CHAPTER SIX

Habitation, structure, meaning

In the last chapter of the book three fundamental terms, habitation, structure, and meaning, become the focus of the investigation. The way that the three terms interrelate is fundamental to the underlying position that has governed the design of the proposed project. With the analysis that will be presented in this chapter, the argument that the overall thesis project presents reaches a state of completion. The chapter ends with reflecting thoughts that give an understanding of the broader beliefs in which the work originated.

BACKGROUND

The Oxford English Dictionary defines habitation as: "The action of dwelling in or inhabiting as a place of residence; occupancy by inhabitants." (note 16) The term means more than just providing shelter or satisfying the utilitarian demands of a building, but it rather pertains to the concept of architectural place.

Examining the issue of habitation in architecture

When observing our immediate environment it is worth noticing the numerous objects that are present. Furniture, personal belongings, and decorative items are some objects that we interact with on a day to day basis. These objects can be seen as *part of the living environment* that if absent would make the architecture incomplete. Among objects those of sentimental value can in fact contribute to what can be called the "spirit of the place." The presence of a photograph or ones favorite books, for example, can transform the top of a desk or the corner of a room into what one can identify as *his or her place*. In other words, if the individual can identify as place with objects such as a photograph or a painting, then architecture does not need to be directly involved in the making of place. How a photograph affects the mind and appeal to ones sentiment is not an architectural concern. Based on the above realization, it is reasonable to ask the following question: how does architecture participate in the making of a habitable place given the fact that a habitable place can be achieved with means that are not necessary in the architect's control?

The horizontal mullion participates in the making of place.

In order to answer the above question, first let us look at the following example. The ledge of the living room window can be described as an elevated plane, in the center of the wall, next to a source of light, that has certain dimensions and a certain texture. Because of the relative location that it has and its formal properties, the ledge for one person can become the place where plants can grow, or for someone else the place to exhibit objects that embody valuable memories for that individual. The different interpretations correspond to two different individuals that can become different place, that is if the architecture is able to receive, contain,

and hold different events that can come about. For that to happen it is important that the elements involved have the appropriate relationship to each other (organization of parts), appropriate relationship within the context, and are appropriately articulated (roughness, smoothness, color, ability to reflect, etc.). The above is true not only at the scale of a window mullion, but also at the scale of a room (elements of urban scale as well). Therefore, architecture does have a role in the making of a habitable place. To put it simply, **architecture participates in the making of habitable places by providing the necessary relationships among elements that have been appropriately designed and have the capacity to become places through a process of discovery by the inhabiter.** In essence, the complete set of relationships that is provided by the architect is the *structure* that is necessary to be present in order for the occupant to make the building a habitable place. (note 17)

About structure

Deriving structure is not a linear process, but one that is based on a dialogue between the set of relationships (syntax) among elements that are interchangable, and the interchangeable elements from which the set of relationship is found. Herman Hertzberger believes that, just like speech informs language in the same way language informs speech; in analogous terms in architecture, structure (analogous to language) can be in dialogue with the elements that make up the living reality that are determined by the individual for the purpose of habitation (analogous to speech). (note 18)

## FURTHER ANALYSIS OF THE PROJECT

In chapter three the unit was presented in terms of internal relationships among elements (rooms) that have been characterized as syntagmatic. To accompany the initial relationships other decisions contribute to further explore the opportunities that the basic relationships (shift in plan and section) offers. Such decisions take place at a different scale and aim towards constructing a framework within which the occupant is able to make adjustments to the architecture to meet his or her individual living needs. The follow-up decisions create a substructure that brings completion to the one that exists at larger scale.

