

DESIGNING FOR COMMUNITY

by

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Virginia Tech in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

Master of Architecture

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Abstract

The aim of this design thesis is to explore the essence of the word “community” in an urban context and propose ways in which design can propagate a sense of community. Four qualities were determined early in this project which were external to the architect, but which are instrumental in promoting the quality of an urban community. First, there must be a sense of place. A river or a fork in the road provide a distinct sense of place. The site needed this type of sense of place to provide an identity of its own. Second, there is a need for access to such common, but important, amenities as grocery and drug stores. Restaurants that are close can produce a familiarity for people in the neighborhood. Seeing the familiar faces of neighbors in these establishments provides a sense of belonging. Thirdly, there must be access to public transportation. Providing a certain walkability or proximity to public places adds a sense of familiarity to place. Finally, there must be a rekindling of the public realm - a site which by its very location provides access to the previous three urban qualities. Using these four ingredients the location of the site was chosen: 300 Block South Henry Street.

Acknowledgements

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Context

Old Town Alexandria is nestled along the west side of the Potomac River approximately 5 miles south of Washington, DC. Alexandria was established in 1749 and was used primarily as a port city for transporting tobacco and other various crops.

The proximity of Alexandria to the District of Columbia has made it an appealing place for residence. It quickly grew in importance as a port city. The population grew and street fronts were filled with townhouses and businesses. This street edge is made richer by the variety of materials used, typically wood, brick and stone. It is not uncommon to walk along the street and see a projecting piece of iron work along the front of a townhouse, a remnant of an earlier parking spot - for a horse.

The city was laid out in a grid manner, except where

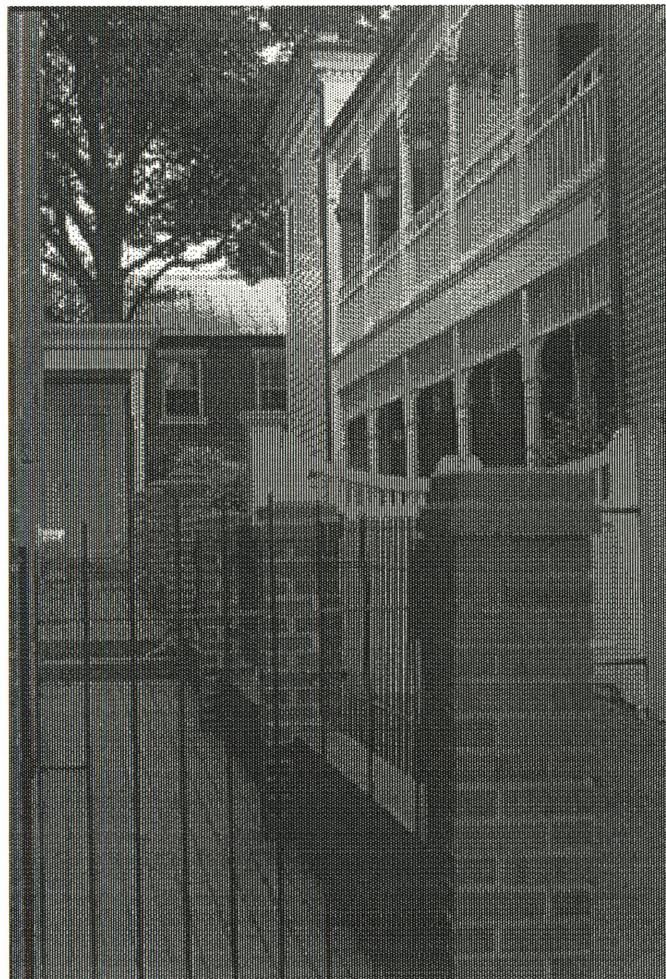
the train came into Alexandria. Here the streets have been developed and gently give way to the train tracks - that were once vital. These train tracks are reminiscent of the early reliance this small city had on its port and the train.

In 1791 Alexandria was included in the new District of Columbia, and the construction of public buildings was prohibited on the Virginia side of the Potomac. This restriction strengthened the residential character of Alexandria, which experienced a building boom at this time. Another building surge occurred in 1846, when the Virginia portion of the District of Columbia was given back to Virginia. (Cox, p. VI) The unique residential character is still evident today, for Alexandria never became a great commercial or industrial center.

The pace of economic growth slowed in the early

1800's. Mainly, because the east port of Alexandria never became linked to the main waterway systems used to supply middle America. It slowly began to suffer as a result, and the economy failed for the local crop producers and the principle shipping families. Old Town Alexandria had a recession as a result of this, and has only recently felt the effects of a revitalization effort.

The city remains primarily residential and small commercial. The historic board fights rigorously to maintain the small scale construction and feel of Old Town. The context of Old Town is rich with colonial flavor. Old Town supplies a rhythm and a scale, which new construction should honor using methods and materials of today. While respecting the history of Alexandria, we can leave a piece of today for tomorrow's history.



Alleyways



Interactive Circulation Spaces

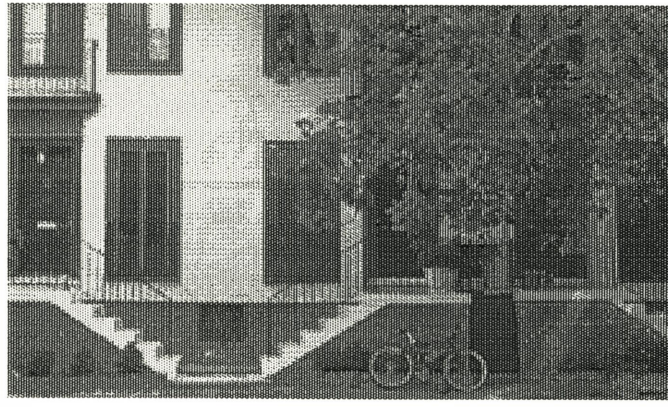
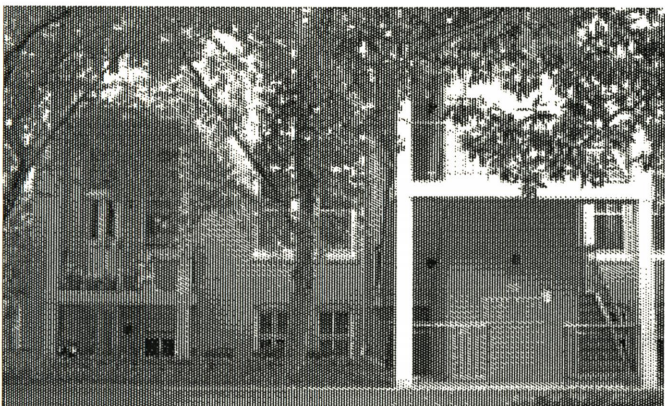


Balconies



The rowhouses present throughout Alexandria provide a fruitful multiplicity to this small city. This is done with the materiality, height, color, textures, and rhythms. The modulation and rhythms are the strongest elements to dictate a modern form. In design it will be these elements that form a sense of present and presence. Harmony with what is existing is a necessity, especially in an area dictated so much by the past. Any varying is controlled, but not a cosmetic copy. Consistency can be continued without copying.

It is this rich character that gives Alexandria its timelessness. It is these spatial relationships that are apparent in all cities which give them each their own identity. Pat-



terns emerge to define Alexandria and its uniqueness - it is seen in the elements of the city, the street, the block, the building and the materials.

The blocks of this city have a private life, one that takes place behind the street front. As these blocks were developed, access was needed to supply the shops and residents. Alleyways developed which were not only used for service but also created spaces where neighbors could get to know each other. It is more common to know who your neighbors are not by crossing them on the street but by spending time in your back yard. Within these alleys people can garden, fix cars, barbecue, or spend their leisurely time.



The dynamics of the residents can begin to show to the others who share this alleyway. One can begin to identify with those who are neighbors. This identification of one's space and others creates a sense of belonging and understanding of your environment.

The alleyways within Alexandria express the life within. It is enjoyable to walk through Alexandria and look back between the row houses to catch a glimpse of life within.



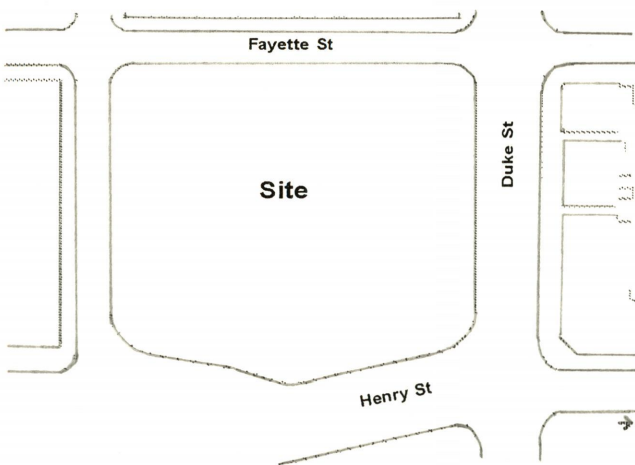
Site

The site is located at the corner of Henry and Duke Streets. It is one of the final undeveloped blocks in Old Town Alexandria. The Henry Street side of the site experiences high traffic volumes. The Duke Street face has a pedestrian quality, with a rhythm on one side of the street which is primarily rowhouse and which is of a "people scale". The other side of the street provides an industrial/commercial feel, with office condominiums and Fannon Oil. The Fannon Oil complex complements the Old Town Alexandria pattern. It is an industrial site, scaled to Alexandria with the thoughtful use of materials. The brick of the Fannon buildings is traditional for the city. Steps are made of brick, continuing the pavers along the public street. The Fannon complex is also surrounded by a cast iron fence.

