

# The Urban Place: Places for Jay to Sit

by Jonathan Perry Chambers



A design thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the degree of  
Master of Architecture

Approved:

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Hans Christian Rott, Chairman

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William W. Brown

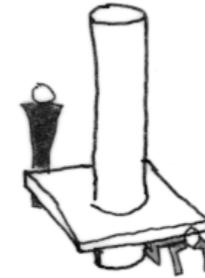
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V. Hunter Pittman

January 14, 1998  
Blacksburg, Virginia



# The Urban Place: Places for Jay to Sit



Abstract:

This thesis is an exploration of the design of successful urban places, those that are filled with people enjoying the vitality present in a density of life.

The inspiration for this thesis came from a statement made by Jason Bergen. While walking through downtown Blacksburg, unsuccessful in our quest to find a place sit down and eat lunch, Jay said, "You know Jon, there are no good places to sit in Blacksburg." Without realizing it, Jay had made a simple observation that can be used to assess the quality of an urban environment.



# The Urban Place: Places for Jay to Sit



## Special Thanks to:

Martha

for her endless patience and support

Hans Christian Rott

for his perceptive critiques and inspiring discussions, and for always respecting me as a fellow architect and a friend

Jason Bergen

for sharing his experience and thoughts about design and building, and for wanting a place to sit

Stu

for showing interest in my work, and for being there, at my defense

## Thanks to:

William W. Brown

V. Hunter Pittman

for sharing their knowledge of architecture and urban design

Jennifer Minetree

for her advice on graphics, page layout and color

David Strandberg

Mark Russin

Eric Chuderwicz

Emmet Thomas

Alice Toth

Leslie Iwai

Jennifer Organsky

My Family

for their advice and support



# The Urban Place: Places for Jay to Sit



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## The Urban Condition

The design and discussion of urban architecture raises two important questions, "What is urbanity?" and "How is the urban condition unique?"

The term urban is most often associated with large cities such as New York, Los Angeles or London, metropolitan areas with millions of people living and working in a vast collection of highrises and skyscrapers. This perception is understandable since urban conditions generally develop in many sections of large cities. However, the existence of urbanity on the smaller scale is often overlooked.

Overall population and land area of a town or city, alone, have little to do with the urban condition. Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Rio Maggiore, the hill towns of Cinque Terre, Italy, are ideally urban despite their small overall population and land area. Each serves as a microcosm for the study of urbanity.

The contrast between New York and Rio Maggiore is striking; however, each embodies three essential characteristics of urbanity: density, variety of use, and structure.



1 Manhattan, New York



2 Rio Maggiore, Italy

## Density

Rural and suburban areas are diffuse collections of independent dwellings constructed on separate parcels of property, sharing only boundaries, walls, and fences between them. The planning of these areas emphasizes individual ownership and independence; shared space is limited to parks and recreation areas.

Urban areas are inherently dense, a concentration of life. Individual structures, containing private residences, offices, churches and businesses, interact with one another, sharing space and defining interesting spaces between them. The density of buildings and people encourages pedestrian life and provides opportunities for interaction, making a lively environment with a strong sense of community.

The land surrounding the towns of Cinque Terre is rural and agrarian; however, the towns themselves are very dense. In Cinque Terre, the residences, businesses, churches and civic buildings are constructed adjacent to or on top of one another along slopes of the steep hills rising out of the Mediterranean Sea. The inhabitants enjoy the spectacle and the chance interactions that occur when neighbors passing by, fisherman preparing their nets, children playing, older people resting, teens flirting and vendors selling goods, share space in the street or community plaza.



3 Rio Maggiore, Italy



4 Manarola, Italy



5 Newbury Street - Boston, Massachusetts



6 Vernazza, Italy

## Variety of Use

The density of urban areas puts people in close proximity to one another, promoting pedestrian life and lessening the need for automobiles. Mixed use buildings, with retail, restaurant and office space at street level and private apartments above, further encourage pedestrian activity by giving residents the option to live, work, shop and go out - all within one neighborhood. The coexistence of commercial and residential functions also ensures that an area is occupied twenty-four hours a day. The presence of people is perhaps the most effective deterrent to the crime, littering and vandalism that plague many cities.

Boston's Newbury Street combines ground floor retail and restaurant space with upper floor office and residential space. People pass by, window shop, stop to talk to friends at outdoor cafes, and then continue on their way. Apartments and stores along Newbury street are among the most coveted in all of Boston.

In his book Lessons for Students, Herman Hertzberger discusses the idea of the "living street," an outdoor room, defined by surrounding buildings, that provides shared space for residents to interact in. Vernazza's main street and piazza are front yard, outdoor cafe, playground, loading area, boat yard and farmers market all at the same time. The residents share a sense of community because they all share this interactive space.

## Structure

Urban areas have an underlying structure. The organization of the dense construction provides orientation and order for the inhabitants in a situation that could otherwise become chaotic. Many cities such as, New York, Philadelphia and Barcelona, employ a grid to organize portions of their large land areas. The grid is a simple structure that can be repeated and expanded endlessly without reducing its effectiveness.

In Barcelona, the grid of blocks with central courtyards provides a physical structure that orders the dense construction and supports the social structure of the city.

The severe contours of the Italian Riviera landscape provide a natural structure for the towns of Cinque Terre. Vernazza is organized along a single road running through a crease between two hills and terminating at the sea. Nearly all the buildings front toward this main street, providing a comprehensible orientation. The town also exhibits a basic hierarchy. The church is perched in a prominent position at the top of the hill. Residences follow down the majority of the hillside, with retail shops appearing only on the first floor of the town's central street. The main street terminates at a plaza and the harbor which are occupied by the town's commercial fishing industry.



7 City Grid - Barcelona, Spain



8 Vernazza, Italy



9 Harbor - Vernazza, Italy

## Human Perception of Urban Architecture

The density of construction in towns affects the way people perceive and interact with architecture. In suburban or rural areas, a person views a building from a distance, while driving by or approaching it. The building can be seen as a whole allowing one to discern the overall expression of the architectonic elements. In the urban setting, views of buildings are obscured by nearby and adjacent construction; a person cannot step back from a building far enough to view the entire structure at one time. Instead, man tends to notice spaces between buildings and segments of the architecture, facades, entrances, thresholds, windows, balconies, details, materials and light.



10 Middle School - Morbio, Italy



11 Lugano, Switzerland



## Designing The Urban Place

The design considerations for the making of a good urban place center around responses to the urban condition and man's presence in the urban environment.

Buildings inserted into an urban situation should support the density and structure of the area, initiate an architectural dialog with the existing context, contribute to the mixed use environment, combine human and urban scale, exhibit architectural generosity, define quality outdoor pedestrian spaces, and present a interactive edge to these spaces.

Outdoor public space should generate a sense of place, provide focal points, allow a copious variety of seating and include natural elements.

## Supporting the Existing Density

In an urban setting, buildings are constructed adjacent to or atop each other with occasional open spaces left between for streets, alleys, plazas or public squares. A project added to a downtown context must support this density. The building should have an urban footprint, stepping right up to the edge of the sidewalk, making a presence on the street and leaving no space unclaimed. Buildings that are set back from the sidewalk, breakdown the density of the area and make little contribution to the definition of the street. The new construction also must not overwhelm the street. The street front height of the structure should rise to a height consistent with its surrounding context.

### Commerzbank, Frankfurt, Germany

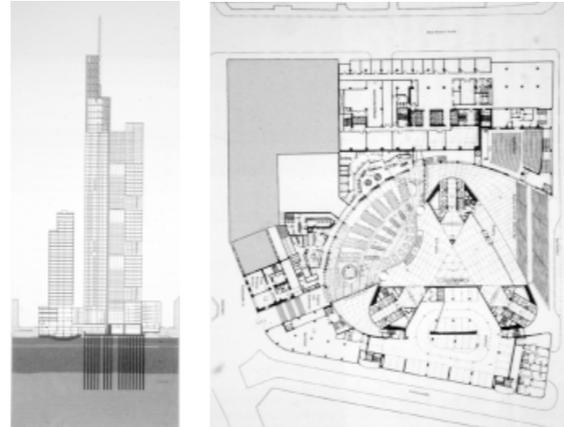
The recent Commerzbank in Frankfurt, Germany, designed by Norman Foster & Partners, presents a six story facade along the street, continuing the uniform building height of the area. The project's sixty story skyscraper is set back from the street. The passerby can glimpse the tower through a glass entry way but is not overwhelmed by its extreme height. The tower supports the density of the city skyline while the lower portion of the building maintains the existing urban density at the street scale.



12 Commerzbank (Street Scale) - Frankfurt, Germany



13 Commerzbank (City Scale)



14 Commerzbank (Section and Plan)

### Corbusier's Plan Voisin

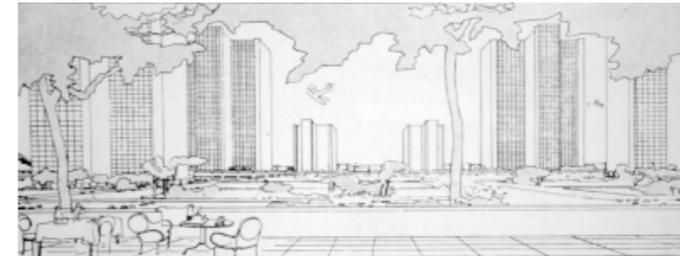
In his early years, Le Corbusier developed a dislike for the dense construction of the medieval city and the street life associated with it. In 1925, he conceived the Plan Voisin, the reconstruction of Paris as a garden city. According to this plan, many of the oldest sections of Paris would be destroyed and replaced with a grid of cruciform towers, separated by large gardens and accessed by four lane highways.

In Corbusier's sketch the plan seems quite ideal, spacious terraces overlooking a picturesque landscape, free from the congestion existing in the old city streets. The Plan Voisin was never carried out in Paris or anywhere else by Le Corbusier; however, other architects tried similar schemes but with a less ideal vision and less ideal results.

A number of apartment tower communities were built outside New York City during the 1950's. The projects lack density and are fragmented from the rest of the city by the expressways used to access them. These conditions make pedestrian life impossible and the automobile a necessity. The excess of automobiles in these neighborhoods combined with tight budgets for their construction led to the substitution of parking lots for the gardens between the buildings and ultimately to the perversion of Corbusier's vision.



