

Civic Space

An Architectural Framework for Urban Invention

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Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture

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13 July 2010
Blacksburg, Virginia

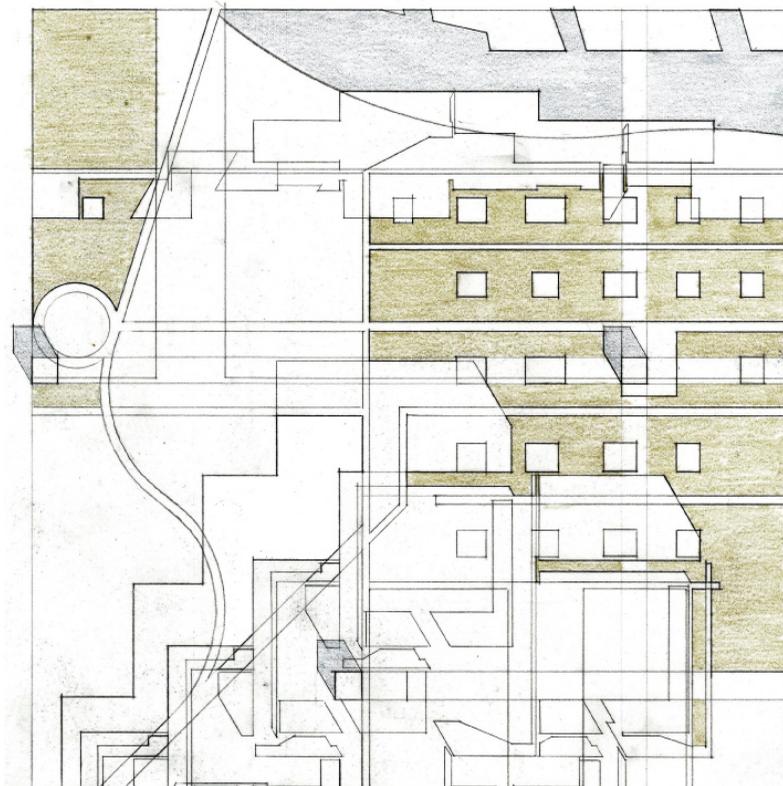
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keywords: grid, garden, field, frame, forum, square, node, reticulum

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Abstract

This project represents the search for an architecture within the physical, historical, and political situation that an existing city presents. Set within the physical bounds of Savannah, it builds upon an understanding of the city as a series of Utopian propositions existing subliminally and often incongruously. As such, the project concerns the making of public space--space to relieve the culturally disjointed condition of modern urban life by acting as a sort of stage for creative expression and collective improvisation. This also involves the making of characteristic places, which by energetically acknowledging, confronting, challenging, or amplifying the city's conceptions of itself, have the potential to generate both physical and metaphysical transformations. Furthermore, in response to urban development paradigms that are either senselessly uncoordinated or mechanistically authoritarian, the project proposes an alternative: the structured interweaving of a 'civic layer' of these generative urban centers, each serving a different part of the city. The centers must function architecturally as the symbols and containers of civic life, providing space and programmatic flexibility to allow for open cultural engagement while aesthetically enlivening the urban fabric and serving collectively as an index to the city at large.

I would like to thank:

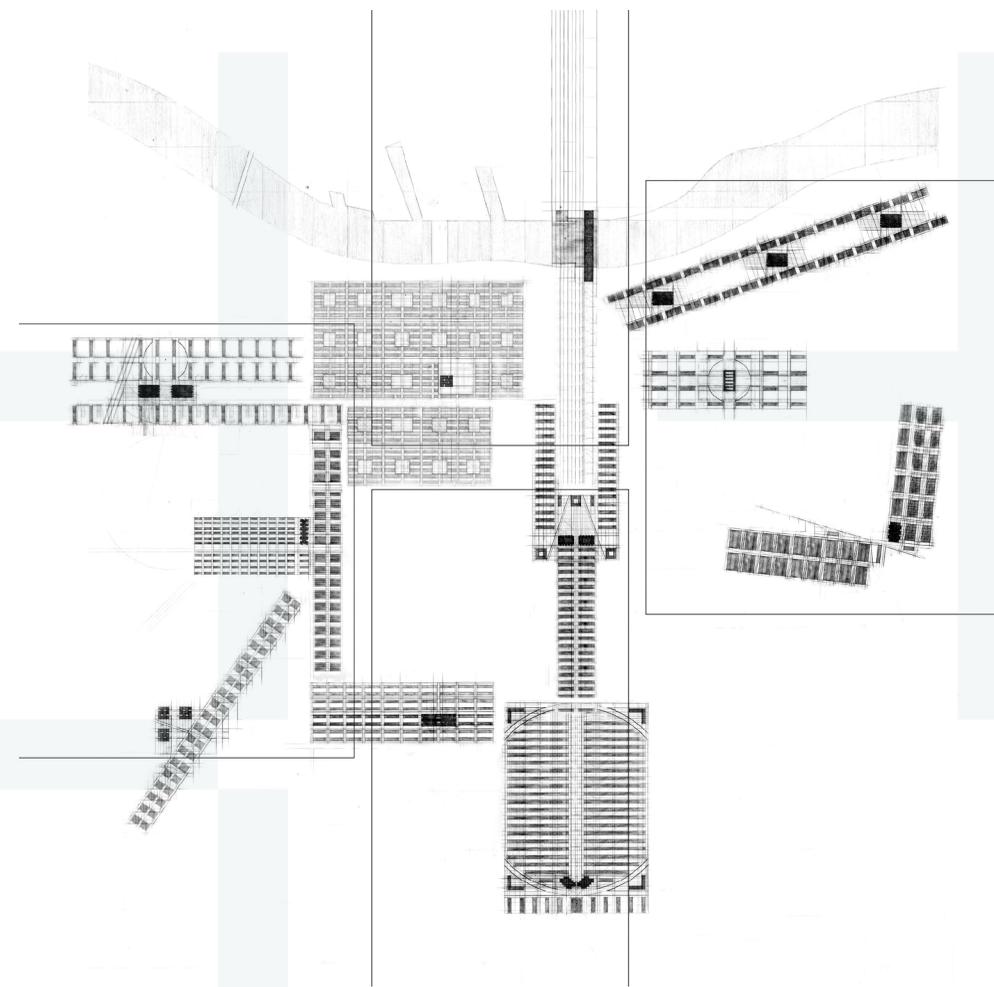
the members of my committee, Steve, Scott, and Frank,
for their wisdom

Professors Pittman, Rodriguez-Camilloni, Rott, and Galloway,
for their insights

my fellow students,
for their questions

my family and my friends,
for your encouragement and your humor.

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This project has many starting points, and while it would be impossible to catalog them all or to somehow trace the precise genealogy of the work, it is important to provide some clues as to what influences and ideas helped to form the project into its current state. While we can perhaps imagine an architecture so patently harmonious with its circumstances and expressive of its aims that it needs no introduction, there are always, and always have been, the obstacles of representation, intention (not to mention contention), and interpretive bias to overcome, as well as the impossibility of presenting an architectural work, in its entirety, in a direct or linear manner such as may be possible with a musical composition or a painting. Therefore it is hoped that pointing in a few directions at the outset will allow the architecture itself to be more clearly seen.

One starting point, and perhaps the most significant, is a conception of architecture itself, what it is and what it should be, since this will bear on everything that is made, and since redundancy or misconstrual may be avoided through a clear demarcation of territory. While the term 'architecture' may be used to connote the structure of natural formations, including organisms, or of purely functionalist machinery, or of organizational systems and hierarchies, and while architecture as a category of art may overlap the other categories and freely borrow media and techniques within an 'expanded field' of constructive possibilities, the indispensable and timeless role of architecture is the formal structuring of spatial experience. This is to be found in a dream or memory more readily than in any city, and Le Corbusier's assertion that it is "a matter of plastic emotion" implies, essentially, that matter does not matter, except insofar as it allows one to re-enter the emotional space it defines.

From this emerges another starting point: a dream of the city and the desire to involve oneself in its unfolding. This point is necessarily suspended between an actuality and a utopia, between the presence of an urban structure—an architecture—encrusted by the pragmatic and visionary accumulations of centuries, and the utopian reimagining of this real city, Savannah. As in any rendering, certain facts must be selectively omitted so that the most essential aspects are made visible. The urban order that bleeds through this process of erasure is a primitive one, made up of primary elements which persist and shape the city over time. These artifacts and the spaces between them comprise the field of possibilities in which a new order is planned as an amendment to the old.

This brings us to the starting 'points' of the grid itself, a grid which, as an urbanizing device, echoes not only the Cartesian ordering of the wilderness that took place at a continental scale in the new world and early America, but also the subsequent 'regularizations' of European cities, including the Barcelona expansion of Ildefonso Cerdá and Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for Paris. The heavy reticulation of this last example is taken to its logical extreme (and beyond) in Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette, in which the structural nodes are the disjointed reassemblies of so many fragmented utopias gone before.

Although figurative, the isolation of these component parts from the possibility of a socially-ordered whole recalls a long string of small but radical self-sufficiency models, from the phalanstery of Charles Fourier to the Arcology of Paolo Soleri. Indeed, the greatest value of these off-grid experiments may be in their peculiarity, for by contrast with their surroundings they emphasize the interdependence they appear to disdain, just as the folly set against the backdrop of the Enlightenment era proposed a temporary world of madness and pleasure, bringing into sharp relief the detached rationality expected to govern society.

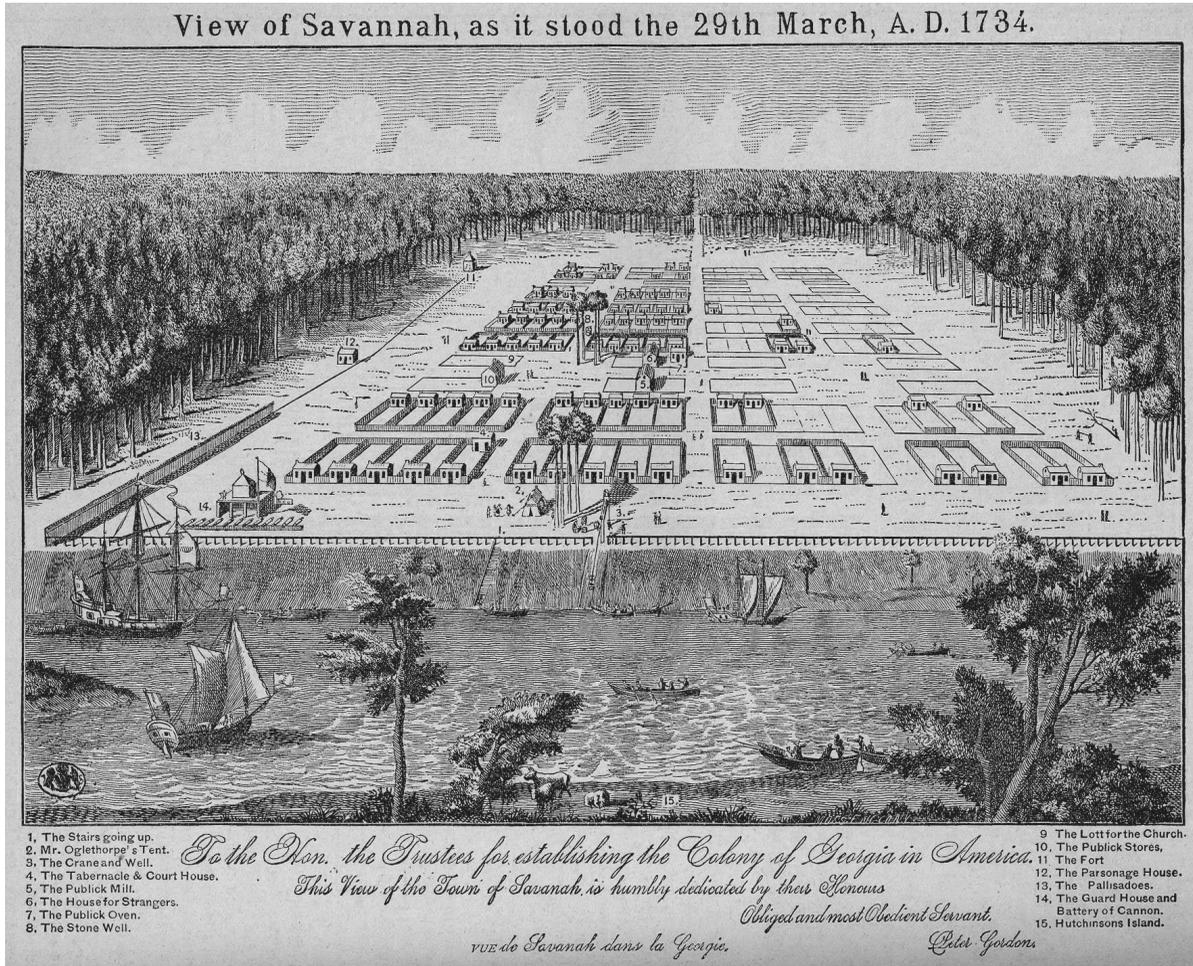
Arata Isozaki, associated with both the Metabolist movement's similarly idealistic proposals for a technological urban megastructure and the unapologetically introspective architecture of the Japanese New Wave, has suggested that the folly itself, by combining in new and unprogrammed ways with the other elements of the city, might somehow reveal a model for urbanism in the future. This was certainly one of the aims implied by Tschumi's thesis for la Villette, which proposed that the static physical space of the building is charged with the propensity to generate events. Through the instability of the project's program within the anchoring points of its grid, as well as the symbolic emptiness of its formal elements, it could both accept and feed into endless possibilities of cultural invention.

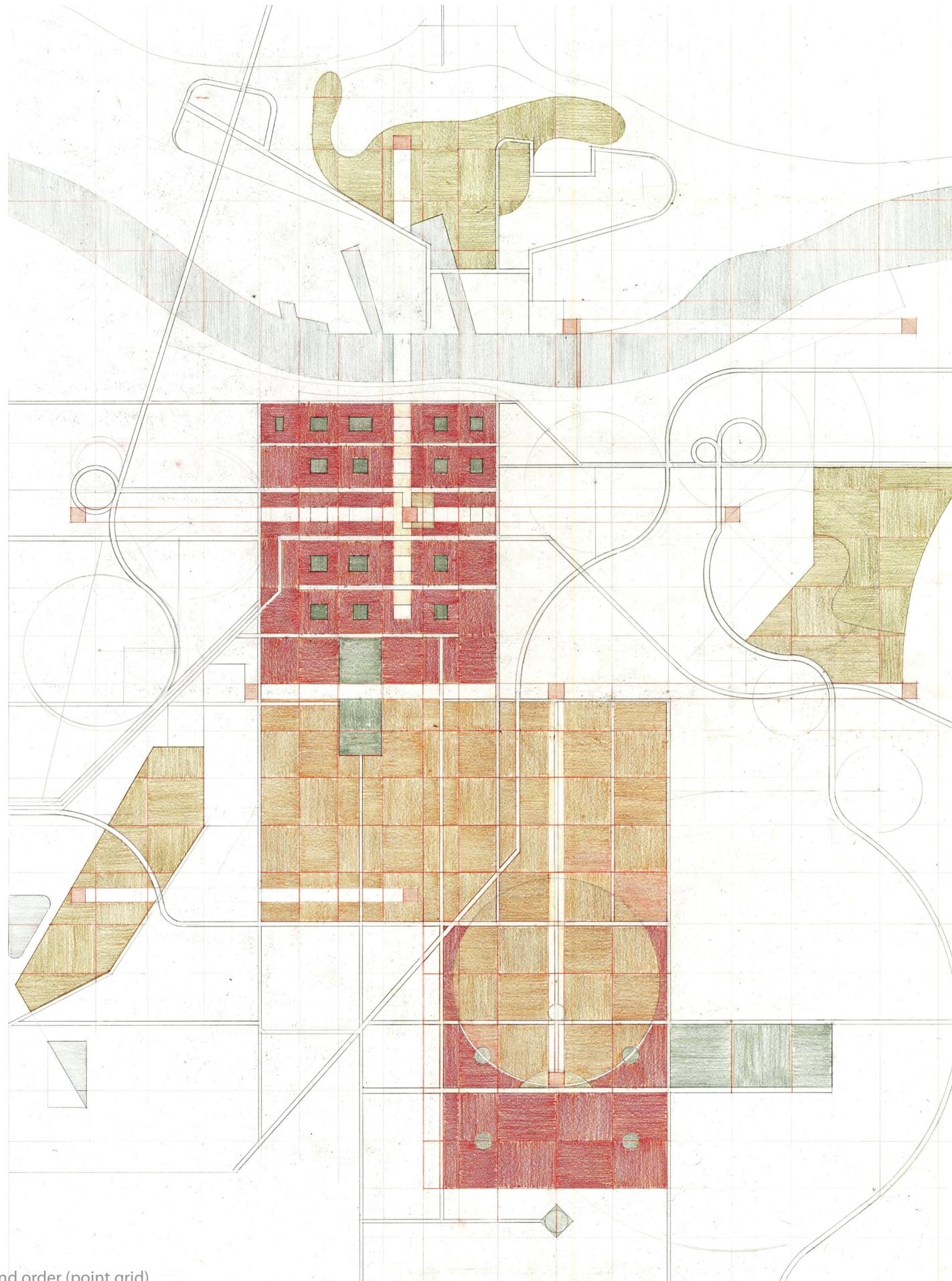
It is interesting then to consider what sorts of temporary utopias might arise from an adequately fertile urban field; utopias, perhaps, that while not totalizing in their impact, provide the foil to an urban wilderness in which the 'public realm' means little more than the real estate owned by the government. What is needed is a dynamic scene that is constantly remade by people acting in accordance with their ideals. This does not require an institutional presence but merely a skeletal intervention—one in which the structural elements of the building are joined together to create a frame. Around this, any number of programmatic elements might be installed, or indeed, the entire structure might remain unprogrammed, a sort of proto-ruin, having no functional justification yet nevertheless attracting people and lending concrete form to their experience of the place. The aim is a space that is truly public, in the sense that it is openly involved in the life of the city.

