Mario Botta

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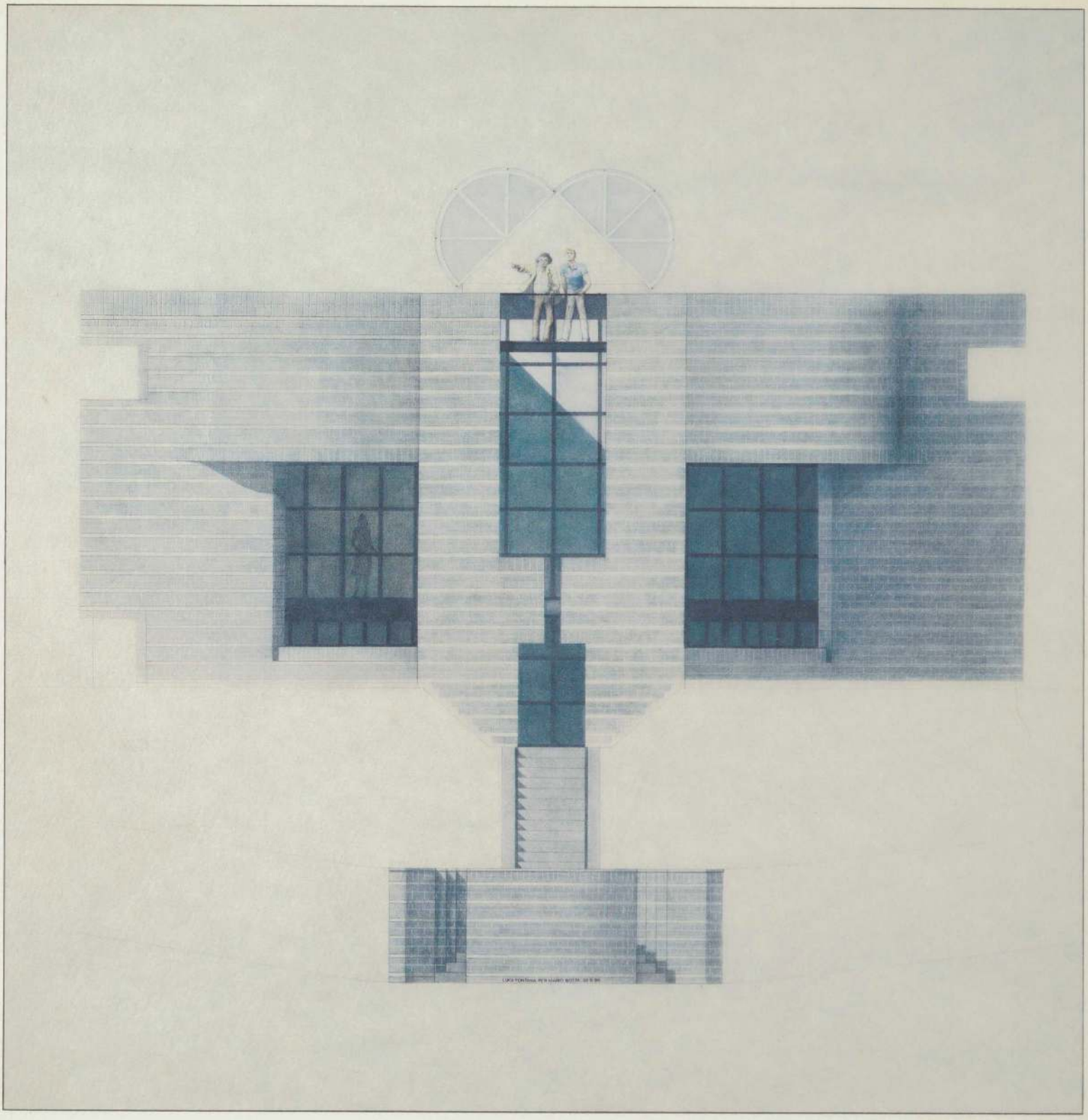

Mario Botta

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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House, Breganzona, Switzerland. 1984
Front facade

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House, Morbio Superiore, Switzerland. 1982–83
Sketch

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S.W.

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Contents

Mario Botta and the Modernist Tradition

The Museum of Modern Art's first exhibition in the Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program was devoted to the work of Leon Krier and Ricardo Bofill, two architects who consider the modern movement a failure and propose their own versions of a return to classicism. The second exhibition in this series focuses on the architecture of Mario Botta, whose work has played an important role in the revitalization and renewal of modern architecture.

At age forty-three, Mario Botta has practiced architecture for nearly twenty-five years. He got an early start: dropping out of secondary school when he was fifteen because he found it boring, he apprenticed, almost by chance, to the architectural firm of Carloni and Camenisch, in Lugano, and quickly discovered that architecture was his calling. His first built works date from this period. After a three-year apprenticeship, he went back to school to acquire a baccalaureate, and then a professional degree from the architecture school in Venice. Botta graduated in 1969, a time of intense student radicalism, and was the only candidate for a degree who chose Carlo Scarpa, then regarded as a conservative formalist, as his thesis critic. In 1970 Botta established his own architectural practice in Lugano.

During Botta's four years in Venice both Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn designed important projects for that city. With a combination of single-minded determination and youthful enthusiasm, Botta persuaded both architects to hire him; he worked for Le Corbusier on the Venice hospital during his first year in the city, and for Kahn on the convention center exhibition just after he graduated. Luck, but also a clear sense of direction, led Botta into contact with Le Corbusier, Kahn, and Scarpa. Fittingly, he has built on their tradition.

Mario Botta first gained international attention with a remarkable series of houses in Switzerland, modest in budget and scale but of strong monumentality. While clearly modernist, these houses also have ties to the vernacular architecture of Botta's native canton of Ticino as well as to the classical tradition. Set in a spectacular landscape of hills and lakes on the southern slopes of the Swiss Alps, they evoke a clear sense of place, their bold, archetypal geometric forms often echoing those of the local vernacular. Built of ascetic materials, beautifully crafted, tactile, and sensual, they comprise a rich set of variations on a few basic themes that have begun to define a new modern domestic type which, like

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its classical precedents, is axially organized and presents a powerful symmetrical image, or figure.

Botta's recent large-scale urban projects build upon many of the formal themes developed in his private houses and, like them, express his preoccupation with context. In these projects he has succeeded in defining a viable alternative to those seeking to destroy the fabric of the traditional city and to those who would preserve the historic city at a certain moment in time. Botta's formulation, "A newness of the old and an archeology of the new," conveys a sense both of historic continuity and of present-day innovation. In all his work the context is an important point of departure, whether by context is meant landscape, urban fabric, local building tradition, or past and present culture. And for him that context includes the modernist tradition in architecture.

But Botta's modernism is not utopian. It neither pursues a machine aesthetic nor asserts the primacy of function in generating form, although current critiques would so characterize all of modernism. Botta's modernism is part of a movement away from the technological and functional determinism of the 1920s, which came to be known as the International Style, toward a man-centered modernism that sought fundamentals within a more humanist framework, using as points of departure archaic, primitive, and vernacular sources. The idea was not to copy these sources but to understand their underlying principles of form, construction, and psychology. Paralleling contemporary ethnography, in which primitive peoples were studied in order to get beneath the encrusted layers of "culture" in Western societies to the "purer" states of man, this modernist tradition similarly sought to strip architecture of its layers of style and ornamentation in search of the timeless.

This move away from International Style functionalism was first apparent in the gradual appropriation and reinterpretation of the Mediterranean vernacular in the 1930s by Le Corbusier, which evolved into his archaizing, *béton brut* postwar work. Similarly, by 1935 in Scandinavia, Erik Gunnar Asplund and Alvar Aalto moved away from the International Style by reintegrating the vernacular and classical into their work. A renewed interest in rooting their architecture to the earth and using natural materials emerged, partly inspired by their discovery of Frank Lloyd Wright's work of the 1930s. And Louis Kahn, perhaps the most significant architect to emerge

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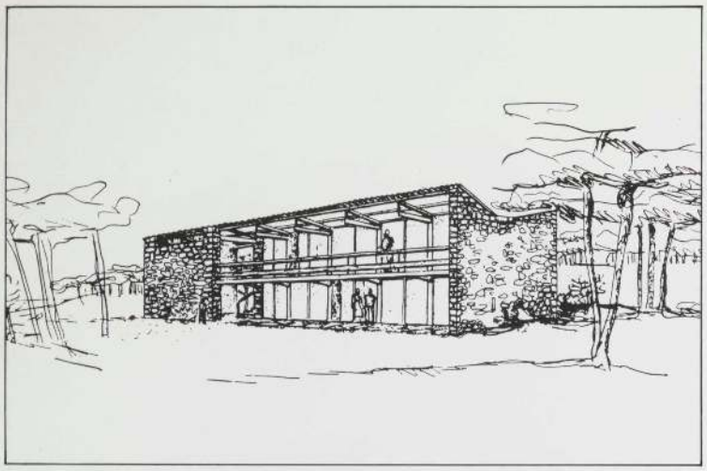
Mario Botta
Parish House, Genestrerio, Switzerland
1961–63
2
Bird-hunting Tower, Agra, Switzerland
3
Chapel, Roveredo, Switzerland



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in the postwar years, more systematically reintegrated into the modern movement the abstracted form world of the past. While this new architecture took many diverse forms, all of them had in common a shift from a technologically and functionally driven architecture emphasizing discontinuity with the past to an architecture that emphasized the timeless needs of man and sought to reinterpret the past in the context of modern society.

A central and fascinating aspect of Botta's work, and of considerable concern to architecture today, is the question of the continuity and evolution of the modernist tradition. Botta has acknowledged the important influence that Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, and Carlo Scarpa have had on him. Of the three, Louis Kahn is perhaps the most important influence. Kahn's Beaux-Arts training schooled him in classical methods of plan composition, and through his teacher Paul Cret, he developed a fundamental belief in a structural rationalism that had roots in nineteenth-century architectural theory, particularly that of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. This interest in structural rationalism, which saw as equally valid the logic of traditional means of construction as well as of modern means such as space frames, was combined with an interest in the primary forms of ancient architecture. Ruins, particularly of ancient Roman and Islamic buildings, which had shed everything but the essence of their form, materiality, and structure, provided for Kahn a timeless and rational point of departure for architecture. The interest in ruins was not a megalomaniacal wish for immortality, as in the case of Albert Speer and his patron; rather, as Kenneth Frampton has said, the return to ancient sources "was for Kahn a necessary stand against the historic 'void' of the modern epoch."

The interest in the tectonics of materials, the clear articulation of parts, and the pursuit of primary geometries to create order, hierarchy, and seriality in Botta's architecture build on the work of Kahn. His use of light to give definition to both exteriors and interiors similarly has connections to Kahn. And Botta's ability to draw inspiration from the Ticino vernacular owes something to Kahn's way of seeing the past in terms of essentials. Kahn's influence on Botta runs like a thread from the beginning of his career to the present, from early projects such as the competition for a secondary school in Locarno of 1970, a house at Cadenazzo of 1970–71, and a secondary school at Morbio Inferiore (pages 42–43) to later projects such as a house at Massagno (pages 28–29) and the Bank of Gotthard in Lugano (pages 50–51).

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Le Corbusier
House, Mathes, France. 1935
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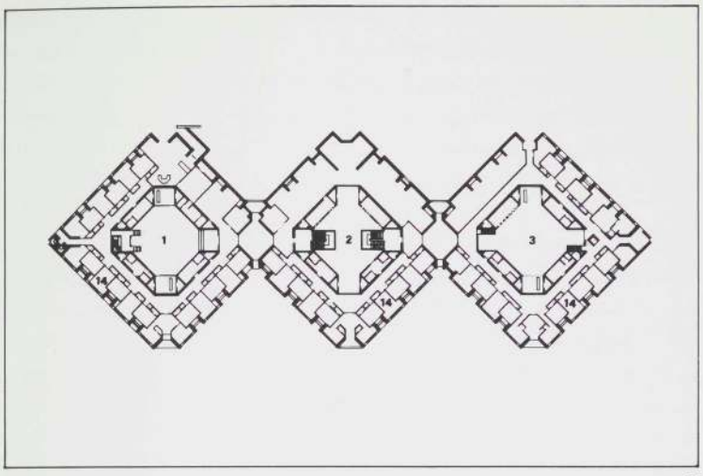
Erik Gunnar Asplund
Woodland Crematorium, Stockholm, Sweden
1935–40
6
Louis Kahn
Indian Institute of Management
Ahmedabad, India. 1963–74



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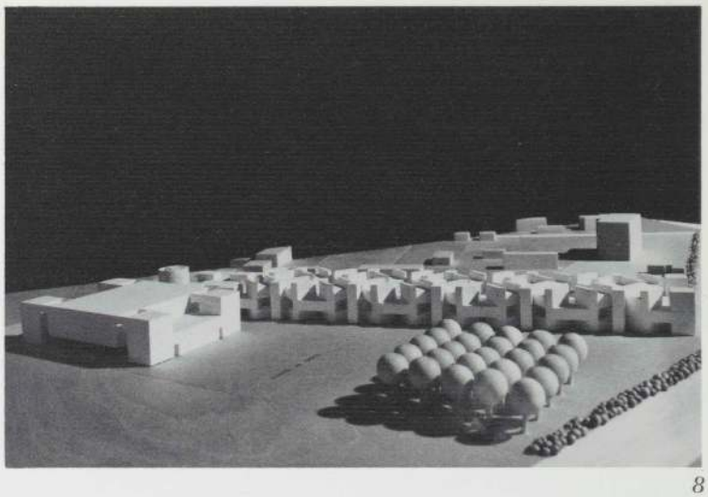

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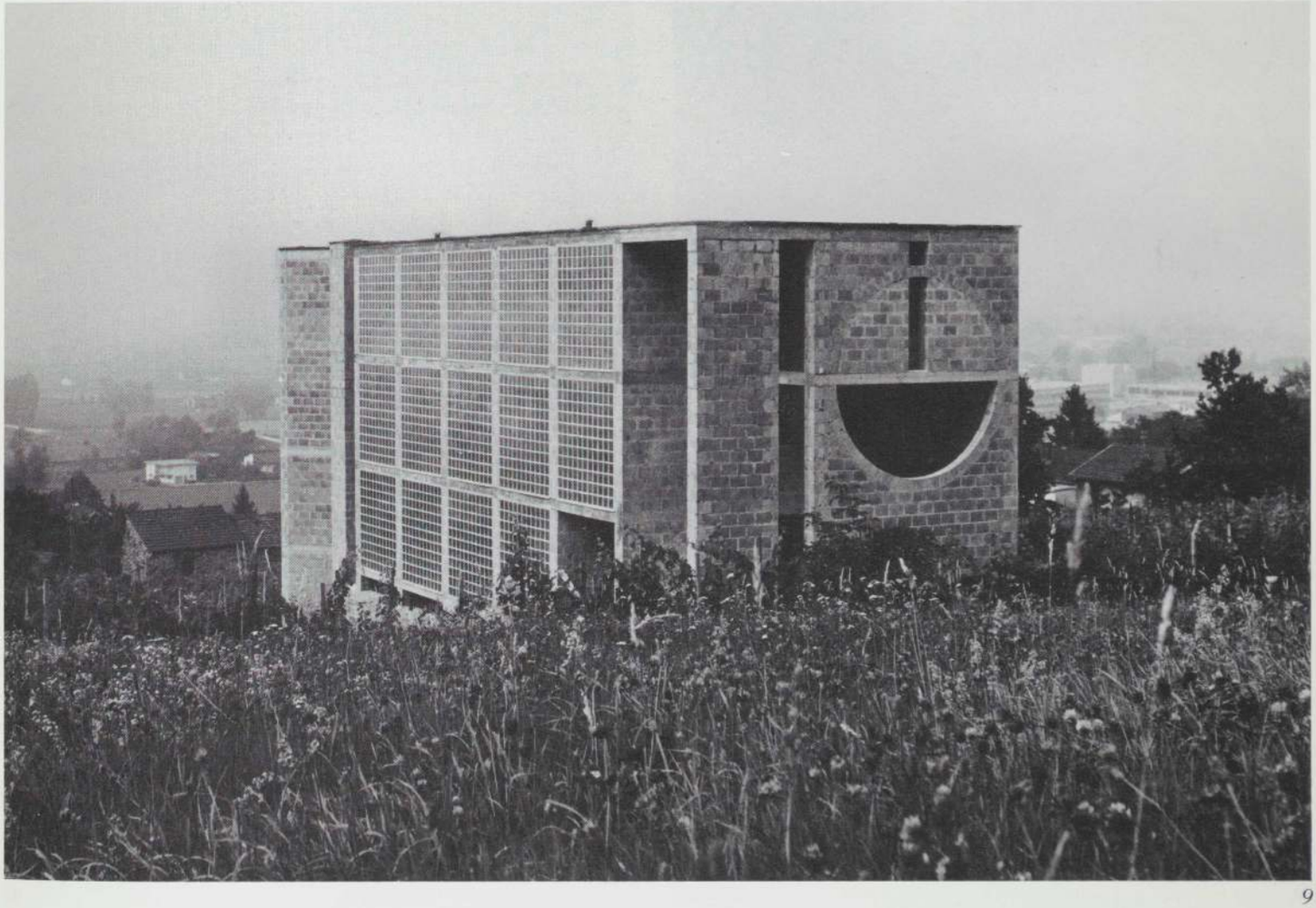

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Louis Kahn
Erdman Dormitories, Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. 1962–65
Ground-floor plan
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Mario Botta
School, Locarno, Switzerland. 1970
Project: model
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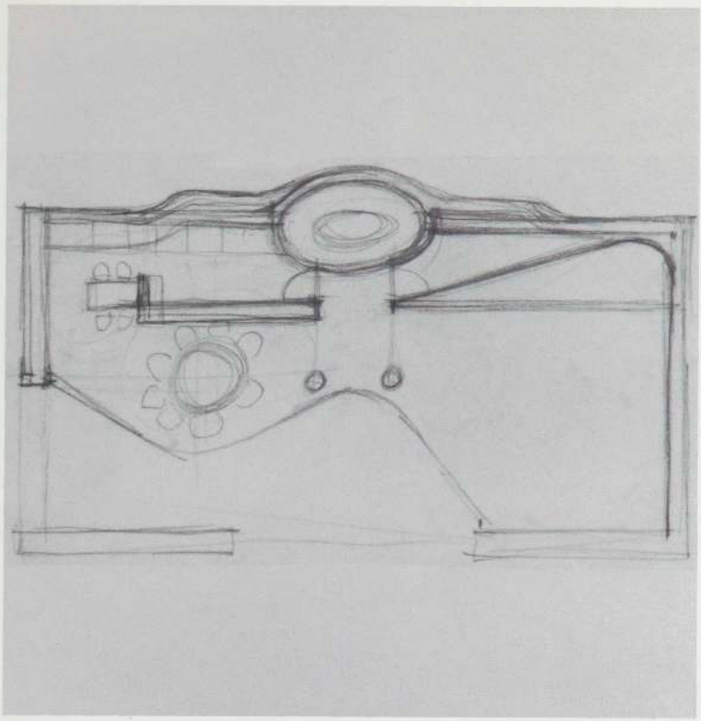
Mario Botta
House, Cadenazzo, Switzerland. 1970–71



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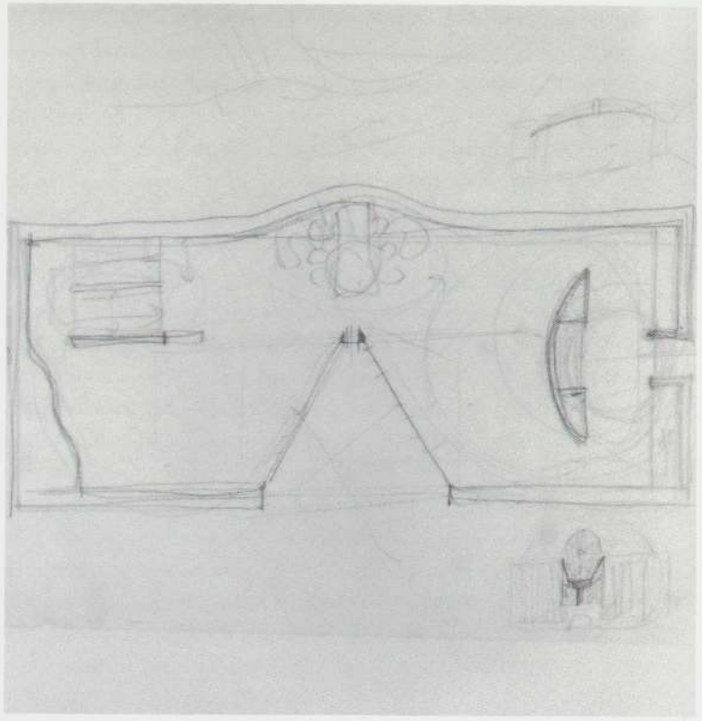

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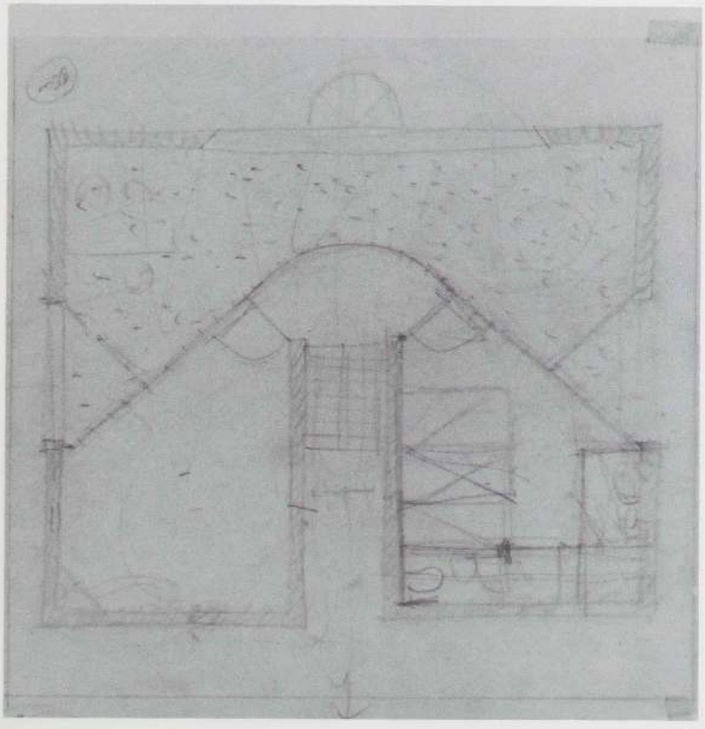

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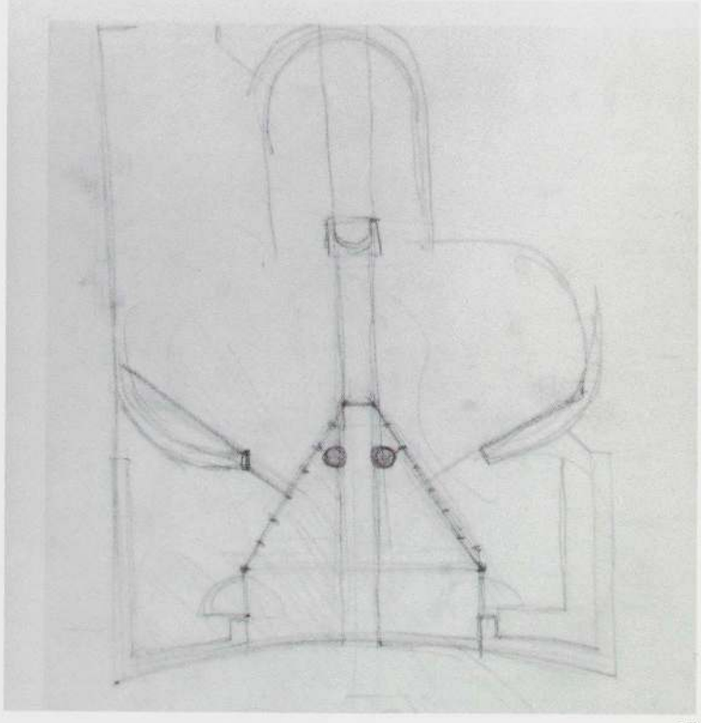

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Mario Botta
Preliminary sketches for houses:
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Massagno, Switzerland. 1979–81
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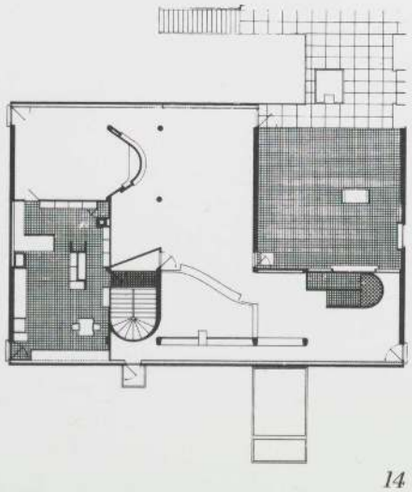
Viganello, Switzerland. 1981–82
12
Pregassona, Switzerland. 1979
13
Morbio Superiore, Switzerland. 1982–83



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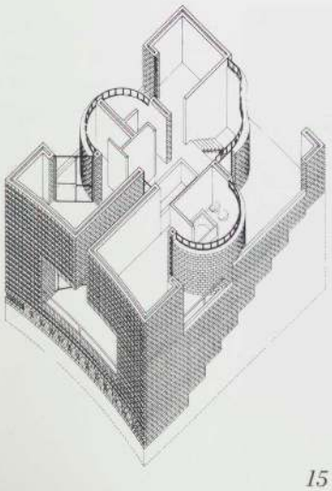
Le Corbusier
Villa, Garches, France. 1927
Second-floor plan

From his countryman Le Corbusier, Botta learned a sense of the social dimensions of architecture, an understanding of the interrelationship of architecture, as he put it, with social, political, and economic concerns. More particularly, having both a social and formal dimension, Botta's predilection for the open plan would seem to have derived from Le Corbusier, and on a more exclusively formal level so would Botta's dynamic method of plan composition. But while Le Corbusier was a master of free form, combining order and freedom, organic and geometric forms in a generally dynamic asymmetrical interplay, Botta tends to compose with primary geometric forms, arranging them into a dynamic relationship along the main axis. This has allowed him to synthesize some of the basics of Kahn's static geometric plans with the more dynamic compositional methods of Le Corbusier.

The Le Corbusier influence is apparent in the house at Stabio of 1965–67, built while he was in architecture school, with its splayed exterior stair in a dynamic relationship to the main rectangular mass of the house and the asymmetrical end facade. The most recently completed house, at Morbio Superiore (pages 36–37), with its complex curving composition within the rectilinear building shell creating a strong dynamic tension, echoes Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye.

While Carlo Scarpa was not a great conceptualizer of new architecture like Le Corbusier or Kahn, his importance for Botta lies in his emphasis on detail, texture, and materials. Scarpa explored freely this aspect of modernism. While Botta's preference for ascetic materials and matter-of-fact but carefully conceived detailing in his houses and early buildings is clearly in the spirit of Kahn and Le Corbusier, the more intricate detailing and use of richer materials that have emerged later in his work owe more to Scarpa.

Botta's ability to synthesize all these influences into an architecture that is clearly and consistently his own as well as his extraordinary sense of materials, craft, and detail give his projects their authority. And two issues of wider importance demonstrate how Botta has evolved beyond these architects. The first issue, Botta's departure from a strict structural rationalism, relates to Kahn in particular; the second issue, Botta's introduction of center and figure into his architecture, relates to both Le Corbusier and Kahn as well as to the modernist tradition in general.



