

WESTMINSTER

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BARBER, Peter

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Output 3 (Design)

DONNYBROOK

Barber, Peter (2005)

Donnybrook Quarter, Bow

General Description:

The Donnybrook Quarter is an ultra-high-density, low-rise, mixed-use scheme. It sits on a prominent corner site in the East End of London. The aim is to provide vibrant and colourful public space, bounded by a hard edge of buildings. Its starting point is defiantly urban. Today some 130 people inhabit the 40 housing units, with about 25% of them provided as affordable rented housing. At the heart of the scheme a new pedestrianised street runs north-to-south across the site, giving access to the dwellings on either side and offering a walkable route to adjacent streets. This street has an intimate scale, being only 7 m wide and bordered on either side by two-and-a-half-storey buildings. Balconies, terraces, bay windows and numerous front doors overhang and overlap the central street. Deckchairs, some chat, colourful plants, even the chance for people to meet. Where they meet Old Ford Road, a busy road, the buildings rise to four storeys and non-residential uses are introduced - a shop, a community centre, a café. On the east side of the site an elegant residential terrace follows the slow sweeping curve of Parnell Road.

The typical double unit in Donnybrook comprises a two-bedroomed maisonette at upper ground and first floor and a two-bedroom flat at lower ground floor. The configuration as a 'notched' terrace enables ultra-high densities of up to 520 habitable rooms per hectare, whilst maintaining good levels of privacy and amenity to every dwelling. Each dwelling has its own front door on the street and its own 8 m x 4 m courtyard. The upper maisonette is entered from the street through a courtyard garden. Its living area has a fully glazed sliding screen, which faces south, over the courtyard. Upstairs there is a double bedroom, another bedroom or study, a bathroom, and a balcony that overlooks the street. The lower maisonette has a street entrance door leading down a staircase into an open-plan living area. The room is flooded with light from a fully-glazed sliding screen, which gives access into the courtyard garden. Its living area leads to a double bedroom, a single bedroom or study and a bathroom. The courtyard in each dwelling is an undifferentiated space which it is hoped, in time, might be used by residents who need a 'lean-to', a shed, a greenhouse, or maybe just some supports for their plants.

Research Questions:

The primary issues in the Donnybrook Quarter include:

- (1) How to use the program requirements and site conditions of the estate to create a new model of high-density, mixed-use building for a compact inner-city site.
- (2) How to conceive the project to reinforce the centrality of the urban street as the primary generator of social and economic life, and as a means to reinvigorate cities.
- (3) How to utilise an extensive process of physical model-making to test out complex housing permutations, and to investigate construction technologies in order to meet the design objectives within an extremely tight budget and construction schedule.

Thus the core of the research behind the Donnybrook Quarter was about how to design housing from the street inwards, and how then to allow for change and user adaptation.

Aims/Objectives:

(1) To achieve a high-density model of urban living to increase street activity and socio-economic conditions in a deprived Inner London borough.

As well as the writings of Walter Benjamin on the lively streets of Naples and other cities, and of the promotion of high-density development by Lord Richard Rogers and the Urban Taskforce Report, in terms of integrating such ideas into an actual design proposal for social housing, a very broad range of historical and contemporary precedents were studied by Peter Barber. Key amongst these were the mass housing schemes by Alvaro Siza, most notably his sizeable project in Evora in Portugal, which also relies on the use of terraces with 'notched' sections. In turn, this model was adapted to create the innovative and distinctive typologies that are found in the Donnybrook Quarter.

(2) To conceive a way of looking at sustainable architecture in what are essentially urban rather than technological terms.

Back in 1997, the Urban Taskforce Report chaired by Lord Rogers produced a strong set of recommendations, which through the government's subsequent Urban White Paper made a new kind of project possible. The Urban Taskforce recommended a radical rethinking of zoning policy that for generations has given us boring and inconvenient mono-functional neighbourhoods. It recommended the introduction of tax breaks for the development of sites and perhaps most significantly, it recommended the introduction of new planning guidelines allowing construction and 'estate renewal' on a scale unseen since the immediate post-war period. Such a programme has the capacity to deliver the construction and refurbishment of hundreds of thousands of urban dwellings, as well as offering opportunities for us to create whole new city quarters. Schemes such as the Donnybrook Quarter are important experiments towards achieving that goal.

(3) To re-establish urban design, and above all the need for a close and direct relationship with the street, as the primary driver in urban housing design.

Here it should be noted that Peter Barber made good use in the Donnybrook scheme of Space Syntax analysis, as developed by Bill Hillier at UCL. While this technique cannot account for all aspects of urban design, it is a useful tool in trying to assess what would be the most successful circulation connections to be made in a housing estate, ensuring it will fit into the surrounding urban network as effectively as possible. This analysis for the Donnybrook Quarter was provided by Ben Stringer of the University of Westminster, earlier a star student of Hillier's at UCL. Furthermore, in an attempt to ascertain the reality on the ground, and to provide a research basis for studying the issue of urban vitality through street design, a post-occupancy research project into the Donnybrook Quarter has been started at the University of Westminster. It is being led by Murray Fraser and Ben Stringer, and also incorporates Austin Smyth, head of that university's Department of Transport, to discover how the scheme is faring in practice and how occupants might have had their transit and movement patterns affected by the design.

(4) To re-establish a process of design which, while accepting the benefits of computer-aided-design, still locates the key decisions in the realm of the hand-made, through sketching and physical model-making.

Again, a clear objective of the Donnybrook project is to reassert the central importance of particularly physical models in the evolution of innovative, spatially complex designs.

