



OBJECTS OF ASSEMBLY

Designing for Collective Life through
Space, Structure, and Story

Compiled By	Nicholas Zhao
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Type:	Portfolio

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Designing for
Collective Life through
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Story

INTRODUCTION.

This portfolio curates a collection of objects—not fixed artifacts, but active assemblies: spatial proposals, material systems, and conceptual tools shaped in response to conditions of shared life.

Across storm-prone coastlines, contested housing blocks, and forgotten theaters, each project operates as a site of gathering, resistance, and repair. These works are not just designs for space, but invitations to rethink how people come together—to dwell, to perform, to rebuild. condition.

PART I — PRIMARY ASSEMBLIES

I. Edge of the Storm

Seagate Community, Coney Island, Brooklyn, NY 11224

Reintegrating Seagate into the Public Fabric of Coney Island

II. The Housing Cycle

Chelsea-Elliott & Fulton Houses, Manhattan, NY 10011

A Modular Intervention to NYCHA Housing Renovation

III. The Rehearsal

31 Canal Street, Lower East Side, New York, NY 10002

A Multi-Purpose Center towards Destigmatization

PARTS.

The first section presents three architectural proposals that engage directly with public needs and communal futures. The second assembles supporting studies: written arguments, material experiments, and coded systems that have sharpened my design methods and expanded the mediums through which I work.

Together, these entries are not standalone solutions, but parts of a living catalog—a record of how architecture can participate in assembling the collective

PART II — INSTRUMENTS OF ASSEMBLY

IV. Power Tools

Trump-Owned Towers, New York City (1983–2025)

Mapping Spatial Power in Trump's Urban Real Estate Empire

V. Tensile Practices

Site of Study: Unspecified

Lightweight Structures for Responsive Space-Making

VII. Histories of Contemporary Architecture

Site of Research: Canonical Theory Texts, 20th–21st Century

Reframing Canonical Architectural Theory

VIII. Coding for Spatial Purposes

Site of Interface: Personal Film Archive, Web-Based Platform

Designing a Film Archive as Spatial Reference System

I. Edge of the Storm

A PRUDENTIAL PLAN FOR CONEY ISLAND

Columbia GSAPP Studio

Instructor: David Moon NHDM Studio

Project Type: Group Work Nicholas Zhao Xiaoxuan Xu

Summer 2025

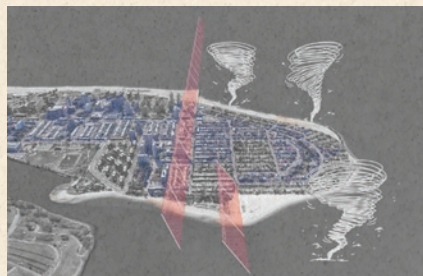
Introduction:

The terms “City” and “Island” seem contradictory. We see a “City” as a network connecting people and their environment—a complex system of public and private spaces. In contrast, an “Island” is typically isolated, private, and lacks connectivity and transition. Islands are often accessible only by limited transportation, such as boats, planes, or sometimes bridges, creating introverted communities.

Rem Koolhaas described the connection between Manhattan and Coney Island in *Delirious New York*: “wide enough to feed the resort with a continuous flow of visitors yet narrow enough to keep a majority of urban inmates in place.” Today, the connection between Manhattan and Coney Island is over-constructed, making Coney Island no longer a technical island. However, the “Sea Gate” community remains isolated, surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean on three sides and enclosed by a wall on the fourth, with only two resident-only entrances.



HOW DO WE MOVE? (Illustration of Rebuild Process)



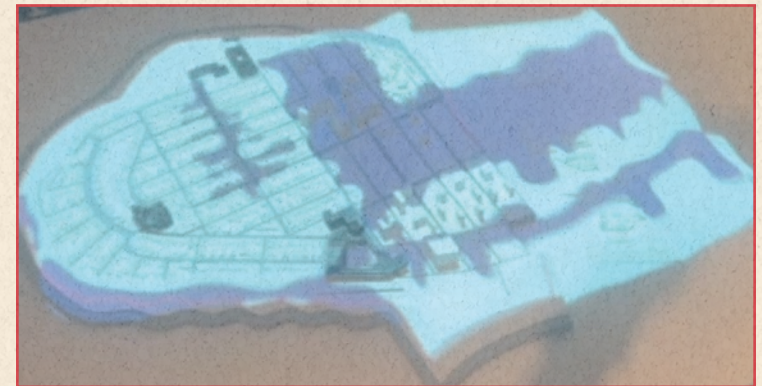
SITE CONDITIONS

Seagate, a private community on the western edge of Coney Island, faces an increasingly precarious future as climate volatility intensifies. Despite the illusion of exclusivity and physical isolation, the enclave remains deeply vulnerable—its exposure to storm surge, ocean rise, and high winds exacerbated by geographic positioning and outdated infrastructure. Hurricane Sandy made this precarity painfully clear. In 2012, the storm overwhelmed the community's defenses, collapsing bulkheads, flooding homes, and severing connections to the rest of the peninsula. The event underscored a truth: no matter how self-contained Seagate may appear, its fate is inseparable from the broader hydrological and social systems it attempts to wall off.

This project reframes that vulnerability not as a limitation, but as an opportunity to re-cast Seagate's relationship with water—and with the public. Rather than retreat or fortify, the proposal imagines new public interfaces that embrace flood dynamics as generative forces. In this way, climate risk becomes a spatial mediator: a way to redraw boundaries, invite new flows, and open the community—physically and symbolically—toward the rest of Coney Island.



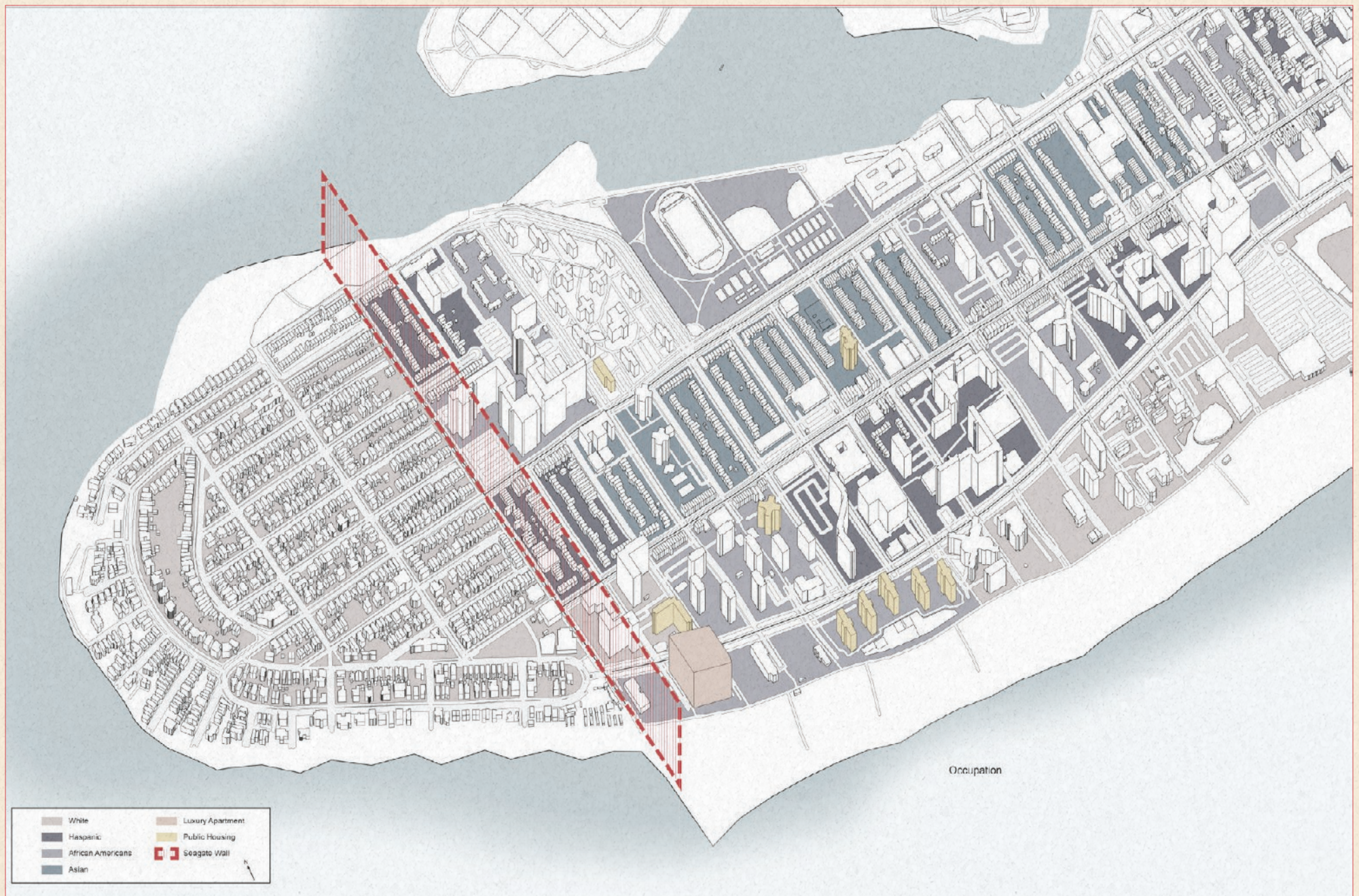
1:200 Model of Site
Zero Flood Condition



1:200 Model of Site
Area Most Prevalent to Flooding

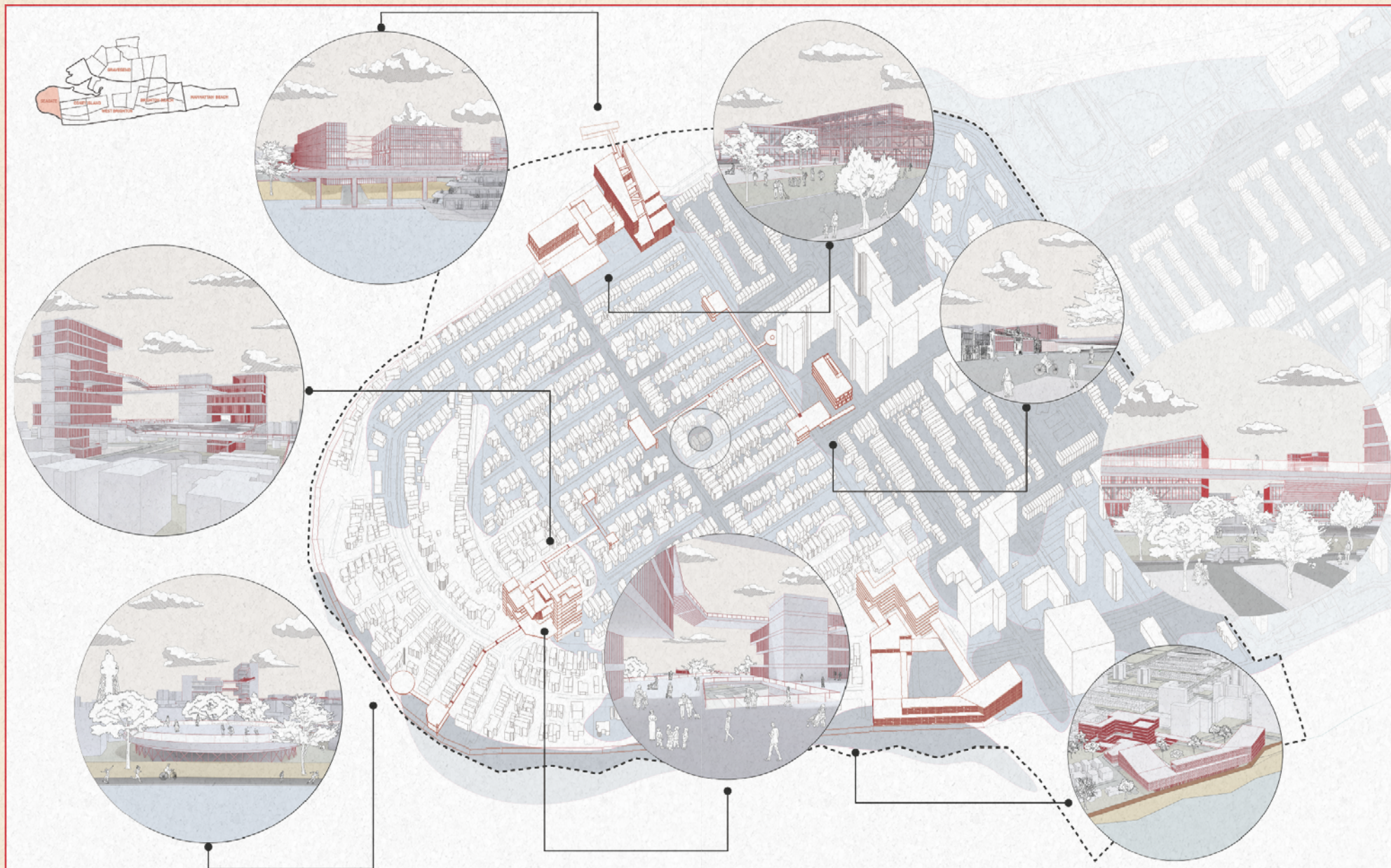


1:200 Model of Site
Overall At Risk Flood Site



CONEY ISLAND and SEAGATE

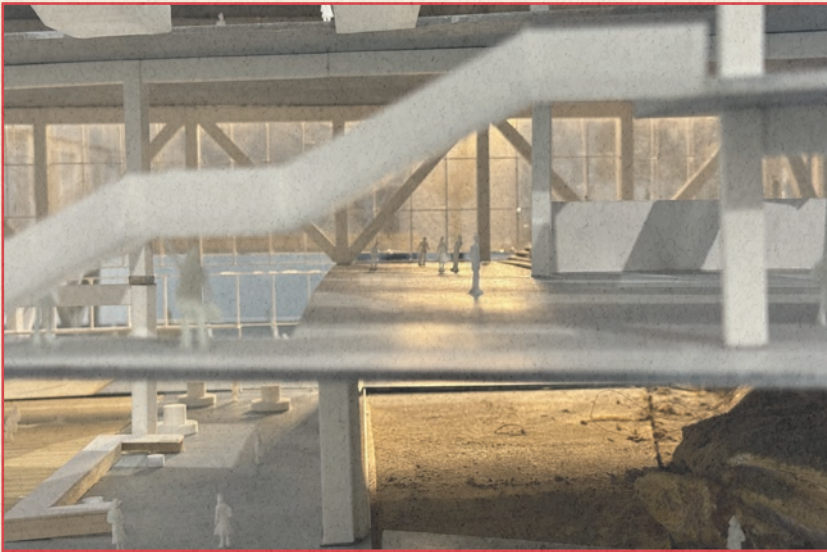
This map visualizes the stark spatial and ethnic divisions between Coney Island and the gated community of Seagate. Highlighting racial demographics—White, Hispanic, Black/African American, and Asian populations—it reveals how the Seagate wall physically and symbolically enforces segregation. Public housing clusters are situated just outside the wall, while luxury apartments lie within, illustrating a sharp contrast in access, infrastructure, and community visibility. The red diagonal line marks the Seagate barrier, underscoring its role as a boundary of both class and race.