The complete set of relationships that occur at various scales in the proposed project brings order to the living environment and aims towards an architecture that is not a direct representation of a single mode of living, but one that has the competence to take on several. The several modes correspond to different habitable conditions, at different scales, that can relate in a meaningful way with the inhabitant.
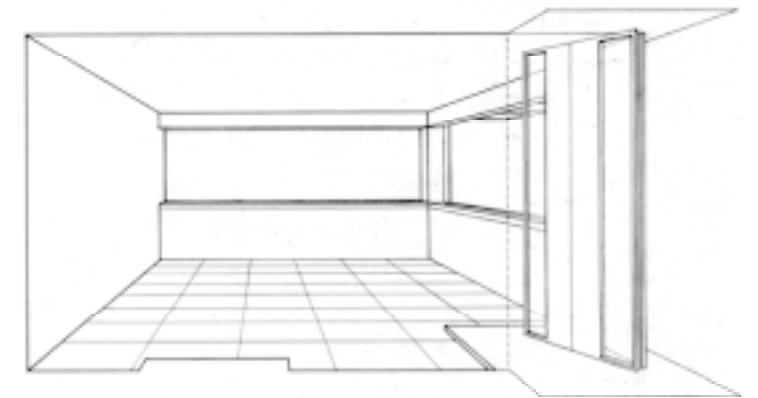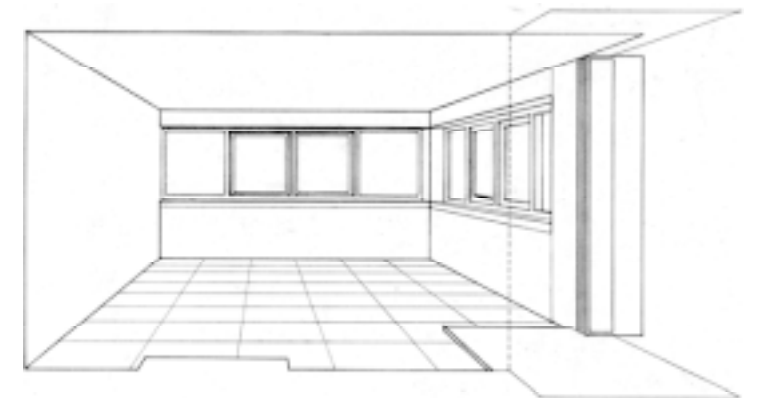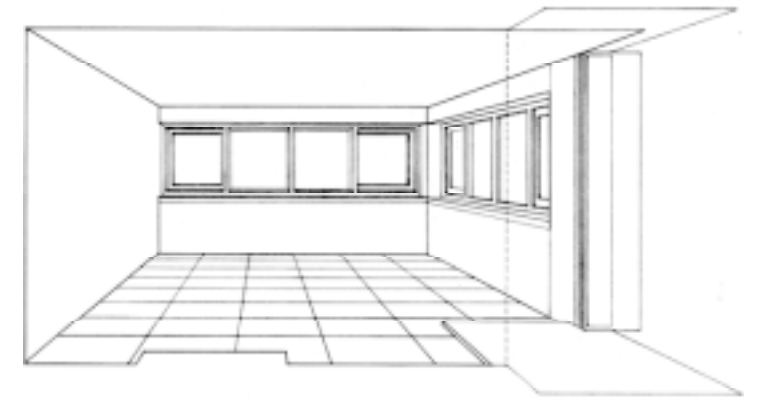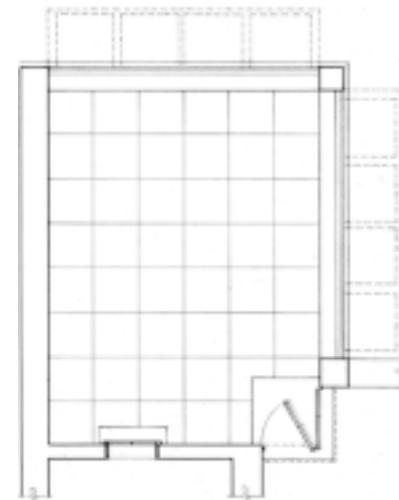

