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FOREWORD

Francesco Borromini is widely known as an Italian Renaissance architect, but he was actually born in Bissone near Lugano in the Old Swiss Confederacy. He began his career by following his father's footsteps as a stonemason. Le Corbusier originally came from La Chaux-de-Fonds, a small town in canton Neuchâtel; his father painted delicate images onto the dials of watches. Peter Zumthor, one of the most revered contemporary architects, was born to a cabinet-maker and started his career as a carpenter. These examples highlight the relationship that many Swiss architects have with craftsmanship and their intimate knowledge of working with materials. It is this deep understanding of the physical nature of making objects out of age-old materials—wood, stone, glass, concrete—that shines through the buildings of many Swiss architects, both historically and today.

Swiss Sensibility examines the rich and deep-rooted tradition of architecture in Switzerland, the sensibility of many Swiss architects and a pervasive culture of architecture. That such a small, landlocked country has produced such wealth of fine architecture is testament to this tradition. The volume of work produced in Switzerland might not seem significant when compared with larger nations, but the resonance and influence of the work is considerable. *Swiss Sensibility* traces the history of this trajectory, examining the country's architectural prosperity and the development of its many talented architects.

Why is it that architects in Switzerland have managed to achieve their standard of excellence? What are the forces at play that have combined to create the fertile ground for the discipline to flourish? Switzerland's intricate linguistic and cultural borders, and the variety of its vernacular architecture, are counterbalanced by its strong tradition of cosmopolitanism. Switzerland has a large reservoir of small, creative practices that support a sophisticated culture of building design. This resource, coupled with an excellent standard of architectural education, high quality craftsmanship, and a tradition of open competitions allowing new talent to emerge, are all aspects that influence the production of architecture in this country. In most countries the role of the architect has been diminished, whereas in Switzerland architects still tend to have authorship of their work; steering their designs from the sketch stage all the way through to the finished building.

Building in Switzerland's alpine topography poses a significant challenge but, at the same time, forces architects to think three-dimensionally from the onset. Though one can't talk of a Swiss style per se, what is evident is a certain understatement and a strong sense of belonging with the context. The extreme weather impacts on detailing; keeping the icy cold out and the heat inside is vital to survival. Additionally, there are not many natural resources like oil and steel in Switzerland, so architects have had to be innovative and use the natural resources they have had at their disposal in abundance: stone and wood.

If the definition of sensibility is having an acute awareness and responsiveness, then the architecture presented in this book shows in myriad ways Swiss architects' keen sensitivity to their environment and history, whether it be the restrained renovation of an old farmhouse in Ticino or a bold new sports center in Windisch; multistory apartment building in Basel city or a museum in Flims village. Buildings, both large and small, each display the architect's attention to detailing and material, beautiful craftsmanship and precise construction. The chosen kaleidoscope of buildings—all designed by Swiss architects and built in Switzerland during the past few decades—is intended to inspire the reader and to convey the admiration shared by many. Each project is examined with the aid of texts, photographs, and drawings. Twenty-five projects from across the country by fifteen architectural practices are interspersed with four essays by prominent intellectuals—three of whom are architects—and an interview with a distinguished architect. Each text focuses on a different aspect of Swiss architecture: James Breiding looks at the historic development of architecture over the centuries, Niall McLaughlin critically examines the phenomenon of Swiss architecture from the perspective of a "pure outsider," Irina Davidovici looks at the cultural models on which the production of contemporary architecture in Switzerland is based, while Jean-Paul Jaccaud scrutinizes the conditions of practice in Switzerland, comparing and contrasting them with Anglo-Saxon countries. The interview at the heart of the book gives the reader a fascinating insight into the intensely personal design process of the eminent architect, Peter Zumthor.

Swiss Sensibility is not about promoting a brand, but rather sets out to illustrate the broad approach to a highly valued discipline. The book is an exploration of the difference and uniqueness that gives this small country its great architectural reputation and pays homage to architecture produced with dedication, passion, and integrity.

Anna Roos

MILLER & MARANTA



My incentive to pick up a pencil in the morning at all,
is the search for knowledge.

Quintus Miller

MILLER & MARANTA
SAN GOTTARDO GUESTHOUSE
GOTTHARD PASS
2008–2010

For thousands of years the Gotthard Pass has been an important threshold between north and south Europe and for many centuries has played a significant role in the economy and culture of central Switzerland. Since the early thirteenth century, the pass has been a vital trade route connecting different cultures and language regions. Caravans of merchants transporting grain, wine, rice, and salt, even entire armies trekked over the pass. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Gotthard Pass was imbued with an almost mythological status symbolizing the independence of Switzerland. Thus, as *Alpentransversale*, the pass is strategically, culturally, and historically significant.

