

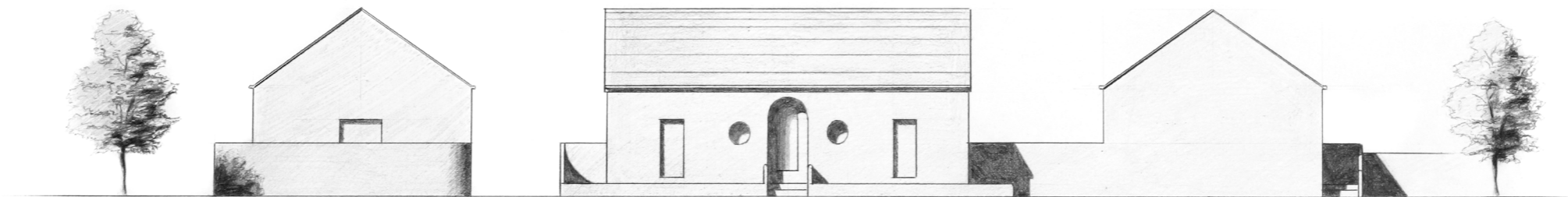
The Role of Country Estates in 21st Century Ireland

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Bachelor of Architecture

By

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Introduction

The “Big House” has been a term common in cultural discourse since the late nineteenth century to identify the imposing country houses built by landed aristocracy across the nation during the Anglo-Irish colonisation of Ireland. (McCormack, 1992) In the second half of the seventeenth century, these opulent structures started to appear all over the nation, and they continued to be built well into the nineteenth century. The Big House served as a physical representation of the landlord’s position and function in local and often national affairs. Wealthy landowners competed with one another to build magnificent homes with elaborate architectural details, luxurious interiors, and expansive grounds and gardens. The Big House was the headquarters of the broader estate which required a sizable household staff and many labourers, which made these homes a significant source of local employment. The landed estates ranged in size from modest local operations covering hundreds of acres to vast estates covering thousands of acres. While discussions of Irish country houses frequently focus on large private palatial structures like that of Castletown House or Powerscourt House, it’s important to take note of smaller-scaled estate houses which often share the same qualities and features that make many of these houses architectural masterpieces. (Craig, 2006)

The study and conservation of Irish country houses falls behind that of our British counterparts, despite the fact that the history and architecture of these buildings were greatly influenced by British practice. Our nation’s country houses have been neglected and underappreciated, which has resulted in the loss of a significant portion of our cultural history, not just our architectural heritage. While a small majority of the largest and grandest surviving country houses have been converted into the likes of hotels and offices, these conversions frequently show little regard for the cultural and historical significance of the property and its surroundings and are instead used simply as a marketing ploy. (McCarthy, 2019)

This research aims to investigate the relevance of these structures today. Understanding the reasons why people’s perceptions of their significance vary greatly is crucial to finding out how we may conserve their historical significance while utilising their numerous assets to maintain and enhance our cultural heritage. Beyond just conservation, there are lessons to be learned from these structures. It is imperative that we reconsider how we handle these properties and recognize their capacity to serve our future at this crucial point in their existence.

“Architecture is the biggest unwritten document of history”

- Daniel Libeskind

(Libeskind, 2017)

History: Society, Economy & Geography

The introduction of New English and Scots settlers in the 16th and 17th centuries is largely responsible for the formation of the 18th and 19th century landowning class. These settlers benefited from both the vast land confiscations that took place between the 1650s and 1690s as well as the land reallocations that were a component of the various plantation programs that began between 1550 and 1640. Due to poor planning, lack of interest in England, and ongoing local antagonism in Ireland, the original plantations failed to sustain their financial and demographic viability. Mostly beginning in Ulster, the major land transfers from the existing Catholic Gaelic to Old English social elites took place not during the plantations per se, but rather as a result of the Cromwellian and Restoration land confiscations carried out in the wake of the 1641 rebellion and those carried out after the Williamite Wars of the 1690s. (Graham et al, 1997)

By 1703, just 14% of the nation's productive land was still owned by Catholics, and they constituted a minority in each county. However, it is noteworthy that the bulk of the catholic landowners who were evicted in this manner continued to live on their previous estates as head tenants, where their existence might significantly hinder the stability of incoming Protestant settlement in the future. The Cromwellian strategy would force landowners to move to Connacht, which was akin to a reservation for Catholics, while the planting scheme was focussed on the three provinces of Ulster, Leinster, and Munster. As a result, the value of Catholic owned estates was significantly lower. (Graham et al, 1997)

The English government would clarify in the conditions and details of the Land Grants and Leasehold Tenures the new English landowners obtained that they aimed to revive the exploitation of Ireland's resources in addition to supporting the plantations there. In contrast to the previous Gaelic economic systems, landowners and tenants were pushed to adopt modern commercial conceptions of land management and economic methods. Although this was a significant contributor to Ireland's economic development in the 17th century, the plantations also significantly extended a few urban areas, the most of which were commercial capitals like Galway and Waterford. Around this period, Catholic gentry still controlled a significant portion of the trade sector. (Graham et al, 1997)



Map showing the Cromwellian plan to move Catholic and Confederate landholders westwards (Luscombe, 2012)



Following the famine, insolvent estates of all sizes were forced to sell up their land holdings, which gave prosperous merchants and tenant farmers the opportunity to buy more property. The number of landowning households doubled between 1780 and 1840, allowing more individuals to participate in the social realm of land ownership. Unlike the bulk of landowners in Ireland, who made minimal reinvestment on their estate's agricultural productivity, there are several examples of English landlords aggressively upgrading drainage, rebuilding tenant farm buildings, and rationalising old field systems. This lack of commitment from landowners in Ireland was caused by a variety of factors, such as contractual restrictions and a desire to reclaim land from long-term renters, among others. In exchange, the renter was required to pay the rent and make improvements to the property or agricultural methods. It may be claimed that this type of relationship was prone to conflict when the political or economic environment wasn't conducive to the well-being of renters. (Graham et al, 1997) See Appendix A for further information on the 'improvement' of landed estates and Appendix B for the rural land adjustments which resulted from the population increase after the famine.

Ireland's rural economy was centred on the landed estate, and the land system was built on the relationship between landlord and tenant. In addition to collecting rent, the landlord was also required to perform noble obligations including offering assistance and employment during hard times. After the famine of 1740, Conolly's Folly was commissioned by the owners of Castletown House, Celbridge, in order to provide the poor residents of Celbridge with employment. This would serve as a folly for the estate and is located precisely 3000 metres from the rear of the house. (Clerkin, 2015)

Conolly's Folly (Wikipedia, 2023)

Conservation: Why preserve?

Historic houses in Ireland are a significant component of our nation's social, cultural, and architectural heritage. They are an important part of our country's history and a key source of regional identity. Historic houses offer a window into the past and aid in the preservation of our rich history of cultural and architectural heritage. Additionally, historic homes are a must-see destination for both local and foreign tourists, and they help to spur economic growth, especially in local communities. The fact that well-preserved Irish country houses like Westport House and Newbridge House contribute so much to the economy and tourist appeal of a range of different regions across the nation is only one of the many reasons why people should be glad that they have been preserved. (Griffin et al, 1988)

It is also acknowledged that these buildings can result in significant public benefits. The old country homes that are still standing in Ireland are irreplaceable collections of architecture, art, history, and culture. They are a crucial aesthetic, ecological, social, and economic resource, as are the landscapes, gardens, and demesnes that go with them. The Irish country house tells the tale of the family and craftsmen who built it and those who took care of it, as well as the communities that supported them and who can benefit from it now. Some of these attractions are among the most popular in the nation and have the potential to significantly contribute to economic growth, especially in rural regions, by creating jobs and fostering sustainable rural development. Numerous local businesses profit from their involvement in marketing and procuring local goods and services. Traditional skills and crafts, as well as modern ones in industries ranging from hospitality and retail to agriculture and construction, are maintained via the preservation and restoration of the Irish country house. (Griffin et al, 1988)

“Stylistically and culturally these houses are extra-ordinarily interesting, for in bridging the gap between indigenous building and imported English and other European influences - and incorporating features of both - they illustrate a continuity in building practice linking the great with the small and the remoter centuries with time only recently past.”

- Maurice Craig on Irish Houses of the Middle Size
(Craig, 1976)



Top: Westport House, Co. Mayo
Bottom: The Saloon at Russborough House, Co. Wicklow

(Westport House, 2022)
(Parsons, 2015)



Lessons from the Big House

The typical estate house in Ireland was only one of the landowners' residences. They might have a primary residence in England or Dublin, and the country house would be more of a country retreat that they only lived in for a few months of the year because the cities, like Dublin, were where the majority of networking and social activity would happen among aristocracy, especially when parliament was in session. However, with expansive private landscapes to form a demesne and enough space for a large mansion as the focal point, this was where the nobles could flaunt their wealth and rejoice by throwing lavish parties for other members of the nobility. One would think that the smaller house was built to be more functional than some of the larger, grander homes since it appears more modest in terms of size and ornamentation, however, even the most ornately decorated palace was made to be incredibly utilitarian, and both the building and its context operated like a machine. (McCarthy, 2019)

Landlords and their architects envisioned the house as a venue for entertainment in addition to daily usage. The Irish were known for having many servants in their homes and for their excellent hospitality. Many of the documented alterations and extensions to country homes in their heyday were made to accommodate servants, typically by adding an additional storey to the structure with a drastically lower ceiling height. The big house was not just a workplace, but also where many of the staff would live. Typically, the ground floor and first floor of the house served as an elegant stage for the family's extravagant parties and gatherings, much like a theatrical set, while servants kept everything running smoothly from the basement kitchen, secret stairways in the deep walls, and staff quarters tucked away upstairs. (McCarthy, 2019)

The architect, who, like an artist, viewed these types of houses as a sculpture that should be beautiful from all perspectives, was very intentional about keeping the workers hidden. This went so far as to include tunnels, allowing staff direct access to the home's basement without interfering with visitors' and families' views. The agricultural buildings, which were frequently attached to the main house but hidden from view of the gentry, were usually connected by these tunnels. The practical nature of the house's operations had a significant impact on John Nash's design of houses like Rockingham, Co. Roscommon, for instance. (McCarthy, 2019) See Appendix C for a description of how turf made the journey from the ground to the fireplaces of Rockingham.

Top: The Long Gallery at Castletown House, Co. Kildare
 Bottom: Servants' tunnel at Moore Hall, Co. Mayo

(The Castletown Foundation, 2023)
 (O'Byrne, 2014)

In order to dazzle guests at his new mansion, Lord Norton, who was the owner of Rockingham at the time it was completed, had the same intention as the patrons and architects of similar houses, who frequently made the house only partially visible from the avenues it was approached from. They intended to tease the guest by giving them little glances of the house before it was fully revealed. The design of the house itself incorporates this idea of a sequential experience. The path a visitor took through the building was most often carefully planned out, guiding them and steering them away from more private spaces. The main hall is one of the most interesting areas that visitors to these kinds of homes commonly recall, and this is not a coincidence. The main hall needed to be impressive and imposing. Contrary to the other rooms on the same floor, such as the dining hall or saloon, which would have a variety of luxurious furnishings and decorating, this was often accomplished by rich architecture rather than the contents of the space. The main hall was often a double-height room with intricate plasterwork, maybe with skylights or even a dome. (Connolly, 2018)

Compression and release, where the visitor would initially walk through a smaller entry hall before opening into a great double-height space to enhance the feeling of scale, was another popular strategy for manipulating the sequential experience in relation to the main hall. A grand staircase was frequently part of the main hall, and its grandeur and adornment varied according to the significance of the rooms it led to. Larger homes, like Powerscourt, featured a double-height saloon on the first floor, therefore a grand staircase was important because this would have been the usual route for guests. (McCarthy, 2019) In country houses of all sizes, even the smaller ones, remarkable stairs are a common feature. Apart from small details like intricate architraves, chimneypieces and cornice plasterwork, this was frequently the main opportunity to display the finest joinery and craftsmanship. (Craig, 1976)

The design of these buildings was heavily influenced by their function. Beginning to emerge is the idea that these structures served as a stage for entertainment rather than merely being used by the family on a daily basis. Each of these homes sought to offer a special celebratory experience with the best craftsmanship, aesthetics, and architecture. Only a small number of people would be able to experience the most delight in these designs, but as the influence of these social elites diminished, so did the number of those who appreciated them. It is important to note that these structures' timeless beauty is still significant today. These structures can and should continue to serve as gathering places, forming communities that can celebrate, appreciate, and protect these historical monuments and the detailed craftsmanship their design embodies. (McCarthy, 2019)



Top: Entrance Hall at Westport House, Co. Mayo
Bottom: The Stair Hall at Ballyfin House, Co. Laois

(Mallon, 2016)
(Devan, 2018)



Gweedone, Co. Donegal circa. 1890

(Heichelbech, 2023)

Social Resilience: Architecture and community

Although there has been a lot of work done to define and measure economic and environmental sustainability, social sustainability has proven to be more difficult. Social sustainability entails establishing physical cultural and social spaces that promote people's wellbeing and foster a feeling of community in order to ensure the maintenance of the many social relations that exist in healthy communities within the built environment. (Bacon et al, 2013) Social sustainability brings together a number of different ideas about social equity, social needs and the sustainability of communities, often described in terms of social capital, social cohesion and wellbeing. Designers should be aware that communities are frequently the subject matter experts on problems that directly affect them. The challenges and solutions are closest to those who are closest to them. This promotes ownership and sustainability for improved project outcomes. (Bacon et al, 2013)