The Henry Street neighboring block is an office complex, consisting of commercial townhouses and large commercial buildings. The remainder of the neighboring blocks consist of both residential and otherwise small commercial buildings. These rowhouses and office condominiums follow the traditional rhythms of Old Town.

The site has an unusual plan to the overall rigid grid form of Alexandria. Its neighboring blocks give way to the traffic pattern and quietly acknowledge the history of the site - its past reliance on the train.

This site is a gateway into the district known as Old Town. Many commuters pass this block on their way home from a days work in Washington, DC.



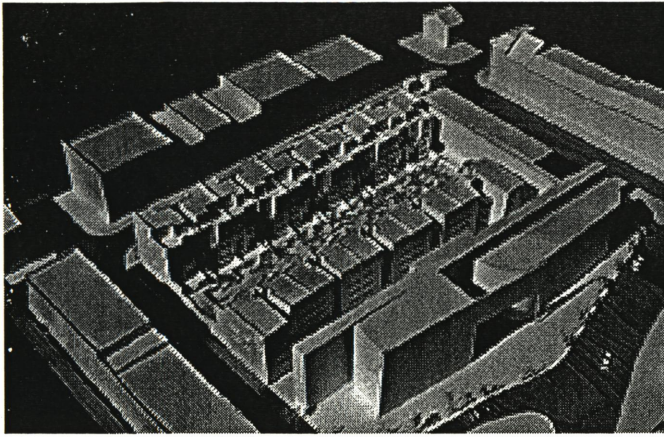
View South at Site from Henry & Duke St Intersection



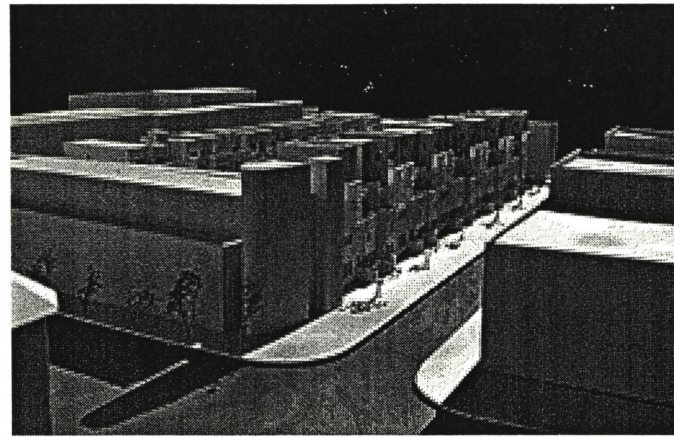
View West across from Site down Duke Street



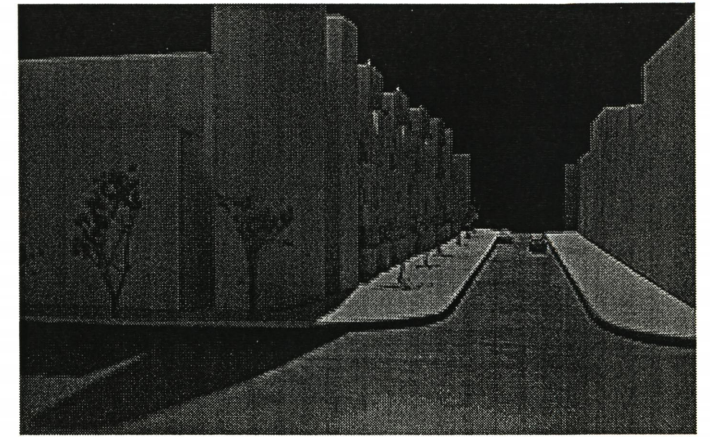
View South at Site from Fayette & Duke St Intersection



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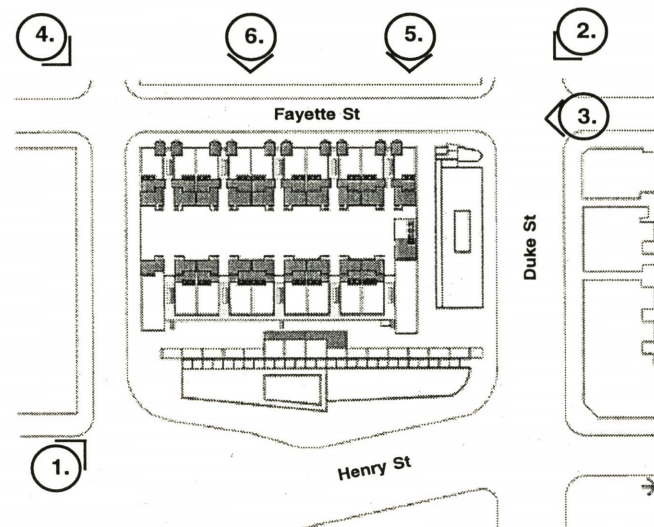
Design

Two questions drove this design. First, how does an architect design a flexible living space that would enable the long term resident and the short term resident to feel ownership? And, how can the transitions from public to private space be developed as architectural elements - not a series of locked doors?

The master plan of the site required the commercial and residential occupancy which is typical of Old Town Alexandria. The multi-storied commercial buildings on the east side of the site are elemental to the housing; they are a buffer to the residential units to the west.

The following issues became challenges in the design: the coexistence of public and private, dwelling as part of the whole, and the transition from commercial scale to that of the individual.

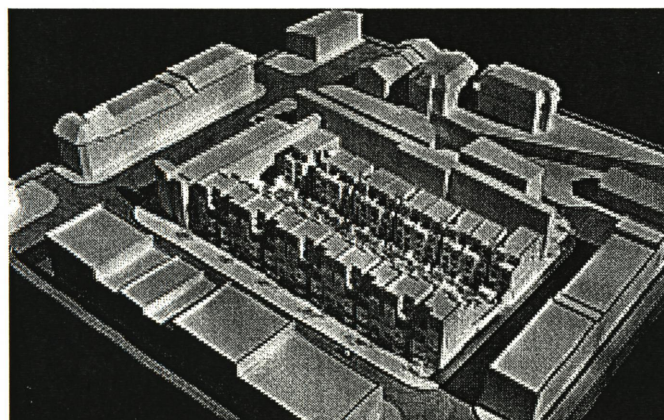
The commercial side along Henry Street was de-



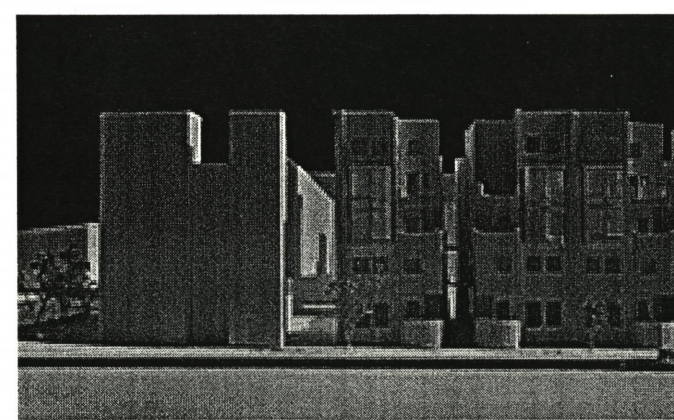
signed for what it is, a street front for cars. Between this eastern commercial building and the centrally located apartment building was an alley. Typical of an Old Town Alexandria block, this provided access to the commercial buildings for pick-ups and deliveries and the mundane practice of trash collection. The apartment building had its primary circulation facing this alley.

The commercial building along the northern edge of the site on the Duke Street face also acts as a buffer for the housing. The commercial activities on the Duke Street face cater more to the pedestrian. The office space is attached via a bridge to the commercial building along the east side of the site.

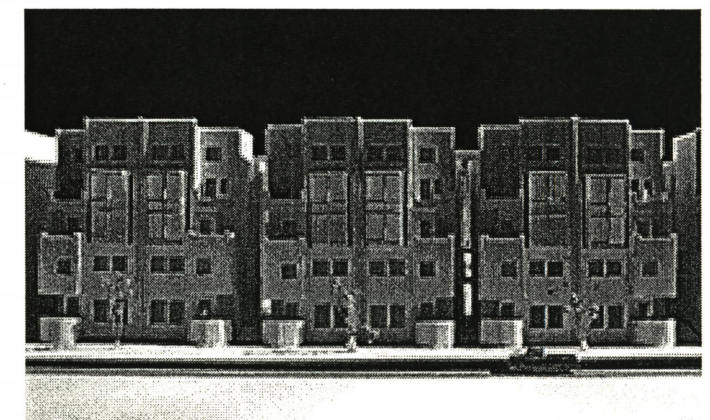
These two buildings, while instrumental to the overall layout of the block, are created as buffers for the housing which is the main focus of the design.



