A Transitional Home in The City:

Rebuilding the Layers of Daily Life

by
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Bachelor of Fine Arts
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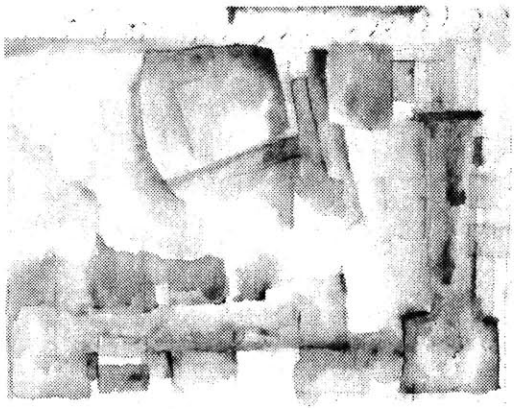

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MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE
OF TECHNOLOGY

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on February 12, 1990 in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Architecture

Abstract

This thesis explores how the architecture of a place can be informed by an understanding of psychological needs. The project is the design of a transitional home in the South End of Boston. A transitional home is a place where homeless families reside during their difficult journey from crisis shelter to permanent housing. It is a place that offers physical and psychological protection, two essential components of shelter. The architectural layering of territories is examined as a way to ease the effect of the crisis, or make the emotional transition of its residents a smoother one. The suggestion is that the architectural form of the home might be designed by applying an understanding of the emotional crisis of homelessness.

The thesis is organized into two general sections. The first discusses the crisis of homelessness, the relationship between the transitional home and the broader community, and the programmatic and emotional needs of the residents. The second defines three psychological stages of crisis. It is the interpretation of these three stages and the needs associated with them that drives the design exploration, in an attempt to make the building more sensitive to the needs of the residents.

Thesis Supervisor: Renee Chow
Title: Lecturer

Dedication

To Jan, for your criticism and enthusiasm: it is greatly appreciated.

To Molly for all your insights into this project, and the sweet doses of inspiration between edits.

To Renee, for your ever-perceptive design critique and for reminding me that it took Van Eyck twenty years!

To Sevag, Don, Tim, Mahmood, Craig, Paulo, Bill and Chiong. Thank you all for your very generous help and good humor.

To Sabina, Clyde, Rick and Patrick for dear friendship, critique and many cherished good times.

To Yomi, Laya, Ellie, Nonnie, and Bruce for your love and friendship.

Most importantly, to my parents. Thank you both for your love, support and encouragement. This is for you.

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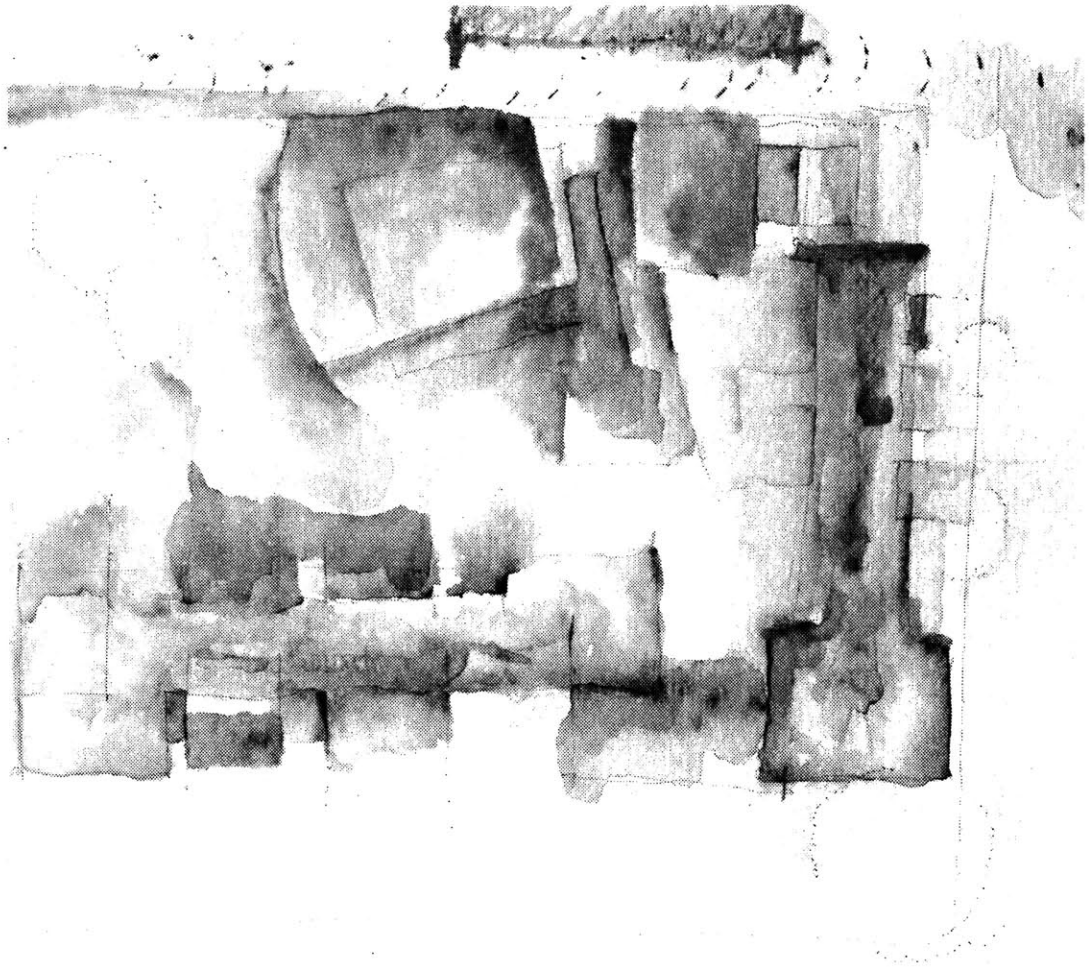


Preliminary Plan, watercolor on Strathmore

"Continuity is essential to a personal sense of meaning."
Kathleen Hirsch, Songs From the Alley

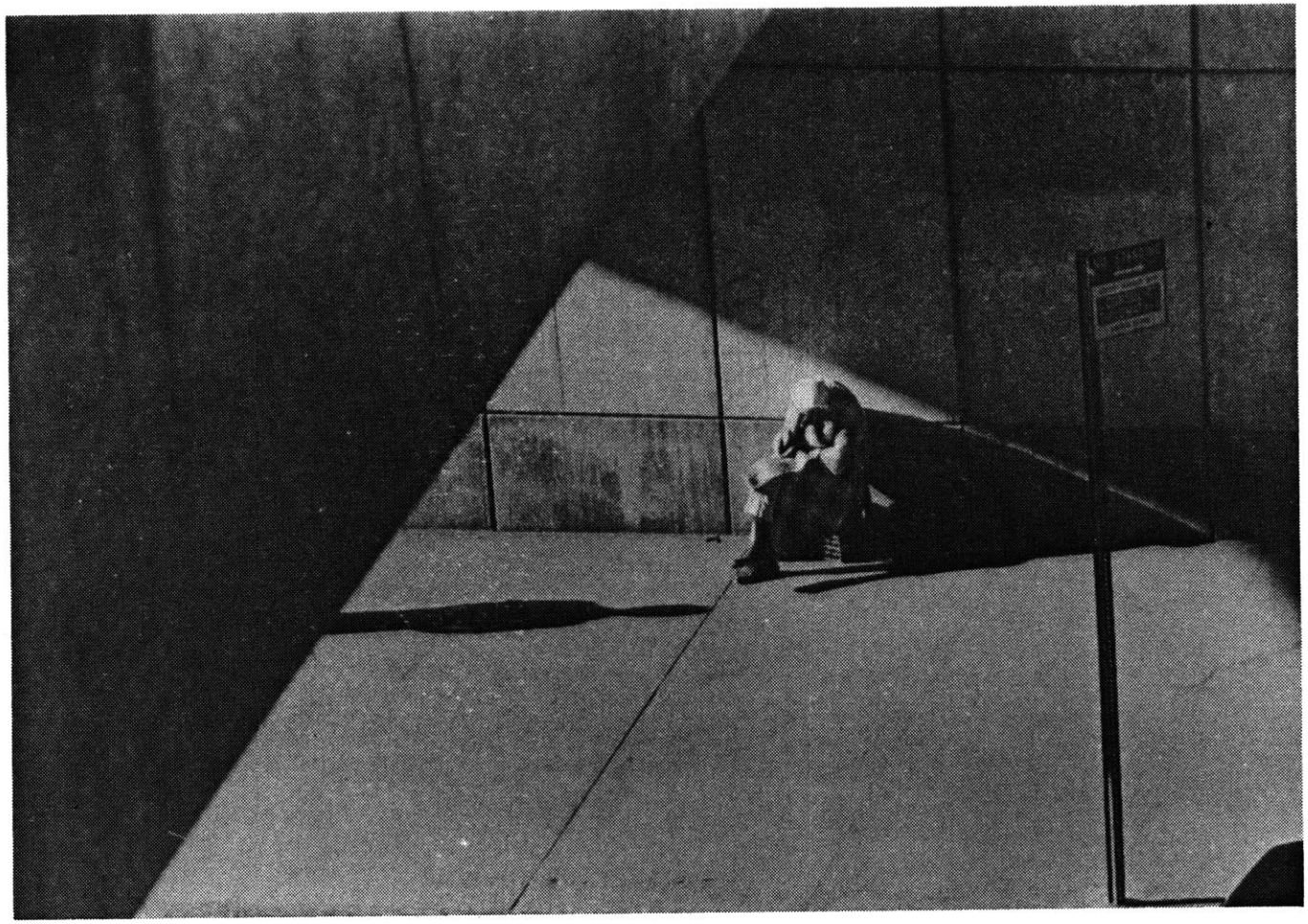
Homelessness, in its simplest terms, is a lack of the physical structure that we refer to as shelter. The problem, of course, is far more complex and cross-disciplinary, but to aid in its solution one might begin with physical structure. To satisfy the requirements of physical shelter is the primary role of architecture. But architecture has the capacity to include other disciplines in its study. And an equally important corollary to architecture's role is to provide psychological security through shelter. Through architecture we are offered a connection to the larger world about us, but are given protection from it at the same time.

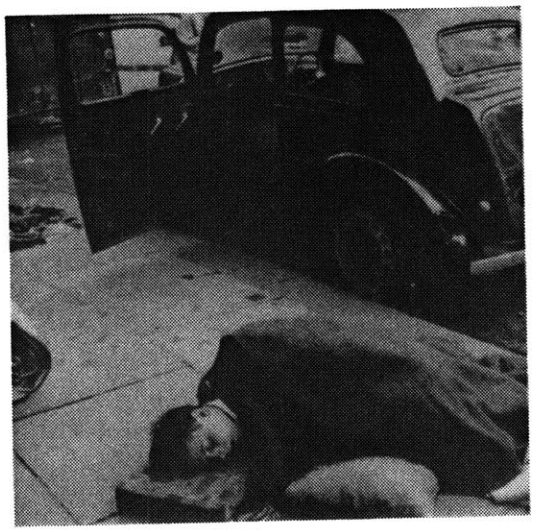
The quality of the shelter, however, does not necessarily produce contentment or psychological equilibrium. As Kevin Lynch pointed out, "One can be miserable in an island paradise and joyful in a slum"[1]. So perhaps one cannot put the burden of satisfying essential human values upon architecture. In no way, for example, will physical form correct the social maladies of society or the gross inequities affected by our government.

Architecture and psychology, however, do work in partnership. To build the complete entity that is shelter, the understanding of its physical and psychological components is crucial. The transitional home is a place that embodies both. It provides a physical link between crisis shelters and permanent housing, but it also attempts to provide the emotional security and continuity that will build a truly complete shelter for its residents. To understand the psychological layers of behavior, even in part, might facilitate a parallel study of the architectural layering of territories. Then perhaps the sensitivity of the design will be heightened to offer options and variety to its residents. This thesis looks at designing the delicate microcosm of a transitional house for families through the understanding of those psychological transitions.

Seclusion in building was the dominant quality of early architectural space. It was closely associated with the sensation of being protected against the hostility of the environment, both weather and animal, and thus was the prerequisite for psychological comfort. Seclusion in building is not antisocial. Instead it is the affirmation that ..ties within family are stronger than those to society..
Heinrich Engel, The Japanese House: A Tradition for Contemporary Architecture

Single-family house





Old myths about homelessness

The homeless are not some weird human flotsam somehow born into their condition- they are our neighbors. They are us.
Mary Gaitskill

The homeless population in America is growing at an alarmingly rapid rate. Every major city has become a backdrop for the cruel manifestations of poverty and homelessness. Many more homeless people subsist outside of the cities. In Boston, the number of shelter beds has increased 183% in the past five years from 972 to 2,754, and the shelters are still filled to capacity and crying out for larger facilities. Who are the people occupying these beds?[2]

The homeless population does not consist entirely of vagrants, hobos and drunkards, as one typical misconception would have it. The population is one of working men, working women, and many children. The fastest growing segment of the homeless, in fact, are families. In Massachusetts, three-quarters of all newly homeless people are families with children. In Boston, 90% of these are single-parent families headed by women.[3]

There is a new population among the homeless. They are people who were working all their lives and lost their jobs, or people who remained marginally afloat financially until a crisis or ilness devastated them. The result is a loss of home.And with the loss of home begins the loss of one's family.

Contrary to another societal misconception, the "new" homeless are no longer made up solely of deinstitutionalized patients of mental hospitals. Few homeless people were inmates of those institutions that were emptied in the 1970's. However,"all are inmates of an institution ..it is this institution, one of our own invention, that will mass-produce pathologies, addiction,violence, depedancies..
on a scale that will transcend, by far, whatever deviant behaviors we may try to write into their pasts."[4]

Homeless families share a number of ailments. Their support systems have broken down, whether economic or a network of family and friends who could be of assistance. They have all travelled a long road to arrive at this point: loss of apartment or home, time spent in other people's apartments, welfare hotels, and shelters.

"These goods are more than a form of decoration or a cushion against want; they are... the furniture of self." To lose the sum of one's belongings is to lose evidence of who one is.
Jonathan Kozol, Rachel and Her Children

Homelessness is a crisis that touches painfully the heart and soul of our society; it afflicts pain on the many delicate branches of our lives. It is the cruel indication of a government that, in large part, looks the other way to the detriment of family integrity. It is a tragedy of inadequate health care and rampant disease among its victims. It is the harmful impact of crisis on children's emotional development and education at such a crucial stage in their lives. Saddest of all, though, is that homelessness is the cruel punishment that so many families now endure, their daily lives reduced to pain and struggle.

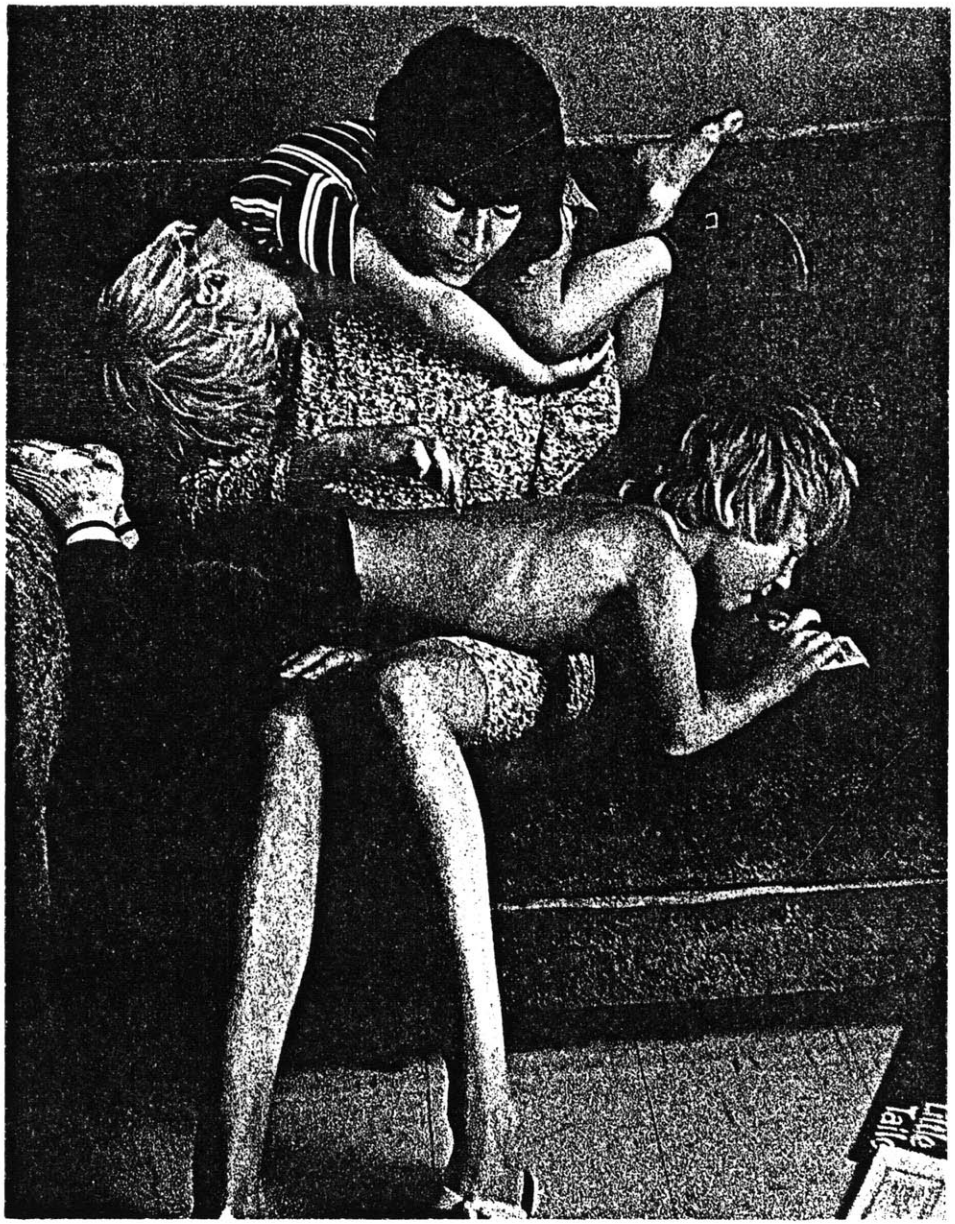
Homeless families all find themselves in the midst of a severe crisis, a situation that is often entirely new and shocking to them. As in times of war, when confronted with a crisis, people tend to cling to one another in an effort to create a zone of safety. The family is that zone of safety in the crisis of homelessness, and every effort must be made to protect it. The type of shelter that would seem most valuable, then, is one that allows the famliy to remain together.

Splintering is often the fate of homeless families. And the most painful of the many harsh blows that a family is dealt is that of family disintegration. Often, due to harmful government policies, children will be eligible for a larger budget allocation if placed in a foster home than with their real mother.

If the children do reside with their mother in a welfare hotel, it is common practice to charge the father of the family exorbitant fees for the right to visit his own children for an evening. These practices and the values inherent in them are prevalent in the political system ; they are cruel, financial disincentives to family integrity. And they corner homeless parents into impossible decisions.

It is inconceivable to me that parent and child, already experiencing an extreme crisis, be separated one from the other. Indeed, one ray of hope is the dignity, strength and courage with which parents manage to survive and hold the family together through the terrifying events they confront.

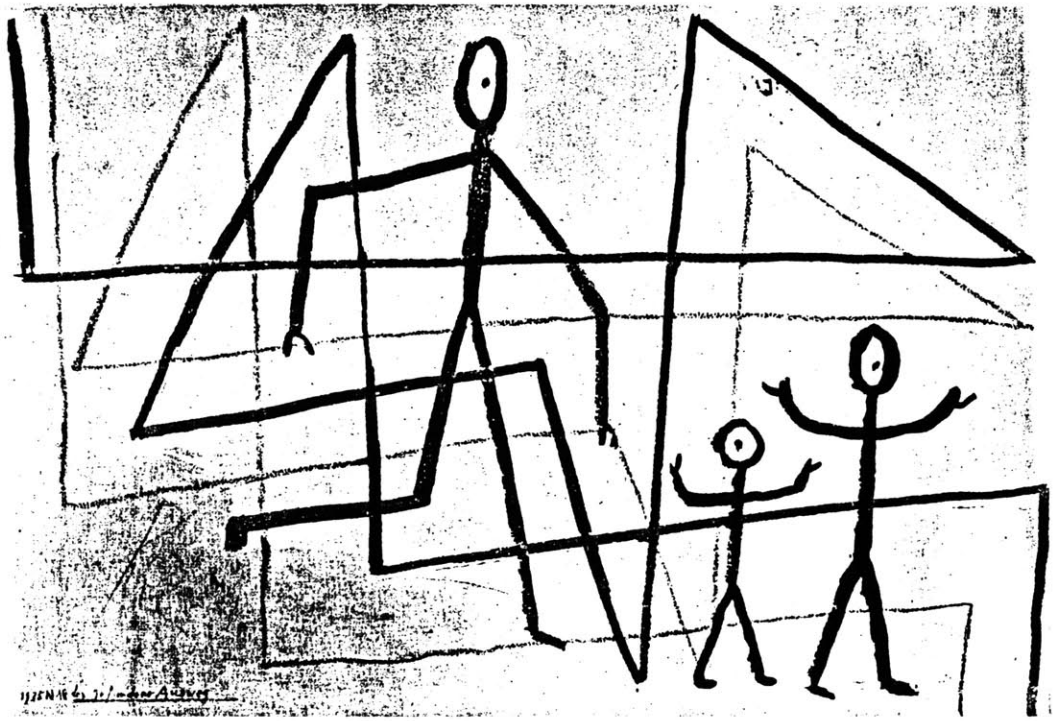
Constance McCullough describes her understanding of the family as the "We of me". An integral part of a person's being is that of their role as a family member: father, mother, child. The 'We" is a metaphorical umbilical cord between parent and child; it is the link that makes the unit of *family*. Family cannot be synthesized, nor can parental love. The imperative is to keep the family intact. The necessity, then, is to develop transitional housing whose founding philosophy is to support parents in their efforts to grow strong as nurturers of the family.



Family cannot be synthesized, nor can parental love. The imperative is to keep the family intact.

