

**SPIRIT OF PLACE:
DESIGNING WITHIN THE
HISTORIC CONTEXT OF
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA**

By

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MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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(ABSTRACT)

The investigation of the Spirit of a historic place, Alexandria, Virginia, to acquire an understanding of its identity; the unique patterns, language, structure, rhythm, and character, which has led to its development as a meaningful place.

To respect the Spirit of this place through the design of a place to dwell within Alexandria which is sensitive to, and evolves from, this living tradition.

An architecture which achieves meaning through its relation to, and reinterpretation, transformation, and revelation of the inherent qualities of the historic artifact.

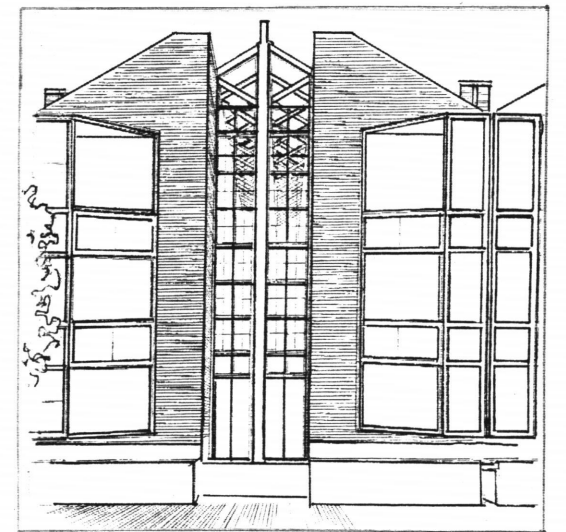
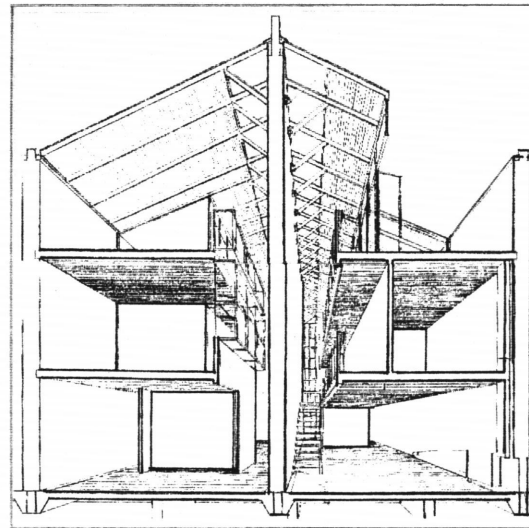
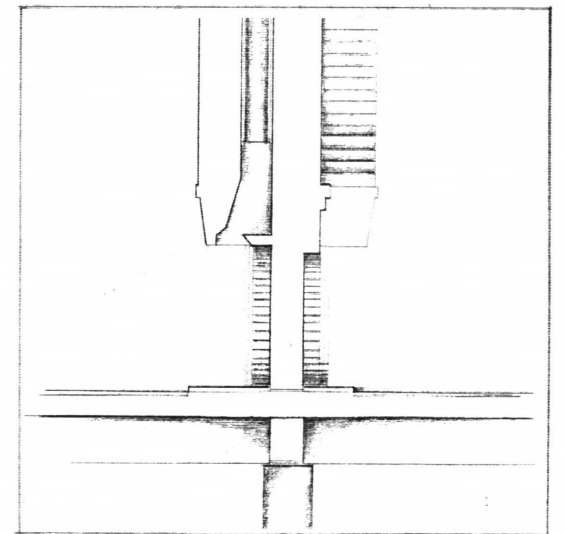
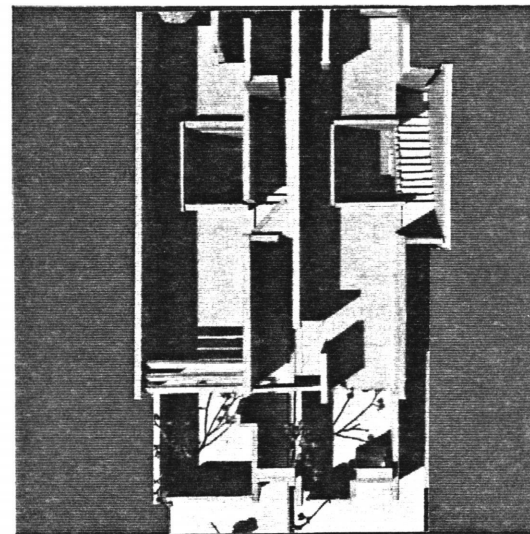
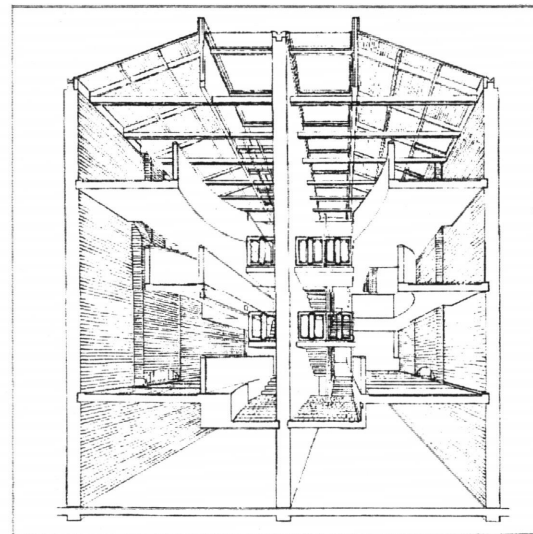
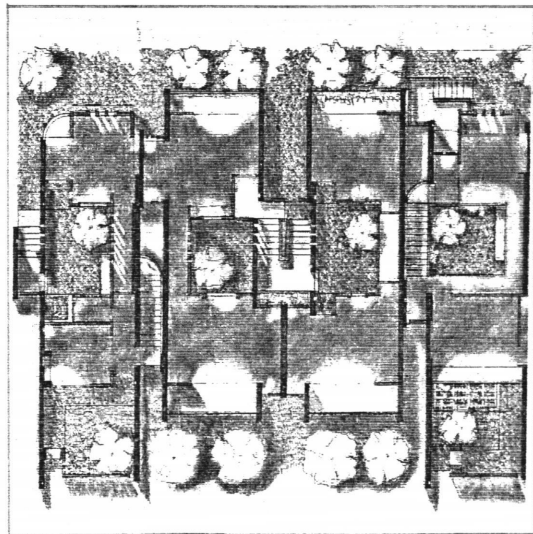


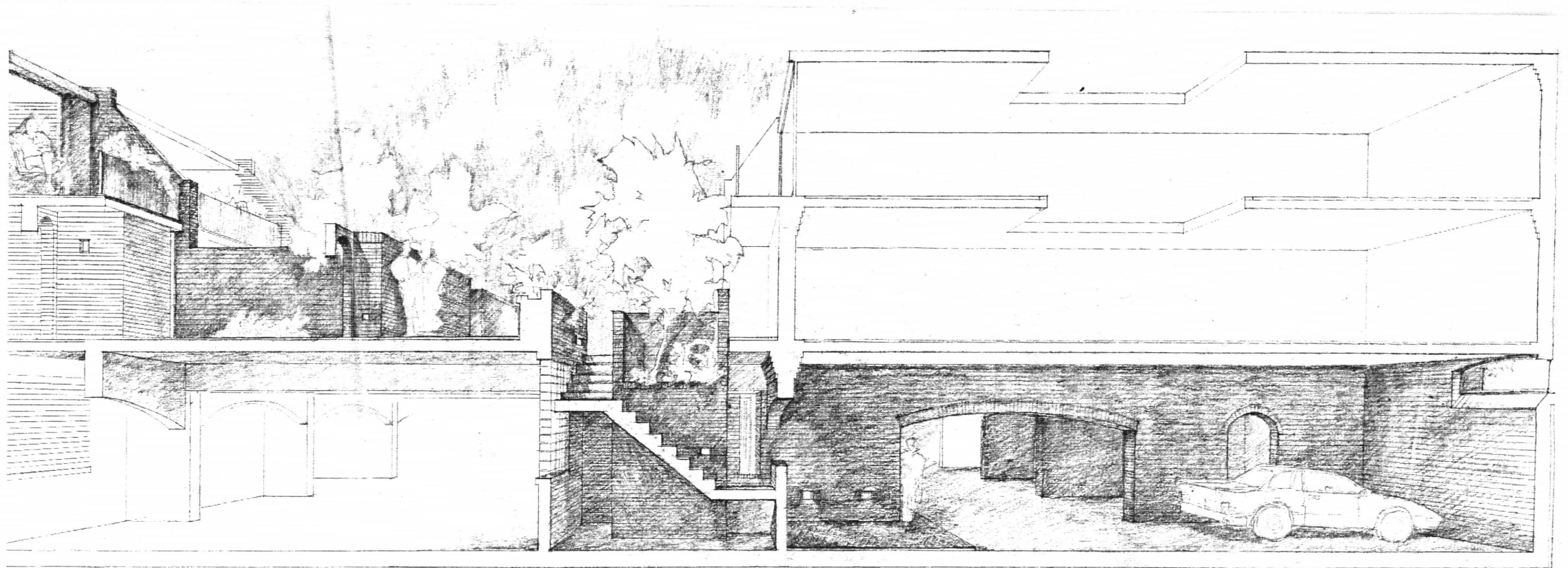
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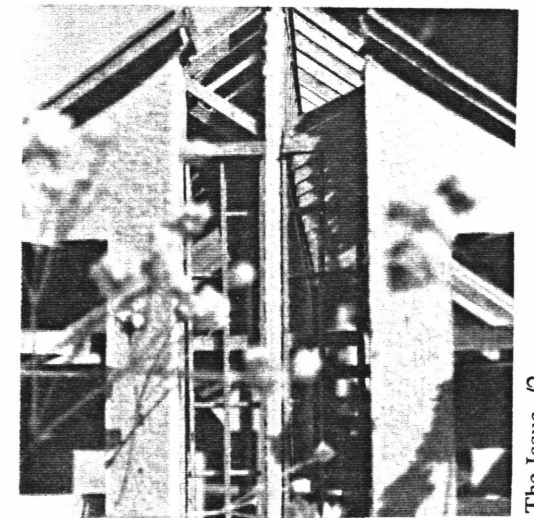
"A loss of place deprives man of one of his most basic needs: a meaningful environment. We have every reason to believe that the human alienation so common today, to a high extent is due to the scarce possibilities of orientation and identification offered by the modern environment." Meaning is a psychic function. It depends on identification, and implies a sense of "belonging". It therefore constitutes the basis of dwelling. We ought to repeat that man's most fundamental need is to experience his existence as meaningful...to respect the spirit of a place does not mean to copy old models. It means to determine the identity of the place and to interpret it in ever new ways. Only then may we talk about a living tradition which makes change meaningful by relating it to a set of locally founded parameters".

