

Robin Hood Gardens  
A Choreographed Demolition



*Robin Hood Gardens:  
A Choreographed Demolition*

*Master Thesis*

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*Matter Space Structure*

*Chalmers University of Technology 2014*



*THE SCENE*

photographs

*THE REPERTOIRE*

original drawings

*THE EVENT*

*THE REHEARSAL*

site plan  
axonometric  
plan  
plan

*BALANCE*

section  
axonometric

*THE SOLO ACT*

*THE PERFORMANCE*

notes

## The Scene

During the decades after the Second World War Western Europe witnessed an unprecedented housing boom and still today the houses constructed during those intense decades constitute large parts of our western cities. So was also the situation in London, where high-rise tower blocks became the modernist version of Wren's church spires. Today these buildings are reaching a respectable age and are in need of drastic actions while at the same time the ideals from that era are frowned upon and the large scale modernist planning consider inhumane and mechanical. [i] Housing prices and shortage are both rising and as globalisation and capitalism irrevocable changes the faces of our cities [ii] it is even more important to remember and learn from our recent history. Most significantly during those intense postwar decades there was – not only an extreme momentum – but also an almost total alignment of political interests, planning ideals, production methods and architectural education and research. At the forefront of this rapid movement you will find Alison + Peter Smithson – true children of their time – building, writing and teaching. During these productive years the housing scheme Robin Hood Gardens – that reluctantly has become a symbol for this whole era – was built in East London.

Completed in 1972 Robin Hood Garden is a true monument over architectural theories, prefabrication methods and political will; as well as class, segregation and the utter failure of society to care for the people in the direst need. In the past decade the fate of Robin Hood Gardens has been intensively discussed while the steel re-bars expose themselves as the concrete continues to weather away. The question has been whether to save and refurbish it or to demolish it. In 2009 Robin Hood Gardens was granted immunity against listing which effectively opened up the road to demolition. But still today, it defiantly stands tall [1].



Robin Hood Gardens seen from the Blackwall Tunnel Approach





Photograph Sandra Loussada, 1972







Photograph Sandra Loussada, 1972







## The Repertoire

The debate about Robin Hood Gardens has been extremely black and white and quite often lost sight of the actual buildings (despite their often mentioned 'brutal' presence) and 'the real past or present of Robin Hood Gardens' [iii]. Will it be a new Pruitt-Igoe (demolished in April 1972 - the same year RHG was completed) or another refurbish success story like the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield (short-listed for the 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize)?

I would argue that the complexity of Robin Hood Gardens (and indeed many other similar housing schemes) requires a third way – an untameable way of contradictions with a debate full of paradoxes, feelings and controversy – a *repertoire* that is neither black or white. Through exposing the architectural paradoxes of Robin Hood Gardens the architecture also stops being objectified. It becomes a subject, an agent, the protagonist of what is to be the choreographed fate of this large housing complex. The *repertoire* builds on Smithson's original ideas and investigations on housing, the city and the landscape.

Robin Hood Gardens will dance one last waltz – a choreographed demolition – that captivates the audience; changes direction and intensity; for a minute freezes in space hardly breathing, before once again exploding in to movement: "... as if the dancer had been 'carving space out of a pliable substance'." [iv] The endlessly variable dance is created out of a *repertoire* with a strict set of 'moves' from three different categories: Subtraction, Addition and Cumulation. These moves are an architectural representation of the existence, the debate and theories that Robin Hood Gardens encapsulate. When combined and executed these *moves* unlock the many paradoxes of Robin Hood Gardens and architecturally expose and arrange them in front of the observer:

<i>rhythm</i>	<i>repetition</i>
<i>urbanism</i>	<i>housing</i>
<i>ordinariness</i>	<i>uniqueness</i>
<i>city</i>	<i>landscape</i>
<i>structure</i>	<i>space</i>

These paradoxes also question the profit driven pseudo democratic political process of regeneration. Instead of observing the architecture as an object it becomes – through this choreographed exposure – an instrument of change. An instrument that utilises the structure of Robin Hood Gardens to set the framework for a new type of redevelopment where event and social responsibility are at the heart. Robin Hood Garden as an event will be the epicentre for change, affecting itself, the neighbouring areas and eventually the wider city.

Existing



Noise wall and moat effectively secludes RHG from the wider city



Uninviting units deactivate the ground floor uses.



The millenium green is 'stress free zone' in the middle of the busy city



Well planned and generous maisonette units.



