

FRAMING THE COMMON

THE CASE OF RAZAK MANSIONS

In our headlong rush towards progress, it is important to pause for awhile and take stock of what we have and what we risk losing.



A SHORT BACKGROUND

RAZAK

MANSSIONS

HISTORY AND URGENCY

In approaching the subject of the 'common' in the context of apartments here in Kuala Lumpur, we have decided to focus on a specific example of a collective housing project, the Razak Mansions estate. The reason for this decision is the fact that this estate - situated 10 minutes away from city center - with its luxurious expanse of common spaces, is scheduled for demolition in 2017, in order to make way for a commercial development. The case of Razak Mansions then becomes an interesting opportunity not only to document a set of common spaces but also to reflect on the shrinking of the common in the face of relentless privatized commercial development. When the development of the city puts commercial returns as its main objective, what is the value of the common?

Razak Mansions is the second realized of a series of three collective housing projects in Kuala Lumpur launched by the City Commissioner (Pesuruhjaya Ibukota, now known as Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur or Kuala Lumpur City Hall) in the late 50's and the early 60's. It is the only one remaining; the first - Suleiman Courts - was demolished in 1986 to make way for a department store and the third - Pekekiling Flats - was demolished in the mid 2000's to make way for luxury apartments. These projects played a key role in the project for a modern Malaysia, since they were designed and built to accommodate the migration of the population from the countryside to the city during the years immediately after independence in 1957.

Razak Mansions, mature
rain trees in the courtyard
of Block 14



Built between 1960 and 1967, - the Razak Mansions estate took its name from Tun Abdul Razak, the then deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia - the way of life has not changed much since those days. Without relying on some rhetorical attempts at instilling unity, the common spaces of Razak Mansions testifies to the common values of the inhabitants and the common idea of Malaysia as a modern and ethnically diverse nation. Razak Mansions, a reminder of a way of life from a different era, remain a world of its own.

In April 2014 the Prime Minister visited Razak Mansions, declared his attachment to it - since it was officiated by his late father - and then announced that it will be demolished to make way for modern and comfortable replacement apartments. While the residents will be compensated accordingly - a one to one replacement of units will be the development policy - nothing which was shown of the new scheme speaks of the quality of the new development - much less the common spaces which had played a very central role for the Razak Mansions community - but rather it will be yet another 'tower on podium' development.

The construction of the new replacement blocks - named 1Razak Mansions - is scheduled to be completed at the end of 2016. After the occupants move in, the current Razak Mansions estate will be demolished to make way for a new commercial development. A truly modern project, embodying the ideas of common values, will be demolished to accommodate a different idea of progress.

Replacement block, nearing completion



It is at this moment and in light of what is happening that we find it urgent to develop a project to document Razak Mansions before the inevitable demolition. Our intention is not only to document the physicality of Razak Mansion as architecture but also to use Razak Mansion as a frame with which to look at a period of Malaysia's history in which modernity was an urgent common project. Architecture and common spaces act as the background on which this history is inscribed.

We believe that history is not simply the past but rather something that surrounds us and should be open to debate and reassessment. Documenting Razak Mansions then becomes not just a project to document architecture, but ultimately an instrument to address our common history and where we are heading. In our headlong rush towards progress, it is important to pause for awhile and take stock of what we have and what we risk losing.

Documenting Hazak Mansions

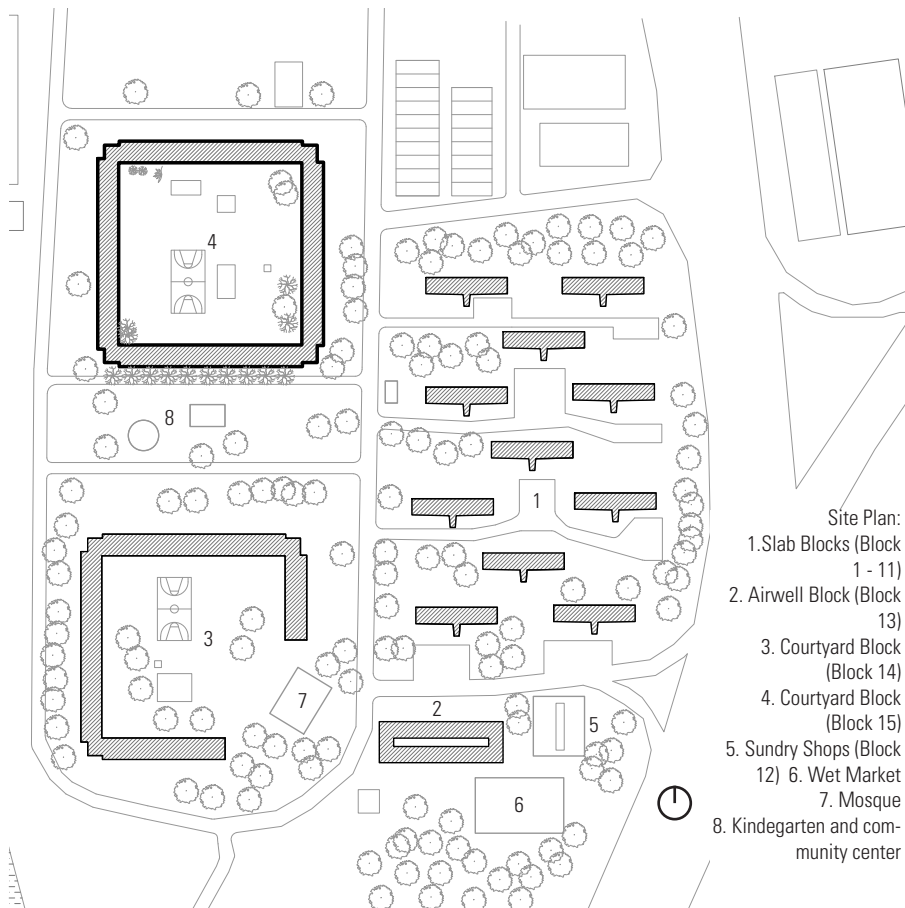


FACTS AND FIGURES

Built between the years 1960 and 1967, Razak Mansions was the first housing project in Kuala Lumpur undertaken by the Architect's Department of the then Pesuruhanjaya Ibukota or the City Commissioner - previous projects had utilised the expertise of the architects from the Housing Trust.

The estate is made of up of 15 blocks of 3 different types (slab blocks, courtyard blocks and air well blocks) for a total of 661 units. The slab block typology were utilized for blocks 1 to 11 (completed 1963). The courtyard typology - which is a unique typology for this region and hence the focus of the current stage of the research - were utilized for blocks 14 and 15 (1963) while the air well block typology were utilized for block 13 (1967). the Sizes of the units range from 400 -500 sqft. Other facilities provided within the estate are sundry shops, a wet market, a mosque, a kindergarten, residence association office and community halls.

The current documentation within this booklet will focus on common spaces and elements as found in Block 15 of the Razak Mansions estate, while the other blocks would be further analysed in the upcoming parts of the research.



Site Plan:

1. Slab Blocks (Block 1 - 11)
2. Airwell Block (Block 13)
3. Courtyard Block (Block 14)
4. Courtyard Block (Block 15)
5. Sundry Shops (Block 12)
6. Wet Market
7. Mosque
8. Kindergarten and community center

SLAB BLOCKS (Blocks 1- 11)

Architect: Eric Taylor for Pesuruhanjaya Ibukota / City Commissioner (now Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur- DBKL / City Hall)

Construction: 1960 - 1963

Number of stories: 4

Number of units per floor: 6

Number of blocks: 11

Number of Units: 264

Circulation: single-loaded corridor

Razak Mansions, slab
block (1961)



COURTYARD BLOCKS (Blocks 14 & 15)

Architect: S.P. Chow for Pesuruhanjaya Ibukota / City Commissioner (now Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur- DBKL / City Hall)

Construction: 1963

Number of stories: 4

Number of units per floor: 35 (Block 14) and 48 (Block 15)

Number of blocks: 2

Number of Units: 328 (142 in Block 14 and 186 in Block 15)

Circulation: single-loaded corridor around courtyard

Razak Mansions, courtyard block (1963)



AIR WELL BLOCKS (Block 13)

Architect: S.P. Chow for Pesuruhanjaya Ibukota / City Commissioner (now Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur- DBKL / City Hall)

