

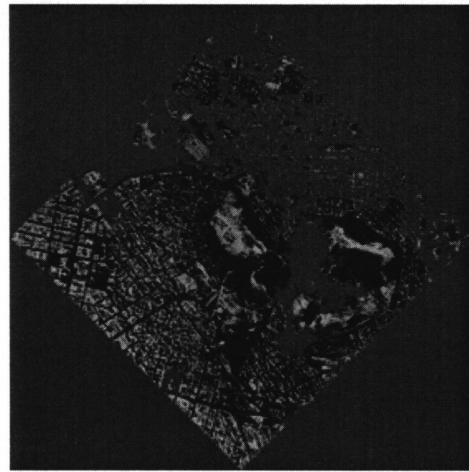
BUILDING IN THE SHADOW OF THE ACROPOLIS



ARCHITECTURE AS A CONTEXTUAL RESPONSE

by

Epaminondas Daskalakis



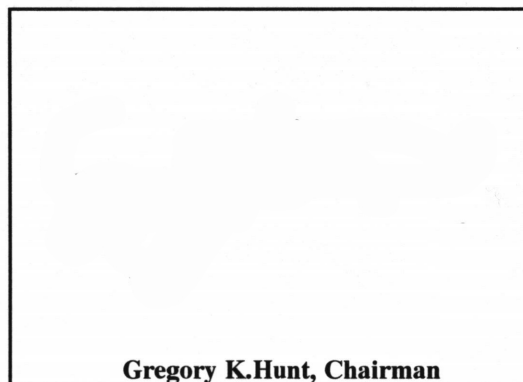
Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER IN ARCHITECTURE

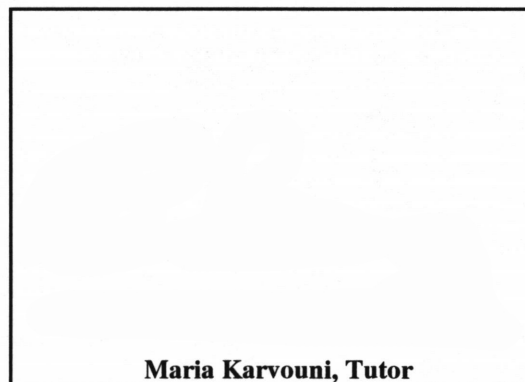
Washington/Alexandria Center

August 15, 1994

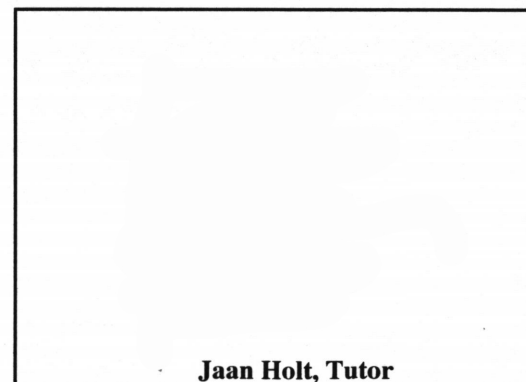
Approved by:



Gregory K. Hunt, Chairman



Maria Karvouni, Tutor



Jaan Holt, Tutor





To my mother...

"To live is to believe the rumor of hope.

I give you the holly's fierce ceremony,

The sound far off of diminished carols

An angel amid columns and perspective,

(You can already sense the aromatic

Gifts, the splendor, the gold's dormancy,

What will it buy?) the inquietude,

Annunciations and visitations.

See how the branches weave a revealing arch,

How one looks heavenward?

I give you this pastoral ruin,

This lean to where animals are fed.

Or is it an abandoned shrine or tomb?

You can see these are lean times

And the same set is used for each act of the

drama..."

■ Pankey, Eric, Apocrypha



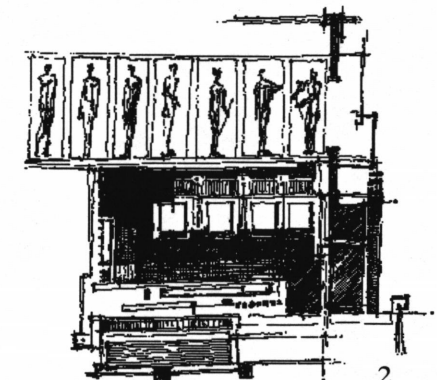
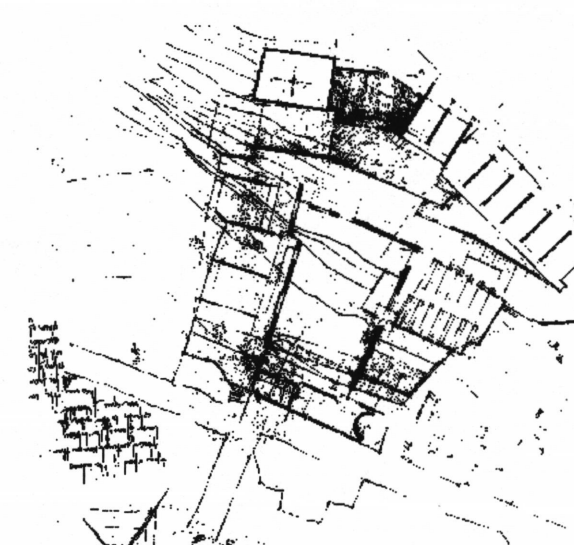
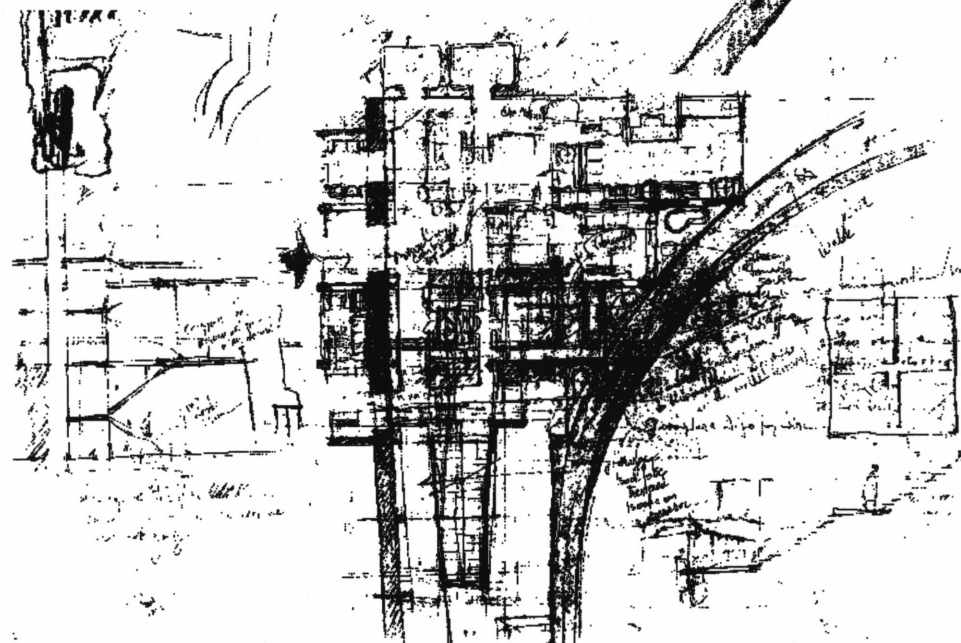
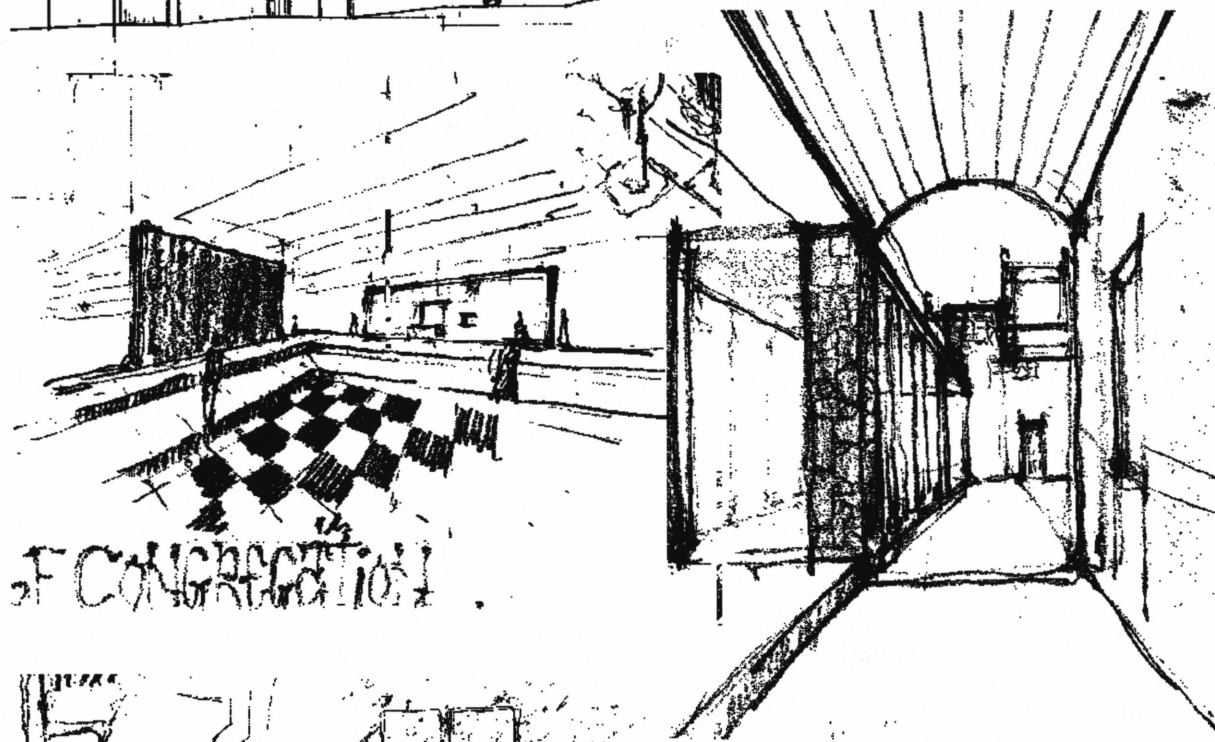
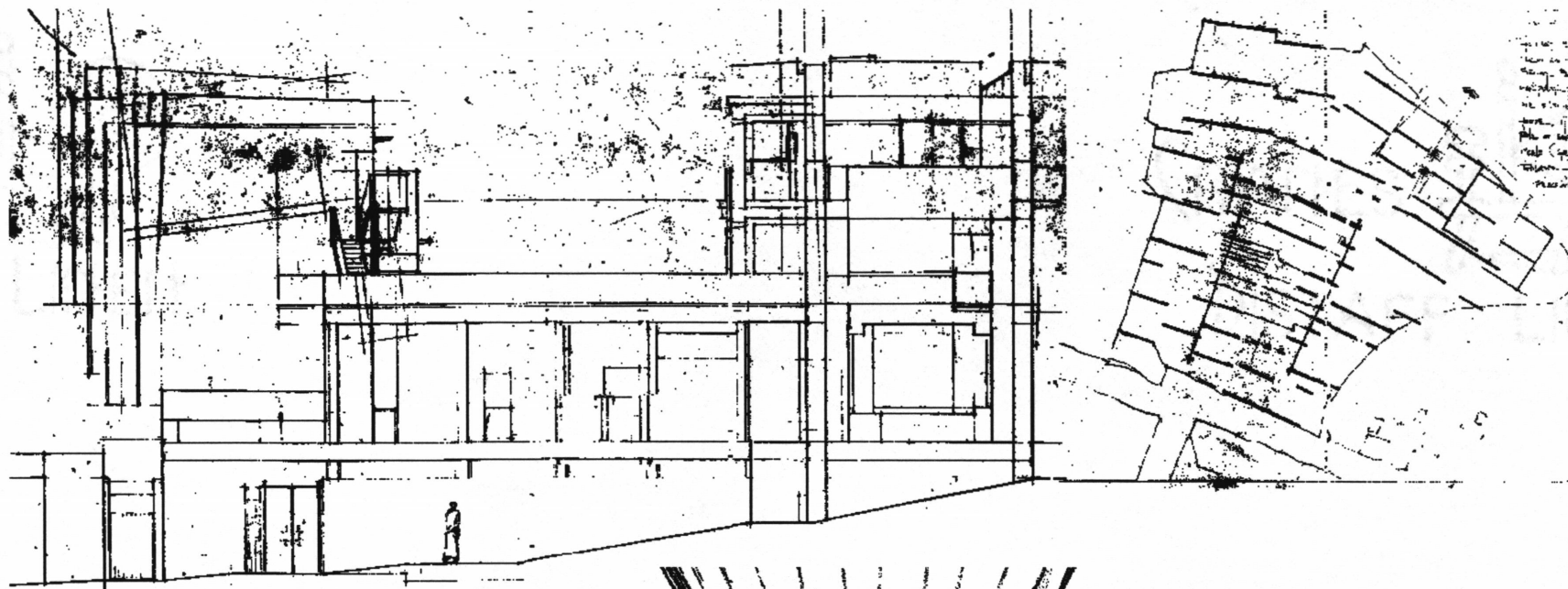
Never before did I feel as strongly the need to critically observe the changes in the attitude and belief of the people of my country; never before did I feel such disappointed in what I saw. It all started from a desire to search or even become part of a responsible suggestion: the beginning of a solution.