INTERGRATION IMAGINED

This intervention reimagines the Coney Island coastal strip and boardwalk as a connective spine—an infrastructural and social platform that fosters integration through shared, everyday space. Instead of large-scale development, the proposal introduces modest, multifunctional structures along a continuous greenway that supports public use and strengthens the island's hurricane resilience through ecological buffers and elevated design.

Going beyond train access, new ferry terminals and walkable connections link historically separate areas, promoting movement and interaction across communities. This is a framework for coexistence—where the boardwalk becomes not just a recreational edge, but a civic space rooted in accessibility, care, and environmental responsibility.



1/4 Scale Model Commerical Strip
Internal Greenary System within Commerical
Strip & Board Walk



1/4 Scale Model Community Hub
Internal Amphitheater Space and Elevated
Ground Floor



1/4 Scale Model Community Hub
Relationship With Dock and Sand

II. Health in Place

A PRUDENTIAL PLAN FOR CONEY ISLAND

Columbia GSAPP Studio

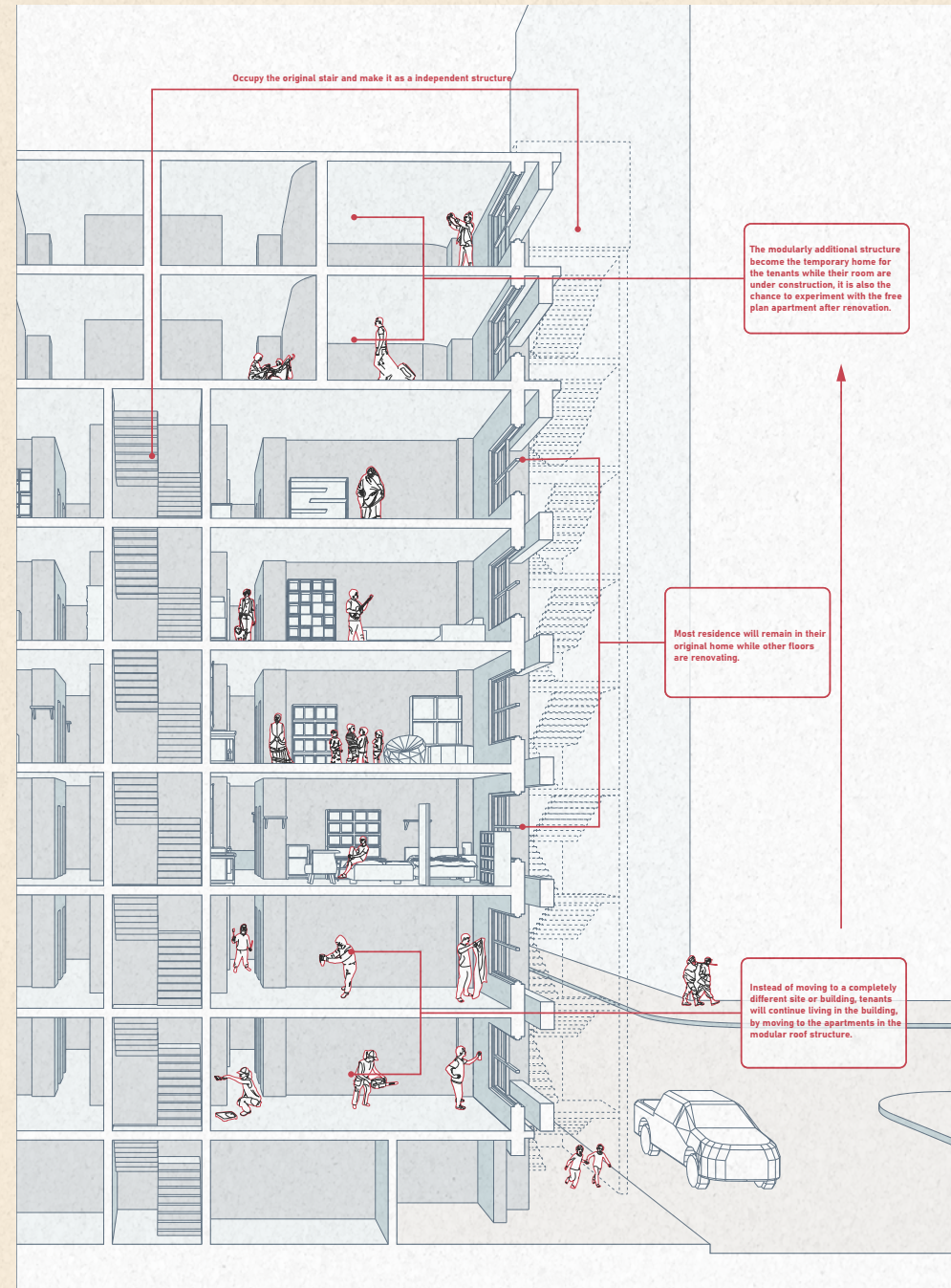
Instructor: A.L HU

Project Type: Group Work Nicholas Zhao Xiaoxuan Xu

Fall 2025

Introduction:

This project is rooted in the belief that public housing can be more than just a place to live—it can be a sanctuary for health, connection, and pride. By prioritizing non-demolition and phased renovations, we aim to minimize displacement and empower tenants to shape their own spaces. Unsafe stairwells, neglected courtyards, and rigid layouts are reimagined into adaptable, vibrant environments that support both personal and community well-being. Our vision is to create a prototype for future NYCHA renovations, proving that public housing can become a true home—one that inspires and uplifts every resident.



SECTION OF RENOVATION CYCLE

Health in Place

RESEARCH: FULL PROTENTIAL OF HOME

This research examines how public housing campuses can evolve beyond basic shelter to become vibrant, inclusive communities. By addressing physical, mental, and community health, we aim to redesign public housing as a home where tenants can thrive. Our focus is on unlocking the full potential of underutilized spaces, fostering connection, pride, and well-being among tenants and the surrounding neighborhood.

GOALS

Redefine public housing campuses as environments that support physical, mental, and community health.

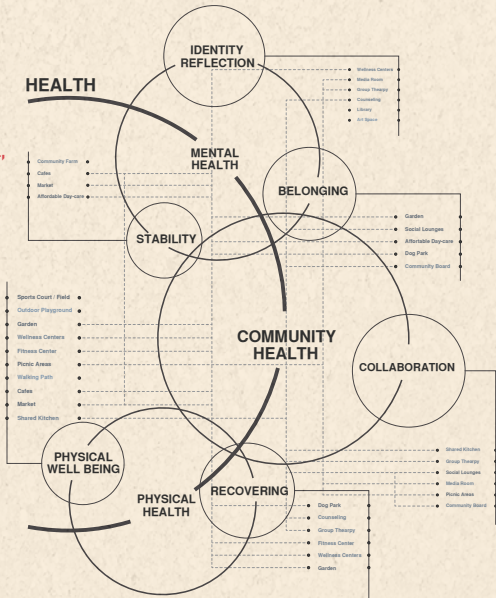
Enhance underutilized spaces to foster interaction, inclusivity, and belonging.

Create spaces and programs that align with tenants' needs and aspirations.

What Is Full Potential?

Public housing campuses are more than just residential complexes—they are vibrant, potential-filled environments with the capacity to surpass traditional townhouses and apartments. For us, full potential means offering tenants and the surrounding neighborhood not only what is essential but also spaces that cultivate a true sense of home and community.

These campuses possess extensive interior and exterior spaces that, through strategic improvements and thoughtfully designed programs, can provide enhanced facilities and amenities. These upgrades directly support physical and mental health, fostering a thriving environment that tenants and the community can truly call home—a place that inspires pride, well-being,

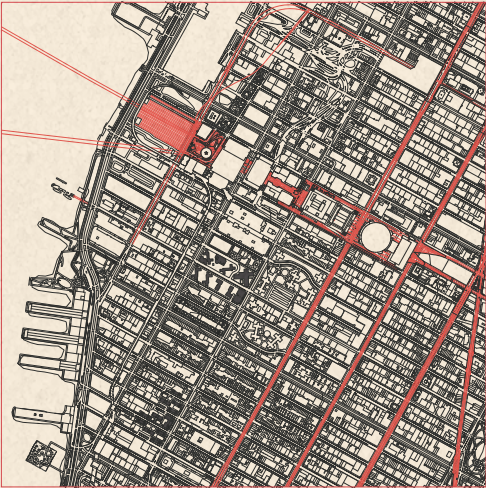


What is Home?

Home is not merely a physical structure; it is a place of return—a sanctuary where individuals and families feel grounded, secure, and supported. It is where people can find stability in their daily lives, build meaningful connections, and nurture their physical and mental health. A true home provides an environment where residents feel a sense of belonging, allowing them to reflect on and express their identities within a supportive community.

The home we envision strives to provide more than shelter. It is an integrated environment designed to enhance physical and mental health, promote recovery and stability, and support personal and collective growth. This vision reflects a commitment to creating spaces where residents feel empowered to thrive both individually and as part of a larger community.

UNDERSTANDING URBAN-SCALE CONDITION



Public Transportation Surrounding Site



Urban Green Within 15mins Walking Distance

Site Conditions

Our analysis considers the relationship between tenants' health and their home environment, starting at a broader urban scale. In New York City, accessible green spaces within a 1-mile radius or a 10-minute walk are scarce, even in otherwise appealing neighborhoods. This lack of green areas limits opportunities for exercise and relaxation, negatively impacting physical health and reducing tenants' sense of connection to their home and community.

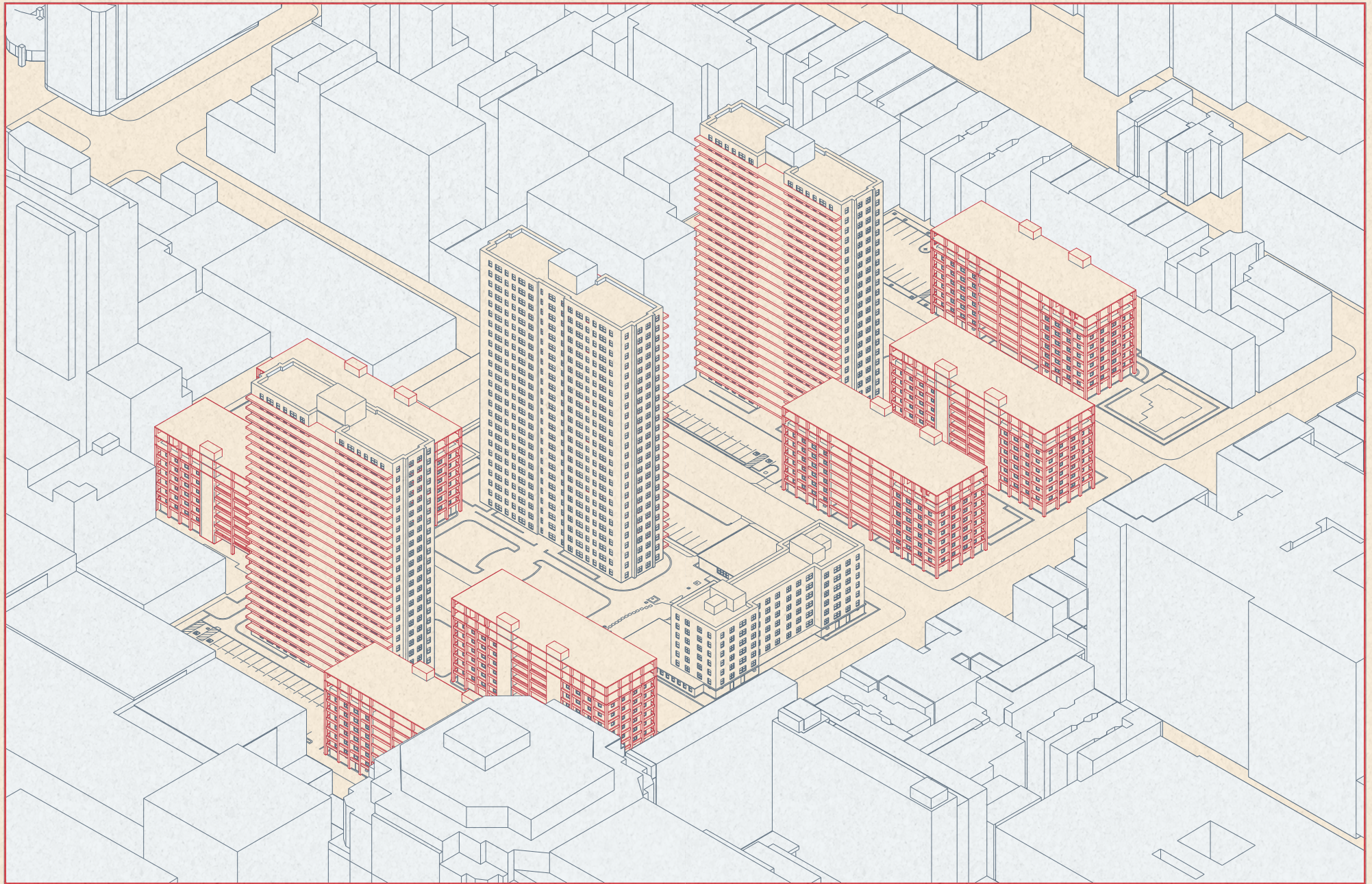
In terms of amenities, the Fulton, Chelsea, and Elliott campuses benefit from accessible public transportation, unlike more isolated sites like Coney Island. However, the absence of affordable gyms limits physical activity opportunities and contributes to feelings of exclusion. While grocery stores are present nearby, many tenants still travel long distances to access affordable essentials, exposing gaps in local resources that impact day-