Christian Norberg-Schultz
Genius Loci



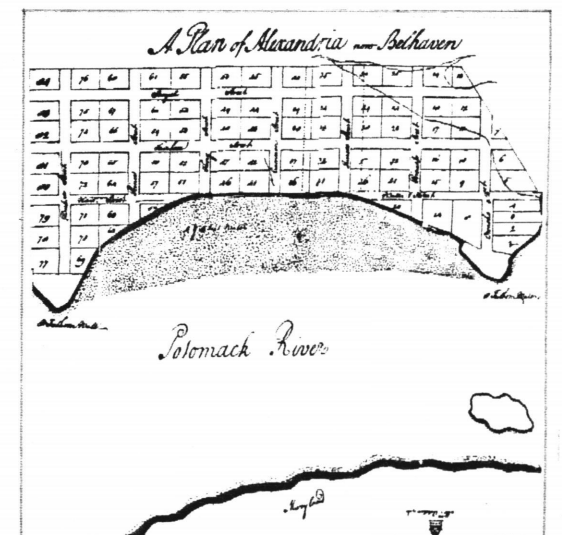
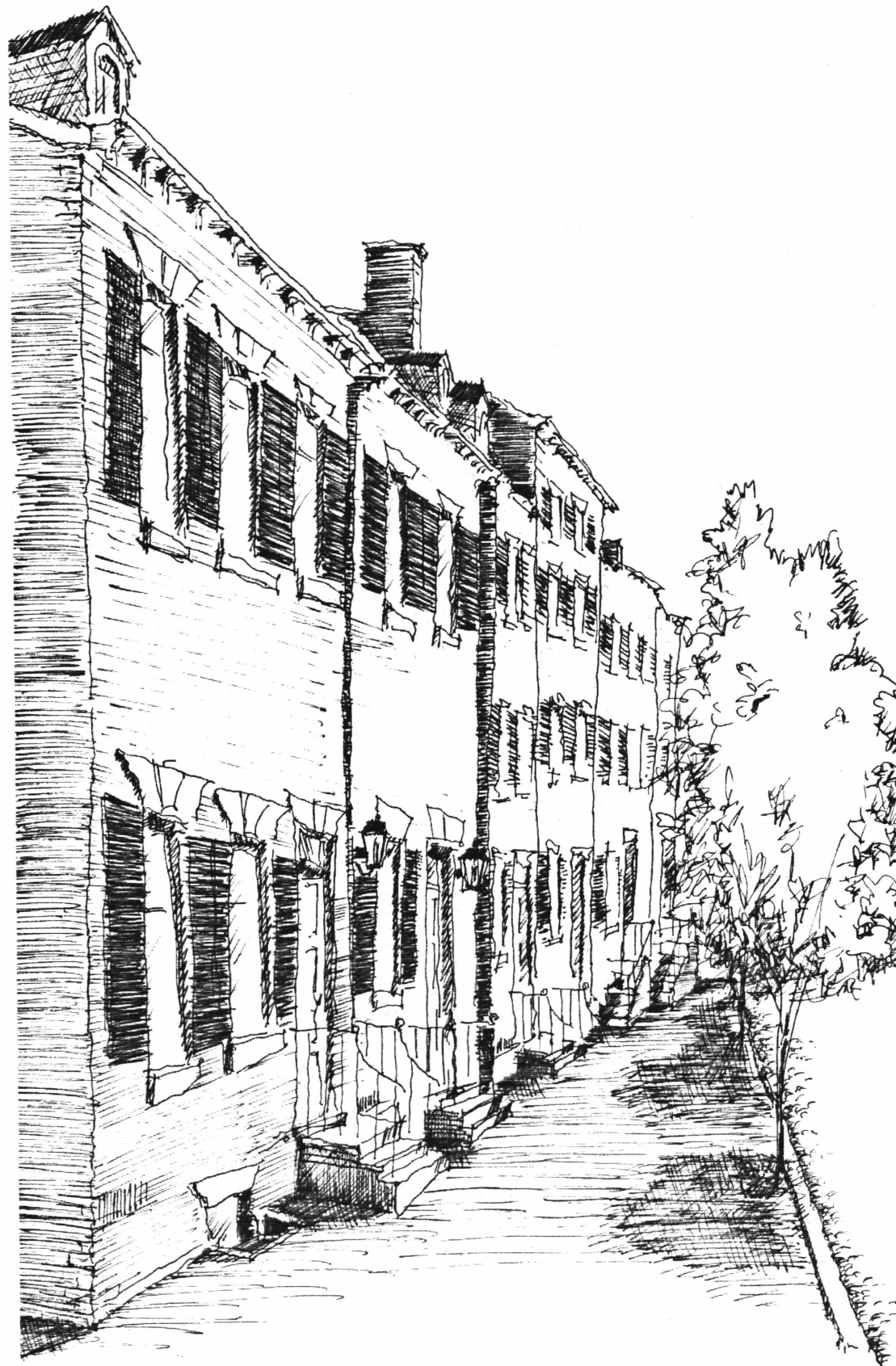
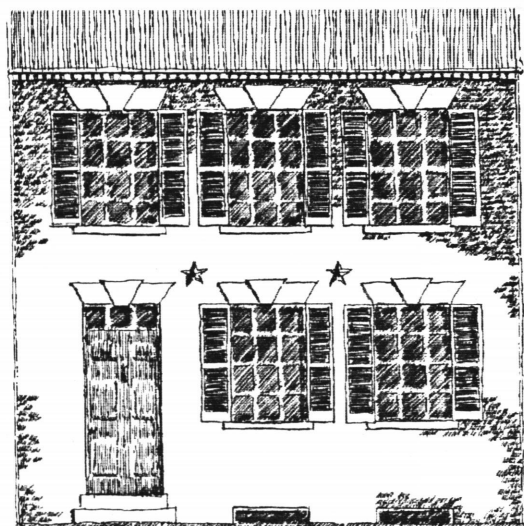
THE ISSUE: LOSS OF PLACE

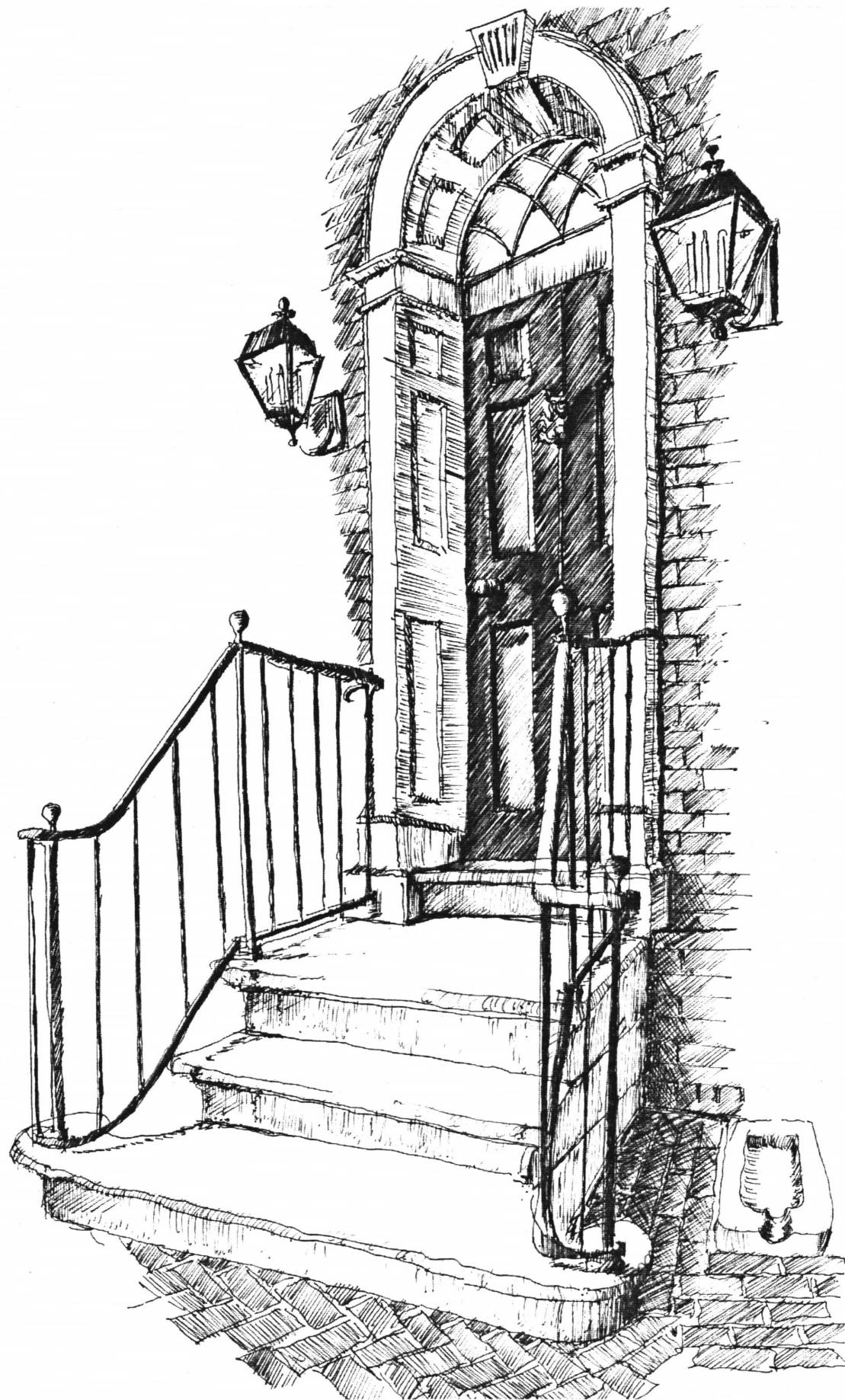
The thesis began with a concern for the clearly apparent loss of place which our society is experiencing in its new man made environment. In discussing this "modern dilemma", Christian Norberg-Schultz writes that "after the second world war most places have been subjected to profound changes. The qualities which have traditionally distinguished human settlements have been corrupted or have got irreparably lost. Reconstructed or new towns also look very different from the places of the past." He goes on to say that "although a general order may be present, it usually does not bring about any sense of place. The changes done to already existing towns have analogous effects. The urban tissue is "opened up", the continuity of "walls" is interrupted, and the coherence of the urban spaces damaged. As a consequence, nodes, paths, and districts lose their identity, and the town as a whole its imaginability." Places are particular, and possess a unique character and quality inherent to themselves. The notion of real places with individual character begins with the "premise that the architect particularizes. He discerns special patterns of human activity, and organizes movement. He develops a clarifying pattern, a design to which the whole process of building is subjected. Within this pattern there must be a controlling image that gives people the chance to know where they are-in space, in time, and in the order of things. People must have something to be in. Thus the fundamental principle of architecture is territorial. The architect assembles physical materials from which the observer creates not just an image of a building but of "place".



