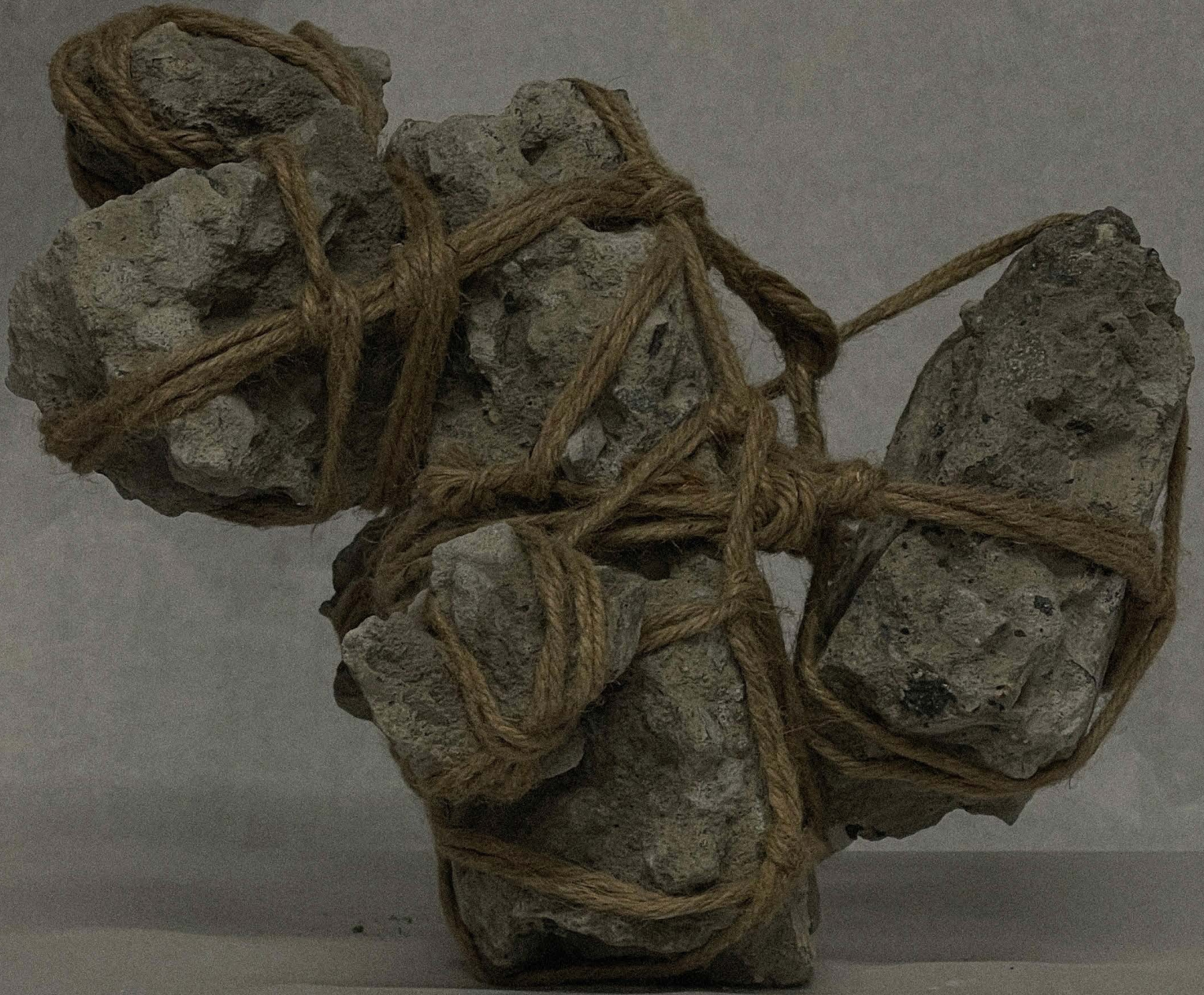


Ways of touching



Rilka Li

Three years at Columbia GSAPP have shown me the way to these questions, the questions I feel my way through in the pages that follow, the asking—and the living—of which which may yet take a lifetime.

What do we find when we touch our environment, buildings, and land, and allow ourselves to be changed by what we find?

Can I learn to tend carefully to what exists, on scales material and intimate, and civic and historical? Can I learn to honor what already is?

Could we think of the body as the original medium of knowing? How does a body know place, history, and memory?

How do two beings, two objects, two surfaces, two worlds impose themselves upon one another: interweave, merge, yet maintain difference?

What does it mean to live together, to live with an ecological philosophy?

How do I keep cultivating a quality of sensitivity, looking and listening closely, deep and sustained attention?

What can architecture do?

What should architecture do?

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Through Home

Through Home considers home as not a singular place but a gradient of intimacy and belongingness, within which we can each begin to construct a resilient sense of self and personal identity. Our project hybridizes familiar high-density housing typologies to generate a living circulation, so that 'the way home' becomes a journey integrating public and civic life with the increasingly intimate spaces of community, family, and the individual.

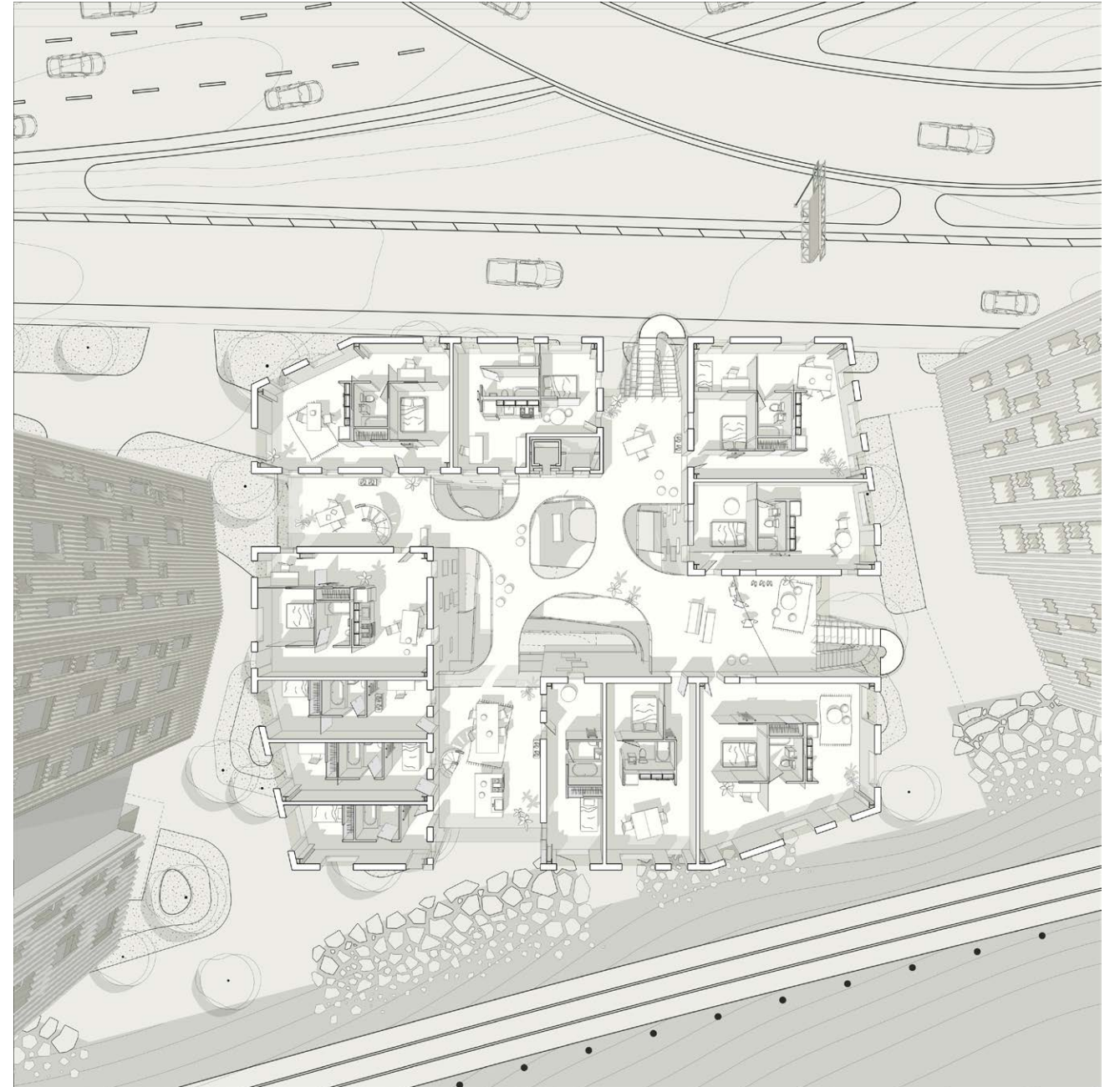
From the scale of the site to that of the bedroom, levels of interiority and privacy are calibrated to allow for multiple and nested spheres of belonging.

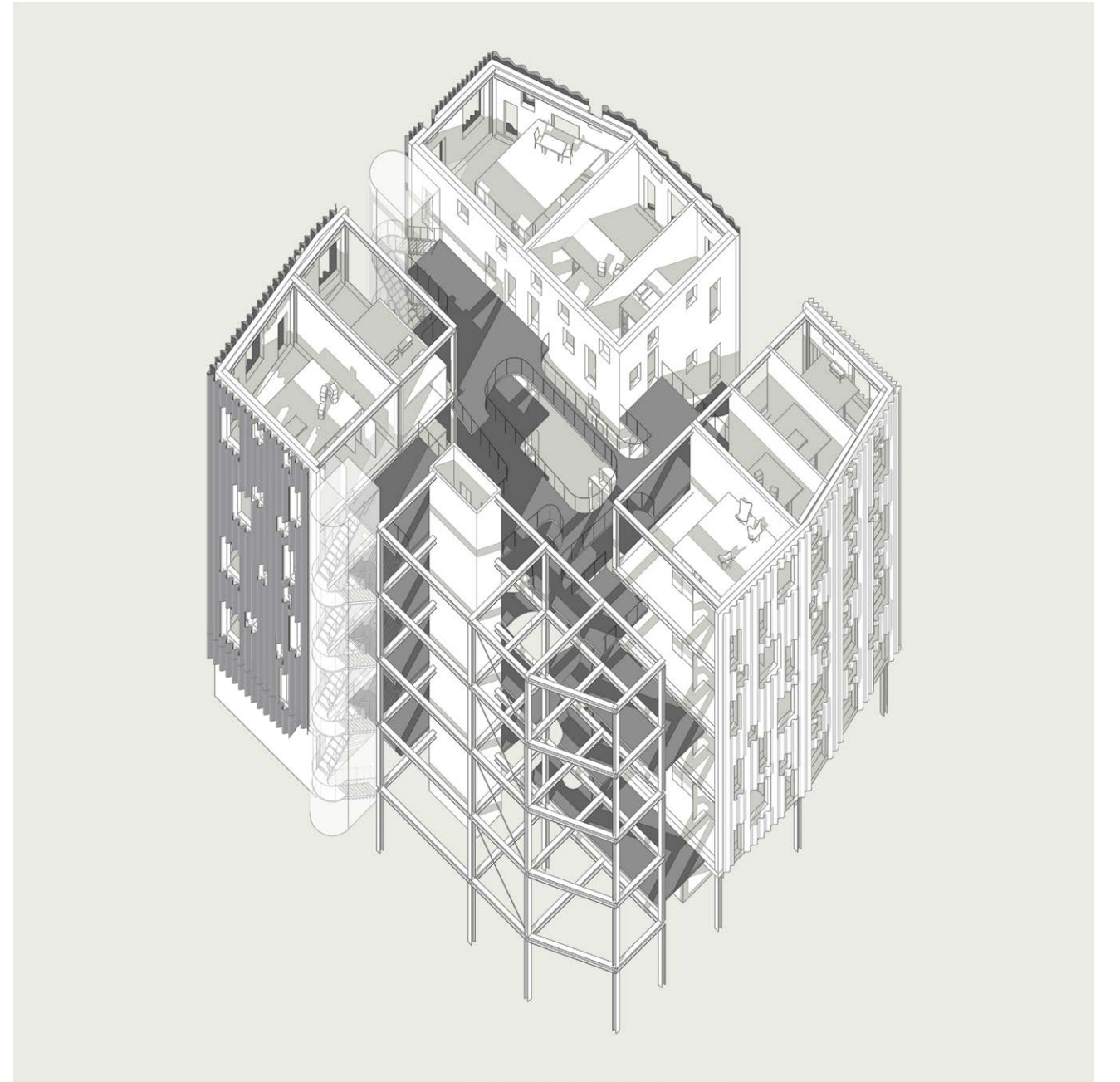
Every microtower houses a combination of microunits, studios, 1-bedrooms, and 2-bedrooms. Double-height terraces connect the microtowers, offering neighbors a shared living room and kitchen, and giving every unit an interior front porch on the way home.

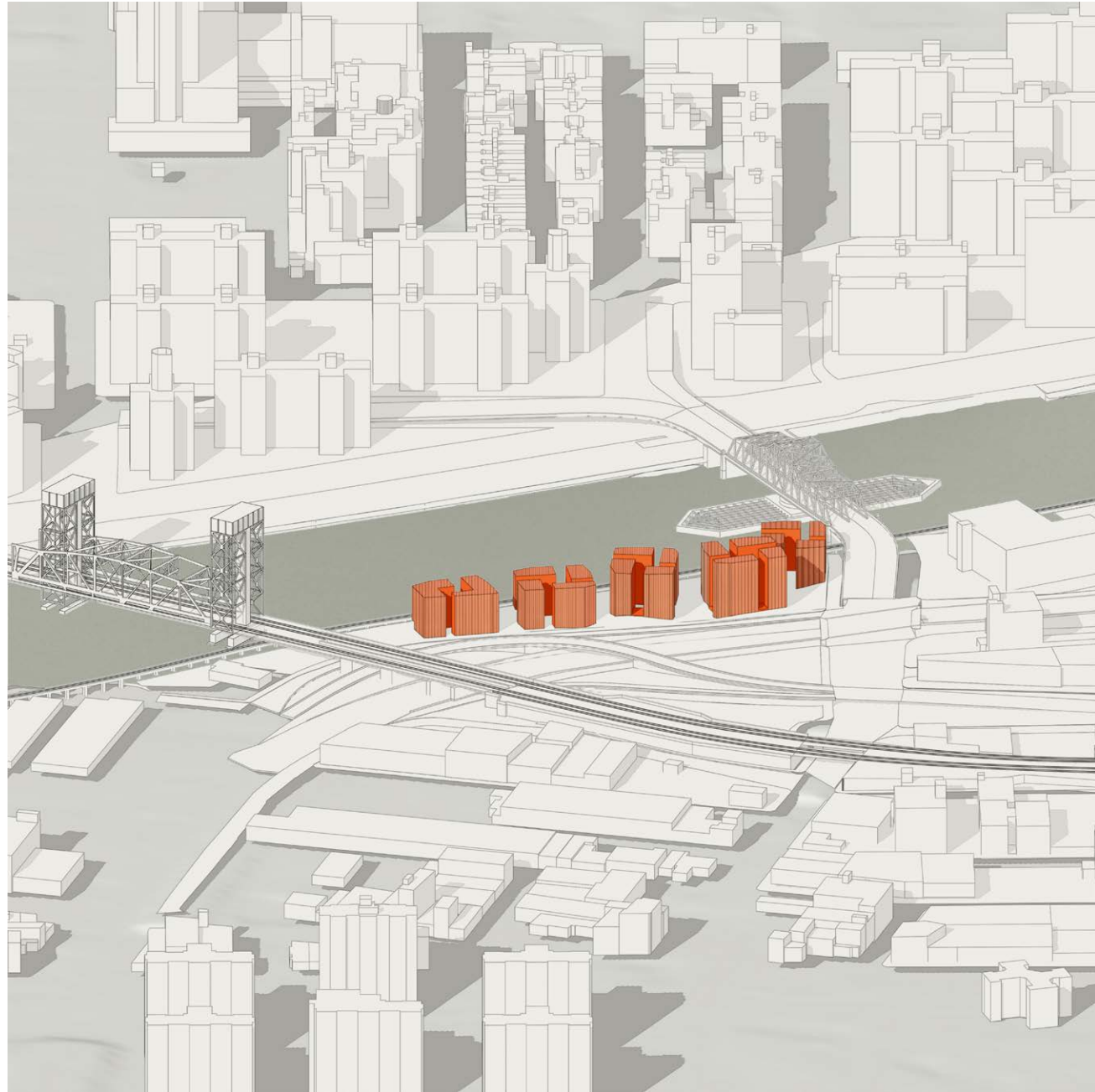
Within the units a central wet core houses the bathroom and kitchen fixtures, which then define the living zones around them.

Core III Studio
Mimi Hoang
Fall 2022

In collaboration with
Mohamed Ismail









Study model of one residential unit in Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza's Torres Blancas project outside Madrid, Spain. Exterior load-bearing walls and a concrete core allow for resident-specified interior walls and flexibility in plan.

Vacavillage

Six single-family houses in Vacaville, California currently have their neighboring backyards separated, like every house in the D.R. Horton Southtown development, with fencing. The fence reproduces the paranoia of the car-dominated suburb, with its harsh duplication of the planar edges of the houses.

I propose removing the exterior cladding from the ground floor of these six houses, revealing the wood framing. The 'accessory dwelling units' spanning across the backyards then become necessary structural elements as they brace the laterally weakened houses.

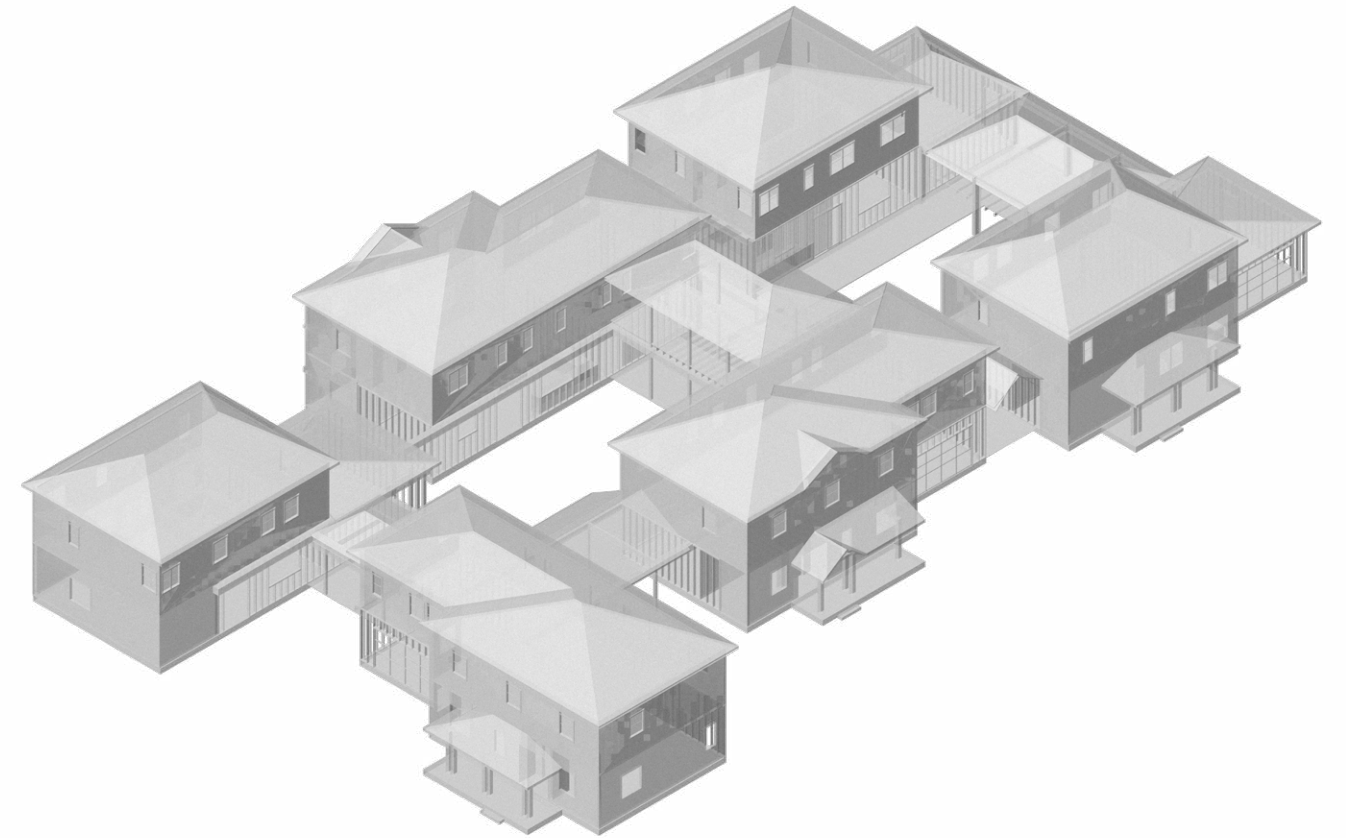
The residents' experience is softened into a gradient: from individual to collective, personal to communal, filtered and diffused by the exposed wood framing, the additional living spaces, and activity in the shared backyards.

