

The **original print** of the book

## **A Reconstitution of Place**

by

**James Coley**

resides in the Architecture Library at VA Tech.

This PDF document may differ greatly in format and resolution from the original.

# A Reconstitution of Place

James Coley

Thesis submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Architecture.

Approved:

---

William Brown, Chairman

---

V. Hunter Pittman

---

Pia Sarpaneva

---

Frank Weiner

I would like to thank my thesis committee for their for their guidance and insight, Nicole Adams for her encouragement, and my mother for her continual support.

## **Abstract**

By drawing upon the essential characteristics of a locality, an architect may, through reinterpretation, reconstitute a place. This occurs when mundane characteristics of a locality are reformulated in such a manner that their presence becomes significant.





## **Table of Contents**

Reconstitution

Historic Precedence

The Project

Bibliography - Photographic Credits

Vita

As an art, architecture is fundamentally concerned with the making of poetic works. This orientation towards the poetic elevates architecture above mere construction and above the styles of a particular time. With a conscious consideration of the poetic, architecture possesses the potential to constitute a richer, more engaging world. This is accomplished by an elevation of the mundane through a revelation of the essential in order to make a place. This is a re-constitution of the world; what exists, the mundane, can be redefined and placed back into the world. It is important to note that the primary meaning of “mundane” is of the world, but the word also connotes the common, the everyday.

In an attempt to achieve a greater understanding of the term “poetic,” a brief analysis of the art of poetry may prove beneficial. The poet Charles Simic provides an example from his *Selected Poems, 1963-1983*.

#### WATERMELONS

Green Buddhas  
On the fruit stand.  
We eat the smile  
And spit out the teeth.

Simic grounds his poem with familiar everyday things; watermelons, fruit stands, smiles, spit, and teeth. The familiar provides a point of departure, a foundation from which the poet may begin. This journey is facilitated by a few of the devices specific to the art; rhythm, meter, alliteration and metaphor. Although these devices are necessary in the making of the poem, they alone do not constitute poetry. What is poetic about the work is that it takes mundane things and a familiar event, the eating of a watermelon, and represents it in a unfamiliar way. The poet grounds his poem in the mundane because it is this shared world that we all hold in common. He then presents these objects in an unfamiliar way for one to reconsider their significance. By viewing the common in a different light, one acquires a fuller understanding of both the familiar and the unfamiliar, thereby giving them a more rewarding life.

The mundane provides a point of departure for the poet twenty years later in his collection, *The World Doesn't End*.

I PLAYED IN THE  
SMALLEST THEATRES

Bits of infernal gravel  
On the window sill  
Surrounding a solitary  
White bread crumb.

In his presentation, Simic exercises a bare boned economy; absent are the use of simile and metaphor. The meter is like that of everyday speech. In this poem of late twentieth century anxiety and isolation, only the essential remains. This economic and precise presentation causes one to stop and contemplate the work's significance unencumbered by additional ambiguity from external references. Nevertheless, the poem can still support multiple readings and sustain questioning concerning its possible meaning. Being able to support this questioning is the mark of a poetic work.

Just as a reliance on mere formal devices proves inadequate to achieve the poetic, by itself this initial grounding and reduction to the essential also proves insufficient to achieve the poetic. The poetic work comes into existence over time through a continued process of creation, criticism and revision. During this process, the mundane is employed by the devices specific to the art in order to create a work of art, the poetic. This process is not governed by fixed rules, but by an exercise of judgment that is founded upon an experience of making and a questioning of what has been made. Each work is considered anew, yet the artist's prior work provides a foundation for judging the work to be. For example, the ability to present a fairly thematically complex four line poem, with the exclusion of simile and metaphor is not readily acquired but developed over twenty years and through hundreds of works. Numerous workings and re-workings are necessary for the artist to fully develop his craft.

Architecture and poetry loosely share some general formal concerns in meter, structure, order, and rhythm, They also possess a more fundamental alliance in their concerns as art. As artistic endeavors both architecture and poetry share a common goal, the poetic work. In the pursuit of this goal, both have a common grounding in the mundane. When this foundation is built upon each reveals something essential about the world in which we dwell.



1

Donald Judd's renovation of the Arena building in Marfa, Texas, provides an excellent example of an artist elevating the common-place by revealing the essential (fig. 1). Here, Judd began work with nine existing concrete floor braces. He poured two concrete floor slabs at each end of this formation of braces. Finally, he infilled the area between these two slabs and the nine braces with crushed gravel (Judd, 32).

Where there had once been an ordinary room with a few concrete strips in the floor, there now exists a precisely ordered room of nine linear concrete elements that connect two polished slabs of concrete. The braces reinforce the primary axis of the structure while constituting a unique gravel garden. With a few intelligent additions, Judd exposes a potential that was present, but had not been actualized. Judd's additions re-present, that is present again, an essential aspect of the work that was not previously apparent. By reducing the building to what is essential, Judd makes the order latent in the work apparent. As Le Corbusier writes, "art is poetry: the emotion of the senses, the joy of the mind as it measures and appreciates, the recognition of an axial principle which touches the depth of our being" (Le Corbusier, 215). Order is the axial principle that Judd makes apparent in this act of revealing.



2

In his essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger discusses this act of creating something new through the revelation of a thing's nature. He writes, "origin here means that from and by which something is what it is and as it is. What something is, as it is, we call its essence or nature" (Heidegger, 17). Judd reveals this essence, here a unique space bound by a roof above and nine concrete strips below. This function of revelation defines another capacity of the poetic. Simic writes, "the task of poetry, perhaps, is to salvage a trace of the authentic from the wreckage of religious, philosophical, and political systems" (Simic, 2-3). Here "authentic" has the meaning of real, of this world and concurrently, the original, the source. The world is revealed by exposing the essential.



3

Alvaro Siza's work, particularly his swimming pool at Leca da Palmeira, attempts to rescue something of this authentic (figs. 2 - 5). Here Siza works with a common condition, the transition from the land to the sea. Siza literally concretizes the various conditions and relationships of this transitory zone, making intangible conditions tangible. Siza does this by constructing a linear concrete structure that parallels and re-inforces the man-made highway. This is bound on the sea-side by an extensive rock out-cropping, which is in turn bound by two concrete swimming pools. The concrete pools are bordered by additional rocks, sand, and the ocean. One enters the facility from the street level by passing down into the concrete element then, "one emerges from this "thick" sea-wall to the full panorama and ferocity of the ocean" (Frampton, 11).

Here Siza defines a place by intensifying the basic conditions of the locality. Given the complexity of this environment, Siza makes the transition correspondingly complex using the numerous concrete walls and the two pools as diminishing boundary lines. He re-presents the boundary between the land and the sea by constructing it in built form, thus establishing a dialogue between the land and the sea and the natural and the man-made. As Alexandre Alves Costa writes, "Siza restores the existing, and reaffirms it in his validation of the new" (Siza, 15).

Another dialogue concerning the nature of concrete occurs through its employment in close proximity to its constituent parts: rock, sand, and water. Like Simic and Judd, Siza employs the everyday to reveal something essential, thus moving his work toward the poetic. Not only does Siza reveal something intrinsic about the material, but more importantly by the way he employs it, Siza also reveals something fundamental about the place. Here one views an opening of the architect's possible subject matter, with only common materials one can encompass a larger world. With the elevation of the mundane one can, through re-definition, restore something present in a place, thus revealing a potential of the site, the material of construction and a fundamental element of architecture. This provides the basis for an act of reconstitution.

By this act, one aims to recover something from the world by redefining it in such a way that the mundane is seen as something greater than the common place. When Simic speaks of salvaging a "trace of the authentic," this is the type of recovery he desires. For example, by choosing to employ concrete in his work at Leca da Palmeira, Siza reveals an essential characteristic of the material and of the site not readily apparent. The concrete's placement in and near water actually strengthens the material and reinforces its presence as something stable and seemingly permanent. However, the ocean's relentless waves foretell of a future reclamation. This opposition only serves to heighten one's awareness of the ocean's and the concrete's nature while simultaneously opening one's consideration to a larger notion of time.

Siza's work at Leca da Palmeira provides an example of a project that reconstitutes a place. The architect takes a given condition and isolates some of the specific characteristics of it. Ideas and thoughts concerning these characteristics are explored and developed with the means and devices specific to the art form; such as, order, proportion, rhythm, balance, harmony, opposition, size, and scale. The results of this investigation, the re-workings are then posited back into the world. If successful, the project makes what is essential to a locality become visible, thereby defining a place. The world is changed by the presence of the new and the relationships this presence makes apparent.



4

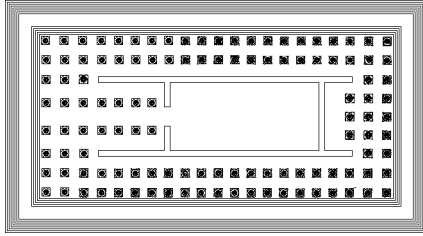


5

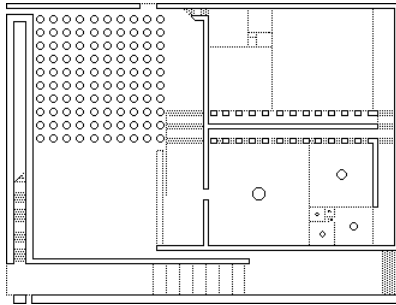
This act of re-constitution need not be specific to any one place, but provides an orientation to guide a project in its conception and subsequent development. The elements employed do not necessarily have to be unique to the locality, but what is essential about their specific employment and what is essential to them as things in themselves needs to be revealed in their re-definition. For example, two of the specific conditions of the town of Blacksburg are the corner column and the isolated wall. This wall has several manifestations, most notably the parapet wall, and for lack of a better word the “end” wall. Both the walls and the columns contribute to the definition of the town of Blacksburg. The columns mark several corners along Main Street and provide a locus of entrance for the buildings to which they belong. Their distinct characteristics could be strengthened by establishing a dialogue between them and the perimeter columns on the campus of VPI&SU. The individually articulated wall also contributes to the townscape of Blacksburg. Downtown the earlier manifestations are the brick and clapboard parapet walls which provide a more monumental street facade for Main Street while generally obscuring the pitched roofs of the buildings. More recently the isolated wall occurs as a wall that demarcates a boundary, and more rarely, when used in conjunction with another wall, provides a point of entrance. Outside of the downtown area this wall more commonly appears as a fire wall between apartments or rental spaces.







The Temple of Artemis provides a very early example of the column as a unit within a large field of like elements. Here one hundred and sixteen columns surround a walled courtyard that opens to the sky. The column field acts as a transition zone between the temple courtyard, the sacred, and the outside world, the profane. The presence of the columns directs and orients one's movement into and around the sacred interior courtyard.

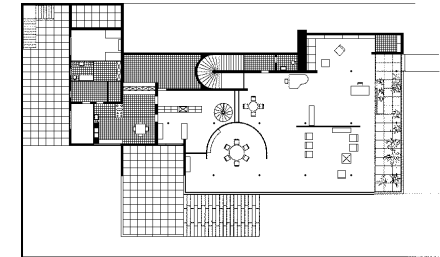


Over two thousand years later, Giuseppe Terragni again employs a field of columns in his unrealized Danteum project. Again, they act as a filter between two distinct spaces. This time the transition is between the streets of Rome and an institution dedicated to the study of Italy's greatest poet. In both cases, the size, scale, and placement of the columns in proximity to each other becomes a primary concern as they help define each respective space.

