

A DWELLING AMONG WALLS

by

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(Abstract)

Sigfried Giedion wrote that the basic aim of the modern movement was to "win the split of thought and feeling" which is characteristic of modern man; that despite his power of scientific thought, modern man has lost a true relationship to the world in which he lives, and that what is lacking in our time is a satisfactory development of man's emotional faculties.

This thesis is the record of an architectural project which was allowed to depend upon the impetus of emotion for the development of its language and program. The written portion of this record is in part a history and in part an interpretation of the project.

The project begins in pursuit of the desire to dwell upon a particular site.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people to whom I owe thanks, but here I would like to give special thanks to and to .

This book is dedicated to my parents.

PART ONE

I had been looking for a project with a strong emotional basis, for something that I really wanted in my heart to do.

During the spring of 1983, I was occupied with a study of the walls of the unfinished portion of the arsenal at Radford, Virginia.

From the moment I first came upon the walls, I was transfixed by them. I was strongly attracted by their desolateness. I wondered what it meant to want to gaze upon and even inhabit such a desolate place.

Perhaps by imagining that I lived there, I could come to understand something about this attraction.

Figure 1 is a snapshot of the unfinished part of Radford Arsenal, as seen from the road between Radford and Price's Fork. The photograph was taken on my second visit to the walls.

The walls were built during the second world war, as the first stage of a project to expand the arsenal. They are made of reinforced concrete and were intended to contain fires or explosions in their connecting structures. Before the connecting buildings were completed, the war ended and construction was abruptly abandoned.

The drawing in figure 2 was made to aid in the imaginary habitation of the field of walls.

I had carried over into this project a desire to address the issue of post-and-slab construction. This desire sprang partly from a love of unfinished reinforced concrete post-and-slab structures, and partly from the thought that by adopting this very common type of construction from the outset, I would be establishing a link with the built world, which was a realm to which I expected to return. I was also very much haunted by Le Corbusier's *Maison Dom-ino*, both as an icon of modernism and as a repudiation of the wall.

Where you stand, dig deep and pry!
Down there is the well!
Let the obscurantists cry:
"Down there is only —hell!"

Figure 3 is a photograph of a model of an early idea of how to inhabit the field of walls. Beside the wall on the right is a two-bay frame structure; beside the wall on the left is a steel structure intended to hold an observation platform. The observation platform and frame structure are so placed as to be invisible to a person standing between the two walls. The drawing in figure 2 would be the view from the observation platform toward the frame structure concealed by a wall. This grouping forms a single dwelling, separated from itself by a large, empty outdoor room. The part of the dwelling which is concerned with being physically close to a wall and the part which is concerned only with gazing upon a wall do not interfere with one another.

This scheme for a dwelling is meant in the spirit of Gaston Bachelard's definition of a house as "an instrument with which to confront the cosmos."

The crayon drawings in figures 4 and 5 are further meditations upon the walls. In the former, an attempt was made to generate architectural ideas through the spontaneous interjection of various shapes. In the latter, this attempt was not made, but as an afterthought, a shadowy, box-like shape was added, representing the previously described frame structure. This can be seen in the lower left-hand quadrant of the drawing, beside one of the original walls, but at a slight angle to it, as though it were pulling away.

Figure 6 is a detail of this configuration.

I would like to call attention in this detail to the uppermost slab of the added structure. This should be the only part of the structure that touches the original wall. The connection would be made by cutting a groove in the wall in which to pour one side of the slab, so that the wall and slab would become monolithic. In the original of this drawing, this uppermost platform is colored gold, and was referred to for a time, with discretionary irony, as "the golden slab." It is the place of the hoped-for fulfillment of the longing inspired by the walls.

