

## Downtown Transformation: Community Event as Design Generator

*I enter downtown Middletown, Ohio at the intersection of Main Street and Central Avenue. Old buildings line the streets with some tell-tale signs of decay. Paint is fading. Brick walls are crumbling. The space...is quiet. It was not always so, and if you were to ask lifelong residents, they would not hesitate to tell you all about it. This is where it all happened. The vacant structures are tangible reminders of more prosperous times.*



**Figure 1:** One of three murals painted on downtown buildings.

*A vibrant mural painted on a nearby façade depicts a scene from the past with active streets and interaction between community members. I struggle to find where this activity and interaction currently takes place. Detailed cornices, interesting material patterns, and intricate stonework leave hints of a unique identity, but they call out to an absent audience.*



**Figure 2:** Looking east down Central Avenue.

*Cars zip by, but other pedestrians are scarce. I have the irrational urge to grab the whole scene and shake it until it wakes up. I know that I am not seeing the true colors of downtown and wonder what it will take to bring that image to the surface. Continuing my journey, I take a few pictures of an impressive, but vacant, old building across the street. A man pops his head out the window of his parked car and asks, "Do you know what they're gonna do with the Sebald building?" This man's question reveals some inner attachment to Middletown and suggests a more complete image of the downtown that lies beneath the surface in the hearts and minds of the community.*

## Introduction

Thinking about how and why people are attached to a community brings to mind personal relationships to place. I moved several times while growing up, never remaining in a place long enough to become truly attached to it. Having only ever lived in small or medium-sized cities, I have a particular interest in place attachments within these contexts. The old downtown buildings intrigue me – how their appearance and use has changed over time. I wonder about the feelings these places evoke for different types of people: those who have lived there all their life, those like me who may only stay a few years, and children growing up and beginning to form their own relationships to place. Consider the way you feel about the place you live...work...have fun. What would you say influences these feelings the most? Physical elements? Activities? Past memories? The people around you? In this paper, I explore these diverse feelings in downtown Middletown, Ohio and prepare for a design process that learns from the ways people engage the existing built environment, respecting the dynamic ways both buildings and people add meaning to place. I ask: how can the socio-spatial context of a community event inform a design process to transform the blighted urban environments of post-industrial, small-city downtowns?

For decades, cities have pursued ways to counteract decentralization and revive the downtown setting. This is a particular challenge in small, post-industrial cities where industry relocation and shrinking urban populations have led to deteriorated downtown

environments rife with vacant buildings and underused properties. In 2008, *Forbes* listed Middletown, Ohio among "America's fastest-dying towns,"<sup>1</sup> a painful stigma for a community proud of its past and struggling to make plans for the future. In general, development plans carry out vast changes to infrastructure, public spaces, and the built environment that alter peoples' paths and experiences of place. Downtown changes may enhance or diminish these experiences, depending at least in part on how the changes interconnect with the existing built environment and respond to social patterns. A helpful practice is to consider the existing engagement of place, a phenomenon that is most apparent in downtown Middletown during events where the community can come together. Especially in light of failed revitalization attempts, it is important to learn from past mistakes and reevaluate the ways designers and planners treat downtown as a place as well as the locus of various particular places.

## Origins of the Exploration

This paper draws partly on my previous work in downtown Middletown for a master's thesis in geography in which I investigated how planners and designers can gauge and articulate public perceptions about local sense of place.<sup>2</sup> I was originally drawn to the contradictions of the city's urban core; how it possessed a wealth of stately architecture but that which was in disrepair; how it was built to occupy thousands but barely managed to draw pedestrian traffic; how it had a thriving past

but showed signs of a bleak future. It had recently been branded a "dying town," and I wanted to know why. On the surface, I discovered a floundering downtown with low public moral. But the more I talked to people, the more I became convinced of a community spark lying dormant amidst years of political, economic, and social struggles. I was hooked on their stories...hearing about the glory days when the downtown was the center of city life and also about its slow, steady decline when local industries shut down, businesses moved to the outskirts of town, and people lost interest in the downtown. I came out of the experience with some understanding of what the community cherishes about their downtown as it was, as it is, and about what they hope it becomes. As a geographer, I developed an appreciation for the complexity of places and the feelings they evoke for different people. As a designer, I know that it may not be possible to fully grasp local sense of place prior to initiating a project, but that does not negate its importance.

Middletown has struggled to harness local place perceptions in past attempts to revive the downtown. The City Centre Mall is the most notable example. Following proposals in 1963 for a new thoroughfare system,<sup>3</sup> the City made plans for an enclosed downtown mall to occupy the core area, closing large portions of Central Avenue and Broad Street to street traffic.<sup>4</sup> Leading up to the construction in 1973, several articles in *The Middletown Journal* and other regional newspapers highlight the excitement surrounding the project, as well as public speculations.<sup>5</sup> These articles create a narrative of demolition as building after building came down to make way for the

parking garage.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, the City is now at the tail end of another razing schedule. Competing markets, and a host of other factors, prevented the downtown mall from prospering. The mall was demolished in 2002, and the last remnants of the parking garage are currently being cleared away. The project's failure reflects the devastating cost of neglecting peoples' investments in how development changes affect the places they are attached to, whether through memory, everyday contact, or even unconsciously.

Downtown Middletown is now in a time of transition, and while citizens regret the blight and vacancy found in downtown, they still feel a strong sense of place during times when the community comes together. The city is proud of their long tradition of events, the most recent addition being the Broad Street Bash, a series of free music concerts that take place downtown every other Wednesday during summer months. The city closes off a section of Central Avenue and Broad Street, making room for hundreds and sometimes thousands of local and regional citizens to come enjoy the festivities. In addition to the music performance, there is a moon jump for the kids, food and beverage vendors, and police presence to maintain order. The event momentarily encapsulates what the community is yearning for in the downtown: an appeal to both young and old, a local and regional destination, the presence of the arts, and the feeling of safety. But the downtown built environment does not yet reflect the social vitality displayed during events like the Bash, and it is this contradiction that I intend to address in my design process.

## Methodology

Current downtown developments allow me to position my design strides within a larger vision. Last year the city assembled a five-year strategic plan to unify downtown revitalization efforts.<sup>7</sup> Other efforts within the community, such as the Place Matters study<sup>8</sup> sponsored by Middletown United Way, have consolidated their goals to align with the downtown plan. A large group of downtown stakeholders also met recently to endorse the Main Street Program<sup>9</sup> as the structure for revitalization plans. Supplementing the broad scope of these plans, I will explore a more detailed approach, focusing on the interconnection of downtown spaces both physically and socially. For example, a zone designated "mixed-use" in a master plan says very little about how one site joins those adjacent to it, how building functions correspond with one another, and how people occupy and move around the space. These urban aspects require attention to the ways people engage their surroundings, and the Broad Street Bash provides a setting to observe these interactions at a time of increased activity in the downtown.<sup>10</sup>

## Exploring the Place(s) of Downtown

Analyzing the social and spatial characteristics of a physical environment in attempts to guide a design plan unleashes a vast array of design complexities, especially in a temporary setting like the Broad Street Bash. In *Space and Place*, human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's approach to place and time sparks questions to be considered within the urban setting.<sup>11</sup> Two of

his central ideas relating time and experience are: "1) If time is conceived as flow or movement then place is pause... 2) While it takes time to form an attachment to place, the quality and intensity of experience matters more than simple duration" (198).

Pause. Stopping temporarily. What would encourage someone to pause in the scurry of daily events? Approach it differently. How can relationships to place grow during times when people do pause? What does "quality and intensity of experience" entail, and how can it be achieved in a fast-paced world? Edward Relph, geographer of place and sense of place, acknowledges the argument that places are unrealistic ideals in such a world but maintains that inherent in all of us is the desire to be connected to and take care of places where we reside.<sup>12</sup> Relph states, "Attending to places means attending directly to one of the immediate realities of everyday life" (26). In Middletown, many people rarely have a reason or even a desire to go downtown. It is not often part of their day-to-day activities. A community event leads to "pause."

In his three volumes of *Event-Cities*, architect and theorist, Bernard Tschumi, directs attention to such activities and their value to the conceptual process of architecture.<sup>13</sup> Each text carefully documents projects as examples of "designing conditions, rather than conditioning design."<sup>14</sup> Tschumi dichotomizes "program" and "event," the expected and the unexpected, and advocates "promiscuous collisions" between them.<sup>15</sup> I point to a similar approach in exploring phased development in small-city downtown revitalization.

## Place in Revitalization

Documented cases of revitalized downtowns are often difficult to find, but several studies provide a general understanding of failed efforts, particularly within a small-city context.<sup>16</sup> Many attempts dwell on the big picture, neglecting the specific qualities of place possessing vast community significance. There is typically a primary focus on retail development or downtown malls intended to boost economic resources.<sup>17</sup> Such cases indicate how large-scale investments, while successful in some contexts, are often ineffective and sometimes even exacerbate decline in others, as in the case of Middletown.

It is necessary to avoid a one-size-fits-all mentality. Upon examining revitalization efforts of five different Wisconsin cities, Professor of Urban Planning, Michael Burayidi concludes that particular strategies will not always apply to every case as cities possess distinct physical, political, and social characteristics and a range of different revitalization challenges.<sup>18</sup> Burayidi states, "Downtown revitalization requires adaptation rather than adoption of programs that have worked in other communities" (63). Place-based processes provide ways to capitalize on a downtown's unique identity, strategies that by definition result in different steps in different places. In his article, "Downtown Development Principles for Small Cities," Kent Robertson, a professor of community studies and activist in small-city downtown development, outlines overarching guides to follow in downtown revitalization efforts but concludes by endorsing "small-scale

improvements" as opposed to "big fix" solutions.<sup>19</sup>

Jane Jacobs is another known dissenter of "big fixes." In her prolific text, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she criticizes the urban planning policies of the 1950s, particularly those associated with urban renewal.<sup>20</sup> Her exploration seeks to understand how cities actually function, beyond appearances. She demonstrates an alternative process for understanding the urban context, making observations based on her own experience of cities and their intricate neighborhoods and spaces. This seemingly obvious, but underused, tactic has considerable implications for small-city planning.<sup>21</sup> Particularly in cities seeking timely urban revitalization options, planners may lean towards instant beautification projects that risk oversimplifying the inherent meanings in community spaces. This calls for approaches to planning and design that are sensitive to local contexts, respecting the ways community members engage the downtown environment.

In *Sacred Structures of Everyday Life*, community designer Randolph Hester also assesses the value of human activity to planning efforts as he reflects on his work to "uncover valued places" during the development of a plan for reviving the community of Manteo, North Carolina.<sup>22</sup> Oftentimes the places people identified as sacred were mundane places associated with a common, everyday activity.<sup>23</sup> He observes that while these connections to place held little interest for developers and often conflicted with options for economic growth, they were non-negotiable in the minds of community

members. Similar place attachments exist in downtown Middletown and, in light of these discoveries, it is essential that they be underscored for revitalization efforts to have any lasting, meaningful impact.

## **Case Studies**

### *Covington, Kentucky*

Similar to Middletown's history, Covington thrived on an industrial backbone largely connected to its location along the Ohio River and enjoyed economic prosperity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century followed by steady decline through the 70s. Leading up to the new century the city pursued downtown revival and efforts along the riverfront. This redevelopment slowly moved throughout the downtown as new businesses moved into rehabilitated historic structures.<sup>24</sup> Assistant City Manager, Larissa Sims, shared with me how the City created a strategic plan in 2008 that emphasized public involvement, referring to it as a "stepping stone to get everyone on the same page." The plan was established through a "visioning process" and collaboration between city leaders and members of the community to determine goals and strategies for the future of downtown Covington.

Twice a year, various community organizations and citizens tour through the downtown to call attention to pressing issues. This ritual attests to the value of witnessing downtown changes firsthand. Continuing challenges include the loss of jobs to the suburbs as well as the high cost of attempts to maintain the downtown's historic character. The City has recently

received various grants for housing projects, site clean-up, and extending development. This includes funding for Timestar Commons, a more permanent public space for the community's farmer's market. They also put together an incentive package for businesses meeting certain requirements. There is a balance between pursuing economic benefits for the downtown and enhancing the spaces for community activity.

MainStrasse Village, one of the city's 19 neighborhoods, currently keeps a yearly calendar of events, including two of the largest festivals in Kentucky and the tri-state area, Oktoberfest and Maifest. In addition, Full Spectrum, a community event that recognizes and celebrates the arts, takes place throughout October. Larissa conveyed the benefits of bringing people into the downtown to increase awareness and revenue but also stressed the importance of first establishing a safe, functional, and aesthetically pleasing environment. In Middletown, both need to occur simultaneously, and my design process will explore incremental changes towards both ends.

### *Springfield, Ohio*

Much like Middletown and Covington, Springfield possesses a deep-seated pride in its rich history as a center of commerce, a source of downtown prosperity that began to diminish in step with the shifting economy in the 1950s. In a conversation with Maureen Fagans, city planner and Executive Director of Springfield's Center City Association, I learned how a group of concerned citizens took notice in 1998 that

there was no longer an emphasis on downtown and worked to turn that around. In March of 2002, the Association hosted the American Institute of Architect's Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (RUDAT) to assess downtown revitalization strategies and provide a guide to proceed. Over the course of five days of interviews, focus groups, and public meetings, the team became acquainted with the community, learning about its history, current challenges for redevelopment, and future aspirations for the downtown.<sup>25</sup>

Eight years later, projects continue to unfold from this plan, suggesting the kind of timeline for Middletown to expect as well as the intensive community process necessary to launch efforts. Maureen discussed how downtown events, like their summer music shows, are the major community attractors and how people notice downtown changes during these times, as evidenced by the "Speak Up" section in the local newspaper and publically-sponsored projects.<sup>26</sup> She also noted continuing challenges, one being the difficulty of achieving a high level of collaboration in a poor economy where people are reluctant to try something new. Another is the lack of a community calendar to create awareness of events sponsored by various groups. These and others are issues for Middletown to anticipate or attempt to avoid in future development, concerns that will influence my design process.

## Returning to Middletown

*I reenter downtown Middletown at the intersection of Main Street and Central Avenue.*

*This time I come to a "Road Closed" sign and see the festivities of the Broad Street Bash already underway a couple blocks ahead. My colleague, Steph, and I park and walk to join the throng of people already enjoying the classic rock tunes coming from the stage. We pass many vacant structures that I observed during my previous visit, but the streets are now alive with spectators, conversation, music, and the familiar smells of fair food. Children contribute hysterical laughter to the din of music as they play in a moon jump nearby.*



**Figure 3:** Community members and visitors, young and old, occupy Governor's Square, sitting on bleachers, picnic tables, and lawn chairs while many filter into the street at the intersection of Broad Street and Central Avenue.

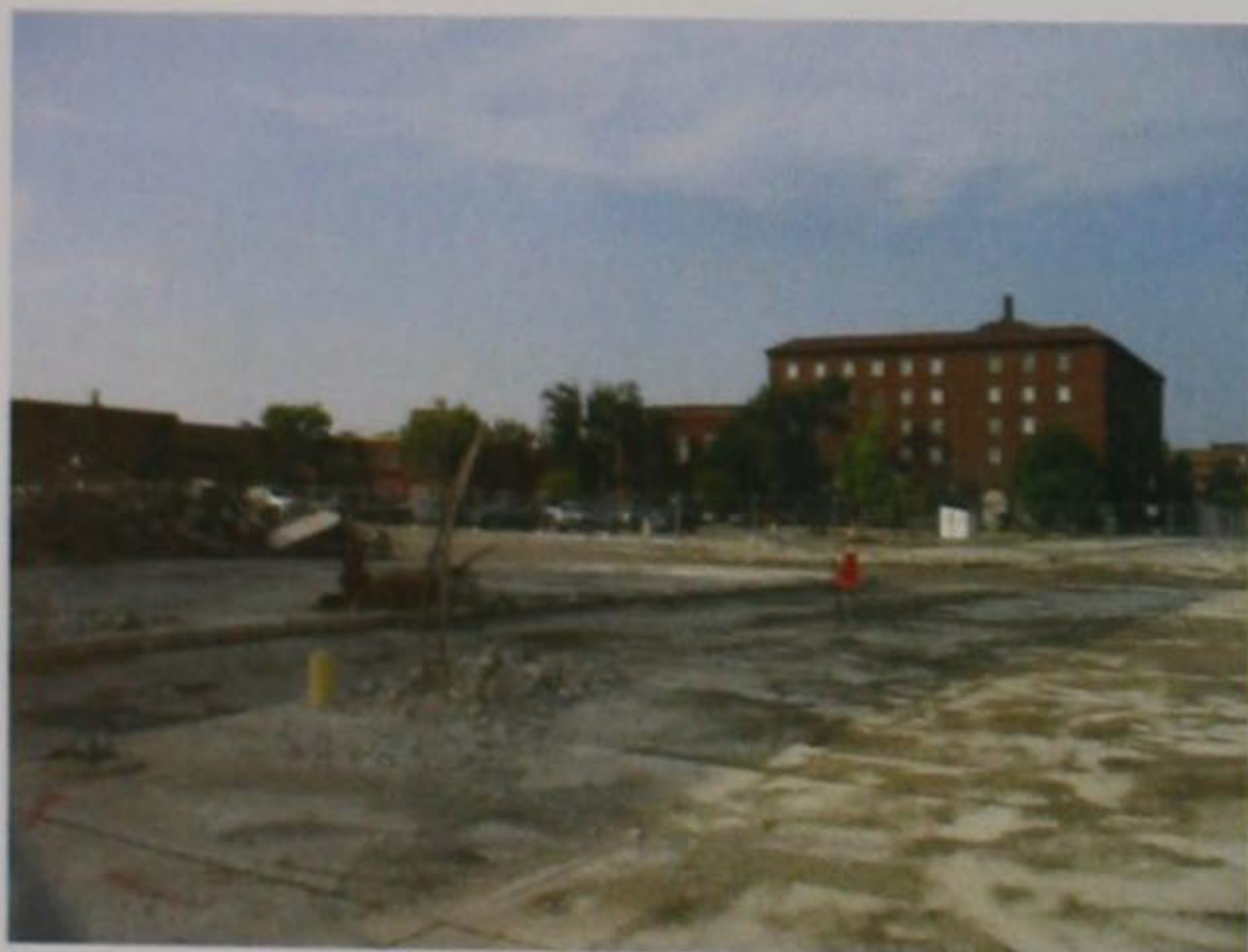
*Steph and I head to one of the food vendors lining the street and sit with our food in the middle of the crowd. People tap to the beat and mouth the lyrics along with the band. Some are gathered at a distance making conversation. Teenagers walk around in groups and find places to be private. I come close to forgetting I am in a struggling downtown, a fact made more evident as I walk along the perimeter of the festivities.*



**Figure 4:** Kids dance around wildly up close to the stage.

*Steph remarks, "It seems like this is it." She is genuinely impressed with the unique architecture of some nearby buildings and enjoys the event atmosphere but is not convinced that the downtown provides many other opportunities for activity.*

*I notice a sign on one of the adjacent buildings advertising available band rooms for practice space. And, several people look down from the second floor of Beau Verre Studios, a recently renovated stained glass studio. The absence of the parking garage as the north façade of the event significantly alters the space.*



**Figure 5:** Piles of rubble are all that remain at the former site of the parking garage.

*It is evident that at least some of the surrounding buildings are being utilized and that city plans are moving forward. But, as I think about this event in relation to the physical context of the downtown and to the flow of other activities within this space, what stands out to me is its isolation. Such animation seems restricted to this place at this time...*

### **Preparing for Process**

My challenge is to create a program of architectural events that entices people to linger in the downtown, to generate activity in other places at other times. Perceiving community needs and observing the ways people use space in the immediate context of the Broad Street Bash is invaluable to this task. In contrast to large-scale investments venturing to solve the problems of small-city downtowns in one swipe, I argue that design proposals must integrate with existing valued spaces in the community. This serves to sustain and bolster local sense of place. I advocate a step-by-step approach where built and unbuilt spaces intersect strategically to promote activity in defined or undefined paths<sup>27</sup> throughout the site of the Bash that ultimately penetrate further into the downtown. Each subsequent design intervention establishes new sequences of activities to occur prior to or following the event. Extending the action within the urban core in both space and time has potential to alter the predominantly negative perception of downtown and produce seeds for transformation. This approach begins small



and works in conjunction with comprehensive plans meant to unify and guide strategies, discovering points of intervention that bring plans to a human scale and suggest ways to initiate development by building on people's existing connections to place.

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<sup>1</sup> The data used to substantiate this list comes from the U.S. Census Bureau's three-year American Community Survey between 2005 and 2007. The population range is between 20,000 and 65,000 and the four metrics include "income growth, the rate of domestic in-migration, the change in poverty, and the percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher."

Matt Woolsey, "America's Fastest-Dying Towns," *Forbes*, December 9, 2008, accessed on March 16, 2009, [http://www.forbes.com/2008/12/08/towns-ten-economy-forbeslife-cx\\_mw\\_1209dying.html](http://www.forbes.com/2008/12/08/towns-ten-economy-forbeslife-cx_mw_1209dying.html).

<sup>2</sup> Community participation was crucial to this endeavor, and by collecting public narratives, conducting interviews, and organizing public forums, I was able to gain valuable insights into local place perceptions and the challenges of forming a vision for the future.

Leah DePriest, "Gauging and Articulating Sense of Place in Downtown Revitalization: The Case Study of Downtown Middletown, Ohio" (master's thesis, Miami University, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> This system consisted of three concentric "belts" around the city and actually showcased a "downtown loop" that would be "an efficient by-pass around the core area."

Middletown (Ohio). 1963. *Master Plan: Middletown Urban Area*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Roger L. Miller and George C. Crout, *Middletown Ohio* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 1998), 115-118.

<sup>5</sup> One article laments, "The downtown of old will be but a distant memory for most or a nostalgic snapshot in someone's scrapbook."

Fred Sennet, "Downtown: Razing Will Change Its Face," *The Middletown Journal*, June 27, 1971.

In a "letter to the editor," one citizen states, "Our city Great Ones are so busy slapping each other on the back they've neglected or preferred not to get the opinion of the citizens of Middletown. Citizens could improve the quality of their own homes if it wasn't for the federal government taxing us for 'super malls' we don't want."

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Judy Adams, "Put Glass Dome on Super Mall," *The Middletown Journal*, January, 15, 1973.

Attracting regional attention, a Hamilton journalist reports, "They're burying downtown Middletown. It will be entombed in more than \$2.4 million worth of glass and steel."

Jim Blount, "They're Burying Downtown Middletown," *Journal-News*, March 14, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> The project eventually claimed 43 downtown buildings, including the beloved Paramount Theatre.

<sup>7</sup> This City consulted with Woolpert, a design, engineering, and geospatial firm in the creation of this plan. The plan establishes goals based on 6 overarching principles: A) Consolidate downtown into cohesive districts. B) Build a strong residential presence. C) Make Downtown friendly to pedestrians and functional for the automobile. D) Leverage downtown's civic assets. E) Create a welcoming downtown. F) Establish downtown Middletown on the proposed statewide passenger railway. "Downtown Middletown Strategic Plan," City of Middletown, Ohio, accessed July 20, 2010, <http://www.cityofmiddletown.org/ed/dsp.html>.

<sup>8</sup> This study was conducted to identify assets within the community as well as challenges. Focus areas were established as well as community teams in each area to work on specific issues.

<sup>9</sup> The Main Street Program is a strategy for revitalization established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It is an economic development tool with a four-point approach: organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. "Main Street," National Trust for Historic Preservation, accessed July 20, 2010, <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/>

<sup>10</sup> It stands to reason that I run the risk of making assumptions based on personal understandings of place and letting them affect how I interpret my experience. To be sure, I feel differently about the event context than the Middletown native catching up with some high school friends or the visitor enjoying their favorite regional band or the teenager who came unwillingly with their parents and sits with exclusive interest in their cell phone. Any designer, planner, or researcher has to be wary of biases and hasty generalizations. This, in fact, is part of the incentive to explore new revitalization techniques, with the expectation of arriving at more sensitive means to denote downtown plans that integrate human scale.

<sup>11</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Relph, "Modernity and the Reclamation of Place," in *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology*, ed. David Seamon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 25-40.

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Tschumi, *Event-Cities: Praxis* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994).

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<sup>14</sup> *Event-Cities 2*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Event-Cities: Praxis*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Michael A. Burayidi, "An Assessment of Downtown Revitalization in Five Small Wisconsin cities," in *Downtowns: Revitalizing the Centers of Small Urban Communities*, ed. Michael A. Burayidi (New York: Routledge, 2001), 47-64.

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<sup>17</sup> Pierre Fillion and Karen Hammond, "The Failure of Shopping Malls as a Tool of Downtown Revitalization in Mid-Size Urban Areas," *Plan Canada* 46, no. 4 (2006): 49-52.

<sup>18</sup> Michael A. Burayidi, "An Assessment of Downtown Revitalization in Five Small Wisconsin Cities," in *Downtowns: Revitalizing the Centers of Small Urban Communities*, ed. Michael A. Burayidi (New York: Routledge, 2001), 47-64.

<sup>19</sup> Kent A. Robertson, "Downtown Development Principles for Small Cities," in *Downtowns: Revitalizing the Centers of Small Urban Communities*, ed. Michael A. Burayidi (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9-22.

<sup>20</sup> Jacobs challenges many modernist planning principles, particularly the tendency to make dogmatic assumptions regarding downtown or neighborhood revitalization. For example, green spaces are good; parks are good; density is bad; streets are dangerous. The list goes on, but the general idea is that planners of the day operated on multiple claims that Jacobs systematically proves to be false, or at least not true in all cases. She provides example after example of cases where planners were doing more detriment than good as well as cases that showed evidence in direct opposition to planners' predictions.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1961).

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs warns against making such leaps between her observations and activity in small cities. However, I only mean to highlight how small city

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planners may have the same tendency to make assumptions about how their cities' function.

<sup>22</sup> In preparation for this plan, Hester moved his office to Manteo and launched "a community-wide discussion" to discuss design strategies. This included a community-goals survey, randomly selected interviews in citizens' homes, and behavior mapping. The result was a "cultural mosaic that illustrated not only how space related to the town's present social patterns but also suggested how collective memory had been invested in certain parts of the landscape" (273).

Randolph Hester, "Sacred Structures and Everyday Life: A Return to Manteo, North Carolina," in *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology*, ed. David Seamon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 271-297.

<sup>23</sup> Hester provides a definition of sacred structures as "those places – buildings, outdoor spaces, and landscapes – that exemplify, typify, reinforce, and perhaps even extol the everyday patterns and special rituals of community life" (279).

<sup>24</sup> City of Covington, Kentucky, accessed on July 25, 2010, <http://www.covingtonky.com/>.

