

How to Re-inhabit the House of Your Enemy?



DAAR/Diego Segatto

In the summer of 2005, the Israeli Army left the ground of the Gaza strip and relocated the occupation to the airspace up above—and, of course, around its walls and gates. It left behind the bulldozed rubble of more than 3,000 buildings. These were mainly single-family homes, but also public buildings, schools, military installations as well as industrial and agricultural facilities built for the benefit of the twenty-one settlements and the scores of military bases that protected them. Prior to the withdrawal, and ignorant of the impending destruction, a number of local and international interested parties considered several alternative scenarios for the possible reuse of buildings in the settlements. The imminent evacuation had opened up a unique arena of speculation, in which, between April 2004, when the plans for evacuations were made firm, and August 2005, when they were carried out, interested parties grappled with questions that would normally be relegated to the domain of architecture and planning.

Although the evacuation was conceived and undertaken as a unilateral Israeli operation, the fate of settlement buildings was debated by the US, the EU, the UN, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), along with a variety of NGOs, think tanks, and some of the world's wealthiest Arab property developers.

These various groups convened with the Palestinian Ministry of Planning for intense meetings. On the other side, Israeli discussions focused on the potential symbolic effect of Israeli architecture under Palestinian control. Representing the attitudes of the right-wing faction of the Likud Party, Benjamin Netanyahu—who later resigned his office of Finance Minister in protest against the evacuation—demanded that all settlement homes be destroyed. Purportedly, this was in order to avoid the broadcast of what he felt were ideologically destructive images: Arabs living in the homes of Jews and synagogues turning into mosques. The Palestinians, he said, “will dance on our rooftops.”

His rhetoric conjured up images of a murderous Palestinian mob storming the gates of settlements, looting and reoccupying the homes of “decent” settlers. This “apocalyptic scenario,” he feared, would become the symbolic image for a reversal—and thus imply the reversibility—of a Zionist project previously characterized by the seizure, destruction, and, in some cases, reoccupation of Palestinian dwellings that became highly prized real estate among an “orientalized” Israeli bourgeoisie. Images broadcast internationally of the evacuated settlements taken over by Palestinians might have triggered barely-repressed middle-class anxieties at the root of the suburban project itself: the internally ordered, well-serviced outposts of the “first world” collapsing in the face of a “barbaric” surge of the “third world” irrupting, so to speak, from the outside.

The US administration, on the other hand, was firmly opposed to the destruction of the settlements. Handing over homes, public buildings, agricultural, and industrial assets was seen by President Bush and Condoleezza Rice as more than mere economic stimulus. What could better befit the American agenda of “civilizing the Middle East” into a liberal society with broad middle-class values than having Palestinians live in American-style single-family homes? In response to US demands, the Israeli government announced that it would reconsider its decision to demolish settlement homes.

Mohamed Alabbar, a flamboyant Arab businessman, arrived in Israel six months prior to the evacuation, met with Shimon Peres and briefly with Ariel Sharon, and promptly offered to buy all the homes and other real estate assets in the settlements of Gush Katif for \$56 million. Alabbar is the chairman of Emaar Properties, a gigantic real estate company registered in the United Arab Emirates. The company has been a central player in the frantic development of Dubai, specializing in the rapid construction of themed onshore tourist and residential projects. He imagined the settlement block of Katif as the site of a possible tourist enclave.

This resulted in bizarre, grotesque plans for Dubai-style, high-rise hotel complexes. Settler homes would become a part of a set of tourist villages on what was now dubbed “the best beach resort of the Mediterranean”; if the project had come to fruition, such complexes would no doubt have become extraterritorial enclaves set against the deep poverty surrounding them. These fantasies fortunately never got very far. But together with other proposals for wholesale privatization they would have robbed Palestinians of the evacuated land to which they were entitled, and which they desperately needed, as a public.

It was therefore no wonder that Palestinians responded angrily when they were asked to pay for the remaining structures, and, considering Israel's price-offer, to over-pay for something they had never asked for. Is not paying for the colonies equivalent, in some respects, to the executed having to pay for the bullet that kills him? Palestinian Minister Saeb Erekat stated that the Palestinians were not interested in purchasing the infrastructure and told Israel simply to "dismantle the houses and take them away." Jihad Alwazir, permanent secretary of the Palestinian Ministry of Planning, claimed that "the settlements are an alien body that was forced on the Palestinians," and that if it were up to him, he would "have a big bonfire ... where every Palestinian should come with a hammer and bang on a building."

Power Unplugged

Our project began where the above scenario failed, starting with a similar question, but from a different perspective: how could Israel's colonial architecture be reused, recycled, or re-inhabited at the moment it is unplugged from the military/political power that charged it?

The proposals discussed by international organizations and property developers entailed either the complete destruction of the existing architecture, or its reinscription into continued or renewed colonialist functions and hierarchies. As discussed in the introduction, both these paths for us ultimately fail to live up to the conditions and task of decolonization. Hence, in seeking a third option, our project imagined that a new set of collective functions would inhabit the abandoned military structures and the evacuated houses of the colonists.

We began to ask ourselves what new institutions and activities could model the evacuated space and what physical transformations these spaces would require. The guiding principle remains the same: not to eliminate the power of the occupation's built spaces, but rather to redirect its destructive potential towards the fulfilment of other aims. We believe that if the geography of occupation is to be liberated, its potential must be turned against itself. Because the reuse of the colonial architecture is a more general cultural/political issue, we do not seek to present a single, unified architectural solution, but rather what we call "fragments of possibility."

The project was organized around a series of consultations. Each Saturday, we hosted a meeting of representatives of various organizations and individuals to discuss these issues, seeking to determine to what extent the evacuated structures might be adaptable to accommodating new uses. Among the guests were members of a variety of NGOs, private organizations, public institutions, refugee associations, culture and art institutions, private landowners, architects, planners, writers, journalists and academics.¹

The idea was to set up an arena of speculation in which different actors could simulate and evaluate a set of scenarios for possible transformation. Their genuine participation was the crucial factor and the only element that could guarantee the implementation of these projects—if they were ever to be realized.

"Why are you wasting your time and our time by thinking about the future of the colonial architecture? Occupation will never end and settlements will expand even more in the future."

¹ Some of these meetings were video-recorded and can be watched at <http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/scenarios/>.

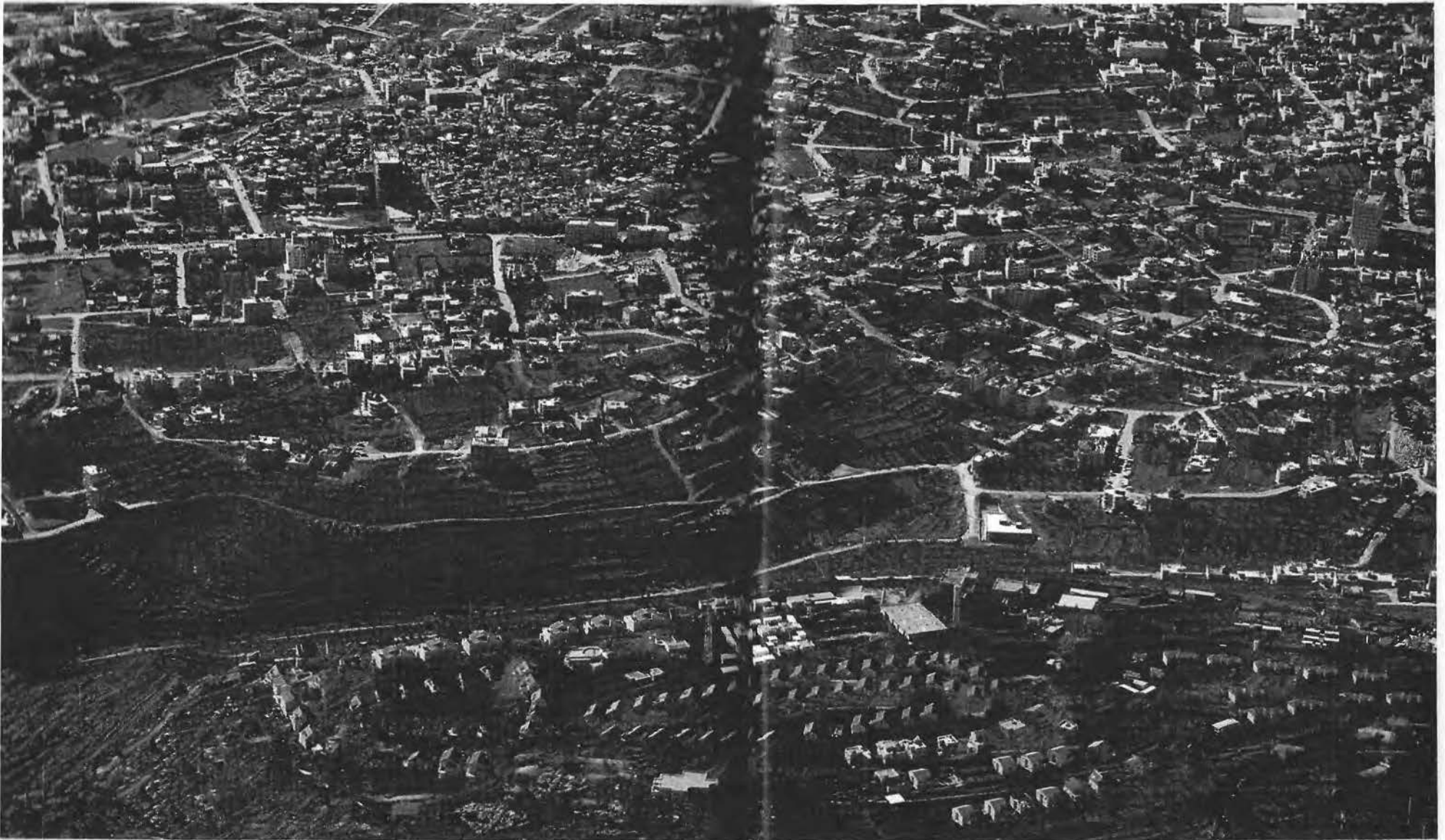
In most of our meetings with local NGOs, municipalities, or universities these were the words used to question the scenarios of decolonization we posed. These are certainly legitimate questions. Being born under occupation, you quickly learn that planning your own future is prohibited. It was only when we began organizing these discussions around architectural models displaying the re-use of the colonies that the possibilities began to become apparent. The discussion then shifted from "if it will happen" to "how it will happen," from geopolitical scenarios to architectural transformations of houses, windows, and doors.... When the process of imagination starts it is difficult to stop it.

