# REFRACTIVE ARCHITECTURE

MATTHEW PLASENCIA | SPRING 2018 | WISCHER

#### A PARADIGM SHIFT THROUGH EDUCATION

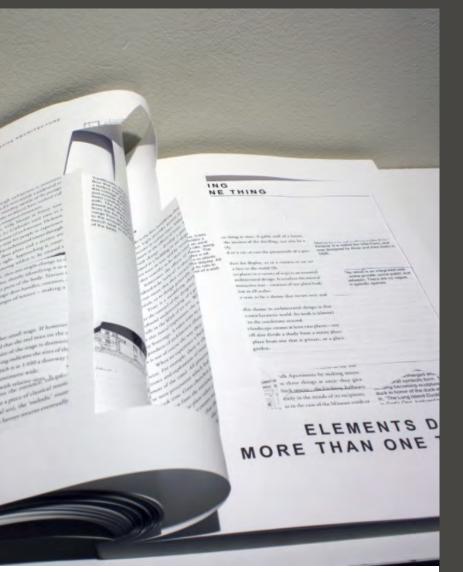




figure 0.2 Representation of modern utopia, or no place

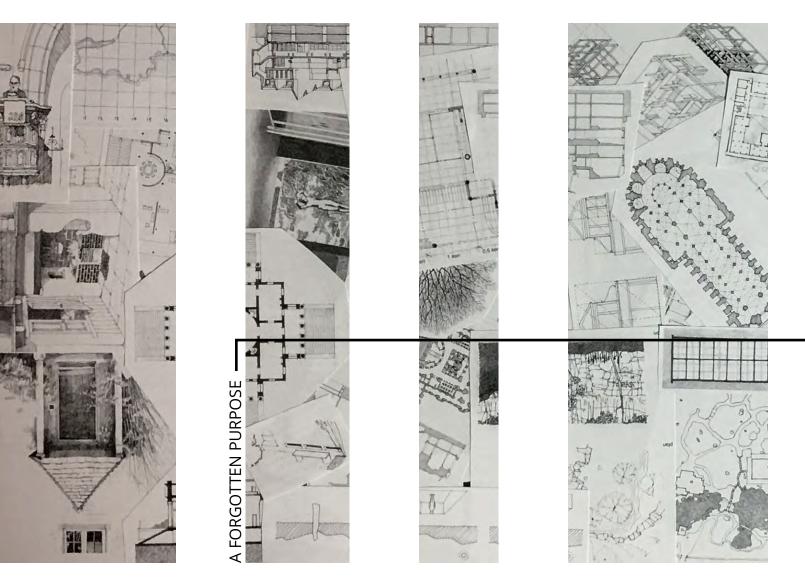
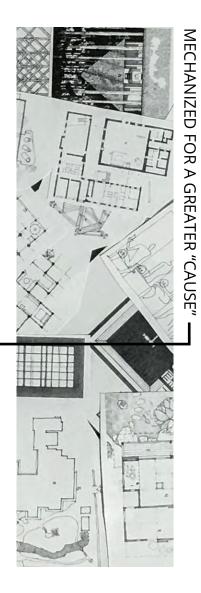
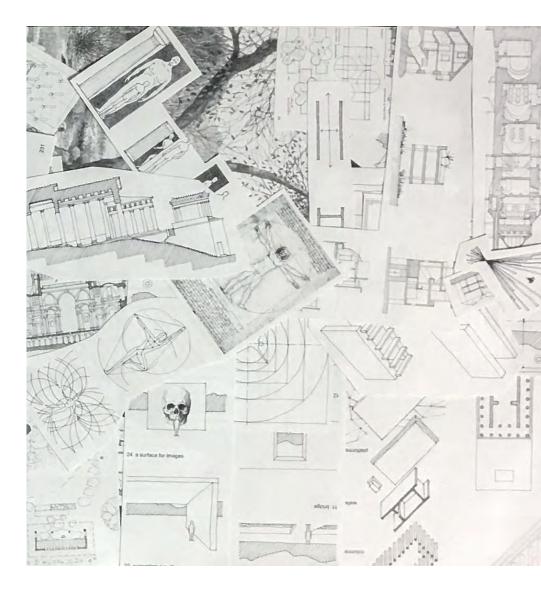


figure 0.3 A fragment of the artefact, containing a recombined textbook on a glass panel





# Mattlew Plasencia

**Refractive Architecture** 

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Thesis Committee Chair

Date

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A design thesis submitted to the Department of Architecture and Landscape Architecture of North Dakota State University

Ву

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Architecture May 2018 Fargo, North Dakota

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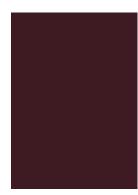
# THESIS ABSTRACT

How can the design of an educational facility allow the optimization of the individual in order to propel the many?

A place of no place, void of connection or meaning. We are moving ever more rapidly into a utopian society. A society of automatons, operating as machines. Aspects of our world today have been reduced and categorized to a point they become void of all meaning. This abstraction is rooted in information going as far back as the 15th century. Where the knowledge could be thought about and not practiced. Where education was removed as an experience and transitioned into a reductive representation.

Through a prismatic approach to architecture, a classroom is no longer void of connection or context to others. The foundation of this re-imagined education lies with the individual. Where the foundation of 'being' is built first. Then brought forward into all other aspects of life. Allowing for a more holistic approach to life. But more importantly allowing the optimization of the individual through architecture, in a world that currently celebrates mediocrity. Subjects are taught without relation or context to each other or the greater world around them. But we know that in this world, nothing exists without the influence and connection to everything else around it.

## NARRATIVE



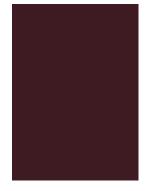
In today's world, the idea of a Utopia is in many ways, very comforting to people. Utopias, for many, are seen as havens. But the reality of utopia is vastly different and I would go as far as to say that we are inching ever more closely to living in a Utopia. If we were ever to truly attain this status of utopia, what happens is, we as humans become reductions. We become mere automatons operating at the will of a larger mechanism. A mechanism that lingers over, never to be seen but is felt at the essence of how we live. But thankfully, we have the opportunity to change, at any moment in time we can make the decision to shift our lives in the direction we want. But the problem is most of us either never realize this or never see this opportunity. This problem is what I am addressing in my architectural thesis

With my project I am proposing that we take a paradigm shift in the way we look at the world. When we look at the world the common thread amongst most individuals is education. Education plays a





### NARRATIVE



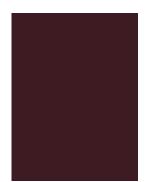
major role in most people's lives. For that reason I am suggesting an alternative approach to education. An approach that is rooted no longer in the benefit of the collective but in the benefit of the individual. A prismatic sense of education where a connection can be made through the individual and put back into the world through a new lens. A prism of knowledge and education which allows for the optimization of the single in order to propel the many.

In order to accomplish this it requires a space in which the inhabitants have the opportunity to experience themselves, to grow and develop and then simultaneously share and learn with others. To do this the program of the spaces becomes key. The program provides the opportunity to recompose a fractured system. To do this, the building is not about abandoning the core principles of education today but reinterpreting them anew. My project proposal is to create a shift in which we view education and the architecture around it.

