

**Studio Sergison**  
Accademia di architettura  
Università della Svizzera italiana

Spring Semester 2011  
Modernism as a contemporary vernacular (2)

## Contents

5	Introduction
6	Modernism as a contemporary vernacular
12	House portraits
16	Masterplan areas
18	Urban strategy
58	Catalogue
60	Acknowledgements

## Introduction



In the Autumn semester 2010 we explored the notion of Modernism as a contemporary vernacular in the context of the city of Tel Aviv. In a highly contested urban setting, we considered the legacy of International Modernism in relation to the city's need to densify and expand.

In the Spring semester 2011 we chose to continue our investigation in the town of Palau, on the north-east corner of Sardinia. Like many Mediterranean towns, Palau is facing pressure to grow and extend largely as a result of tourism. At the invitation of the Municipality of Palau, we considered strategies for managing this. The work recorded in this catalogue constitutes a speculation on the possible future of Palau.

The approach taken by the studio involved looking very carefully at the current local situation within its wider geographic context. Working in groups of five, the students studied the town and selected areas that represent the inherently different places that exist within it. Their work attempts to define the unique characteristics of existing neighbourhoods and to develop ideas at different scales to reinforce the positive aspects of each of these places.

Working in pairs, students then developed more detailed proposals for the areas identified in the strategy plan as sites for projects. This exercise is offered as a form of test planning for the future of Palau.

The studio was greatly supported by architect Alberto Ponis who, in the course of his long and sustained career has consistently worked within the idiom of International Modernism, while remaining sensitive to local conditions in terms of climate, topography, typology and building tradition. The catalogue includes some examples of an extensive photographic survey the students produced of the buildings realised by this exceptional architect.

The projects developed by the students will be exhibited in Palau in July 2011, and this confirms our commitment to produce useful studies and share our ideas with the community that lives in or uses the places we study.

A typical street in Palau with a view of the surrounding hills

## Modernism as a contemporary vernacular (2)

Jonathan Sergison

International Modernism derives its image of 'newness' in part from industry: grain silos, ships, motor cars. These were referred to by Le Corbusier in one of the most influential arguments made for the modern movement in his 'Vers une architecture'. Another facet of the search for an image of newness looked to the simple, pre-classical, primitive island architecture of the Mediterranean for inspiration. These forms are often painted white in a way that renders them pure, and free from classical cultural association.

Le Corbusier's journey to the south east of Europe (his so-called 'Journey to the Orient') was well documented and is frequently cited. He was not, however, unique in finding inspiration in a more primordial way of building. Louis Kahn is another architect that fundamentally changed the direction of his work as a result of exposure to the traditional domestic architecture of the Greek Islands. These buildings are a direct and practical response to their geographic setting, and the first generation of modernist architects found this very appealing.

While the central protagonists of the modern movement - Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, J.P. Oud, among others - where forceful personalities that did not shy away from a degree of self-promotion, another approach also emerged, exploring the notion of modernity by placing equal emphasis on projects being of their place rather than universal.

Alvar Aalto was an early protagonist of this tendency; others include Sigmund Lewerentz and Gunnar Asplund. All of them were educated in the classical tradition, but in the course of their careers they explored a very pure form of Modernism and later developed a specifically Scandinavian interpretation of architecture, which led them, in their mature years, to propose a way of making architecture that was without precedent. This can be seen as a particularly Nordic attitude, imbued with a spirit of humanism and a belief that buildings should be of their place, as well as being contemporary. Jørn Utzon, Peter Celsing, Sverre Fehn and, to some extent, Arne Jacobson further developed this sensibility.

This proved inspiring for a particular strand of British architecture, sometimes referred to as the Cambridge school, which includes Denys Lasdun, Colin St. John Wilson, Lesley Martin and Patrick Hodgkinson, among others. Alison and Peter Smithson, James Stirling and James Gowan did have at certain times in their careers a connection to this sensibility, but they were always too conceptually restless to remain in one camp for long.

Where this 'other tradition' has been adopted with remarkable enthusiasm is where the journey can be said to have started — in the south of Europe. While several Greek and Italian architects developed a modernist architecture that is sensitive to a building's place in the world, a number of architects from the Iberian Peninsula were directly influenced by northern European architecture and have drawn upon it in their own work, such as Antonio Coderch in Barcelona and the Porto masters, Fernando Távora and Álvaro Siza.

In 1983, architectural theorist Kenneth Frampton addressed this other approach to Modernism in his seminal essay 'Critical Regionalism', where he defines precisely the inherent characteristics of what he argued had been a tendency in the architecture of the last 40 years or so. It does not do justice to the seriousness of his argument to summarise Frampton's analysis as an investigation of the tension that exists in contemporary architecture between the need to be modern (the universal) and the sense of responsibility to the local (the particular), but this is broadly the thrust of his point.

Frampton's argument draws upon an earlier essay by Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis entitled 'The grid and the pathway' which discusses the work of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis in the context of Greek architectural culture. The authors consider the position adopted by the two Greek architects as a way of mediating between two opposite poles. The first of these is the universalising character of neo-classicism and its evolution into the Modernist position of Mies van der Rohe's late works. The second is the search for a regional architecture that is so evident in the later projects of Dimitris Pikionis. The essay is careful to acknowledge the importance of Aris Konstantinidis and the example and inspiration he provided for a younger generation of architects.

Alan Colquhoun's 'Critique of Regionalism' offers a more circumspect examination of the notion of tradition and questions the validity of an approach that places emphasis on the local above all else in contemporary architecture.

Together, these insights raise questions about the challenges of working with a sense of tradition that is held as a form of collective memory. In a contemporary sense this notion is more complex than it was fifty or more years ago. We must also be cautious of any uncritical acceptance of the notion of a 'universal culture,' which negates diversity and specificity.

A more 'critical' approach seems as relevant now as when Frampton employed the word 28 years ago, endorsing the possibility that an appropriate architecture might be found through a process of negotiation. This is not to diminish the legitimacy or appropriateness of a recognition of place and the complexity of the contemporary condition.

As Frampton declares, 'critical regionalism' is a marginal practice and has remained so since the time he formulated a definition of its inherent characteristics. It could be argued that this is where its strength lies.

Aris Konstantinidis  
Guest quarters, Xenia Hotel  
Epidaurus, Greece







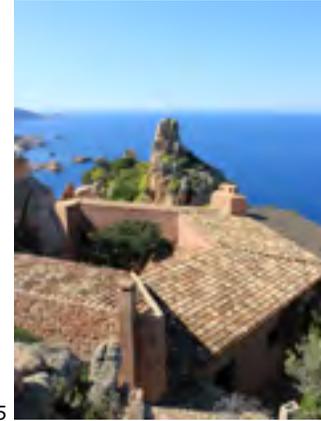
12



3



4



5



78



9



6

Previous page:  
Carlotta Sartorio, Casa  
Scalesciani

1  
Lucrezia Vonzun, Casa Ponis

2  
Lucrezia Vonzun, Stazzo  
Pulcheddu

3  
Edoardo Regali, Casa Gostner

4  
Enrico Paolo Ciani, Casa Gostner

5  
Stefano Bagni, Casa Gostner

6  
Michael Stettler, Casa Ponis

7  
Martin Migeon, Villaggio K1

8  
Martin Migeon, Villaggio K1

9  
Michael Stettler, Casa  
Scalesciani

Page 14 15  
Panorama of Palau and the  
archipelago with la Maddalena  
island in the background



## Masterplan areas

Five areas were identified, each of which has very specific characteristics. Projects were then developed within these areas in a manner that addresses both their peculiarity and complementarity.



1  
Masterplan group 1



2  
Masterplan group 2



3  
Masterplan group 3



4  
Masterplan group 4



5  
Masterplan group 5



## Urban strategy

A new overall vision for Palau is intended to strengthen and enhance the existing urban condition. At the periphery of the town a series of very precise projects is proposed as part of a process of consolidation, addition and densification.

### Group 1 - Harbour area

- 1 Filippo Cartocci, Stefano Cogo p.22-23
- 2 Davide Casoli, Luca Dalmasso p.24
- 3 Stefano Bagni, Lukas Eschmann p.25

### Group 2 - Old town centre

- 4 Armina Alexandru, Iris Hilton p.28-31
- 5 Matteo Ranci, Ruggero Cipolla p.32-33
- 6 Jessica Braendli, Giulia Golemme p.34-35

### Group 3 - Railway station area

- 7 Eoin Hunt, Matthew Rauch p.38-39
- 8 Enrico Paolo Ciani, Edoardo Regali p.40-41
- 9 Marco Burnengo, Pietro Mazzanti p.42-43

### Group 4 - Ferry terminal and sea front promenade

- 10 Pier Luca Carubia, Damir Kabilovic p.46
- 11 Camilla Frattini, Carlotta Sartorio p.47
- 12 Michael Stettler, Lucrezia Vonzun p.48-51

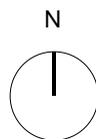
### Group 5 - Sports field area

- 13 Maddalena Matteoni, Francesca Molteni p.54
- 14 Martin Migeon p.55
- 15 Josephine Giller, Anna Salvioni p.56-57

