

THE
VILLA
SAVANNAH

by

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INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of modernism, the study of traditional urban design principles have increasingly drawn the attention of architects interested in the development of an enduring theory and practice of architecture. This thesis supports the position that an architect be able to comprehend the *concept* of a city as a prelude to architectural design. As the architect Francesco di Giorgio wrote in the fifteenth century, "architecture is a distinctly urban art, so the design of cities comes first, because this is the context in which buildings are constructed." The topic of this thesis, a house in the city of Savannah, is presented to reaffirm those principles that di Giorgio and others laid down more than a half millennium ago. As argued in this thesis, a building may be thought of as urban only if it supports the original concept for the city. That urban concept can be found through a study of the urban plan as well as through the study of urban history. Given an understanding of the urban plan and the original concept, an architect may begin to form a basis for design.

The thesis book, which is the fruit of this study, is divided into three parts, Study of the City, Design rooted in Sources, and The Villa project. In the first part I will present written research which has formed the basis for the argument as well as the subsequent design. The second part includes sketches, diagrams, and the illustration of architectural works which helped bridge the worlds of writing and drawing. The third part consists of the urban house as presented in formal drawings. While each section of the book reflects the divergent interests of the author, I hope that the original intention was not lost along the way. That intention was to show how the relationships between urban concept, urban plan, and architectural work reinforce one another to make architecture.

While in recent years a great deal of effort has been made towards the design of new traditional cities and towns, far less attention has been given to analyzing the conceptual foundation of existing ones. This thesis will present how a new building might reawaken and reinforce an existing urban concept which has been abandoned and laid dormant for over one hundred years. There is no certain means of recovering this original concept, but I have found that an investigation into urban history and a study of the city plan have provided enough direction for an architect to act.

The thesis uses Savannah, Georgia to give shape to the argument because here the connection between a larger urban concept, reinforcing urban plan, and actual buildings is so clearly and elegantly presented. Though Savannah is perhaps not the most important conceptually designed American city--other more important cities which come to mind are Washington, D.C. and Annapolis, Maryland--I have chosen Savannah because of the strength of its form, the practicality of its plan, and foremost its overall beauty. The design project that accompanies this thesis represents a student's attempt at interpreting the concept of Savannah and proposing how a new house should be built on the principles found there. The drawings are presented to support this relationship between urban concept, city plan, and architectural work in a way that words cannot.

URBAN CONCEPTS

The study of traditional cities has been a subject of scholarly interest in our own time. Robert Dripps, in his article "Saving the Idea: A typological Approach to the Conservation of the City," has given some thought to the subject of how we might build in a traditional city. He argues that to build well in the city, one must first reinforce the *idea* of the town as a whole. Citing Joseph Rykwert's classic *The Idea of a Town*, Dripps demonstrates that many American cities contain the latent structure of what he calls "the pre-modern city." The crossing of two roads marking a center and dividing an area into a representation of the "four corners of the world," is a fundamental basis for traditional cities. The boundary wall or finite edge to secure the city from the unknown completes the most basic diagram. Dripps argues that this idea is so strong that neither its transportation to the North American wilderness nor the shedding of the European city wall to accommodate the pastoral landscape can rob the diagram of its potency. To support the urban order, old and new buildings must live within the clearly understood hierarchy. If new buildings do not reaffirm the urban order, we might say the concept has been misunderstood or recklessly abandoned. But since the urban concept survives in drawings, we can still recover and apply its principles in actual projects.

The most difficult and least tangible aspect of restoring a traditional city's conceptual basis is recognizing and representing an urban idea. The original intention is often difficult to read in traditional cities for several reasons. Very often when we attempt to read the idea in a city, we find that the urban setting has completely changed over time and therefore difficult to decipher. The recognition of the damage this has done to the underlying order of cities has produced two reactions in our time. On one pole we discover a stylized version of traditional architecture known as "contextualism." This modernist strategy favors the production of superficial traits from traditional architecture while ignoring any deeper investigation into underlying principles. Contextualism is more about style than it is about principles, and therefore it is not a legitimate form of architecture. At the other extreme we find buildings that were not designed for their urban settings at all but for the place they will occupy within an architect's monograph. Neither of these approaches to design supports the original urban concept, and therefore neither leads to the making of urbane buildings.

Given the state cities are in today, it is easy to be skeptical about the primacy of overriding concept in urban design. In premodern cities this simply was not the case, and therein lies the critical difference between traditional cities and those designed under current thought about cities. In traditional cities, the urban concept is always spelled out in formal architectural arrangements which are positioned hierarchically. To explain what I mean by representing the urban concept, I will recount the founding of the city of Savannah and demonstrate how its urban form represents the intentions of the city's founders.

URBAN HISTORY

To present Savannah as an authentic urban model, we have to return to the story of its origin. The earliest scheme for Savannah was to develop the city for profit and nobility as an excursion into feudalism, one of the few in the colonies. This plan was abandoned and in 1734, the idea for Savannah was restructured as a straightforward proprietary community. At the time of its founding, Savannah was presented as a modern version of the Roman republic of Livy. Like its ancient counterpart, the Savannah would be based on a structure of independent proprietorship and a concern for civic virtue.

The evocation of Rome as a model appears early in the history of Savannah. In a 1737 sermon, Philip Bearcroft states the ideals of this New World society, "An equal quantity of land is given to every planter sent over, that they may apply with pleasure and Alacrity, to the Cultivation of their farms...which will naturally raise such a general Industry, and virtuous Emulation through the colony, that with the free-born

Romans of old, they will quit the Plough only to transact the Business of their rising state; and that finished, hasten back to the labors of the field, and at the close of them, sit with their wives and children, under their own vines and fruit trees, and enjoy themselves, in virtuous frugality, under the happy influence of this Agrarian law.

In the summer 1729, James Edward Oglethorpe gathered support of several parliamentary men, and clergy, to "settle a colony of one hundred English families on the river Savannah." His vision was for a society of modest farm households. Everyone citizen was required to build a house on 60' x 90' lot within twelve months of arrival. Forty-four acres were allotted in the countryside for the cultivation of crops and a five-acre garden lot was provided in the city.

URBAN PLAN

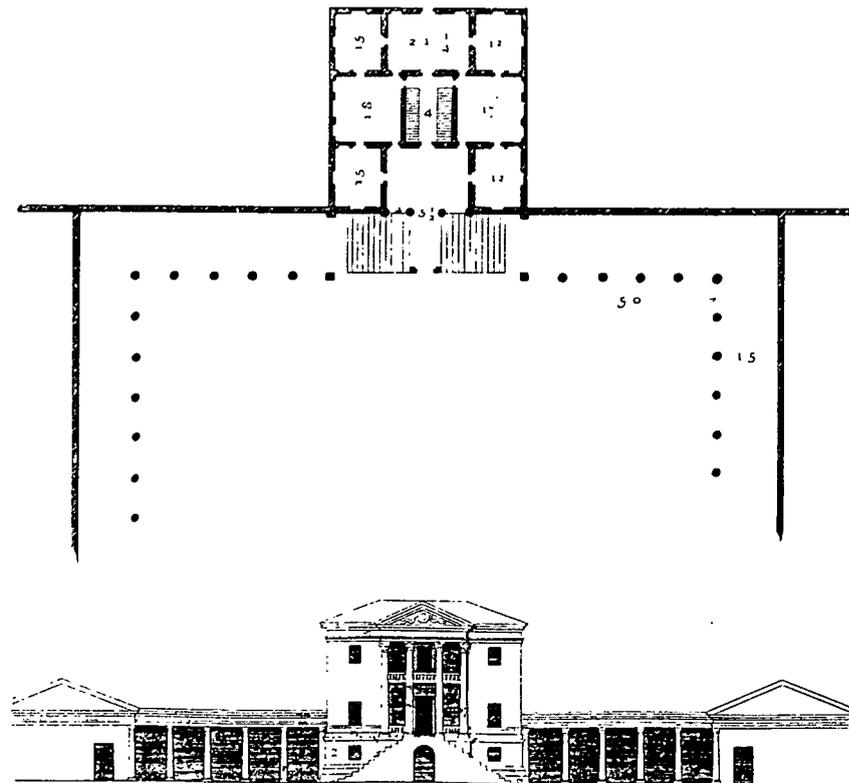
Savannah is an authentic traditional city because the political order has provided the organization and disposition of buildings which are set within a visible hierarchy. Seen in a 1734 engraving, the founders of Savannah treated the native wilderness as a void in which to impose European standards of city-making. By means of the urban plan, the settlers transform wilderness into civil and rural settings. The wilderness is to be converted along an axis leading from a navigable, working river.