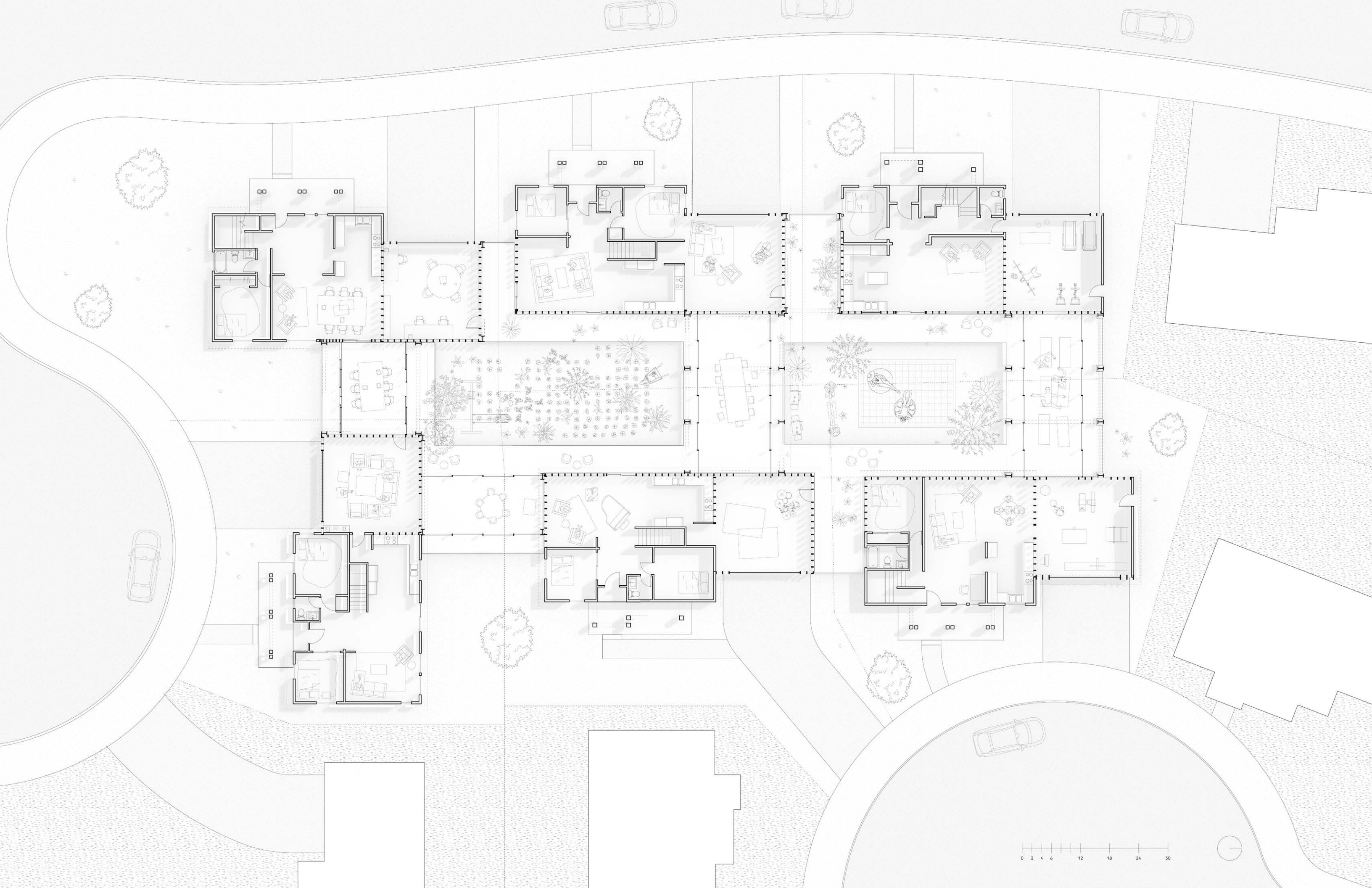
With the six houses newly opened up, and their boundaries diffused, they become more adaptable to a variety of families and co-living configurations: dens and living rooms in original plans are freed up, allowing for more bedrooms, and easier access between houses means a daughter who moved back home and stay in the house next door.

In this little six-house collective, luxury and abundance are defined differently: shared spaces and shared amenities, from vegetable garden to laundry room to gym, woodshop, music room, children's playroom, coworking office.

The speculators who drew the property lines of the American suburbs and sold—and continue to sell—their model homes to millions of people do their business by the maxim: if you build it, they will come. With this suburban fiction, I'm selling something too: a small-scale renovation of the American Dream.

Advanced VI Studio
Michael Bell
Spring 2024

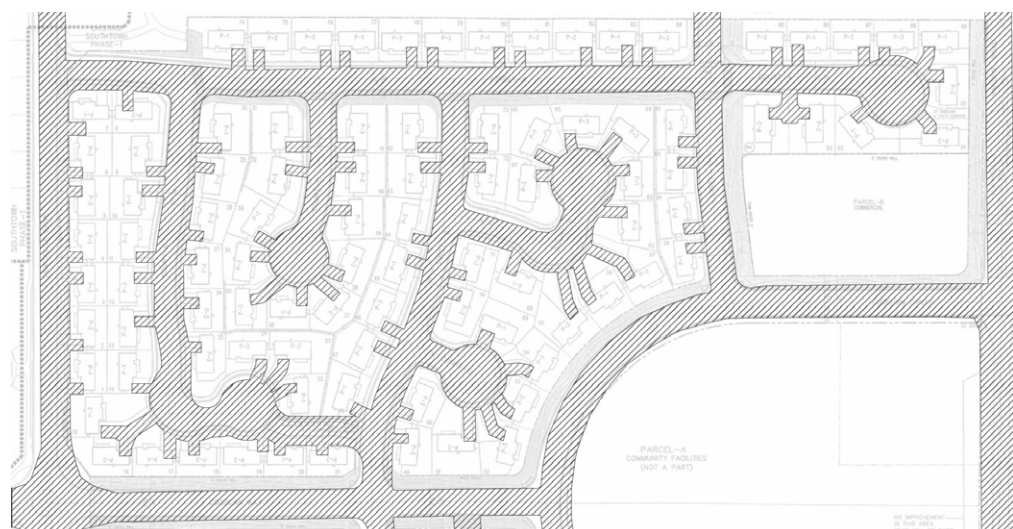




0 2 4 6 12 18 24 30







Paved surface extends from the street, into the driveway, into the garage. The house is designed by the car.

Yet for all this proliferation of hardscape, two people living off of two different culs-de-sac might find their rear windows mere feet away from each other, defended only by a fence.

Towards a Trans-Species Architecture

Rilka Li

Extreme Design

Prof. Mark Wigley

December 27, 2022

1. **We are always building houses for what we love.** We build them in order to love. A house, which might be a structure inside the heart, is equivalent to the act of definition, to delineation. Without the house of your body separate from mine, what are *you*; how can one say that *I love you*? Constructing boundaries is the beginning of entanglement, of bodies which can newly touch one another.
2. **Hospitality and violence speak a common language.** The common language is control. Every nurturing gesture is inevitably also one of influence, an imposition of one's own self upon the world. We tell a tree as we tell a child as we tell an ancestor as we tell a dear friend: stay here, so that I may best care for you. An inherent tension of domestication is that it is both to give shelter and to encase—to contain.
3. **True hospitality asks us to inhabit an oceanic sensitivity.** How else will you know whether you are acting as earth or cage? Perhaps the deepest intention of hospitality is to nourish an inner desire: where one wants to grow, how one wants to move through this world. But we can only ever amplify that which strikes a resonance within ourselves to begin with. And so we tune ourselves to receive, allow ourselves to be submerged within the inchoate desires of the other, and in becoming so attuned we are domesticated in return.
4. **To design with tenderness is to design with touch.** The gaze turns everything into property; the gaze is a frame, itself a container. Touch is beyond looking. Touch demands exposure, the sensory organ of the skin receiving and receiving through its pores and nerves even as it provides resistance, and leaves its own traces. Delicacy of action is predicated on the reciprocity of touching: sensing and acting, lovingly, inquisitively, in continuous dialogue.

5. **An ambiguous structure carries its own resilience.** Is the building supporting the living things, or is it the other way around? Can a building exist separately of the life which burrows into its crevices and clammers up its walls? Where precisely is the infrastructure? Who is holding up whom? Whether we answer both, or neither, it all remains standing; and amidst this confusion of gravity there is a little more room to breathe, and grow, and keep holding on, and up.
6. **Preservation does not consist in embalming a dead thing but rather giving room to continue being alive.** After excavation comes the long and beautiful life of tending and maintenance. Maybe the physical texture of preservation can be thought of as a kind of scaffolding. A light-weight skeletal armature invites the complexity of the historical present to twine around it. Because so long as one can speak, and have presence, one remains alive.
7. **Attention is a form of planting.** The simplest and most honest way to make more of something is to see it, and touch it, and feel it, and give it space within your awareness. You lift the ground into the sky, and suddenly the park beyond comes into focus. It feels as though now there is more park, because there is. But in many ways this attending does not come easily when one has already learned the shapes and outlines of the world.
8. **When we were children we had not yet drawn the borders of people and things.** The world of the child is a psychedelic carnival, where everything is everything: a rich and sparkling ocean of interconnectedness and possibility. It is a world of wisdom without knowledge. And yet, it seems that inscribed upon each of us is the longing, when presented with the nascent suggestion of form, to sharpen its contours. A small hand pushes against the thickness of reality, feels how it pushes back; the thinnest of walls between things begin shimmering into perception. Thus, slowly, we

become grown-ups. What would it mean to embark on a return to childhood? Would we dismantle our careful structures of meaning and float simply in warm waters, suspended?

9. **Encountering the other is both a way to undo what we know and a way to begin knowing.** Every quality contains the after-image of its counterpart. The interior can be thought of as a sort of exterior; transparency is a sort of opacity. Light, heavy, porous, smooth, ground, sky: in the confusing process of eroding these definitions we gain a precious understanding of their true nature. We have always defined the human species against what it is not. How is a human not like a plant, or an animal, or bacteria, or a building, or the air? But now that we have asked the first question, we can ask the second. Would it be possible for us to say that there is no difference between our species and any other? In this way trees and birds and mushrooms and clouds help teach us what it means to be human.
10. **A trans-species architecture is an architecture of fertility.** A trans-species architecture is simultaneously giving and receiving. When we plant ourselves within this fertile ground, we are creating space to find out who we are and what we can become. Planting kindred beings too is an invitation to fill this space with their hope and yearning and desires. It's a promise to give water and light and nutrition and shelter to every curious tendril of an entity, known or once known or not yet known.

Unearthing

We explore the act of repairing through excavation, looking at the work of revealing, repairing, and reinterpreting contested ground. Our site is a grassy lawn on Newburgh's Hudson River waterfront: the site of a devastating, racially-motivated urban renewal campaign in the 1960s.

The demolition was conducted quickly, incompletely, and today the hillside bears traces of that hasty removal. Our research into satellite imagery and historical cartographies, as well as our own personal encounters in discovering these material remainders, opened up a recently-buried, almost-forgotten history. There are ways in which this ground stubbornly resists the urge to treat it as empty today.

Our project takes on the shape of a physical and emotional process. The interventions begin as excavation sites, sites of a participatory archaeology, inviting the intimacy of touching and recovering these old foundations. We embark on speculation about the buried material: how deep, what kind of debris and rubble, in what state of ruination?

Amongst the remnants of where the backyards of many buildings once met, we envision a space which will host conversations and artifacts of intersectional storytelling: a way to share memory from the people who still remember what Newburgh used to be, to the youth of Newburgh today, who experience their own forms of displacement. Weaving archaeology, narrative, and archival into the civic life of Newburgh, we hope to finally create a way forward for this strange mound.

Advanced IV Studio
Nahyun Hwang
Spring 2023

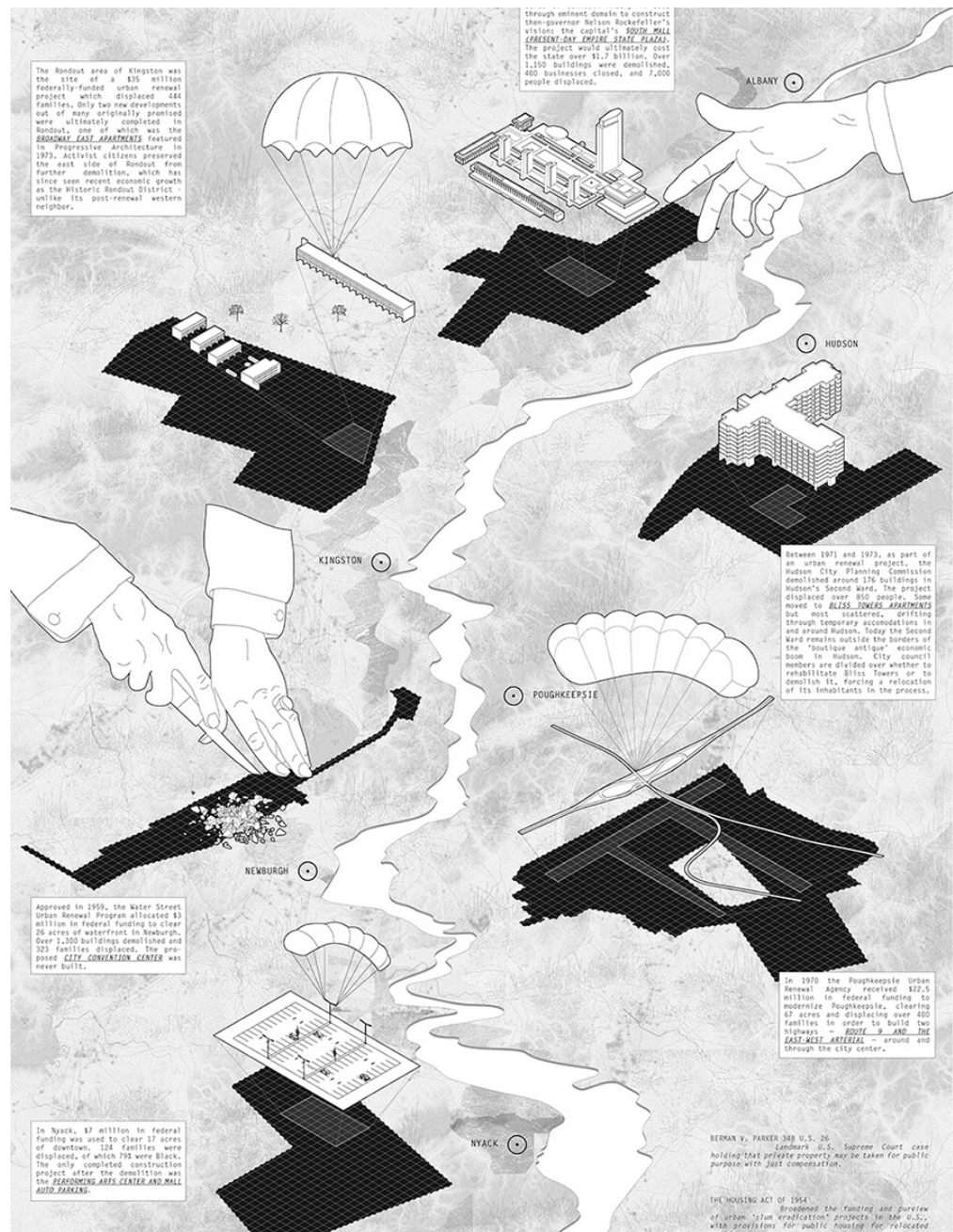
In collaboration with
Maria Doku



The voids of old basements, imprints of an uncaredful demolition, are clearly visible from satellite imagery of the Newburgh waterfront. At the site, they appear as strange ridges in the lawn. I brushed off a layer of dirt and grass, and there they were: the ruined brick walls.







Present day Kingston 815s, aerial view

Viewing Tower from Newburgh to Beacon across Hudson River

Demolition of Water St neighborhood in progress during urban renewal

Demolition of Water St Savings Bank

18 1/2 Colden St. Rappley Residence

11 1/2 Colden St. Residence with protruding two-story arched window

Breakley & Colden

2-7-5-20

49 Colden St. Carney's Shop and New Carney's Shop and New Hotel and beer garden

3-7-7-4

88-86 Second Street. Above the and real estate offices, fur and menswear retailers

22 1/2 Water St. Park & Lot 827 from furniture and carpeting

103-100 Water St. First Bank Church of God

96 1/2 Water St. Eureka Bar and Grill

96-92 1/2 Water St. Webster Building. St. Louis has lobby in a fire

82 1/2 Water St. T & H Garage

81 1/2 Water St. Business Bldg., auto repair, carpet cleaning

7 Colden St. Used store, antique shop, essential boutique basement

26 Water St. Bar and grill operated by white Italian

88-87 Water St. Newburgh Savings Bank

78 Water St. Apartments and Bar's

82-81 Colden St. Park's Market, open fur

11 Colden St. 8th Motion Theater

30 Water St. A.C. Restaurant Equipment

68 Water St. Linsen Hardware Co.

88 Water St. 1st St. Bank Clerk and





Sovereign seeds 2

Black farmers make up less than 2% of all farmers in the United States today. Across the country, Black households are significantly less likely than white households to have access to supermarkets and fresh, nutritious produce—a phenomenon also known as food apartheid. Soul Fire Farm, a 75-acre Afro-indigenous community farm in Grafton, NY, takes a multifaceted approach towards countering this national legacy of racial injustice in food systems. The farm distributes its harvest through a CSA (community-supported agriculture) program for low-income households experiencing food apartheid. On the farm itself, the next generation of BIPOC farmers is trained in ancestral techniques of regenerative agriculture, as well as in areas like business management, anti-racist training, and carpentry.

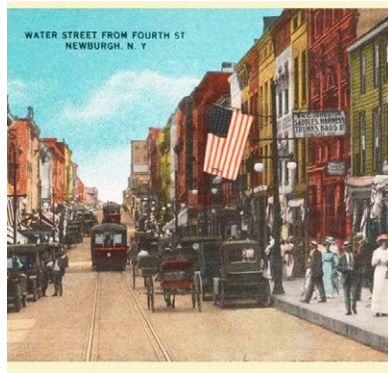
Soul Fire Farm
Location: Grafton, NY
Founder: Leah Penneman
Year: 2010
Source: <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/>



What we keep underground 2

A site of extraction, agriculture, shelter, and storage: the labyrinthine subterranean complex formerly known as Burden Mine has born witness to the multiplicity of human ingenuity in employing and filling a place. The iron ore mine was closed due to declining profits, and purchased decades later for its suitability in growing what would eventually become a quarter of the country's cultivated mushrooms. In the 1950s, widespread fears of nuclear war fueled a business pivot towards bomb-proof storage for documents and, at one point, for people: corporations leased caverns as fallout shelters for their top executives. Today, near-daily shipments from city centers bring documents and records destined for long-term storage: a vast and hidden infrastructure of information, tucked into a mountain outside of town.

Iron Mountain storage facility
Location: Gettysburg, Columbia County, NY
Founder: Herman K. Kraus
Year: 1951
Source: <https://www.ironmountain.com/about-us/history>



A little big city 1

Water Street, before it was ravaged by agents of urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s, was once called Little New York. It was home to a thriving working-class community, many residents of whom had been a part of the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South in the decades prior. It got its name from the outposts of big city stores on the street, including Grants (a variety store with its own record label, electronics brand, and lunch counter), Penny's (which sold local and imported herbs, incense, pamphlets, and lozenges), and Kresge's (a department store). In order to qualify for federal urban renewal funds, the city needed to designate the area as a slum—and so it did, with a 1958 appraisal describing the neighborhood as in poor repair, despite looking well-maintained in photographs.

Little New York / Water St.
Location: Newburgh, Orange County, NY
Year: 1965 (demolished 1959)
Source: <https://theurbangeneration.com/blog/2018/01/17/lost-newburgh-the-legacy-of-urban-renewal-part-1a/>



Connected by craftsmanship 4

John Ruskin's dream of an "ideal community" of artists was pursued across the Atlantic in Byrdcliffe Colony, the oldest arts and crafts colony in the United States. Founders Whitehead and McCall sought to create a community brought together and frantically sustained by furniture-making, metalwork, pottery, weaving, and photography. Byrdcliffe in some ways represented an artistic, craft-centered rebellion against the machinic production conditions of the Industrial Revolution. Ultimately the vision of a self-sufficient operation was stymied by financial difficulties and by Whitehead's autocratic leadership. After his death, most of the 1,200-acre property was sold to neighboring interests. The remaining buildings were left to the Woodstock Guild, who continue to manage artists' residences on the site today.

Byrdcliffe Arts Colony
Location: Woodstock, NY
Founders: Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead, Jane Byrd McCall, Bolton Brown, Hervey White
Year: 1902
Source: <https://www.woodstockguild.org/>



Uncertain shores 4

In the past couple of years, several federally-chartered flights of unaccompanied migrant youths arriving in the Hudson Valley region have become a lightning rod for right-wing protest against the immigration policies of the current administration. Although similar flights have in fact been operating since the early 2000s, the strategic privacy of the operation—to protect the identities of those on the flights—does point to a serious precarity in the situation of refugee youth arriving to the Hudson Valley, who may not have familial ties in the area. Organizations like St. Christopher's in Westchester County provide shelter, healthcare, and other services for migrant children as part of a refugee resettlement program, but more availability of these services is required to fulfill the rising need.