Palau Masterplan scale 1:1000

#### legend:

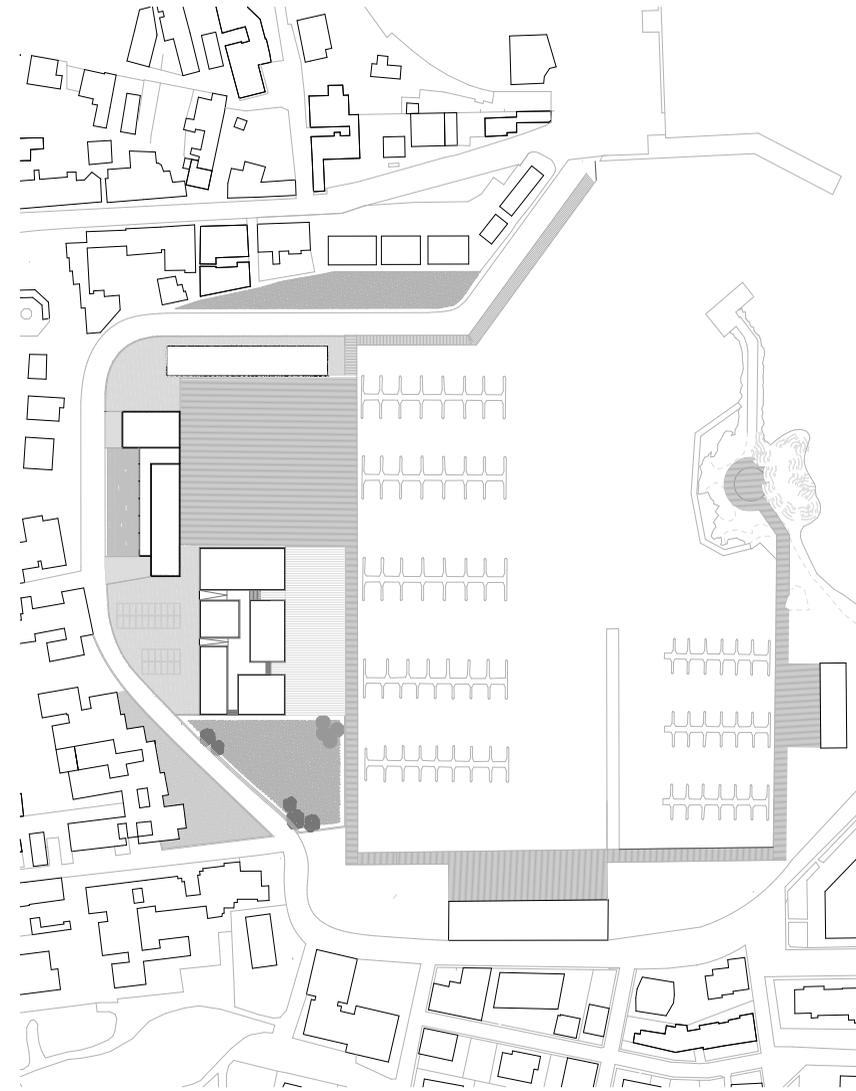
- Public amenity
- Protected green areas
- Existing trees
- New trees
- Existing pedestrian streets and pavement
- New pedestrian streets and pavement
- Existing streets
- Existing buildings
- New buildings



Group 1 - Harbour area



The area around the existing harbour is considered unsuccessful in its current form, due to its lack of an overall structure. A new urban vision suggests a way of maintaining existing uses and activities while introducing a number of carefully placed new buildings to structure the public realm.



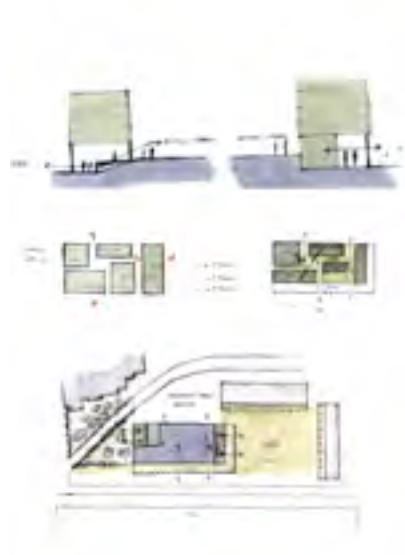
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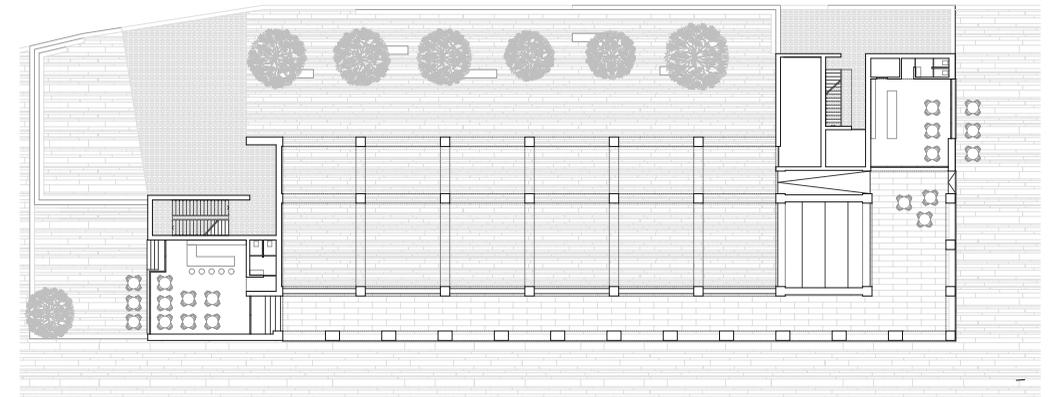
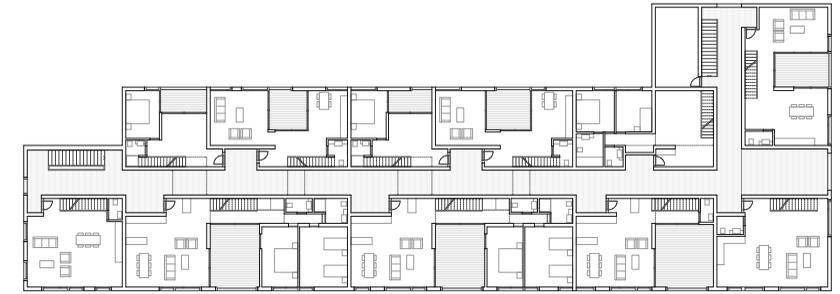


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1  
View of harbour  
2  
Harbour car park

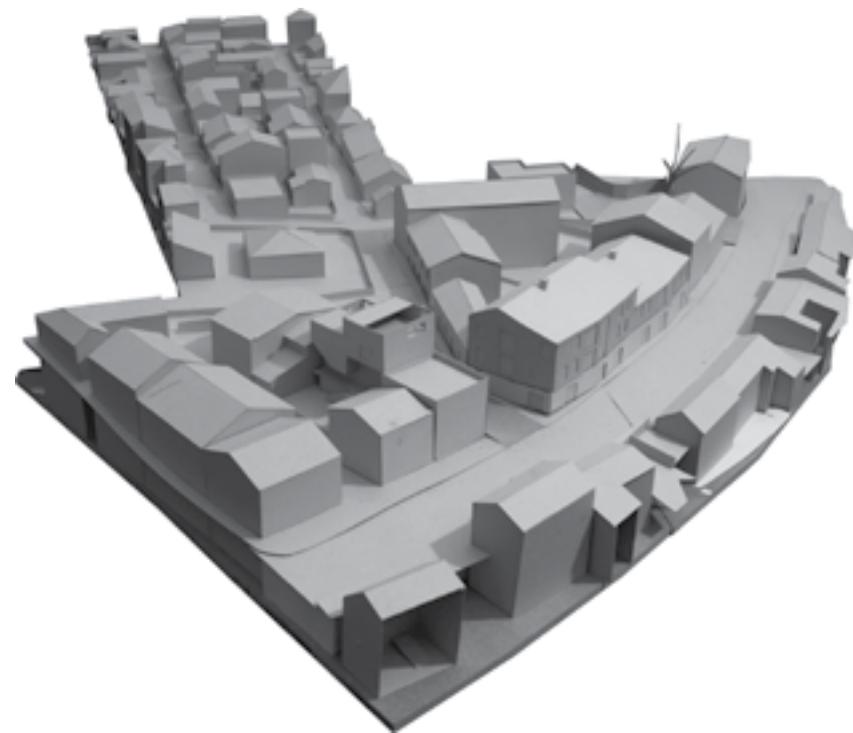
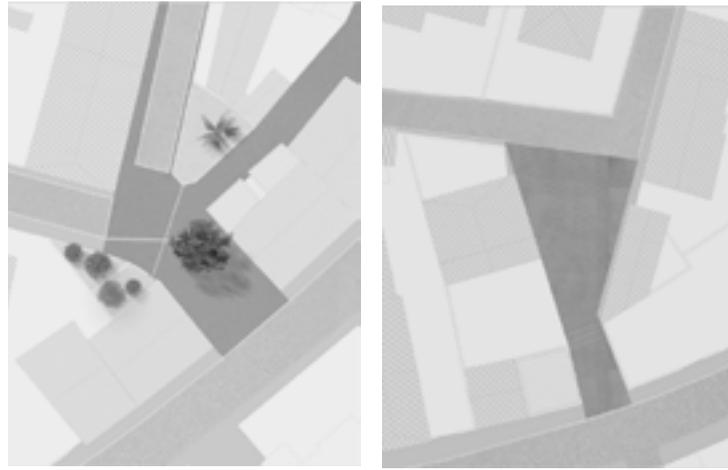




Group 2 - Old town centre



In this area, the most established and homogeneous part of Palau, minor adjustments to the public realm are suggested. New buildings are proposed on empty lots and urban voids. All the urban interventions envisaged are informed by great sensitivity to the character of the place.



