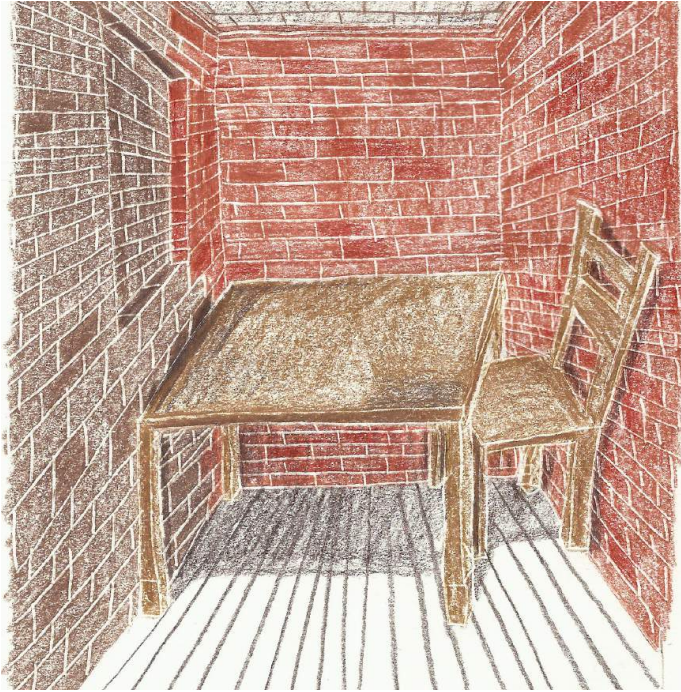




OCCULT MEMORY

A STROLL IN THE SUBCONSCIOUS

occult

/ɒˈkʌlt, ˈɒkʌlt/

1. hidden; concealed
2. secret; esoteric
3. beyond the realm of human comprehension and understanding; inscrutable; not apprehended by the mind; mysterious
4. designating or of certain arts, studies, or practices, as magic, alchemy, or astrology, involving mysterious powers that some people believe can affect the way things happen

origin of occult

Latin occultus “hidden, concealed, keep secret”

adverb

ɒkˈultˈli

noun

ɒkˈultˈness

OCCULT MEMORY

A stroll in the subconscious

by
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Masterthesis 'The Drawing and the Space'
Faculty of Architecture, Campus Sint-Lucas Ghent, KU Leuven
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“I find myself most interested in pictures that remind me of something outside themselves, familiar but still unidentifiable.”

Michael Ashkin
(*Shinkle*, 2016, p. 19)

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PREFACE

Last year I went to London for a two-month internship. During that period I wandered around the city and noticed a different architectural style than the one I know or have studied in the past years. This atypical architecture intrigued me because some facades were designed in an unconventional way. I could not imagine the function behind the facades, as there did not seem to be a continuity between interior and exterior. This triggered my imagination and I expected that the people behind these facades would also live atypically.

The dysfunction that appears here, by not knowing what occurs behind the facades, will be an important aspect in this master thesis. I have designed through my imagination, in which I enabled the visitor to experience an architecture from my perspective. My aim was to rethink the function of architecture in order to search for a more extensive experience.

I

London

LONDON, South Kensington. A sunny day in late Spring. I'm walking towards the Victoria and Albert Museum and choose to take another path as usual. I wander and gaze around. Next to me, I see the railways of the tube at a lower level, in the open air. A tube passes and disappears underground, underneath the houses. From this view I can see the rear of a strange building. Getting closer I behold the odd corner of the house, which is slightly wider than one meter. People call it 'Thin House' because it's one of the narrowest homes in the capital. I walk and observe all sides of this terraced house to try and understand how one could live in such a small house. At the backside of the house there aren't a lot of windows, at the front it looks like a typical English house.



Thin House, 5 Thurloe Square.

Coming back from the museum I decide to go back home via the same streets so I'll pass the 'Thin House' again. Still unable to comprehend this home and still imagining everything, I take several turns in the street to try and untangle the mystery. Walking a little further, I come across another unfamiliar house, or two houses. It looks like there are two houses connected to each other, enclosed by a brick wall. However, this wall continues into one of the facades of the first house. I don't immediately see how there is a separated entrance for two homes, on this side of the street there is only one. The wall is too high to look over it. Walking past the house I enter another street and see the front of these houses, where I find the main entrance. So the main road gives access to the back door and back garden. You could say that the house is oriented conversely.



Rear of the house, 18 Pelham Street.

I Return to England

One year later, I still wonder about those uncanny facades. My curiosity pushed me to revisit the place. While planning my travel to London again, I decided to make it as inspirational as possible by visiting a couple of places.

The two places that captivated me the most were South Kensington, a district in West London, where a lot of different architecture can be seen. This goes from small houses to large monuments; and Painswick, which is a town that stands on a hill in the Stroud district. Its narrow streets and traditional architecture make it a perfect example of an English village. The town is mainly constructed of locally Cotswold stone.

Wandering in every street, I haven't entered any of these houses, which is an important parameter for this master thesis. Since I don't take a look inside the houses I'm not restricted in my thinking about how these spaces would be.



Plan
My walk in South Kensington, London



London, South Kensington.



London, Hampstead.



London, South Kensington.



London, South Kensington.



London, Chelsea.



London, Dalston.



London, Mayfair.



London, Mayfair.



Plan
My walk in Painswick, Gloucester



Gloucester, Painswick.



Gloucester, Painswick.



Gloucester, Painswick.



Gloucester, Painswick.

















II

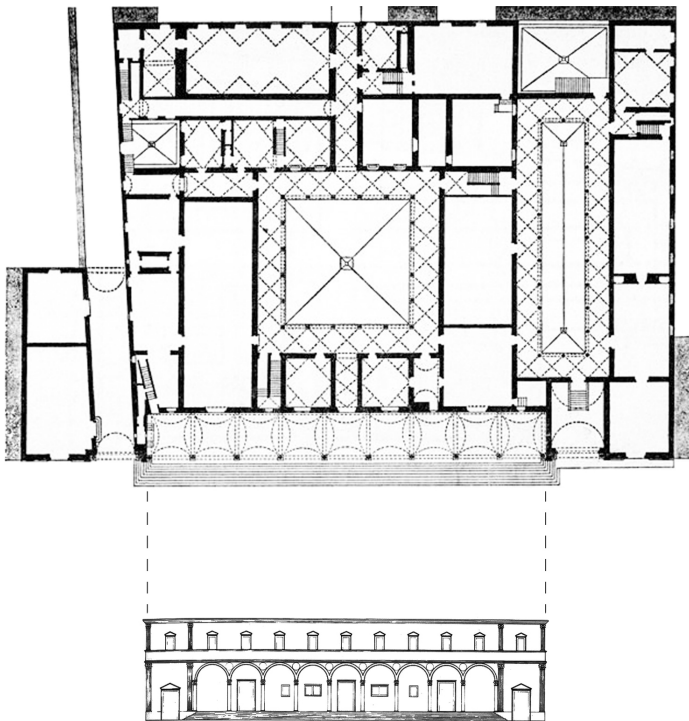
Dysfunction

“While a house today must still shelter, it does not need to symbolise or romanticise its sheltering function, to the contrary such symbols are today meaningless and merely nostalgic.”

Peter Eisenman
(*Leach, 1997, p. 278*)

The idea of how facades should be designed, or how it was instructed during my education, is that one should be able to reveal accurately what is behind the front of the building. But this appearance of the facade, as in London, may not be consistent with the interior. This way of thinking was applied in the Renaissance, for example in Ospedale degli Innocenti by Brunnelleschi. The front, consisting of a loggia, was designed with the aim of regularity and geometric order, which was important in Renaissance architecture. Behind this facade is a series of original houses and buildings that were built for the purpose of this foundling hospital.

If, during the Renaissance, they were looking for a regularity in the facade, this was not set as a purpose in the facades that I noticed in London. The reason why I noticed these buildings was because there were elements in the facades that seemed strange or atypical to me.



Plan and facade Ospedale degli Innocenti (1419)
Filippo Brunelleschi

This made me question what we consider as the usual way of designing. Designing takes place with tradition in mind, by which I refer to what we know and are familiar with. Such as the facade that represents the internal layout and within this layout the logical sequence of spaces in which we move around. Everything is positioned in a specific way because of its function and scale.

While Descartes would say that we need an absolute 'break' with tradition of architecture, Andrew Benjamin argues that it is rather "the reinscription of a repetition within an attempt to break down the repetition of tradition". (*Leach, 1997, p. 269*) We cannot break with the tradition, because we cannot design out of nowhere. We rely on tradition. The only difference one can make is how to look at tradition, by reconsidering and reinvestigating.

Architecture has the purpose to be a shelter, a familiar place. By thinking about dysfunction, that doesn't have to be the first focus. By distancing the function and scale there can emerge an estrangement that may cause an uncomfortable feeling. The familiar will be reformed into the unfamiliar. This disrupted conventional living is something that's clearly visible in Eisenman's House VI, when a column separates the seats at the dining table, making it difficult to insert a table or to make a conversation. This also appears in the bedroom, where a window in the middle of the wall makes it impossible to fit a double bed.

By deviating from our knowledge and the function, a new experience could be created. When entering a building our prediction can be disrupted which provokes our imagination and memory.



Bedroom House VI
Peter Eisenman

III

Between the conscious and the unconscious

Since I did not know the function behind the facades, I chose to fill in and design these spaces myself by entering through my imagination, in a dream. The visitor will be able to access my imagination through my drawings. He will enter a world where the architecture seems ordinary at first, but is anything but ordinary. Here the memory is as important as the imagination, as it ensures whether we recognize something or not. I want him to become aware of the ‘typical’ architectural elements (such as a stair, door, window, wall, floor and ceiling), as these are slightly changed or positioned differently by thinking about dysfunction and scale. He will enter a world where no one has ever been and his familiar knowledge transforms into something unknown, which will create a disoriented feeling. This removes the visitor from his consciousness and takes him into the subconscious mind.