At the summit of the Gotthard Pass is a scattering of buildings between two lakes; these include the old lodgings—now a museum—and Hotel St Gotthard. Archaeological artifacts indicate the presence of a chapel on the site since pre-Roman times, while the hostel, alongside the chapel, has been dated to the year 1623. The two buildings have a history of misfortune: first they were destroyed by an avalanche in 1774 and then again by fire in 1905. Each reconstruction left a layer of history.

Thanks to support by the Fondazione Pro San Gottardo, the revitalization and refurbishment of the structures was made possible. Six architectural practices were invited to take part in a competition. Basel-based office, Miller & Maranta was awarded the commission in 2005. As design professor at Mendrisio Academy of Architecture in Ticino, Quintus Miller, with his partner Paola Maranta, play an important role in the architectural discourse in Switzerland. Their work was showcased at the Venice Biennale in 2012.

Having asked themselves how a contemporary building might be constructed on the basis of a vernacular construction typology, the architects drew their inspiration from rural buildings in canton Uri, where timber has been used within massive walls since the fifteenth century. With great sensibility they had to strike a balance between remaining true to the historic meaning of the building, while also acknowledging the present and creating a striking contemporary building. Their first strategy was to radically hollow out the building, leaving only the outer walls, with their elegant, double-bowed windows, and the granite stair on the first level. Secondly, the building was raised by a level and finally the chapel and hostel were unified beneath an enormous lead roof. By raising the building by one level more rooms could be accommodated and the volume could become more prominent, thus creating an optical focus on the Alp. It is the slender bell-tower that divides the great faceted volume into two parts: sacred/secular, chapel/hostel. The muted coarse plaster and gray lead roof echo the color of the craggy rocks surrounding the building and blend it into the landscape.

Logistically the construction of the building posed a daunting challenge, as there is only a short window of snow-free time during summer when construction is viable. This constraint required innovative thinking and meticulous planning. To radically reduce in-situ construction time, the large timber cladding elements for the interiors were assembled in the valley below and hauled up the mountain where they could be rapidly installed. Clad entirely with untreated, spruce wood, the individual rooms throughout have an almost monastic atmosphere intended to intensify one's perception of the majestic and austere surrounding landscape. The precision of the carpentry is truly admirable. With the joinery, time-old vernacular Alpine architecture has been interpreted in an intensely modern manner. At the same time, the wood-scented rooms still evoke an atmosphere of archaic beauty. It is the perfectly meted understatement one often sees in Swiss architecture that gives it its force. Each room has been named after previous distinguished visitors to the hostel from past eras: Goethe, Honoré de Balzac, and Petrarch to name a few. Nowadays the rooms cater for a new age of tourists: alpine cyclists and mountaineers.

Architecturally, it is the monumental south front and the monolithic lead roof that have the greatest visual impact. Miller & Maranta has rejuvenated the building and elevated its status as is fitting for its historic and strategic significance on the Gotthard. Standing proud, facing southward, the building has a sense of self-evident belonging to the site, as if it had never been any different. The architecture is restrained, but it is also powerful.



For years this adage has accompanied us:
“Tradition doesn’t mean preserving the ashes, but rather
keeping the fires burning.”