Developed as an outpost in the larger urban world, Savannah presents a clear diagram of public and private areas. Its layout allowed for an orderly and predictable expansion for over one hundred years, only to be abandoned after the civil war. Savannah is an aggregation of building blocks, or wards, each with an open landscaped square at its center. Its multi-directional pattern can expand easily through and around the natural terrain to accommodate larger public precincts when required: for graveyards, public parks, ravines, and so on.

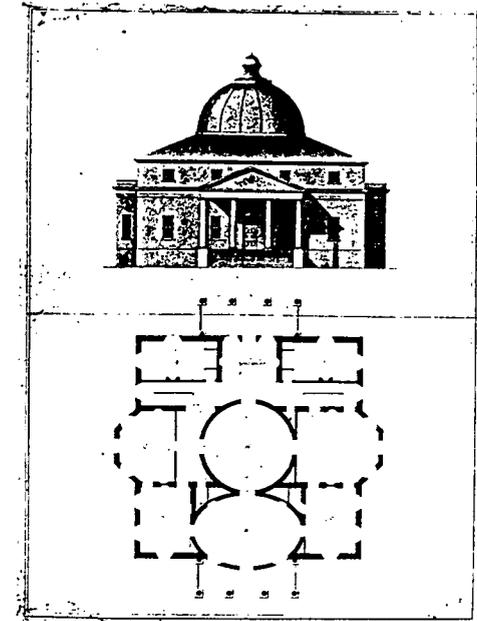
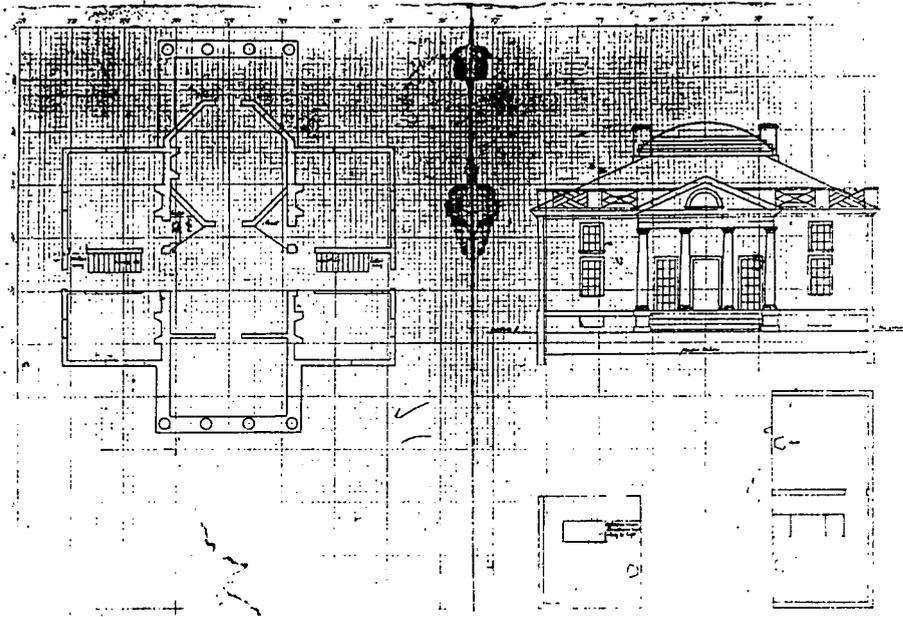
Each ward has its own internal order of streets, including necessary service mews, and is bounded by city-wide streets, thus sorting out local from through traffic and more private from more public areas in the most direct way. The major street is tied to the wilderness. The second-greatest streets are connected to ward centers. The third type of street- the lane or alley- connects the backs of houses. Four public lots facing the opposite sides of each square are given over to buildings of important public use. And when these lots are filled by single houses, they are almost always modeled on grand villas.

The fundamental basis for the plan of Savannah is the idea of individual proprietorship within the larger whole. Savannah is made of individual houses set within squares set within a city. In proposing a design for a house in Savannah, the key is

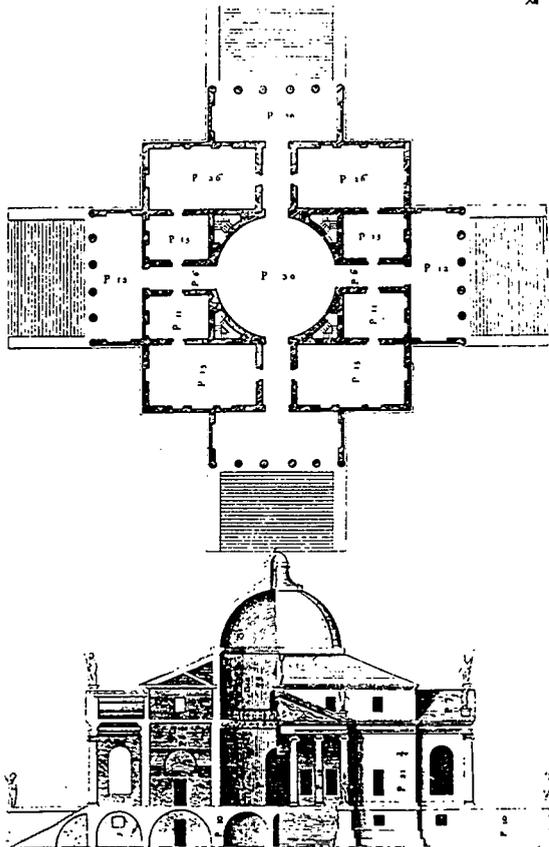
to accommodate the individual in his house while maintaining communal conventions of urban design. As Jacqueline Robertson has written, Savannah brings together "the hard-earned lessons of the new world settlement with more advanced concepts of European urbanism. The essential theme of this Arcadian community is that of an idealized domesticity with the individual house not only as the center of urban life, but as the city's most representative secular temple."



A. Palladio, Plan and Elevation of a Villa from the Four Books



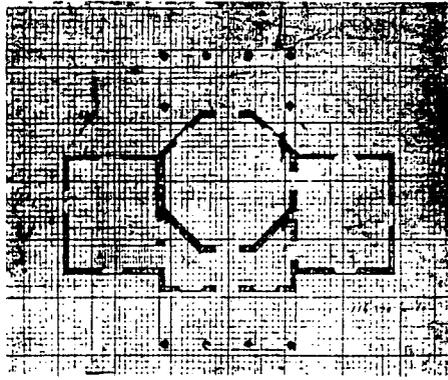
Upper Left: Thos. Jefferson, Barbooursville, Plan and Elevation. Above: A Rotunda House drawn by Robert Mills. Lower Left: A. Palladio, Villa Rotunda. Below: words of L.B. Alberti.



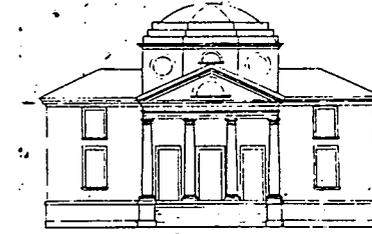
There is a further distance between a house in the city and a villa: the ornament to a town house ought to be far more sober in character, whereas in a villa the allures of license and delight are allowed. Another difference is that with a town house the boundary of the neighborhood property imposes many constraints that may be treated with greater freedom in a villa.

Extravagance I detest. I am delighted by anything that combines ingenuity with grace and wit.

I would rather the private houses of the wealthy were wanting in things that might contribute to their ornament, than to have the more modest and thrifty accuse them of luxury in their own way. Anyone who wants to understand correctly the true and correct ornament of a building must realize that its principle component and generator is not the outlay of wealth but the wealth of ingenuity. I firmly believe that any person of sense would not want to design his private house very differently from those of others, but on the other hand, no sensible person would wish that anyone else should surpass him in the skill of the workmen, or in praise for his counsel and judgment.