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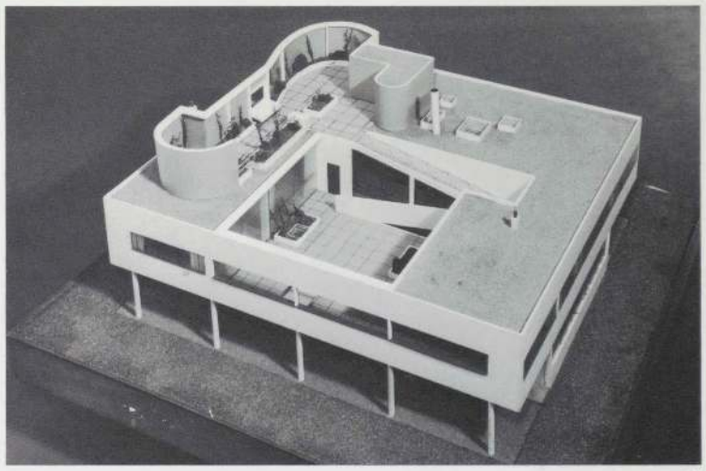

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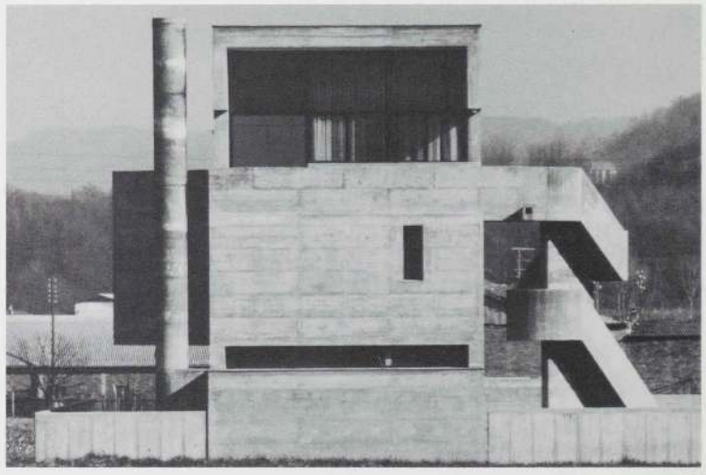

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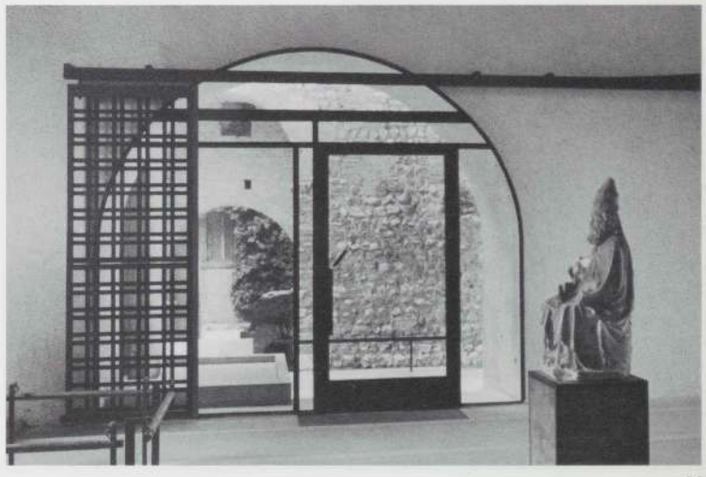

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Mario Botta
House, Morbio Superiore, Switzerland
1982–83
Axonometric
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Le Corbusier
Villa Savoye, Poissy, France. 1929–31
Model
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Mario Botta
House, Stabio, Switzerland. 1965–67
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Carlo Scarpa
Castelvecchio Museum, Verona, Italy. 1964

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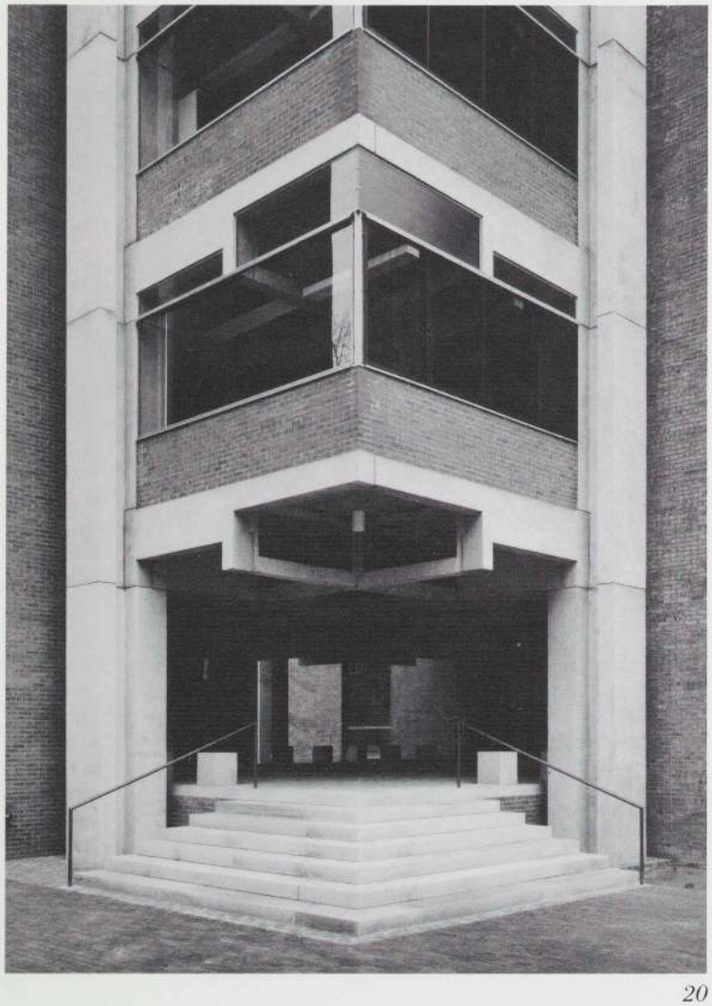

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Louis Kahn
Library, Phillips Exeter Academy
Exeter, New Hampshire. 1967–72
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Louis Kahn
Alfred Newton Richards Medical Research Building
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 1957–61
Entrance
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Mario Botta
Office Building, Lugano, Switzerland
1981–85

For Kahn the clear expression of structural logic was of primary concern. There is usually no confusion as to what constitutes bearing walls, what is cladding, or how things are held up. For instance, the cantilevered corners of Kahn's Alfred Newton Richards Medical Research Building clearly reveal the reinforced concrete trusses that hold them up. However, in Botta's work structure is concealed, as in the cantilevered corners of the house at Pregassona (pages 30–31), and in the brick-clad stepped facade of the office building in Lugano (pages 48–49), which is articulated as thick enough to be read as a bearing wall but does not make explicit how it is held up. The precariousness of the massing is fundamental to the experience of the building. Structural logic is deliberately subverted for perceptual ends.

For Botta contextual concerns take precedence over structural consistency, and it is in this larger conceptual framework of priorities that one must see his break with Kahn. The logic of his wanting to articulate a strong corner and, at the same time, tie the office building into the existing fabric is clear. In freeing himself from Kahn's structural rationalism, Botta was able to recognize the demands of the surroundings and the need for a strongly articulated corner as well as entry, the latter particularly being almost always subordinate in Kahn's architecture.

Modern architects of the 1920s struggled to break away from historical styles, which they viewed as having been made obsolete by new techniques and materials, and from the formal ordering methods of historical architecture, which they viewed equally as an architectural representation of a moribund social order. For historical architectural paradigms they substituted new architectural paradigms—universal space, column grids, moveable wall planes, and an asymmetrical and nonhierarchic order—in what must partly be seen as an architectural effort to create a more egalitarian society. While they succeeded in creating a new architecture, which in its openness and lack of traditional hierarchies may have appeared more egalitarian, it is questionable whether this new architecture had any ameliorating effects on the social order. Where they did succeed, not entirely unwittingly, was in providing a model for a utilitarian way of building and a rationale for it, which was then appropriated and debased by society's economic forces.

Botta's generation is struggling to overcome the resultant loss of a sense of center and place that today pervades the

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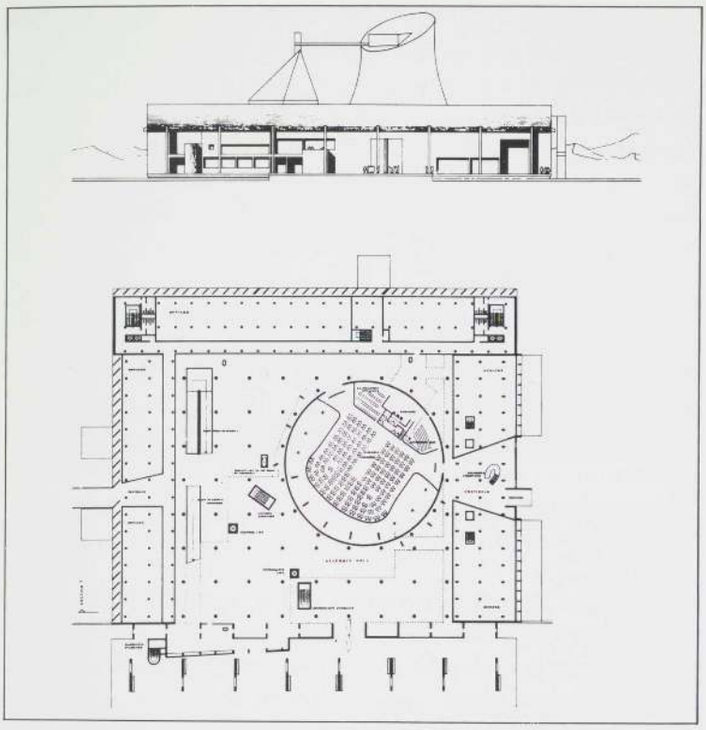

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Le Corbusier
Assembly Building
Chandigarh, India. 1952–61
Front elevation and ground-floor plan
23
Le Corbusier
Monastery of La Tourette
Eveux, France. 1957–59
View of courtyard

architecture and urbanism of the industrial mass democracies. For Le Corbusier, an important priority was to develop an architecture that freed itself from the rigid axiality of the French tradition. Botta has, it would appear, almost by instinct, moved toward reintroducing axiality and a sense of center to a modern architectural tradition that formerly proscribed it. Efforts in the postwar years to reappropriate older paradigms in the context of modern architecture produced some paradoxical and many unconvincing results. Perhaps the most paradoxical was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's reintroduction of classical symmetry into his late work. Because of the dematerialized nature of his glass-and-steel architecture and its undifferentiated grid, as well as his refusal to articulate the vertical dimension of space, space was never contained nor hierarchy expressed, and thus the sense of center was subverted. Other postwar efforts at a modern American monumentality, such as Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York, were less than convincing.

The most convincing efforts at a new monumentality were those of Le Corbusier and Kahn. But although both reintroduced great centralized spaces and variations on axial planning, there remains in their work a strong ambivalence, in the case of Kahn, and a clear shunning, in the case of Le Corbusier, with regard to the articulation of center and figure. While the work of both architects provided powerful images, these forms were usually derived from, and celebrated the monumentalization of, functional elements—whether canopies, ramps, stair towers, or structural and service elements. They were asymmetrically composed in the work of Le Corbusier and usually in series in the work of Kahn.

In the work of Le Corbusier important spaces tended toward the periphery of the buildings while the center was occupied by an undifferentiated column grid or circulation area. The examples are numerous. In his monumental assembly building at Chandigarh the assembly chamber has drifted off to the periphery of the interior column-filled space and been turned thirty degrees off the orthogonal, completely subverting a sense of center or procession. Similarly, the courtyard of the monastery of La Tourette is crisscrossed by corridors, denying its usual historic role as a central focus.

Kahn's was a serial monumentality, achieved by repeating similar architectural and structural units. His emphasis on structural systems and seriality subverted the sense of

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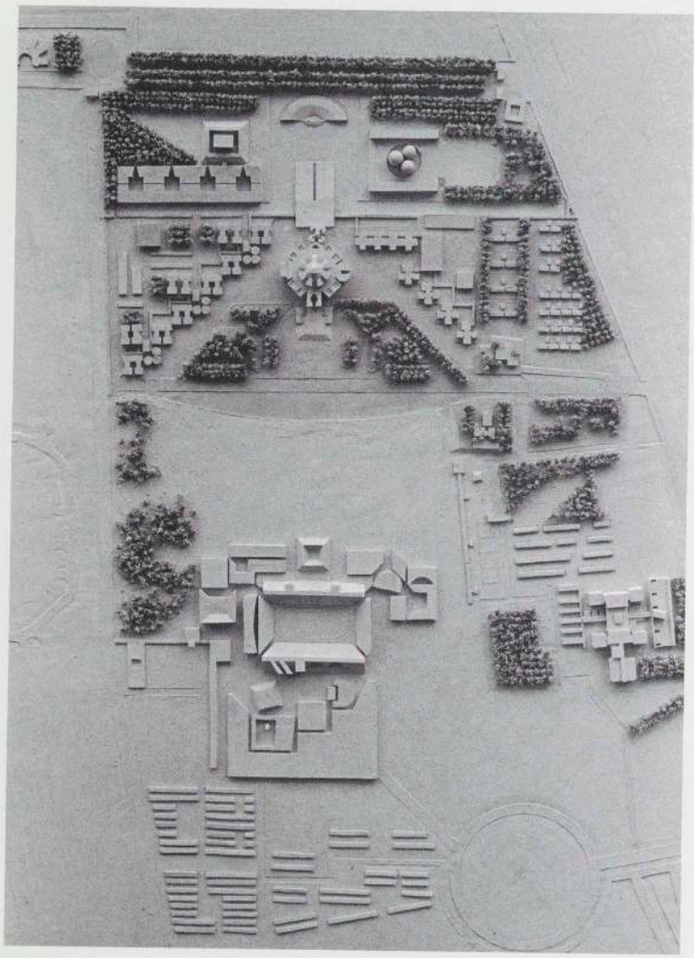

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hierarchy and figure. Even in his most monumental effort, the parliament building at Dacca, which occupies the central point of an essentially symmetrical axial urban composition, Kahn subverted the perception of clear hierarchy of facade and entry by rotating the complex forty-five degrees and repeating a series of almost identical architectonic masses around the central assembly hall, giving it a sense of equal weight in all directions.

Kahn's emphasis on seriality was shared widely in this period, especially in the work of architects such as Aldo van Eyck. While he and others were much concerned with creating a sense of place and human scale and, like Kahn, had a strong interest in primitive vernaculars, they focused on a free, picturesque arrangement of repetitive units and continued to take a prohibitive attitude toward axiality, monumentality, and figural articulation.

But the false linkage between centrality, monumentality, and a reactionary social order so prevalent, especially in Europe, until recently is no longer convincing for a generation for whom the loss of place, center, identity, and communality has been much more critical. Equally critical has been the problem of how to find an authentic way to bring back centrality and figure without resorting to historical pastiche, in other words, how to convincingly separate these paradigms from the styles or parodies thereof.

Lost in the late 1960s debate stirred up by *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* by Robert Venturi, whose ideas were best demonstrated by the house for his mother, was that house's reaffirmation of a strong figural presence. While it was seen as demonstrating how one establishes an order only to subvert it to accommodate the realities of the program, its single most far-reaching influence may very well have been the gestalt of its strongly figural front facade, split apart at the center. It broke the unspoken prohibition on articulation of figure as well as the prohibition on direct stylistic quotation, an issue it flirted with. And while the house's progeny, so to speak, tended in the direction of a literal stylistic revival, its influence was also to have an important effect on Botta, first tentatively in the house at Manno of 1975, subtly in the house at Ligornetto (pages 26–27) of 1975–76, and more overtly in the house at Pregassona (pages 30–31) and the project for a house at Caviano, both of 1979.

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Louis Kahn
Parliament Building, Dacca, Bangladesh
1962–74
Front facade
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Louis Kahn
Parliament Building, Dacca, Bangladesh
1962–74
Site plan
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Aldo van Eyck
Children's Home, Amsterdam, Holland. 1960

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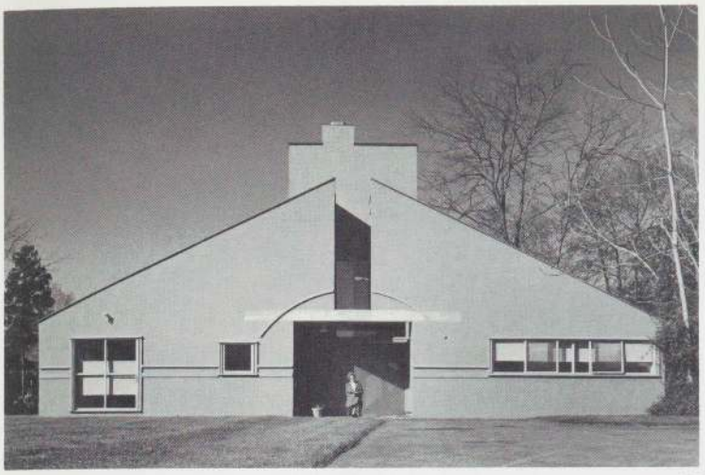

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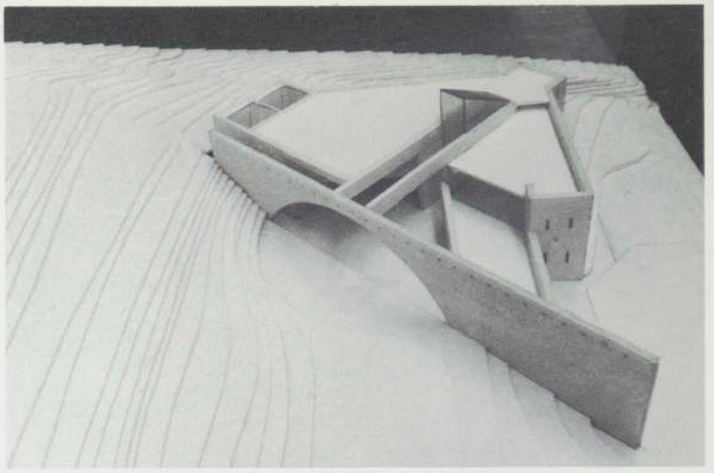

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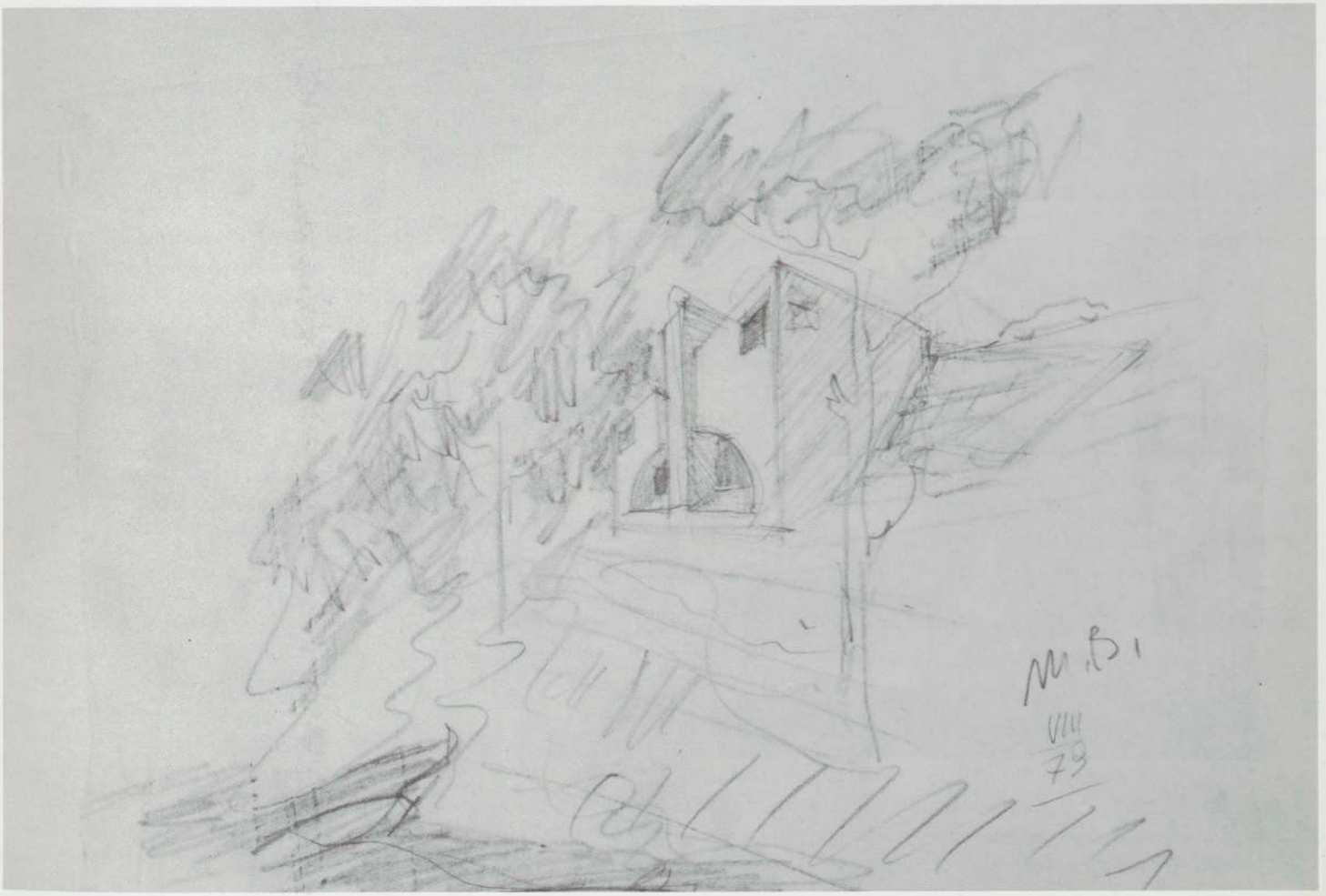

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Venturi and Rauch
House, Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania. 1962
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Mario Botta
House, Manno, Switzerland. 1975
Project: model
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Mario Botta
House, Caviano, Switzerland. 1979
Project: sketch

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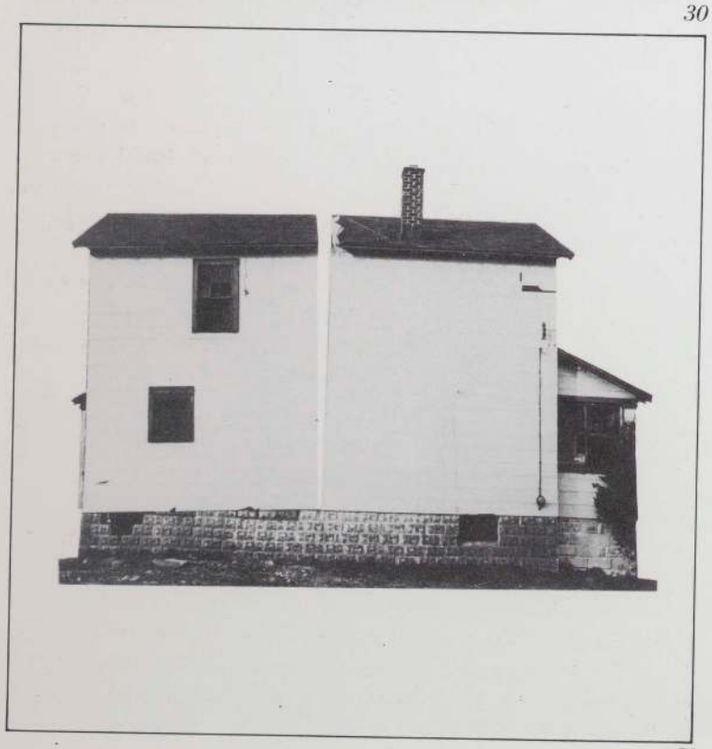

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SITE
Best Products Showroom, Arden Fair Mall
Sacramento, California. 1976–77
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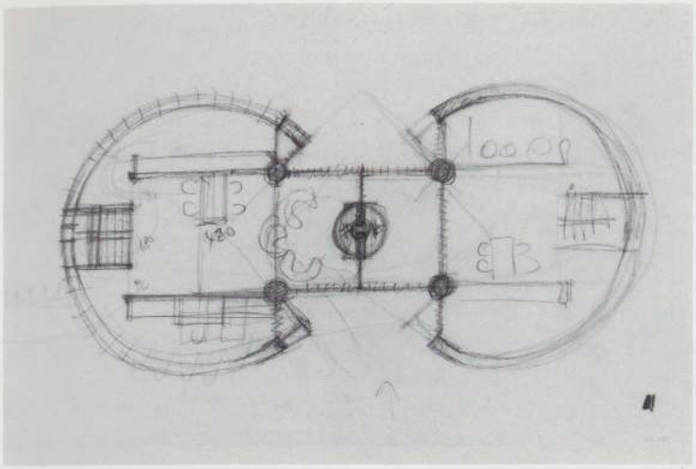
Gordon Matta-Clark
Splitting. *1974*

The evolution we see in Botta's architecture from the studied asymmetry and seriality of his early work to the strong articulation of center and figure is not an isolated phenomenon. What remains unique to Botta, however, is that there is an internal consistency and logic to this evolution. He remains true to his modernist vocabulary and achieves a consistency between plan and facade within that context, avoiding pasted-on facade motifs or eclectic *poché* plans. In the process, he has broadened the range of expression of the modernist tradition.

In openly asserting a strong symmetrical image, or figure, on his facades Botta provides, in a straightforward way, a sense of the symmetrical order of the building. This makes his work quite different from that of Le Corbusier and Kahn and places it closer to a more traditional classical ordering system, as can be seen at the library at Villeurbanne (pages 54–55). Botta's figures make no pretense at being functionally derived; they are there to provide coherence to the architectural order and an identity to the building. In addition, their symmetry provides a fundamental point of reference to the human body.

But while Botta appropriates a classical ordering system, he does not allow himself to be locked into any rigid schema or pompous overdramatization. The entrances to his houses remain modest, as does the vertical circulation, which on occasion, as at Viganello, breaks away from the axial order. Living spaces remain modest and subordinate to the organizing focal point be it a two-story terrace or a skylit slot of space.

While the figural quality of Botta's work has been discussed here and elsewhere, notably by Christian Norberg-Schultz, the character and themes of these figures, which give his work a special tension, have not been explored. Today, the new classicists appropriate the classical model as figure, the postmodernists appropriate stylistic fragments as figure, and the neorationalists utilize a distilled version of the historical type as figure. Botta's figures, on the other hand, do not have any such clear historic lineage. Classicizing in their affirmation of a strong central symmetry, many of the facades with their cut vertical slits or stepped cutout voids as entrances echo, by inversion, grand entrances of the past. But these configurations go beyond being merely abstracted negatives of past models. They evoke their own associations and derive their power from a carefully orchestrated formal tension.



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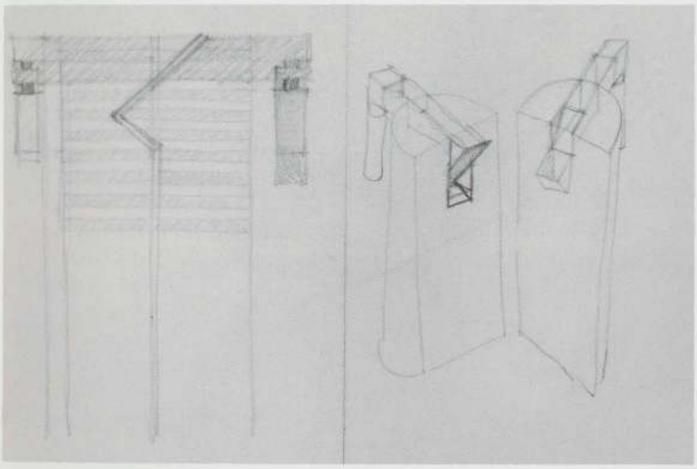

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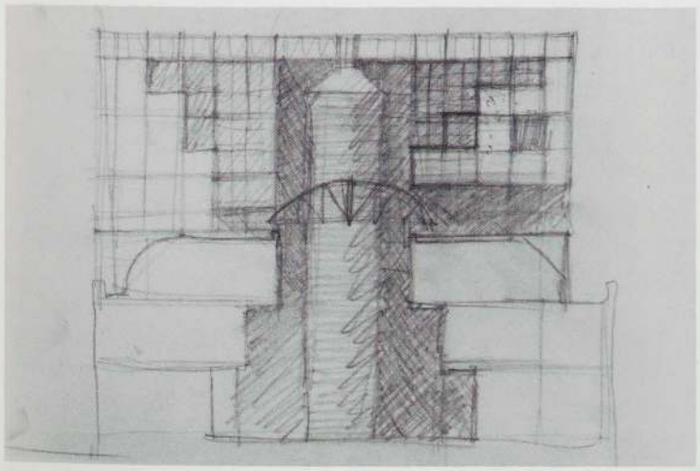


34

32
Mario Botta
Two-family House, Bosco, Switzerland. 1985
Project: sketch plan
33
Mario Botta
Design of water and wine pitchers for Alessi
1985
34
Mario Botta
Second Office Building, Lugano, Switzerland
1985
Sketch

The vertical slit which often marks the center of Botta's buildings reads equally as a fissure. This ambiguous reading reflects a built-in tension in the articulation of the buildings themselves between unity and fragmentation. The stepped, cantilevered massing at Pregassona or the jagged, zipperlike treatment of both sides of the split entry facades of the Bank of Gotthard suggest both violent fissure and its opposite, attraction. And the sense of parts cut out and removed, leaving forms precariously balanced, as at Pregassona, echoes a more ambiguous and complex cultural association with ruins than that of Kahn. Within the context of his architectural constructs, Botta has subtly built in a sense of a cultural condition that has parallels in some of the work of SITE, in a more amusing fashion, or in the work of artist Gordon Matta-Clark, in a more sinister fashion, in projects such as *Splitting*, where he literally cut an old house in half. Although they have been seen by some as small, modern, middle-class versions of Andrea Palladio's villas because of their axiality and monumentality, Botta's houses (and buildings) are far from the harmonious wholes projected by Palladio. While they clearly address some of the same issues and give dignity to the act of habitation, they also touch deeper and more complex psychological issues in our culture: our desire for order and oneness, but also our sense of, and fear for, the precariousness and fragility of that order.

A gentler and more organic variation on the theme of unity/duality also appears in Botta's work, as exemplified by the project for a two-family house at Bosco of 1985. Here the two circular plan elements appear to have separated, suggesting an amoebalike biological splitting. A charming variation on the same theme, and echoing not separation but coming together in unity, is Botta's design project for water and wine pitchers, which when brought together form a circular whole with their respective spouts fitting one above the other.

In Botta's round house at Stabio of 1980–81 (pages 32–33) the south facade suggests a fissure more like the cracking of a shell, with the central fragment cradled by the two symmetrical halves. On the north facade the semicylindrical stair tower enveloped by the split-apart cylindrical shell evokes the coupling of male and female forms. A still-unbuilt second office building project for Lugano similarly pursues erotic imagery, but like the round house at Stabio, ambiguously suggests the stair tower as a colossal structural column as well.

While on one level the figural quality of Botta's work engages psychological and cultural issues, on another level, his buildings engage the physical context and provide a discourse between his houses and the changing landscape, his buildings and their urban surroundings, and finally his urban design projects and their own internal context, as that context has evolved in his work from the beginning of his practice to the present.

The beautiful Ticino landscape provides one context for Botta's domestic architecture, but in many cases there is another context less benign. Ironically, while the interiors of his houses cultivate the modernist open plan, the exteriors cultivate almost fortresslike solid walls. These houses turn inward and upward. Built-in terraces act as mediating spaces to the outside world; skylit central slits carry the eye up. In this respect Botta is unlike the pioneers of the modern movement who dematerialized exterior walls to break down the distinction between outside and inside. It is not hostile nature, wild animals, or roving bandits that have caused Botta to reject the early modern movement's ideal of open communication with nature. Unfortunately, the hostile force the houses guard against is rapacious suburban land development.

However, it would be a mistake to see Botta's thick-walled houses as primarily a defensive stance. In addition to providing a womblike sense of protection, their forms also suggest the possibility of an alternative, more appropriate, and orderly form for human habitation. It is no coincidence that Botta's first house at Stabio also recalled Le Corbusier's Citrohan House, a basic unit of habitation that potentially could be combined in a number of ways to form larger, even dense, communities. That basic idea, the reproducible, combinable unit, underlies almost all of Botta's houses. In fact, at the same time he designed the house at Pregassona (1979) he also produced a project for a series of tightly spaced row houses for Riva San Vitale, using the house as the basic unit. His artisan center at Balerna of 1977–79 (pages 46–47) and his recent row housing at Pregassona (pages 58–59) evidence this concern to create larger communal configurations.

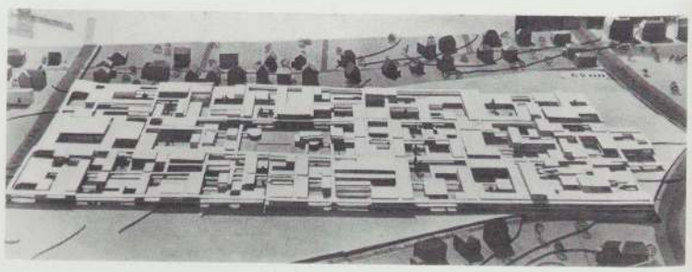
Botta has been criticized for monumentalizing the private house. But this same sense of dignity and monumentality is evident in the individual row-house units which, when combined, form a coherent and harmonious totality. The balance between sense of community and assertion of individual dignity is an important concept in his architecture.