Construction: 1967

Number of stories: 5

Number of units per floor: 12

Number of blocks: 1

Number of Units: 69

Circulation: single-loaded corridor around air well

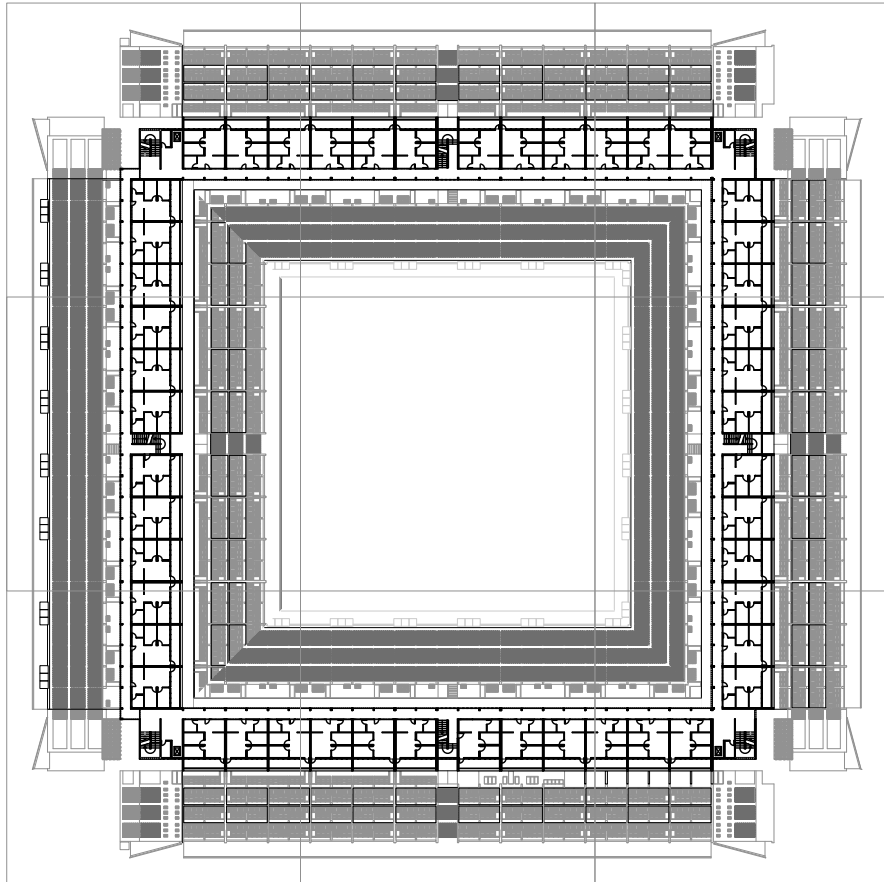
Razak Mansions, airwell block (1967)