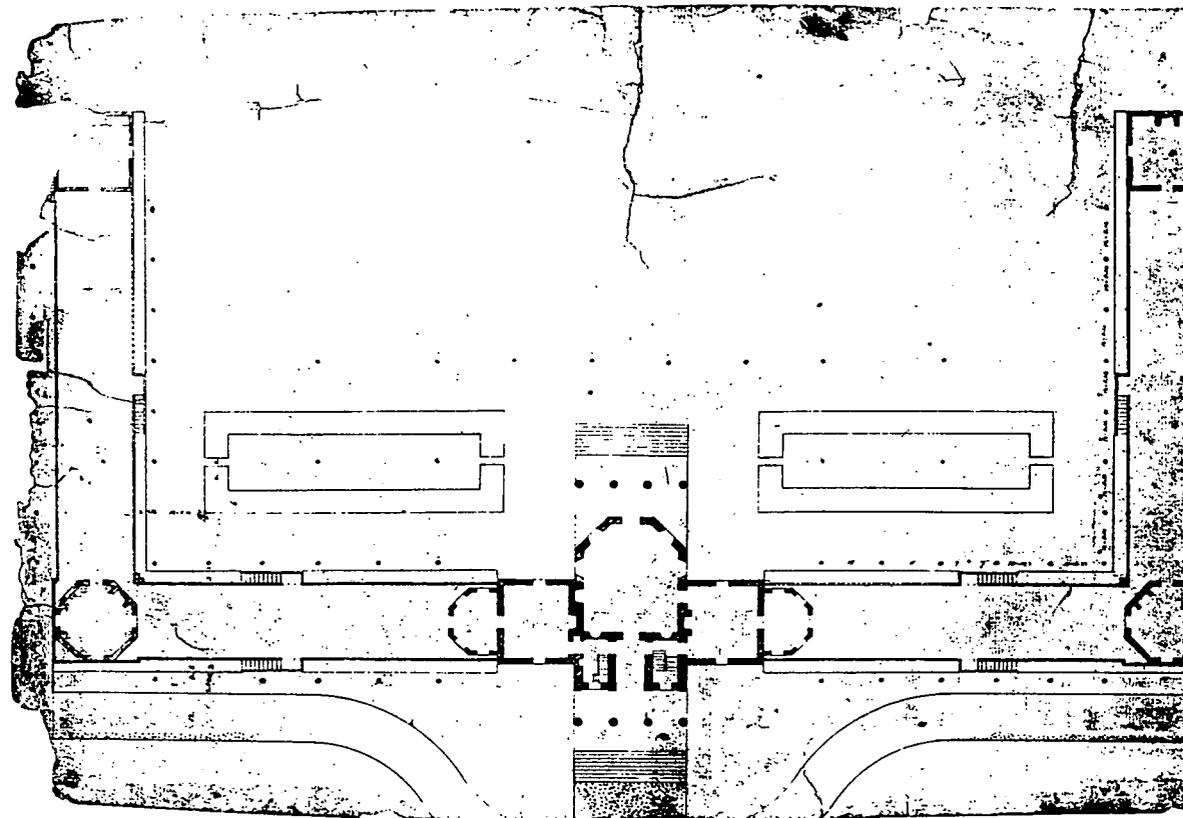


Thos. Jefferson, Plan for a Town House

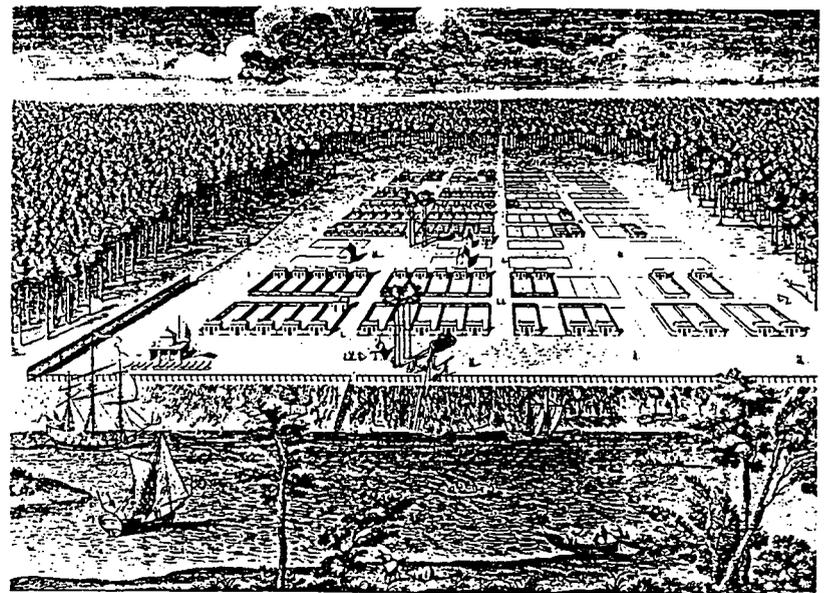
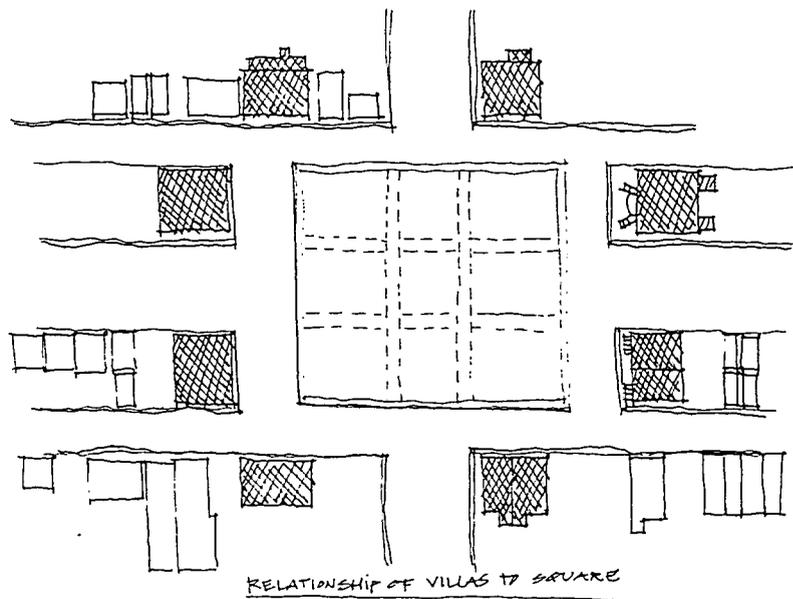
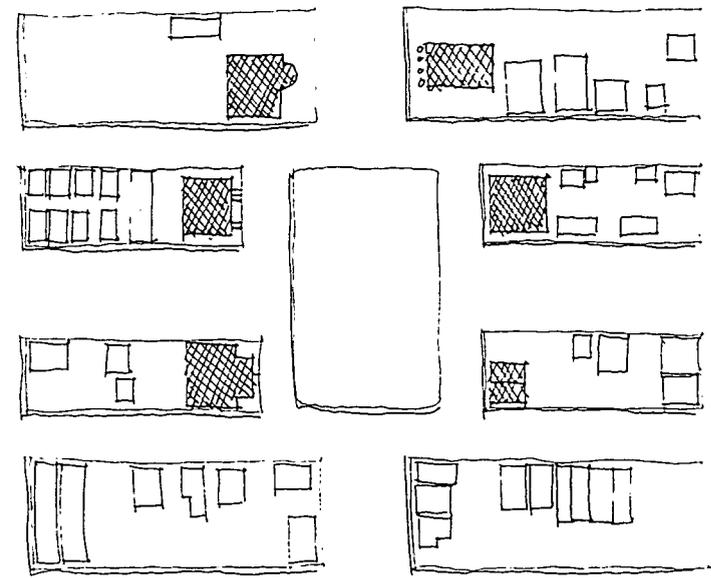
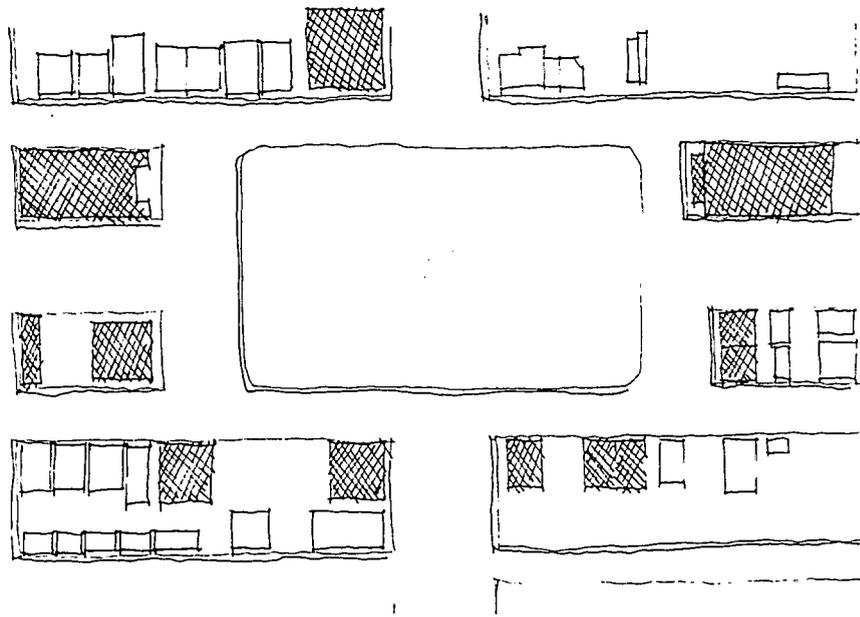


