

EXISTENZOPTIMUM¹

The project ‘Existenzoptimum’² is the outcome of the research into architecture and design practices, informed by socialist and materialist–feminist critique. Its particular focus is to explore the way in which class and gender, embedded in the concept of family, are produced and reproduced through material culture, architecture in particular, and how and why a certain type of family, advocated as the “basic social unit”, still remains the predominant way of organizing life, also in spatial terms.

Starting from historical case studies that proposed architecture for alternative social structures, the project tries to put an emphasis on architecture’s role in emancipatory social transformation, rather than its latent support of the status quo, or in fact social oppression.

1 The title of this project has been adapted with reference to the disputed concept of ‘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 on 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.

2 “Existenzoptimum” was first realized with the support of the Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen fellowship at a seminar organized at the Institute of Architectural Theory for the students of the Innsbruck Faculty of Architecture.

THINKING THE SOCIALIST–FEMINIST CITY

Here, the selection of case studies focuses on some very early, bold and mainly unrealised proposals, which tried to answer the question: How can new urbanist proposals and housing typologies change human lives for the better?

On the macro scale, the problems that needed to be solved were identified as a malaise of the contemporary city, a typology deriving directly from capitalist production and labour relations (the mercantile city and the industrial city). The solution to the inequalities produced by the system³ was sought in new forms of urbanism, as well as in the quest to organise reproductive work on the scale of society, rather than the nuclear family.⁴

On the micro scale, many of the featured proposals tried to achieve social equality through the dissolution of the nuclear family as it was considered to be based on the division of labour along the gender lines.⁵

3 “To want to solve the housing question while at the same time desiring to maintain the modern big cities is an absurdity. The modern big cities, however, will be abolished only by the abolition of the capitalist mode of production, and when this is once on the way then there will be quite other thing to do than supplying each worker with a little house for his own possession.”

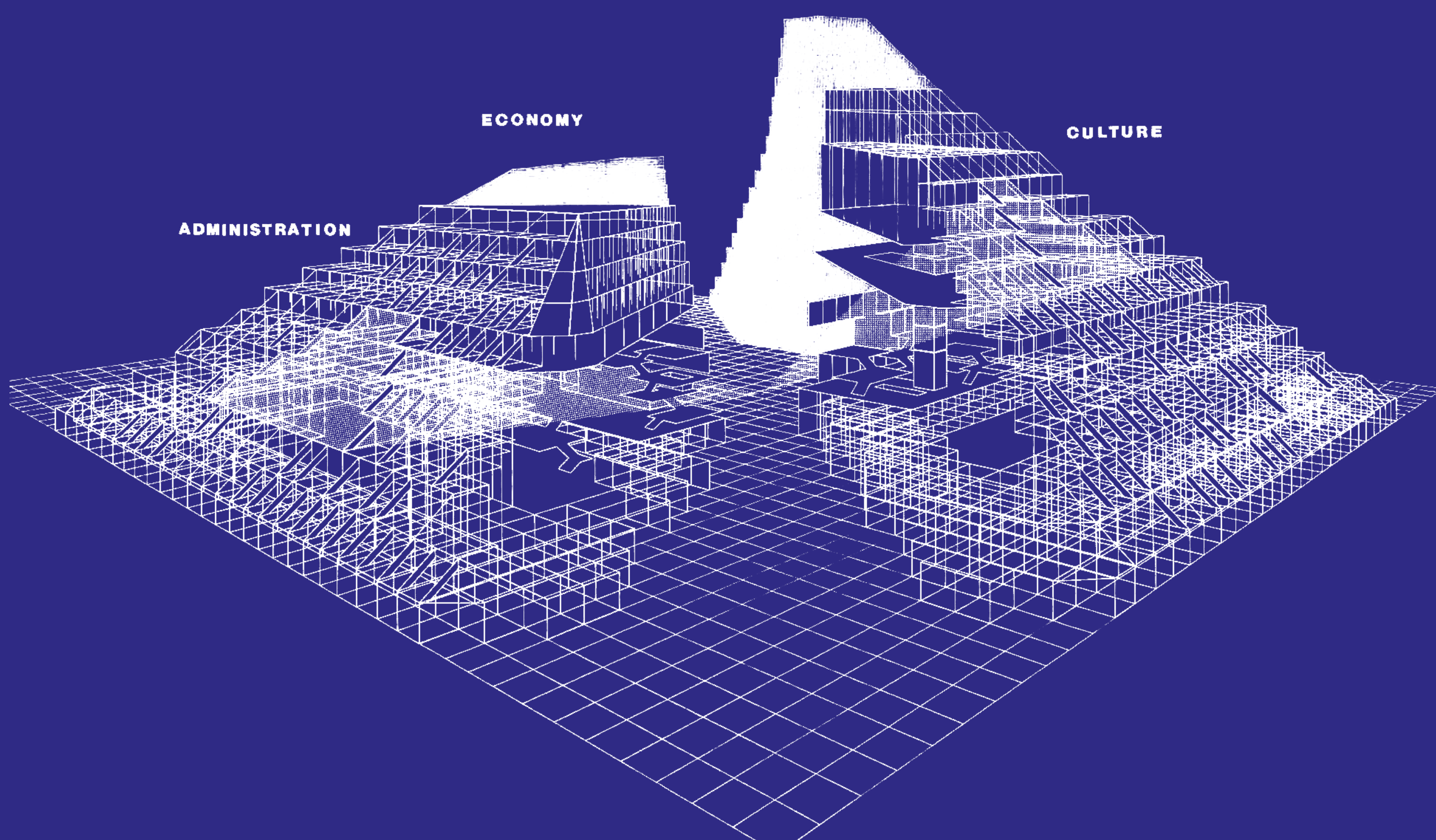
Engels, Frederick. “Zur Wohnungsfrage [The Housing Question]”, The Leipzig Volksstaat, 1872

4 “Women would have to be relieved of housekeeping and childcare duties and freed from the bonds of marriage. New Socialist institutions such as canteens, laundries, and nurseries would permit Soviet women to practice domestic independence – and, crucially, to enter the workforce.”