Interior elevation, view from living room.
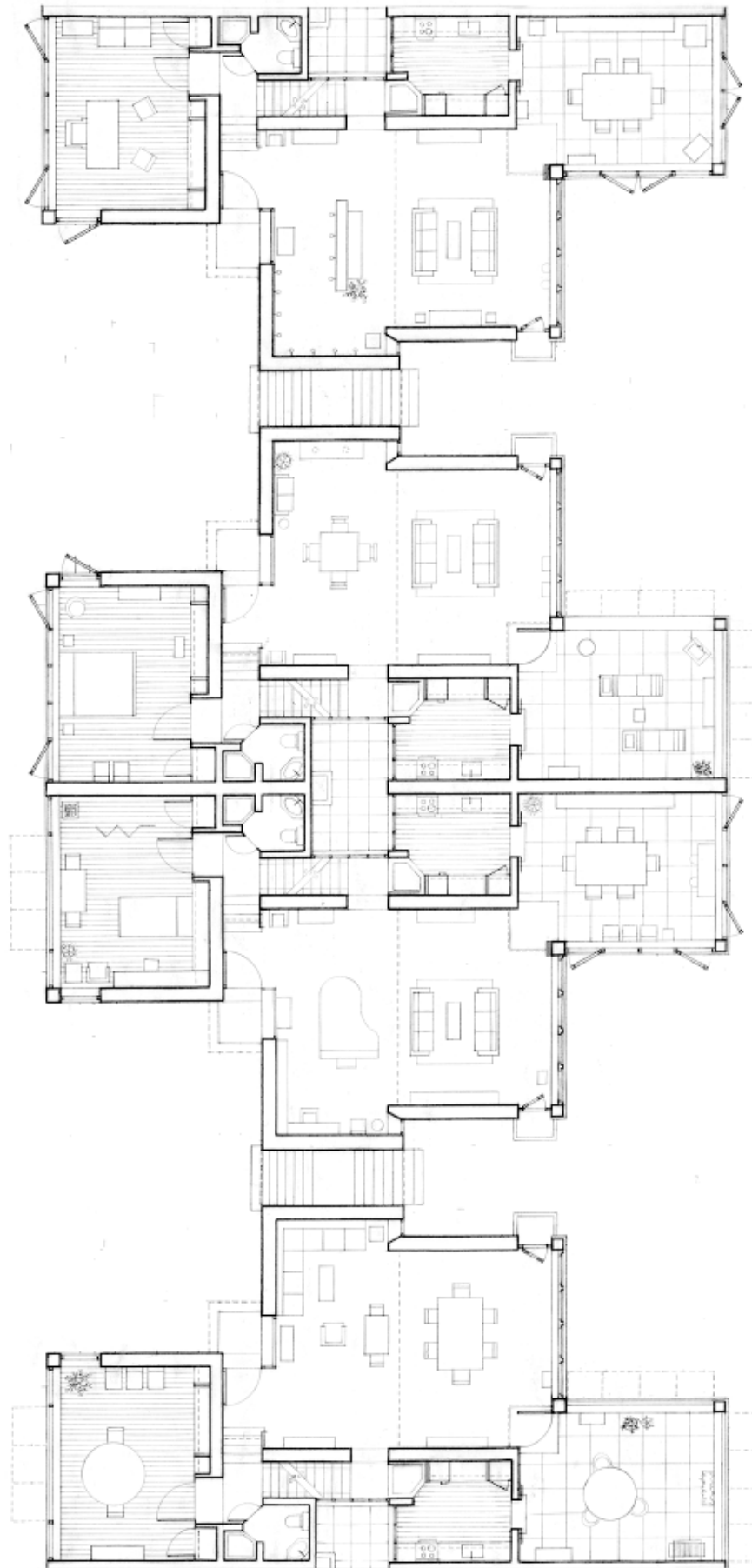
Floor plan at level B
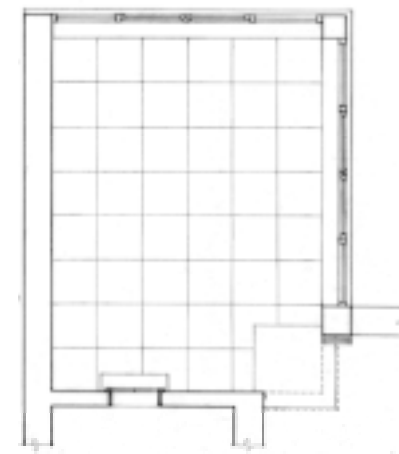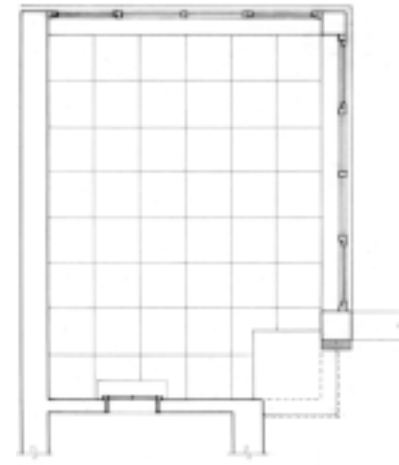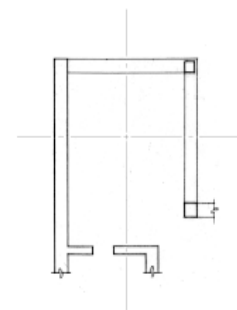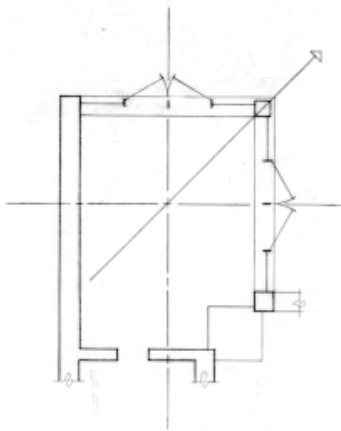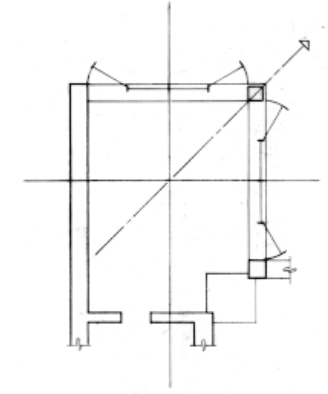
Three ways of articulating the interior elevations. Each one correspond to a different possibility on how the room can be used. All three designs maintain the corner orientation in the interior and embody decisions at a smaller scale which encourages the participation of the individual.
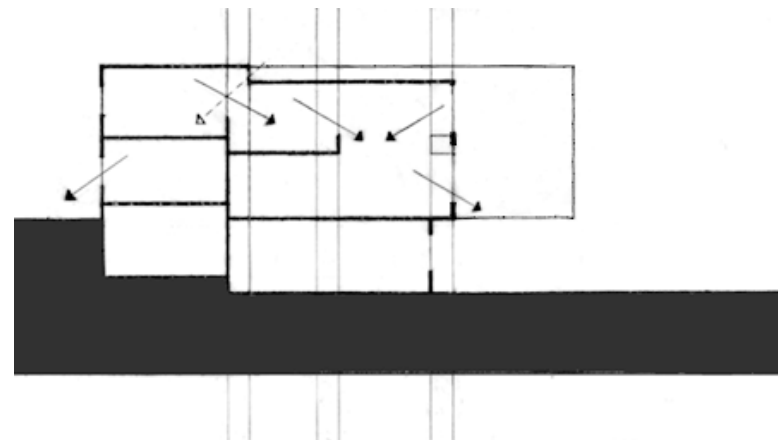
Meaning and habitatioon

