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ANOTHER
ARCHITECTURE



Behind You!

OTO Arquitectos versus the Volcano

'Western-style buildings
don't work in Kenya'
José Selgas

Two new university
complexes
Switzerland

'Le Corbusier overcomes
my vandalism'
Xavier Delory

Redefining the house-
with-garden concept
KWK Promes

Tom Darmon and
Laetitia Antonini.
Photo Antonini
Darmon Architectes



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Long Section → Antonini Darmon Architectes

Text
Rafaël Magrou

'We want to be builders'

French firm Antonini Darmon
is currently realizing one
housing project after another.

Portrait → Paris | France

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Antonini Darmon is a Paris-based architecture practice founded in 2006 by Laetitia Antonini (1975) and Tom Darmon (1978). Although seen as 'young architects' by their French peers, they have designed and built a considerable number of projects. The year 2014 has been pivotal for them.

You are both architects, but you have different cultural backgrounds, as Laetitia grew up in Corsica and Tom is half-French, half-English. How did you meet?

LAETITIA ANTONINI: We studied together at the École d'architecture de Paris-la Seine, where we were part of the same atelier. Each atelier was made up of a cross-section of students from different educational levels. The undergraduates assisted the postgraduates, and the resulting 'team atmosphere' was a good basis for the way things work at a professional architecture firm.

TOM DARMON: Even as students, we entered a lot of competitions. And parallel to attending school, we also worked for professional architecture practices. Laetitia worked at Atelier du Pont, and I collaborated with Louis Paillard just after he left Périphériques. While working with him I had an opportunity to develop various projects, which paved the way for the launch of Antonini Darmon. Louis also invited us to be partners on some of his projects, which for a couple of 30 year-old architects meant a chance to gain public recognition.

ANTONINI: After founding our practice in 2006, we were invited to enter a number of closed competitions, some of which we won – and some of which were built.

Most of your projects are in cities. How would you characterize your architecture?

ANTONINI: Yes, our projects are mostly urban, but we have no intention of designing projects whose façades are just 'make-up'. We try to take a position – an attitude – that relates to the context. We are not interested in reducing the work we do to an aesthetic exercise.

DARMON: Of course, what we want to develop is a contemporary architecture, using a limited range of components and good, sustainable materials. Looking at worldwide architecture production, we notice that everything seems more or less the same, wherever it may be. Our goal is to design projects that are specific to programme and context.

ANTONINI: In a way, we are trying to develop an endemic architecture. We follow the fundamentals that Vitruvius set out in his treatise: *firmitas, utilitas and venustas* – strong, useful and beautiful. At the same time, we realize that we're part of a generation of economic, ecological and digital transition.

DARMON: Our proposals always suggest buildings with collective uses and maximum comfort for users. A good example is our winning competition entry for a housing project in the Belleville neighbourhood of Paris, completed just a few months ago. Our design features an internal street – a passageway where people can meet and talk – that turns the project into a kind of village laid out in 'sequences' that offer a sense of warmth and privacy.

ANTONINI: In Paris's 5th arrondissement, next to the University of Jussieu and across from a large Citroën garage, we designed a building – we call it a *poquebot* – that resembles a cruise liner. It accommodates social housing and retail facilities. We opted for a monumental building – big enough to counter its context – with an urban façade that protects an interior core. The expected completion date is 2016.

It's been nine years since you started your practice. How has it evolved?

ANTONINI: Our main idea is to stick to the fundamentals – the theme that Rem Koolhaas chose for last year's Venice Architecture Biennale. We make a point of remembering that architecture is for the inhabitants, as most of our projects include housing and social programmes. But that doesn't rule out contemporary architecture. It's a question of reinterpretation.

DARMON: In a housing project for researchers in the 12th arrondissement, we reinterpreted the cloister. Our design has a ground-level courtyard with arches and, on the upper storeys, mullioned windows arranged in a staggered pattern. In the commune of Boulogne-Billancourt, a western suburb of Paris, we were faced with a lack of contextual references, so we made a 'palace' for the occupants of the 33 social-housing →

→ The upper part of the building in Belleville, which is finished in matta white stucco, rests on a base clad in glazed white bricks.





Long Section

Antonini Darmon Architect



← Typical Parisian paving stones cover the floor of the new internal street.

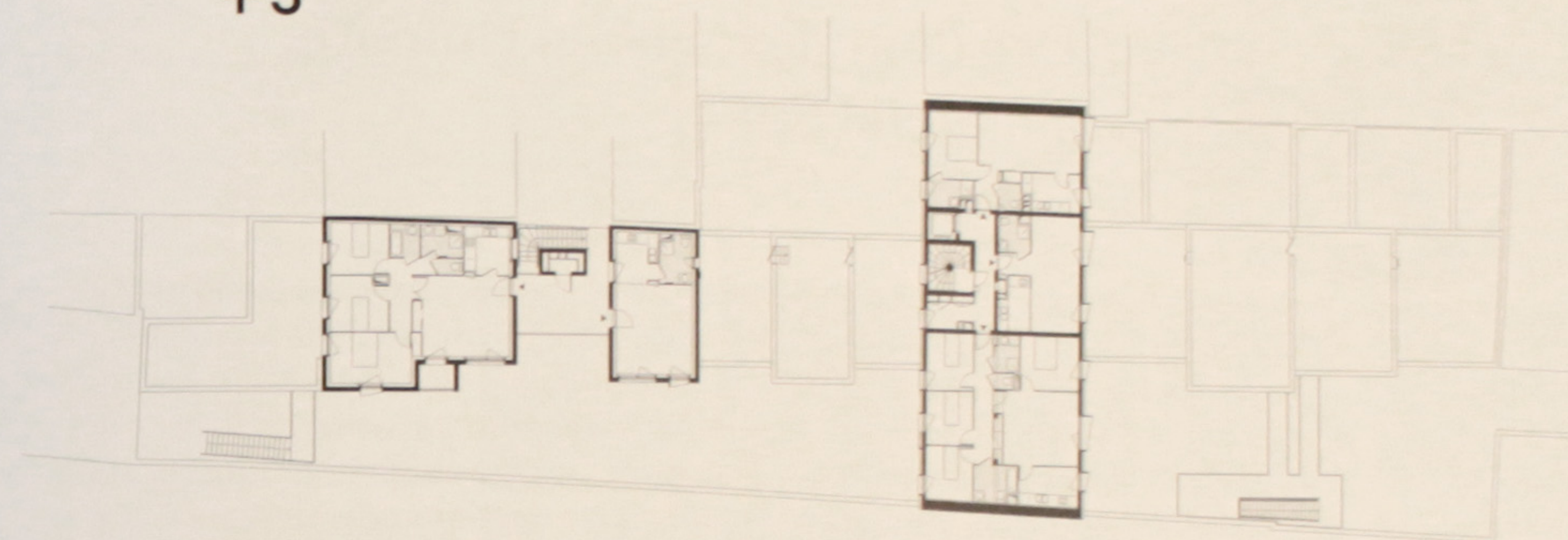
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Extension and Renovation of Social Housing