15 Corbusier's Plan Voisin, 1925



16 Corbusier's City for Three Million People, 1922



17 Alfred E. Smith Houses - New York, New York



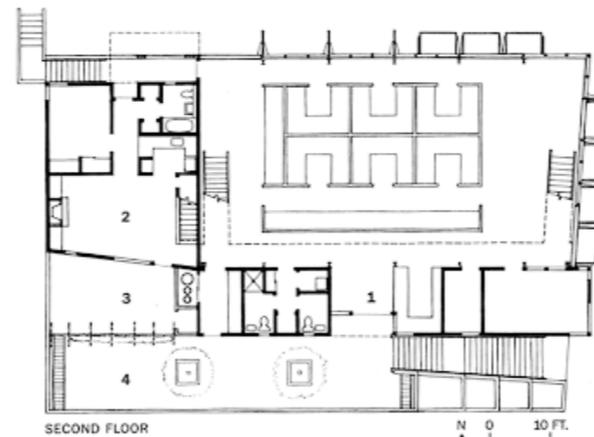
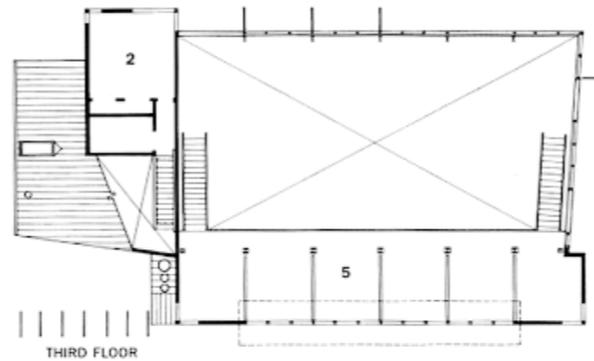
**Acknowledging the Underlying Structure**

The underlying structure of an urban area, such as the grid of Barcelona, provides order in a situation that might otherwise become chaotic. When a new building is added to the urban situation it should reinforce the structure through modest compliance or by bold contrast.

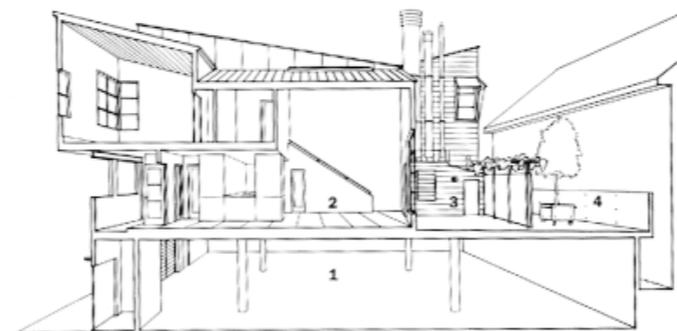
Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum emphasizes New York City's grid through obvious contrast. The building occupies the end of a block along Fifth Avenue. The project's large circular volume and curved entrance awning extend over the sidewalk, breaking the plane of rectilinear facades lining Fifth Avenue and violating the city's structure. The dramatic circular forms of the Guggenheim cause one to suddenly become aware of the grid, and its nearly endless repetition, as if seeing the city for the first time. Landmark projects like the Guggenheim are striking and can greatly enhance the way one perceives the surrounding context; however, it is the humble fabric of the city that makes the opportunities for such buildings to stand out.



18 The Guggenheim Museum - New York, New York



- 1. Office
- 2. Apartment
- 3. Apartment garden
- 4. Office garden
- 5. Office mezzanine



- 1. Parking
- 2. Apartment
- 3. Apartment garden
- 4. Office garden

19 The Tipping Building - Berkeley, California

**Including Variety of Use**

Successful urban areas are complete environments that promote pedestrian life and interaction between the inhabitants. Residents have the unique opportunity to live, work, worship, shop, play and dine out all within their neighborhood. A project inserted into an urban area should include varied uses, insuring twenty-four hour habitation and supporting the formation of a sense of community.

In Berkley, California, Fernau & Hartman Architects have introduced a mixed use building into a neighborhood of primarily residential construction. The 9800 sq. ft. building houses a cafe, street level parking, an architectural office, and an apartment. The project provides a new opportunity for area residents, the opportunity to walk down to the corner to enjoy a cup of coffee or a meal at the local cafe.



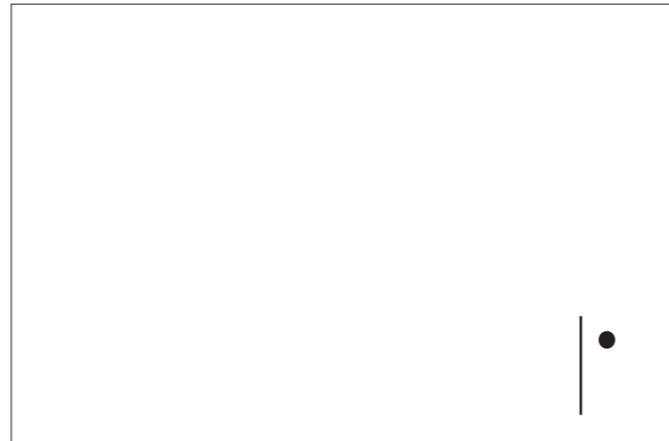
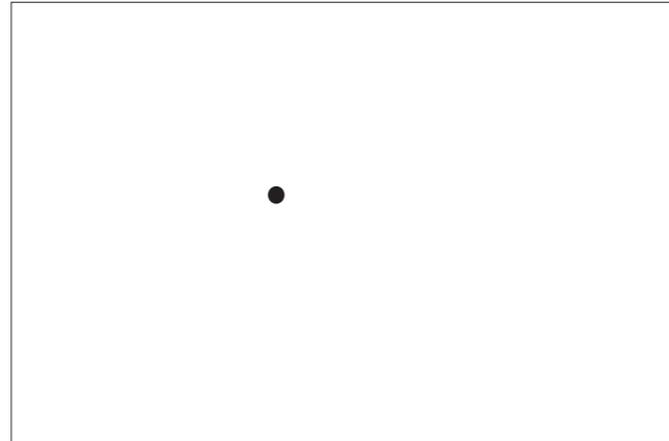
20 The Tipping Building

## Conversing with The Urban Context

An urban project must have dialogue with the existing context. When two or more buildings, are placed in close proximity to one another each influences the other and together they define the space between them.

The dialog between objects placed near each other can be studied at a small scale with a dot, a line and a sheet of paper. If a small black dot is placed alone near the center of a white sheet of paper, the dot appears only as an object alone in space. However, if the same dot is placed close to a line drawn near the edge of the paper, the two objects interact with each other and the paper. The placement or composition of the two objects and the space between them must be carefully considered to achieve a pleasing result.

The buildings in an urban area are no different. A building inserted into the urban context does not act independently as a one constructed on an open landscape might. Urban structures form unified facades that work together to define the boundaries of the open areas between. Each building must be designed to have a strong dialogue with the existing structures. Particular attention should be paid to the negative spaces, streets, alleys and plazas, because they are the outdoor rooms that often are host to much of the activity of urban life.



## Dialogue by Contrast

Having dialogue does not imply duplicating the surroundings, a building can have dialogue by contrast or similarity. I.M. Pei's John Hancock Tower in Boston, Massachusetts is a fine example of a successful dialogue of contrast. The sixty story glass and steel tower was constructed next to H.H. Richardson's Trinity Church, a fifty foot tall stone structure with finely carved detail. The Hancock's form, scale and material are in direct opposition to the Trinity; however, the reflective blue glass mirrors the intricate facades of the church and the other surrounding buildings, maintaining a harmonious conversation.



21 John Hancock Tower - Boston Massachusetts



22 Reflections In John Hancock Facade

## Combining Urban and Human Scale

In a dense environment, the mass of the multi-story construction can be overwhelming, discouraging street life and reducing the opportunities for interaction. The urban scale of city buildings must be given human measure through the incorporation of doors, windows, awnings, balconies and other details that relate to the size of the human body. Facades with appropriately sized details and openings hold the attention of passersby, and invite them to enter the building or spend time in the outdoor spaces defined by the building.

Mario Botta's Societa Banca Svizzera in Lugano, Switzerland successfully combines urban and human scale to create a landmark building. When approaching the bank or admiring it from the parking lot across the corner, one feels the power of the large corner column formed by the subtractions from the street facades. The small entrance at the base of the column invites passersby in, under the shelter of the building, to experience the meticulously detailed storefronts.



22 Societa di Banca Svizzera - Lugano, Switzerland



23 Societa di Banca Svizzera Storefronts



24 Societa Banca Svizzera from side street

## Designing with Generosity

Space is limited in an urban environment. Apartments, retail shops, restaurants and offices are, for the most part, significantly smaller than those in suburban and rural areas. The Super Walmart with 10' wide aisles is simply not an option in a downtown area. The challenge to the designer is to exploit opportunities to provide something extra or special for the inhabitants of the building, something that makes the limited space seem luxurious instead of restrictive.



25 Roof Terrace - Salzburg, Austria

## Exploiting Opportunities

Two rowhouses in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, provide an opportunity to show the results of thoughtful, generous design. The first rowhouse is part of the historic fabric constructed during the early 19th century and renovated over time, the later is part of a low income housing project built in recent years. Both rowhouses sit back about ten feet from the sidewalk, providing an opportunity for the designer to create an intermediary space. The first townhouse claims the space for a modest garden defined by low stone walls that also provide a place to sit along the street. In contrast, the housing project leaves the in-between space undefined and empty, spending any extra money for the building on an ornate door detail.



26 Row House - Alexandria, Virginia



27 Low Income Housing - Alexandria, Virginia

### Allowance for the Inevitable

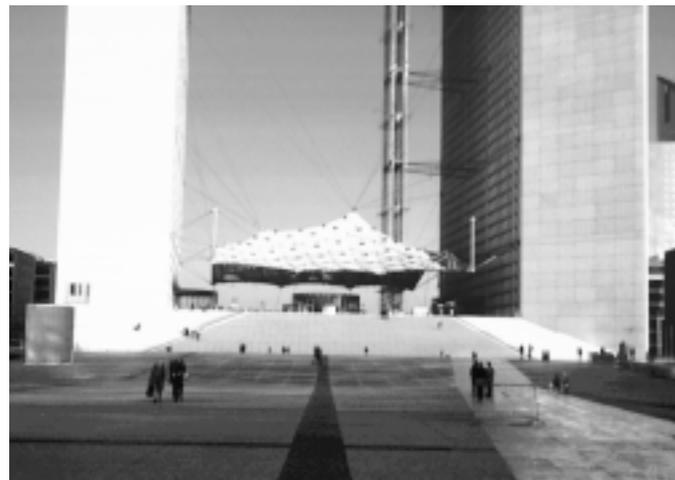
The addition of signs and logos to building facades is inevitable; businesses need to advertise in order to survive. The designer of the Oyster Bar and Grill Room in Alexandria, Virginia thoughtfully provided the space for the sign to be printed inside an exposed steel lintel spanning the entrance.



28 Oyster Bar and Grill Room - Alexandria, Virginia

### Generosity of Size

The extremely generous, sittable steps of the Grand Arch in Paris transform the open plaza in front of it into an amphetheatre capable of seating hundreds.



29 Grand Arch - Paris, France

### Making An Interactive Edge

A quality interface between an urban building and the street or plaza it defines is essential to a project's success. A severe edge between inside and outside, or public and private spaces discourages inhabitants from entering or spending time near the building. Standing at an abrupt edge between building and street, one often feels exposed or in the way, desiring to move on to a more comfortable place. A layered, interactive edge, on the other hand, blurs the line between inside and out or public and private. Passersby are drawn in, and feel comfortable sitting, talking or window shopping in the intermediary space of the gradual entrance.