What is meaning? Within the field of semiology that addresses the relationship of the signifier (form) to the signified (meaning as content), what is signified is not formal. Henri Focillon affirms the following " the fundamental content of form is a formal content." (note 19) Form can be separated from external significations and signify only its self. In the same line of thought, Terry Eagleton makes the following case: " meaning does not necessary need to be substantial with intrinsic value but a relative one." (note 20) This is based on the belief that individual elements within a system have meaning only in relation to one another, a relative meaning.


Condition in which meaning lies in the difference between low and high.

Let's examine for a moment the condition that, shown above has a prominent role in the project as it is repeated several times. As a condition of significance, it can be described diagrammatically as low versus high. Its meaning lies in the fact that low is different to high. (note 21) What takes place on the elevated plane and how it is used depends on the fact that it presents a differentiation that can take a variety of uses. In this example, the contrast between low and high that corresponds to a different degree of privacy is what the architect provides for the inhabitant to give meaning to the two sides (low side, high side). One can come to the conclusion that, *habitation can be established when there can be a meaningful relationship of the individual with the form.*

Meaning can also lie in conditions in which the differentiation is not only in the low versus high, but also other properties such as the following: texture (rough-smooth), or the change in illumination (light-dark), or the change of the floor pattern, etc. When relative meaning is established a common boundary condition is established as well. Therefore, the act can be repeated at different scales in order to further subdivide a room and construct relationships at a range of scales that contribute to the habitability of the unit.