Psychologist Sigmund Freud says about ‘the Unheimlich’ that it “creates a feeling of mental displacement caused by the surfacing of unconscious and unfamiliar feelings.” A literal translation of ‘Unheimlich’ is ‘unhomely’, but it mainly emphasises the uncanny, uncomfortable and unfamiliar feeling.

I'm looking for the boundary between *the known* (as I see as conscious) and *the unknown* (as the unconscious or the uncomfortable). The subconscious mind lies on their shared border.

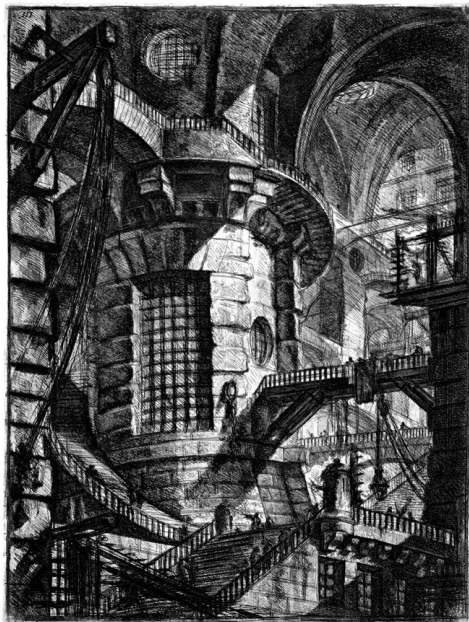
The subconscious is less clear than the conscious. To explain it with a dream: the unconscious can become conscious in a dream. In the dream itself one is aware of what one is dreaming of. After waking up, one is not always aware of what one has dreamed, which makes it unconscious. But eventually we can become aware of this dream again, later on, in the subconscious. As Freud stated that dreaming is 'a look into the unconscious'.

The idea of these levels was extensively studied by Freud. He believed that the mind can be divided into three levels as he introduced the 3-levels-of-awareness (Freud, 1913, p. 542):

The *Conscious*, were we find all thoughts and actions within our awareness.

The *Preconscious*, were we find all thoughts and actions we can become aware of if we think about them.

The *Unconscious*, were we find all past memories that are inaccessible to us. We cannot try to recollect these memories, no matter how hard we try.



The Round Tower (Carceri d'invenzione)
Giovanni Battista Piranesi

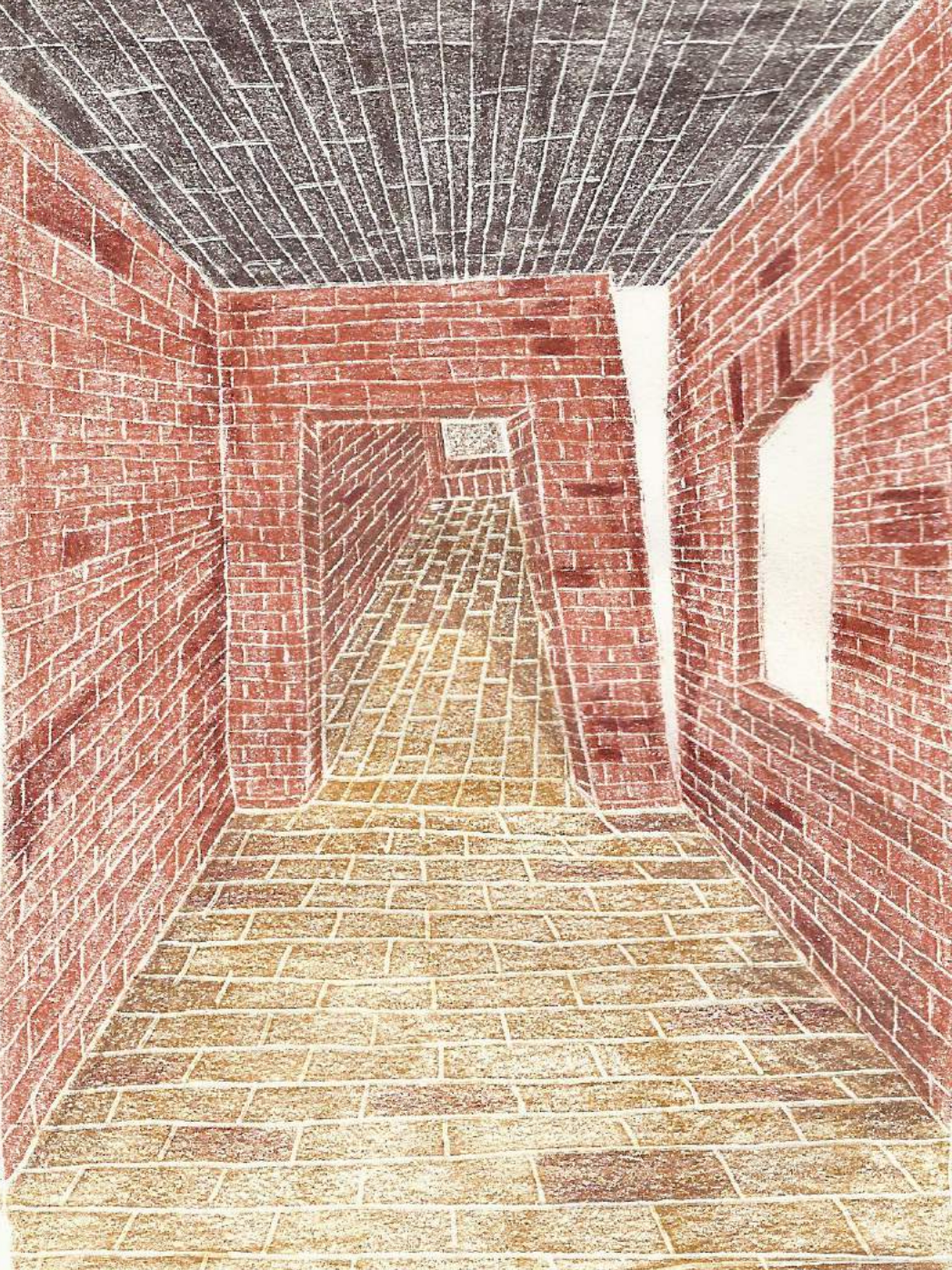
This master thesis is about the subconscious part, which is not often discussed in architecture. This architecture would be an impulse to become aware of the subconscious and make it possible to manipulate it. Something may seem realistic without really being so. According to Jorge Luis Borges, 'truth' exists in fiction but something fictional can only be 'true' in the fictional world.

Piranesi's drawings of his imaginary prisons also explores with the boundary between fiction and reality. There is a presence of the uncanny. Furthermore I was inspired by Magic Realism, which is a subgenre of fantastic literature. Here, stories are written where some elements occur that cannot be part of what exists in reality. A lot of those stories create a dark and disorienting atmosphere.

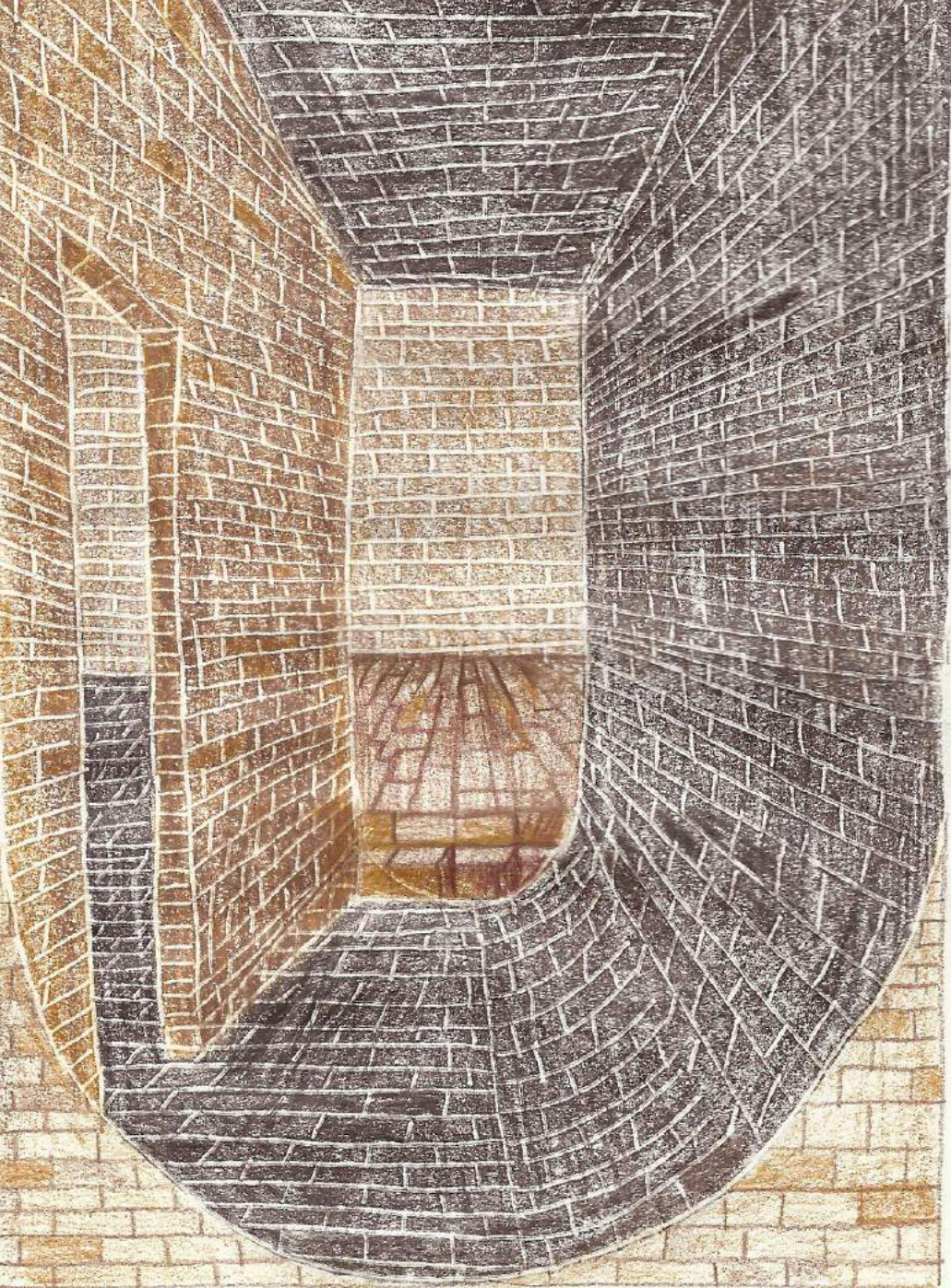
IV

Drawings

After visiting the houses of Londen, this time mentally and not physically, I made drawings of spaces with dysfunction and scale in mind. By thinking about architectural elements and taking them out of their context, I came to a series of drawings. I allowed coincidence during the drawing process and this resulted in spaces that I could not have imagined in advance. The drawings can only give the illusion of the third dimension. Not everything is given, making your imagination the most important part of understanding the spaces. Some elements are recurring, such as a door that cannot be opened or a staircase that leads to nothing. Therefore perspective is an important part in the drawings, where for example some floors will appear to be sloping and it may seem that a wrong perspective have been applied. But everything you see on the drawing is truly how it is. Here, one is again confronted with the own experience and memory, from which one must learn to deviate.