Unusable balconies that double up as escape routes

Debate



Cover | *Architectural Design* no. 9, 1972



Spread | *Architectural Design* no. 9, 1972



Front Page | *Building Design Friday* June 26, 2009



Editorial | *Architect's Journal* 27.09.2007



Cover | *Robin Hood Gardens Re-visions*, Ed. Alan Powers, 2010

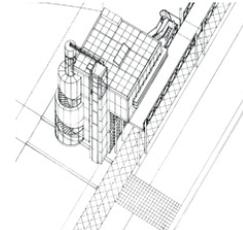
Theory



Sectional model | Peter Eisenman, Cannaregio 1978



Conical Intersect | Gordon Matta Clark, 1975



Axonometric Drawing | Bernard Tschumi, Parc de la Villette, 1984



Collage Architecture | Nils-Öle Lund 1982



Extract from MT 3, *The Fall* | Bernard Tschumi, *Manhattan Transcripts* 1981

*Subtraction*



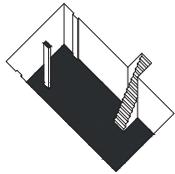
S1 Section



S2 Slice



S3 Cut



S4 Ground

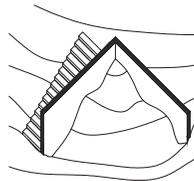


S5 Elements

*Addition*



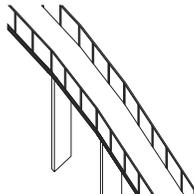
A1 Flood



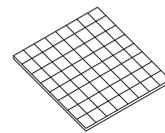
A2 Levee &  
Stair



A3 Vertical  
Circulation



A4 Horizontal  
Circulation



A5 Public Terraces

*Cumulation*



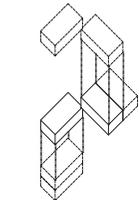
C1 Green Congestion



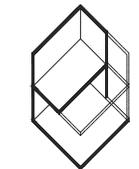
C2 Stack of Mullions



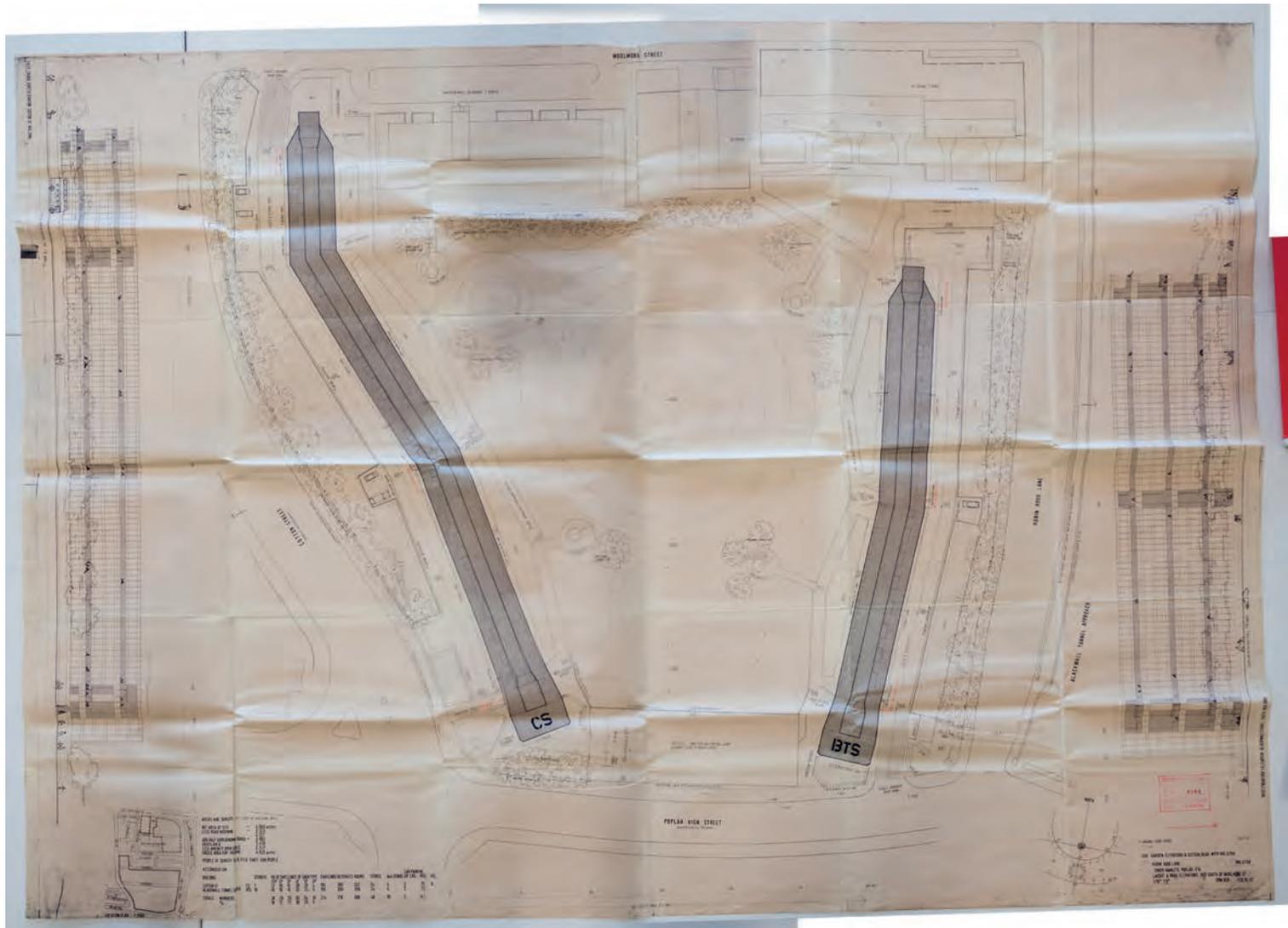
C3 Layers



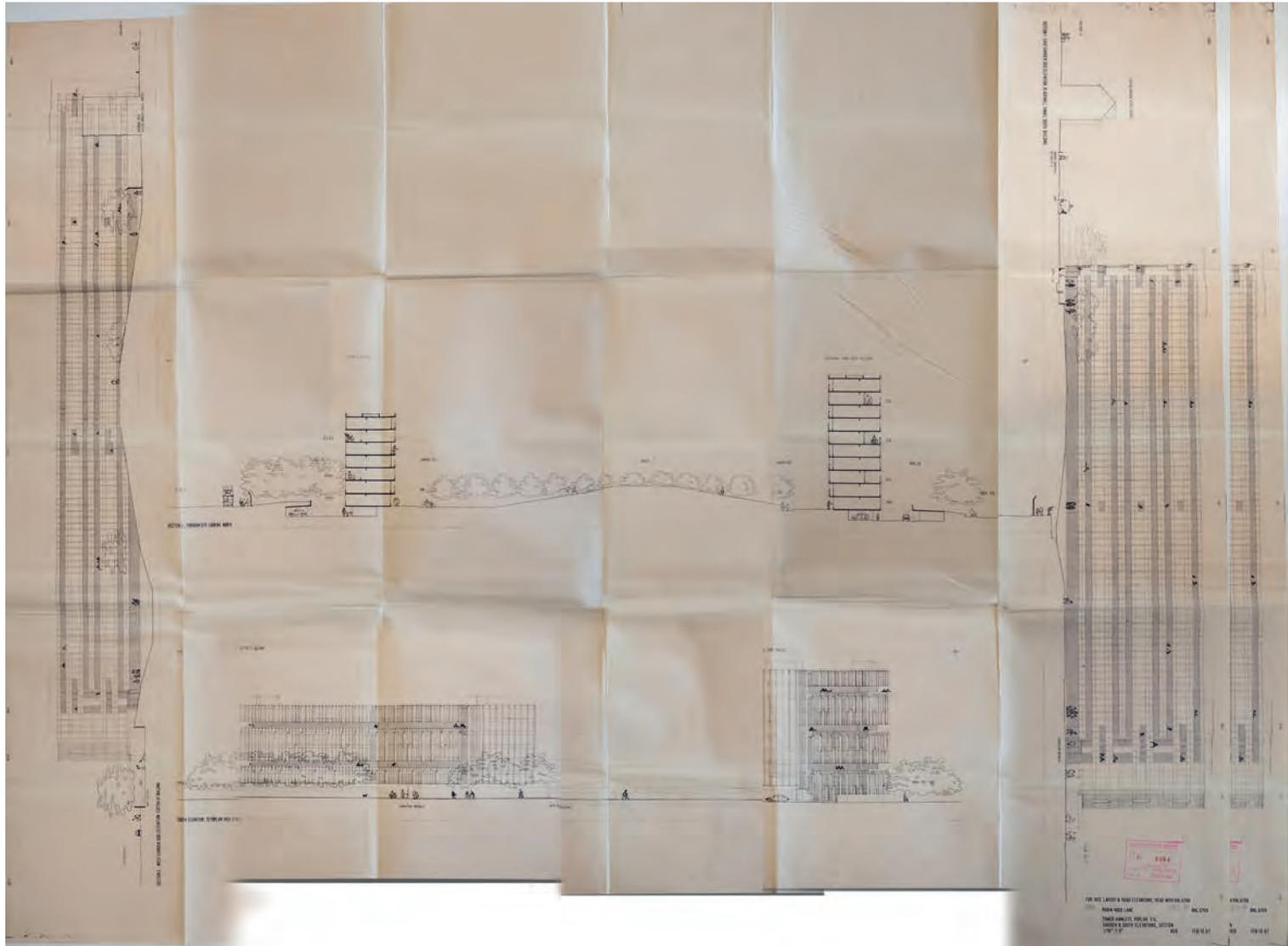
C4 Combination



C5 Expansion

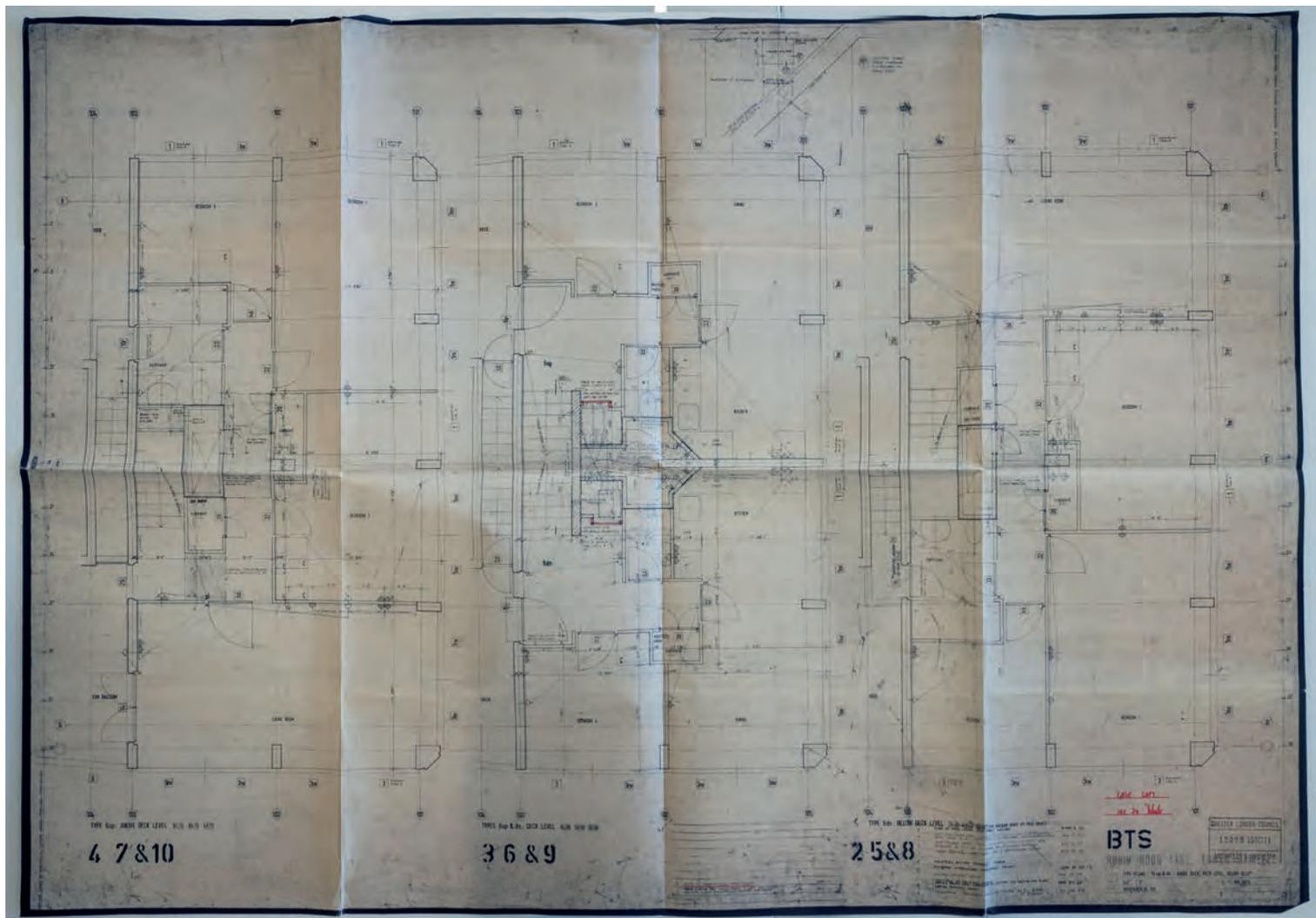


Original Planning Drawing, London Metropolitan Archives



Original Planning Drawing, London Metropolitan Archives





Original Detail Design Drawing, London Metropolitan Archives

## The Event

### *THE UNAVOIDABLE EVENT OF DEMOLITION*

The site is split like a kipper with the famous mound (part of it made it to this year's Venice Biennale) located in the centre. This 'stress-free zone' is truly the centrepiece of the scheme and the Smithson's referenced Capability Brown's rolling hills when creating the mound: "Hills are a great formal idea, ever various, expressive of mood, expectant of weather." [v]. A stress-free zone, protected by the concrete buildings giving people space to breath in and polluted and over-trafficked city. But the sole mound needs company, a new topography will create a "range of hills" [vi] – a new space battling