Context:

Peter Barber is widely acknowledged as one of the most talented British architects who is operating in housing design, linking his research into the nature of street life with the creation of innovative high-density housing models. The Donnybrook Quarter contributes squarely to contemporary research into higher densities of urban living, as being urged upon the profession by bodies such as the Urban Task Force, and articulated by leading architectural figures like Lord Richard Rogers and Ricky Burdett.

It should be pointed out Peter Barber obtained the commission for the Donnybrook Quarter after winning the original competition for 'Innovation in Housing' which was run by the Circle 33 Housing Association back in 2002. He kept to his design principles even despite great commercial pressures being placed on Circle 33 to abandon their social vision and reshape the scheme to suit London's private housing market. In the eyes of Barber, the scheme could only ever become a genuinely lively urban area if there was a proper mix of wealthier and poorer people, older and younger, singles and families.

As such, the Donnybrook scheme needs to be seen as a further contribution towards investigations into the social consequences of densified urban living, and is pursued with the ultimate aim of improving urban sustainability. The notion of the street as the locus for social interaction has a long pedigree in architectural thought, as promoted by writers like Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett. Peter Barber is thus following very much in their footsteps, and indeed prior to Donnybrook he had designed a well-received masterplan proposal which sought to renew the sense of street culture in two Dalston estates, the Haggerston East and Kingsland Estates, as discussed in *Building Design* (9 March 2001, pp. 12-13) and *Local Government News* (July/August 2001, p. 16). Many of the ideas first developed in this masterplan were later to resurface in the Donnybrook Quarter and other housing projects by Barber, such as the Tanner Street Estate.

Research Methods:

Numerous visits were made to the Donnybrook site in order to understand its inherent complexity and potential. Extensive discussions were then held with the client, Circle 33, and also the local planning officers, to see how far they would allow the dominant local housing density levels to be increased in the scheme. Concurrently a variety of programmatic solutions and spatial permutations, as well as the detailed three-dimensional complexity of each of the estate and its surroundings, were tested out through extensive physical model-making and other forms of visualisation. These analyses in turn allowed the refinement of the overall configuration of the building in terms of accessibility, circulation, lighting conditions, structural expression, housing typologies, and general functional viability. The many physical models were all constructed with the same logic as the real construction operations would be on site, being regularly and quickly updated throughout the whole process.

Another crucial aspect of the research carried out by Peter Barber involved not just looking at general housing design, but also an in-depth analysis of highly regarded practitioners, of which - as noted - the most influential on the final project was the work of Alvaro Siza. This source however was blended in with Barber's ongoing interest in the cultural life of the urban street, with the testing of various design options always being tied back to Space Syntax and other forms of interpreting just what it is that makes a street successful, or not, in generating a sense of urban vibrancy.

Dissemination:

The Donnybrook Quarter has been written up extensively from its very earliest stages in the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times*, *Evening Standard*, etc. as well as appearing often in the architectural press and in architectural books. The most relevant texts are:

- Cherry, Bridget et al. *The Buildings of England - London, Vol.5: East*. New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 625-6.
- French, Hilary (ed). *Accommodating Change*. London: Circle 33 Housing Group, 2002.
- Woodman, Ellis. 'Streets Ahead'. *Building Design*, 24 February 2006, pp. 12-15.
- Young, Eleanor. 'Neighbourhood Watch'. *RIBA Journal*, April 2006, pp. 32-40.
- Dyckhoff, Tom. 'The Cockneys' own kasbah', *Times*, 24 January 2006, p. 24.
- Merrick, Jay. 'Neapolitan London', *Independent*, 25 January 2006, p. 42.
- Rose, Steve. 'Marbella on the Thames', *Guardian*, 6 February 2006, pp. 19-20.
- Fraser, Murray, 'Beyond Koolhaas'. In Rendell, Jane, et al (eds.). *Critical Architecture*. London/New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 334-8.

The press reaction to Donnybrook has been overwhelmingly favourable, as can be seen by this following sample of quotes:

- 'Barber has just completed the most innovative piece of large-scale housing built in Britain for years.' [Dyckhoff, Tom. *Times*, 24 January 2006]
- 'Donnybrook is a complex, socially challenging architectural arrangement. The rationalism used in Bow is about inclusion, physical agreement and the startling realities of progressive urban change.' [Merrick, Jay. *Independent*, 25 January 2006]
- 'Top dogs for 2006, best buildings in class. Housing: Donnybrook ... Peter Barber Architects is ... best placed to make a really significant impact on a sector that for many years has fought shy of innovative design.' [Woodman, Ellis. *Building Design*, 6 January 2006]
- 'This inspiring scheme ... strives to repair some of the rips that have been made in London's fabric since the Second World War. If you can achieve all that with this level of elegance, you could well be on to something.' [Rose, Steve. *Guardian*, 6 February 2006]

In addition to its press reviews, the Donnybrook Quarter scheme was also included as an exemplary new project for the capital's built fabric as part of the New London Architecture Exhibition in mid-2005.

Peter Barber is frequently invited to give public lectures on his architectural work, now having presented nearly 50 talks across Britain and in countries abroad. As well as the perhaps more expected lectures to architectural schools, the RIBA, or the Architectural League of New York, these talks by Barber have also included an invitation to address a symposium on contemporary urbanism in Genoa, Italy (May 2005), or the special session on housing policy at the Labour Party Conference in Manchester (October 2006), or most recently at a multidisciplinary event on urban development for Middle Eastern city mayors held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, Iran (October 2007). Talking about the Donnybrook Quarter forms a major element of these public lectures on his design work.

