

somewhere between PLACE and DIRECTION

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

MASTERS of ARCHITECTURE

Approved by:



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LOUIS

BIEKER

Blacksburg, Va.. 1995

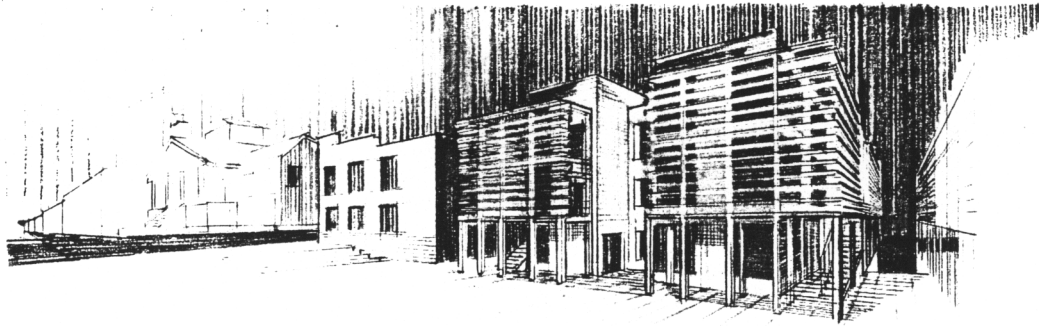
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A B S T R A C T

The aim of this design thesis was to carefully examine the condition of an American small town, and through an understanding of that exploration; offer the design of a residential community that draws its energy from the place and aspires to extend the life of the town through an intensification of Main Street America.



3.20.95.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My special thanks to my thesis chairman Bill Brown, and to my committee members, Pia Sarpaneva, Michael O'Brien and Mark Blizzard for their patience and abilities to bring out the right questions.

I.	Position..	..Impetus to Action
II.	Process..	..Reason to Method
III.	Project..	..Abstract to Reality



P O S I T I O N

Figure - Ground
Scale
Authenticity

From the memory of a quote,

*"...Whatever space and time mean in
architecture, place and occasion mean more."*

Aldo van Eyck



Today's cities are an unhappy marriage of simultaneously valuing the scale and charm of the Medieval town with a Modernist idealism and promise of a brave new world. While the evolution of the modern city has flourished in the last century, traditional urbanism has steadily been destroyed..

Placing oneself momentarily in a position of abstracting the shape of the modern city, one can find the twentieth century town as a combination of two simple concepts; the traditional town and the "city in the park."¹ While the first is in essence an experience of scale in which the spaces, as defined by continuous walls of the street, are emphasized over the building volumes; the Modern city treats architecture as figural, de-emphasizing the spaces which these buildings define or imply.² The resulting combination of these opposite ways of ordering the city has yielded many unstructured, confused towns we find built today..

It seems useful to stop and reflect.

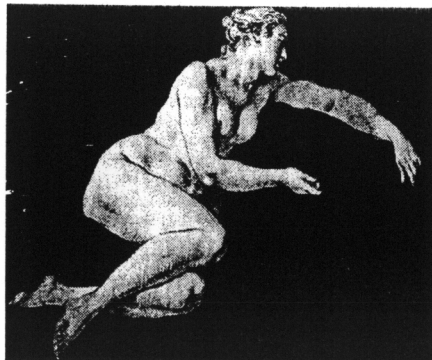


Figure -Ground

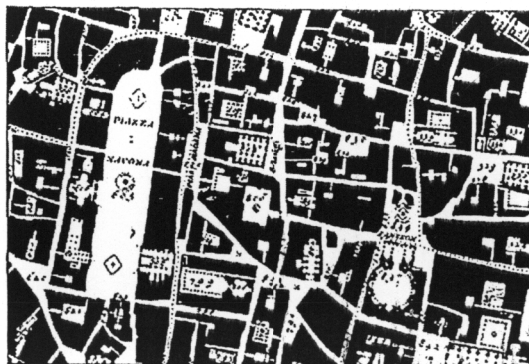
The act of building in the traditional city can be primarily perceived as an act of subtraction; a taking away of solid mass in the delimiting of space. These subtracted spaces had positive, figural qualities. The city was perceived as a densely woven urban fabric in which the buildings and the figural spaces contributed to create the whole.

Le Corbusier's plans for the Modern city, as reciprocal, reversed the composition; isolated buildings were placed in park like settings. Architecture was to be without preferred faces and viewed as figural objects in the round, drawing their generative power from internal self-referential rules.

When studied at the scale of the town, the opposed figure-ground relationships represent two different ways of treating architectural space. Each position represents a way of looking at the city and each has a figural quality. Recognizing that the figure-ground relationship is conceptually reversible it follows quite naturally that their roles are interdependent for ordering architecture.

"I dislike a sentimental antiquarian attitude towards the past as much as I dislike a sentimental technocratic one towards the future. Both are founded on a static, clockwork notion of time. So let's start with the past for a change and discover the unchanging condition of man."

Aldo van Eyck



Nolli Map, Rome

Valid architecture today must search for a middle ground; an attempt to understand and reconcile these two ways of looking at the city. As such, architects must plant themselves firmly in both worlds, one that aspires to the universals of a Modernist idealism and one that enjoys the particulars of the traditional town.

Through this essential understanding of this arriere-garde posturing, the architect must be critical to reinterpret architecture as a continuation of the past under the rules of today's realities.. By so acting, the architect is in a constant dialogue between self as creative individual and convention.

"Architects must learn to take an arriere-garde position...one that equally distances itself from both the optimization of advanced technology and the ever present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism or the glibly decorative."

Kenneth Frampton



Le Corbusier, Plan Voisin, Paris

An essential quality found at the scale of the small town and often lost in the Modern city, is a direct relationship between its residents and its history, traditions and memories; often lost in the modern city. Additionally, due to its scale, acts of change are deeply felt in the small town. The pace of the small town offers a unique situation in that quite often progress and change are slow.

While sympathetic to the needs of the town's residents, architecture must attempt to break down this sentimentality and nostalgia for the "good ole' days," accepting change and progress as a necessary. In an attempt to satisfy a need for the particular and spark an interest in an authentic, rooted culturally specific architecture, this thesis interacts with the small town as a

direct source of inspiration.

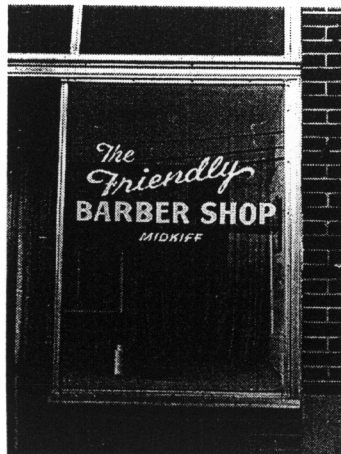
By simply observing the influence of the automobile on the small town, the necessity for architecture to be scaled to the pedestrian is essential.³ While the automobile has thrived and prospered in the modern city, the town has suffered the loss the human dimensions of discovery, complexity, place and community. Uniformity and economically driven design have become the rule. A steady erosion of culture and tradition, in the ever increasing dependence on the car, has become the consequence.

Architecture must act to slow this erosion and recapture, refocus, remind the community of the importance of culture, tradition and community, still coveted in the small town; while simultaneously reorienting to the constant demands of progress,

on typology:

"The language of building types revived a traditional way of looking at function and reestablished precedent as a point of departure for designing a building. Gone is the Modernist search for new forms latent in the program, site or technology. Typology brought me to see architecture as a language of tradition rather than a scientific/ technical field which invention is valued more than convention."

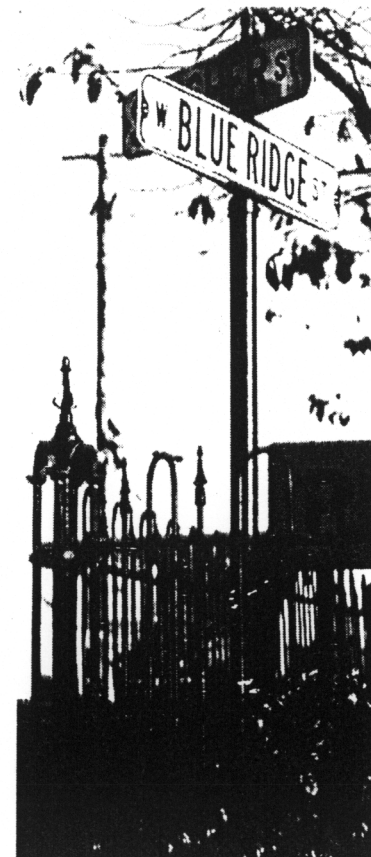
Kenneth Frampton



Character of Stuart

change and technology.

This Frampton quote critiques a loss of the specific and reopens the door to an architecture rooted in tradition, culture and place. These memories and traditions hold real value to the designer as our ideals and act to construct a conceptual setting from which architecture can be founded. No longer is it necessary to approach each project tabula rasa. These traditions and memories become a foundation, a conscious part of the designers vocabulary, and must be perceptually included in their architecture.



Juhani Pallasmaa talks about the innocent faith of the early Modernists being replaced with an authenticity found in a Second Modernism,

"... Architects must develop a strategy of Cultural Resistance in slowing down the undesirable, antihuman development of the modern city. By so doing...one has recognized both the realities of making in today's world, but at the same time positioned himself to take advantage and draw from the pool of culture, history, memory and tradition."

It is important to understand that the role of the architect is to use both Modernist method and traditionalist metaphor to reinterpret and give new meaning to their work.

In addition, to architecture founded in tradition, valid architecture must be "place specific." This position elevates local culture, history and memory to be prime determinants of form. This more complete set of limits attempts to inform an authentic, local, rooted architecture that resists mass culture. It attempts to satisfy a need for the particular and spark an interest in our American culture.

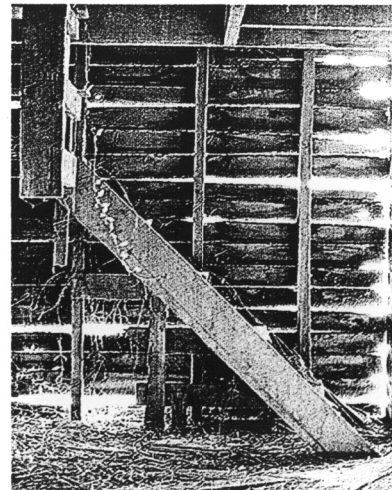
Valid architecture today must employ a **"Strategy of Resistance,"** a tactic that while recognizing the ideals of a utopian Modernism 'seeks to construct a method to refocus on an authentic culture. The architect must believe in a better future of man.

Critical Regionalism stresses,

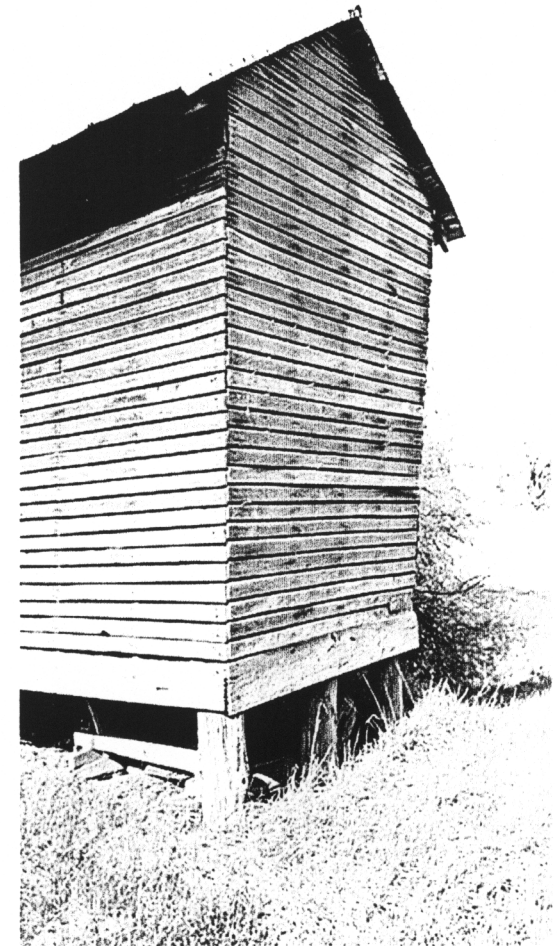
"Certain site specific factors from topography to the varying play of local light across the structure...Hence Critical Regionalism is opposed to the tendency of 'universal civilization' and favors a response to the specific conditions imposed by site, culture and light."

Kenneth Frampton

The humble barn rests quietly in the rural landscape. Its' purposeful, direct, pragmatic form give its' lasting permanence among our memories. Authenticity in its' form allow it to forever exist above a sentimental, loud architectural souvenir.



Details in area

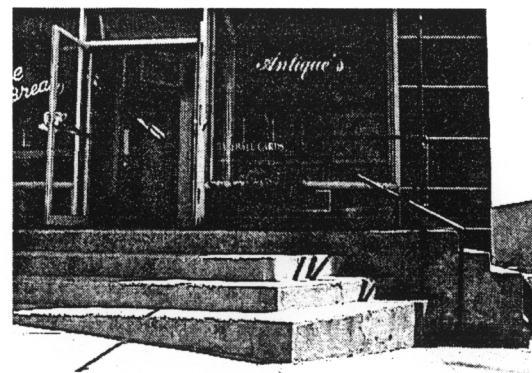


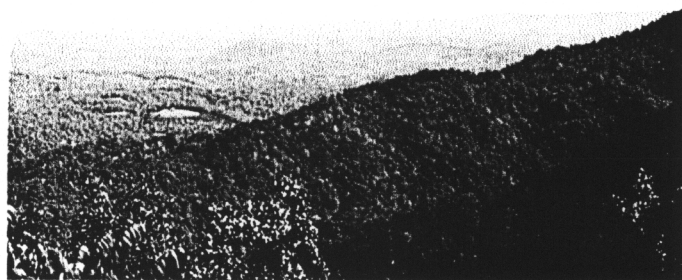
P R O C E S S

Context
Stuart
Findings
Place

*It is necessary to discover the architecture which the site itself is seeking...an inherent logic in the place..drawing inspiration from the sites formal characteristics as well as cultural traditions, natural resources, climate, city structure living patterns and age old customs.**

Tadao Ando





V, VI



VII

Located in the heart of the Blue Ridge mountains in the state of Virginia, Stuart, is a living tribute to small town America. Time has not stopped, but as residents will say,

"Things sometimes appear to move slowly in Patrick County."