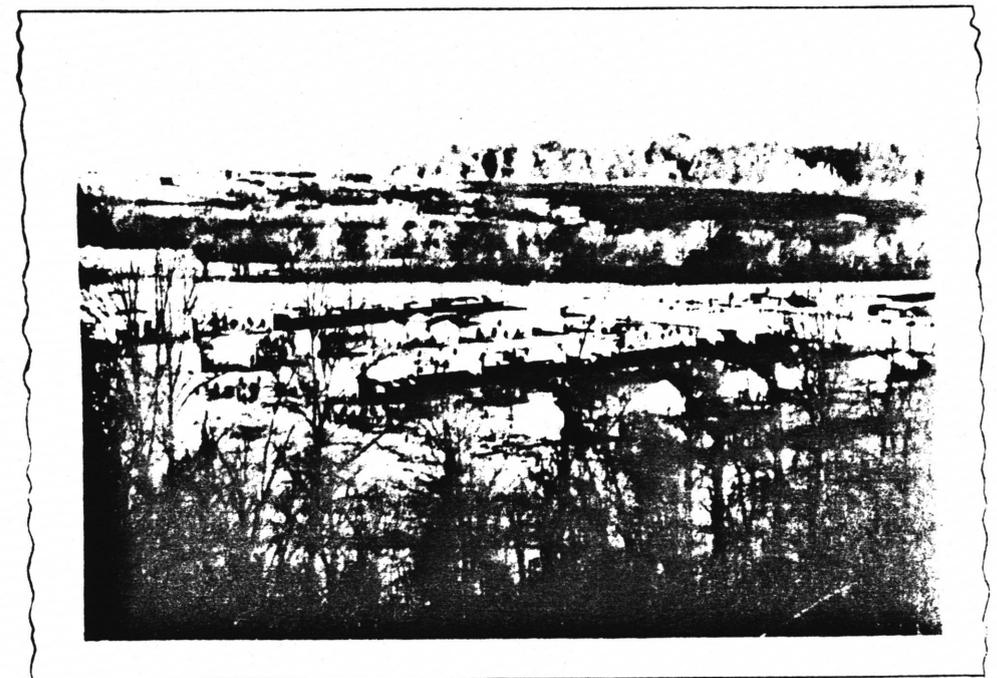


Figure 1

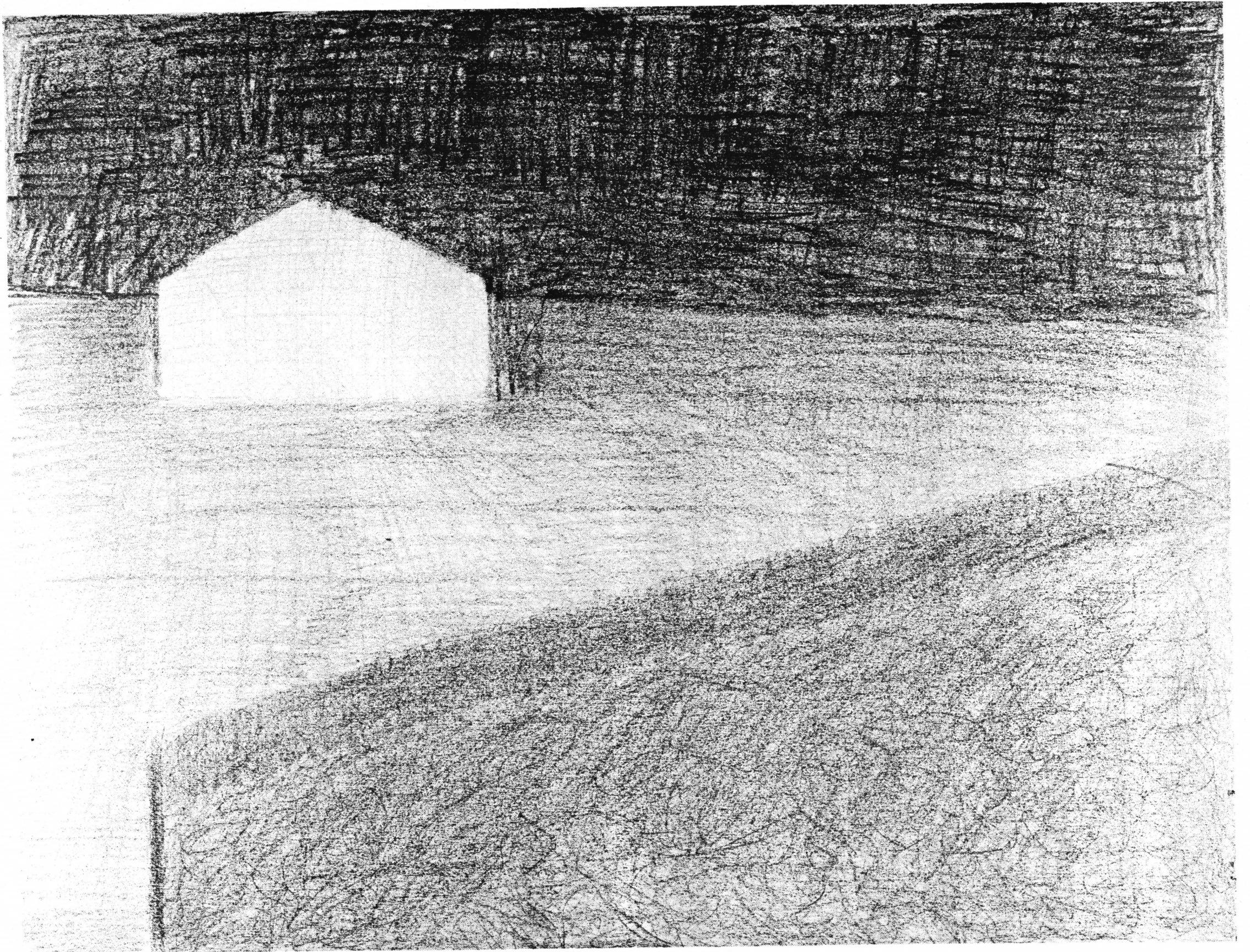


Figure 2

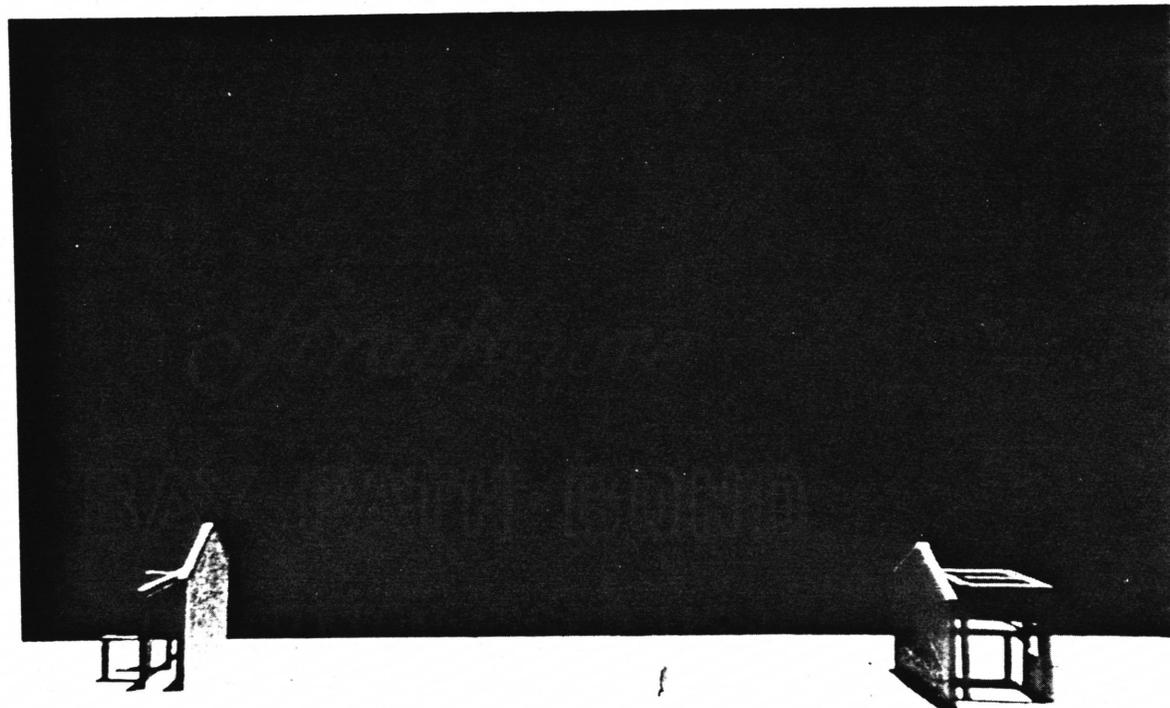


Figure 3

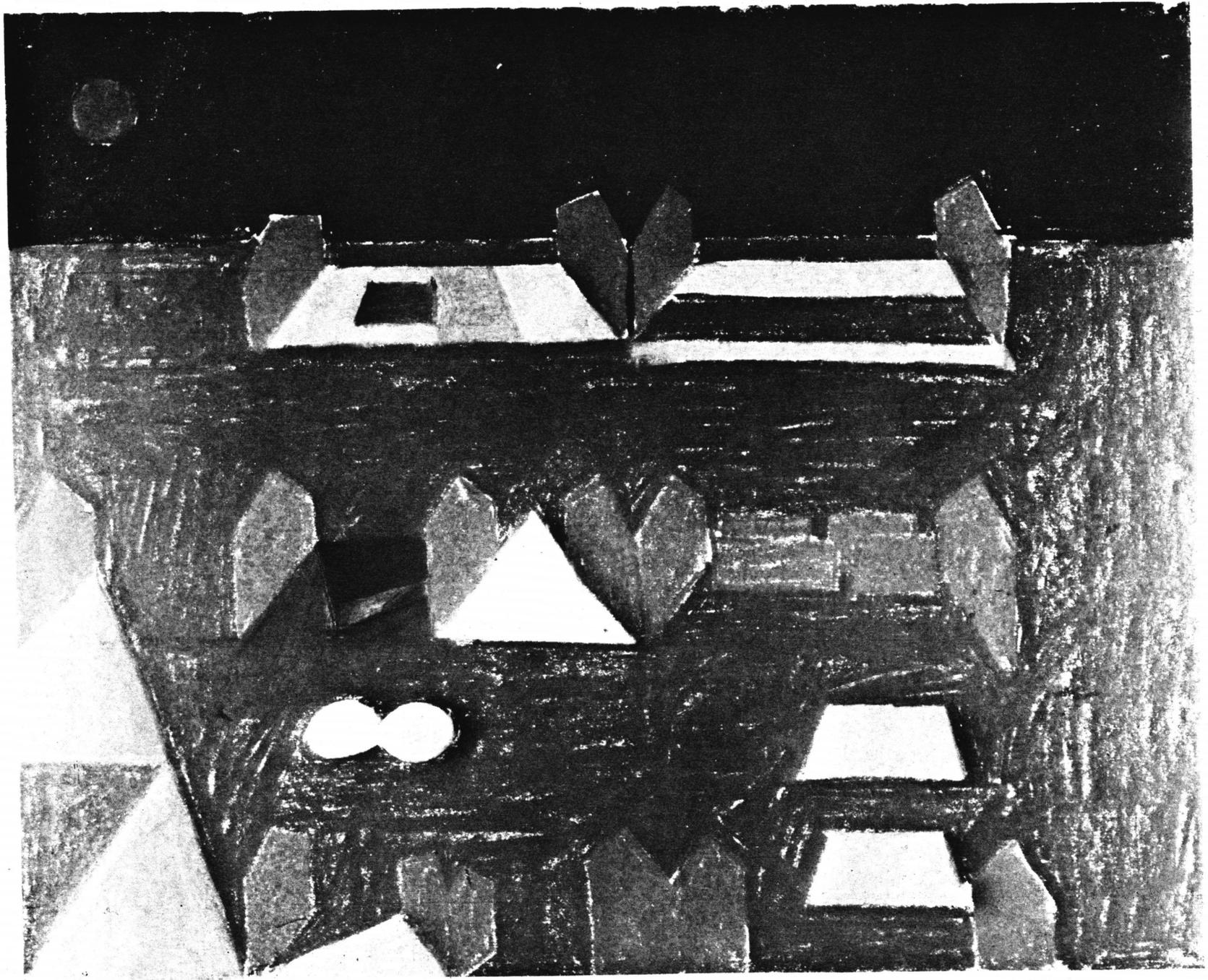


Figure 4

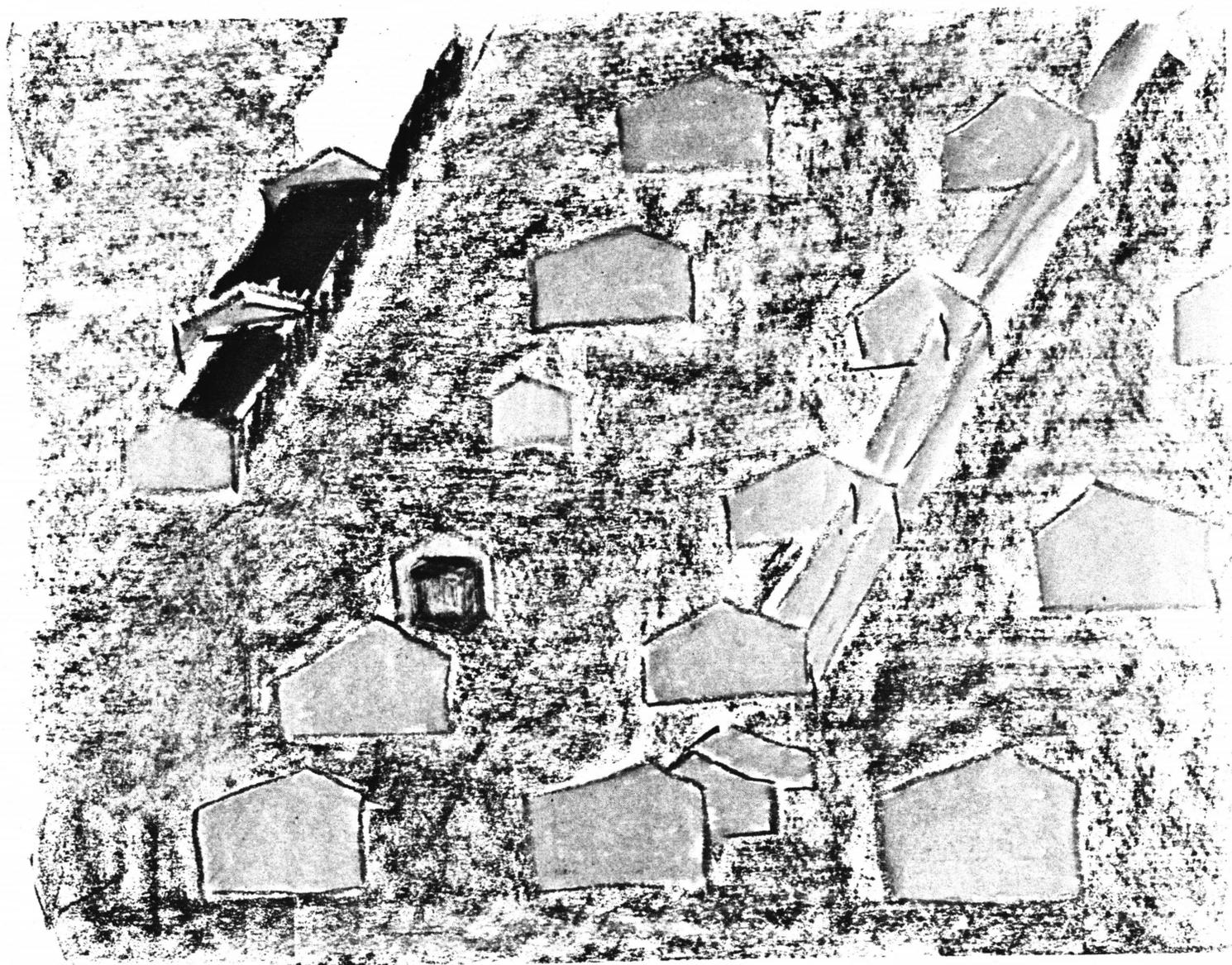


Figure 5

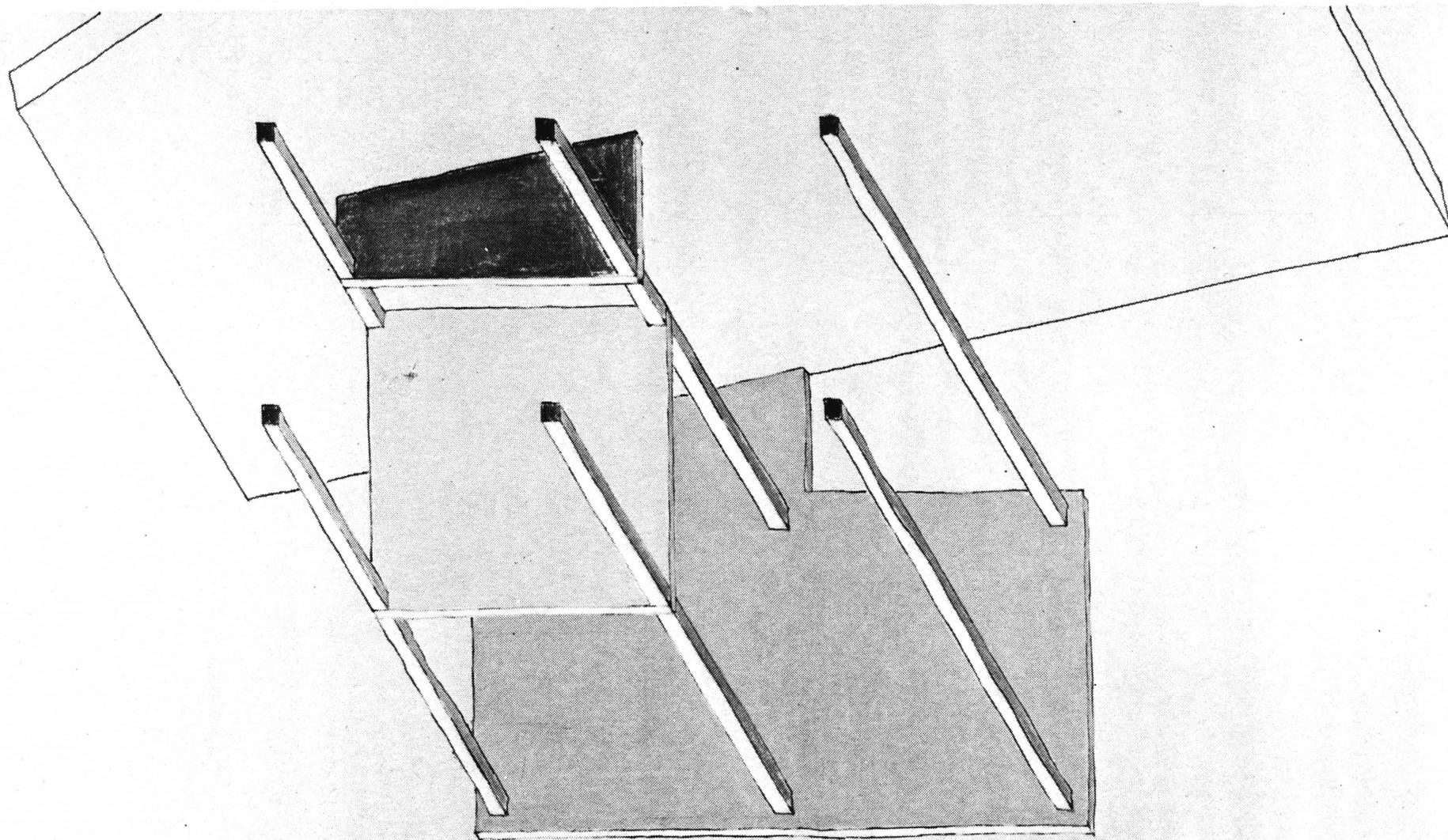


Figure 6

PART TWO

The site fixed the mood of the project. I wanted to use architecture to imaginatively dwell on the site; I wanted the architecture to reflect the thoughts and feelings inspired by the site. The program was for a house—not so much a house *for* myself as one which reflected myself; which reflected my condition at the time that the mood of the site most appealed to me. In a way this meant a return to a state of despondency, but with the purpose of pushing through it rather than trying to evade it. The house reflects this in that it acts as a gateway from the site back into the site. This can be seen if you study the plan and consider the house as a path. You approach from the north, go up the ramp on the west side, cross the south side, turn the corner into the eastern gallery, go past the stairs to the entrance. The entrance leads straight into the back of the north wall. The first floor is really a single modulated hall which leads finally to the double openings of the southern wall, through which the site beckons once again.

The first portion of this hall is the lightshaft between the north wall and one of the two square bays which form the main body of the house. The bay adjacent to the lightshaft has the bedroom on its second level, as well as an open hall overlooking the eastern gallery and a balcony facing to the south. On the first level of this bay is a grotto-like space formed by the concrete walls turning around it. At the bottom of the lightshaft, towards the second bay from the entrance, is a reflecting pool, the edge of which can be seen from the grotto space. If you walk past this space, you enter the second bay, a two-story space which I imagine to be for work and for parties or gatherings. In a way this is an inside-out space, because of the way it is overlooked by the bedroom window as though it were on the outside of the house, and in the way it serves as a threshold to the reentering of the site, through the two southern openings where light pours in its welcome. The space is also a threshold to a narrow courtyard on its north side, which is also the place where rainwater enters the building after having fallen from the roof. Steps lead up from the water where it disappears to pass beneath the reflecting pool, which is at the opposite end of this court. There, still water bridges moving water. This interplay of waters is something you deduce but don't actually see.