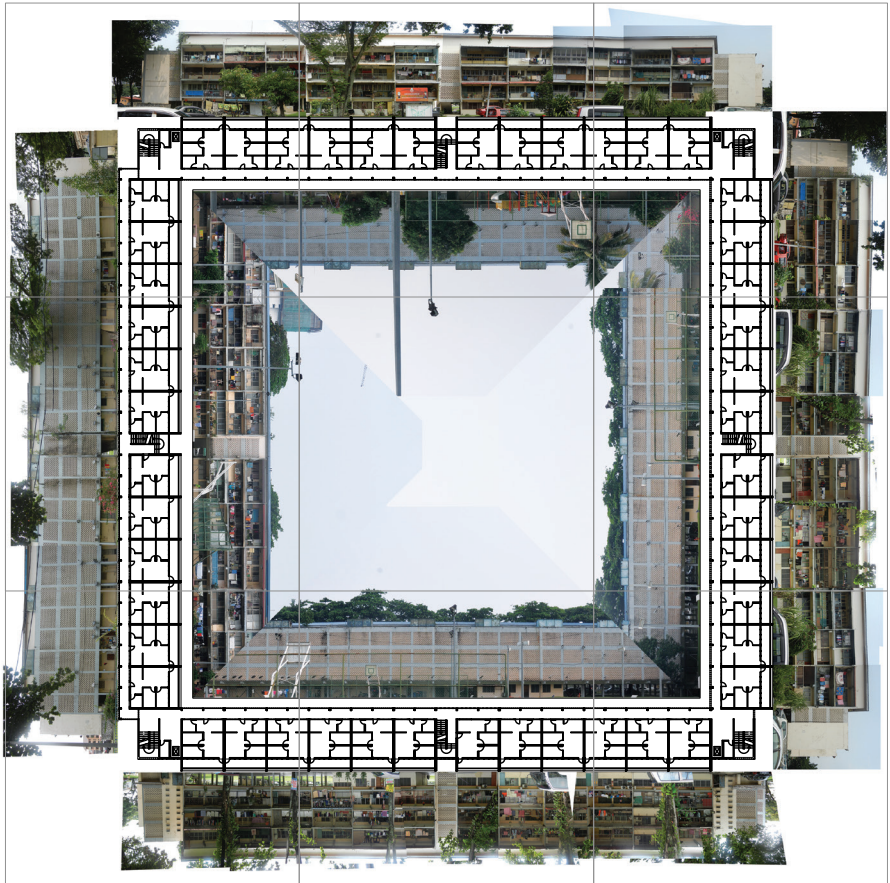
BLOCK 15, RAZAK MANSIONS

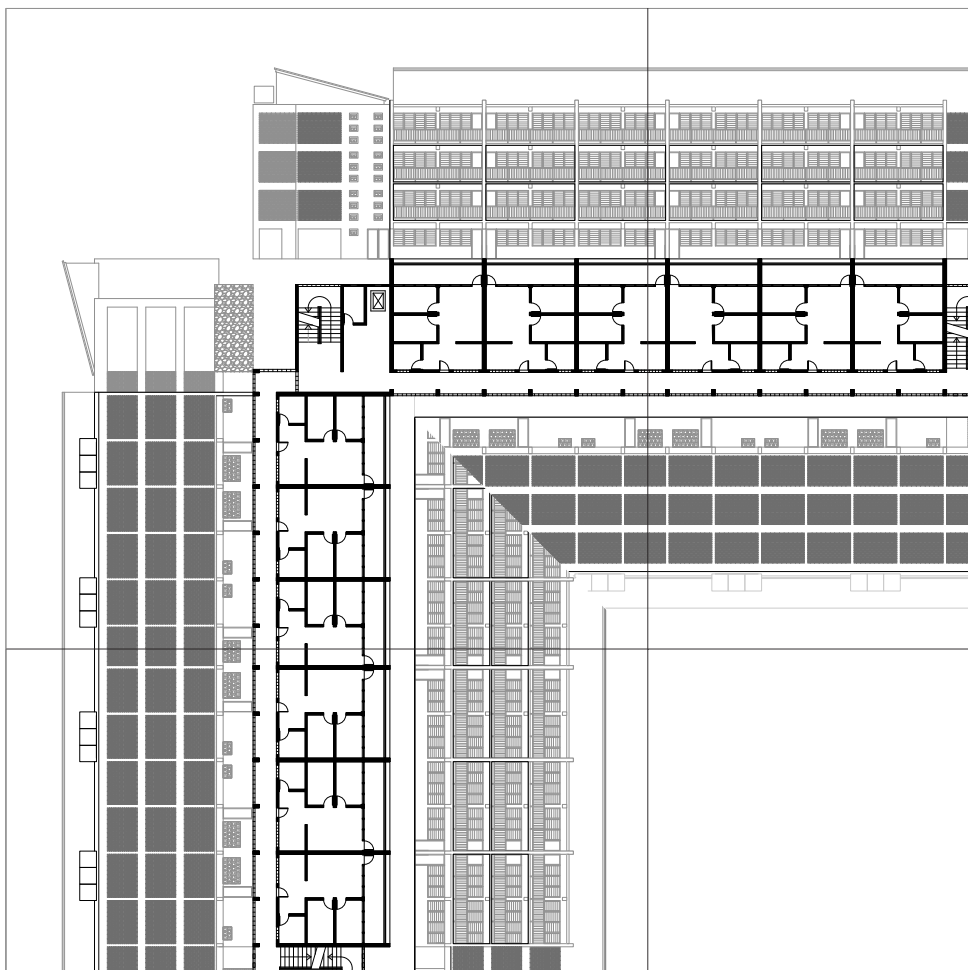
DRAWINGS & IMAGES

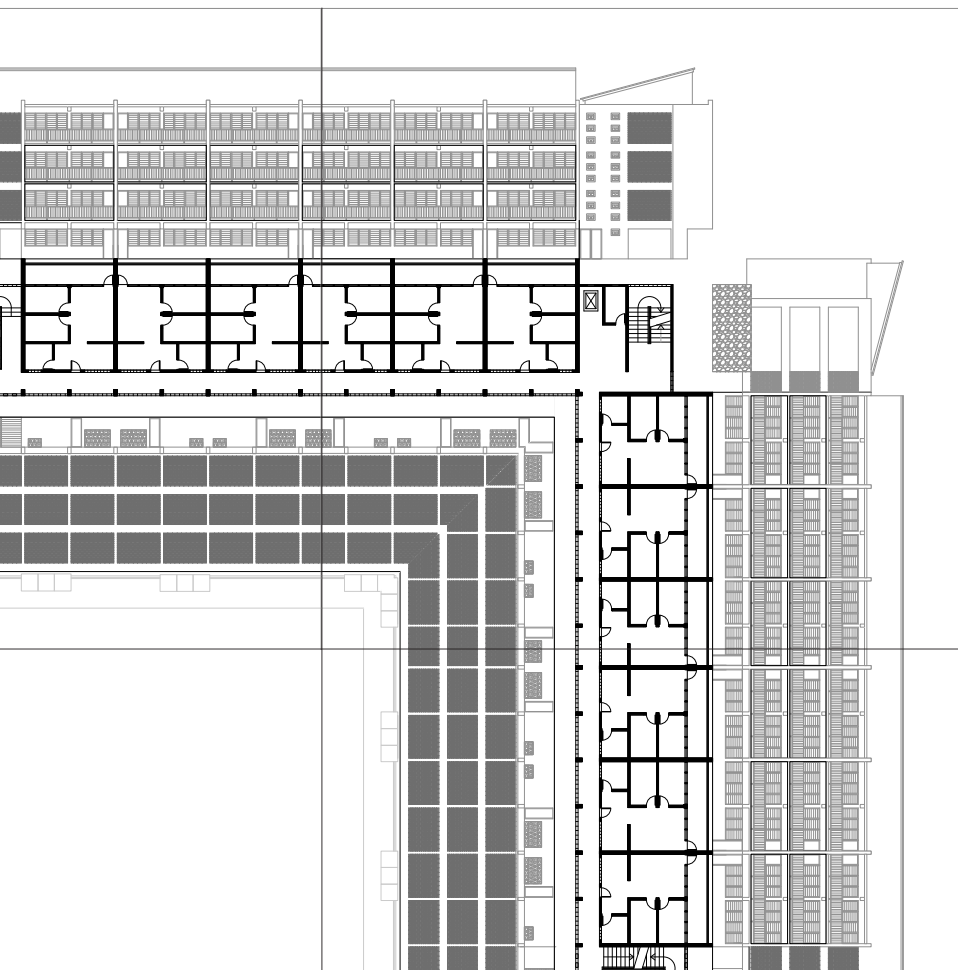
KEY PLAN: DRAWINGS

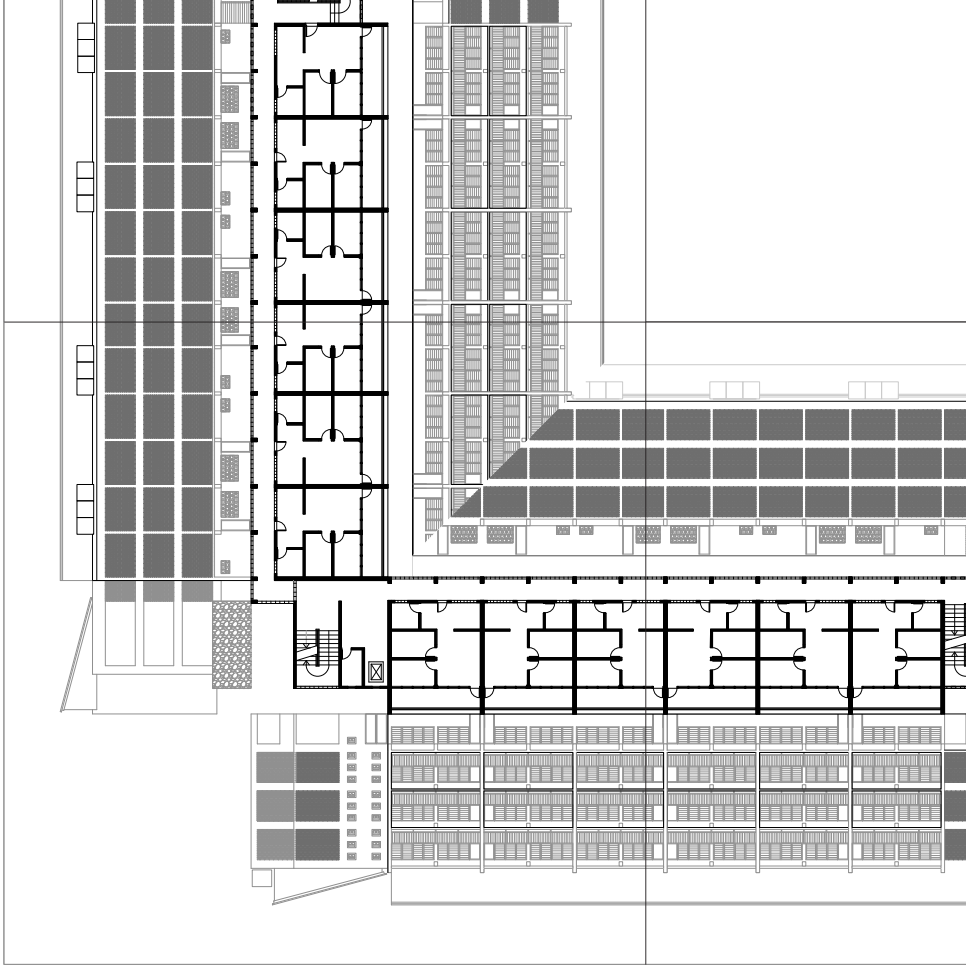


