# North Dakota State University
## Graduate School

**Title**

ILLUMINATING CONNECTIONS: A THEATRICAL INTERVENTION IN URBAN LONELINESS

**By**

Carter J. Huber

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *thesis* complies with North Dakota State

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ILLUMINATING CONNECTIONS: A THEATRICAL INTERVENTION IN URBAN

LONELINESS


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# ABSTRACT

Amidst the hustle of urban life, an epidemic of loneliness grips our modern cities, casting shadows upon the once vibrant display of community. Before the 19th century, public spaces thrived as stages where every encounter was a theatrical exchange, a space to recognize oneself through the presence of others. However, the cityscape shifted with time, veiling the human connection behind privatization and specialization.

This project intertwines theater and urban intervention to capture the fleeting moments of human connection. Each scene serves as a bridge between solitude and community, inviting audiences to rediscover the beauty of shared experiences. Through storytelling, we can reignite the flame of interaction, breathing life into forgotten urban corners.

Located in the once-vibrant neighborhood of Cabrini-Green in Chicago, IL, this project will act as a new foundation for this redeveloping community, offering a beacon of hope among its storied past. It will function as a community hub, a stage for the play of urban life, where all are invited to participate. This redevelopment marks a unique opportunity to honor the past while forging a new path forward, bridging divides, and fostering belonging for generations to come.

# DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this thesis to my family, friends, and everyone who has supported me along

this journey. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Problem Statement

Throughout history, public spaces have been essential components of urban life, serving as arenas for social, cultural, and political interactions. Ancient sites such as the Greek agora and Roman forums exemplify how public spaces functioned as vibrant hubs where individuals from diverse backgrounds gathered, fostering a sense of community and collective identity. These spaces were not only venues for commercial and political activities but also served as sites for cultural and religious gatherings, encouraging spontaneous interactions and shared experiences among community members.

However, the evolution of urban environments has brought about significant changes in public spaces and communal interactions. The transition from the 18th to the 19th century marked a crucial period in the transformation of public life. As cities grew and industrialization took hold, the concept of public space began to shift. Factors such as urbanization, technological advancements, and changing social norms contributed to a gradual decline in the vibrancy of public life.

In contemporary urban settings, despite the density of populations, many cities struggle with a pervasive sense of social isolation. The rise of digital communication and the increasing emphasis on individualism have further exacerbated this disconnect among city dwellers. The result is a fragmented urban landscape where people often feel isolated and disconnected from their communities.

## 1.2 Objective

The objective of this thesis is to explore how the design of public spaces, specifically through theater and urban intervention, can reduce loneliness and foster connections within urban neighborhoods. By studying historical contexts, current urban issues, and the impact of design on community cohesion, this project aims to propose a community hub in Cabrini-Green, Chicago, as a model for enhancing social interactions and reducing isolation in urban areas. Although I will not be directly working with the community of Cabrini-Green in the design of this project, the aim is to create a concept that can be adapted and implemented with community input. This thesis seeks to provide a framework for future community-led initiatives and urban interventions that prioritize human connections and inclusivity, ultimately contributing to the revitalization of urban neighborhoods and the well-being of their residents.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Background

Extensive research went into the works of scholars who have dedicated many years to studying the challenges facing urban societies today and has provided crucial background information for this project. By looking into historical contexts, this research helps to understand how past societies functioned, the evolution of urban life, and how we can apply these historical lessons to design a better future.

### 2.2 Literature Review

#### 2.2.1 How Public Life Has Evolved Over Time

Richard Sennet's "*The Fall of Public Man*" offers a comprehensive exploration into the evolving dynamics of public and private life. Drawing parallels between post-Augustan Roman society and contemporary life, Sennet investigates the shift from active public participation to passive conformity, highlighting societal transformations over time. The work critiques the erosion of genuine public engagement, marked by a growing preference for ritualistic obligations and a stark dichotomy between individual emotions and broader societal dynamics. He examines how modern psychology, particularly in the American context, influences public life, leading to a preference for personal emotion over collective responsibility. The book argues that this intensified individualism, coupled with societal forces like capitalism, has redefined the public realm, making genuine public interactions increasingly rare. With cities epitomizing these shifts, Sennet underscores the importance of re-evaluating the balance between our public duties and private lives (Richard Sennett, 1977)