1



2

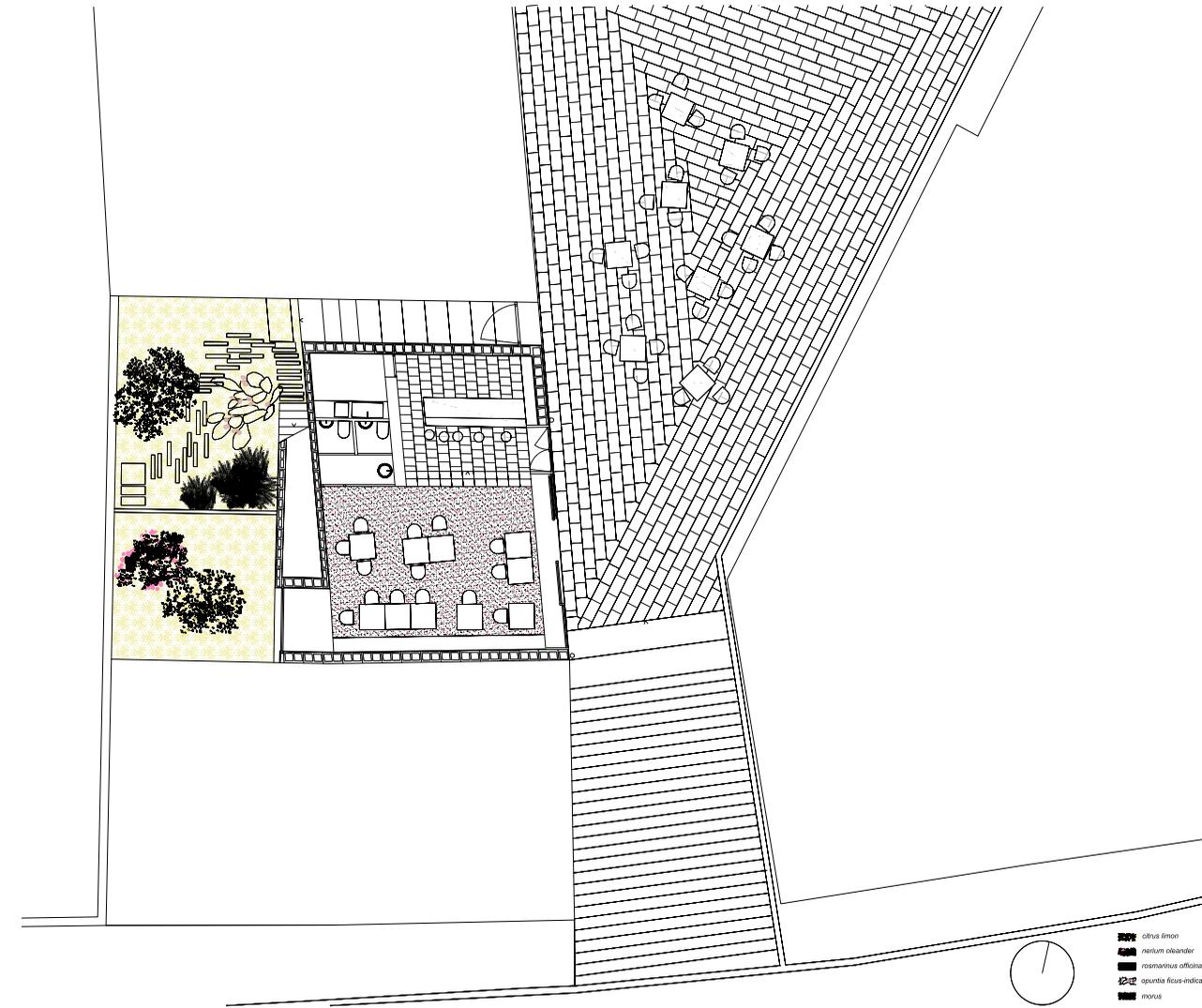
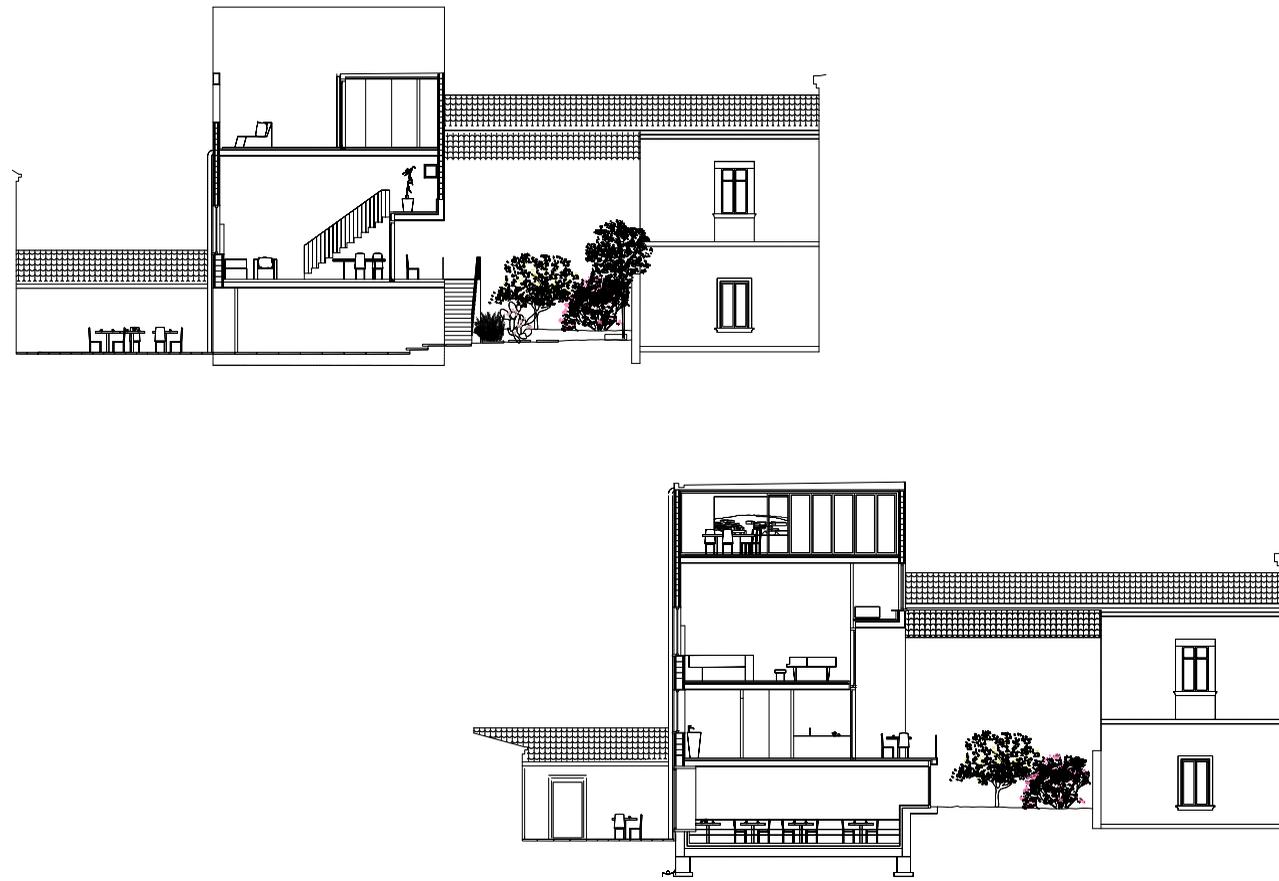