Esteem Indicators:

The Donnybrook Quarter has gained a host of significant awards, including:

- Winner of Circle 33's 'Accommodating Change: Innovation in Housing' original competition (2002)
- Housing Design Award (2004; shortlisted yet again in 2006)
- Highly Commended in 2004 Royal Academy Summer Show's Architecture Awards
- American Institute of Architects (UK/London Chapter) Design Excellence Award (2006)
- RIBA Regional Design Award (2006)
- Included on the long-list for the 2006 Stirling Prize, and only just narrowly missed making the final cut.

In addition, and to a large degree due to his work on the Donnybrook Quarter project, Peter Barber has recently been awarded with the following prize:

- Winner of Affordable Housing Architect of the Year in the *Building Design Annual Awards* (2007)

Here it is worth quoting at length the encomium in *Building Design* to explain why their judges arrived at the above decision:

'Over the past 10 years, Peter Barber Architects has blazed a trail through the UK public housing scene with radical and innovative housing projects, from the large scale including Tanner Street Gateway, Barking, and Donnybrook Quarter in east London, to beautifully crafted projects like the Cedars Road Pavilion in south-west London.'

'The judges said it was inventive with plan and section, creating places that feel more generous than normal rules allow. They felt the work represents a significant turning point in the culture of British housing provision, and could compete with the best of the private sector and win.'

[*Building Design*, 2 November 2007. p. 11]