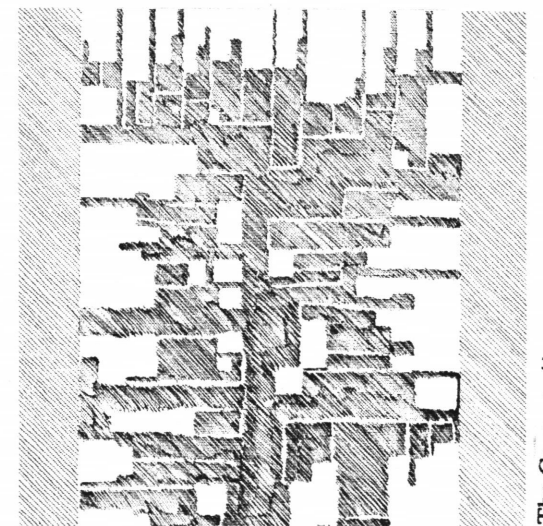
THE CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING A PLACE

At the outset of the design process, Old Town Alexandria was studied to better understand its unique characteristics and rules which have led to its evolution as a strong historic place. This investigation became the point of departure for the thesis itself, not with the intention to duplicate the existing fabric of Alexandria, but in order to acquire enough insight of what has come before to determine an appropriate architectural response. Alexandria was originally organized on a grid plan consisting of city blocks of two acres each. These blocks have a particular pattern and set of rules which they ascribe to. Each block was originally 245 feet from east to west, and 350 feet from north to south. Originally divided into four equal parcels, the blocks were later subdivided into smaller plots as the town grew in size. The first row houses were constructed on these plots, built adjacent to one another, and placed close to the street line. The streets followed a set of rules in their arrangement and relationship to the houses. The row houses were typically two and three stories in height and quite narrow in their width, held tightly against the narrow sidewalks.





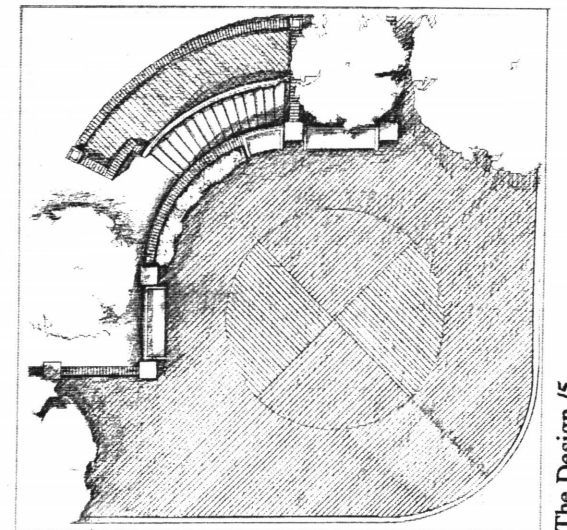
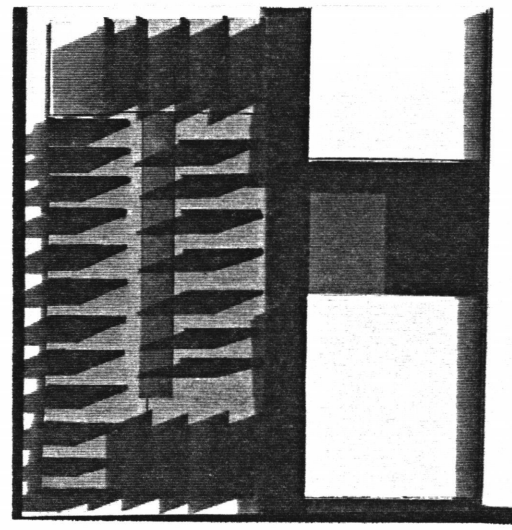
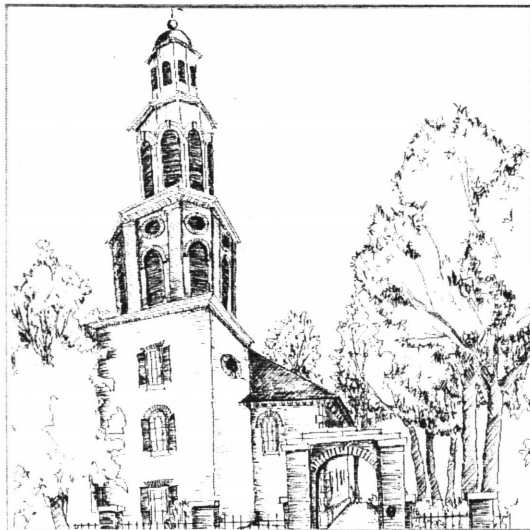
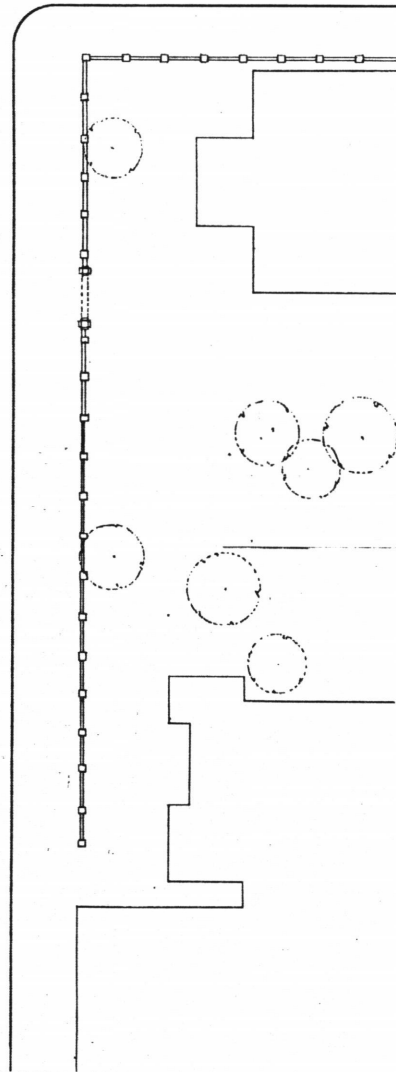
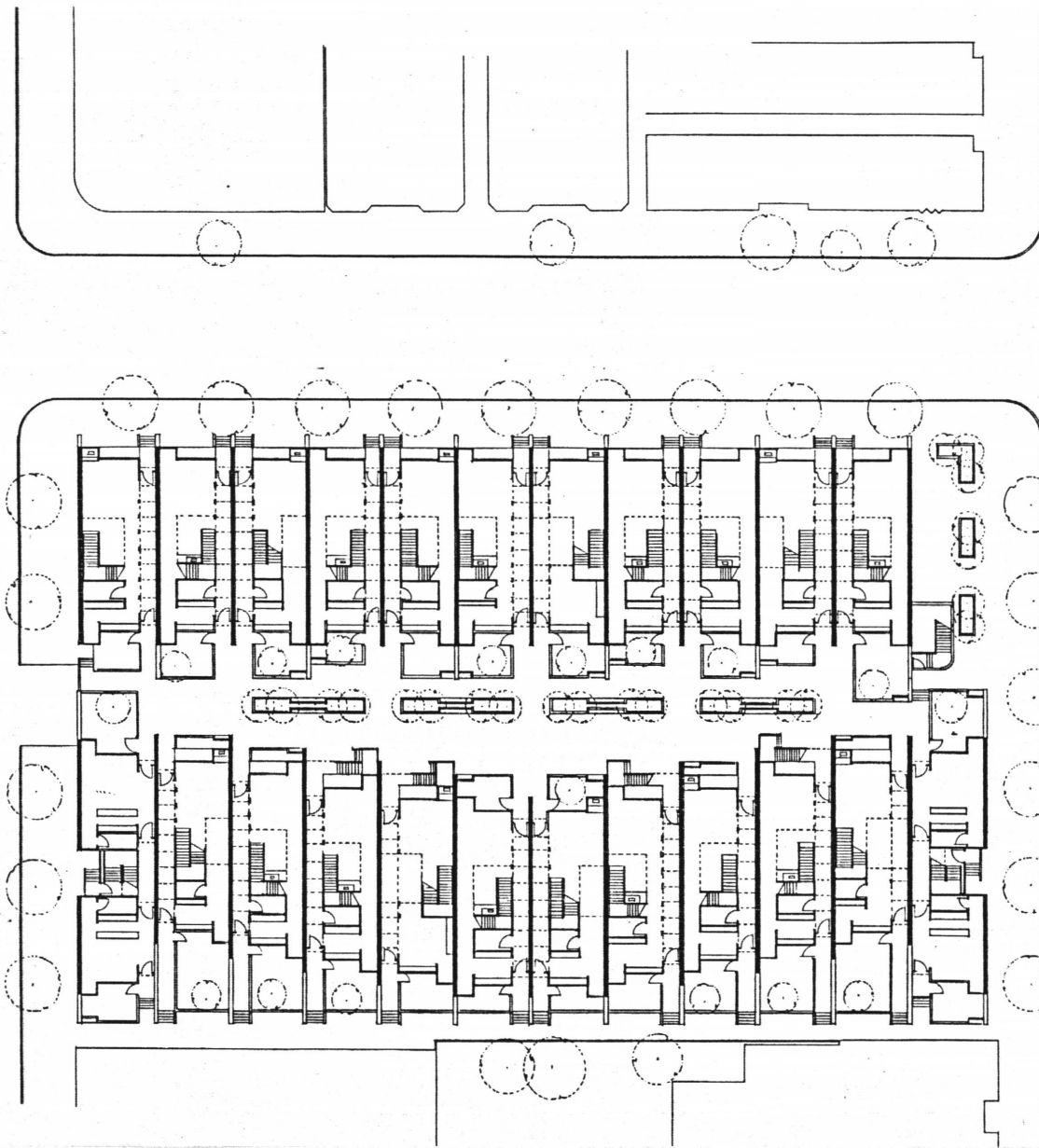
A hierarchy of community and private spaces exists throughout Alexandria, following certain rules and patterns. The relationship between the private individual dwellings and the larger community occurs along the street edge, with the sidewalk, raised entry stoops, and a raised water table acting as transitional elements between the two. Alleyways and pathways connect the public streets to the more private rear courtyards and gardens of the houses. These paths dissect the blocks, often running between the row houses themselves. These paths and alleyways are in the semi-public realm, concurring a sense of ownership by the inhabitants of the particular block. The interior space formed by the perimeter of row houses along the edge of the block consists of private intimate courtyards at the rear of the houses, and parking spaces for the automobile in protected enclosures. Access to these parking spots now occurs by means of alleyways which run the length of the block. The architectural language of Alexandria was studied to better understand its form. The original row houses were rectangular or square in their form, with an entrance hall running the length of one side and rooms opening off of it. The type of construction utilized were masonry brick bearing walls. Houses were typically of frame or brick construction with earlier houses having clapboard siding, and later that of brick. The houses were typically built up a half level on a brick water table. Roofs were of simple gable form, with elaborate cornices. The careful attention given to corners, primary entrances, window openings, and the points where the facade meets both the sky and the ground, give the houses a scale pleasing to the pedestrian along the sidewalk.



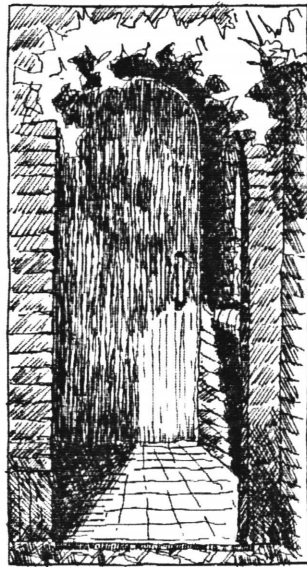
THE PROCESS: MAKING A PLACE

THE SITE

The site chosen for the thesis is the public parking lot on Cameron street across from Christ Church in Old Town Alexandria. The program for the thesis asked for a variety of new housing types on the existing site while accommodating the present number of public parking spaces. The most pronounced feature of this site is its interruption in the urban wall which characterizes the edge of the traditional blocks throughout Alexandria. This disconfiguration of the urban pattern is a direct result of the impact of the automobile on what was originally designed as a pedestrian environment. The first step taken in the organization of the site was to address this modern incursion by the restoration of the traditional urban edge along the street. A solution was chosen which could provide a built edge around the block, while at the same time accommodating the automobile in a reconciliatory fashion. By raising the new row houses above the parking area and allowing them to reach to the edge of the sidewalk, a condition was created which better adapted the new needs of the society to the traditional fabric of the place. This configuration on the site was then transformed to respond to other conditions specific to this particular site. The corner of this new urban edge adjacent to Christ Church was pulled back to recognize the importance of this public landmark in the larger community, and provide a public park for the worshippers who congregate at this corner.