On the first level of the house there is also a bathroom adjacent to the eastern gallery. The entire room is a shower with a toilet and a sink in it, which comes from my memory of a bathroom in a small hotel on a Greek island. It is meant also to allude to the lavatories in planes and busses.

For the past ten years or so I have lived mostly in group houses, where people come and go, and where you come to identify your bedroom as your house, in the sense of privacy and territory. I have tried to treat the bedroom in this house to remember that condition. In plan it is more or less square—the diagrammatic symbol of the self. It has four identical windows, one in the middle of each of its four walls. This gives it an integrity in looking on disinterestedly to all that is circling around it. Also, from the two-story hall space, its disinterested window creates a sense of there being an “other” within the house rather than of the house being entirely at one with itself.

You see in the plan of the second floor that this “self-room” is broken or unfinished at one corner. In order to speak about this, I have to elaborate on the idea of the house as the symbolic diagram of the search that was begun by first entering into the site, and later as a diagram which suggests a certain hierarchical structure that may be related to a person's inner life.

The north wall of the house, as an element, is derived from the free-standing walls of the field. The house marks out a path to its own wall. You approach this wall in the hope of finding something, but you don't know what it will be.

The idea of the house plan as an inwardly spiralling path arose gradually as part of a solution to the problem of how to enter a square structural bay. You enter this house by walking around it, and each successive elevation—from the north to west to south to east—draws you closer and is more revealing than the previous one. Just as you get to know a person little by little, gradually—almost indirectly—the house reveals itself.

The refinements in the design of the house were based partly on the realization that the house could be seen as a path, and partly on the idea of recalling a condition of fragmentation and estrangement, which had to do with the original attraction of the site.

Fragmentation is expressed in the treatment of the southwest and middle southern corners, where the path suggested by the lower walls is not followed by the upper walls. (The lower and upper walls of the western or second bay are distinguished respectively by vertically or horizontally placed form work.) These breaks in the upper walls form openings for direct sunlight to enter the two-story space.