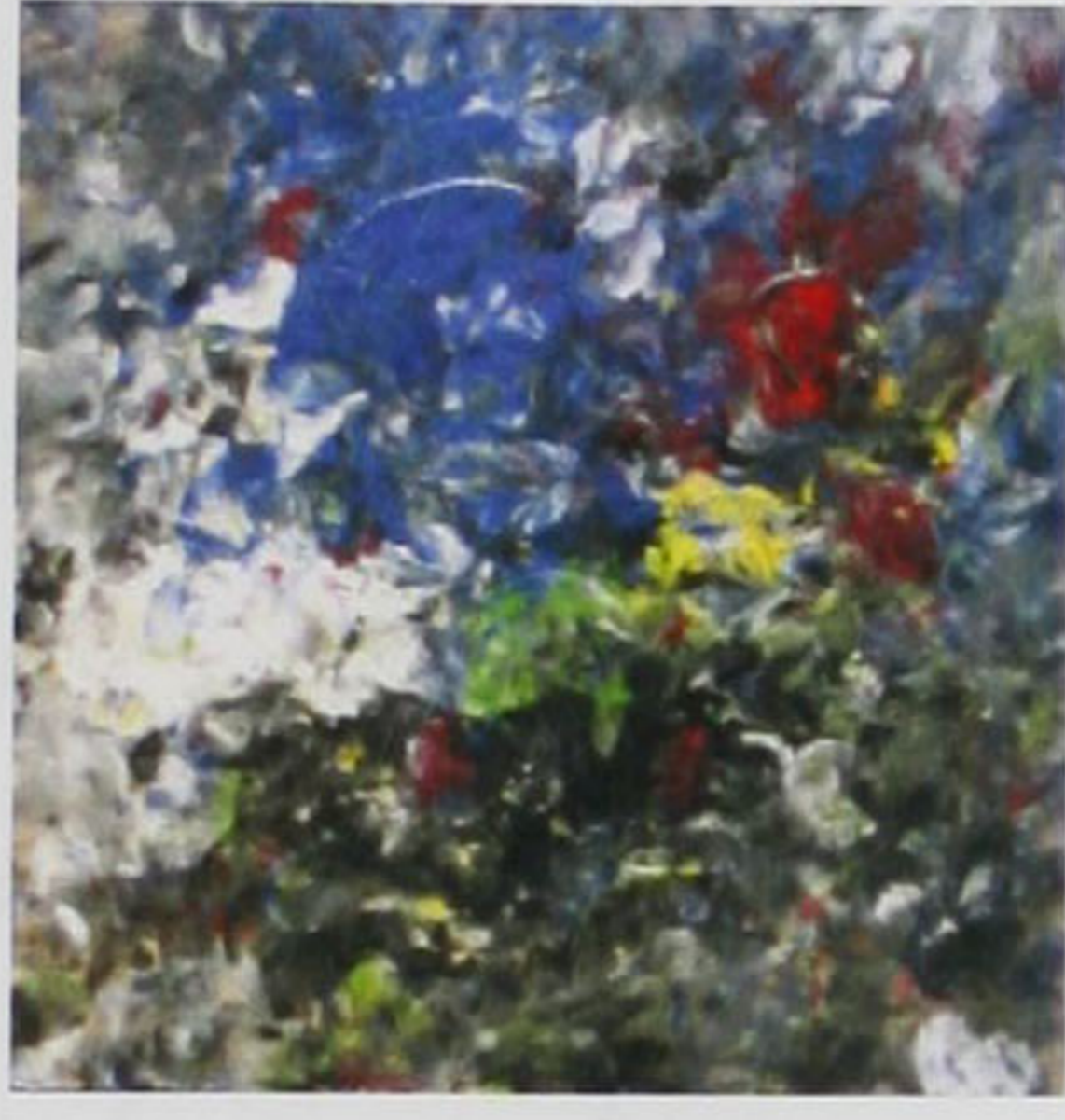
<sup>25</sup> Following the visit, the team wrote a report "to focus specifically on new ways in which the community of Springfield needs to look at the downtown in order to harness the energy and passion for its revitalization." The team of professionals recognized the primary challenges associated with implementing the plans for each district and made recommendations to local government in regards to land and zone uses and also emphasized the importance of public/private partnerships. Furthermore, the team proposed a general schedule for implementation, acknowledging steps to be taken within an immediate time frame and those to be developed on a long term basis. Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT). "Restarting the Heart: The City Center Renewal," March 11, 2002, accessed on July 25, 2010, <http://center-city.org/>.

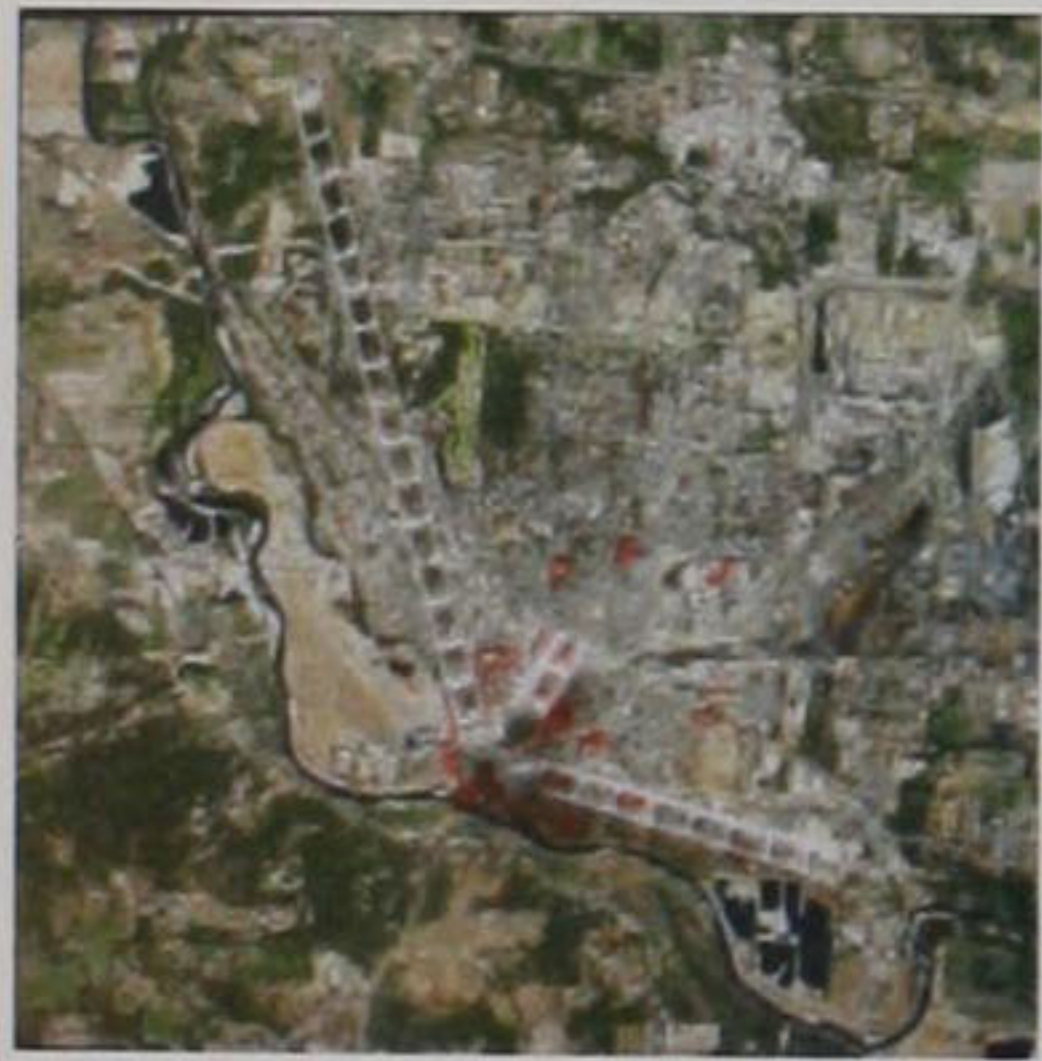
<sup>26</sup> One such project is the Association's popular flower basket program. When funds were low, they decided to see if people in the community would sponsor the baskets in exchange for attaching their name to the basket. There was an extremely positive response, and Maureen hopes to do something similar with the downtown banner program.

<sup>27</sup> Here I make reference back to Tschumi in the way he distinguishes between the requirements of program and the ways that their spatial configurations can provoke "uncommon or unpredictable events" (*Event-Cities 2*, 13).

# Process

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How can the socio-spatial context of a community event inform a design process to transform post-industrial small city downtown?

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- establish points of intersection into the plan
- strategy of layering development until these areas are saturated
- develop overall strategies:
  - ~~street~~ calming/streetscape
  - traffic
  - green spaces... develop a network
  - parking... opportunities to consolidate?

- Former parking garage/Swallen's
  - underground parking
  - event space... farmer's market
  - community garden
  - amphitheater
  - ice rink/summer fountain
  - day care
  - retail/dining
- Richie's Pawn Shop → Canal Museum...
- Vacancy b/w Pendleton + TV Middletown
  - artist's live/work space

- public art/sculpture
- LIGHTING!
- TREES!
- small-architectural "events"

- Shading devices
- bus stops
- public furniture
- fountains
- historic landmarks
- gateways

### - PIECEMEAL PLANNING

- city's strategic plan as an indirect guide
- \* attention to phases both temporally and spatially.



### - SITE-SPECIFIC

- intensive focus on a particular site
- \* purposeful connection to context
- \* environmental integration



### - DOWNTOWN DETAILS

- "bread crumbs"
- connecting pieces/paths



# Concept and Site Exploration



# Middletown, Ohio

Butler and Warren Counties  
39°30'22"N 84°22'33"W

## Population

Total: 51,065  
Male: 47,785  
Female: 52,280

## Job Salaries

Average salary for jobs: \$29,785  
Median Income of Households: \$16,215

## Unemployment Rate

Unemployment rate: 5.8%  
2% decrease in # of jobs since March 2003

## Commute

Car-pool: 9.1%  
Public transportation: 1%  
Average travel time: 20 minutes

## Industries

15% Manufacturing  
17% Educational, health, and social services  
13% Retail trade



Demographic Information



Figure/Ground



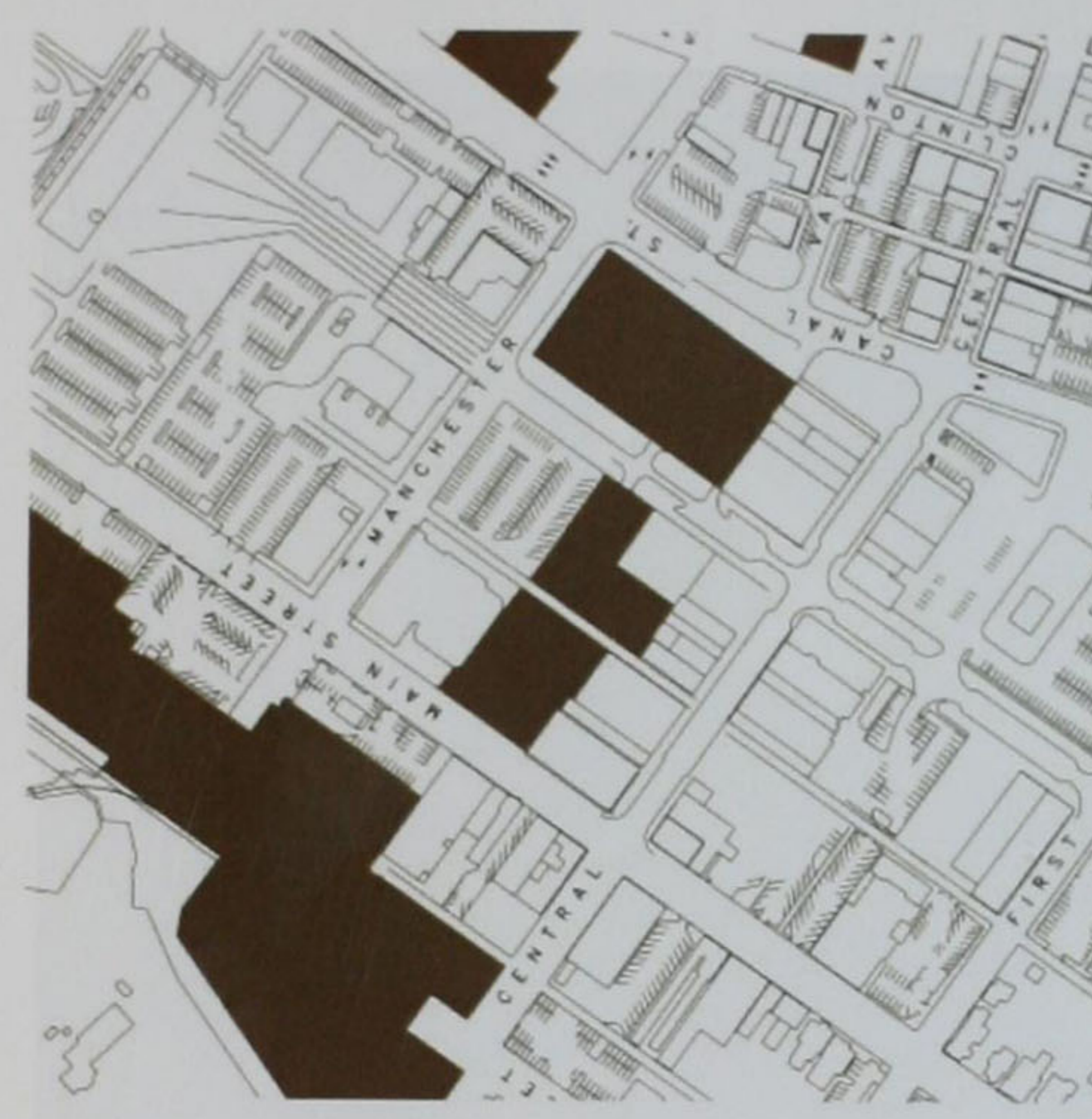
Green Space



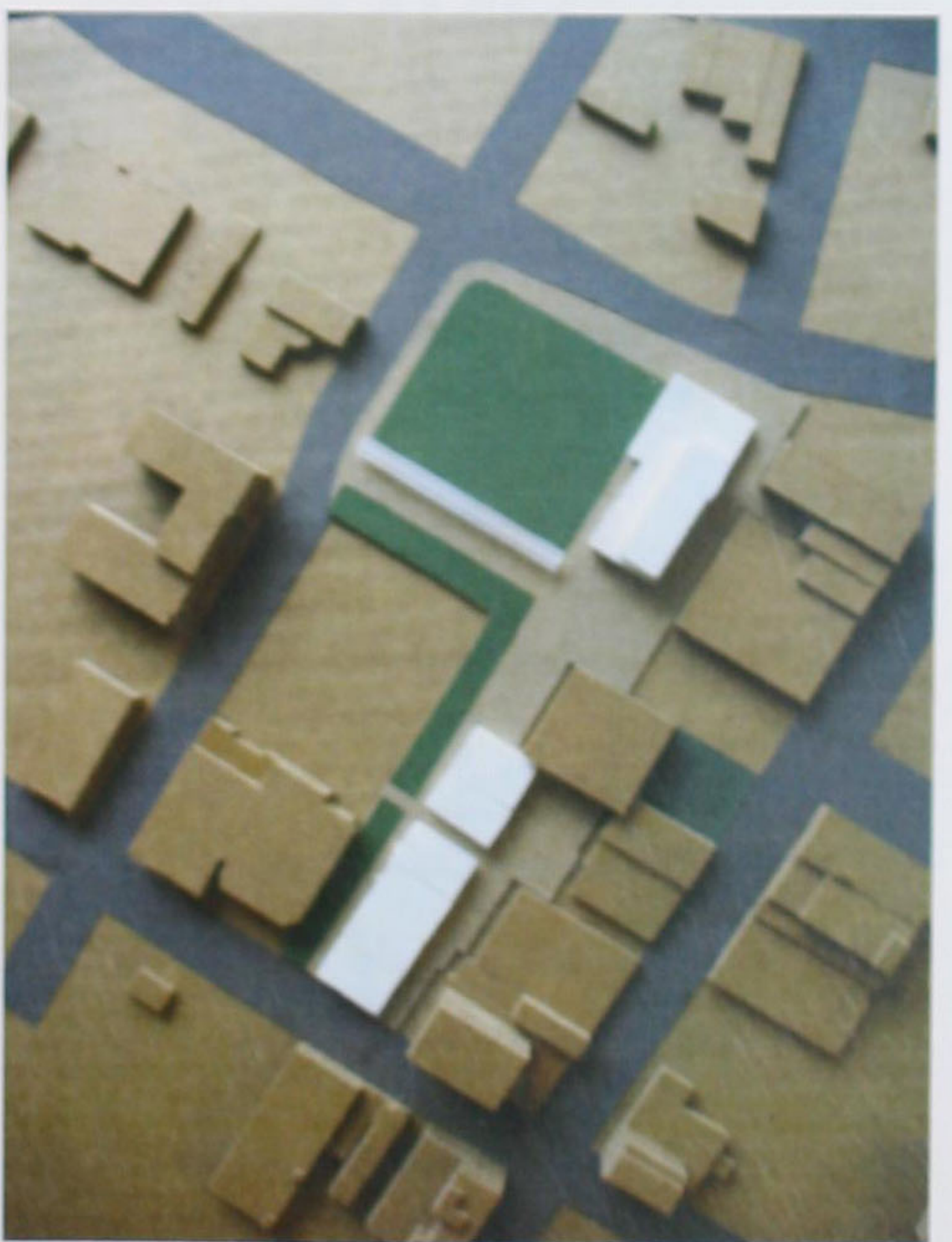
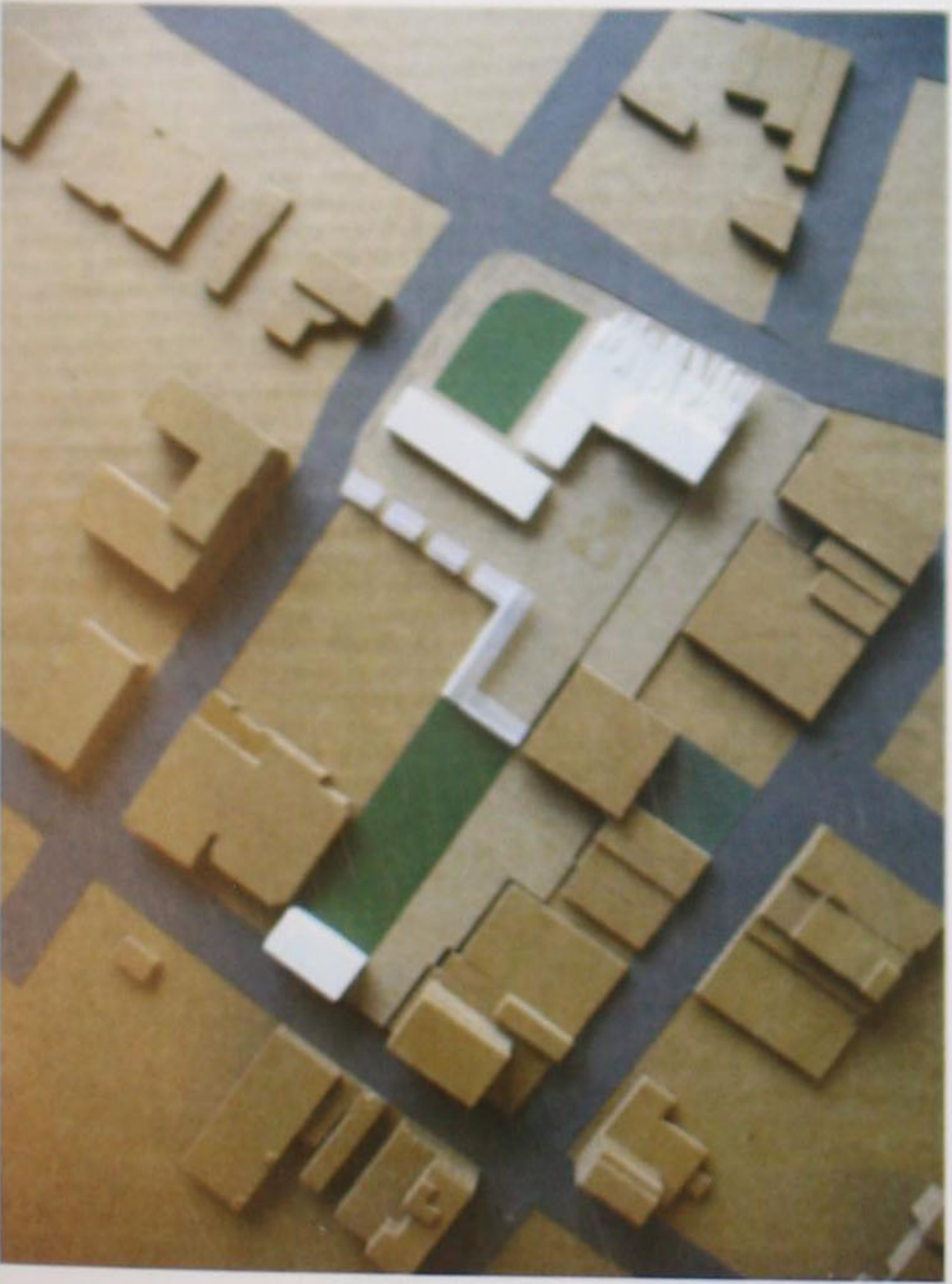
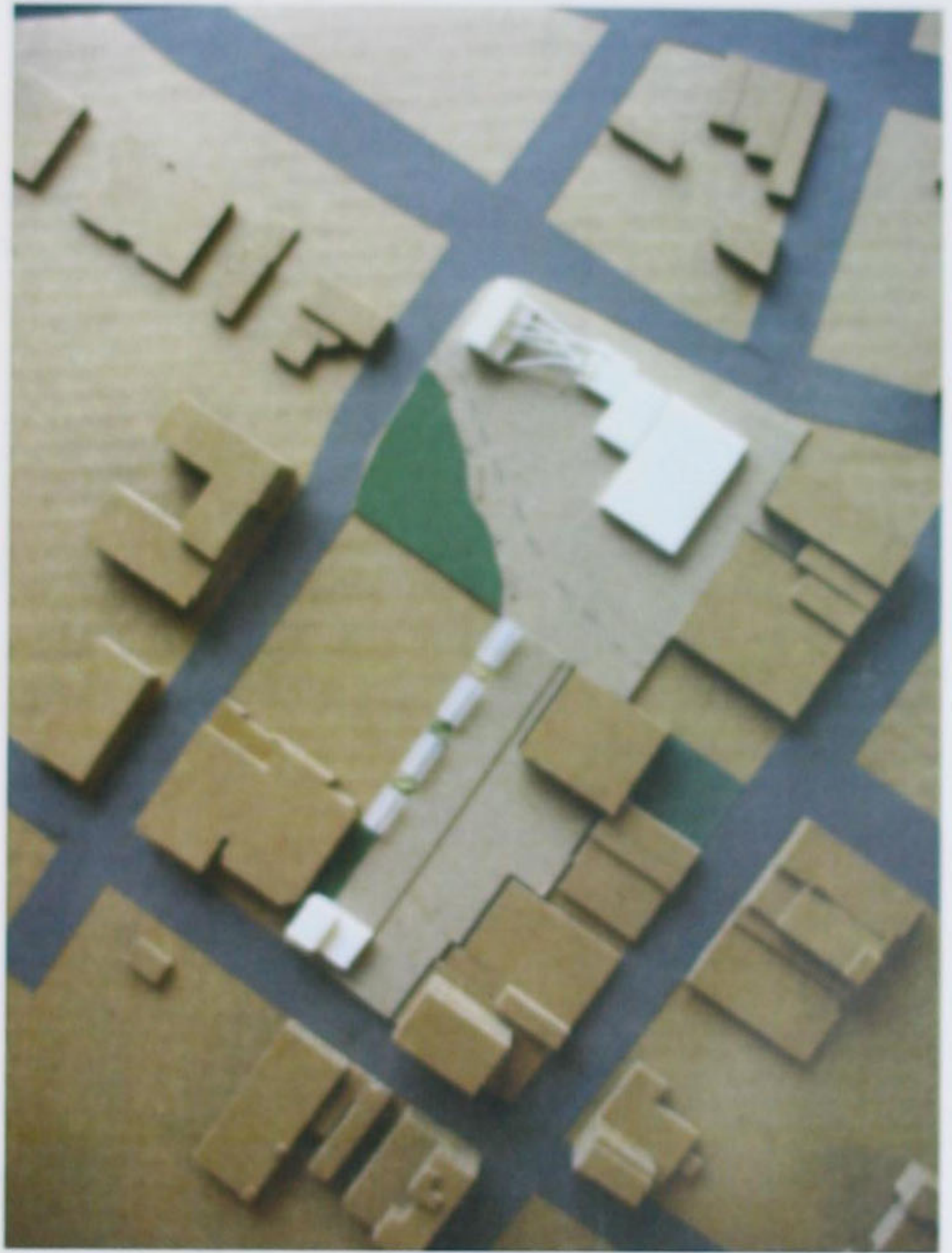
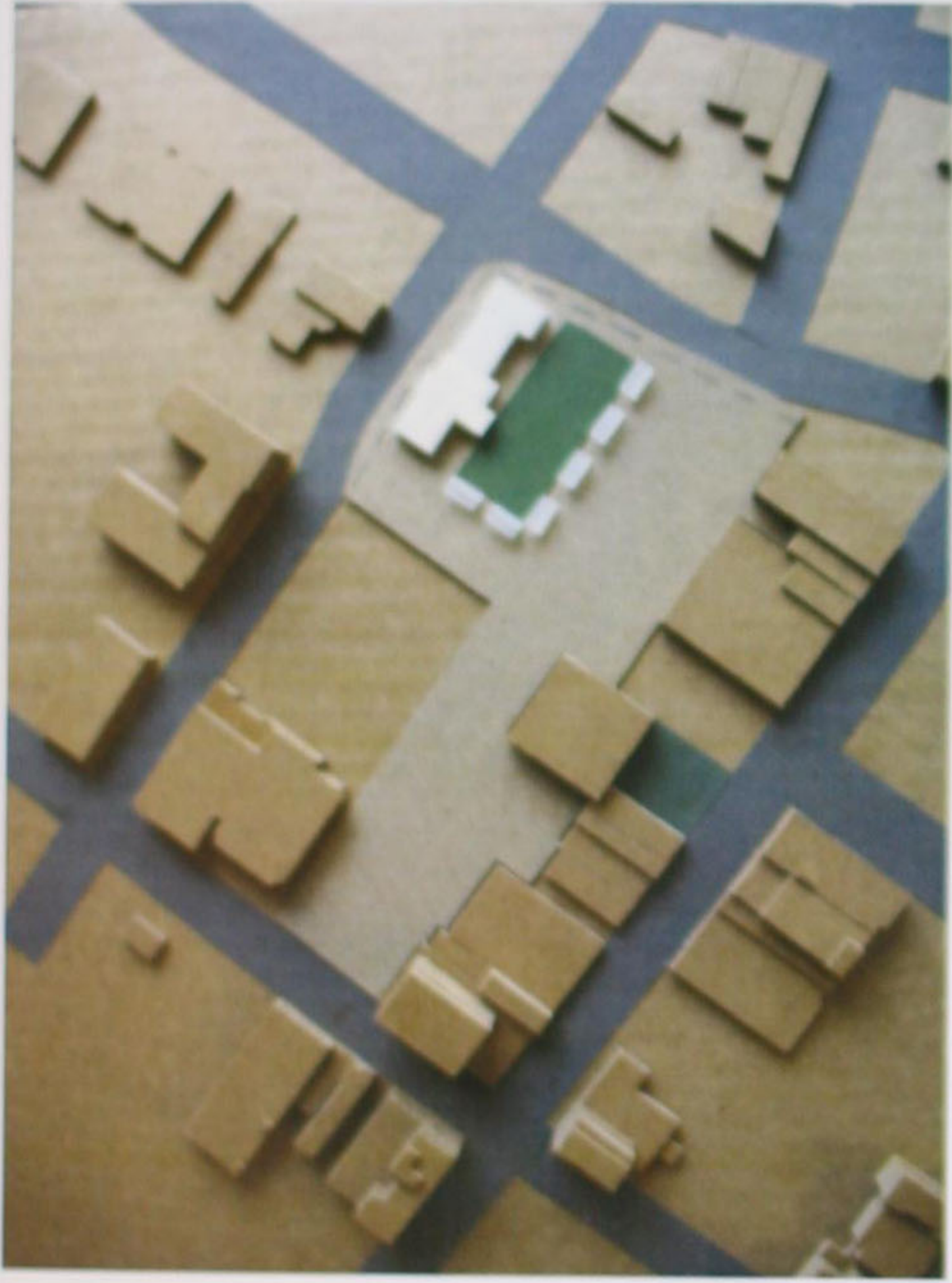
Parking