Graham Livesey's "*Fictional Cities*" in "*Chora, Vol. 1: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture,*" offers an exploration of the intricate interplay between architecture, narratives, and urban existence. Livesey emphasizes the similarity of individual experiences and broader societal narratives, particularly when manifested through public events within the city. Positioning the urban landscape as a narrative canvas, he depicts the city as a crucible where people, places, and objects intertwine to mirror both individual and collective stories. Livesey raises concerns regarding the postindustrial state of cities, cautioning against the transformation of urban areas into representations of other times or places. Using Los Angeles as a prime example, he critiques its emergence as a fictional city. However, Livesey also celebrates cities as a "sum of trajectories" and emphasizes the role of architecture in curating urban narratives. Through this lens, architects are envisioned as mediators, bridging the tangible realm with the fictional, revealing the multilayered stories that cities hold (Graham Livesey, 1994)

In "*Architecture: The Space of Participation*," Alberto Perez-Gomez delivers a compelling critique of contemporary architectural practices. He voices concerns about the prevailing emphasis on utilitarian and practical designs, suggesting that this approach often sidelines cultural and societal well-being. By drawing contrasts with historical practices, Perez-Gomez emphasizes how architecture historically focused on creating communicative spaces that nurtured community bonds and reflected societal order. Modern metropolises, in his view, lack these essential intersubjective and emotional spaces, leading to a diminished human connection. Perez-Gomez weaves in philosophical insights, notably referencing Vitruvius, to depict architecture as more than just structural design; it's a medium resonating with human experiences, echoing the depth and emotion found in ancient theater. Furthermore, the book offers a thought-provoking discourse on the transformation of public spaces in our increasingly

digital age, emphasizing the richness and nuance of tangible, physical interactions (Pérez-Gómez, 2017).

Henrik Reeh's "*Fragmentation, Improvisation, and Urban Quality*" in "*Chora 3: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*," offers an intricate exploration into urban spatial experiences, drawing inspiration from Kracauer's perceptions of the fragmented city. Challenging the Modern Movement's rejection of ornamentation, the work celebrates the richness of ornamental spatial experiences. Reeh explores various forms of fragmentation: the architectural blend of styles in public spaces, the altering reflections in mirrors that distort spatial perceptions, and the social-semiotic interpretations influenced by human interactions in these spaces. Using the stand-up bars of southern Europe as prime examples, the study highlights how such venues extend beyond architectural constructs, serving as vivid social hubs where life's dynamics play out. By illuminating the complex nature of fragmentation, the work suggests that the true value of cities lies in the improvisational spaces they offer. In its essence, Reeh's writing makes a compelling argument for fragmentation as a determinant of urban quality, emphasizing its role in fostering improvisation and redefining societal interactions in urban heterotopias (Henrick Reeh, 1999).

In "*Poetic Language and Architectural Meaning*" by Alberto Perez-Gomez, featured in "*Timely Meditations Vol. 2: Architectural Philosophy and Hermeneutics (Selected Essays on Architecture),*" the evolution of architecture is examined, highlighting a significant shift in architectural ideology during the 19th century. Before this period, architects such as Ledoux believed that buildings possessed a mute poetry, capable of evoking a range of emotions. It was a time when architecture was a medium for storytelling where every space had its appropriate colors, light, and ornaments. Buildings communicated their character through poetic words, not

just geometric proportions. This was the era when architecture was intimately linked with human experience, a harmony of space and emotion. However, with the rise of positivism and specialization, architecture shifted towards a focus on pragmatic functionality, leading to a detachment from its poetic roots. This marked a turning point where architecture became more concerned with solving spatial and structural problems rather than expressing poetic language. As a result, the connection between architecture and language became increasingly severed, with architects emphasizing visual coherence and stylistic elements driven by various ideologies, leaving the depth of poetic expression behind (Pérez-Gómez, 2016).

