

From Emergency to Permanence: Evaluating Modular Housing as a Long-Term Solution for Disaster Survivors

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Solution for Disaster Survivors**

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ABSTRACT

In response to the increasing impact of hurricanes and flooding in Houston, this thesis proposes a resilient and adaptable housing solution for displaced and low-income residents with dignity, efficiency, and sustainability. The project is located in Alief, a culturally vibrant, elevated neighborhood in southwest Houston. The design incorporates prefabricated mass timber modules, a construction method that is fast, adaptable, and environmentally conscious. The lightweight, renewable nature of timber ensures a low-carbon footprint, while the skeleton-infill system offers architectural flexibility to accommodate changing household needs. With the capacity for approximately 500 units, this project addresses urgent housing demands without compromising on quality or comfort. Beyond mere shelter, the development emphasizes community, connection, and healing. Shared activity spaces and carefully designed interiors encourage interaction, collaboration, and a revitalized sense of belonging. The elements are designed to enhance daily life and support long-term well-being. At its core, this project uses architecture as a tool for resilience, bridging the gap between emergency response and sustainable living. It presents a scalable model for cities like Houston, where climate-related challenges require housing solutions that are quick, sustainable, and profoundly human.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In a city like Houston, where hurricanes and flooding are becoming more frequent, finding a safe and stable place to live can feel out of reach, especially for families already facing economic hardship. This thesis explores how architecture can be part of the solution, offering not just shelter but a sense of dignity, comfort, and community when it's needed most.

Set in Alief, a culturally rich and elevated neighborhood in southwest Houston, the project proposes a modular housing community built with prefabricated mass timber which is a sustainable, low-carbon material that allows homes to be assembled quickly and efficiently. With space for around 500 units, the design balances speed and affordability with beauty and adaptability, creating homes that can grow and change with the people who live in them.

This isn't only about making functional buildings. It's about people. The development includes shared spaces that bring neighbors together, thoughtful layouts that support daily life, and design choices that promote healing after loss or displacement. Every detail is meant to restore a sense of belonging and stability.

At its heart, this project believes that housing can be both a rapid response to crisis and a foundation for a better future. It offers a hopeful, human-centered model for cities like Houston, where resilience means more than rebuilding, it means reimagining how we live together.

DEDICATIONS

I am incredibly grateful to my family- mummy, pappa and brother.
I truly appreciate their unwavering support.

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of the thesis centers the design of modular housing for disaster survivors. The site is located in Houston, Texas. Due to disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Beryl occurring in that region, the project serves as an affordable housing with the consideration for prefabricated modular units. The project aims to provide facilities required for the residents and explores spatial design to enhance the functionality and aesthetic appeal with respect to the modular system.

Context

The site is located in the southwest part of Houston, state of Texas. It is situated at a little higher elevation than rest of the Houston. The climate is humid and hot over most of the year. The location is away from the high-risk flood zone making it suitable for affordable and communal housing. The design is for single family and multi-family dwelling. With the need for housing and shelter for disaster survivors, the project is focused on sustainable modular housing.

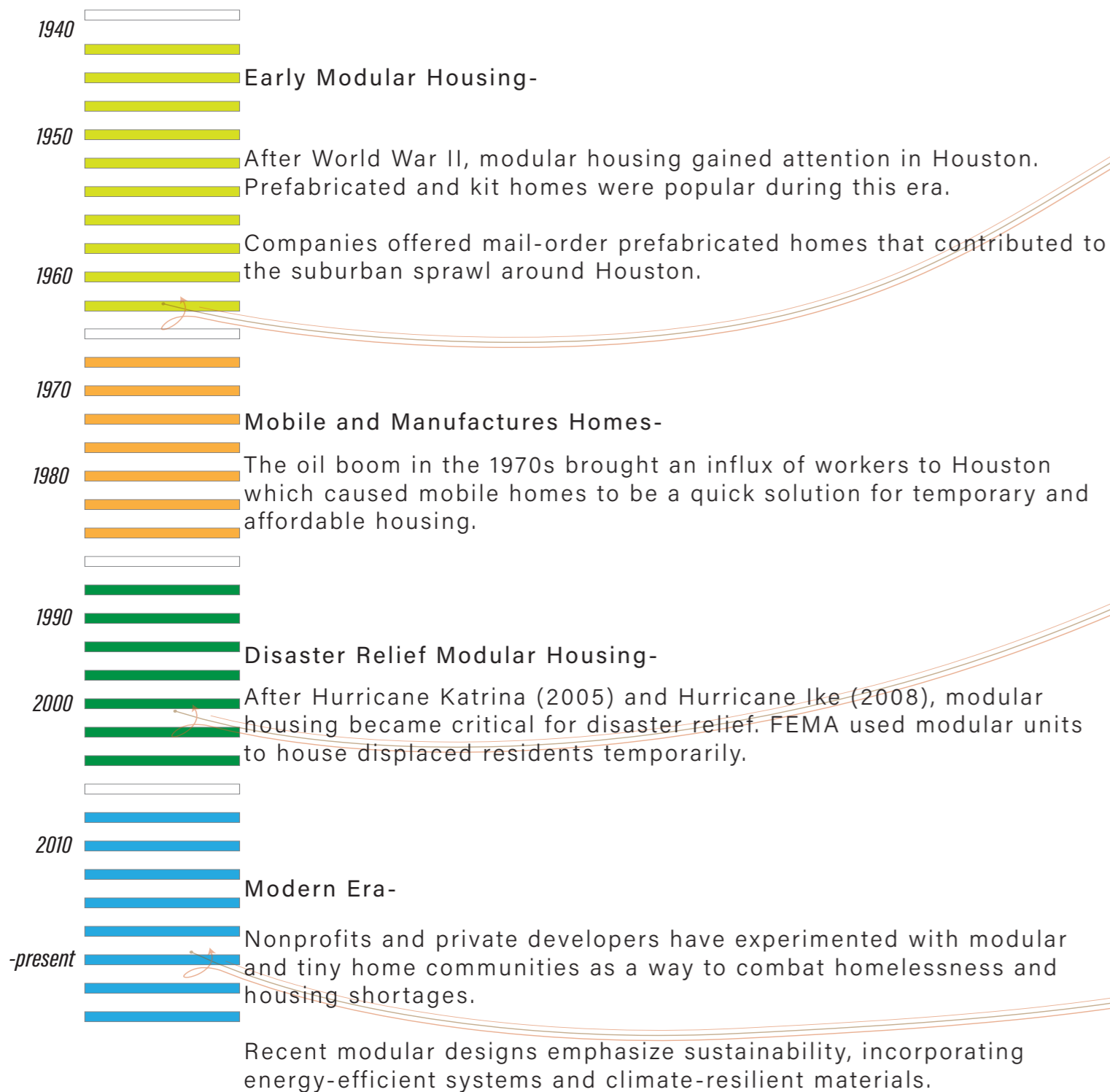
Historical Background

Houston is deeply linked to broader struggles with hurricanes. It has impacts on the urban landscape and housing strategies. Major storms like Hurricanes Carla, Allison, Ike, and Harvey have underscored the urgent need for resilient infrastructure, better drainage systems and disaster ready housing. The need for deployable, robust, modular and timber-based structure is necessary.

Project Objectives

This project envisions a resilient, community-centered housing development in Alief, Houston, designed to serve low-income residents and disaster survivors. At its core is a focus on co-living and connection, with shared communal and activity spaces that foster a sense of belonging and social support. Using prefabricated modular units, the development can accommodate approximately 500 units including both single-family and multi-family households. The skeleton-infill construction system provides a durable framework, enabling flexibility and rapid deployment. A mass timber structural system underscores the project's commitment to sustainability, offering both ecological benefits and a warm, natural living environment. Overall, the project is not just about shelter; it's about creating comfort, stability, and new opportunities for people rebuilding their lives.

Contextual background with timeline



Demographic Information on Modular Housing in Houston

1960-1980
Early modular housing catered to Industrial workers in the oil and gas sector. Predominantly White (Non-Hispanic) males, reflecting workforce demographics of the time.
Seasonal Migrants:
Temporary modular housing was used for migrant farmworkers and construction laborers. Primarily Hispanic/Latino workers, especially in rural areas surrounding Houston.
Mostly single men or small households, 1-2 people, employed in physically demanding industries.

1990-2010
Modular housing was introduced in affordable housing projects as a need for the earning of low income families below minimum Area Median Income (AMI), which included Hispanic/Latino (44%) and African American (32%) families, reflecting Houston's economic and racial diversity.
Post-disaster modular units were deployed after hurricanes like Hurricane Allison (2001) and Hurricane Harvey (2017). The disaster survivors included Hispanic/Latino:50%, African American:35%, White (Non-Hispanic):10%, Asian:5%
Areas with high usage of modular housing included East End, Third Ward, and Alief.

2010-present
Modular housing is increasingly used for permanent supportive housing to serve individuals transitioning from homelessness or those with disabilities.
The present ethnicity is African American:45%, Hispanic/Latino:35%, White (Non-Hispanic):15%, Other:5%,
Veterans and low-income seniors are common users of modular housing projects in Houston.
Mostly single individuals or couples without children.

Use of timber modules in Houston

Timber room modules are gaining prominence due to their ecological benefits, cost-efficiency, and flexibility. Prefabrication advances and modularity reduce construction time and costs, while lightweight timber allows for easier transportation and soundproof designs. Timber offers architectural potential with aesthetic and atmospheric quality, meeting urbanization demands for low-emission housing solutions.

In Houston, timber room modules are ideal for addressing urban housing shortages driven by population growth, migration, and changing demographics. Their ecological benefits, cost-efficiency, and rapid construction timelines make them suitable for low-emission, affordable housing. Timber's lightweight nature facilitates easy transportation, while prefabrication reduces costs and construction time.

Factors

There are several factors between the United States and European countries which differ and affect the success of Modular construction in the United States.

Building Codes & Regulations

In the United States, some states and municipalities make modifications to the model building code (The International Building Code), requiring modular construction to meet varying standards. On the other hand, many European countries have more uniform national codes, facilitating broader adoption of modular methods.

Construction Culture & Market Inertia

The United States construction industry has a longstanding preference for traditional on-site building techniques which makes the cultural inertia transfer to modular methods challenging. In contrast, countries like Sweden up to 50% of buildings have embraced modular construction.

Financing & Investment Challenges

U.S. financial institutions have preference towards traditional construction financing models, which comprise incremental payments. It creates challenges in securing financing as Modular construction typically requires more substantial upfront investment.

Labor Market & Costs

The United States has a large and reasonably priced construction workforce, which decreases the financial motivation to shift towards modular construction. On the other hand, the higher labor expenses in certain European regions make the efficiency of modular techniques more attractive.

Logistics & Transportation

The United States has complications to transport large modular units due to vast geographical size, increasing costs. European countries, with denser populations and shorter distances between urban centers, face fewer logistical challenges in this regard.

Perception & Aesthetics

In the U.S., modular construction is sometimes associated with lower-quality structures, such as mobile homes. This perception hinders its acceptance for mainstream housing projects. To improve public perception, European markets have demonstrated directness to high-quality modular designs.

PRECEDENTS

Puukuokka Apartment

Architect- OPEEA, Helsinki
Purpose- Residential Complex
Location- Finland
Floor Area- 11065 sq ft
Completed- 2018

Program-

The project stands out due to its innovative use of room modules. Each apartment features a facade-facing spatial layer that includes a bedroom, living room, and loggia, all contained within a single room module. A second module accommodates the interior spaces, such as bathrooms, kitchens, and ancillary areas. Utility installations are integrated into the corridor walls, allowing for independent maintenance.

Approach-

The first phase of construction was completed in just nine months, an essential advantage given Finland's climatic conditions. The room modules were delivered fully fitted with interiors and external wall structures, including wind-proofing. The prefabricated modular timber cladding was installed afterward. Despite the modular approach, the sculptural facade effectively conceals the construction method.

The road-facing facades are clad in black-painted spruce, while the western facade, overlooking a small grove, features untreated larch. On this side, projecting balconies alternate with glazed loggias, extending the living spaces of the smaller apartments.

The building is equipped with a sprinkler system. Inside, the walls of the apartments and stairwells are covered with plasterboard. However, in the flats, the wooden surfaces remain exposed on the ceilings, while in the white stairwells, the wooden flooring has been left visible.

A key focus in the design process was optimizing the entire production and construction workflow. Prefabricating the modules not only minimized on-site construction time but also enabled production in a controlled factory environment, significantly reducing the structure's exposure to weather conditions and humidity during assembly. Additionally, the wooden facade elements were prefabricated and delivered to the site as ready-to-install components.

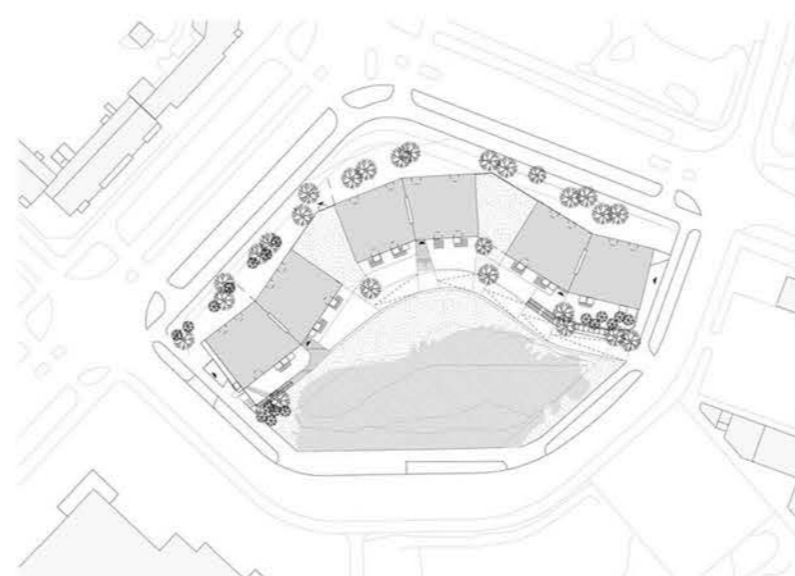
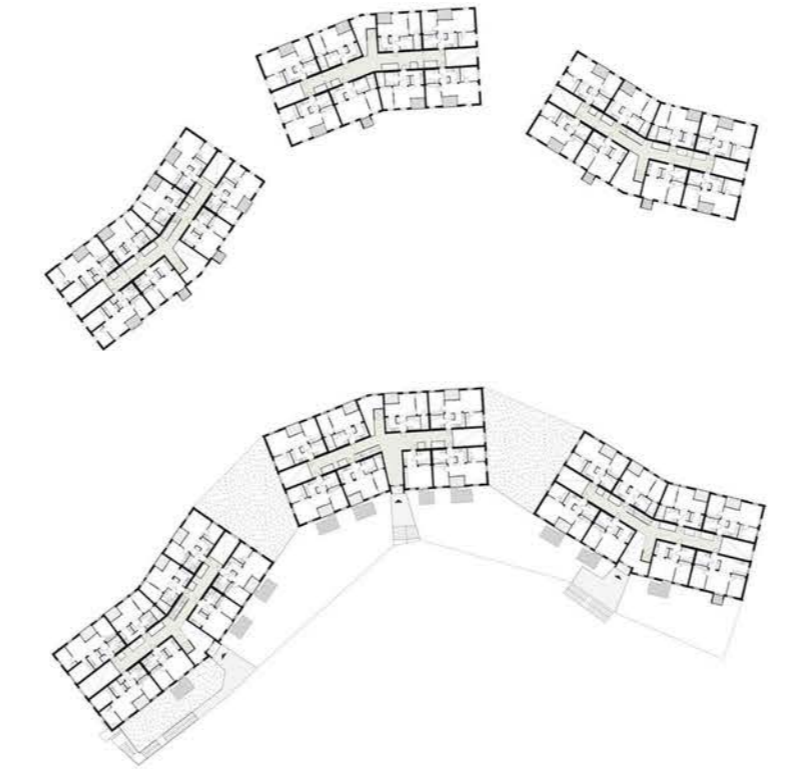
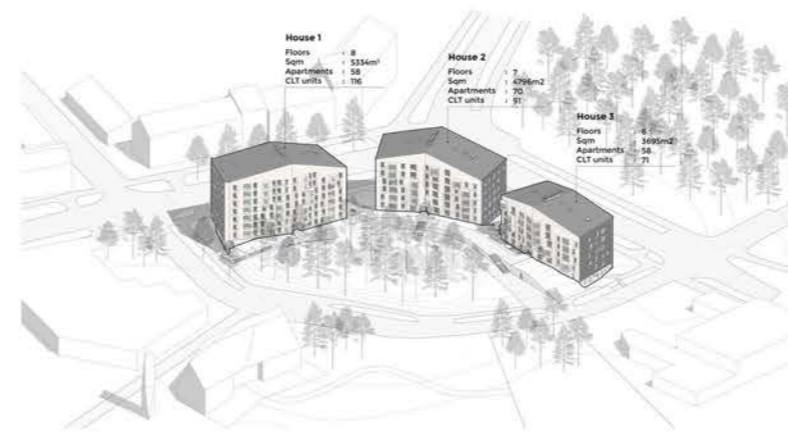


figure 02



figure 03

Hotel Katharinenhof

Architect- Johannes Kaufmann Architektur

Purpose- Hospitality Building

Location- Austria

Construction- Cross laminated timber

Completed- 2017

Program-

Located in the heart of Dornbirn, the building serves as an extension to an existing hotel. Due to the extremely short construction timeline, a room module construction method was chosen. The basement contains an underground parking garage, while the ground floor houses the reception, lobby, kitchen, breakfast room, and a connection to the existing building. The three upper floors accommodate 39 four-star hotel rooms, designed using three distinct room module types: single, standard double, and superior double rooms.

Approach-

The stairwell and lift shaft were also prefabricated as timber room modules. The building, with its urban appearance, does not immediately reveal its timber construction. At the client's request, the cross-laminated timber structure was clad with plasterboard on the interior. This layer enhances sound insulation and provides a fire safety encasement for the load-bearing elements. Ventilation ducts and outlets are integrated into the ceilings of the fully equipped modules.

A seamless metal facade covers both the reinforced concrete base and the room modules, highlighting the building's structural rigor. A deep incision in the volume accentuates the entrance, while the sloping, recessed glazed facades of the hotel rooms create small balcony niches.

These balconies are supported by slender cross-laminated timber panels, sealed and covered with a grid. The balconies were prefabricated together with the modules, with only the facade skin being applied on-site. The module prefabrication took four weeks, and the modules were installed on the base in just three days. The entire construction process, including the basement, was completed in only six months.

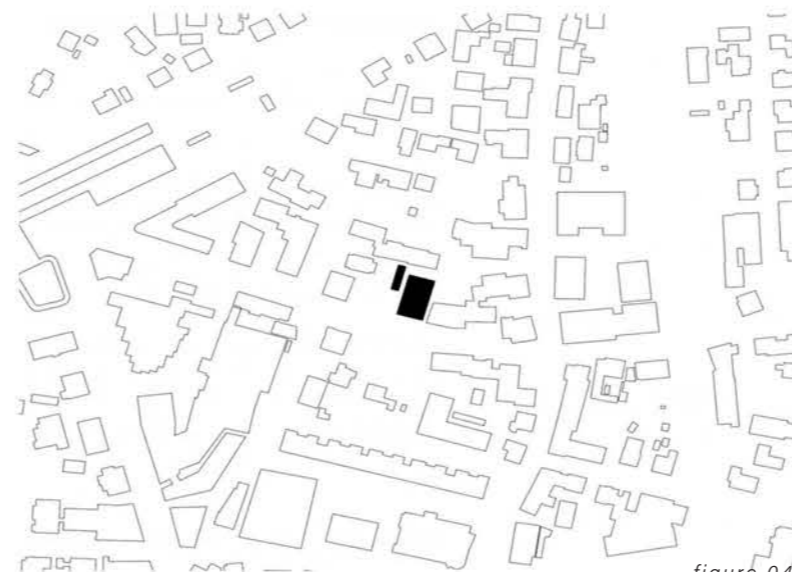
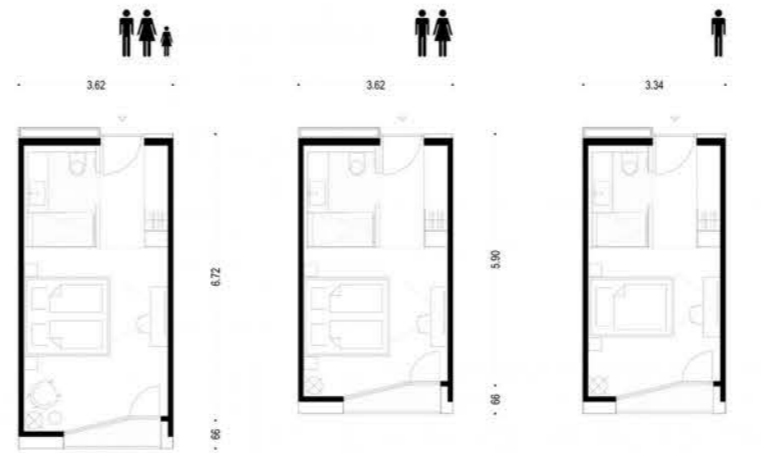


figure 04

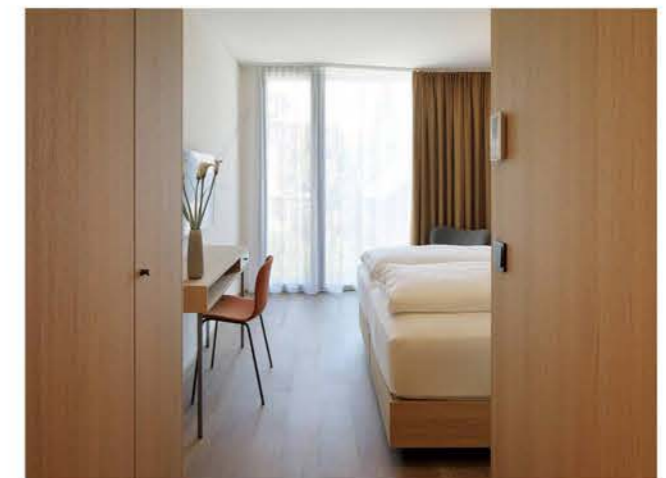


figure 05

Hotel Jakarta

Architect- seARCH Architects

Purpose- Hospitality Building

Location- Netherlands

Floor Area- 177600 sq ft

Completed- 2018

Program-

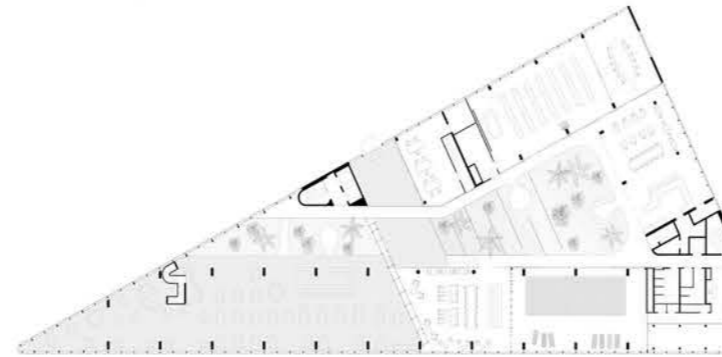
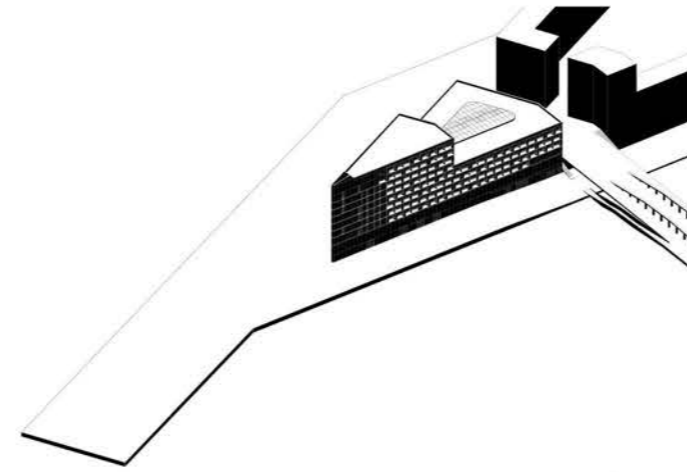
Hotel Jakarta combines modern, sustainable architecture with Indonesian-inspired design elements to create a luxurious and eco-friendly environment. The hotel features 200 rooms, wellness facilities, a rooftop garden, and public spaces like a café and sky bar, all designed to connect guests with nature through green facades, tropical plants, and natural materials.

