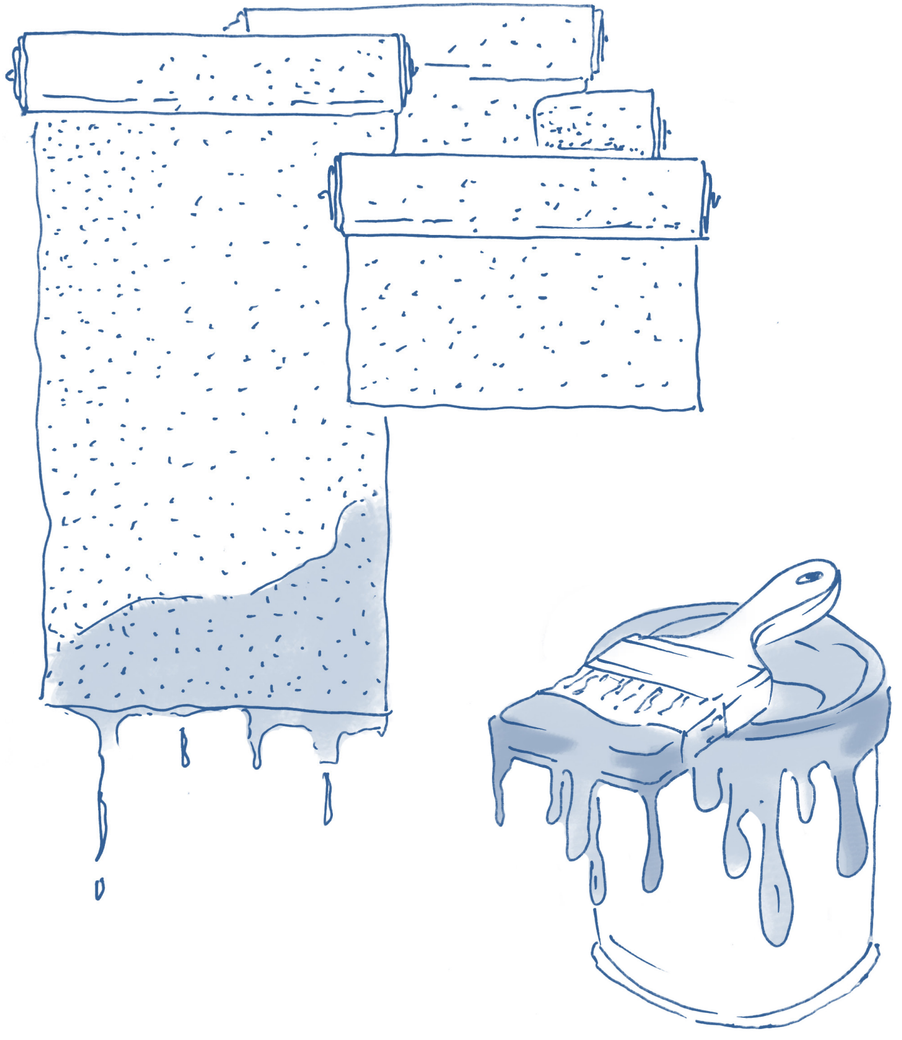
Panelka Beyond Ideology:
In between a remnant of Soviet reality and a catalyst for individuality

Aleksandra I. Shopova | City of the Future | P5

“I remember, I wanted to change the original wallpaper because I saw how beautiful my neighbours’ apartment was. Their wallpaper was beautifully embossed, but it was a bathroom one. They had painted it over with latex paint, so the whole wall looked embossed... very beautiful. Ever since I saw it, I went crazy for it. I drove all over town but there was none to buy. Wherever I went, I would search for it. Finally, I went to Assenovgrad and found it in a shop. When I said “I want 11 rolls!”, the woman squinted her eyes and asked “Excuse me?! How big is your bathroom?!” So I answered “As big as a living room and a kitchen!”. She said “But the wallpaper is for a bathroom! How are you going to install it in a living room and kitchen?!” I said “Just like that!” (Laughs)

“In a nutshell, it was all do-it-yourself and it was a great pleasure. “



Panelka defined

Panelka (Панелка) is a Bulgarian term, which refers to prefabricated panel apartment buildings, constructed during the Soviet period (1950-1989)

The conundrum of Panelka

short-term housing solution		long outlived the life span of 20 years
designed to correspond with the needs of communist society		host of democratic society
perceived as outdated		continues developing today through residents interventions

Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space

Perceived space:

Any neutral physical environment

Conceived space:

The political and social lens through which the environment is viewed

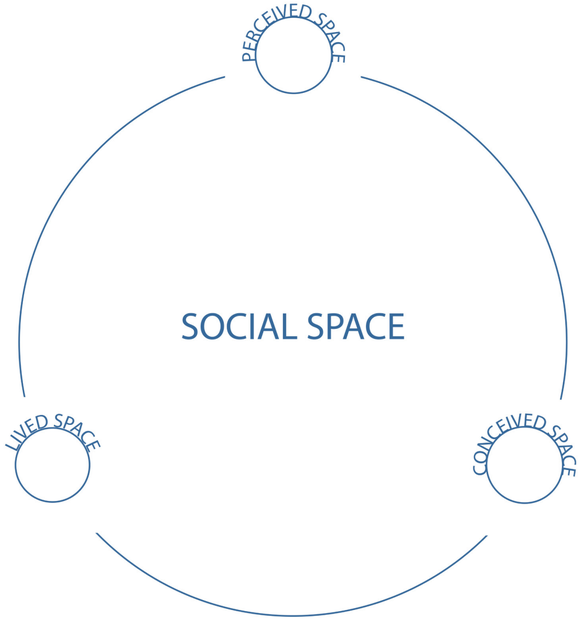
Lived space:

The way one interacts with their environment

Social space:

The perceived, conceived, and lived space produce the social space

Lefebvre’s triad:



The social space of Panelka during the Soviet period

Perceived space:

Panelka neighbourhoods were often created from scratch and are easily replicated

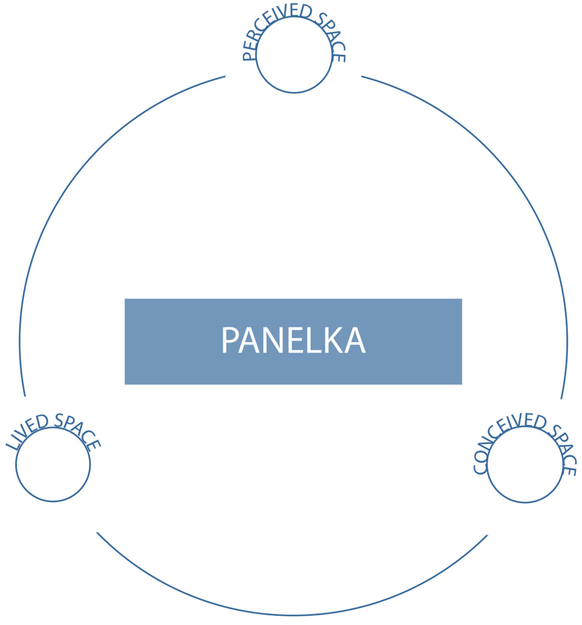
Conceived space:

Soviet ideology was the dominant political and social lens. Panelka's were part of "building communism". It was seen as the ideal living space for the 'soviet citizen'

Lived space:

Social survaillance limited self expression to the private realm

Lefebvre's triad:



The social space of Panelka during the Transition

Conceived space during the Soviet period:

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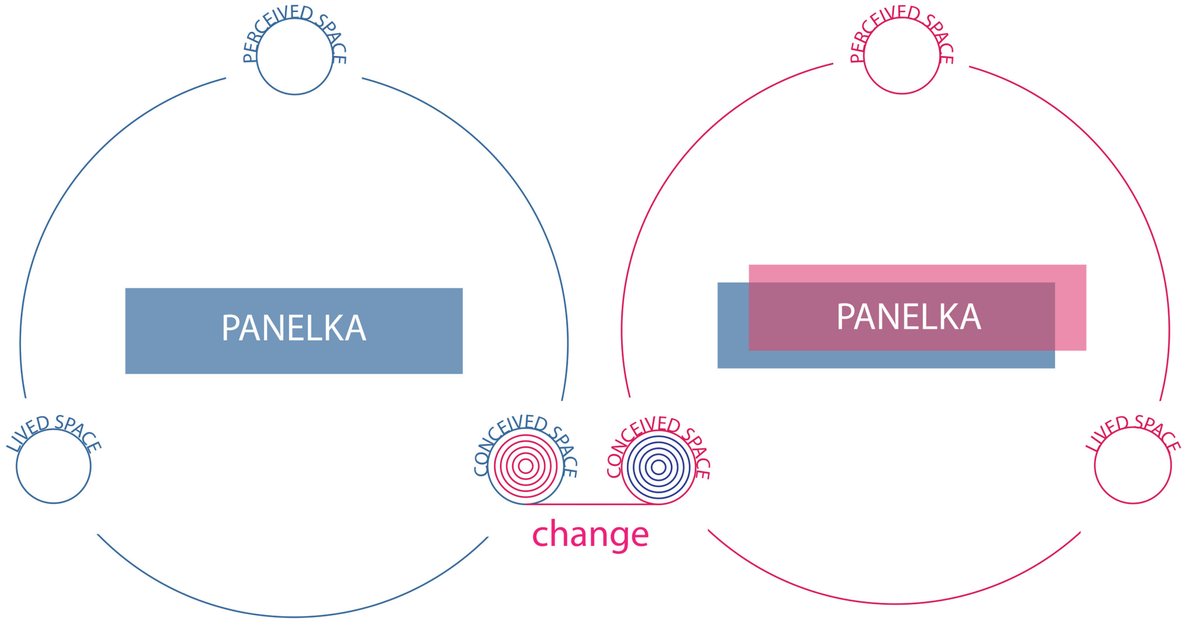
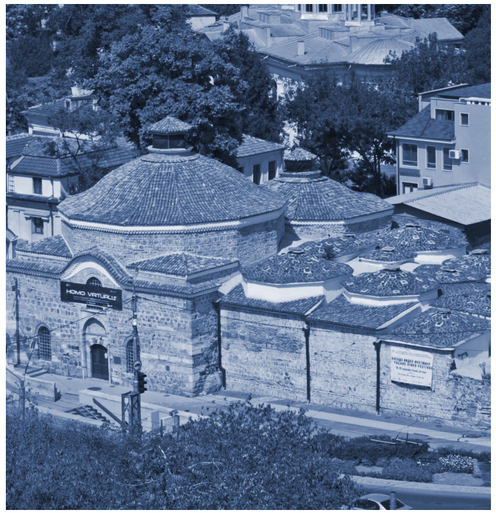
Conceived space during the Transition:

Due to the change in the political climate, the political and social lens of Soviet ideology was removed, resulting in uncontrolled freedom



The social space of Panelka during the Transition

Plovdiv as the research site



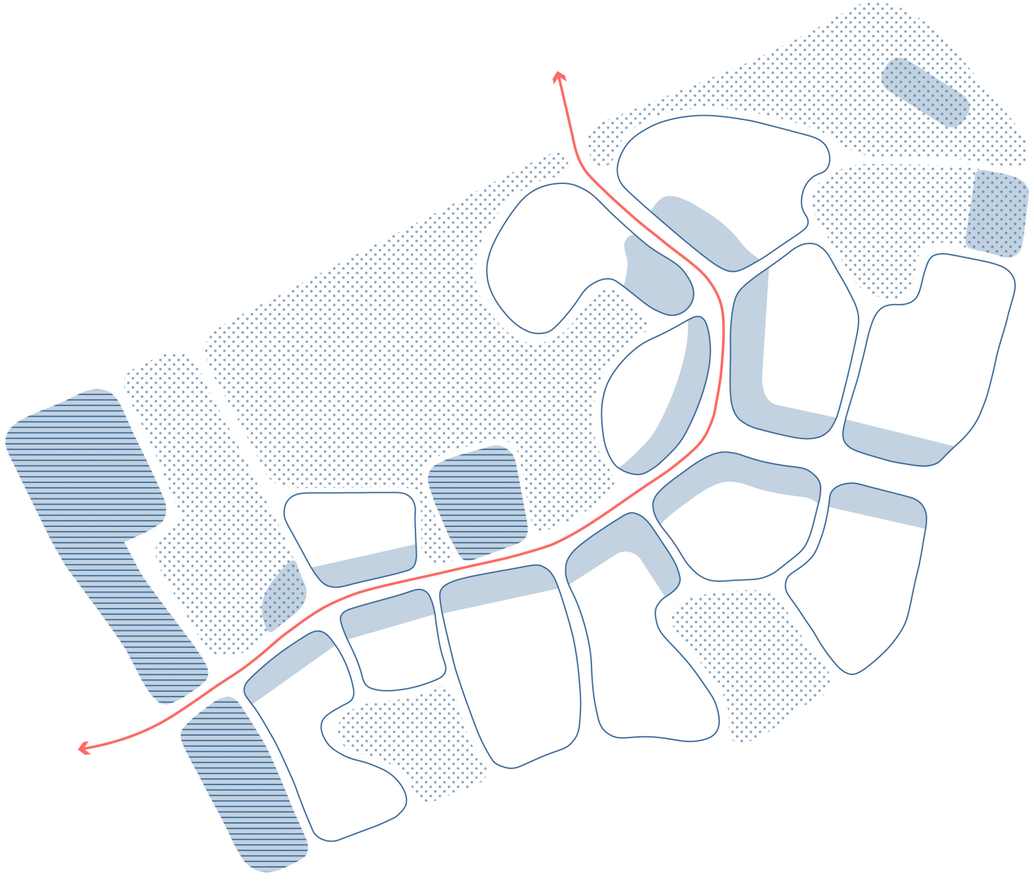
Original concept of Trakiya

иният район „Тракия". Макет.
rtier résidentiel „Trakia". Maquette.

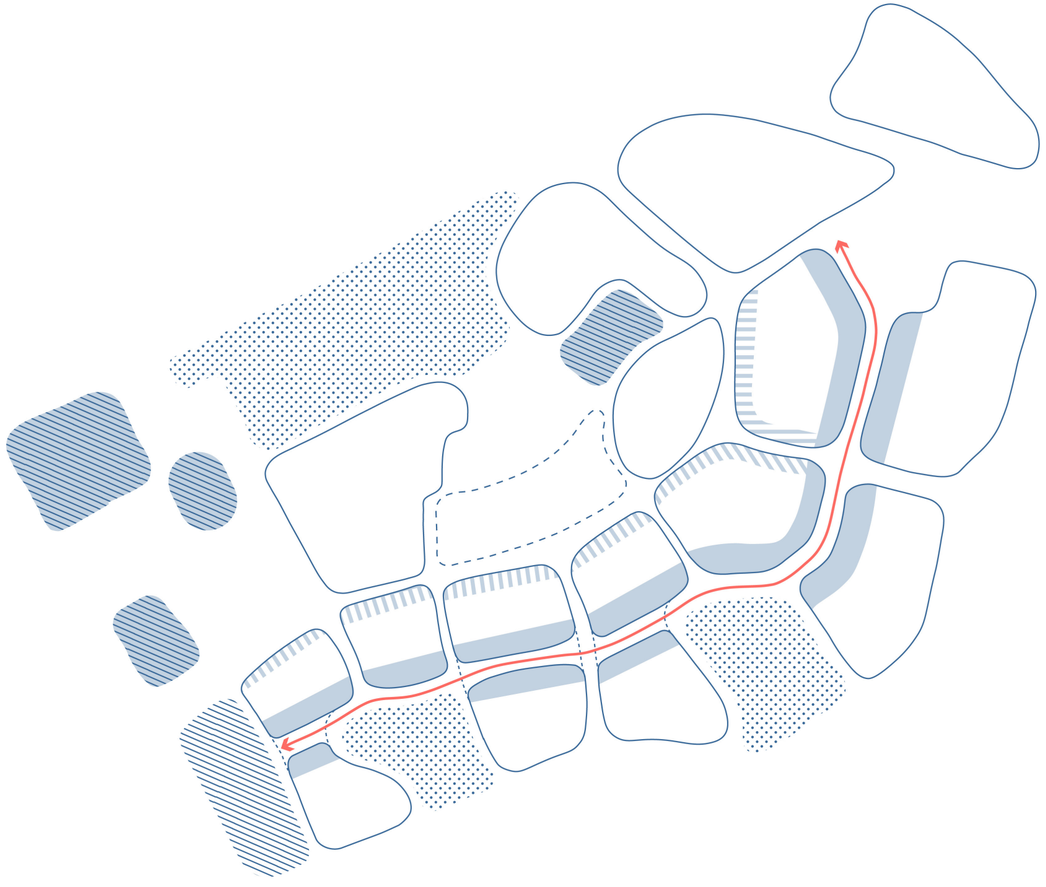
2
Генерален план: 1 — комуникационно-транспортна мрежа; 2 — обществен гараж за 450 коли; 3 — жилищни блокове; 4 — обществена зеленина; 5 — парк „Лаута"; 6 — ботаническа градина; 7 — сдвоено 60-класно ЕСПУ; 8—30-класно ЕСПУ; 9—детски комбинат за 320 деца; 10 — детска градина за 200 деца; 11 — детски ясли за 120 деца; 12 — регионален обществен център; 13 — обществено-политически и административен и културен център; 14 — Селскостопански институт; 15 — ж.п. гара „Изток"; 16 — национален музей на българската авиация; 17 — районна болница с поликлиника; 18 — поликлиника; 19 — хотел; 20 — поща; 21 — обекти на търговията, общественото хранене, услуги, култура и изкуство; 22 — супермаркет
Plan général

From concept to execution

"backbone"
park
public facilities
public activity



conceptualized



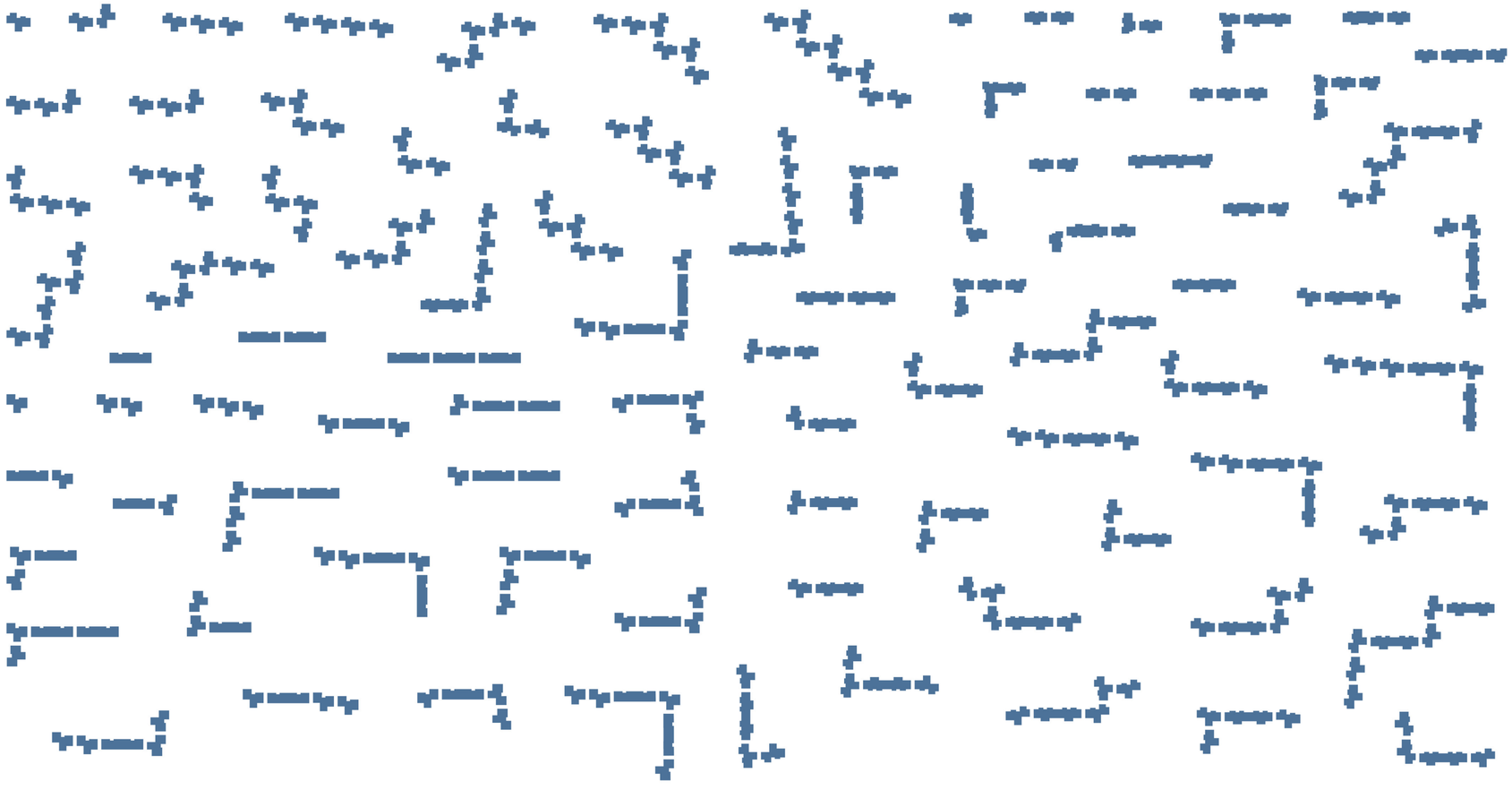
reality

The result of the unfinished construction

“Weren’t they going to build an opera house there?! And a park... and an opera...”

Panelka types and configurations

the 5 types



the 92 type configurations

Residents’ public interventions

- Gazebo
- Rancho
- Shops
- Gardens

“We’ve did the parking lot ourselves, the landscaping outside as well. We built the gazebo by the entrance. G.(her husband) planted all the trees in front. The ones on the other side of the block, as well as on the street side... he planted them, even the walnut trees. He wanted a walnut tree garden. Nobody told us what to do in front of our block entrance beforehand.”

