

## Three Houses

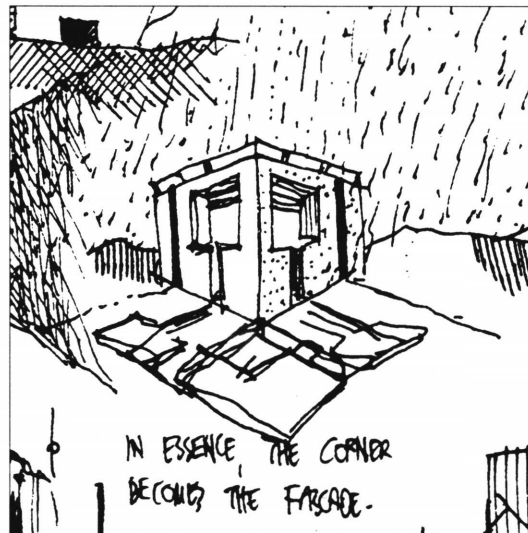
A Search for the Meaning of Place

Frederick T. Sutton III

Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture.

May 1993  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Approved



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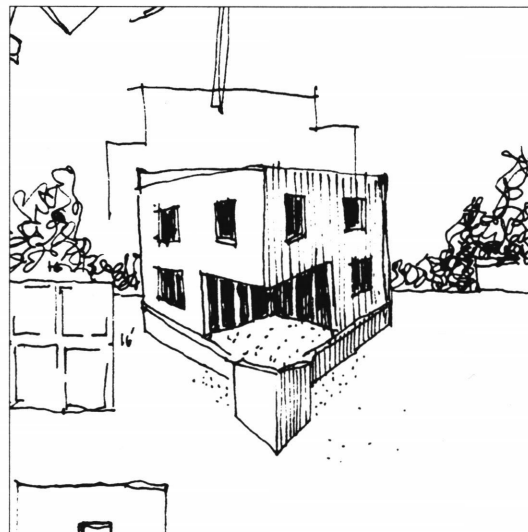
Salahuddin Choudhury, Chairman

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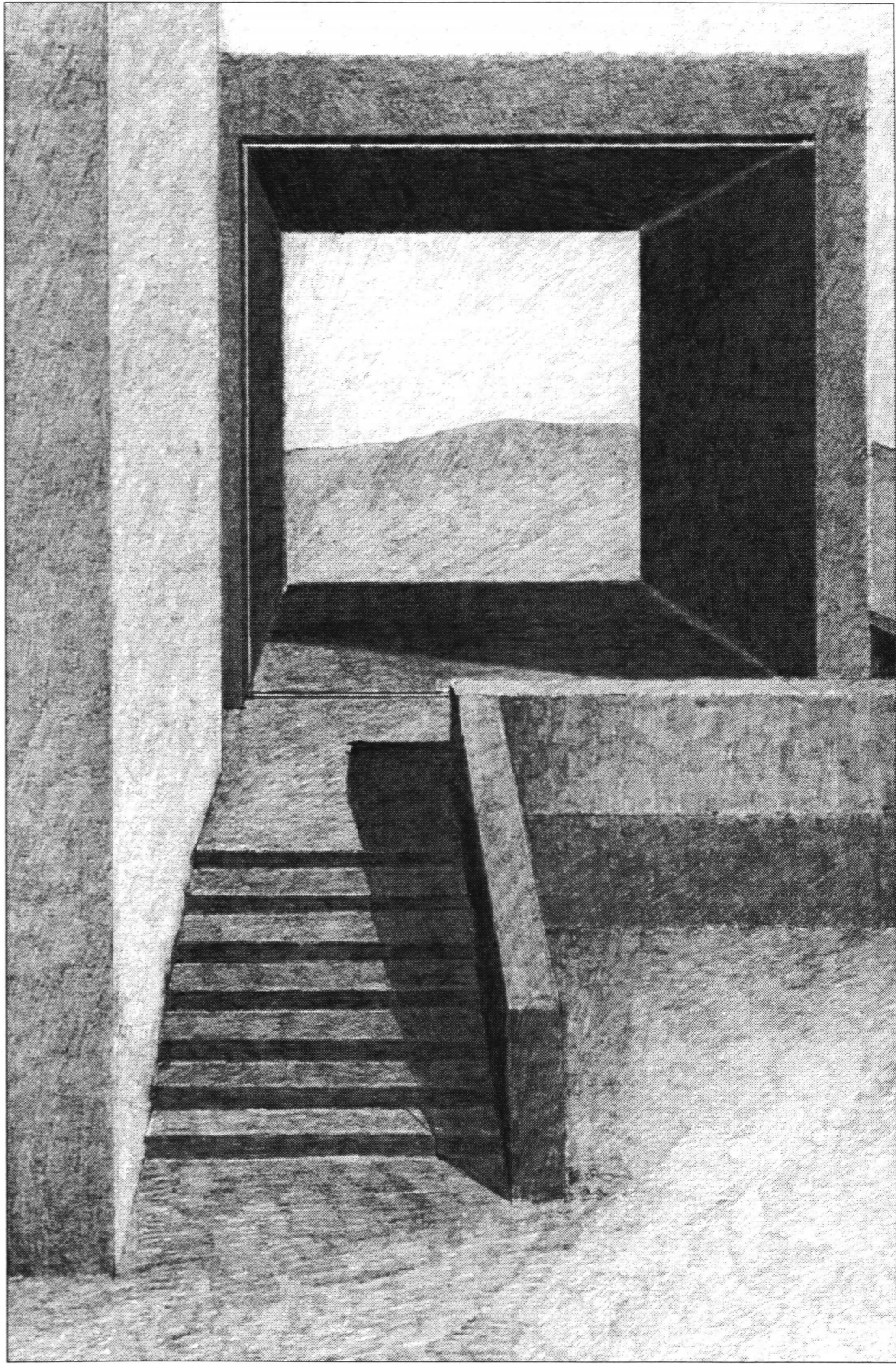
Heinrich Schnödt

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William Galloway



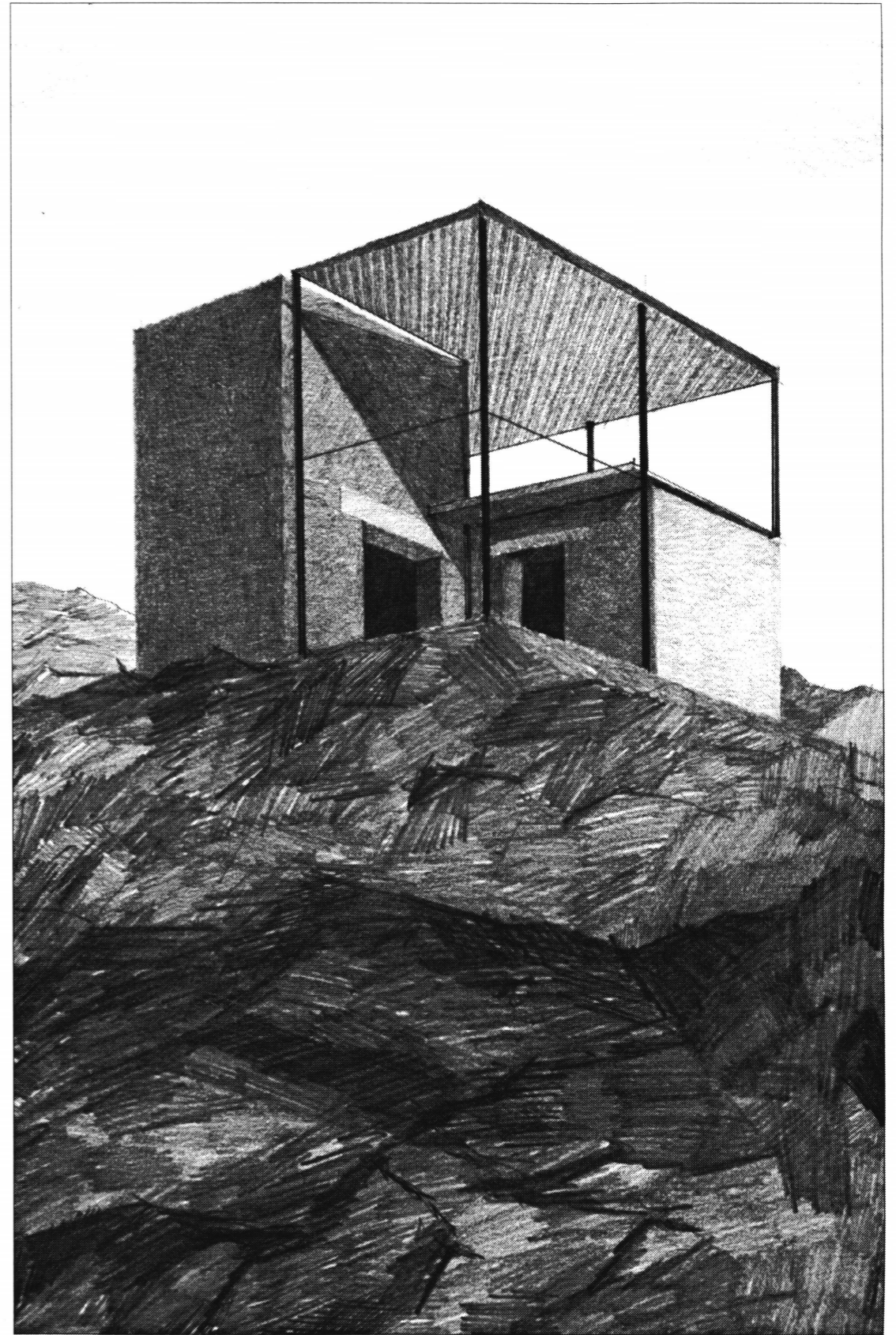
For Mom and Dad





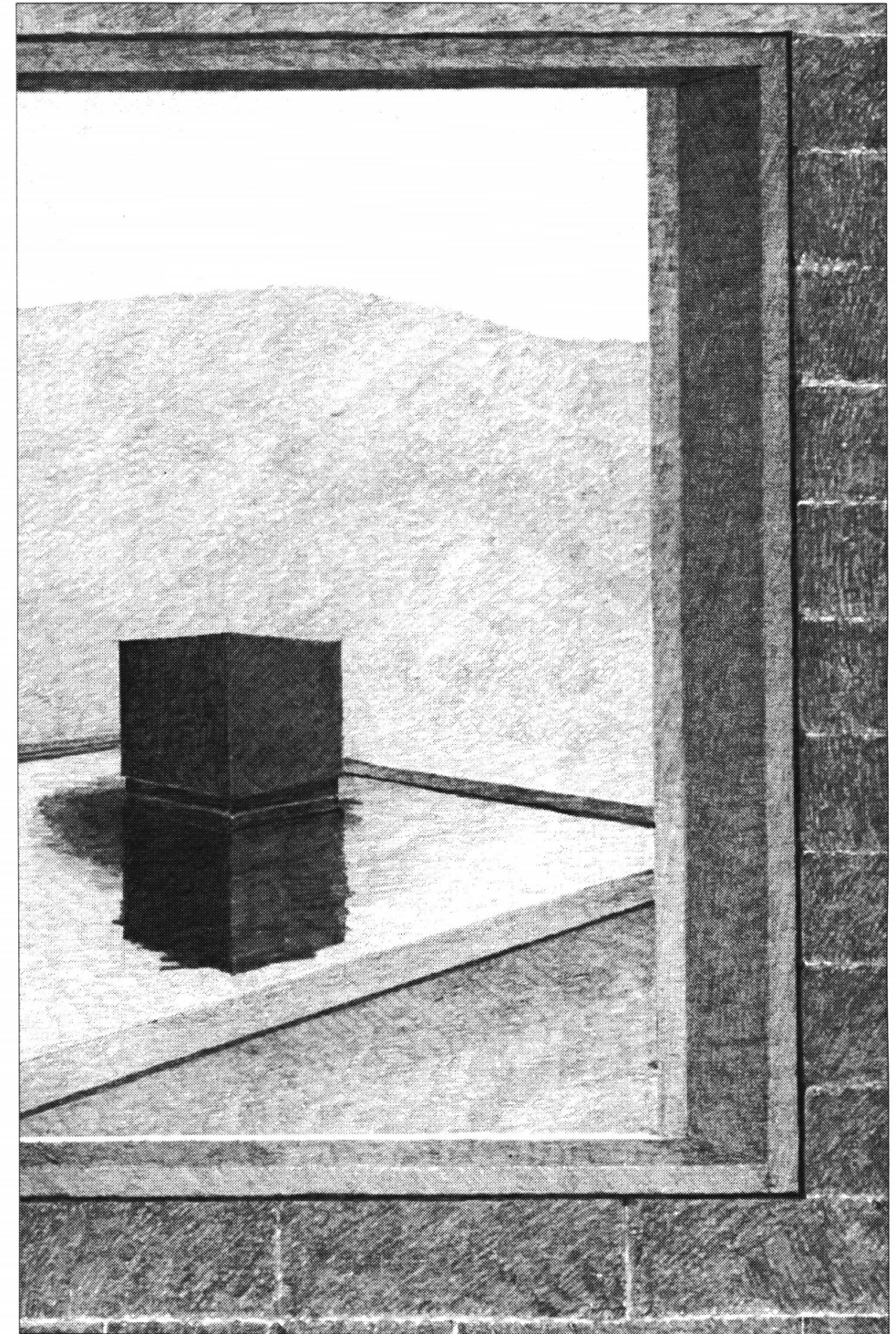
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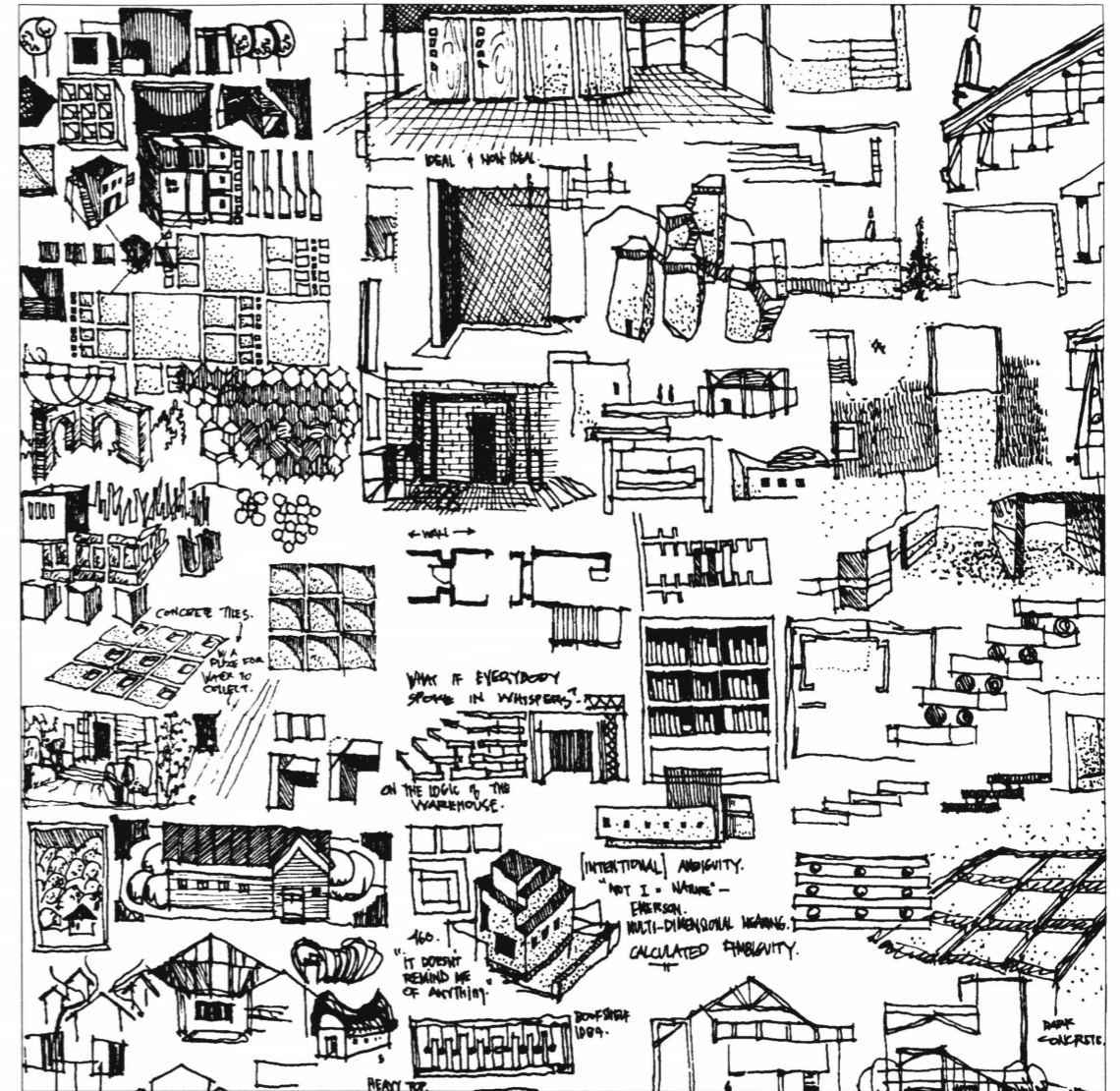
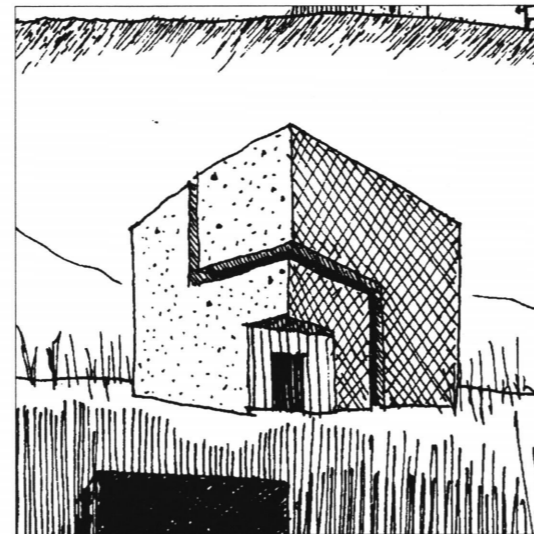
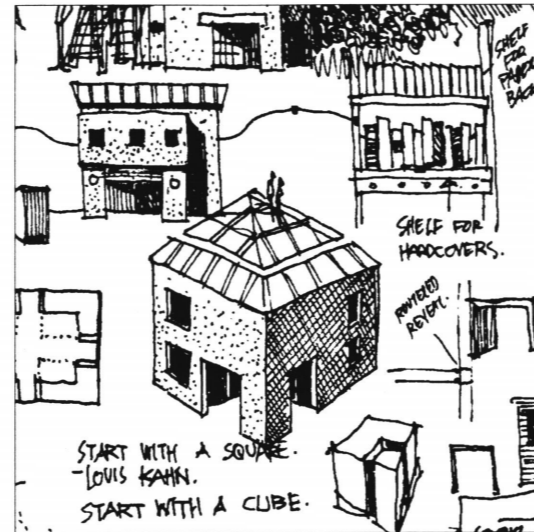