Implicit in such an aim as well is the necessity of a degree of stasis relative to the city's growth, both in terms of density and at the periphery. This involves a sort of scalable polycentrism which, unlike the radial garden cities of Ebenezer Howard, is boundless and flexible. To this end, O.M. Ungers' attempt to increase both the complexity and the comprehensibility of the modern city under the rubric of 'layering' is nicely complemented by Fumihiko Maki's argument that urban aggregations should come into being through the placement of generative elements, growing sequentially according to a compositional theme in which each new element contains the built-in linkages by which the next is added.

This approach to development brings us back to another point of origin: the founding of Savannah in the early eighteenth century, organized according to the pattern of its own growth, the unit composed of a central garden square flanked by public, then private houses, with roads separating block from block. The architectural metaphor for organic growth to be found in this almost cellular divisioning, as in Maki's 'group form', is appropriate to many scales of construction, wherein units may aggregate into buildings and buildings into blocks, and so on, until the urban fabric—in the sense of Aldo Rossi's *fabricca*, the continuing construction of the city over time—becomes the textured interweaving of many different patterns, each pointing back to its own origin and collectively indexing the space of the city.

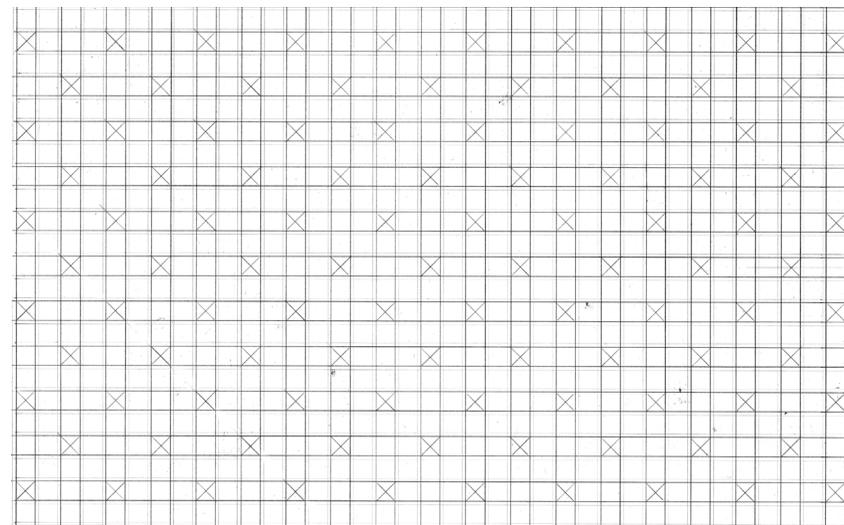
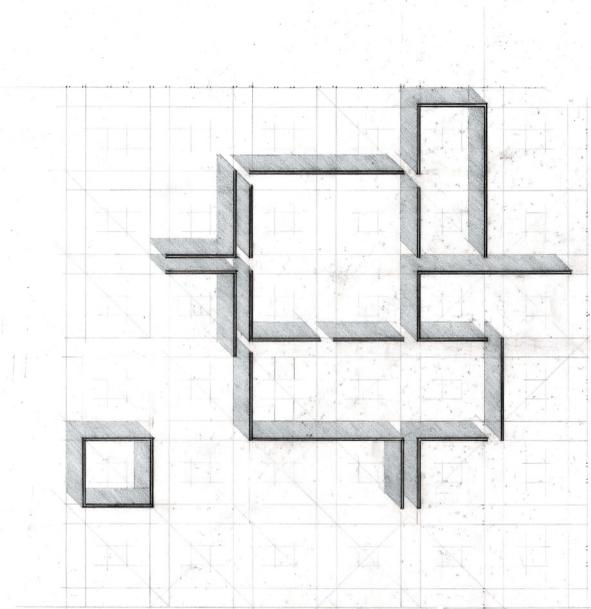
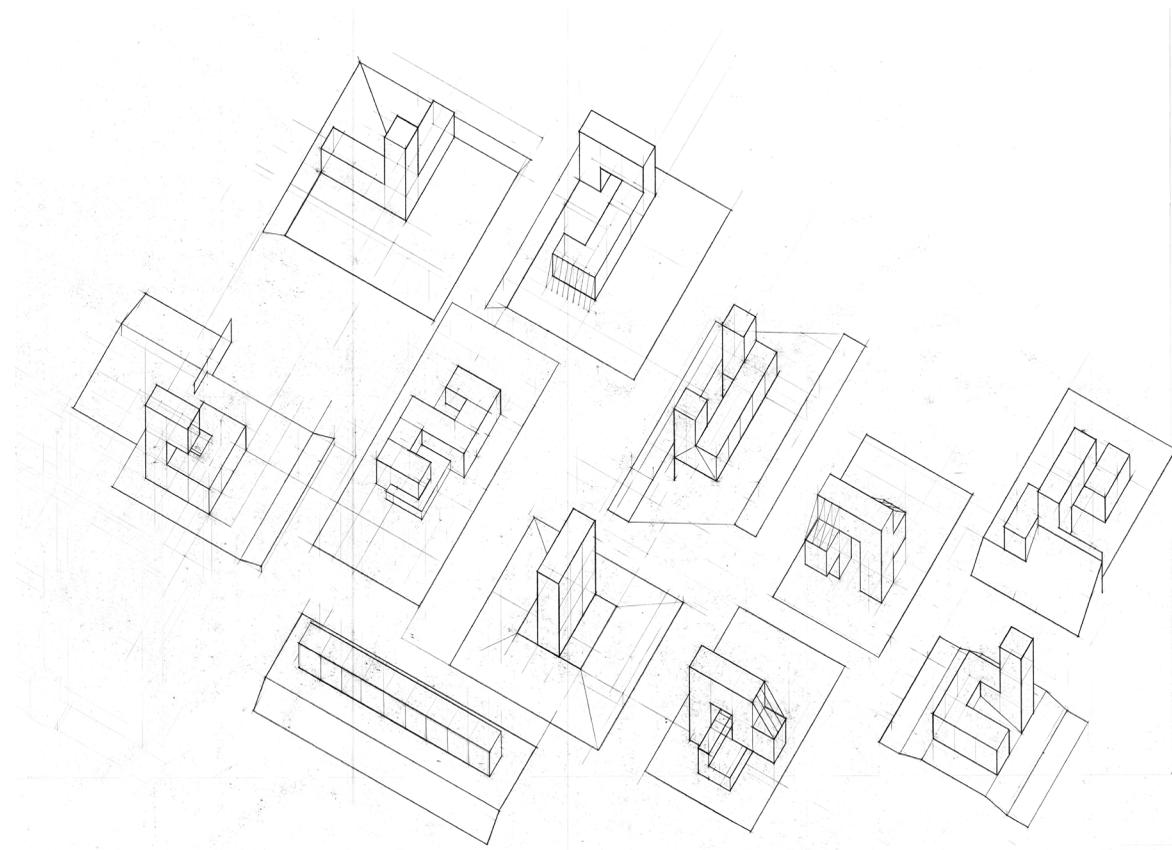
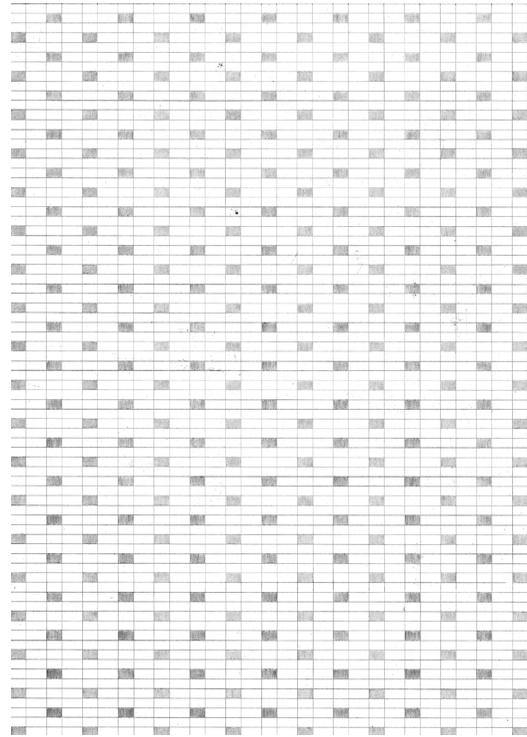
Finally, this project is itself a starting point in the work of understanding a place and laying out an architecture that is worthy of it. There are many ways to construct the pieces of the city, and as each of these pieces gradually folds itself into the new framework suggested by its placement, the self-sustaining idea of its existence is both absorbed and transformed by its relationship to the place, inspiring the dreams of an architecture not previously imagined.