Thereafter, when we presented our plans and models, the initial reaction of our discussants was a smile. In the beginning, we feared we were being ridiculed. Were our plans too far-fetched and outlandish in this environment of permanent impossibility? It is also true that models are reduced worlds "under control" and that they often make people smile. But the smile might equally be interpreted as the first moment of decolonization of the mind. Rather than a single, unified proposal of urban planning covering the entirety of Palestine, DAAR presented a series of detailed transformations on an architectural scale. The project site would be chosen as a laboratory to explore different modes of reusing colonial architecture. The first was a colony called P'sagot, on Jabel Tawil, next to Ramallah.

Jabel Tawil (P'sagot)

There is a large satellite photograph hanging in the entrance hall of the al-Bireh municipality (the town adjacent to Ramallah and near the settlement of P'sagot). When we first visited, on this map there were two white cutouts masking two areas: the place where P'sagot now stands and the refugee camp of al-Amari, at the city's southern fringe. Both are zones extraterritorial to municipal control. The municipality could not access the first for physical reasons; and chose to avoid the second as planning for it would be considered an act of normalization of the politically charged status of Palestinian refugees. These cutouts were an inversion of the white spots that colonial cartographers used to draw over native territory. When we returned two years later, the map was still hanging in the hall but the municipality had removed the two white masks, integrating both types of extraterritorial space into the urban and cognitive geography of el-Bireh. With the masks now removed, P'sagot came into full view.

Located on a hill some 900 meters above sea level, the colony P'sagot visually dominates the entire area around it. Until 1967, it was used as an open space for recreation. The hills of Jerusalem and Ramallah were popular with families from the Gulf, especially Kuwaitis, who traveled here to escape the summer heat. In 1964, the municipality of al-Quds, under Jordanian control, bought the land in preparation for its development into a tourist resort. The work started in early 1967 with the construction of an access road, which is the only remaining trace of this project.



Ungrounding, the roads and private plots around the houses are covered by a new surface of soil, Jabel Tawil (P'sagot) and Ramallah el-Bireh.
Based on a photograph by Milutin Labudovic for Peace Now, 2002.

Some fourteen years later, in July 1981, at the initiative of the Likud Party, the colony of P'sagot was inaugurated as "compensation" to right-wing Israelis for the evacuation of the Sinai Peninsula. The area once designated for tourist accommodation was the first to be occupied by settler housing. The first houses set on the hill of Jabel Tawil were prefabricated structures wheeled over from Yamit, a settlement that had been evacuated in the north of the Sinai. P'sagot is at present a religious settlement inhabited by 1,700 people, mainly American Jews and a minority of recent Russian and French Jews. We interviewed Jewish residents of the settlement, many of whom arrived from the US to settle the occupied territories. Here is a short excerpt:

When we came here, some twenty years ago, this place was a no man's land. Then we started adding new houses.

DAAR: As an act against any territorial compromise? There were sixty families, which in two months grew to a hundred and twenty families. There were a lot of empty houses, empty caravans too. People were scared to come. You had to come through Ramallah, not the bypass road.

DAAR: So you would prefer to go through Ramallah? Yes.

DAAR: Just to demonstrate presence? To demonstrate that this is our land. I come from America, and Americans in America are American. If Mexicans come to America and they want to live in America, they have to act like Americans. They cannot just tell you what to do...

DAAR: I am not sure who you are referring to, you just said yourself that you come from America. Because I am Jewish.

DAAR: But the Palestinians were already here, no? Yes, but this is our land. If they want to stay here, I do not mind; they can live here, they can stay here, they can be here, they can work for us, we could work for them. But they cannot decide for me what's going to be here, because we are here. [. . .]

DAAR: Did they move the original houses from the Sinai? Yes, they are prefabricated houses. They are the property of the settlement now, but people can rent them.

DAAR: So one day by political decision all of the P'sagot settlement will be moved somewhere else? I hope not. We lived in these houses after we first arrived. They are still used for newcomers until they build new houses. Here is very cheap because it's no man's land. In Jerusalem it is much more expensive.

DAAR: How much is the rent? A caravan is 550 NIS (€110) a month.

DAAR: Do you think that the government wants to evacuate you? Yes, for sure.

DAAR: How do you know? From the radio.

DAAR: How are you organizing yourself in response to the threat of evacuation? We are not organizing at all. I think people will not even fight here, most of them will just go.

DAAR: And what do you think Palestinians should do with the settlement?

I don't want to leave it like this... I don't want even to talk about it...

DAAR: Would you prefer to have it destroyed?

Yes... I believe that we came on a mission... for the good of the Jews and to get as much land as we can... so what will happen is decided by somebody up there... I don't listen to the radio... What is the difference if I know... Should I start packing? What am I going to do?

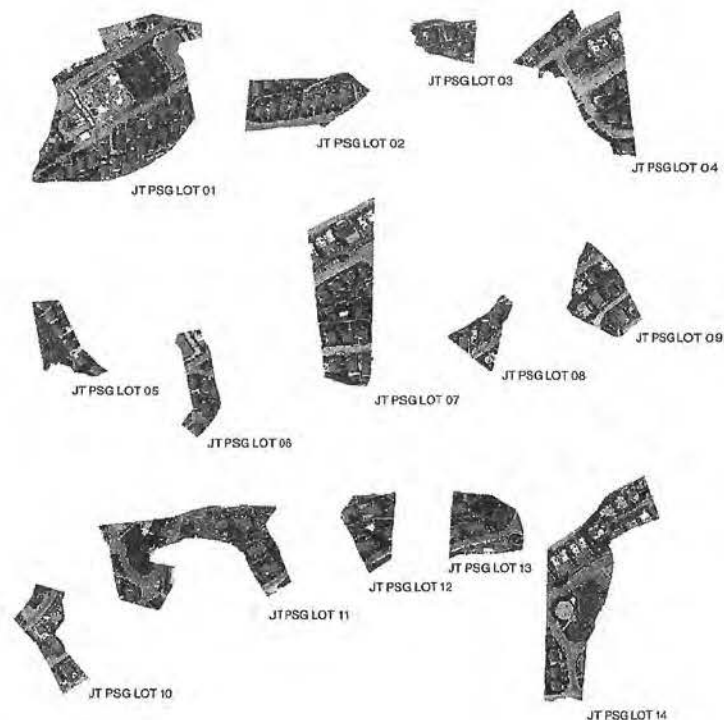


Superimposition of land ownership map from 1954 on a satellite image of P'sagot, DAAR

Deparcelization

A crucial issue in this project is land ownership. In the course of our analysis, we made use of both documentary resources and interviews to identify some of the landowners within the areas of the colonies.