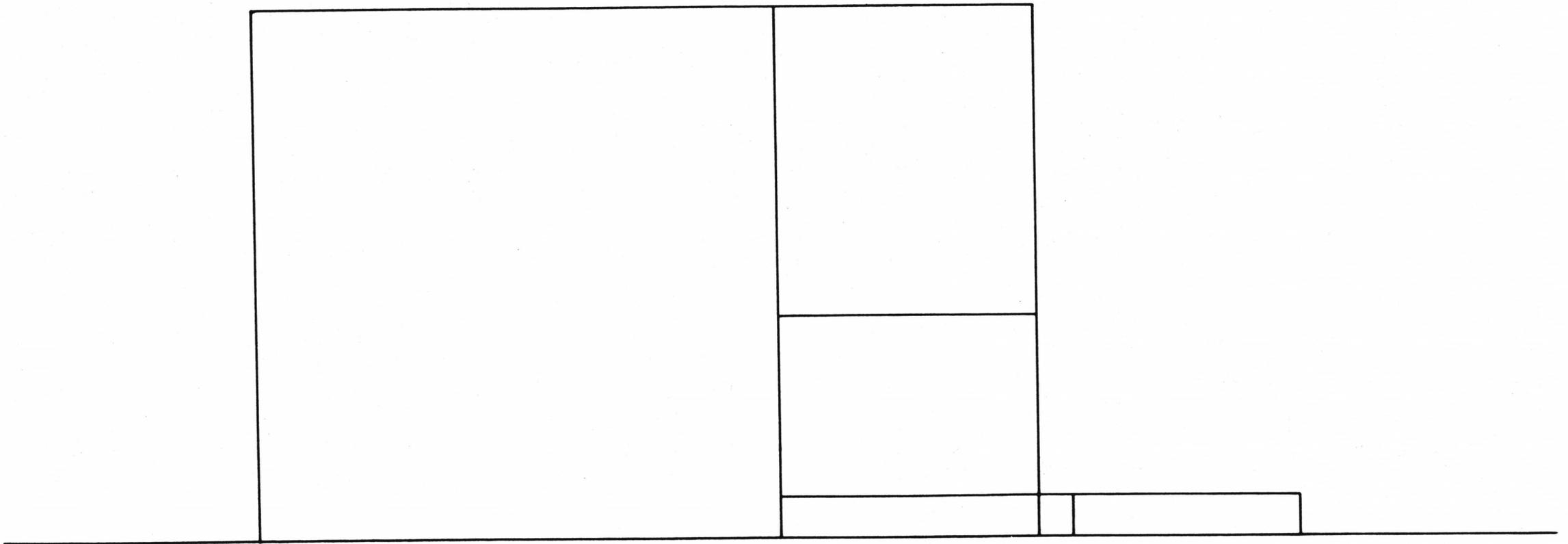
A kind of estrangement or standing-back from its situation is reflected in the way the house is placed in the field of walls, in the nature and number of its openings, and in its proportions. In an earlier version, the house was horizontal in bearing and its only walls were on the outside, forming a partial enclosure for a garden. With respect to the governing mood of the project, this horizontality and appropriation of land were simply too comfortable. Gradually the house itself became walls, and its proportions drew back vertically from the ground. The garden enclosure flew to the roof. The house became as a concrete ark passing in stillness through the site.

Once you are up on the roof, the game of the diagram is over. There is only the sky or the view of the wall field, and the broken corner where rainwater runs down. There is no longer the need to solve anything or to look beyond what is apparent.

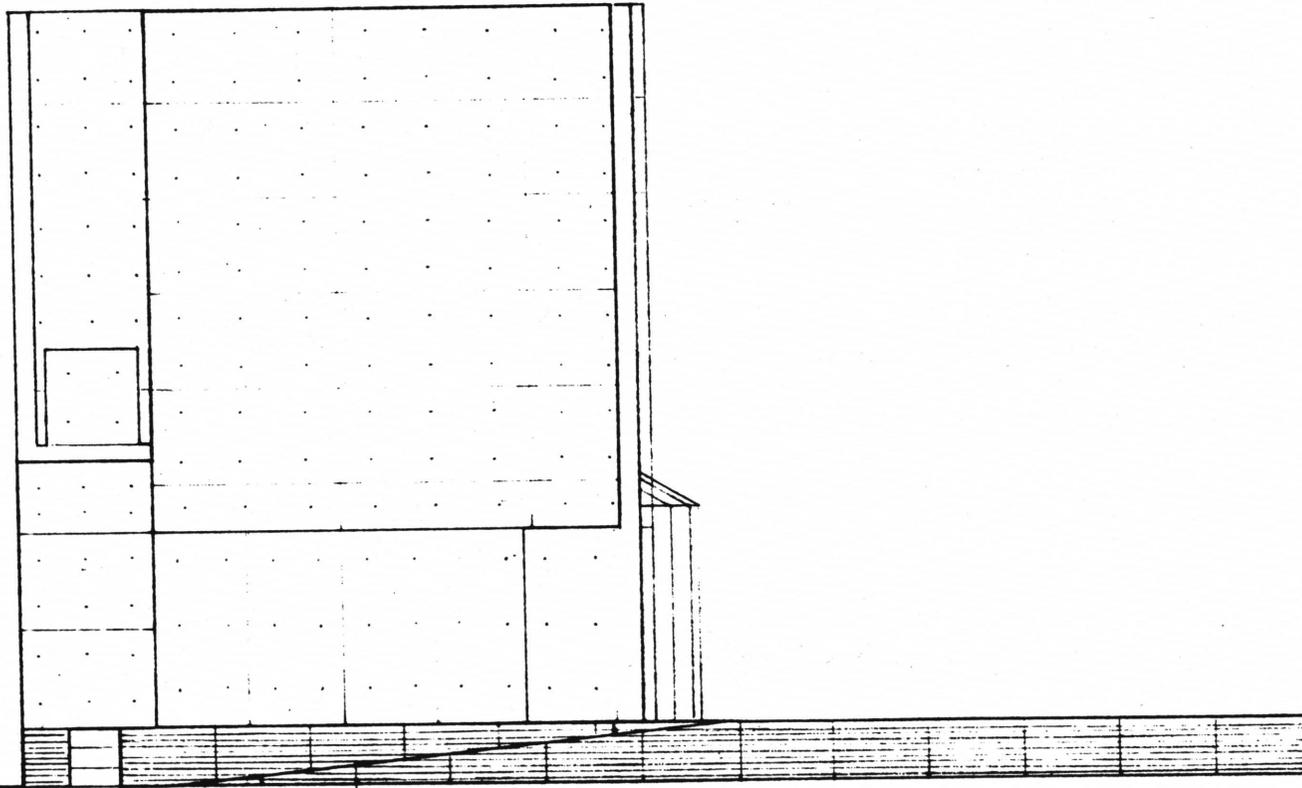
On the second level of the house there are two rooms physically connected to the north wall. These rooms are bridges between the north wall and the main body of the house. In terms of the house as a path, the less remote of these bridge rooms is the study. It is accessible directly from the second floor hallway. The more remote bridge room is accessible only through the bedroom, so in terms of the path of the house it is even more private or remote than the bedroom, except that it is an open terrace leading only to a view back to the beginning of the path of the house. This "room" is really the place where the wall and the house meet. It is the real center of the house, its beginning and end.

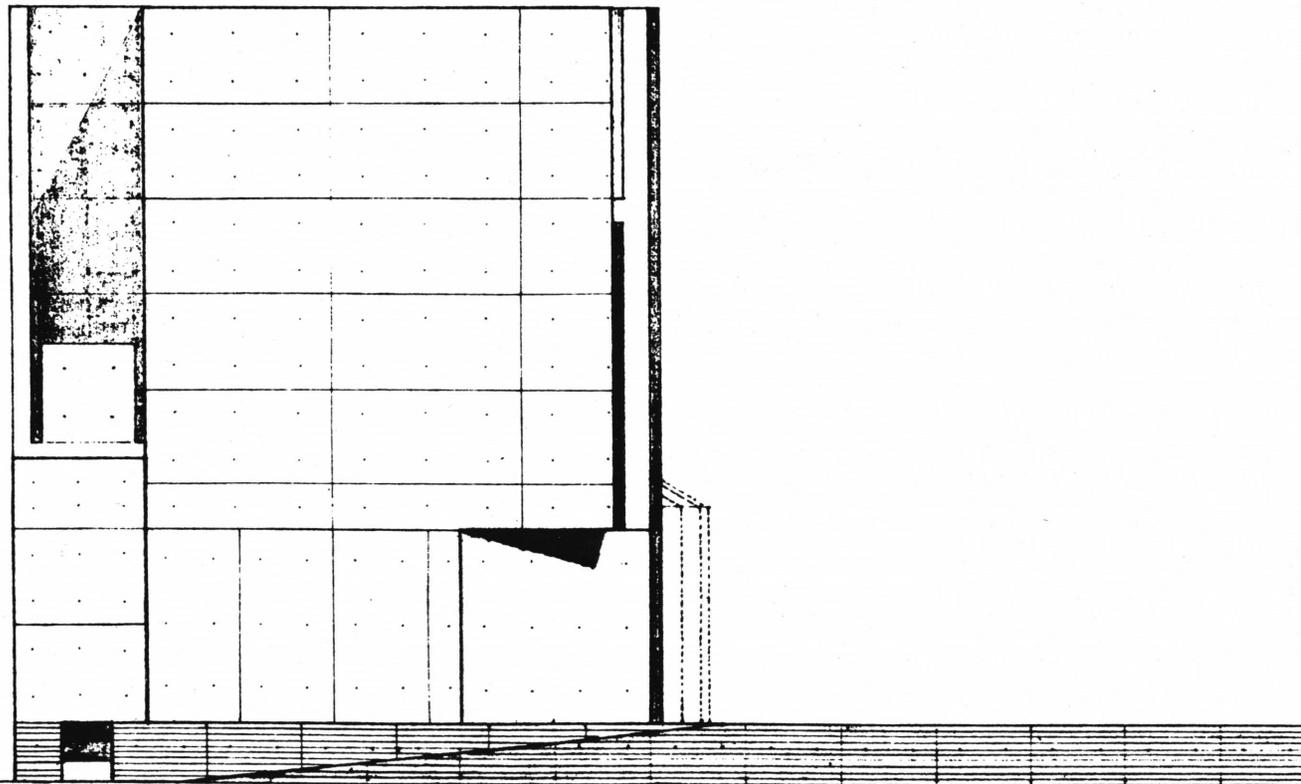
You could also say that the bedroom is the center of the house, which formally is closer to being true. As the center—the point of stillness amid motion—the openings in its four walls are centered and equal. But out of or into the corner of this room, and nearer to the original wall which inspires and is the real ground of the house, emerges the empty terrace. This terrace overlooks the bedroom—the center of the house as an inwardly spiralling path—just as it overlooks the outer beginning of that path. Motion and stillness are one to the terrace. It is the deeper center than the formal center of the house. Structurally it is monolithic with the northern wall, but from within the bedroom it becomes present where the house is broken; where the provisional (infill) walls that demarcate the formal center are suddenly interrupted.

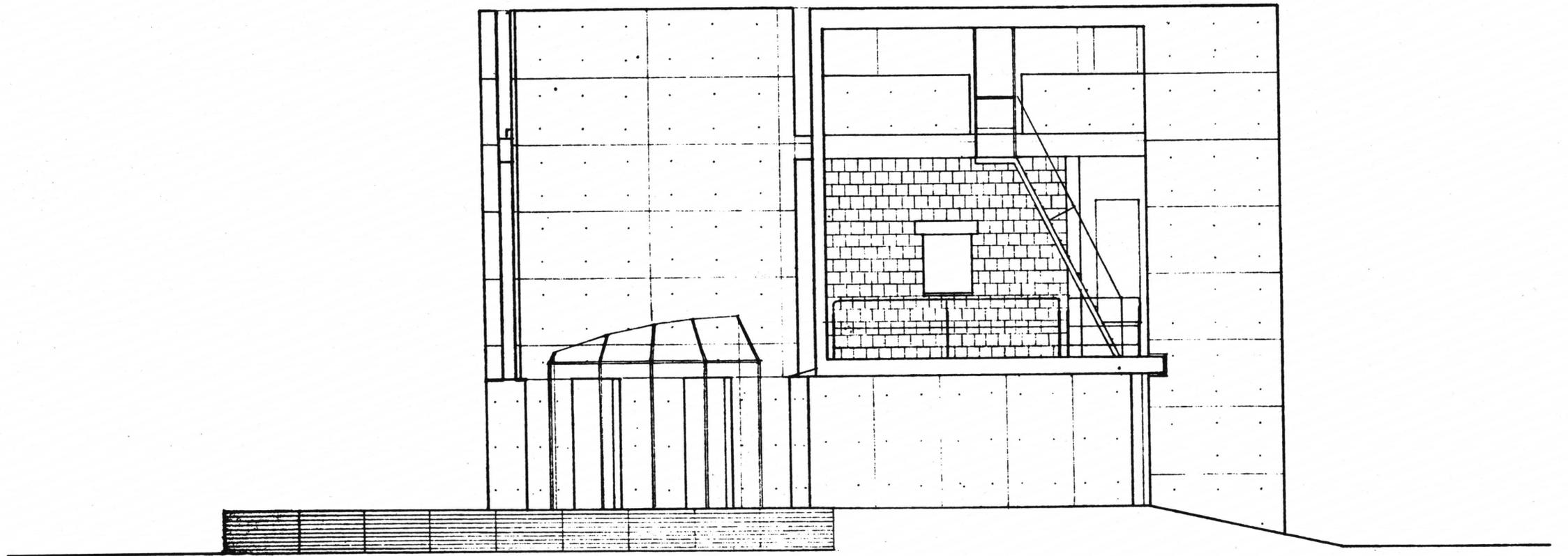
The bridge room that is a terrace can be seen as breaking into the corner of the bedroom as things which are vital but intractable can break into a person's ordered privacy. So, although privacy is an important theme in this house, it is not the ultimate value and the bedroom is not the ultimate room. Neither is the study, though it, too, bridges to the wall. Diagrammatically it is perhaps less significant that the study bridges to the wall than it is that the terrace is reached by way of the bedroom. The terrace meets the house at the end of the path that is the house, as though coming from another direction. It is of the house and not of the house, but not of anything other than the house. The terrace is meant to allude to whatever is more urgent than study and more intimate than sleep.



