



Recent Projects

Author(s): Kazuyo Sejima

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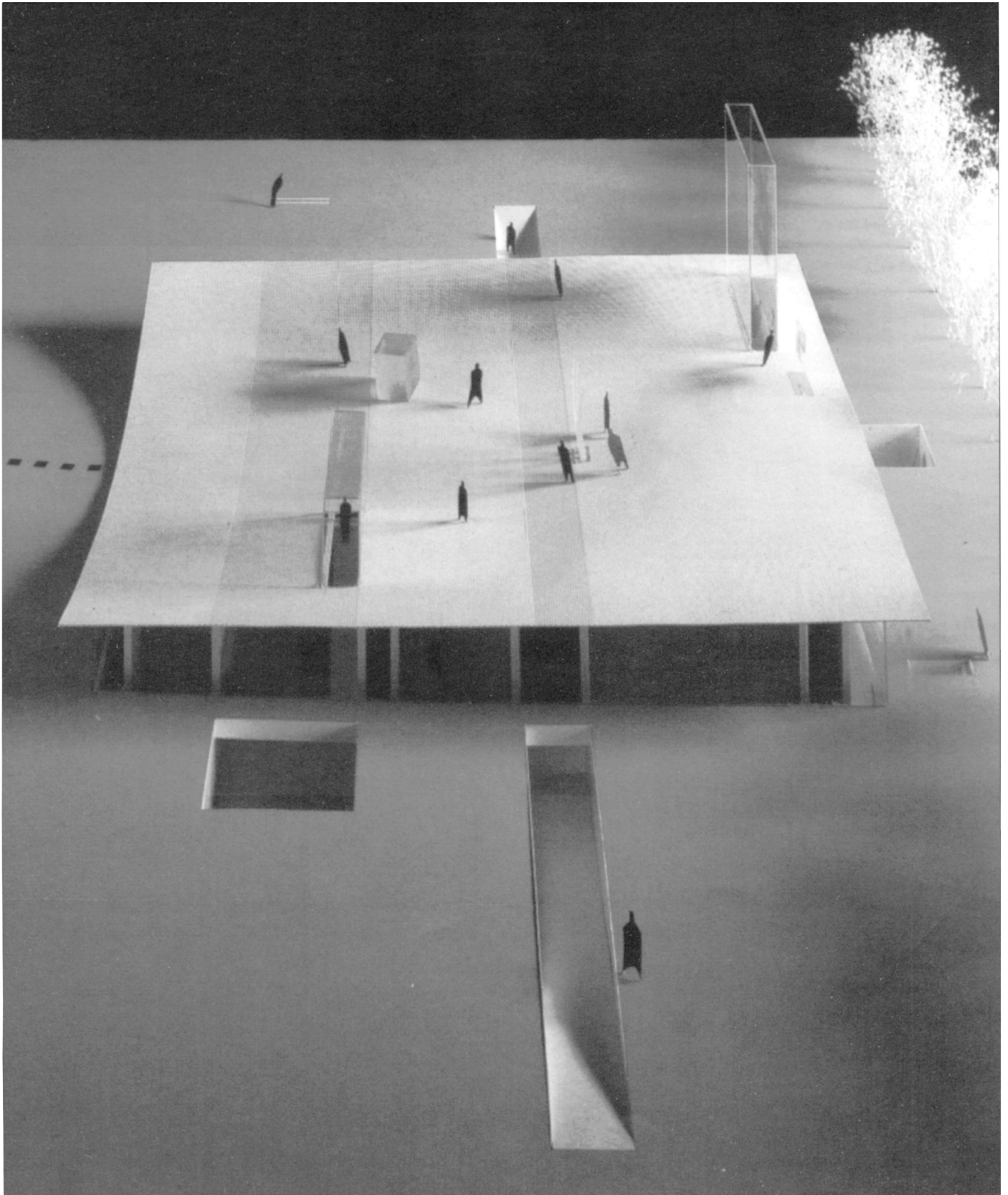
Kazuyo Sejima

Recent Projects

Multi Media Studio

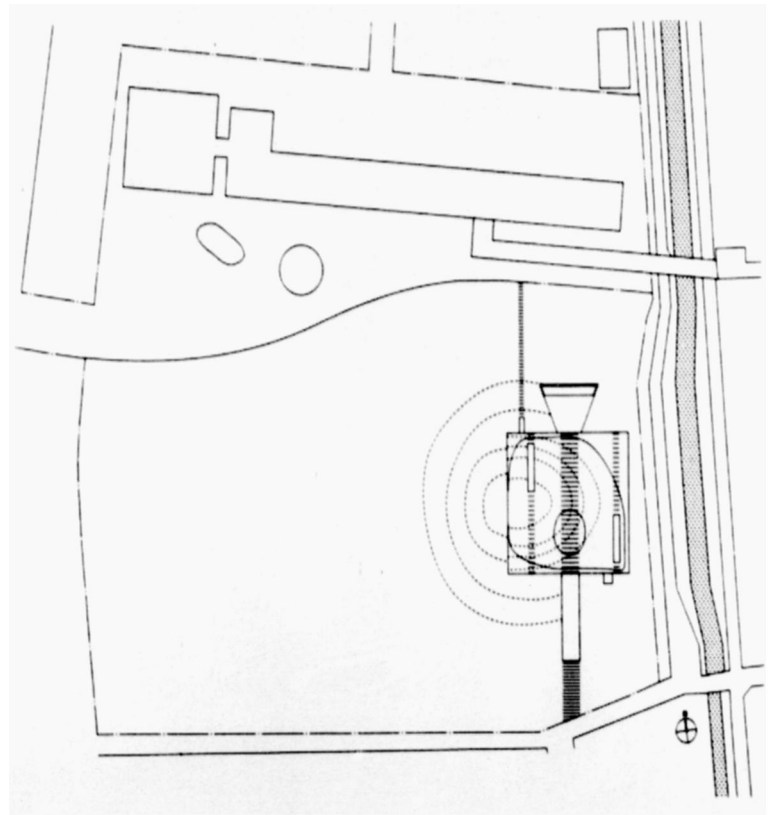
Gifu Kitagata Apartments

Metropolitan Housing Studies





View of model showing east façade

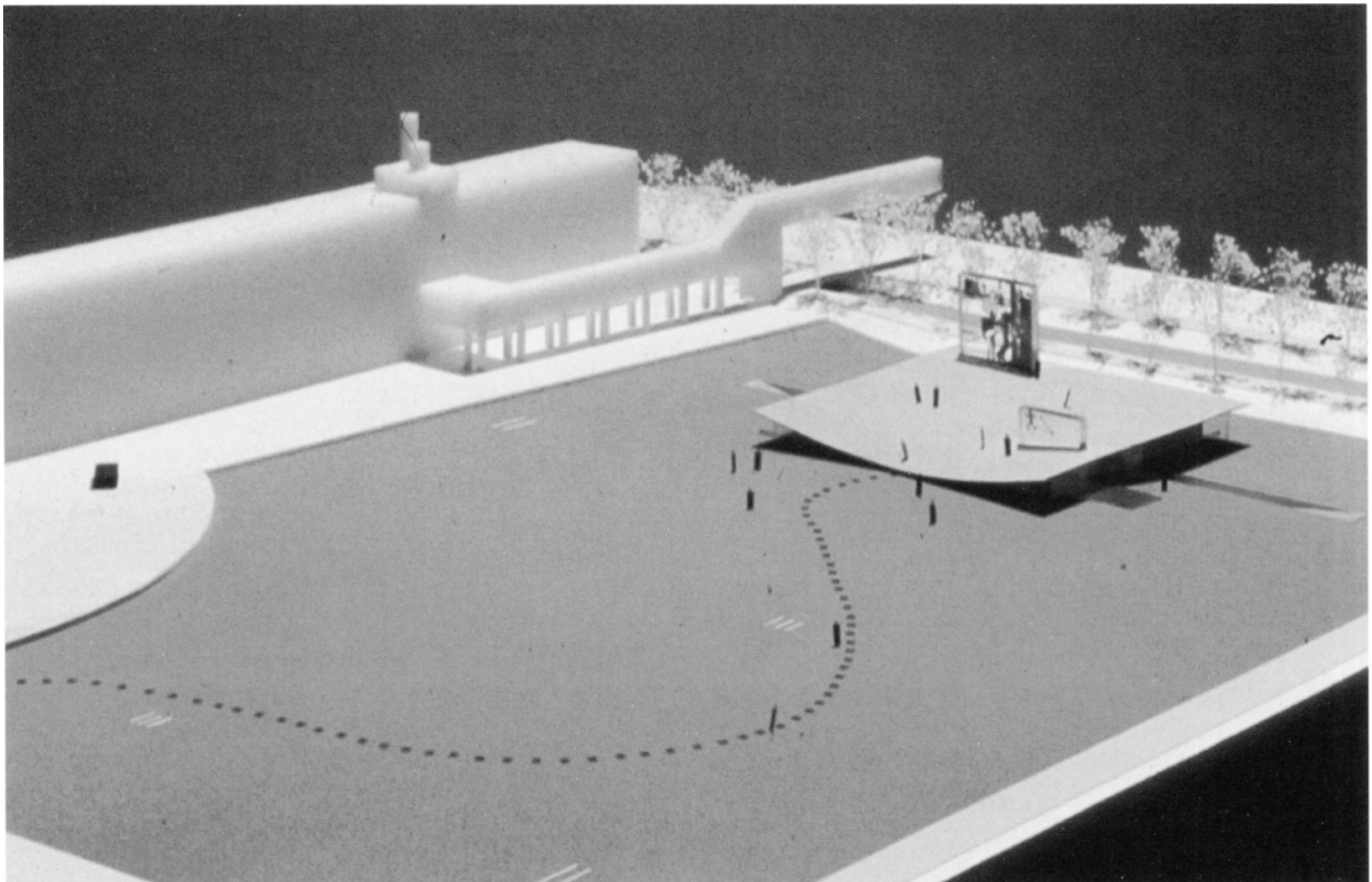


Frontispiece: view from south of
Multi Media Studio

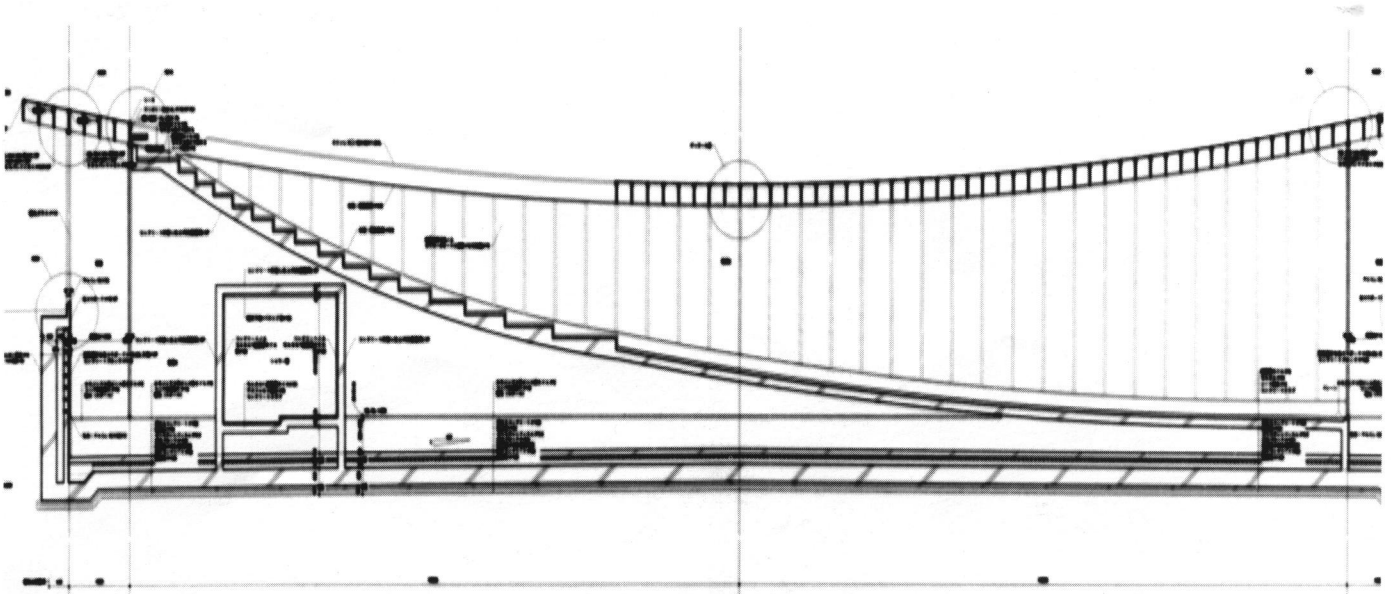
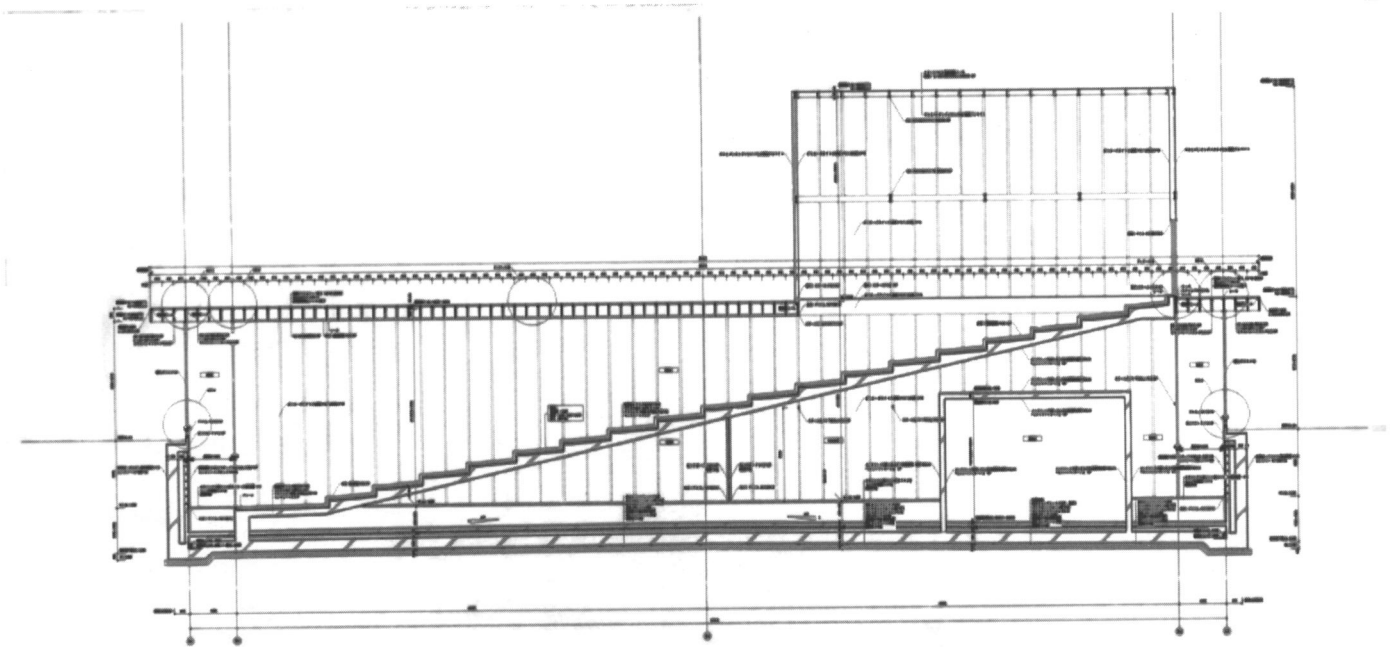
Site plan