Design Strategy

A key consideration for the site is the commitment to a non-demolition approach. This decision stems from several critical factors:

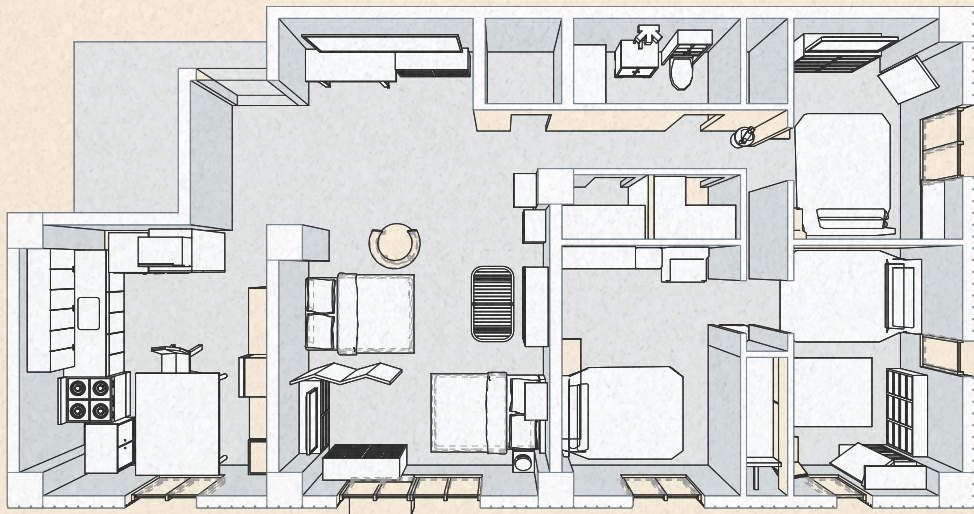
1. There is no guarantee that all tenants would be able to return after demolition.
2. Construction timelines for demolition and rebuilding are uncertain, creating prolonged displacement.
3. The cost of demolition exceeds that of renovation.
4. Extensive renovation can mirror the disruptions of demolition, requiring tenants to vacate their homes for safety and health reasons.
5. Tenants prioritize maintaining their homes over concerns about construction costs.

Given these challenges, our primary design strategy focuses on a phased approach to minimize disruption. This strategy avoids large-scale construction and ensures a smoother transition for tenants between their current homes and the improved living environment. By prioritizing continuity and minimizing displacement, we aim to preserve the integrity of the community while delivering meaningful upgrades.



FULTON PLOT ISOMETRIC
Modified with Recyclable Modules

Scale 1 INDIVIDUAL HOMES



Home of Seven Across Four Generation
(Current Snap Shot)

Research Introduction

This research examines how public housing campuses can evolve beyond basic shelter to become vibrant, inclusive communities. By addressing physical, mental, and community health, we aim to redesign public housing as a home where tenants can thrive. Our focus is on unlocking the full potential of underutilized spaces, fostering connection, pride, and well-being among tenants and the surrounding neighborhood.

GOALS

- 1.Redefine public housing campuses as environments that support physical, mental, and community health.
- 2.Enhance underutilized spaces to foster interaction, inclusivity, and belonging.
- 3.Create spaces and programs that align with tenants' needs and aspirations.

TAKEAWAYS

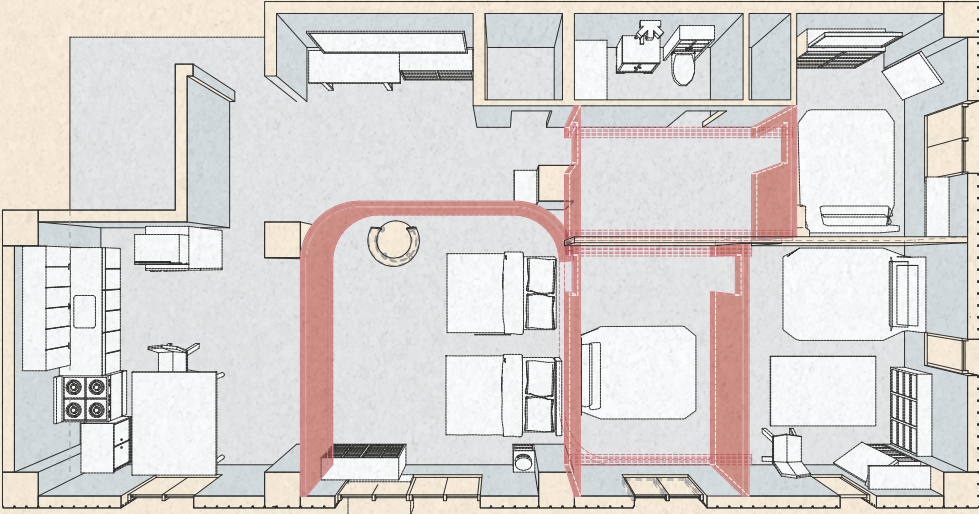
Inclusive design can transform underutilized spaces into hubs for interaction, ensuring all age groups benefit equally

Understanding Home of the Tenants

Based on the lived experiences of tenants in public housing campuses, scale 1's purpose focuses on a hypothetical apartment model housing a multigenerational family of seven. This unique household spans four generations, which presents both spatial and relational challenges within the apartment.

While the apartment is relatively spacious, the layout highlights significant design inefficiencies. Narrow hallways restrict movement, and the lack of designated communal gathering spaces places strain on the household's mental and social well-being. These issues are compounded by the everyday demands of a large family, demonstrating the limitations of static layouts that fail to evolve alongside changing family dynamics.

The family is also in a period of transition, with one member potentially moving out with her child. This situation amplifies the need for adaptable spatial designs that can respond to shifting household compositions and evolving tenant needs. Such transitions, while natural, often bring additional spatial and emotional challenges that the current layout is ill-equipped to address.



Home of Seven Across Four Generation
Modified with Adjustable Walls



Modifications

- 1.Enhanced Communal Spaces:
The introduction of designated gathering areas promotes family cohesion and mental well-being. These spaces provide opportunities for multigenerational interactions and support mental health by reducing stress associated with cramped living conditions.Enhance underutilized spaces to foster interaction, inclusivity, and belonging.
- 2.Flexible Adaptation:
Modular elements within the design allow tenants to adjust spaces as household needs evolve. For instance, rooms can be reconfigured for privacy or communal use, addressing the needs of families experiencing changes such as members moving out or growing families.
- 3.Improved Functionality:
By reorganizing circulation spaces, the new layout ensures that narrow hallways and inefficient transitions no longer hinder mobility or utility. This creates a more livable and harmonious environment for all residents.

Imagined Space Function

The proposed layout seeks to address the spatial inefficiencies of the current design, offering a more adaptable and tenant-centered approach. By introducing flexible, multi-purpose spaces, the design enables families to personalize their homes to better suit their needs, fostering a sense of ownership and agency among tenants.

As part of the renovation strategy outlined in Scale 2, this new layout will be introduced in temporary housing units, serving as a testing ground where tenants can experience and experiment with the design. Tenants will have the opportunity to provide feedback, suggest modifications, or opt for further customizations when their permanent homes are renovated. This iterative process ensures that renovations are deeply aligned with tenant needs, fostering trust and collaboration between residents and designers.

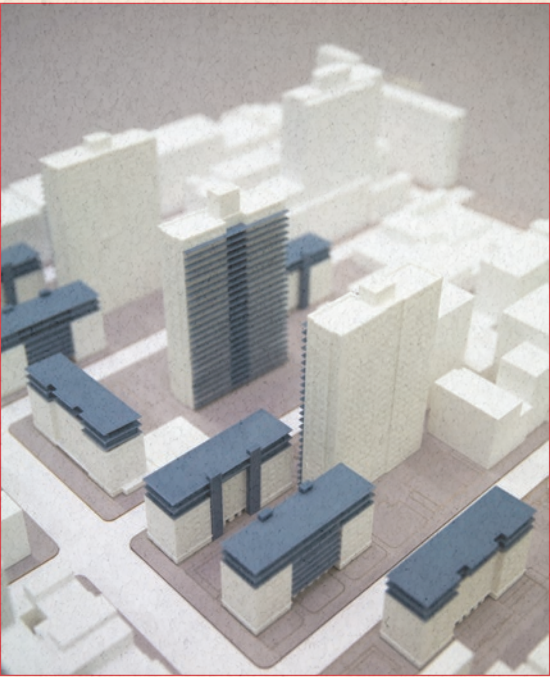
The new layout focuses on how inclusive, adaptable designs can transform public housing into vibrant, supportive environments that promote individual and community wellbeing while respecting the unique experiences of tenants.

Scale 2 - Building

This phase shifts focus to how the principles of Scale 1 can be applied effectively at the building scale. Public housing buildings often face critical challenges, and one of the most pressing is the lack of safety within the stairwell systems. These interior stairwells are frequently dark, narrow, and isolated, creating an environment that fosters unsafe situations and leaves tenants feeling vulnerable and insecure. Addressing this issue is key to improving both the functionality of the buildings and the sense of safety for residents.

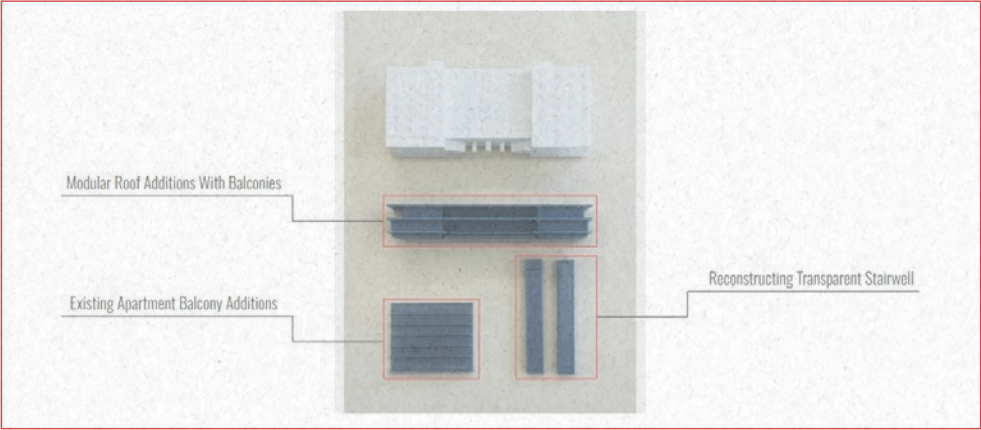
To resolve this, we propose relocating the stairwells to the exterior facade of the buildings. By moving the stairs outside, we increase visibility and transparency, transforming the stairwells into open, well-lit spaces that foster a greater sense of safety. This adjustment also allows for better integration between the building and its surrounding environment, encouraging safer and more public-friendly use of these critical circulation spaces.

In addition to redesigning the stair system, we propose a solution to one of the most significant challenges in public housing renovations: tenant displacement. Each Fulton house would gain an additional two floors with a free-plan design, creating temporary housing for residents during renovation. This approach ensures that tenants can remain within their building throughout the construction process, avoiding the stress and uncertainty of relocation. By staying close to their homes, tenants retain their connection to their community, minimizing disruption to their daily lives.



SITE MODEL FOR FULTON RENOVATION

This phased renovation strategy avoids the extreme costs and long timelines associated with demolition while addressing key safety and housing challenges. By improving stairwell safety and providing temporary housing, we aim to create a smoother transition between the old and renovated spaces, guaranteeing tenants a home to return to. This approach reflects our commitment to enhancing both the physical structure of the building and the emotional well-being of its residents, aligning with the broader goals of creating spaces that foster safety, stability, and a sense of community.



MODUALS FOR FULTON RENOVATION

Scale 3 - Community

Scales 1 and 2 focused on the tenants' primary goal: creating a better home to return to. Scale 3 shifts the focus toward strengthening community health by addressing the broader social and spatial challenges within the site. While tenants share strong bonds, current public spaces lack adequate seating and gathering areas, often leaving residents to stand on the street.

The campus exteriors hold significant potential, but several issues hinder their use. Public spaces are fenced off from the surrounding Chelsea community, isolating NYCHA residents and limiting green space access. Additionally, the grey, hospital-like spaces beneath the Fulton apartments lack warmth, and amenities such as the unmaintained playground remain neglected.