### 2.2.2 How Loneliness Is Affecting Our Cities

Jennifer Latson's article "*A Cure for Disconnection*" in Psychology Today provides a detailed exploration of the paradox between modern urbanization and the increasing feelings of loneliness. As urban areas become more populated, a sense of isolation seems to grow. A takeaway from Latson's writing is in the comparison between the isolation seen in contemporary cities and the strong community ties in Villagrande Strisaili, a Sardinian town known for its uniquely long lifespans among residents and deeply rooted sense of togetherness. By highlighting Villagrande, Latson emphasizes the importance of community spaces in nurturing human interactions and mental wellness. The article details the health ramifications of loneliness, equating its effects to those of long-term smoking, and also provides other great information and stories on this subject. The Villagrande example from this article showcases the potential benefits of communal life in urban planning and societal structures (Jennifer Latson, 2018).

# 3. METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Project Location – Chicago, IL

The project is located in Chicago, Illinois, the third most populated city in the United States, with a population of approximately 2.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Known for its rich architectural history, vibrant cultural scene, and iconic skyline, Chicago experiences a humid continental climate with warm summers and cold winters. The city is predominantly urban, characterized by a mix of densely populated neighborhoods and expansive suburban areas. Chicago faces numerous urban challenges, including housing, transportation, and social inequality issues, all of which are relevant to the thesis project's focus on fostering community connections in urban environments.



Figure 3.1.1: Map of Illinois
(Source: nationsonline.org)

**3.2 Site Selection – Cabrini-Green**

In my search for an ideal site for this project, I looked for a community that has experienced adversity and could benefit from a central space for its members to reconnect. After researching communities across the United States, I found Cabrini-Green, a neighborhood that once thrived but has faced significant challenges, making it a fitting location for this project.

Cabrini-Green's history dates back to 1941 when the Frances Cabrini Row Houses were built to address Chicago's post-World War II housing crisis. Over the years, Cabrini-Green expanded to include several high-rise buildings, known as "the reds" and "the whites," providing affordable housing for low-income residents and fostering a sense of community during urban growth. However, economic decline in the 1960s and 70s, coupled with the aftermath of the 1968 riots following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, led to increased gang activity and violence in Cabrini-Green.

Despite the challenges, long-term residents remember Cabrini-Green as a safe and close-knit community. However, negative portrayals in the media painted the entire neighborhood as dangerous, causing fear and contributing to its stigma. When the demolition of the high-rise buildings began in 1995, residents were devastated, losing not only their homes but also the strong connections they had forged over the years.

Today, only the row houses remain from the original Cabrini-Green buildings, and the neighborhood has undergone several phases of revitalization, primarily focused on mixed-income housing. However, there are still vacant areas awaiting revitalization, presenting an opportunity to create a new community hub that honors Cabrini-Green's past while fostering connections and addressing the social isolation that followed its demolition.

Figure 3.2.1: Cabrini-Green Surrounding Context Map
(Source: Google Earth Pro, 2024)

## 3.3 Specific Site

Examining the designated site for this project, it currently comprises a 6-acre vacant grass field where four high-rise housing buildings previously stood. Surrounding the site today are churches, residential buildings, the original Frances Cabrini Row Houses, and parks. As there are no existing plans for the renovation of this specific site, it presents an ideal opportunity to establish a fundamental community hub. This hub would serve the residents who once lived here and those currently residing in the area, providing them with a space for connection and interaction.

Figure 3.3.1: Current Site with Surrounding Context
(Source: Google Earth Pro, 2024)