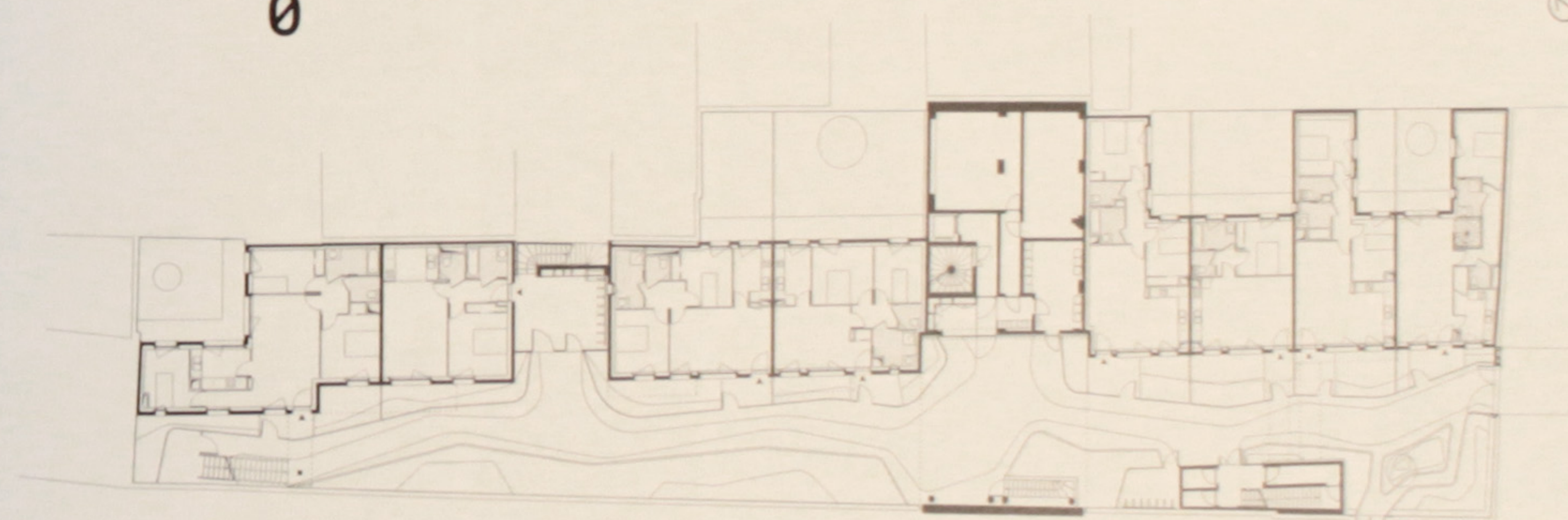
Belleville | Paris | France | 2014
Photos Luc Boegly

In Belleville, a Parisian working-class neighbourhood, Antonini Darmon renovated and extended a five-storey, 33-unit apartment building that occupies part of a long narrow strip of land and forms a significant piece of the area's heritage. The architects hollowed out the base of the building and inserted a new internal street: a semiprivate communal space for interaction and socialization. Aligned with this central passage is a new volume that 'pierces' the existing building.

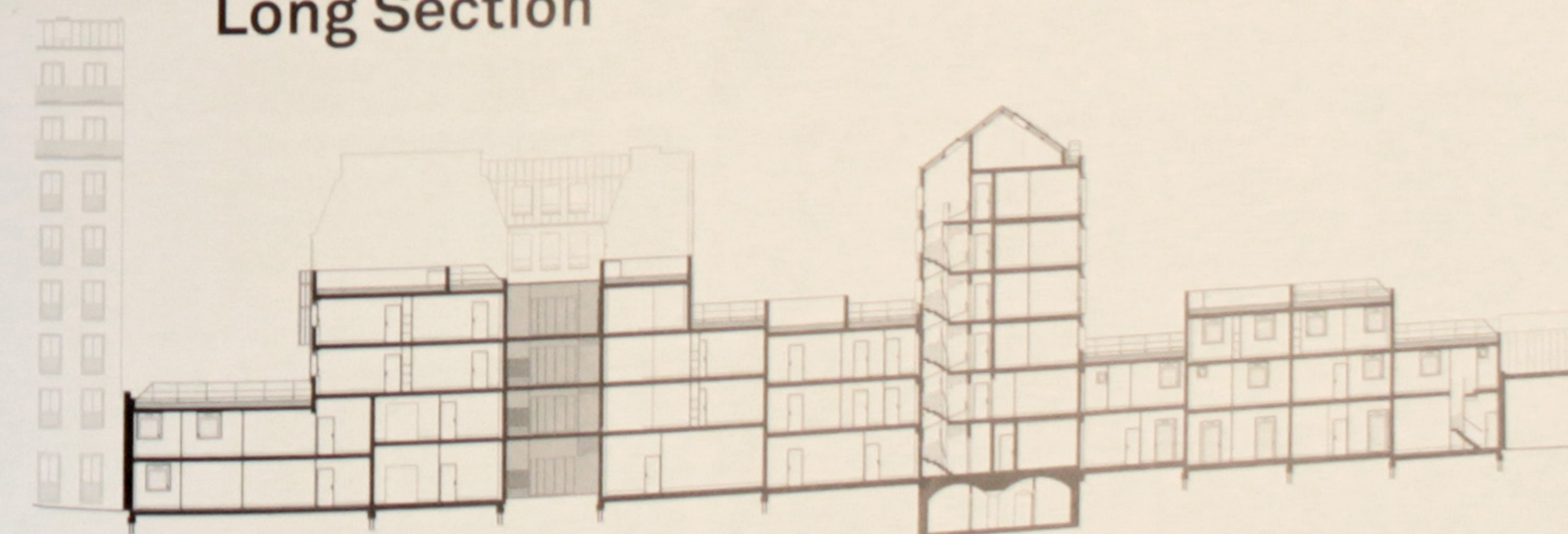
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Long Section