Thos. Jefferson, Elevation for a Town House

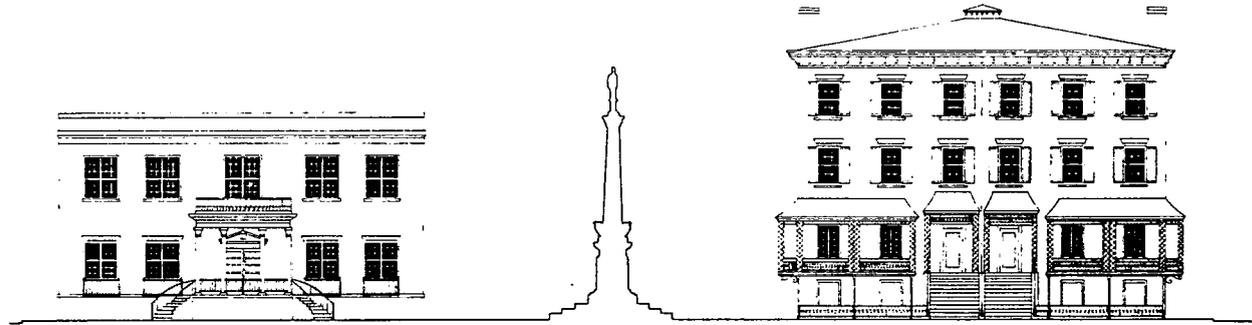
In his project for an urban house, Jefferson demonstrates how knowledge from the tradition of country villa design can be applied to an urban setting. The source for the house is of course Monticello and perhaps the urban houses of late 18th century Paris. Like its country counterpart, the urban house has a strong geometric center marked by a dome. But without the familiar wings and dependencies of Monticello, the urban house lacks a vital connection to the ground. Since the site is unknown (Philadelphia?), Jefferson may not have completed the design due to a lack of knowledge of that city's design conventions. What remains is an unfulfilled concept but one that begs a contemporary response.



Thos. Jefferson, Monticello.

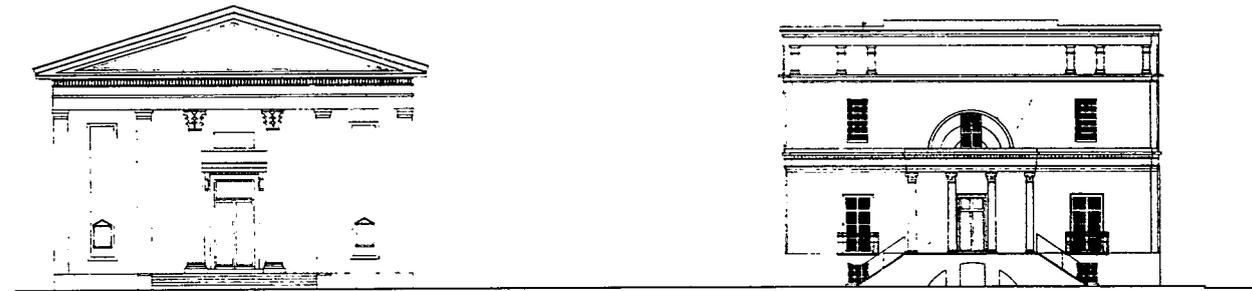


*Above and Below Left: Sketches of the relationship of Savannah squares to Urban Villas.
Below: 1734 Idealized Engraving of Savannah.*



TODAY

MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY



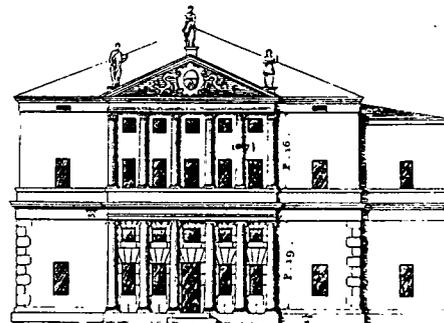
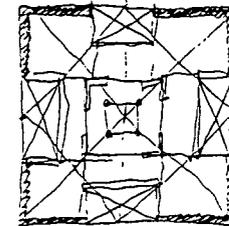
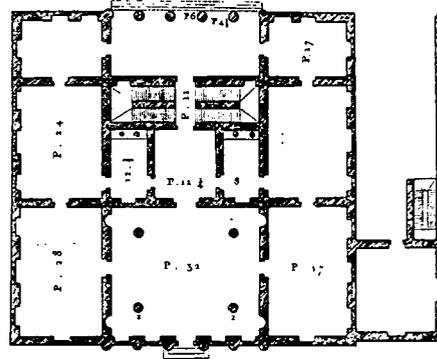
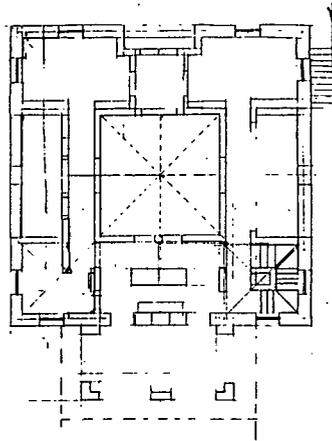
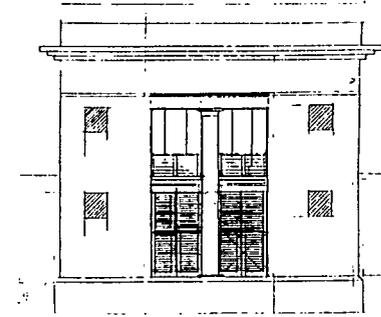
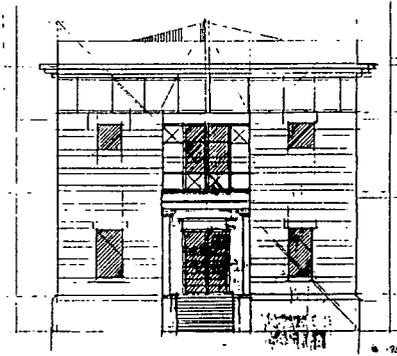
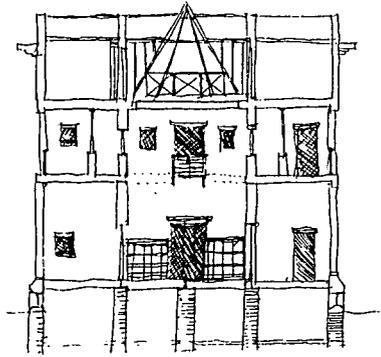
1850