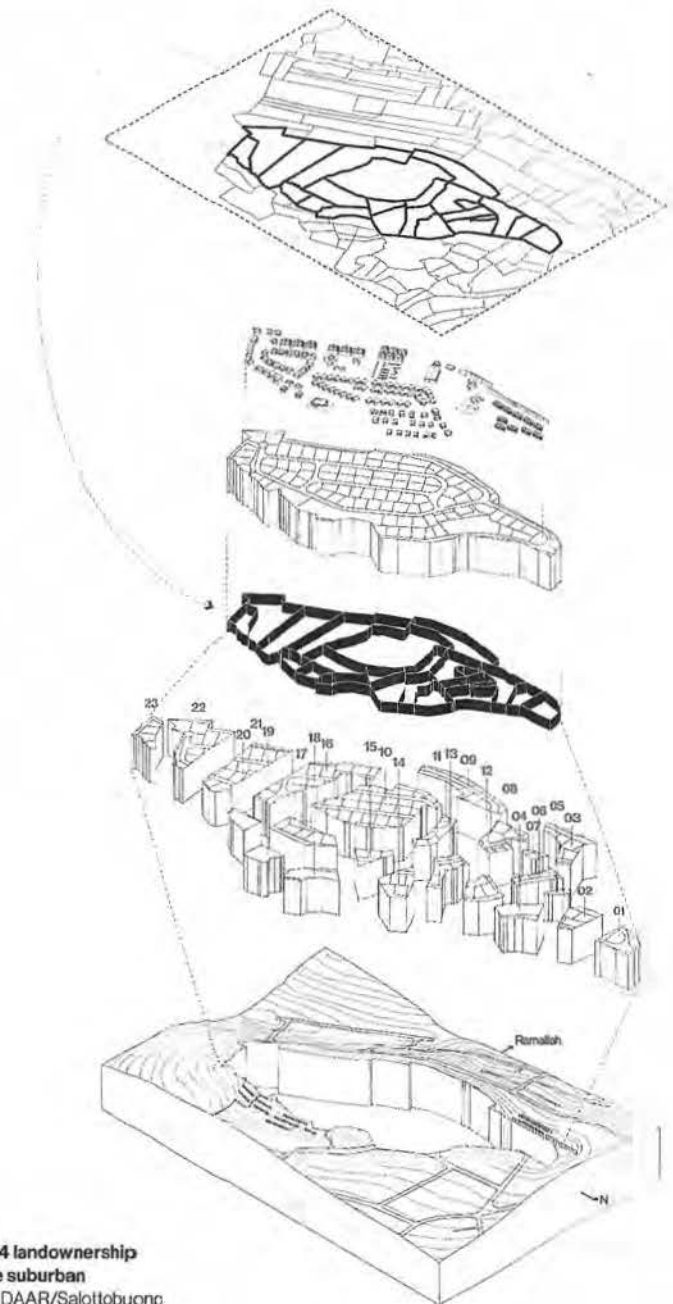
The buildings of the colony of P'sagot, like those of many such colonies, are built upon land that either belonged to Palestinian families, i.e., private land, or on public land that was used by Palestinians for recreation purposes or for the fulfilment of their public needs.



Our investigation traced some of the Palestinian landowners to the United States, Australia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq; and of course, some were closer at hand in Palestine, sometimes fenced off just a few hundred meters away from their own land. Their private and family histories are the intertwined histories of Palestine and its displaced communities, forced out by colonization and drawn away by economic and professional opportunities overseas.

Much of the core of the colony belonged to one of various kinds of Palestinian collective land types, which was the reason that it was easy for Israel to expropriate it as “state land.” The rest, about a half of the area of P’sagot, belonged to private owners. These private fields gradually fell into Israeli control using other expropriation devices. We felt that the fate of private lands should be decided by their owners. It was thus rather within the communal lands that we proposed various types of collective uses.

We discovered a map dating from 1954 that shows the original parceling of Jabel Tawil. We superimposed the 1954 map onto the plan of the colony. The Palestinian demarcation lines cut arbitrary paths through the suburban fabric of the settlements, sometimes literally through the structures themselves, creating a new relationship between the houses and their parcels, between internal and external spaces, and between public and private spaces.

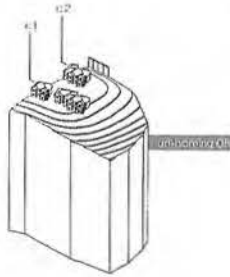


Deparcelization: the 1954 landownership division cuts through the suburban fabric of the settlement. DAAR/Salottobuono

Architecture after Revolution

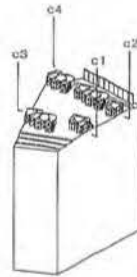
Parcel 01

- ◇ 6.362 m² } 0,09
- ◇ 459 m²
- ◇ 3.903 m²
- ◇ 0,56 m²/m²



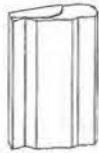
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- ◇ 4050 m² } 0,17
- ◇ 711 m²
- ◇ 6.229 m²
- ◇ 1,53 m²/m²



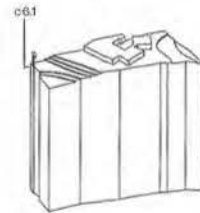
Parcel 05

- ◇ 791 m² } /
- ◇ /
- ◇ /
- ◇ /



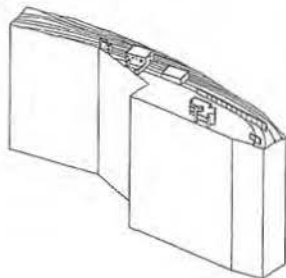
Parcel 06

- ◇ 3.275 m² } 0,22
- ◇ 710 m²
- ◇ 3.049 m²
- ◇ 0,93 m²/m²



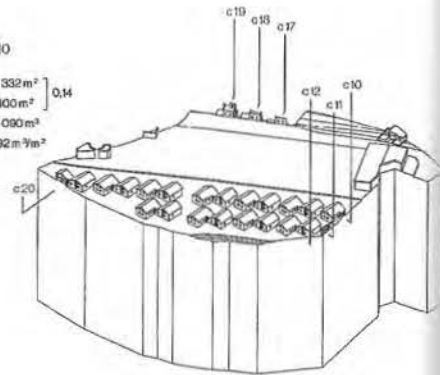
Parcel 09

- ◇ 9.495 m² } 0,06
- ◇ 575 m²
- ◇ 4.160 m²
- ◇ 0,44 m²/m²



Parcel 10

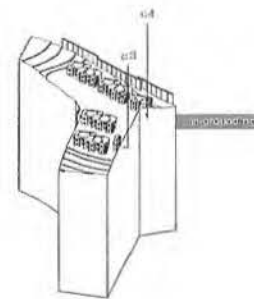
- ◇ 27.332 m² } 0,14
- ◇ 3.900 m²
- ◇ 25.090 m²
- ◇ 0,92 m²/m²



Chapter III

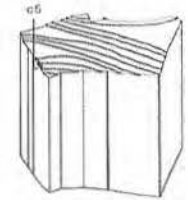
Parcel 03

- ◇ 5.559 m² } 0,14
- ◇ 932 m²
- ◇ 7.974 m²
- ◇ 1,22 m²/m²



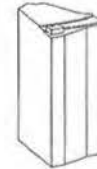
Parcel 04

- ◇ 4.903 m² } /
- ◇ 4 m²
- ◇ 19 m²
- ◇ /



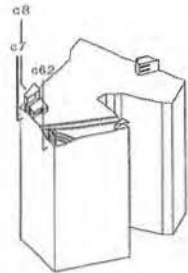
Parcel 07

- ◇ 1.182 m² } 0,04
- ◇ 42 m²
- ◇ 59 m²
- ◇ 0,05 m²/m²



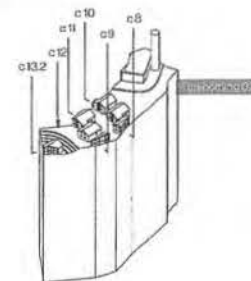
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- ◇ 282 m²
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- ◇ 0,24 m²/m²



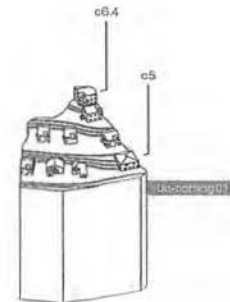
Parcel 11

- ◇ 4.023 m² } 0,26
- ◇ 1.042 m²
- ◇ 5.903 m²
- ◇ 1,47 m²/m²



Parcel 12

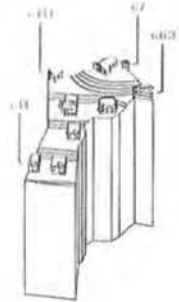
- ◇ 5.420 m² } 0,18
- ◇ 963 m²
- ◇ 4.635 m²
- ◇ 0,69 m²/m²