Unaccompanied migrant youths arriving in Hudson Valley
Location: Across the Hudson Valley
Organization: St. Christopher's New Windsor (e.g.), U.S. Health and Human Services
Year: 1997-Present
Source: <https://www.poliifact.com/factsheets/2022/mar/16/tyler-kisler-st-clemens-hidden-secrecy-flying-immigrants-us-cities/>



The Bliss myth 2

The spatial logics of urban renewal—their patterns of investment and disinvestment—continue to shape the economic landscape today. In Hudson's Second Ward, the Bliss Towers Apartments stands as the only major completed urban renewal development. Today, Bliss Towers in disrepair, with many of its units uninhabitable due to leaks, cracked structures, and asbestos. It sits at the center of a local controversy, with residents and neighbors torn on whether public funds should be used to rehabilitate the building or to tear it down and replace it with new development, displacing its current residents in the process. Meanwhile, just south on Warren Street, the buildings which had been spared from demolition are now part of the infamous antique revival scene, beloved and lauded on for their historic character.

Bliss Towers Apartments
Location: Hudson, Orange County, NY
Organization: Hudson Urban Renewal Agency, Hudson City Planning Commission
Year: 1973-Present
Source: <https://gissapsilvertown.blogspot.com/2010/09/question-of-bliss-towers.html>



Stewards of memory 6

In 1750, land outside the walls of colonial Kingston was designated as burial ground for enslaved Africans, who were denied church burial within the settlement. More than two centuries passed during which the former burial ground passed into private ownership and its history was forgotten. Archaeological research in the 1990s strongly suggested the existence of long-neglected graves, whose existence was finally confirmed decades later in 2019 using ground-penetrating radar. The intervening years saw a complex and protracted effort on the part of multiple advocacy groups to recognize the historical significance of the site and protect it. Today Harambee stewards the land, and an ongoing effort to convert the site into memorial mobilizes the youth of Kingston in a collaborative, community design project.

Pine Street African Burial Ground
Location: Kingston, NY
Organization: Kingston Land Trust, Harambee Kingston New York
Years: 1750–present
Source: <https://kingstonlandtrust.org/pine-street-african-burial-ground>



Farm labor leaves scars 6

The introduction of long-needed healthcare programs aimed specifically at providing medical services to migrant workers and their families in the Hudson Valley area also functioned to highlight the particular health problems which were more prevalent across the migrant laborer population than other residents of the area. Health conditions related to the daily manual labor were many and myriad: respiratory problems arising from pesticides, urinary-tract infections from standing all day in the fields in women, fungal infections from working in wet and muddy conditions, bad backs, and injuries. The other common pattern of health problems was similar to low-income urban residents: diabetes, high blood pressure, tuberculosis, and heart conditions. These were often treated sporadically due to the temporary, unstable work.

San River Health (formerly Peekskill Health Center)
Location: Peekskill, Westchester County, NY
Founders: Willie Mae Jackson, Pearl Woods, Jeannette Phillips and Mary Woods
Year: 1989-Present
Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/23/region/peekskill-health-center-reaches-out-to-vagrants.html>



Tending to remnants 3

The history of land banks can be traced back to an origin nearly contemporaneous with urban renewal development projects, but the land bank approach is something altogether different from *tabula rasa*. Instead of wielding the power of eminent domain to enact large-scale demolition, land banks identify and acquire titles to vacant properties, remove barriers to redevelopment and rehabilitation of buildings, and then transfer the properties to new owners while incorporating community needs and priorities. The Newburgh Community Land Bank (NCLB) is now in its 11th year and has generated over 300 units of housing, reducing vacancy in its target neighborhoods by more than a third. The NCLB has also rehabilitated large vacant lots into sites of urban agriculture, supporting local food security and resilience.

House to Home, Habitat for Humanity, East End I, Artist in Vacancy, Downing Park Urban Farm
Location: Newburgh, Orange County, NY
Organization: Newburgh Community Land Bank
Year: 2012
Source: <https://www.newburghcommunitylandbank.org/>



Corporate restructuring 8

In 1950 IBM opened its main manufacturing plant in Ulster County. Over the next thirty years the corporation would become the linchpin of the Hudson Valley economy, employing thousands of people and catalyzing the rapid growth of suburban development in Kingston and Poughkeepsie. Its eventual downsizing in the 1990s devastated the local economy, leaving former workers unemployed with cascading consequences for local businesses. For the next two decades, IBM's former campus (branded "TechCity") was at the center of a series of economic and environmental failures, including improper demolition of its buildings which created hazardous conditions due to the presence of asbestos. In 2022 IBM announced its memorial mobilizes the youth of Kingston in a collaborative, community design project.

IBM manufacturing plants and corporate headquarters
Location: Kingston, Ulster, and Westchester Counties
Organization: IBM
Years: 1950–present
Source: <https://omeka.hvh.org/exhibits/show/kingston-the-ibm-years/>



Revolution at a remove 8

The first anti-slavery protest meeting in North America convened, according to historian Richard Norton Smith, in 1767 at the Oblong Friends Meeting House in the hamlet known as Quaker Hill. By 1778, the Friends who gathered at the house had resolved to abolish slavery within their own community and to refuse contributions from anyone who owned slaves. Though conscripted into housing soldiers of the Continental Army, their pacifist policies prevented them from offering assistance or even mentioning the situation in their recorded histories. Quaker membership in the area waned with the rising influence of the Industrial Revolution and the draw of a faster, more materially wealthy way of life. Their history provides an unconventional template for how to participate in political events: firmly, yet at a distance.

Oblong Friends Meeting House, Quaker Hill
Location: Pausling, Dutchess County, NY
Organization: Religious Society of Friends
Years: 1764-1882
Source: <https://pskib.org/dutchess-county-quaker-meeting-houses-the-oblong-meeting-house-at-quaker-hill/>



Tapestry of care 5

The former Hotel Newburgh escaped the fate of its neighbor the Palatine Hotel, instead becoming housing for disenfranchised residents of Newburgh and eventually finding its way into the hands of the Safe Harbors of the Hudson organization in 2002. Safe Harbors renovated the deteriorating building, which had seen high rates of crime and drug use in the years prior, into a supportive housing complex. Now called Cornerstone Residences, it offers 128 residences for different groups of adults in need of support, as well as a slew of on-site services including job training, counseling, and a free GED program. The housing complex is integrated with an arts center, also built by Safe Harbors, which incorporates the wider city with lively arts programming and ensures a robust tapestry of community support.

The Cornerstone Residence (former Hotel Newburgh)
Location: Newburgh, Orange County, NY
Organization: Safe Harbors of the Hudson
Year: 2004
Source: <https://safe-harbors.org/the-cornerstone/>



Living where you work 10

The declining availability of affordable housing options across Hudson Valley, including in Ulster, Greene, and Dutchess Counties, has led to arrangements wherein business owners source and subsidize housing for their workers, at times within their own homes. Many employees of Mohonk Mountain House, for example, stay within dormitory-style lodging in the resort itself, sharing amenities between multiple people. The owner of Tabla restaurant in Tannersville has purchased property with which to provide subsidized housing to employees. Others still have found room in living rooms, spare bedrooms, and trailers to house employees. Structurally, the fact of employer-provided housing as the only or most viable option places workers in a position of vulnerability and precarity, tying shelter to workplace.

Employer-sourced employee housing
Location: Hudson Valley region
People: Workers, business owners
Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/19/realestate/hudson-valley-housing-workers.html>



Environmentalism vs. Environmentalism 10

Which, and whose, environments are really at stake in the extensive debates around ecological safety and sustainability? The fiercely contested 2021 decommissioning of the Indian Point Energy Center, a nuclear power plant 25 miles outside of New York City which provided a fourth of the city's power, brought these faultlines into sharp relief. Those in favor of closing cited the risk of a nuclear accident to the 20 million city residents of NYC and the harmful impact to the fish species of the Hudson River ecosystem. Those against closing cited the tradeoff of having to replace its energy output with fossil fuel-burning power plants, which would dramatically impact the near-term carbon emissions profile of New York state, as well as the impact on land use, as nuclear generates the highest power per built area.

Decommissioning of Indian Point Energy Center
Location: Buchanan, Westchester County, NY
Key Figures: Entergy, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Hudson Valley environmentalist groups
Source: <https://www.esa.gov/body/energy/indian-point-1>



Homegrown homes 6

For over a hundred years, the liminal space of the City of Hudson was home to a secret neighborhood, a collection of 17 shacks occupied by an anarchic collective of fishermen and their loved ones. The structures in what is known as Furgury (or otherwise as Shantytown or the North Dock Tin Boat Association) are assemblages of scavenged materials: roofing from an old church, tin from the bottom of a land can. In 2012, a violent SHAT raid by the city cleared out the shacks for good. Now, with their residents scattered, the shacks of Furgury likely don't have much longer. After every winter, the Shantyowners would repair the damage caused by ice expanding and crushing the stilt supports the shacks, but without this active maintenance, they will likely slowly crumble and fall into the Hudson.

Furgury, Shantytown, or North Dock Tin Boat Association
Location: Hudson, Columbia County, NY
Year: Late 1800s-2012
Source: <https://thehudsonvalley.com/2017/06/07/hudson-ny-furgury-shack-village/>

Haunted Interval

What do we allow to accumulate in leftover spaces and in our bodies?

The contributions of this American research university to the development of weaponry have aftershocks even while the material reminders of its nuclear program, like the 70 ton cyclotron, get dismantled, removed. In searching for artifacts of the Manhattan Project, I began to consider the body too as a site, and I wondered how to invite the body to be a meeting place for histories of troubled entanglements. To create a space for listening which crawls into the gaps between walls and listens for what seeps in.

In 1939, in room 128 of Pupin Hall, a wall of water tanks, three feet deep, was installed to shield the occupants of Pupin from the radiation shed by the cyclotron. The thick mass of the water absorbed the impact of the neutrons as they flew out. After the war, the physics department proposed a deeper protection, drawing plans for an excavated containment vault, never built. In the 1950s, a report from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission found only trace radiation in Pupin, with the exception for some lingering in drainage pipes from a lab upstairs. When the final material remnants of the cyclotron were removed from the basement of Pupin Hall in 2008, they were re-inspected, and pronounced clean.

Dodge Fitness Center was built in 1974, lifting the campus level by three stories, and covering the former planned site of the nuclear containment vault. Plaster fill was added to block windows which would now face the wall of Dodge.

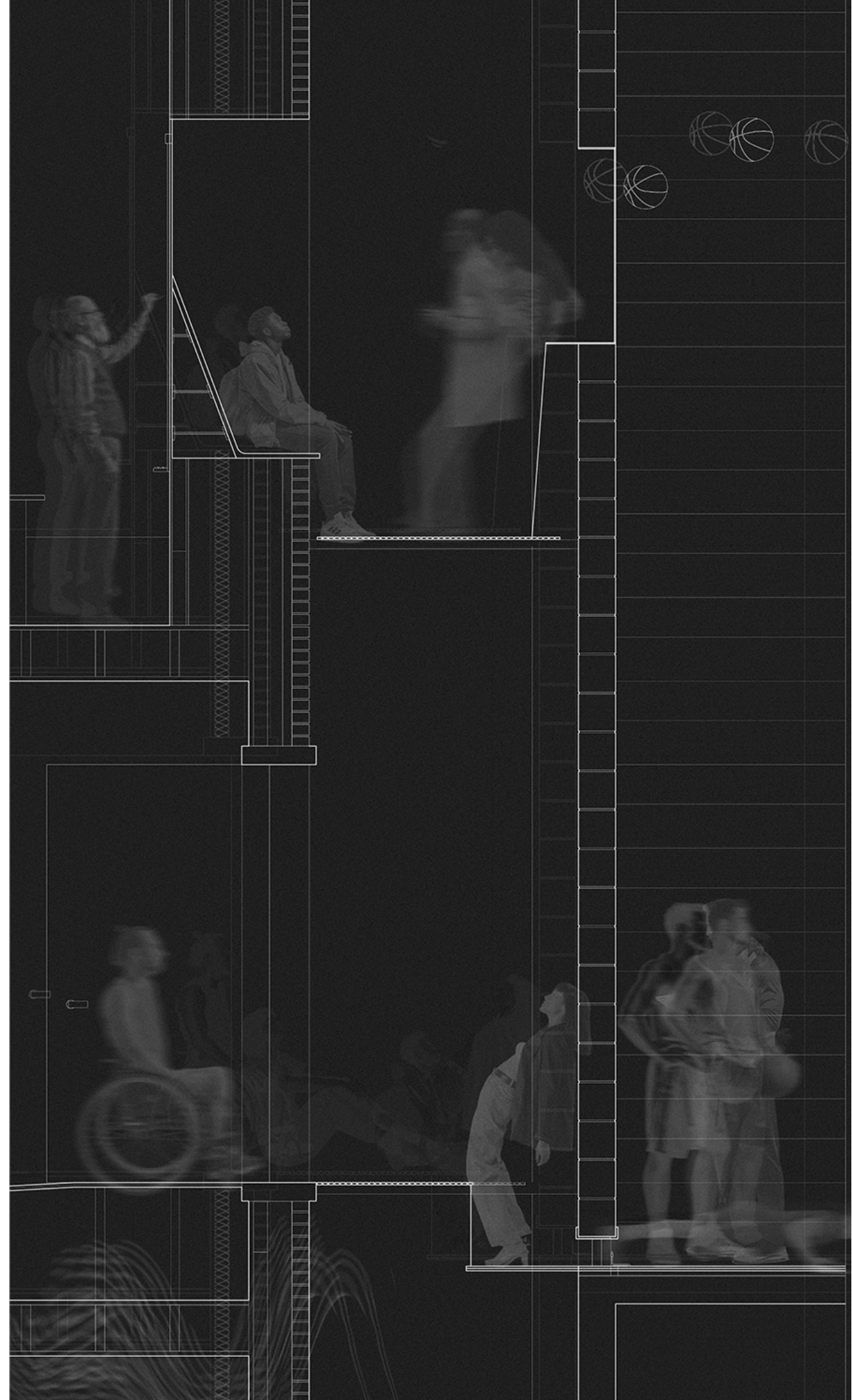
Where the two buildings meet there is a gap. It's about 6 feet wide. For a significant span of this gap, there is on one side a physics lecture hall, on the other a gymnasium - two spaces which both participate in disciplining of bodies, the body as instrument. One negates the body in service of the mind; the other worships, perfects the body. This adjacency has an echo of Fermi's accounts from the Manhattan Project, of the muscular Columbia football team unknowingly hauling tanks of uranium in for the war effort. My intervention reveals and inhabits this space, this little slice which is thick with accumulated memory and institutional force.

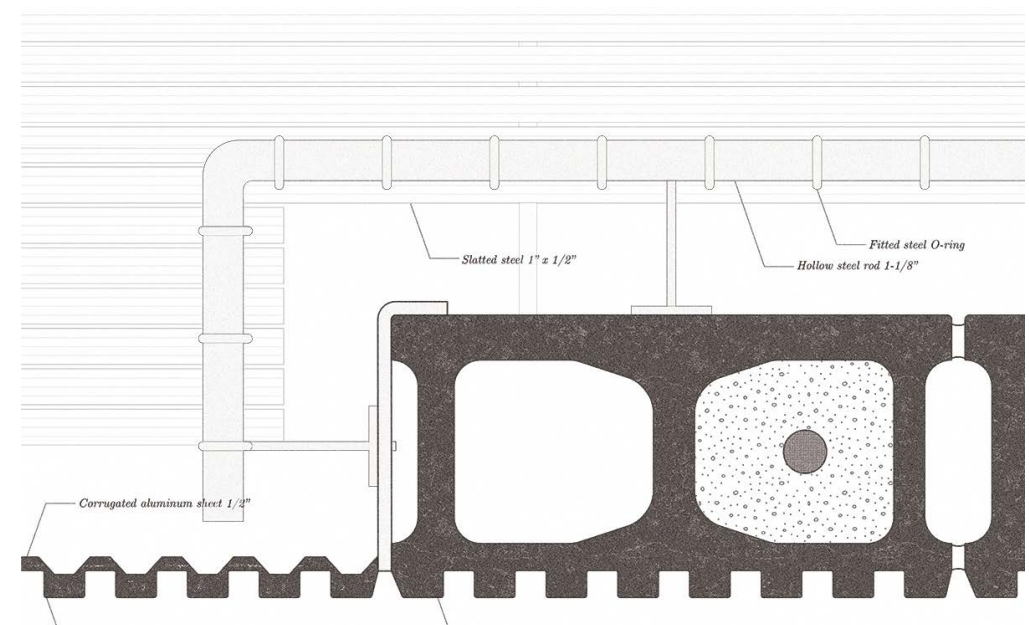
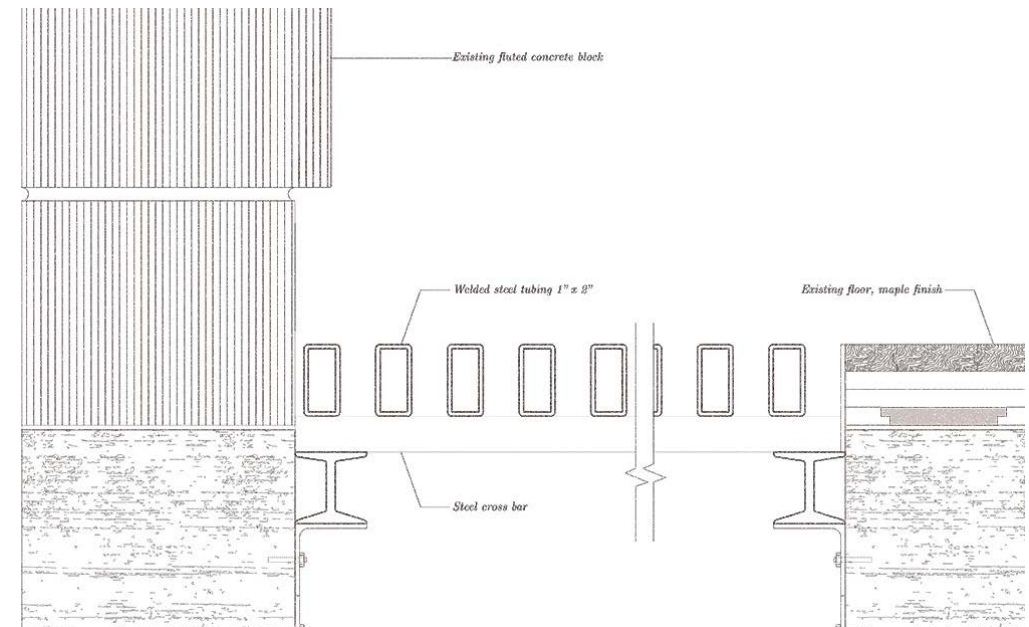
Advanced V Studio
Mario Gooden & Raven Chacon
Fall 2023