Crawford, Christina E. “From the Old Family – to the New.” Harvard Design Magazine, no. 41: Family Planning (2015): 38–45.

5 “Convinced that the built environment must be transformed to reflect more egalitarian systems of production and consumption persuaded them of the importance of making full critique of conventional housing and domestic life”

Hayden, Dolores. The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities, MIT Press, 1981

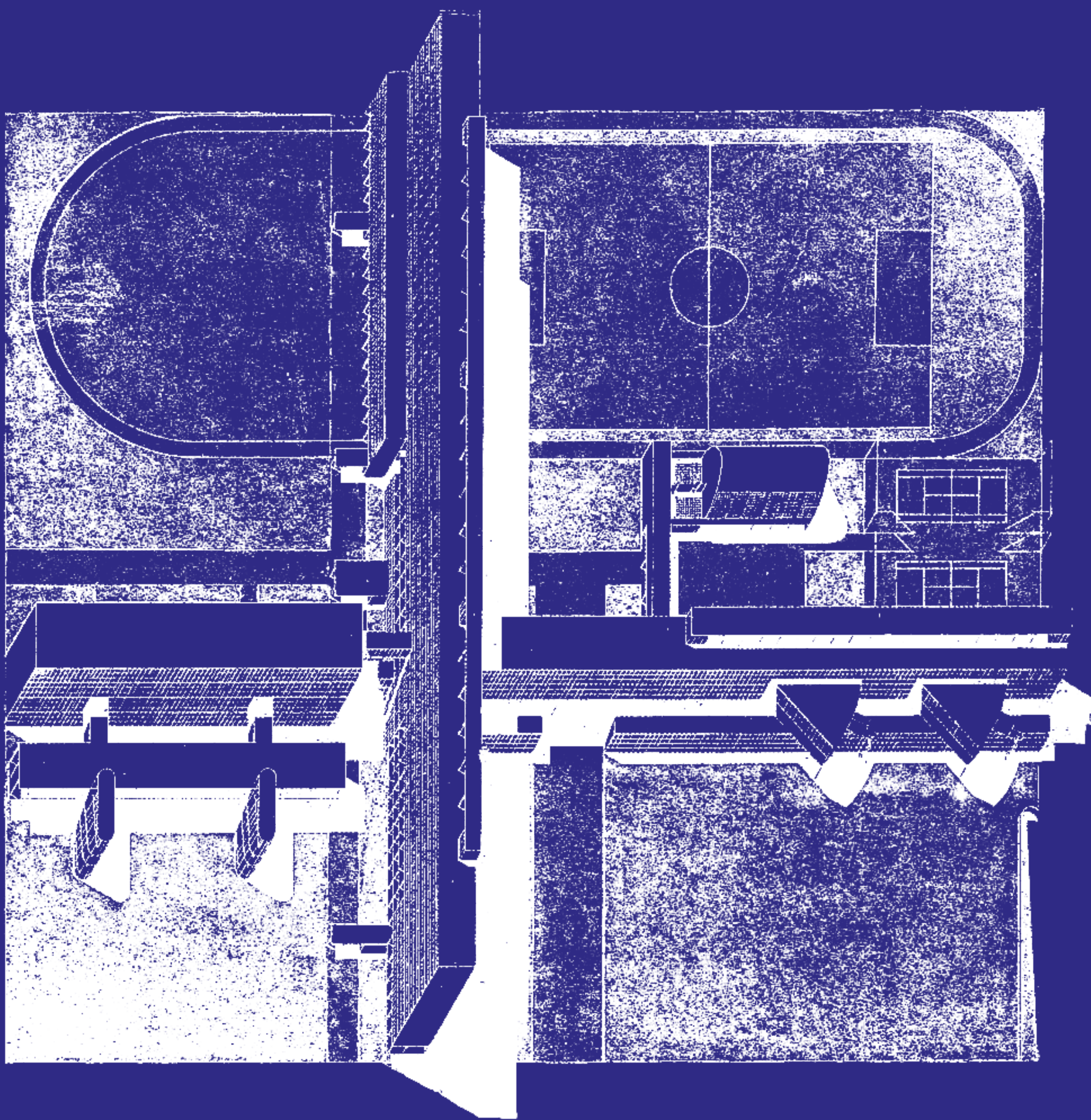


SYNTHURBANISM

‘Sintak’ is a day – an efficient working, creative or non-working day that we are entitled to on the level of present-day productivity, and which we are losing against our will due to anarchic urban disorganization. ‘Sintak’, once adopted as a way of life organization; only possible in socialism, becomes a lever of conceiving all social activities.