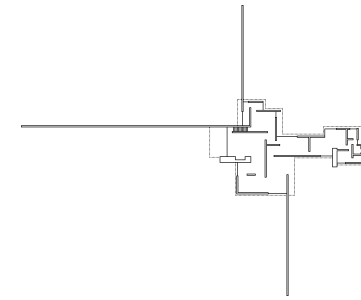


At the Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier employs his concrete pilotis to free the ground floor of the building from the earth for circulation and the accommodation of such functions as parking. This column colonnade also reinforces the perspective view while marking the perimeter of the building. Specific interior columns mark points of entrance and exit.

At the Tugendhat House in Brno, the Czech Republic, the structural column allows Mies Van der Rohe to determine the placement of walls free of structural concerns. Therefore, he employs the two, the column and the wall, to define corridors, the boundary of rooms, and a point of entrance.



Mies Van der Rohe constructs his Brick Country House mainly of load bearing masonry walls that act as sight lines which radiate out into the landscape. When used in a parallel configuration, they also mark an entrance and help define a stairway.



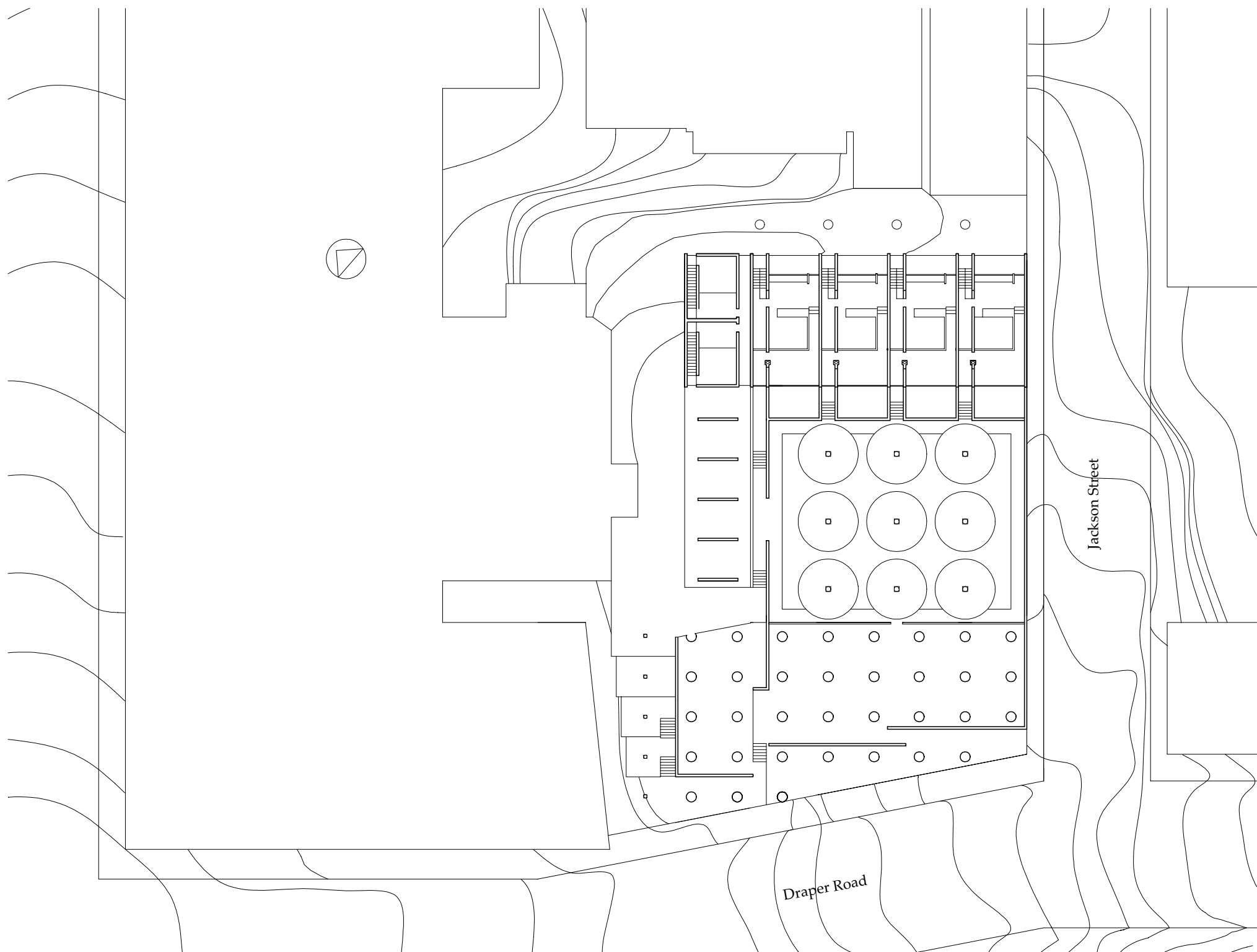
North of Lugano, Switzerland, Rudy Hunziker constructs a series of row houses by the repetition of a series of parallel masonry walls. Within this configuration the double wall serves as a locus of entrance and a place for an internal stairway beside the primary dwelling spaces of each apartment. A concrete wall that extends out from this entrance defines the exterior limits of each house and provides a place for each unit's mailbox. These extending walls serve to reinforce the order of the whole, while articulating the presence of the individual unit