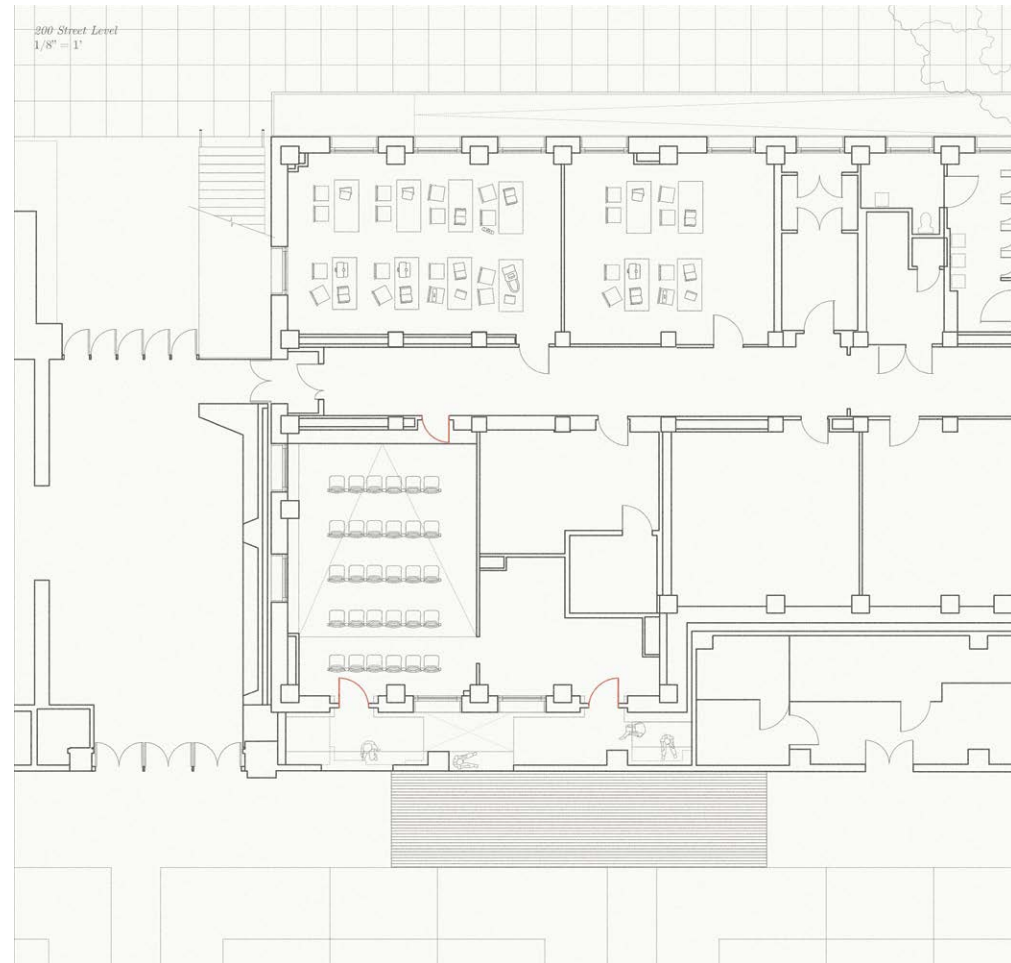
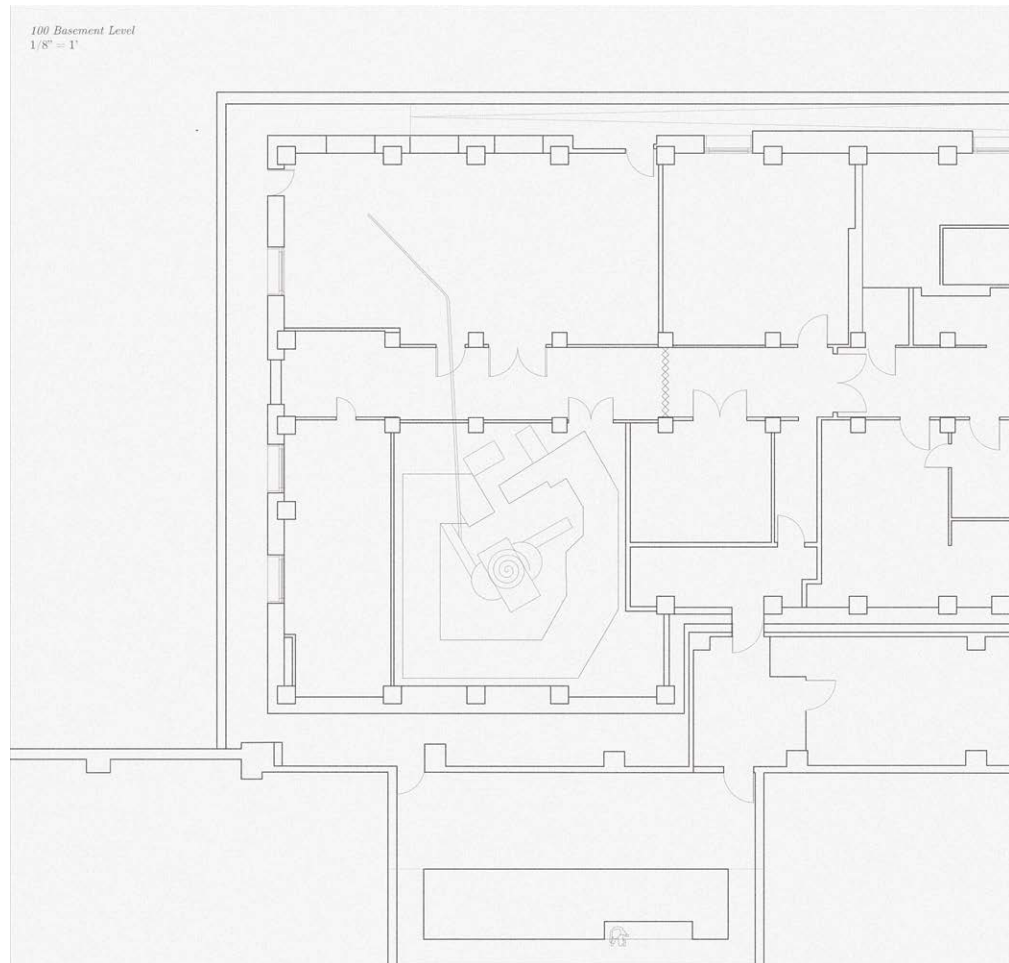
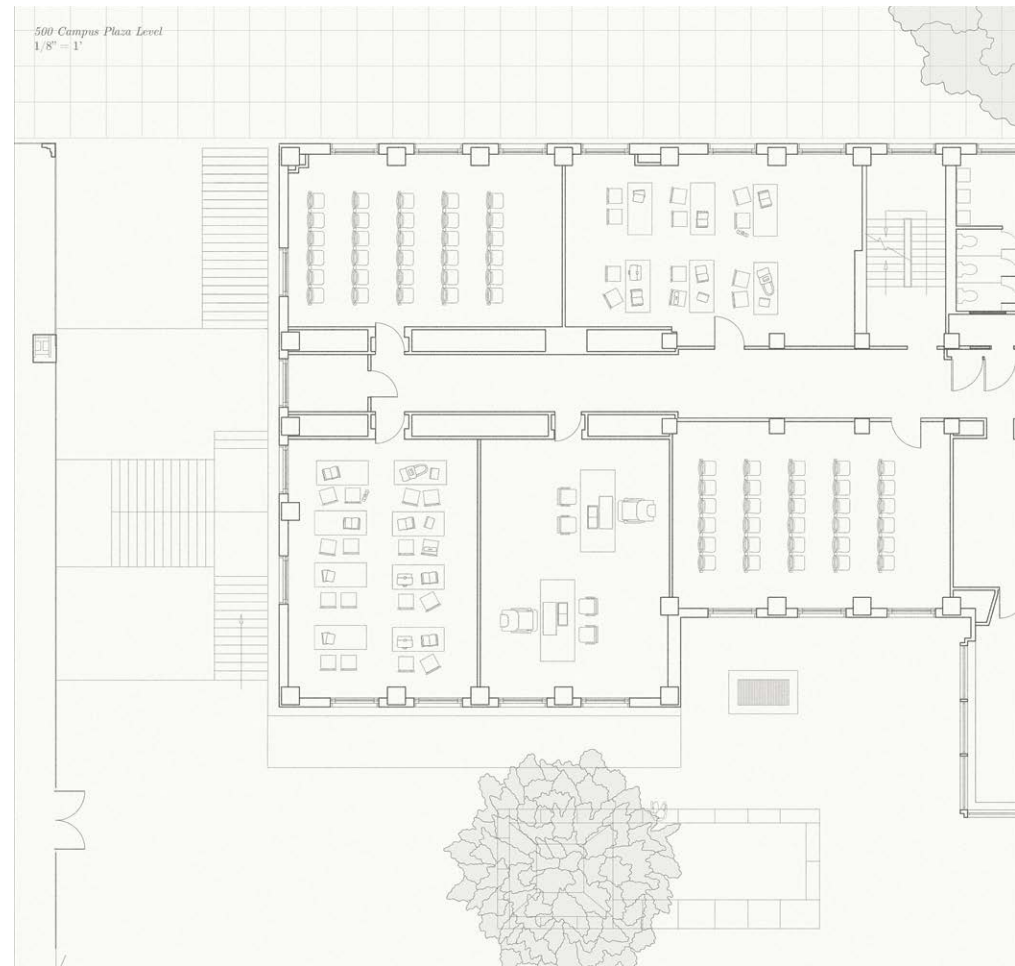
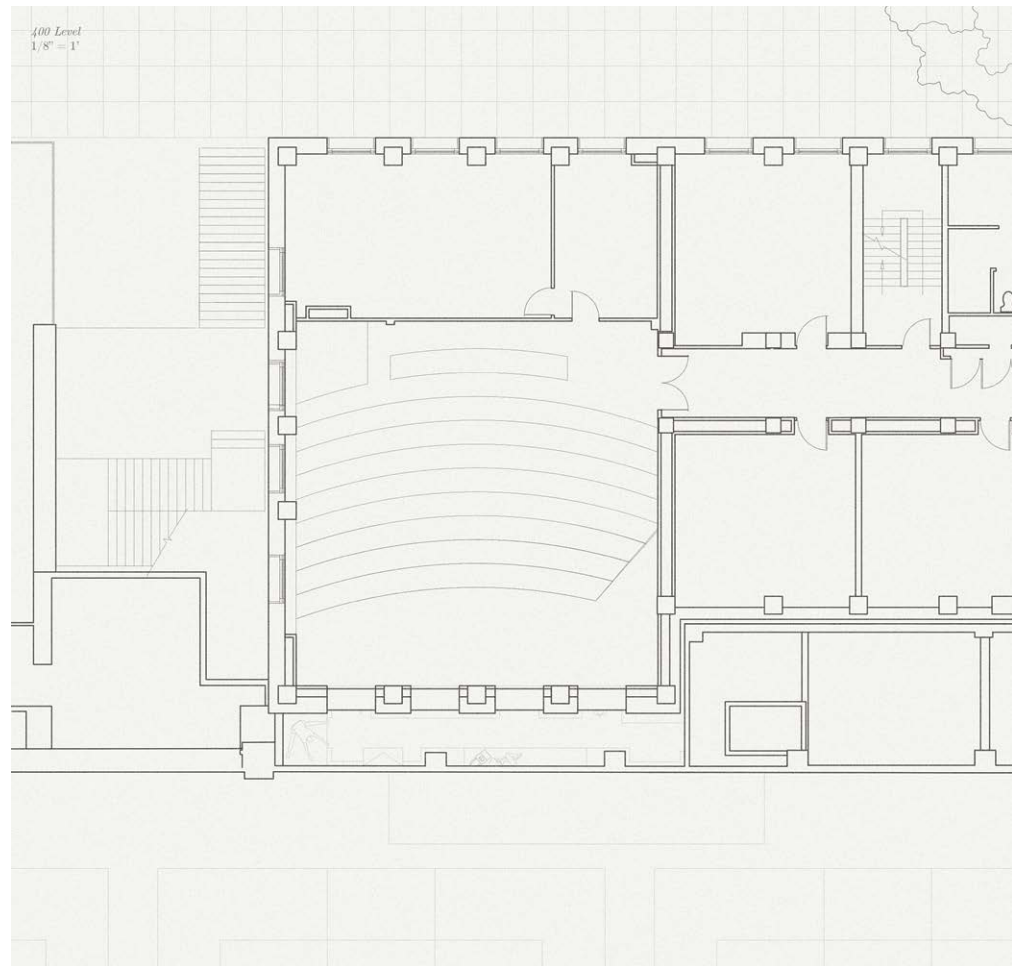
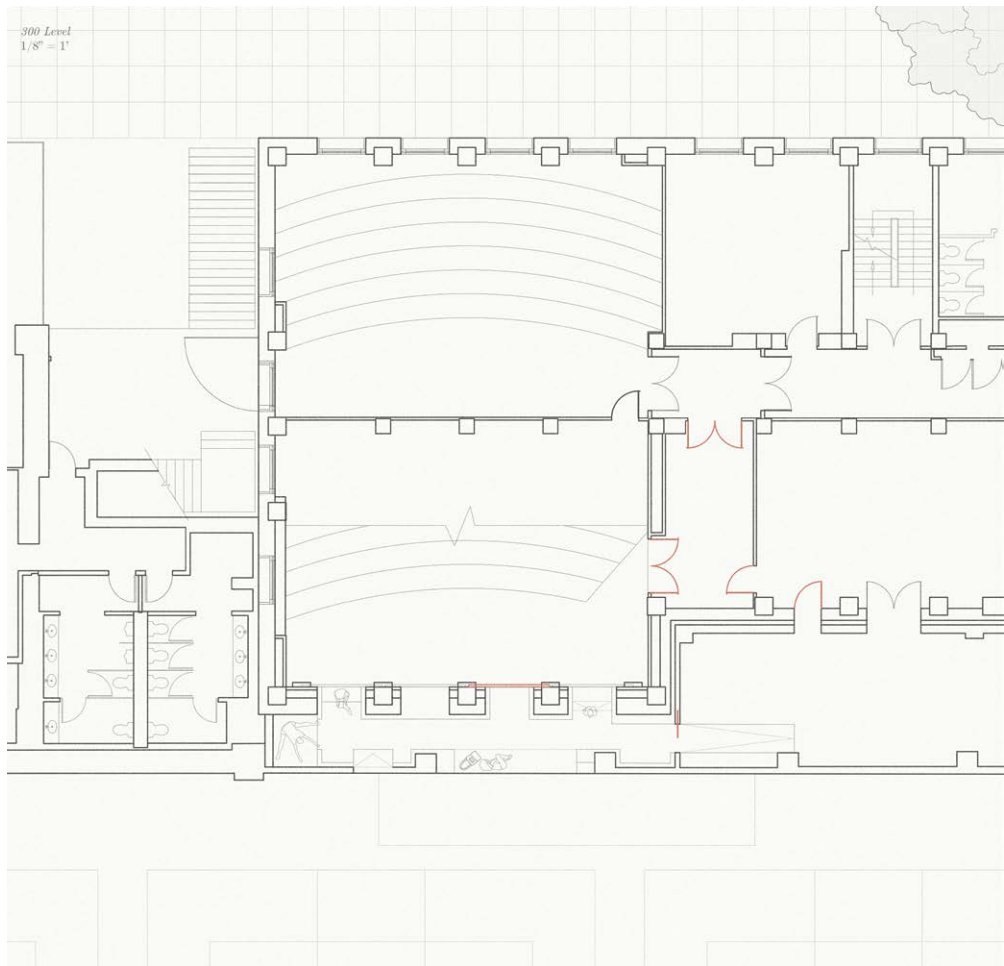
I propose a thinning of the walls from the inside, making audible this spatial condition, a place to pause, be still, and absorb.

The access to the space comes from carve-outs in the walls of Pupin made in the ghostly imprints of old windows. The lecture hall has chalkboards on tracks which can be raised, revealing a path into the forgotten space. Sitting behind it, the wall sounds like the dampened sound of chalk as it is wielded in hand and strikes the chalkboard. The opposite wall mediates and transfers the impact of basketball against gymnasium. The original wall is fluted concrete block, and the new material is corrugated metal with applied concrete. From the court, the material would look the same, except for the thinnest line where mortar has been replaced by metal.

Both decay and accumulation are processes which unfold in time. I think that sound is something that accumulates in us when we give it attention, space. With my project I give an invitation to pause, and let the body in a moment of stillness be the measure of the rhythms that the building hears. We have inherited decaying memories and accumulating histories, which when we are receptive, sink in, beneath the skin, absorbed into the bones.







Alley Tensions

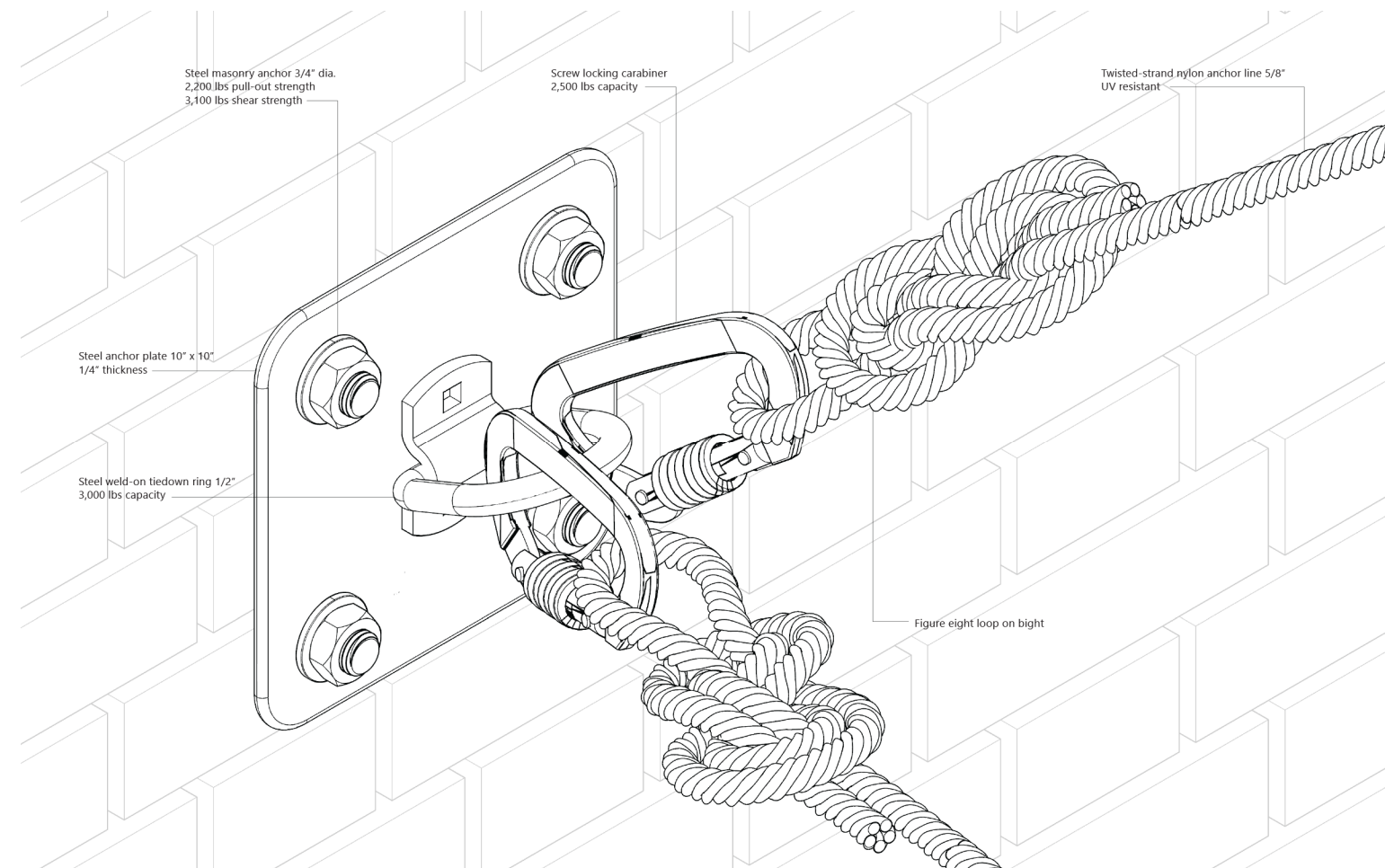
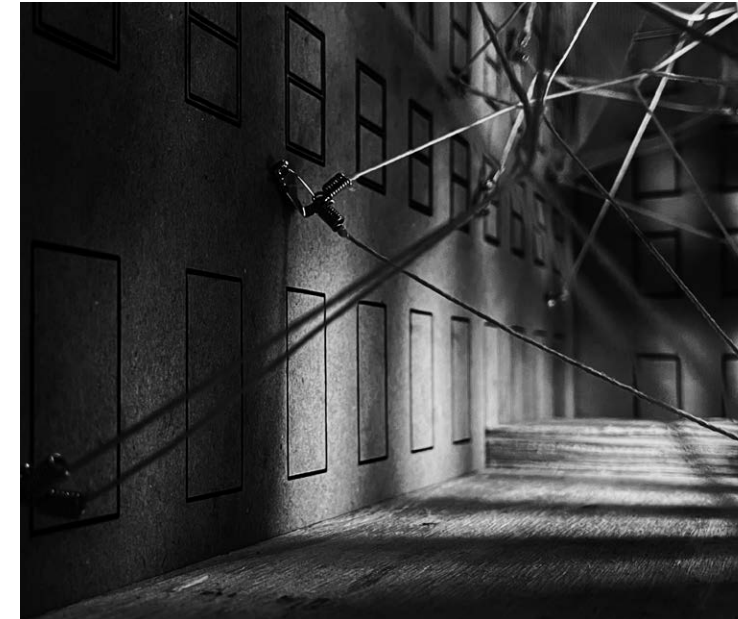
A tensile, climbable system spans the narrow width of the former public laneway of Jones Alley, operating as a substrate for physical training and activity.

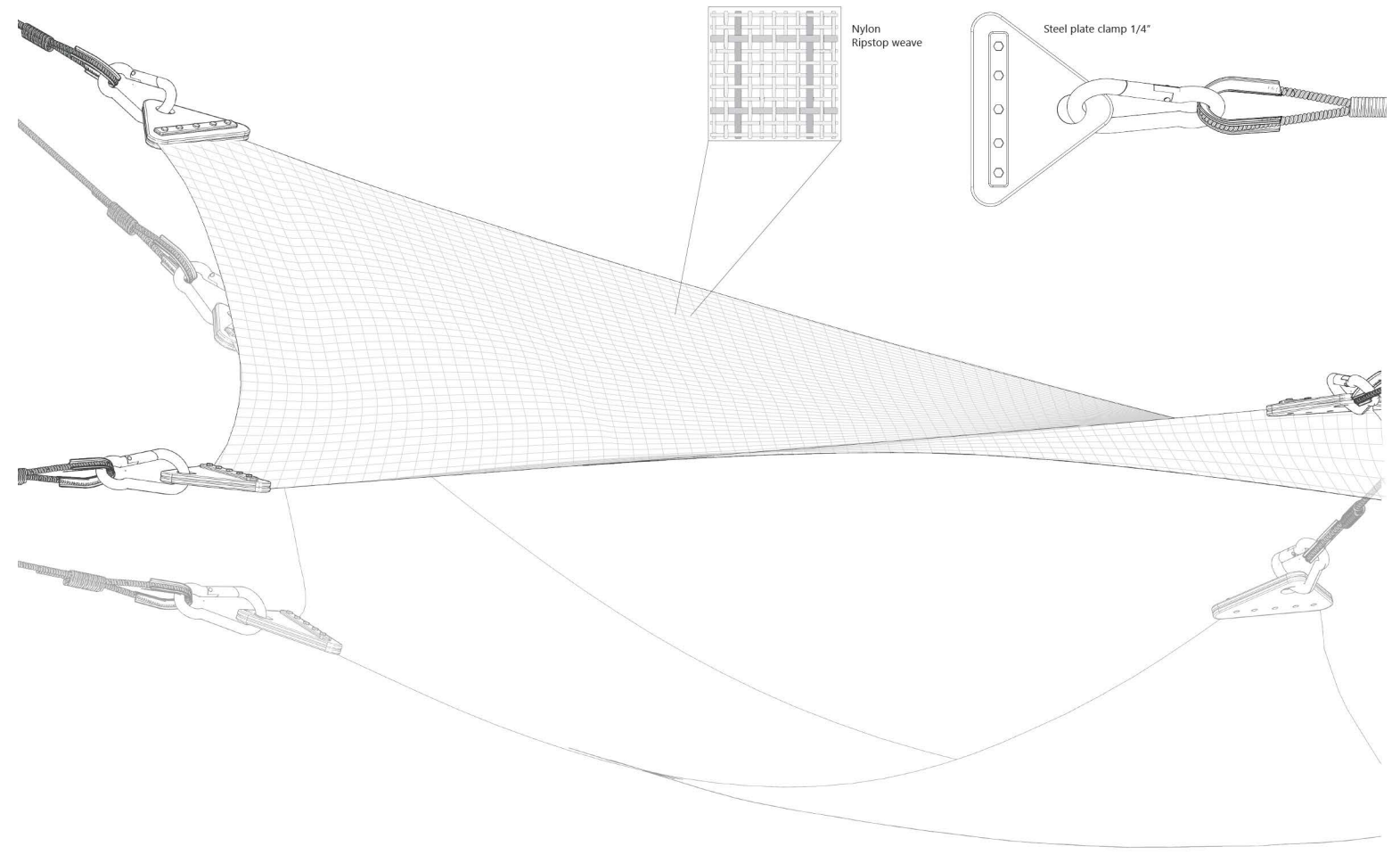
Using a restrained material palette of steel plate, rope, and lightweight fabric, this project co-opts the unornamented back facades of Broadway and Bond Street to create a suspended realm occupiable by nonresidents of the alley.