"Without that social faith, what a burden it would be to have children! The children are everyone's heirs, everyone's business, everyone's future."
Marge Piercy, Women on the Edge of Time

"The Way Out at Last," painting by Paul Klee



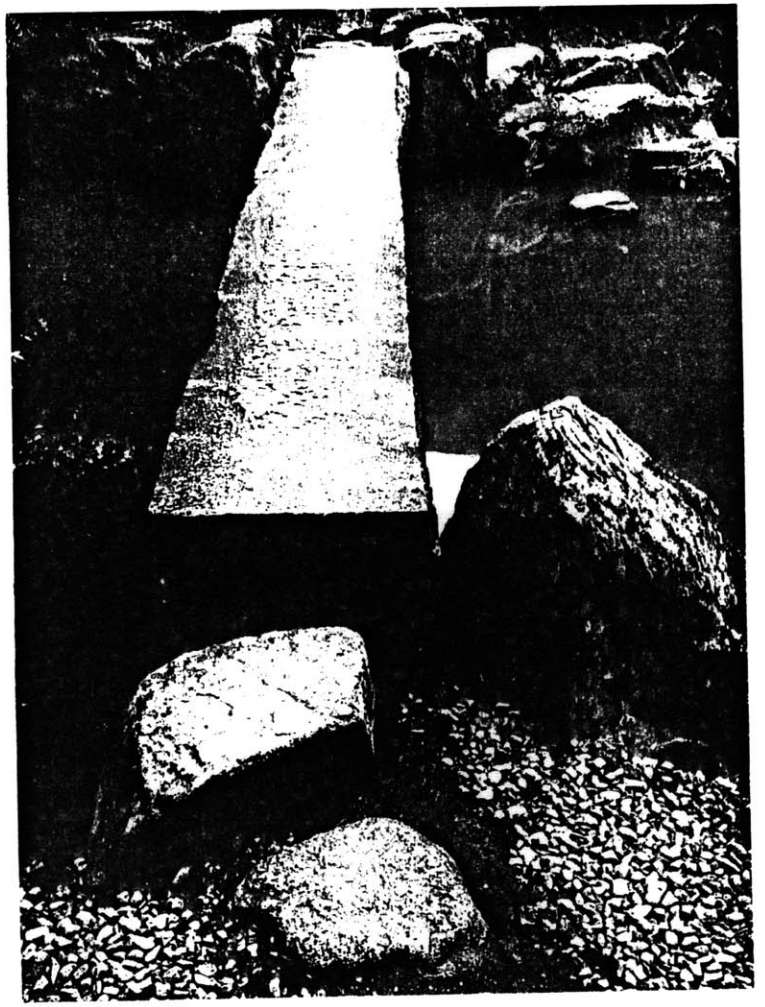
A Home is a prerequisite for a family life."
Habitat Forum, Berlin 1987

Eyes

Eyes open to scan with hesitance
A brilliant azure sky
They dart to a silhouette of a young sister
Asleep beneath a thin sheet
On the living room floor
Near Mommy
Who is motionless on a mattress.

Eyes, grey and mourning,
study the network of cracks on a plaster wall
The faded cloth that drapes a table
Yesterday's crumbs that inhabit a tattered rug.

Eyes, betraying youth despite their heavy sadness
Drop to watch a spider's progress
Across a vinyl square of floor.
Today they three will leave here
A place not warm, but familiar
A place so far from the one called theirs.



"Where do I go when there's no one to turn to
Feeling all alone wondering why I am
Where do I go when I need familiar?"
"Mae Frances" sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock

The term *Transitional Home* appears frequently in this text and warrants definition. Transitional is a misnomer in some respects. It implies a state of movement, flux or impending change. The transitional home, however, is a place of relative permanence for families that have been shunted from emergency shelter, to hotel, to the cramped apartment of a friend, and often back again in a suffocating, cyclical pattern. The transitional home offers a respite from that cycle.

The word *home* implies great permanence. It is the secure dwelling that allows us to feel rooted. It is a place in which to cook and care for one's family. It brings to mind the traditional definition of home as the "sharing of food..the essence of home and hearth in most societies."[5] The transitional home will never be a substitute for a permanent home. Beyond all analysis, only a home in the truest sense of the word "allows a family to flourish and to breathe."[6] The hope is, however, to build some "home" into a place where families are trying desperately to rebuild their own hearths, brick by brick.

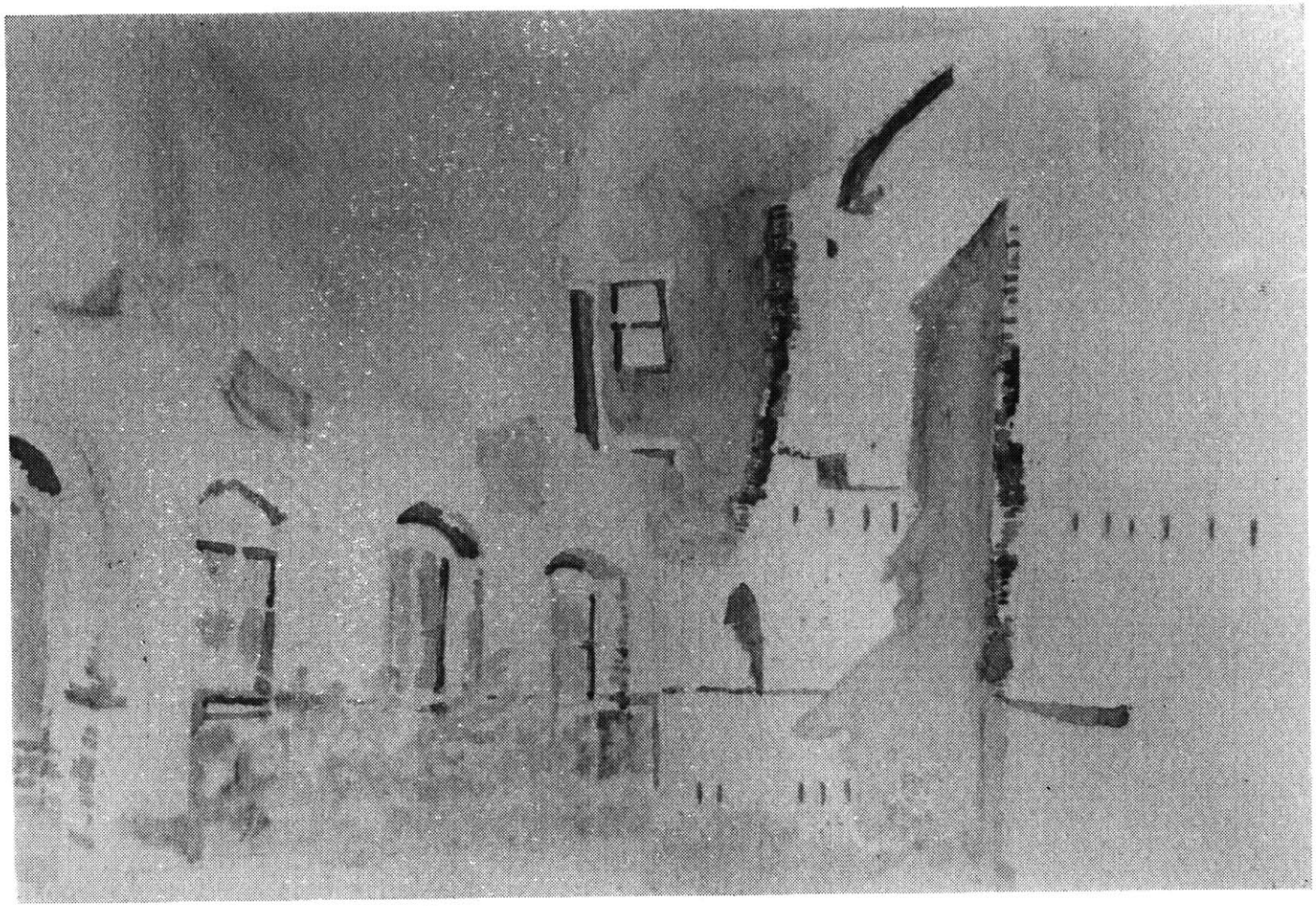
A transitional home is often referred to as second stage housing "to distinguish its place after crisis shelters, providing the bridge to self-sufficiency and permanent housing."[7]

The metaphor of the bridge is telling. It communicates to us that the recent ever-widening gap between emergency shelters and desperately needed housing is now too wide to safely jump- it must be bridged. And to assure a safe traversing, the bridge must be stable and sound. Only then will the trip across the chasm be sure-footed enough to offer families the foundations of a stable future upon reaching the other side.

The bridge is a measure of time. Crossing the chasm implies direction and movement, a journey toward a destination. There is no encouragement to linger indefinitely on it. Residents will stay at the home for periods of up to two years. They are encouraged to begin the search for housing and jobs within days of their arrival. A community job training center on the site provides the opportunity to learn skills that will help residents to secure work. A house-run bakery on the Tremont Street edge of the site offers the chance to learn to operate a small business and have contact with people in the neighborhood. This in turn will foster self-confidence.

The bridge is also a measure of community outreach and support, a network of individuals who devote time and intensity, energy and commitment to easing the crossing of the chasm. The support network within the home consists of counsellors, daycare supervisors, teachers, and administrators as well as a core group of volunteer staff members.

"Shelter, if it's warm and safe may keep a family from dying. Only a home allows a family to flourish and to breathe."
Jonathan Kozol, Rachel and Her Children



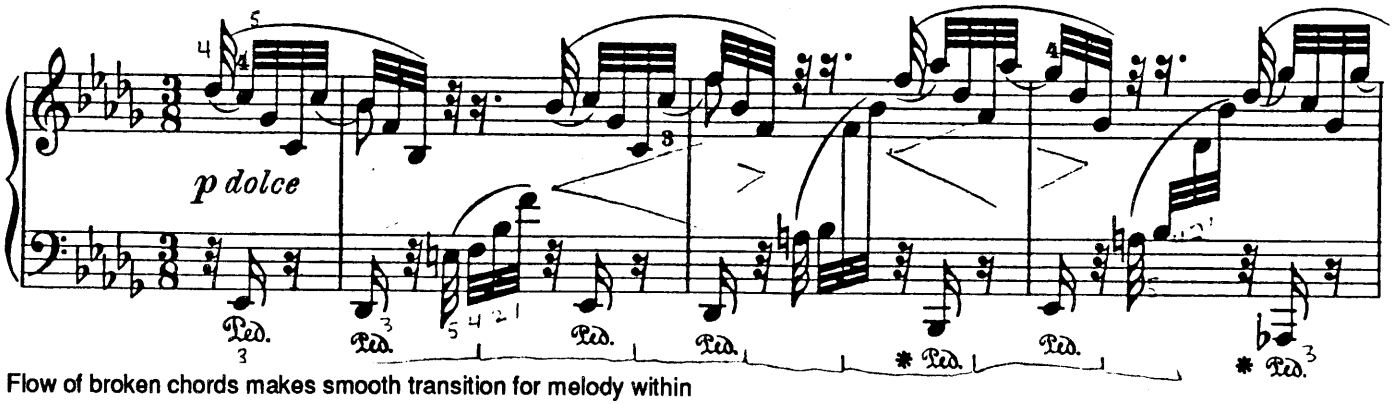
Watercolor of church wall along Tremont Street

"An important preliminary to seeing things whole is to define and understand their parts."
Kevin Lynch, Good City Form

This exploration suggests that a transitional home is as a place whose collection of spaces could ease the emotional transition of its residents; that the form of places can have some bearing on the drama that is played out within them; that these collection of spaces can be explored as separate tangents to a larger curve. By its nature, the design of a transitional home might benefit from a method that would clearly delineate its parts as well as its additively-formed whole.

The method, in this case, takes its cue from the discussion of architecture and psychology as a twosome that readily work in partnership. By understanding the various psychological states that residents might experience, it is hoped that one might increase one's sensitivities to the very specific and delicate needs of a particular group. In turn, the design of the home might benefit directly from such heightened awareness.

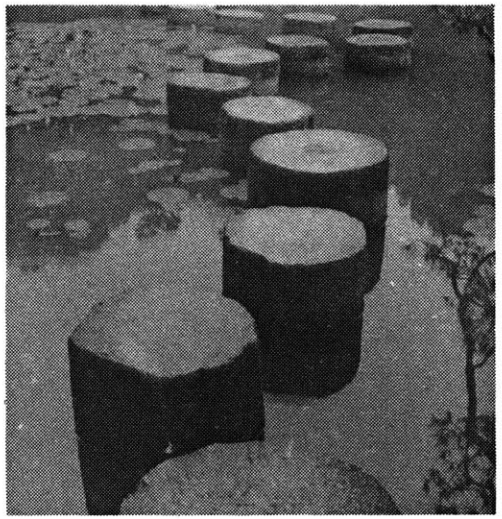
To diagram emotional transitions brings to mind a plotted curve that rises upward, then drops suddenly, then continues slightly upward. It is a bumpy road on the graph, to be sure. The fluctuations of emotion during such a traumatic time are understandably far greater than under normal circumstances, and would be difficult to chart. But if three points on that uneven curve are described, then one could begin to explore the architectural form based on those finite number of

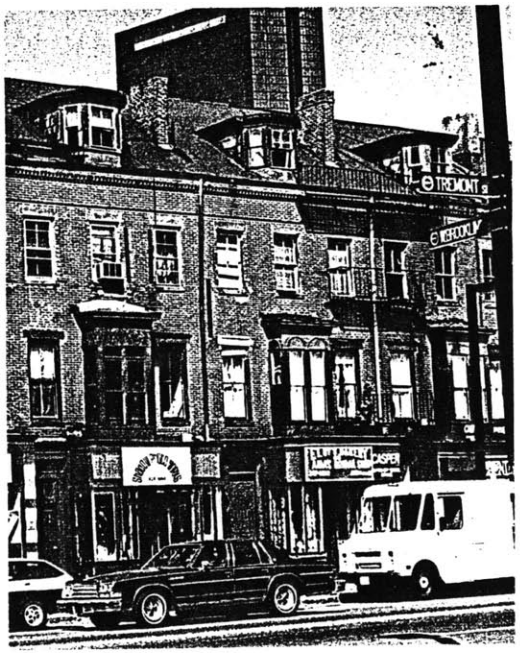


Flow of broken chords makes smooth transition for melody within

points. In other words, the meandering psychological transitions can be understood as three general stages.

These are interpreted as states of emotional upheaval, instability, and later, growth that parents and their children experience during their stay in the home. The stages are labelled Arrival, Acclimation and Thriving for simple reference. Once defined, each stage can become an advocate for its own presence in the home. Each stage carries its own set of requirements. The design, then, is carried out as a transition in its own right. It moves from one exploration to another, knowing the painful emotional states of each stage, and melding thoughts, hopes and understandings into a layering of physical form.





Tremont Street

In thinking about the psychological journey as a series of stages, one might alter the metaphor of the bridge, and reconsider its accuracy for argument sake.

The journey is comprised of many small and painstaking moves, some of which veer sideways, even backward. The course does not consist of a singular motion along a simple route. It is the weaving and meandering of the psychological and physical journey that make it so difficult. The image of a series of stepping stones seems more fitting: some of which are flat and others slippery with algae. The implication is that one tries to chart one's own course, by choosing the stone's that seem to lead most safely to the other embankment. The bridge, then, is a move on a different scale. It is the larger, urban- scaled transition between the home and the community.

Inherent in this urban site, is a difficult bridge: one which connects public and private space. By bridging that span, one establishes a sense of anchorage of the house to the community, the public realm. This connection is undeniably important. It asserts that there ought to be reciprocity between the two realms, so that each might come to know the other, and sense the inextricable ties to one anothers future. The public realm must be cherished, even if one builds a protective, private place within the city. "The city is a collective, shared place, a place that is in the most literal sense common ground."[8]

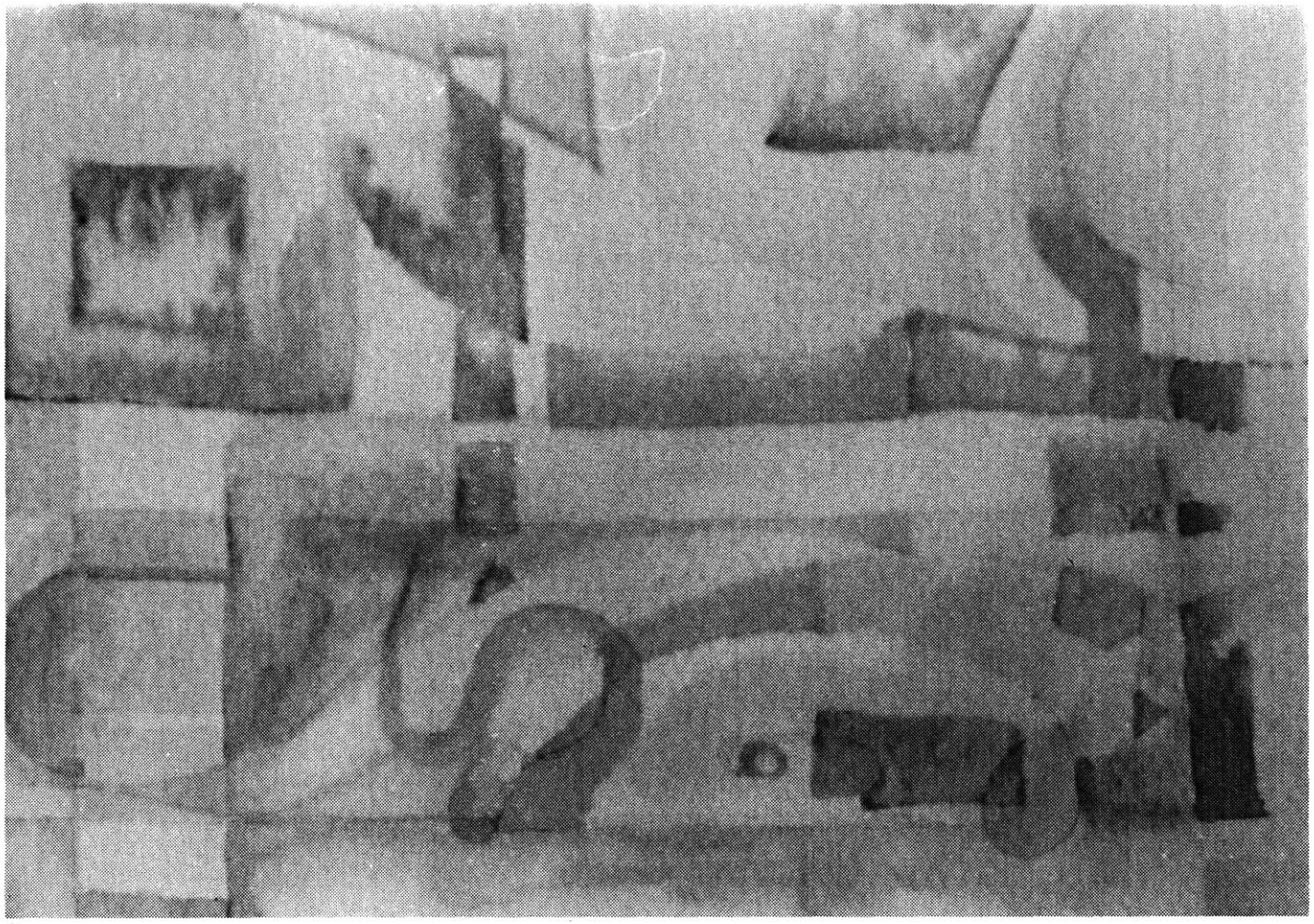
The common ground is a bridge of sorts. And to build it of careful layers is to foster the harmonious coexistence between household and community. The city, particularly in times of crisis, ought to reach out to embrace its citizens, and households must, in turn reach out to the city. It is a mutuality crucial to the maintenance of community life, crucial to the possibility of a dialogue.

The dialogue, in this case is banter between the transitional home and the city. Their conversation is a cautious but friendly one. Through the design, the attempt must be made to form a protective shell within which the residents feel secure. Yet at the same time the shell must be permeable in places. It cannot turn its back to the city, by reasoning that such a shelter must hide from the evils that are the city. The risk in this attitude, and its equivalent architectural form is a lack of connection to the community ; it is an absence of reciprocity.

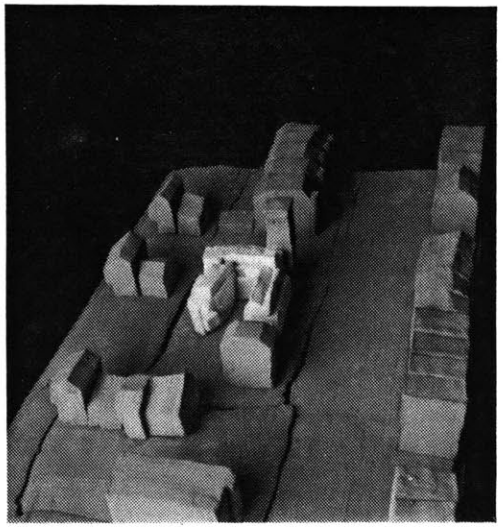
It is imperative that the transitional home be as open as possible about the need for shelter. In this way it begins to remove the stigmas and myths about homelessness that society has fabricated in order to create its own impenetrable shell of complacency.

"A city..is a place that implicates..how one learns to talk with and learn from people who are unlike oneself, which is how a human being becomes human.
Richard Sennett, "The Civitas of Seeing"

Activity on Tremont Street across from the site



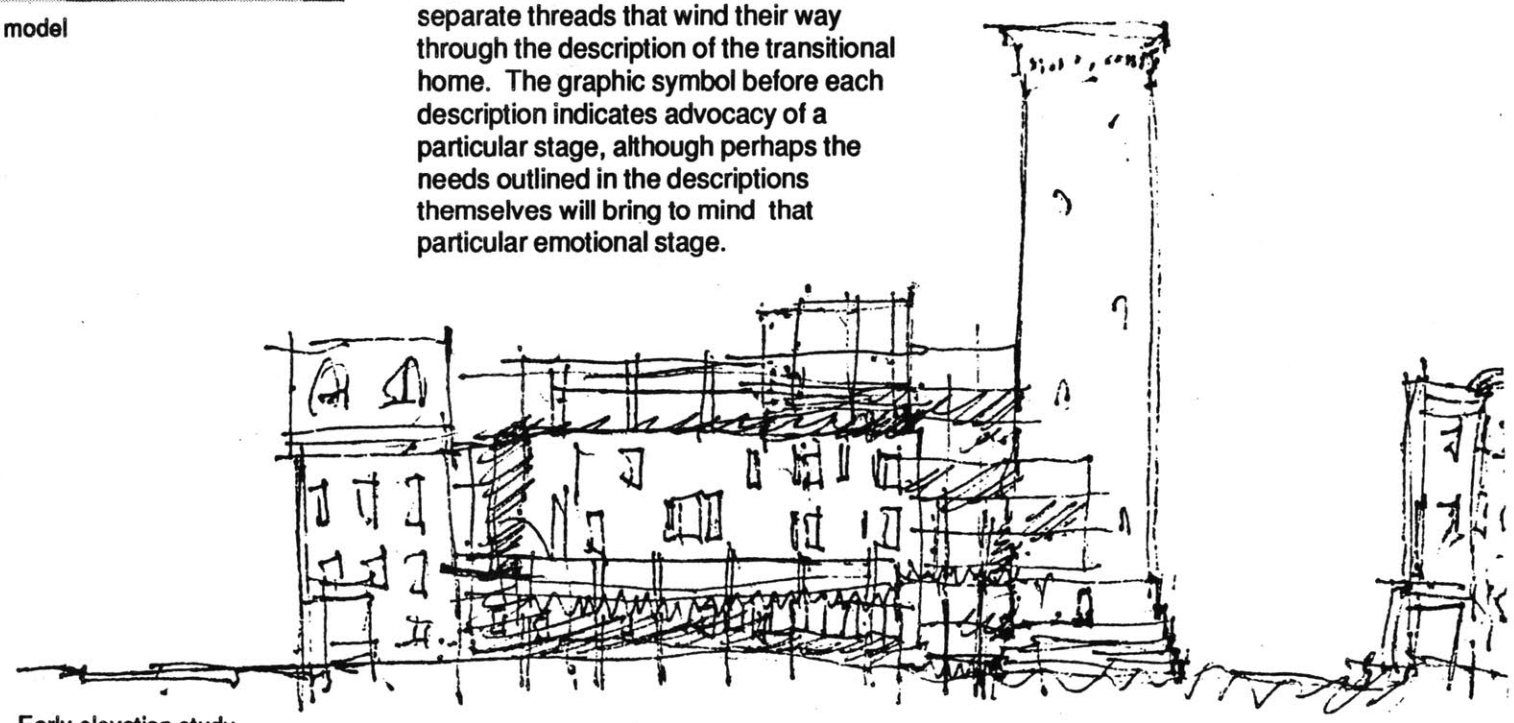
"Transition of line and color," watercolor on Strathmore paper