Multi Media Studio, 1995

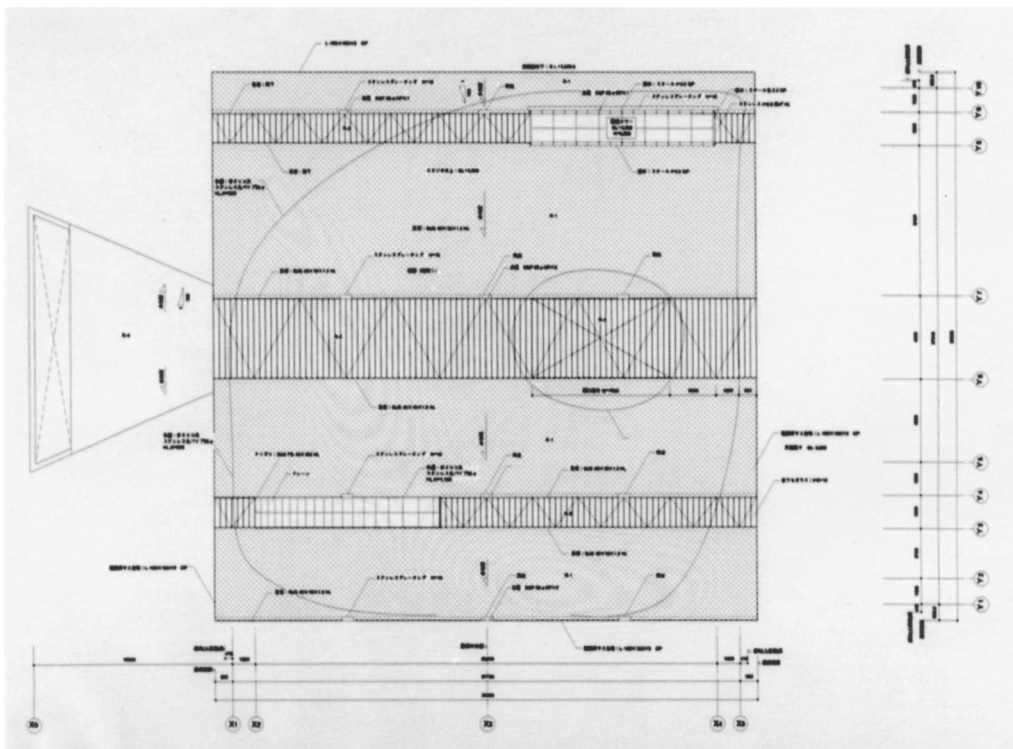
Located in a regional city two hours from Tokyo, the Multi Media Studio expands an existing school to provide facilities for computer artists. The design reflects both this new art form and the particular siting of the building on a flat grassland plane in one corner of an expansive green campus. The client requested that the building include a gallery open to students and to the general public. The program required high ceilings throughout; in order to blend the resulting volume with the environment, the building was submerged 1.8 meters below grade. A square plan plaza with a parabolic section surmounts this volume, dipping on one edge to meet the ground. A vertical screen rising from the roof plaza presents a floating image over the campus green. Access to the spaces below occurs from the plaza, which doubles as an outdoor exhibition space. Inside, the studio and ateliers are arranged in strips surrounded by corridors that shelter the work spaces from the external environment. Individual rooms are oriented toward the natural light.



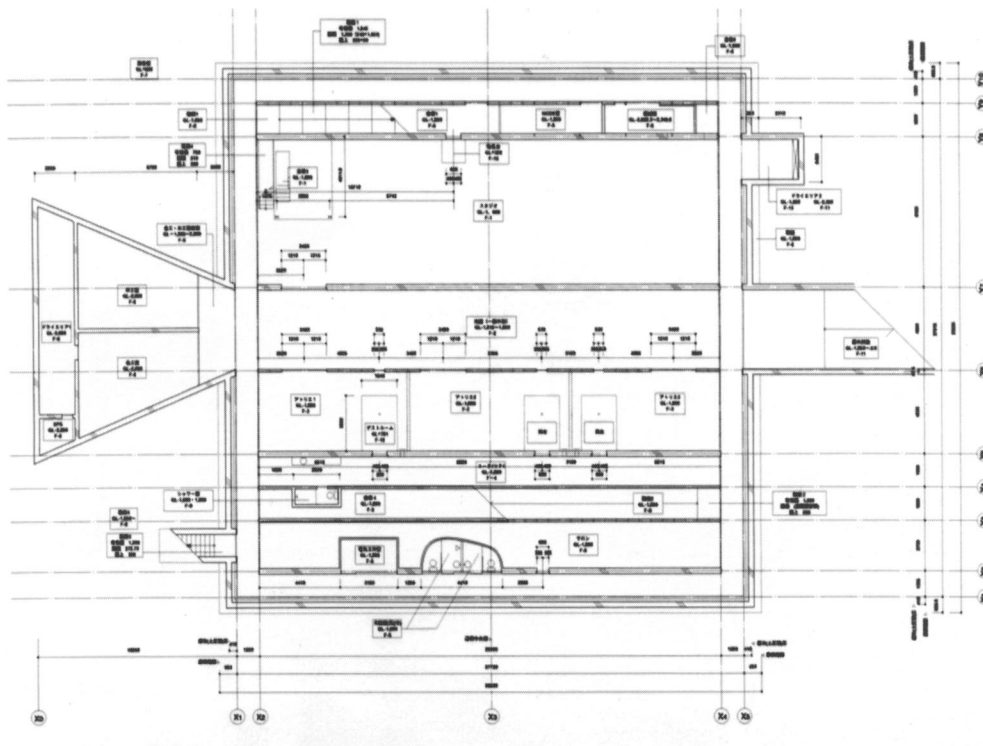
View of site



North-south sections



Roof plan



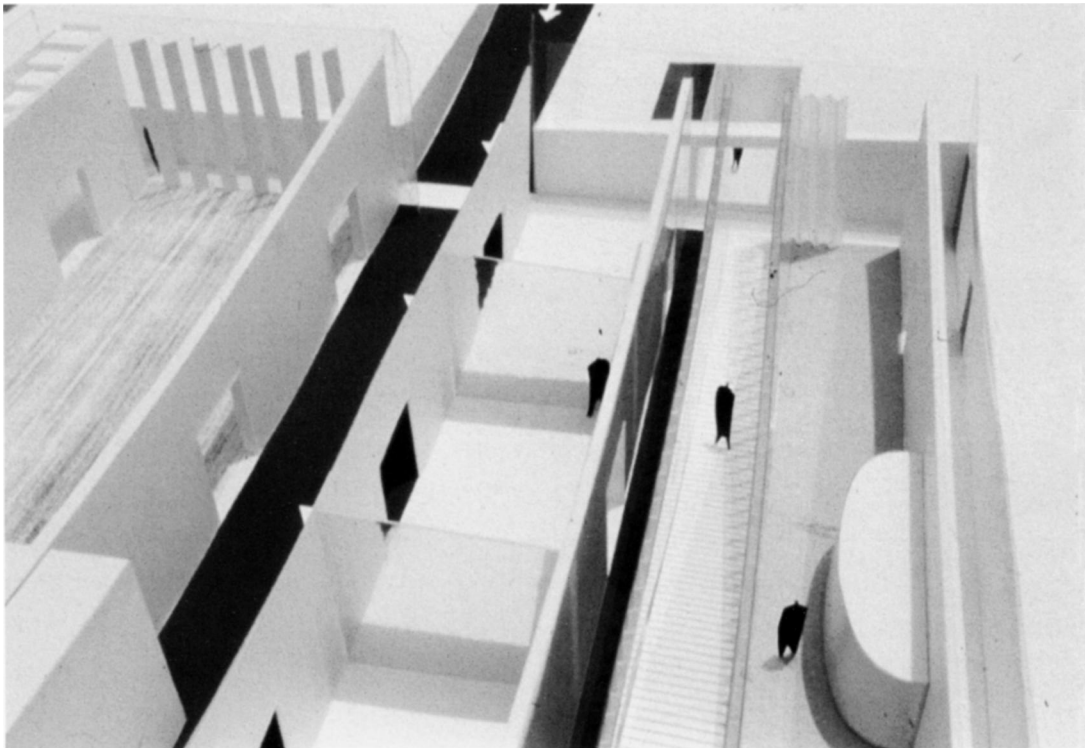
First-floor plan



View of roof plaza from east



View of interior from above



View of interior from above

Project Credits

Design team: Kazuyo Sejima, Toshihiro Yoshimura, and Yoshitaka Tanase

Collaborating designer: Ryue Nishizawa

Structural engineers: Sasaki Structural Consultants

Mechanical engineering: System Design Laboratory, ES Associates, and Otaki E & M Consultants

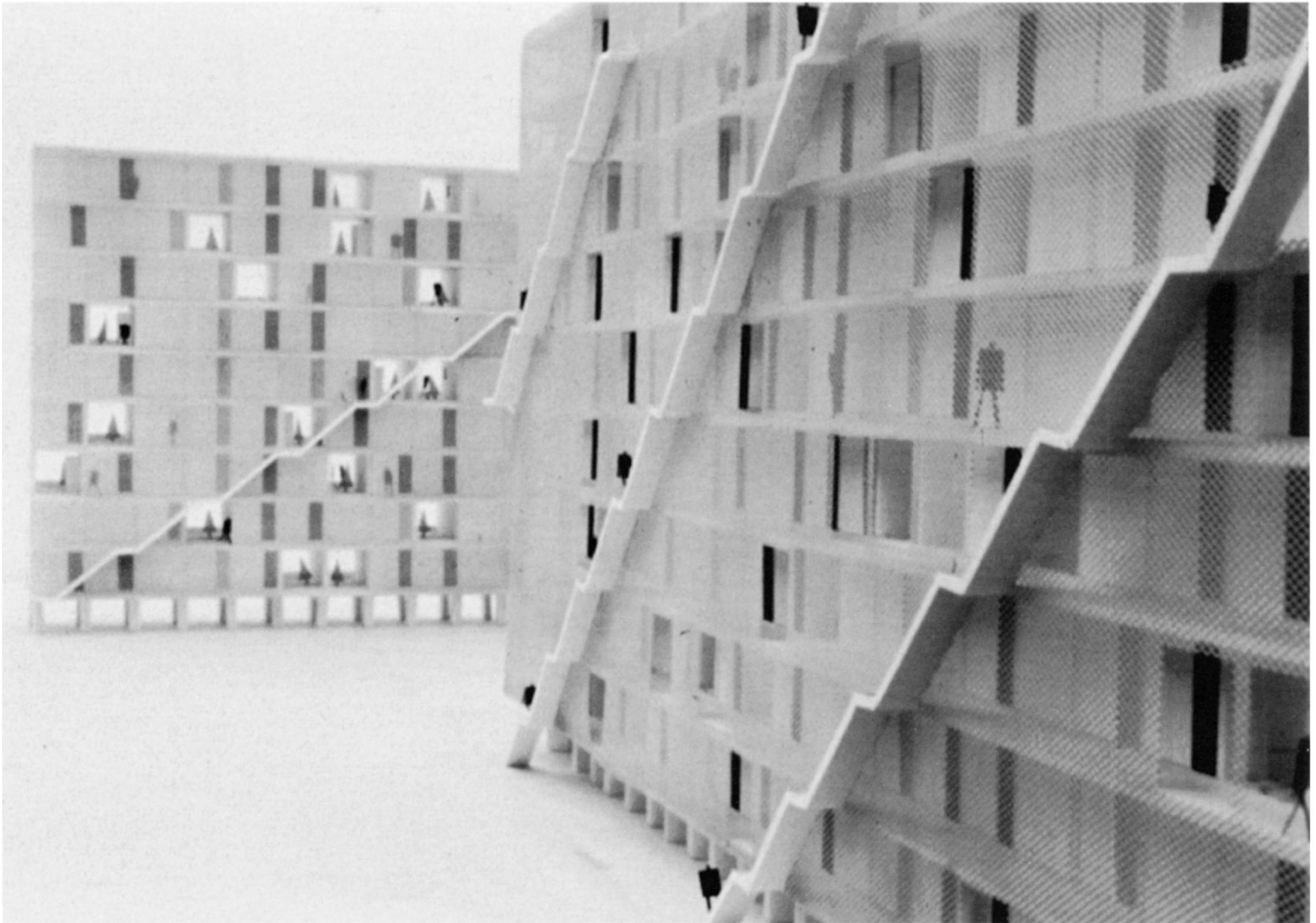
Figure Credits

1, 4. Photographs by Hiroshi Ueda.

All other images courtesy Kazuyo Sejima & Associates.



View of south façade

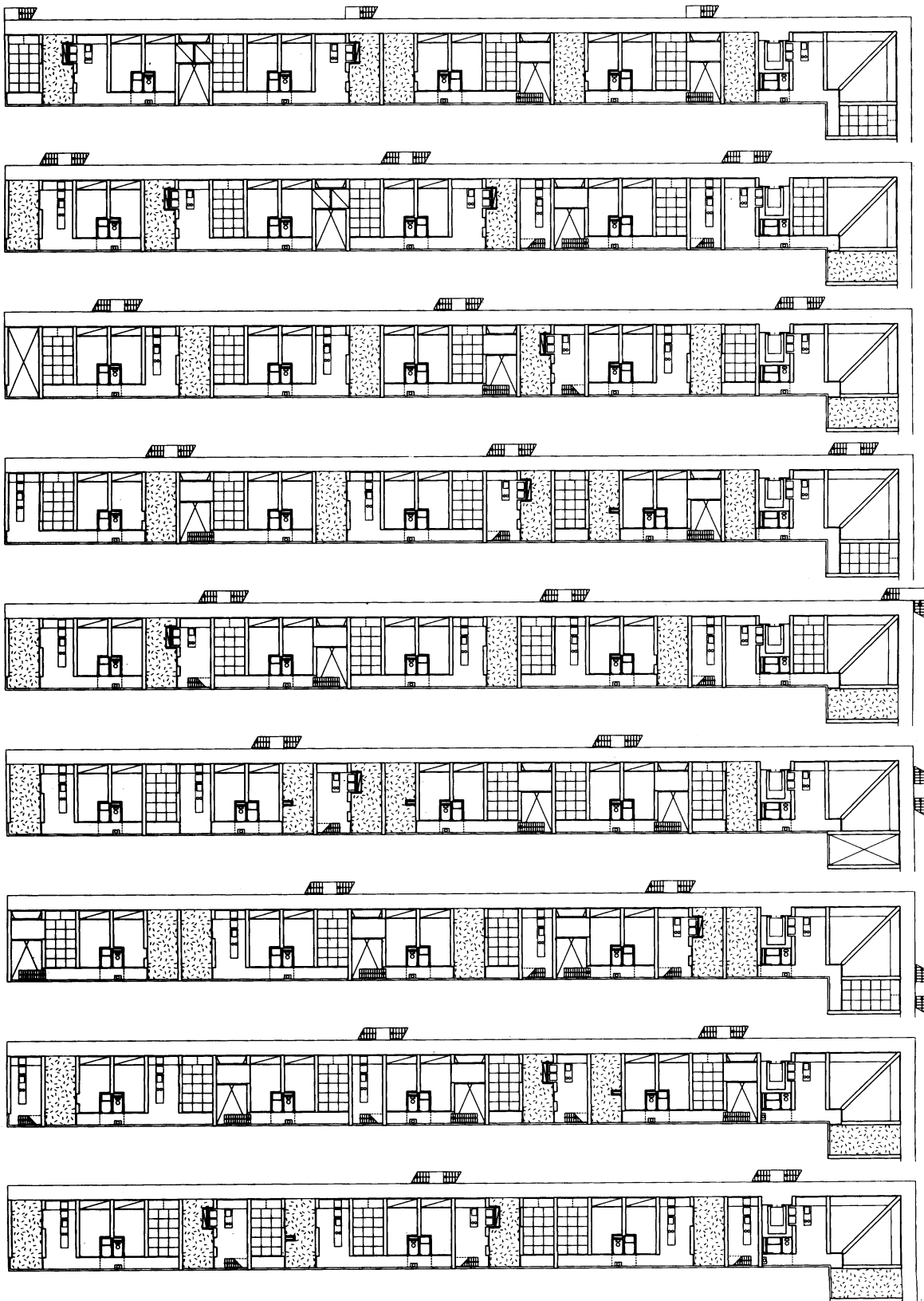


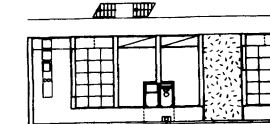
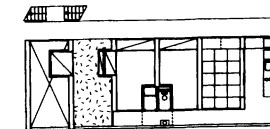
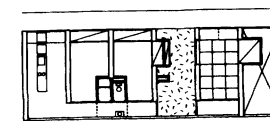
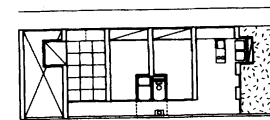
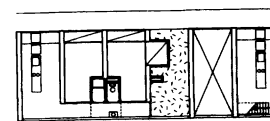
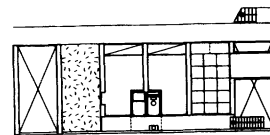
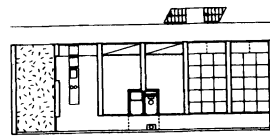
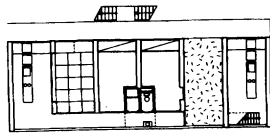
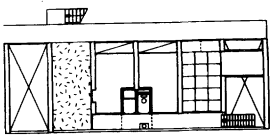
View from northwest