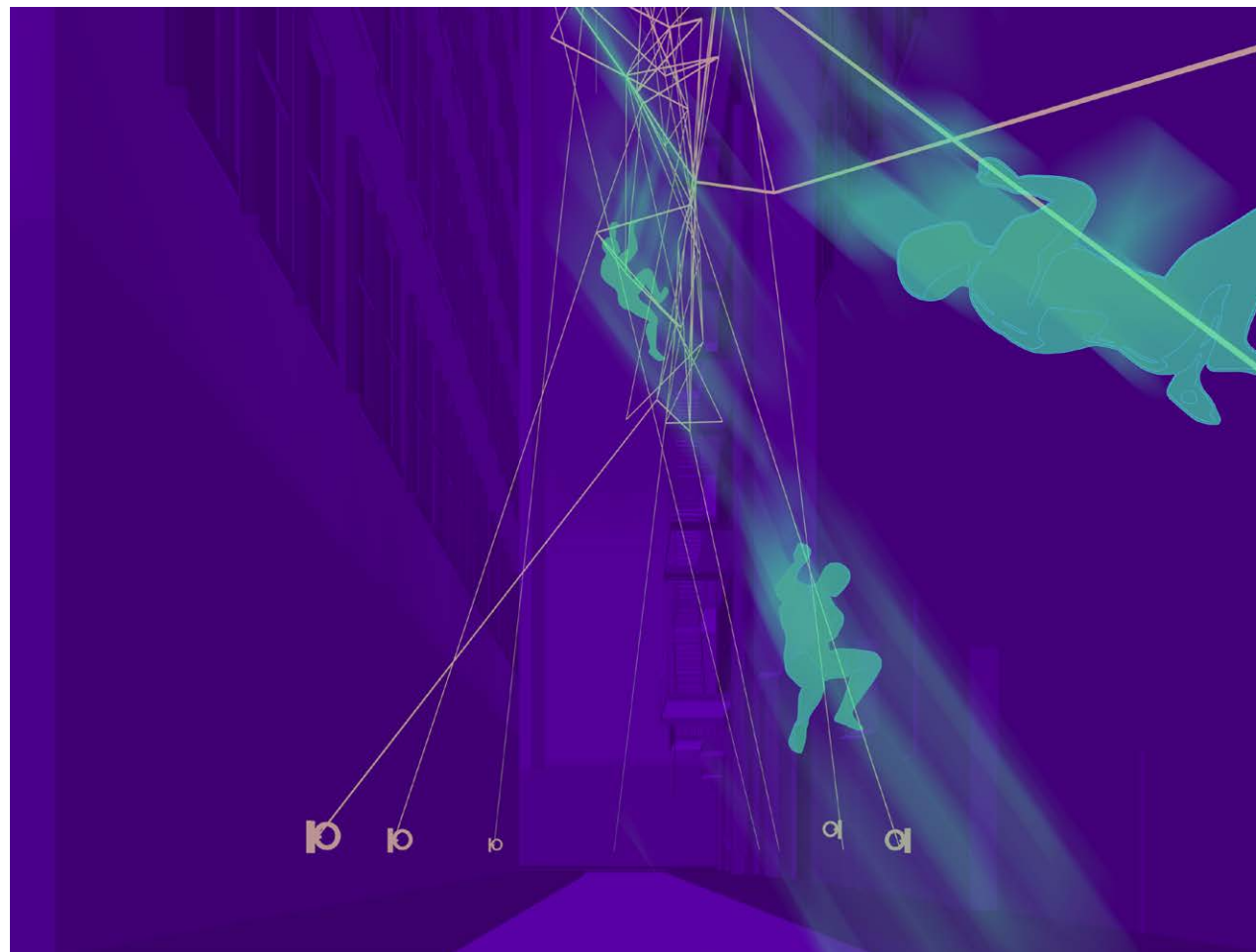
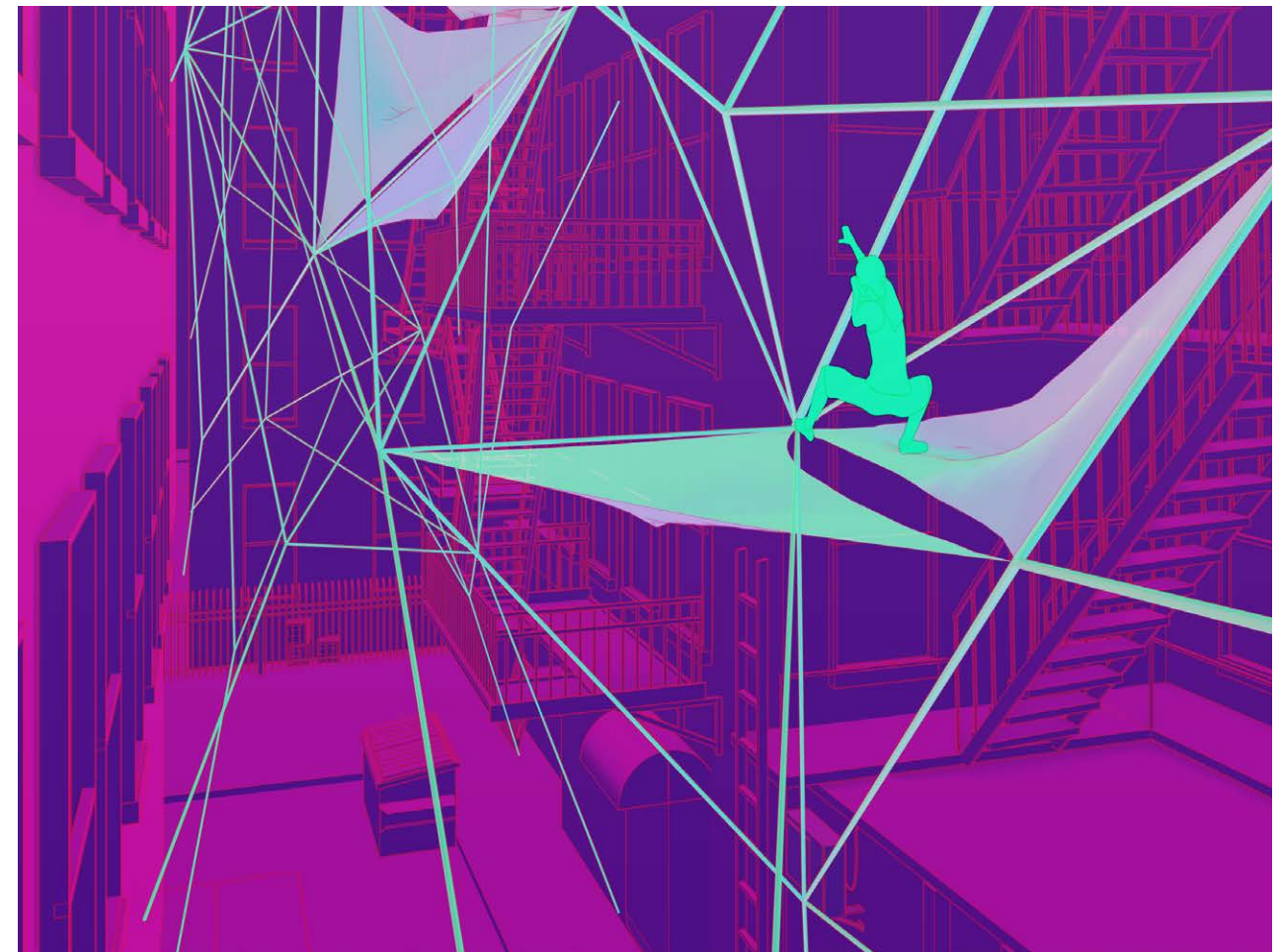
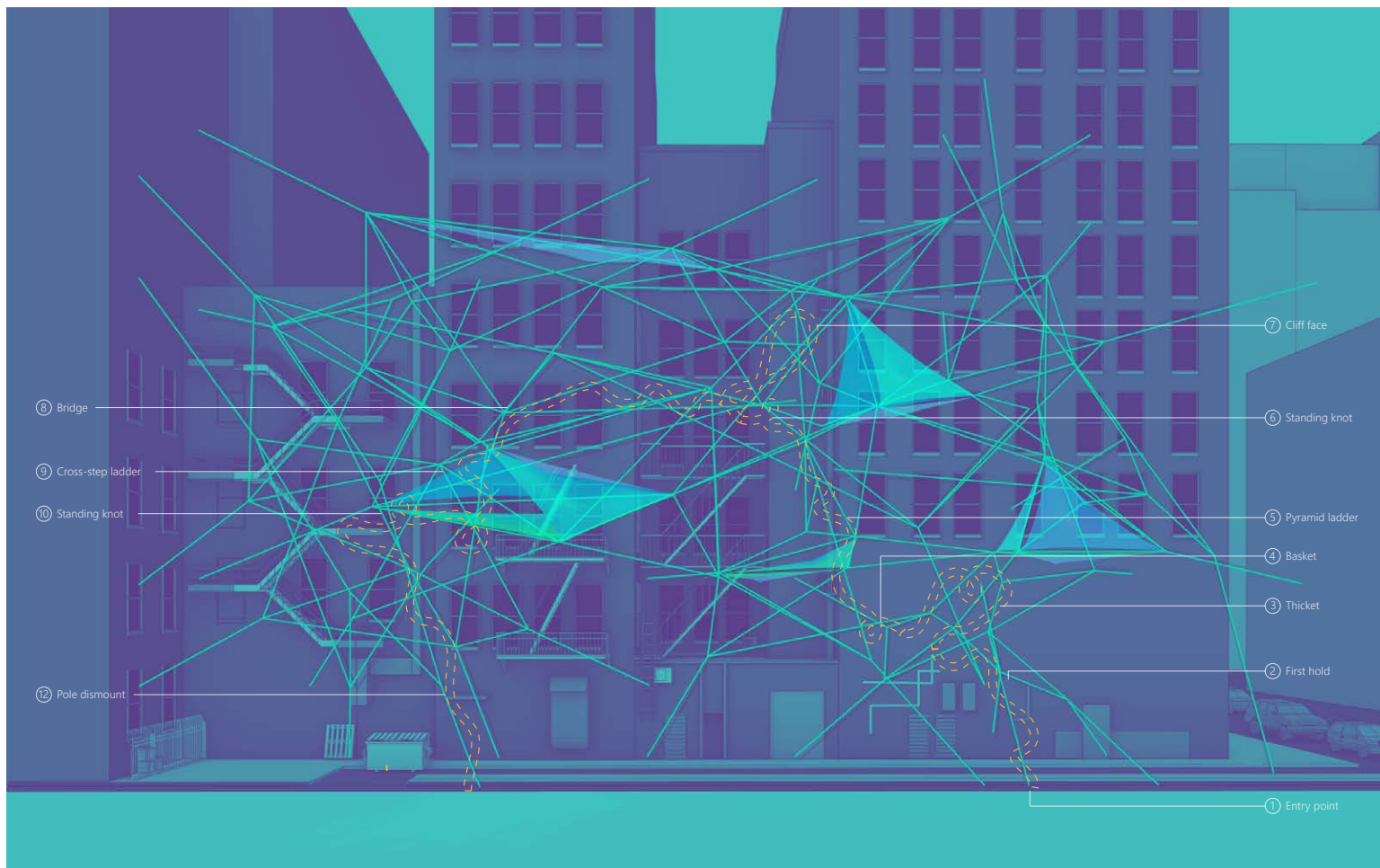
The structure introduces an unexpected intimacy to the urban context: its verticality invites bodily-kinesthetic engagement from climbers as they negotiate novel movement pathways, and its closeness to high-end residences lining Jones Alley creates a dense layering of private spatial conditions, separated only by the thin boundary of a wall.

The project borrows intelligence from the improvisational arts of rock climbing and parkour, creating opportunities to discover, refine, and communicate new ways to co-opt the tensioned web and its compressive boundary walls.

Core I Studio
Amina Blacksher
Fall 2021







Drawing in Air

Using TouchDesigner software and a Leap Motion hardware sensor, I built an interface for mark-making with the machine. As a former software engineer, I have a complicated relationship with digital creation. At times my connection with my tools feels so seamless as to be cyborgian; at others the cool screen, the processor, and their peripheral devices seem alien, inert.

Instructions:

When you move your hands over the sensor in front of you, you are feeding inputs into a system which draws its output on the screen. There are additional inputs and transformations: the software and hardware, the code I wrote, the controls that I chose to build in. Who is drawing, right now? How do we locate authorship in the videos produced from this experiment?

The symmetry and automatic color functions are intended to nudge the experience more towards that of a tool doing the job for you. When they are active, it feels a little less like you're in control of the drawing. Even so, your input is crucial to generating the particular result. Given enough time with this tool, you might start to feel like these features can be harnessed and used with creative, expressive intent.

Architectural Drawing and Representation II
Lorenzo Villaggi
Spring 2022





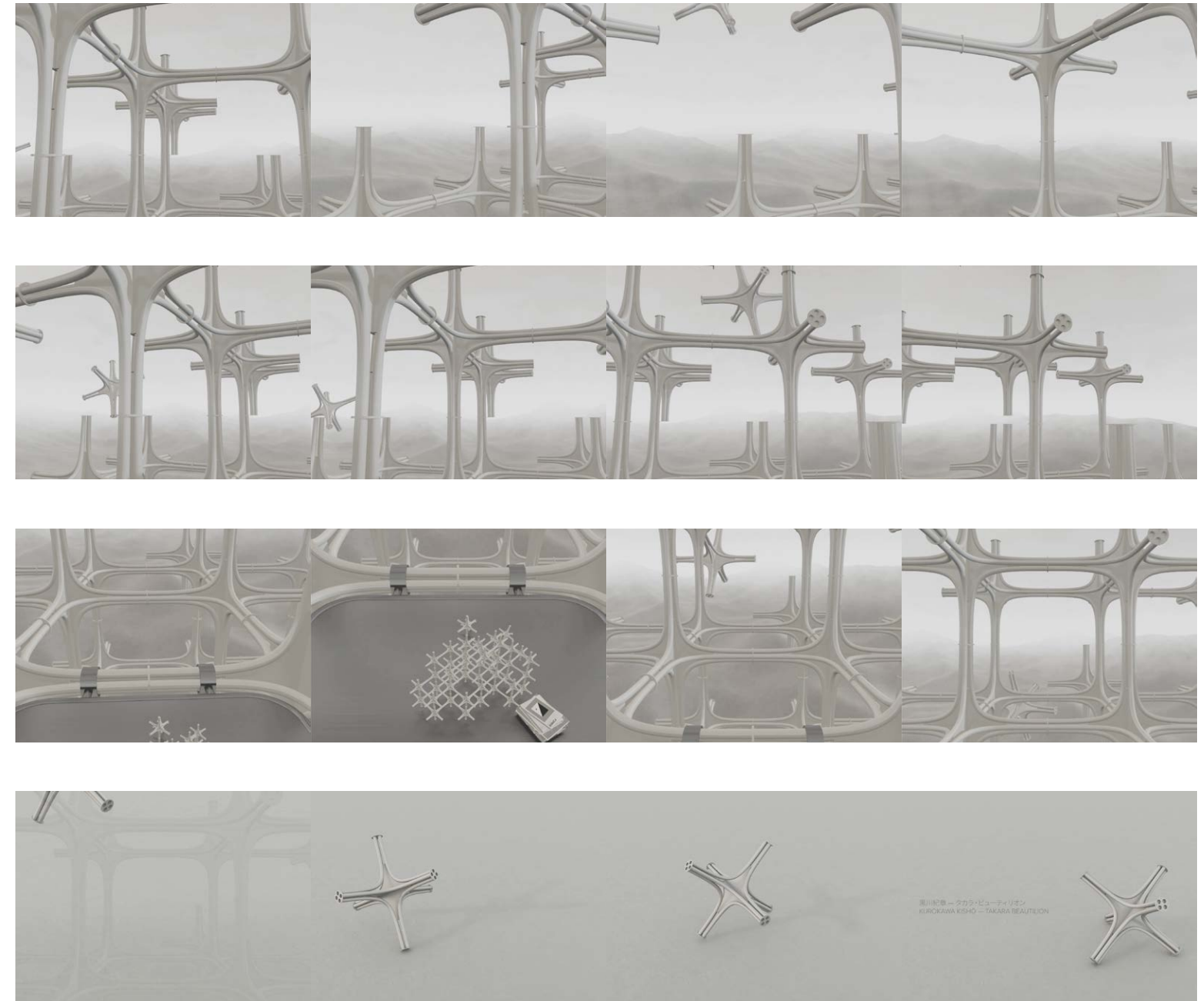
Takara Beutilion Study

The Takara Beutilion designed by Kisho Kurokawa for the Osaka Expo of 1970 expressed the architectural ambitions of Japanese Metabolism to a global audience.

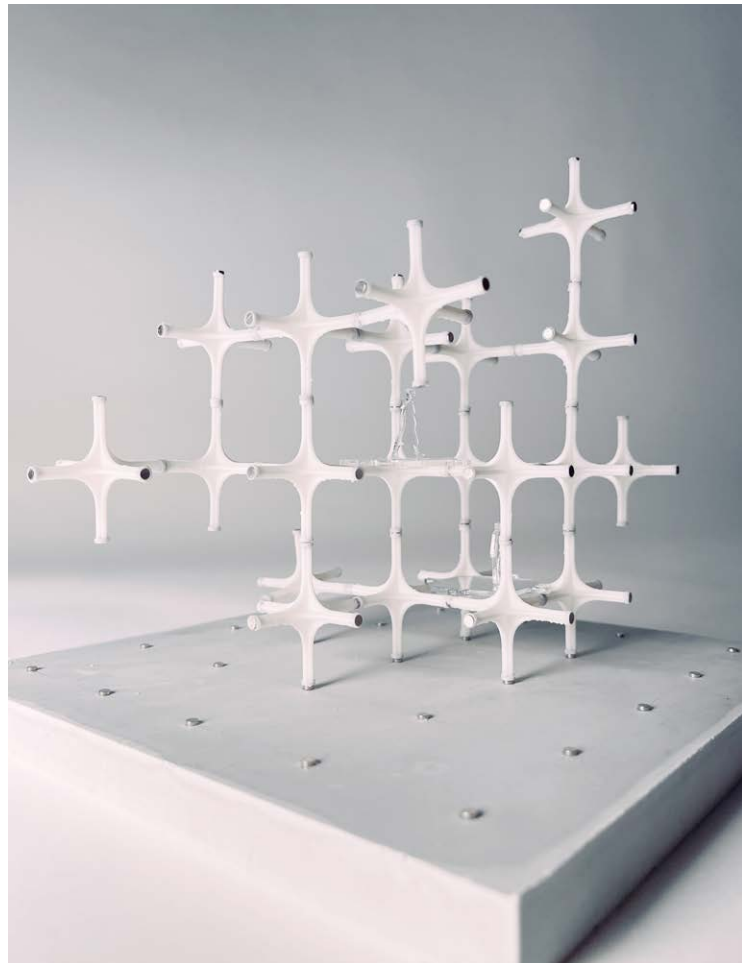
I studied Kurokawa's six-legged steel modules and the resultant system, within which were embedded ideas of organic, adaptable, and self-healing construction.

Video animation, model-making, and drawing offer different opportunities to explore and re-explore the ongoing questions of scale—toy, dwelling, or mega-infra-structure?—and of individual, personal, human agency in the act of building.

Architectural Drawing and Representation I
Andrea Chiney
Fall 2021



0'33" film with audio <https://vimeo.com/788060951>



Binding Matter

Cheap white clothes hangers, a trash bag caught as it tumbled in the wind down 14th St, a used shower loofah—and heat. At first I sat down and started bending the plastic hangers by hand. I liked bending them, liked trying to twist and coax them into some new alien configuration. Sometimes I'd push them too far; they'd break. When I started using the heat gun they quietly collapsed instead, going glossy and malleable. You know... plastic.