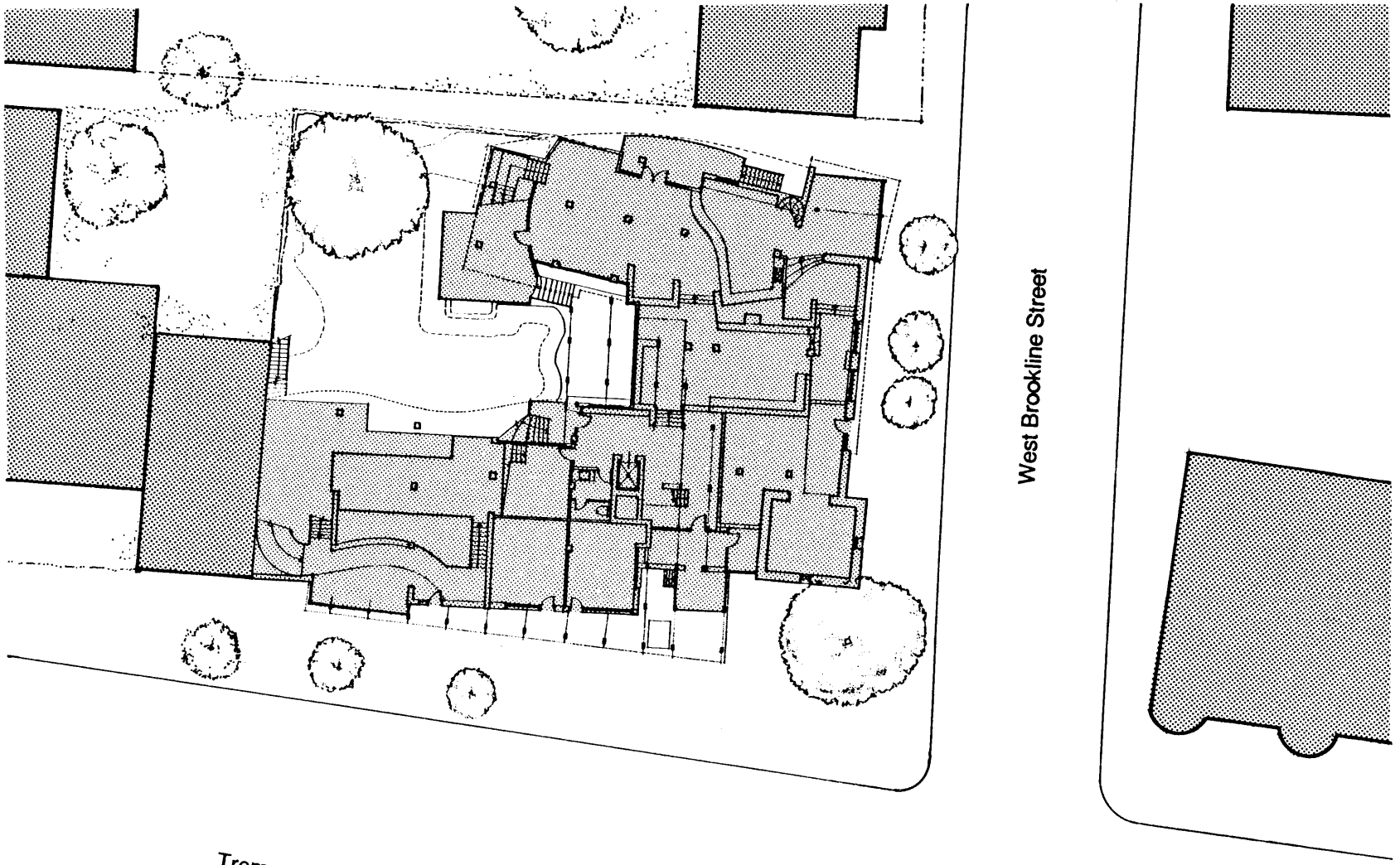
Clay massing model

Transitions of two kinds are explored in this chapter. Like the Brahm's intermezzo in the last chapter, it is built of several layers that work in unison to create the entirety. The transitions, in this case are not musical but architectural and psychological. After a look at the design as a whole, the various parts are explored with the help of the three psychological stages.

Because the stages are not isolated, and one's emotions tend to fluctuate rather than follow a straight and predictable course, the design elaboration follows such a format. Each stage advocates for its own requirements, and act as one of three separate threads that wind their way through the description of the transitional home. The graphic symbol before each description indicates advocacy of a particular stage, although perhaps the needs outlined in the descriptions themselves will bring to mind that particular emotional stage.



Early elevation study

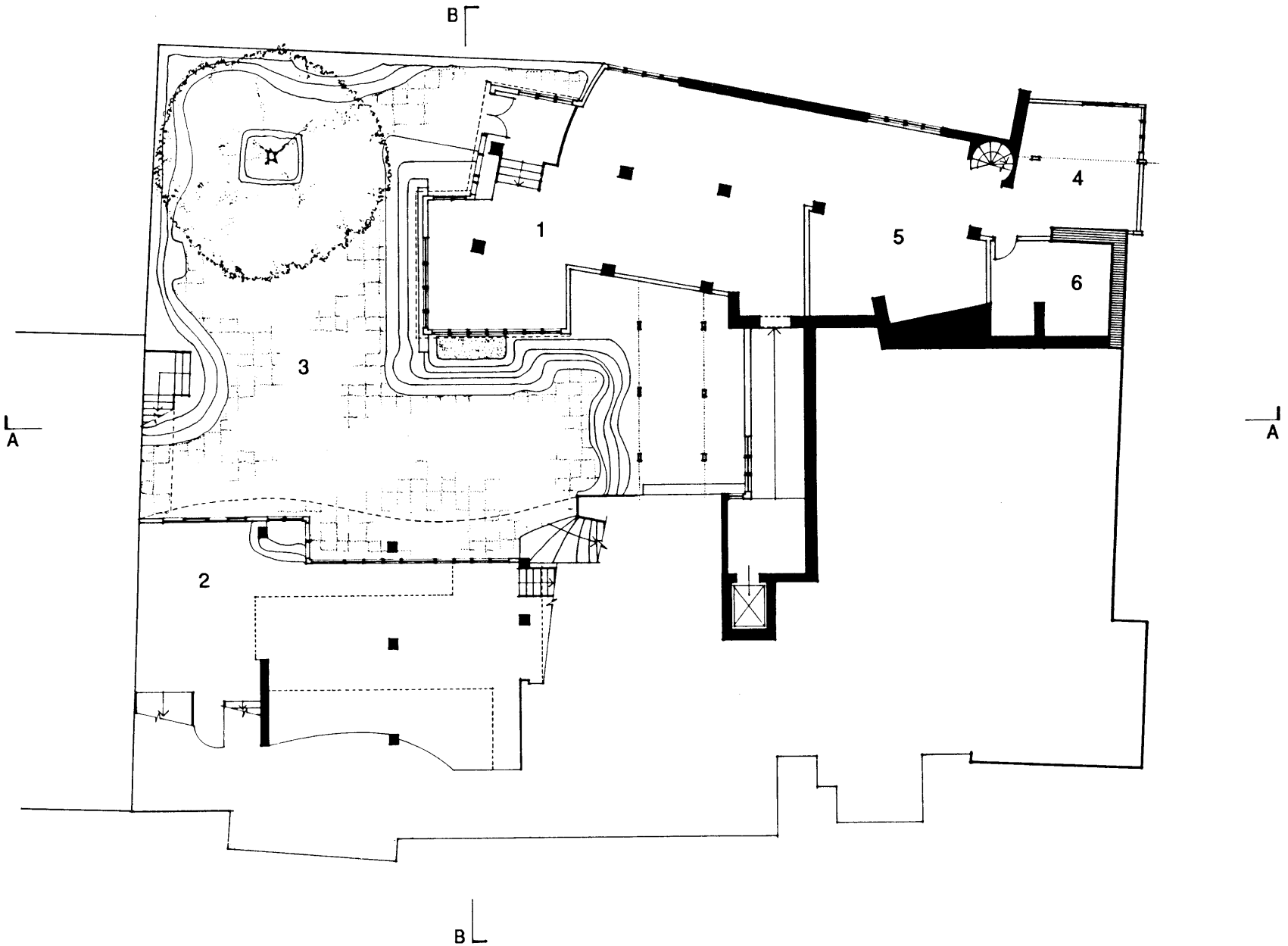


SITE PLAN

BASEMENT PLAN

1. Laundry (el. -3')*
2. Daycare Center (el. -2')
3. Play Yard (el. -4')
4. Pantry
5. Storage
6. Repairs

*street level is graded as +0'

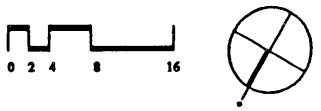


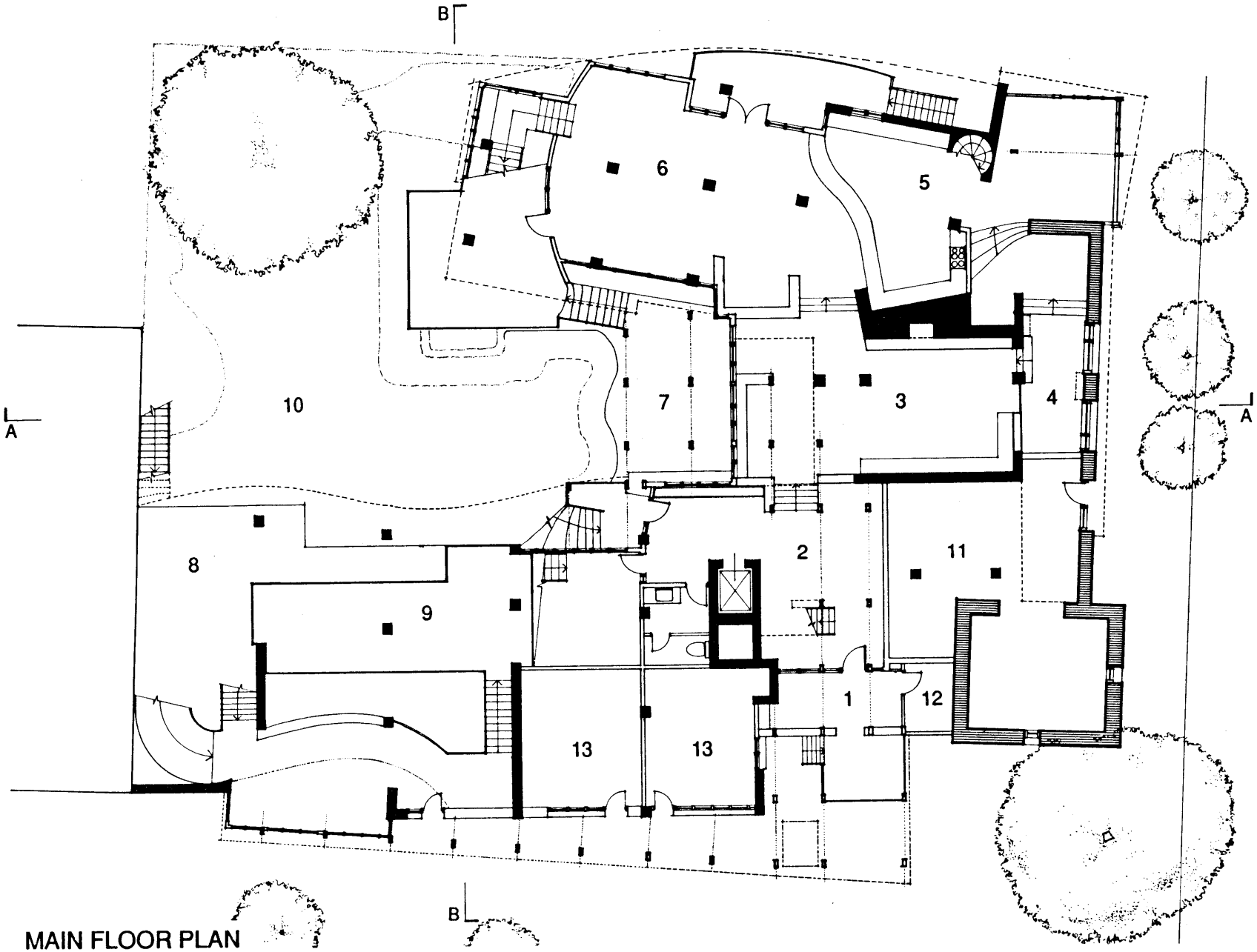
BASEMENT PLAN

MAIN FLOOR PLAN

1. Entrance (el. +2')*
2. Hall
3. Living Room (el. +4')
4. Reading Alcove (el. +3')
5. Kitchen (el. +7')
6. Dining Room (el. +6')
7. Terrace (el. +0')
8. Daycare Center Below
9. Play Loft
10. Play Yard (el. -4')
11. Job Training Center
12. Bicycle Storage
13. Commercial Space

*street level is gradod as +0'

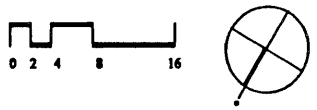




MAIN FLOOR PLAN

SECOND FLOOR PLAN

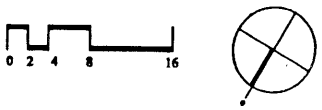
1. Administration
2. Counselling Rooms
3. Director
4. Apartments
5. Conference Room
6. Family Lounge