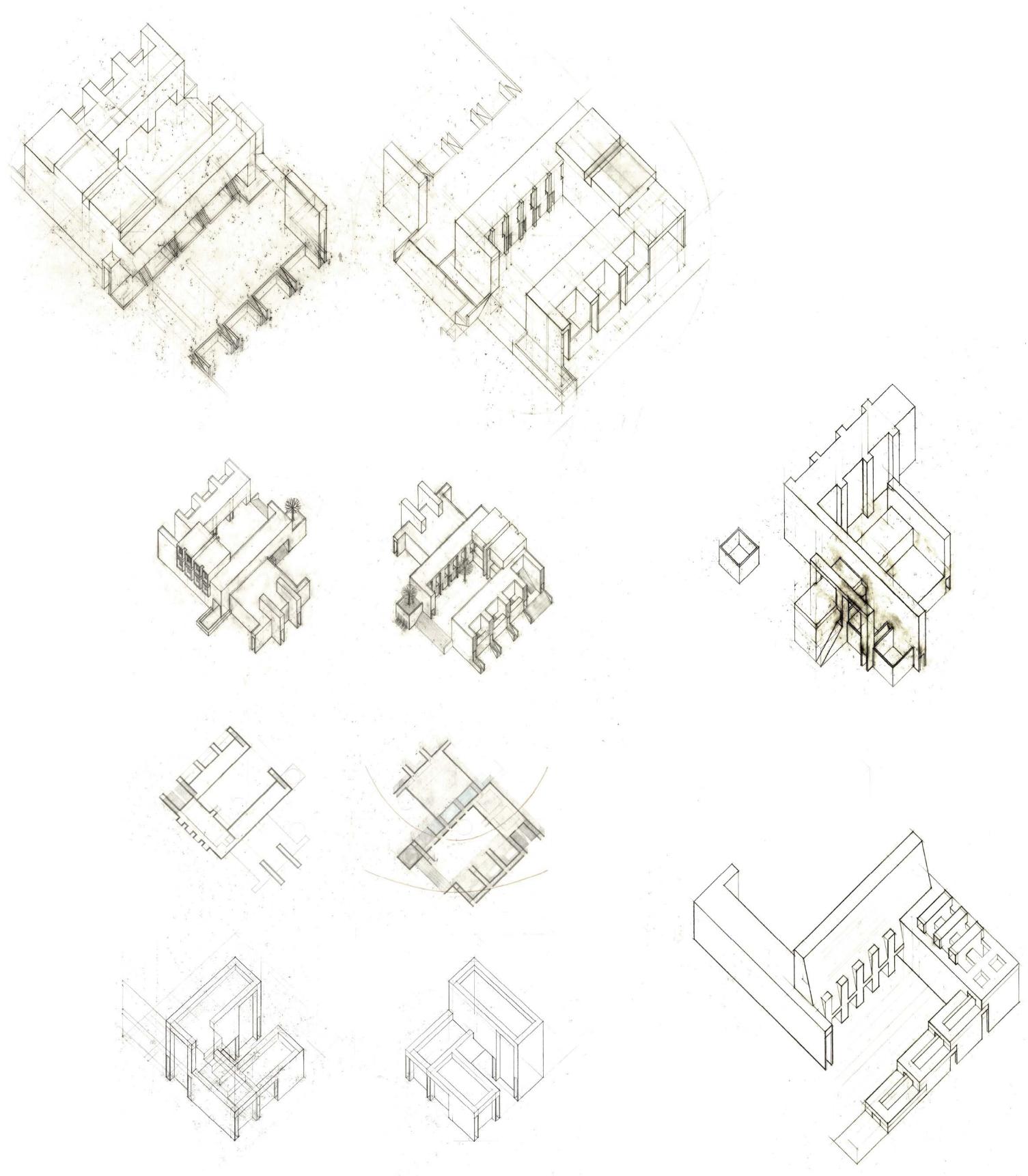


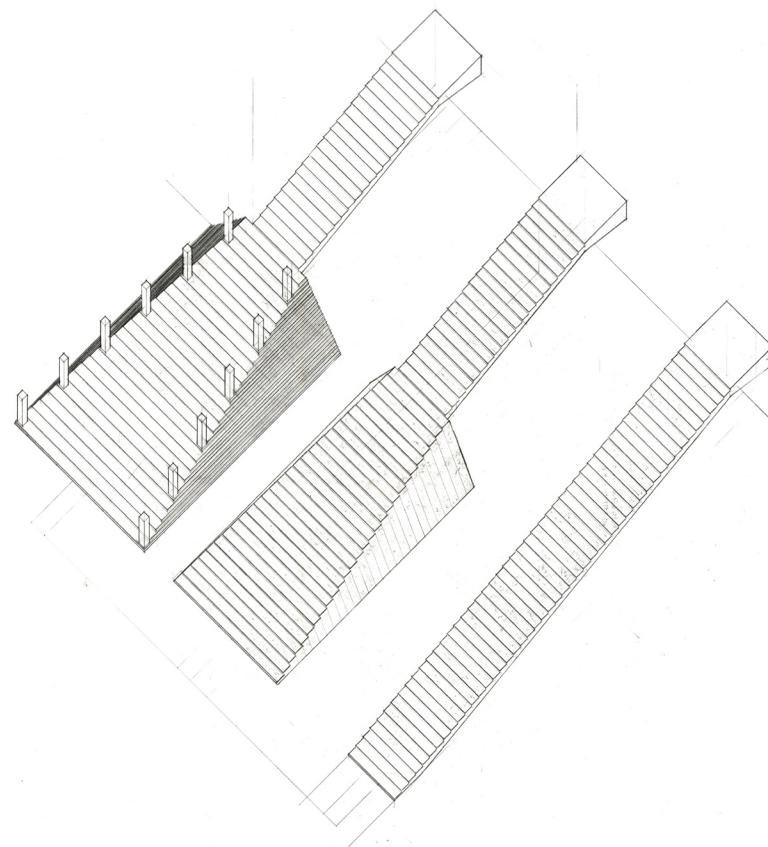
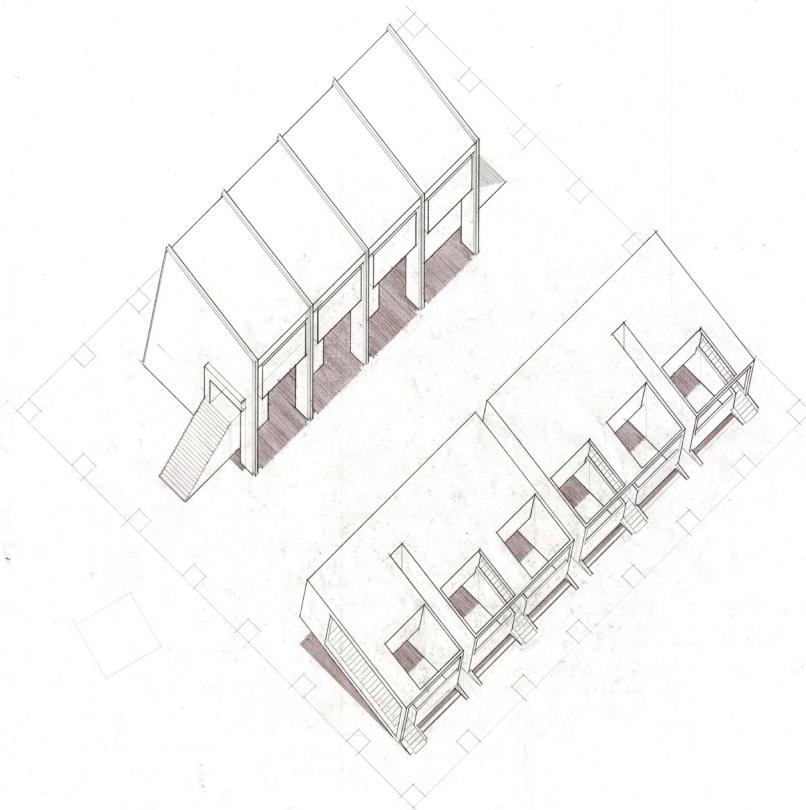
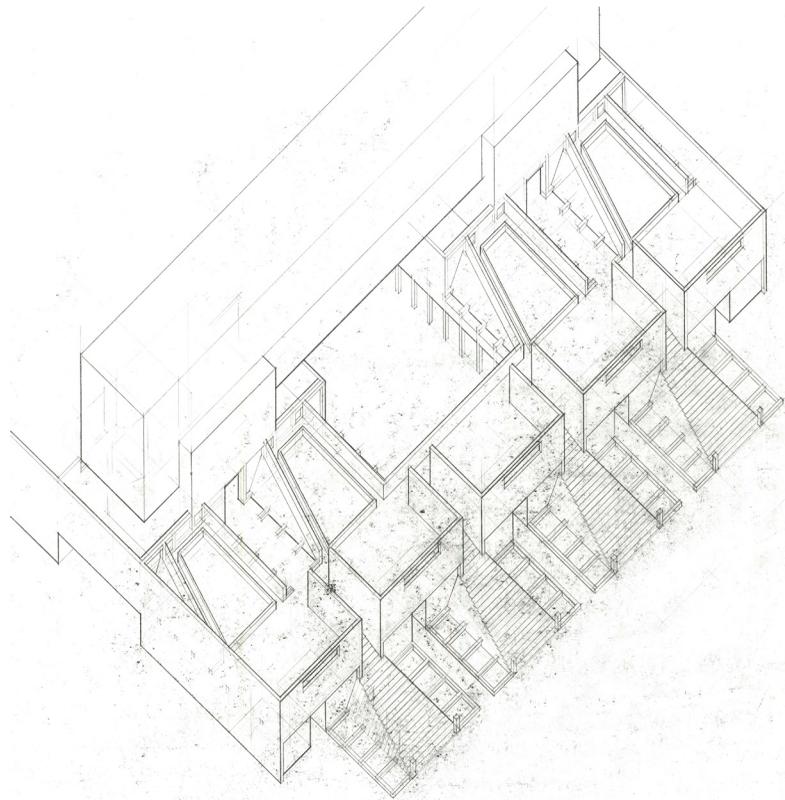


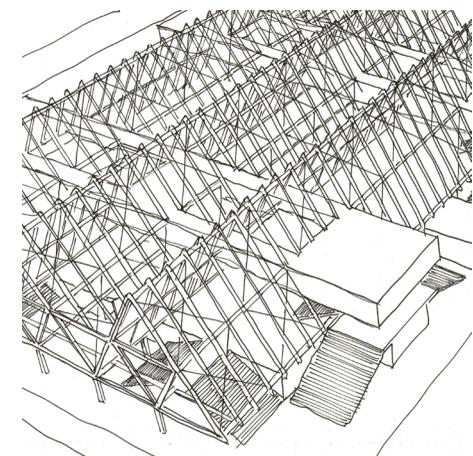
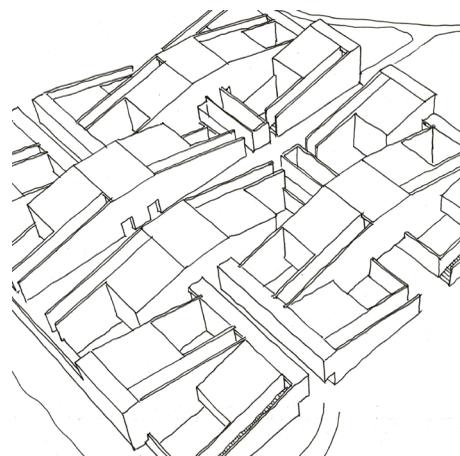
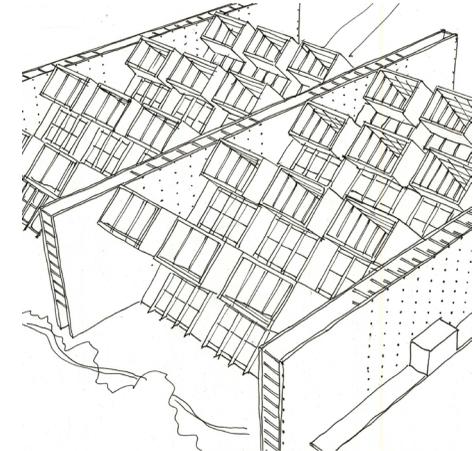
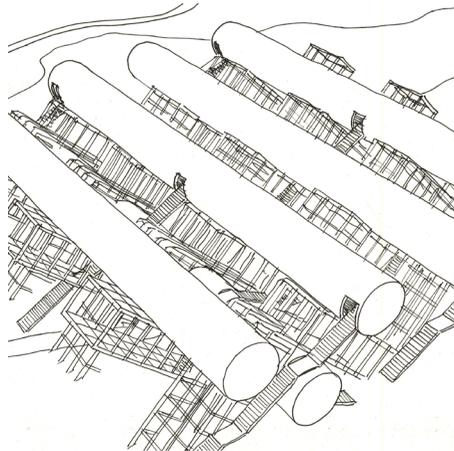
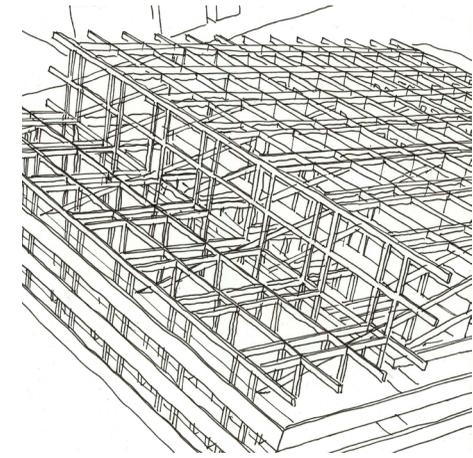
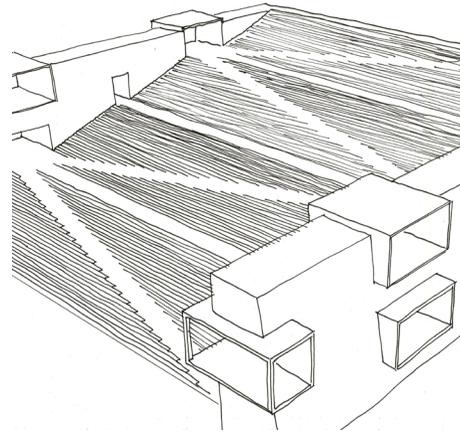
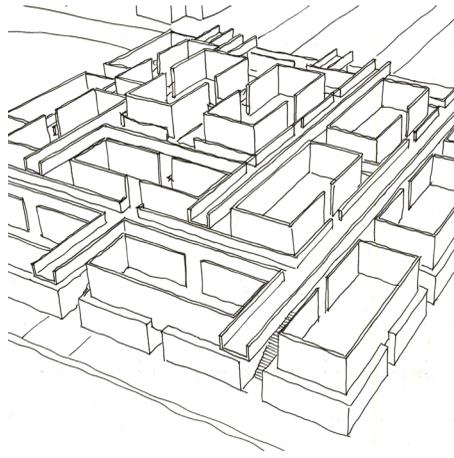
Preliminary: artifact and order (point grid)