## Abstract

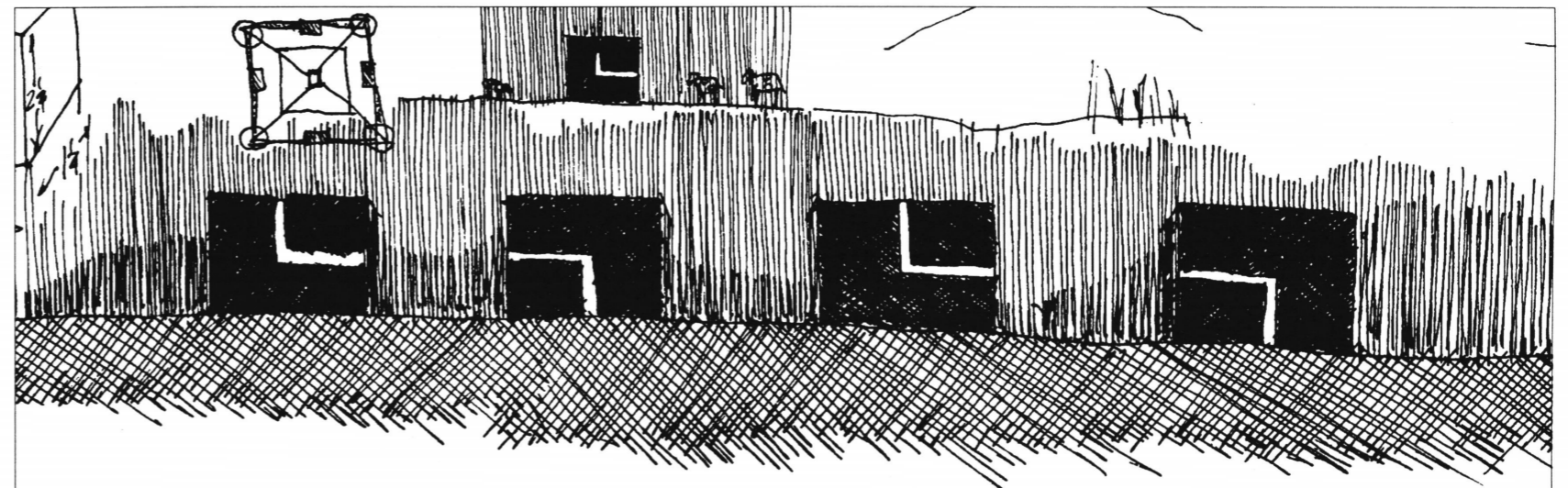
An architecture of experience is one that asks the dweller to participate in the making of the place. The building does not tell a story, but instead presents fragments that become a foundation for the dweller's interpretation. The fragments complement that which is already existing in Nature and in the human consciousness in order to provide the framework for a richer architecture. The participant's experience is not unlike that of recalling a dream; the pieces manifest themselves one by one, each one clearly defined, but the whole is elusive. In the end it is the participant who completes the whole.



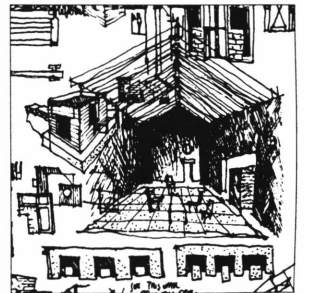
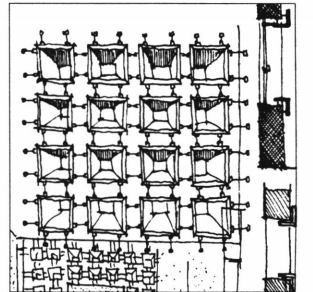
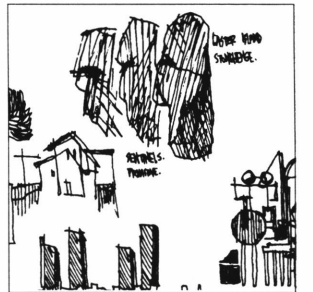
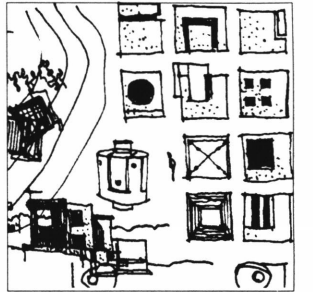
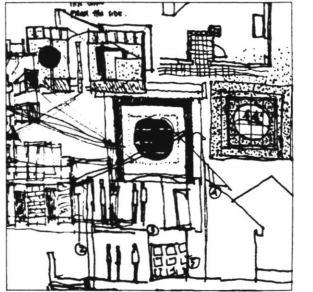
## Fragments



The cube is the beginning for an architecture of experience. By altering the cube, and trying to find variations in its construction and presentation, memories are evoked, thoughts are summoned. These fragments represent a search for the ways in which a cube can remind the participant of archetypes already present in his or her existence; the form suggests meaning, it doesn't dictate it.

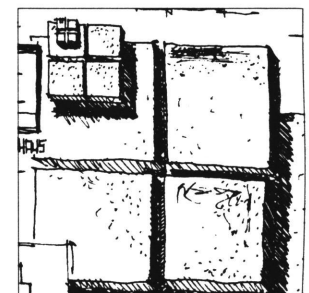
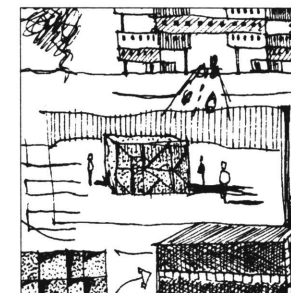
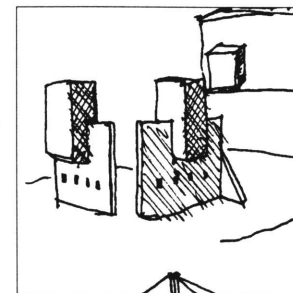
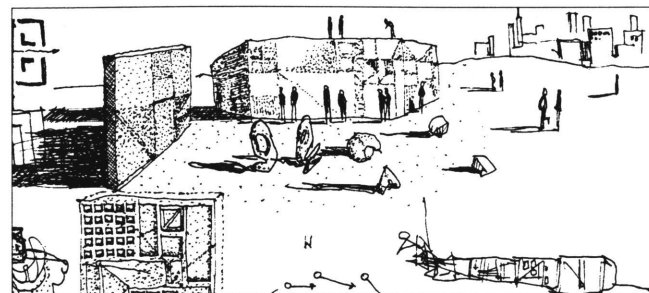
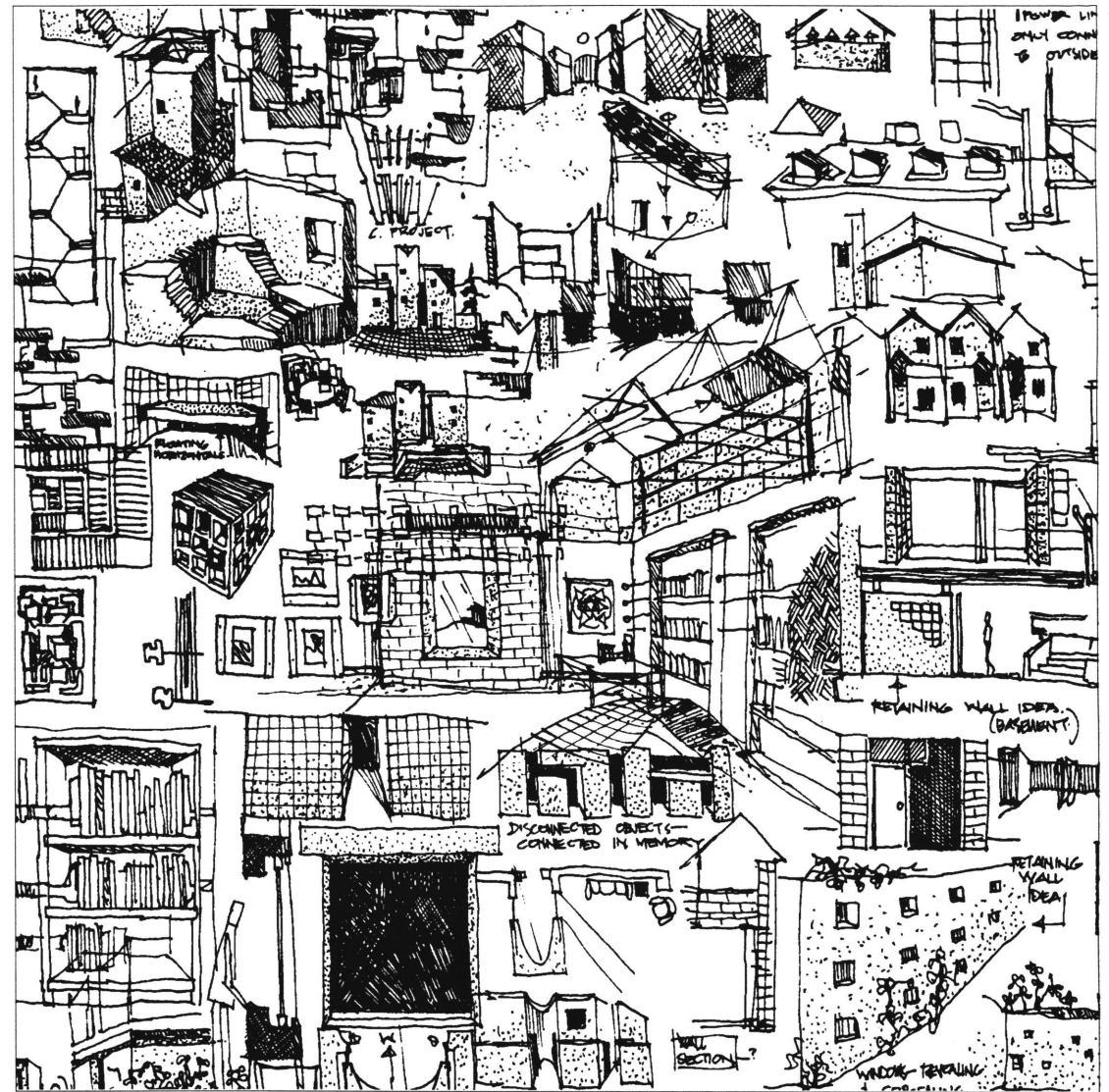


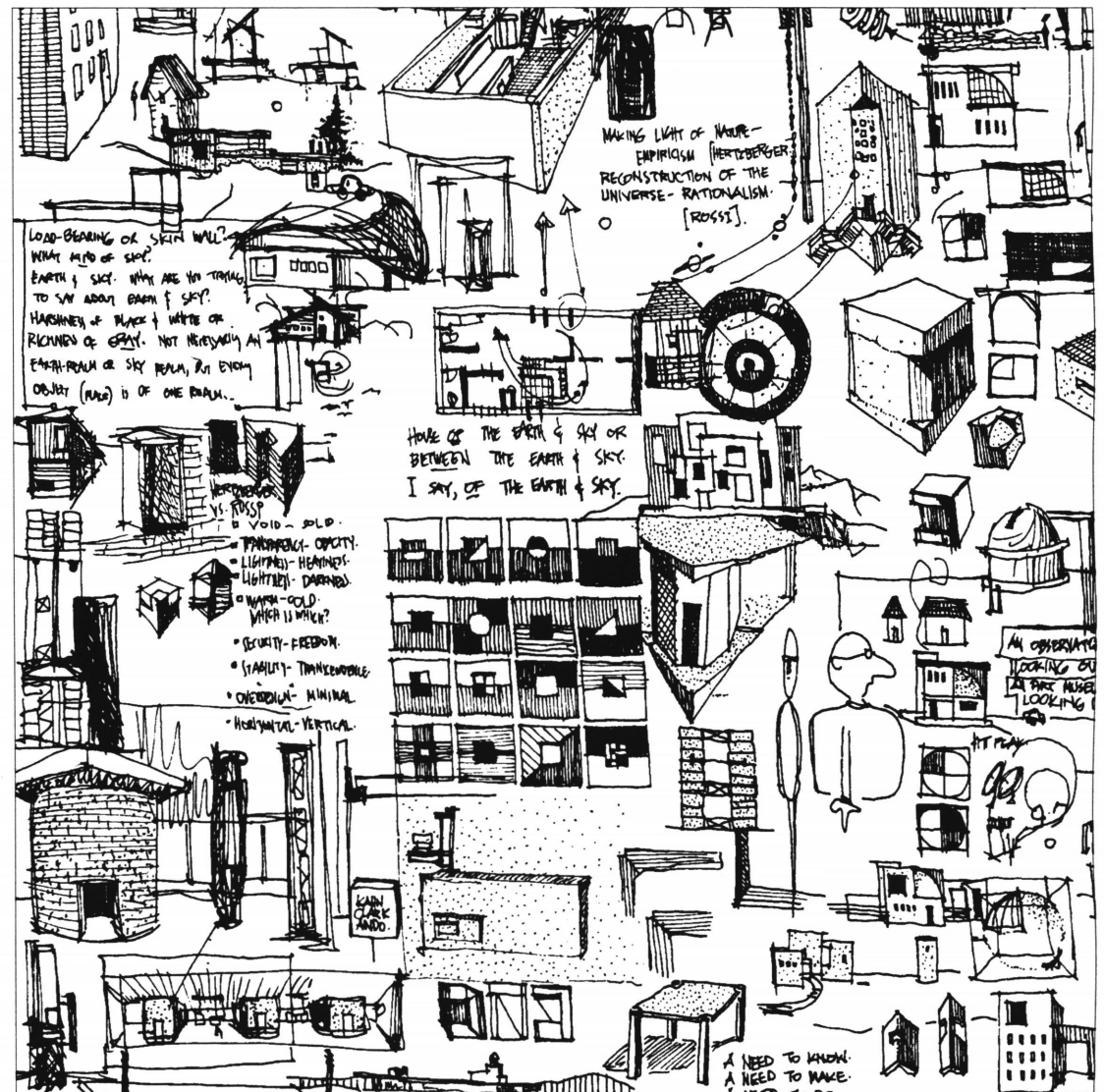
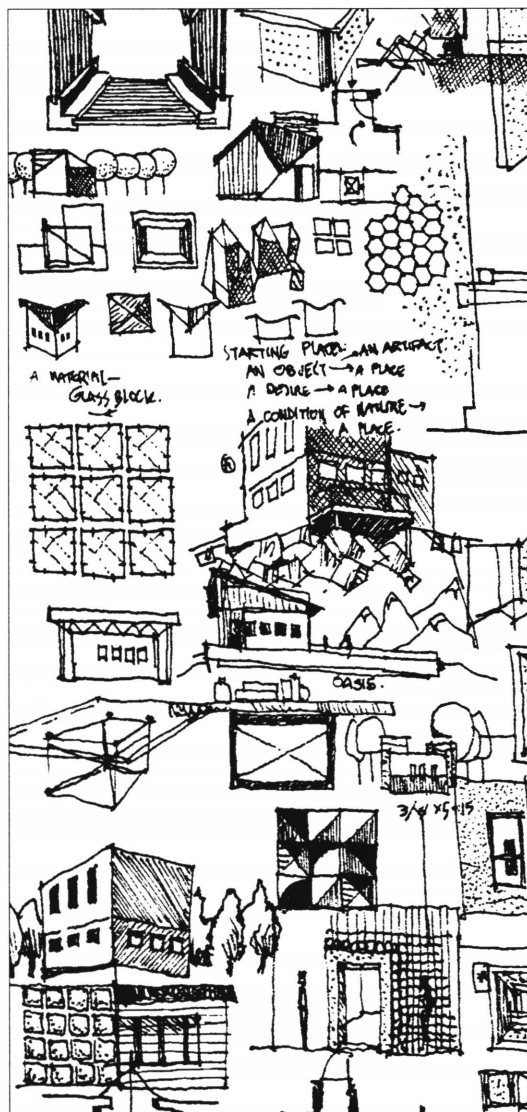
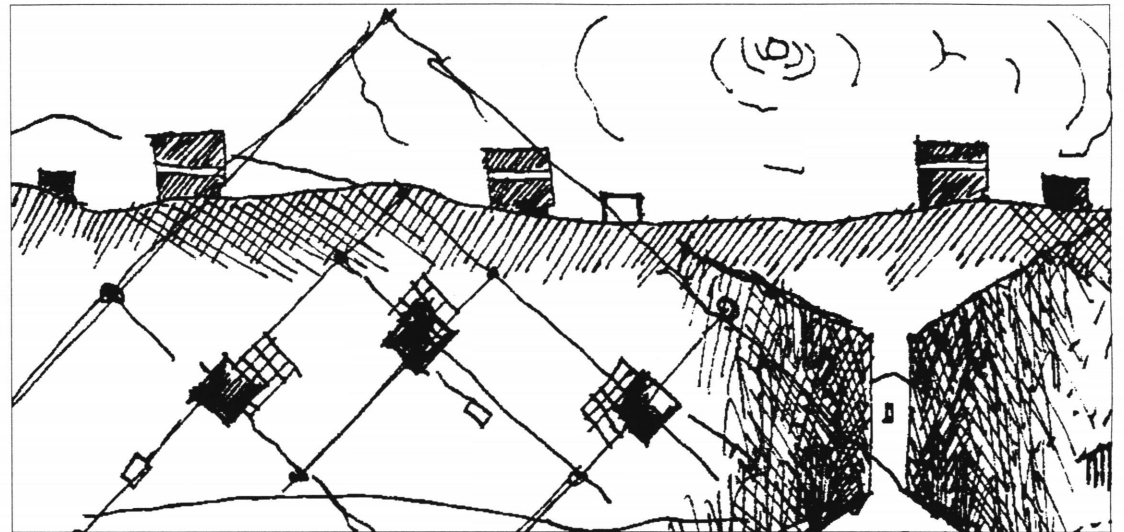