With fear of dangerously simplifying the motives which lead me to this thesis, and the thoughts concerning the subjects of my exploration, I will attempt to present to you the issues on which I have focused throughout my research, and hopefully convey to you the enthusiasm with which I undertook this project...



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Introduction

“The problem of the contemporary language of Greek architecture still remains ‘unsolved’ and any debate about the contemporary ‘Greek styles’ is a debate about the ideology and culture of today.”

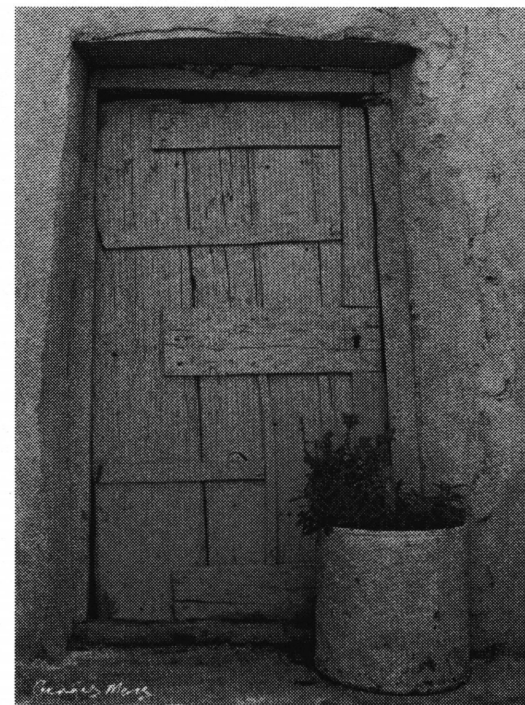
Christofellis, Alexander, Function and Strategies of Architectural Composition



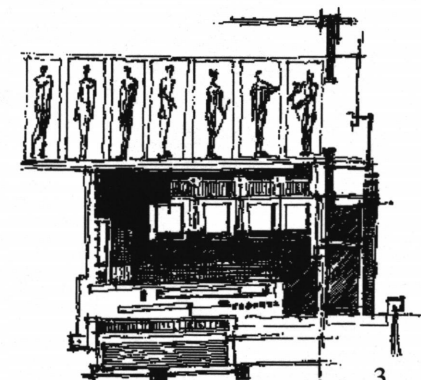
The primary motivating force that led to the realization of this project, was a continuous need I felt to “reconnect” with the physical and spiritual reality of Greece, for this is the place I shall return to and attempt to understand and taste the next step of my life.

Throughout the past six years of my studies within the realm of architecture, Greece was standing like a shadow away from the “center of the picture”; mostly referred to as a “historic place” or “the land of Acropolis”, it was treated as “a country of the past.” My perception of Greece is that of a place which is still very much alive and evolving and my desire was to find a way to communicate these intense feelings. This is the reason I chose to work on a project that takes place in the shadow of the rock of the Acropolis, the symbol of both past and future Greece. The difficulties and dangers of using such a site, became apparent during my visit and subsequent analysis of the context of the area. This thesis has become a stepping stone in my understanding of the architecture of Greece, its forms, its materials, its images, its

sunlight.....As one can understand, such a project was the “excuse” for something bigger than just the completion of a degree. It signified the acceptance of a new responsibility in terms of understanding and acknowledging the physical and social complexities of the specific region of Greece. I urge the reader to see this thesis not as having an end within itself but rather as an initiative towards the refinement of my perception and the formalization of my position on architecture and architectural thought. Its primary intent was to enable me to explore the fundamental issues and concerns derived from the life, attitudes, climate, context, materials and topography within Old Athens, in the specific region known as Plaka. Therefore, the whole process is just part of a personal search which will continue as I return to Greece and try to evaluate the assumptions, thoughts, criticisms and approach that I assumed.



a Typical street in the area of Plaka: narrow, shaded with trees, surrounded by older three or four story houses, absence of the car...



Architecture as a response

The goal of this thesis was to create a Center for research, dialogue and retreat among representatives and scholars of the contemporary Greek culture, civilization and Orthodoxy. Their ultimate responsibility would be to define a "path" through which the Greek culture and religion may be able to continue developing harmoniously in the future, assuming a position that is respectful to the history and contemporary needs

The attempt was for me to understand the possible ways that these two worlds could come together to re-explore their complex relationships and bonds, as defined in the past and as they need to be defined now, in the context of the modern society. As a result, the goal was to create a place, a sequence of spaces, for this "meeting" to happen. Writers, poets, painters, musicians, sculptors, architects, sociologists, theologians, monks and pastors, professors of the Universities ... they would all participate. This collaboration would not have a documenting character. It would not be focusing on the examination of the past from a historic perspective, but rather it would be based on the critical and responsible study of today's culture and its relationship with Orthodoxy. Throughout this process, these tightly related parts of Hellenism would be re-examined, and the elements that

compose them would be redefined, therefore enabling them to relate to the spiritual, artistic, political, scientific, social and economic conditions of my country today.

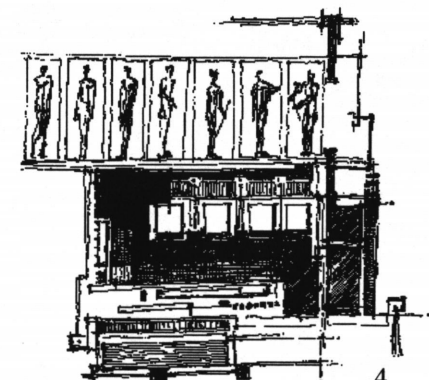
It is obvious that such responsibility cannot be given exclusively to one group of people, such as sociologists or theologians or artists, but rather it should be the result of the commitment and undertaking by a group of dedicated individuals representing all of the areas noted above. The intention of creating such a Center anticipates the making of a place which provides those individuals with the ability to collaborate through dialogue, exchange and criticism, while at the same time cultivating opinions, creativity and the development of critical ability. The members of such a group ought to know the importance and impact of their personal work, as well as that of their team, on individuals and on the larger social group. They are the "flames" of today's Greek culture which should not only be preserved but combined to make a larger flame, a 'fire' if possible that burns strongly without interruption, defining our image holistically for today's and future generations.

The above thoughts comprise only a part of the theoretical base of this project. Being aware of the fact that architecture alone is not in the position of bringing about changes or solutions to social, cultural, or political problems, but that it is only able to suggest

and provide a means through which such changes can occur, I have tried to design a place where the above ideas can come into being.

The main design challenge encountered was the composition of spaces in such a manner as to attract and serve diametrically opposite functions, types of expression and personalities. The Place of Learning for the researcher-scientist is the library; the Place of Expression for the artist is the studio; the Place of Creation for the writer could be a simple desk in a room. These parameters, as well as those concerning the contextuality of the site, pushed me during the early design stages to think of this Center as a Complex, comprised of four fundamental parts. Each part would act independently, yet be linked together with the others, creating 'the whole', through what I call the "Outdoor Place of Exchange." This courtyard acts as the centerpiece, the connecting element of the different parts, and it is considered the place where, in the form of

a Aerial Photograph of Athens over the monuments of the Acropolis.



The Site

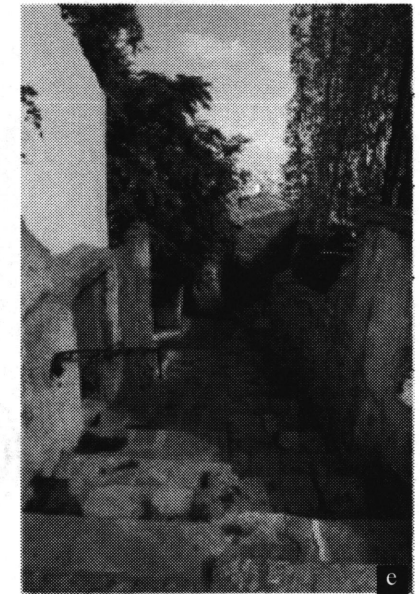
The idea of the building as a complex composed of smaller independent yet interconnected parts, is one which I have been exploring and experimenting with for the last few years. Its origins are deeply rooted in Greek culture and history. The endless possibilities for 'dialogue and play' among the different masses have become a fascinating subject of my search, rich in compositional, aesthetic and functional exercises. In this exploration, the study of several Greek monasteries on Mount Athos and others in the area of Gortinia central Greece, became a very helpful guide in understanding issues concerning the arrangement and development of parts into a whole. In this dialogue, debate or performance, this diverse crowd would coexist and act as one entity.

The site is located on the southern most point of the Plaka, bordering the neighborhood of Anafiotica, at the foot of the North side of the rock of the Acropolis, separating the old city from the archaeological site which extends to the South and West. Several factors drew me to this area, primarily because it is the heart of Greece, the center of its modern civilization, where events and symbols occur, thus allowing this effort to reflect directly onto the people themselves and on their places of learning and cultivation.

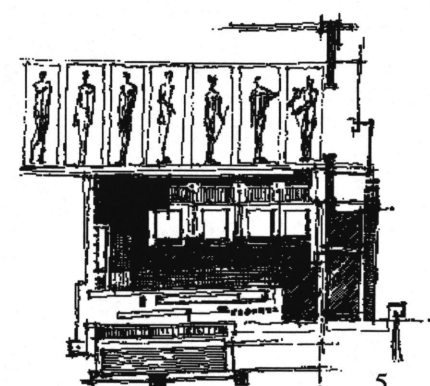
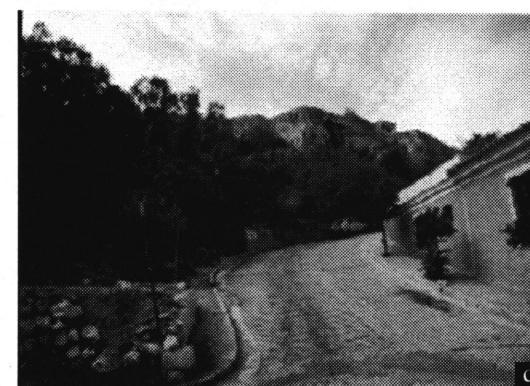
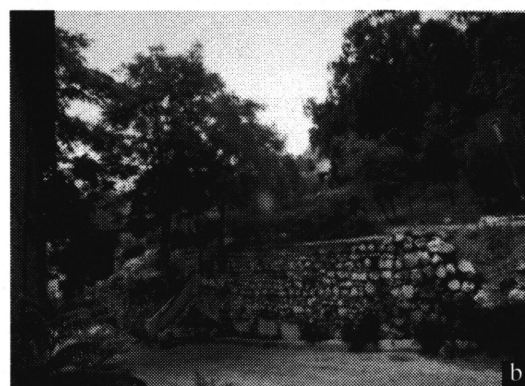
It became obvious in my approach, that through such a movement of the Hellenic

I choose this site realizing the special needs of the rather unique and demanding functions that would be combined in this project. The most particular group of participants in this complex would be the monks (representatives of Orthodoxy), and I will explain why.

