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RICE UNIVERSITY

EXTENDED FAMILY HOUSING:
ON SUTURE IN THE FORMAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HOUSING

by

DOUGLAS HILL

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTERS OF ARCHITECTURE

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Lars Lerup, Dean
Architecture

Erick Ragni, Professor
Architecture

Yung Ho Chang, Professor
Architecture

Houston, Texas
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ABSTRACT

Extended Family Housing

On suture in the formal and social construction of housing

by

Douglas Hill

The lack of zoning in Houston weakens typological identity in the architecture of the city and precipitate new morphologies in urban form. A formal analysis of commercial development in the residential area of Montrose shows the mixed fabric of the city , both in scale and type. This analysis is the basis of an alternate strategy of suture in the development of the block in the fabric of the city and is applied to housing design. In conclusion, such a strategy is by necessity ad hoc if it is to be responsive to unforeseen growth patterns in a city without zoning.

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EXTENDED FAMILY HOUSING:

On suture in the formal and social construction of housing

Suture

This thesis employs suture as an urban strategy for housing design in Houston. Implicit in the concept of suture is the insertion of a heterogenous element in a ruptured form or the binding of identity among multiple forms. It is perhaps an ideal strategy for a city of heterogenous form such as Houston . Colin Rowe remarked on the interstitial space that is a secondary affect of that heterogeneity "...in Houston or Los Angeles, if the fields of internal coherence and the areas of interstitial debris are, no doubt, more difficult to identify by explicit name and if their existence we only know by personal exposure, perhaps more important is the tendency in both cities to revert to almost Roman conditions of bricolage."[1]He adds "That is: while the physique and the politics of Rome provide perhaps the most graphic example of collisive fields and interstitial debris, there are calmer versions of equivalent interests which are not hard to find.[2]This project extends the ground of existing fabric and investigates adaptation as a way of extending form. I will define strategies of collage bricolage and suture (a linguistic model applied in psychoanalysis and cinema) in that sense of adaptation. All three models reject the notion of a singular or unitary reading of identity and rely instead on assemblage to establish identity.

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[1] Rowe, *Collage City*,p.107

In the face of no zoning, typological meaning is lost as buildings are adapted to unforeseen functions. Having acknowledged the contingent aspect of typological meaning in a city whose urban form is not reinforced by zoning, there are ways to extend relationship among ostensibly unrelated conditions. Kaja Silverman supplies a working definition of suture from the model of Jacques Lacan: "the concept of suture attempts to account for the means by which subjects emerge within discourse...that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in so doing gains meaning at the expense of being"[3]. This linguistic analogy may provide a helpful tool if one looks at architecture as an autonomous discourse, as a language having typology and morphology of city form as semantic units. In the face of the loss of singular meaning in a city of hybridized forms and functions, elisions and insertions to form might already constitute a working method. The notion of the assemblage establishes identity as different but inseparable from its constituent parts.

In such a city as Houston, in which the larger scale of order is first the land and the freeway infrastructure, localized strategies may be more appropriate. Anthony Vidler argues, that by the later half of the twentieth century, architectural strategizing has abandoned totalizing strategies of all kinds in the pursuit of more localized action:"If utopian reconstruction was the preferred method of twenties modernism, wholesale destruction the aim of post-war redevelopment, and nostalgic representation the dream of postmodern

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[2] Rowe, *Collage City*, p.107

aestheticism, then the nineties seem to be embracing a combination of strategic planning and tactical incursion as a way of intervening among the blighted remains of capitalism's last cities. And while the forms of this new sensibility vary widely, from neo-surrealist carnival to deconstructive collapse, the sensibility is common: total rebuilding, total demolition, or total revival, are all blocked by the inertia of the already built and institutionally confirmed. only a nomadic, fast-moving, small-scale, and intrusive organism can operate in the interstices of what William Gibson, returning for a moment from cyberspace, has called 'Nighttown', in order to change its aging structures, not by radical change, but by gradual mutation."[4]

The notion that architectural practices operate not in a tabula rasa but in a contested space is implicit to this post-modern discourse: "Space, rather, is considered to be an already occupied terrain, a territory to be surveyed carefully, invaded silently, and with preparations made for partial retreat"The results of this shift in tactics are architecturally demonstrated, not simply in stylistic shifts, but in deliberate changes of scale, that range from the 'demonumentalized' to the 'dismantled'...These are not left to lie where they fell in some dystopian wasteland at the edge or the margin; they are honed into tools, weapons and instruments of insertion, opening rifts and faults in the apparently seamless fabric of the city to let in its new inhabitants"[5].Suture, like these honed tools, acts in the place of the element where it has been inserted, "Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse...it figures

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[3] Silverman," *OnSuture", Film, Theory and Criticism*, 199
[4] Vidler, Anthony,"*Home Alone", The City Inside Us*, p.37
[5] Vidler,"*Home Alone", The City Inside Us,p.*37

there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension-- the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of."[6] If anything remains consistent within Houston's urban form it is the grafting of existing formal/programmatic conditions onto new uses and forms not prefigured in a planning process. Suture can reflect this practice.

Houston as setting

In considering the setting of Houston, two problems developed as a consequence of no zoning in this postwar city, the interface of the automobile and the pedestrian and the problem of the facade and type in a city without urban form to anchor representation.