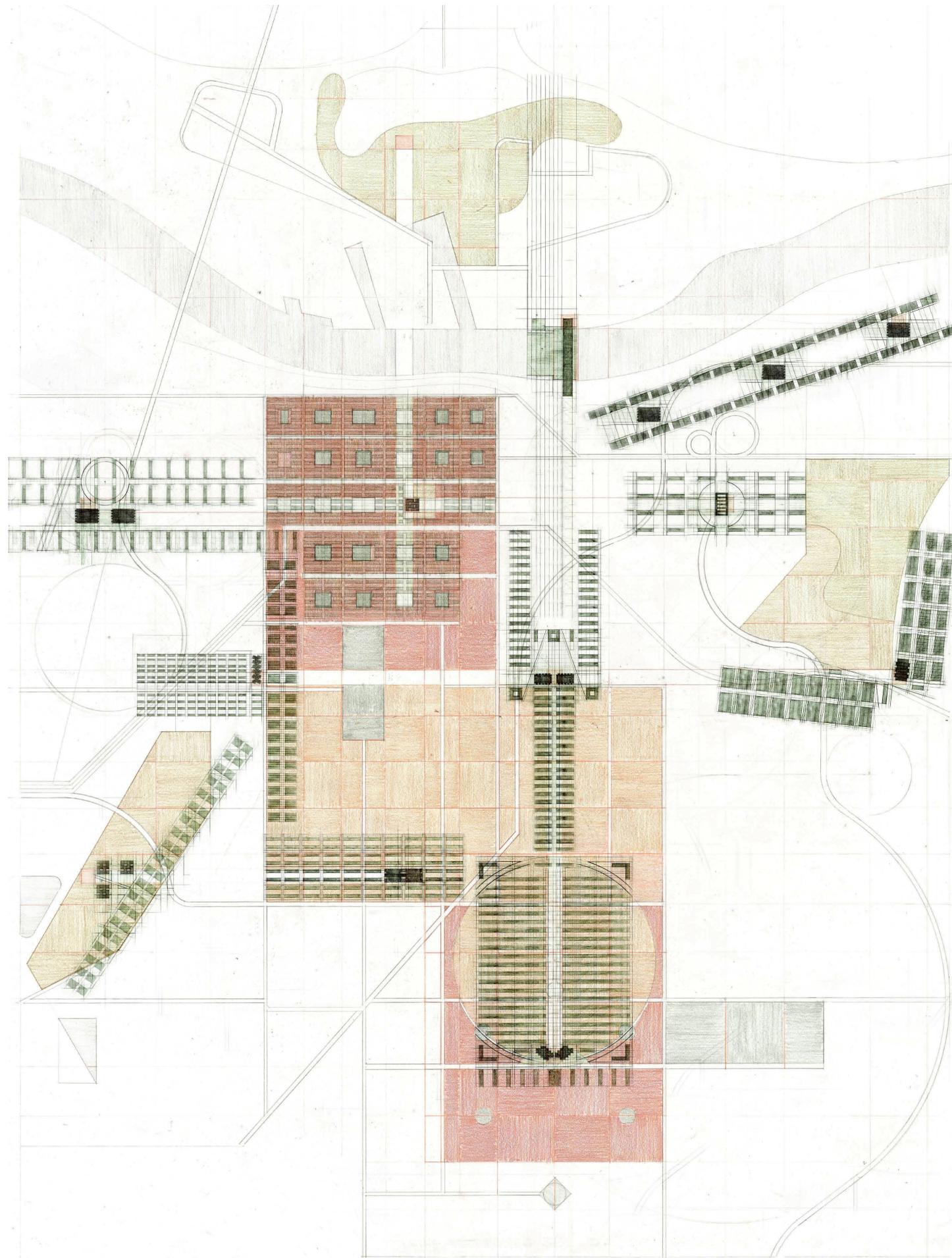


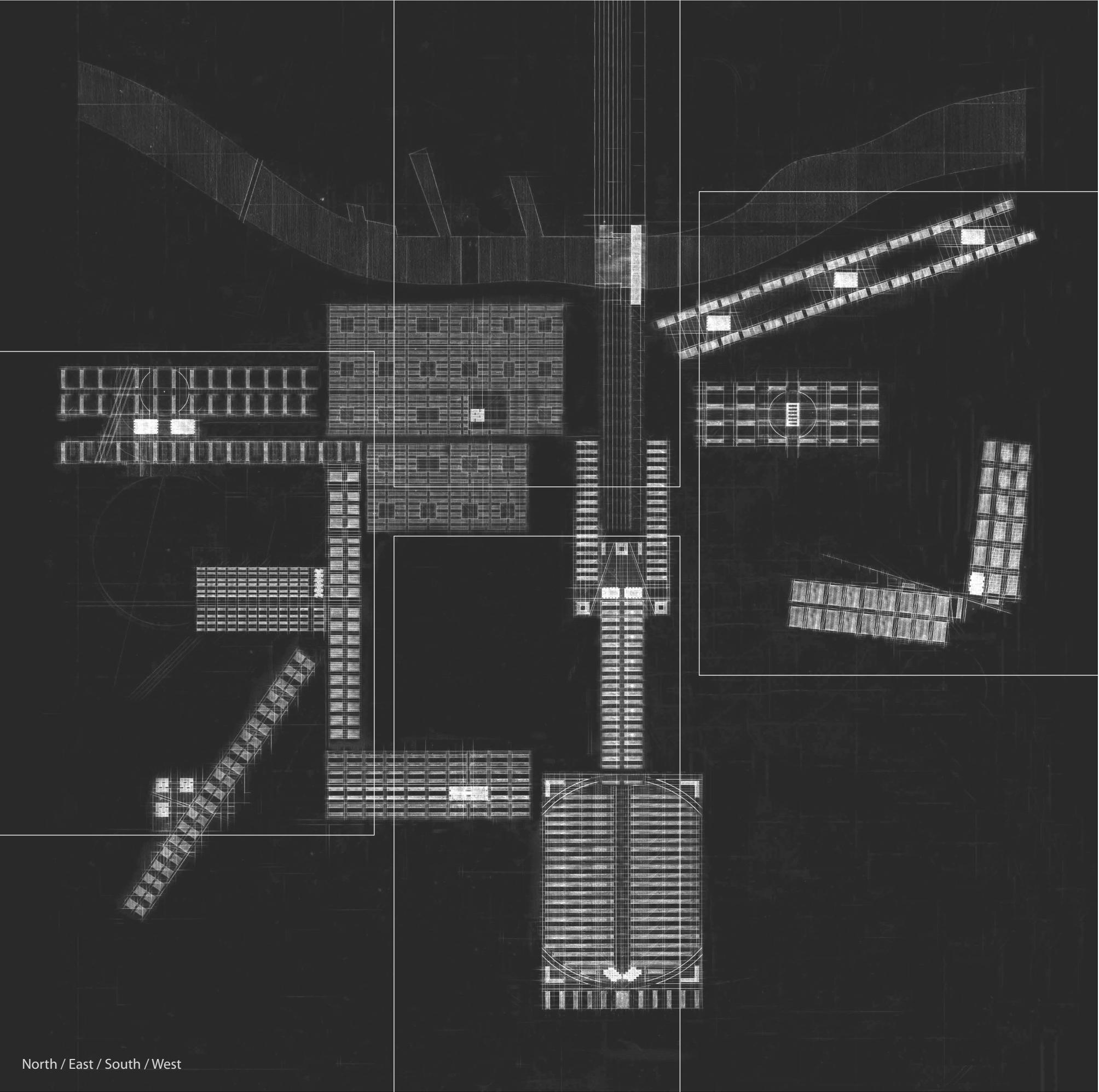






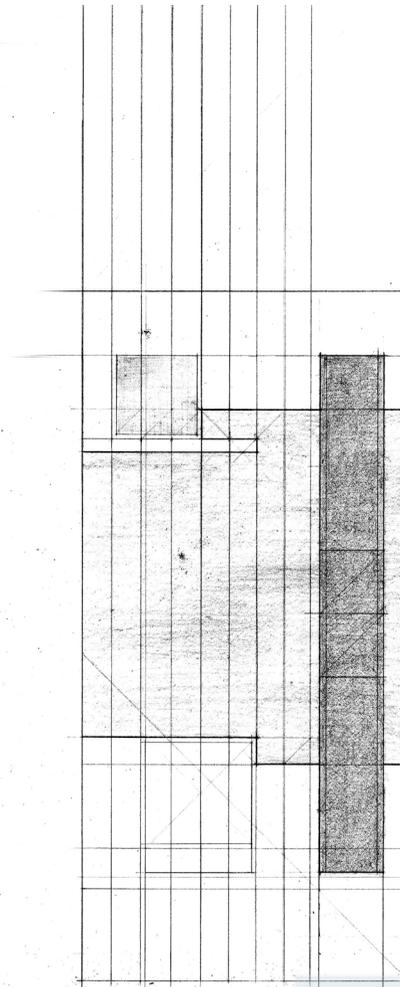
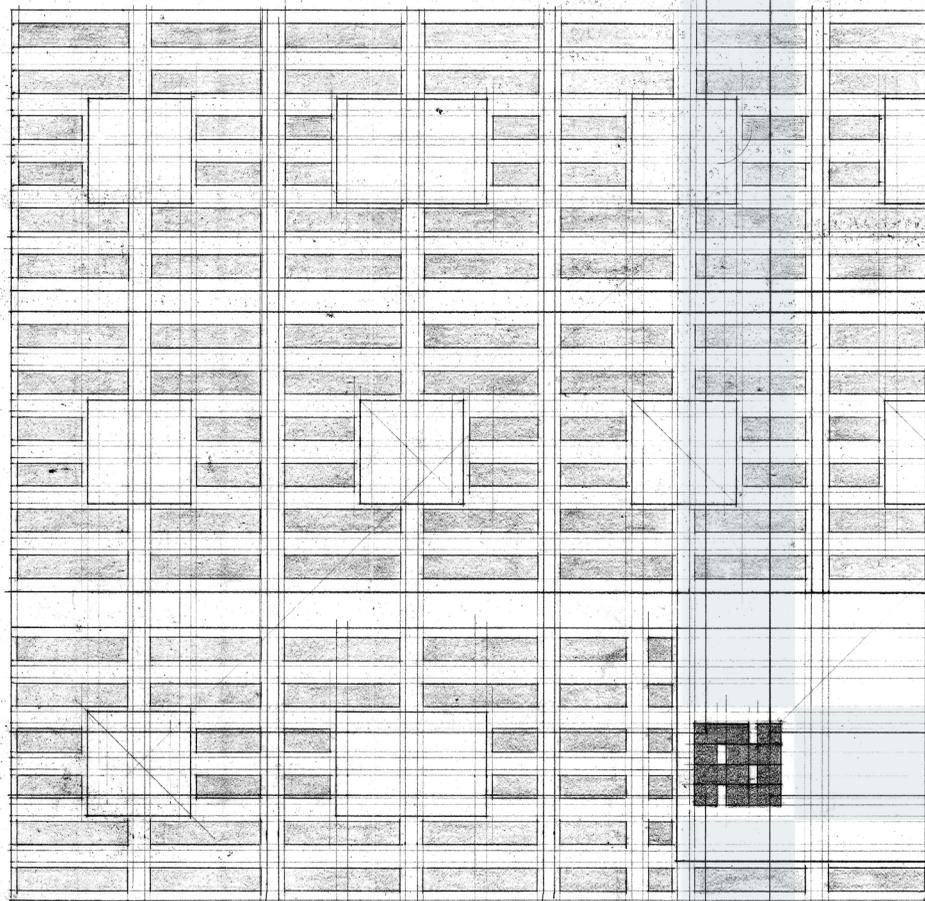






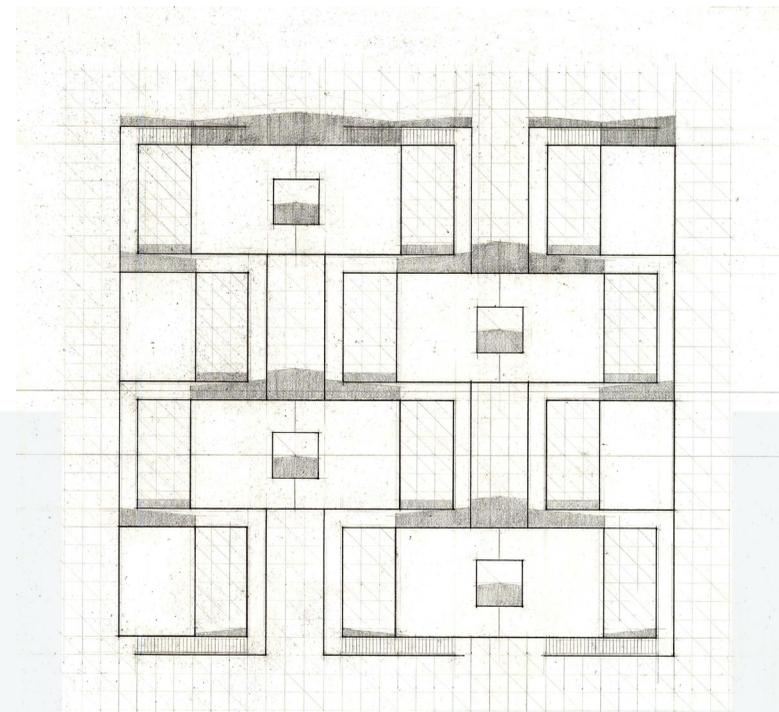
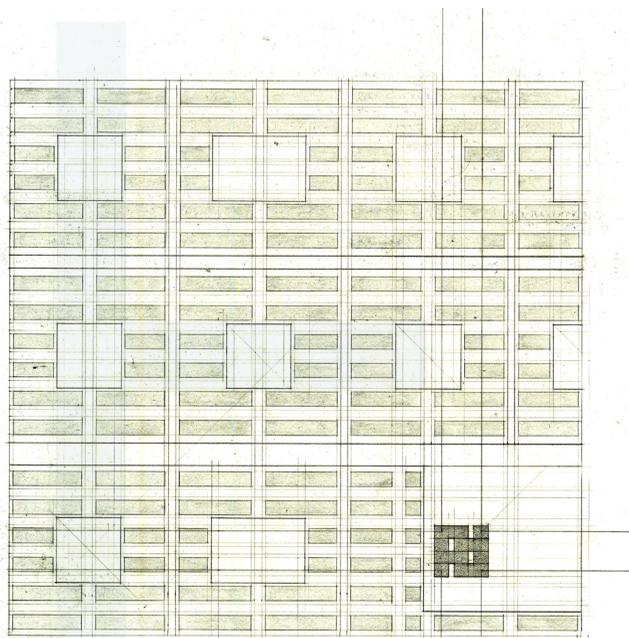
North / East / South / West

"American architecture is above all 'the architecture of the city':
primary elements, monuments, parts."
-Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*

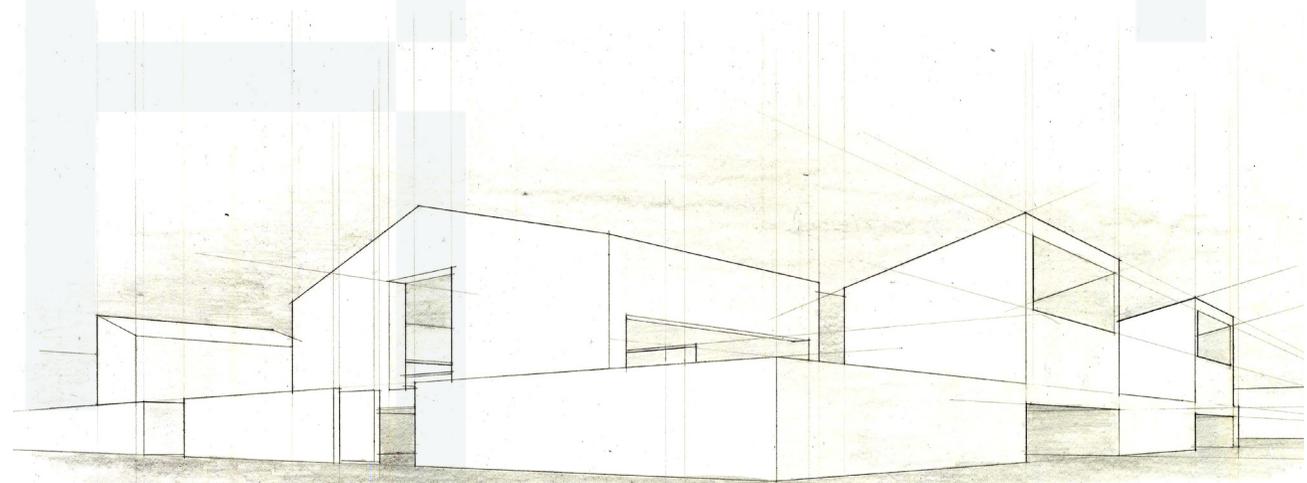


WATER LANDING

AN INITIAL RESTING
PLACE

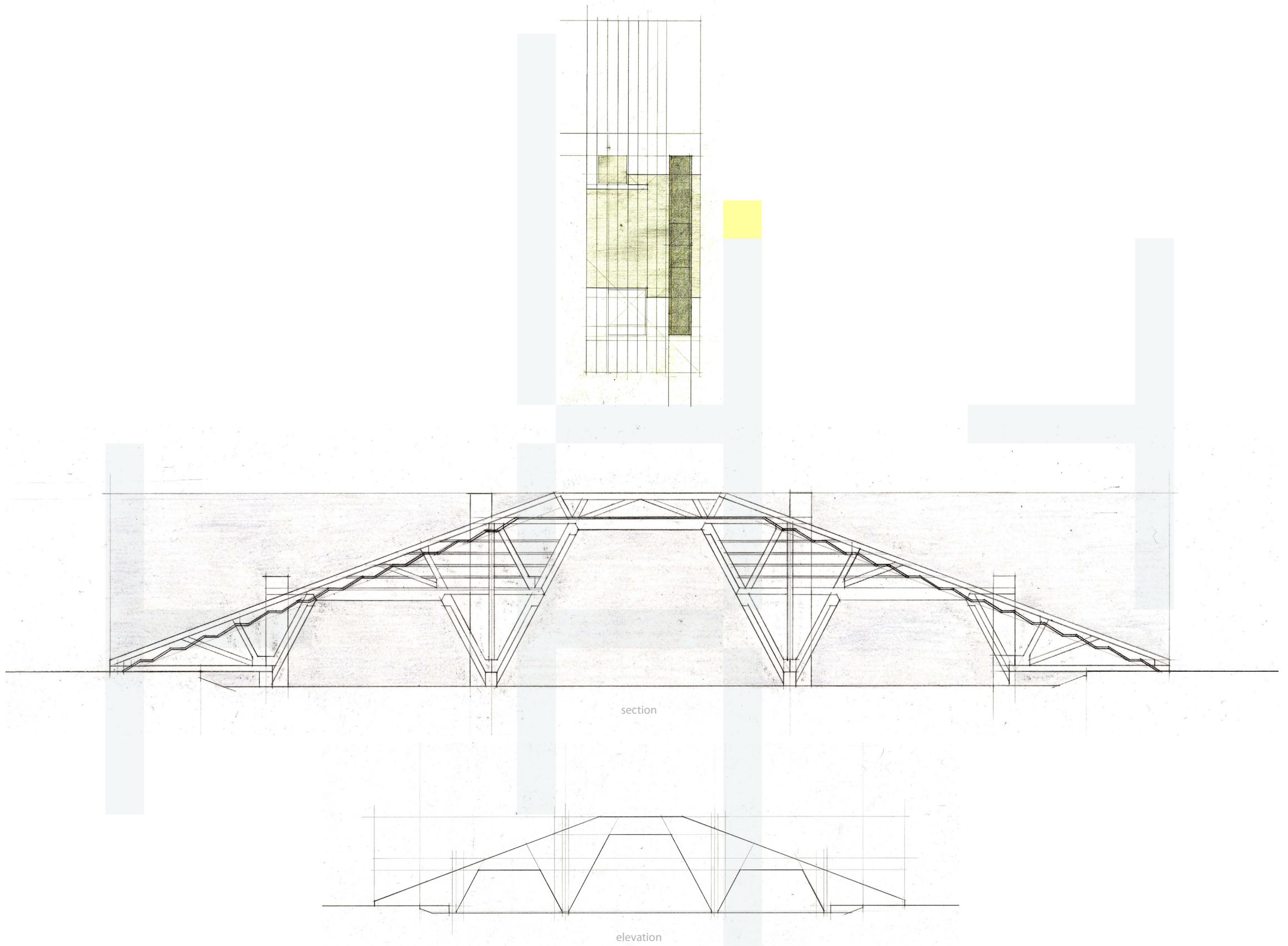


top view



An Initial Resting Place

The punctuated fabric of the old city generates a walking rhythm, which opens to the space of an expansive square cemetery. Here there is a partial shelter, where dim walkways tessellate with sun-filled grottoes.

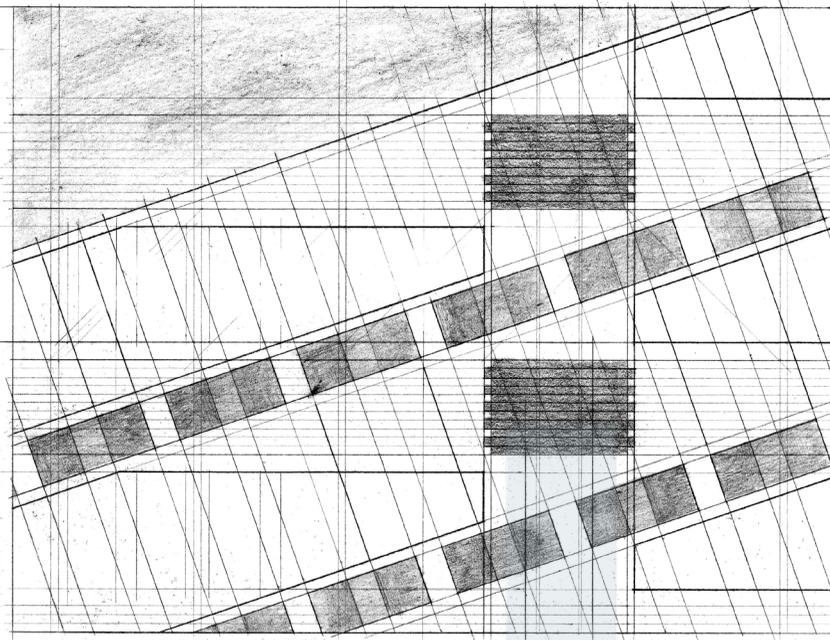


section

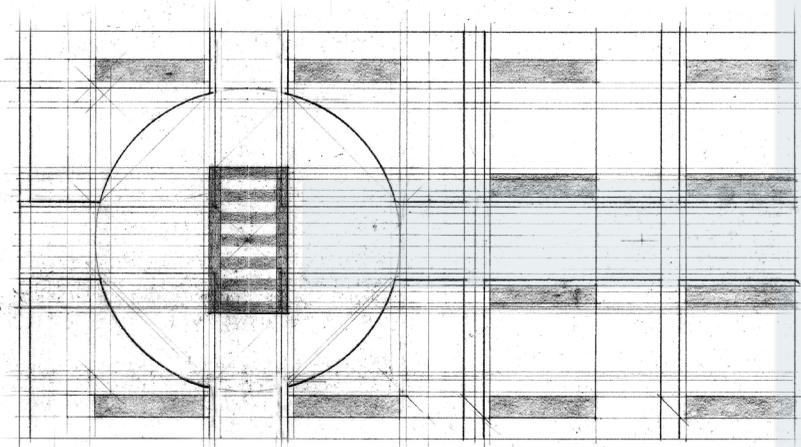
elevation

Water Landing
Riverfront and plaza fold up into a terraced bridge, connecting civilized streets with wild pathways.