Internal view diagram
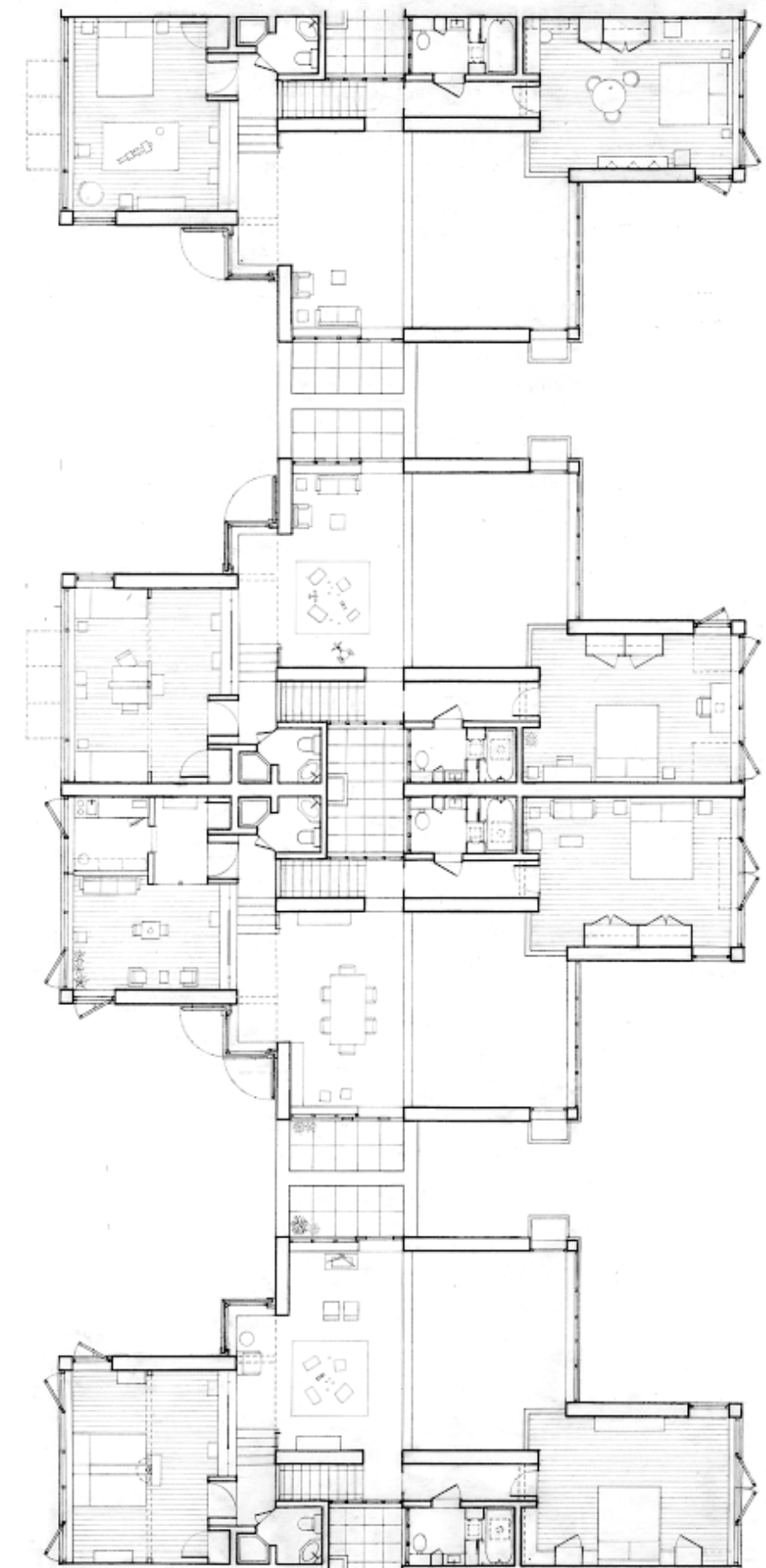
Floor plan at level C
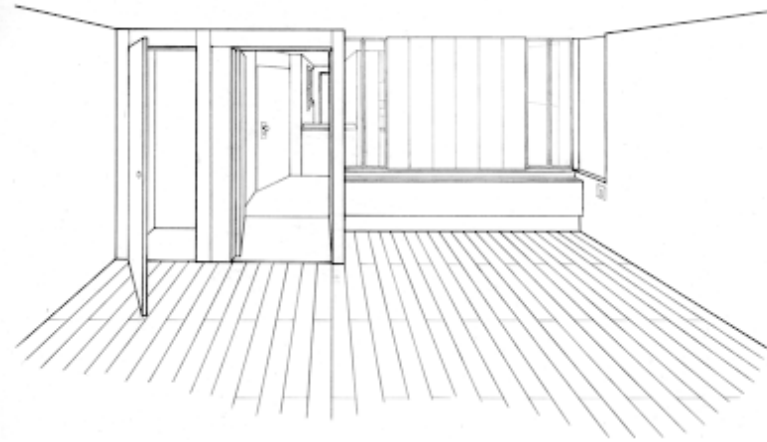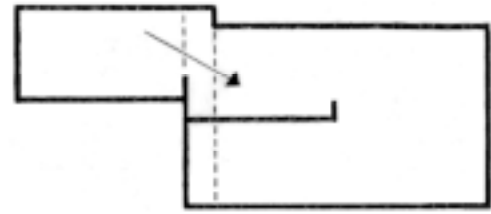
Interior view of bedroom at level C when the partition is
closed.
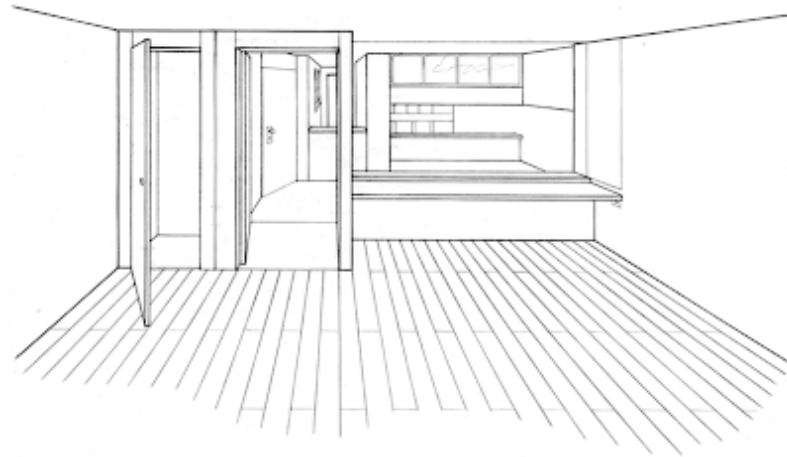
Interior view of bedroom at C level when the partition is
open.