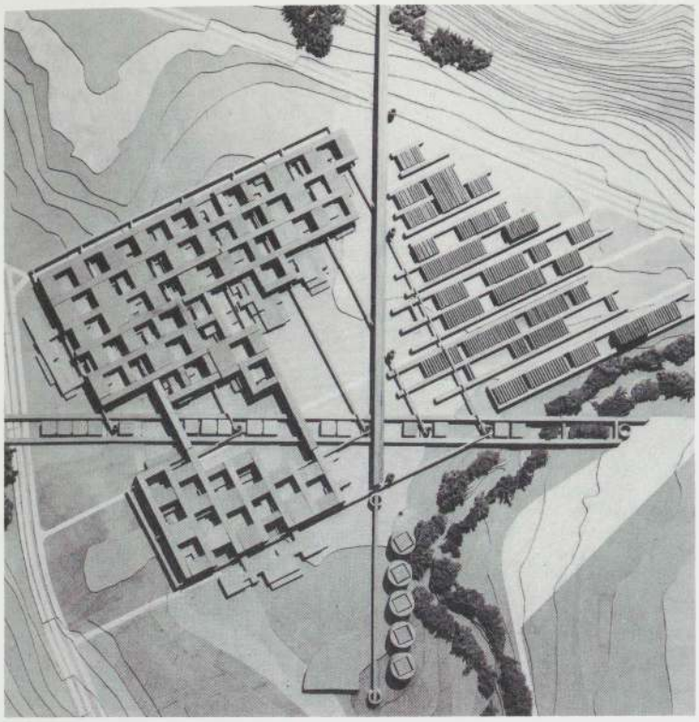
Botta approaches the urban context with the same consideration for appropriate siting and gesture that he shows in the context of the rural landscape. But while his houses suggest a basic critique of continuing suburban development, being most comfortable alone in the landscape or in tighter clusters of similar units, his urban work accepts the traditional urban fabric and texture as a point of departure. In contrast to the futuristic and utopian urban visions of the first generation of modernists or the similarly utopian visions of an idyllic urban past of the current generation, Botta's approach is rooted in present reality. He is sympathetic to the fabric and typology of the traditional city, but nevertheless is at odds with the strict preservationists who wish to repeat exactly the surrounding urban fabric in new developments. His urban responses are dependent on the particulars of context and program. Thus, at the cultural center at Chambéry (pages 52–53) Botta deliberately sets up a strong contrast between the closed, traditional form of the square Napoleonic barracks and his new, curved, modernist theater complex that abuts it. And yet, while highly unorthodox, this juxtaposition is carefully considered, producing a strong resonance precisely because of this tension of contrasts.

To understand the significance of Botta's urban proposal for Turin (pages 62–63), one must see it in relation to his very first large-scale urban competition proposal, the Lausanne Polytechnic master plan of 1970. The transformation in Botta's conception from one project to the other is of major importance, and a fascinating reflection of the change that has taken place over the 1970s and 1980s in Botta's own thinking and in urban design in general.

The Lausanne project, which in fact was sited in the countryside, owes much to the thinking of Shadrach Woods, whose proposal for the Free University of Berlin served as a model. The gridded structure proposed for Berlin sought to emulate the scale of the traditional city and to provide the framework for built form and human activity. The structure was nonhierarchic, with flexibility and expandability as important governing priorities.

Like the Berlin scheme, the Lausanne project consisted of a square grid with "infill" university buildings superimposed on





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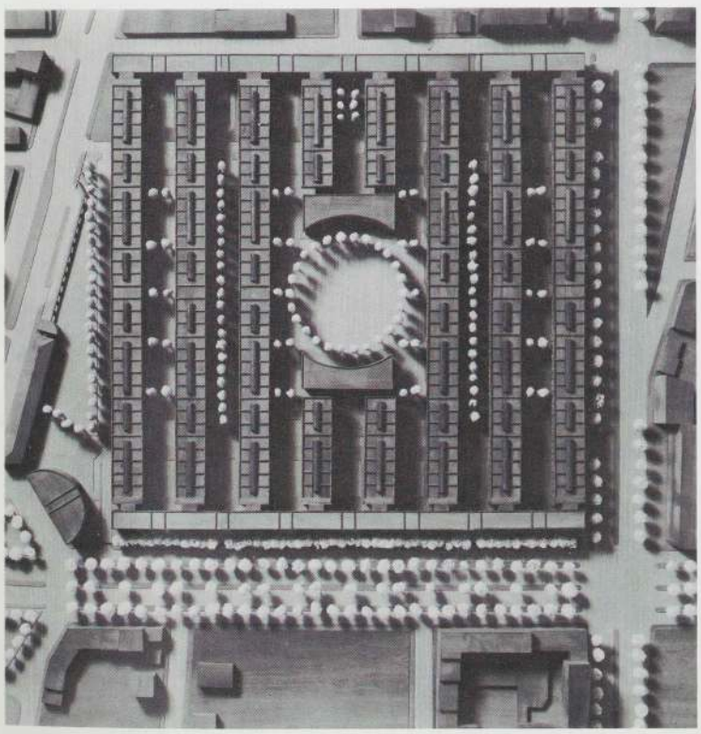


37

35
Shadrach Woods
Free University of Berlin, West Berlin. 1963
Model
36
Mario Botta, with Tita Carloni, Aurelio Galfetti, Flora Ruchat, and Luigi Snozzi
Lausanne Polytechnic Master Plan
Lausanne, Switzerland. 1970
Project: model
37
Mario Botta
Urban Housing, Turin, Italy. 1985
Model

a main cross of circulation at an angle. Where these pedestrian circulation spines cut through the square grid, large areas remained as residual open space, serving as open park area but also space for future building expansion. A third zone of parallel linear laboratory spaces overlapped one edge of the grid.

Given the fact that the programs for Lausanne and Turin are quite different, one may still deduce a major shift in formal conception. What at Lausanne was a nonhierarchic network where activities might be plugged in flexibly has at Turin become a deliberate articulation of center with a clear commitment to an order and hierarchy in the location of built elements—where functions may change over time but the built form provides a permanent order. And what at Lausanne was unarticulated open space has at Turin become the formal, circular public space located at the very center of the scheme.

While Turin is essentially a closed square and, as such, has an almost classical order, it is not composed of traditional urban building types so popular in present-day urban design, but rather of Botta's own variation on modernist urban housing models. While the totality forms an enclosed superblock in plan, in elevation from the ground to the fourth floor the complex is open and permeable. It represents a fascinating and significant experiment in open and closed urban forms, and combines the creation of a sense of center with a modernist open flow of space.

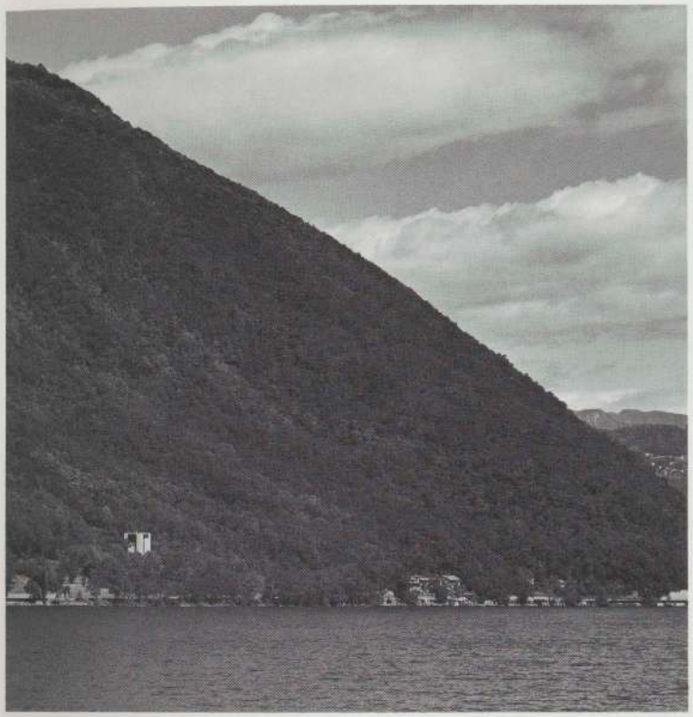
Mario Botta developed as an architect immersed in the modern movement, but like others of his generation, he also became highly critical of how its ideals had been debased and exploited by commercial interests. Even more important, he has been able to approach critically the evolving ideology and theory of the modern movement itself. Unlike many of his colleagues, whose critiques of modernism have led them to abandon it altogether, Botta has continued to work within its context, transforming and revitalizing it in the process. The willingness to experiment, to push for new solutions and syntheses, not blindly but critically, characterizes Botta's work and is part of the legacy of the modernist tradition. As Botta himself has put it, "Building is a fundamentally productive activity; it presupposes a faith in man, in one's work, in the need to express oneself and to bear witness to one's own time in positive terms."

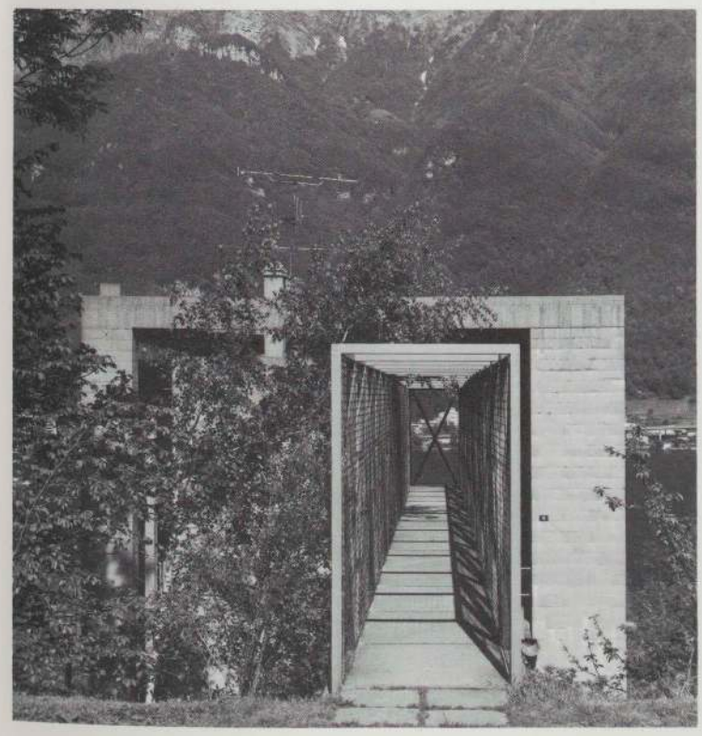
Projects

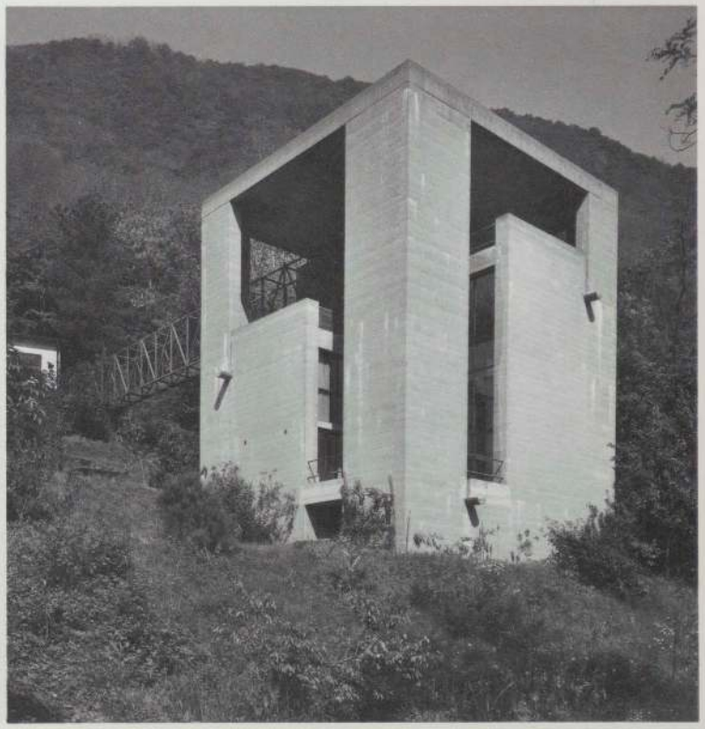
House
Riva San Vitale, Switzerland
1972–73

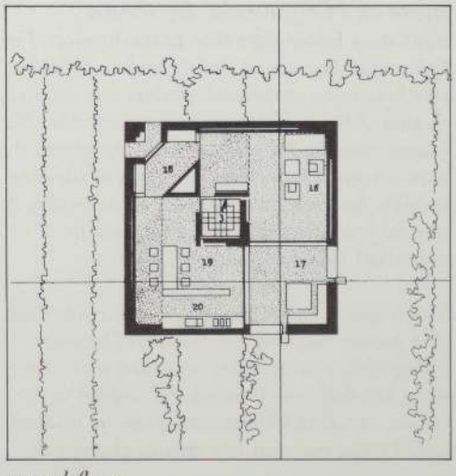
The house at Riva San Vitale, on a sloping site facing Lake Lugano and distant snow-capped mountains, is entered at the upper level via a long steel bridge painted red. The house itself consists of a cubic tower frame with heavy corner pillars built of oversize concrete blocks. The volumes of the various living spaces fill in the frame, starting with one quadrant on the top floor and concluding with three quadrants, four floors below at the living-room level.

Unfilled quadrants provide steplike sequences of exterior terraces. A square staircase located almost at the center of the square plan ties the spaces together vertically. In contrast to the blunt clarity of the massive exterior, the interior is labyrinthine and intimate. Emphasis on the large openings cut into the cubic mass of the house achieves a monumentality similar to that of the local vernacular.









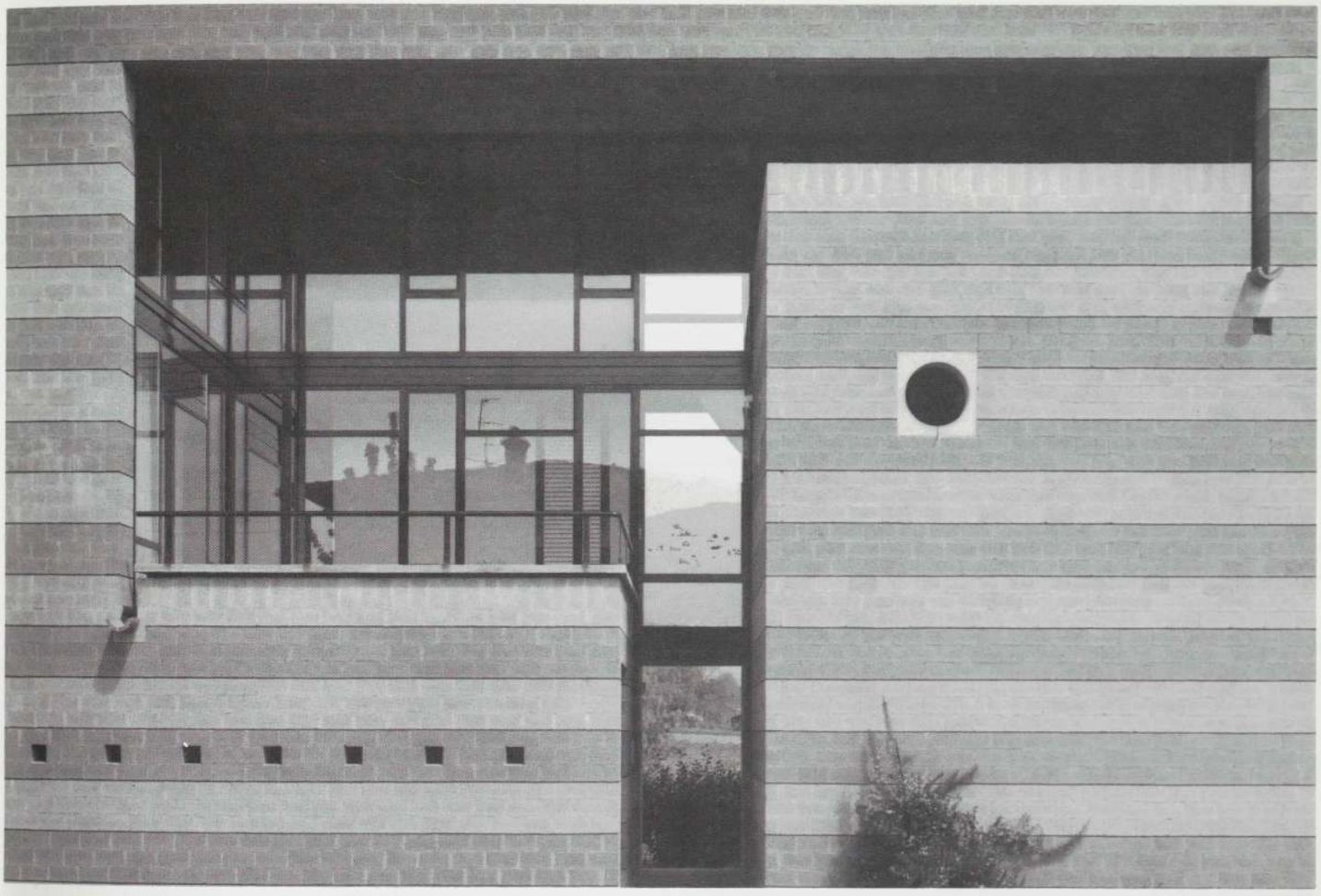
second floor

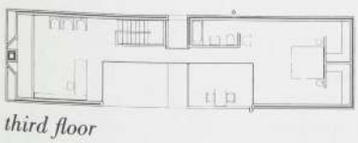
House
Ligornetto, Switzerland
1975–76

Based on a long, narrow, rectangular multistory house type that Botta developed in two earlier houses (at Stabio and Cadenazzo), this house, nevertheless, negates the urban origins of the type by reorienting its axis. No longer running the length of the structure, the axis is turned to pierce the center of the long facade. As such, the house at Ligornetto is the crucial transition to his frontal, axially organized later houses.

The impetus for this inversion was contextual. The house, marking the boundary between village and countryside, acts as a wall. The axial slit that cuts through the middle of the house, creating a bifurcated plan, is bridged only by the roof and two narrow glassed-in corridors connecting across it. A terrace zone is carved out on the south facade on either side of the axial slit. Windows, except for several small porthole openings, are entirely in the inset area.

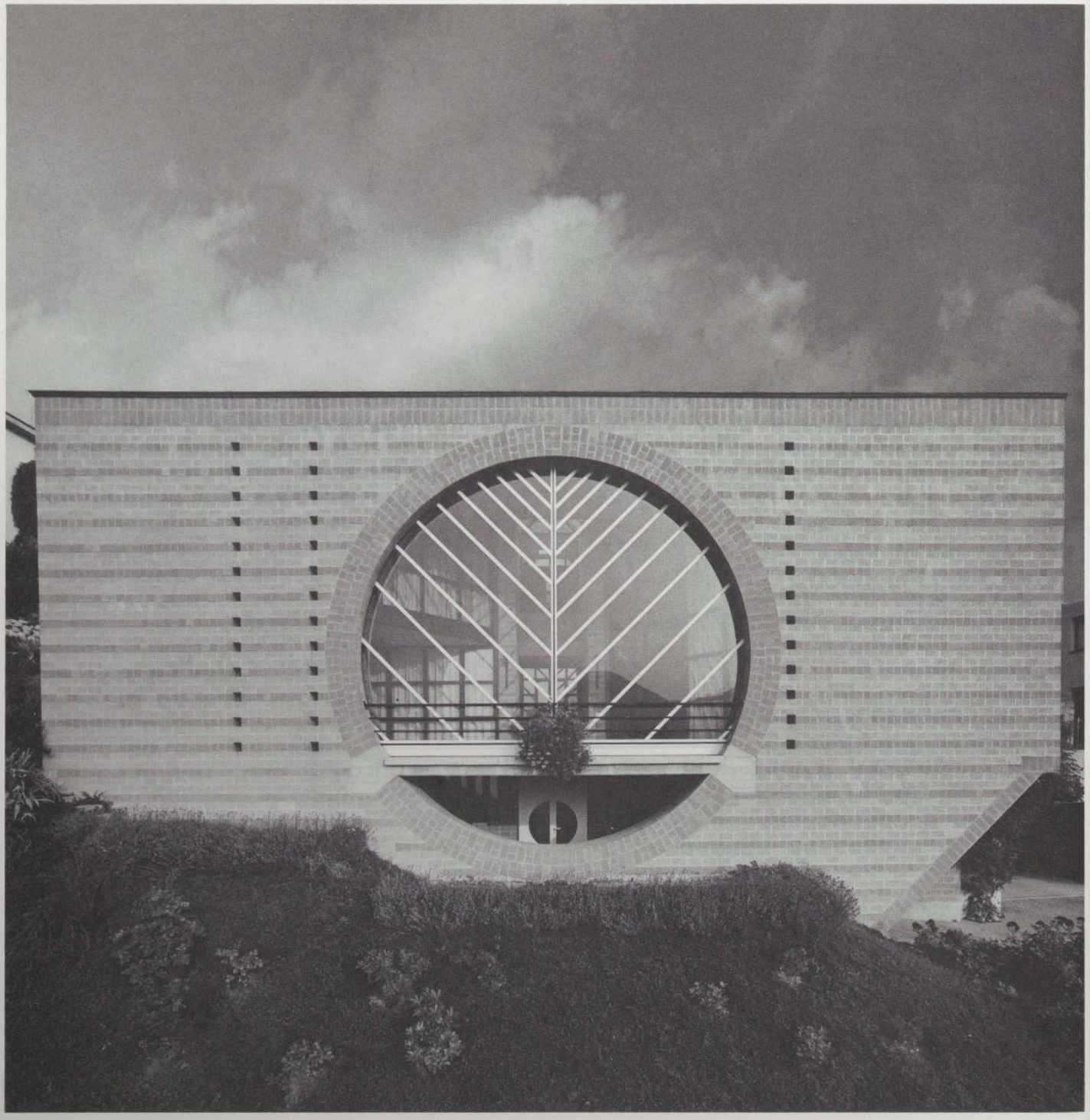
This house sets the pattern for the essentially open-plan interiors of most of Botta's houses, and marks an important jump in their level of craftsmanship and detailing. The banding of the facade with differently shaded concrete blocks, a theme to continue in Botta's work, is introduced here.





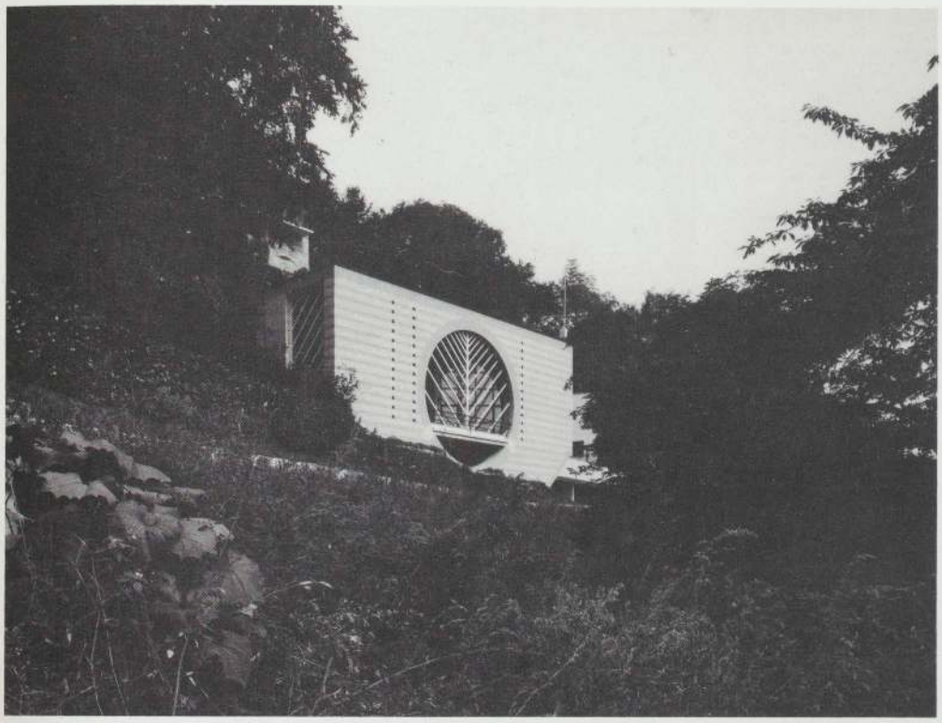
third floor

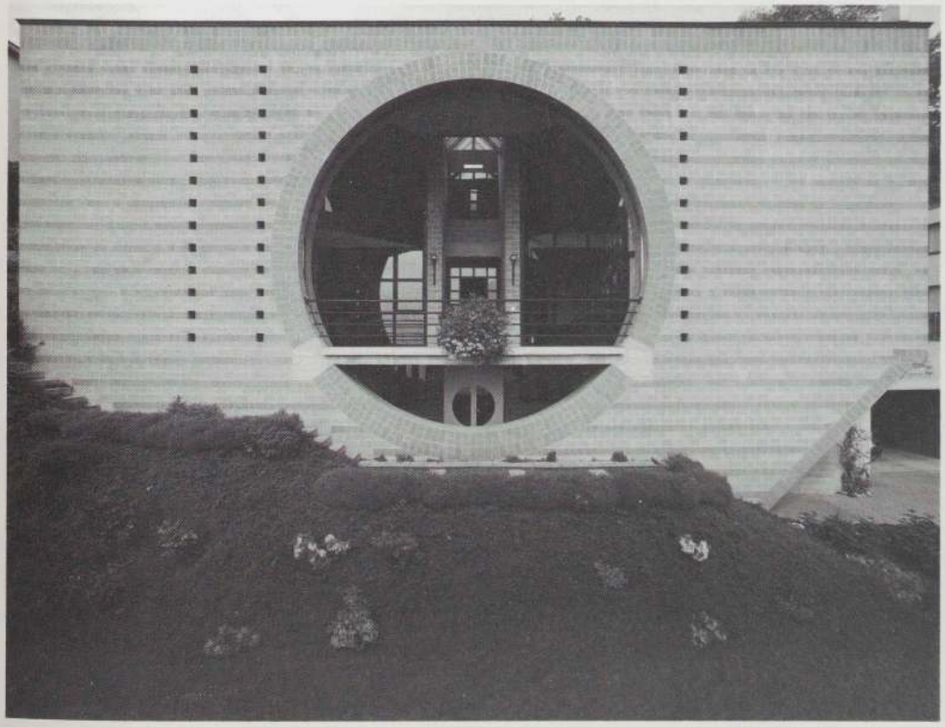
second floor

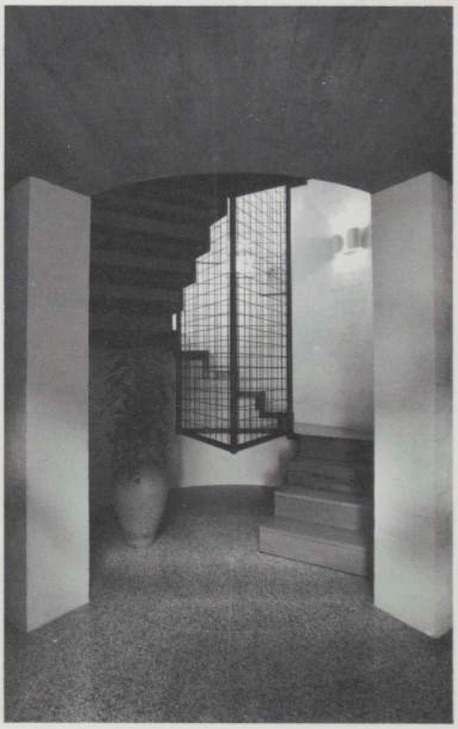


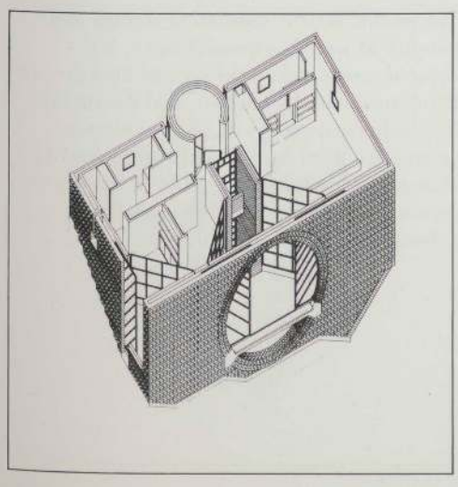
House
Massagno, Switzerland
1979–81

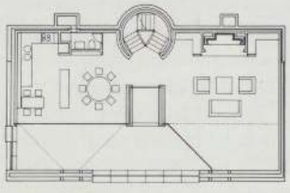
Built on a steeply sloping site, the house at Massagno focuses its giant "Cyclops eye" toward the view to the south. The shallow three-story structure has a triangular terrace wedged into its center behind the circular opening in the front facade. All the living spaces of the house are oriented around the terrace, which can be closed off with huge glass sliding doors held between the double-layered front wall. The circular stair, partly pushed out the rear facade, reinforces the axial organization of the house. Skylights above the stair and the central lightwell spatially tie the three floors together and fill the house with additional light. A chromatic block banding similar to that at Ligornetto gives the front facade a visual richness.



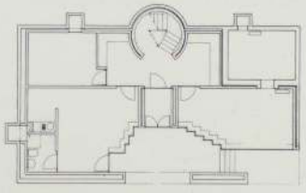








second floor

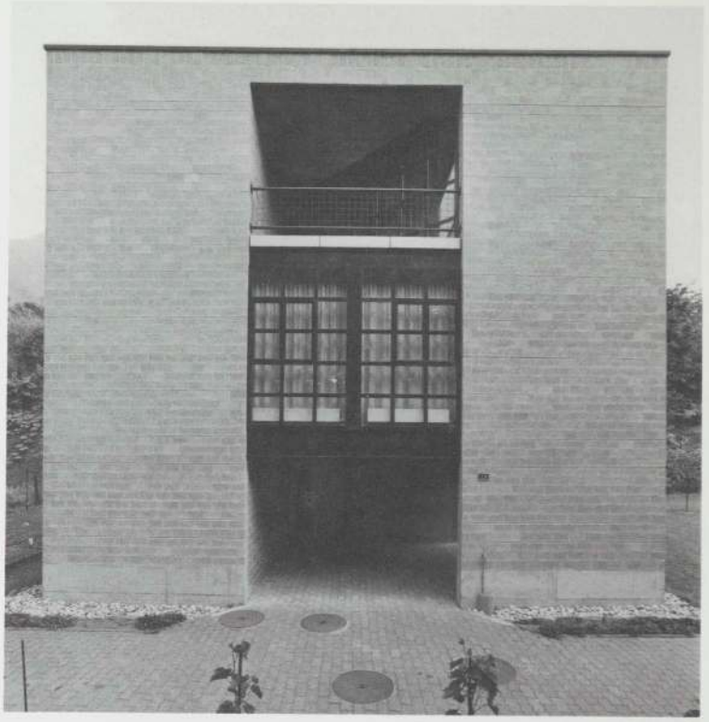


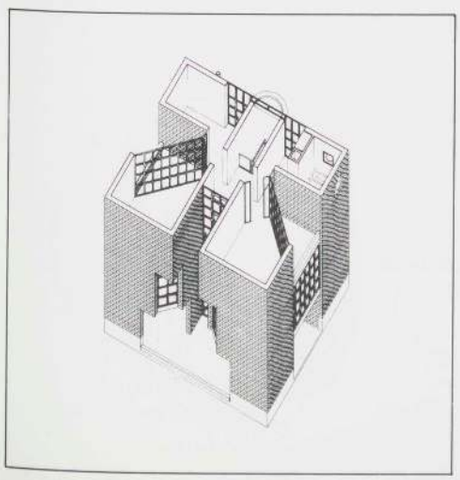
ground floor

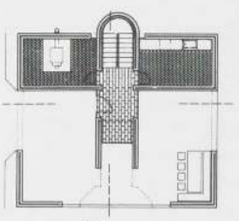
House
Pregassona, Switzerland
1979

Located on a terraced site, this house seems an almost perfect cubic volume, delineated by heavy masonry corners and punctured by areas cut into the volume and by glazing. The entrance facade is defined by a deep vertical slit, capped by a triangular glass roof. This opening steps down in two progressively wider cuts on the second and ground floors. The staircase, the width of the vertical slit, is on axis with it and partly protrudes out the rear facade in a semicircular enclosure.