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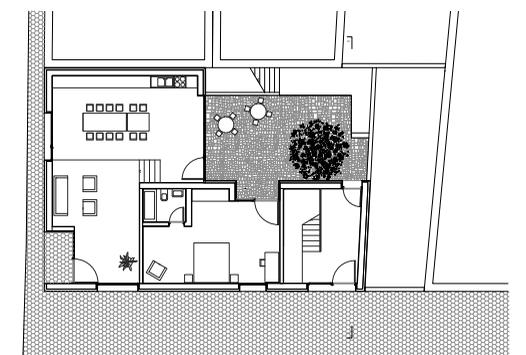
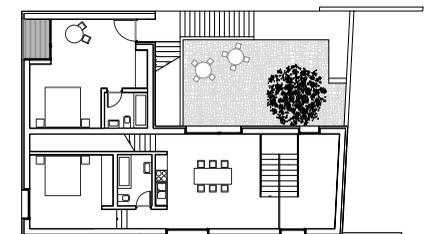
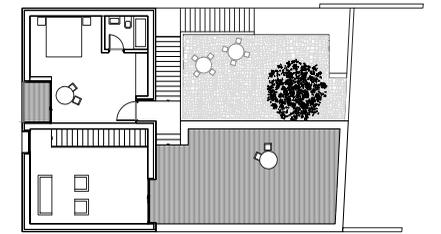
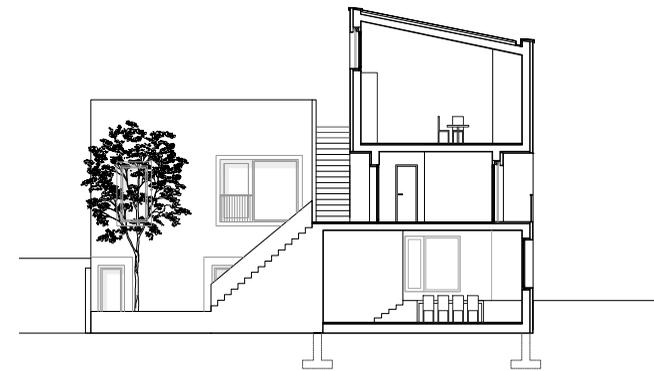
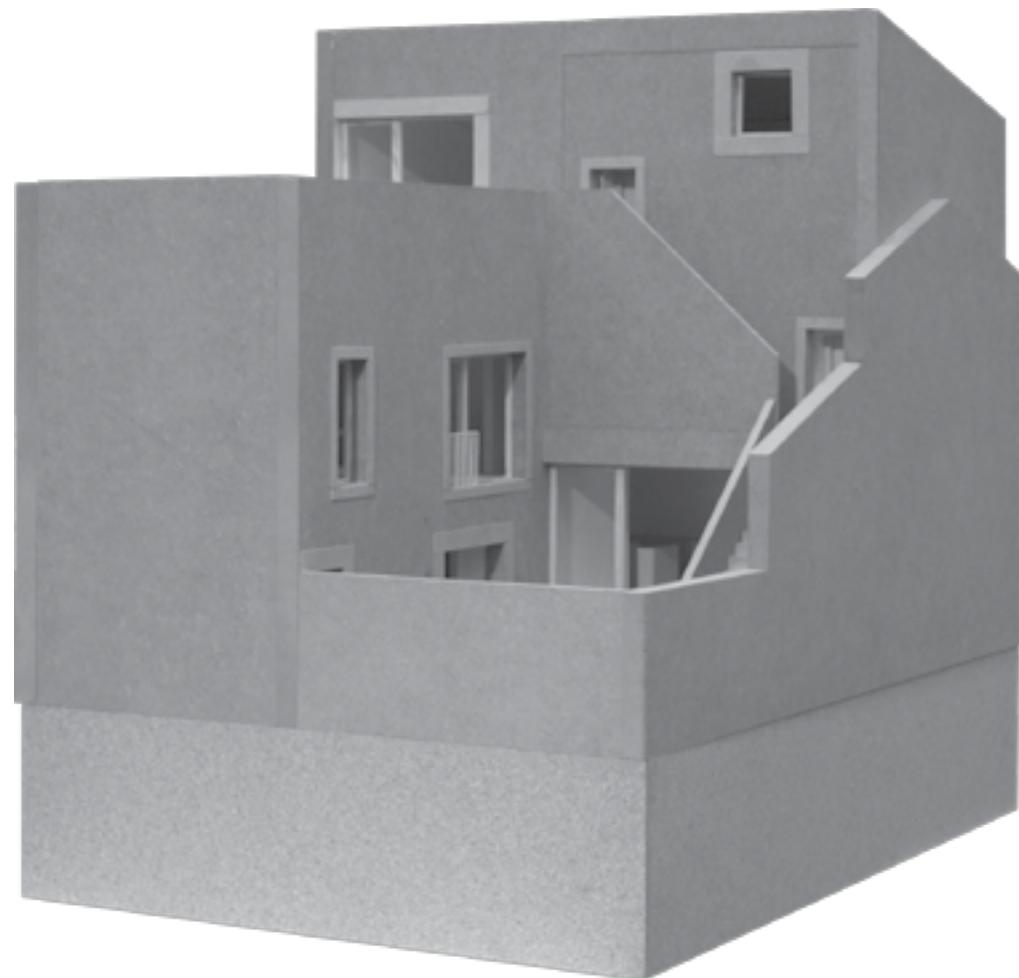
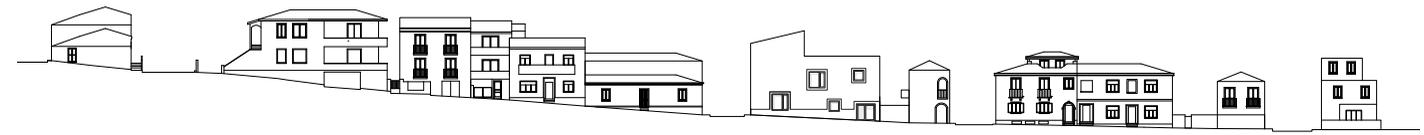
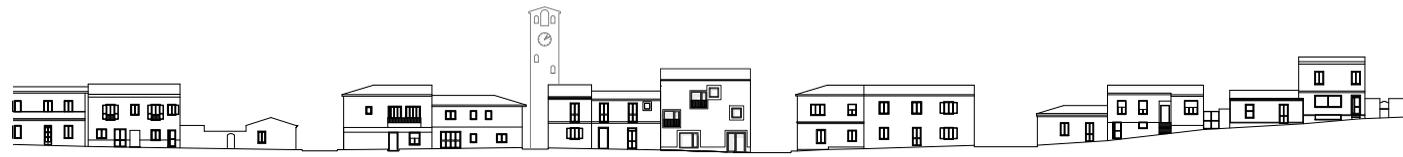
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- 1 Piazza Tre Lati
- 2 A site in the Old Town
- 3 Via Divisione Nembo
- 4 Historic town centre









### Group 3: Railway station area



This area would benefit from a rationalisation of the railway infrastructure and the introduction of a new linear park. A number of new buildings are proposed within this new landscape. Some of these residential buildings were subsequently tested at a larger scale.

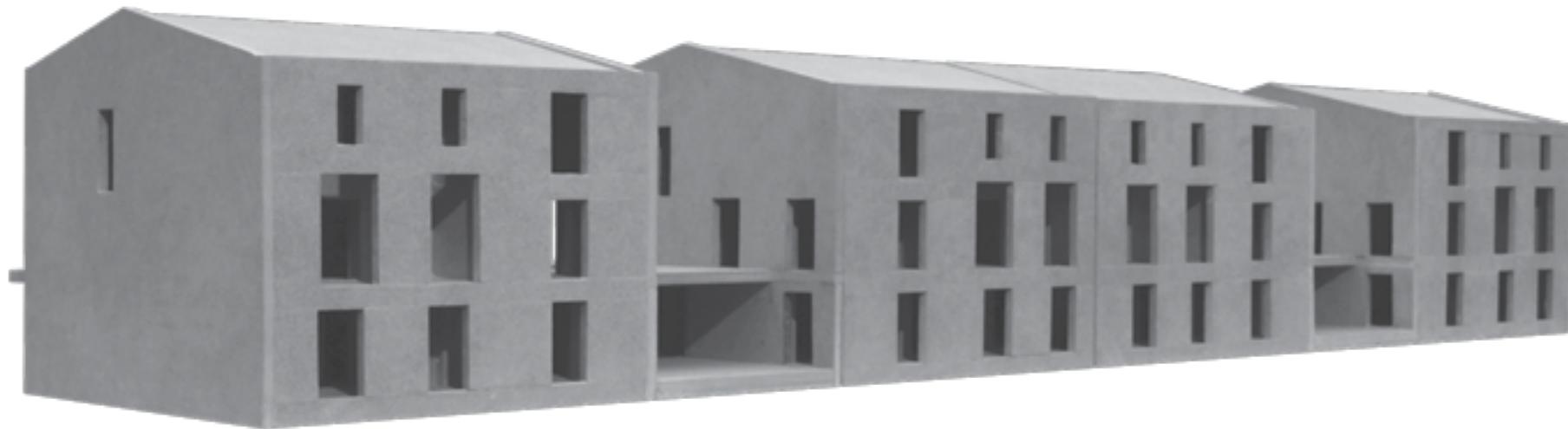
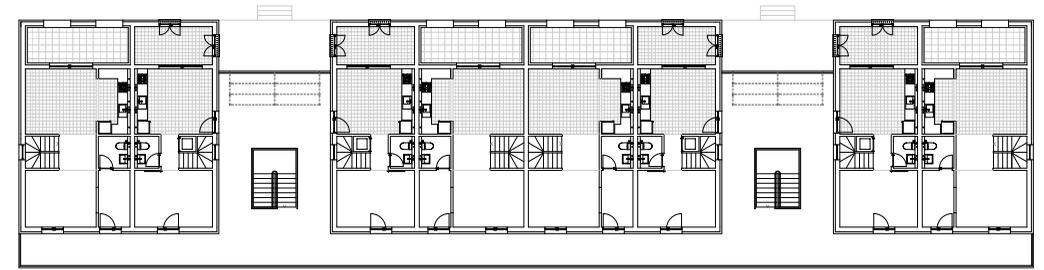
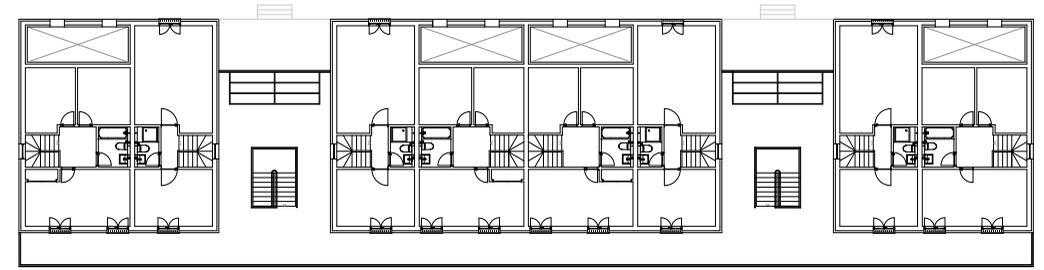
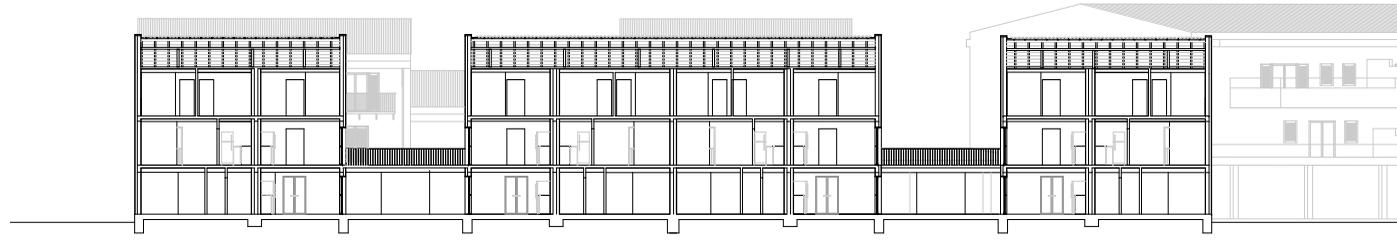


