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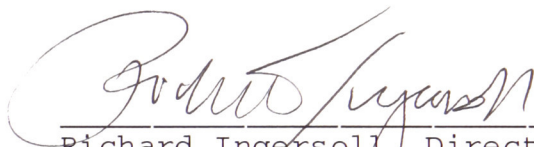
UNCOOPERATIVE HOUSING

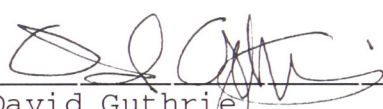
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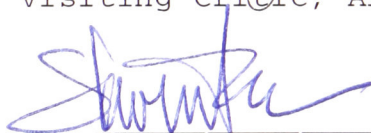
ALFONS POBLOCKI JR.

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MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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1996

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Houston, Texas  
April 1996

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## ABSTRACT

### Uncooperative Housing

by

Alfons Poblocki Jr.

This thesis is intended to demonstrate a strategy for the creation of mixed income housing in the City of New York as an alternative not only to the upper income cooperative and condominium schemes of the 1980's which do not respond to current housing demands but also to the perennially unpopular, albeit necessary low income housing projects. In the interest of providing a low-impact solution which effectively mediates between speculative concerns and sensitivity to the identity and character of existing neighborhoods, inspiration was derived from unconventional sources. The low profile occupation tactics employed by squatters, artists and the homeless have been applied to the creation of a series of experimental shelter and circulation prototypes which ultimately inform the design of a mixed income housing project to be sited on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express a debt of gratitude to Dean Lars Lerup without whose interest and support this thesis would not have been possible. Special thanks to Richard Ingersoll for his continued faith and influence on my work process. I would also like to thank my advisors David Guthrie and Sanford Quinter for their influence and patience, Martin Chunpreecha for invaluable moral support and Buddhist soul food, and Merlin and Pearl, to whom this thesis is dedicated.



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TITLE DEED SECOND AVE.	
RENT \$250.	
With 1 Wine Bar	\$500.
With 2 Boutiques	675.
With 3 Gourmet Shops	950.
With 4 Galleries	1100.
With CO-OPS \$1400.	
<i>If a landlord owns ALL the buildings on a block, the rent is Doubled on Unrenovated Units in those buildings.</i>	

DAY GLEESON / DENNIS THOMAS

1

## UNCOOPERATIVE HOUSING

Can a willingness to take matters which affect your living condition into one's own hands be considered "uncooperative?".

Lack of respect for housing regulations, refusal to shoulder the burden of increasing rent for housing stock which is declining in quality rather than improving, and claiming space which is vacant, yet unavailable through legal channels, may, for many New Yorkers mean the difference between having a place to live, finding oneself out on the street.

"While the juxtaposition of extreme wealth and poverty have always been a conspicuous aspect of the culture of housing in New York City; the last decades have produced a physical commentary on this condition quite foreign to previous history. For the first time fundamental changes in the economy of this city have produced a reduction in housing stock, a worsening

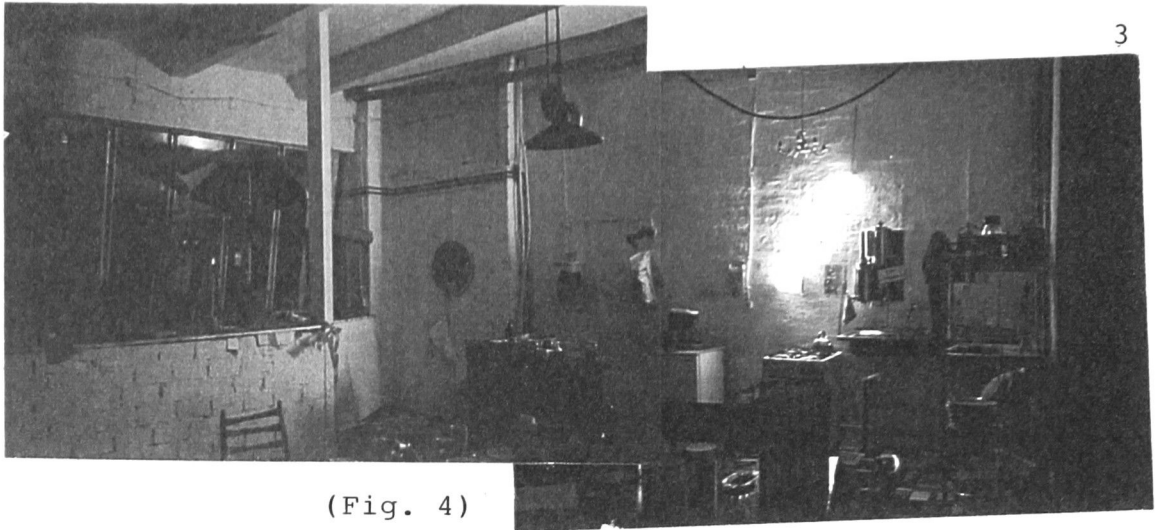


(Fig. 1)



(Fig. 2)

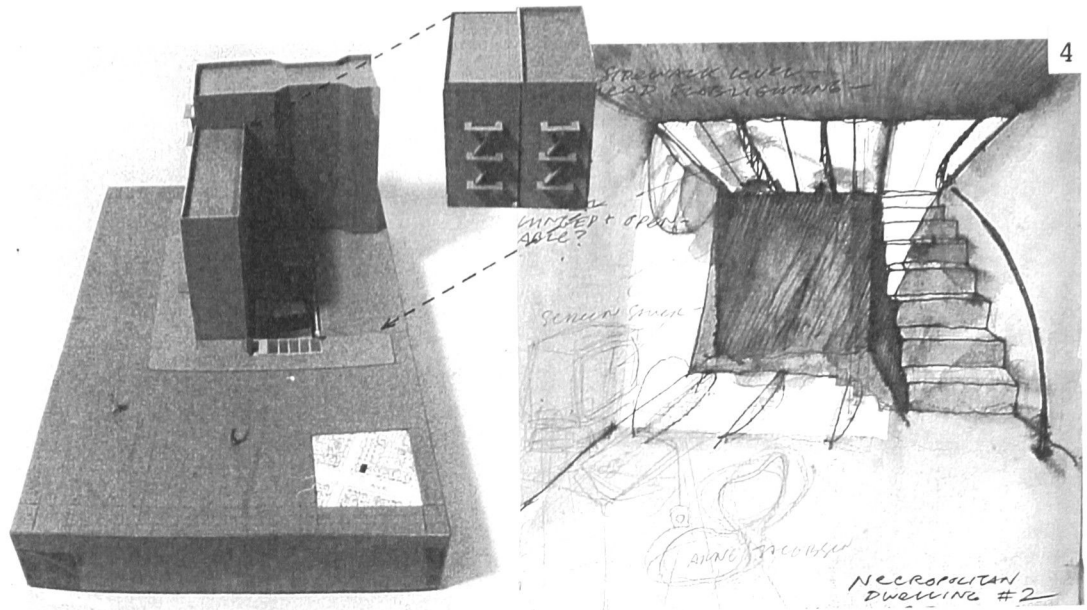
of the domestic living standards of the poor, and a widening gap between rich and poor, in which old patterns of upward social mobility appear to have stagnated."<sup>2</sup> In the wake of the almost 300 demolitions which took place on the Lower East Side of Manhattan between the years of 1977 and 1989,<sup>3</sup> the ground lies fallow for development catering to both extremes of the housing spectrum. Recent projects include the imposing slab of 'Red Square', (Fig. 1) whose thirteen stories dominate the north side of Houston Street between Avenues A and B, and the co-op conversion of Christadora House (completed 1987) on the eastern edge of Tompkins Square Park, which has become a local symbol for the eastward creep of gentrification in this area. To the east, the low income, low rise (three-story) Lower East Side I and II projects (Fig. 2) replace entire blocks



of what were formerly five and six-story tenements on East 5th and 6th Streets.