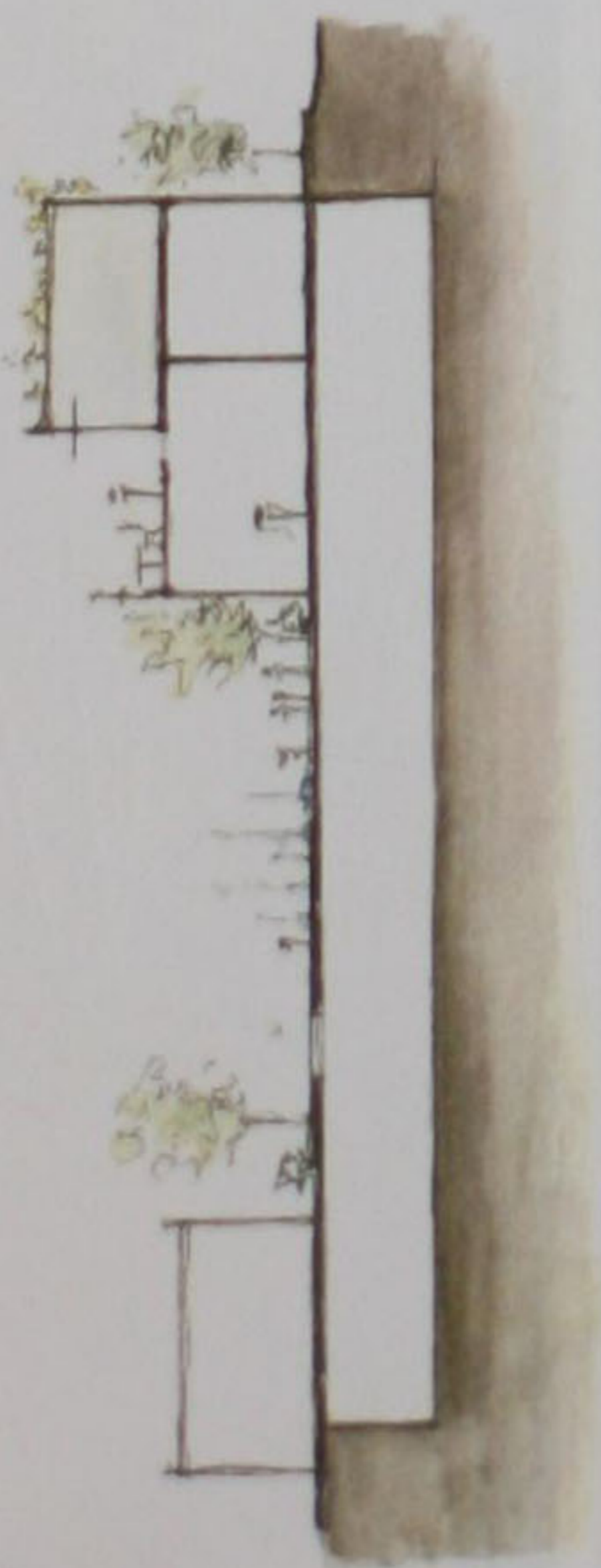
Planned Open Space

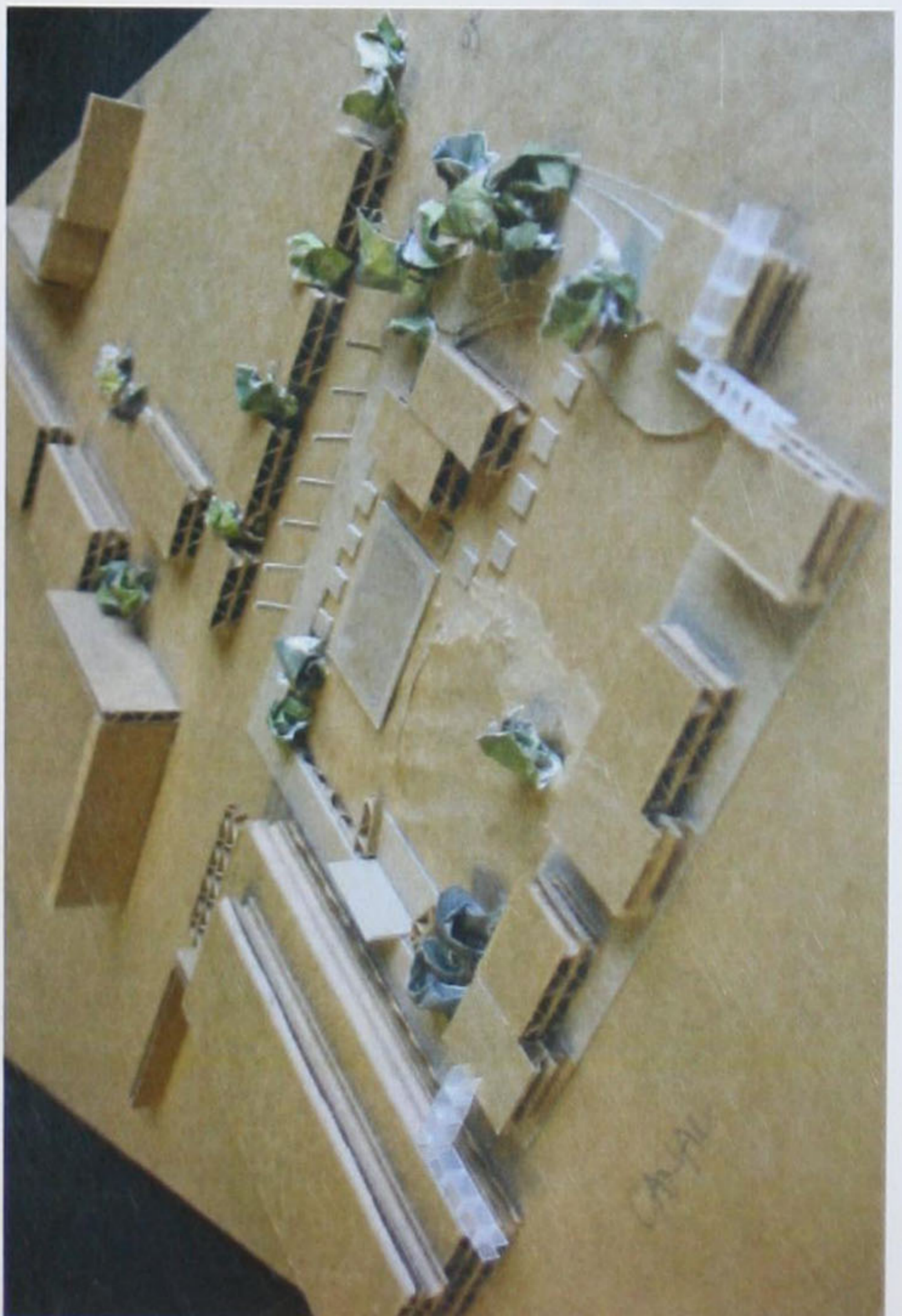
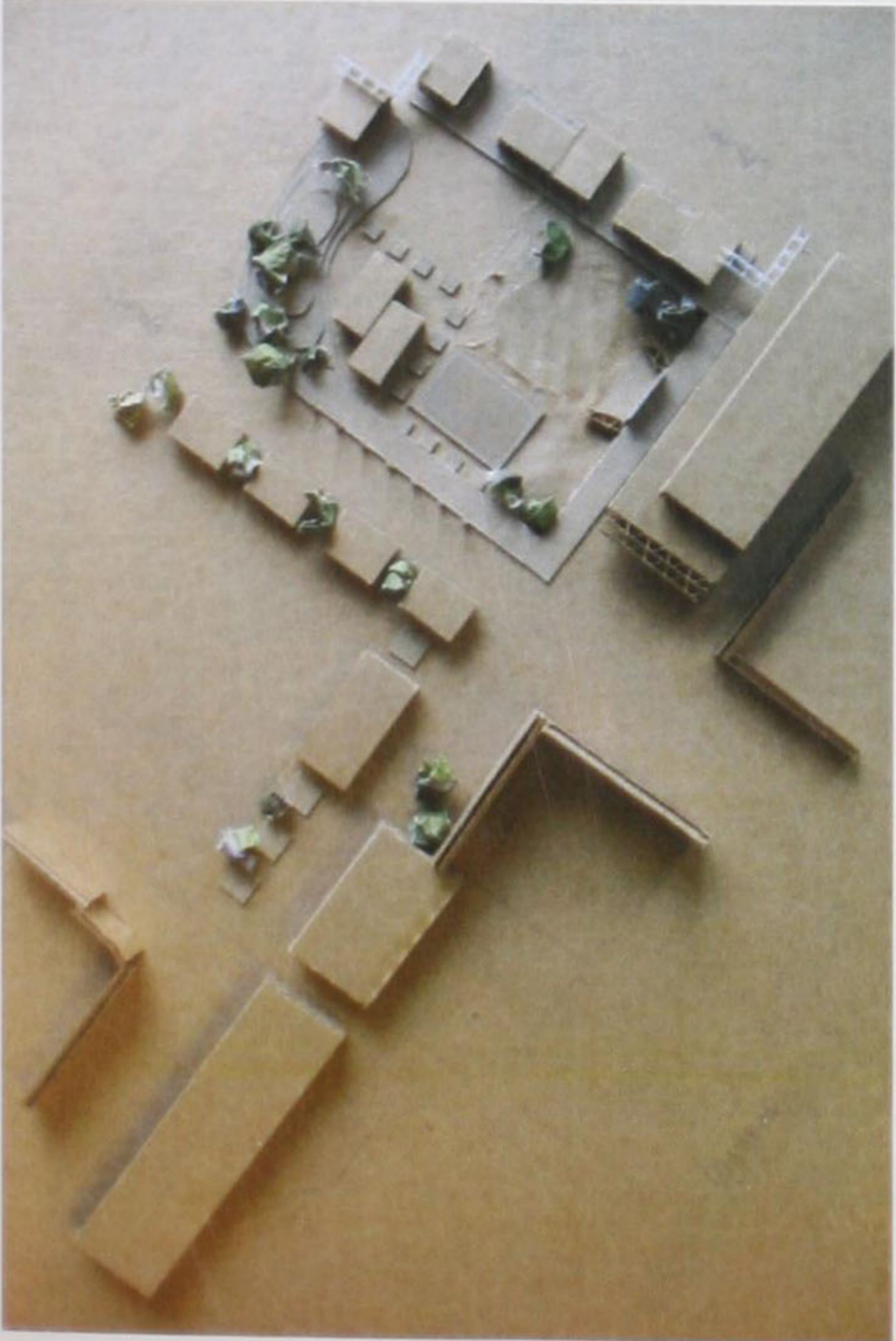
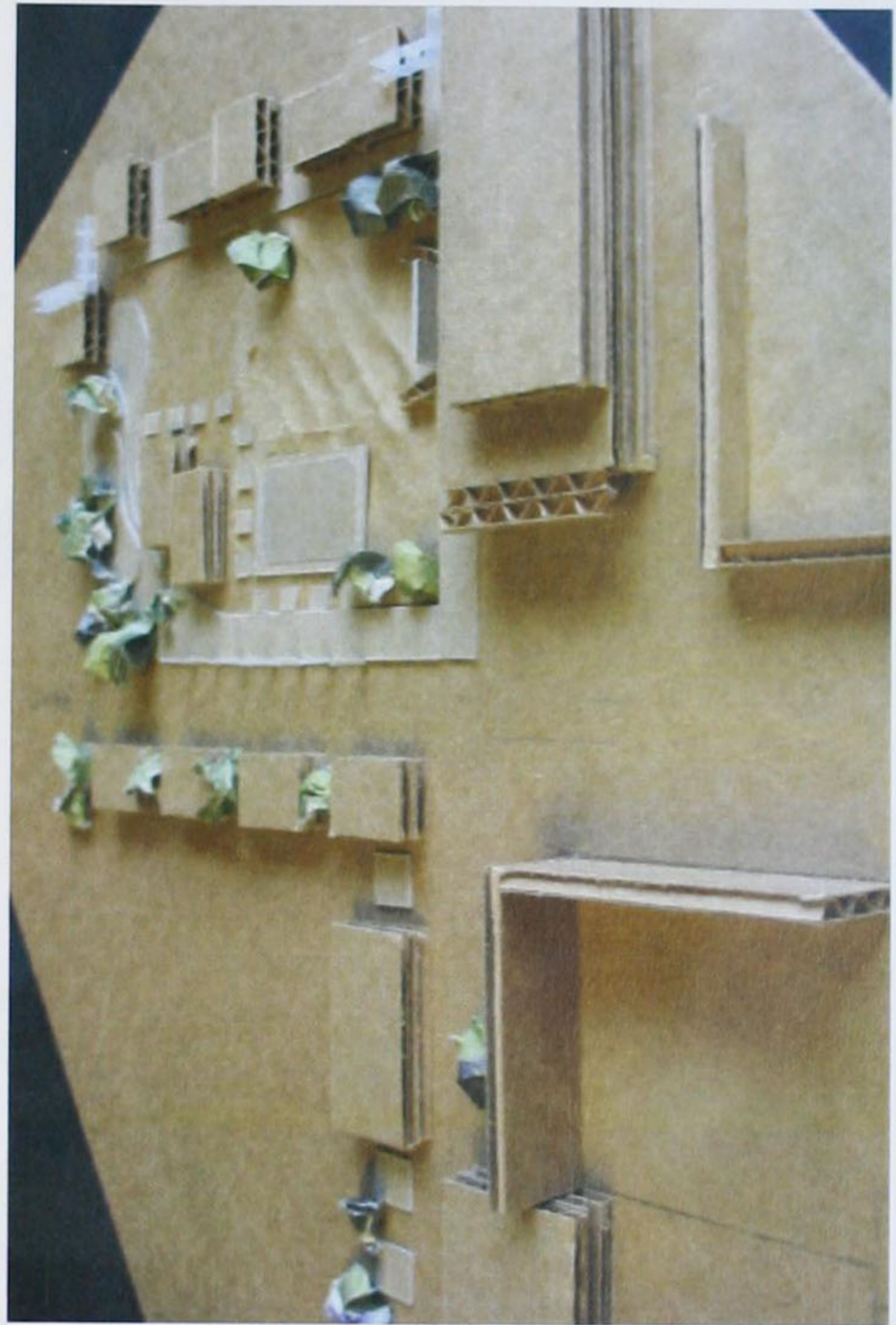


Unplanned Open Space

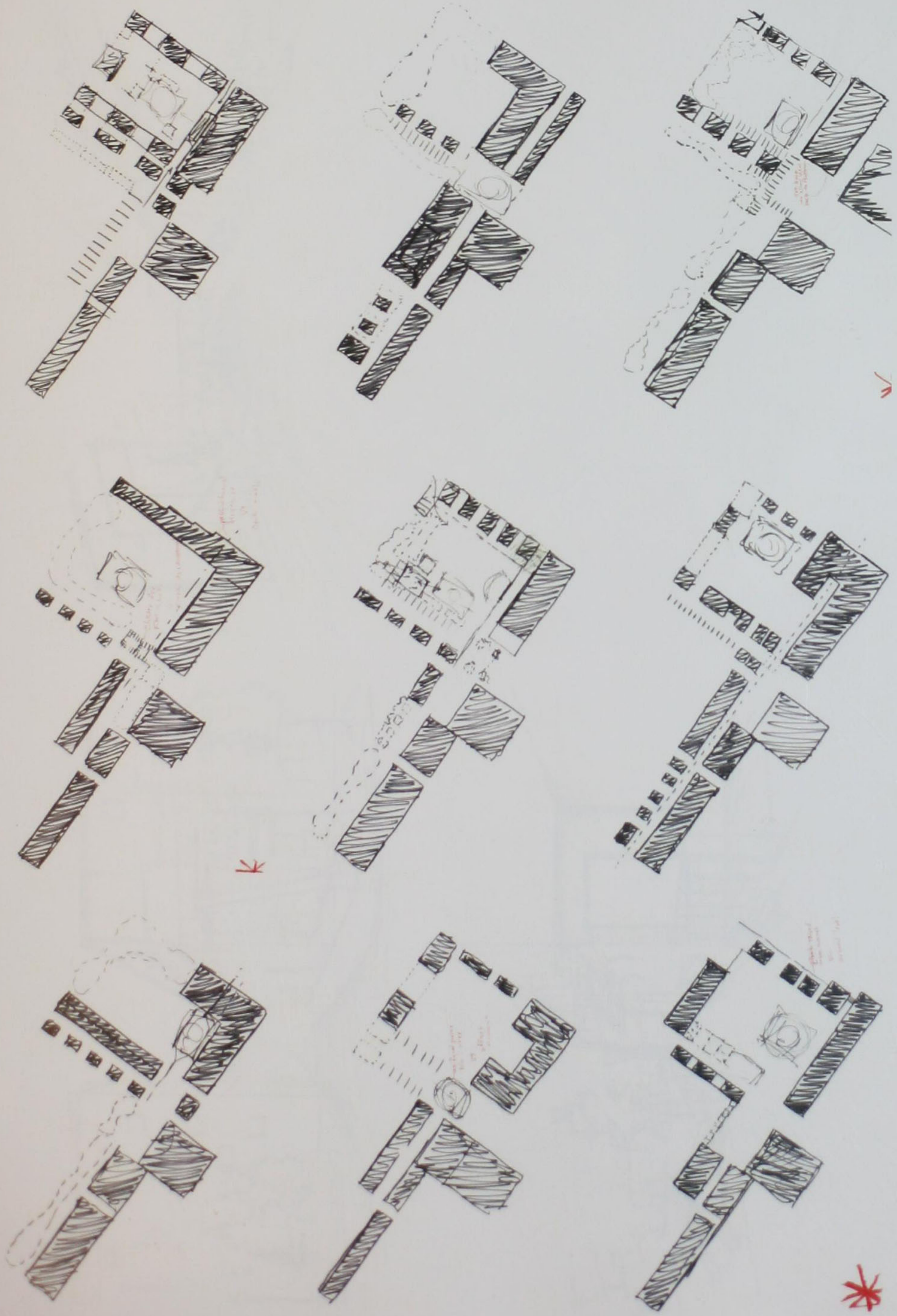


Site Model Schemes

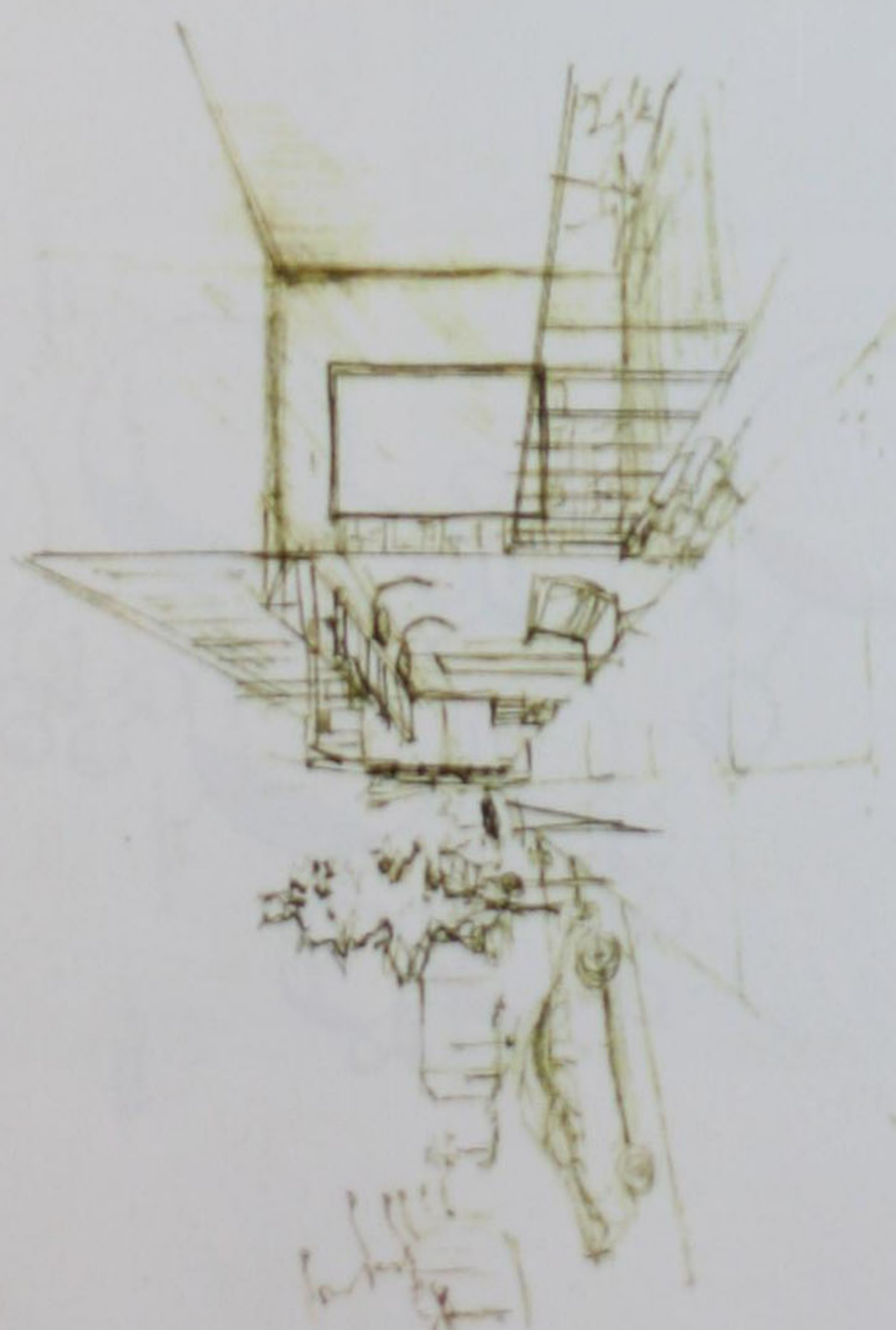
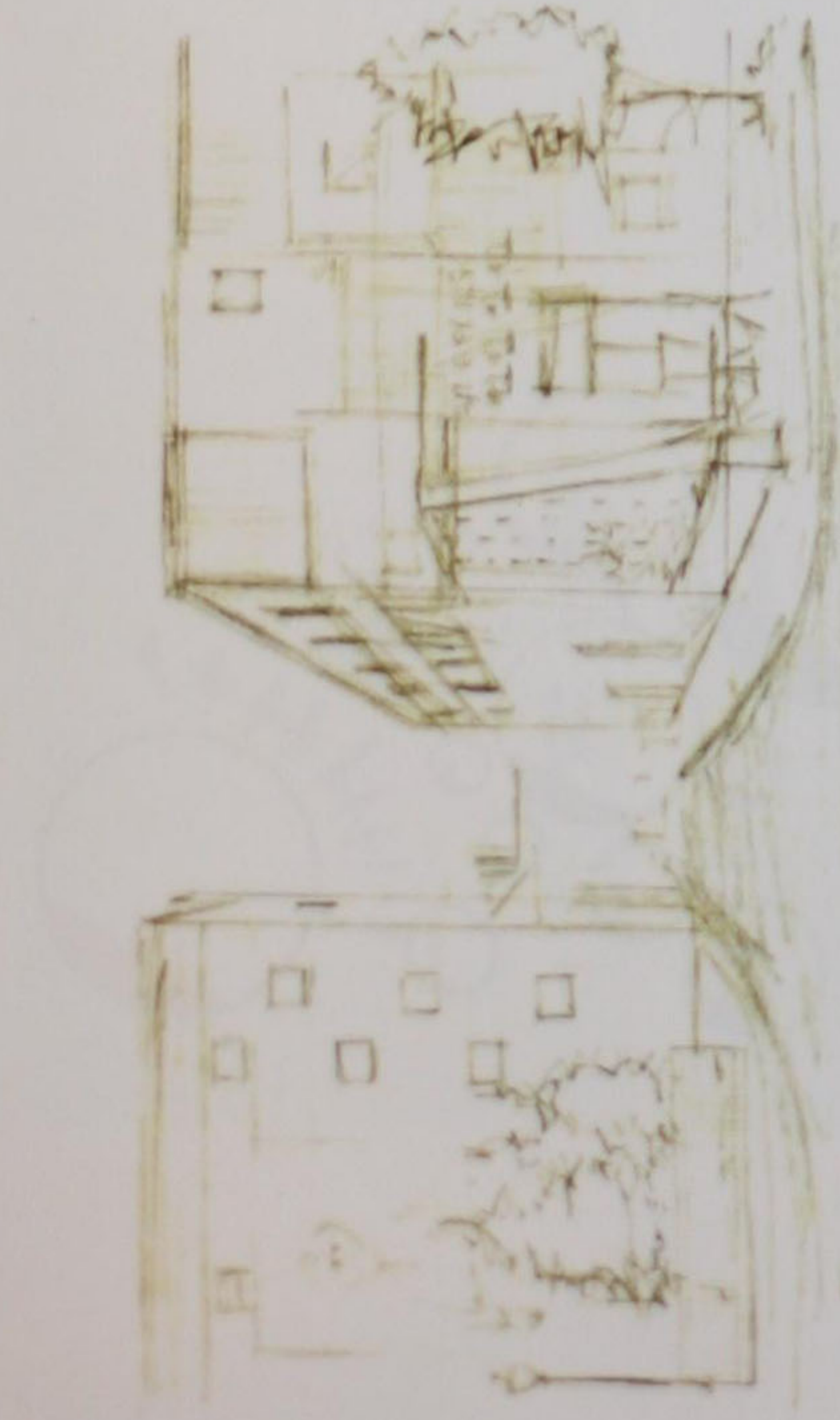
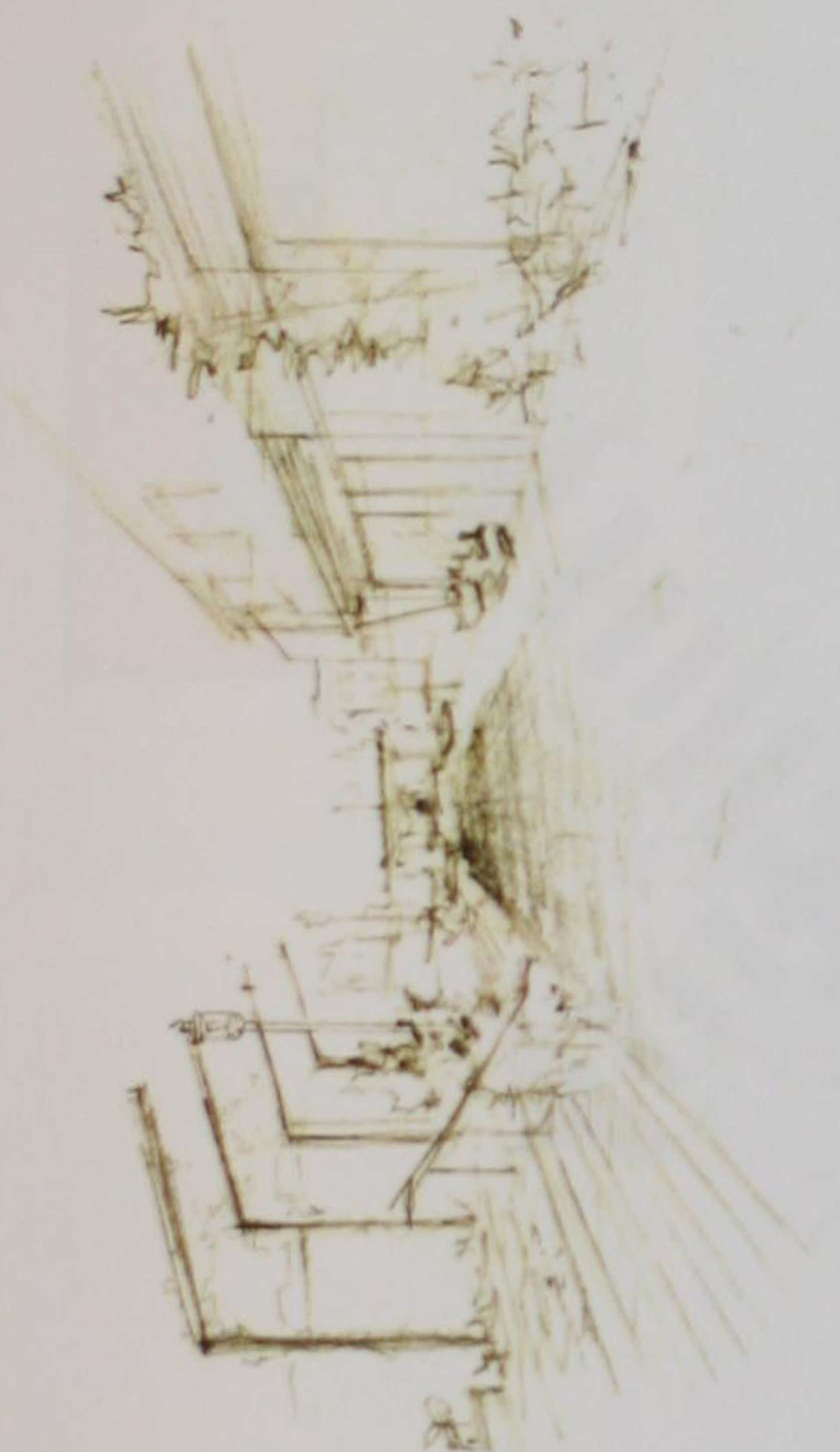