Gillie's Restaurant and Bollo's Coffeehouse in Blacksburg, Virginia provide a transitional space between inside and out using an overhang and recessed entrance. At Gillie's the protruding awning makes a claim on a strip of the public sidewalk, providing an opportunity for outdoor seating. Passersby feel at ease while stopping to talk to friends enjoying lunch at a street side table.

Similarly, at Bollo's, a bench has been added on the sidewalk in the recess that forms the coffeehouse's entrance. The bench is shared by the public and the patrons of Bollo's.



31 Gillie's - Blacksburg, VA



32 Bollo's - Blacksburg, VA



30 Stairs, Grand Arch

## Designing Outdoor Public Spaces

Urban residences do not have a yard in the sense that suburban and rural homes do. Public streets, sidewalks, alleys, plazas and parks, are the outdoor spaces associated with the urban home. These public areas are playground, shopping mall, front porch, cafe, recreation area and thruway, all in one. Quality outdoor spaces are essential to a successful urban environment.

### Sense of Place

The primary quality of a successful urban plaza is a "sense of place." An open space must have some kind of spatial order or definition before it can be acknowledged as a "place." The Piazza San Marco in Venice, Italy is enclosed on three sides with an "architectural frame," a continuous arcaded facade that transforms the open plaza into a three dimensional outdoor room. The open end is punctuated with the huge Basilica San Marco completing the enclosure. The building facades that form the frame are high enough to make the area appear as a single volume but not so high that the space becomes claustrophobic.

In larger open spaces or those surrounded by streets, the nearby buildings are generally not sufficient to define a place. In these situations, a sense of place can be achieved by creating a new enclosing element or a density of elements that have the desired effect.

Along the waterfront of Barcelona, Spain, a wide open space has been transformed into a successful park using a density of large column/lightposts. The regular, repetitive structure of the columns brings order to an empty space, making it easily discernible by the human eye.

Barcelona's Placa del Saintes takes the other approach, introducing two roof structures that define the spaces beneath them. The first roof is long, low and undulating, making a covered path from the train station toward the center of the city. The second roof is high, square and static, creating a shaded place to sit.



33 Piazza San Marco - Venice, Italy



36 Piazza Navona - Rome, Italy



34 Waterfront Park - Barcelona, Spain



37 Grand Palais - Paris, France



35 Placa del Saintes - Barcelona, Spain

### Focal points

Focal points are another important component of a successful outdoor space. Fountains, statues, sculptures, bollards, columns and other objects placed in an open area help to break up the space and give inhabitants something to gather around, lean against or sit on.

Piazza Navona in Rome, Italy, is defined by a strong architectural frame which is complemented by a large fountain and obelisk in its center. Tourists, artists and residents gravitate to this central focus sitting along the edge of the fountain or on the surrounding bollards.

The Grand Palais in Paris, France encloses a courtyard that has been open to the public for years but was rarely used. The recent introduction of a grid of striped columns of varying heights, reduces the scale of the space, provides focal points for activity, and captures the interest of inhabitants.

## Seating

In The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, author William Whyte states, "People sit where there are places to sit." Whyte studied plazas in New York and other large cities to discover what makes one more successful than the other. He found a direct correlation between the popularity of a place and the supply, variety and quality of seating. The designer should exploit all opportunities to make seating or sittable space, such as, wide ledges, planters, stairs and walls.

The bench in Barcelona's Park Guell, designed by Antonio Gaudi, is one of the finest examples of quality urban seating in existence. The bench defines an elevated dirt play area, providing enclosure, seating, railing and sidewalk with one element. The simple dirt surface is transformed into one of the most popular outdoor spaces in the city. In plan, the bench waves into and out of the play area, a simple design move that provides a large variety of seating options. Friends sit and talk, facing each other, in a trough of the wave; while parents sit at a crest of the wave watching their children play in the plaza. The contoured backrest rises up at a regular interval providing occasional seats with a head rest. A row of bumps separates the seat from the channel that drains away rain water.



38 Park Guell - Barcelona Spain



39 Park Guell



40 Park Guell

## The Town

The Town of Blacksburg was established in 1798 in a basin shaped depression in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwestern Virginia. The town was mainly an agricultural community but also served as a stop along a major route to the West.

Like most urban areas, Blacksburg has structure, density and a context with unique conditions that are worthy of study and acknowledgment in the design of a new project added to the area.

## The Structure

The town was originally laid out as a 4 block by 4 block grid encompassing 38 acres. The sixteen squares were aligned diagonally to the north, allowing all facades to receive direct sunlight at some time each day. The grid continues to provide the underlying structure for the downtown area, although the Main Street axis through town has also become a dominant organizing element. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University developed independently along side the town to the West.



## The Density

The density of downtown Blacksburg exists along Main Street, the primary artery through town, and continues around the corner on College Avenue, the connector between downtown and the Virginia Tech Campus. The tightly packed buildings along these streets house retail shops, restaurants, bars, and other businesses on their ground level, and offices, galleries, and student apartments upstairs. The continuous wall of formal, urban scale facades is interrupted only by the streets and an occasional narrow alleyway leading to the rear of the buildings.

Trees line the sidewalks of the streets, granting privacy to upper floor occupants, creating a buffer between automobile and pedestrian traffic, contributing to the definition of the street as an enclosed space, and increasing the density of the area.



41 Main Street Facades



42 Main Street

## Parking

The desirable density along Main Street and College Avenue breaks up quickly on the surrounding streets. Suburban style parking lots cover a large amount of the land behind the building that front on Main and College. Despite the large amount of square footage allotted for parking, the number of spaces is still insufficient to satisfy the demand.

The downtown is further fragmented by the development of suburban shopping malls. Gables Shopping Center and University Mall are located just beyond walking distance from the center of town. Both are designed for easy access by automobile and neglect areas for pedestrian movement.



43 Downtown Parking



44 Gables Shopping Center



45 University Mall

## Outdoor Spaces

The over allocation of outdoor space for surface parking has greatly limited the areas available for pedestrians to spend time in downtown Blacksburg. The sidewalk and Henderson Lawn, a University green space adjacent to downtown, are the only places for pedestrians.

Sidewalk benches are placed much too close to the street. One can barely extend his or her legs without risking injury from passing cars.

Henderson Lawn provides a nice grassy hill ideal for sitting and watching the downtown activity. However, the lawn is separated from the sidewalk with a fence of pointed steel bars that inhibits entrance from the street. Few people bother to circumvent the barrier, most find somewhere else to sit.



46 Main Street Bench



47 Henderson Lawn

## Buildings

The majority of Blacksburg's older buildings support the density of downtown and acknowledge its structure. The buildings front the sidewalk leaving no unclaimed space. The gabled ends have been masked with urban scale facades that give the buildings prominence and contribute to the definition of the street. Detailed cornices, double hung windows and awnings provide human scale. Street level storefronts are transparent and sheltered, inviting window shopping and entry.

The majority of recent buildings constructed along Main Street have learned little from their predecessors. The new apartment complex along North Main ignores the town's major axis. The building presents a blunt gabled end to the street with no storefront or entrance facing the sidewalk.

The First Union Bank at the corner of South Main Street and Jackson Street lacks all human scale. The massive glass volume overwhelms the street and provides no detail to hold the attention of passersby. However, the edge of the planter at the base of the building does provide a place to sit.



48 Urban Scale Facade - Blacksburg, VA



49 Apartments - Blacksburg, VA



50 First Union Bank - Blacksburg, VA

## Corner Column

One of Blacksburg's most apparent building traditions is the use of the corner column. Buildings at the intersection of two streets have a chamfered corner on the ground floor with a column inserted to support the upper floor. An entrance is made behind the column facing the intersection. The columns give prominence to the corner buildings and the bevelled edge visually turns the corner.



51 Capone's Jewelers



52 Hokie Spokes

### The Shared Stair

Buildings with two sections sharing a central stair is another common sight in Blacksburg. The stair provides access to upper floors and serves as a separator between storefronts.



52 The Cellar and Record Exchange

### The Interactive Storefront

The recessed, glass storefronts provide a transparent and sheltered interface between inside and the street. Each entrance is unique, offering a new experience from one to the next.



55 Davidsons Clothing

### The Distinctive Roof

Blacksburg is home to more than its share of interesting roof structures that shelter and provide definition to various outdoor spaces.



58 Wilco



53 Eagle Express Clothing



56 The Clothes Rack



59 New River Oil Company

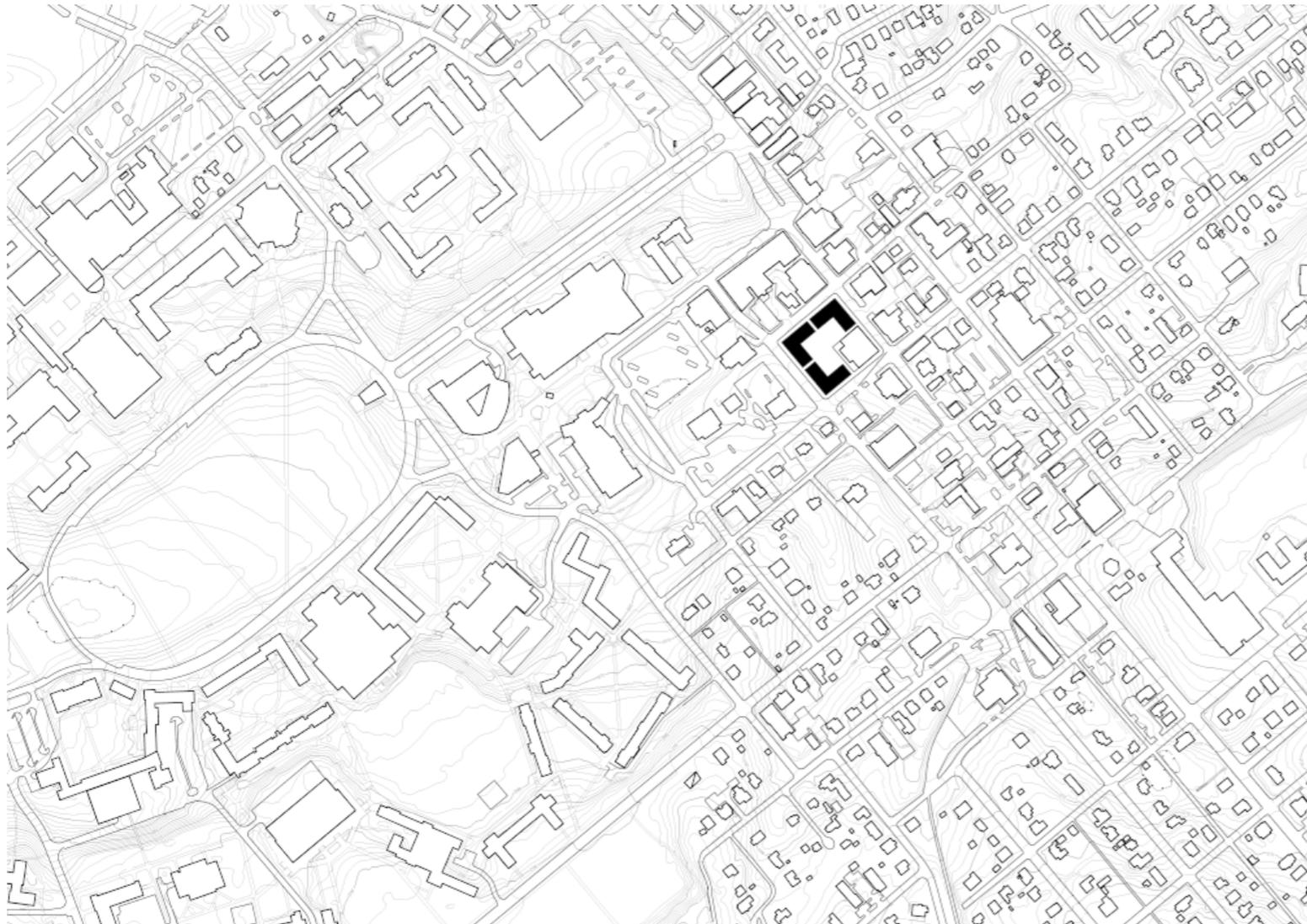
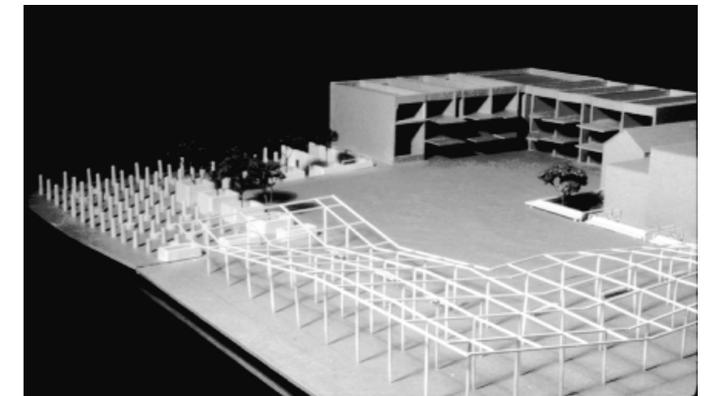