LIGHT ARTILLERY

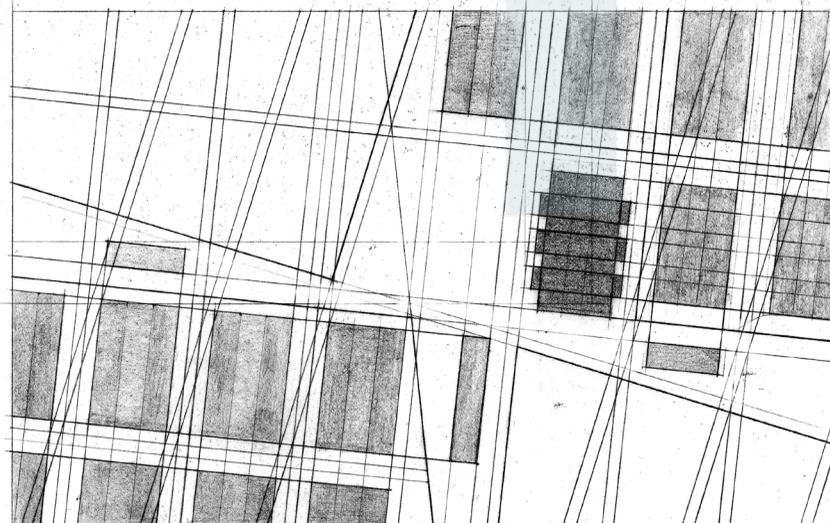


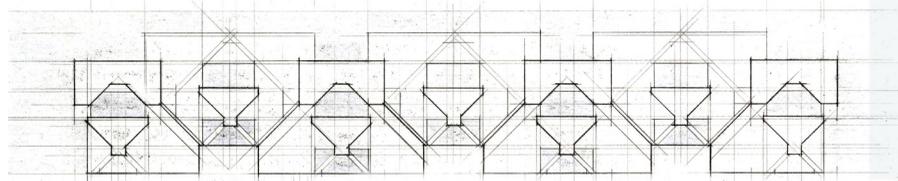
A PACING GALLERY



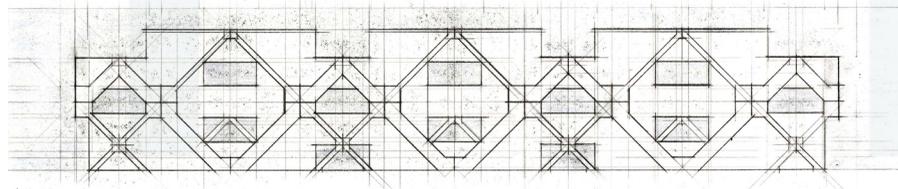
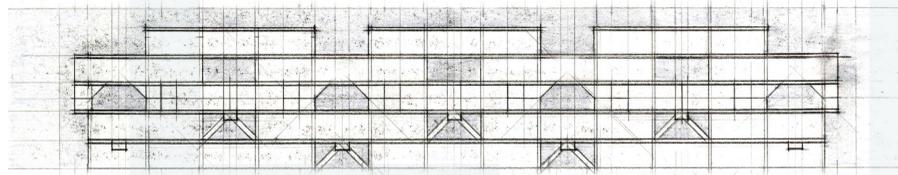
"Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes."
-Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

RIGHT ANGLE ASYLUM

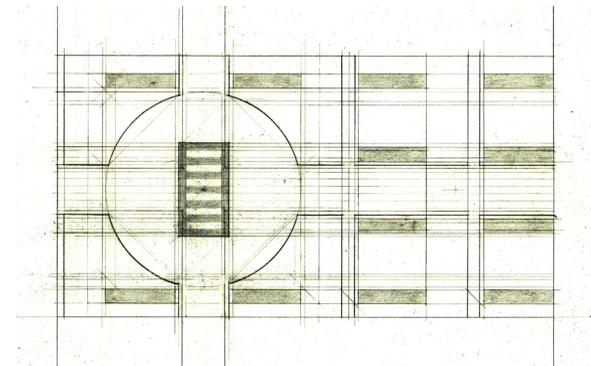
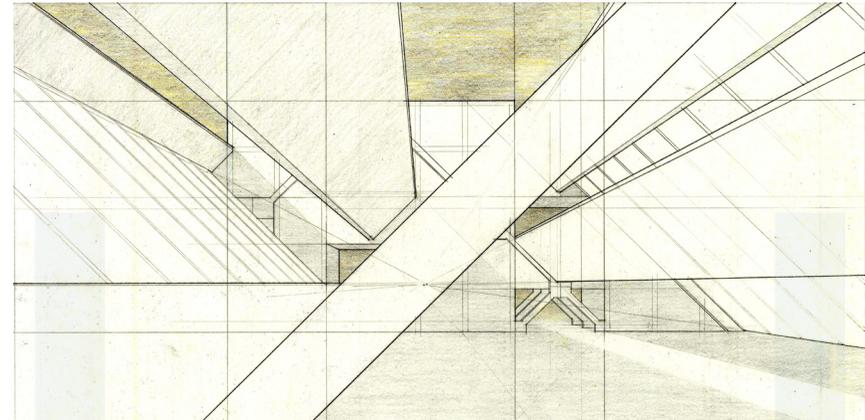




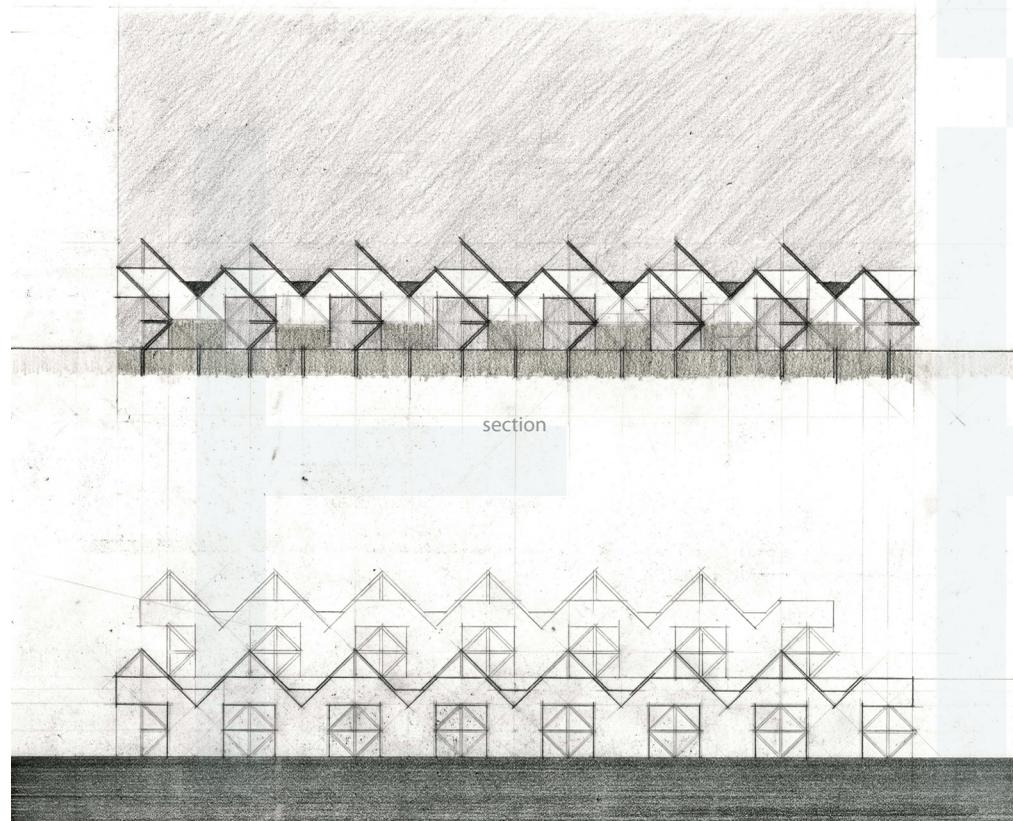
sections



elevation

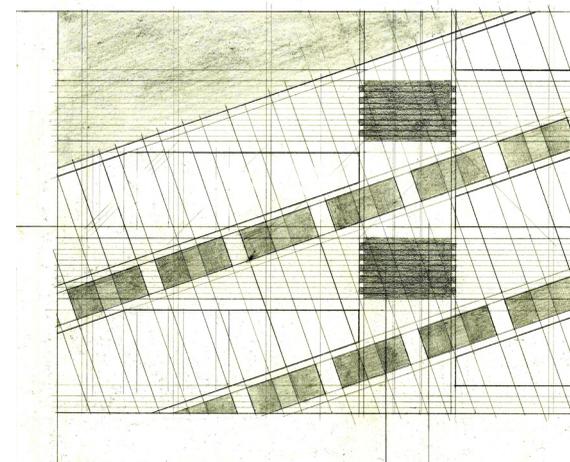
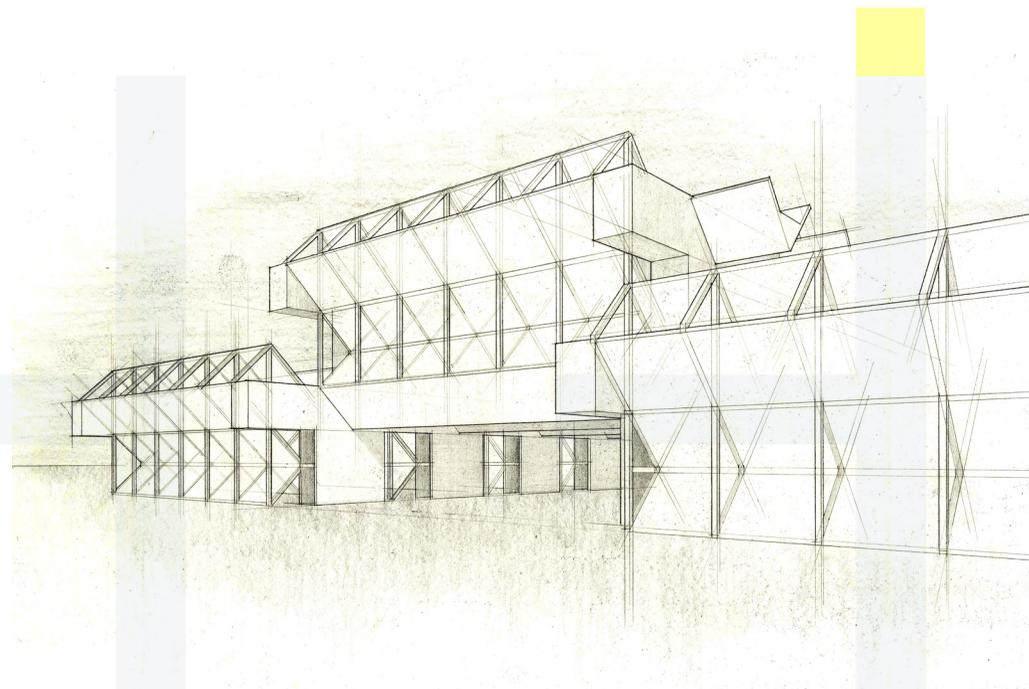


A Pacing Gallery
The motorist, upon discovering this pedestrian oasis,
might disembark to find an unexpected new freedom of movement.



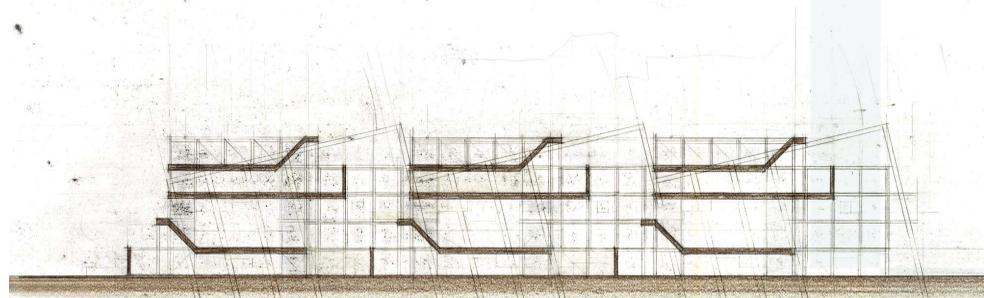
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elevation

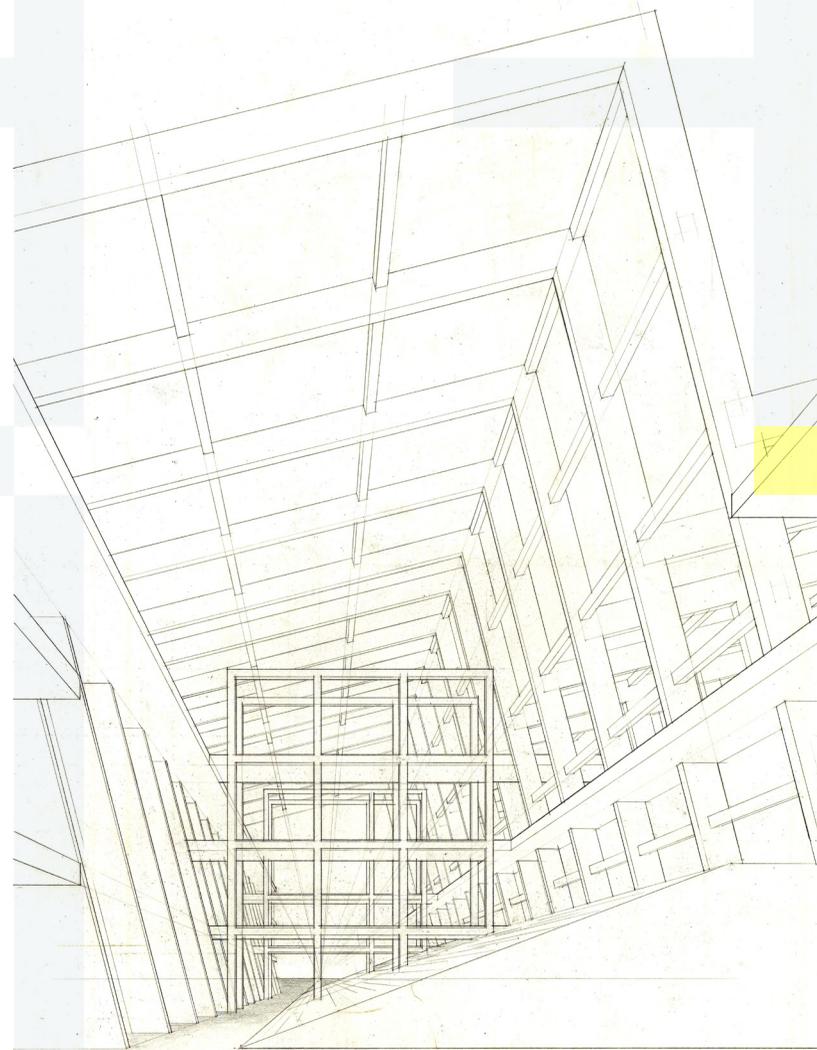
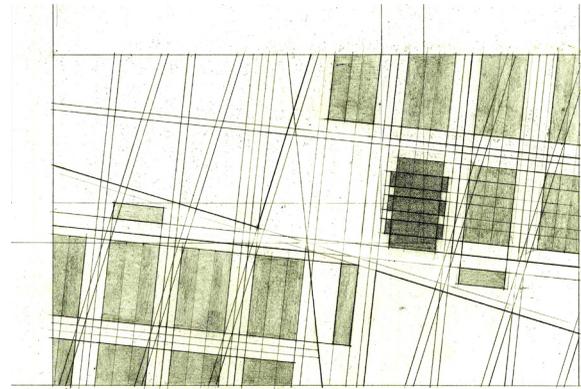
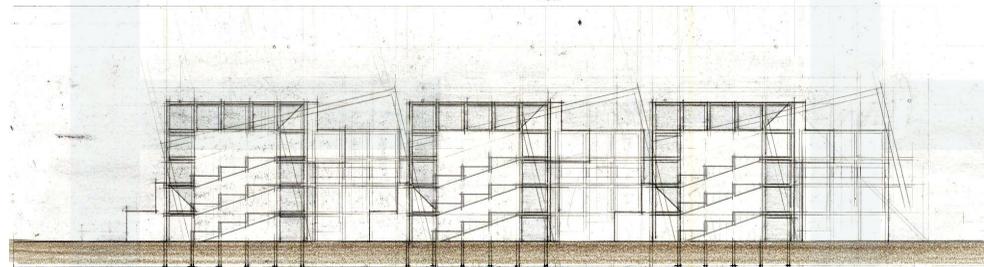


Light Artillery

Vigilantly arrayed along the river, these outposts point to the sky, but illuminate what is within.
On display are the actions of defenders and invaders alike.