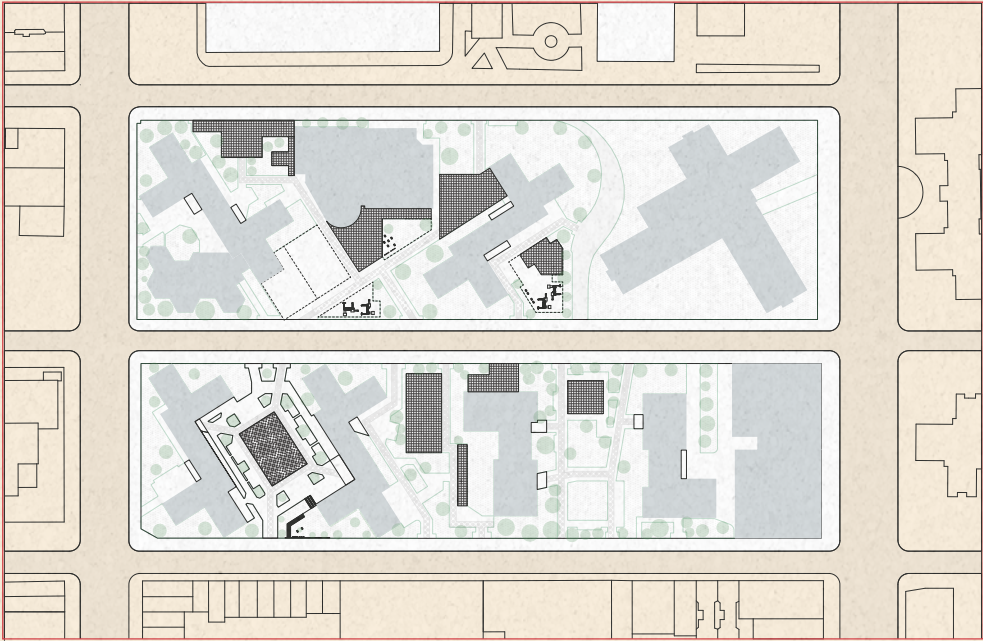
As previously noted, public transport running north-south is highly accessible, leading to predominantly west-east foot traffic. This positions edge spaces along the site as critical opportunities for fostering community interaction. However, many of these edge areas, such as underground courtyards with narrow stairways, are currently unused due to limited access and obstructed views.



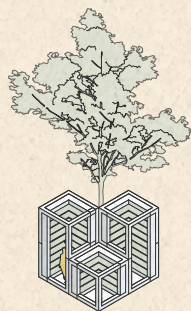
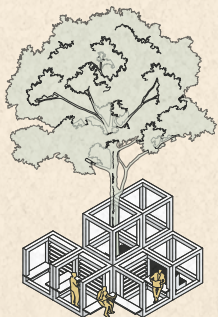
SEVERED CANOPIES:
FENCED GREENS AND CONVOLUTED PATH SYSTEM



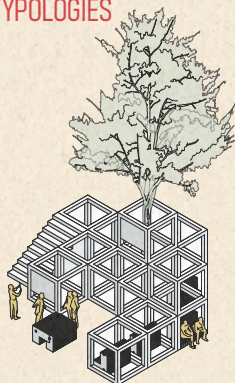
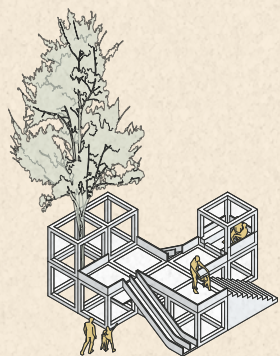
VACANCY:
HOSTILE GREY SPACE AND UNKEPT PLAYGROUNDS



CHELSEA MASRTER PLAN: RENEWED COURTYARDS & POCKET PARKS



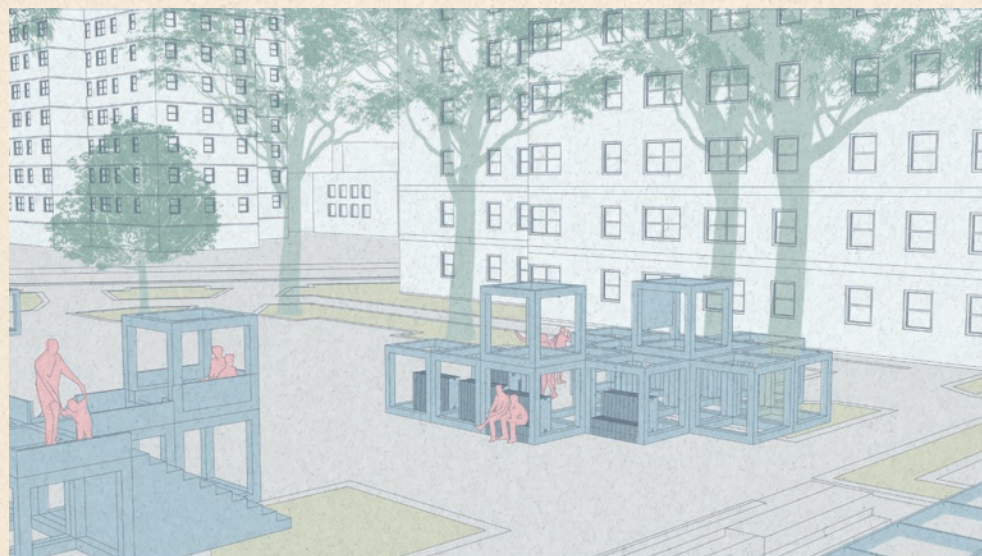
POTENTIAL TIMBER TYPOLOGIES



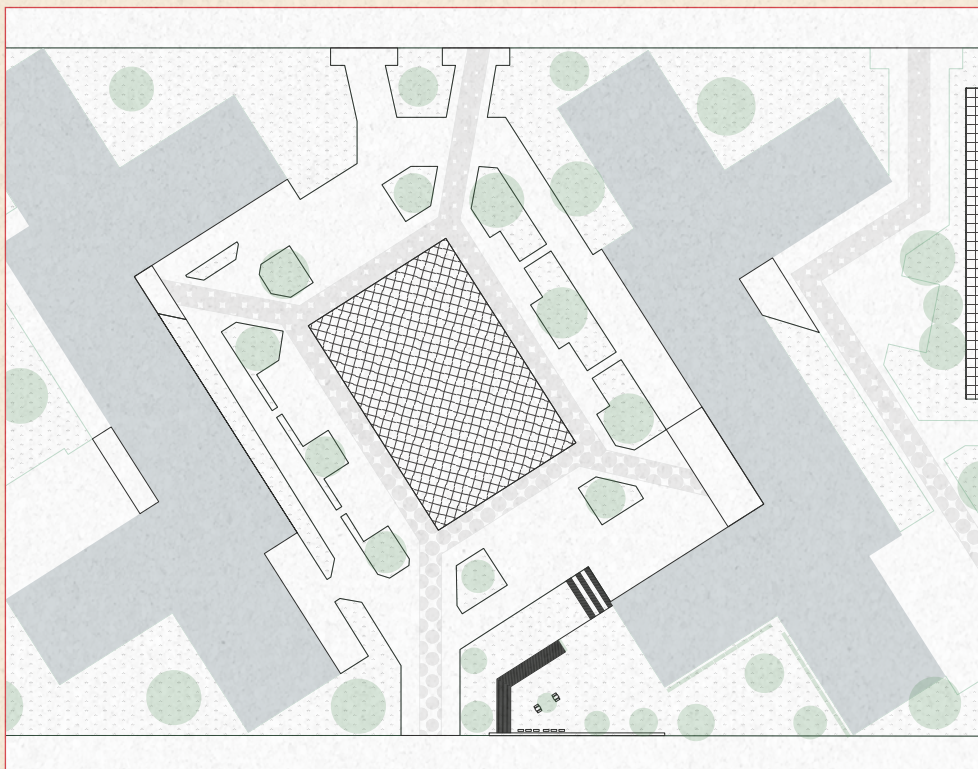
Open stairways and improved visibility will make these areas inviting and accessible, while community services like reading rooms will provide tenants with shared spaces that foster connection and personal growth. These changes will create a welcoming transition between the campus and the surrounding urban fabric, promoting stronger ties between tenants and the larger community.

Internally, our focus shifts to enhancing privacy while addressing inclusivity and flexibility. The repurposing of fenced green areas and outdated playgrounds will introduce multi-use spaces that are not limited to specific age groups. Instead of static, single-purpose designs, we aim to integrate adaptable installations that support a variety of uses, encouraging tenants of all ages to interact, play, and relax in ways that meet their needs.

Through these thoughtful interventions, we are redefining the role of public spaces within the campus. These spaces are no longer secondary or underutilized areas but are vital components of a cohesive, health-focused community design. By addressing physical, mental, and community health holistically, our design strategy ensures that the campus evolves into a place where tenants can feel pride, belonging, and well-being.



INTERIOR COURT WITH REUSED TIMBER STRUCTURE



UNDERGROUND SERVICE CENTER WITH INFORMAL STAIRS

III. The Rehearsal

A Theater Rebuilt for Mental health and Community
Columbia GSAPP Studio
Instructor: Hilary Sample
Project Type: Individual work
Spring 2025

Introduction:

Psychodrama isn't new.

But maybe it feels unfamiliar because it doesn't sit neatly with what we expect from therapy. It doesn't rely on analysis alone, or on naming things from a distance. It doesn't start with understanding. It starts with doing. With stepping into a memory. Taking on a role. Rehearsing a version of the past or the future — not as an idea, but as an action.

Some people respond well to that. Especially people who feel stuck when asked to talk about what's wrong.

Kids, for example, who don't always have the language. Teenagers, who are used to performance already, even when they pretend they're not.
Adults who can talk endlessly and still feel like nothing's changed.

It works in groups, usually. Which helps. Because life happens in relation to others. And so does healing. You play the parent. I play the friend. Someone else plays the voice in your head that you've been trying to ignore. The room becomes a kind of stage. But not a theatrical one. More like a rehearsal space for reality. Temporary. Flexible. Loosely defined. And sometimes that's enough to let something new happen.

Of course, it's messy. There's no standard script. No single methodology. That's part of the criticism. It doesn't fit neatly into evidence-based categories. It's hard to measure outcomes when the point is transformation, not solution. Hard to quantify a breakthrough that happens because someone cried at the exact moment someone else stood in the right place.

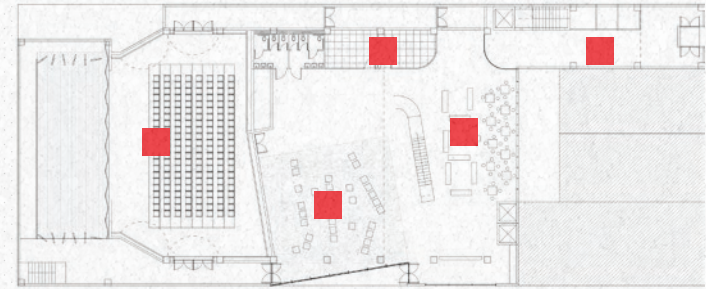
Still, maybe some things don't need to be measured before they matter.
Psychodrama makes space for things we can't prove but can feel.
It assumes that change can come from movement, not just meaning. From being inside the thing, not just talking around it.

THE REHEARSAL

OPERATING HOURS

Psychodrama & Therapeutic Use
Monday – Sunday: 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM
(Drop-in solo, group sessions, and therapy consultations)

Theater & Performance Events
Thursday – Sunday: 7:30 PM – 10:00 PM
(Doors open at 7:00 PM — shows begin at 8:00 PM)

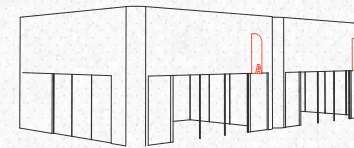
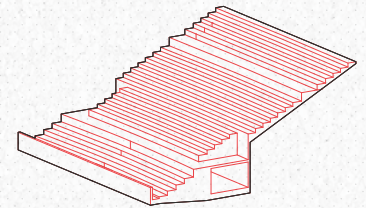


TONIGHT ON STAGE

20:00 | **Echo Reversal** (devised)
22:00 | **One Chair Left** (monologue loop)

THIS WEEK

Fri | Community Playback
Sat | "The Body Remembers" (gesture score)
Sun | Aftercare Cabaret



PSYCHODRAMA SCHEDULE

12:00 – Solo Room Open
14:00 – Group Circle (drop-in)
17:00 – Therapist Warmup

Ask for a yellow badge.
You can:
Watch
Participate
Leave whenever

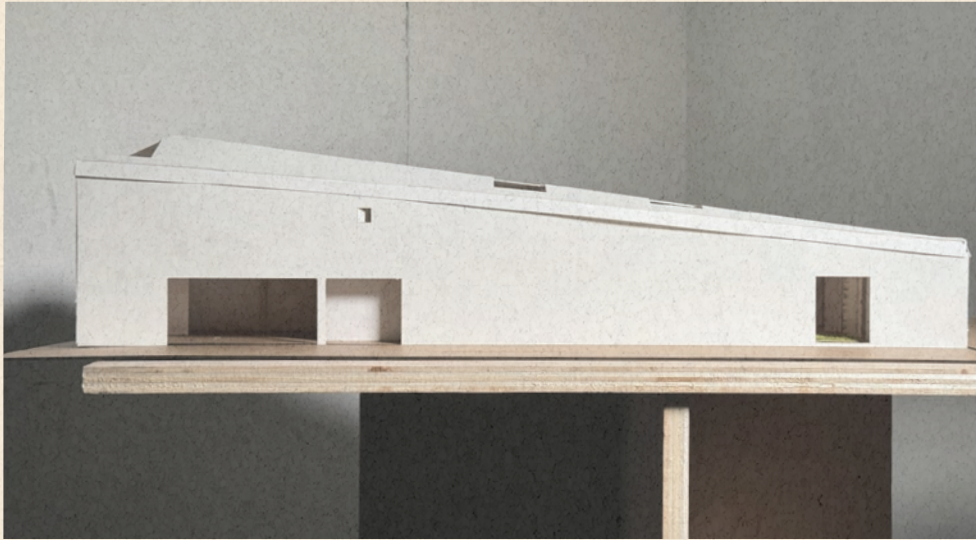
→ CONNECT WITH A THERAPIST

- What is Psychodrama?
- Getting Started
- Upcoming Performances
- Aftercare Resources



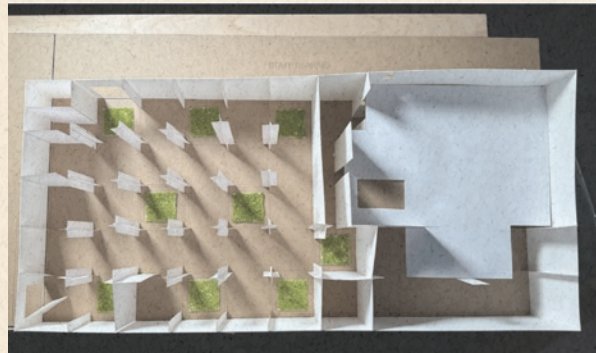
CLINIC CASE STUDY - 1/4 STUDY MODEL

Chiyodanomori Dental Clinic by Hironaka Ogawa

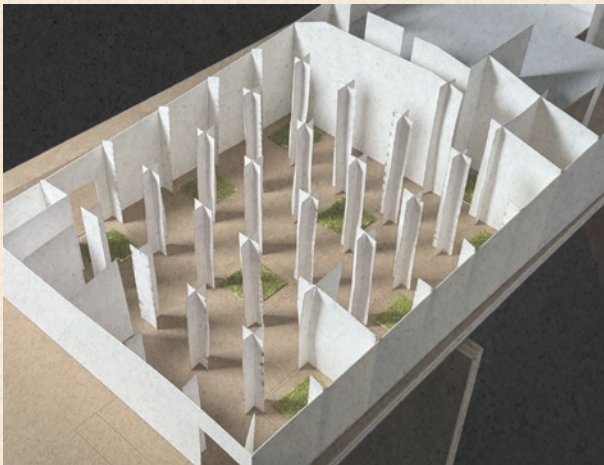


CONTEXT:

This is a dental clinic accompanied with a housing project. The conditions required were: to make the clinic and housing into one building, to create three individual treatment rooms and a couple of rooms that are able to alter into treatment rooms in the future for the clinic, and to provide the treatment area wide spread feelings while keeping its privacy.