# A PRECEDENT STUDY: THE ENDLESS HOUSE



## The Endless House



The ideals presented in Kiesler's Endless House were the foundation to my project. The Endless House was not as much about an actual project but more so about a critique of modernism in the 20th century. Kiesler's work strove to create a contrast between reductive architecture and the embodiment of space. For Kiesler the Endless House was about allowing the inhabitant to "architect" the space. Creating a space of imagination and growth through architecture within the individual. It was the idea of bringing the individual back into the space which laid the foundation for my work

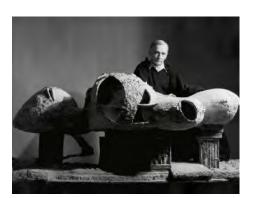


figure 1.3 Kiesler pictured with a model of his *Endless House.* 

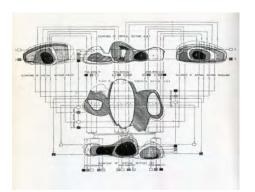
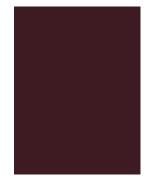


figure 1.4 Corresponding plans and sections to the model of the *Endless House*.

### The Endless House



Frederick Kiesler, working in New York throughout the 20th century dedicated a large portion of his career to what he called The Endless House. This project was an architectural attempt of surrealism in architecture along with a direct critique the ideologies of modernism that were growing at the time. In the seventh edition of The Chora, Angeliki Sioli addresses and analyses Kiesler's Endless House in a article titled Is the Endless a House?

Analyzing more closely Sioli's work through the lenses of Paul Ricoeur and Cvril and Liliane Welch the first theme that came through was the usage of poetic language through an absent present. Sioli does this between the body and flesh of a human, and the physical aspect of building. Kiesler's goal through the Endless House was to critique modernism by allowing an experience to be felt through the architecture. An active embodiment of space where the inhabitants become the architects creating the space through ourselves. This is only seen possible within the project by allowing a distance to occur between spaces. A lack of "structure" to the space allows the inhabitant to architect the spaces themselves.

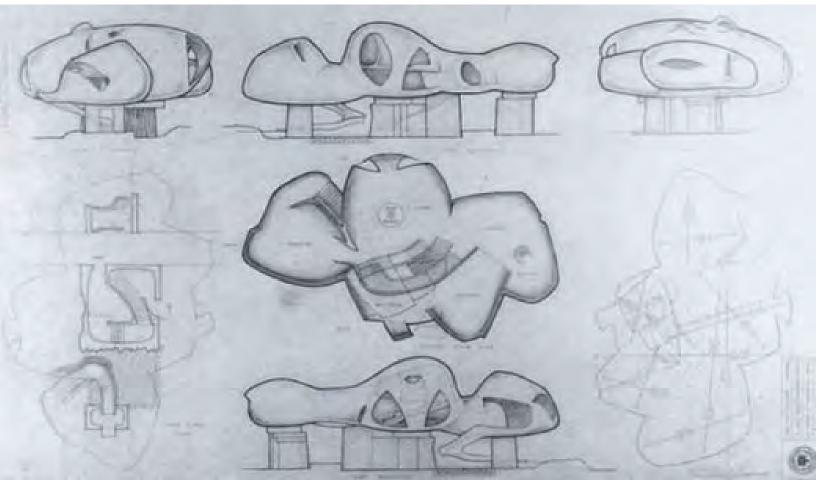


figure 1.5 Preliminary drawings of the *Endless House.* 

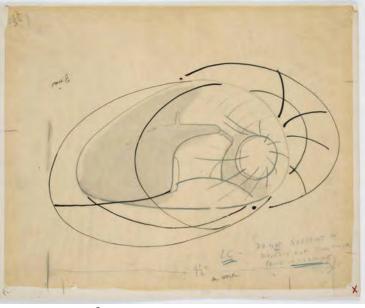


figure 1.6 Initial sketch of the *Endless House*.



figure 1.7 Process photo of interior of the *Endless House*.

As inhabitants who are now playing an active role within the space, the spaces themselves lose an identity. No longer is a kitchen just a kitchen or a living room only a living room. The ebb and flow of inhabitants creates an interconnected experience within the space bending, blurring, and reshaping our perception of them. This is felt as Sioli describes the flesh of the house, he goes on to say, "They could have walked on it's curvilinear floors and imagined flying, sat on it's curved walls and felt the intimacy of their bodies with the flesh of the house." Sioli describes the experiences that would have been felt within the space as we interacted with the building but in doing so he creates an experience in our minds connecting our perception more closely with our body. Through the architecture we are more able to experience and understand something that is not.



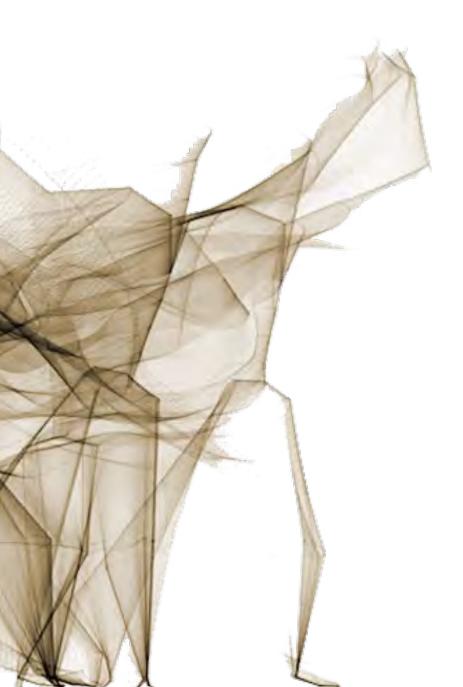


Just as Kiesler strove to allow the inhabitant to architect the space, it was my goal to create a relationship of spaces within. Because as people our realities our integrated ebbing and flowing between things, so too should the spaces within the building ebb and flow.

# PROGRAM



The construction and combination of spaces allows for the inhabitants and users to build a relationship between the inside and out. Understanding that there is not a separation at any level. But rather our reality exists on a continuum where things float from one to the other.



# PROJECT PROGRAM

## SPACES

Internal Focus

Internal Study

Dialogue

Gym Fitness Studios Meditation Spaces Open Classroom Studio Lecture Breakout Rooms Cafe Library Admin. Offices Outdoor Patios

#### INTERNAL FOCUS

We as physical beings can come to express and develop our ability to move, and therefore are ability to be in this world. These areas of movement allow for the foundation of 'being' to be laid. These spaces include areas of fitness and exercise, studios for yoga or pilates, and meditation spaces to clear and strengthen our thoughts. Because there is no separation between our mind and body they must have equal emphasis.

#### INTERNAL STUDY

Here students can come and develop their own thoughts and ideas, learn and grow through previous information. These spaces are both individual and shared. They take form as open studios. Much like here at NDSU. Through my own personal experience I can speak to the power of spaces like these for individuals. It allows for open dialogue between peers but it also allows for individual study. Spaces to both focus inward or outward allows for the ideas and thoughts to be developed at the most thorough level.