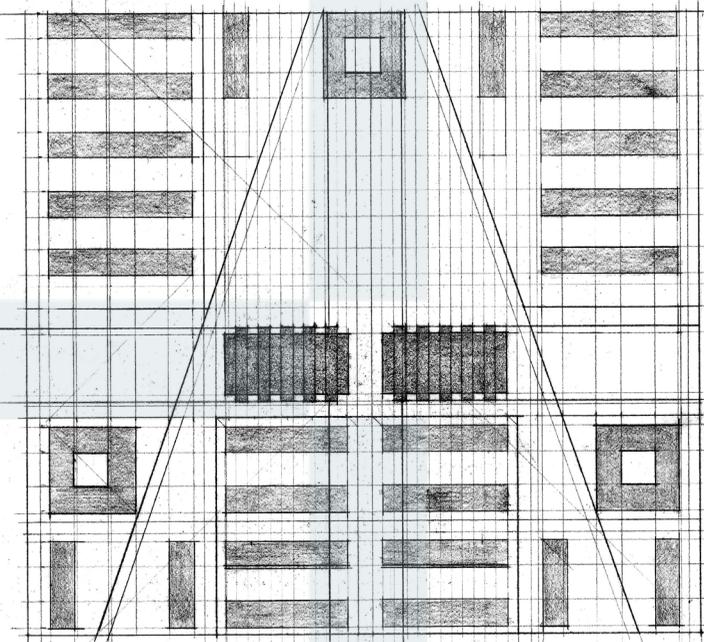


sections

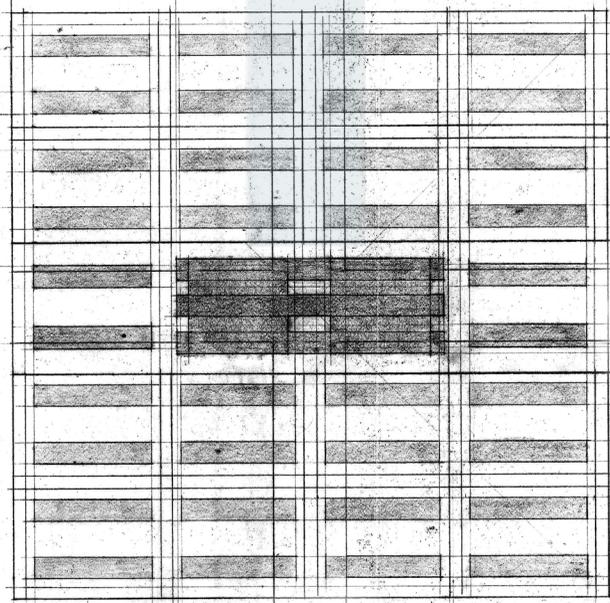


Right Angle Asylum
This point is the vertex of city and suburb, playground and graveyard.
Here there is sanctuary for angles and angels who can no longer live up to the pressures of perfect orthogonality.

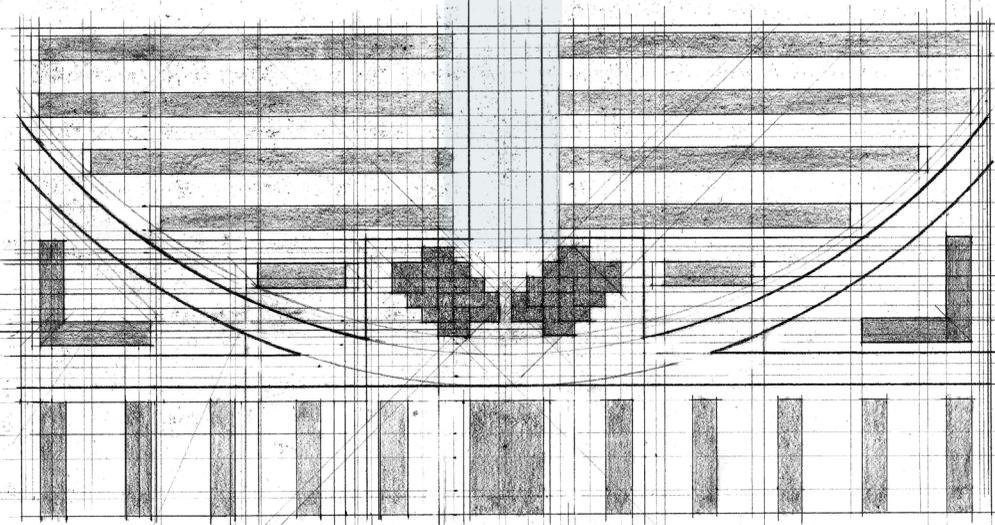
A VEGETABLE SHRINE



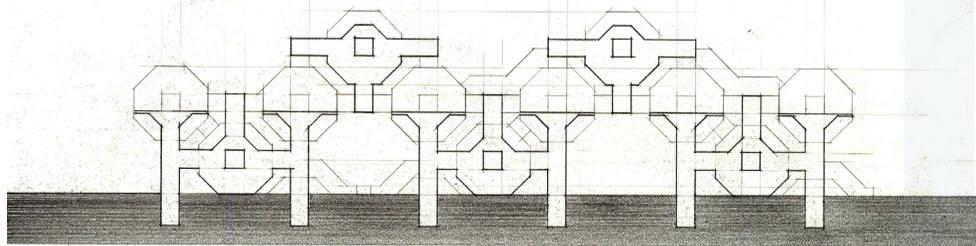
STOIC SALON



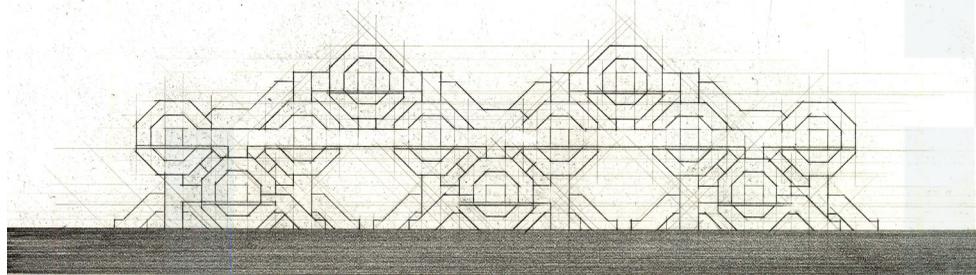
A CULTURE OF EARTH



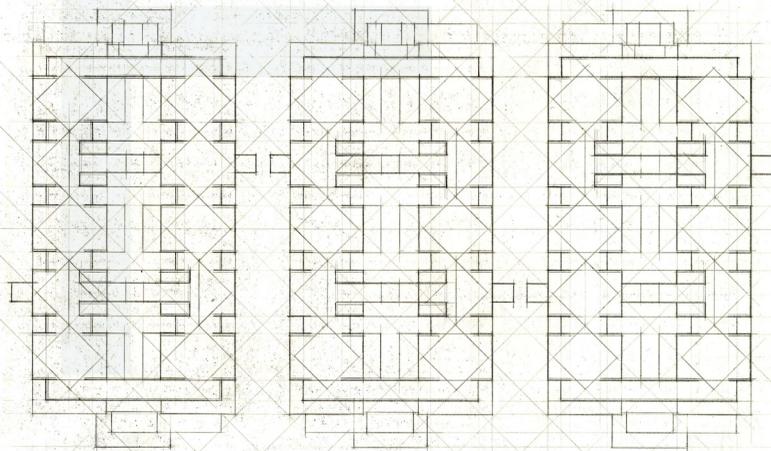
"[The] chief function of the city is to convert power into form, energy into culture, dead matter into the living symbols of art, biological reproduction into social creativity."
– Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*



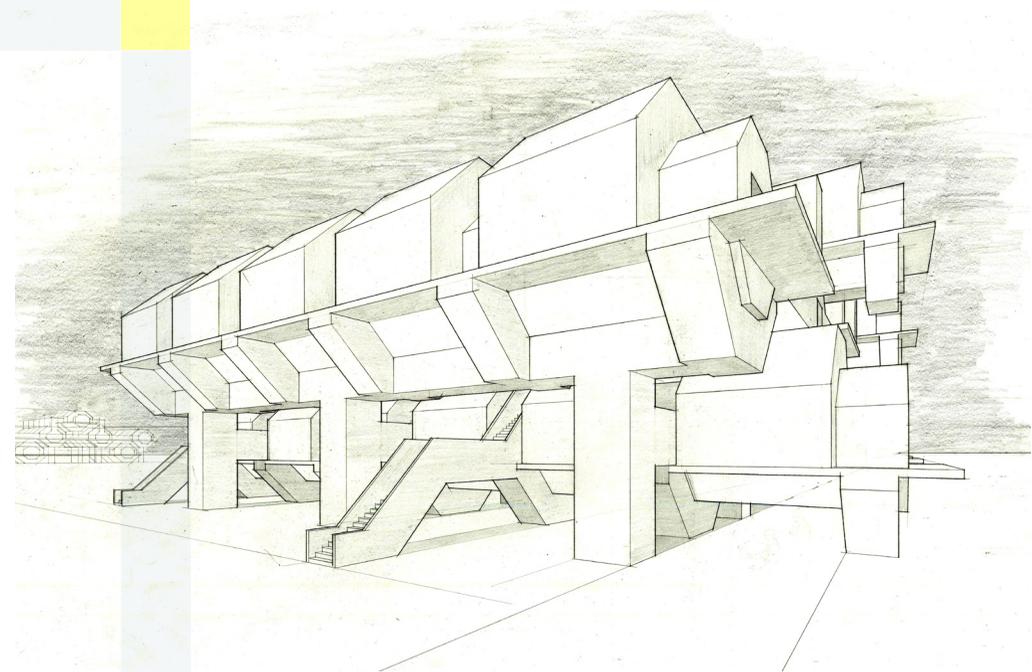
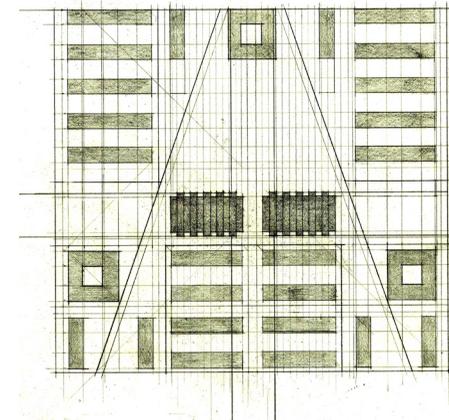
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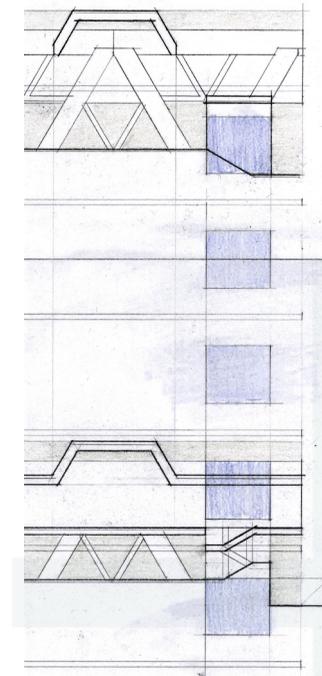
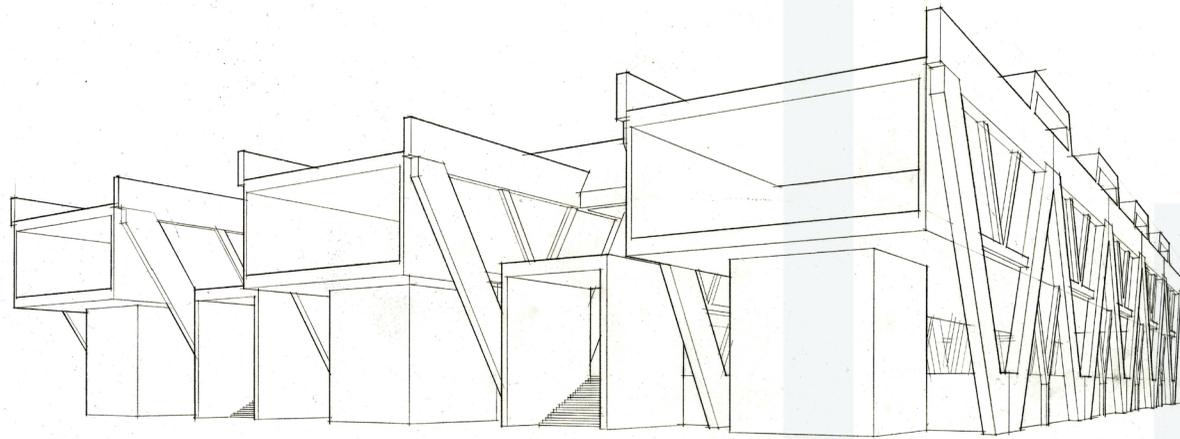
elevation



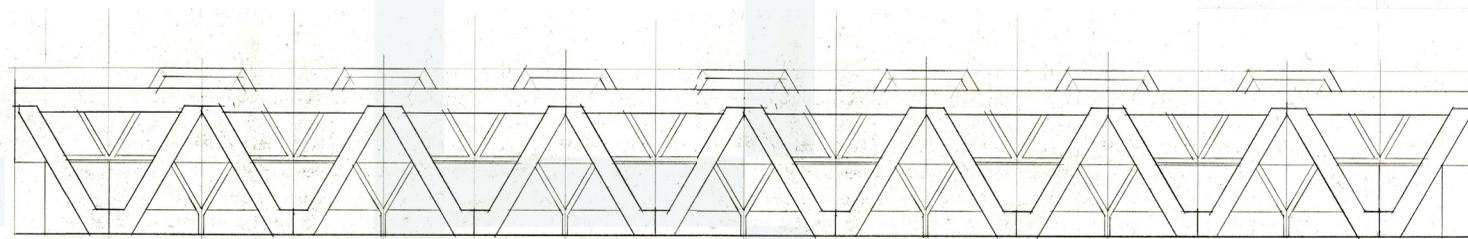
plan



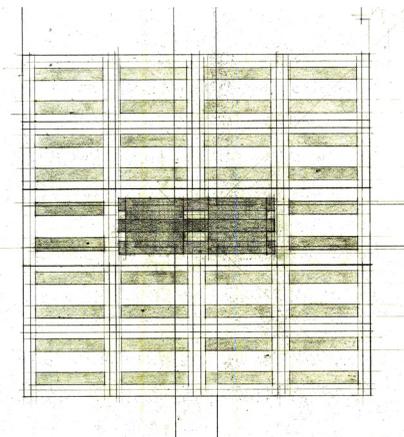
A Vegetable Shrine
Just as cities condense in order to allow field and farm their space,
the richness of urban space may be preserved and sanctified through the propagation of rural densities.