Gifu Kitagata Apartment, 1994

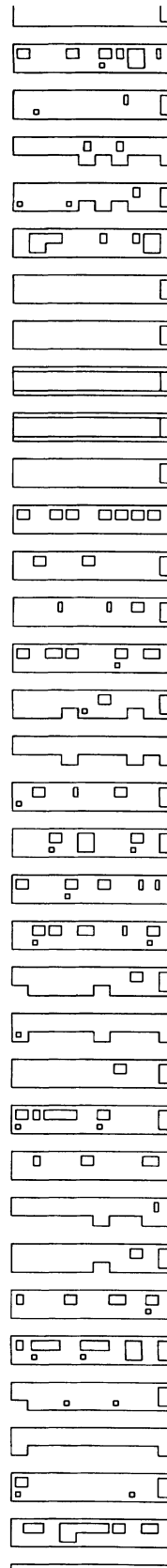
This design is part of a large-scale public housing reconstruction project managed by the Gifu prefecture and conducted under the coordination of the Arata Isozaki Atelier with the involvement of three other women architects. Since the idea for the overall layout was to line the perimeter of the site with the buildings, this block was assigned to be built parallel to one street-side property line. The ground level comprises a field of pilotis and open-air parking, allowing direct access to the site from any direction. Above, one hundred seven residential units occupy the remaining nine floors. About one third of the units are maisonettes, roughly half of which have two-story spaces. A range of different types has been combined freely in section, thus generating complex elevations.

Public housing blocks normally become monolithic volumes. In this case, reducing the depth of the block to a thin slab made it possible to create something different from the monotonous volume typical of high-rise blocks. Every unit has its own terrace. Collectively, these create holes in the block that allow glimpses through the building and reduce the impression of massiveness. Each unit consists of a linear distribution of the terrace, an eat-in kitchen, and bedrooms, all linked by a narrow sunroom on the south façade. The silhouettes of people moving inside will thus be visible across this screen.





Plans of residential floors

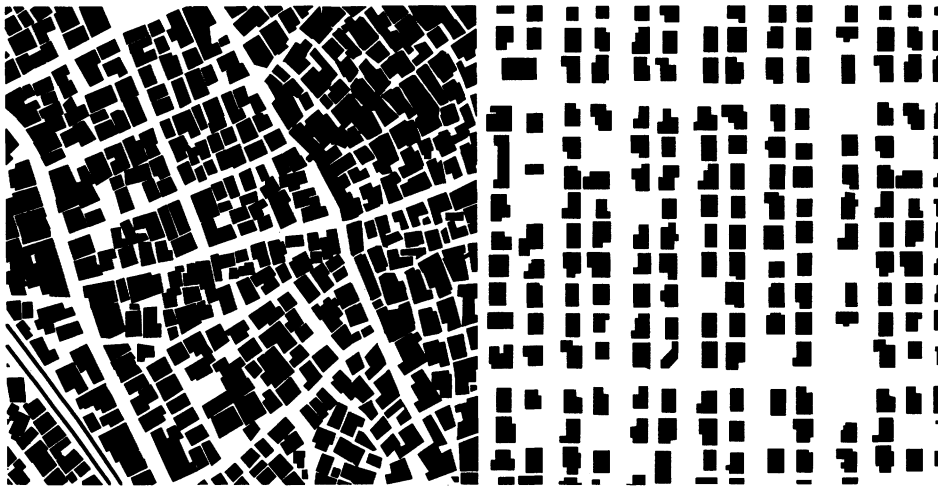


Wall members

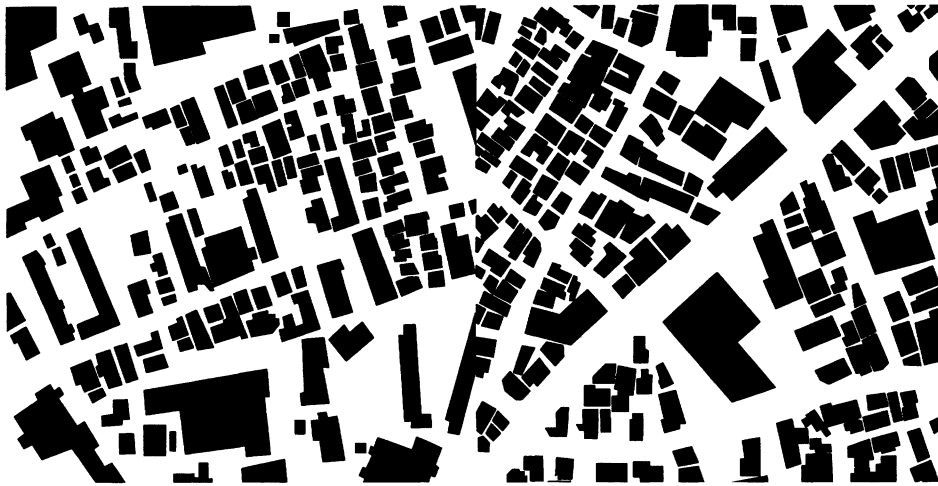
Project Credits

Design team: Kazuyo Sejima, Ryue Nishizawa, and Koichiro Tokimori

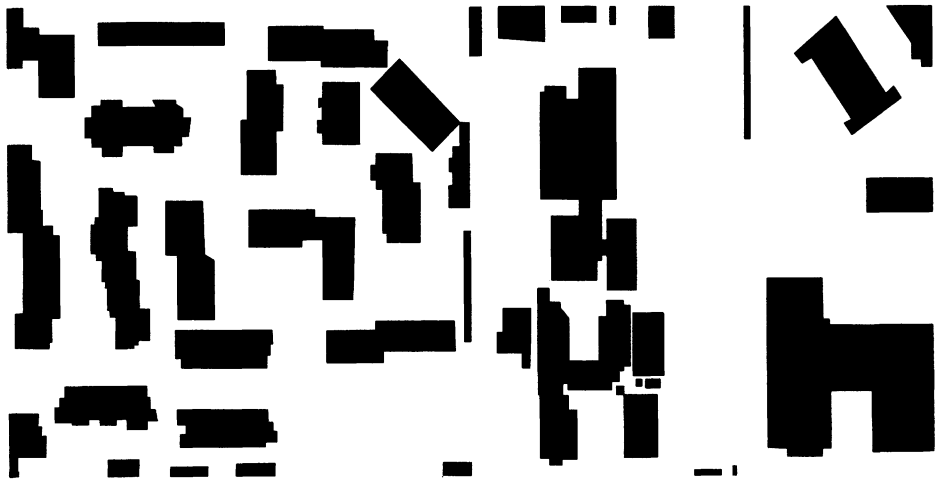
Structural engineers: Matsui Gengo + ORS



Type A: low-rise urban plan



Type B: medium-rise urban plan

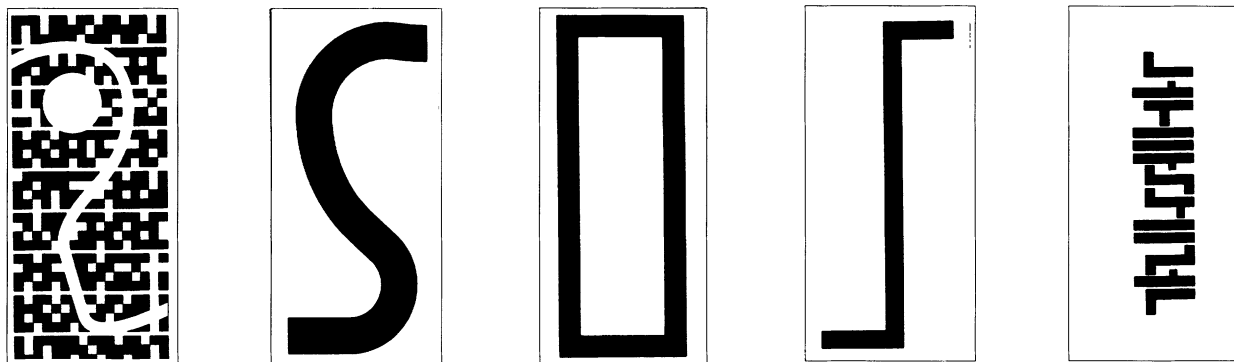


Type C: high-rise urban plan

New Dwelling in the Metropolis: The Privatization of Exterior Space

At present, the most prevalent form of dwelling in Japanese cities is communal housing, most of which follows an “nLDK” pattern, a formula that describes the number of bedrooms as well as the arrangement of living room, dining room, and kitchen. This system — a product of concern for interior space alone — has been implemented throughout Japan with little regard for a residential sense of scale or density, such that once-different lifestyles have become homogeneous. One resolution to this problem is to consider exterior space in the design of collective housing. Thus in order to develop new apartment prototypes it is important to examine the possible relation of housing to the context of the city.

An investigation of standard public housing plans, particularly those established by the guidelines of the Housing Development Agency and the Tokyo Public Housing Corporation, indicated that an average unit has a floor area of seventy square meters and follows the “3DK” pattern (three bedrooms with dining and kitchen areas). In addition, the most common housing density is one hundred twenty units per hectare. The housing types presented here follow both this density and the 3DK formula.



Plan diagrams of five housing prototypes

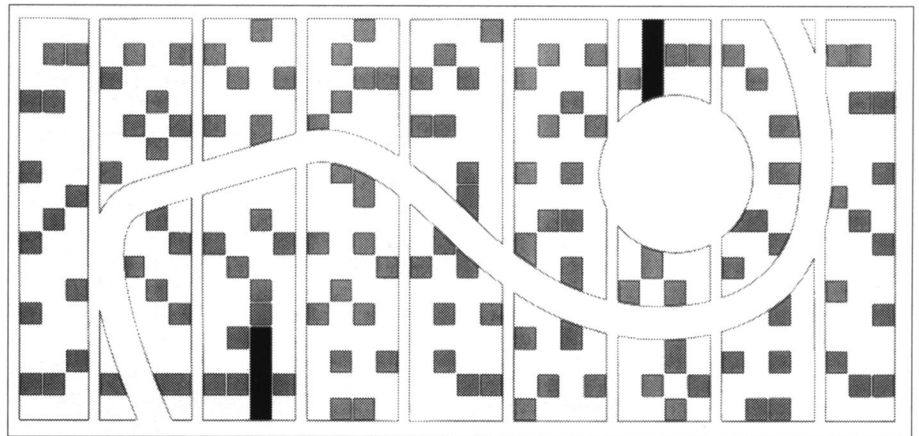
The attempt to make exterior space as significant to this process as interior space suggests a new form of dwelling that might recall campus housing. At the same time, these housing types take into consideration that the typical scale of apartment complexes has grown to enormous proportions, a result of the increasing demand for residential units. This study proposes various possibilities for how collective housing can be arranged on a particular site, given a density of one hundred twenty units per hectare. Buildings are grouped into a “volume landscape,” a formation of buildings organized to shape the exterior environment. These types can be described as follows:

Type A: low-rise housing zone. This type reduces differences between the city and the suburb. It comprises structures with small volumes but dense sections, restricting open space but providing greater contact with the ground.

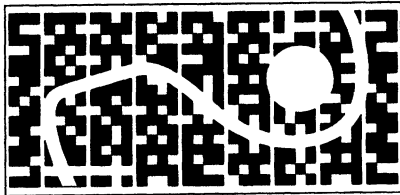
Type B: varied building volumes with randomly placed open spaces. By including middle- and high-rise structures, the surrounding outdoor environment can encompass more open space. This type is most common in cities today.

Type C: vertical high volume structures. The vertical density of high-rise buildings provides plentiful open spaces and gives the impression of living in a parklike environment, a strategy typical of newer cities.

Altogether, the research resulted in five prototypes: low-rises, two variations on middle-rises, and two variations on high-rises. At present, collective housing in the metropolis means a massive volume on a site. This study has shown that what matters is not just volume and site, but rather, the total environment. By considering the total landscape, it is possible to develop numerous dwelling types, with their corresponding internal space compositions, while creating a variety of volumes.

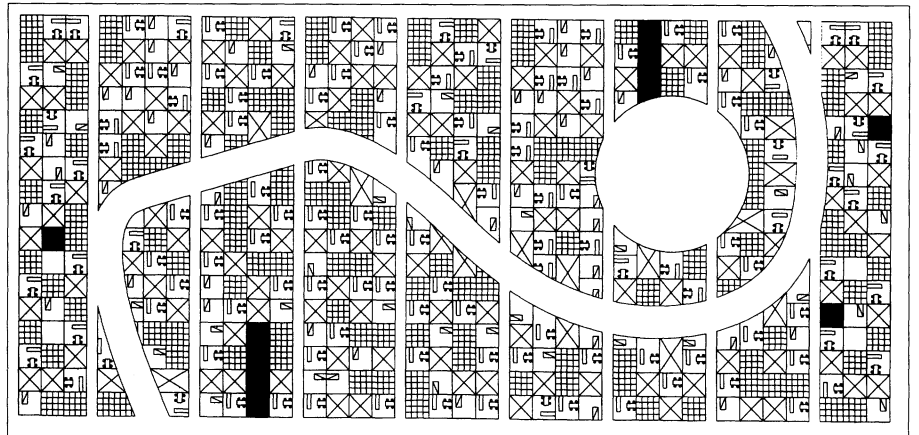


Roof plan

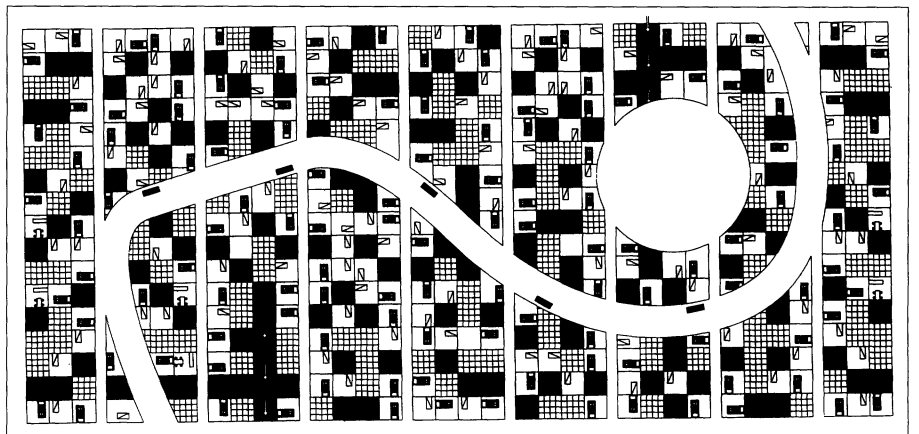


1. Low-rises with separate gardens (one-story underground parking with two-story units) and a building-to-ground ratio of sixty percent.