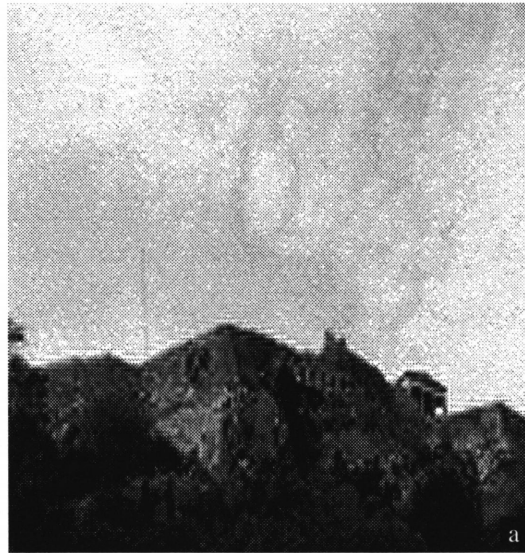
(Greek) spirit, the representatives of Orthodoxy can not be absent. The position that I have followed from the beginning of this project assumes the tremendous need for protecting and preserving the bond between Hellenism and Orthodoxy as given.



- a Topographic map of the area of Plaka showing the location of the site
- b Views of the site from its northern most point facing south and moving towards Theorias str.
- c The rock of the Acropolis dominates the background, and the back side of the Erechtheion can be distinguished.
- d Some of the steps of Plaka that lead to the feet of the rock of Acropolis. As the land slopes rather steeply, the views of Athens unfold for the walker, behind these trees.



It is the norm among Orthodox monasteries and monks to choose to establish themselves and live far from the center of the cities in a state of isolation. They act 'like the egg', creating an independent world inside a shell, almost denying communication and contact with the "outside." In this case, it is my hope to 'break the shell of the egg' and to understand the value of communication, allowing the exchange to take place through dialogue and critical, helpful debate, expressing the inner strength of the monastery. Through this work, I don't intend to redefine the use of the Orthodox monasteries or their way of operating. Nevertheless, I feel that monks consist of an essential part of this effort and therefore there is a need for a small monastic community within the complex.

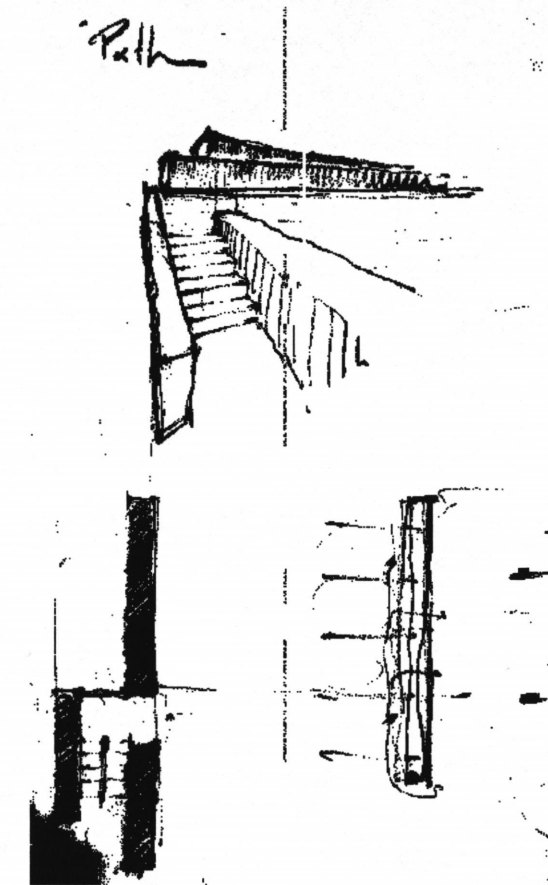


This community will inevitably, yet appropriately, be located in the center of Athens, differently from any other one, giving the monks the opportunity to act as "Apostles" within their immediate societal group and

also to retreat to their own personal world, their cell, to contemplate and pray.

Located within the older part of the city, and as high up the hill of Acropolis as the zoning restrictions allow, the site overlooks the mid-rises of the modern center of Athens and has a variety of unique views towards north. To the northeast, one is able to see the building of the Greek Parliament and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Straight towards the north the silhouettes of the rooftops of the University of Athens, the Academy of Greece and the National Library can be seen behind the masses of more contemporary structures. To the northwest, the view opens up even more, exposing in the background the mountain of Pendeli, in the middle ground the archaeological site of the Agora and the temple of Theseio and in the foreground, diagonally across from the site, the building of the First University of Greece. As the sun continues on its afternoon path, the hill of the Acropolis throws its shadow like a blanket, making its presence even more dominant, 'assuring that no one forgets it' before the end of each day.

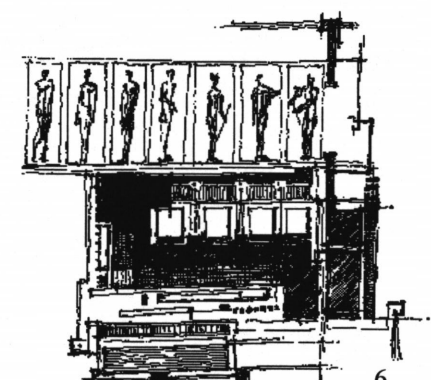
When visiting the area, the physical and psychological importance that such a Center can assume at this location becomes profound. The streets surrounding the site are very narrow, allowing only for pedestrian circulation except from one, Theorias str. (the curved street towards the West), which provides the only vehicular access to this area. Due to this fact, the vehicular traffic is almost nonexistent, leaving the area free of noise and air pollution and allowing for local residents and tourists to walk or bike. This setting could be ideal for the monastic community since it is



a The Erechtheion on the north side of the Parthenon as the rock drops its shadow...

b One of the plethora of churches located almost adjacent to each other in this particular part of the city.

c Views of the site from its southernmost -and highest- point, right next to the church, facing north towards the modern downtown section of Athens.



located in a "quiet oasis" just a few minutes from the center of the modern city. In a way, relatively to the fast rhythm of life in the Capital, a feeling of remoteness is present on this site.

Further observing the context, one can appreciate the old-urban character of the Plaka given to it by the relatively small properties, its narrow streets, its "organically grown" character. The structures are not more than three, some times four, stories high. As the paths ascend the hill, the presence and dominance of steps become apparent. These qualities of the streets and the scale of the Plaka were essentially, the guides in my exploration of the architecture of the Center. The idea of a complex was implied by the size of the structures surrounding the area and their complex volumetric relationship, the physical qualities of the site (very steep, rocky ground, peculiar shape) and my personal interest for such an approach.

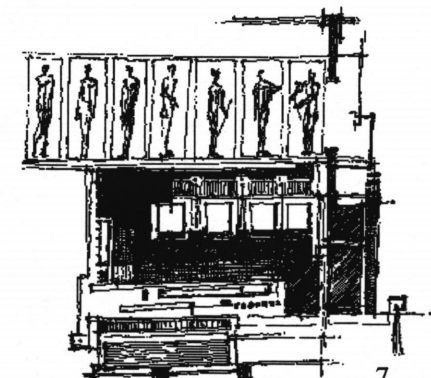
As I noted before, the properties in Plaka are rather small. Having a wedge-shape site with maximum length of forty-seven meters and maximum width of sixty, I felt it was necessary to attempt making it feel bigger by creating a central courtyard. In such a scheme, the circulation to the different parts of the complex becomes very important. Outdoor covered spaces, arcades, steps, changes between the light and the shadow, between the uncovered and paved ground, between the revealing and the hiding of a view, invite or guide the users to walk and ascend or descend among the different sections of the site. The path became the extension of the street inside the boundaries of the site. Its 'playfulness', in relationship

to the rest of the structures, signifies a will to make the act of walking inside this complex a new experience each time. The path, that one can follow from the entry gate to each part of the Complex, becomes the 'narration of the story', the way things are presented. The route crosses through the central open space, wraps around it and takes you away from it or leads you to it. The path and its relationship to the structures, separate the site into three different parts, three zones of privacy and differentiation of function. As this Center becomes the meeting place of 'the sacred' and 'the profound', the path tends to lead from one world to the other. Only a few specific people can participate in this effort and enter this site. The path filters them as they ascend towards the Library or the Visitors' cells letting the monks be the only ones who can reach the upper most part which houses their Cells, Refectory, and finally their small Church, the corner stone of the entire Center, Agios Simeon.

One more uniqueness of this location, derives from the fact that the development of any architectural structure on this site is primarily a 'section problem'. Nevertheless, the plan of the entire complex, therefore the shapes and relationships among the parts, the compositional forms used, become very important once one realizes that everything is visible from the top of the rock of Acropolis. This fact added another dimension to my compositional problem. The rooftops of the structures were as important as ever before. They cannot turn into mechanical storage spaces but they should actually reflect, to those above them, the character, and beauty, of the structures beneath them. The roofs became terraces or roof gardens, or connecting surfaces, planes for the sun to reflect on, places to admire the view, to contemplate, to