It is worth emphasizing the importance of the adjustable
partition that is an intermediate boundary between the two
rooms. In fact, it is the single most important element to
which adaptability is dependent on.
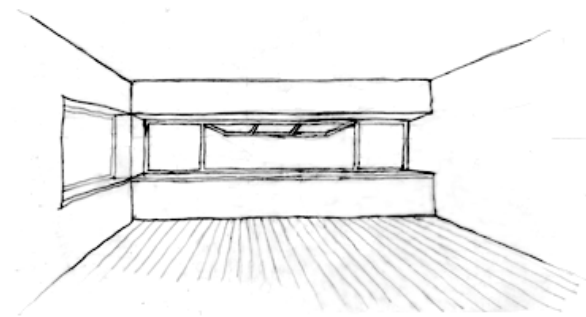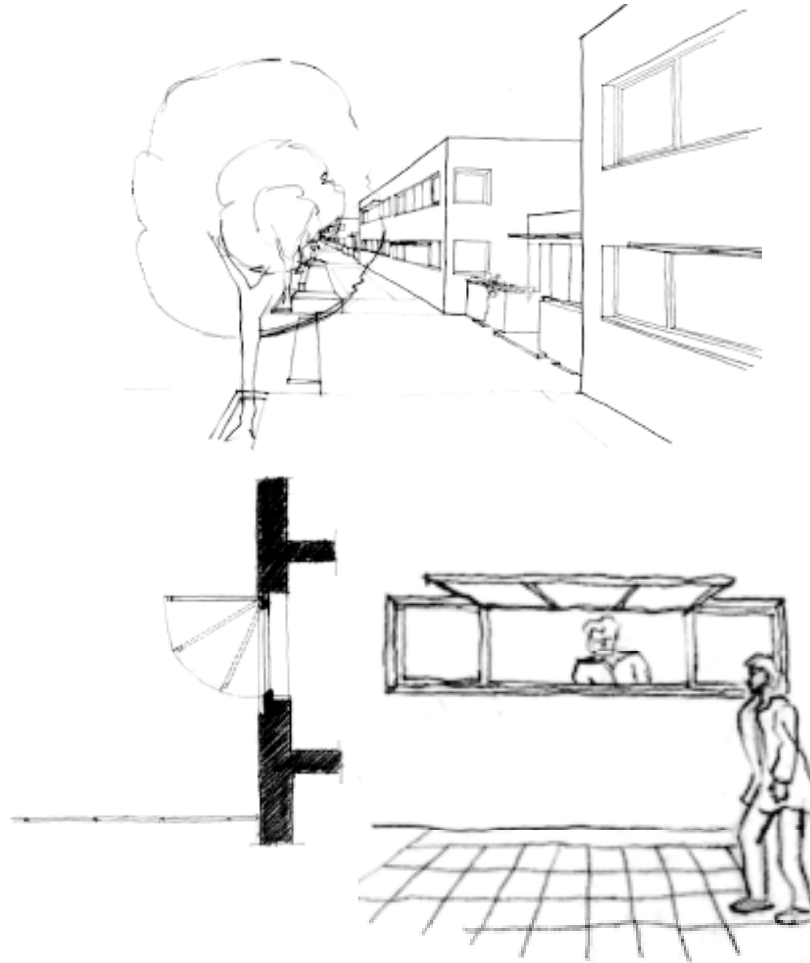
The engagement of the building to the public realm of the
sidewalk is a critical urban condition. The floor of the
sidewalk acknowledges that condition by changing the tile
pattern and making a different zone. With the projection of
the window into the public realm, the boundary of the house
extends into the sidewalk. Though it is not a permanent con-
dition, and can only be capitalized on occasions, the opening
of the window gives the suggestion of a small room that has
the potential to become a meeting place that can add "life" and