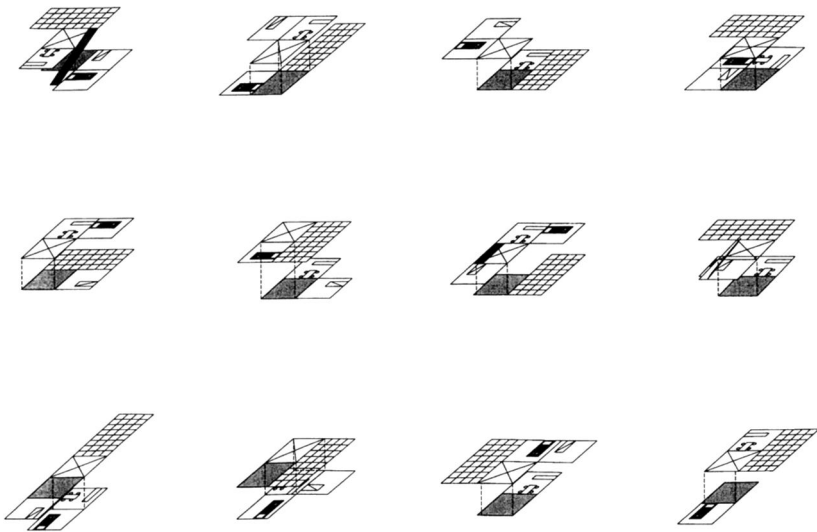
Here, two-story maisonette units occupy the entire site. Open spaces determined by the building-to-ground ratio are distributed throughout the site in the form of separate gardens for all units. Each unit also has a private garden on the roof and at ground level. All units contain six elements: an open garden, an eat-in kitchen, a utility space, and three bedrooms. An entry lane providing light and air cuts through the site at a fifteen-meter angle, allowing variation in linking the six basic elements and generating plans.



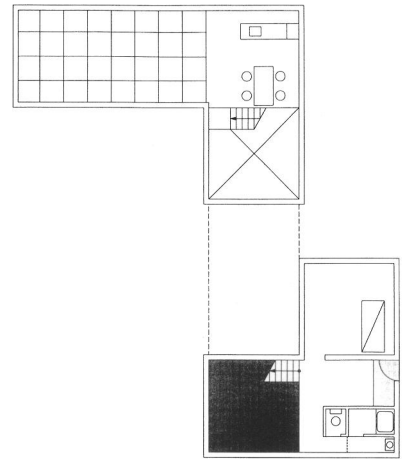
Typical floor plan



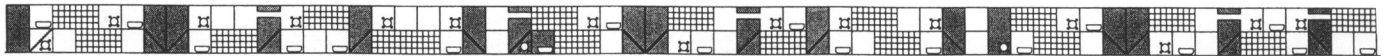
Ground-floor plan



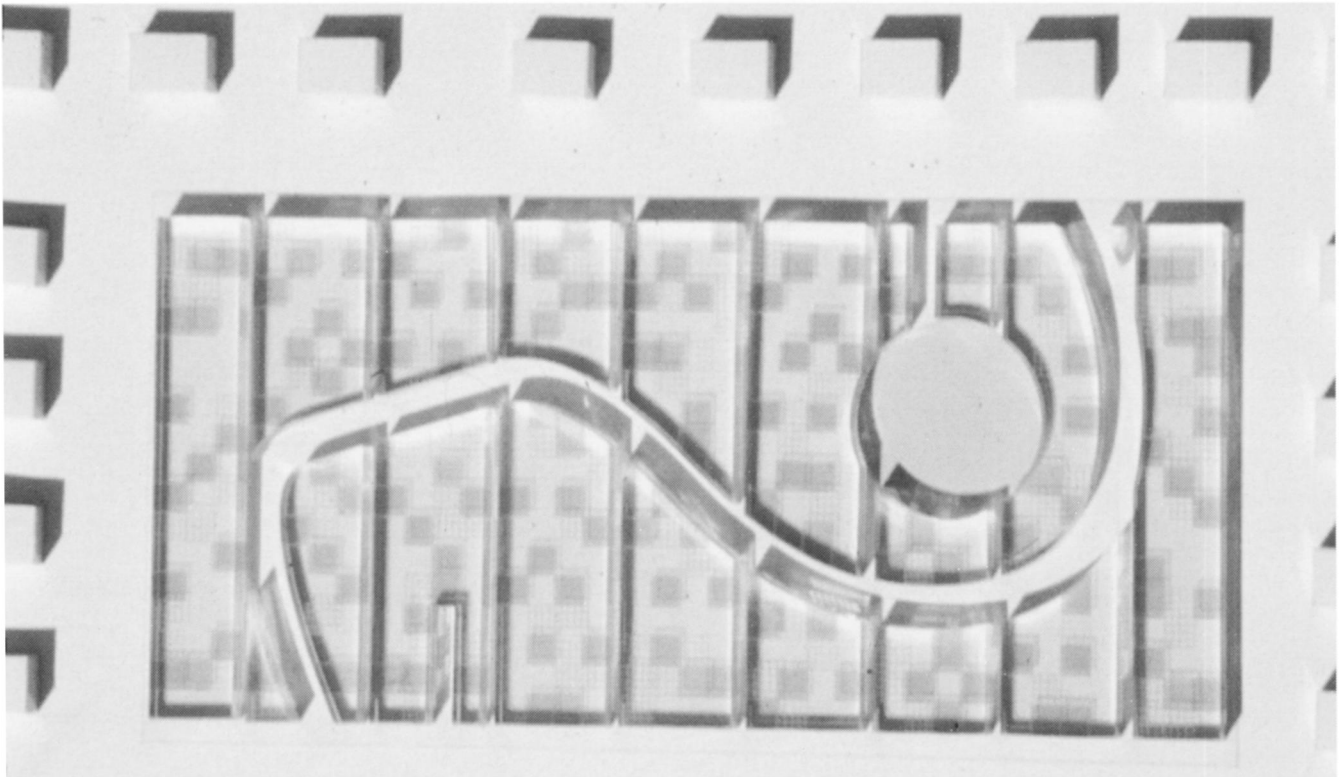
Isometrics showing unit layout variations

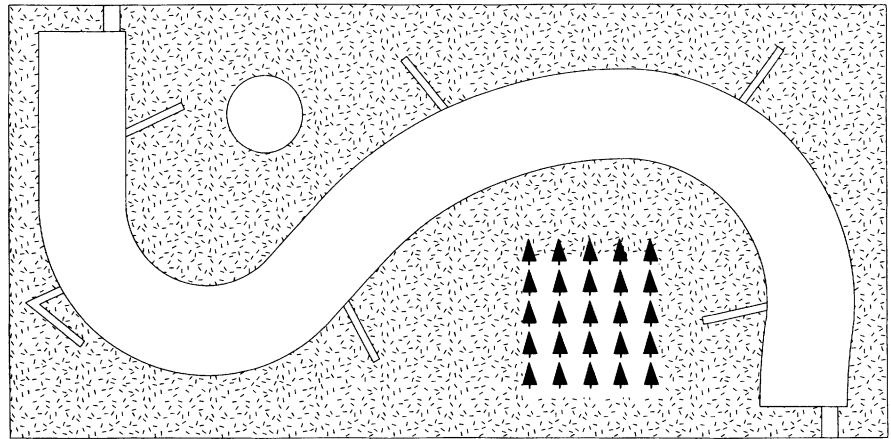


Typical unit plan

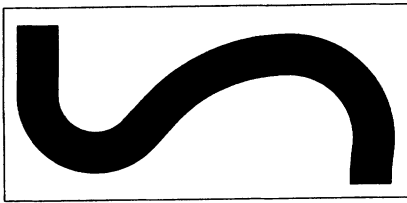


Sectional diagram



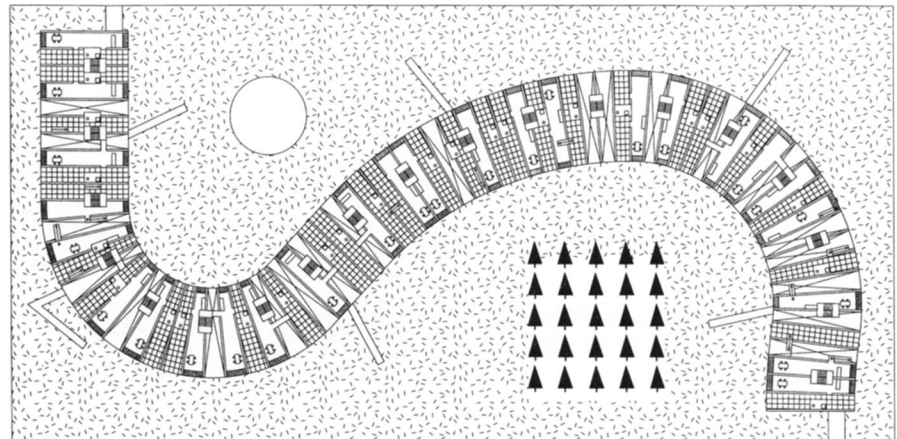


Roof plan

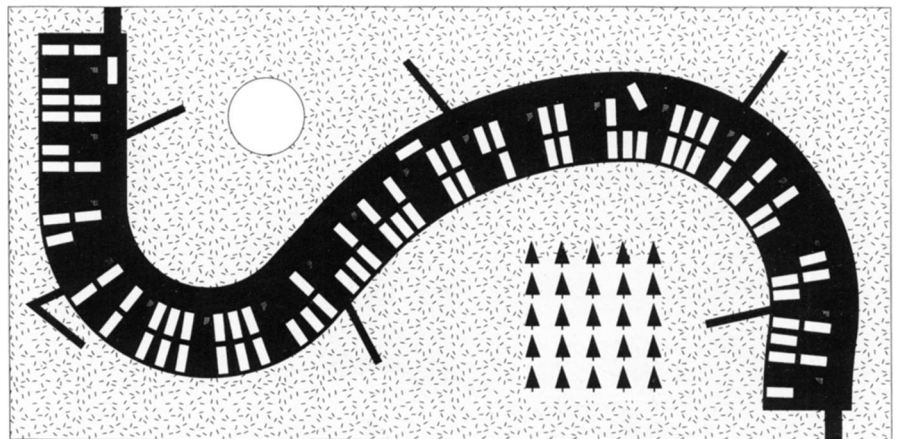


2. Middle-rises with an S-curve form (semiunderground parking area and four-story walk-up residential blocks) and a building-to-ground ratio of thirty percent.

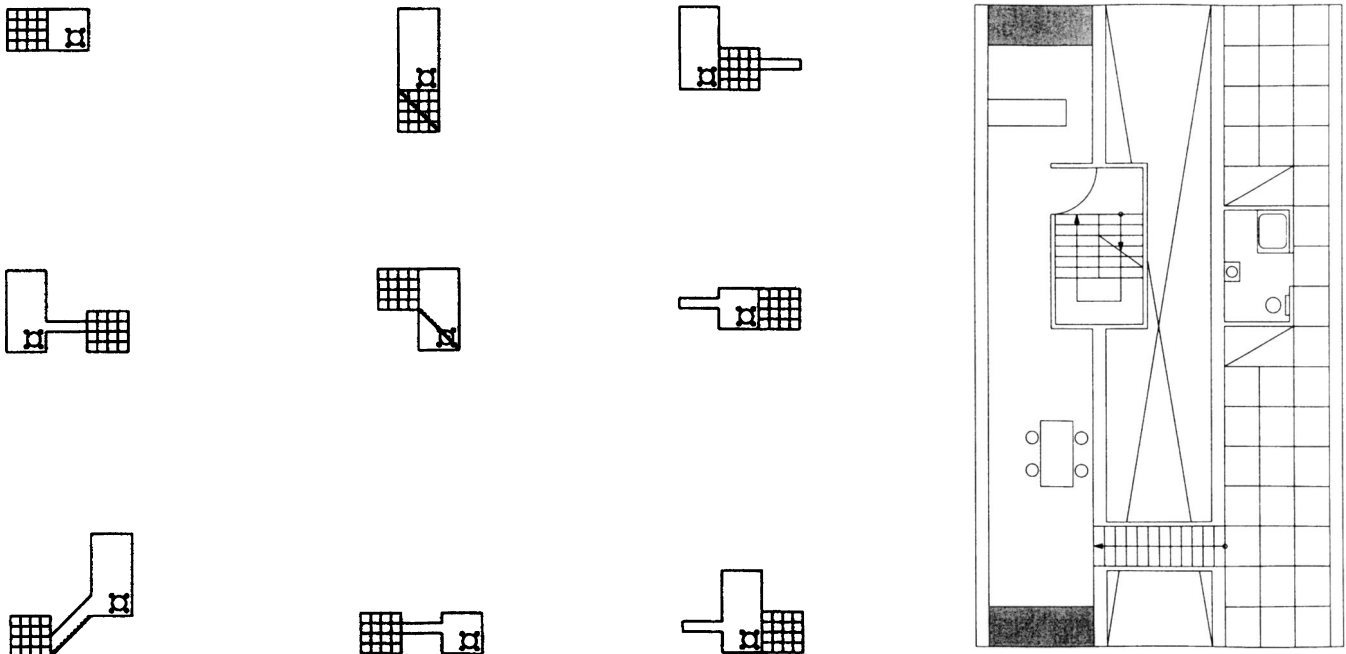
Approached by stairs, these four-story blocks sit above a semiunderground parking area defined by a field of pilotis. The depth necessary to make a stable four-story structure is turned to positive use on the interior, which is composed of random combinations of 14.5-meter deep public (living and dining) and private (bedroom) spaces that attach or overlap and separate. Open space around the entire block guarantees the same environmental conditions in each unit, while allowing for terraces for each unit on both sides of the block. This type can be adapted to a wide range of site conditions by modifying the form of the volume.