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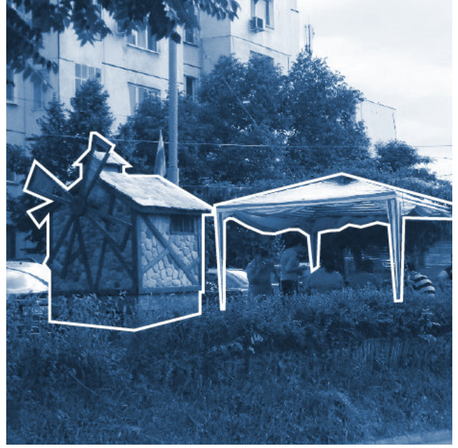

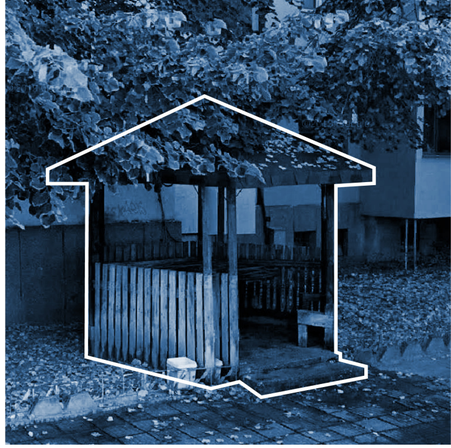

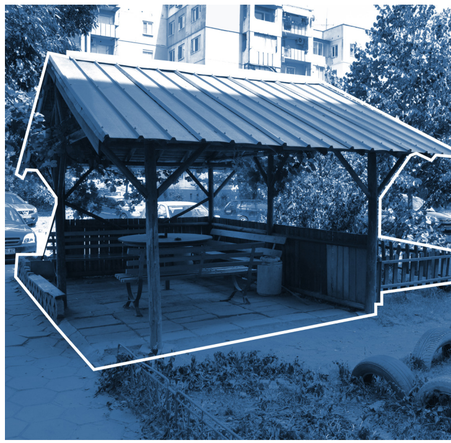

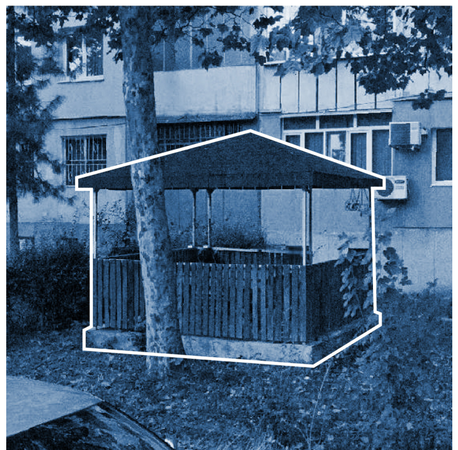

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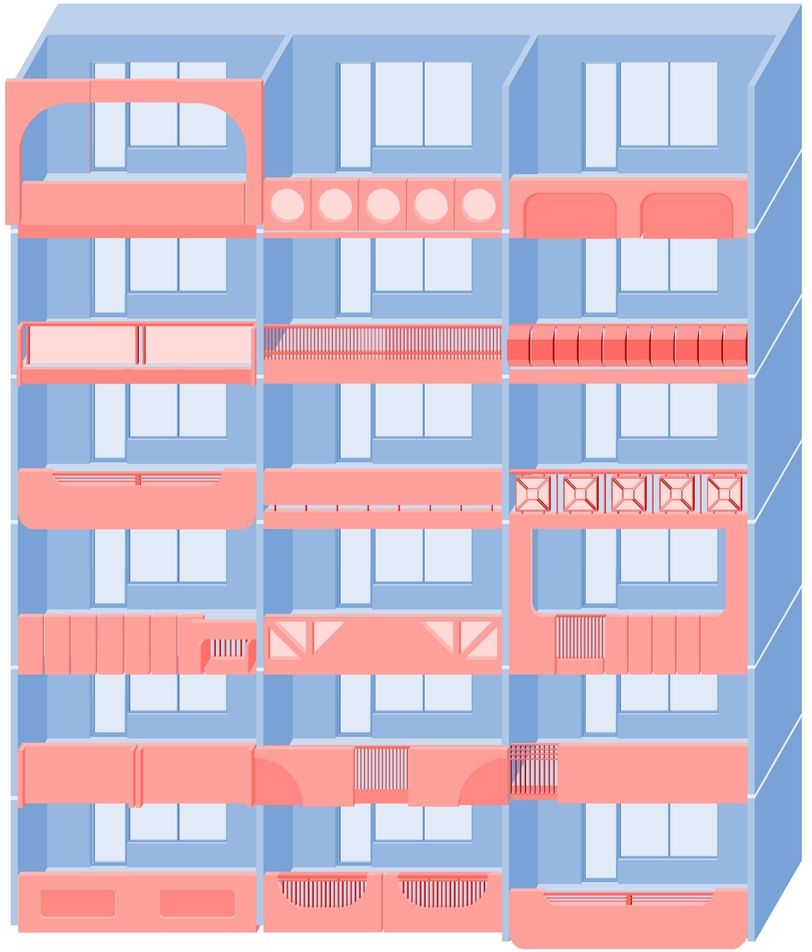
The balcony as a means to Panelka’s identity

“The authors of the Plovdiv nomenclature (...) set themselves the task of breaking the boredom and greyness of large-panel residential construction”

- the journal “Architektura”, 1979

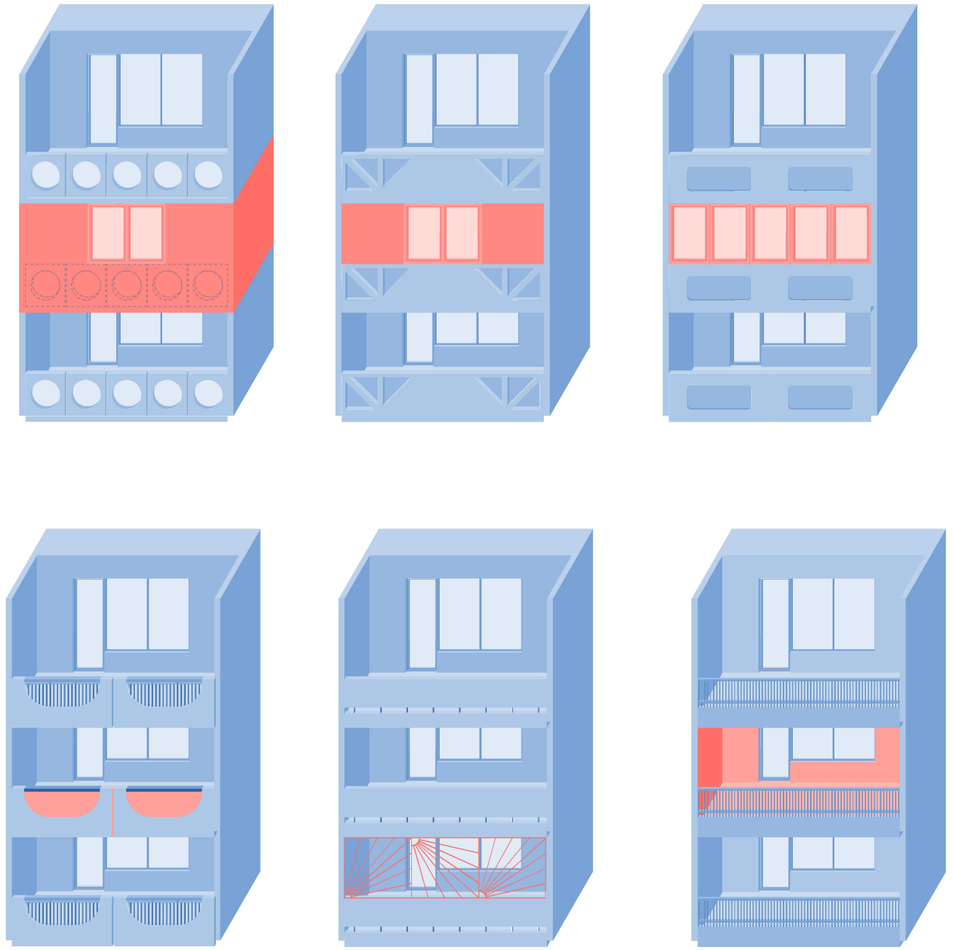


assemblage of the Trakiya’s 18 balcony types

The balcony as a means to residents' identity

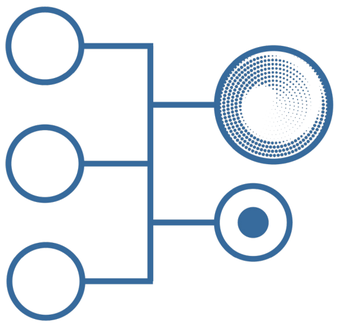
"Were we allowed to enclose the balcony?"
"Well, it was ambiguous" (Laughs)
"We weren't allowed to, but we enclosed it."

- Panelka resident, 2022



Panelka apartments at construction

We were allowed to apply for an apartment. Then the commander called me in: “Do you agree to this apartment?” “I agree!” “Have you asked the wife?” “Ah, there’s nothing to ask, she knows I’ll take her to a better place!”

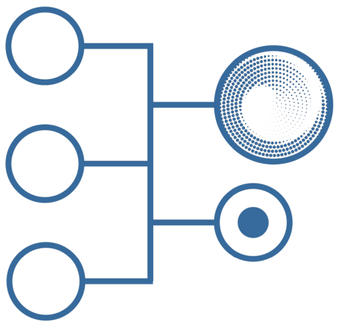


functionalist layout

variation in apartment layouts

Apartment transformations

“Here everyone became very creative when it came to enclosing rooms.”



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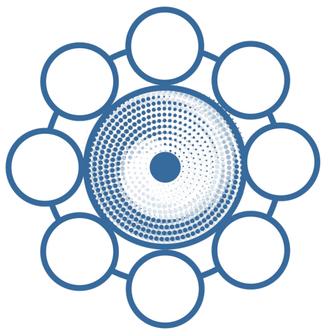
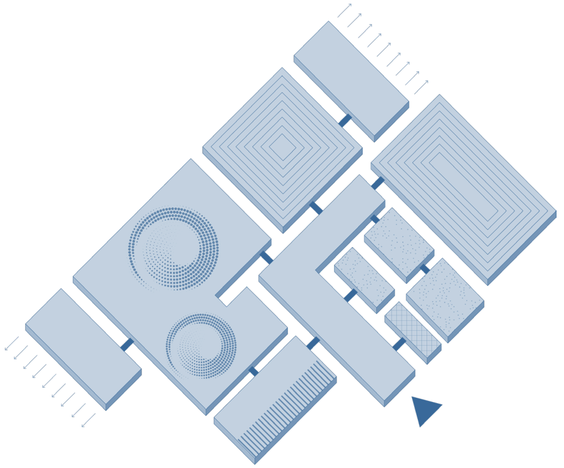
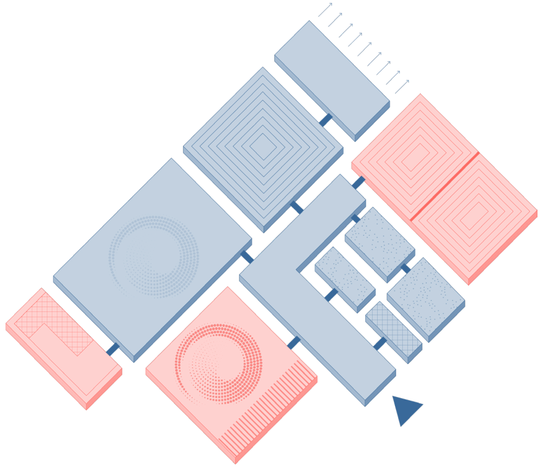
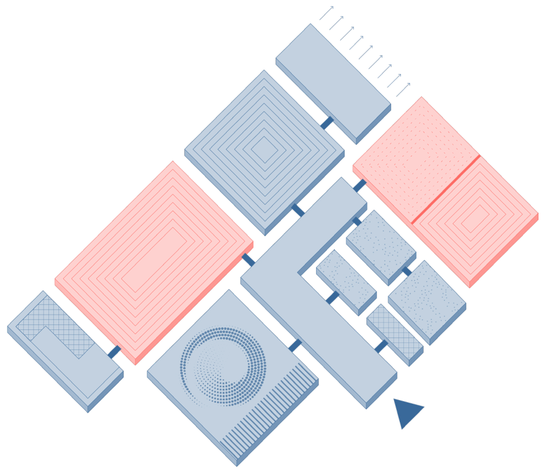
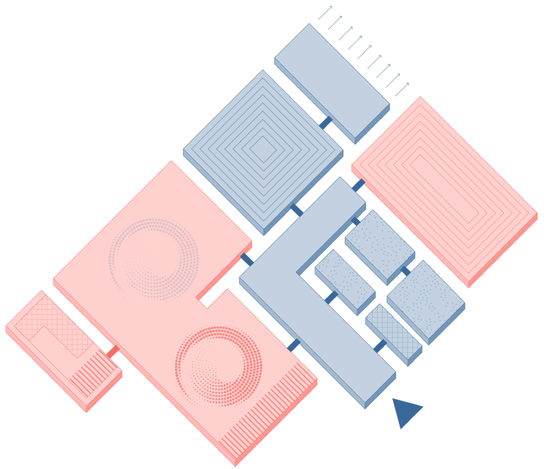


traditional BG layout









Panelka in flux

diversity unleashed during
the Transition period

established “order” for oneself,
results in multiplicity of order
in the public

vertical plane: individual
horizontal plane: collective

evolved vernacular character

Sennett’s borders and boundries

Trakiya’s spatial boundries:

car abyss

disconnection

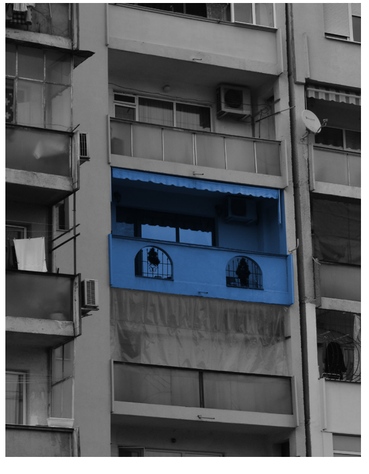
“blind facades”

grass desserts

Trakiya’s interventions:

orientation

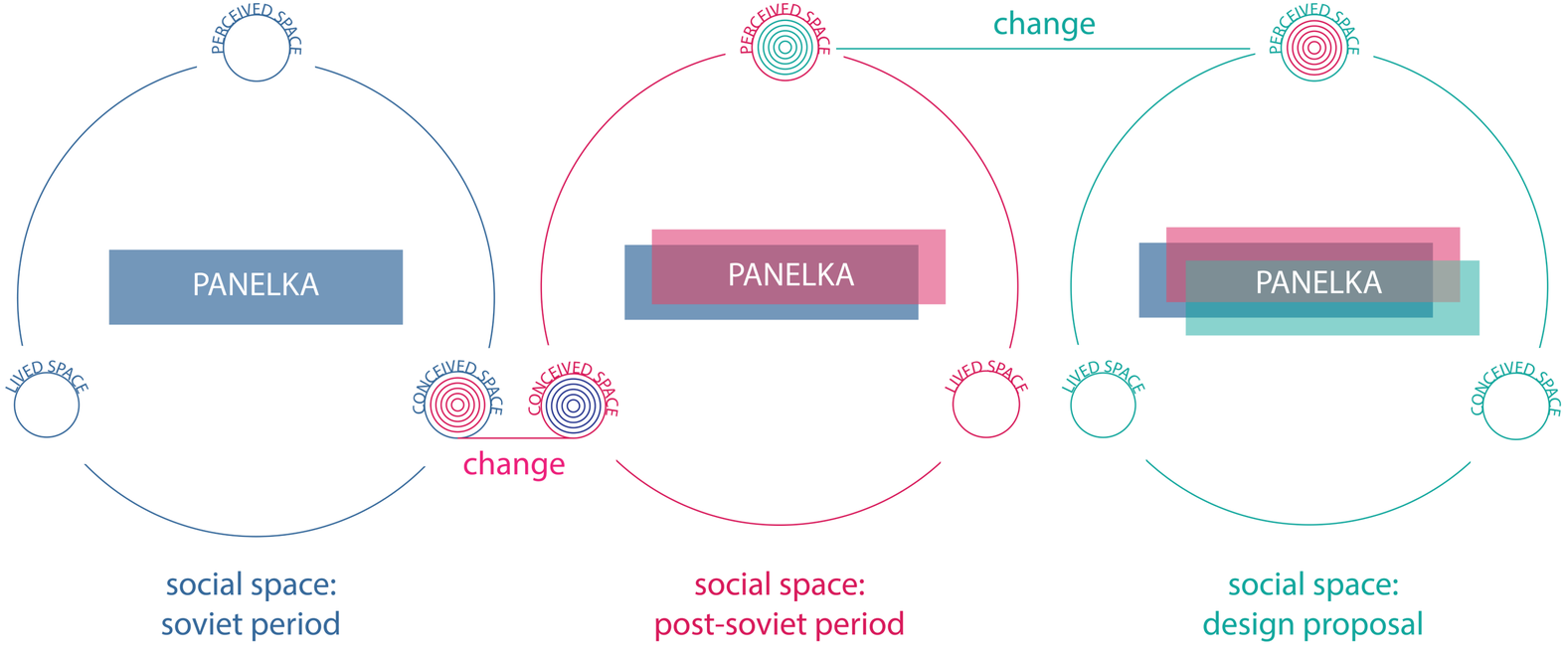
places for encouner



individuality in the public realm

individuality in the private realm

The “re-production” of space



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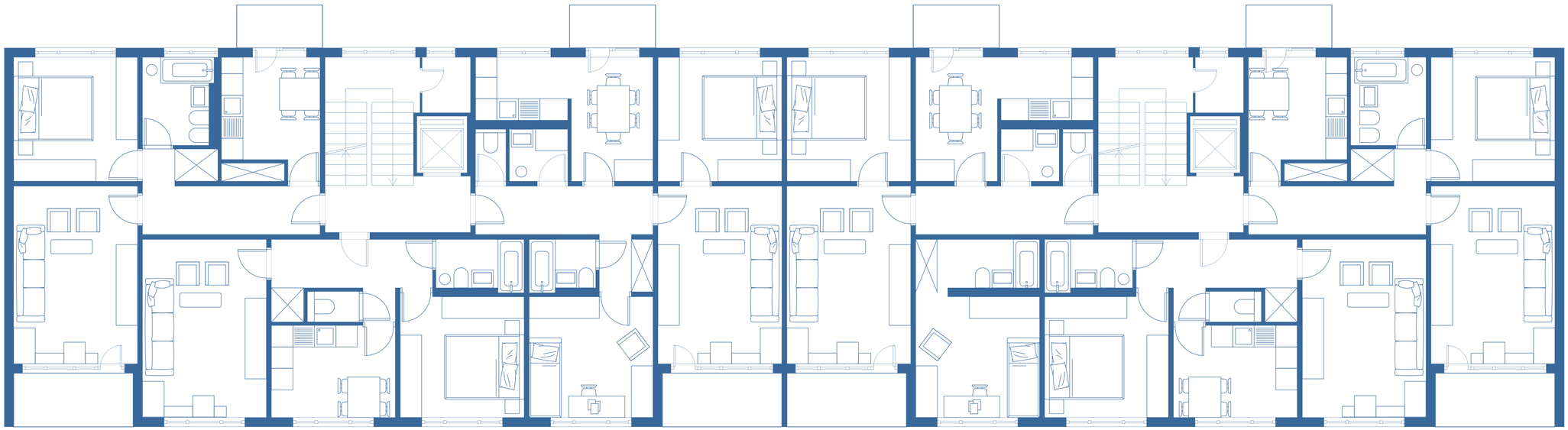

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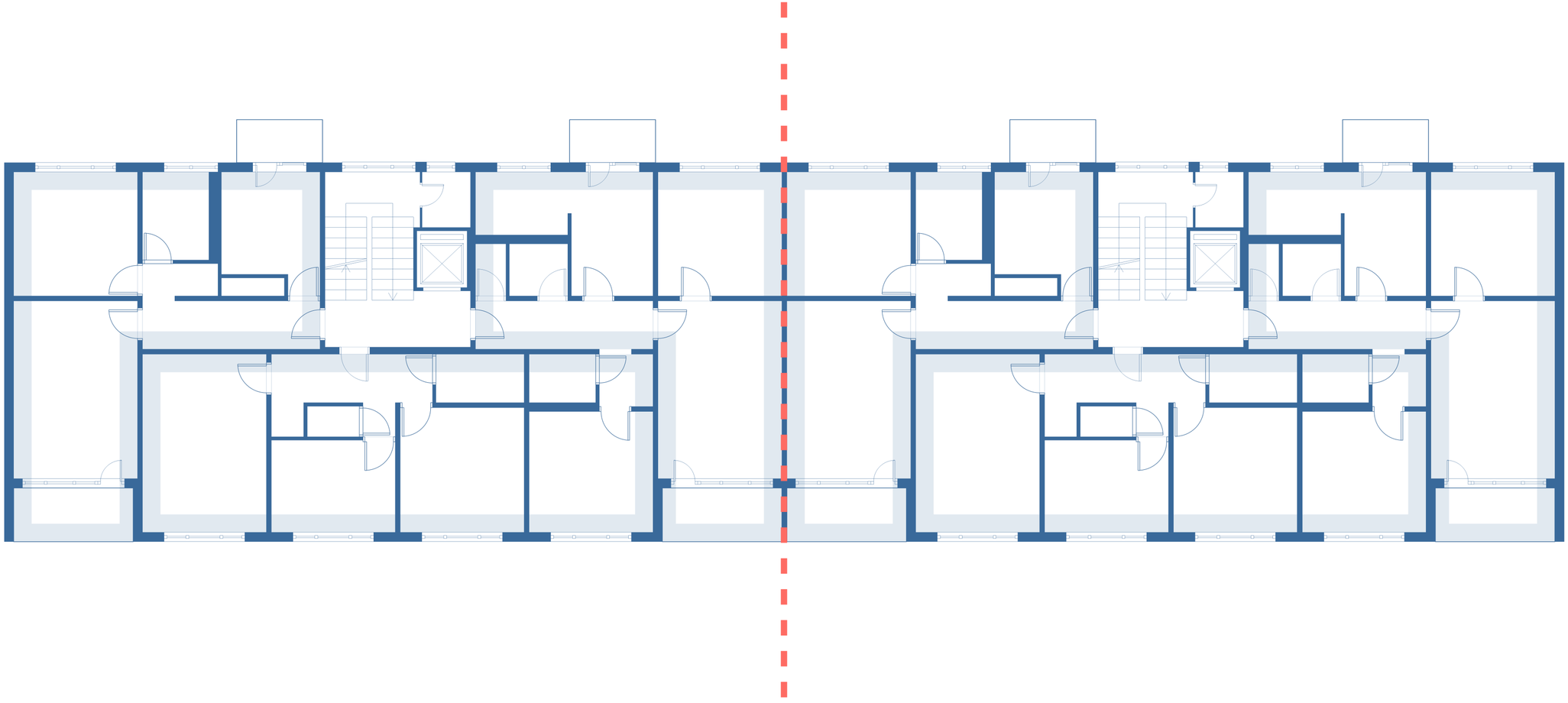
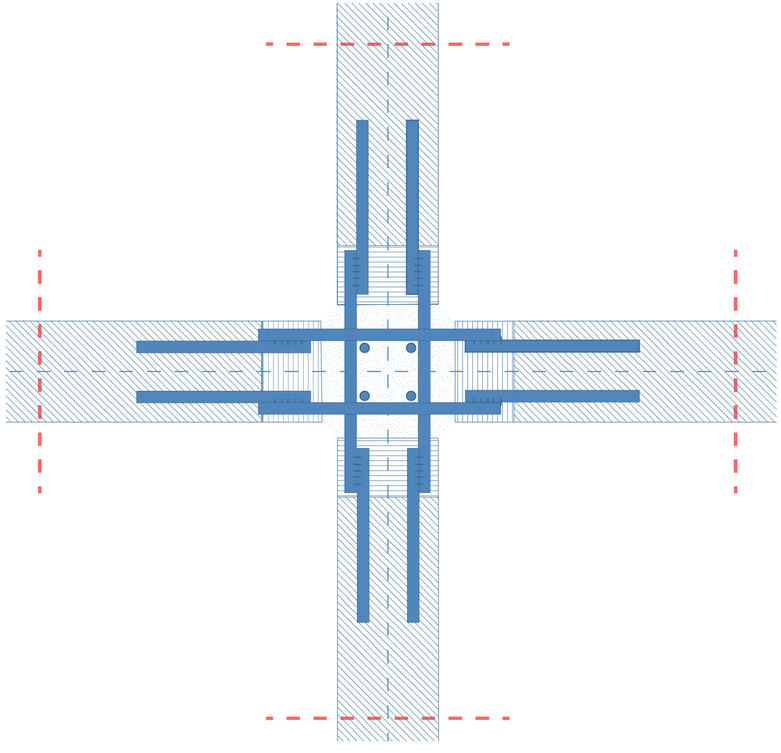
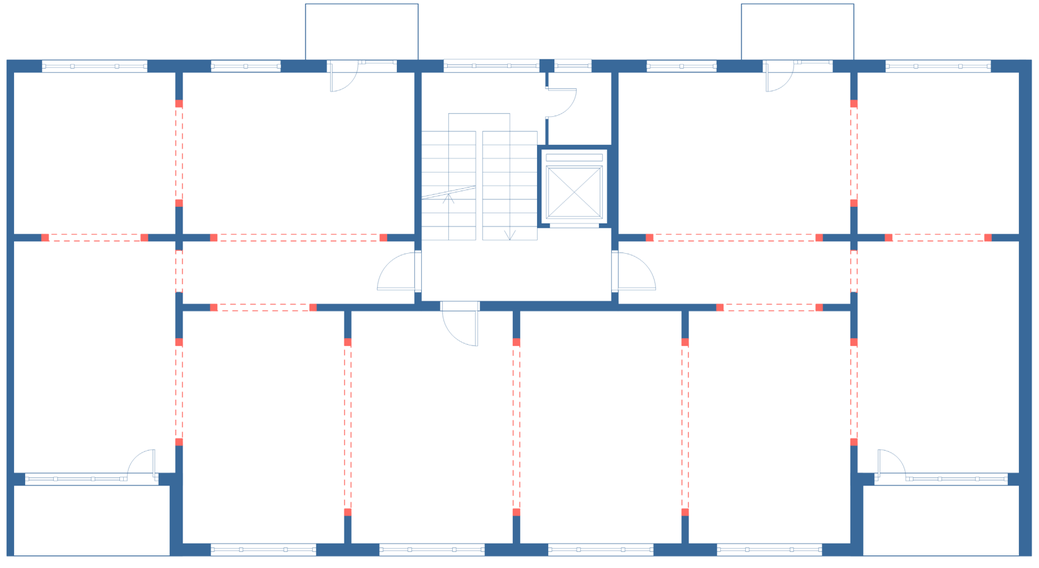