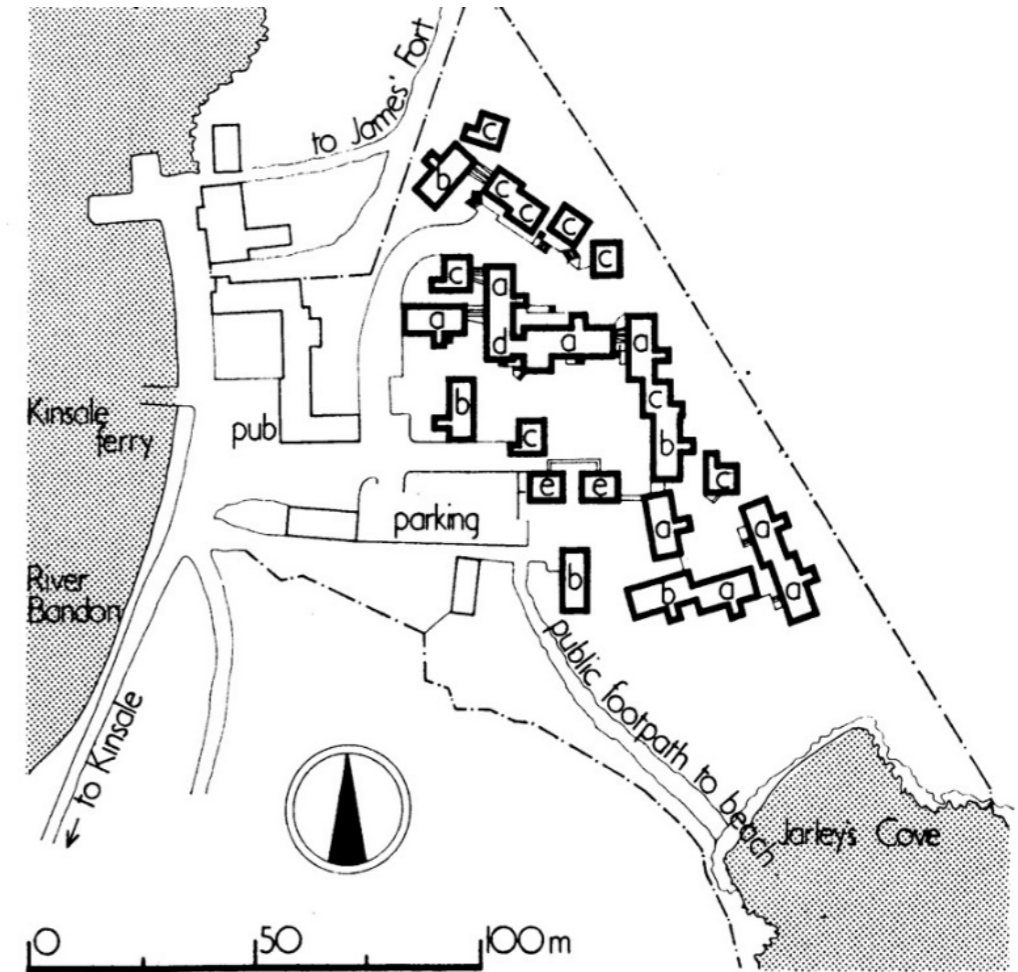
The significance of community in Irish culture must be addressed when discussing how landed estates influenced social development in Ireland. An old Irish concept called 'Meitheal' refers to how local people would band together to support one another. In earlier eras, Meitheal was a prominent idea, particularly in rural Ireland. When crops needed to be gathered, hay needed to be harvested, or fields needed to be sowed, neighbours would come together to help. Community togetherness is at the core of the idea, achieved via collaborative efforts and mutually beneficial assistance. Meitheal is the Irish word for the age-old, worldwide practice of collaborating to meet societal needs. (Khadka & Furunes, 2021)

Castlepark Village

It's worth mentioning an instance where the study of Ireland's rural communities played a key role in designing a development which would sit into a sensitive portion of the Irish landscape. In contrast to the housing being built at the time, which completely ignored the older villages, the network, and the way the houses were related to the surrounding countryside, Denis Anderson and Lindsay Johnson's Castlepark Village, Kinsale, was instantly embraced by the locals as part of the existing infrastructure when it was built in 1972. Anderson was adamant that we should study these older towns and villages to find out what makes them successful and strive to imitate those qualities rather than trying to replicate them. There aren't many instances of new housing in Ireland since that address critical regionalism like this. (Johnson, 2013)

Anderson studied earlier Irish towns like Licketstown, Kilkenny, and he believed that these communities were like that of pre-modernist architecture, and like Lyons, believed the interactions and spaces between buildings were more important than the design of the individual units. He made a conscious effort to limit the number of materials they utilised, and they tried to stick to those that are appropriate for the location but he used them in a contemporary fashion. He believed that having buildings that are well related rather than those that are thoroughly designed as individual units is more crucial. He wanted to design a mixed housing cluster that would reference and draw on the local traditions through a process of models and sketches. In contrast to the conventional teaching of architecture schools, Anderson's design process starts with the solution and then works backward, connecting the numerous aspects and gaining economies of design and construction by repeating features and switching up elements. (O'Toole, 2016)

Denis Anderson was one of the first architects who investigated the potential inherent knowledge of old Irish villages like the ones at Licketstown that were previously highlighted. The topography, environment, local resources and skills allowed these rough villages (mostly in the west of Ireland) where the native Irish people had been displaced from more productive land by the colonisers outlined in the early chapters. There is no doubt that such villages, where disorderly groups of homes nestle together to shelter and protect one another from the elements, were the concept of 'meitheal' originated from. Simple structures clustered together in an untidy manner were not placed there by accident. The areas in between buildings were carefully considered, as well as how they would improve the lives of people who resided there. The employment of creative grouping practices in an effort to foster community, with special attention to the spaces between and around the buildings themselves, is not limited to this one instance.



Site Plan of Castlepark Village (Johnson, 2013)



Example of a traditional cluster village in Magherabeg, Co. Galway (Geohive.ie, 1829-1842)

“Personally, I think it’s more important to have a good relationship between the buildings than to have buildings that are well designed as units, but not well related.”

- Denis Anderson

(O’Toole, 2016)

SPAN Developments

Eric Lyons CBE was a British designer and architect. He won praise for his work creating family-friendly, technologically advanced housing communities in England in the latter half of the 20th century. Low-cost systematic repetition was employed with care to create pieces that were adequate on their own but, when combined, could do far more than the sum of their parts alone. They were in the business of intentionally combining buildings and landscape in attractive compositions for the benefit of both, and they understood the value of a well-planted landscape. A shared garden centre unit, the formation of Friends, and an easy and crucial management structure all contributed to ensuring the upkeep of the structures and gardens as well as the community's goals. Townsend also introduced residents' associations, or communities, in order to take into account the ongoing wellbeing of the inhabitants and structures. (Simms, 2006)

One may argue that much of the first-generation modernists, like Lyons, which we typically associate with clean lines and manufactured surfaces, is romantic in its emotional sense and more sensitive to the site and the surrounding environment than was previously thought. British landscape architect Brenda Colvin CBE, asserted that, if well planned, community gardens may promote social cohesion of a group even more than community halls and structures. This was a belief that inventive grouping practices could foster a feeling of community where buildings define both the visual and practical spaces. Spaces around buildings and the structures themselves should be integrated. Community is essential. The development and preservation of the environment require human involvement. Making common areas and establishing structures that allow inhabitants to participate in their surroundings can be efficient ways to build a sense of community. (Simms, 2006)

Being a member of a SPAN development included buying one share in a non-profit making a limited company managed by The Register of Friendly Societies. The tenants as a society create their own management committee which cares for the maintenance of the buildings and grounds. A chance for genuine involvement through the sharing of obligations would foster cohesion and the sensation of ownership was tempered by mutual respect, and the shared responsibilities did not impair the value of the individual's investment. The general committee, which would be elected by the inhabitants, would oversee managing the development's common spaces, especially the landscaped ones. When Lyons was asked about the appearance of housing, he entitled his paper 'setting' and emphasised that we should design our whole environment. (Simms, 2006) Lyons proposed an innovative solution to the issues involved in giving locations their own identities. The gaps between the buildings are not left to chance, and the coherent structures produced by this integrated design approach also contribute to creating the surroundings, which complement the buildings. He believed a strong sense of place is crucial for creating community.



Top: SPAN Houses in Blackheath, London. (The Modern House, 2023)

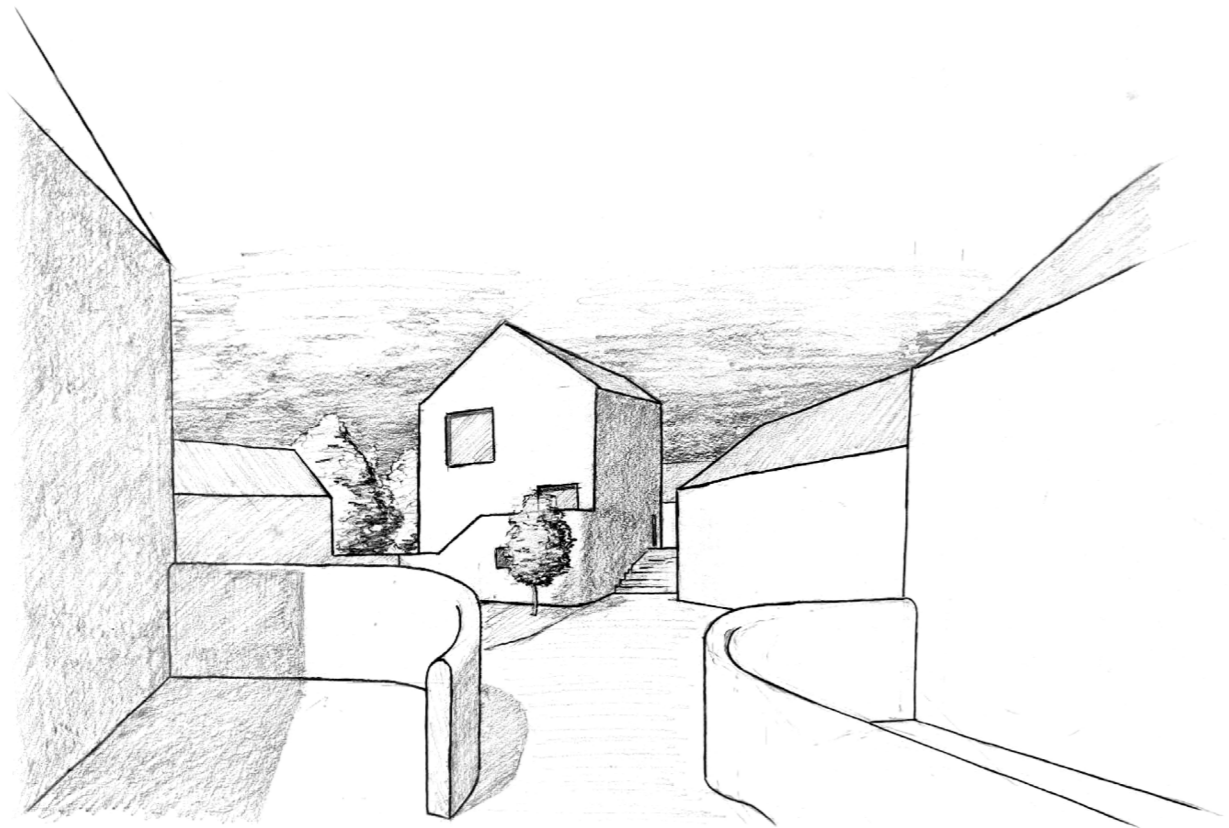
Bottom: Site Plan of New Ash Green in Kent by SPAN Developments (1966-71) (Wilkinson, 2015)



Fostering community through sense of place

Since we already touched on SPAN and Anderson's attempts to create communities through placemaking, it is important to discuss "critical regionalism". Not only are many Irish town layouts dependent on their link to the local estate but even the names of some villages and towns are derived from the names of the local landed gentries across the country, demonstrating the importance of the country estate to the creation of Irish towns and villages. Some people are totally unaware of the large old house concealed behind high stone walls and tall oak trees that had a significant influence on the growth of their local area. The term "critical regionalism", considered as a concept, denotes the notion of placemaking in theorising. This theory holds that a place is defined in the present in a way that clearly and intentionally represents the uniqueness of a local environment and community, while embracing the ideals of global and universal achievements and technologies. To put it another way, the idea of critical regionalism should be viewed as a notion of placemaking, with locations being thought of as local representations of culture. (Malešević et al, 2020)

While the lack of private outdoor space in the Anderson and SPAN developments may raise concerns at first glance, this was a deliberate choice made by both parties because, when addressing the needs of the community, it is crucial to place more emphasis on the shared spaces and ensure that they are created to celebrate cohesion and place. It's important to understand that the prospect of hierarchy lessening the more attention is focused on attempting to develop a tight knit community. A feeling of place motivates a preservation effort, and it is important to keep this in mind while talking about approaches to conserve historic structures. As environments become more shared and less owned, people can appreciate them as a whole rather than merely their own plot.