The extreme growth that occurred with the postwar economy in the face of a lack of context and low land values served to establish Houston as a model of the postwar city. "Frequently, the relationship between such factors as, for example, relative land value (and consequent land uses) and accessibility cause juxtapositions with completely unanticipated jumps in scale. Any attempt to classify a building-type on a purely functional basis is complicated by the extreme range of physical contexts in which the building-type may operate."[7] The loss of type is constantly invoked as a consequnce of the lack of zoning and extreme conditions of growth in Houston. Because of scalar disjunctions and

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[6] Miller, "*Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier),*" *Screen* (1977-78), 18(4):25-26

the lack of context, buildings are precipitated beyond recognition. There is no longer a clear relationship between the facade and the interior or function of the building. "The differentiation which occurs within a given building type represents an extended range true of all building types, such that it becomes possible for a given type to cross over, visually, into another type. For example, the classification 'office buiding' also contains a hybrid collection of associations with images of housing. While the basis of contemporary architectural form has generally been seen as the program--that character which ostensibly separates it from architecture of previous eras-- coupled with this is the adage that the external form should reflect the internal arrangement. Yet, of the forms recognizable as 'modern' are generally so abstract that they can be enlarged and reduced to any size, to operate at a variety of scales and contain diverse functions.The lack of clear representation in buildings puts into question traditional roles of the facade, and the delineation of public space.[8]

In Peter Rowe's inventory of the causes of the contemporary city's lack of identity he invokes the displacement of the pedestrian by the car and the lack of place-making infrastructure of the pedestrian city. The notion of the middle landscape as outlined by Peter Rowe Making a Middle Landscape, considers the contemporary city in light of the legacy of the automobile. As development proliferates in the periphery of the city, the center of the city drifts in a miasma of old and obsolete forms. Pedestrian street life is threatened in the face of urban

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[7] Papademetriou," *Aspects of an Urban Vernacular,"Harvard Architecure Review, volume 1*,p.123
[8] Papademetriou, Peter, *"Aspects of an Urban Vernacular", Harvard Architecture Review, volume 1,* p.130

sprawl. The older density of building fabric is traded for a more sparse and holey version.

"It was in America that the street and eventually its system of extension , the grid, became the generator for urban form. In the decades since the advent of the automobile, the spatial character of the American city has been transformed through the virtual dissolution of the solid city, most particularly in the new, evolving cities of the american Southwest which have developed since the second world war...Here the spaces have generally developed in relation to vehicular movement and are scaled not to pedestrian but to freeway speeds; buildings no longer make urban space, but are reduced to objects in a field".

One strategy to ameliorate the interface of the car and pedestrian is to create a pedestrian street removed from the automobile. Peter and Alison Smithson champion the creation of urban infrastructures or armatures as a way of place-making and reidentification of place "Indeed, the pattern comes close to the search made by Team X for an architecture that grows out of movement and encounter, a search involving the development of such concepts as "stem and"infrastructure'. It is equally close to Serge Chermayeff's conception of the building as a set of hierarchies, or as a structure which separates and mixes target points and exchange nodes. It also recalls a preooccupation with process and stasis across a line of circulation, a preoccupation that characterized the Japanese architecture and American 'action architecture' of the 1960's."[9]

The Smithsons speak of the concept of street in their planning ideas:"It is the idea of the street not the reality of the street that is important-- the creation of

[9] Lefaivre and Tzonis, *Atelier 66*, p.22

effective group-spaces fulfilling the vital function of identification and enclosure, making the socially vital life-of-the-streets possible....at all densities such 'streets'are made possible, by the creation of a true street-deck in the air, each deck having a large number of people dependent on it for access..."[10]

Design in the city might set these two agendas of design taking account of the automobile and designing to establish scalar relationships where these are lacking.

Bricolage

"On the level of built form, rather than in terms of socio-cultural or market abstractions, the dispersal of buildings themselves serves to complicate further the clarity of this urban structure, since the new system allows for diverse transformations of architectural form and multiplies any development of a typological taxonomy."[11]The dispersal or broadening of type leaves us less concerned with type than action that reinvests form with meaning.

Papademetriou addresses the complicated issue of architecture as a form of representation, obviously contested in a market economy by private interests. Is there any collective form? Only a populist vernacular, if one is to believe him. "Perhaps the evolution of a new urban vernacular, where collective issues of form narrow the gap between Collage City and Learning from Las Vegas, will also suggest reintegration, through architecture, of our perception of the

[10] Smithson, Peter and Alison, *Ordinariness and Light*, p.52

physical environment. In this way, we may fruitfully return to the very root of 'vulgar ' itself': of or pertaining to the common people or general public...vernacular, also, written or translated into the vernacular"[12]

A similar notion is expressed in Jencks. He understands this gap as one of understanding function "There is an unalterable and widening gap between exterior and interior, symbol and content, form and function -- a gap which is making the environment more and more inarticulate, impossible to understand and difficult to manipulate."[13]The problems of type opens up on new modes of generating form based on latent or potential meanings rather than type. "Now, the characteristic feature of mythical thought, as of 'bricolage' on the practical plane, is that it builds up structured sets, not directly with other structured sets but by using the remains and debris of events...odds and ends in English, fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or society. The relation between the diachronic and the synchronic is therefore in a sense reversed. Mythical thought, that 'bricoleur', builds up structures by fitting together events, or rather the remains of events..."[14]

..."The set of the bricoleur's means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project...It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the 'bricoleur' himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy'"[15].

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[11] Papademetriou, Peter, *Aspects of an Urban Vernacular*p,126
[12] Papademetriou,*"Aspects of an Urban Vernacular", Harvard Architecture Review, volume 1* p.135
[13] Jencks, Charles, *Adhocism*, p.59
[14] Levi-Strauss, *Savage Mind,* p.22
[15] Levi-Strauss,*Savage Mind* p.18

One might invoke an interactionist approach that insists on the profoundly social nature of architecture, that, indeed, one cannot separate the subject (user) from object, that they are (their separate histories) perpetually interactive and articulating each other. If there is validity to type, the setting must be there to affirm it. "What is important here is how the dwellers construe particular buildings, how they take buidings into account. In other words, people are not responding organisms but active individuals who in their aproach to things produce meaning .. this is an entirely different vantage point than the one which views dwellers as responding to the play of the captivating quaility of the stage and its props. Behavior from our vantage point is no longer reaction but interaction (based on self reflection and interpretation), which causes the meaning of the physical setting to become highly unpredictable and profoundly affects the attempt to form a perspective of the relation between people and architecture."[16]

We might speak of scales of building or scales of fabric of the city that promote this type of interaction or complicates the web of relationship between user and object. Jane Jacobs argues for this city of local scales, for urban density and heterogeneity.