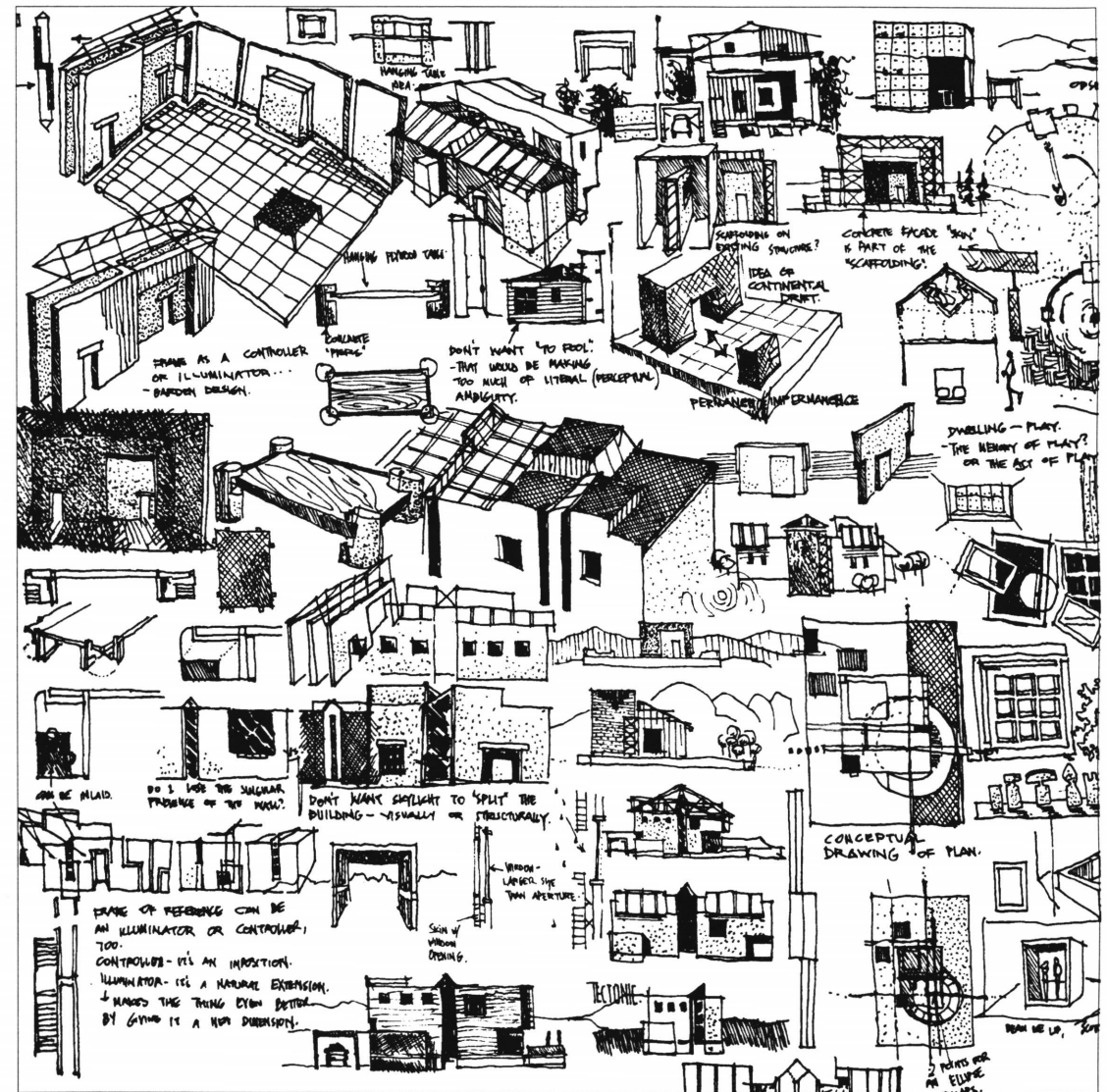
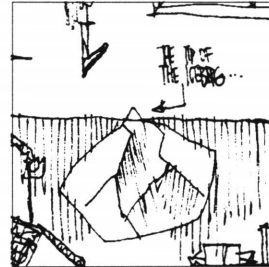
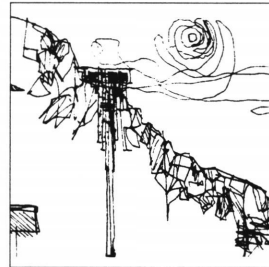
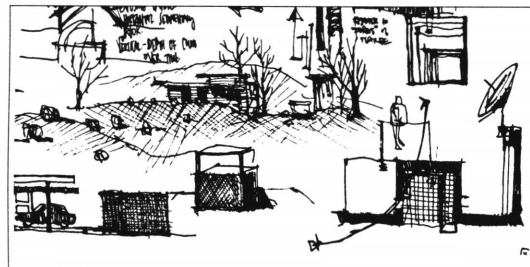


The ruin allows for the dweller to bring his experiences to it; thus it is a different place for each person. The child receives a plastic race car for Christmas, and it is dictated to him (by his parents, by the packaging, and ultimately by the thing itself) how he should play with it; instead, he plays with the box it came in. The box, like the ruin, allows the imagination of the child to come to bear in the experiencing of the toy; the boy or girl becomes a creative participant in the activity, just as the dweller participates in the making of a place. Each person participates differently, bringing his or her individual experiences to the building. The architect can cultivate this differentiation by making a building with universal qualities that transcend time and location.

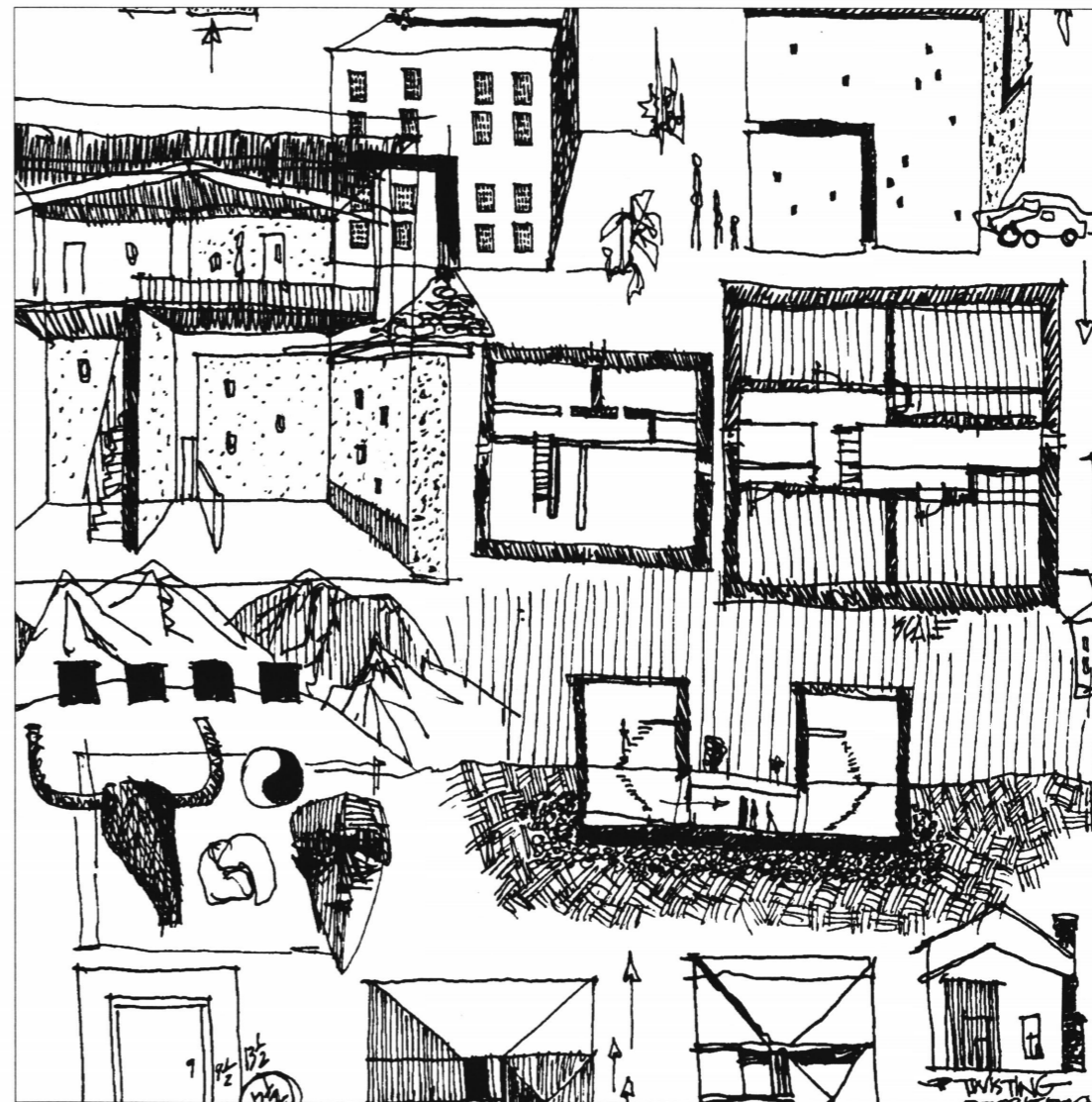
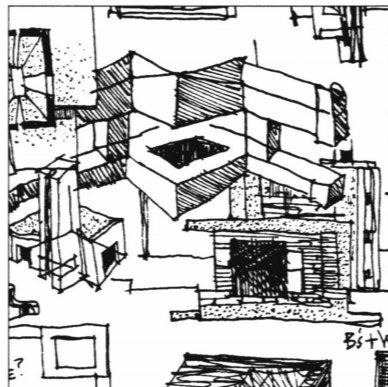
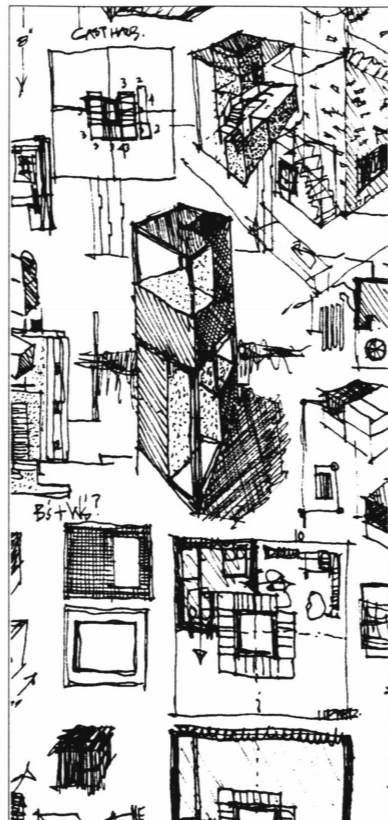




The architect cannot dictate how the dweller is to interpret or use his design. The engineer becomes offended when someone finds a use for his design that was not intended, whereas the architect is happily surprised, if not flattered. The way the sunlight accentuates the texture of a wall, or the fact that a house reminds the dweller of a particular cabin from his childhood—these are not things that the architect plans specifically, but can allow for events or moments like these to take place. The architect usually cannot control the life of his building once it is built, so he makes forms or gestures that are open-ended.

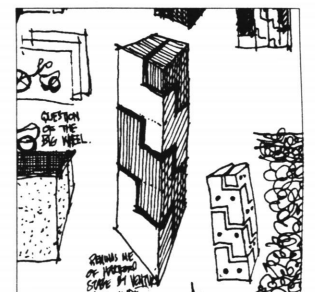
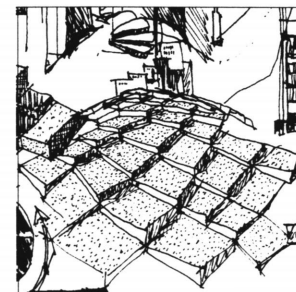
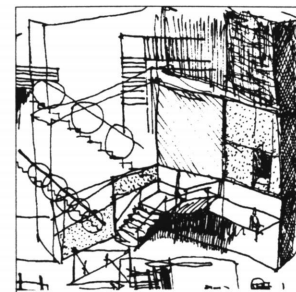
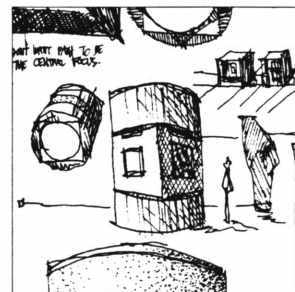
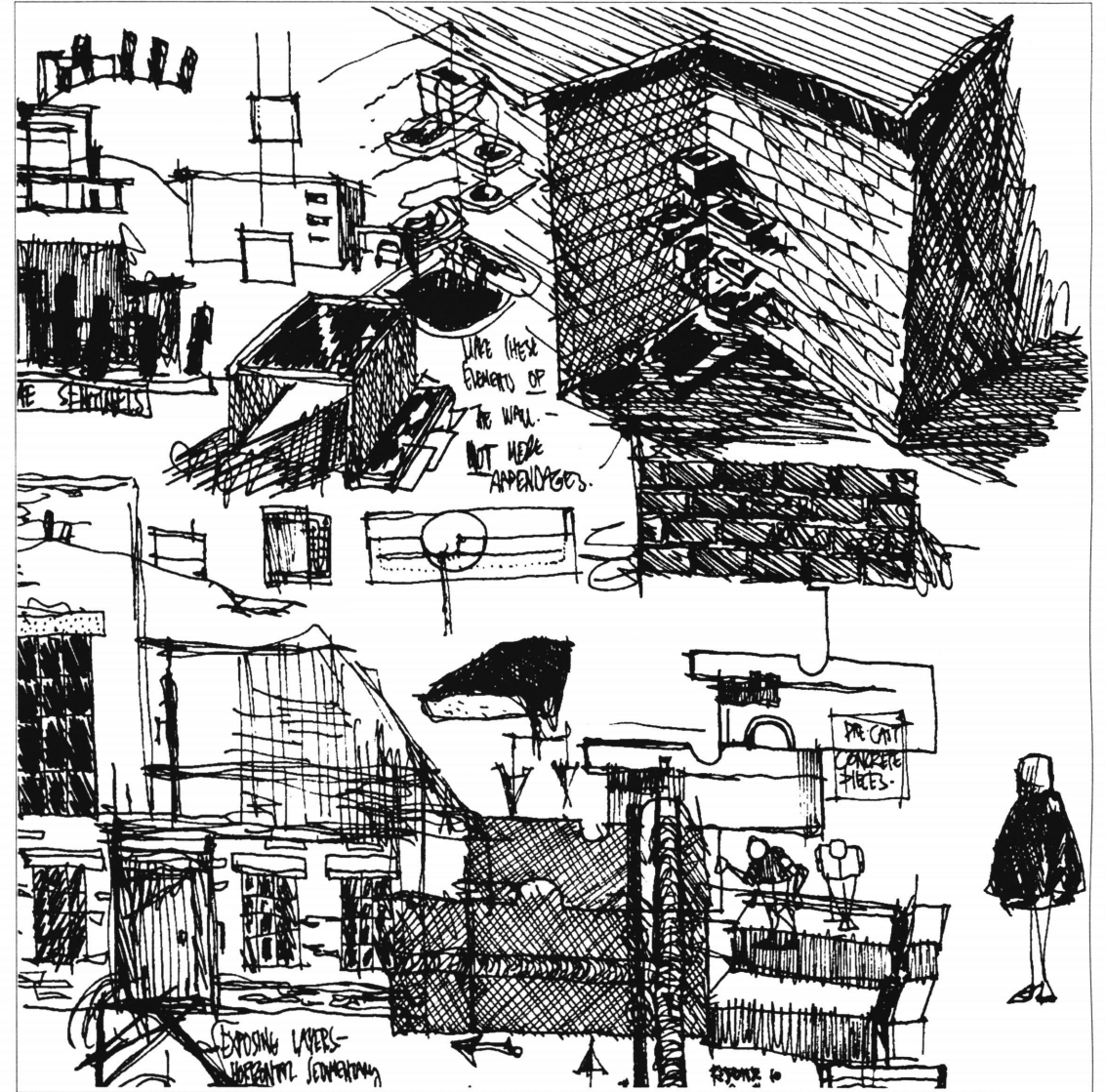






