

Existenzoptimum

The title of this project has been adapted with reference to the disputed concept of an *Existenzminimum*, which was conceived as an emergency measure to regulate the provision of low-cost housing for the growing working class between the World Wars, but has been criticized for perpetuating low-standard living conditions for the underprivileged. *Existenzoptimum* builds upon the ideals of the *Existenzminimum* while developing a proposal for cooperative living in opposition to family life and its ideology, considering issues such as class, gender etc.

Fokus Grupa with:
Audrey Morency
Anouk Muller
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Innsbruck 2016

This booklet accompanies an architectural proposal made for the exhibition Nuisance Value at the *Kunstpavillon Innsbruck*. The project *Existenzoptimum* is the outcome of our research into architecture and design practices, informed by socialist and materialist-feminist critique, realized with the support of the *Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen* fellowship and as a seminar organized at the Institute of Architectural Theory for students of the Innsbruck Faculty of Architecture.

The project developed into a didactic process and an exchange with the students Audrey Morency, Anouk Muller, Pol Olk and Laura Winterberg. The exchange was initiated through a series of lectures and discussions, which explored the value systems produced and reproduced through material practices such as design, architecture and art. The particular focus of the seminar was to explore the way in which class and gender ideology, embedded in the concept of the family, are produced and reproduced via material culture, architecture in particular, and how and why the family, advocated as the 'basic social

unit' remains so predominant in contemporary society, indeed a battlefield of ideological struggle and a tool for reactionary politics. The intention of the seminar was to encourage the students to explore the ways in which these questions find expression in the built environment or, more importantly, to look at alternative ways in which architecture has tried and may try again to address these questions.

To initiate the discussions, we delivered a series of three lectures; the first was based on a feminist critique of the ideology of domesticity. We looked at proposals for communal living and working arrangements by utopian socialists such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier and different communitarian sects, materialist-feminist experiments in the socialization of domestic work from the 19th and early 20th century US, as well as early Soviet examples of communal housing and the socialization of reproductive work. In the second lecture we shifted our focus to imagined futures, looking at examples of utopian literature that imagined more egalitarian futures, which relied on technical progress and building typologies that would produce new

social relations. Continuing on the literary examples, in the third lecture, we looked at the ways architecture was communicated through the media, mostly focusing on the exhibitions of architecture intended as propaganda or as didactic tools. Additionally, after each of the above mentioned blocks we engaged students with reading materials and films in order to extend the discussions.

Departing from historical case studies that proposed architecture for alternative social structures, we tried to put an emphasis on architecture's role in emancipatory social transformation rather than its latent support of the status quo, or indeed social oppression. The question we propose is: *Which scenarios of the everyday do we want to build into our built environment and what kind of architecture would facilitate them?* The students were given a task to propose model housing, taking their cues from the lectures and discussions around the reading materials, which would envision a housing system for a more egalitarian society of the near future. Their main point of departure was an analysis of the elements of living arrangements

proposed by Viéra Pavlovna and Dmitri Sergéitch Lopuhkov, the protagonists of the book *What is to Be Done?* (1863) written by the Russian philosopher, journalist and literary critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky. In an attempt to establish a new form of shared living, one with equal power relations, Chernyshevsky's protagonists agree to live in separate rooms, where each of them can enjoy their privacy and autonomy, with a shared living room, or a parlor, which they treat as a public space, a space that has to be negotiated between them. This proposal provides an alternative to the domesticity of family life.

From this section of the book, the premise of the minimum existence, or rather the 'optimum existence', based on an individual who always relates to another via shared, public space, a place of negotiation and production of meaning was established. The *Existenzoptimum* is imagined as a citizen's right, including a 'private space' and a 'public space' that goes with it, but acquires meaning only in cooperation with others. From this basic premise a series of additional parameters was

established, continuing on ideas expressed in *What is to Be Done?*, but also from other sources:

- ¶ the ideal of communality and cooperation; the unit has to work with others in order to fulfil the 'optimum existence',
- ¶ the idea of socialization of domestic work; facilities such as kitchen, dining room, bathroom and toilets are communal spaces that are to be shared with others,
- ¶ the idea of repurposing or parasitizing; the units are made to make use of existing architectural structures,
- ¶ the idea of adaptability; the system consists of these parameters, and design has to adapt to different spatial contexts and social configurations,
- ¶ the idea of mobility; the unit should be fitted for transport.

The outcome of the seminar simulates a conventional exhibition of architecture, consisting of a 1:1 model of a living unit and a 1:30 model of a modular system

implemented at the specific site, that of the *Kunstpavillon*. In the exhibition space the 1:1 model allows the visitors to relate physically to the space, while the discursive 1:30 model, provided with 10 living units, is a sort of a board game that the visitors can play and experiment with, allowing them to accommodate different possible social and architectural configurations parasitizing on the *Kunstpavillon*. The players might try to maximize the number of units per sq. meter following the logic of a dormitory, or organize a housing and working collective that can acquire more communal space to use for social or commercial activities. The choice of a living unit conforming to a 3x3x2.5m cubicle with 3x3m of public space could be altered in size or shape, but the basic parameters listed above need to be addressed by the spatial configurations.

The proposed system intends to open up questions about the way individuals may want to relate to each other, or cohabit with each other, forming these questions as architectural propositions. The objective of the *Existenzoptimum* project is to facilitate an individual's relation

to collectivity directly, without the family as an intermediary, opening up possibilities to imagine different spatial and social relations that the traditional family apartment, intended for the nuclear family, doesn't necessarily allow for. In this context, parasitizing on the existing infrastructure, which is not always intended for housing in the first place, may provide new possibilities for the bottom-up planners of the near future.

**WHAT IS TO BE DONE?
— A VITAL QUESTION**

Nikolay Chernishevsky, 1863

We will have two rooms, one for you and one for me, and a little parlour where we will take breakfast, dine, and receive our visitors — those who come to see us both, not you or me alone. Second, I shall not dare to enter your room lest I might disturb you.

No more shall you dare to enter mine.

I shall have no right to demand anything whatever of you. If you, dear friend, deem it useful to speak to me of your affairs, you will do so of your own accord, vice versa. There are three points settled. Are there any others?

We are teaching others to live according to our economical principles, but we, ourselves, don't take it into our heads to arrange our own lives in accordance with them. Isn't one large household more advantageous than several small ones? I should like to apply this law to our own housekeeping arrangements. If we had lived with somebody, we, and those who lived with us, would have saved almost half of our expenses. I should be able to give up those execrable lessons, which I detest so; my salary from the factory would be enough, and I should get time for relaxation. I could occupy my time with scientific work, and thus have taken up my career again. It is only necessary to find people such as it would be agreeable to live with. What do you think about this?

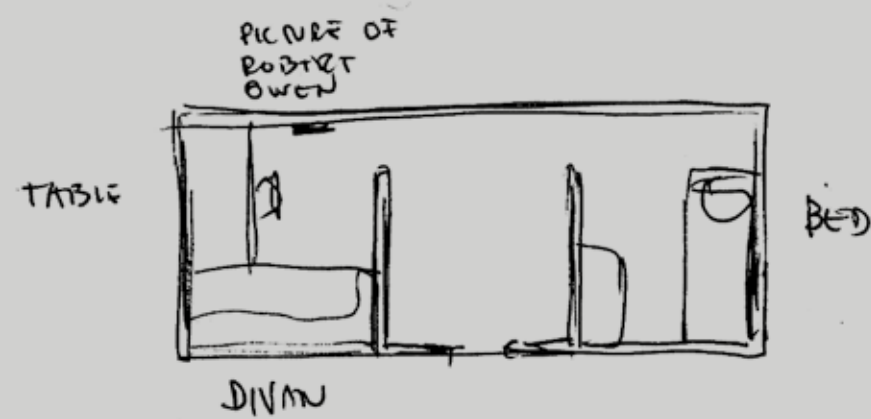
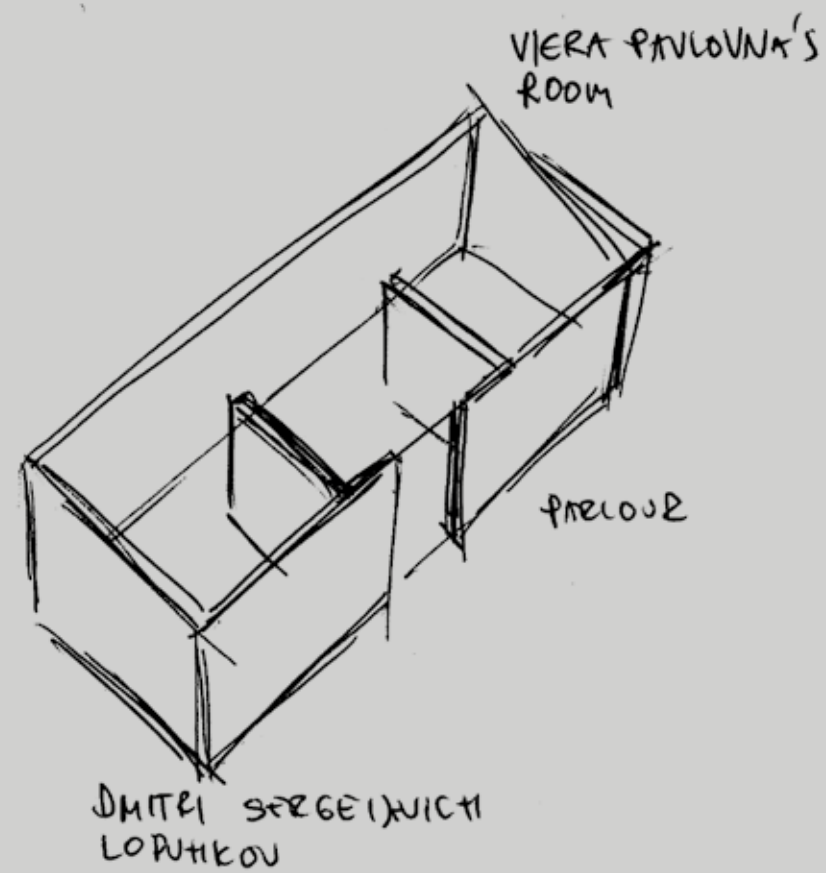
But this building — what on earth is it? What style of architecture? There's nothing at all like it now. Inside there's a real house, a colossal one, surrounded by this crystal and cast iron edifice as if by a sheath, forming broad galleries around it on every floor. What graceful architecture in the inner house! What narrow spaces between the windows!