Figure 3.3.2: 2002 Site with Surrounding Context
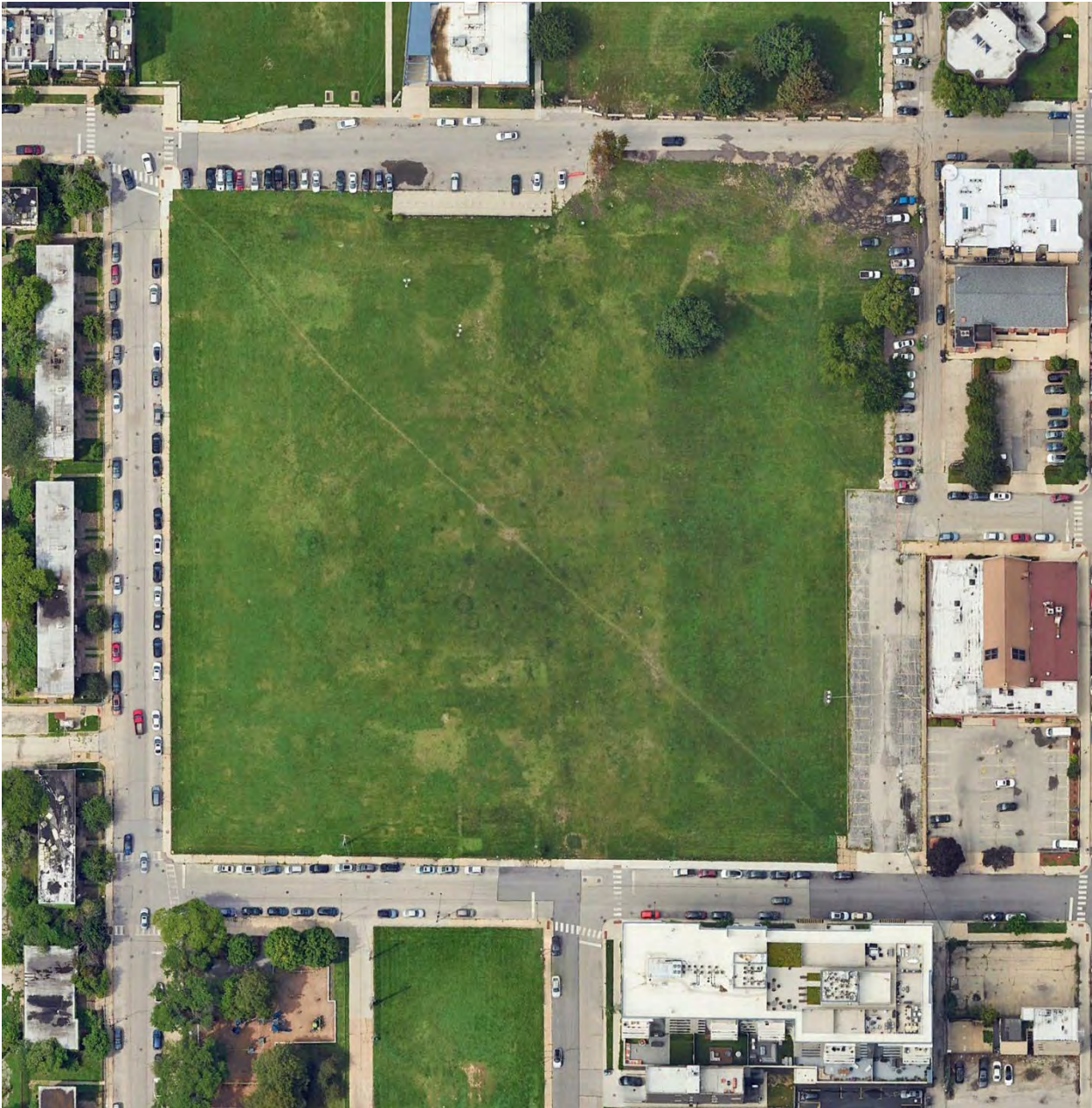(Source: Google Earth Pro, 2002)

Figure 3.3.3: Current Site
(Source: Google Earth Pro, 2024)

Figure 3.3.4: 2002 Site
(Source: Google Earth Pro, 2002)