Hints of a former town presence and memories of better times remain strong while the physical characteristics of the town are slowly fading away. Perhaps most importantly Stuarts' lost **"sense of place"** and unfocused town identity is in jeopardy of eroding to a dissolved memory.

The history of Stuart is remarkable, particularly if one relates it to the structure of the town itself. In 1791, the selection of Stuart, as the Patrick County seat sparked growth. The town responded accordingly with the development of "uptown", a humble civic center.

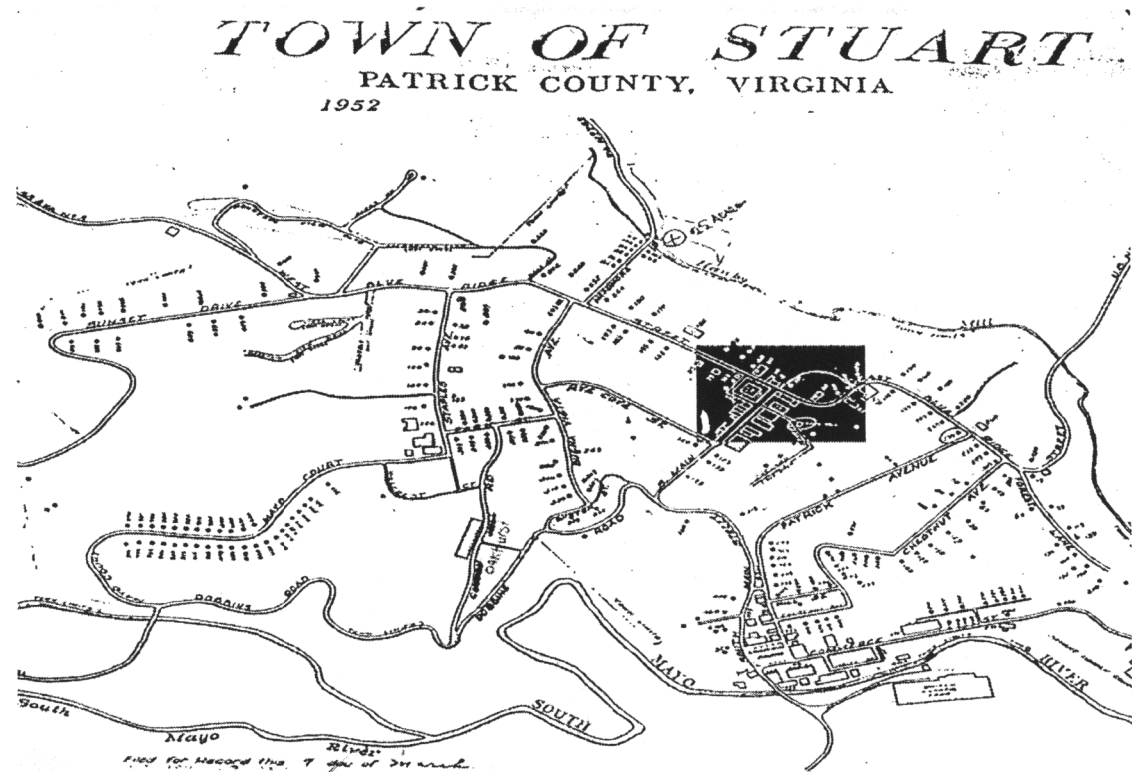
Concurrently, driven by an early dependence on the railroad, a discreet social, cultural, commercial "Downtown" flourished. Although the town plan showed rather far-sighted sensitivities towards growth, little dialogue was exchanged between these two distinct town centers. World War II had a crippling effect on the health of Stuart. Americas' need for war steel and subsequent removal of the railroad constituted the death of Downtown. With this move essential urban components had been severed. The future vitality of the town was in question.

Some time after, the city fathers had the foresight to focus their attentions on Uptown and create one unified town center. Single minded buildings stand in place as failed attempts to unite the town. The critical residential component remained distinctly outside Uptown Stuart, following a suburban model. Perhaps most importantly, still missing from Uptown is the essential quality of place...a state of mind.

Christian Norberg-Schulz describes Morphology as:

"Built form, with local characteristics, that hold the spontaneous power of saying, 'I am in Venice.'"

By recognizing the need for one town center, Stuart has refocused to Uptown. This thesis attempts to refine an existing town structure by reestablishing a distinct town center and creating a response, ***"I am in Stuart."***



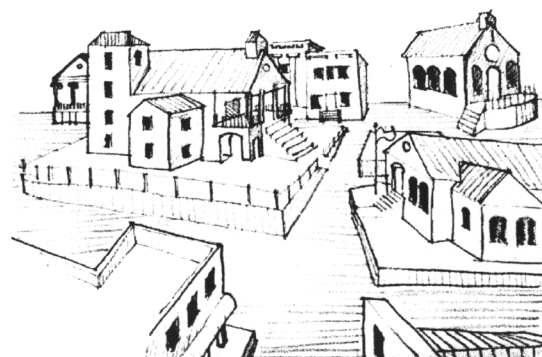
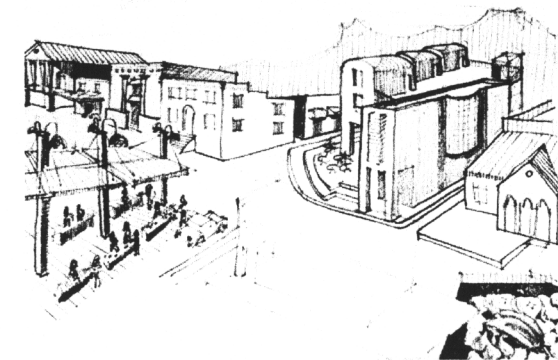
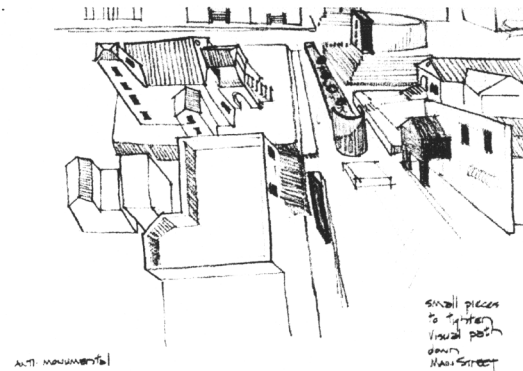
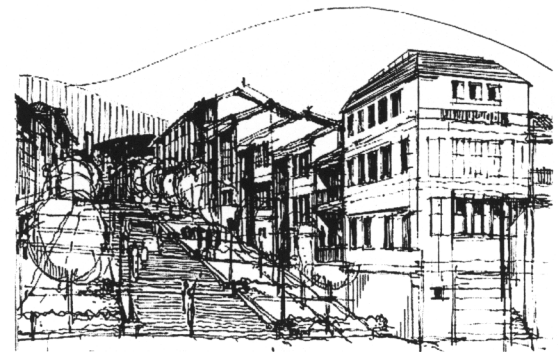
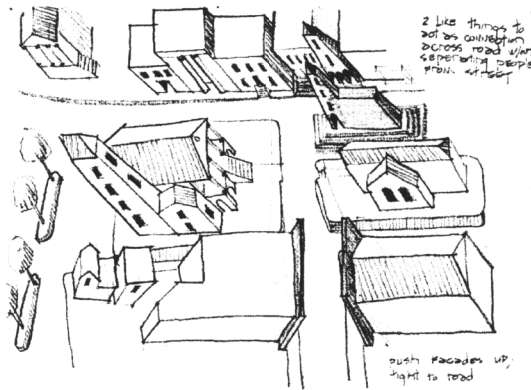
Residential Stuart



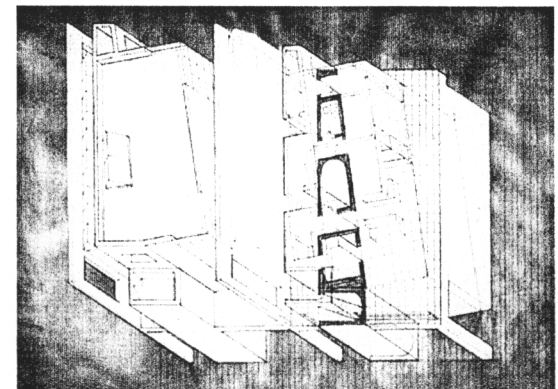
Downtown



Uptown



Focus on Uptown



Early developments

While the built form of Uptown shows hopeful aspirations for development, as evident through the towns civic monuments, the realities of the place fall short of the dreams of its residents.

Pride and memories, however, remain strong.

Through an engagement in the place, certain conditions were found in an attitude towards building in Stuart. Associated with this attitude is a rather pragmatic method of acting and making from a standpoint of necessity and function. Through this rather direct process, both the corporeal object and a beauty associated with the act of its very making are born.

Connected to this process is an understanding of a vernacular found in the rural landscape and the small town. In this vernacular, aesthetic beauty is achieved through its' very making. The immediacy of understanding both its' function and reason

for being can be judged aesthetic. Theoretical discourse and allusion play little role in the design of Stuart. Through this rather direct process of making first out of function and necessity, reflections on and understandings of the act and the thing can be discovered.

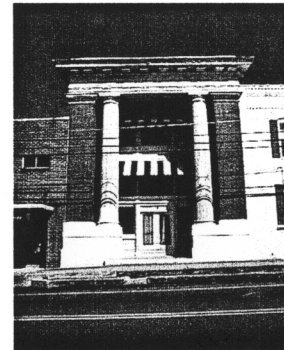
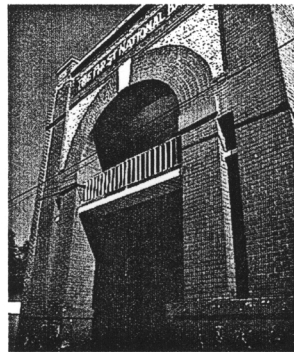
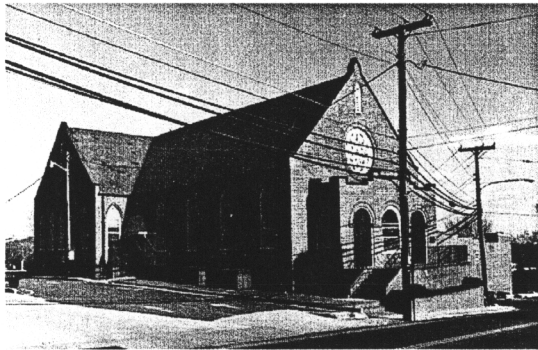
Stuart could be described as having architecture without consciously, "knowing it." Architectural thoughts and buildings exist under rules outside our discipline and should be judged on the experience they provoke or the way they are perceived.

By looking at architecture through these eyes, and understanding building in this region, an appreciation for a valid vernacular was developed. Judgements as to the ability to call it Architecture is left to the mind of the observer. One could judge both the process and many times the resultant objects to be aesthetic artifacts.

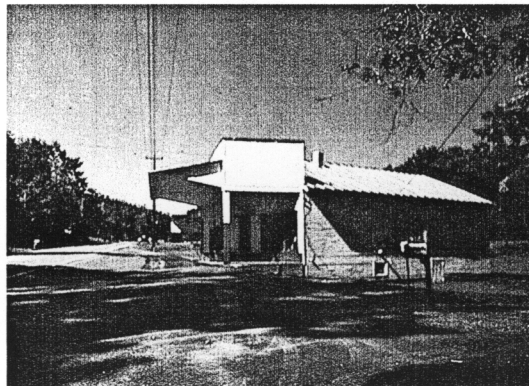
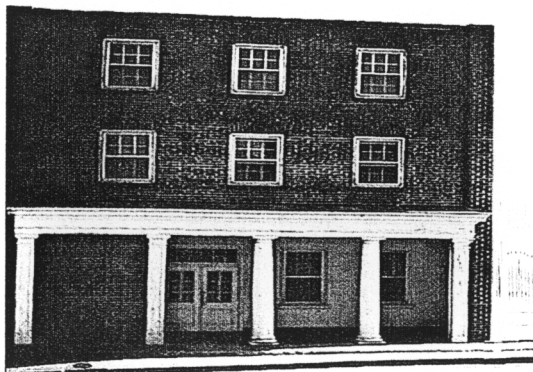
This process of building in Stuart can be likened to the essence of Sol LeWitt's art. For LeWitt, art lies in the "idea" which he has connected to intuition rather than theory. He is far more concerned with how things are and how they come about, rather than how they end up looking. The power of his art lies in its very process; **"Creative Discovery"** in which the elusive idea is something born in the process of making and reflecting. Beauty lies in both the act and the object.⁵ The viewer simply comes to the process in reverse, beginning with the object and working back through the concept to the idea that sparked the concept and object.

In retrospect, this thesis attempted a similar process of "drawing out" the idea through a process of acting and reflecting on the thing as opposed to a predetermined demonstration of architecture.

