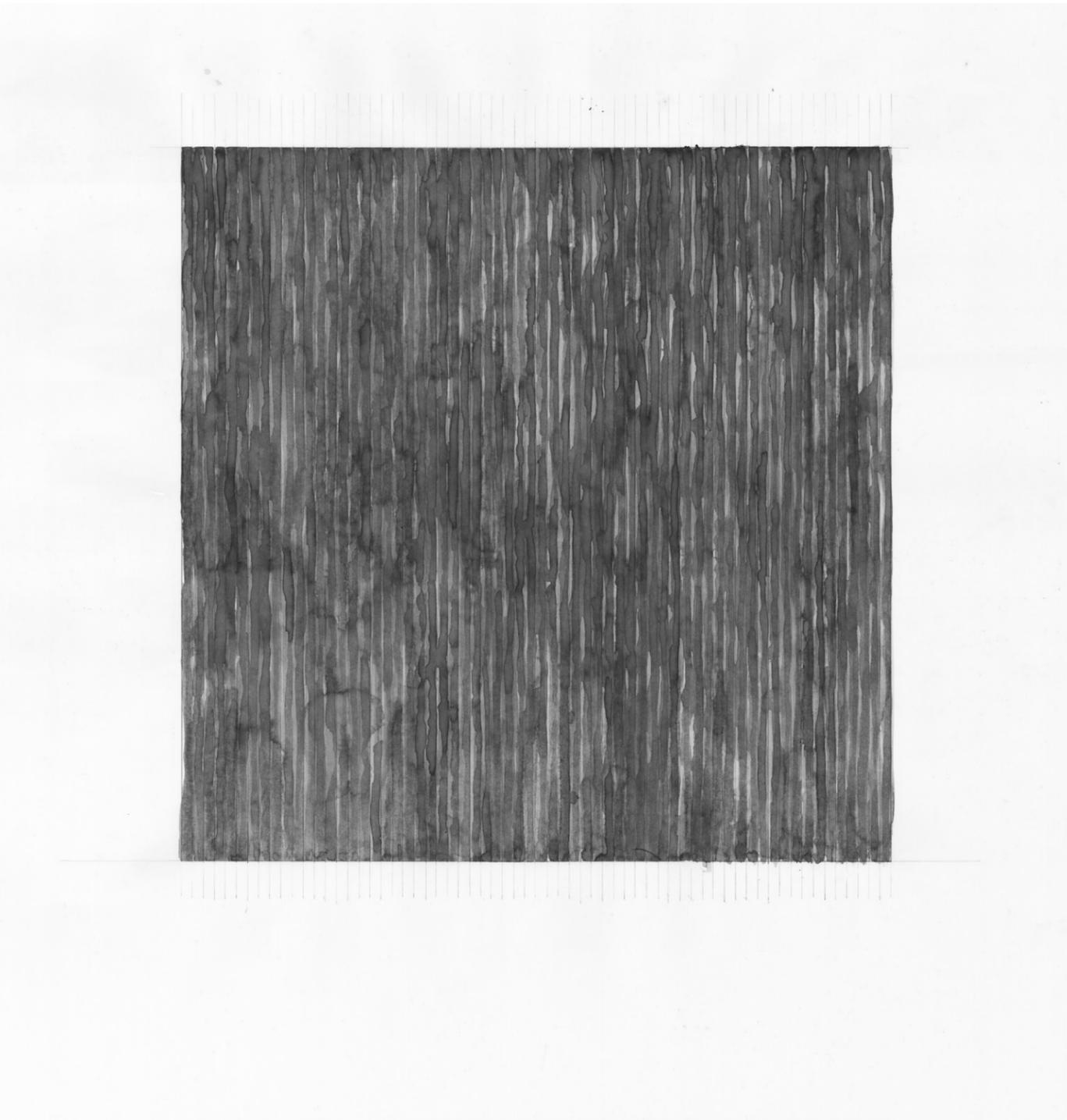


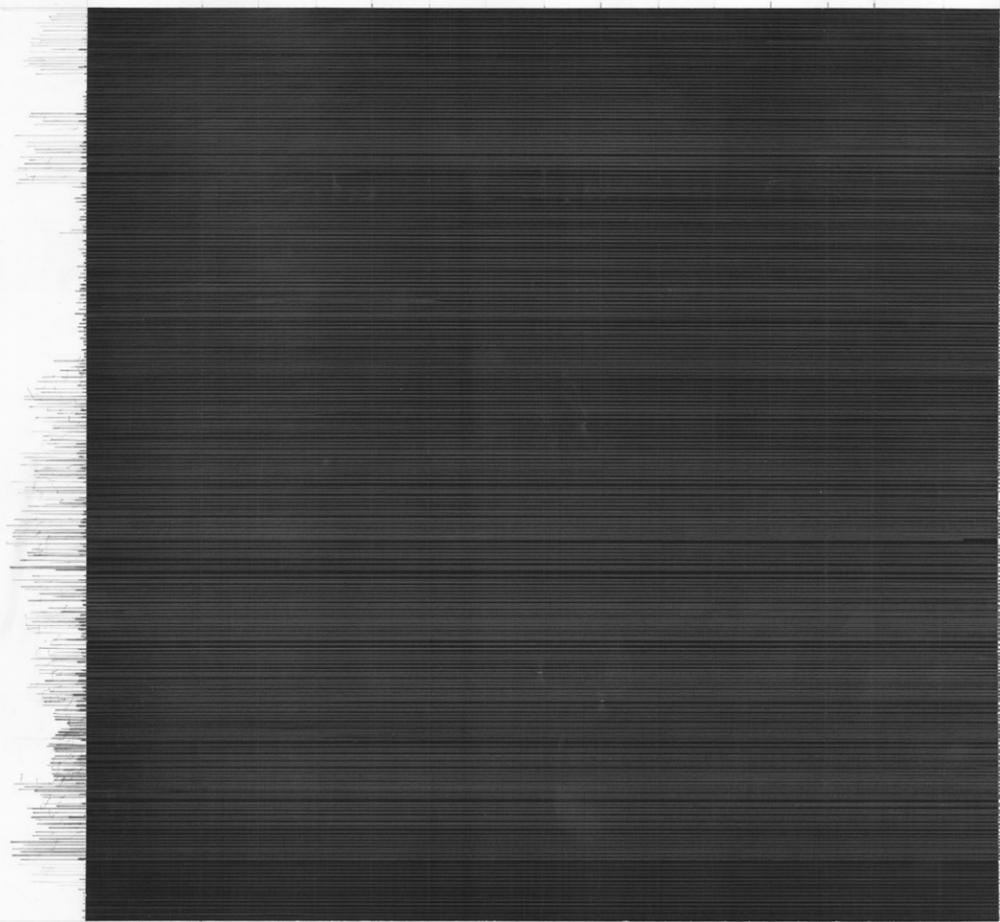
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