The Panelka strategy



existing attachment method of
prefabriocated panels



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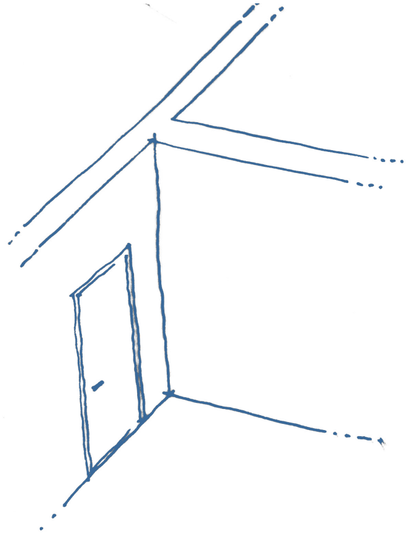
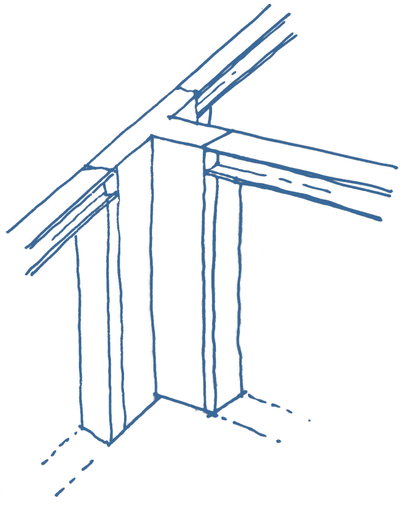
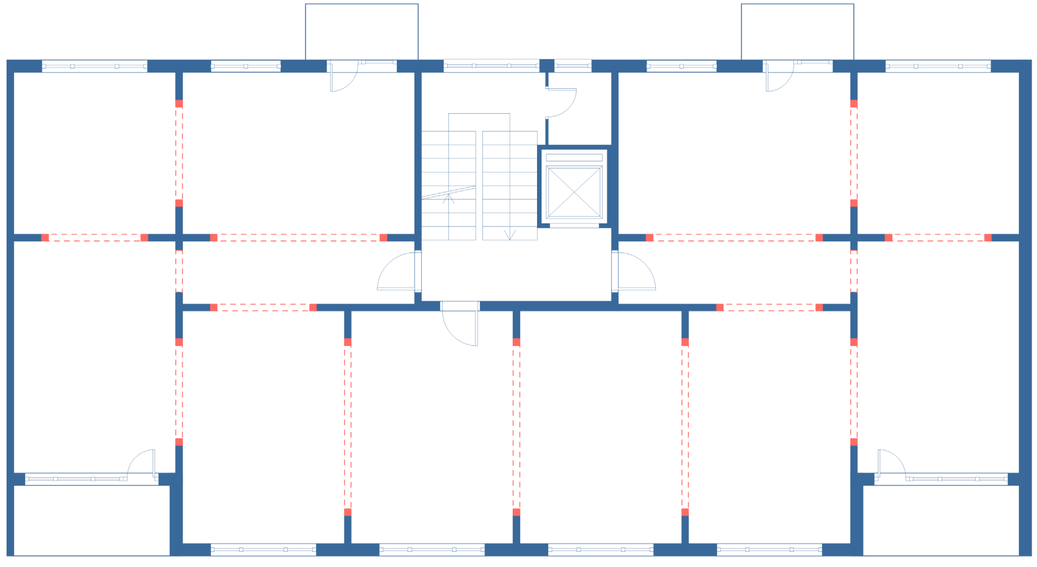
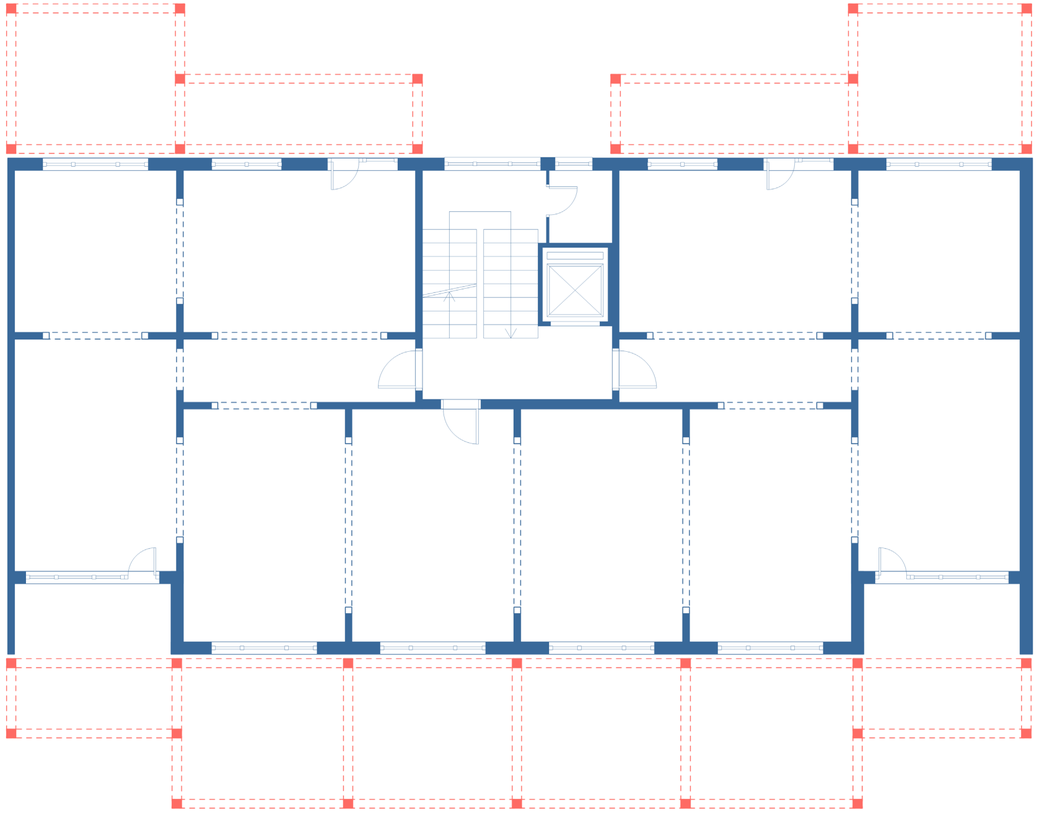


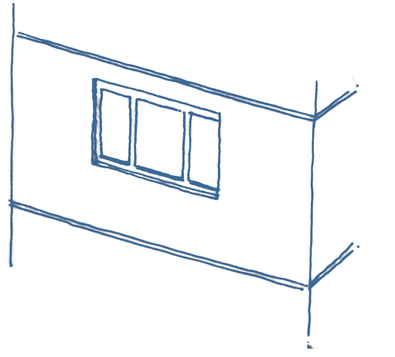


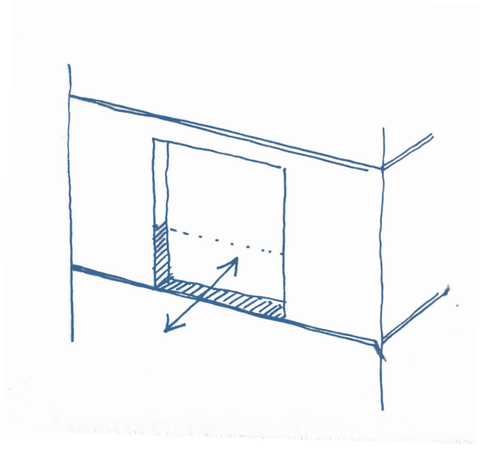


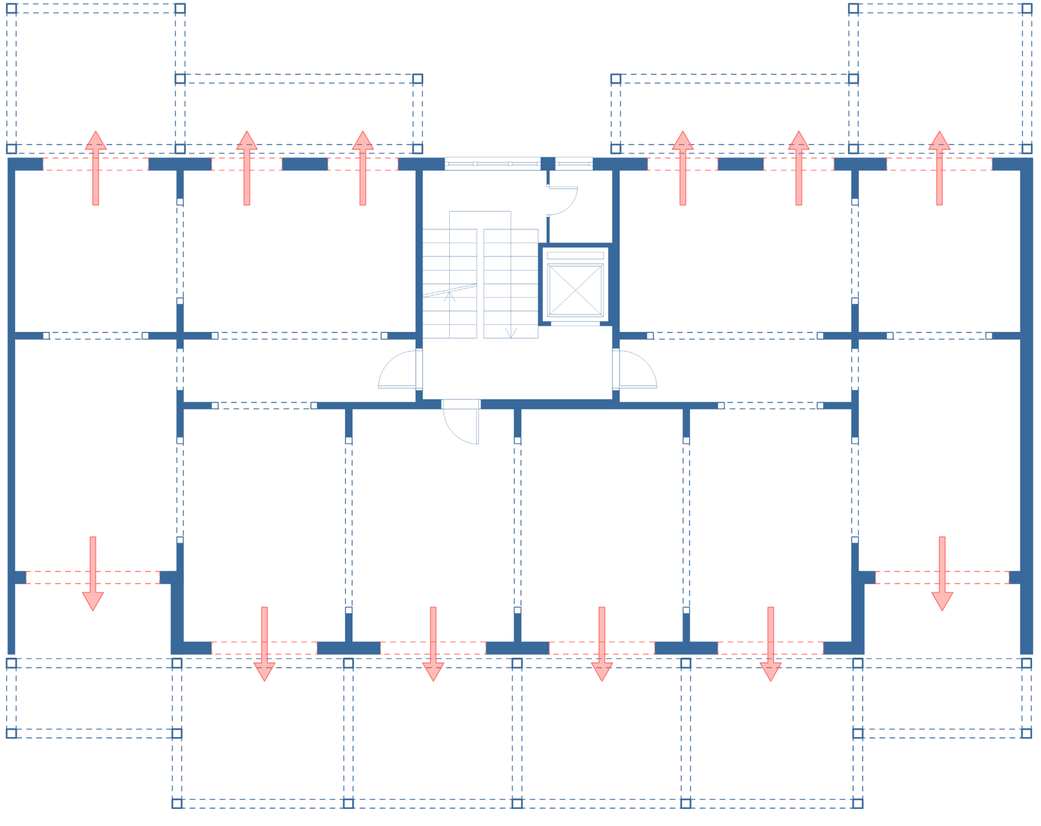
The extension



Connection between the extention and Panelka



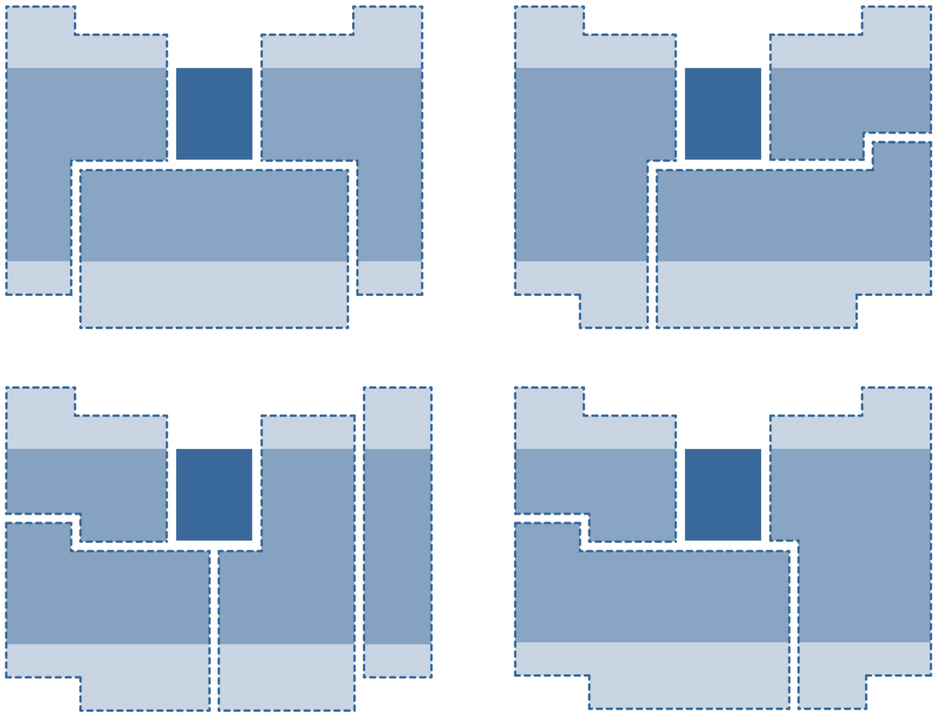




Diversification of the apartment layouts

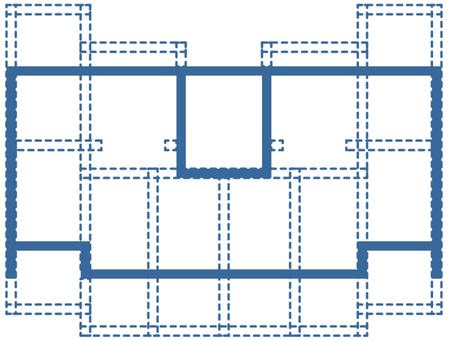
existing Panelka

the Panelka strategy

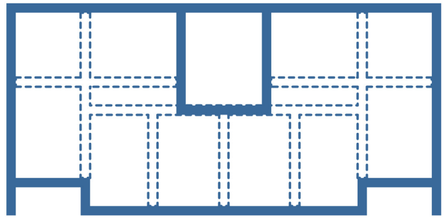


Ensuring the structural integrity

the Panelka strategy



existing Panelka



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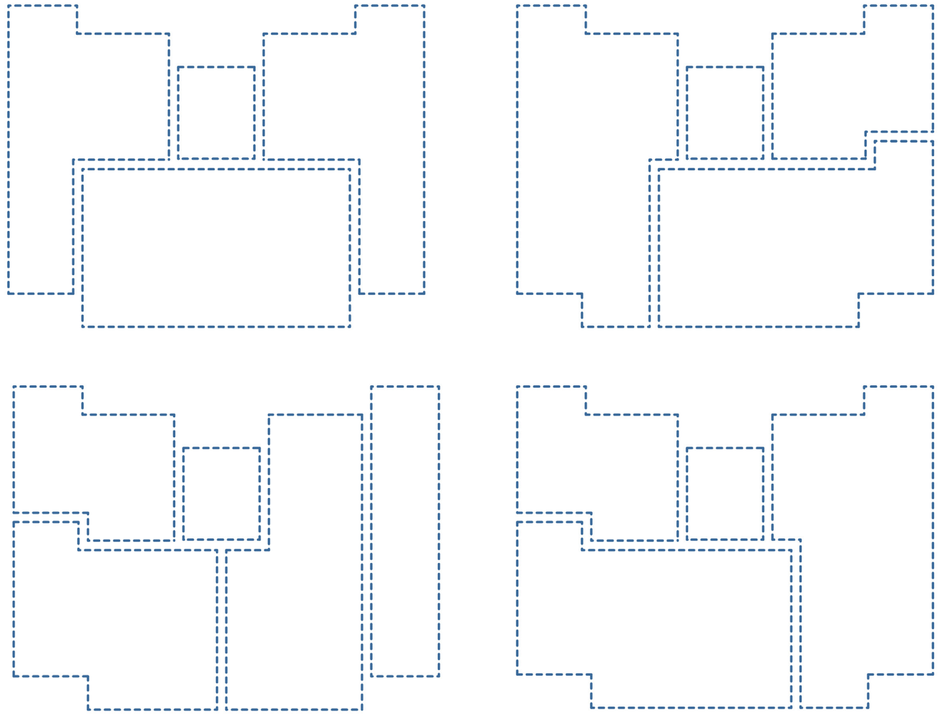
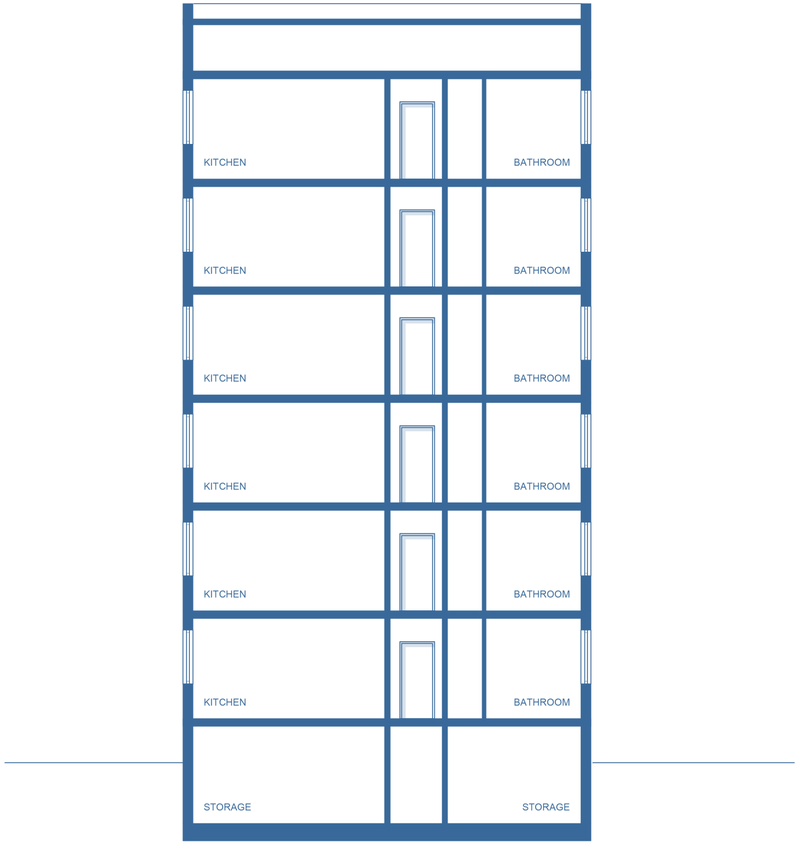
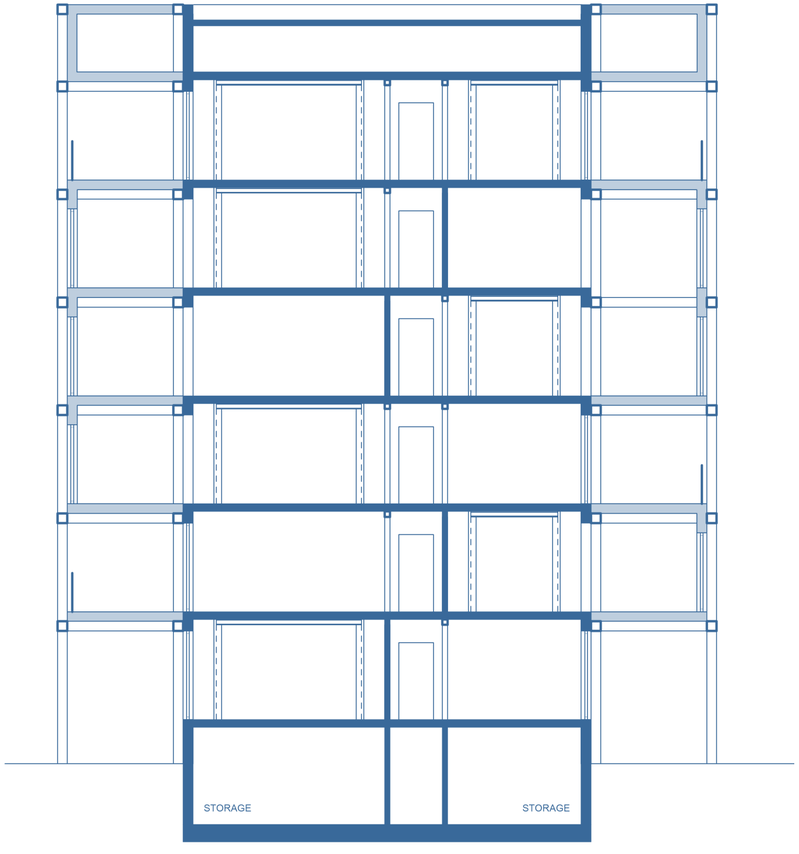


Variation in living space

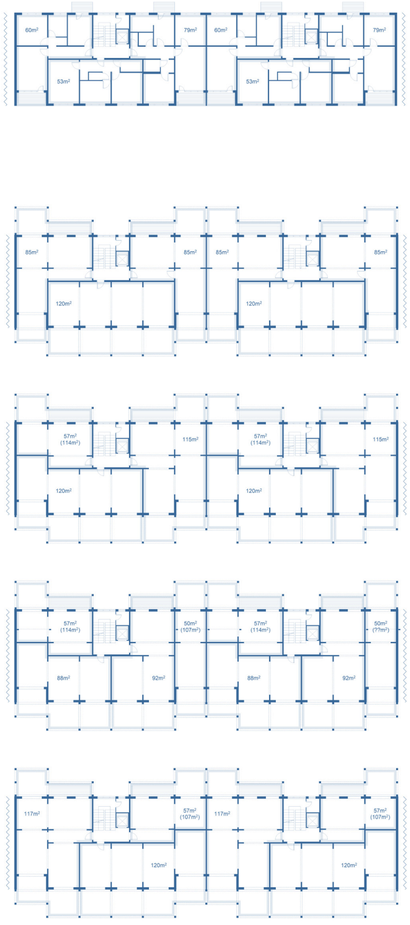


existing Panelka

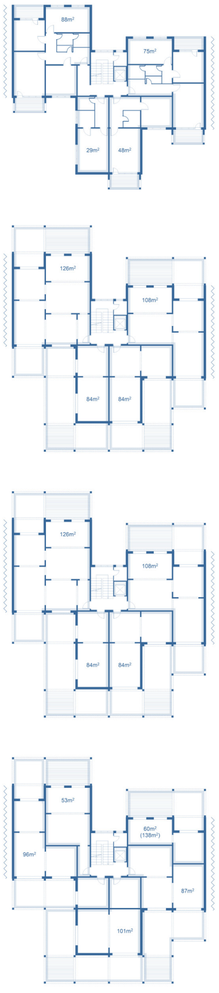


the Panelka strategy

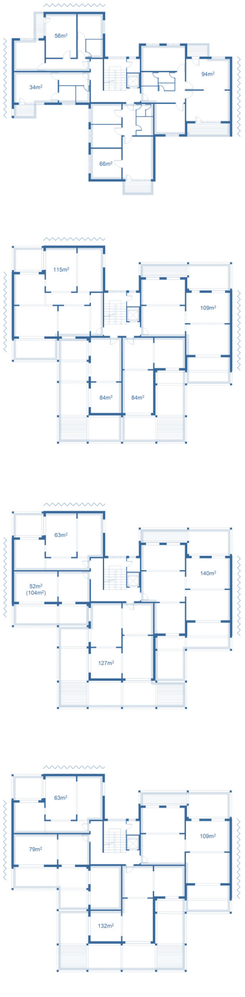
Variation in living space



BS-V-VIII-223-223



BS-V-VIII-424



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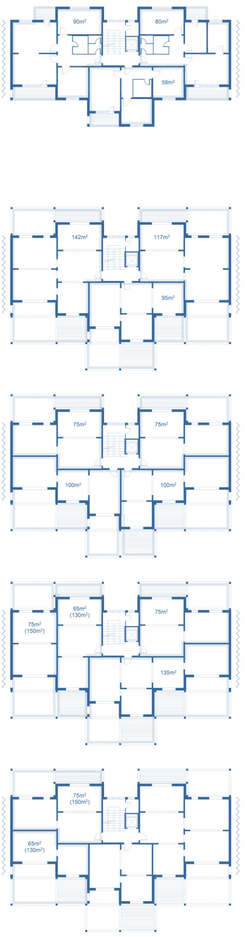