Architecture after Revolution

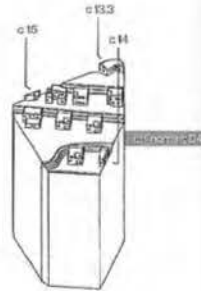
Parcel 11

- ◇ 4 174 m²] 0,11
- ◇ 107 m²
- ◇ 0 016 m²
- ◇ 1 806 m²



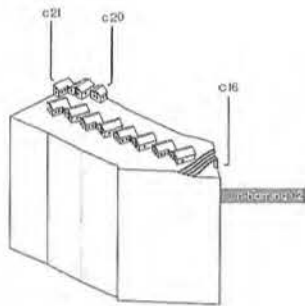
Parcel 14

- ◇ 5 861 m²] 0,17
- ◇ 986 m²
- ◇ 7 650 m²
- ◇ 1 31 m²/m²



Parcel 17

- ◇ 7 404 m²] 0,17
- ◇ 1 292 m²
- ◇ 9 012 m²
- ◇ 1 20 m²/m²



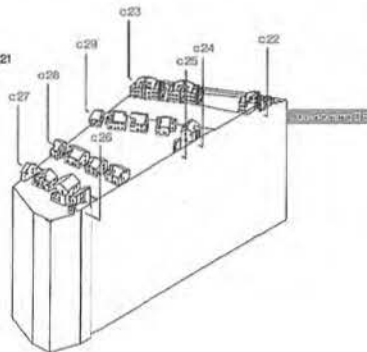
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- ◇ 448 m²
- ◇ 3 273 m²
- ◇ 0,80 m²/m²



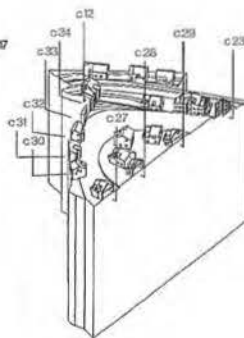
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- ◇ 13 174 m²] 0,21
- ◇ 2 777 m²
- ◇ 24 970 m²
- ◇ 1 00 m²/m²



Parcel 22

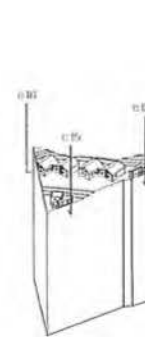
- ◇ 12 448 m²] 0,17
- ◇ 2 114 m²
- ◇ 15 166 m²
- ◇ 1 22 m²/m²



Chapter III

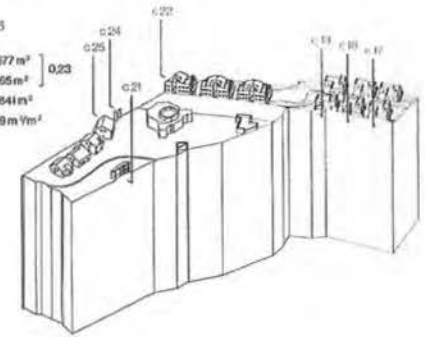
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- ◇ 2 916 m²] 0,23
- ◇ 677 m²
- ◇ 4 038 m²
- ◇ 1,38 m²/m²



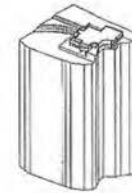
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- ◇ 2,09 m²/m²



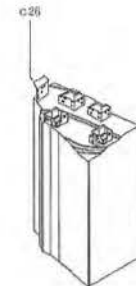
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- ◇ 2 826 m²] 0,32
- ◇ 907 m²
- ◇ 6 287 m²
- ◇ 2,22 m²/m²



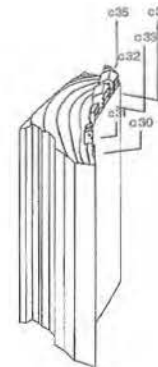
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- ◇ 538 m²
- ◇ 4 615 m²
- ◇ 1,53 m²/m²

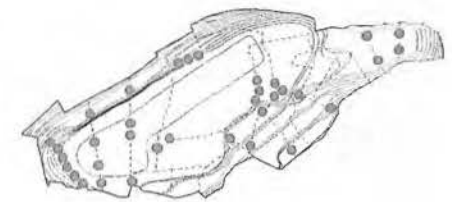


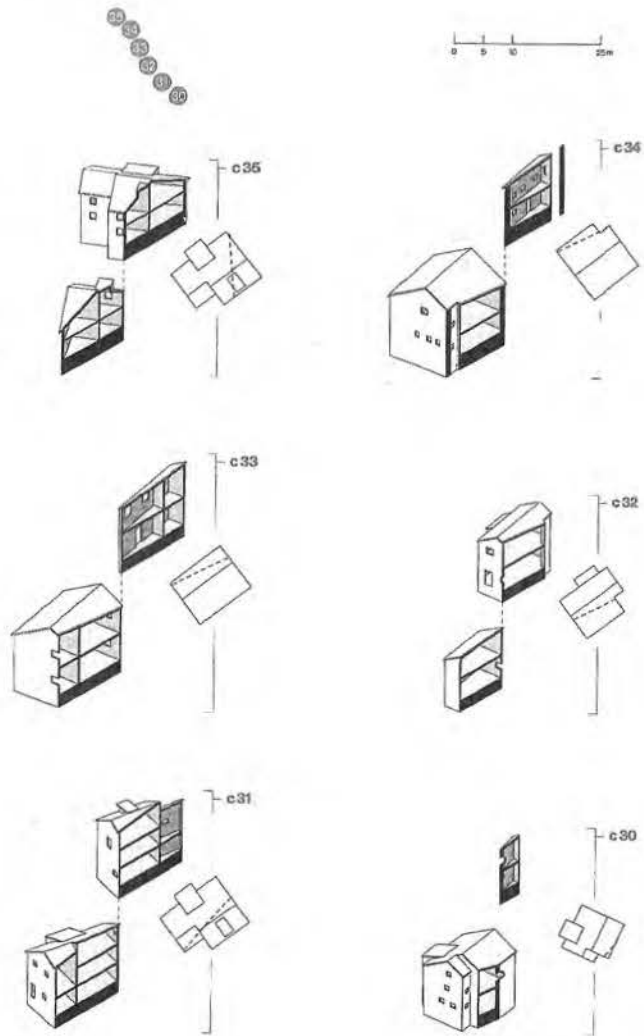
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- ◇ 3 771 m²] 0,09
- ◇ 333 m²
- ◇ 2 689 m²
- ◇ 0,71 m²/m²