But who lives in this house that is more magnificent than any palace? Many people live here, a great many. Let's go back to the hall and see how they dine, says the elder sister. They enter the largest of the huge halls. Half of it is the occupied by tables that have already been set. There are so many of them! How many people dine here? A thousand or more. Not everyone's here; those who prefer to eat in their own rooms dine here. The old men and women and the children who didn't work in the fields have prepared everything.

They are everywhere. Many are at the theatre, some as actors, others as musicians, and still others as spectators, just as they desire. Some are in lecture halls, museums and libraries.

Soon, during the winter, there'll be constant changes: small groups of people who like winter outings will arrive to spend a few days here. In the summer, when it's nice to be here and there's work to be done, many different guests arrive from the south.

But a great many houses had to be built to accommodate all the guests; in some, people from different lands have settled together with their hosts. Each person chooses the company that suits him best. But, having received this multitude of guests for the summer to help with the work, you can head south to spend the other seven or eight unpleasant months of the year; each person goes wherever he chooses.



INDIVIDUAL UNITS

AUTONOMOUS SPACE

PRIVACY

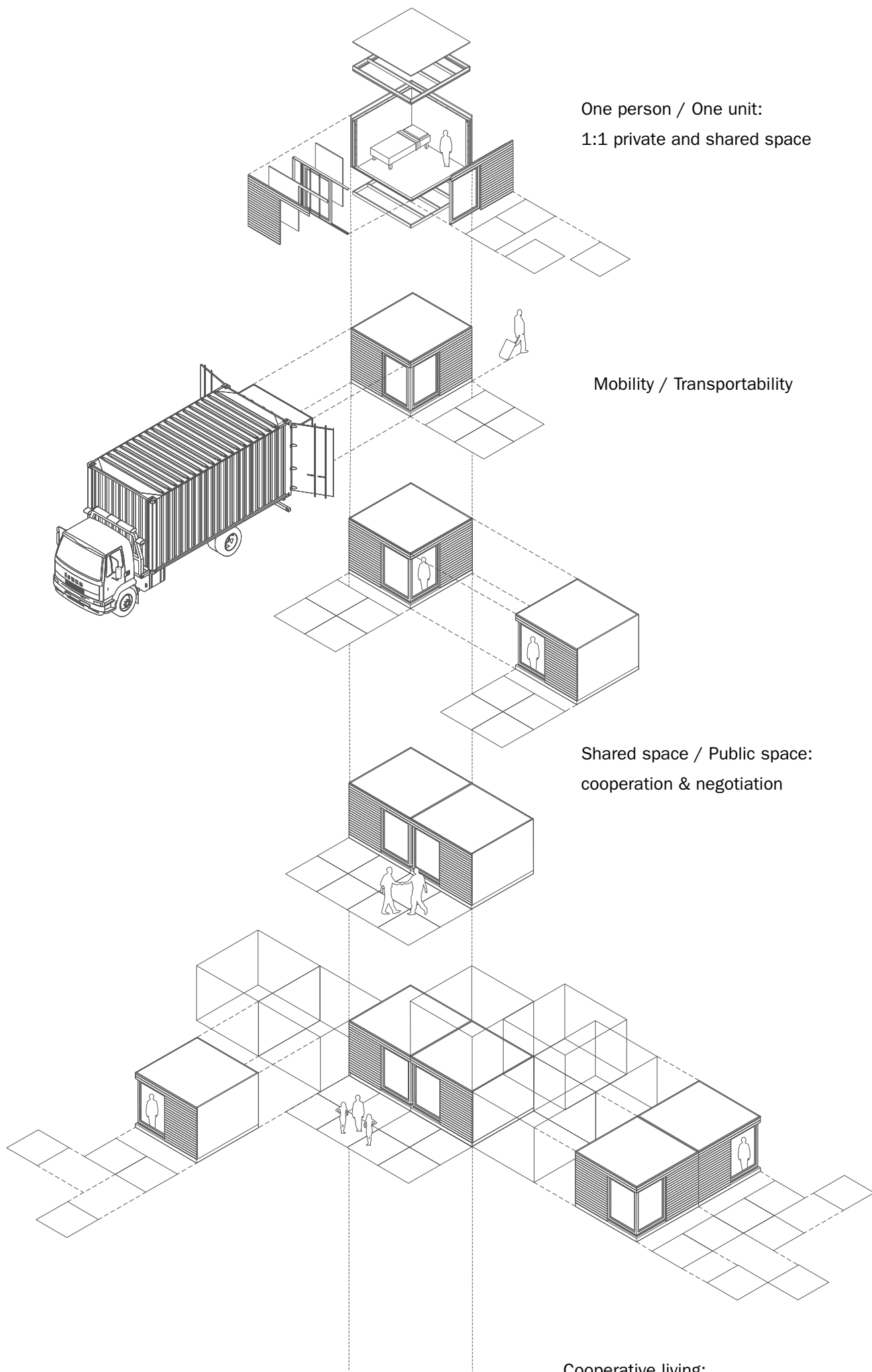
NEGOTIATED SPACE

MOBILITY

COMMUNAL LIVING

GLASS ARCHITECTURE

SOCIALISED HOUSEWORK

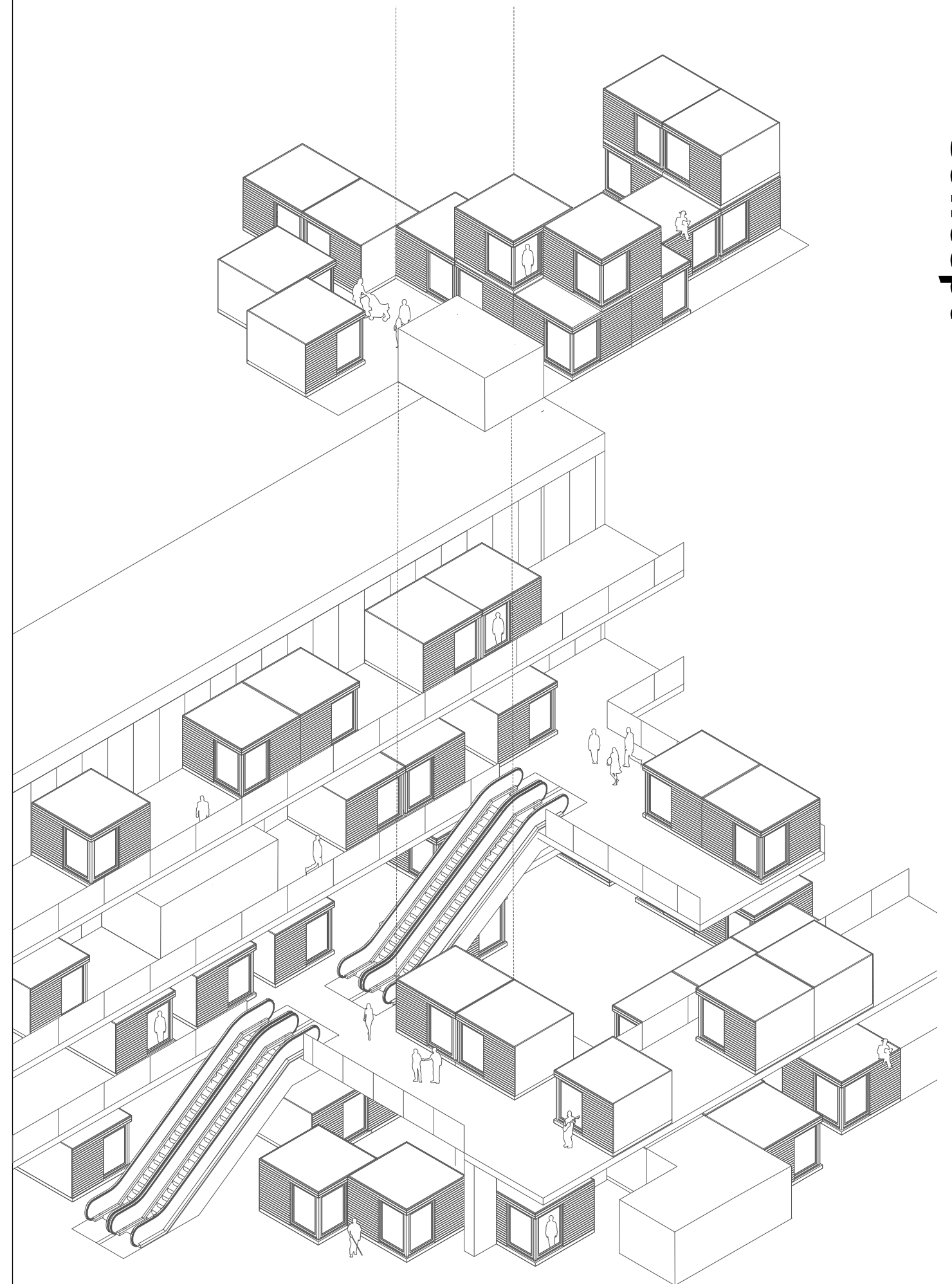


One person / One unit:
1:1 private and shared space

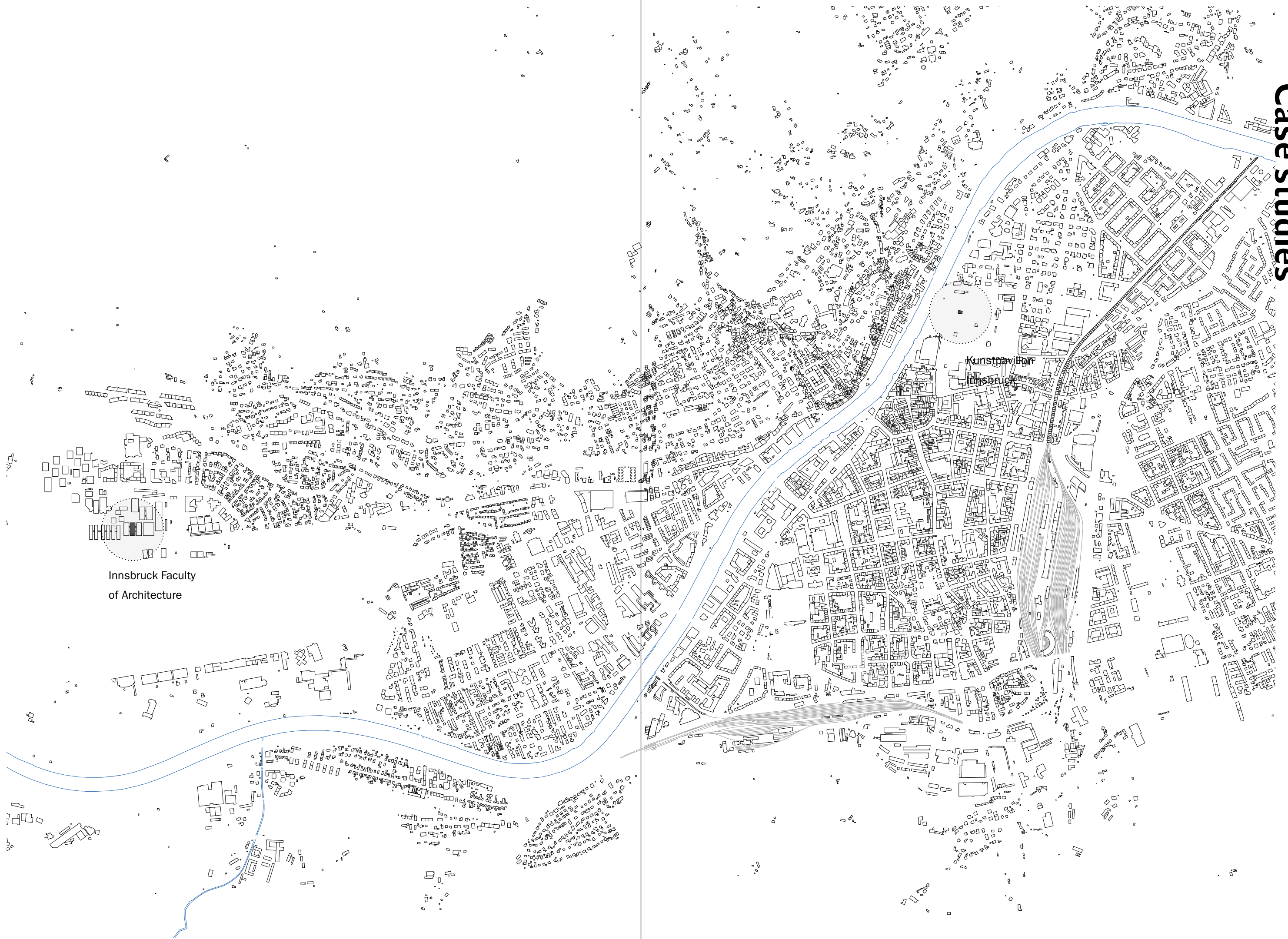
Mobility / Transportability

Shared space / Public space:
cooperation & negotiation

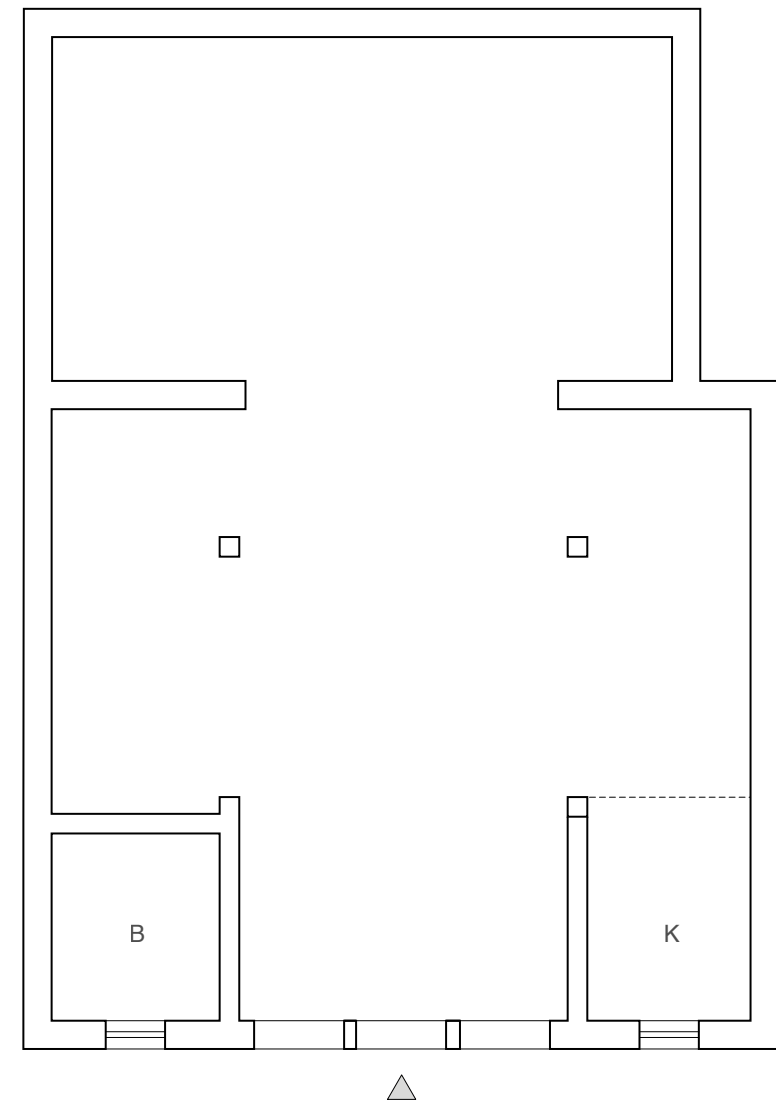
Cooperative living:
individuals interact via
shared / public space