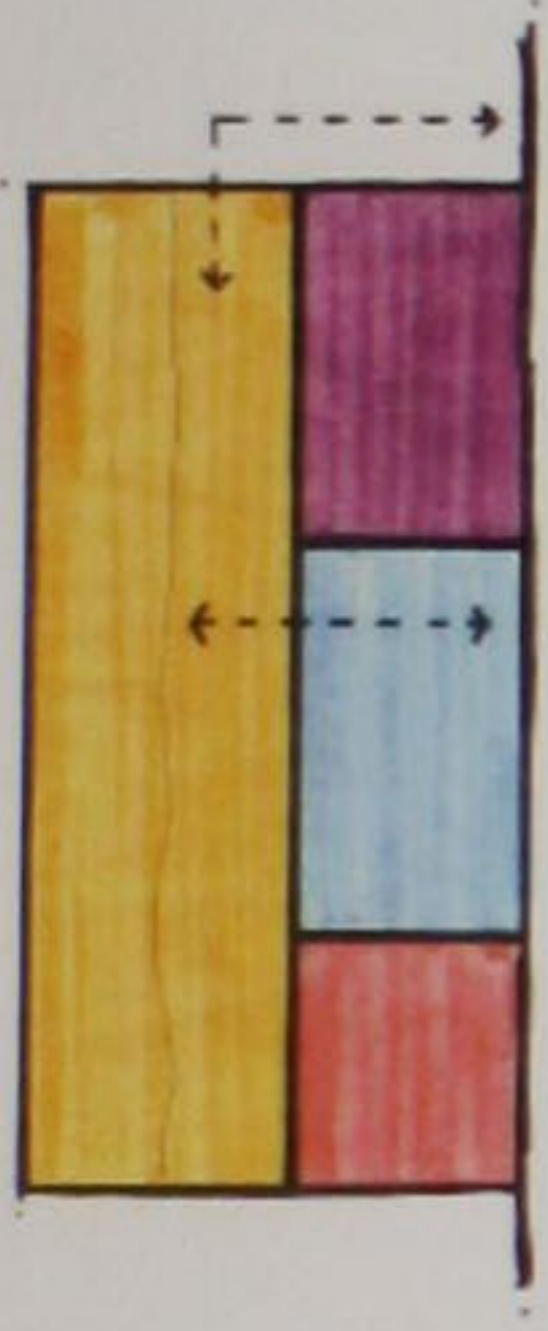
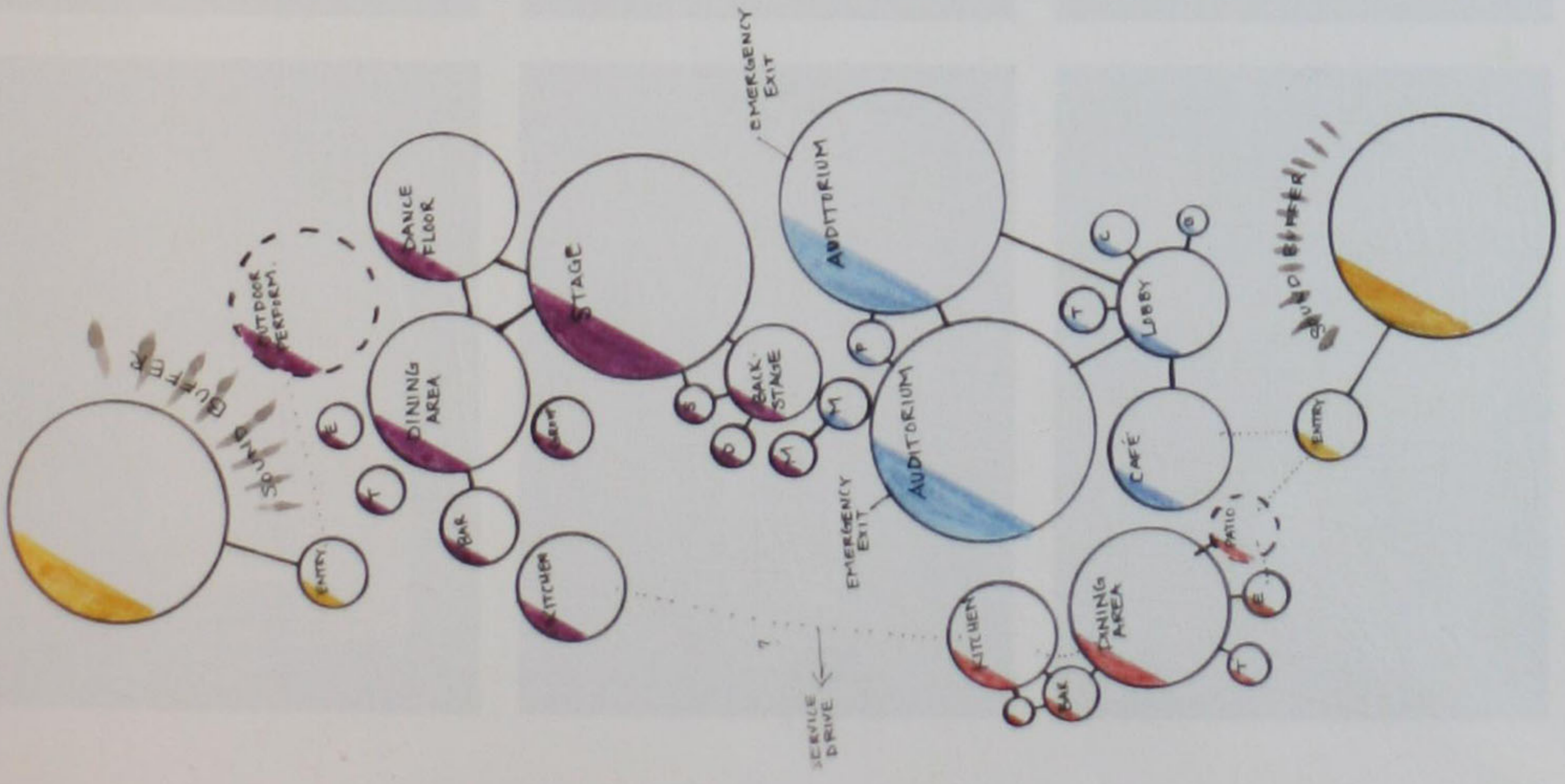


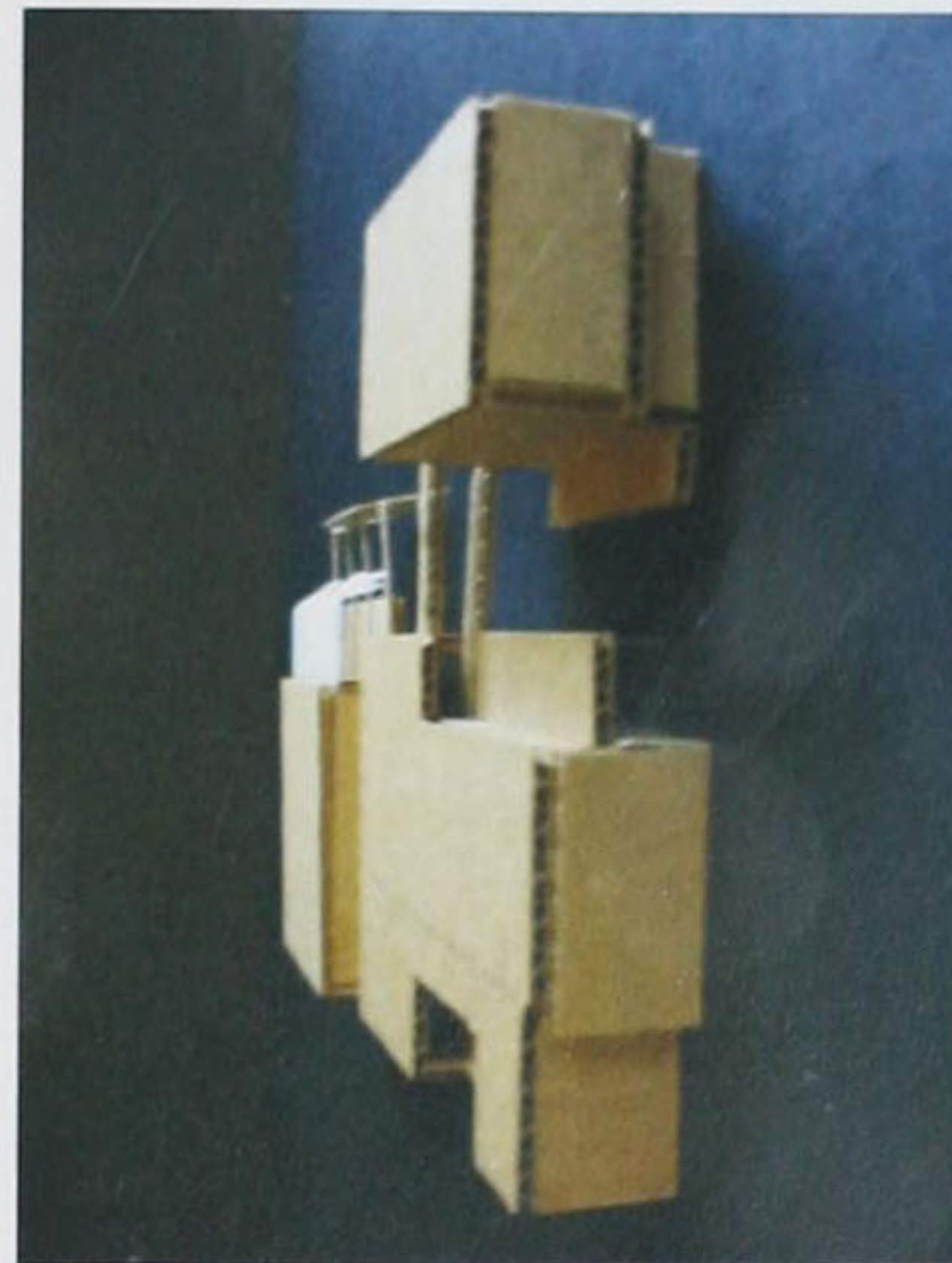
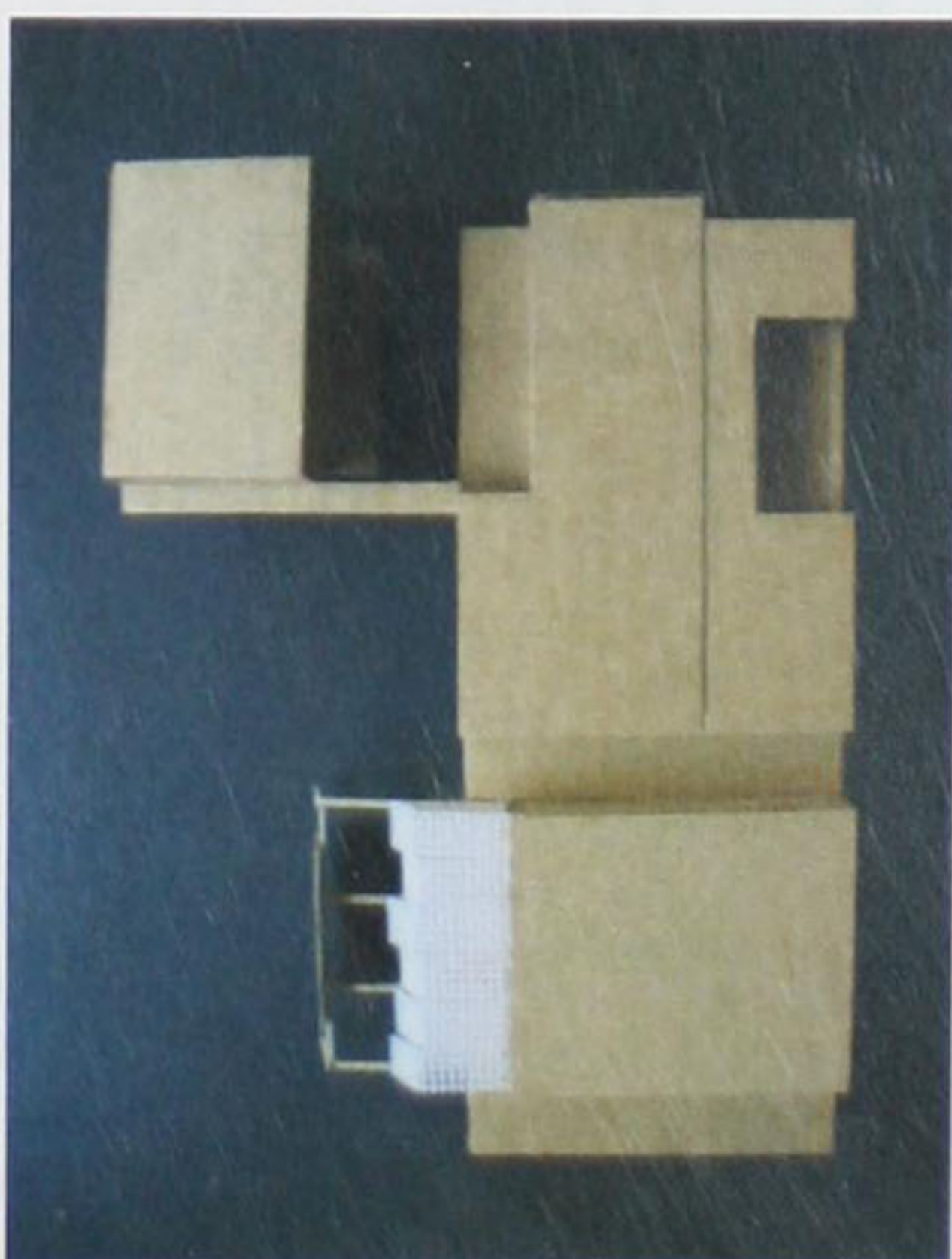
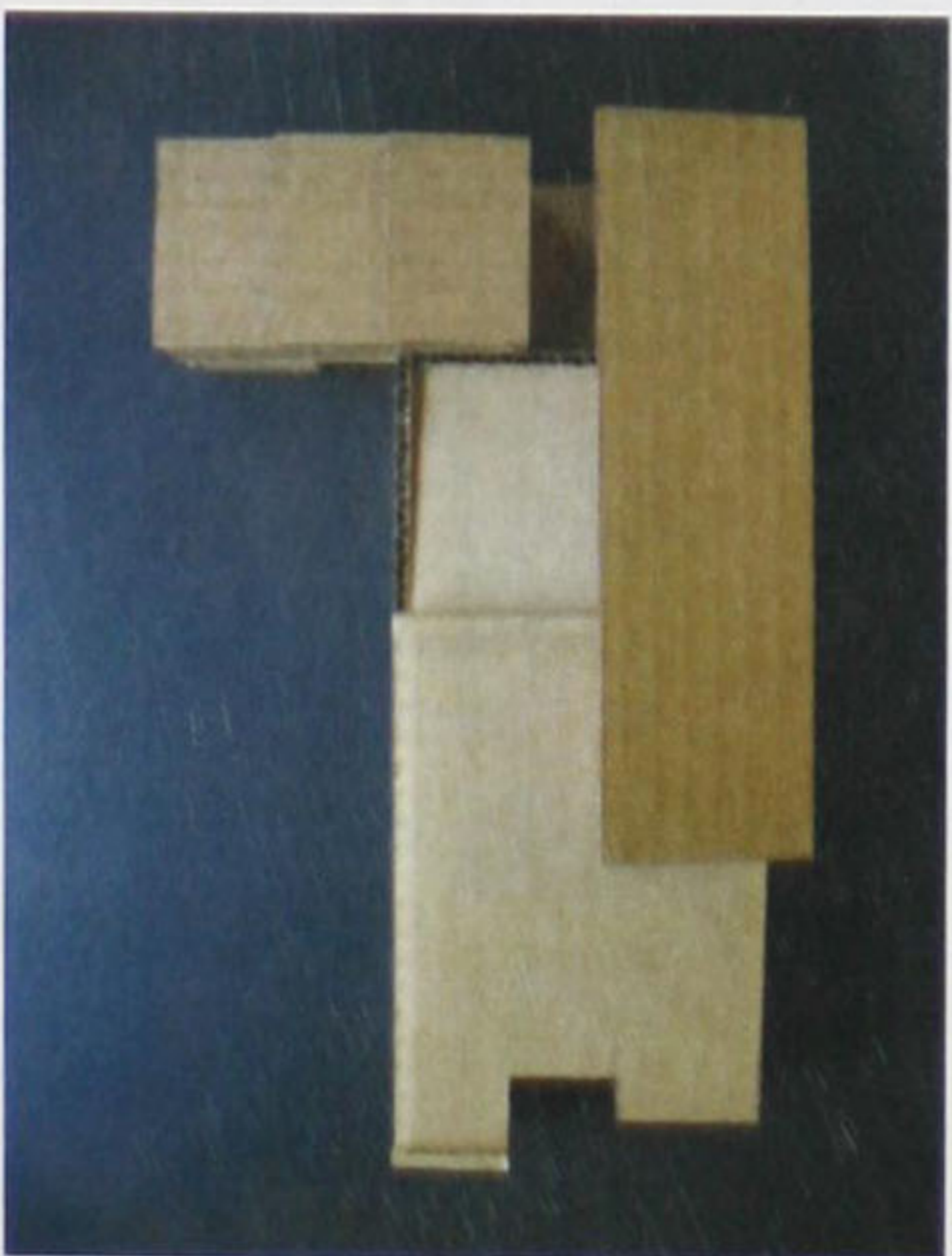
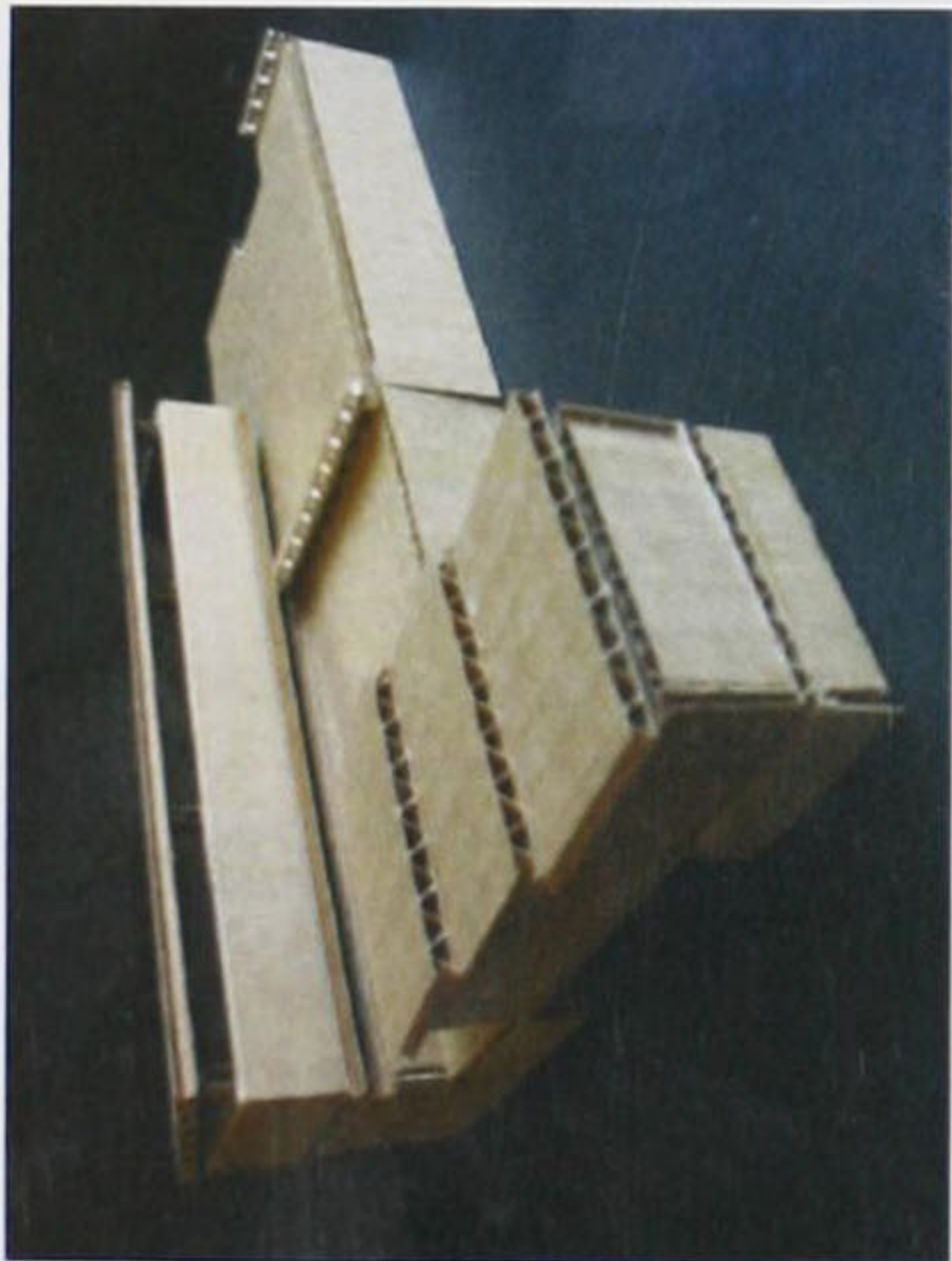
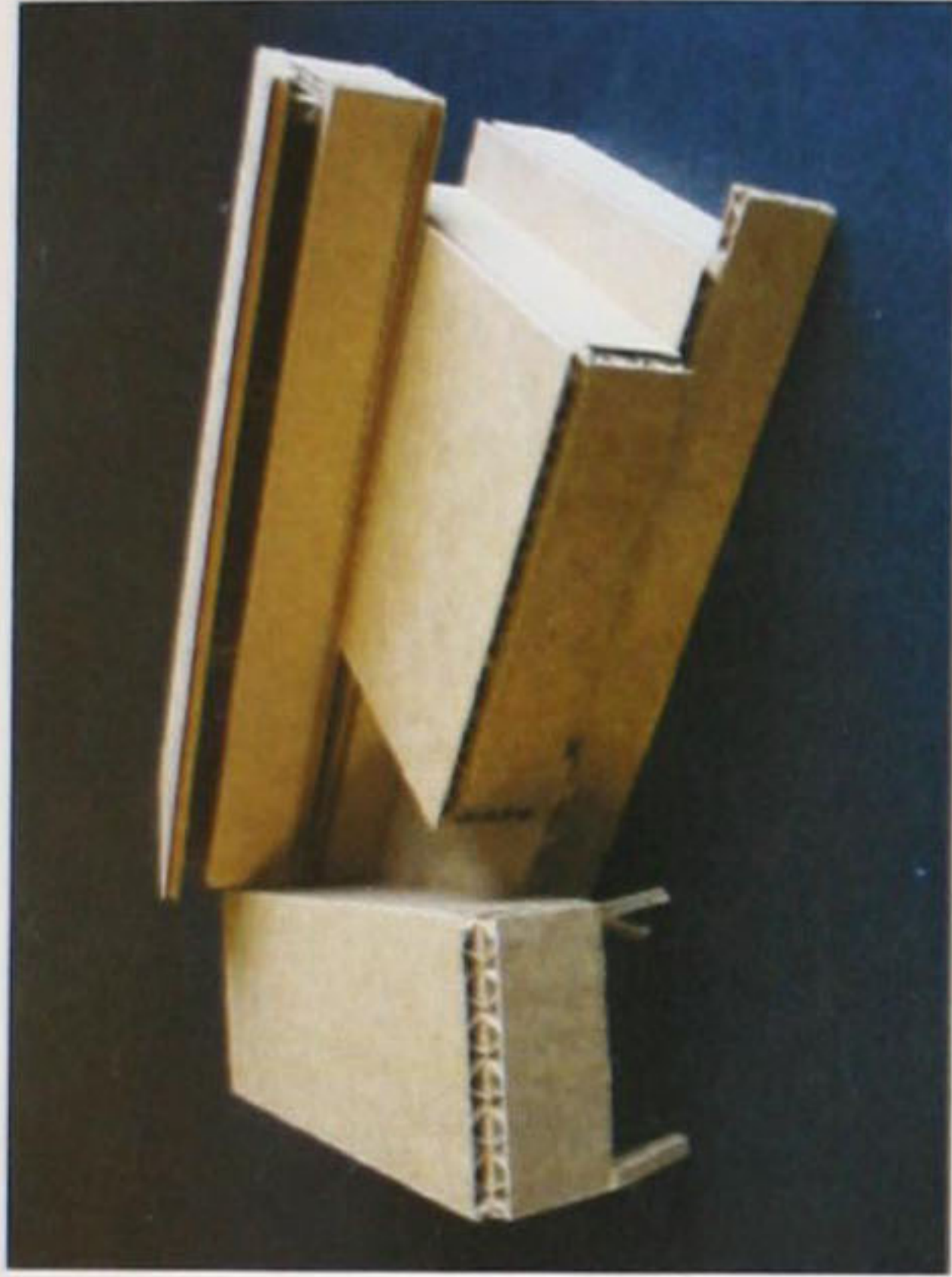
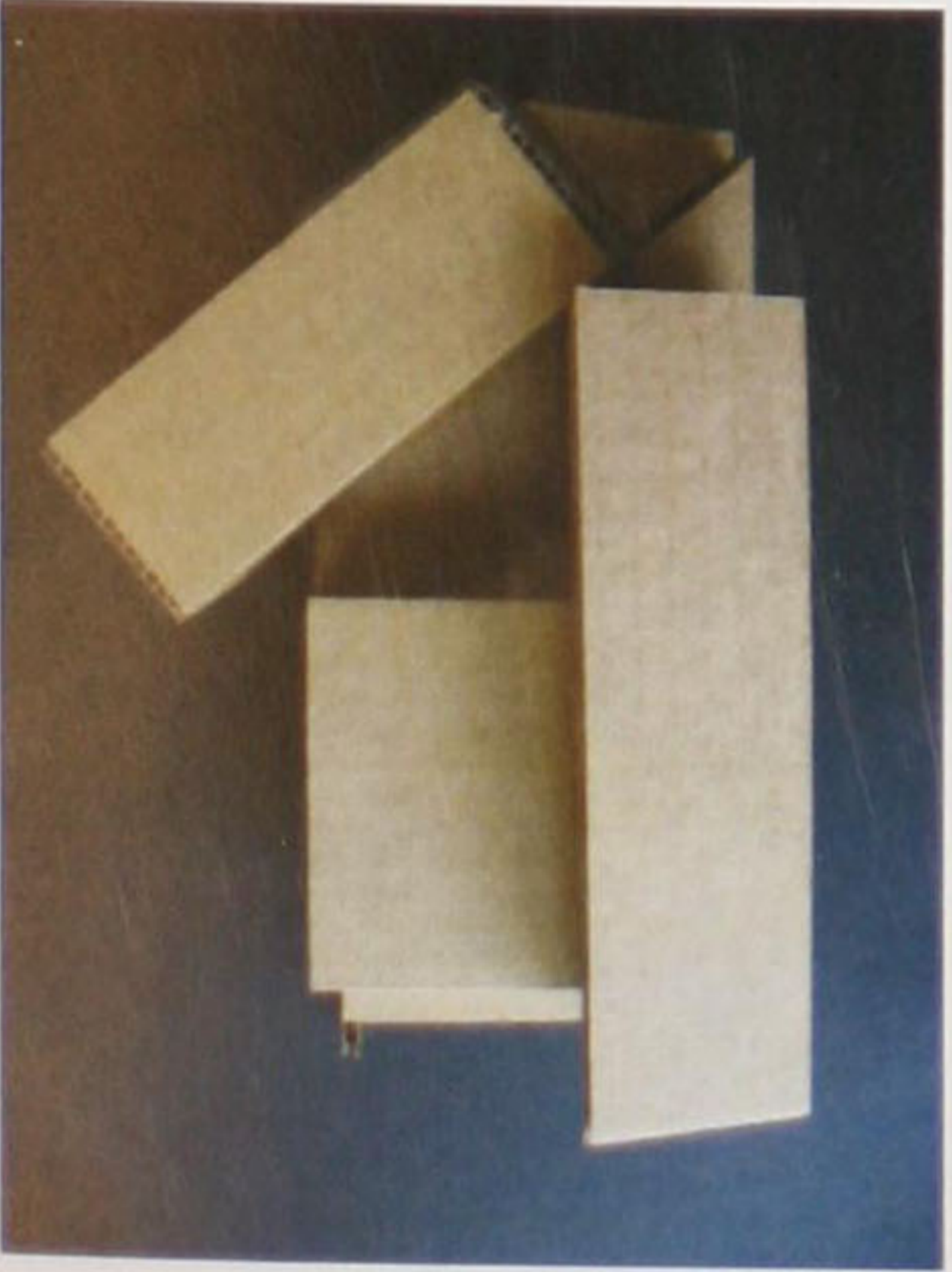
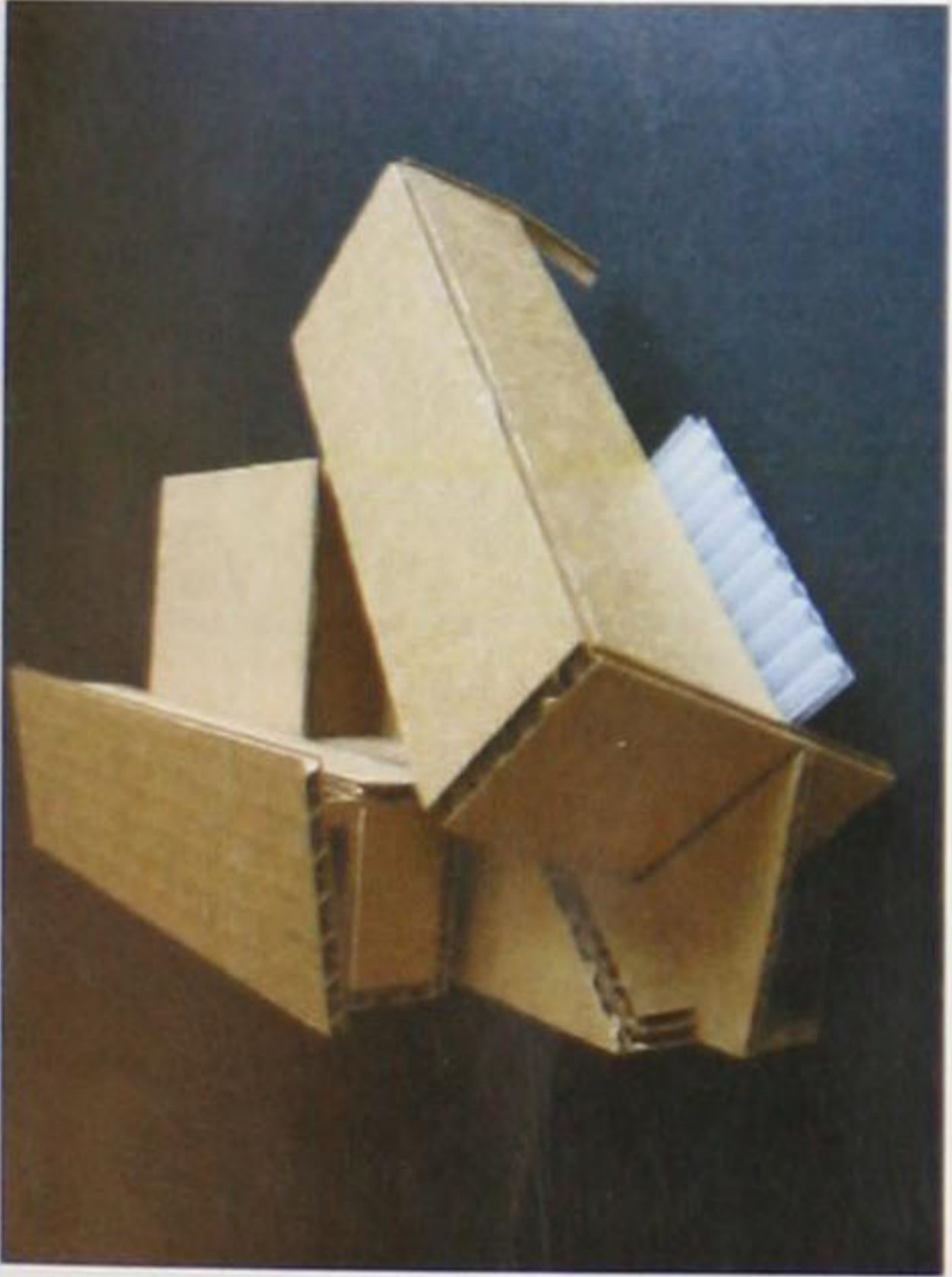
Preliminary Site Model