the figures of the buildings. The outside of Robin Hood Gardens is as discouraging as a landscape of hills might be inviting. Busy roads on all sides, a 3 metre tall acoustical barrier and an equally deep moat effectively cut the site off from its surroundings. A Superblock, a 'landcastle' [vii] in an harsh traffic environment – on the outside the human scale has been thoroughly lost.



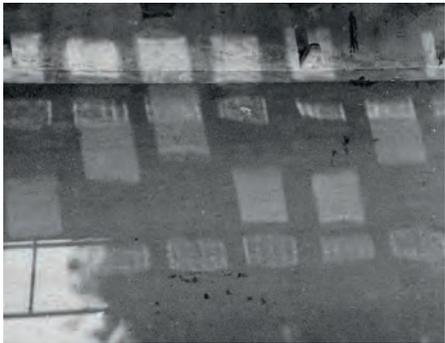
[i]



[ii]



[iii]



[iv]



[v]



[vi]

[i] Alison + Peter Smithson in 1968 [ii] Still from BBC Documentary, *The Smithson's on Housing*, 1970 [iii] The Millenium Mound, Alison Smithson, 1973 [iv] Window reflections, Ioana Marinescu, 2009 [v] Still from BBC Documentary, *The Smithson's on Housing*, 1970 [vi] View towards the Thames, 2014

1970 The swedish SUNDH  
precast system

1972 Photograph by  
Sandra Loussada



2018 Flooding of the east moat  
along Blackwall Tunnel

2002 Photograph by  
David Grandorge

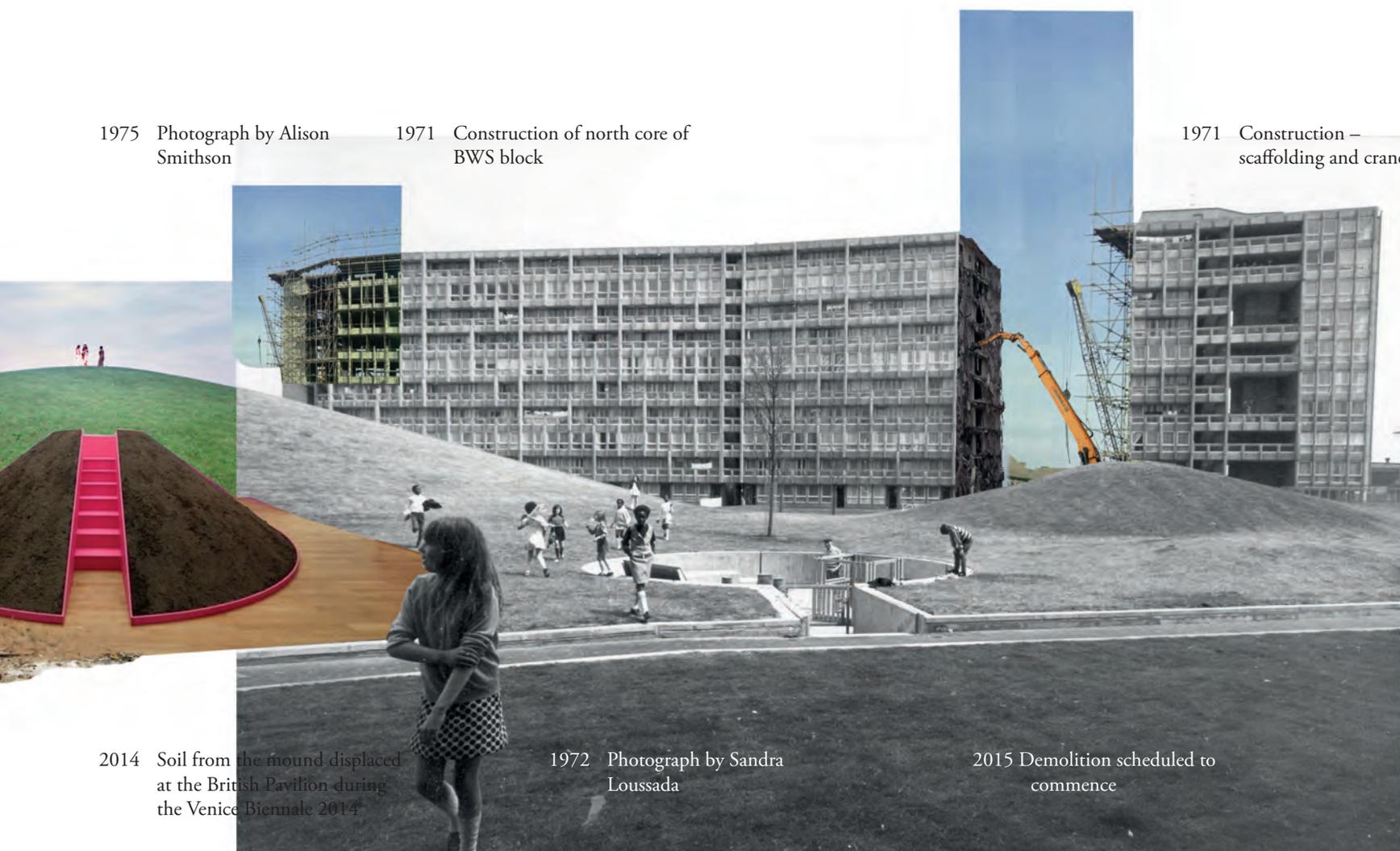
2008 Photograph by Iona  
Marinescu

2016 Archeological excavations of  
the new 'Millenium Green'

1975 Photograph by Alison Smithson

1971 Construction of north core of BWS block

1971 Construction — scaffolding and crane



2014 Soil from the mound displaced at the British Pavilion during the Venice Biennale 2014

1972 Photograph by Sandra Loussada

2015 Demolition scheduled to commence

Collage of courtyard facades

1969 During Construction



2014 Sketch of acoustic wall and access moat

2014 Photograph of Cotton Street Elevation

2014 Sunken football pitch

1969 Collage of construction



1972 Photograph by Sandra Loussada

1972 Photograph by Sandra Loussada

Collage of external facades

# The Rehearsal

*SUBTRACTION, ADDITION, CUMULATION*

By removing strategic, large sections of the buildings the site is reconnected to the city; the landscape is transformed to host the past, present and the future. Housing units are enlarged and combined, allowing for new and varied ways of living. People, water, sound and the surrounding city is welcomed in to shape the new topography. Circulation, public spaces, terraces and plantation are added to bridge from the past to what may come.