Typical floor plan

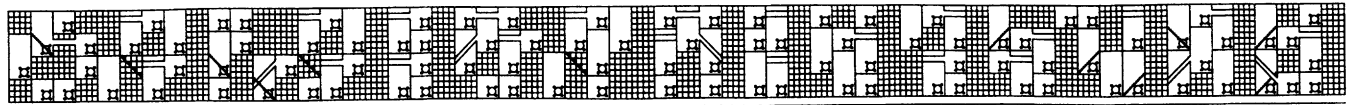


Ground-floor plan

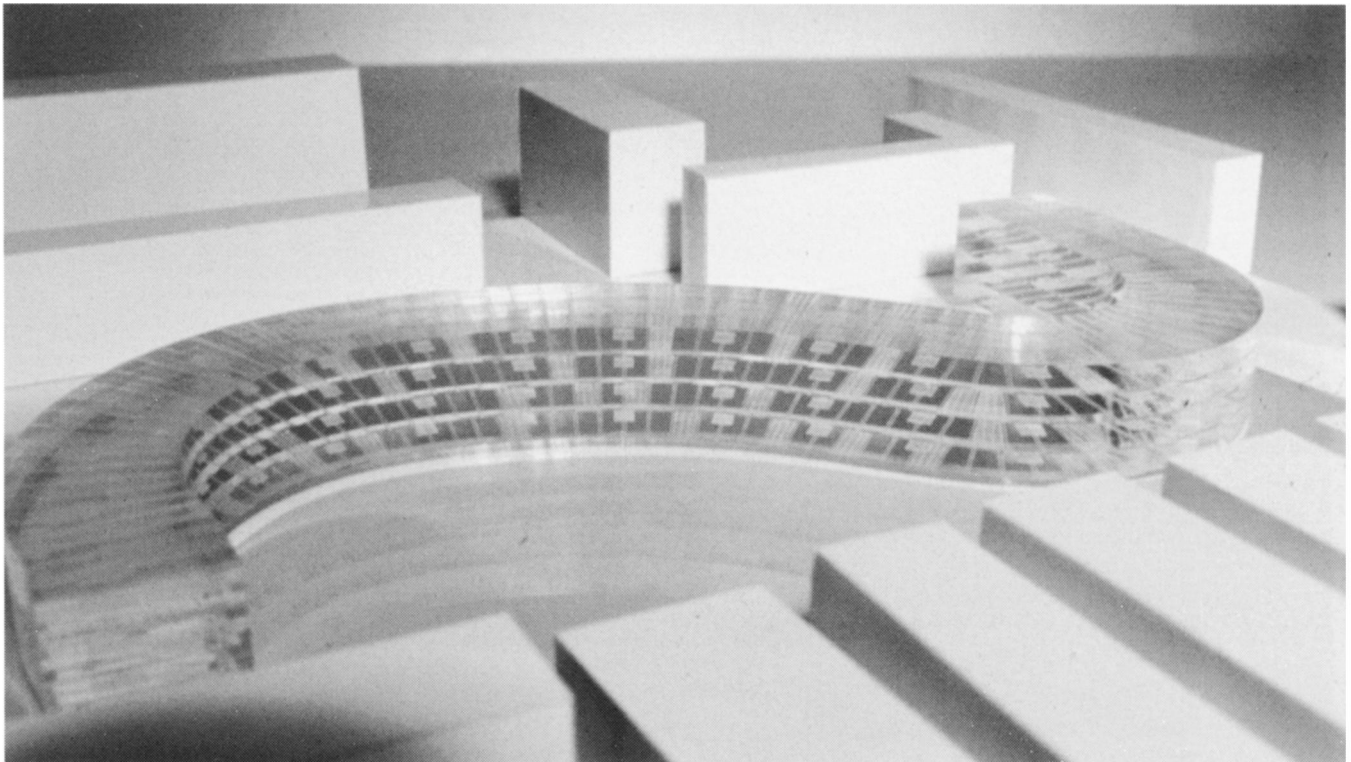


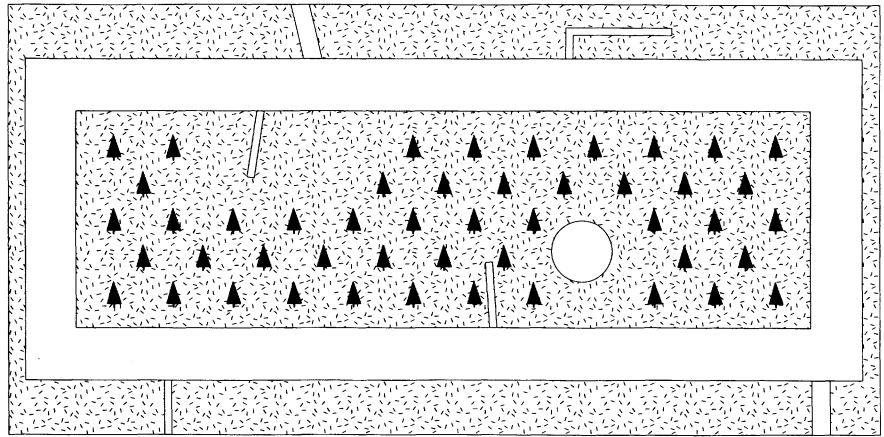
Unit plan variations

Typical unit plan

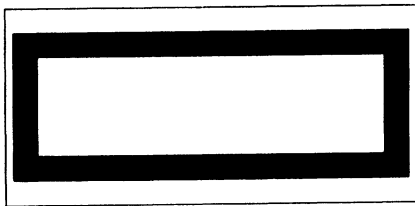


Sectional diagram



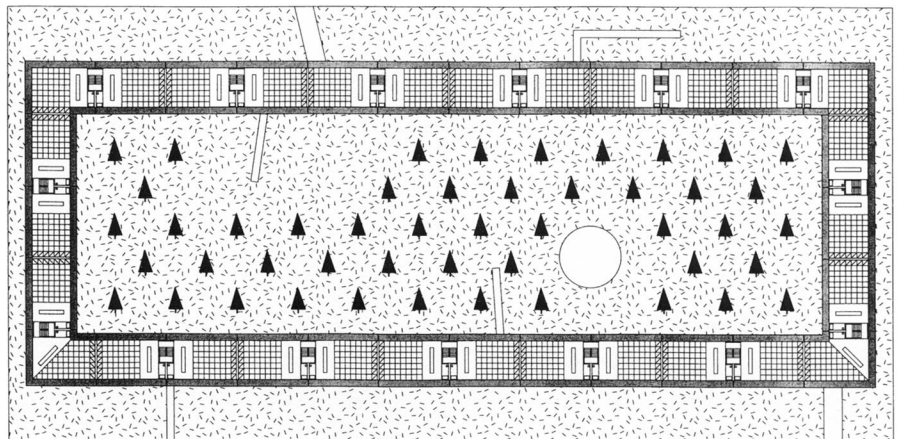


Roof plan

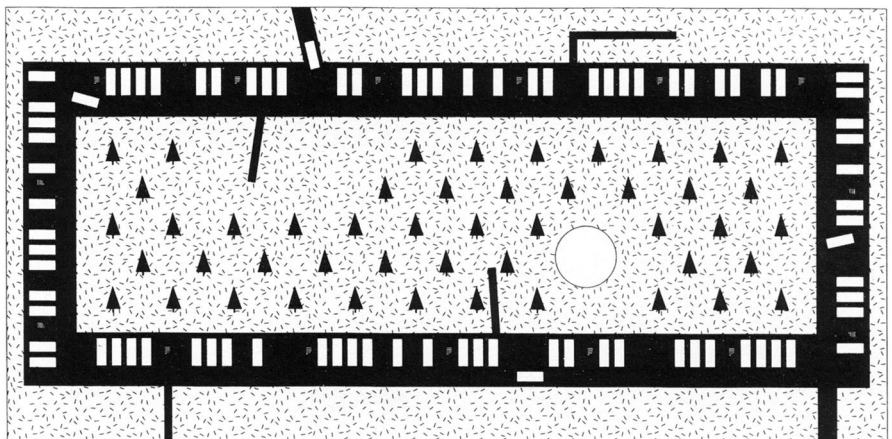


3. Middle-rises with a central court (semiunderground parking area and four-story walk-up residential blocks) and a building-to-ground ratio of thirty percent.

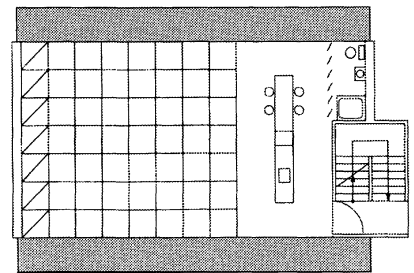
For this type, the same four-story walk-up configuration as the S-curve is extended around the perimeter of the site and made thinner. Open spaces have thus been divided into a courtyard and an exterior. Each unit has two terraces facing either side and linked by a more public zone containing the dining area; a secondary private space can be partitioned freely from the dining area. These are essentially one-room units, but several types can derive from various planning strategies for the dining area. This form can also be manipulated according to existing site conditions.



Typical floor plan

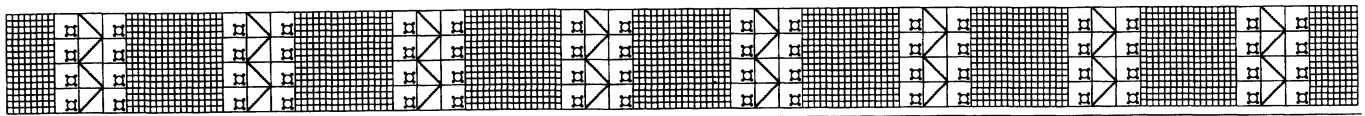


Ground-floor plan

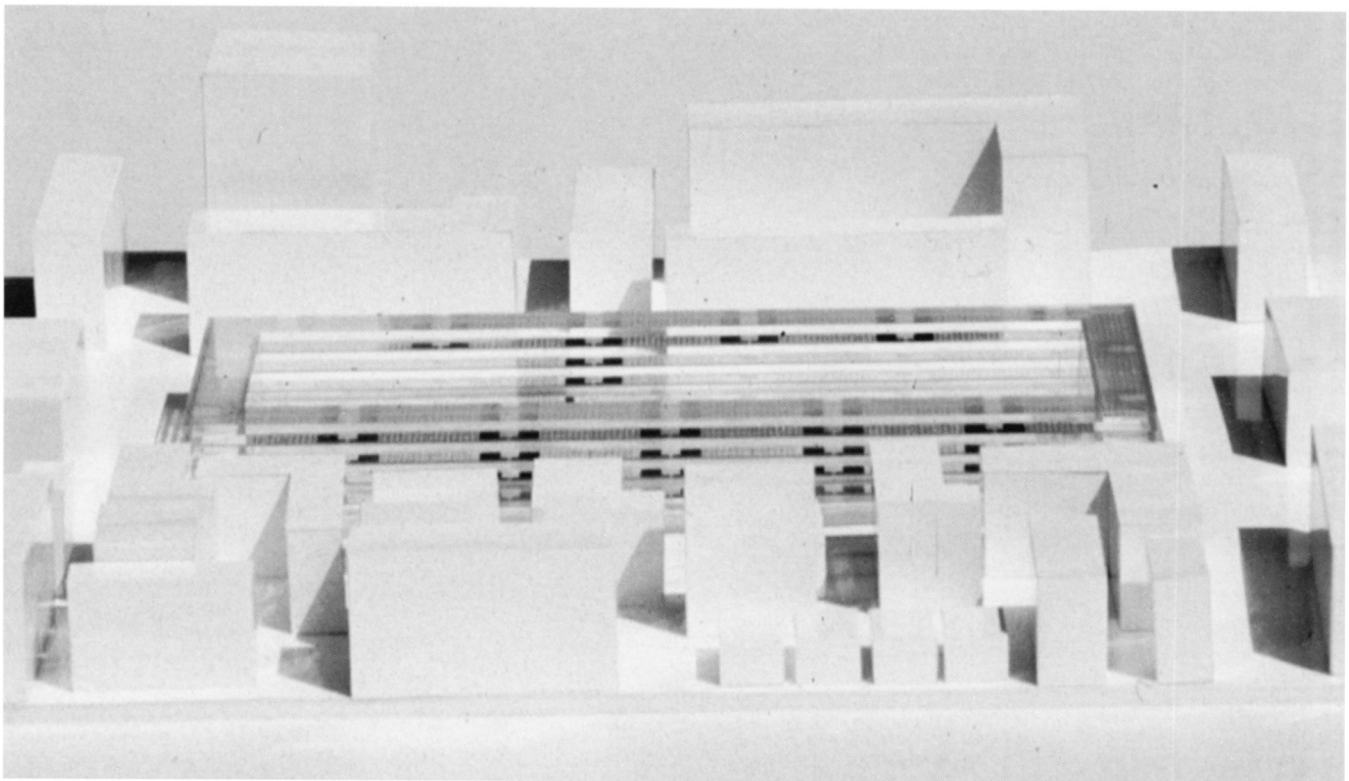


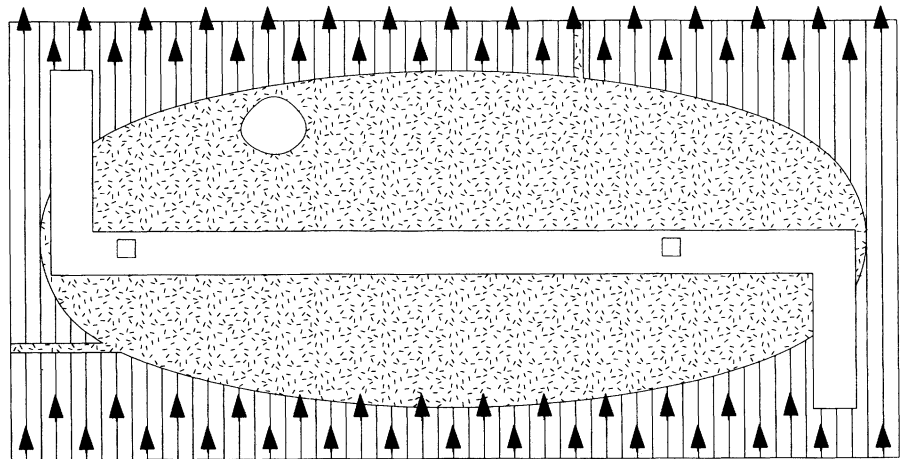
Unit plan variations

Typical unit plan

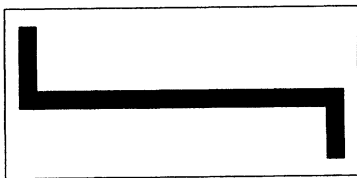


Sectional diagram



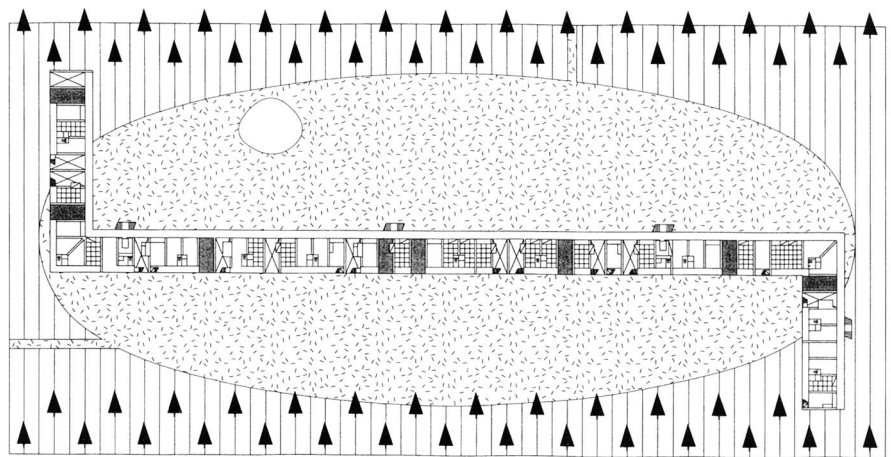


Roof plan

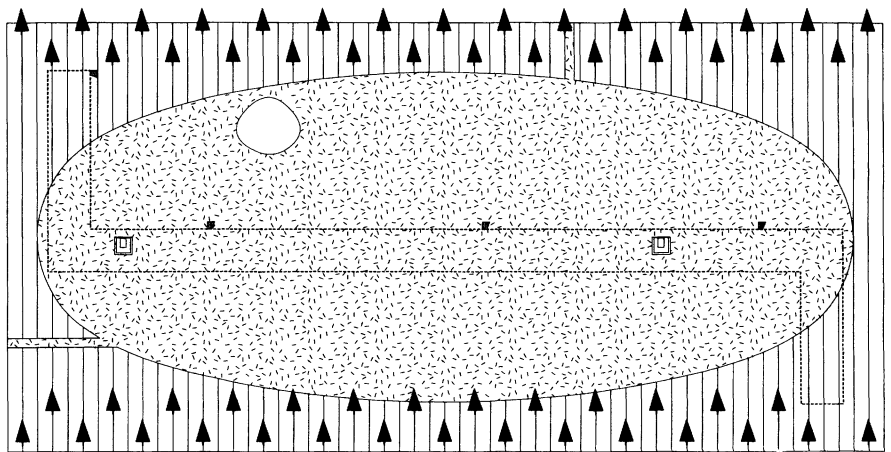


4. High-rise with a zigzag form (eleven-story block with corridors on one side — pilotis and ten residential stories) and a building-to-ground ratio of twelve percent.