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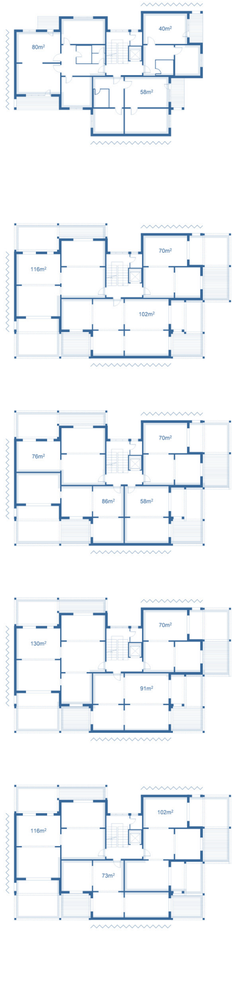
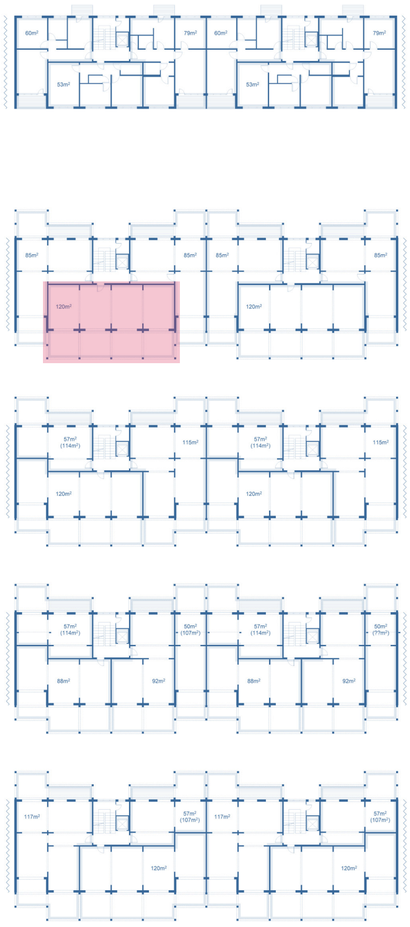


BS-V-VIII-234

Variation in living space



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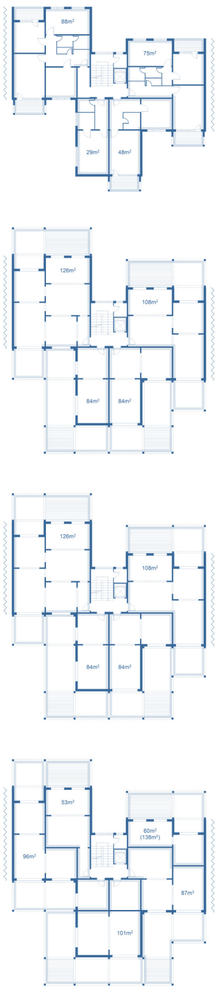

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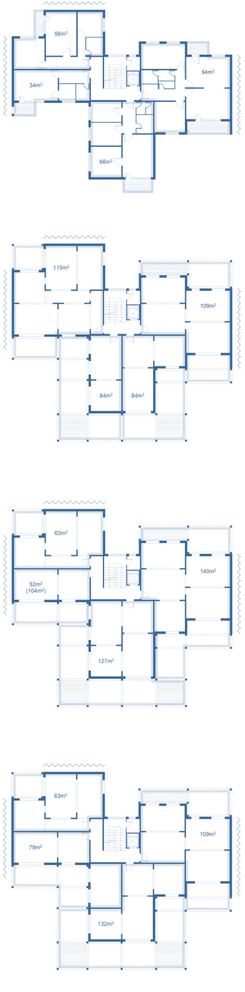

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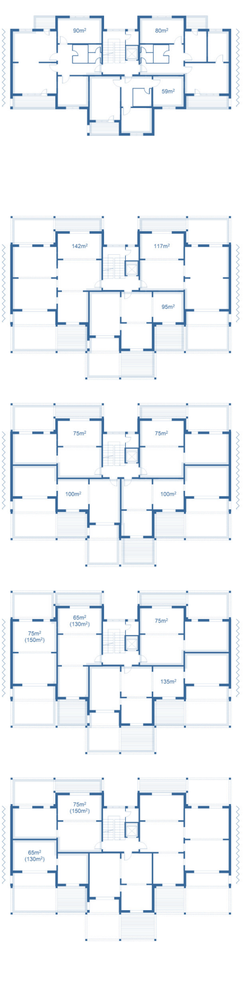

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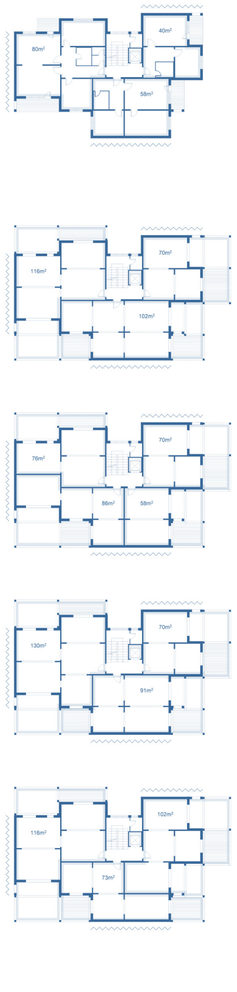

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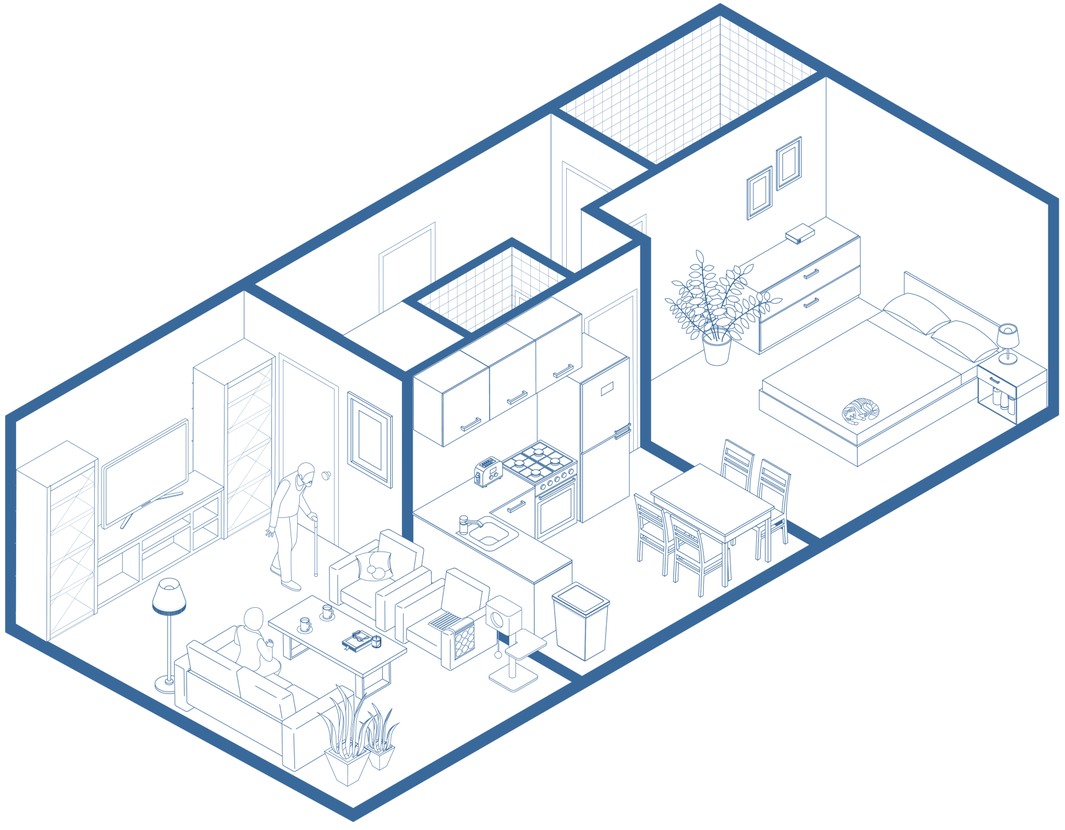
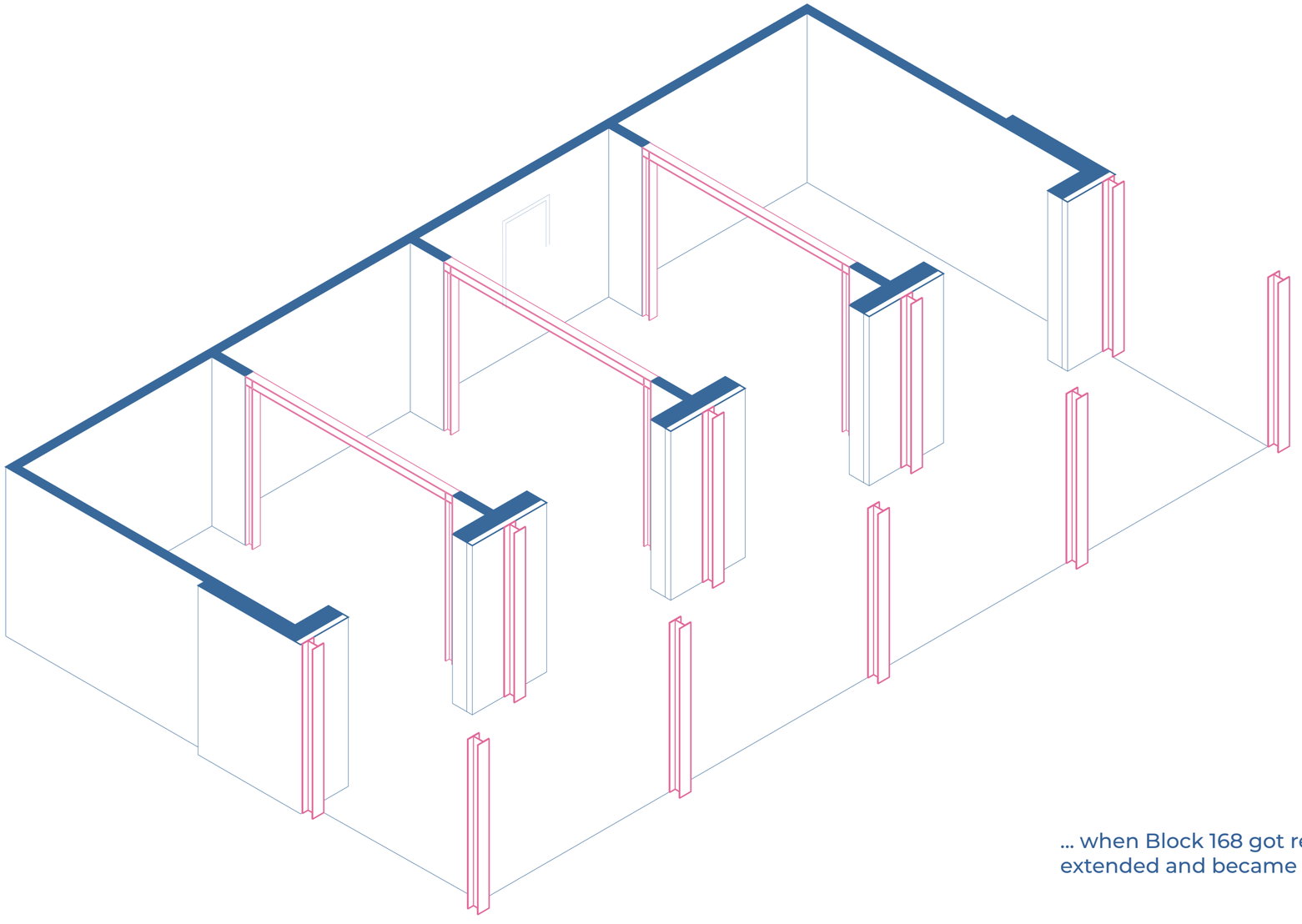
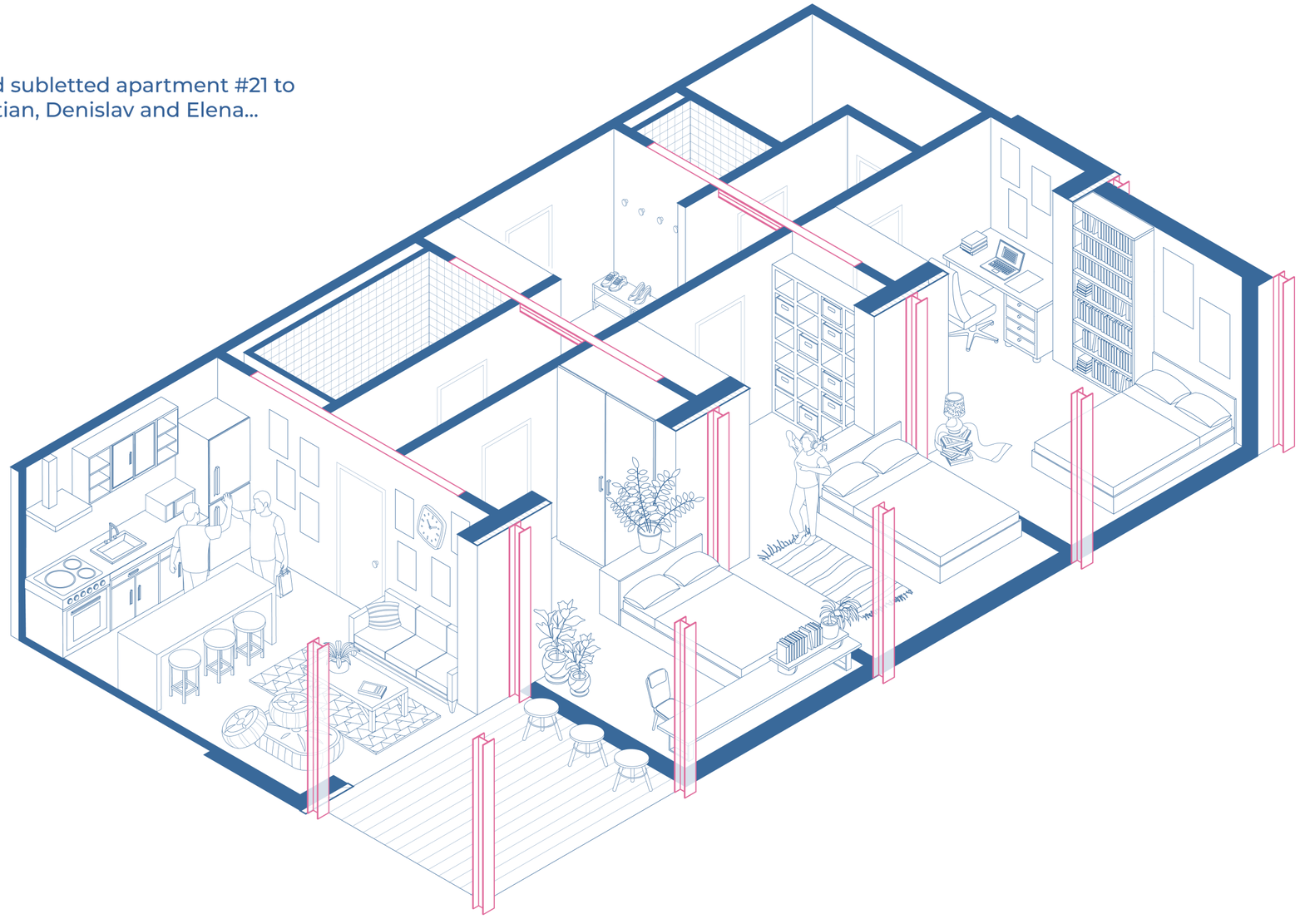


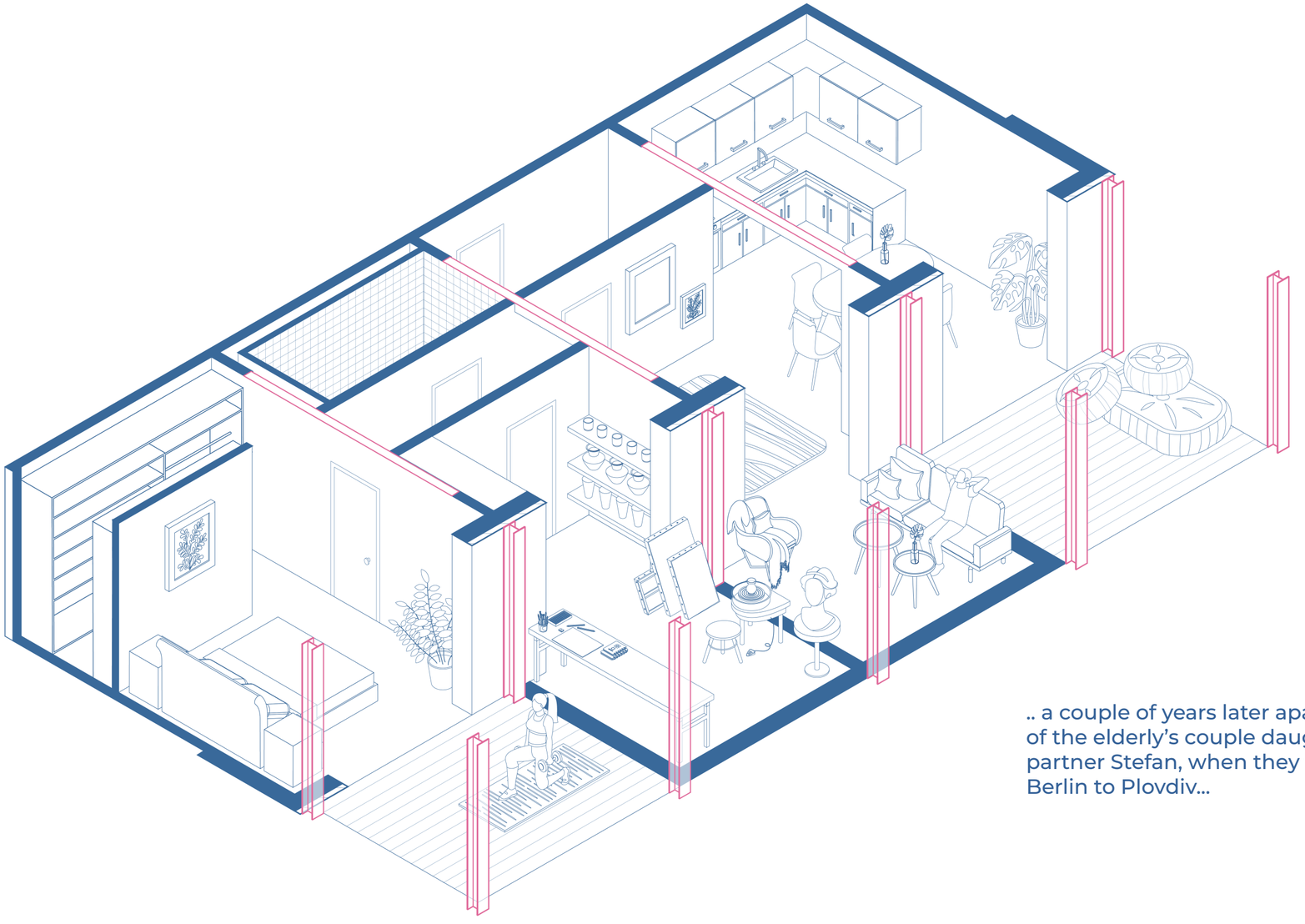
Iva and Vasil have been living in apartment #21
since they first got married in 1976...



... when Block 168 got renovated apartment #21 got extended and became too big for the elderly couple...

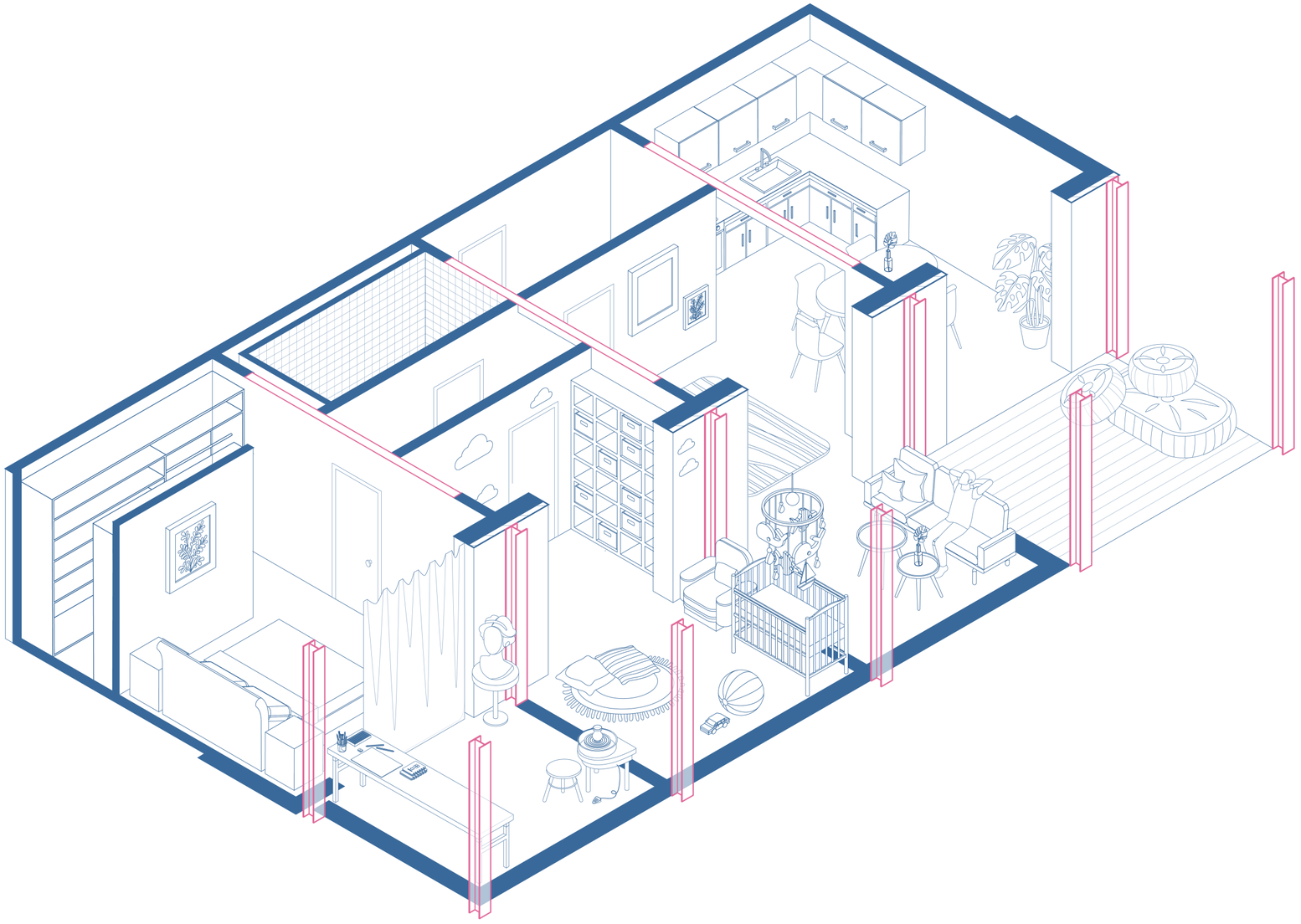
... so they rearranged and subletted apartment #21 to the three students - Kristian, Denislav and Elena...