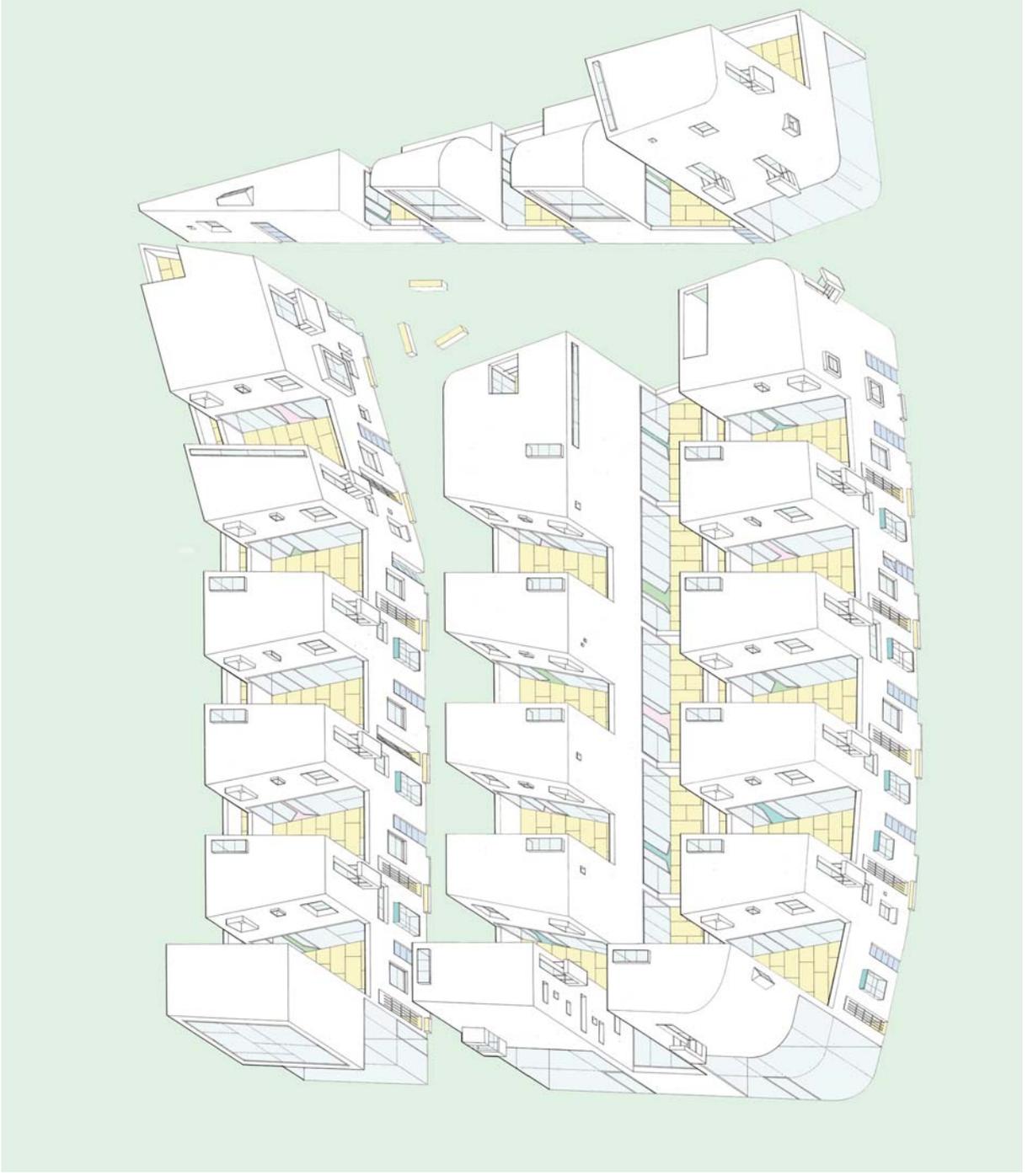


Image 1: Axonometric of the Donnybrook Quarter

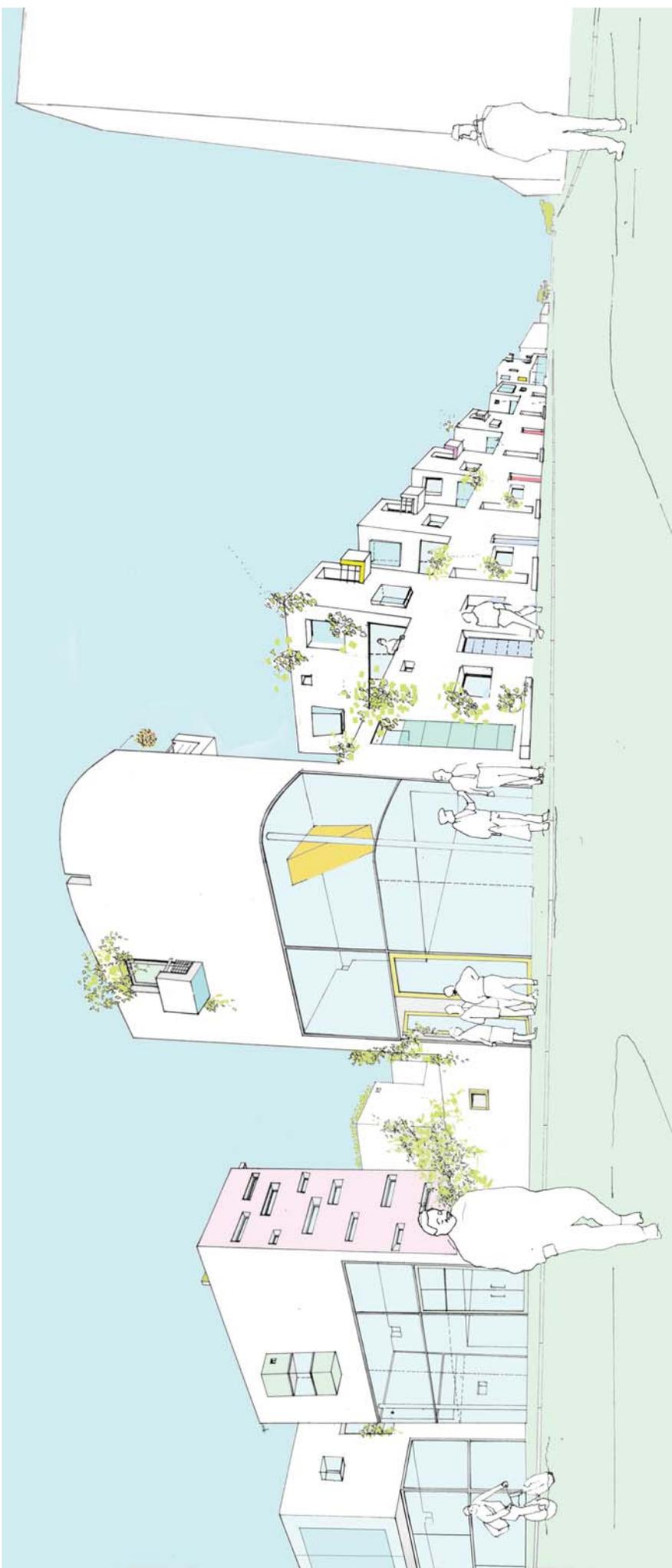


Image 2: Street perspective of the Donnybrook Quarter



Old Ford Road

Image 3: Site Plan of the Donnybrook Quarter