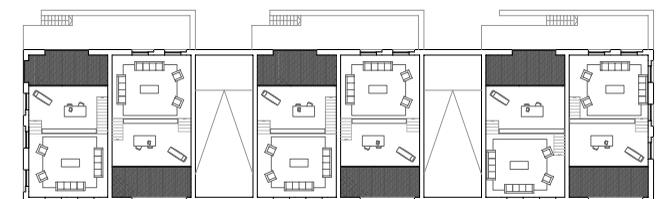
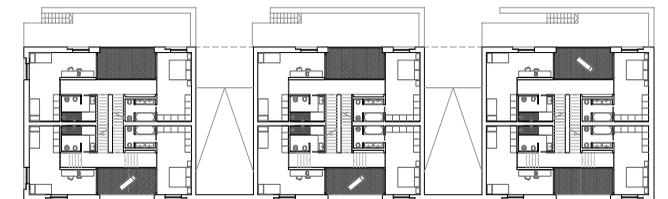
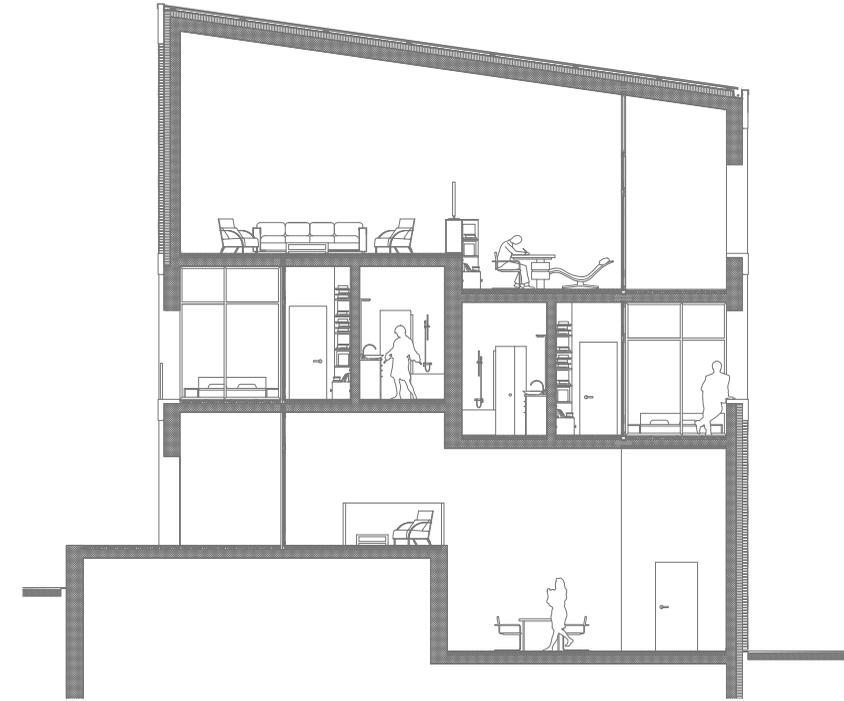
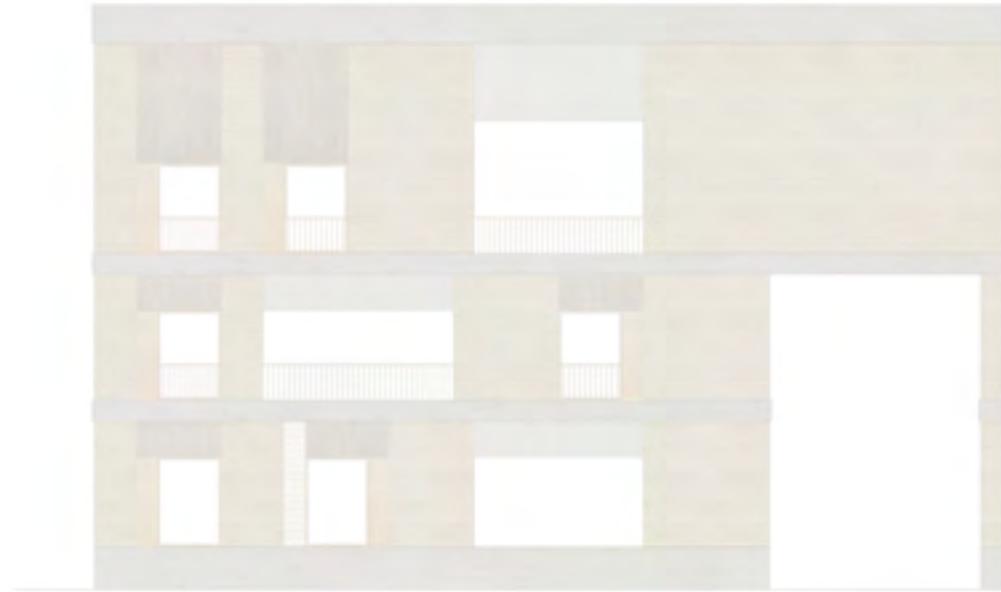
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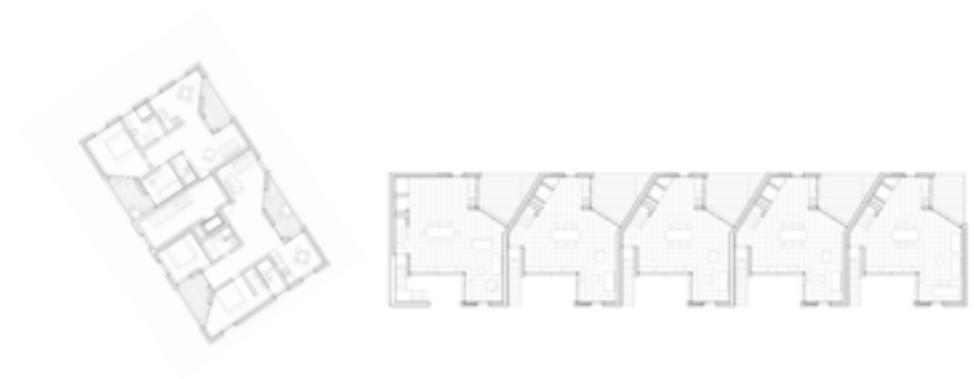


2

- 1 View towards the old railway station
- 2 View along the railway tracks







Group 4 - Ferry terminal and seafront promenade



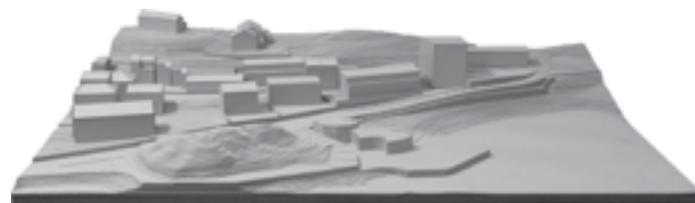
This strategically important area of Palau was considered in its key role as a point of arrival/departure. A concentration of new building is proposed around the ferry terminal. Heading out towards the north, a more generous sea promenade is created, leading to the existing pine woods where a new hotel and a restaurant are proposed.