The ground floor is devoted to storage and laundry as well as extensive open, but covered, areas, while the second floor contains living room, study, kitchen, and dining area. Two bedrooms, each with its own terrace, occupy the third floor. This program, partly elaborated several years earlier at Ligornetto, serves with variations as the basis for subsequent houses as well.







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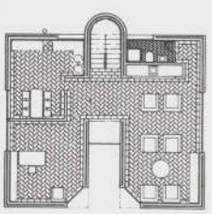
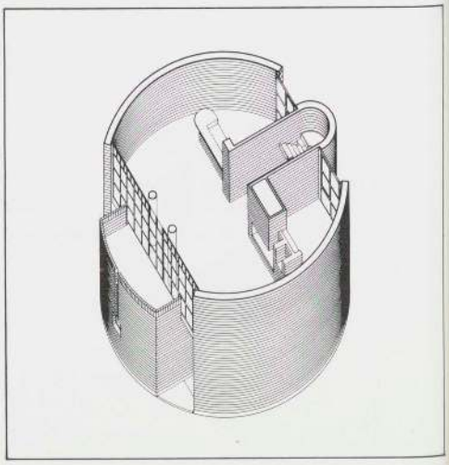
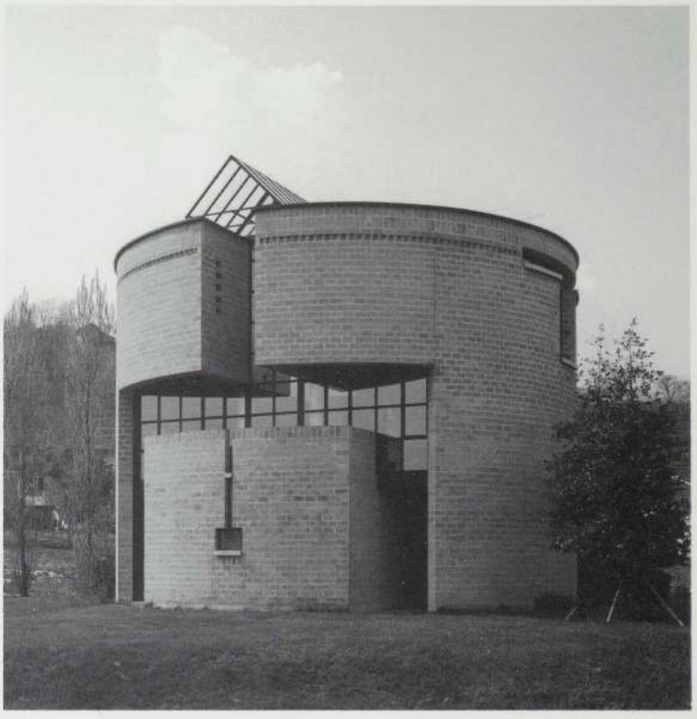


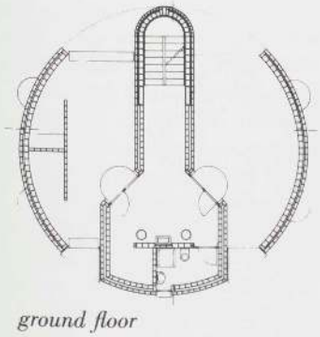
second floor

House
Stabio, Switzerland
1980–81

Built on the edge of a rural field that, unfortunately, is in the process of being suburbanized, Botta's cylindrical house turns in on itself. However, while rejecting any dialogue with the surrounding houses, its richly textured form establishes a strong rapport with the landscape, in particular the curving ridge behind it. A cylindrical variation on the house at Pregassona, the house at Stabio nonetheless embodies some significant differences. The internal vertical slit with its skylight above acts as a unifying spatial element instead of a divider as at Pregassona. The semicylindrical stair on the entry facade appears to have cracked the shell of the house, but also suggests a structural pillar, which, of course, it is not.







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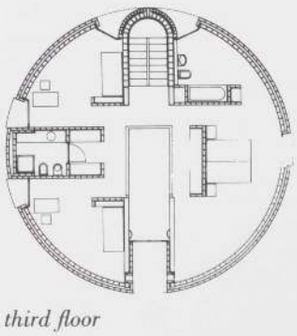
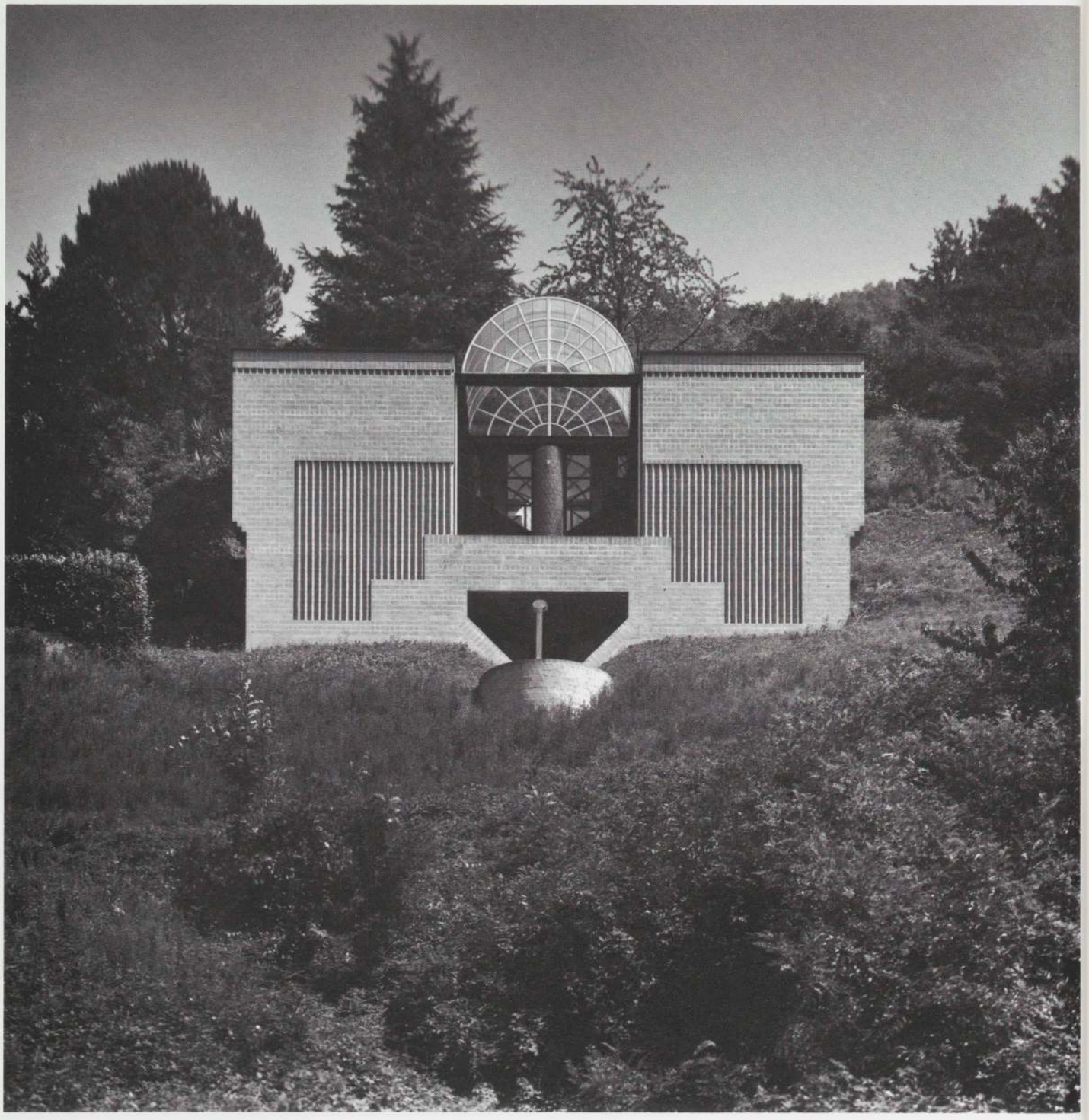
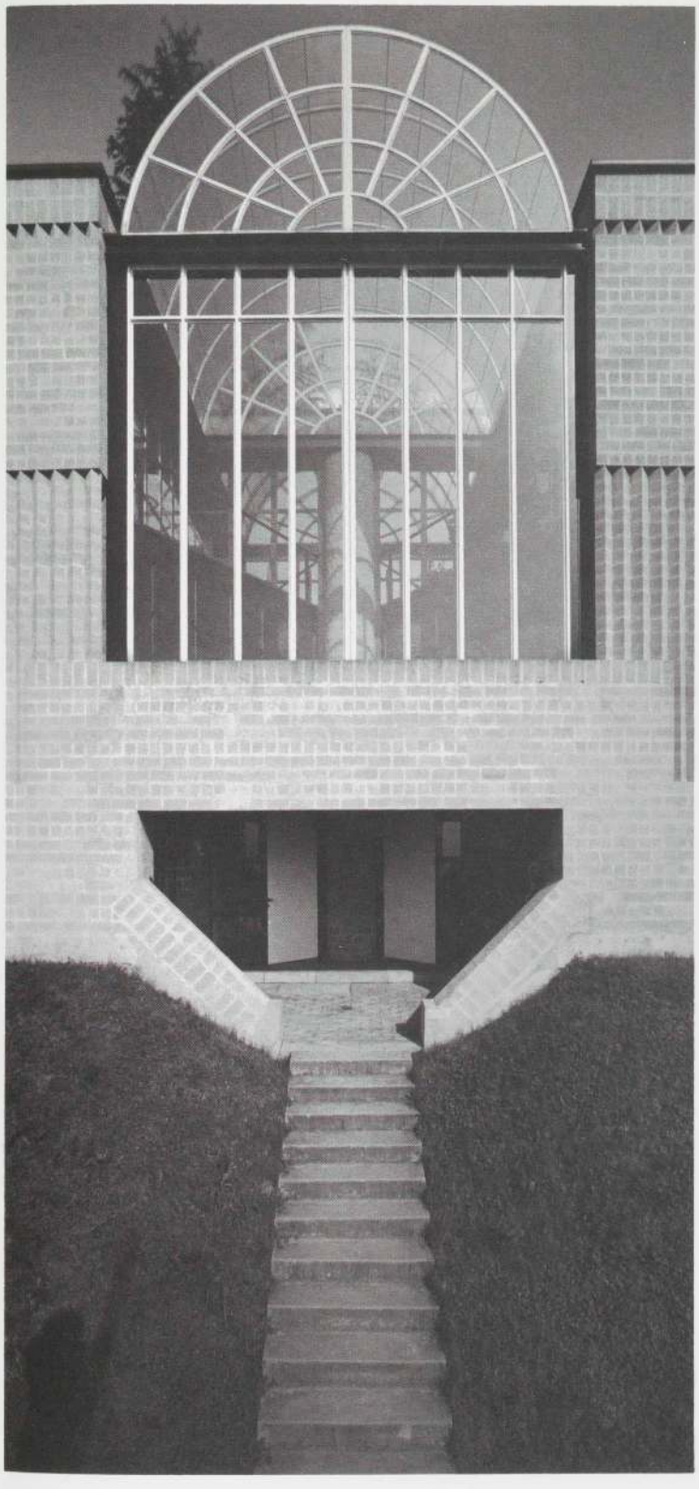


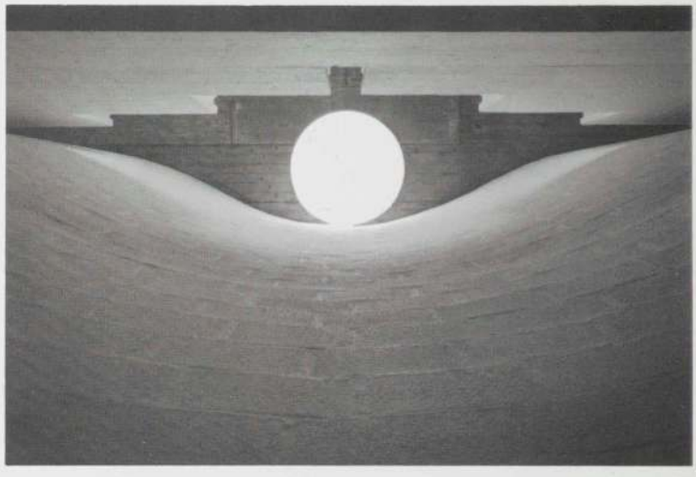
third floor

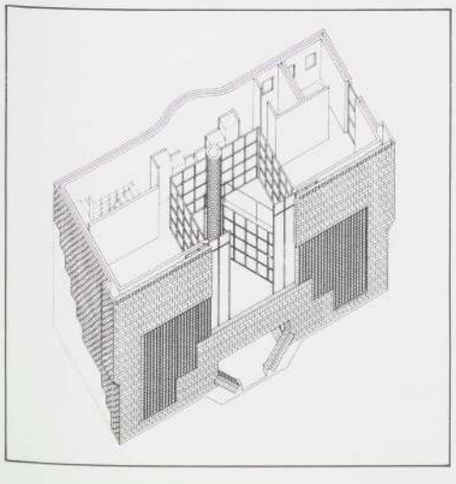


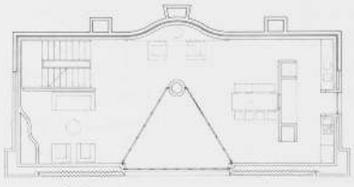
House
Viganello, Switzerland
1981–82

A variation of the house at Massagno, this house is Botta's most classical composition, suggesting itself as a small, latter-day Palladian villa. The memory of a double grand stair suggested by the patterning of the front facade, the wide opening of the inset terrace, and the generous dimensions of the vaulted gallerialike skylight all reinforce this genteel imagery. The thrust of the triangular terrace into the center of the rectangular body of the house sets up the same dynamics as at Massagno, but instead of having a stair push out the north side here the back facade buckles out to accommodate a round skylight. As at Massagno, the plan is similarly open with most of the spaces oriented toward the inset terrace.

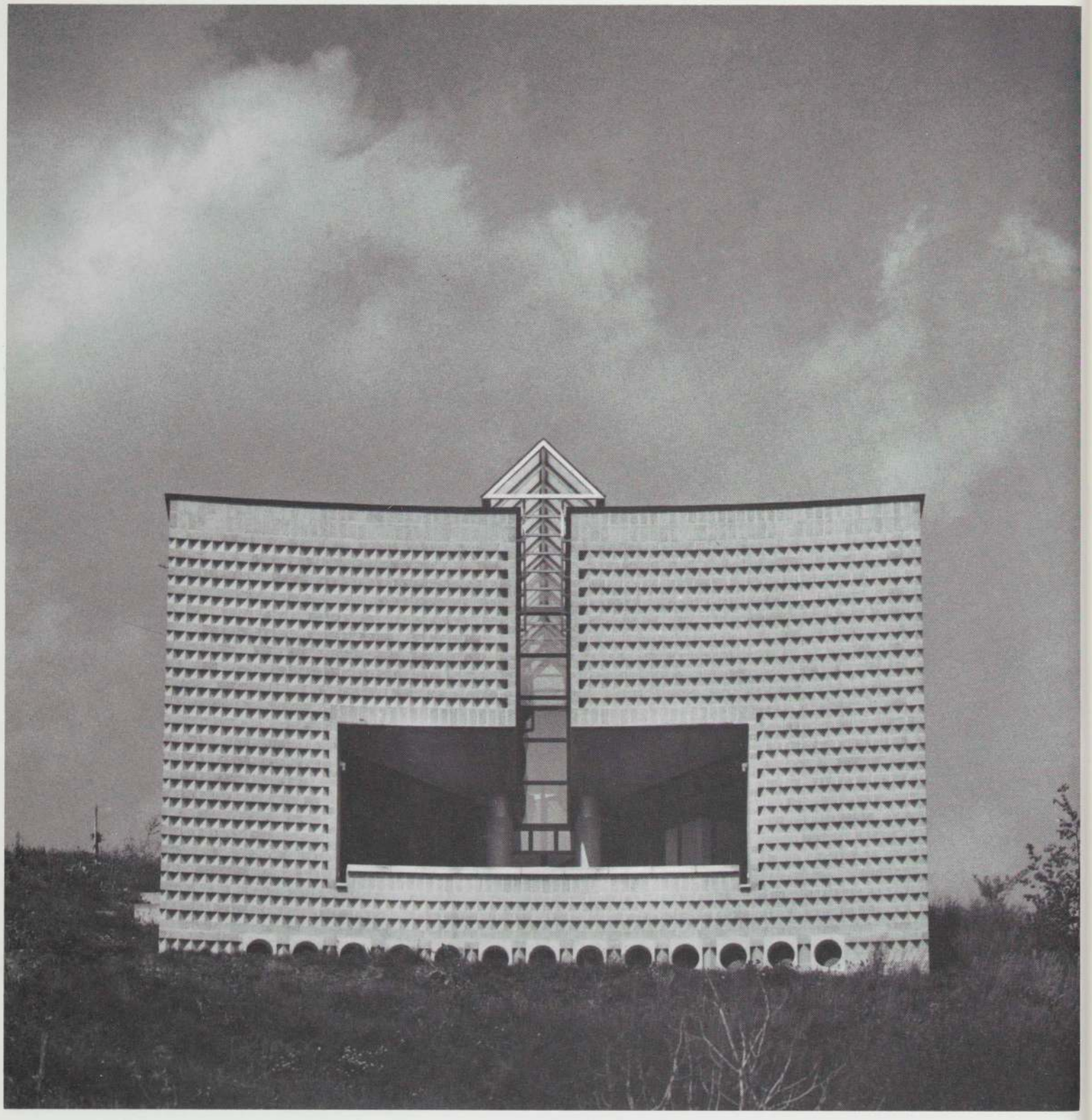








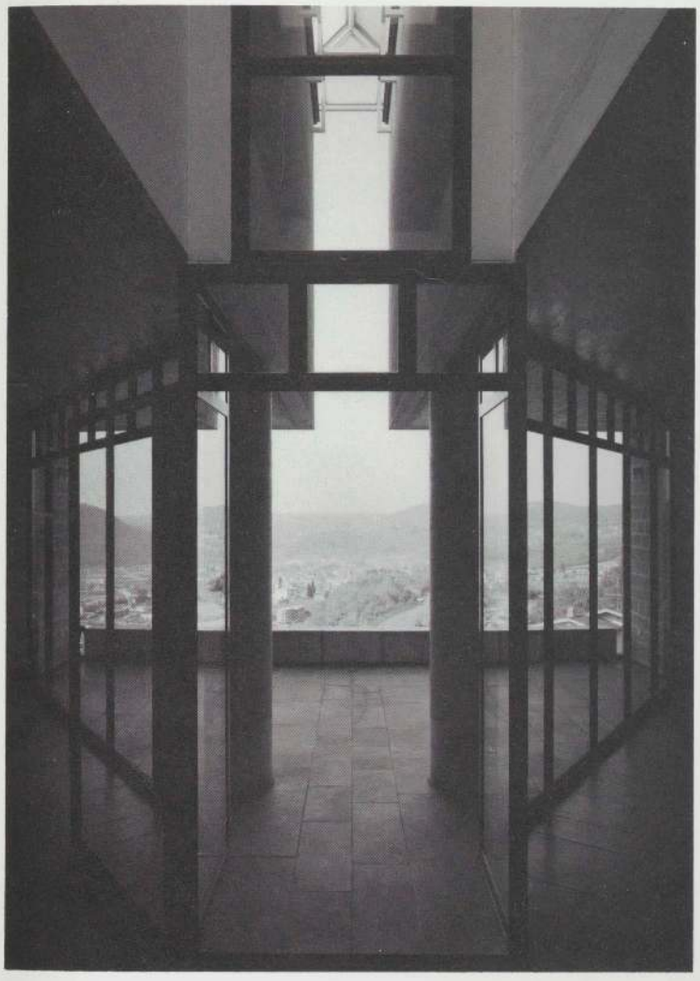
second floor

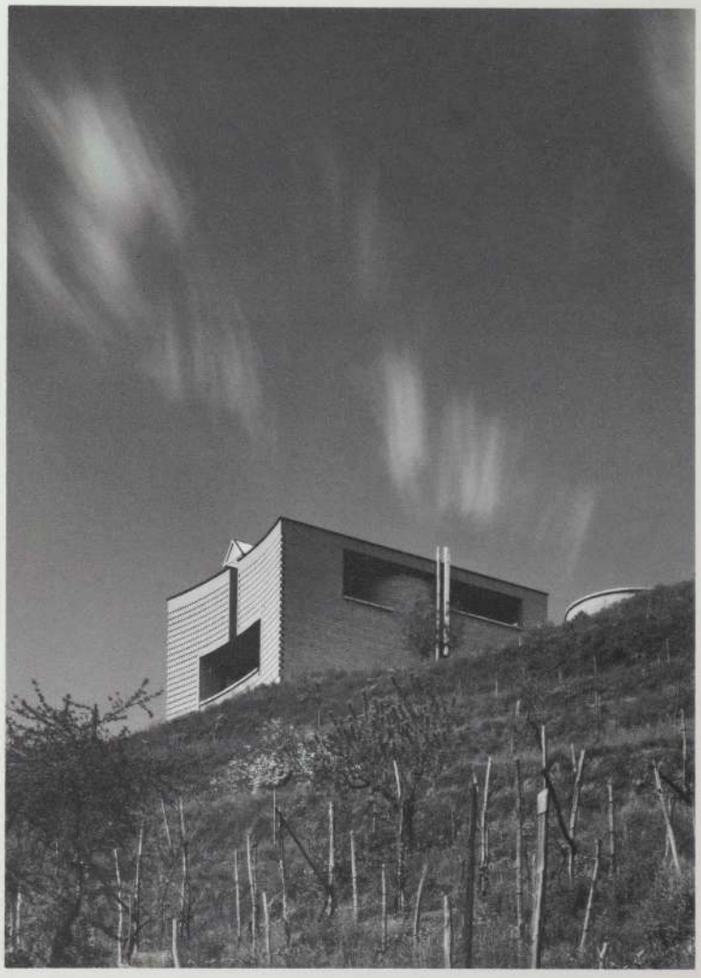


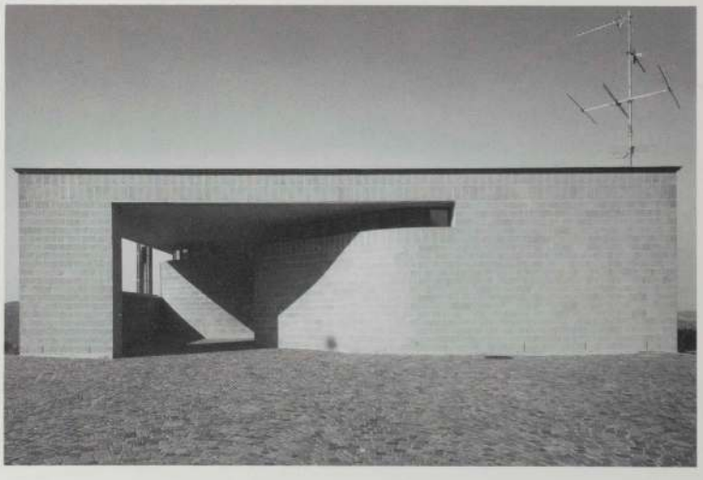
House
Morbio Superiore, Switzerland
1982–83

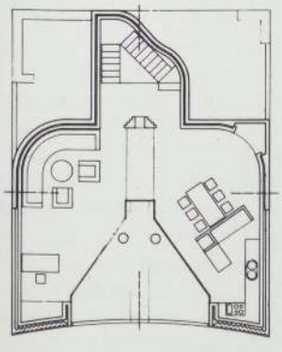
Situated on a sloping site at the edge of a ridge, this house is entered on the top floor and represents an interesting recombination of elements from Botta's earlier houses. A distended square in plan, the house develops an independent, internal, strongly animated composition whose form becomes visible on the top floor, where incised entry and bedroom terraces reveal its shape. This configuration and its square envelope merge on the south facade, whose slight curving inflection seems to have responded both to the contour lines of the site and to the dynamics of the plan.

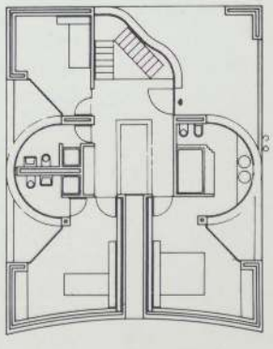
As at Massagno and Viganello, Botta has singled out the south facade toward the view for special treatment. The facade, composed of alternating rows of concrete blocks laid straight and at a forty-five degree angle, becomes richly textured as it responds to the changing light throughout the day. The painting of the angled surfaces with silver paint intensifies the optical effect.