Image 4: Ground Floor plan of Donnybrook Quarter

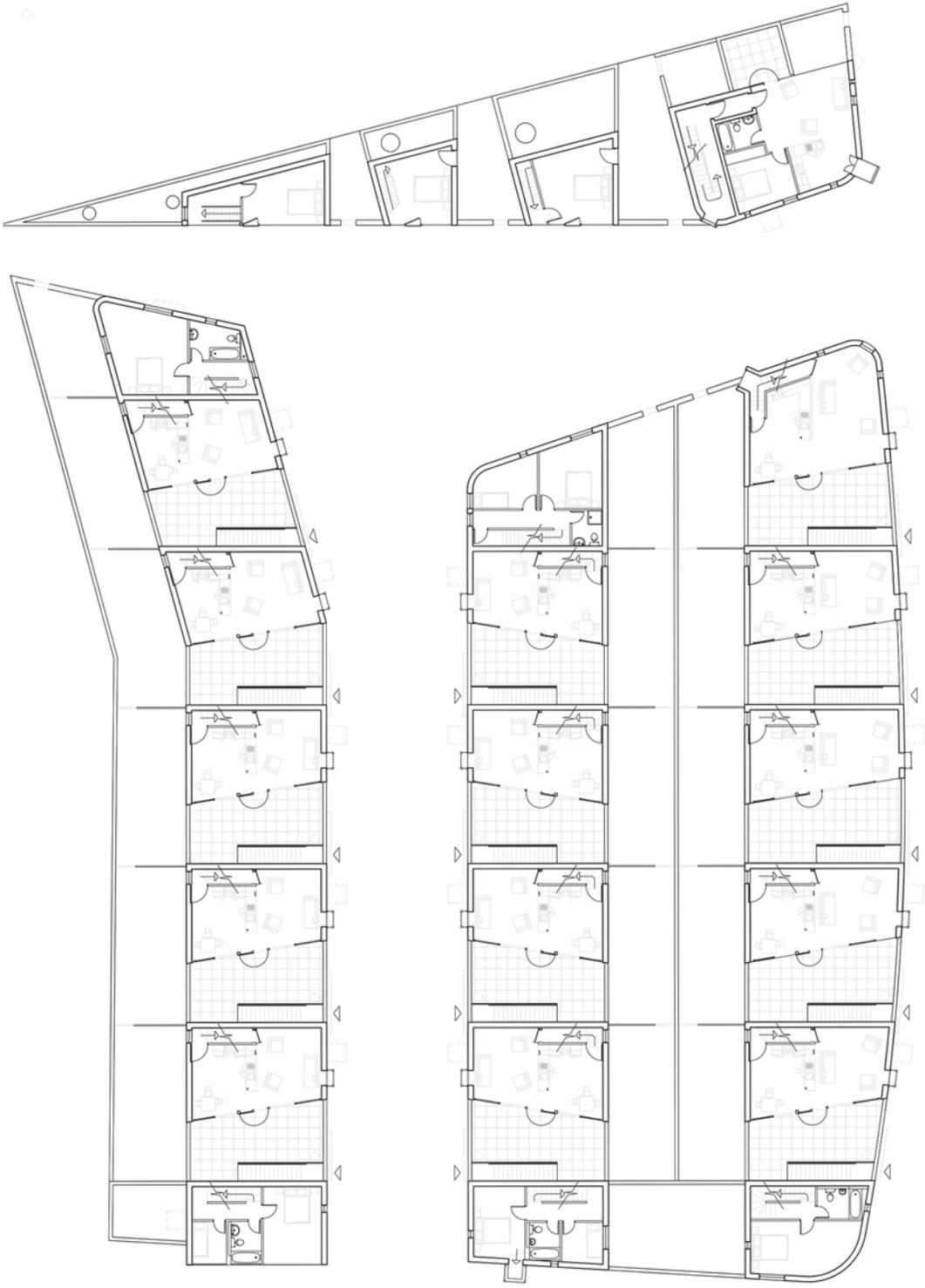


Image 5: First Floor plan of Donnybrook Quarter



Image 6: Second Floor plan of Donnybrook Quarter

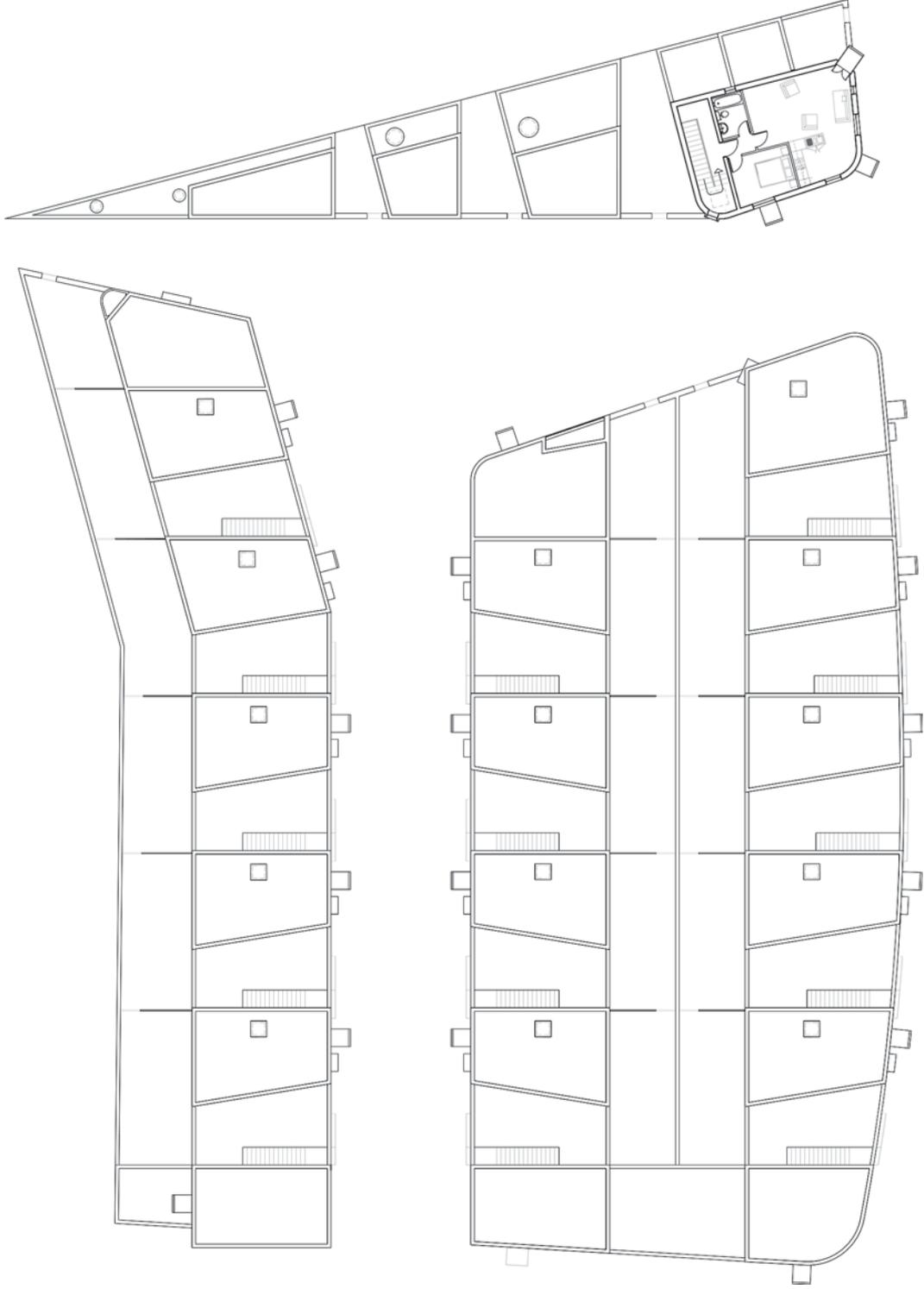


Image 7: Third Floor plan of Donnybrook Quarter