Miller & Maranta

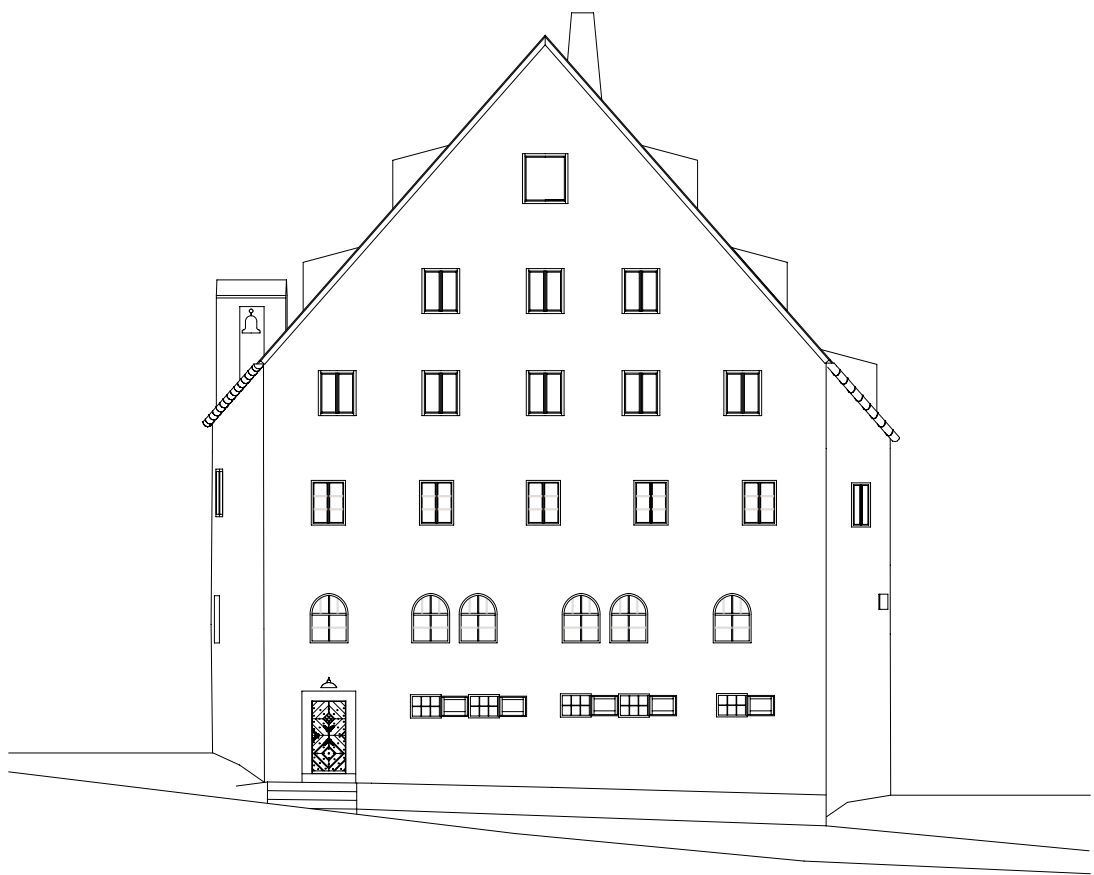






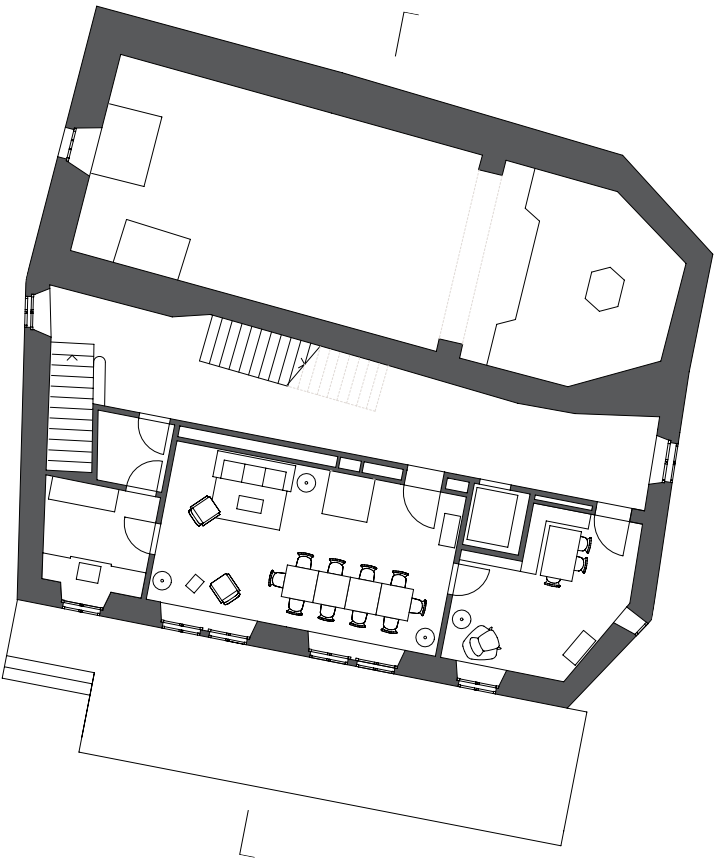
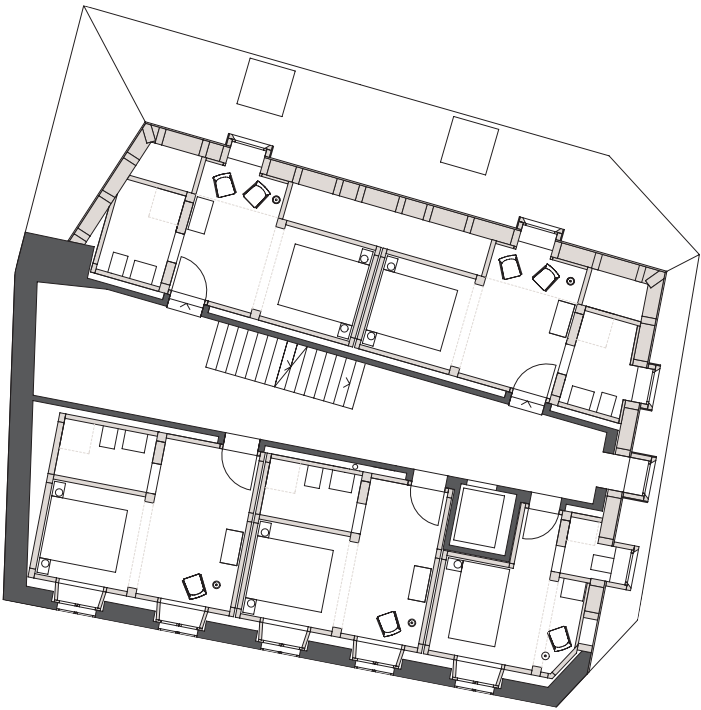