Site Massing Iterations

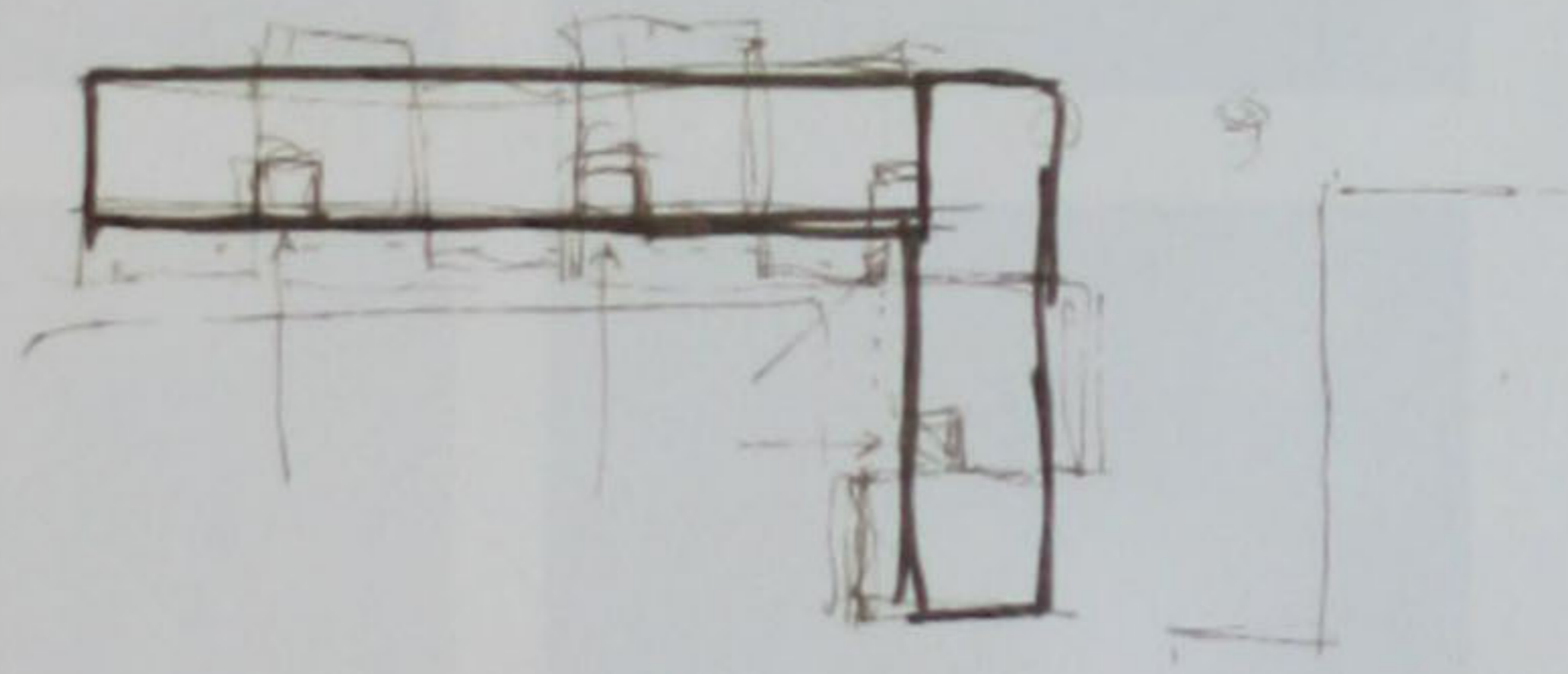
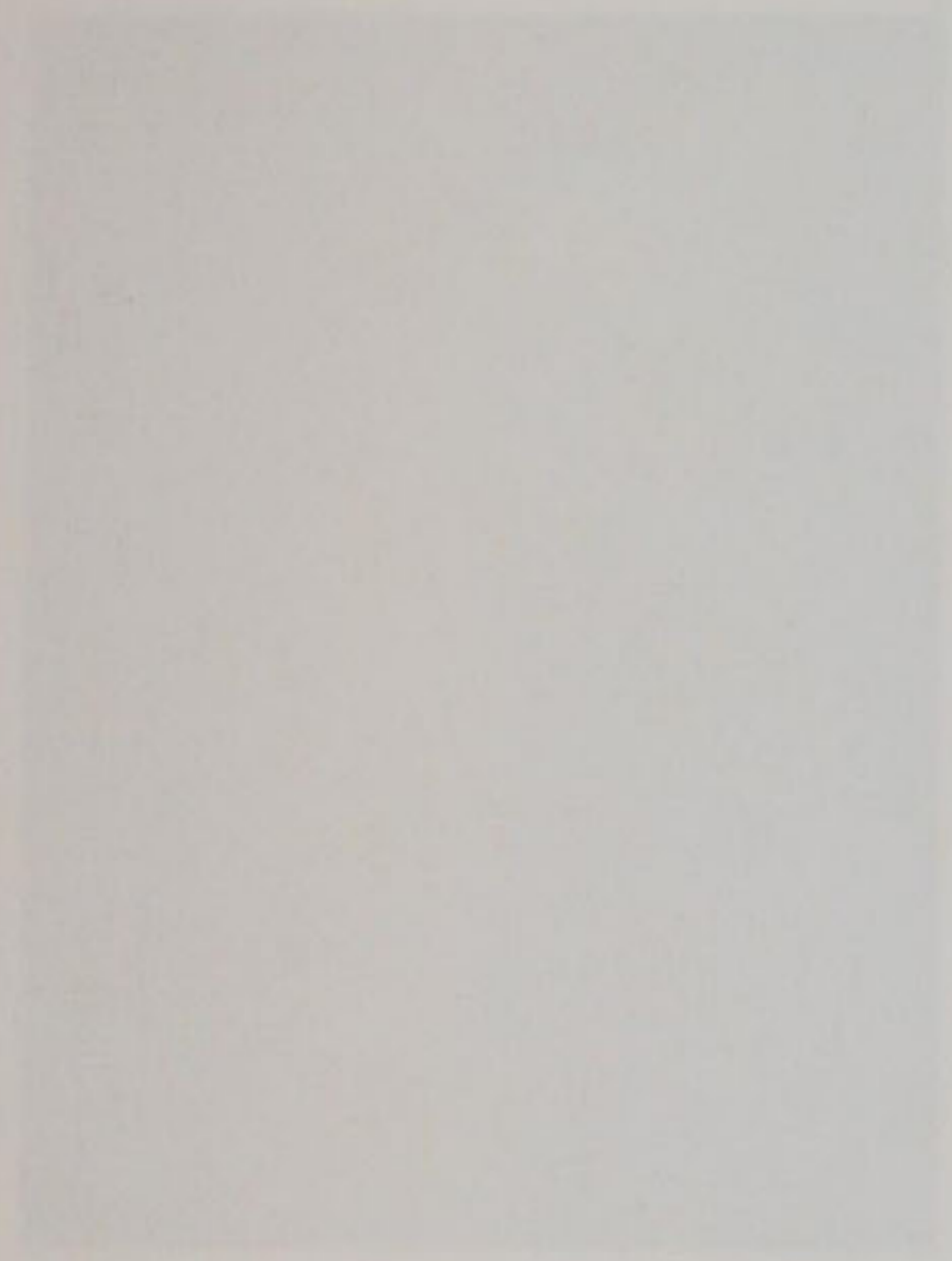
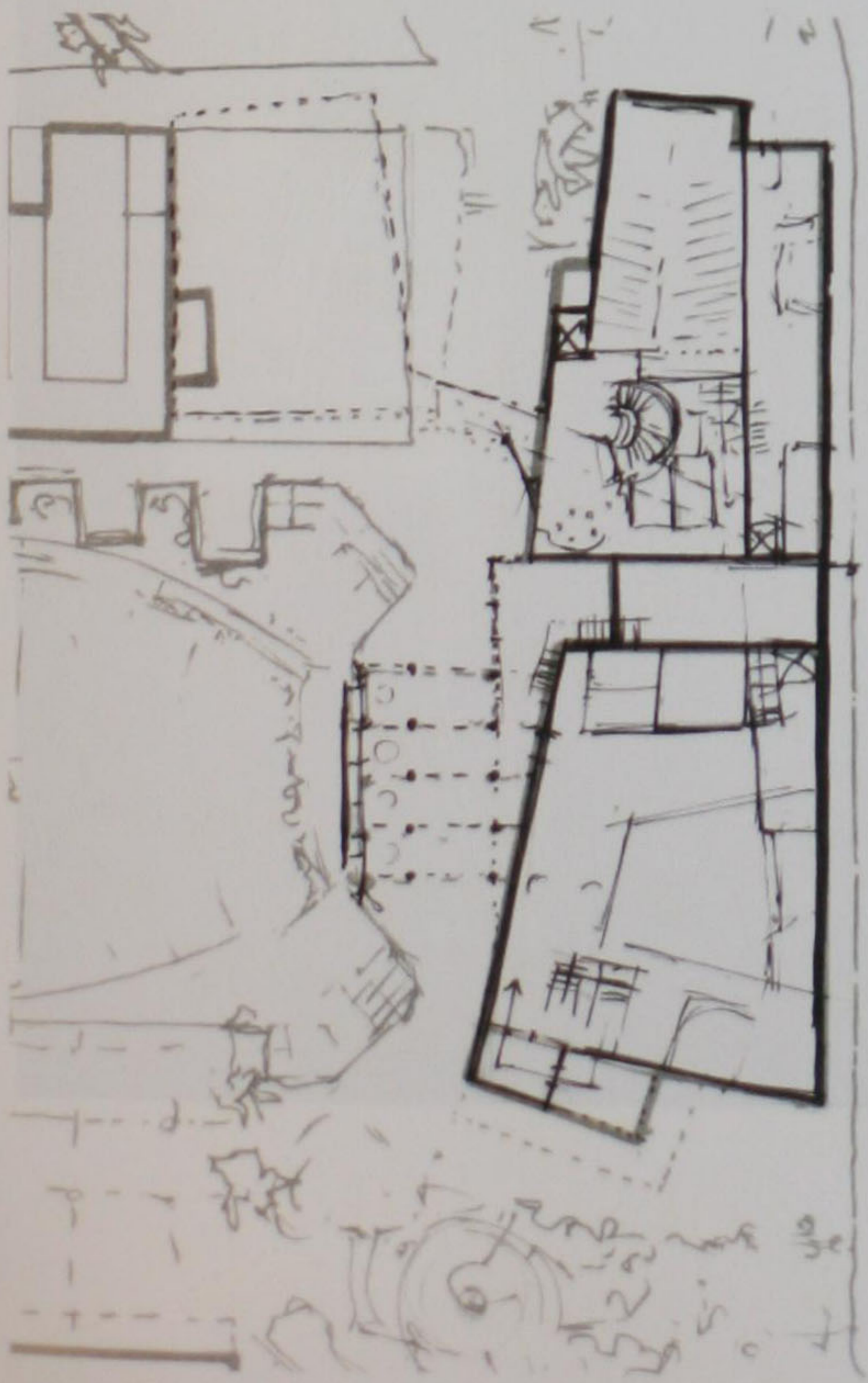