A grid of 55 squares forms a clear blueprint for the building. Each square is a functional module, with large doorways linking them together to allow for flexible configurations. Every module is assigned a specific function—whether for treatment, waiting, or other needs—yet the open connections prevent the spaces from feeling isolated.



CLINIC CASE STUDY - 1/2 STUDY MODEL

Chiyodanomori Dental Clinic by Hironaka Ogawa



1/2 STUDY MODEL OF COURTYARD SPACE

Throughout the plan, 11 strategically placed courtyards are integrated across different regions, each serving as both a divider and a gathering point by introducing natural light and facilitating varied communal interactions. The ten square courtyards are dotted around the building and are visible through square windows that match the proportions of the doorways, the courtyards windows are by surprise fixed, and with addition of a vertical puncture through the roof to enable a breath into what is normally unseen natural light.



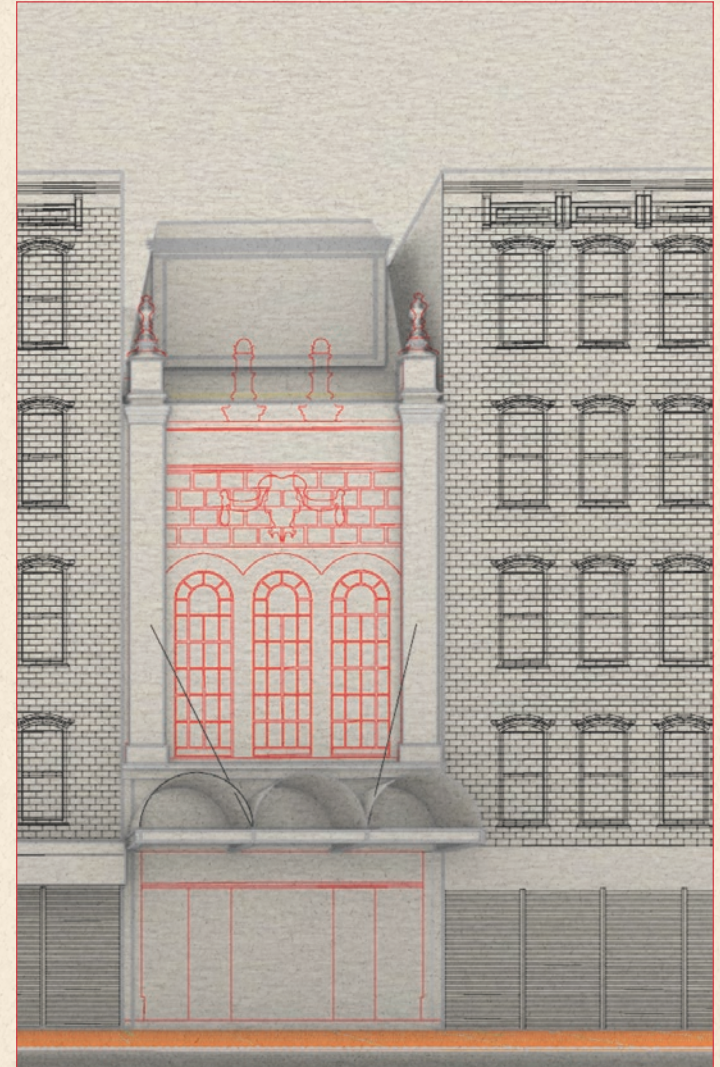
THE REHEARSAL

Entrance Design



Then: The Theater as Spectacle

The original Canal Street Theater stood as a small-scale monument to the cinematic era — with its ornate brick and terracotta facade, its vertical signage, and a projecting marquee overhang that stretched confidently over the sidewalk. More than just shelter, the marquee acted as a beacon: announcing showtimes, stars, and titles in bold lettering to anyone passing by. The building's identity was performative even at street level — its entrance dramatized by lightbulbs, angled posters, and architectural ornament meant to entice. It was never subtle. The street became a kind of foyer; anticipation began not at the door, but on the sidewalk.



Now: Rehearsal as Soft Invitation

In the reimagined facade of Rehearsal, the marquee is not resurrected — it's reinterpreted. The new entrance canopy is lighter, quieter, but still extends over the public realm to signal entry. Instead of broadcasting movies, the storefront now functions as a living table of contents: a curated display that reveals what's happening inside — workshops, performances, community talks, therapeutic sessions. Like the old theater listings, this system invites curiosity without requiring commitment. The information booth becomes a threshold space: not just where people check in, but where they glimpse the evolving story of the building. The spirit of public engagement remains — but now, it offers participation, not passive viewing.



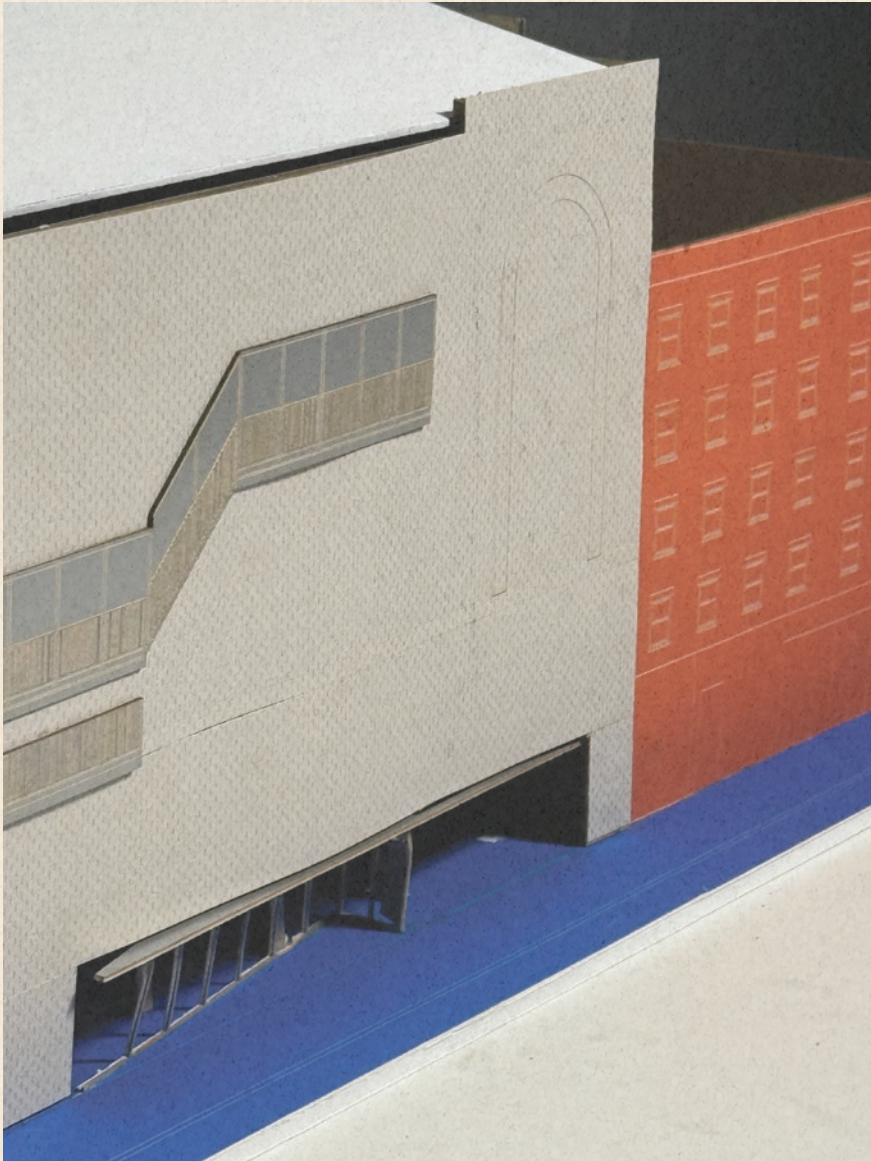
Then: The Door as Absence

No clear signage, no light, no path. A door existed, but barely. It was not a gesture toward the public, but a seam in the wall — passed daily, entered rarely.

Now: The Threshold as Welcome

This entrance now leads. It opens into the co-working zone, the open rehearsal space, the theater's more casual side. For students, for neighbors, for anyone not sure if they belong yet. Light cues, soft framing, and a visible schedule say otherwise: you do.





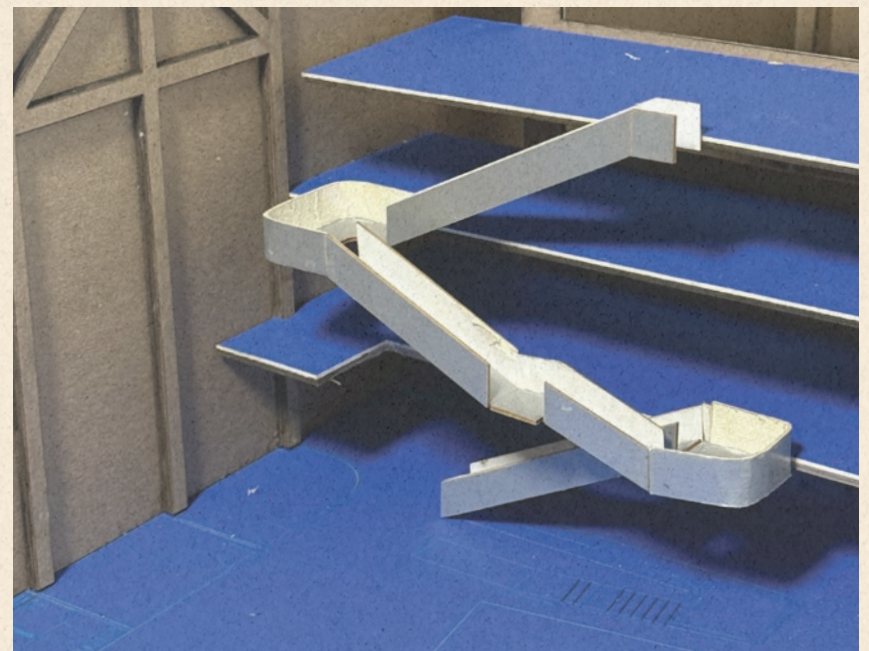
1/8th Paper Model : Ludlow Street Facade



