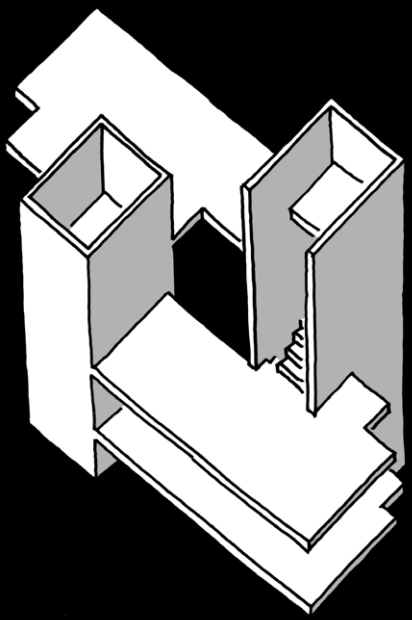
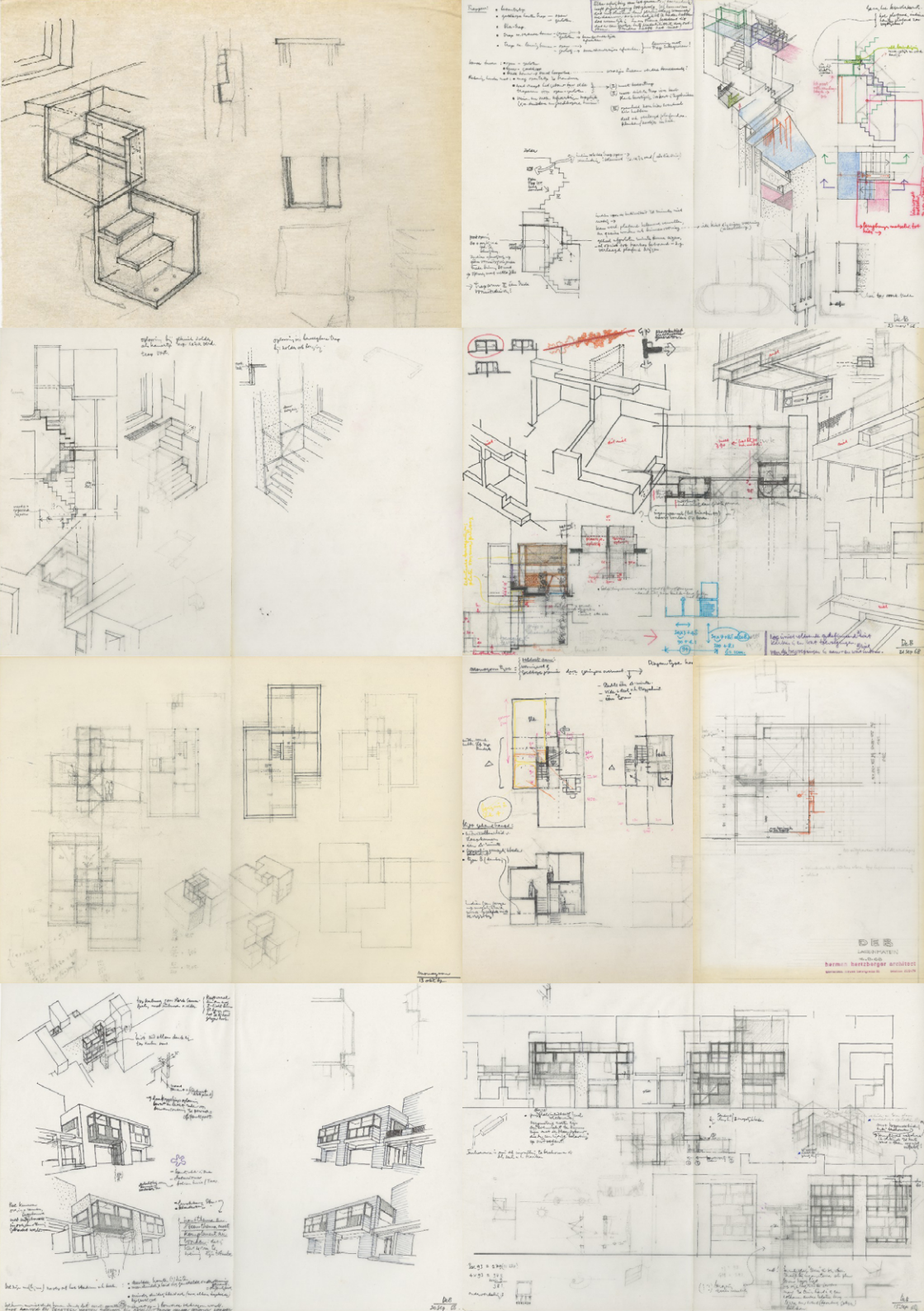
DIAGOON HOUSING DELFT