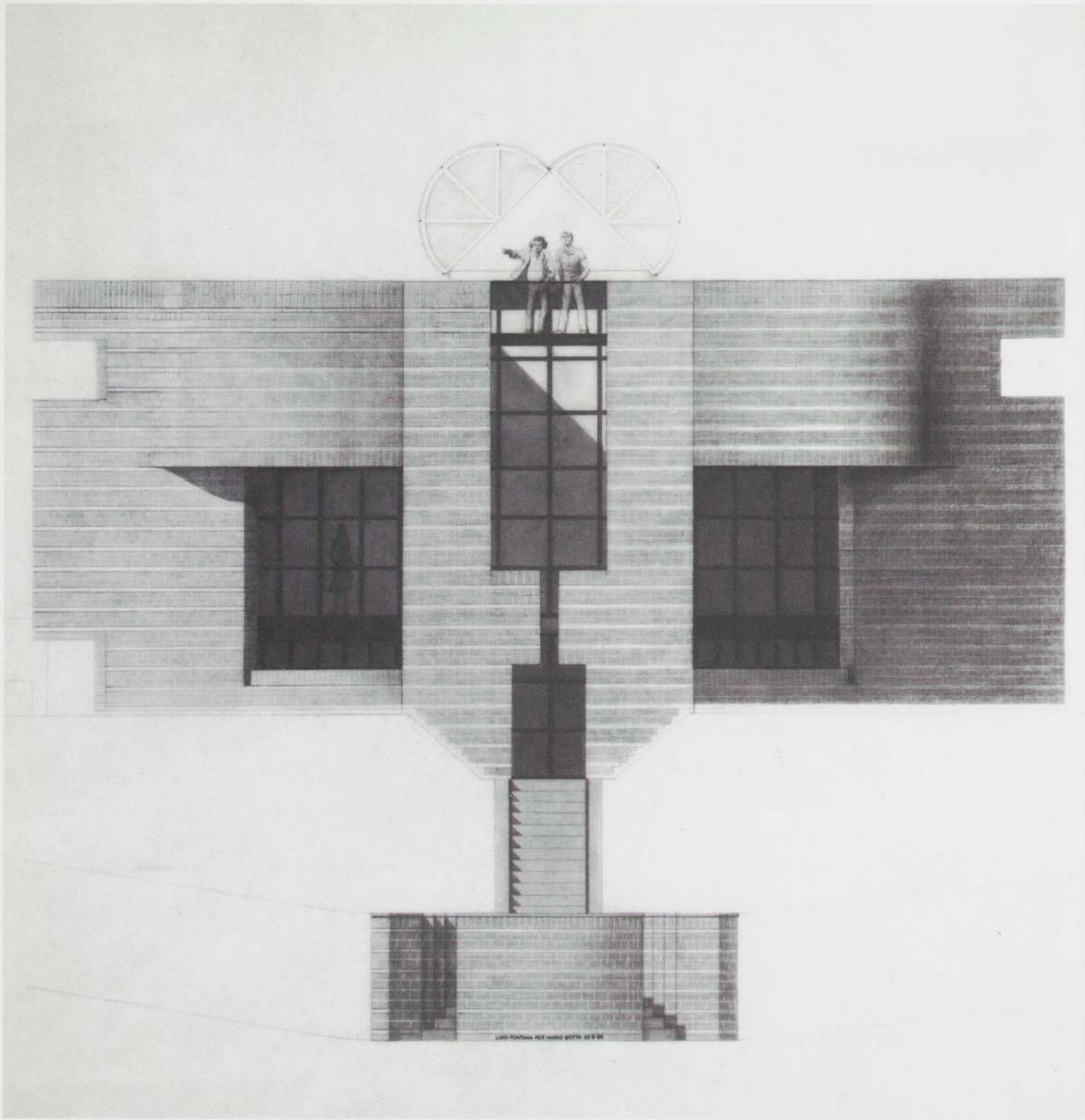






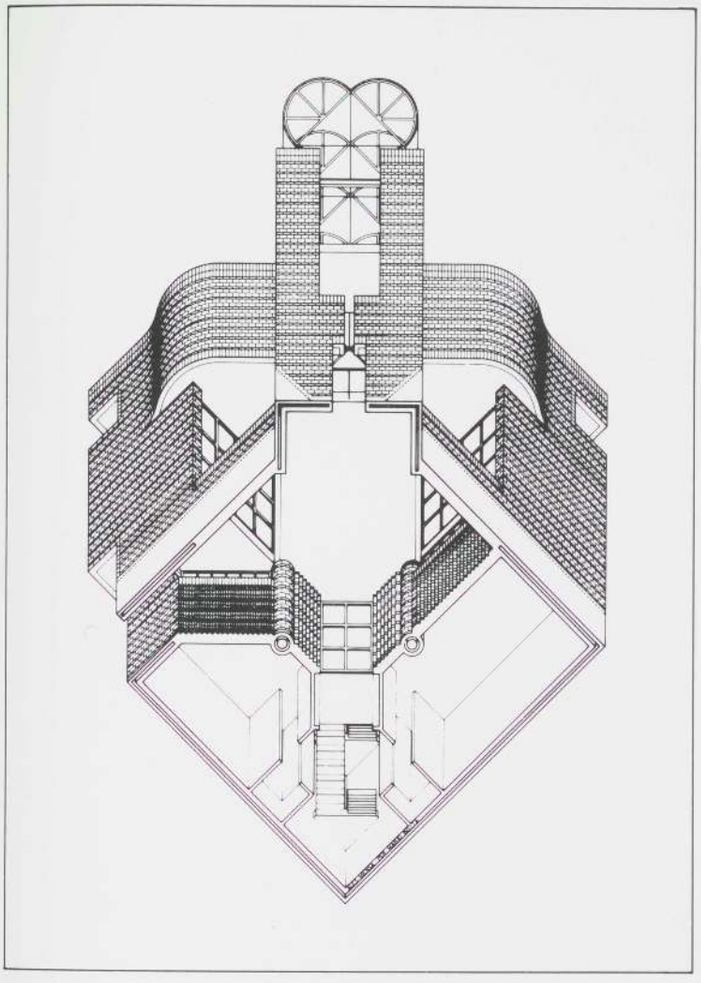


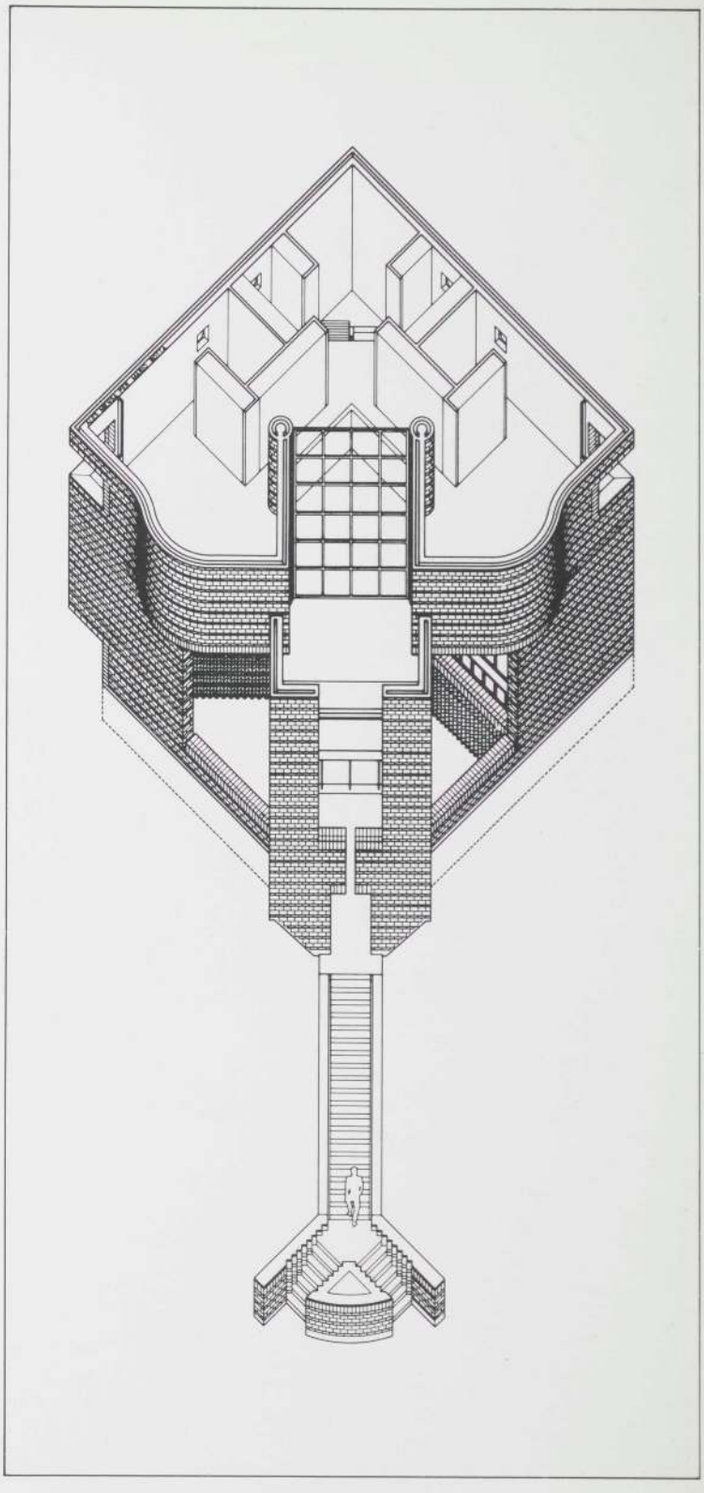
second floor *third floor*

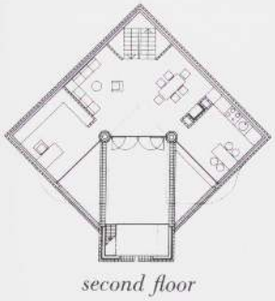


House
Breganzona, Switzerland
1984

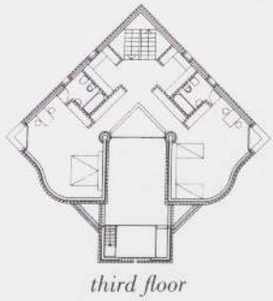
Planned for a corner lot, this house is sited on a level mound with the lawn sloping down to a retaining wall along the street. Access is from the corner at a forty-five degree diagonal, up a set of exterior stairs cut into the earth. Compositionally, this is one of Botta's most complex houses. Essentially an L-shaped house on a square base, it has a large, seemingly independent terrace structure thrust out of its center at a forty-five degree angle. The terrace, with its two corner pillars and split cylinder skylight, provides both a monumental front and covered entry to the building. The third floor, which appears in plan to have been deformed by the thrust of the terrace, mediates between the reading of the house as an L-shape and a square.



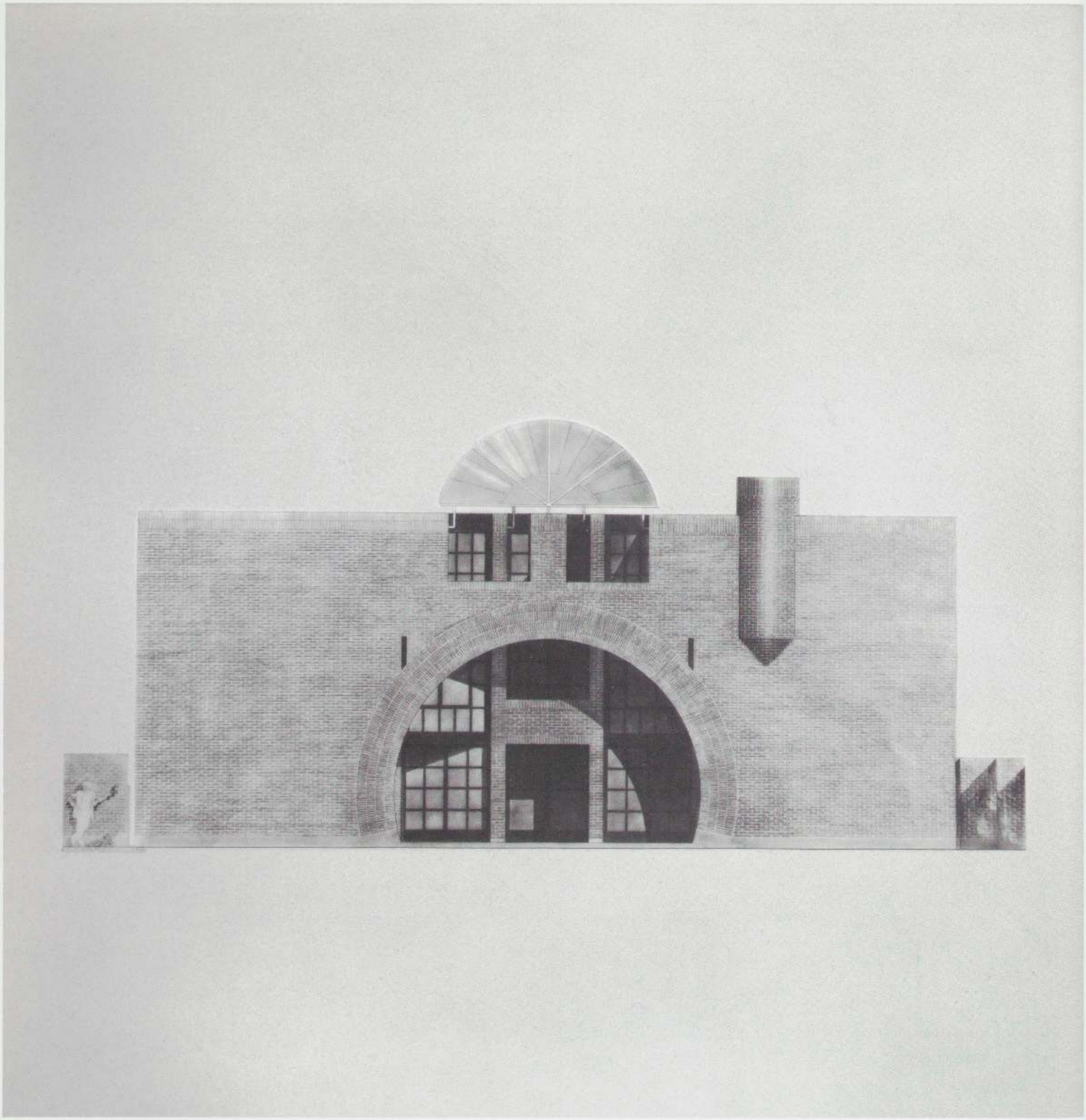




second floor

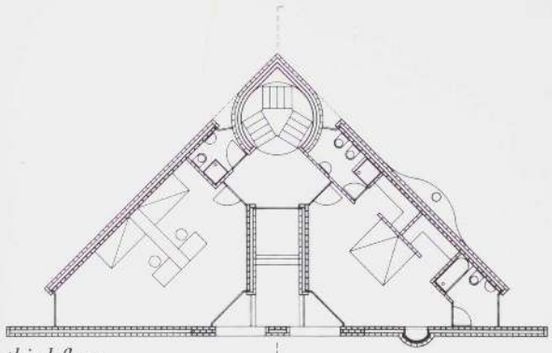


third floor

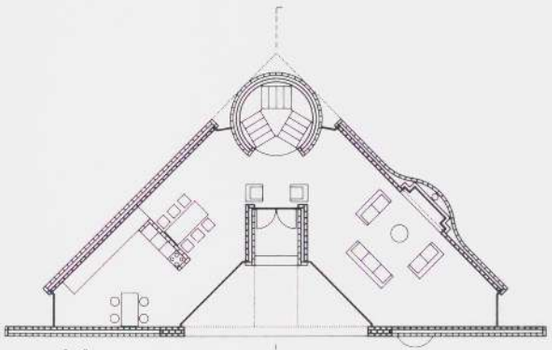


House
Morbio Inferiore, Switzerland
1986

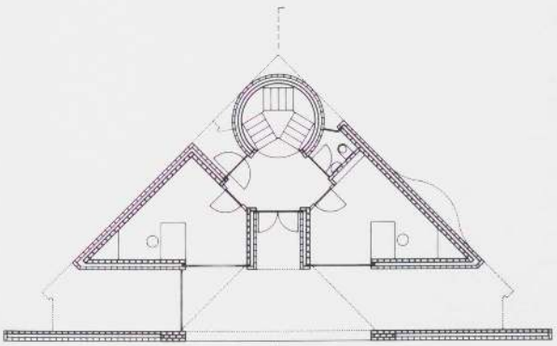
This new project for a house at Morbio Inferiore, like the gallery in Tokyo, explores the permutations of a triangular plan. Occupying the corner of the lot, at the junction of two streets, the house faces into a walled garden. Its siting recalls Botta's earlier project for a house at Manno of 1975. Axially organized, the house, to be built of red brick, has a great arched opening in the center of its long diagonal garden facade. Behind the diagonal facade a *porte cochère* allows access to the main entrance. The circular stairs break open the back corner of the house.



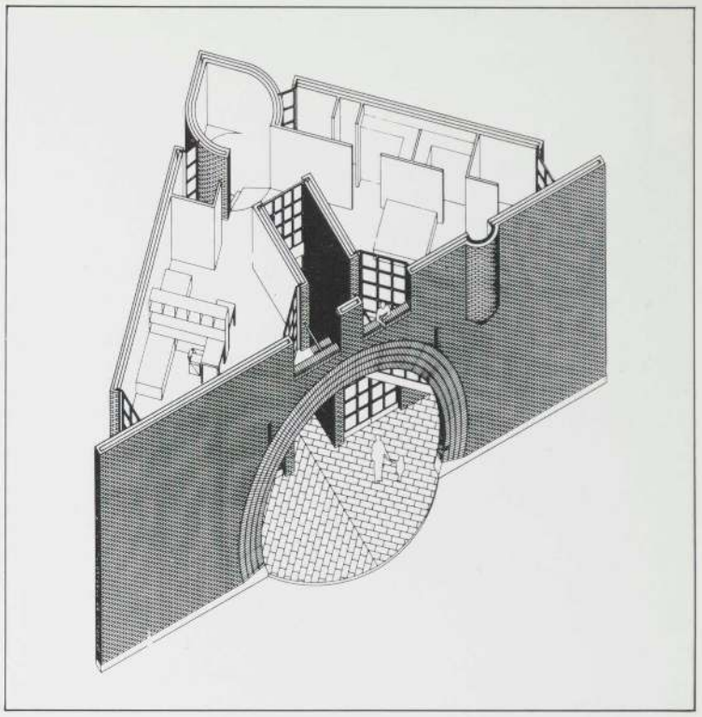
third floor

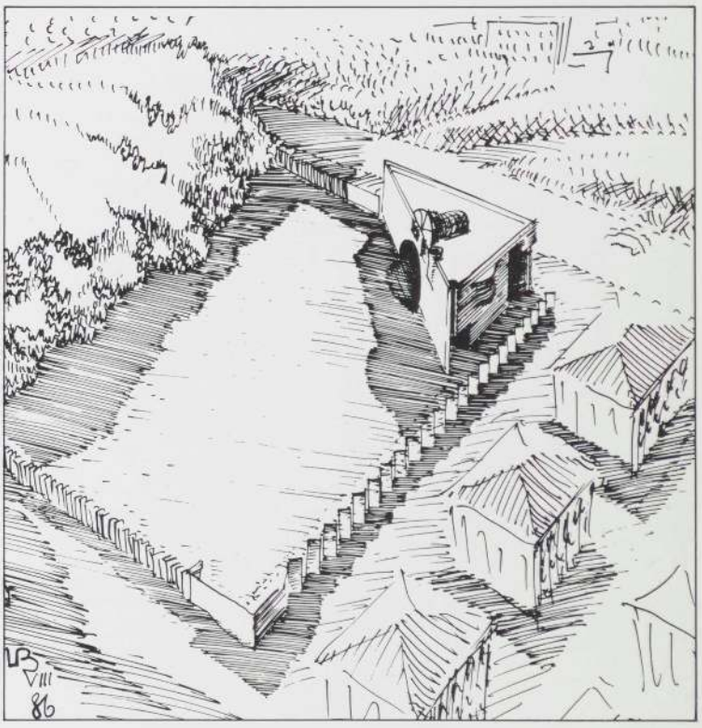


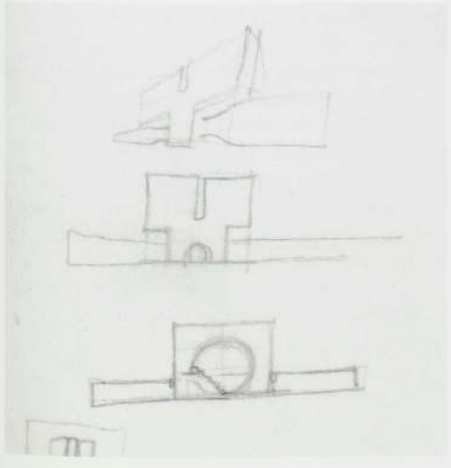
second floor



ground floor



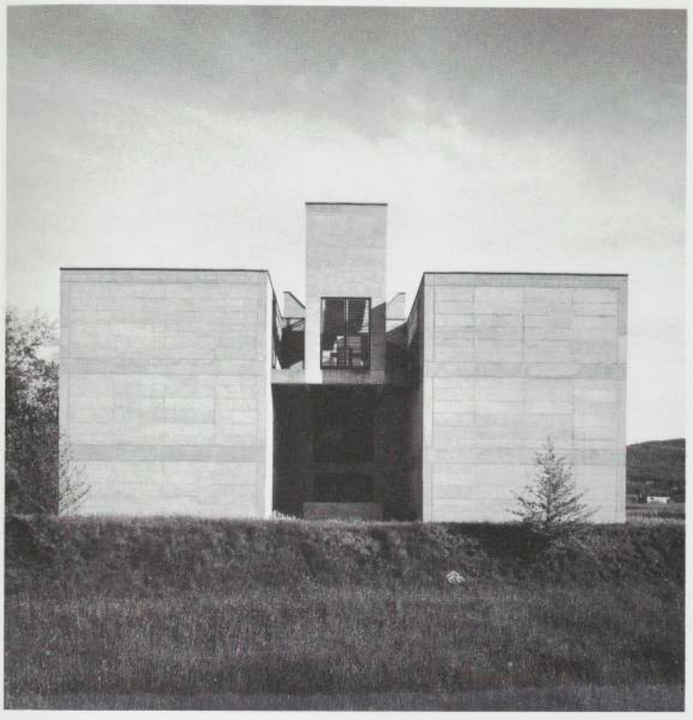


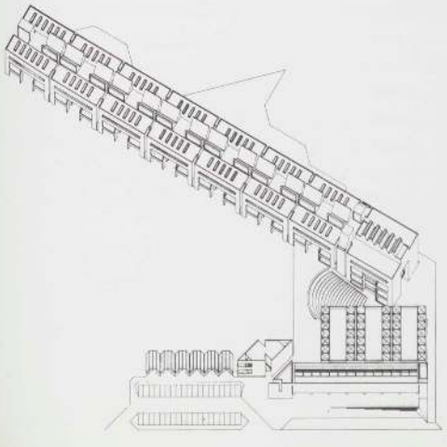


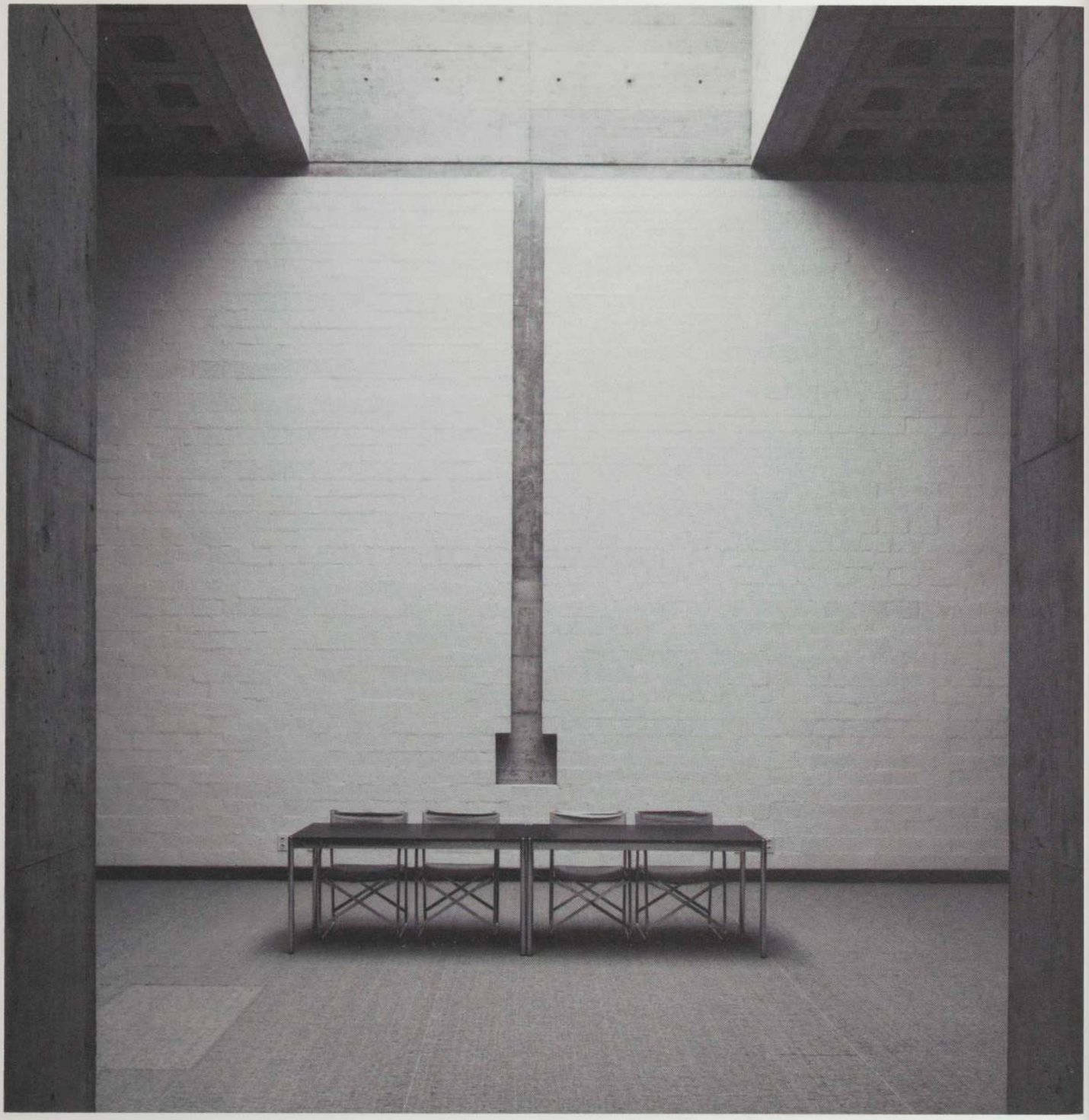
School
Morbio Inferiore, Switzerland
1972–77

This secondary school, the first of Botta's large-scale projects to be built, is the realization of a successful competition entry. Located on an extensive open area surrounded by rolling hills, the structure is divided into distinct elements composed to define a place. These elements are a gymnasium wing, with a long canopied entry, and a caretaker's house, both aligned with the street; and a long classroom wing, splayed at an angle and separate, stretching north–south along the edge of a ravine. An outdoor amphitheater occupies the angle where gymnasium and classroom building meet.

The classroom wing consists of eight classroom–office–laboratory clusters. A central skylit *aula* three stories high runs their full length, essentially functioning as a skewer tying together the eight sections. Stairs and wide bridges break up the relentless length of the space on the first two stories, but at the third story the entire long space can be seen through a series of framed apertures in a remarkable telescopic vista.

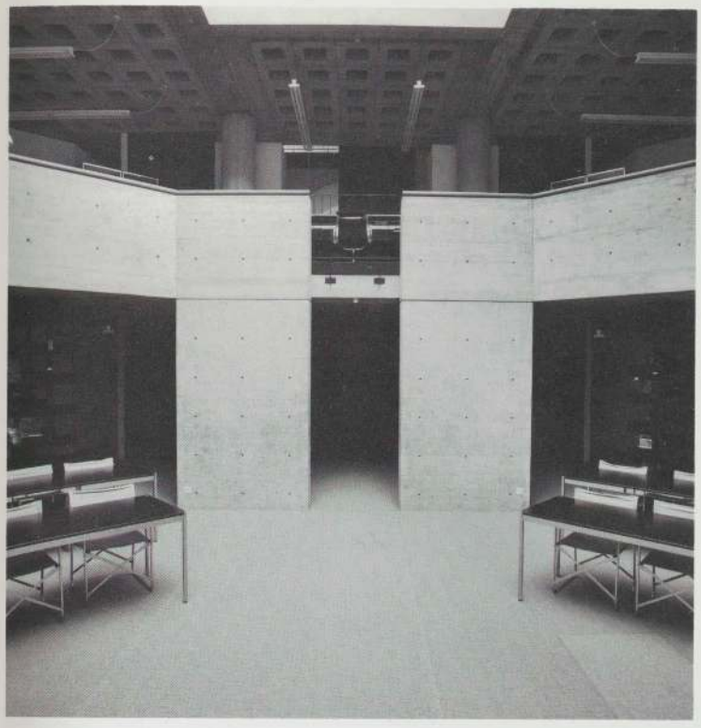


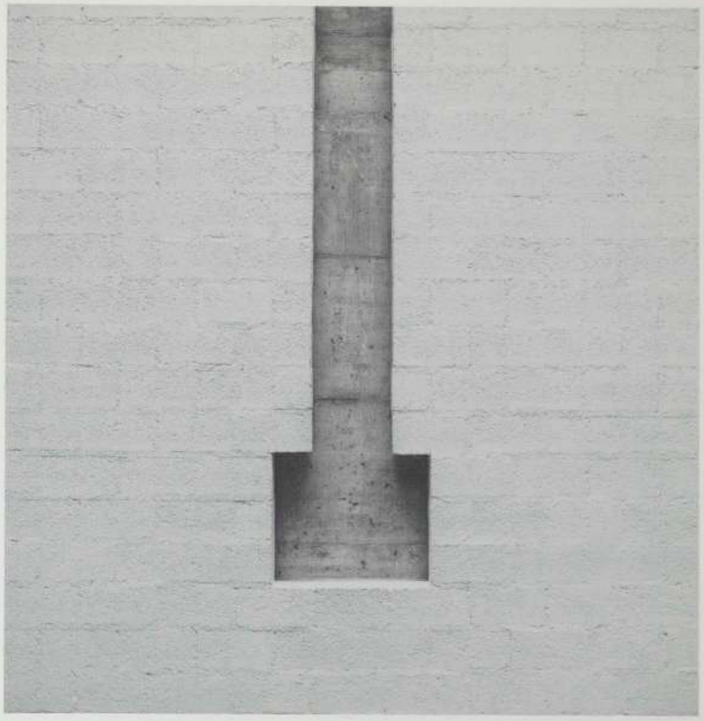


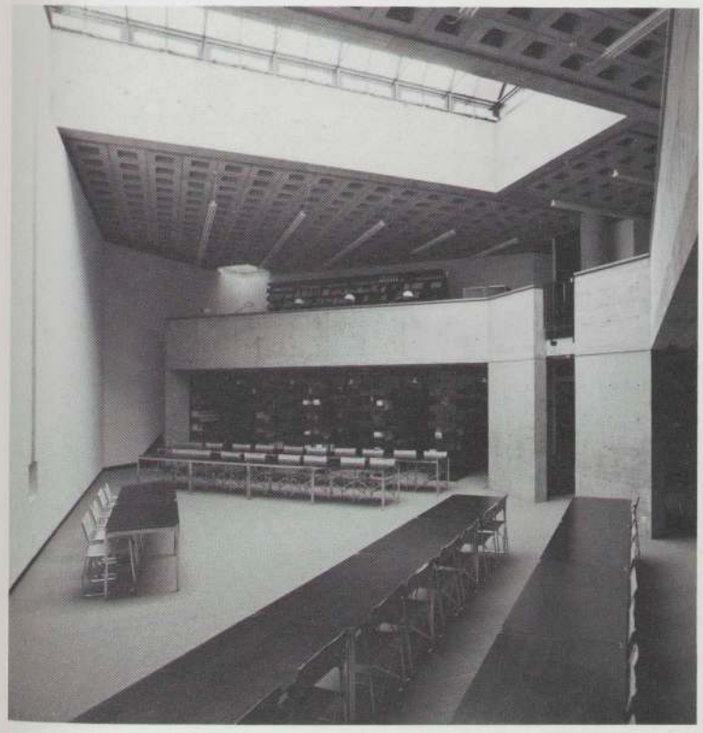


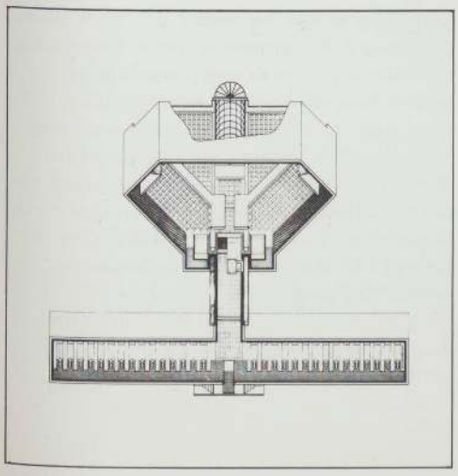
Library, Capuchin Monastery
Lugano, Switzerland
1976–79

Built as an addition to an existing seventeenth-century monastery, this library, a two-story reading room with balcony and a separate stack area, is almost entirely underground, making a minimal visual impact on the exterior of the old building complex. The long, low stack area, partly protruding from the ground, creates a raised base in front of the extended west wing of the monastery, the ground floor of which becomes the entrance lobby to the library. The reading room is in the form of a truncated diamond with its entry on the diagonal axis. The reinforced-concrete balconies spread in the wide gesture of a pair of arms pushed apart by the wall opposite, creating an essentially triangular space with a palpable sense of compression. A large skylight is placed on axis. The light washing the white-block wall, with its vertical slit ending in a niche at the bottom, creates a powerful, sacral feeling.



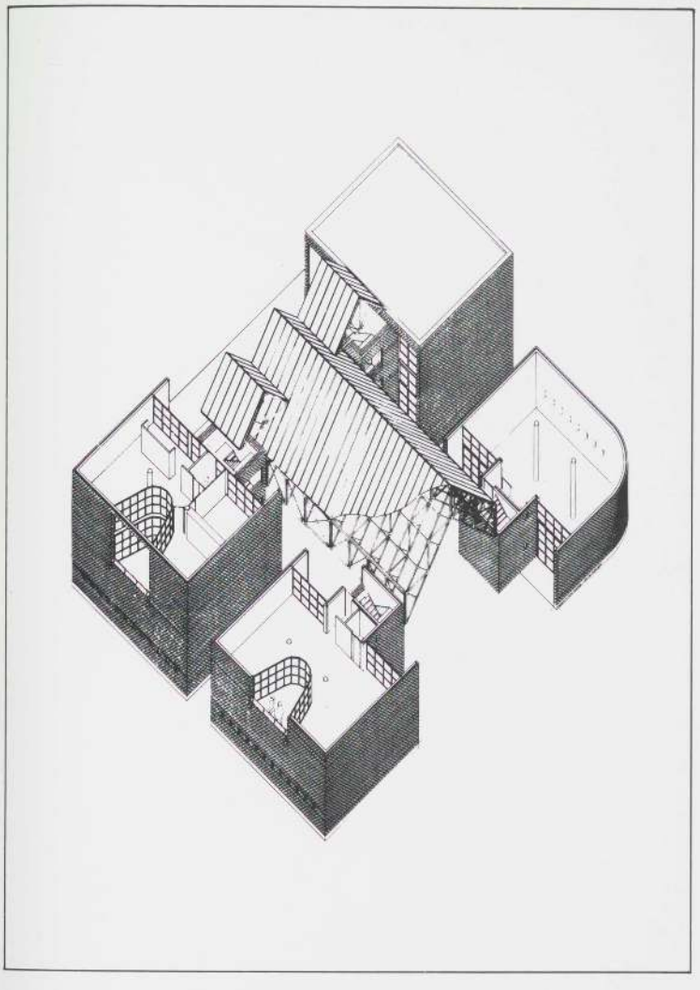


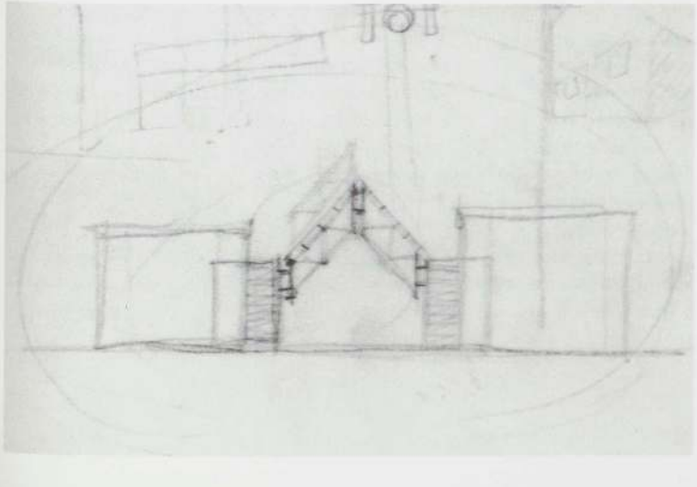




Artisan Center
Balerna, Switzerland
1977–79

Consisting of four separate cubic units joined by one roof, the artisan center at Balerna has an unusual program, with workshops on the ground floor, offices on the second floor, and living spaces on the third floor of each unit. Two-story-high terraces cut into the upper floors. Paired adjacent to and across from each other, the four units define a large space which is roofed over with metal truss skylights, but open at either end, forming a communal outdoor working and delivery area. The complex, which is located in an industrial area, expresses a sense of dignity amid the surrounding chaos.