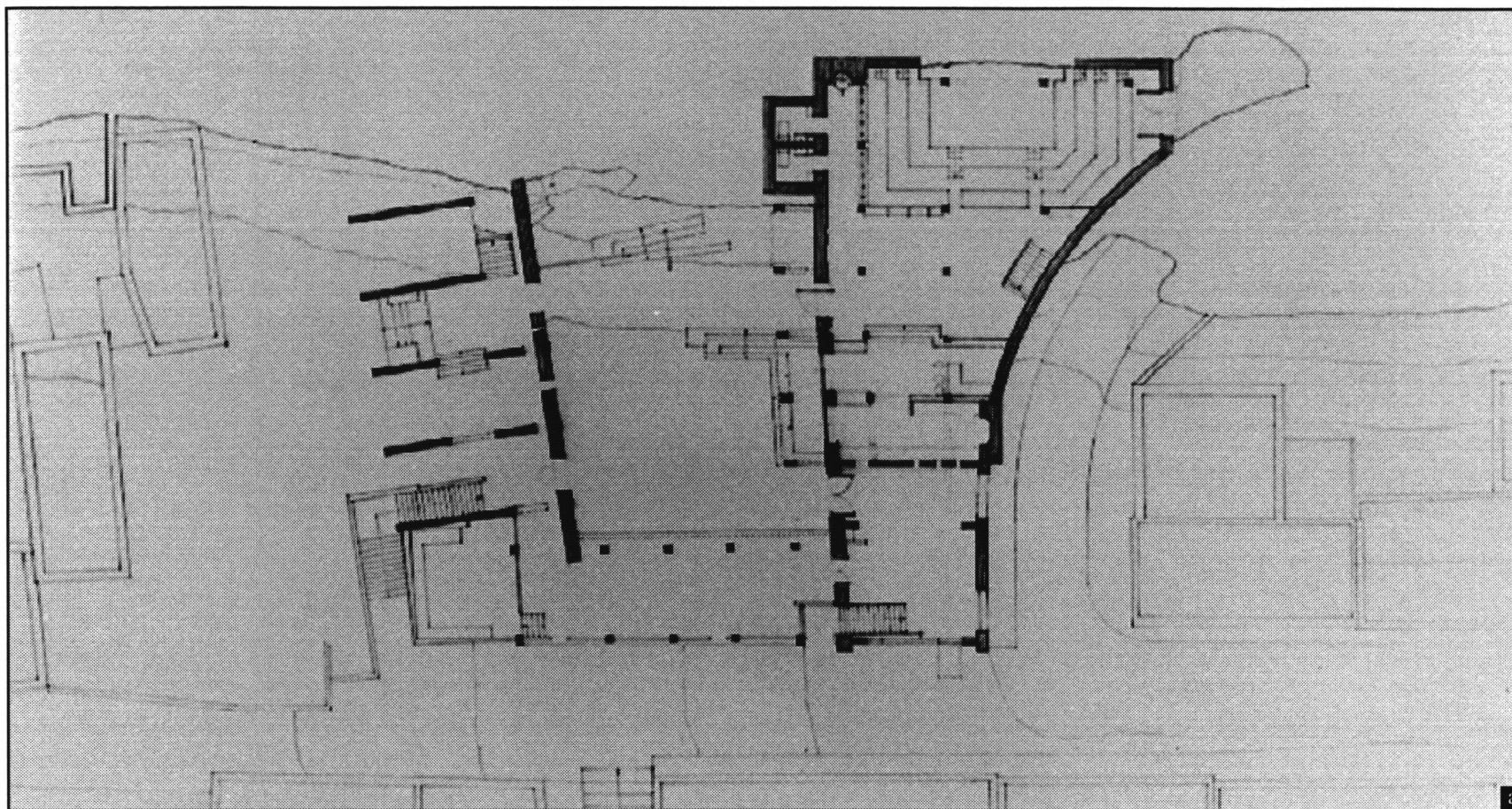


- a Plaque depicting three Apostles. It is believed to be part of a marble screen, the most lavish feature decorating the interior of a church of the tenth or eleventh century.
- b Exploratory sketches of organizational massing strategies on the site



share a conversation. The plan and the

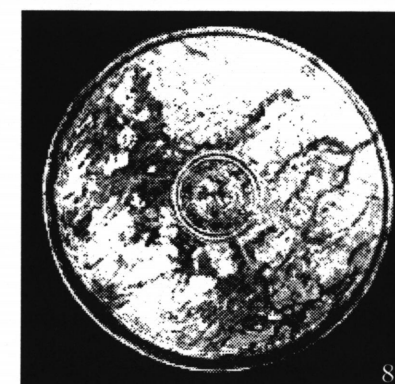
The project

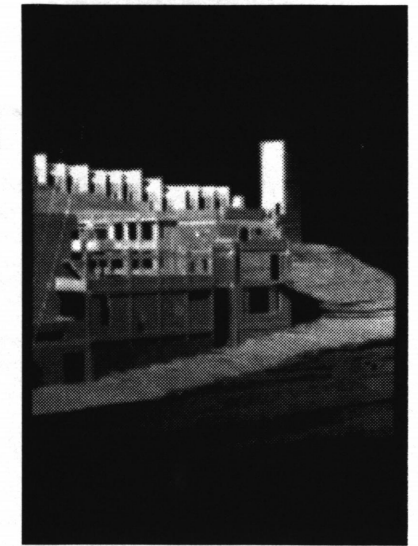
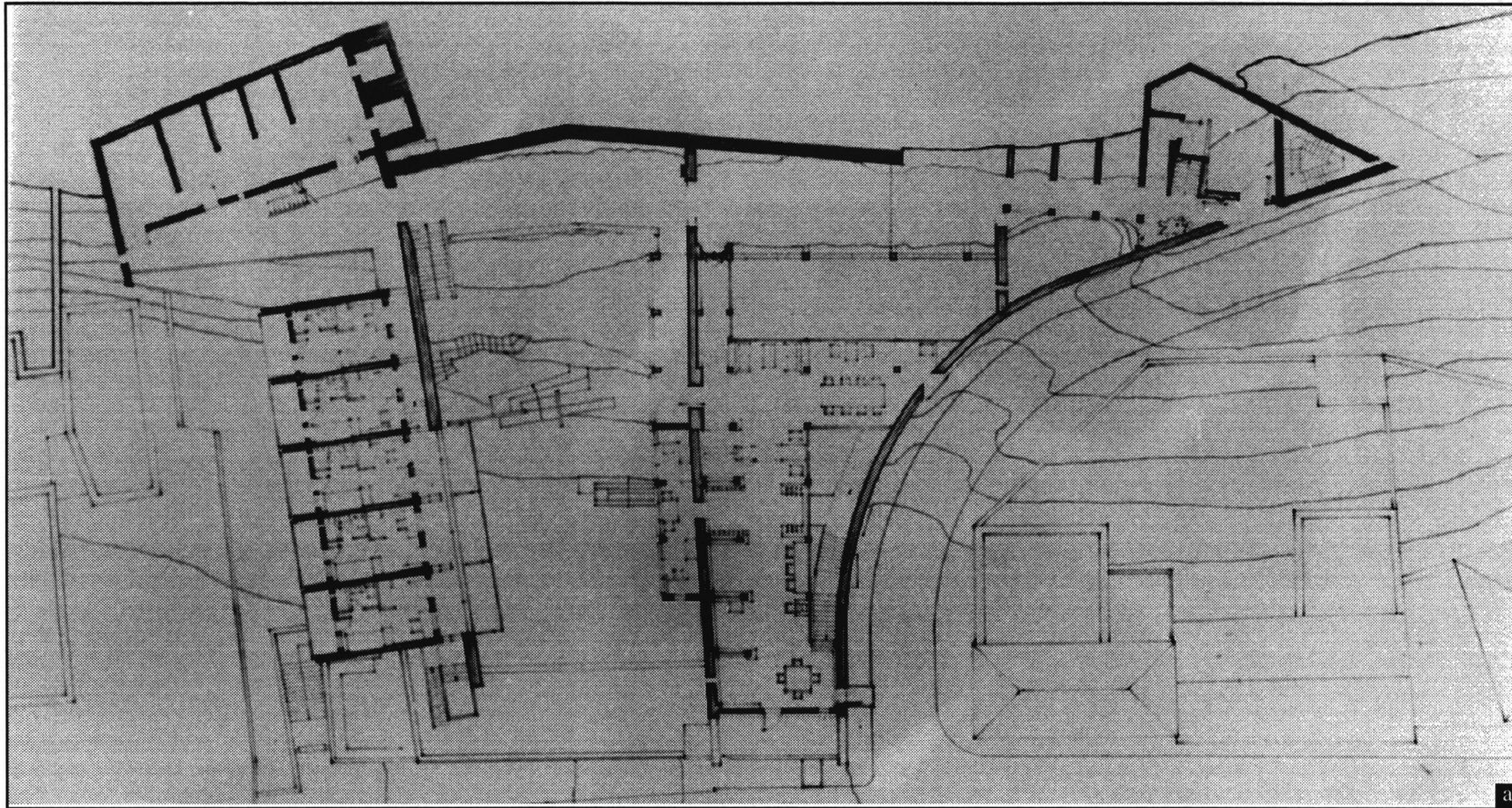


- a** First plan through the commons of the Complex. The Library is located to the right, defining the edge of the site towards Theoreias str. with its curved wall. In the middle, the Outdoor Place of Exchange bound by the two heavy stone walls becomes the physical and spiritual center of the Complex. To the left, the plan cuts through the section through the structure of the Visitors' cells which are actually elevated above the created 'stoa' letting it become a covered walkway or path which leads from the lower courtyard to the Church in the monastic section.



- b** View of the Complex from its northwest corner. In the foreground the main entrance and the curved wall of the Library and in the background, the cascading monks' Cells and the Church of Agios Simeon.





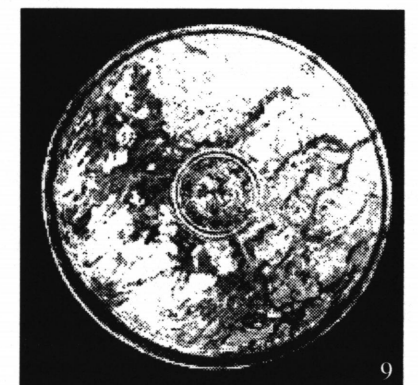
a Second plan of the commons revealing primarily the third floor of the Library and the units for housing the visitor- researchers, lecturers or artists of the Center. Towards the top of the drawing, the beginning of the monastic complex starts becoming apparent with its Administrative/ Refectory structure to the left and its belltower to the right which becomes a reference point for the passers-by or for those viewing the Center from the Acropolis.

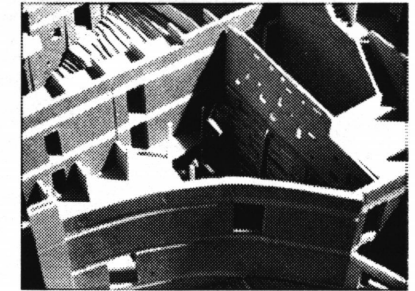
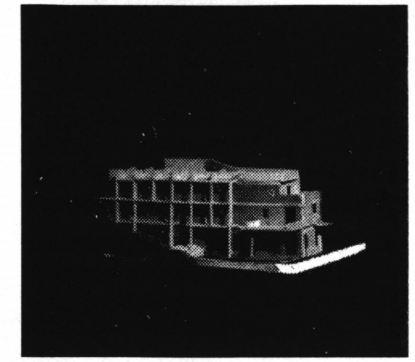
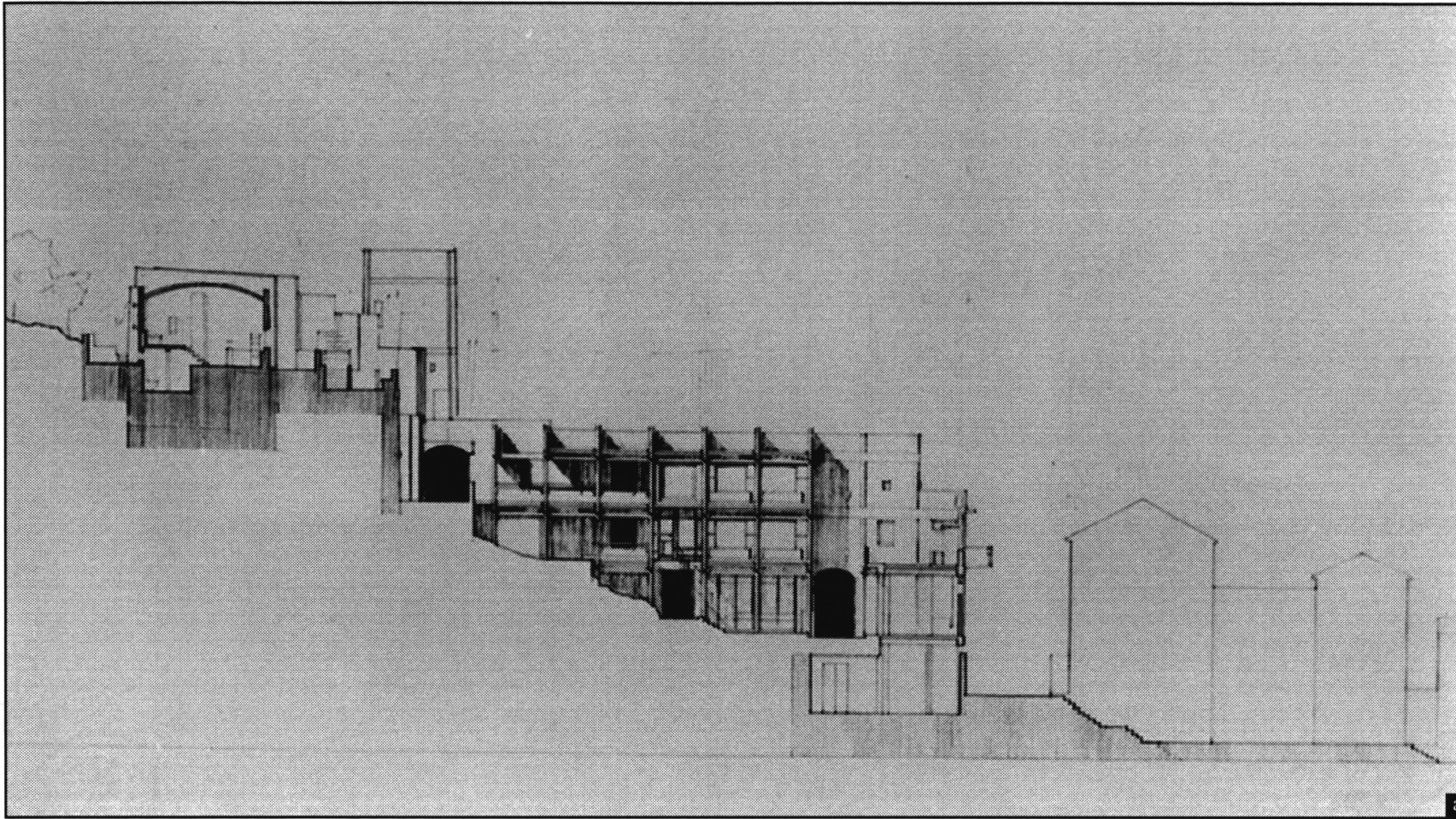