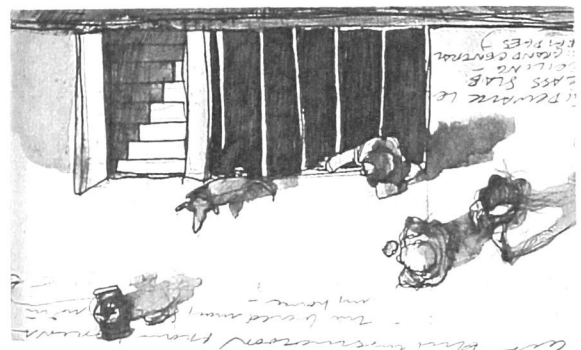
Meanwhile, city residents which represent the very bottom end of the housing spectrum often manage to live and survive purely by slipping between the cracks of the system, employing ad hoc<sup>4</sup> and sometimes illegal means to house themselves. This project began as an investigation of these unconventional housing solutions: The ubiquitous cardboard boxes which appear nightly in midtown Manhattan, (Fig. 3) but disappear surreptitiously by morning, squats (Fig. 4) and homesteads which need to defend themselves against housing authority raids and police-assisted evictions<sup>5</sup> as well as industrial lofts which double as artists' living spaces which need to disguise any sign of 24-hour occupation.

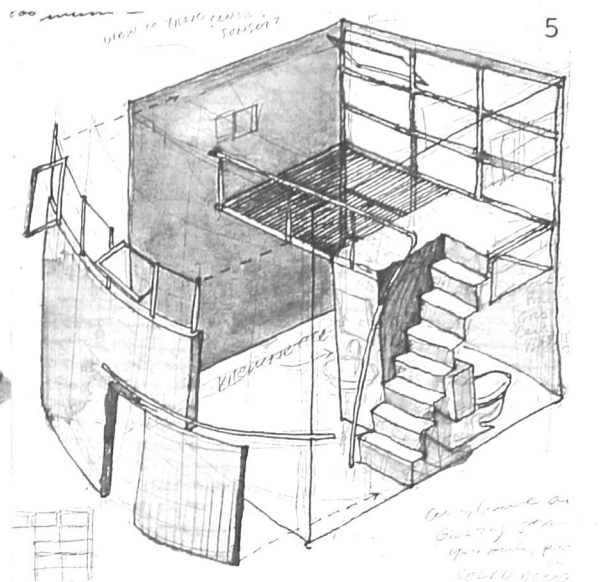
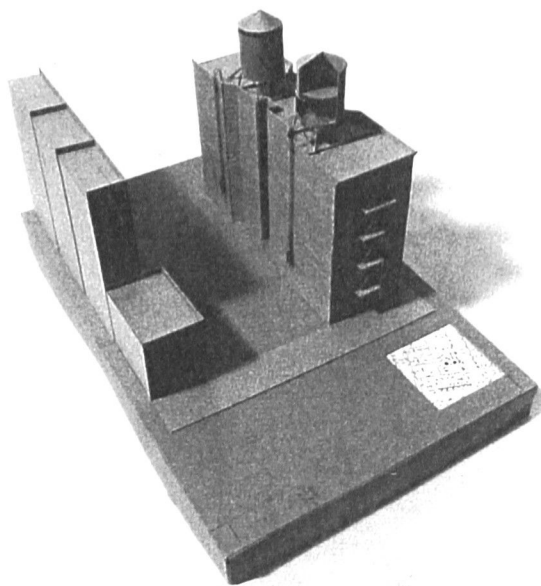
The following experimental prototypes do not describe solutions, so much as illustrate tactics for inhabiting the unclaimed territory; the uninhabited spaces that exist unused in a city because they remain unseen:



(Fig. 5)

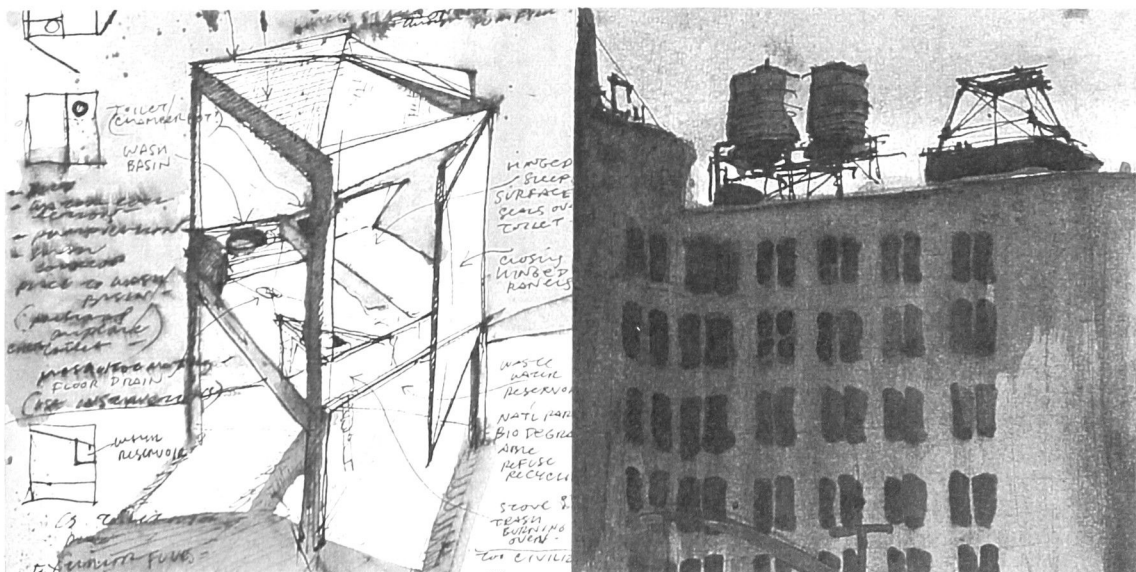
PORTABLE SKY Describes a method for inhabiting a cellar space which would not normally be considered a comfortable or even tolerable living situation. This model displays a method to introduce maximum natural light, combined with easily movable functions within the space. (If you want to wake up to sunlight, move your entire bedroom over to the sky.) As well as artificial ventilation to create a habitable situation.

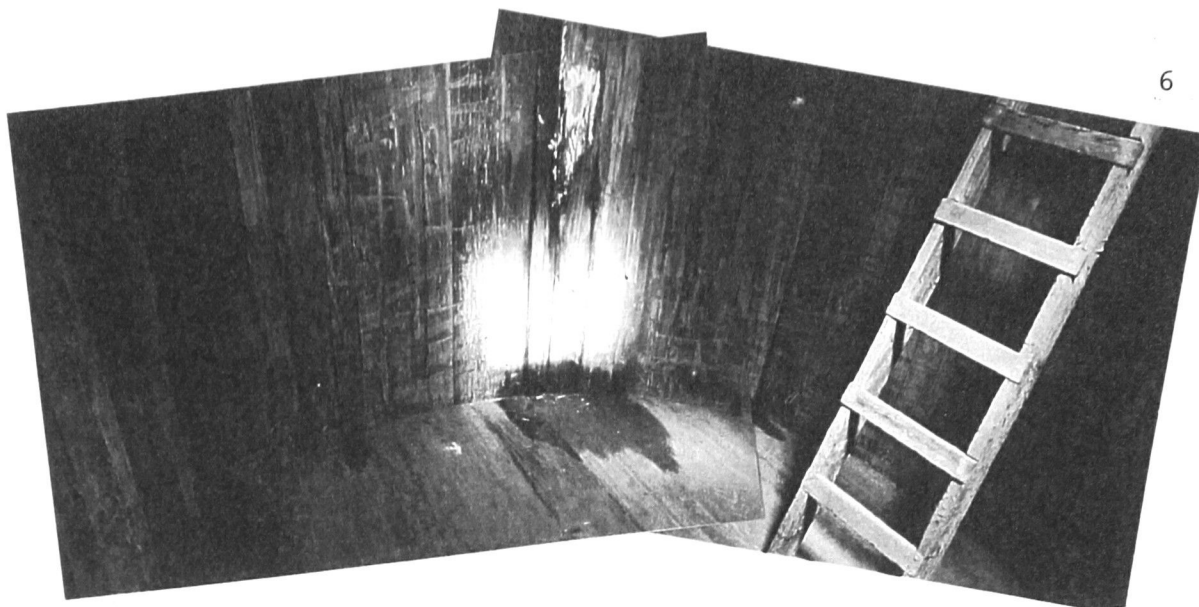




(Fig. 6) Rendering showing possible space saving organization for tower interiors.

HERMIT TOWER: A variety of anti-social housing in which an individual can, through efficient use of space, inhabit one of the many vacant water towers which punctuate the skyline of Manhattan, and enjoy autonomy as well as a view.