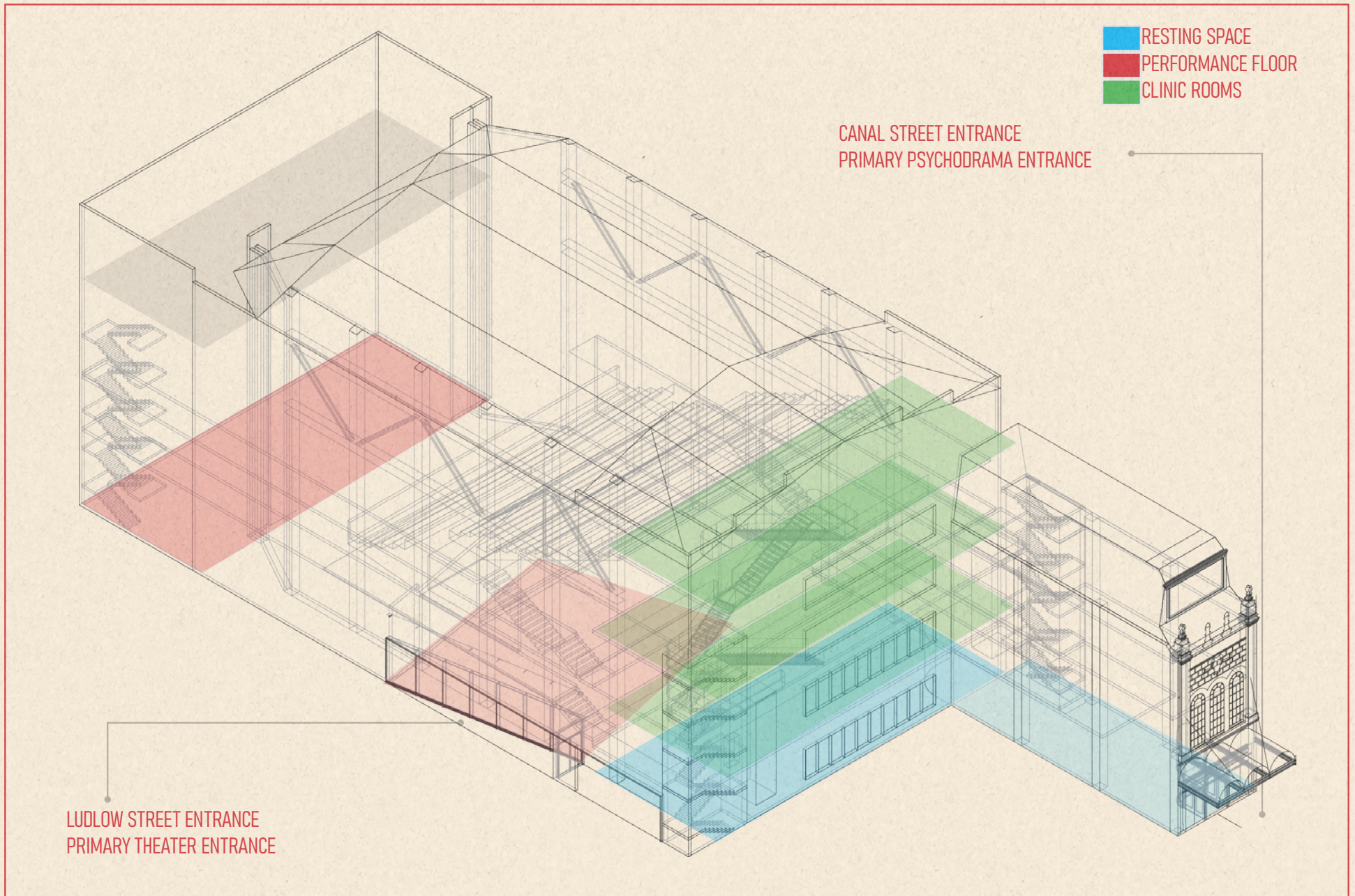
1/8th Paper Model : Canal Street Facade



1/8th Paper Model : Existing Structure and Second Facade



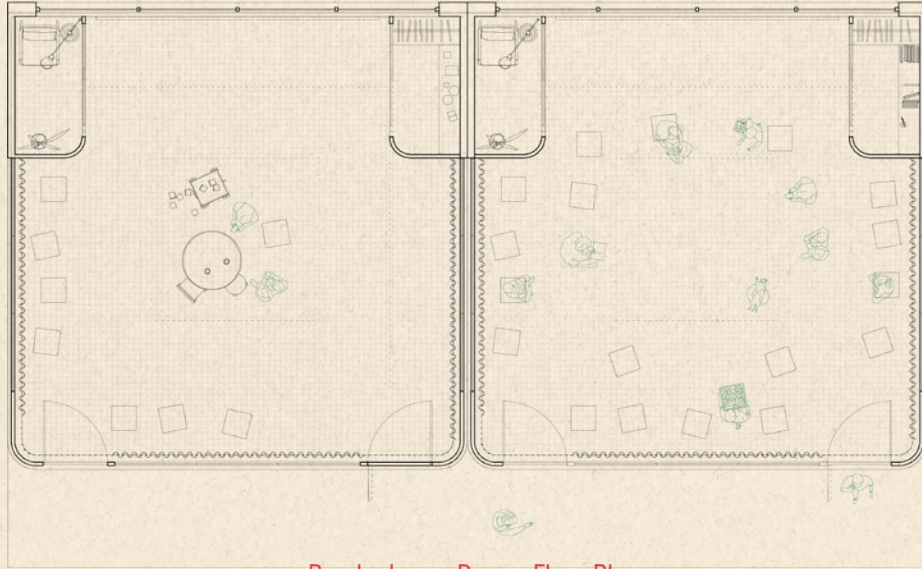
1/8th Paper Model : Existing Structure and Primary Stair



ISOMETRIC DIAGRAM OF THEATER RENOVATED

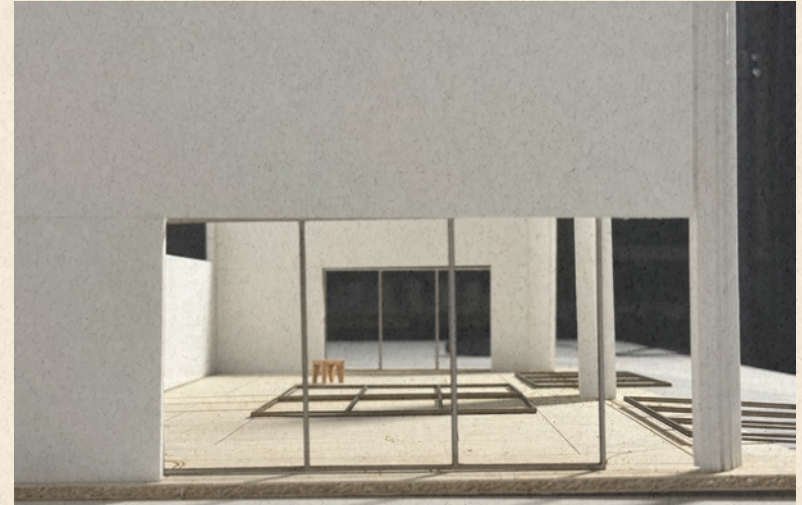
THE REHEARSAL

Entrance Design



Psychodrama Rooms Floor Plan

The rooms are multi-patient/single patient changeable, with transparency across rooms which allows director/therapist to oversee both spaces. The overhanging lights are configured with one layer of 4x4 and 2x2, which can be turned on during different settings to create intimacy if needed.



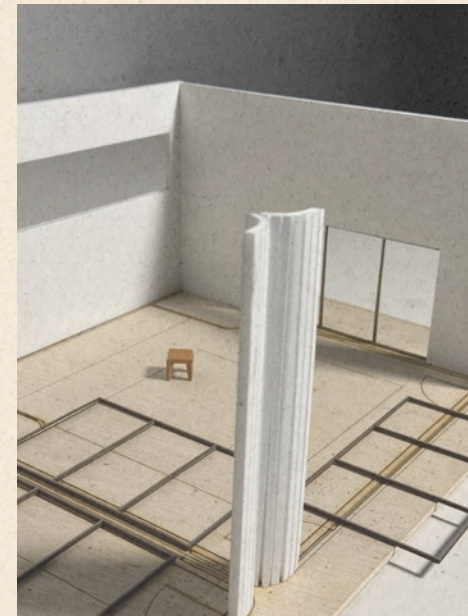
Psychodrama Rooms 1/2 Scale model

The Transparency of performance and Therapy if needed



Psychodrama Rooms Render

The Rooms are carefully placed alongside an atrium space that allows for both circulation of fresh air which is extremely important in psychodrama setting, as well as having needed natural light.



Columbia GSAPP Elective
Instructor: Jelisa Blumberg
Project Type: Groupwork
Nicholas Zhao \ Xiaoxuan Xu \ Ruiqi Ai
Spring 2025

Handed this record with care. The names are visible. The meanings are not.

Sincerely,

Director of Spatial Affairs

This correspondence has been opened for inspection by YOU.

This correspondence has been opened for inspection by YOU.

This report outlines the transformation of architecture into [REDACTED] — a process by which buildings no longer merely contain [REDACTED], but perform it. Please note: access to certain financial records, leasing agreements, and tax documents has been restricted under Section [REDACTED] of the Public Observation Act.

b7D [REDACTED] b7C [REDACTED]

International, Chicago

isles beach, Metro Tower, Kolkata

700 Fifth Avenue Wall Street

assets located at strategic coordinates, including but not limited to:

PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION DAY STATION

Power Has an Address
725 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10022
United States of Real Estate

Stage I: Economic Foundations -
Real Estate as Power
Trump Tower is built (1983)

Stage 6: Leap Claw
Politics, Publicity, P
Symbolic Economy

Trump Tower stands at the intersection of spectacle and publicity (positive or negative) feels political relevance political relevance draws tourism tourism and media generate economic return.

Stage 5: Capitalism
Controversy
Contested Landmark

The tower becomes a feedback machine: politics and capital produce each other.

The building becomes both criticized and revered— attracting protests, selfies, their prices.

Dubai pleasure (read as lust) is the archived era becomes both literal and symbolic branding—selfie by the Trump image.

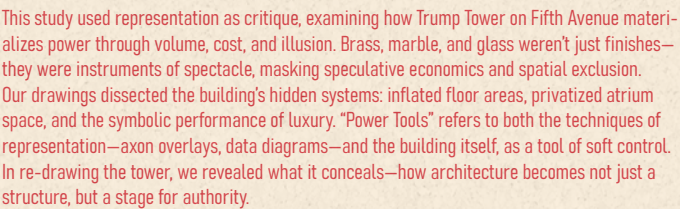
The tower becomes a tourist site—visitors come not just to shop but to

- Gift shops sell political memorabilia.
- Food courts cater to curiosity-seekers.
- Architecture as destination.
- Political theater blends into consumer behavior.

Stage 4: Tourist Commodity
Post-Election
Commercialization

Stage 2: Spectacle and Brand Amplification Media Persona Emerges

Stage 2: Political Platform
Architecture as PUBLICITY
2016 Campaign & President



Across from the United Nations, a wall of glass rises. It dominates behind the skyline. As people wander, thinking of death, I carry them through and out to others, and not just a place before. It's a relief. I come to sets of reflections that make sense in place right. One more, many are



The number for the bank's Another for the office in 2007, the building was worth one-half a billion—until it wasn't. The space sits at the heart of Wall Street, but it plays a different game. The building becomes a character: it's a financial-futures coliseum and the arena of risk for the bank. The structure doesn't move, but the numbers around it do.



Warren's in fact's answer to the global Pump & Dump Energy controversy, sustainable waterworks luxury packaged as profit. It presents an option - but only for a few. The rest see the bill come from the street, inside, outside, their water's soluble dust, believe. We're just a building. It's a message about who belongs, and who doesn't.

[illegible]

READINGS

Borio, Géraldine & Caroline Wuthrich. Hong Kong In-Between & Option Value and Storefront Vacancy in New York City

An open-air living room

Dry cat food in a dish, a handmade cook's cap, a warm half-eaten bowl of noodles. With more and more presence of daily life, we started to feel more relaxed.

Further down, a wall clock at the correct time and a daily wall calendar with the previous day's page duly torn away. We soon realize that a clock and a calendar will exist in almost every lane and alley we will wander through. We may not always see the person whose items these are, but we sense a living system.

Further along, under a blue tarpaulin, t-shirts on hangers, a mirror on a tin wall, three toothbrushes in a cup, a small bonsai. Does someone really live here? We see a worn sofa, a mah-jong table with four chairs of unequal height, and we imagine the clicking of the tiles.

We start believing, like archaeologists, that these spaces can tell us more about the story of the city and its successive traces of evolution.

It intrigues us that these domestic activities happen in an open space of a massive city that can be so impenetrable—as if a routine Hong Kong day is so intense, so full, almost larger than life, that it cannot be contained within the walls of people's small homes. As if the extra moments of life have been pushed outdoors.

Hong Kong is largely a city without vandalism—who would want to destroy one's own living room?



"An open-air living room" – Streets as Extensions of Domestic Space

Local business storefronts are exactly the functional "furnitures" of the urban living space that extend within your neighborhood.

a city needs active storefronts to serve the rhythms of everyday life.



The city of economy (part 2)

In nature, nothing survives by chance, sentimentality does not exist, and each part exists to maintain the whole. Nature is frugal and equilibrium is the supreme judge. Natural selection has no mercy, and evolution balances needs and conditions.

These rules of nature also prevail in the urban jungle, and perhaps the last remaining fertile land of the city is the in-between spaces. Like giant leaves, tarpaulins extend and retract according to sun and rain, but disappear by night when the ephemeral micro-shops are all packed up to leave room for a restaurant's outdoor terrace. In a narrow lane, a beetle-cupboard opens its carapace without disturbing the flow of pedestrians: a micro-shop might only need a width of 29cm to stock a range of shoes.

Design in the micro-layer does not follow aesthetic considerations but balances function and availability. Far from being informal, the appropriation reflects a precise interpretation of the context. Each construction is individually adapted to the specific conditions in an economy of space, material, and means. Each construction is built to be used and nothing is standardized. This approach results in a kind of aesthetic, a sincerity of form that is designed from within and therefore reflects its 'owner'. Each detail is carefully considered and is therefore sophisticated.

The designs found in the back lanes are unique because they follow pragmatic rules of economy, lightness, and adaptability, not rules of trends, fashion, or aesthetics. The designs are from the colloquial, the local, and create an identity true to Hong Kong.

Just as design at the micro scale is pragmatic, the same approach is found at the macro scale—the two co-exist and co-benefit. The macro/micro relationship is one of reciprocity. As architects and designers, we can learn from this attitude. In order to design for this city, we have to understand the rules in order to work with them.

A nail salon in a converted apartment, a pop-up dumpling shop in an alleyway, or a hardware store stacked with goods spilling onto the sidewalk

These are urban adaptations that exist because they are needed, not because they fit a master plan



emergency policies dictated which businesses could remain open, who received financial aid, and how commercial landlords adjusted lease agreements.

at land division and ownership. The government owns the land in Hong Kong and gives developers a lease. Private access to public land—including the back lanes—is ambiguous, and ownership unclear, admits a senior surveyor with the Lands Department. Back lanes are fragmented pieces of land: some parts are private and remain with the owner of the lease, and some are given back to the government. Thus, the management and maintenance of the spaces are also unclear.

Yet this situation is set to change—the process of larger buildings occupying several lots is now in force. The government might soon be relieved of these lanes seen as 'black spots' too difficult to control, as cracks in a polished system.

Observe this notice found on a metal panel in a back lane in North Point: "This rear lane used to be an environmental hygiene black spot. With the support of the Eastern District Council, Government departments carried out extensive improvement work here in 2004 under the Team Clean initiatives. Your support and co-operation are vital to maintaining the environmental hygiene condition in this rear lane."

The government thus might favour official public spaces because it can control those spaces. A long list of rules—printed on metal panels bolted in the ground—stands at the entrance of every urban park, square, and promenade in Hong Kong, and at every barbecue site, beach, and pier. Forbidden activities vary, from playing mah-jong, smoking, hanging laundry, having a map, feeding birds, skateboarding, or playing with a ball. As back lanes are hidden and spread out all over the city, those activities can happen there, unseen; and the over-regulation of public spaces might explain why they do happen there. The many rules of one void seem to influence the other void. What is interesting is that because of the unclear status of the back lanes, officially forbidden activities are largely tolerated.