b View of the North elevation of the Complex. Imagine the steep rocks rising in the background, elevating one's eyes towards the sky.

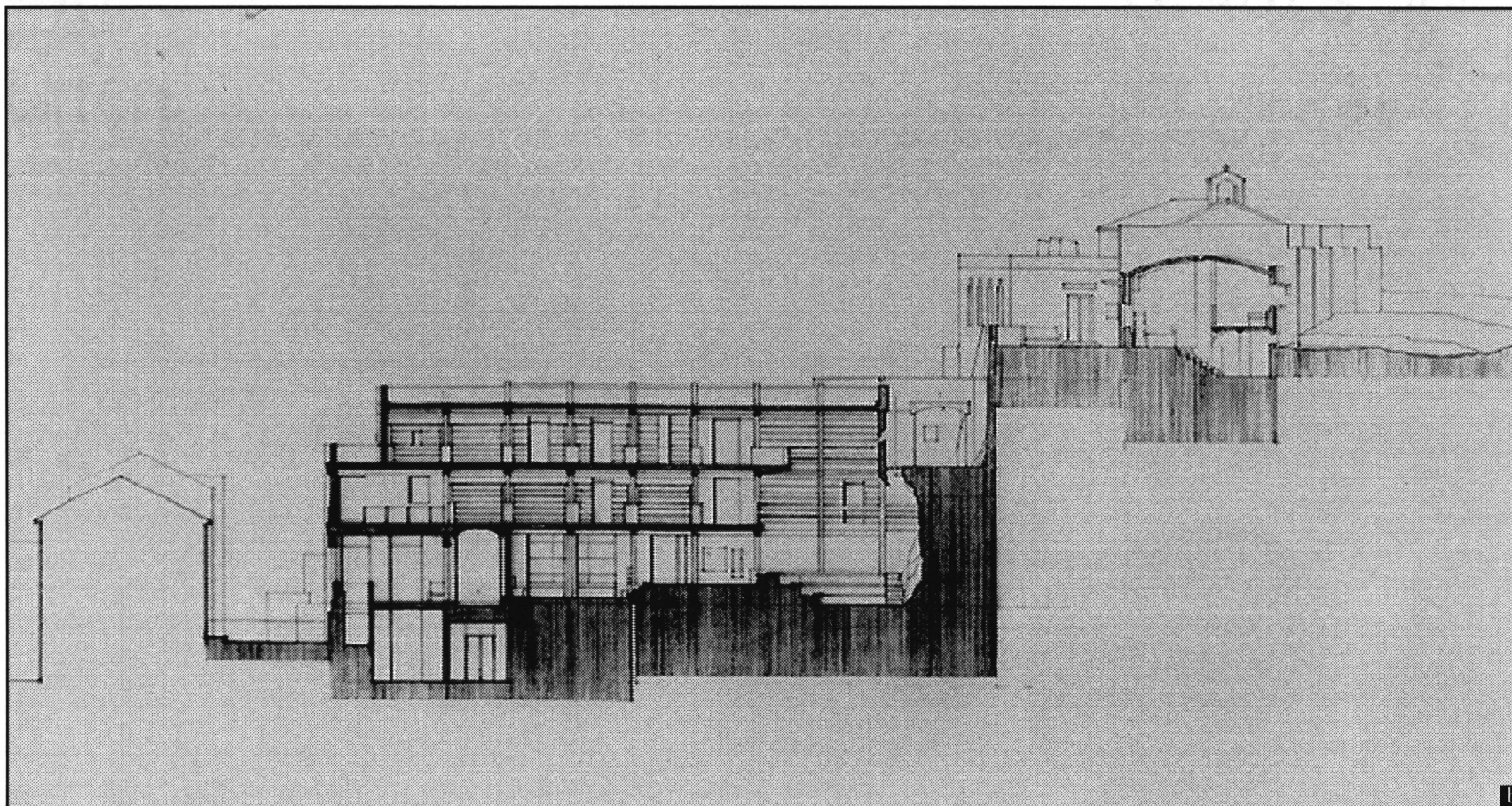


c View of the Church of Agios Simeon through the vertical planes of the Monks' Cells from Theoreias str.

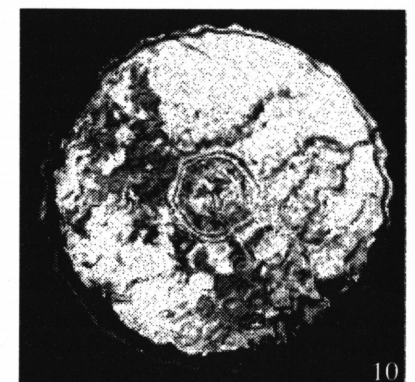


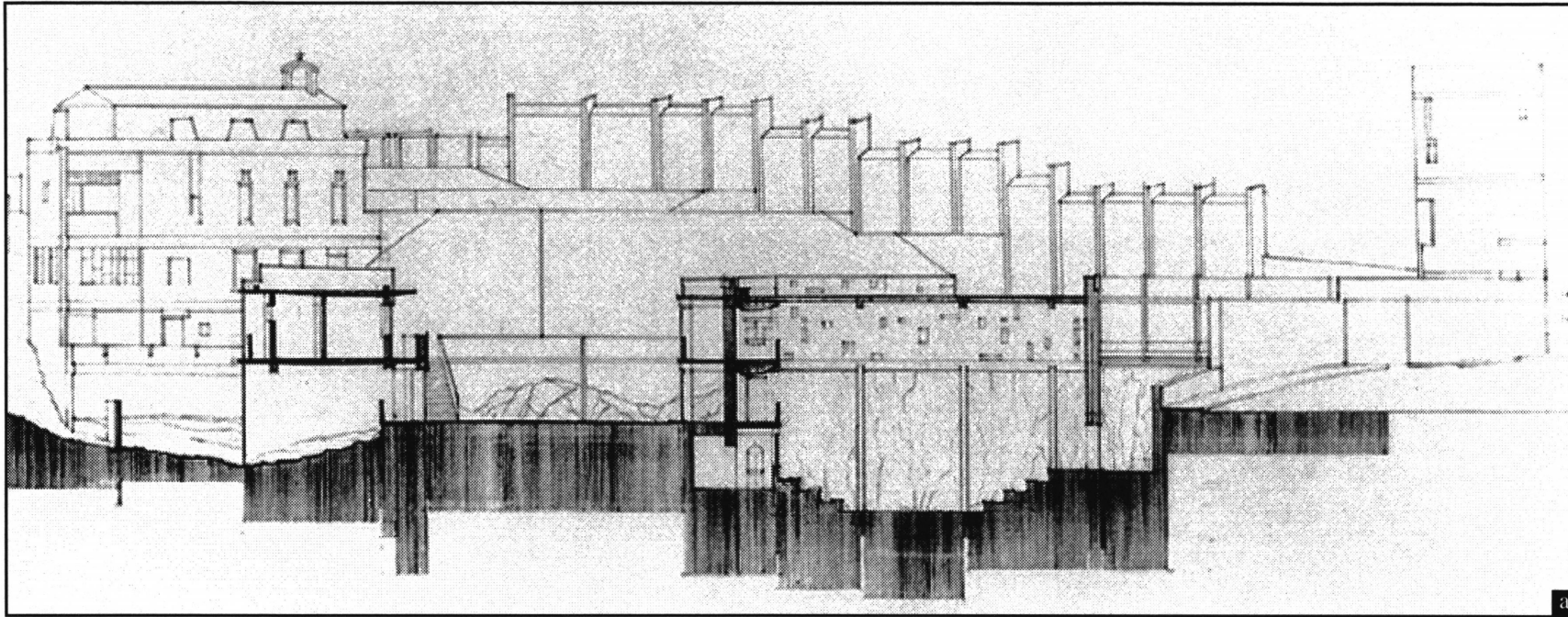


a Section through the courtyard facing west, exposing the 'interior' elevation of the Library, and the relationship of the structure to the steeply sloping ground, the Cells above and their terraces. The Library connects to the courtyard at each of the three levels. On the outside, the massive masonry wall defines the courtyard yet on the inside, it 'houses' the shelves for the books.

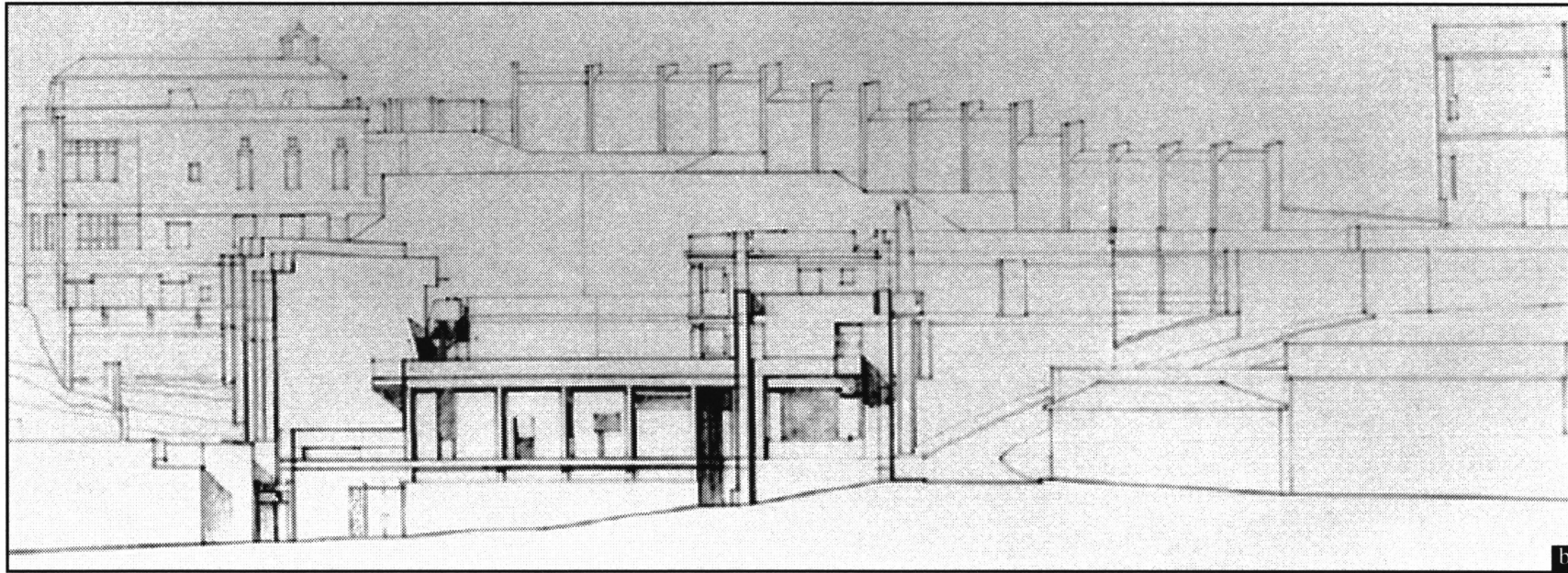


b The north-south section through the Library itself. The building does not simply sit on the site but it bonds with it. The small amphitheater has the raw rocks as its stage and opens the Library floors to create the volume for its performances. The south wall above the amphitheater directs the southern light downwards letting it wash on the rough rock.