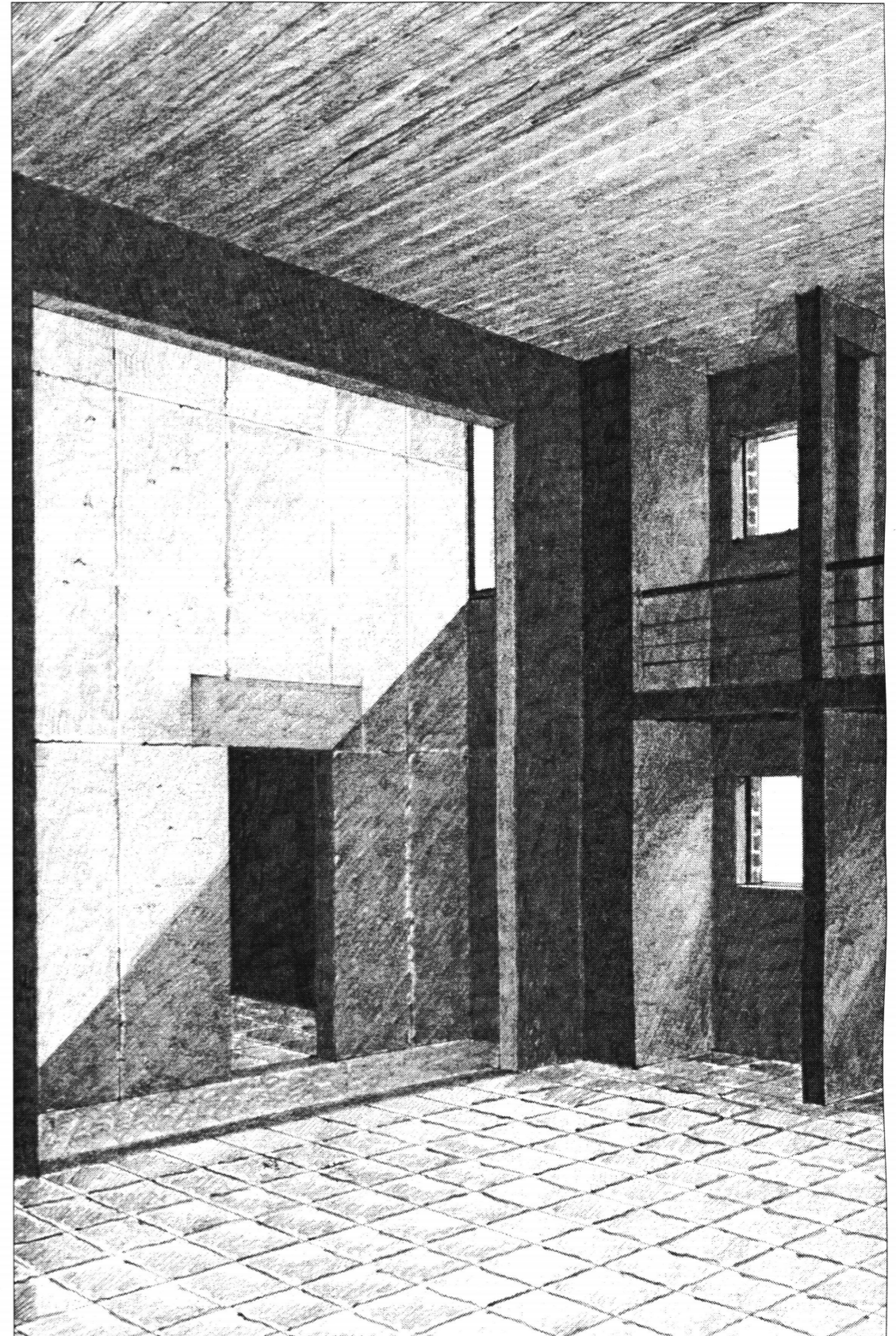
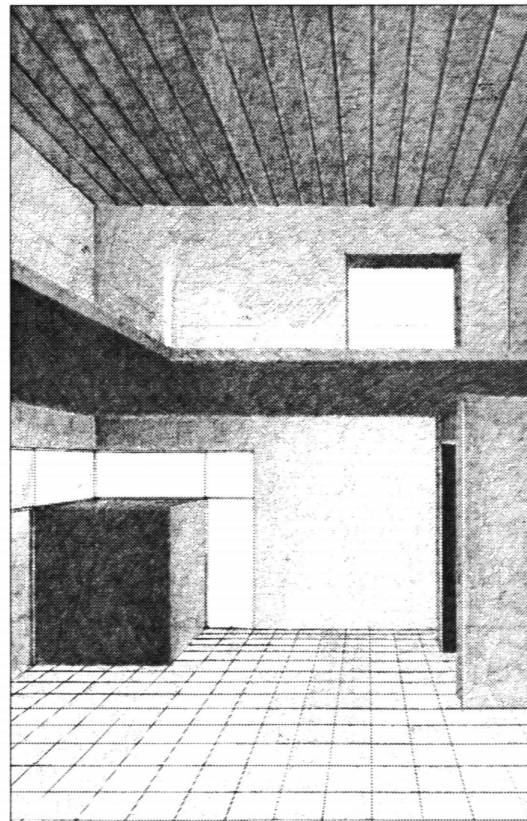
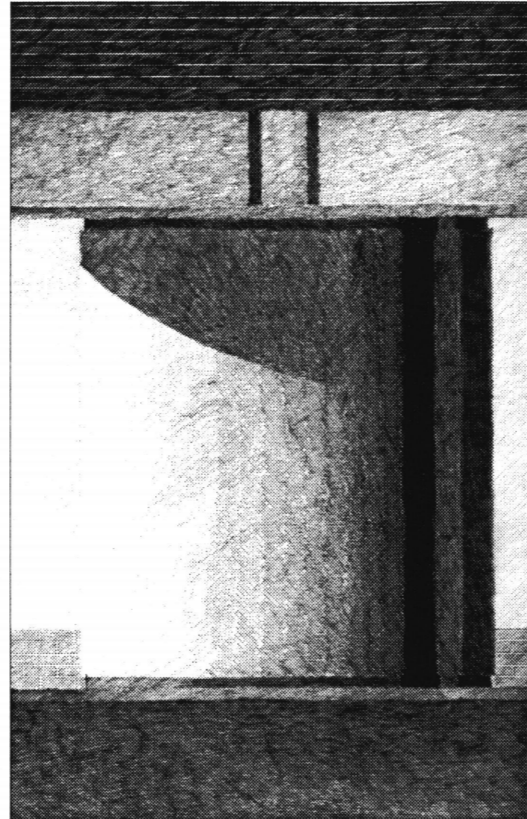


To acknowledge material in a building is to respect the orders of Nature. Glass, wood, steel, concrete, and stone are constants, barometers by which we measure the passage of time. We acknowledge that our existence is short, but we can still thank the building for having made our time more full with meaning and reflection. By designing with the intrinsic properties of material in mind, the architect conveys a sense that the building is not a monument to his superior intellect, but is a recognition that fundamental constants in Nature persist beyond his own understanding.

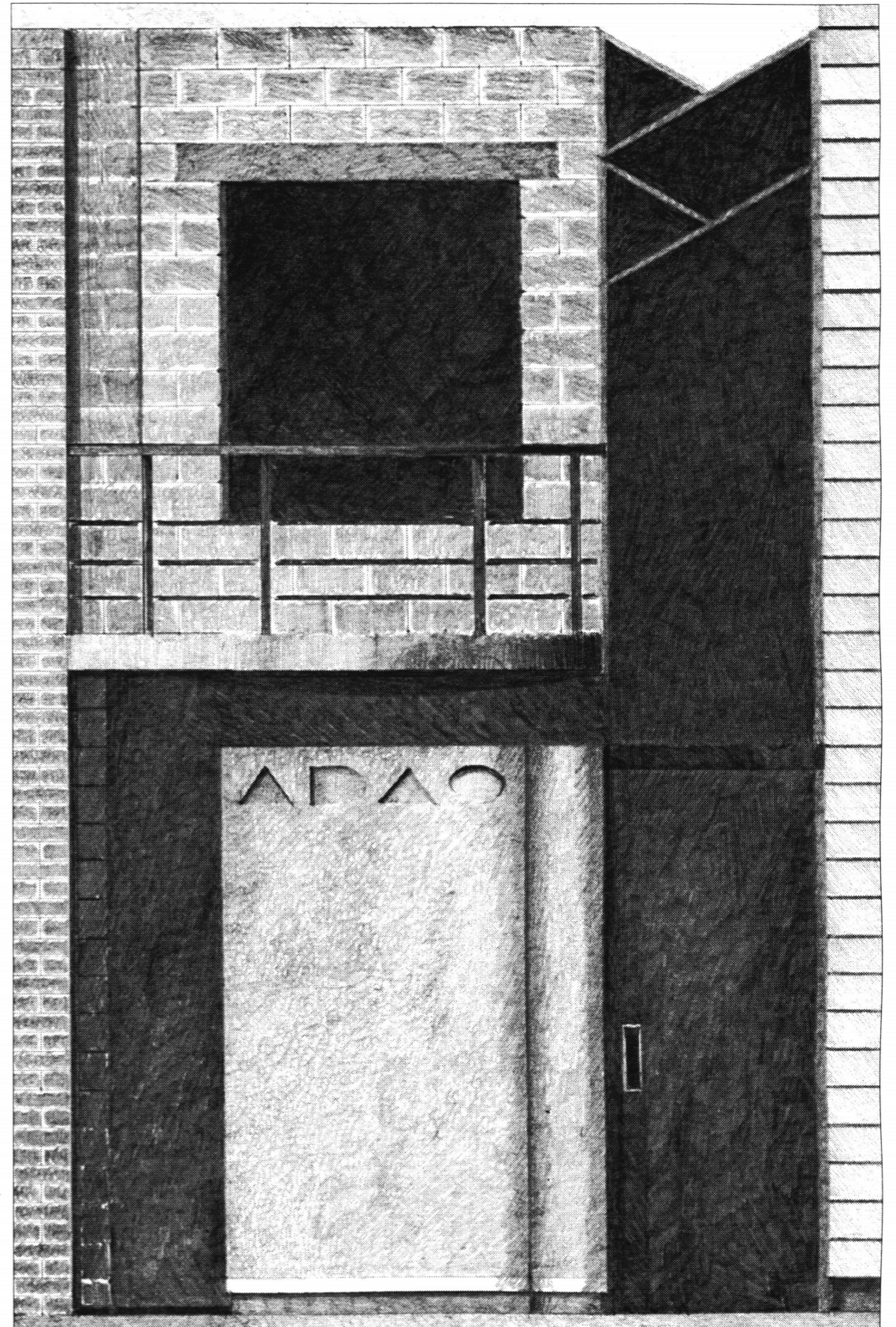
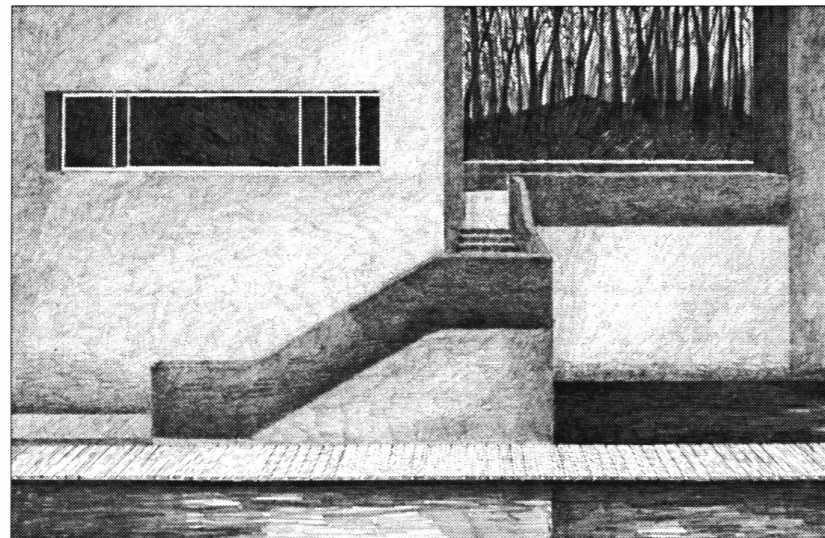


## Elements, Places

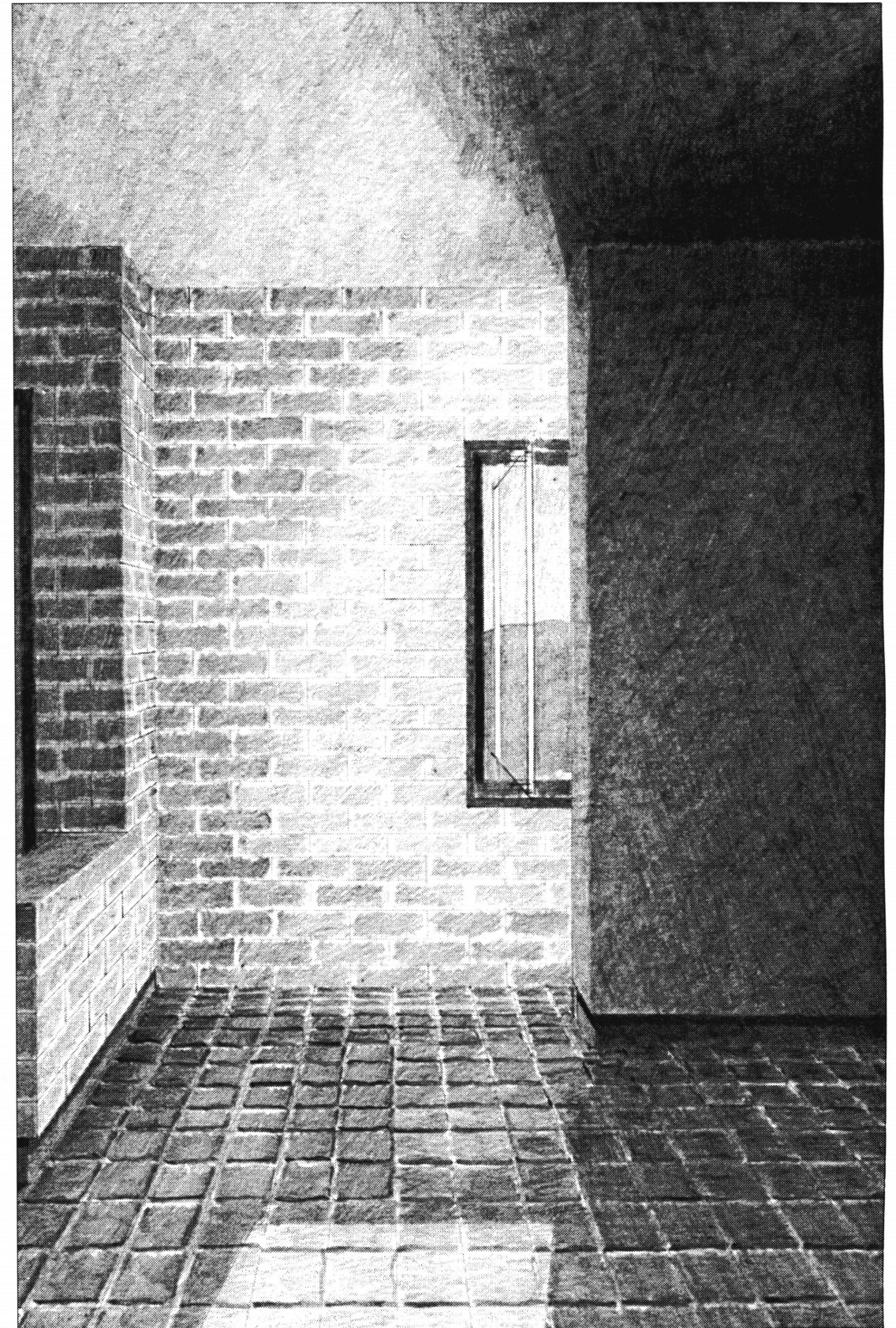
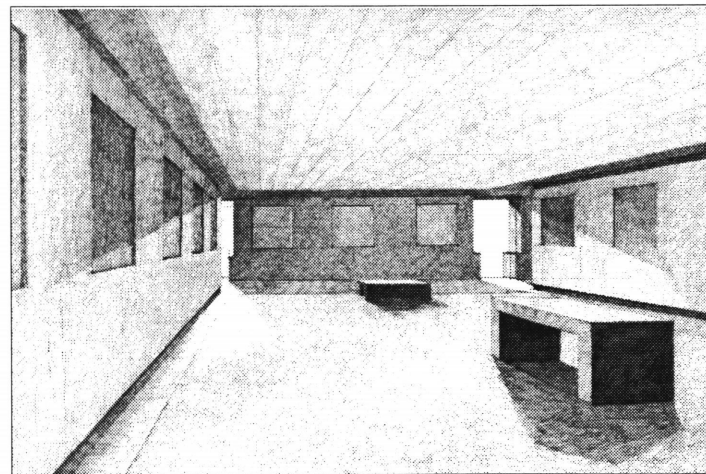
The work in this thesis is an attempt at discovering an architecture of experience. When one speaks of "experiencing architecture" what comes to mind is an intimate and complex relationship between viewer and viewed, between house and housed. An architecture of experience is one of direct, real, at times raw communication between man and object. The sky and the earth act on the building to give it a meaningful presence. The thoughts and memories of man also act on the building to make a place which stimulates more thought. The powers of Nature and the reflection of man complement each other, ultimately giving rise to a self-perpetuating spiral. Man talks to building. Building talks to man.



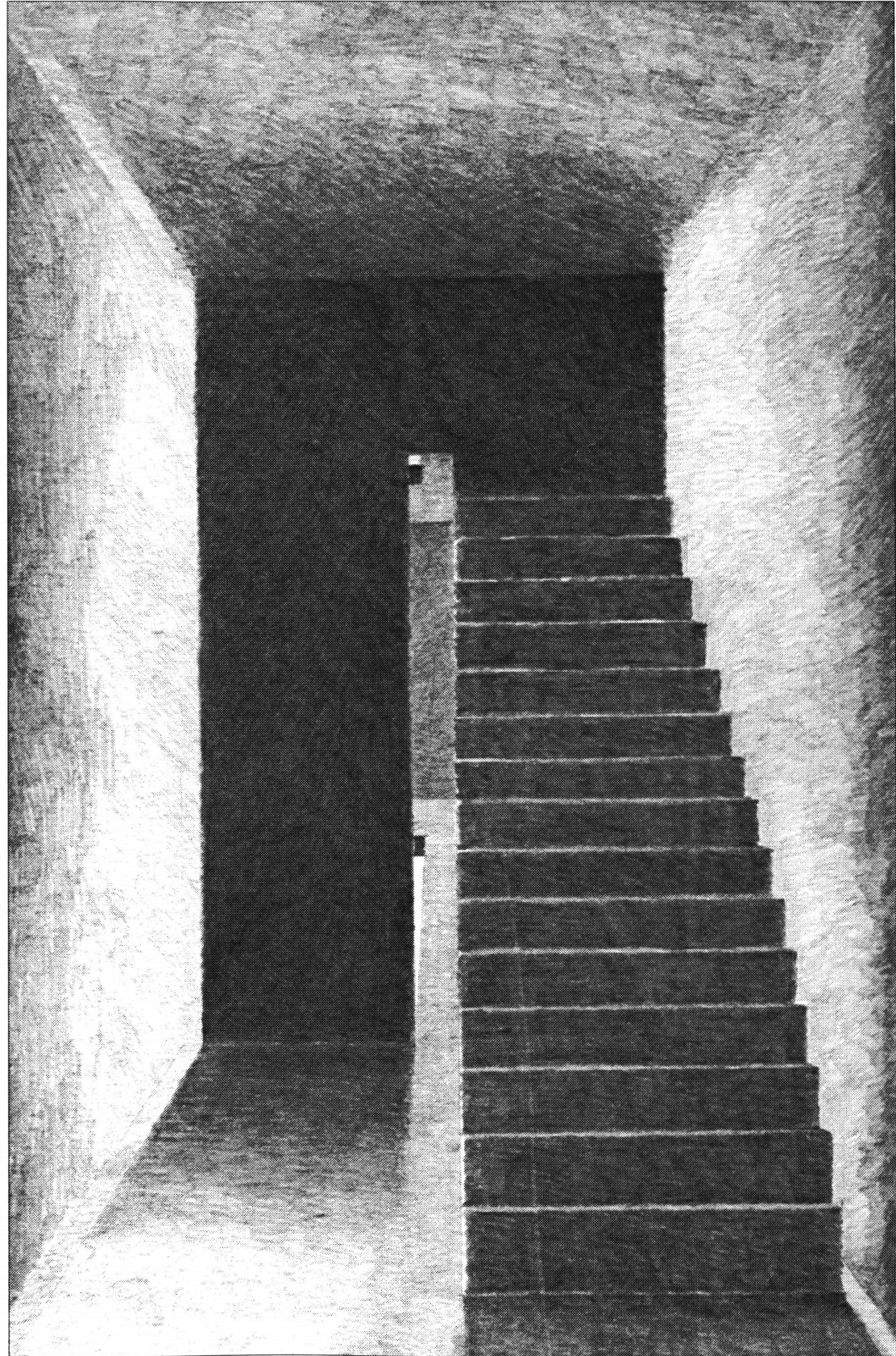
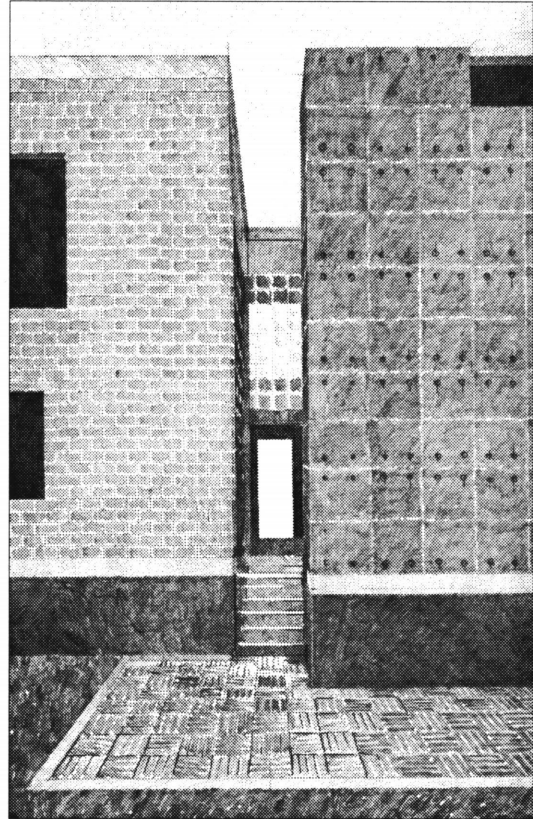
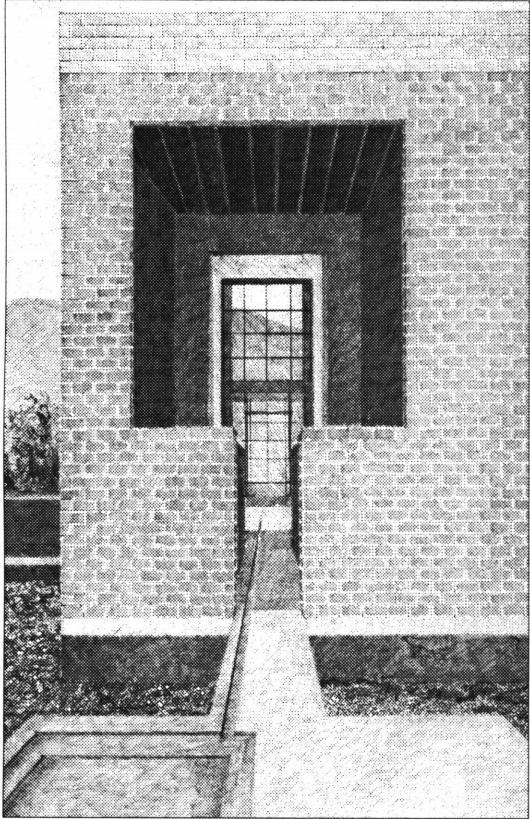