#### DIALOGUE

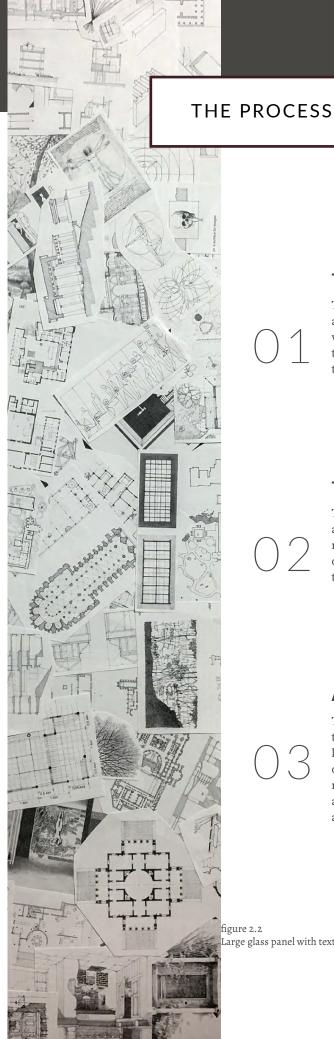
These rooms consist of what could be considered classrooms. But these classrooms operate on a different level. In this school, it is not about a concept to be forced onto students, but about the sharing of ideas to strengthen or change others beliefs. Spaces where ideas and concepts can be shared in full.

## A STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE THROUGH THE ARTEFACT:

A PRISMATIC COMBINATION OF EIDETIC KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE INDIVIDUAL

# ARTEFACT





#### THE PERFORMANCE

The initial concept for the artefact began as a performance in which two people walked closer together. This was meant to create a self conscious awareness of themselves and the space they inhabit.

#### **TEXTBOOK CARVING**

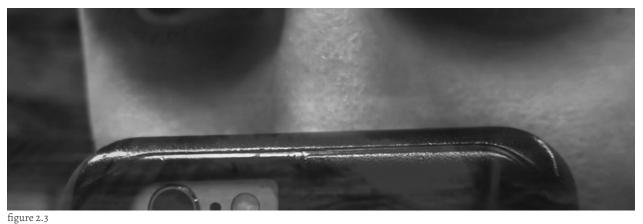
The next iteration I attempted to create a voided carve within education. By removing the reductive representations of architecture and recombining them on the panels of glass.

#### **A RECOMBINATION**

The final attempt of the artefact lead to the recombination of architectural knowledge through the entire process of the artefact itself. It allowed not just a representation to be created but rather an experience involving the individual and the education process.

figure 2.2 Large glass panel with textbook pictures pasted on.

## ARTEFACT IMAGES



screenshot of artefact video warping perception of participants space.



figure 2.4 Textbook from artefact with images carved out.

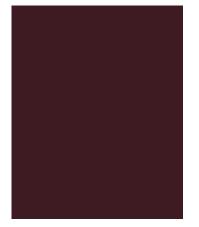


figure 2.5 Photo of classmates participating in the recombination of information through the artefact.





figure 3.0 Image of a cultural utopia throughout time.



My project proposal is to create a shift in which we view education and the architecture around it. The site, located in Los Angeles California serves as a perfect junction to critique modern society's reductive nature and our approach to a Utopian society, free of thinking, acting, and feeling beings, but rather a society of sames. Where we can become nothing more and nothing less than operators serving a greater function. This idea is not a new one and stems back into history but is also relevant throughout many mediums of culture. One important one being film.





figure 3.1 Image blending scenes from divergent, a graduation ceremony and reductive degrees available in universities.

Both Hunger Games and Divergent depict societies in which the citizens are ruled and governed buy an authoritarian machine. A society in which citizens produce for one cause and one cause only. The betterment and advancement of the machine. Nothing more. But as humans, we are multifaceted beings and although suited for production there is much more that we as individuals are capable of. p. 33

#### "NO PLACE"

As I stated prior, the concept of Utopia is not new, but rather dates back to the 16th century with Thomas More and his writings on Ou-Topos, or Utopia, and more directly translated to no place. I would argue today's world is more representative of More's definition of Utopia which is no place.

More lived during the 16th century at the height of a societal revolution that shook the entire world. It is in this period of time when philosophy, science, mathematics, and many other subjects began to explode and it is at this time when Descartes coined the phrase, "I think, therefore I am." It was Descartes' work that separated the mind from the body. In this separation of the mind from the body he ultimately removed the body from the world, for it was only now in the eyes of Descartes that the mind existed beyond the physical body. Because Descartes believed that the mind could exist free from the body, the mind could now exist within itself.



figure 3.2 A map of Thomas More's utopia written in the 15th century.



figure 3.3 A photograph of modern American neighborhood highlighting More's concept of no place.

If we move forward yet again in our modern times, I would argue that Thomas More's definition of Utopia is more closely aligned with today's society than most care to admit. I would go so far as to say that it is true, we are living in a Utopia. If we pause for a moment and think about our lives and the lives around us, it can become clear that we in many ways have become cogs in this larger machine. It is as if we have been funneled into a specific mind set and fed the idea that we are truly free to live in this world. It is in this cycle we lose ourselves and our place.

The emphasis of my project brings awareness back to the individual. It is about understanding that optimization of individuals allows for an advancement of the whole. It is about empowering those who feel lost, confused, or are dissatisfied with the current model. My building attempts to allow individual to truly be in this world.

At this foundation of what we call 'being' is movement. Before we exist on any other level we first exist within this body. This body is the vehicle for which we approach life and if this vehicle is out of alignment then everything we do becomes misaligned. That is why physical movement is a major component in my project. Without the ability to move and use this vehicle we will never truly reach our highest potential. Along with movement my building also utilizes other components of being to allow the individual to learn and develop their own thoughts and ideas about themselves and their world.



figure 3.4 A bird eye view of an American neighborhood or more closely, 'no place'.





To understand why I chose movement as the first core principle in the building it is key to understand how the ancient Greeks viewed learning and knowledge. Before we had modern education, knowledge came from the lived experience. The Greeks experienced life around them and through this experience it was possible to piece together the knowledge of the world in which they lived. Rather than a top down approach of analyzing and rationalizing their world, they approached life from the experience. This meant that unlike today there was no separation between things. Art, culture, and architecture were not seen as separate subjects but integrated together. One did not exist without the other. In another way, the mind was not separate from the body but integrated. What happened to the body in space directly influenced the thoughts and actions of the individual because there was no separation. Now that we have an understanding of how knowledge existed before Descartes we can look forward in time and see how Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella and finally John Comenius shifted us from an embodied experience of the world into a world reduced. A world in which essences are only ever known and our being of this world is removed.

Having understood More's idea of no place and utopia, Tommaso Campanella, a philosopher of the 15th and 16th century took More's and Descartes' reduction one step further by creating a fictional city called City of the Sun. This city is comprised in such a way that it started a chain reaction of reduced knowledge throughout the world. This City of the Sun was rooted in Campanella's beliefs about the world in which he has stated, "The world is a living image of God." This image of God was seen as perfect to Campanella. For him the world could be reduced through this image. This reduction was the City of the Sun.

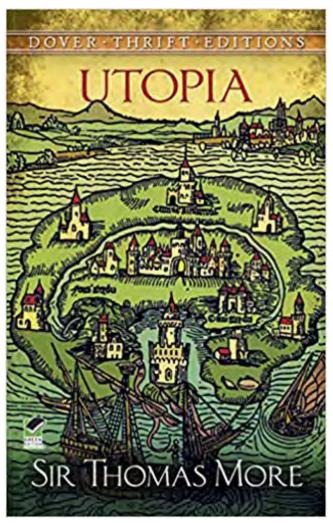


figure 3.6 The book cover of Utopia written by Thomas More.



figure 3.7 Drawing of Campanella's, *City of the Sun*.