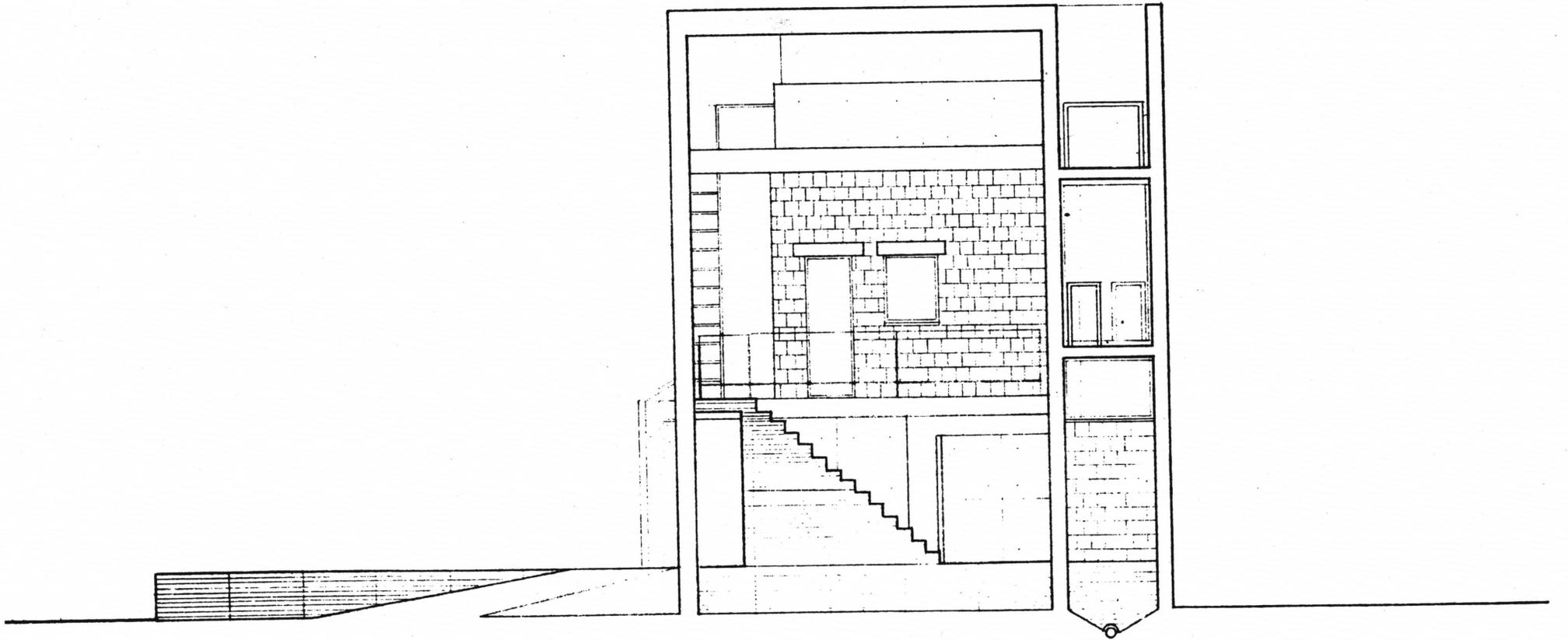
NORTH ELEVATION



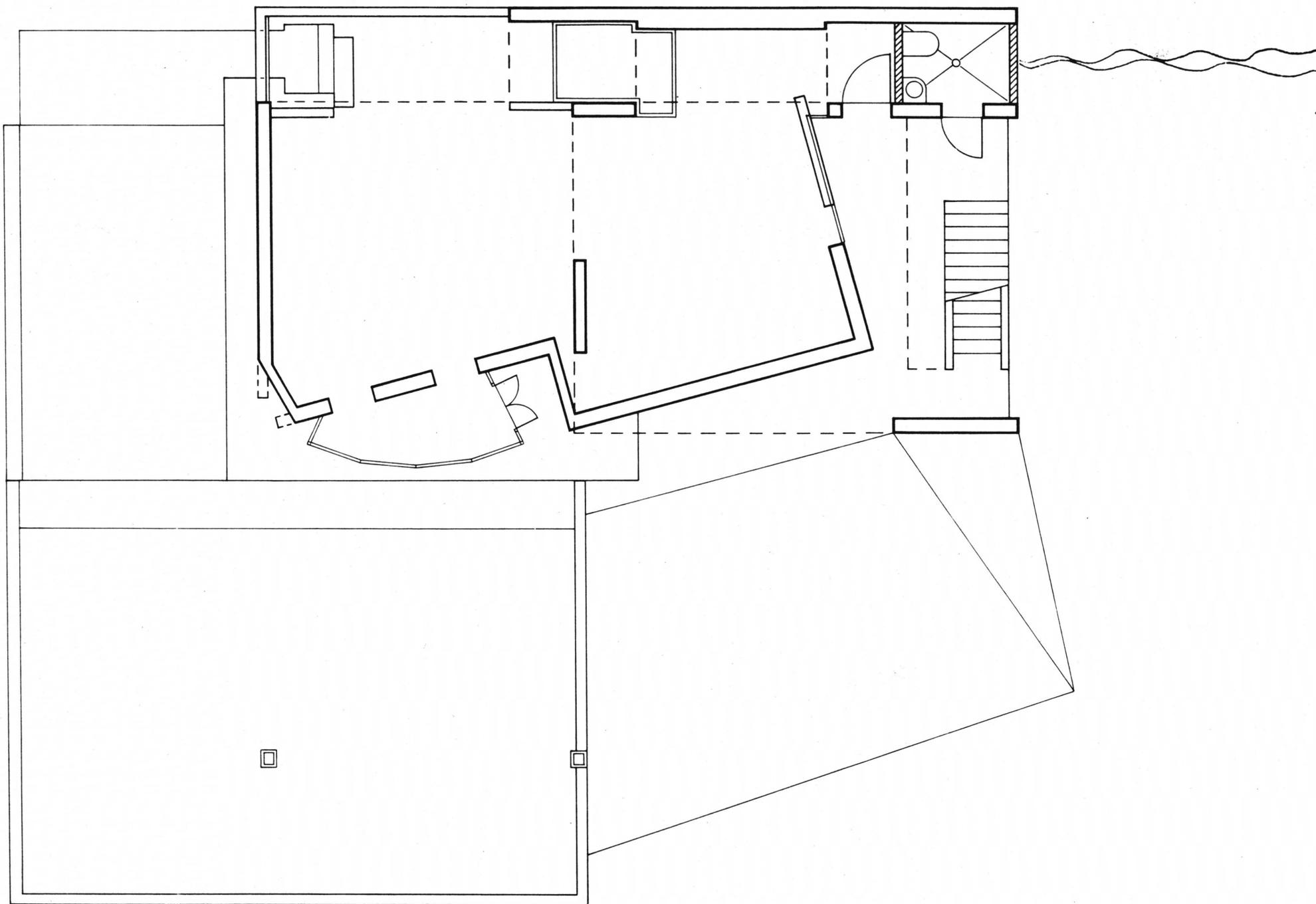




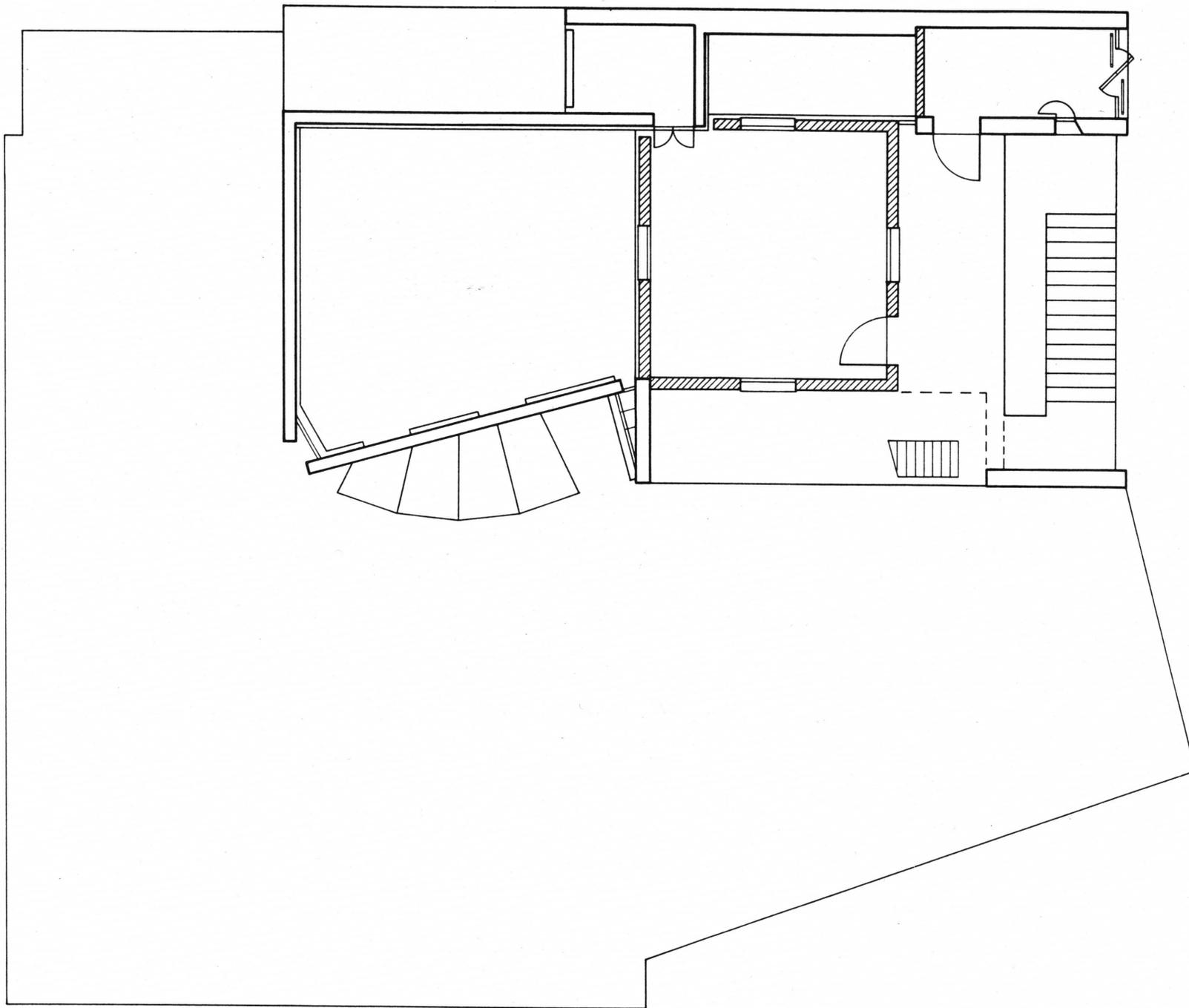
SOUTH ELEVATION



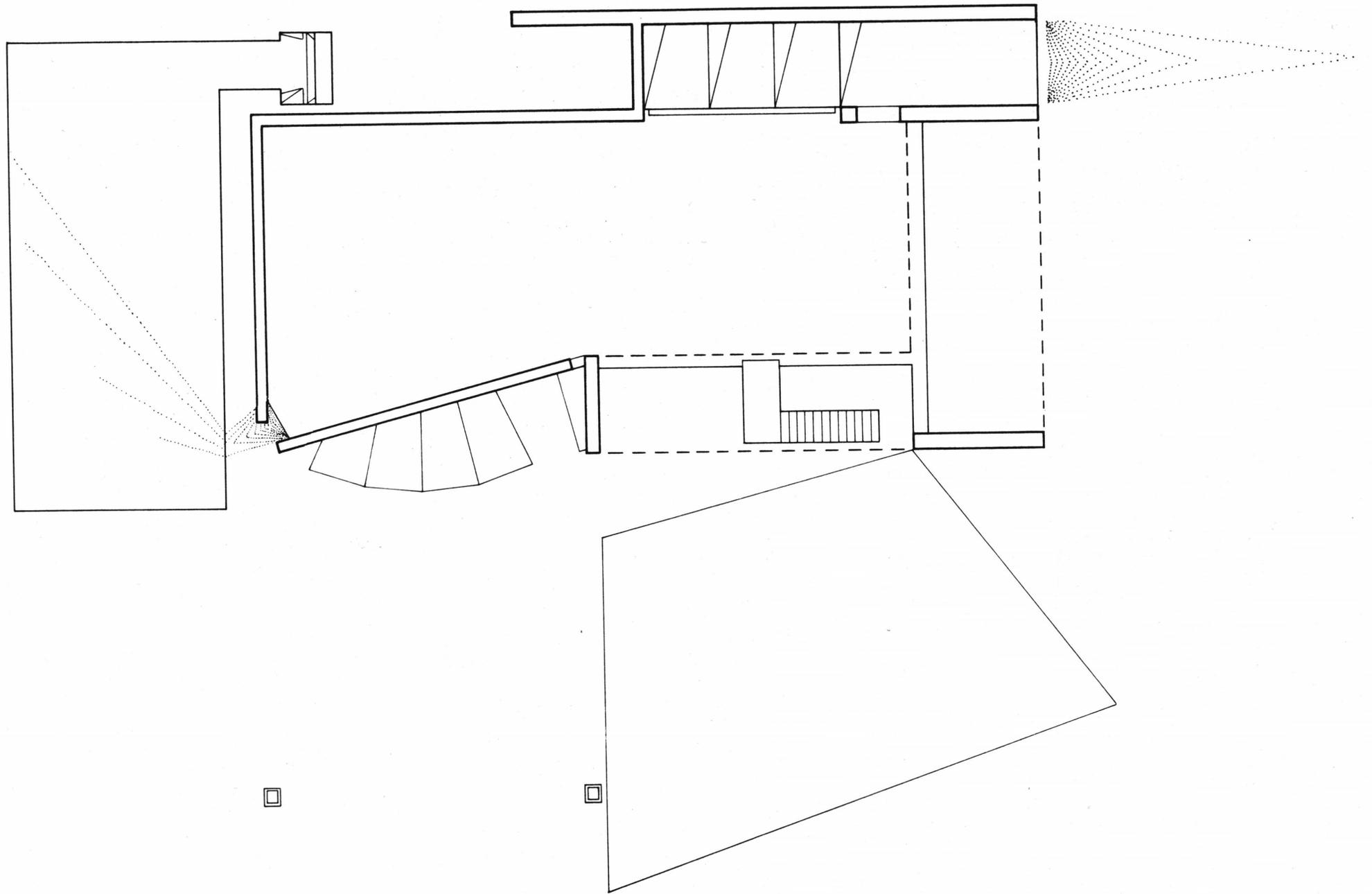
EAST ELEVATION



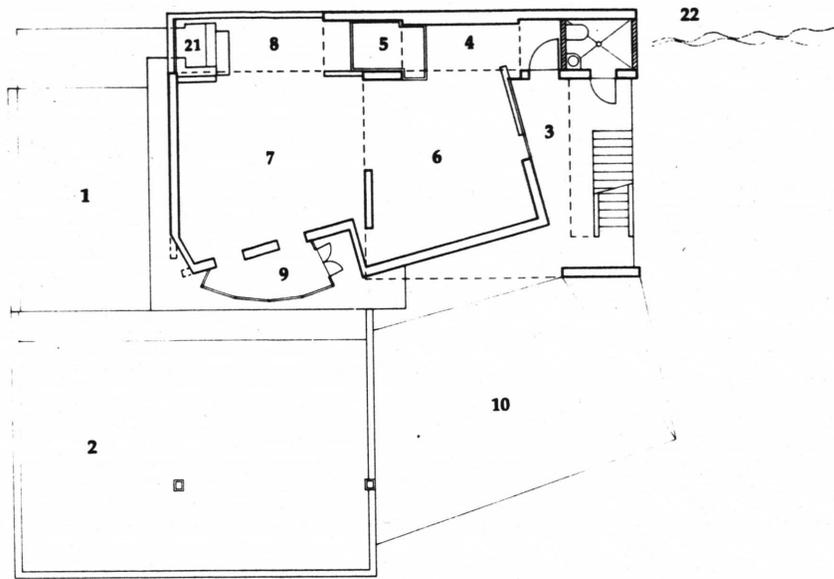
FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

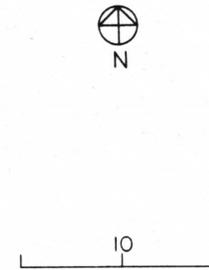


ROOF PLAN; PATH OF WATER

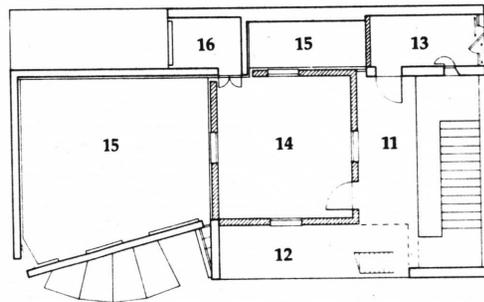


- 1 RAMP UP
- 2 RAISED LAWN
- 3 GALLERY
- 4 LIGHTWELL
- 5 REFLECTING POOL
- 6 ONE-STORY SPACE (GROTTO SPACE)
- 7 TWO-STORY SPACE
- 8 NORTH COURTYARD
- 9 SUN ROOM
- 10 BERM RAMP-DOWN TO FIELD

- 21 STAIRWELL-RAINWATER ENTRANCE
- 22 RAINWATER CHANNEL

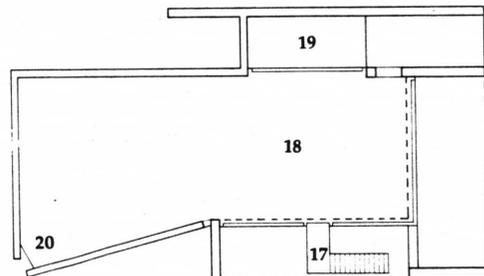


GROUND FLOOR PLAN



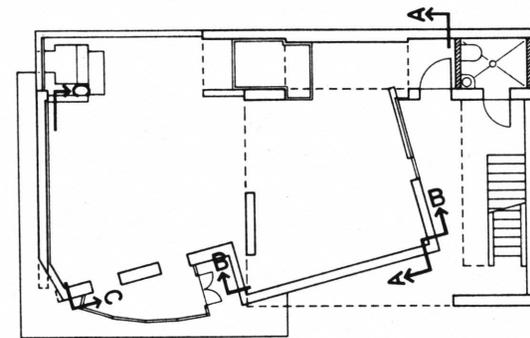
- 11 HALLWAY
- 12 BALCONY
- 13 STUDY
- 14 BEDROOM
- 15 VOID
- 16 TERRACE

SECOND FLOOR PLAN



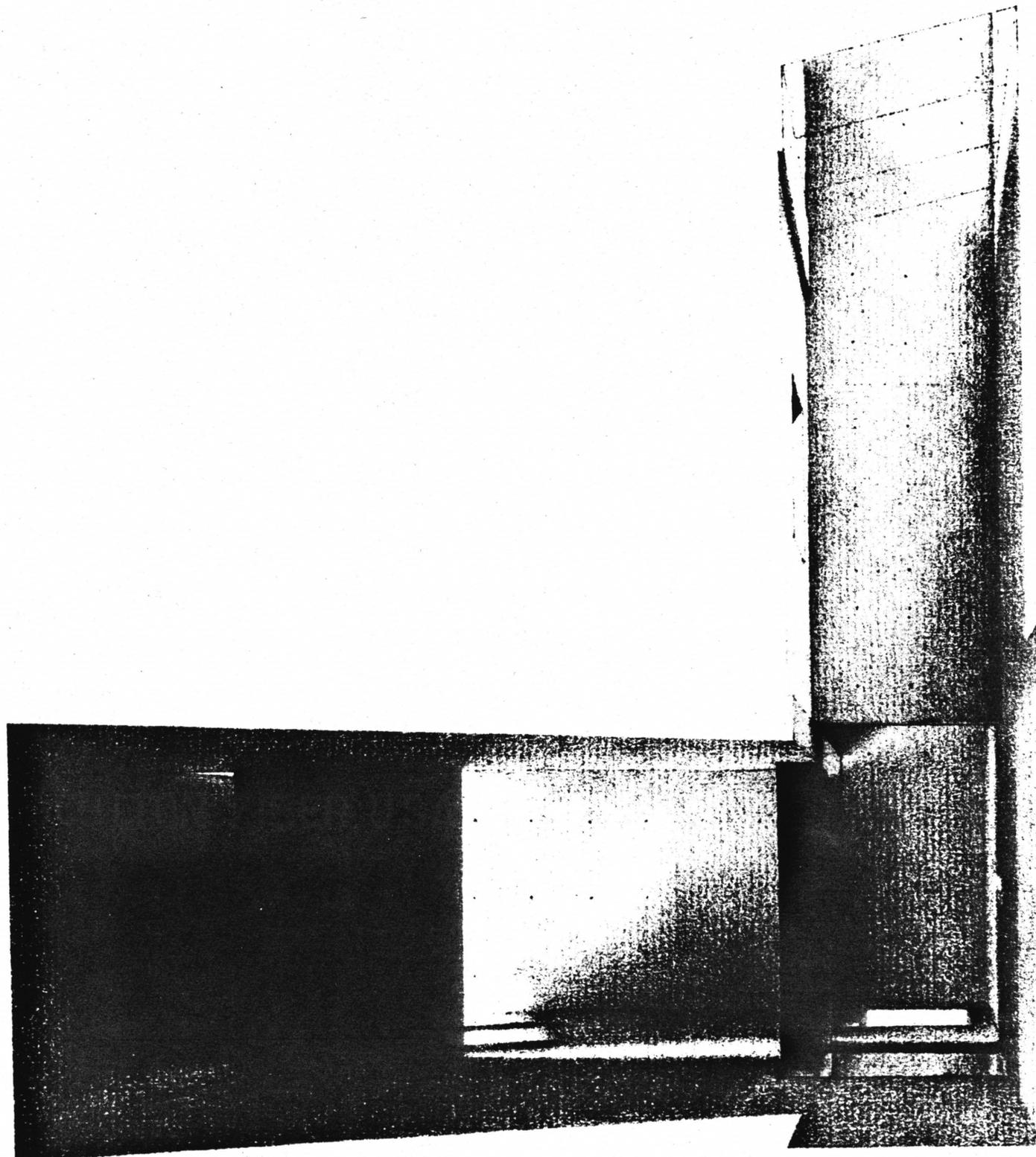
- 17 SHIP'S LADDER
- 18 ROOF
- 19 SKYLIGHT
- 20 WATER EXITS ROOF