Along the same lines, one might ask if the architect might have the same sort of agency in the city as the subject (user) in the building. Would it be possible to work in the city of no zoning to perpetuate found relationships not as a prefigured planning gesture, but as an immediate investment, akin to the work

[16] Lerup, Lars, *Building the Unfinished*, p.20

of the bricoleur? Levi-Strauss establishes this dichotomy between scientific logical or serial thought and the analogical 'savage' thought of the bricoleur.

"This is another way of saying that the engineer works by means of concepts and the 'bricoleur' by means of signs. The sets which each employs are at different distances from the poles on the axis of oppostion between nature and culture. One way indeed in which signs can be opposed to concepts is that whereas concepts aim to be wholly transparent with respect to reality, signs allow and even require the interposing and incorporation of a certain amount of human culture into reality. Signs, in Pierce's vigorous phrase 'address somebody'".[17]whether the language be spoken, filmic (based on edit cuts),or architecture. One might add that the work of the bricoleur with signs is akin to the strategy of suture, wherein the subject is articulated in language through a set of substitutions which are binary in form, signifier to signified.

The city that would be the outcome of such work might be a set of secondary and accidental effects, but also articulate differences rather than a prefigured urban structure.

Papademetriou argues for this complexity.

"Urban theories which philosophically would seem to be exclusive to one another often present features which are merely complementary. Rather than proposing dialectical alternatives, the images of both the Ville Radieuse and Broadacre City become two virtual aspects of the same manifestation, mutually reinforcing rather than mutually excluding each other. This indicates that a fairly complex urban form has developed, one which does not lend itself to simple

[17] Levi-Strauss, *Savage Mind.* p.20

explanation or representation. With such juxtaposition or contradiction between philosophies more often the case than not, the need exists for a fresh view of urbanization that recognizes both the potential independent and interdependent functioning of environmental activity, an order operating beyond the level of mere surface appearance. "[18]

A strategy of bricolage promises to link local forms and functions of the city that occur happenstance in this miasma. Indeed, it is a strategy that can succeed without erasure or overbuilding or nostalgia, as Anthony Vidler remarked of other modernist and postmodern strategies. As Levi-Strauss describes in his analysis of the bricoleur, "he /she does not work with an idealized or aforesaid set of goals, but in consideration of the conditions he/she finds. The bricoleur does not act as a scientist or planner, but finds use in available resources"[19]. We might then begin to characterize the bricoleur as an empowering agent and an ecologist in the local urban landscape. The work of the bricoleur implies scales of local action that organize separate directions or energies of the city. By Levi Strauss' definition there is a sense of immediacy both temporally and spatially to the forms the bricoleur might address, for instance, binary relationships such as finished-unfinished, existing-new.

The possibility of extending found relationships and the impossibility or lack of desirability in completing an arrangement is also argued for. "Most of the buildings in Houston have the visual interest of weeds in a lot"[20], Donald Judd

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[18] Papademetriou, *"Aspects of an Urban Vernacular", Harvard Architecture Review, volume I* p.123
[19] Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p.17-18
[20] Judd, Donald, *Arkitektur*, p.182

remarks. How can the existing fabric be expanded upon, not only for the recuperation of existing building stock but to use it as a kind of reef in a set of fragile structures or relationships. Buildings designed in such a manner may not even look complete in themselves but imply some extension, they may be pieces of a larger fabric. and hold identity only in relation to it.

Facade

An aspect of the strategy of suture could be the scalar form and materiality with which building is accomplished. This concern sometimes may subvert the reading of the inside, defying traditional understanding of the relationship of the facade to the interior of the building.

Through the materials with which form is articulated, identity might be slipped or elided in the suture:"To recover our sense of surface, the Russian formalists recommended 'defamiliarization', the re-creation of strangeness. The dadaists did much the same. It is the practice of reviving our experience of form and texture by altering the context in which we normally encounter the owner of these properties. What we need, of course, is an eye, a nose, a feel for the intrinsic. As I've said, surfaces slip out of sight and disappear in the ever-present network of extrinsic relations and practical concerns: they become nothing but a use, nothing but a name" [21]We might begin to think of the city as a set of surfaces with individual properties odd scalar relationships adjacencies and disjunctive programming. Rather than dismissing them, they could be

[21] Gass, William, p.39

articulated as if they were never bound to one identity of form. It is in their differentiation structurally that they gain power:"Ambiguity, then , is not satisfying , in itelf, nor is it considered as a device on its own a thing to be attempted; it must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation on the other hand, it is a thing which the more interesting and valuable situations are likely to justify. "[22]

Suture may operate in a given context by diffusing typological readings on the level of scale of materials. The envelope or skin of the exploded box are structured to establish connection between different forms. The work of Gehry and Herzog and DeMeuron both problematize architectural construction in such a manner. They engage the body in a set of phenomenological issues that go beyond type and symbolic form: the relationship of the body to large and small spaces, that of the body to the container, the use of material, construction type and finish which organize one's perception of space, the scaling of space and materiality (textural memories linking person to construct).

Levi-Strauss invokes the fascination with scale that the bricoleur's work provokes"...like Japanese gardens, miniature vehicles and ships in bottles, what in the bricoleur's language are called' small-scale models' or' miniatures'. Now, the question arises whether the small-scale model or miniature, which is also the 'masterpiece' of the journeyman may not in fact be the universal type of the work of art. All miniatures seem to have intrinsic aesthetic qualtiy...