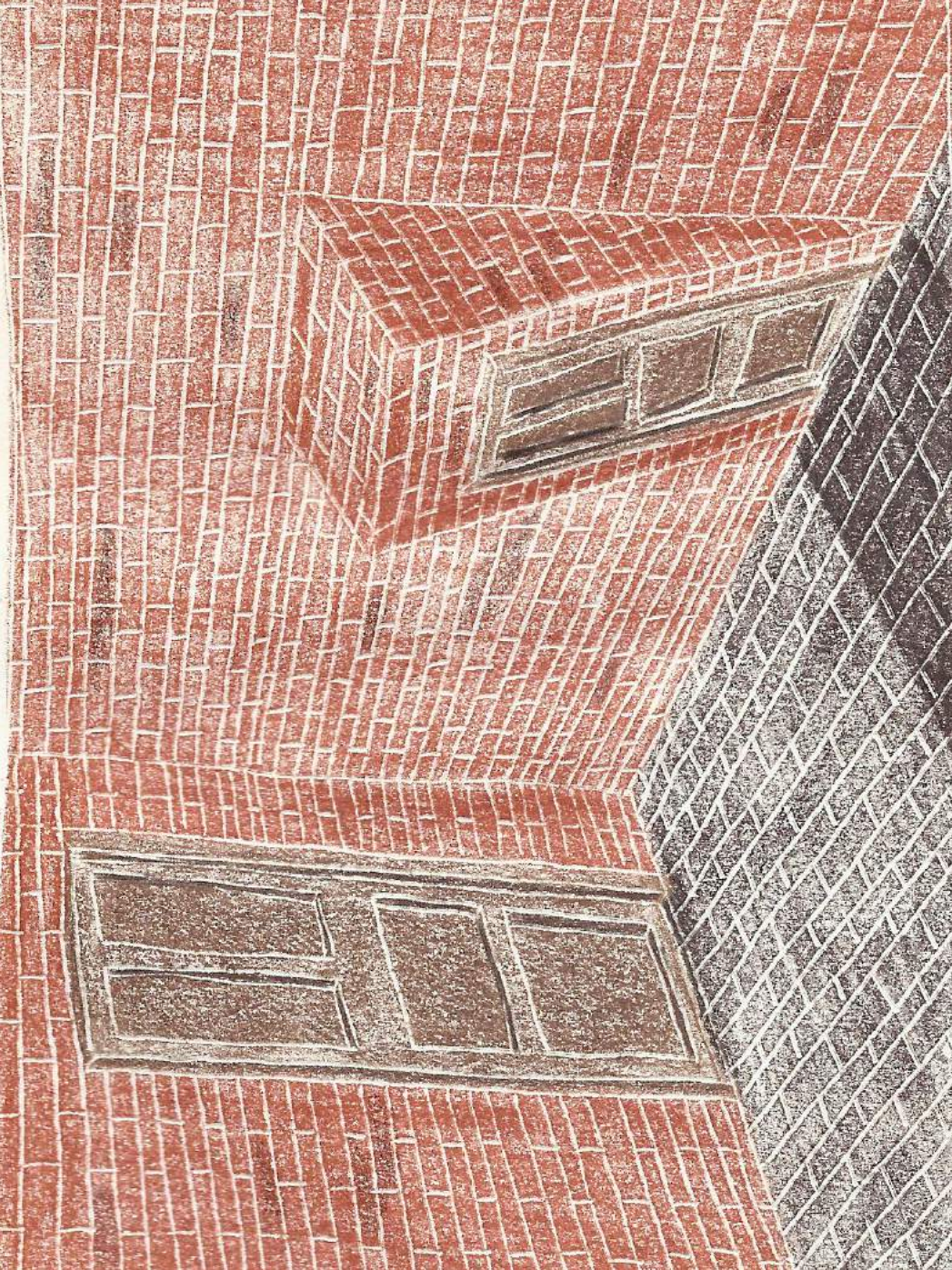


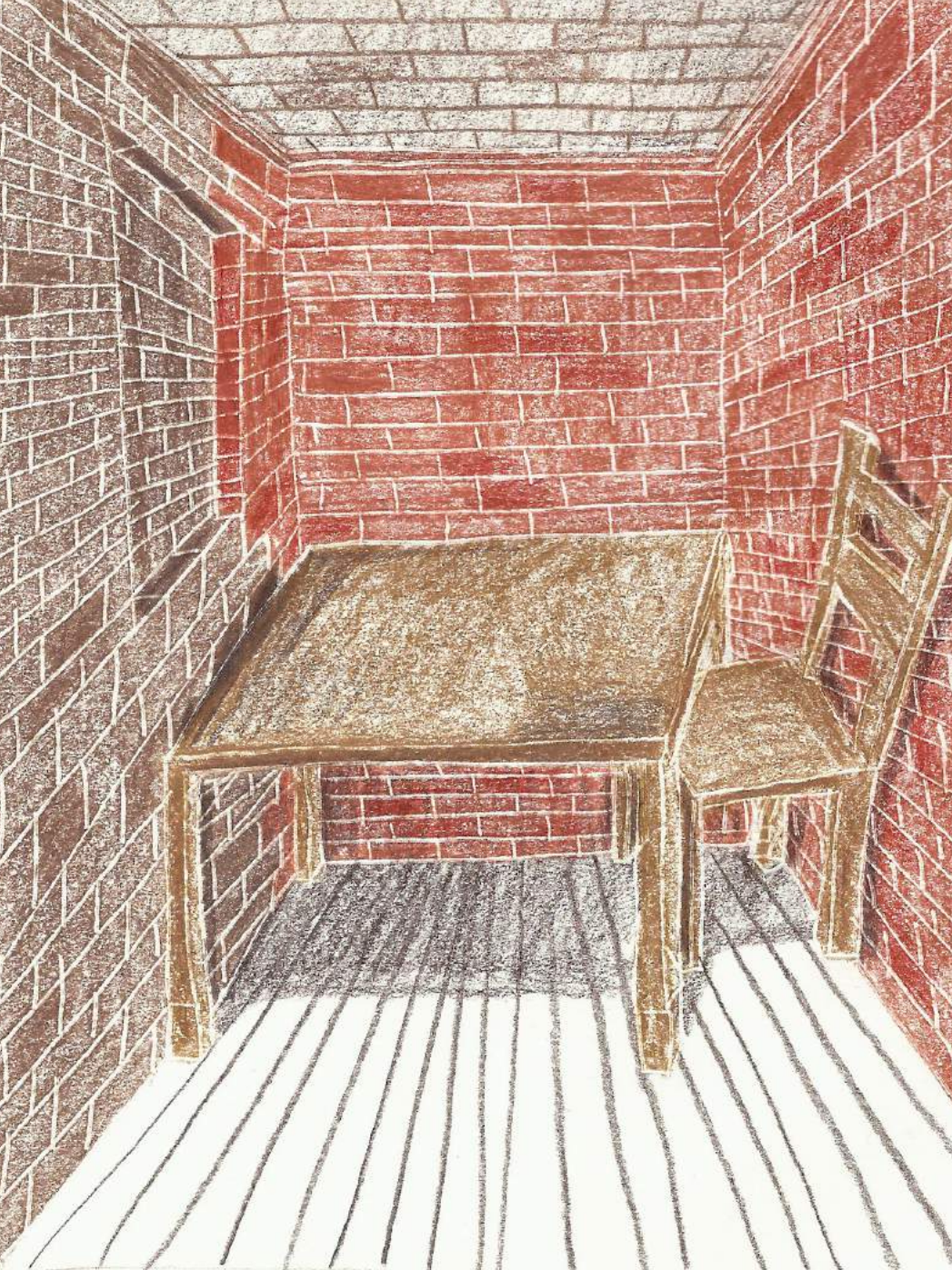






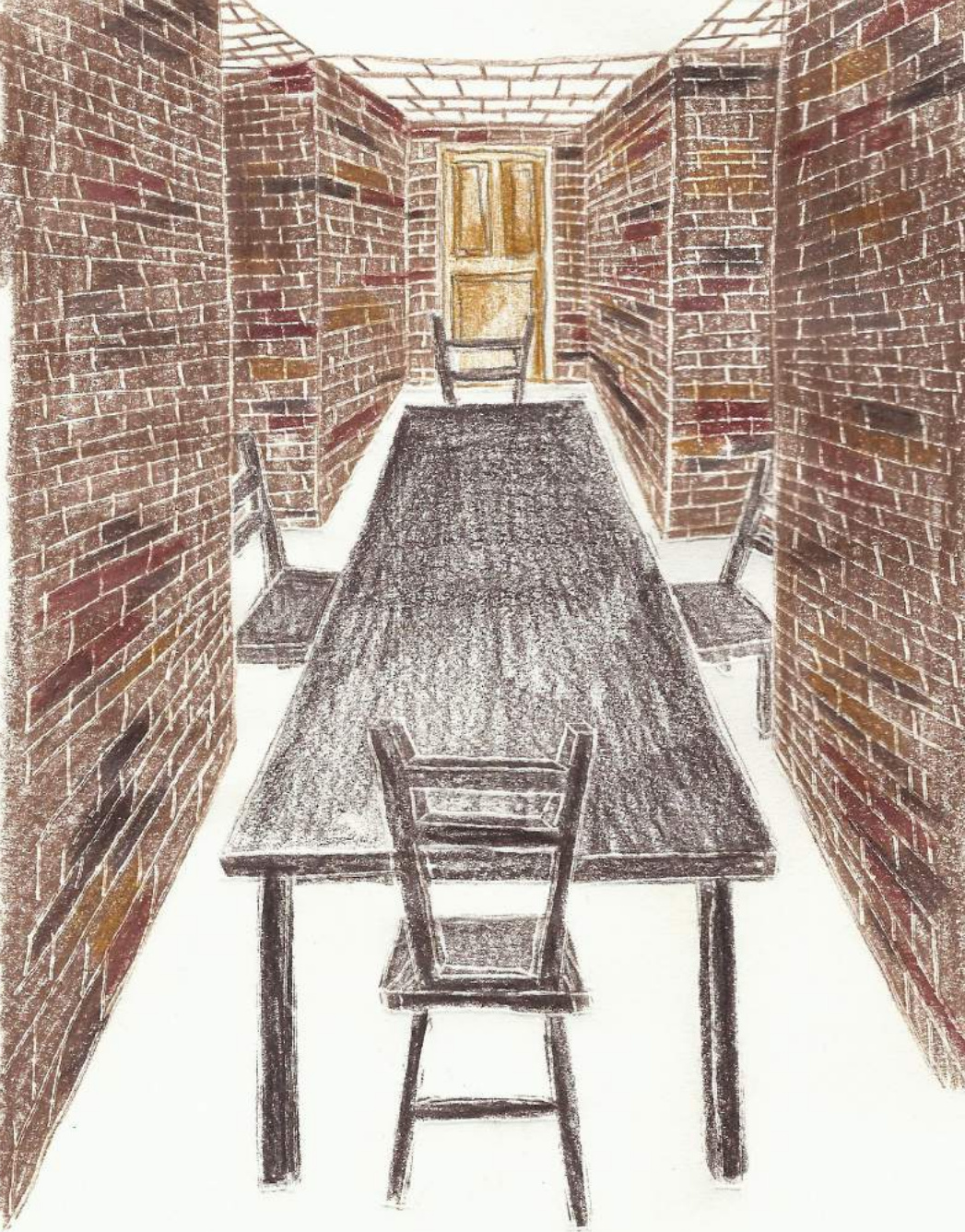










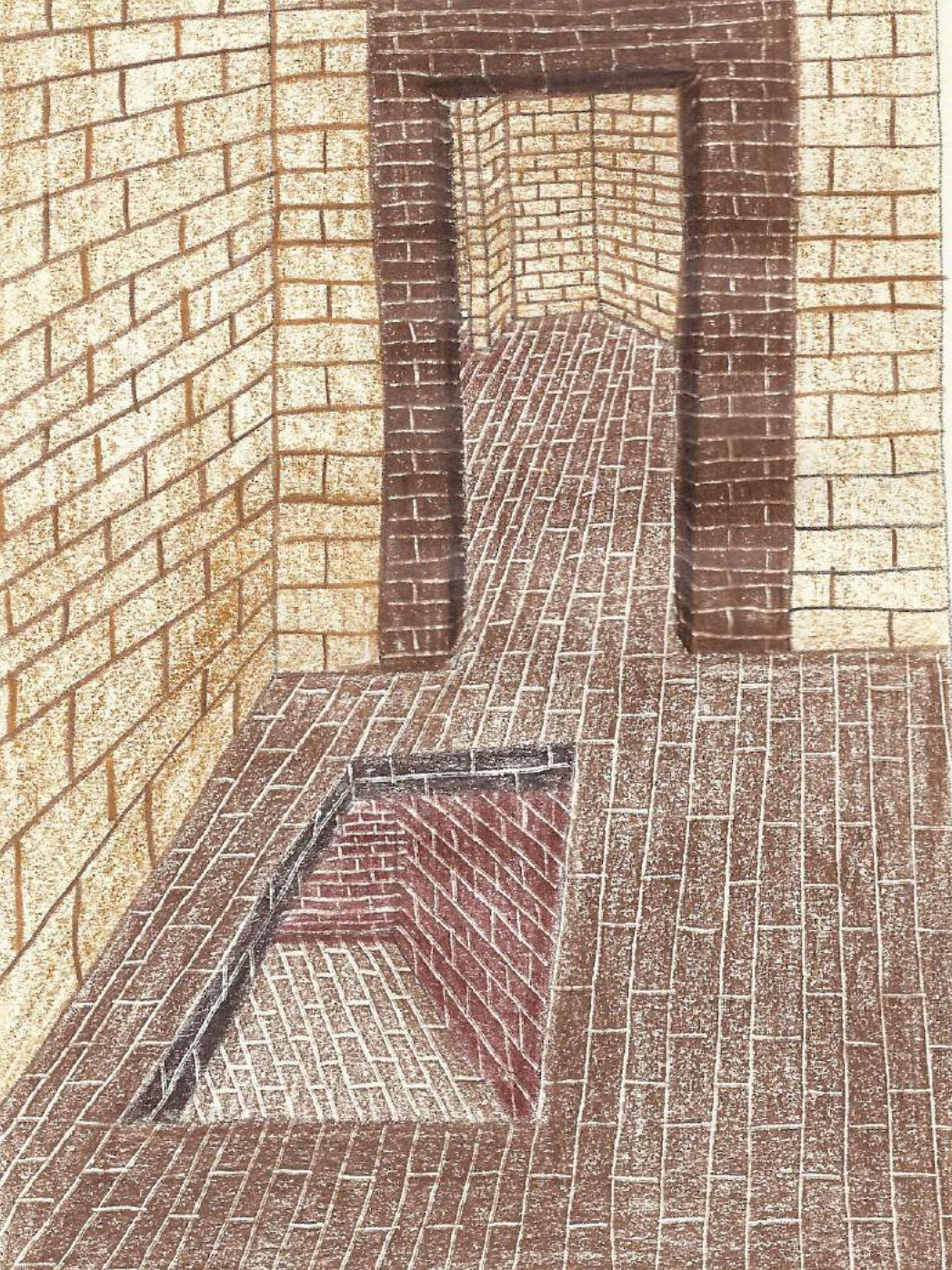


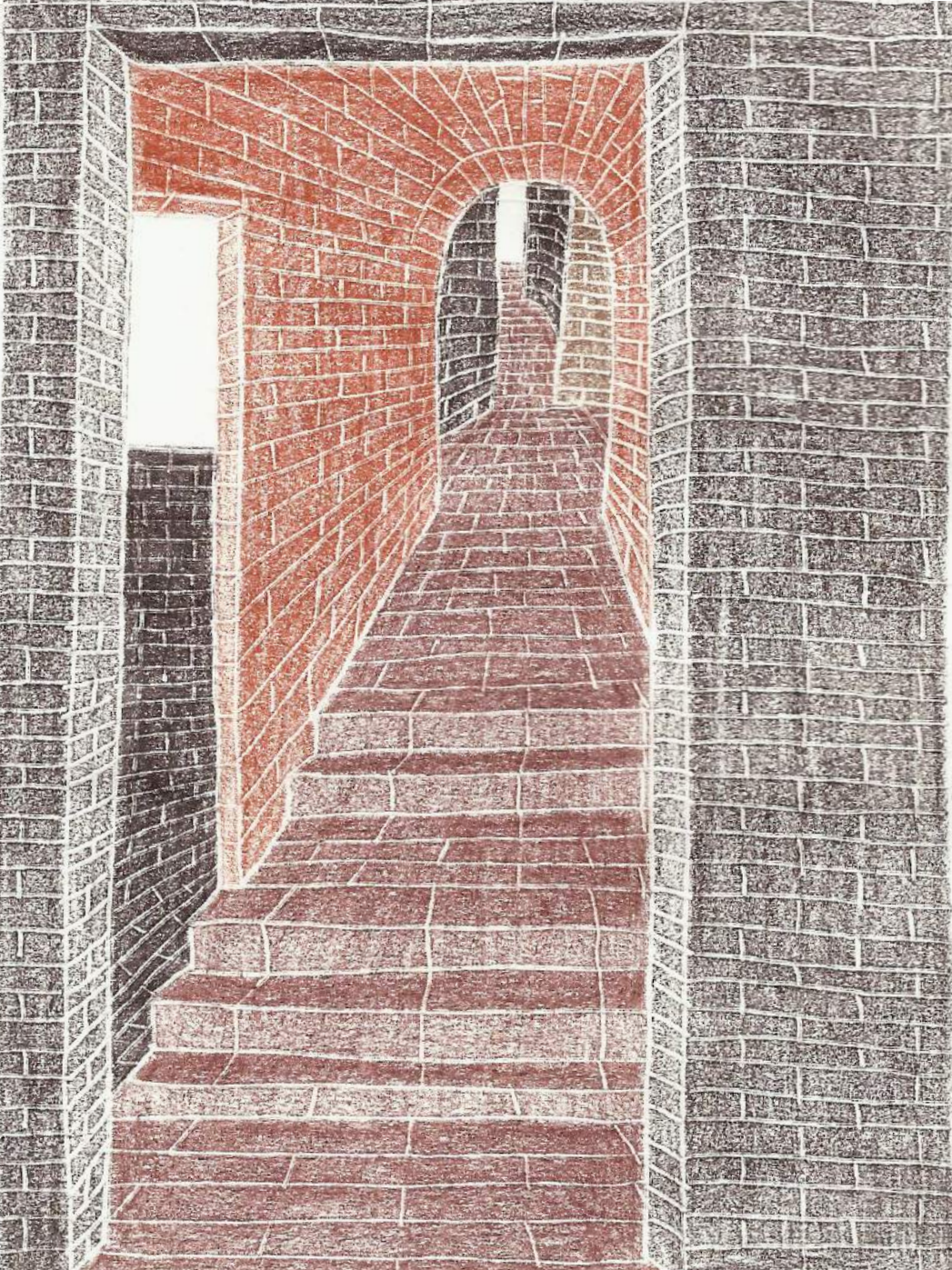