*Choreographed Demolition Sequence – Site Model | 1:1000*





*Choreographed Demolition Sequence – Site Model | 1:1000*



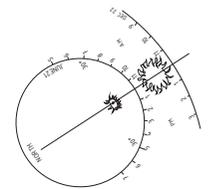
*Choreographed Demolition Sequence – Site Model | 1:1000*

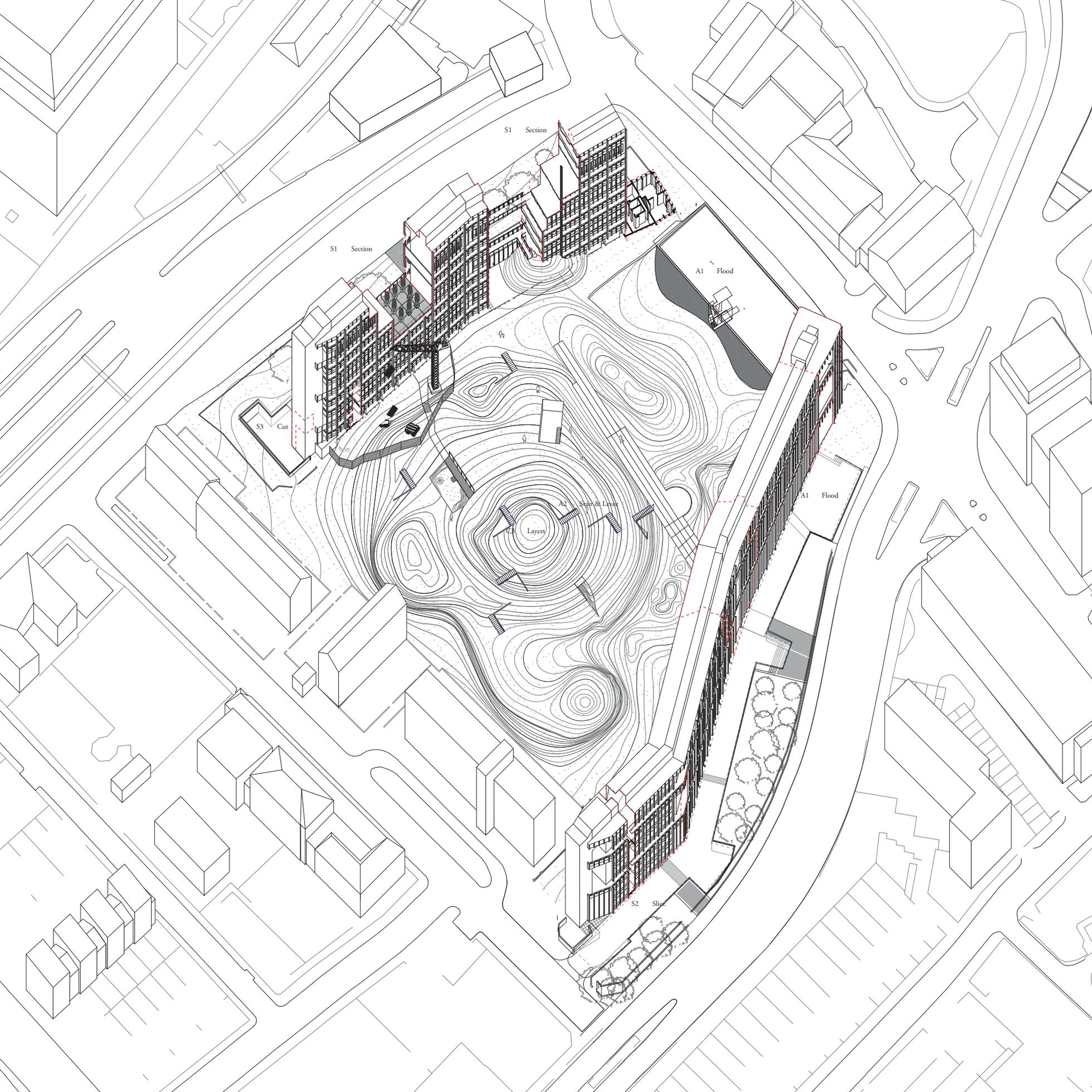












S1 Section

S1 Section

A1 Flood