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[22] Empson, William, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p.265

What is the value of reduction either of scale or in the number of properties. It seems to result from a sort of reversal in the process of understanding. To understand a real object in its totality we always tend to work from its parts. The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it. Reduction in scale reverses this situation. Being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. By being qualitatively diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified. More exactly, this qualitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing...A child's doll is no longer an enemy, a rival or even an interlocutor. In it and through it a person is made into a subject...I have so far only considered matters of scale which, as we have just seen, imply a dialectical relation between size (i.e. quantity) and quality. But miniatures have a further feature. They are 'man made' and, what is more, made by hand. They are therefore not just projections or passive homologues of the object: they constitute a real experiment within it. Now the model being an artefact, it is possible to understand how it is made and this understanding of the method of construction adds its supplementary dimension

On a different plane we therefore find once more this dialogue with the materials and means of execution by which we defined bricolage."[23]

Practice

"The bricoleur's means represent a set of actual and possible relations, they are operators...The characteristic feature of mythical thought, as of bricolage, is that it builds up structured sets by fitting together the remains and debris of events and experiences, which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to

[23] Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* p.20-24

find them a meaning...once it materializes, the project will inevitably be at a remove from the initial aim (which was moreover a mere sketch), a phenomenon felicitously called objectif hasard. Further, the bricoleur is not confined to accomplishment and execution: he may never complete his purpose"[24]

The collision of functions of the commercial strip and residential development occurs throughout the city-- on Westheimer, the Montrose bar area, Rice Village and the Colquitt gallery district there is already a tension between different programs and types. In some instances, this tension has already resulted in hybrid forms. Westheimer Avenue is a commmercial zone of converted bungalows in a residential fabric. The morphology of the blocks establish primary and secondary zones, the street and right of way typical to the city. The secondary zone contains the garage and garage apartment. Pedestrian infrastructure is minimal as the automobile has taken over much of the interior of the block with parking.

My thesis is an adhoc intervention that begins to organize what is already a double character to the block and a resivion of the city's morphology on Westheimer. The empty housing lots have become parking lots to the adjacent buildings.The function of the existing building fabric of the single family homes is either housing or commercial along the blocks fronting Westheimer. Its use is contingent on the trend of development along Westheimer Avenue. We read in the domestic space its possible hybrid commercial functions, funeral home, tattoo parlor, beauty parlor, coffehouse. While that is a strong trend to the front

[24] Levi-Strauss,*Savage Mind*, p.15

of the block, the fabric of the interior of the block has been disappearing. Extended family housing is introduced in the zone of the garage apartment.

This reintroduction is also a reidentification of existing artefacts of the built landscape. The yard is incorporated within the body of the extended family housing in the form of a patio. The garage door of the typical garage on the lot becomes part of a continuous envelope or enclave of extended family housing. It occupies and extends the zone of the garage apartment in the territory of the single family house. It is social housing, that is both the repetitive and small in scale. The singular figure of the garage apartment is aggregated and extended within a single figure at the scale of the block rather than the individual lot. It reads as a ground to the existing building, both an enclave wall and a boardwalk and is identifiable in relation to it, despite its aggregation. The indiviual unit has an open plan and strong indoor-outdoor thresholds, as is typical of the garage type. The development of the entire block reflects actual scales of ownership in the area, either in the hands of speculators or resident landlord tenants.

I have included the interface of the automobile and pedestrian at the street and the yard as one place of reidentification. It is clear in parts of the city, the automobile has taken over the block in the form of parking and marginalized the pedestrian. On the other hand, the garage is not used as a place for the automobile, but as an extension of the house, either in the form of storage, work space, or additional housing. The establishment of path between car and building is problematic as an urban as well as social issue. Because the

ground surface is territorialized by the automobile, I have allocated it to parking and established a specific boardwalk as a threshold for the pedestrian to the building. . As the block is given over to hybridization, I am reinserting a secondary infrastructure, a path identifable with the zone of the right of way. It is qualitatively different in that the front is signage and relates to the street while the rear is inward looking and has no obvious facade that defines the interior spaces. Tzonis comments on the importance of the path "Like Pikonis' pedestrian path, the Antonikakis pathway is made up of concrete, lived-in places for meeting that we find in local popular archtiecture--doorsteps, passages, courts. They have a recognizable, memorable shape, a locus in human association; they have a history and they belong to a social life. The typology of these places has not rejected context, reality or the human factor. It approaches that level of discourse which we might term a realistic typology."[25]

The ramifications of the project have application in other parts of the city whether they follow the morphology of blocks with rights of ways and garage apartments, or alterity between commercial and residential programming. The formal intervention is a way of organizing the interior of the block and leaving the perimeter porous for automobile access. In method it works with existing trends of the city (the adhoc appropriation of residential areas for commercial/retail development) and accomodates contingent development, as a form of bricolage.

I want to close with the remark of Tzonis on Antonakakis:

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[25] Liane LeFaivre and Alexander Tzonis, *Atelier 66*, p 21-22

" Each time the circuit of these place is laid down and every time one passes through it, it is in order to reenact a ritual. It is a confirmation of the human community and a symbolic act of resistance against its destruction. Do such objects have the power to change human habit? Are they not disfunctional with respect to their everyday use? ...Such questions are out of place. These designs are not meant to be take for demonstrations of environmental determinism, where the product is expected to shape human activity, nor as a naive example of social reformism. Both as efforts are necessarily doomed to fail. One cannot expect such things of a building... Nevertheless, these are objects which, in supporting everday activities, set up implicit comments on social life and the human condition.[26]