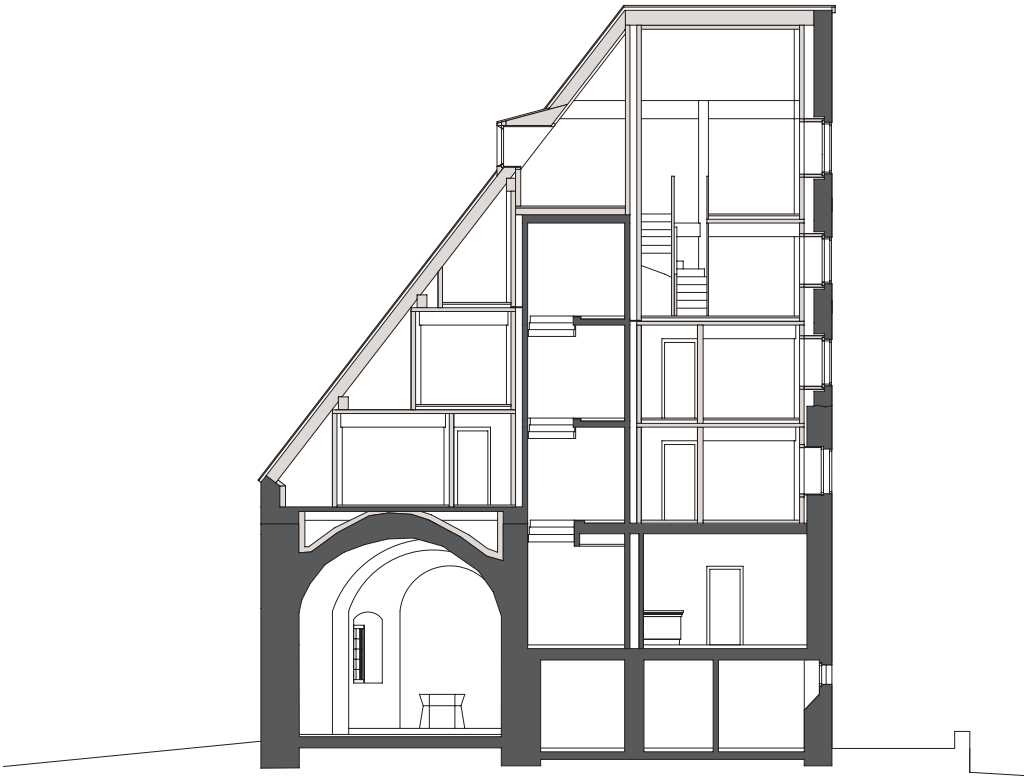
SOUTH ELEVATION

1:200



3RD FLOOR
1ST FLOOR

1:200



SECTION

Quintus Miller and Paola Maranta play a central role in the production and discourse of architecture in Switzerland. Their approach to architecture has been strongly influenced by Aldo Rossi's theories of Analogue Architecture absorbed while studying at the ETH in the 1980s. Part of their education involved analyzing ephemeral aspects of the discipline, like the emotional effect that architecture has on people and the atmosphere of a space. With their analogue architecture, they sought to embed architecture into its setting and promote the creation of a strong relationship of a building to its context. According to this theory, buildings should be ambiguous and multi-faceted enabling them to be read in a variety of ways, changing their function over time.

