



***Thresholds in the Urban
Environment***

Women and Children's Shelter

by
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S. Anita King

Abstract

The premise of this thesis is to explore the transition of spaces through thresholds. This exploration begins with the urban environment and how one transitions through spaces into private spaces. In particular, this thesis addresses battered women and children and how their transition in life relates to transitional spaces. The journey began with research of precedence. However, the existence of shelters for battered women and children is relatively new. Therefore, I began at the roots of housing, community housing, monasteries, orphanages and dormitories. I also drew from my own experiences with roommates, dorm life and group situations.

This design reflects the transition of spaces and how that relates to the life of battered women and children. The site is located in urban Washington, DC.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my committee members for all of their insight and knowledge. Thank you Susan Piedmont-Palladino for all of your patience, support and knowledge and drive to keep me on track. Thank you Marco Frascari for all of your techniques to make me think in new and different ways, as well as your attention to detail. Thank you Jaan Holt for your stories that always seem to provide insight into the needs architecture should fulfill and the unique perspective on the built environment.

Thanks to my friends that helped throughout my thesis and especially at the very end! I appreciate all of those that helped me so much at the end to build models and shade facades. Your hard work is reflected in my final project and I truly appreciate all of your efforts.

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One Woman's Journey

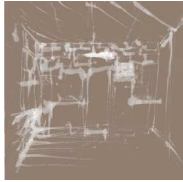
A woman named Julia is scared for her life and the lives of her children. She has been beaten by her husband several times. He has begun drinking heavily and threatening her life. She has become concerned that his violence will soon turn to her children. She has three children under the age of ten. Many of the neighbors believe she is abused by her husband because of her constant bruises and claims of clumsiness when her bones are broken.

One day she goes to the local salon to have her children's hair cut. The woman behind the desk has seen her walk past the salon every day on her way to work. The woman offers Julia some samples of make-up to take home and try on at some other time. Julia accepts the offer and leaves with her children to arrive home before her husband returns from work. Once she has gotten home, she hides the make-up under her daughter's bed, so that she will not be accused of spending money. The next day she leaves for work as usual. She arrives back from work before her husband returns. She decides to look at the make-up samples and finds that the lipstick is not a lipstick at all. The container has information on the local shelters and help lines for victims of domestic violence. She never realized



others knew her situation and admits to herself that she has become more scared for her safety as the years have passed. She decides that she will call the help line from work the following day. The counselor on the help line discusses her situation and agrees to meet her for coffee at a diner in the city.

Julia comes to the diner and relates her fear for herself and her children. The counselor explains that there has recently become an opening at a local shelter, but she will have to leave most of her belongings behind and not tell anyone that she is planning to leave. If she decides to leave, she must act quickly to avoid suspicion and eliminate the need to rationalize the situation. Julia agrees to think about it, but knows that it will be a hard transition. She is afraid her husband will look for her and retaliate. The counselor describes the program and informs her that she will be given food and safe housing until she can sufficiently accommodate her family. She cannot let any know that she will be leaving. The program provides work training and placement, as well as daycare and school placement. This concerns Julia because she has depended on her neighbors many times and has become friends with most of them. This is the only place she has lived for the past fifteen years. She doesn't keep in



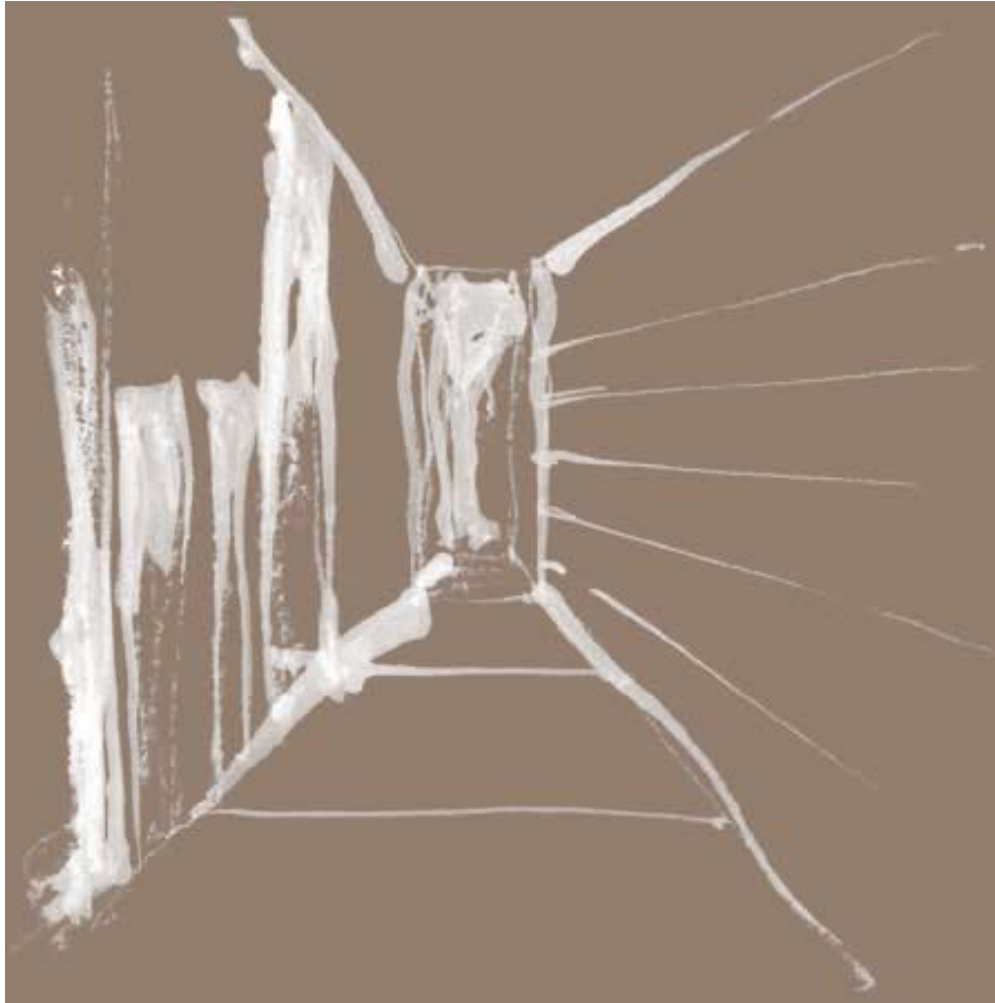
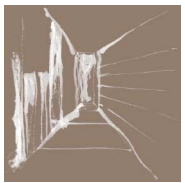
touch with her family and has no support group. Julia asked if she could decide later, because she must return home before her husband gets off work.

That night her husband begins yelling at their children and she realizes she must leave soon. She makes arrangements with the counselor to move at the beginning of the week while her husband is at work. Monday morning she sends her children to school as usual and leaves for work at 8 am like she does everyday. She knows her husband must leave for work at 9 am and is sure that he will be leaving today to pick up his paycheck. After her husband leaves for work, she returns to pack as many her and her children's items as she can. She has very few suitcases, because they have rarely left the neighborhood. She packs most of their clothes and photos in plastic bags collected from the grocery store. A taxi has been scheduled to pick her up later that morning. She frantically packs most of her belongings and worries that her husband will come home to find her there. The taxi arrives and she packs all of her bags in the trunk of the car. The taxi stops at her children's school and she signs them out of classes. They will never return to see their school friends. The taxi drops them off at a diner and they take all of their belongings with



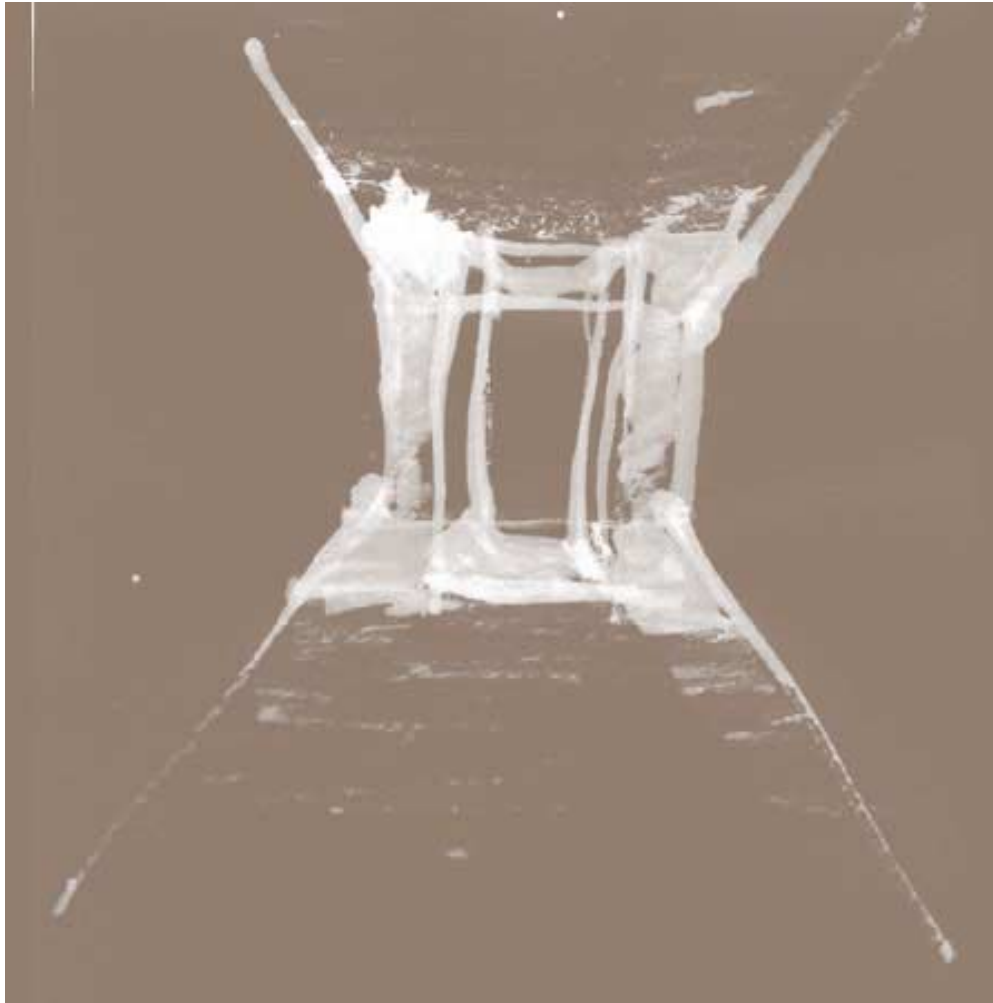
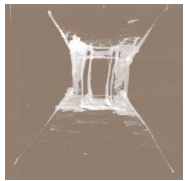
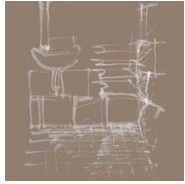
them. The counselor is waiting for them and is glad to see that they have arrived safely. The children are crying because they are unsure of why their mother is panicking and they don't know where they are going. The counselor meets with them and tells the children that they are going to a new safe place with lots of children their age to play with. The counselor packs all of their items into a rental car that they will take to the shelter. The counselor will be driving, but she wants to assure that they have not been followed and that the car cannot be identified with the location that they are going. She drives around the city briefly describing the new life they are about to encounter. They arrive at the shelter.

They do not need to carry all of their items in at this moment. Others will help them soon. They arrive at the front entrance on the street front that appears to be a wall. The wall opens to courtyard. Julia and her children immediately feel at ease. The sound of water trickling down a stone wall helps to block the noises of city life. The trees to the left create canopies of privacy and comfort, while the garden to the left gently steps out to nourish the mind. As she steps through the threshold, she realizes she has left her old life behind and she becomes at ease with her decision to make it on her own. She

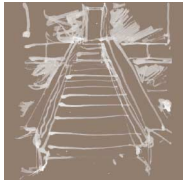


looks down the path to find relaxation in the reflecting pool as it defines the boundaries of the community. Her children stand beside her in amazement as they see children playing and women laughing. They have been scared for a long time and depended on each other. They realize now that they have others to relate to. They are welcomed and joined by others in the community. The counselor shows her to her room and the wall closes behind her. She is now part of the community and will stay her for a year or so while she learns to support herself and her family.