1967-1970



HERMAN HERTZBERGER


hermen hertzberger architect

Diagoon Housing Delft

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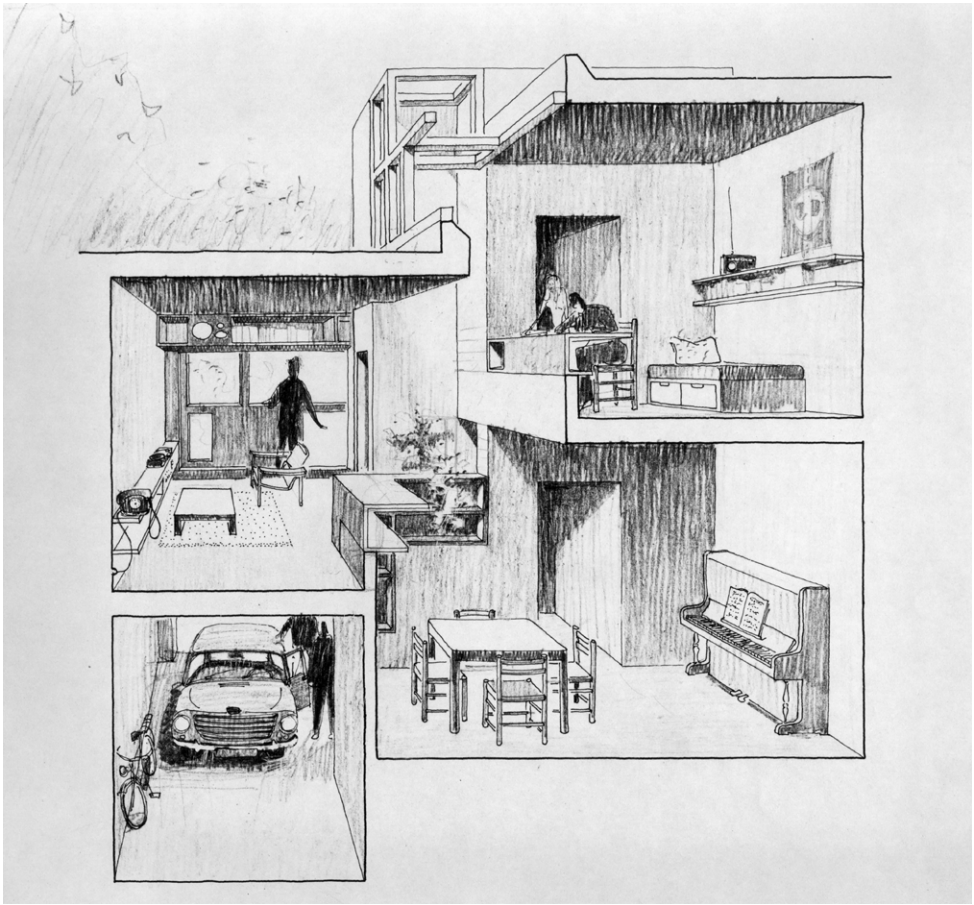
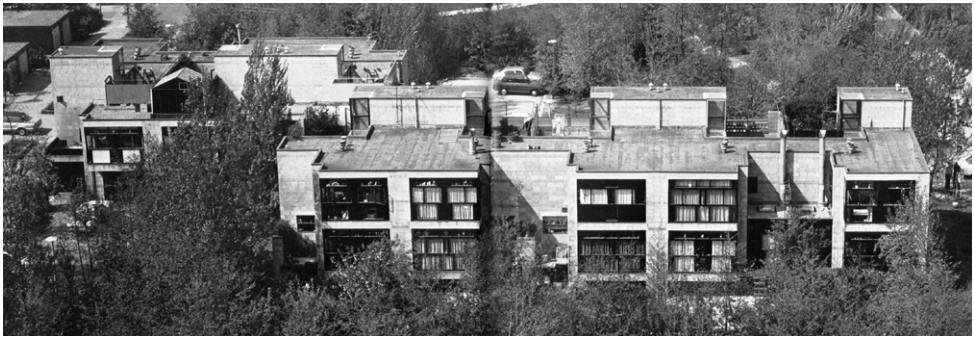
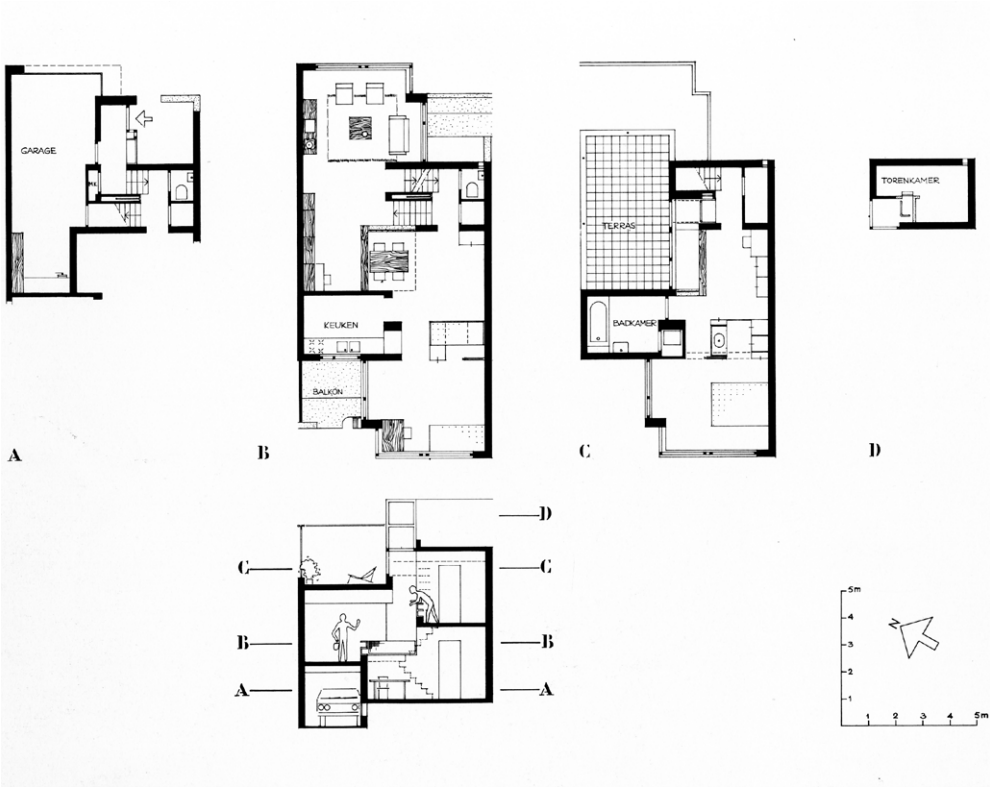
Herman Hertzberger
June 2016