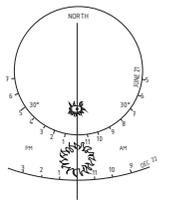
S3 Cut

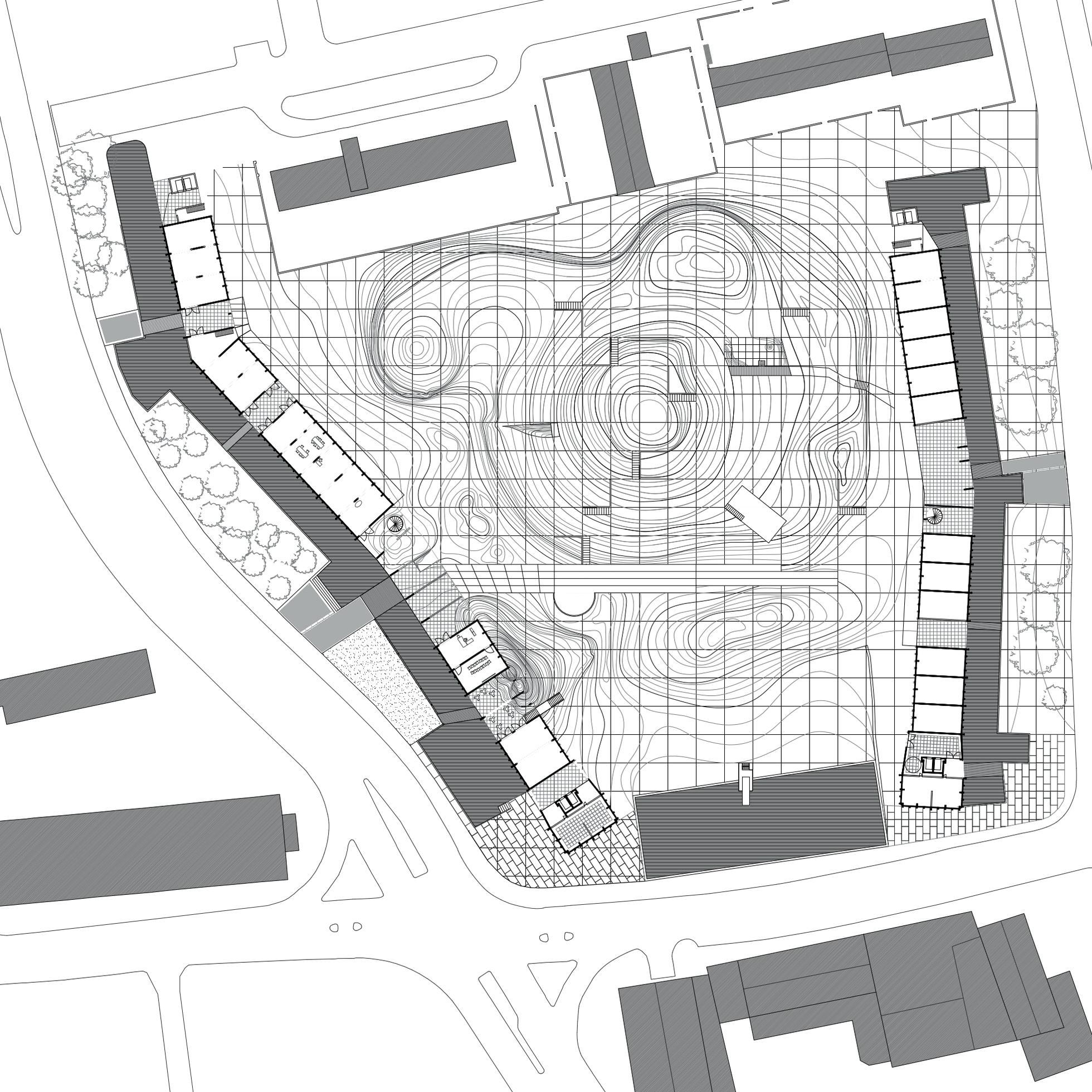
A2 Start & Layers

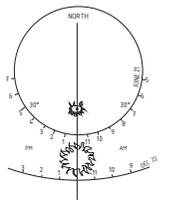
Layers

A1 Flood

S2 Slice





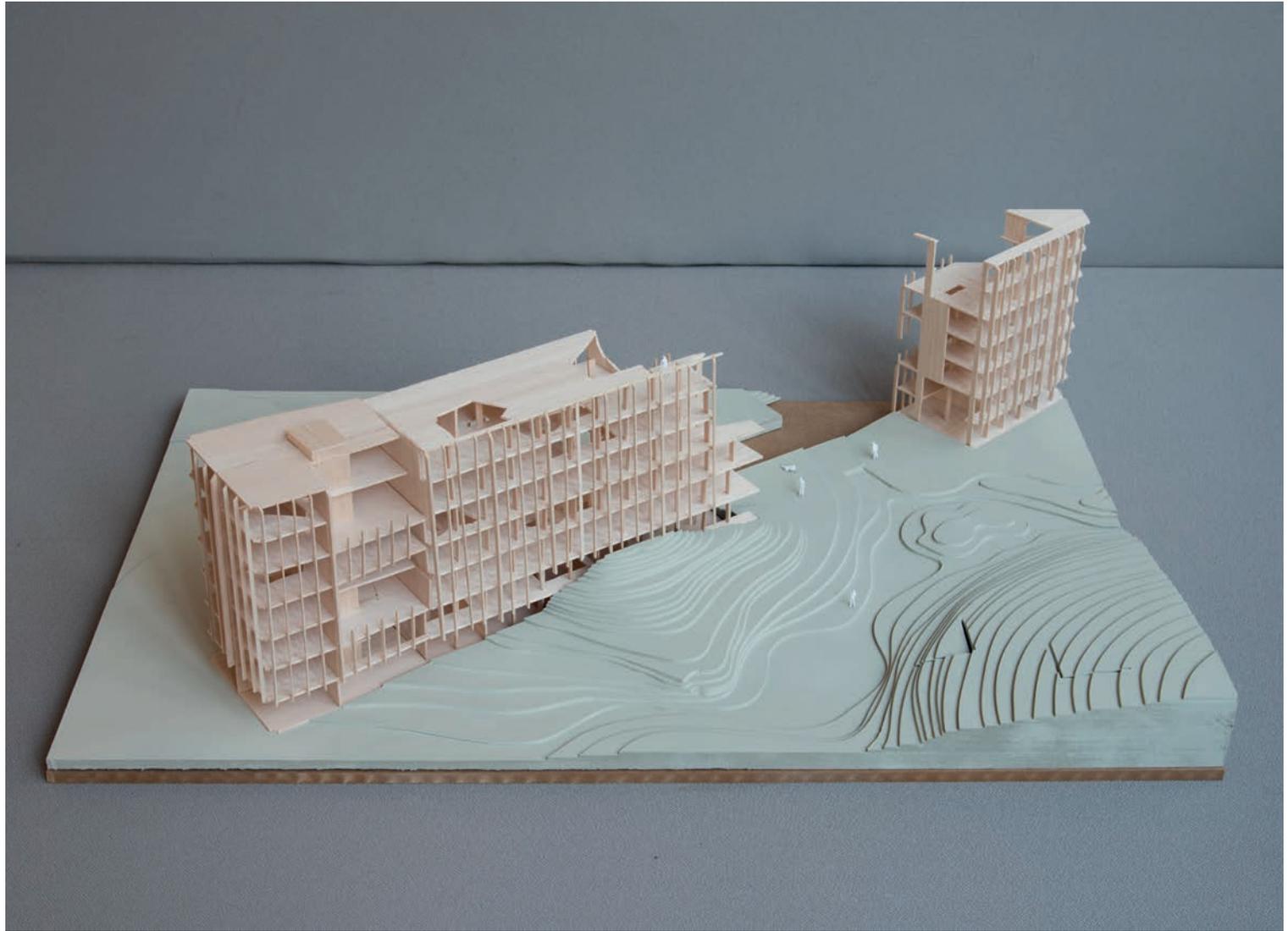


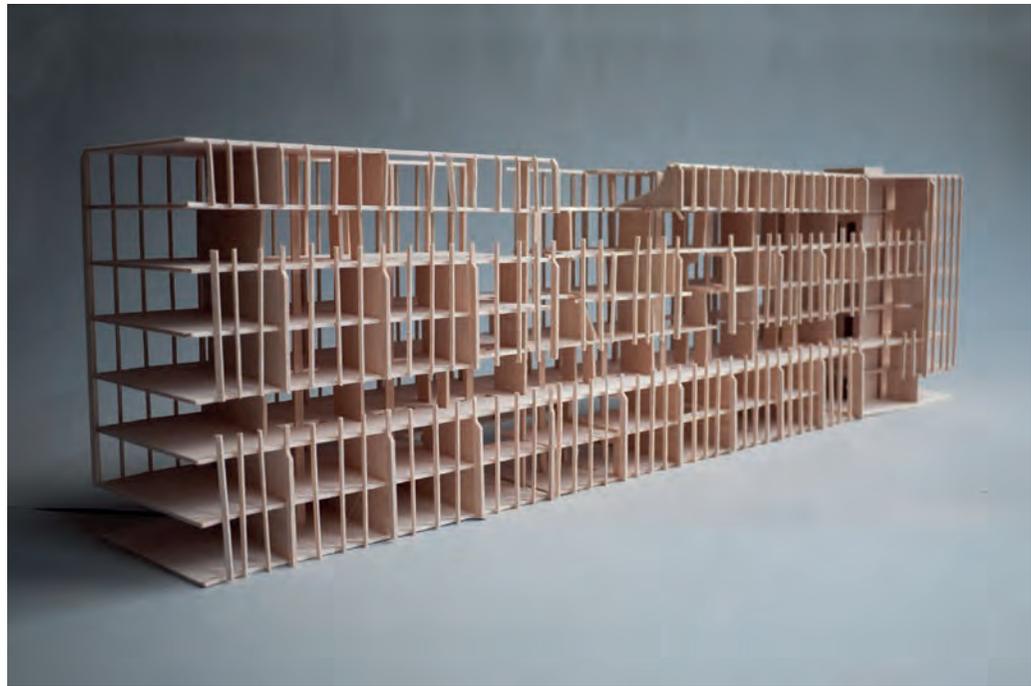
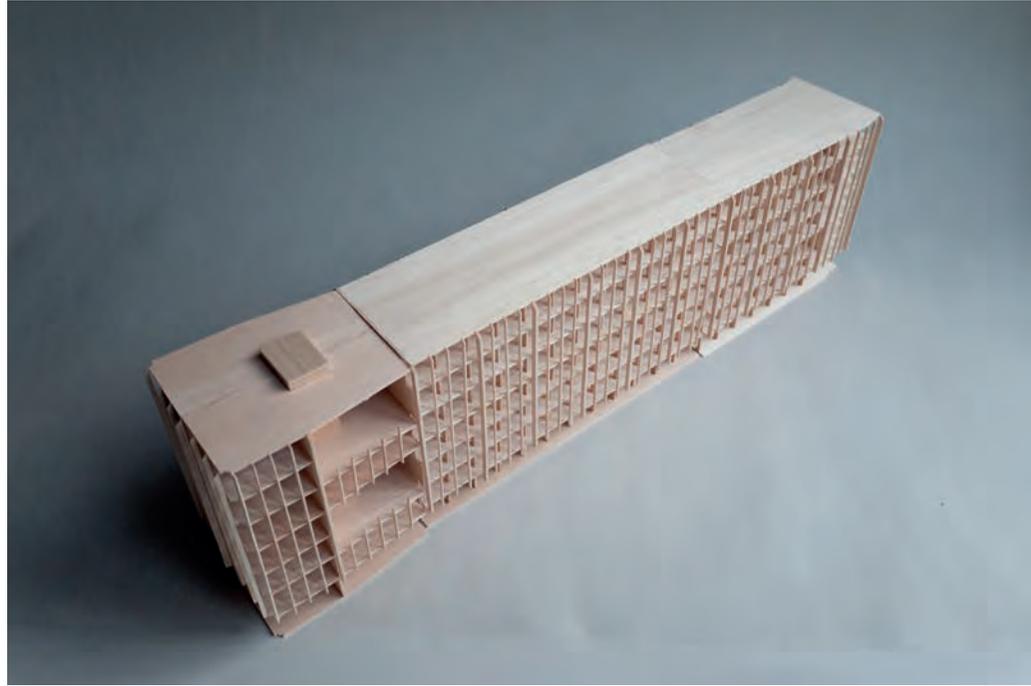