ZIGGURAT is the basic cell of ‘Synthurbanism’. The principle on which this object is based is an efficient organization of life of a relatively large number of people. These considerations focus on a unit consisting of approximately 10,000 people. The majority of their life takes place here, because the building provides everything such a small city could have, in the most cost-effective and purposeful way. The efficiency of life in such unit is primarily envisaged as the majority of everyday life functions “under one roof” with the shortest communication links. Socialism–communism is certainly the social movement that, by seeking a harmonious relationship between the individual and the collective, becomes interested in man as an integral biological and social being. In one’s life in general, which also includes one’s time – which is nothing other, but that life expressed in its duration.

Within the ziggurat, all life functions of the collective take place before the eyes of each of its member–citizen. Since their early age people see and learn these functions as a part of the whole of collective organism, and this also creates the feeling of collective belonging and responsibility. At the same time this develops the possibility of self-management as a real and tangible political function. As an instrument of political management, ziggurat also has a hall – assembly hall for 6,000 people, a meeting place where all decisions are made through a referendum – consensus. ‘Synthurbanism’ is not something that solves all the problems of the efficiency of life overnight, but it is a sufficiently clear and convincing framework, which, defined once in fours dimensions as a principle, becomes the programme of such reorientation of life to the widest scale, and only such social structures able to solve the life of the collective and the individual as an integral task, will be able to respond to this dictation of time.



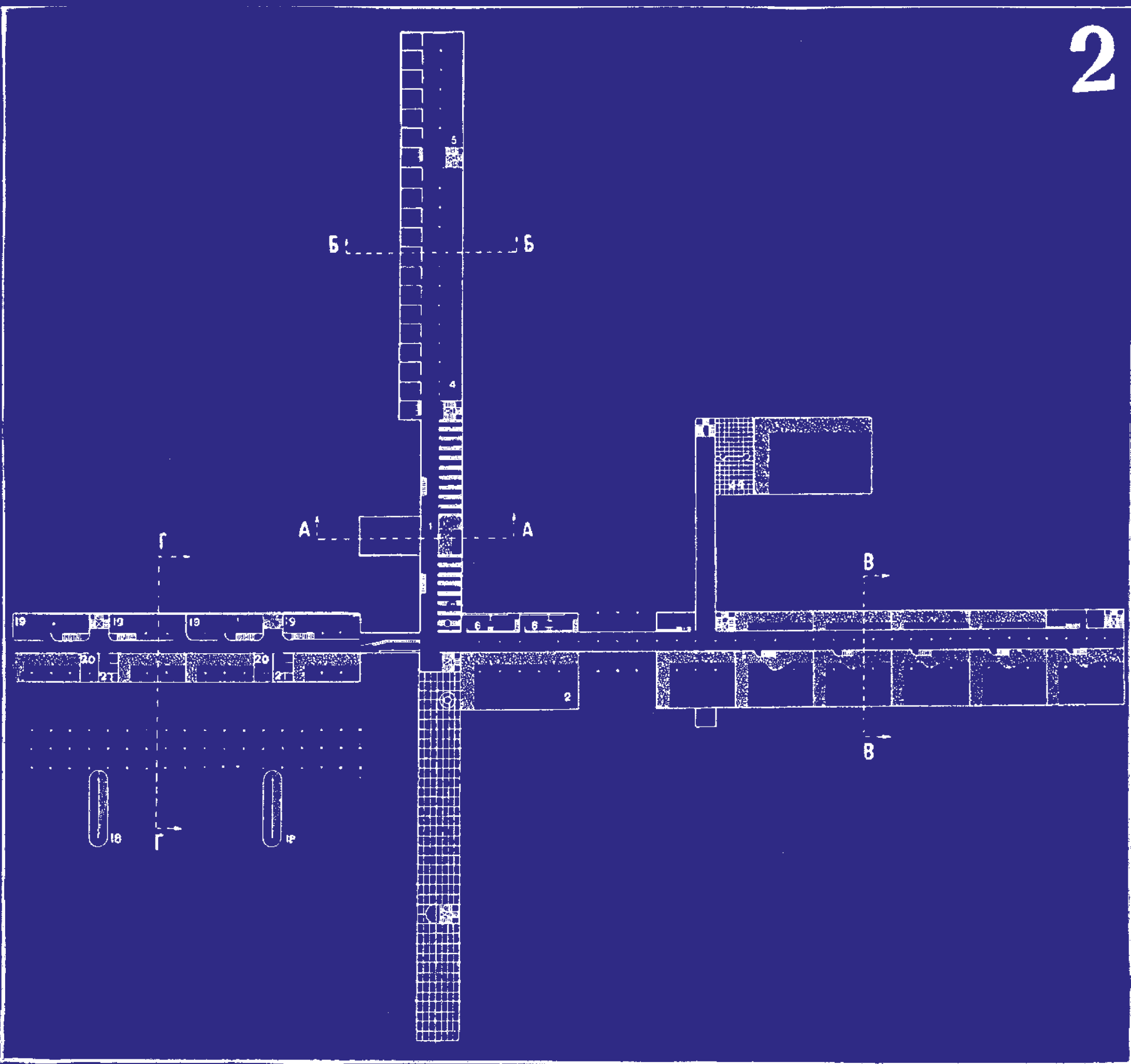
THE HOUSE COMMUNE

Recognizing the indisputable fact of overcrowding in Moscow, invoking the wastefulness of repetitive individual living units, O.S.A. leaders saw the House Commune as the only solution: it would cut costs by communalizing services, release women (and men) from repetitive domestic housework and thereby raise national labour productivity, promote a spirit of communism through collective living, and allow some privacy as well. The first big O.S.A. scheme for a house commune within the supercity was that of Barshch and V. M. Vladimirov in 1929: two intersecting buildings with 1,000 adults in one, 360 preschoolers in the left intersector, and 320 schoolchildren in the right. The adult wing had four communal and six sleeping floors and a communal dining room equipped with a conveyor-belt table.