GARAGE
KEUKEN
BALKON
TERRAS
BADKAMER
TORENKAMER
A
B
C
D
A
B
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D
5m
4
3
2
1
1
2
3
4
5m

Diagoon - a framework for polyvalence

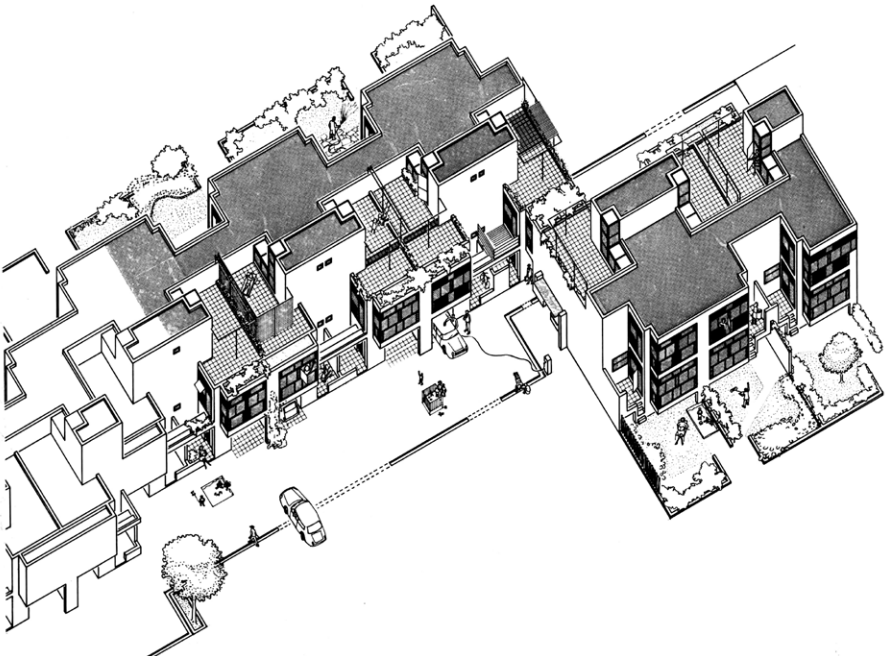
Basic idea of the 'Diagoon' houses is to conceive the house basically as one vertically as well as horizontally articulated space which next to a central living area consists of a variety of sites, interpretable for different use according to everybody's personal needs and preferences as far as enclosure is concerned. In this way it denies the persistent stereotype of the division in two or three separate floors where separate rooms are accessible from corridors. It also allows easy adaptation to changing family composition in time. Ultimately the house as a whole could be one space or rather be divided into, say, four smaller independent units sharing a communal centre with kitchen and bathroom whereas the roof terrace could be covered and transformed into still one more unit.
The central living area is lit from the top where it opens up to the roof terrace and lets the sun in through the day independent of the orientation of the house.

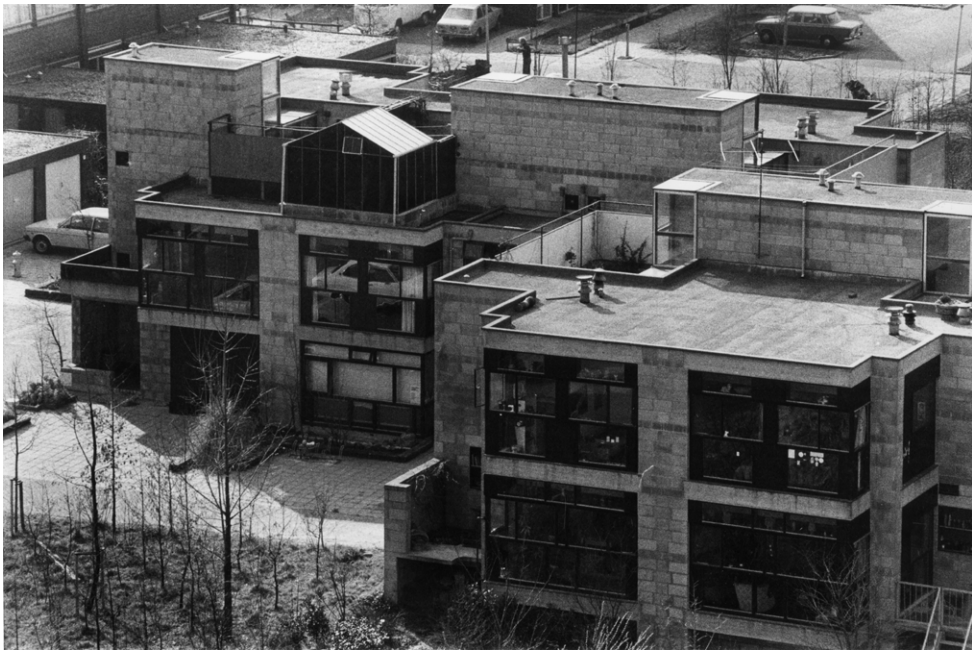
These Diagoon houses represent the outstanding example of putting into practice our idea of polyvalence, as a capacity or inbuilt suitability to generate pertinent solutions for each new situation as it arises. If multipurpose means designing deliberately for predetermined ends, polyvalence is the capacity (where nothing has been fixed beforehand about how a form or space will respond to unspecified situations) to not just take up unforeseen applications but to actually incite them. Powered by knowledge about general human behaviour, polyvalence can anticipate the form of objects and spaces, thereby foreseeing the unforeseen.