Approach-

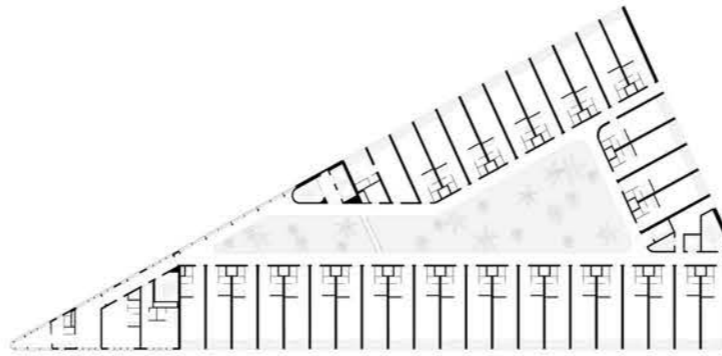
Hotel Jakarta incorporates a modular design approach to streamline construction and enhance efficiency. The building's modularity primarily involves the prefabrication of key elements off-site, including the room modules and certain structural components, such as the timber facades and cross-laminated timber (CLT) panels. These modules were produced in controlled factory conditions, ensuring high-quality standards and reducing construction time on-site.

The prefabricated room modules were designed to be fully fitted with interior features, allowing for quick assembly upon arrival at the site. This modular construction method contributed to the rapid building timeline, with the modules being mounted on the base structure in just three days after delivery. The use of prefabrication also minimized exposure to weather conditions, reducing potential delays and maintaining the integrity of materials.

In addition to the room modules, the facade was also modular, with large panels of timber and metal cladding that were pre-assembled off-site, adding to the building's overall speed of construction. This modular approach ensured a high level of quality control, reduced waste, and significantly shortened the construction period, which was completed in only six months.



seARCH
HOTEL JAKARTA - NETHERLANDS



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HOTEL JAKARTA - NETHERLANDS

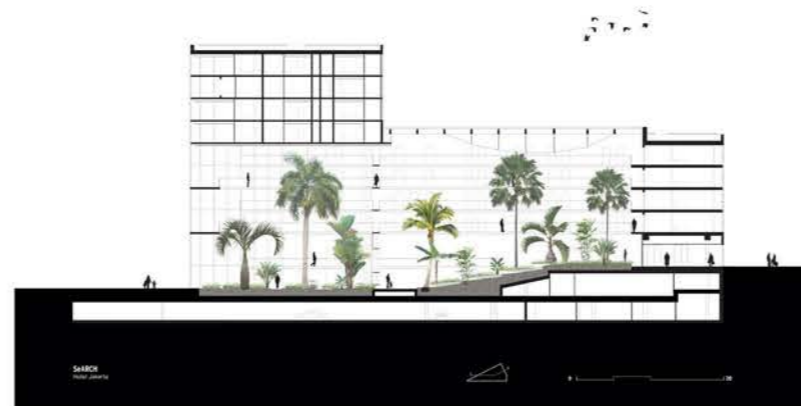


figure 06

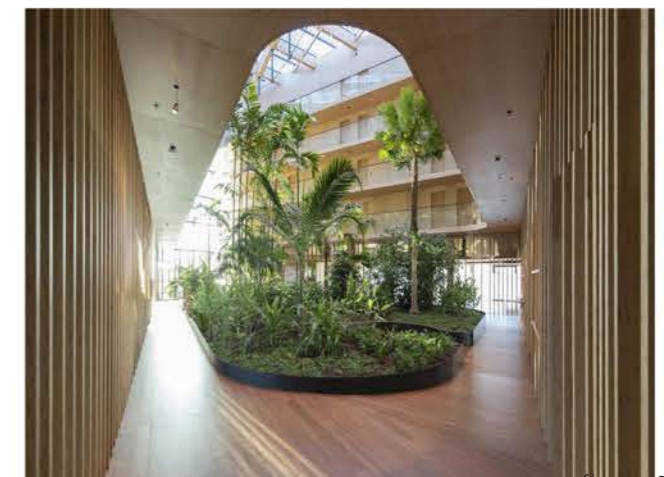


figure 07 12

Schindler Exhibiton Building

Architect- Basel Burckhardt

Purpose- Office and Administration

Location- Switzerland

Floor Area- 215270 sq ft

Completed- 2020

Program-

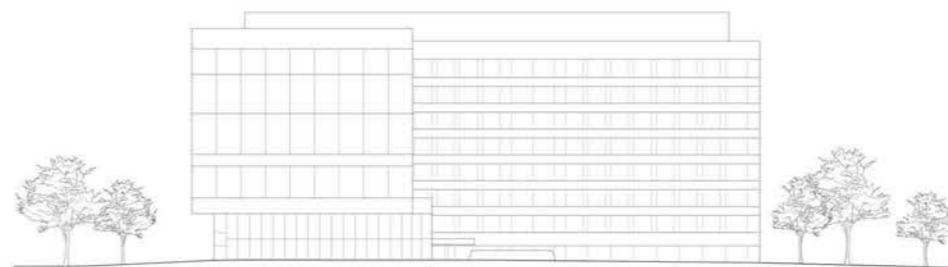
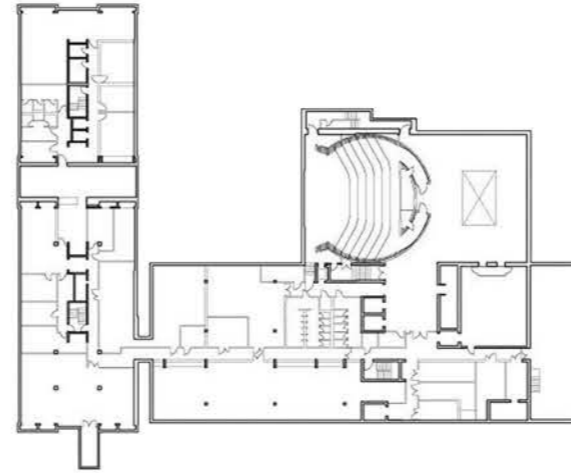
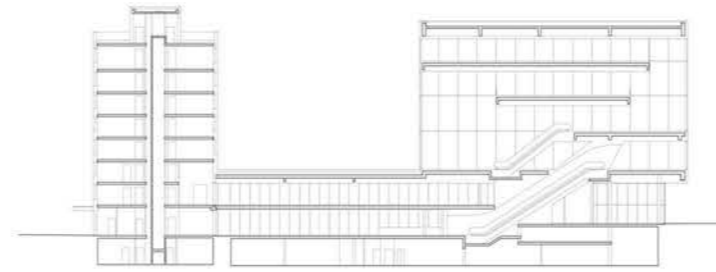
The main focus of the building is its exhibition area, spanning several floors and designed to immerse visitors in Schindler's advancements in vertical transportation technology. The interactive displays combine both digital and physical elements, such as the City Model, which uses augmented reality to highlight Schindler's global projects, and the Cube Experience, an interactive space that tells stories about urban mobility and Schindler's contribution to modern cities. These areas are adaptable, featuring modular exhibition systems that can be easily reconfigured and updated to incorporate future innovations.

Approach-

The Building employs modular elements that streamline construction. Prefabricated components, including interior walls and ceiling structures, were created off-site and then assembled on-site. This method reduced labor time, minimized on-site disruptions, and ensured high-quality finishes.

The building's exhibition areas are equipped with modular stands and movable partitions, allowing easy adaptation for various events and exhibitions based on the company's needs. These flexible elements enable quick reconfigurations to accommodate different installations, interactive displays, and presentations.

The use of modular construction supports the building's sustainability objectives. Many prefabricated modules are designed with energy efficiency in mind. Energy-efficient features, such as prefabricated walls, lighting, HVAC, and solar power integration, contribute to reducing energy consumption and minimizing the environmental impact of the construction process.



FAILED PRECEDENTS

Nakagin Capsule Tower

Architect- Kisho Kurokawa

Purpose- Mixed-use Housing

Location- Japan

Construction- Prefabricated modular housing

Completed- 1972-2022

Program-

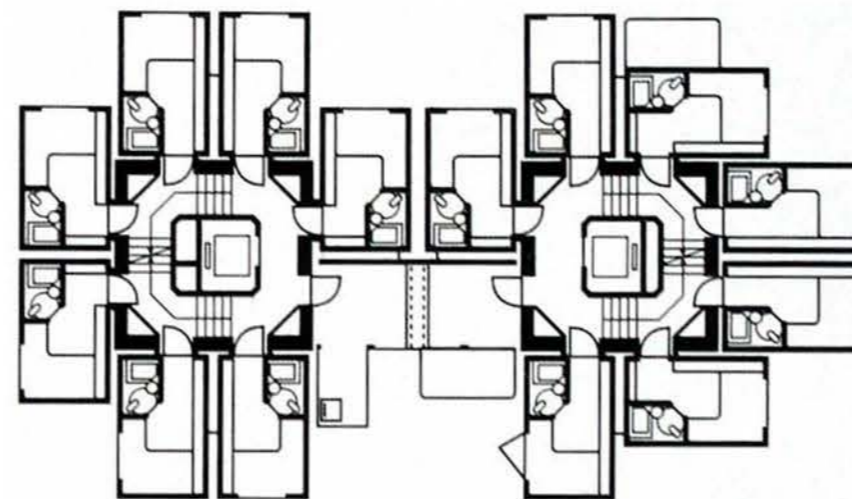
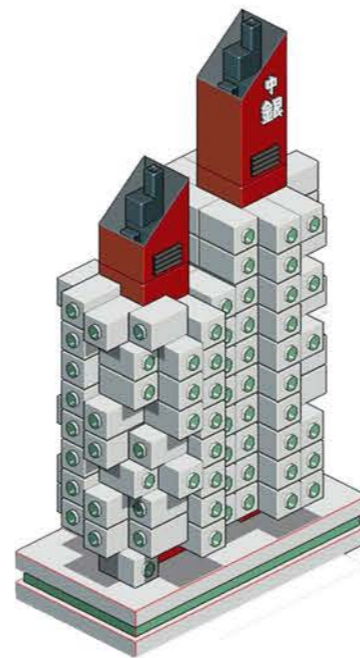
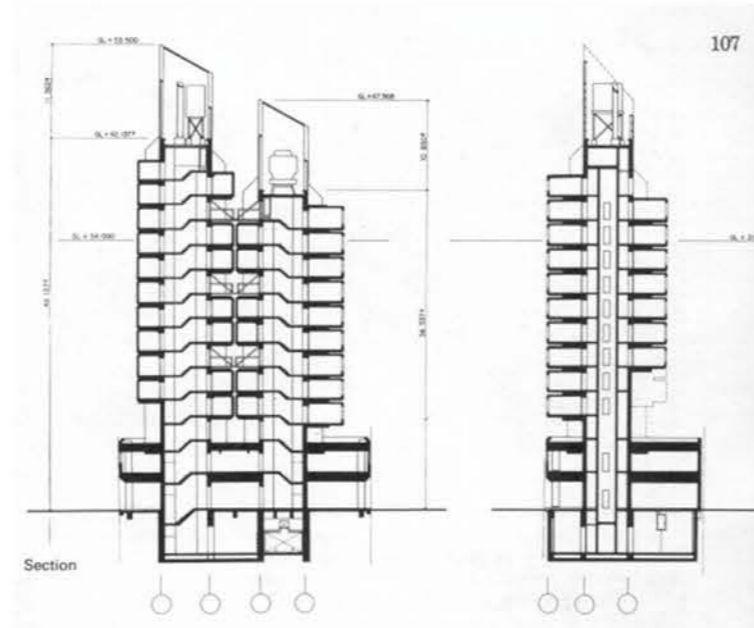
The Nakagin Capsule Tower was a bold experiment in how we might live in the future. It was made up of 140 tiny, self-contained pods each about the size of a small bedroom attached to two concrete towers that held all the utilities and elevators. These capsules were designed for single businessmen. The big idea was that each unit could be removed and replaced over time, keeping the building fresh and flexible. But in reality, none of the capsules were ever swapped out. Technical challenges, high costs, and lack of coordination got in the way. The tower became a cultural icon, admired for its vision of modular, adaptable housing, even though it couldn't quite deliver on its promise.

Failure-

The Nakagin Capsule Tower was a bold and fascinating idea that simply couldn't keep up with the real world. It was meant to be a flexible, futuristic building where individual living pods could be removed and replaced over time like plugging in new parts as needed. But in practice, that vision never came to life. The capsules were tightly connected to utilities, and removing even one proved too complex and expensive. What was meant to be adaptable quickly became static.

Ownership was another big hurdle. Each tiny pod was privately owned, so any big decisions like renovations or replacements required unanimous agreement, which was nearly impossible. As the years passed, the building aged badly. It had outdated systems, expensive maintenance needs, and even asbestos. Without a clear plan or support for long-term care, the building slowly fell apart.

The tower was demolished in 2022. Still, it left behind a powerful message that even the most exciting architectural ideas need practical systems, shared responsibility, and long-term planning to truly work.



SIRH

Architect- Claude Prouve

Purpose- Community Housing

Location- France

Construction- Prefabricated Modular housing

Completed- 1970-2012

Program-

The SIRH modular housing was designed to address housing shortages in postwar France through the use of modular construction. The idea was to create flexible, adaptable living spaces using prefabricated units that could be assembled and rearranged as needed, allowing for both short-term and long-term housing solutions. The program aimed to provide a more efficient, industrialized method of construction by utilizing prefabricated modules, each consisting of living units that could be stacked or altered to suit different needs.

Failure-

Claude Prouvé's experimental building was a bold attempt to rethink how we could build homes. The aim was to create a flexible, industrial way of constructing housing, using prefabricated modules that could be stacked and rearranged as needed. It was a forward-thinking response to the housing shortages of the postwar era, capturing the spirit of optimism and innovation of its time.

But despite the brilliance of the idea, things didn't go as planned. The reality of making the modular system work was more complicated. Coordinating things like plumbing and utilities across these modules turned out to be a major challenge. While the building was completed, it was never used as originally intended. Financial difficulties and a lack of widespread support caused the project to never gain traction and was quietly left behind.

The structure stood unused for many years before being demolished in 2012. Still, even though it didn't succeed, the building serves as a fascinating example of architectural experimentation that even the most visionary ideas need the right conditions, backing, and timing to truly come to life.



figure 12

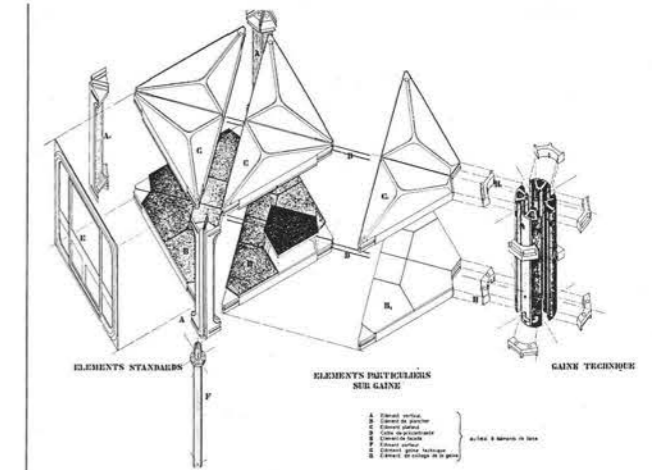


figure 13 18

OPEN BUILDING IDEA

The Open Building is an architectural approach developed by N. John Habraken to promote user control, flexibility, and long term adaptability for housing and urban design. The main idea divides the building into Support and Infill layers.

The Support/ base structure includes the main frame and shared systems.

The Infill layer includes interior layouts and finishes to be customized according to the users.

Key Open Building strategies-

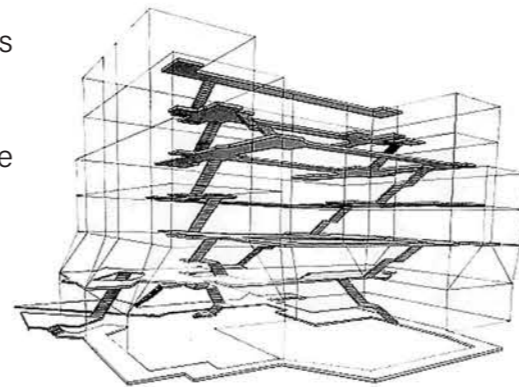
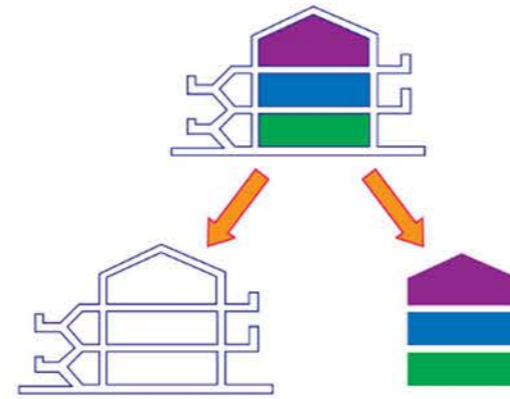
-There are activity spaces for residents.

-The building system has modular system which can be replaced/ rearranged/ recycled as per the requirements.

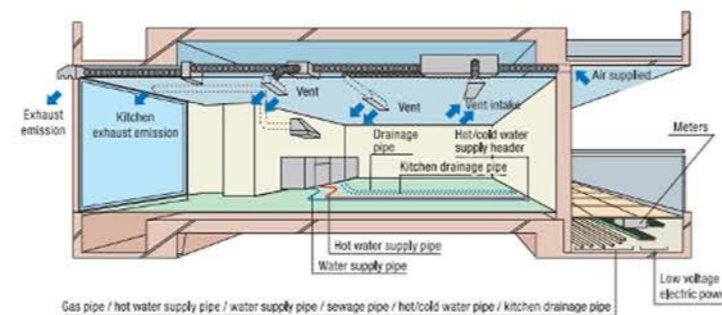
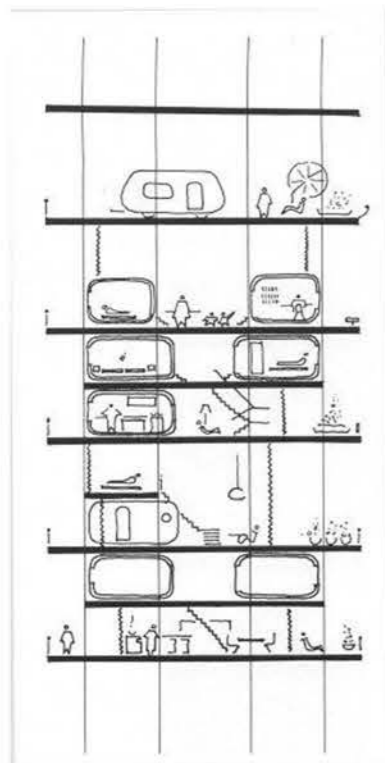
-The separation of skeleton from infills ensures renovations without the risk of damage.

-There are flexible piping systems for large scale facilities.

-The idea encourages longevity and reduced waste.



PRECEDENT



NEXT21

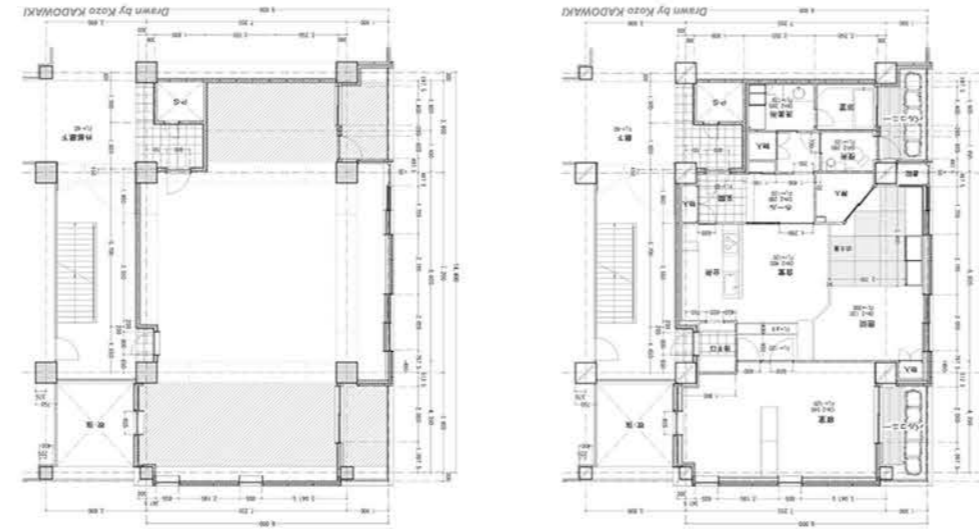
Architect- Yositika UTIDA, Shu-Koh-Sha Architectural, Urban Design Studio
 Purpose- Mixed-use Housing
 Location- Japan
 Area- 10,000 SF
 Completed- 1994

Program-
 The project is a pioneering example of Open Building principles, designed to adapt to the evolving needs of urban living. Initiated by Osaka Gas Co, Ltd, the project was conceived as an experimental housing complex that could respond flexibly to changing societal and individual requirements. The project's design emphasizes environmental sustainability, energy efficiency and the capacity to accommodate diverse lifestyles over time.

Approach-
 The building was divided into two main parts- a sturdy, long lasting structure that formed the backbone and a customizable interior layer where individual residents could shape their own spaces. This meant people could update, rearrange or even split their homes without affecting the larger building. The exterior was designed to be flexible. Windows, balconies and walls could be changed depending on how residents wanted to use them.

The project was built with community and sustainability in mind. Shared walkways and open spaces acted like vertical neighborhoods, encouraging neighbors to interact naturally. The project tested out eco-friendly systems and energy saving technologies too, making it a sort of real-life experiment in greener living.