The city of the Sun took it's basic layout and organization from the cosmos. A system in which there were a series of circular streets all branching out around the central temple. The central temple serving as a representation of the sun and the streets were the planets orbiting paths. This layout in itself became the first reduction in knowledge, for Campanella believed that knowledge was eidetic. For knowledge to be eidetic it means it is part of a recall pattern. So rather than an embodying the idea of an oak tree for example, your eidetic knowledge only recalls the essence of the oak tree, not all aspects of it. Think of how we use flash cards for strictly memorization and recall. By reducing it down to merely an essence you lose the part of knowledge that extends beyond that thing and connects it with the rest of the world. To further deepen Campanella's reduction, the city walls were painted with murals depicting the world not as an embodied experience but rather the essence of what is. This again reduces knowledge to merely the essence of something and allows it to be known eidetically or through images and recall rather than a fully embodied knowledge. It is in these first stages of reduction we can begin to understand how people begin to become cogs of regurgitated information for the machine rather than embodied beings experiencing the world around them.





figure 3.8 A collaged image of the 'manufactory' of humanity.



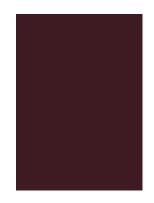
While Campanella was crafting his representative society of the cosmos, John Comenius, another philosopher of the 16th and 17th century was also crafting is philosophical views on education. Comenius is known as the father of education and his philosophies are still present in schools today.

Comenius like Campanella believed in the eidetic recall process of information and knowledge. He took it one step further by developing a system for learning the Latin alphabet in which letters, sounds, and images could be direct representation of the world so no longer would something exist in the world as knowledge but it's essence could represent the true being of what it was. It was Comenius who once said that, "The school is the manufactory of humanity." But it was this manufactory in which our humanity was stripped from us.

"The school is the manufactory of humanity." - Comenius

# PROJECT PROPOSAL

# TYPOLOGY & CLIENT



#### **PROJECT TYPOLOGY**

A school built as an alternative to secondary education.

#### USER/CLIENT

This school will be designed for students above the age of 18. It would be considered a private endeavor into education and built for anyone wishing for a different approach to standardized education.

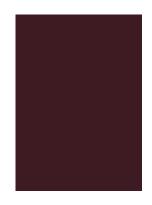
#### **BUILDING SPACES**

Gym Fitness Studios Meditation Studios Small Scale Classrooms Large Open Studios Library Administrative Offices Outdoor Patios Cafe/Coffee Shop

#### DESIGN FACTORS

Practical Usage of Space Recombination of Traditional Spaces A Movement of withins Crossing Over Between Spaces

# PROJECT ELEMENTS



## PROJECT EMPHASIS



The emphasis of the project lies within the dialogue created through the ideas presented about the architecture. This project was meant to create a questioning within ourselves about our current system. It was meant to highlight the underlying shortcomings in society to allow the opportunity to spur a more holistic approach to education and architecture in the future.

#### **PROJECT JUSTIFICATION**

Over the past 500 years our world has become increasingly reductive. Things have become hyper insulated and fail to relate to greater ideas around the world and throughout culture. I believe that a major contributor to many of the problems we face today such as mental health, opioid epidemics, and rising health care cost are all contributed to by a lack of purpose and understanding of who we are and how we function as beings. It is why I am choosing to attempt to create an architecture that can allow reintroduction of ourselves with ourselves through education.

## JUSTIFICATION



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# GOAL FOR THESIS

The goal for this entire project was to allow people to see and understand that nothing we do operates on an insular level. It was to create awareness, understanding, and conversation around the way in which modern society is established in hopes to create an opportunity for growth in the future.

Create and facilitate a discussion within a traditional educational setting about the future of education.

Allow for a paradigm shift in how we view ourselves and our relation to our architecture.

Critique and identify the shortcomings in architecture and the ability to truly communicate thoughts and idea through traditional drawings.