ROOF PLAN

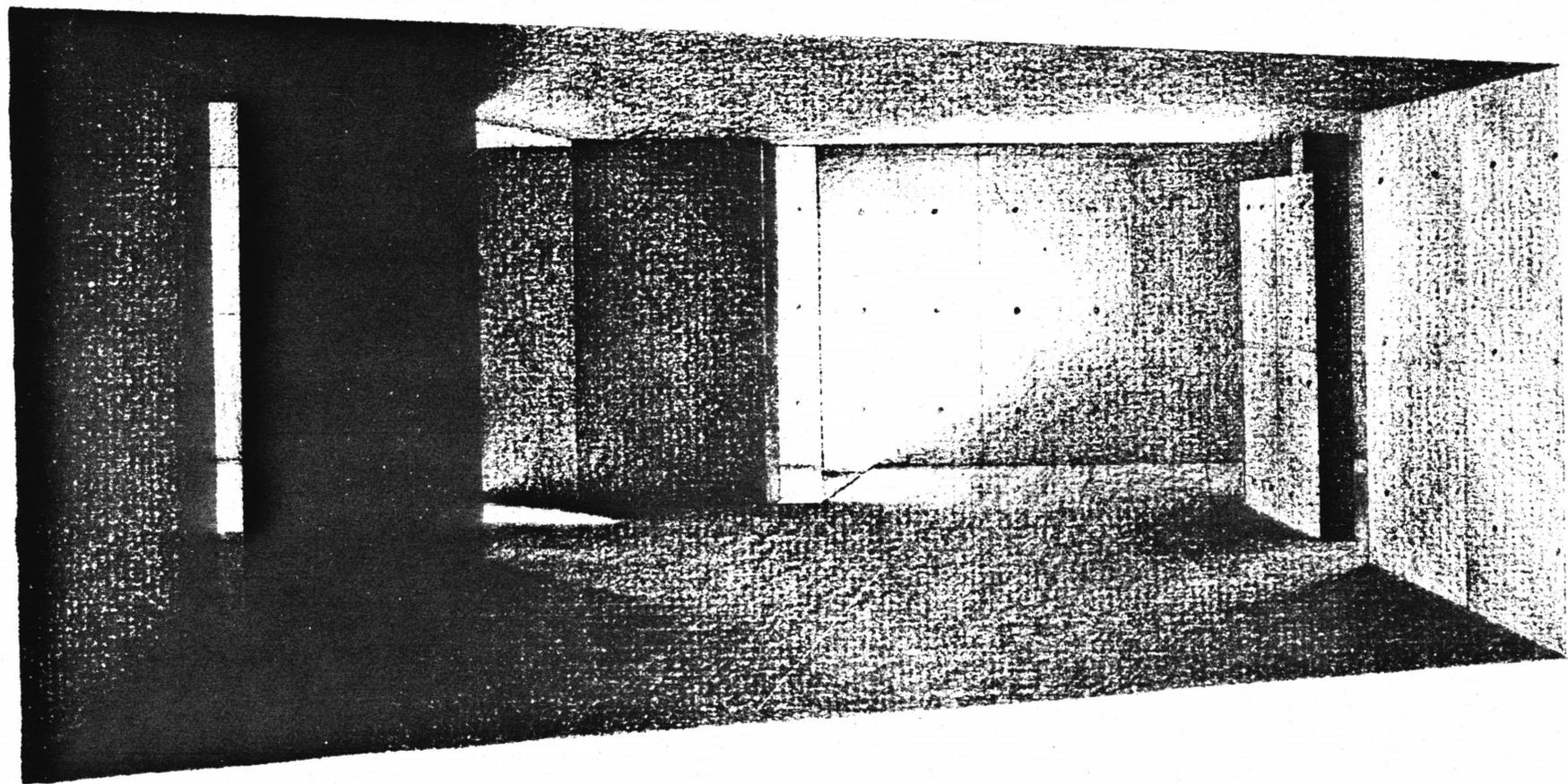


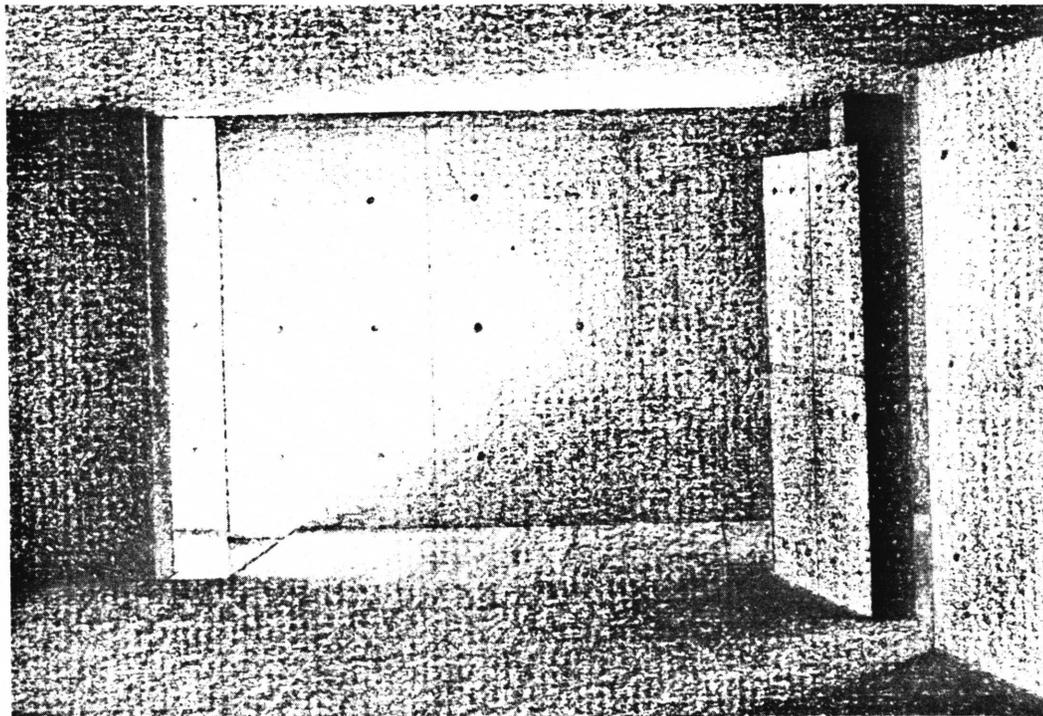
KEY TO PERSPECTIVE SECTIONS

**PERSPECTIVE SECTIONS COLORED
BY LINDA HEINRICH**

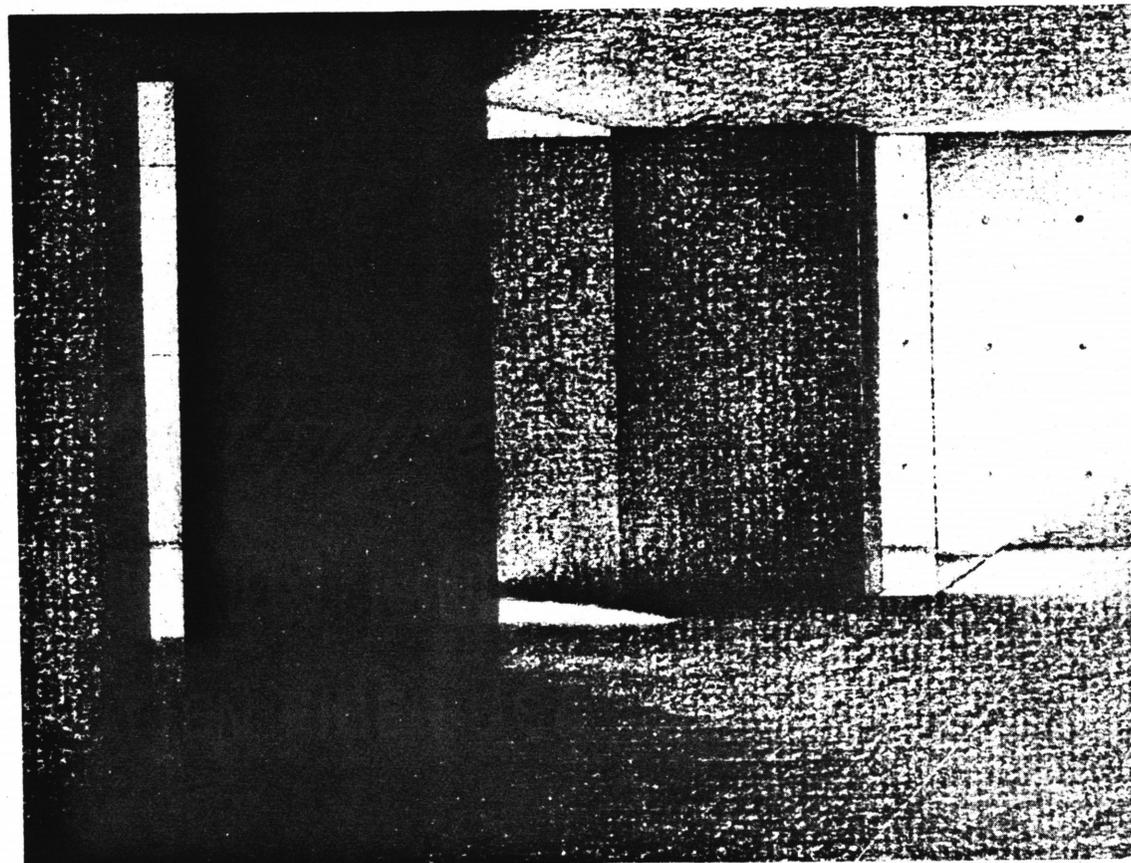


AA

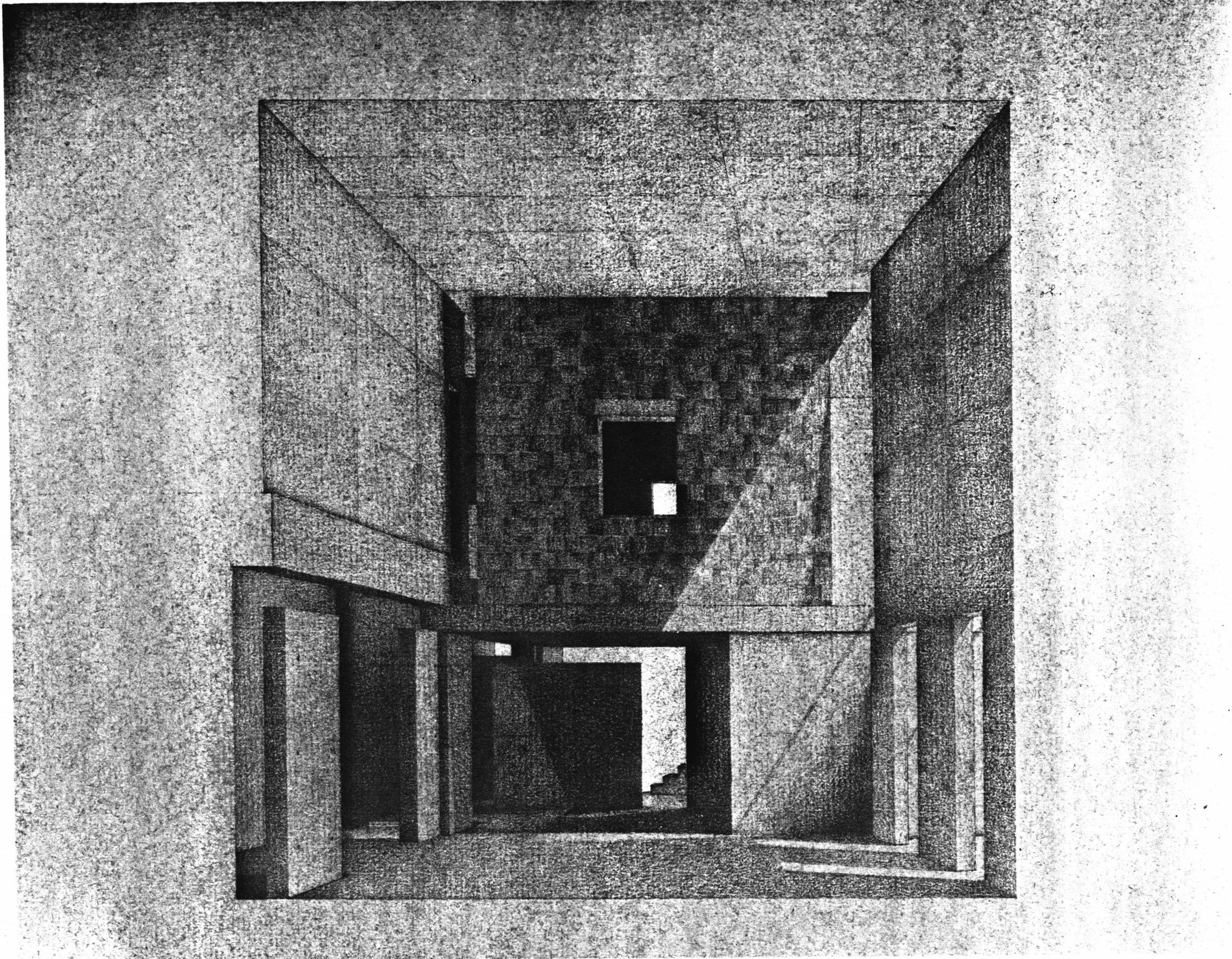


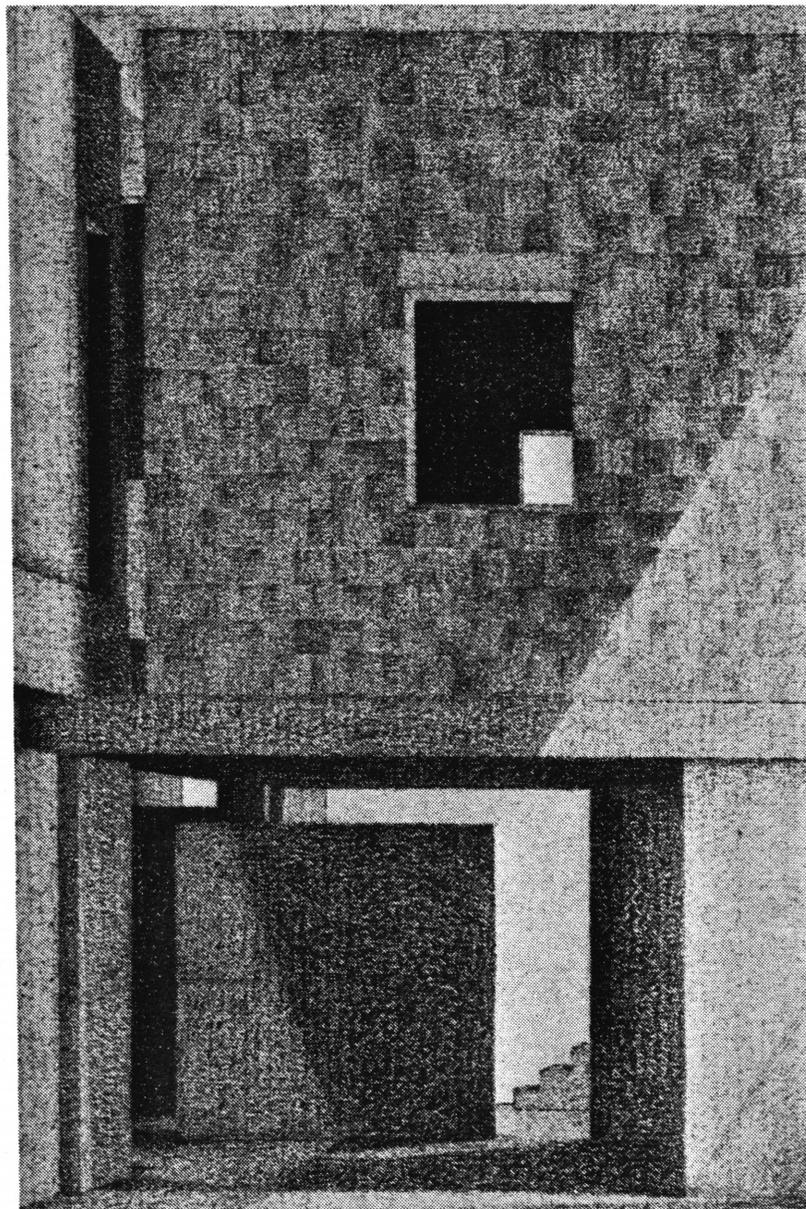