60 New River Oil Company

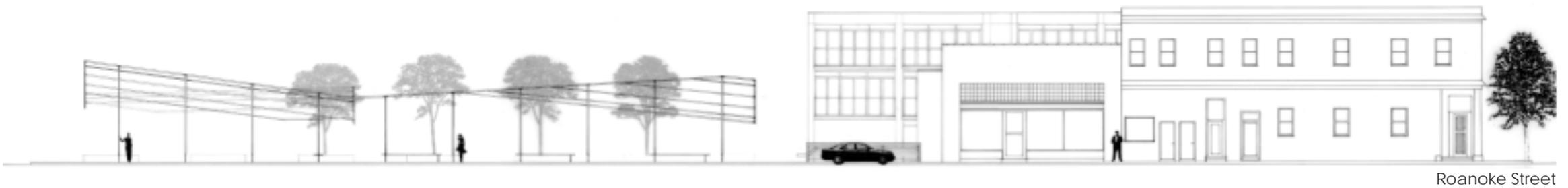
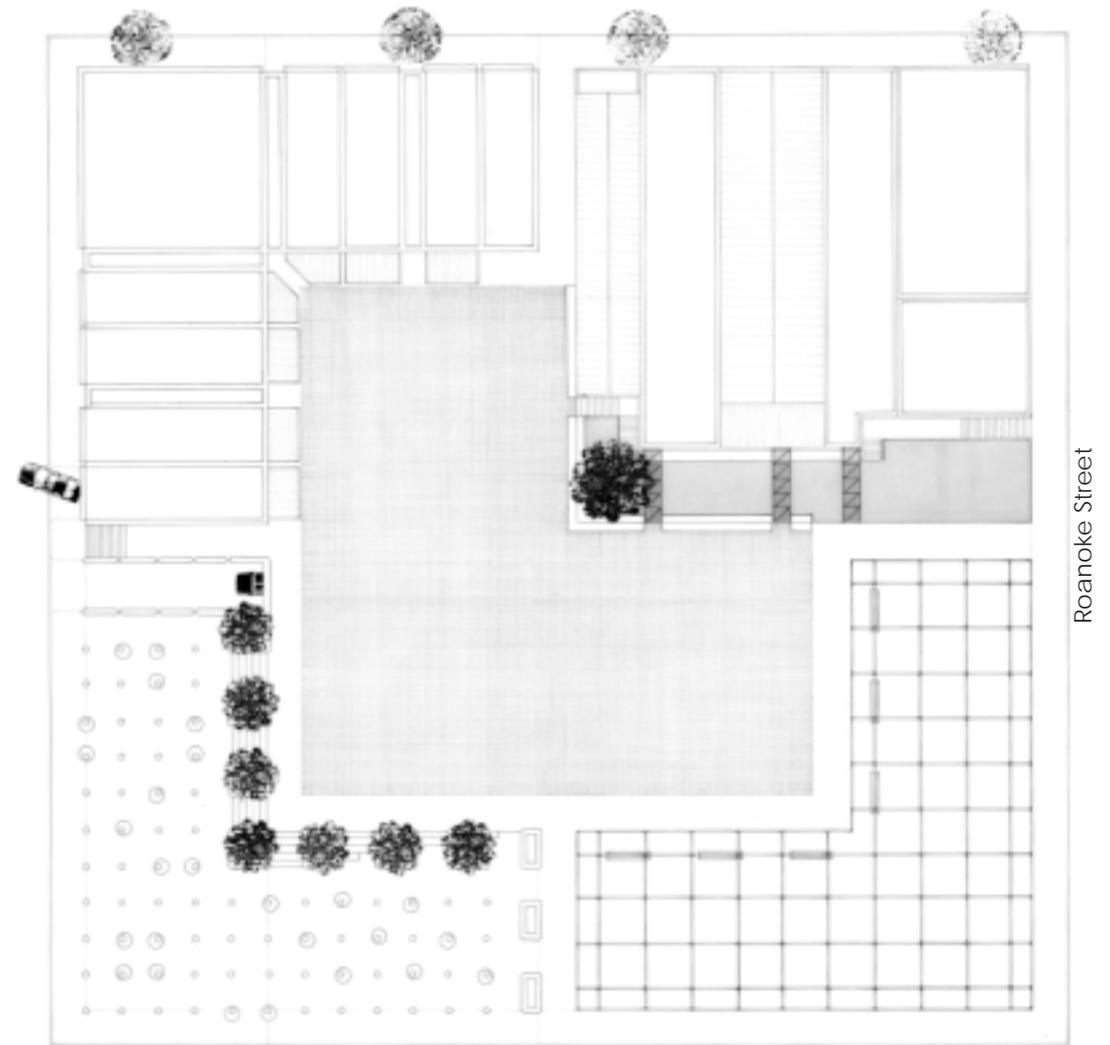
## The Project

The project encompasses the redesign of a block in the grid of downtown Blacksburg, Virginia. The site for the project is defined by Main Street, Jackson Street, Draper Road and Roanoke Street. A farmers market, two parking lots, a motel, a book store, a large vacant retail space, and a density of six historic buildings currently inhabit the site. The historic buildings, covering the eastern quadrant of the site, house successful businesses and have sufficient architectural merit to be preserved. The remainder of the site will be replaced with a new mixed-use project that will support the urbanity of Blacksburg.

The new construction will include a mixed-use building with retail spaces at street level and apartments above, a parking garage below grade, a new farmers market, a park, and an open plaza.

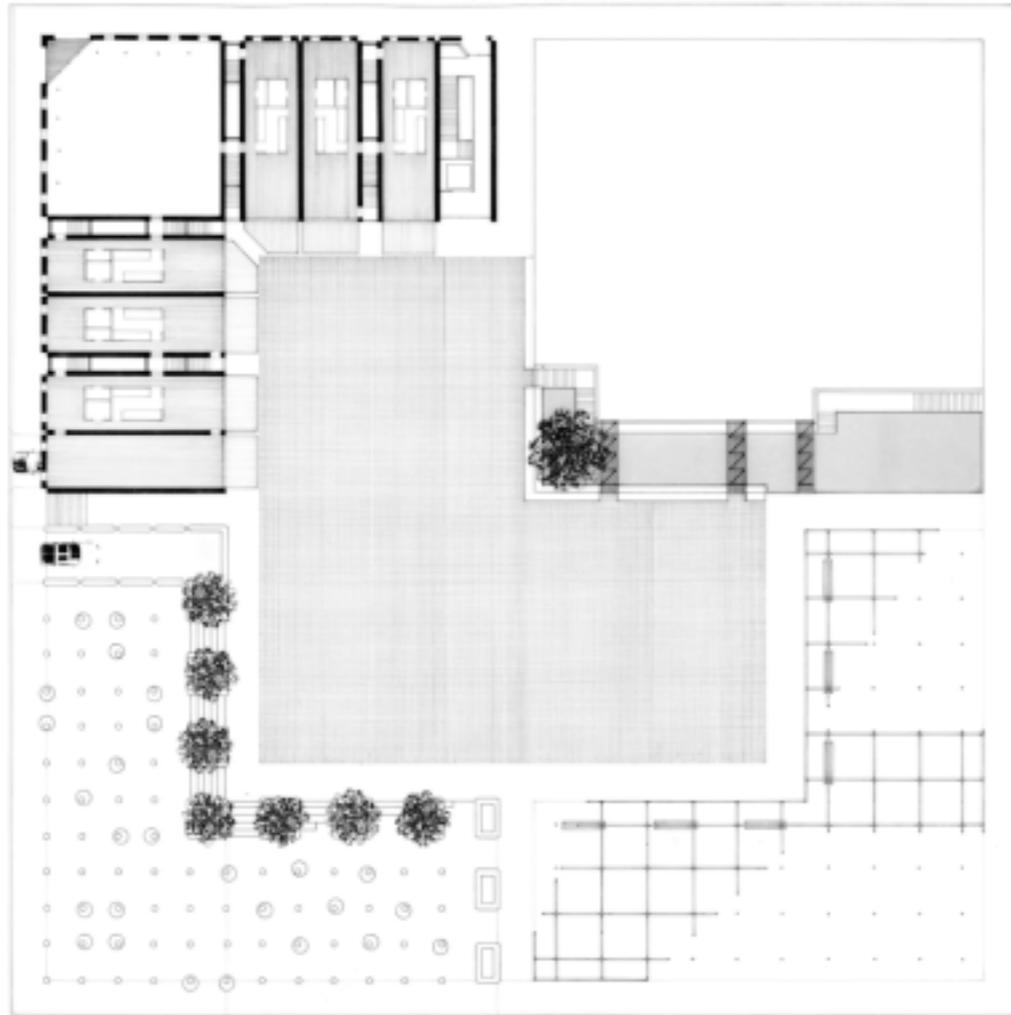


The site is divided into four quadrants: the existing buildings to be preserved, the retail stores with apartments above, the column park, and the farmers market. All structures front the street, maintaining an urban footprint that leaves no space unclaimed. Each quadrant sacrifices a portion of its interior to form an enclosed, L-shaped plaza. The plaza serves as a common area between the diverse sections of the project. The irregular plan along the rear of the existing buildings is reconciled with the simple geometry of the plaza using a large opening that lets light into the parking garage below the street level.