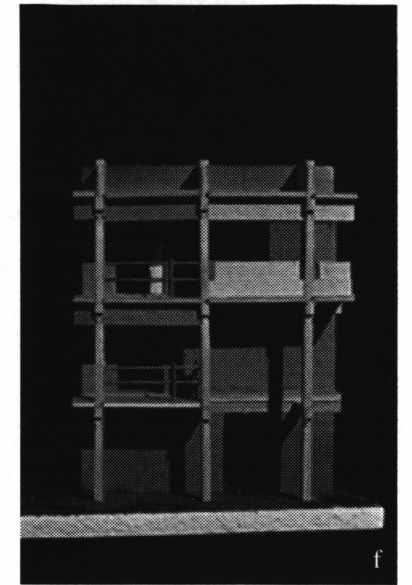




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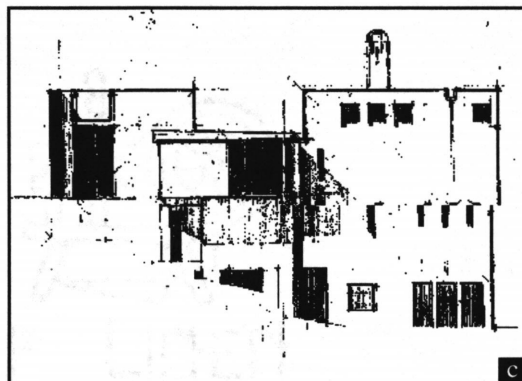


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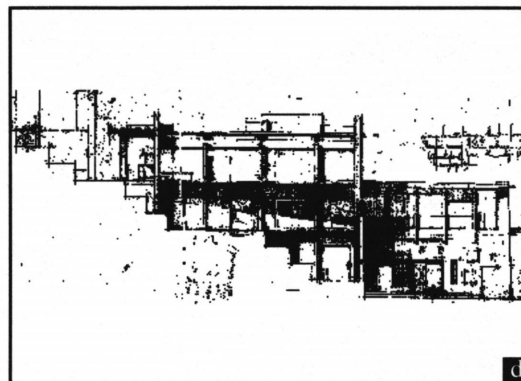


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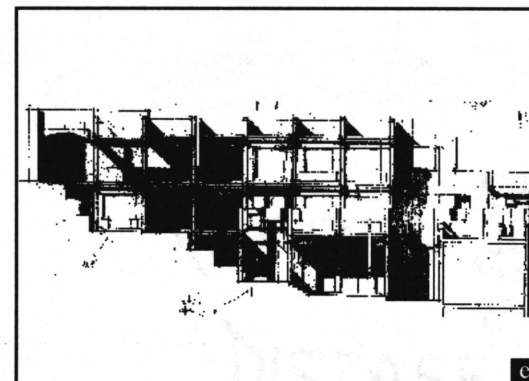
- a East-west section facing south, through amphitheater, courtyard and Visitors' cells facing south.
- b North elevation of the Center. In the foreground and to the right is the Library. In the background and to the left is the Church with a small belltower on its roof.
- c Development drawings for the inward facing elevation of the Library.
- d
- e
- f Study model of a typical bay on the Library's facade. Study of connections between concrete and stone.



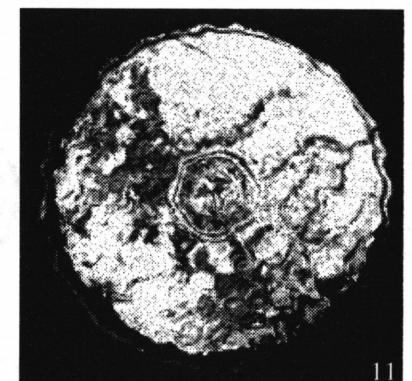
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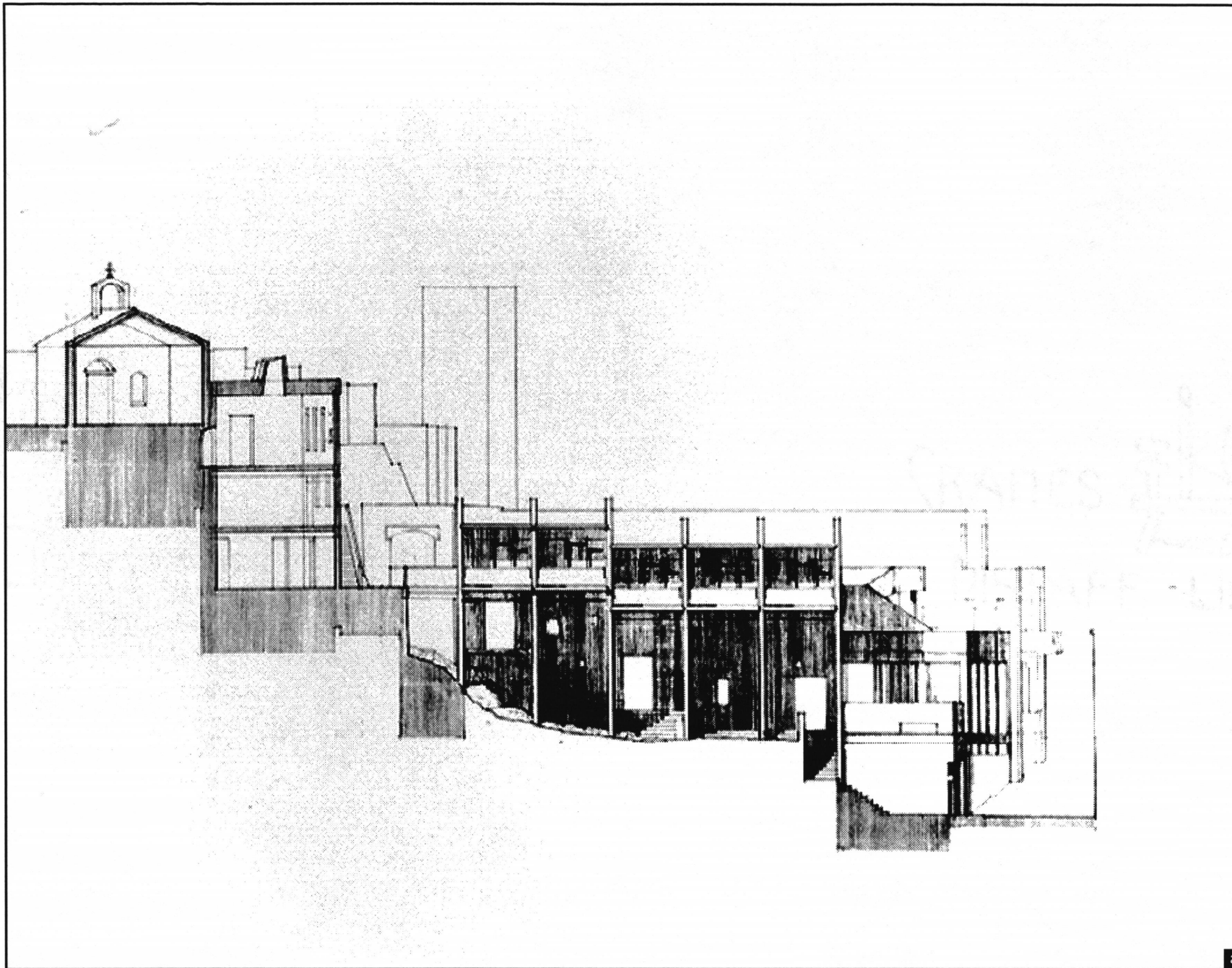
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a East elevation of the Visitors' Cells and section through the Refectory and Church. The actual units are elevated above ground level, allowing the space underneath to become a 'stoa'. The smaller 'rooms' created by a sequence of vertical planes of the 'stoa', become the extension of the main courtyard as smaller, shaded, more intimate Places of Gathering and Dialogue.

b Plan detail of the northeast corner of the Complex. A secondary entrance provides direct access to the visitors' Units.

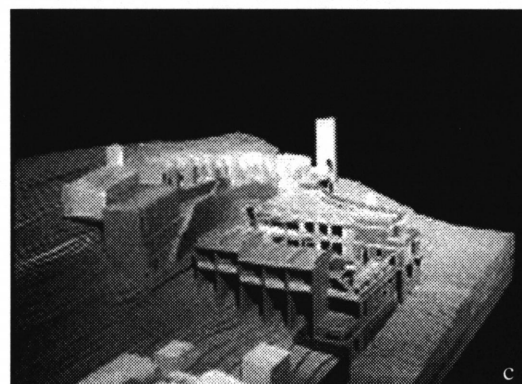
c 'Eagle's eye view' from the northeast.

d The five Units with their balcony looking over the central space and across to the Studying Units of Library.