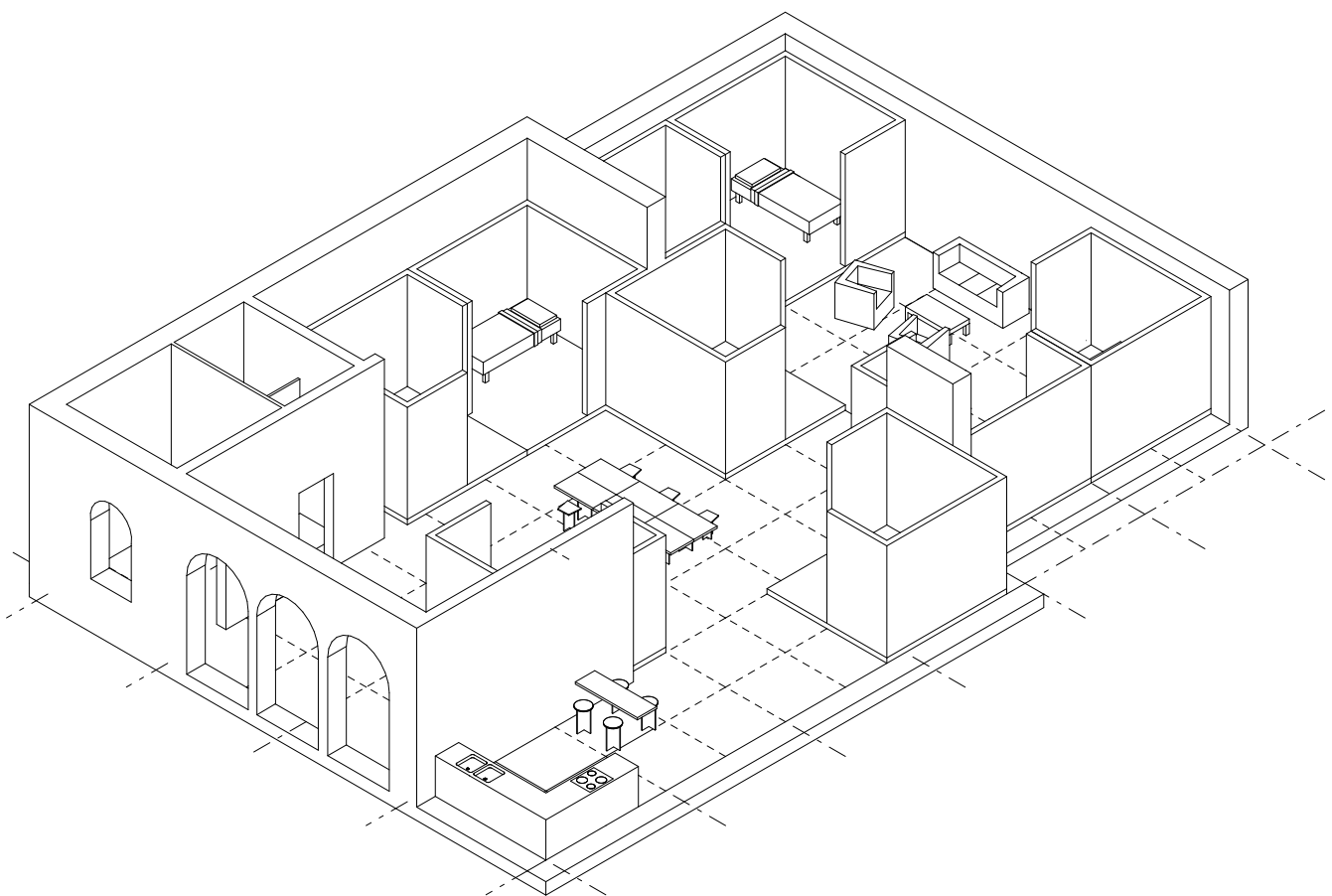
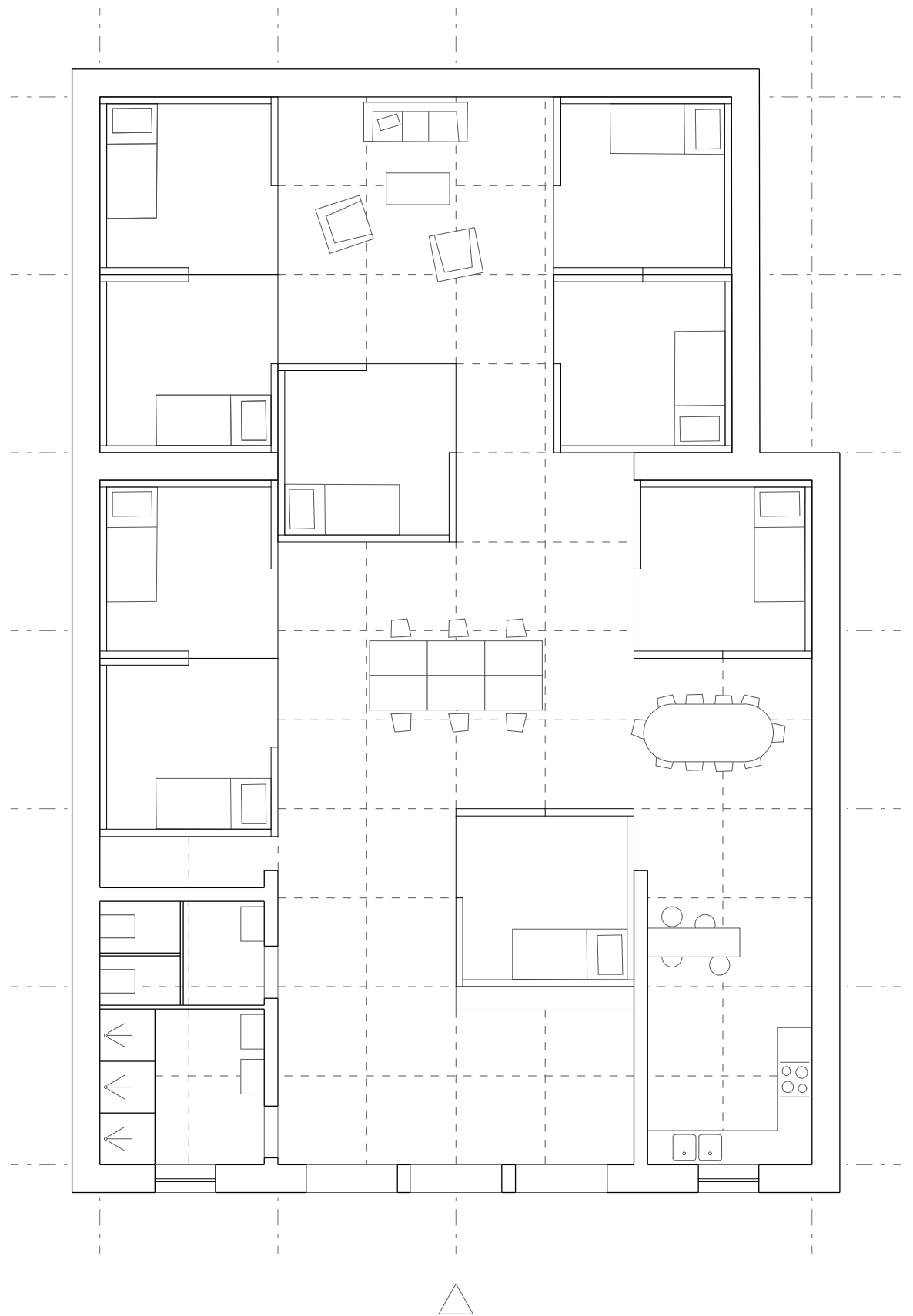
Parasitism:
units require pre-existing built structure