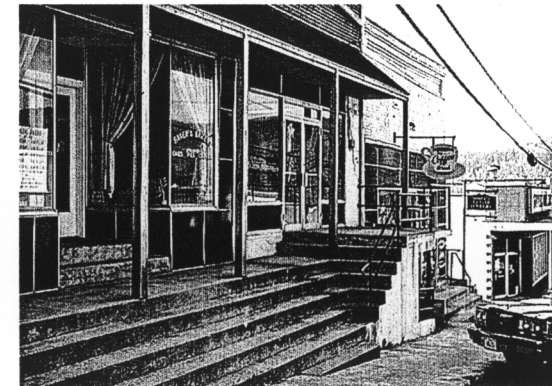
Through a consistent application of this rather pragmatic process of doing first, reflecting second, and understanding last the "Why" is developed.



Stuarts' civic monuments



Curiosities



*"Order is conceptually founded on a condition of inequality."
Aquinas*

An understanding of this quote would suggest the necessity of hierarchy to allow for us to make order of our world. Aquinas' insight has a direct relationship to architecture in a similar necessity for order. For a hierarchy to exist, a relationship of parts in which one part exalts itself over another must be present. It is in this relationship that the observer finds order. How they interact allows for the making of rules. Through this understanding, order is an involvement of parts, a relationship of parts, to create rules.

In an attempt to create an architecture that responds directly to recapture a "sense of place," the application of a similar process of establishing a hierarchy is developed; one that exalts the "place" from the field it resides in.

The act of creating this **sense of place** in the context of a town must be assertive and critical of current suburban trends of the town, but also responsive by way of employing local cultures and traditions.

Again the architect is in a constant dialogue between:

self as autonomous - original artistic expression
culture bound - tradition as the basis for individual creativity

Consistent with an understanding of the place is the concept of Heterotopia; a cohesion or unity achieved through the expression of parts. Phorphyrios describes this condition of heterotopia as:

Discriminato: Imposing and investigating the primary investigation of difference

Convenientia: referring to the adjacency of dissimilar things so that they assume similarities by default through their spatial adjacencies

This thesis attempts to use a similar idea ; an engagement of dissimilar things to bring order. The essence of the idea, as a tool to make decisions, resides in the moment of change when two entities come together, interact and redefine each other architecturally. This process allows for the beauty of the individual to be expressed as well as a resonance developed by its' location to other objects. It is the celebration of this moment of change, when forces come together, that this project is all about.

The proposal is ordered around a combined understanding of these principals of place and makes a statement on a range of scales all ordered around the theme of, "Engagements."

Town	Housing engages Civic Center
Plaza	Place engages direction
House	Wood engages brick



Main Street



Bellinzona, Switzerland at Carnival



Prague

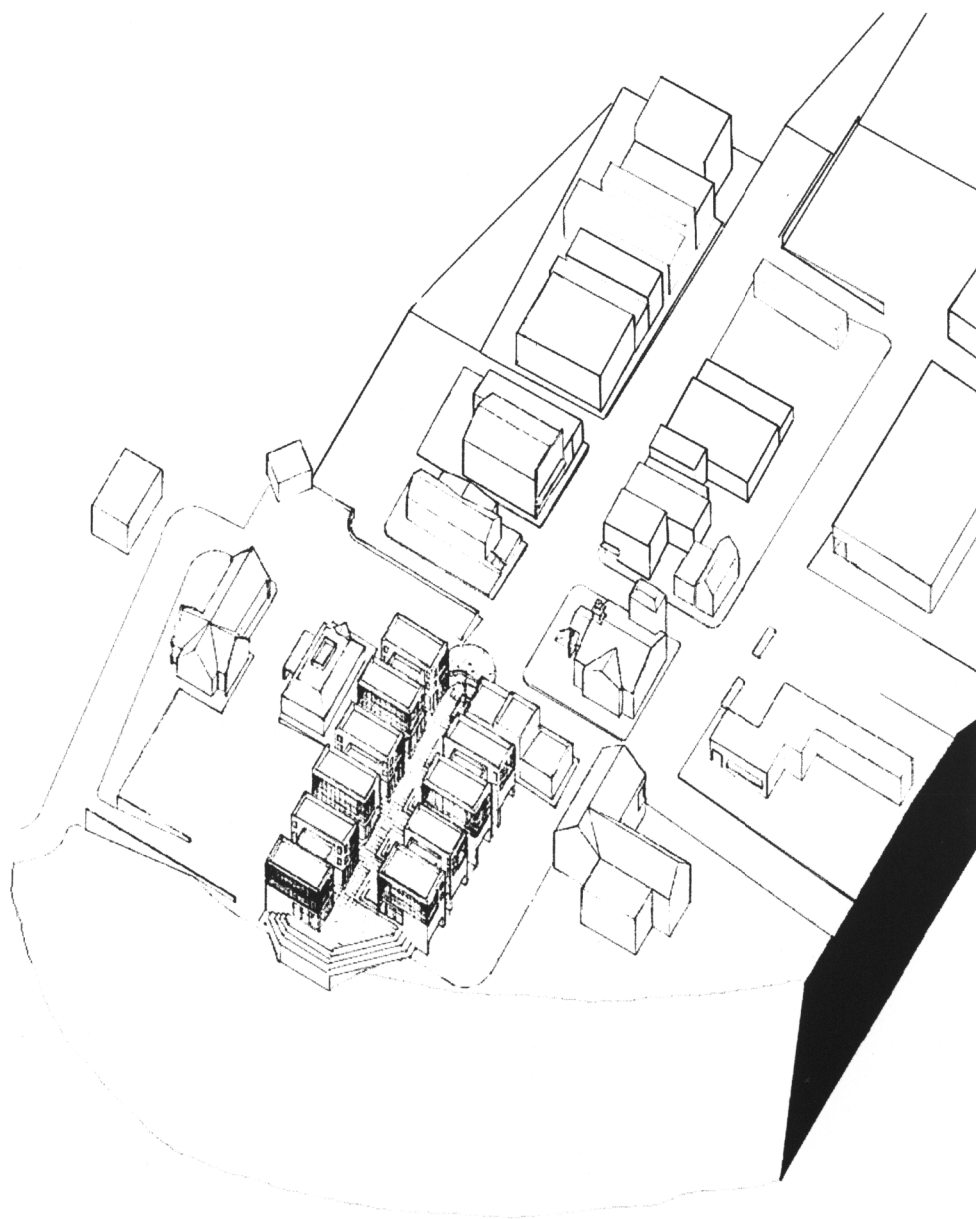
P R O J E C T

town housing engages civic center
plaza place engages direction
house wood engages brick

*"The street is one of the first institutions of the city,
where the buildings opposite each other talk to each
other."*

Louis I. Kahn

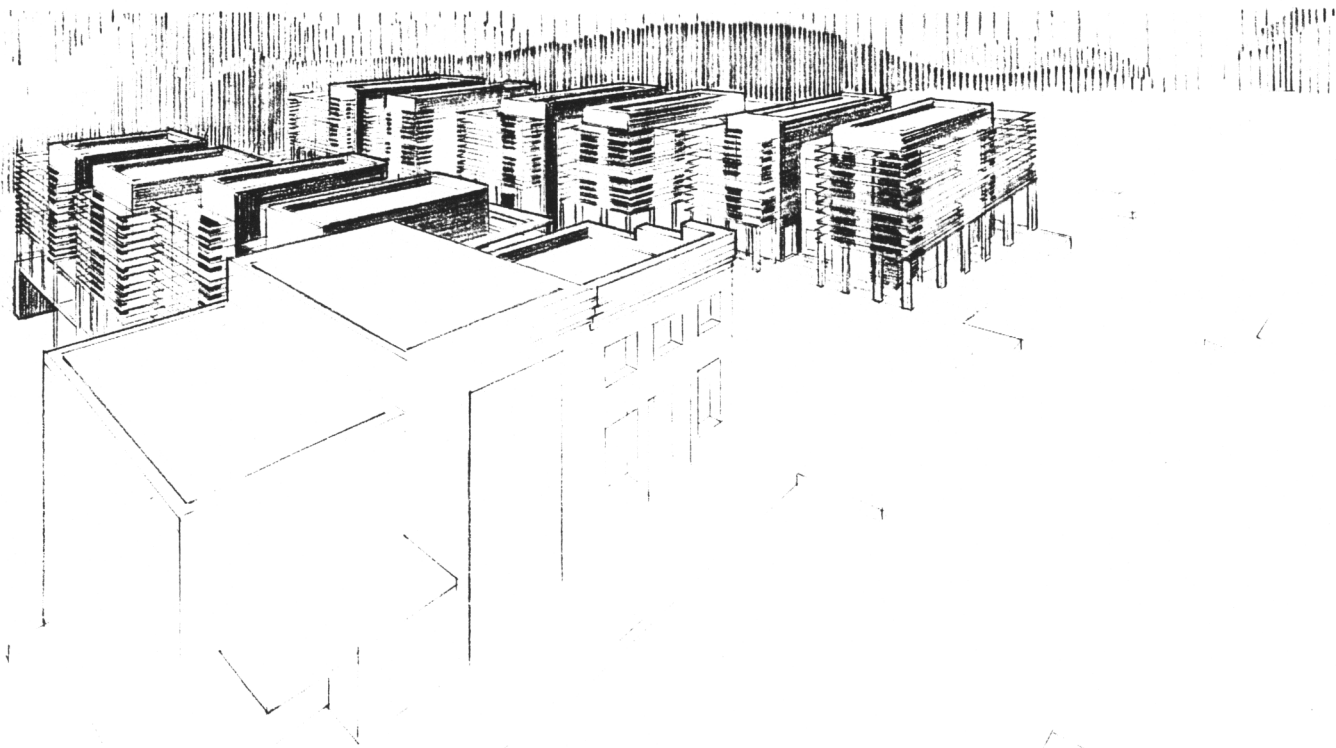




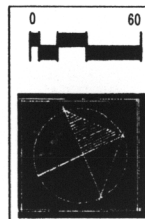
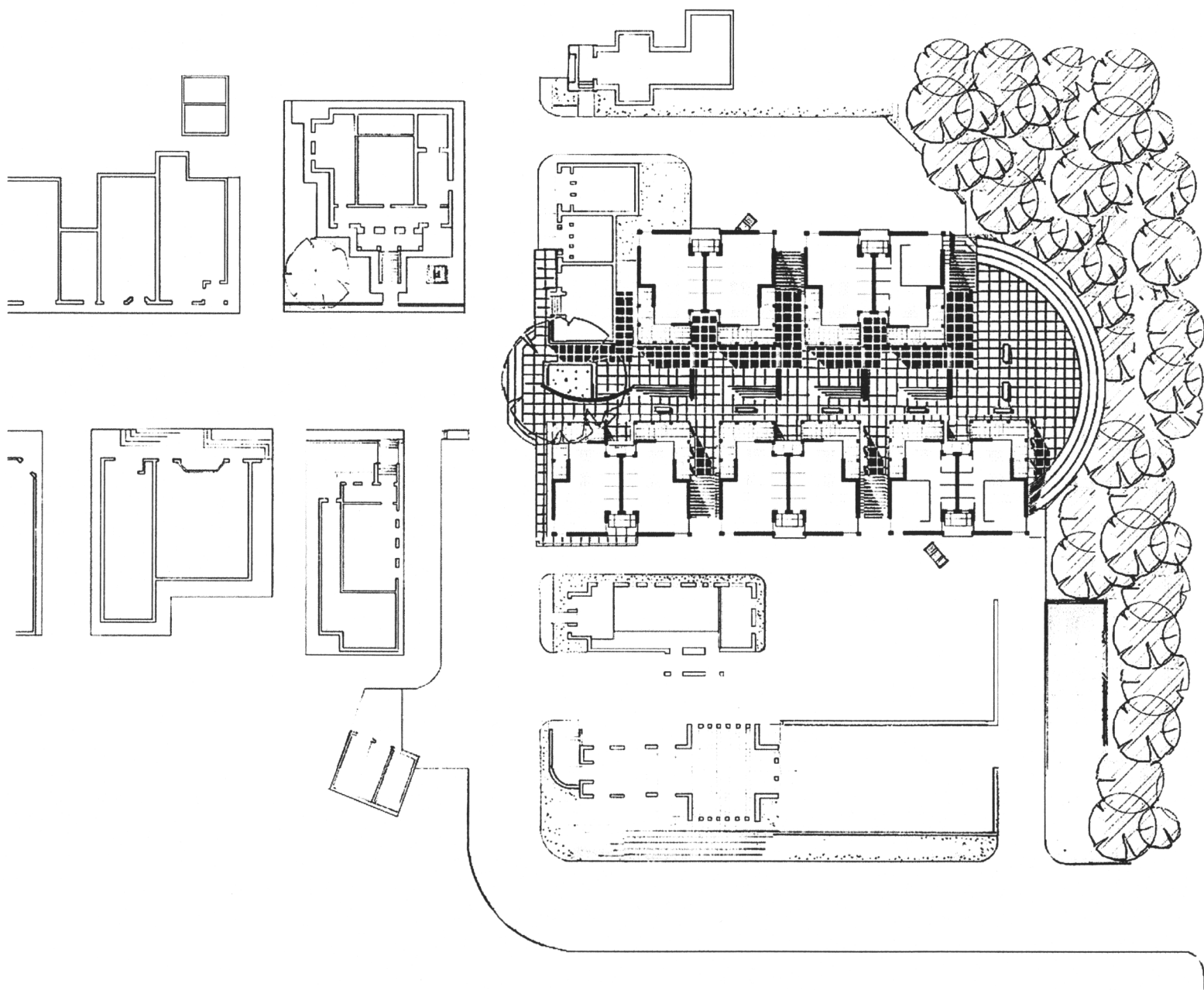
"A great city is not a loose conglomeration of high profile buildings, but a densely woven fabric in which the buildings are part of the whole...if the streets and sidewalks are designed to encourage life and activity, the architecture in its public role as a street wall will flourish."