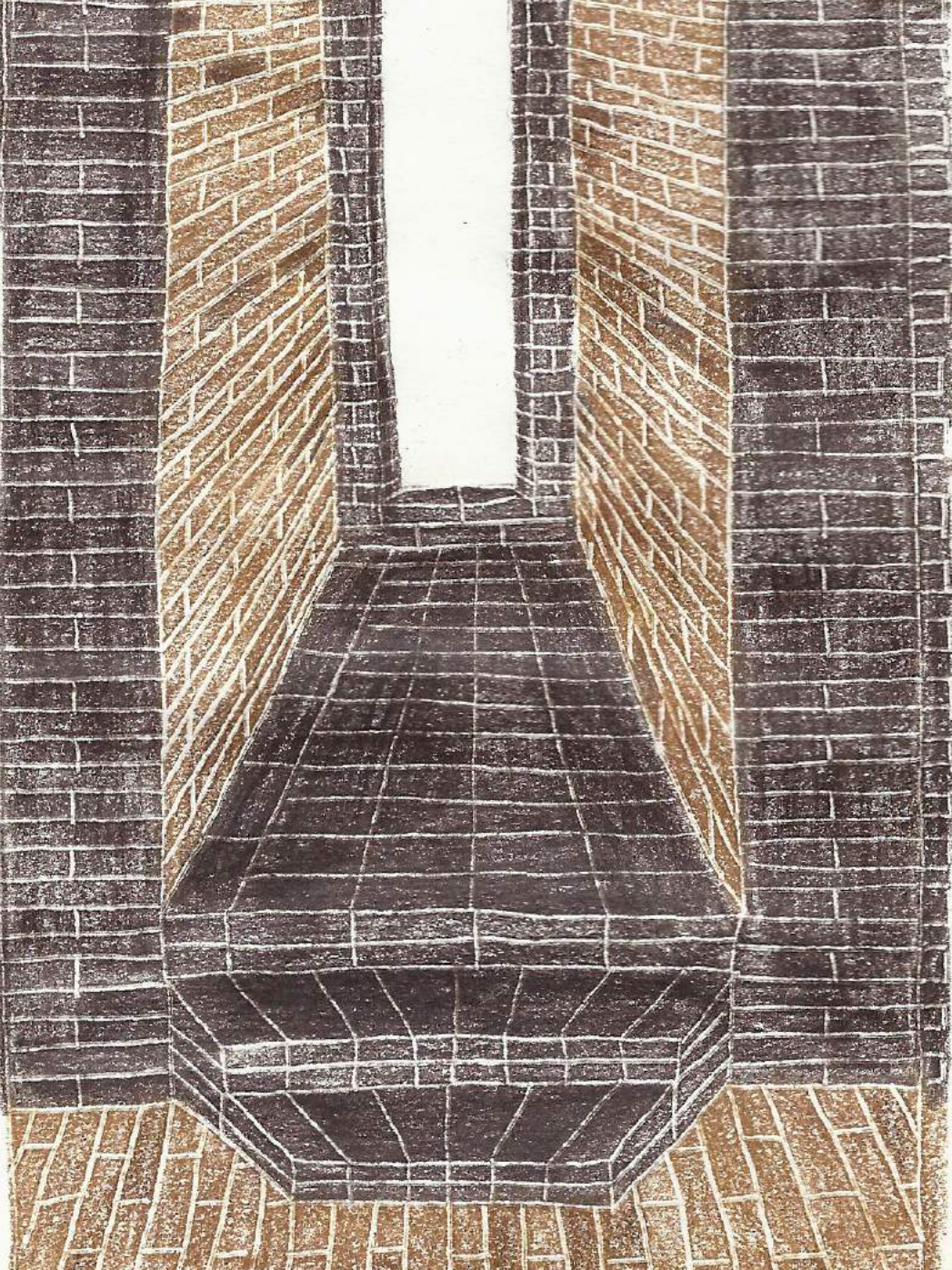


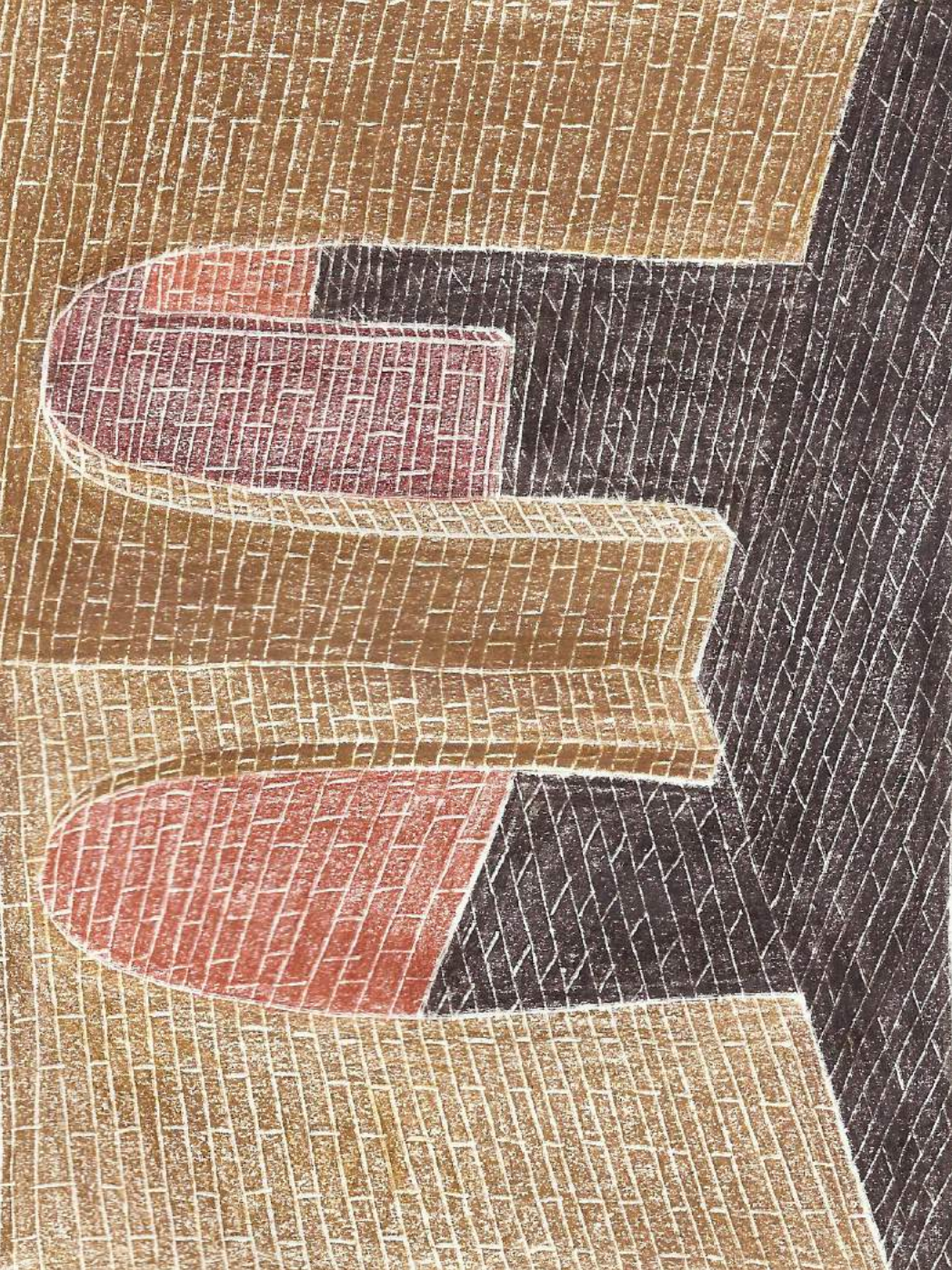


















V
A stroll in the subconscious
through a plan

My intention is to take the visitor on a stroll through my imagination, where he will be able to access through a model, a film and a story. I connected the fragmented drawings (see chapter IV) to each other, as a walk from one house to another on a site in South Kensington, London.