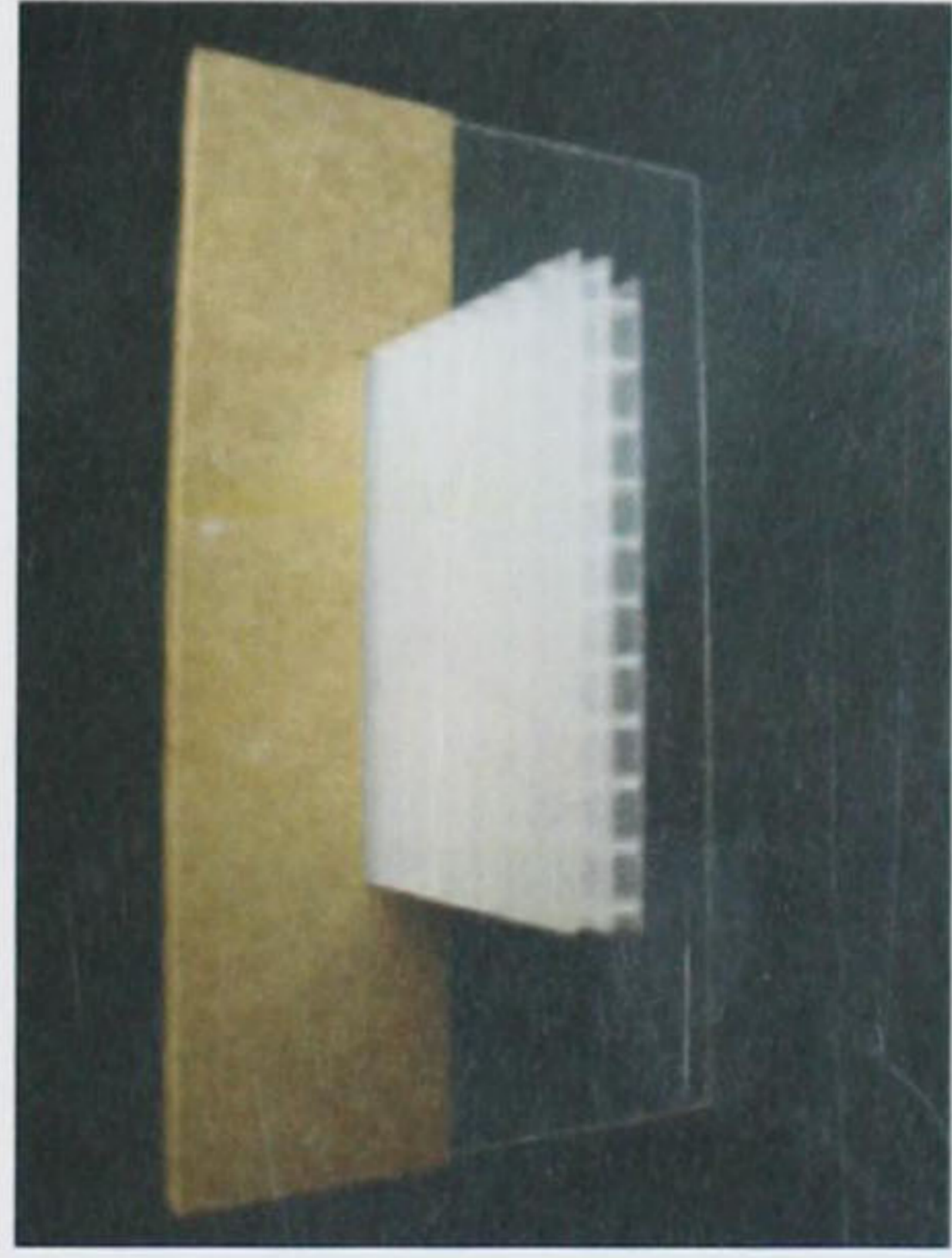




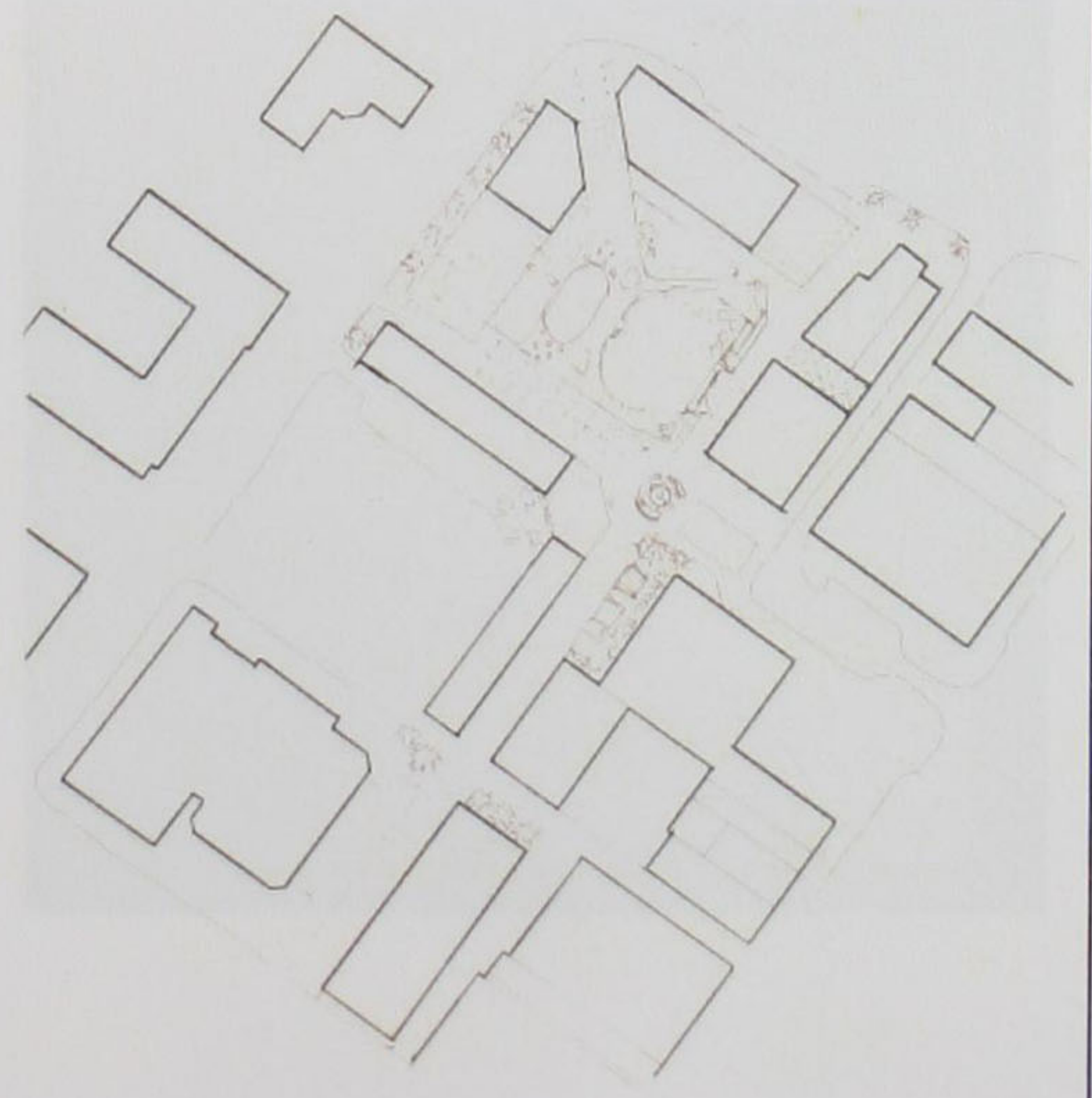
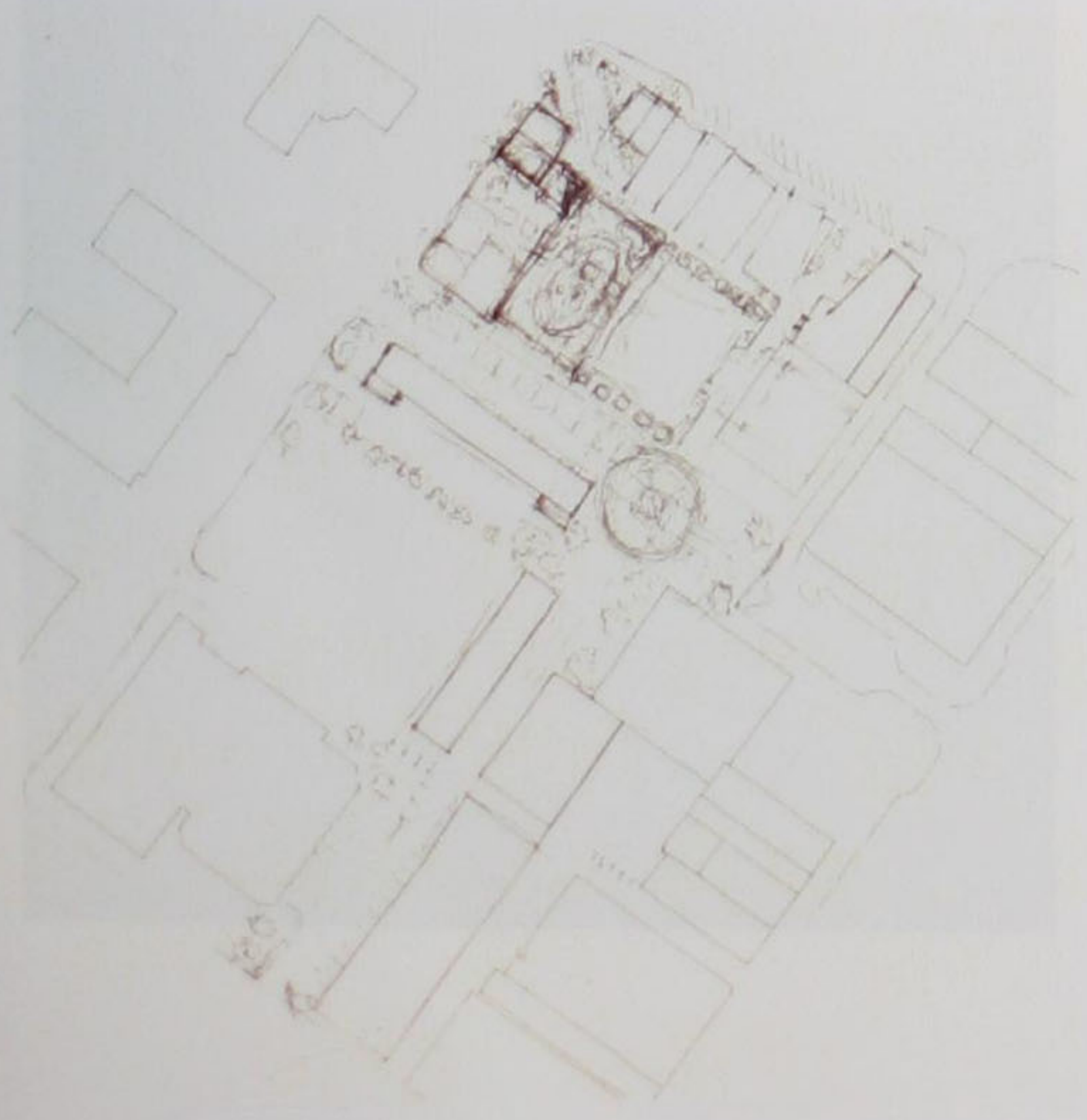
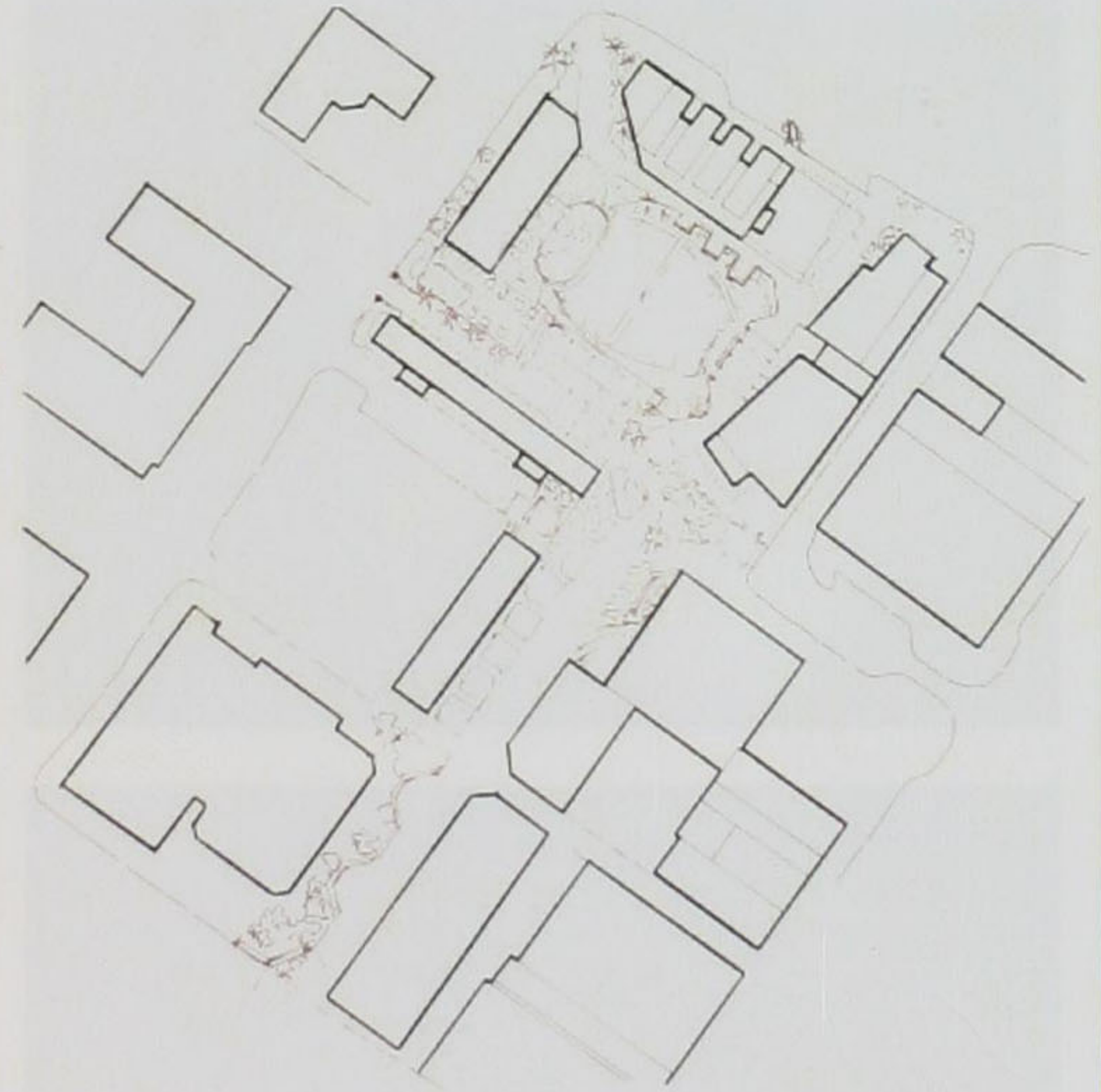
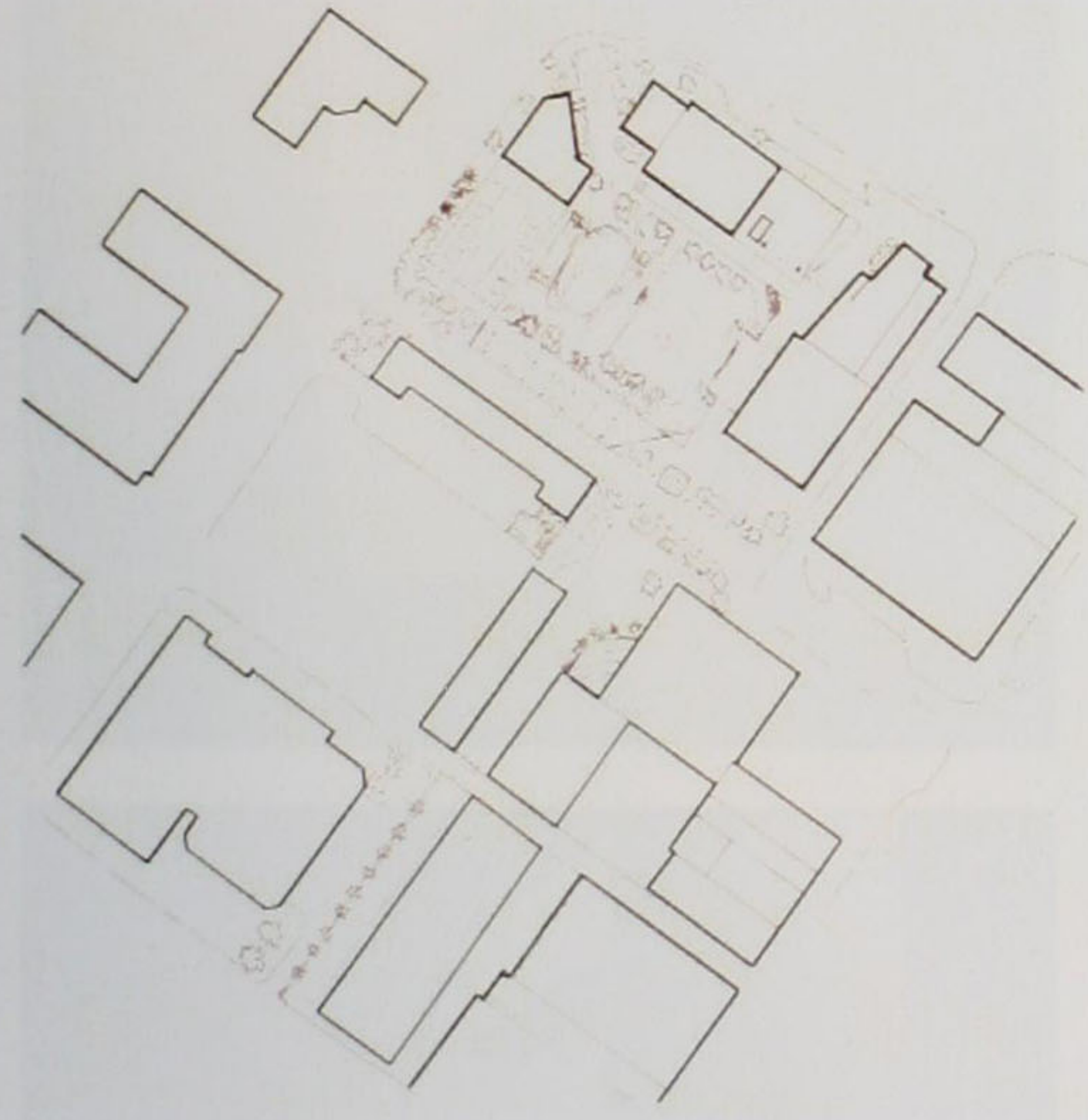
Building Study Models

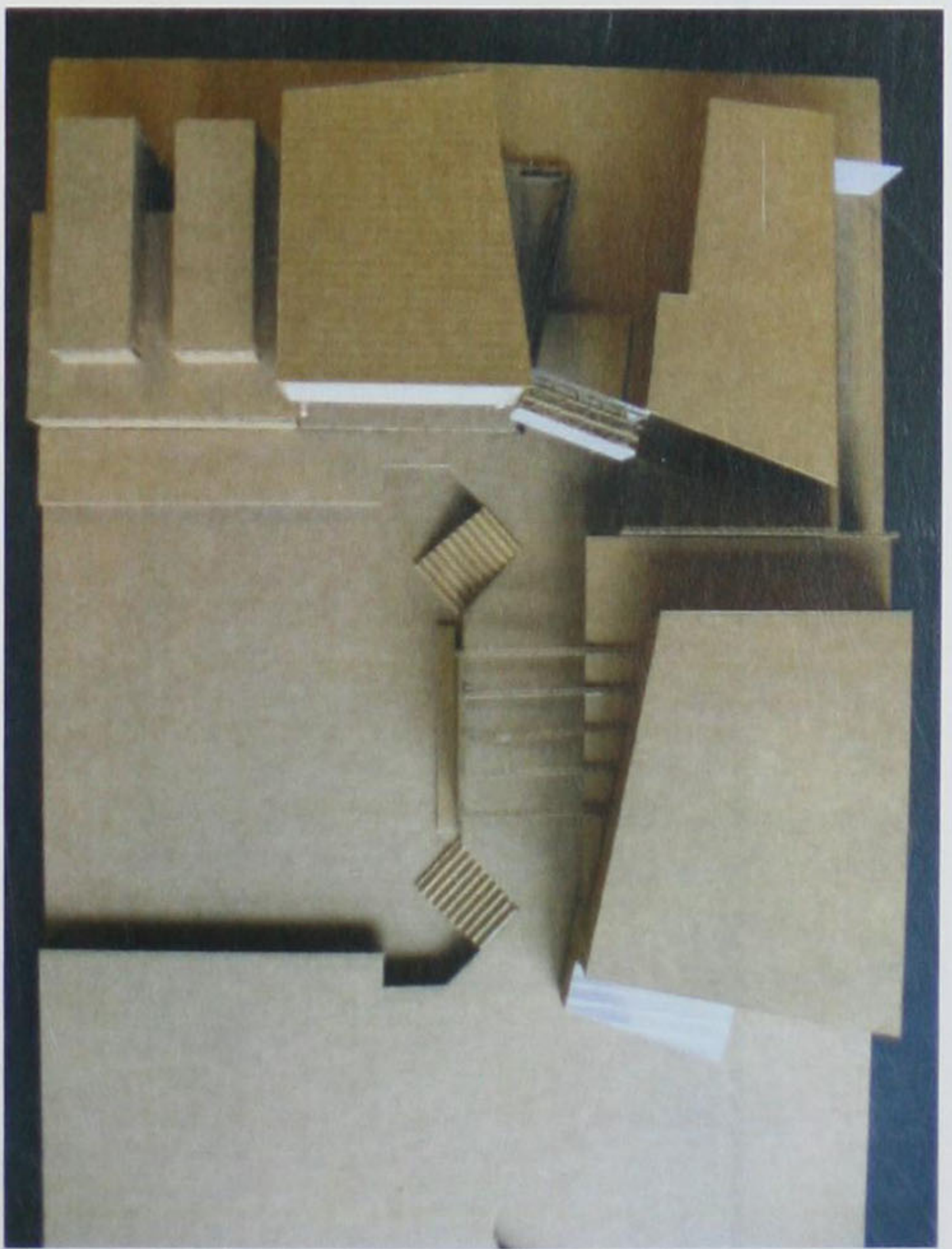
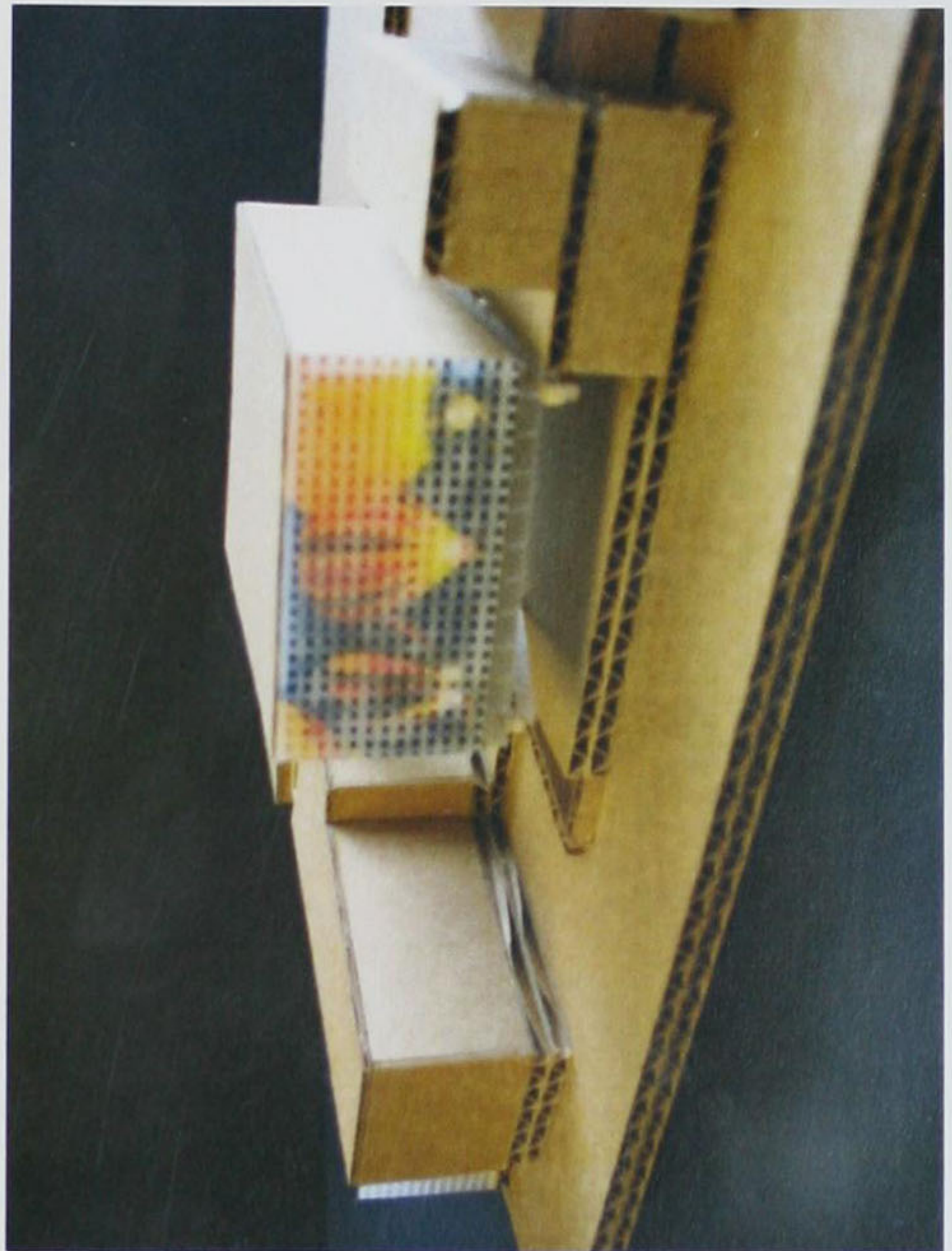
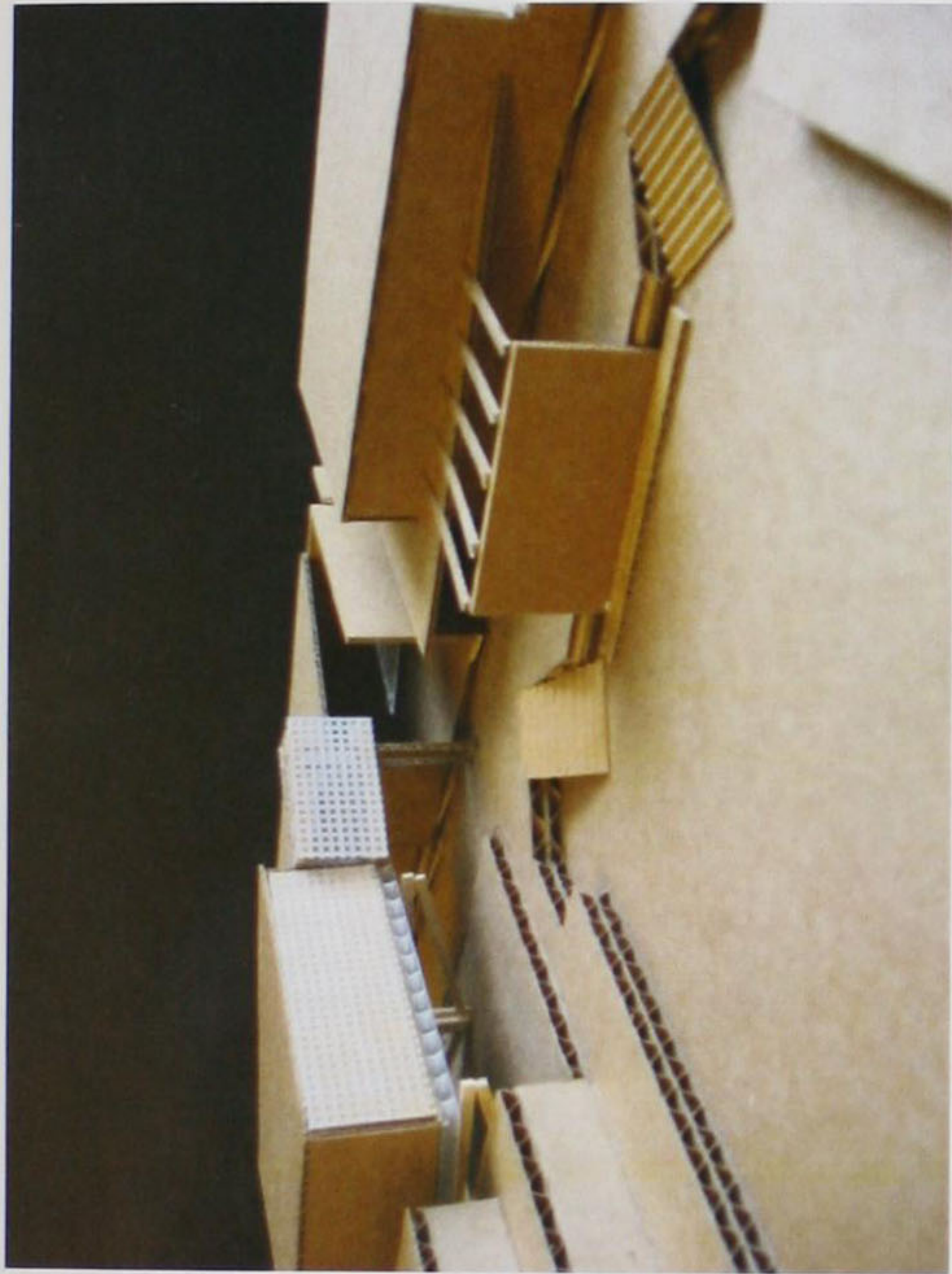






Theatre Entry Study Models

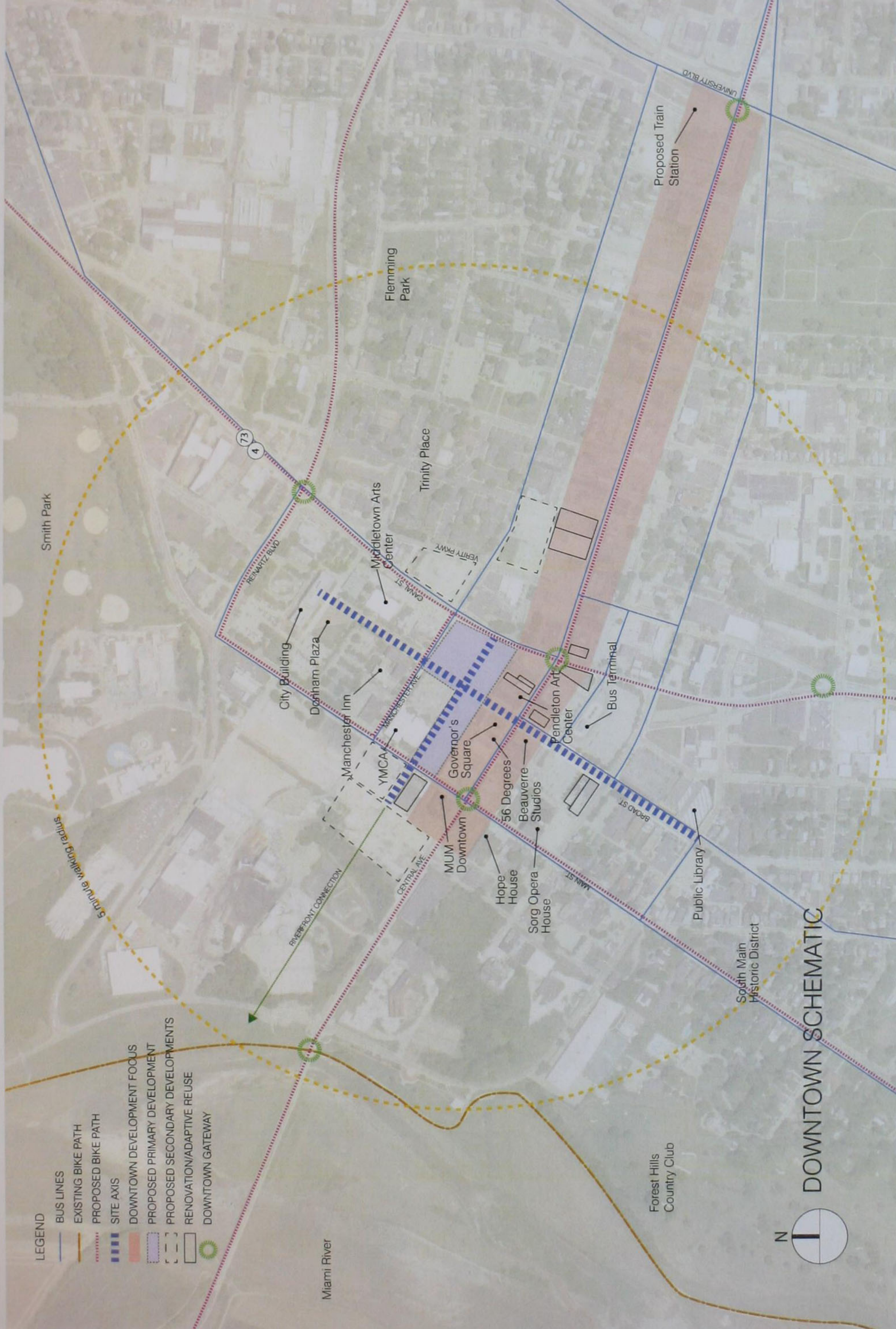




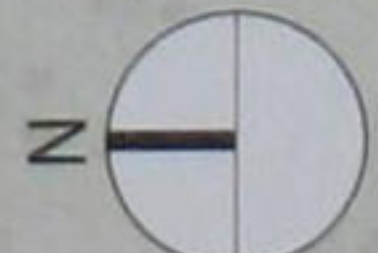
Final Building Study Model

Final Presentation

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- LEGEND**
- BUS LINES
  - EXISTING BIKE PATH
  - PROPOSED BIKE PATH
  - SITE AXIS
  - DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT FOCUS
  - PROPOSED PRIMARY DEVELOPMENT
  - PROPOSED SECONDARY DEVELOPMENTS
  - RENOVATION/ADAPTIVE REUSE
  - DOWNTOWN GATEWAY