Polyvalence is not leaving out as much as possible but contributing a maximum of spatial conditions that in principle can figure in every situation and in every designation. These conditions lend themselves to each new use, depending on what can be expected. The focus here is on facilities that, even in situations when no immediate use presents itself, at no time obstruct user freedom but rather incite and encourage a more intensive use of space. If generic space allows for interpretation, passively in other words, polyvalence actively induces it, encourages it and in principle incites it. Unlike the indifference of generic space polyvalent space is essentially suggestive to whatever it is that presents itself. It is in fact what we have called inviting form. What really matters, then, is the suitability of the space concerned, its capacity to become an environment familiar to whoever appropriates it next.

In fact it is rather like the way the imagination of children makes a large cardboard box into a child-sized house full of everything they need to stay in and with cut windows to look out, instead of a fully formed and thus defined product. What you need are incentives, stimuli leading to interpretation.

The ‘idea’ of a thing can serve as a substitute for the definite form of that thing. It represents in your head the image that doesn’t exist literally in reality. The idea behind polyvalence was that we could focus more on the ‘idea’ of the things when designing than on their literal, materialized form. This gives the most basic forms (call them arch-forms) and spatial principles, which possess the capacity to initiate in every situation a process that can create for everyone the spatial conditions most appropriate to them. What this does in fact is reach back to the structural basis, the capacity to give each new situation the interpretation appropriate to it.





In order that applicability and life expectancy are kept as general as possible, we must derive our formal idiom preferably from the collective memory: that which is entertained consciously or otherwise by everyone in one way or another and retrievable by means of association. To this end our themes must be suggested rather than enunciated, inciting 'readers' to interpretations of their own, so that it is appropriate for everyone in their own way and in their own words. Architects and architecture accordingly provide the language rather than the narrative and with it the 'structure' that can generate ever new narratives from place to place and from moment to moment.

And just as the original structuralism in language and in the ordering of human social patterns makes a distinction between what in principle is objective and permanent – the structural – and the way that permanent component is interpreted in subjective situations that are different every time, it is equally possible to translate that distinction into architecture. This can be clarified by the concepts of 'competence' and 'performance', which lends themselves not just in language but equally in architecture to distinguishing between a general capacity and its temporary and/or local application.

The diagoon houses are more about the idea of living, leaving the way this will be performed to the different inhabitants for whom it is supposed to offer an instrument.

A (musical) instrument essentially contains as many possibilities of usage as uses to which it is put – an instrument must be played. Within the limits of the instrument, it is up to the player to draw what he can from it, within the limits of his own ability. Thus instrument and player reveal to each other their

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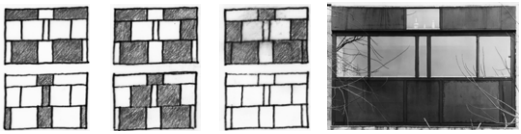
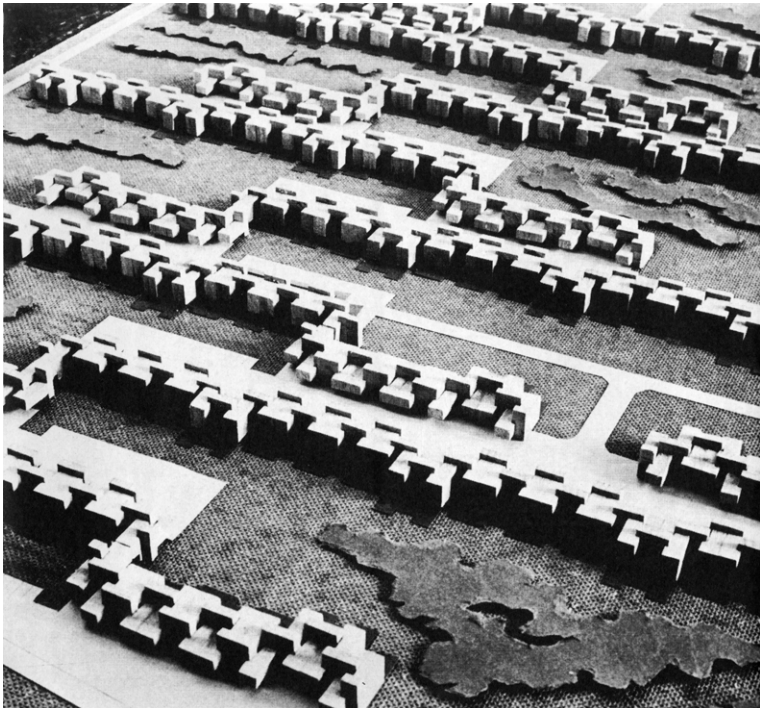
respective abilities to complement and fulfill one another. Form as an instrument offers the scope for each person to do what he has most at heart, and above all to do it in his own way.