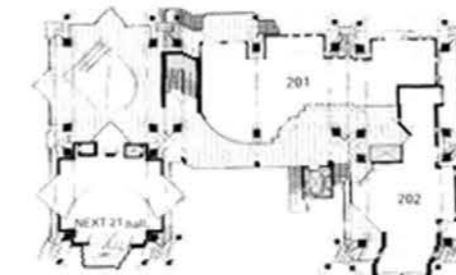
The approach was to build a resilient framework that could support long-term adaptability, user participation, and sustainable urban living, a living laboratory where housing could respond to the changes in society, technology and lifestyle.



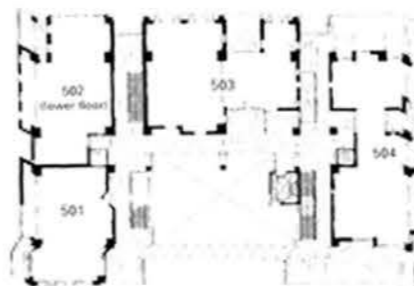
3rd floor



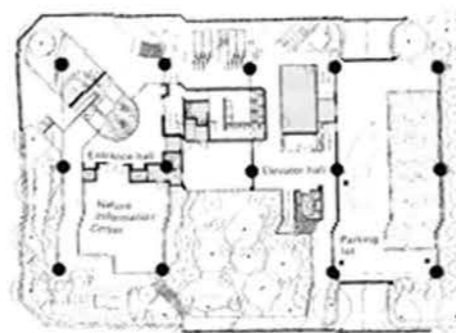
6th floor



2nd floor



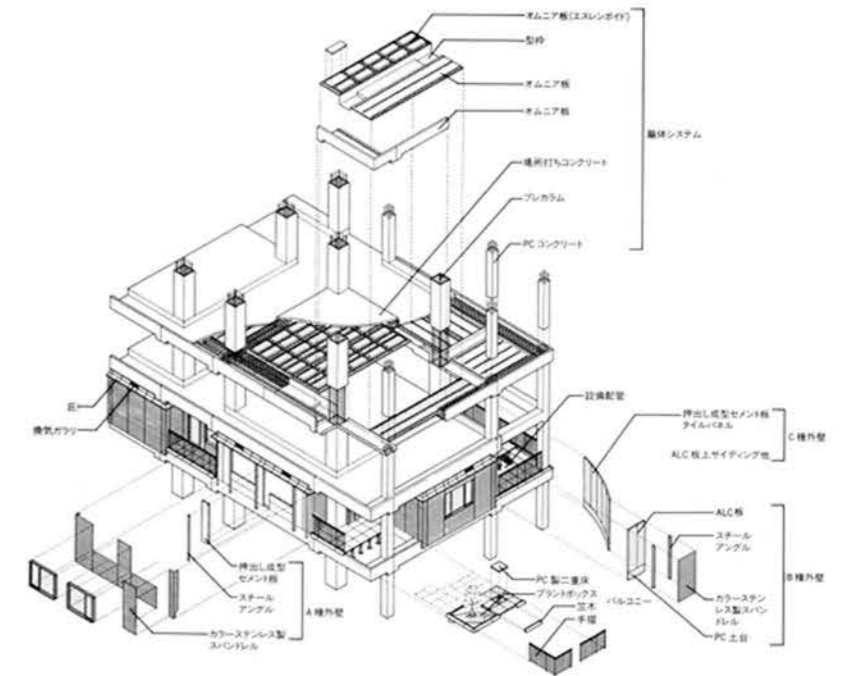
5th floor



1st floor



4th floor



SITE SELECTION

Alief, Houston, Texas

Alief is a vibrant, culturally rich neighborhood in southwest Houston that sits just a little higher than the rest of the city which is about 79 feet above sea level. While it's on flat land, which can make flooding a concern, it's not in a high-risk flood zone. That, along with its central location and strong community ties, makes Alief a meaningful place to build something that truly helps people.

The site has an area about 280,000 square feet tucked near a wetland filled with trees, close to public transport, and not far from industrial areas that offer job opportunities. It's already home to a small group of nomadic residents who've found a quiet place there. This project is about creating a space that offers comfort, dignity, and opportunity.

In a city that's seen its share of floods and displacement, this space in Alief could become a sanctuary where disaster survivors can find stability and where local residents can benefit from something built with care and purpose.

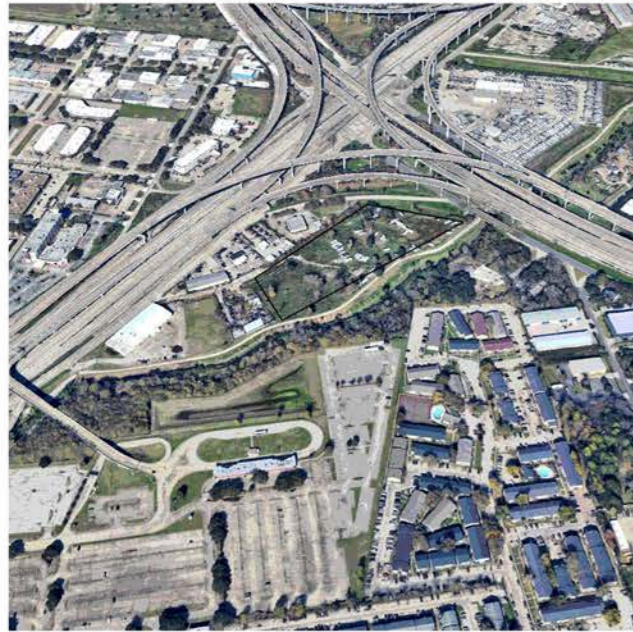
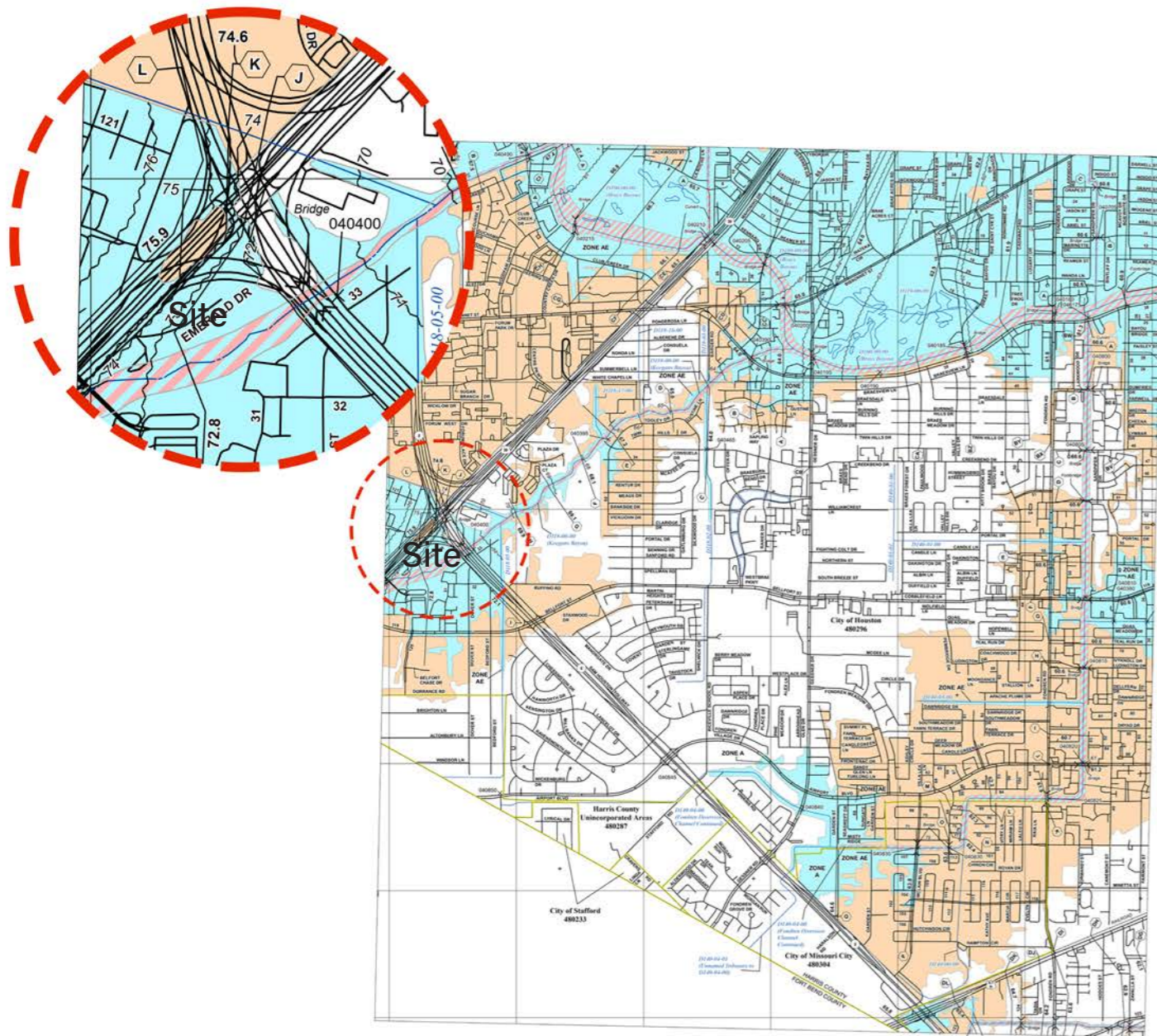


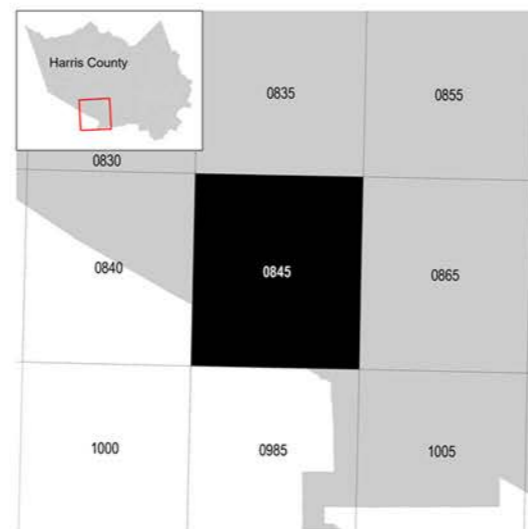
figure 17



figure 17



DESIGN DEVELOPMENT



Considerations



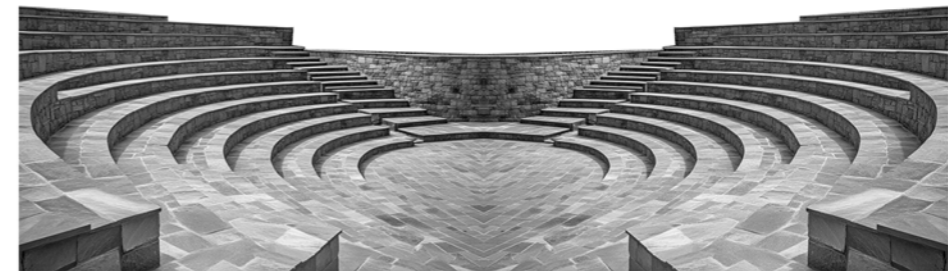
Building



Modularity



Building with stilts



Amphitheatre

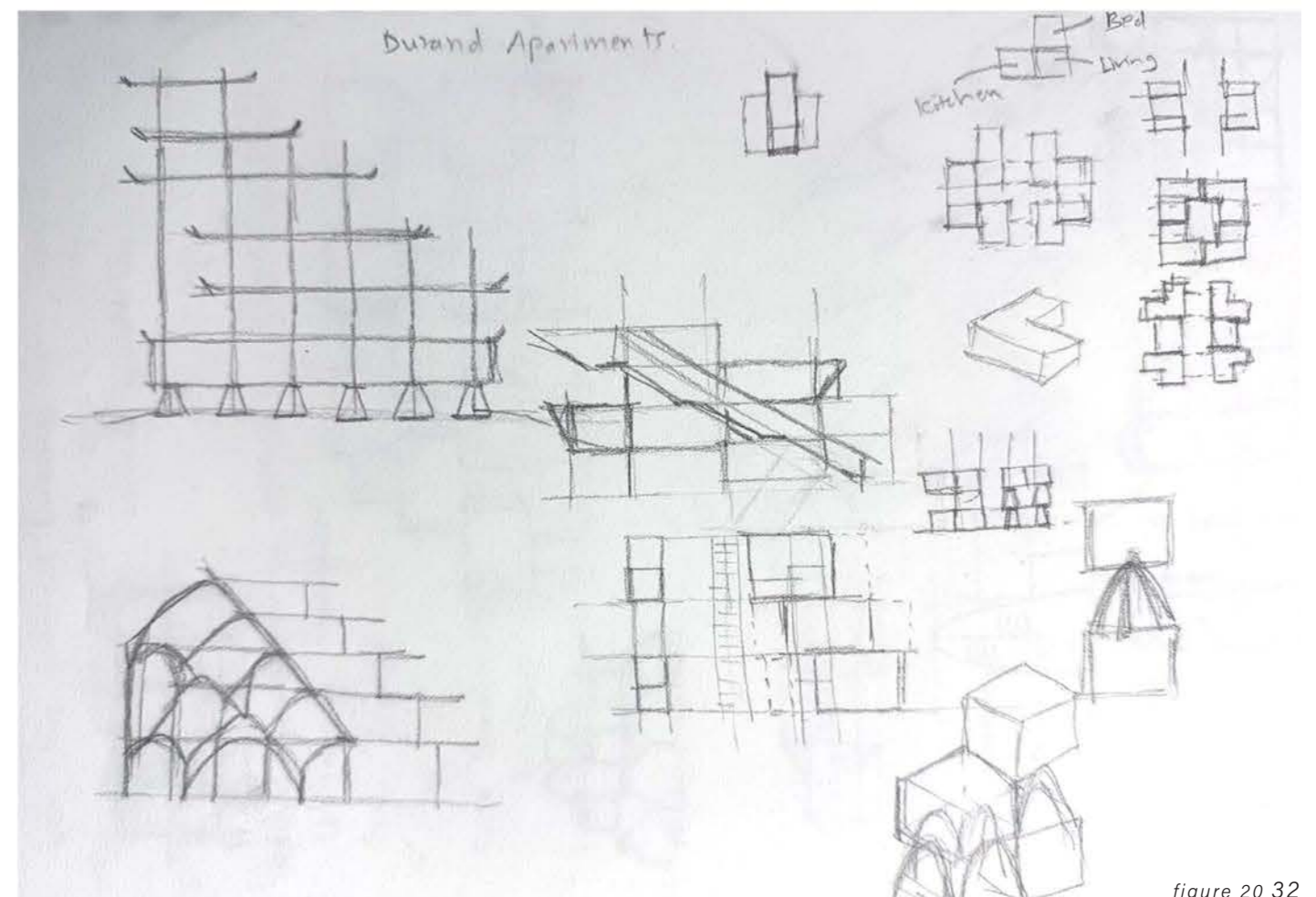
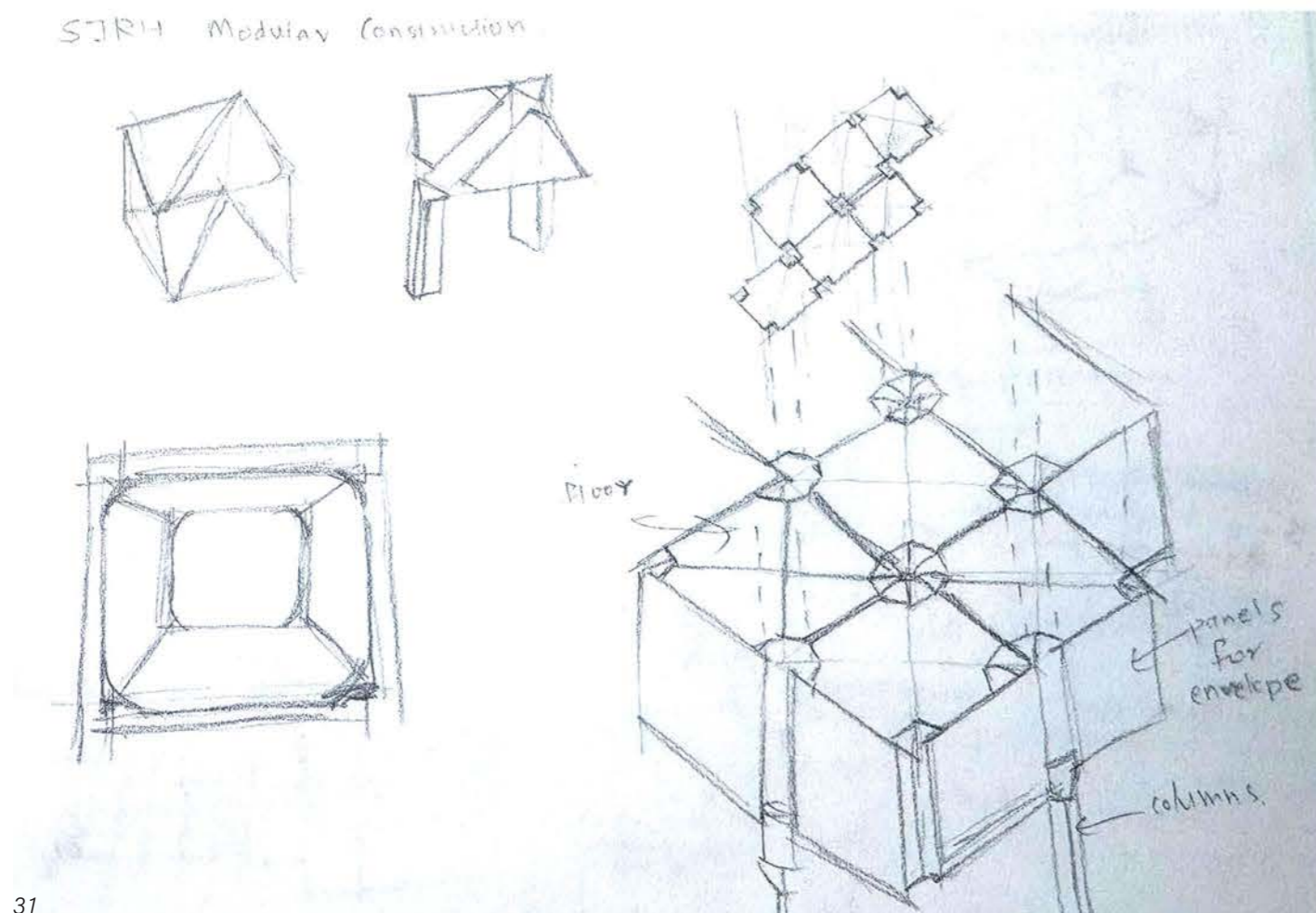
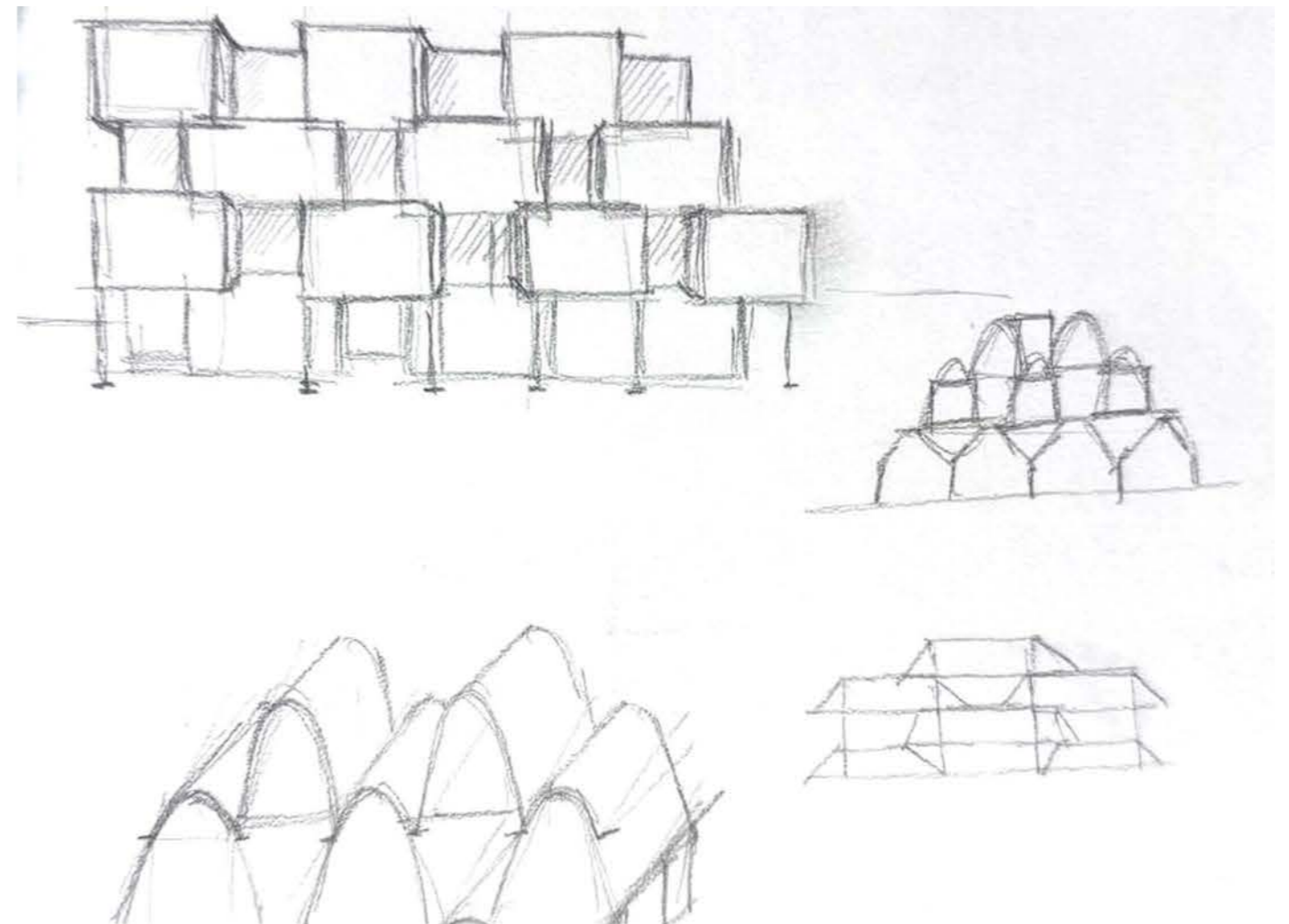
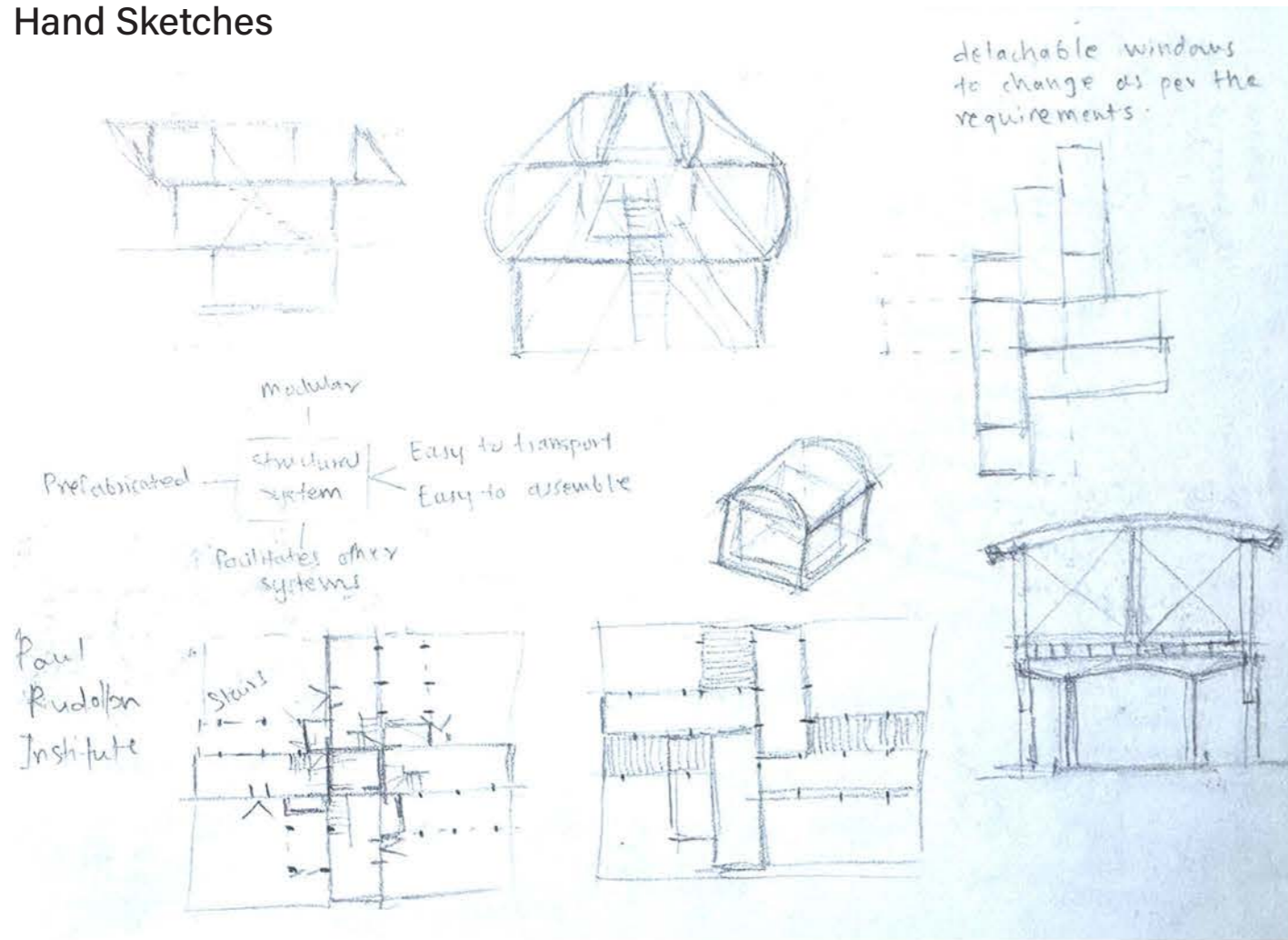