Robert Geddes





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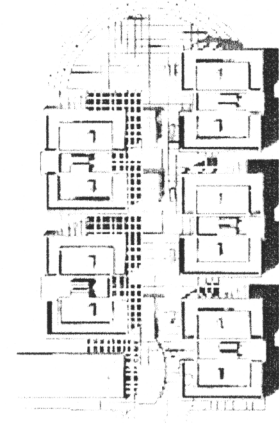
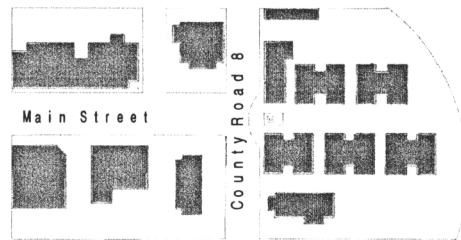
Fronting the intersection of Main Street and County Road 8, the site has existed for many years as an unresolved curiosity.

Situated somewhere between the rural and urban landscapes, the site bridges a distinct edge condition of town. Its' location is monumental; the end of the towns only axis and the beginning of the untouched landscape.

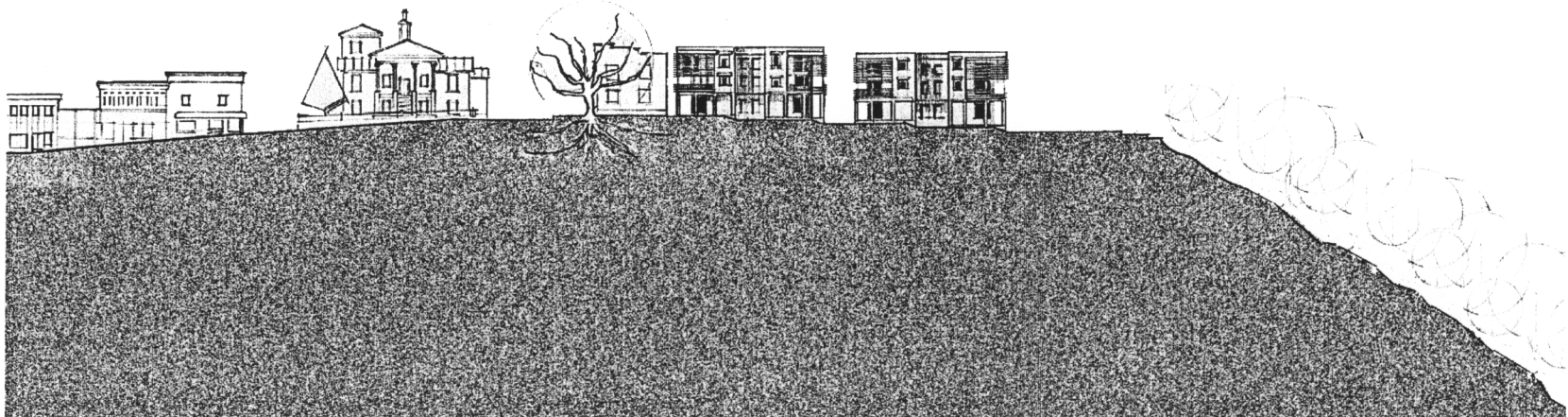
Seen as a necessary act for the town, the proposal places a housing community in this critical location primarily because it functions as an essential ingredient required to extend the life of the town itself; acting to catalyze both cultural and economic spin-off activities



site



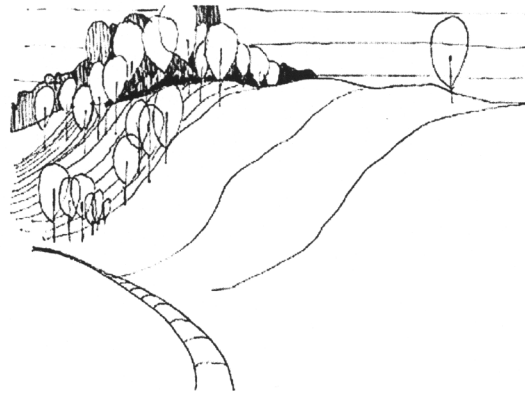
Section through plaza



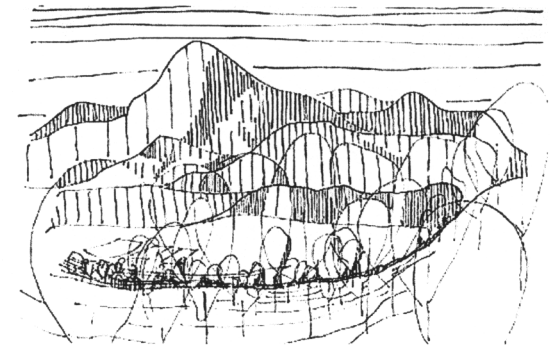
The proposal sets the public space on reciprocal grounds as the buildings. Place is created as an intensification of Main Street with aspirations of continuing the existing patterns of town. In this sense the proposal develops a parti that inextricably ties the building to the context in a manner that tends to disguise the limits of the actual building lot...thereby linking the relative symbolic importance of the project to the town.

Kenneth Frampton talks of treating the act of building architecture as a process of "inlaying", which implies an understanding of the prehistory of the place, linking the act to memories.

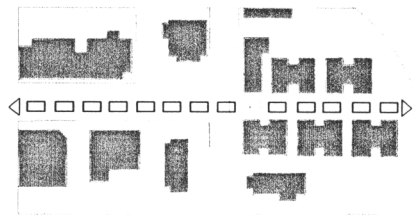
At this largest scale the project is assertive on the level of institution, house engages civic center, seeking to create place distinct from context. Additionally the proposal is responsive to town by continuing Main Street, working within the existing town structure.



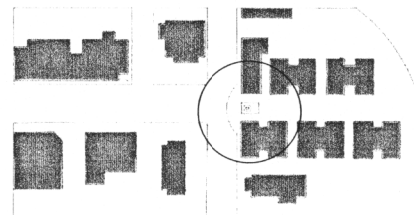
looking up to site



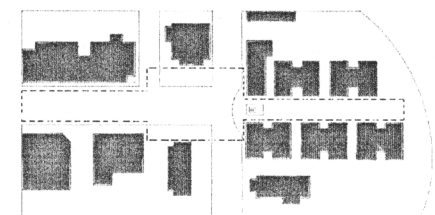
edge of site looking down slope



Direction

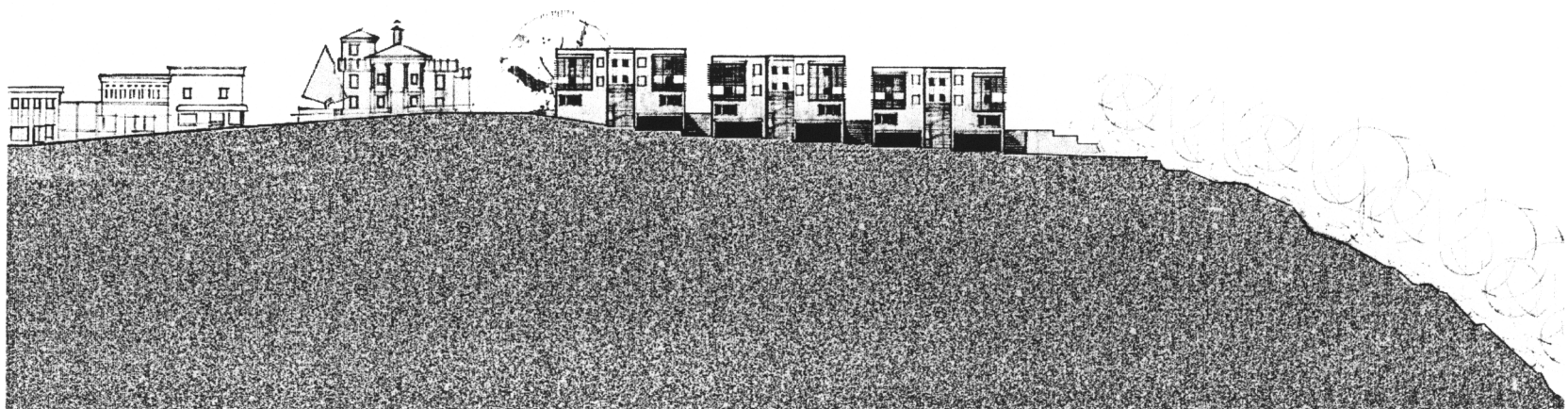


Center



Place

Section through parking



Christian Norberg-Schulz on discussion of general properties of urban form.

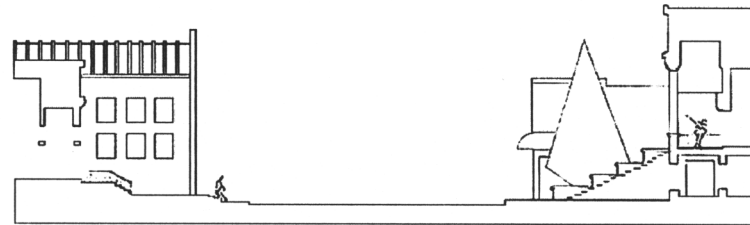
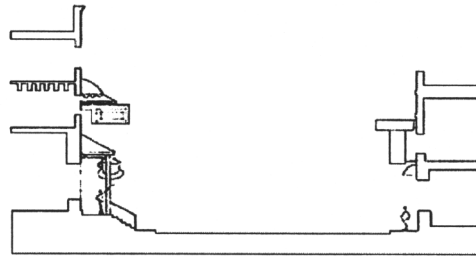
"All three must be present and reveal themselves, to allow for meeting, choice and spontaneity to occur;"

- I) Variety Urban space formation requires more than a simple togetherness
- II) Density Implies a close togetherness
- III) Continuity Urban experience as a continuous process

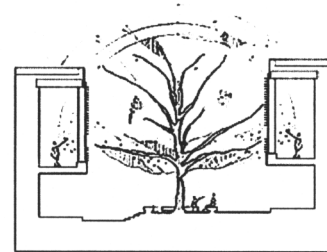
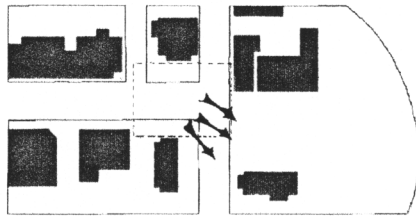
Street is in a constant dialogue between the figural buildings and the figural space of Main Street.

The scale of Main Street tightens to accommodate the pedestrian.

Main Street
Post Office - Courthouse
Site

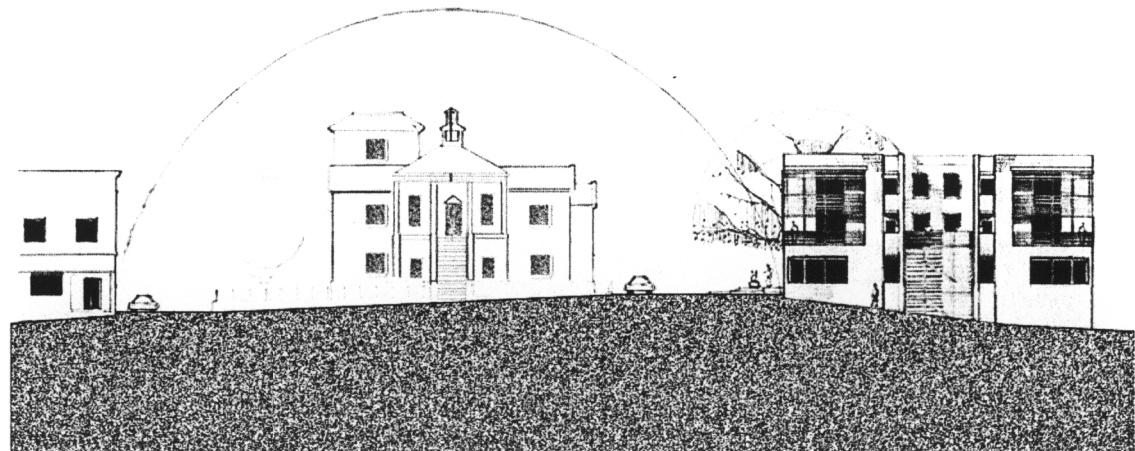
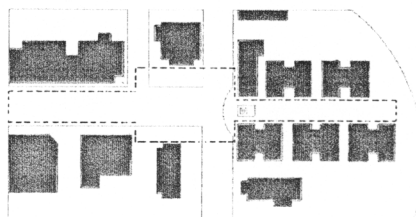


Existing



Missing from the town square is the firmness of the northern edge. The presence of the public room created by the towns civic monuments is missing. This thesis gives this quality of spatial experience back to the town by establishing an edge.