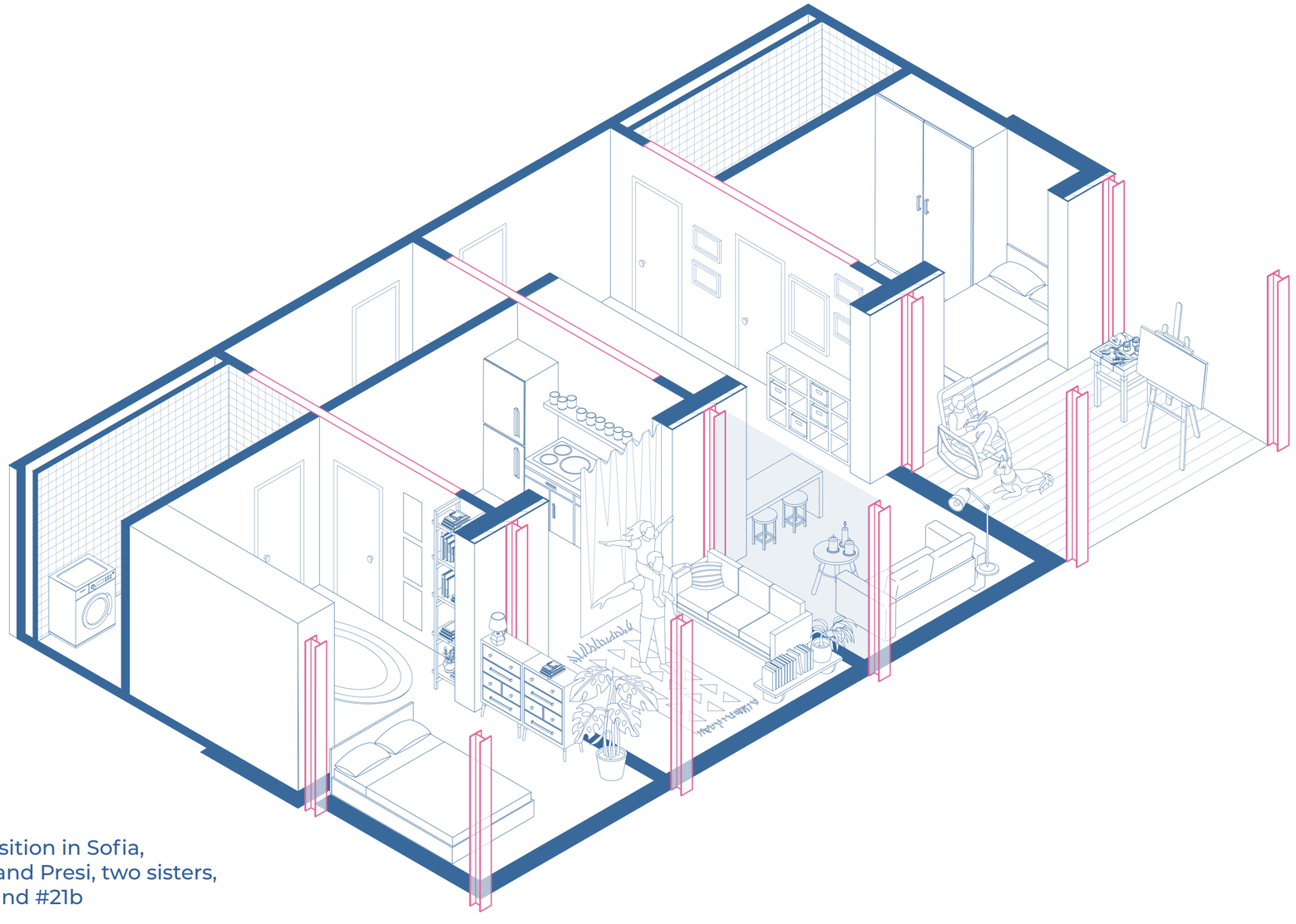




.. a couple of years later apartment #21 was the home of the elderly's couple daughter, Silvana, and her partner Stefan, when they first moved back from Berlin to Plovdiv...

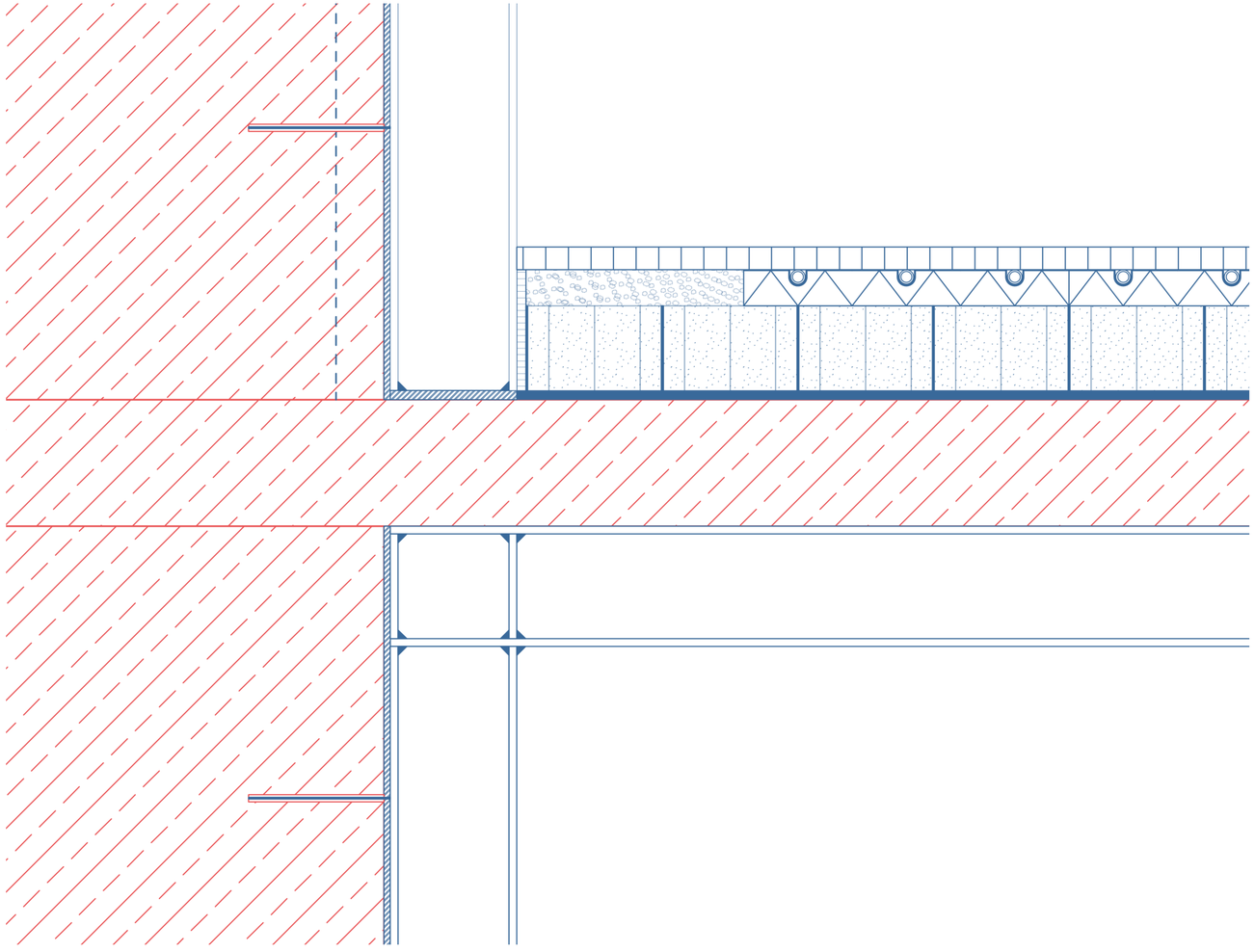
.. in apartment #21 they had their first child, Petar...



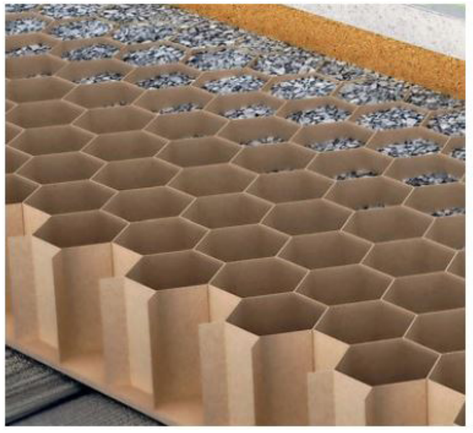


.. as Stefan was offered a new position in Sofia,
apartment #21 was sold to Gabi and Presi, two sisters,
which created the studios #21a and #21b

The floor construction

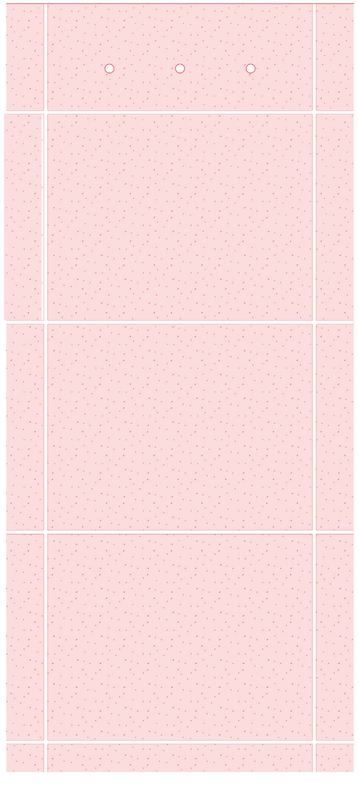


modular underfloor heating
and cooling system

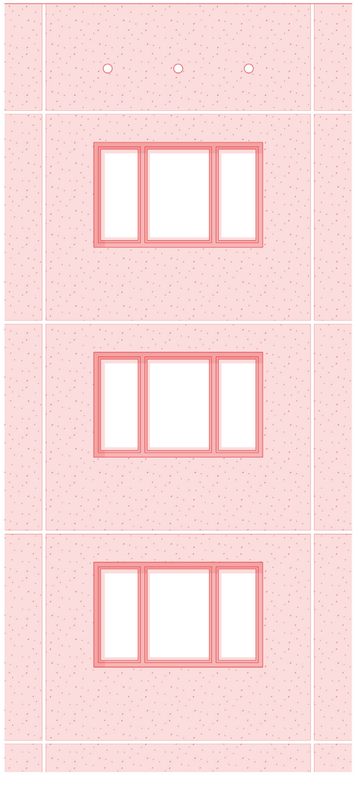


cardboard honeycomb panel
with perlite infill

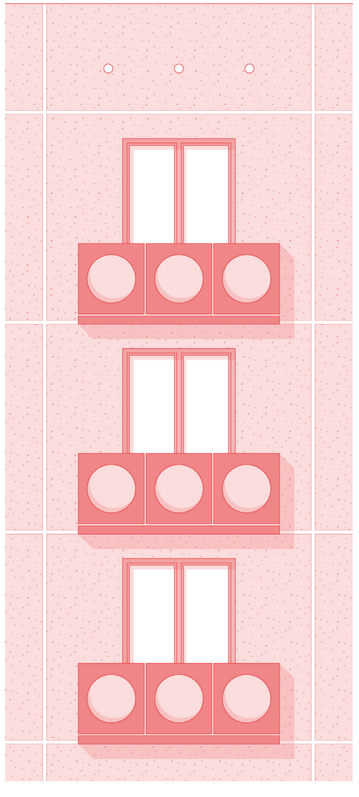
Panelka’s facade upclose



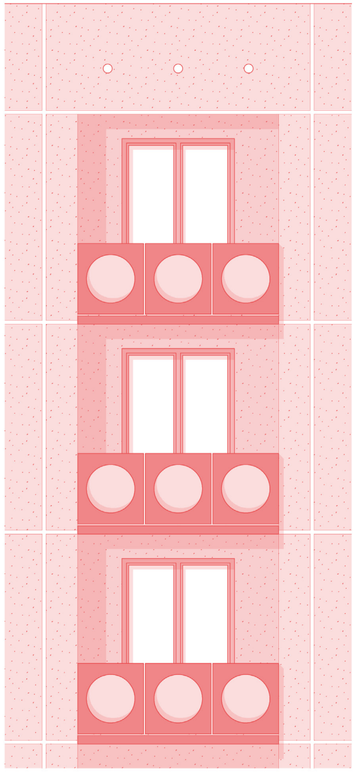
element A:
blind facades



element B:
openings



element C:
balconies



element D:
loggias

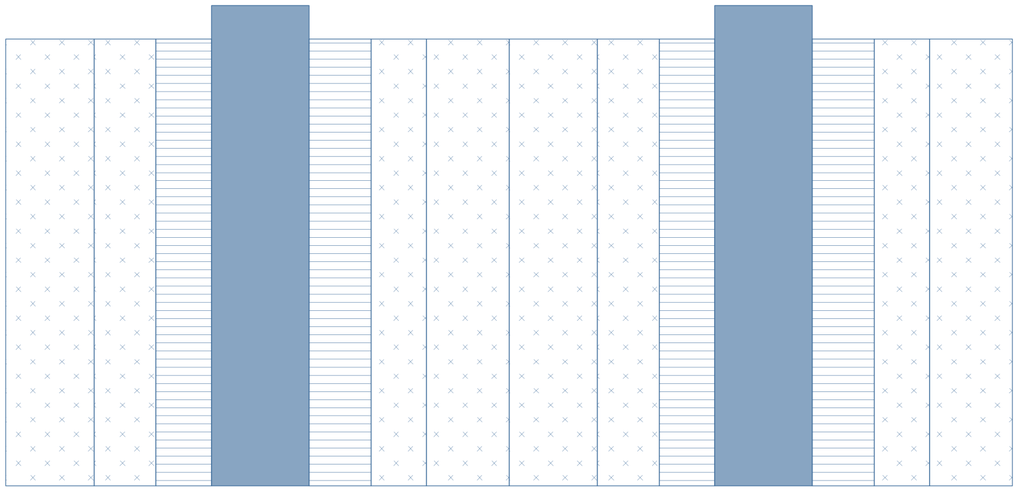
Panelka’s rhythm

BS-V-VIII-223-223

BS-V-VIII-333

BS-V-VIII-234

Panelka’s rhythm



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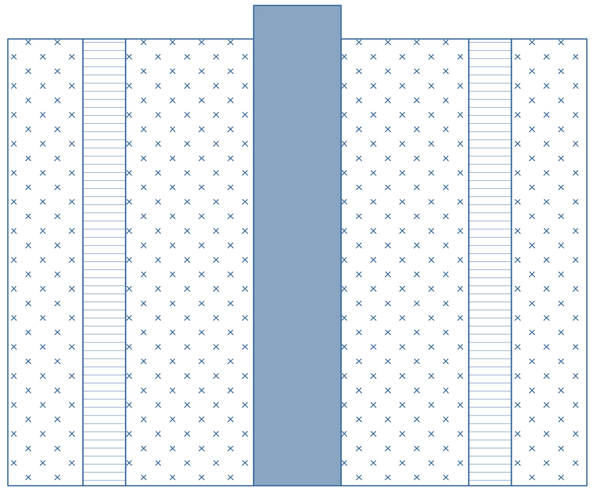

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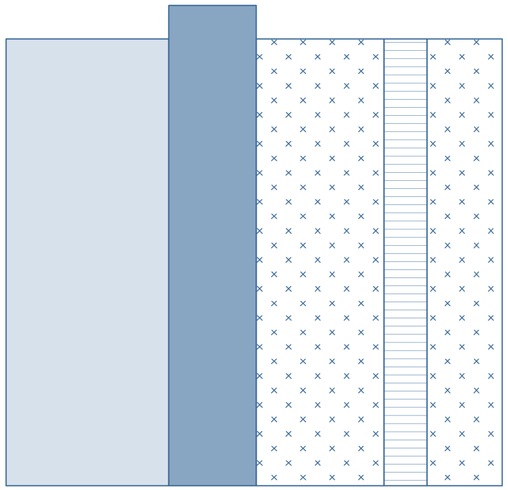
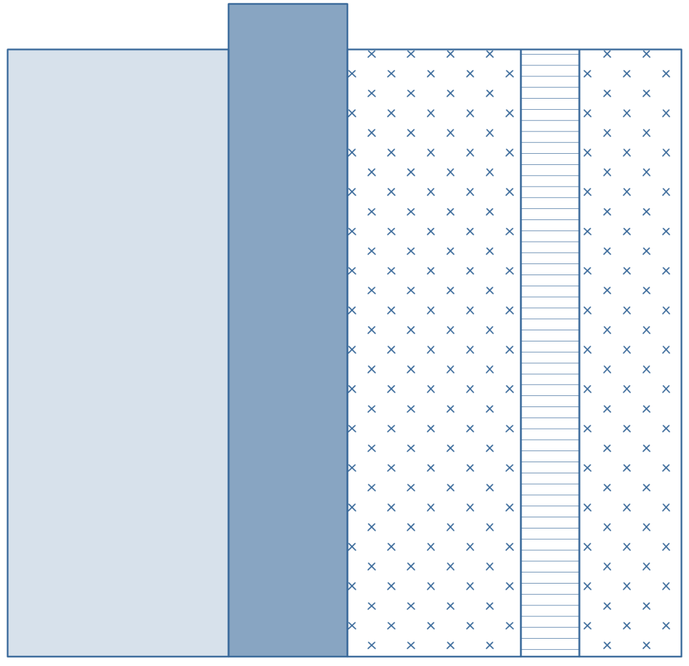
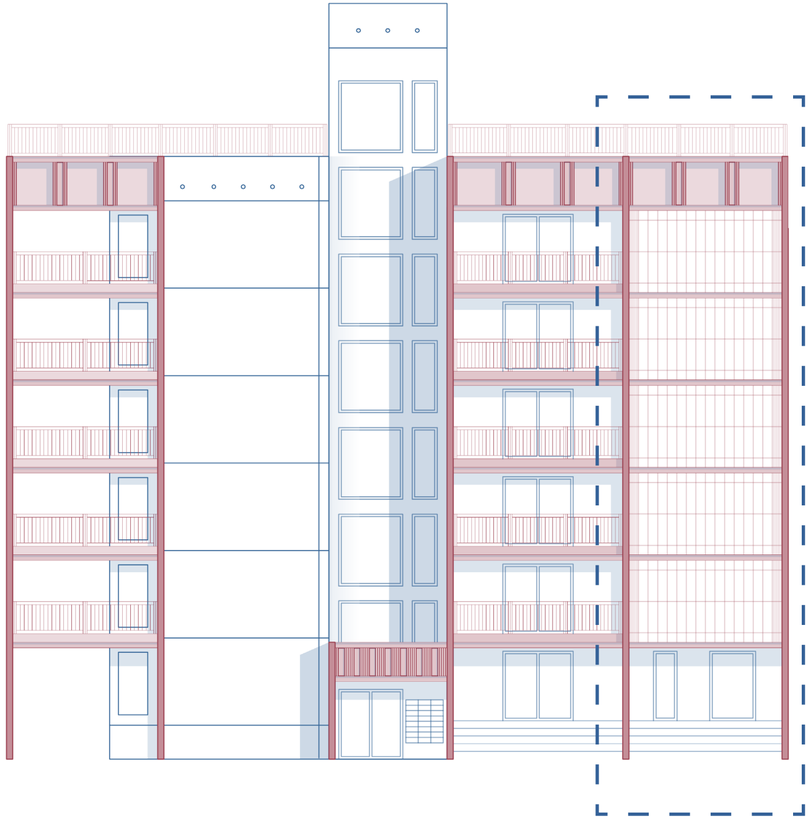