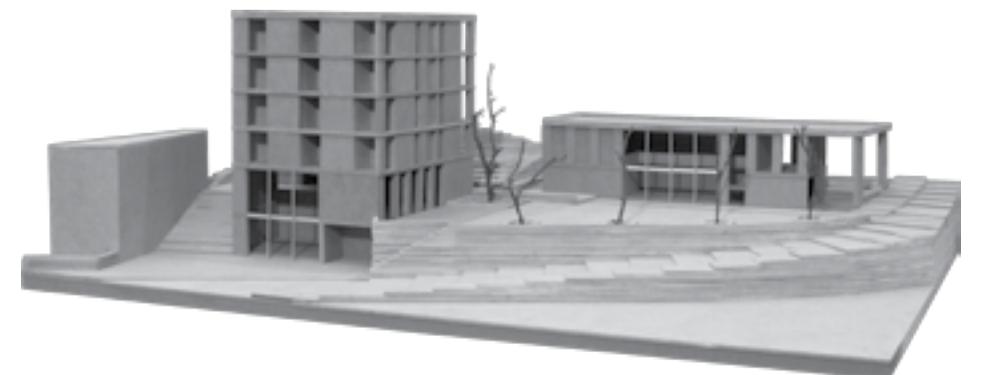
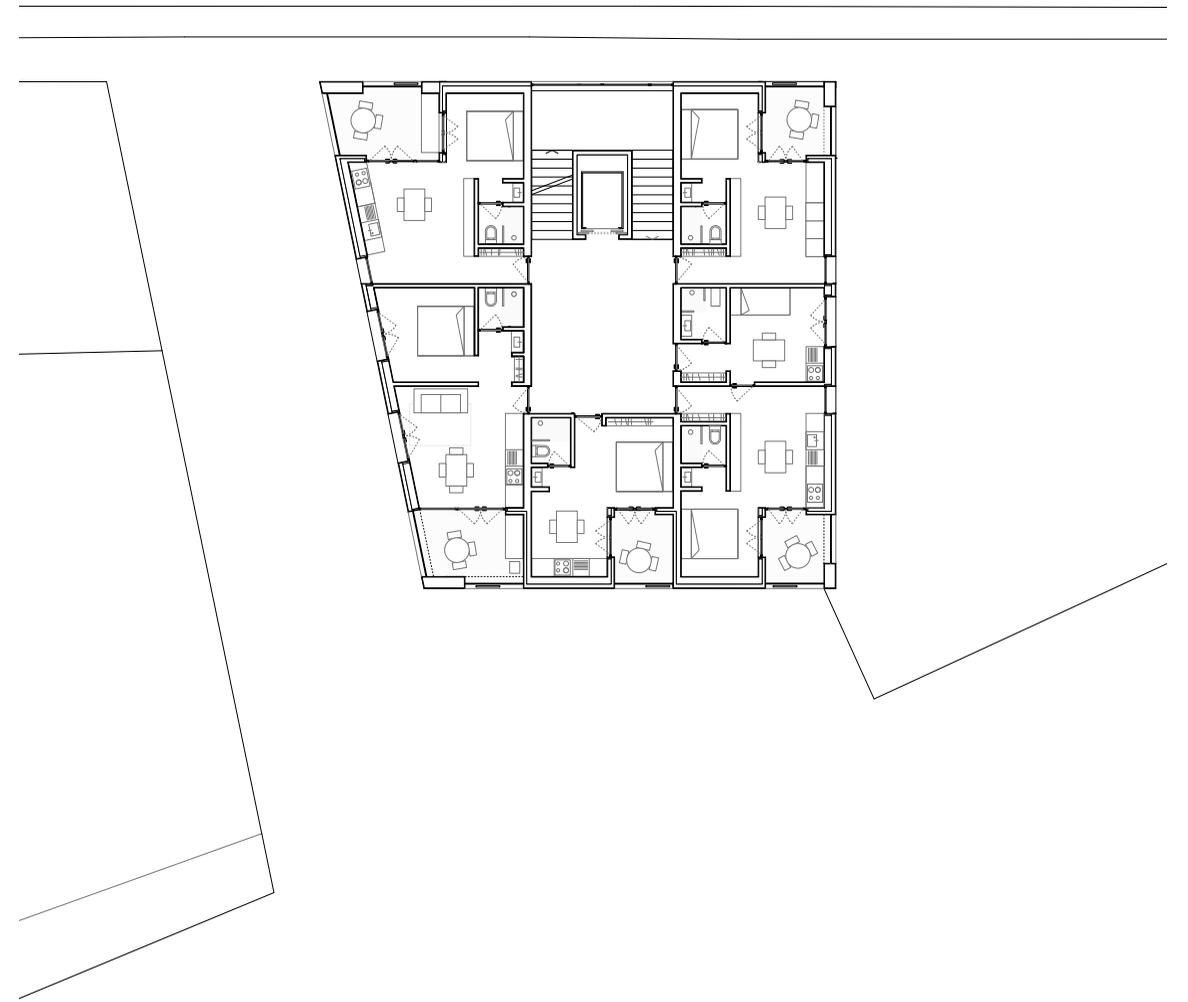
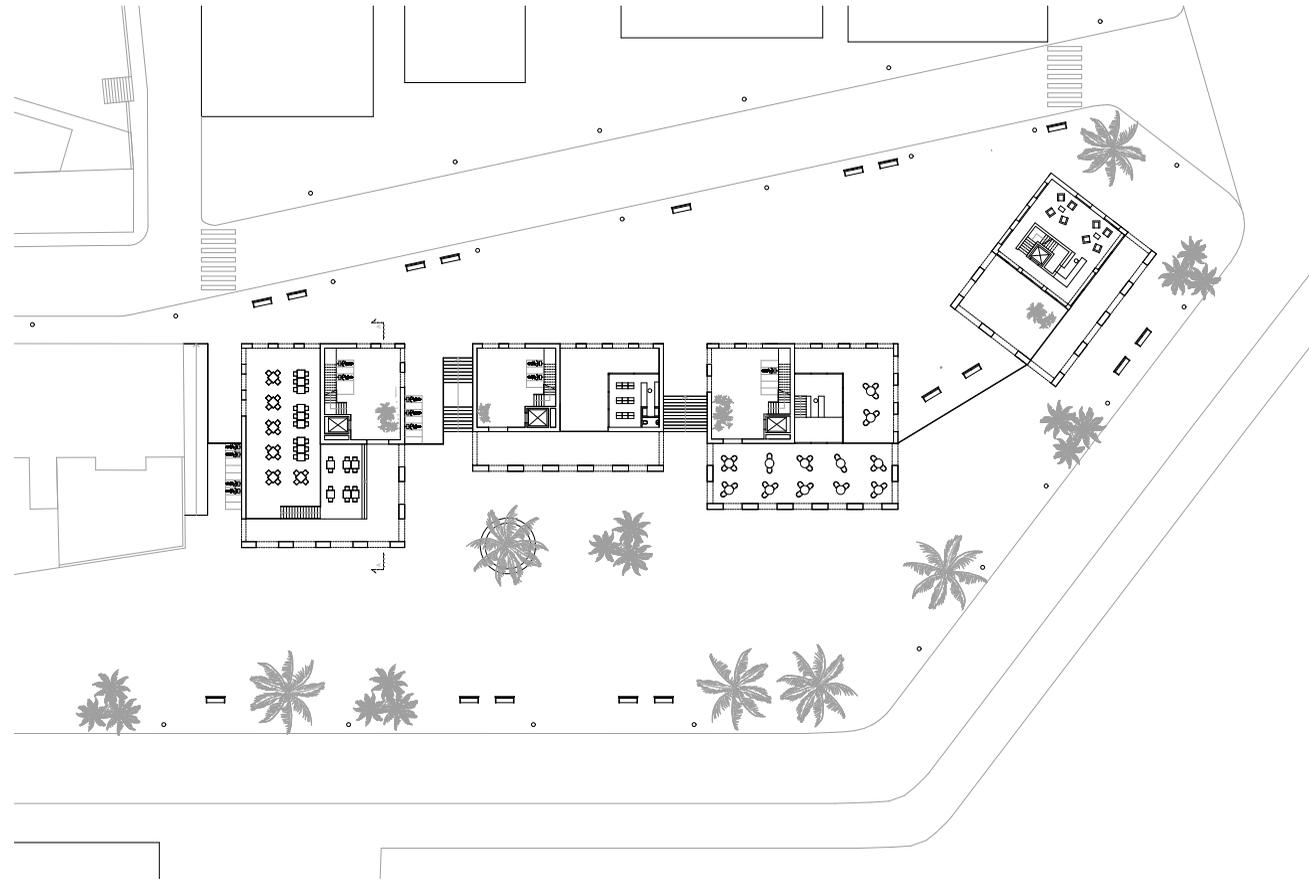
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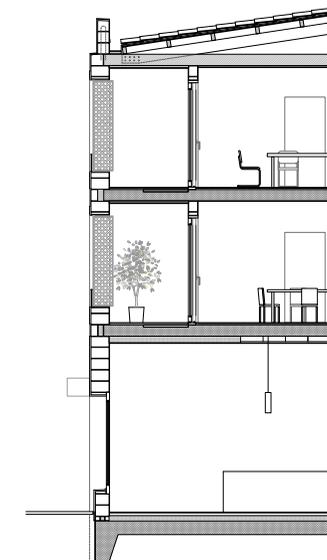
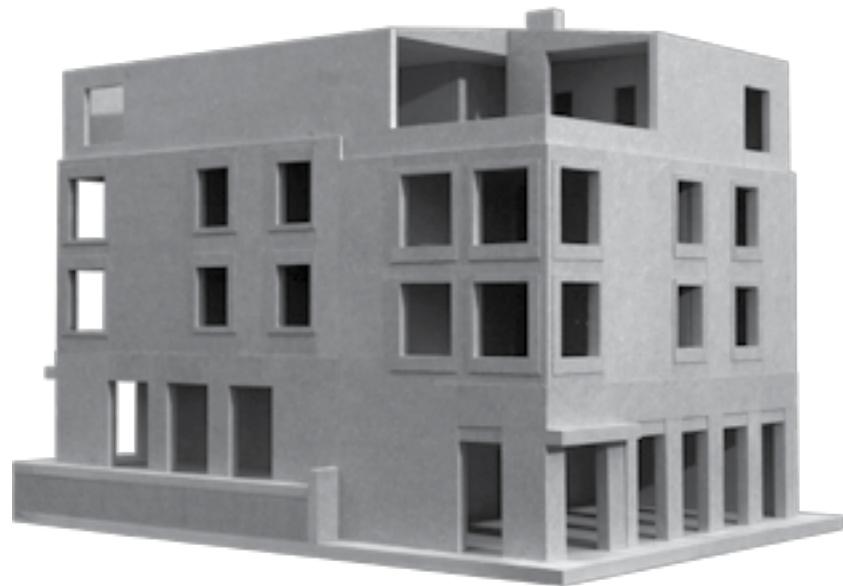
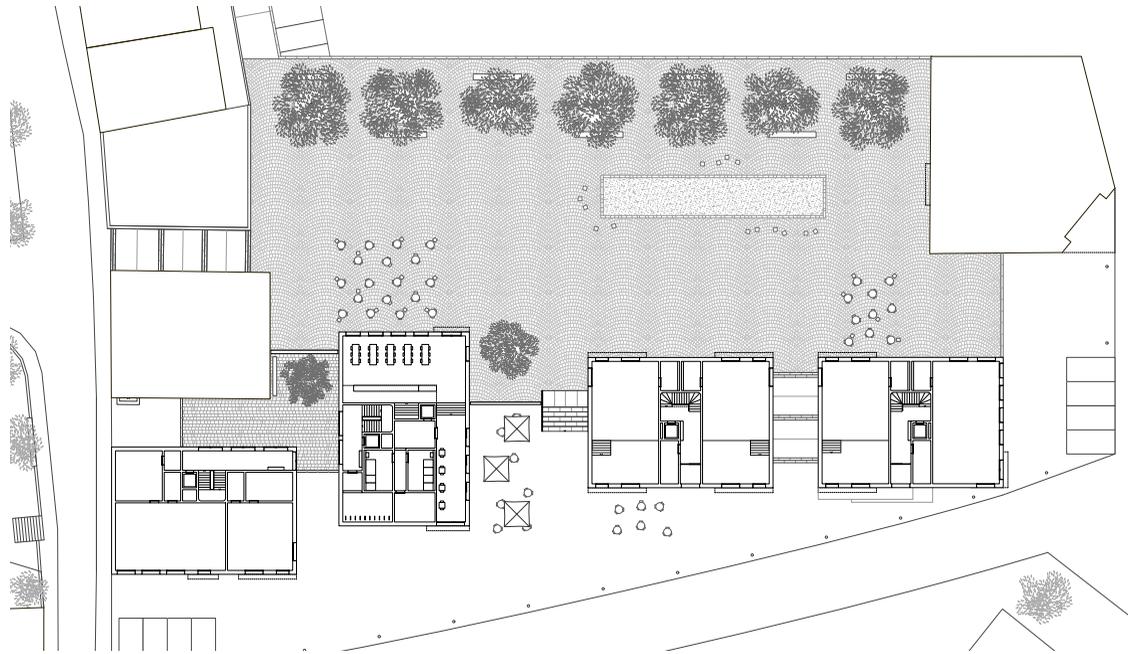