Building with stilts

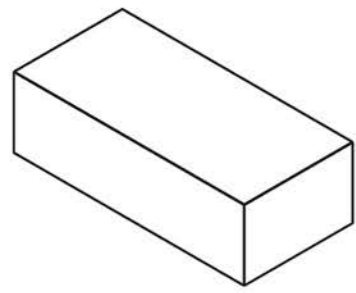


Bioswale

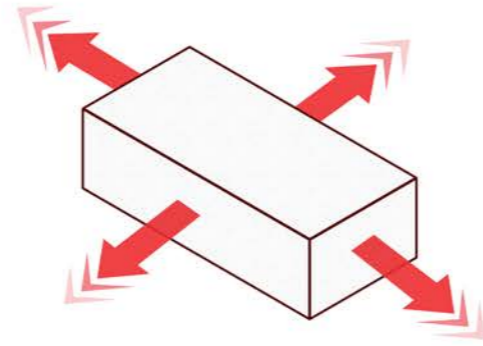
Hand Sketches



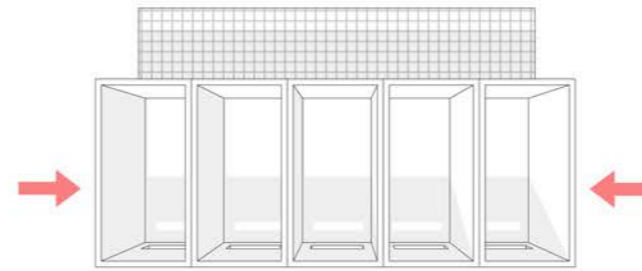
Concept



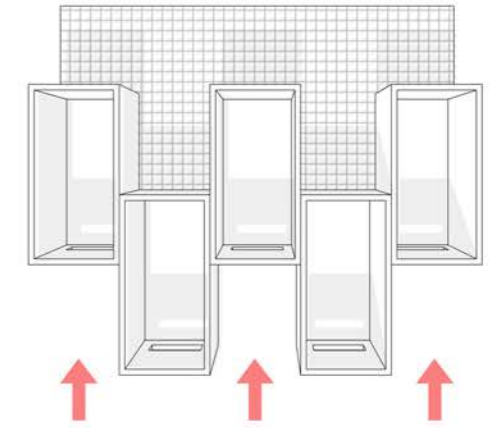
Single mass



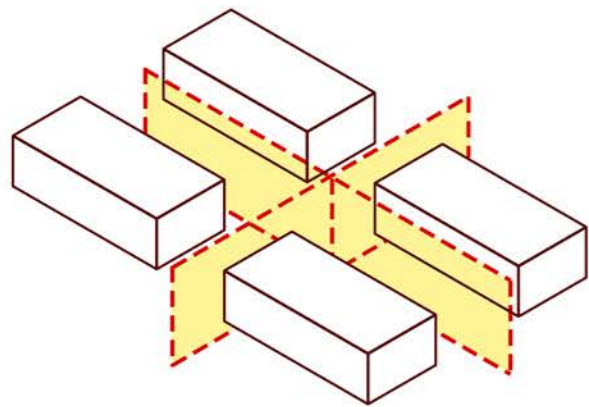
Extension



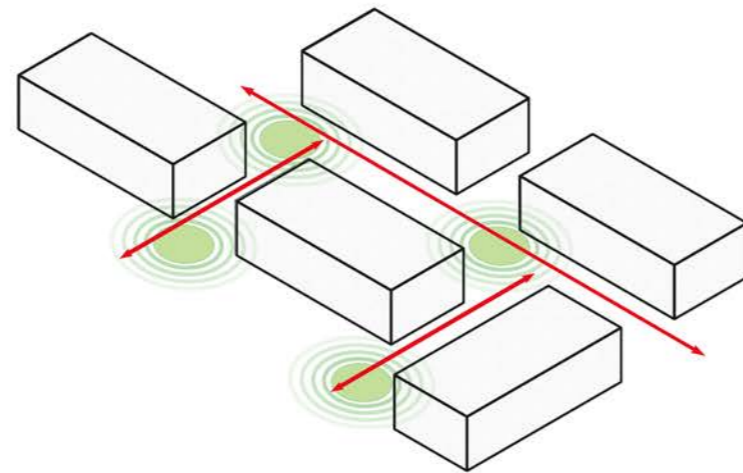
Initial linear arrangement



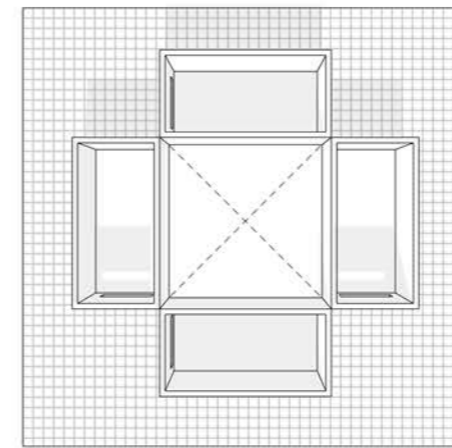
Space shifting



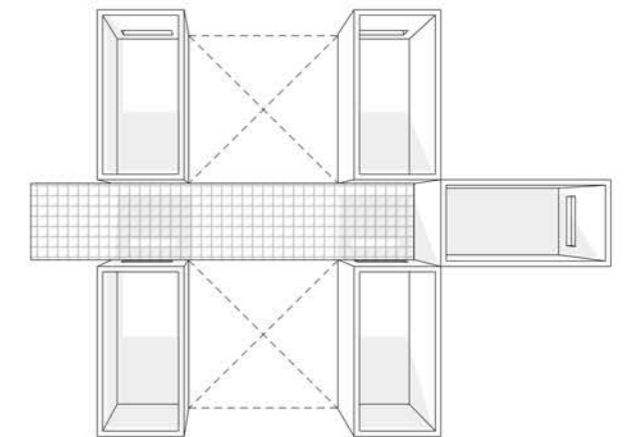
Separation of blocks



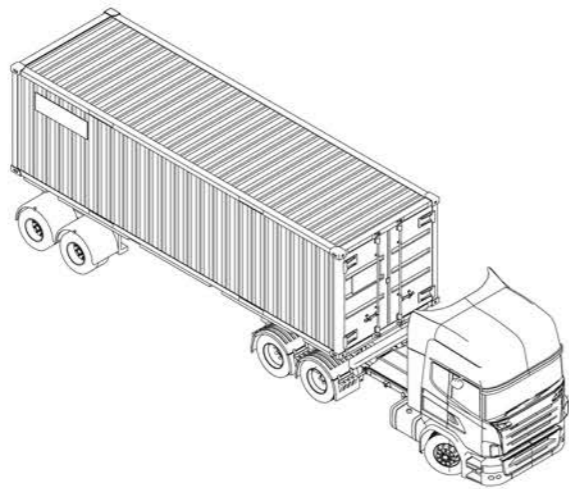
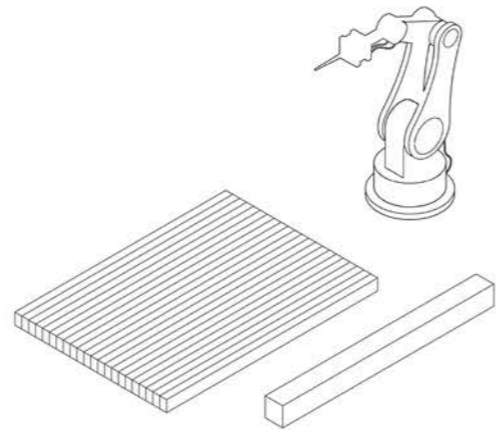
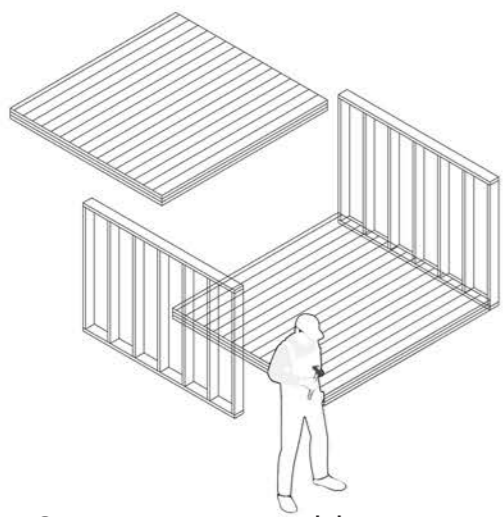
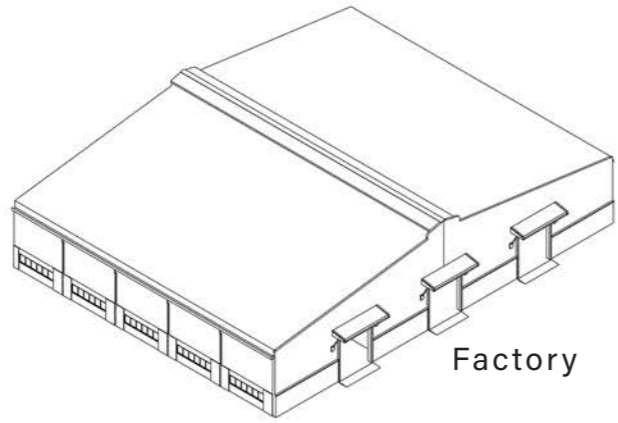
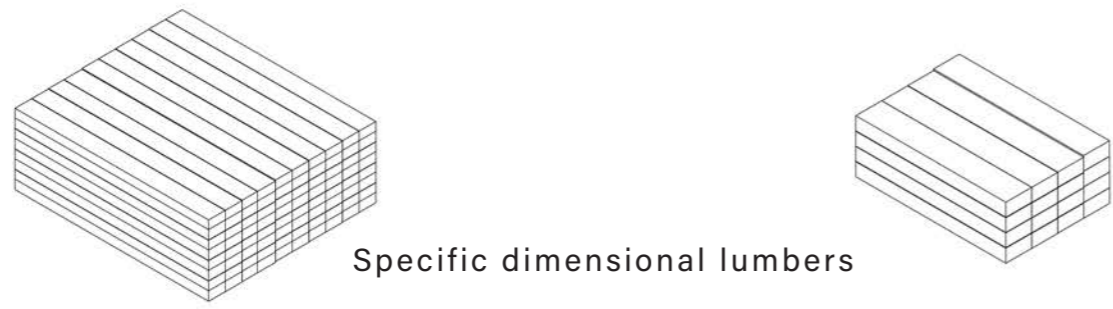
Open spaces