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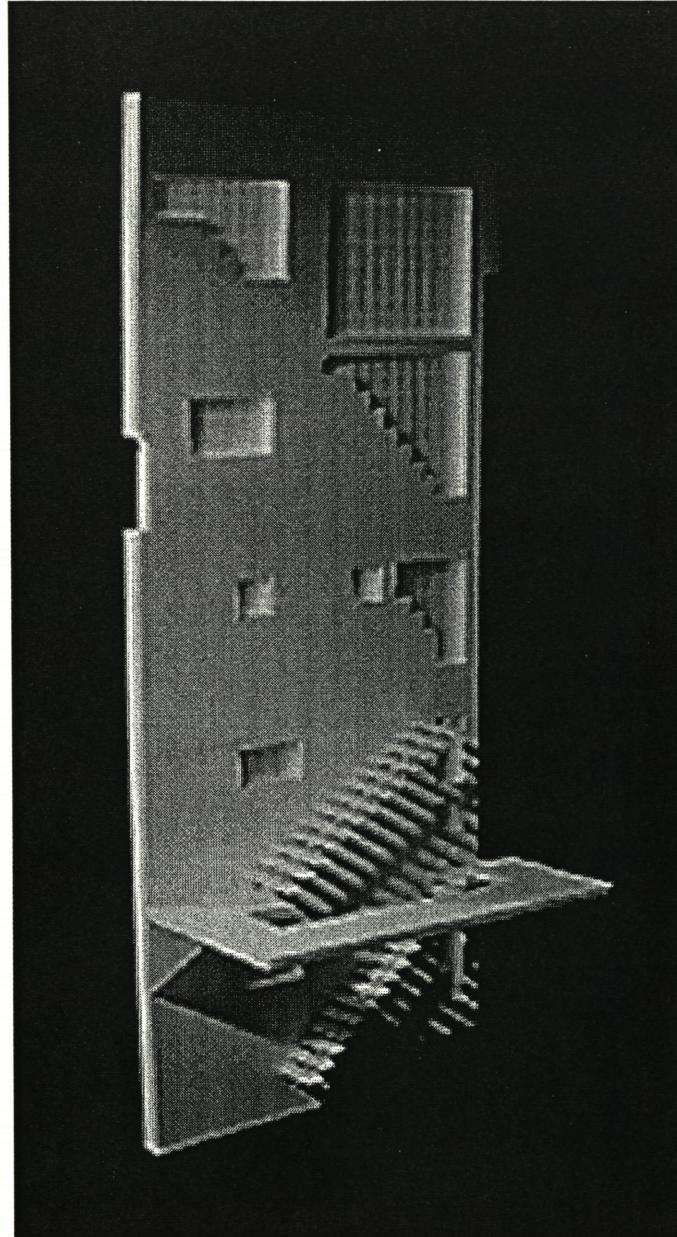
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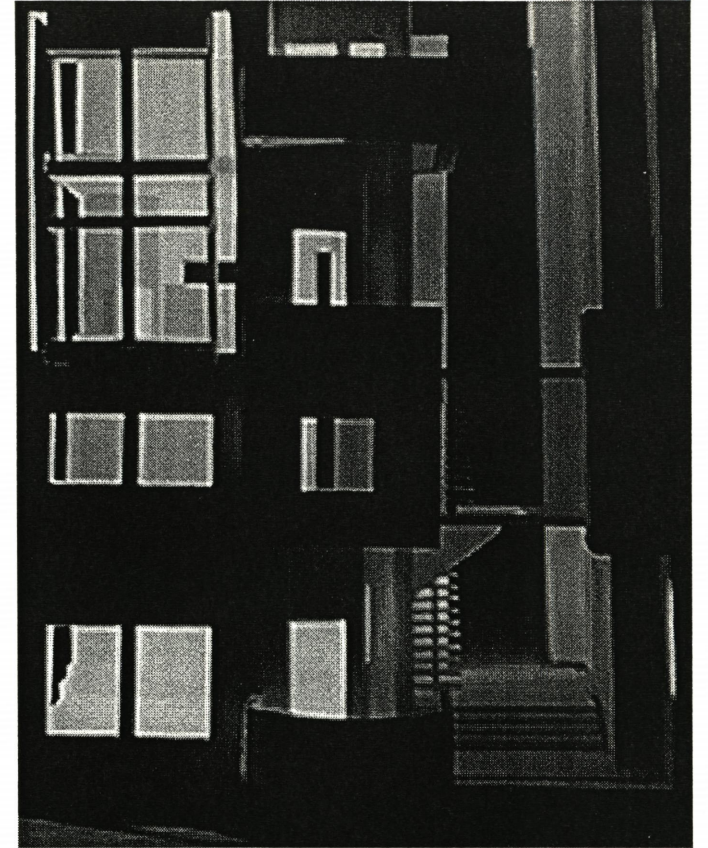
6.



Initially, there were a series of decisions made which determined a great deal about how these housing units would be designed. All units would have visual access to the interior courtyard. Each would participate in the courtyard through balconies or patios. All units would have double orientation for an even light quality and cross ventilation. Most importantly, the entrance into the housing will act as a series of transitions for the residents. The entrance will also provide the observer a look into the courtyard. The observer will be able to look into this alley between units and see how the people within live. It is here that the dwellers and observers first meet in a community sense. Community is not solely how a dweller senses his or her community from inside the home, but how the outside perceives them (the overall units) as being a part of the community. The housing must have a sense of presence.



The alley way or entrance leads one away from the street as he comes up the initial steps into the realm of the building. The steps and interior alley are pavers, reflective of the traditional sidewalks of Old Town Alexandria. At this level one can continue into the lower level housing units, the back courtyard, or go up to the above housing units.



These alley way stairs are open to the outside elements. The risers and landings provide some protection to those below. The open top allows natural light to pass through into the housing units within. The alley walls of the housing units have an opaque glass block. This allows light to enter the interior core of all the units, while still providing privacy. the glass block also allows the residents to illuminate the alley. The space between becomes animated just by the day to day functioning of the residents within.