Image 8: Cross-sections in both directions through Donnybrook Quarter



Image 9: Elevations of Donnybrook Quarter

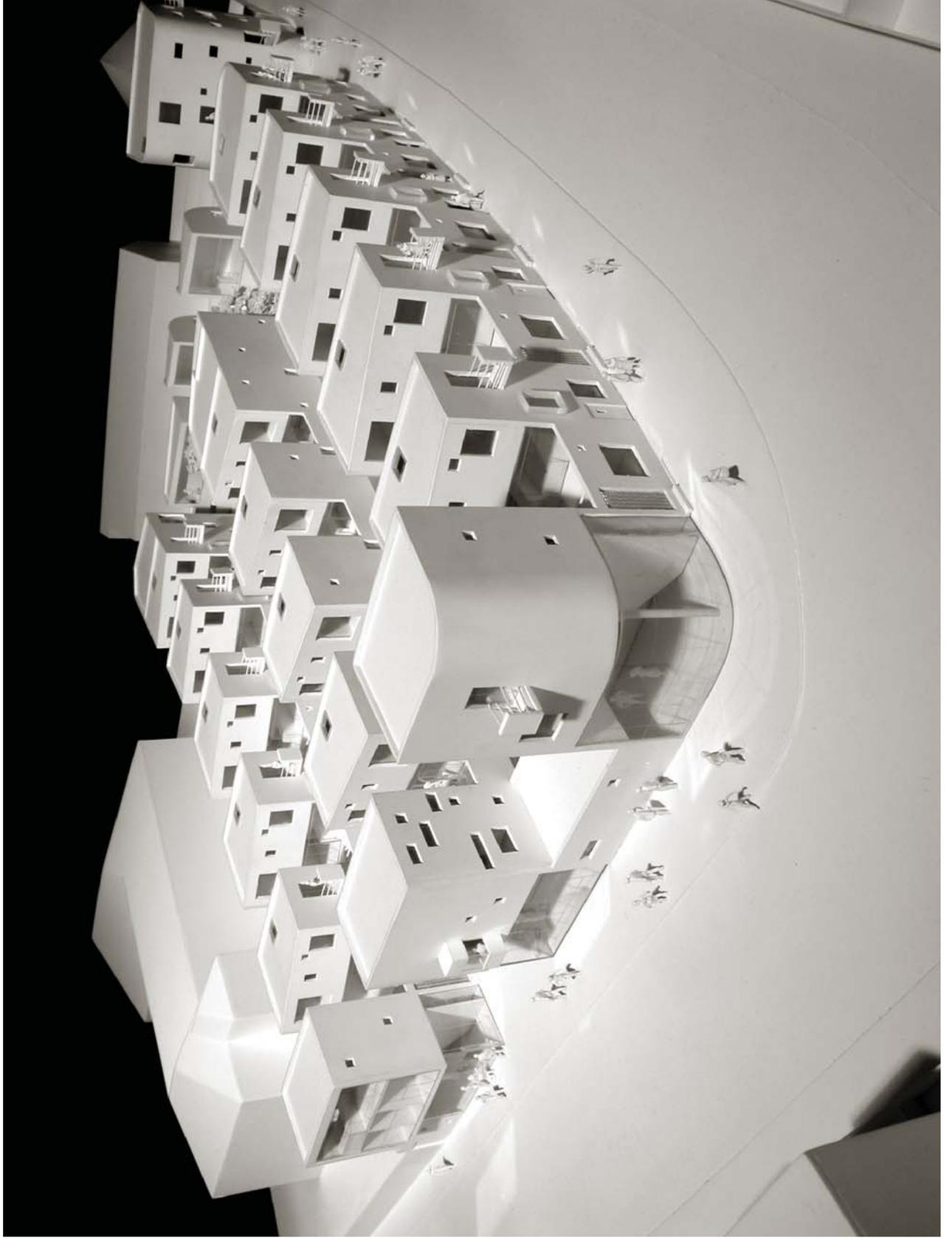


Image 10: Model

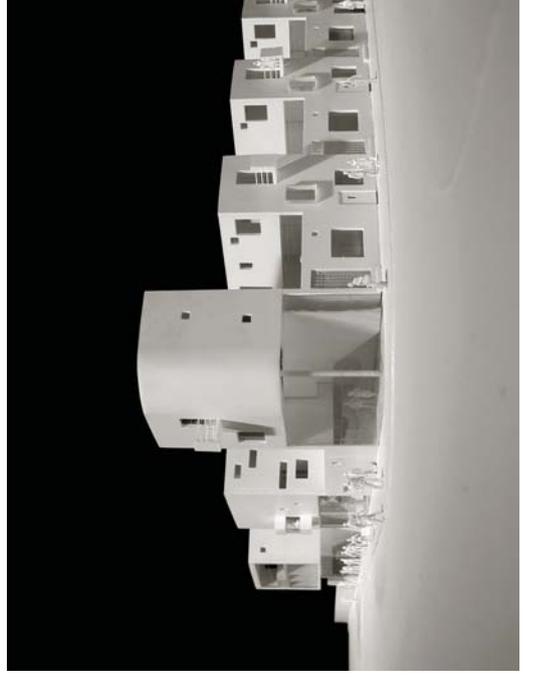
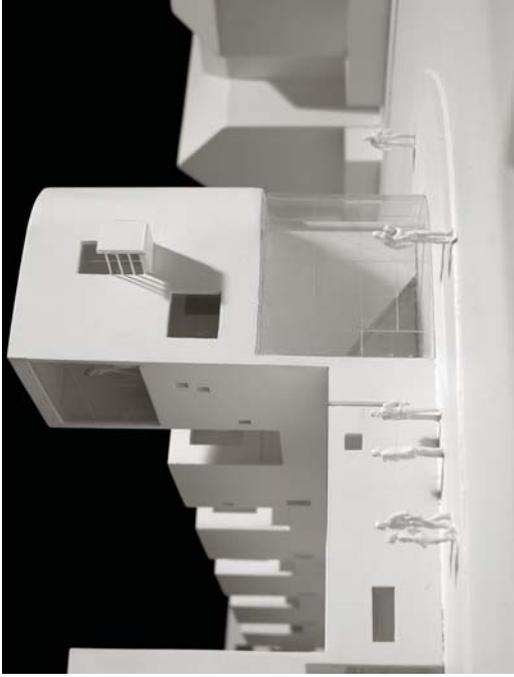