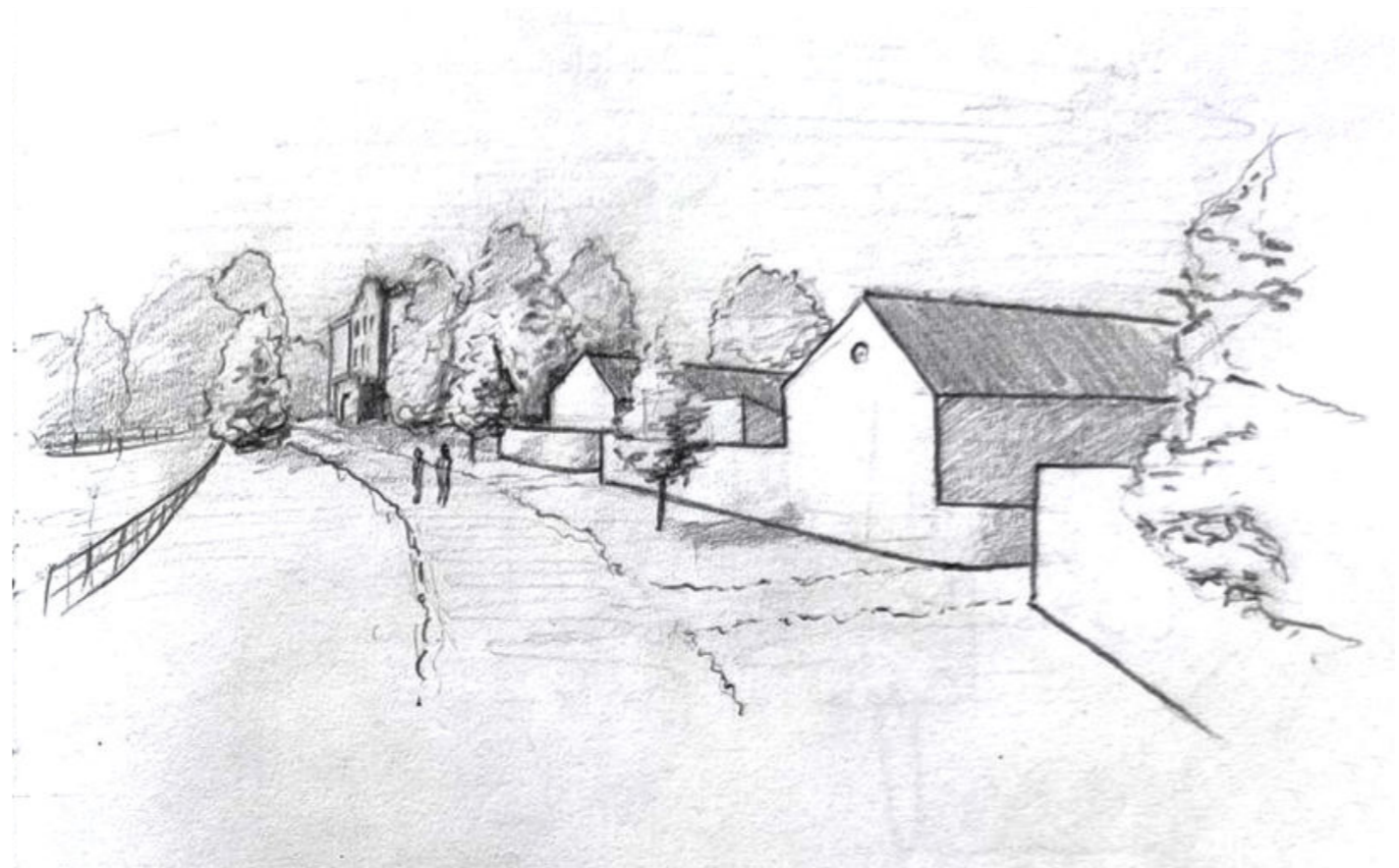


Early Concept Sketch by Author

Utilising resources while preserving and honouring cultural and heritage value

While it is evident that the widespread loss of Irish country houses over the past 100 years was almost never caused by issues with the design or construction of the buildings themselves, social politics were to blame for the burning of the Big House's and the gradual decay and neglect of these historic structures. We have gradually come to understand the significance of these buildings in terms of our cultural and architectural heritage. We must widen the scope of sustainability and acknowledge that failing communities can also result in irreparable damage also, particularly to our cultural identity. Language, dress, and food are only a few ways that culture is expressed, but our built environment plays a defining role in our cultural identity and laying the foundation for the creation of thriving, long-lasting communities. (Smith, 2018)

When the development of this sort of site takes over the historic elements without giving much thought to the surrounding environment, the initial monumental experience of the site and existing structures are more often lost. As a result, the building and its surroundings' historical value is significantly diminished, and there are less possibilities for the building's prospective future. The objective should be to carefully create spaces that not only pay homage to the architecture and history of the existing buildings, but also work to enhance them and bring them to the foreground as a place to be celebrated by its setting rather than just placing new structures discretely near the traditional structure in the hopes of not interrupting it.



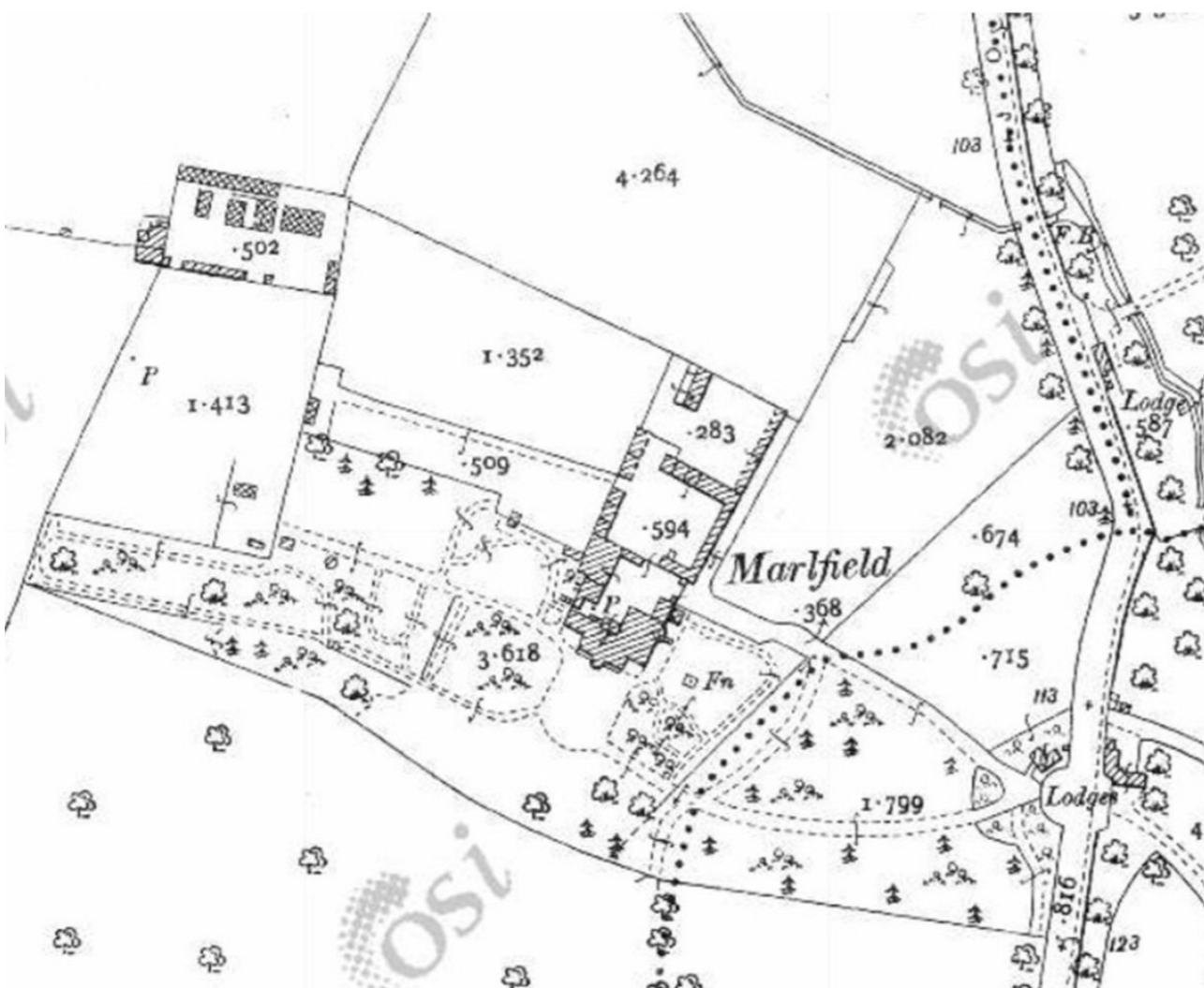
Early Concept Sketch by Author



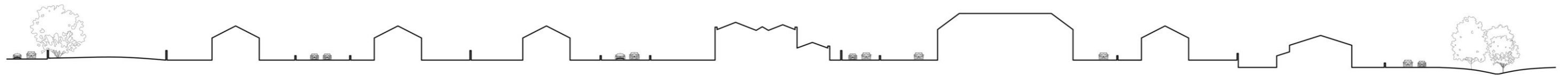
These houses and their surroundings are not only examples of great architecture and craftsmanship in and of themselves, but frequently include components that depict how they would have been used in the past, such as outbuildings, walled gardens, and gate-houses. Things that are usually overlooked and undervalued but are nonetheless important to comprehending how these sites were intended to be utilized. All of these estates were made to be incredibly practical and efficient, and each and every person on the estate had a specific role to play. The design of these homes can teach us a lot of things. These estates were more than simply a lovely place of leisure, they were also extremely productive and operated like well-oiled machines.

Sadly, the majority of the smaller-scale properties, which are not as self-sufficient as the largest homes and estates like Newbridge House or Westport House, especially those smaller homes on the outskirts of Dublin City, have been subject to negligent developments that frequently have no regard for the historic integrity of the site and the land is simply used to pack in as many houses as possible, leaving the main house with few possibilities other than being divided into apartments.

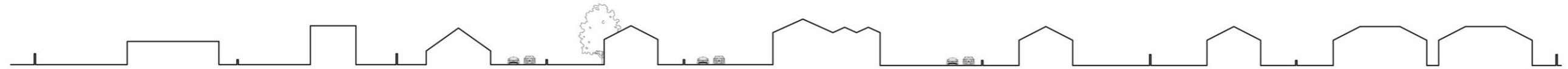
The outcome of these sites tends to be quite similar, and upon comparing them with historic maps of the original designs, it becomes apparent that very little consideration was given to preserving the site's original design and planning. These sites frequently featured large treelines to provide natural shelter, ensuring privacy from nearby roads and other external elements. They also incorporated gate houses, avenues, and intentionally designed approaches to enhance the overall experience. These approaches were carefully planned to offer captivating views and picturesque vistas, forming an integral part of the site's design.



Top: Aerial View of the Marlfield Estate circa. 2021 (Google earth 2022)
 Bottom: Historic Map of the Marlfield Estate 1829-1841 (Geohive.ie, 1829-1842)



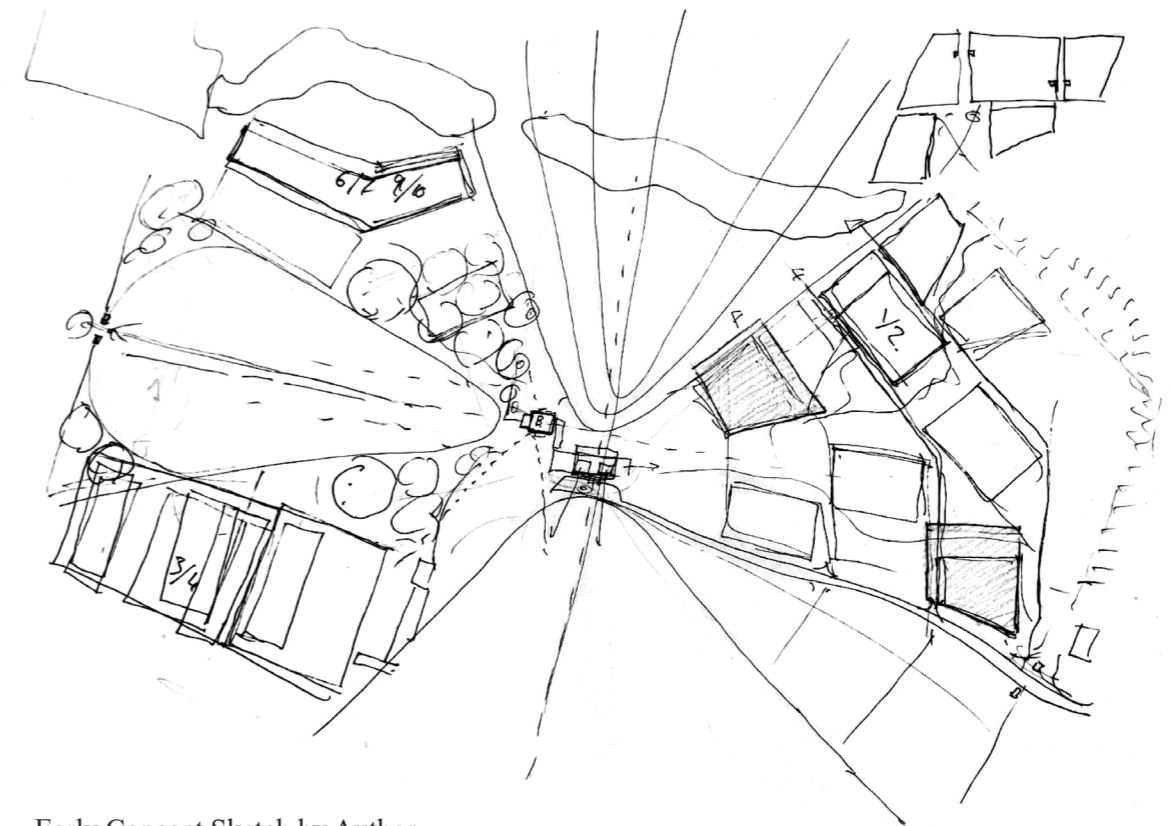
Section line through the current Marlfield Estate



Section line through the current Stradbrook Hall Estate

The current day section lines in many of these developments clearly demonstrate how the main house becomes submerged by rows of housing units, divided only by roads or imposing apartment buildings. Although the main house itself may have been preserved, the site lacks the distinctive character and unique features that could have truly given these developments a sense of identity and a strong sense of place.