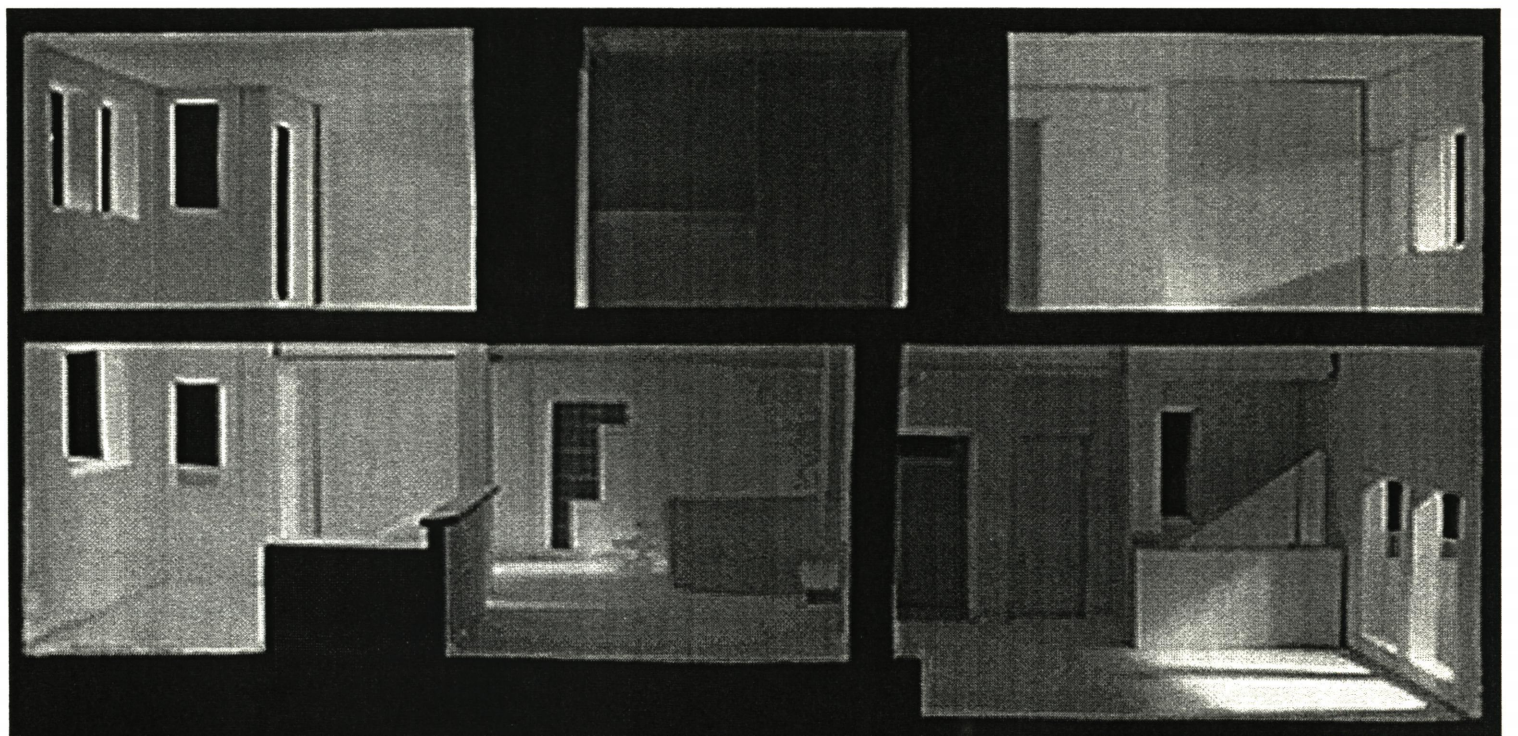
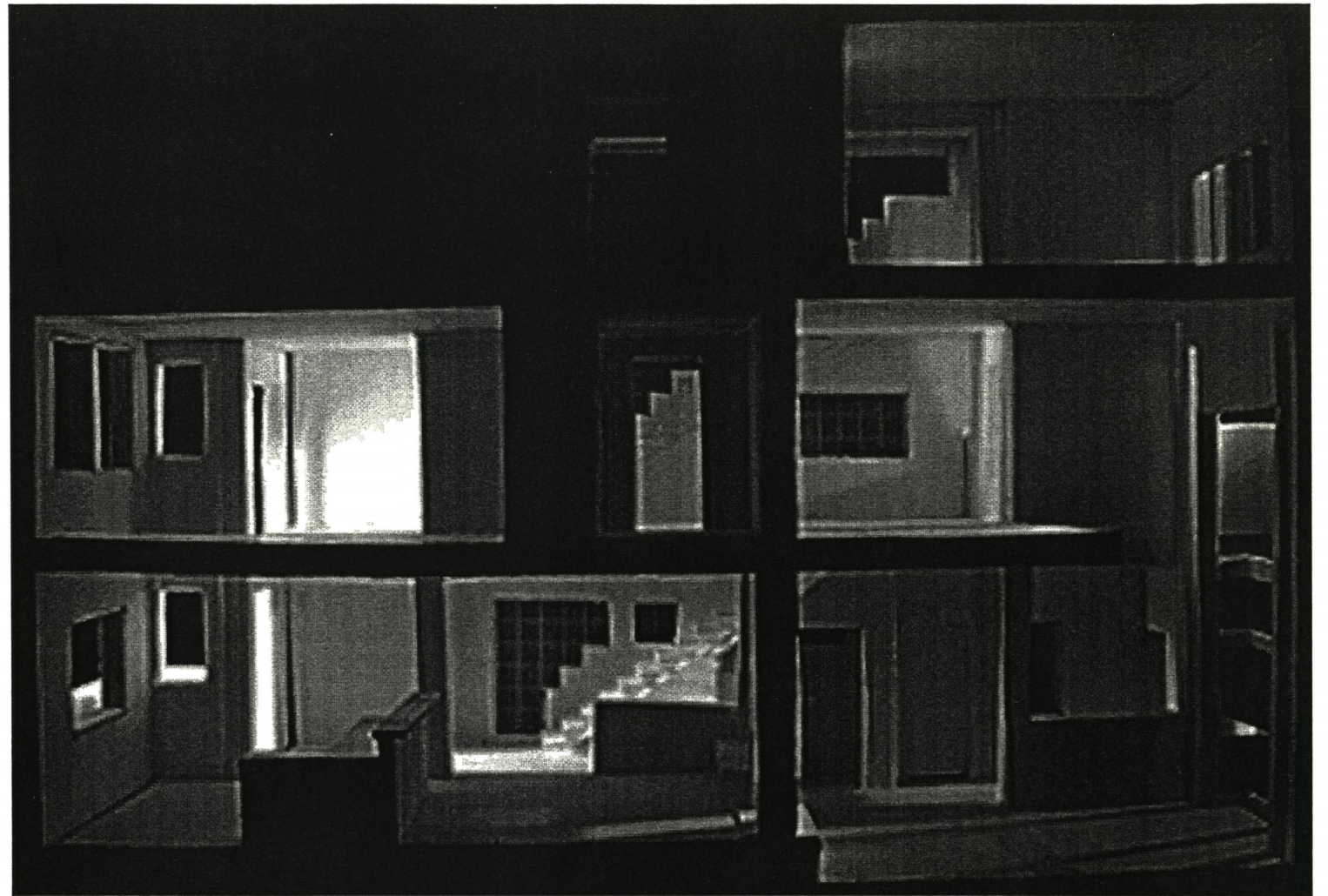
Each unit has its own private entry space. (See plans C and E) This space has room for plants or a bench. Each owner can treat his entry differently, reflecting his life, and his identity. This visual access into a neighbor's house begins to allow a nearby resident to know his neighbor and his interests. This entry into the townhouses can be seen from Fayette Street. This entry way continues into the unit becoming the primary circulation.

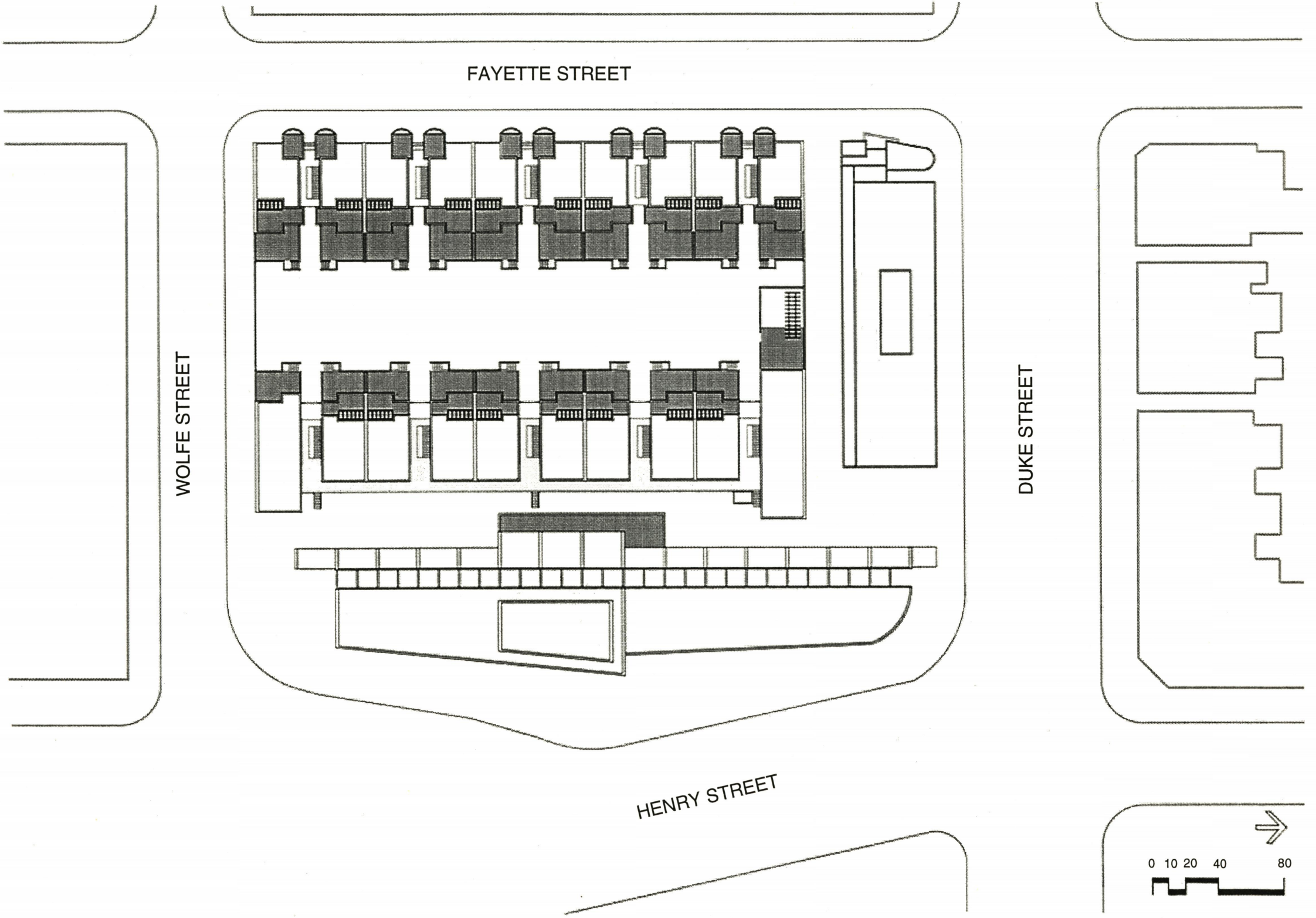
The unit interior is divided by the structure, a series of columns and low walls that run the entire length of the units. This defines the space within a room and the circulation realm. The circulation runs parallel to the circulation within the alley way. This inside circulation acts as a sound buffer.