When the building and man are engaged in communication, a place is born. This idea of place is not merely a geographic location, but a harmonious gathering of factors which include the presence of Nature and the thoughts of man. Places have the capability of elevating man's spirit.

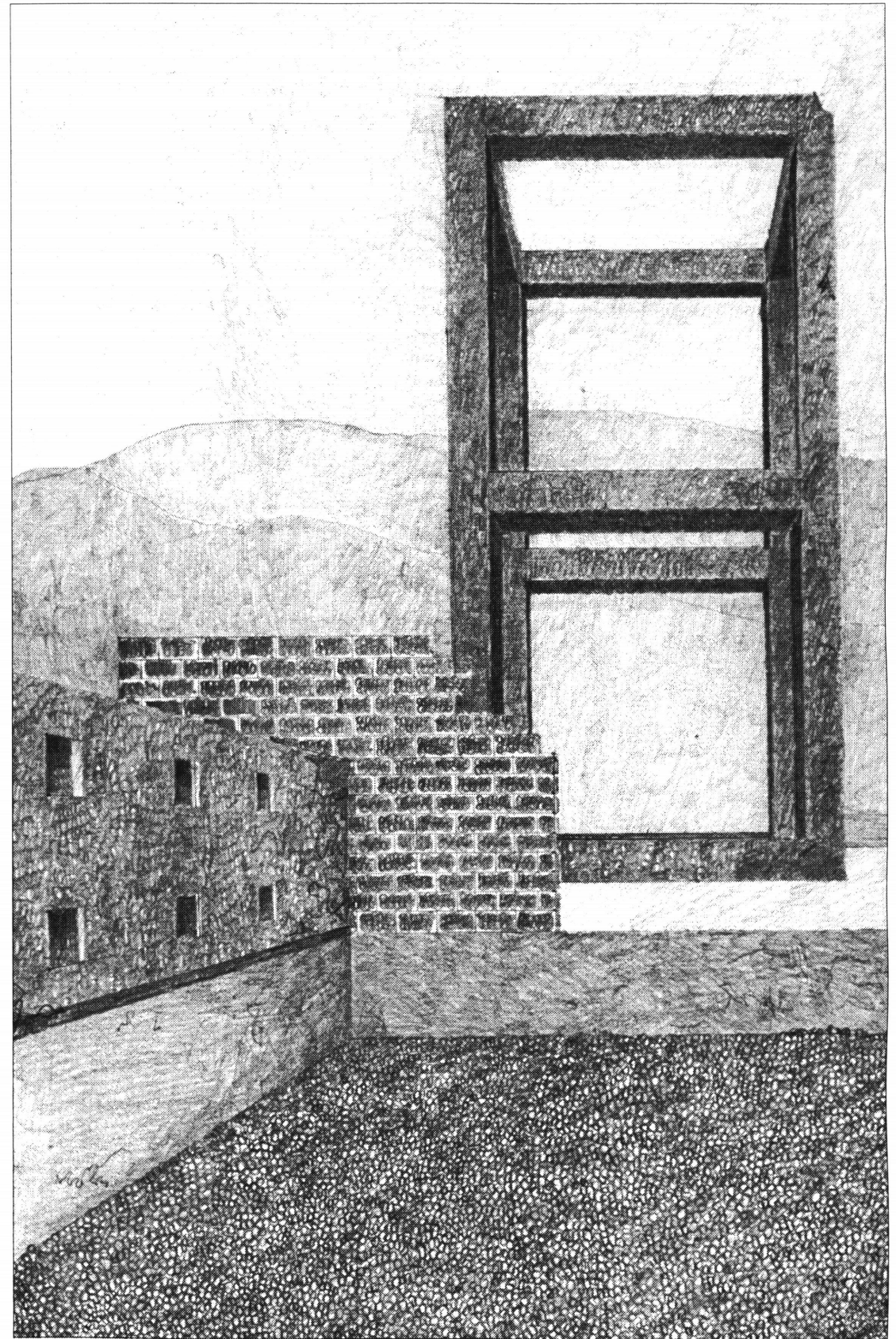
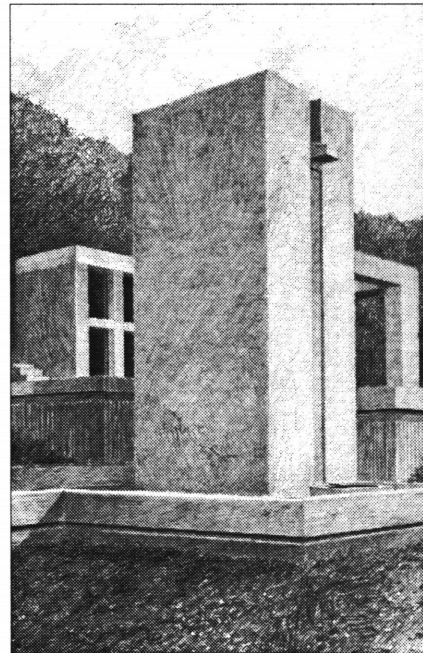
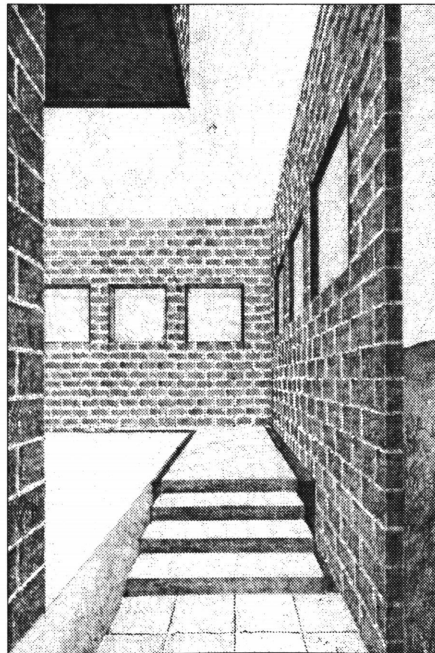
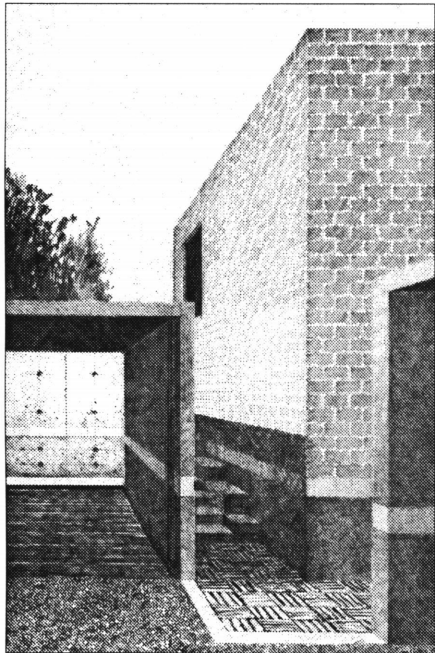




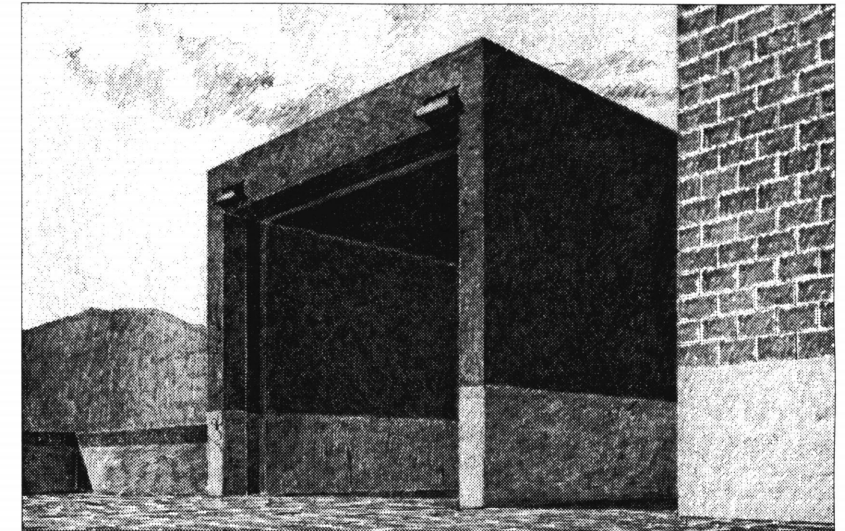
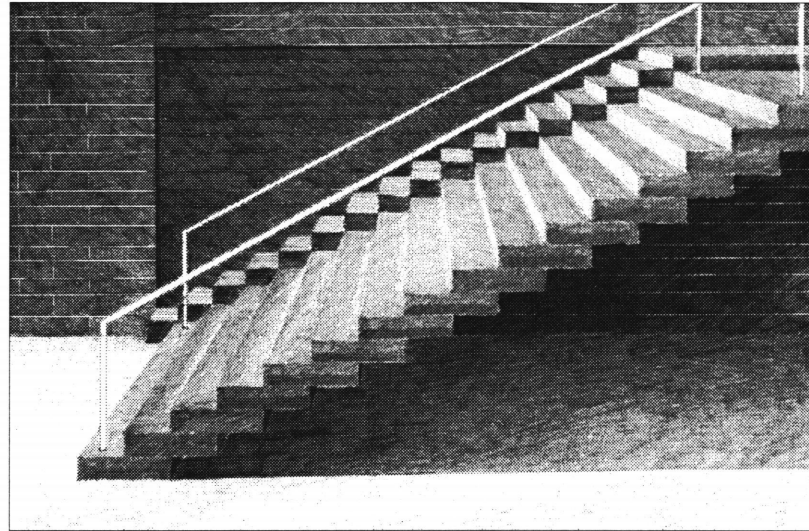




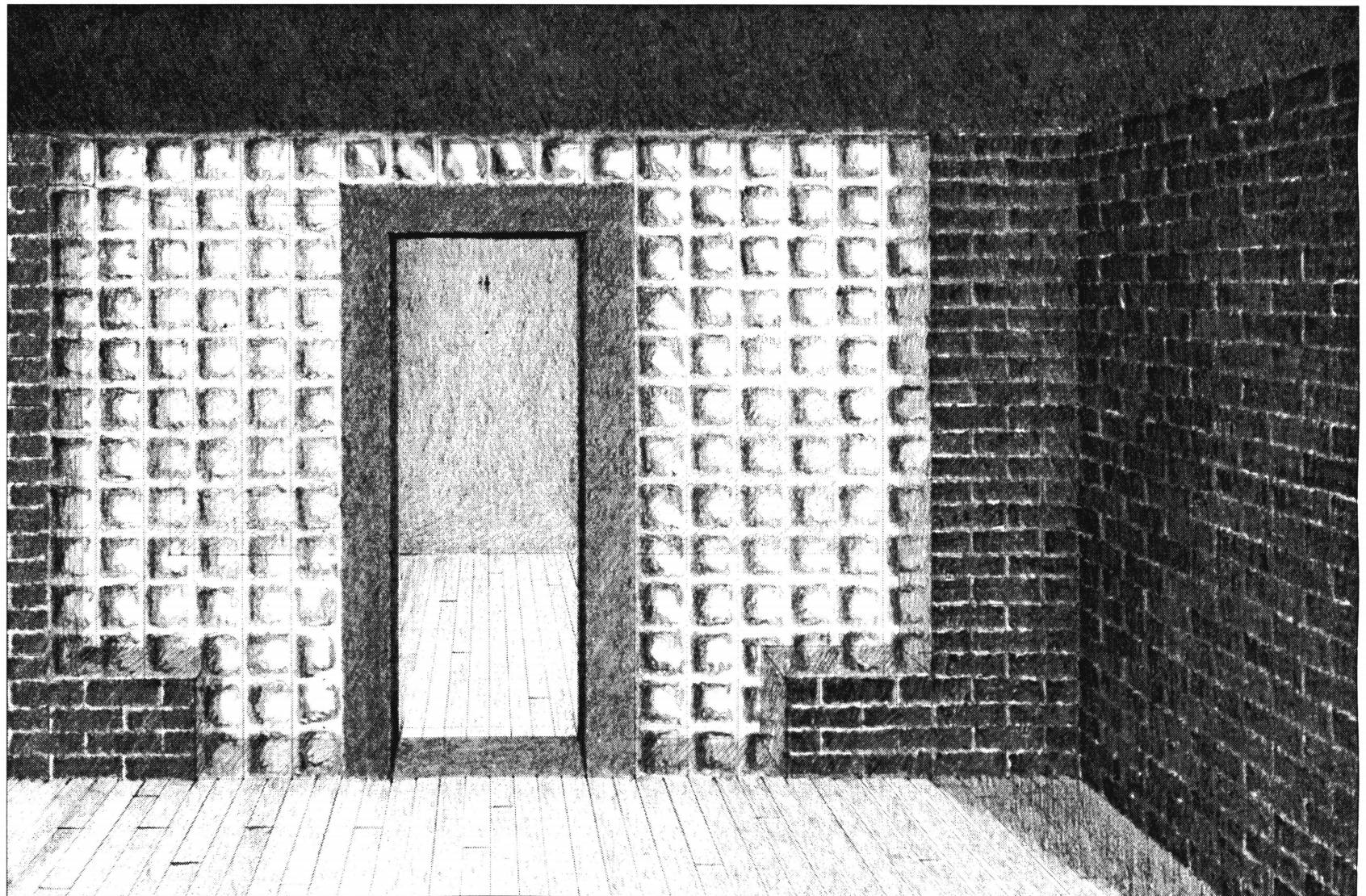
Architecture has the potential of bringing meaningful phenomena to the dweller. The architect lays the groundwork for this phenomena, but the elements of Nature-Light, the Sky, the Earth, Time--are constant and thus constantly act toward the making of places. The architect's will is present at a place, and is perceptible, but the phenomenon of a place is not dependent on this will. The building speaks directly, clearly, and immediately with the dweller or the passerby. Like the father teaching his son how to ride a bicycle, the architect's role is to father the building, to breathe life into it, but then to let go and let it exist on its own.