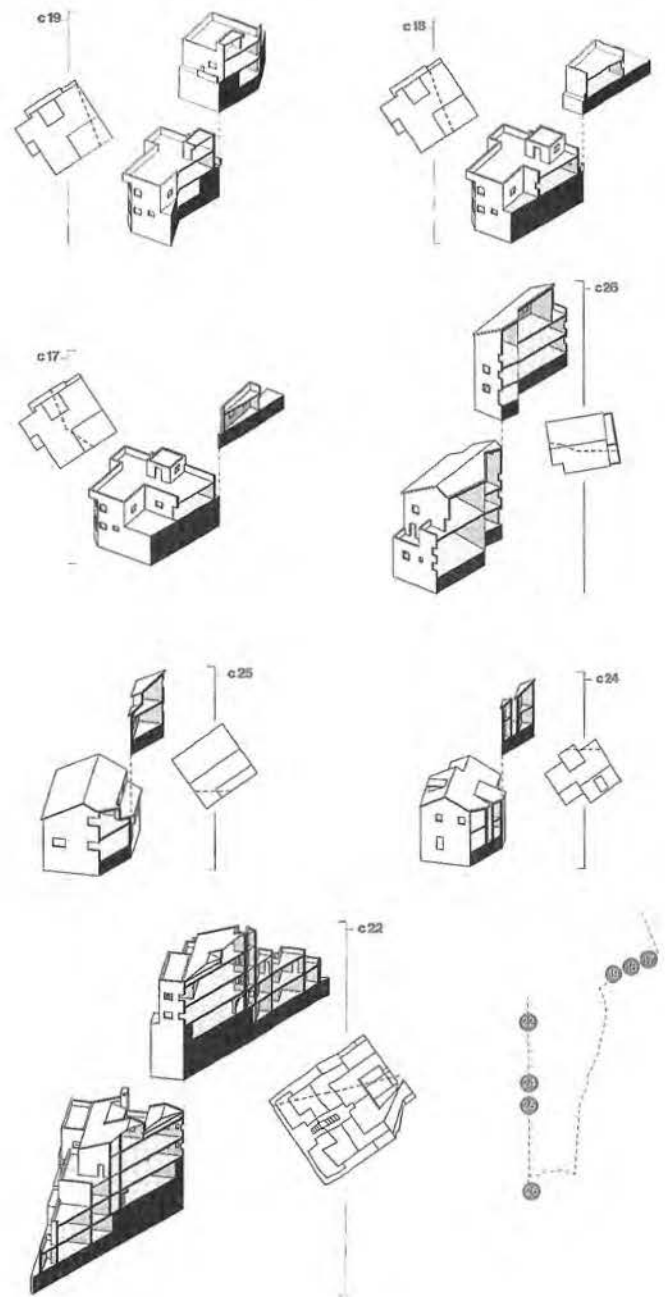


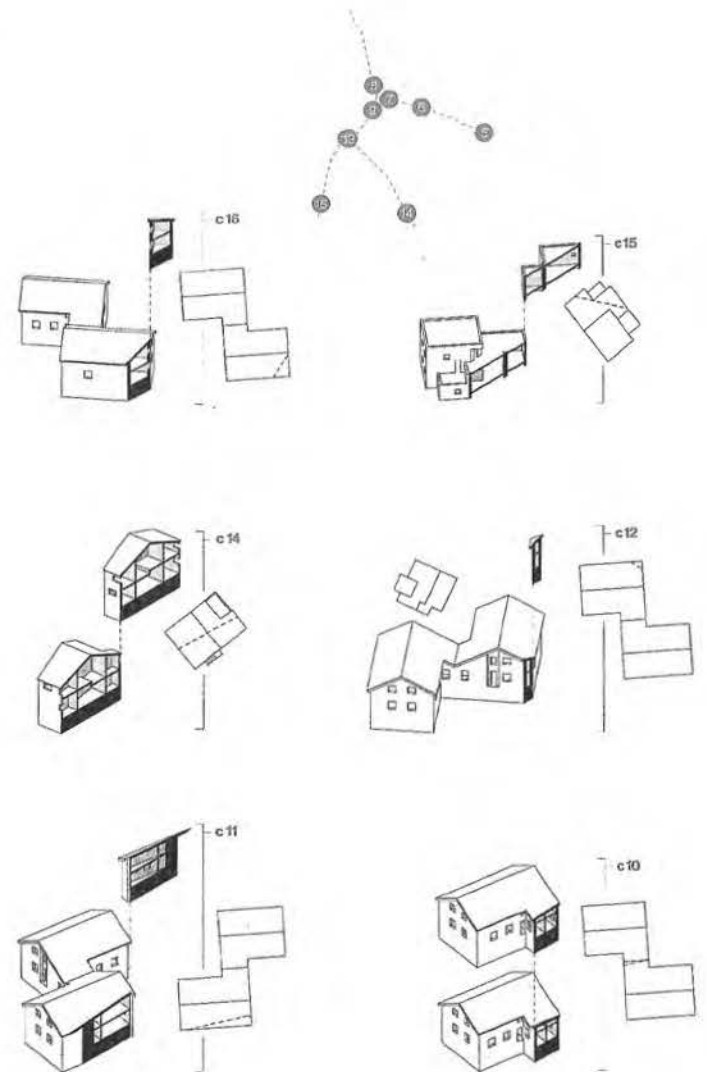
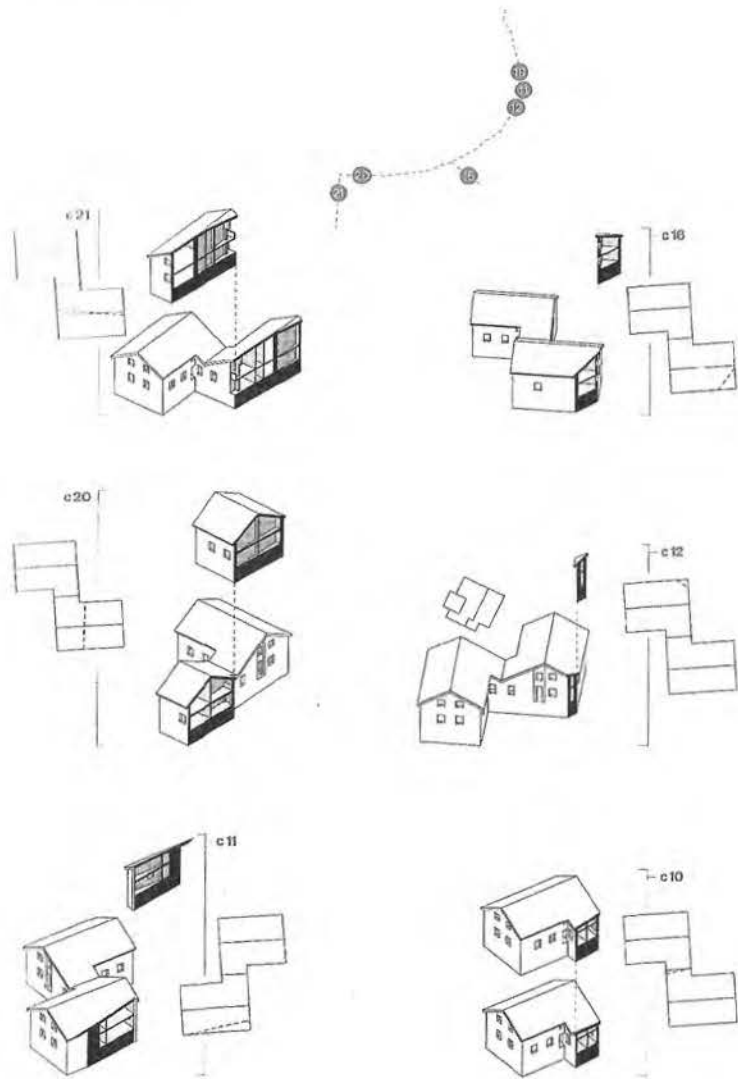
Map of the cuts

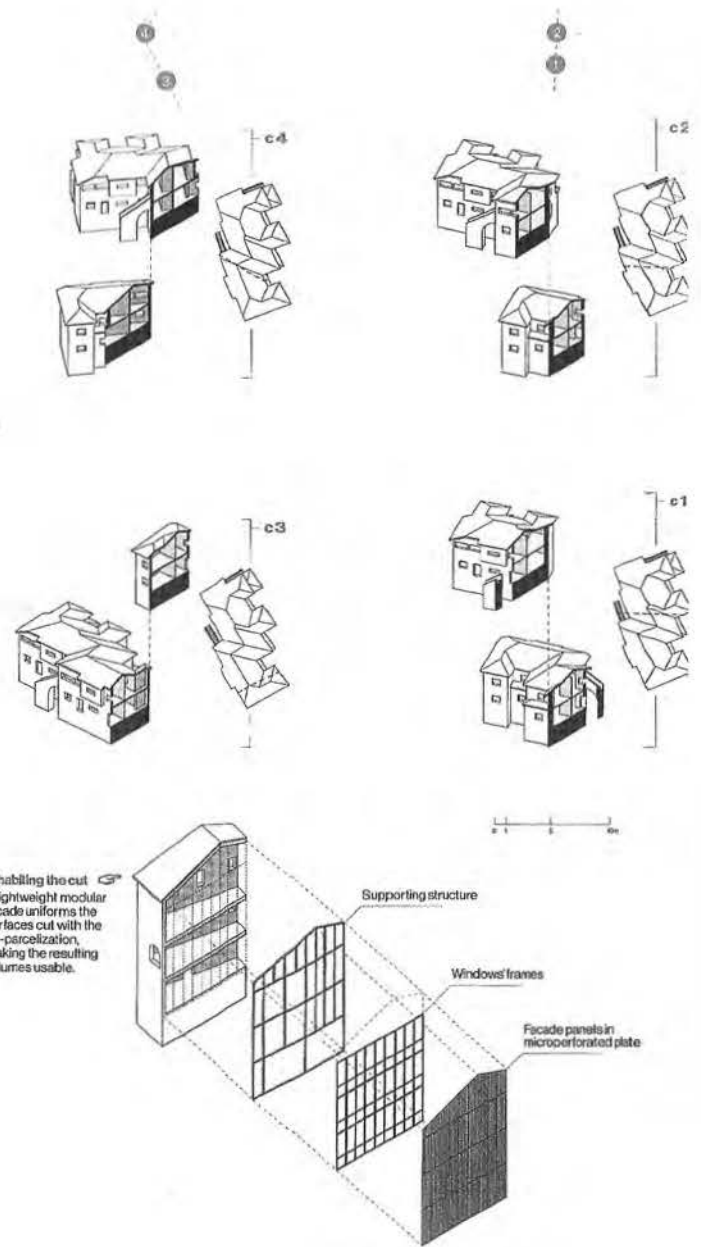
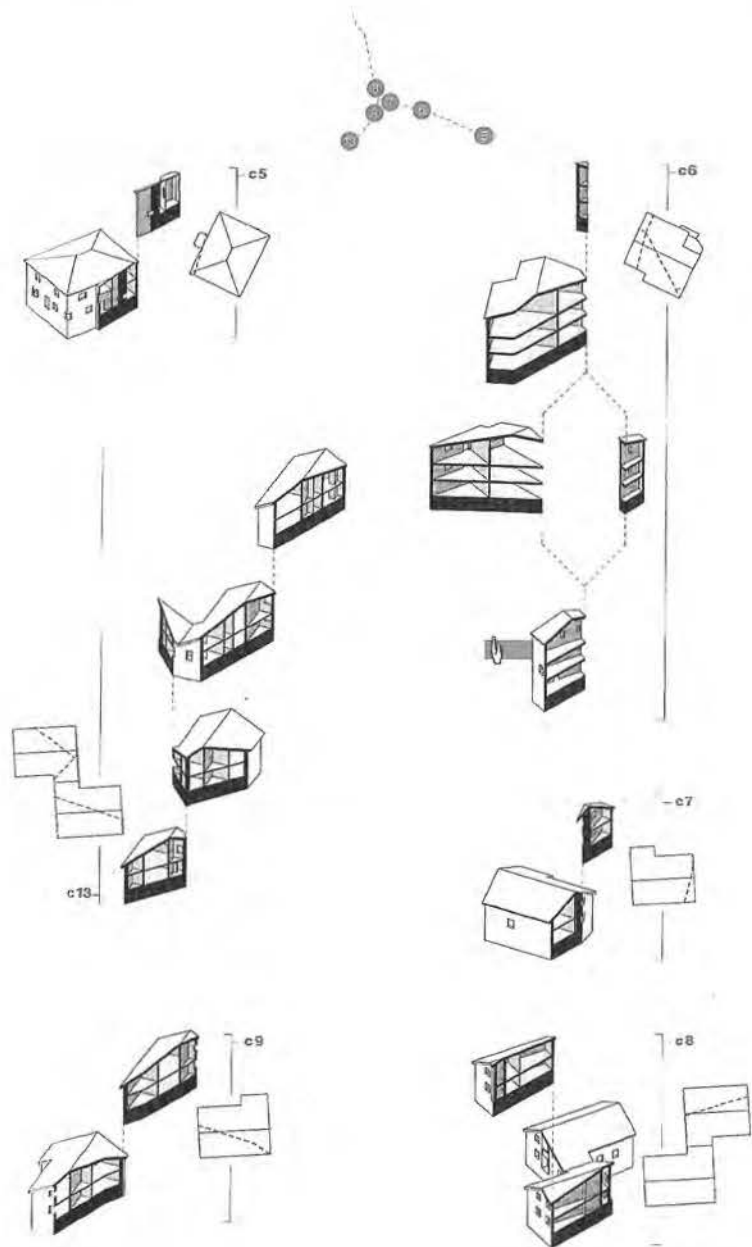