[26] Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, *Atelier 66*, p.22

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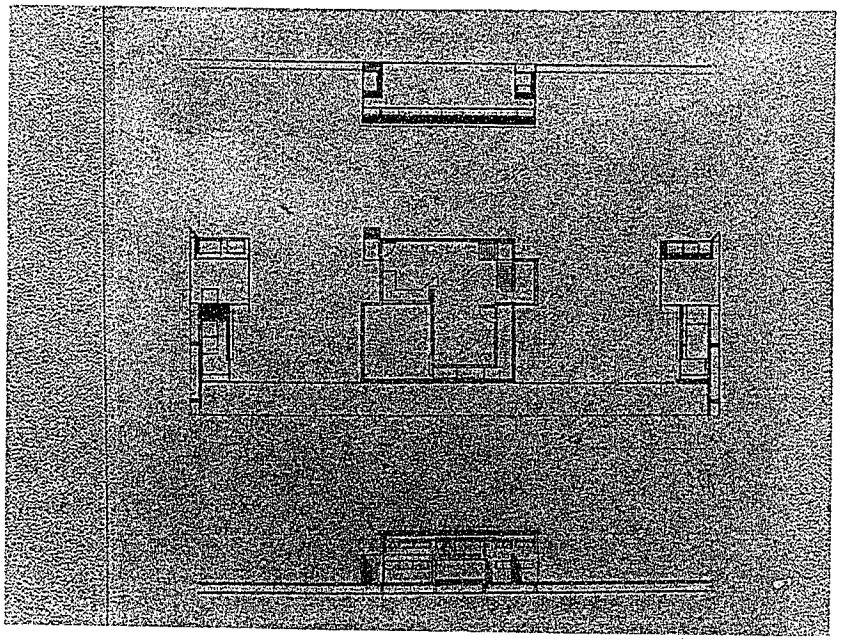
Appendix

Figure 1.plan, section, elevation of individual unit



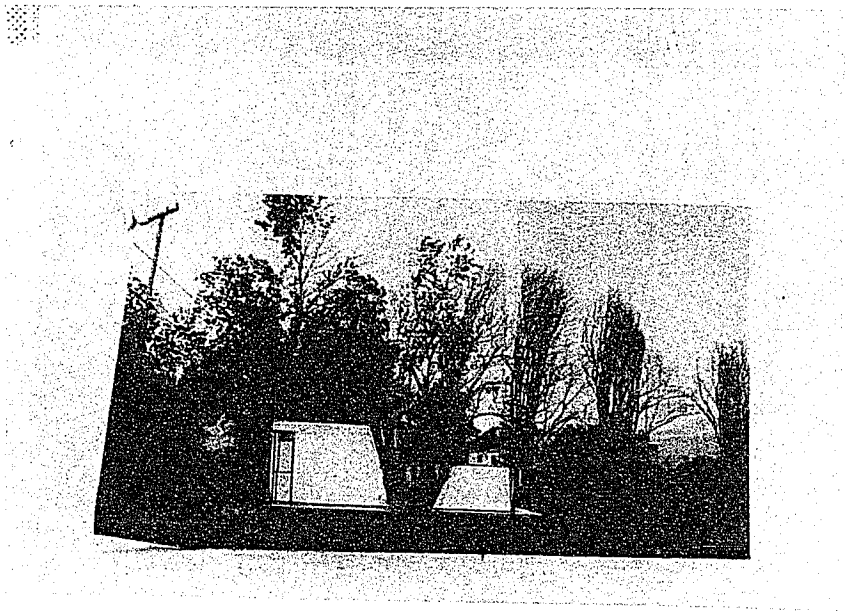
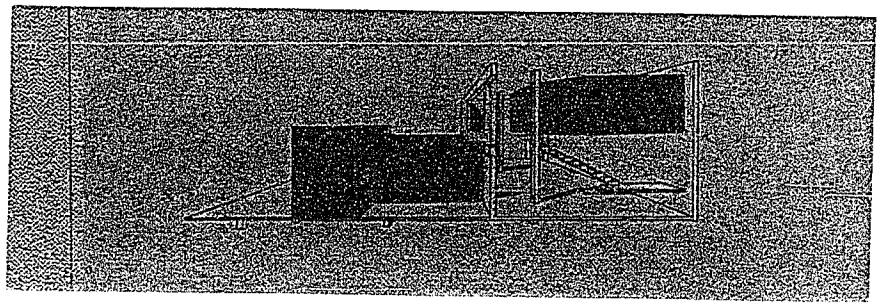