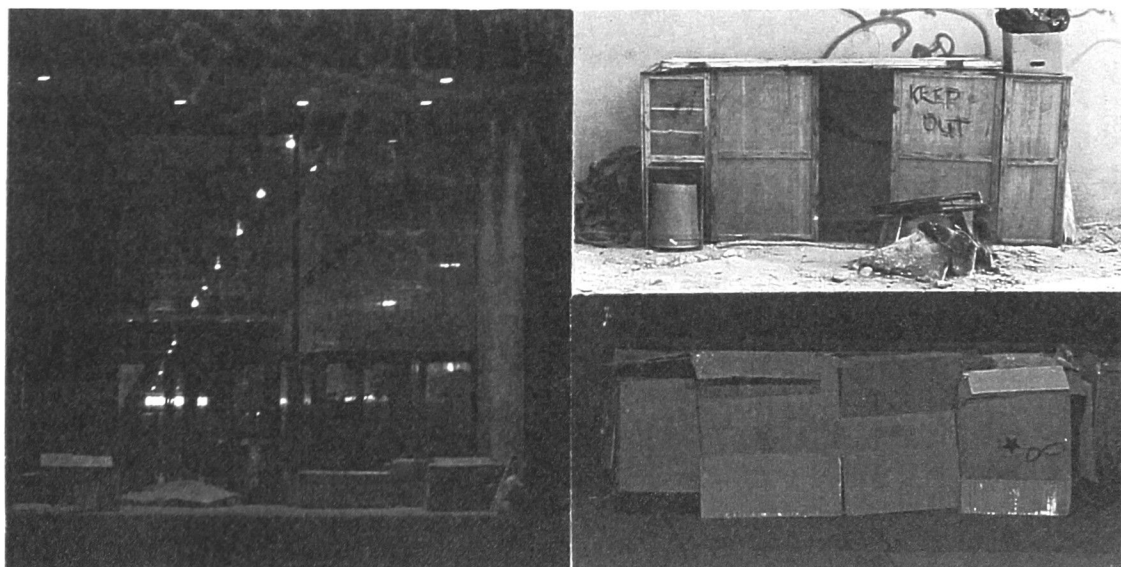


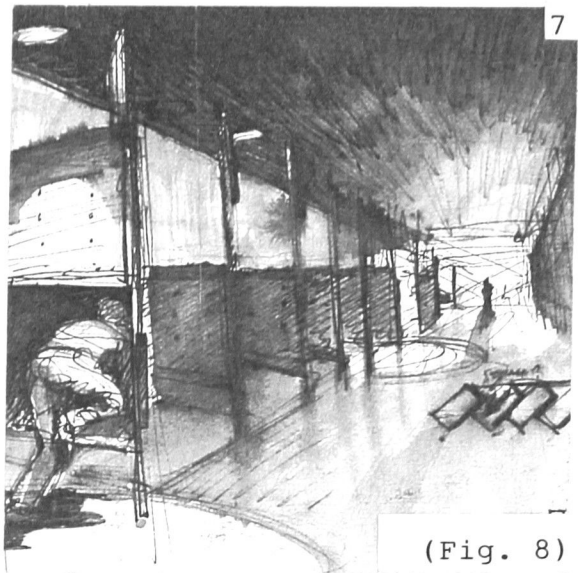
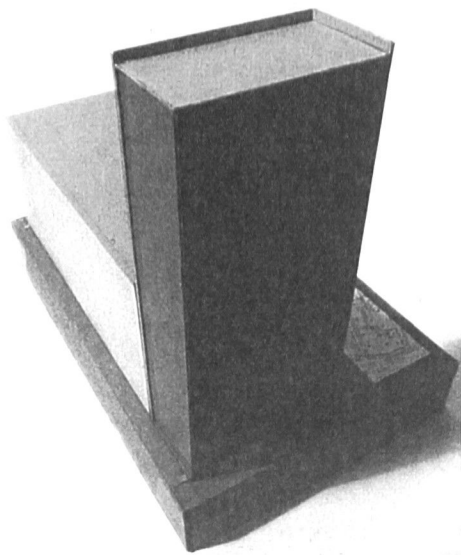


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(Fig. 7) Typical water tower interior.

(Fig. 3) Encampment of boxes on 7th Avenue seeking additional shelter in building foyer - 3:35 a.m.



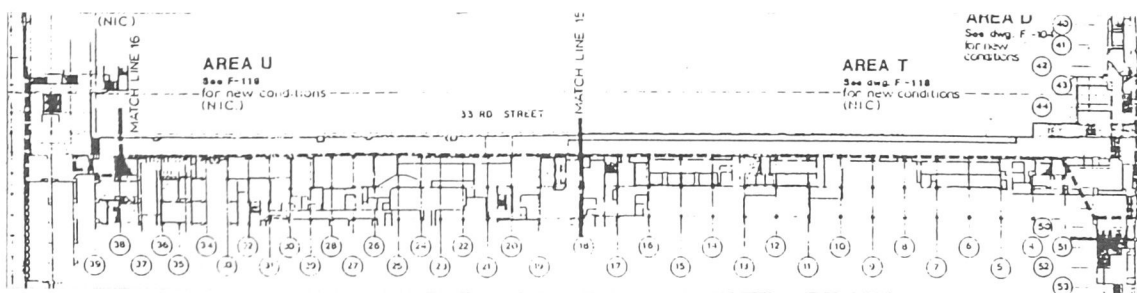


(Fig. 8)

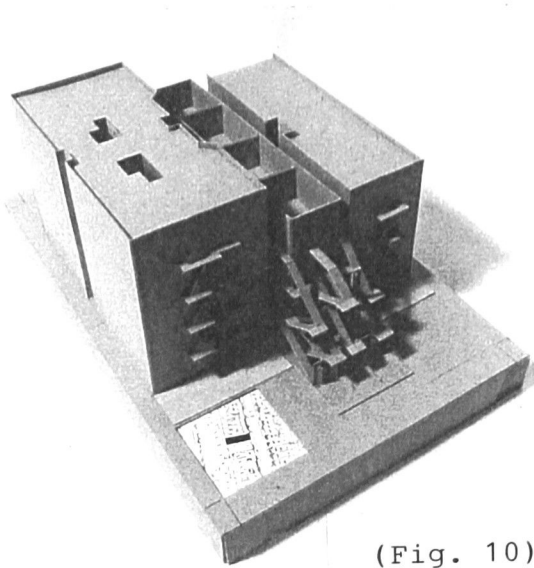
**SUBWAY SHELTER:** A scheme for utilizing the unused Hudson Tunnels: an unused pedestrian thoroughfare which lies below 33rd Street for the 900 foot distance between 6th and 7th Avenue connecting Penn Station to the Herald Square Subway station. Invisible, city-owned real estate; like many abandoned subway tunnels and stations, which in this sketch proposal, could be utilized not for permanent dwelling, but as a possible shelter and public bathing facility.

(Fig. 9)

Subterranean site of possible shelter (courtesy of N.Y. Metropolitan Transit Authority)



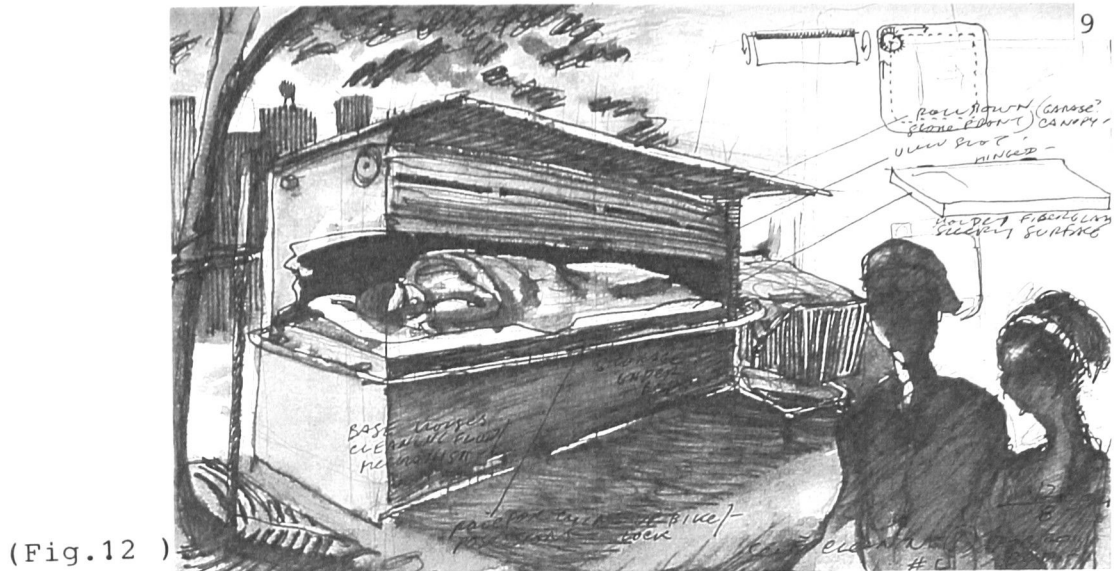




ESCAPIST HOUSING: Not so much a strategy for habitation, as it is a plan for circulation. It is intended to provide individual, private access with no shared circulation beyond the sidewalk, to all the residents of the building gratifying, at the expense of all other considerations, a desire for absolute security and autonomy among tenants.