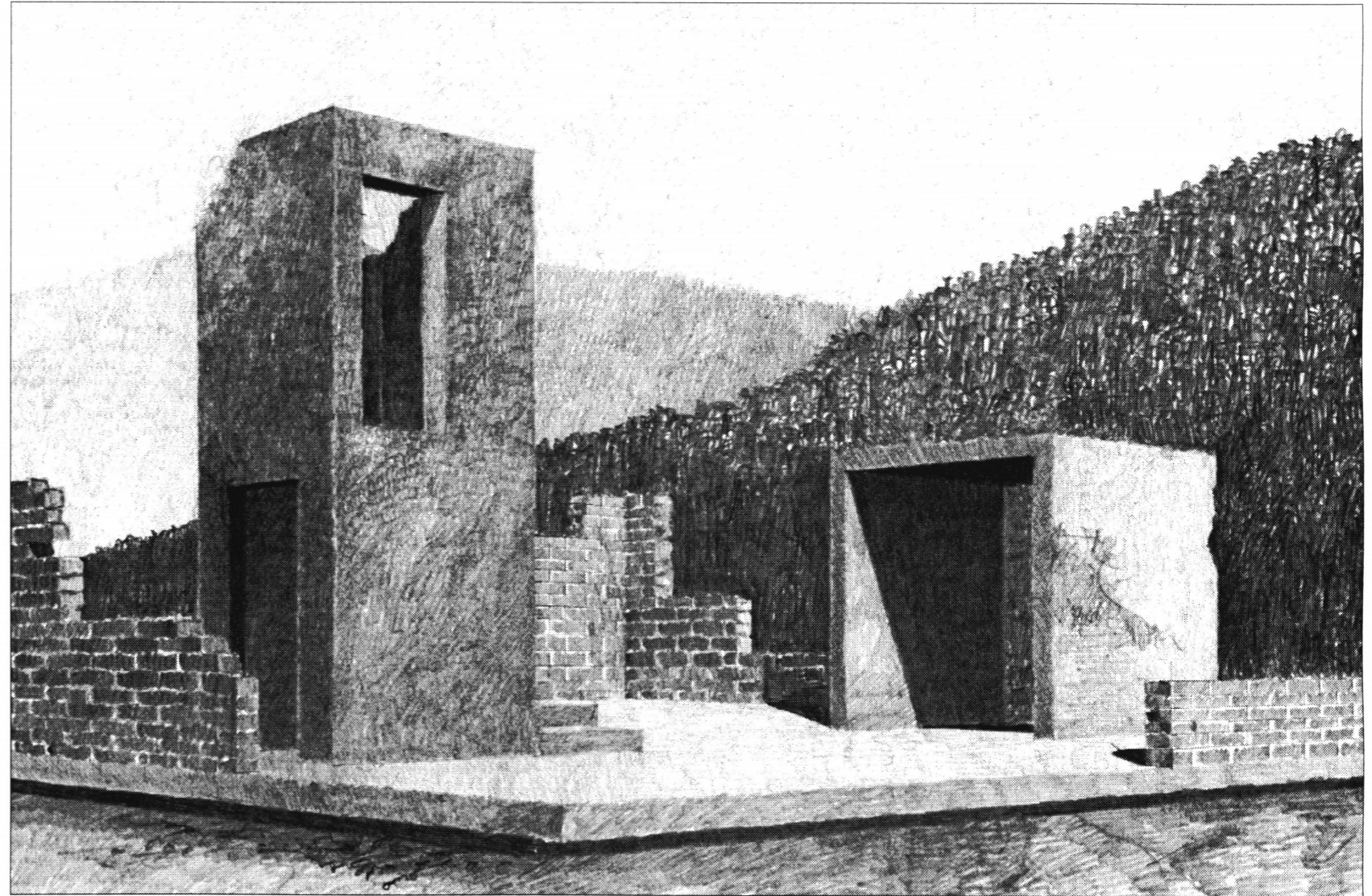
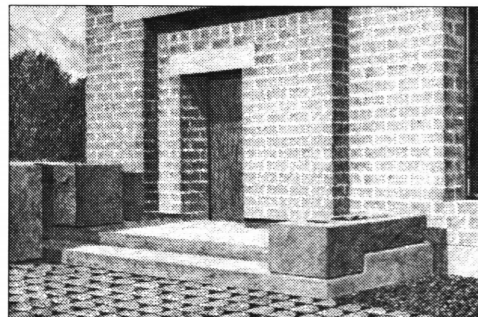
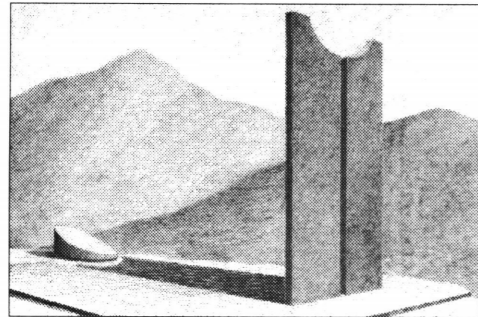


Not only does the building bring something to the observer, but man has an opportunity to contribute to the making of the place. In order for an architecture of experience to manifest itself at its highest level, man must bring with him his own past. The dweller perceives the building in the context of his own experience. His experience includes places he has known, dreams he has had, textures he has felt.

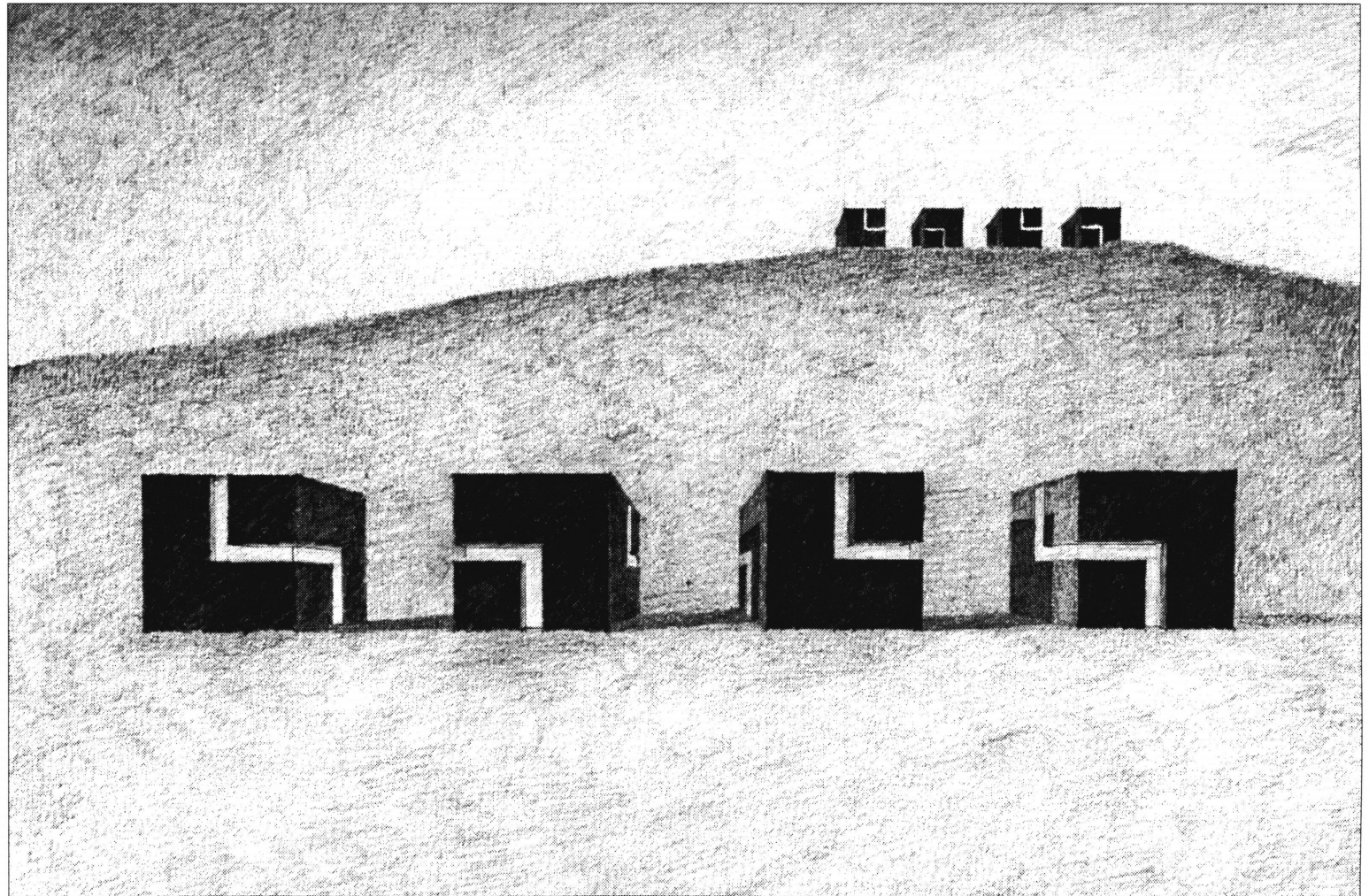
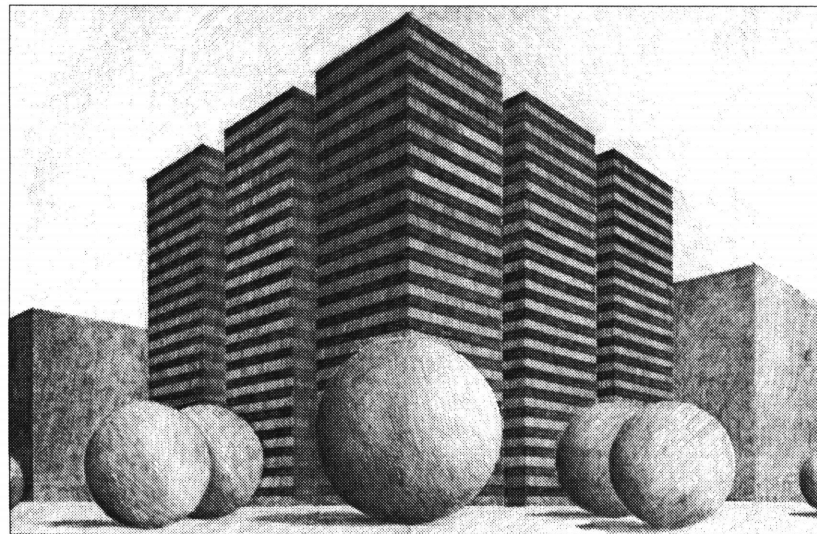
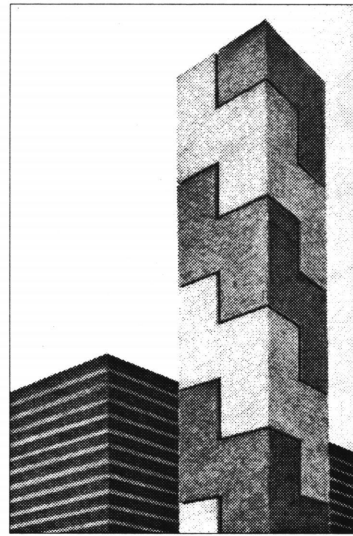




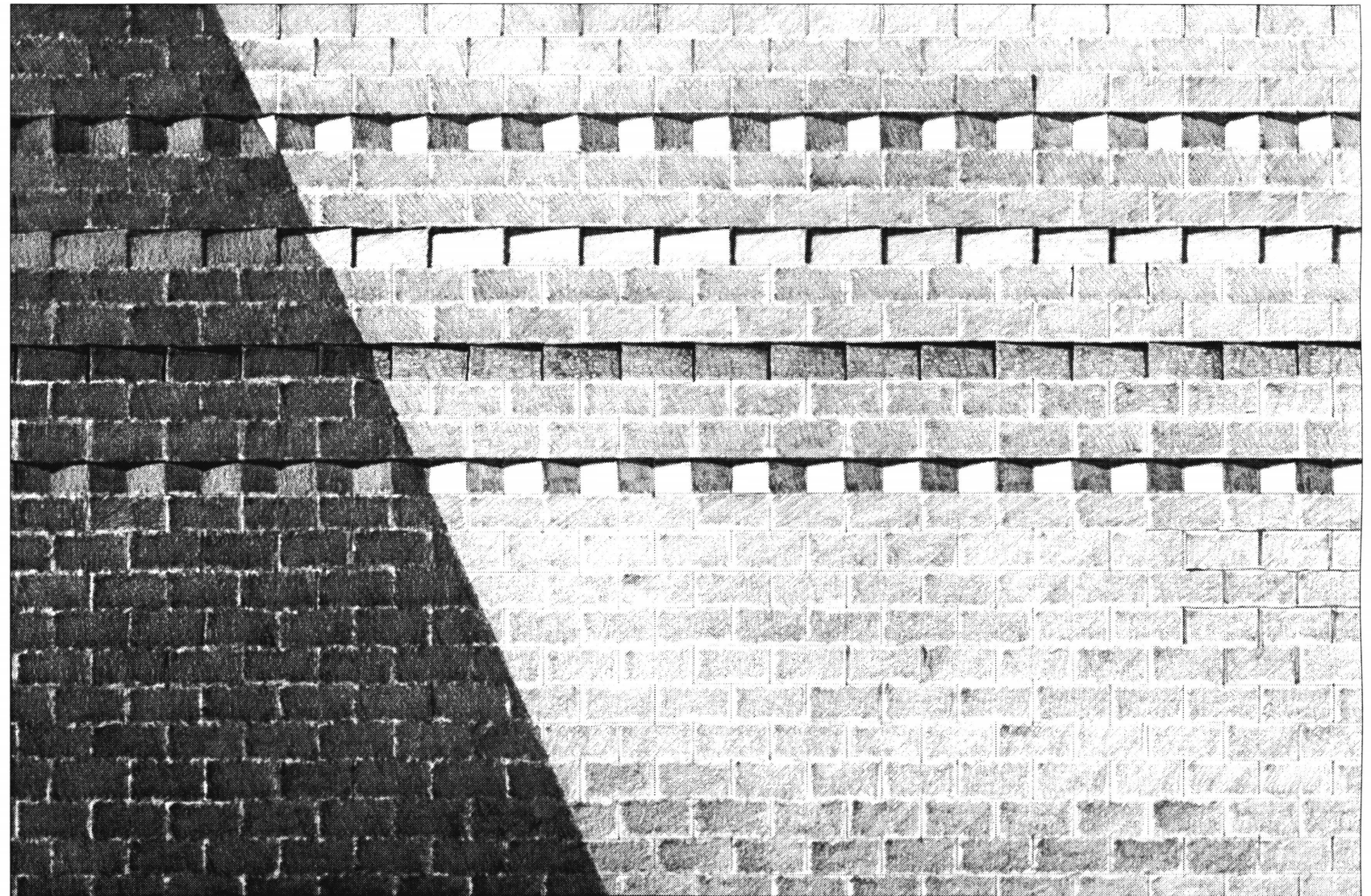
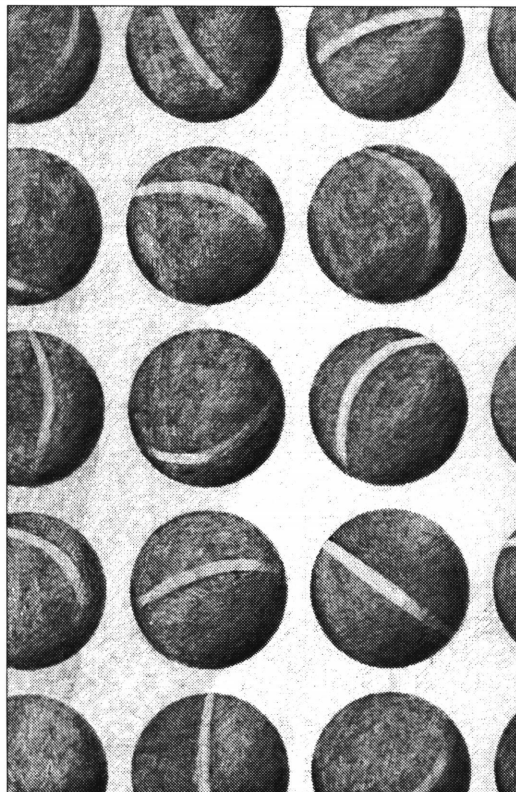
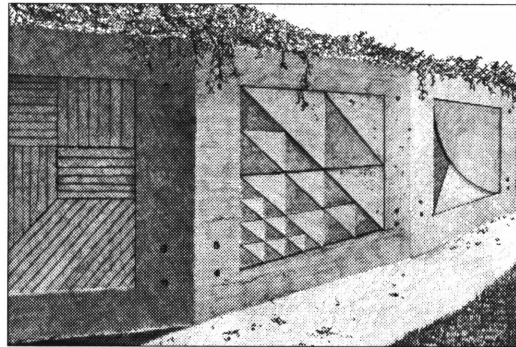
Beyond this he brings a collective cultural experience that cannot be traced to one particular origin. Perhaps the observer has never truly thought about the idea of plinth or ruin or corner, but there is a certain degree of understanding that occurs when he sees these elements in a more revealing light. Perhaps he has never seen a house with a courtyard in the middle or an entrance that takes him through a number of layers of spaces, but because these conditions have precedents in human culture, he is able to make some sense of them and appreciate them.







The role of the architect is not to spell out what these archetypes mean or how they should be read, but rather to put them in a position that will foster many interpretations. By allowing this transparency of meaning, the architect gives his work greater depth and the phenomenon of Place is more potent.