Often, when developments focus solely on achieving a certain population density, it can lead to the destruction of the historical and architectural integrity of the existing structures. The majority of such developments recorded for my research showcases one dwelling size option fitting approximately 150 people per hectare, with only 10% of open space available. I suggest an alternative strategy that acknowledges the significance of incorporating more open space within these specific locations, rather than solely prioritizing maximum occupancy. The proposed approach aims to preserve over 50% of the site as functional open space, emphasizing the importance of providing ample shared open space. This approach ensures that future possibilities for the main house's use are not disrupted, allowing for the preservation of the historical and architectural significance while providing ample open space for the community.



Early Concept Sketch by Author



Project Introduction

After exploring the significance of country estates in 21st century Ireland, I began to develop a brief with a particular focus on smaller estates on the outskirts of Dublin city. Despite their historical and architectural value, these estates have often been subjected to inconsiderate housing developments that have jeopardised their integrity. The work examined the impact of such developments and their effect on the character of the main house and site.

The project proposes an approach to preserving the historical and architectural integrity of these estates, while also accommodating modern-day residential needs. As a case study, the project uses Ashtown House, offering guidelines for developing such sites with individualised attention to their specific parameters, ensuring longevity and long term benefits.



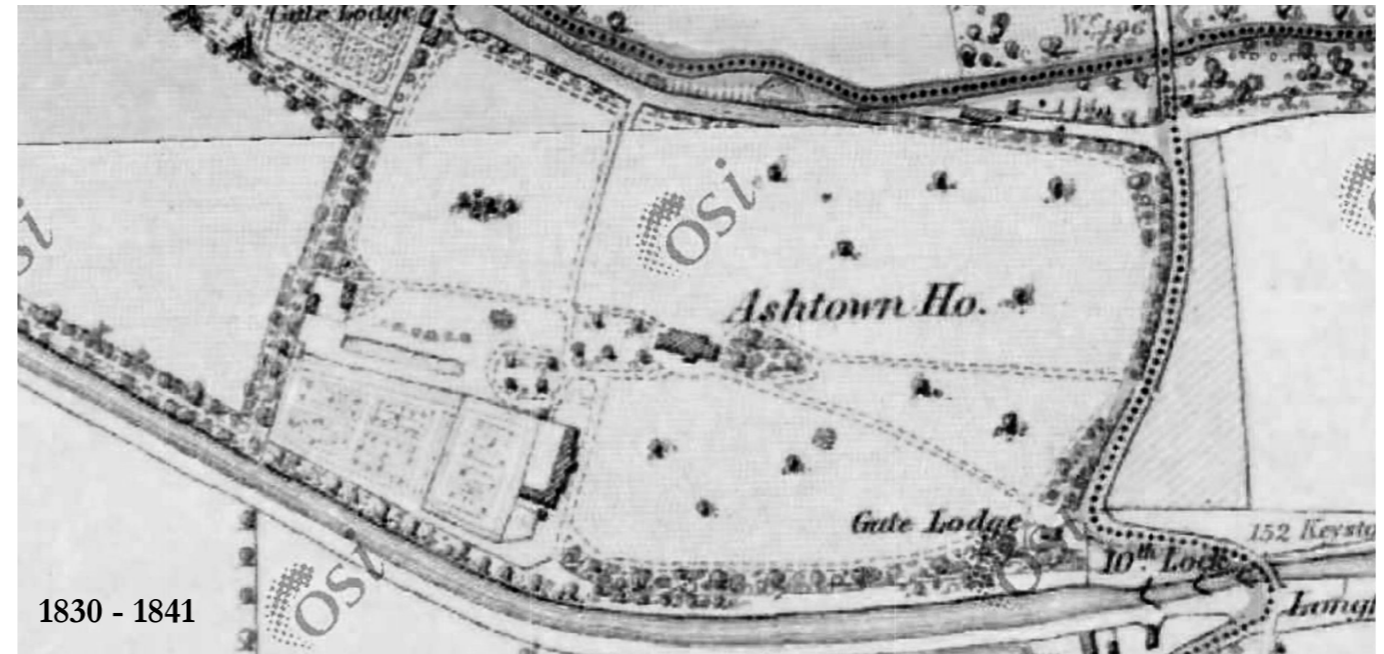
The proposed approach includes a unique housing typology which emphasises sustainability, community, and the spaces between buildings, drawing lessons from rural Irish villages and recent examples of housing that prioritise community and a shared sense of place. Ultimately, the project acknowledges the importance of country estates in preserving Ireland's cultural heritage, and defines rules to ensure their historical and architectural integrity is maintained while meeting contemporary demands.



Images of the Ashtown House Estate by Author

The Site

With a limited number of these properties remaining in the Tolka Valley area, I chose to investigate the site of Ashtown House. It is situated between the Tolka River and the Royal Canal, just west of Ashtown. This location is rapidly expanding and offers immediate access to multiple public transportation amenities. Ashtown House exemplifies the type of site that often falls victim to inconsiderate developments. Despite this, the majority of the site's significant features, such as the original outbuildings, walled garden, avenue, and entrance, still remain. Since the site is relatively flat, I was particularly interested in creating a man-made typology that incorporates different levels to address the issues of scale and overcrowding mentioned in the previous examples.



Top: Historic Map of the Ashtown House Estate 1830-1841
Bottom: Aerial View of the Ashtown House Estate circa. 2021

(Geohive.ie, 1829-1842)
(Google earth, 2022)

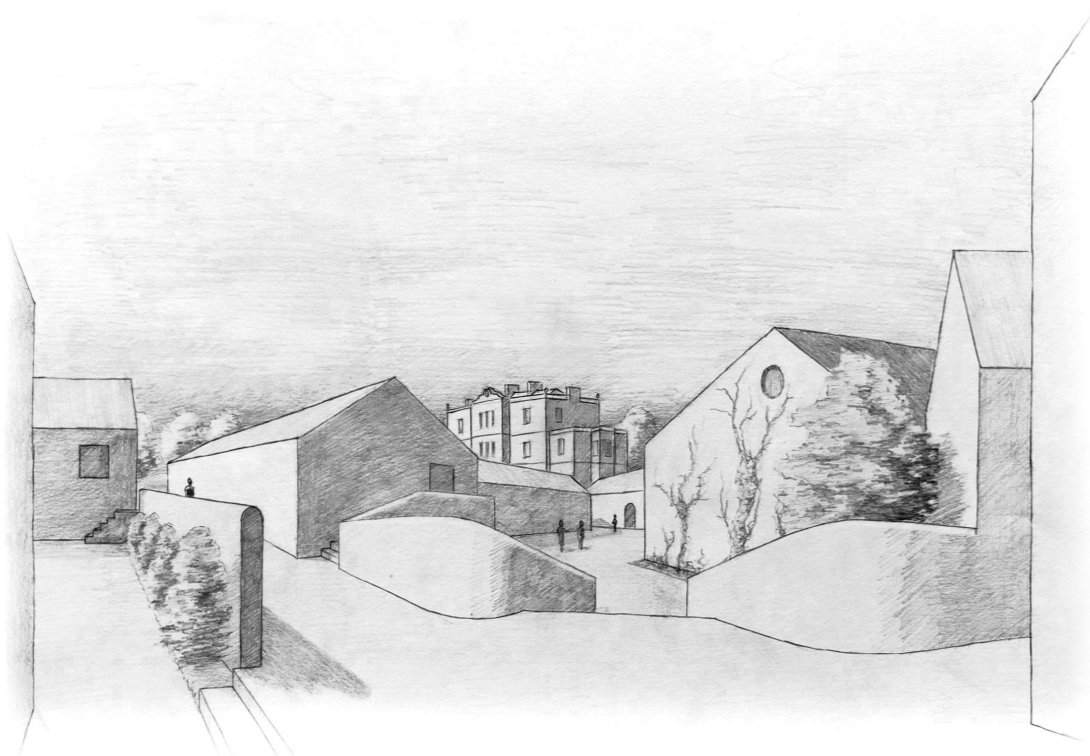




As my research progressed, I developed a fascination with the close-knit community dynamics of country estates, which led me to explore the connection between sustainability and community, particularly in rural Irish communities. What intrigued me was how these communities resembled small, egalitarian societies, deviating from the social hierarchy often found in country estates. I also found inspiration in the deliberate planning and utilization of in-between spaces in rural clusters, which served as a catalyst for my final proposal.

As mentioned earlier, my exploration of contemporary housing design that emphasizes community and relationships provided further inspiration. Architects such as Denis Anderson and Eric Lyons & SPAN have made noteworthy contributions in this field. Their residential projects beautifully illustrate the significance of recognizing the spaces between buildings and treating the site as a shared entity, rather than a mere collection of individual houses.

What struck me about the works of Anderson and Eric Lyons & SPAN is the presence of common concepts in their successful developments. These concepts involve reducing the prominence of vehicles or prioritizing alternative modes of transportation, fostering a strong sense of place, creating intimate spaces, and establishing areas that actively encourage community interaction. Their architectural endeavors exemplify the potential of design to cultivate a robust sense of community and belonging within residential environments. These considerations played a pivotal role in both the macro-scale planning of the site and the micro-scale arrangement of individual buildings.



Top: Licketstown, Co. Kilkenny circa. 1954
Bottom: Early Concept Sketch by Author

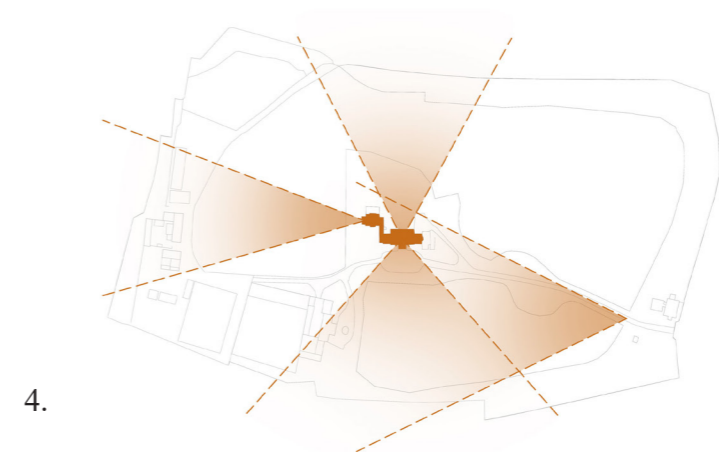
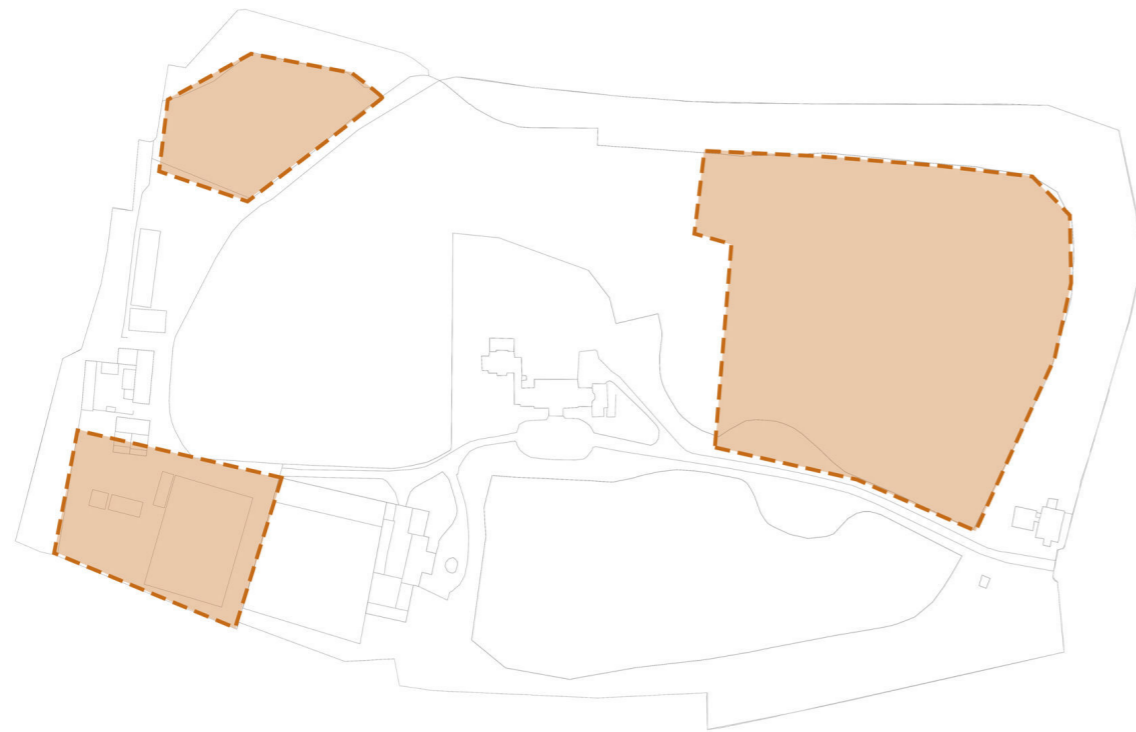
(Hangstraw, 2023)

After identifying the aspects of successful communities that are absent in conventional housing developments where the primary focus is on meeting density requirements, I established rules for developing these specific sites. These rules prioritize individualized attention and specificity to the site's parameters, which contribute to their significance. This approach may not achieve as high a density, but it can ensure the preservation of the site's integrity, longevity, and potentially yield more long-term benefits.