Roof Level Plan  
Roanoke Street Elevation

Main Street



The individual retail spaces and apartments are constructed adjacent to one another, sharing loadbearing walls and stairwells between them. The narrow facades continue the rhythm of side by side buildings existing along Main Street. At the corner, a larger retail space with offices above punctuates the block and turns the corner onto Jackson Street.

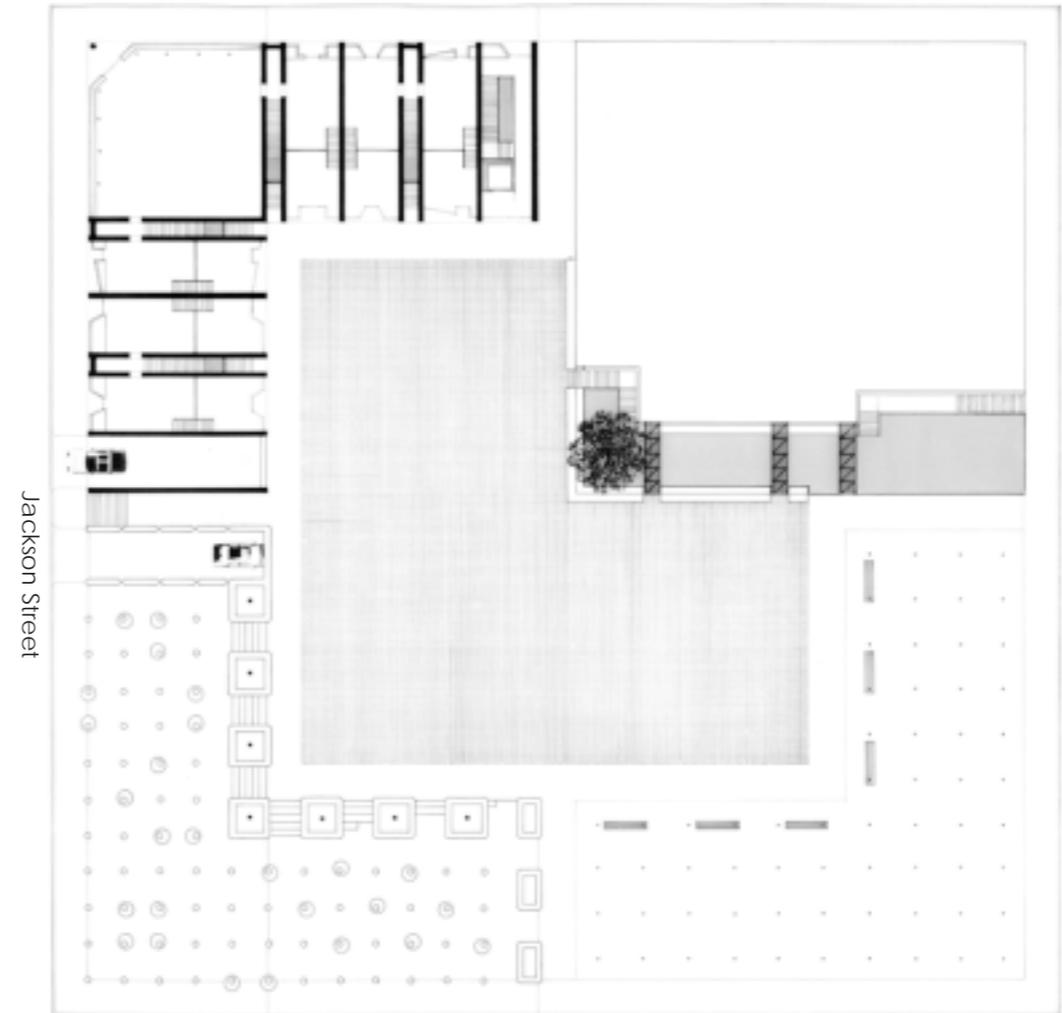
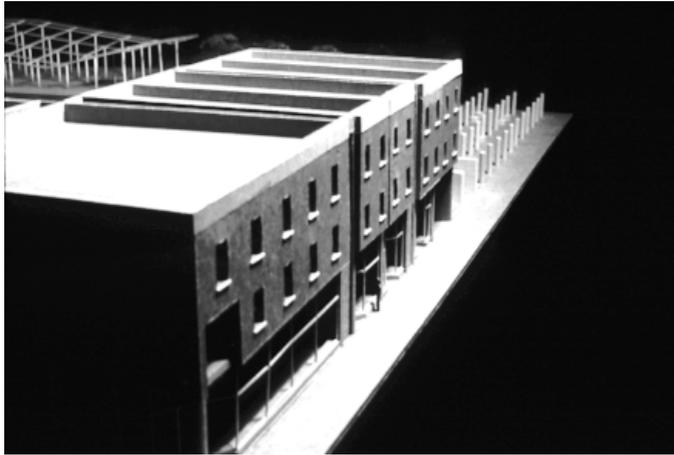
The alley between the new building and the existing buildings is retained to provide access to the courtyard plaza within.



Apartment First Floor Level Plan  
Main Street Elevation

The mixed use building uses the traditional corner column and chamfered edge to turn the corner at the Main Street and Jackson Street intersection. The apartments and retail spaces front both streets in the same fashion, encouraging pedestrian traffic to turn onto Jackson Street and making a gesture of lateral expansion of the Main Street density.

The mass of the structures decreases along Draper Road, mediating between the town grid and the less dense Virginia Tech property across the road.



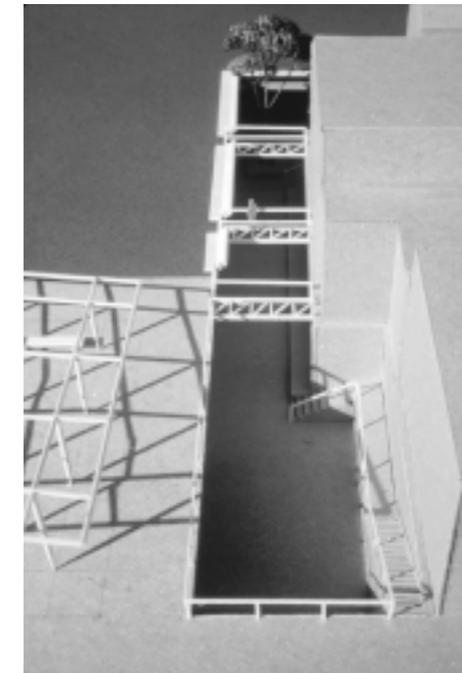
Retail Level Plan  
Jackson Street Elevation



Draper Road

The sixty parking spaces provided by street level lots previously existing on the site are replaced by a one level, below grade parking garage accomodating seventy five vehicles. The garage is designed to be another level of the project, a cohesive part of the whole. Daylight is brought into the space through an opening behind the existing buildings. Directly below the opening is a continuation of the plaza at garage level. Access to the garage is provided in three places: through the automobile entrance on Jackson Street, via elevator or indoor stair through the Main Street entrance, and by outdoor stairs behind the existing buildings.

The backsides of the existing buildings are accessed via lightweight steel bridges crossing the garage skylight.

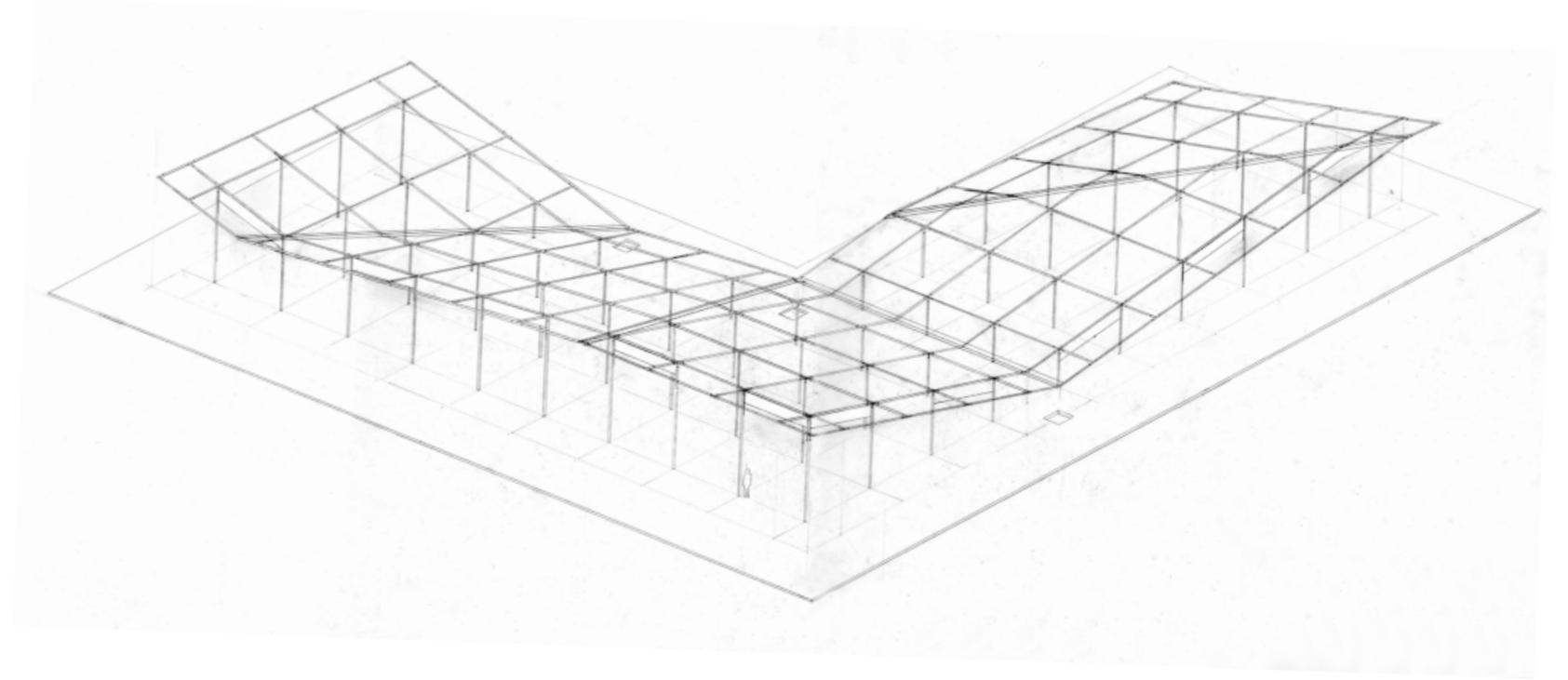


Draper Road

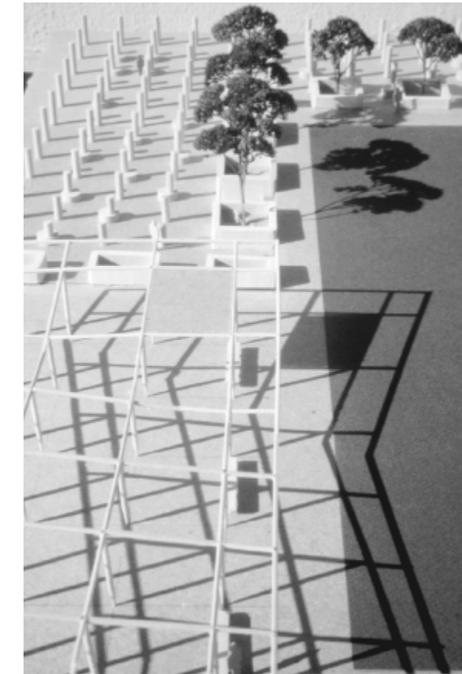
Garage Level Plan  
Draper Road Elevation

## The Farmers Market

The new farmers market replaces a narrow strip of stands currently running along a parking lot. The new steel tube frame forms a roof structure that slants and bends defining the space below. The troughs of the roof separate the area into three sections: the main market facing Draper Road, a secondary market space on Roanoke street, and a small performance area oriented toward the plaza.