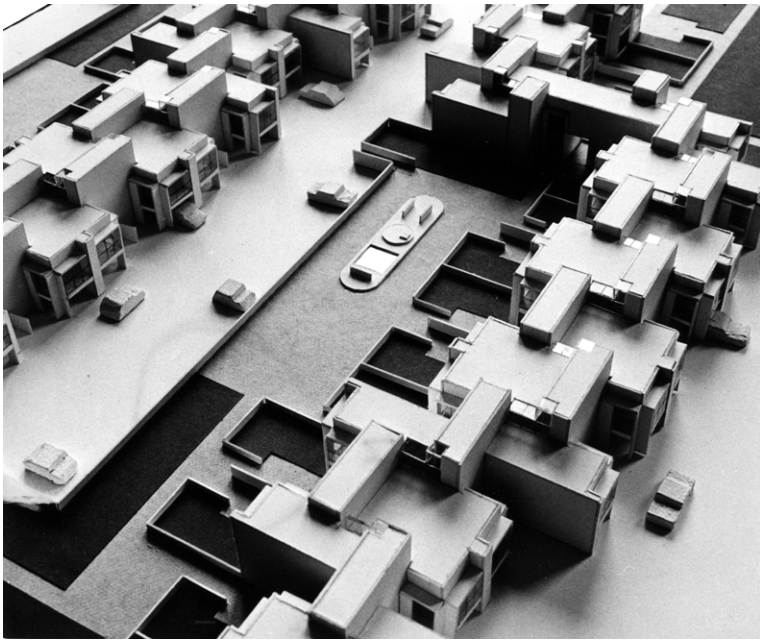
In the design of each building the architect must constantly bear in mind that the users must have the freedom to decide for themselves how they want to use each part, each space. Their personal interpretation is infinitely more important than the stereotyped approach of the architect strictly adhering to his building programme. The combination of functions which together constitute the programme is geared to a standard pattern of living – a sort of highest common factor, more or less suitable for everyone – and inevitably results in everyone being forced to fit the image that we are expected to project, according to which we are expected to act, to eat, to sleep, to enter our homes – an image, in short, which each one of us only very faintly resembles, and which is therefore wholly inadequate.

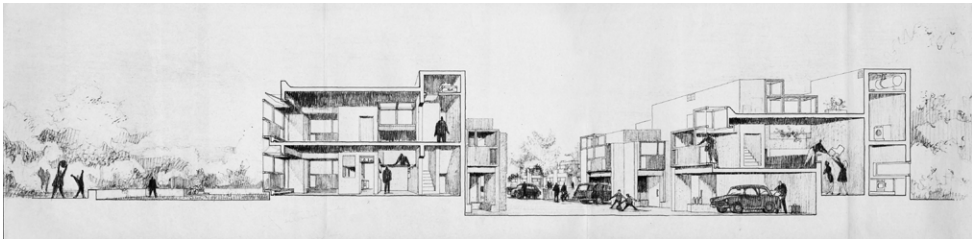
Window frames are designed in a way as to offer a choice of glass or rather closed panels. As long as it is filled in symmetrically it will always show a characteristic appearance. Probably this architectonic intervention, the way it literally wants to explain the idea of framework (structure) and infill, was pushing too far and did not really work out. Those windows that are not composed after this design principle are added by inhabitants in places of their own choice.