The woodshop has had one lonely CMU block sitting underneath the chop saw for a long time. It turns out that it was left over from the inflatable pavilion project this past spring. I smashed it on the floor, and then I bound it together with twine. The second week I went to United Transit Mix, a ready-mix concrete supplier on my block in Bushwick. I felt very small next to the heavy equipment as I asked for a little piece of their product... I plucked out a tiny morsel of a concrete from a fresh pile that was nevertheless so heavy I almost couldn't heft it all the way to campus. There is something both brutal and tender about the bondage.

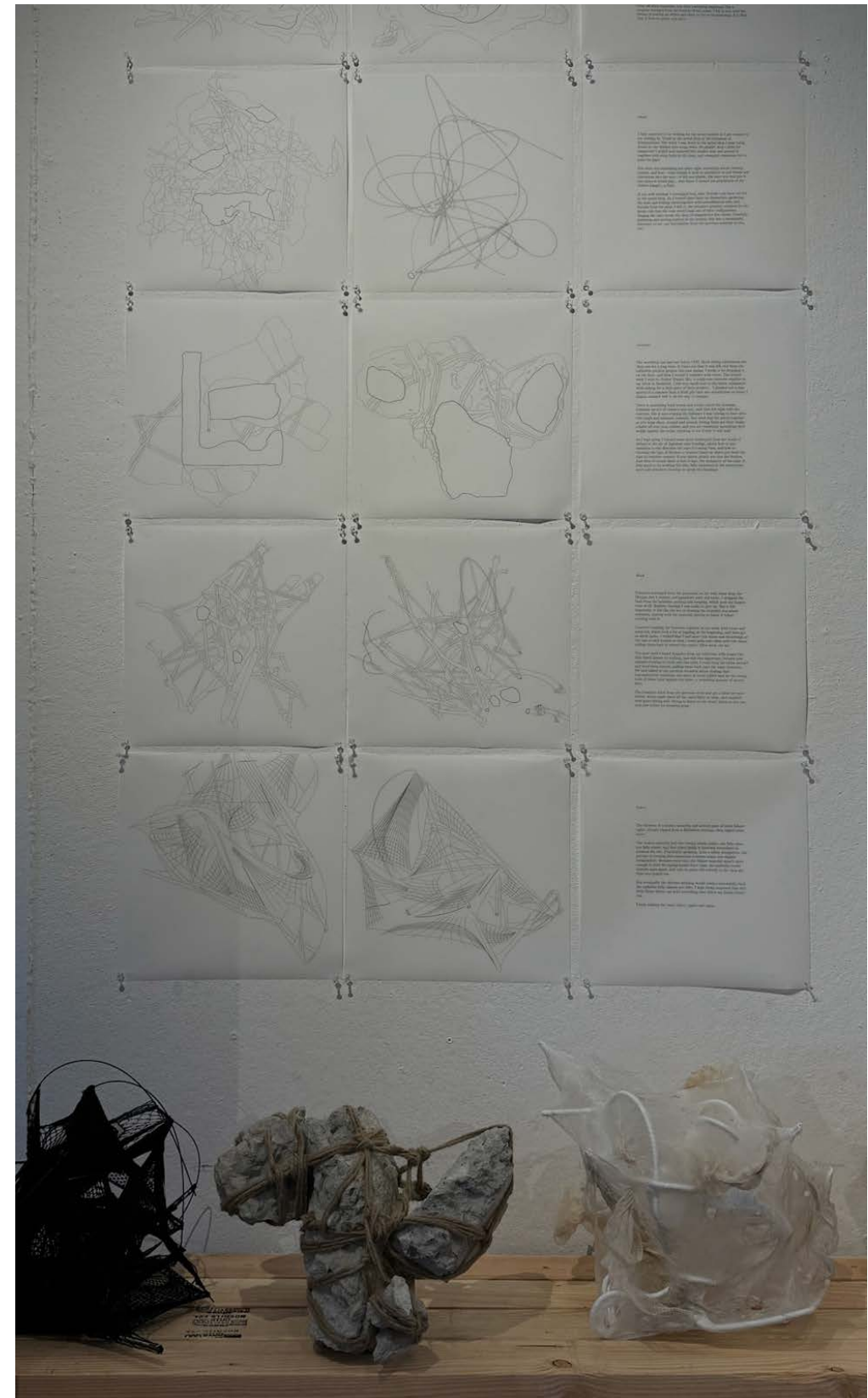
Thin rods, gathered at the ends by stray nuts and ferrules from the shop.

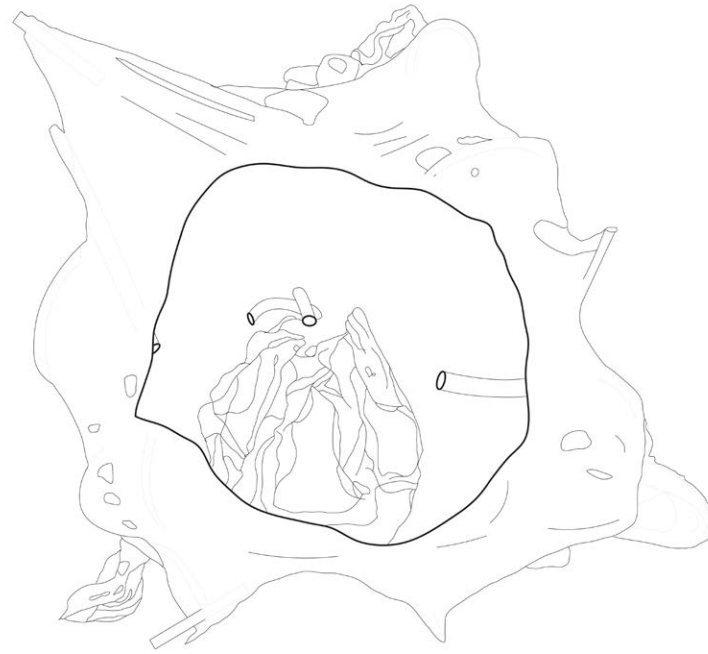
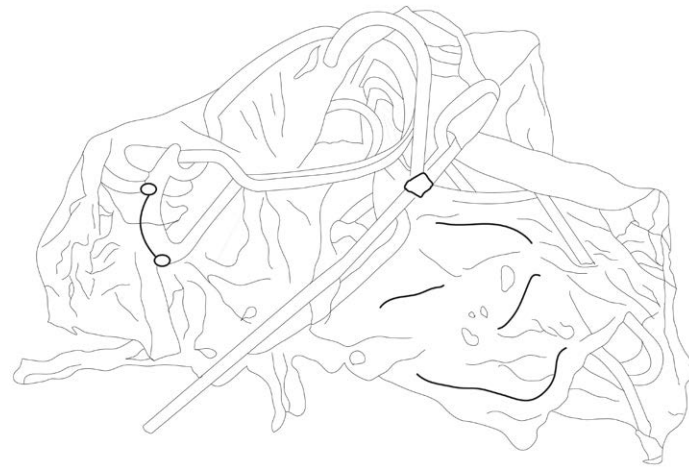
Branches scavenged from the pavement on my walk home from the Morgan Ave L station, red paracord, red twine. I stripped the bark from the branches, peeling and scraping, this took the longest time of all. Halfway through I was ready to give up. It felt important: it felt like the act of cleaning the branches was about attention, staying with the material, getting to know it before working with it.

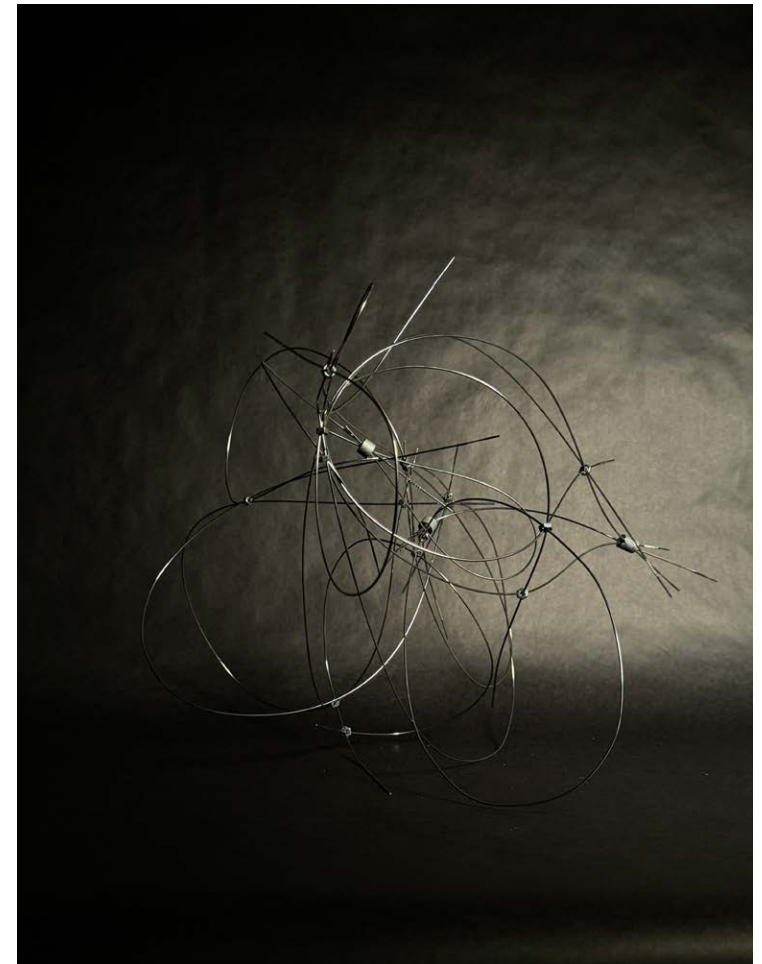
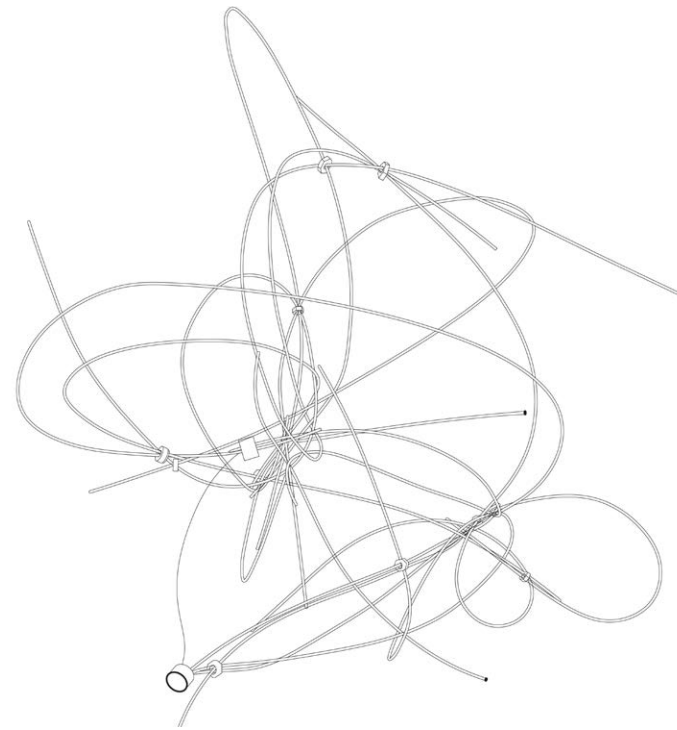
The skeleton of a broken umbrella and several pairs of black fishnet tights, already ripped from a Halloween costume, then ripped some more.

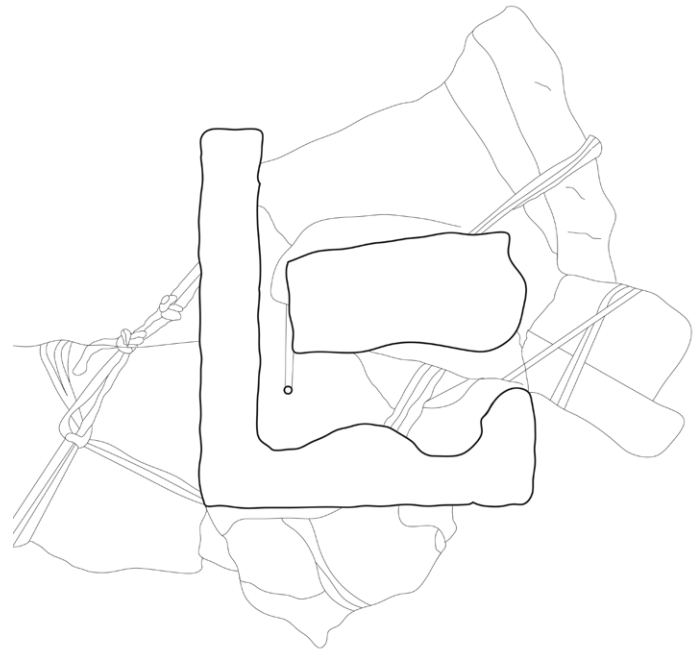
I keep making the same object, again and again.

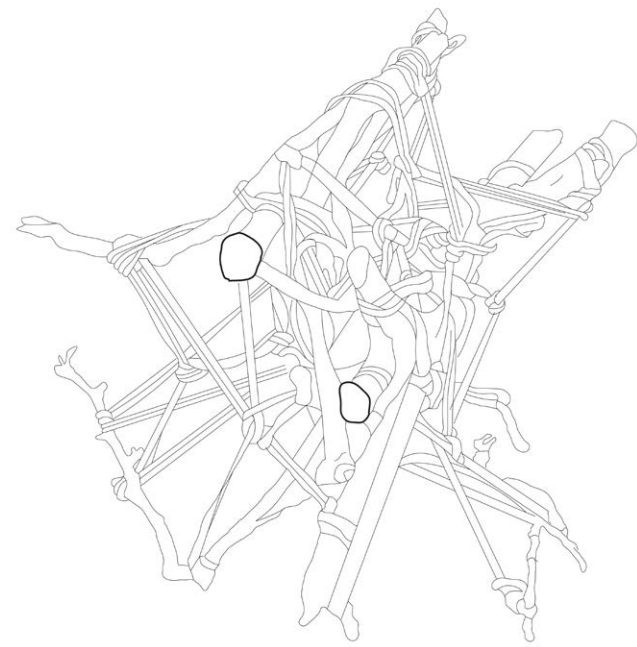
MAKE
Ada Tolla & Giuseppe Lignano
Fall 2023











Heavy Floaters

In structures, environments, and objects, there is always an uneasy reciprocity between supporting and supported.

We are interested in the contingency of such relationships, which embody ambiguous directions of agency and carry the ever-present risk of failure. Our explorations have centered on the interplay between heavy and light, hard and soft, fragile and robust, solid and immaterial.

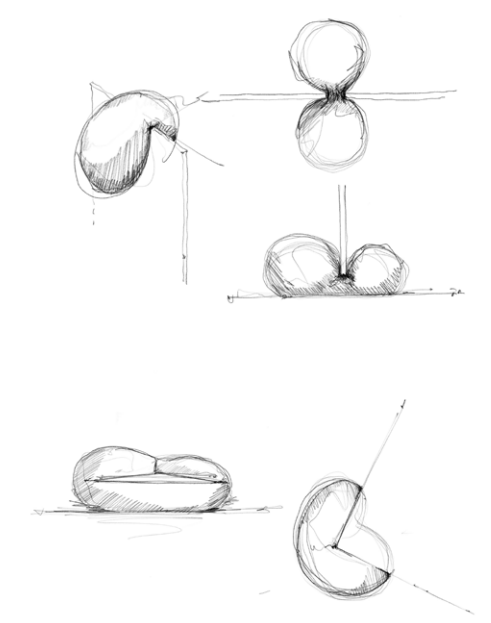
For our final object, the forming of cast cement around sheets of transparent acrylic becomes a connective act. In the process of curing, an intimate conversation between two materials in the moment of fabrication is captured, made visible, and a delicate equilibrium emerges.

Within the resulting system there is a confusion of structural logic: does stone hold up glass, or the other way around? Where is it breakable, and where is it strong?

Subject Object
Suchi Reddy
Spring 2023

In collaboration with
Mohamed Ismail





Together, Gravity

The architecture building is a body, this cool and heavy metallic chain-link is a body, and we are each a body. We affect one another. Silvery mesh mediates the relationship between person and structure as we test leaning, pulling, falling, tumbling, carrying.

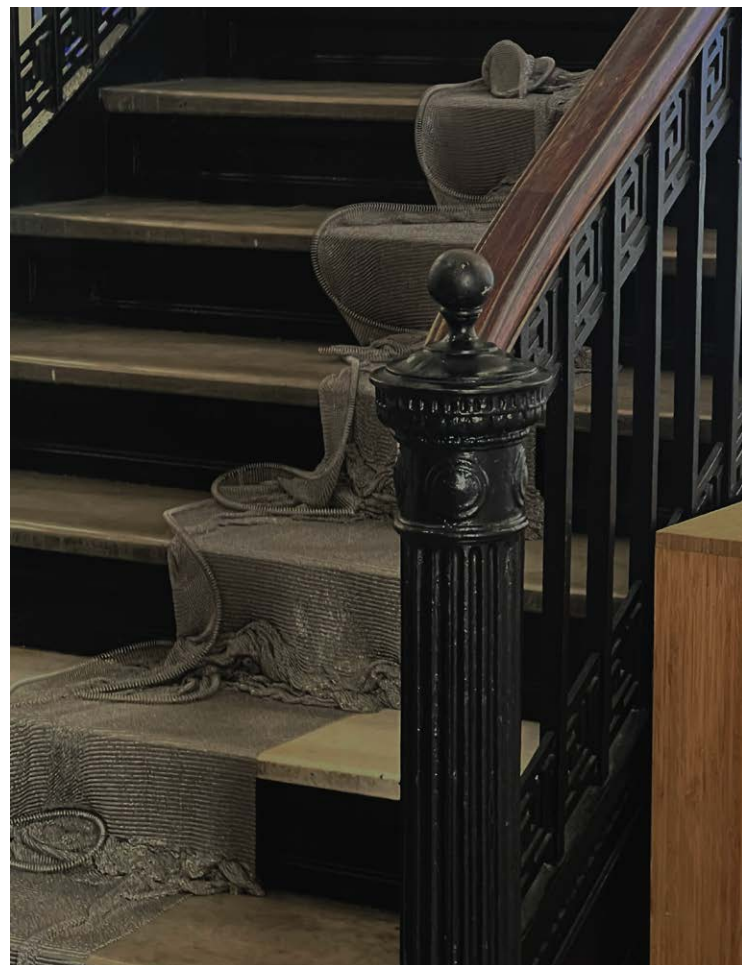
Without attentive care this experimentation tips over into damage, for shared weight to shade into unevenness and unequal burden. Bodies in space can heal one another, help one another, harm one another.

To move through these possibilities one must use one's own senses as weathervane. Attunement to environment—attunement from environment—is at the heart of orienting towards kindred bodies.

Bodies and Public Space
Bryony Roberts
Spring 2023

In collaboration with
Erisa Nakamura
Kelvin Lee
Vincent Yang





Staging School

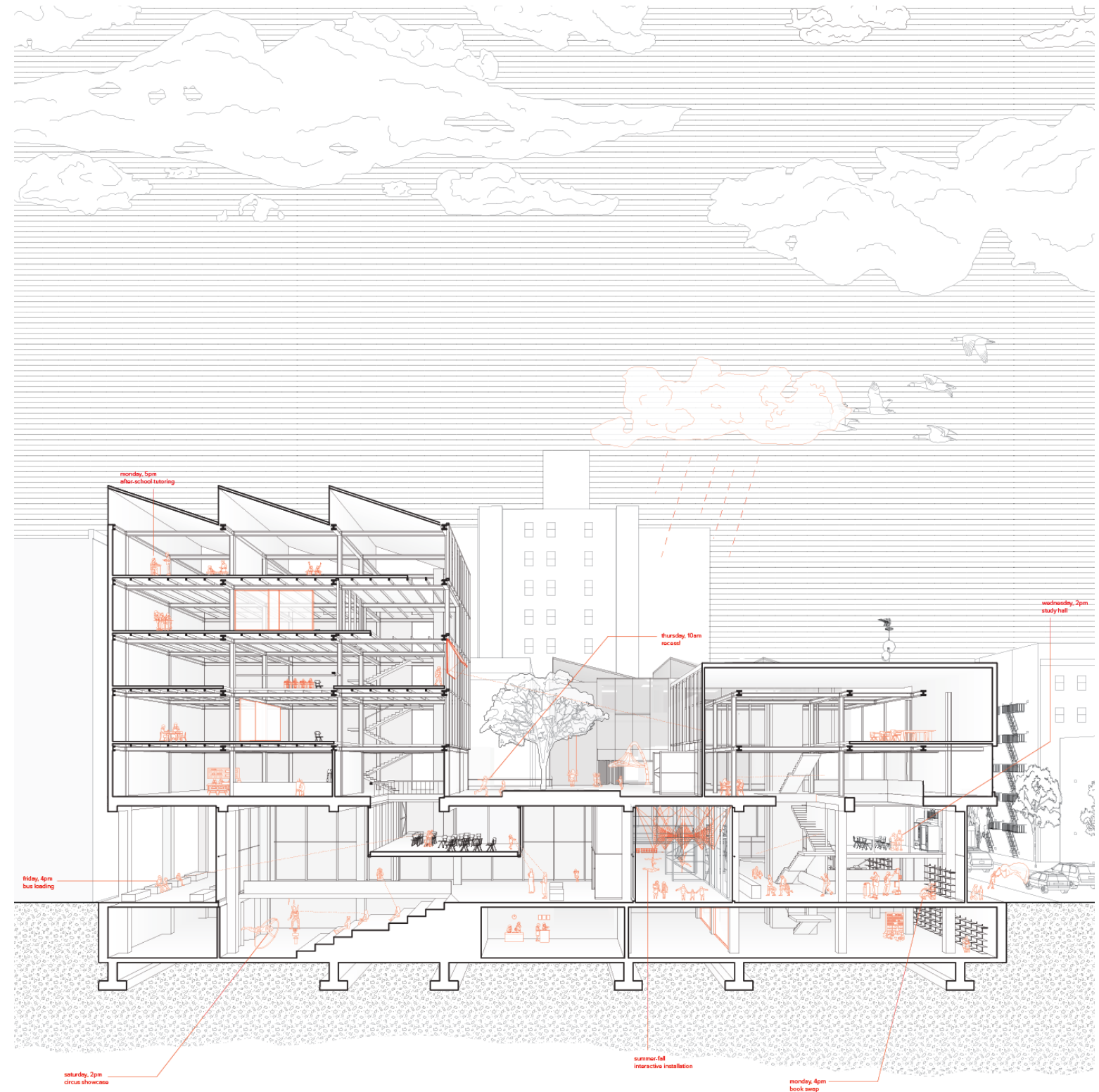
I came to think about school through the lens of theatre, and specifically the everyday theatre of people-watching. The neighboring Sara D. Roosevelt parked served as spectacle and lesson—who is rendered visible, who lives here, and what do they do? People-watching becomes a way of producing knowledge, and shapes the response of this school.