The steel tubes are assembled using pre-manufactured joints with a cruciform section. The entire structure can be bolted together on site and then welded to give the joints maximum strength. The light frame receives roof panels that can be inserted or removed, allowing residents to design the shelter for each event throughout the year.



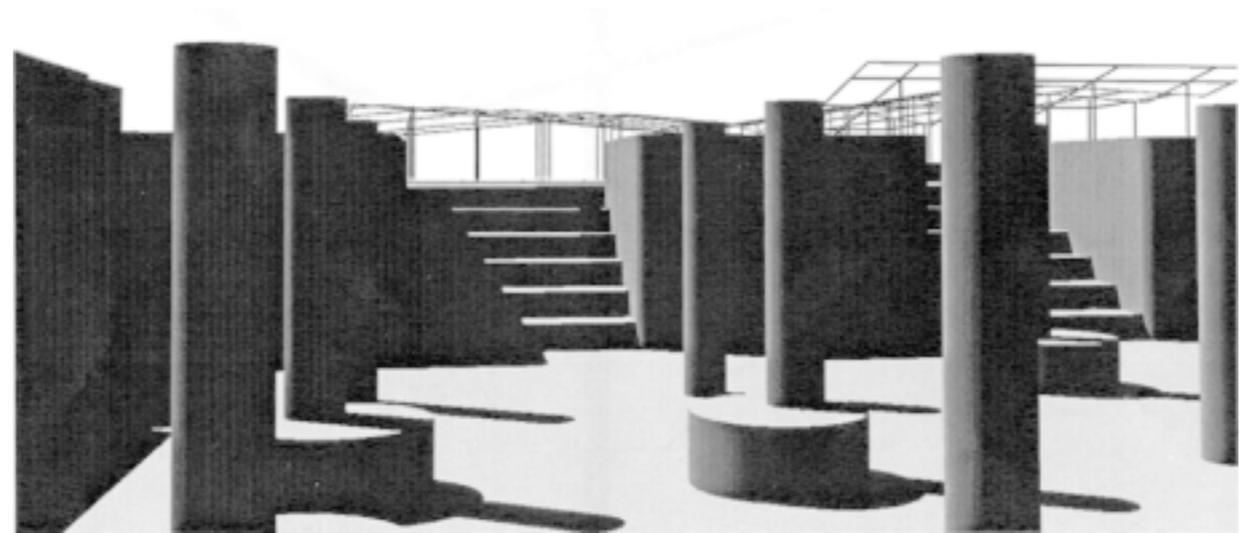
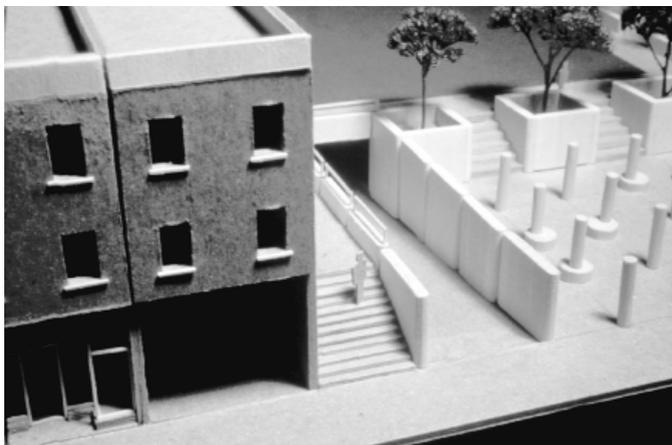
## The Column Park

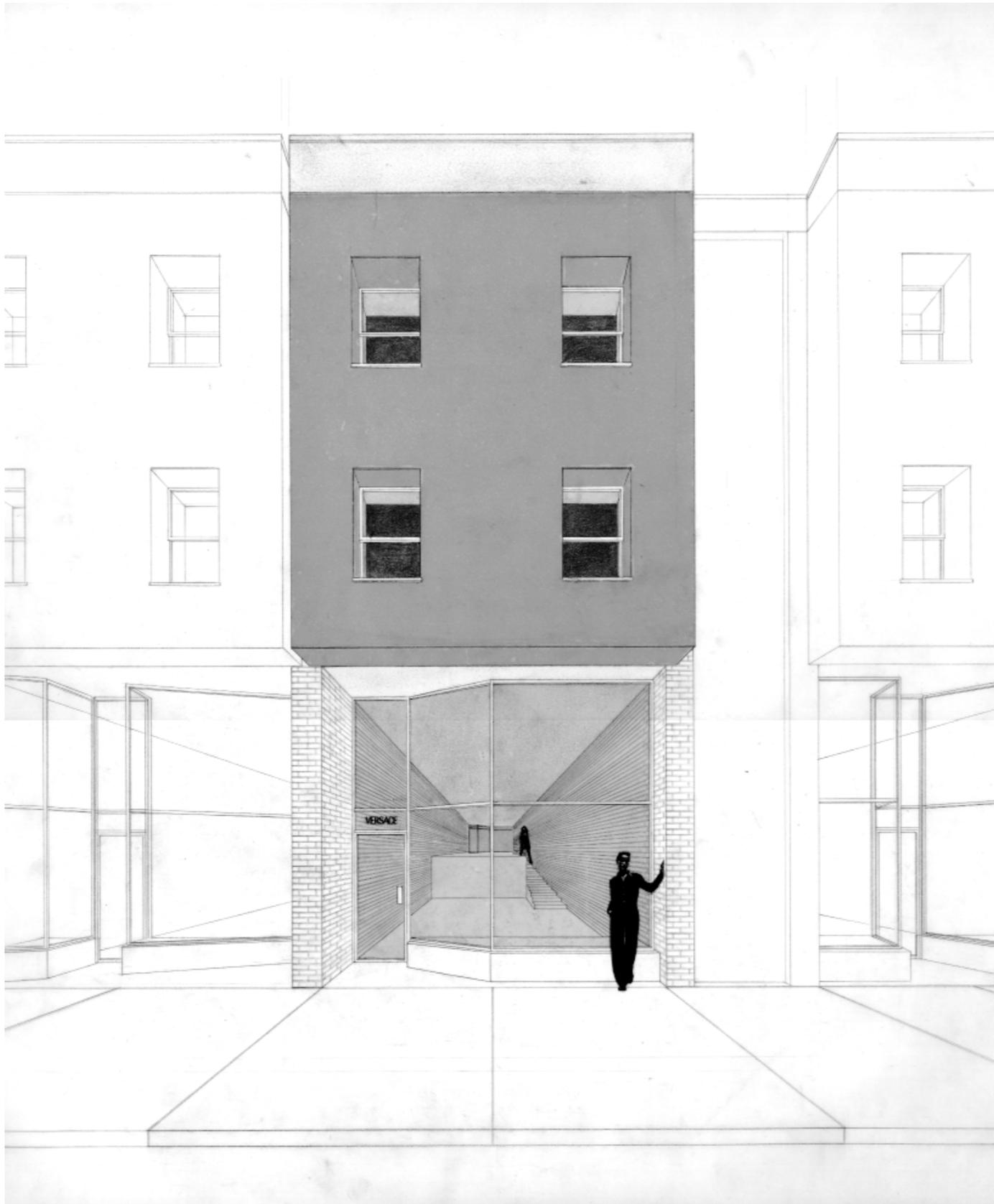
The corner park relies on a repetition of columns to create a sense of place. The density of elements creates a permeable enclosure where one feels protected but not excluded from the busy sidewalk and street.

Circular bases provide seating around selected columns. Each base is offset, orienting the seat toward others or to the sun during a particular time of day. The column seats and the large stairs between the planters provide places to play, to sit, to lie down in the sun, and to climb up and gain a better view.

At the garage entrance, laterally translated columns form walls that surround the ramp, providing the necessary protection, in a language consistent with the columns.

On the inside edge of the park, the raised planters hold earth for trees and flowers, and provide sittable space facing the open plaza.