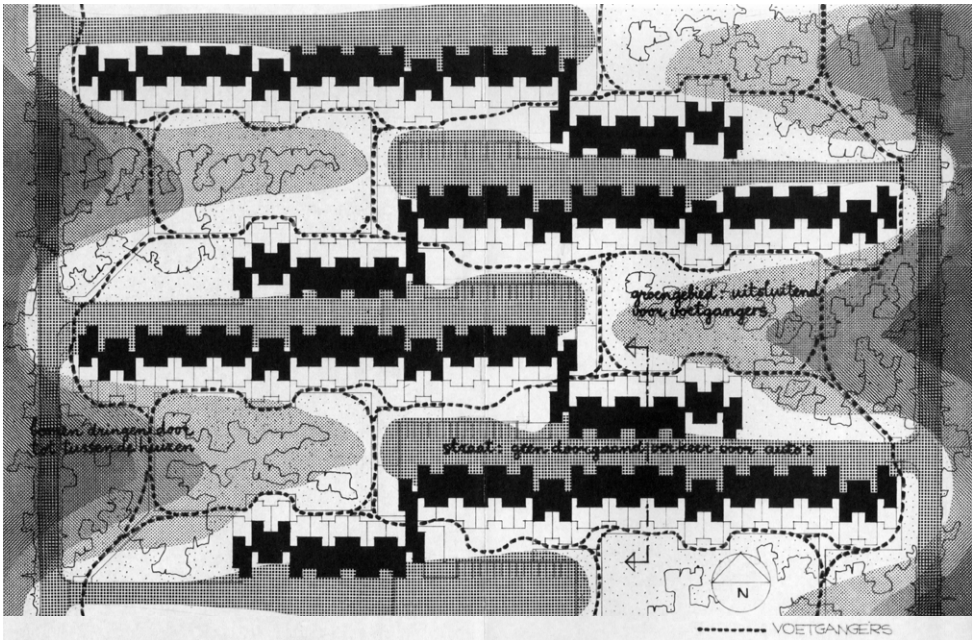
We refrained from separating walls between adjacent gardens as well as terraces, limiting our intervention to a merely suggestion by a footing of concrete blocs with holes for inhabitants to - if they feel a need - complete it with a wall of climbing plants, reed mats, or any other material including a stone wall if they like.







Prior to the construction of the eight Diagoon units we were commissioned to design a complete neighbourhood in the village of Vaassen where a prototype in an urban scheme was presented first. But the investor thought this too great a risk to built such a quantity of what was considered an experimental proposal. Later on it was decided to build twelve units which was limited after all to the eight finally realised units. Of these eight units six have their entrance at the west side and two directed to the east with at the turning point a pedestrian public throughway. In the original urban scheme this was a repeated device in the pedestrian routing system.