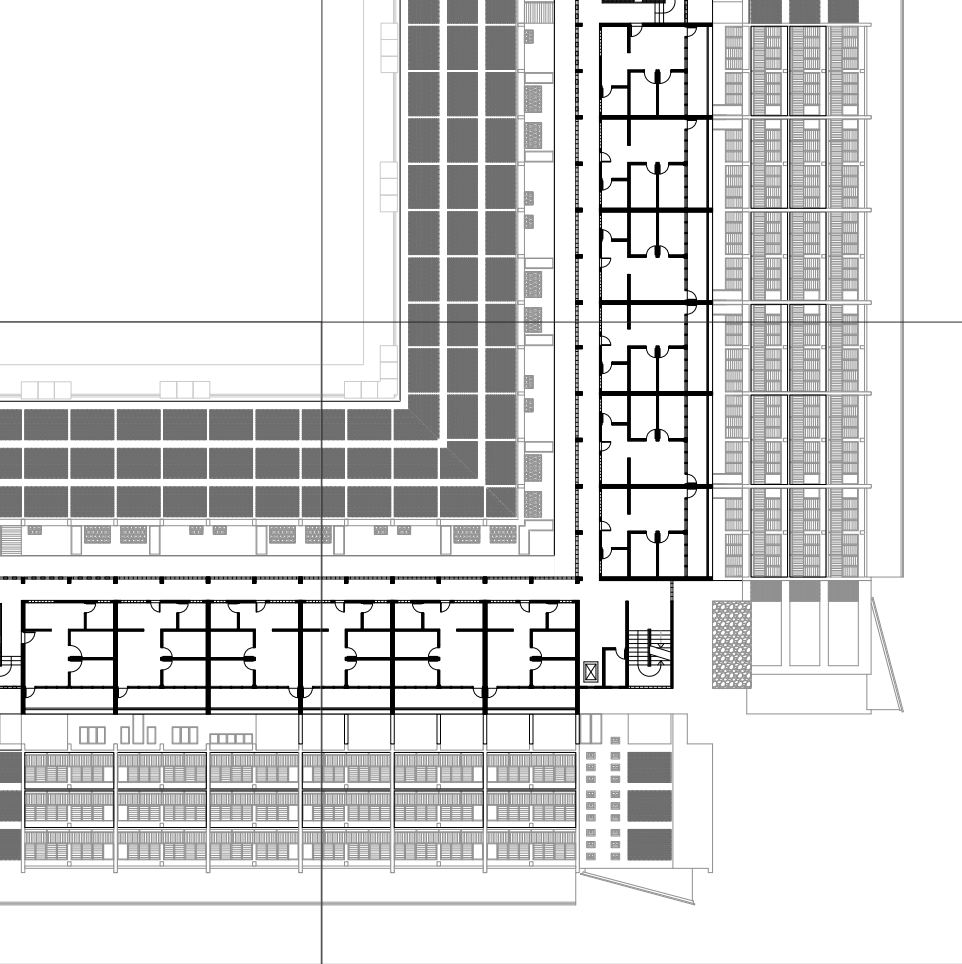
KEY PLAN: IMAGES

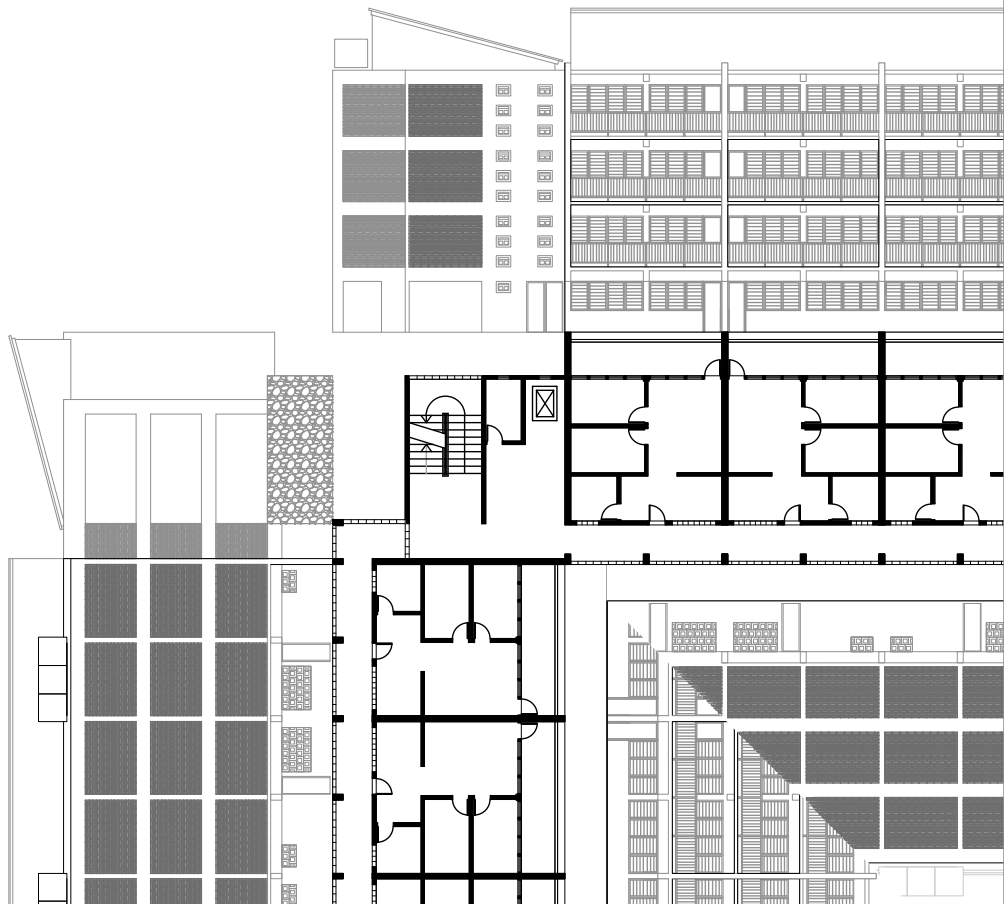


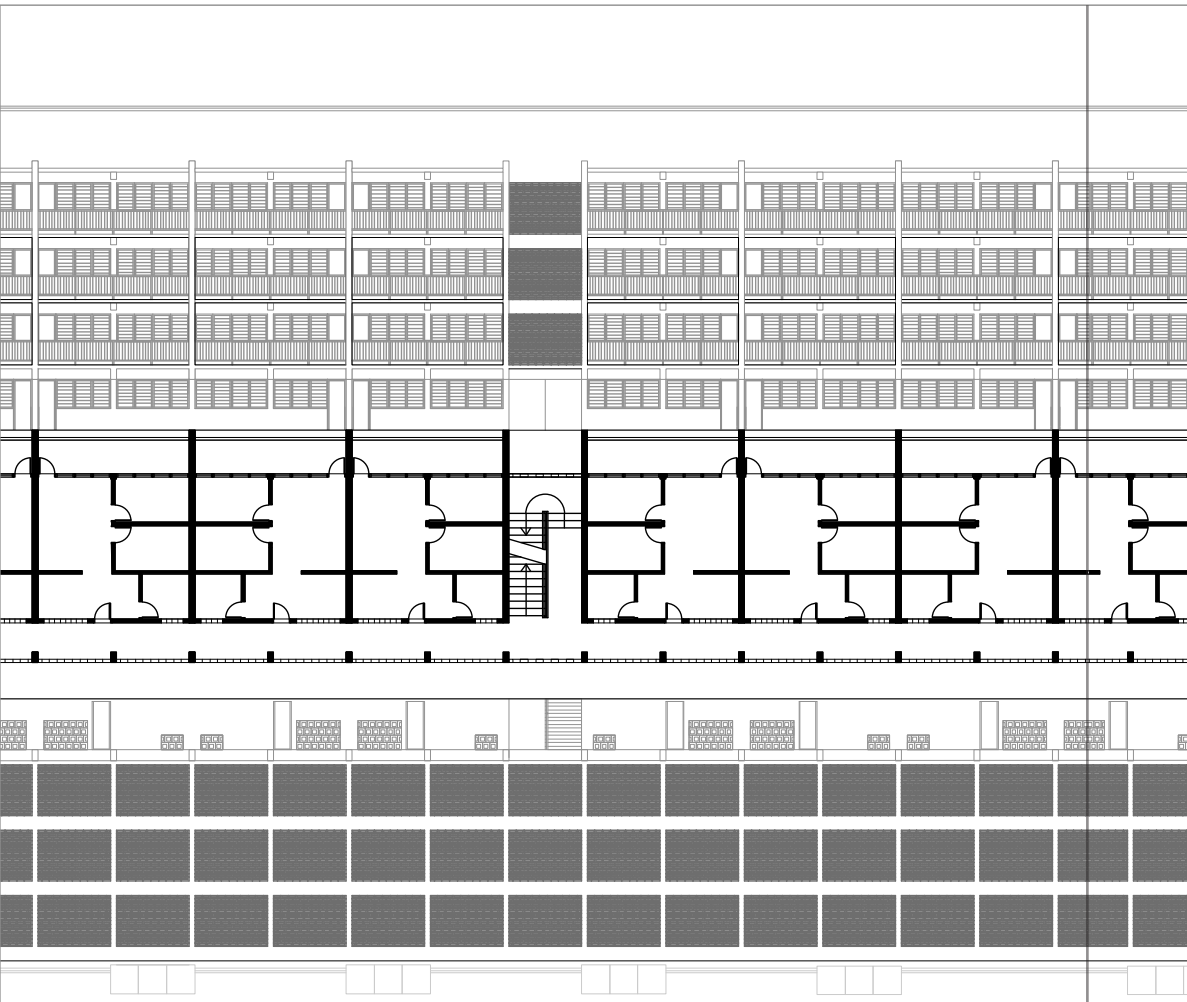


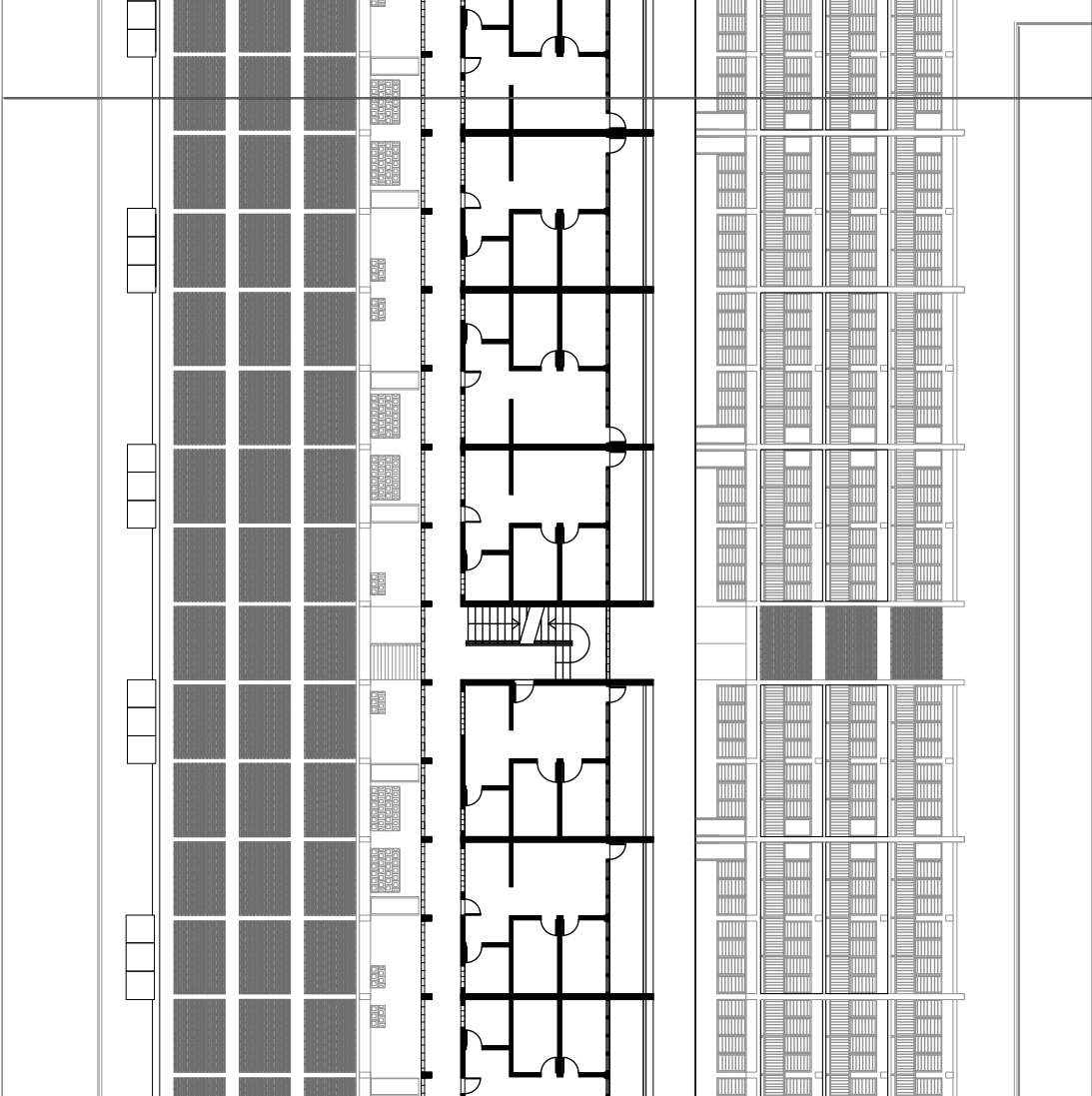