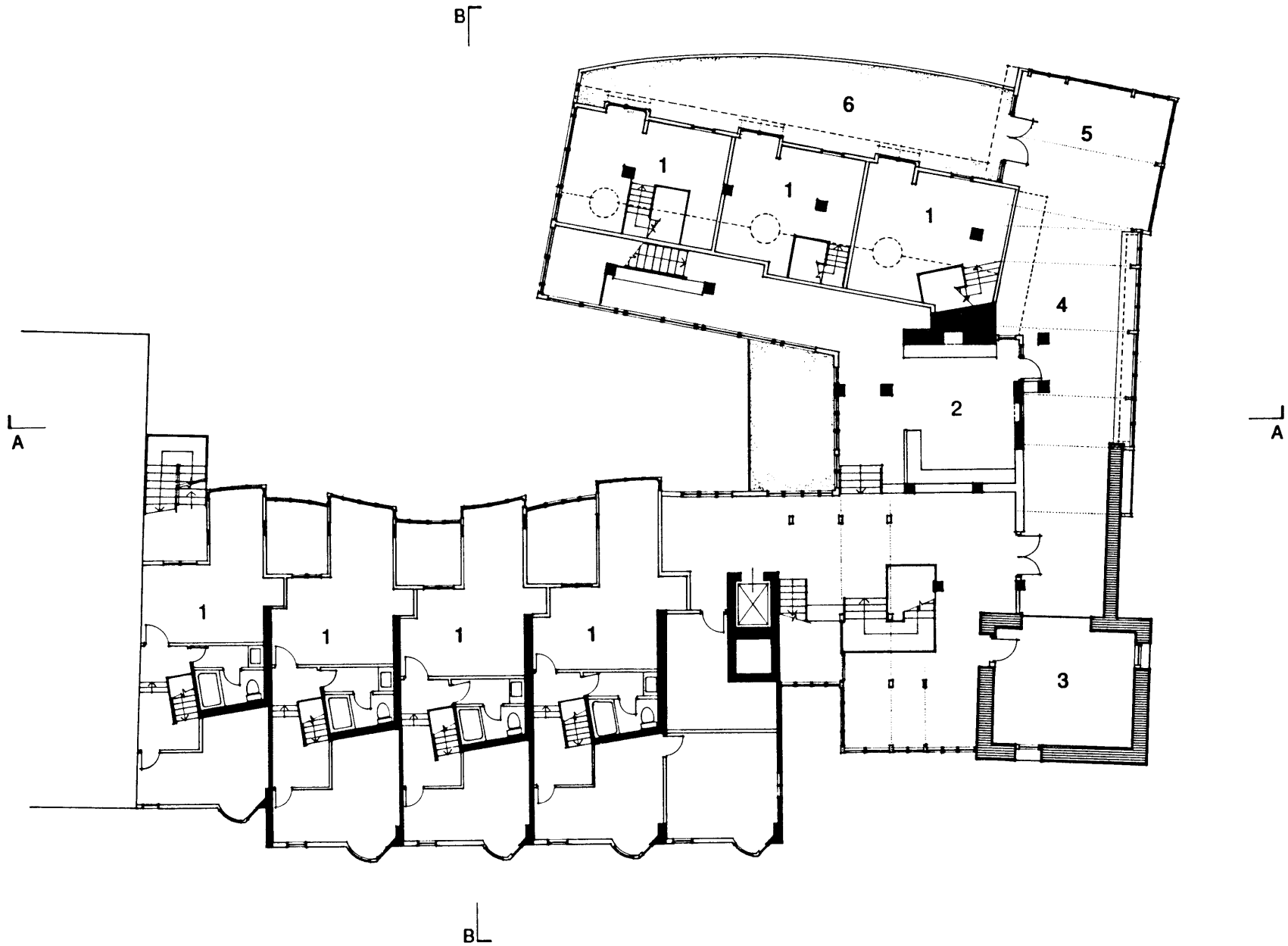


SECOND FLOOR PLAN

THIRD FLOOR PLAN

1. Apartments
2. Family Lounge
3. Teen Lounge
4. Greenhouse
5. Sunroom
6. Roof Garden

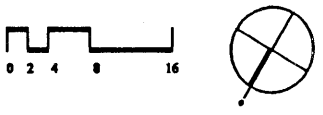


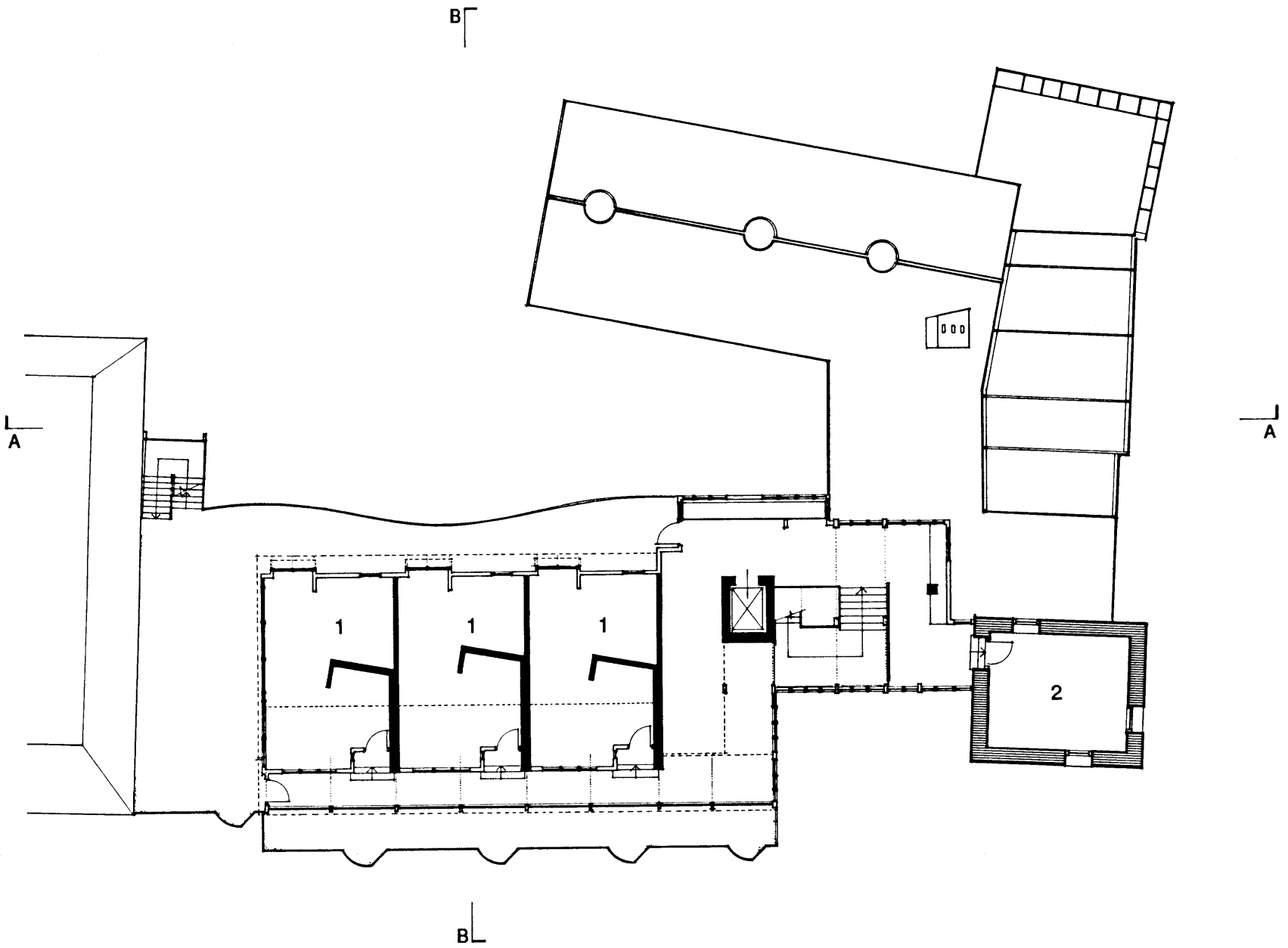


THIRD FLOOR PLAN

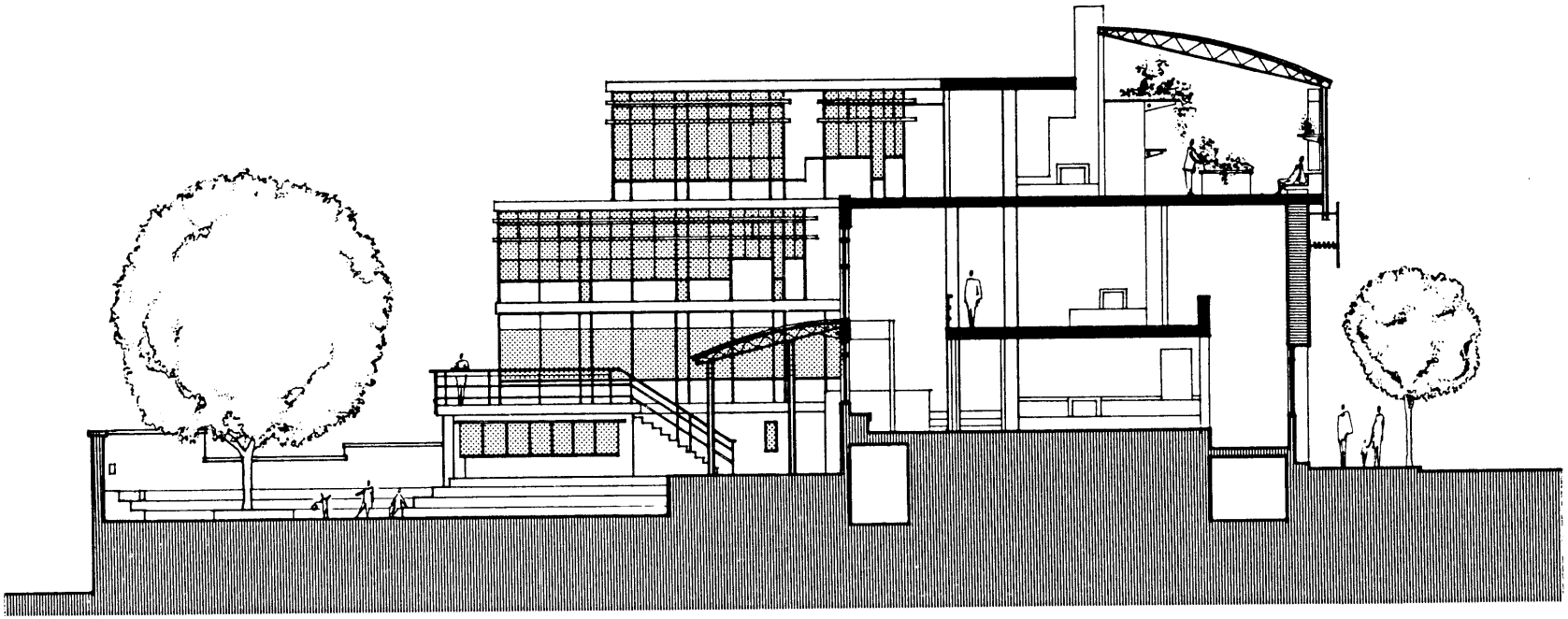
FOURTH FLOOR PLAN

1. Apartments
2. Retreat



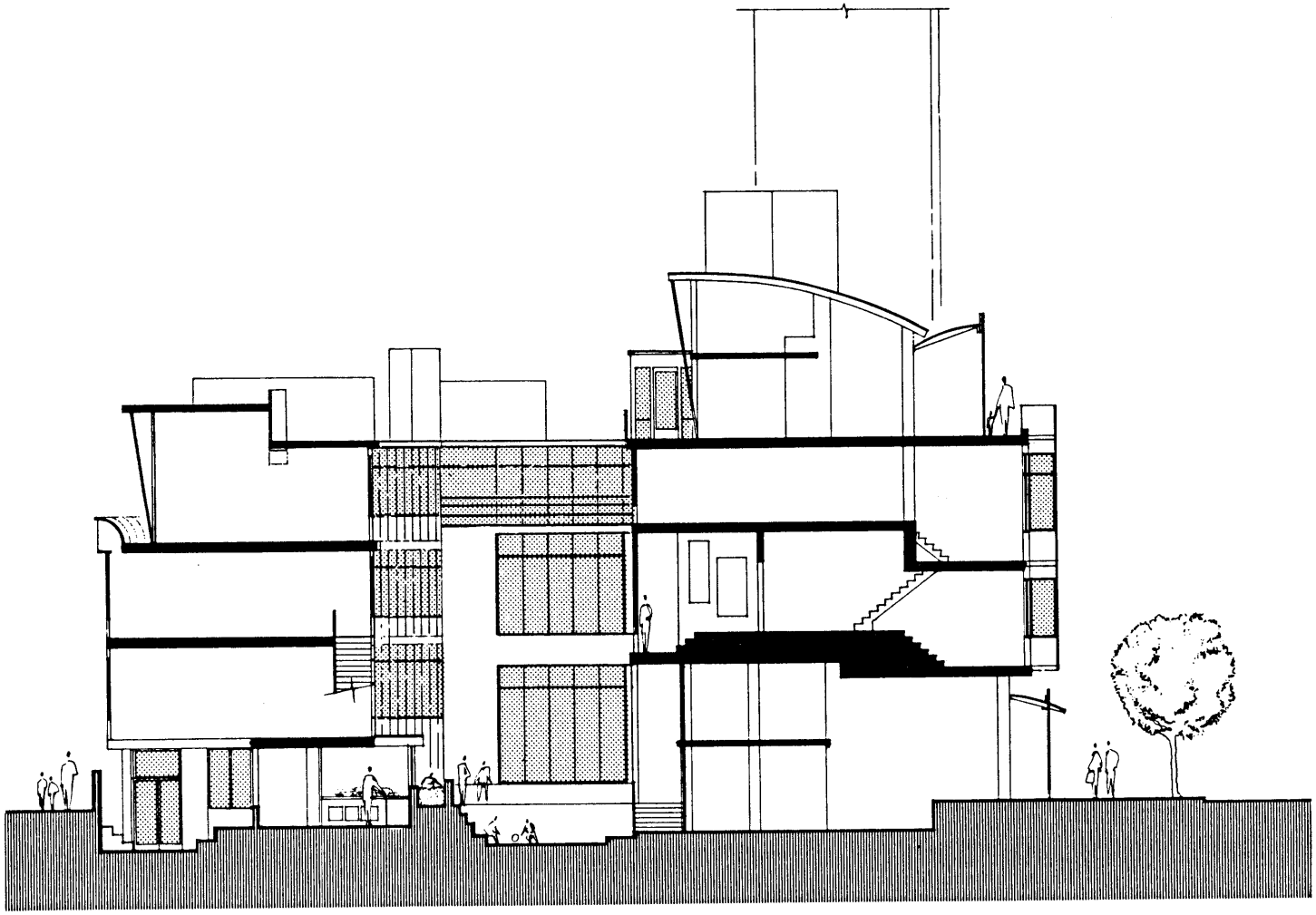


FOURTH FLOOR PLAN



SECTION A-A

0 2 4 8 16



SECTION B-B

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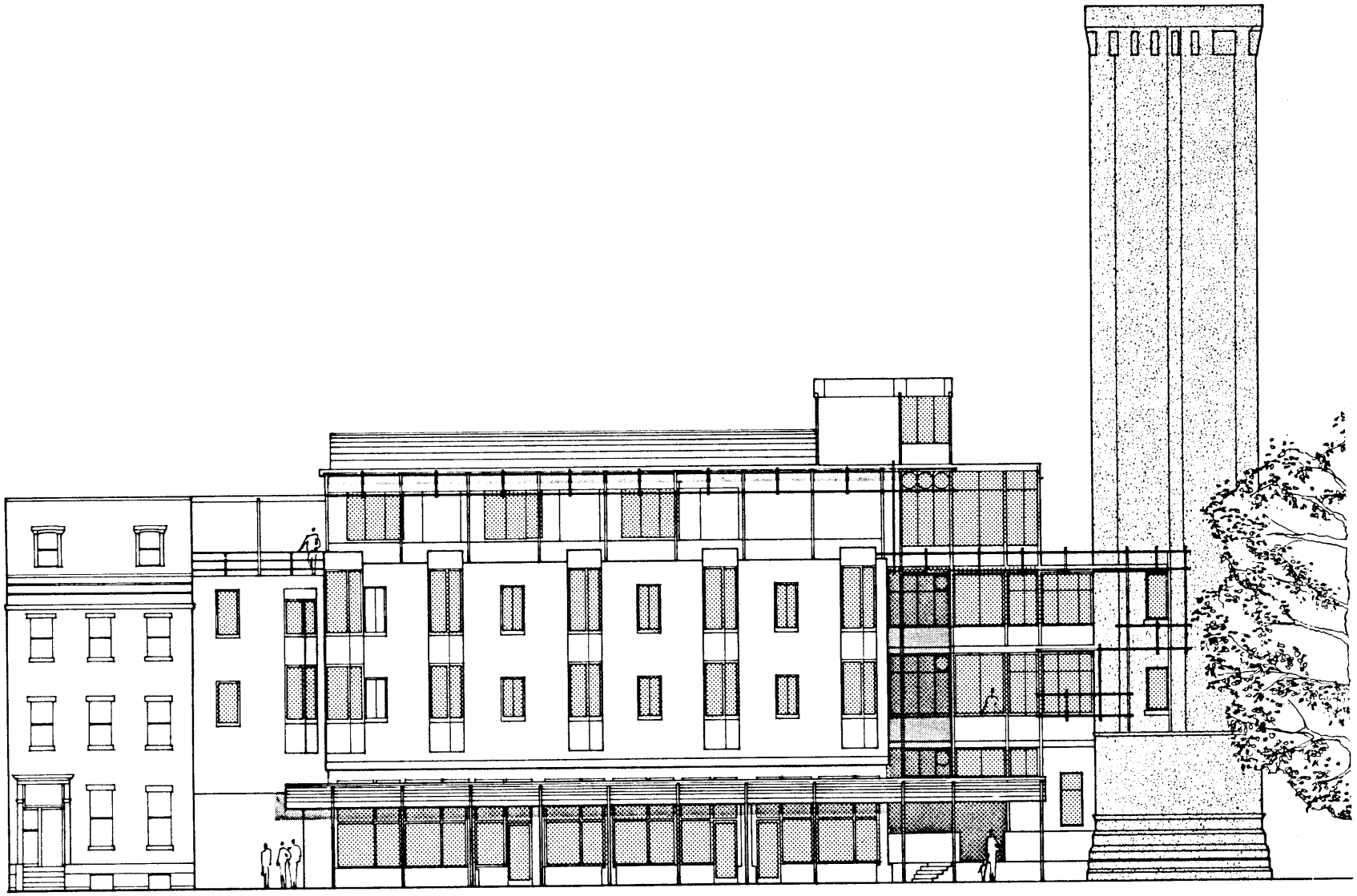

TREMONT STREET ELEVATION

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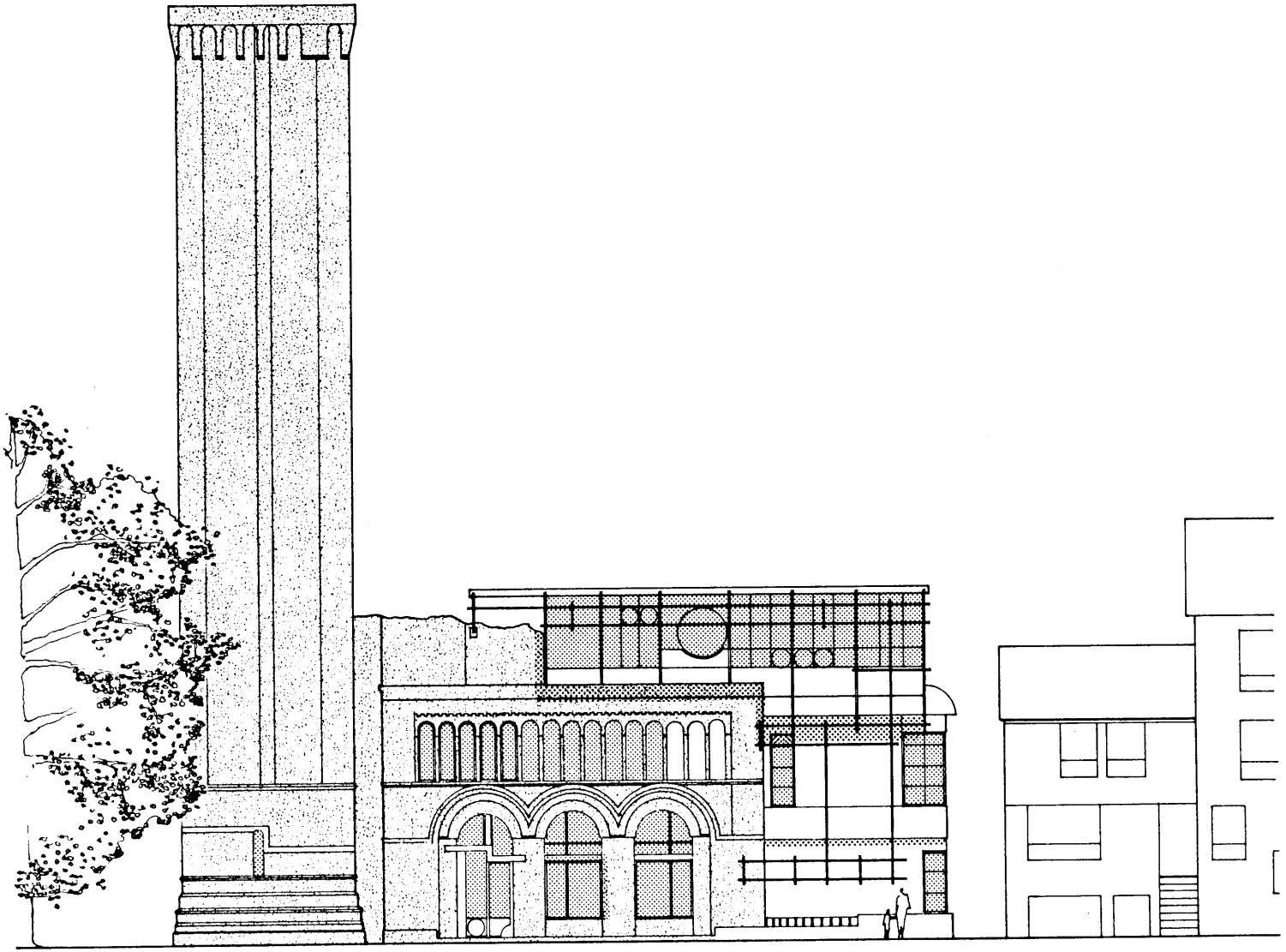

W. BROOKLINE STREET ELEVATION

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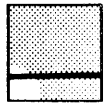
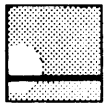


Arrival

To arrive. The word implies a place recently departed, and the act of moving between points. Memories of one's previous sojourn are as vivid as they will ever be, and the quantum leap between past and future is as close as it will ever be. To arrive is to feel newness and relief but also threat and fear of what is unknown. It is the advent of a new and positive phase in a seemingly endless crisis.

Of the three stages, it is the shortest but also the densest. One experiences a gamut of emotions in this brief time. The desire to hide in the face of extreme anxiety is mingled with an equally strong desire to reach out for support and friendship. The need to be alone with one's thoughts is coupled confusingly with the need to reach out and find some seed of stability. Soon after arriving at the transitional home, however, one is likely to move into a stage of acclimatization, whether by one's own motivation or by the urging of the staff.



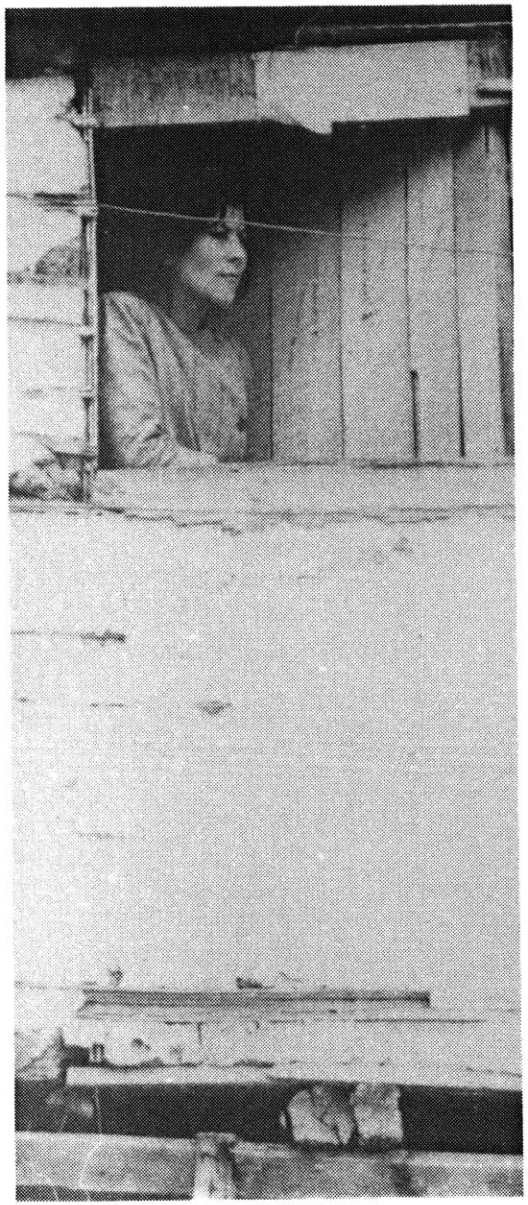
Acclimation

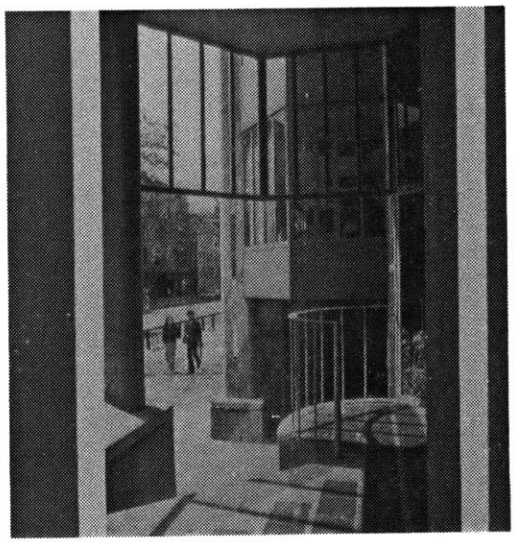
To become accustomed to changed conditions. This stage describes the day to day trials of staying. It is the process of settling when one feels unsettled and unstable. It is about planting roots hesitantly in order to gain "temporary permanence". For these families will eventually move on, and this home will never be a true permanent home for them: there will always be one last muscle tensed in anticipation of yet another shift.

For the time being, however, it is a stage of incremental growth and increasing ease. It is a time in which, of necessity, these ten families learn to interact, and ten parents find greater measures of friendship and support. Spending time in the communal spaces seems less intimidating than it had upon arrival, as does spending time in the neighborhood.

Thriving

To thrive is to feel stronger, more stable in the midst of the crisis of homelessness. It is feeling a sense of independence, and a renewed confidence to the extent that one can grow, achieve, and stand tall against further odds. One's sense of pride flourishes. Fearfulness and threat may lessen, freeing the way for a generosity to help those who are experiencing the same crisis. One envisions stable life beyond the transitional home, and strives for it, hopefully with only minor lapses. Having been in the transitional home for some time, one is comfortable engaging in activity with other members of the house and equally at ease with situations on the street. Shifting between the two worlds is a more facile move than ever before.

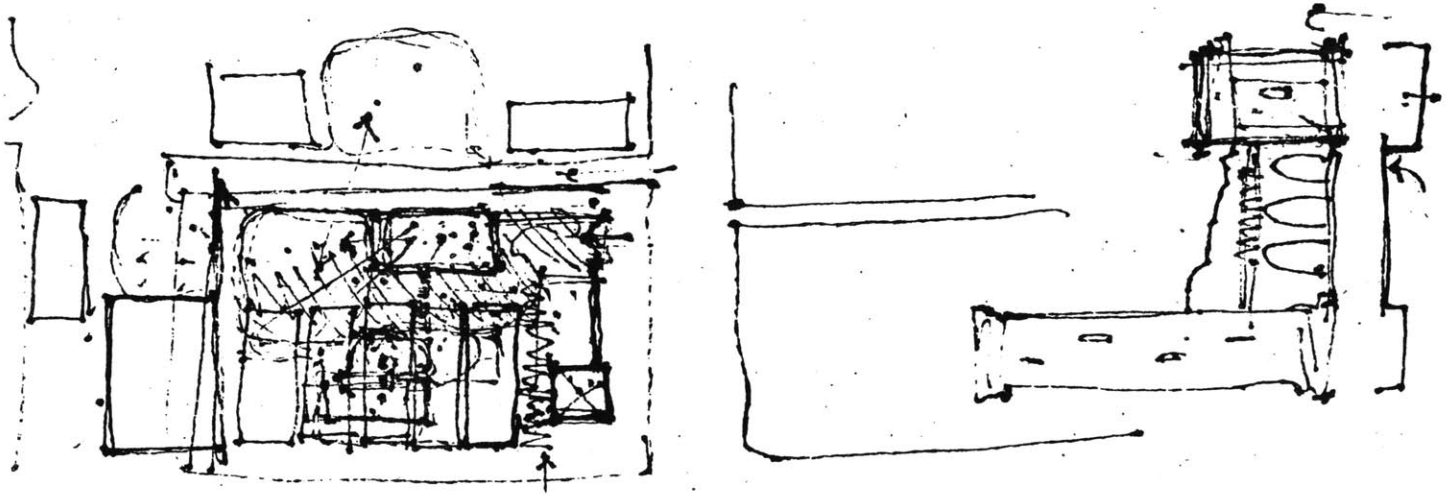




Hubertus House, Amsterdam. Home for single mothers by Aldo Van Eyck

Transitional homes often have complex programs which combine housing and shared living facilities in addition to support services. In this case, to make the stew even thicker, several public uses are added to the typical program. A job training facility and two commercial spaces all front the street and serve the surrounding community. A daycare center also serves both the residents and the neighborhood. In the home are ten family apartments. They are intended for single-parent families. A greater emphasis has been put on the size and variety of the communal meeting places to encourage socializing and participation. There is a large communal kitchen, dining room and living room with a reading alcove to its side. Traditional yard and terrace space is supplemented by a greenhouse and a vegetable garden sprouting on a rooftop. The administration consists of a reception office, conference room and counselling rooms. Other programmatic spaces are a laundry room for the residents and staff, two family lounges, a teen lounge, and outdoor play space for the children.

The program offers enough variety to readily accommodate the three psychological stages. The program also enables one, in designing the home, to make the connection to the community mentioned earlier. The most important aspect of the program is a personal design requirement that the transitional home feel as little like an institution as possible.



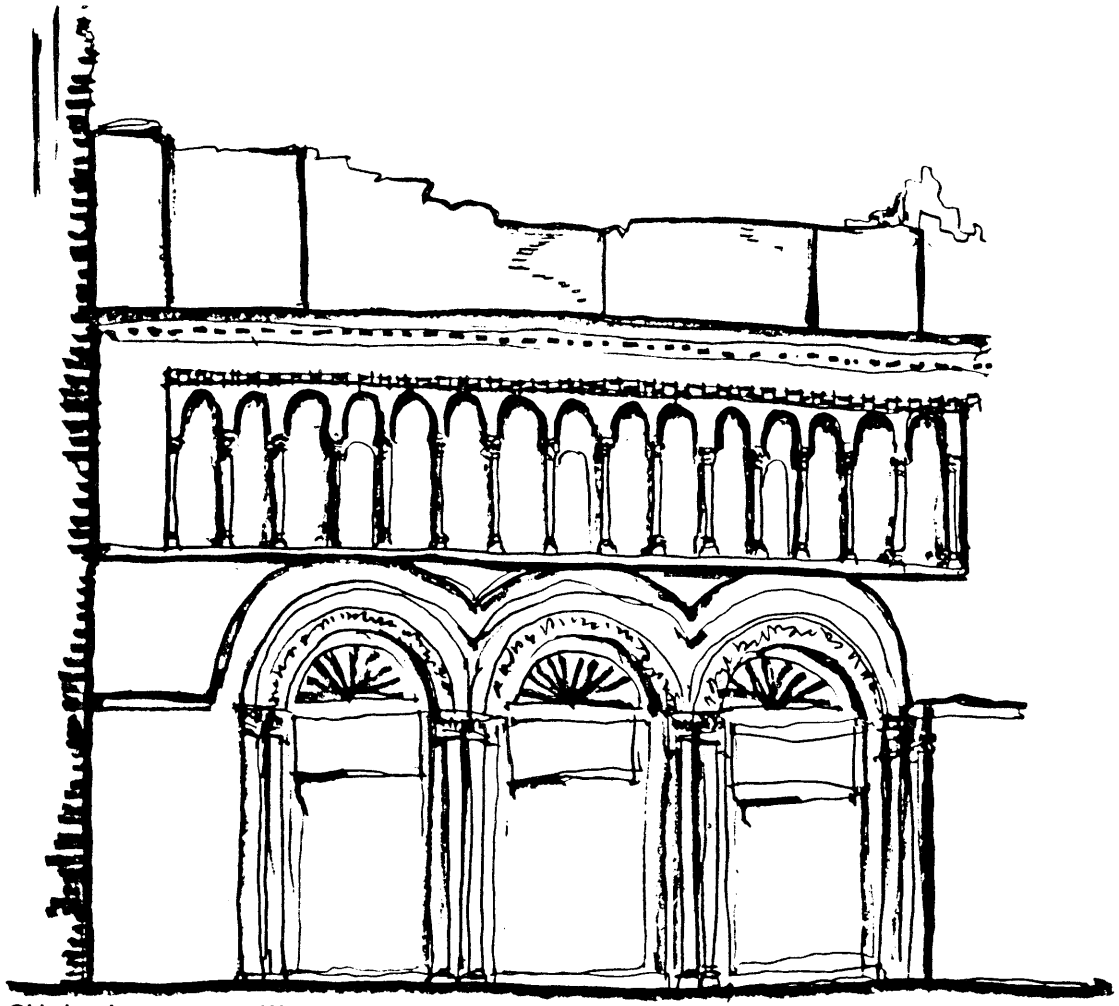
Preliminary diagram of building organization

View across Tremont Street

Saturday
A first impression of the neighborhood

Buses frequently letting off passengers, cars, lines of people in front of stores, luncheonettes, laundromats, pizza.
Community gardens at Rutland and Shawmut are colorful, full of sunflowers, phlox, roses, other bright flowers whose names I do not know.
Villa Victoria—lots of folks outside-sitting on steps, "hanging", cleaning or fixing cars, blaring salsa music, Moms walking 2,3,4 children.
Columbus Street is active but much less so than Tremont Street.
Once off the main drag, the streets are small, shady, and quiet- quite a contrast.
Action moves East-West;
Quiet floats North-south.