**3.4 Precedents / Case Studies**

**3.4.1 Greek Theaters**

      Ancient Greek theaters were central to community and civic life as part of the religious festivals dedicated to Dionysus. These theaters were not only venues for dramatic performances but also democratic spaces where citizens engaged actively, discussing vital societal themes from morality to politics, thus reinforcing the social and civic fabric of their city-states. This project draws inspiration from ancient theaters, aiming to create spaces where residents actively participate in communal life, mirroring the engaging and participatory nature of ancient Greek theatrical experiences.
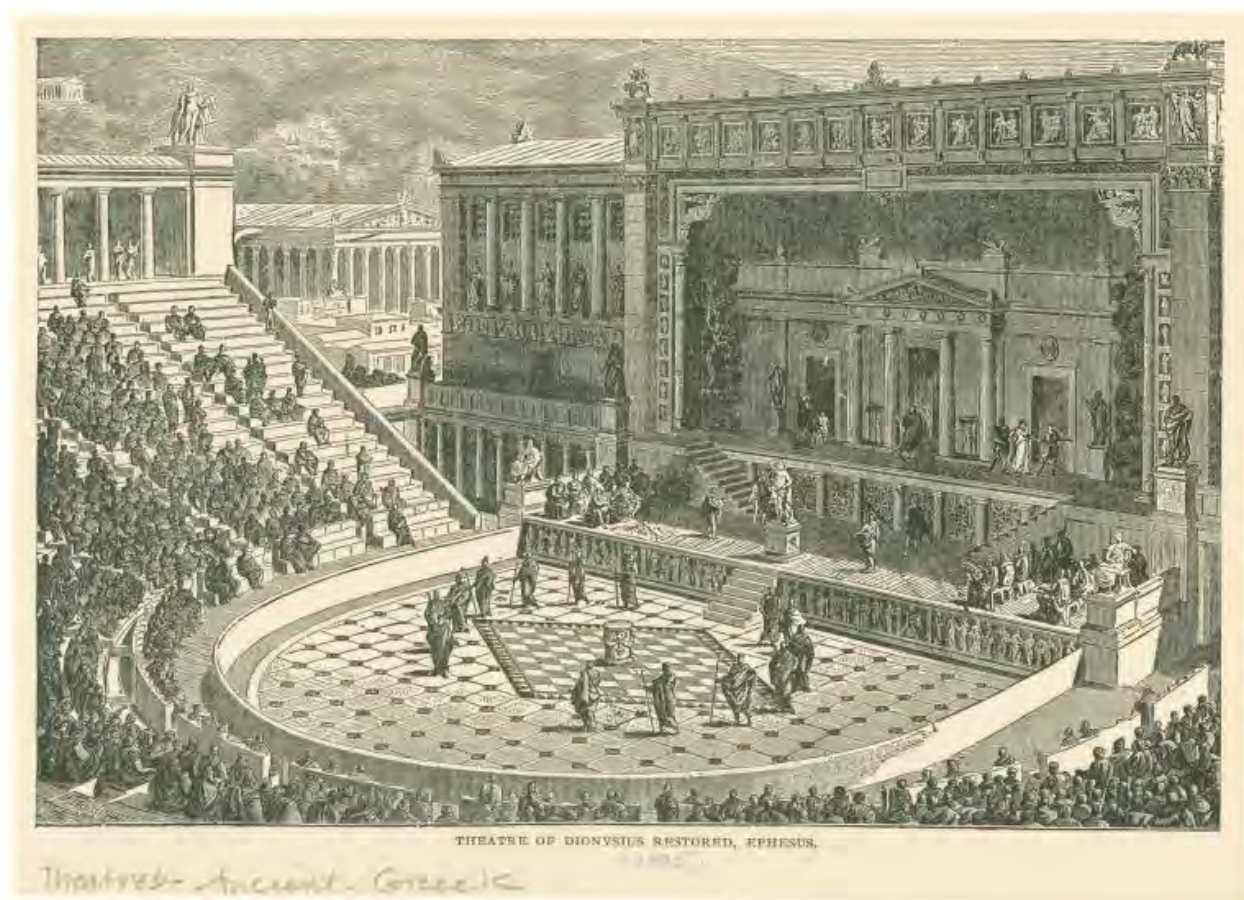


Figure 3.4.1: Ancient Greek Theater
(Source: digitalcollections.nypl.org, 1896)

### 3.4.2 Origin of Shadow Tracing

The story of the Corinthian maiden, who traced her departing lover's shadow to keep his memory alive, highlights the profound role of light and shadow in preserving the essence of the absent. Like the maiden's act of tracing the shadow, my design seeks to capture and preserve fleeting moments, emotions, and memories through the interplay of light and shadow in the built environment. Just as shadows can evoke the presence of the absent, my project aims to create spaces that evoke a sense of connection and continuity, bridging past, present, and future experiences.