*Thin House, 5 Thurloe Square,
London, South Kensington.*



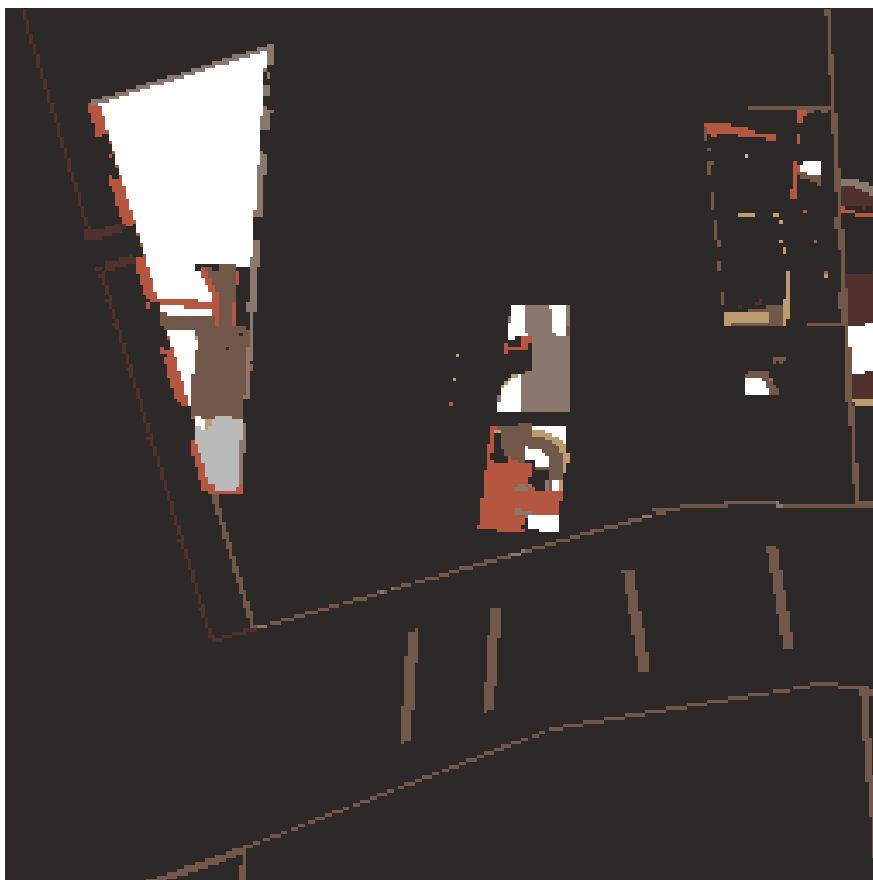
Front and rear of the house

*18 Pelham Place,
London, South Kensington.*



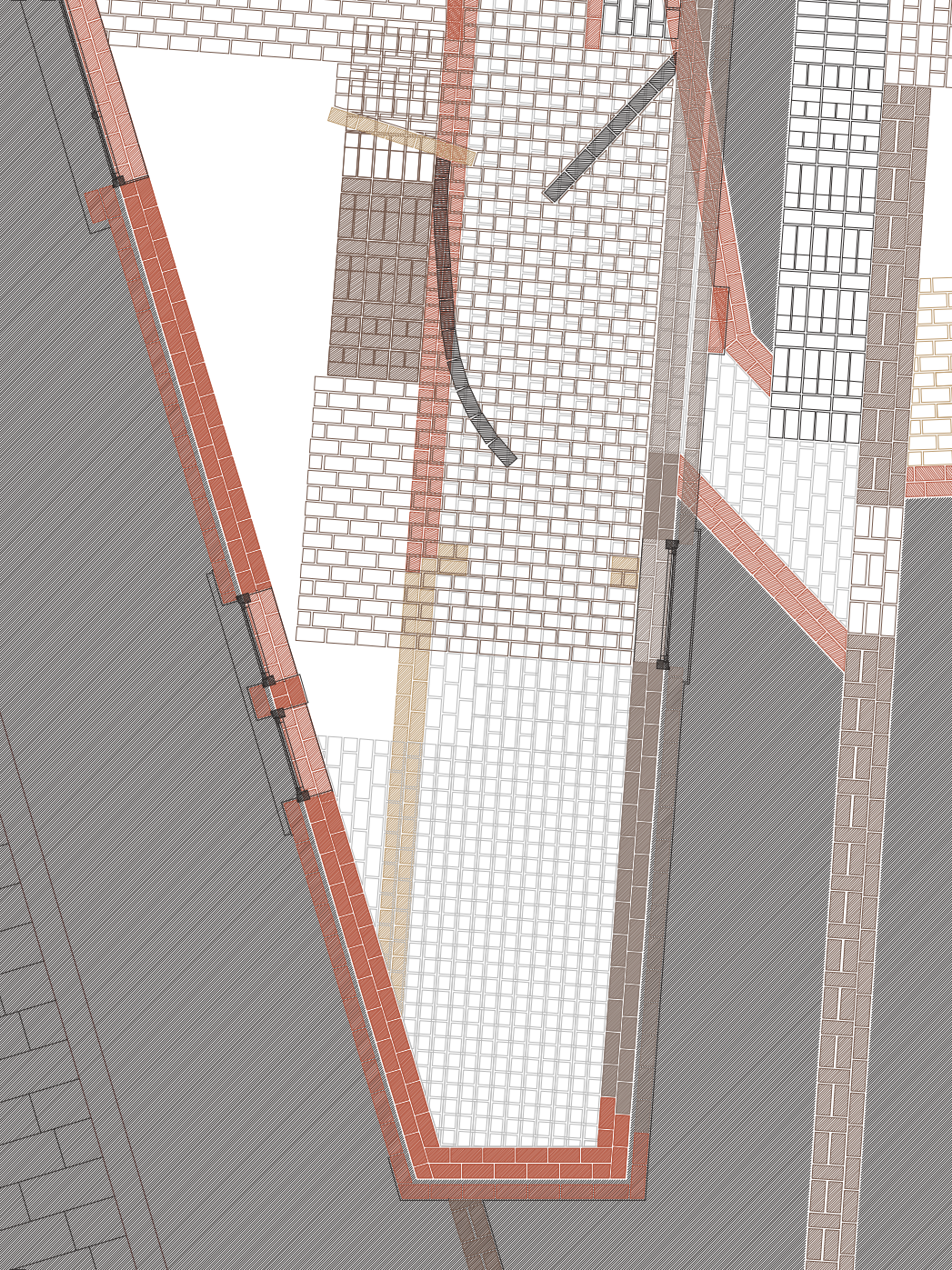
Front and rear of the house

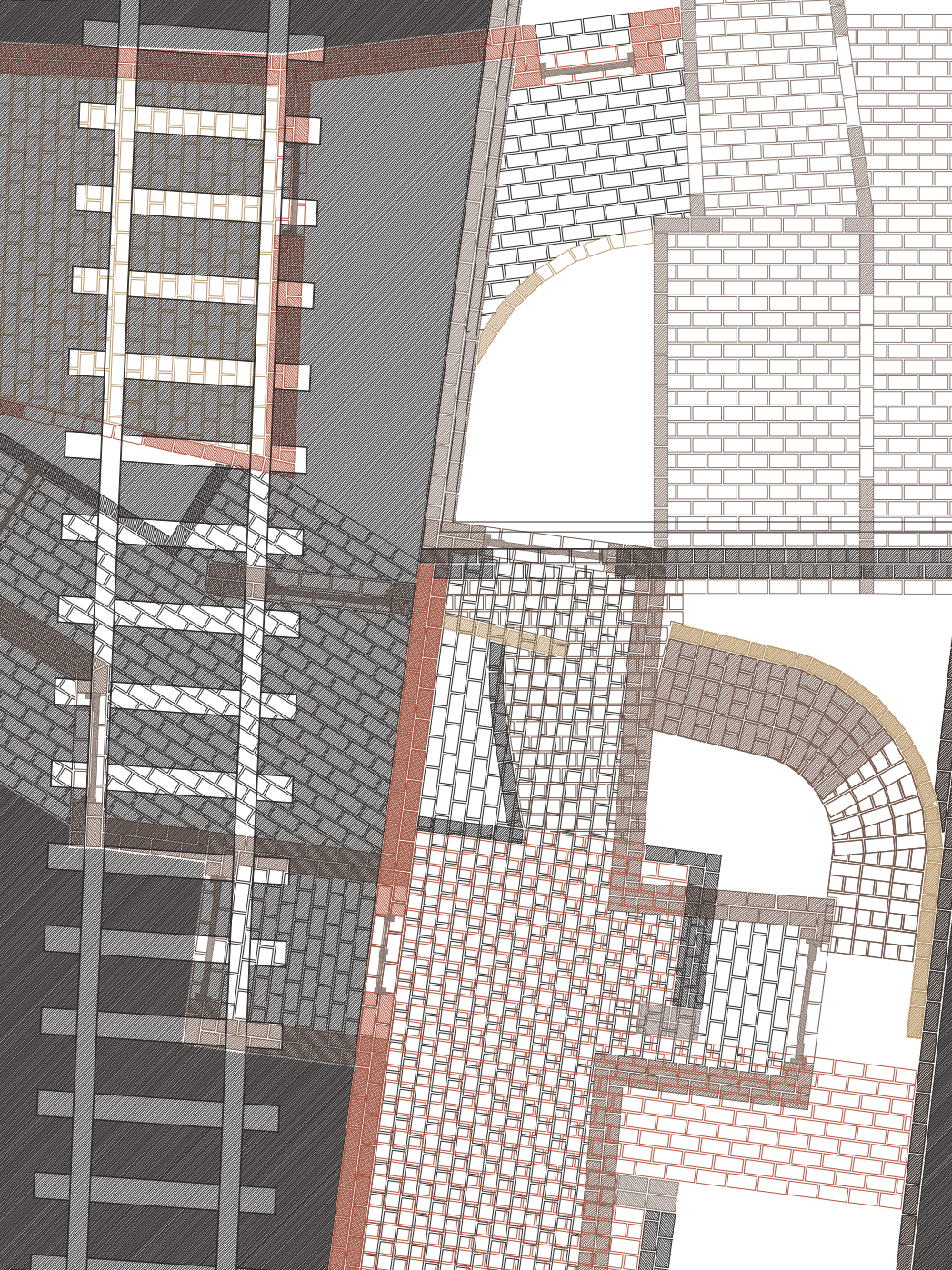
When you enter one house, you can proceed to the other house, by choosing an underground path. On the way, there are a few stops where you can go to a higher floor, where you can have a look outside to orientate yourself.