Throughout the year, she wakes up every morning to eat breakfast with her children and their loft mates. The children tease each other while the women drink coffee and discuss recipes for the upcoming Thanksgiving dinner. Julia has now been here for six months. As the seasons have changed the shelter has transitional into a new place. The bright copper wall that reflected so much light in the summer has started to patina. She realizes that the group of women has helped through her most difficult times. She is now part of a community that she has come to cherish. She leaves every morning to learn new work skills. She has gotten a job and her children are going to a new school. She has not seen her husband or any of her

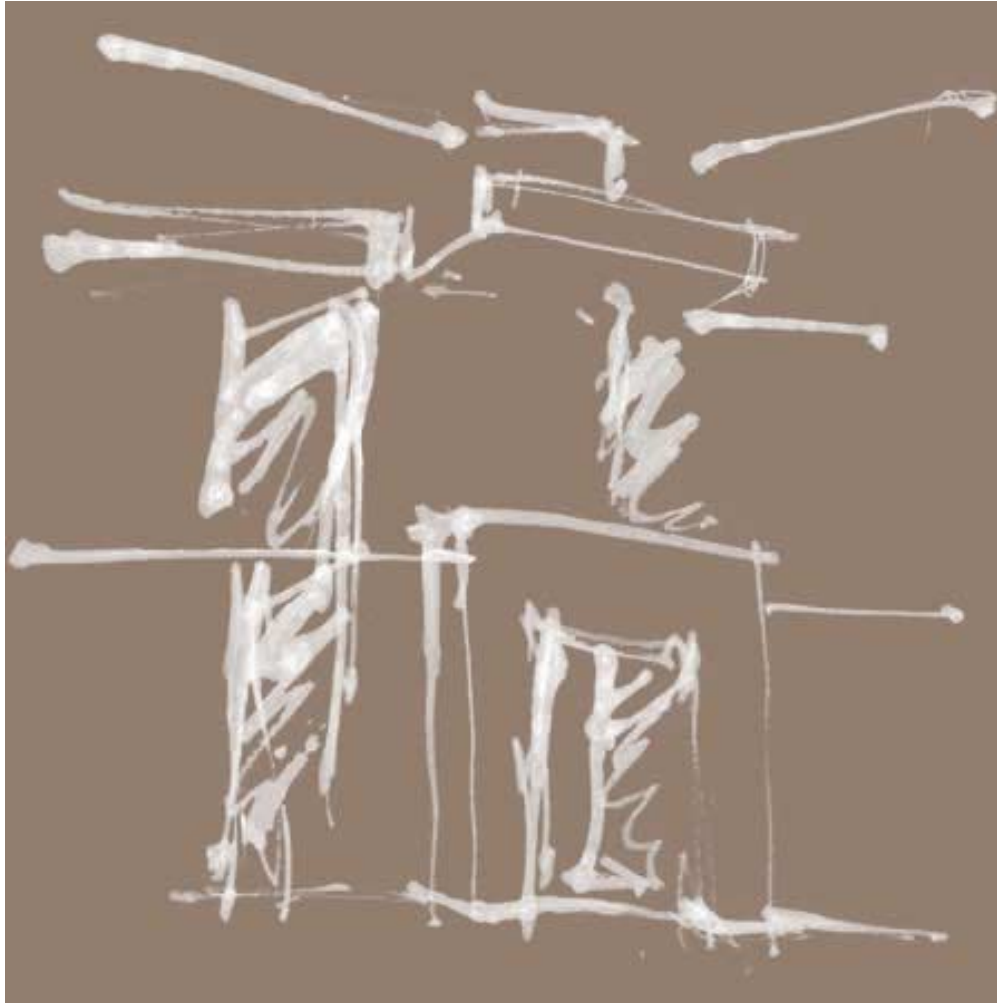


neighbors. She carries on her daily activities without fear. Each day, she passes through a door within the wall that opened on her first day. She is reminded of her triumphs and remembers that her strength will get her through her difficult times. When she returns from work, she sees two of her children playing with the other children in the playground. A counselor watches to make sure they are all having fun. A few women are folding laundry and overlooking the children. It is dusk and it is her turn to help with dinner. She walks up the first set of stairs and down the exterior corridor peering down into the gardens. A few women are cross-stitching and drinking lemonade. She arrives at her apartment as she passes the stairs that lead to the vegetables garden. The water that feeds the garden is gently moving because of the breeze. She walks in to see her oldest daughter doing her homework in the living room. She goes to her bedroom and looks out as the sun sets. She lowers the curtains and changes out of her work clothes. She asks her daughter if she needs any help. She leaves and travels down the garden steps. Several people that worked in the garden are sitting at the bottom of the steps. Most of the harvest is over for this season. They are lining the isles with poinsettias to sell at a holiday fundraiser. She heads to the

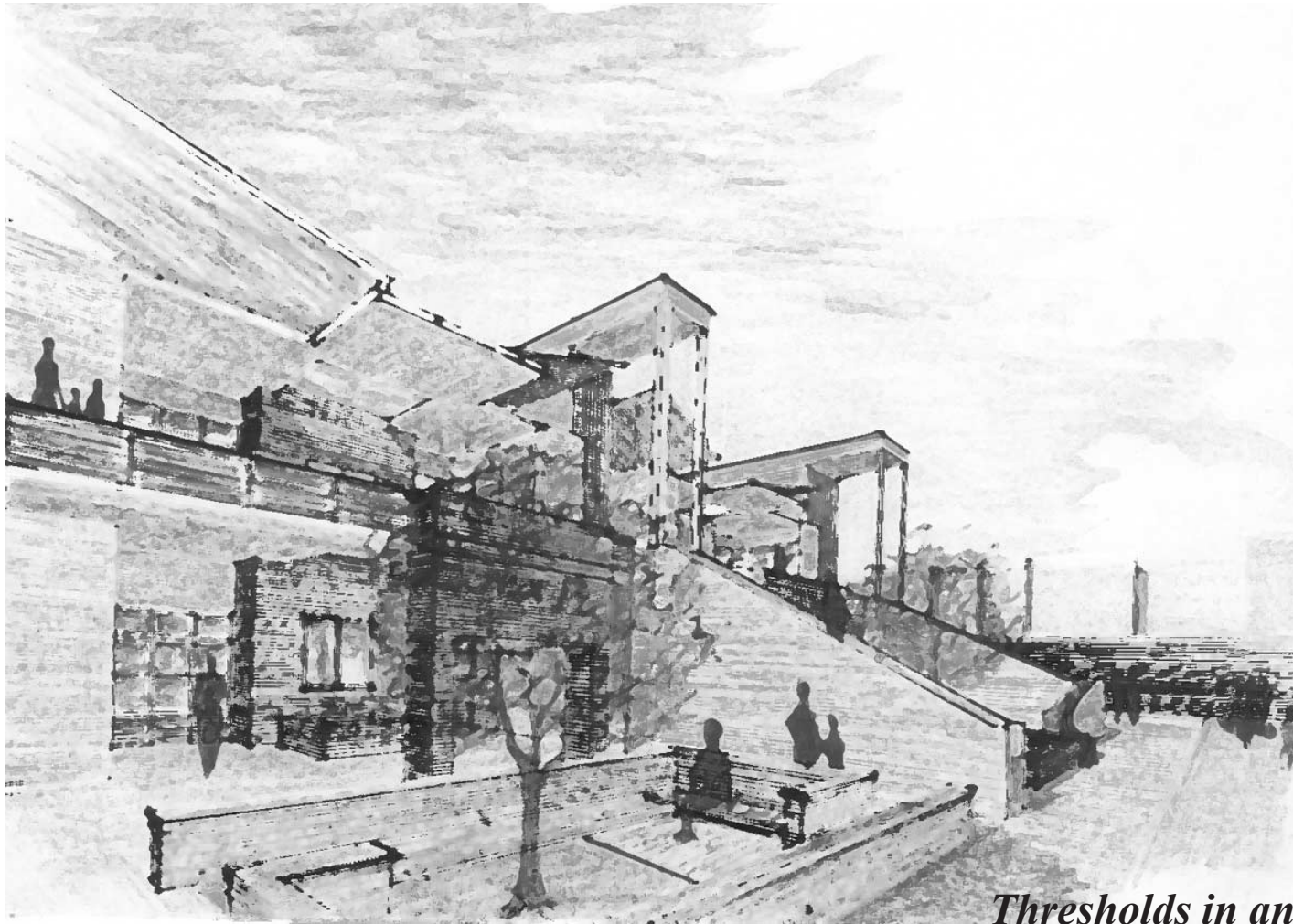


main kitchen. Some of the women have already arrived and have begun cooking. Several of the women have been working later hours, so they will be serving dinner and cleaning up when they arrive. The community gathers in the dining room at 7:30 pm and begins eating dinner. Afterwards, they retreat to their apartments and settle in for the night.

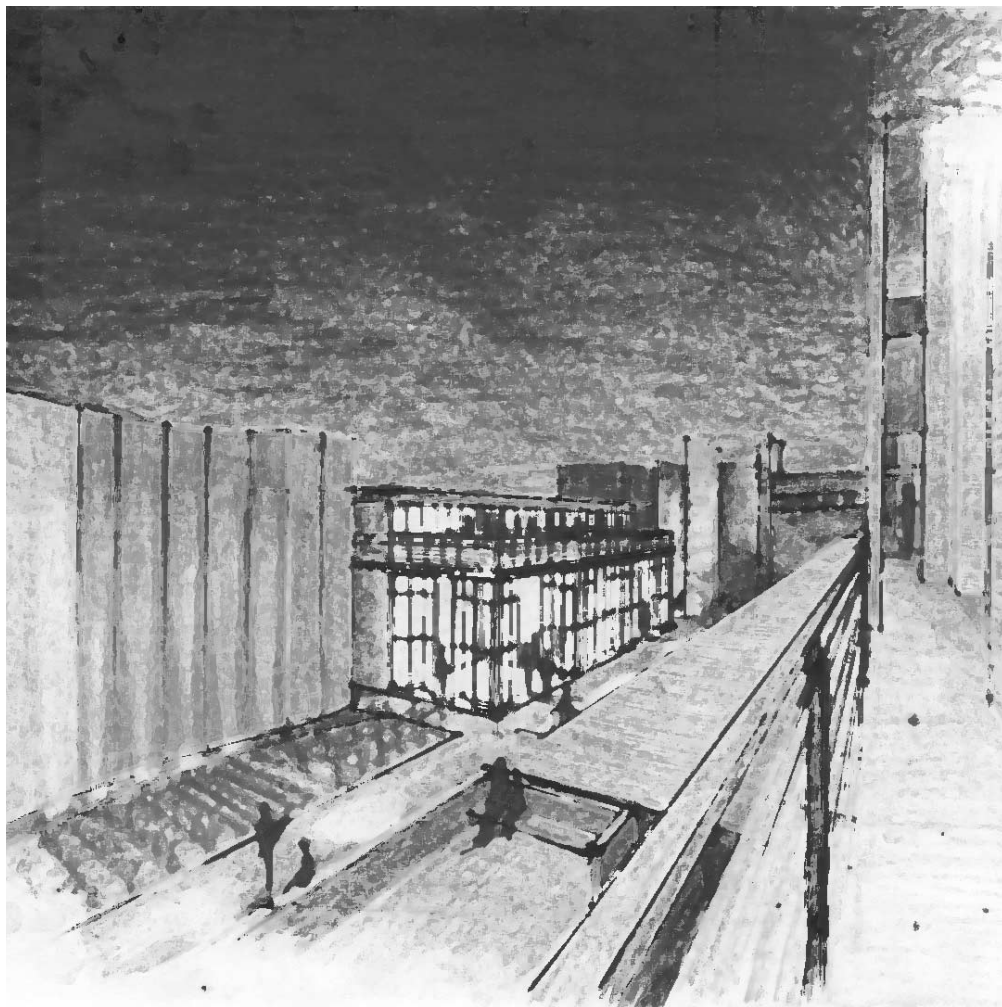
As the year continues, Julia learns how to save money and budget for her families needs. Spring has arrived and Julia relaxes in her garden each Saturday. Her children play with the others in the community and are enjoying their new school. Her neighbors often meet in their garden to discuss the plans for birthday parties and the like. Of course, like all families, Julia tends to the family's laundry as she oversees her children playing on the swings. The children spend Sundays in the library finishing projects for school as Julia picks vegetables for the week. As a new week begins, Julia heads off to work. She no longer needs training and has found a new job close by. The children head off to school and return before Julia gets home from work. During those hours, the children retreat to the basement to explore arts and crafts, while counselors help them through troubles and fears.