Figure 3.4.2: Origin of Shadow Tracing Drawing
(Source: commons.wikimedia.org, 1791)

### 3.4.3 Cubism

Cubism has been a key influence on this project, particularly in the design approach for the site and the performing arts center. Cubism, known for breaking down subjects into basic geometric forms and reassembling them to offer multiple perspectives, inspired the layout and structure of the spaces. Intentionally placed screens are used to highlight specific views, obscure visibility, and create a sense of discovery as visitors move through different areas of the site.



Figure 3.4.3: Le Canigou
(Source: buffaloakg.org, 1921)

### 3.4.4 Piranesi Drawings

Giovanni Battista Piranesi's detailed drawings of ruins and fantastical architecture encourage viewers to wander through imagined spaces, exploring the layers and depths of architectural history through the play of light and shadow. Piranesi challenges us to look beyond the surface, prompting a deeper reflection on the past and the possibilities it holds. Inspired by this, I aimed to evoke a sense of wonder throughout my site, particularly by creating specific views that guide users through the site, enticing them to explore new areas and gain different perspectives.

Figure 3.4.4: The Round Tower
(Source: https://www.metmuseum.org, 1749-50)

### 3.4.5 Southern Stand Bars

In the writing "*Fragmentation, Improvisation, and Urban Quality*" In "*Chora 3: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*", Henrik Reeh, an associate professor specializing in humanistic urban studies, explores the work of Siegfried Kracauer, a German journalist known for his urban culture insights. Kracauer gives a detailed look at vibrant stand-up bars in southern Mediterranean cities such as Marseille. These bars serve as dynamic cultural spaces that blend various architectural styles and extend social interactions into the streets, with sunlight playing a transformative role. Described metaphorically by Kracauer as "burning holes in the tissue of the cities," sunlight adds a fragmented, dreamlike quality to urban space, enhancing the aesthetic and social dynamics of these environments. Both Henrik Reeh and Siegfried Kracauer emphasize the importance of these lively public spaces in fostering community and encouraging social and cultural growth. I used these ideas in creating the covered plaza space within the project.

7.2 Barcelona, 1993.
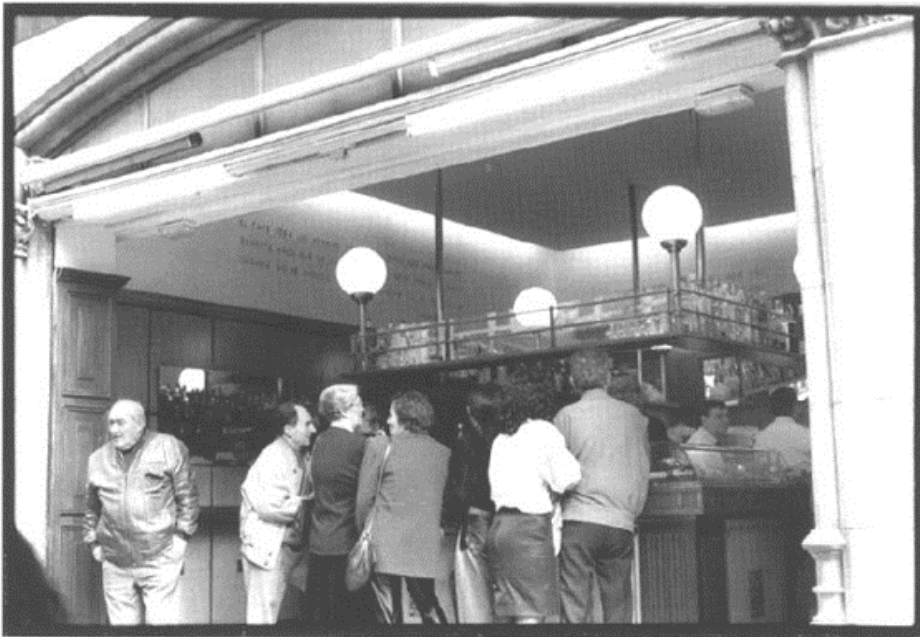


7.3 Barcelona, 1993.

Figure 3.4.5: Southern Stand Bar Images
(Source: Chora Vol. 3, p. 163)