Figure 2. Sectional perspective



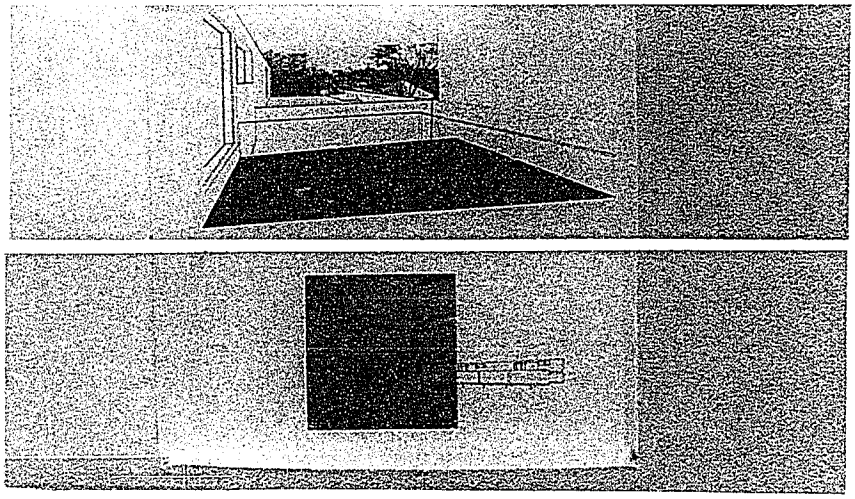


Figure 3. Interior and exterior perspectives

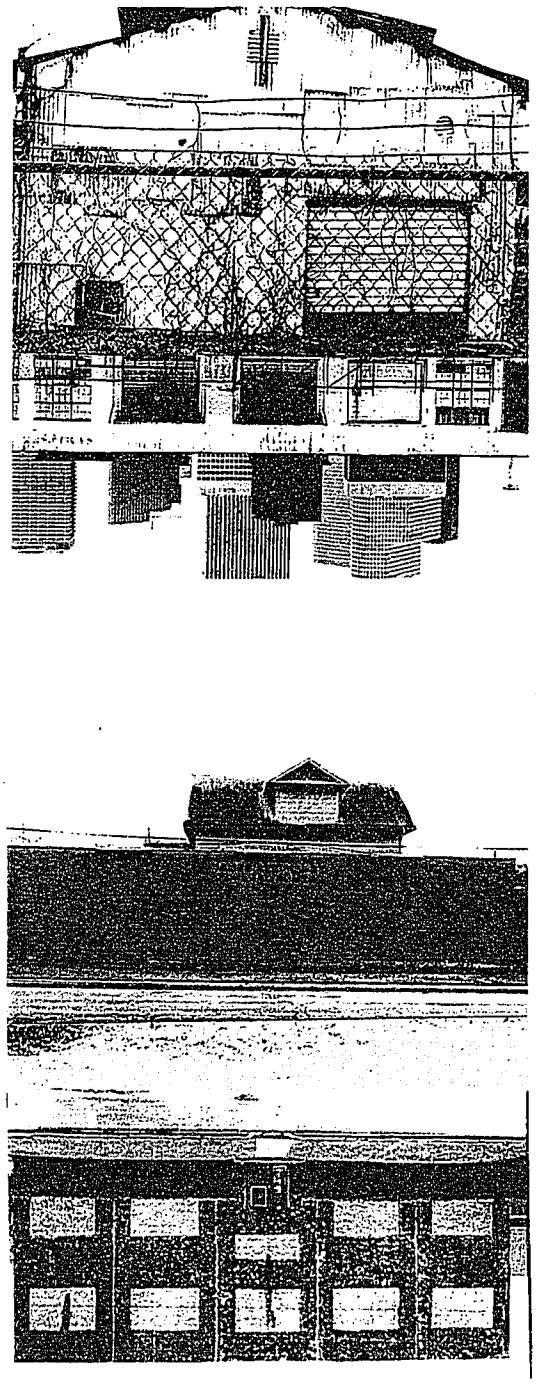