It seems that another set of rules prevails in back lanes: a consensus among neighbours. Self-regulated and horizontal, the rules are unwritten, require interaction, and exemplify a micro-scale society.

In fact, unwritten rules always emerge from a culture and the context. One must sense them and exercise personal judgment. Far from creating chaos, these unwritten rules—as opposed to written rules—can encourage people to behave with sensitivity and responsibility. In other words, like human beings, along with this sense of freedom and responsibility, however, is also a sense of impermanence and lack of ownership. With the uncertainty of what may be permitted in edge public spaces, little is built for the long term. Some improvements to back lane structures are undertaken, but the day-to-day modifications might disappear, be removed, or be deemed illegal; therefore, micro-shops that might have been operating for over 40 years might still exhibit a certain 'unfinished' makeshift aesthetic, as if continually under renovation, as if continually unstable. Yet, also continually created.

Spaces that are adaptable to changing needs tend to survive despite economic shifts, suggesting that appropriation leads to longevity, even in unofficial spaces.

Public areas receive continuous attention through sanitation campaigns and urban renewal projects, while commercial storefronts are left to market dynamics, leading to long-term vacancies.

How does regulation ensure spaces are never abandoned, can private spaces remain healthy and autonomous?

Who Dictates the conditions? What are the primary motives for the "player"

Abstract

Why do storefronts remain empty for more than a year in some of the world's highest-rent retail districts? Landlords with vacancies derive option value from two sources of uncertainty. First, increasing downstream retail demand may drive up market rents tomorrow. Second, different tenants may have different willingness to pay for the same space, creating an incentive for landlords to wait for a particularly high rent offer. High move-in costs, search frictions, and high contract dissolution costs for landlords amplify this option value. We estimate the model parameters by matching quarterly vacancy rates, lease-up rates, and tenant exit rates from a comprehensive, high-frequency storefront tracking survey, combined with micro data on commercial leases. In a counterfactual exercise, we find that reducing the variance of the match quality distribution by 50% reduces long-run vacancy rates by 33% on average, while reducing the variance of the aggregate state variable has almost no effect. Finally, we use the estimated model to quantify the impact of a retail vacancy tax on long-run vacancy rates, average rents, and social welfare. Vacancies would have to generate negative externalities of \$18.72 per square foot per quarter (about 30% of average rents) to justify a 1% vacancy tax on assessed property values.

One of the most significant takeaways from Moskzowski's paper is that vacancy is not merely a symptom of economic decline but an active landlord strategy—storefronts remain vacant not because there are no tenants, but because landlords are waiting for a more profitable tenant to emerge.

Figure 4: Contractual Lease Term Distribution

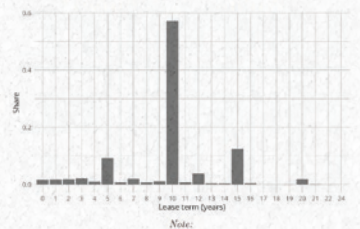
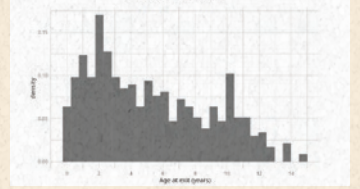


Figure 5: Lease Age at Exit (a) Empirical Distribution



TENSILE STRUCTURES

Columbia GSAPP Elective
Instructor: Robert E Marino
Project Type: Group Work
Nicholas Zhao An-Tai Lu
Fall 2024

PHASE 1

This material study began with the search for a stretchable, form-responsive membrane—a surface that could be pulled, shaped, and frozen into tension. A tensile canopy was first modeled by draping fabric over anchor points, observing how it settled under gravity. That form was then translated into a mold. Through casting, the softness of stretch became fixed: a solid memory of stress held in the cured material. The process shifted between flexible improvisation and rigid resolution—between the provisional and the permanent.



PHASE 2

The second phase focused on structural refinement. The stretched model was iterated into a pavilion defined by three points of controlled protrusion—its final geometry emerging not from a top-down plan, but from the embedded logic of tension. Rather than designing the shape, we designed the forces that shaped it. The result was not only a formal exercise, but a way to understand structure as a negotiation between material behavior and spatial intent.



HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE THEORY

Columbia GSAPP Elective

Instructor: Mark. S. Wigley

Project Type: Individual

Nicholas Zhao An-Tai Lu

Fall 2024

I. Introduction

Learning from Las Vegas, published in 1972 by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, offered a critique of modernist architecture, which had long propagated ideas such as "less is more" and "form follows function." The authors reframe architecture as an interpersonal, culturally rooted art form, challenging the austere functionalism that dominated the twentieth century. Venturi et al argues that, by ignoring ornamentation and symbolism, the modernist style frequently alienated the public and overlooked the expressive possibilities of "banal" structures. Using Las Vegas as an example, Venturi and his co-authors urged architects to examine the significance of commercial vernacular, popular culture, and symbolic "decorations" in their designs.

This essay argues that Learning from Las Vegas functions as a theoretical manifesto for postmodernism, the theory stems from a bottom-up study that hopes to encourage architectural-thinkers to embrace cultural symbols, pluralism, and accessibility. Venturi makes a case for architecture that resonates with ordinary people, acknowledges diverse aesthetics, and reflects the realities of everyday life. The analysis will follow several lines of inquiry: first, by contextualizing the text within the architectural debates of the 1960s and 1970s; second, by breaking down the authors' central arguments, particularly the symbolic distinction between Ducks and Decorated Sheds; and finally, by evaluating the text's rhetorical strategies and visual techniques, which play a crucial role in challenging and reorienting architectural thought.

This essay demonstrates that Learning from Las Vegas is not merely a critique of modernism but a transformative theoretical work that has reshaped our understanding of architecture's cultural and communicative potential.

II. Context and Audience

Learning from Las Vegas occurred at a period when modernism dominated architectural discourse, with its stern aesthetics and rejection of ornamentation. In the beginning of the 20th century, prominent figures including Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius pioneered a modernist movement that emphasized functional purity, abstraction, and rejection of historical formal precedence. However, by the 1960s, there had grown dissatisfaction with modernism's perceived monotony and elitism. Critics challenged whether modernism's formal austerity was congruent with the social and cultural realities of the time.

In the late 1960s, Yale's School of Art and Architecture emerged as an essential hub of political engagement and postmodern critique, cultivating a climate of cultural radicalism. The Learning from Las Vegas studio-seminar, directed by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour in 1968, became one of the school's most significant undertakings, impacting architectural discussion for decades.

At the same time, under department chair Charles W. Moore, students became very engaged in urban research and experimenting with media technologies. It might be said that because of these initiatives, Architecture theory has pointed toward new directions for the field.

The primary intent of investigating Las Vegas, which is an amalgamation of new transportation, commercialism and functionalism, was to focus on Las Vegas as a device or playing ground to constitute a critique of modernist philosophy, which focused on the use of symbols as agents of cultural change. Venturi believed Learning from Las Vegas as a model of opposition, arguing that the ideal environment for this critique was provided by Las Vegas's commercial strip that was both symbolic and cultural in which the architecture was meant to be culturally embedded.

Unlike modernist projects that emphasized functional abstraction, Las Vegas's architecture was unapologetically commercial, symbolic, and accessible. Venturi and Scott Brown recognized in Las Vegas's sprawling signage and commercialized buildings a model of "ordinary" architecture that communicated directly with the public. By studying Las Vegas, they sought to dismantle the binary between "high" and "low" culture, positioning popular symbols and commercial signs as legitimate architectural elements. This reframing challenged modernist orthodox by presenting architecture as a cultural artifact that could reflect popular aesthetics and engage the everyday experiences of the public.

The intended audience for Learning from Las Vegas was initially architectural professionals and academics. However, the book's accessible writing style and extensive visual material helped it reach a wider audience. Unlike the abstract theoretical texts of deconstructivist theorists like Peter Eisenman or Derrida, which required a high level of academic engagement, Learning from Las Vegas employed a simpler, direct style of language and humor to appeal to a broader readership. For example, the authors write with lightheartedness about the exaggerated commercialism of Las Vegas, describing its signs as the "buildings' voice," noting that, "The sign at the front is the architect's voice in the service of the program it advertises". Such straightforward language, combined with phrases like "Less is a bore," injects humor and accessibility into their critique of modernist austerity. By using visual evidence, including photographs of Las Vegas's commercial architecture, Venturi and Scott Brown have constructed a series of arguments formulated, perhaps partially due to the nature of the theory being against the regimentation of formal-function play during the era. The intervention had by surprise made architectural discourse more inclusive, bridging the gap between theory and everyday experience.

Through its accessible critique of modernism's detachment, Learning from Las Vegas invites readers to reconsider the role of popular aesthetics and symbolism in architecture. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour advocate for a responsive architecture that resonates with the public, a stance that resonates with postmodernism's rejection of singular "truths" and its embrace of diverse perspectives. This accessible, inclusive approach not only reinforces the book's anti-modernist stance but also solidifies its place as a foundational text for postmodernism, which embraced symbolic plurality and questioned architectural hierarchies.

III. Mission and Strategic Role

The purpose of the study was to put another way to the dominant modernist paradigm and to suggest a different approach to architecture that values popular flavor, cultural context, and symbols. In the process of observing and learning from the Las Vegas commercial strip, Venturi, and his co-authors argue that this is because of the communicative power of architecture and that the very people it wants to appeal to are at odds with one another.

Venturi and his co-authors argue that modernism, in its pursuit of "pure" and functional form, neglects the communicative power of architecture and alienates the very people it aims to serve.

They highlight this critique describing the current “architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form”. They contend that buildings should be more than utilitarian structures; they should engage the public through forms that are symbolic, culturally resonant, and reflective of the lived experience.

Alongside Yale School of architecture, Venturi and the co-authors offer a completely different interpretation. The subject of their study was Las Vegas. Las Vegas is a classic sprawling city that has gone from desert to oasis in 50 years. The opportunity that pushed the city's development and its unique typology was the popularization of small automobiles; automobiles replaced walking and the space of the city changed dramatically. The scale of the city is no longer people, but cars, whom the driver and pedestrians have a completely different experience, and according to *The View from Each*, speed is the determining factor of perspective. With increased speed, human attention shifts from details to broad impressions, compelling Las Vegas's spatial symbols to register directly in the driver's perception. Thus, the protagonists of Las Vegas space are no longer buildings, but signifiers, signs of various scales written with various messages. In this case, the buildings recede to the back and the signs approach the main roadway by virtue of their efficient messaging capabilities. They are the protagonists of Las Vegas.

By its complexity and new formality of the Las Vegas commercial strip, *Learning from Las Vegas* leans on its contrast to mainstream ideology of modernist architecture, and thus generating a concurrent thesis for synthesizing a counter point towards more pragmatic architectural forms.

IV. Key Arguments and Concepts

Venturi summarized the space of Las Vegas in this way: the symbols in the space precede the forms in the space, and Las Vegas, as a system of information exchange, is the most important place in the modern architecture.

The distinction between the Duck and the Decorated Shed serves as the foundational metaphor in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour illustrate this concept by comparing Paul Rudolph's Crawford Manor with their own Guild House. In their framework, a Duck is a building where the form itself is a symbolic statement, designed to convey meaning through its architectural shape and structure. On the other hand, the Decorated Shed prioritizes function with a straightforward form, relying on external ornamentation or signage to convey its symbolic content. This approach separates structure from symbolism, allowing for both practical use and the flexibility to adapt to different contexts.

The authors describe Guild House as a quintessential Decorated Shed, where “symbolism involves ornament and is more or less dependent on explicit associations; it looks like what it is not only because of what it is but also because of what it reminds you of.” The building's ornamentation, such as its applied signage and oversized antenna, provides a direct and accessible form of communication, rooted in popular references and associations that the public can easily interpret. In contrast, Crawford Manor exemplifies the Duck, with its form embodying layers of implicit meaning. The authors note that Crawford Manor's symbolism is “different from the appliqué ornament of Guild House” and that its physiognomy creates associations through inherent characteristics like “size, texture, color, and so forth,” rather than through explicit decoration.

This contrast highlights how each building approaches symbolism: Guild House relies on external ornament to connect with the viewer, while Crawford Manor's form itself carries abstract expressionist messages, providing “layers of meaning beyond the ‘abstract expressionist’ messages derived from the inherent physiognomic characteristics of the forms.” In their embrace of the Ugly and Ordinary, the authors promote a fusion of high and low culture, arguing that architecture should reflect both elite and popular cultural values. They contend that the symbols and signs commonly dismissed as “low” culture are relevant to the everyday lives of users and should not be excluded from architectural discourse. This fusion is essential to creating spaces that are engaging, familiar, and resonant with a broad audience.

By championing the Decorated Shed, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour make a case for architecture that prioritizes clear communication with the public. They argue that architecture, like language, is a form of communication that must be accessible and relatable.

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, buildings use commercial means of communicating with the people to enter, and thus create a graphic medium which can be identified in real time, which is very obvious to the people. Especially in alert from the regiment of modernist architecture which Venturi and his co-authors argue, which shows that architecture may be expressive, humorous and culturally relevant, which are usually rejected by contemporary ideals.

V. Theory as a Mechanism for Critique

Learning from Las Vegas operates as a mechanism of critique by directly challenging the modernist architectural ideals of the 20th century. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour present their argument as a deliberate opposition to modernism's rigid prescriptions, advocating instead for the acceptance of diverse and complex elements within architecture. These elements include not only the physical structures of buildings but also their signs, neon strips, and often-overlooked utilities—features that modernism dismisses as superficial or ugly. The authors argue for their importance both explicitly, through textual analysis, and implicitly, by reflecting these values in their use of accessible language, humor, and visual strategies.