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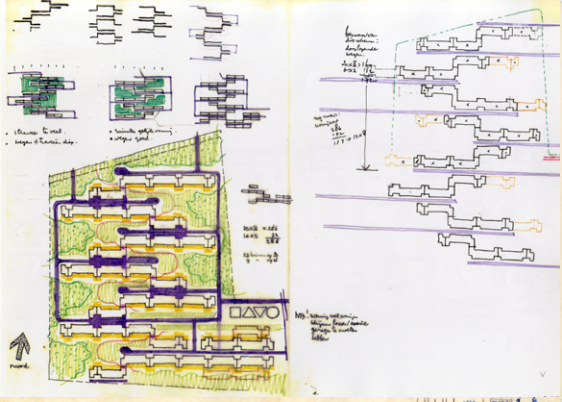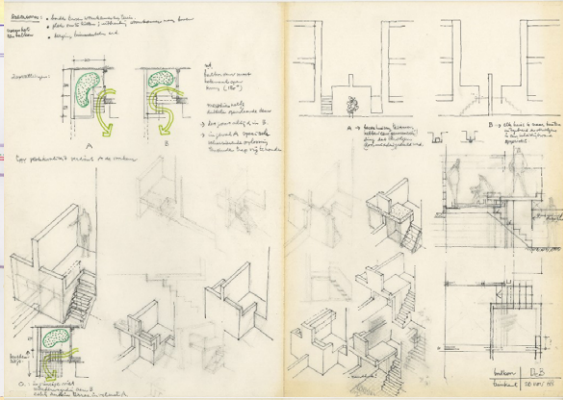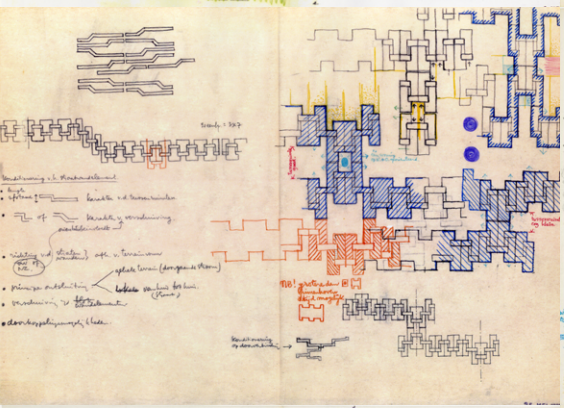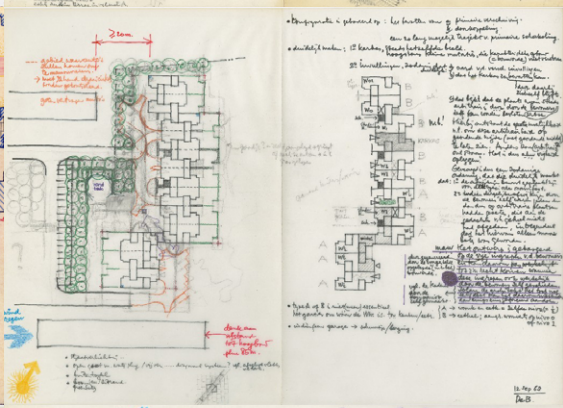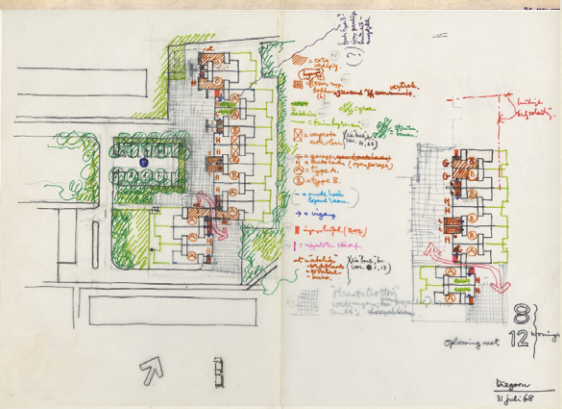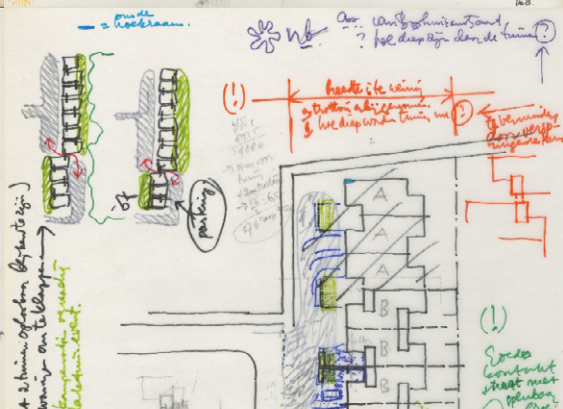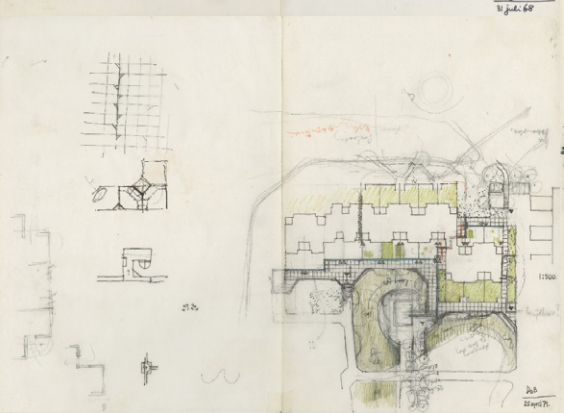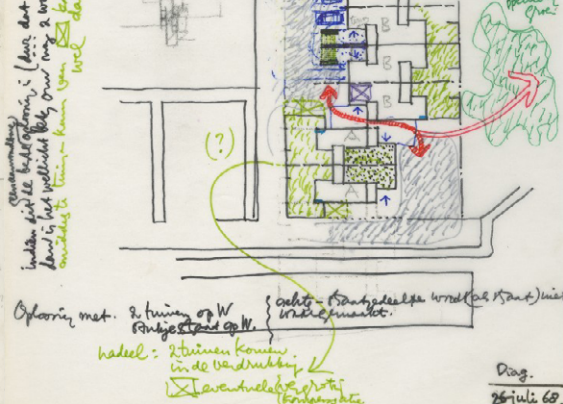
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