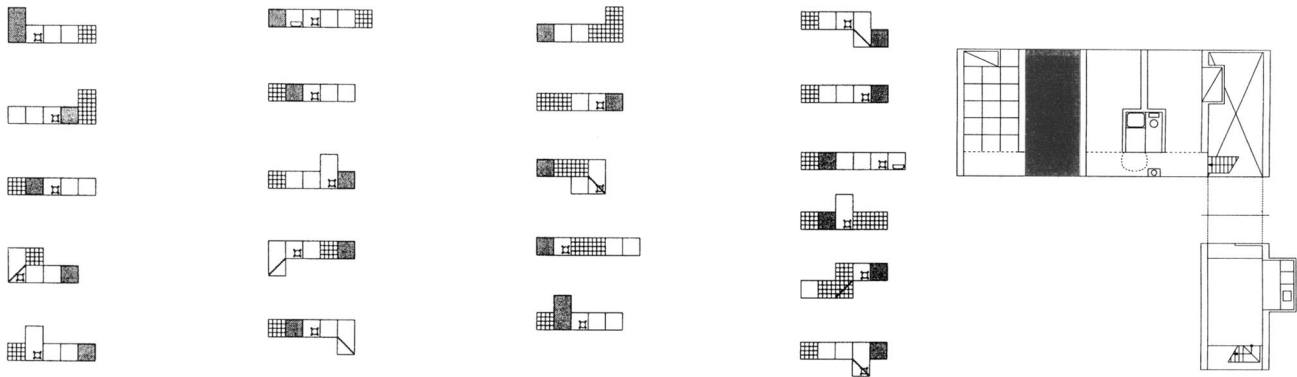
This type increases the height and makes the volume narrower so that it is possible for all units to face the side that gets the most sun. Zigzagging the block across the site allows a longer block while retaining uninterrupted open space around the whole. A variety of unit sections are possible according to the handling of the front-side space that links the rooms. This space also serves as buffer zone between interior and exterior, improving the effects of living high off the ground. Terraces of individual units appear as random holes in a flat volume, revealing glimpses of the landscape on the far side of the block and reducing its monolithic quality. Though separated from the ground, it makes possible a contact with nature.



Typical floor plan

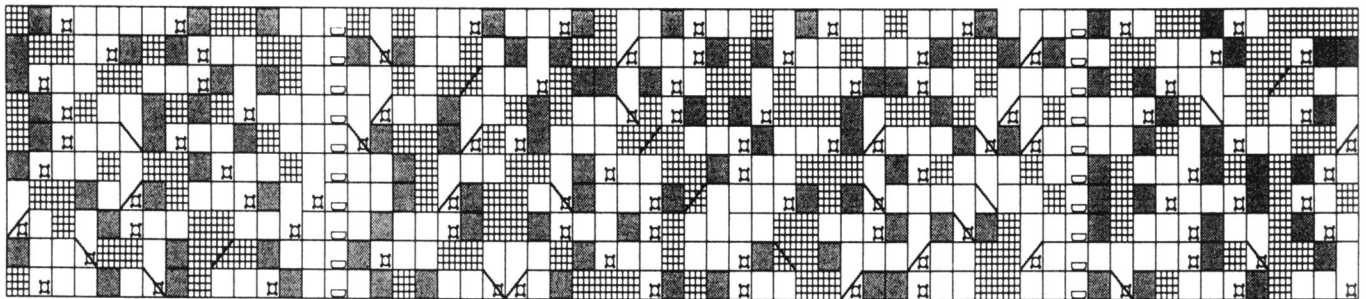


Ground-floor plan

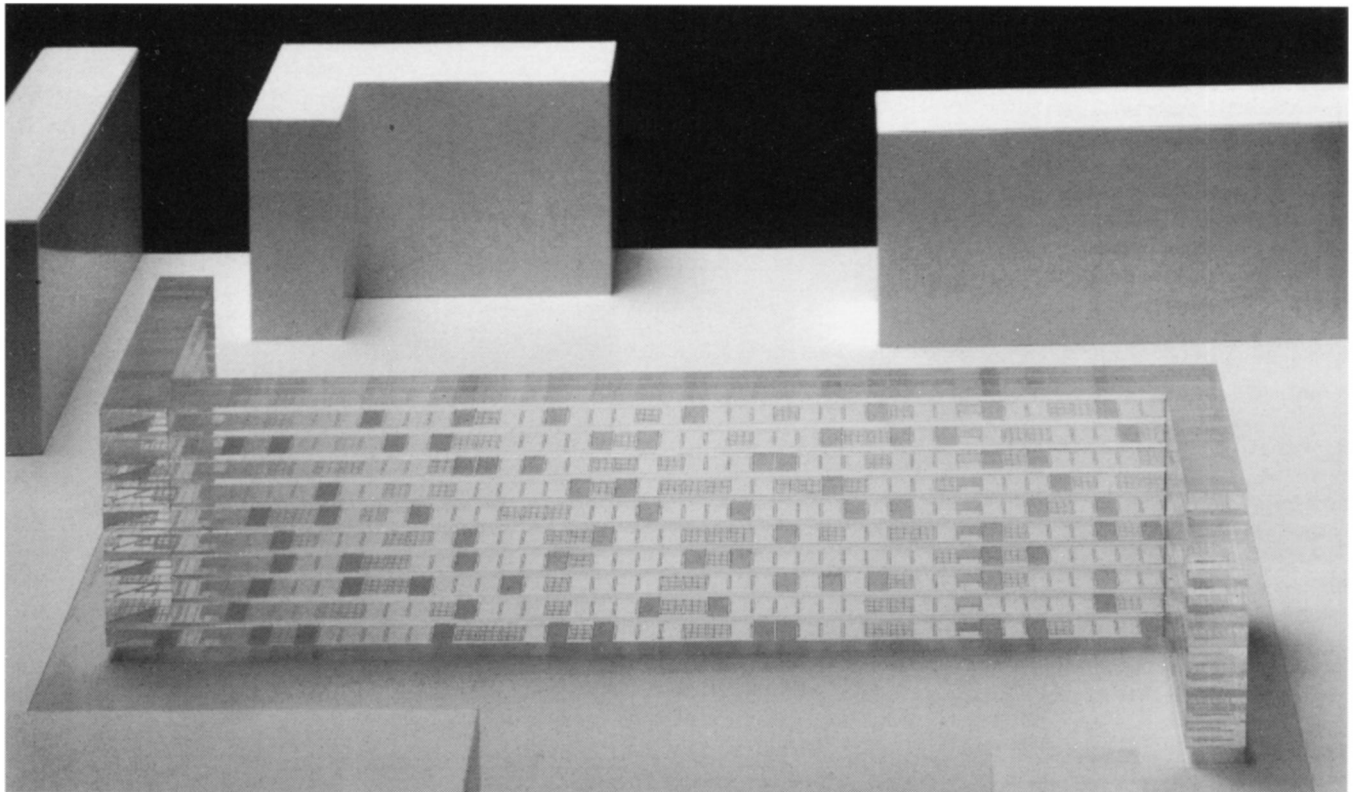


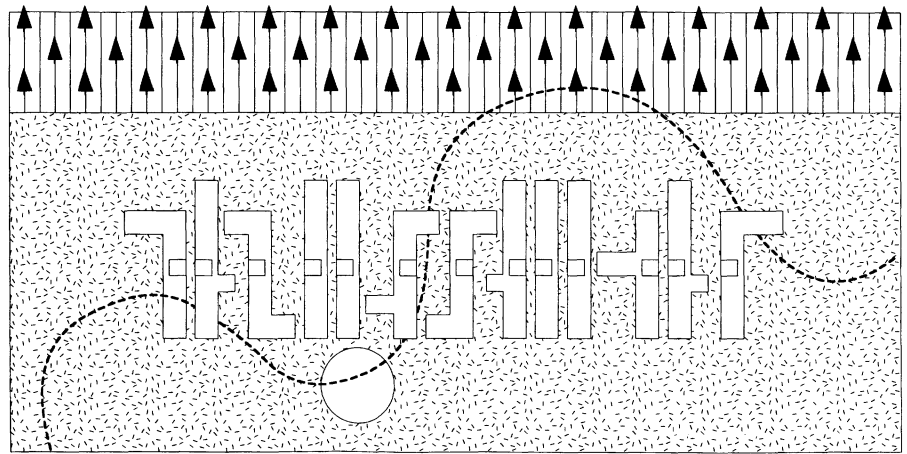
Unit plan variations

Typical unit plan

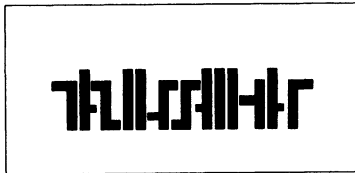


Sectional diagram



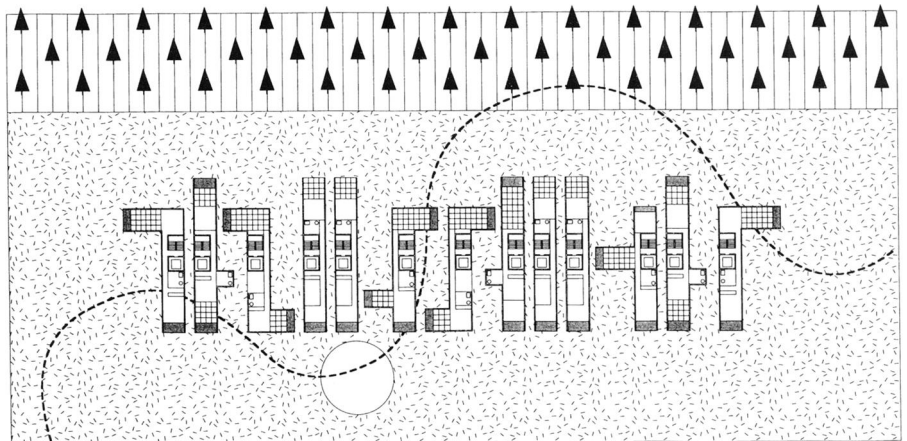


Roof plan

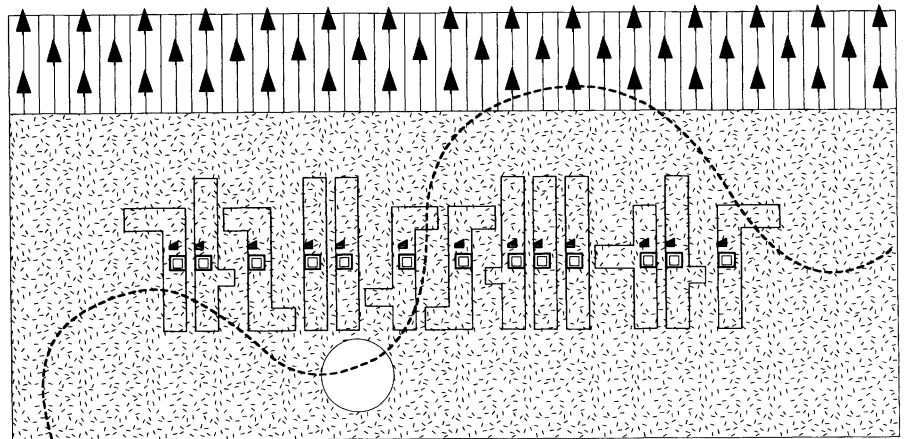


5. High-rises with scattered configuration (ten-story core-based blocks — pilotis and nine residential stories) and a building-to-ground ratio of twelve percent.

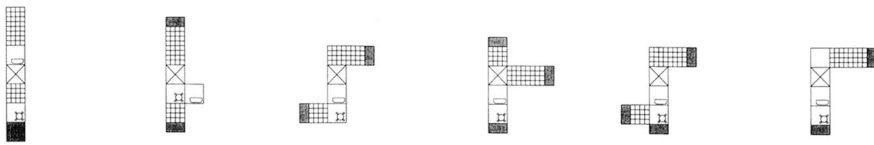
A chain of blocks of highly unusual proportions, containing one dwelling unit per floor, are located in the center of the site, surrounded by a large amount of open space. Since the volumes are formed by the stacking of freely planned units, different kinds of volumes arise. Each unit has four exterior walls. The small space between blocks is intended as a visual, physical and psychological buffer zone for these tower-in-a-park high-rises.