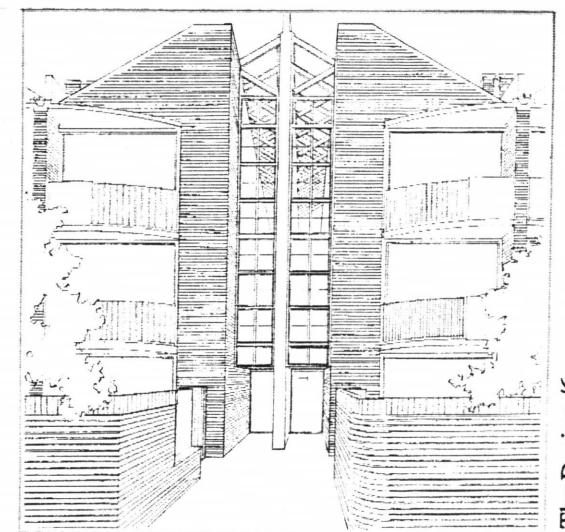
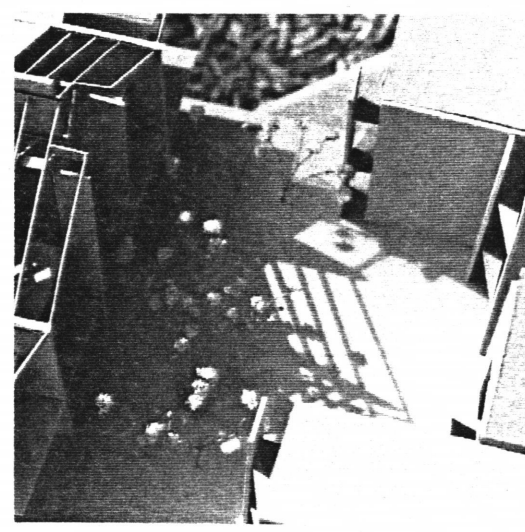
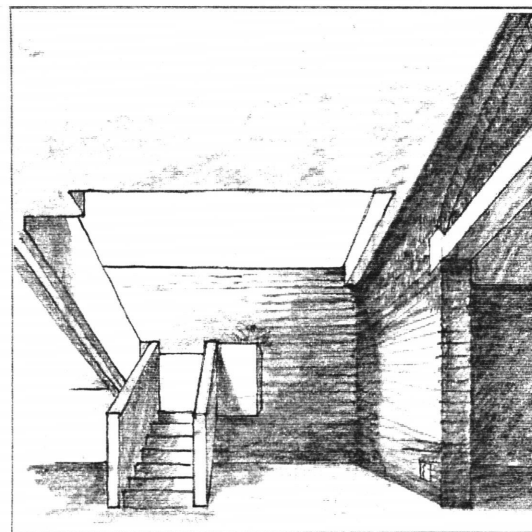
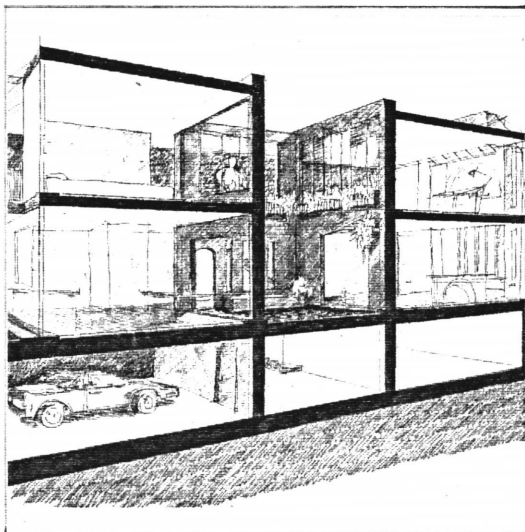


AN URBAN ROOM

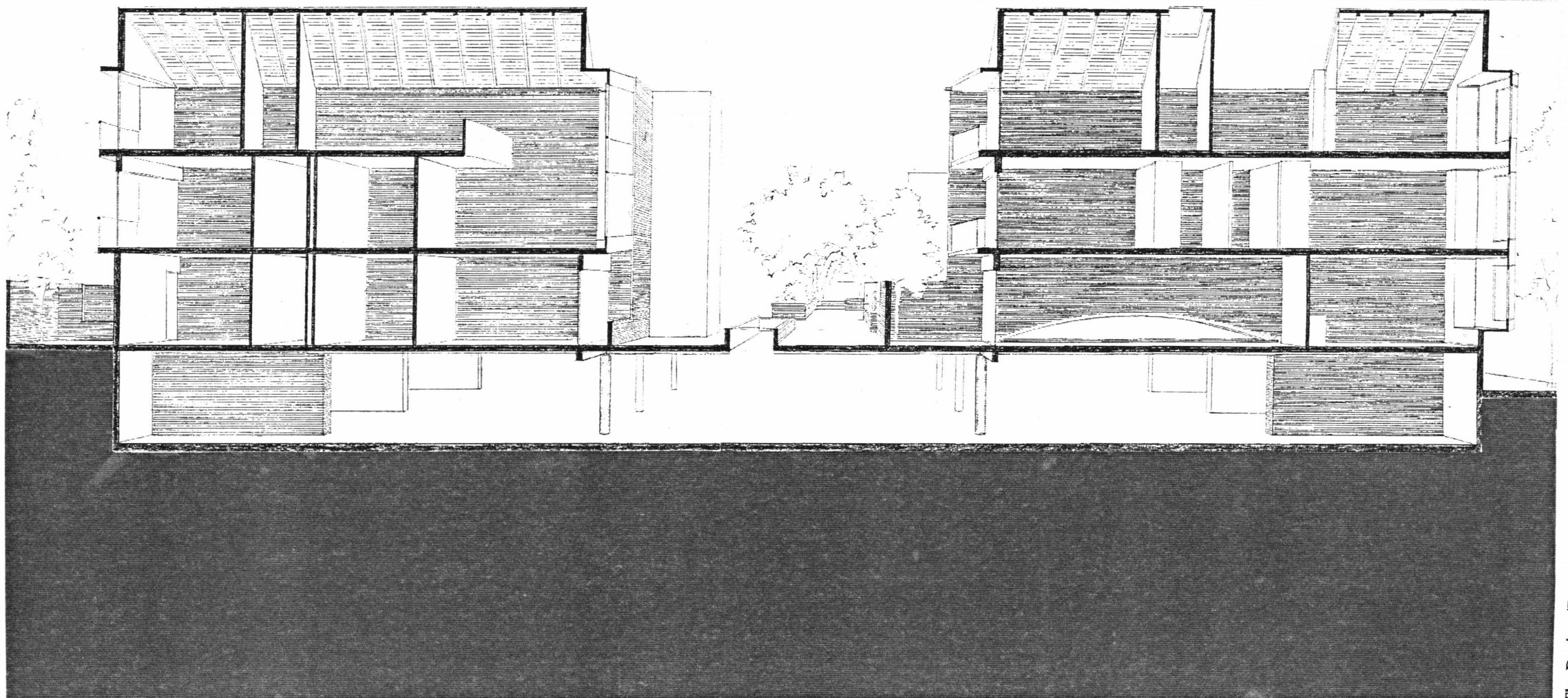


SEQUENCE OF EVENTS:
THE TRANSITION FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE
REALM. A HIERARCHY OF PLACES.
THE ELEMENT OF DISCOVERY.

The design of the open space created by the placement of the row houses around the perimeter of the block was approached with an attitude about the creation of a meaningful place within the interior of the block which could express the shared nature of the space. Interior spaces and alleyways within the city blocks created by the traditional configuration of row houses are currently being used as parking lots for cars and a depository for trash. In order to reinforce the traditional patterns found in the historic fabric of Alexandria, this space was designed instead as a shared room for people at an urban scale with edges and boundaries created by the row houses themselves. These edges were articulated through the extension of the row houses into this room in the form of courtyards, planters, and trees. These elements create an edge sensitive to the individual, bringing the scale of the row houses down to that of the person in the room. The extending and retracting of the edge itself through shifts helped to create a variety of nooks and small scale corners to offset the monotony of a single straight edge of row houses. Principle entrances into the row houses open onto this special room.