Proposed

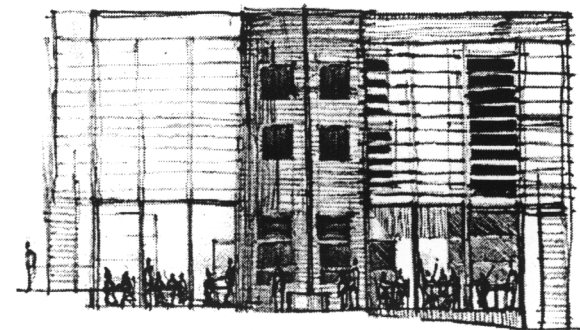


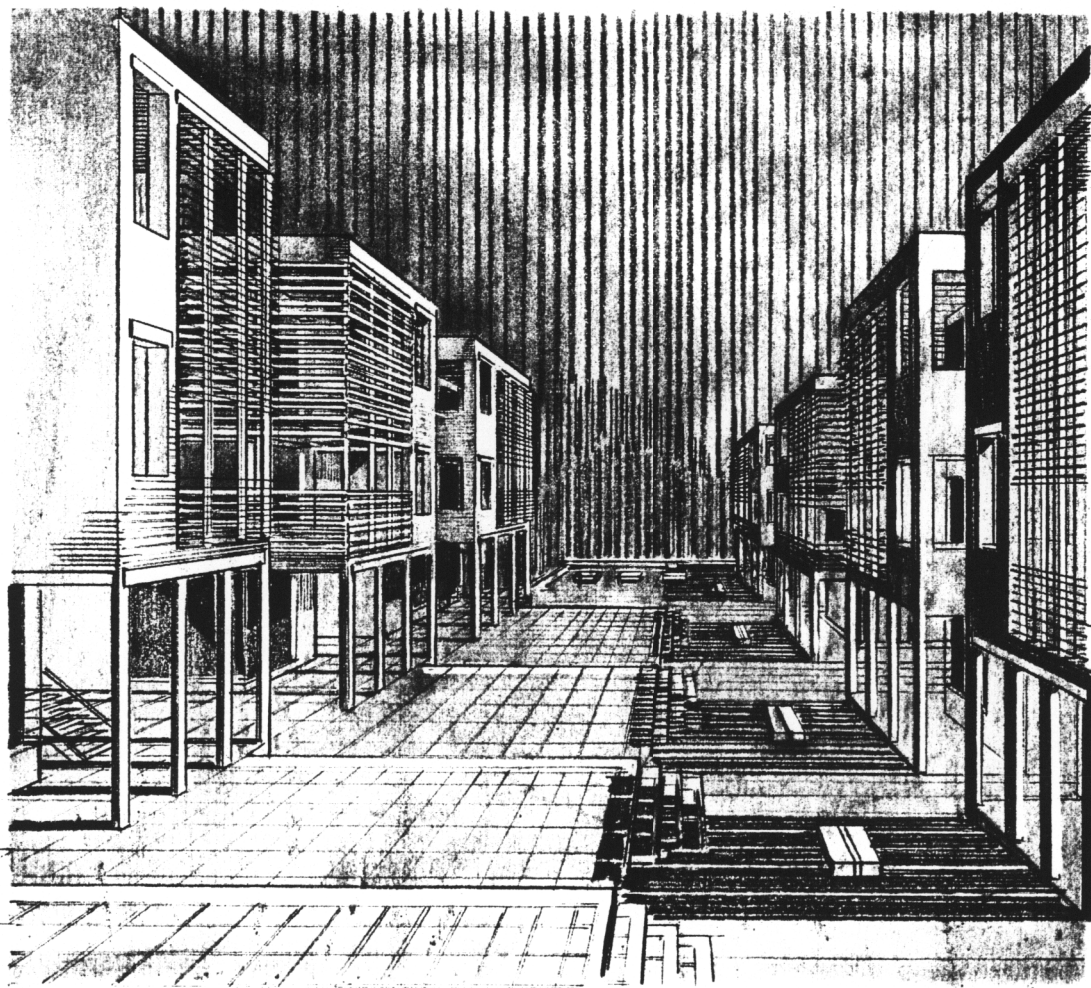
P L A Z A



"The square is a psychological parking place within the civic landscape. It makes a community a community, not merely an aggregate of individuals."

Paul Zucker

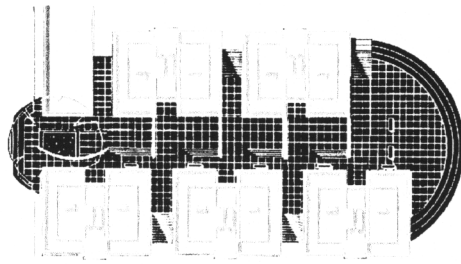




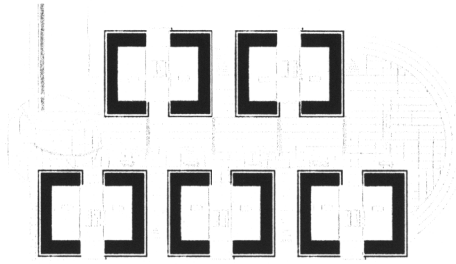
The plaza pushes into the intersection of Main Street and County Road 8, extending the life of the project and slowing the pace of the car.

The in-between acts to blur the directness of the plaza, the towns most public condition and housing, the towns most private. The screen acts as both a threshold between two realms, and as a figural object in itself.

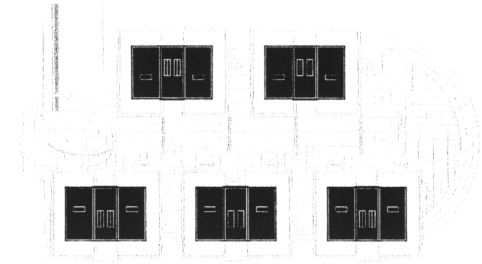
Three conditions exist in the transition from public to private at this scale of the project. The residents of the units experience the project through a series of layers.



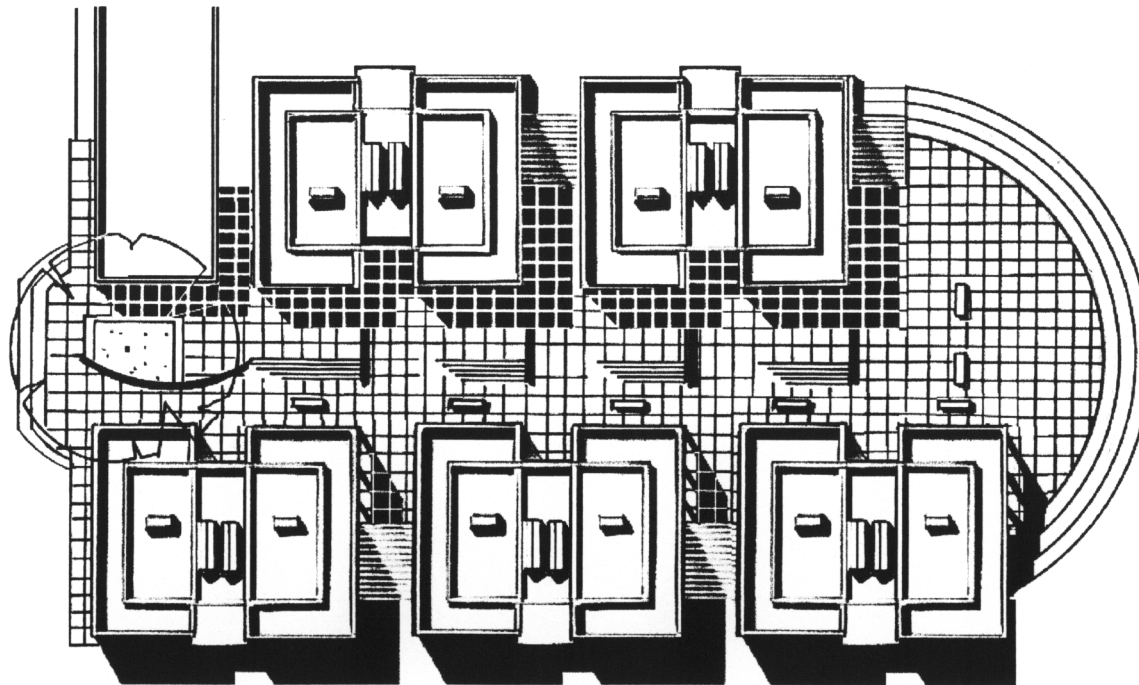
Public

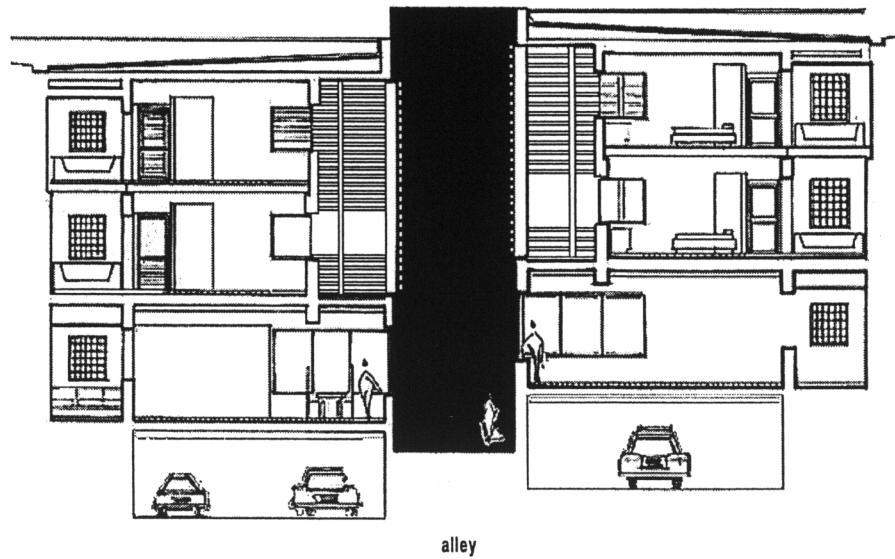


In - Between



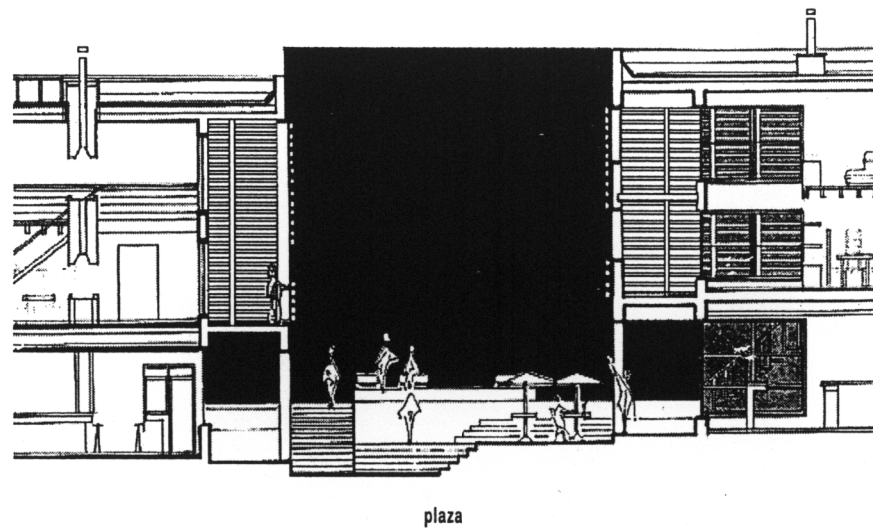
Private





The in-between has form. A figure is created by the relationship of one building to another. The varying proportions of the in-between develop a hierarchy of public, semi-public, and private spaces.

The wooden screen forms the edge of the town's public room.



The site slopes considerably, because of this the plaza extends down the hill, blurring the edge between nature and man. The units, similarly, step down to meet the hill. They are paired and have gaps between them to create a rhythmic pattern in elevation and allow for light to enter from the sides.

This pattern was found through an existing condition on Main Street. Alleys or gaps existed between buildings, the shops, however, failed to take advantage of an opportunity to grab light and oriented solely to their street fronts.

The proposal, while responding to the established pattern, critiques the missed opportunity to create architecture by orienting both to the street and the alley.



...The street level is public except for the two units facing the slope of the hill, which become flats.

...The central plaza is a public place where residents interact with the town; an engagement of public and private.



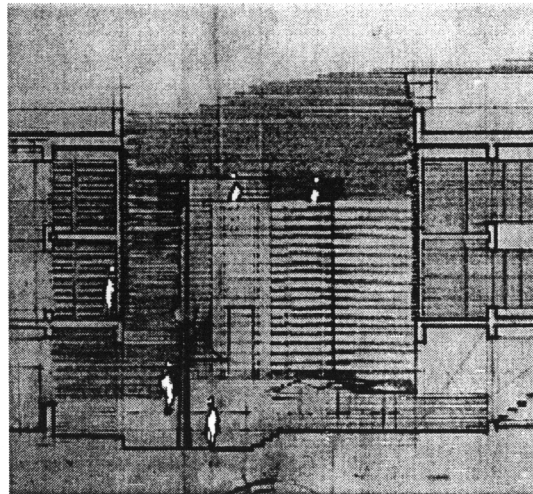
The physical presence of the tree represents an idea, a memory, a recognition of a desire to mark the center. In an attempt to place a locally significant intervention at the exact point of transition from town to housing, the tree marks this intersection.

Specific to the history of Stuart is the story of the Liar's Tree; a place where locals to come, gathered and told fish tales about the, "one that got away." In direct relationship to the County Courthouse, the Liar's Tree set up a poetic dialogue between itself and the towns center for truth.

In an attempt to regain some of these memories this thesis replants an oak tree.

Early attempts recognized the potential of this condition to establish both a physical, perceptual place and a point of transition. Suggestions for the architectural artifact were offered. These objects, while responding to physical conditions present in the place, did little to symbolically contribute to the traditions and memories of Stuart. All attempts left this essential tie to, "Stuarts' sense of place" unresolved.

The tree answers to itself as a direct, pragmatic monument to the town. In this sense it represents the "right" thing to do here. Its immediacy of physical, cultural and symbolic understandings are consistent to the ideals of the thesis and the town.