BS-V-VIII-234

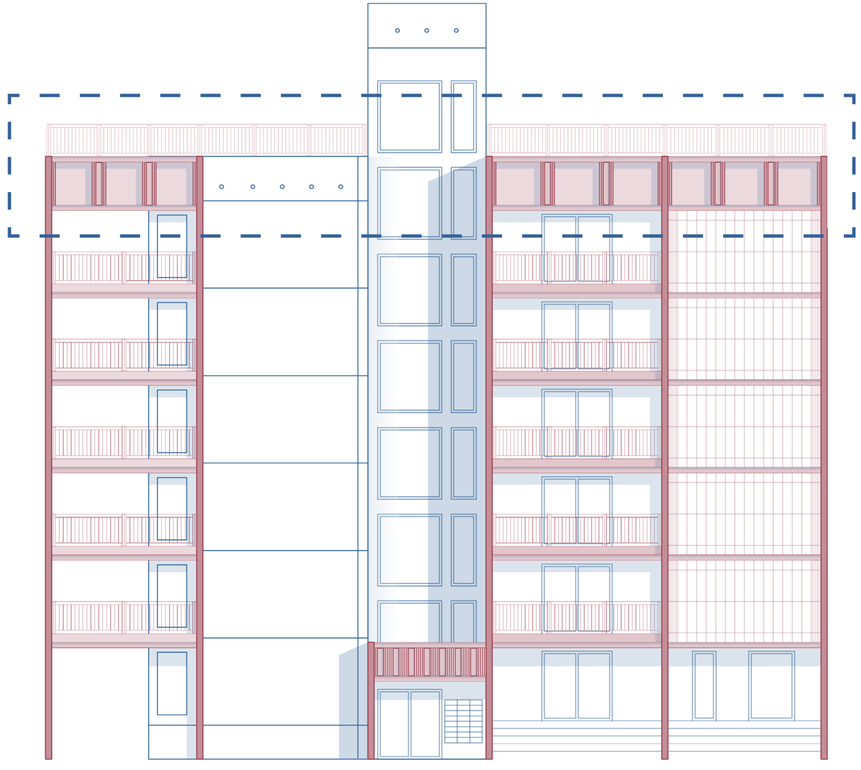
Panelkas' rhythm



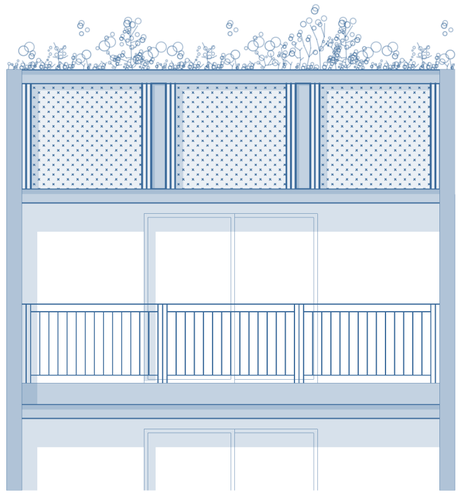
Facade elements

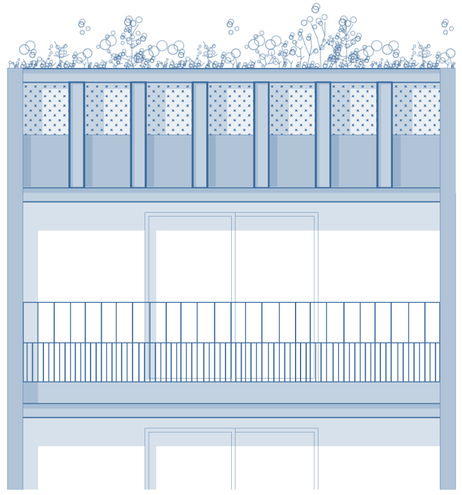


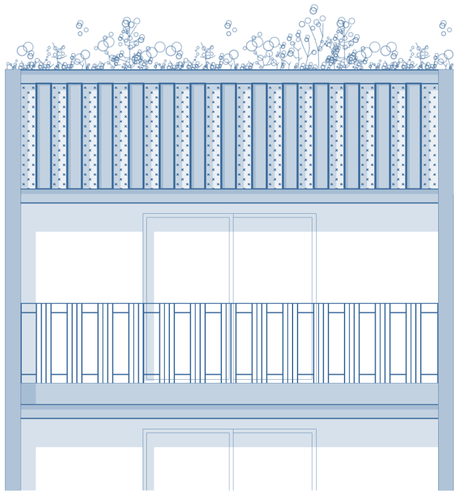
Crown

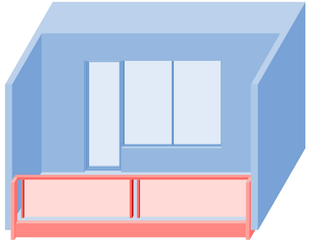


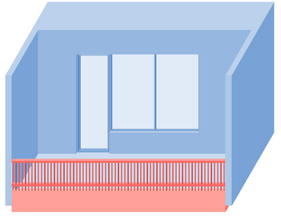
Crown

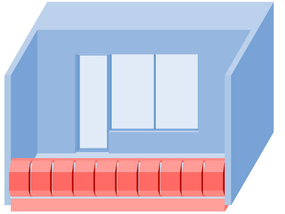












Vertical zoning

common

Vertical zoning

common

private

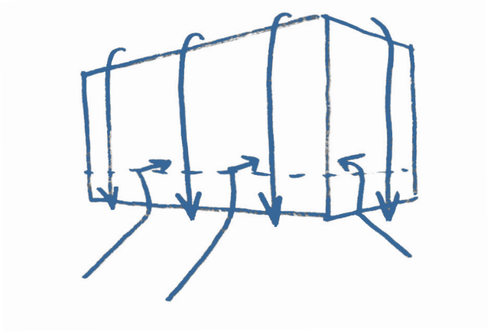
Vertical zoning

common

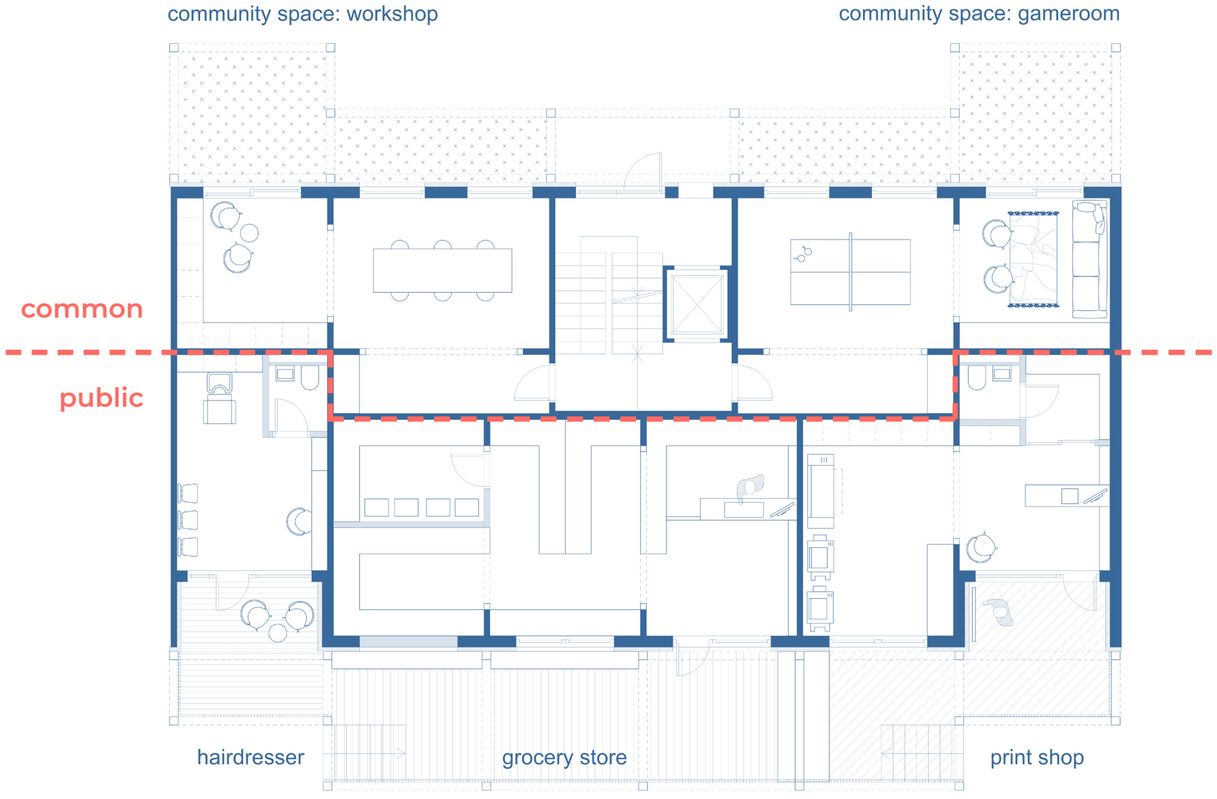
private

public

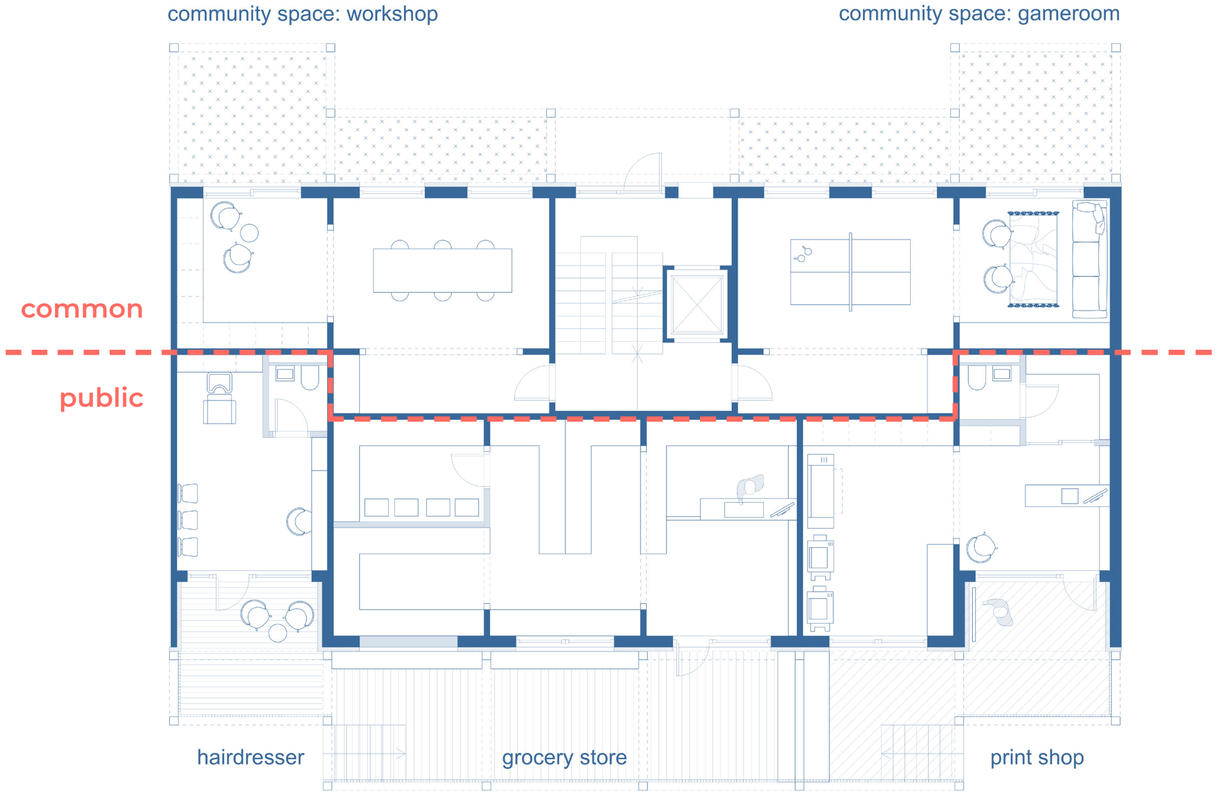
“Two-sided” character



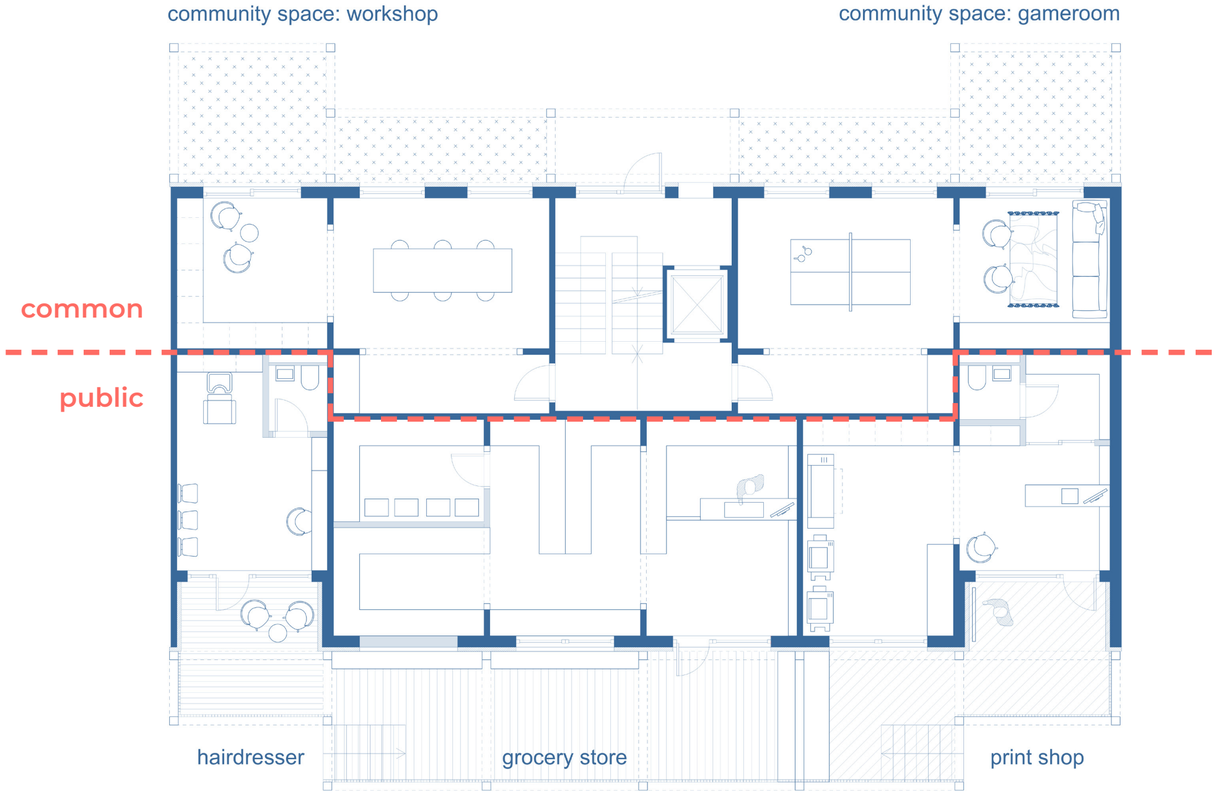
layering of public and private



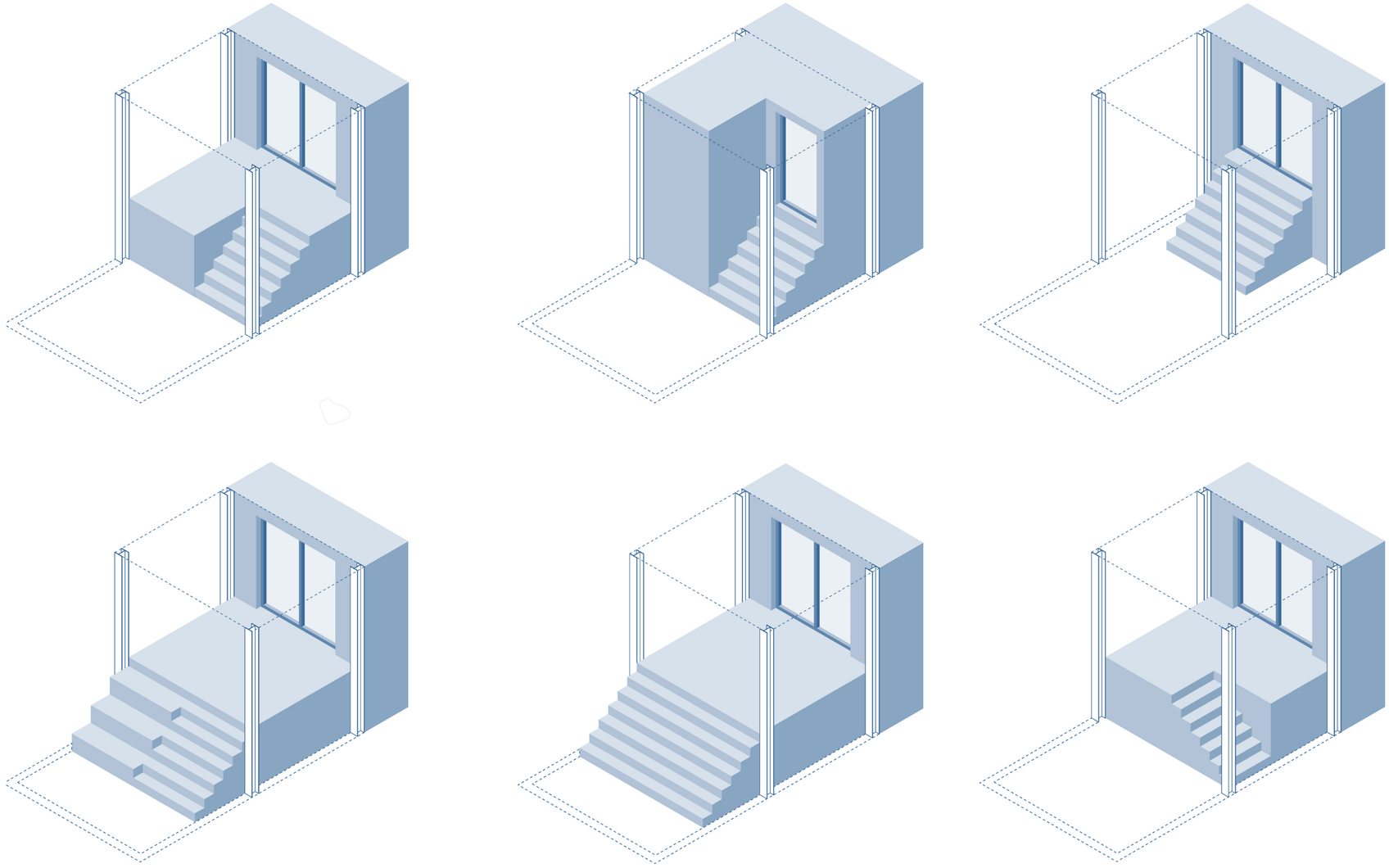
“Two-sided” character



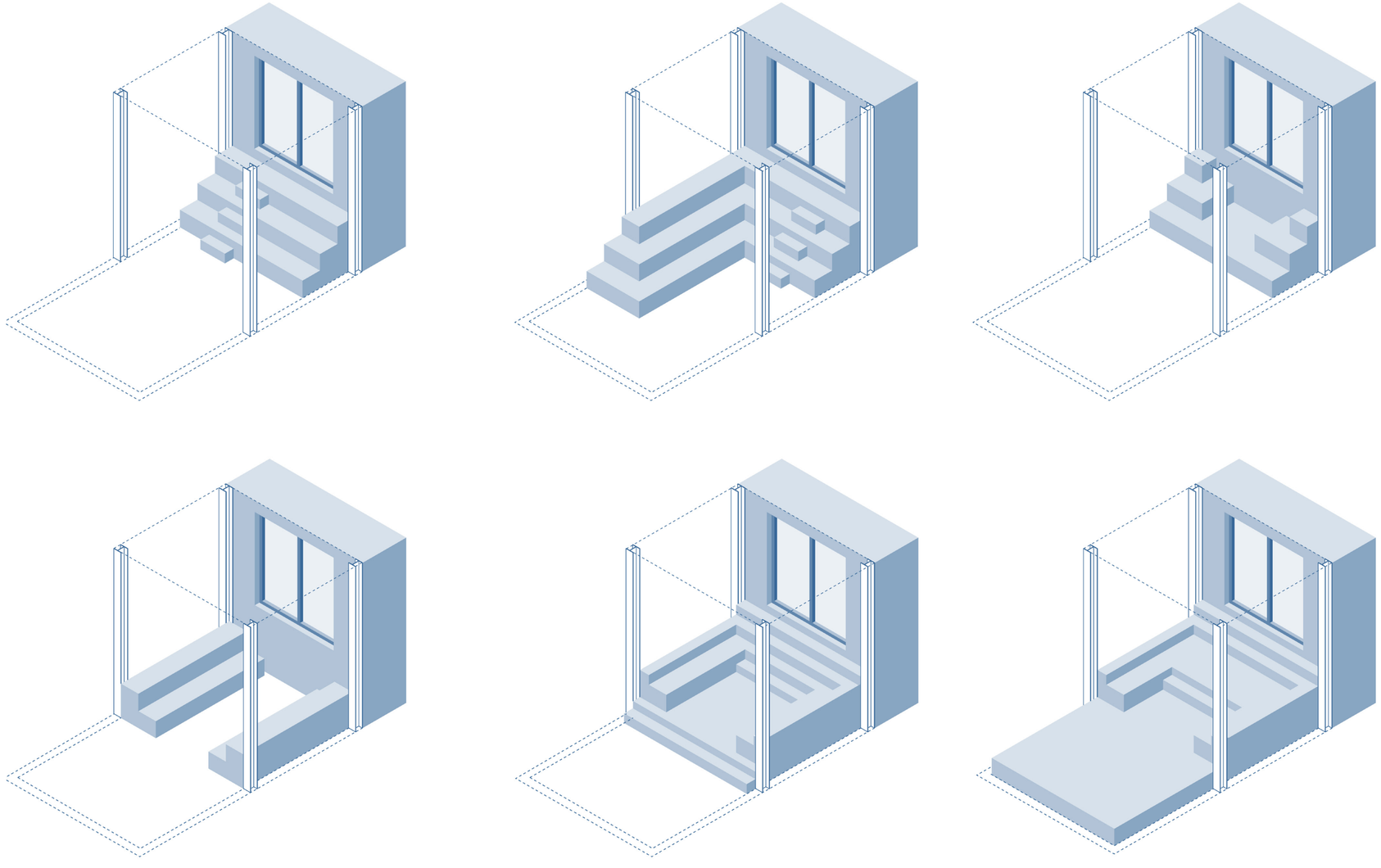
“Two-sided” character



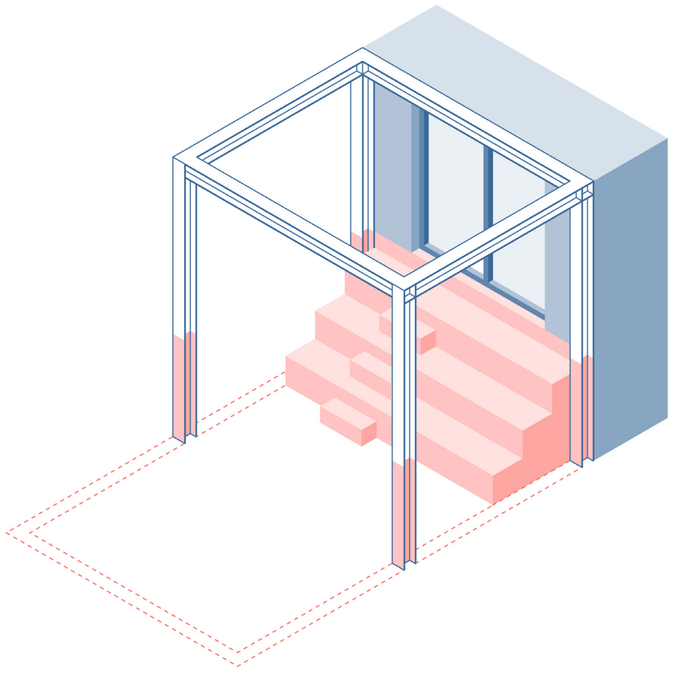
“Public” geometry

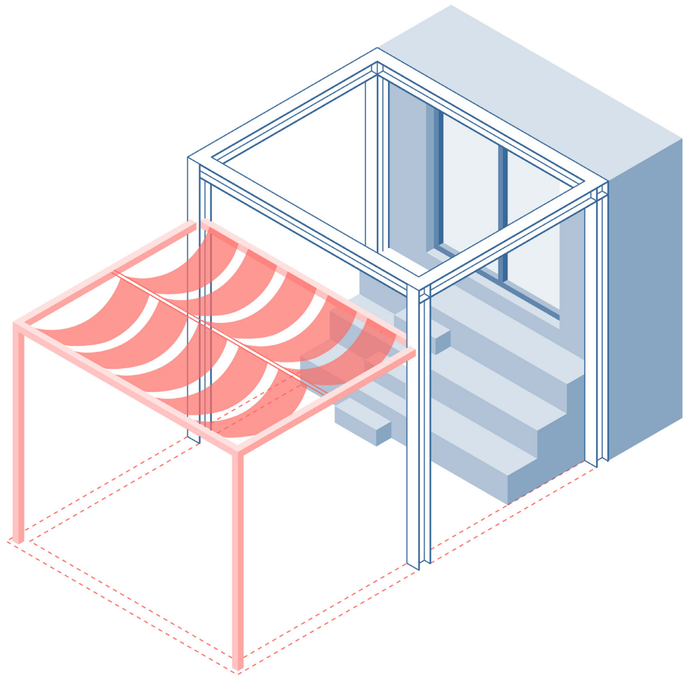


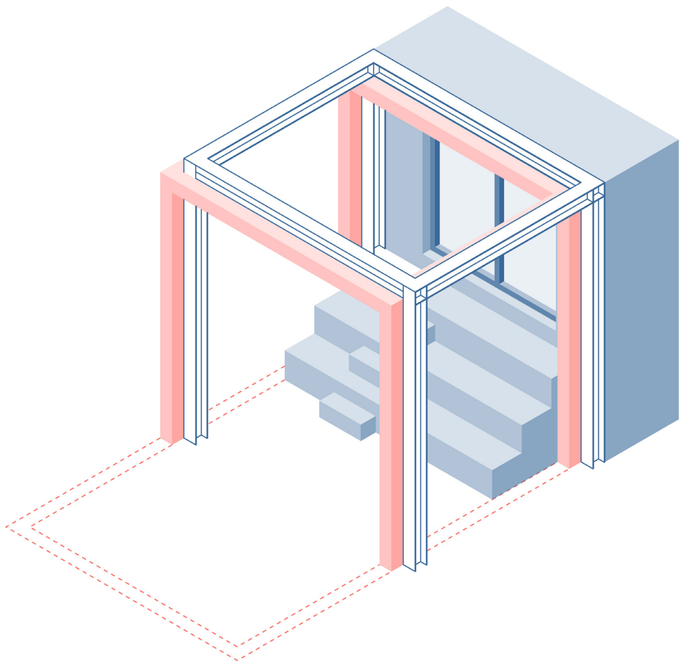
“Common” geometry

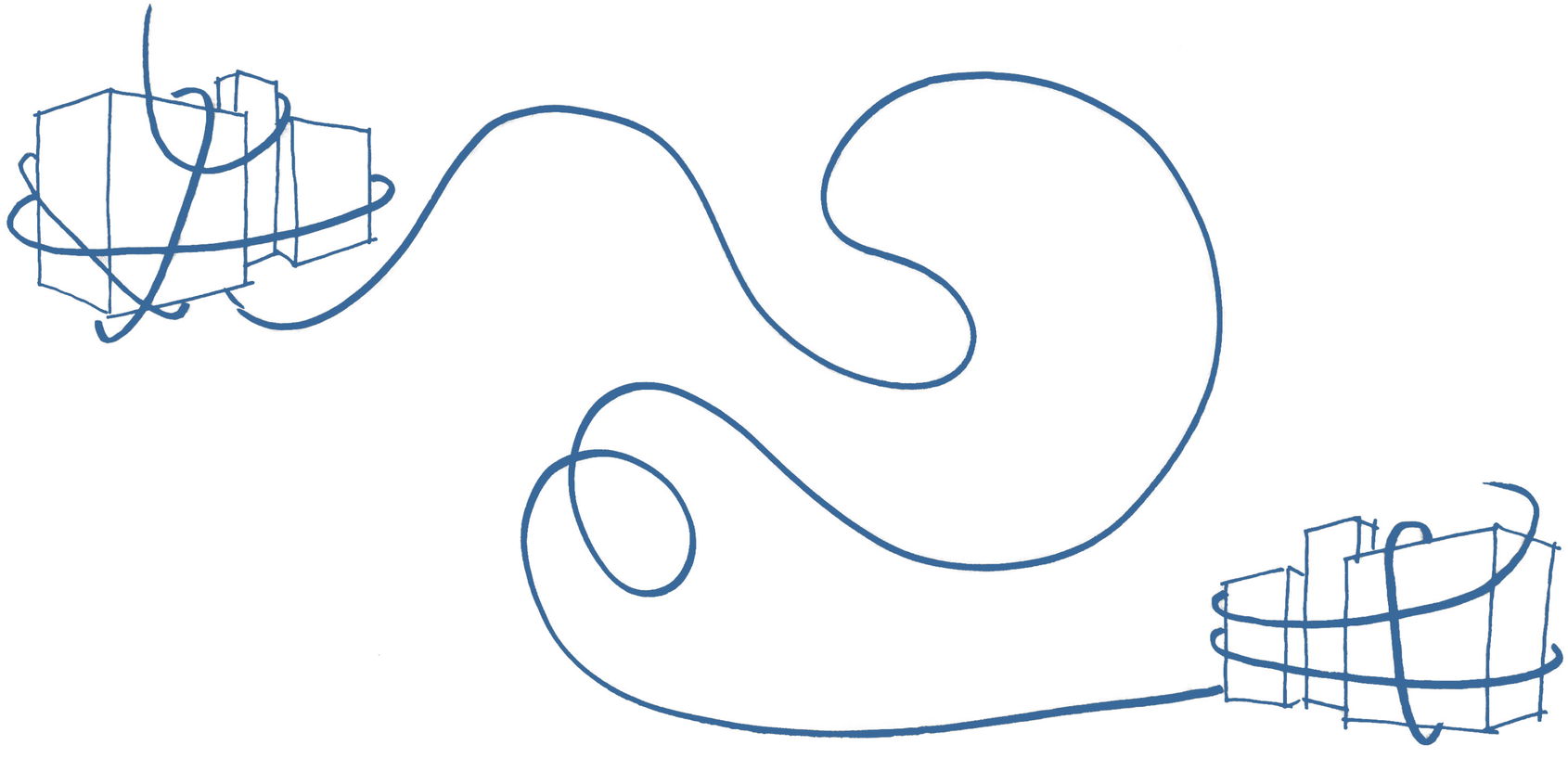


Visual indications

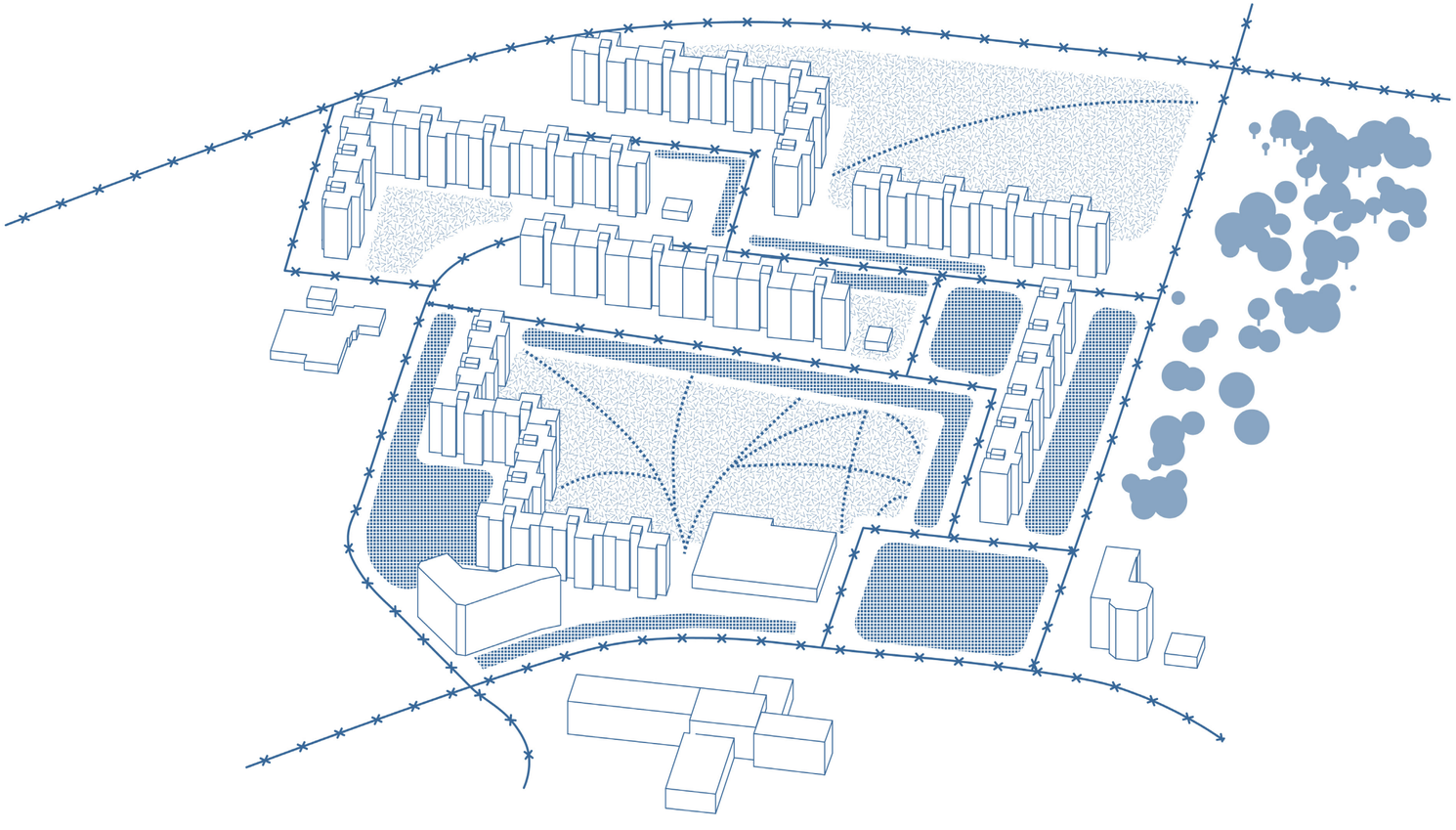




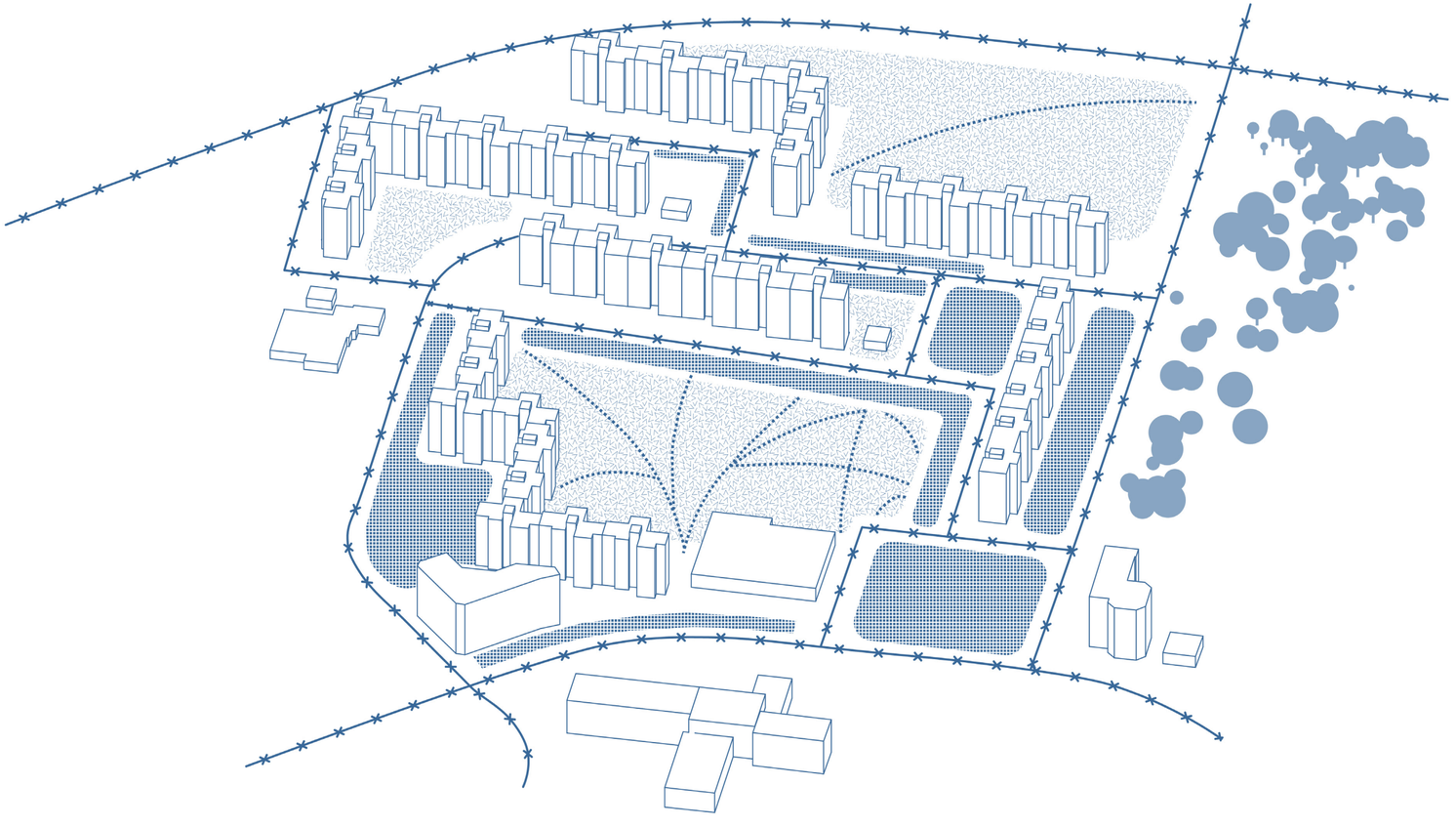