Open space

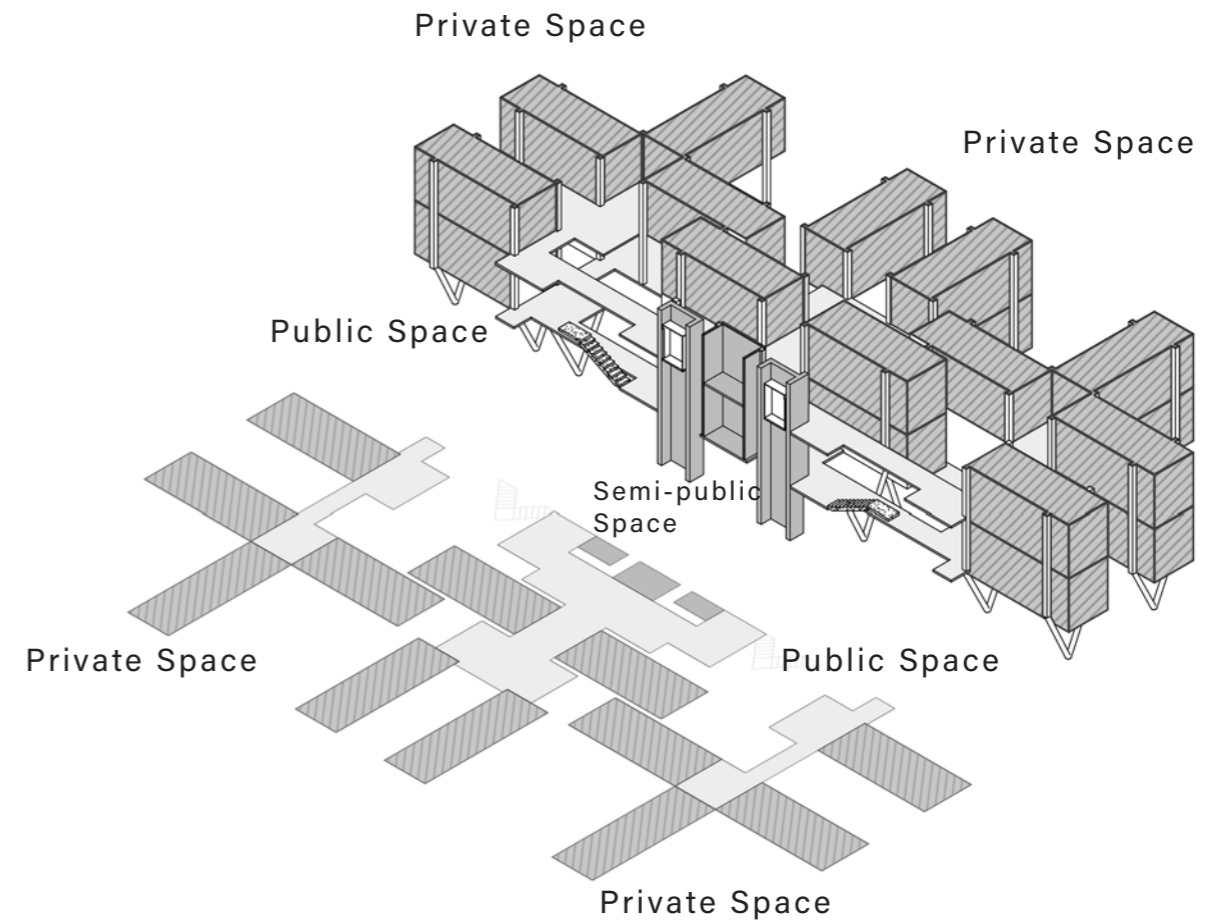


Open space with functional circulation



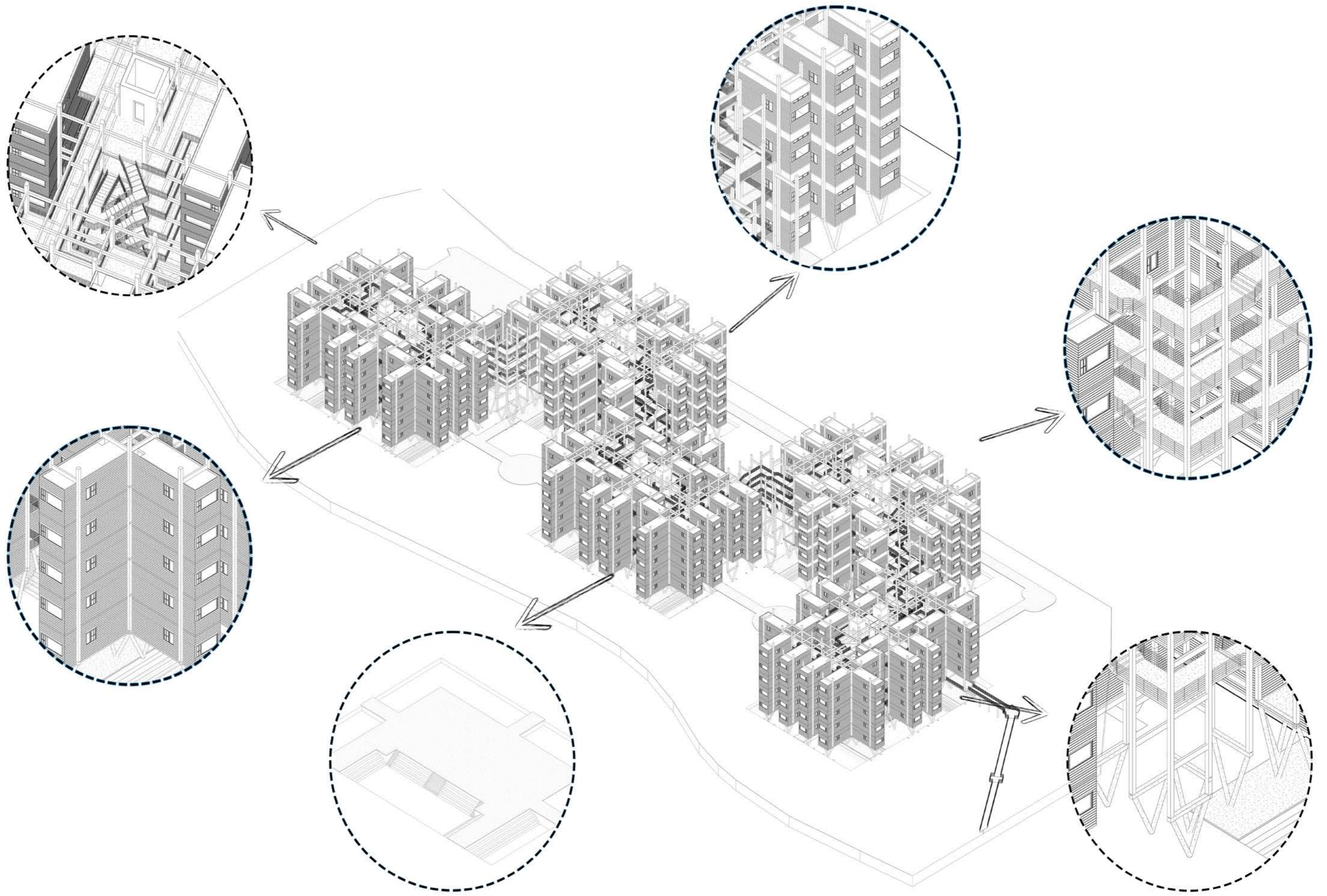
Production to Service

figure 23
Transportation

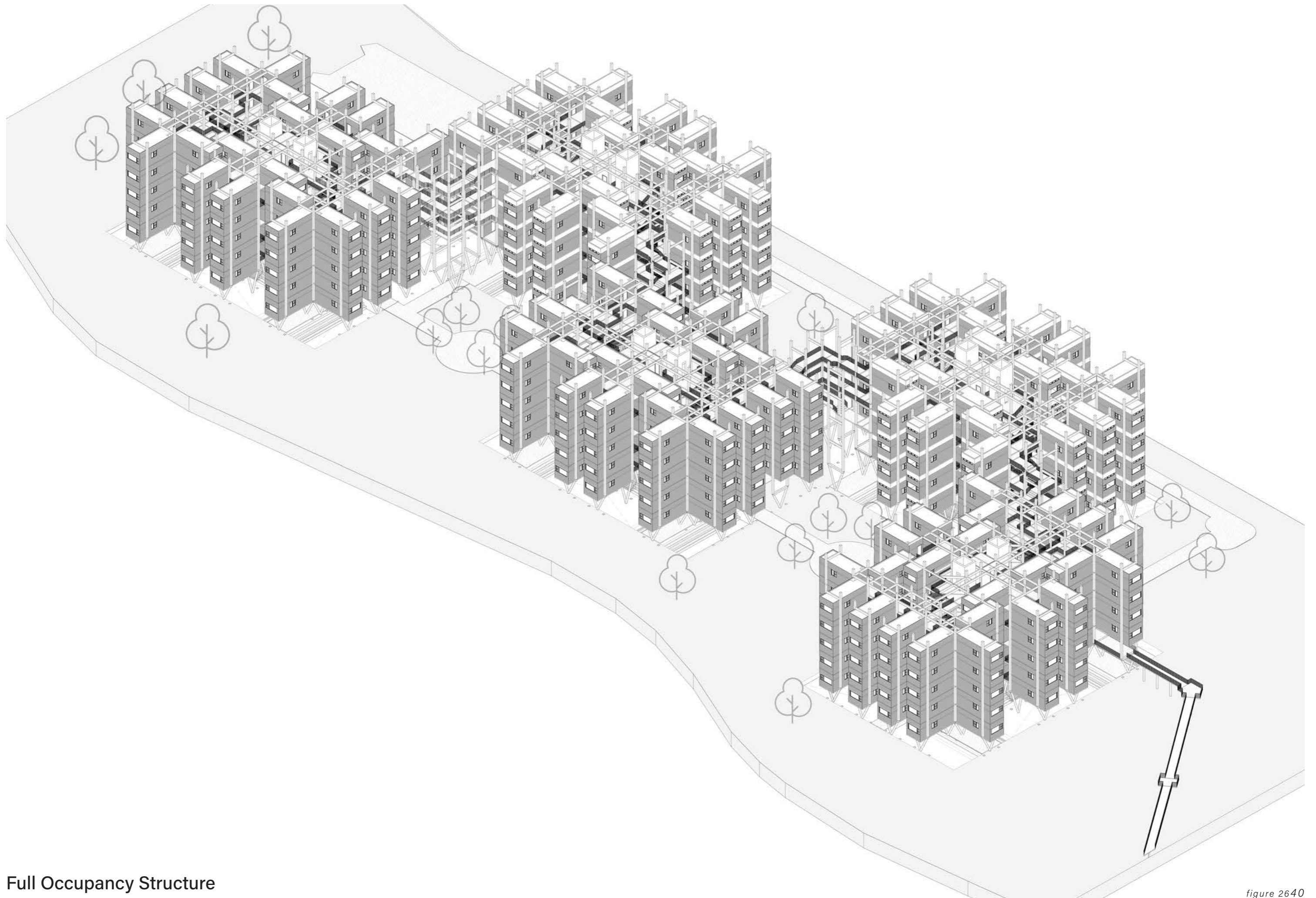


Zoning

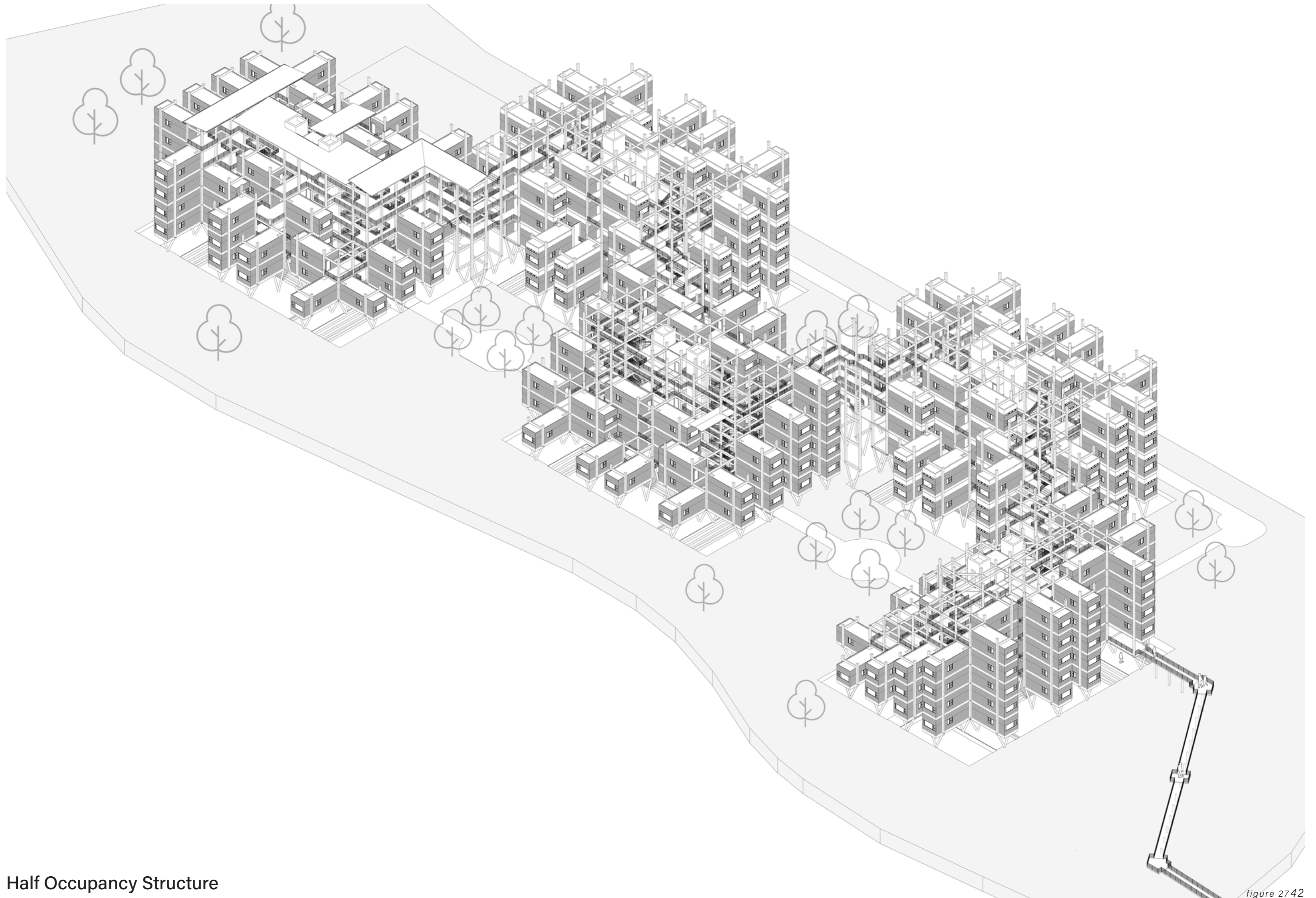
figure 24 36



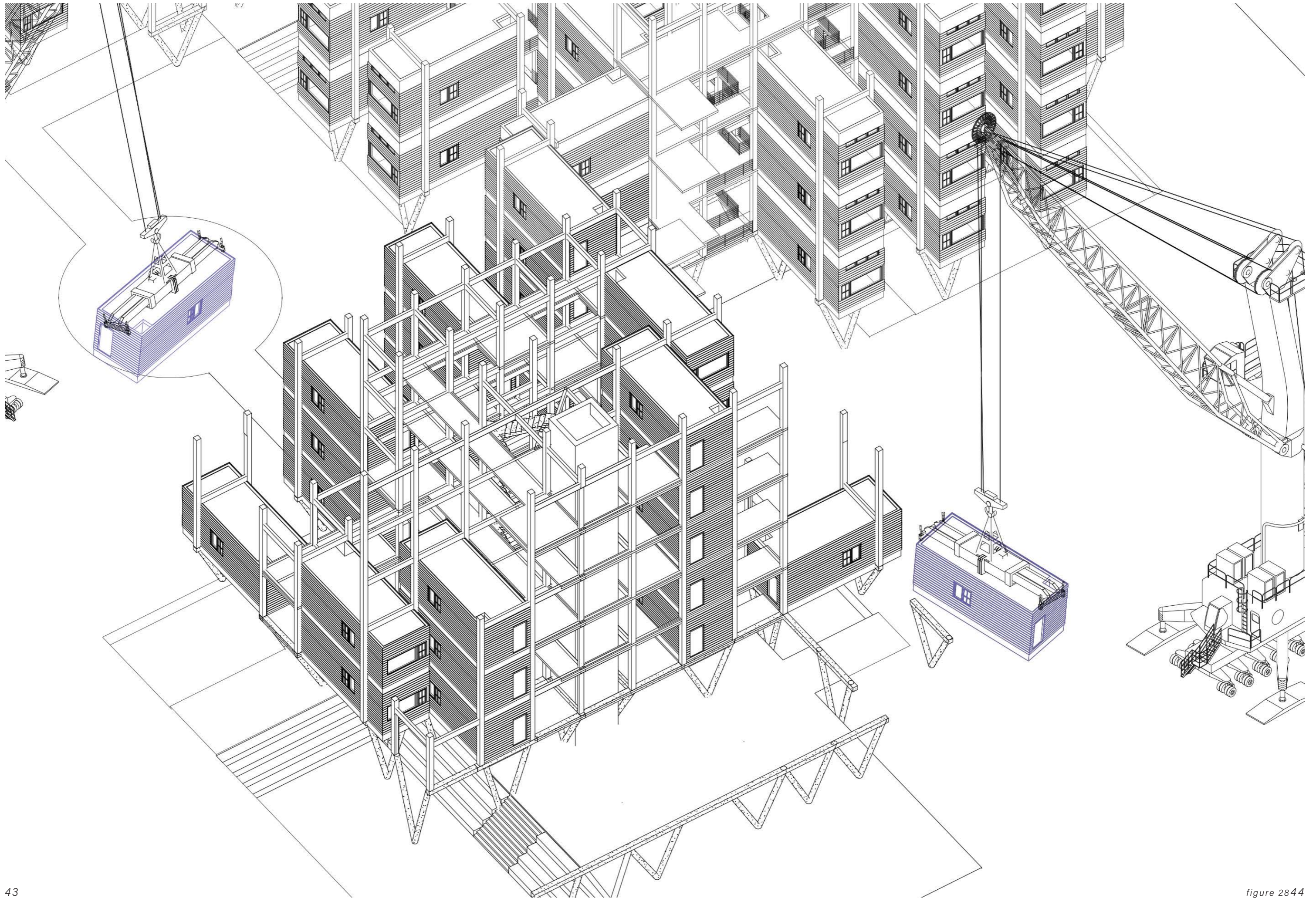
Full Occupancy Structure



Full Occupancy Structure



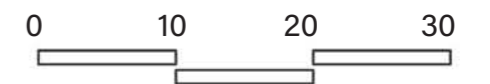
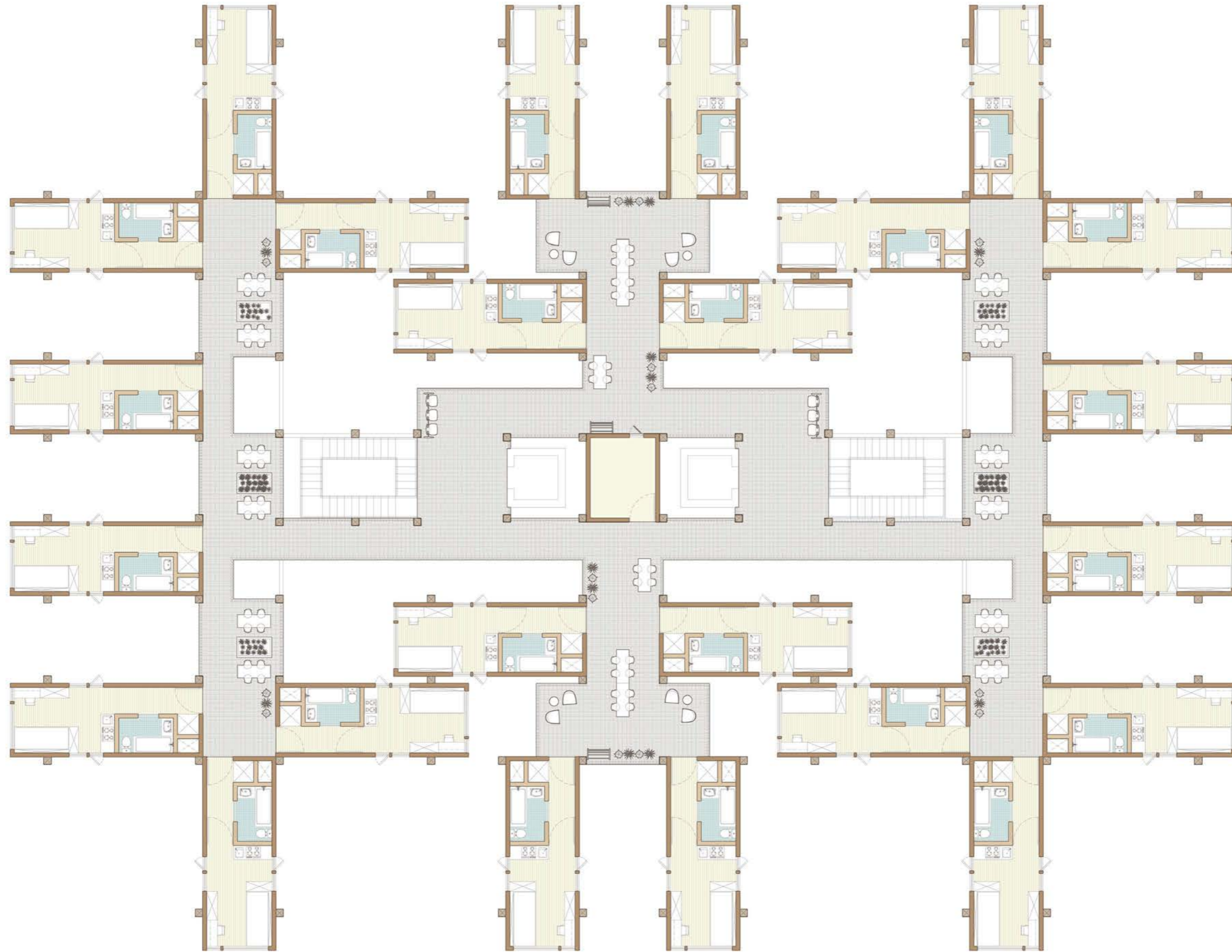
Half Occupancy Structure