**DOWNTOWN SCHEMATIC**

Smith Park

73  
4

REINARTZ BLVD

Flemming Park

Trinity Place

Middletown Arts Center

VERITY PKWY

Proposed Train Station

UNIVERSITY BLVD

City Building

Donham Plaza

Manchester Inn

YMCA

MANCHESTER PIKE

Governor's Square

56 Degrees

Beauverre Studios

Pendleton Arts Center

Bus Terminal

BROAD ST

RIVERPOINT CONNECTION

CENTRAL AVE

MUM Downtown

Hope House

Sorg Opera House

Public Library

MAIN ST

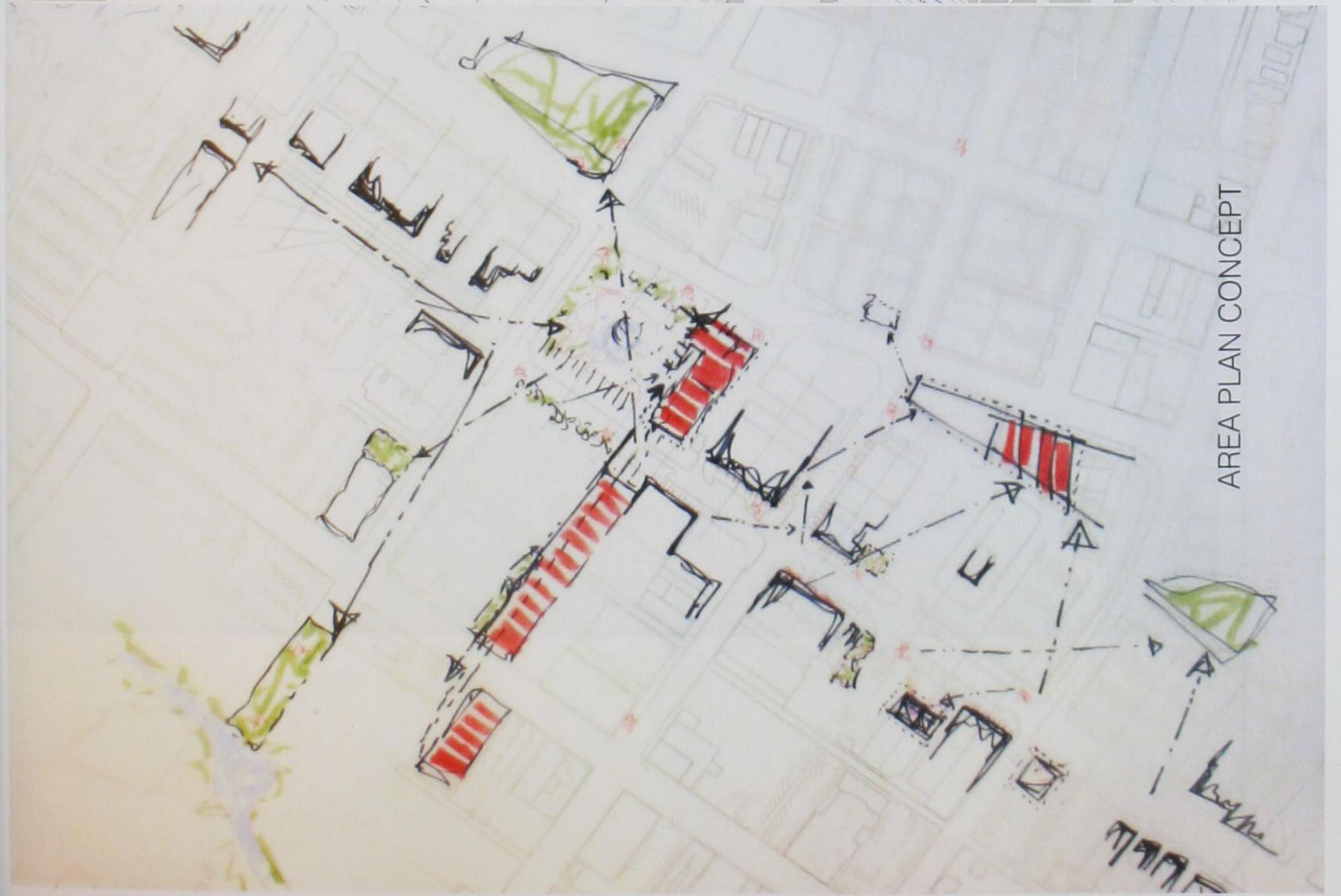
South Main Historic District

Forest Hills Country Club

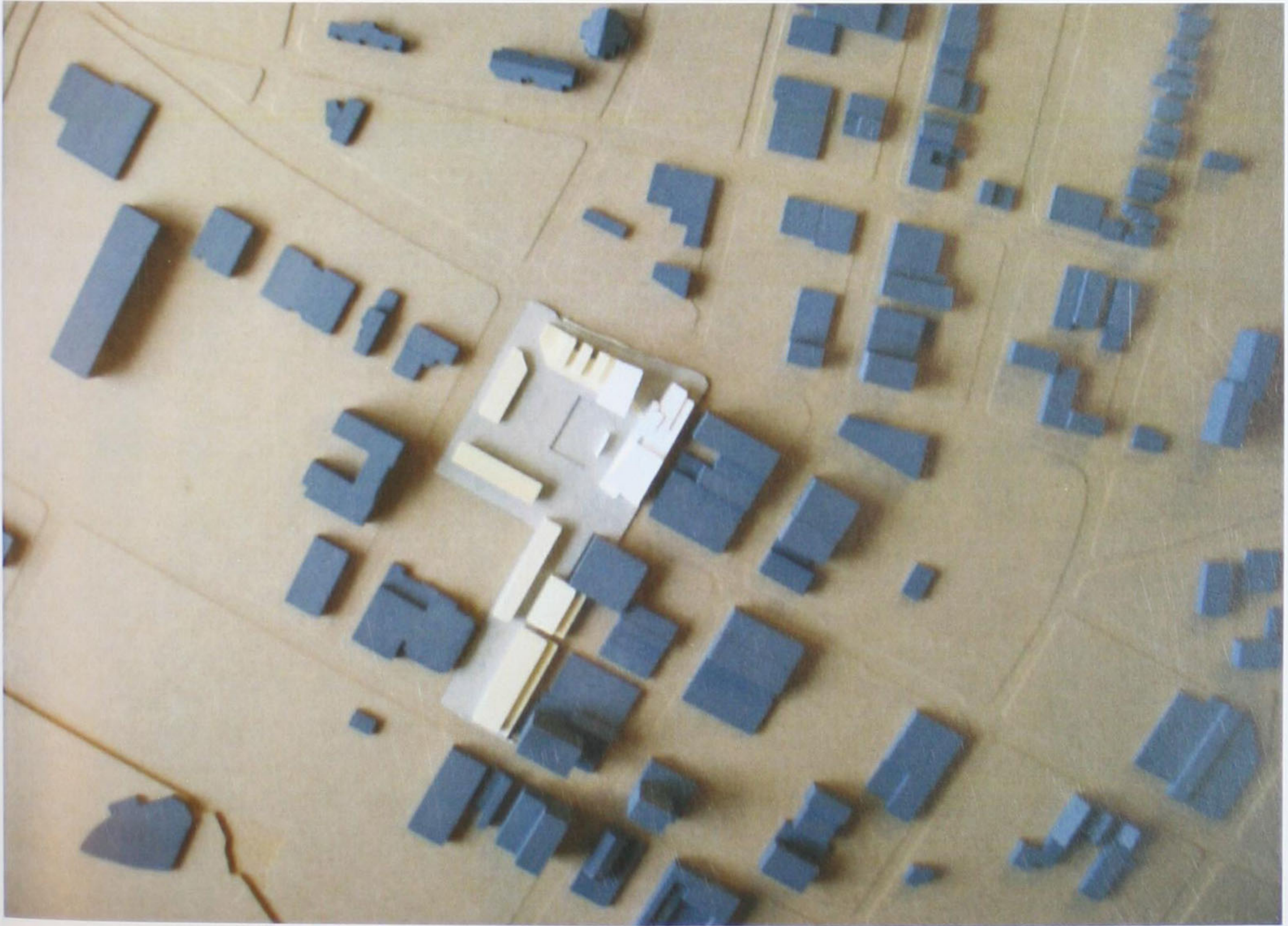
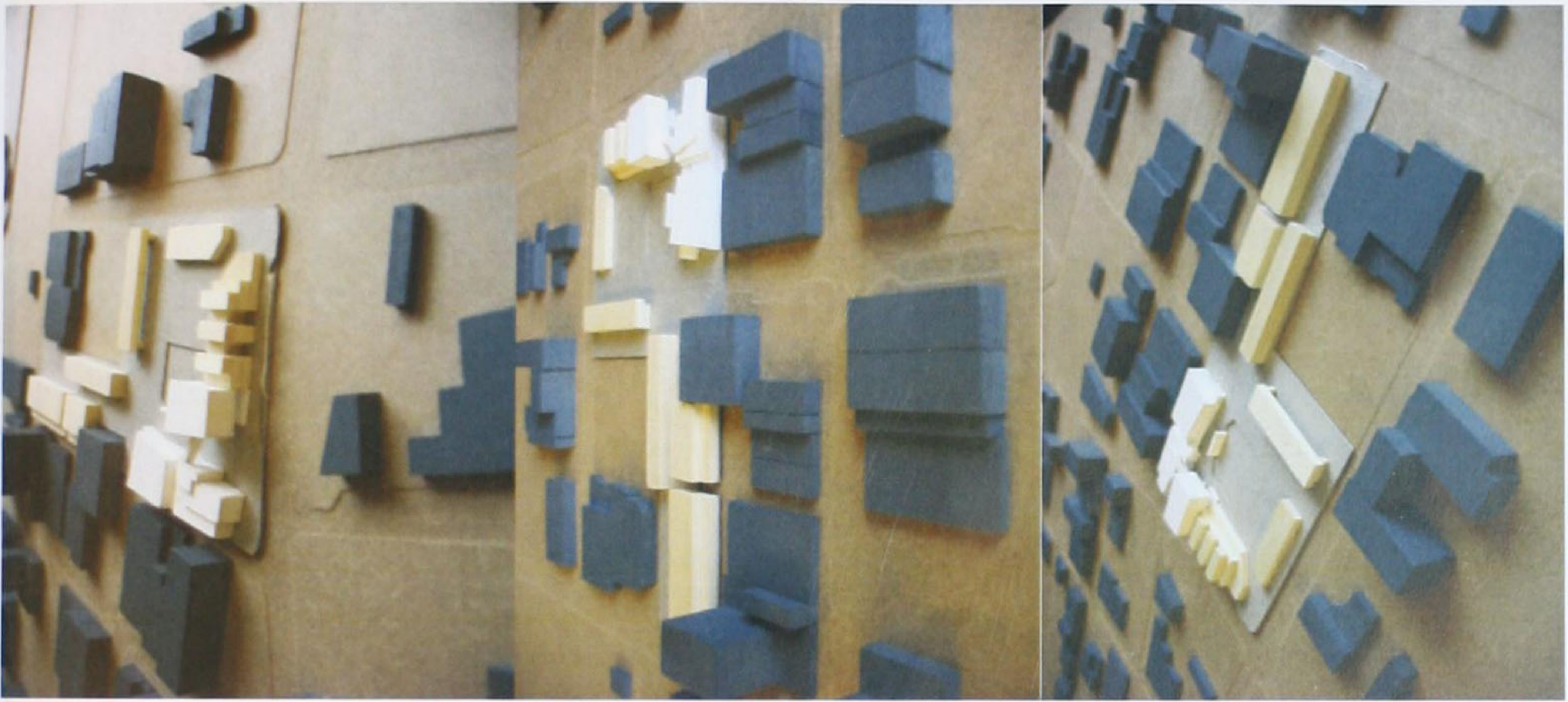
Miami River



AREA PLAN



AREA PLAN CONCEPT



Final Area Model





**LEGEND**

- 1 MIXED-USE - PERMANENT FARMER'S MARKET AND RESIDENTIAL
- 2 COMMUNITY GARDEN PLOTS
- 3 TOOL SHED AND COMMUNITY STORAGE
- 4 VISITOR'S CENTER
- 5 MIXED-USE - RETAIL AND LIVE/WORK SPACE
- 6 BICYCLE STORAGE
- 7 COVERED COMMUNITY SPACE / CONCESSIONS - ACCESS TO PUBLIC TOILETS
- 8 PLAYGROUND
- 9 SEASONAL FOUNTAIN / ICE RINK
- 10 TEMPORARY FARMER'S MARKET
- 11 MARKET DROP-OFF / LOADING
- 12 MARKET DRIVE-OFF / LOADING
- 13 OUTDOOR MOVIE SCREENING
- 14 MIXED-USE - COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION SPACE AND RESIDENTIAL
- 15 AMPHITHEATER
- 16 MIXED-USE - RETAIL AND RESIDENTIAL



**SITE PLAN**

- COMMUNITY SPACE
- RETAIL
- RESIDENTIAL
- EXISTING BUILDING



SECTION A-5



SECTION A-4



SECTION A-3



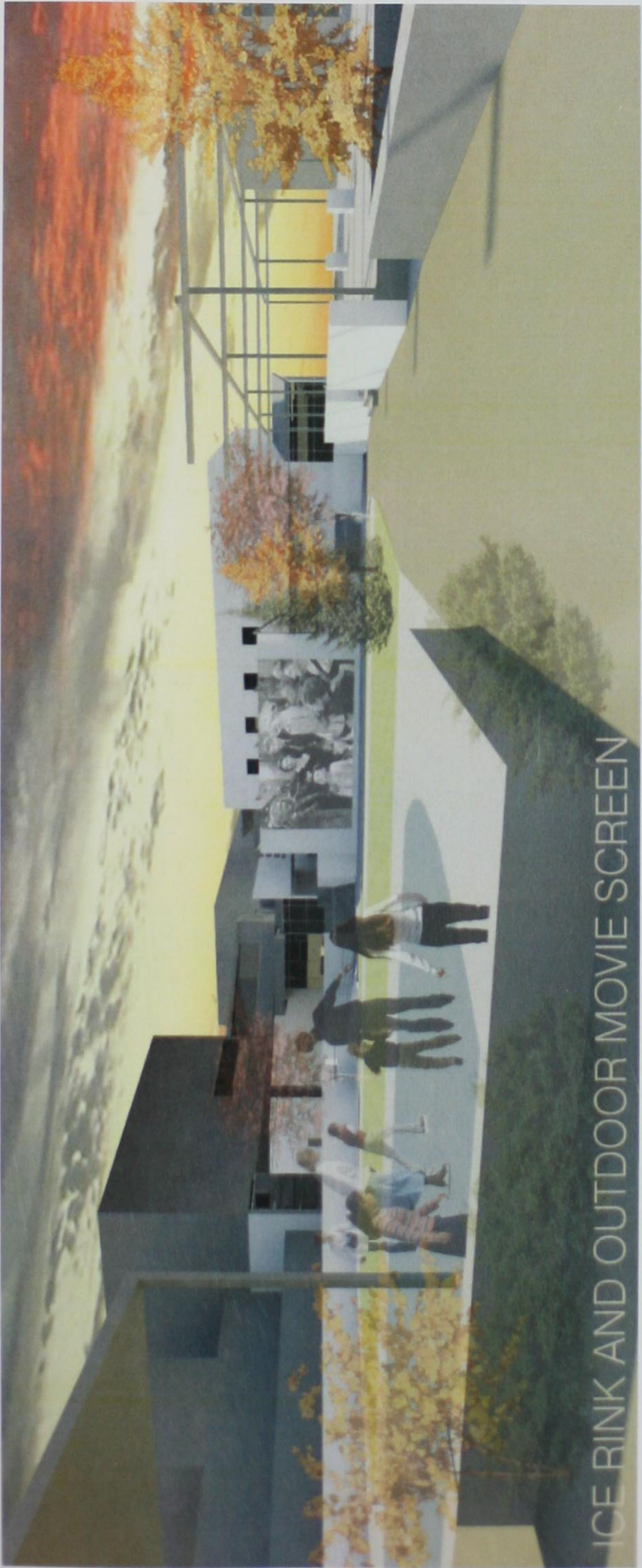
SECTION A-2



SECTION A-1



NORTHEAST SITE ENTRY



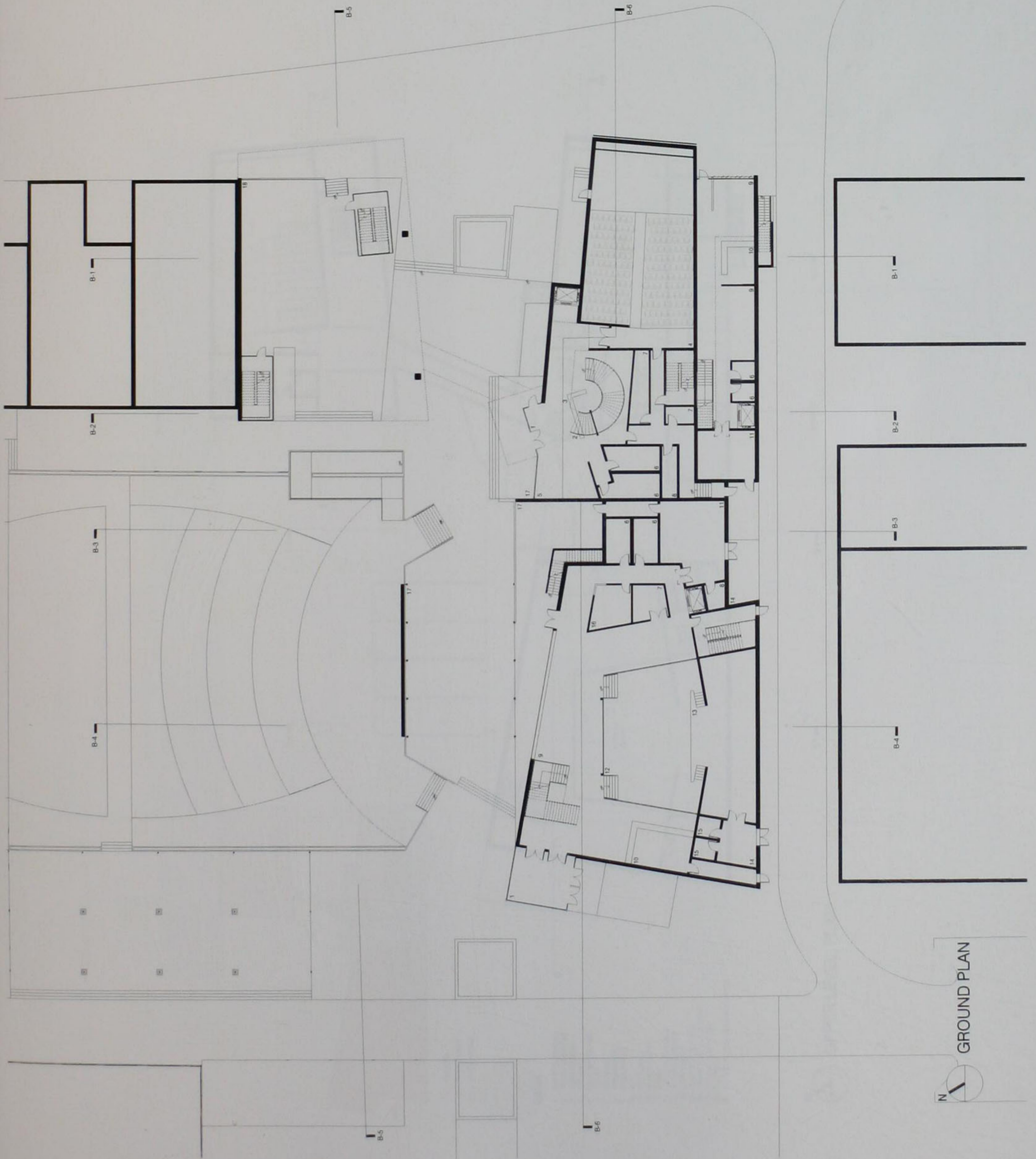
ICE RINK AND OUTDOOR MOVIE SCREEN



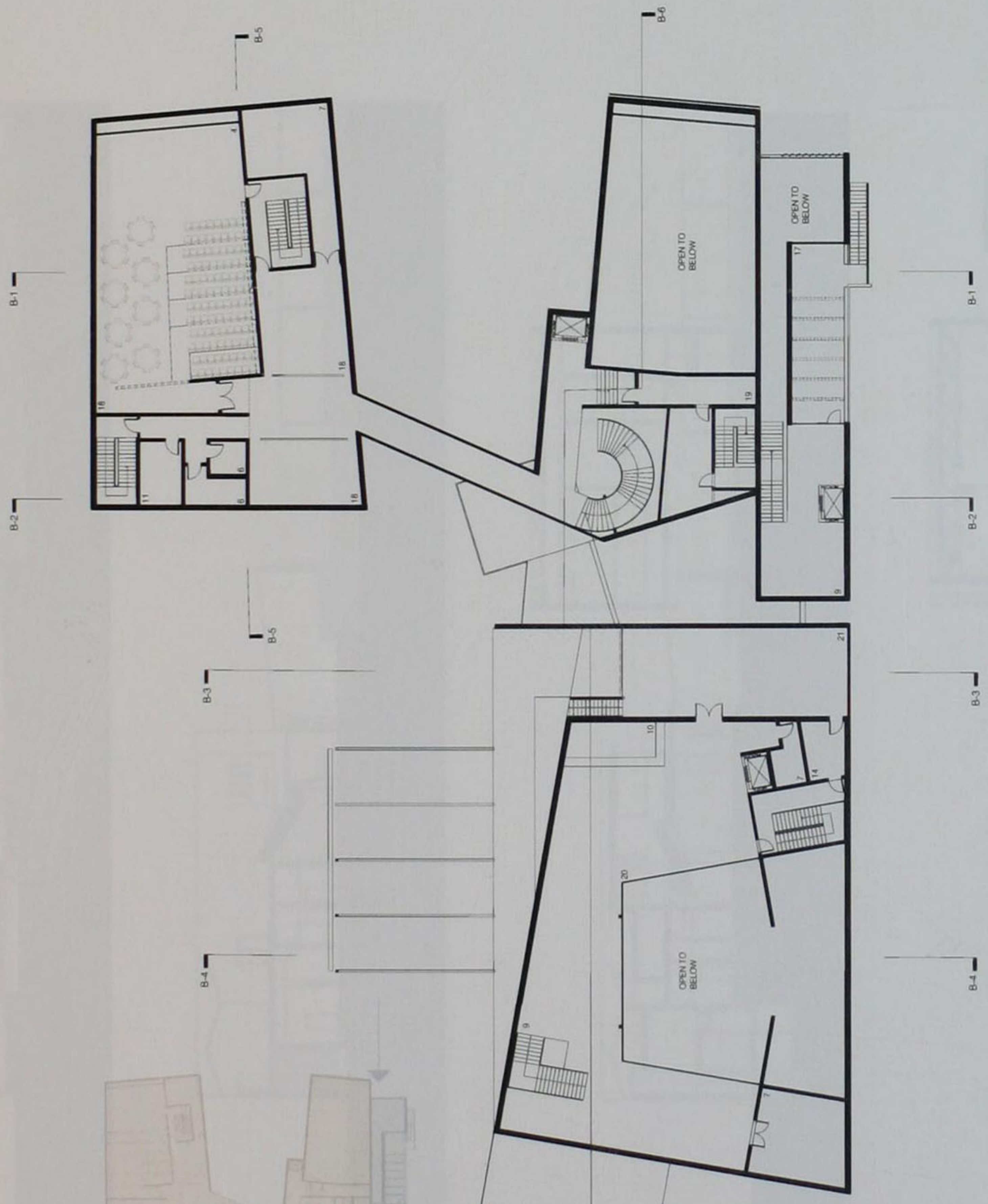
COMMUNITY GARDEN PLOTS



FARMER'S MARKET DISPLAY



N  
GROUND PLAN



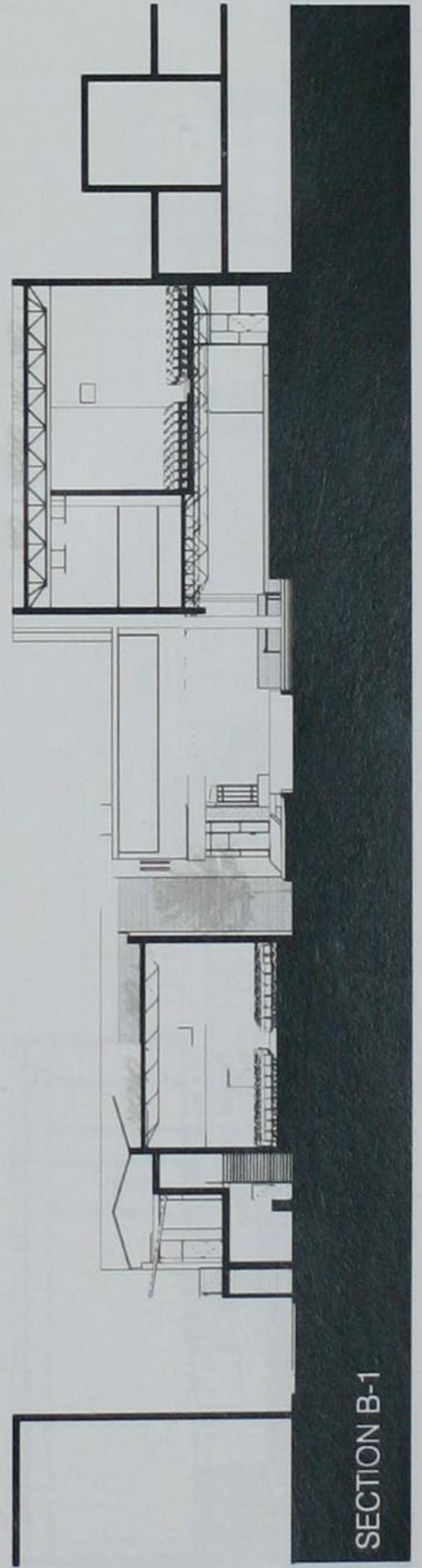
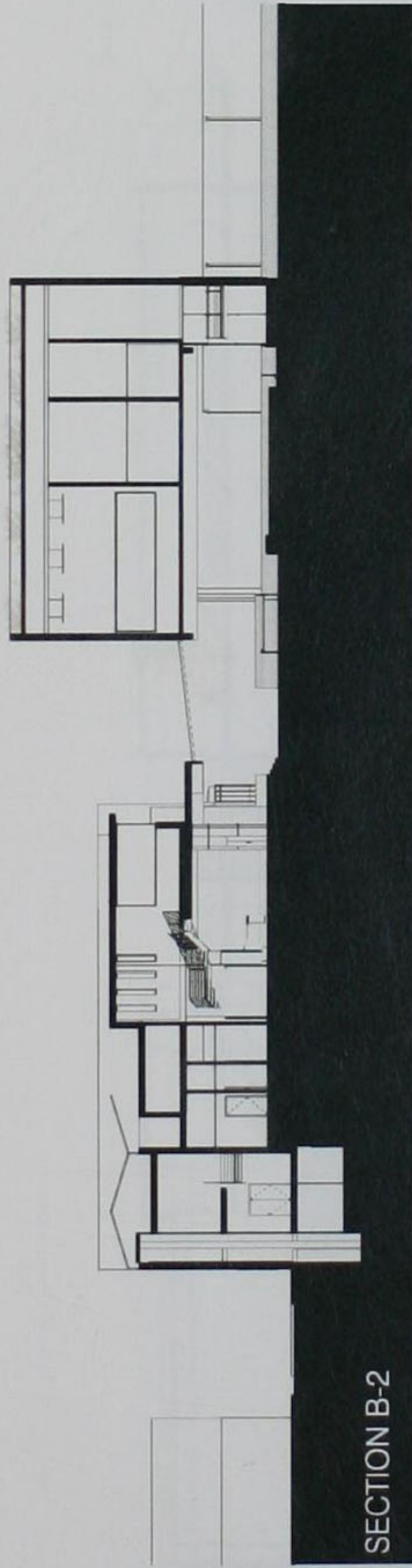
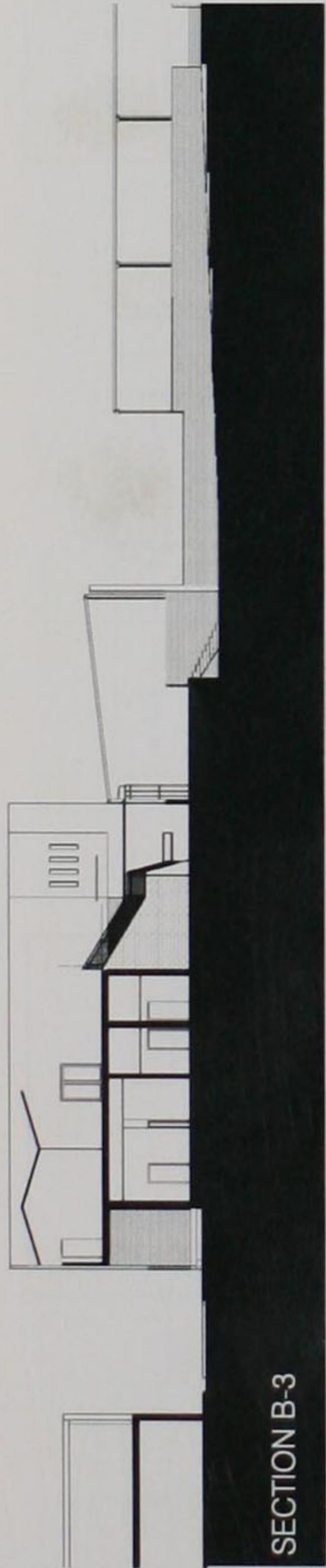
THEATRE  
 RESTAURANT  
 MUSIC VENUE