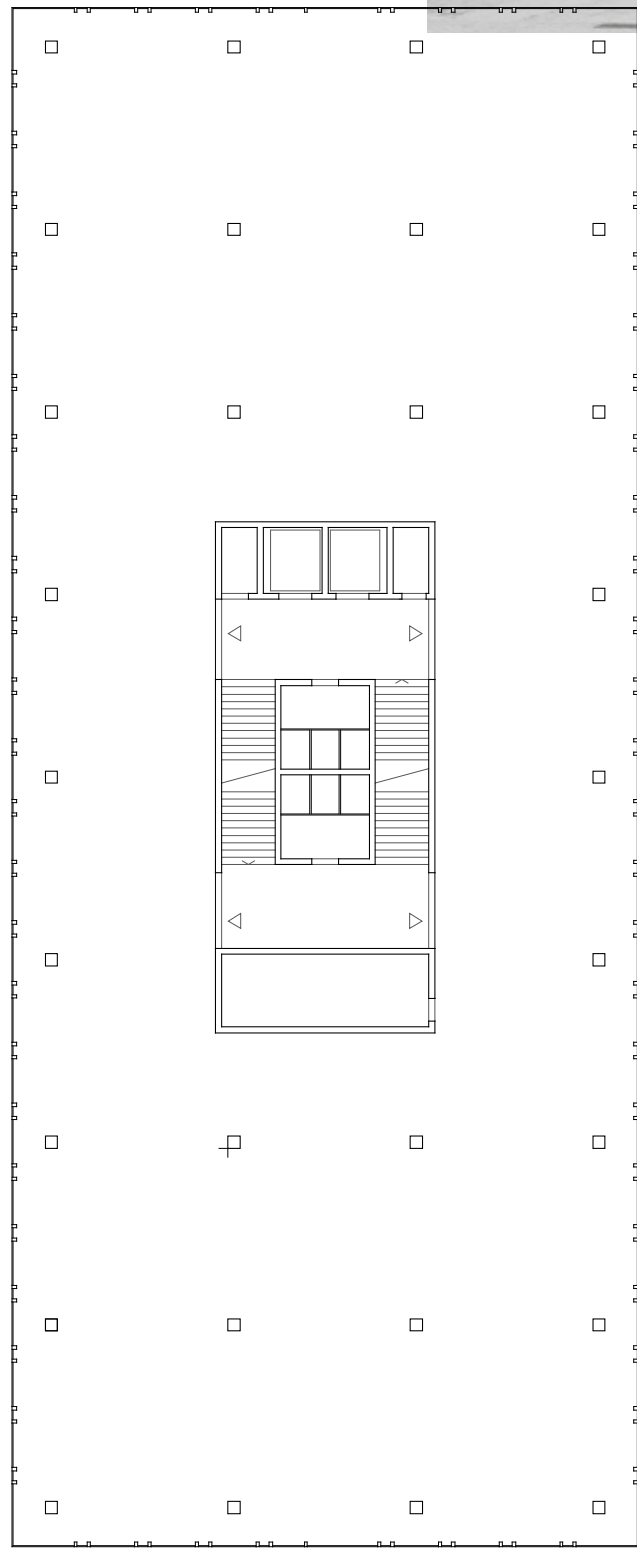
Kunstpavillon

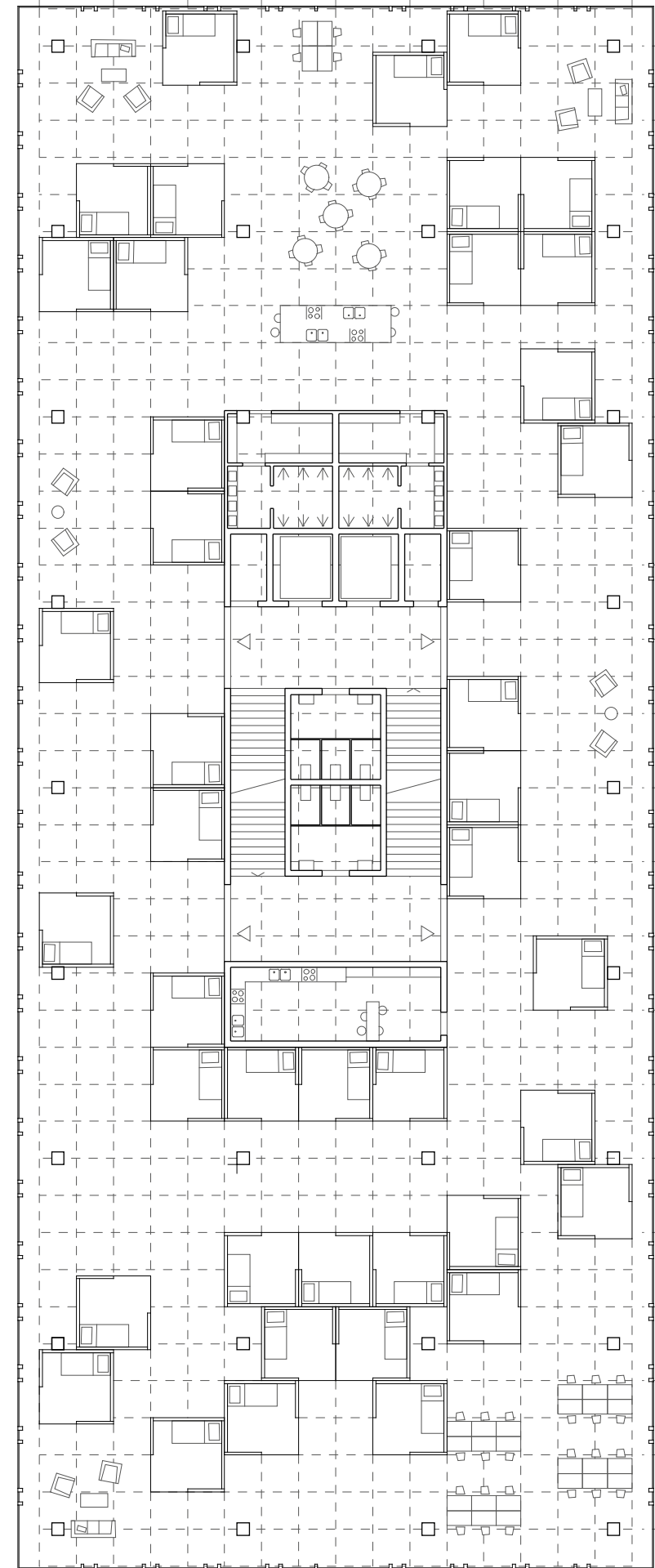
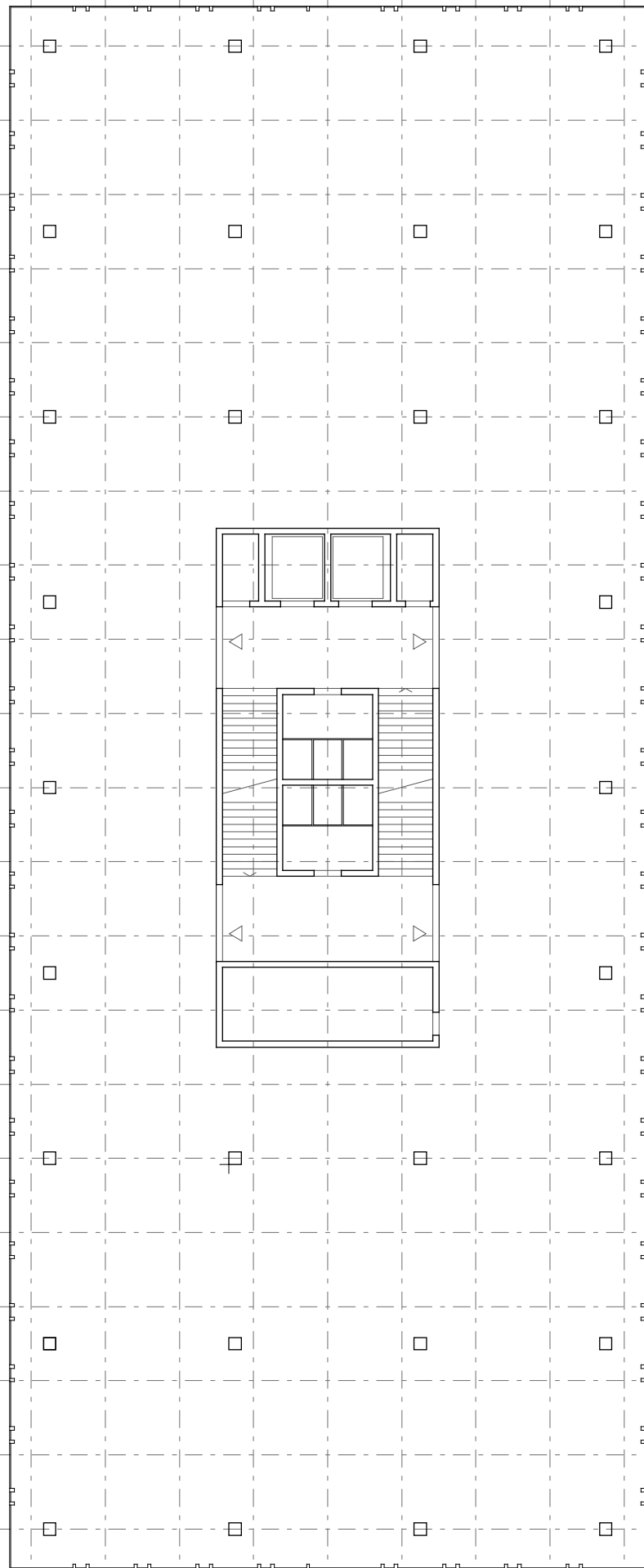