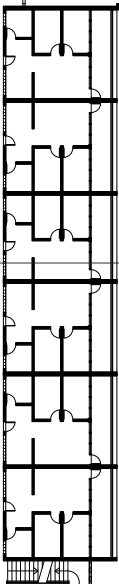
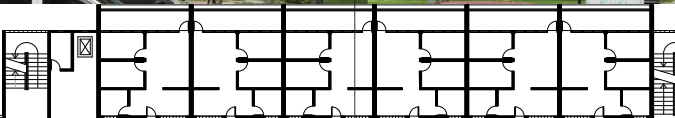




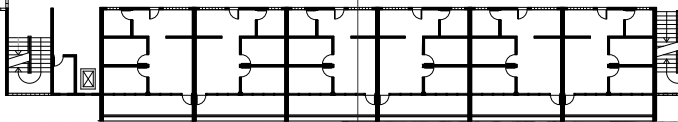
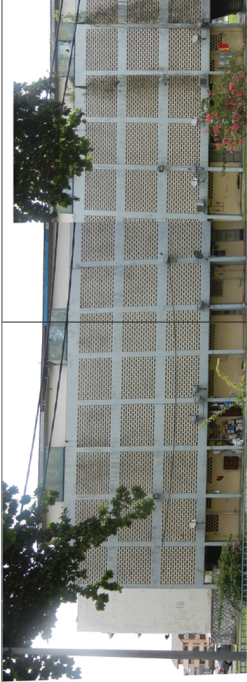
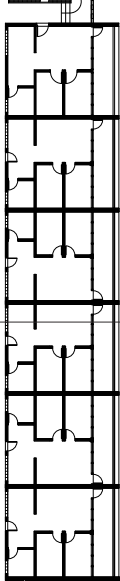