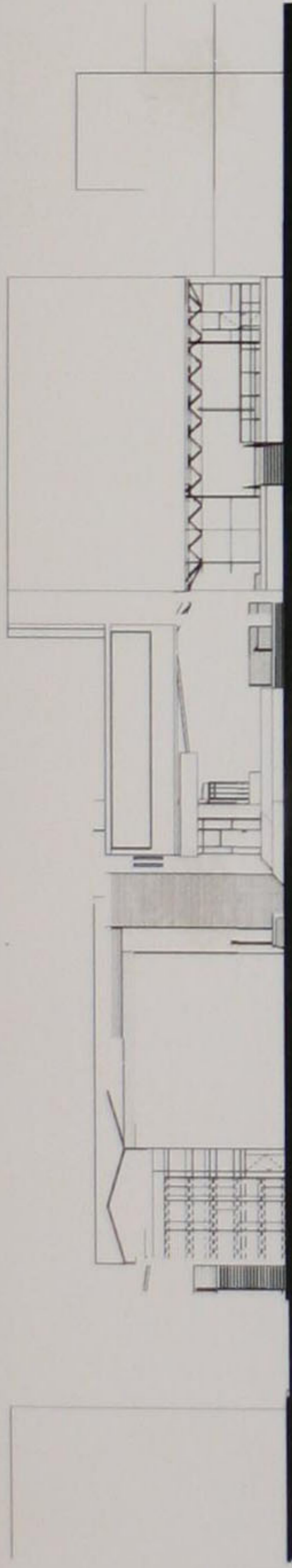
LEGEND

- 1 ENTRY/VESTIBULE
- 2 TICKET COUNTER
- 3 CONCESSIONS
- 4 THEATRE
- 5 SEATING/LOUNGE
- 6 TOILET
- 7 STORAGE
- 8 MECHANICAL
- 9 DINING AREA
- 10 BAR
- 11 KITCHEN
- 12 DANCE FLOOR
- 13 STAGE
- 14 LOADING/STAGING
- 15 DRESSING ROOM
- 16 COAT CHECK
- 17 OUTDOOR SEATING
- 18 TEMPORARY EVENT SPACE
- 19 PROJECTION ROOM
- 20 BILLIARDS
- 21 OUTDOOR PERFORMANCE SPACE

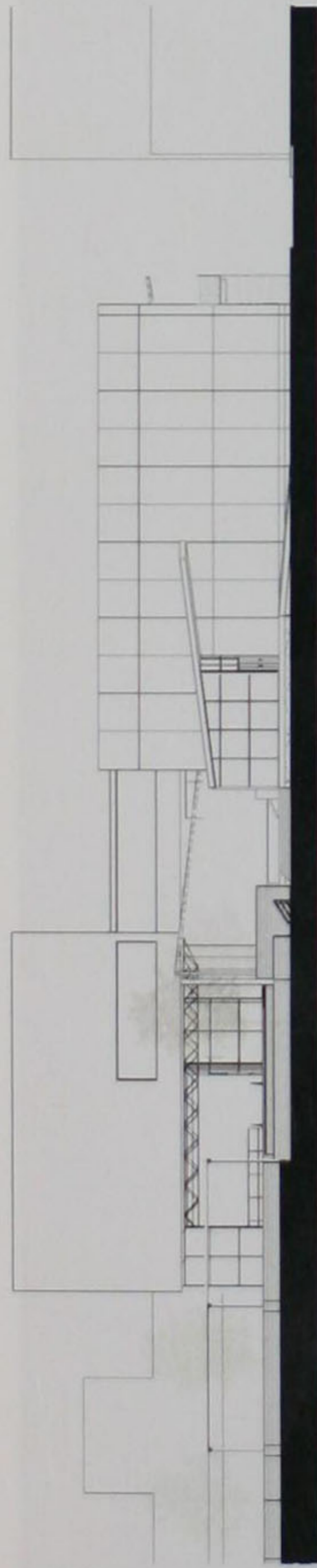
N  
 UPPER LEVEL PLAN







SOUTHEAST ELEVATION



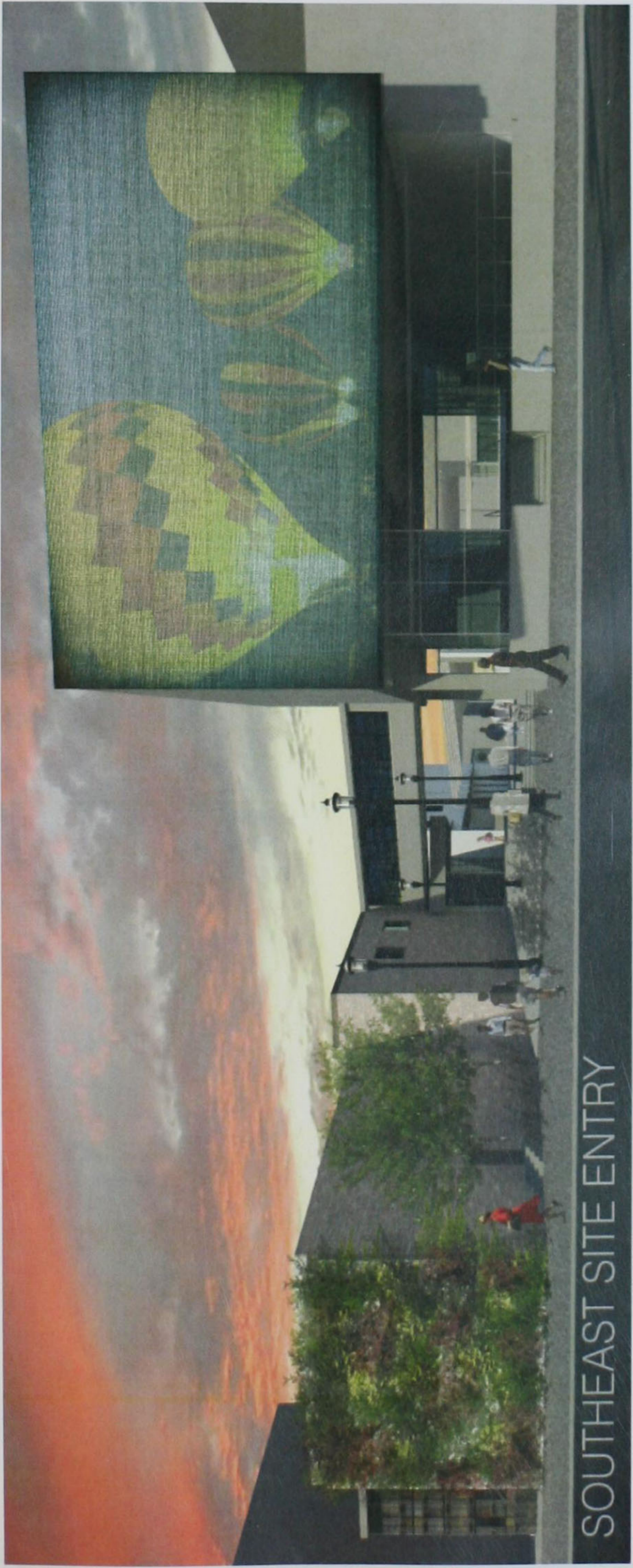
NORTHWEST ELEVATION



SECTION B-6



SECTION B-5



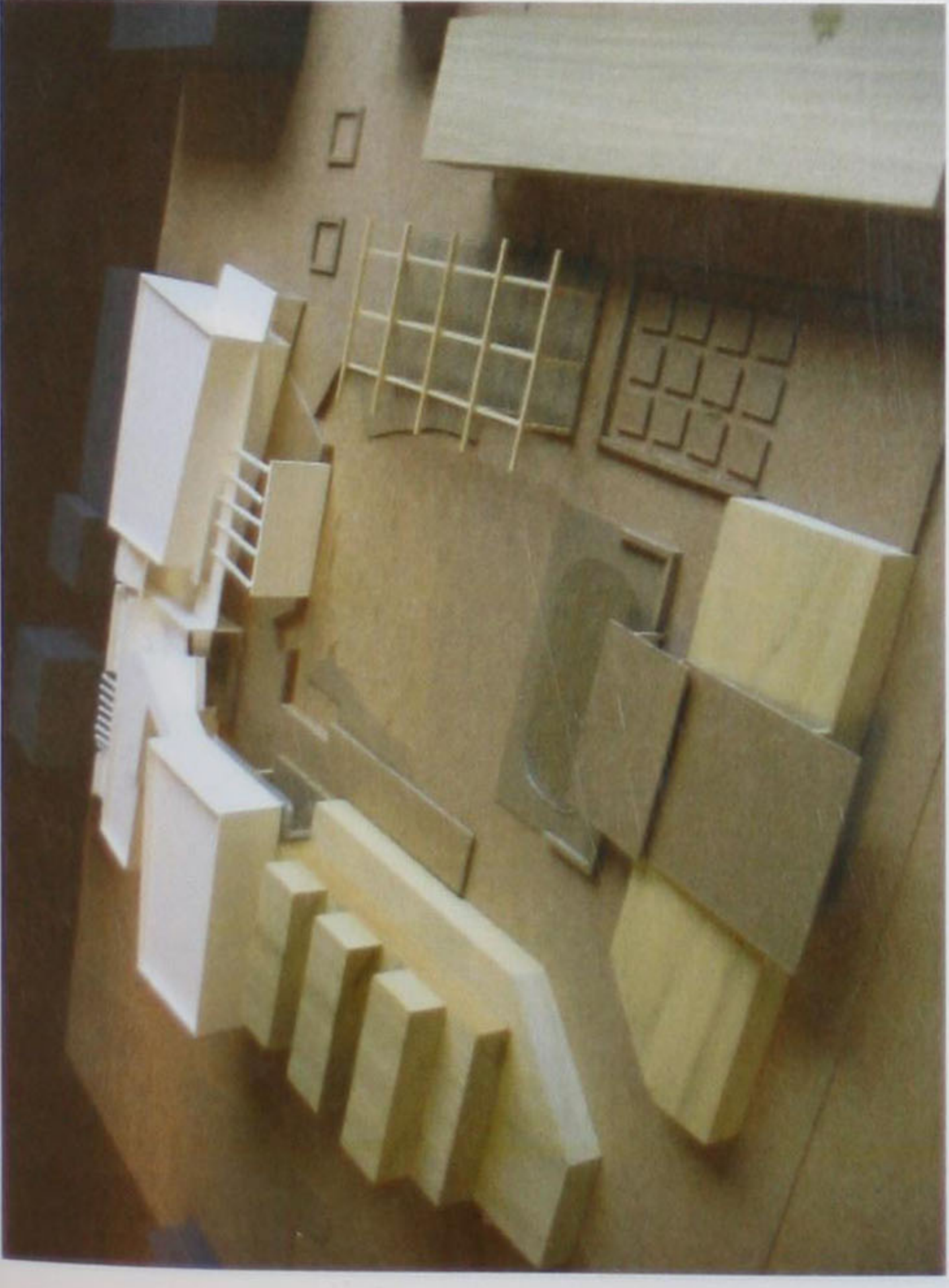
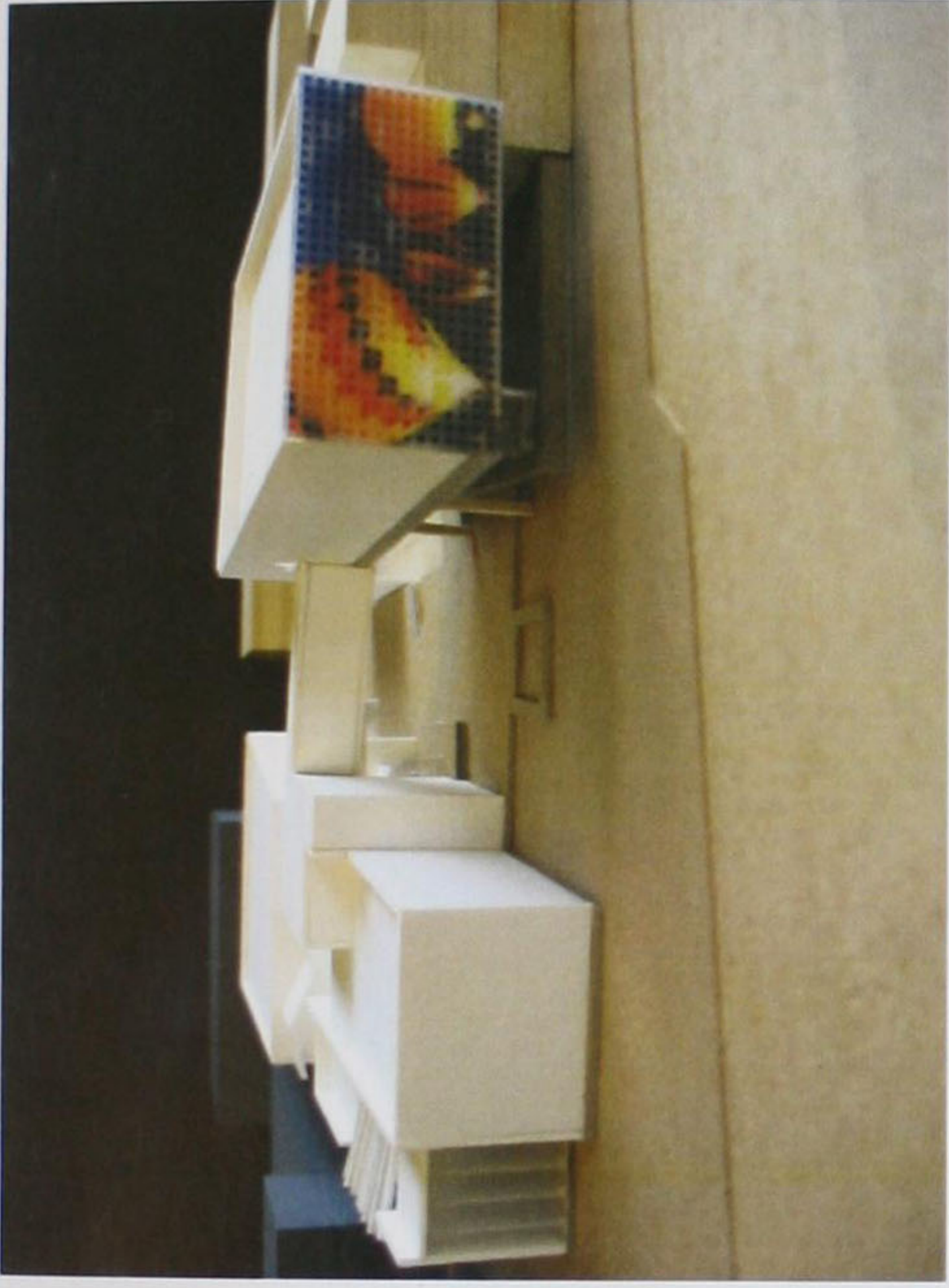
SOUTHEAST SITE ENTRY



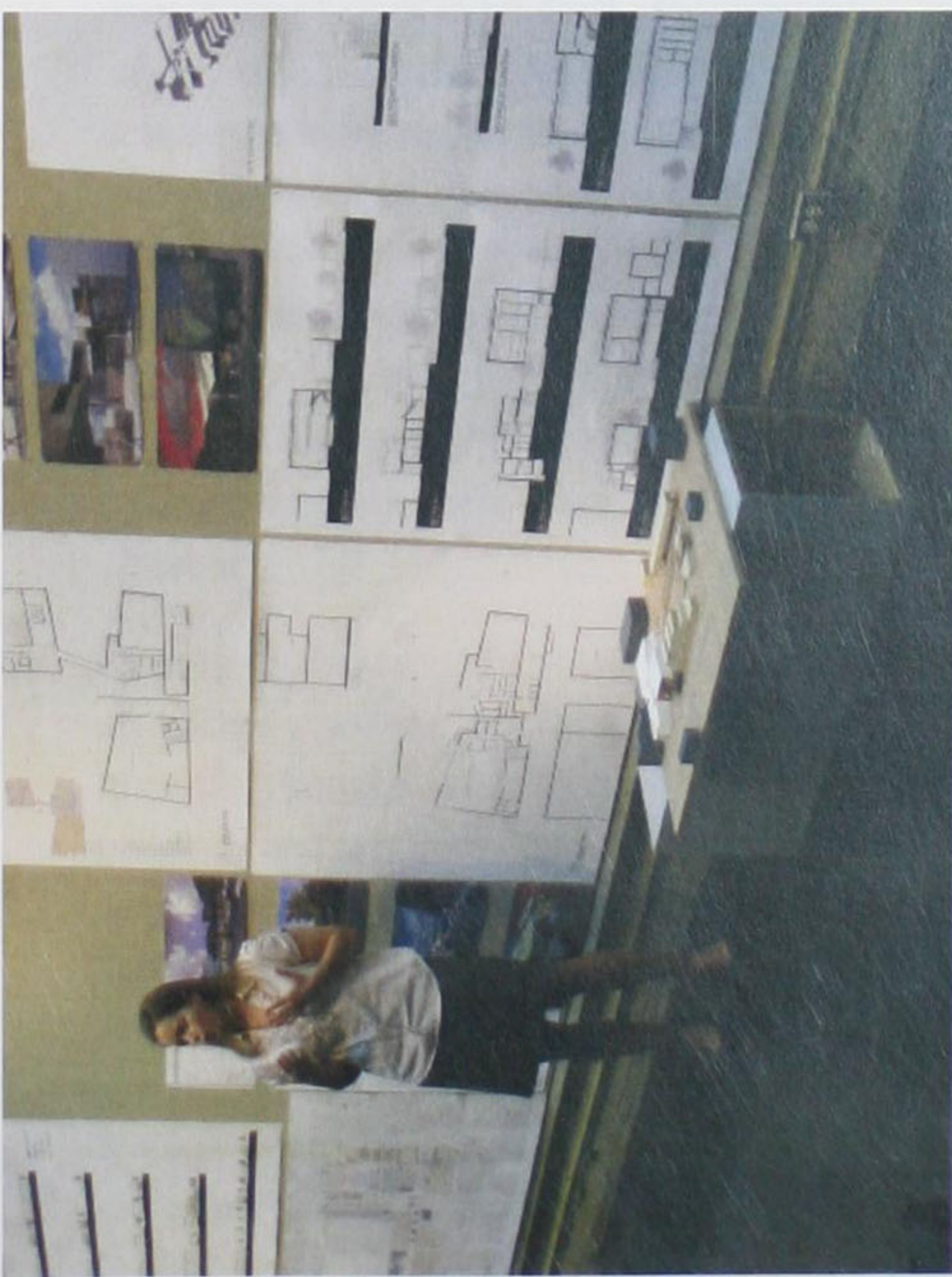
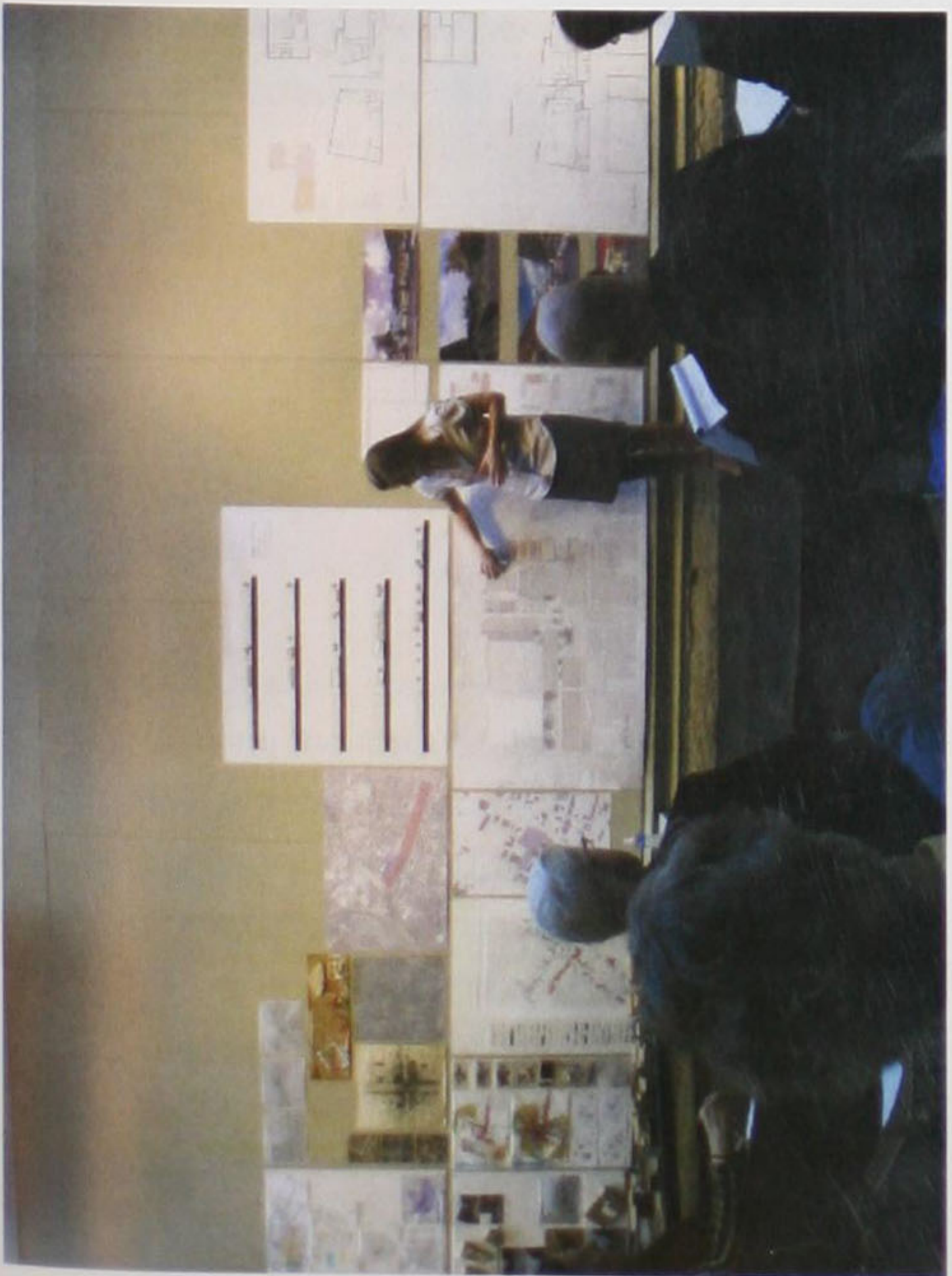
THEATRE ENTRANCE



VIEW FROM PEDESTRIAN INTERSECTION



Final Building Model



Presentation Photos

# Downtown Transformation: Community Event as Design Generator

## Thesis Design Addendum

### Transition to Process

Upon completion of the written thesis document, I began to extract key elements to initiate my design process. Feedback from our thesis correspondent, Renee Chow, provided some initial direction and ideas to consider. She was pleased with the optimism of my sort of bottom up approach. But, in order to focus my tactics, she suggested to remain mindful of the larger economic, social, and physical conditions that affect the downtown even if they might not all be addressed architecturally within the scope of my project. Renee was also intrigued by the idea of events that leave footprints, that perhaps the Bash doesn't entirely disappear but leaves behind traces.

My design process began with a hands-on, multi-media approach to conceptually explore ways to address my thesis question: how can the socio-spatial context of a community event inform a design process to transform post-industrial, small-city downtowns? The key concepts and ideas I focused on included: unifying the isolated elements that remain in the downtown, incorporating a sense of community ownership, and promoting sustained activity spatially and temporally. My tactile investigation began with abstract diagramming, sketching, and model building, but it carried on throughout my thesis development, providing a very loose and fluid

transition of concepts between the site and building.

### Project Scale and Site Selection

From the very beginning of the thesis process, I knew that attention to scale would be a driving force in regards to project scope as well as to how I would situate my project within its immediate context and that of the greater downtown area. I struggled with how to reconcile my project with the planning efforts currently being pursued by the City and the magnitude of work to be done. My strategy was to work back and forth between varying scales to determine "points of intervention" and ways to stitch them into the existing downtown environment. At the downtown scale this included a bike path and the location of secondary developments and renovation projects. At a more immediate scale there was also the location of new bus stops and sites for street art.

Identifying an appropriate building site was a significant challenge, not for the lack thereof... quite the opposite. With so many vacant buildings and lots in the downtown, it was easy to get lost in all the possibilities. Initially I considered pursuing the adaptive reuse of a few existing buildings given that the the City's primary development focus is along Central Avenue. In the end, however, I operated under the assumption that businesses and



other building occupants would follow that initiative in step with indicators of downtown growth.

Therefore, I concentrated on developing a vibrant community space, a place to serve both local citizens and visitors, making any development in its proximity an attractive option. I saw an opportunity to provide a sort of civic intersection by emphasizing the axis between the City Building and the Public Library, the center of which is Governor's Square and the site of the Bash festivities. I decided on the site just north of the Square, the site of the former parking garage and Swallen's building, to establish another axis connecting Main Street and Canal Street.

### **Planning Approach**

The final site plan includes two primary pedestrian corridors set up in line with the two established axes that form the armature for the site development. In planning the site I sought to articulate both built and open space as well as paths into and through the site. I spent considerable effort exploring different iterations of site massing and strategies to designate a variety of public open spaces along with the amenities to support them. Views into the site as well as access and circulation greatly influenced these decisions.

A large open green space with outdoor movie screening occupies a significant portion of the site. A seasonal fountain/ice rink, community gardens and other landscaping, retail space, and temporary farmer's market stalls all frame this space. Other site functions include a visitor's center, mixed use projects, permanent farmer's market space, and various

opportunities for smaller gatherings. Together, the site functions provide a setting for activity and interaction whether it be defined or undefined, at a large scale or small.

### **Building Design Approach**

The form of the building was derived from a persistent process of moving back and forth between the site scale and the building scale and identifying desired entry points, circulation, and views. The building program has three main components: a small-scale music venue, a restaurant, and a small independent movie theatre. I wanted to maintain an emphasis on arts and entertainment as well as a sensitive approach to economic development.

I designed each of the building components with spaces to foster different experiences at different times. The music venue has an outdoor performance area with visual cues from the community space. There is an outdoor dining terrace on the upper level of the restaurant, visible from the street and upon entry. The theatre has two auditorium spaces, one on each level. The upper level is accessed by a formal stair and bridge and is programmed as a flexible, multi-use space with movable partition walls to open the room up for a dinner theatre arrangement or other community events. The bridge helps frame the site entry from the east and the massing of the upper theatre provides a dramatic gesture and view into the site, as well as a public open space at the ground level.

The building façades reiterate the idea of promoting alternate experiences. The music venue is clad primarily of corten steel that will gradually reveal the effects of weathering and

time. The primary restaurant façade is composed of a colorful system of louvers and glazing. The lower-level theatre space is covered on the exterior by a growing wall, with the upper space possessing a large programmable screen inspired by the murals in the downtown.

### **Design Critique and Final Thoughts**

The guest critics at my final design presentation included Renee Chow from the University of California, Berkeley, Michael Gibson from Ball State University, and Mary Beth McGrew from the University of Cincinnati. Collectively, we discussed the spatial opportunities that the site affords and how they could be expanded even further by continuing to explore connections between site and building whether through use or circulation. Having read my paper, Renee had a greater sense of the project evolution and was pleased with my choice of site and overall design focus in relation to my initial thesis premise. She felt that in my planning of the site I might need to look more carefully at building frontage relationships to the street and site. Michael appreciated the scale of the project and the ability to trace a clear line of thought through my process work. He pointed out how some of the interior spaces lack the more specific attention given to the exterior spaces. Mary Beth was intrigued by the way I phased the development and could visualize how one portion of the project might influence the next depending on patterns of activity.

The critique provided an appropriate mode of "concluding" a process that is really just beginning. Our conversation brought to light

the successes of my project as well as how it might develop further, surfacing new ideas and methods. I hope to carry these concepts into my future work as I continue to explore architecture and planning within the physical and social context of the downtown.