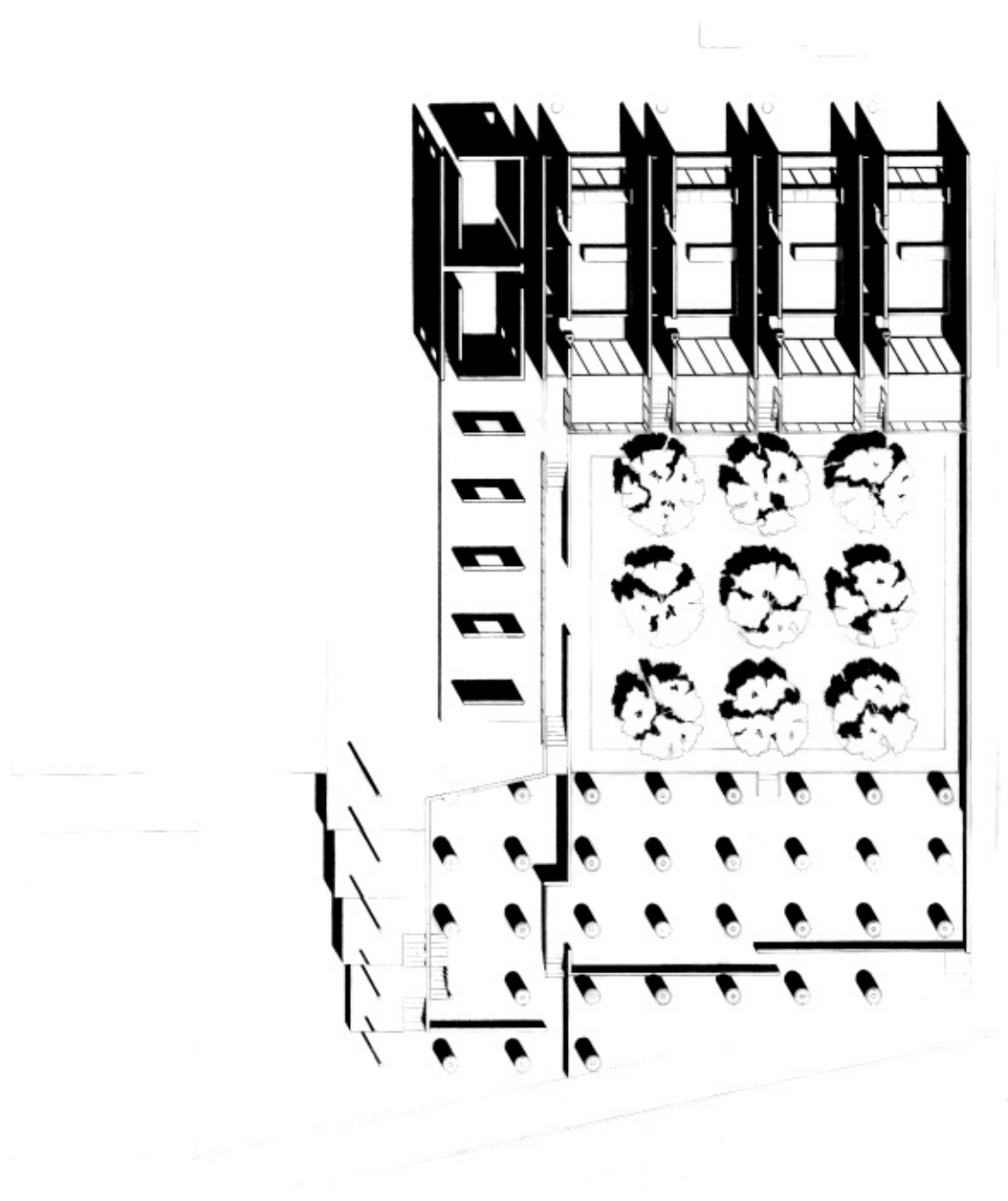


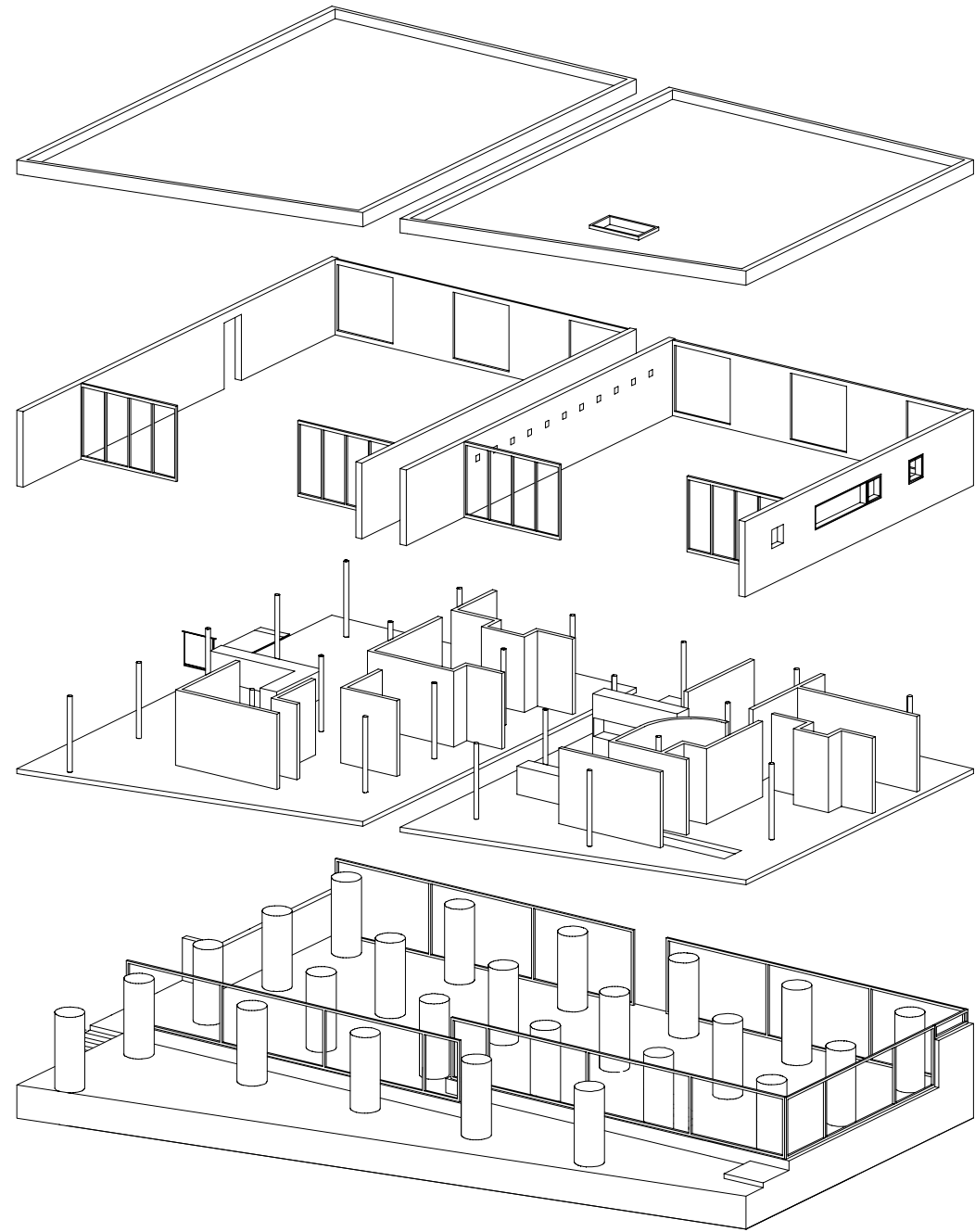


## **The Project**

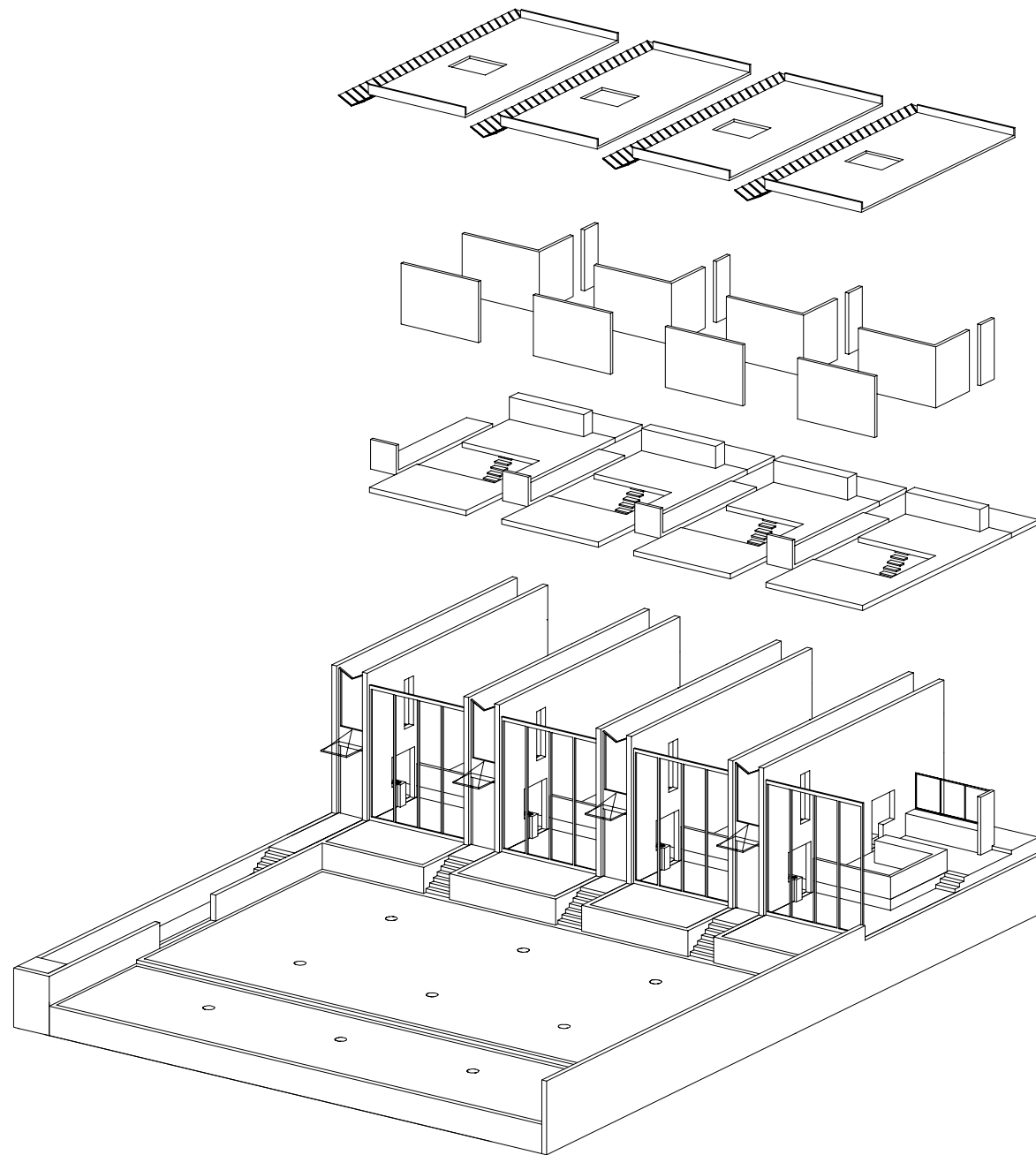
The project is a reinterpretation of the extant columns and isolated walls of Blacksburg, Virginia. In this reconstitution a series of parallel walls are repeated at a fifteen foot interval moving away from a secondary street in the downtown area. These walls define a space for four two-storey row houses and two apartments, while marking the northeast boundary of a courtyard of nine red-oak trees. Across the courtyard to the southeast lies the reinterpretation of the corner column. This is a field of large diameter columns in which the presence of the column becomes as significant as the space defined. As a whole, this retail space acts as a filter between the town and the project's interior courtyard. Five individual apartments lie above this field of columns. Here the columns' size diminishes to a point at which it is necessary to introduce partition walls in order to fully define the space.