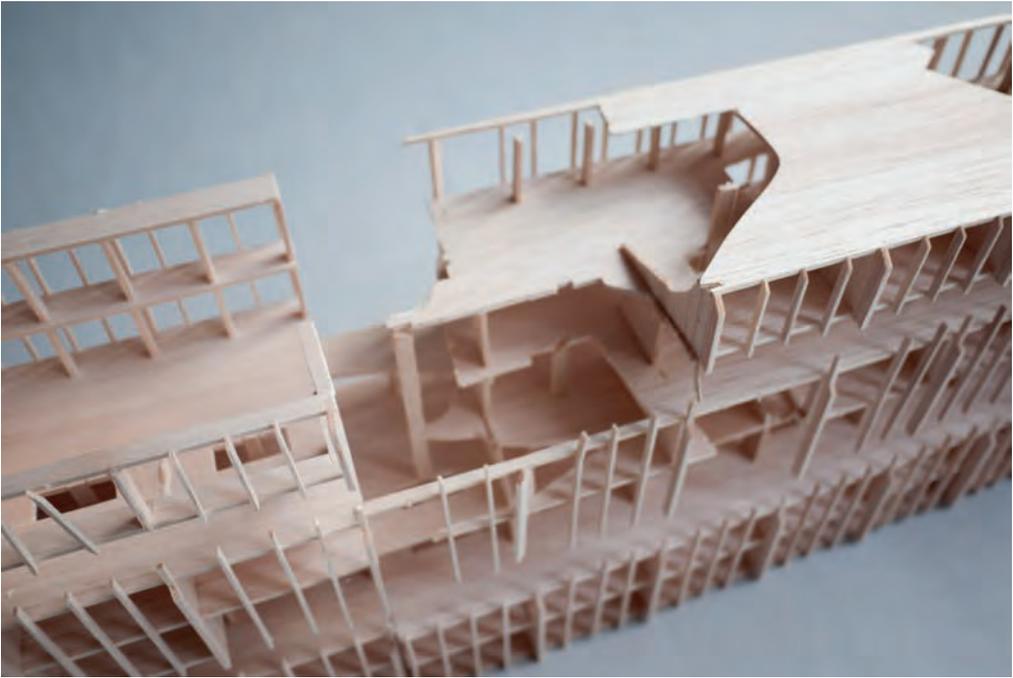
# Balance

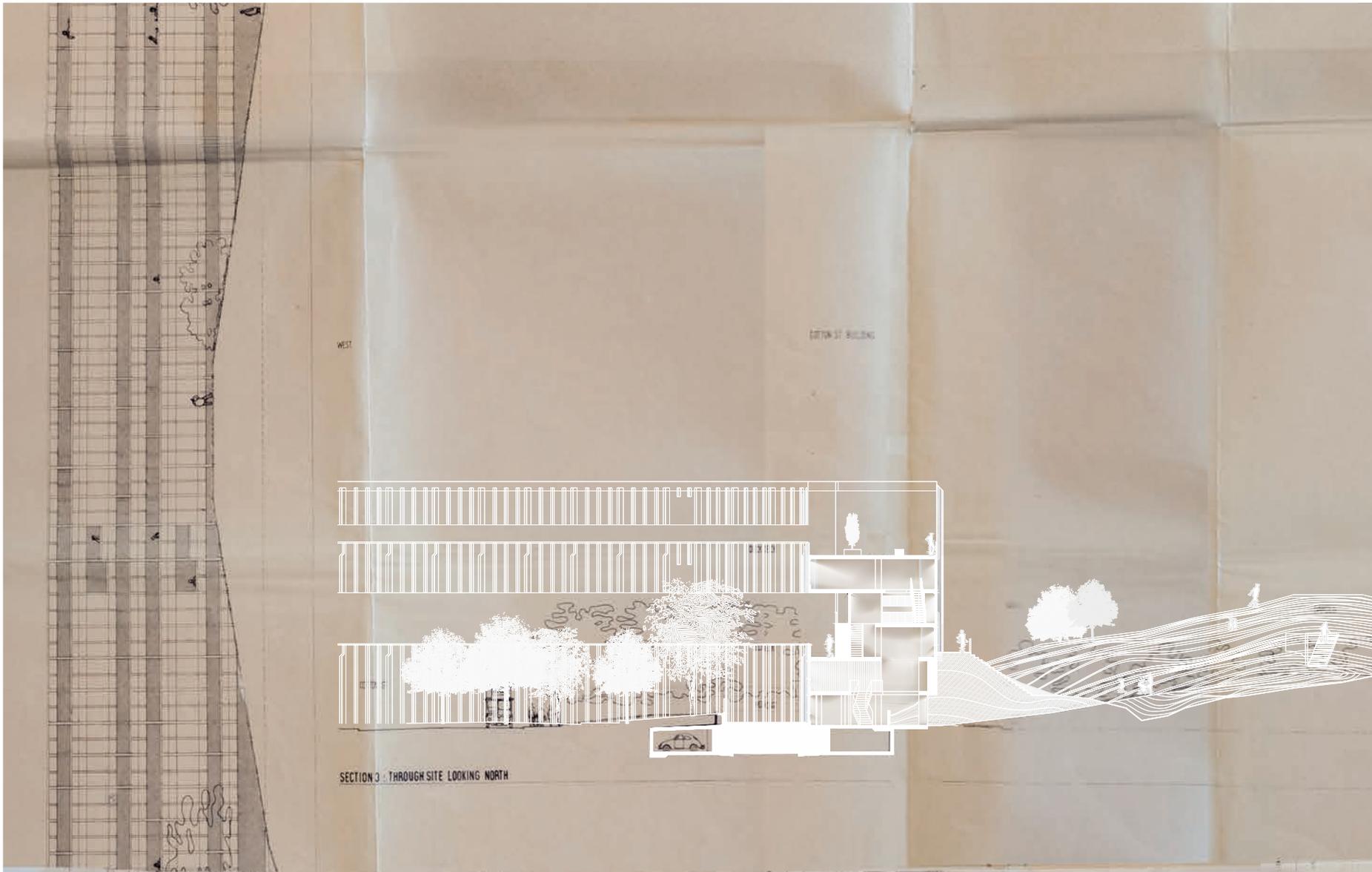
## *STRUCTURAL DIS-ASSEMBLAGE*

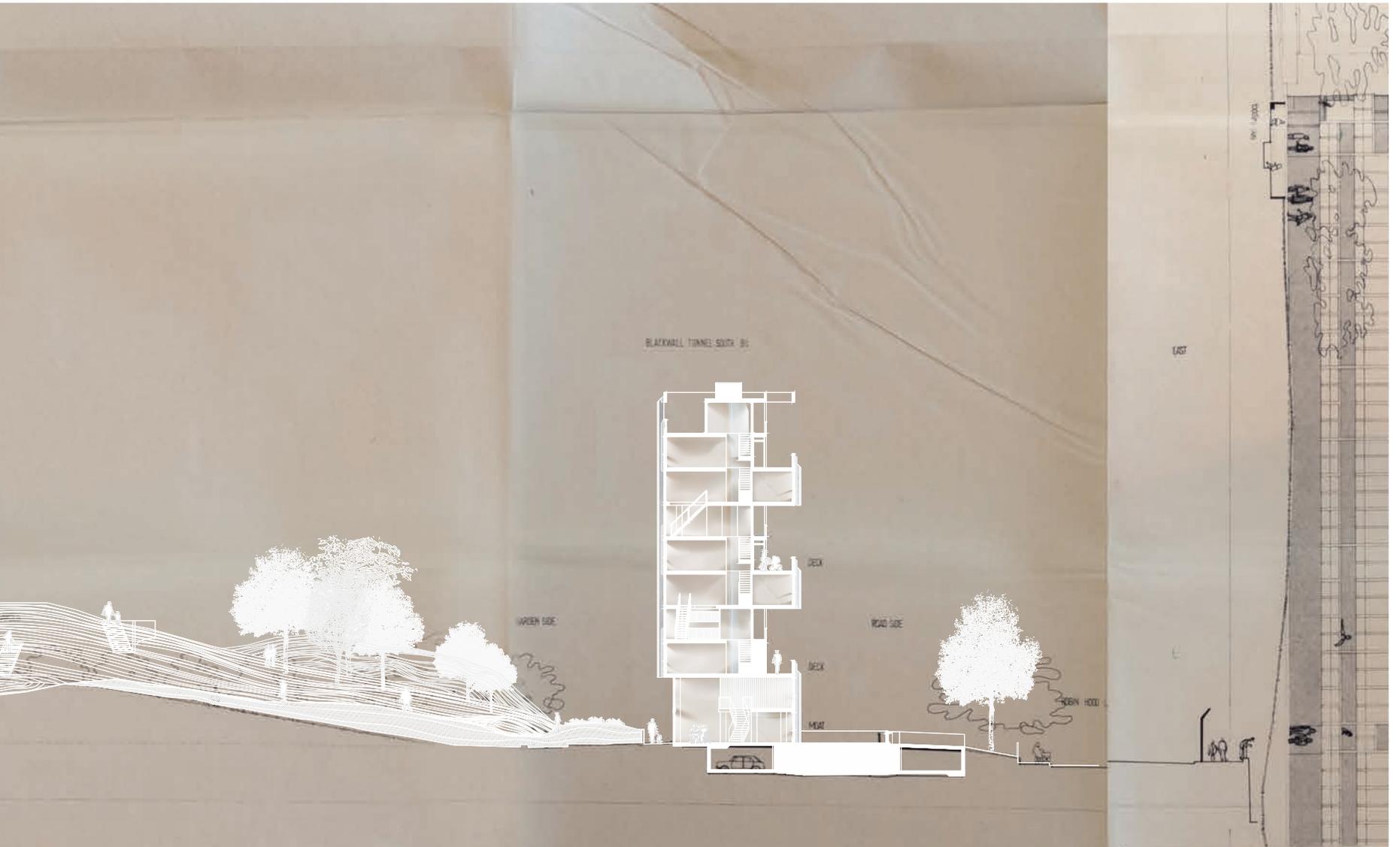
Just before construction began the structure changed from the intended insitu concrete box frame to the Swedish SUNDH precast system. So already once in its lifetime Robin Hood Gardens structure has been radically affected. Now it is time again. The choreographed demolition is balancing on the edge of the structural system's capacity – pushing, cutting, stretching and challenging. Like the architecture is being challenged on a figure ground relationship the structural constitution is being pushed and stretch to its limits. The concrete is laid bare and inspected; slabs and walls are penetrated; precast mullions are removed and reordered into new constellations. “You cut a hole in the building and people can look inside and see the way other people really lived.. it's making space without building it” *[ix]*