3



- 1 Typical street descending towards the port
- 2 Via Nazionale
- 3 Disused railway tracks at boarding point



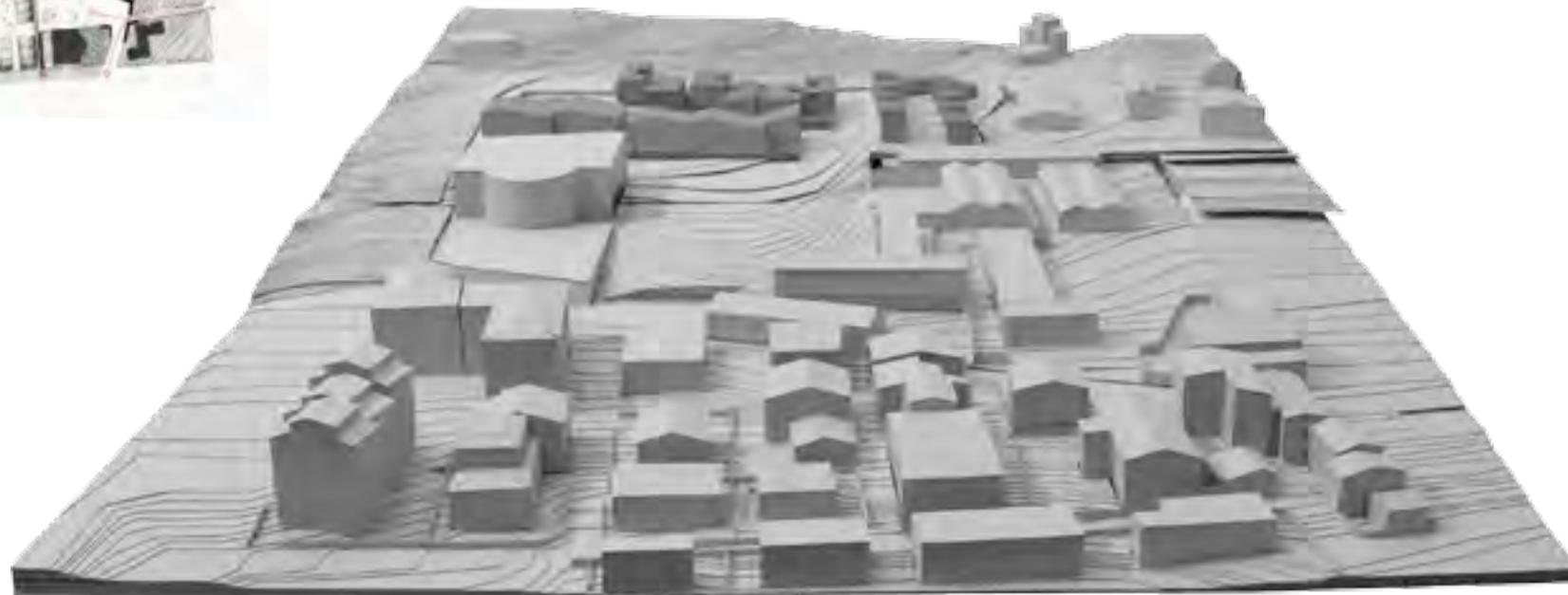
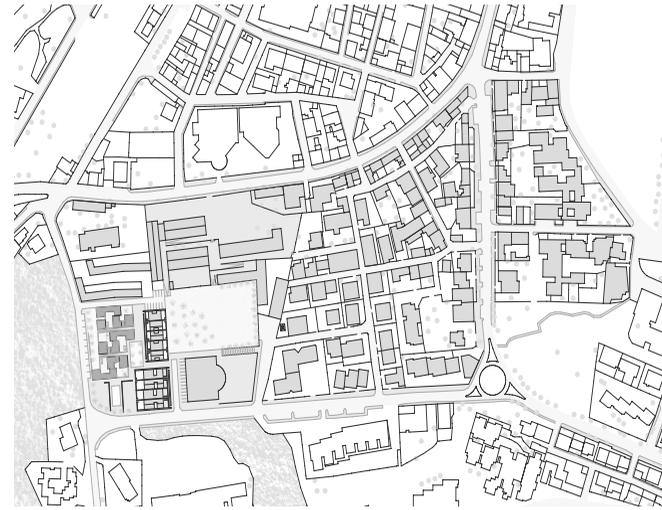




## Group 5 - Sports fields area



Our study of this area concluded that, for the most part, it functions well as a neighbourhood. Critical areas were identified to the north and west of the sports building. A new housing settlement is proposed to help organise recreational uses and strengthen the presence of the cultural quarter to the north. Various housing strategies were studied in greater detail.