Portrait → Paris | France



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Mixed-Use Complex: Social Housing and Commercial Space

Nantes | France | 2014
Photos Alexandre Wasilewski

Rising from a base that comprises 500 m² of commercial space and six two-storey houses is a tower that holds an additional 24 apartments. The tower has a gridded façade framed by steel beams. The architects paid close attention to outdoor areas, such as gardens 'in the plinth' that serve as a buffer between private and public zones, and patios designed to protect occupants from the elements. Outdoor spaces in the tower actually wrap the gridded façade, some sections of which are filled with solid panels, while others are open or screened with perforated-aluminium shutters.

← units we designed. Inspired by buildings along the Grand Canal in Venice, we used white prefabricated-concrete elements in a few shapes and sizes. In so doing, we managed to streamline the overall economy of the building and to achieve a random rhythm on the façade.

ANTONINI: The concrete elements allowed for large windows and for an intermediate zone with galleries and terraces. At the top of the building, a low-ceilinged attic level replaces the classic acroterium. The result is a building that looks like Giovanni Guerrini's 1940 Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana in Rome, although our social-housing project has a more delicate, less systematic design.

DARMON: Windows are crucial to the way in which we develop relationships between exterior and interior. We're constantly trying to reinvent the window frame. For the Belleville project, we designed 5-mm-thin steel frames that hide both windowpanes and shutters. In Boulogne-Billancourt, arches provide large windows with shade and protection, and in Nantes we played with a grid of squares – some open, some filled and some with shades.

Can you describe your processes and the tools you use?

ANTONINI: Once we know the programme, we interpret it in as many ways as possible. We study the location. Everyone at the office participates in every project. We believe in complete transparency. Nobody puts his or her signature on anything – it's really a collective process.

DARMON: Then we build models on a scale of 1:500, which we combine with plans and sections to test different scenarios. We eliminate the ones that don't satisfy us – or the brief.

The projects in Boulogne-Billancourt and Nantes seem to be mostly about geometry. What about materiality?

DARMON: It depends on context and programme. On the cramped site in Belleville, we used white glazed bricks to reflect

light. In Bussy-Saint-Georges, just east of Paris, we designed an extension to an archives building by Dominique Perrault. We proposed two large concrete boxes – containers to protect books from light – which we tried to make disappear with panels of polished stainless steel that are folded to create a blurred image.

ANTONINI: But you're right about the importance of geometry. We use it as a way to tie the project to the location. In Nantes, for instance, the building site – part of a master plan by Alexandre Chemetoff – is a former shipyard. That's why we suggested a 'signal' that looks like the bow of a ship and generates the triangle at the top of the building. We developed a double façade with loggias from which residents can experience the surroundings.

DARMON: Indeed. The site offers a tremendous view of the Île de Nantes and the Loire River. In this region, the weather often changes and outdoor spaces should be designed to protect users from sun, rain and wind.

Having completed several buildings, you must look back on 2014 as a pivotal year for your company. What does the future look like?

ANTONINI: That's a difficult question, but we think – and we hope – that the projects we've built will raise our credibility in the eyes of potential clients, who can now see that we're able to realize what we design.

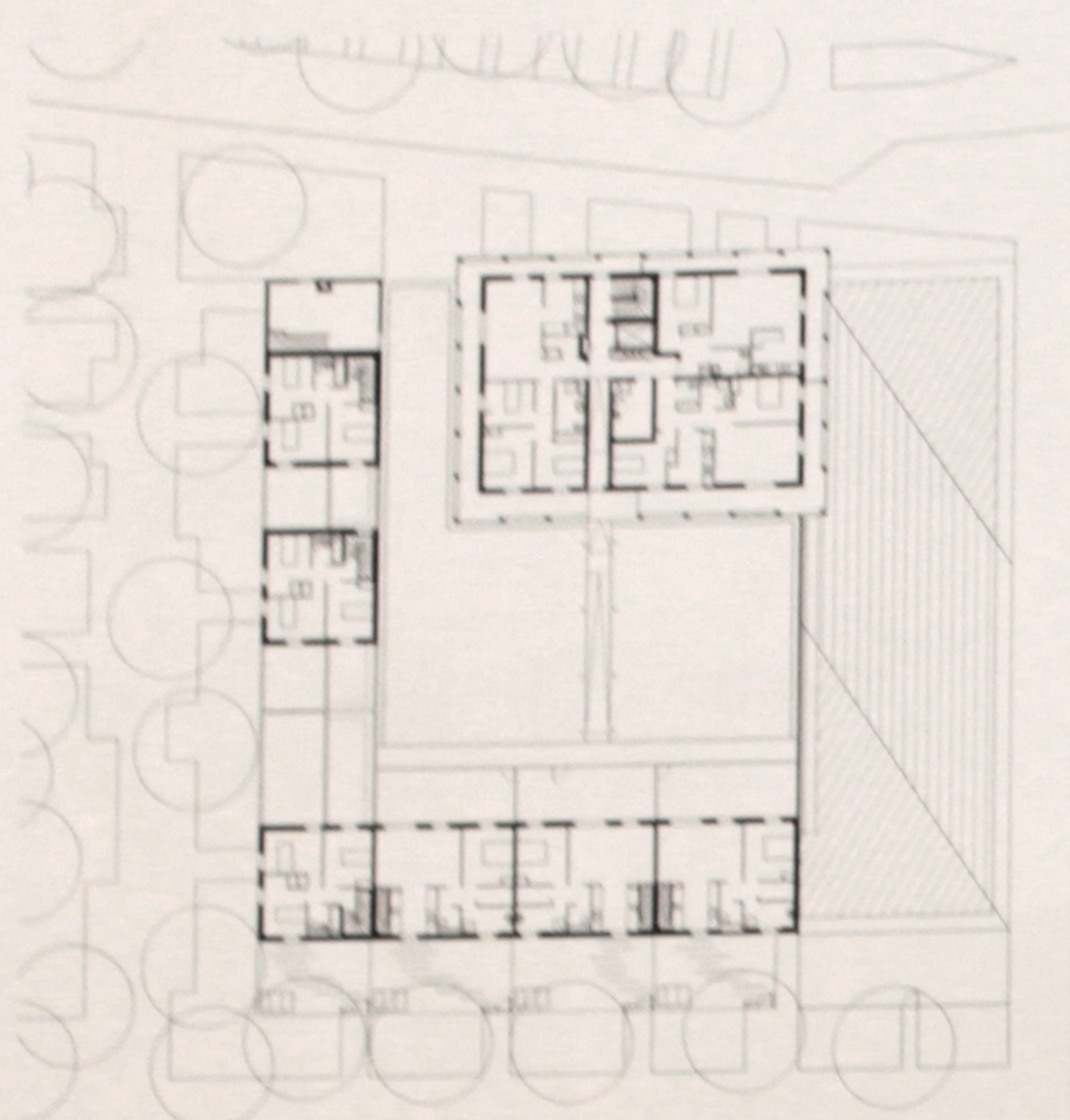
DARMON: We're eager to learn more and to take on programmes that are new to us. We do have questions about the role of the architect today, and those questions apply to us as well. How is it possible to guarantee a quality result when we have no control over the building site and the specifications? We want to be builders, not only designers, but every day the act of building is becoming more and more of a battle. ←