After a year has past, Julia packs all of her and her children's belongings. They have found a new apartment across town in a secure building where a few women from the shelter have moved. She knows she will have a support group there and feels she can financially support her family. Julia walks down the stairs to the vegetable garden she has spent so much time. She looks to her left to see the shimmering pool of water that she retreated to on those dark days. She looks to her right and sees a wall between her and the city. Her children run down the stairs and head towards the wall as it opens. As she passes through the ceremonial door, she realizes that she has become independent.



Thresholds in an Urban Environment



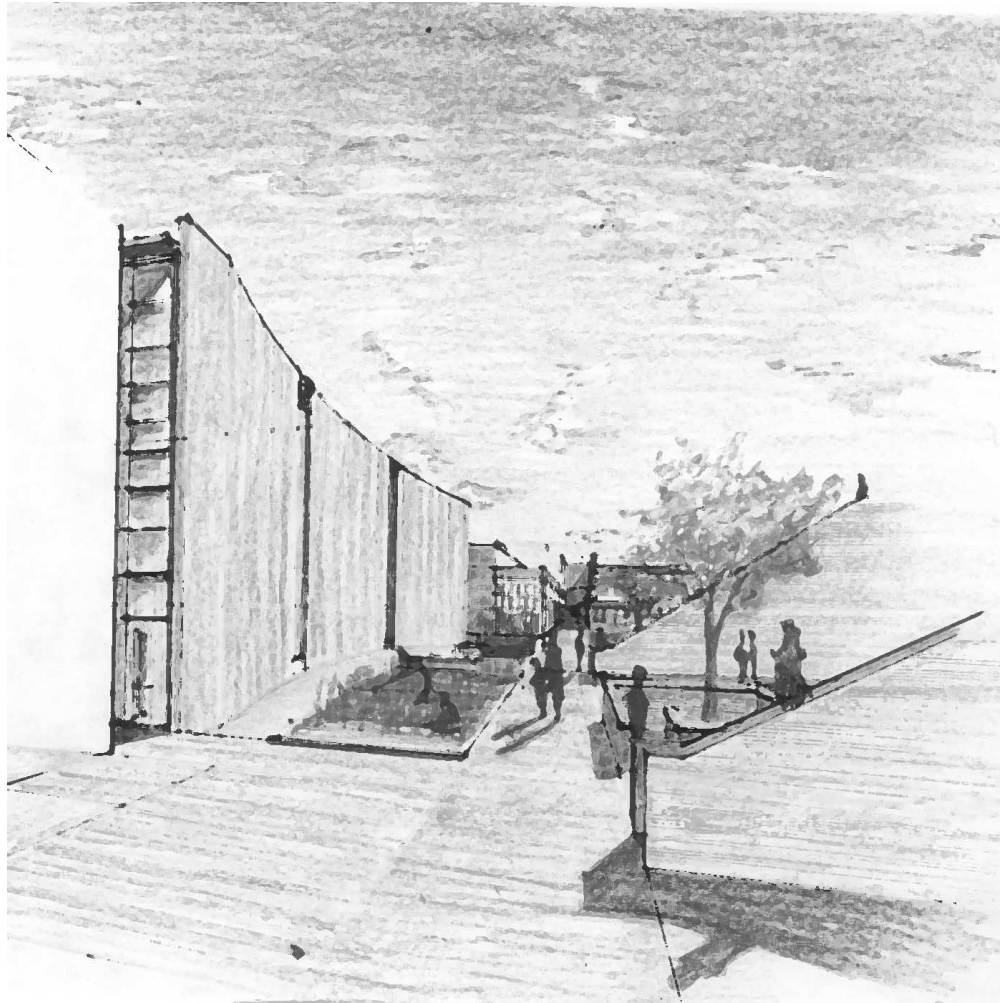
View of Community Dining from Housing Balcony

Thresholds in an Urban Environment

Thresholds represent a transition between spaces. My project translates the physical threshold into the metaphorical threshold of a woman and children's shelter. My idea was to create a shelter that relates to the transformation of these women and children's lives.

My studies began with the importance of the threshold throughout history and how a threshold translates throughout all aspects of architecture.

Thresholds represent a significant importance throughout society. In mythology, Janus, the god of thresholds, and Portunus, the god of house doors, translated the importance of thresholds as the key element of transitional space. The wall was considered sacred and none were to cross. The threshold served the func-



View of Library and Community Garden

tional needs to move between spaces. However, as the wall was a protector, the thresholds became vulnerable and required the protection of the gods.

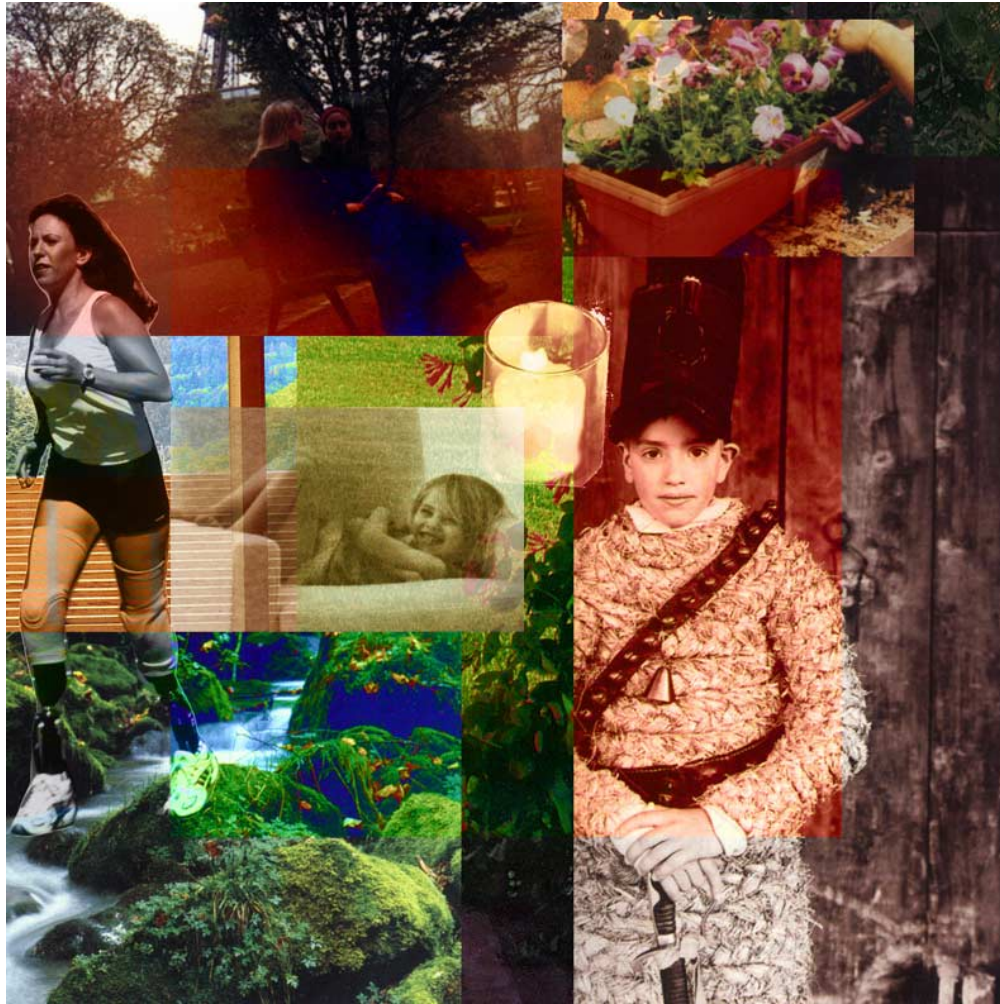
The movement through thresholds creates the experience of the building. The idea of thresholds is symbolized in the transition of the women passing through a ceremonial front door. The idea is that the front door relates to the initial and most important step to independence. Many of these women lack self-esteem and financial resources to support themselves or their families. By passing through the door, these women have acknowledged the responsibility to become independent. The series of thresholds relates to the passages to different stages of the building, which reflects the nature of the spaces and the intended uses. The doors and gates are the primary thresholds that define the



exchange of spaces. However, there are secondary thresholds that are defined by the material, level and directional changes that occur within the building and courtyard. Each door or gate defines the individual spaces created for each of the families.



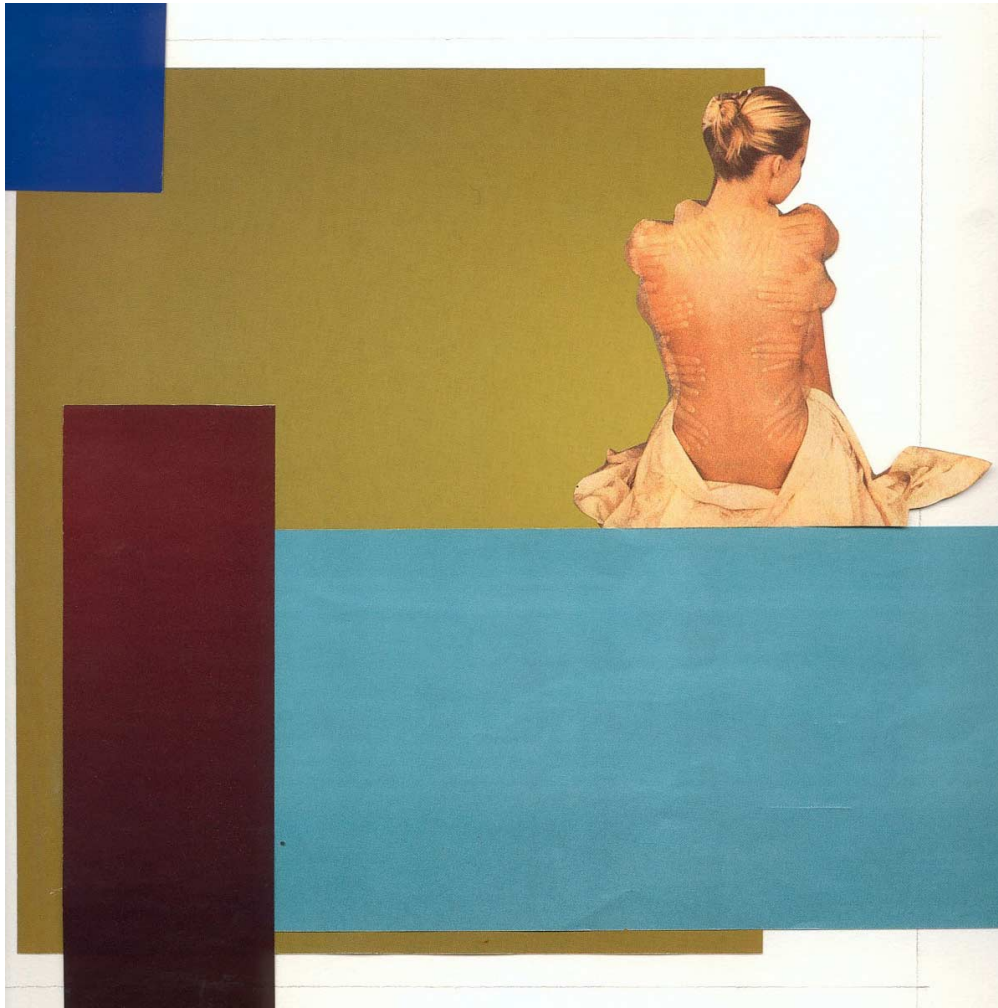
Preliminary Research



Preliminary Research

In order to better understand the needs and the current resources for women and children in DC, I interviewed the directors at the two major women's shelters. I interviewed Crystal Nichols at the House of Ruth and Caitlin Finnegan at My Sister's Place.