performance criteria

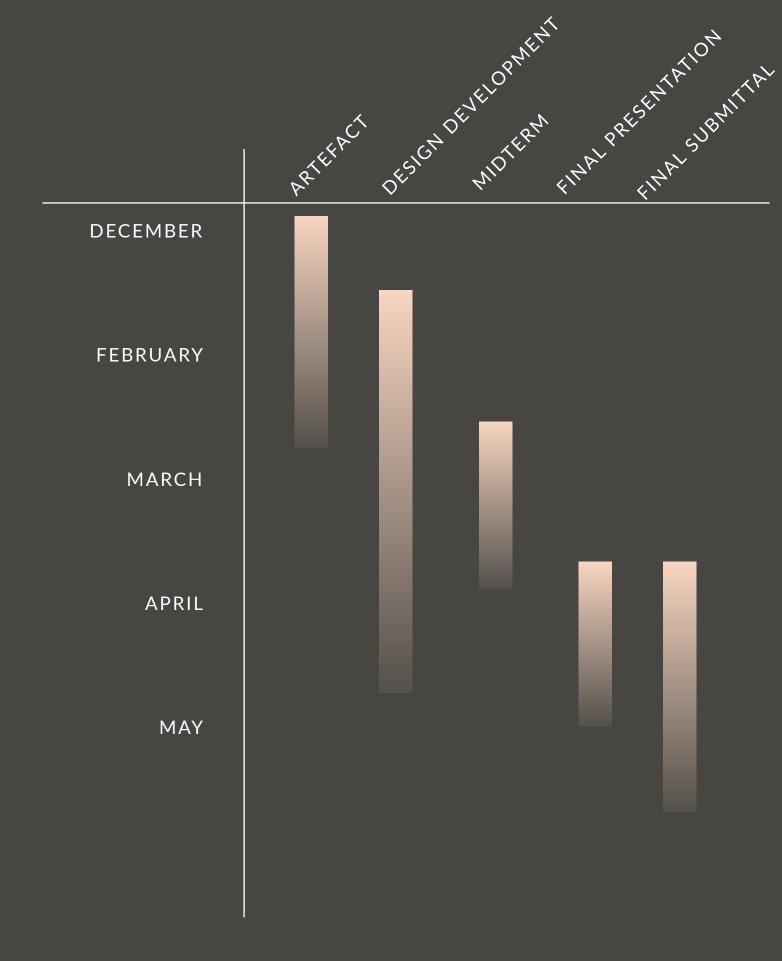


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# PROJECT PLANNING



SITE ANALYSIS

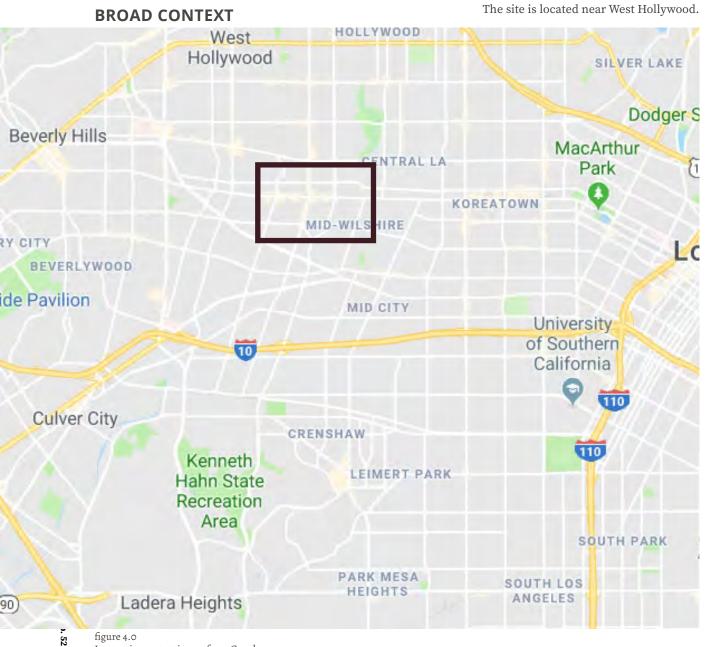
# LOS ANGELES, CA

POP. 3.9 Million

900 schools

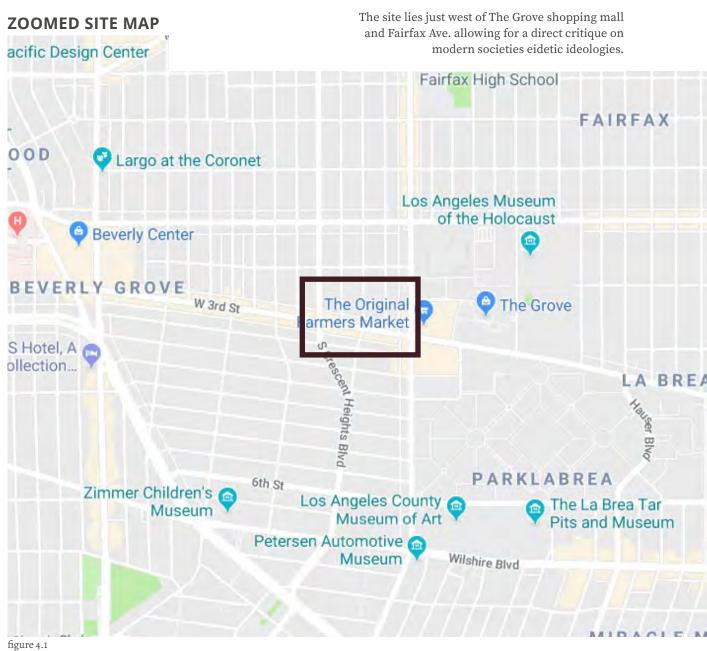
640,000 students

## SITE LOCATION



Larger site context image from Google maps.

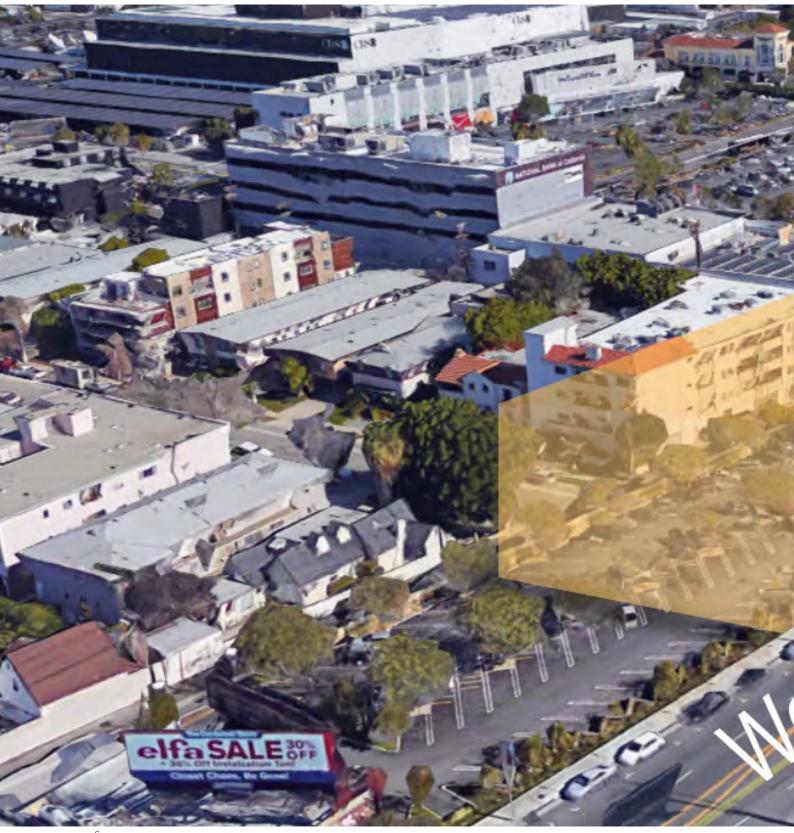
### SITE CONTEXT

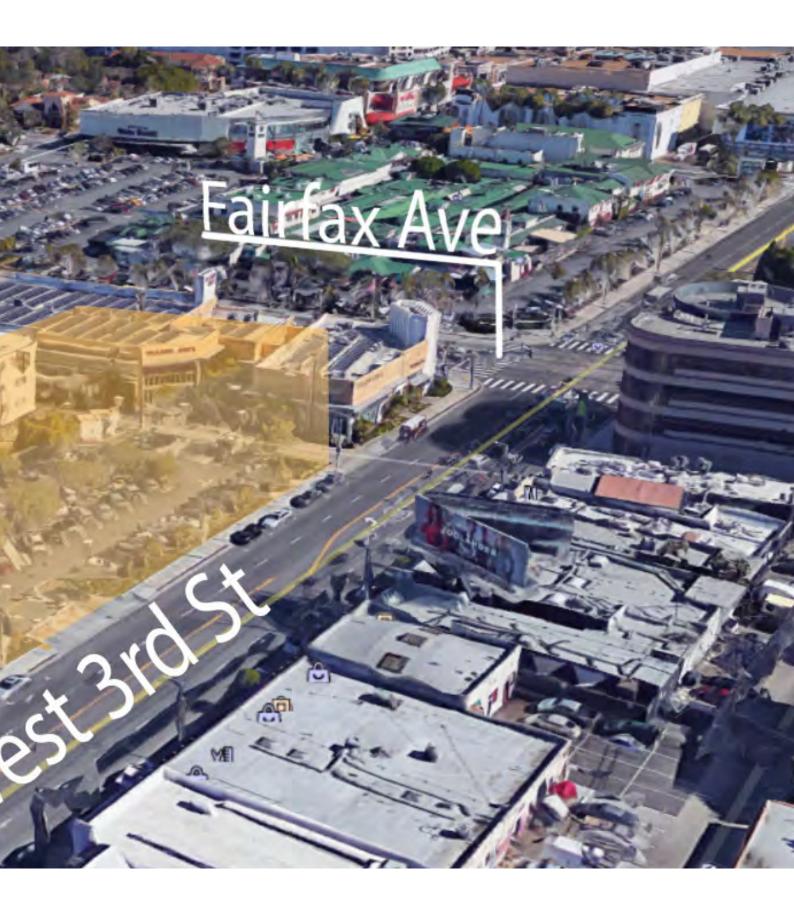


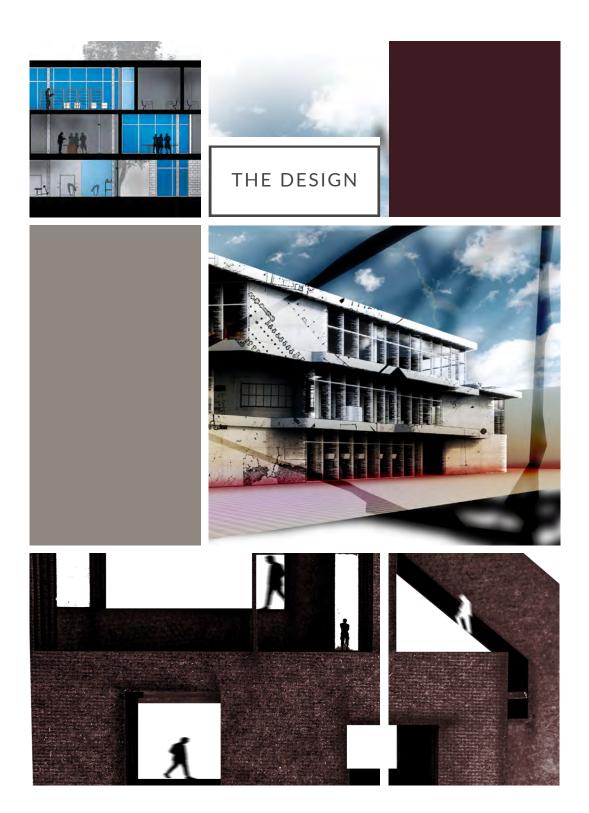
Zoomed in site map photo showing context of area form Google maps.