Classical House Commune theory had always made the collectivized kitchen its central tenet: to save costs, promote eating together, and rescue housewives from the slavery of kitchen life. The “women question” and the family, hotly debated in the first decade of the Revolution, had informed home planning discourse from the beginning. All Bolsheviks were verbally committed to ending the drudgery of housework for wives, though the question of separation of children from parents – even in a nearby building – evoked considerable division. The most extreme advocate of “de-

Image captions top left to bottom right:

- 1 Richter, Vjenceslav. “Synthurbanism”, Richter Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1964
 - 2 Barsch & Vladimirov. “Communal House”, Moscow, Sovremennaya arkhitektura, 1929, issue 4
 - 3 Barsch & Vladimirov. “Communal House”, Moscow, Sovremennaya arkhitektura, 1929, issue 4
- descriptions of case-studies from:
- 1 Richter, Vjenceslav. Synthurbanism, Mladost, Zagreb, 1964
 - 2 Stites, Richard. Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution, Oxford University Press, 1989



familization” within the House Commune by means of mandatory communal dining and separation of children from parents, V. Kuzmin, codified his appeals in 1930 in a famous piece entitled “Problems of the Scientific Organization of Everyday Life.”

But sex and leisure remain in a mist. Kuzmin hopes to sleep the unmarried, by gender, in rooms of six (without describing how their sex lives will operate) and “couples” in adjoining rooms whose connecting door is locked when divorce occurs. The family as such evaporates, since the children are housed apart, though, as always, parents have access to them.