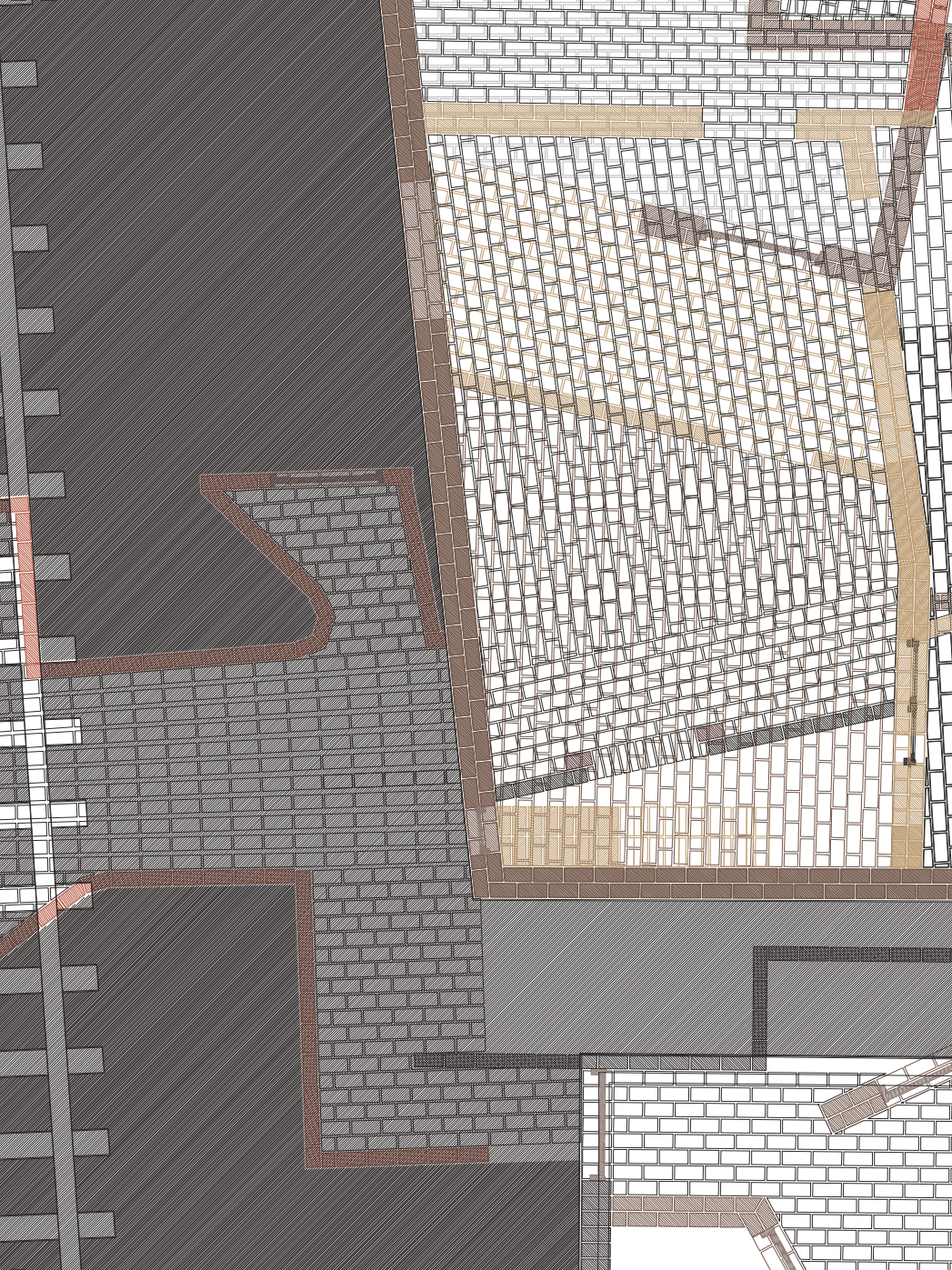


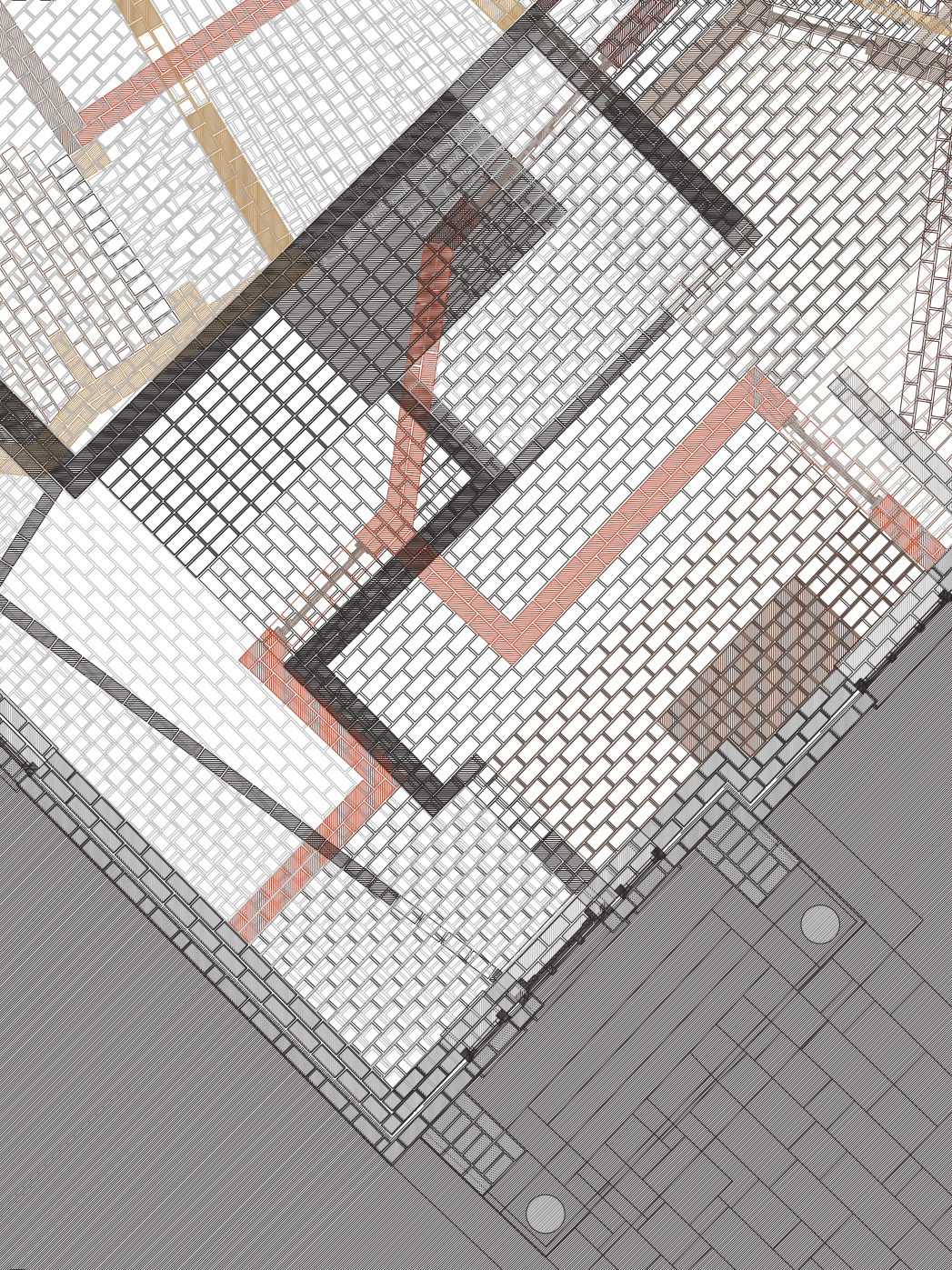
drawing 1: p.