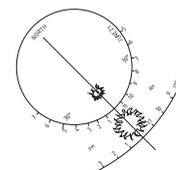












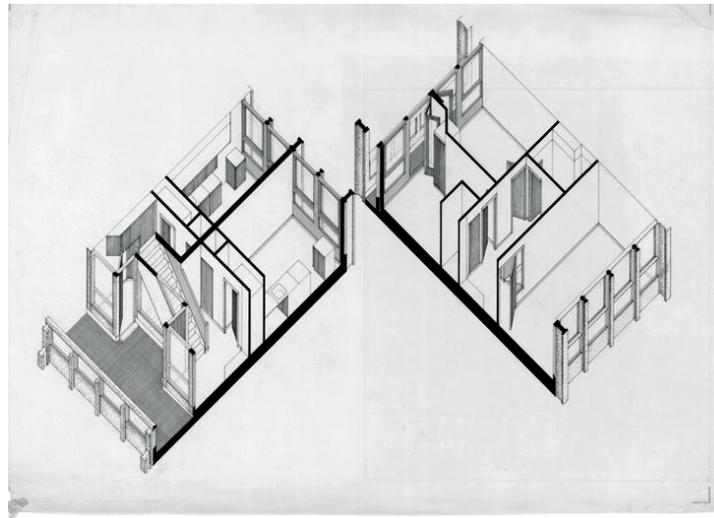
Section Cut – Axonometric | 1:100



## The Solo Act

### *NEW WAYS OF LIVING*

Internal walls and slabs are cut open, the structure is stripped back to its raw core and simple yet fine additions (stairs and balustrades, doors and windows) create new spaces for living. The new spaces question and battle the inherent repetition of the Swedish precast structural frame and create new generous flats where verticality, generosity and unconventional spaces are the key elements. This allows for new ways of living; large families; over generations; large groups of people for a short time. The last sigh of Robin Hood Garden will reinvent its initial intentions: providing generous and varied spaces that anyone can afford.