The townhouse size varies from two to four bedrooms. The living room is double height in some of these units sacrificing a bedroom. They also have a minimum of one outside space, but usually there are two.

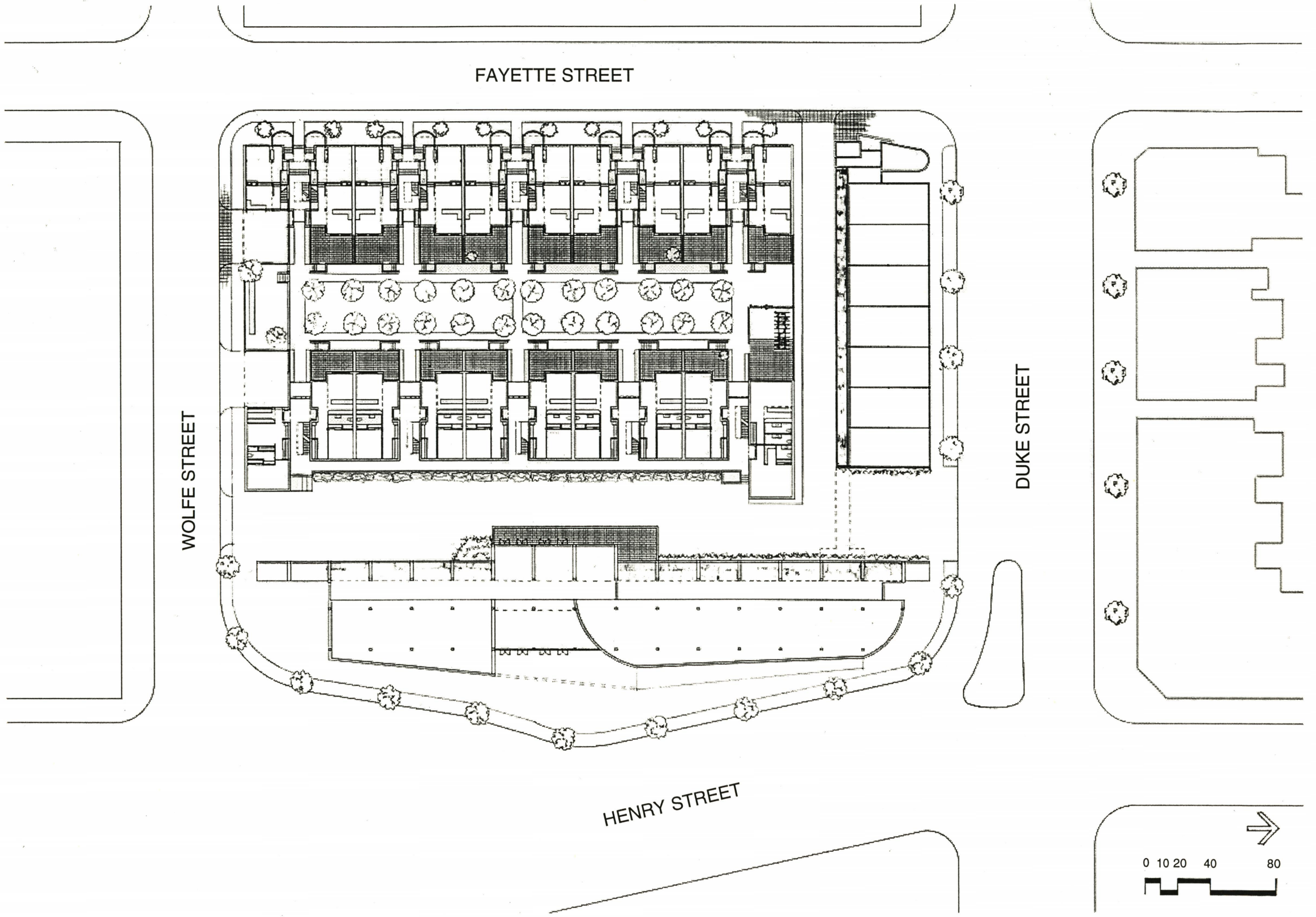
A slight elevation change occurs within these units. The front living space is lower and separated from the kitchen and dining area by half walls and necessary kitchen shelving. Visual privacy is achieved through this design, allowing the residents to sit in separate rooms and feel privacy without closing a door. It also gives a resident preparing a meal the ability to look out his front window or look back into the courtyard easily.

The courtyard is a place for people to gather, observe, or play. The courtyard can be entered from between the townhouses and apartments. Glimpses of the courtyard can be seen through the alley ways and from the corner of Duke and Henry Streets, providing a physical link from their home to the town in which they live.