Image 11: Model



Image 12: Aerial photo

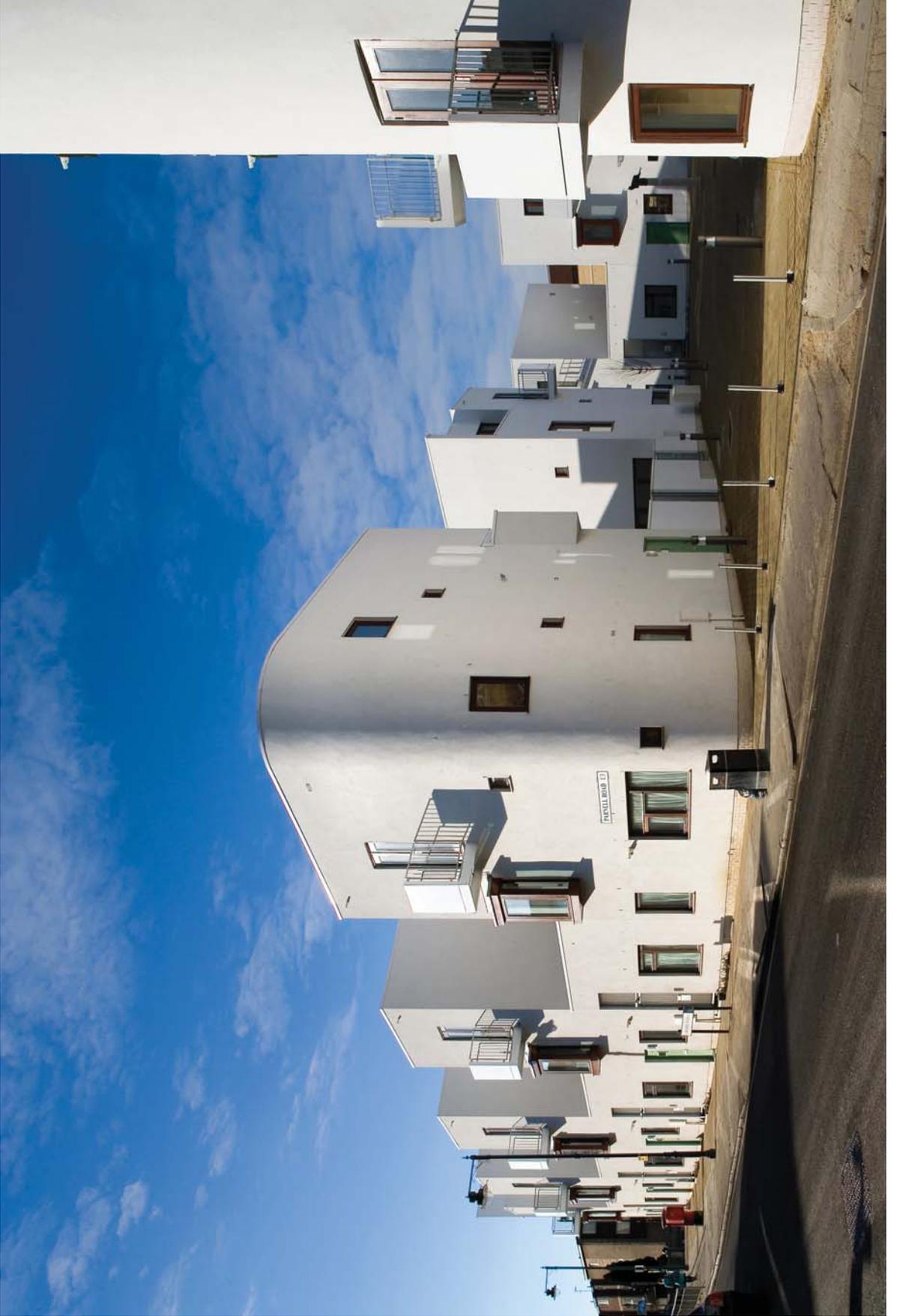
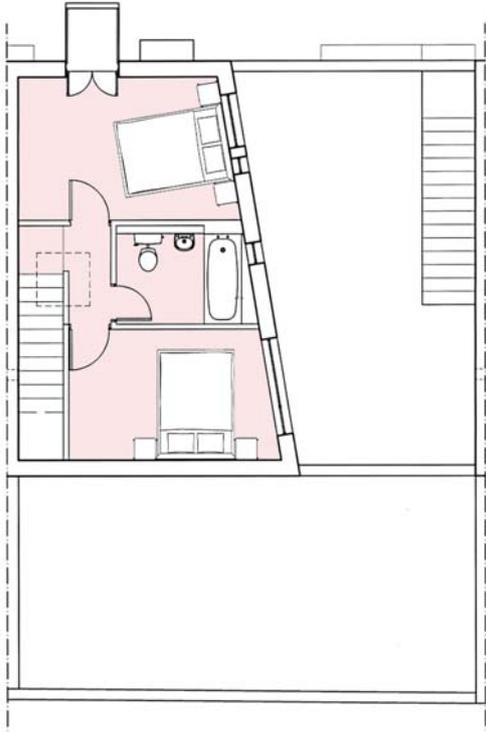