antonini-darmon.fr

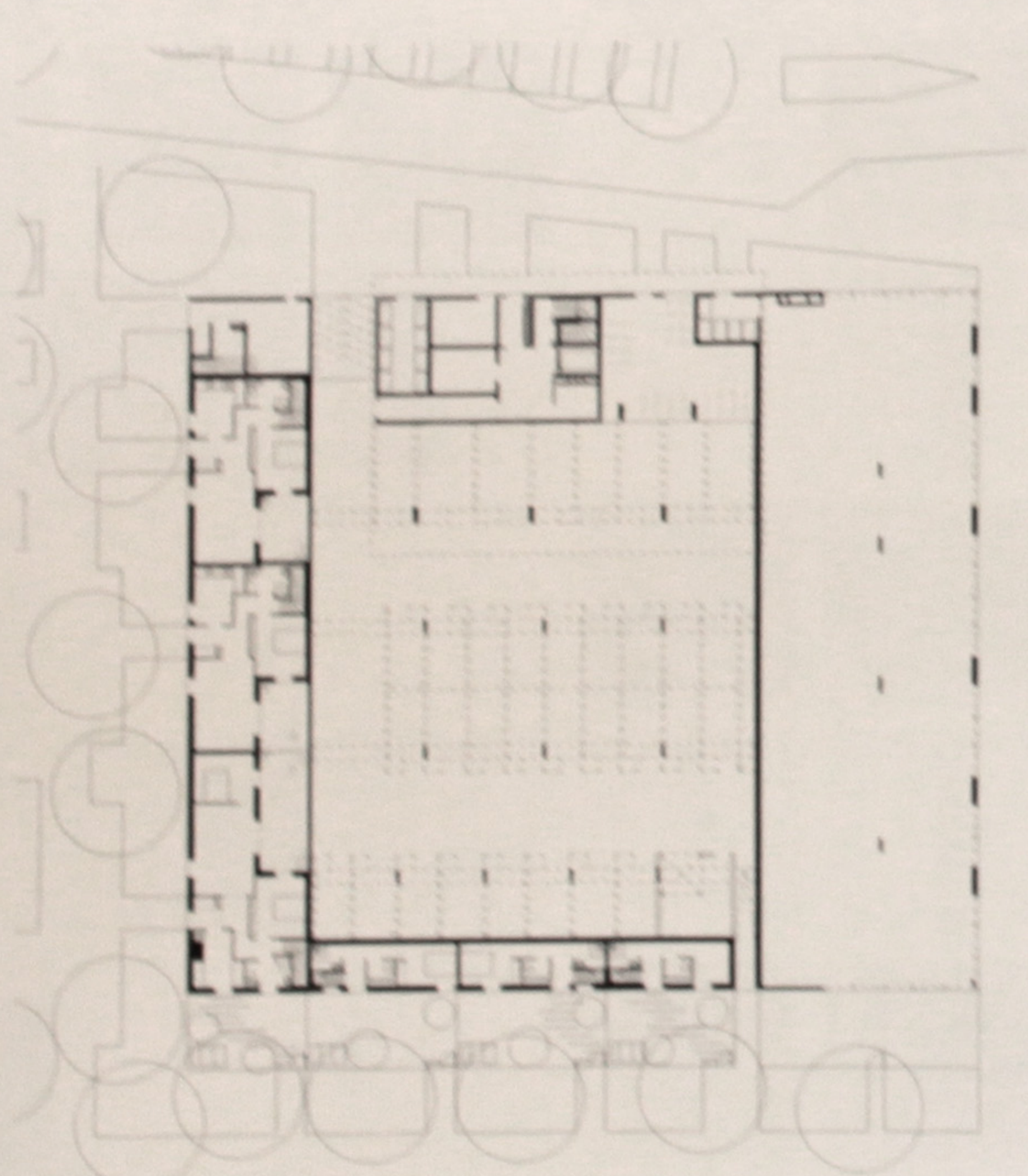
→ The building has become a powerful landmark for the city.