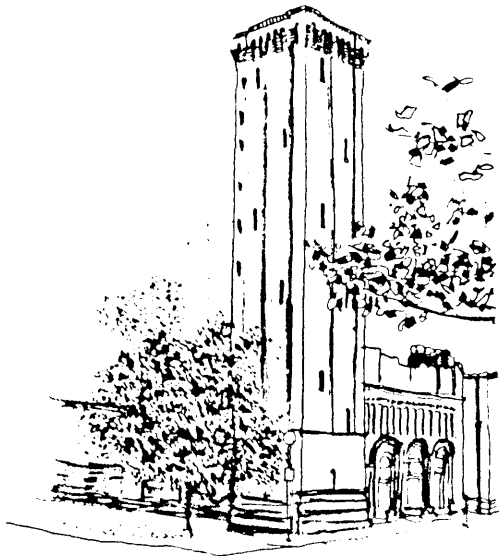
Sketchbook entry, September 2,1989



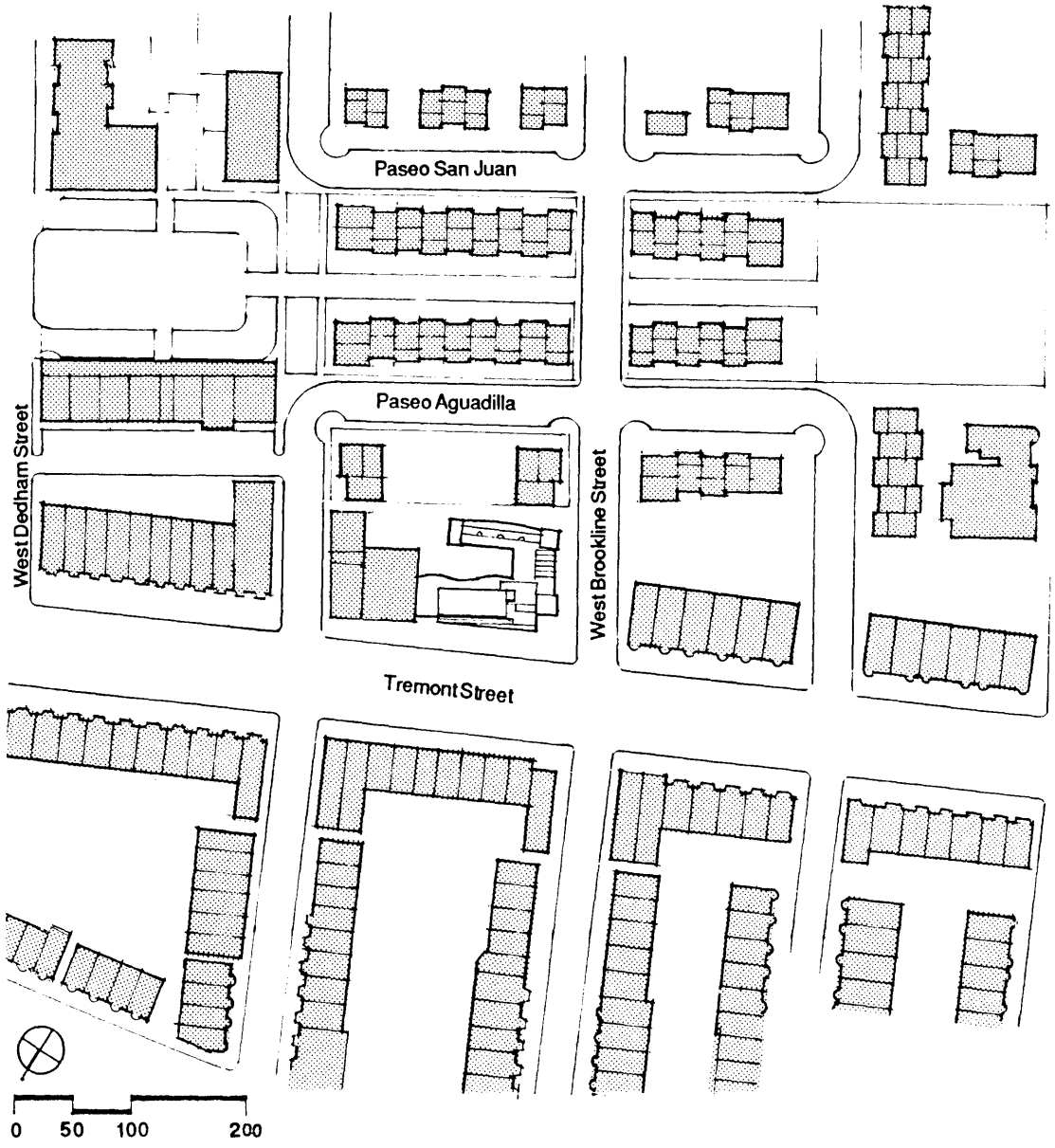
Old church entrance on West Brookline Street

The Shawmut Congregational Church was built in 1864, designed by architect Charles Edward Parker. The Shawmut changed its congregational ownership many times over the years and even housed the South End branch of the Boston Public Library for a time. In 1975 the church burned, leaving only the brick exterior walls and the square tower standing.

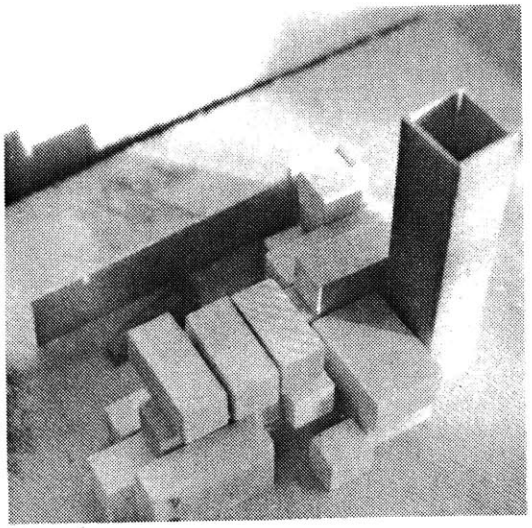
The site occupies a corner on Tremont Street, east of Massachusetts Avenue at the corner of West Brookline Street. It is unmistakable due to a large church that sits at a slight skew to the Street. The church's tower marks a prominent vertical landmark along the consistent band of four storey brick row houses on Tremont Street.



View of site from Tremont Street



SITE MAP



Early massing model

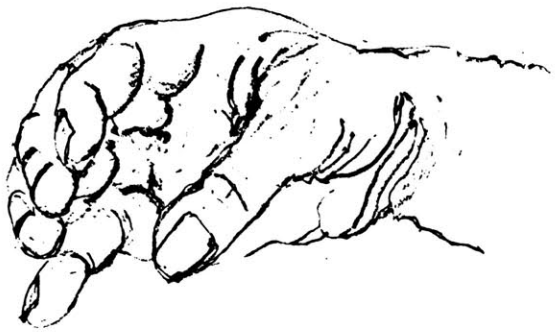
The organization of the building is such that it provides both connection to the neighborhood and protection within the walls of the home. The larger form of the building implies the curl of a protective arm or a hand that is cupped around a delicate object. At the same time, the cracks between fingers offer permeability and reciprocity with the street edge.

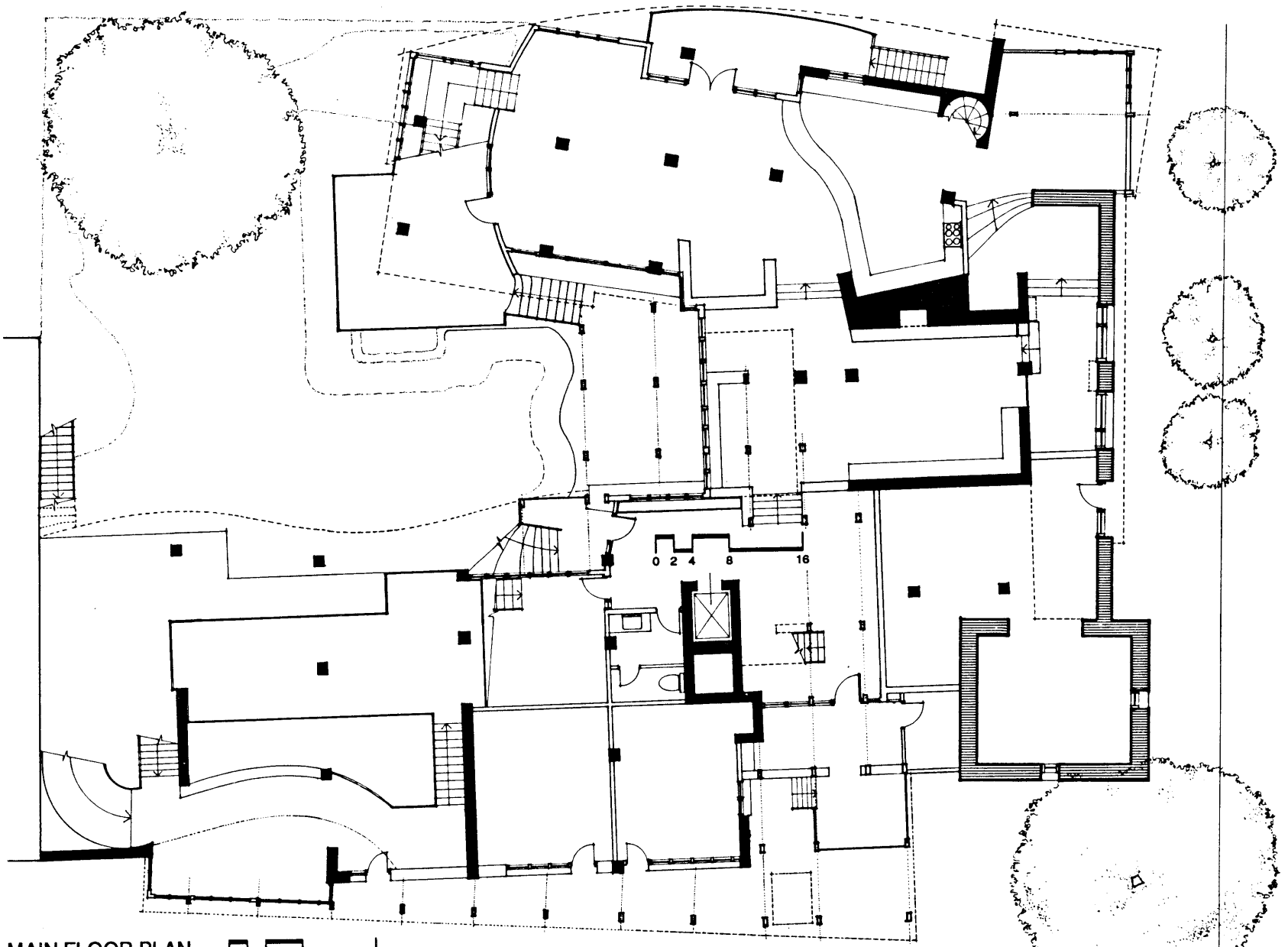
The two wings of the building house the residential units, and are raised up to create space beneath them for communal uses. The wings are also slightly splayed so as to allow as much sun as possible into the courtyard spaces. As another means of procuring sunlight, the southern wing of the building is lower than its northern counterpart. The outdoor spaces enclosed by the building associate with the Villa Victoria neighborhood and its yards, removed from the busyness on Tremont Street.

The apartments form three separate formal pieces that give residential size to the building. The duplex units that face Tremont Street attempt to continue the south end rowhouse typology by offering a variation on its theme: the size of bay is smaller in these units and there is still some understanding of units as a group rather than as entirely autonomous places.

The edge of Tremont Street is built as a strong continuity with the existing edge. Commercial uses are positioned along this side so that retail activity on Tremont Street is continuous and remains sprinkled evenly along it. The old church tower and wall on West Brookline Street remain on the site and are renovated. They help to build the street edge and corner, and act as a solid enclosure on which to register the main communal spaces of the building.

"Each community(family) should be a separate social and spatial unit, as autonomous as possible. Internally, however, its places and people should be highly interdependent. The organic model emphasizes the cooperation that maintains society, in contrast to seeing society as a competitive struggle."
Kevin Lynch, Good City Form





MAIN FLOOR PLAN 0 2 4 8 16

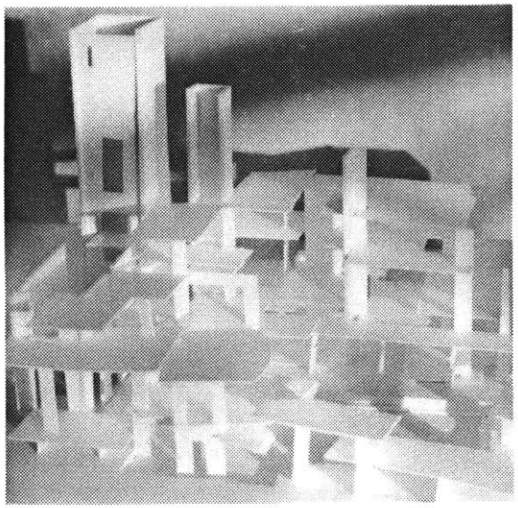
Playground in Hubertus House by Aldo Van Eyck

The house ..above all breathes equality..Open-yes, but in no way vague or fluctuating. In fact open and protective at the same time."
Aldo Van Eyck, on the Hubertus House, Amsterdam

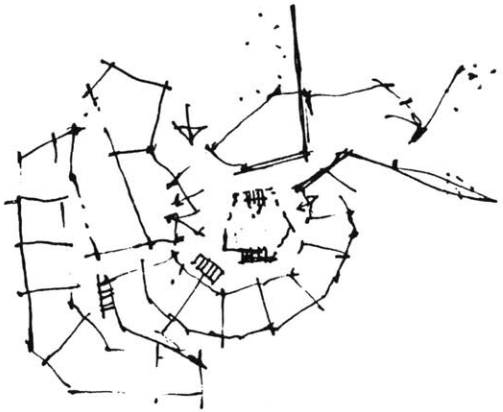
Although these ten families are experiencing a similar situation, their private spaces ought to reveal their individualities to as great an extent as possible in a communal living situation. In a small village, every person is known for personality, talents and idiosyncrasies unique to them. Because these families are at different states of coming and going and have different needs, it seems appropriate that the apartments vary one from the next. No two units are identical.

There are three initial variations of apartments: duplex units, flats and loft apartments on the uppermost floor. In each, differences in sizes create further variety. The notion of a village within a house could also be analogous in the unique ways that each family inhabits their home, brings life to it, and reveals bits about themselves in the process.

The way in which the form of the apartments are defined makes them even more recognizable as unique places. The four duplex units are protected within the walls of a panelled box that is punctuated with bay windows on each face. Above this solid are three birds nest apartments perched on top of the building. In tree house manner, they are compact and borrow the light frame structure used at the entrance and the greenhouse. The three flats sit southward in their own arm of the building, gaining light across a small rooftop garden.

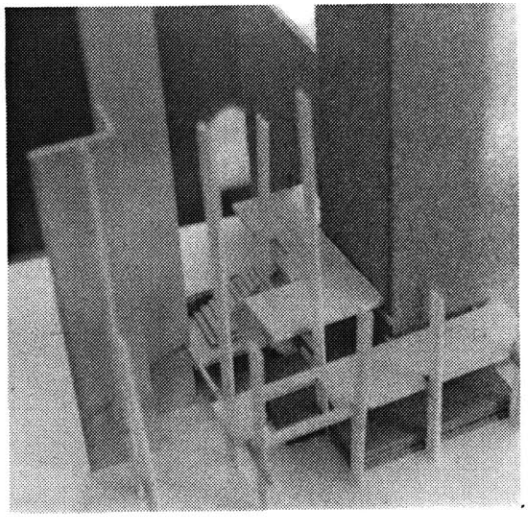


Early sketch model



Progymnasium, Lorch, by Günter Behnisch

Study model

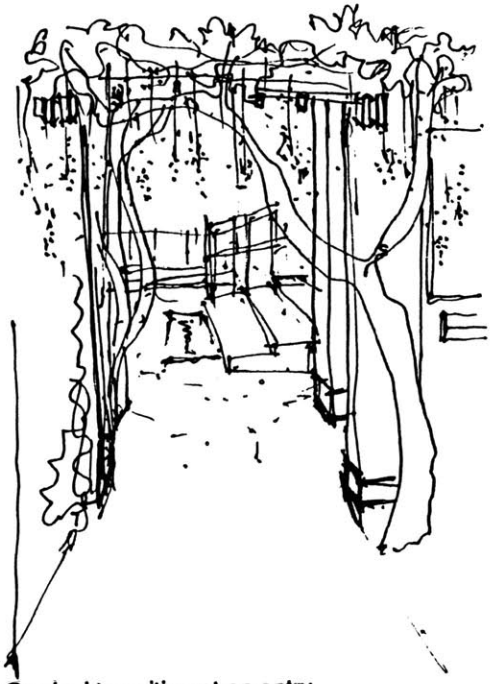


Study model of entrance stair

The main entrance offers a proud and dignified stand on a main commercial and residential street. The entrance speaks of thriving- a strength to confront the busy street that Tremont is and enter proudly on its edge. There is an eagerness to let one's presence be known. The residents who feel at ease with the bustling life on Tremont Street, and move easily in and out of it, are, by their very interaction with the South End community stating their unwillingness to be ignored by society. They are helping to remove the stigma attached to them by refusing to hide; by entering through the front door, not through a service alley.

The entrance stairs are a positive element in themselves, built of a light steel structure that is nestled in between the brick wall of the old church tower and the new structure to its left. It offers an airy welcome to the home. For a resident who is thriving, it reinforces the ease of movement from the city into the home and vise-versa.

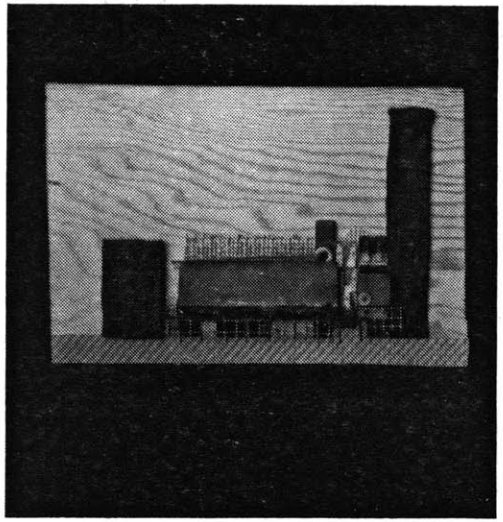
It also responds to the need of those who are feeling threatened, by setting back from the street edge in the protection of the walls of the building, and comprised of a gradual and increasingly protective series of moves up and off the street. The movement is parallel to the street at first, never back to it. A respite in the form of a landing allows one to glance back out at the street behind the security of a low wall. The ground form moves upward incrementally, allowing time and space to adjust to new surroundings and slip away cautiously from a bustling urban street.



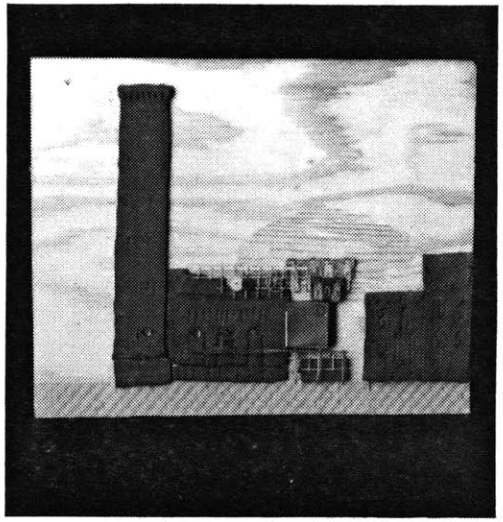
Gradual transition at an entry

"A building with presence is not apologetic, but asserts itself as architecture..a building with presence is not one that would wish to disappear".

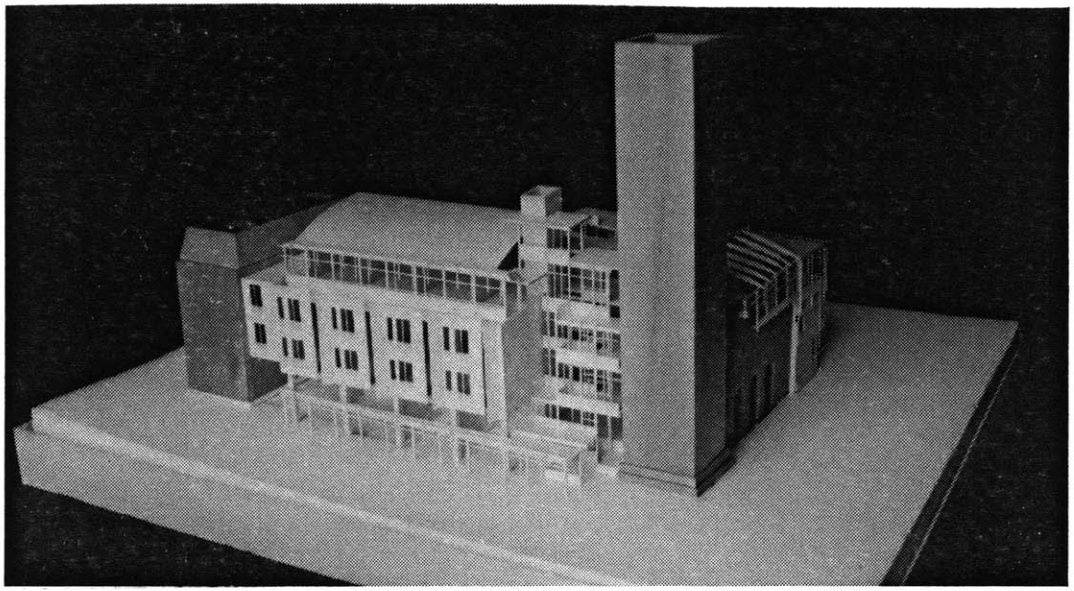
Michael Benedikt, For An Architecture of Reality



Elevation study



Elevation study



A view from the Tremont Street corner

A CRITICAL MASS OF ACTIVITY

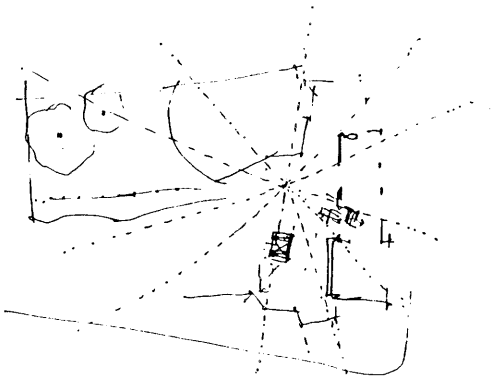
In our house, there was always an abundance of activity at the very heart of the place- five children engaged in playing piano, or clarinet, or trumpet (would you mind keeping it down!), engaged in experimenting with crafts, less engaged in attending to homework, or generally adding to the noise level. No one wanted to be secluded in their bedrooms: the dining room and living room were far more appealing.