PARANOID RETREAT: A windowless retreat to serve a security conscious tenant: Ambient light and views of the outside world are offered by picture-window sized TV monitors showing entrances to building and CNN broadcasts.





**HOMELESS KIOSK:** A temporary individual shelter which houses one occupant: appearing to the casual observer to be a newspaper stand closed for the evening. It is unoccupiable during the day when engaged in a self-cleaning cycle.

The basic tactics that are a common thread in all of these examples are those of camouflage, stealth, and subterfuge; to occupy a city that is considered not just dense, but impenetrable, by slipping into the cracks and claiming that space which is unaccounted for - not being fought over, or perhaps sitting right out in the open under unsuspecting noses.

In my search for a site where I might be able to implement some of these strategies, I was very fortunate to discover what I would consider to be a very large crack in the surface of the city; extending from Houston Street in the south, to the north side of East 3rd Street on the Lower

East Side, occupying a total area of twelve city lots measuring 25' x 100'. 10

This site is not entirely unique in an area which has witnessed hundreds of demolitions since the late 1970's, however many recent projects have taken advantage of this fertile situation by creating monolithic projects running parallel to the street grid; introducing a new consistency-a sudden regularity to an area which derives much of its architectural character from piece meal smaller scale development upon the narrowly sliced "gridiron" of the Commissioners Plan of 1811.

While it is true that this type of design manages to avoid many of the problems inherent to single lot infill housing in New York, the subject of numerous design competitions since the last century, I believe that such overt presence and large scale homogeneity serves not only to visually disrupt the character of existing neighborhoods, but in the case of low-cost housing to stigmatize the occupants as well: While walking down East 5th Street in the vicinity of the Lower East Side I project I was asked by a resident: "Do you know where you are?". Implying that it should have been obvious to one that I had left the "neighborhood", and entered the "project."

This stigmatization is at the core of community resistance encountered by low-income or subsidized housing project proposals: ("There goes the neighborhood.") It is not the prospect of having poorer neighbors, but the concentration

and visibility that will have an effect of ones perception of their community and ultimately on real estate values.

Community disapproval is certainly not the only front of resistance to providing affordable housing. Recent years have seen a continuing plunge in city funding allocated to housing programs, however a recent glimmer of hope has been offered by the success of projects designed along the lines of the single room occupancy hotel.

In a recent New York Times article, city officials report that "once built, supported S.R.O.'s are cheaper to operate than shelters, which cost the city between \$18,000. and \$21,000. per bed per year. The cost at a supported S.R.O. is \$8,000. to \$10,000. per resident."<sup>6</sup>

One reason for the lower cost is that S.R.O. residents are not transient. Tenants are offered a long term place to live unlike a shelter, which allows him/her to hold a job; to be financially stable and therefore able to pay rent.

The success of the S.R.O.'s indicates to one that there are responsible, low income residents of New York who are simply not being served by the range of existing housing stock.

It is my intention to create a variety of housing that does not isolate and serve a single income level, but rather combines many income levels: If the City of New York, currently one of the largest real estate holders in New York, does certainly turn a profit on a portion of its

landholdings, why is it inconceivable to combine profit and subsidy in the same project? 12

Low cost housing does not need to be a liability!

Through innovative planning it is possible to quietly infiltrate a neighborhood with a large project of great diversity, and to surmount the problems inherent to combining income levels in a situation as intimate as the place one lives.

A very similar prototype is offered by the public spaces of New York itself, a primarily pedestrian city, whose denizens are perhaps more accustomed to rubbing elbows with strangers of tremendous social diversity than most other American cities. The streets and subways of New York operate a bit like one vast public interior: A very large party where you don't know too many people, but are welcome nevertheless.

The site I've chosen extends northward from Houston St. between Avenues B and C, slipping between tenements, whose scarred party walls still show traces of the neighborhood's former density; to the north side of East 3rd St.

It is interesting to note, that many tenements still standing, which previously would have been sandwiched between many more of their kind, now enjoy a completely unforeseen mini- "Tower in the Park" situation - enjoyed by few (if any) other types of dwelling in the city: This area has gone from a maximum built density in the early part of this century, to an almost minimum ratio of built

to unbuilt in some areas; neither of these conditions in<sup>13</sup> my opinion, are optimum for a comfortable yet vital urban situation. Density is an enjoyable feature of urban life.

The planning of my individual lots takes into consideration the punctuation of the street facade with courtyards allowing light and air to penetrate the streets, as well as the buildings themselves, more easily.

While the courtyards, for security reasons, are not freely accessible from the street to non-residents; visually and spatially they extend from the interior of the project into the public realm of the street.

In this project, all paranoia inducing, semi-private interior spaces have been eliminated, corridors and hallways have been replaced by exterior, light admitting, steel grid stairways and walkways - which not only allow greater light penetration into habitable interior spaces, but create a situation where on the exterior, all circulation is visually and aurally linked through a number of levels - as in the vertical light 'slots' which connect courtyards; the courtyards themselves turn circulation into spectacle: minimal light and sight obstruction allows self surveillance by tenants.

In short, I have attempted to create a sharp distinction between public and private. One is in public until one enters his/her own apartment.

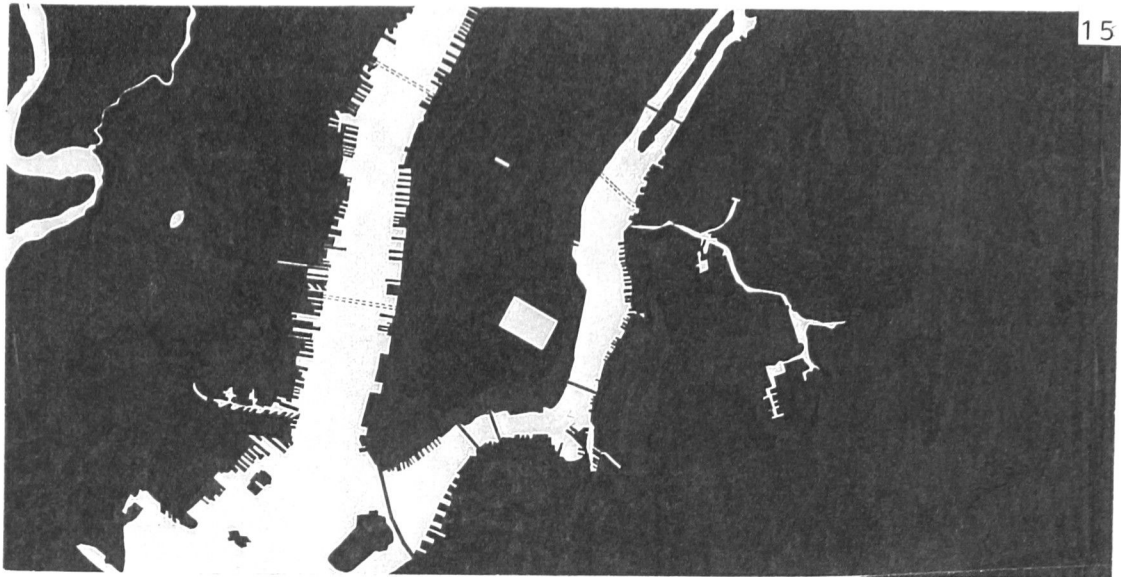
This project involves a number of apartment types, from the smallest 144 square foot S.R.O. type unit to the 1,728 square foot loft unit.