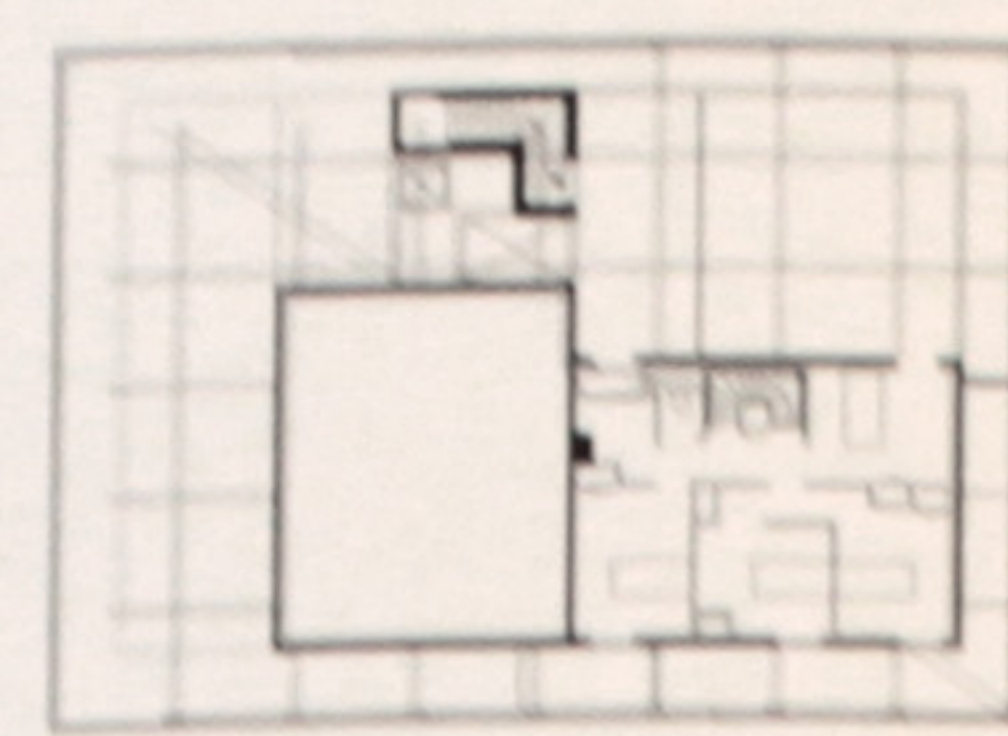
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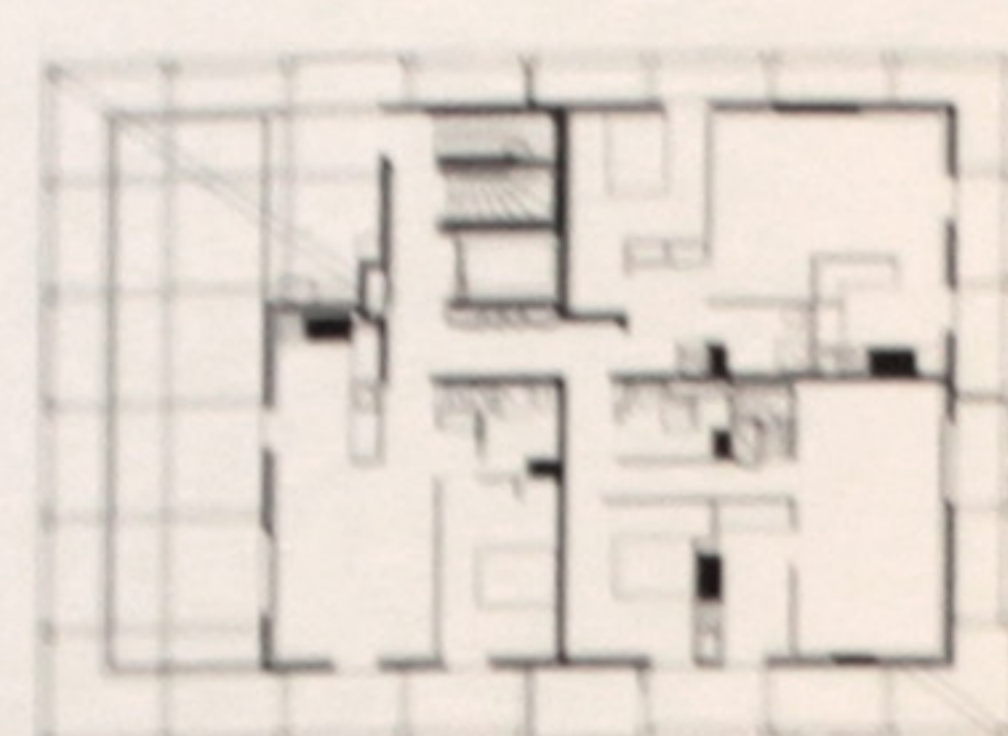
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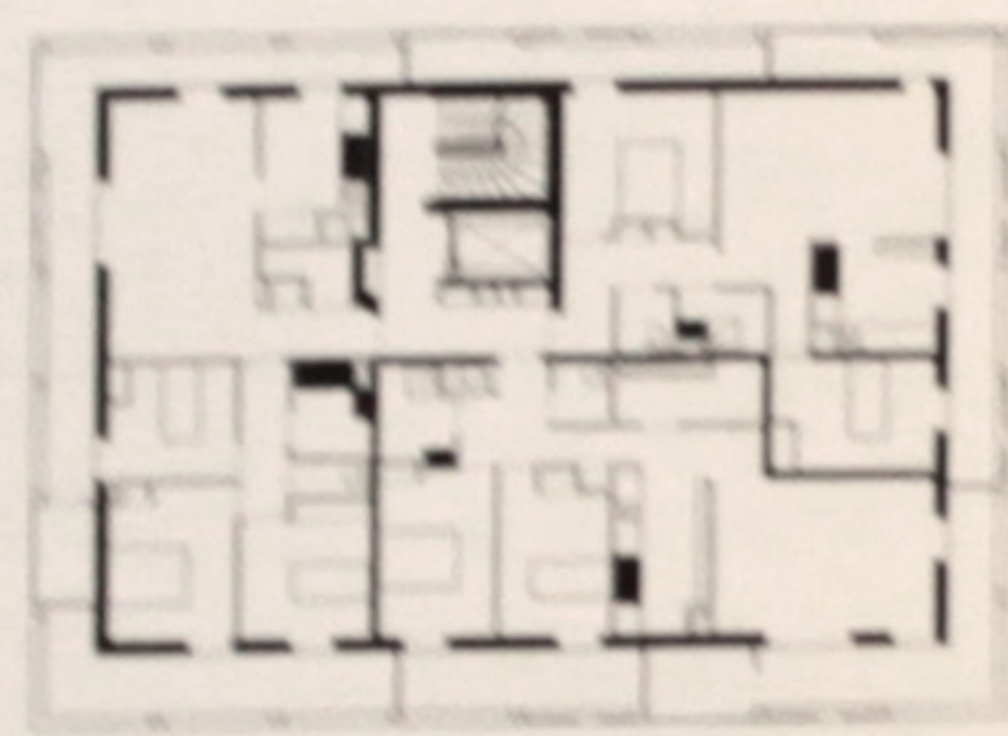