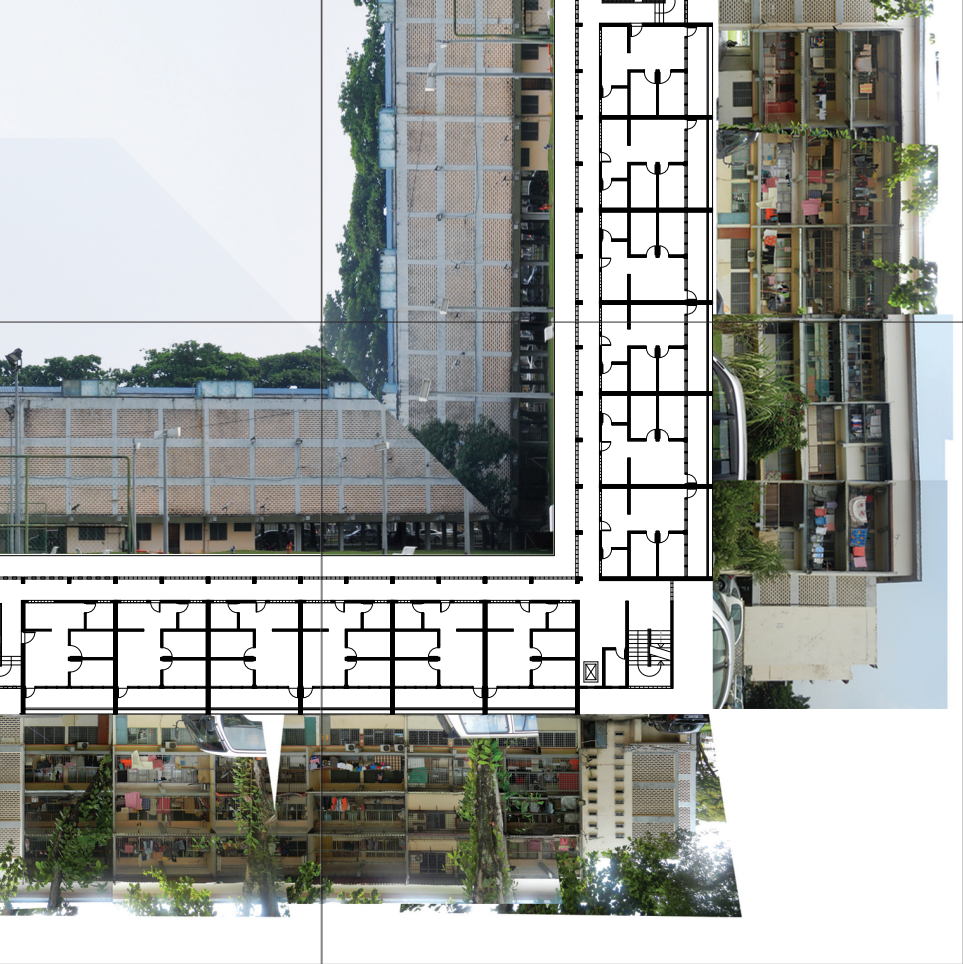


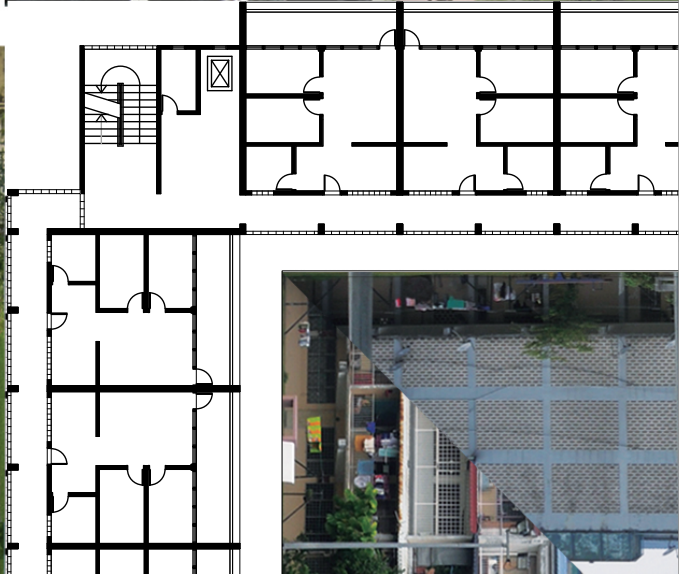


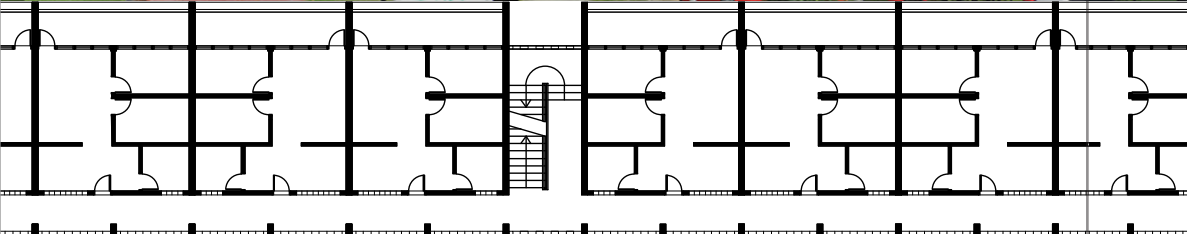


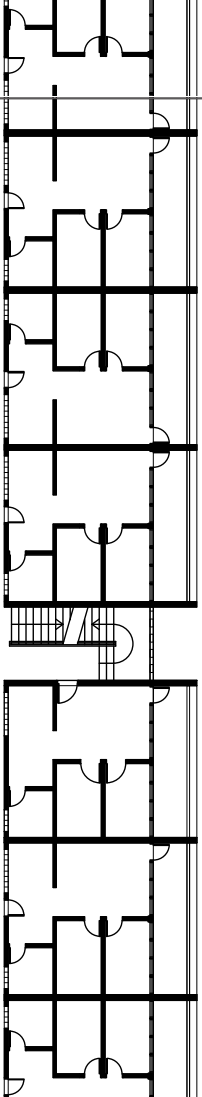














BLOCK 15, RAZAK MANSIONS

THE COMMONS

THE COMMONS

How do we frame Razak Mansions' idea of the commons, as a concept that stages itself around the term "public", "community" and the "social", as it addresses a common space? A common, as a noun, indicates space, either by location or context, paved or green, owned wholly by the community. The community, inhabits these spaces, usually public in nature and are united by either a common way of life, cultural, ethnic identity or other factors. Here, the commons are physical, visible and accessible spaces of encounters outside one's own contained and constructed realities ¹, where the public enact rituals and make claim on the city, their right to the city.

In a modern city, public spaces are often seen as a problem, and has become a space of contention. Besides being spaces of encounter, 'the common' plays an important role in social change. Public spheres are sites of democratic deliberation and participation, as well as a space of introspection and reflection. Some commons may be accessible to all, still there are those heavily regulated and privately managed and few others which are exclusive to a particular social group.

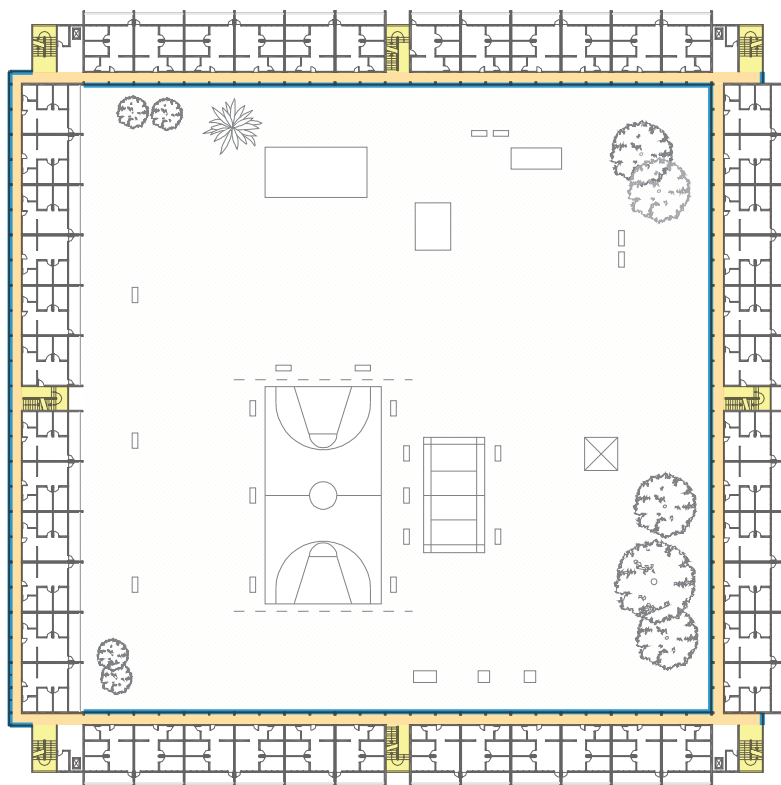
Within an enclave not far from the heart of Kuala Lumpur, the residents of Razak Mansions created a sanctuary of their own. The compact living units meant that many everyday activities has to take place outside, in the common areas. Therefore the significance of the commons in Razak Mansions could not be exaggerated.

For the residents of Razak Mansions, meeting, gossip, play, and relaxation takes place in the expansive courtyards, the seemingly endless corridors and connecting staircases. The shared spaces of Razak Mansions are central to residents' lives, staging interactions, communal participation as well as neighbourhood surveillance.

The boundary between the public and the private is blurred when noises from the inside or aroma from the kitchen invades the corridors and down the stairs. In Razak Mansions' public spaces, the ambiguities of proprietorship, of aesthetics, of senses, of social relations and political economy of everyday life collide. These shared commons remain inclusive, allowing further participation of the collective. If we are to look at Razak Mansions public spaces as literal common, it is a place shared together by friends, neighbours and citizens, whom are united not by a common ethnic or racial identity, but rather by a great understanding and tolerance for diversity.

In the past, Razak Mansion was a nationalist instrument to encourage racial assimilation. In not too distant future, it will again be appropriated by the state and private developers as an urgent site of modern development. Razak Mansion's space of exchange and interaction will become but a memory for the residents, who are moving to the new - high rise - block where a different relationship to the commons will be formed.