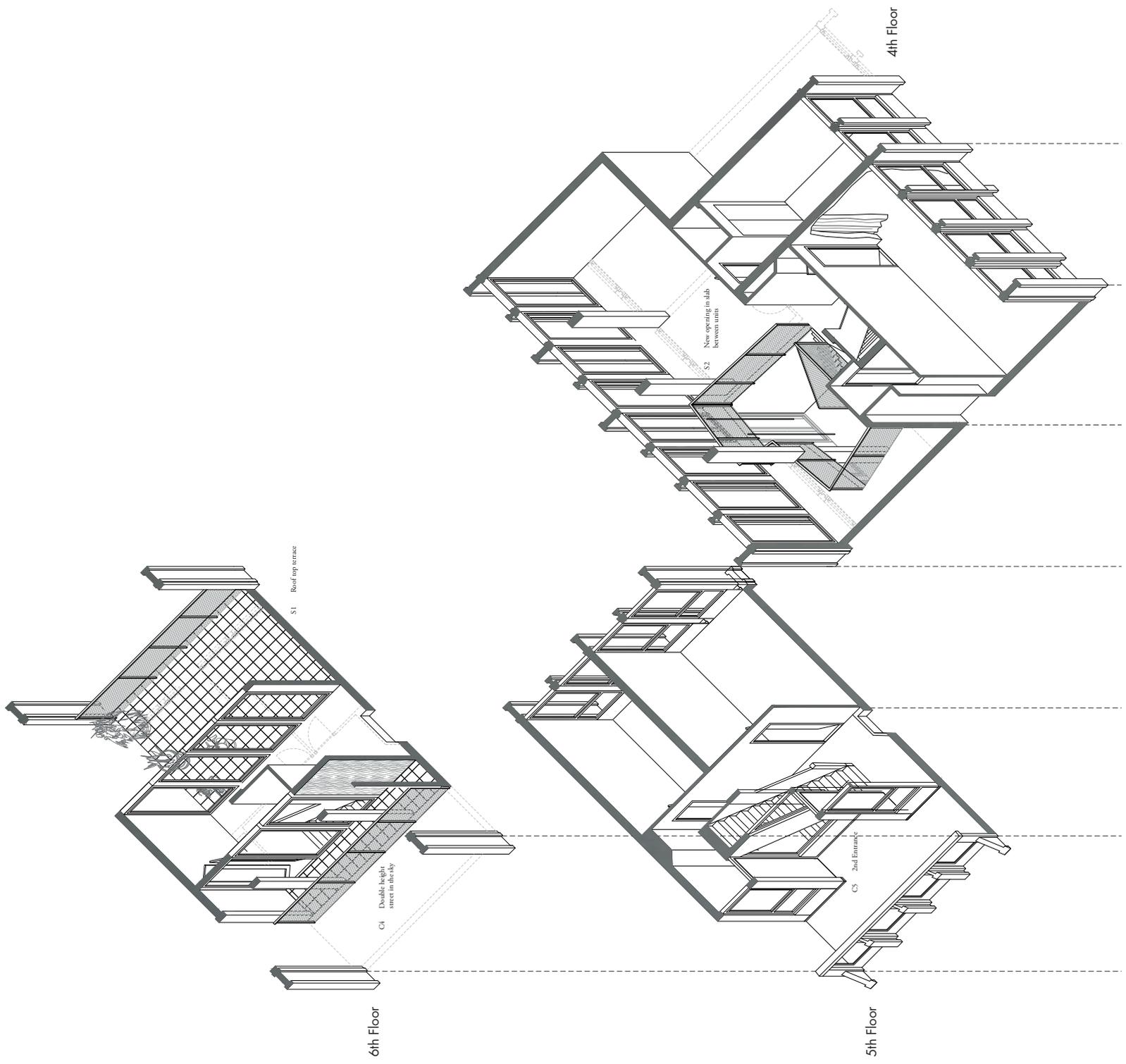


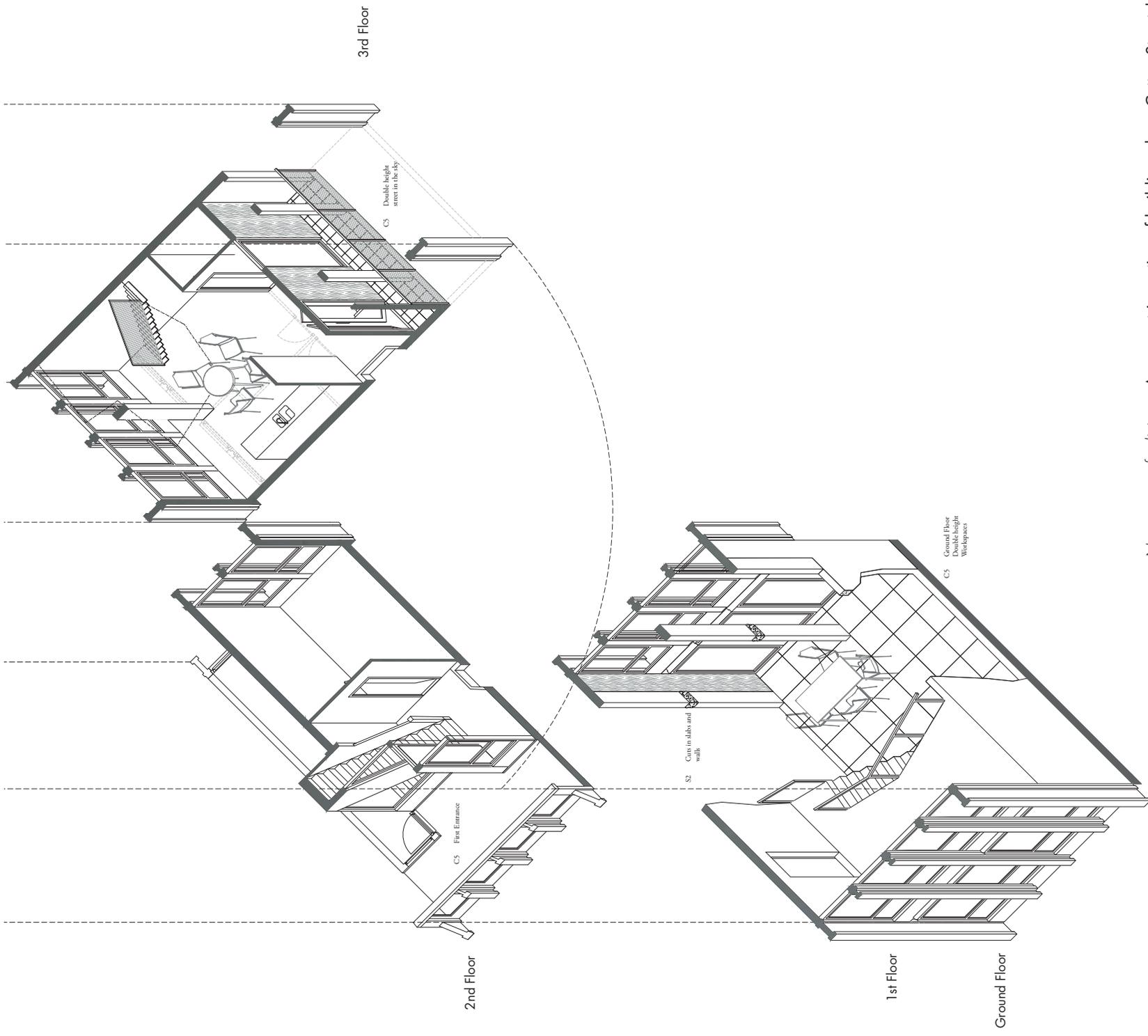
*Axonometric of Robin Hood Garden typical maisonette | A+P Smithson, 1969*



- Precast Concrete Mullion 1
- Timber framed window 2
- Single glazed horizontal pivot window 3
- Precast concrete balustrade coping 4
- Single glazed fixed light 5
- Single glazed fixed window 6
- Screed on top of stepped slab 7
- Precast concrete spandrel panel 8
- Added metal balustrade around opening in slab 9
- Insitu concrete slab 250 10
- Cut face through insitu concrete slab 11
- Varnished plywood spandrel panel 12

*New Spaces – Axonometric of cut through slab between units scale 1:20*







[i]



[ii]

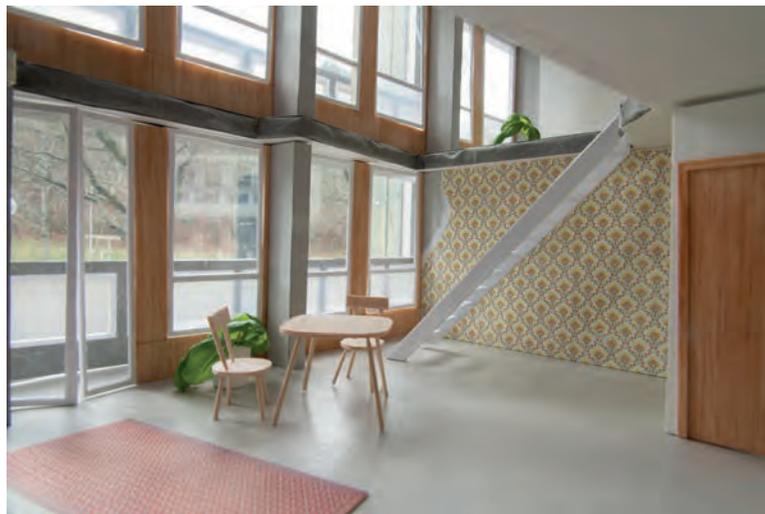


[iii]





[v]



[vi]



[vii]

[i, iv] Model photo of double height 'Street in the sky'

[ii] Photograph of 'Street in the Sky', Peter Smithson 1972

[iii] Collage of 'Street in the Sky' inspired by Gordon Matta Clark

[v, vi, viii] Model photo of dining room with double floor to ceiling height.

[vii] Photograph of living room, Sandra Loussada 1972



## The Performance

### *CAPABILITY BROWN'S HILLS AND HERE COMES THE FLOOD*

The new topography is, just as the existing mound, created from spoil of the demolished buildings on the site, a cyclical event. Together with the demolition rubble myths and histories are forever embedded and remembered in the topography of the landscape. This echoes Peter Eisenman's proposal for the Canareggio site in Venice: "These holes are potential sites for future houses or potential sites for future graves. They embody the emptiness of rationality."<sup>[viii]</sup> Through this cumulative process of ordering, stacking, burying and excavating the topography becomes an archive of memories as well as of what may come. The moat is flooded and simple bridges connect the new topography to the wider city. The concrete of the buildings are reflected in the water - suddenly you are living on water – once again Venice comes to mind.



New landscape of 'rolling hills' created of demolition waste





Flooded moat along elevation facing Cotton Street

### Notes

- [i] Erik Stenberg, Structural Systems of the Million Program Era, 2012
- [ii] In London alone, over 200 high-rise developments (over 20 stories) are being constructed over the coming years, something that will drastically change the perception of the city.
- [iii] Alan Powers, *A Critical Narrative*, Robin Hood Garden Re-visions, 2009
- [iv] Bernard Tschumi, *Manhattan Transcripts*, 1981
- [v, vi] Peter Smithson, *Housing*, Architectural Design No. 9, 1972
- [vii] Ken Baker, *Robin Hood Gardens as a Perimeter Building*, Robin Hood Gardens Revisions, 2009
- [viii] Peter Eisenman, *Three Texts for Venice*, Domus 611, 1980
- [ix] Gordon Matta Clark, *Conical Intersects*, 1975

### Selected Bibliography

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- Architect's Journal, 27.09.07, 03.07.08
- Building Design, 22.02.08, 29.02.08, 26.06.09
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- Poplar SoundWalks: Robin Hood Gardens, *Poplar Summer School 2014*, Architecture Foundation