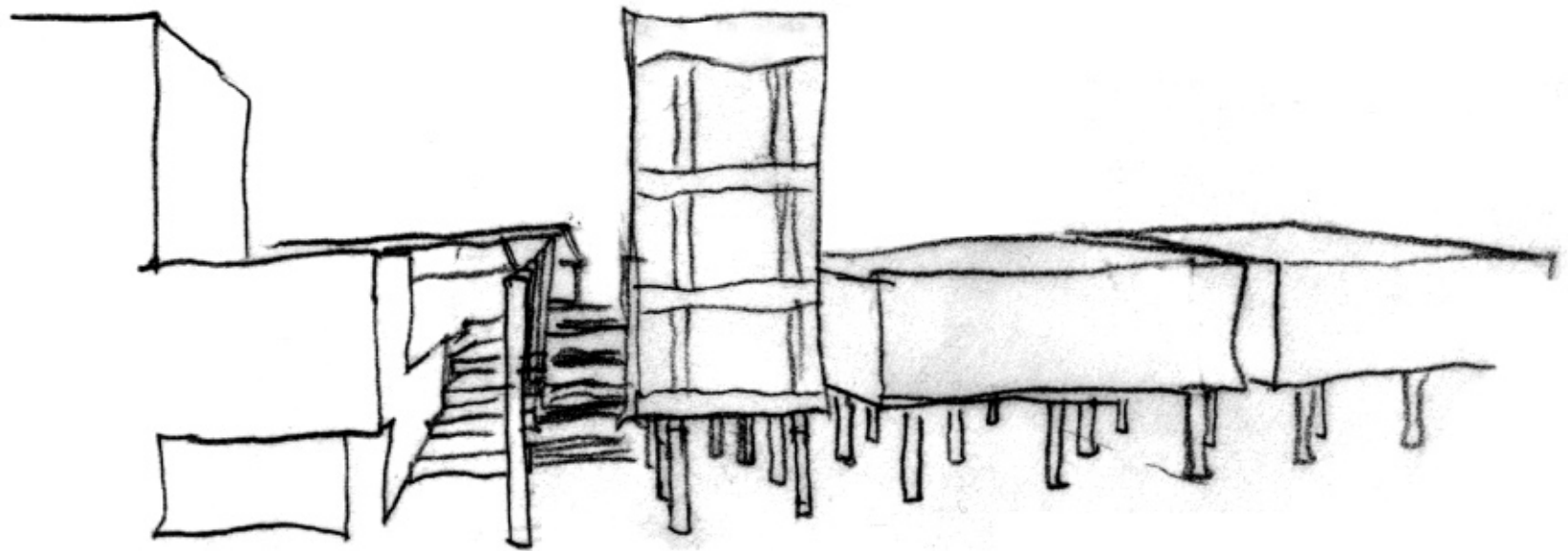




Retail Space and Apartments

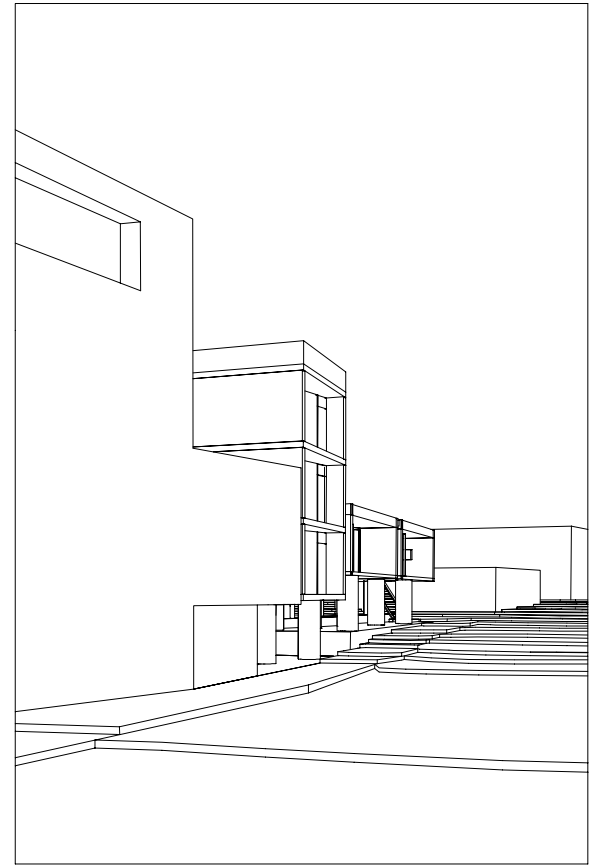


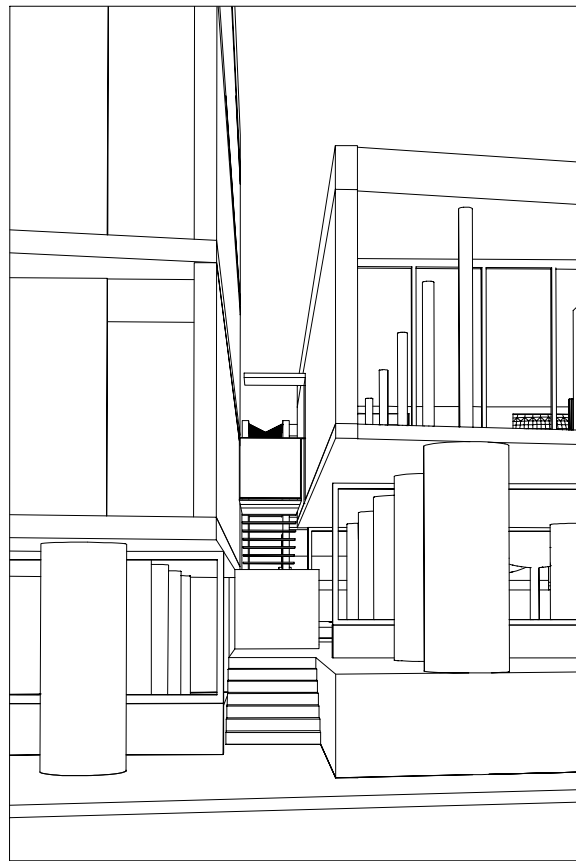
Row Houses

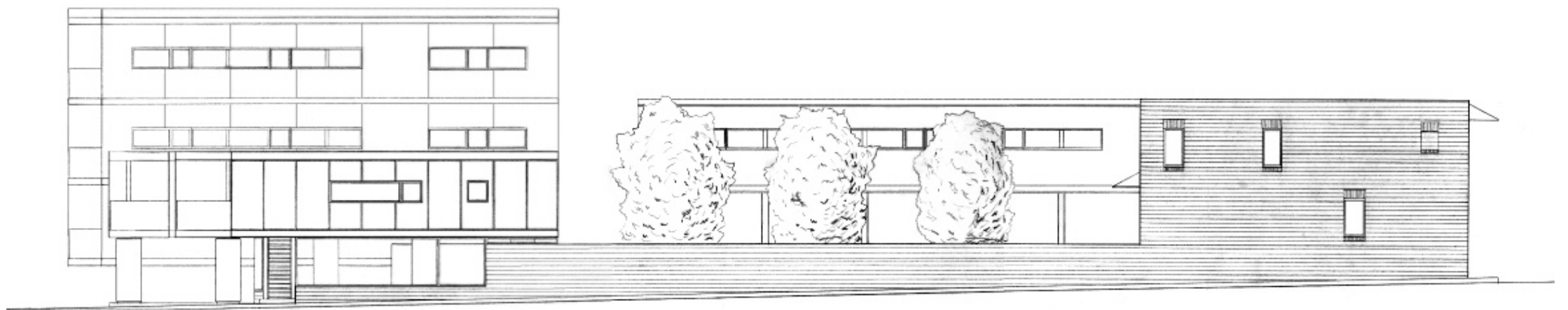


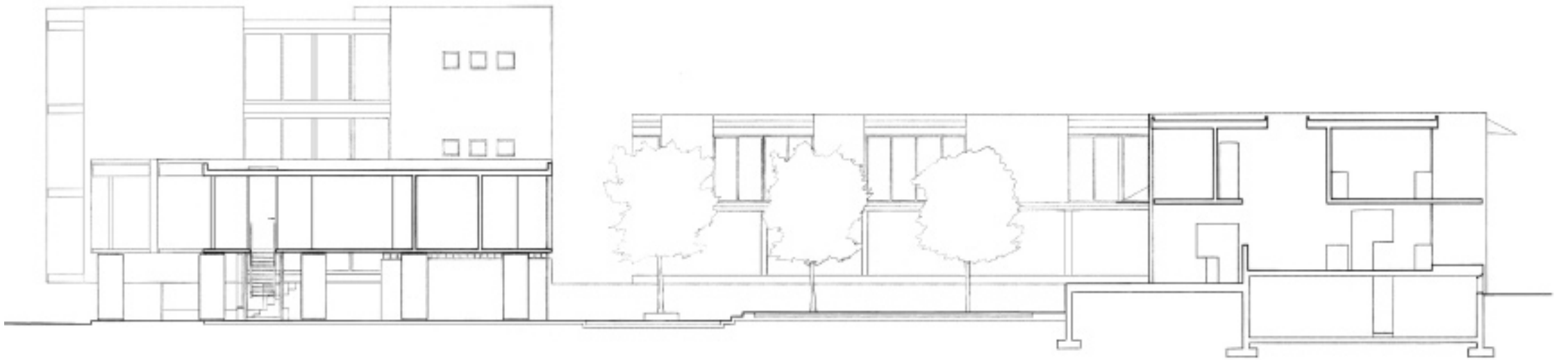


Jackson Street





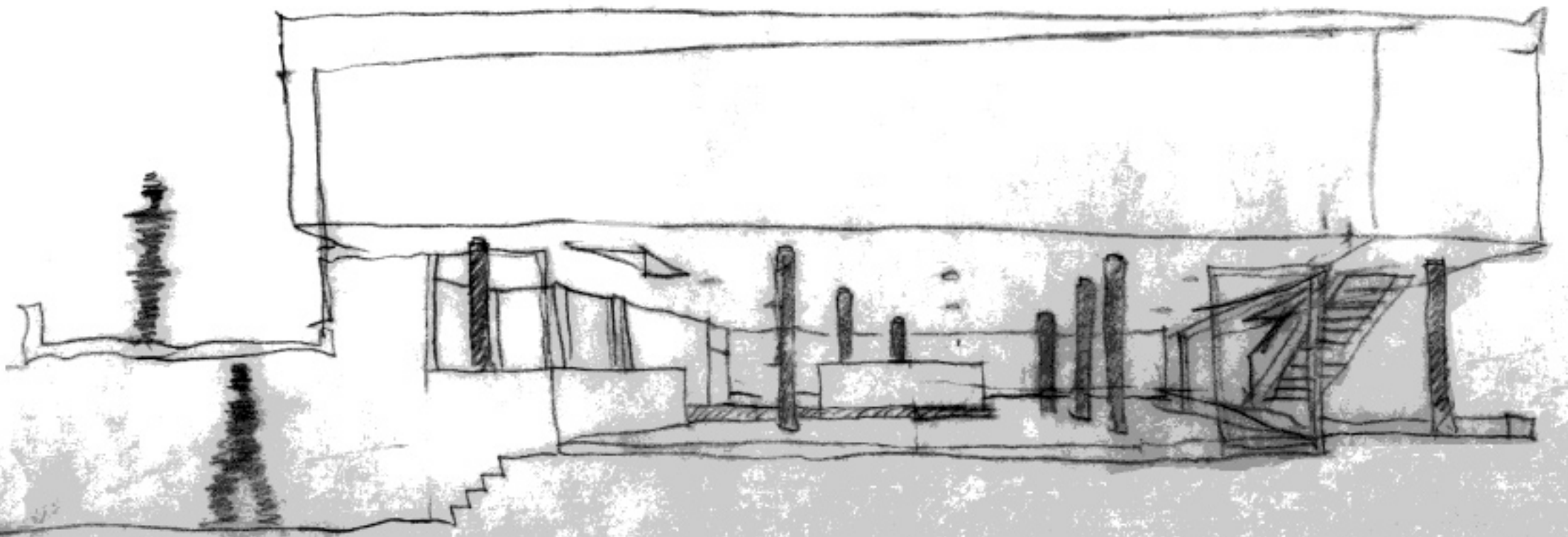