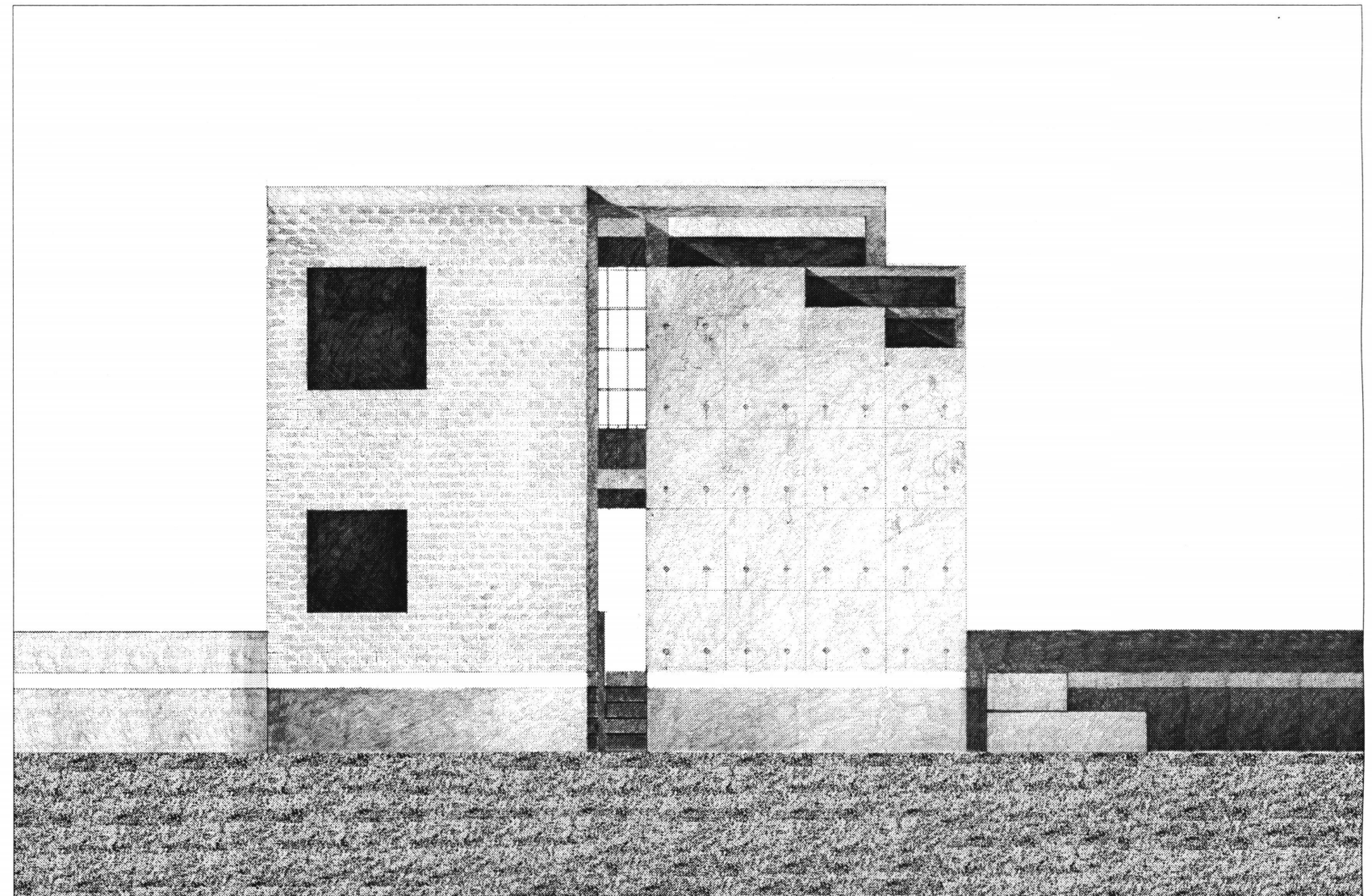
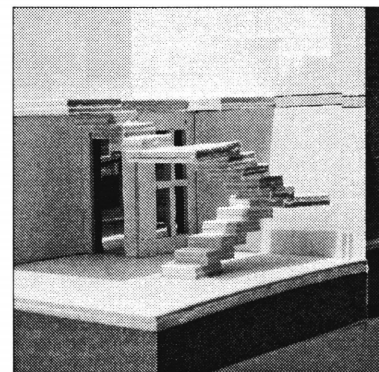
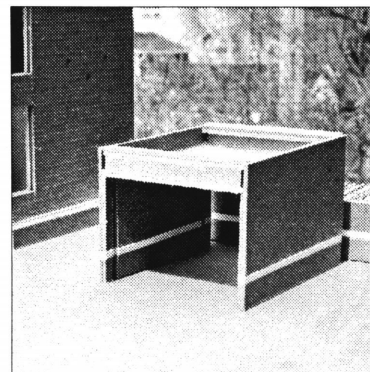
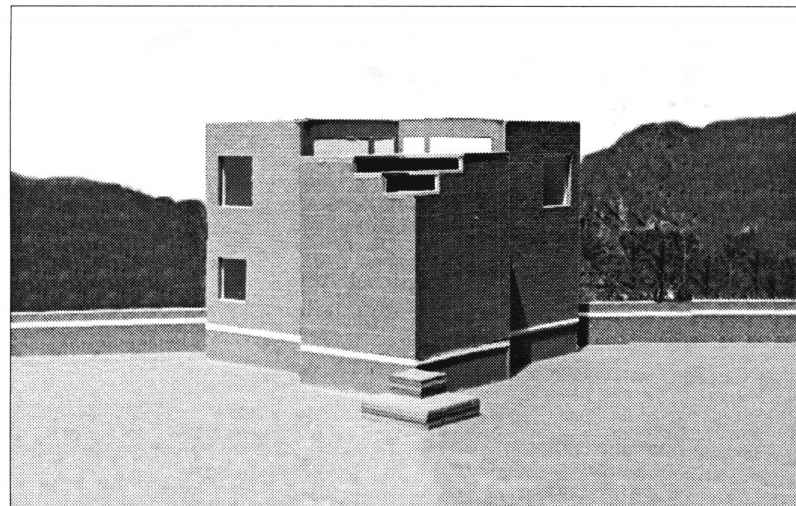




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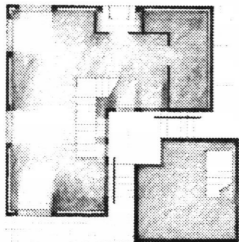
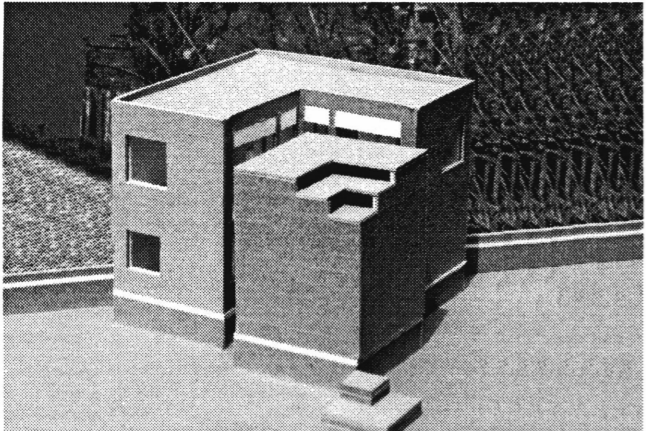
The three houses are ordered by a continuous plinth, physical layering of spaces, thoughts about the intrinsic qualities of the materials, and ideas about permanence and impermanence.

The plinth is not just a literal foundation for the buildings, but it is also a conceptual starting point. The plinth is a floor slab that connects the inside to the outside of each house, and by existing at a constant elevation, connects the houses to each other. It separates the realms of earth and sky.

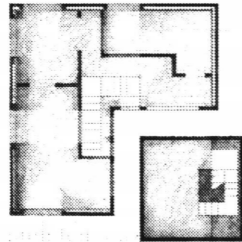


*House 1 Front Elevation*

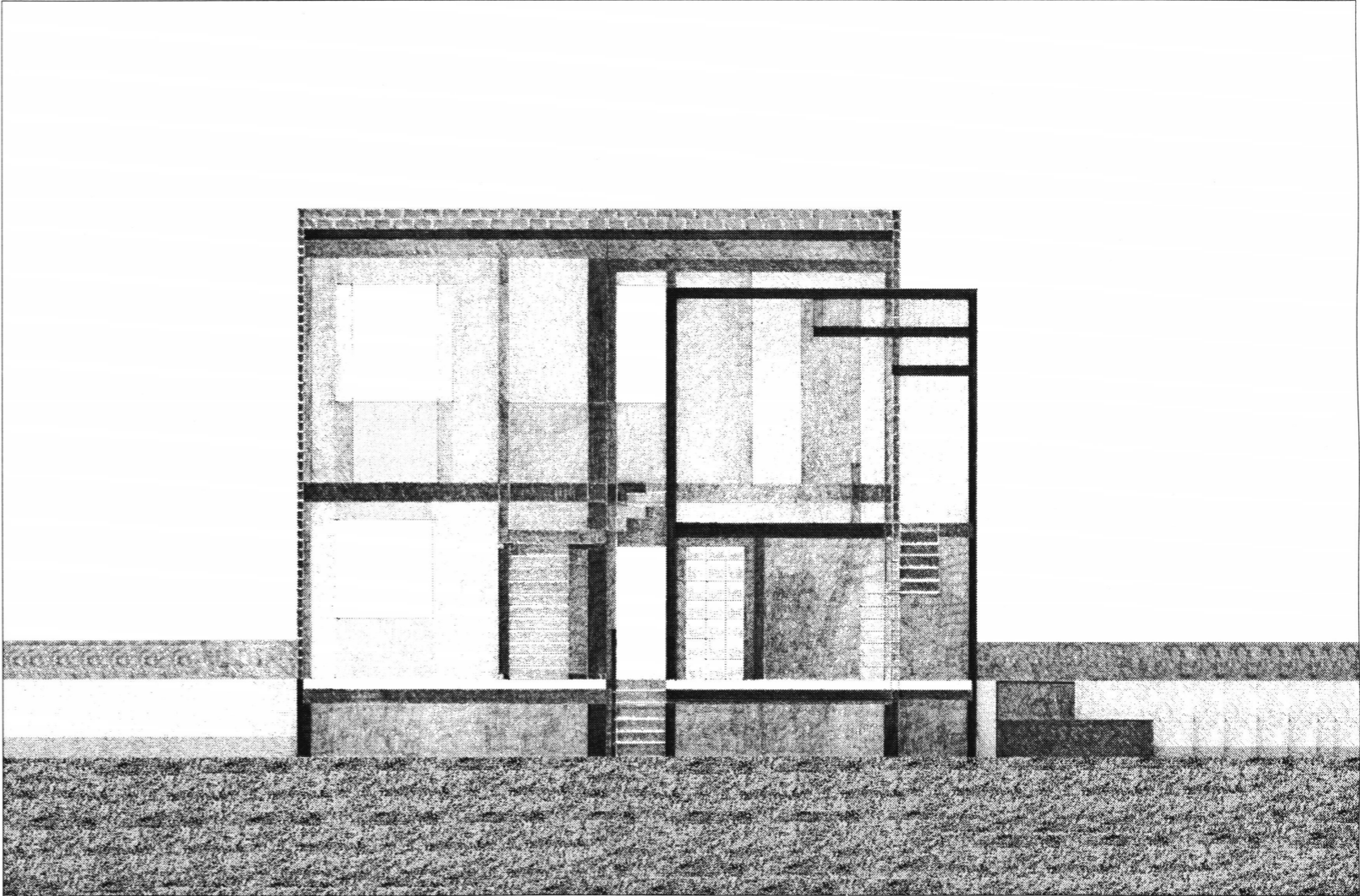
Buildings age, trying to withstand the forces of time. Sooner or later, they become ruins, still valuable to many as places of silence and reflection, but no longer serving their intended function. It is the ruin, the core stronghold of a building, be it a wall or a core or a flat slab, that persists against the inevitable decay. The cladding may be gone, the glass windows broken, but the foundation remains, first built and last to fall. The plinth as a connecting element ties the buildings together, as if to say that they were all built upon the same rock slab. In the end the plinths become terraces in the landscape, places of stability in a rapidly changing world.



*First Floor Plan*



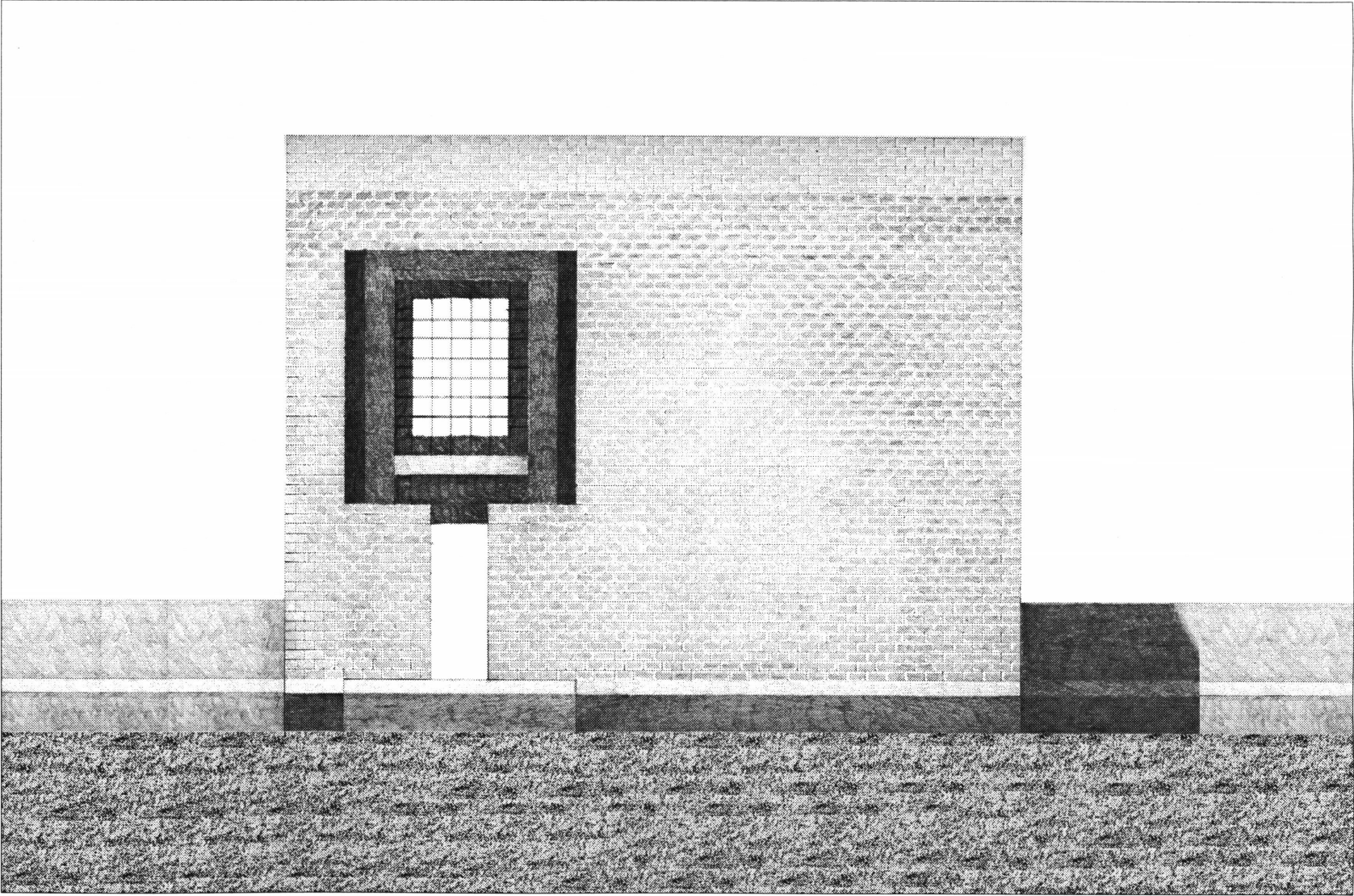
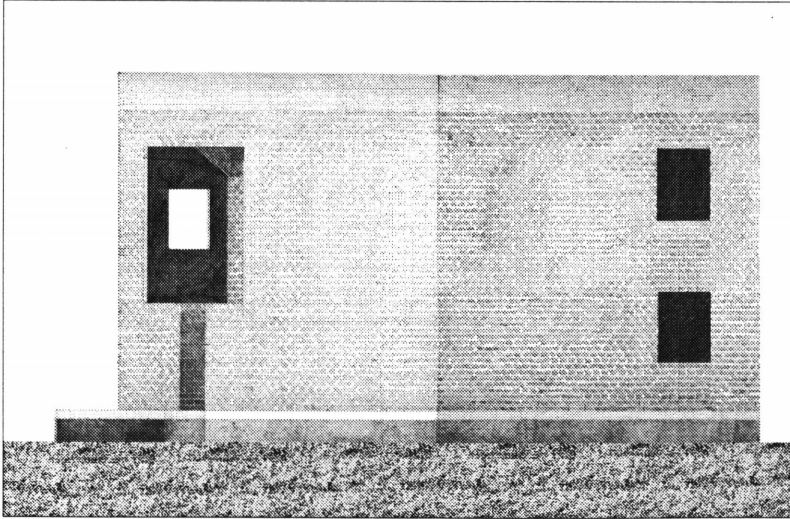
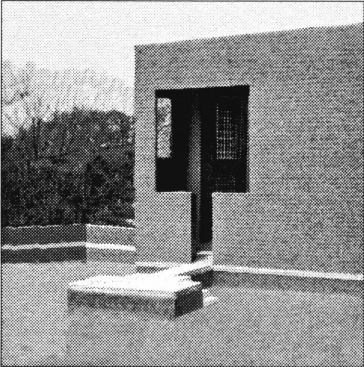
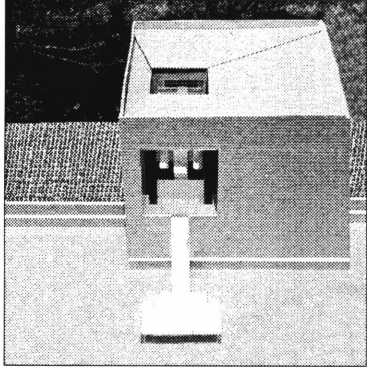
*Second Floor Plan*



*House 1 Composite Section*



Within each house spaces are layered such that there is often a view of a dark space followed by a lighter space and then another dark area. Fragmented glimpses of the outside are possible as the dweller moves through the house. The participant's eye becomes activated, as well as his memory. The glimpses are mirrors without reflection: subtle reminders that he is part of a larger realm of existence.