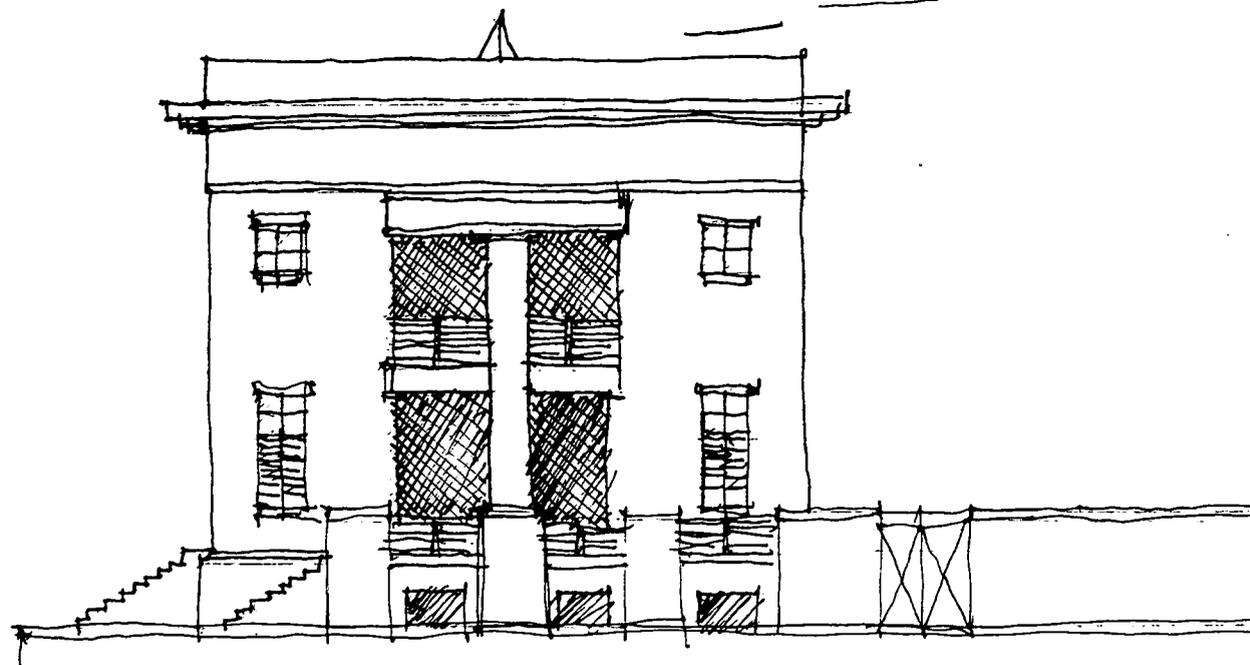
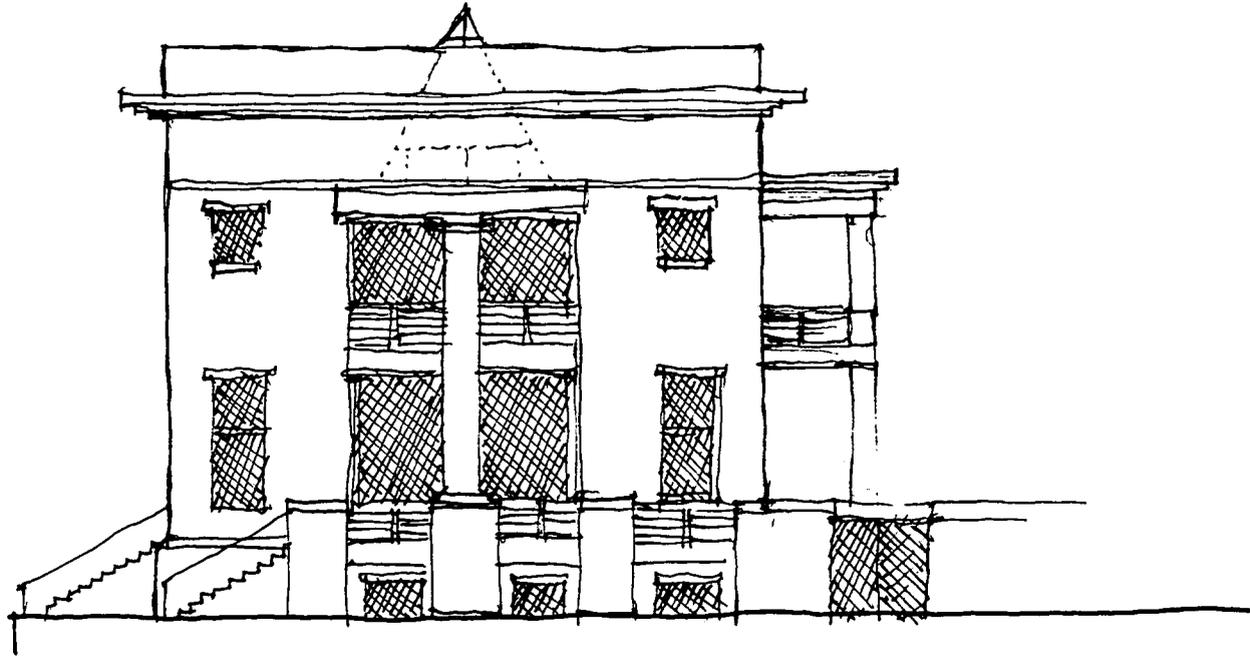
1819