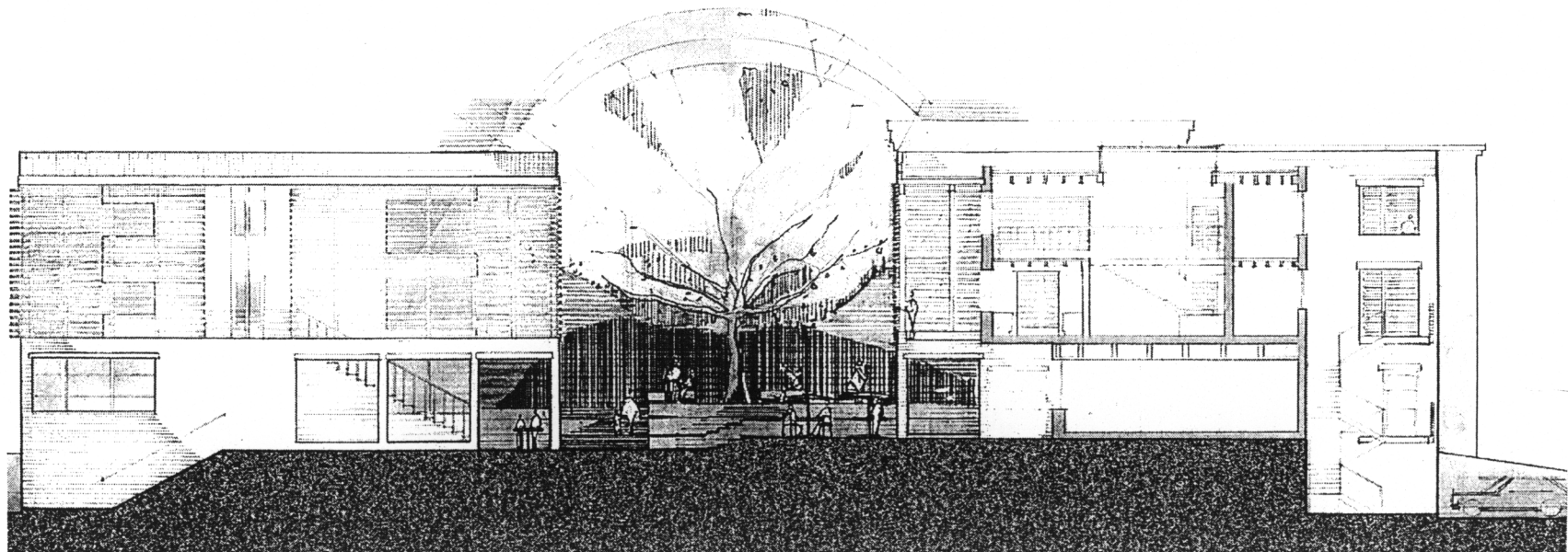
Pavilion-observation tower marking this place of transition.

The placement of the tree responds to different concerns present in the place.

...It reestablishes a dialogue with the courthouse lost with the removal of the Liar's Tree.

...It marks a point of transition, from housing to civic center, acting as both a point of termination and continuation. A place for endings and beginnings.

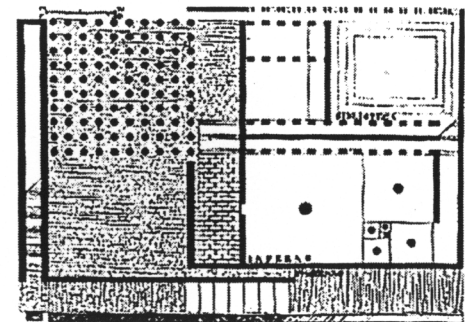
...It allows for a street level transparency necessary to maintain the sense of continuation of Main Street, while still marking a threshold.

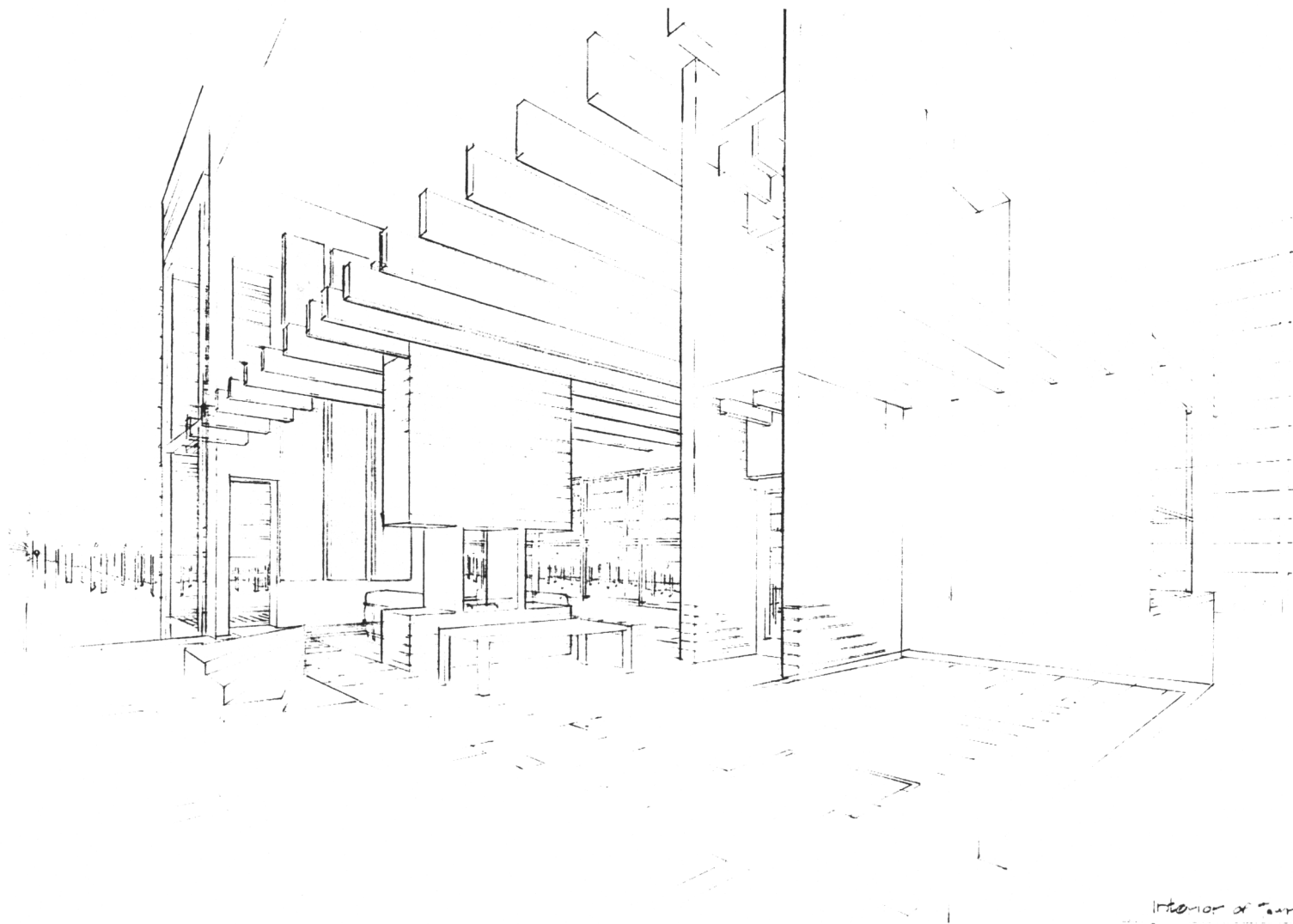


H O U S E

"Home is a collection and concretization of personal images of protection and intimacy that help us recognize and remember who we are...home is a mediator between public and private life... the emotional impact of home is related to the act not the object, the act of entering, not the door...the act of gathering around, rather than the hearth or the table."

Juhani Pallasmaa

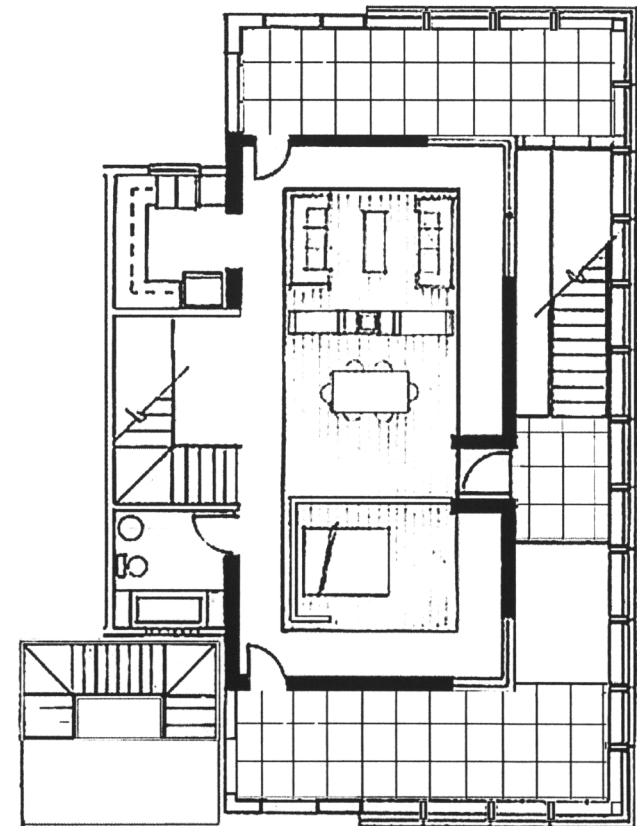
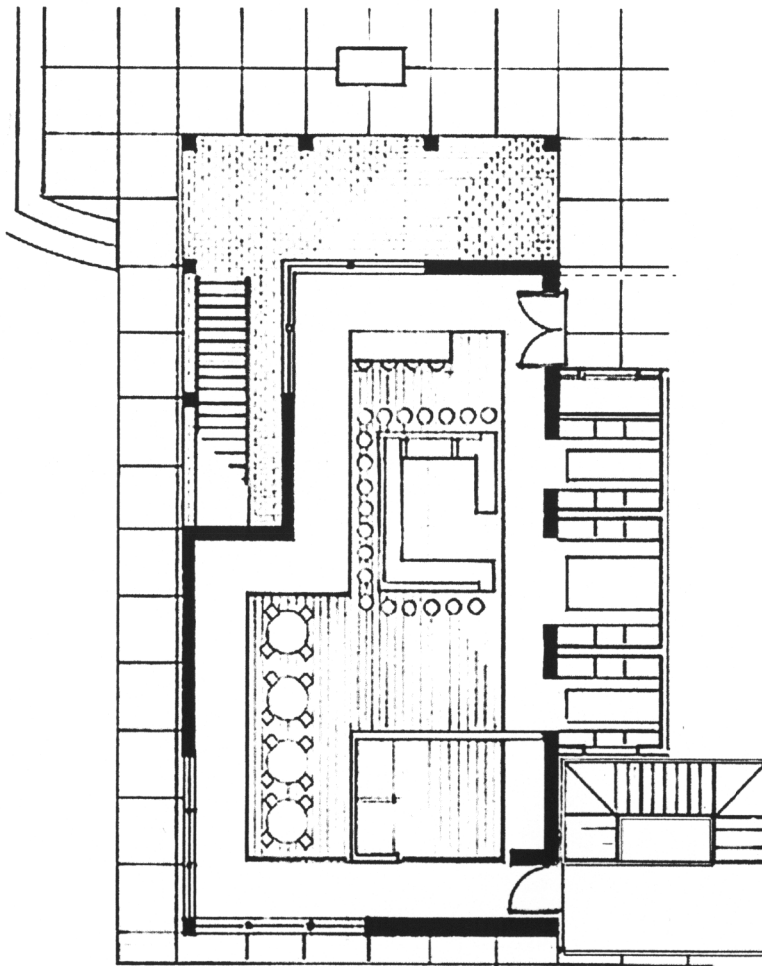
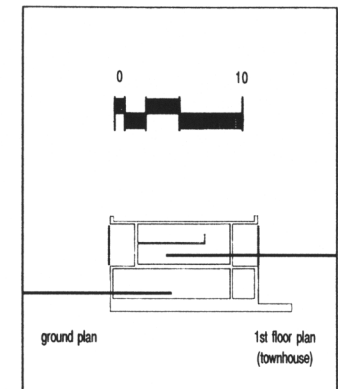


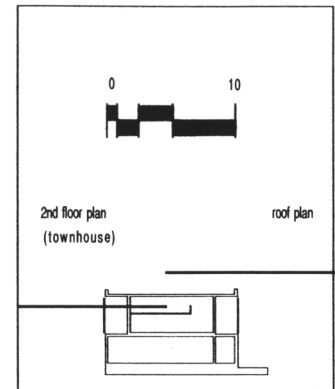
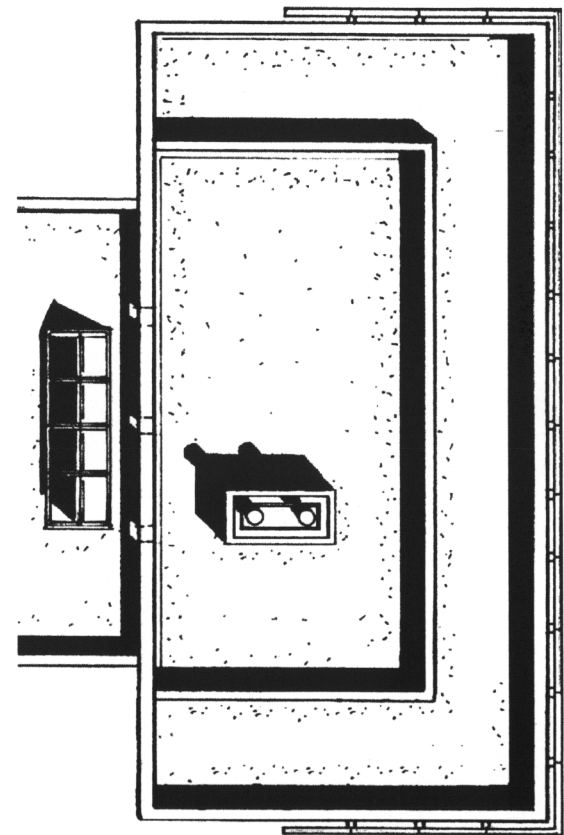
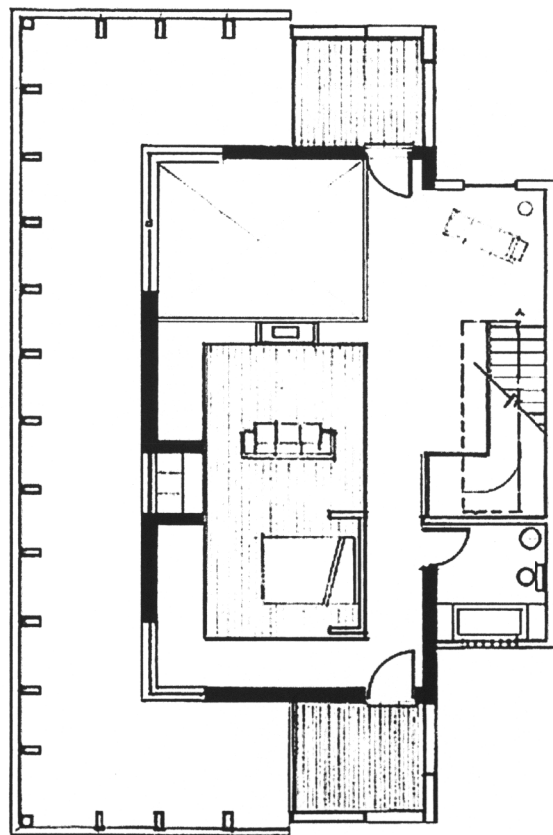