I have formulated four essential rules that underscore the significance of specific elements for the successful development of the site. These rules focus on the following aspects:

1. Outbuildings and Subsidiary Structures.
2. The Original Circulation, Movement Patterns, and Functionality of the Site.
3. The Existing Trees and Vegetation.
4. Principal Views & Vistas.

By applying these guidelines to my own site, I have identified three specific areas that are suitable for further development. Importantly, these areas can be developed without compromising the integrity of the site or its historical significance.





I focused on utilising the large space of land on the east side of the site and potentially developing areas outlined to the west. An important goal was to minimize reliance on vehicles, and to achieve this, I allocated 0.6 parking spaces per dwelling in the housing development.

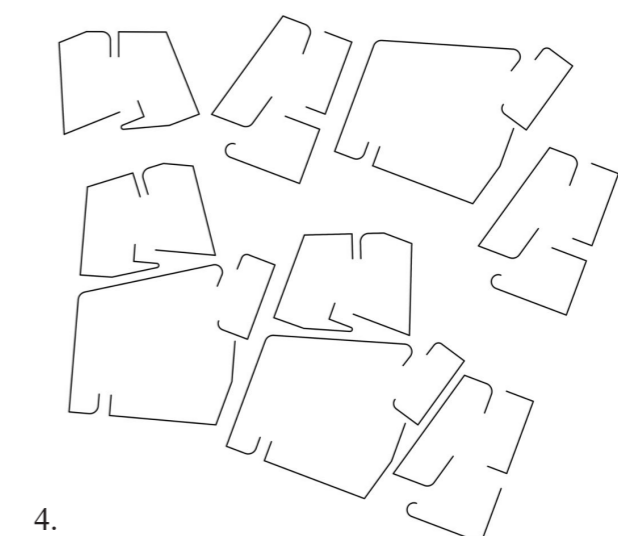
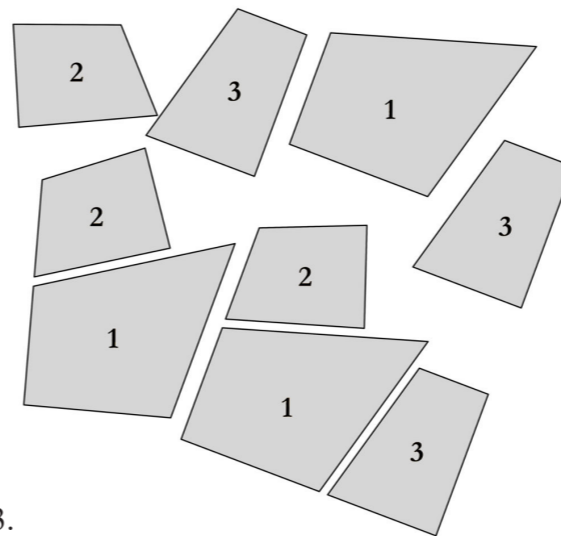
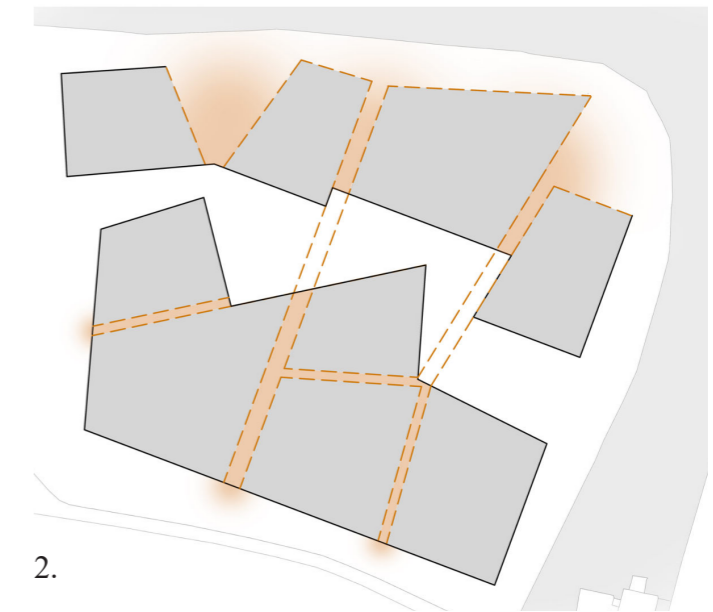
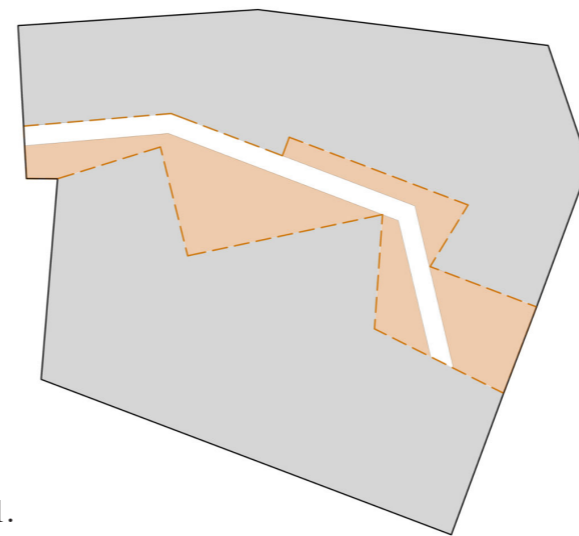
To create a more harmonious relationship between the housing and its surroundings, I positioned the housing near natural features. By allowing any necessary vehicle circulation and incorporating some parking within the center of the space, I sought to avoid enclosing the development with roads that prioritize vehicles. Instead, my intention was for the development to be embraced by the natural borders of the site, seamlessly blending with its surroundings.

1. Any necessary vehicle circulation is located in the centre, ensuring that the homes are not cut off from the natural surroundings. By opening up these shared routes with pedestrian friendly spaces, this eliminates the sense of being confined to straight roads where vehicles had priority.

2. The development was divided into sections by creating more pedestrian permeability routes in a north-south direction, providing greater exposure to and connection with the natural context.

3. These sections are organized into three different cluster formations that are replicated and slightly shifted for continuity, with the larger-shaped formation receiving the most of my attention in my work.

4. The final arrangement of the clusters was developed by determining the building forms inside and permeability through these formations.