Steel frame construction and simple partition wall 14  
interior division allow a degree of flexibility which can  
adapt to whichever unit sizes prove to be popular.

The courtyards are served by stairs which access  
alternate sides of the same housing block (Fig.22). This  
variety of circulation is designed to reduce the number of  
stairways and catwalks on the exterior of the building,  
obstructing less light into the courtyards as well as pro-  
viding access to only half of a housing block in a particular  
courtyard.

This reduces the "apparent" density of the block which  
you might be living in - you never see all of the people  
living in your building. Also, the doorway and fenestration  
patterns on the exterior of the building do not reveal the  
configuration of apartments or S.R.O. units behind the walls.  
Just as the tactics of stealth and camouflage are used to  
disguise the size and extent of this 360 unit project; the  
same strategies are used on a smaller scale to distribute  
units and divert attention from the unit size, as well as the  
income level of a particular occupant.

In this way I believe that it is possible for an  
architect to employ tactics of stealth and subterfuge to  
allievate some of the friction of a mixed income solution,  
and therefore contribute to the quality of urban living for  
many whose housing choices are limited.



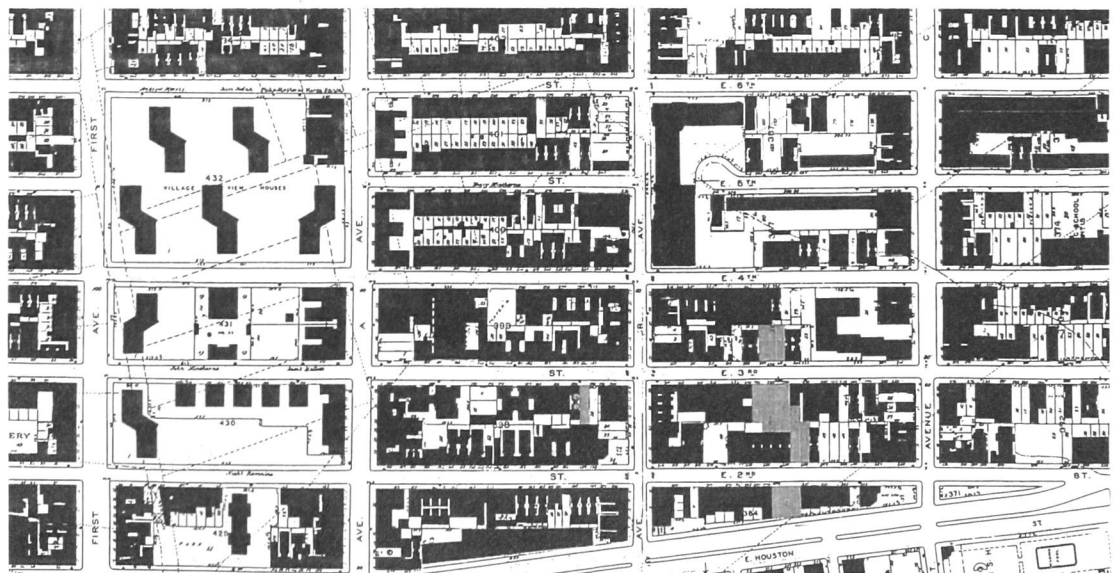
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(Fig. 13) Site map of Manhattan Island, showing area of inset.

Following 2 pages: (Fig.15) Map indicating sites to the North and South of East 2nd Street.

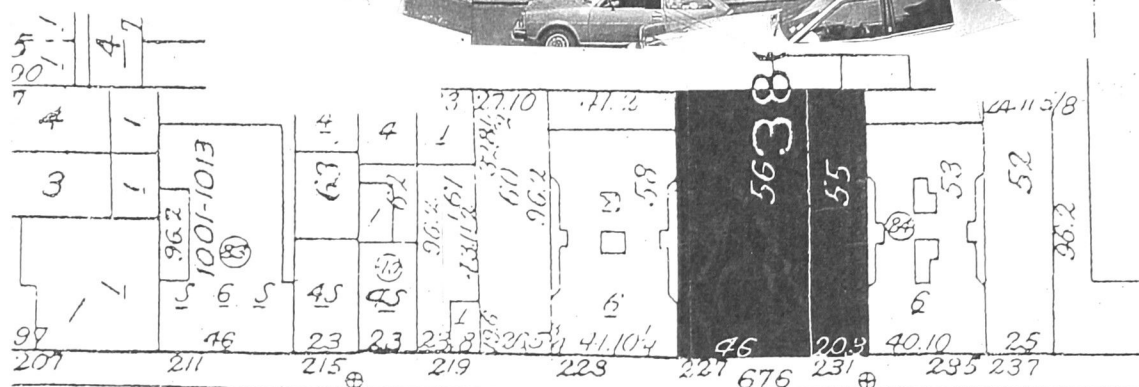
(Fig.16) Map indicating sites to the North and South of East 3rd Street.

(Fig.14) Site map showing project site.

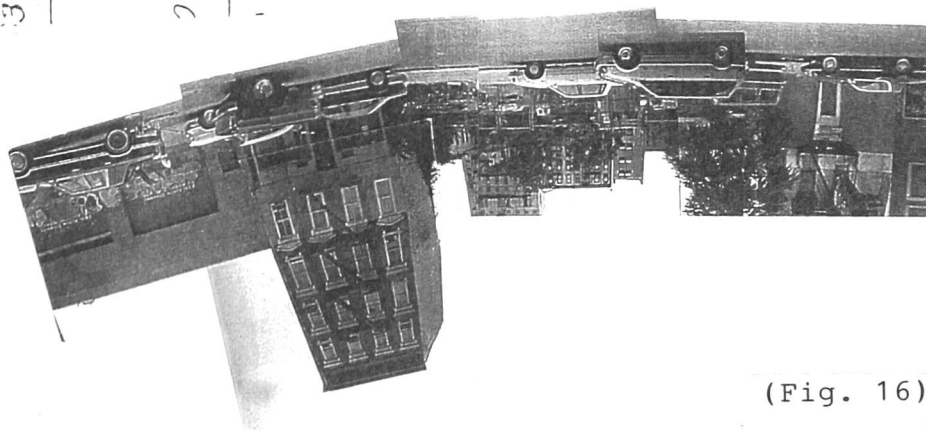
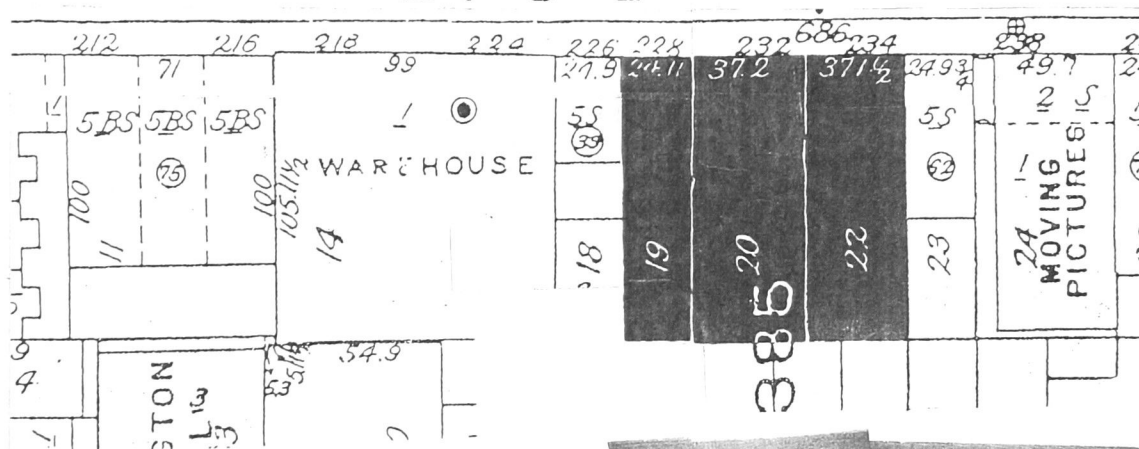