"vitality" to the sidewalk.
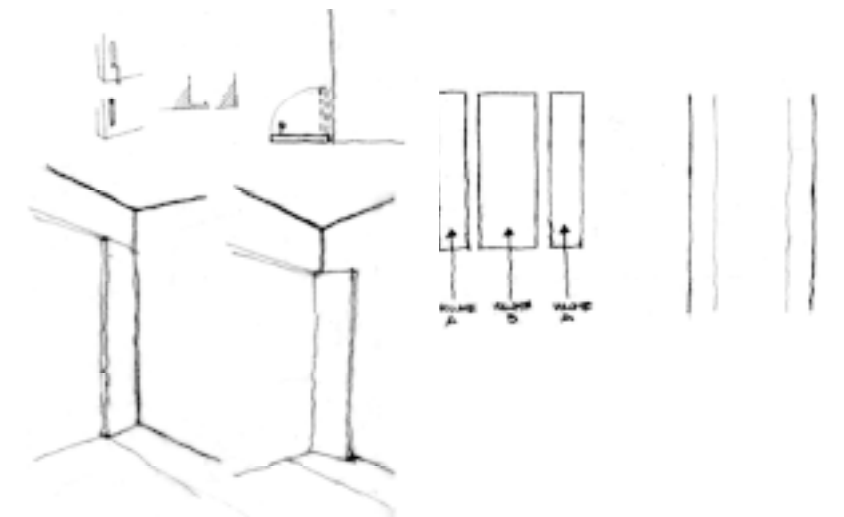
The hallway shown above is in many ways no different than a
street. Both can be seen as service zones but also as rooms
for habitation. In the particular example the two side zones
adjust the scale of the room and encourage the participation
of the individual. The proposed design for the hallway is able
to resolve a practical matter that is common in many housing
projects. In the proposal the opening of the two side parti-
tions indicates the use of the entire zone, which can be very
beneficial for the in and out flow of furniture.
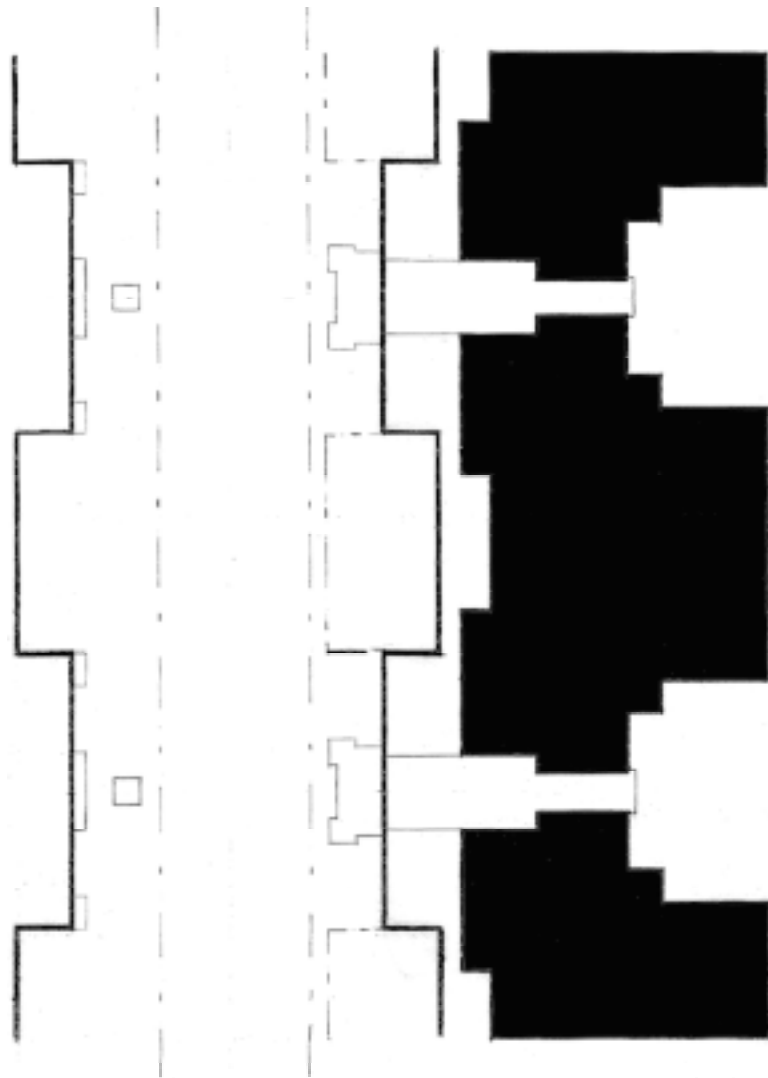
The above study, which corresponds to the floor condition in the back of the units, addresses the substructure that results from dividing the field into zones.
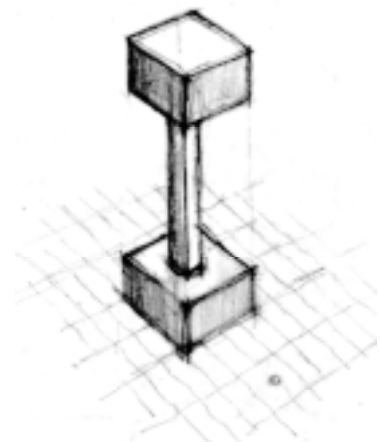
lightpost