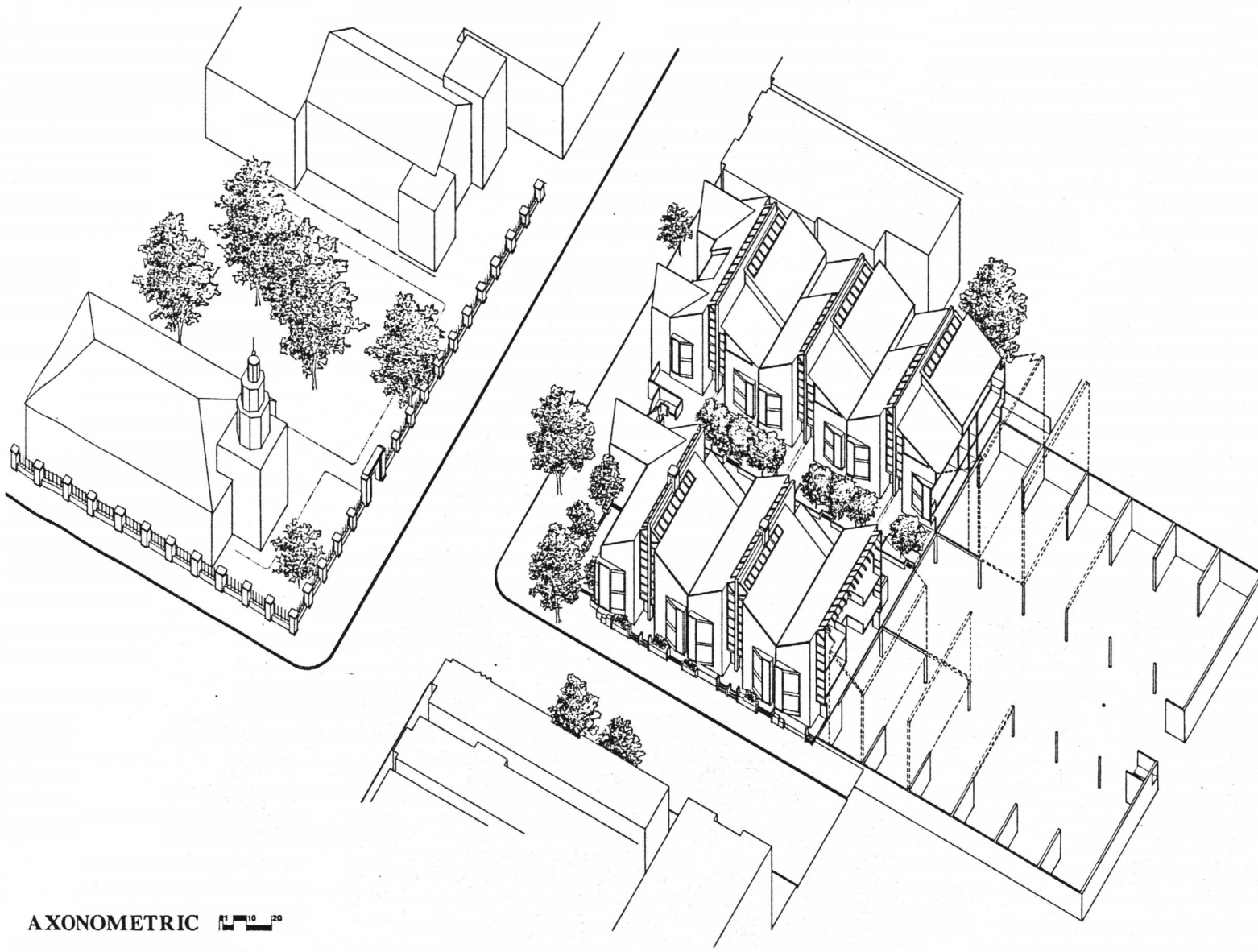


The entrance and procession through the room was treated as an event for the inhabitants of the row houses. The inhabitants are introduced to this shared room through the orientation of entrances at either end of the room's axis created by its length. Passage through this semi-public realm eases the transition from the larger community to the individual dwelling. This is accomplished both by the procession down the room's length and by the final threshold provided by the penetration of the room's edge of courtyards before entering the realm of the private dwelling.

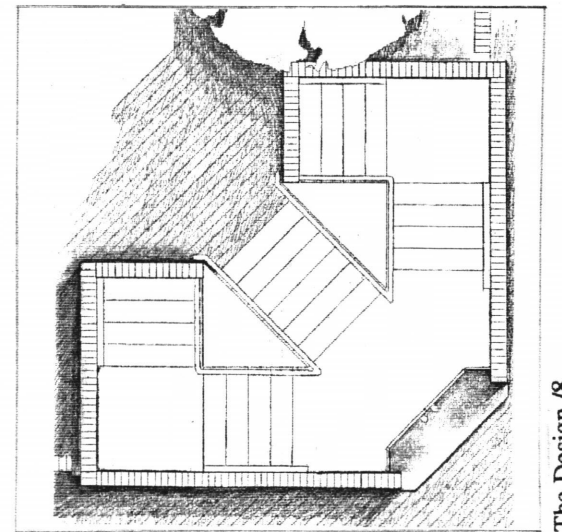
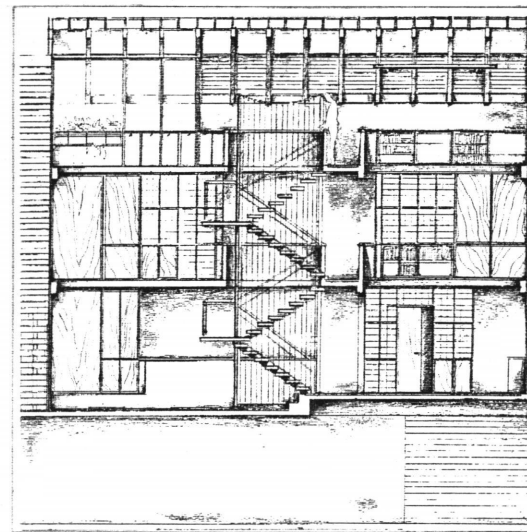
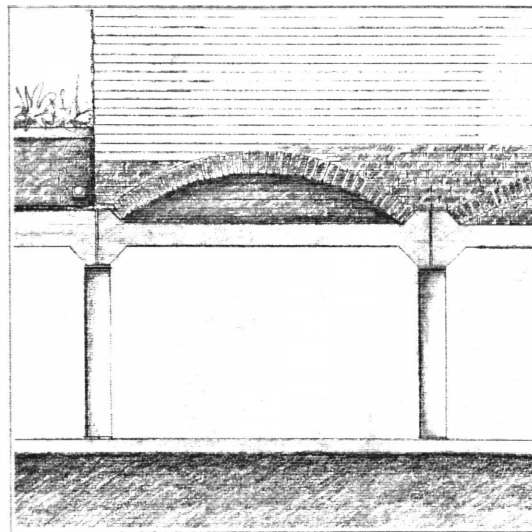
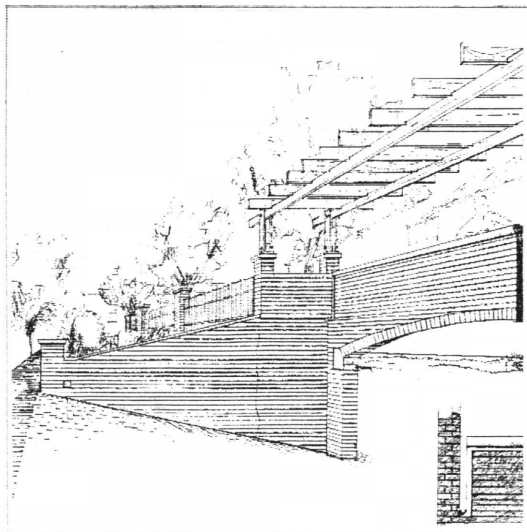


THE IMPACT OF THE AUTOMOBILE

The design proposes to restore the urban edge to the existing site through the accommodation of a parking area set below a raised platform which supports the row houses, and allows them to extend to the edge of the sidewalk. Access to the parking area is along the Alfred Street edge in the form of a single entrance below the raised area. It is the intention of the design to distinguish between the realm of the automobile and that of the private dwellings, as well as creating a transition between the two. This distinction is made by the use of different palettes of materials and architectural elements in the construction of the two realms. The realm of the car manifest itself as a world of concrete and an architecture of columns. The realm of the individual row houses is manifest as a world of scale masonry brick and an architecture of walls. At their point of intersection a masonry arch is carried by a concrete beam. The transition between the two realms is eased through a vertical sequence of spaces, up from the parking area, through the urban room, and into the private dwellings. It is the pedestrian who dwells between the walls in a world of wood and glass.

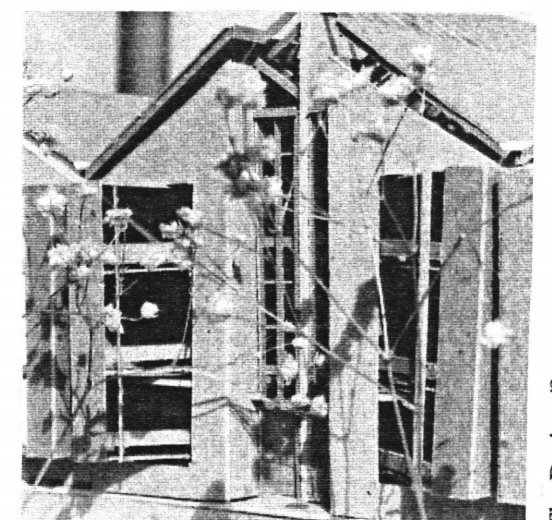
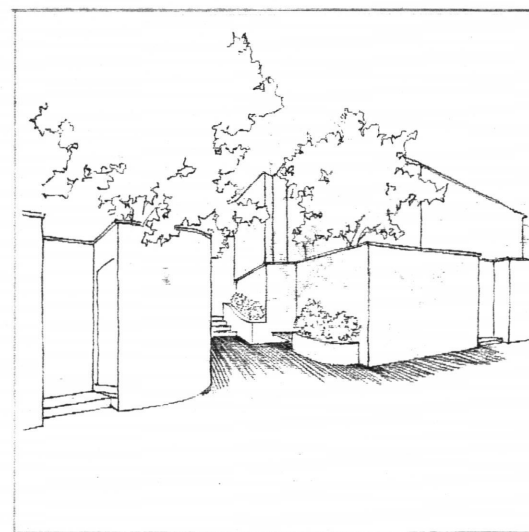
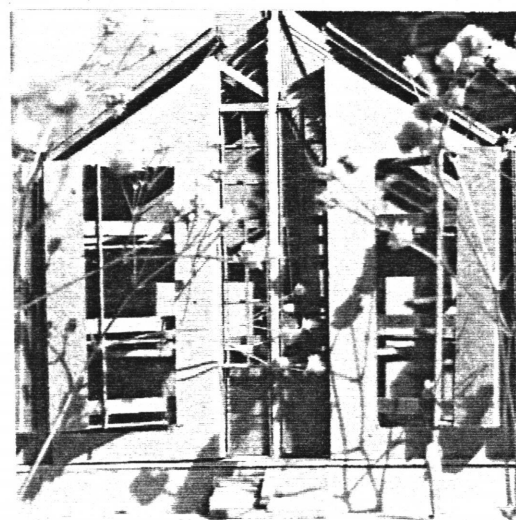
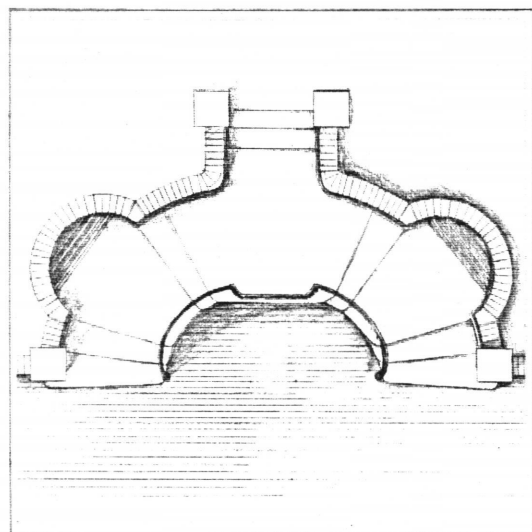
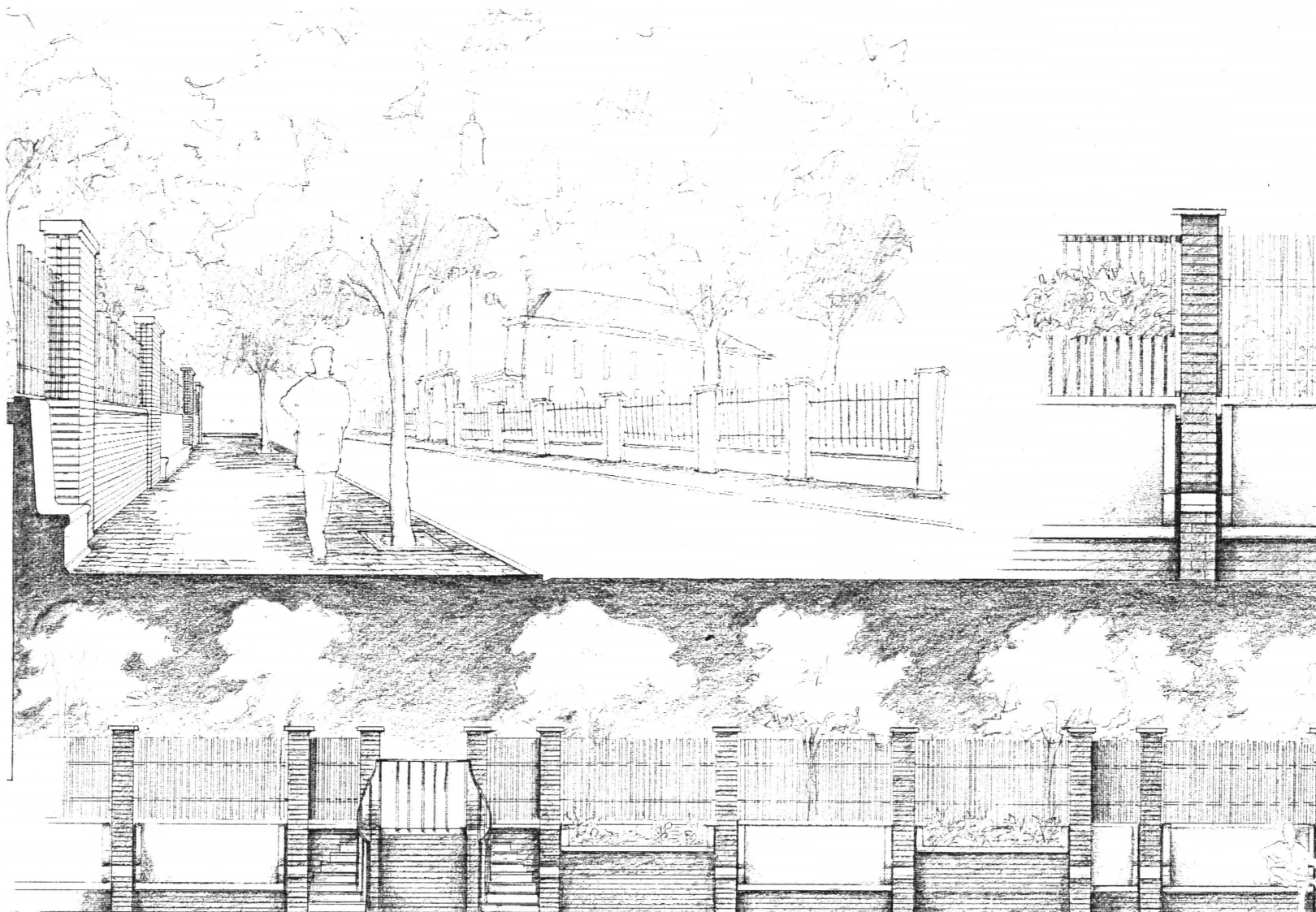