THE LIENAR CITY

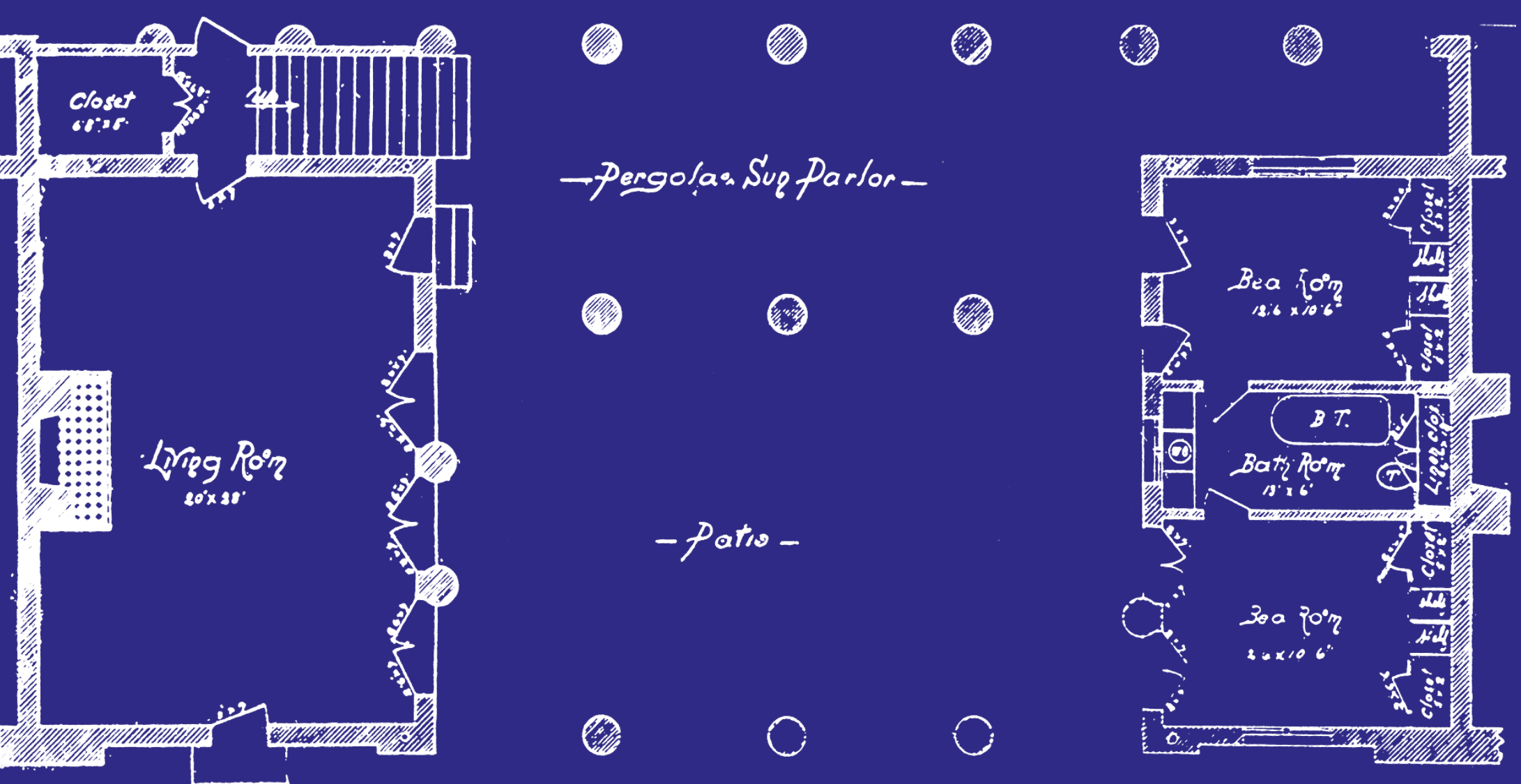
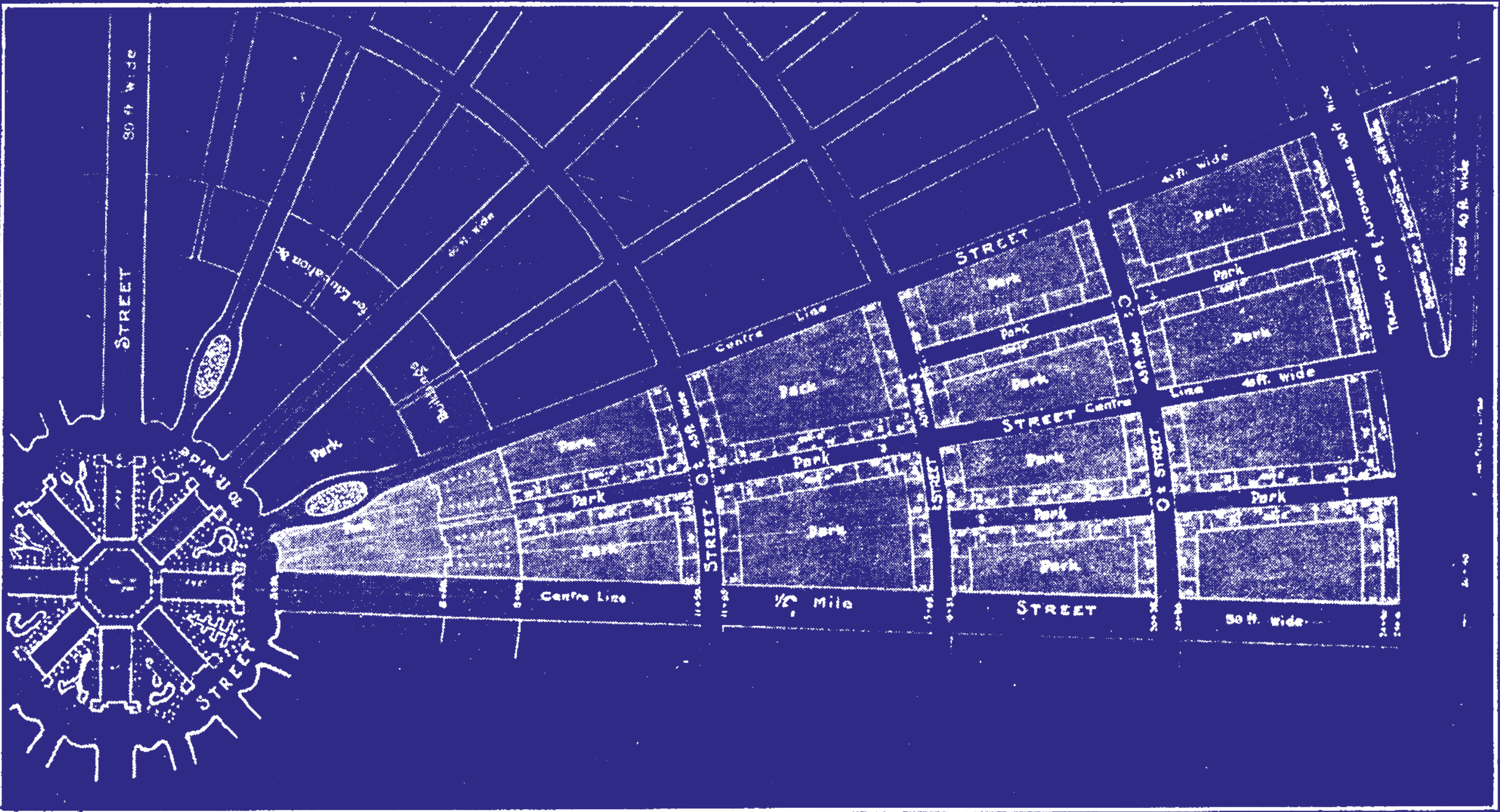
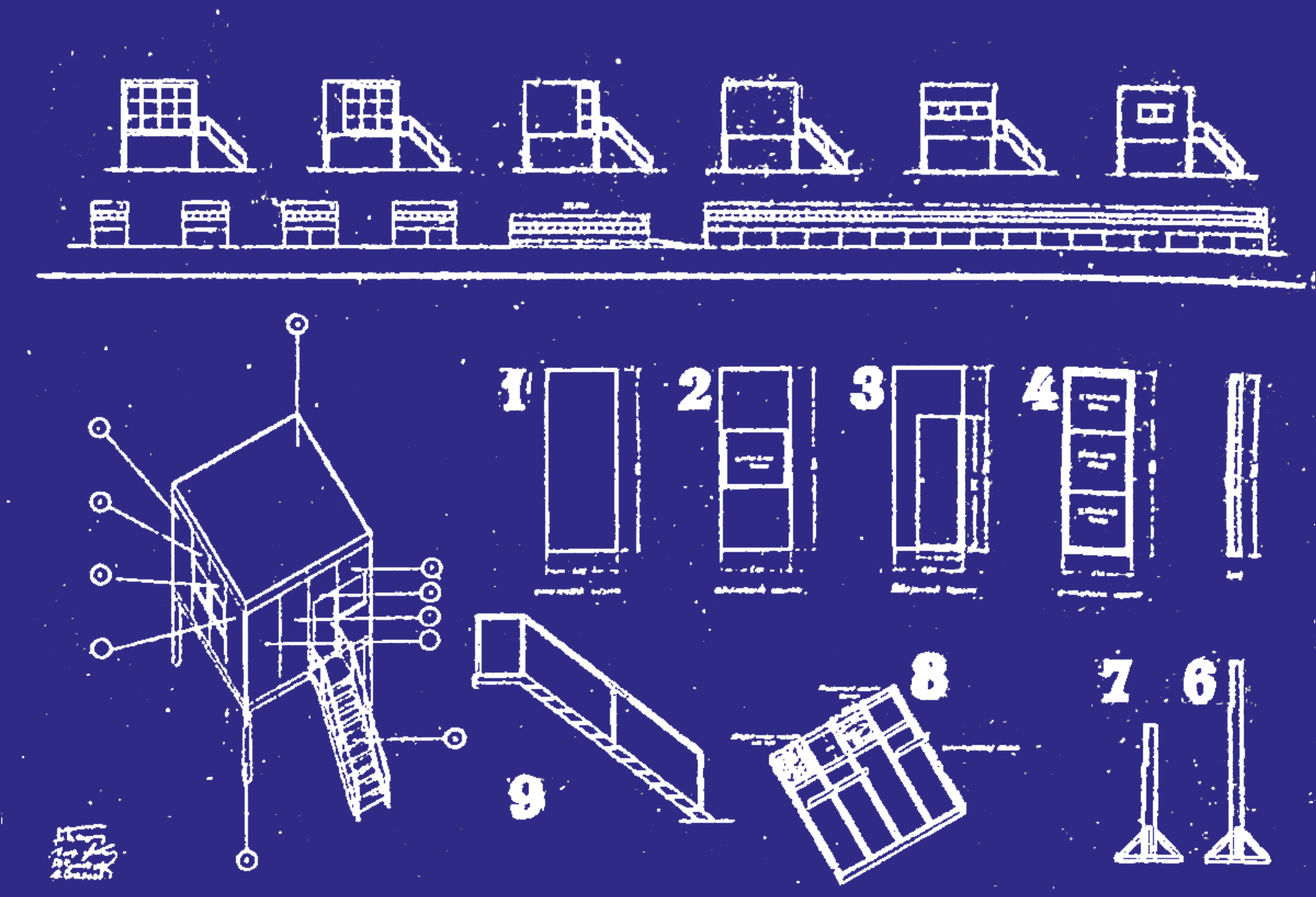