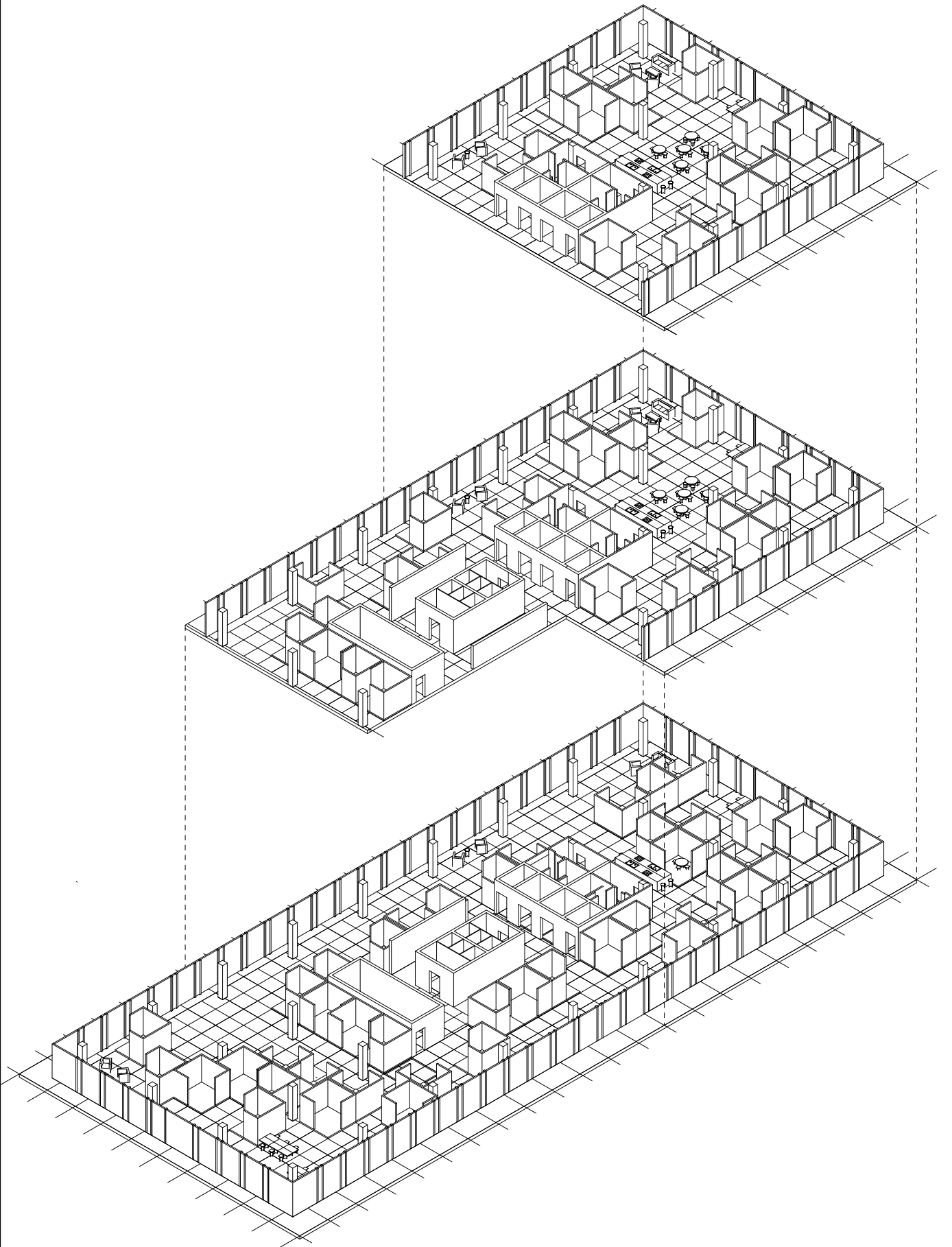
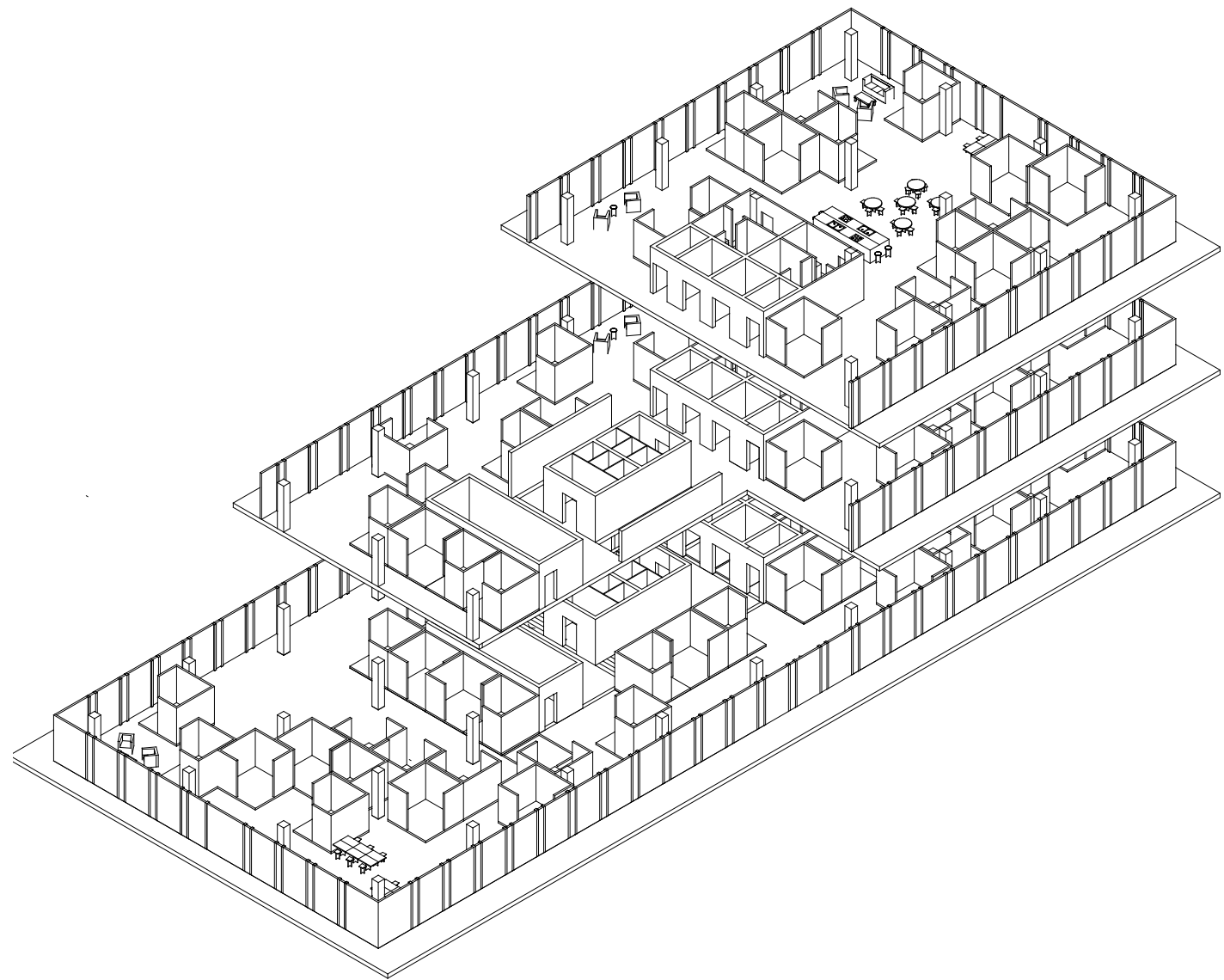
Co-op household