AXONOMETRIC 



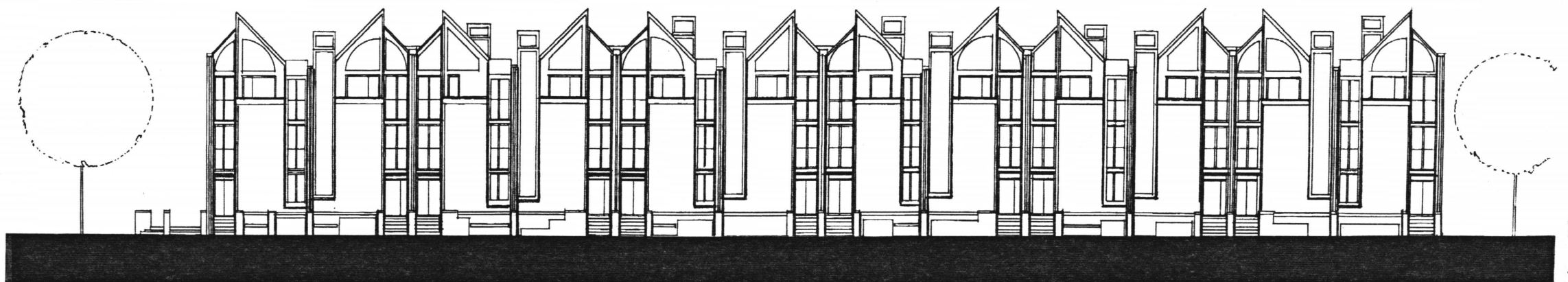
STREETS FOR PEOPLE

A spatial hierarchy of public and private spaces exists throughout the traditional fabric of Old Town Alexandria. A raised water table, stairs and entry stoops, all act as important transitional elements, helping to smooth the transition from the street and larger community to the private individual dwellings. During the design process, the design of the outer edge created by the placement of the row houses along the perimeter of the block evolved from the desire to maintain the separation and privacy of the individual row houses, while at the same time recognizing their responsibility to the larger whole of Old Town Alexandria. This desire led to the creation of a transitional zone between the row houses and the sidewalk which could accommodate the converse needs to provide privacy while at the same time offering a sensitive edge to the people using the sidewalk. This zone took the form of a series of parallel half walls extended out from the primary bearing walls of the row houses, running the length of and perpendicular to the sidewalk. Between these half walls were placed a variety of small scale elements: steps up to the row houses, planters, and benches. Through the employment of these small scale elements, a transitional layer materialized which helps to mediate movement between the two realms of the larger community and the private dwellings, while at the same time presenting a soft edge to the people along the sidewalk.



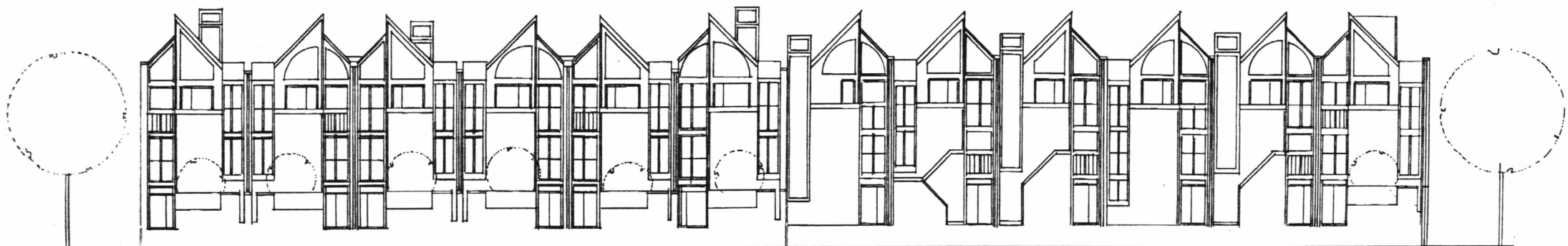
PEDESTRIAN SCALE

The urban edge in Old Town Alexandria has a characteristic scale which is pleasing to the pedestrian. The design evolved through a desire to maintain this intimate scale by understanding its language and applying these principles to the facades of the new row houses. The manipulation of vertical and horizontal proportions and dimensions, expression of the different parts of the building, the use of human scale building materials, and the interplay of light and shadow all contribute to give the desired pedestrian scale to this shared urban wall.



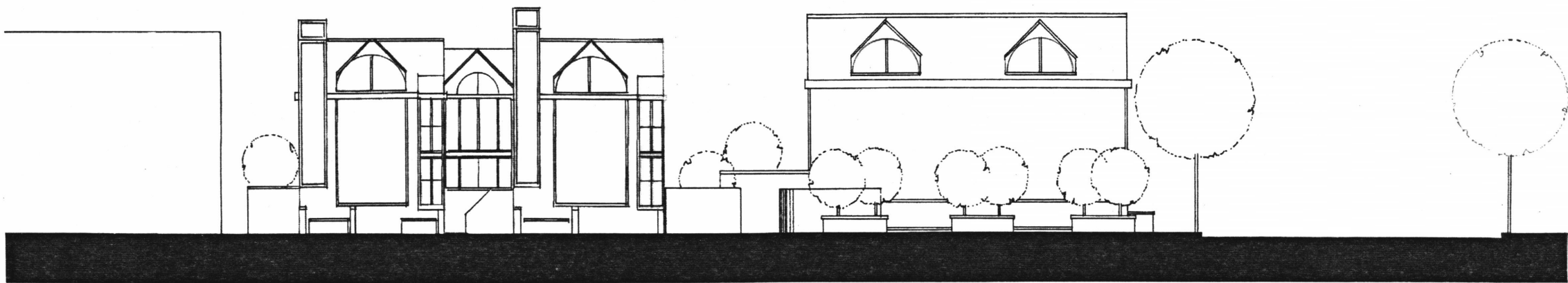
CAMERON STREET ELEVATION





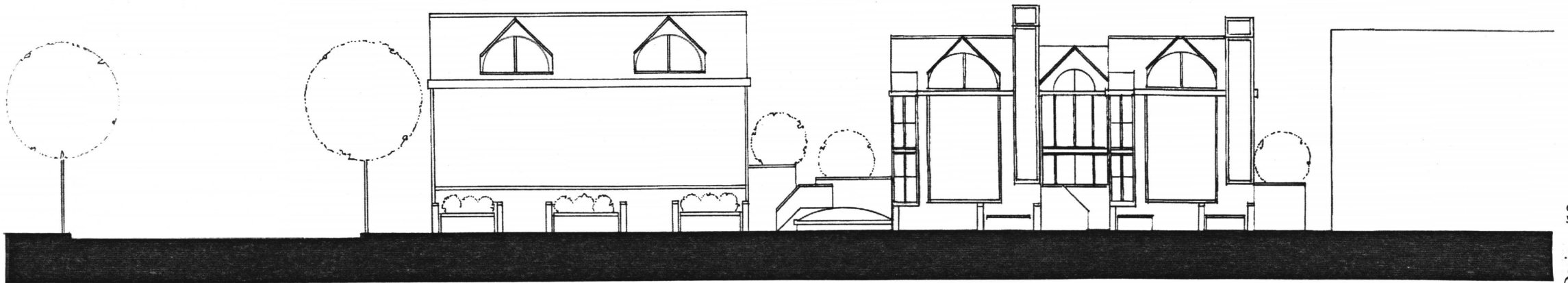
INTERIOR STREET ELEVATIONS





COLUMBUS STREET ELEVATION.