The importance of a women and children's shelter is to provide the essential means for a woman become self-sustaining. The shelters I researched house women and children in a secure location after they leave the abuser. Through these organizations' experiences, they have found that many women do not succeed if they are only provided short-term housing due to lack of work skills and affordable housing. Many of these women have never lived alone and have three to four children. In addition, they often lack quality jobs and necessary job training. These



housing shelters provide a furnished apartment setting with all sustaining attributes; such as kitchen, living space, bedrooms and bathroom. The apartment buildings are generally purchased and renovated to house 12-16 families along with a program coordinator, 2 social workers and a few general workers or volunteers. Spaces are generally provided for group activities and counseling. I used these shelters as a model for the programming of my shelter.

As this information provided the necessary essential information for survival, it is important to understand the psychological impact abuse causes to women and children. The built environment contributes to the rehabilitation of a family.

I began my research in 1993 at an exhibit in the Atlanta College of Art and Design. At the time, I did not know the content of the

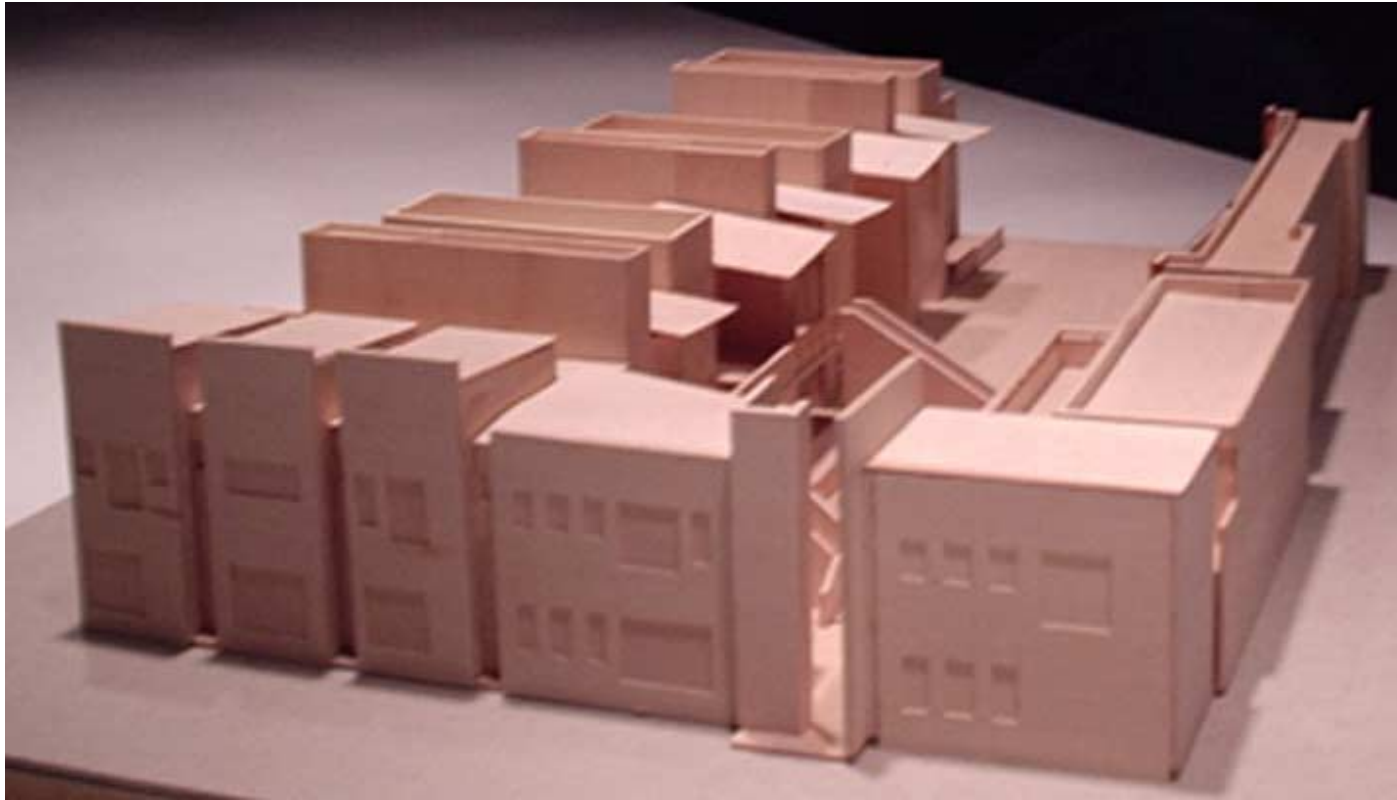
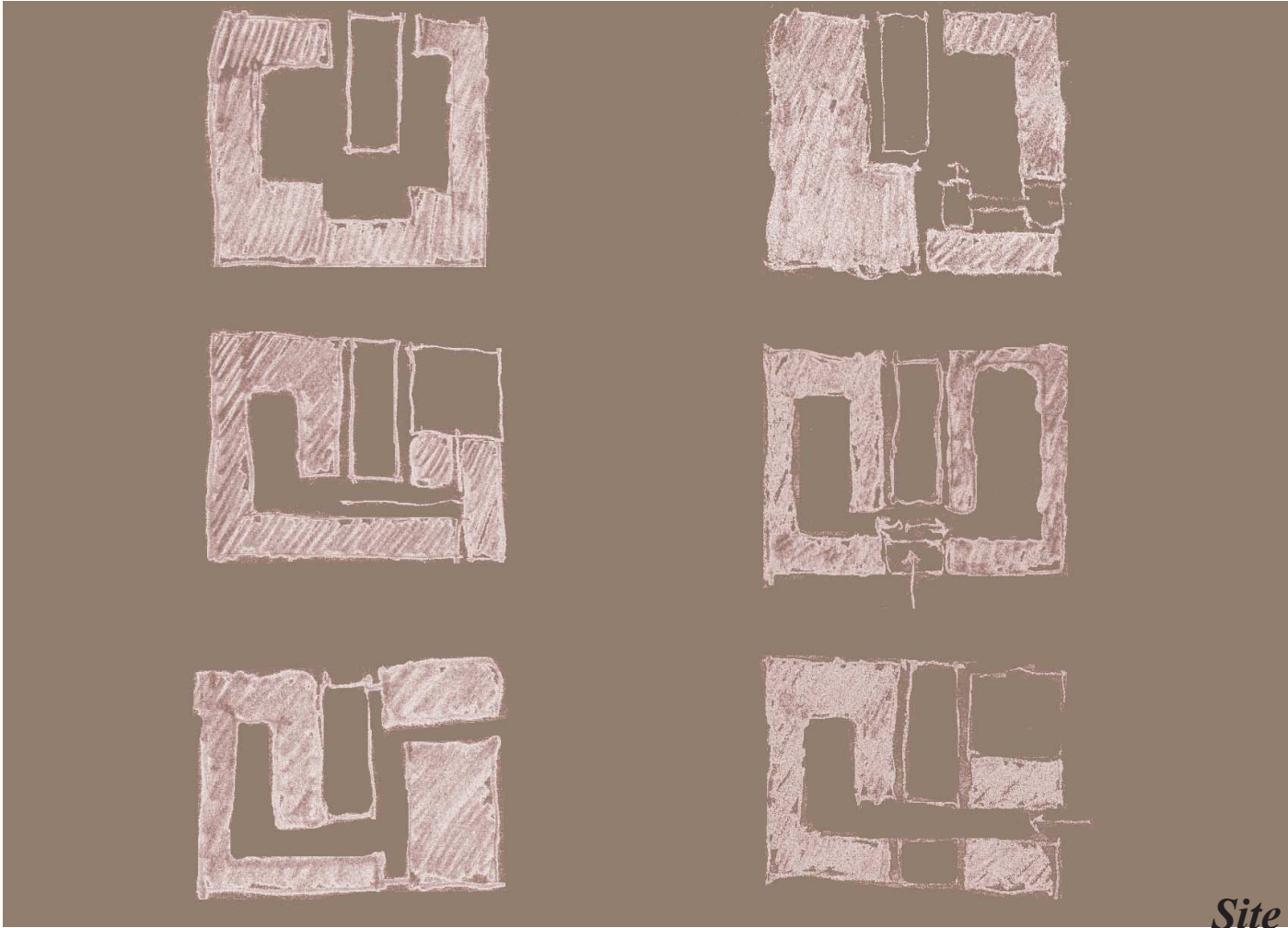


exhibit I was about to see. I do not recall a sign or description before I entered. However, I do recall the experience I felt as I moved through the space and the emotion that I still recall as I discovered the exhibit translated the fear and trauma of battered women and children. It is hard to understand that fear without ever being in that situation. However, this exhibit stayed with me over the years because it has best allowed me to view the psychological impact from a woman and child's perspective of abuse. It is important to understand that my design addresses the emotion of fear and how that can be comforted within a built environment.



Site Selection and Layout

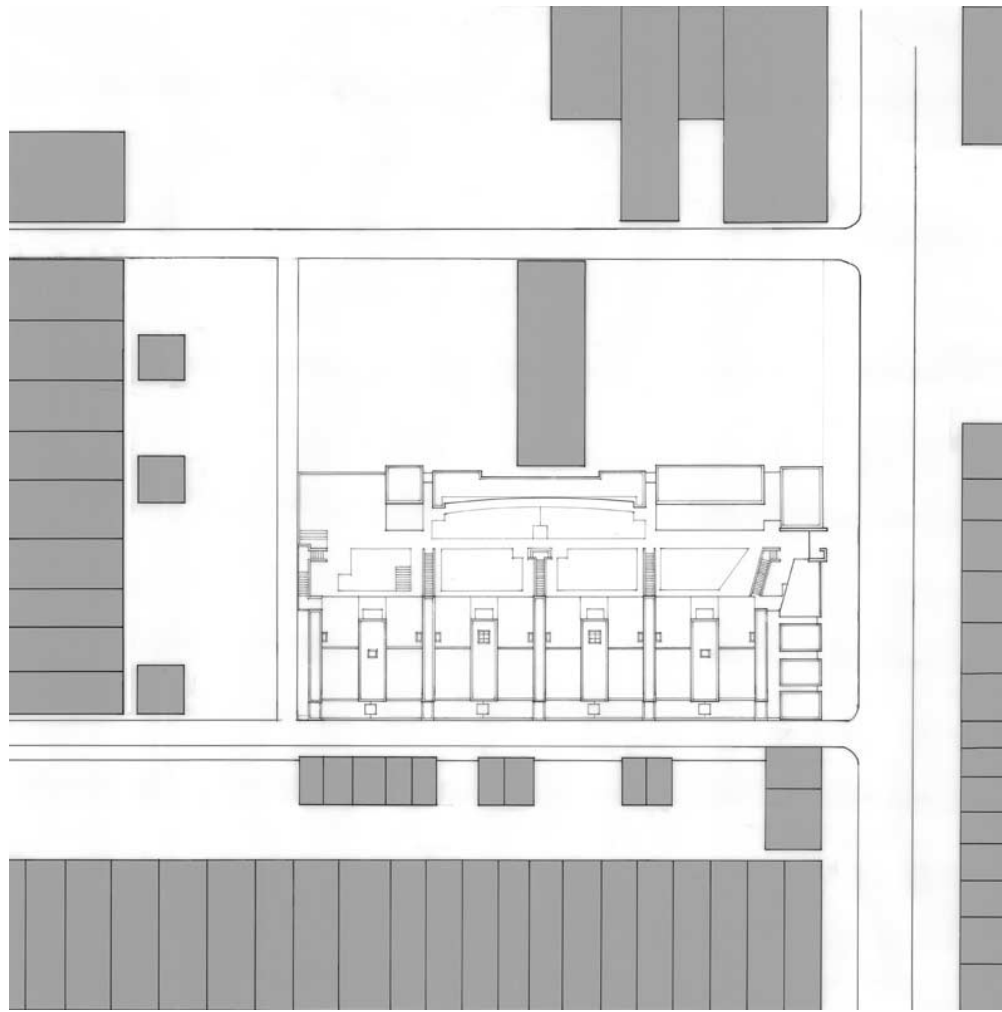


Neighborhood Chosen

Site Selection

The idea was to focus on the need for a shelter in a large city and how to create a smaller community within a larger scale. I chose Washington, DC for the scale of the city. By the nature of a large population, the need for community services rises due to the number of people. I chose the District of Columbia, because it has many organization and community programs to help many of those in need. However, during my research I found that very few shelters for women and children exist within the city, yet there are a high number of reported cases of sexual abuse, neglect and domestic violence. Washington, DC also provides a complex and unique situation due to the diversity of people, culture and income levels.