Sewing machines and fabric, pastels and markers, Legos, composition books always took precedence over any table setting, which made dinner rather informal. My mother never worried that paint would stain the living room rug, or that scissors would cut through a table cloth. "Houses are meant to be lived in and that's what we're doing", she'd say. There'd never be a plastic couch slipcover in *our* house.

That fleeting nostalgic memory served me well: I realized that because the transitional home is comprised of families who are new to each other, much could be gained by inspiring a "heart" of the home where some critical mass of activity and excitement takes place. The literal hearth of the home sits firmly between the kitchen and living room, where everybody will likely happen by at some point during the day.

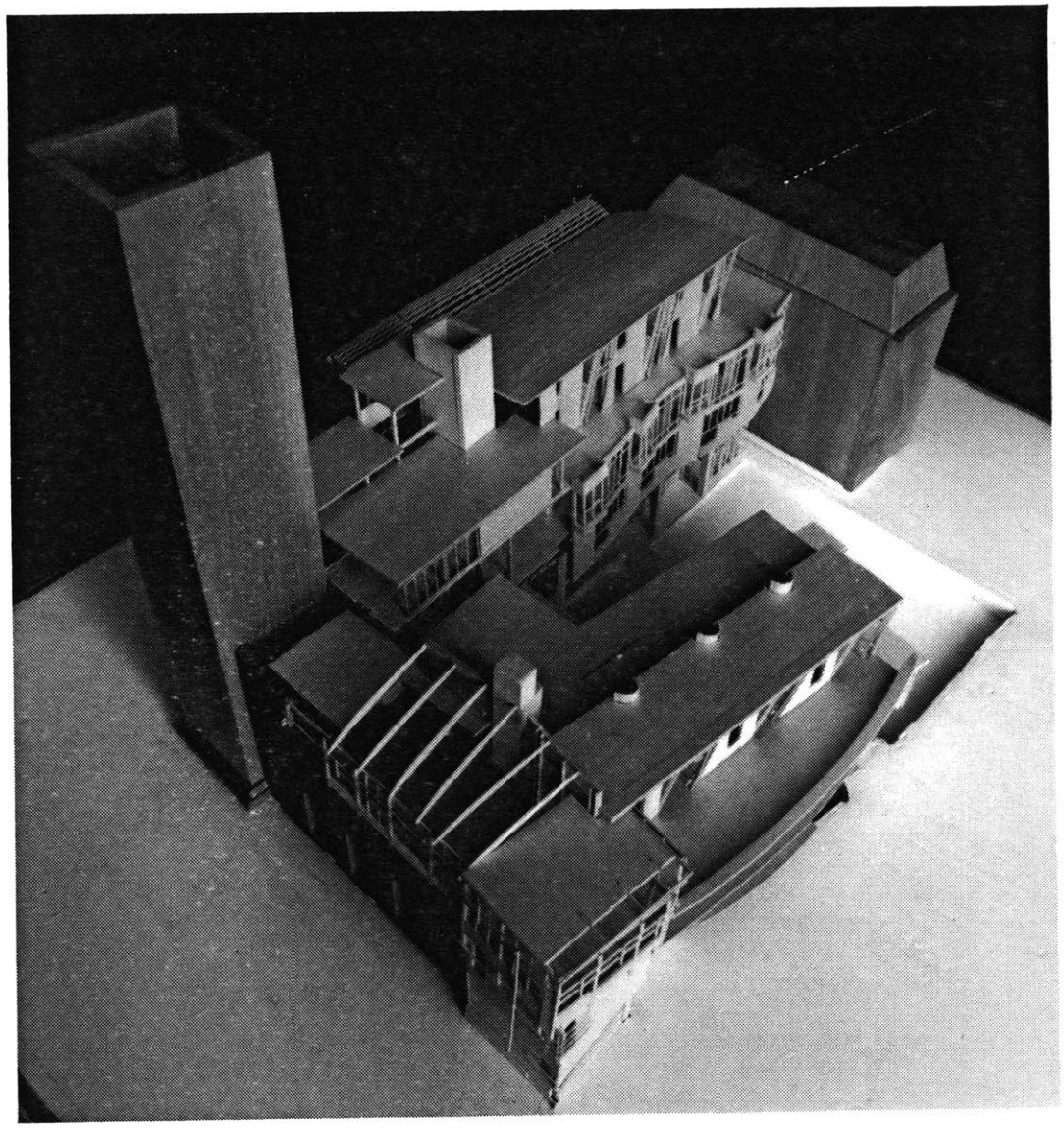
It is a place to grab a cup of coffee in the morning, participate in a housing meeting, or meet before an evening meal.

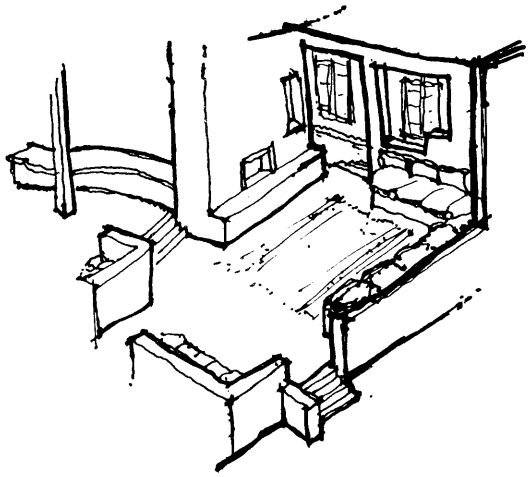
Although the "rooms" are designated with rather conventional labels, they are open to many uses. There is a clear connection between these communal spaces. They are spacious but tucked protectively under the apartment units. They have physical or visual access to the playyard and garden outdoors.



The heart of the building

Central Hall in De Overloop Almere, housing for the elderly, by Herman Hertzberger





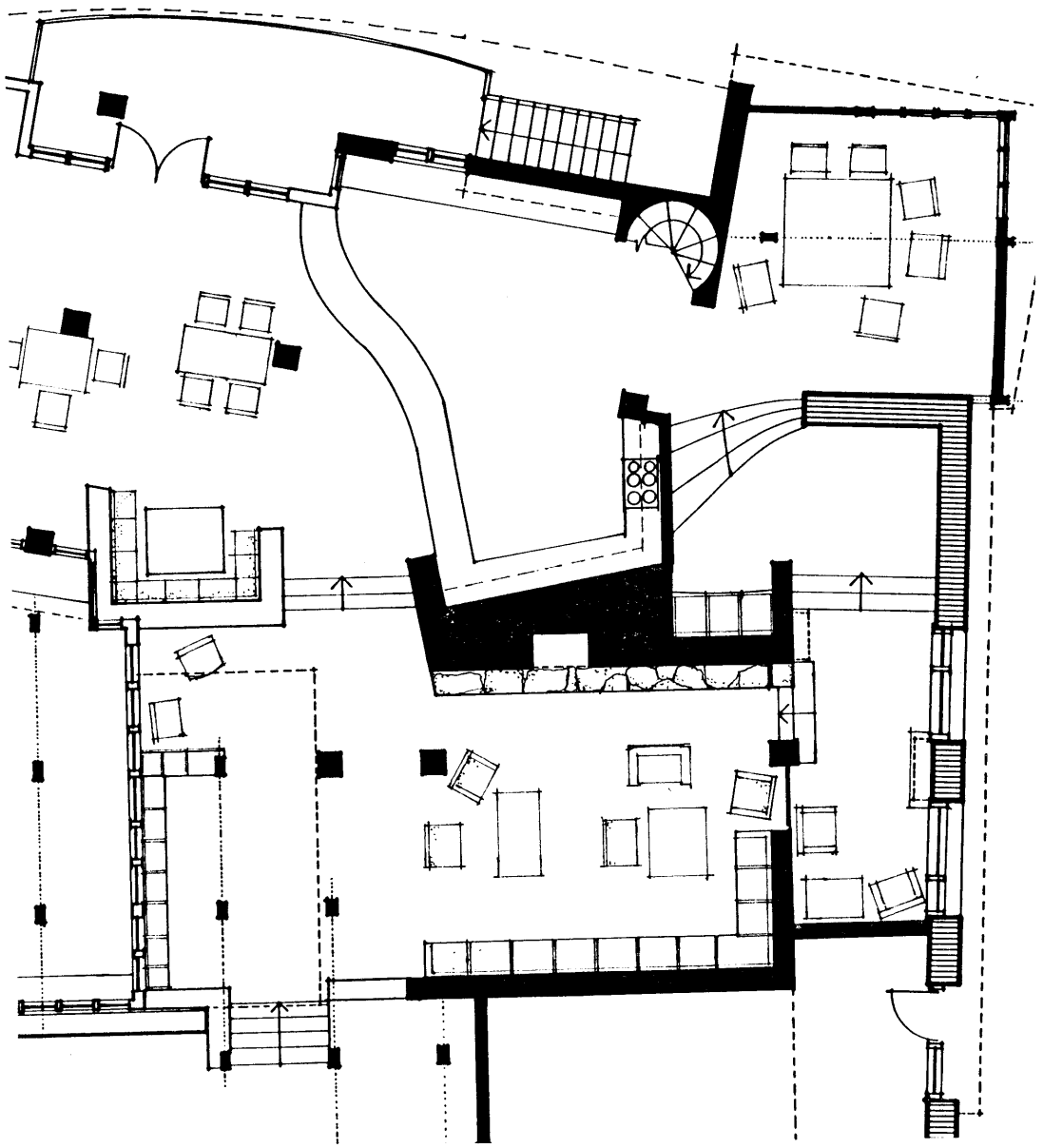
The living area

If thriving, one might spend a greater amount of time in the shared areas of the building than in secluded places. One would feel substantially more comfortable in social situations at this point than upon arrival into the home. The living area and kitchen would truly become one's own: a place to meet with other parents and spend an evening, or chat with the cook at the kitchen table. The kitchen work surfaces and "inards" are visible from the dining room and are easily accessible as much like a kitchen in private residential situations. It is informal and open to the residents for use.

The kitchen has an important role to play within the house: it is a place of growth, of physical and emotional sustenance. It is easily reached, yet sits cozily in one corner of the house, defined by a hearth on one side and bright southern light on the outer side.
The kitchen, in its life and warmth, is the clump of sugar and raisins found in a bowl of hot oatmeal.

To sit in the living room is to be visible to others moving about the home, not a daunting prospect for a resident who is thriving. It is a place that is dynamic, where the structural lines converge and where the outside moves in to meet the building.

"In every room, in every space and every place there is something that tries to make it special, some indication that somebody was there before."
Jan Wampler, "A Village in A House", in Spazio e Societa 26

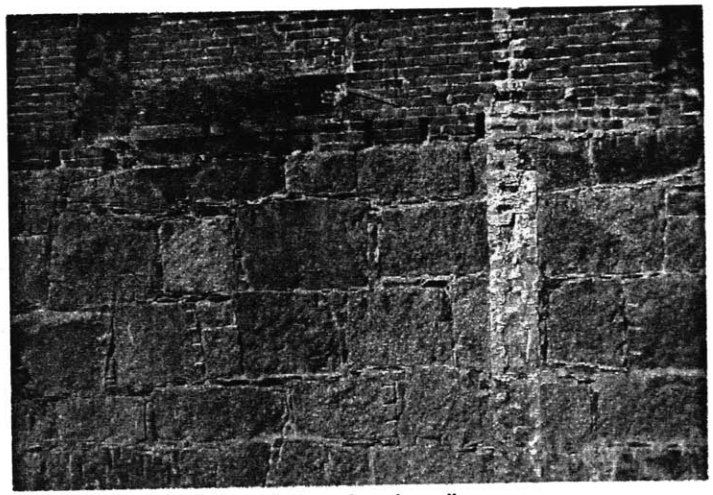


Detail plan of communal place

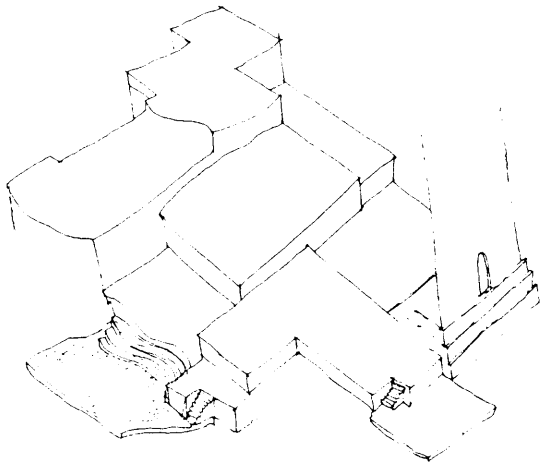
There are places within the rooms that are smaller and quiet, so that one may feel part of a larger gathering but gain some sense of security from a sheltered alcove; a place that is present but not in the thick of things.

The living room is nestled into the old church wall as a measure of protection, a grandfather of a wall. One can inhabit a crannie in order to be quite removed and yet have visual connection to the activity in the house.

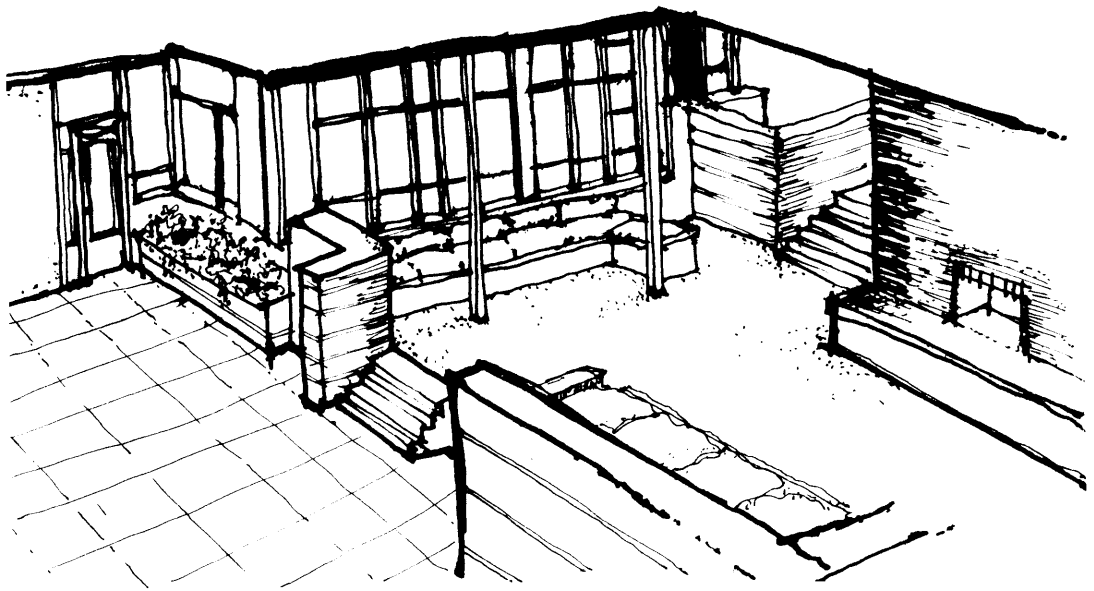
The communal places are built up from the entrance to form a high plateau where one may scan the activity within the house or back on the street. To glance about before proceeding through the building one may be drawn to join in gradually. The attempt is to "offer opportunity, rather than give direction".[9]



Stone and brick of the existing church wall



Ground form built up to a plateau that encompasses views around the house

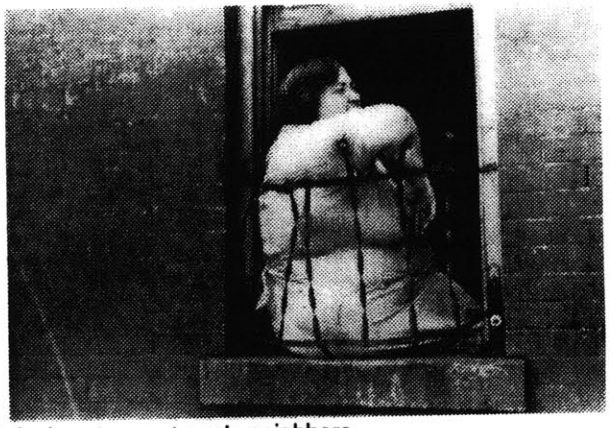


Wohnhochhaus Apartments by Hans Scharoun

The access along the apartments is always normal to the public access, clearly expressing the difference between the two worlds. The access curves gently, creating places that are varying distances away from the apartment units. Should a person feel like reaching their unit without coming into contact with others they might choose to walk on the outer edge of the access.

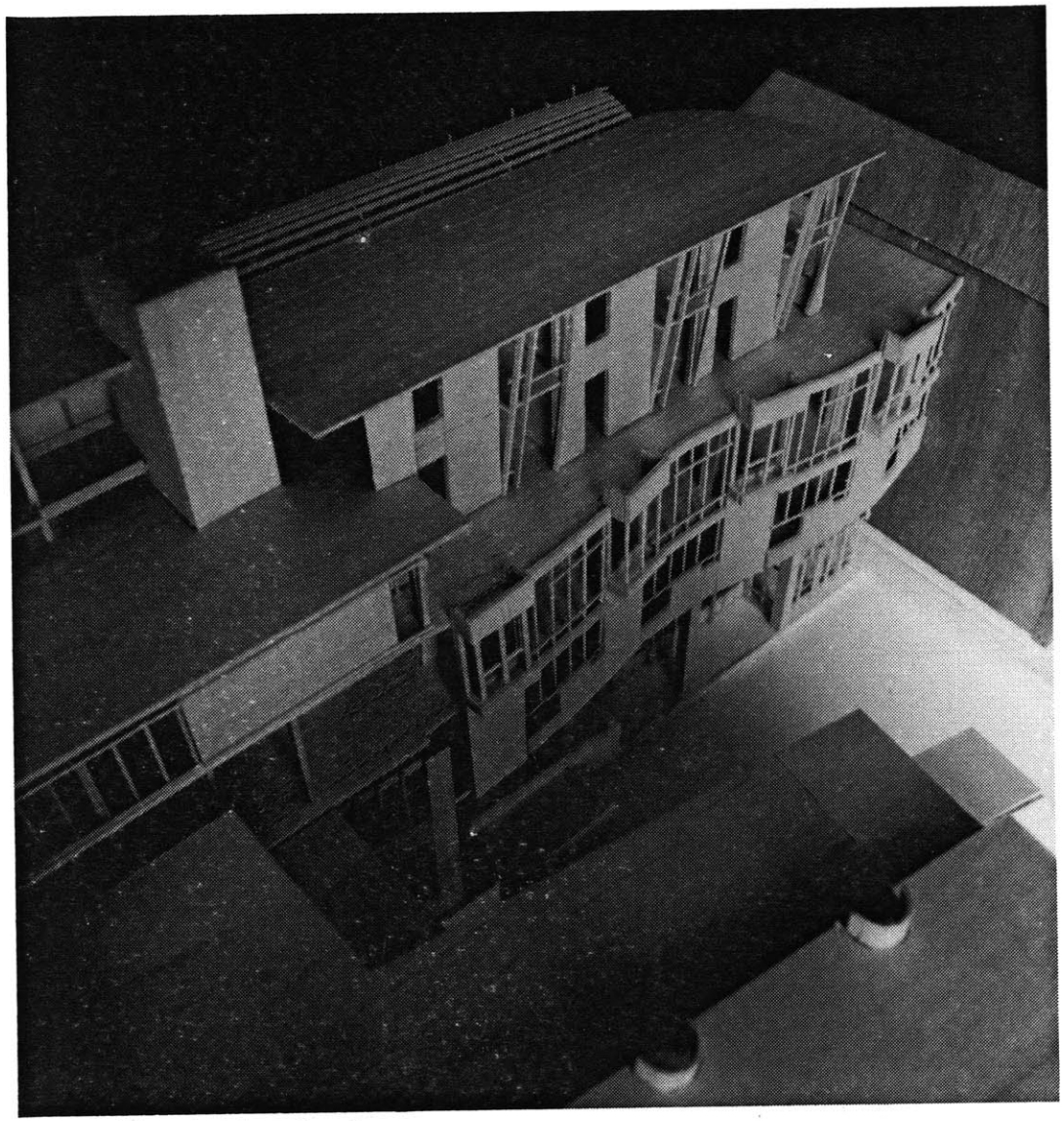
To be thriving, one might sit on the front stoop of one's apartment and greet friends as they happen by. The small porch enables two types of exchange: of territory between the apartments and the access and of words between people.

Study sketch of duplex apartments

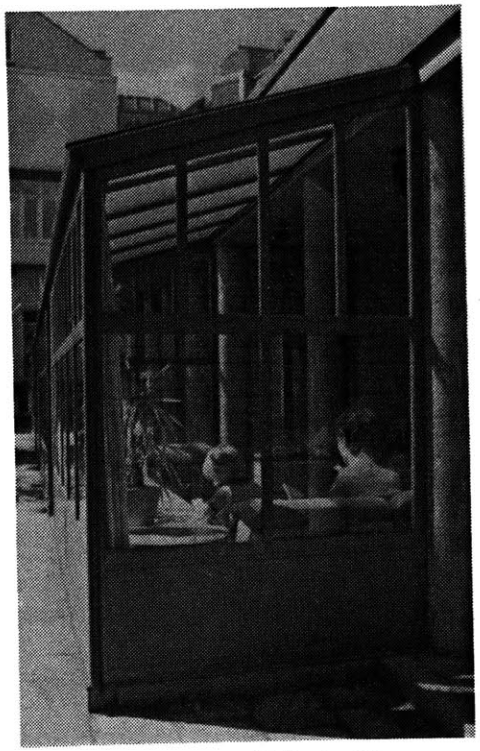


A place to greet one's neighbors

The bay windows provide another opportunity to communicate with those passing by with the protection of being inside. The built-in sitting space in the apartment offers a view out but is far enough back from the access that it provides greater territorial depth and hence, greater privacy. The form of the wall echoes that of the building: partially enclosing in order to shelter and protect.