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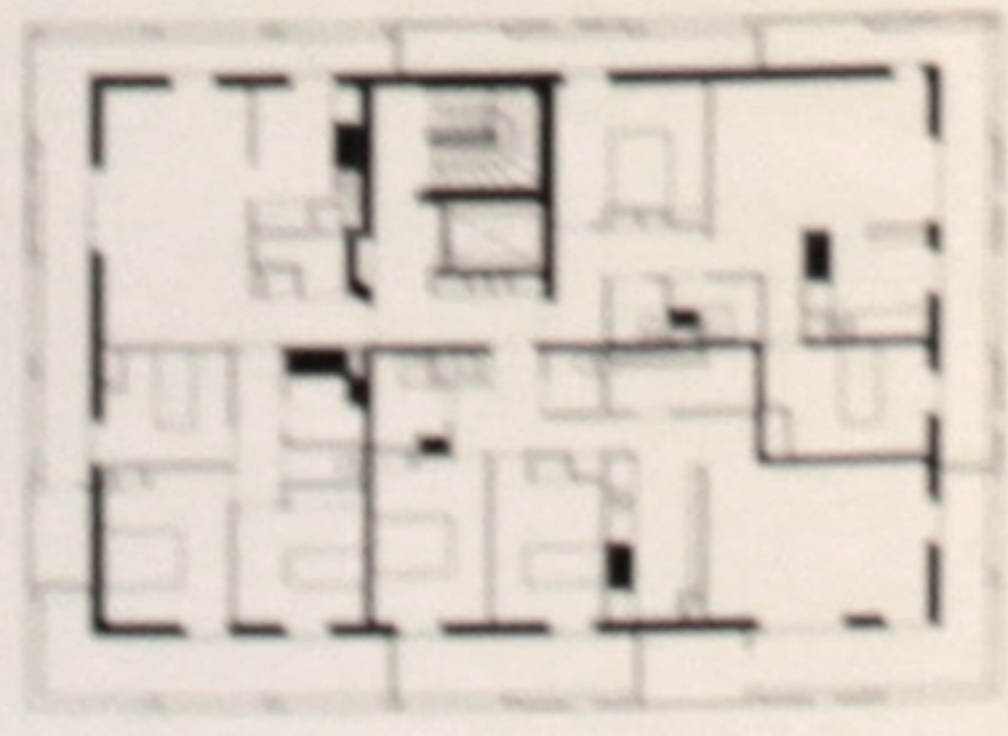
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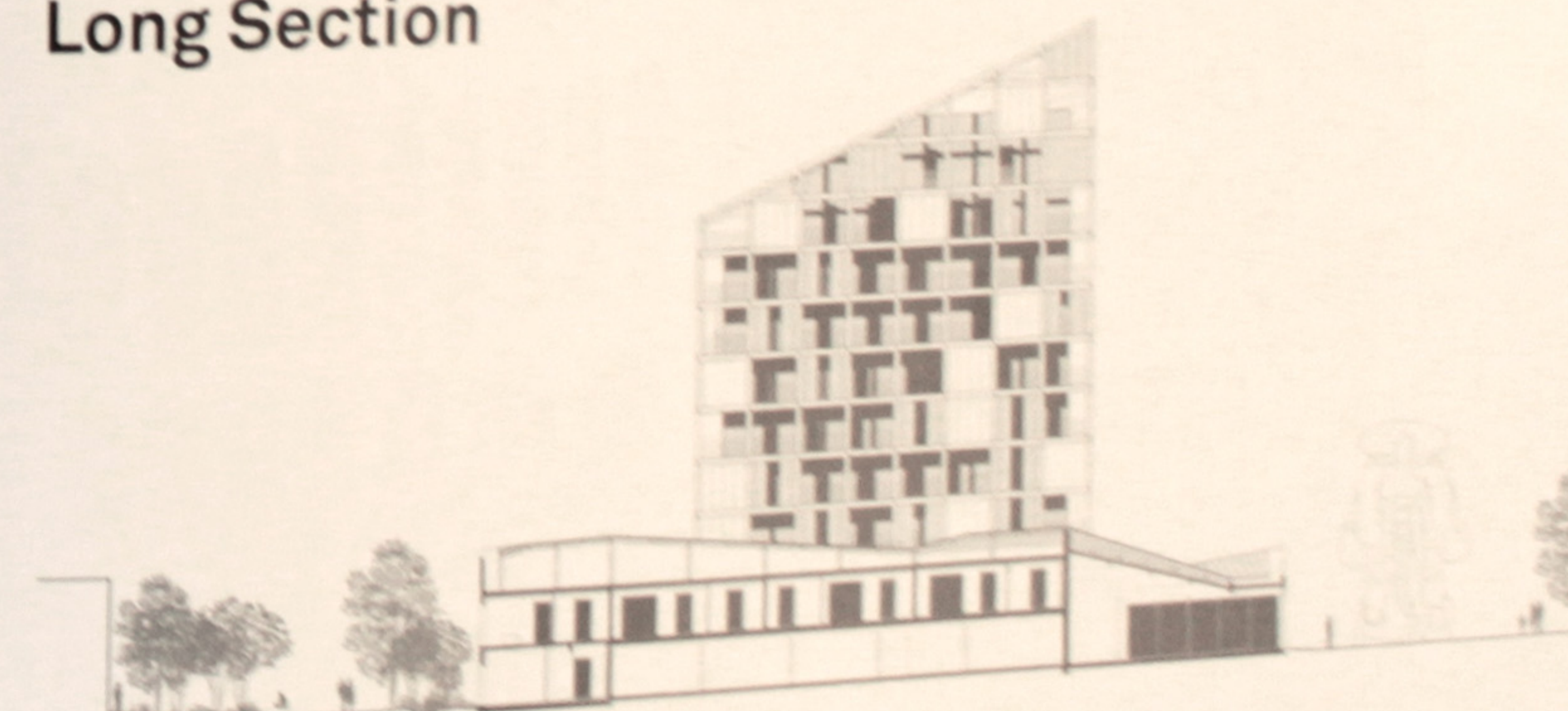