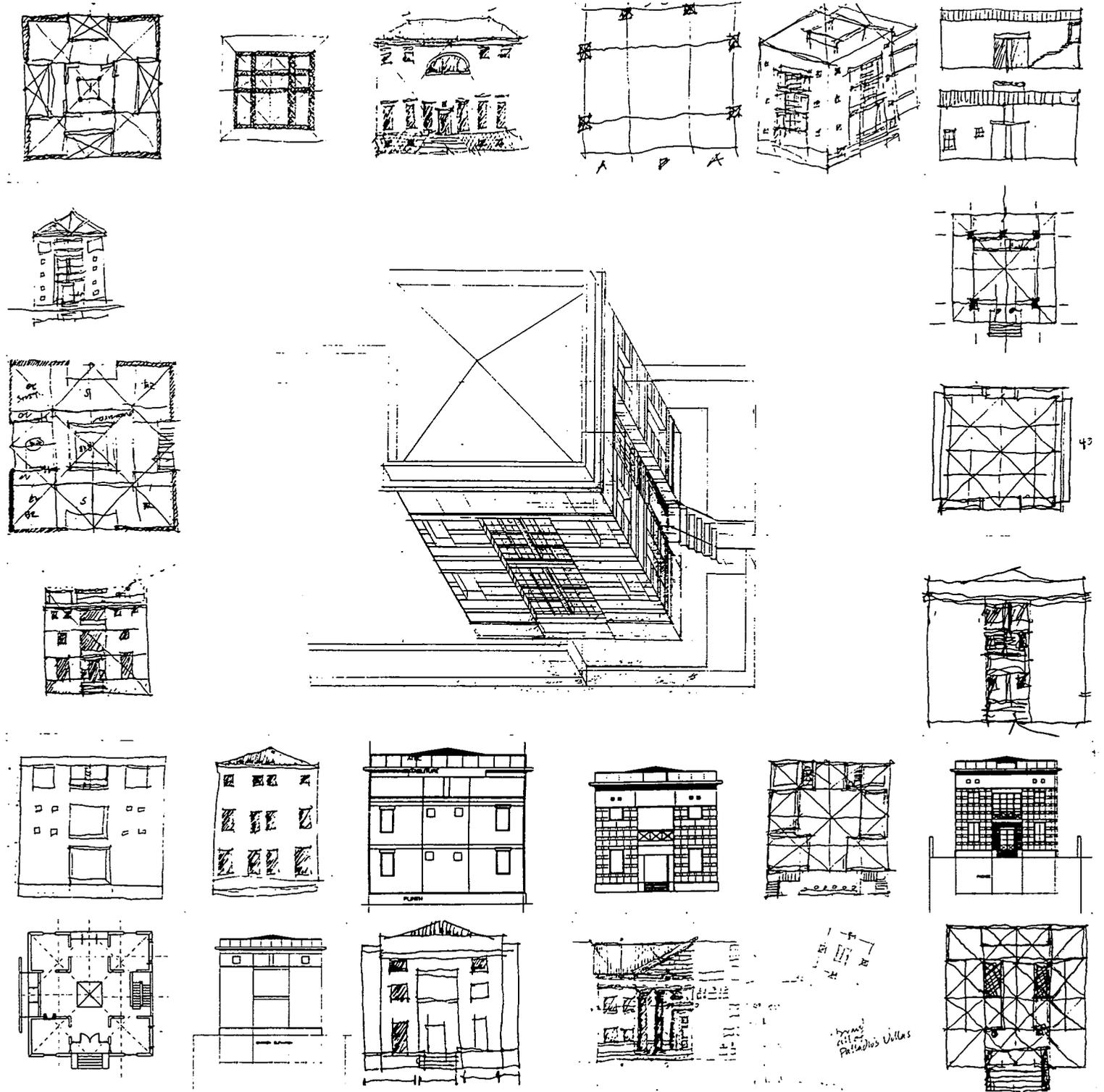


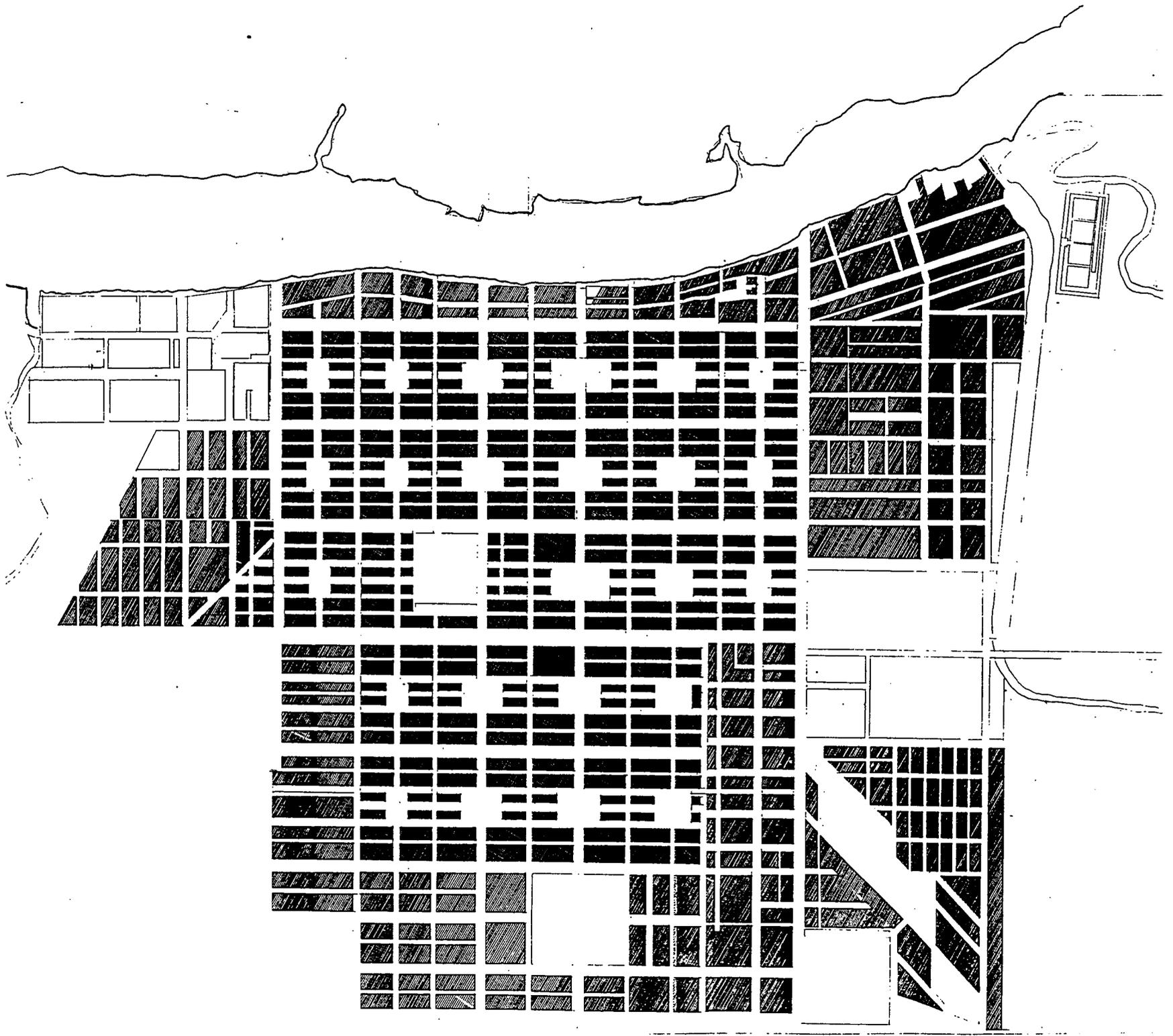
1817

c. 1840 — ADDITIONS c. 1890

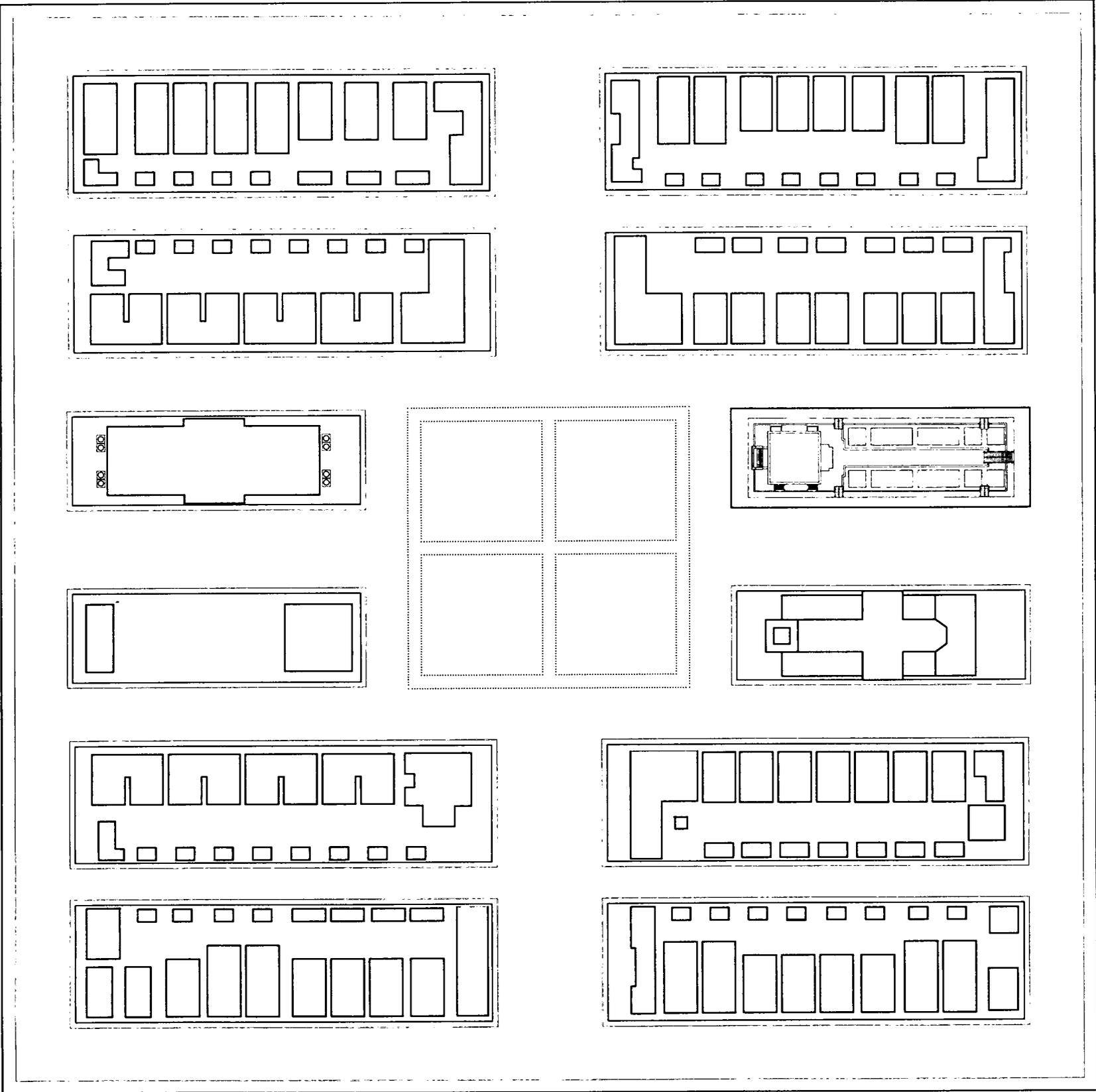