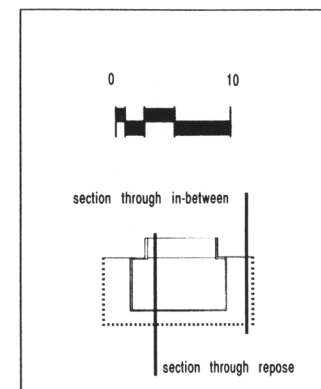
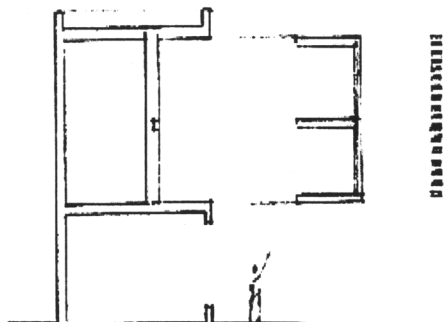
Interior of Townhouse 4
E

The houses are ordered by served and servant spaces and are defined by a simultaneous condition of circulation and repose. By pushing the services and circulation to the edges of the plan, a simultaneous condition of dense center and center as void is created. The Danteum, on the previous page, employs a similar strategy in the creation of its plan.

The housing units are small consisting of both townhouses and flats. All have porches that provide for connections with the outside world. The living spaces are pushed forward and orient to the plaza.





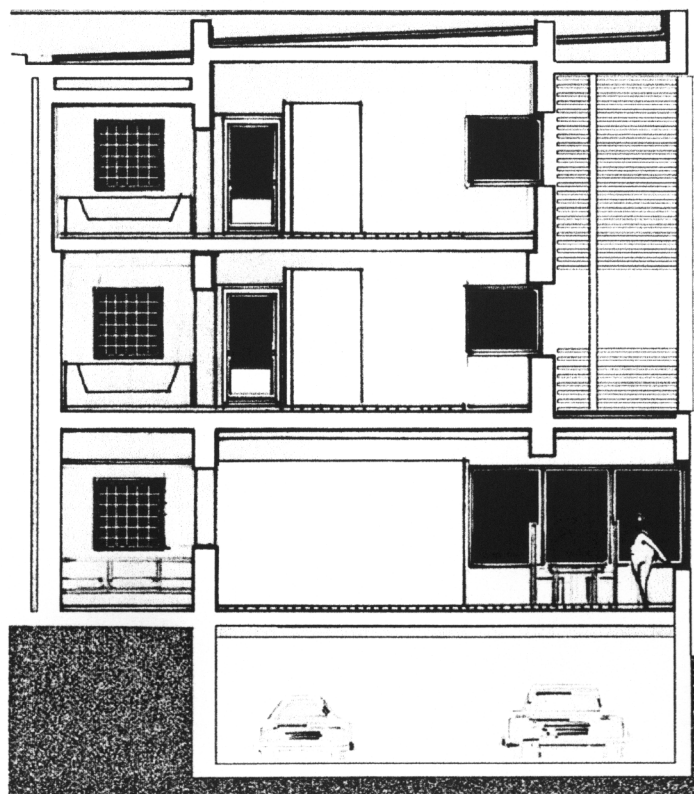


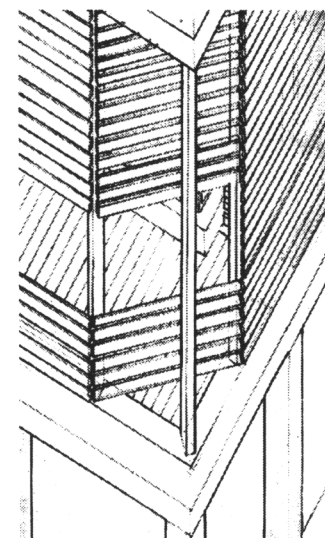
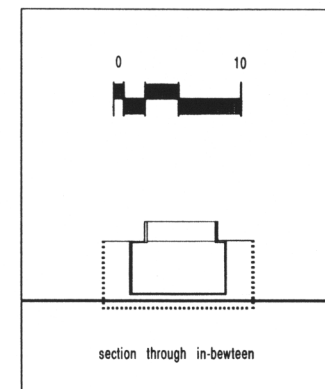
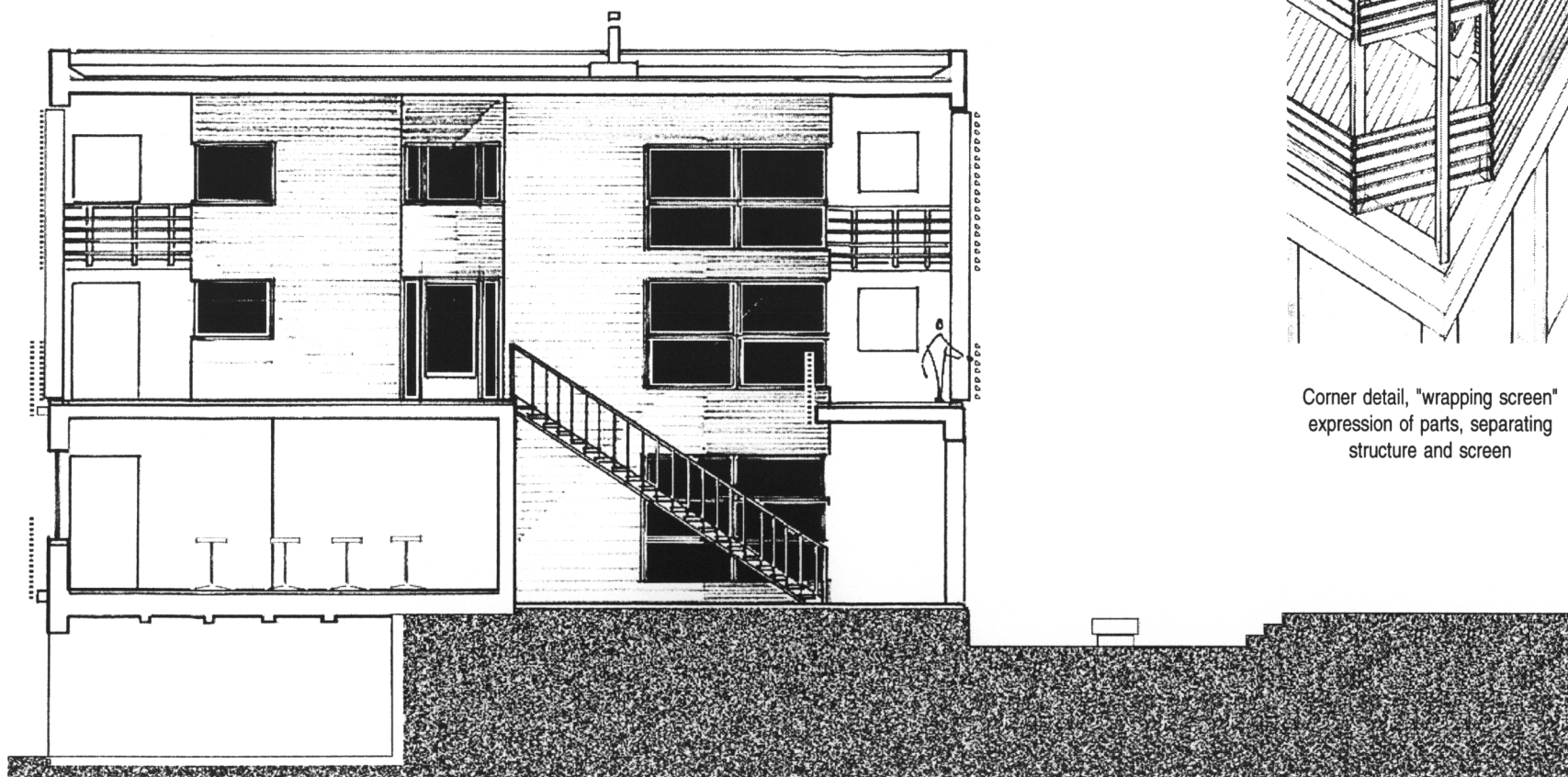
Each unit is defined by a combination of:

brick as core of house

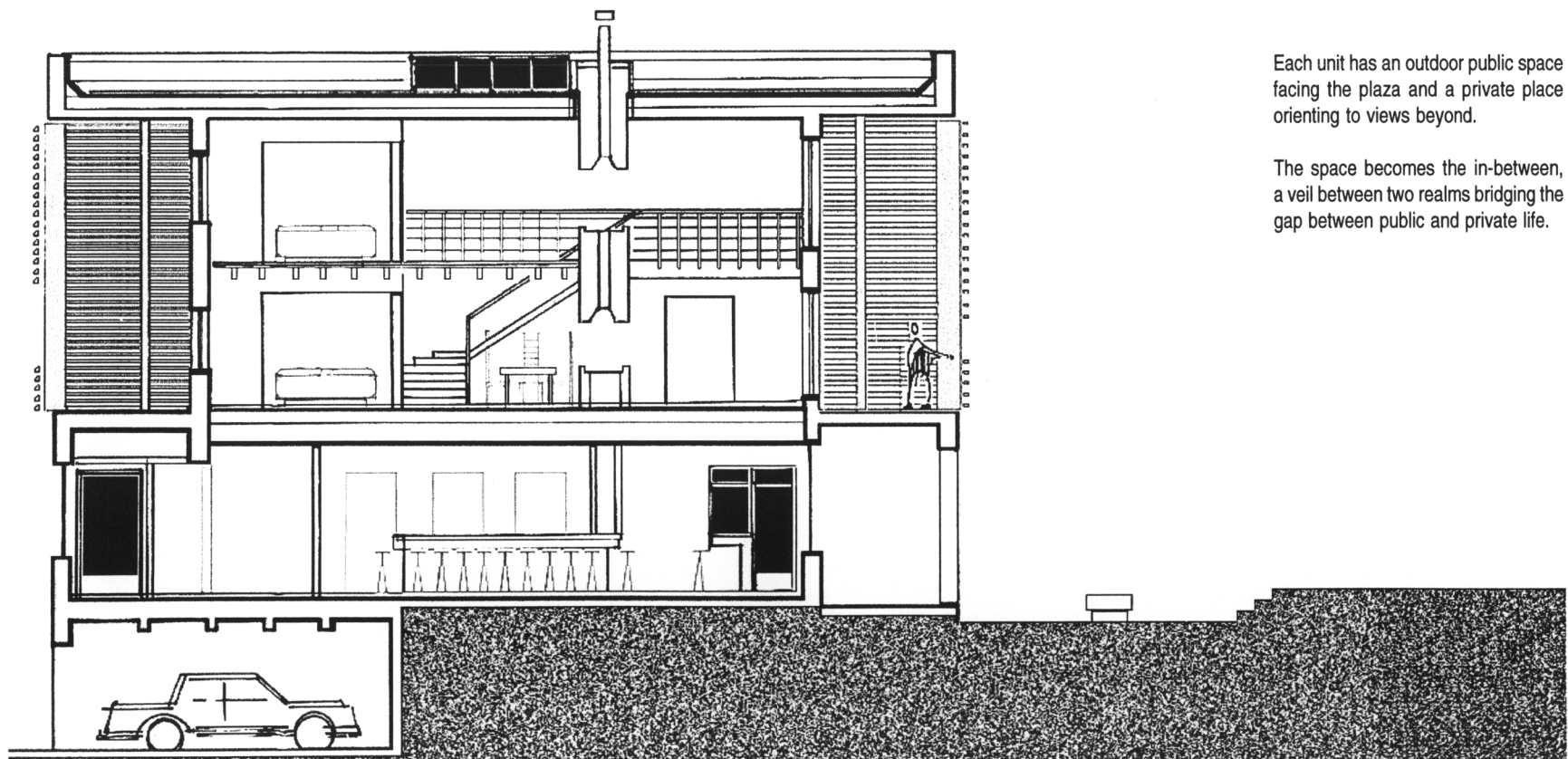
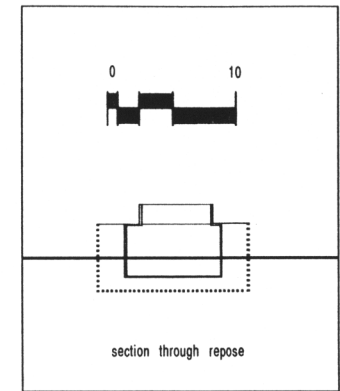
timber as columnar structure