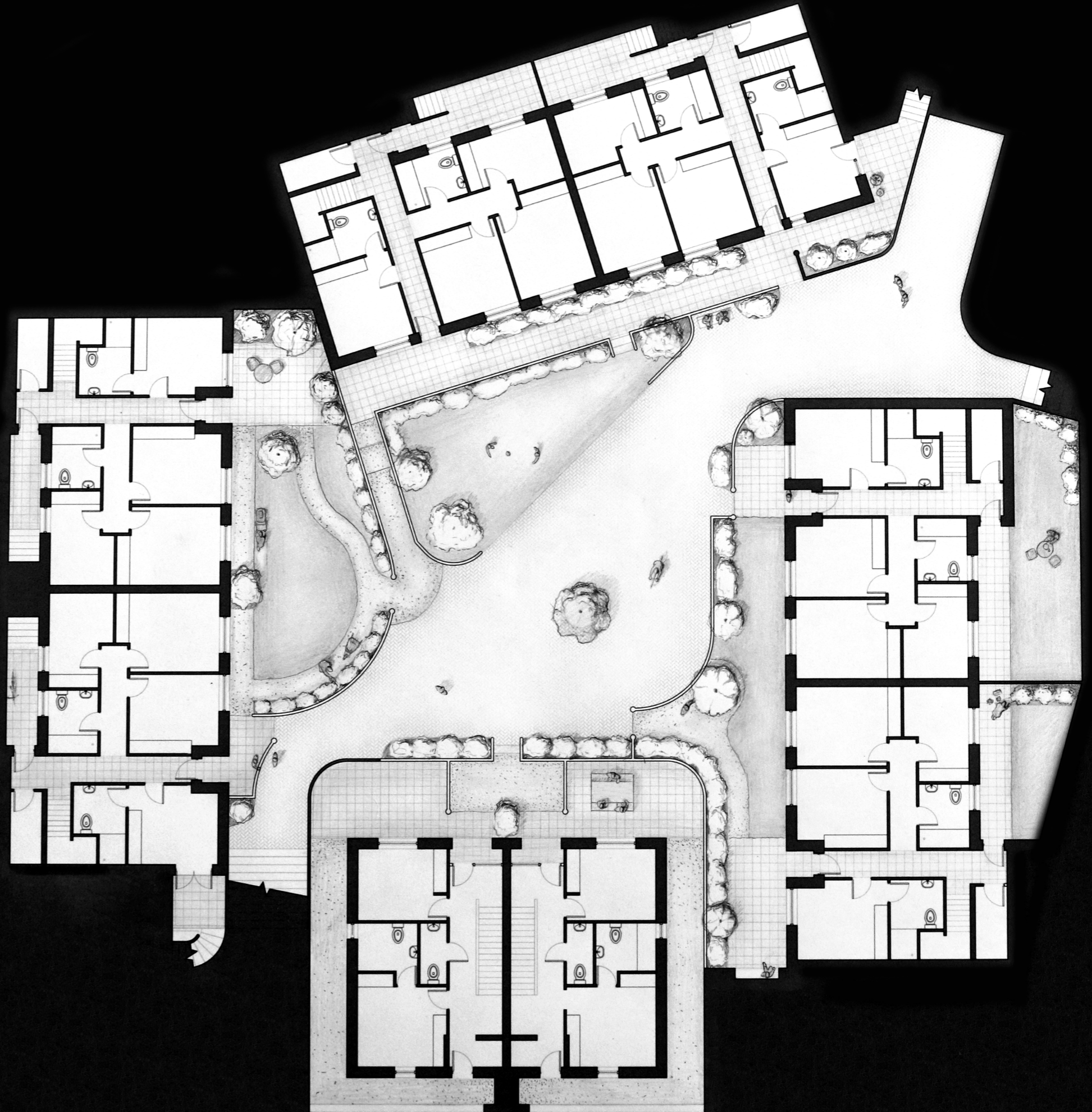


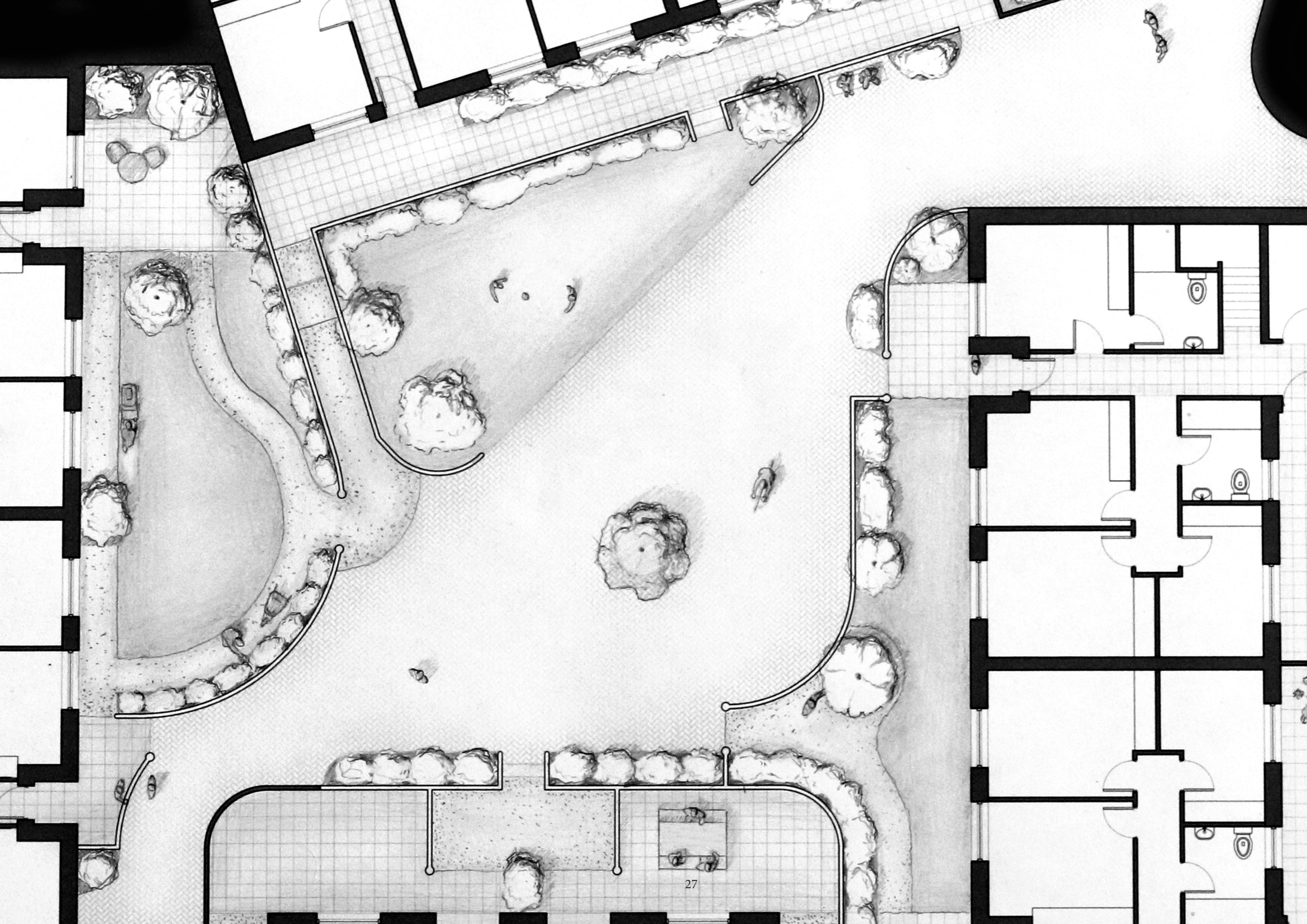


Through a long process of sketches and sketch modelling, I developed a replicable cluster design. This design incorporates a lower central yard, which provides necessary height while maintaining overall low structures. The first floor houses the living spaces, while the ground floor is dedicated to the bedrooms. Each house offers access from both outside the cluster on the first floor and within the central yard on the ground floor.

While it is true that some dwellings have slightly less private outdoor space compared to conventional housing estates, the cluster compensates with ample shared space. In fact, the community is essentially nestled within a parkland setting. Special attention has been devoted to the design of shared spaces, such as undivided gardens or intimate porches with niche-like seating arrangements that face the expansive open parkland.

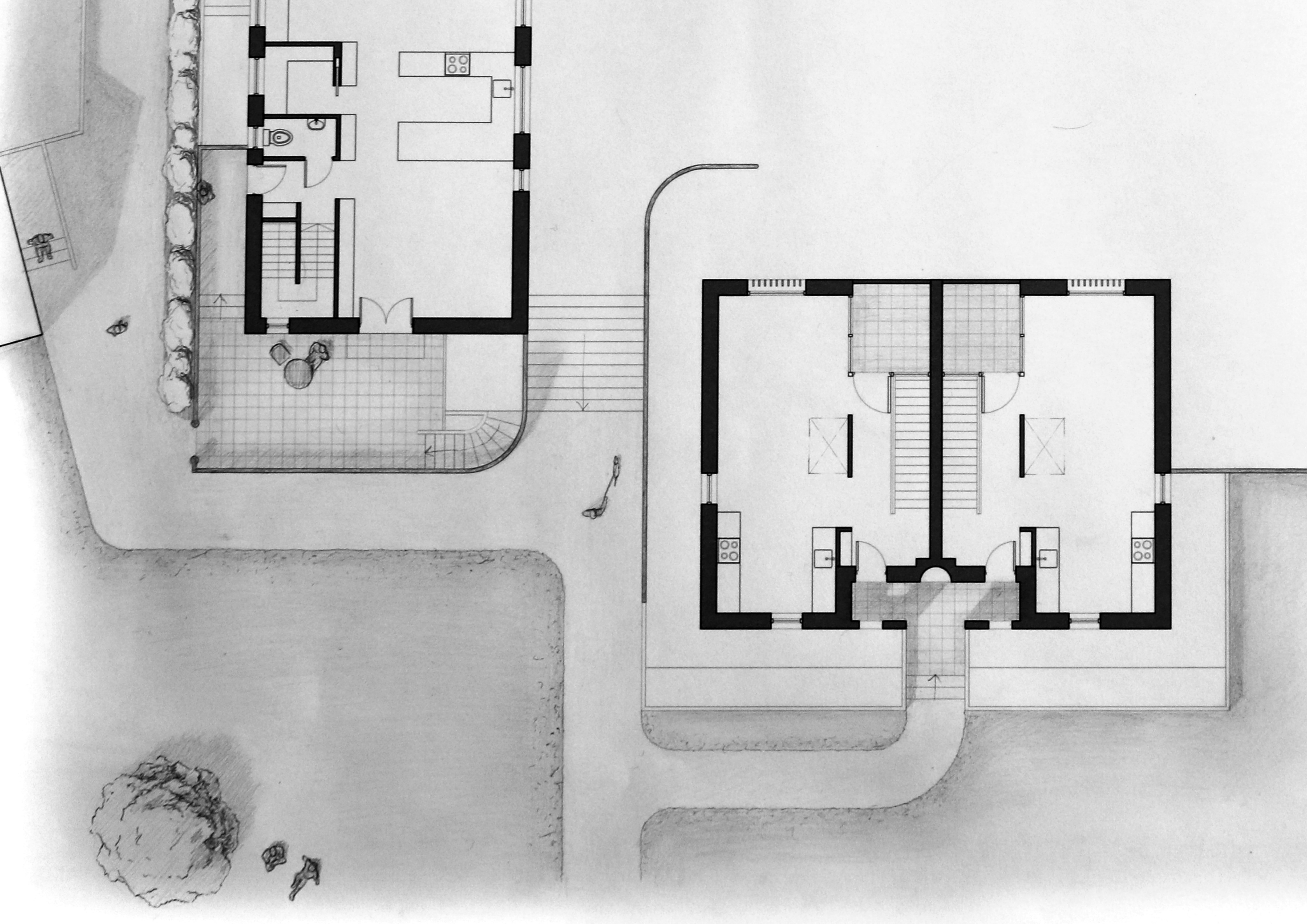
Proposed Ground Floor Plan



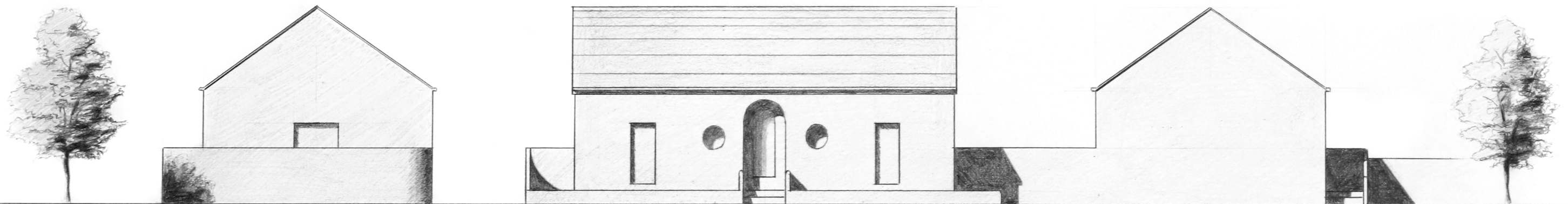
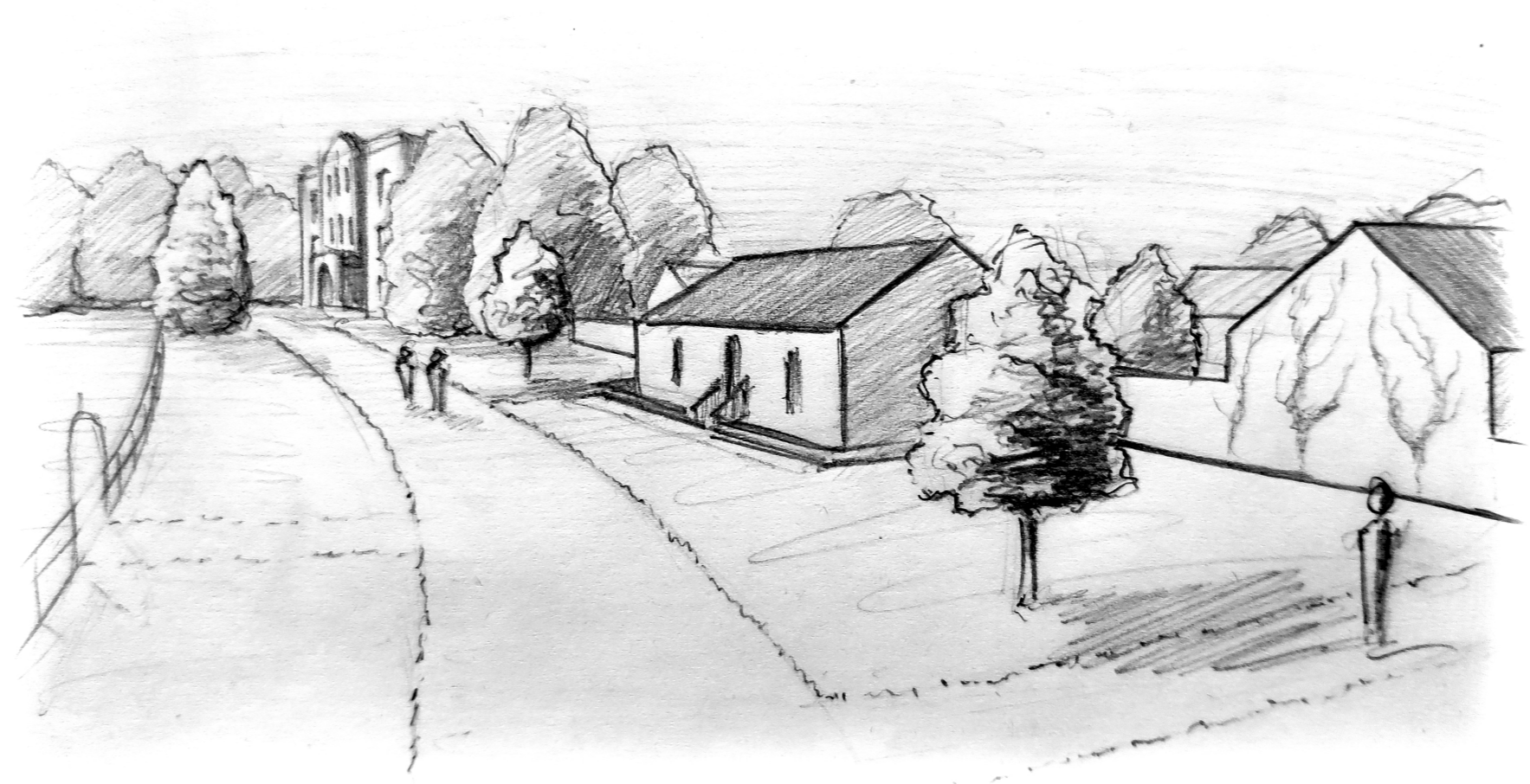