The neighborhood for a shelter is vital to the success. This neighborhood creates an identity sim-



Block, Street, Boundaries of the Site

ilar to the chameleon it is in a state of transformation, is neither “good” nor “bad”, but is adapting to change and transforming into a new fabric. This in turn relates to the idea that the shelter serves as a point of transformation into a new life. The neighborhood itself is a community of organizations that focus on many different needs. Since many of the women and children come to the shelter with little or no money, it is important that this neighborhood have the vital ingredients for the public to access churches, schools, counseling centers, metro stops, recreational facilities, grocery centers and many other community based conveniences.

The size and scale of the buildings vary, thus creating a diverse and dynamic cityscape.

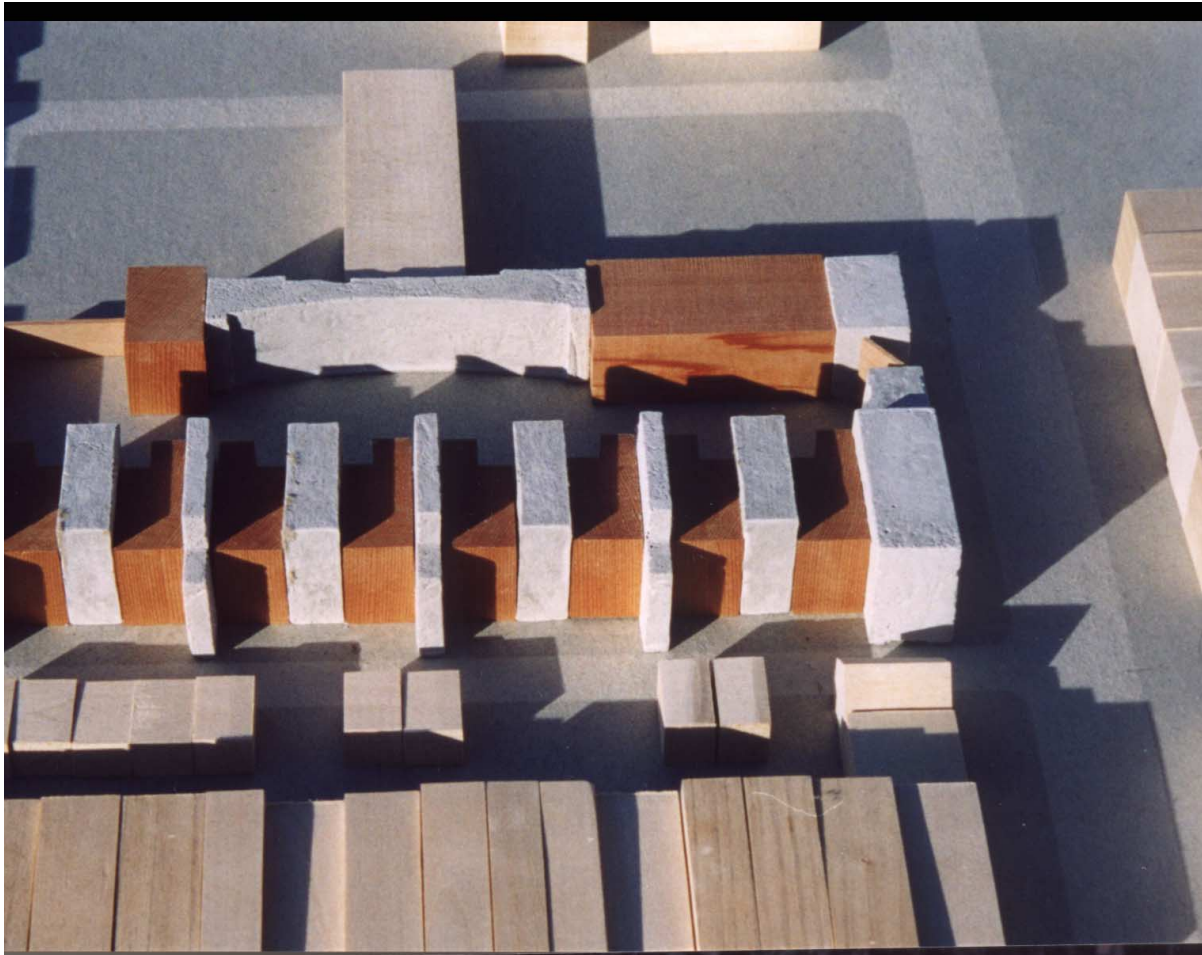
The street level is a small comfortable scale that is not overwhelming. The houses in the



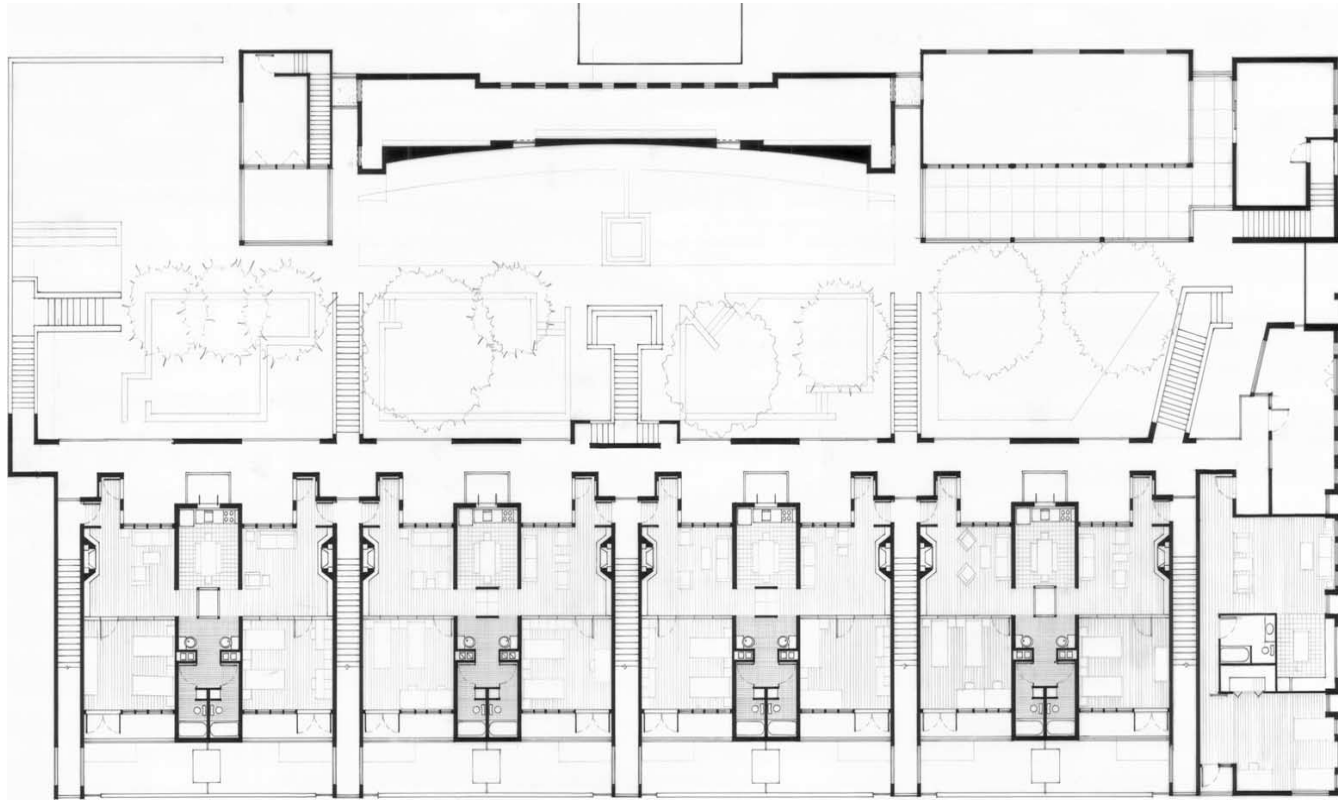
neighborhood range from two to three stories. Public buildings range from two to eight stories.

The boundaries of the site exist primarily in the center of the city block. In comparison to the overall scale of the building, very little of it exist on the common streetfront.

The selection of the site involved choosing a safe location with a similar economic background as the women and children living in the shelter. This neighborhood provides a comfort level of safety while maintaining a balance of community found in the women's previous neighborhoods.