ALL COMMONS

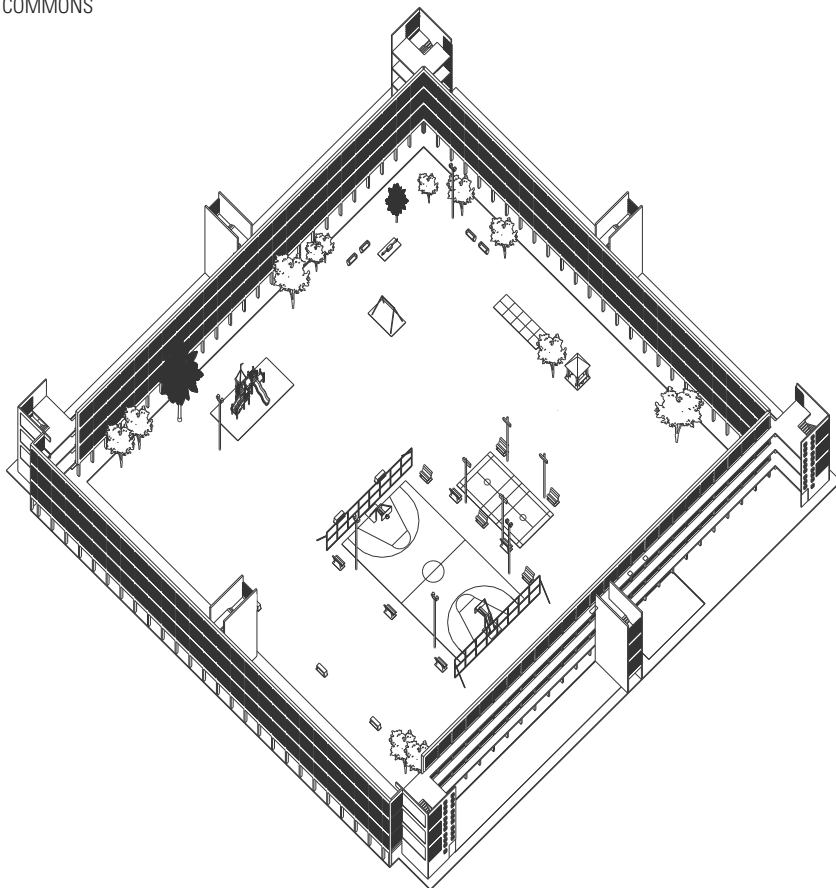


What would remain is perhaps a nostalgia for the quiet, comfortable ways of living, centered around expansive common spaces. A public space however does not automatically become a common even if they contribute to the qualities of the commons. It is only when social forces are appropriated on the public space, does it become a common. Here, public spaces can rise to be a common and a common can² decline into public spaces. As Razak Mansion awaits its destruction, a common has already been created. Though not a revolutionary movement, a creative common is being produced to be disseminated to the larger public. The production of this common is a reflective social action, if not to protect the qualities of the common, then perhaps the memory of Razak Mansion residences.

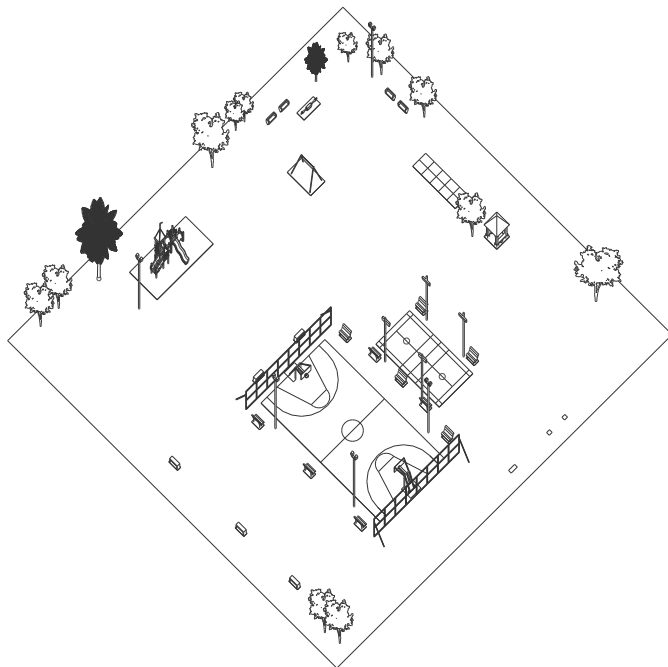
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2 Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, (New York: Verso, 2012)