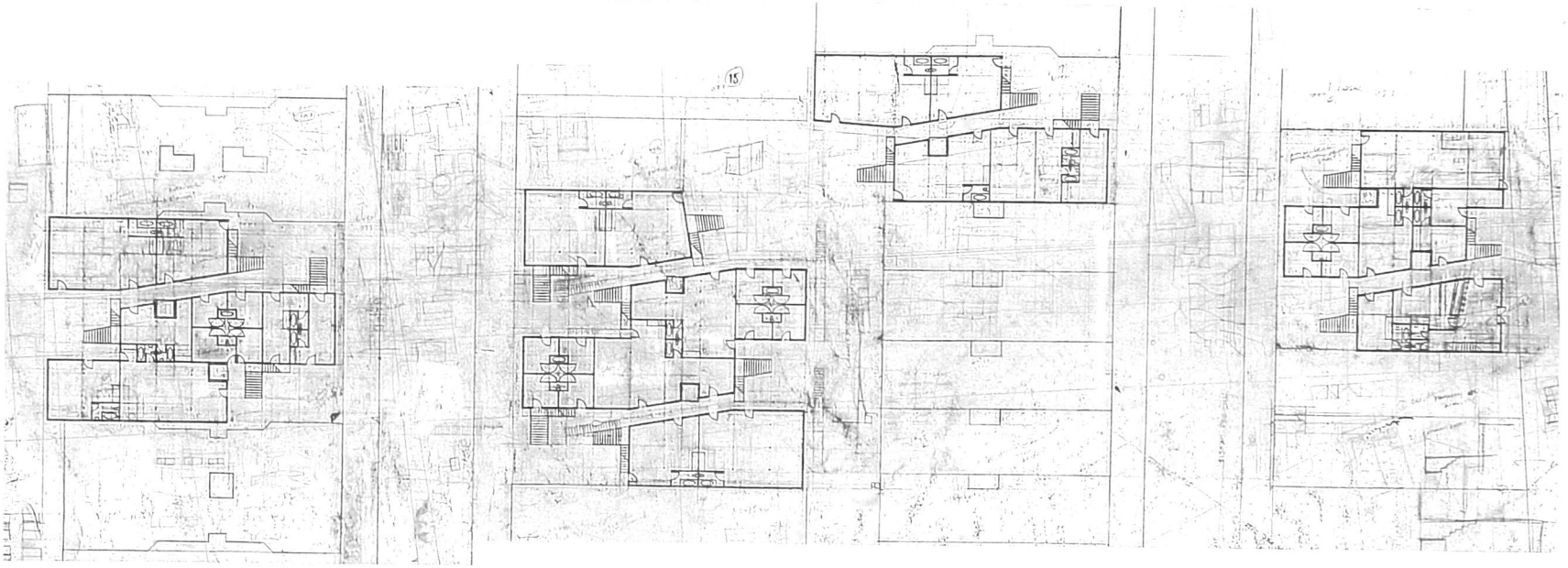




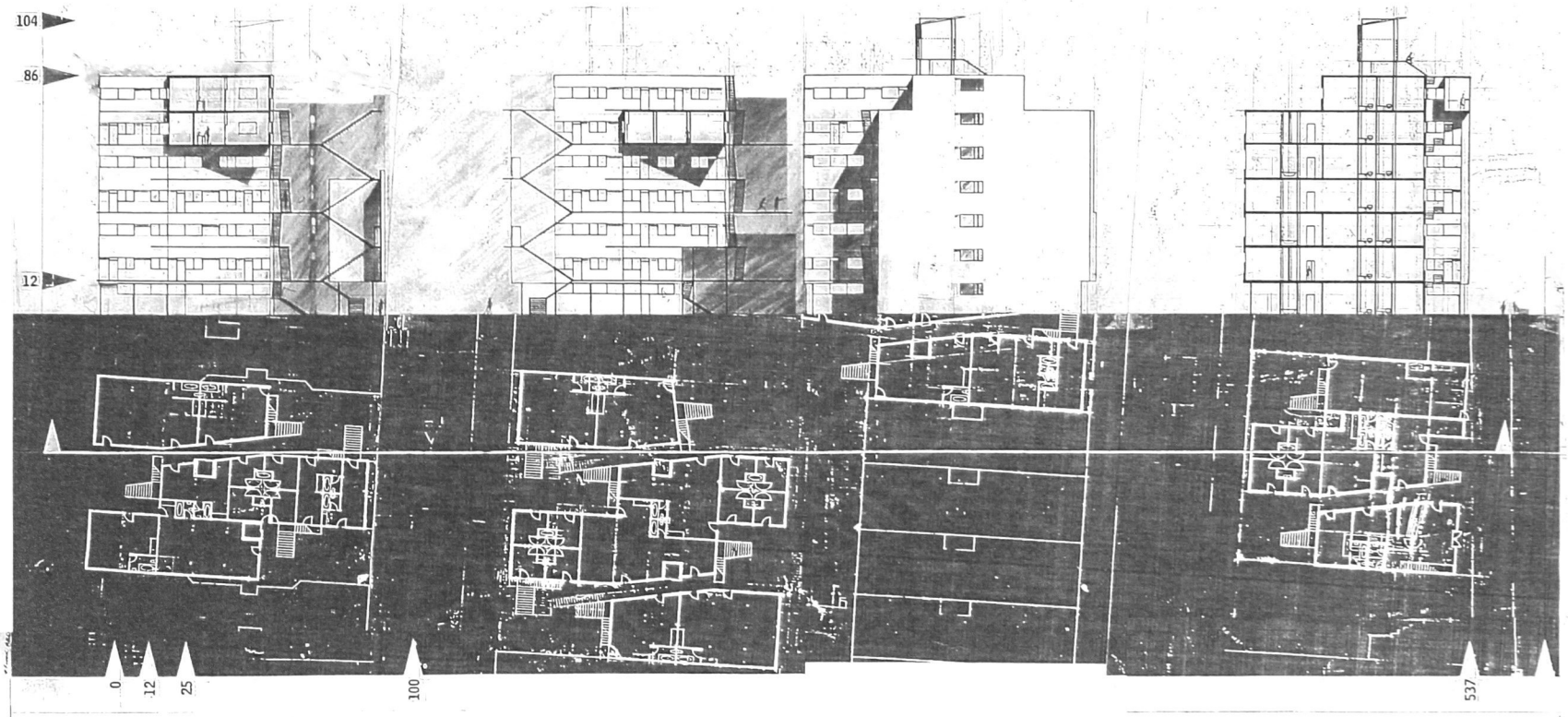
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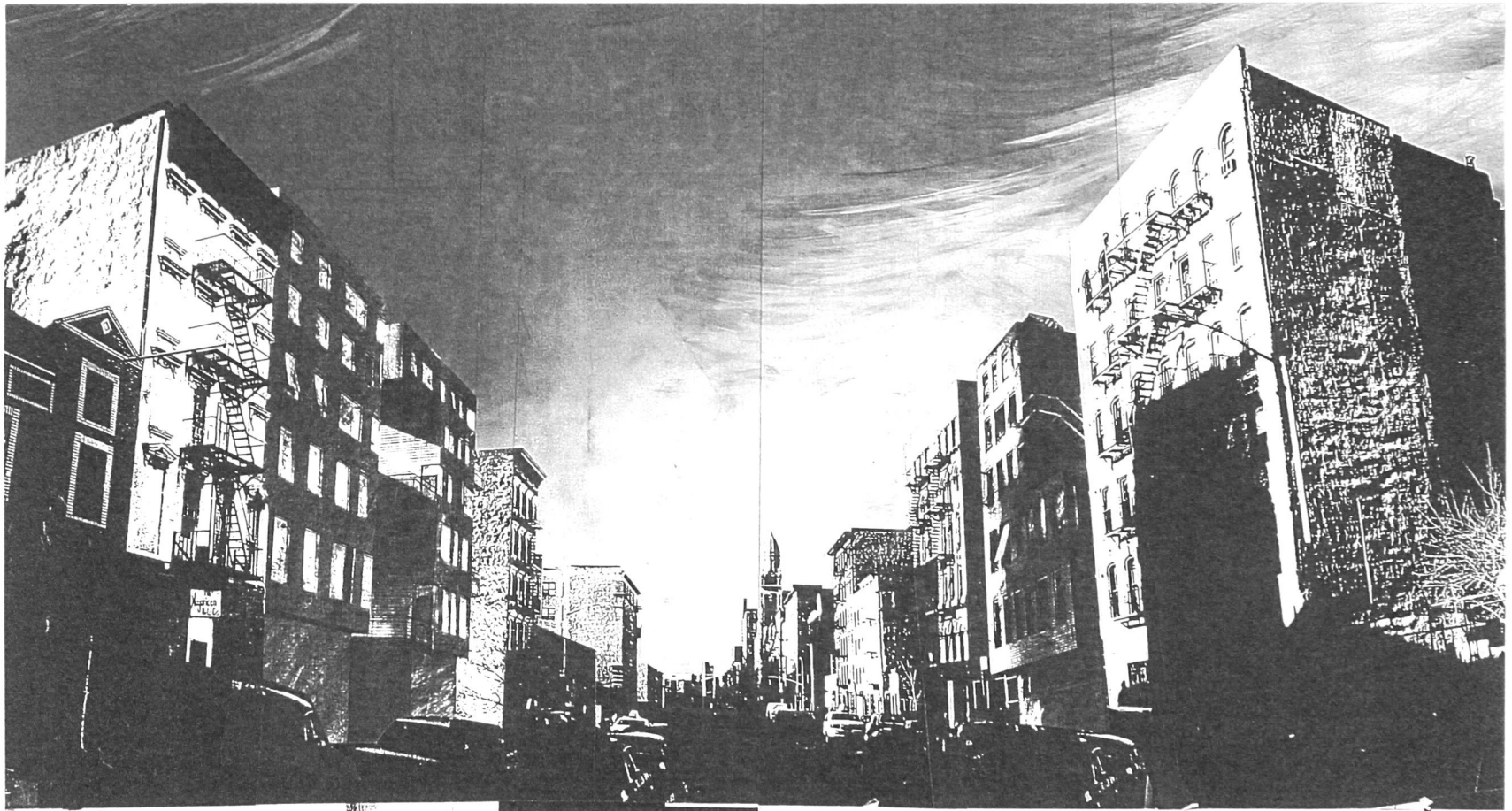
(Fig. 16)