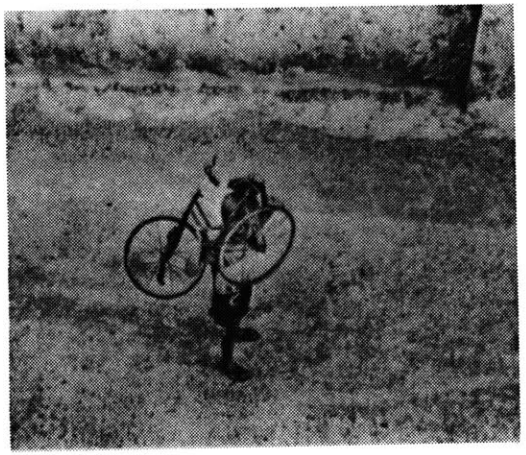


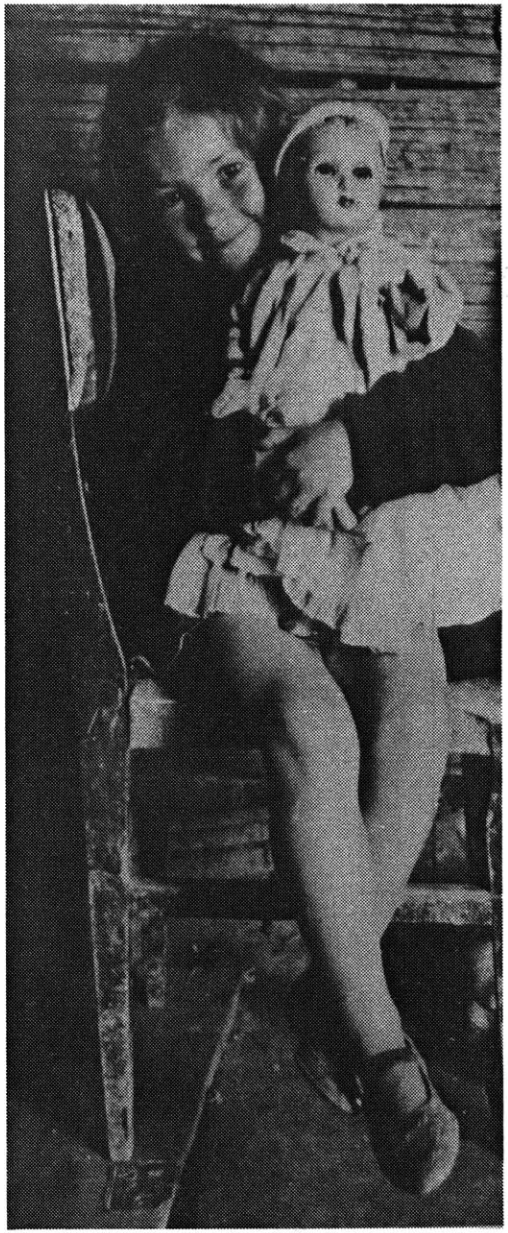
Courtyard elevation of apartments



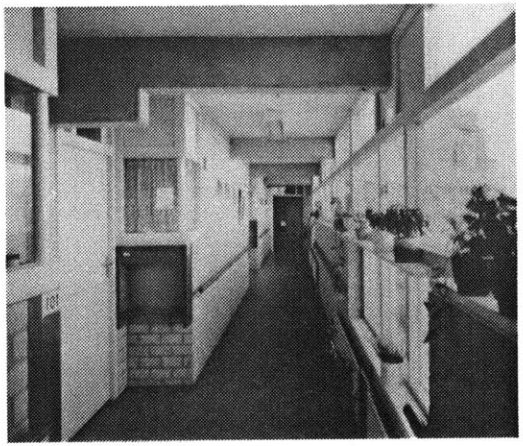
Children's playrooms, Hubertus House

Play space within each unit allows a child who has recently arrived at the home to play within the security of the apartment until he or she begins to feel confident enough to join the group of children. From inside the apartment perhaps a child will glimpse his peers climbing the big tree in the playyard, and he or she will be tempted to venture downstairs and join in.





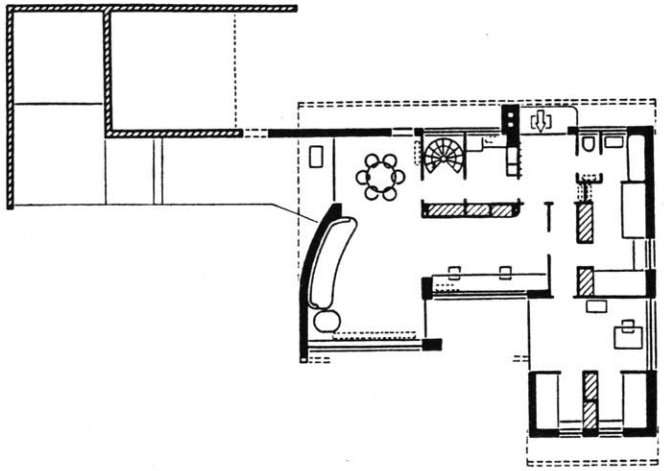
"Kinder yoren, Zisse kinder yoren"
(Childhood hours, sweet childhood hours)
Yiddish Folk Song



Entrance area to apartments, De Overloop Almere by Herman Hertzberger

In the duplex apartment, the shifting of the two levels fosters a feeling of spaciousness. To create several levels partially separated. This still allows access for parental supervision or the comfort for a child in seeing a parent in the next room. The parent's bedroom is far enough away from the children's space to offer privacy and occasional respite from the children's activity.

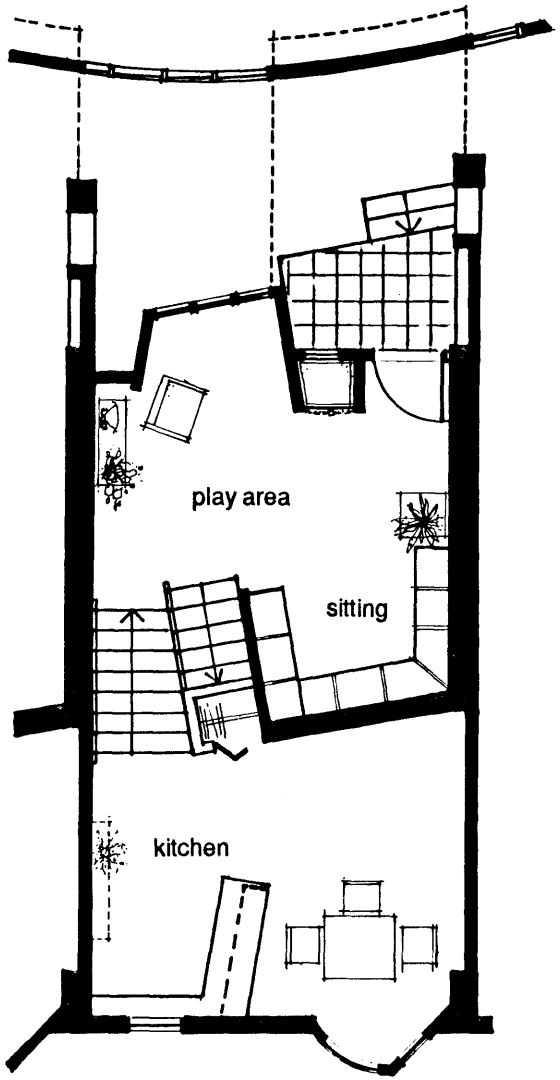
The shared spaces connect the parent's world to the children's world. There is the sitting area mentioned earlier whose angle focuses toward the most pleasing view as does the seating in many of Hans Scharoun's houses. There is also a play space with a window seat cum toy chest, and a small kitchen that overlooks Tremont Street.

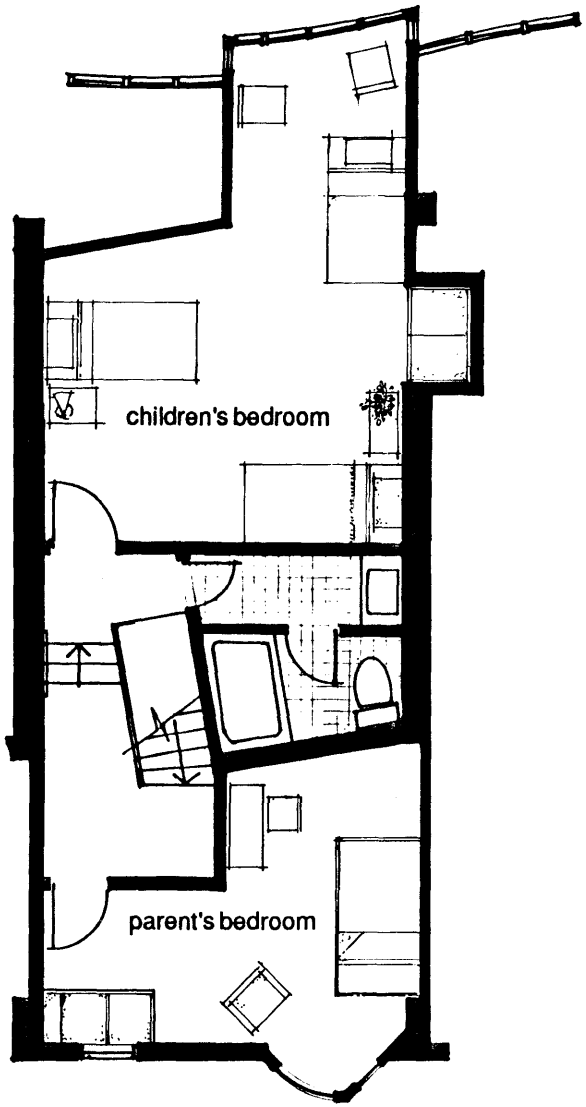


Landschaft House, by Hans Scharoun

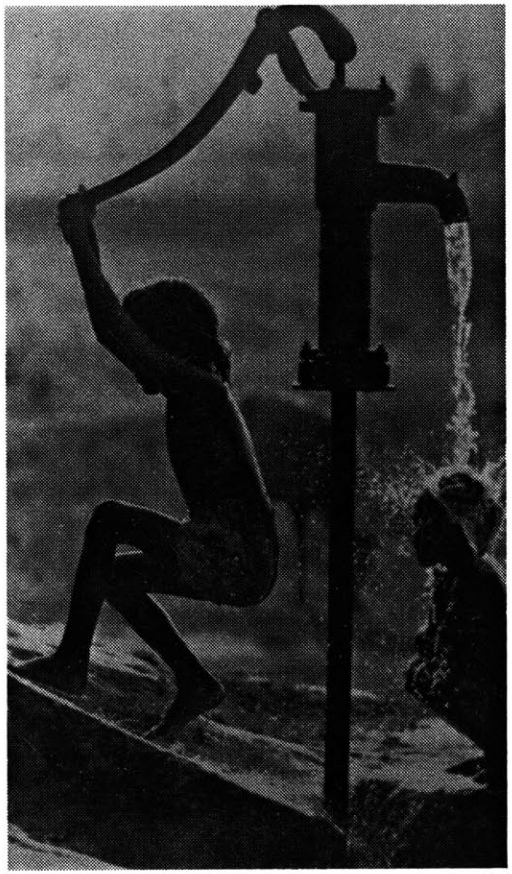
"The bedrooms are big and private and high-ceilinged and they do not open on the swimming pool and one can imagine reading in one of them or writing a book, or closing the door and crying until dinner."

Joan Didion, The White Album



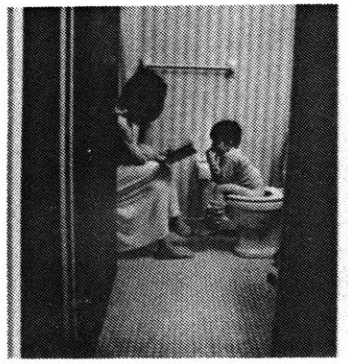


DUPLEX APARTMENT PLAN



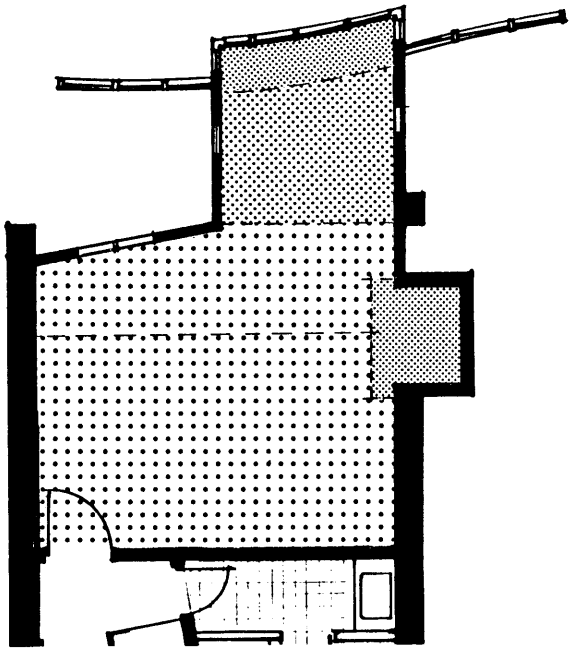
The bathroom can truly be considered a place of thriving at bathtime! There is room in the tub for several siblings, setting the stage for a story- telling or book-reading session. Two compartments allow a parent to luxuriate in the bath without interruption. After a sojourn in a crisis shelter, in which shower time is often an experience devoid of privacy or dignity , the option to bath in one's own surroundings is a pleasure inherent in any of the three stages.

In the children's domain, a square bay of the room sits boldly over the access. Feeling courageous,a child might venture to its edge, claim the curved wall of the building to look into the playyard, and even glance sideways to the next bay. A tin can telephone line would string easily between neighbors' windows.

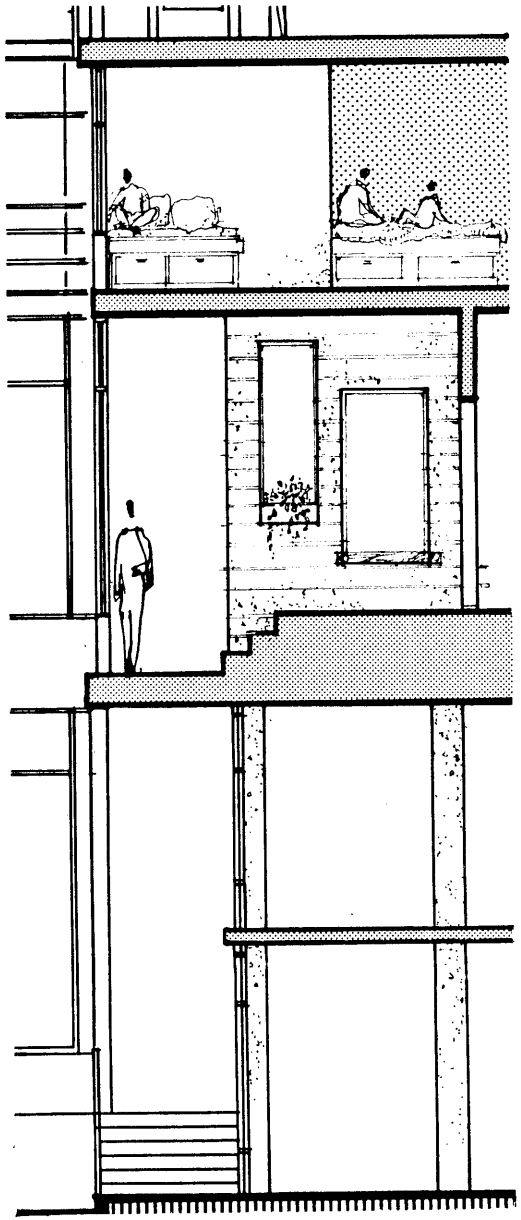


"The bathrooms are big and airy and they do not have bidets but they do have room for hampers, and dressing tables, and chairs on which to sit and read a story to a child in the bathtub."

Joan Didion, The White Album



Territories in the children's bedrooms

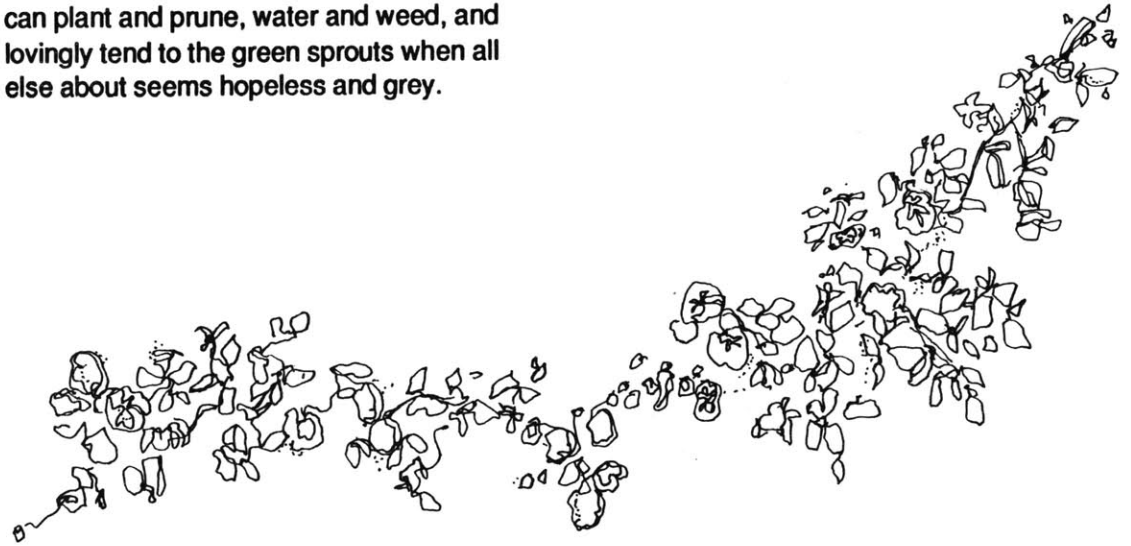


Section through apartment at children's bedroom

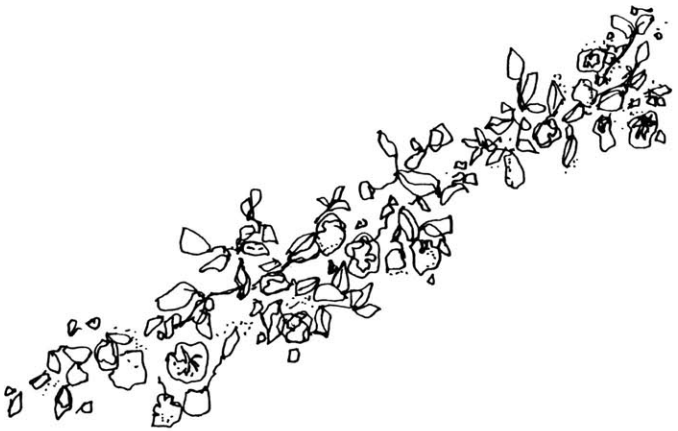
To thrive also means to flourish and grow, words that bring to my mind thoughts of growth in nature: of plants and flowers and trees, of life that has been nourished and maintained to a point where it can blossom and soar. The greenhouse that perches atop the church wall is the very literal programmatic transformation of that metaphor.

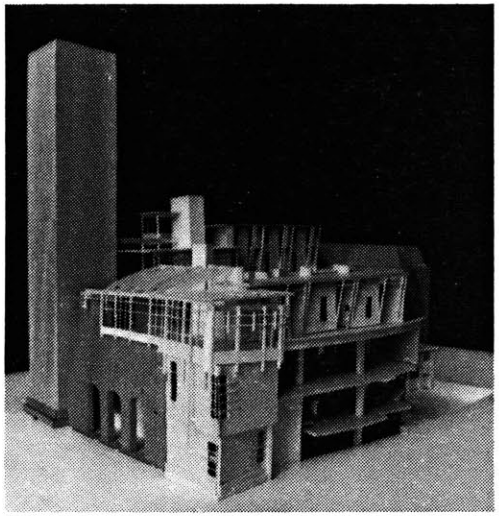
The city is replete with places that have been neglected and trodden upon in a careless way- parks and landscape that have fallen upon botanical hard times. The urban garden, whether in its neat, cropped greenness or fanciful swatches of color, grows full as an indication that life does flourish and thrive within even the harshest of conditions. This greenhouse and sunroom are just such places: where one can plant and prune, water and weed, and lovingly tend to the green sprouts when all else about seems hopeless and grey.

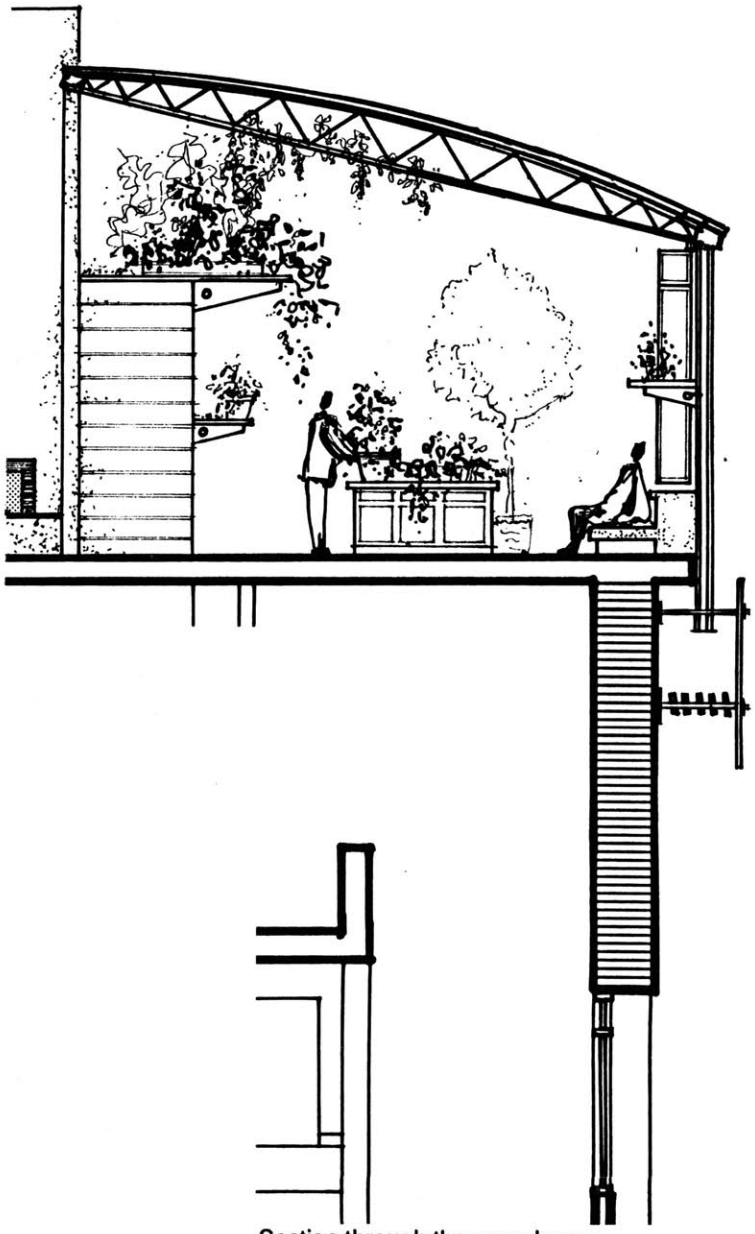
Within the greenhouse are smaller edges to inhabit if one does not care to be in the heart of the "planting excitement ". To glimpse down West Brookline Street and contemplate, the old church wall holds a canitlevered window seat on it where one could back away from the room if only by several feet. There is a sunroom at the end of the greenhouse where one can sit as far from the inside activity as possible and look out to the neighborhood at a sunny corner.



For a resident who has recently arrived and might feel hesitant to venture up to the greenhouse, a place for a window box at each apartment entrance make a fine miniature of a greenhouse, a garden that sits within the boundaries of one's personal space.