Figure 4. Collage studies

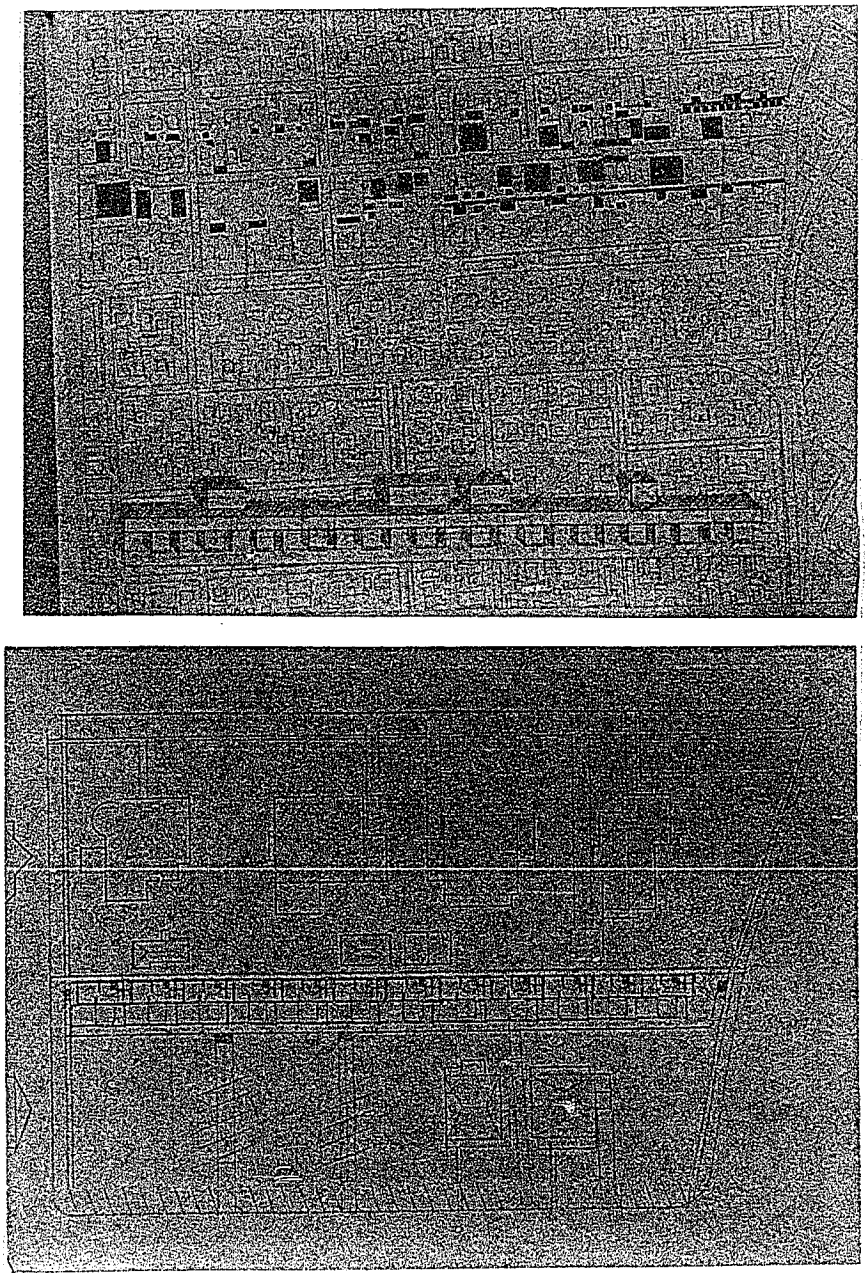


Figure 5 Site plan, Site Analysis

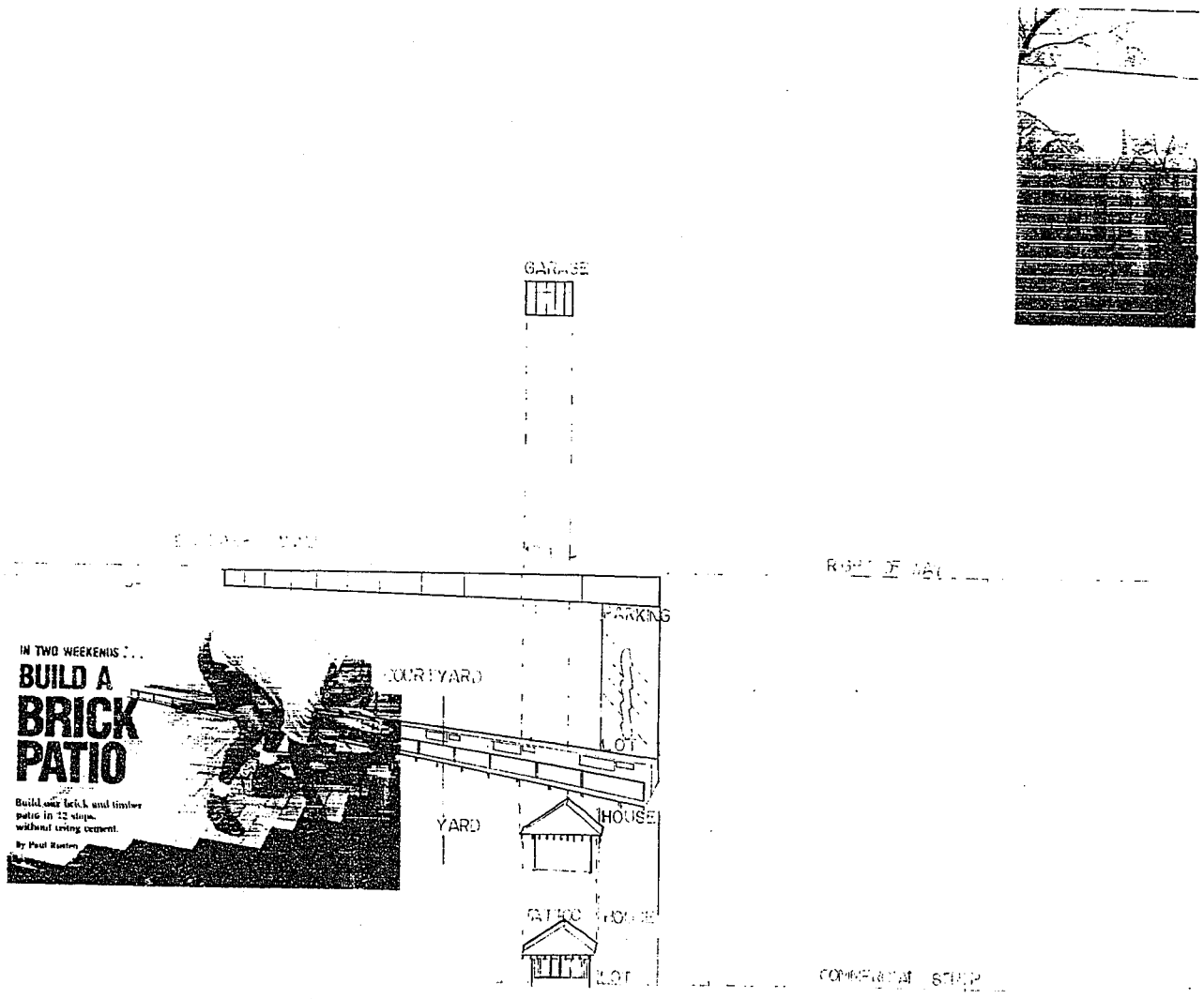
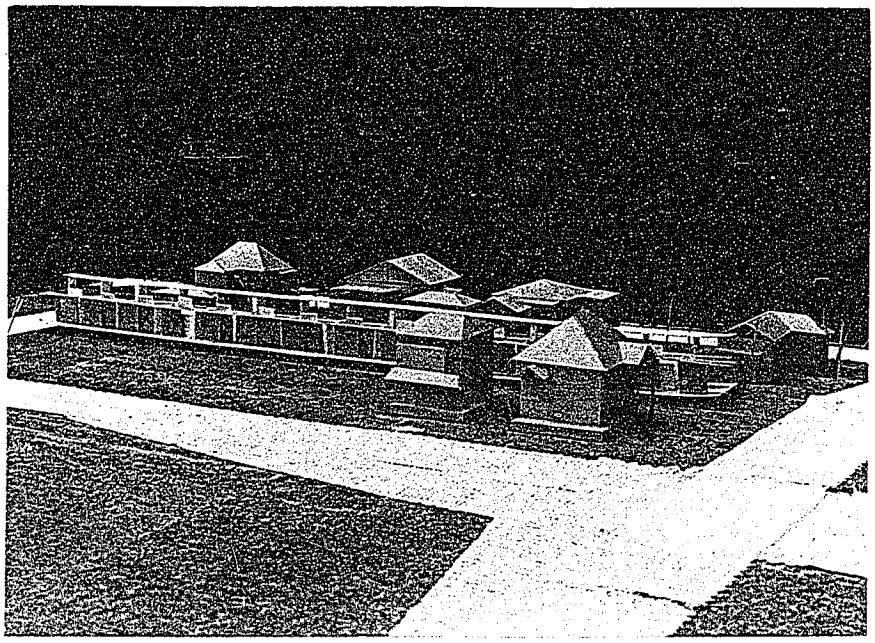