(Fig.17) Ground floor plan of entire site - note the connecting "circulation slots" between courtyards which extend upward to the sky six stories above, and "four-share" bathrooms for use by S.R.O. type units: Each S.R.O. unit shares a bathroom with three others, and a kitchen with seven other residents.

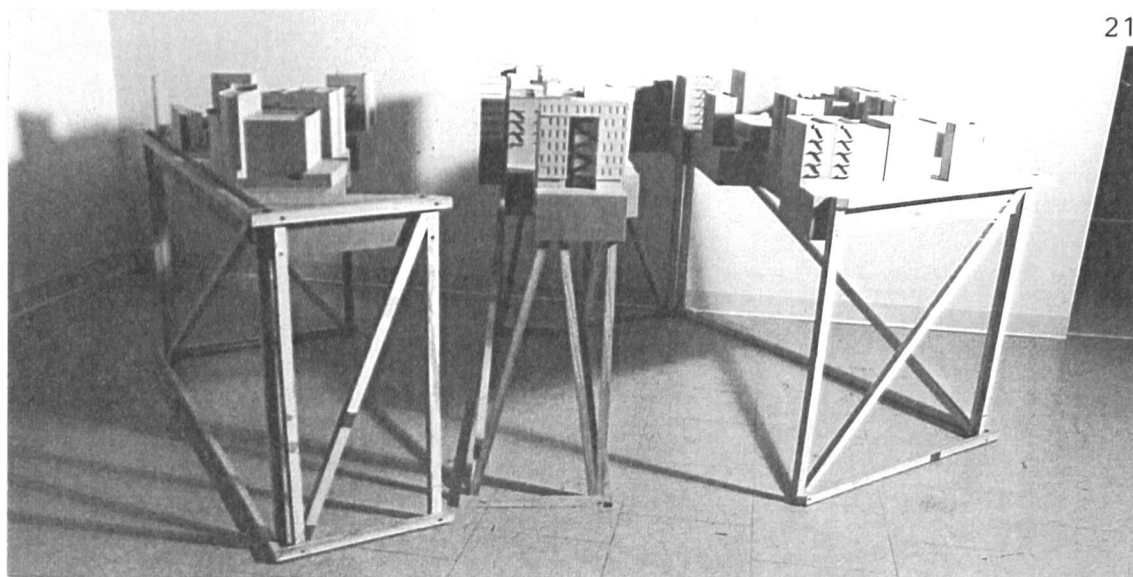


(Fig.18) Sectional rendering of complete site showing views into courtyards served by scissoring stairways, as well as consistent courtyard fenestration pattern which disguises the type of unit which exists behind the facade wall.



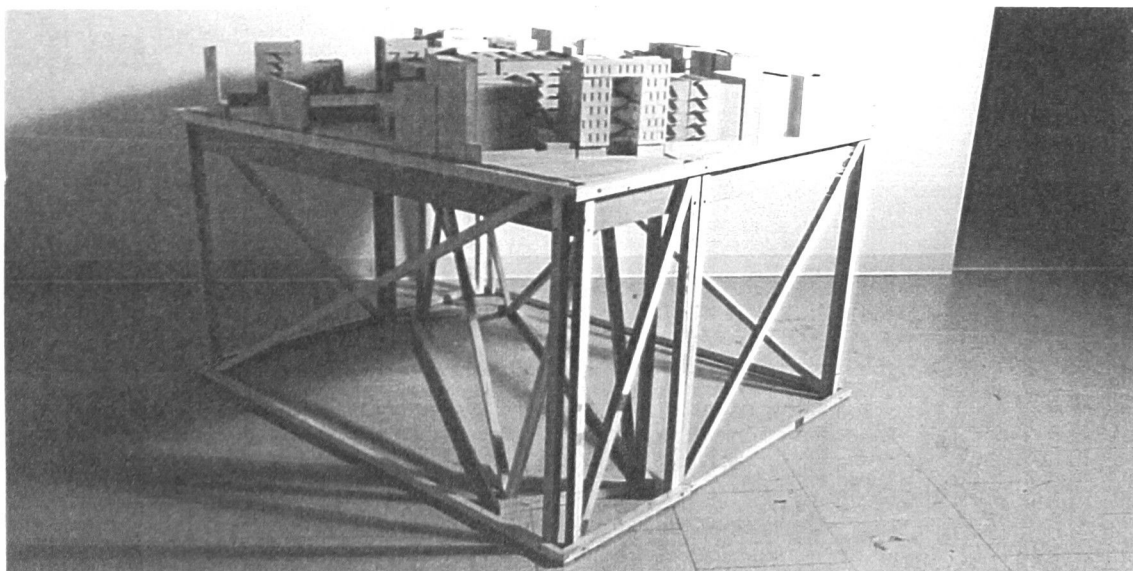
(Fig.19) Rendering of view down East 3rd Street looking west, showing character of street facades (North and South).