Proposed First Floor Plan





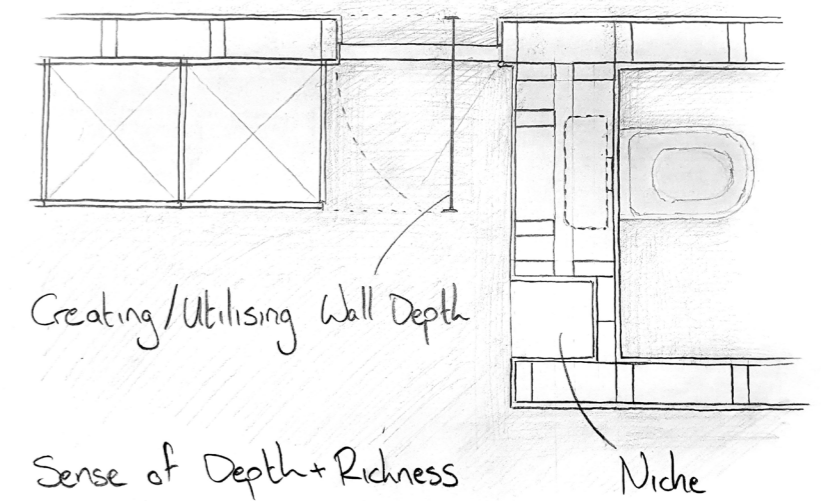
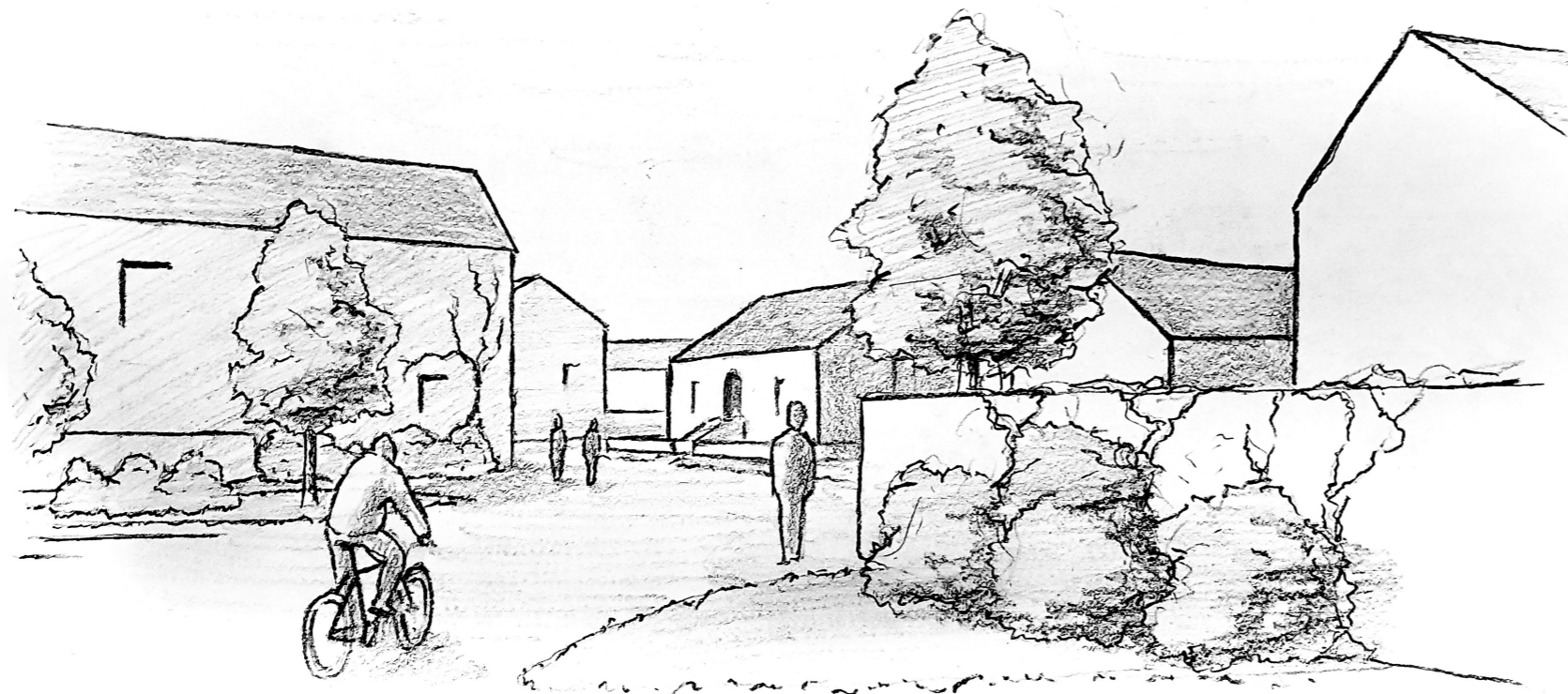
With a focus on preserving the original avenue as a pedestrian-friendly environment, I was mindful of the primary views and significant elevations that would be presented on the site. This approach aimed to not only connect residents to Ashtown but also promote sustainable and active modes of transportation.





The utilization of short spans and a simple timber frame construction not only eliminates the need for structural internal walls but also enables a versatile internal arrangement that can be adapted to varying needs while preserving a clean and simple external aesthetic.

Throughout the sketching process, I explored the concept of internal walls, experimenting with their depth to enhance functionality. Drawing inspiration from the deep walls observed in estate houses and vernacular buildings, these ideas enriched the design by incorporating architectural references and ensuring a thoughtful integration of functional elements.



Roof Build Up

- Roof Tiles
- Horizontal Timber Battens
- Timber Counter Battens
- Breather Membrane
- 18 Plywood
- 200mm Rigid Insulation between Rafters
- Vapour Barrier
- 50mm Woodfibre Board
- Service Cavity
- 12mm Plasterboard

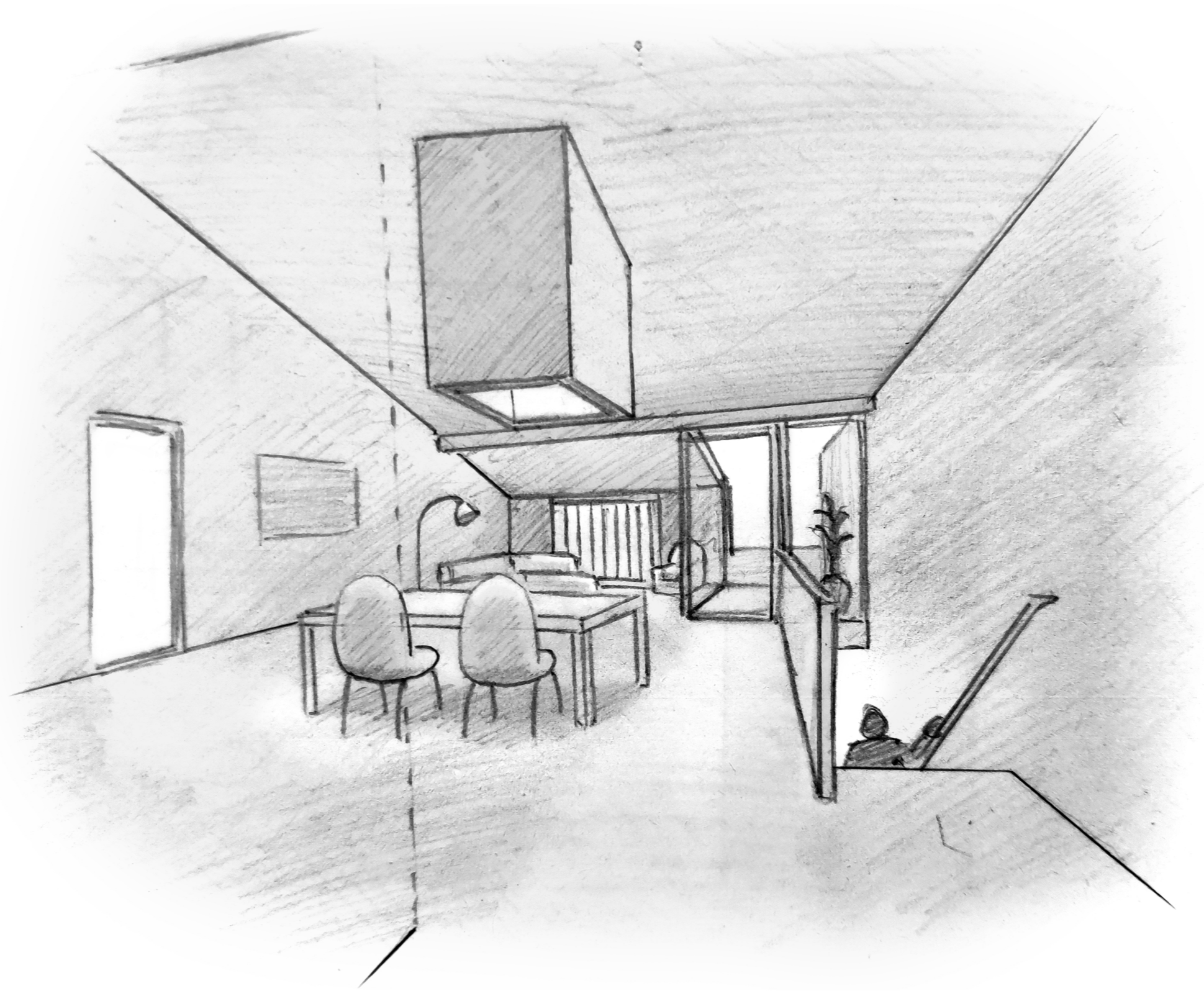
Typical Wall Build Up

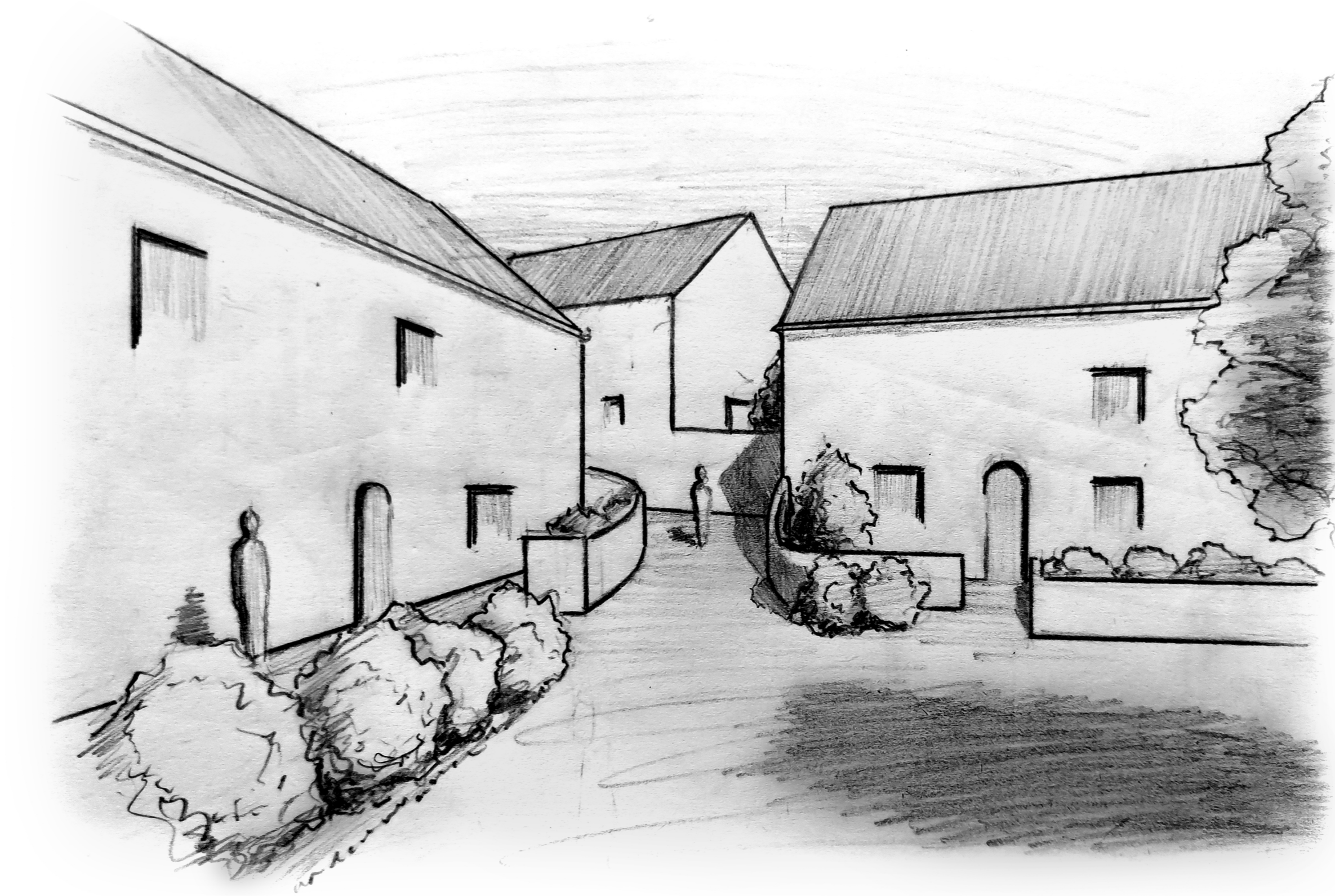
- Rendered Finish
- 12mm Cement Board
- 35mm x 40mm Timber Battens
- Breather Membrane
- 100mm Woodfibre Board
- 200mm Vertical Stud & Insulation
- Vapour Check
- 18mm Plywood
- 50mm Woodfibre Board
- 12mm Plasterboard

Typical Floor Build Up

- Hardwood Floor Finish
- 150mm Concrete Slab
- 100mm Rigid Insulation
- Radon Barrier
- 60mm Sand Screed
- Compacted Hardcore