Figure 6. Analytic Drawing

Figure 7.1/16" Model Views



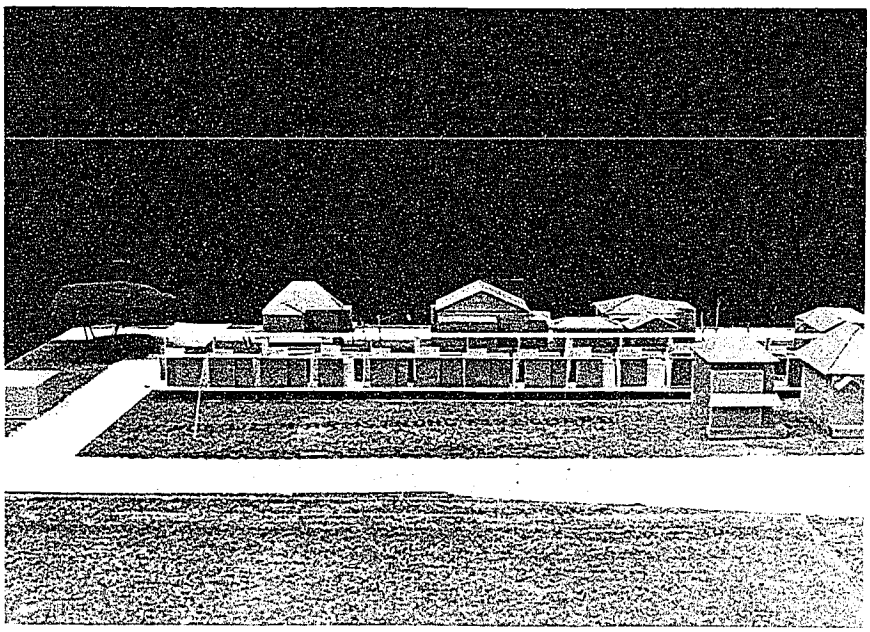
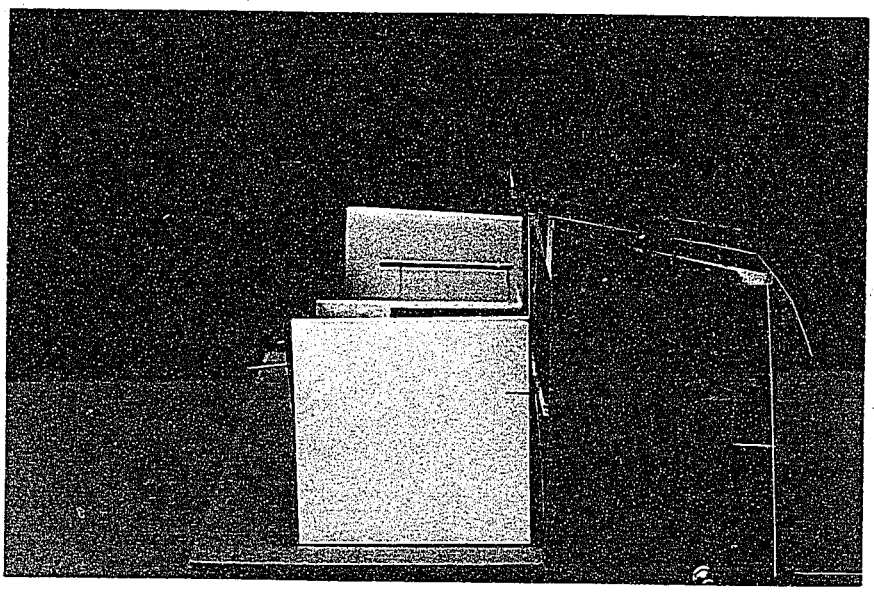
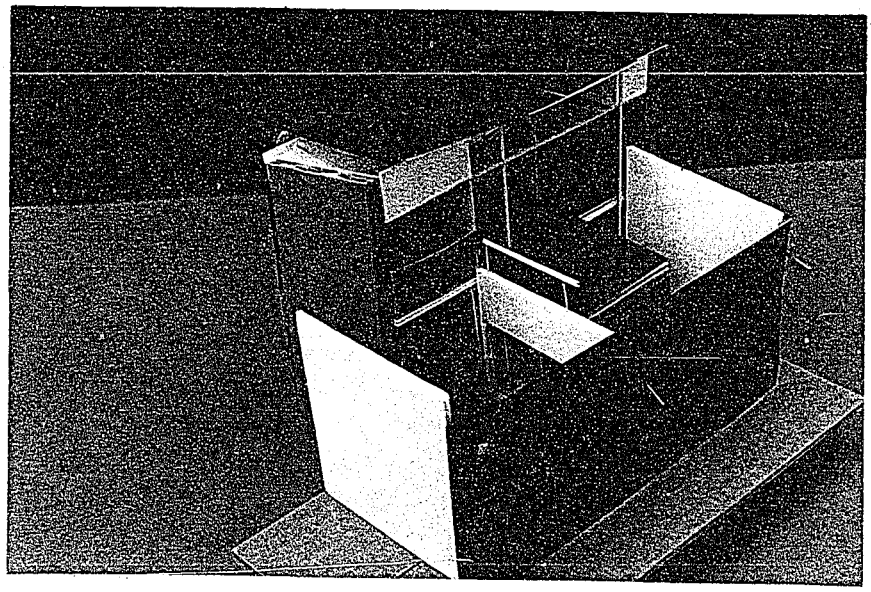



Figure 8. 1/4" Model views