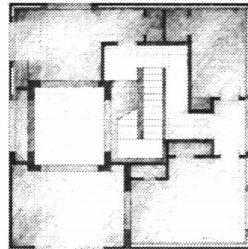


*House 2 Front Elevation*

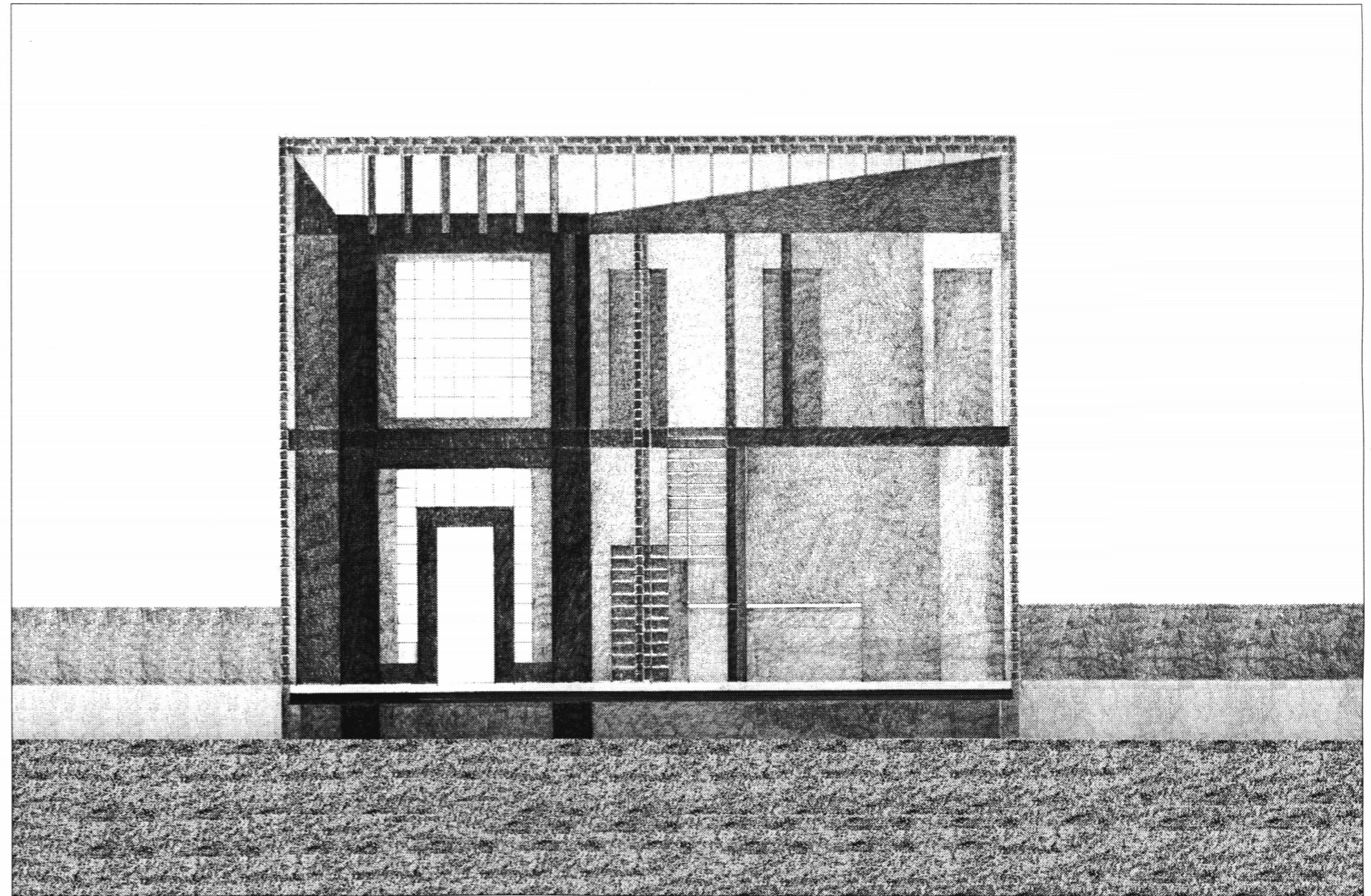
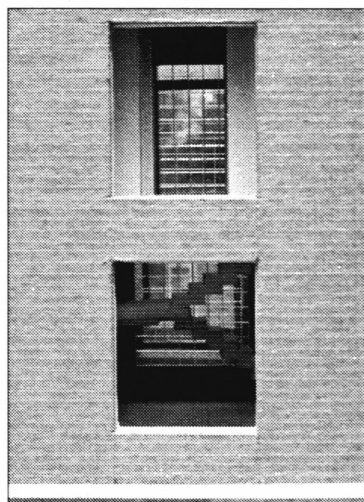
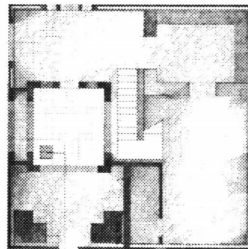


Two of the houses include a poured in place concrete core or frame. The core brings the physical strength of the house within the building. The exterior curtain wall made of large concrete bricks acts as an exterior shell and will eventually be the first to crumble, revealing the more permanent layers of the house.

*Second Floor Plan*

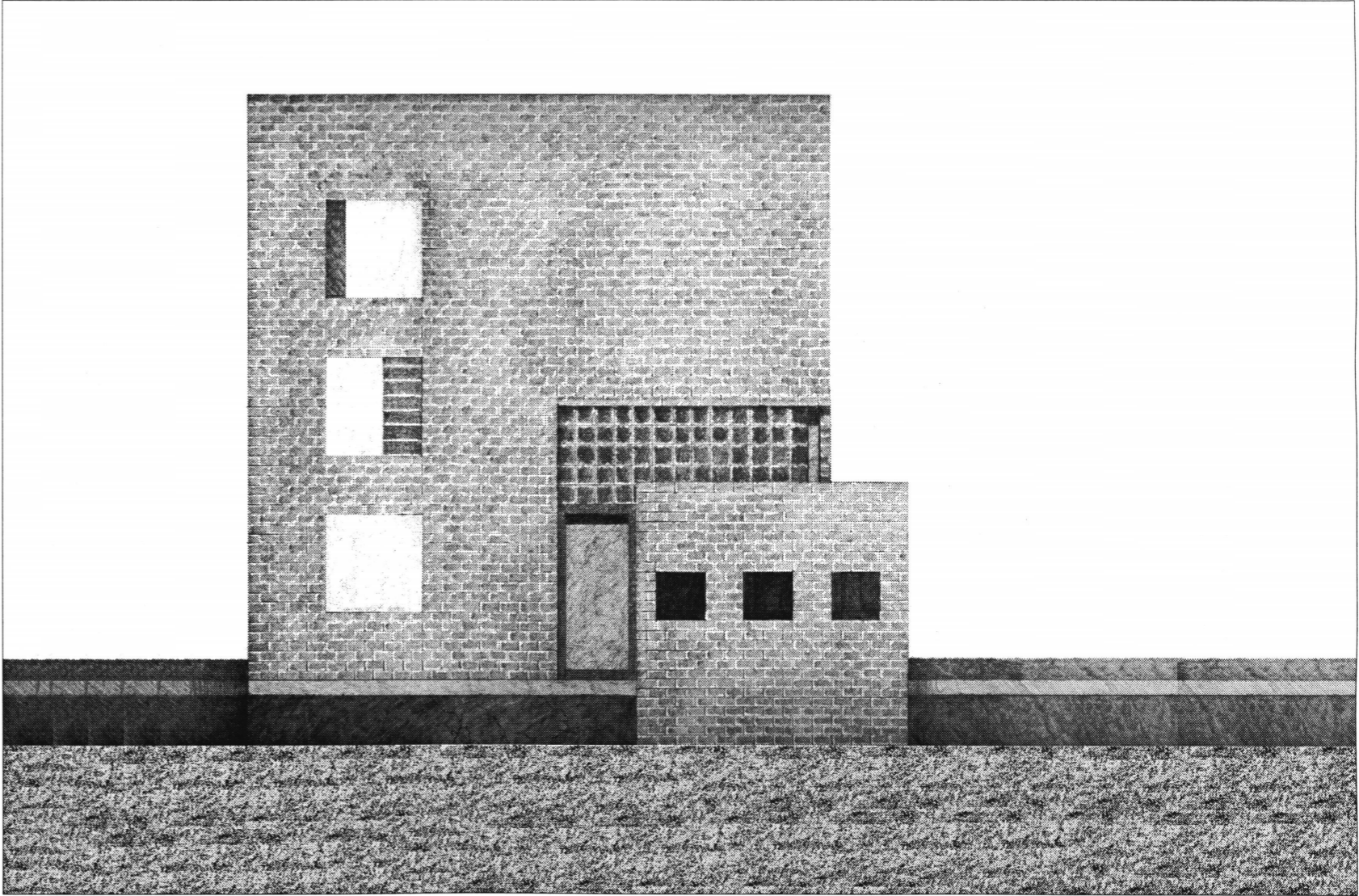
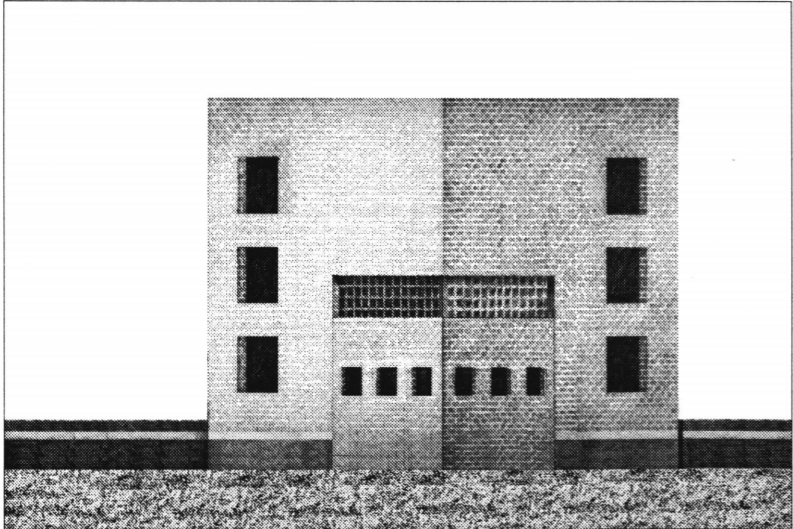
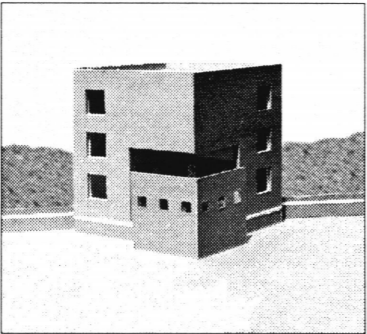
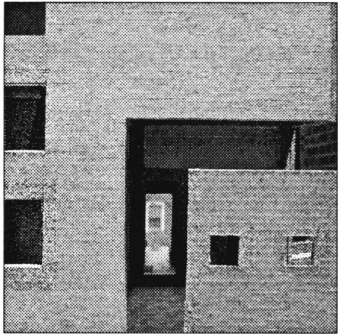


*First Floor Plan*



*House 2 Composite Section*

The houses present themselves to the viewer as objects in the hills of the Virginia landscape. Each visible to one another, they are three structures borne of the same idea, but individual and distinct. Scale is not apparent as one approaches the houses, because there is no guage by which to measure. By drawing the exterior stairs and entrance within the houses, there is an attempt to allow the passerby to formulate his own reading. The houses become small huts or large monolithic figures keeping watch on one another. The viewer sees the object, not having an immediate understanding of where the dwelling fits in his or her experience, only that it does.

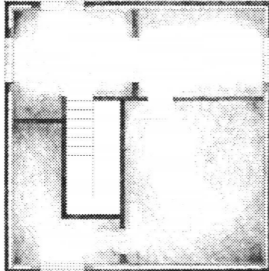


*House 3 Front Elevation*

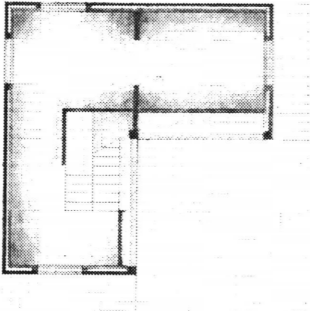


The houses are sentinels, reminders of the passage of time, guardians of the landscape. Like Stonehenge, they take one back to the roots of existence; they are glimpses into another world which cannot be fully grasped. Monumental in the sense that they hint at a dimension larger than themselves, yet what that is is a secret kept between themselves.

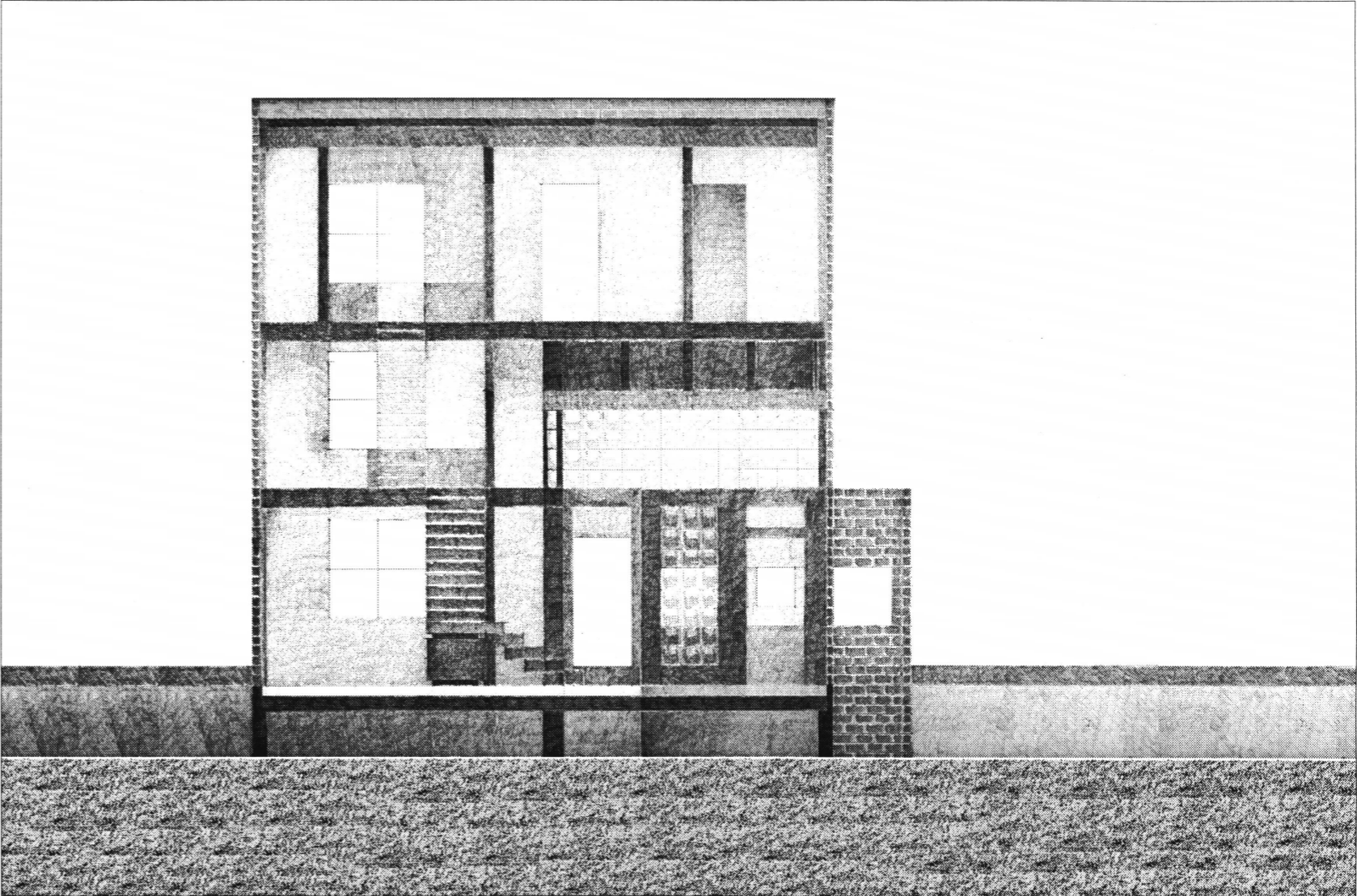
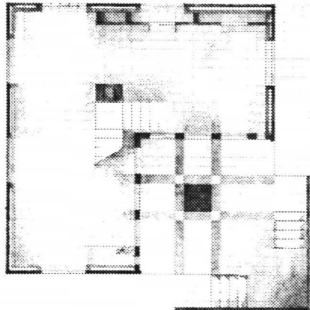
*Third Floor Plan*



*Second Floor Plan*



*First Floor Plan*

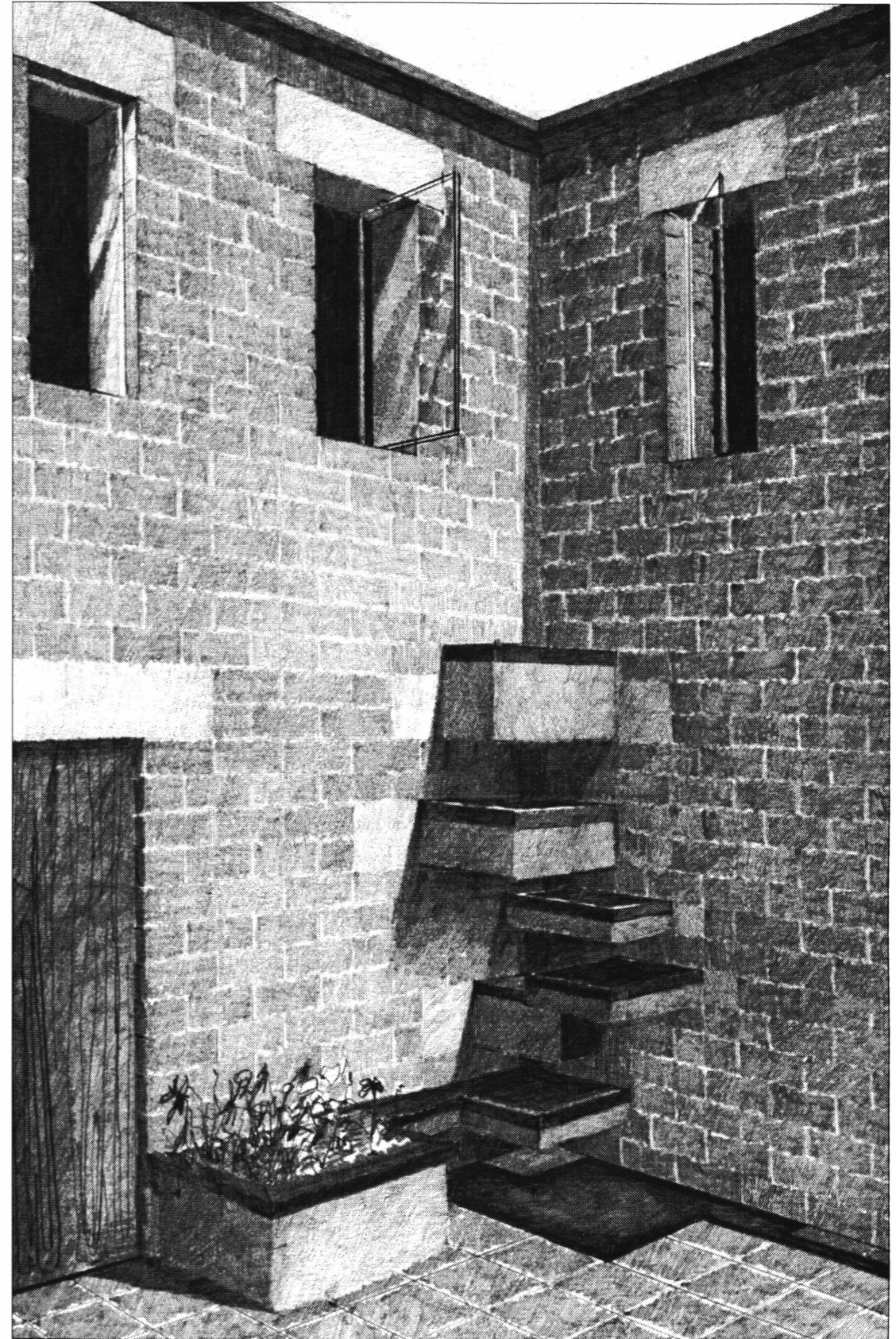


*House 3 Composite Section*



## Final Thoughts

The places and houses in this thesis are concrete, real, and specific, while at the same time having universal qualities that make them approachable by everyone. An attempt has been made to strike a chord at the root of human understanding, to awaken thoughts that have been stifled by the chaotic pace of modern life. The dweller participates in the making of a place, because the building is both familiar and unfamiliar to him. The memory of the individual confronts the deeper memory of culture, giving rise to an architecture of experience.



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