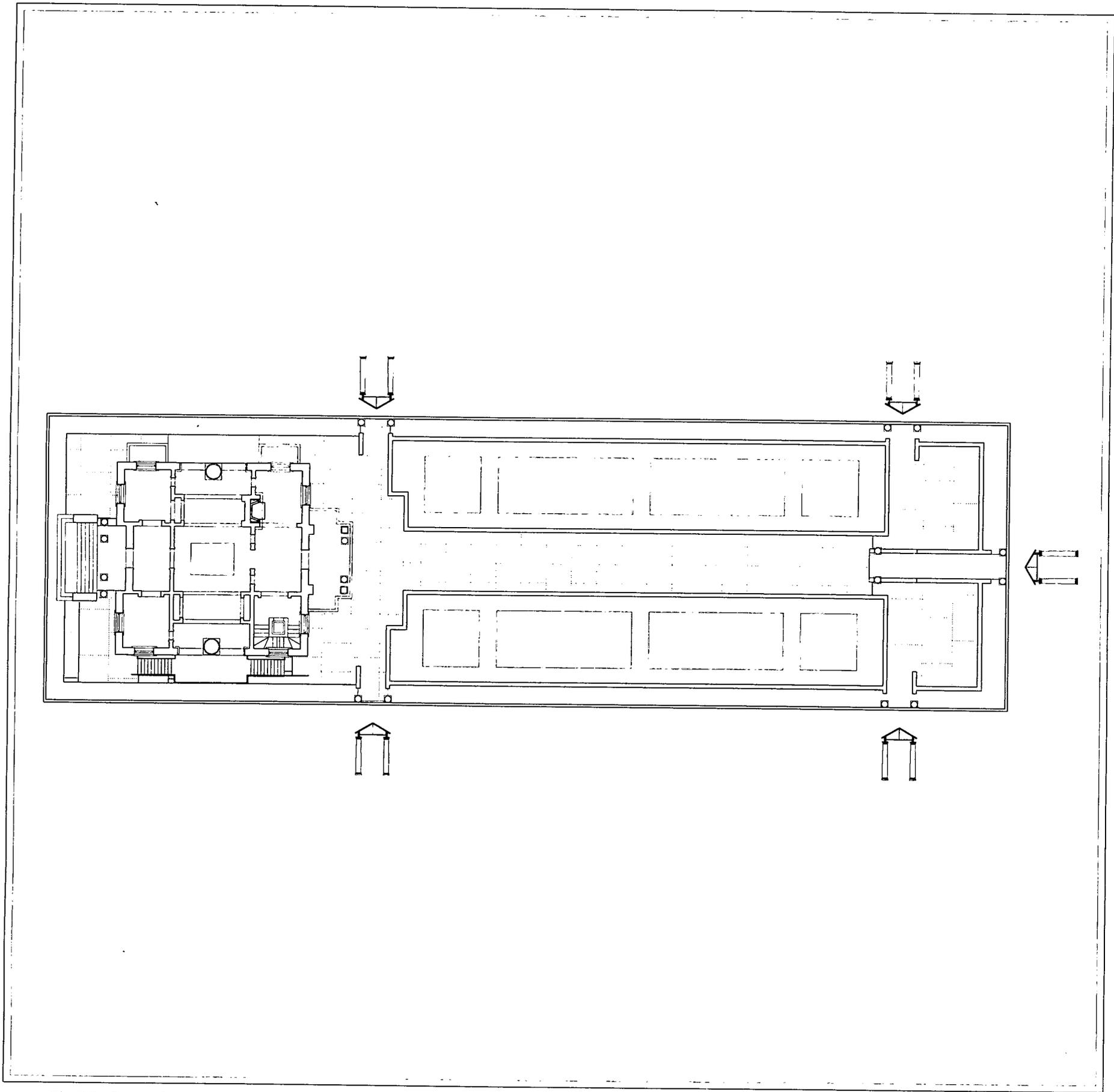






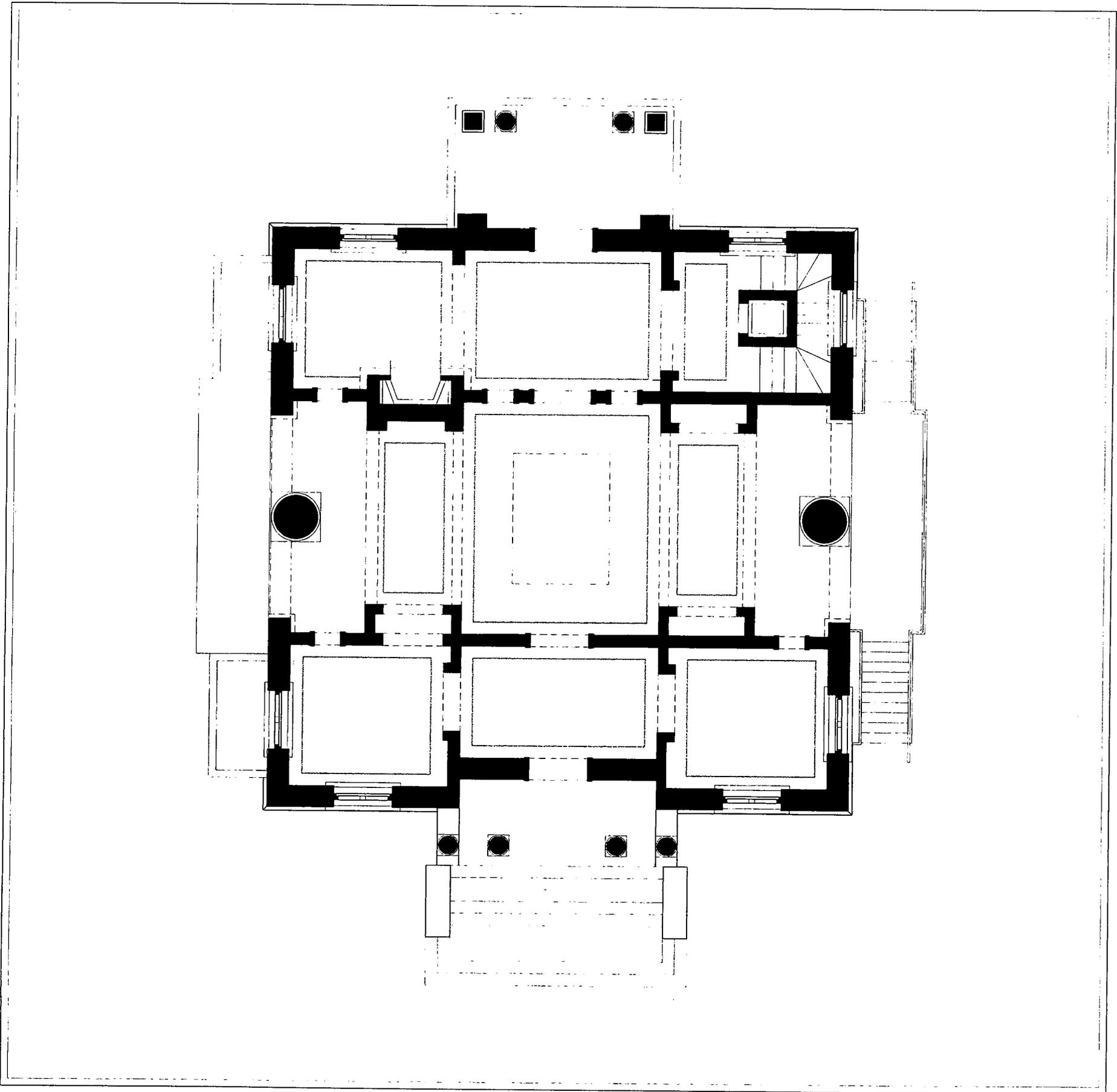
Map of the City illustrating the Development of the Ward Concept