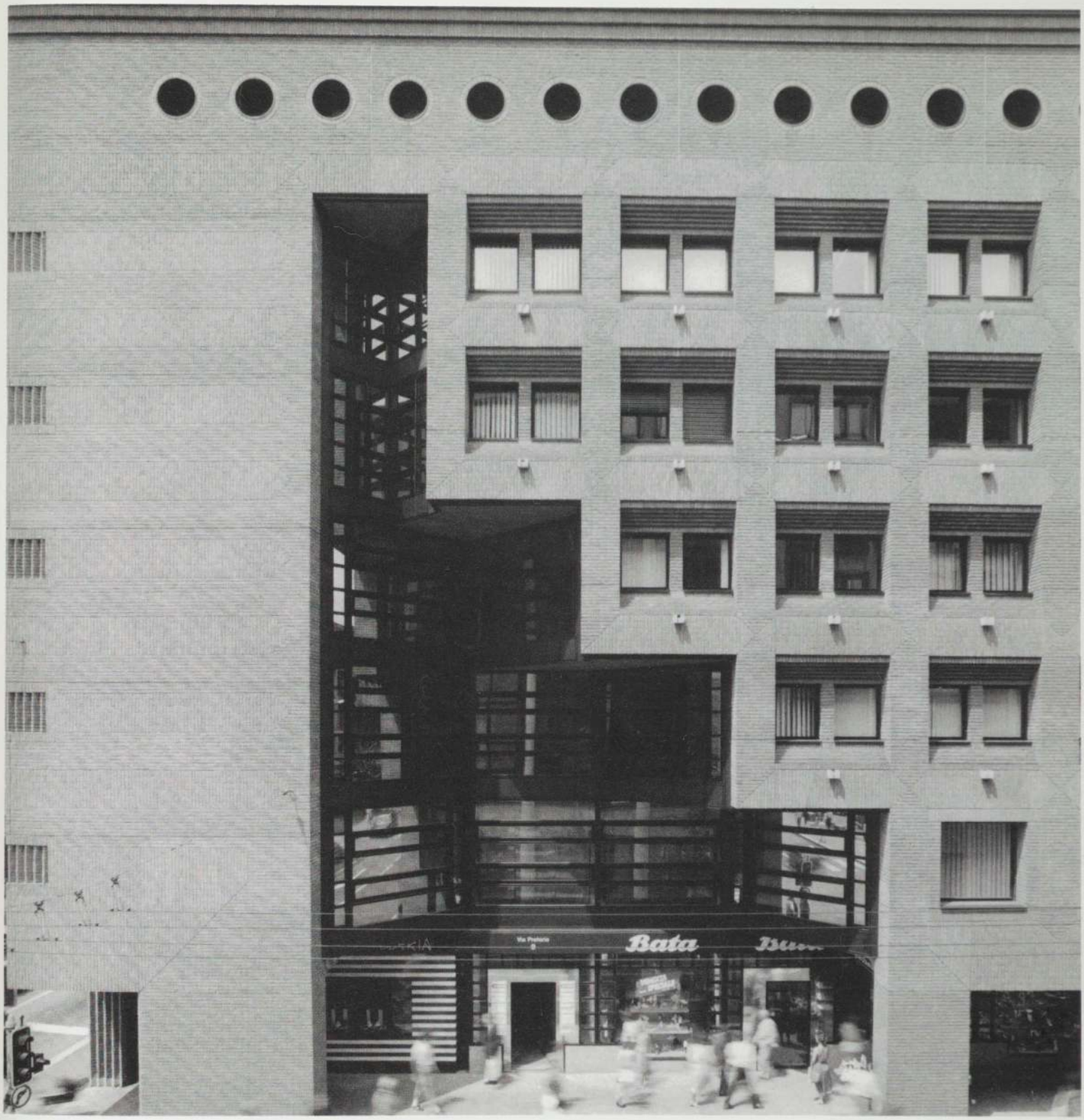


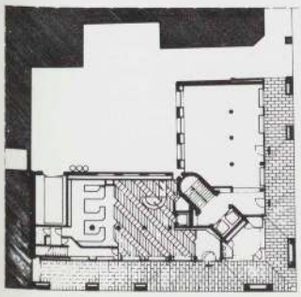


Office Building
Lugano, Switzerland
1981–85

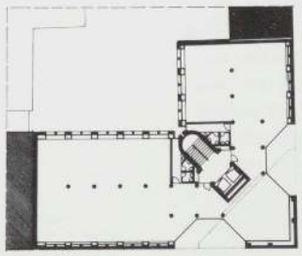
This office building, situated on a corner lot diagonally across from a park, exists in a mixed urban context of old and new commercial structures. Built of reinforced concrete, it is clad in richly detailed red brick that gives the appearance of being a thick bearing wall. The square frame modules have been cut away to reveal a modern glass-and-steel inset facade as well as to define a massive corner masonry tower. A top floor with small porthole windows, to which both the corner tower and the brick frame facades fuse, stabilizes the composition.

Botta's building blends in with the surrounding urban fabric and at the same time stands out from it. Continuing a long urban building tradition of marking an important corner with a tower, Botta does it in a formally inventive manner.

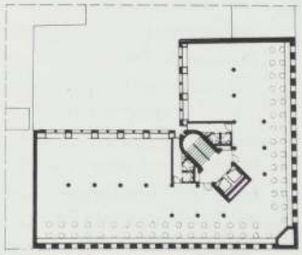




ground floor



third floor

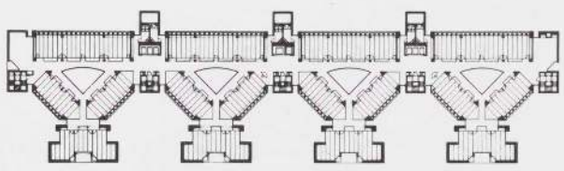


seventh floor

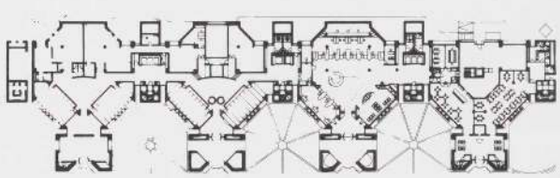
Bank of Gotthard
Lugano, Switzerland
1982–86

This six-story building on a main street at the edge of Lugano's business district is surrounded by closely spaced, freestanding buildings. So as not to overwhelm the scale of the surroundings, Botta broke up the large building program into four distinct linked units, each of which presents a narrow but monumental entry facade to the street. The bulk of the building is set back, creating a series of recessed courts open to the street. Vertical circulation and service towers connect the office units together. The offices of each unit cluster around a triangular skylit atrium.

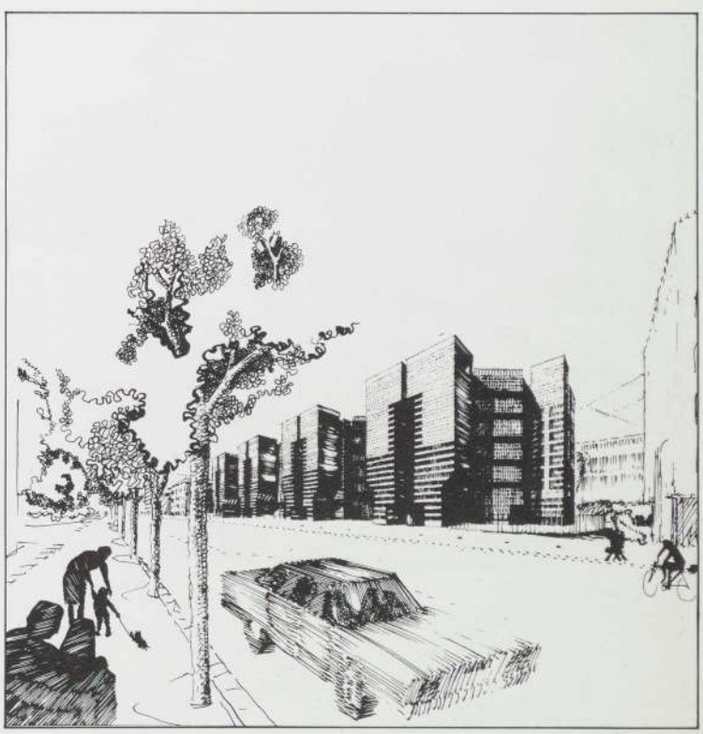
The building is constructed of reinforced concrete and clad in pink granite alternating with bands of gray granite. The larger window areas are protected by cantilevered *brise-soleil* of granite and concrete.

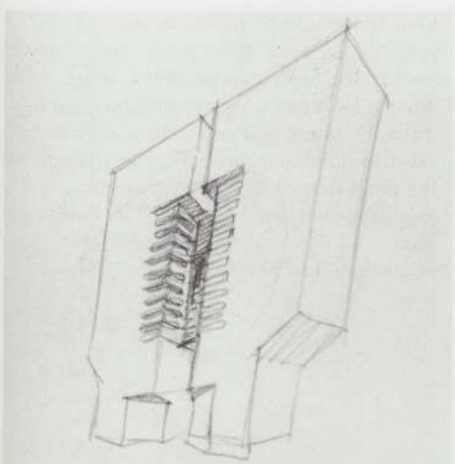


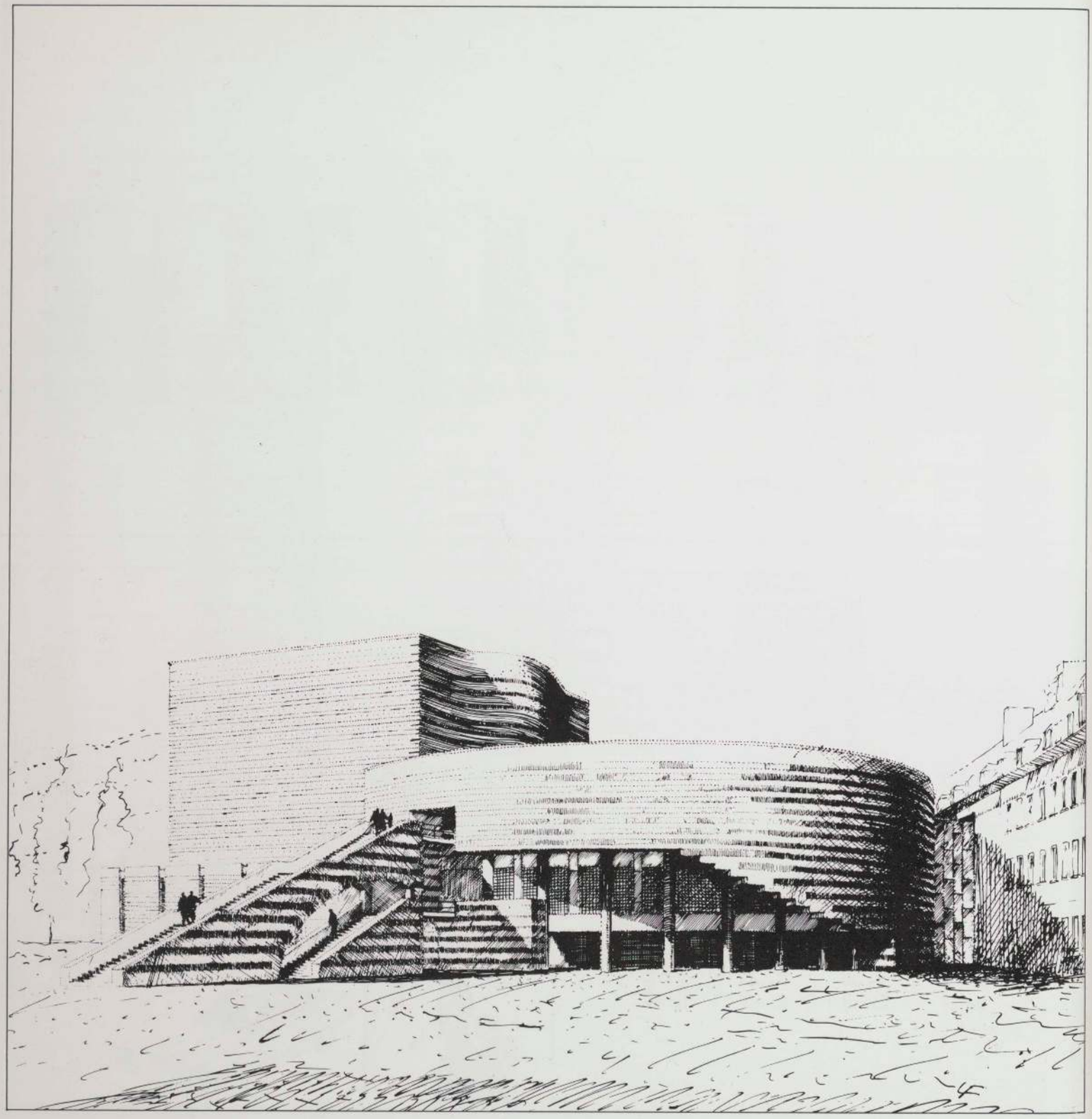
typical office floor



ground floor



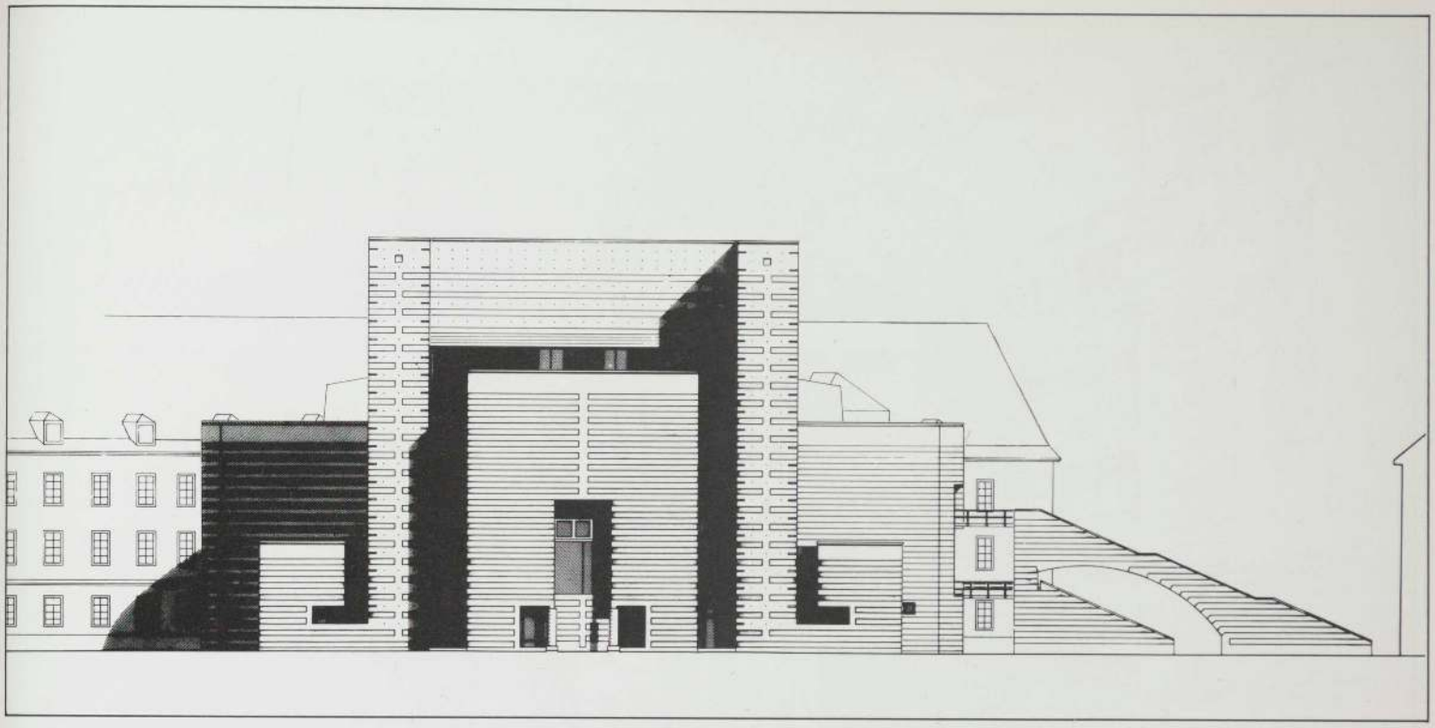


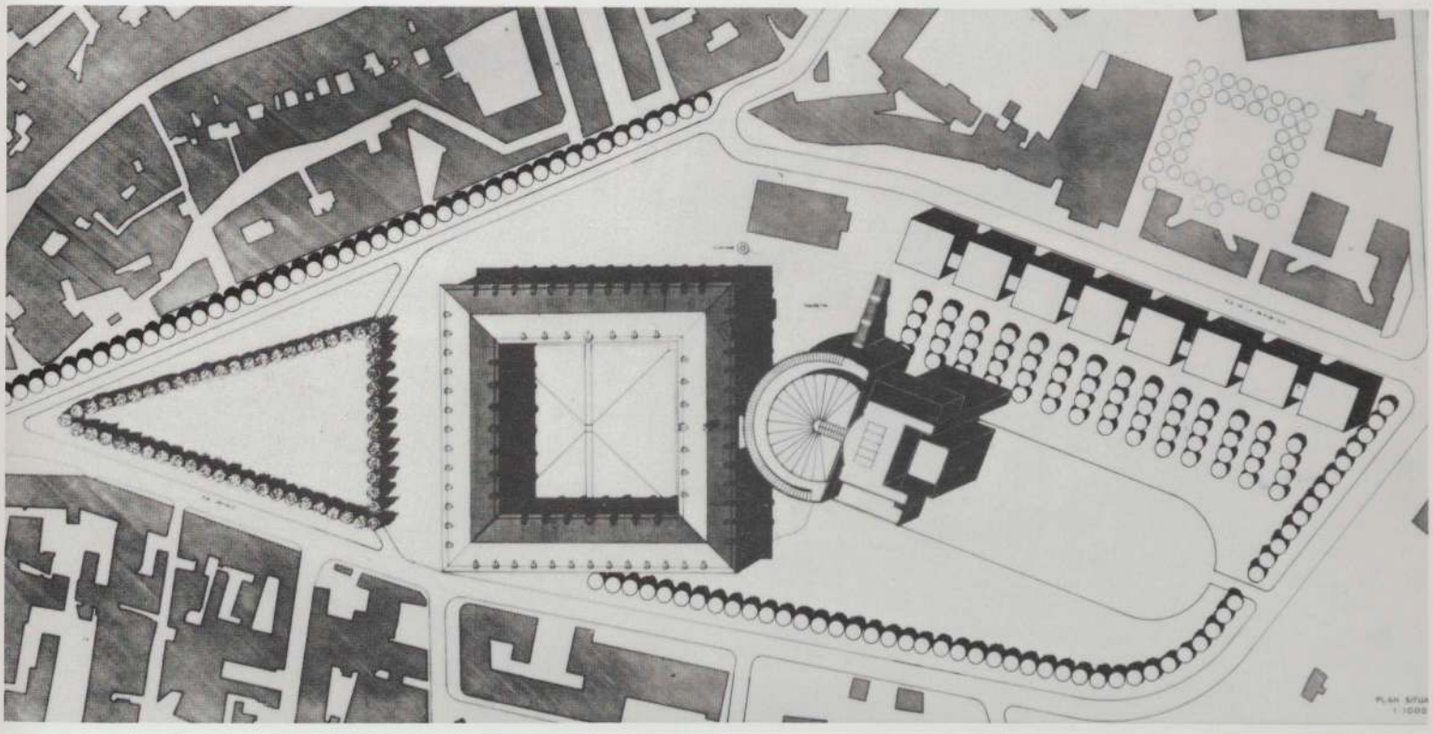


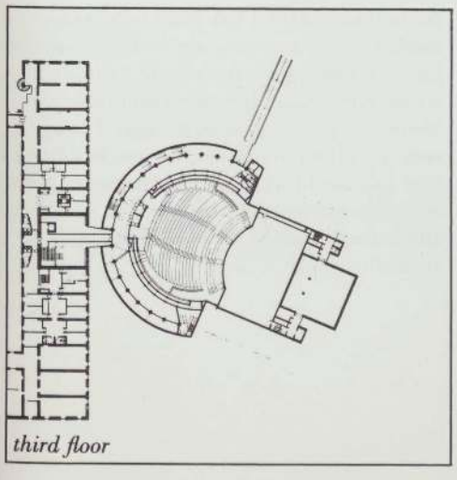
Cultural Center
Chambéry, France
1982–86

The program for this cultural center required a new 900-seat theater and a smaller cinema hall in conjunction with the restoration of the Napoleonic barracks. The enormous square barracks, with a courtyard in its center, dominates an irregular open area surrounded by a tight nineteenth-century urban fabric. Botta's semicircular theater abuts the middle of the east facade of the barracks at an angle off the axis to align with the street to the north. Entry to the theater is via the courtyard of the barracks, through a new lobby in its east wing, and across a glass-enclosed bridge. Thus, Botta's building becomes an appendage or tail to the barracks.

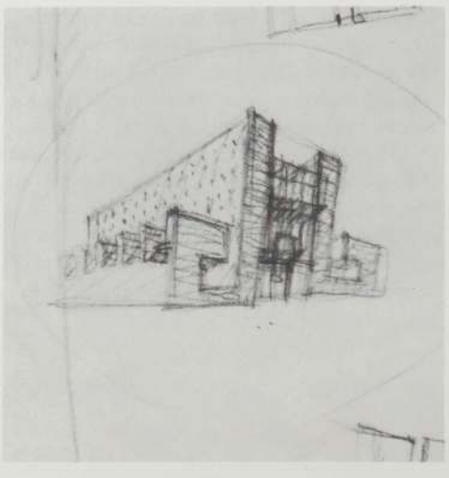
The theater addition itself consists of a semicircular area, three stories high, housing the theater, access promenades, stairs, and cinema hall; and a square part housing the stage, fly tower, and service areas. A large two-tiered outdoor fire stair gives definition to the plaza formed by theater, barracks, and existing police headquarters. The building, of reinforced concrete, is clad in alternate bands of concrete and beige stone.

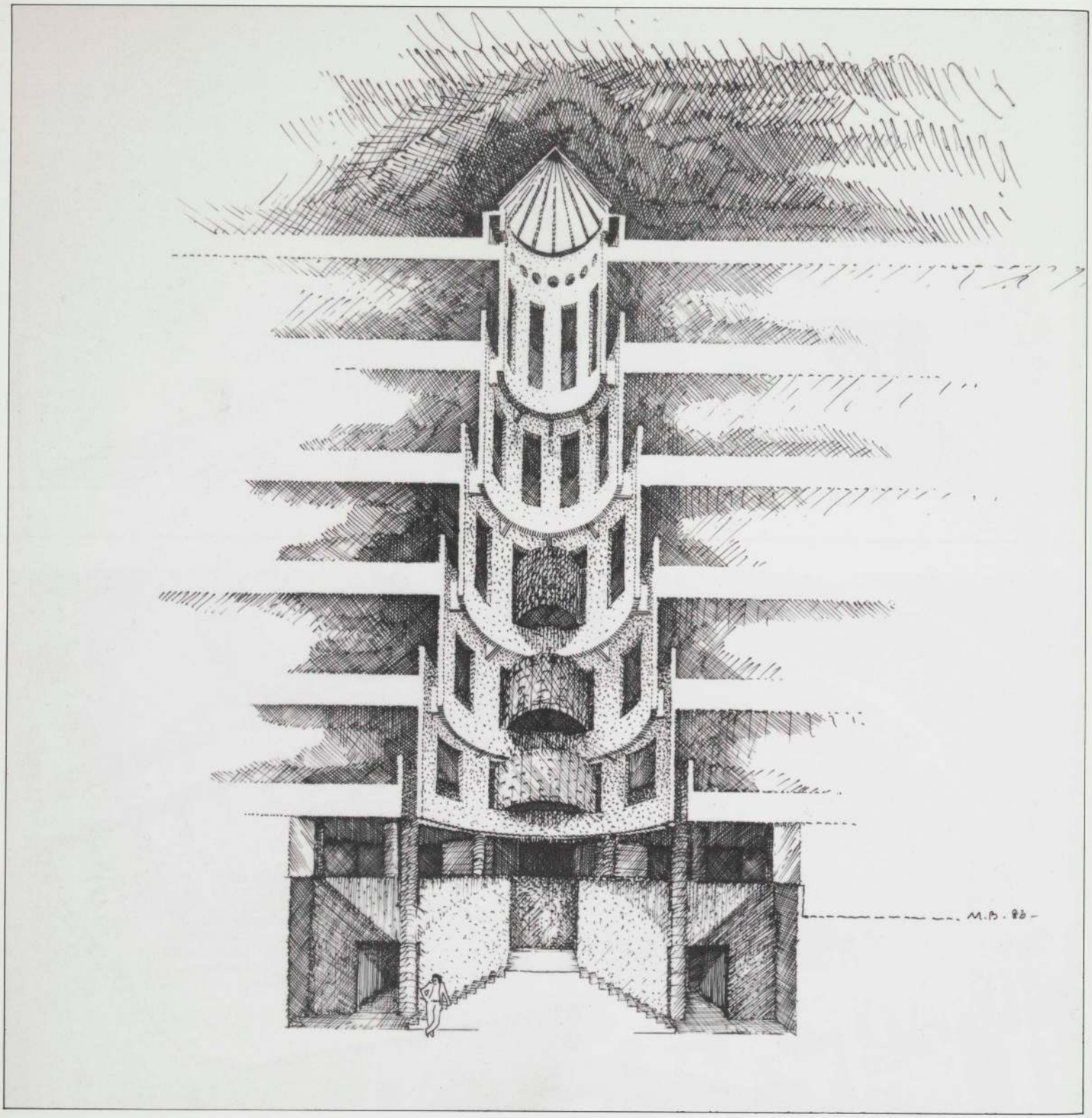






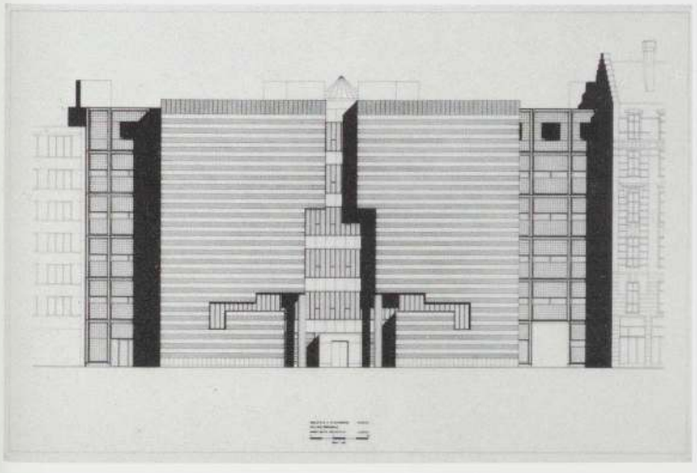
third floor

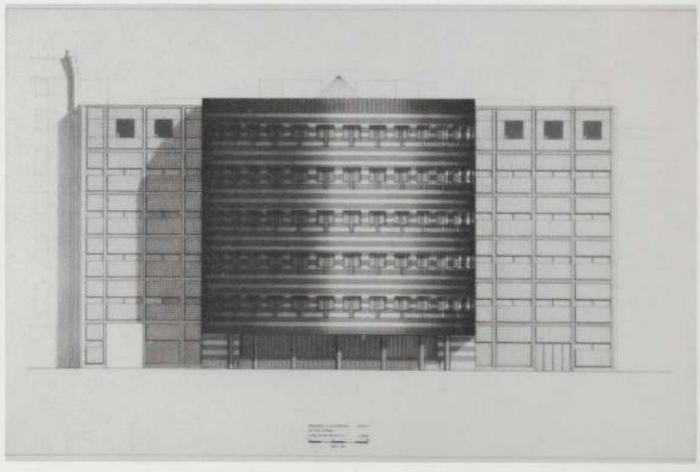


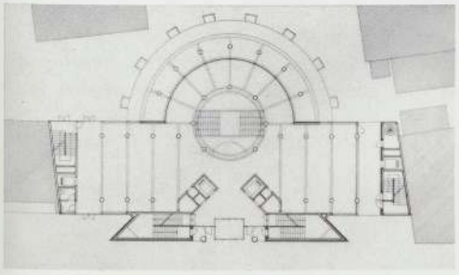


Library
Villeurbanne, France
1984

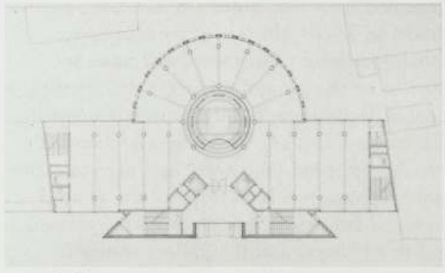
This library, to be built on one of the main streets of the city, mediates, with its two distinct street facade layers, between the original building line established during the nineteenth century and the setback line established after the Second World War, when it was assumed that all the old buildings would be demolished and the street widened. The solid front facade layer houses stairs and services and is split apart at the center to accommodate the main entrance. The plan of the building behind this layer is a classic rectangle with a protruding semicircle at the back. A seven-story-high skylit cylindrical atrium open to the basement diminishes in diameter for each floor as it rises. The main section of the reinforced-concrete building is clad in glass block, while the protruding front and the semicircular back are clad in alternating bands of beige and dark gray stone.