#### **BIRDS EYE VIEW OF SITE**

The site was chosen for one main reason. The location serves as an epicenter of modern ideologies and practices while simultaneously being an area of advancements. Los Angeles allows the perfect opportunity for this paradigm shift in society to take place.







DESIGN PROCESS





The design process through different mediums allowed the exploration of built form, progmatic space, and their relation through environment and language to be explored fully.

# INITIAL CONCEPTS



figure 4.3 The first model created to represent tension in the project.



figure 4.4 A prismatic representation of how architecture can create form and space.

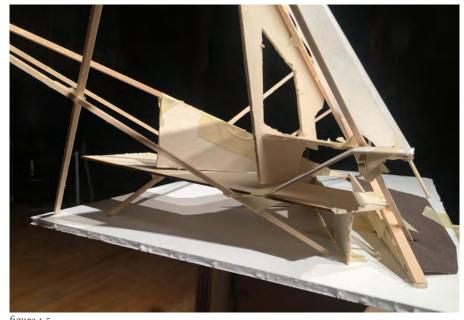


figure 4.5 A section of the prism creating a relation between plan and section.

## TENSION

The initial idea behind the model of tension was to create a feeling of things being pulled apart and pushed together at the same time. To create an experience of moving into and out of spaces with never actually leaving.

## PRISM

The prism brought the idea of tension a step further as if the building was being extracted from the ground. A feeling in which moving into and out of spaces was created but the building was grounded in the earth creating a connection between ourselves and our world.

## PRISM DEVELOPED

This is a sample section model exploring the potential of how spaces come together in plane but also in section. It was here I began to understand how spaces could interact together to create a holistic feeling of architecture.





figure 4.6 Section model of built space both in reality and computer.





figure 4.7 A relation between model and computer how space is arranged in plan and section.





figure 4.8 Exterior perspectives in process of both interior and exterior of building.

## FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Here I was able to advance the design beginning to integrate computer technology with modeling to advance the design along.

**EXPLORING SECTIONS** 

SECTIONS IN RELATION PLAN

FACADE DEVELOPMENT

As the inhabitants approach the entry is slightly confusing, moving into and through the building while never entering fully. You pass what would be into the building to the core. While walking through the entry you begin to feel yourself within spaces which are both framing and refracting other spaces. The ground floor comprised of the spaces of internal focus, students of the school around you exercising as you board the elevator to the second floor.

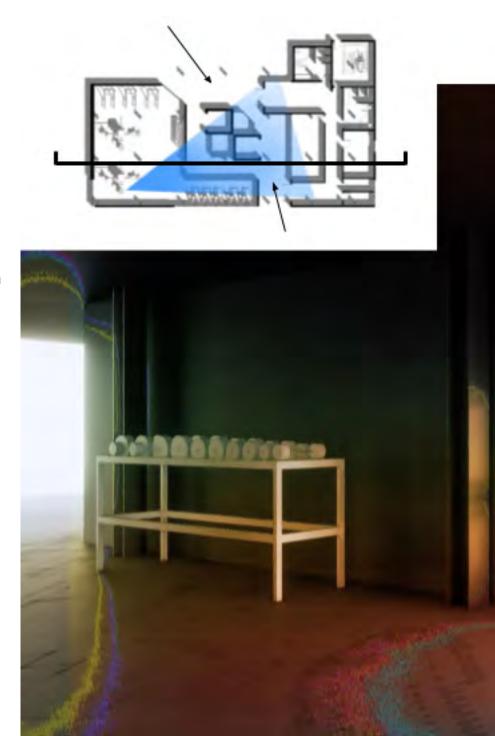
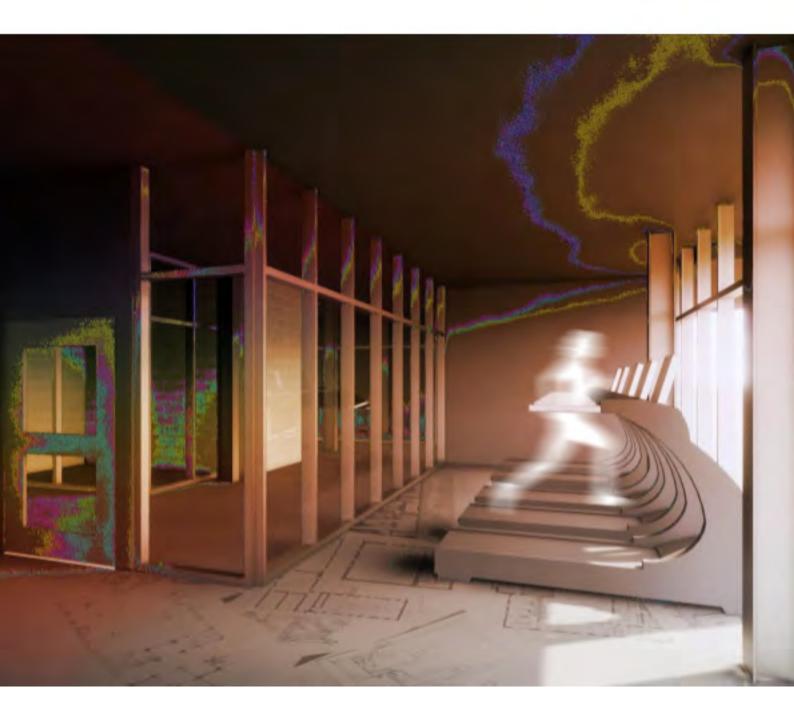


figure 4.9 First interior perspective highlighting entry condition and fitness areas.

Just as Kiesler strove to allow the inhabitant to architect the space, it was my goal to create a relationship of spaces within. Because as people our realities our integrated ebbing and flowing between things, so too should the spaces within the building ebb and flow.



Emerging through the elevator doors into a hallway. Framed by the thoughts and ideas of your peers. The gym below, originally seen as the entry becomes the foundation to what you now stand on. You move past the classrooms and into the studio here you come to find more peers. All working towards their own goals. No longer is a classroom based around the thoughts and ideas of a collective but the thoughts and ideas of the individuals.



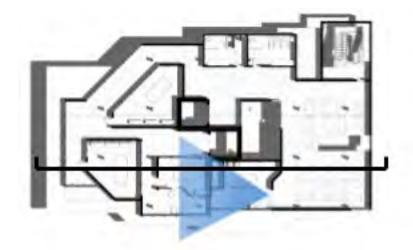


Interior perspective leaving elevator highlighting classroom connections.