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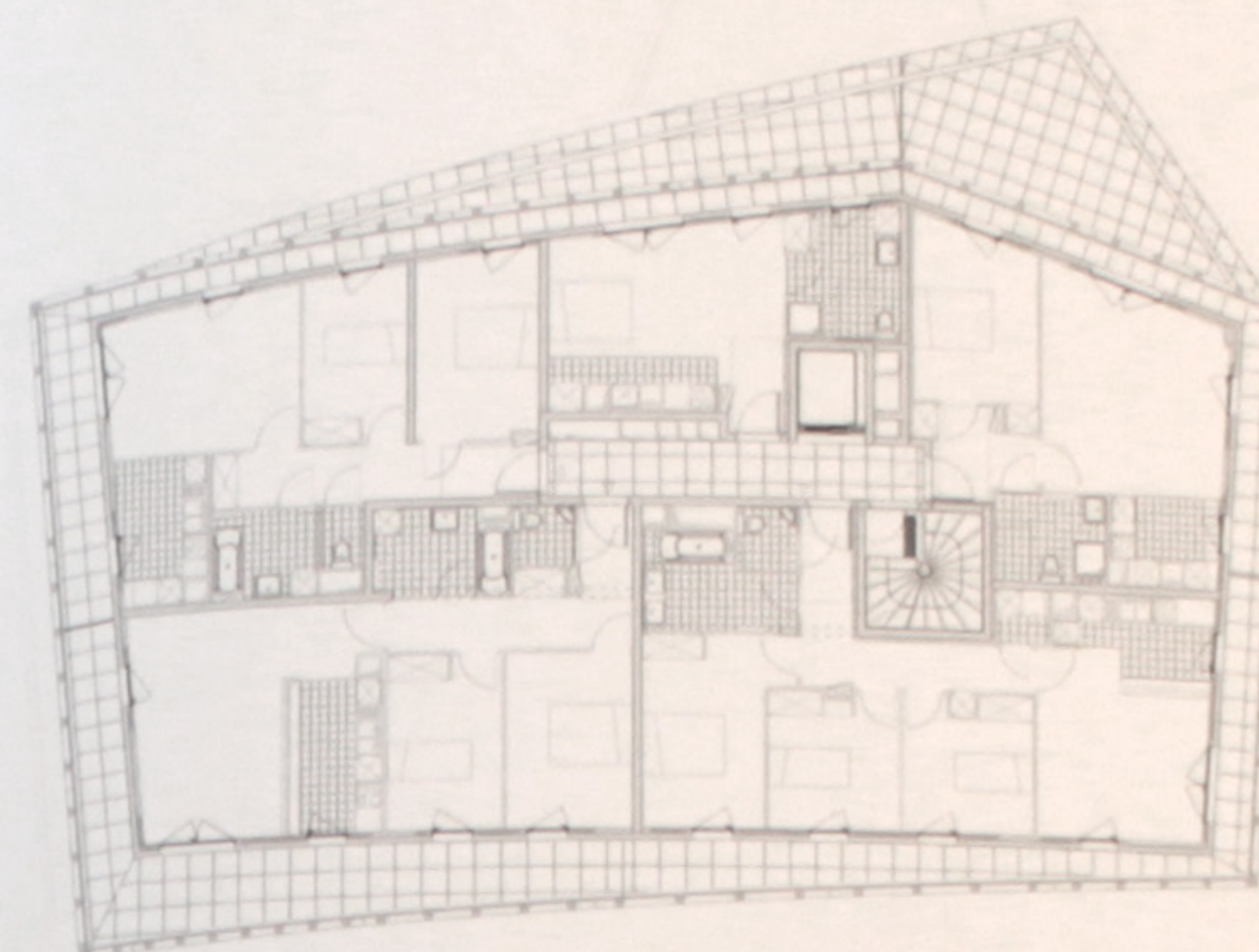
↑ The base of the project is clad in wooden slats.