Faculty of Architecture





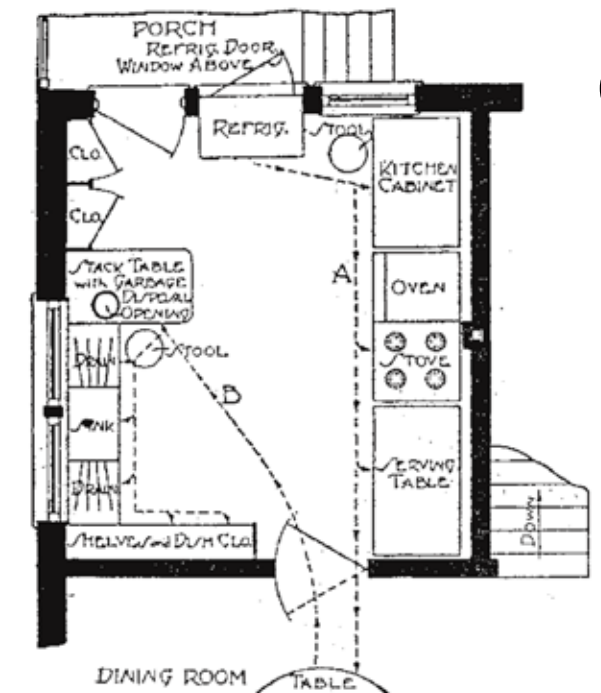
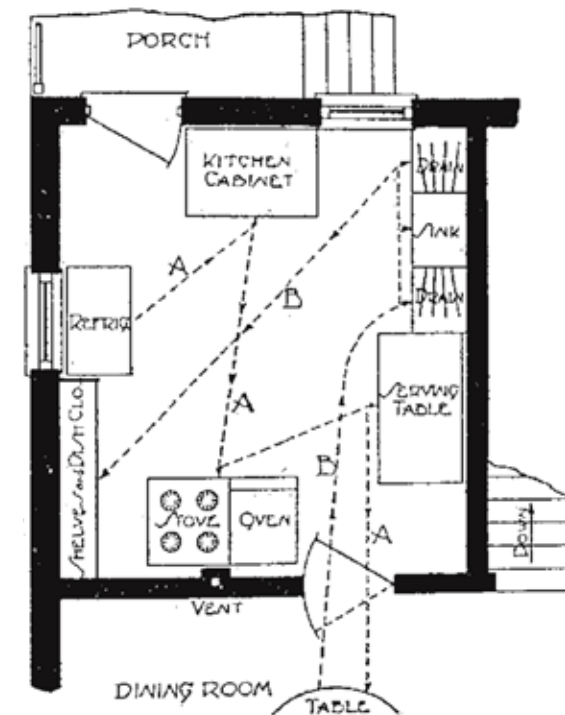
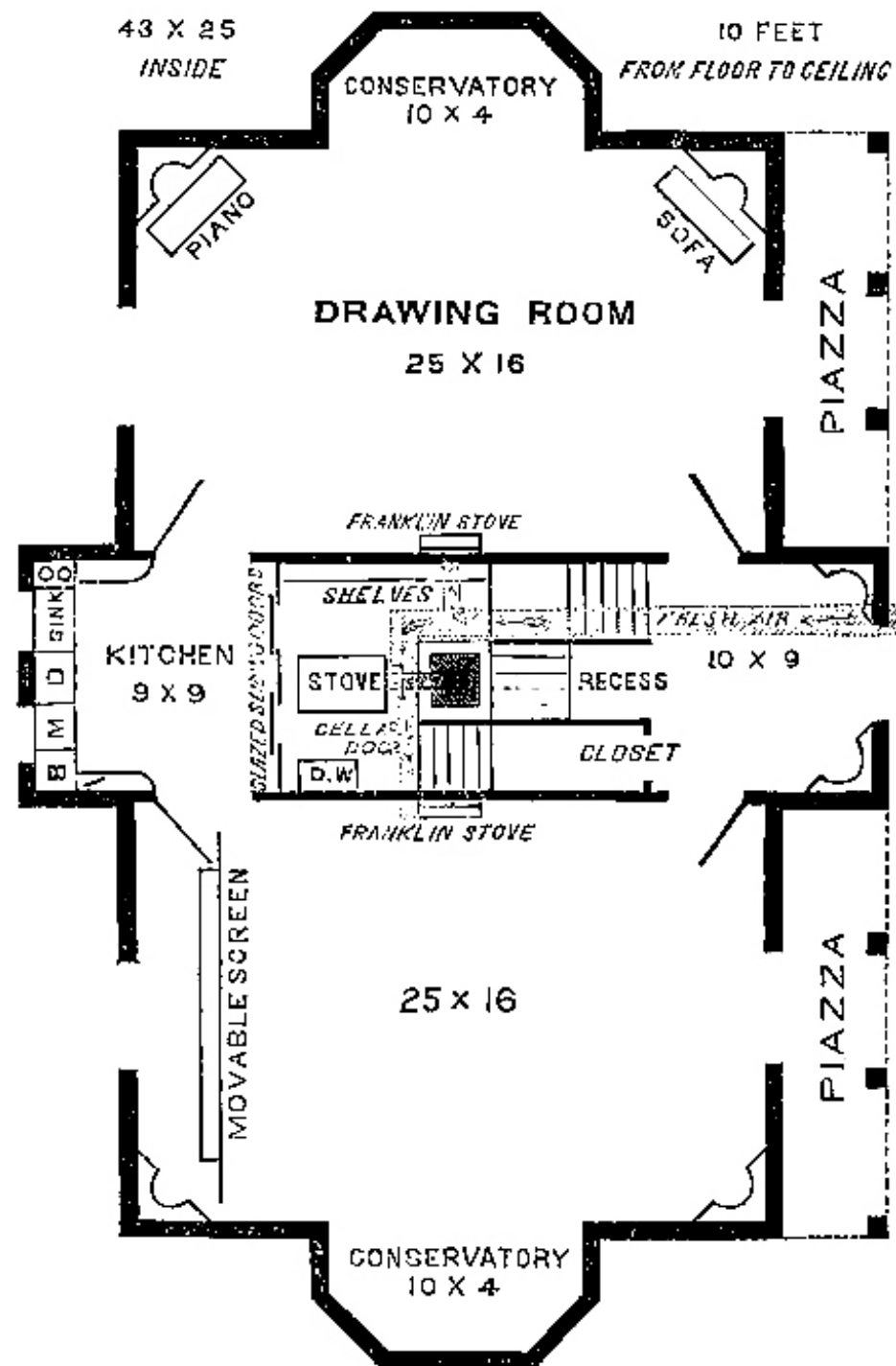