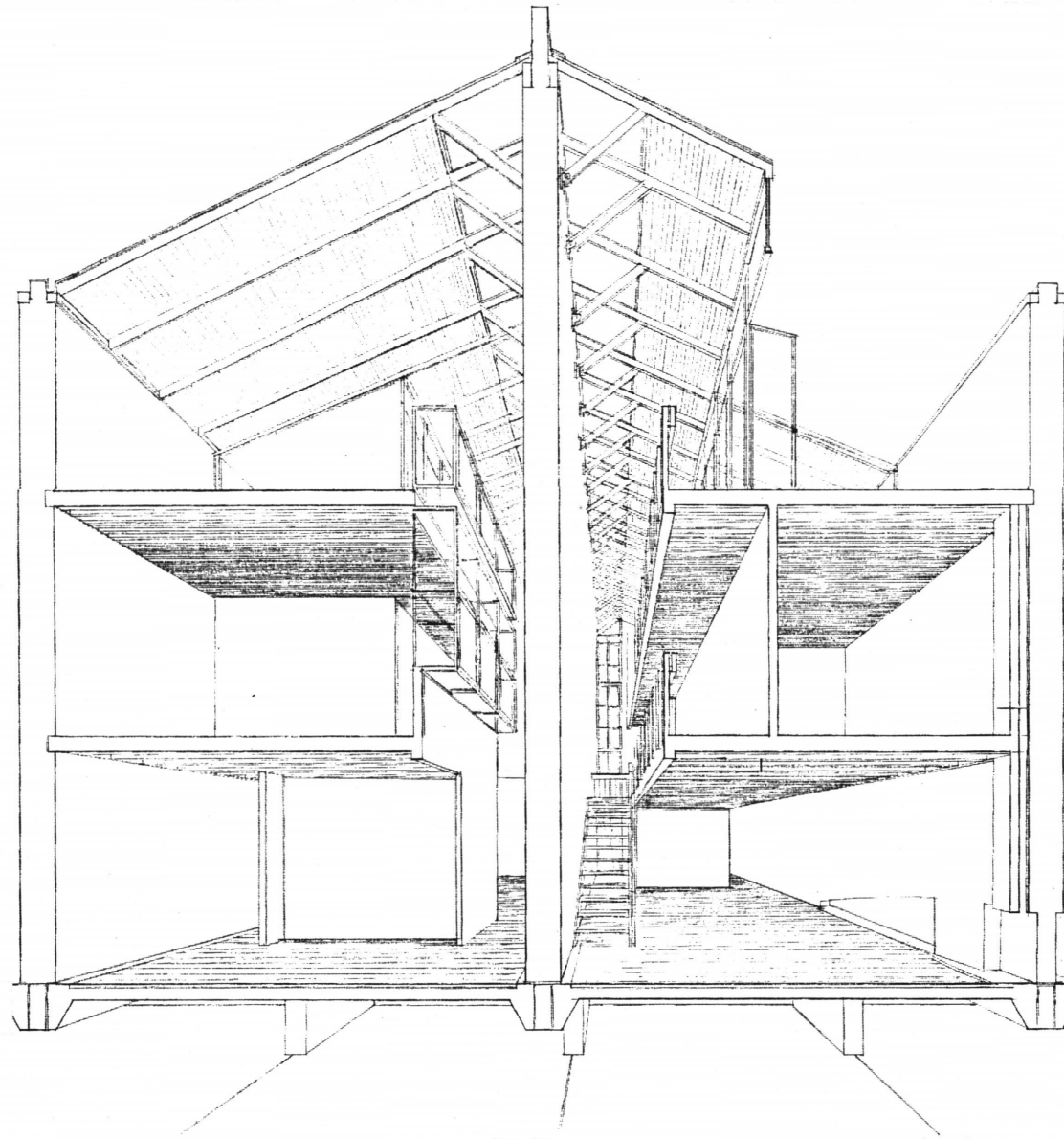
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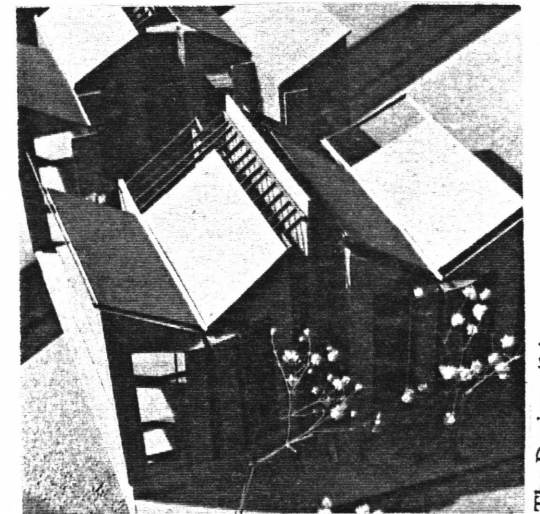
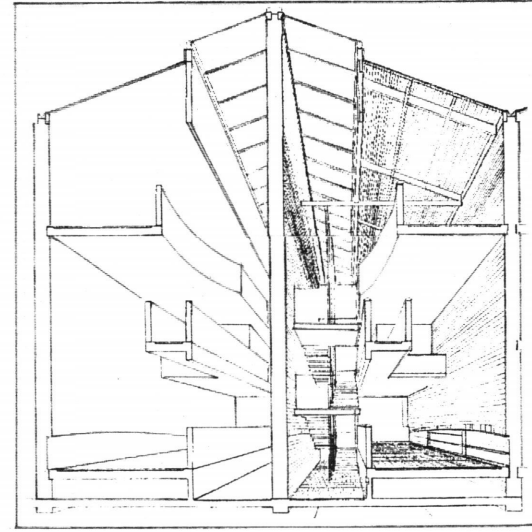
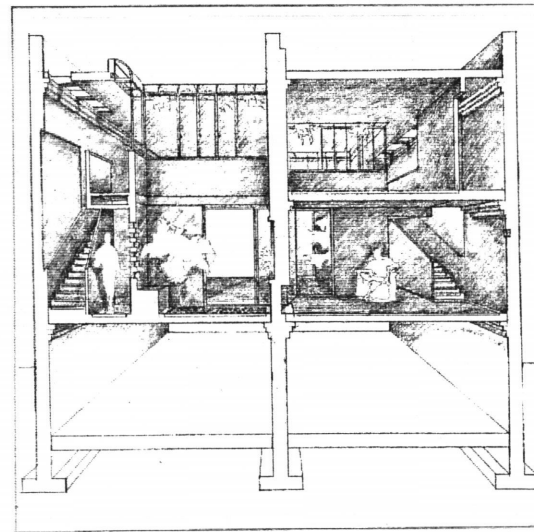
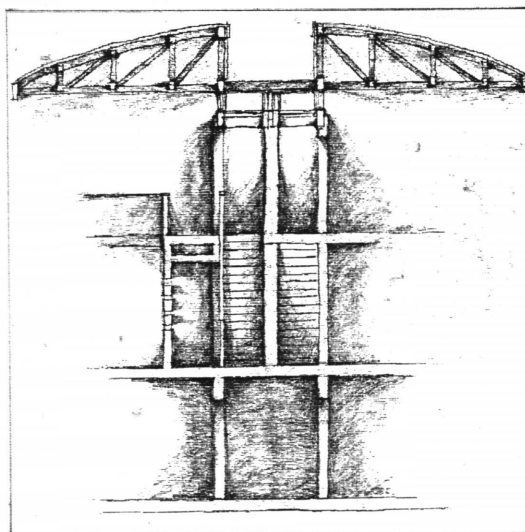
ALFRED STREET ELEVATION

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ARCHITECTURE OF WALLS

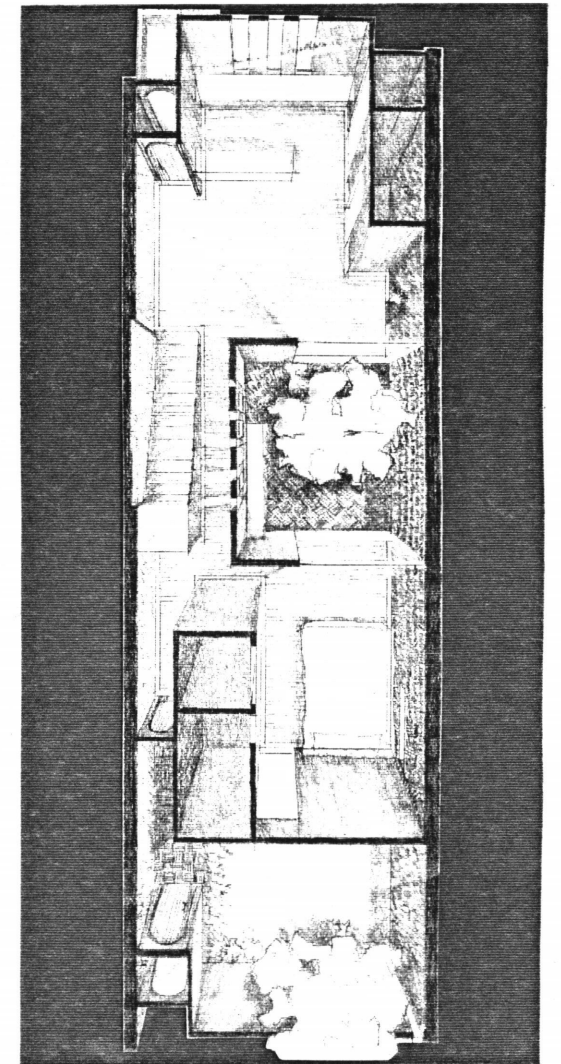
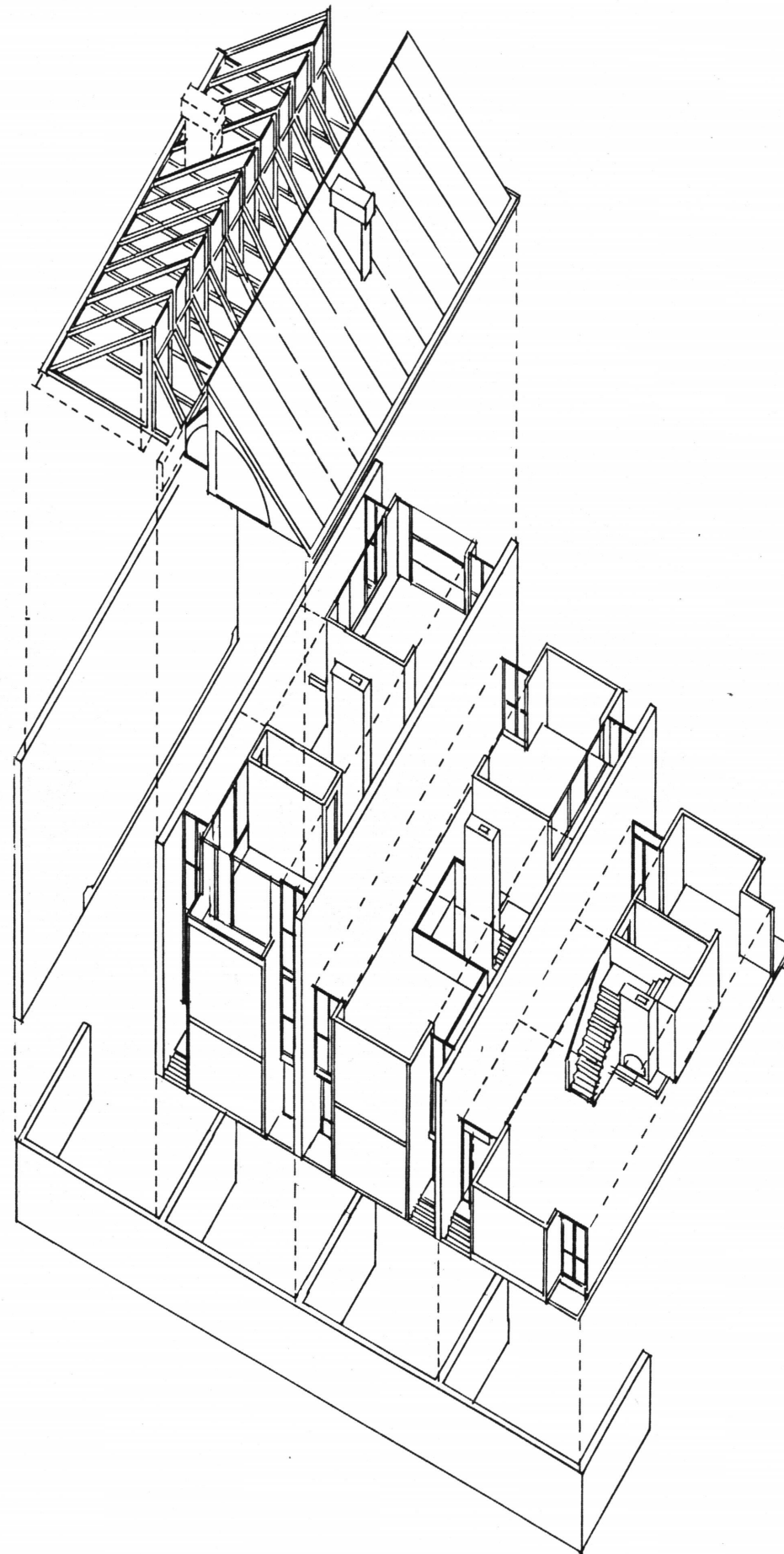
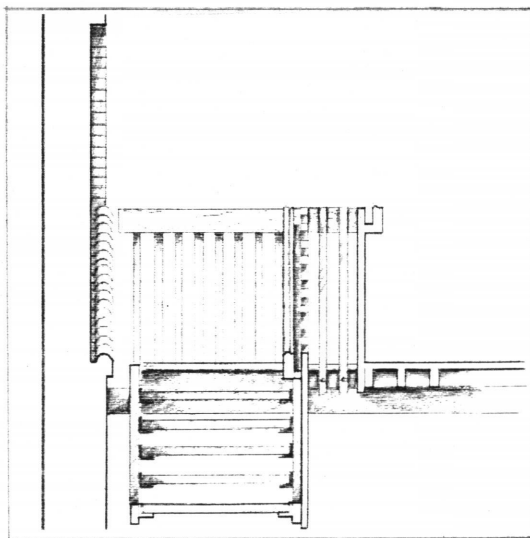