Miller & Maranta's Villa Garbald is situated close to the border in the village Castasegna in an Italian-speaking valley in canton Graubünden. Dense, multi-level farmhouses give the village an urban feel. The guesthouse replaces an old hay barn and stands above an elegant villa designed for the Garbald family in 1863–1864 by the first professor of architecture at the ETH, Gottfried Semper. In 1955 the last descendant of the Garbald family set up a foundation, which was later able to recruit the *Collegium Helveticum* to collaborate on the creation of a refuge for intellectual debate and dialogue, spearheaded by a competition held in 2001, which was won by Miller & Maranta.

What makes Miller & Maranta's building remarkable is the manner of its construction and its amorphous, crystalline form. The project starts with a garden wall encircling the site, creating a private enclave within. Inspired by *Roccoli*, or Italian bird-catching towers, the six-story building stands proudly, like an abstract, monolithic sculpture in a garden. The tower declares itself as a dominant form, set against the landscape and the sky. By contorting the plan off the perpendicular, randomly placing the windows, and expressing the surfaces, the architects have enhanced the monolithic, abstract feel of the building. The polygonal plan is a continuation of the rustic garden wall and curved walkways that meander across the site linking one building to the other. The amorphous, angled plan is mirrored in the articulation of the roof that kinks up rather cheekily towards Semper's elegant villa below.

Rather than being built from bottom to top, Villa Garbald is constructed from outside to inside. The structural core is the fireplace around which the staircase winds up from the seminar space on the ground floor towards the apex "depositing" bedrooms as it spirals upward. The displacement of the rooms and the constant shifting of levels are translated through to the freely floating apertures on the facades. As the window frames are concealed and are flush with the reveals, the openings read like punctured bird holes in the four facades and emphasize the three-dimensionality and abstract form in-the-round. To echo the rustic texture of the enclosing garden walls, granite from the Maira River was added as an aggregate to the concrete mix of the tower walls. To bring this aggregate to the foreground, the concrete surfaces were etched with high-pressure water in a process called hydro-abrasion; this requires highly skilled craftsmanship to get a unified overall texture. This "assault" on the surfaces, to create their rough tactility, heightens the organic, rustic nature of the building, binding it into the landscape and echoing the surfaces of the garden walls and surrounding farm buildings. Miller & Maranta has set up a sophisticated dialogue between the new villa and its historic context.

Interestingly, the architects say that when they design a specific room, they start with its atmosphere. Budget constraint was no obstacle but they nevertheless managed to create simple, perhaps spartan, but high-quality interior spaces. Meticulous care was taken with the finishes—with the construction of the broken-white, smooth lime plaster walls and the carpentry of the doors, windows, shutters, and furniture. With its raw surfaces and powerful, sculptural form, Miller & Maranta has created a new contemporary language for alpine architecture using some of the deeply engrained lessons on Analogue Architecture they learnt decades ago in Zurich.

When we have to design a specific room, we begin with its atmosphere.