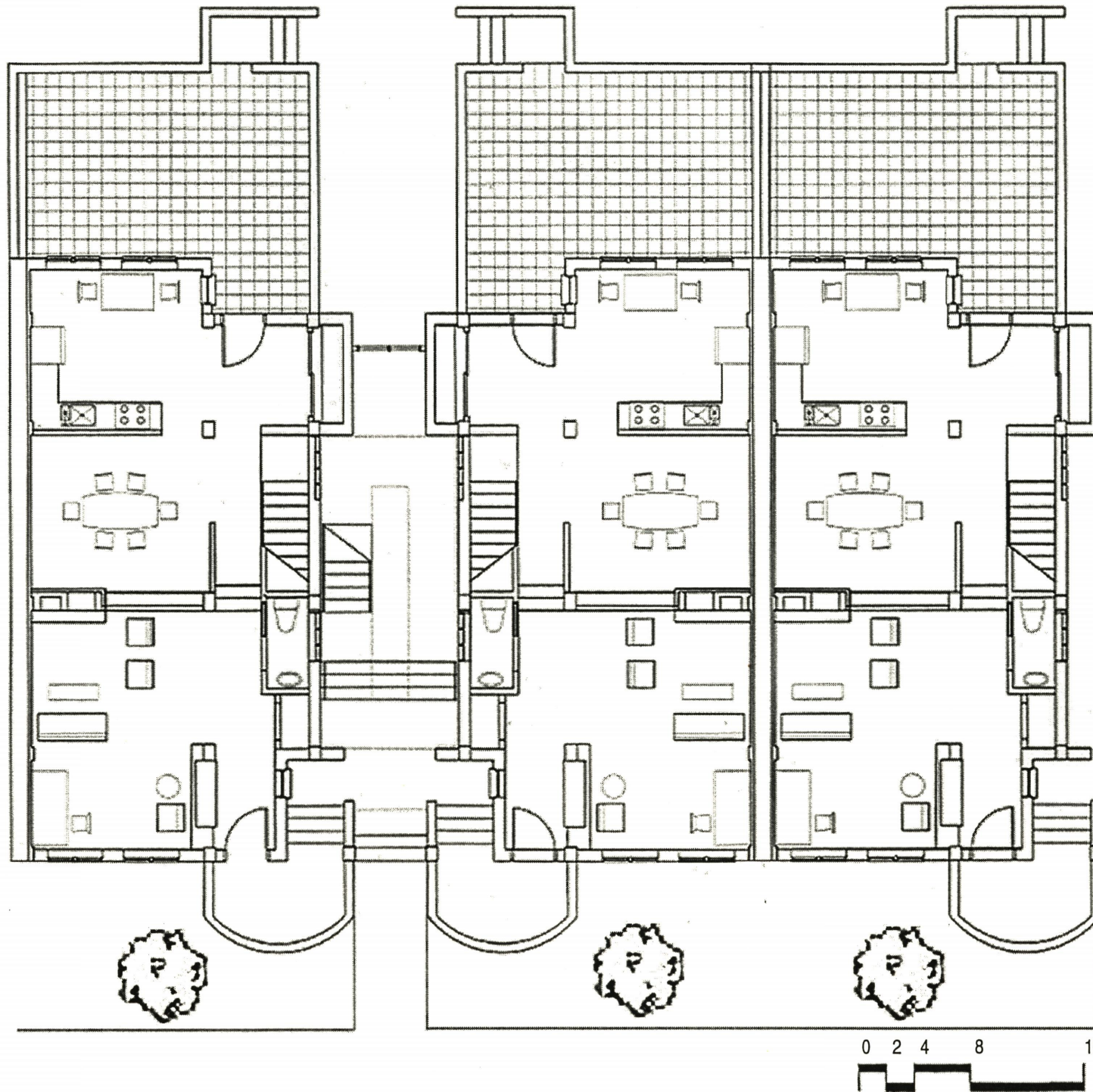




A Site Roof Plan

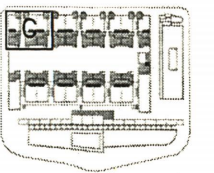


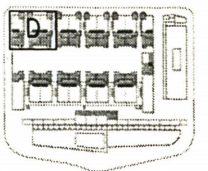
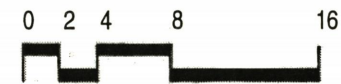
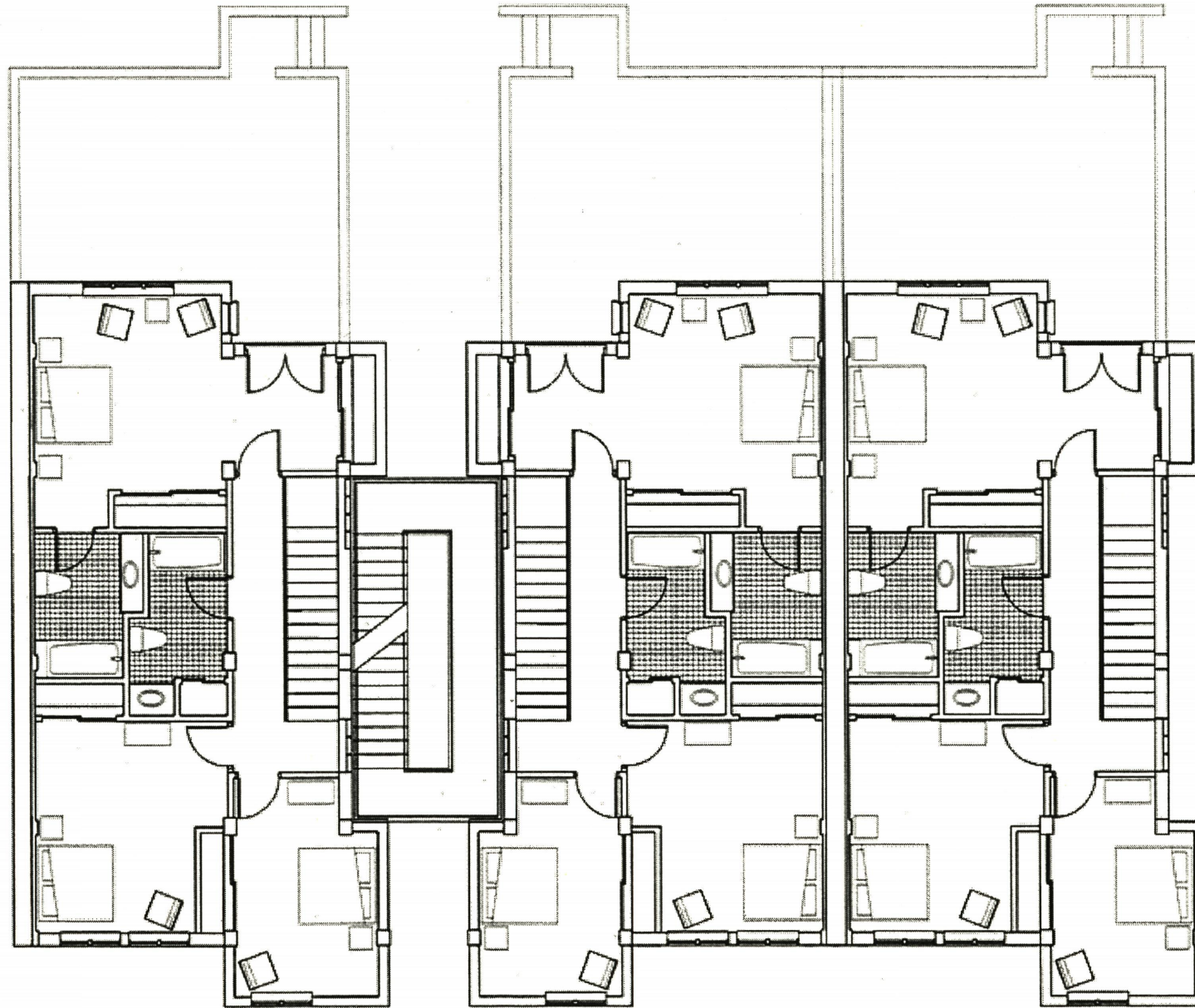
B Site Plan - Pedestrian Plan



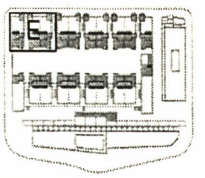
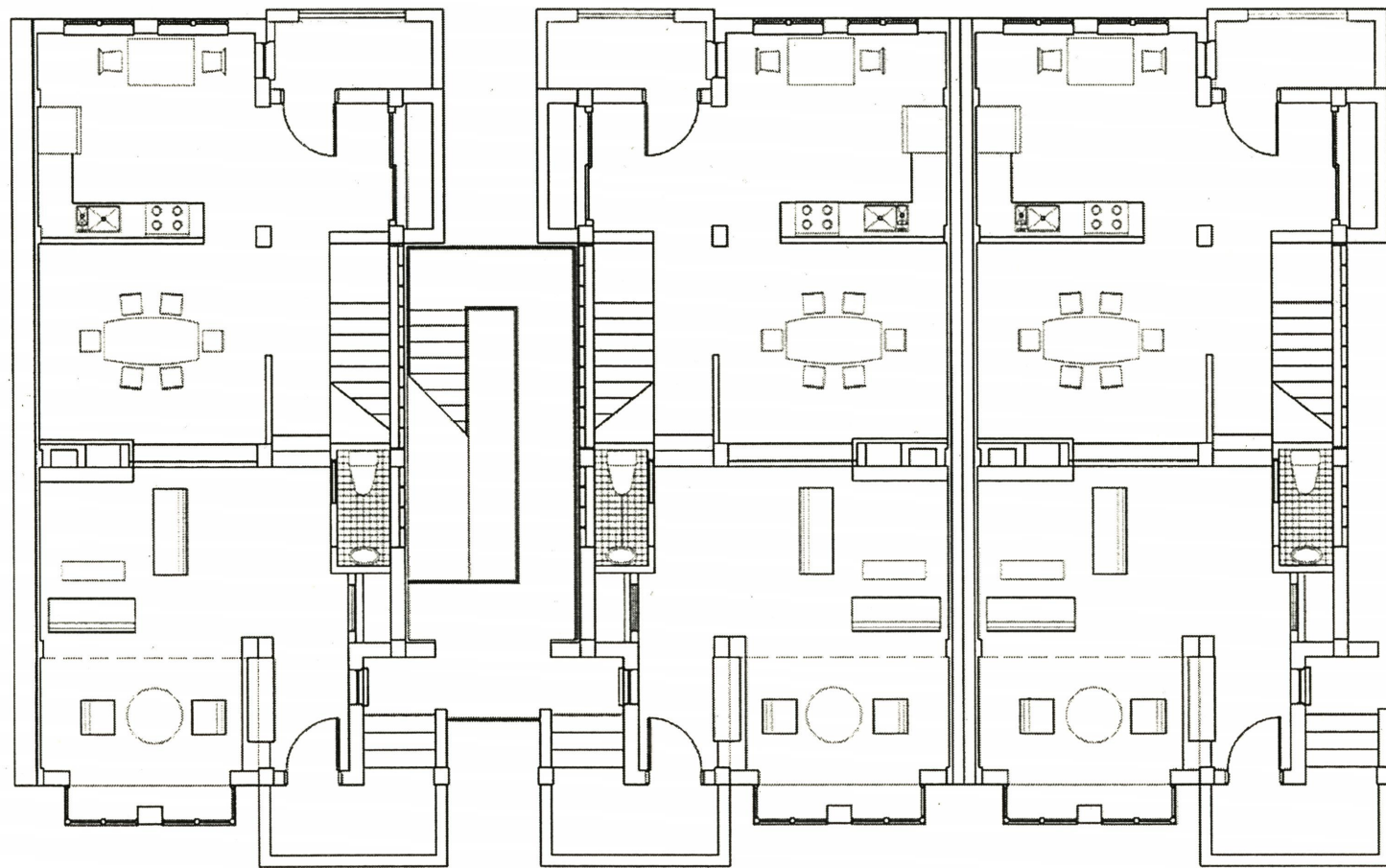
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First Floor - Condominium Units