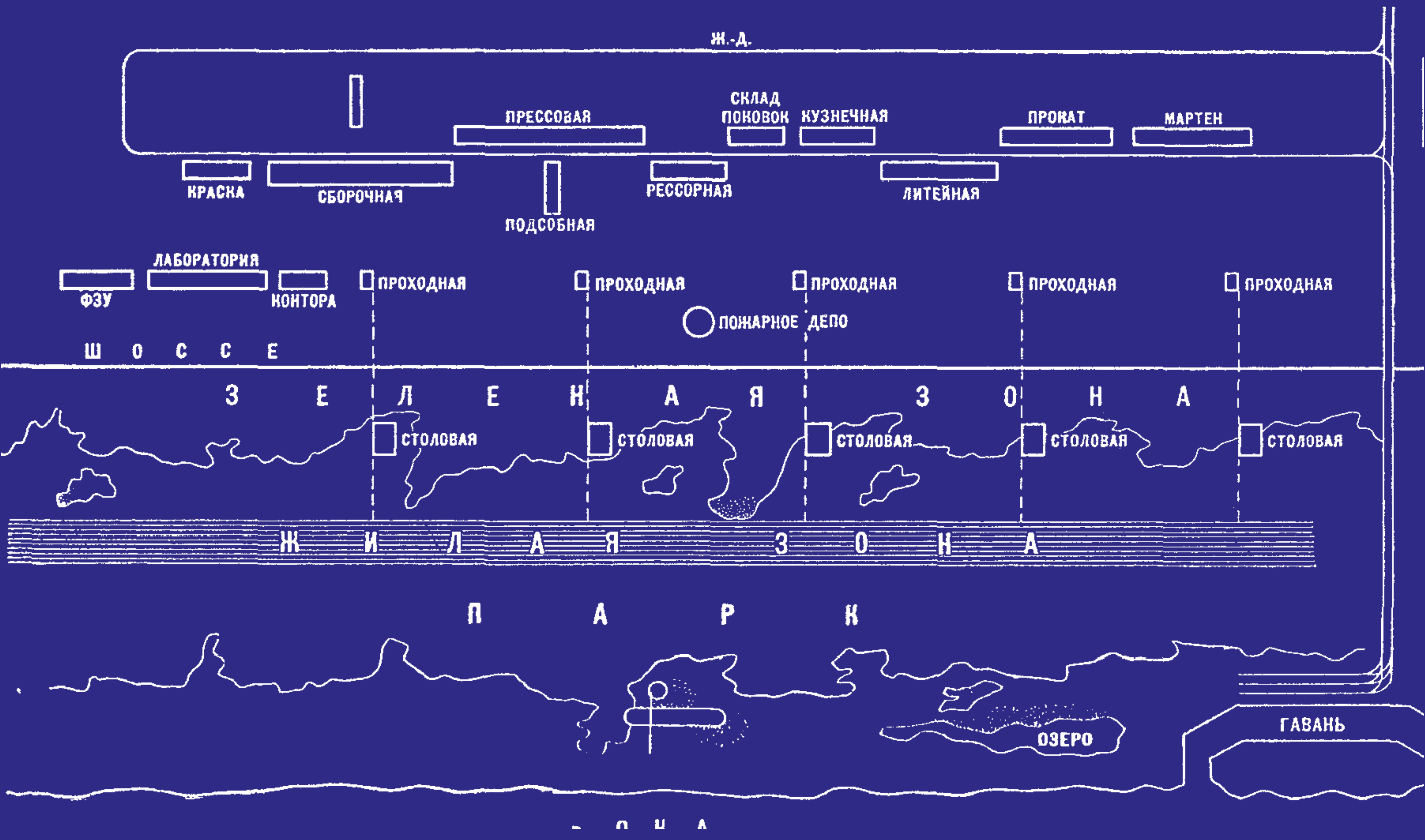
The birth of utopian town planning in the 1920s USSR grew directly and self-consciously out of a strong distaste for the current city.