Building Design

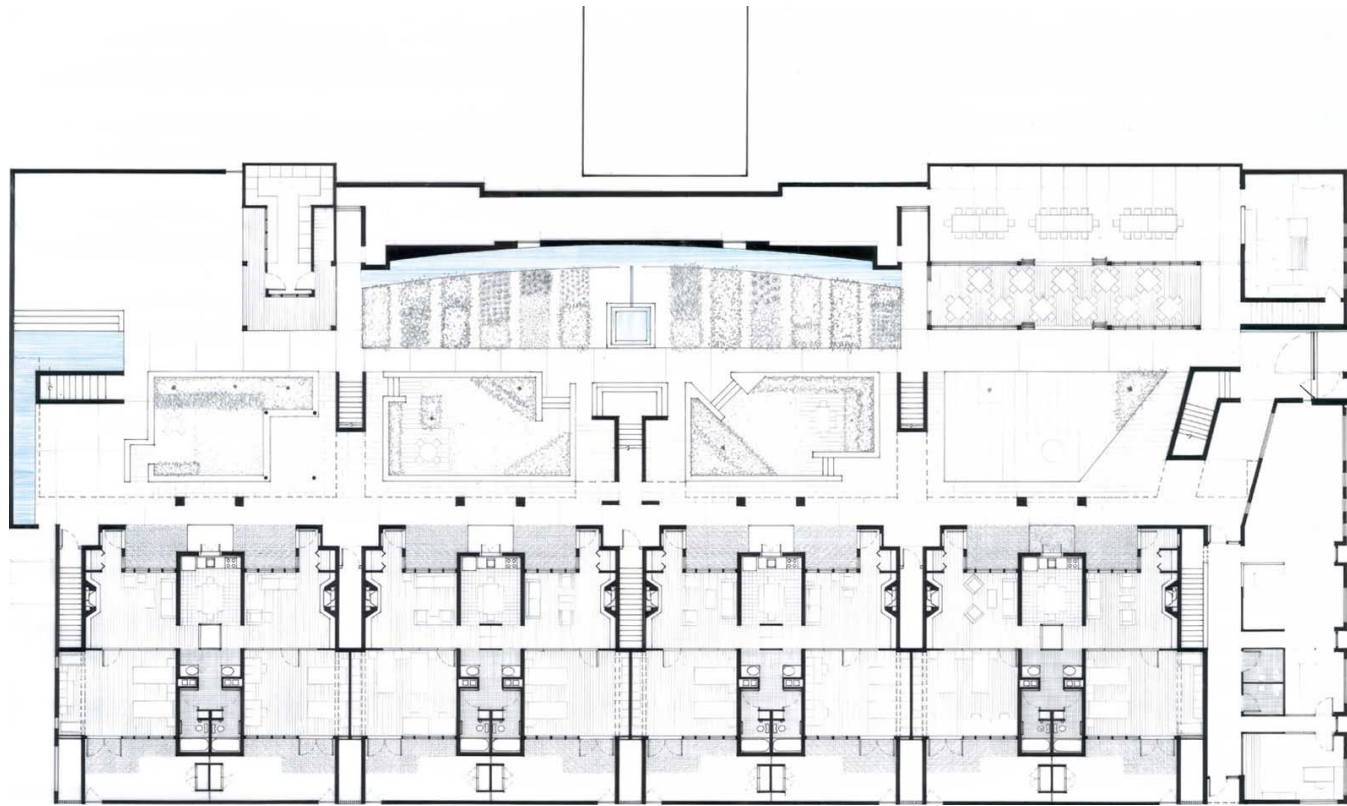


Second Floor Plan

Building Layout

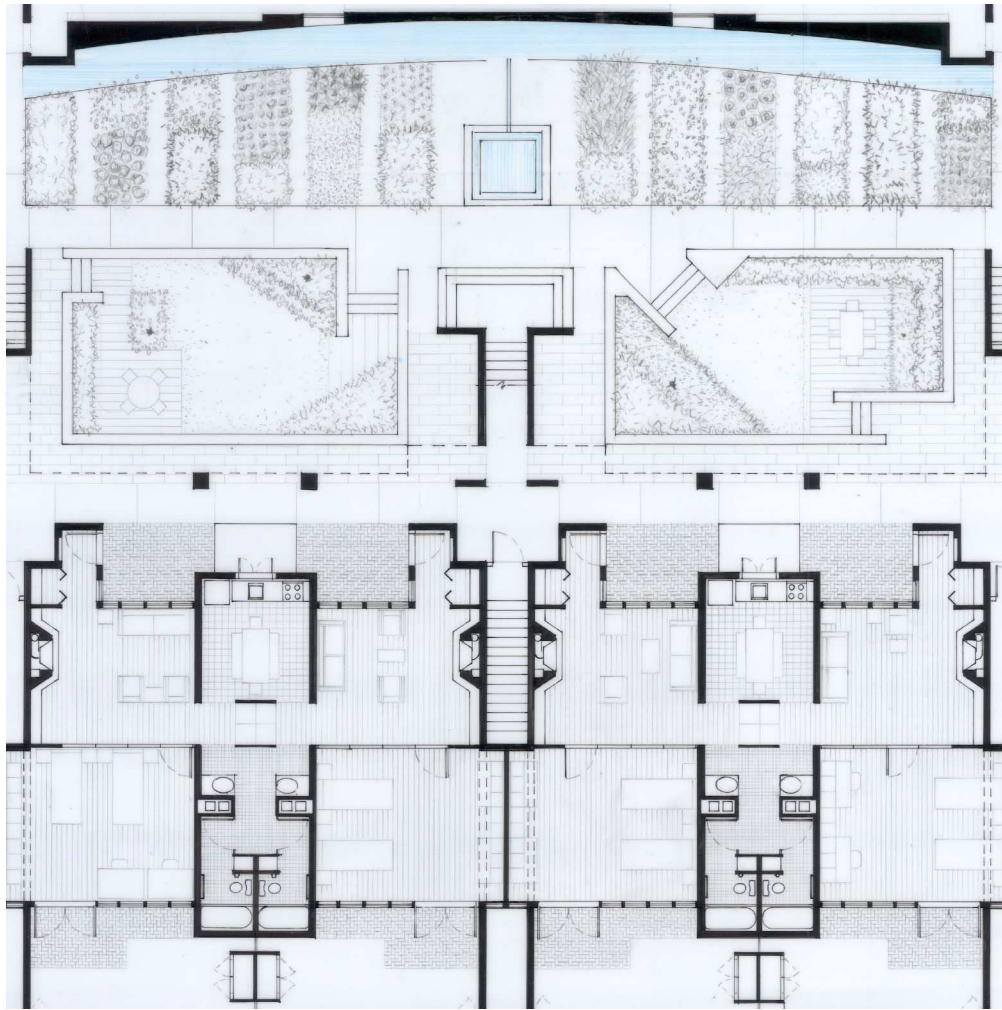
The design of this shelter relates to the site in many ways. Primarily, the scale is sensitive to the neighboring houses, businesses and community centers. The building is designed to mask the nature of its purpose by providing security features that allow it to be amidst a city block without relating to its use. The shelter relates to the nature of the neighborhood and blends into the street fabric.

The site itself is a parking lot located in the center core of the city block. The streetfront faces an unkept residential streetfront. In general, the quality of life is safe and is not secluded from the regular activity of the main thoroughfare. Although primarily residential, there are small community centers, churches and hotels that share the streetfront and create a diverse atmosphere that does not dictate the nature



First Floor Plan

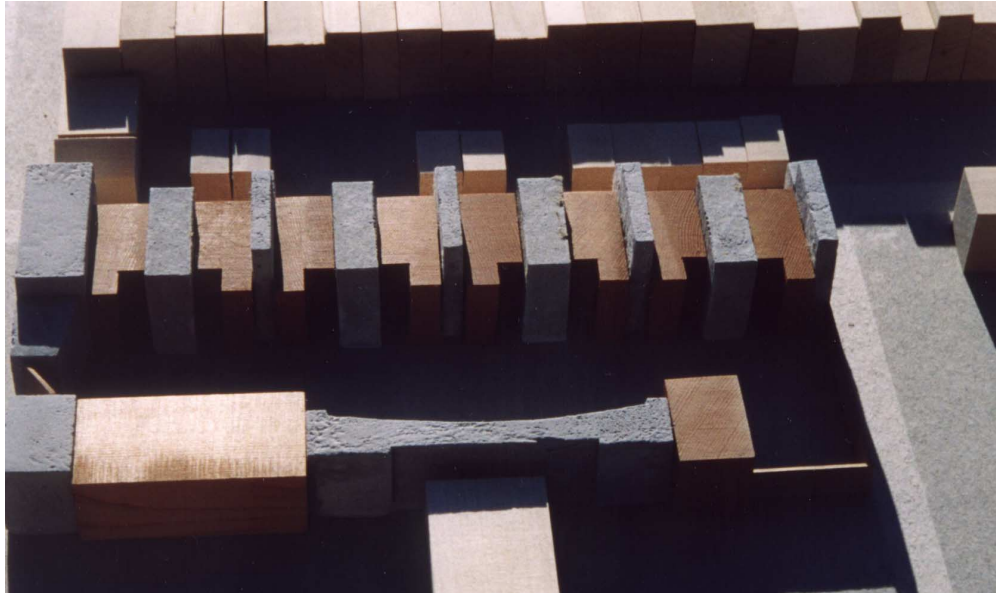
of a building in the neighborhood. Because of this diversity, it is possible to create a community within a neighborhood that exhibits several different functions. In order to maintain its privacy, the business functions of the community are placed at streetfront to give an illusion of an office or multifunctional complex that does not label itself as a community organization or public structure. The streetfront also has the main kitchen of the complex for easy access for deliveries while maintaining the center or hearth of the community secluded. A protecting wall to secure the women and create a community center surrounds the shelter. To the north of the shelter boundaries are the spaces intended for all the women and children and community functions. The playground, laundry, library and dining align the northern face. These functions are located to the north to provide a visual and sound barrier from the



Enlarged Partial Floor Plan

busy street. The housing is situated on the south to take advantage of the views and light within the shelter.

The community spaces are arranged to gradiate from open to more intimate areas. The main courtyard allows for many different levels of privacy. As you enter, the more open community spaces invite all to share in the activities. In general, the dining space trickles out into the courtyard for celebrations and cook-outs. Each of the stairs relate to the function in which they serve. The first stair you approach is the main stair that functions to easily access the different levels and quickly pass the courtyard to go to apartments on the second level. This stair is large enough to allow many people to use the stair together and provides an overlook to the paved area of the courtyard. The second stair relates to the dining and library and provides a direct route from

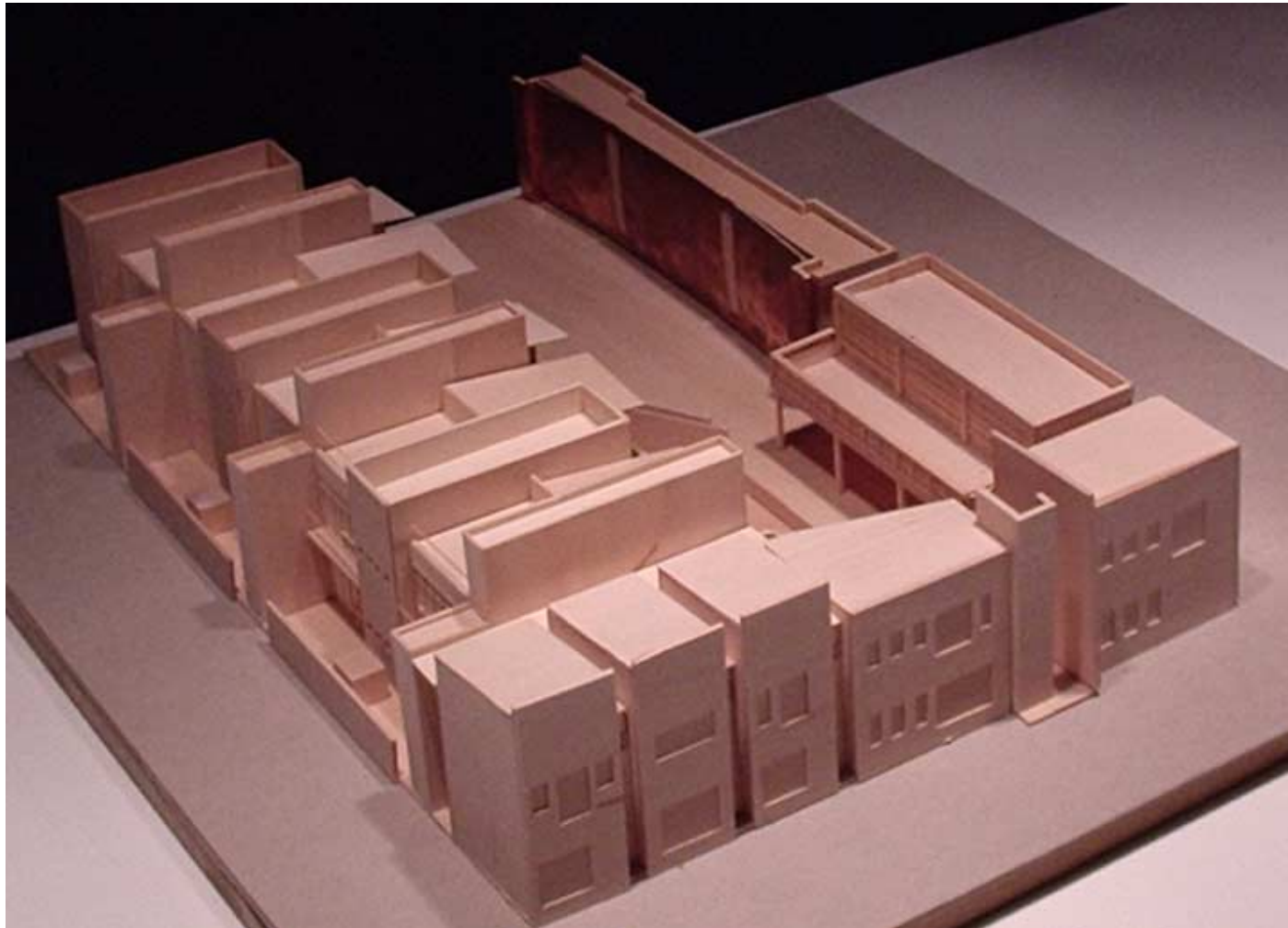


Site Model view from North

the upper level to these community spaces. The third stair opens to the vegetable garden to provide a place to rest and reflect. The fourth stair relates to the library and laundry and provides easy access to those locations. The final stair is rarely used and therefore relates to the most secluded area of the courtyard; the reflecting pool. This provides an intimate setting to overlook the pool and relax.