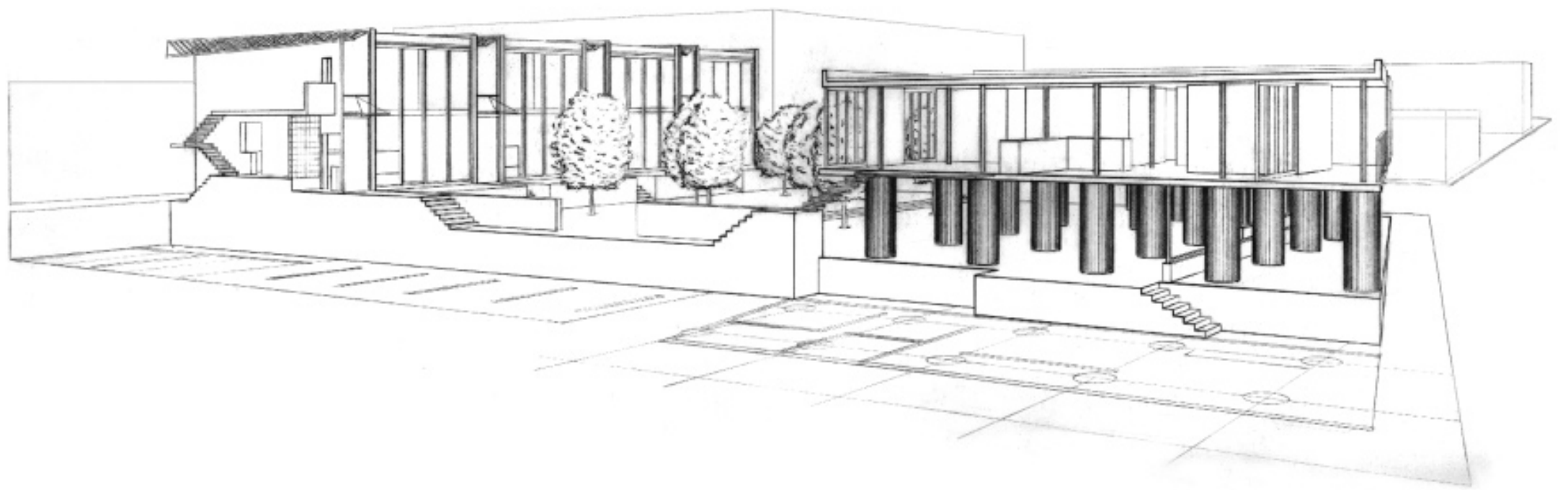


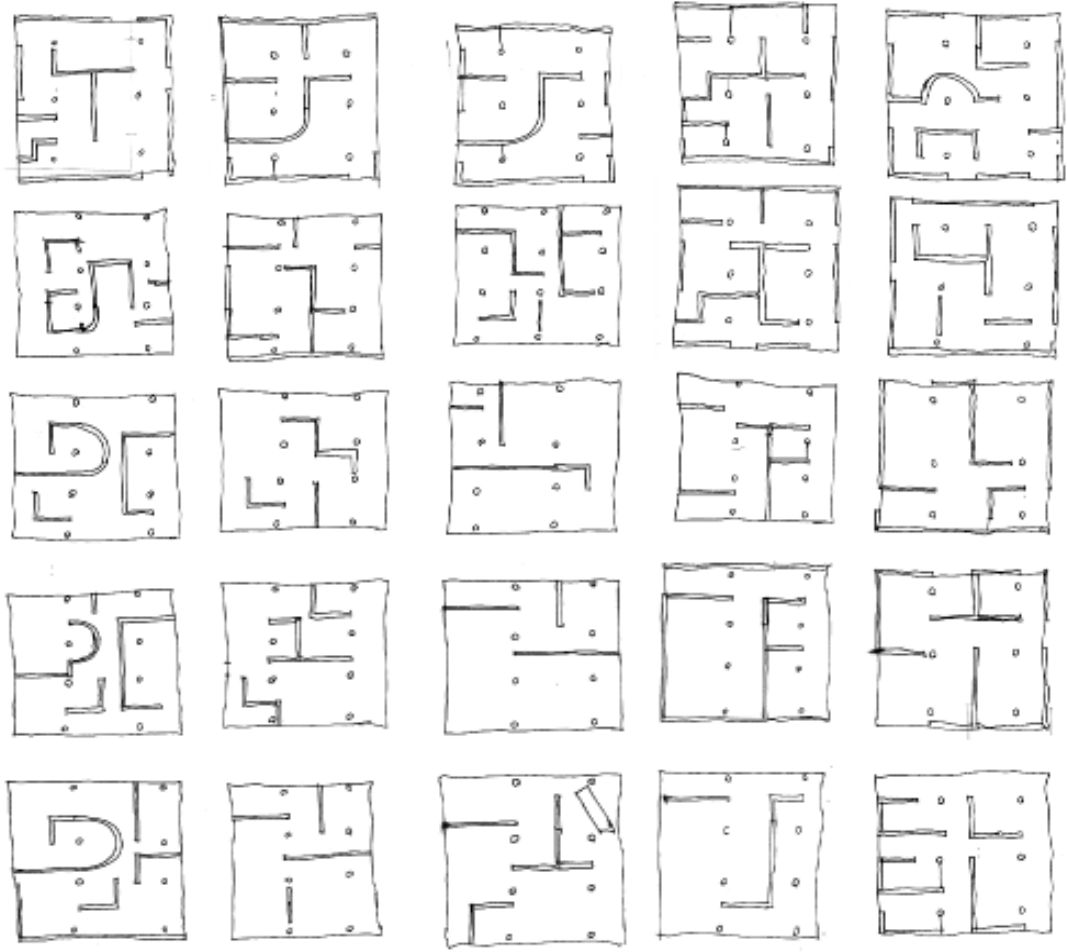
Retail/ Apartments

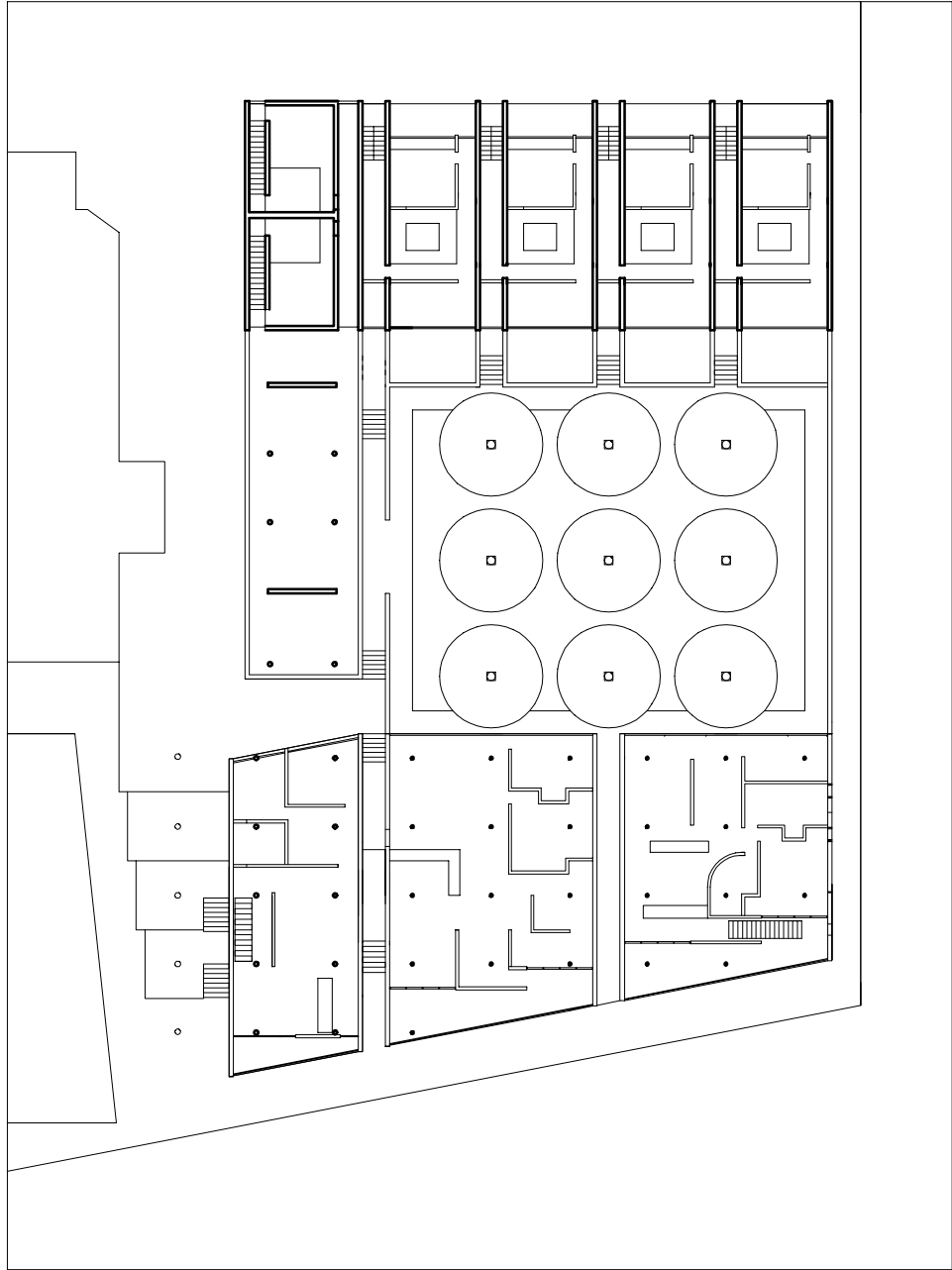
Oak Trees

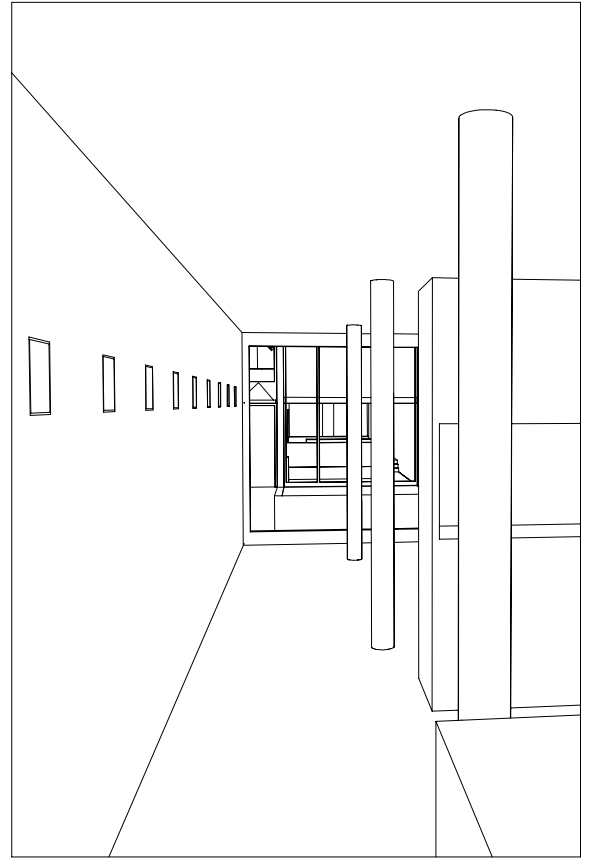
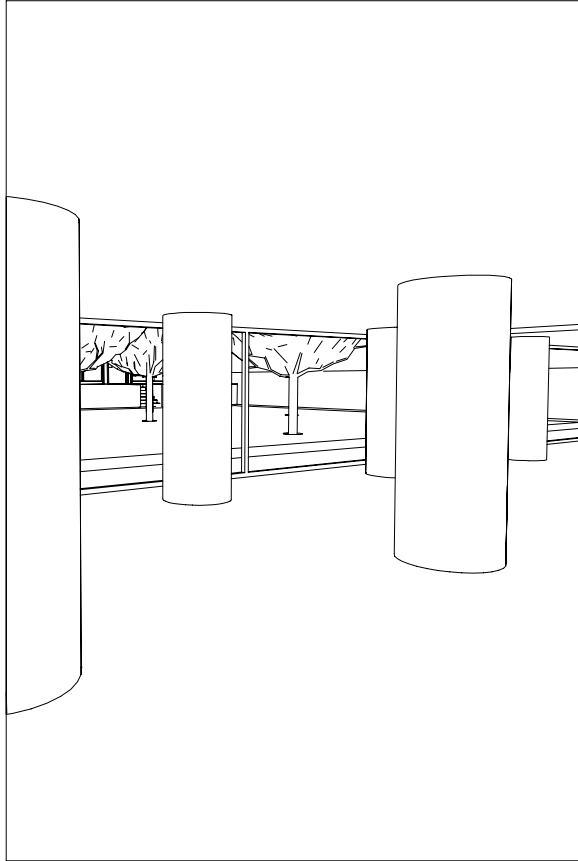
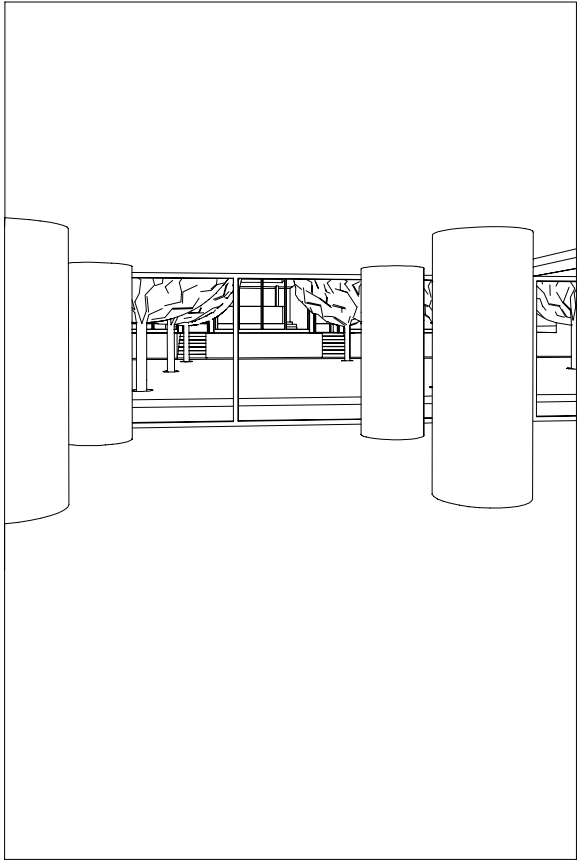
Row Houses