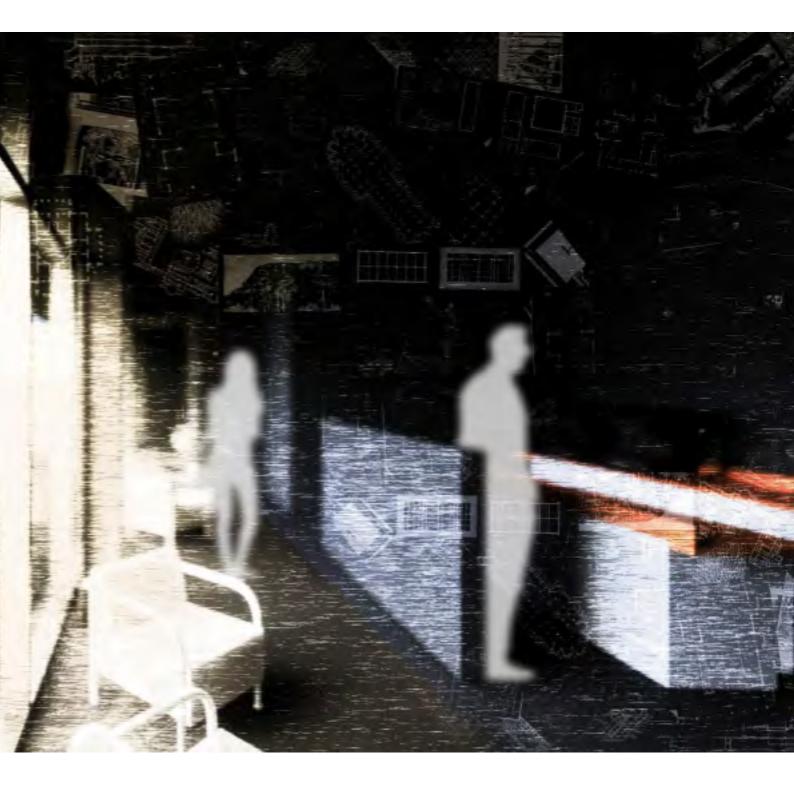
When moving through the building inhabitants are refracted within and out of spaces of the building always returning to a core to move through vertically, in and out.

This movement of being within something which is within something is never truly flowing out of or into another space completely, allows for the connection to be felt of an architecture that is assembled not as separate pieces interconnected, but as one architecture that ceases to be, without the others.





Perspective looking through cafe back into classroom areas.

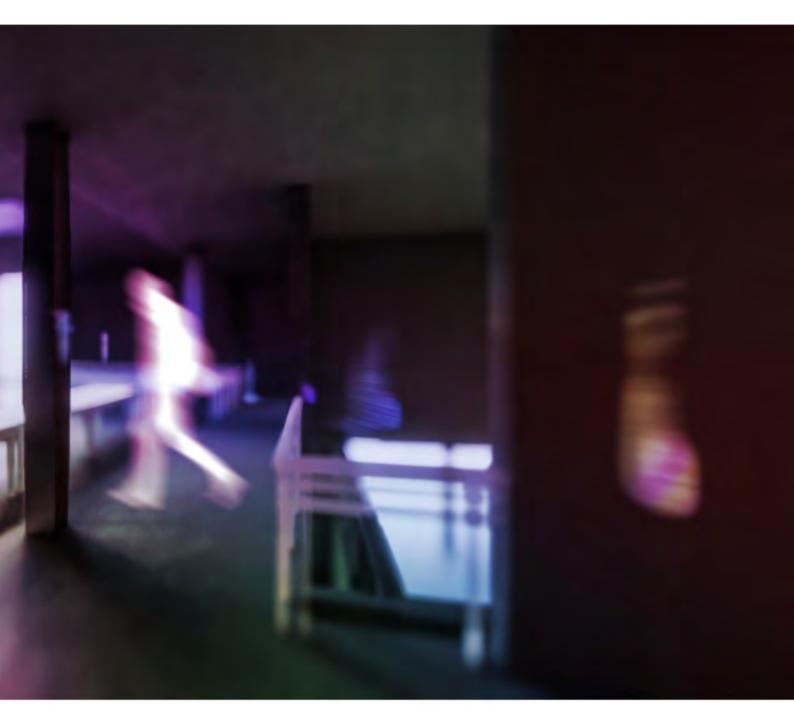


Thinking back to my project the concept of an absent present becomes most important in the third component or the spaces of dialogue.

These spaces consist of small breakout size classrooms where class sizes of ten to fifteen can be held. Here the students attending have the opportunity to bridge across all experiences within the building and bring it forward again. It is this architectural crossing over that allows the absent present to be most felt. What happened to you in the first interactions is brought forward again creating a continuum of in and out.

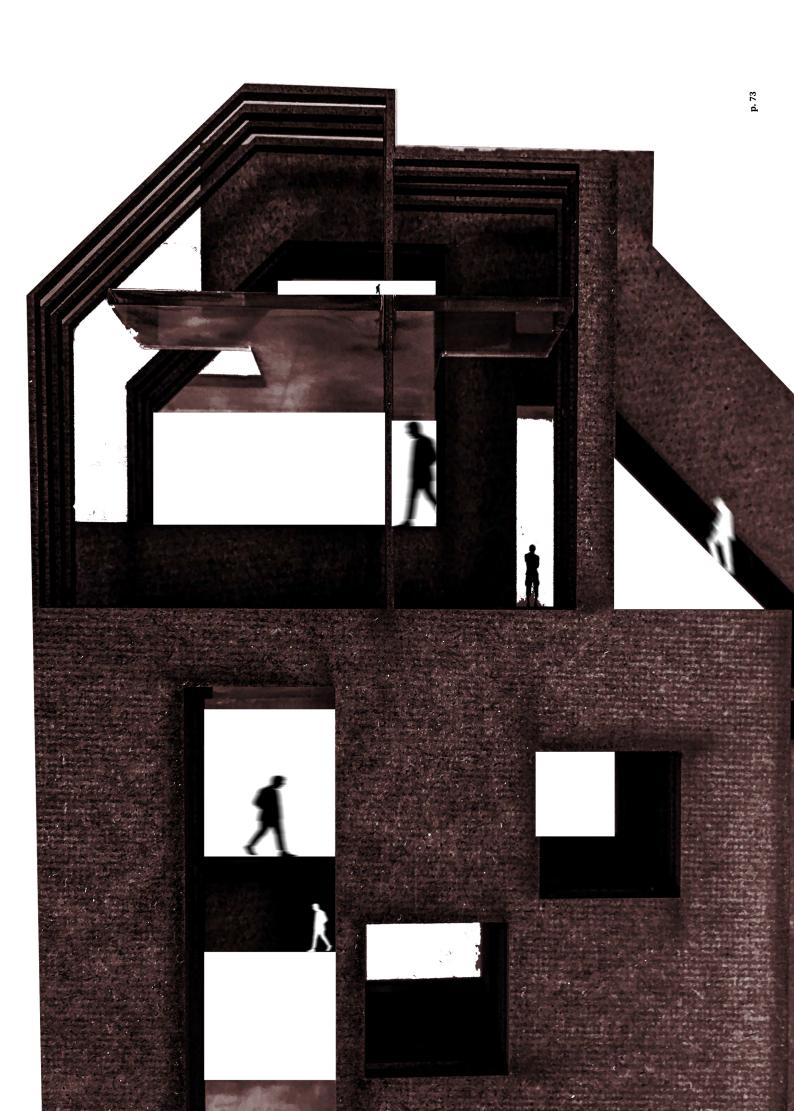


figure 4.12 Perspective of studio spaces showing the interconnection above and below as well as in plan.