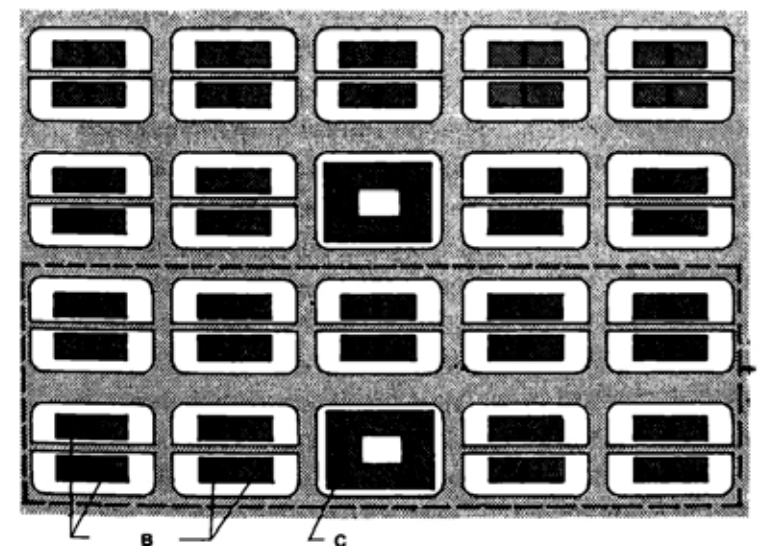


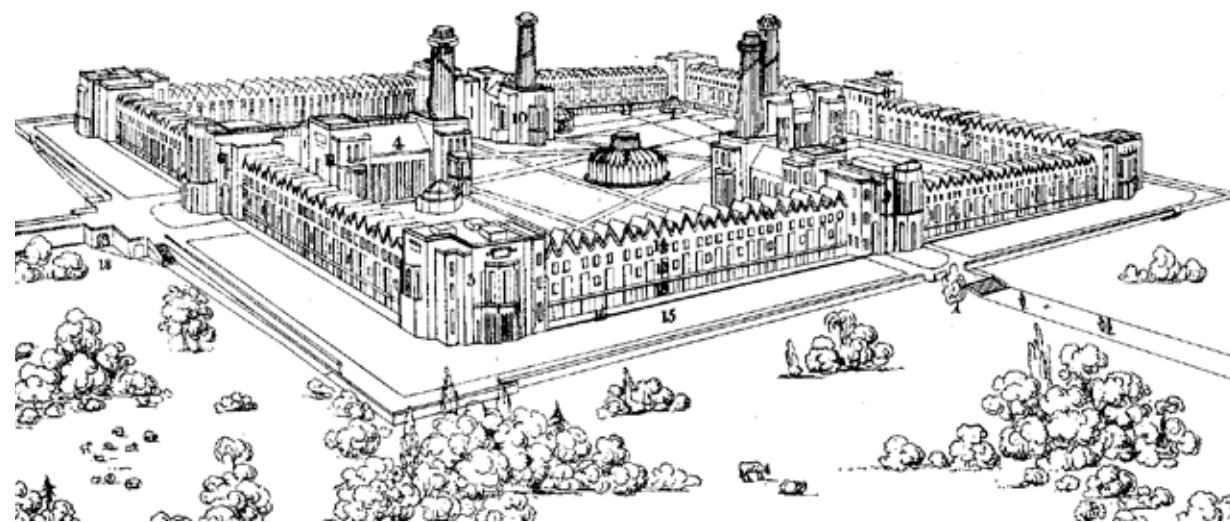
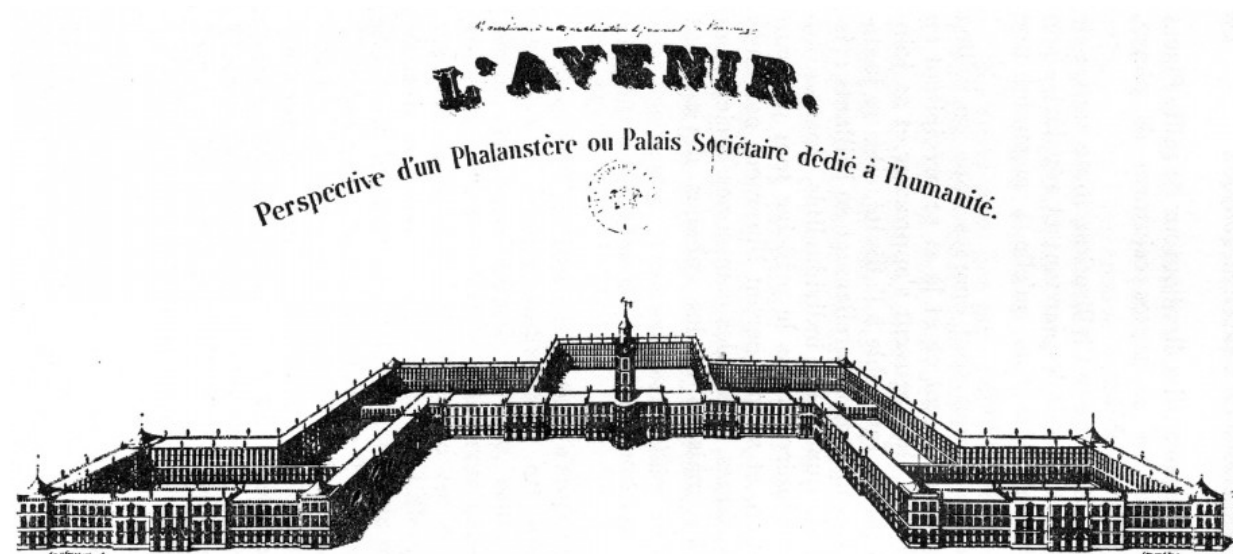
exhibition view:
1:1 model of a living unit with 1:30 model
applied to the *Kunstpavillon*, Innsbruck