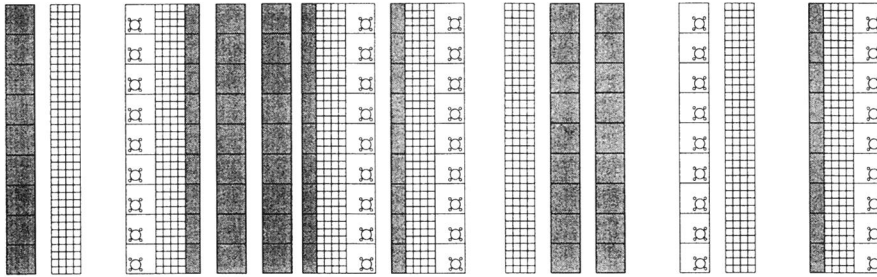
Typical floor plan



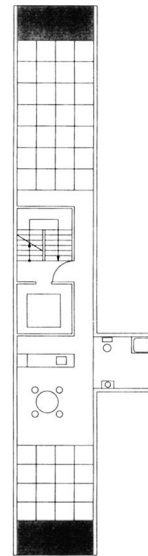
Ground-floor plan



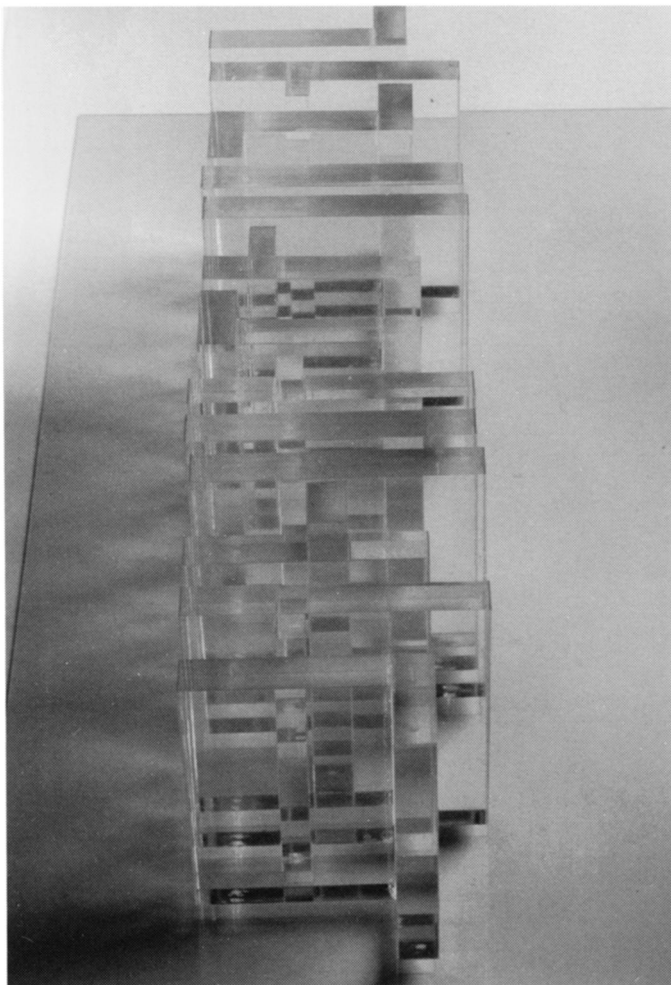
Unit plan variations



Sectional diagram

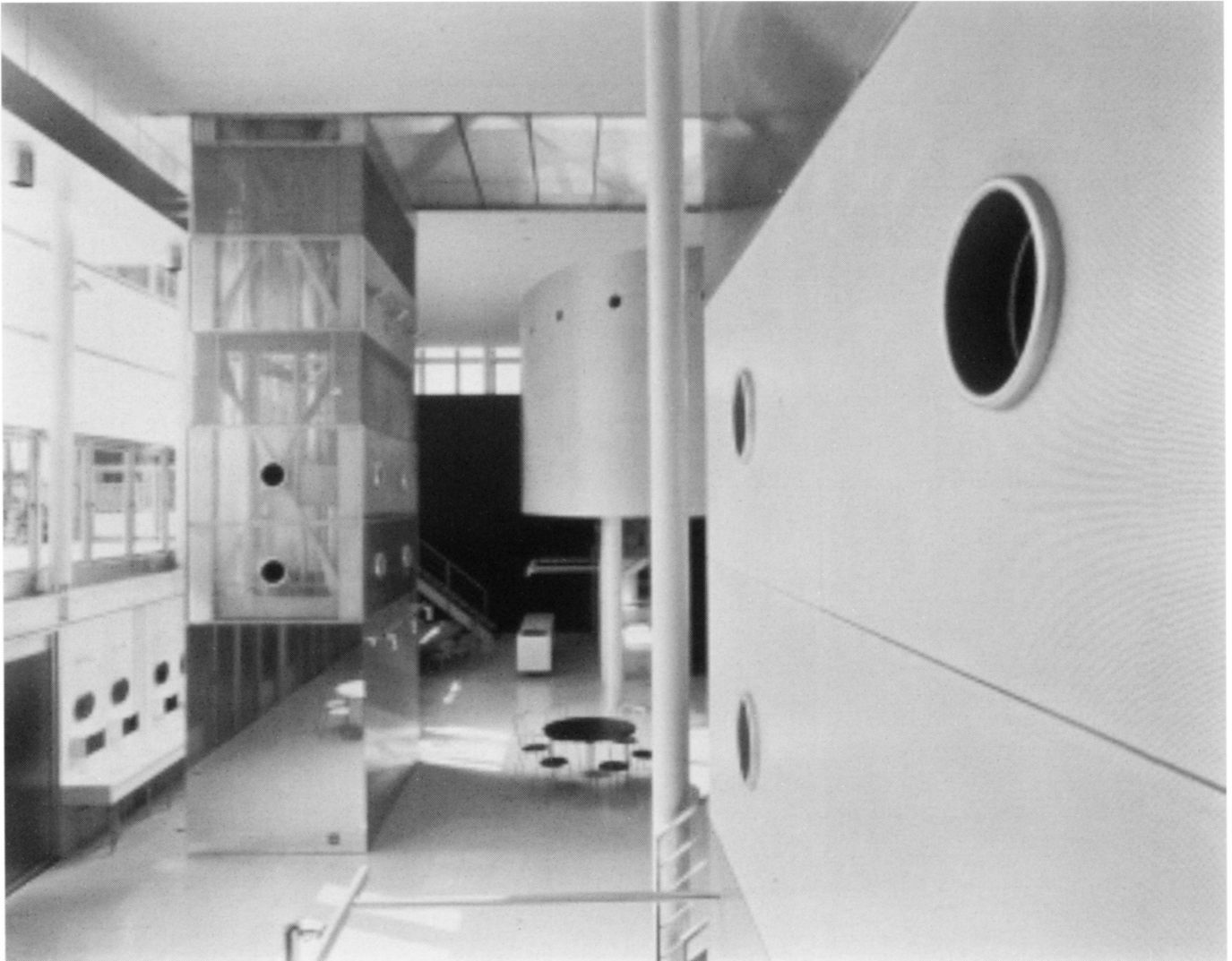


Typical unit plan



Project Credits

Design team: Kazuyo Sejima, Ryue Nishizawa, Sachiko Funaki, and Toshihiro Yoshimura



1. Saishunkan Seiyaku Women's
Dormitory, interior view

Sejima's Theater of Operations

In recent architectural debates, the term “minimalism” has lost its specificity. Instead of designating a group of American artists of the mid- to late 1960s who radically revised the nature of the art object, redefined the space of the viewer, and challenged the limit between painting and sculpture, “minimalist” has become an adjective, loosely applied to any work that is formally reductive, insistently rectilinear or starkly detailed.

Symptomatic of the resulting confusion is the variety of work today labeled minimalist. On the one hand, minimalism is associated with a reassertion of architecture's tectonic identity. With architects such as Tadao Ando in Japan or Alberto Campo Baeza in Spain, the architectural work is stripped of all “inessential” detail so that its fundamental structural basis is made self-evident. Louis Kahn is invoked as a precedent for an architecture that is timeless and elemental. Minimalism here is affiliated with strategies of resistance and characterized as a *refusal* of the temptations of formal elaboration. The architectural constructions and the pronouncements of Donald Judd, one of the most prolific and articulate of the artist/writers of the 1960s, are often cited as another precedent. But this is a narrow and selective rereading of minimalist tenets. In the case of Judd, the highly conservative character of his furniture and architectural constructions is at odds with the resolutely atectonic proposition of his sculptures and retreats from the most radical implications of his earlier writings.

Seemingly opposed, another reading of minimalism surfaces in the catalogue essay by Terence Riley for MoMA's recent *Light Construction* exhibition. Riley refers to Rosalind Krauss's interpretations of minimalism to undergird an argument for an architecture of simple forms capable of



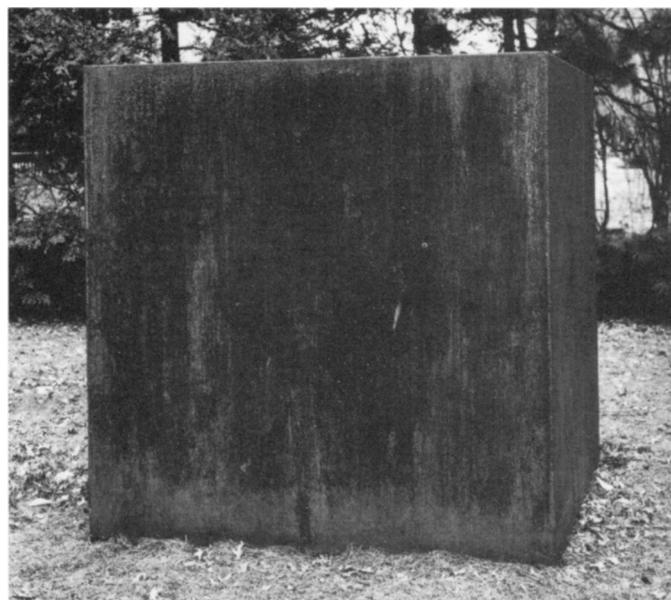
2. Donald Judd, interior view of artillery shed at Fort Russell, Marfa

producing complex phenomenological effects. In a reprise of Mies van der Rohe's “almost nothing,” the building as object fades away, to become a blank screen for an ephemeral play of light, shadow, and translucency. Although closer in spirit to the original minimalists, this, too, is a selective reading. As opposed to the insistent materiality of Judd or Richard Serra, here the privileged points of reference are Dan Flavin and Larry Bell. What these positions share is a sense of return — an appeal to the past to legitimize present-day practices. And both stop short of embracing minimalism's most radical propositions and the rigorous empiricism of the best of this work.

Without insisting on a “correct” reading of minimalism, and recognizing that its radicality was linked to a specific time and place, it seems worthwhile to recall briefly something of this original spirit. In the 1960s, minimalism worked to empty sculpture of a residual anthropomorphism and to counter a tendency toward the decorative in painting. It was at war with the vertical, either the latent figurality of sculpture or the static privilege of the viewer in

painting. Minimalism completed a process of compositional innovation begun with abstract expressionism. Composition by parts — the assemblage of faceted planes and fragmented figures, the lingering shadow of the cubist revolution — was jettisoned in favor of a new sense of the whole: complex wholes ordered not by conventional relations of hierarchy, symmetry, or balance, but rather by serial orders, nonrelational composition, and unified formal gestalts.

Minimalism sought to defamiliarize the object and hence to recuperate its unmediated perception, not by tearing the object from its context or by using distorted or fragmented shapes. Instead, minimalism represented known forms in unfamiliar scales, materials, or positions. Tony Smith's sculpture *Die* is a six-foot-by-six-foot-by-six-foot steel cube painted matte black. When asked why he did not make it larger, he responded that he was not “making a monument.” Asked why he did not make it smaller, he responded that he was not “making an object.” Minimalism works against recognition, and this defamiliarization functions



3. Tony Smith, *Die*, 1962

less to uncover the essential than to assert the undecidable.

This was closely linked to minimalism's other important innovation: the articulation of a new relation of viewer and art object. Attention was shifted away from the object as demarcated solid to emphasize the space of the viewer, the situation of viewing, and the duration of perception. For this reason, minimalism's reductive forms — cubes, cylinders, grids, or planes — should not necessarily be seen (as is often the case, especially in architectural discourse) to mark a return to stable formal values or to idealize conceptual frameworks. In the minimalist view of the world, the capacity of perception to decenter form is greater than the capacity of ideal forms to ground perception. Far from being a symbolic language recalling essentialist values, minimalist geometry aspires to be without content. Its meaning *is* given in perception, what you see *is* what you get. "Minimalist work corrects the ideality of conception with the contingency of perception," as Hal Foster has put it in "The Crux of Minimalism" of 1986. The meaning of a minimalist work, "is produced in the experi-

ence of the world, not in the hypothetically pure and prior space of intentionality." Minimalist geometries are low, not high. Repetition and the simple forms of minimalism are linked to seriality and to the protocols of industrial production, rather than to the timeless and the universal.

Finally, in a conscious critique of the theories of Clement Greenberg, minimalism worked against an ever-narrowing specificity to the disciplines of painting and sculpture. This position was stated most clearly by Judd in his 1965 essay "Specific Objects": "Half or more of the best work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture. . . . Much of the motivation in the new work is to get clear of these forms." Minimalism moved away from the material constraints of the individual disciplines and almost inevitably toward objects and spaces: "The use of three dimensions is an obvious alternative. It opens to anything."

Minimalism's cross-disciplinary incursions inevitably lead back to the complicated question of its relationship to architecture. For Robert Morris, the other key artist/

writer of the 1960s, minimalist work is distinguished by the emphasis on the process of its making. But it is hard not to remark how many of the procedures of minimalist making (not to mention formal devices, materials, or methods) belong to architecture. With minimalism, the sculptural object was inflated to an architectural scale and propelled into an architectural space. More significantly, these objects were often realized by familiar architectural means, that is to say, fabricated according to measured drawings. The distance between idea and execution that marks the work of the architect is here taken over by sculptural practice.

This tendency to borrow across disciplinary boundaries was subjected to intense critical scrutiny in Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" of 1965. Fried objected to the "theatricality" of minimalist work, noting that "what lies *between* the arts is theater." He was referring, above all, to the modes of reception solicited by the minimalist work. Responding to Morris's comments on scale, Fried noted that "the largeness of the piece, in conjunction with its non-relational, uni-



tary character, *distances* the beholder — not just physically, but psychically.” I would suggest, however, that the models of reception invoked by the minimalists owe more to architecture than to theater. Distance, distraction, and duration all characterize the spectator’s relationship to buildings and spaces. Commenting on Tony Smith’s assertion that the experience of contemporary (posturban) space tended to trivialize the experience of the artwork (“All art today is an art of postage stamps”), Fried asked, “If the turnpike, airstrips and drill ground are not works of art, what *are* they?” The answer, I would suggest, is obvious; these are works of architecture. (Or maybe not obvi-

ous, but only if we refuse to admit that there exists a large and important category of spaces or artifacts that are architecture but not necessarily buildings.) In fact, the entire basis of Fried’s critique could be rephrased to say that for him, the problem with minimalist works (or, as he would say, “literalist” works) is that they are too close to architecture, that is to say, insufficiently distinguishable from the everyday objects that frame our day-to-day lives: “We are all literalists most or all of our lives.” Architecture, unlike painting and sculpture, is not subject to a reductive categorical imperative on the order of Greenberg’s definition of painting as the interaction of color on a flat

canvas. Hence an alternative formulation: what lies between the arts is *architecture*.

There is, therefore, something implicitly tautological in architecture’s recall of minimalist strategies: a blindness that refuses to see as fundamentally architectural any strategy already claimed by another discipline (or, more perversely, that finds these strategies attractive precisely because of the prestige of art practices associated with them without recognizing their origins in architectural practice.) If, however, it is true that minimalism’s artifacts are more like architecture and less like sculpture, it is equally true that they are not exactly archi-



4. Pachinko Parlor II, view of façade

tecture. To refer back to minimalism in its earlier art-world context is also to mark out the limits of the return to minimalism as a project in contemporary architecture. (And the selectiveness of the recall. Note that some of minimalism's more radical propositions were taken up and extended by artists usually designated "postminimal": Barry Le Va, Linda Benglis, or Bruce Nauman, for example. Despite a more evident architectural content, this work has largely been overlooked in recent architectural discussions.) Inasmuch as minimalism has worked against function, context, and recognizability, its architectural utility will always be limited. If we stipulate that the procedures

and models of perception invoked are already architectural, then the minimalist reference is doomed to be primarily formal. (Think of the 1970s attempt to legitimize a late-corporate modernism by reference to minimalism: Philip Johnson's Penzoil Building in Houston, for example.) Minimalism, which developed in series, but rarely in fields, is powerless to offer models for the city or for urban agglomeration. Moreover, minimalism's ambition to a unified formal gestalt could be accomplished with materials that were themselves simple and uniform. Not so a building, which, however reductive its formal language, is always a complex assemblage of multiple construc-

5. Villa in the Forest, exterior view



6. Villa in the Forest, interior view

tive members (foundation, frame, infill, membrane) and mechanical systems (HVAC, electrical, conveyance, electronic). A sculpture can be self-contained and complete in itself, while a work of architecture cannot.

All of this is by way of elaborating and clarifying a contextual frame already defined for the work of Kazuyo Sejima published here. Sejima's Saishunkan Seiyaku Women's Dormitory of 1990–91 appeared on the cover of the *Light Construction* catalogue and her work has been established as the most radical exemplar of present-day minimalism: an architecture of intentionally limited formal means that seeks to engender in the experience of the viewer not a contemplative return to essentials or to grounded perception (as in the case of Ando), but rather, an explosive play of light, reflection, sign, and movement. Most evident perhaps in the series of Pachinko Parlors of 1991–93, where the architecture is all but eclipsed in the delirious passage from sign to sign, from reflection to reflection, this character is still visible in her calmest work so far, the Villa in the Forest of 1992–94. In this compact house, subtle asymmetries disturb the stability of the plan figure and maintain the viewer's gaze in a state of restless motion.

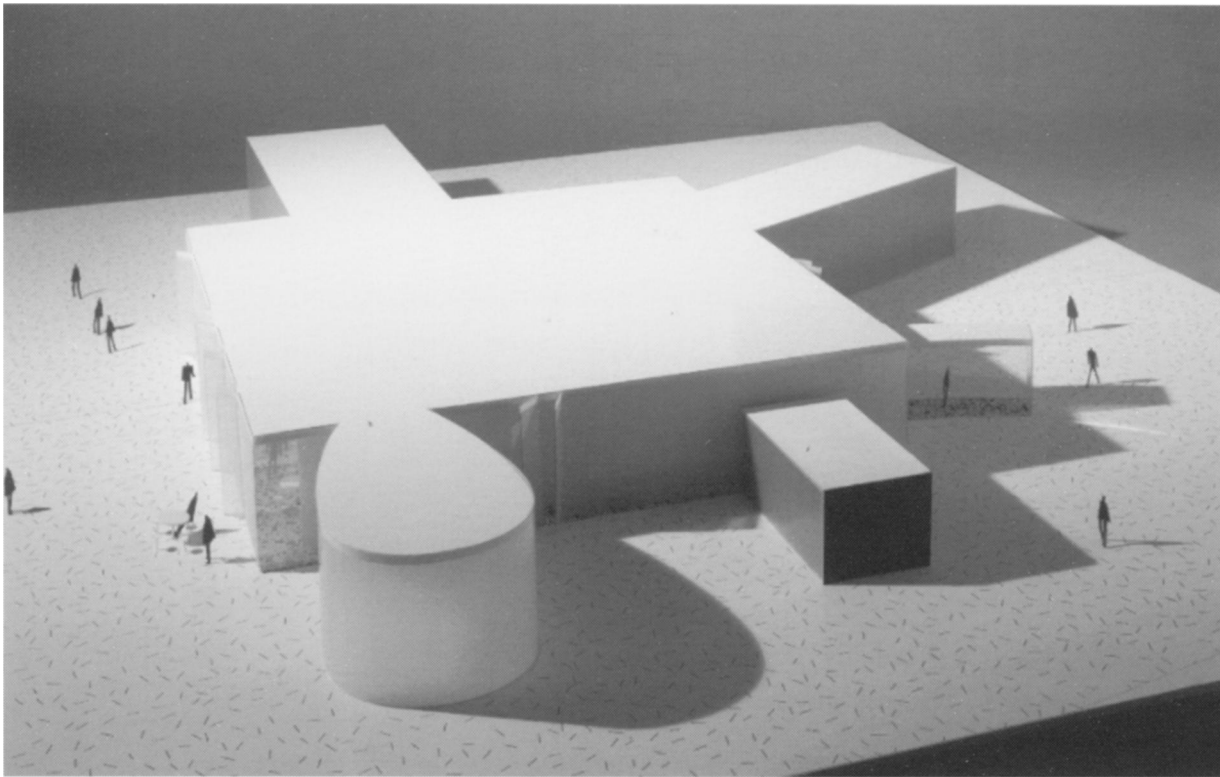
Sejima, for her part, makes no claim for a minimalist affiliation. The means she uses to describe her work refer to program, media, and movement. This is an architecture that travels light, comfortable with the contradictions of present-day reality and free of avant-garde aspirations: "I concede that I am indeed living in the present. But that is all the more reason why I don't believe in trying to deny or conceal that fact by creating oppositional architecture. . . . I consider it anachronistic to take an impossible concept, present it as something of eternal importance, and completely base your ar-



chitecture on it." In part, the freshness of her projects follows from this immediacy: geometry is not identified with resistance or with distant idealisms. As Judd has commented in another context: "The order is not rationalistic and underlying, but it is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another." If we propose an authentic relationship to the minimalist work of the 1960s, it is not because her work recalls their language of forms, or even its ability to achieve maximum effects with minimal means, but rather, this sense of the conditional — an idea of geometry as one order among many, an order that is convenient and practical, but carries with it no metaphysical baggage. And because the geometry in her projects aspires to no universal idealism, it is not oppressive or constraining. This is not a vague and subjective observation, but the result of very specific architectural operations. The precision of plan definition is always offset by the delicacy of enclosing envelope. Containers are multiplied, creating ambiguous zones of enclosure instead of sharp demarcations. The apparent simplicity of the extruded

sections is complicated by involuted circulation paths and unfamiliar objects lodged within these rectilinear volumes.