partial plan / sections

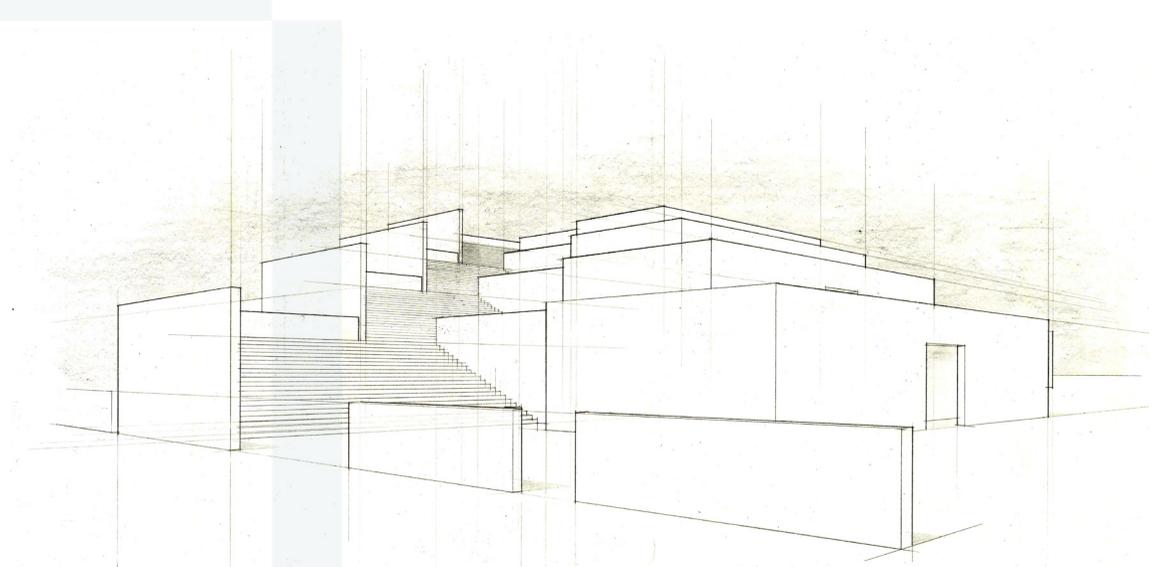
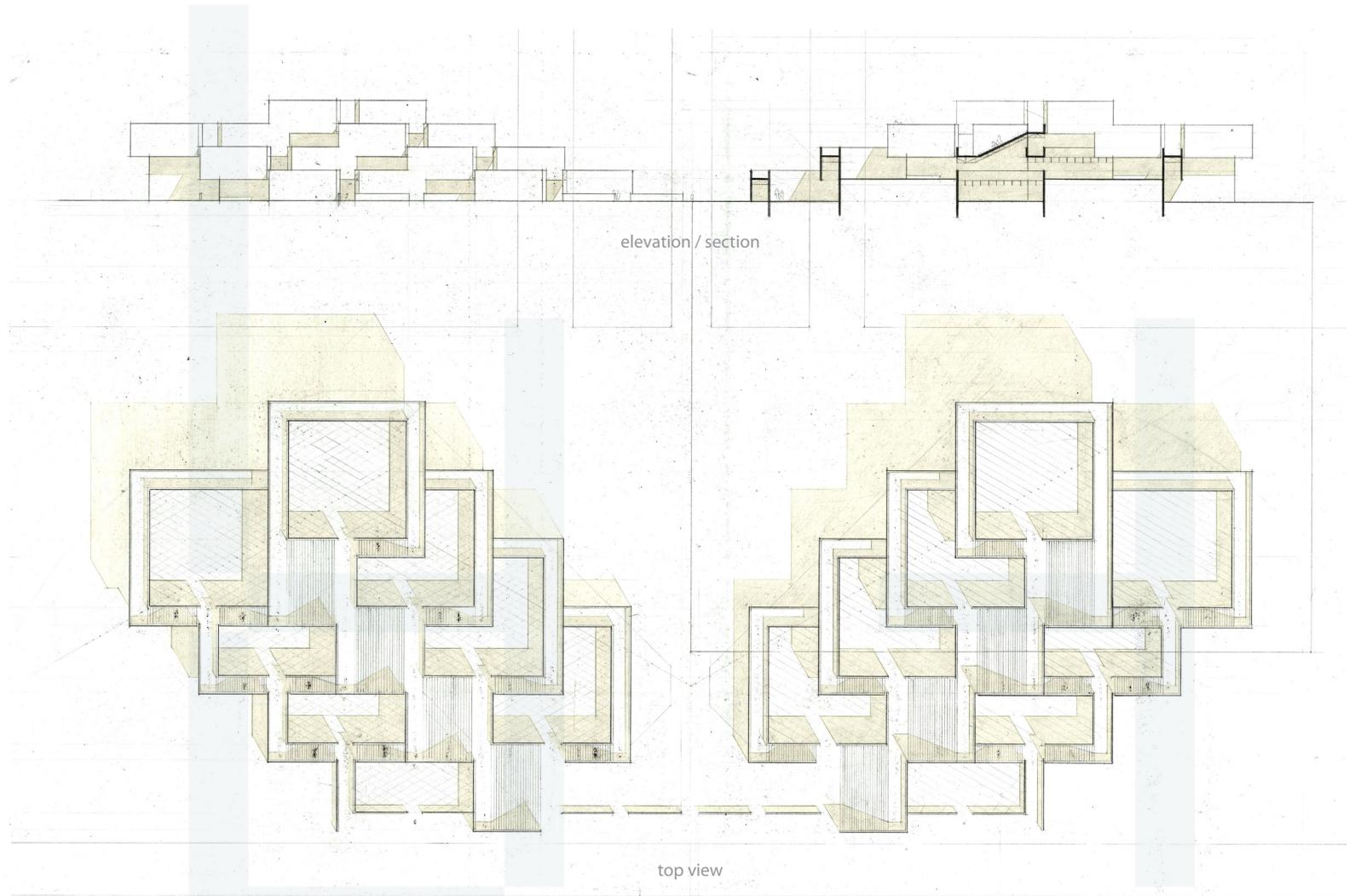
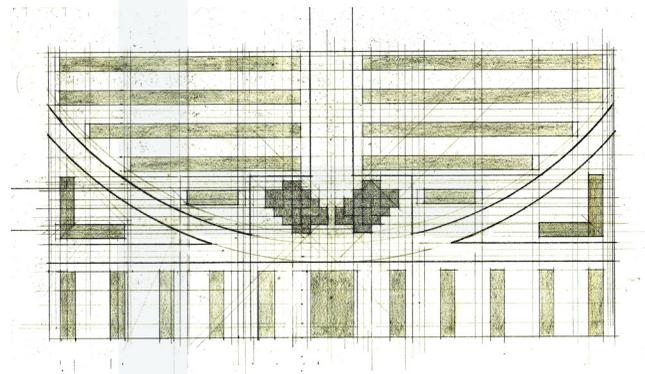


elevation

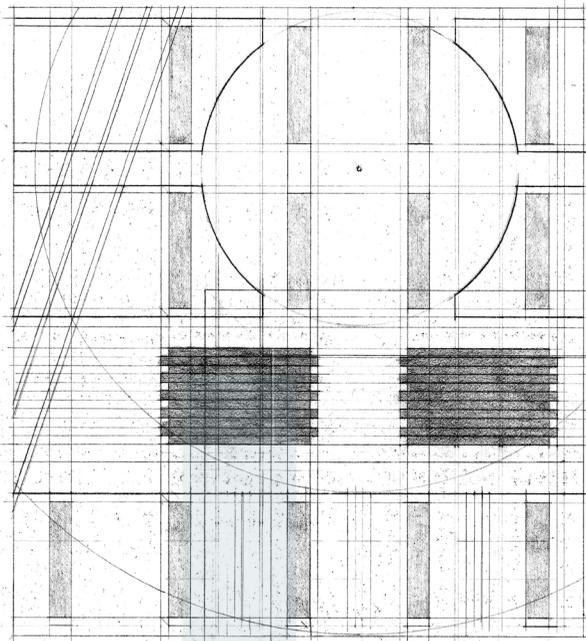


Stoic Salon

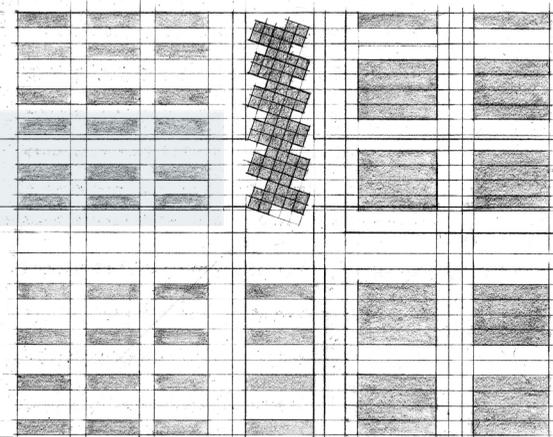
In an environment of eclectic traditionalism, the possibilities for hybridization are endless.
Selective breeding might one day produce a specimen that is both lofty and overt.



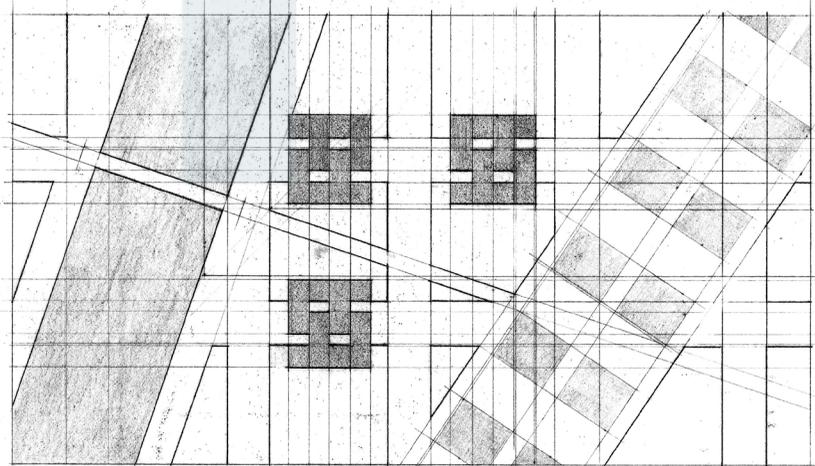
A Culture of Earth
The forming of earth into mounds is the most basic act of construction.
This act has been repeated so many times, in fact, that it now occurs naturally,
resulting in the appearance of surprisingly intricate urban topographies.



MUSE MARKET



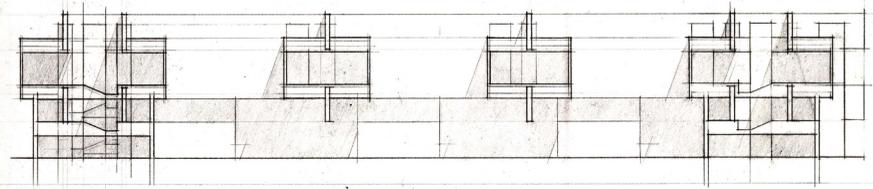
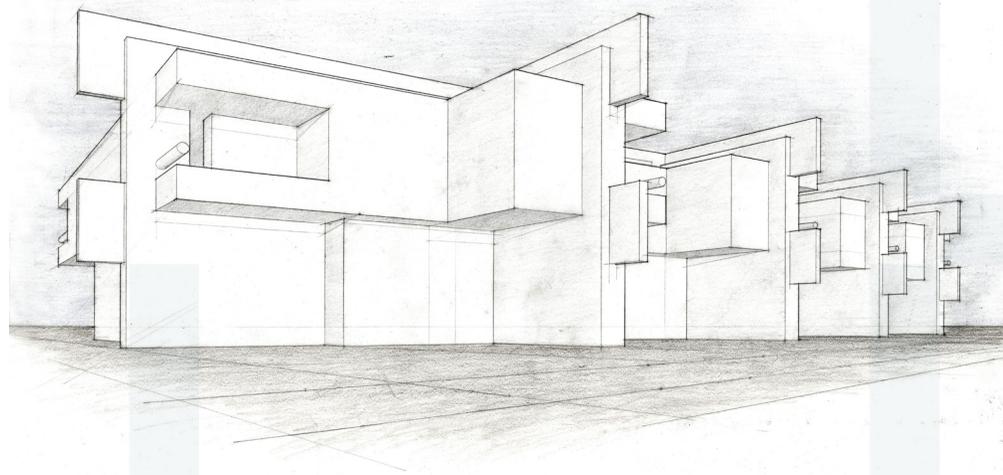
FORUM POPULORUM



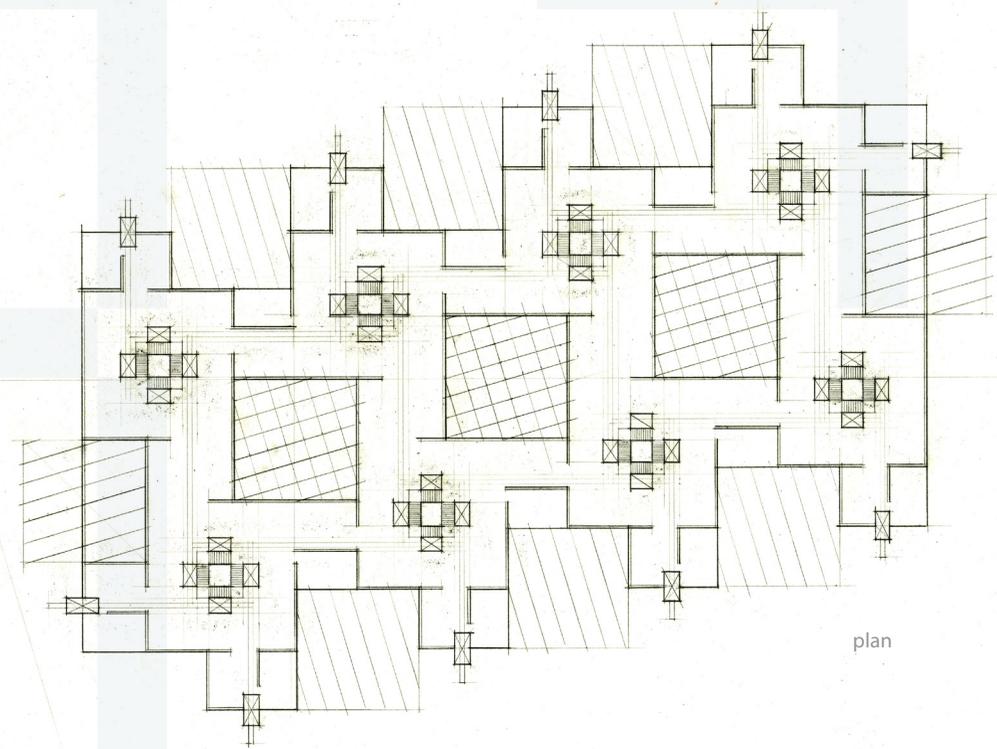
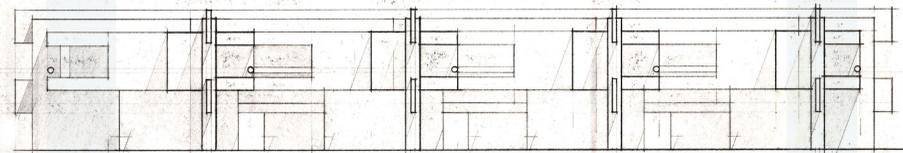
ISLES OF ELSEWHERE

"This city which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, an honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember: names of famous men, virtues, numbers, vegetable and mineral classifications, dates of battles, constellations, parts of speech. Between each idea and each point of the itinerary an affinity or a contrast can be established, serving as an immediate aid to memory."

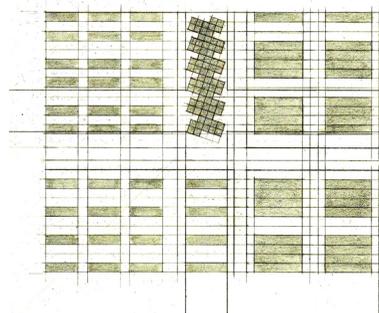
—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*



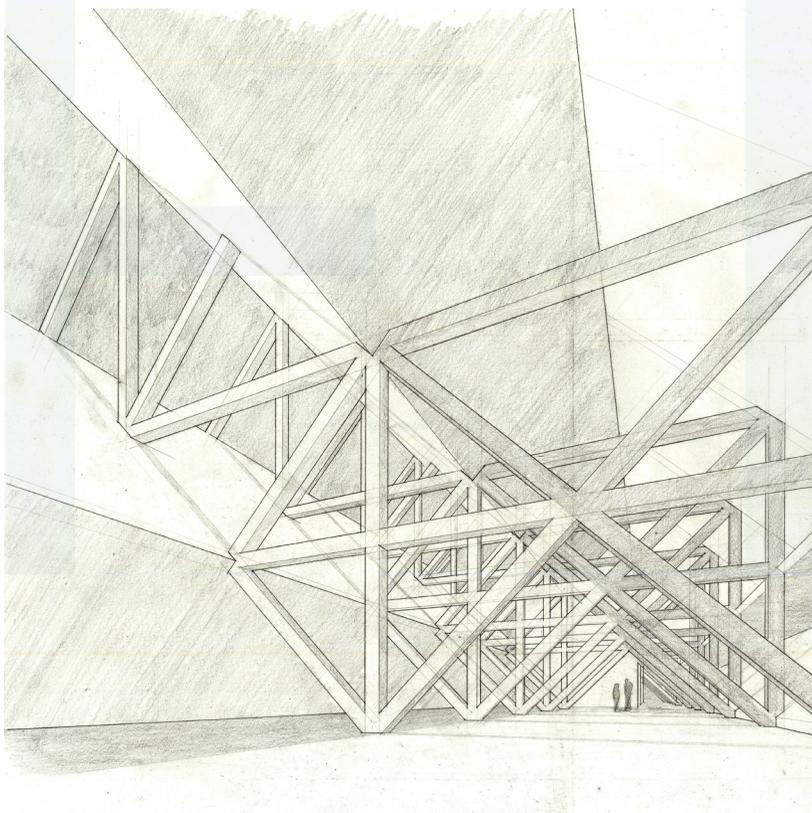
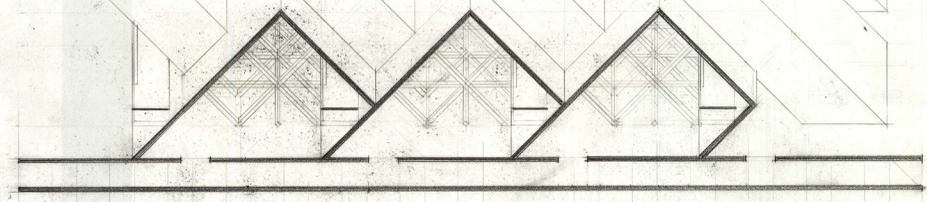
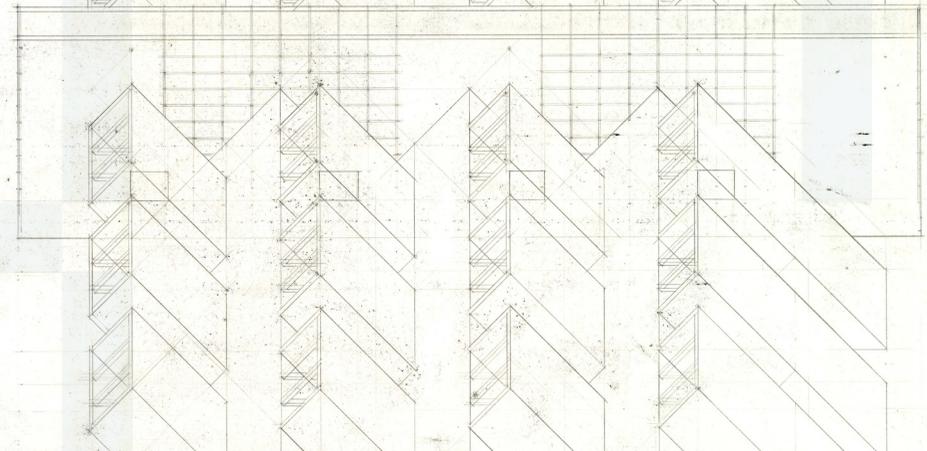
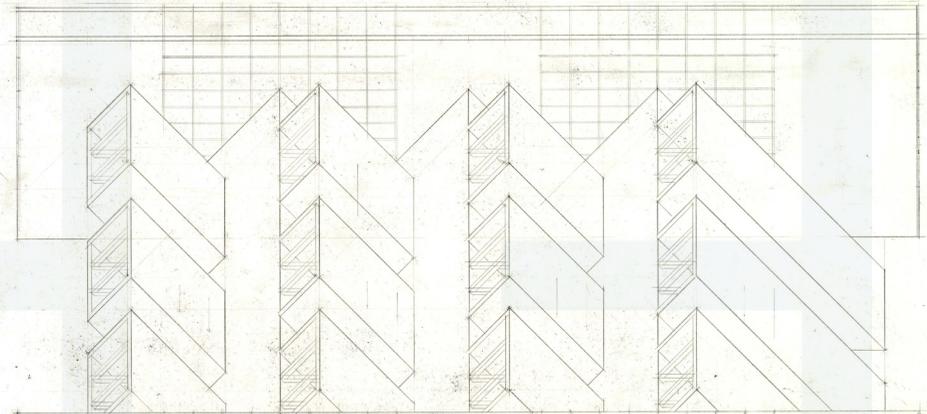
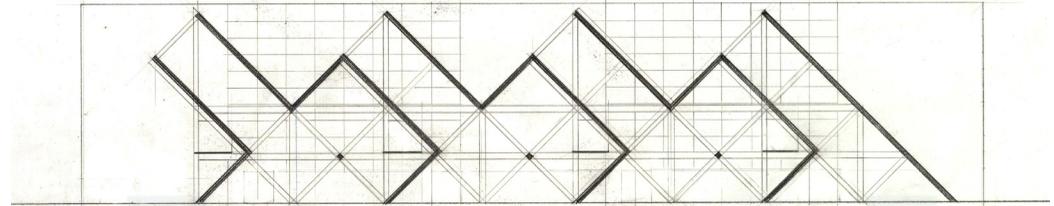
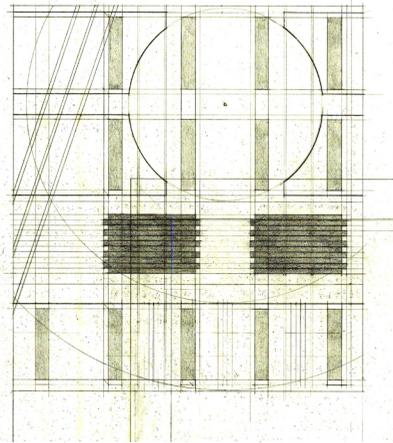
sections