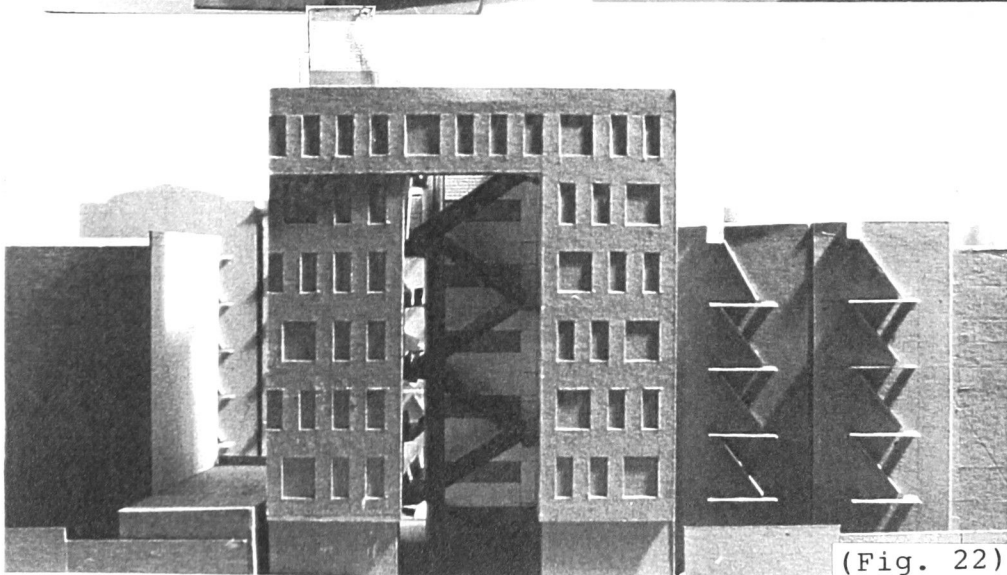
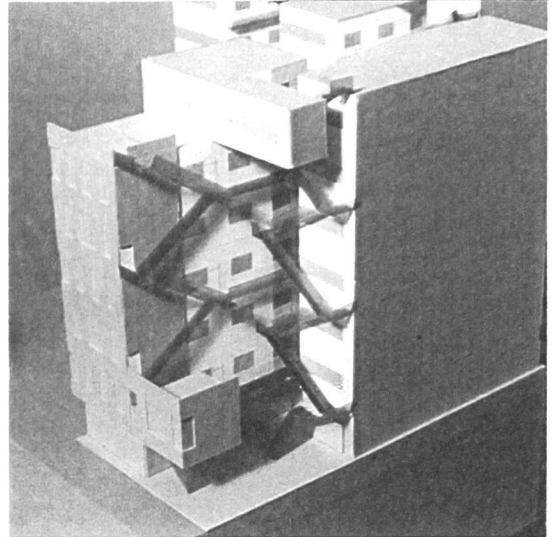
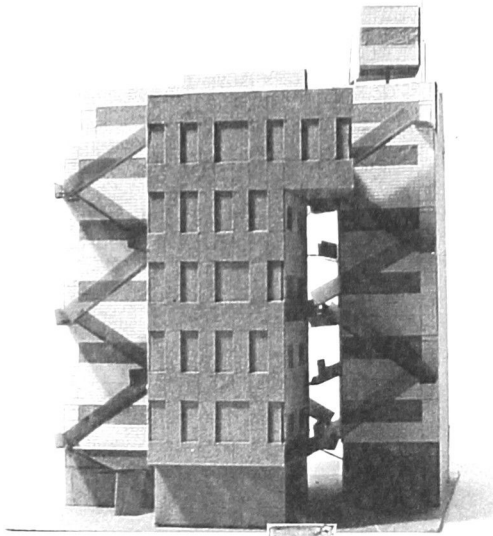
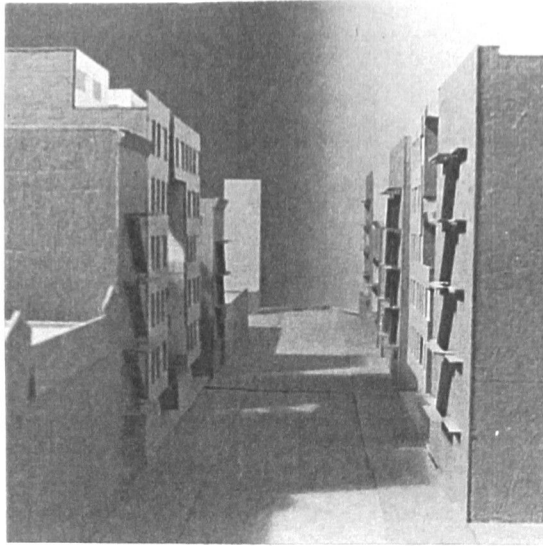


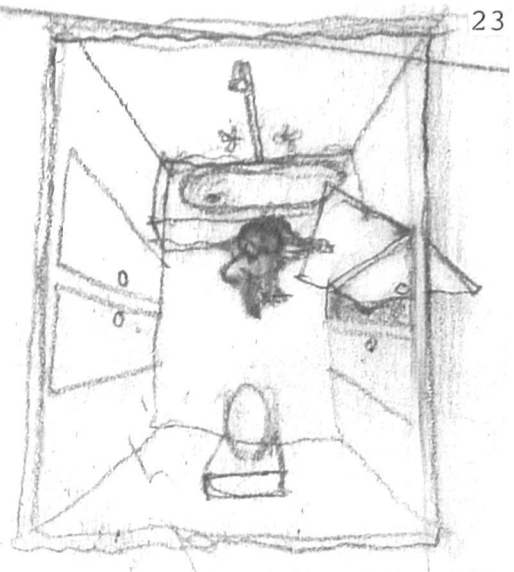
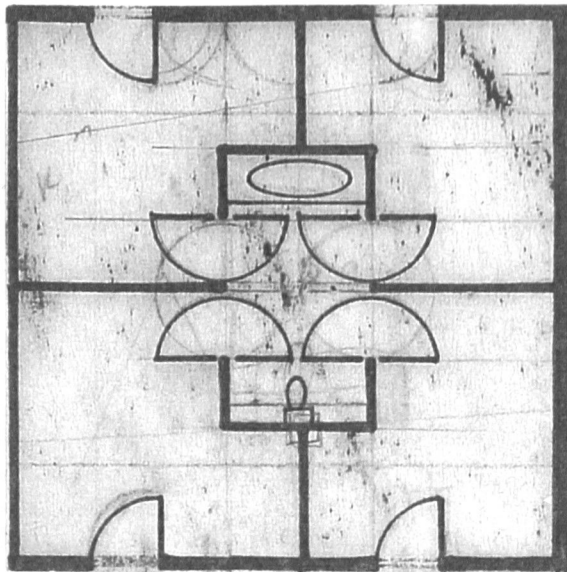


(Fig.20) Site model is designed to separate; revealing isolated "infiltration". In keeping with the spirit of Ad Hocism in which this project was conceived; all materials, and hardware employed in constructing this, as well as the tactic prototype models, have been "found" in the hallways of Rice University or surrounding streets.

(Fig. 21)





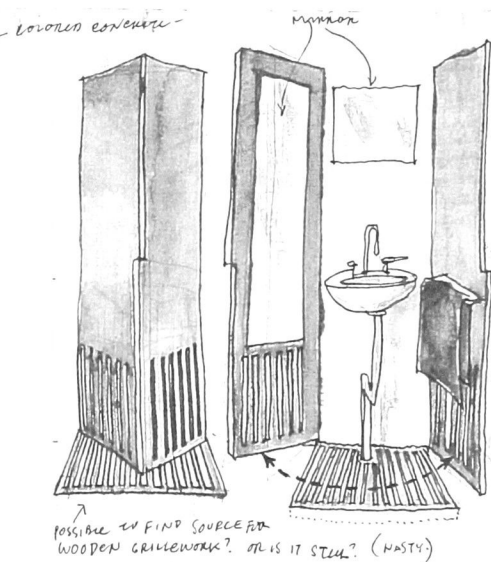
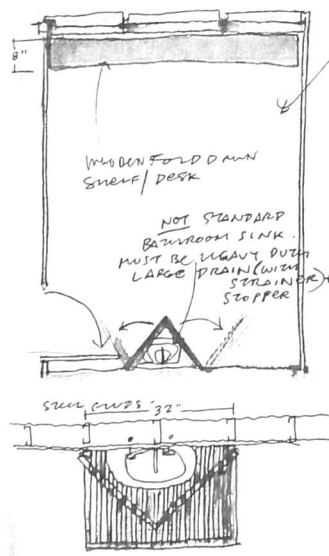


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(Fig.23) "Four share" bathroom featuring double door; to allow interior access to bathrooms for S.R.O. occupants, without stigmatizing 'hallway lines' - double door provides security, psychological as well as actual.

previous page: (Fig.22) model views

(Fig.24) S.R.O. unit "Vanity Closet".





## FOOTNOTES

1. Day Gleeson, Dennis Thomas., image as reproduced in Your House Is Mine, New York: Bullet Space, 1993 unpaginated.
2. Richard Plunz, A History of Housing In New York City, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. p. 322.
3. Nadia Coen, "Ten Years of Demolition", Your House Is Mine, New York: Bullet Space, 1993 unpaginated.
4. Charles Jencks, Adhocism (The Case For Improvisation) New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972. P. 16. Jencks defines "Ad Hoc" as revealing the desire for immediate and purposeful action which permeates everyday life.
5. Matthew Lee in "Homesteaders in New York Neighborhoods" The Catholic Worker, August-September 1994. p. 1 cites an example where "one hundred and fifty police officers arrived unannounced and ordered all residents to pack their belongings and leave within 15 minutes" (this mass eviction is still in litigation in N.Y. County State Supreme Court.)
6. Shawn G. Kennedy, "A New Look In Housing: Refurbishing S.R.O.S." New York Times, March 28th, 1995.

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Lee, Matthew, "Homesteaders in New York Neighborhoods," The Catholic Worker, August-September 1994, p. 1, 8.

Wishnia, Steven, "Home is Where the Squat Is," Voice, August 23, 1994, p. 27.