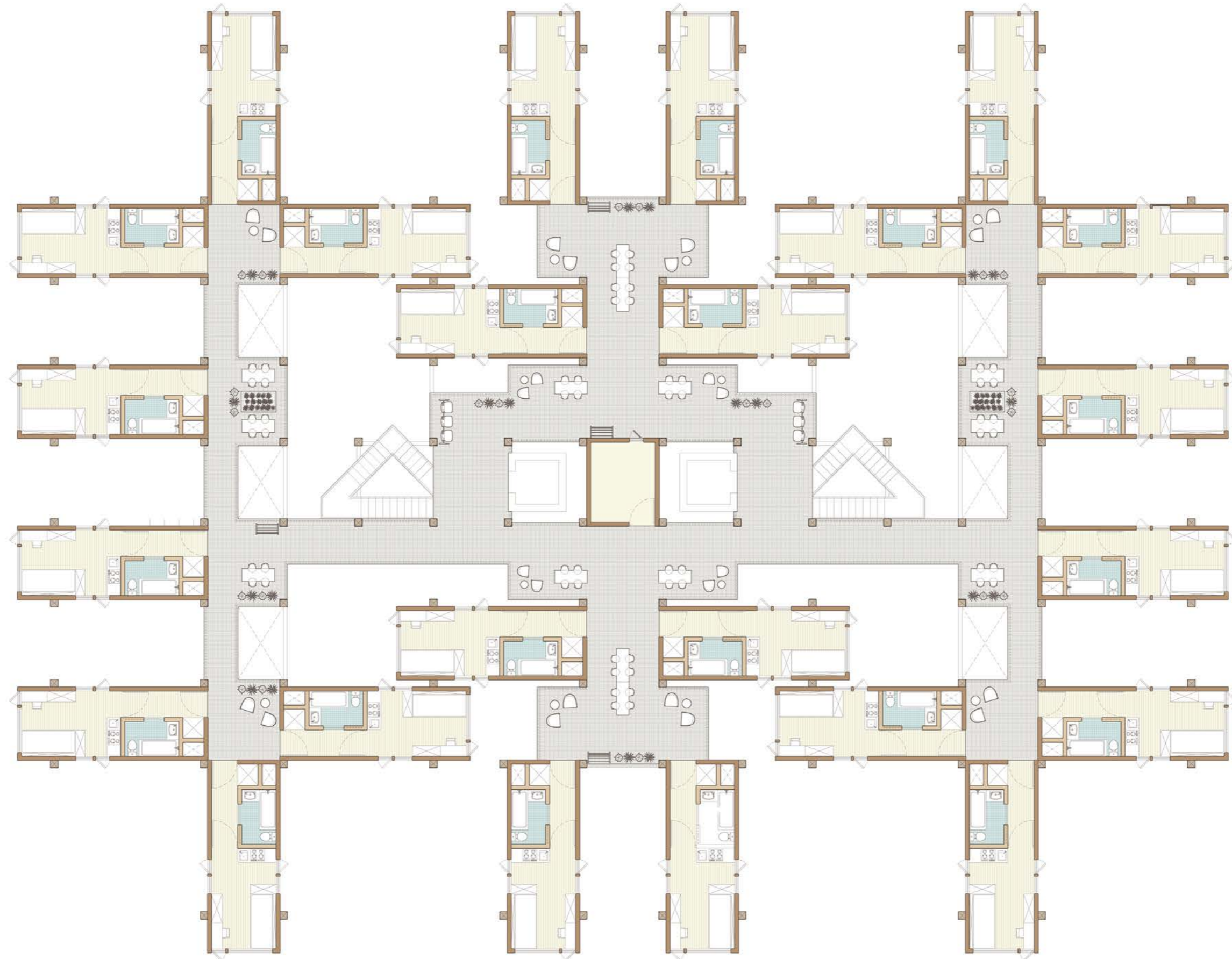
Site Plan



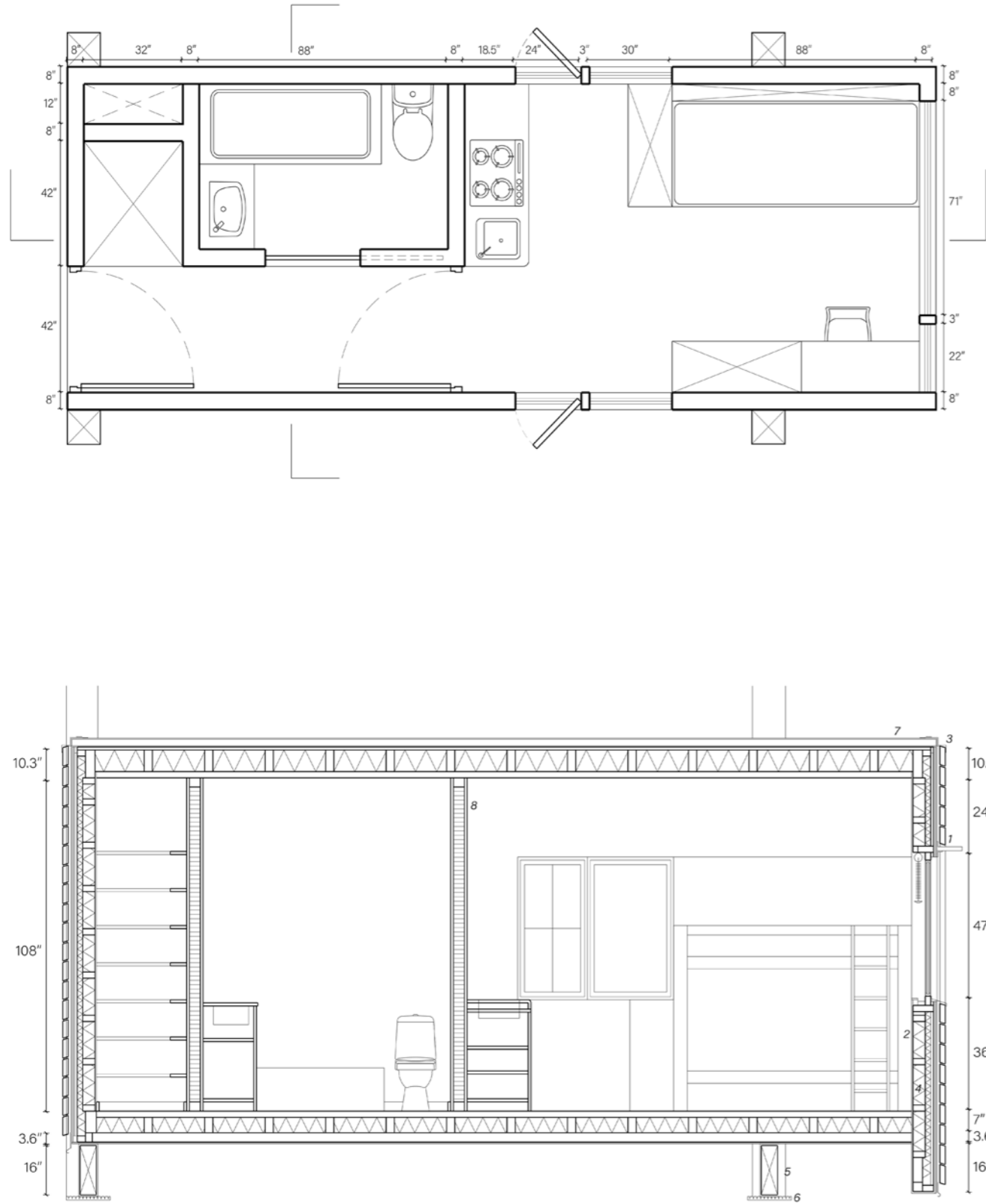
Floor layout variation 1



Floor layout variation 2

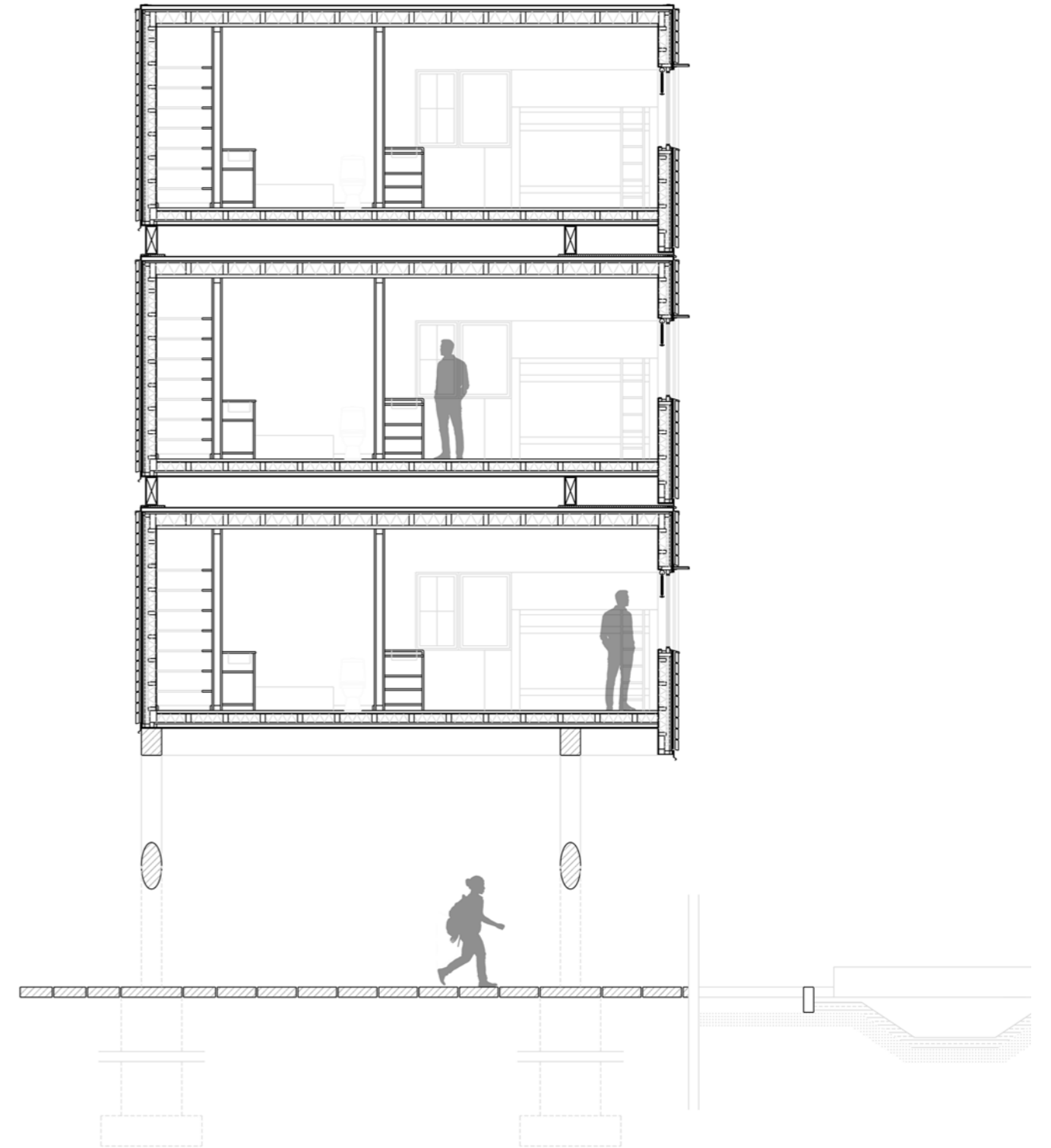


Section



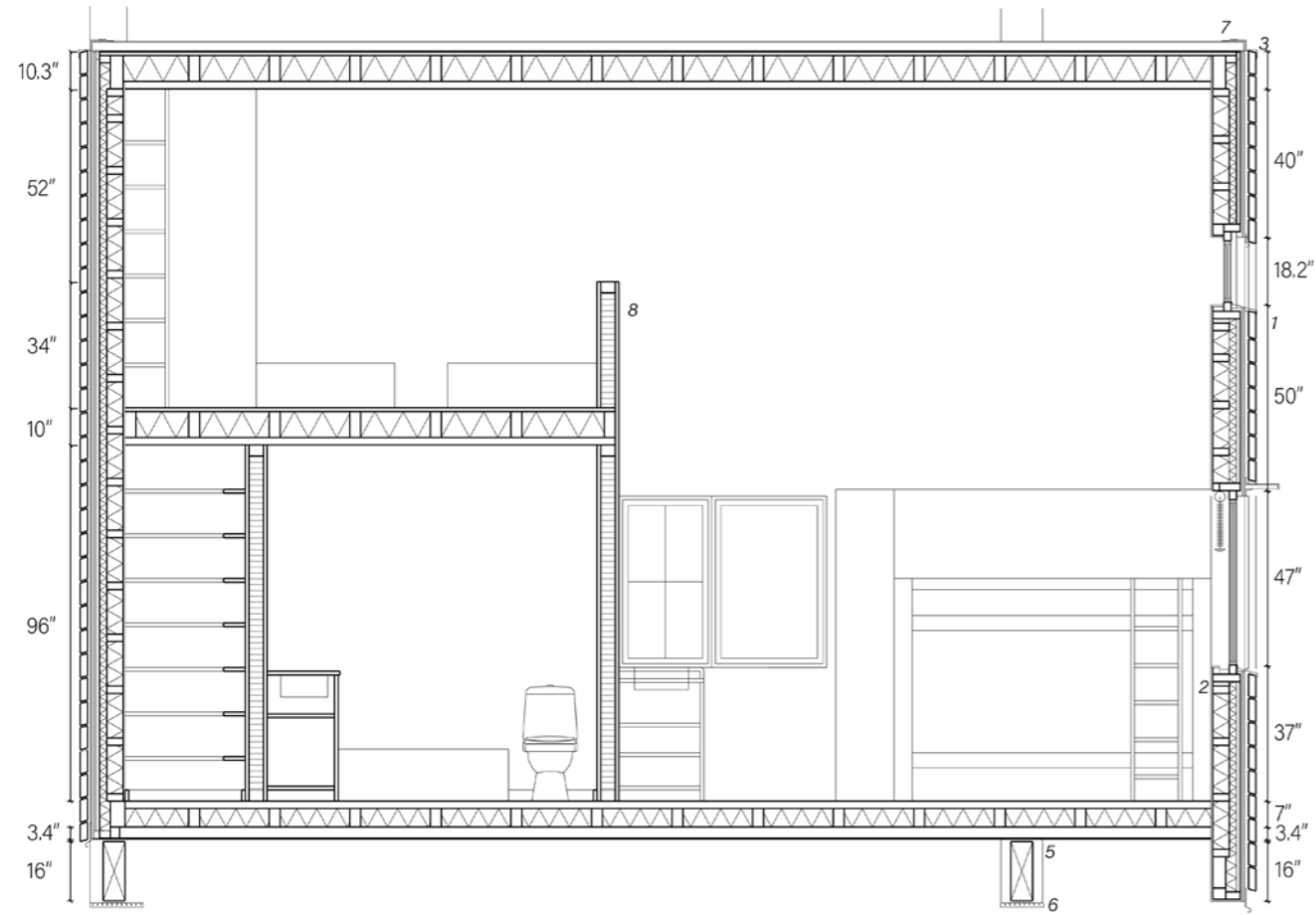
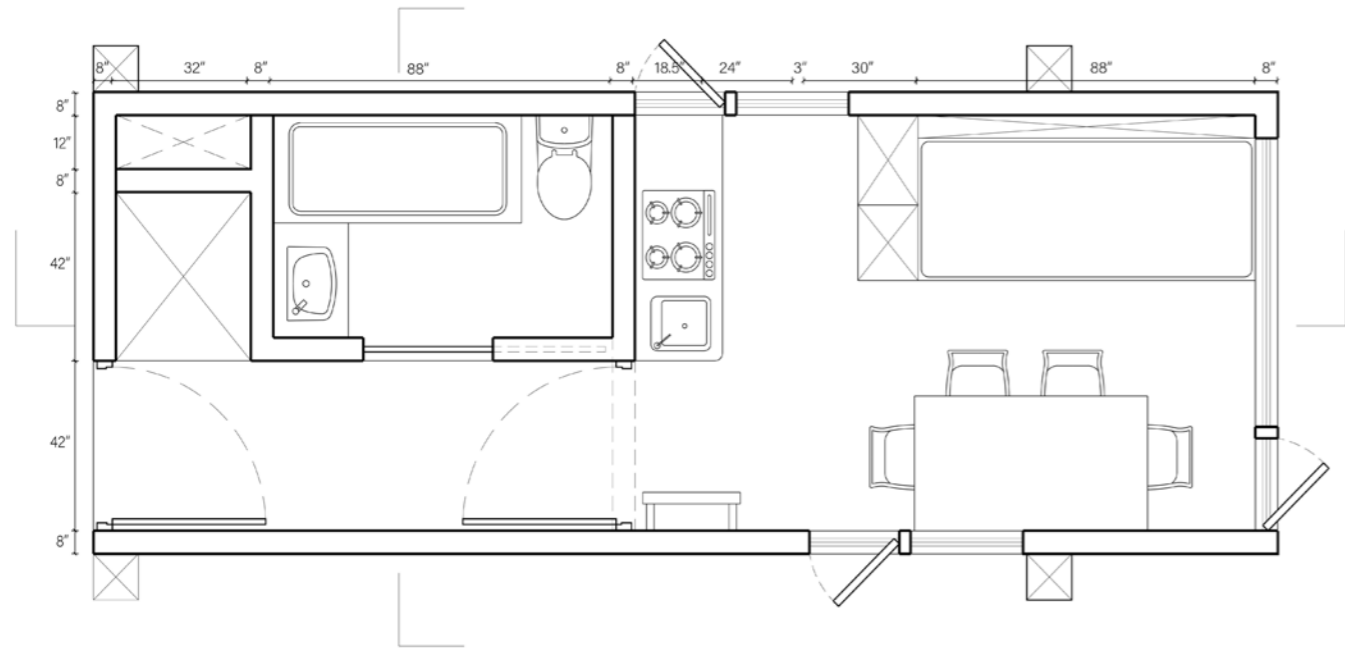
Standard Module

figure 31



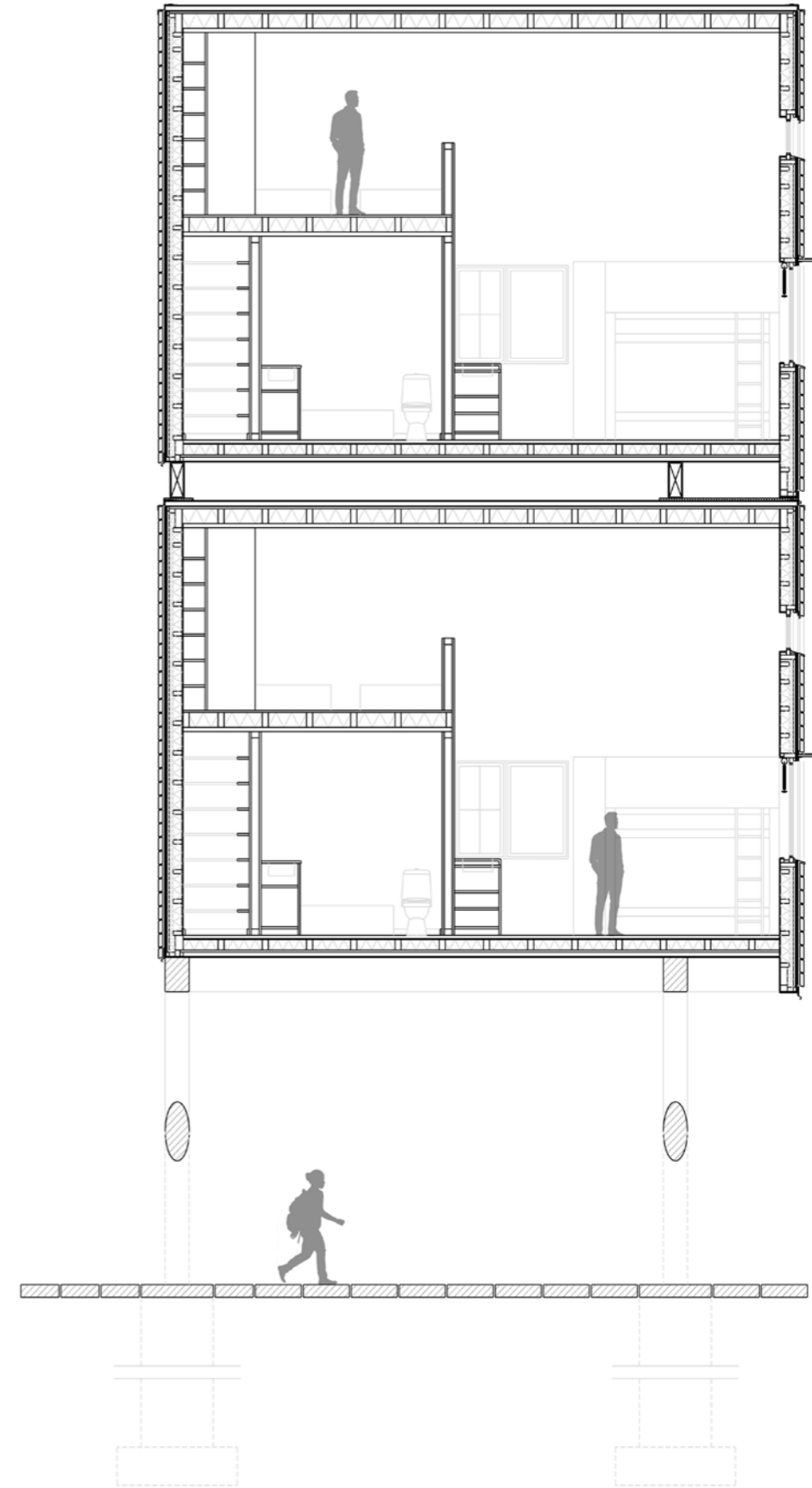
- 1. Wood siding 2. Wall studs 3. Wall studs 4. Insulation
- 5. Timber beams 6. Compressive mat 7. Roof 8. Interior wall 52