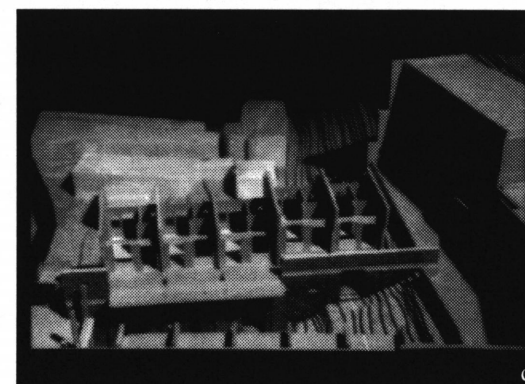
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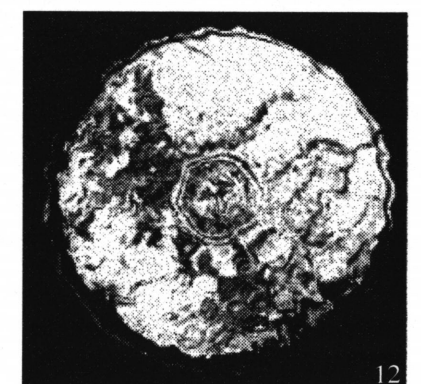
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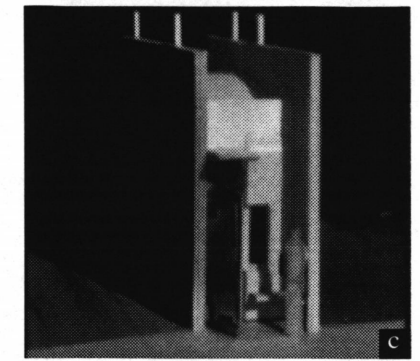
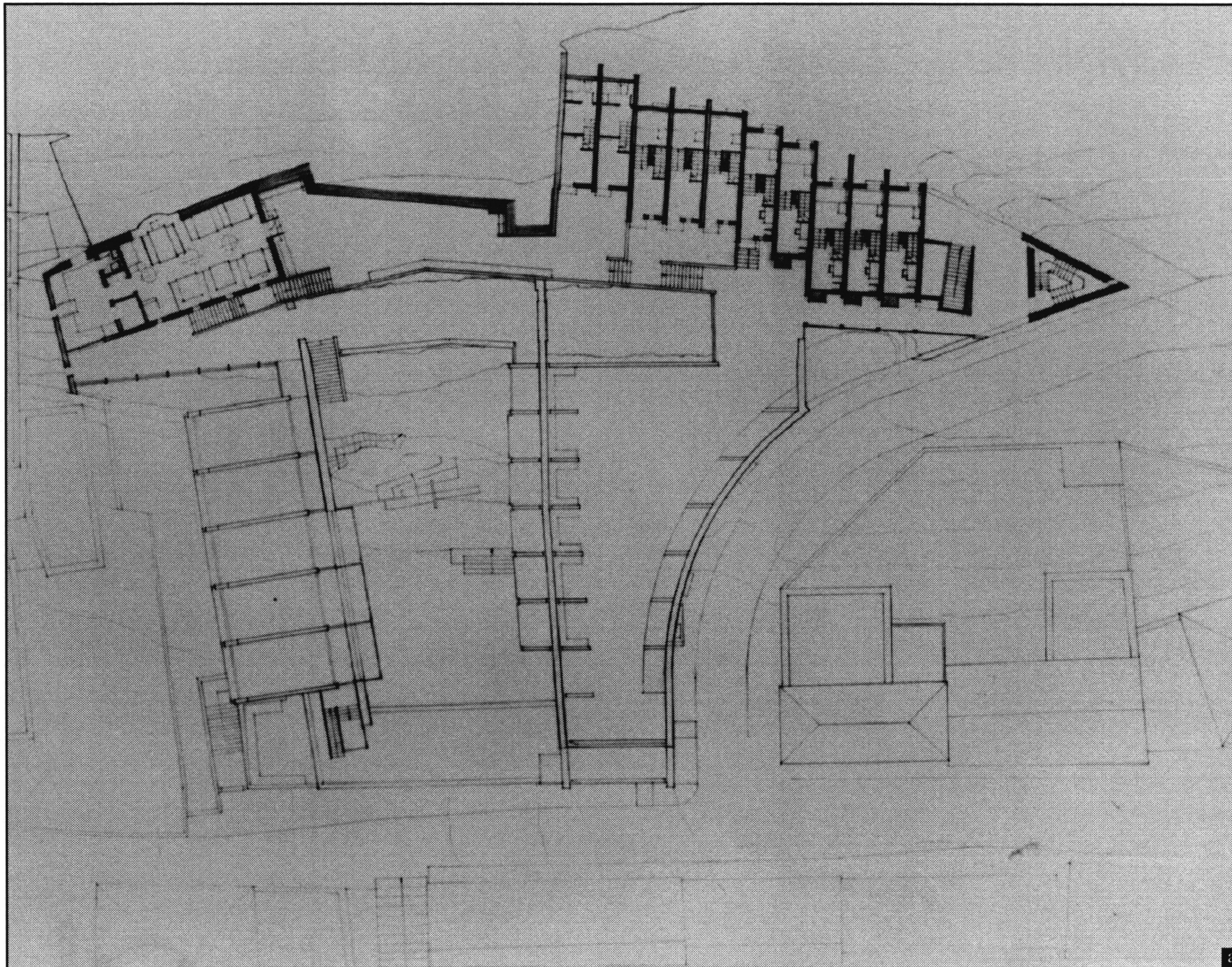
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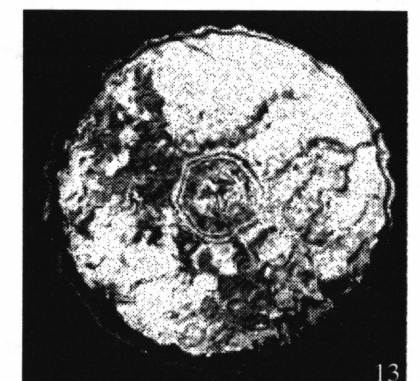
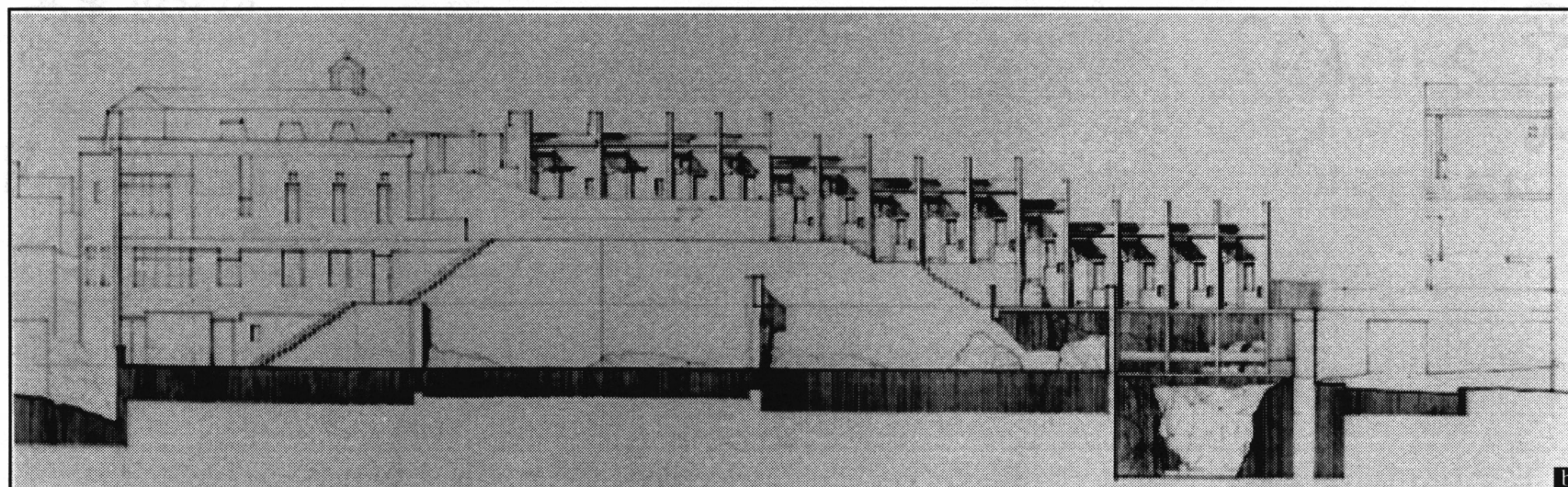
12



a Partial plan of the monastic community, revealing primarily the arrangement of the Cells and their relationship to the rest of the structures. The Library and the visitors' accommodations are shown as roof plans; the Cells begin on the level of the Library's roof. The monks' cells form the spine of the monastic complex. These are the Places of Isolation, Study, Meditation, Sleep and Prayer for the monks. The cells are located on the highest point of the site, being visually and physically isolated from the rest of the structures by the series of terraces that unfold in front of them. The roof of the library becomes the extension of those terraces and a roof garden where the monks can enjoy a contemplative space.

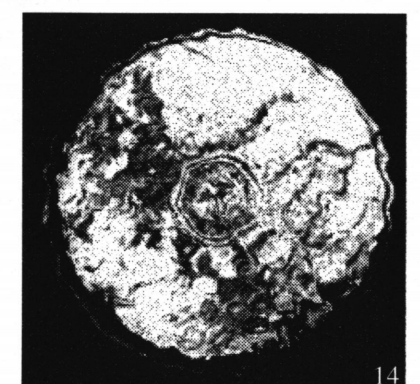
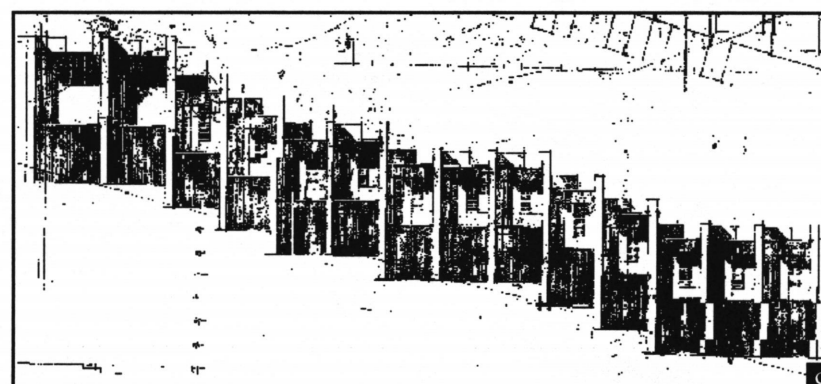
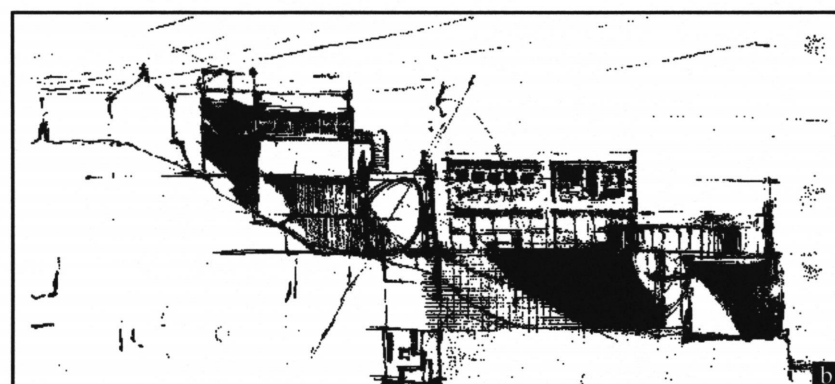
b Section through the terrace which defines and gently separates the more private monastic part from the more public common grounds.