Accessible Language

By employing clear and straightforward language, Venturi and his co-authors reject the dense, abstract discourse typically associated with architectural theory. This stylistic choice aligns with their central thesis: architecture should communicate with the public rather than cater exclusively to an academic or elite audience. One compelling example is the word comparison figure between Guild House and Crawford Manor. The table juxtaposes terms like “boring” versus “interesting,” “conventional” versus “expressive,” and “ordinary” versus “extraordinary.” By pairing these descriptions side-by-side, the authors make their critique highly accessible, emphasizing the ideological differences between the two buildings. Guild House's reliance on “conventional technology” and “old words with new meanings” reflects its pragmatic, communicative approach, while Crawford Manor's association with “abstract expressionism” and “revolutionary” forms highlights its prioritization of formal abstraction over user engagement. This visual and linguistic comparison allows even readers unfamiliar with architectural terminology to recognize the divide between modernist abstraction and Venturi's call for culturally resonant, symbolic architecture.

Humor and Irony

The book's humorous and ironic tone further strengthens its critique of modernism. By embracing the playful and kitschy aspects of Las Vegas, the authors highlight the cultural richness that modernist austerity often ignores. For instance, they humorously critique modernist rigidity with remarks like, “Billboards are almost all right. Naked children have never played in our fountains, and I. M. Pei will never be happy on Route 66” . This witty statement contrasts the romanticized purity of modernist architecture—symbolized by I. M. Pei's pristine ideals—with the unapologetically functional and vernacular landscape of Route 66, where billboards dominate. The humor reveals how modernist architects dismiss these environments as “vulgar” while failing to recognize their communicative power and cultural vibrancy. Venturi's comment also evokes a sense of irony, as the Route 66 landscape's messiness and accessibility arguably align more closely with the needs of a democratic society than the rigid formality of modernism.

This argument is extended further when Venturi reflects on the learning process, stating, “There is a perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward”. Here, Venturi uses playful language to subvert modernist ideals of progress, which often dismiss historical and vernacular elements as regressive or irrelevant. By invoking the idea of “looking downward,” Venturi highlights the value of engaging with the “low”—parking lots, neon signs, and strip malls—as essential elements of contemporary life. Another example of humor and irony appears in the statement, “Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way,

which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things” . The irony lies in Venturi’s subtle jab at Le Corbusier’s utopian vision of razing and rebuilding cities like Paris. By contrasting this with the banal and “tolerant” parking lot, Venturi pokes fun at modernism’s grandiosity and inability to appreciate the commonplace. This lighthearted critique underscores their radical yet democratic alternative: embracing ordinary landscapes rather than imposing rigid ideals. These examples demonstrate how humor and irony serve as vital tools in their critique, making their arguments both accessible and memorable.

These examples underscore how humor and irony function not merely as stylistic tools but as a strategic critique of modernism’s refusal to acknowledge the richness of ordinary environments. The authors take modernism’s seriousness “down a notch”. This lighthearted yet pointed tone ensures their message lands with readers beyond architects.

Visual Elements

Venturi and coauthors use of visual elements to curate and help emphasize architecture is not confined to its own form but operates within larger systems of cultural and spatial meaning. By progressing from large-scale urban introspection to building details and traditionally non-architectural elements like signs, the visuals aid in stripping down the contextual layers of Las Vegas strip.

At the urban scale, Venturi goes into great lengths and detail with diagrams like “Scale-Speed-Symbol” to analyze how signage adapts to the speed and visibility demands of a car-oriented society. These visuals map the placement and scale of signs in relation to motion, showing how Las Vegas transcends traditional spatial forms to create a functional communication system. Supporting this are the Strip maps and the detailed map of “written words” visible from the road, which catalog the sheer volume of messages that make up the urban fabric of the Strip. These visuals reinforce how Las Vegas prioritizes contextual visibility over formal architectural purity, addressing the realities of speed, movement, and commercial competition.

Similarly, the illumination levels and night signage diagrams showcase the Strip’s reliance on light as a medium of communication. At night, signage becomes architecture, transforming the urban environment into a glowing, dynamic landscape of symbols. This challenges the modernist disdain for ornamentation, demonstrating that light and signage are integral to creating spatial and cultural meaning.

At the building scale, comparative visuals such as the Guild House and Crawford Manor tableemphasize how ornament and signage communicate meaning more effectively than abstract formalism. Terms like “boring” versus “interesting” and “conventional” versus “expressive” highlight how Guild House’s pragmatic design engages its audience, while Crawford Manor’s sculptural abstraction ignores cultural context. This reinforces the authors’ argument that architecture should connect with its users rather than alienate them.

Finally, at the smallest and most introspective scale, the book’s black-and-white photographs of signs, such as those of Stardust and Circus Circus, strip away color to focus on the semiotic power of words and shapes. Signs here are not ornamental afterthoughts but essential elements that define the experience of the Strip, functioning as cultural symbols and pragmatic tools of communication. Through this careful layering of visual elements—from macro-scale urban diagrams to micro-scale photographs and maps—Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour demonstrate that architecture does not exist in isolation. It is part of a larger spatial and cultural system where contextual elements like light, signage, and infrastructure play critical roles. These visuals dismantle modernist ideals of autonomous form, showing instead that meaning arises from the dynamic interaction between architecture and its urban, cultural, and symbolic context.

VI. Assumptions and Problematics

Learning from Las Vegas operates on several key assumptions that underpin its critique of modernism and its support for a symbolic, culturally engaged architecture. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour contend that architecture’s role extends beyond mere function, positing that buildings should act as communicative agents within their cultural contexts. They assert that architecture “as shelter with symbols on it has a long and honorable history,” pointing to historical examples where applied ornamentation carried significant cultural meaning. The authors use Las Vegas’s neon signage as a contemporary parallel, emphasizing that these symbols communicate effectively with their audience in ways that modernist abstraction often fails to achieve. By championing ornamentation and applied symbolism, they challenge modernism’s tendency to dismiss such elements as “superficial,” reframing them as integral to an architecture that resonates with its cultural and social milieu.

A foundational assumption in Learning from Las Vegas is the inherent cultural value of popular aesthetics, often dismissed as “tacky” or “commercial.” By analyzing the Las Vegas Strip, the “non-traditional” elements of architecture, such as neon signs and commercial facades that extend beyond the building itself, Venturi and Scott Brown suggest that these elements serve as culturally meaningful expressions that resonate with the public through shared visual language. However, this emphasis on popular aesthetics also introduces several challenges. While these “low” elements democratize design by engaging a broader audience, they risk reducing architecture to mere spectacle or surface-level appeal. The emphasis on ornamentation and symbolism may sometimes overshadow considerations of deeper functional and structural needs.

At the same time, Learning from Las Vegas problematizes key modernist principles, particularly the notion that architectural form should be dictated solely by function. By rejecting this ideal, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour critique the minimalist purity espoused by figures like Mies van der Rohe, who famously declared, “Less is more.” The authors argue that this reductionist approach often strips architecture of its cultural relevance, reducing it to abstract and disengaged forms. They propose instead that architecture embrace complexity and contradiction, recognizing the richness found in ornamentation and symbolic communication, as demonstrated by their analysis of the Las Vegas Strip and its visually dynamic elements.

Moreover, Las Vegas represents a uniquely condensed and complex cultural phenomenon, making it difficult to generalize its principles to other contexts. The city’s extravagant signs and facades arise from specific historical, economic, and social conditions that are not universally replicable. This singularity underscores another limitation: while Learning from Las Vegas critiques modernist formal expressionism, it inadvertently establishes a new framework for examining architecture that remains tied to the formalist lens it seeks to challenge. The reliance on visual and symbolic analysis may leave out broader socio-economic and regional considerations, raising questions about its applicability beyond the unique case of Las Vegas. As a result, the book’s opposition to modernism, while compelling, risks remaining incomplete by failing to provide alternative strategies for addressing these broader dimensions of architectural practice.

The assumptions and problematics within Learning from Las Vegas reflect its dual role as a critique and a manifesto. The authors celebrate the richness of cultural symbols and vernacular expression, challenging the austerity of modernist design. Yet, by embracing the commercial and the everyday, the book also raises critical questions about architecture’s role in navigating between inclusivity and depth, symbolism and substance.

VII. Conclusion

Learning from Las Vegas stands as a sharp critique of modernism, advocating for design that values symbolism, everyday aesthetics, and cultural resonance over purity and abstraction. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour push back against the elitist undertones of modernist ideals, making way for postmodernism’s embrace of pluralism and irony. The theory repositions architecture as not only a functional craft but also a culturally embedded symbol with social relevance. Even today, Learning from Las Vegas challenges architectural practice, reminding us that buildings are cultural artifacts that could venture beyond the simplicity of form and functionality.

CODING FOR SPATIAL PURPOSES

Columbia GSAPP Elective

Instructor: Celeste Layne

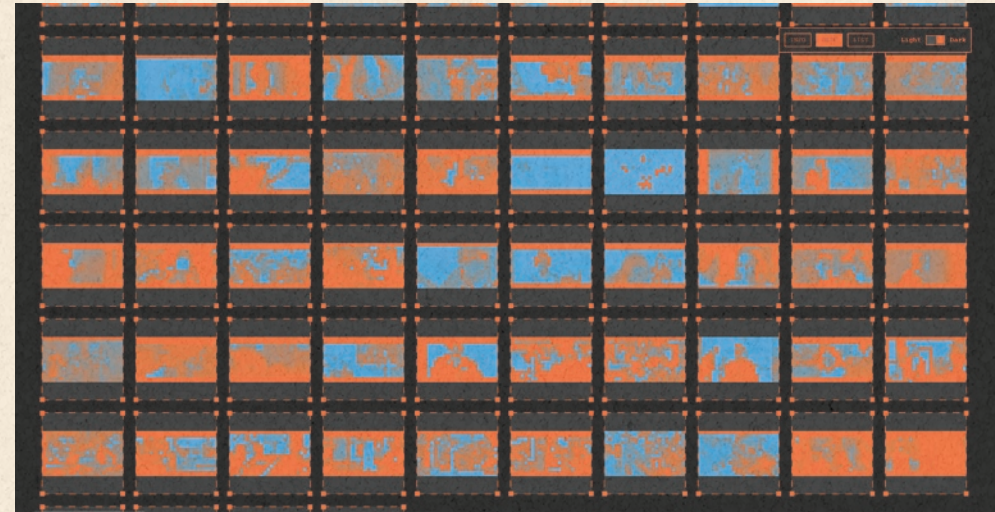
Project Type: Individual

Fall 2024



Quotalog.com

This website acts as a searchable catalog of movie quotes, organized by thematic groups and presented through an interactive grid of obscured film stills. Each image begins pixelated, holding back its content until the user hovers over it, revealing the corresponding scene. This gesture makes viewing an act of engagement—one must move, pause, and look closer. The interface is minimal but responsive, with controls for list/grid views, embedded metadata, and dynamic browsing. In this way, the design treats interaction not as ornament, but as a spatial mechanism—inviting discovery and layering cinematic memory through motion.



NIGHT MODE

The second layer of experience is introduced through a night and day mode, toggled at the top right of the interface. In night mode, the background shifts to black, with orange accents and glowing interface text inspired by film leader tape and analog editing systems. This mode transforms the atmosphere: reducing glare, enhancing contrast, and recontextualizing the grid as a cinematic surface. By shifting the visual temperature, the site echoes the moods of the films it contains—daylight for browsing, night mode for projection. The toggle becomes not just a feature, but a transition—bridging two temporal states within the same digital space.



CLICK FOR TIME STAMP

The final function integrates a clickable reveal mechanism, allowing users to open a full-size still from the film at the exact timestamp of the quote. Paired with the corresponding dialogue line, this moment becomes both cinematic and archival. Each click links language to image, time to memory—transforming quotes from abstract references

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refactored-octo-guacamole [Administrator]
ejs final-project # style.css final-project index.html final-project JS image-sort.js final-project # styl ...

final-project > index.html > html > body > script
1 <!DOCTYPE html>
2 <html lang="en">
3 <head>
4   <meta charset="UTF-8">
5   <meta name="viewport" content="width=device-width, initial-scale=1.0">
6   <title>Quote Catalog</title>
7   <link rel="stylesheet" href="style.css">
8 </head>
9 <body>
10   <!-- Function Bar -->
11   <div class="function-bar">
12     <div class="grid-list">
13       <button class="info-btn" id="info-btn">INFO</button>
14       <a href="index.html"><button id="grid-view" class="active">GRID</button><
15       <a href="list.html"><button id="list-view">LIST</button></a>
16     </div>
17     <div class="theme-container">
18       <span class="theme-label">Light</span>
19       <label class="switch">
20         <input type="checkbox" id="theme-toggle">
21         <span class="slider"></span>
22       </label>
23       <span class="theme-label">Dark</span>
24     </div>
25   </div>
26
27   <!-- Info Container -->
28   <div class="info-container" id="info-container">
29     <h3>Welcome to the Quote Catalog</h3>
30     <p>Click on an image to view details. Hover to see alternate visuals. Switch
31   </div>
32
33   <!-- Main Content -->
34   <main>
35     <div class="grid-container" id="catalog">
36       <!-- Images will be dynamically loaded here -->
37     </div>
38   </main>
39
40 </div>
41 </main>
42
43 <!-- Lightbox Structure -->
44 <div id="lightbox-modal" class="lightbox-modal" style="display: none;">
45   <div class="lightbox-content">
46     <div class="lightbox-header">
47       <span id="lightbox-category">Category: N/A</span>
48       <span id="lightbox-close" class="lightbox-close">&times;</span>
49     </div>
50     <img id="lightbox-image" src="" alt="Lightbox Image">
51     <div class="lightbox-details">
52       <p><strong>Film Name:</strong> <span id="lightbox-movie-name">N/A</sp

```

JAVA HTML CSS Process

Built entirely from scratch, this project comprises over 20,000 lines of HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, coded individually without the use of templates or libraries. Every function—from hover reveals to theme toggles to content filtering—is hardcoded, allowing full control over how information is loaded, sorted, and rendered. Behind the minimal interface lies a carefully structured logic system, designed to make interaction both intuitive and mathematically efficient.

END
2024-2025