DETAIL: REFLECTING POOL

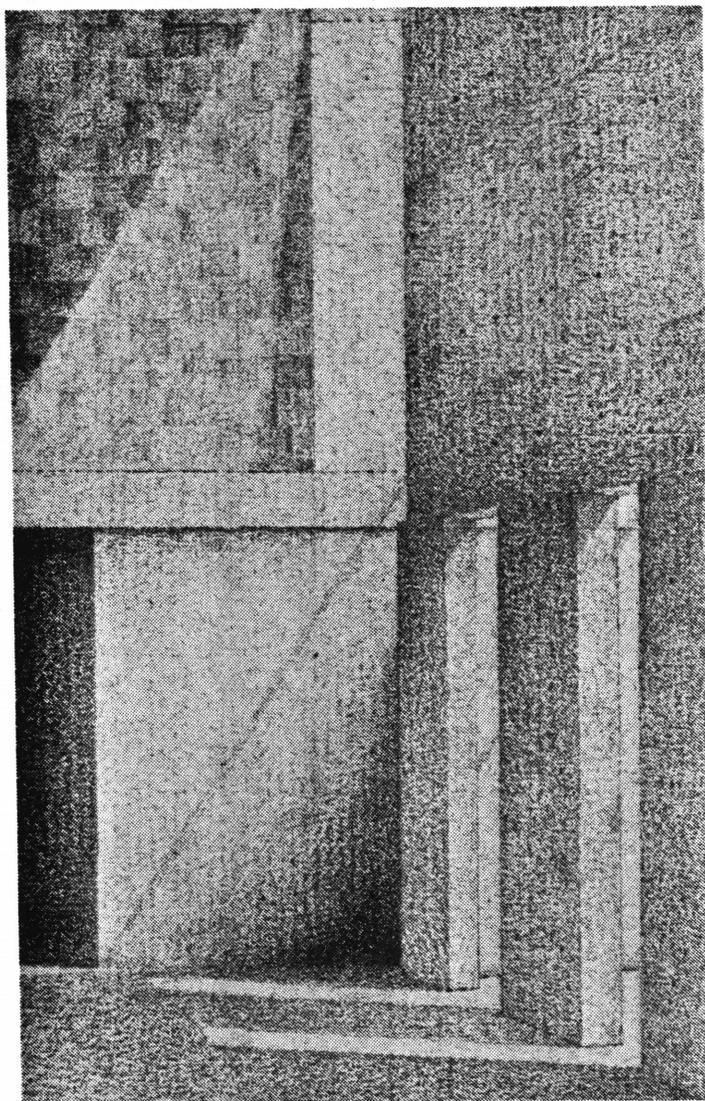


DETAIL: CORNER VIEW

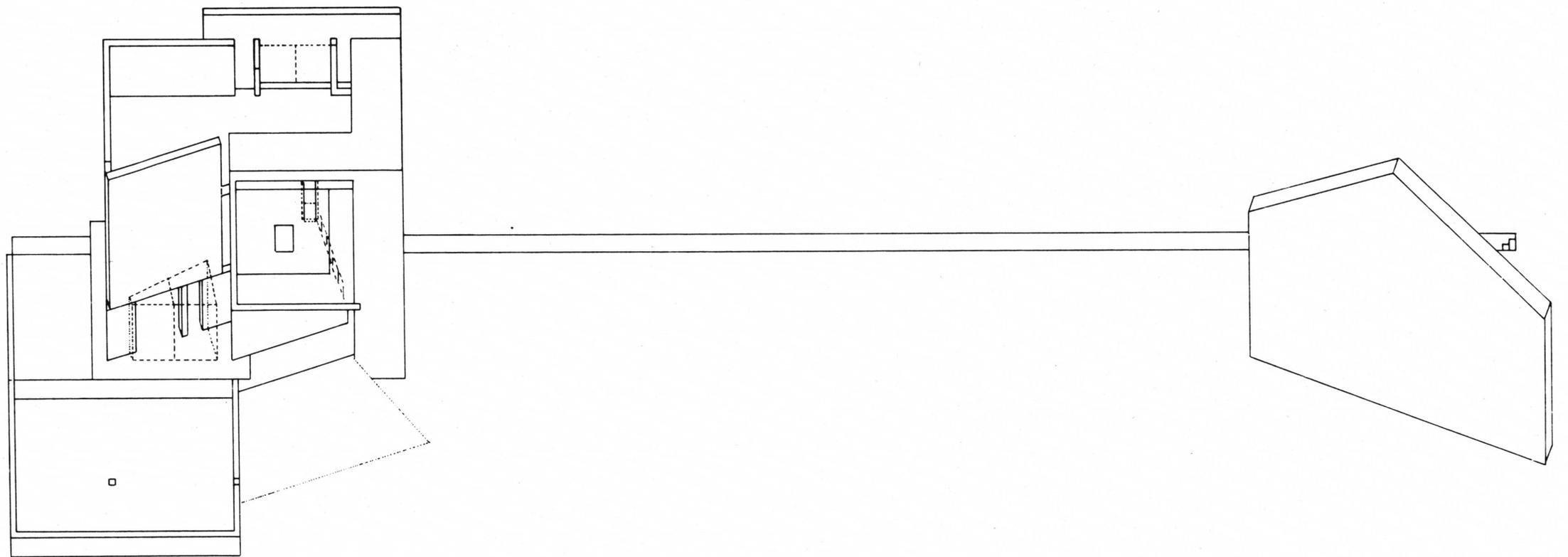


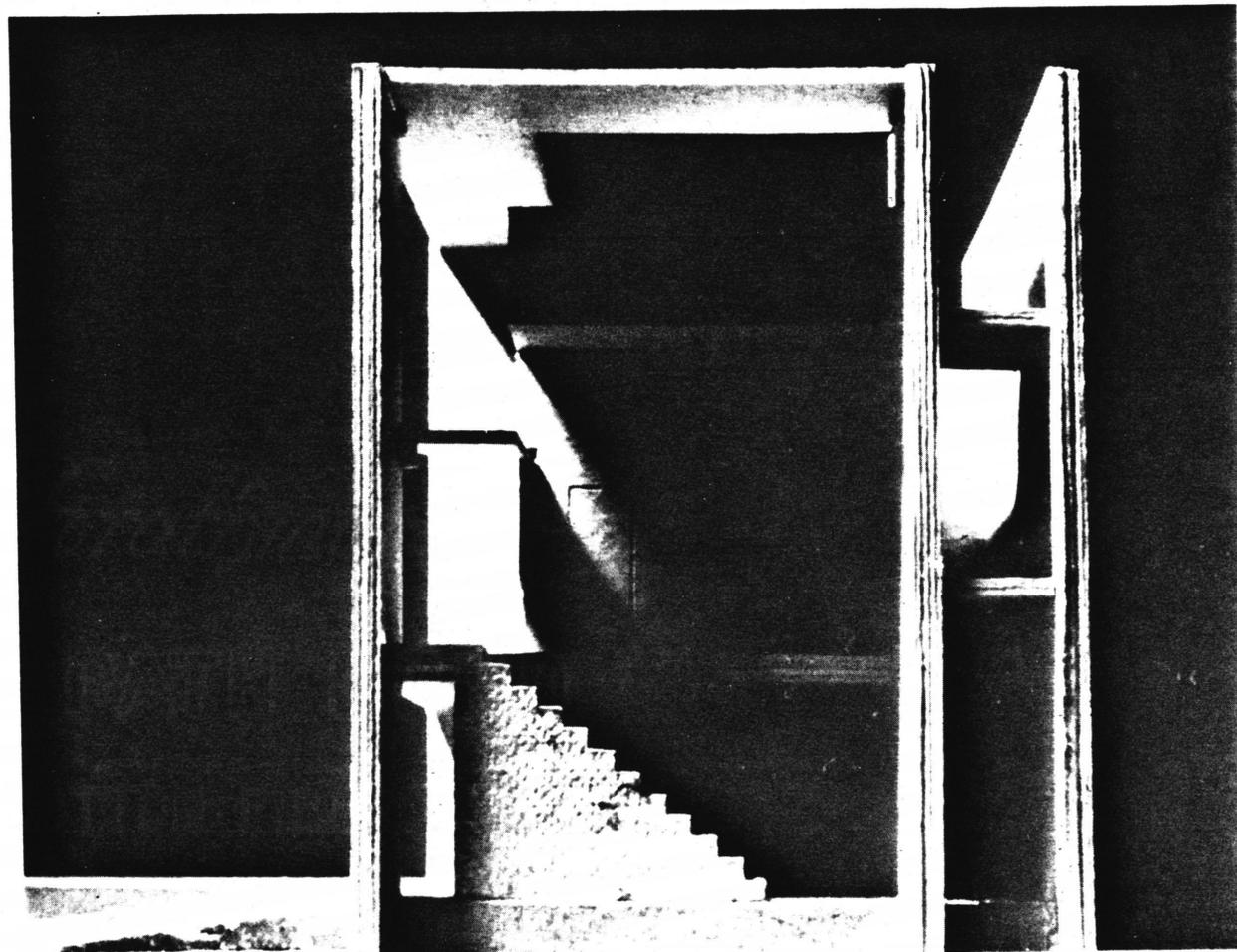
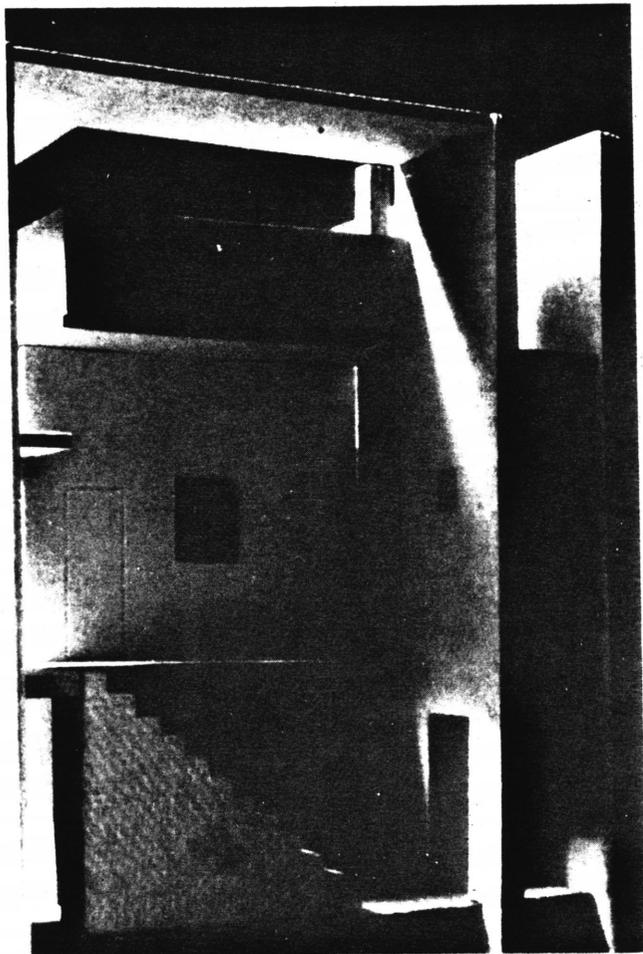


DETAIL: TWO-STORY SPACE

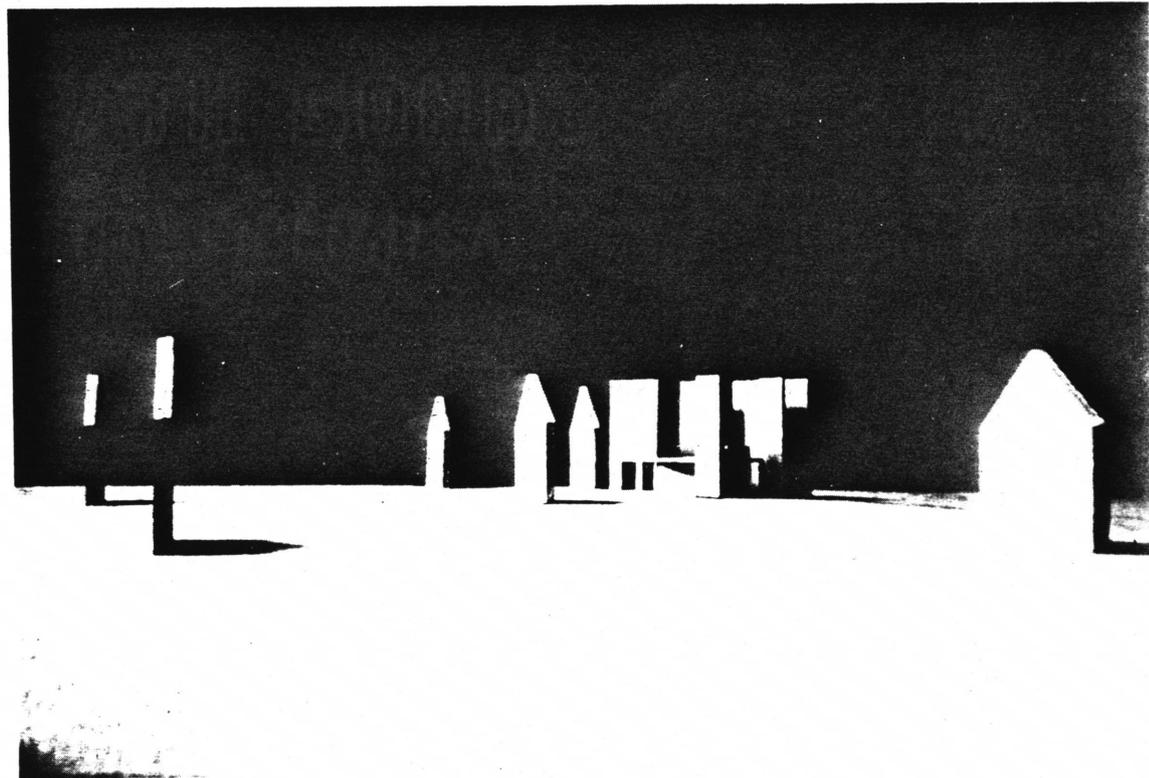
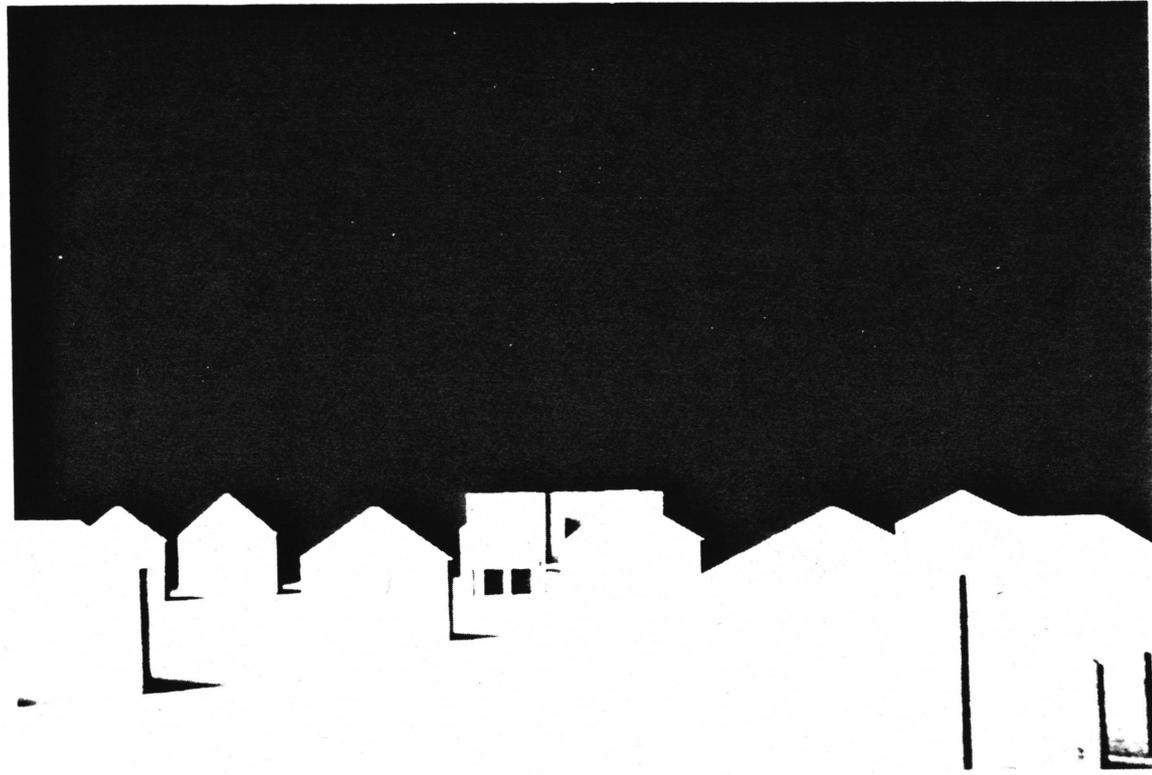