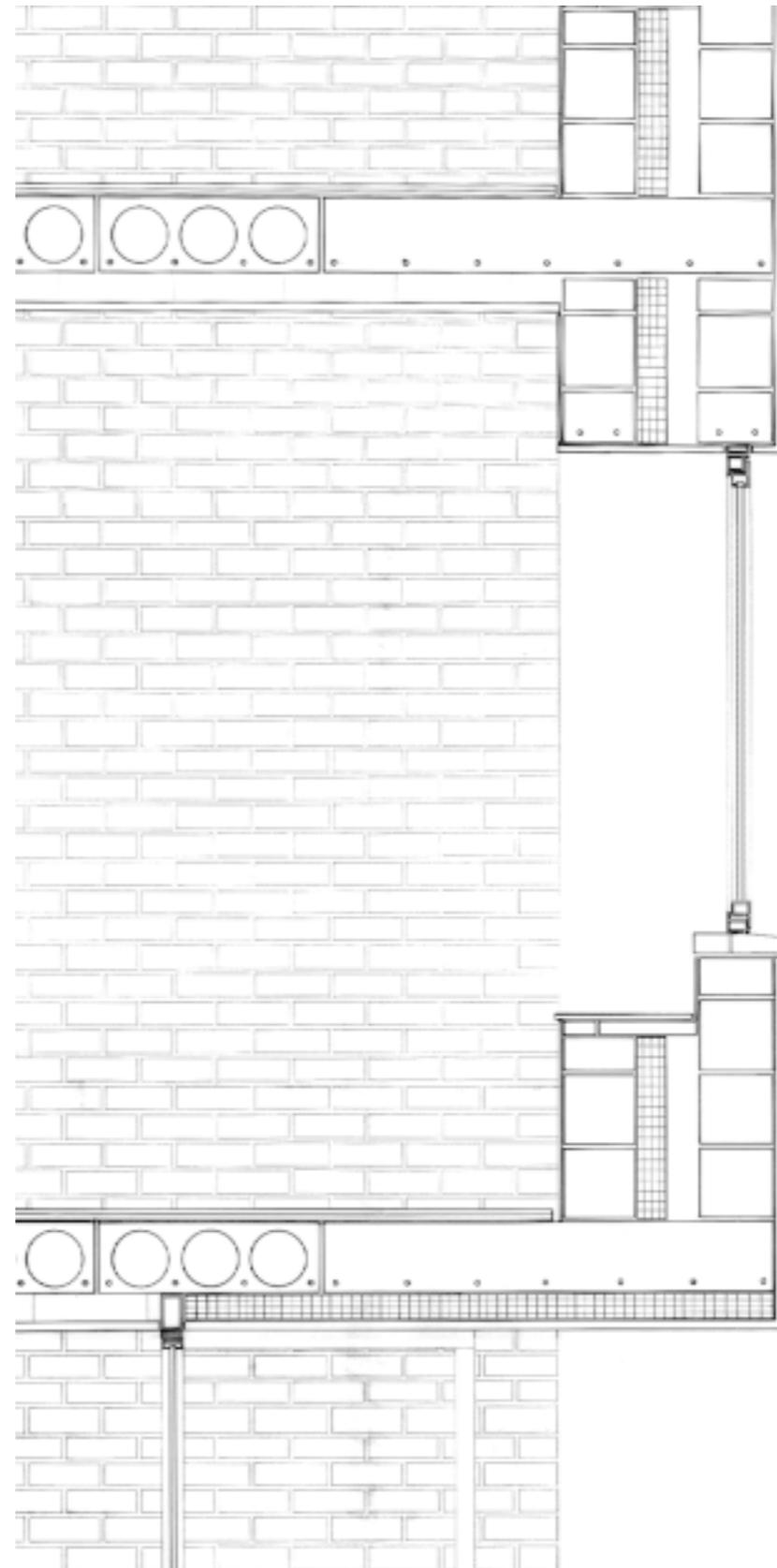
### The Mixed Use Building

The individual units and stairwells of the mixed use building are defined by a series of brick, load bearing walls that run parallel to one another and perpendicular to the street. The retail shops are enclosed with transparent plate glass and low concrete knee-walls. The knee-wall continues into the building providing a seat for patrons or a display area for merchandise. The stores have varied, recessed entrances similar to the others retail spaces in downtown Blacksburg.

The thick, stuccoed facades of the apartments protrude from the building, over the sidewalk, providing privacy for the residents upstairs and extra shelter for window shoppers at street level.

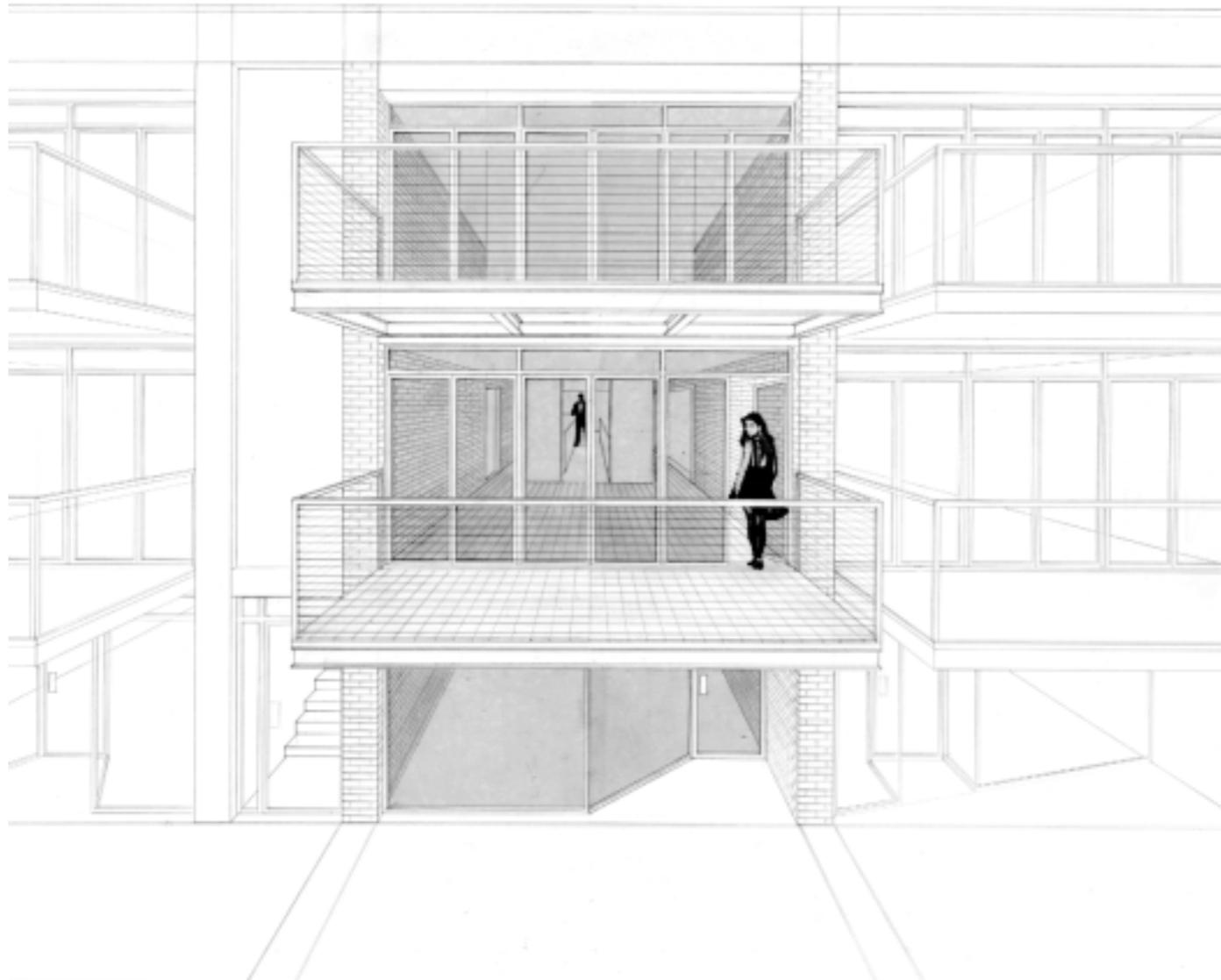
Inside the apartment, the generously thick facade provides the opportunity to make a built-in window seat, a place where residents can sit and view the activity in the street or converse with friends passing on the sidewalk.

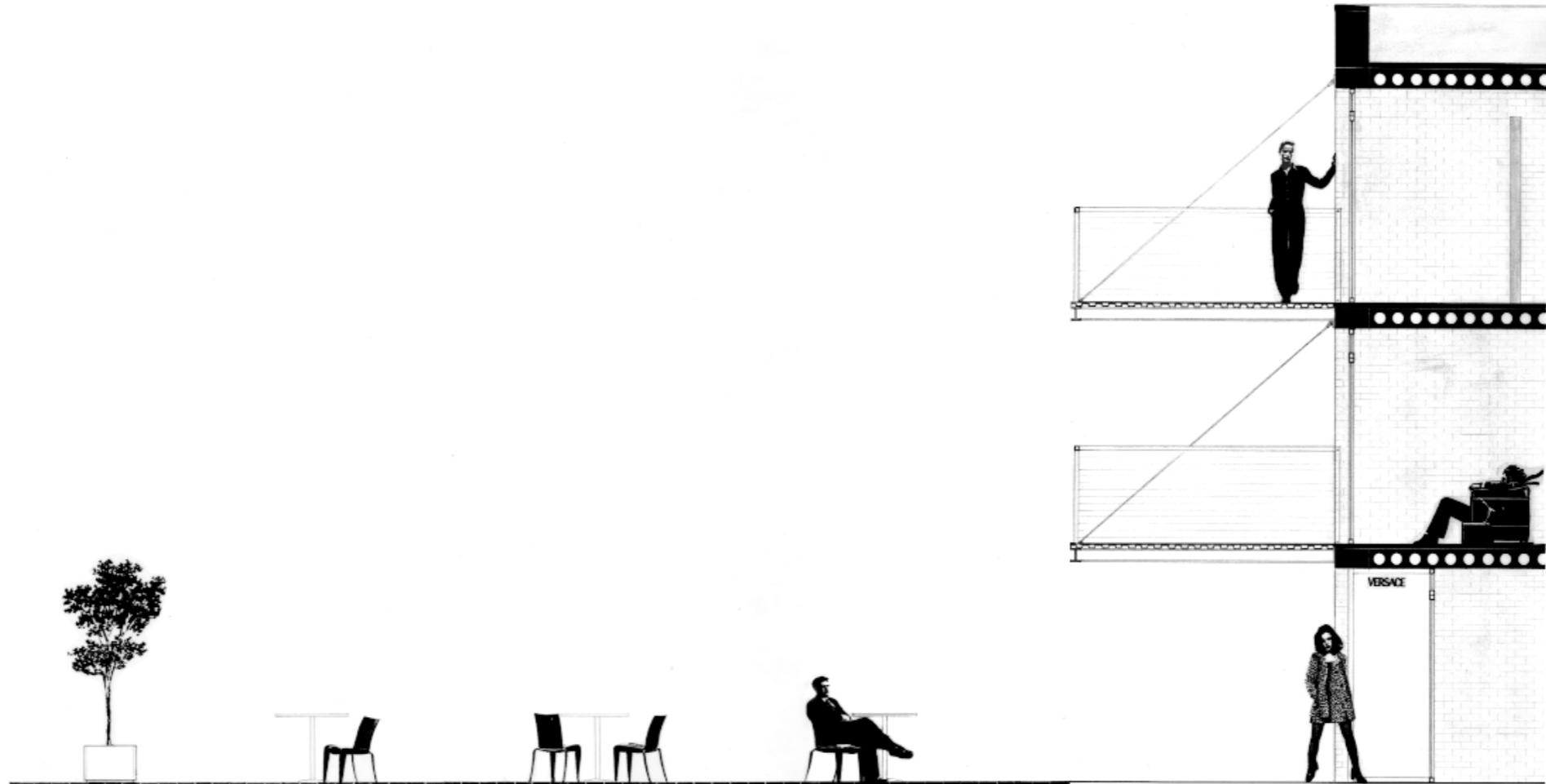
The apartment floor consists of hardwood finish flooring, plywood subflooring and hollow core, precast concrete panels that span between the load bearing brick walls. The facade is constructed of concrete masonry units, finished with stucco on the exterior and drywall on the interior. Casement windows open out toward the street inviting interaction with passersby below.