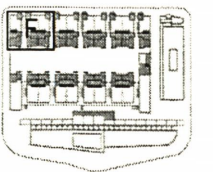
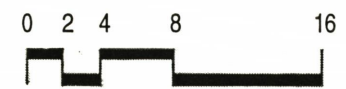
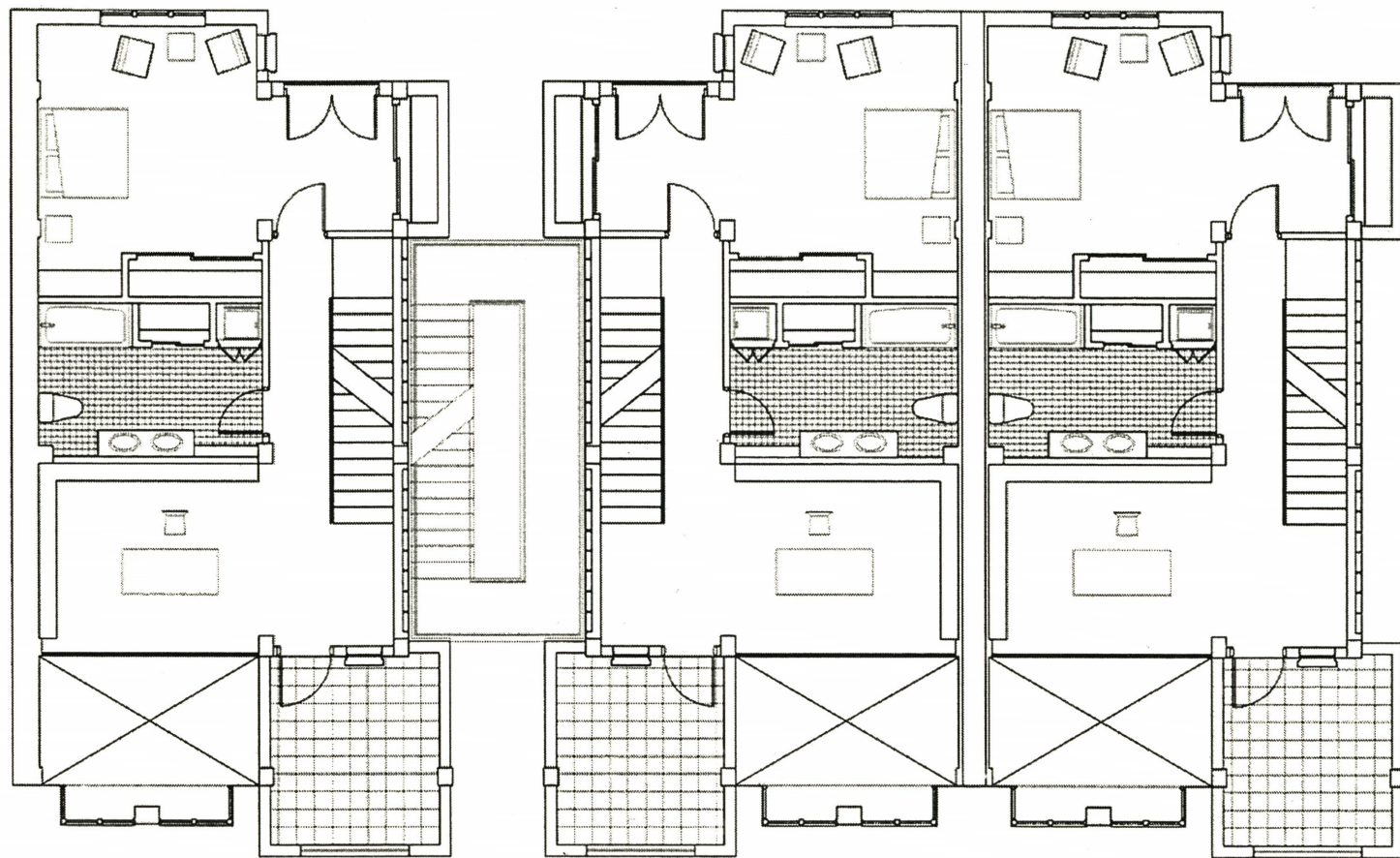


D Second Floor - Condominium Units



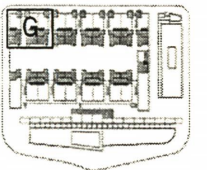
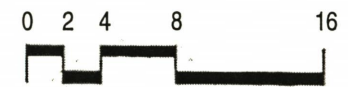
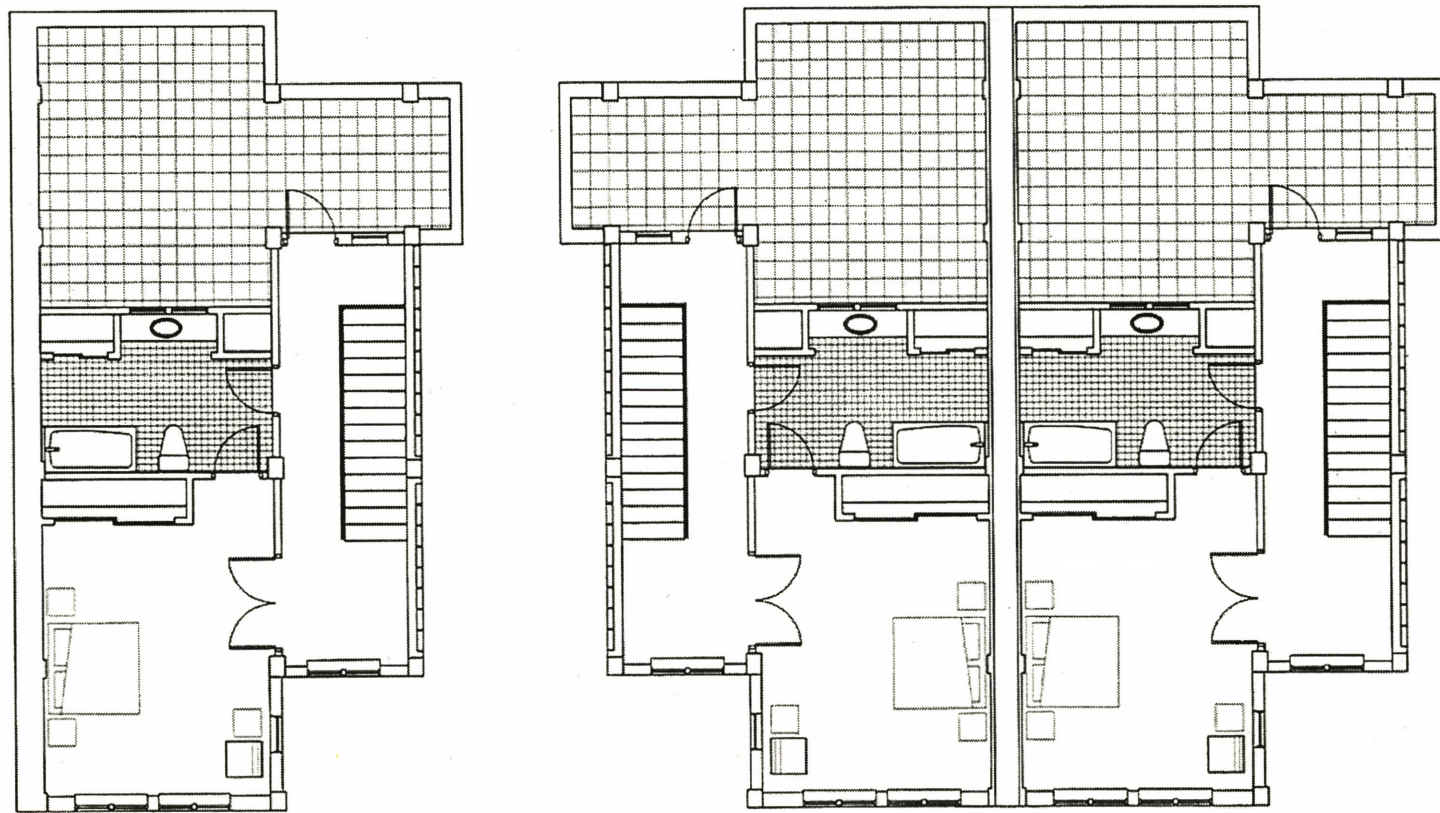
E

Third Floor - Condominium Units (1st Level of Upper Units)



F

Fourth Floor - Condominium Units (2nd Level of Upper Units)



G Fifth Floor - Condominium Units (3rd Level of Upper Units)



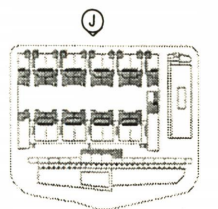
H Partial Front Elevation Multi-Family Condominium Units