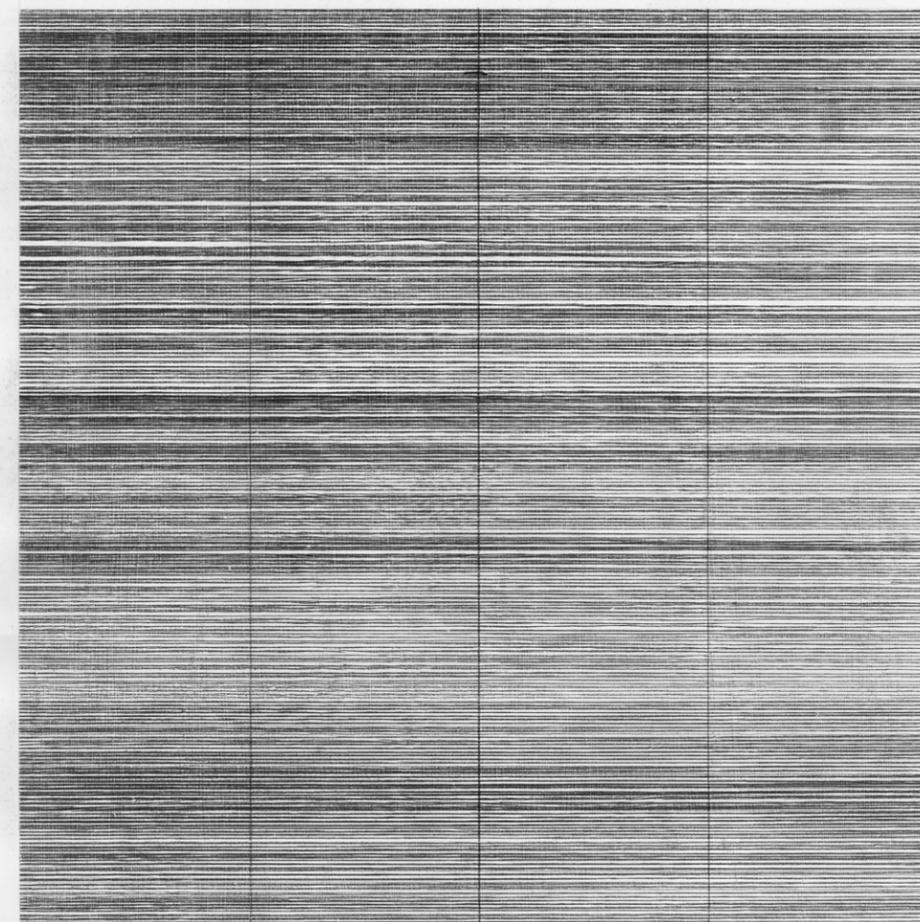
SEP 02 2010







SEP 28 2010



MAR 01 2011

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