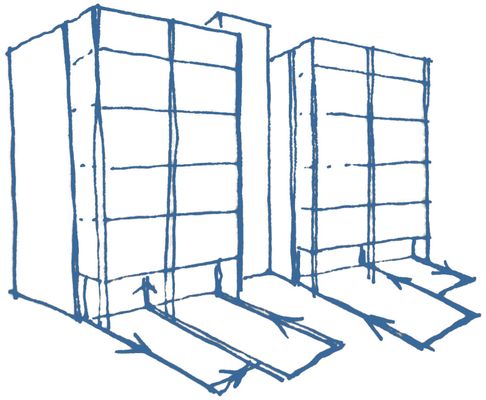
Current urban situation



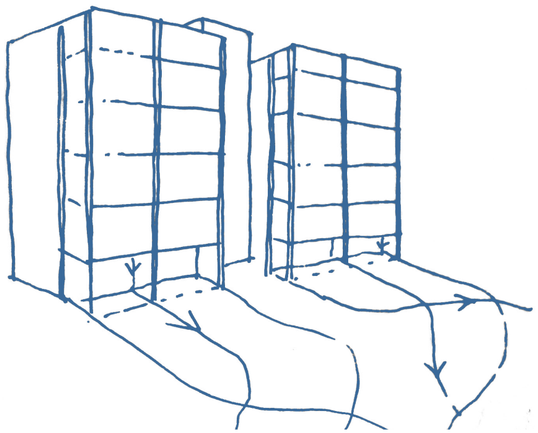
Current urban situation



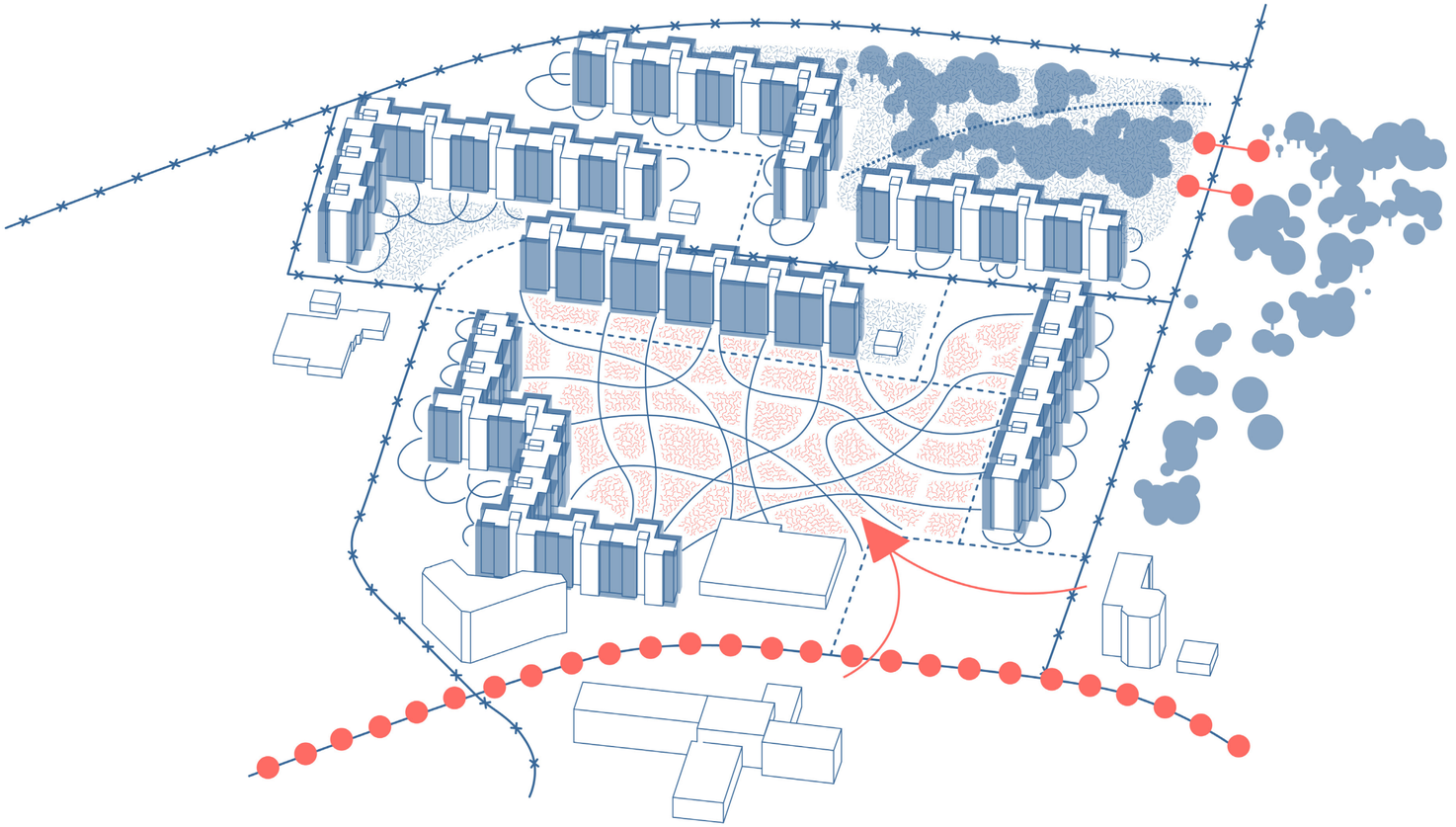
The Panelka strategy



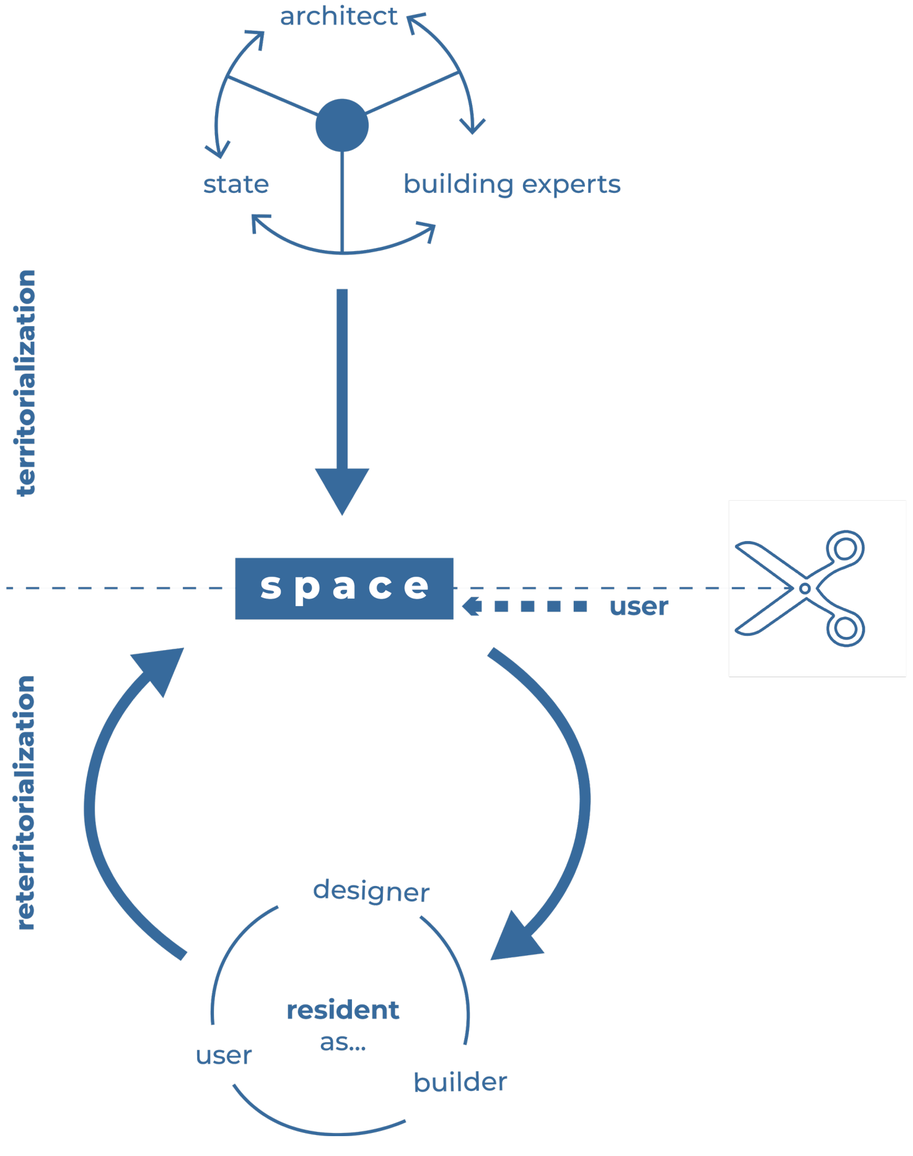
self-referring line



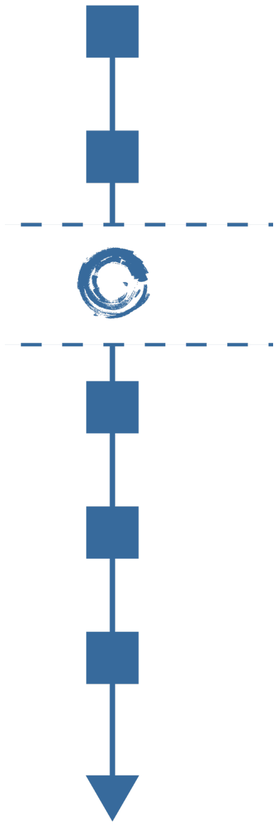
connecting line



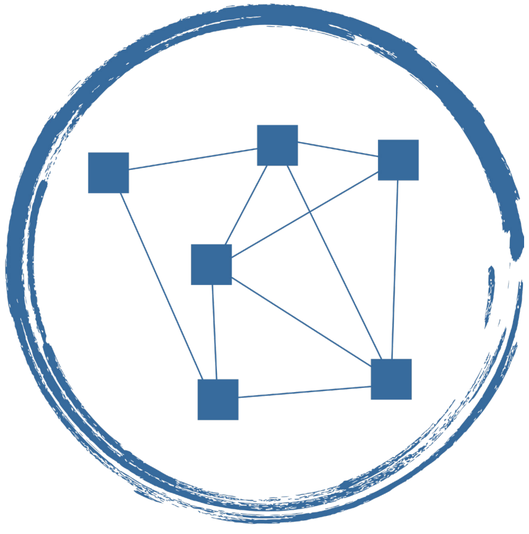
Existing methodology



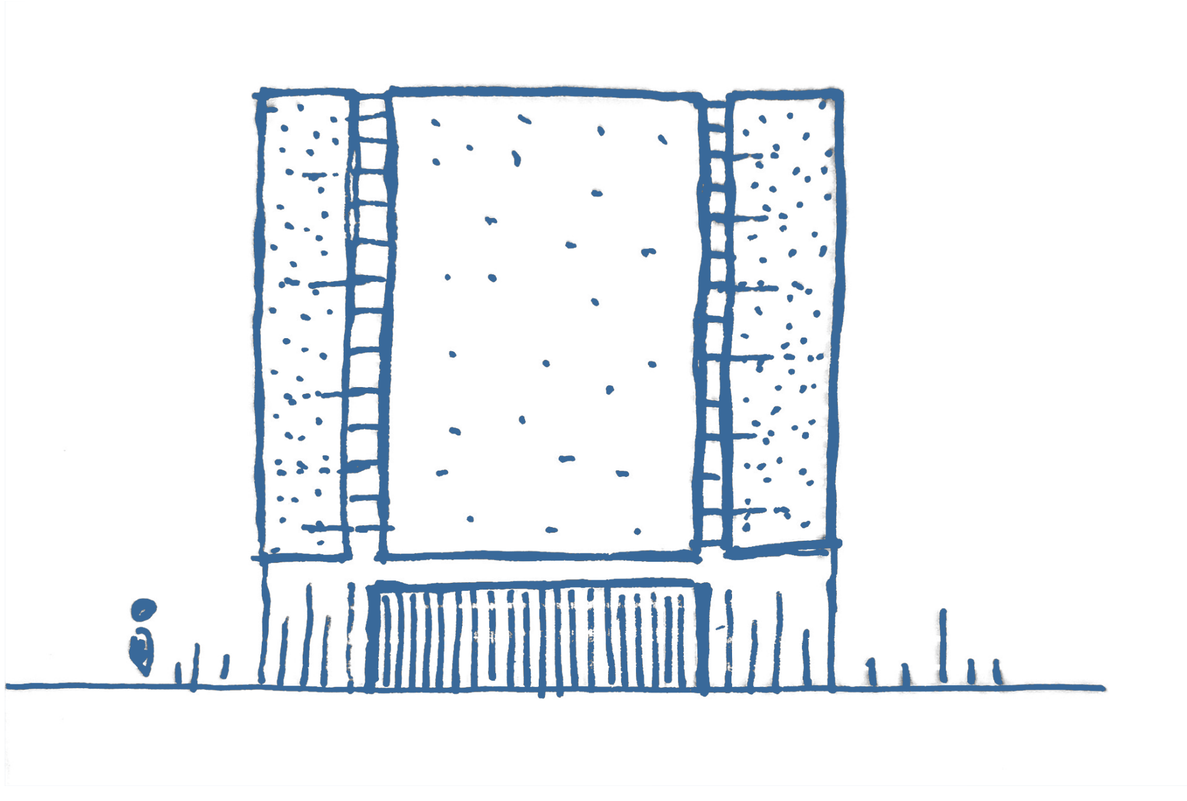
Existing methodology



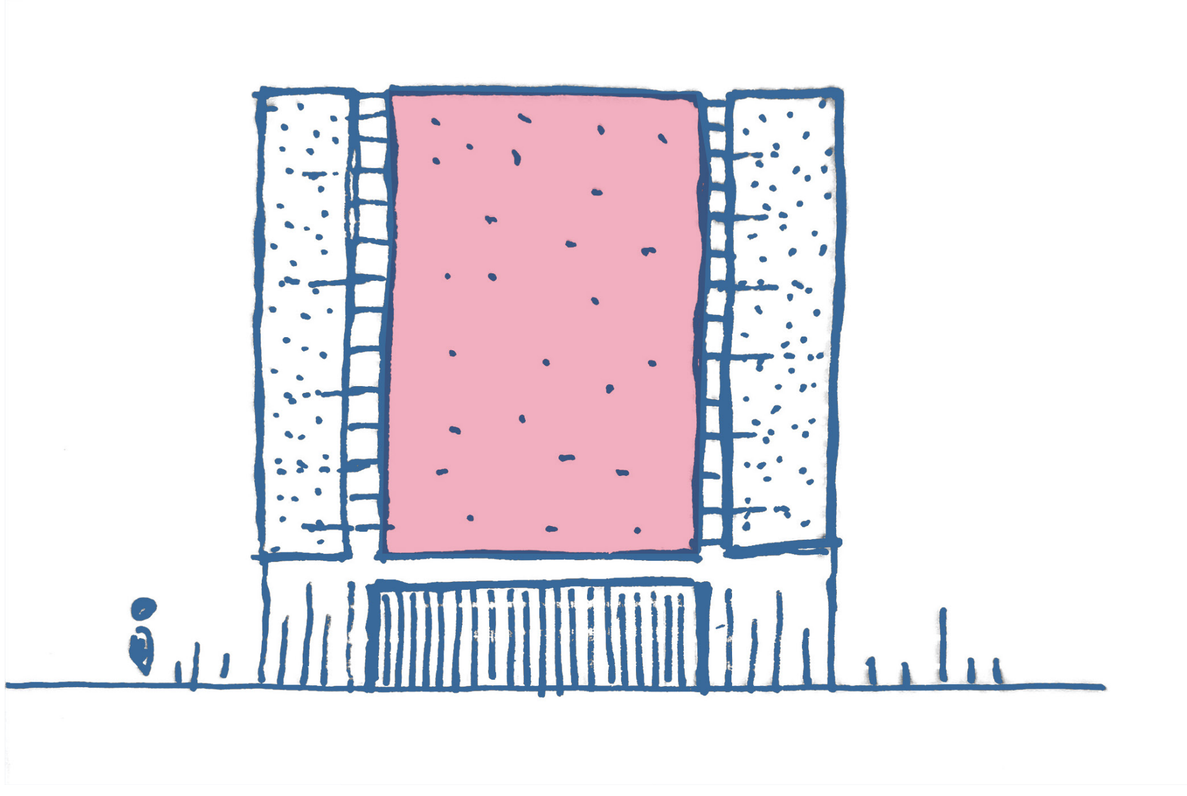
VS



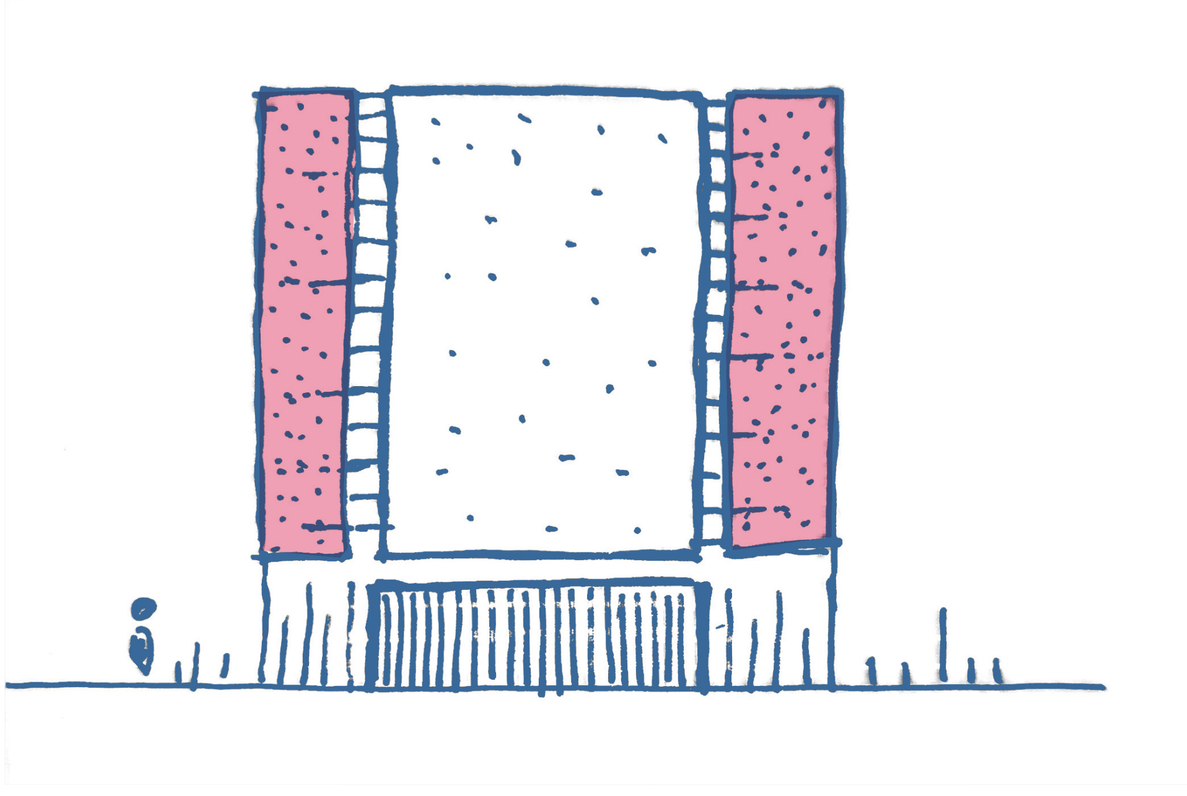
Degrees of participation



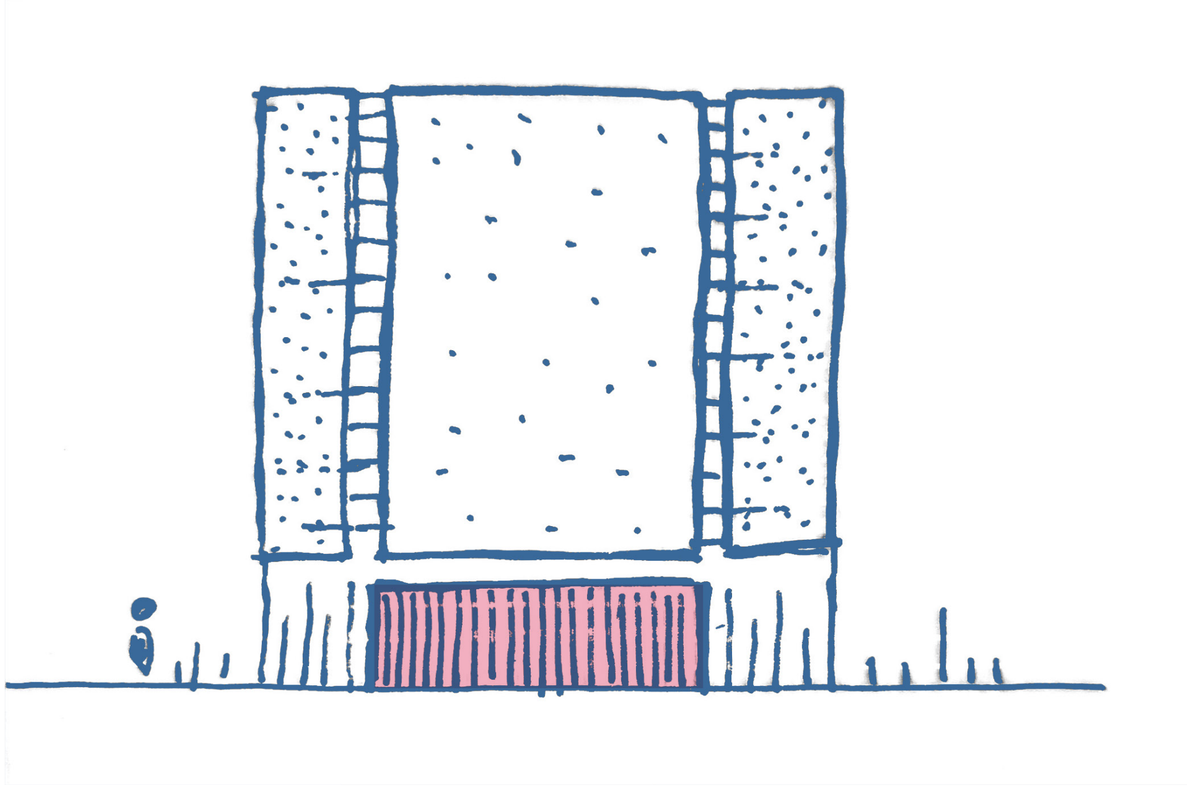
Degrees of participation



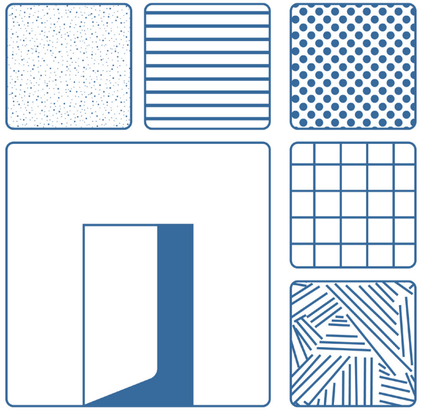
Degrees of participation



Degrees of participation

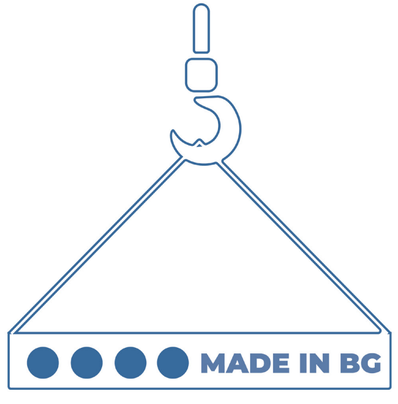


Pilars of circularity



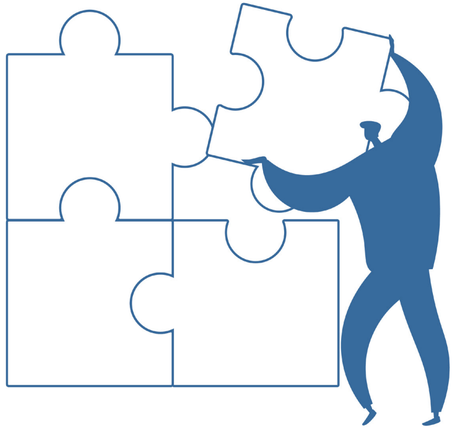
UPCYCLING:

of the old materials and structures: the concrete of the demolished walls/ balconies is going to be used in the process of creating the facade elements



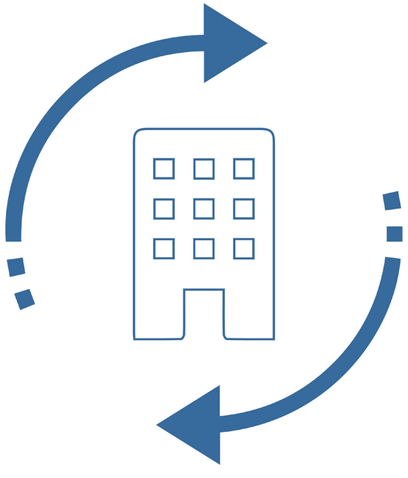
LOCAL MATERIALS:

in the region the production of the following materials is supported: wood fibre boards, perlite, CLT, LVL, recycled honeycomb cardboard