Objects such as the lightpost offer the opportunity to the individual to make a place of his or her own within the public realm and claim temporarily as private what actuality belongs to the public.
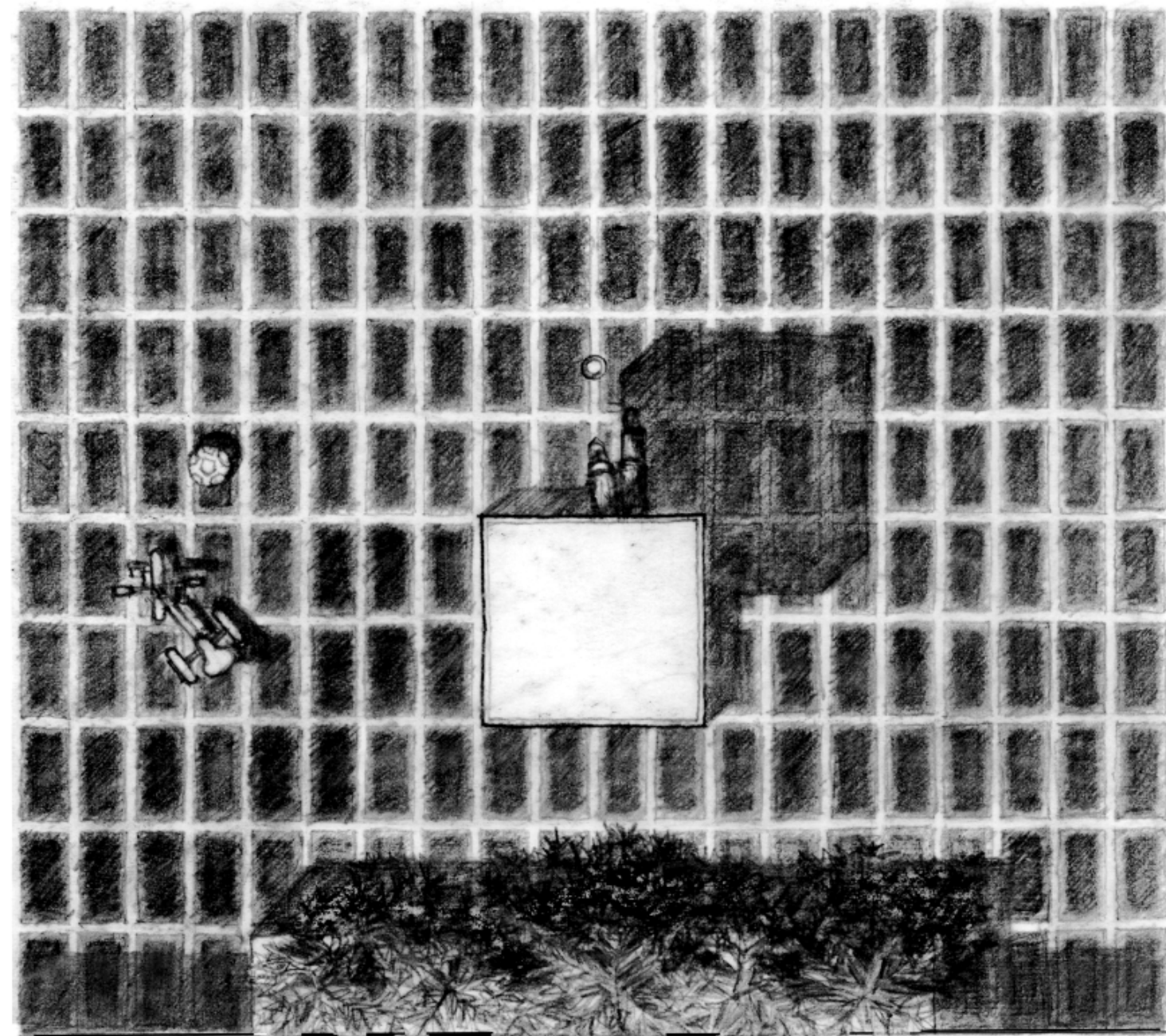
FINAL THOUGHTS
Architecture and the realm of the every day
It is my belief that one can arrive at architecture by designing in a realm that
contributes to the quality of living on a day to day basis. It is possible to find
architecture in the realm of the every day life in which buildings and people
interact. Architecture does not need, as Umberto Eco mentions in the essay
"Function and Sign", to be set apart like "high fashion" but he calls for it to be
like "ready-to-ware clothing." Designing in the realm of the everyday does not
imply that the outcome is ordinary and without difficulty. Quite the contrary,
the realm of the every day life is constantly changing and chaotic in nature;
therefore, the challenge for the architect is to improve the quality of living by
reducing the chaos and bringing structure to a phenomenon such as life. At the
core of this particular way of thinking is an architecture that values practical-
ity, and furthermore respects and acknowledges practical solutions as an essen-
tial part of the good living in which the individual finds personal fulfillment
and growth in an "earth bounded" reality.