Section



Double Height Module

figure 32



1. Wood siding

2. Wall studs

3. Metal flashing

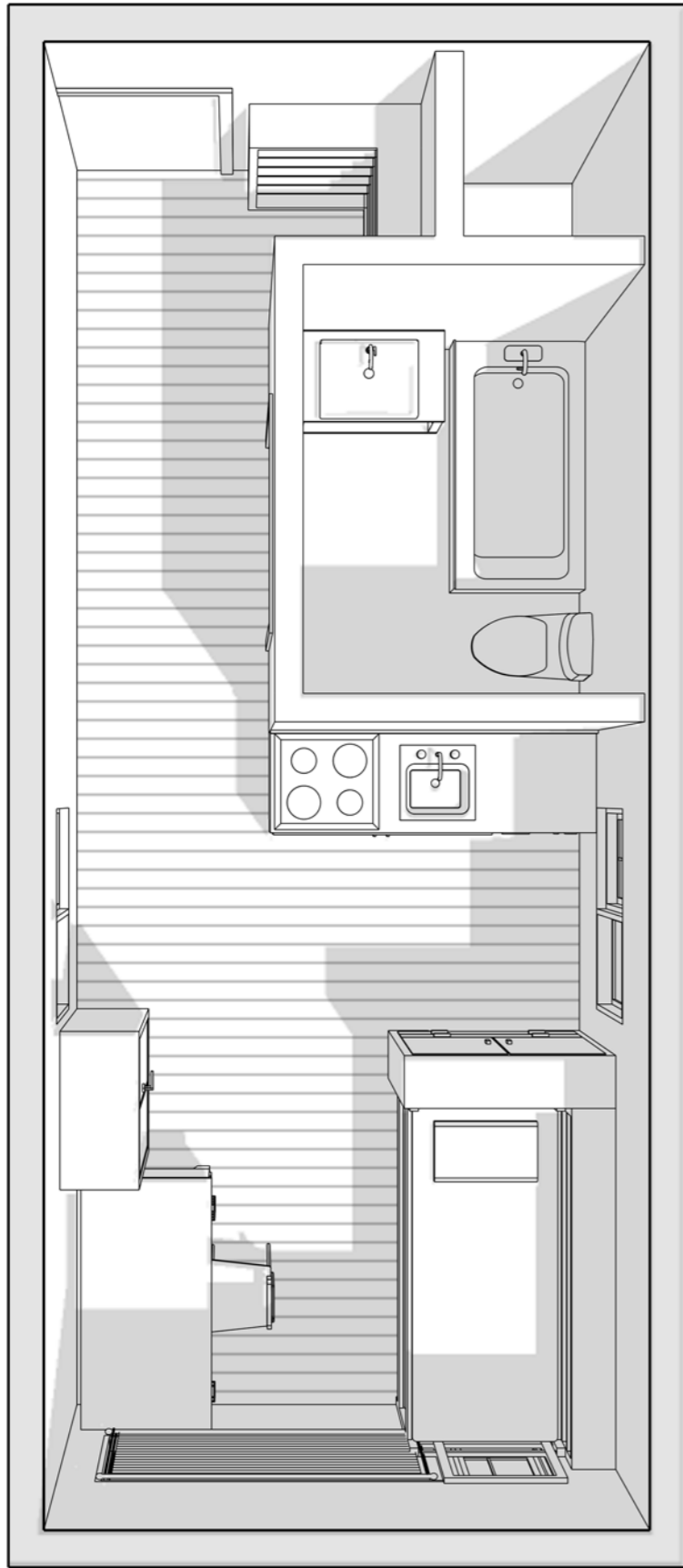
4. Insulation

5. Timber beams

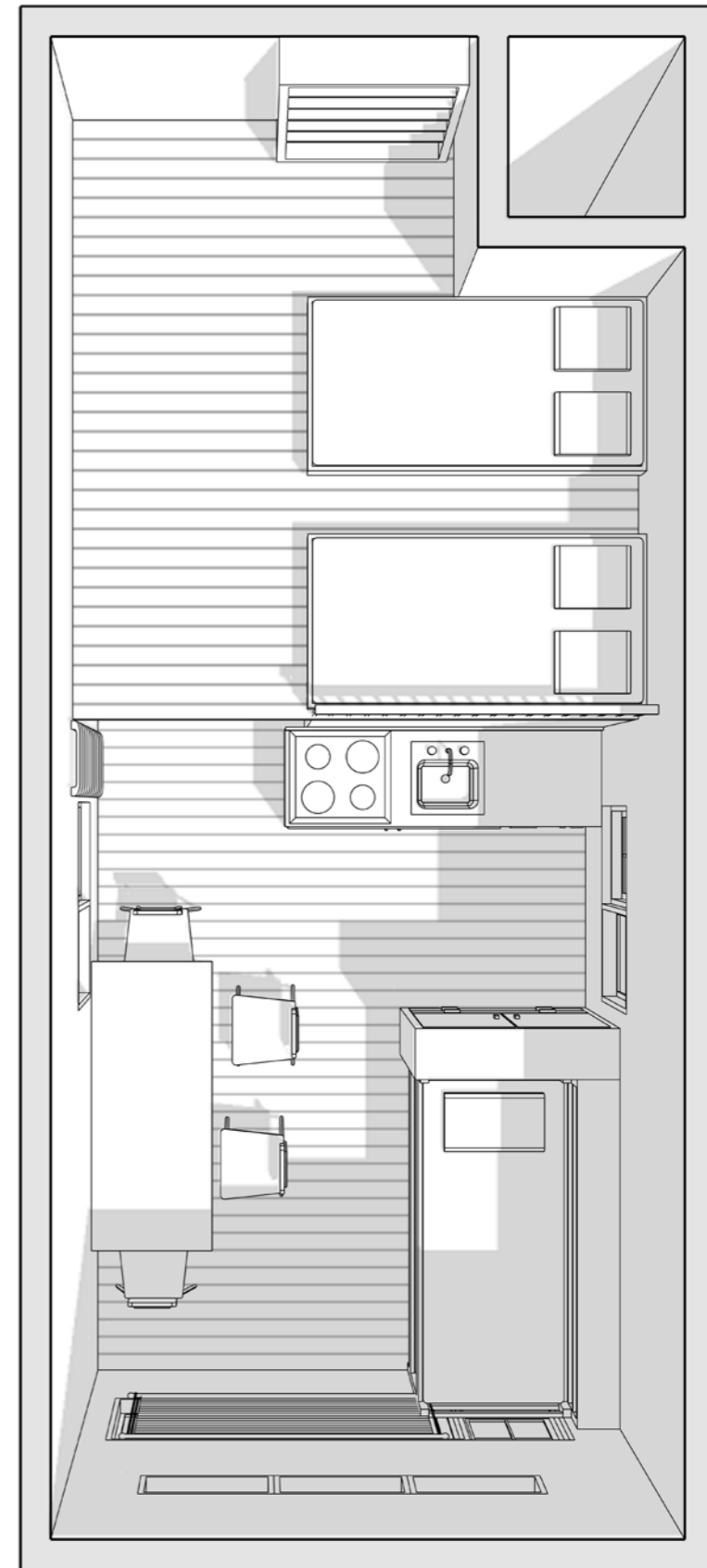
6. Compressive mat

7. Roof

8. Interior wall 54



Standard Module

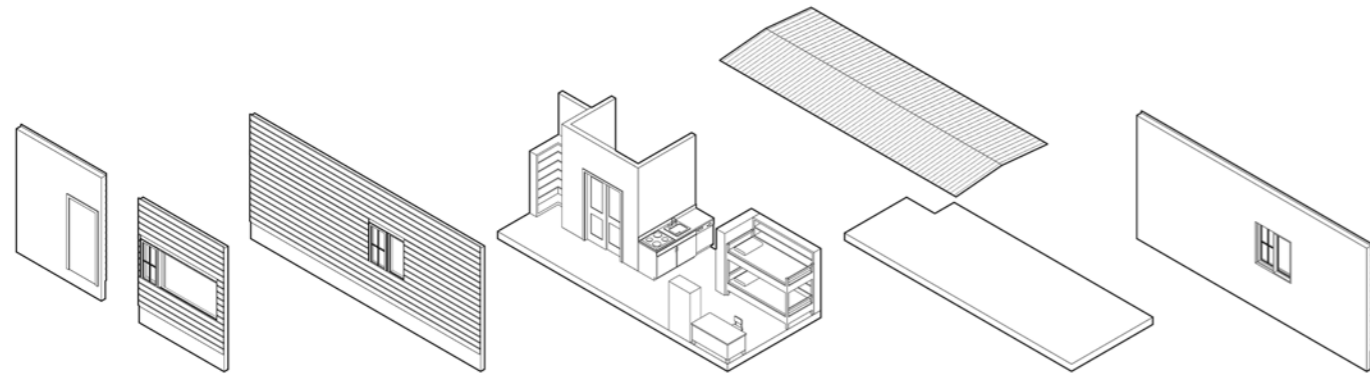


Double Height Module

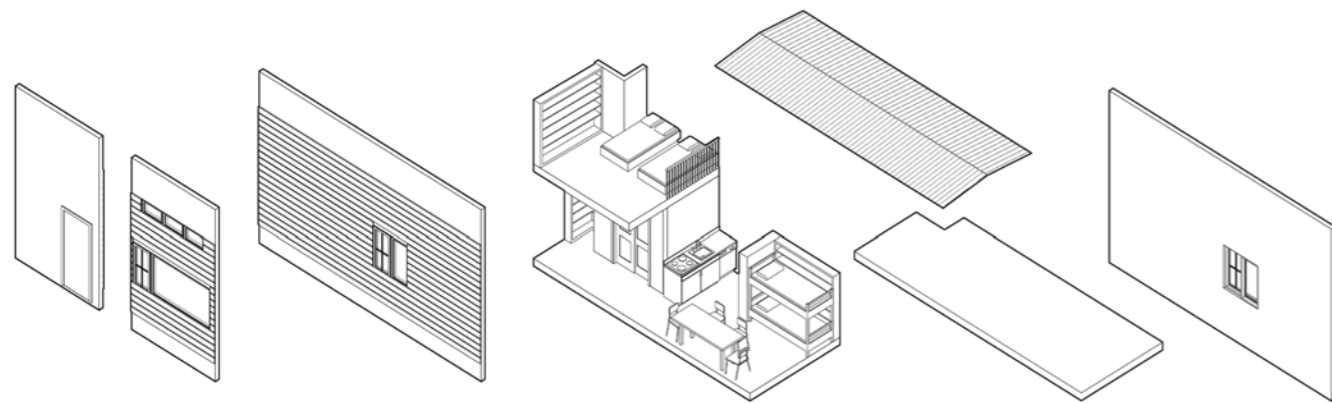
Section



Exploded View

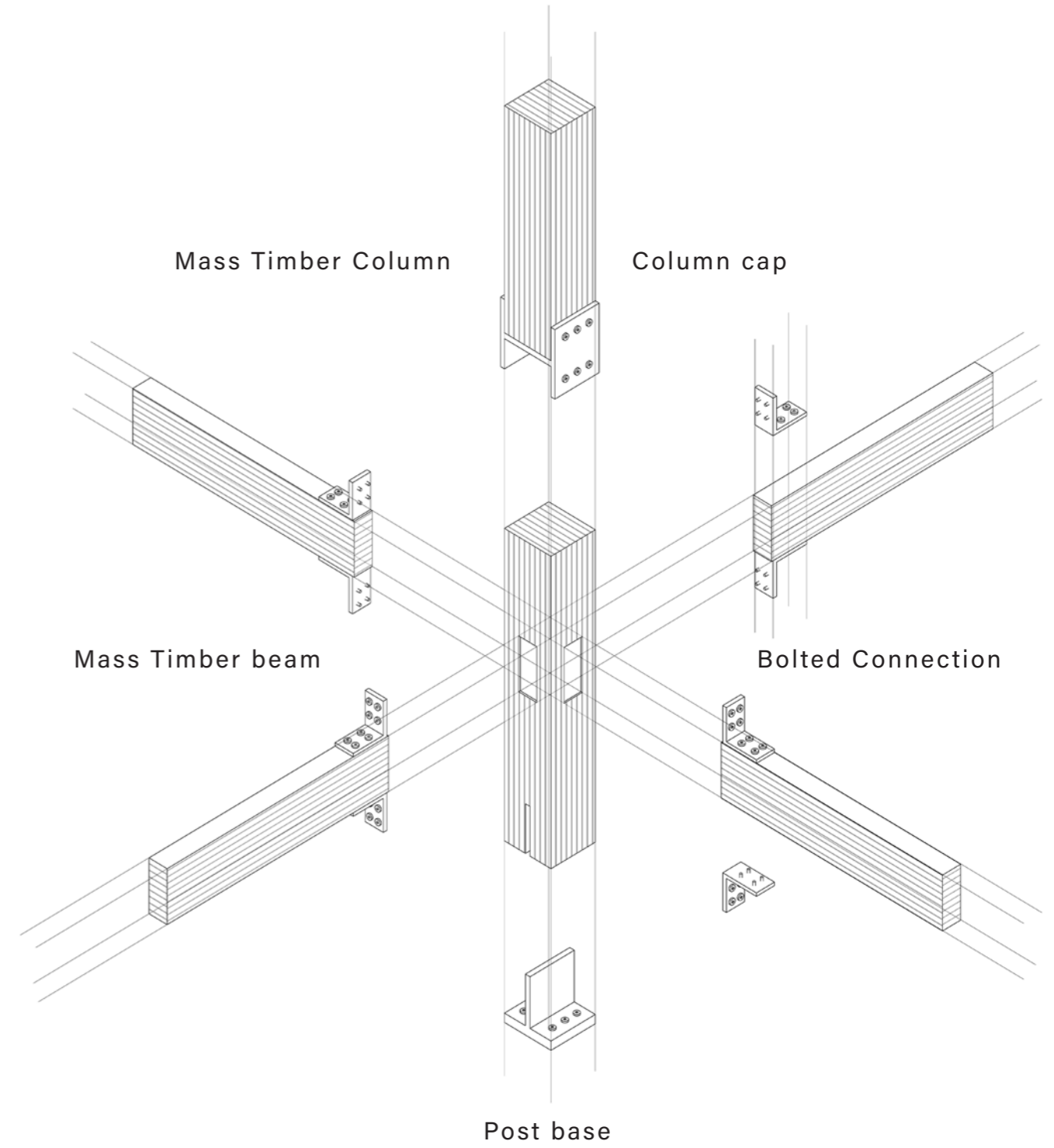


Standard Module

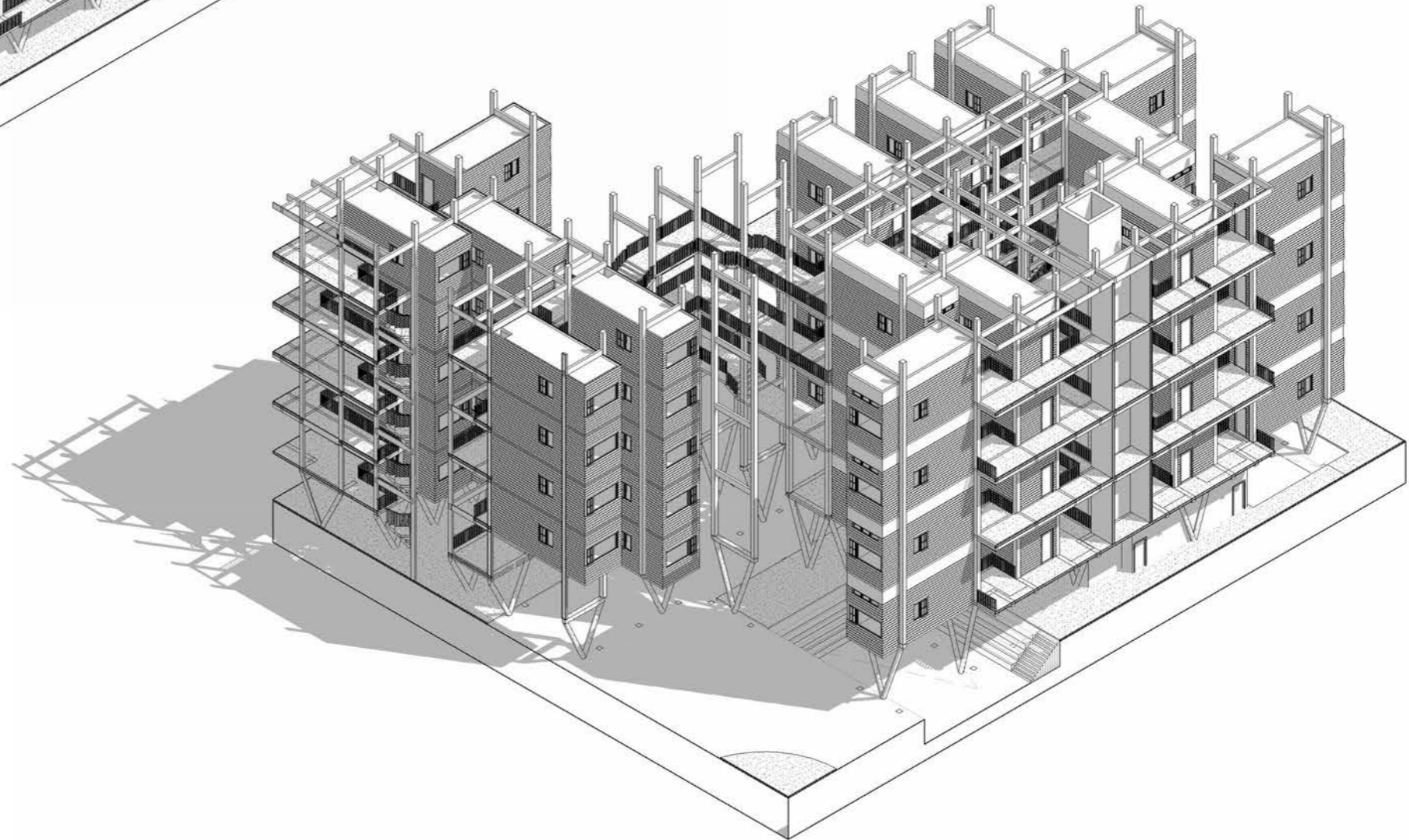
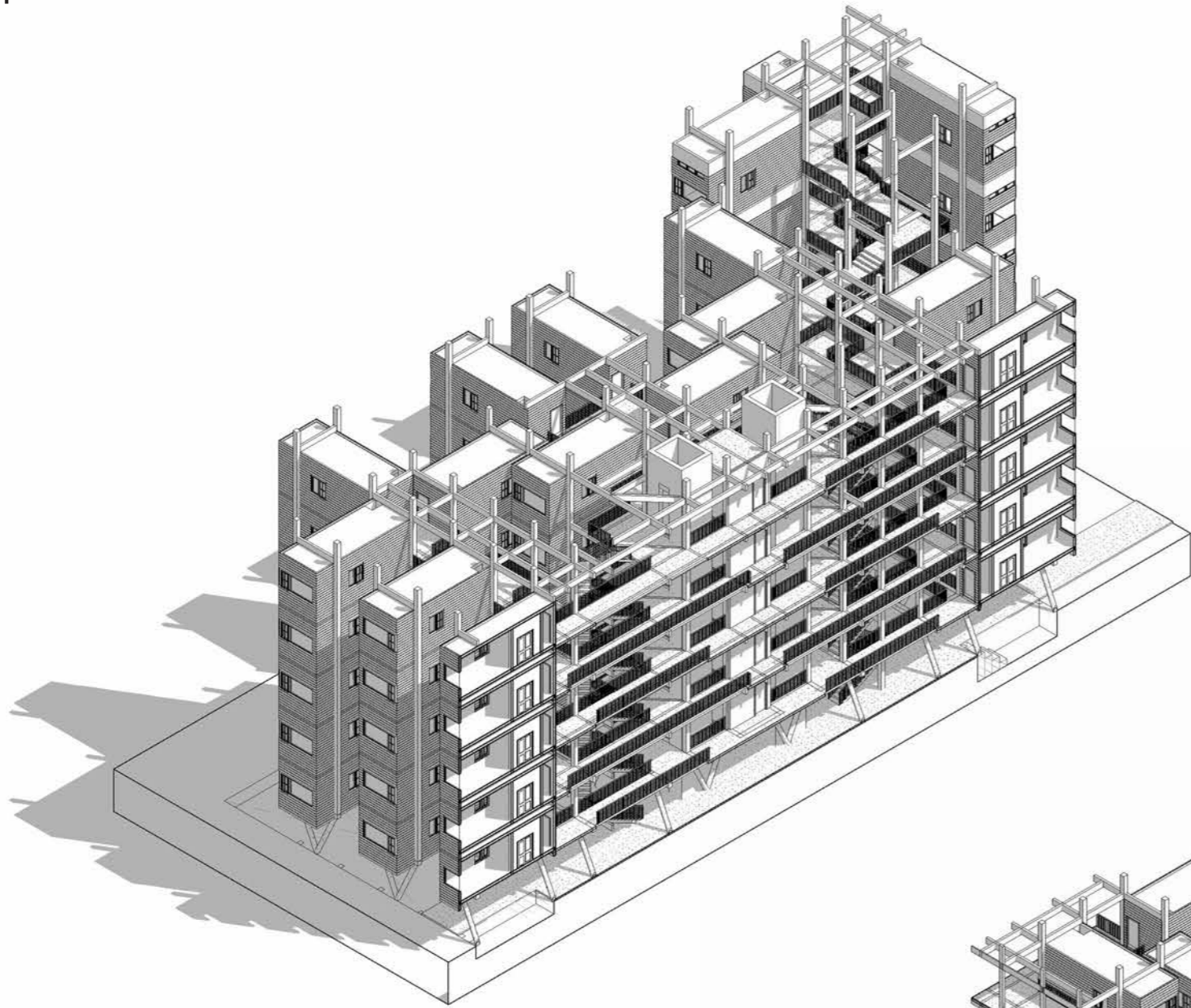