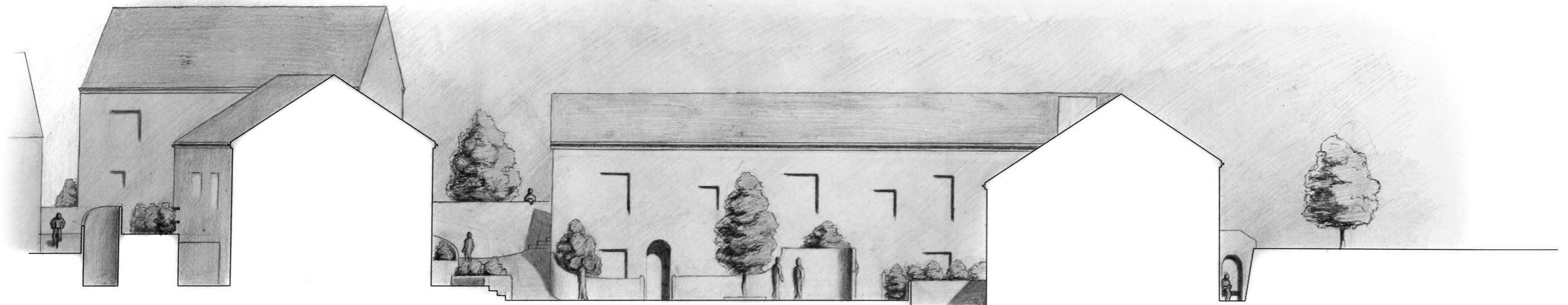


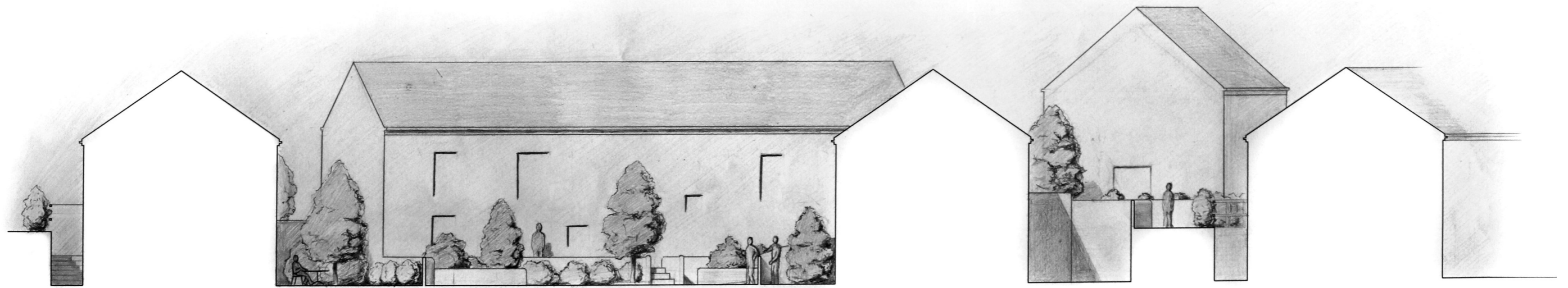
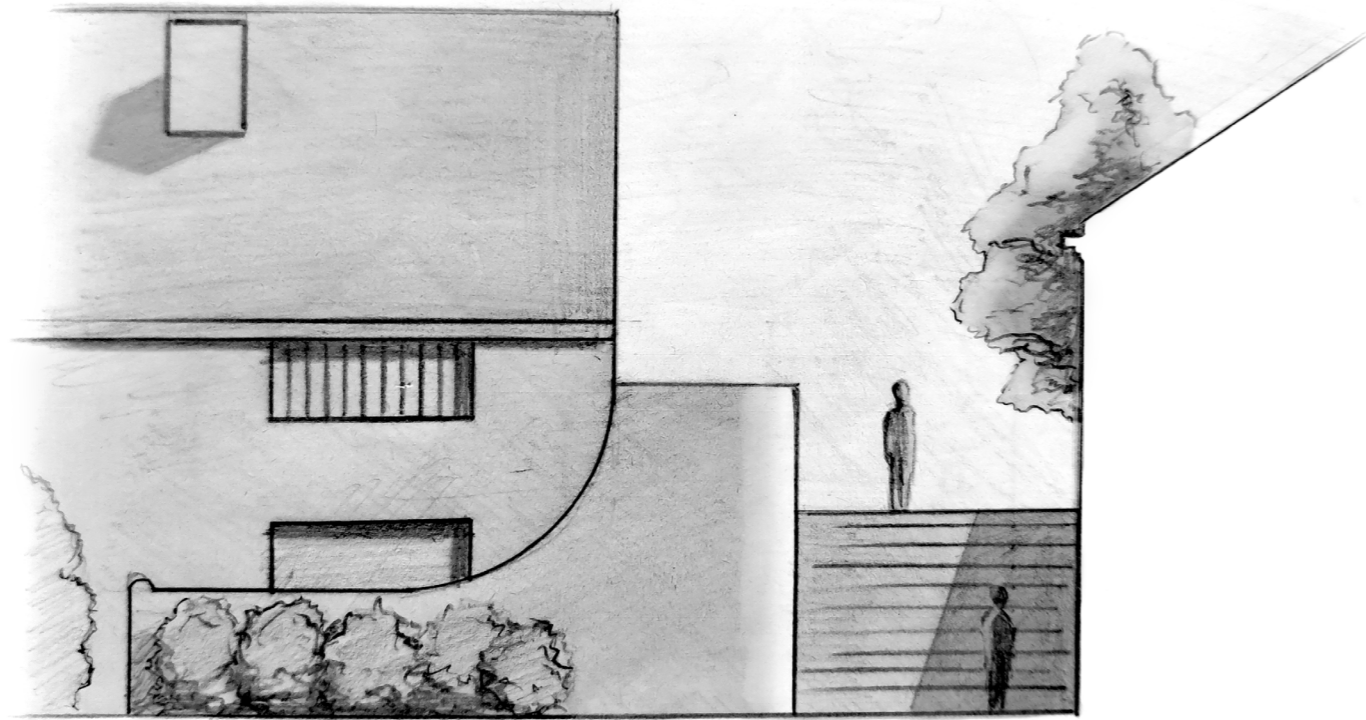


In the design concept, the sections of the project embrace a deliberate choice to reintroduce a man-made typology of levels. This approach allows for the inclusion of structures that exhibit simplicity and modesty in their appearance, akin to outbuildings when viewed from other parts of the site. By employing this design strategy, the aim is to create a unique architectural character that blends harmoniously with the surroundings, without distracting from the sites existing structures.

The significance of this approach lies in the creation of a sheltered and intimate environment within the core of each cluster. The carefully designed levels and their arrangement form a cohesive whole that fosters a strong sense of community among the residents. Within this central space, individuals can interact, engage in social activities, and establish meaningful connections with their neighbors.

The deliberate emphasis on the human scale within these clusters further enhances the sense of intimacy and belonging. By ensuring that the architecture aligns with the proportions and needs of the inhabitants, a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere is created. This human-centric approach encourages a sense of ownership and pride among the community members, as they perceive the space as uniquely theirs.







3D Exploration of the relationship between private and shared space

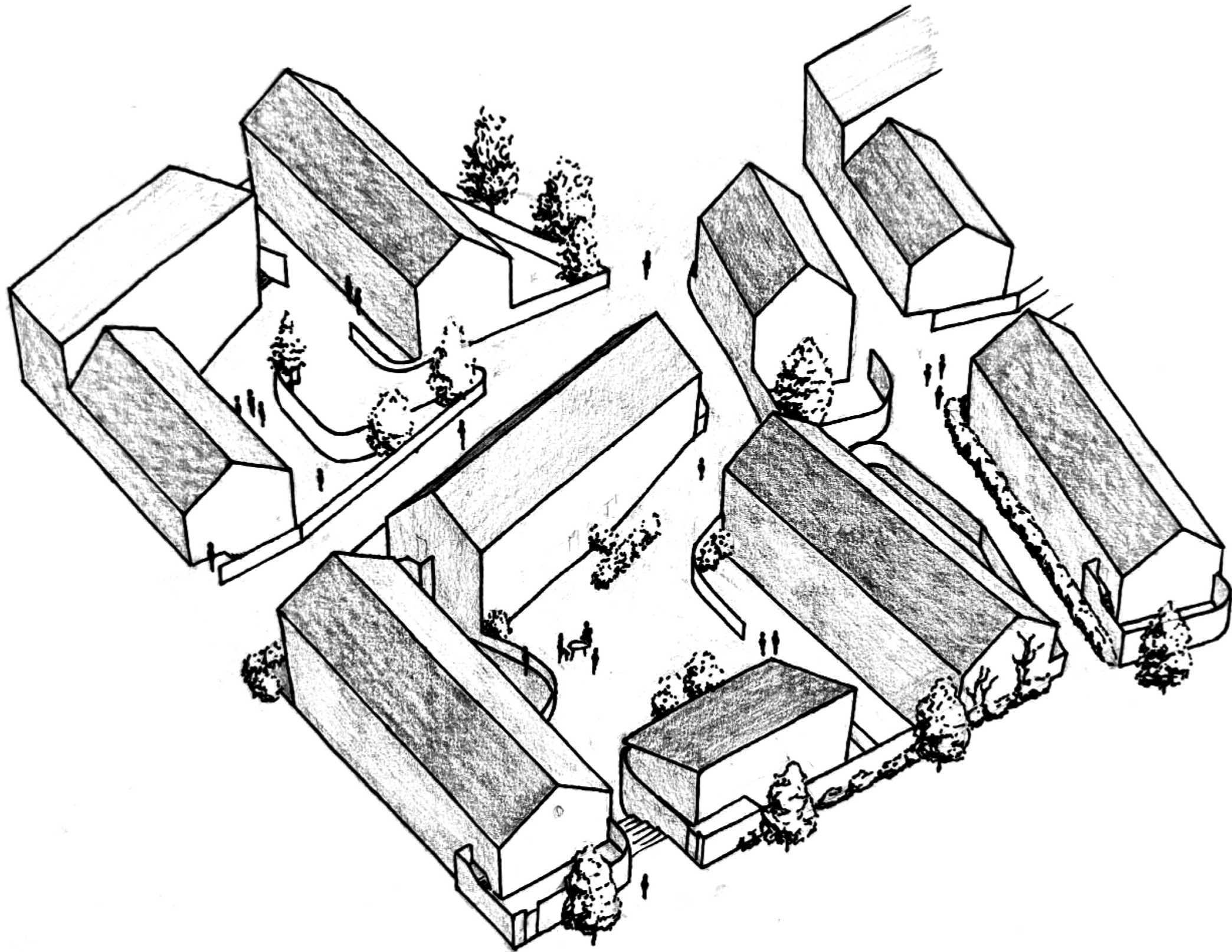


Conclusion

In my thesis, I embarked on a journey to explore the value of country estates and their significance to our nation. Through my research, I discovered a disheartening trend of neglect and disregard for their cultural and architectural importance in the face of insensitive developments. It became evident that without a concerted effort to protect these sites, their loss would be irreparable. The current regulations and laws, while necessary, primarily concentrate on the individual buildings, disregarding the crucial aspects of context and their interconnectedness with the surrounding environment. Unfortunately, these existing regulations failed to adequately preserve the genuine value of country estates. It became evident that a more comprehensive approach, one that encompasses the broader context and effective site management, was essential in ensuring the continued existence of these estates in all their richness and significance.

During my investigation, I recognized the power of a strong and vibrant community in shaping the development of a residential area. It became clear that both people and structures needed to be given equal attention. I firmly believed that fostering a sense of community and instilling pride in one's surroundings would contribute to the preservation of these shared sites. By respecting and showcasing the existing characteristics and main house, the introduction of architecture that harmonises with the site can maintain its essence and create a sense of place crucial for the thriving of communities.

The presented architecture project stands as a testament to the thoughtful and comprehensive approach employed to safeguard the historical and architectural integrity of smaller estates while addressing the needs of contemporary living. By prioritising sustainability, community, and the spaces between buildings, the project strives to establish a deep sense of place and ensure the preservation of Ireland's rich cultural heritage. With careful consideration of the local and immediate context, this project has the potential to make a positive and lasting contribution to the enhancement and safeguarding of these invaluable sites for generations to come, inspiring a collective appreciation and recognition of their enduring worth.



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Appendices

Appendix A: The concept of ‘Improvement’ by landowners emerged in England between 1700 and 1870. This movement was described as “Restructuring [of] the landscape for social and economic, as well as aesthetic ends and, by extension, restructuring and conduct of those who lived in, worked in, and looked upon it.” (Graham et al, 1997) In Ireland, there has typically been a far smaller range of reasons given for landowners’ willingness to participate in these landscape changes. The perception of landowners as economic improvers was minimised in favour of extensive but seemingly unproductive landscape changes carried out for aesthetic, social, and family purposes, as seen by the creation of demesnes and country homes. (Aalen et al, 2011) The Irish landowner was therefore viewed as a consumer rather than a creator of resources. As these rural homes also played a significant part in the political economy, many landowners employed urban improvement both to improve the quality of the area adjacent to their estate and to strengthen the political loyalty of their tenants. Such upgrades and the building of demesnes would both assist the residents find work and make a good impression on political colleagues. (Graham et al, 1997)

Appendix B: In order to address problems brought on by the significant population increase that followed the famine such as unpermitted subletting and subdivision of tenant holdings, the introduction of a rural social adjustment was necessary to handle any issues with plot placement and size brought on by growing population. The ultimate result was a total reorganisation of the landholding and settlement structure that gave rise to autonomous, tiny farms that were compact. The commissioners for the Irish government favoured “squared” farms with a home positioned in the middle of the property. The efficiency of agricultural organisation would have benefited from this, but it cut off the home from its neighbours and was in opposition to customary social behaviour. (Graham et al, 1997)

Appendix C: The building’s initial design was for two floors above two underground basement levels, and a third story was later added for even more staff quarters. Rockingham’s subterranean services relied on three underground tunnels, one of which connected the basement to the lake where turf was mechanically raised into the house from the basement after arriving on boats from the bog. For products coming by land, a second tunnel was used, while a third was used for staff. Although it’s difficult to deny the deliberate levelling of hierarchy built into the architecture of these dwellings, we can start to appreciate how practical the architectural aim was. (McCarthy, 2019)