EASY DIS-ASSEMBLAGE:

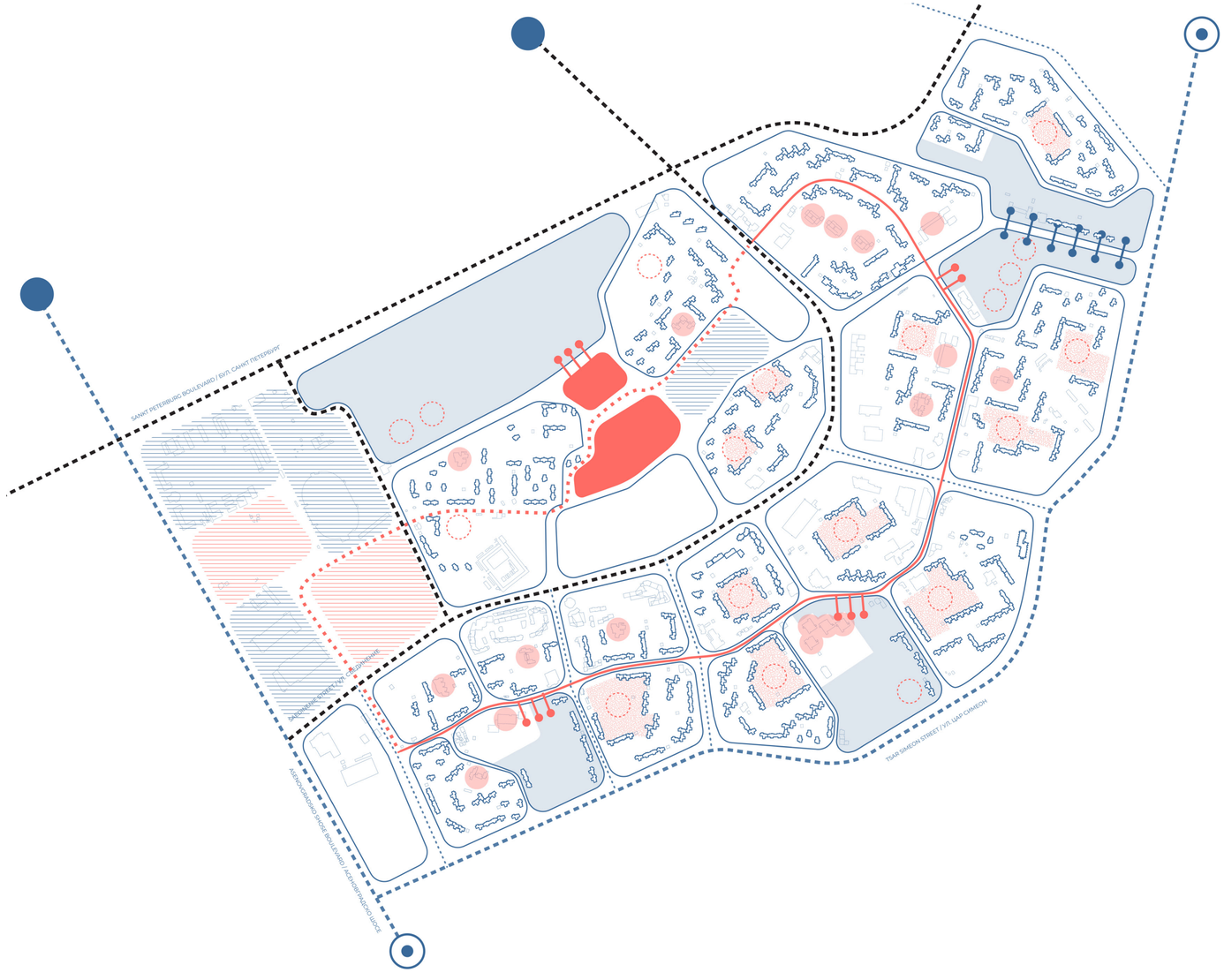
the construction method allows for easy dis-assembladge, even by unskilled people: this ensures flexibility of the apartments, as well as afterlife of the used materials



PROGRAMME FLEXIBILITY:

the change of programme (private and public) allows for multiple life cycles of the Panelka buildings

Conceptual masterplan



- city exit
- Plovdiv center
- built edu. facilities
- unbuilt edu. facilities
- arterial road
- main road
- public backbone
- park
- cultural facility
- new public zone
- existing public zone
- new activity core

Resident interventions as inspiration to turn boundaries into borders

car abyss

disconnection

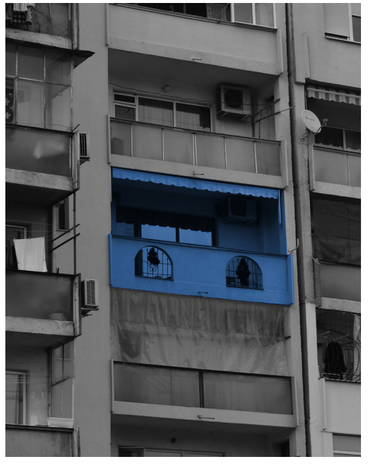
“blind facades”

grass desserts

orientation

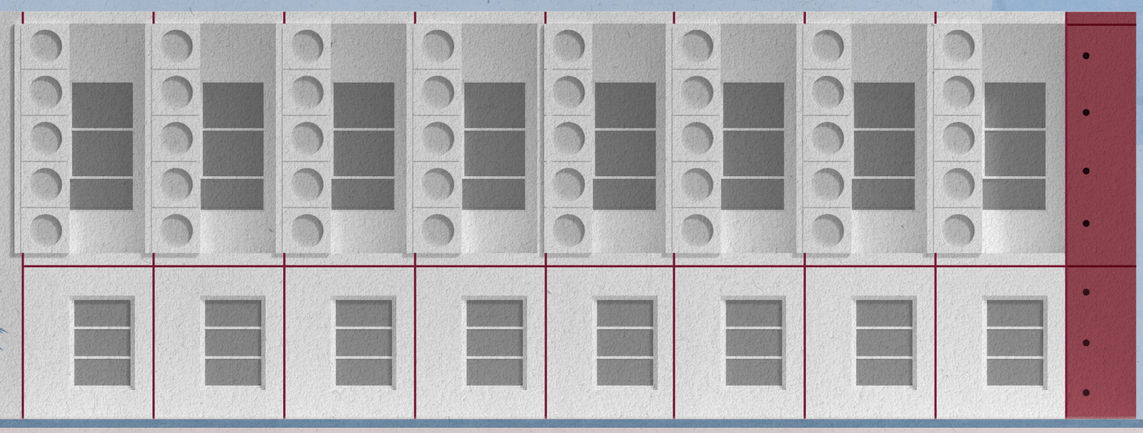
places for encouner

individuality in the public realm

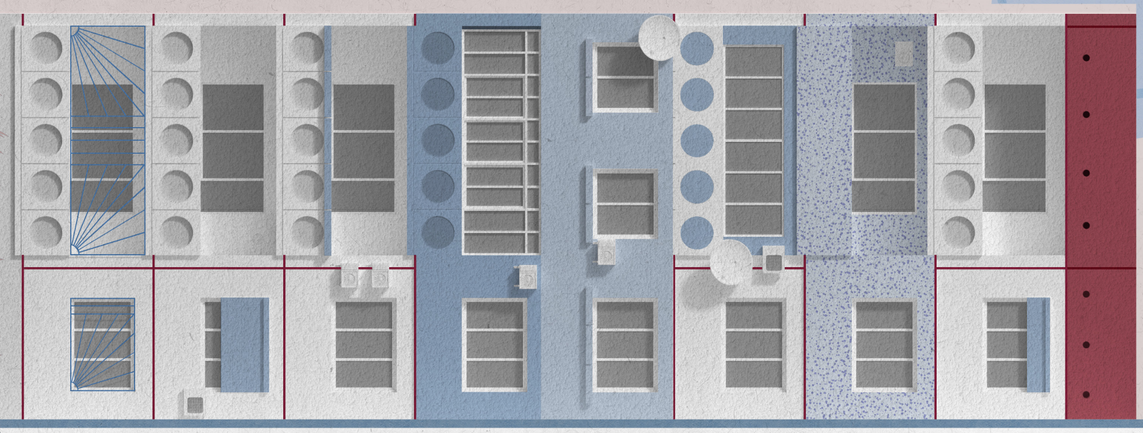
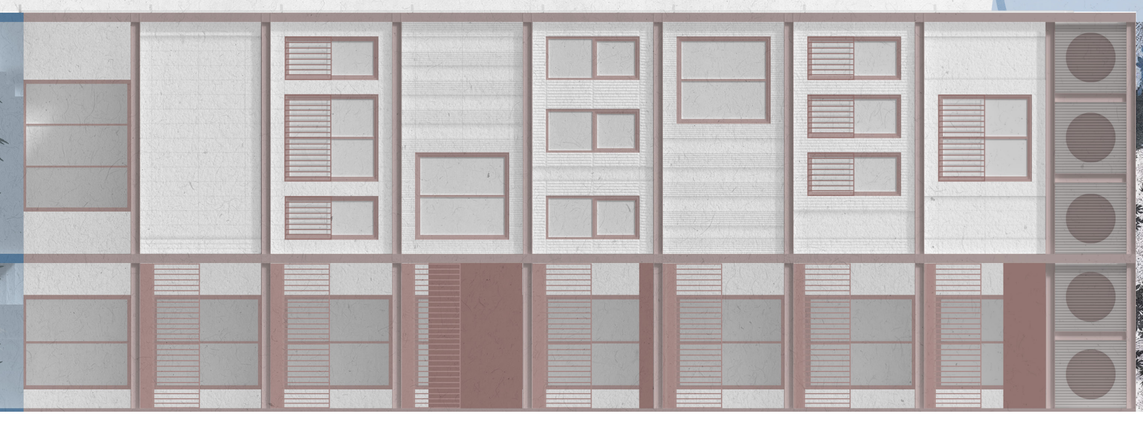


individuality in the private realm

PANELKA OF THE BUILDERS



PANELKA IN TRANSITION



PANELKA OF THE RESIDENTS