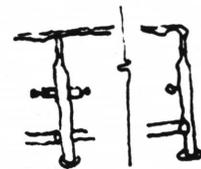
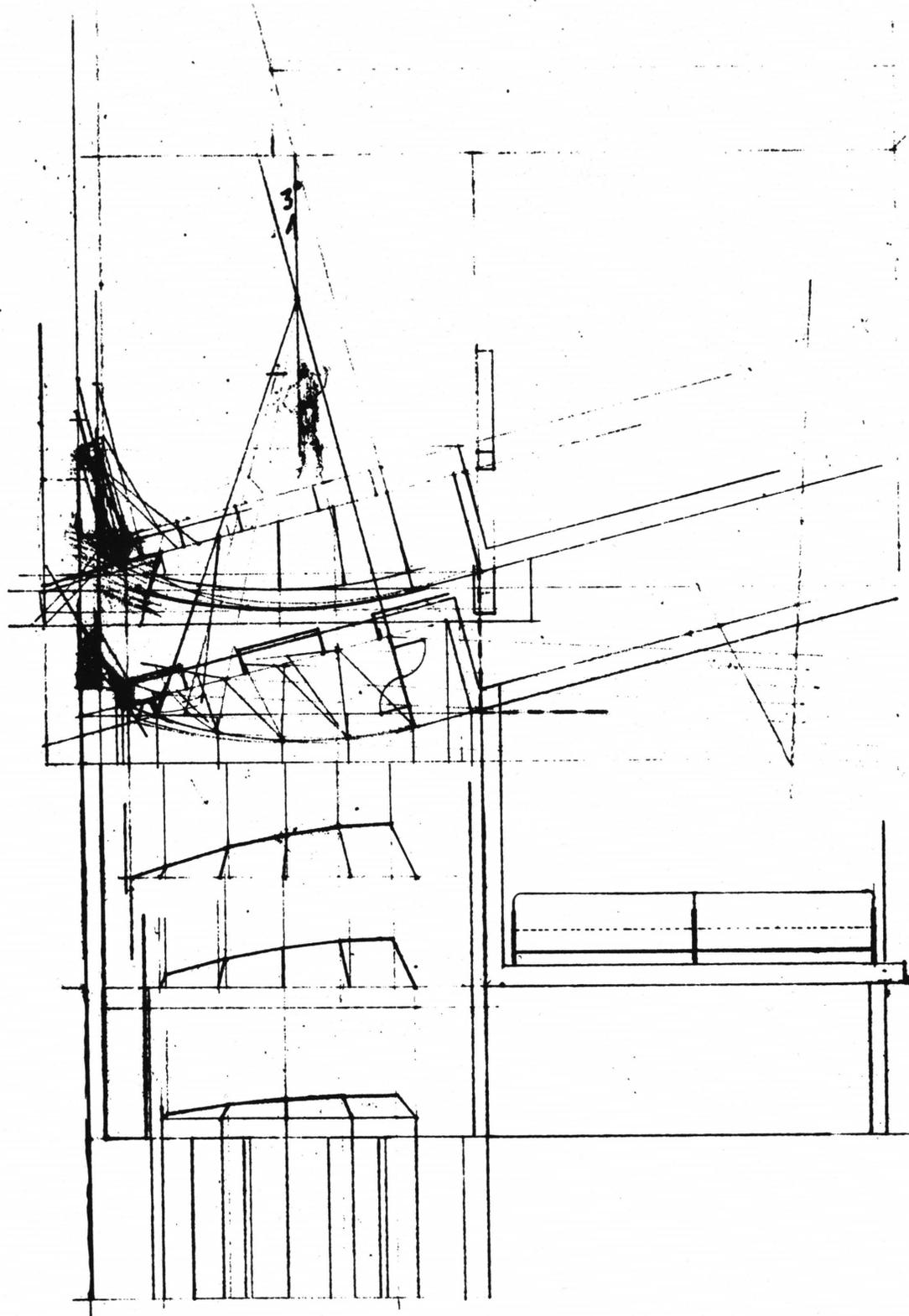
DETAIL: RE-ENTRANCE TO SITE

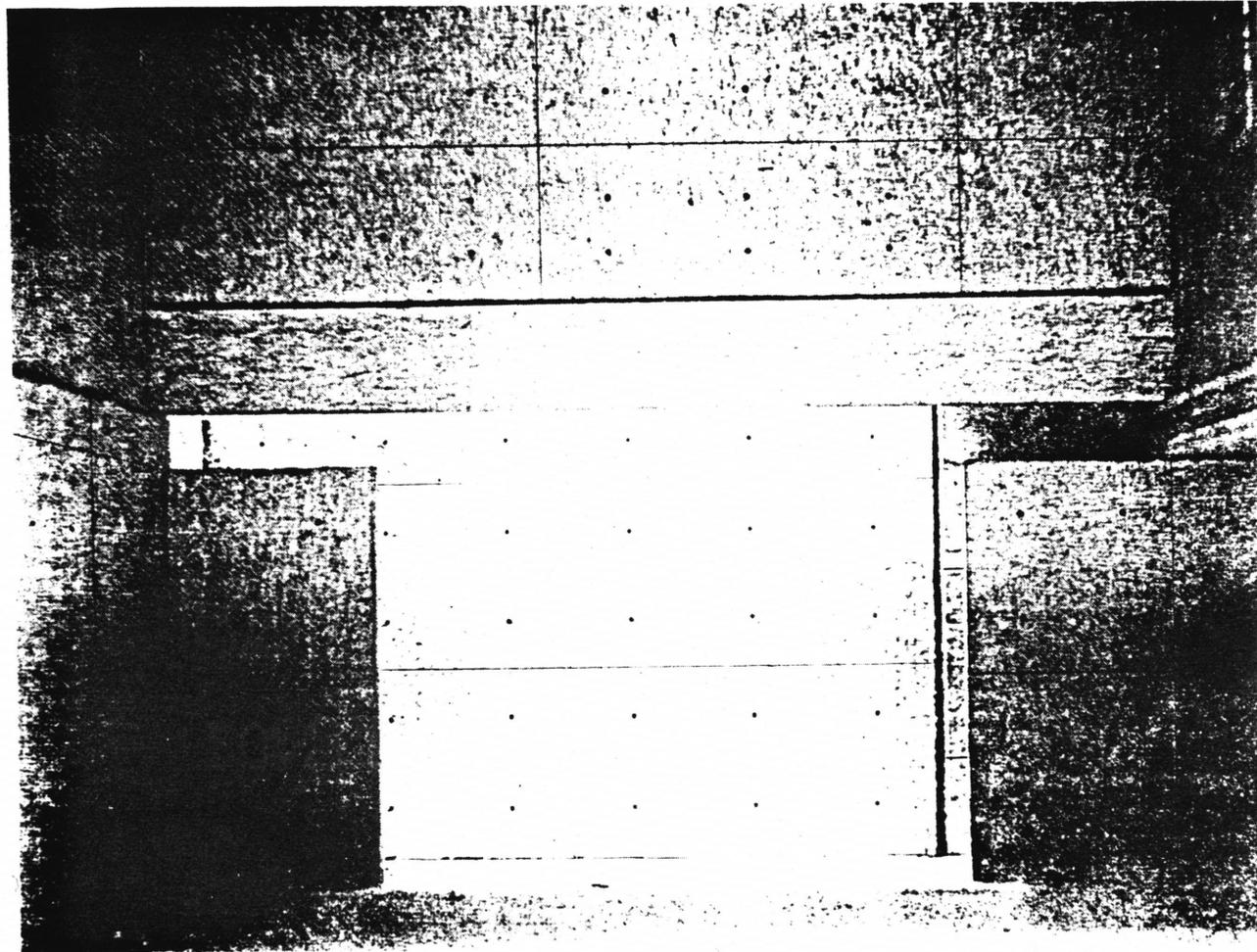




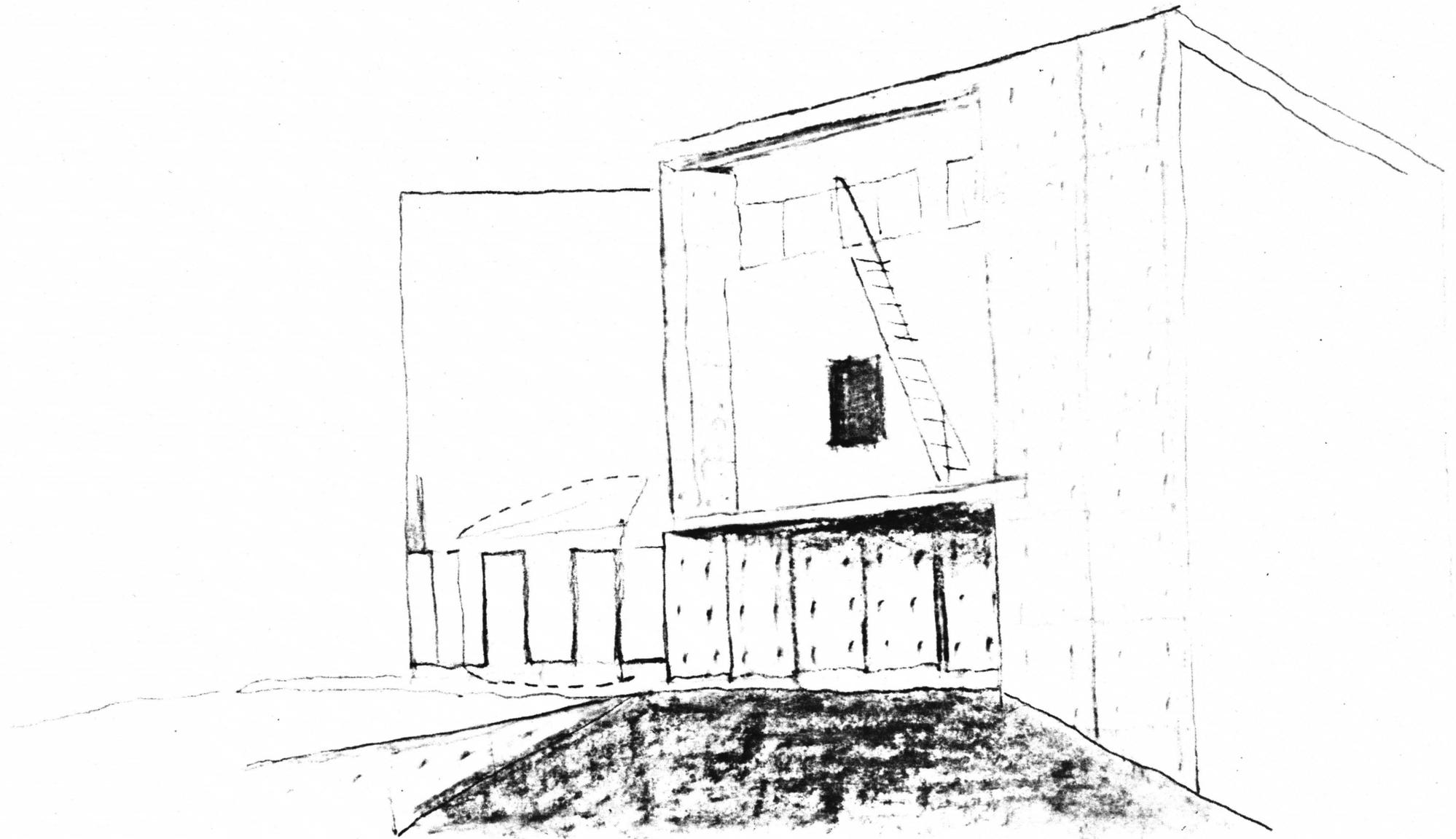
MODEL: EAST ELEVATION







STUDY MODEL: VIEW INTO NORTH COURT



SKETCH: VIEW UP BERM RAMP

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