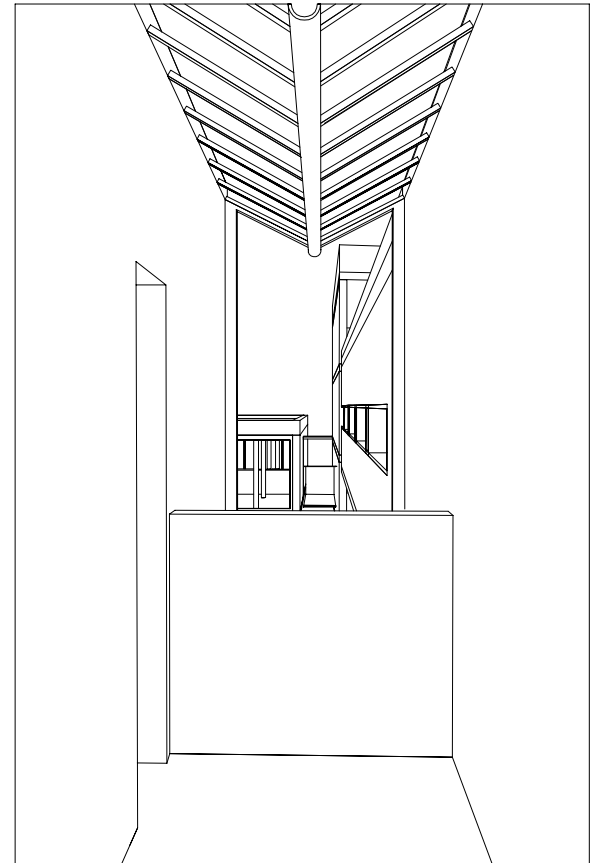
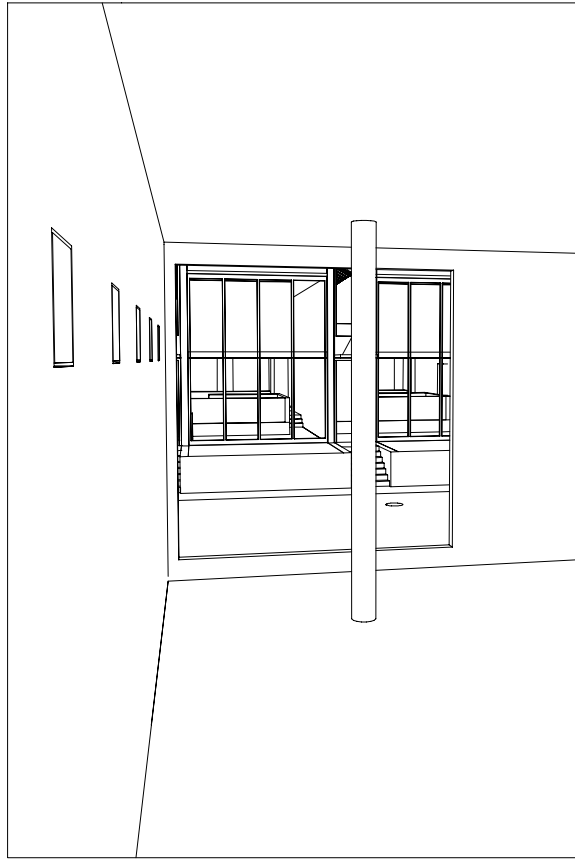