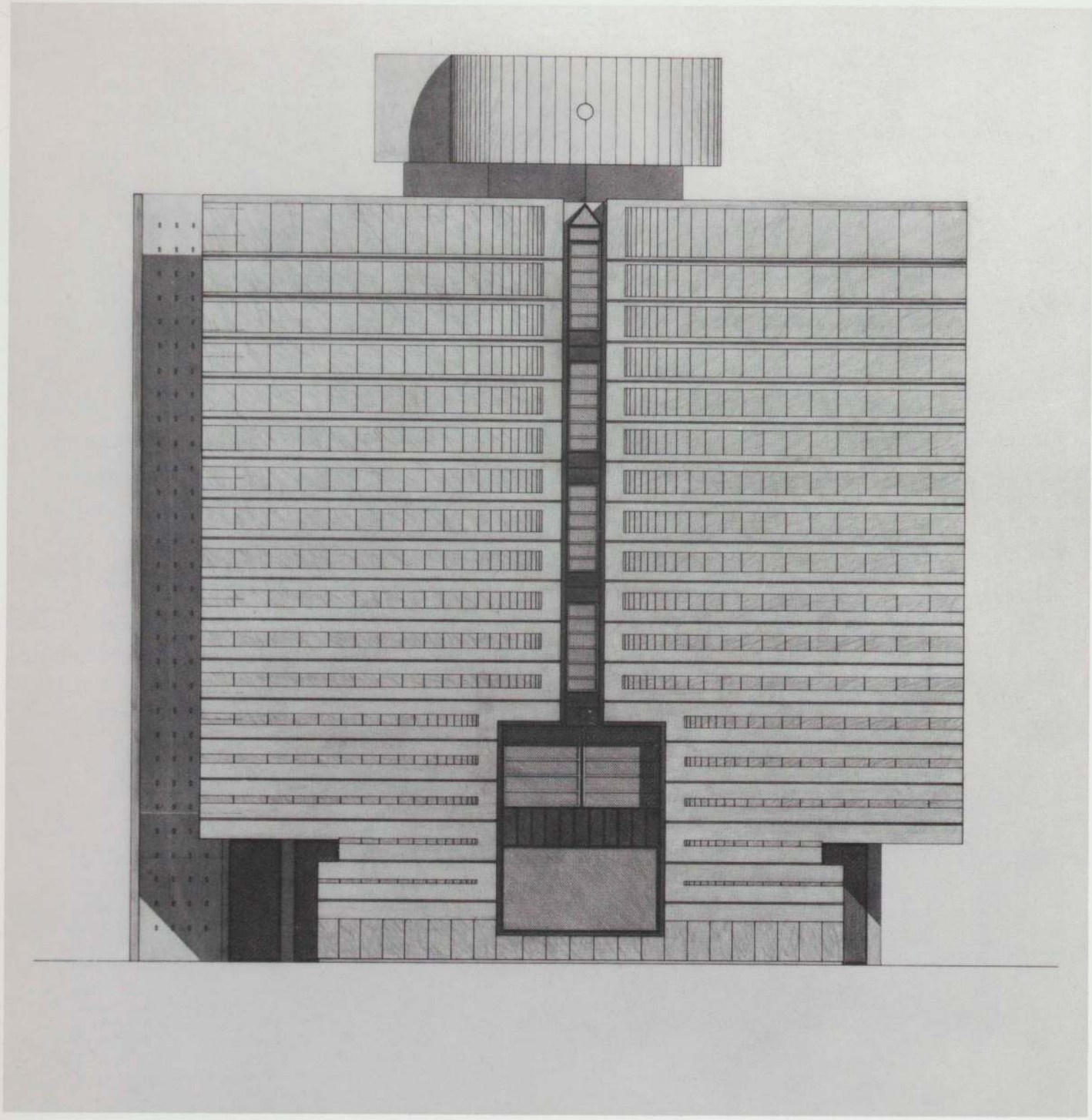




ground floor



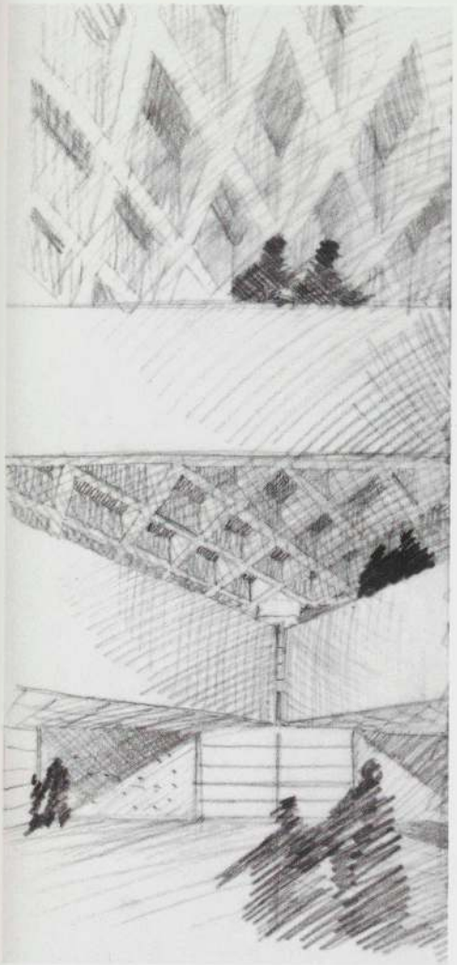
typical floor

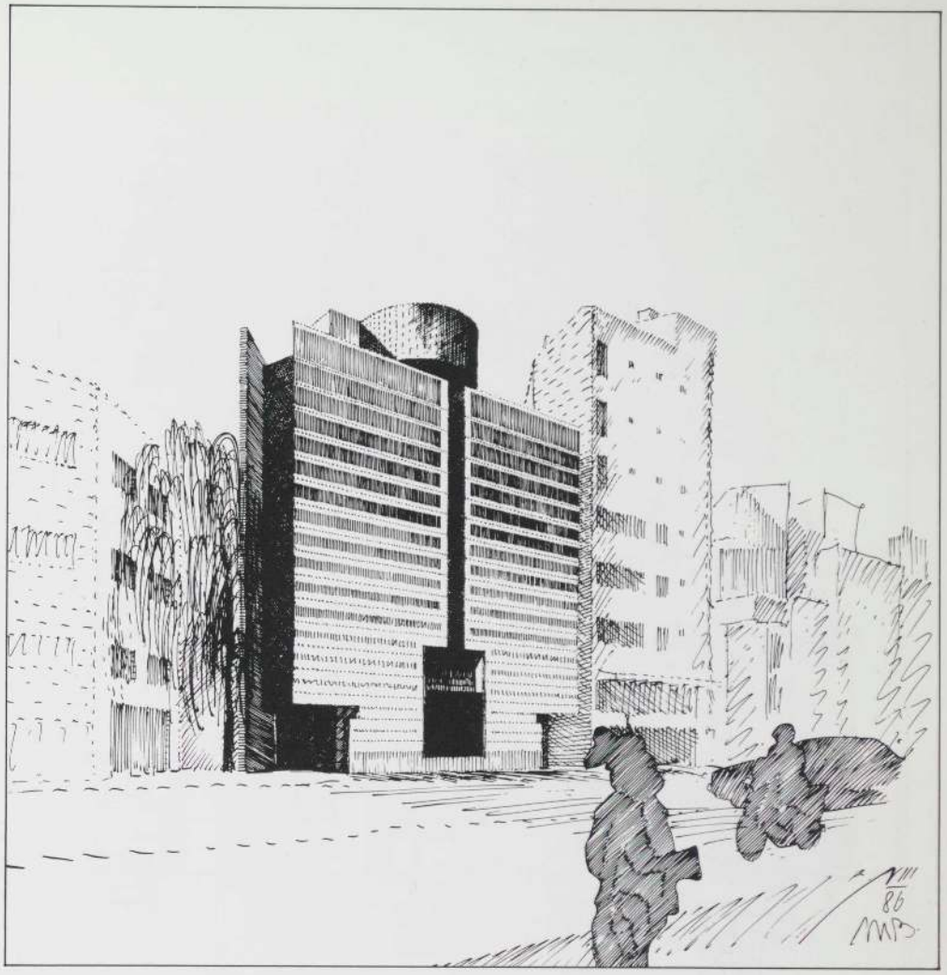


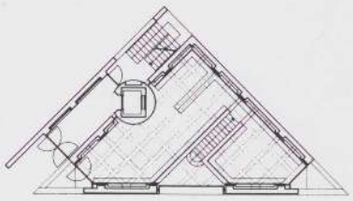
Gallery
Tokyo, Japan
1985

Designed for a triangular site bordered by two streets in Tokyo, this six-story building, housing different functions, will have an imprint on the ground no larger than that of most of Botta's one-family houses. Consisting of a triangular plan, with a service band of circulation, plumbing core, and fire stair, the building houses a bookstore on the ground floor and basement, a gallery on the second and third floors, and the gallery owner's residence on the fourth. The fifth and sixth floors are office space. A circular elevator core pierces the plan at the juncture of the building and its service band. Mechanical systems are lodged in a small structure on the roof.

The reinforced-concrete structure is clad in a variable-width banding of concrete and marble. A vertical strip of glazing, forming at its base a large ground-floor store window (a bigger version of a recurring Botta motif), splits the main facade in half.







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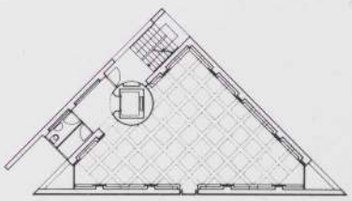

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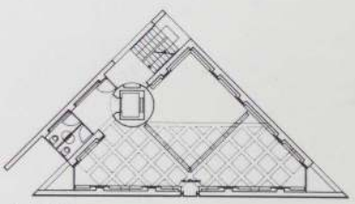
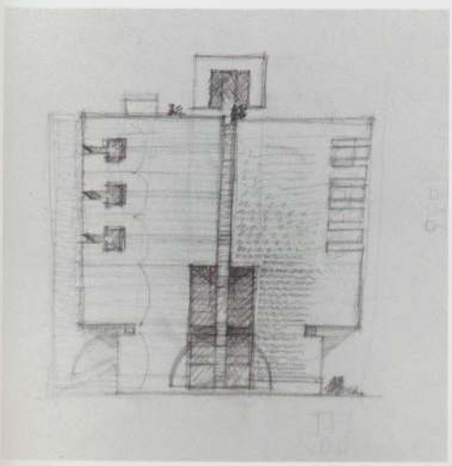
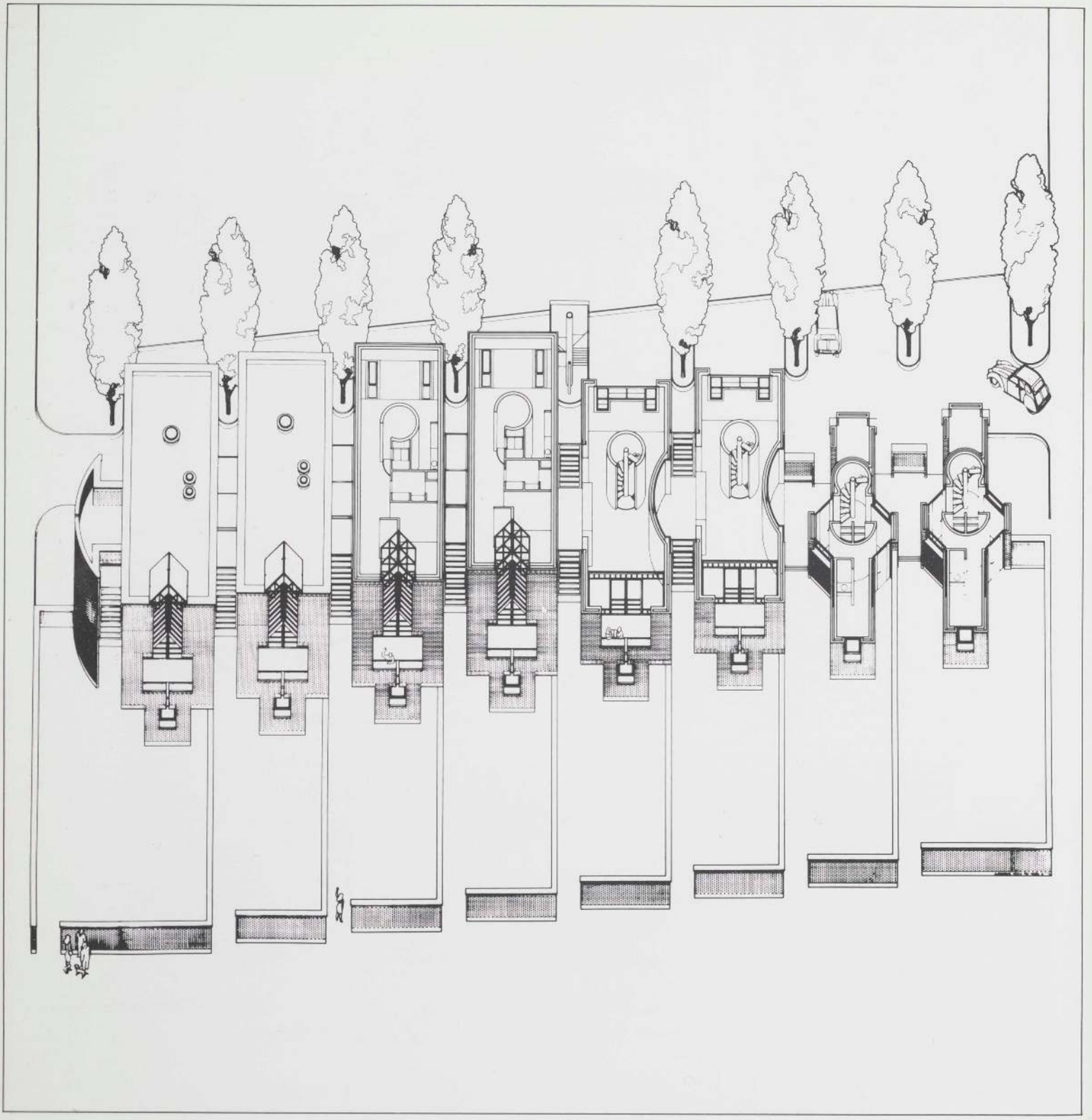


third floor

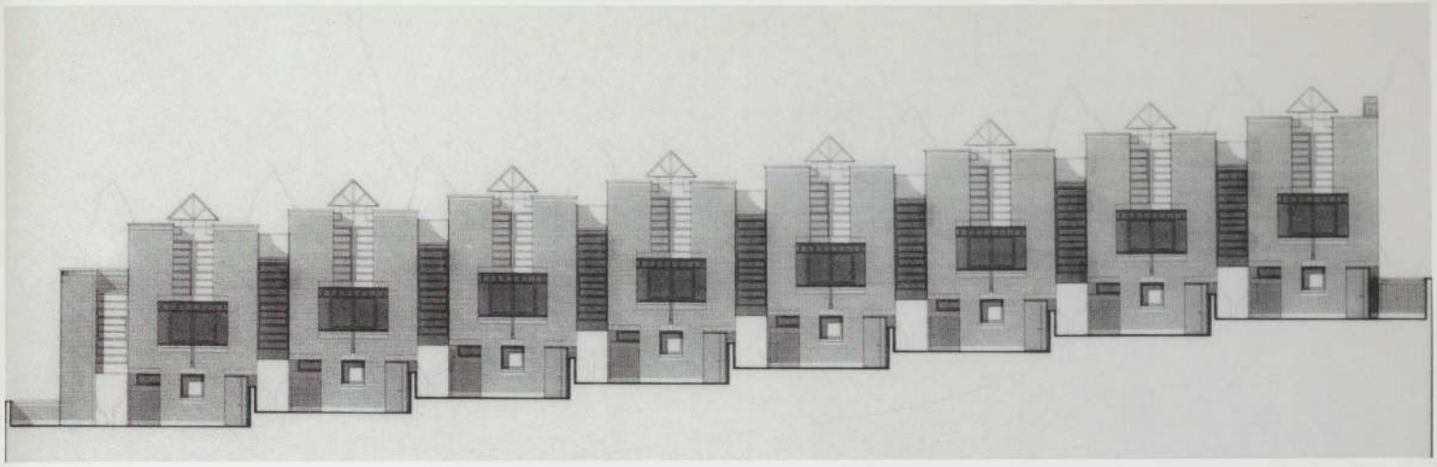


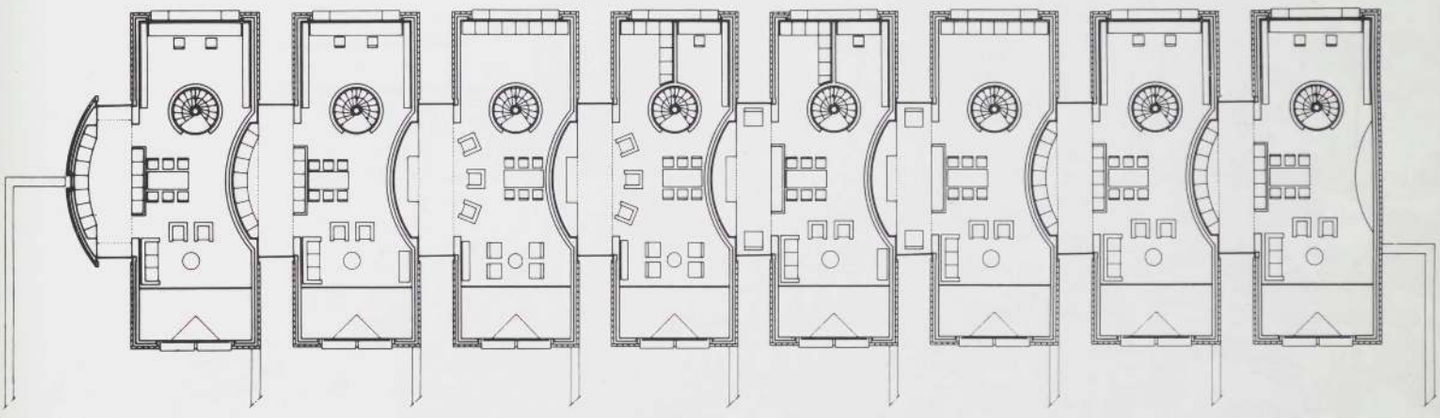


Row Housing
Pregassona, Switzerland
1985

To be built on a gently sloping field in the hills above Lugano, these row houses command a spectacular view toward the south. Unlike most row houses, which share full-length party walls, these are spaced apart with a narrow alley between each one. A high "greenhouse" space that serves as either kitchen or extension of the living room bridges each alley at the second level. The separate but connected massing of the units allows a rich exterior rhythm and a varied view from the interior. The curved walls on the second floor which interlock one unit with another suggest an almost symbolic sense of community.

The narrow ground floor accommodates entry, laundry, and storage. The second floor contains living room, terrace, dining area, and kitchen; the top floor three bedrooms and two baths.





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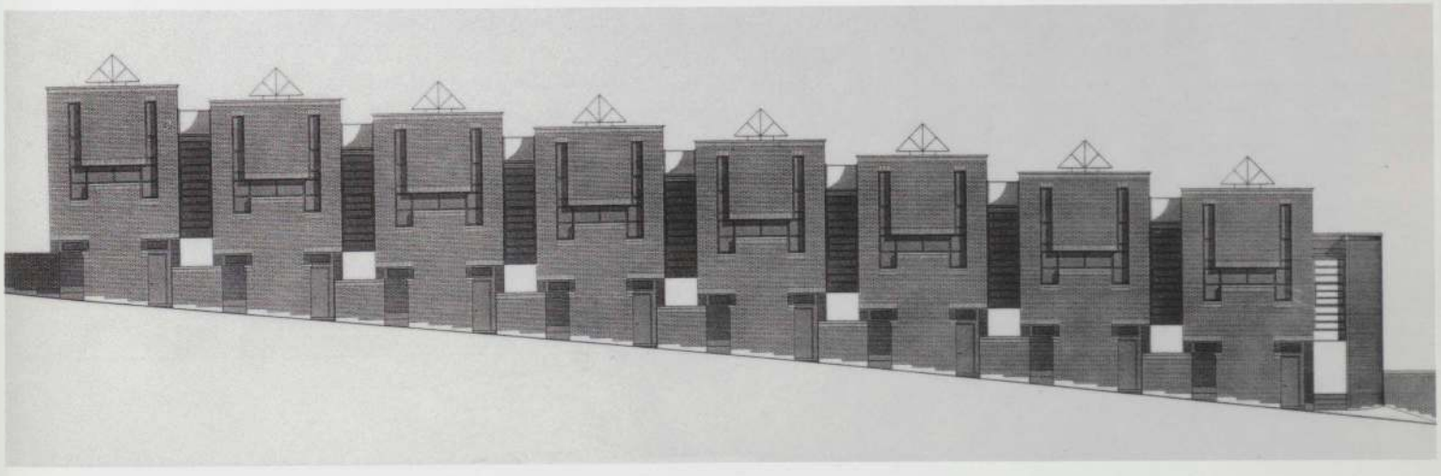
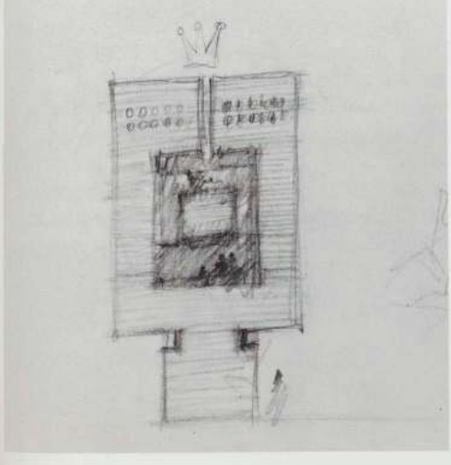
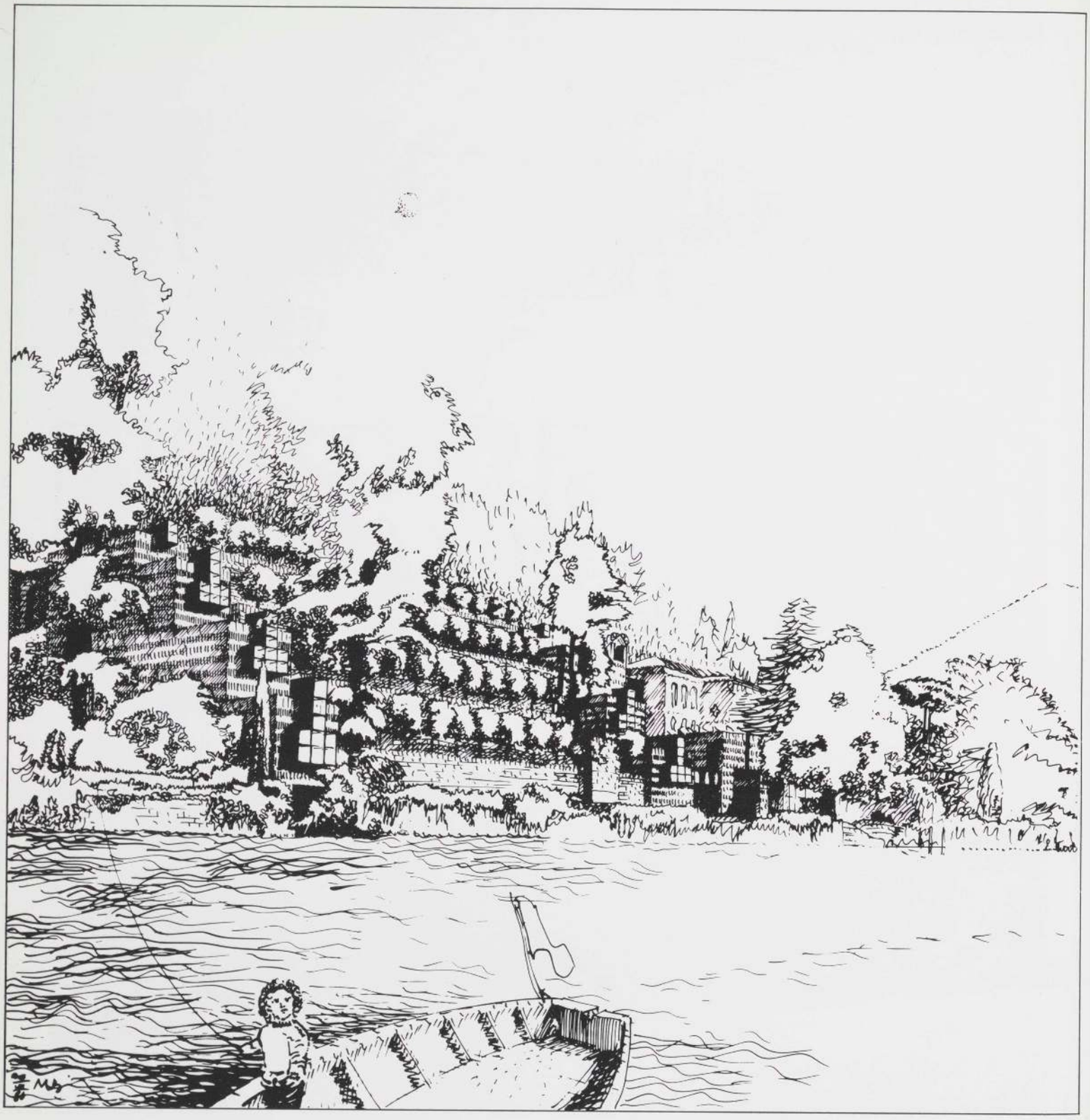






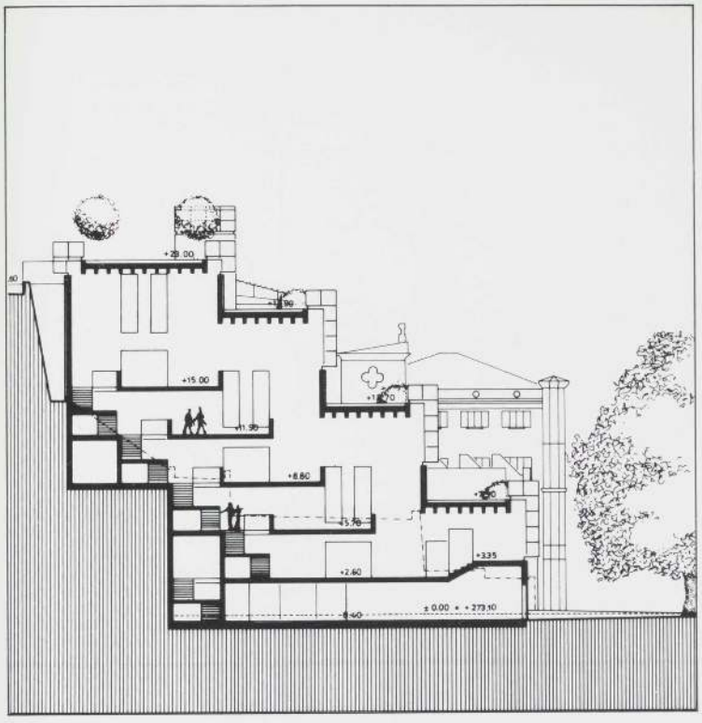
Thyssen-Bornemisza Gallery
Lugano, Switzerland
1986

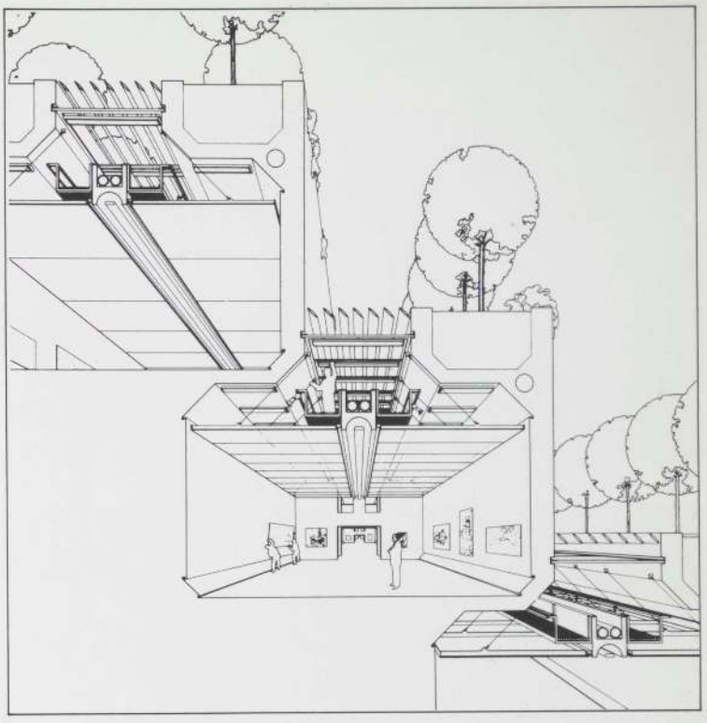
This proposal for a new gallery to house Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection of modern art adjacent to the existing gallery of old masters is a recent competition entry.