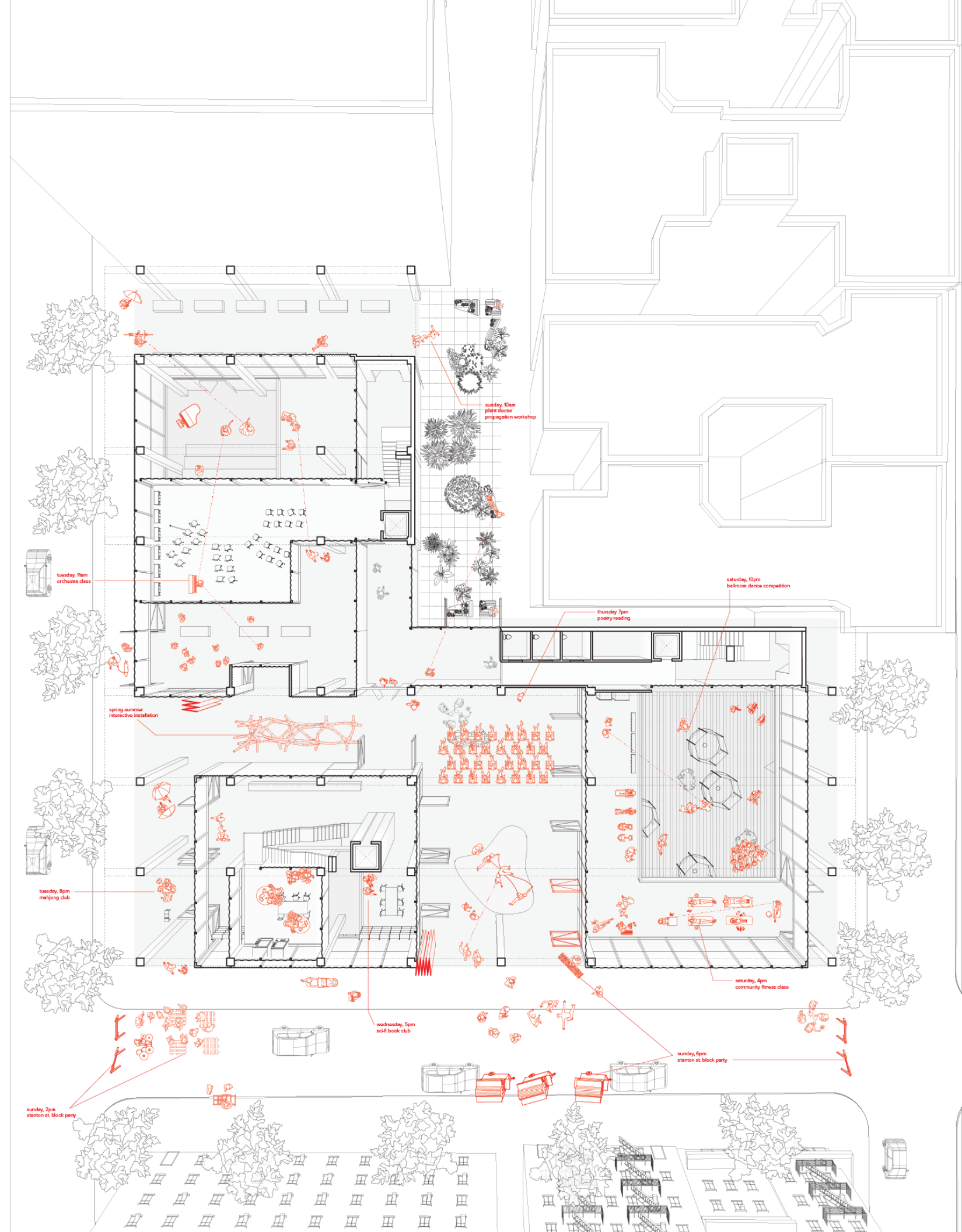
How might we tap into the pedagogical richness of urban theatre with its potential for community coherence, while also honoring the need to have a realm that belongs to the students?

A lifted podium anchored by three volumes becomes a meeting place for students, who can congregate here between their classes and activities. Private space diffuses as one approaches the ground, with spaces that puncture the podium creating visual connection with the public realms below. The rehearsal room dialogues with the auditorium, student lounge with library, and movement room with gymnasium.

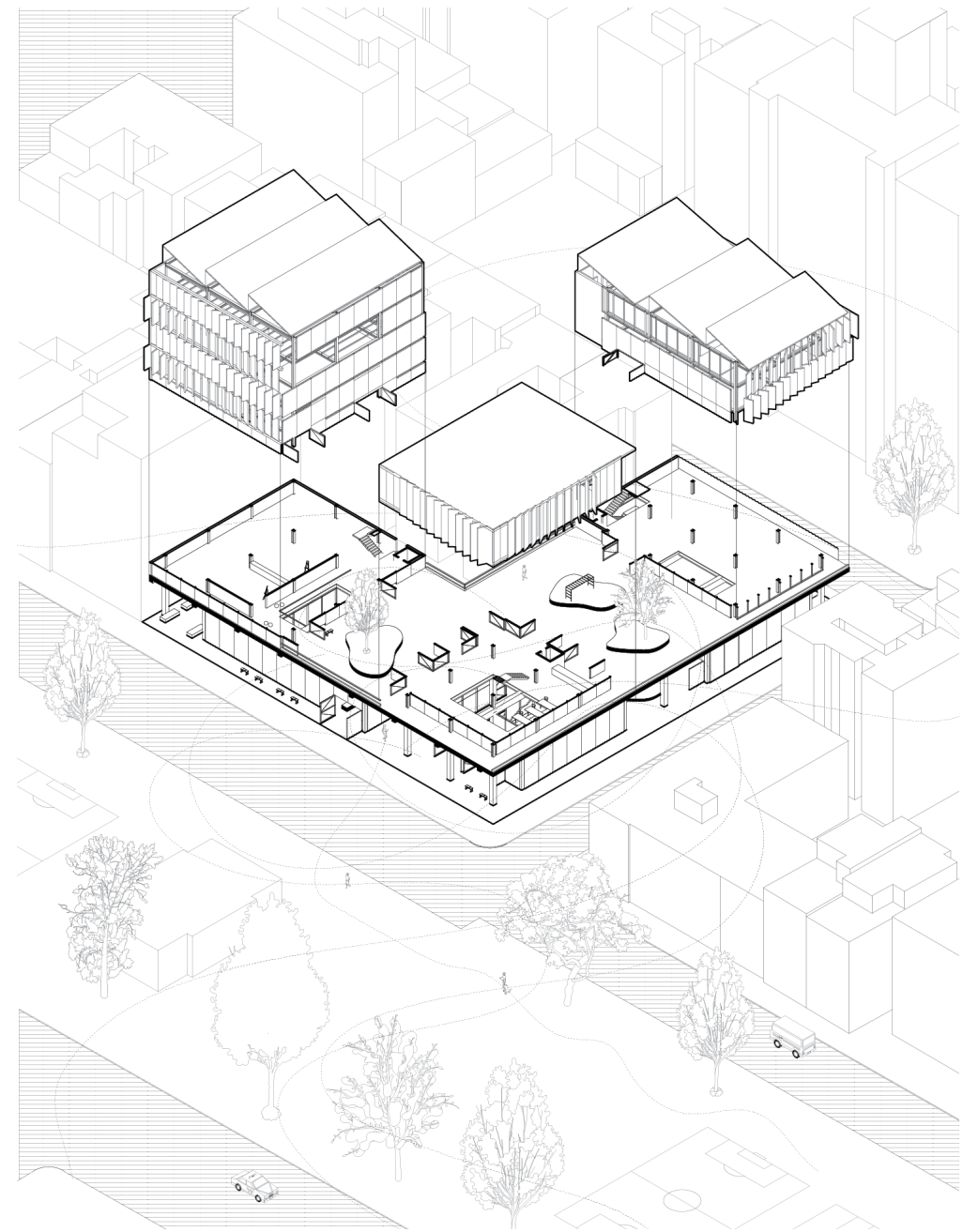
The project intersects traditionally scenographic and picturesque theatre with the undifferentiated, open field of the black box theatre. Ultimately the intention is to create a container to capture the wisdom of casual urban and social theatre.

Core II Studio
Esteban de Backer
Spring 2022









Exhale

The inflatable pavilion acts to coalesce the student body at the closing of the school year, creating shade on hot summer days and inviting guests to rest and play.

This year's design incorporates an interior inflatable intended for Room 408 in Avery Hall, connected through a window to an exterior section suspended over Avery Plaza. As we exchange air through the breath, *Exhale* facilitates visual and social exchange between inside and outside.

In response to the recent police presence on and violent eviction of students from Columbia University Morningside campus, *Exhale* will not be installed as originally planned in the Avery courtyard during the Class of 2024 graduation.

The Outside In Project
Galia Solomonoff & Laurie Hawkinson
Spring 2024

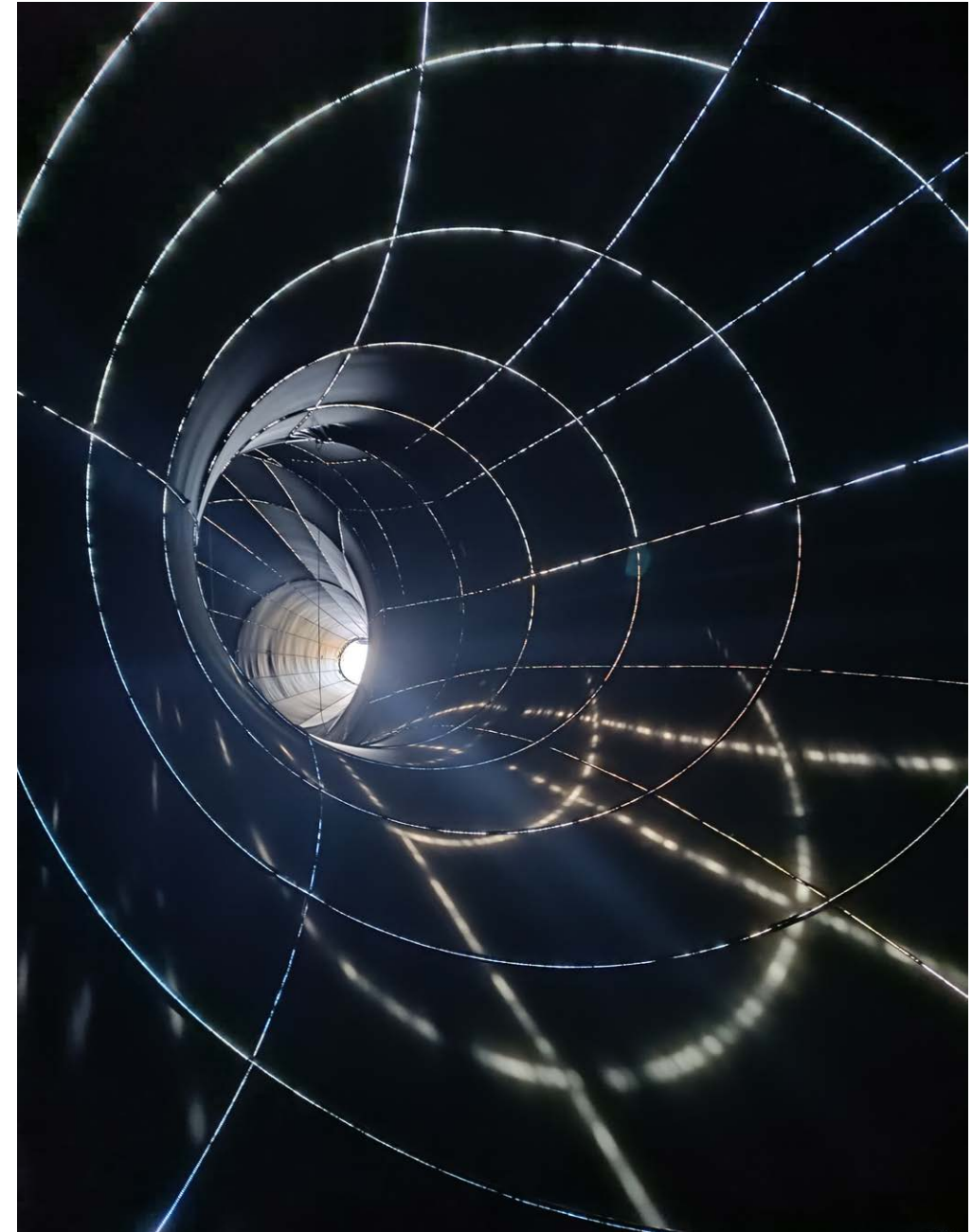
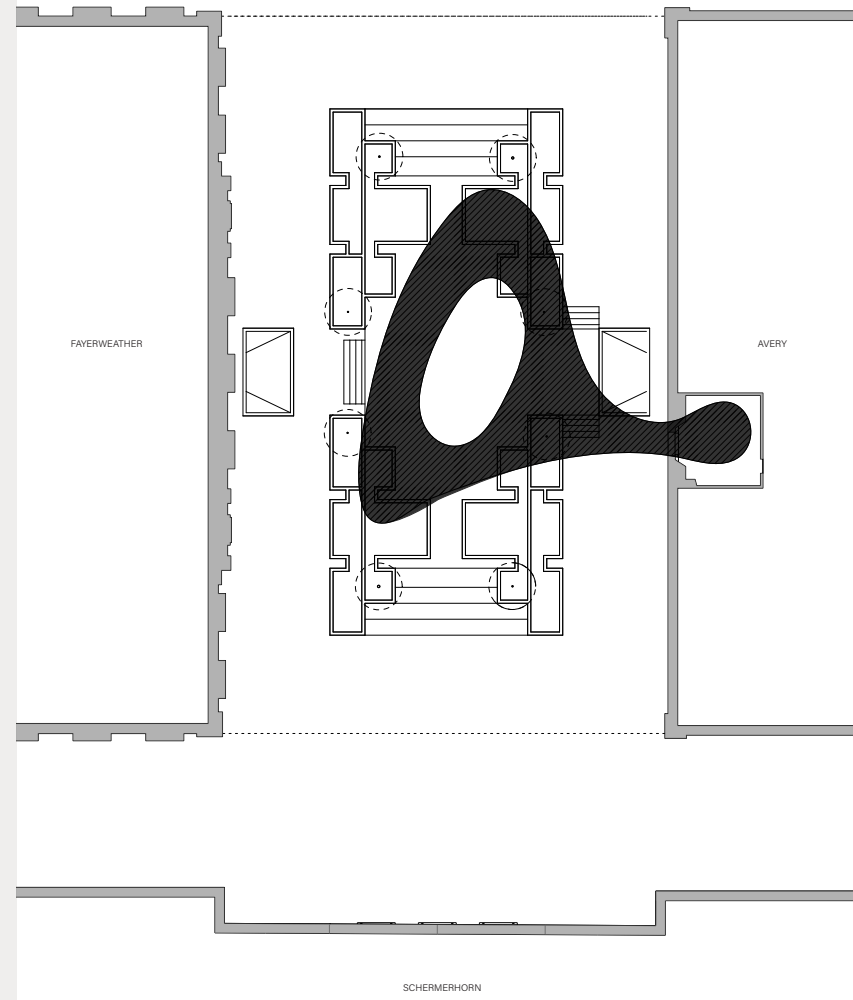
In collaboration with
The Outside In Team

Fabrication and photos
Àrea Cúbica



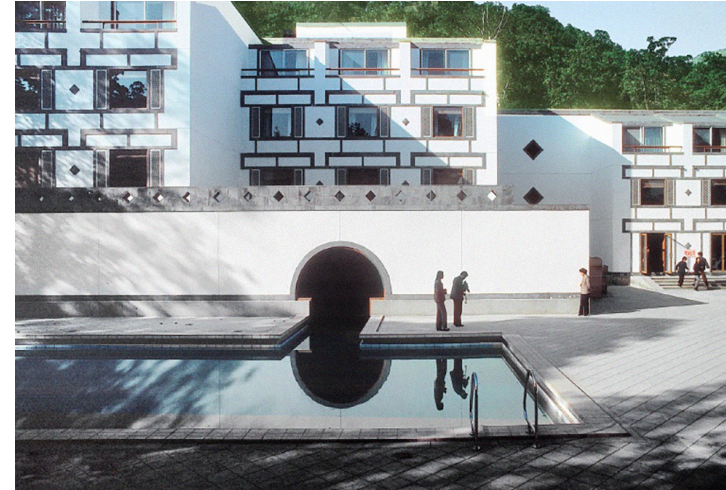
Name: Rilka Li

Iteration code: 1CJ



A Garden Dislocated:
I.M. Pei's Xiangshan Hotel
in Reform-Era China

Rilka Li
Postmodernism & World Systems
Prof. Reinhold Martin
May 5, 2023



*Xiangshan Hotel, I.M. Pei
Beijing, 1972*



*Bonaventure Hotel, John Portman
Los Angeles, 1976*

The Other Postmodern Hotel

In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson conjures the image of a postmodern hotel—citing John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel—as a new mutation in space, “postmodern hyperspace”, which “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.” In addition to the confusion of the body in space, Jameson's analysis argues that the postmodern hotel creates a separate spatial totality—its own world—and that its reflective glass exterior exercises a strange repulsive agency, which dislocates and disassociates the interior from its surroundings.

I.M. Pei's Xiangshan (Fragrant Hill) Hotel on the outskirts of Beijing, completed in 1972, boasts no glassy skin, nor convoluted and cavernous interior, nor vertiginous apparatus of vertical conveyance. Yet it, too, might be read as an attempt to create its own world, might be seen as coated with some shimmering substance which repels the reality of the world which physically encases it, tipping its visitors into a state of dislocation from its temporal and spatial context.

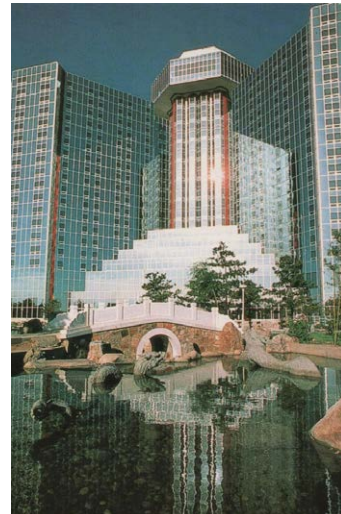
An appeal to tradition by Pei and purported synthesis of the dizzying landscape of Chinese history with Western Modernism, an ideological battleground set within and against a modernizing state, the Xiangshan Hotel becomes a postmodern foil to the Bonaventure.



Beijing Hotel East
Beijing, 1974



Jianguo Hotel, Clement Chen Associates
Beijing, 1982



Great Wall Hotel, Becket International
Beijing, 1983



White Swan Hotel, Guangzhou Design Institute Group
Guangzhou, 1983



Jinling Hotel, P&T Group
Nanjing, 1983



Shanghai Centre, John Portman
Shanghai, 1990

Future Views in the Reform Era

In the years of Mao Zedong's rule in China, strict limits were imposed on tourism; foreign visitors were largely unwelcome in the country. The construction of hotels tailored to guests from abroad was nearly nonexistent, and the low supply was almost immediately felt as soon as initial steps were taken towards a less politically isolated China. The impetus for the East addition of the Beijing Hotel is emblematic of this situation. It was built only following President Nixon's widely-scrutinized initial visit to China in 1972, after a quarter of a century without diplomatic relations between the two countries. During Nixon's visit, his staffers were relegated to stay in a separate hotel, as the Beijing Hotel itself did not have sufficient space to host the full entourage.

After Mao's death in 1976 and the ensuing power struggle, Deng Xiaoping assumed the position of national leader, implementing a series of economic and political reforms which marked a major departure from policy under Mao.

International hotels were integral to the economic and political experiments in this new reform era, injection sites for foreign investments and new cultural exchanges. Among the new projects, cultivated and curated by government officials to enable and underline the new Open Door Policy, were the Jianguo Hotel and the Great Wall Hotel in Beijing. These were the gleaming billboards advertising to the world that China was now open for business.