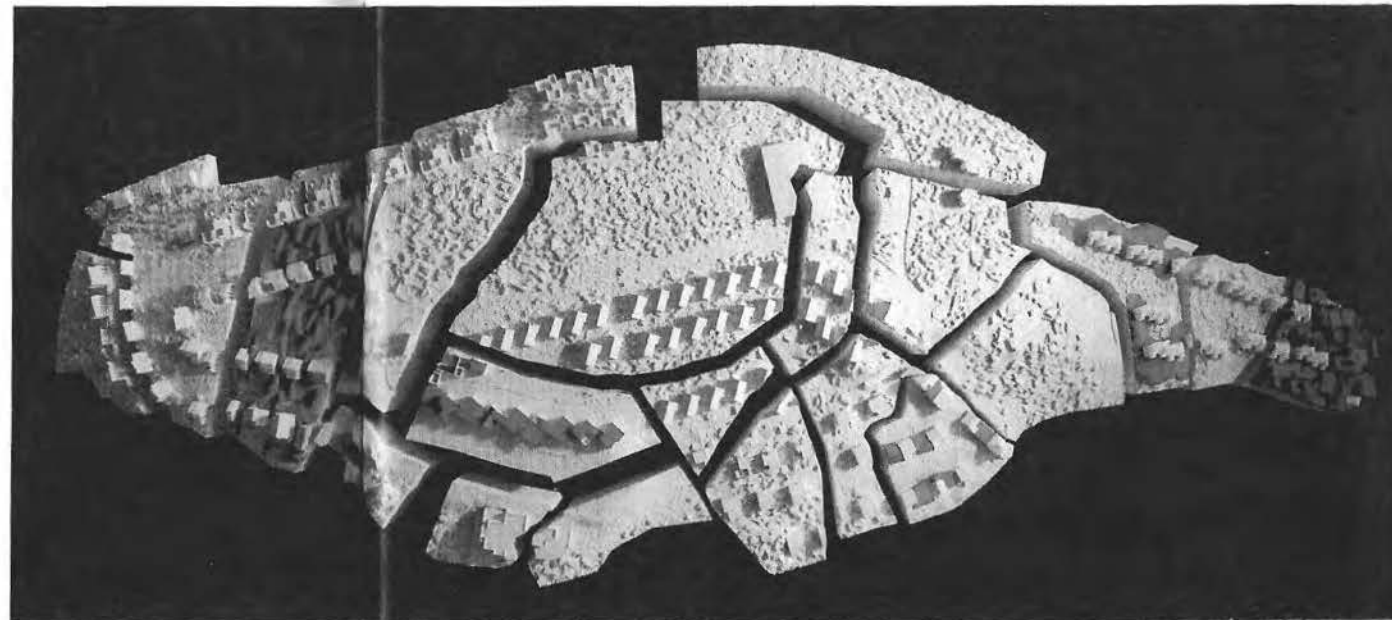
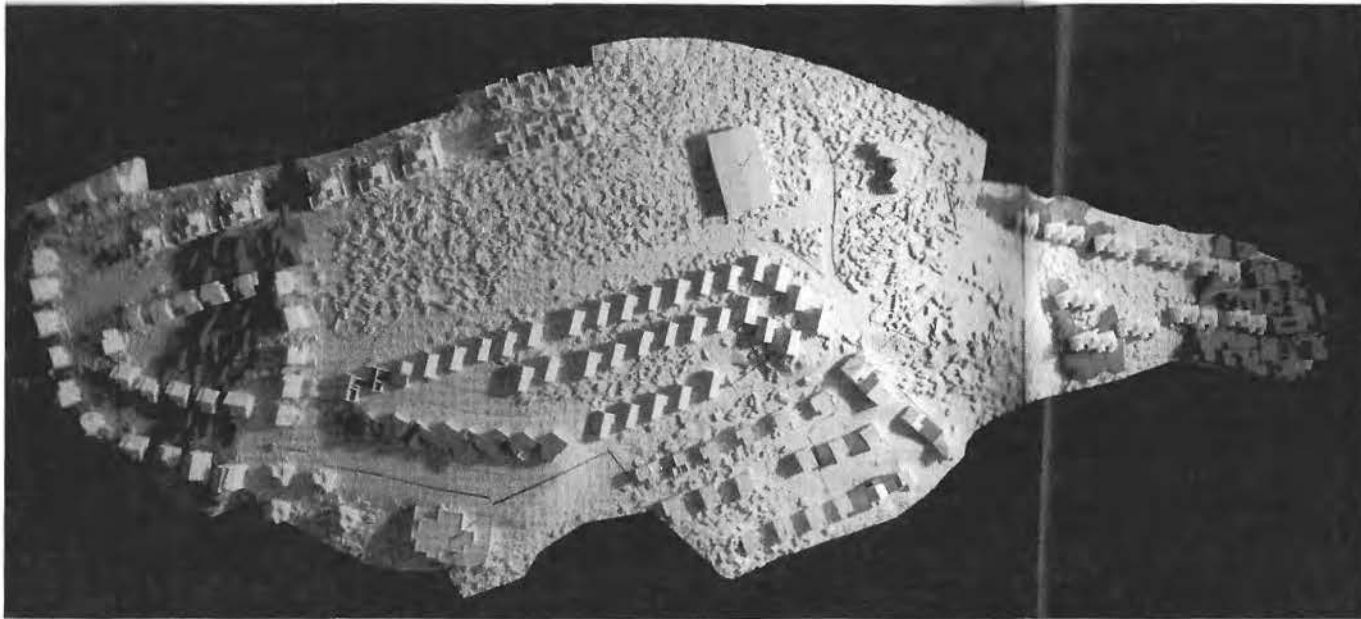


Deparcelization: the 1954 landownership division cuts through the suburban fabric of the settlement. DAAR/Salottobuono