This is also why the qualities of this work cannot be described only in terms of what it refuses or what it leaves out (the customary description of a contemporary minimalism invested in the notion of resistance). It is not only restraint and delicacy that characterize her work, but a very precise and particular plan syntax, a *composition by blocks*, that avoids all sense of montagelike collision; a smooth space that is neither agglomeration nor division, but rather cell-like and topological. Inside-outside relationships are made complex and interesting not only through transparency and reflection, but by the intensity of geometric and programmatic relationships. In the Multi Media Studio, for example, there is an evident desire to overlap and intersect programs and to interconnect spaces and events. The catenary of the inhabited roof-plane connects ground to roof-terrace and the terrace, in turn, to the interior circulation. It encloses and protects the spaces below at the same

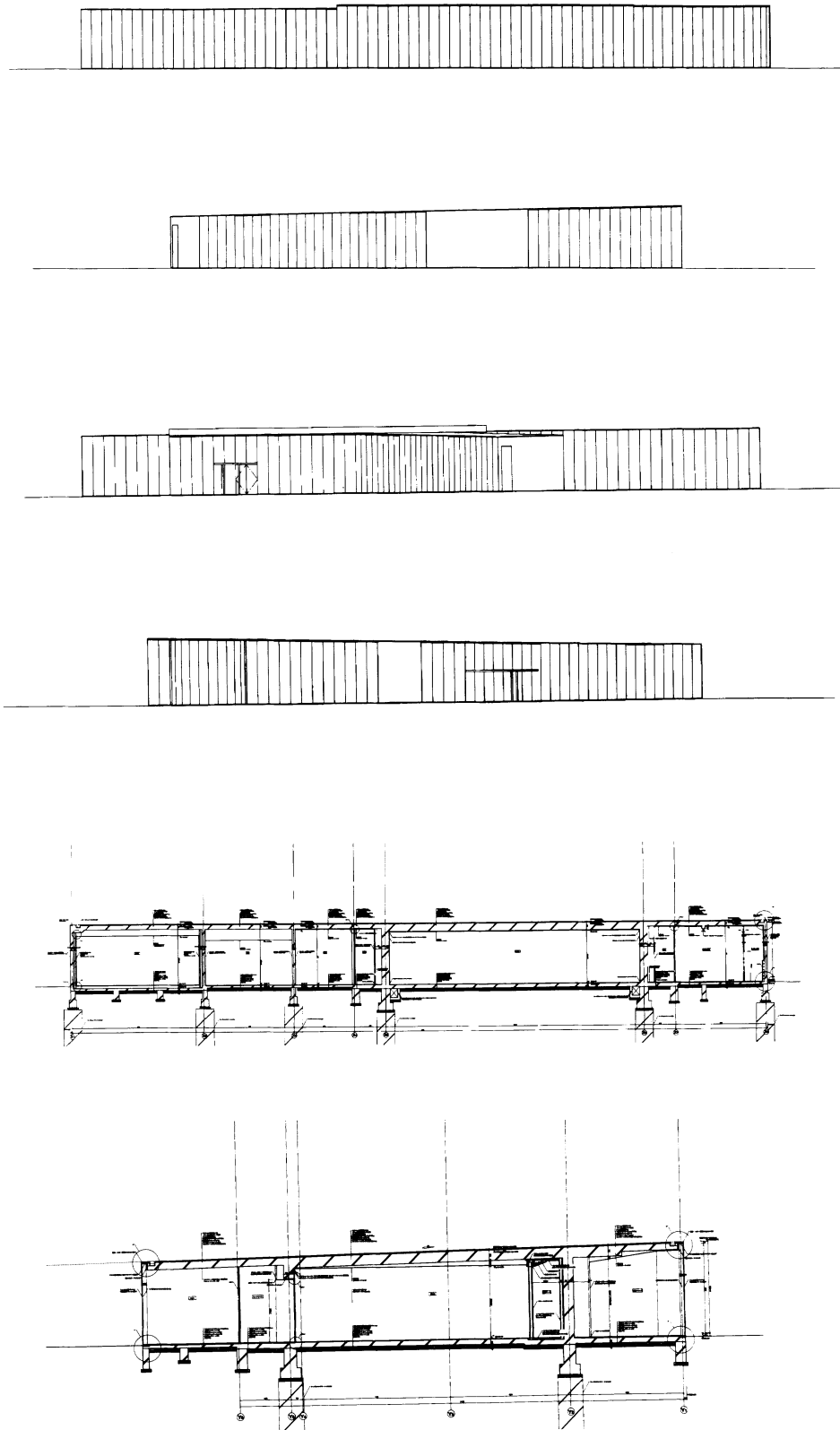


7. N-Museum, view of model

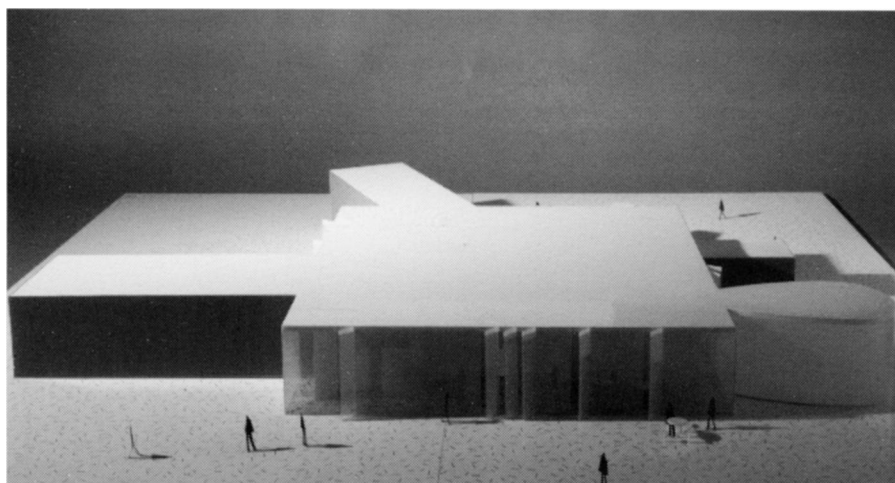
time that it deforms their simple geometries. Finally, at a strategic moment, it doubles and folds down to form the sloping floor of the auditorium. The complexity of this work is not quantitative — an additive complexity of many systems interacting on one another — but qualitative: a minimal number of elements each performing multiple and sometimes contradictory tasks. The trajectory of her work since 1987 has been toward fewer parts, but greater intensity. The appearance of figural plan forms in her latest projects, such as the N-Museum, is completely consistent with this line of development.

A discussion of Sejima's work devoted exclusively to individual projects and the conditions of their reception would miss another key aspect. These new forms of subjectivity do not emerge in a vacuum. They are the result of shifting definitions of urbanity and a response to specific new conditions in the city. If the city today is a dispersed field condition, a network of flows — of information, money, or people — then the capacity of architecture to order or to signify these flows

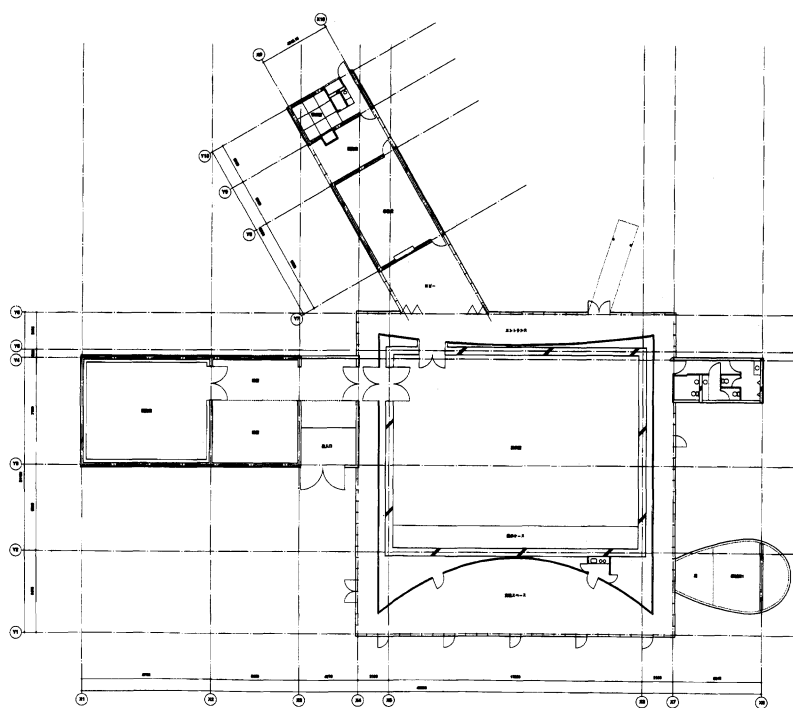
must be rethought. There is an urban proposition evident in this work, which is an extension of the conditions of its reception, but it is something else too. The rigorous formal reduction of her projects shifts attention to the interval, to the space between forms, which could be collective space. The formal syntax of "one thing after another" is a more useful device to mediate the complexity of the contemporary urban experience than the appeal to collage urbanisms or the delirious montage of signs. Her projects pay close attention to context, while recognizing that in the contexts where she is most often called on to operate, the old rules are of little use. Here, too, her realism and optimism are evident. She writes that the purpose of the research into metropolitan housing types published here is "toward the privatization of exterior space." Now, the privatization of public space is a phenomenon much decried by contemporary theorists of urban space, who have called for the reestablishment of a viable public realm. Sejima, by short-circuiting such a demand (whose ideological and nostalgic bases deserve to be examined more closely), can



8. N-Museum, elevations and construction sections



9. N-Museum, view of model



10. N-Museum, plan

capitalize on an actual development to offer a realistic means to enhance the quality of life in collective housing.

As such, it would be misleading to try to understand Sejima's projects from a representational standpoint and to see them as a mirror reflecting the dispersed and evened-out experience of the contemporary city. Is it necessary to insist once again on the impossibility of such a representational project today? Steven Marcus, for example, in "Reading the Illegible: Some Modern Representations of Urban Experience," reminds us that "the city is ceasing to be readable." In this essay, he contrasts the description of the city given in the novels of Saul Bellow and of Thomas Pynchon. The modern city, he writes, "has gone out of control . . . it has lost the signifying potencies and structural coherences that it once seemed to possess." And yet Bellow, Marcus argues, still holds on to the possibility that the novelist can give a coherent account of such an incoherent city. Like Dickens rendering the complexities of the nineteenth-century London, Bellow's descriptions of New York or Chicago retain "meaning, impressiveness and coherence." With Pynchon, on the other hand, this coherence begins to fall apart. Significantly, Pynchon writes about decisive moments in the aftermath of the breakdown of order: post-1945 Berlin, London during the Blitz, or Los Angeles in the 1970s. Fully aware of the long literary history of urban description, he turns this tradition inside out: "In order to see the contemporary urban world clearly, Pynchon asserts here, we must be able to see past 'the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of humanized history endowed with "reason."'" The structural categories are, in these words, meaningless deceptions themselves. The whole has become again destabilized, obscure, baseless, mystified — and most efforts of understanding or construct-

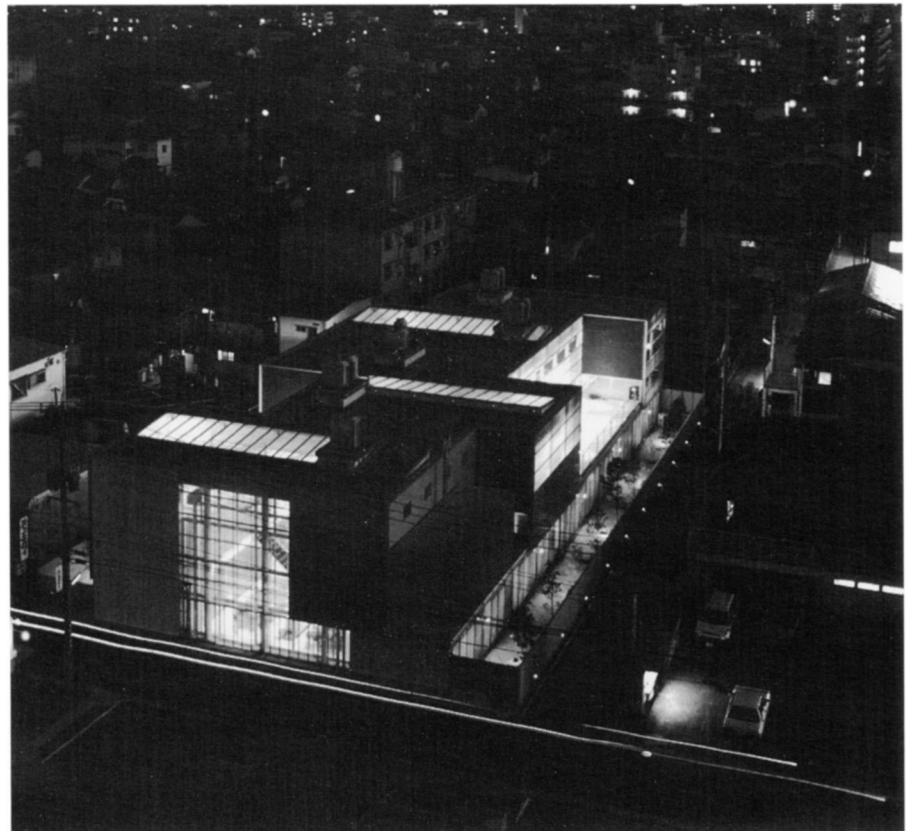
ing a whole are themselves part of a mystification.” Likewise aware that any attempt at explanation is itself a kind of mystification, Sejima’s work does not try to decode the city. It is not invested in its own legibility. It is more about performance and less about “reading.” It operates in a nondiscursive territory, working, on the one hand, instrumentally to facilitate intense programmatic exchange and, on the other, in the realm of experience and effect. Architecture, of course, only reluctantly gives up its ambition to construct the whole. Sejima’s architecture appears effortless, but we should not be deceived. What is less evident is how difficult it is to step back from the temptation to impose order on the incoherent or to construct new myths around this incoherence. In the end, the appeal of this architecture — political and otherwise — is simply its existence as an alternative to the chaos of the contemporary city. It is a delicate “other” to that formless world, deeply enmeshed in its qualities, without pretending to correct it.

Stan Allen

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11. Saishunkan Seiyaku Women's
Dormitory, aerial view