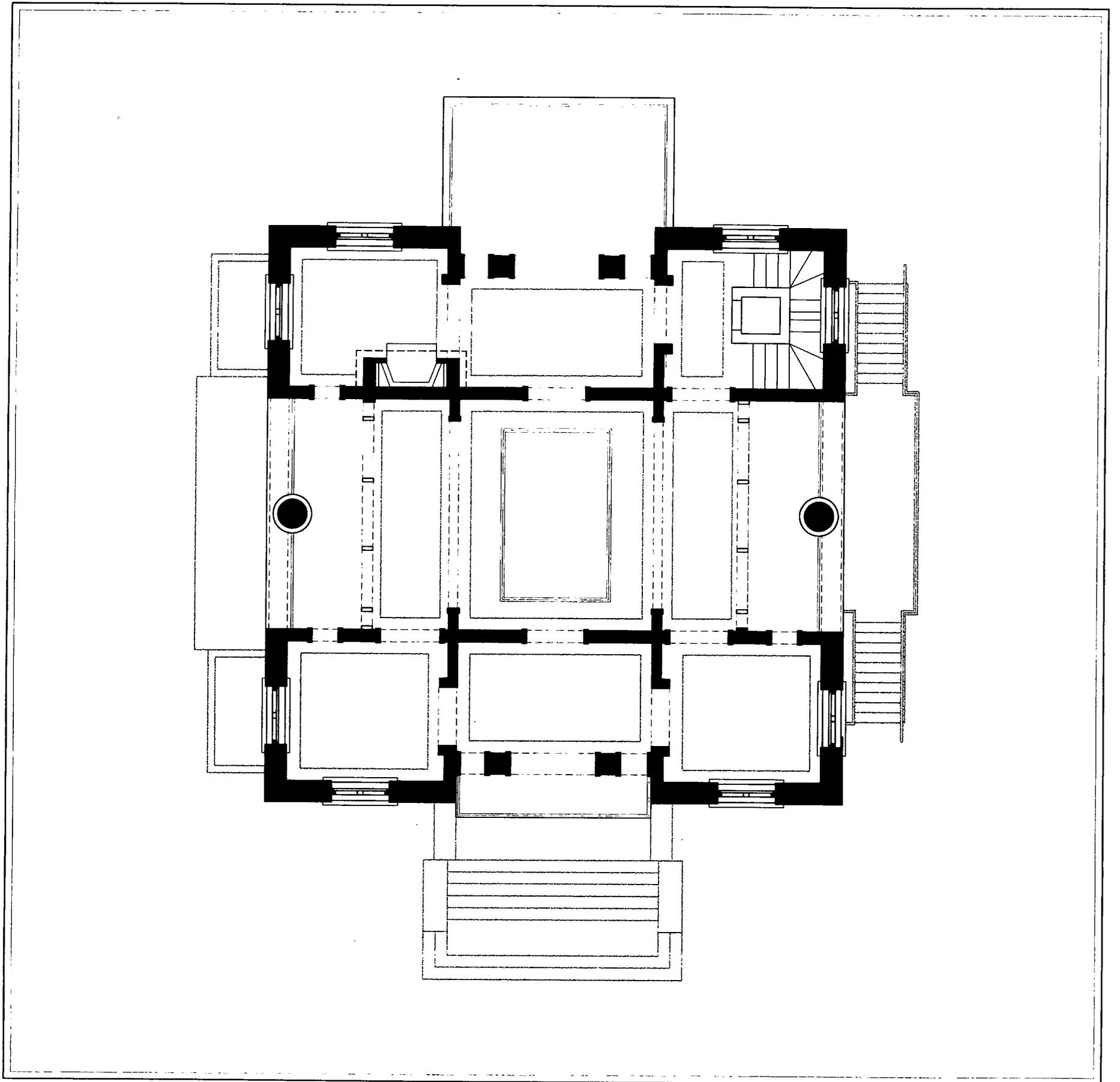




The Villa Savannah 17

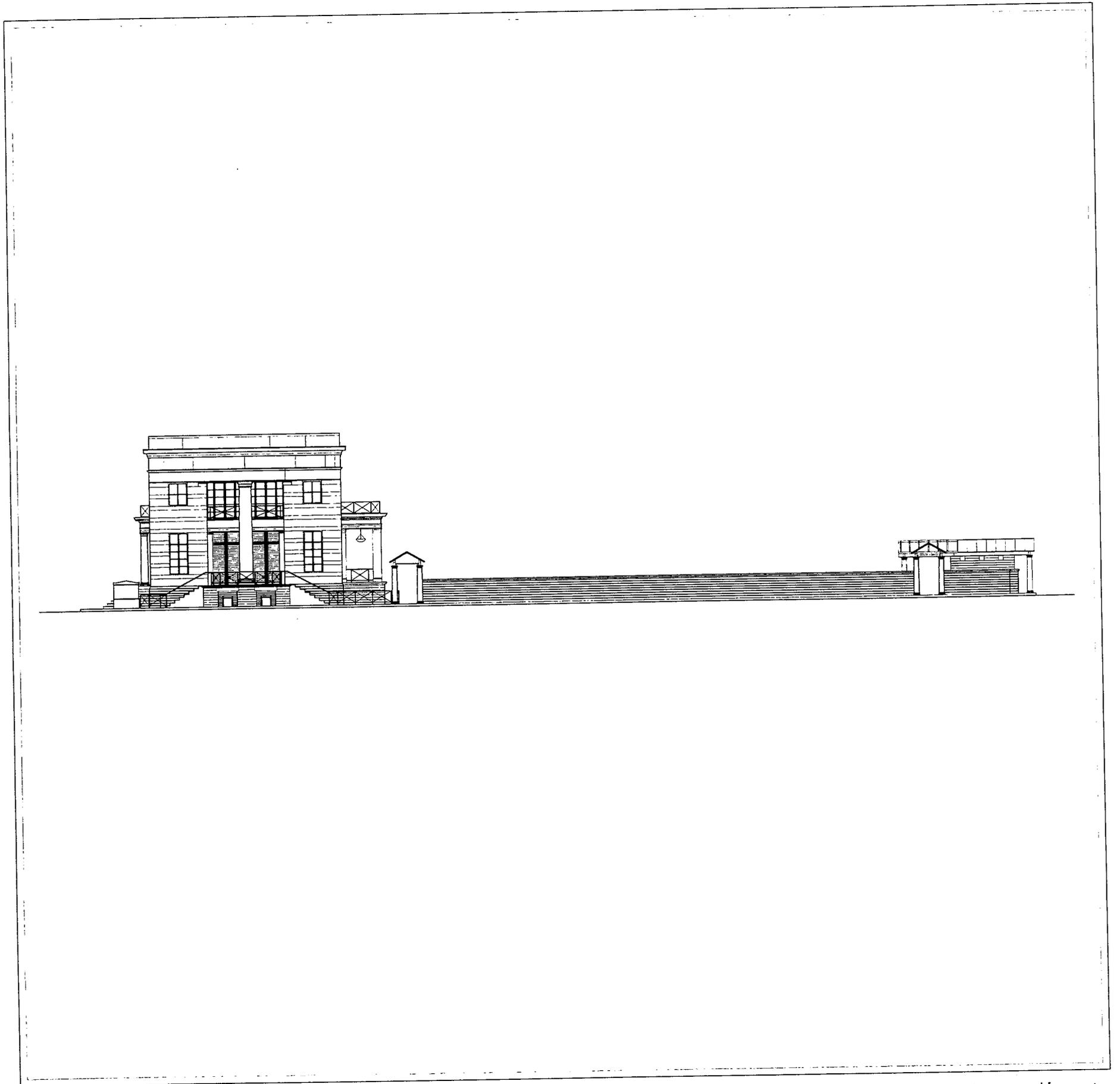
Lot Plan



















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