New hospitality towers, including the White Swan Hotel, the Jinling Hotel, and the Shanghai Centre, would also spring up farther afield.

When representatives of the Party invited I.M. Pei and his family to Beijing in 1978 to discuss a distinguished state commission for the architect, he was presented with the opportunity to design not a single hotel, but a group of high-rises with a total of 100,000 rooms between them. These would be located in areas intended to become popular destinations with foreign visitors: Beijing, Guilin, Nanjing. Pei was asked, in other words, to contribute his international fame in faithful service to an economic reformist agenda which readily leveraged the design language of Western development.

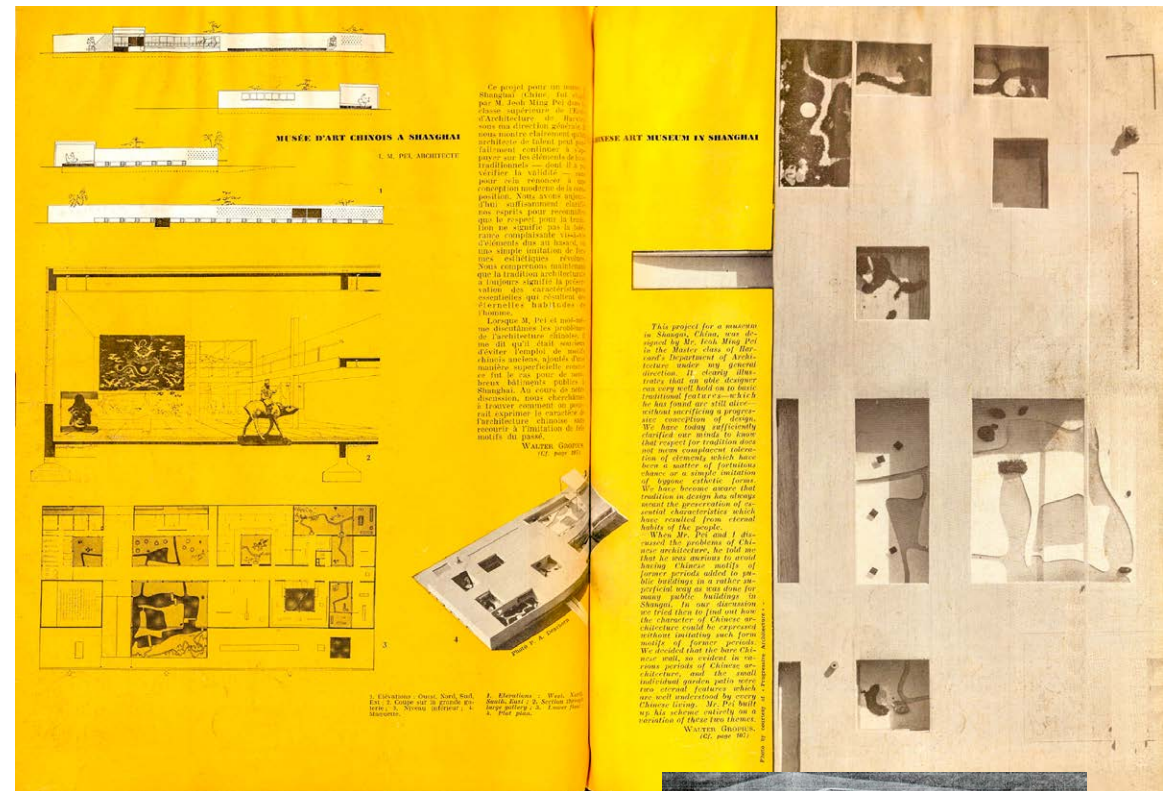


Shizilin (Lion's Grove)
Suzhou, 1342

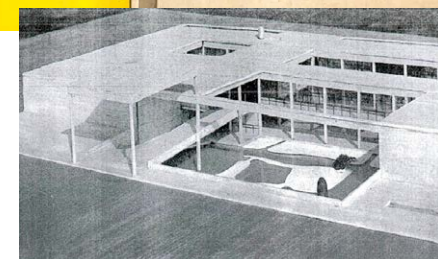
Personal Histories

Ieoh Ming Pei was born in Guangzhou, China in 1917, to a prominent banker father and a devout Buddhist mother. His childhood was spent in Hong Kong and Shanghai and, at least partially, in the classical garden Shizilin (Lion's Grove) in Suzhou—located in Jiangsu, a central coastal province of China—which was owned by his uncle. Shizilin, built in 1342 during the Ming dynasty, proved to be a cherished refrain and design reference for Pei in later projects in his homeland.

At age 17, in 1935, Pei moved to the United States to continue his schooling. A combination of factors, including his father's warnings of returning amidst political turmoil, led to Pei's uninterrupted absence from China for more than 40 years.



Pei's graduate thesis at the Graduate School of Design, "Chinese Art Museum in Shanghai"



At the Graduate School of Design, where Pei studied under Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, he completed his graduate thesis in 1948 on the design of a Chinese art museum in Shanghai. Here his early thoughts on the expression of a uniquely Chinese character in architecture are made visible, with a distinct inclination towards the geometric abstractions of the International Style and a distaste for the ornamental "motifs of former periods" attached to new construction at the time in Shanghai.

If his design of the Xiangshan Hotel decades later can be thought to be Pei's homecoming, then two aspects of this initial exploration of architecture "for China" come more clearly into view.

The first is an interest in the Chinese (presumably central-coastal) garden scheme, whose spatial organization, at least, survived the modernist abstraction which pruned away many of its attendant visual details.

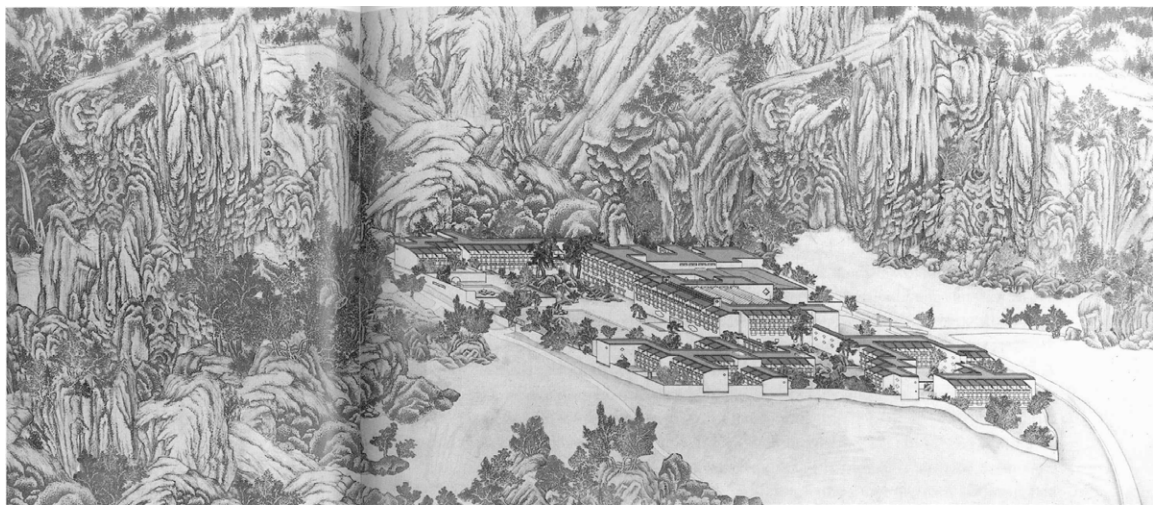
The second is that this commitment to a modernist abstraction, which appears more strongly held in this graduate thesis than it would be in Pei's eventual built work in Xiangshan. This is a curious discrepancy; it is difficult to trace the evolution of such tendencies, and the factors affecting them, and yet its existence affirms that something in the air or the person has changed. In that rhetorical arrangement common to architecture, it seems that whatever *China* demanded of Pei in 1948, it would demand something different of him in 1979.



Low-cost construction in the Design Revolution of 1964
Reprinted from Jianzhu Xuebao, 1966(3): 33



Palace Museum, Forbidden City
Beijing, 1406–1420



Xiangshan Hotel collage with landscape painting from late Ming dyansty by Zheng Zhong (1610-1648), Pei Cobb Freed & Partners

Historical Views in the Reform Era

Pei strongly opposed the proposed siting of the high-rise project when he received word of the state commission. In particular, the locations indicated in Beijing were all close to the city center, and importantly would occupy the yet-unobstructed view of the skyline from within the Forbidden City. The way forward, for Pei, was in not overwriting these remnants of the past.

What was the nature of the China, the true China, that Pei was searching for within his architecture? His interviews suggest that it may be one in which the Cultural Revolution, and the whole Mao regime, had never occurred. Certainly Pei denied a situatedness to the Soviet-influenced architecture of that period, which he deemed “rootless, and disposable in time.”

Enclosures

There is a philosophical through-line of preservation between the move to embed the Xiangshan Hotel within a lush, appealingly untouched landscape—as well as Pei’s approach to the growing things within it, having asked his intern architect to diagram every single tree which might be cut down during construction—and his search for a genuinely Chinese architectural character. Beyond questions of preservation, or perhaps in the process of their asking, the hotel might also begin to act as a boundary for a newly constructed and contained reality.

In moving the project from the urban to the not-quite-rural, with its surrounding woods and stubborn trees, Pei generated a different type of enclosure from Portman’s

hotel, but an enclosure even so. Picking up Jameson’s metaphors of light and prisms, the low-slung buildings of Xiangshan Hotel might exhibit not a reflectivity but a kind of translucency, the eye passing through them into the landscape, a studied seamlessness between the project and the site.

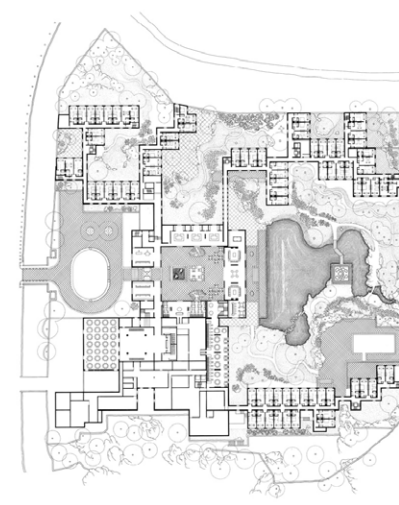
What is produced by this play on opacity? One answer is: the soft, blurred edges of a self-contained world. For the eventual visitors to Xiangshan Hotel, as for visitors to any classical Chinese garden, there would be an experience of stepping out of the world, into another one, smaller, distilled. With the hotel, however, the experience of arriving would also be diffuse, difficult to locate in one moment in the experience of landscape.



Apertures in Xiangshan Hotel

The more southern Suzhou classical garden type was not native, nor climatically adapted, to the northern land it was planted in for the Xiangshan Hotel. It did offer, however, a scenographic and picturesque framework upon which to construct the idyllic vision of an eternal, flourishing China. A Suzhou villa garden is closed, intricate, and utterly constructed: the paths of its streams, the specific placement of its rocks and terrain, and the rooting of its vegetation have all been planned and arranged in order to provide the most pleasant and beautiful representation of a landscape.

The calibrated openings in the hotel, although placed in relation to what is constructed, suggest a framing of what is already present: what is simply found.



Left: Site plan of Xiangshan Hotel, featuring a reconstruction of an older Water Maze (near center right). Right: aerial view of Xiangshan Hotel within the landscape.

The bilingual discourse on Xiangshan Hotel further complicates the significance of site. In the paper “Intersecting narratives of site: Fragrant Hill Hotel as a reconstruction project”, Wang Xuerui and Li Xiangning demonstrate a significant departure in rhetoric between the common English-language reference to “former imperial hunting grounds”, and the more varied Chinese-language discussion which identifies the location as not empty, but rather the site of an imperial garden and still-existing if ruined buildings. As late as 1920, a protectorate for orphaned children was built to augment the existing girls’ school on the land. Before construction began on Pei’s Xiangshan Hotel, the remaining buildings from the protectorate needed to be demolished.

As Wang and Li note, the subtleties within Pei’s own discussions of the site both reveal his awareness of its genuine historical use—in his architectural evocation of original water features, and his extensive research of the site with knowledgeable locals—while also minimizing its earlier life when speaking to Western audiences.

Perhaps this retroactive construction of a virgin landscape can be read in the same way as the artifice of a Suzhou garden: as painterly, with a keen eye towards what will look more natural than nature. Yet there is some sense of having misplaced the past, with its persisting ruins, in order to build an image of it anew; the Forbidden City, preserved, appears to dislocate the old Xiangshan.



Left: Ice-crack carpet in Xiangshan Hotel atrium. Right: Ice-crack pattern in Song dynasty porcelain.



Yunnan stone in the landscaping of Xiangshan Hotel

Dynastic Collage

Visual references pulled from far-flung periods within a long history of imperial rule in China made their way into the design of the Xiangshan Hotel. The carpet displayed in the atrium, itself a replica of a Ming dynasty (1368–1644) carpet, featured a pattern evocative of Song dynasty (960-1279) “ice crack” porcelain, whose techniques were famously lost for centuries.

The massive stones featured in the gardens of Xiangshan Hotel were sourced from the Stone Forest of Yunnan, the southwesternmost province of China, some 1,600 miles away. In legend the Qing dynasty Qianlong Emperor (1735-1796) loved the stones of Yunnan, but they were too difficult to ship to Beijing. In contrast to the lost porcelain, here was the past made accessible.

These references to the artistic glory of Chinese dynasties past, and the vast Chinese landscape itself, do not fit themselves neatly next to those criticized by Pei in his graduate thesis, yet they work on questions of tradition, style, and national identity in a way that seems distant from the abstraction he operated with decades earlier. It seems also distant, as would come to light when the hotel opened, from the expectations of government officials and citizens for what this Chinese-American architect would bring to their country.



Xiangshan Hotel atrium under construction

Unfamiliar Production

Construction of the Xiangshan Hotel yielded many anecdotes about the surprising difficulties encountered by an international architect in working with a Chinese labor force. The foundation was dug by hand by some 2,000 workers. At times the number of workers on site was closer to 3,000, unaided by bulldozers, cranes, or other construction machinery. A lack of coordination between different worker groups who reported separately to the mayor led to miscommunications; Pei found it difficult to motivate workers to approach the project with care and sufficient effort, eventually enlisting his family to join him in address last-minute details like planting and mopping the floors in advance of the opening; often the root cause was, straightforwardly, unfamiliarity with the specific task.

Many of these stories arrive via the frustrated opining of the American team working on the project, and so combined carry a tinge of dismissal or condescension. They also, however, reveal a power struggle: Pei’s firm fighting to exert control, to articulate and produce a labor force which was only imagined, which did not exist in China in 1979. The hotel essentially generated a force field, however weak or tenuous (Pei described the experience as “exhausting”), which altered its social and economic environs in order to accommodate its construction.

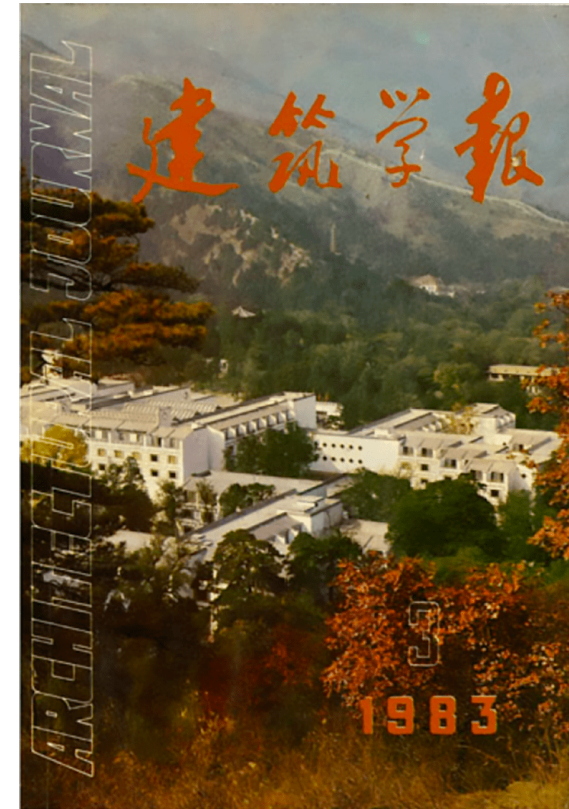


Left: National Gallery of Art, East Wing, 1968-1978. Center: Xiangshan Hotel, 1979-1982. Right: Gray tile detail in Xiangshan Hotel.

The concrete structure and brick foundation of the Xiangshan Hotel were relatively simple construction. The pitched roof of its atrium, with its supporting cross members, demonstrated less structural daring than the space frame spanning the atrium of Pei's East Wing for the National Gallery of Art, completed a year earlier.

If the hotel's design aligned more closely with the infrastructural conditions of labor, material, and technology on this front, though, it saw another disproportionate difficulty in the traditional gray tiles used on the exterior. The tiles were no longer being produced in China, and hiring the old artisans who remembered how to re-produce them meant every five bricks cost a worker's average monthly salary.

A newly developed structural system, not used, and an old building material, employed at great difficulty and cost: there is a sense that the two situations could be intimately related, in that an industry which was striving to accomplish feats such as the former might well, for that reason, have fewer inclinations to devote resources to a continued and nostalgic production of the latter.



Cover of Jianzhu Xuebao (Architectural Journal) magazine featuring Xiangshan Hotel, 1983

Contested Identities

The response from state officials at the completion of Xiangshan Hotel indicate ideological difficulties in assimilating Pei's embrace of tradition—even embarrassment at having paid the associated \$25 million cost—with the party's own gaze towards modernization and the future, with its differing architectural strategies. The state-run newspaper People's Daily notably reviewed the hotel as "strange." Foreign journalists were barred from the hotel opening, ostensibly to tighten control over the project's narrative.

Professional architectural criticism, however, was more ambivalent. The project received coverage in a number of architectural journals and was the subject of a 1982 symposium involving more than 30 practitioners.

Symposium proceedings include commentary that the project was a "reasonable success" (from the deputy architect of the Beijing Institute of Architectural Design), in addition to comments about its "wasteful extravagance," "lack of a contemporary spirit" and its economic impracticality given its distance from the city center.

It seemed to cause consternation in Pei that younger practitioners in China were not enamored with his work after the completion of his project: he described in interviews learning that young architects at the Beijing Institute for Architectural Design were more interested in Michael Graves and the Postmodernists than in Pei.



Advertisement for Connoisseur magazine in the New Yorker, 1983

Pei, though, held a developmentalist position also on the aesthetic and cultural dislocation of the Xiangshang Hotel, viewing cultural discourse in China as proceeding in a kind of offset lockstep. Asked by Connoisseur magazine in 1983 what he really thought of his hotel on the outskirts of Beijing, Pei replied:

“I did the best I could. It is not architecturally all I wanted. But it is the best I could have done under the difficult circumstances. By that I mean at this stage in their development the Chinese are able to comprehend and, more important, construct only a certain amount.”



Bank of China Tower, I.M. Pei
Hong Kong, 1990

Elsewhere—specifically, in Hong Kong—Pei almost simultaneously helmed the construction of the type of high-rise and high-tech architecture which he would not in Beijing. The glass curtain-walled Bank of China Tower, whose construction began in 1985 and was completed in 1990, became the first supertall skyscraper outside of the United States. The structural engineering and execution of the tower’s X-shaped exterior supports, in addition to being of a technical caliber presumably inaccessible to the Xiangshan project, would further infamously align itself more closely with a vision of technological daring than with ancient Chinese traditions—such as the practice of feng shui, wherein Pei’s project signified violence and death.



*Suzhou Museum, I.M. Pei + Pei Partnership Architects
Suzhou, 2006*



Moving Forward, Going Home

A little more than 20 years after the opening of the Xiangshan Hotel, in 2006, Pei completed the new building for the Suzhou Museum near the site of his ancestral family villa. The architectural details of the white plaster walls, dark gray clay tiles, and scenographic garden arrangements of the Xiangshan hotel returned in this new institution.

The relative critical and popular success of the Suzhou Museum project in comparison to what was (in many ways, not least of which was Pei's own narrative) its predecessor places a finer point on the latter's uneasy position in time and space. The spatial development of the Suzhou villa scheme becomes perhaps more resonant with visitors situated closer to its birthplace.

The original mandate of the Suzhou Folk Museum—the display of ancient Chinese painting, calligraphy, and crafts—readily accommodates Pei's experiments with a nativized Chinese architecture, drawing freely and widely from the long history known as tradition, and intimately entangled with landscape.



Xiangshan Hotel, header image from website of the I.M. Pei Foundation

When Is the Garden?

The most commonly-accepted English name “Fragrant Hill” might be considered to be something of a mistranslation. The “Xiang” (香) in “Xiangshan” does at times mean “fragrant,” or “sweet-smelling,” though it can also refer to incense, and the hill or mountain in question was likely named because of the temple at its peak, which would have burned ceremonial incense. This semiotic slipperiness—the way something can be held the same and yet, when slid sideways from its original context, become foreign—has something in common with Pei's hotel. The bucolic complex becomes grounds for a battle over who can wield the political power to induce cultural change, and what it *means* becomes something ambiguous, unfixed, and above all contested.

In designing his hotel, it might be said, I.M. Pei sought to create a altered realm in which certain properties of history and change might hold true, and which would influence the making of new spatial instantiations of that altered realm. But the world of the hotel was ultimately porous to the vicissitudes of that other, outside world, its realities seeping in, and rendering visible the temporal slippages which set the first world apart.

To my teachers and my friends, who are always teaching too—thank you.