Long Section

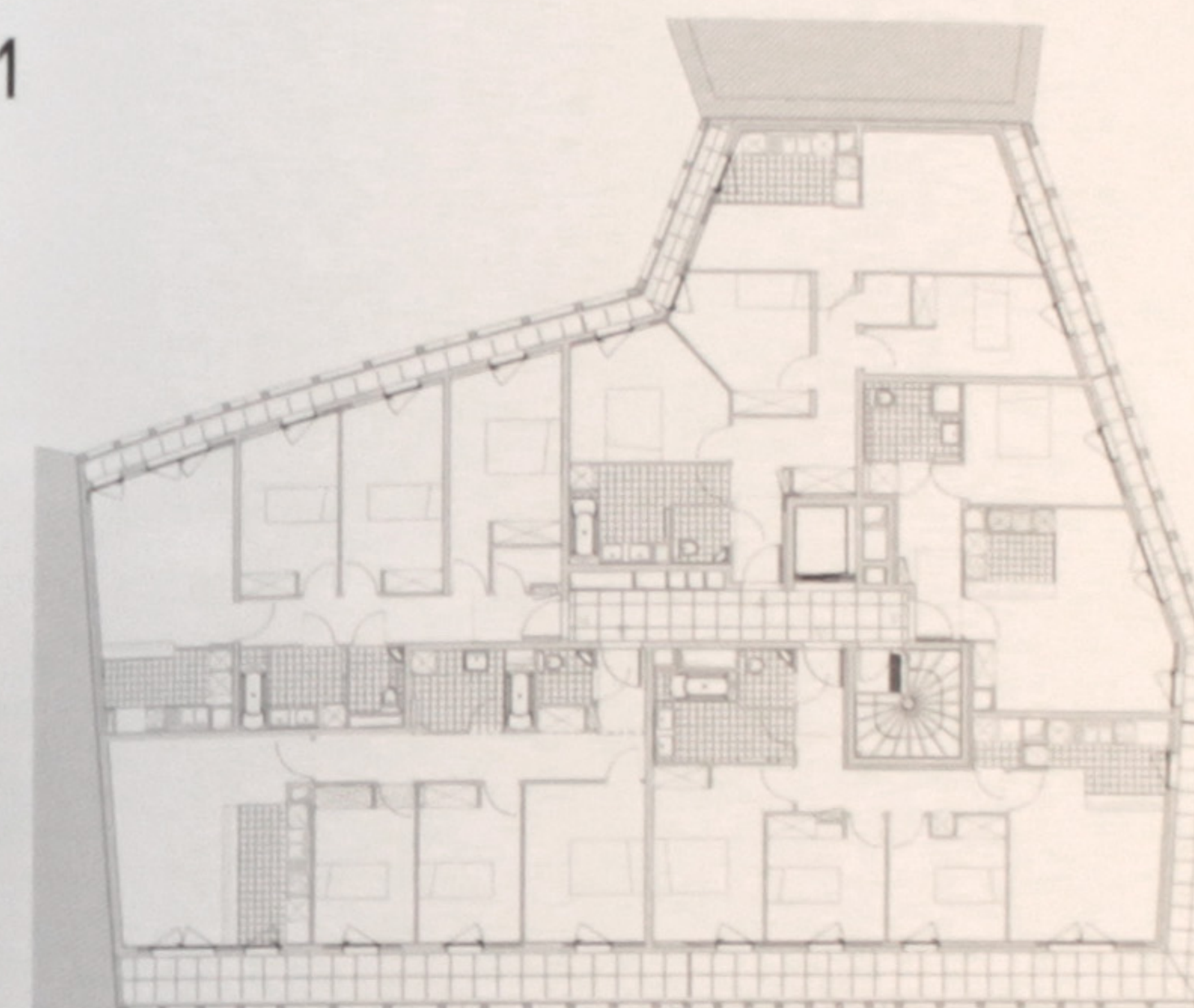




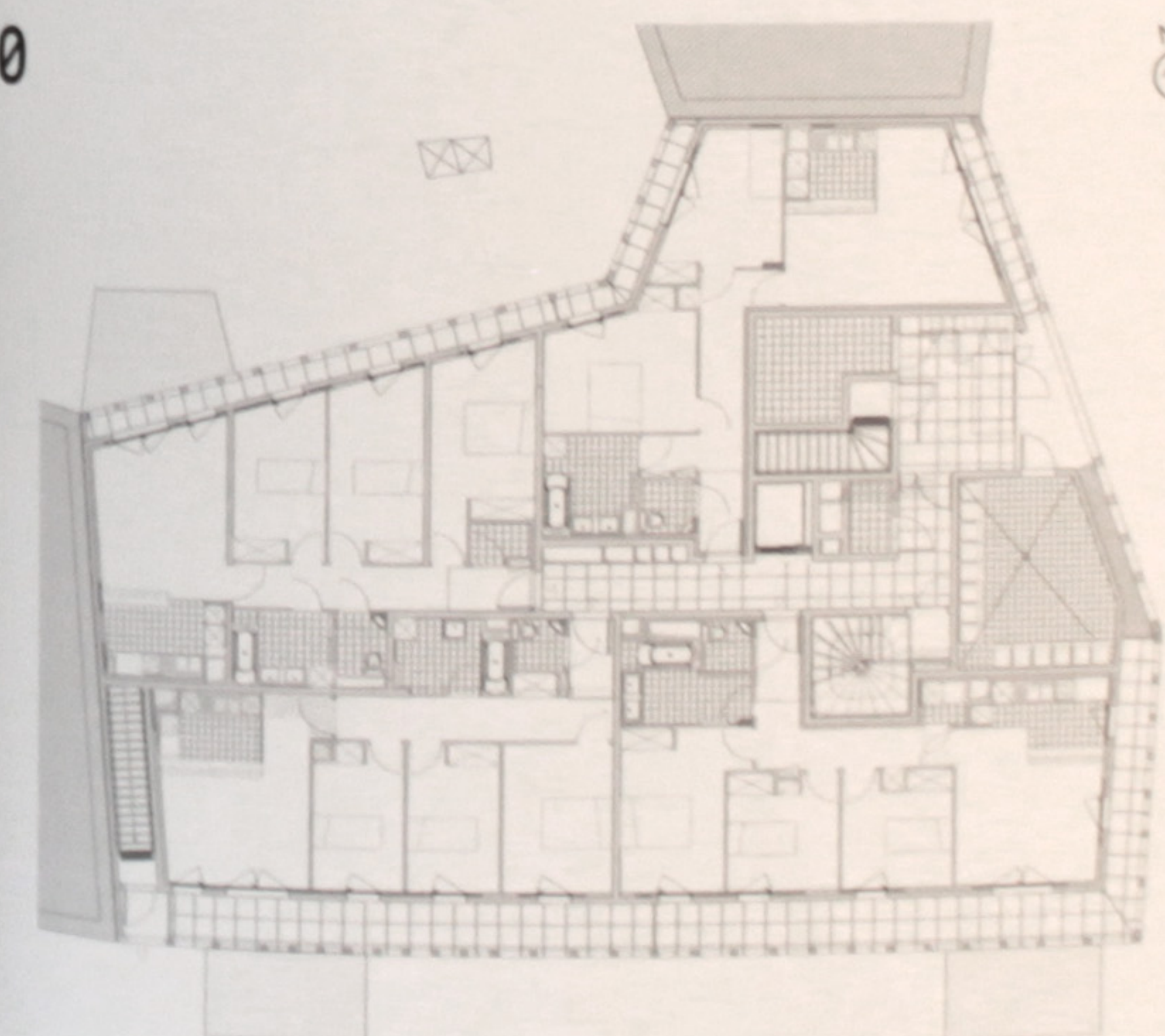
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Social Housing

Boulogne-Billancourt | Paris | France | 2015
Photo Antonini Darmon Architectes

In their 33-unit housing project in Boulogne-Billancourt, the architects started with a basic rectangular volume and twisted it slightly at certain levels to break the mass and to create cantilevers that express a certain monumentality. Borrowed from the vocabulary of classical architecture are the arches, which they refer to as 'a contemporary reinterpretation' of the rhythm of the main façades of the old Renault factory formerly operating in this area – a structure with a strong presence in the collective memory of the French. Antonini Darmon used the arches to create a 'second skin' of loggias that prevent the 'first skin' from direct exposure to buildings opposite the site.

Diagram