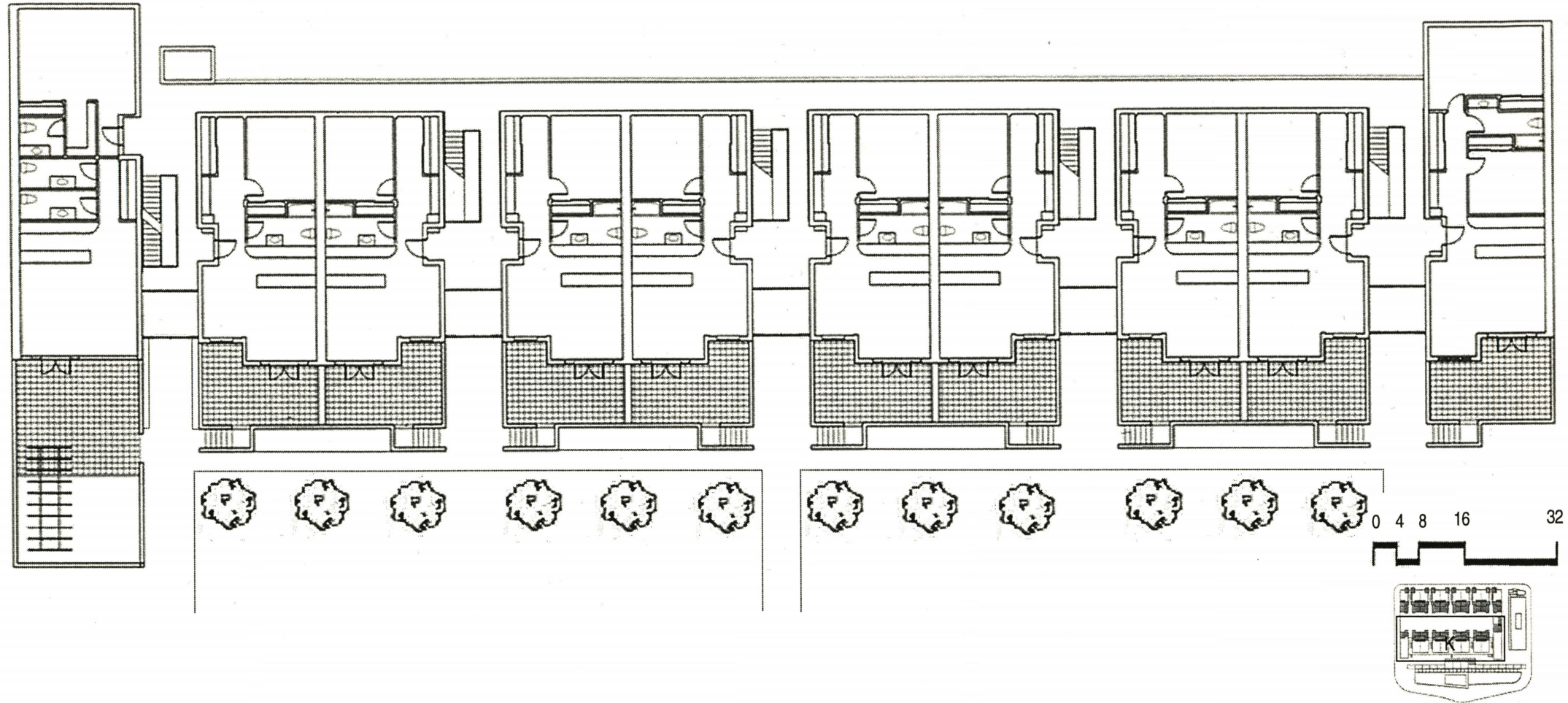


I Partial Rear Elevation Multi-Family Condominium Units



J Fayette Street Elevation

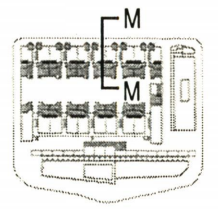
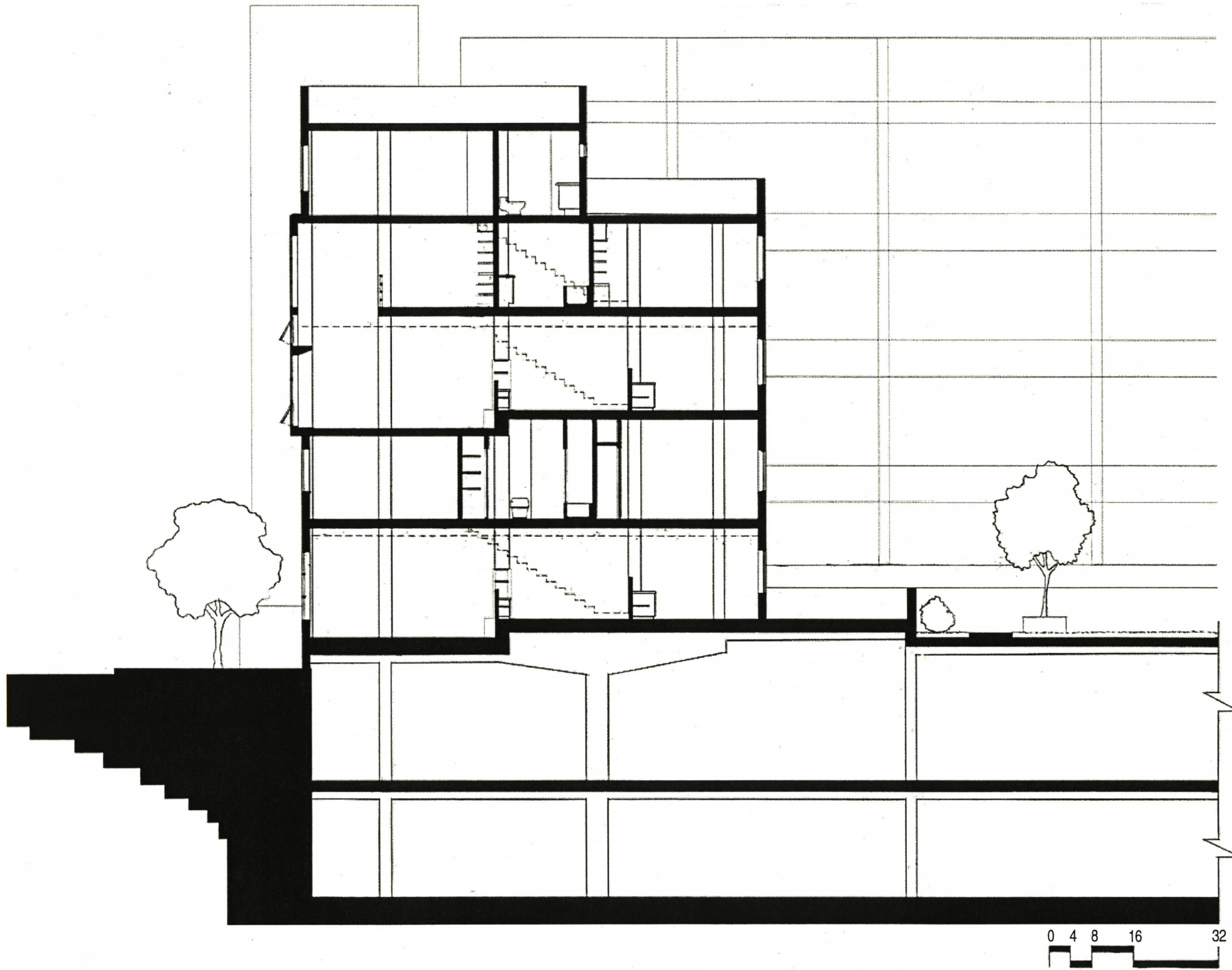




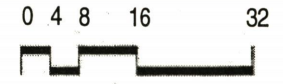
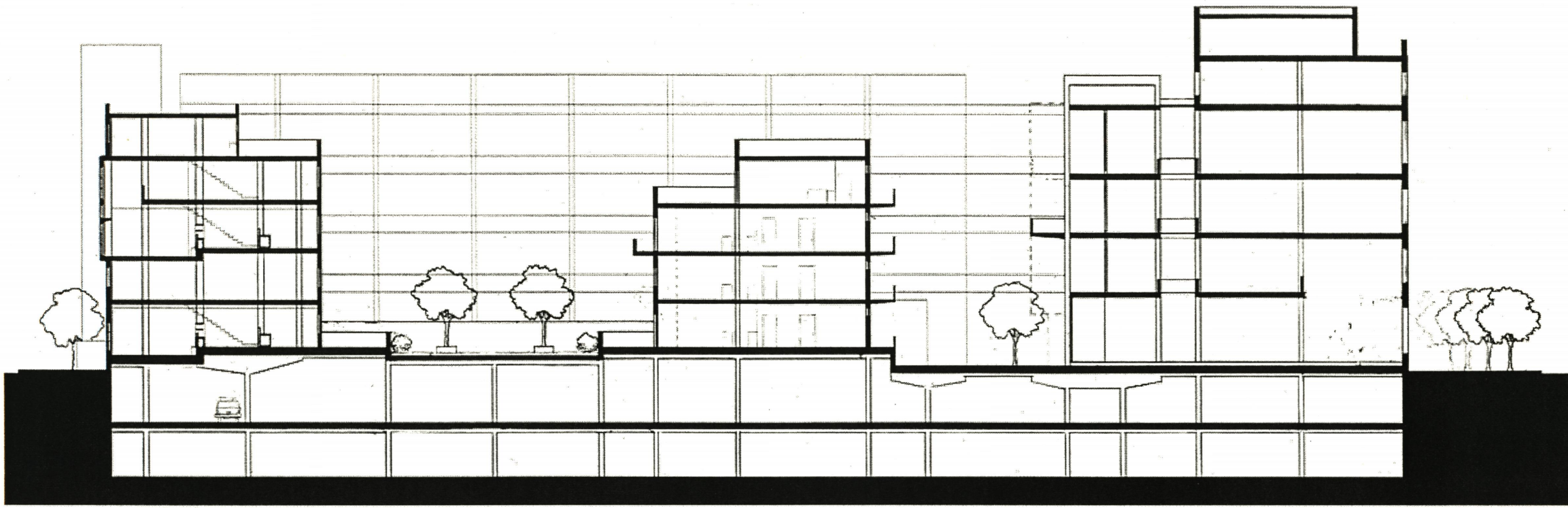
K Plan of Apartments



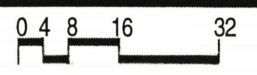
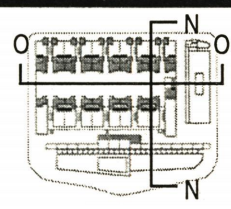
L Elevation of Apartment Building Looking East



M Section Through Typical Multi-Story Units



N Section Through Site Looking North



O Section Through Site Looking West

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