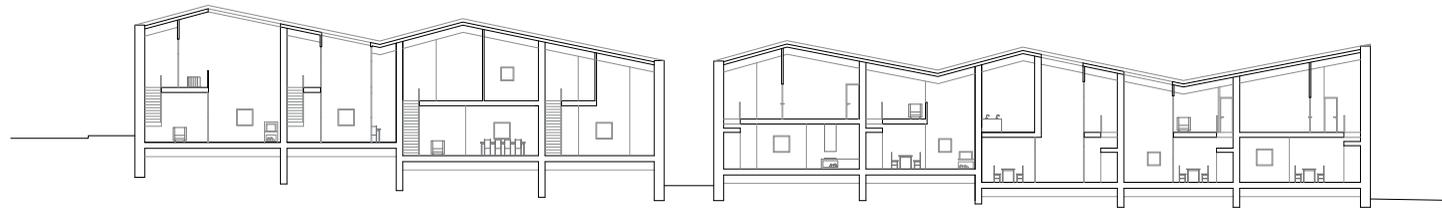
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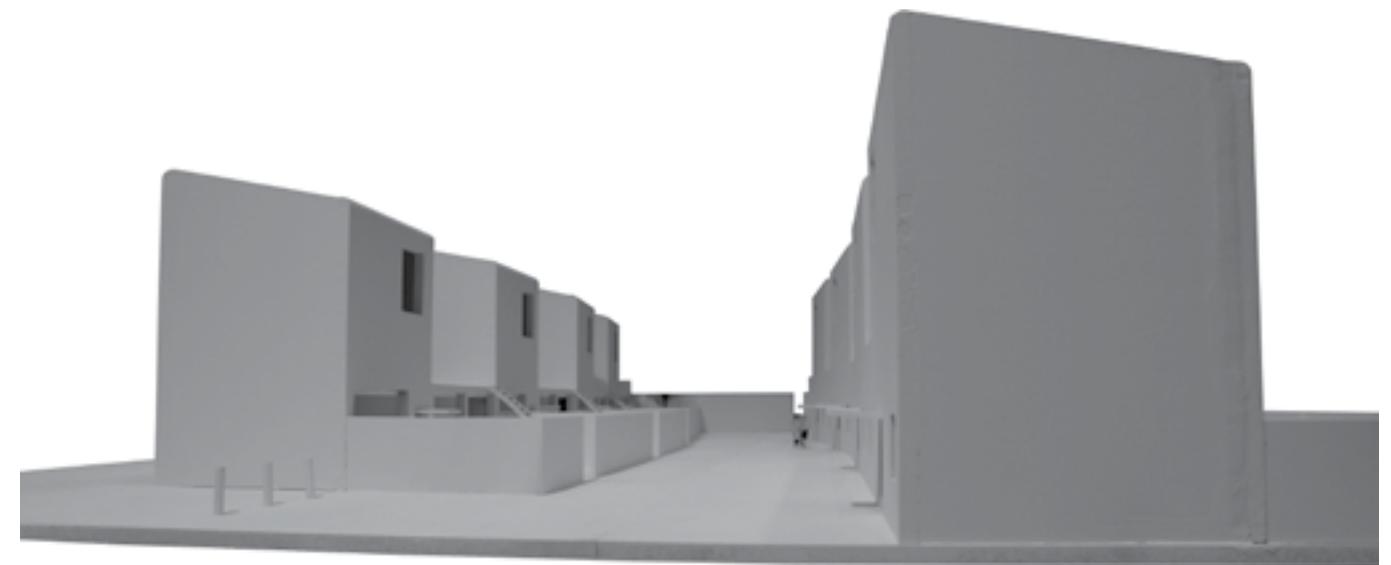
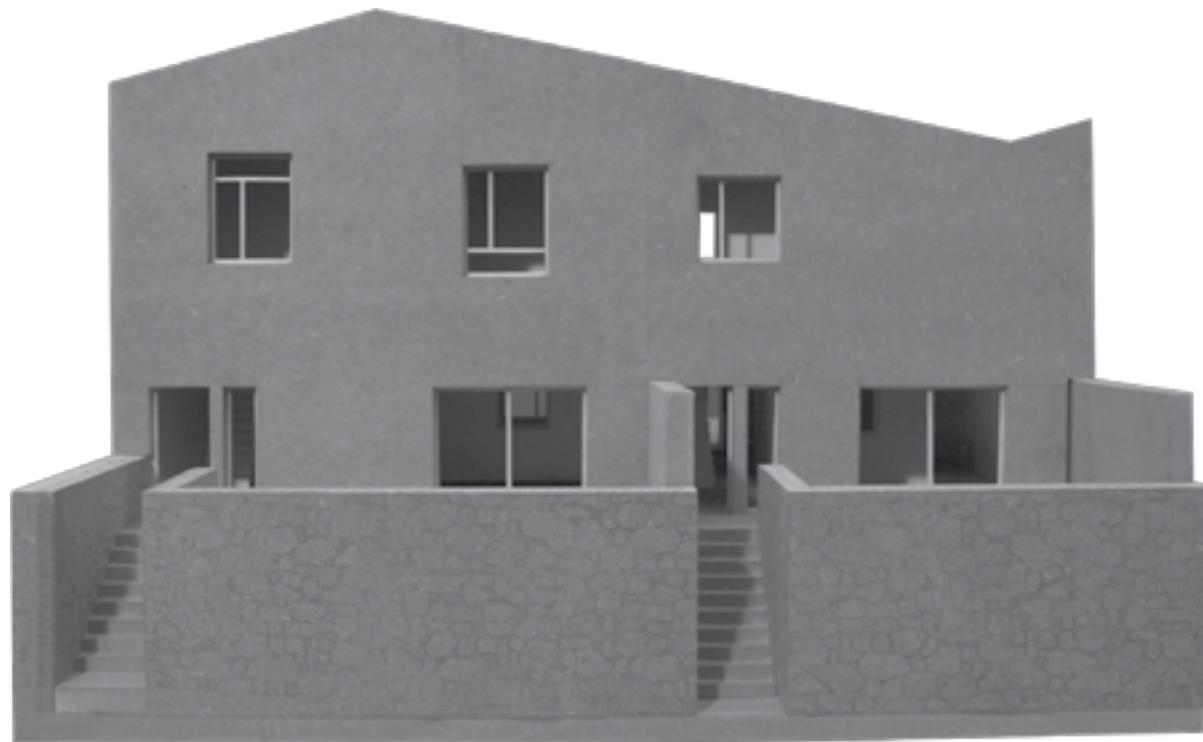
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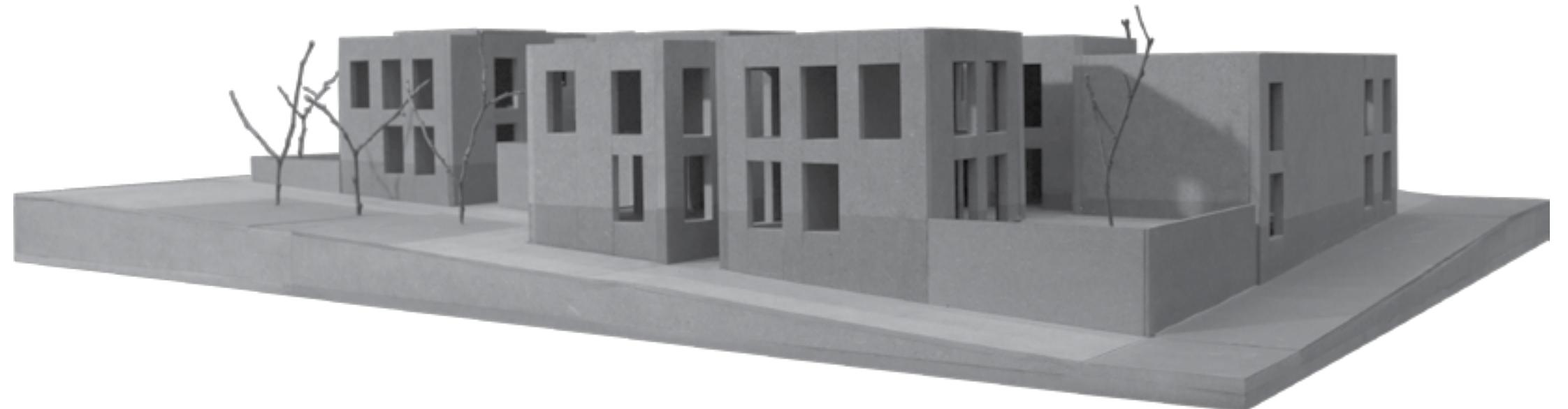
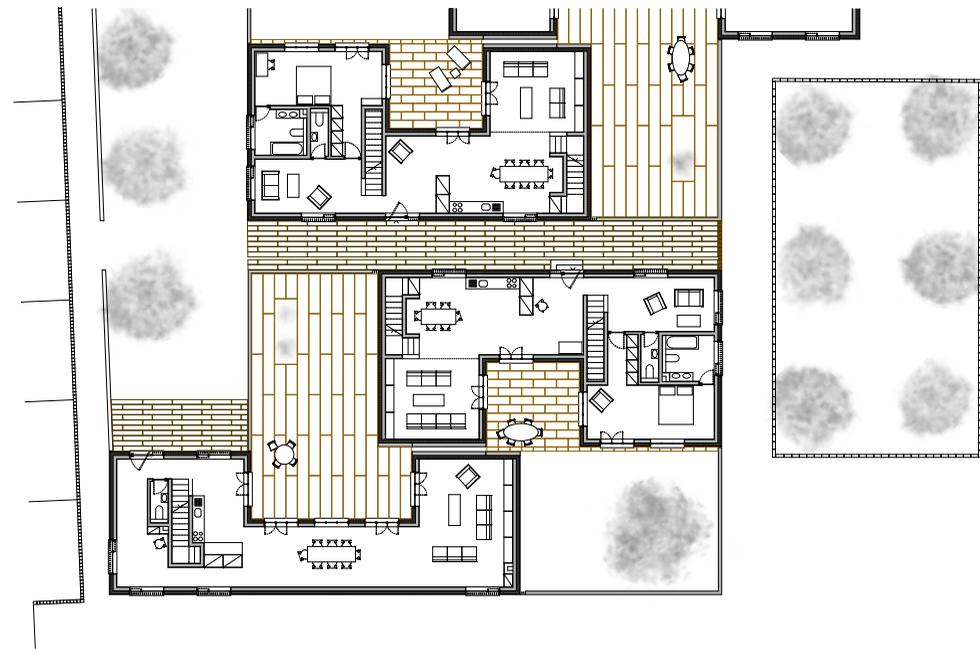
1  
View towards the town centre  
and the sea  
2  
View towards Via Baragge

Maddalena Matteoni, Francesca Molteni



Martin Migeon



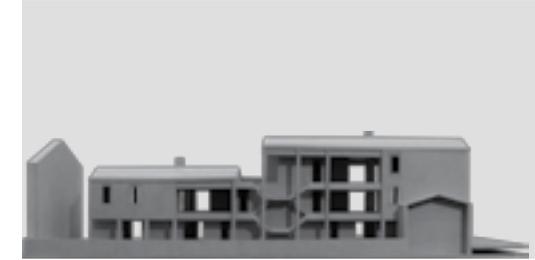




Michael Stettler, Lucrezia Vonzun p48-51



Marco Burnengo, Pietro Mazzanti p42-43



Matteo Ranci Ortigosa, Ruggero Cipolla p32-33



Josephine Giller, Anna Salvioni p56-57



Pier Luca Carubia, Damir Kabilovic p46



Stefano Bagni, Lukas Eschmann p25



Camilla Frattini, Carlotta Sartorio p47



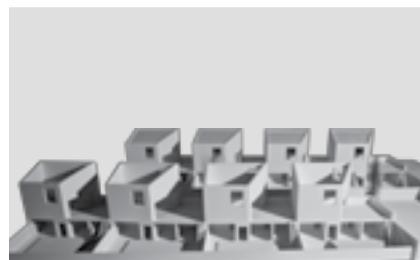
Eoin Hunt, Matthew Rauch p38-39



Maddalena Matteoni, Francesca Molteni p54



Jessica Braendli, Giulia Golemme p34-35



Martin Migeon p55



Enrico Paolo Ciani, Edoardo Regali p40-41



Davide Casoli, Luca Dalmaso p24



Filippo Cartocci, Stefano Cogo p22-23



Armina Alexandru, Iris Hilton p28-31

## Acknowledgements

First of all, I must acknowledge my debt to Alberto Ponis, the person who inspired the work that is documented in this catalogue. I must also thank Annarita and Marta Ponis who, together with Francesco Buzzi, have supported our work in many discreet ways.

I would like to thank Sarah Maunder, Corinne Weber and Marina Aldrovandi for their great care in preparing this catalogue and the accompanying exhibition, and for their invaluable support in organising the studio during the Spring semester.

I am very grateful to my partner, Stephen Bates, for an inspirational lecture that helped us better understand how to meaningfully build a Mediterranean house. My thanks also to Micha Bandini, Tony Fretton, Jean-Paul Jaccaud and Alberto Ponis who acted as visiting critics on different occasions.

I would like to thank the Mayor and the members of the Palau local administration for their interest in our work and their warm hospitality, and the Comune as a whole for sponsoring the exhibition of the work this catalogue illustrates.

Finally I would like to commend the twenty-nine students who worked in the studio during the semester. Their spirit of collaboration, wonderful insights and infectious enthusiasm were utterly compelling.

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