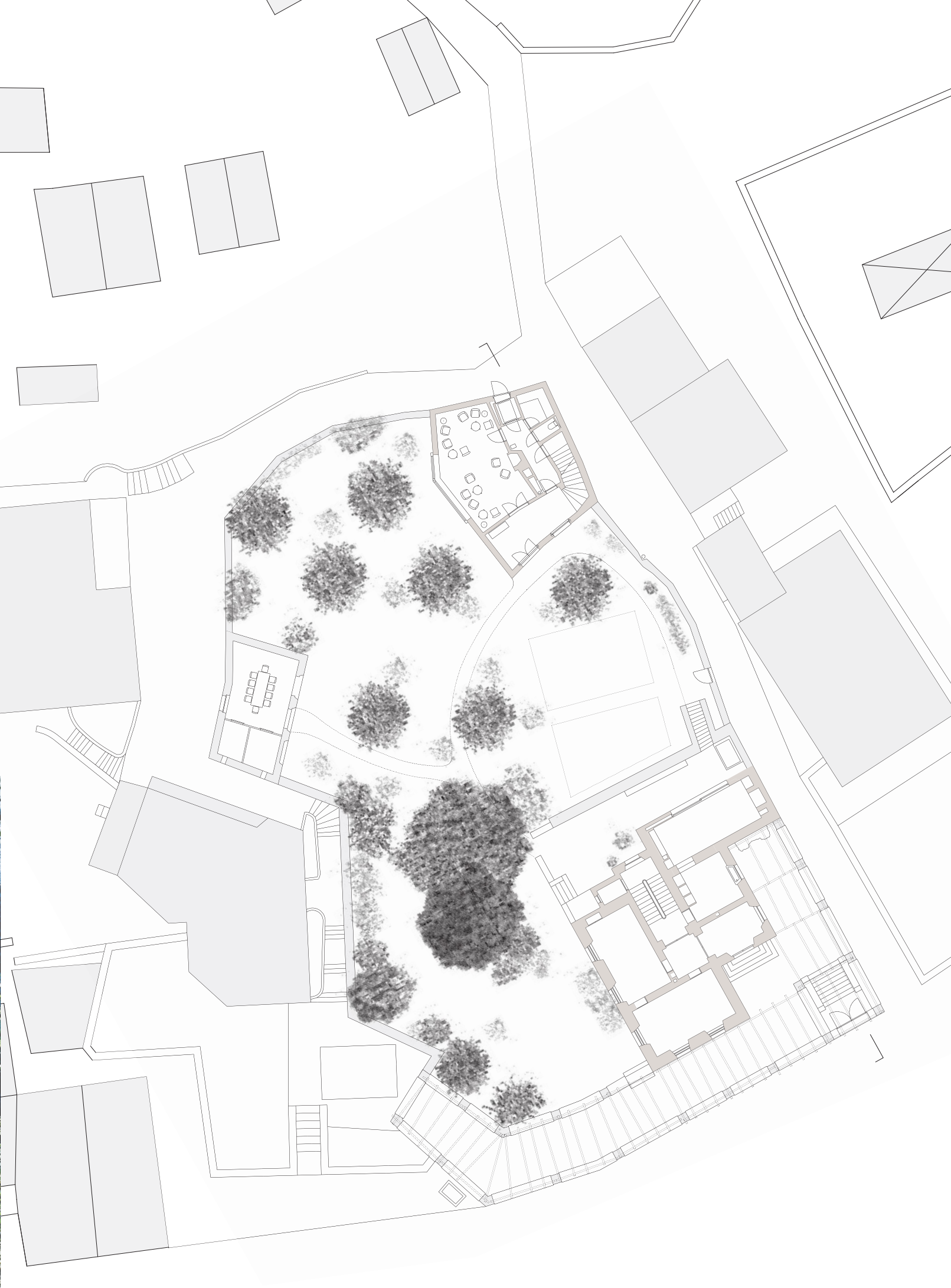
Miller & Maranta





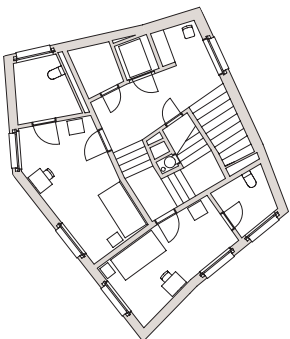
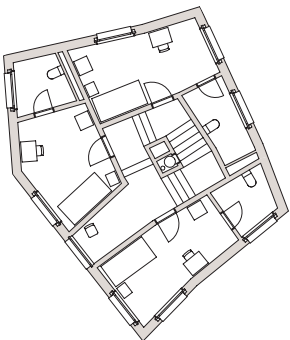
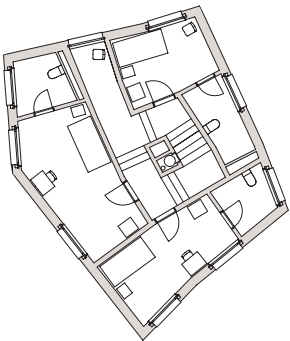
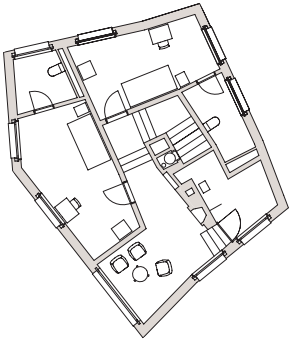






GROUND FLOOR

1:300



4TH FLOOR
3RD FLOOR
2ND FLOOR
1ST FLOOR

1:300