Spaces gradiate from the East to the West as well as North to South. As one enters from the East and moves through the spaces, the stairs relate to the function and movement of the people that use them. They are not static, but relate to the movement through the space and the involvement of the community in the spaces below.

Moving through the courtyard from the East, the spaces relate

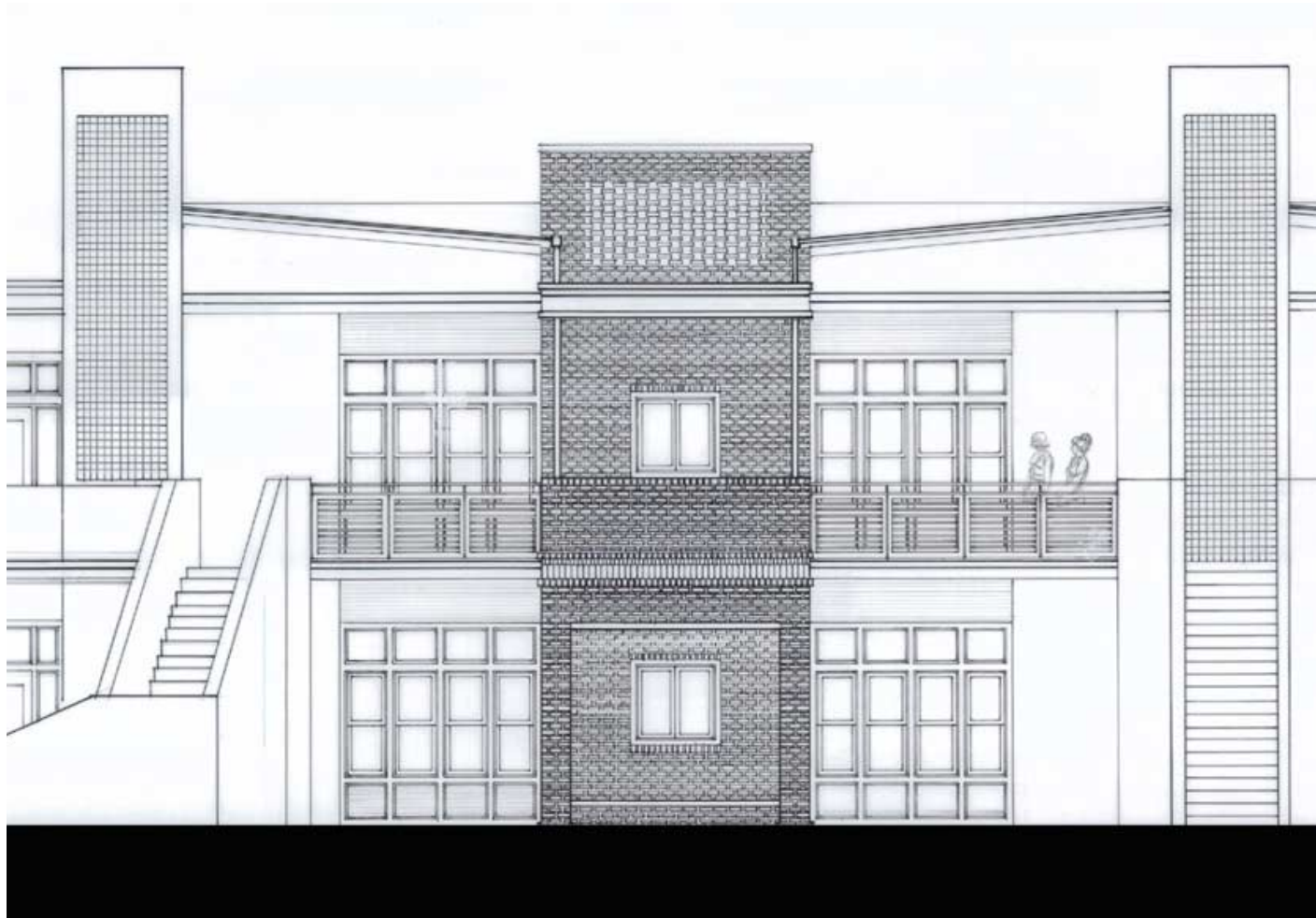


to larger groups. As one moves West through the courtyard, the spaces become more intimate. The same is true moving from North to South within the community. The main group spaces are situated to the North and these spaces translate into more individual spaces as one moves South into the group gardens and through the housing to the individual gardens.

The housing units are designed to have both shared and individual spaces. Because of many women's natural response to seclude themselves from the group initially, the units are arranged such that they must interact with others. This allows the women to begin reinventing themselves immediately and discovering their worth. The premise of this shelter is to work as a group to become individually self-sufficient. The common areas of the housing units are the bathing areas and kitchen.



The kitchen serves as the family center as it does in many households. The bathing areas represent the cleansing and relaxing areas of the housing. Although the living spaces are accessible through the bathing area and kitchen, these are reserved as a semi-private space. The sleeping areas are private to the individual family. Each of the families have a private garden from their bedrooms to retreat and meditate.



Materiality

Materiality

Material selection was very important to me so that I could ensure that the women felt protected, while comforted. I began by creating a rhythm of solid to open buildings. This idea translates the rhythm of community, group, shared and individual spaces.

The main entrance is constructed of stone, while the ceremonial door of wood. This creates a special moment in the rhythm of materials.

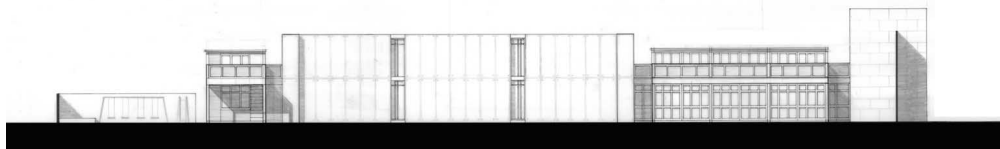
The office spaces, shared kitchens and baths are constructed of brick. These spaces are shared and relate to the neighboring houses. The community stairs are board formed concrete serving as a separation of housing units. This provides a clear transition from one group of units to another and divides the spaces into the group gardens. The