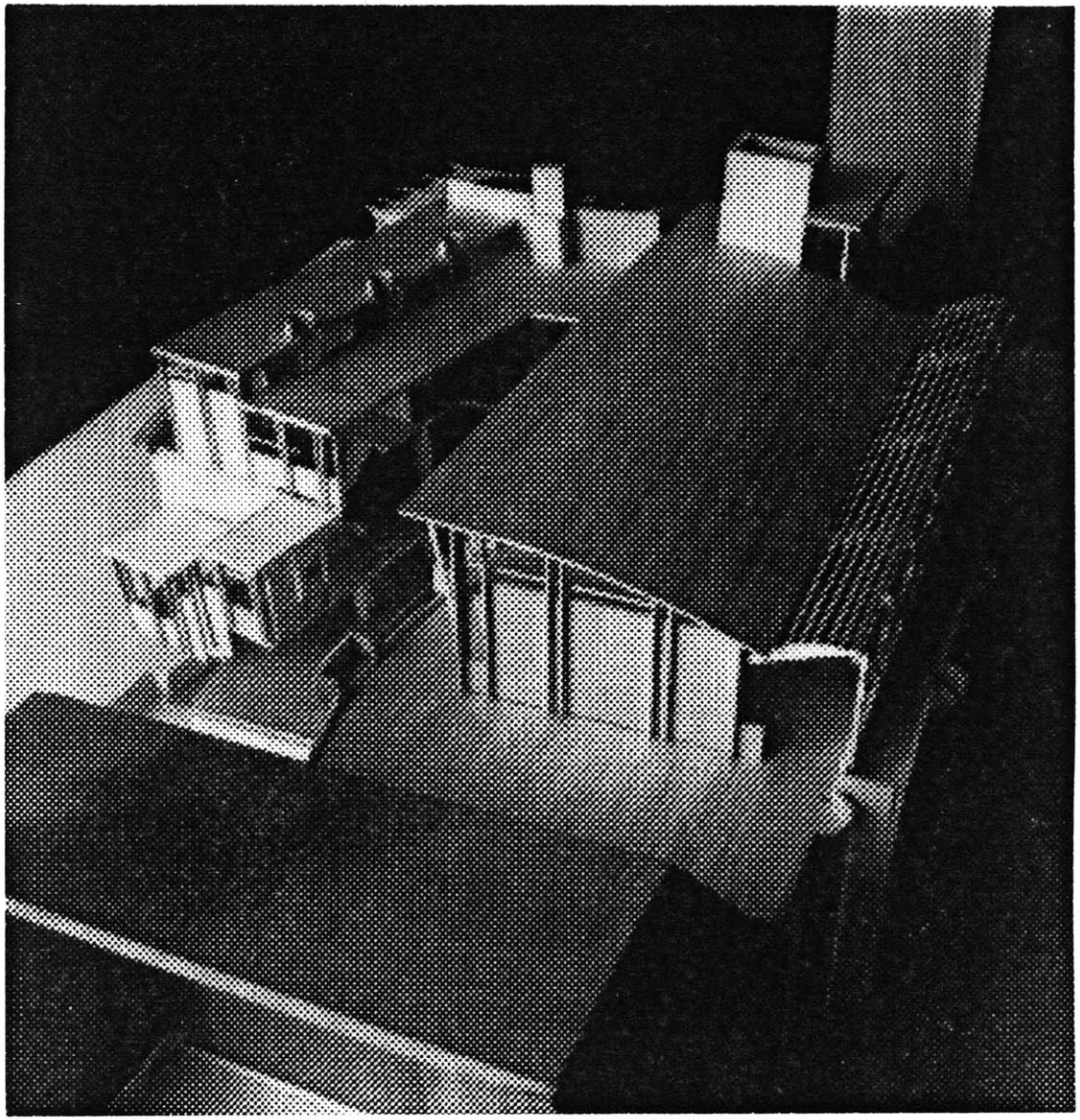


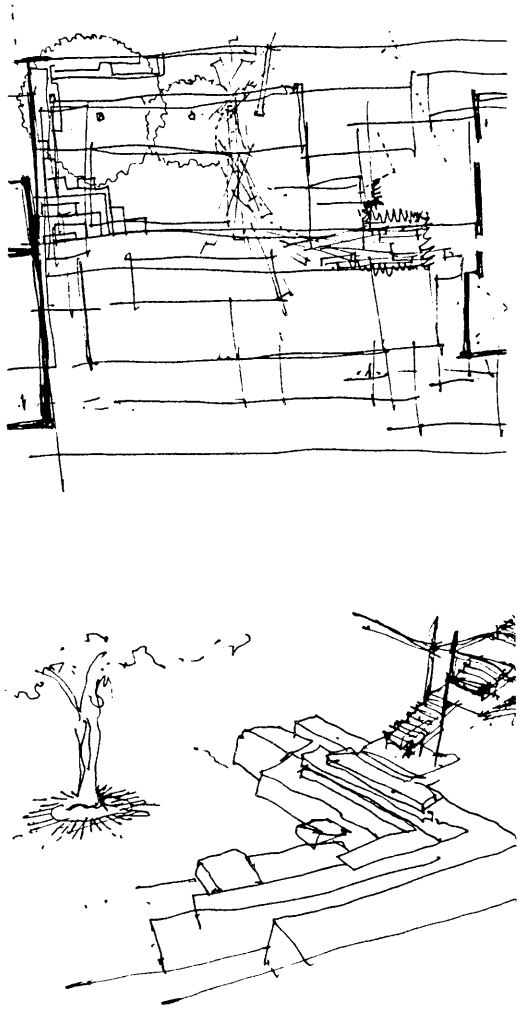


Section through the greenhouse

The family lounges on the second and third floors sit at the hinge of the two wings of the building. They are the exchange or shared territory between the privacy of the apartments. These spaces are intended to be an integral part of the access, to encourage new families to share time together in an informal manner, particularly if they are feeling nervous or unsure about the prospect of heading downstairs into the most public communal spaces. The lounges provide an intermediate size of gathering space.

A sitting room

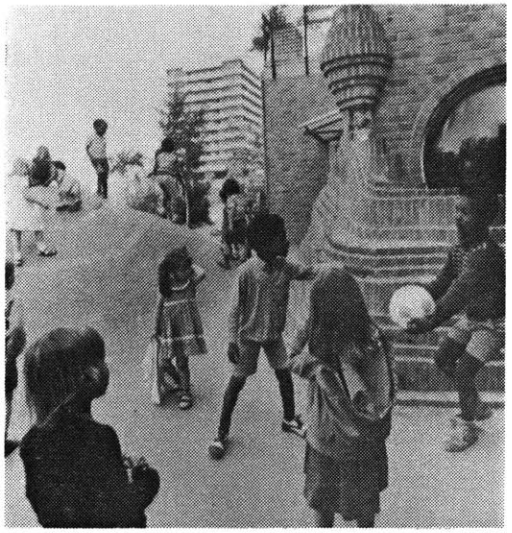




Early sketches of playyard

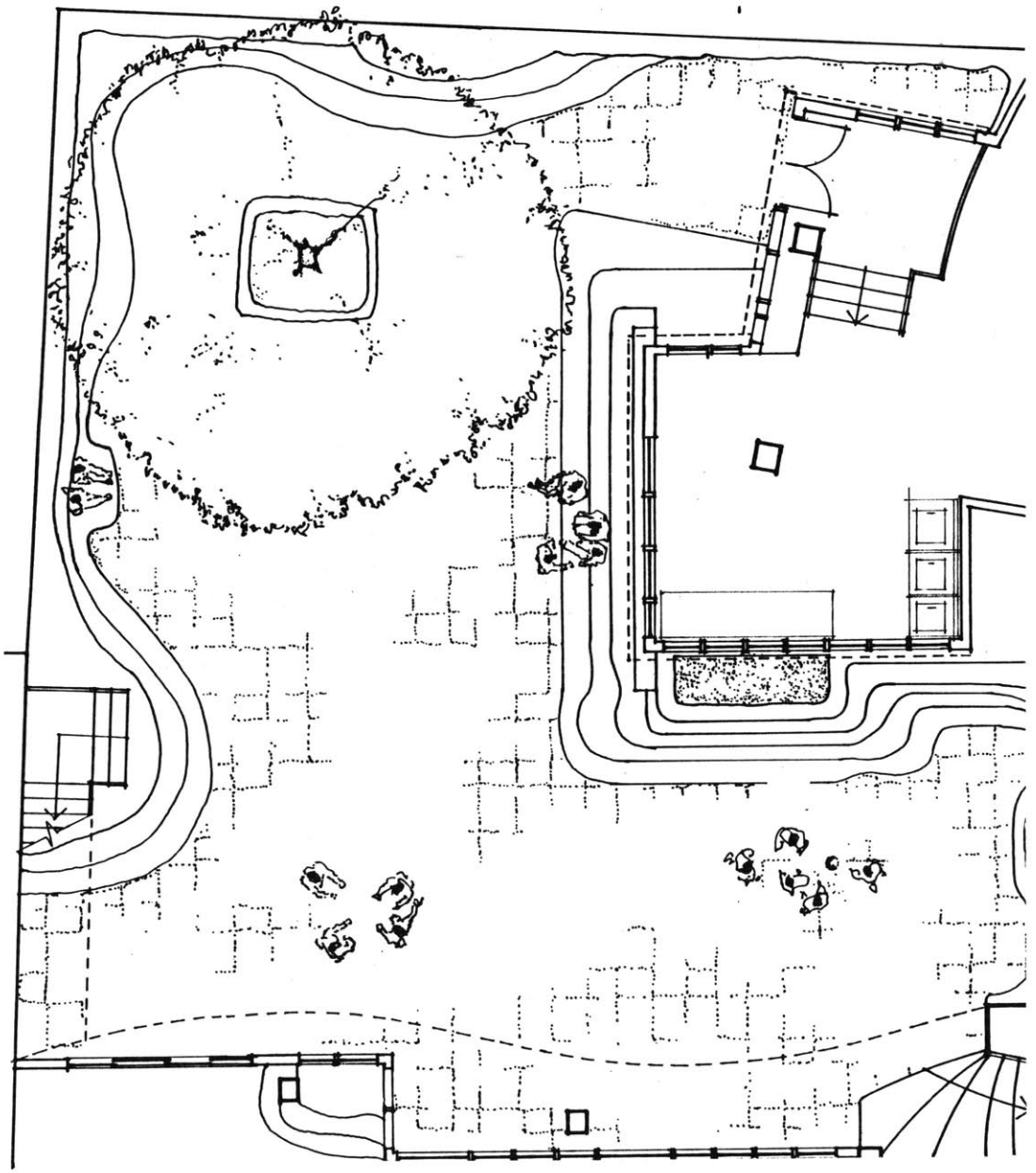
In the outdoor space that is formed by the enclosure of the building's arms, is a small terrace and a large playyard just a ball's throw away from the daycare center. The playyard is a direct extension of the daycare center. A railroad-tie jungle gym that inhabits a tall section inside of the daycare center also marches right through the enclosure and continues its growth out of doors to build the connection between indoor and outdoor play spaces.

On warm days, open glass doors allow the yard and daycare to become one large space, great enough for a child to expend all the energy they could possibly have saved up all day. The yard is playful and fanciful, a part of the house that is reserved for the children, although the adults are welcome to partake of the tree swing, or undulating brick pavement, or the hideaways by the outer walls.



Playful forms in a schoolyard, Lucien Kroll

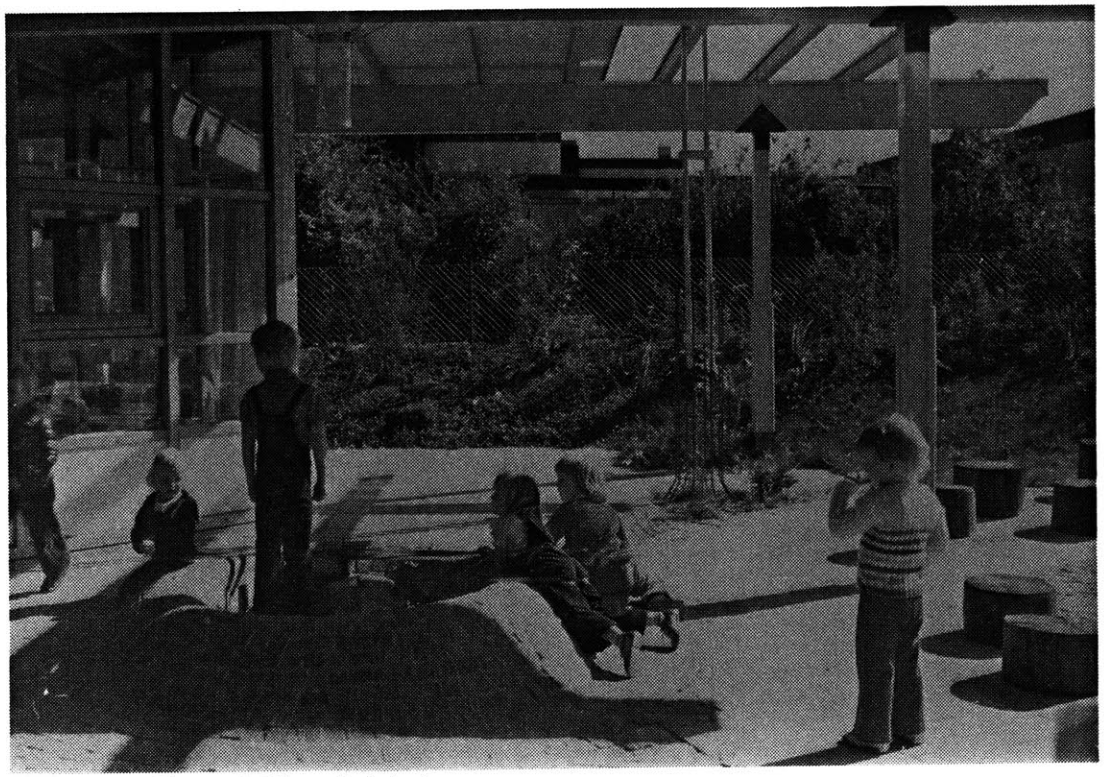
Habitable stair, Lucien Kroll



The playyard

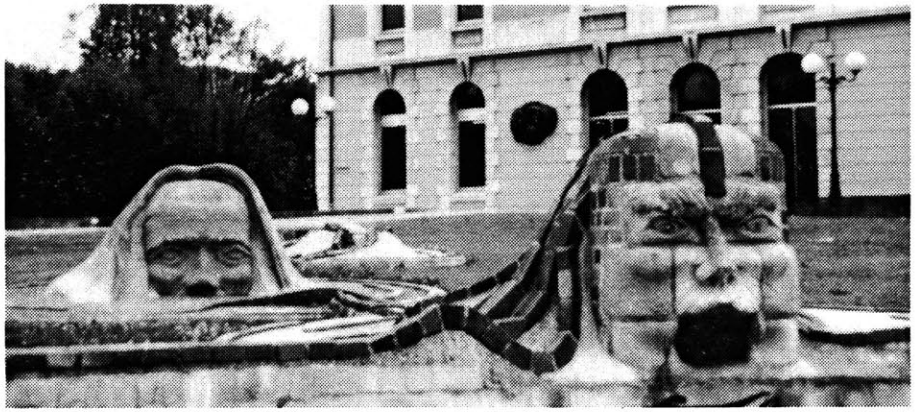
The playyard is adjacent to the smaller terrace, where a parent may keep an eye on their children while still enjoying the outdoors. It is a place, more tightly enveloped by the building and partially covered with a translucent roof for inclement weather.

The terrace is a place where one can enjoy the air without venturing beyond the perimeter of the building into a frightening and unknown urban neighborhood.

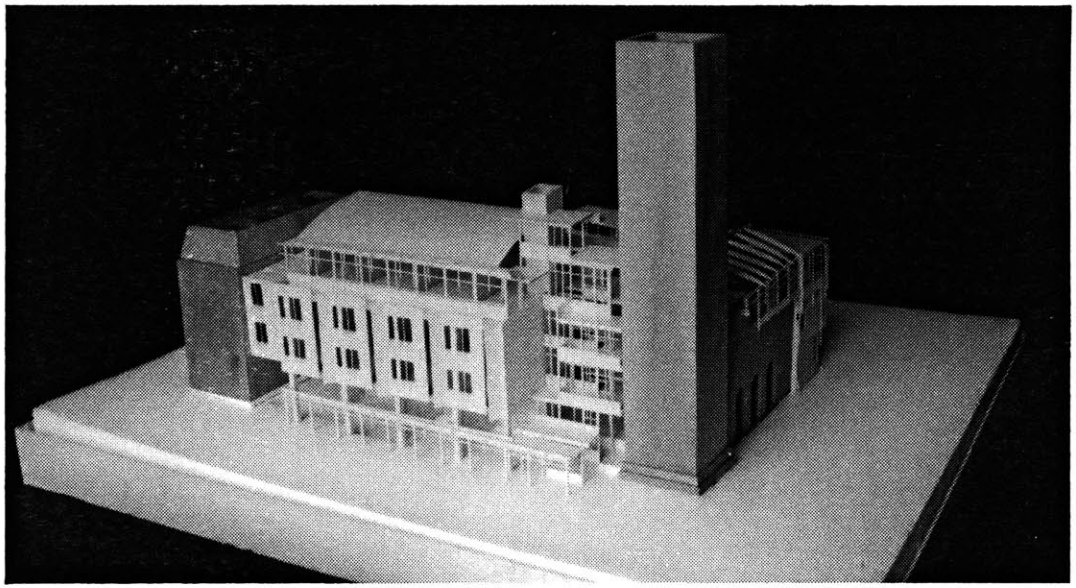


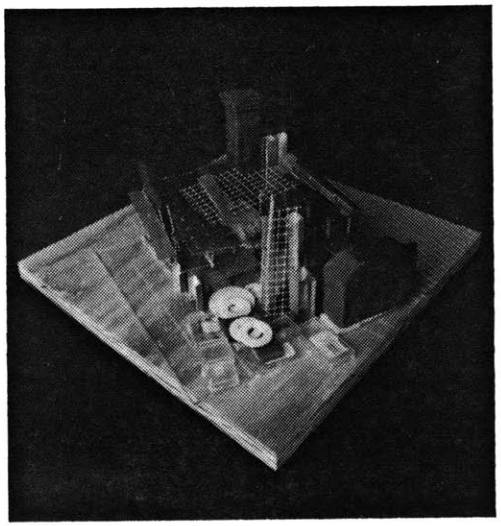
Kindergarten Playyard, Günter Behnisch

Charitable Service of the Lutheran Church Building, by Günter Behnisch



Fanciful brickwork at a park in Belfort, France





Study Model

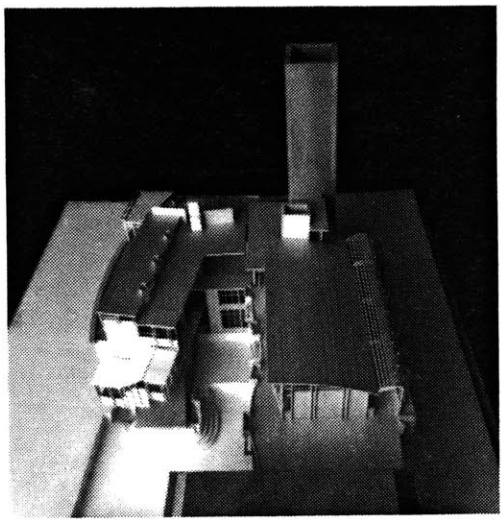
Imagine looking at a object through the colorings of three different filters- filters that would transform our perception of the object. They would produce three variations expressive of each filter's distinct qualities. One might gain insight into what one's naked eye might not be keen enough to see. In much the same way as an artist holds his or her work upside-down to see it in a new light, an architect could employ methods that increase their capacity to see, to understand.

Understanding the psychological turmoil that a homeless person experiences is not a simple task; to design for these specific needs is equally difficult. A transitional home such as the one in this exploration offers that challenge: to understand and design shelter that relieves a trauma that most of us cannot fully comprehend. If the crisis of homelessness is hard to grasp, then it seems that the design might benefit from the three filters, tinting one's lenses to gain further insight.

In an attempt to look at the design through tri-colored glasses, one could understand three layers of perception that form the complex and ever-changing whole. The filters in this exploration, three stages of psychological transition within a transitional home, were useful in translating subtleties of the resident's needs into architectural space, noteably the understanding of territorial layers, and of public-private spatial relationships in a communal living situation.

In this capacity, the filters, or stages of transition, were an essential tool. The truly essential tool, however, is one's empathy and compassion. They are not easy to document, but must be markedly present in the design. Only then will one near the ultimate goal of a greater understanding, a greater sensitivity, and a built effort at solving the crisis of homelessness.

"And life will regain its fluidity."
R.M. Schindler



"It is the best joke there is, that we are here, and fools — that we are sown into time like so much corn, that we are souls sprinkled at random like salt into time and dissolved here, spread into matter, connected by cells right down to our feet, and those feet likely to fell us over a tree root or jam us on a stone. The joke part is that we forget it. Give the mind two seconds alone and it thinks its Pythagoras. We wake up a hundred times a day and laugh."

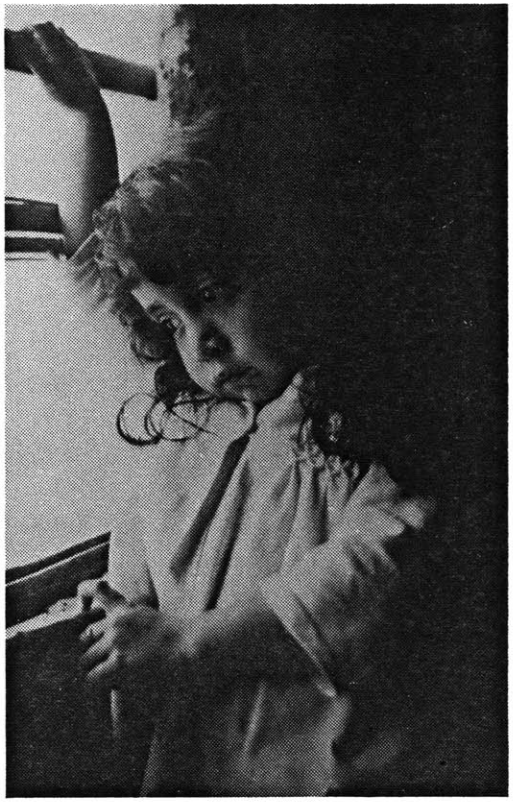
Annie Dillard, Teaching A Stone To Talk

The joke that Annie Dillard refers to is also our saving grace — our ability to survive, to erase enough of our pain to continue on, to laugh at our own inadequacies and live on in spite of them. For every homeless family, "jamming" on one of life's stones is a familiar pain. The brutality that homelessness imposes upon a family threatens their survival instinct; it lessens their ability to laugh at life's jokes, and forget.

For a homeless family, restoring and regenerating becomes a mighty task. Every potential escape avenue seems to be a dead end alley. It is difficult to live in these conditions, even with someone whom you love. Given this, and a gesture of compassion, could we consider a way in which people who didn't, at first, forge ahead according to societie's stringent and narrow rules be given the extra dose of forgetting and laughter per day that would allow them a glimpse of light beyond the crisis.

In other words, let us, in an act of preventative care, give strength to those in need. The human spirit, after all, is resilient and its spring of life plentiful.

"If childhood is a journey, let us see to it that the child never travels by night."
Aldo Van Eyck



"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies- in the final sense- a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.

The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children."

Dwight Eisenhower

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Footnotes

[1] Kevin Lynch, Good City Form, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), p.99

[2] Commitment and Compassion: Boston's Comprehensive Policy for the Homeless, Emergency Shelter Commission, Winter 1988-89), p.5

[3] Jonathan Kozol, Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America, (New York: Faucett Columbine, 1988), p.4

[4] Ibid., p.21

[5] Ibid., p.49

[6] Ibid., p.50

[7] A Manual On Transitional Housing, (Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development, Inc., 1986), p.4

[8] Paul Goldberger, "Can Architects Serve the Public Good?" The New York Times, (Sunday, June 25, 1989), p.30

[9] Michael Benedikt, For an Architecture of Reality (New York: Lumen Books, 1985), p.52

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