Social reformers and architects around the world sought to create new communities to illustrate the possibility of planned living in defiance of the historical growth of medieval towns, fortuitous anarchic industrial patterns, and the resultant nexus with the surrounding hinterland.

Theorist of the concept of the linear city, the sociologist Mikhail Okhitovich who regularly wrote for ‘Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura’, promoted the depopulation of Moscow and other cities and their regreening as parks. The new locus of population was to be linear – an endless road of habitation flanked by individual dwelling places.

Instead of towns or super-cities every 40–50 miles, we see an endless and uninterrupted stretch of dwellings on either side of the road – rows of individual apartment cells, mobile homes on wheels, or boxes on sturdy columns stuck in the ground. Beyond the roads are fields and forests, perhaps farms, industrial sites hidden away along the route. We stop and plant our house; in time we acquire a spouse and plant another box beside our own and attach it; with the coming of children comes the attachment of more boxes. Work and goods are within easy reach (public transport, personal car, or foot, depending on the scheme).

Only in the collective of space, argue the architects, can the individual come into full play. The nearby “bases” enrich this semi-private, semi-communal life: bus stops that are also reading stations, autoparks, cafeterias serving 250 citizens, and nearby centres of sport, culture, education, and communal utilities (kindergarten, laundries, etc.). As with Okhitovich, marriage, divorce, and family growth are made possible by the constant switching of adjoining rooms with lockable doors.



LLANO DEL RIO

Alice Constance Austin’s design for Llano del Rio, California, joined feminist and socialist concerns in a project that developed the urban infrastructure necessary for cooked food delivery and laundry service and carried proposals for cooperative housekeeping to their ultimate conclusion in terms of urban design.

In her ideal city, labour-saving devices in the home and a central laundry and kitchens would relieve woman “of the thankless and unending drudgery of an inconceivably stupid and inefficient system, by which her labours are confiscated”. Job Harriman, the organizer of Llano del Rio, a lawyer and a leader in the Socialist Party in Los Angeles, presented Austin, as the community’s architect, with nine hundred people who wanted a plan for something better than the subdivisions that land speculators were creating in Los Angeles. Austin proposed a city composed of court-yard houses of concrete construction.

Each kitchenless house was to be connected to the central kitchen through a complex underground network of tunnels. Railway cars from the centre of the city would bring cooked food, laundry, and other deliveries to connection points, or “hubs,” from which small electric cars could be dispatched to the basement of each house. Although this system was obviously going to be expensive, Austin argued the economic and aesthetic advantages to a socialist municipal government of placing all gas, water, electric, and telephone lines underground in

the same tunnels as the residential delivery system. Eliminating all business traffic at the centre would produce a more restful city – residents had access to the centre on foot, public delivery systems handled all their shopping, and goods coming to the city could arrive at a centrally located air-freight landing pad.