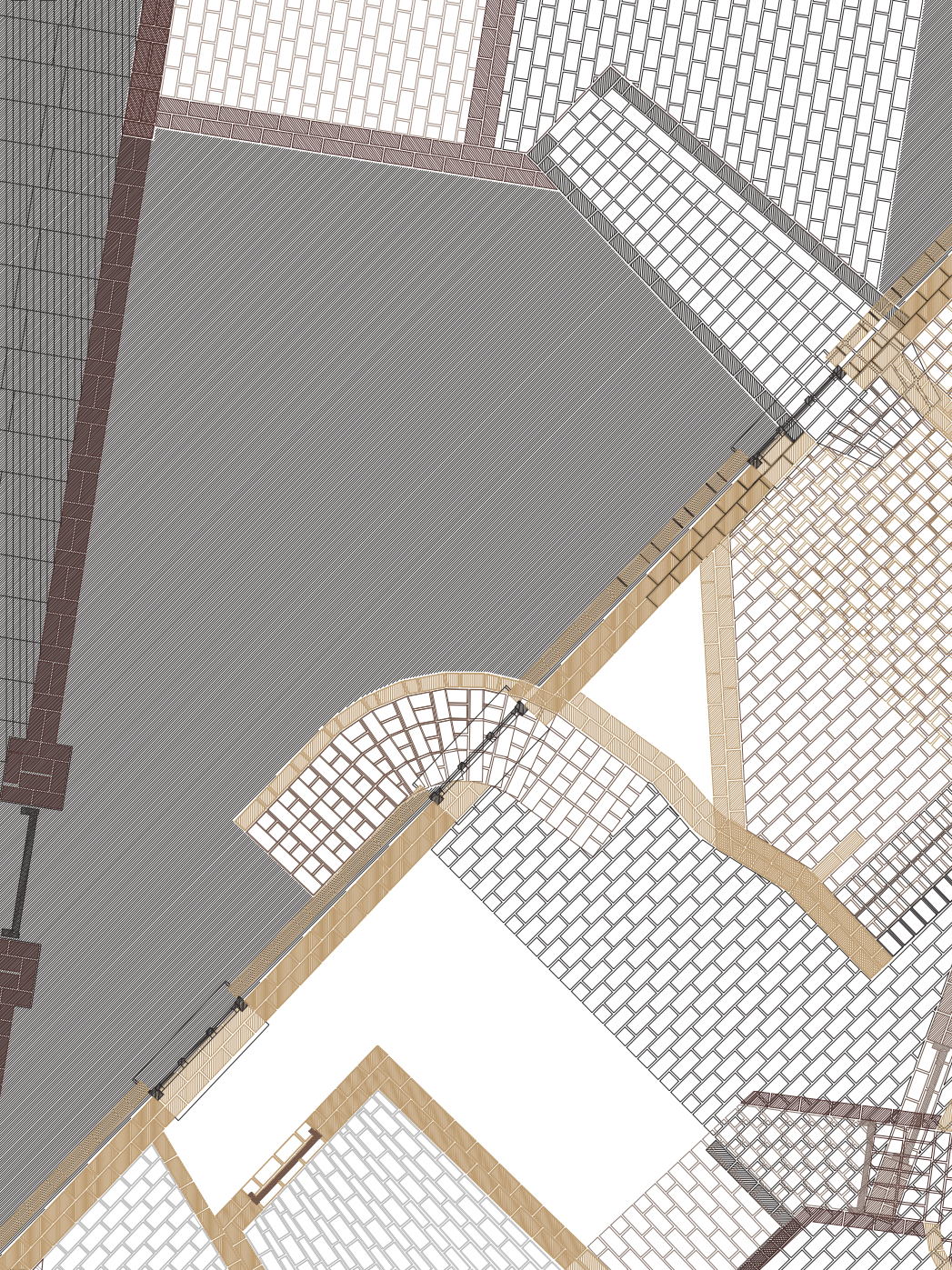


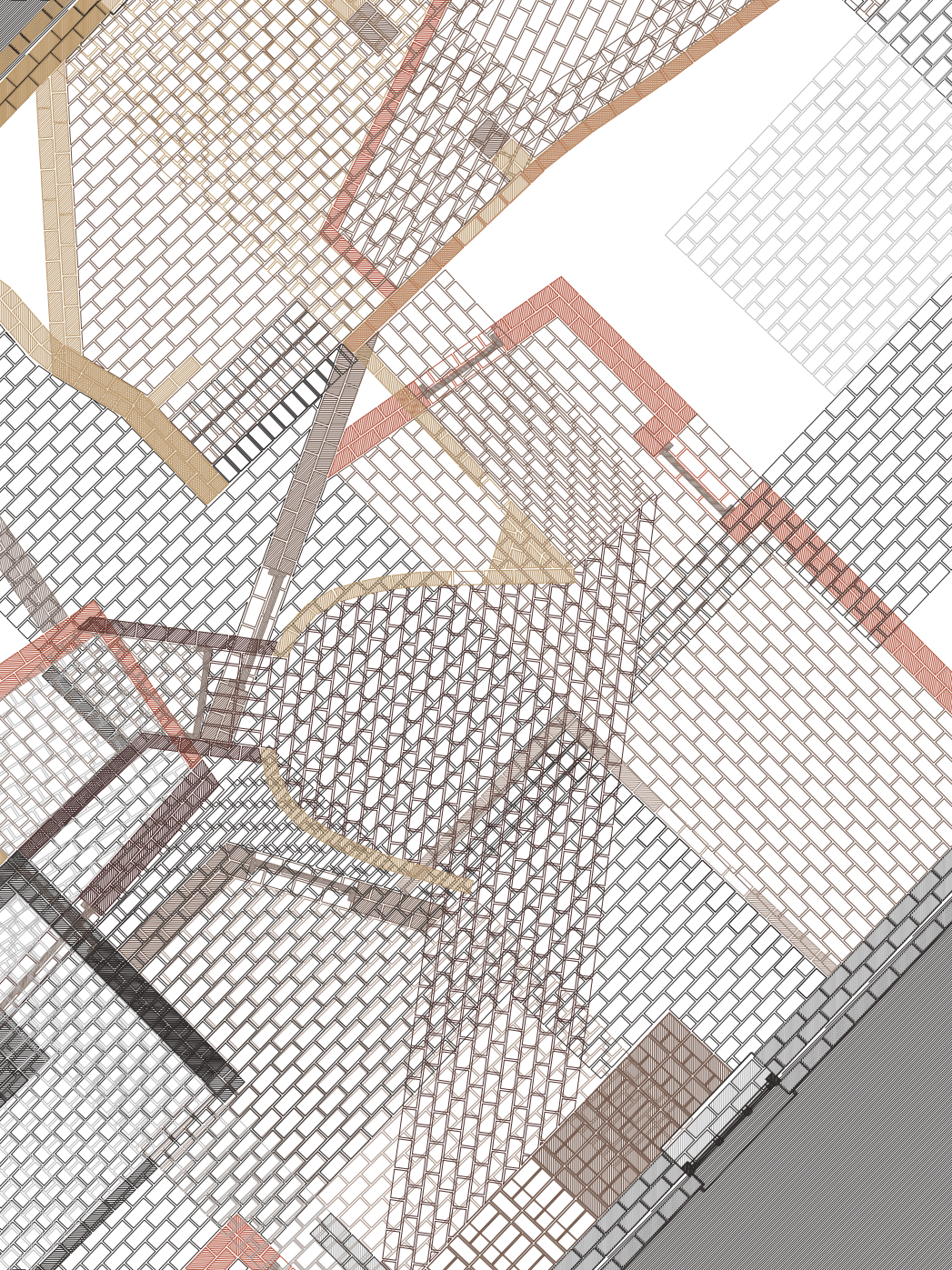












V
A stroll in the subconscious
through a model



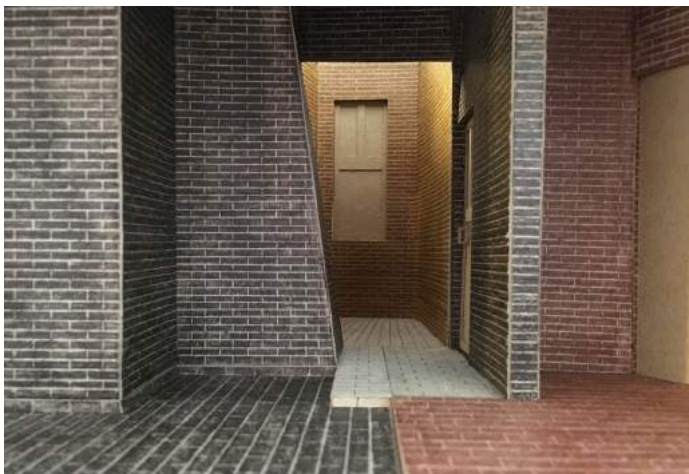
(fig. 25)



(fig. 26-27)



(fig. 28)



(fig. 29-30)



(fig. 31)



(fig. 32-33)

V

A stroll in the subconscious *through a film and story*

After a short night's sleep I slowly open my eyes. I hear the rain ticking against the window. A disoriented feeling comes over me. As my eyes are feeling very tired, they vaguely perceive the room in which I woke up. My thoughts wander to what I have dreamed of. A little confused I remember a locked wooden door that could not be opened.



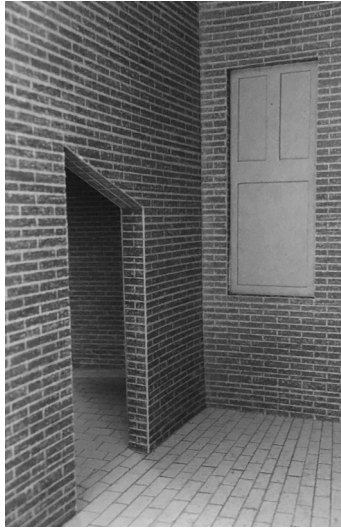
(fig. 34)

Suddenly, I notice the ringing of my alarm on the bedside table, which made me doubt what day it is.



(fig. 35)

It is thursday. The regular day for a visit of my sister. She always travels by train to the nearby station where she still has to walk another 12 minutes to arrive here. After all these years she has the routine to enter through the back door - which is open - with a knock on the door as a warning. At that moment she knows I will descend the stairs.

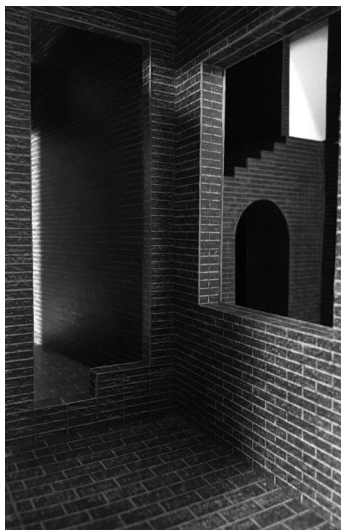


(fig. 36)

I decide to get out of bed. As I walk to the hallway I behold a door that looks familiar. However it is slightly different, having two door handles.

Ten more minutes and it will be ten o'clock. She's unpredictable, she chooses when she wants to be on time. Why should she be on time now? It's the moment to take a brief look behind this door. At once I feel anxious when opening the outer door handle. Carefully I look around and choose to step inside, only for two minutes.

Walking on, I find myself in a space I have already experienced. Or at least I think so, maybe they all look like one another. An uncomfortable and lonely feeling is coming over me. I don't seem to know which way I want to go from here. I'm slowing down my speed, being out of breath.



(fig. 37)

Then it comes to my mind I have been here for more than two minutes, I see many hours have passed. Returning as fast as possible, I hear a knock on the door. Increasing my pace in the hope to reach the stairs soon.



(fig. 38)

Once at the stairs, I don't see anyone, concluding to take a look outside. The sun is shining and I see that she's just stepping into the backyard, towards me. There is no need for her to knock.



(fig. 39)

Epilogue

During this masterthesis I discovered a new architecture for myself where my imagination was the dominant part in my design. The unconventional houses of London that inspired me came together with the subconscious in my drawings. I have been looking for the boundary between the known and the unknown. By thinking about the conventional way of designing and architectural elements, I reconsidered the function - or rather the dysfunction - and scale of architecture. By giving these elements a slight change there can emerge an uncomfortable feeling. This feeling is caused by the fact that we are confronted with our own memory and our familiar thoughts, which does not seem to be in line with what we see. I have come to a design in which I seem to have made an ordinary design, that's anything but ordinary.

I learned that I can use my own imagination to start a design, but I still had to be fully aware of the boundary between reality and fantasy in order to create a new perspective on the existing. Since I did not physically entered the houses, my imagination was not restrained for there was no existing image in my mind. By combining it with a real context the credibility is strengthened. It's about believing my reality, not my dream or imagination.

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