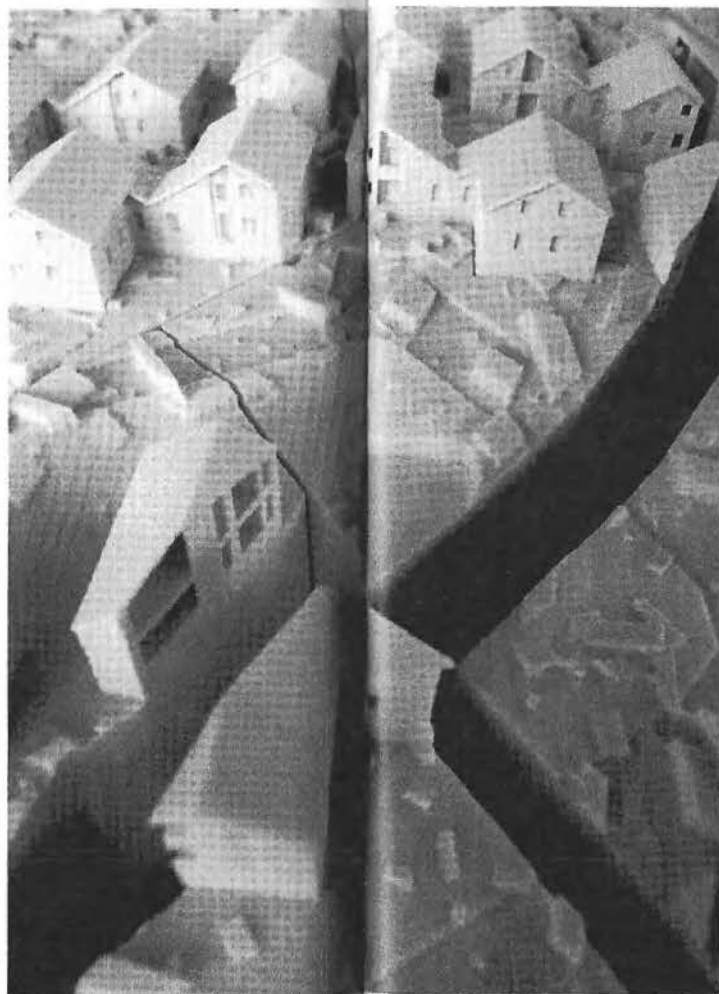
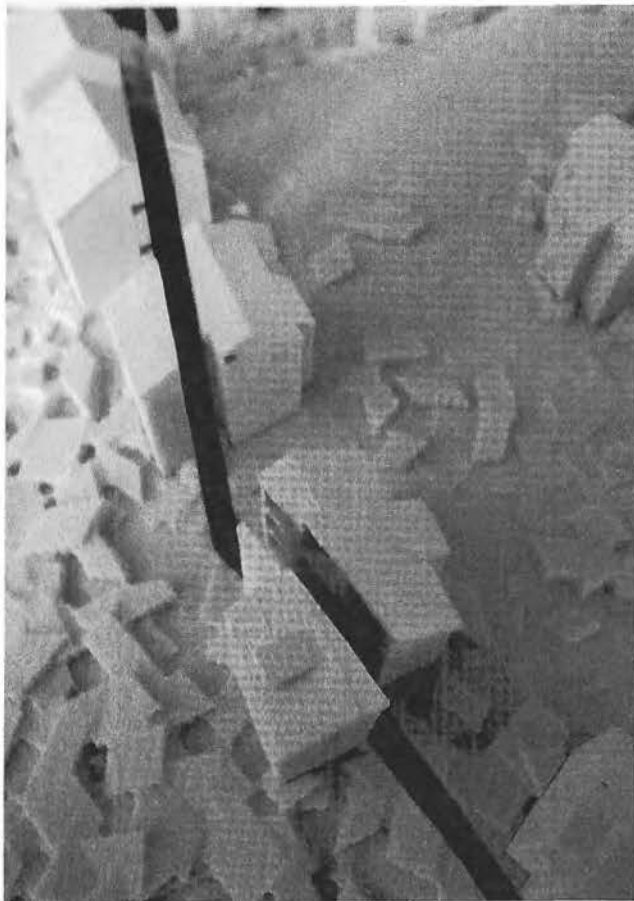








Deparcelization: interventions, in red, are articulated within parcels that are public.
DAAR/Situ Studio



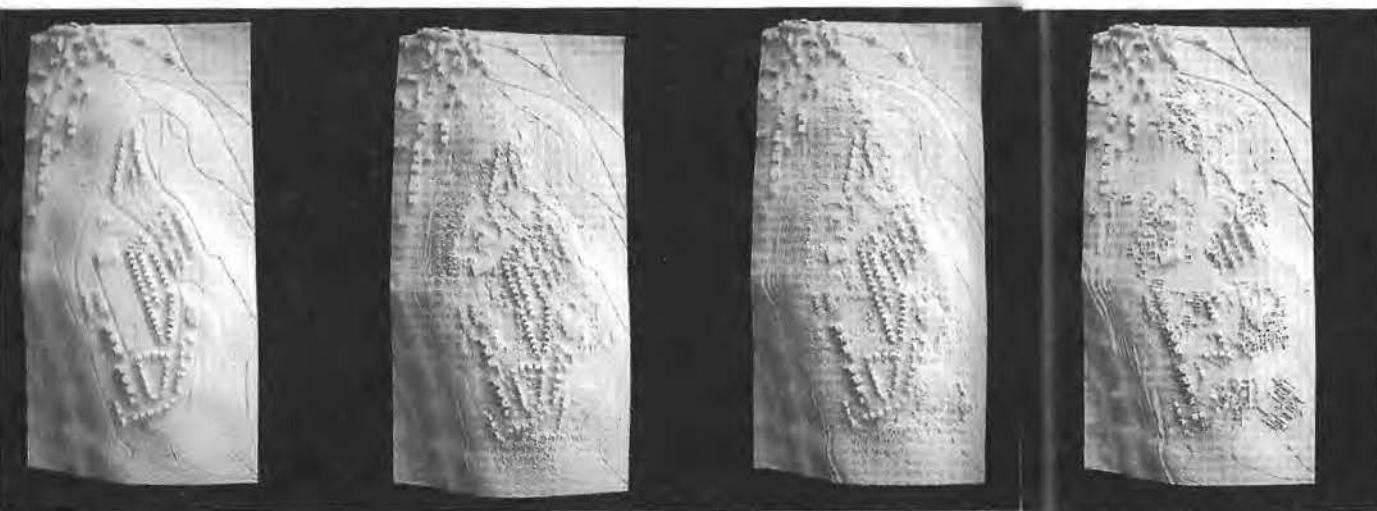
Deparcelization: the old private property lines of parcelization and the colonial buildings are reused for the creation of a third common space, that is neither private nor public. DAAR/Situ Studio

Ungrounding: the Urbanism of the First Ten Centimeters

Settlements are suburban when considered in relation to the Jewish geography of the Occupied Territories. They are gated bedroom communities fed by a growing matrix of roads and other infrastructure—but they could be understood as potentially urban when viewed in relation to the Palestinian cities alongside which they were built. The surface of the suburb is marked by its various uses. It is inscribed extensively with the signs of the petty-bourgeois lifestyle that maintains it: an excess of roads and parking lots, private gardens, fences, sidewalks, and tropical plants. The pattern of streets in the settlements/suburbs is a folded linear structure. By designating drive/walk/no-walk areas, channeling movement, and designating the different degrees of private and public space, the first ten centimeters of the urban ground surface embody most of its operational logic and also its ideology. This surface is the primary site of our intervention. Under the category of “ungrounding,” we suggested a radical transformation of the first ten centimeters of ground.

It is the logic of the surface that we seek to deactivate in order to dismantle the structures that define the internal organization of the suburb and transform its private, public, and communal functions.

Ungrounding is achieved by the dismantling of the existent surface—roads, sidewalks, private gardens—which are then replaced with a new surface layer. The pervasive system of concentric roads and spaces for parking will be eroded, removed, or buried. The barriers and fences that once demarcated the edges of the private lots of the single-family homes will be removed, and thus the land becomes encommuned. Built structures will be suspended like pavilions on a single, unified new surface. Likewise, the re-grounding of the surface is a central part of an attempt to reconfigure a new figure-ground relation. Possible connections between individual buildings will be reconceived. Connections, for example, could be undertaken across a field in which movement is not prescribed by the linear folds of the roads and the sidewalks. >

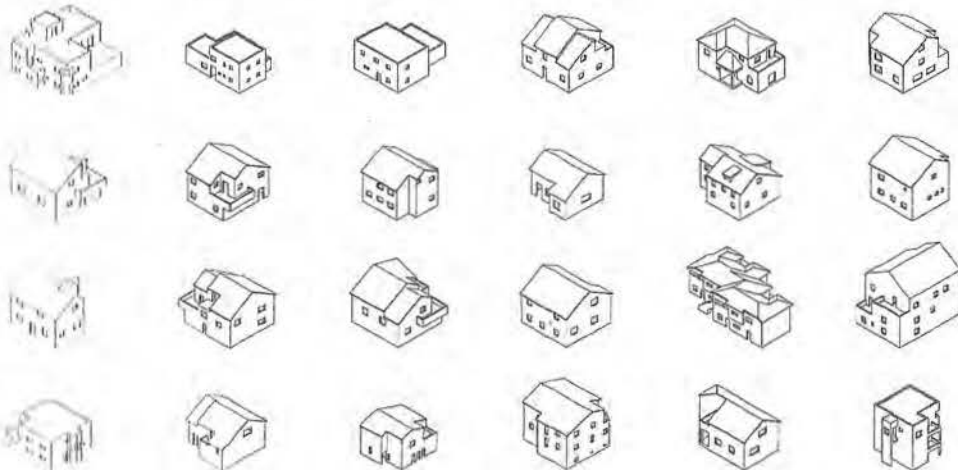


Ungrounding.
DAAR/Situ Studio

Controlled material decay could become part of the process of "place making" and destruction could become part of a design process that would lead to new uses. With ungrounding, it is clear that the destruction of the surface by actively uprooting its elements and also by accelerating the decay of other surface elements would create the ground for new forms of use.