Image 13: Street photo

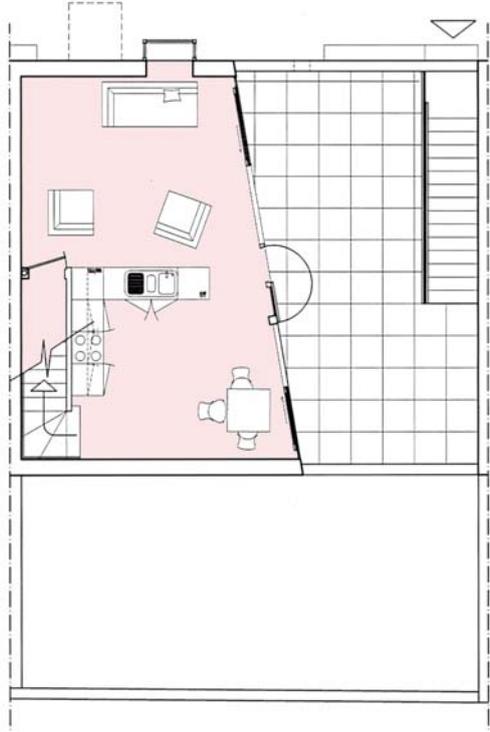


Image 14: Photos around the Quarter



Second Floor plan

Image 15: Floor plans of First Floor maisonette types - sample plans to show innovative approach



First Floor plan

pedestrian routes
3:30-3:45pm 11th october 07



pedestrian routes
6:42-7pm 11th october 07



pedestrian routes
8-8:15am 11th october 07

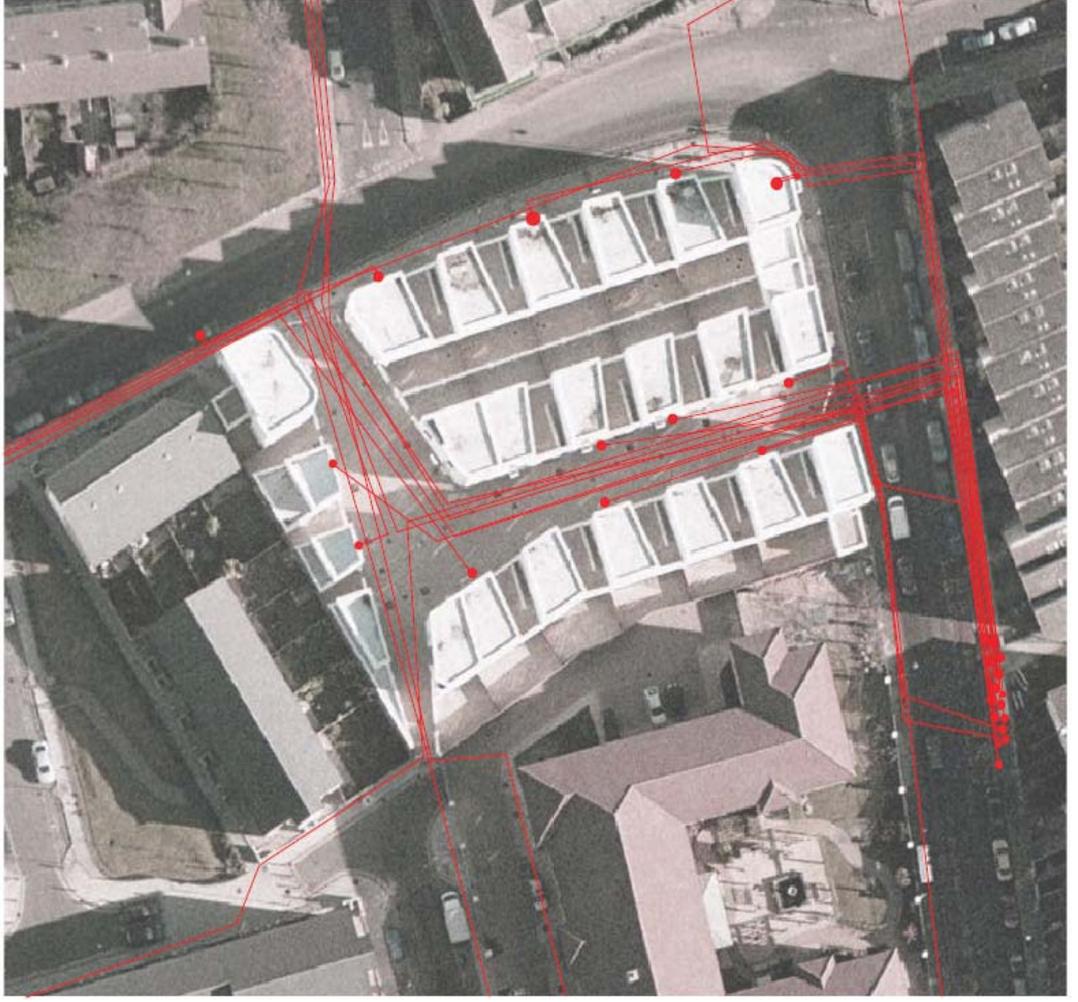


Image 16: Post-occupancy analysis of pedestrian movement patterns around the Donnybrook Quarter



Image 17: Post-occupancy recording of patterns of inhabitation in the Donnybrook Quarter