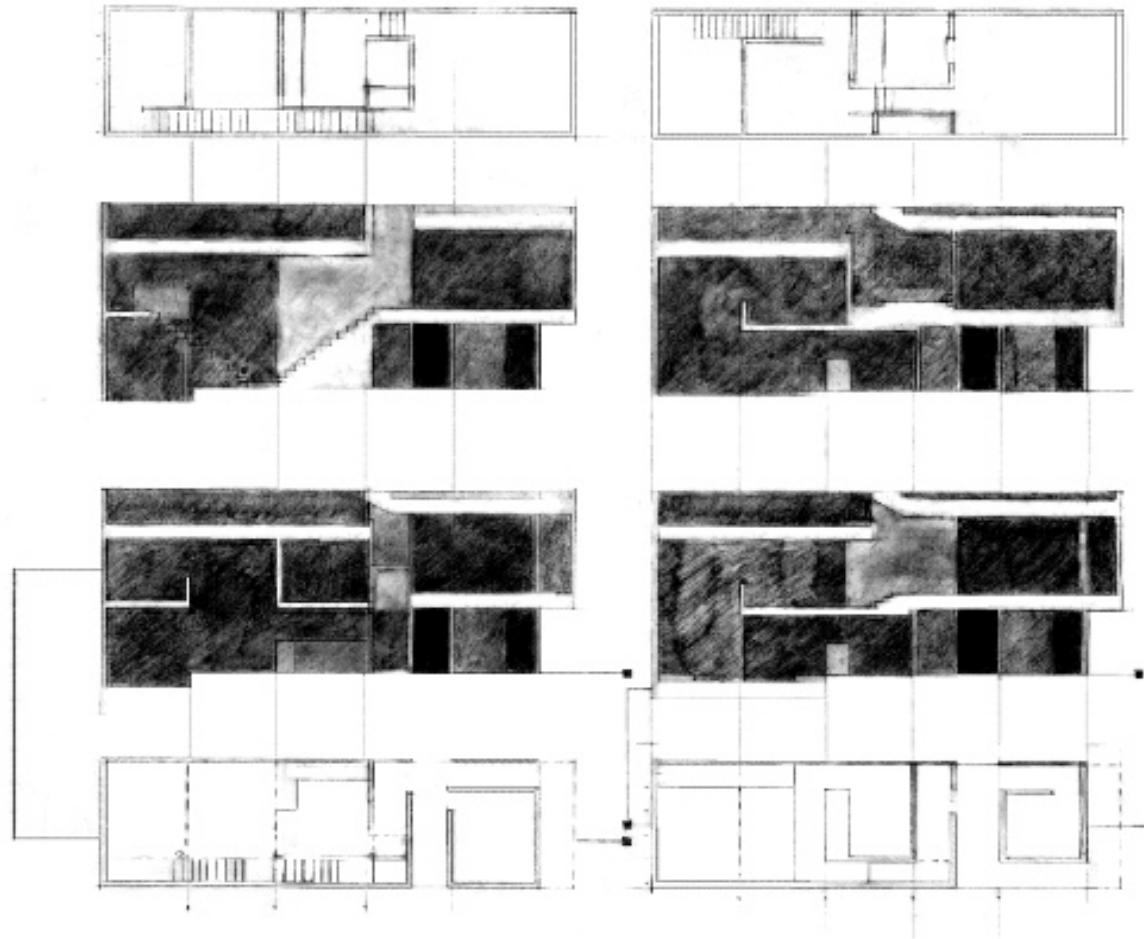


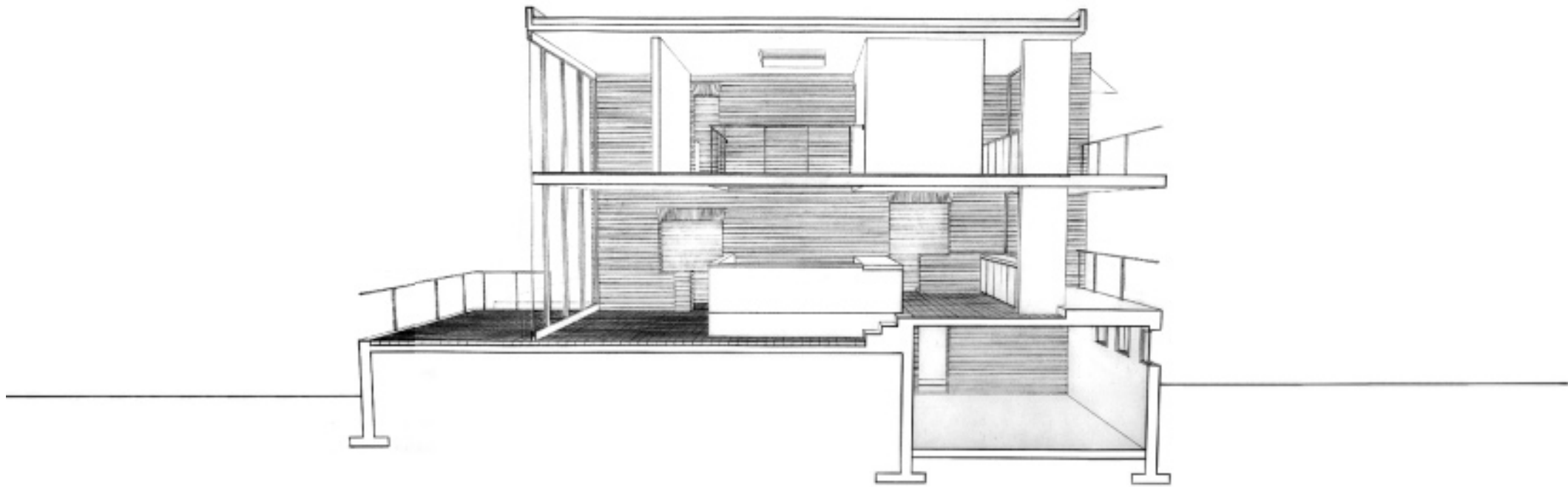


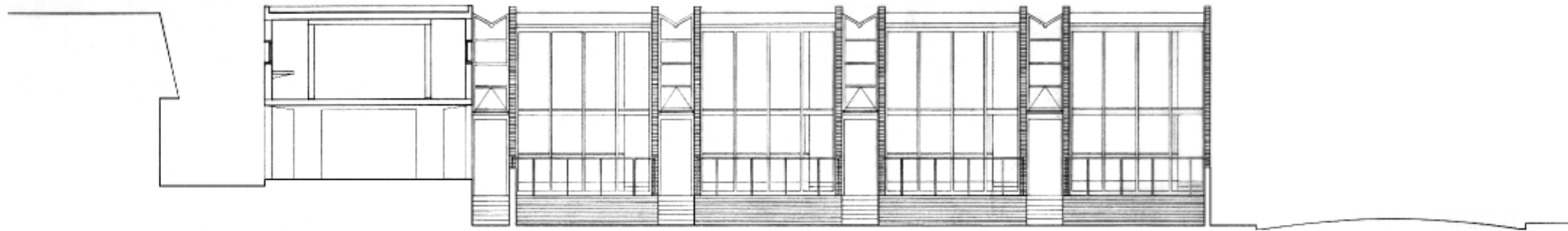


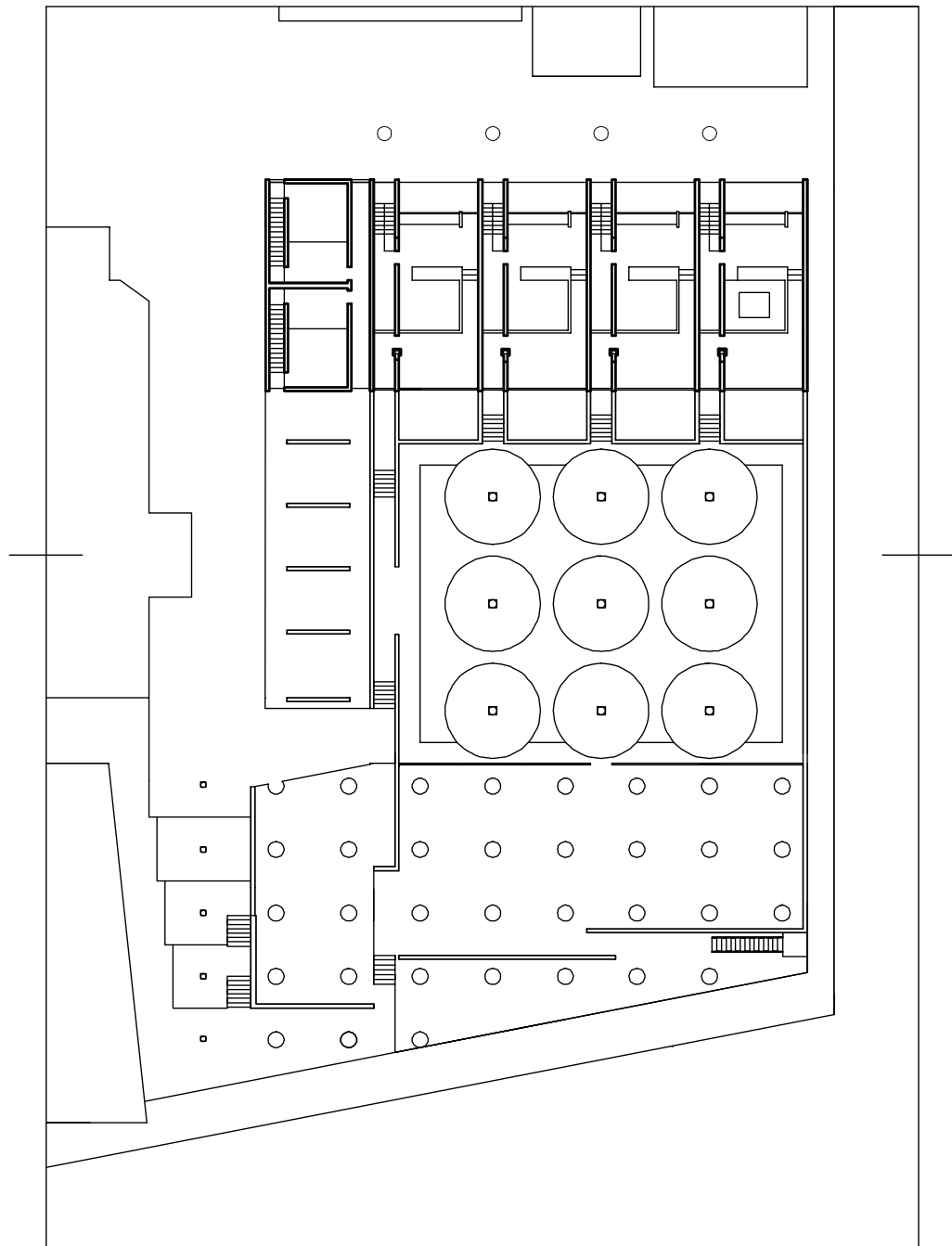


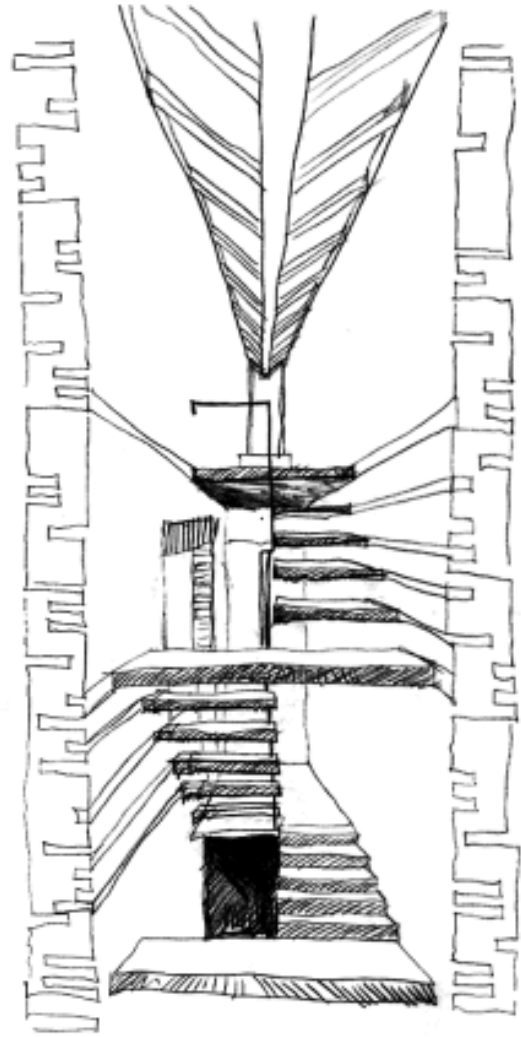
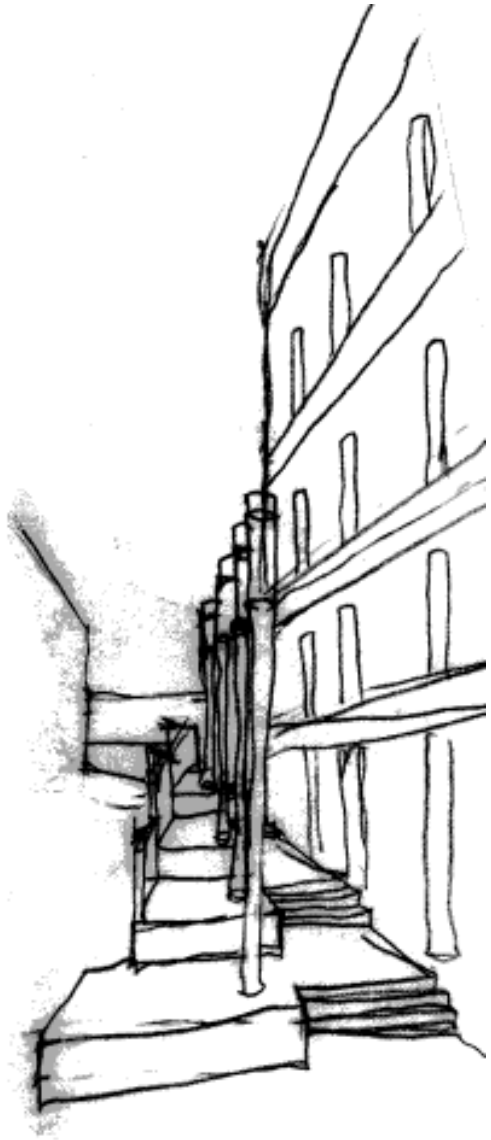


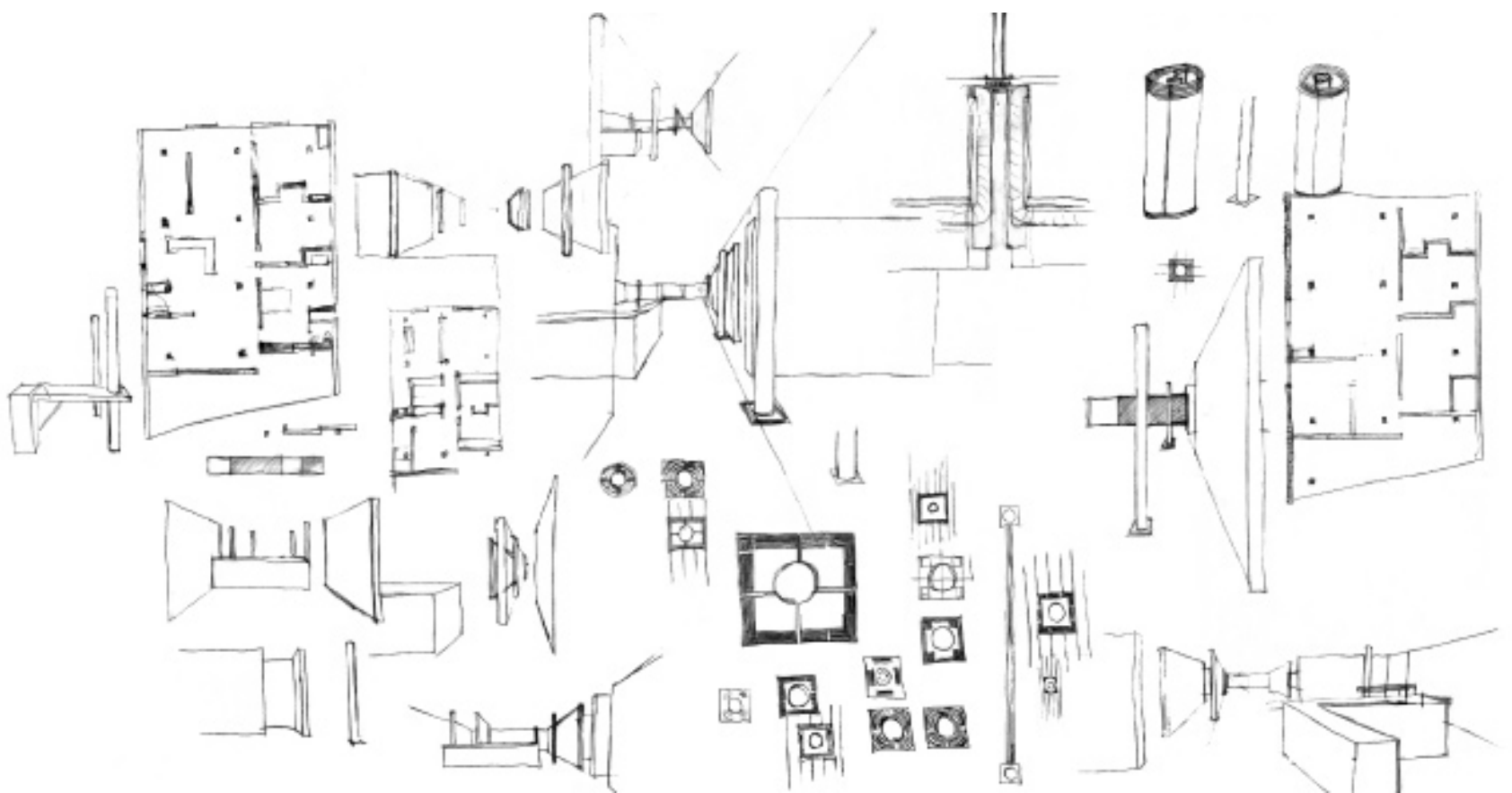


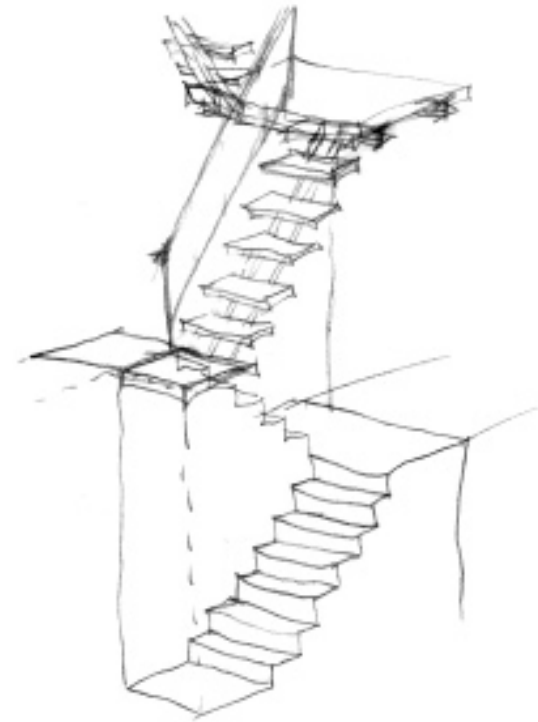
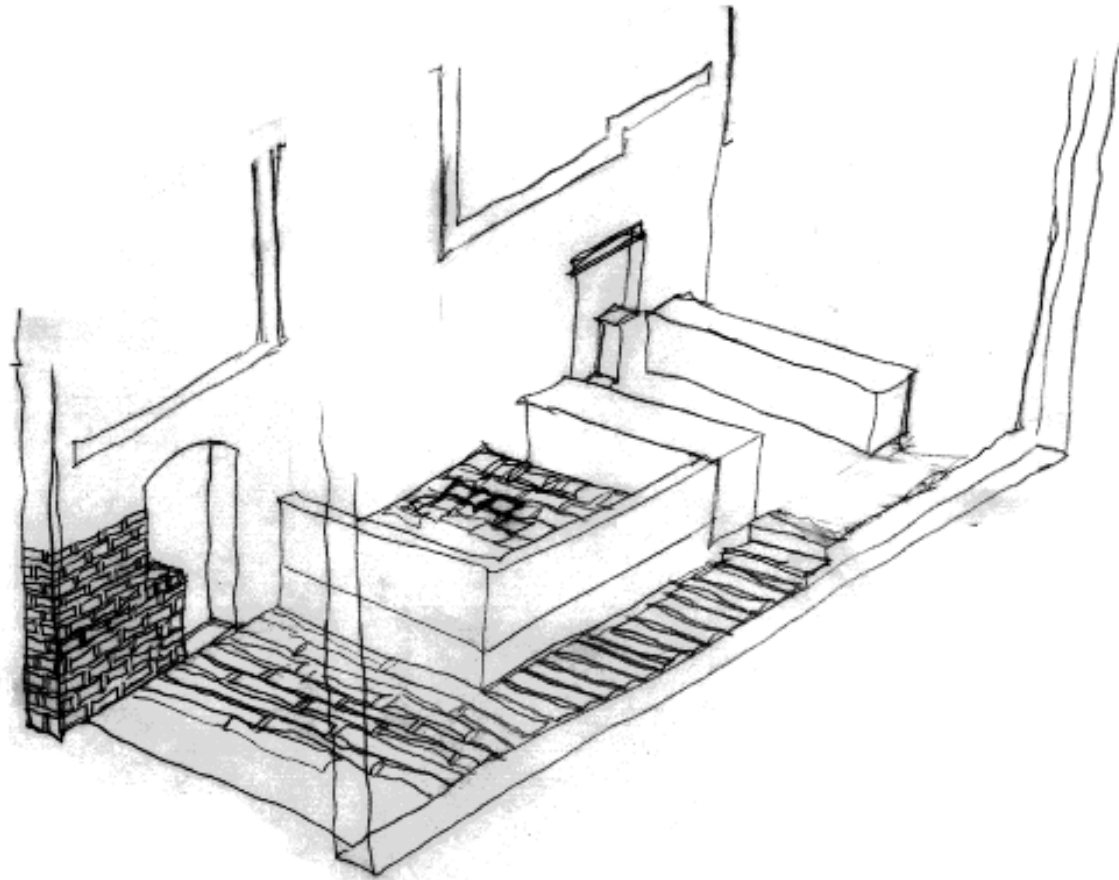