wood as screen and lateral support



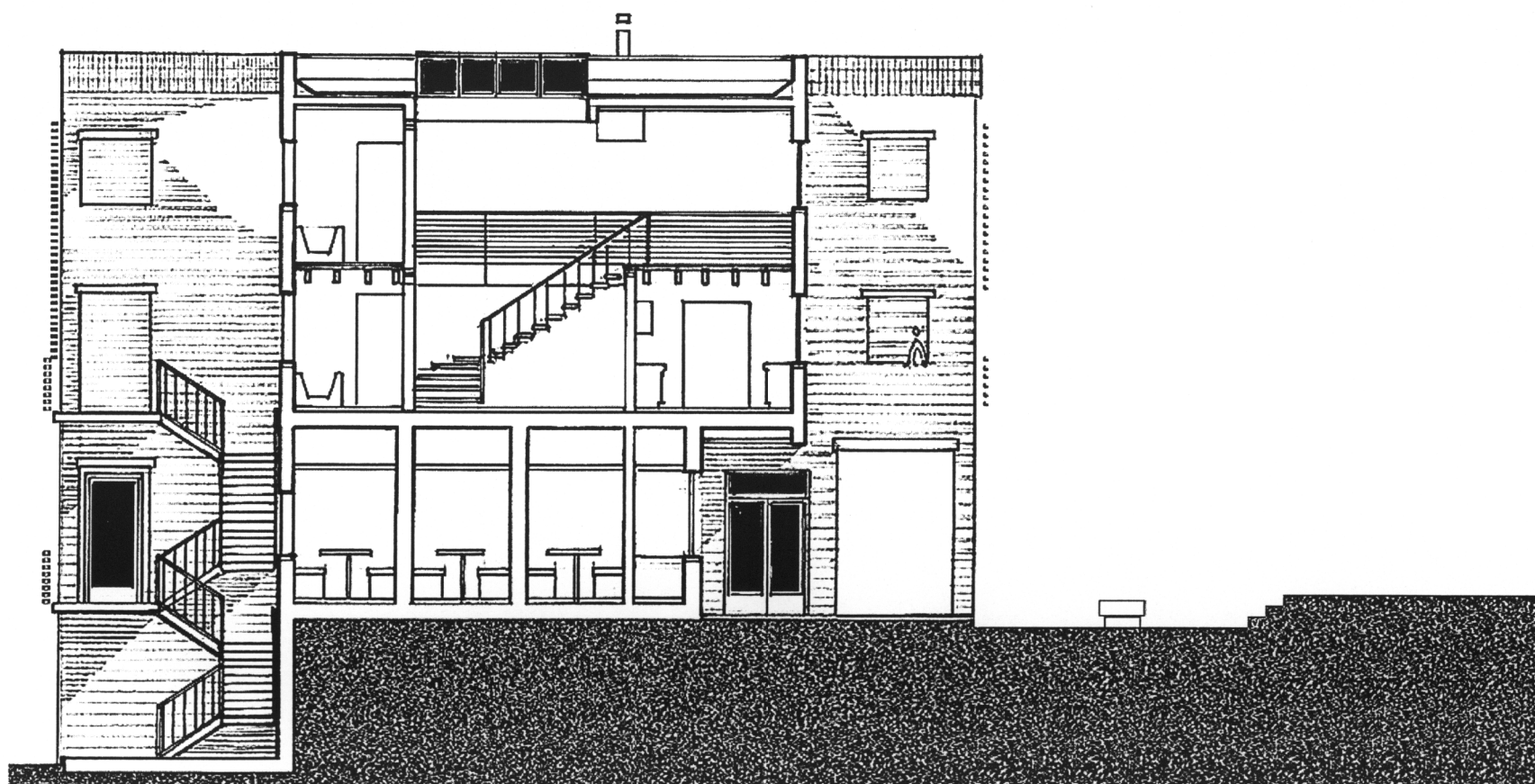
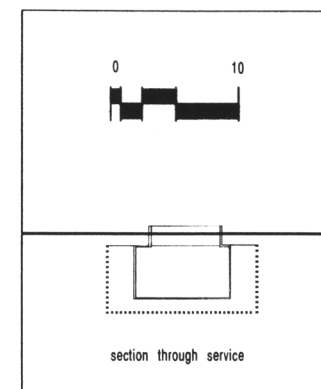


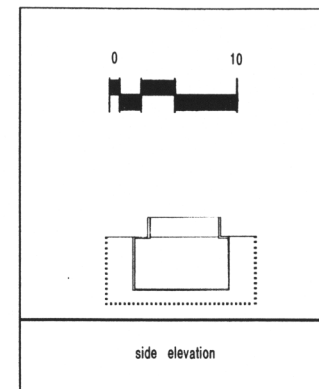
Corner detail, "wrapping screen"
expression of parts, separating
structure and screen



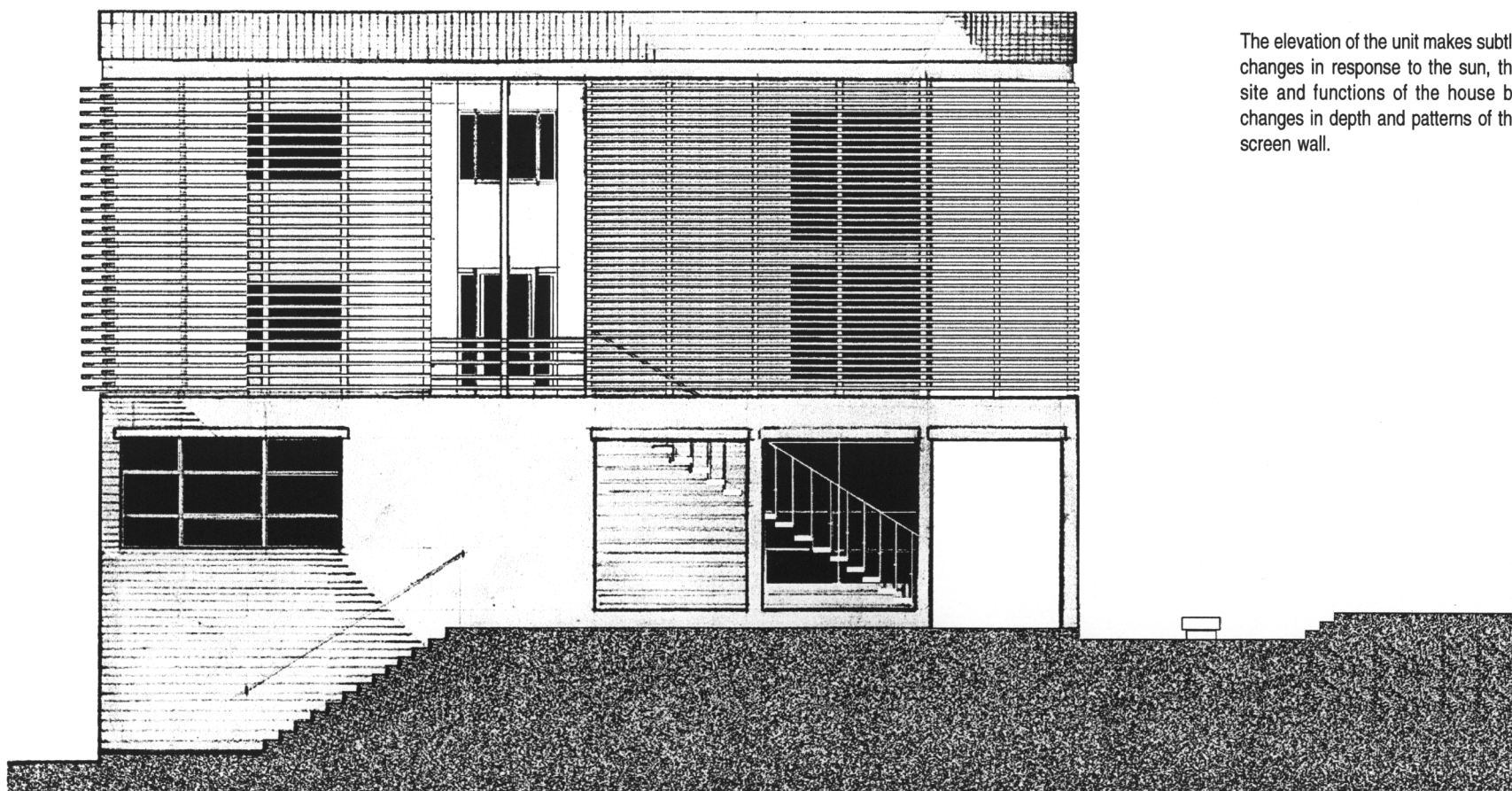
Each unit has an outdoor public space facing the plaza and a private place orienting to views beyond.

The space becomes the in-between, a veil between two realms bridging the gap between public and private life.

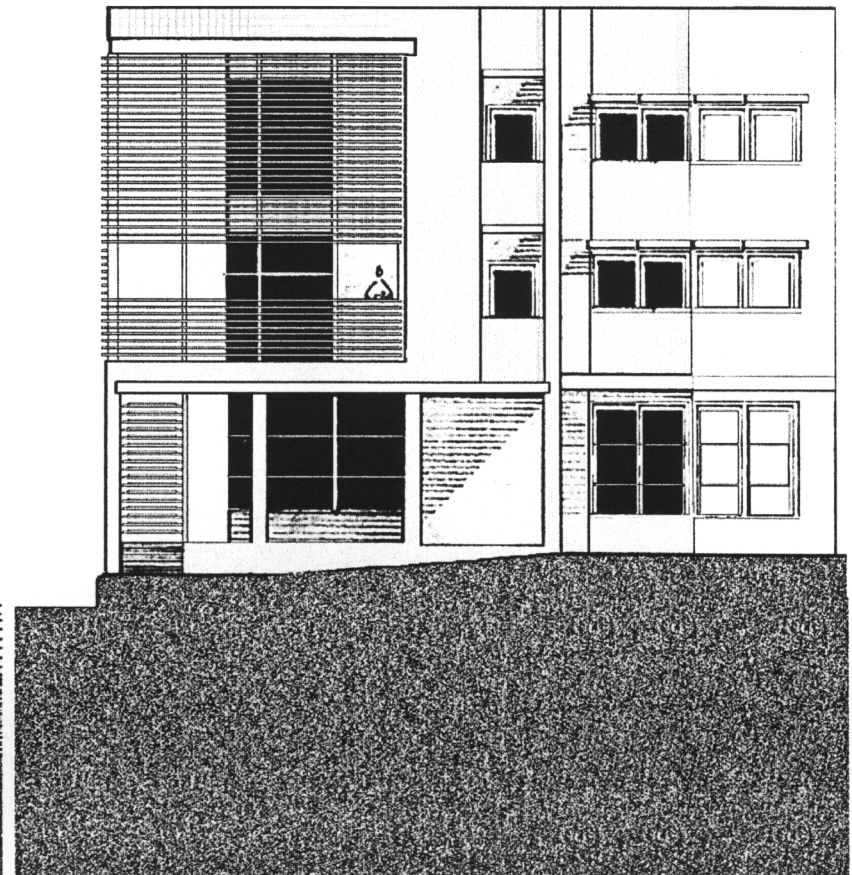
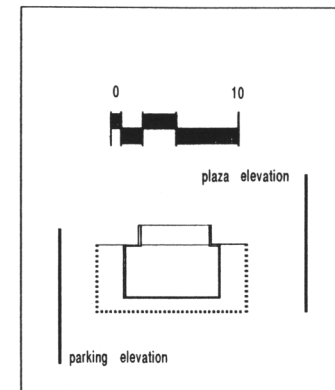




The elevation of the unit makes subtle changes in response to the sun, the site and functions of the house by changes in depth and patterns of the screen wall.



Taken from the local method of barn construction, the screen wall acts to provide the cross bracing. It has the dual responsibility of structural support and visual break. Its' application to the timber construction is a simple moment connection. In keeping with the local traditions, it chooses to create architectural significance by its repetitive nature, essentially the whole becomes greater than any one of the parts. Overdesign of the screen would render it loud, bringing too much attention, against the nature of the local vernacular custom.



END NOTES

1. "...Where the traditional city is composed of corridor streets, grids, squares etc, the "city in the park" locates isolated buildings placed with little relation to the figure of the public space or each other." Thomas Schumacher on Colin Rowe's studies on urban design at Cornell University, late 1960's.
2. "...In contrast to frontalism, born out of a static conception of life, the new architecture will reach a great richness by developing an "all-sided, plastic" way in space and time." Theo Van Doesburg, *24 Points of the New Architecture*, 1924.
3. Point one in, *An Architecture of Critical Resistance*, discussing the naive utopianism of the early Modernists. Kenneth Frampton.
4. Taken from *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, critique of an argument for the emergence of a "new American vernacular." Today's real "places" are roads, loading docks and parking lots becoming places in themselves rather than means to get to places.
5. LeWitt describes his mind as, "Plodding... I have to know A, B, C, and D. I can't go from A to D without knowing what is in between. I can't think of an end at the beginning because I'm not sure what the middle is. I can't imagine the thing until it is done." Unpublished talk by LeWitt to Nova Scotia College of Art, March, 20, 1970.

IMAGES

- I. Volksbrauch um Jahreslauf, Munich 1964
- II. Main Street, Stuart
- III. Corn Cribbs, Ellet Valley, Virginia
- IV. Detail of stair in Stuart
- V. Blue Ridge parkway, Patrick County
- VI. Mill, Patrick County
- VII. Poplars at edge of site
- VIII. Composite of Telc, Czech.
- IX. Street life in Utrecht, Netherlands
- X. Danteum, Guiseppi Terragni

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