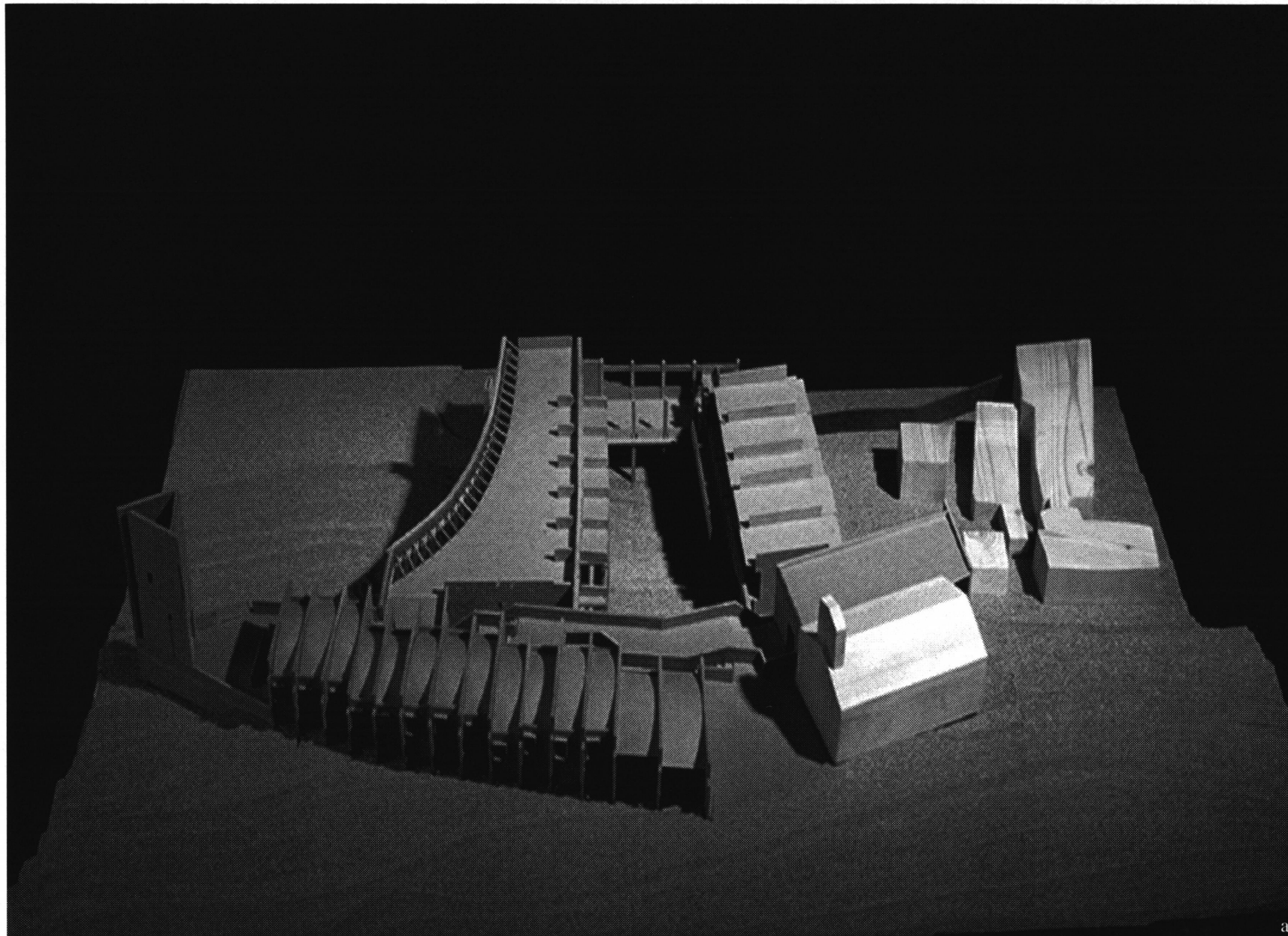
c Model of the typical unit. The small "chimneys" on the top of the walls would serve as air vents for the hot indoor air.



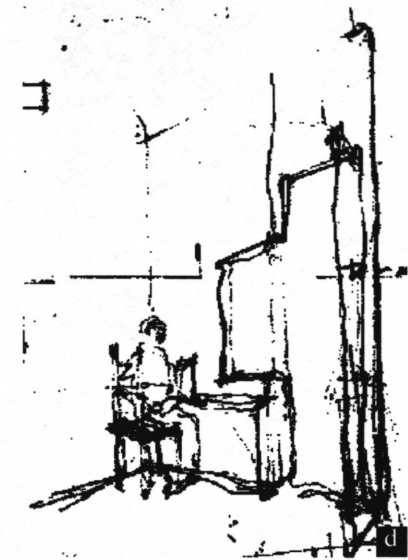


- a** Even if the site had the most peculiar shape and topography I have dealt with, it lent itself to the exploration of unique building massings and forms. The completed project is indigenous to the area and to the specific site. It attempts to fit within its context as a contemporary addition and not an adoption, yet become a landmark, a Center of cultural interest.
- b** The first attempt at a longitudinal section through the entire site. Things changed since...
- c** Process section-elevation for the monks' Cells.
- d** The main terrace at the highest elevation of the courtyard and the main gate-entrance to the Library's outdoor area. To the left of the picture, the steps lead to the Refectory and the terraces of the Monastic Community.



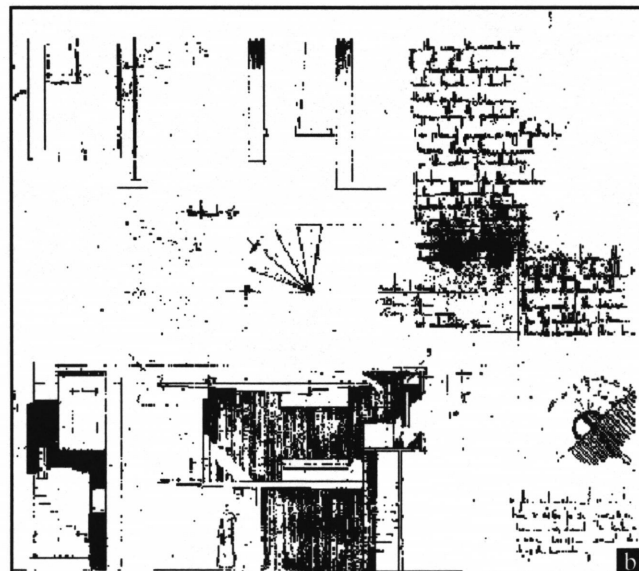


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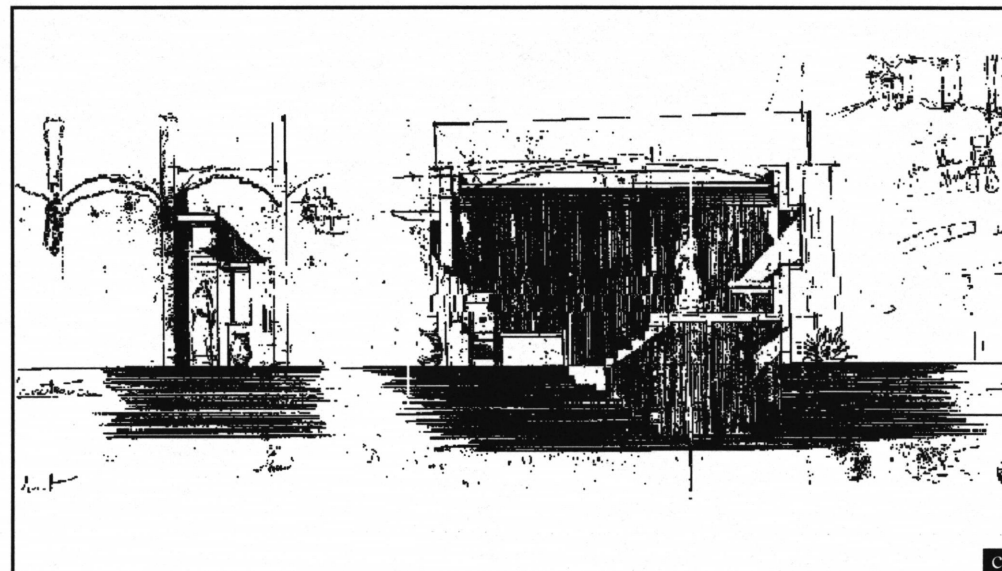


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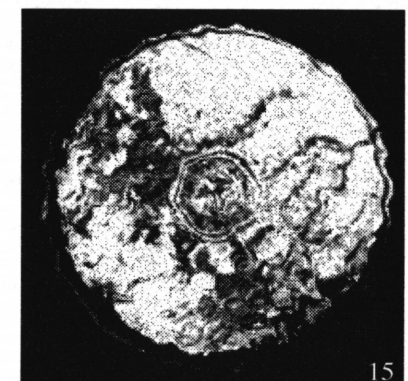
- a Simulated view of the Complex as seen from the rock of the Acropolis. From this perspective, the importance of strong geometric forms for the buildings becomes even more apparent. The structures express the geometry and topography of the site as they extend to its edges and cascade down its steep sloping sides. Then, they break down into smaller units and blend harmoniously with the context, or grow tall into a tower and mark the corner edge of the land facing the Agora, as a place to ascend, admire the view and strike the bells letting out their exhauling sounds.
- b Preliminary sketches-studies of the layout of the Monastic Cell.
- c
- d Reading behind the widow of his cell. The view of Athens unfolds beyond his window.



b

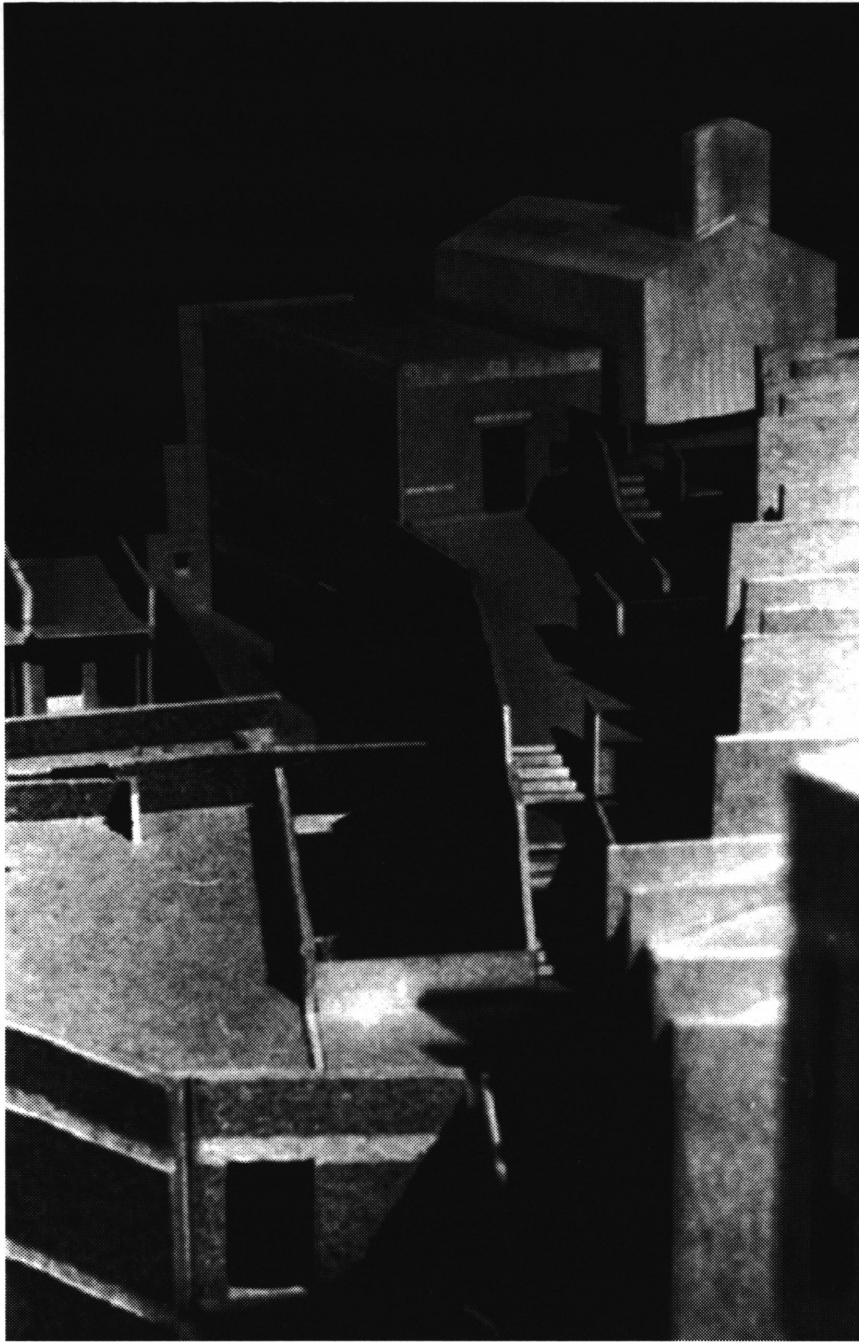


c



15

Epilogue



"Perhaps at the begining, the time and the visible, twin makers of distance, arrived together, drunk, battering on the door just before dawn.

The first light sobered them, and examining the day, they spoke of the far, the past, the invisible. They spoke of the horizons surrounding everything which had not yet disappeared."

Pankey, Eric, Apocrypha



"The existence of pleasure is the first mystery. The existence of pain has prompted far more philosophical speculation. Pleasure and pain need to be considered together, they are inseperable. Yet the space filled by each one is perhaps different."

Berger, John, And our faces, my heart, brief as photos



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