Parallel masonry load bearing walls are the primary type of construction employed for the traditional row houses in Old Town Alexandria. It is this structural order of parallel walls which is carried over into the construction of the new row houses, out of which the masonry walls become the major unifying element throughout the design. These masonry walls were considered to be the essential element which gives the place its form and order. In order to express this role clearly in the design, the living spaces of the row houses are pulled away from the masonry walls so as to celebrate their importance and heighten their presence. This is further enhanced by the construction of this space with a transparent material, while the living spaces between the masonry walls are wood frame construction. The condition created by the placement of the walls in relation to the living spaces opens the long narrow row house to natural light washed down the wall and interjects a feeling of spaciousness between the walls. To further express their principle role, the masonry walls were given the responsibility of providing structural support for both the floor beams and roof frame, shedding water from the roof, and casting diffused natural light into the living spaces. Because the open space also serves as the entrance hall of the house, the people who dwell within the walls are informed of these responsibilities. The design attempts to rethink the traditional attitude about the masonry bearing walls, that of the role of separation and boundary only. The proposed design investigates their potential for serving this function as well as being thought of as a unifying element which two row houses share.



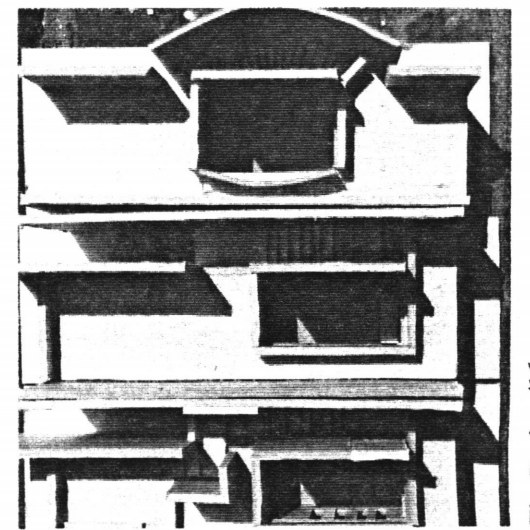
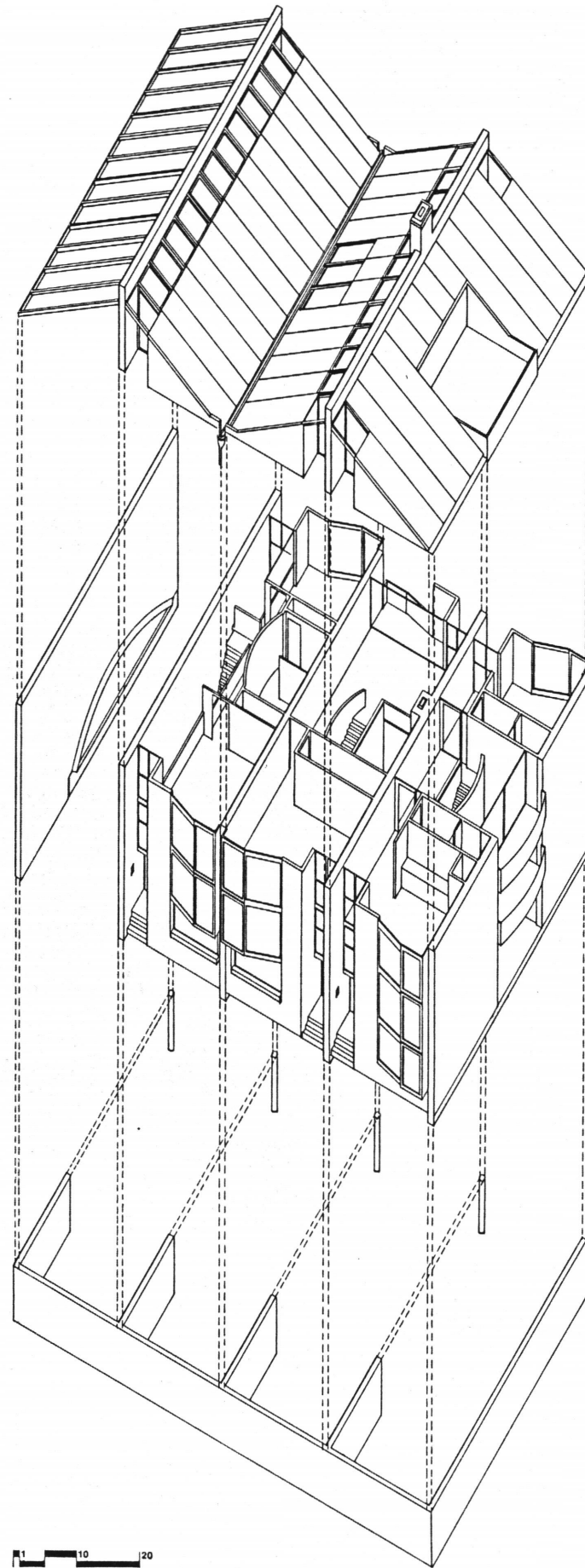
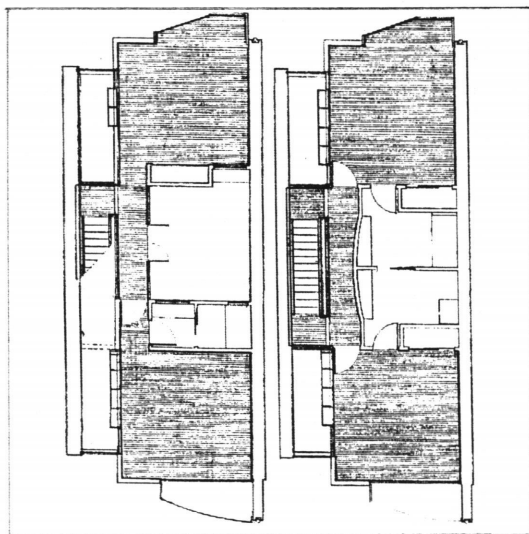
LIVING BETWEEN WALLS

The floor plan for the row houses were designed to strengthen the idea about the new place both through their organization and in a symbolic form. The point of departure for the floor plan began with the traditional configuration of an entrance hall to one side of the house with rooms opening off of this hallway. The attitude about the design of the interior spaces was that these should work within and reinforce the parallel rhythm established by the structural order of masonry bearing walls. Stairs, secondary walls, spaces, and movement are orchestrated in such a fashion as to play within this parallel rhythm. A place was created at the row houses center symbolic of the larger scale urban room at the center of the project. It is this shared room, a focus to the dwelling, which seeks to gather the activities, the life, the light, the hearth, and the space of the home.



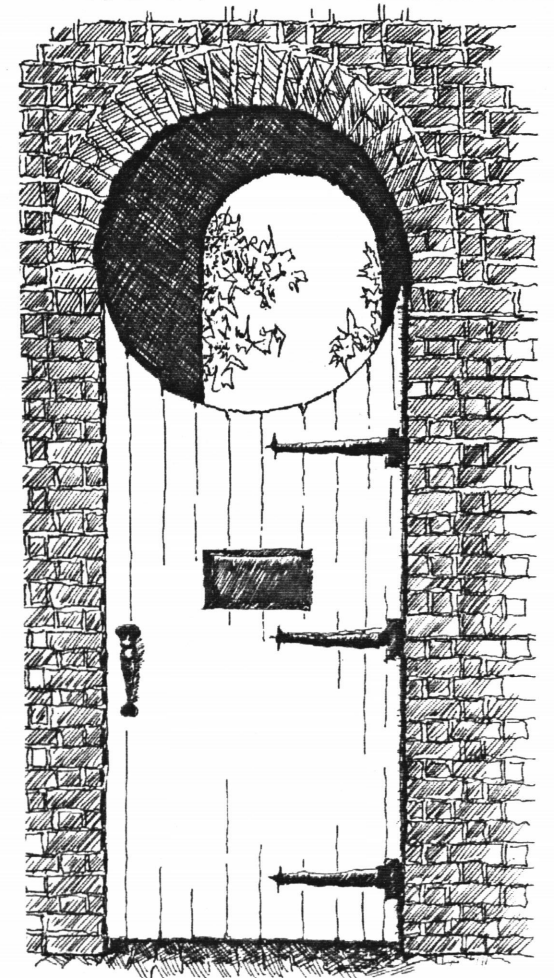
TRANSFORMATION OF TYPE

The potential of the traditional row house form to accommodate a variety of living spaces was investigated during the design process. The organization of the row houses began with the creation of a traditional single family type, which could then be transformed to accommodate smaller subdivisions of this module. The single family type consists of a rectangular form punctuated at its center by an interior courtyard, into which spaces within the house open and are accessed through. The single family type was subdivided horizontally to accommodate the need for single level flats, as well as two story apartments. An additional transformation of this form occurred with the introduction of efficiencies sharing both sides of a central court and entrance stair. It is the intention of the design to present a solution to the real need for smaller, more affordable dwellings in Alexandria today.



"If we find alienation, impersonality, and superficiality in the built environment, these qualities do not come from an inability to design. They come from something deeper: our society's ideas about nature and technology, about human existence and its meaning. It is important, for our own understanding of the nature and purpose of architecture, to learn the lessons of this experience. First, that beyond the world of forms and materials there is an intangible content of invisible, immeasurable principles. Second, that physical objects and spaces, if they are used to show these hidden principles, can contribute to higher levels of consciousness throughout the entire society. Realizing these lessons is our fundamental responsibility as architects".

Milosav Cekic
Architect



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