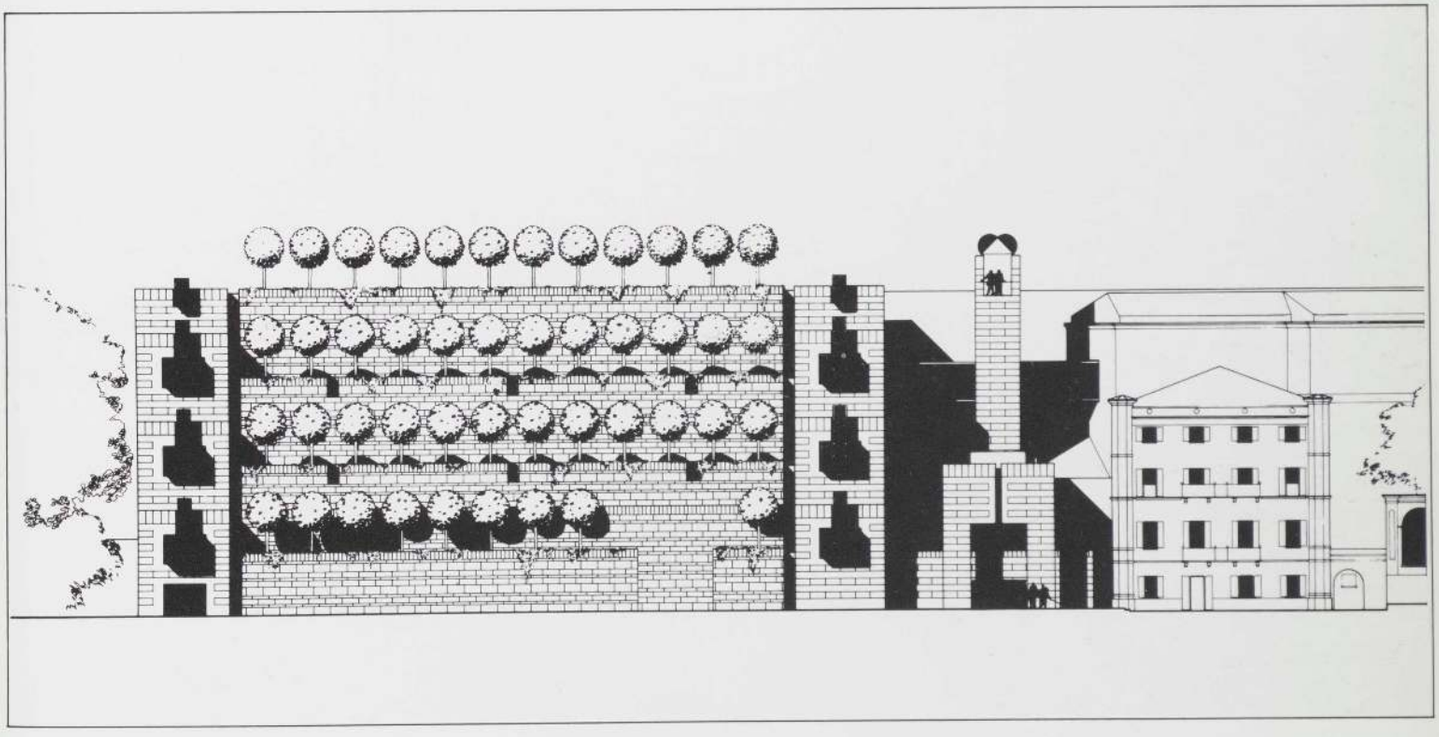
The gallery is located on a long, narrow site on Lake Lugano near Villa Favorita, the baron's residence, with terraces cut into the rock of the steep hillside behind it. A single new entrance for both new and old galleries contains a campanile-like elevator tower that acts as a pivot point for the two buildings. The new gallery is organized on three levels, each consisting of an enfilade of exhibition rooms.

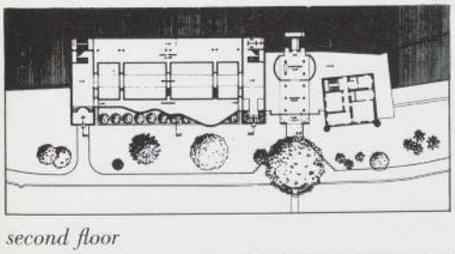
The visitor enters the complex from the ground-floor lobby that serves both buildings, takes an elevator to the top floor (where a bridge connects to the old-master gallery), and proceeds down through the galleries to the lobby.

The long galleries are lit by skylights running their full length, with the light diffused by a hung ceiling of translucent glass. The gallery roofs are planted, alongside the skylights, with neat rows of trees, turning the stone-clad building into a classic architectural/pastoral landscape.









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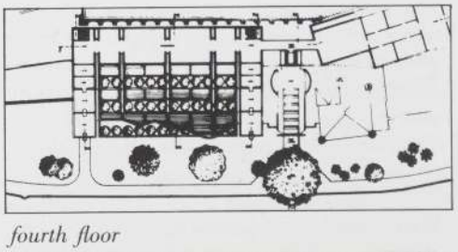
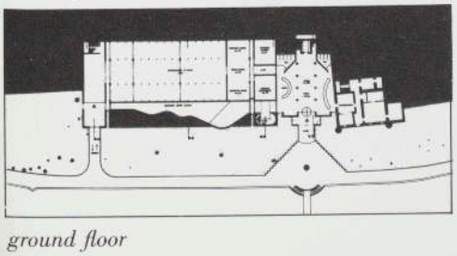
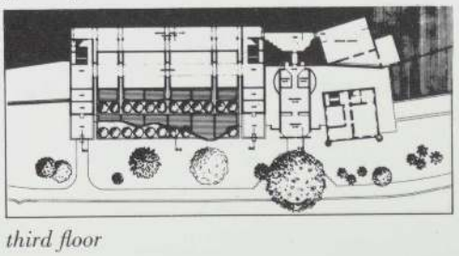


fourth floor



ground floor



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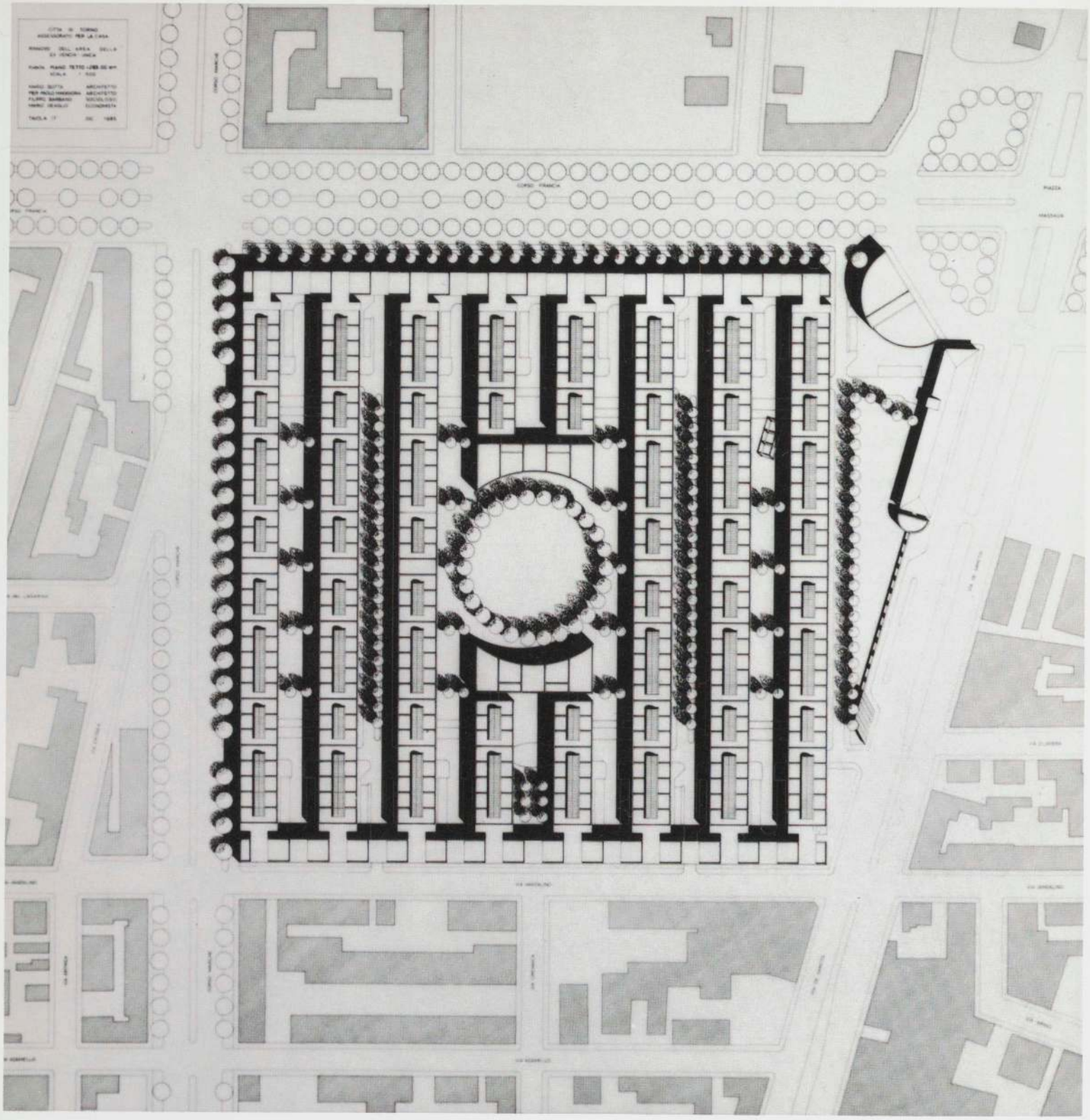
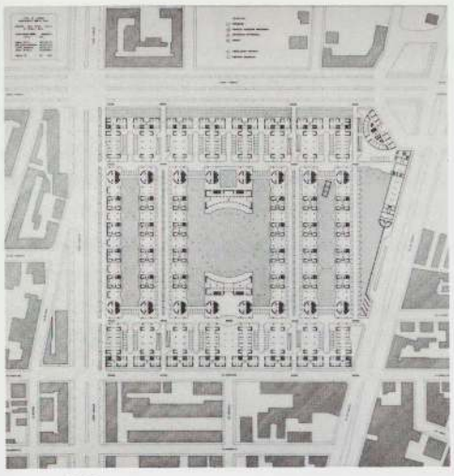


Urban Housing
Turin, Italy
1985

This project will occupy more than four large urban blocks. Eliminating the existing street grid, Botta has proposed one large integrated structure embodying its own road network, parking, open space, and service and commercial facilities, with housing as the predominant program element.

While in height and scale the project is sympathetic to the surrounding urban fabric, in conception it breaks with it radically. Eight "bridges" of housing form the top two stories of this six-story "megastructure," held aloft by regularly spaced square "townhouse" units and cylindrical circulation towers as well as by interspersed columns. Tying the "bridges" together at both ends are six-story office wings, with commercial spaces at street level. While the "townhouse" units are entered directly from the ground, the two top floors are entered via the circulation towers and a series of open skywalks on the fourth floor. A circular park is located in the center of the project, flanked by community buildings that interrupt the two middle housing rows.



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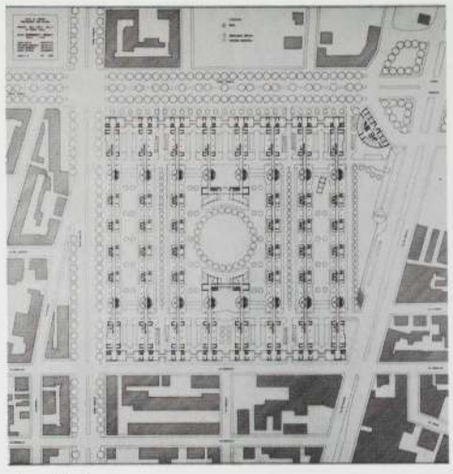

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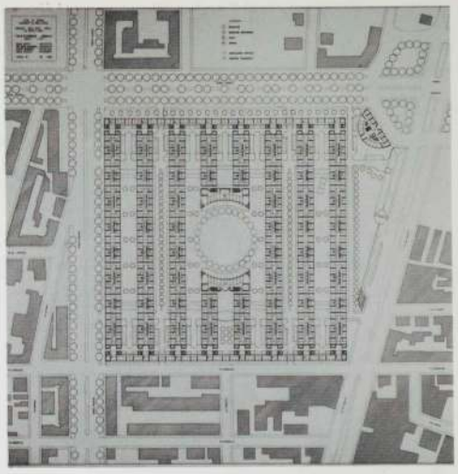

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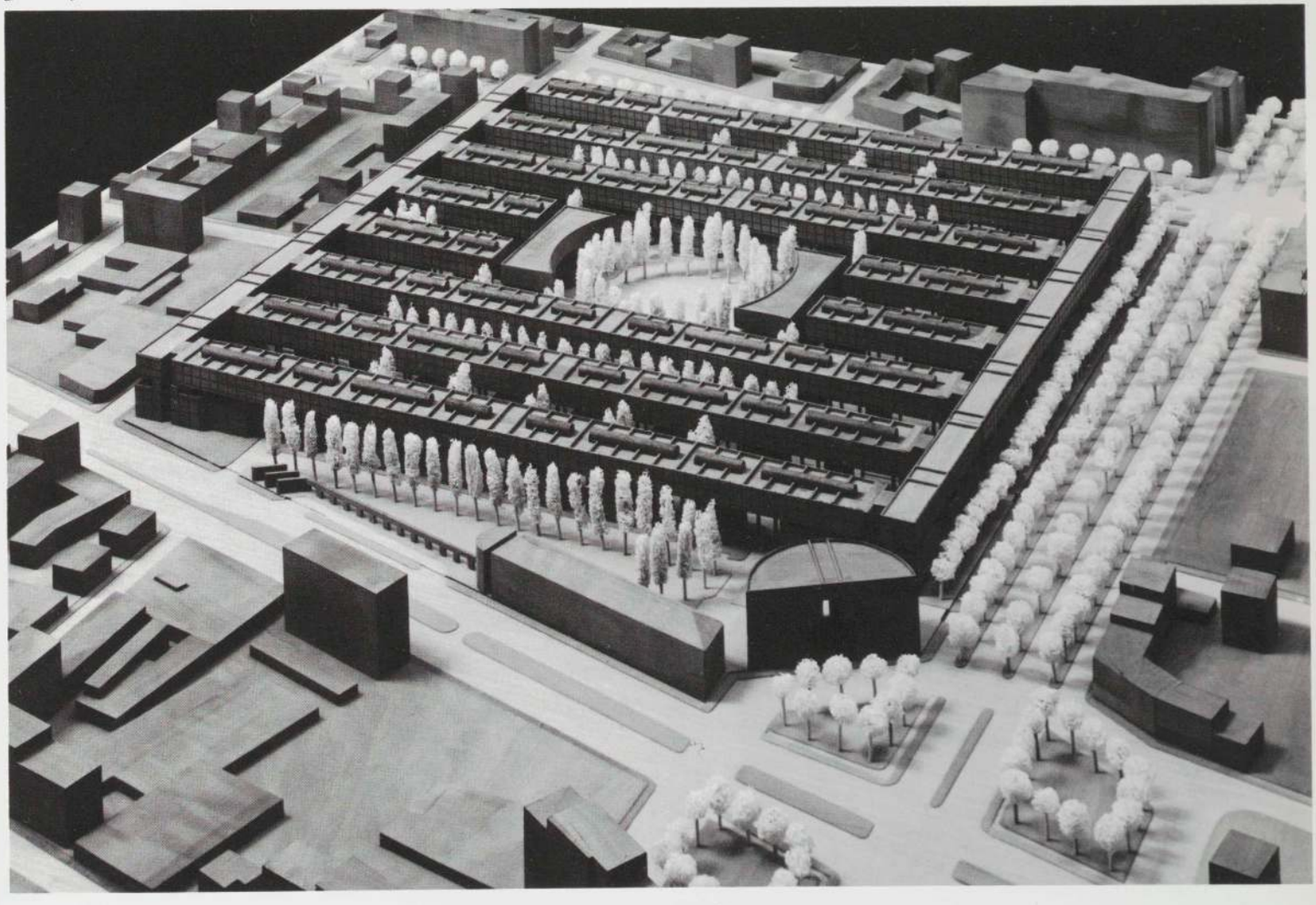

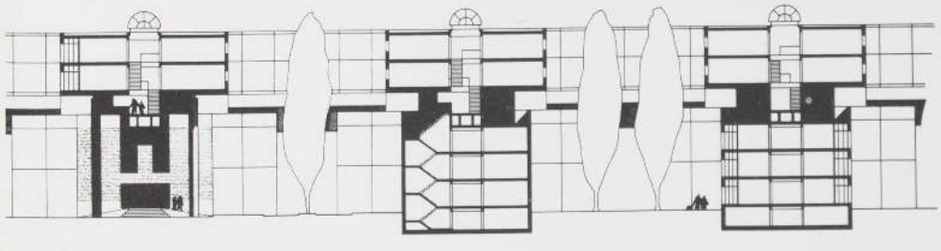

Wrede: Today there is widespread disillusionment with the modern movement, which is seen as a failure. Yet your work indicates that you continue to believe in its evolution. What do you see as the essentials of the modernist tradition in architecture?

Botta: The architectural expression of the modern movement was rather diversified, and within the movement we find a great variety of personalities and contents, from expressionist to organic to rationalist architecture. We must keep this in mind to avoid blaming all of today's ills on a generation of architects who worked with great dedication and made many extraordinary contributions to the field.

One fundamental shared hope united the differences within the modern movement; this was the hope that the new means available to architects—advanced techniques, new materials, industrialization—would provide more satisfactory answers to the problems of twentieth-century man and help to create better living conditions.

The architects, like the avant-garde painters, sculptors, and poets of the time, had glimpsed the great future possibilities offered by this new society of technology and advanced communication. Yet man remained the point of reference. What brought experiences so diverse as those of the modern movement together was the use of abstract elements in the form of geometries, rational laws, and the removal of traditional ornament and elements of expression. In this new modern vision, in most cases, the column, stripped of its expressive elements, became a cylinder, and the architrave was removed from the trabeation. The new composition aimed at reflecting the function for which it was realized rather than at celebrating different architectonic elements. This was a sign of the faith in technology.

Wrede: What do you see as the failure of the modern movement?

Botta: The masters of the modern movement, among them Aalto, Le Corbusier, Loos, Mendelsohn, and Terragni, were all architects of great ability who created new forms of architectural expression. It is the subsequent debasement of their work and teachings that has brought about the impoverishment we witness today.

The moderns all shared the belief that architecture could play

a major role in the shaping of society. In my opinion, the modern movement did not betray this belief; the movement itself was betrayed. Industrial society lost sight of the original objectives and forced man to conform to the laws of technology and mechanization. In this sense, we can fault the modern movement for failing in its goals.

The greatest failure was in town planning, in the vision of the modern zoned city. In fact, it is necessary for man that the organization of living space in the city be more complex than the division of the city into different functional zones utilized at different times of the day. There must also exist in the city large, ample spaces in which history, memory, dreams, imagination, and poetry can be linked and which are not dedicated to strictly functional uses. I believe this is an ethical problem: to make man again the center of interest in the organization of space and not simply to utilize him as an instrument. In the final analysis, the aesthetic always reflects the society that supports it.

Wrede: Would you elaborate on your attitude toward the traditional city?

Botta: The historical city is a collective legacy rich in memories. Its richness lies in its historical layering, the continuous overlapping of diverse epochs and testimonies. The acceleration of modern times has interrupted the evolutionary process of development and shattered the pre-existing balance. In the face of this rapid transformation, the historical city, to us, seems static. But this city nevertheless remains the product of a continual process of transformation. I believe it is still possible to contribute to this city, to intervene in its processes. The idea of change, of modification, is implicit in every architectural act.

The historical city has many things to say and to offer to present-day architecture, but I also believe that contemporary architecture itself can contribute to and enrich this city. It's a natural relationship of give-and-take between architecture and its context. They are two sides of one question, one goal: the creation of a living space.

I believe that good architecture is always a critical interpretation of context. It's always a question of making any new intervention an integral part of the cultural and historical situation of the site. Every epoch needs to interpret, to reread,

Mario Botta, 1986

to understand its past. It's not possible to protect the past. All we can do is offer new interpretations of it.

Wrede: What reservations, if any, would you have about returning to the language of classical architecture?

Botta: The return to historical models and typologies, like the reassertion of classical models, should be seen as a reaction to the chaos, the conflicts, and the lack of values that so-called modern culture has produced. I think we have to admit that the modern development of our cities is the most negative contribution man has ever made. But architecture is the formal expression of history, and often architects are nothing more than mere instruments. It's true that the present-day city is, physically speaking, quite ugly; but I find it even uglier from a social perspective, what with all the violence, terrorism, pollution. And these things know no political or geographical boundaries. In fact, perhaps the modern movement failed because it believed that it was possible to change society through architecture. We know now that all we can change with architecture is architecture itself.

Every language is an expression of its own epoch. The language of classical architecture gave humanity examples of perfection and poetry. The formal expression of the classical world was also, in its content, an expression of grandeur. To reassert, today, the forms of the classical language is to betray it. In my opinion today's so-called neoclassical architects make the same mistake for which they reproach the modern movement. For the moderns, form was derived directly from content. Today, this dualistic relationship between form and function is being proposed in reverse; it is believed that by changing form one changes content as well. I believe that architects who use the classical language today confuse history with styles; they believe that the reassertion of historical styles suffices to express man's new need for history and cultural memory. I think they are misinterpreting what is actually a positive need. In a certain sense one might call such architects a crustacean avant-garde. They are like crayfish: they move backwards.

In order to be architects, in order to accomplish our task, a great deal of confidence, of faith, is indispensable. Building is a fundamentally productive activity; it presupposes a faith in man, in one's work, in the need to express oneself and to bear witness to one's own time in positive terms.

Wrede: You have acknowledged your debt to Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, and Carlo Scarpa. Would you summarize what you see as the important lessons you have drawn from each of them?

Botta: Le Corbusier, Kahn, and Scarpa are points of reference for my entire generation. I've had the good fortune of having had a number of direct experiences with these masters, and my own formation has been influenced by them. I believe that our manner of making architecture, our sensitivity to new problems, is grounded in the historical legacy established by the architectural culture that preceded us. In architecture, as in art, one cannot speak of progress. There is only continuity in the attempt to provide new answers for new situations.

There are no architects of my generation who do not owe something to Le Corbusier. Some of Le Corbusier's hypotheses certainly could and should be reexamined critically, but in any case it is impossible not to take them into account. It would be like a twentieth-century painter ignoring the work of Paul Klee. Le Corbusier personified the hopes of the new architecture. What I find most fascinating and astonishing about him is his ability to translate every kind of need, hope, and thought into architectural terms. There was no political, social, or economic consideration that Le Corbusier could not in some way transform into architecture. This, perhaps, is the great lesson he has taught us.

What impressed me most about Kahn was his ability to get to the roots of problems. He had an almost messianic predisposition to focus on man's primary needs. The edifice was always, for Kahn, a space in which to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the mind before those of the body.

As for Scarpa, what is most important was his capability and sensitivity in giving expression to materials; his ability to read into the very structure of material in order to draw the greatest possible expression from it. Then there's also the great pleasure, the joy he derived merely from something well made.

As for what concerns I share with them, I would definitely have to say poetry is among them, as well as a hope in man beyond all reason.

Wrede: Do you see these concerns as transcending changes in building technology and the culture?

Botta: I believe that technology is a tool, and as such it can be either well used or ill used. The culture of our time has put too much faith in technology for its own sake, without ever rooting its implementation in human dimensions. With the technological infatuation of the last few decades now behind us, we can examine more critically what we have accomplished and what we are in the process of accomplishing. We've gone to the moon, and yet in most cases we have not been able to make better houses on earth. In the modern city we do not live well, our dwellings are miserable, it is hard to get around, it is hard to breathe. The laws of balance between man and nature have been shattered. As a result, the peace and harmony for which man strives are increasingly artificial. We live miserably during the week only to run away in search of peace and quiet on the weekends. During months of the year we accept the harshness of the city, only to escape to the country for vacation.

We have to realize that despite the greater technical comfort afforded by the modern city, the historical city still in fact offers a higher quality of life. We have to look critically at what we have produced and redefine our objectives as regards the dimension of human existence. The danger of losing control over technological growth is a real one. One works either for man or against him; there is no middle ground.

I seem to have more and more a sense of the existence of certain hidden but profound demands—which I recognize as part of the heritage of the modern movement's masters—demands which reassert man as the focus of interest of our profession. These profound exigencies, the need for memory, the need for archaic suggestions, the need for mythic forms, the need for confrontation between man and cosmic values, the need for the great ideas of the past, are all, in fact, the real motivators which have sustained the need for expression and testimony in every epoch.

I feel more and more the need to present images that reaffirm man's ties to his past; I feel it is more important to formulate problems than to provide solutions. Building, for me, is a way of bearing witness to the past, to the greatness of the past, by means of atavistic powers, the mysterious images, the magical symbols which put man back in touch with the deepest memories of his culture.

I believe that today making architecture is a way of resisting the loss of identity, a way of resisting the banalization, the flattening of culture brought about by the consumerism so typical of modern society. In this sense, architecture is more an ethical than an aesthetic phenomenon.

Wrede: What would you characterize as the essential differences between your concerns and those of Le Corbusier and Kahn in their generation?

Botta: The difference between my generation and the preceding ones is that we are better able to understand the limits of technological growth. We are better able to evaluate the dangers inherent in this growth and we can no longer delude ourselves that such problems as environmental balance, scarcity of energy resources, pollution, and so on, will take care of themselves.

Wrede: Geometric order, sense of place, the tectonics of craft and materials, and the importance of light are themes you have stressed in speaking of your work. Can you elaborate on these concerns?

Botta: I shall try to answer this question part by part. First, order, for me, is the matrix of all artifice; it is the concretization of thought, of reason, in relation to the natural world. Architecture is the activity which transforms nature into culture. Order, which is often based on geometry, is the vehicle of this act of transformation. I love the element of order, of ratiocination, as an aspect and as a tool for counterbalancing the natural world. The juxtaposition of an artificial element with a natural one creates a rapport and a clash that, in its intensity, typifies the architectural event.

Second, sense of place, or site. The first step in the architectural act is taking possession of the site. It is a conscious act of transforming a unicum, an awareness that grounds the new intervention in the geography, history, and culture of a particular site. The architecture is the construction of this site. There can be no indifference toward the site. It is the very territory of architecture as well as the primary condition determining the laws by which one must build.

Third, construction and materials are the tools of the craft itself. Without construction, there is no architecture; and construction is realized by means of structures and materials. I like to consider the physiological need for protection implicit

in architecture as directly related to the use and perception of the materials. When I get close to an old construction I feel the need to have a tactile rapport with it, to verify its solidity, its constitution, its surface. It is part of man's primitive need to know and distinguish the various elements of his own space. This is why I try to express every construction and every kind of material for what it really is. There's no such thing as good or bad material; materials are either well used or ill used.

And fourth, light is the true generator of space. Without light there is no space. I like to use light as the concept that carries the composition. Geometry usually comes in as a merely instrumental component subordinate to light, while the light determines the hierarchy of the composition. Symmetry and geometry also serve as balancing elements for the light. Light physically links architecture to the heavens and the cosmos: it is the element that embodies the notion of architecture as an entity standing between the earth and the heavens. I think that this is the principal role of light in my work.

Wrede: Would you comment on the role of certain symbolic and psychological images in your work, in particular the tension between unity and fragmentation, "male" and "female" forms, closure and openness. Are these purely autobiographical themes or do you see them as relevant in a larger, cultural context?

Botta: The symbolic, psychological, and cultural significance of my work represents the different interpretive aspects of the same problem (the reality of the architectural object), which, like all messages, may possibly have several interpretations.

It's true that there is a kind of balance in my work between solid and void. This isn't consciously sought. It's an indirect result which I realize is there only when the work is finished. It's more a question of balance than anything else: a kind of statics of volume, a statics of tension, a statics of space. Perhaps it's an unconscious need to give back to the architectural object a balance of its own. The masculine and feminine shapes are perhaps a way to rediscover a unity between solid and void, black and white, and other such opposites. For example: I believe that the primary need of the house is one of protection, but I also believe that the need exists, inside the house, to project outward. This is perhaps why, in my work, the two things coexist—that is, the need to enclose and the need to thrust outward.

As for whether all this is autobiographical or not, I think that autobiography always conceals much broader concerns. I believe that, as an architect of my time, I interpret general needs even if these are often hidden. But I can only interpret such needs in the light of my own personal history—which is, in any case, focused on broad, general themes.

Wrede: For Kahn, a logically articulated structural system was an important priority in his work; in your work, structural systems and structural logic do not appear to be of equal importance. What are your priorities?

Botta: I agree that in Kahn the question of structure is very important. In my work, I don't think structure is quite as much a determining factor. In my case, the most important factor in the elaboration of a project is the desire to respond to a particular context. Often I actually subordinate structure to this primary concern, which is a need for dialogue, for discourse with the context. For example, in my corner building in Lugano, the desire to respond to a specific situation—that is, the square diagonally in front of the building—made me break up the static structure. In a sense, the building, in its volume, responds to two distinct conditions: the desire to emphasize the corner itself as a strong reference point, and the desire to establish a connection with the existing urban fabric.

I believe that today there is a need for images, for emotion in architecture; a need for architecture to speak once again to people, to become "presence" once again, to become material, to reacquire a meaning that can sometimes be erotic; a need to reestablish a partnership with people, after decades in which architecture was so antiseptic, distant, after the International Style ruined all possibility of communication. In this sense, the conditions for my work are quite different from what they were for Kahn, for whom structure had an autonomy, an importance of its own. I might also add that for me the deepest significance that an architectural object can have lies more in the relationship that it is able to establish with its context than in the object itself. The spatial relationships that it determines are more important than the object itself.

Wrede: What do you see as the significance of the movement toward axiality and centrality in your work?

Botta: I myself am often surprised by the return to axiality in my work. When I begin a project I often feel like breaking up

this axiality; then, during the process of creation, it comes back by itself, stronger than before. I find it there on my work table, like a kind of totemic presence that is reborn each time stronger than the last, precisely when I would prefer to negate it. I have no explanation for it. It might also be related to a question of balance or light; perhaps it's related to the notion of the monument. Architecture is monument, by its very nature. Perhaps axiality helps one to recover this sense. Perhaps it comes out of a need for orientation, for creating an easily recognizable point of reference, a focal point—perhaps all of these at once. Or maybe it's just that I myself am unable to resolve these contradictions, since when I want to destroy these elements they always come back because they are stronger than I. It makes me think of Alberto Giacometti, who said, "What a fool I am! I keep making the same head without ever succeeding."

I believe that every architectural event must have a unity of its own. What I like about the architecture of the past is the immediacy with which I can recognize each individual element. Each fragment, each element, always refers back to the whole. The ability likewise to refer man back to the whole is a sign of the greatness of past architecture. Through one detail it is possible to grasp the whole. I believe that, in modern architecture as well, man still has this need for immediacy in the message of architecture. The architectural message must transcend the complexities of function and the other concerns and demands that it fulfills. I like to be able to grasp the whole with a single glance.

I believe that the axiality in my work is never a superficial axiality. It is an axiality that enables one to enter depth. It's like a camera lens which needs a center in order to perceive depth. So amidst these laws I actually feel I have more expressive space. I need this kind of blueprint, this path, in order to explore various different experiences. I like to experiment with different spatial experiences within this framework. It's like working within a structure, or like being inside a mammal's body with its central vertebral column, around which one can work on the various parts. I like the idea that every building has its own backbone.

Wrede: Historically, architecture stressed precedent and convention. With the advent of the modern movement, architecture stressed invention. In your work there appear to be both historical and modernist precedents as well as an evolving internal typology. Would you elaborate on the roles that precedent and invention play in your own design method?

Botta: The moderns did, of course, see a mirage of endless invention. I believe, in fact, that there can be no creative activity without invention on the one hand and convention on the other. I think every creative act has these two aspects. This is why, before, I didn't speak of the architectural act in terms of preservation or innovation, but in terms of modification, of change. To use an example, I think the painting of Klee, Picasso, Morandi, or Giacometti is actually a very archaic kind of painting, beyond being an innovative kind of painting. I believe that in architecture there is always, at once, a newness of the old and an archeology of the new.

Wrede: Would you like to touch on any other issues?

Botta: I'd just like to close by saying that in architecture I also love those aspects that words cannot capture.

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