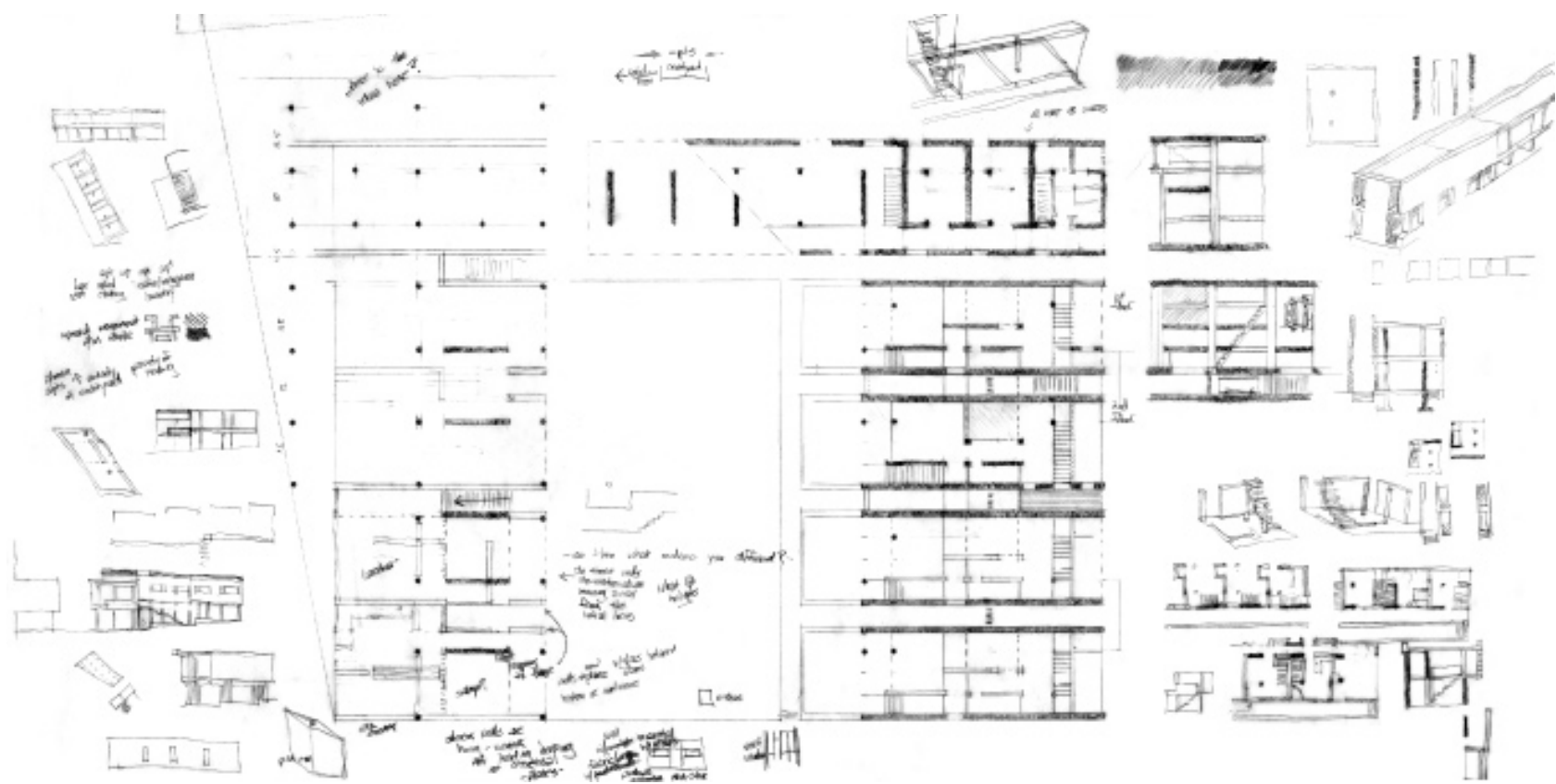


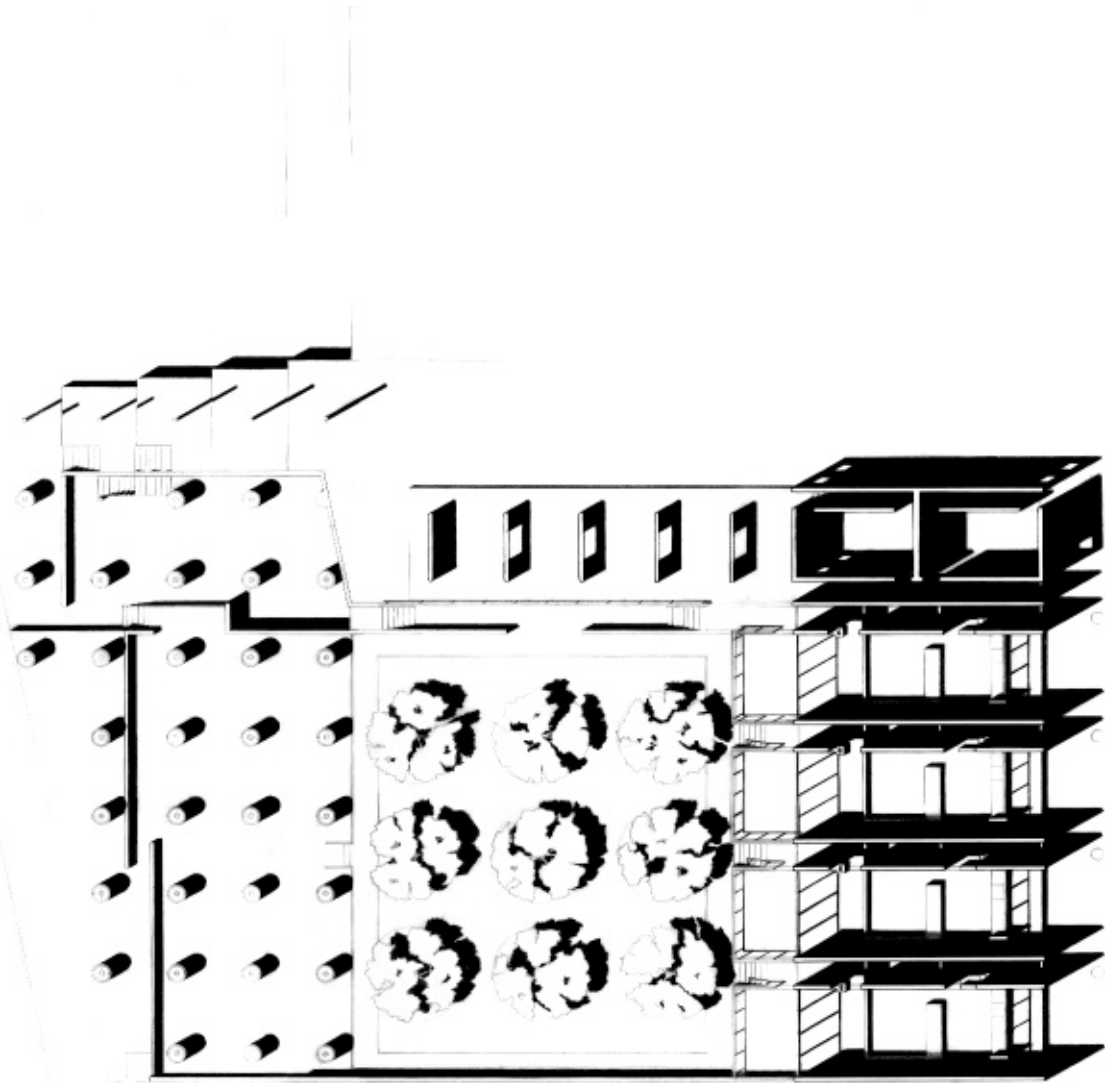












## **Bibliography**

Costa, Alexandre Alves. Introduction. *Alvaro Siza: Figures and Configurations, Buildings and Projects 1986 - 1988*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.

Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Hofstadter, Albert. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Judd, Donald. *Kunst + Design = Art + Design*. Stuttgart: Canst Verlag, 1993.

Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*. Trans. Frederick Etchells. London: John Rodker, 1931.

Norberg - Schulz, Christian. *The Concept of Dwelling: On the Way to Figurative Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1985.

Mancini, Daniel, Paul Mankins and Richard Yeager. *Giuseppe Terragni, Two Projects*. New Haven: Yale University School of Architecture, 1991.

dos Santos, Jose Paulo, ed. *Alvaro Siza: Work and Projects, 1954 -1992*. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1993.

Simic, Charles. *Selected Poems, 1963 - 1983*. New York: George Braziller, 1985.

Simic, Charles. *The Unemployed Fortune - Teller: Essays and Memoirs*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Simic, Charles. *The World Doesn't End: Prose Poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989.

Frampton, Kenneth. Introduction. *Alvaro Siza: Figures and Configurations, Buildings and Projects 1986 - 88*. New York: Rizzoli, 1988.

Spaeth, David. *Mies Van Der Rohe*. New York: Rizzoli, 1985.

Trachtenburg, Marvin and Isabelle Hyman. *Architecture From Pre - History to Post - Modernism*. Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice - Hall, 1986.

## **Photographic Credits**

Luis Seixas Ferreira Alves: 3, 4, 5

Hedrich Blessing Photographers: Plans of Tugendhat House and the Brick Country House

Giovanni Chiaramonte: 2

W. B. Dinsmoor: Plan of the Temple of Artemis

Todd Eberle: 1

Daniel Mancini: Plan of the Danteum

All other photographs by the author

## **Vita**

James Nelson Coley II

August 20, 1969

Master of Architecture  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
Blacksburg, Virginia  
May 1997

Bachelor of Arts  
Wake Forest University  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina  
May 1992