plan

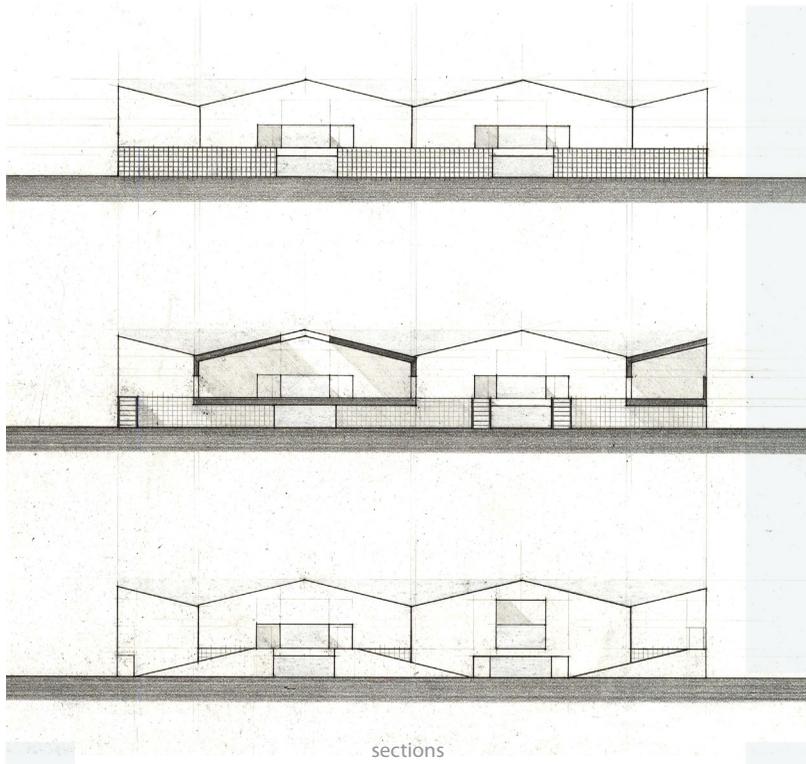


Forum Populorum
A long avenue running north and south divides the old city from public housing, patricians from those who never took Latin.
A porous threshold between the two districts gathers their inhabitants into a common realm.

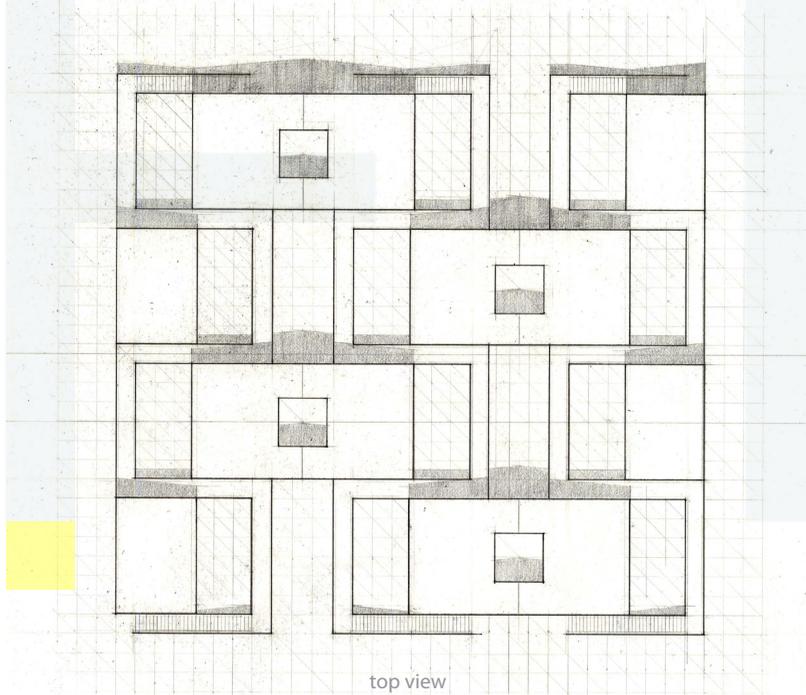


Muse Market

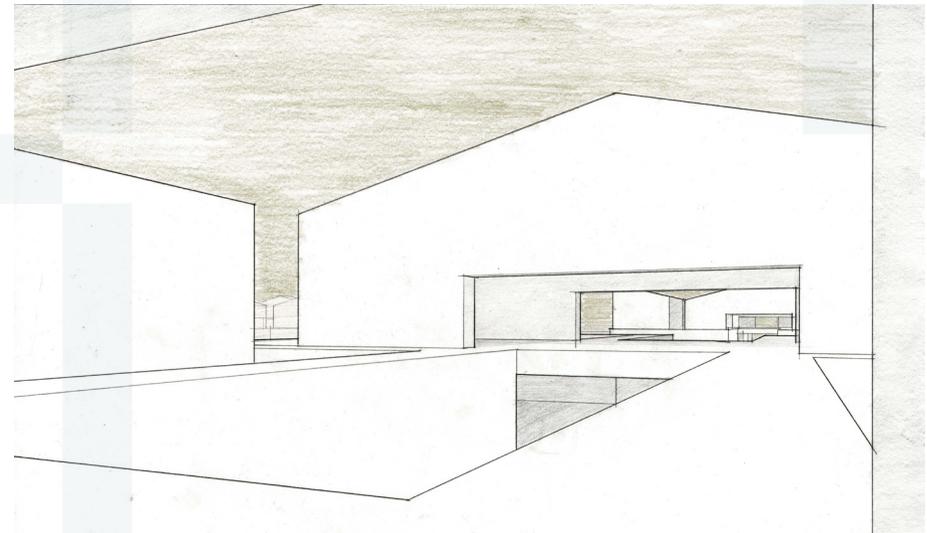
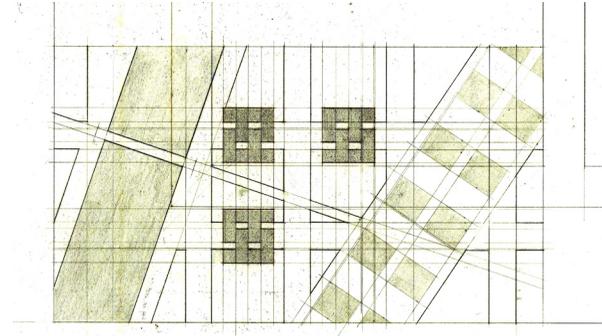
Once the place where work found inspiration, the museum is now given over to the display of expired goods. Here the nine ladies might be free to ply their trades, no longer forced to wait on street corners.



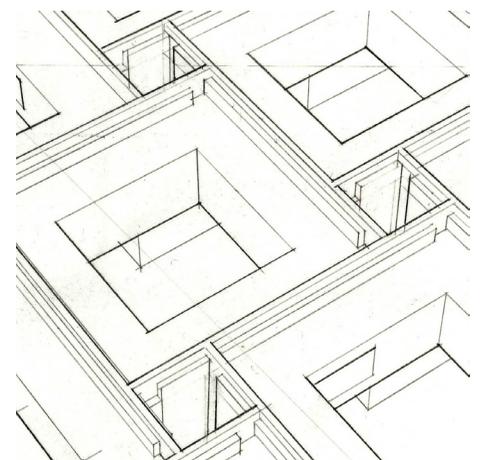
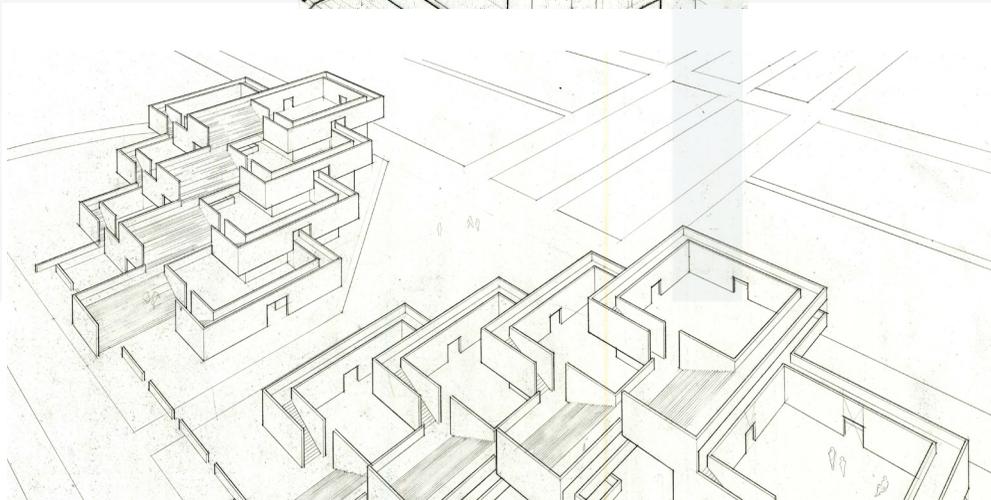
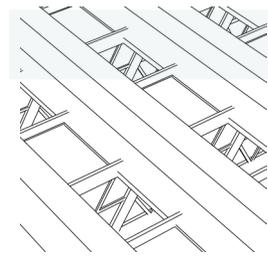
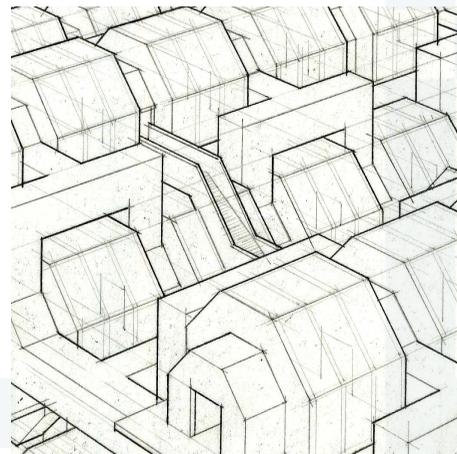
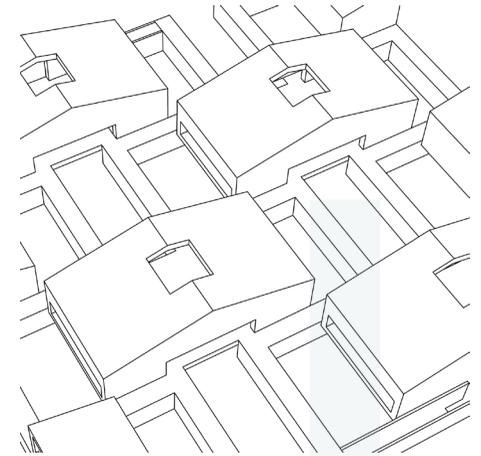
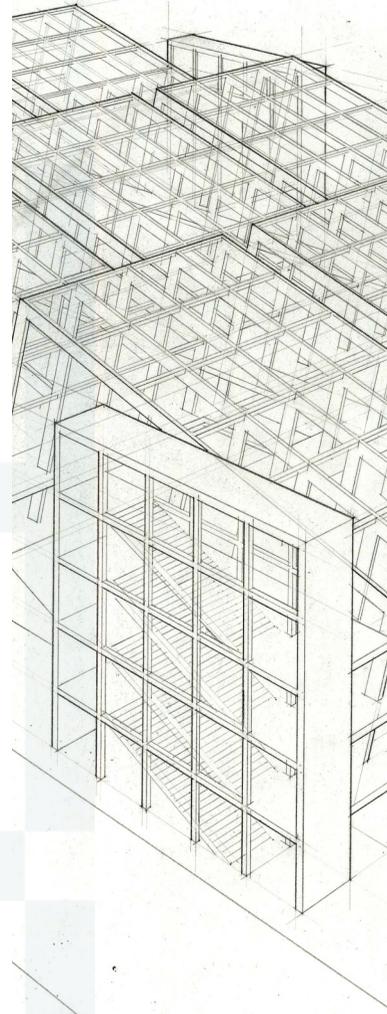
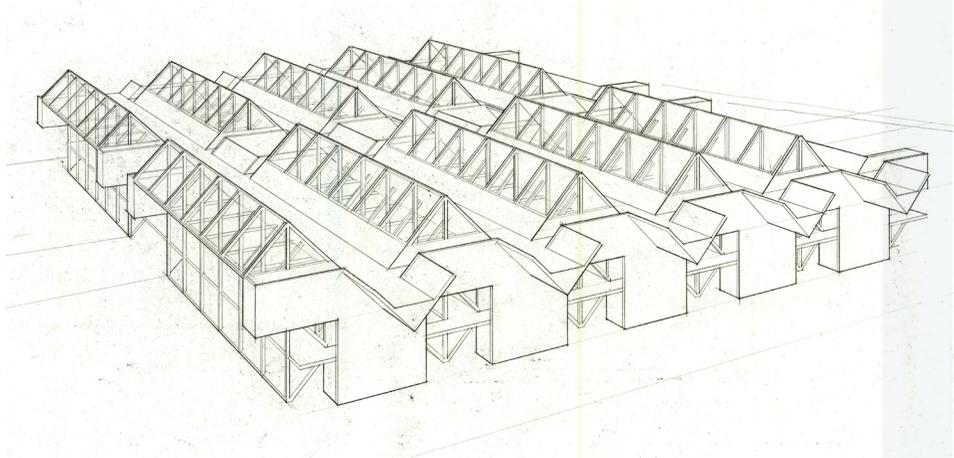
sections



top view



Isles of Elsewhere
Each new Utopia is colonized first by the living, then the dead, until there is no room left for either.
In time, their traces will become the foundations for a new colony.



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Illustrations

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