As people, we have gone our entire lives as inhabiter's of space. These spaces today however have become void of a greater value than their basic functional purpose. This has gouged a void in humanity leaving behind a feeling a despair. This despair is hardly felt however because we have become so conditioned to how things are we become numb to how things could be. We fail to see the context of the world in which we are situated. We fail to see what this world really is and most importantly we fail to see how we as humans, as physical flesh, and spiritual bodies are interconnected as one not as separates.

It is in this way my architecture can act as a prism. A way in which normally foreign programs can be recombined and made whole through architecture.





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Blurring the lines of where one ends and another begins. It is in this way a pragmatic approach to architecture can create a refraction of ideas allowing the individual to experience a more holistic process. And in turn providing the opportunity to shift away from a society of mechanical producers and into a future where the individual can flourish. Because in this world we know, "The mechanical is not something that acts without purpose, but whose purpose can be forgotten."



figure 4.14 Exterior perspective of building collaged with prismatic model created at beginning of project exploration.

### FINAL INSTALLATION



figure 4.15 Image of board installation on 5th floor gallery.

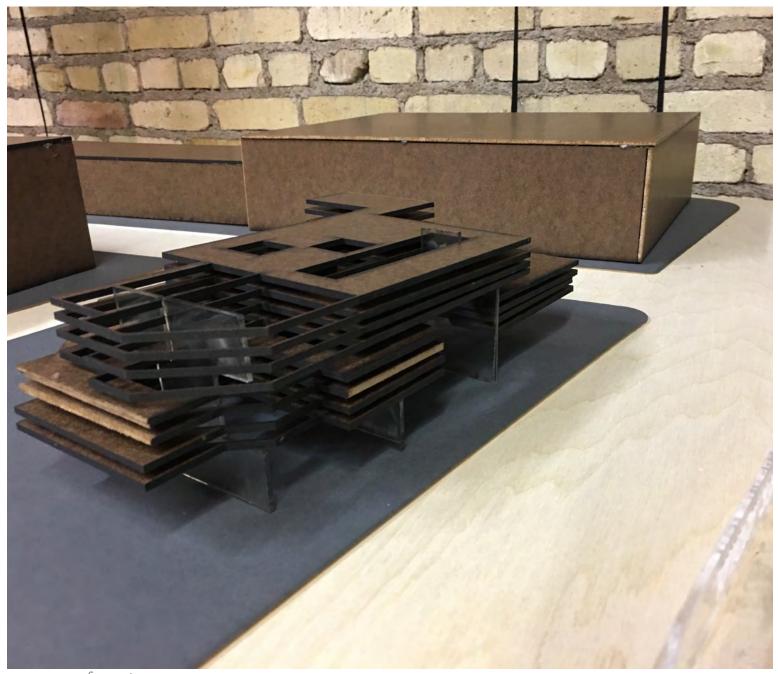
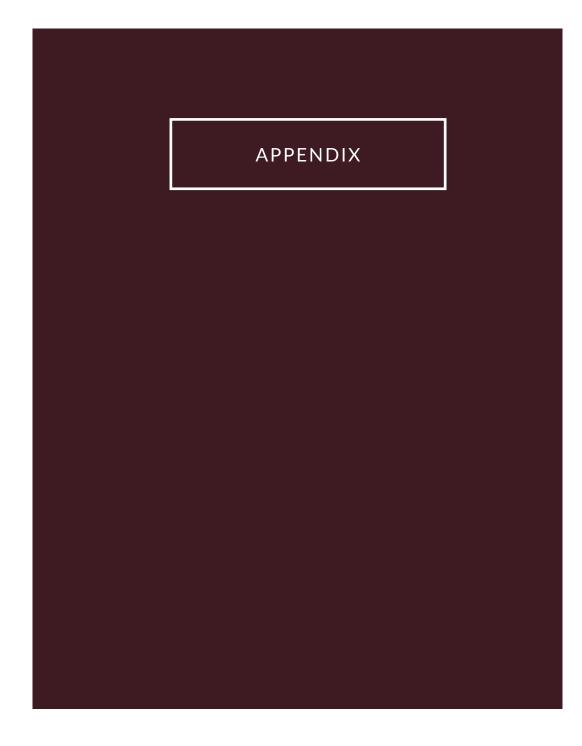


figure 4.16 Image of final model used to collage spaces in an abstract way throughout project. PERFORMANCE

Throughout the entire design process, this has been not only an exploration of architecture, but also culture, and most importantly myself. I believe that throughout this process the project has allowed an opportunity for growth to occur not only though architecture but also through individuals. By raising ideas critiquing the exact system we are involved in it was my hope to spur a conversation about the future not only for NDSU, but also for theirs. It is our role as architects to design the future in order to provide a better world for those who come after us and if we never truly question why we do what we do, how will we ever improve. In that sense I believe the ideas presented in this document can allow for individuals in architecture or not question and assess themselves in order to become the best they can be in order to propel those in the future.





# ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### Enigma of Health - Hans G. Gadamer

Gadamer's book on health began to frame my view of architecture in relation to health. The emphasis of an equilibrium within the body has guided my research through this project.

The World of Perception - Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Ponty's discussion of perception lead to me the understanding of human connection and understanding through others. As Ponty discusses it is only through the other that we can situate ourselves.

Michelangelo: The Image of the Human Body, Artifice, and Architecture -Helmut Klassen

The Image of the Human Body presented the idea of understanding and learning about the body through movement. In order for Michelangelo to learn about the human body and form he drew the body in motions 1,000's of times.

Architecture and the Existential Sense: Space, Body, and the Sense - Juhani Pallasmaa In chapter 30 of Pallasmaa's Architecture and the Existential Sense, he discusses the rediscovery of the connection of sense through the body. That all sense together make up our human interaction with the world.

#### Poliphilo and the Dark Forest Revisited: An Erotic Journey Through Architecture -Alberto Perez-Gomez

Written as a reinterpretation of the original, Poliphilo and the Dark Forest Revisited: An Erotic Journey Through Architecture is intended to unpack Poliphilo's journey to find his long lost love Polia. The book goes in depth into the themes of eroticism and desire highlighting man's carnal drive for more.

Hannah Arendt - The Crisis in Modern Education

Arendt's article on education was written in 1954 and continues to be extremely prevalent in today's society. In the article she touches on the education versus knowledge, and goes on to say that education does not equal knowledge. It is precisely this dilemma in which I hope to shed light on and solve.

Jonathan Powers - Utopian Knowledge: Eidetics, Education, and The Machine In Powers' writing about utopias, and knowledge he goes into great detail the journey of modern education and how it was formed. Going back as early as the 15th century when would be modern thinkers were crafting our world as we see it today, we see guys like Campanella and Comenius and how their early ideas on education have reduced our perception of world to merely images and sounds and nothing more.

#### Angeliki Sioli - Is the Endless a House?

Sioli breaks down and analyzes Kiesler's Endless House. A theoretical project in which Kiesler's goal was to highlight, spiritualize and bring awe to everyday occurrences. By blurring the perception



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Other images were created and collaged through photoshop by myself, Matthew Plasencia

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### STUDIO EXPERIENCE

Second Year:	Fall - Cindy Urness
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Fourth Year: Fall - Don Faulkner Spring - Paul Gleye

Fifth Year: Fall - Stephen Wischer Spring - Stephen Wischer