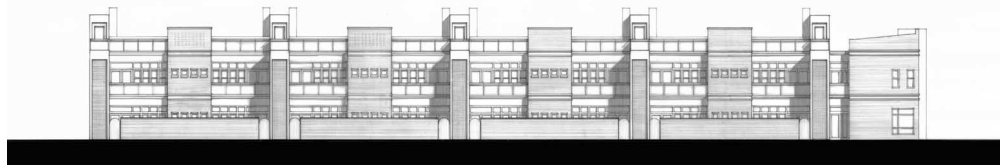
Streetfront Elevation



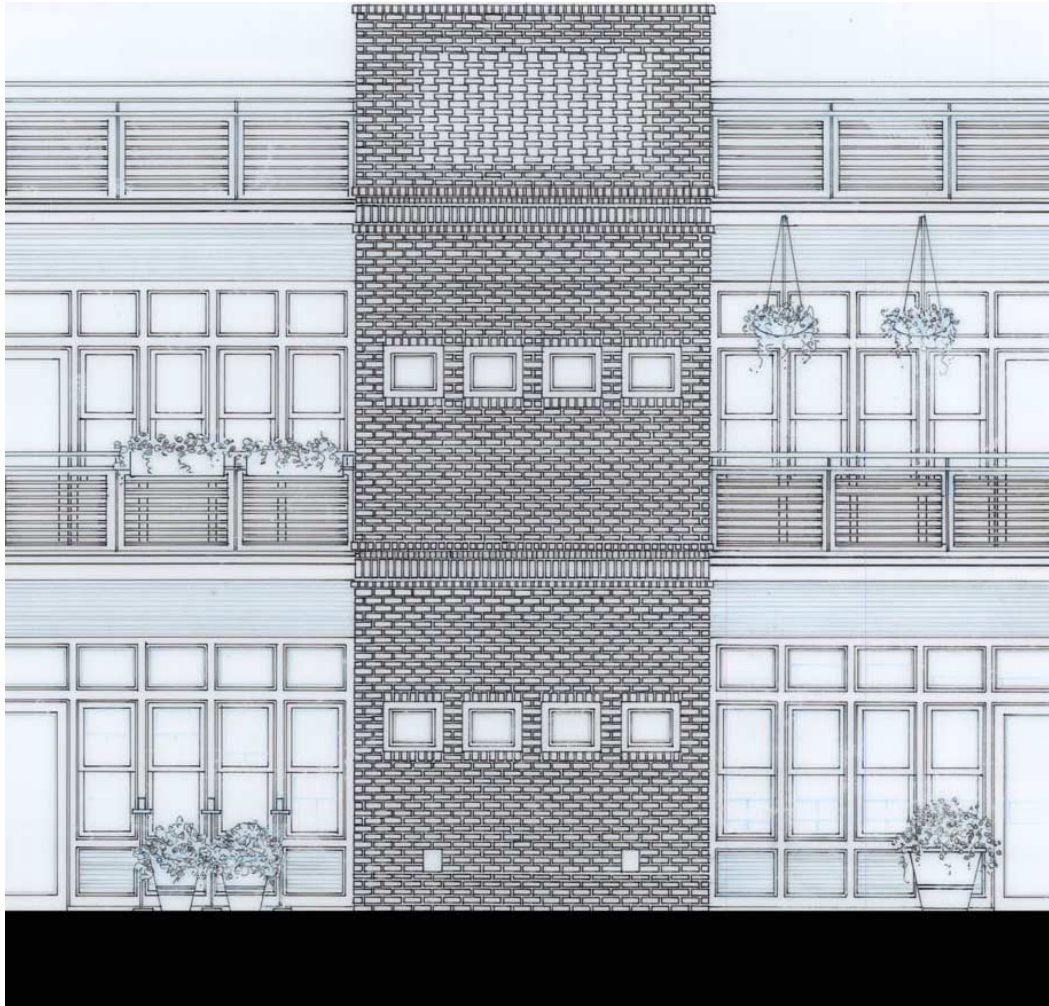
Housing Elevation from Courtyard



Laundry, Library and Dining Elevation from Courtyard

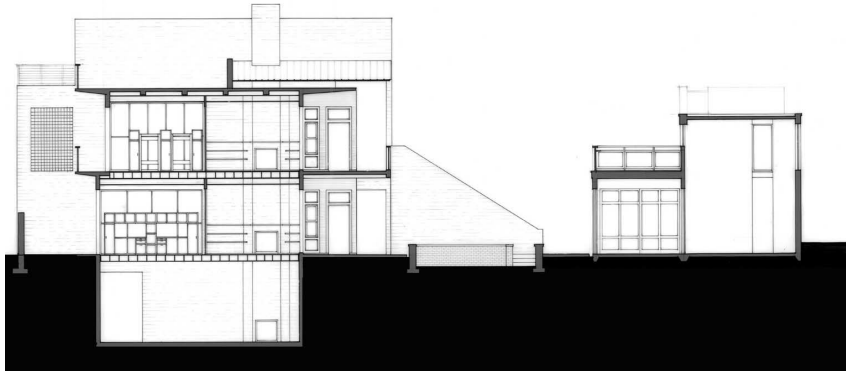


Housing Elevation from Alley

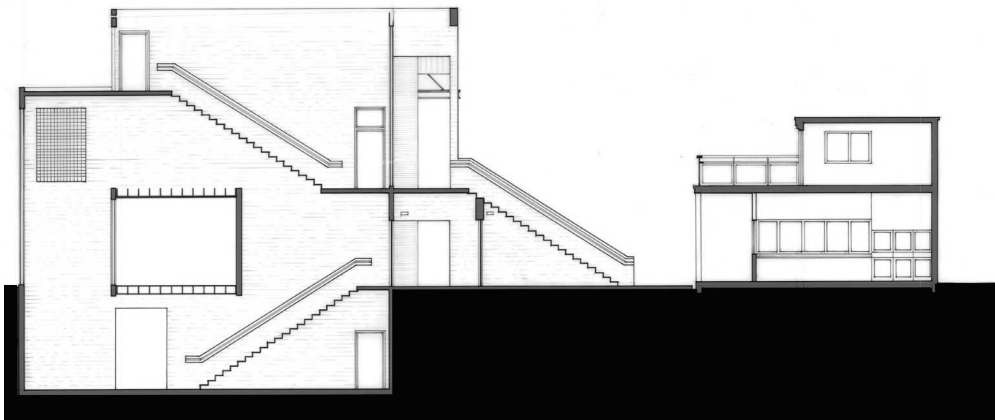


housing units are constructed of wood and glass. The idea is to create an open feeling and accept the sunlight, while feeling protected by the bounding brick and concrete walls. To ensure privacy within the units, sheer fabrics can be pulled down over the windows to allow different levels of light to shine through. In order for the women to feel secure with the number of windows, a perimeter brick wall surrounds the shelter. Due to the layout of the shelter in relationship to the neighboring houses, there are no direct views into the housing units from the adjacent houses across the alley or street. This provides security and comfort to the women and children.

In addition to the walls, the floors are made of wood. This provides a warm feeling, while addressing the psychological comfort of hearing footsteps as they approach. While understanding these women's con-



Section through Housing and Dining



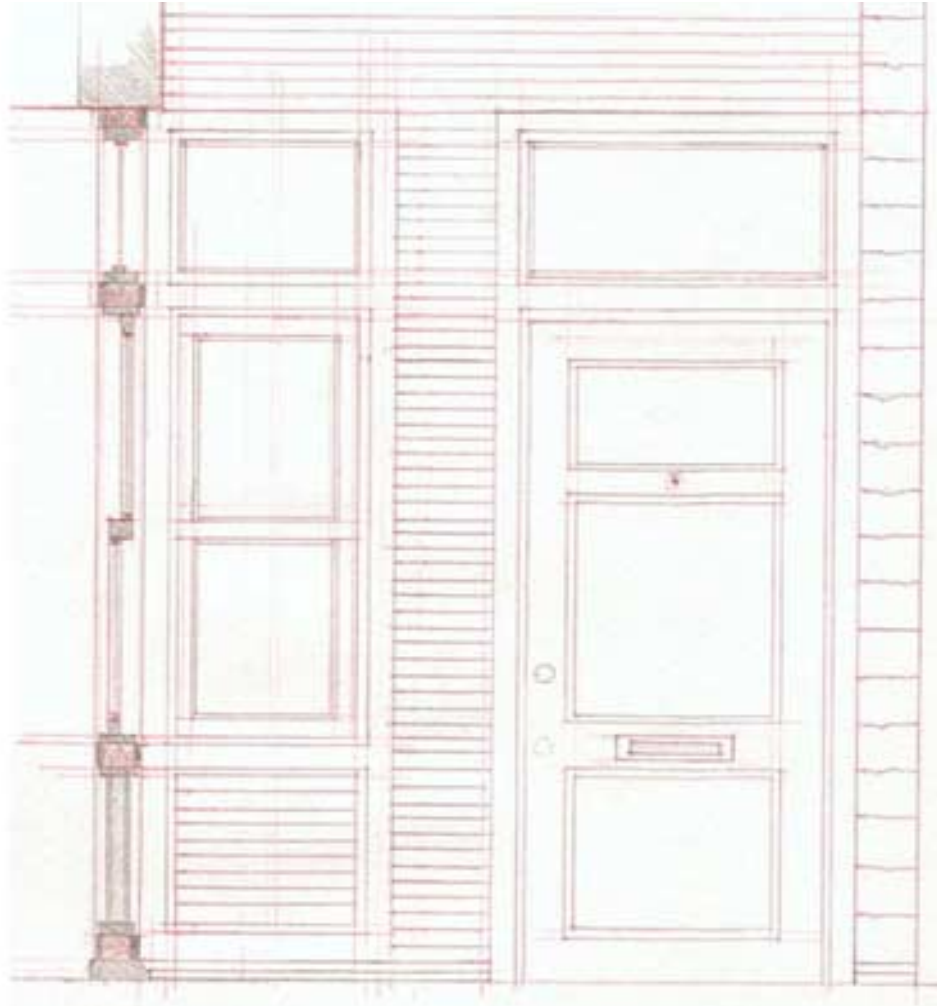
Section through Stair and Laundry

cerns, I addressed the flooring as a response to the fear of the unknown.

The walls between the living spaces and the sleeping spaces are created of sand-blasted glass to allow a glow of light to shine through during the day.



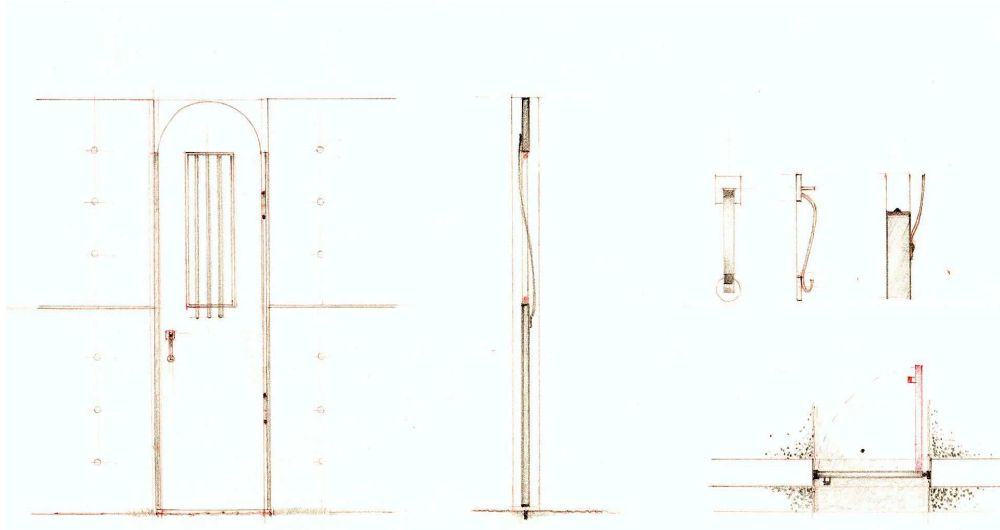
Thresholds



Thresholds

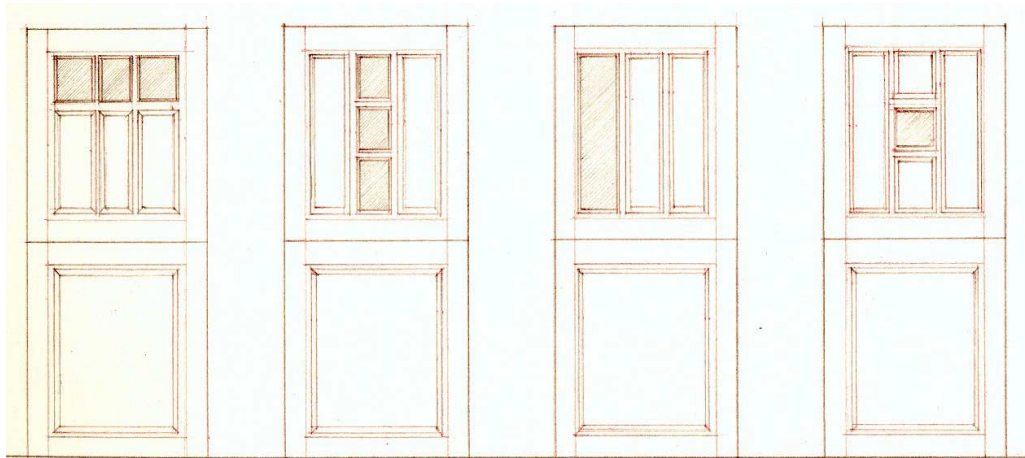
The Main Entrance is located on 13th Street on the east side of the building. The ceremonial door represents the willingness to transform their lives, leave past lives and begin anew. The ceremonial door is only open when a woman has decided to begin a new journey and move into the shelter. The door is open when the family enters for the first time and reopens when the family has become self-sufficient and decides to once again make the transition in life to live on their own.

When entering the door for the first time, water trickles down the face of the rough stone wall to relieve the women and children of the noise of city life. The sound of water as it falls relaxes the mind as the fingers caress the wall to sense a new life. The ceremonial door becomes a reminder each day of the struggles and



achievements these families have made by deciding to leave their previous lives behind. Within the ceremonial door is the front door that is used everyday by the women and children for their daily activities. The position of the door within the ceremonial door is slightly hidden from public view to reserve this building as a private space.

Beyond the ceremonial door begins the transition from public to private spaces. We begin with the streetfront as the public space and move through the ceremonial door into the community space that only serves those living inside the shelter. The community spaces include the vegetable garden that is used to provide the spiritual center and provide a worthiness to the individuals that harvest it. The transition through the community space leads to group gardens. Each with its own identity, the group gardens serve as a space



for neighbors to gather and maintain. These spaces provided the need to communicate and relate to the neighbors, a critical part to becoming self-sufficient and responsible. Beyond the group gardens becomes the shared spaces of the housing units. Each unit has an individual front porch with a shared garden space to create a shared, yet therapeutic activity. Within each of the units are spaces shared to create a network of support and relate the sense of community within the normal activities of life. To retreat to an individual experience, private gardens are given to each of the families to use as they see fit. These gardens provide privacy from the public as well as the community and neighbors.

Notes/Credits

Images:

Image 1: Fronticepiece: Partial Collage; See Page 13, Images 5.

Images 2: Thesis Sketches: original by author; computer enhanced ink on paper.

Images 3: Perspective Drawings: original by Jon Zellweger for author; computer enhanced colored pencil on paper.

Images 3: Site Model: original by author and student assistants; rockite and wood construction.

Images 4: Collages: collages created by author, computer enhanced magazine media from various sources.

Images 5: Building Model: original by author and student assistants; basswood, copper and chip board construction,

Image 6: Site Sketch: original by author; computer enhanced pensil on tracing paper.

Image 7: Area Drawing: created by author; computer drawing based on measured drawings by the District of Columbia Zoning Commission.

Image 8: Site Drawing: original by author; ink on mylar based on site measurements, observations and original design.

Image 9: Second Floor Plan: original by author; ink on mylar.

Image 10: First Floor Plan: original by author; ink on mylar.

Image 11: Enlarged Floor Plan: original by author; ink on mylar.

Image 12: Enlarged Elevation: original by author; ink on mylar.

Image 13: Elevation Drawings: original by author; ink on mylar.

Image 14: Section Drawings: original by author; ink on mylar.

Image 15: threshold Photos: photos taken by author; neighborhood thresholds.

Image 16: Doorway Drawing: original by author; housing doors.

Image 17: Doorway Sketch: original by author; gate doors.

Image 18: Door Elevations: original by author; housing doors.

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