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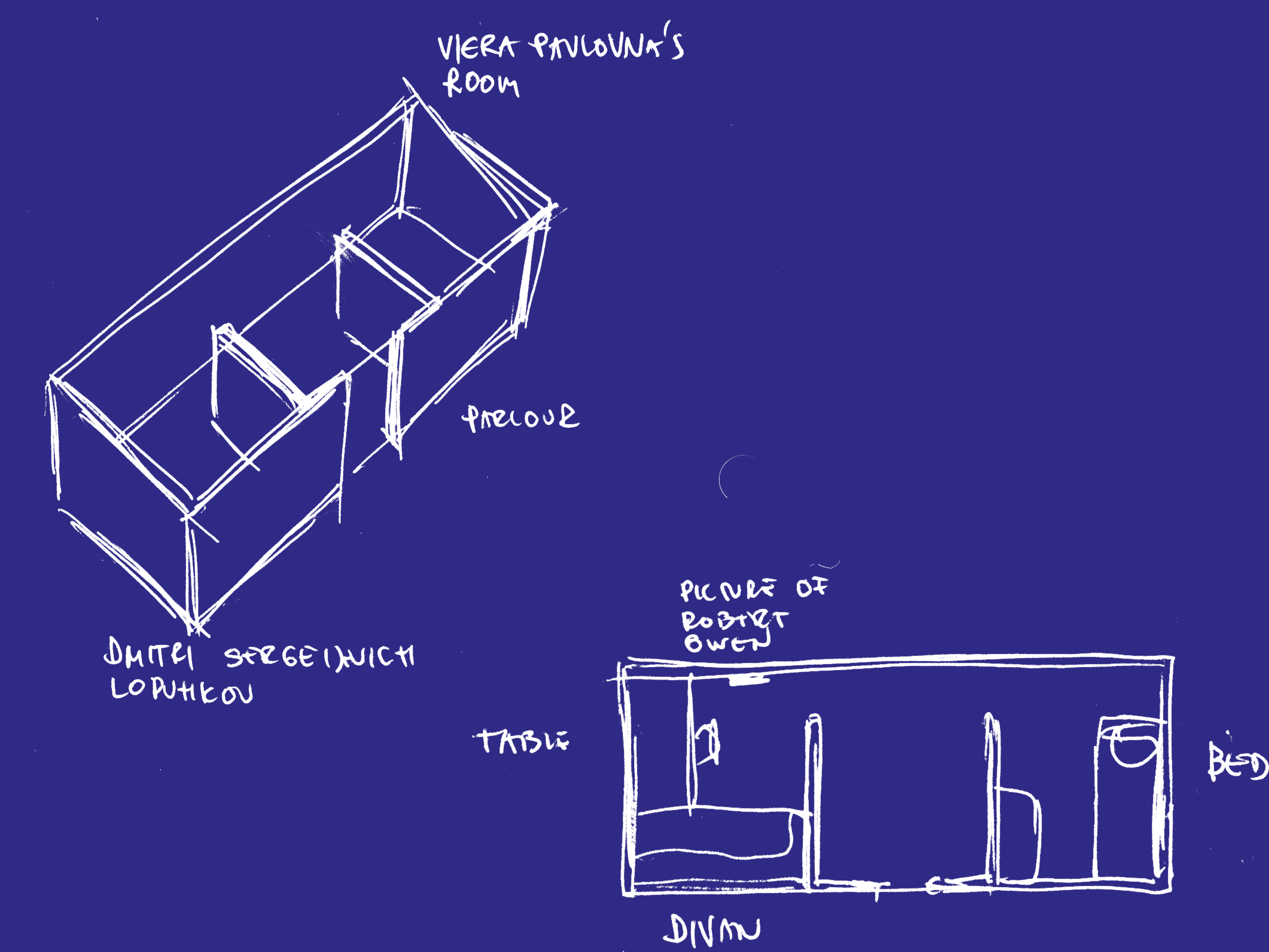
- 1 Master plan for an industrial [linear] city; Milutin, Nikolai. Problema stroitel'stva sotsialisticheskikh gorodov (Problem of Building the Socialist Cities), Moscow–Leningrad: GIZ, 1930
- 2 Proposal for Magnitogorsk; "Magnitogorsk – The General Plan", Sovremennaya arkhitektura, (1930). Issue 1-2: 39–56.
- 3 Austin, Alice Constance. Site plan for a sector of Llano del Rio, 1916; Hayden, Dolores. The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities, MIT Press, 1981
- 4 Austin, Alice Constance. First floor plan for a kitchenless house at Llano del Rio, California, 1916; Hayden, Dolores. The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities, MIT Press, 1981

descriptions of case-studies from:

- 1 Hayden, Dolores. The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities, MIT Press, 1981
- 2 Stites, Richard. Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution, Oxford University Press, 1989

‘Existenzoptimum’ was first structured as a seminar organized at the Institute of Architectural Theory for the students Audrey Morency, Anouk Muller, Pol Olk and Laura Winterberg of the Innsbruck Faculty of Architecture. The students were given the task to propose a housing model, taking their cues from the lectures, discussions and reading materials that focused on various proposals for communal living and working arrangements developed by utopian socialists, such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, communitarian sects in the US, materialist-feminist experiments in the socialization of domestic work from the 19th and early 20th century US and early Soviet examples of communal housing and the socialization of reproductive work.

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 parlour, 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.



... 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 ...

Chernyshevsky, Nikolay. What Is To Be Done?
– A Vital Question, 1863

PROPOSAL

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. Existenzoptimum is imagined as a citizen’s right, including the “private space” and the “public space” that go with it, but it acquires meaning only in cooperation with others.

The four 1:1 models are colour coded to illustrate the relation between the cubicles as private space and their associated public space marked with the lines on the floor. The co-operators can choose 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.



- From this basic premise a series of additional parameters were established, building on the ideas expressed in What Is to Be Done?, and many other sources:
- 1 the ideal of communality and cooperation; the unit has to work with others in order to fulfil the 'optimum existence'
 - 2 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
 - 3 the idea of mobility; the unit can be disassembled and fitted for transport
 - 4 the idea of repurposing or parasitizing; the units should be implemented in the existing architectural structures
 - 5 the idea of adaptability; the design can adapt to different spatial contexts and social configurations

... 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 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 there. 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.

Everyone chooses the company that suits one 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; everyone goes wherever one chooses ...

Chernishevsky, Nikolay. What Is To Be Done?
— A Vital Question, 1863