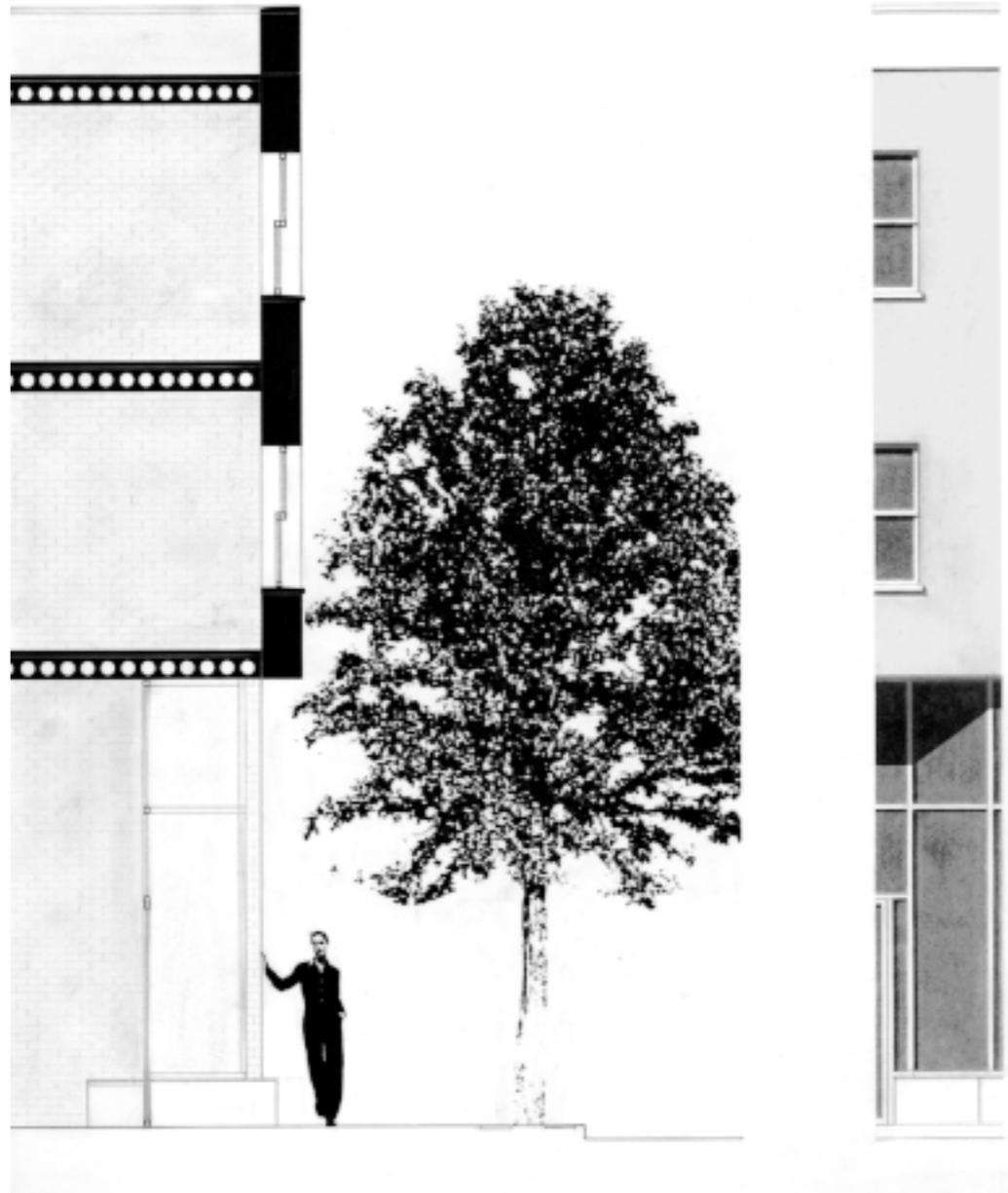
The plaza facades are transparent at all three levels. The rear of the retail shops are a mirror of the street facade, encouraging entrance from either end. Shared stairwells, between units, open onto the plaza, providing access to the apartments above.

The apartments open fully onto balconies that extend out ten feet over the plaza. The balconies continue the apartment outside into the public space, allowing residents to be a part of the activity in the plaza while in the comfort of their private residence. The balconies also screen the interiors of the upper levels giving the residents some visual privacy from the people in the plaza.



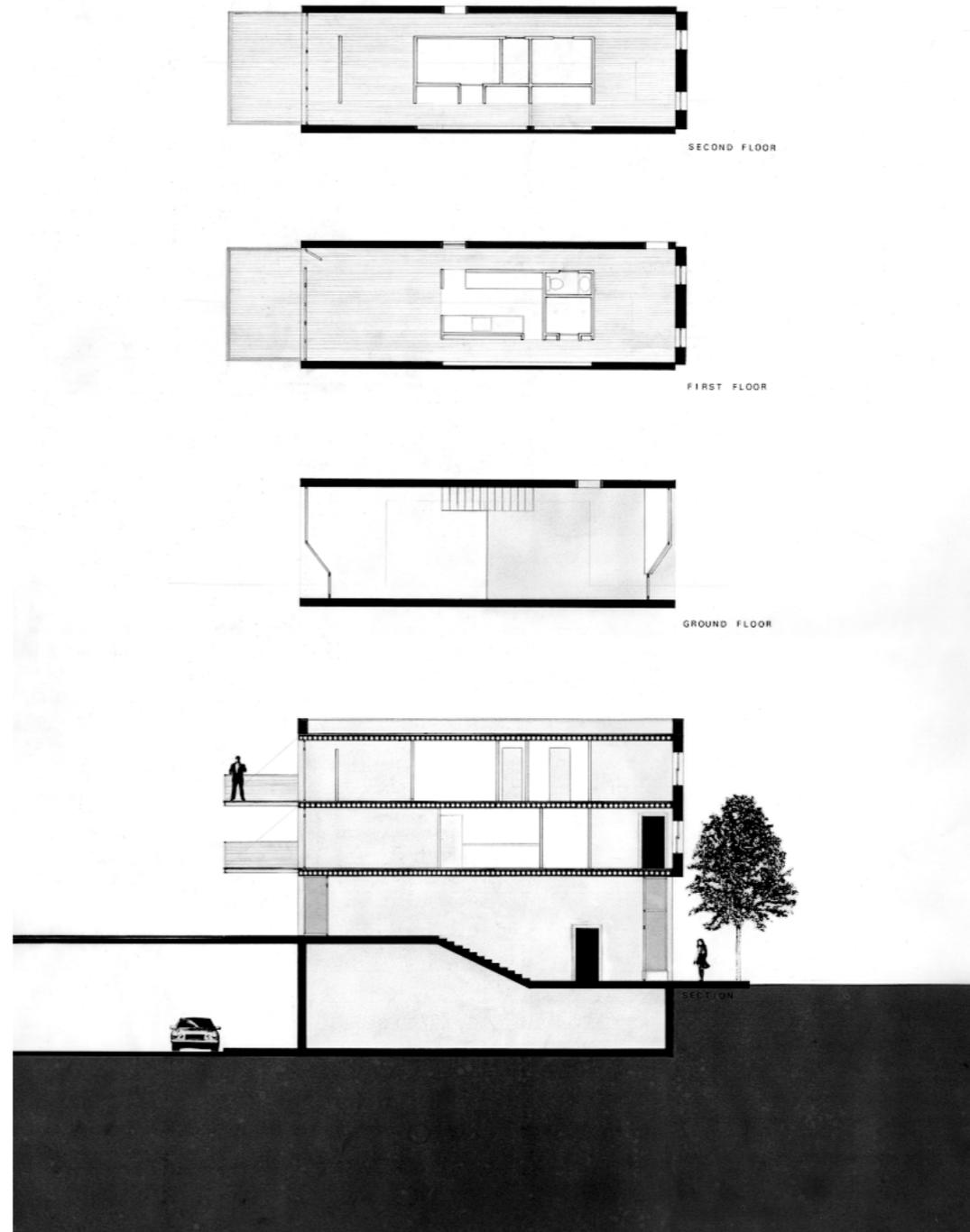


The interfaces between the inside of the building and the public spaces outside are layered and permeable. The recessed storefronts combined with the protruding facades and balconies create soft, ambiguous boundaries between public and private spaces. The intermediary space provides sheltered places to window shop, and a ideal area for an outdoor cafe.



The retail shops reconcile the six foot level difference between the sidewalk and the plaza using a split level section and a connecting stair. Each shop has a door through one of the load bearing, brick walls to a stair that accesses basement storage space.

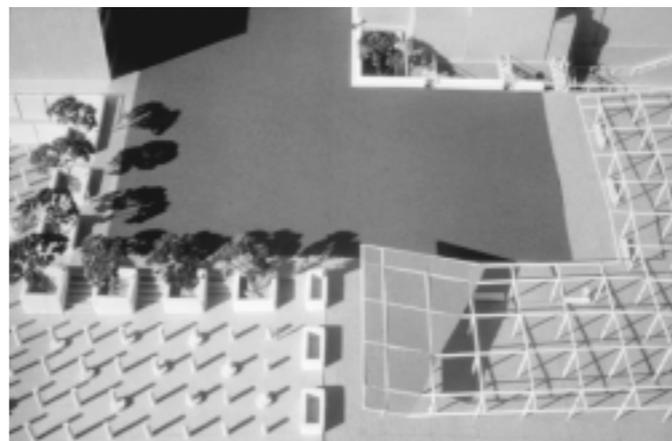
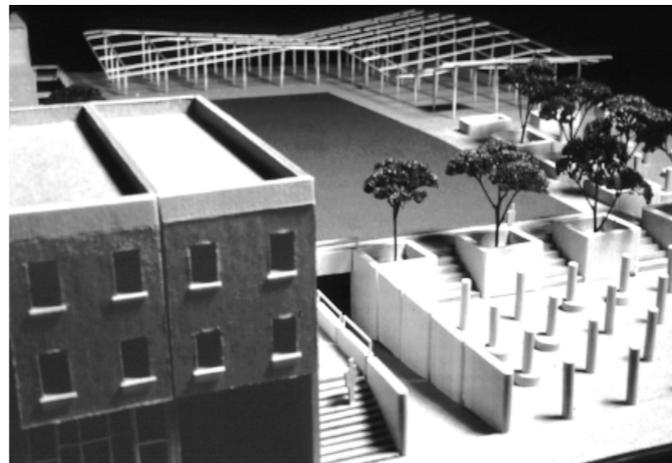
The apartments have an open plan that makes maximum use of the small square footage. The main living spaces are separated with an operational core that houses the kitchen, bathrooms, closets and mechanical equipment. Along one of the hallways the brick wall is recessed to provide generous built-in book shelves.



## The Plaza

The plaza is an open, public space designed to accommodate local festivals, outdoor cafes, large scale art works and childrens' games. The area is defined by brick pavers, a concrete sidewalk, and the architectural frame created by the surrounding structures.

The opening to the parking level below is surrounded by a bench that acts as a railing and provides seating for the plaza. The bench has a backrest sloped at 45 degrees to allow residents to recline and enjoy the afternoon and evening sun.





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*Architectural Record*, October 1992
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  - 36 Hans Christian Rott
  - 37 Eric Chuderwicz
- All other drawings and photographs by Jonathan Chambers



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# Vita

Jonathan Perry Chambers



Master of Architecture  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
January 1998

European Residence Program  
Virginia Tech Center for European Studies, Riva San Vitale,  
Switzerland  
Spring 1996

Bachelor of Science Electrical Engineering  
University of Vermont  
May 1991

Graduate Assistantships and Scholarships  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Construction Volunteer  
Habitat for Humanity of Boston

Senior Quality Assurance Engineer  
IDX Systems Corporation, Boston, Massachusetts

Quality Assurance Team Leader  
Applied Business Technology, New York, New York

Electrical Engineer  
General Dynamics Corporation, Groton, Connecticut