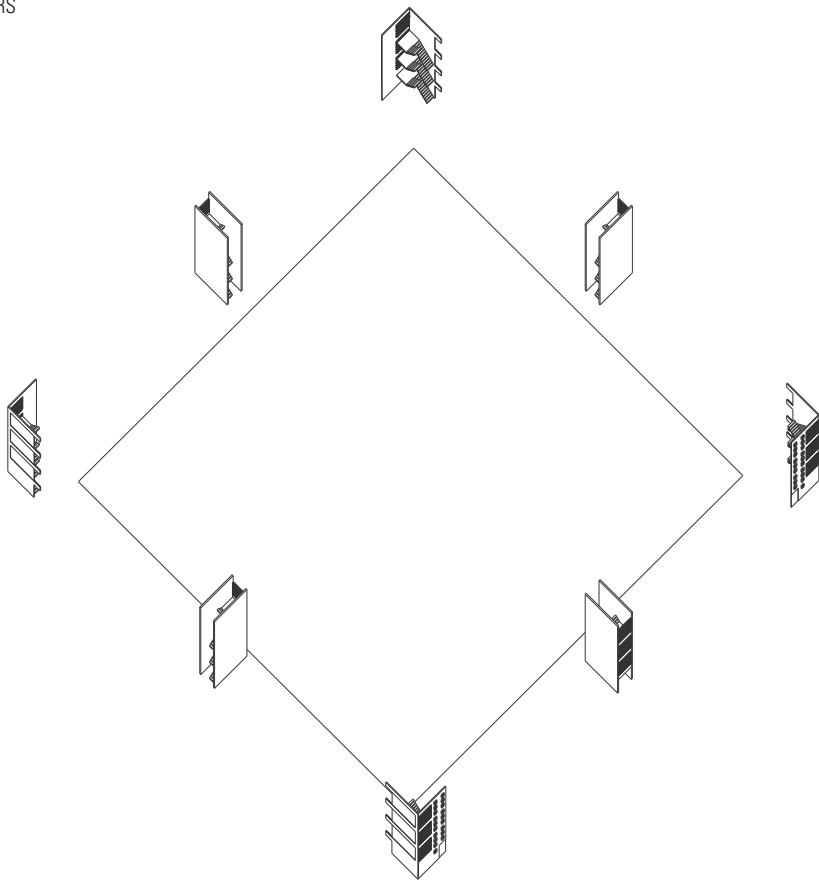
ALL COMMONS



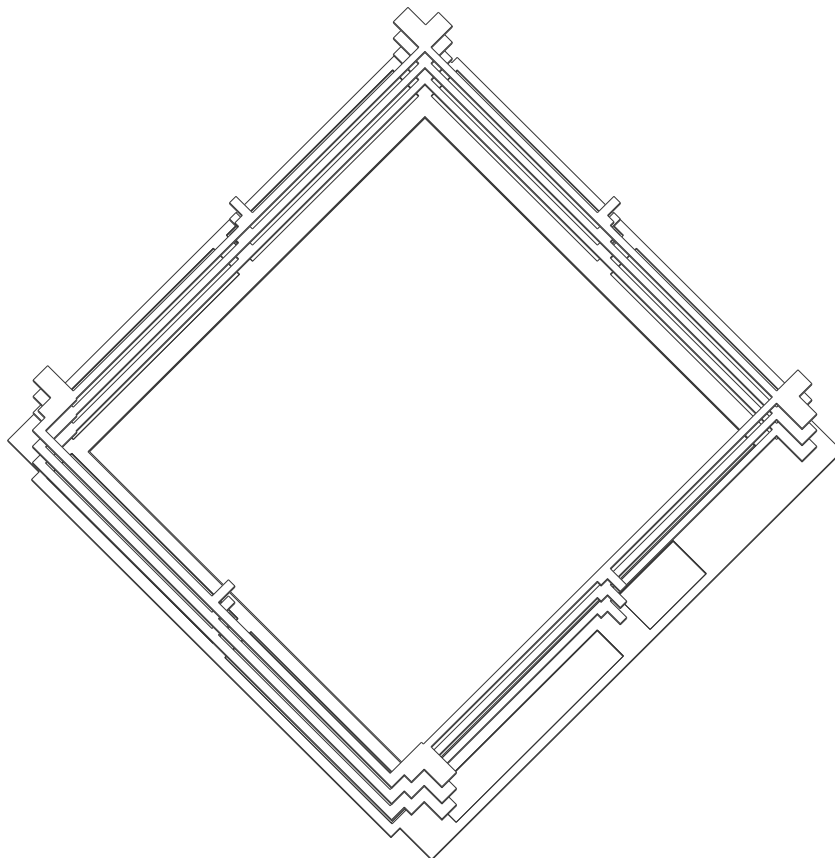
COURTYARD



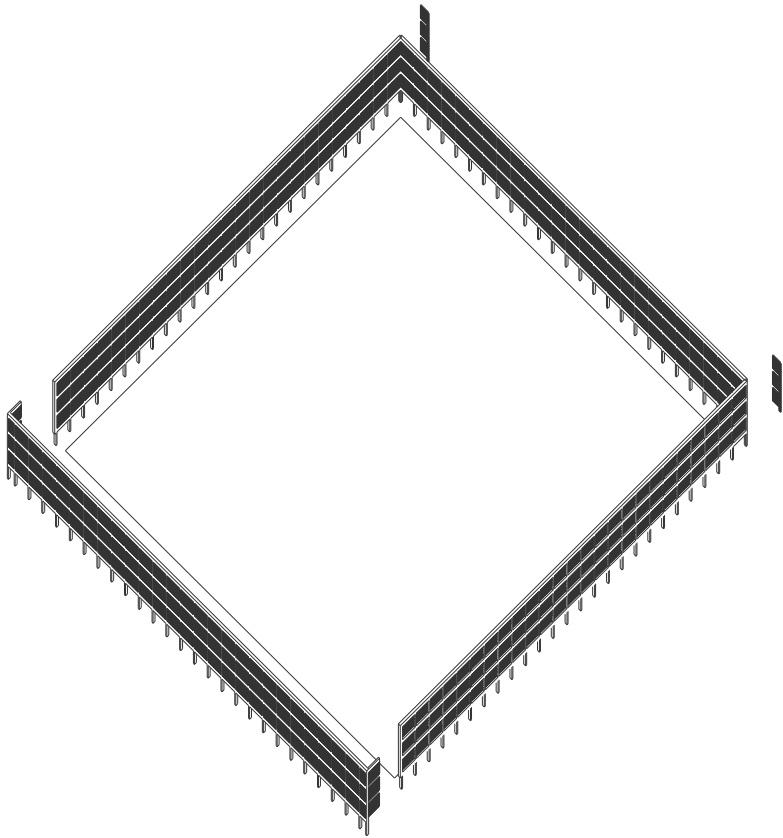
STAIRS



CORRIDORS



FACADE



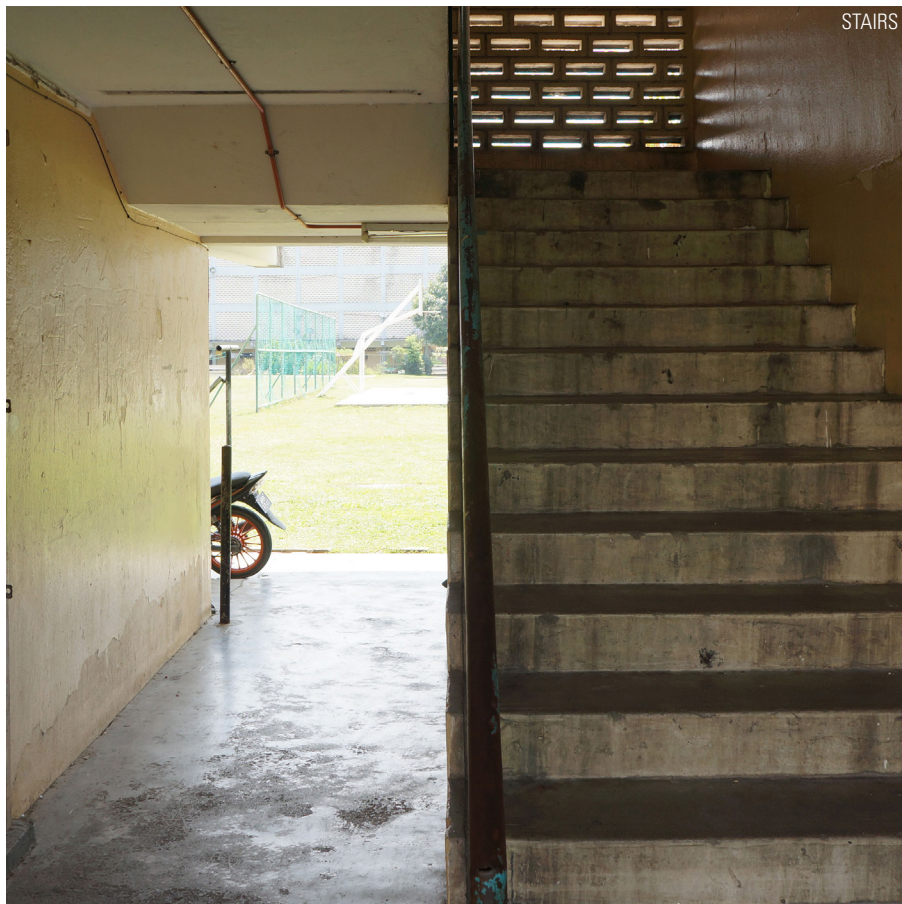
COURTYARD



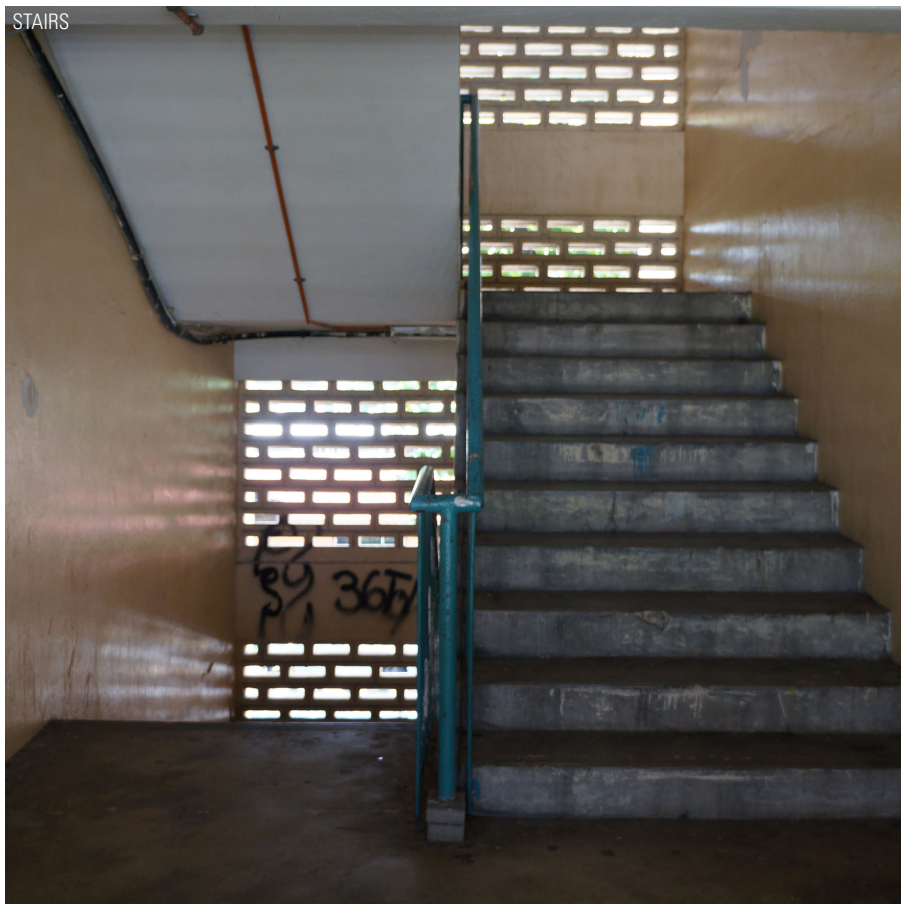
COURTYARD



STAIRS



STAIRS



CORRIDORS



CORRIDORS



COMMON CORRIDOR FACADE



INDIVIDUAL UNIT FACADE



Morning exercise as common ritual, Block 15 courtyard. (still from the video 'Razak Mansions: Lost and Found' by the students of Taylor's University, Kuala Lumpur.)



Play as common ritual, Block 15 courtyard.
(still from the video 'Razak Mansions: Lost
and Found' by the students of Taylor's Univer-
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APPENDIX

Modernist Housing, Demolition, Preservation

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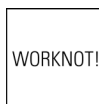
CAMPO (Bogotá):
c-a-m-p-o.com

Project Mosha (Tehran):
worknot-sharedspaces.tumblr.com

CAMPO پروژه مشاع

ROOM

N/A
NORMAL ARCHITECTURE



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