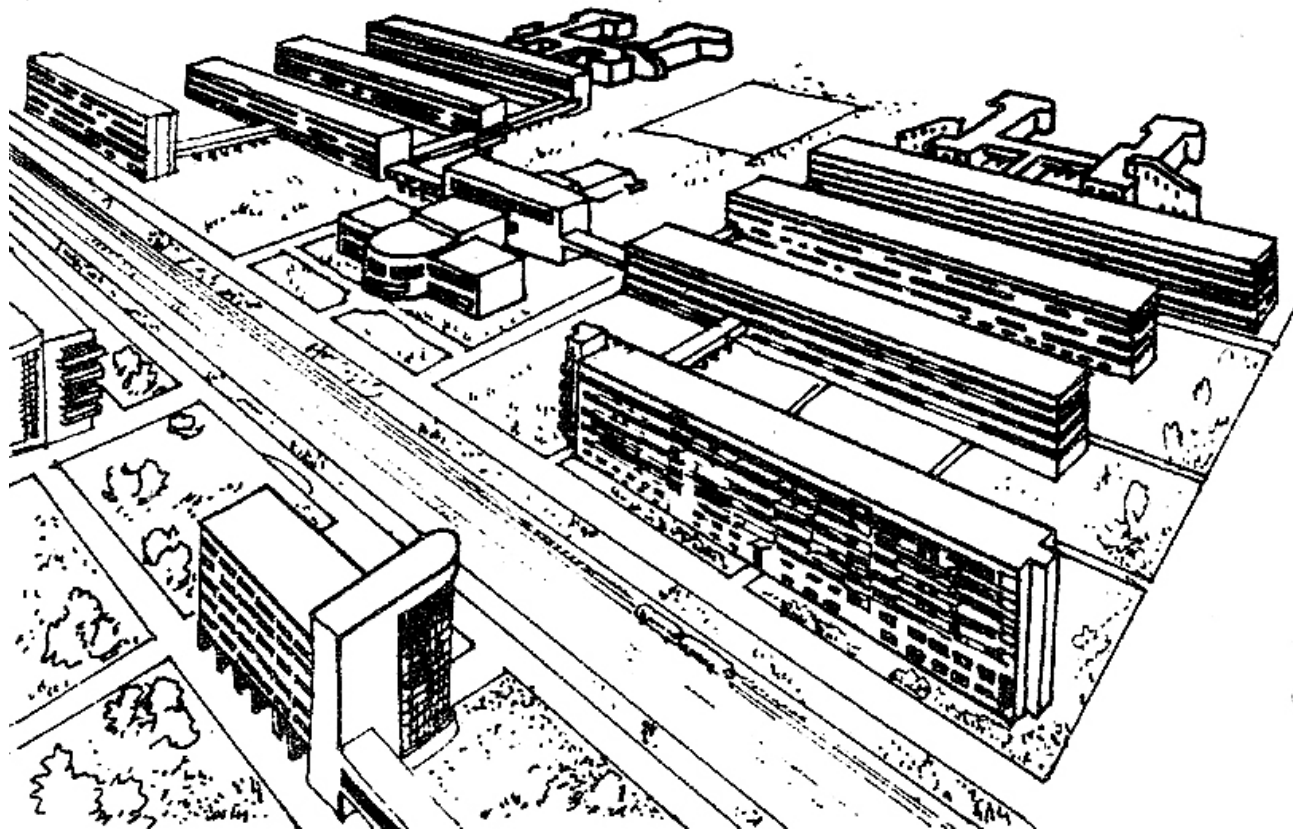


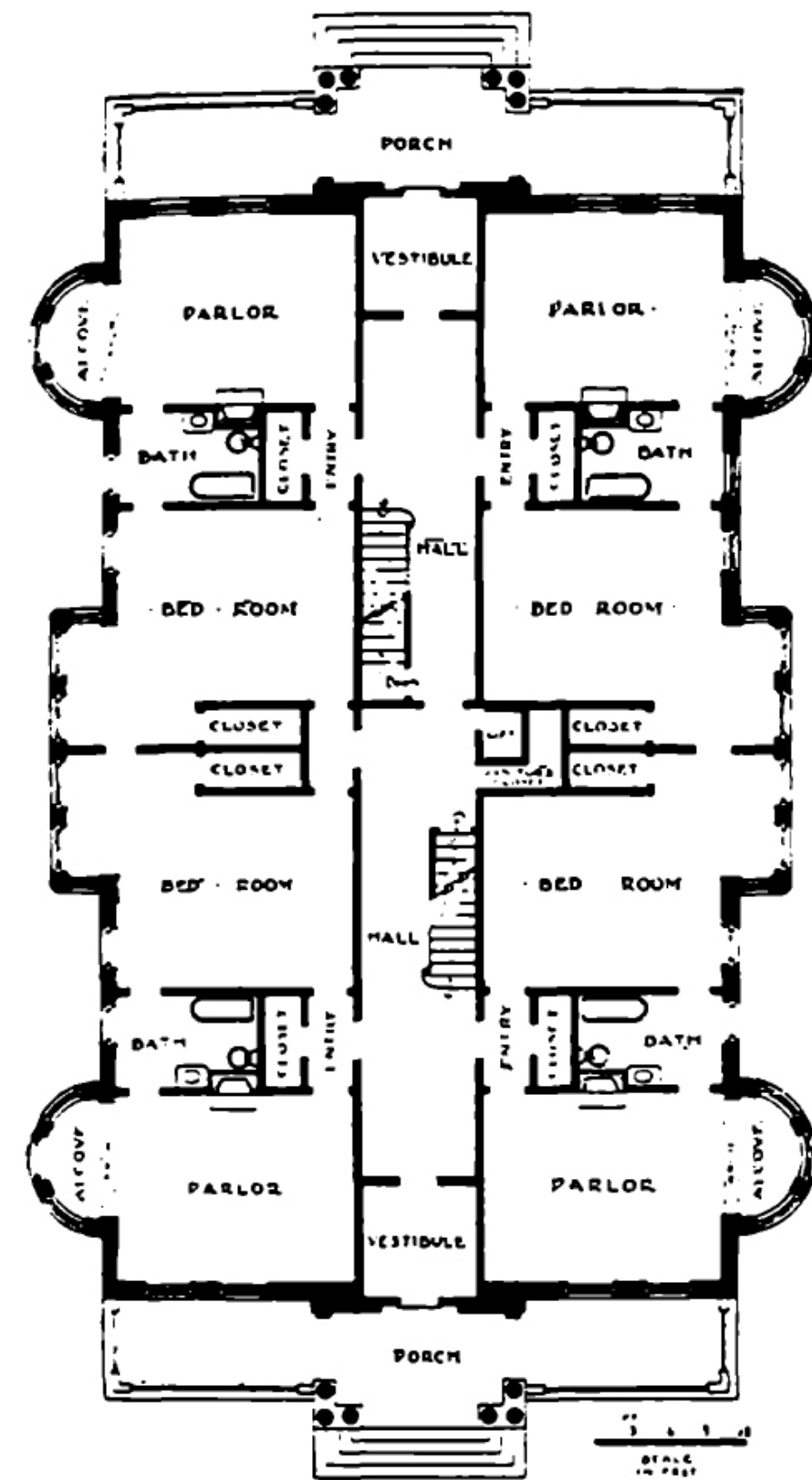
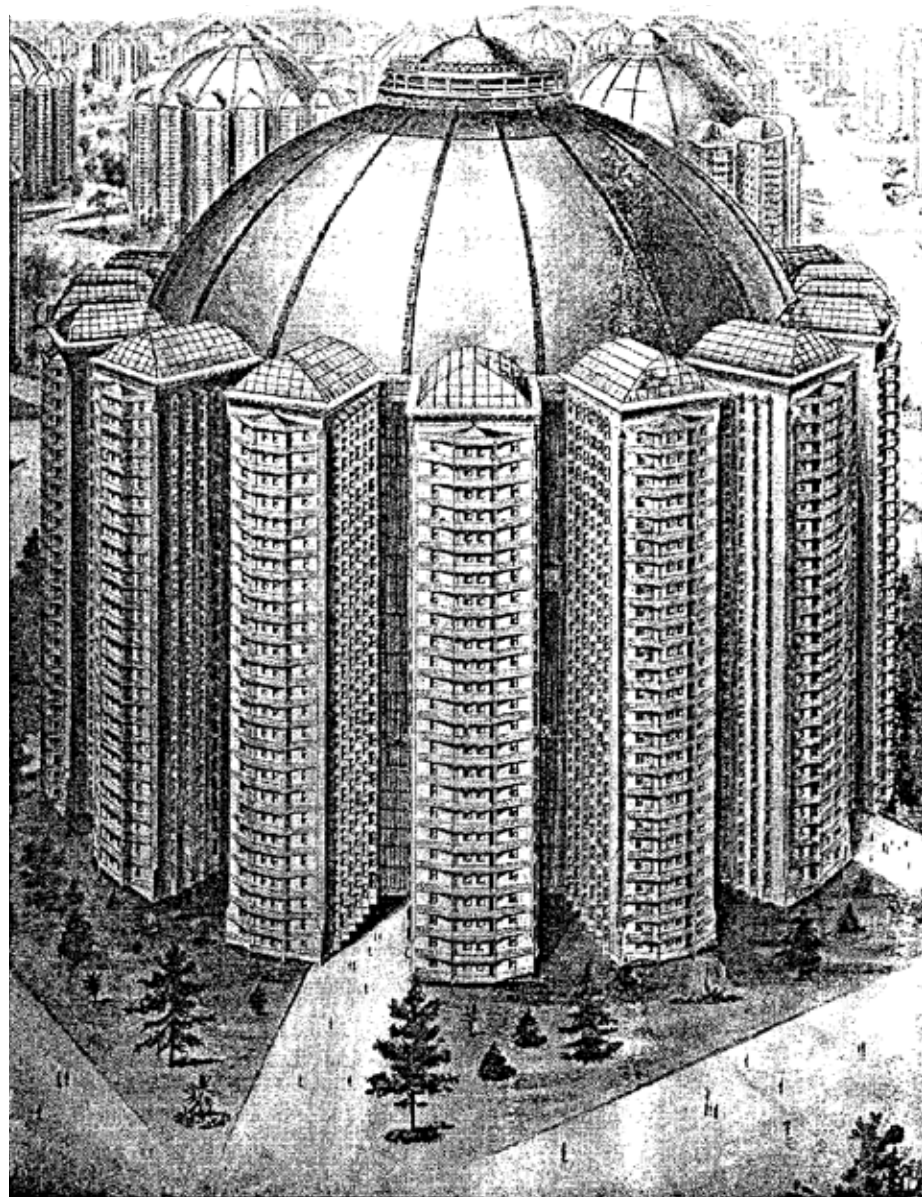
Early unrealised proposals for communal living and working

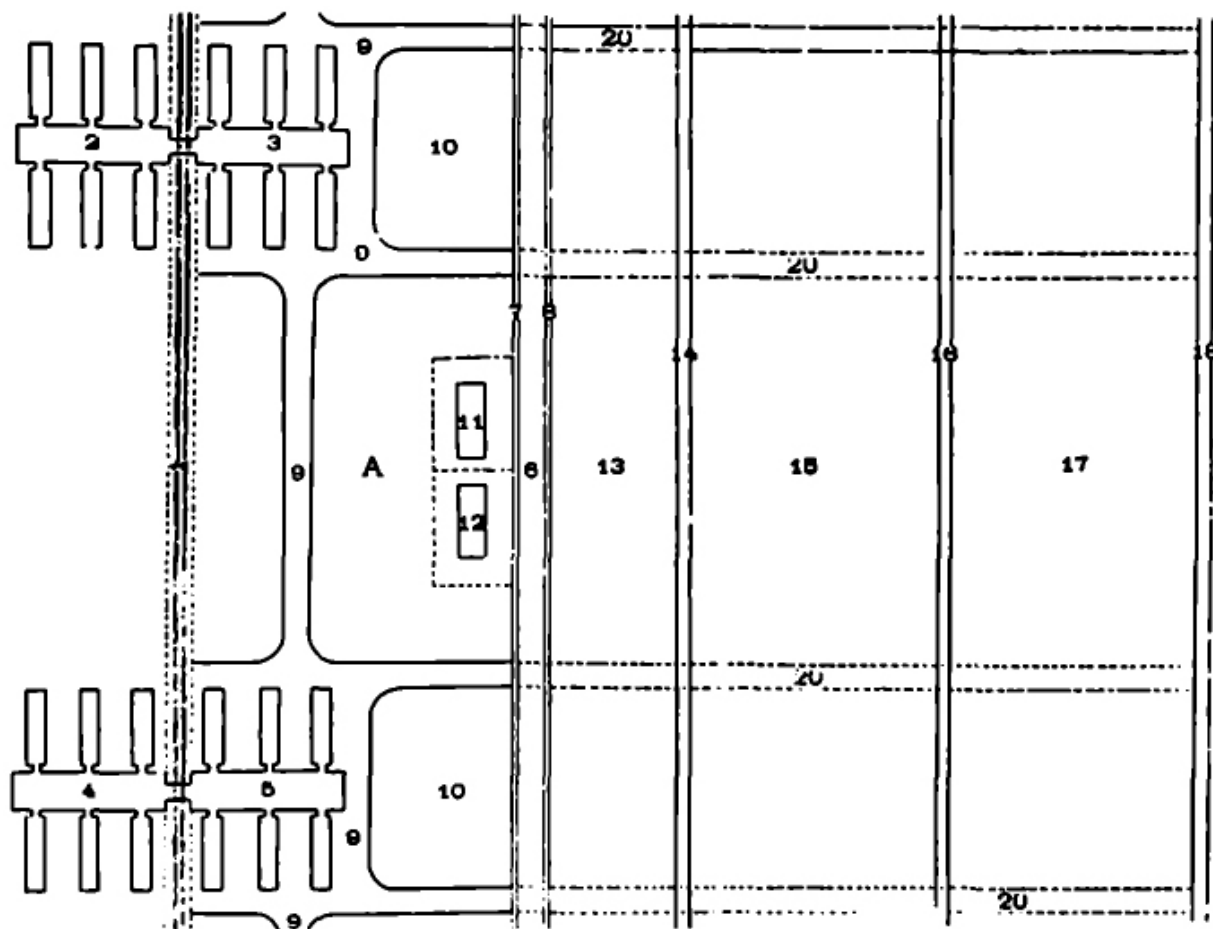
LE FAMILISTÈRE OU PALAIS SOCIAL



Realised concept of *Phalanstère* adapted for families







impressum

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Anouk Muller & Laura Winterberg (section case studies)

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