Double Height Module

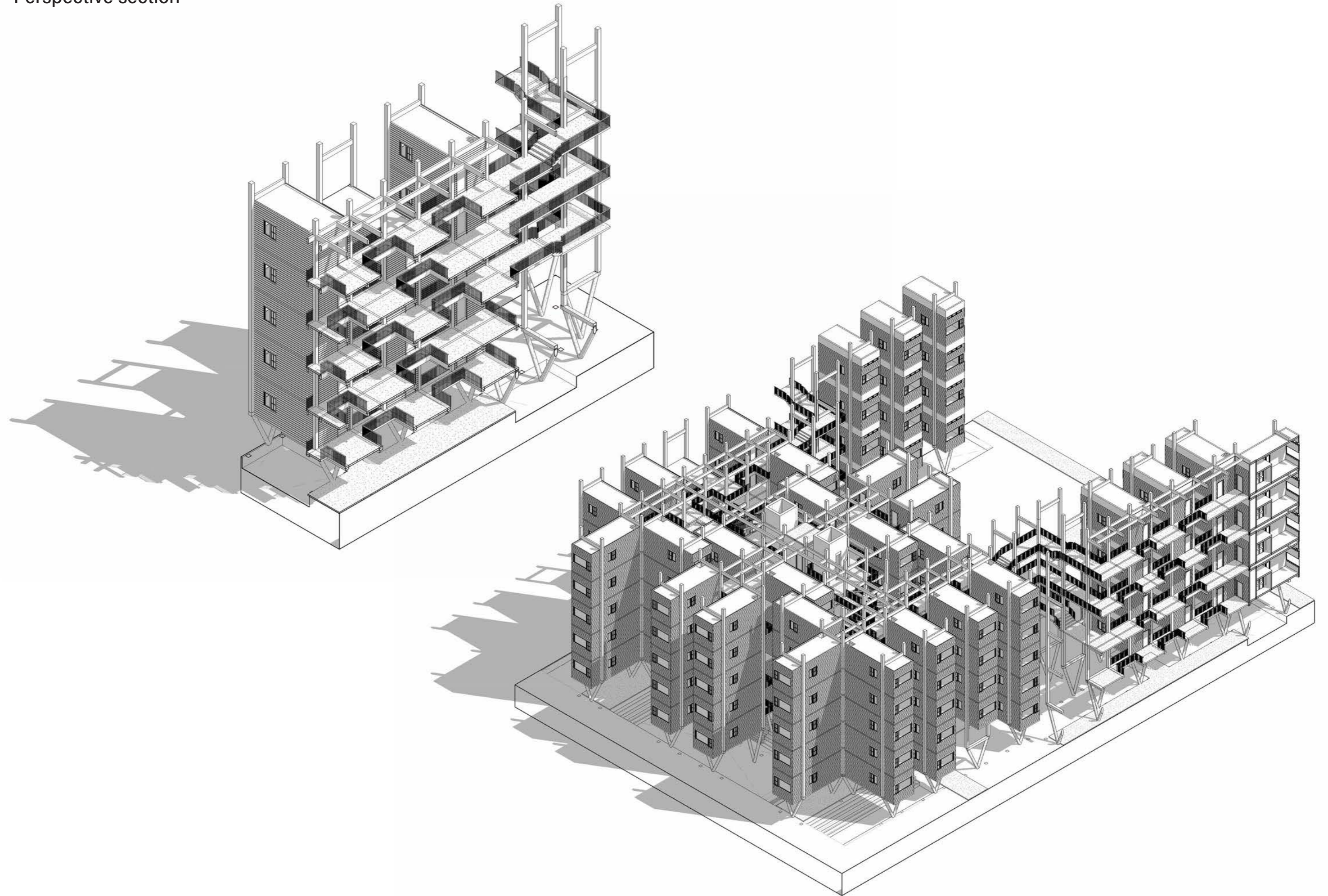
Structural Connection

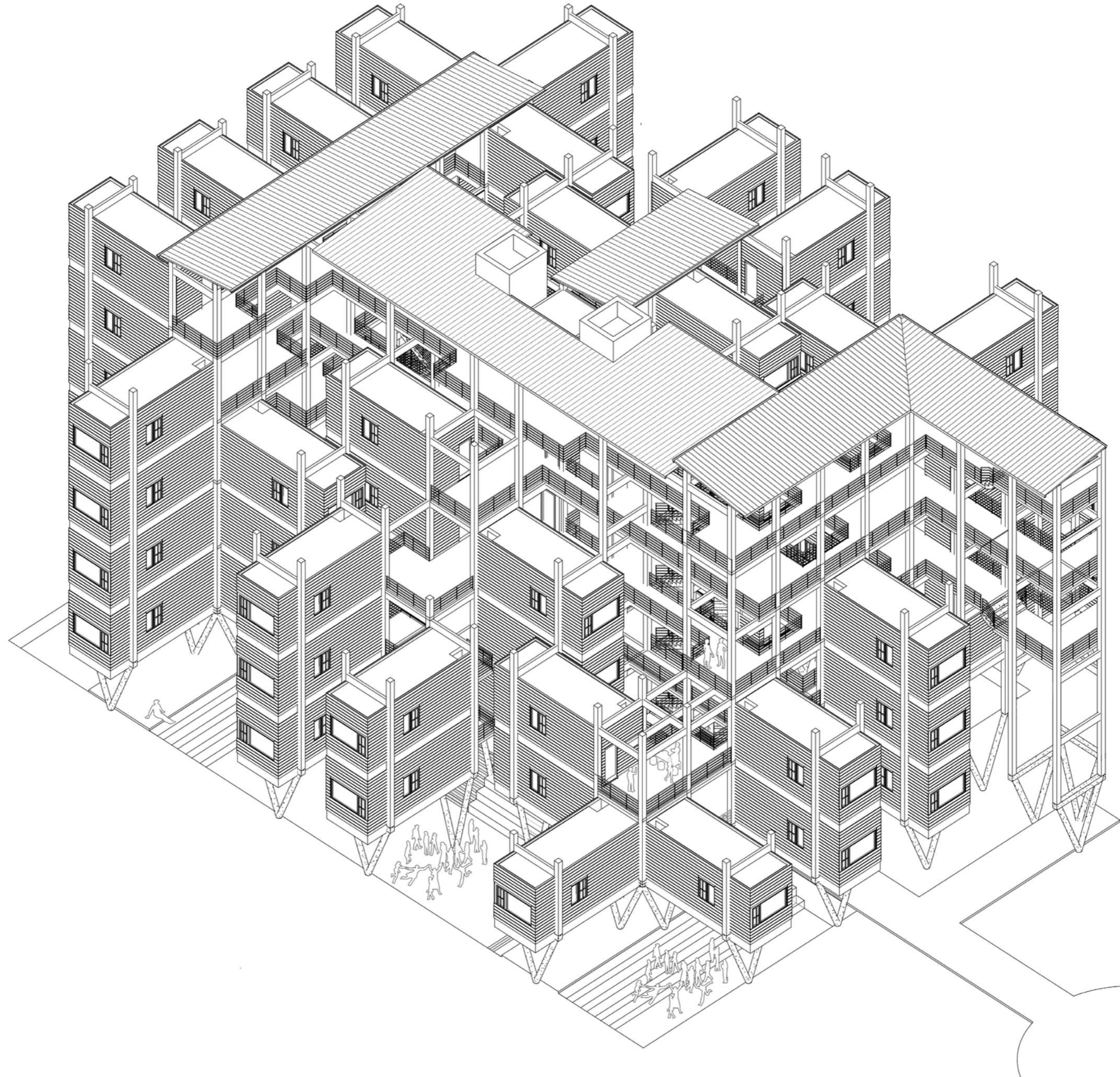


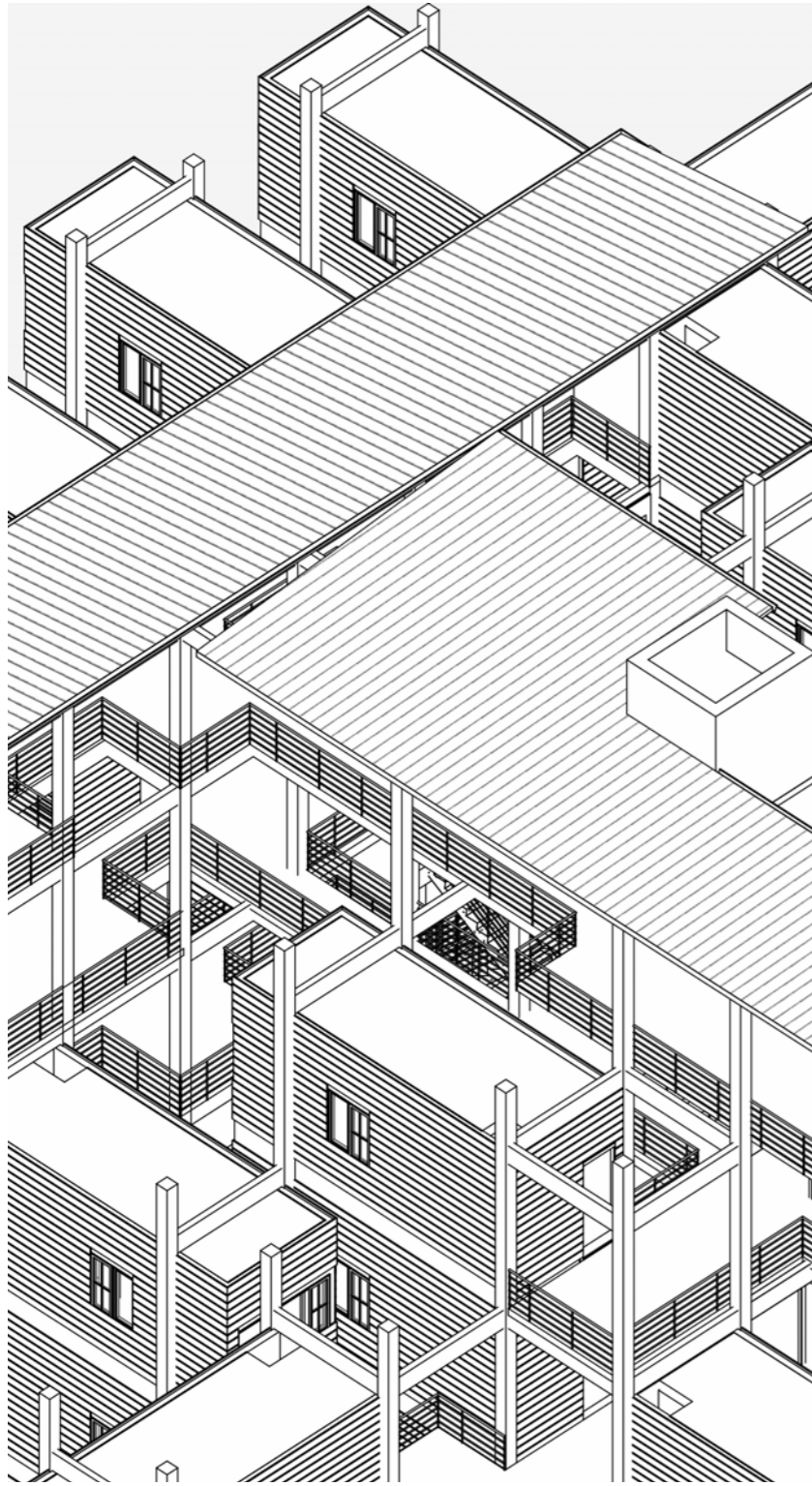
Perspective section



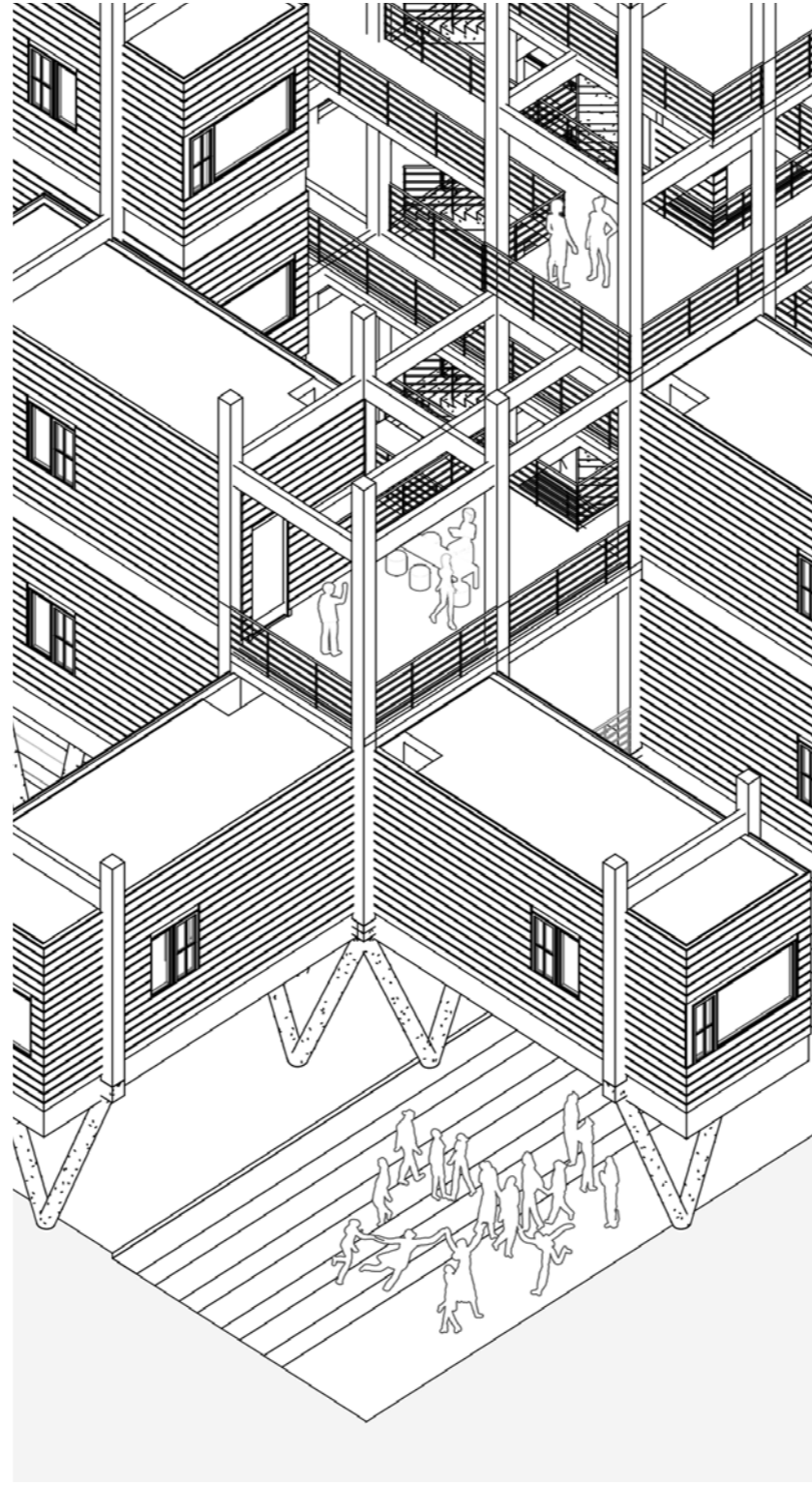
Perspective section



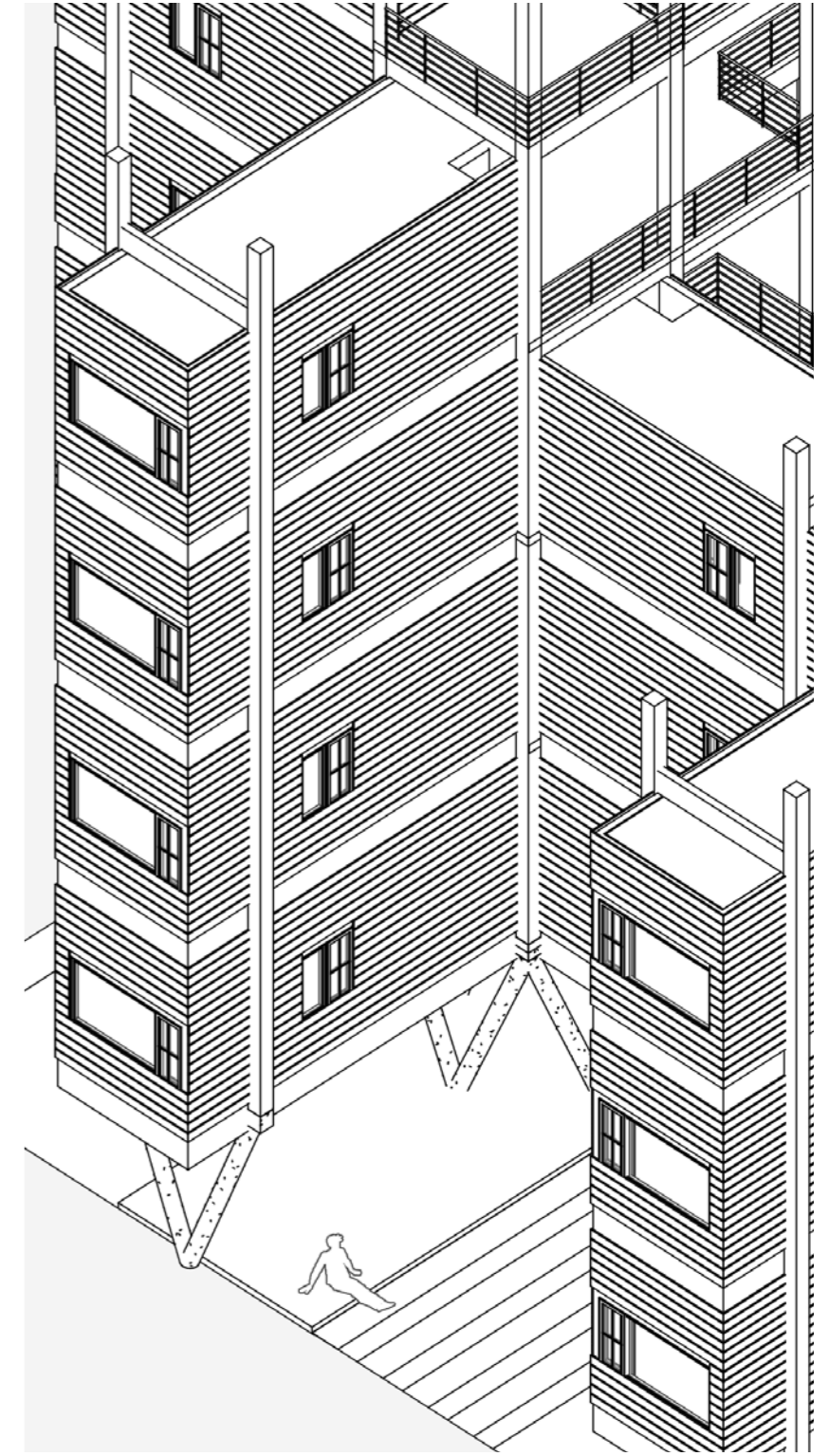




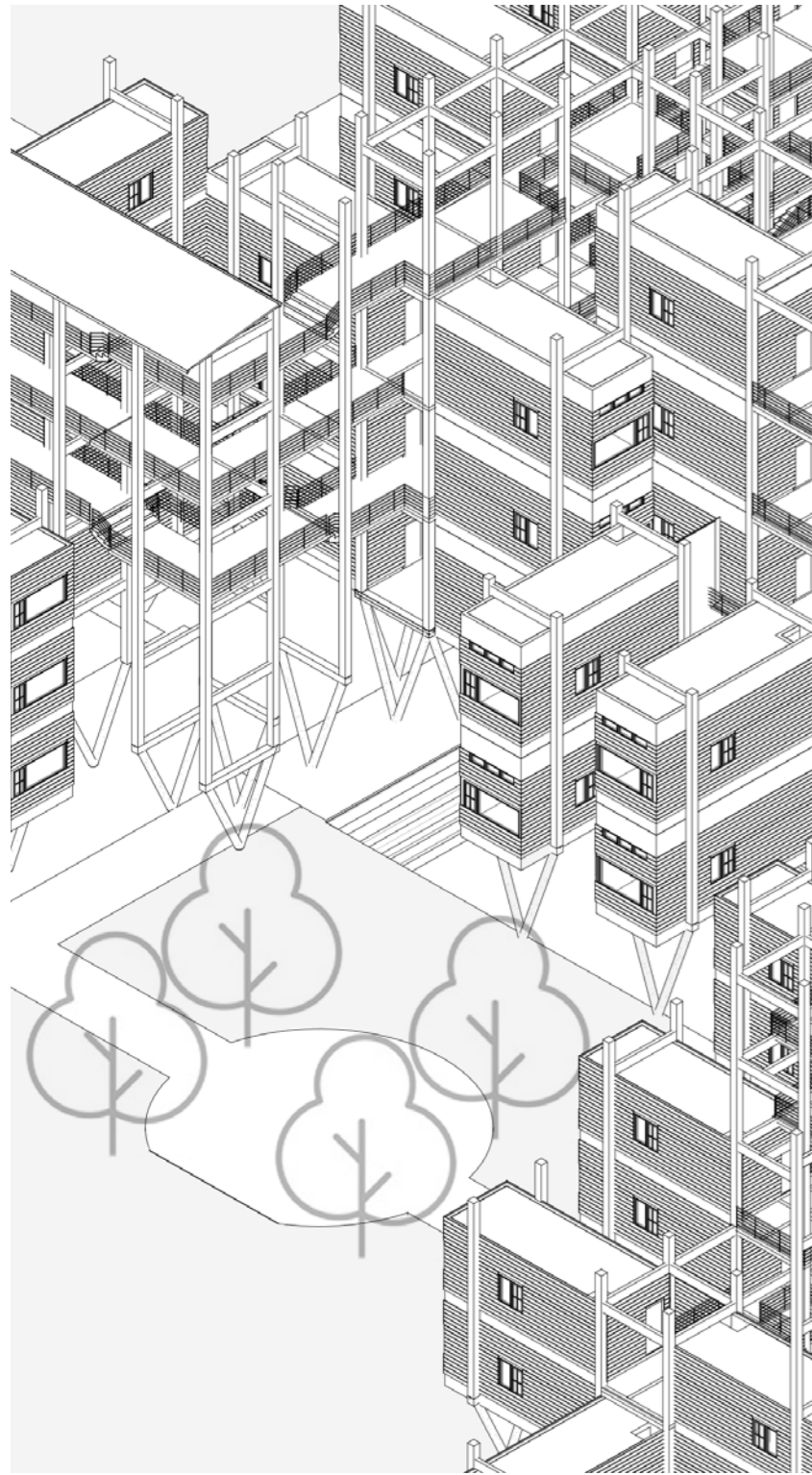
Roof Installation



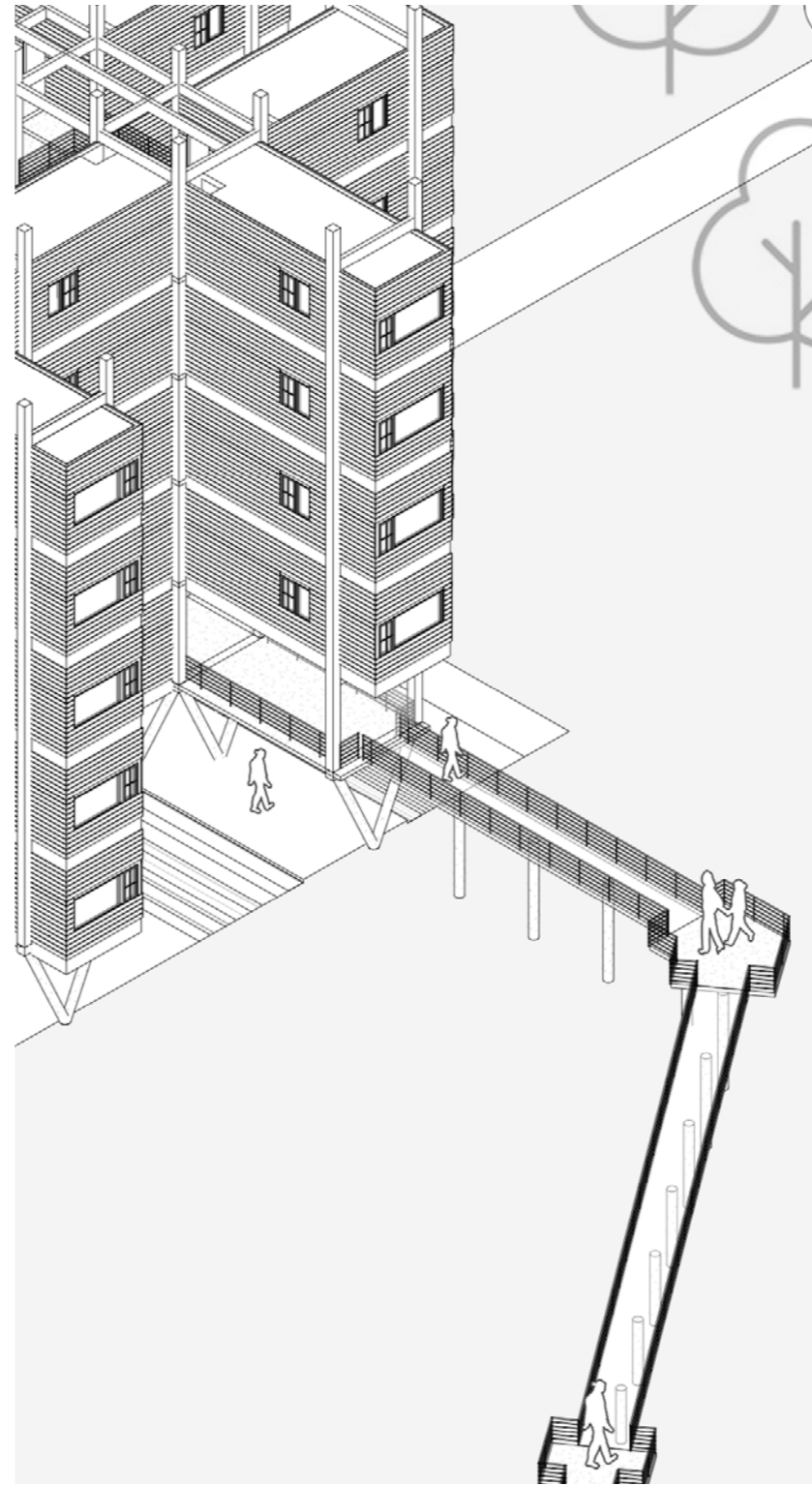
Amphitheatre



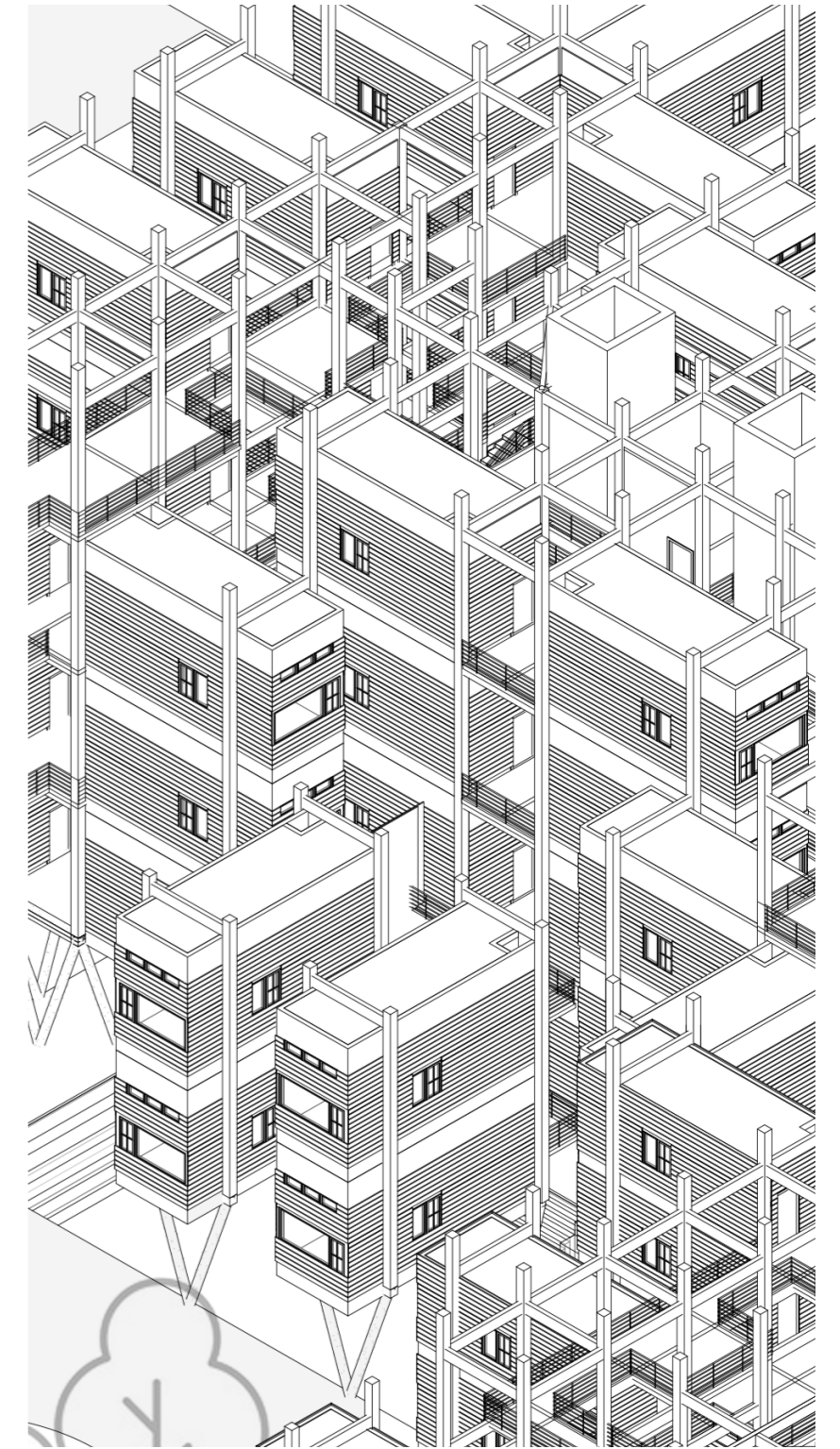
Stilt



Activity space



Ramp



Cluster



Interior view from double height module



Interior view from double height module



Interior view from standard module



Interior view from standard module

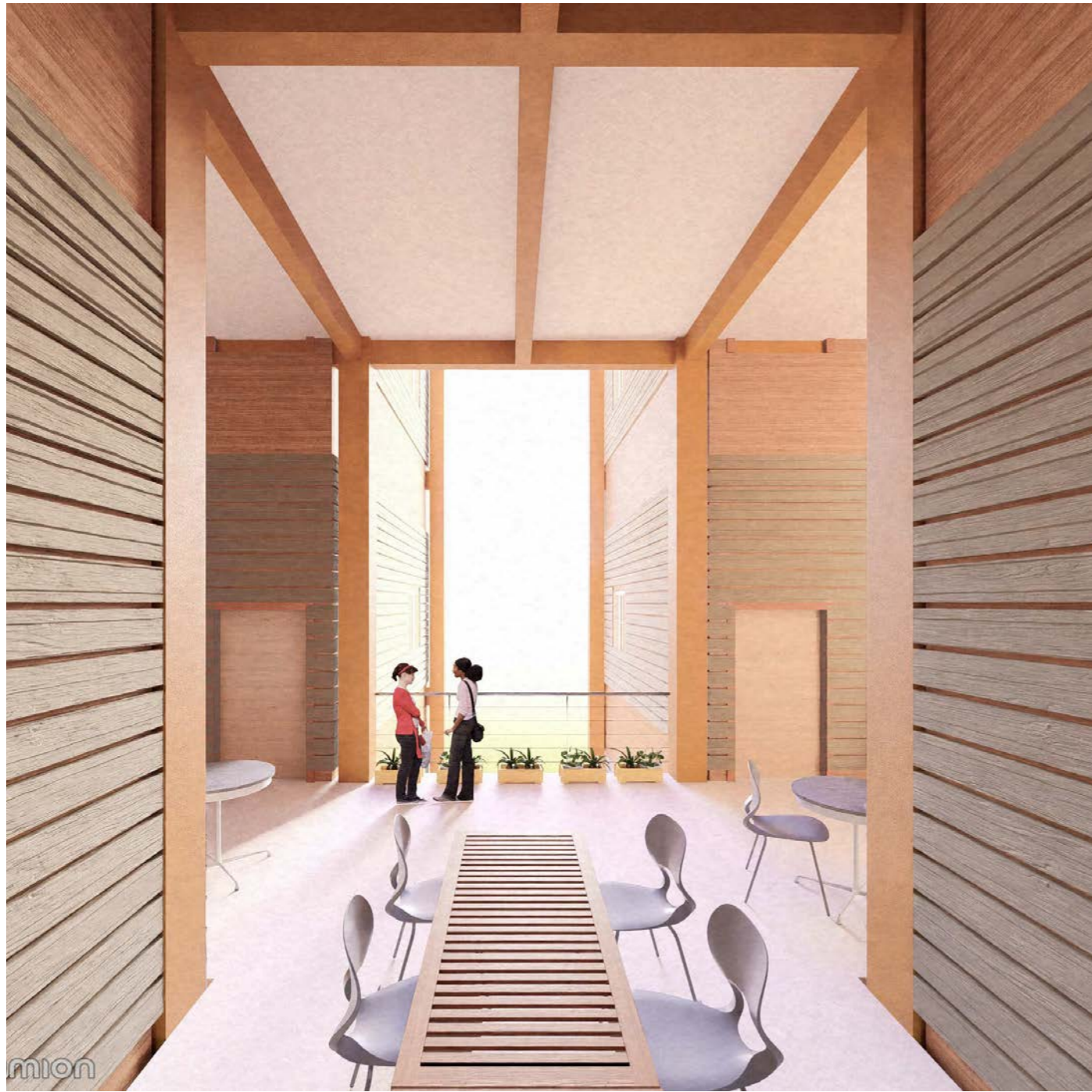


Interior view from standard module



Interior view from standard module





mion

Communal Space




mion

Passage view



Passage view

 lumion



CONCLUSION

This thesis demonstrates the transformative potential of modular, prefabricated housing as both an immediate response and a long-term solution for communities impacted by climate disasters. It proves that housing is more than just shelter and it should be a catalyst for resilience, healing, and meaningful change. Through the use of prefabricated mass timber, the project offers fast, sustainable construction that respects the land while providing spaces where people can live, connect, and grow. With adaptable design and a strong focus on community, it presents a bold, scalable vision for urban resilience. As a testament to the power of modular housing, this project fosters continuity and connection in the face of disruption. This is architecture that responds, restores, and reimagines clearly for a better future.

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<https://www.harriscountyfemt.org/>