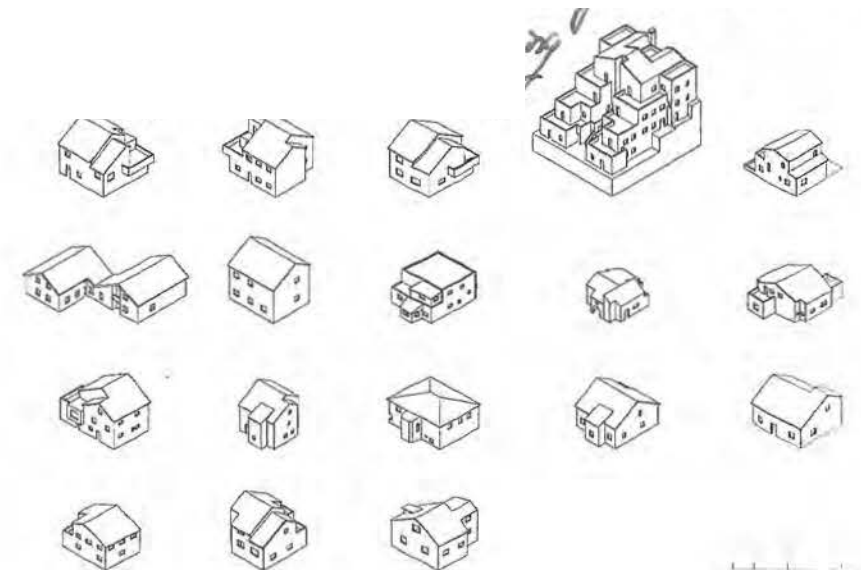
Unhoming

At the molecular level of the occupation is the single-family house on a small plot of land. Investigating ways to transform this repetitive semi-generic structure may open up ways to transform the entire geography of occupation. What are its limits of transformability? Can a single-family home become the nucleus of new types of collective institutions?

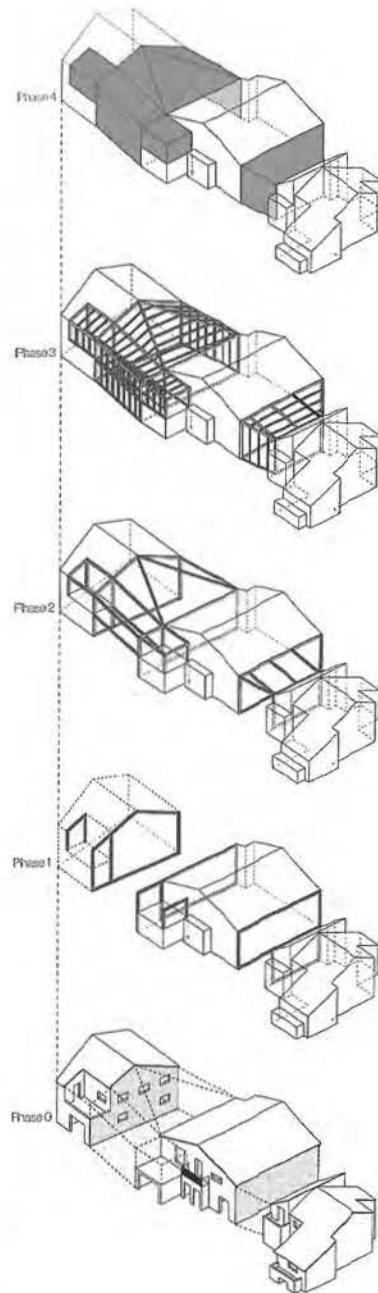


Which structural parts should be retained, and what are the possible ways of connecting together groups of houses? The problem is also how to transform a series of small-scale, single-family houses into unified clusters of communal space.

The problem of "unhoming" is not only a technical question of transformation. A lingering question throughout the project has been how to inhabit the home of one's enemy. Within the multiple cultures of Palestine succeeding each other over the decades, rarely has anyone ever been the "first" or "original" inhabitant, but rather each is always a subsequent. To inhabit the land is always to inhabit it in relation to one's present-day enemies or to an (imagined or real) ancient civilization. This is a condition that turns the habitation of old cities, archaeological sites, battlegrounds, and destroyed villages into culturally complex acts of "co-habitation."



Typologies of homes in Psagot.
DAAR/Salottobuono, 2008



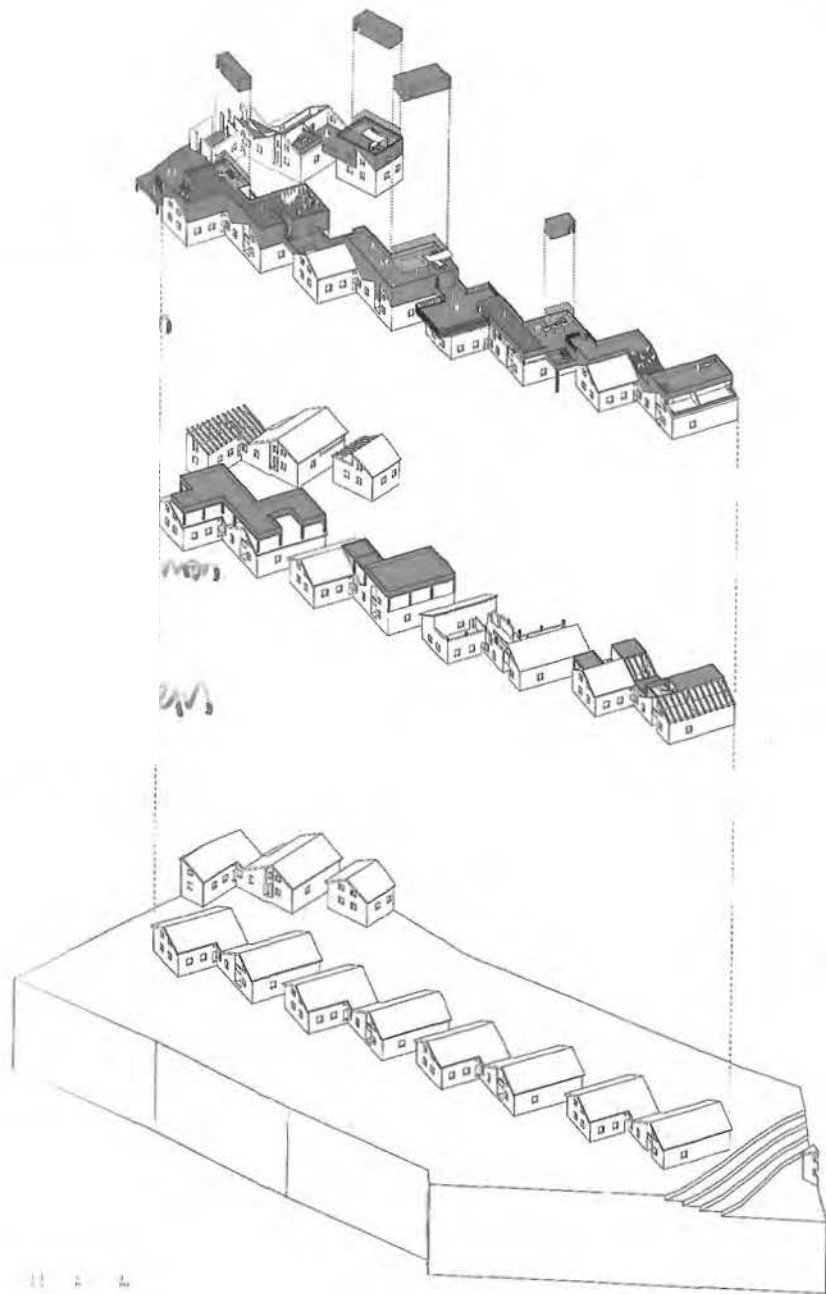
Unhoming.
DAAR/Salottobuono, 2008

A Laboratory of Transformations

Through our work in the Occupied Territories, we began to realize that the project may form a possible laboratory for architectural actions whose reach may go beyond the local specificity of our immediate environment. It may also form the beginning of a way to think through the future of the suburban settlements, many of which are in dire crisis, in other places worldwide. The ritual destruction, reuse, redivivus, or détournement of the single-family house may suggest a possible repertoire of action for the larger transformation of other types of secluded suburban spaces.



Unhoming.
DAAR/Salottobuono/Situ Studio



Unroofing.
DAAR/Salottobuono