**3.4.6 Villagrande Strisaili**

The small village of Villagrande Strisaili in Sardinia exemplifies the power of community. The village's layout promotes regular interaction among residents, fostering a strong family spirit and a close-knit community reminiscent of the past. This daily crossing of paths for basic needs contributes to the village's supportive atmosphere, a tradition passed down through generations. I used the idea of promoting regular interaction among the community members to foster strong connections between residents.
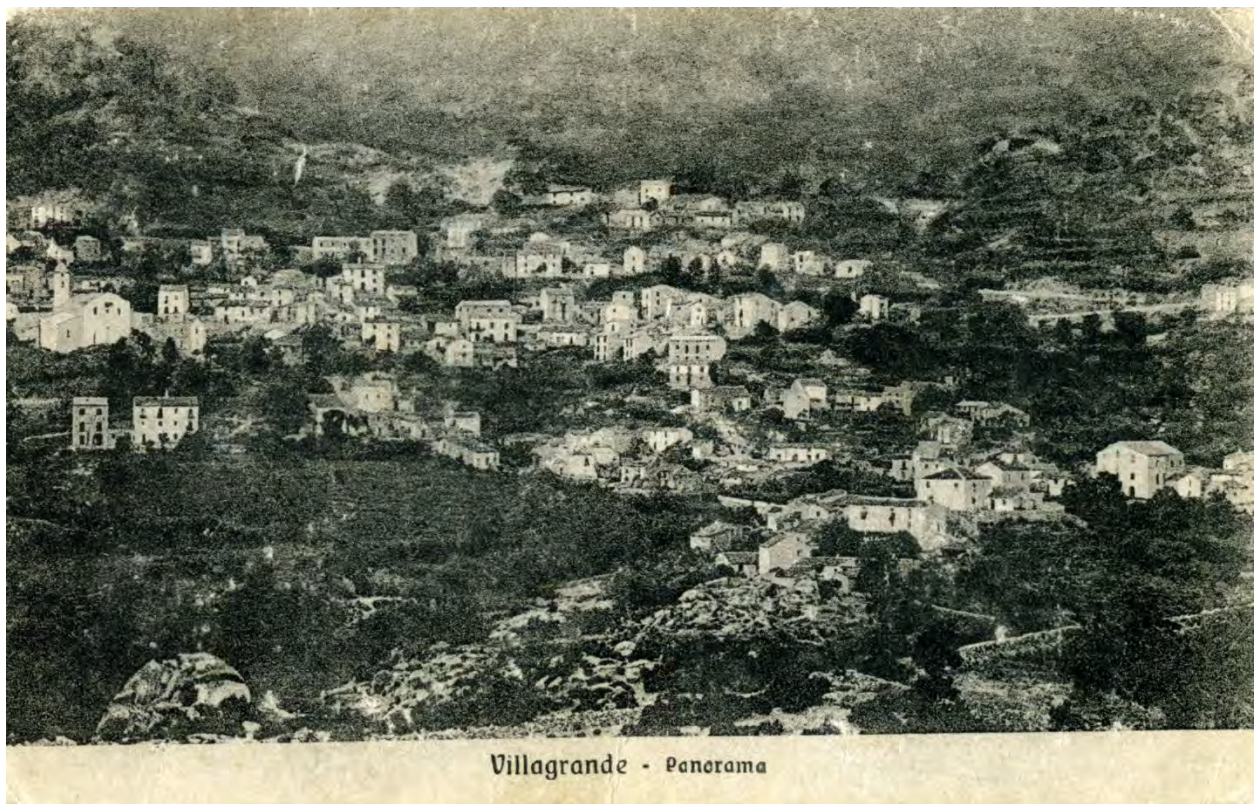


Figure 3.4.6: Villagrande Strisaili Image
(Source: egov5.halleysardegna.com)

### 3.4.7 Victims by John Hejduk

John Hejduk's "*Victims*" project, discussed in a lecture by Professor David Gersten, illustrates a unique perspective on architectural continuity. Hejduk's students overlaid the plan of the Victims project with that of the old Gestapo headquarters, revealing a profound connection between the "victims" or buildings, the erased past site, and the present site. As Gersten explains, "The presence of one time takes the form of a shadow within another time. Each victim inhabits both worlds at the same time," suggesting a layered narrative where past and present coexist in architectural form. I used the idea of incorporating what was once on this site with the new design to connect both the past and present in the architecture.
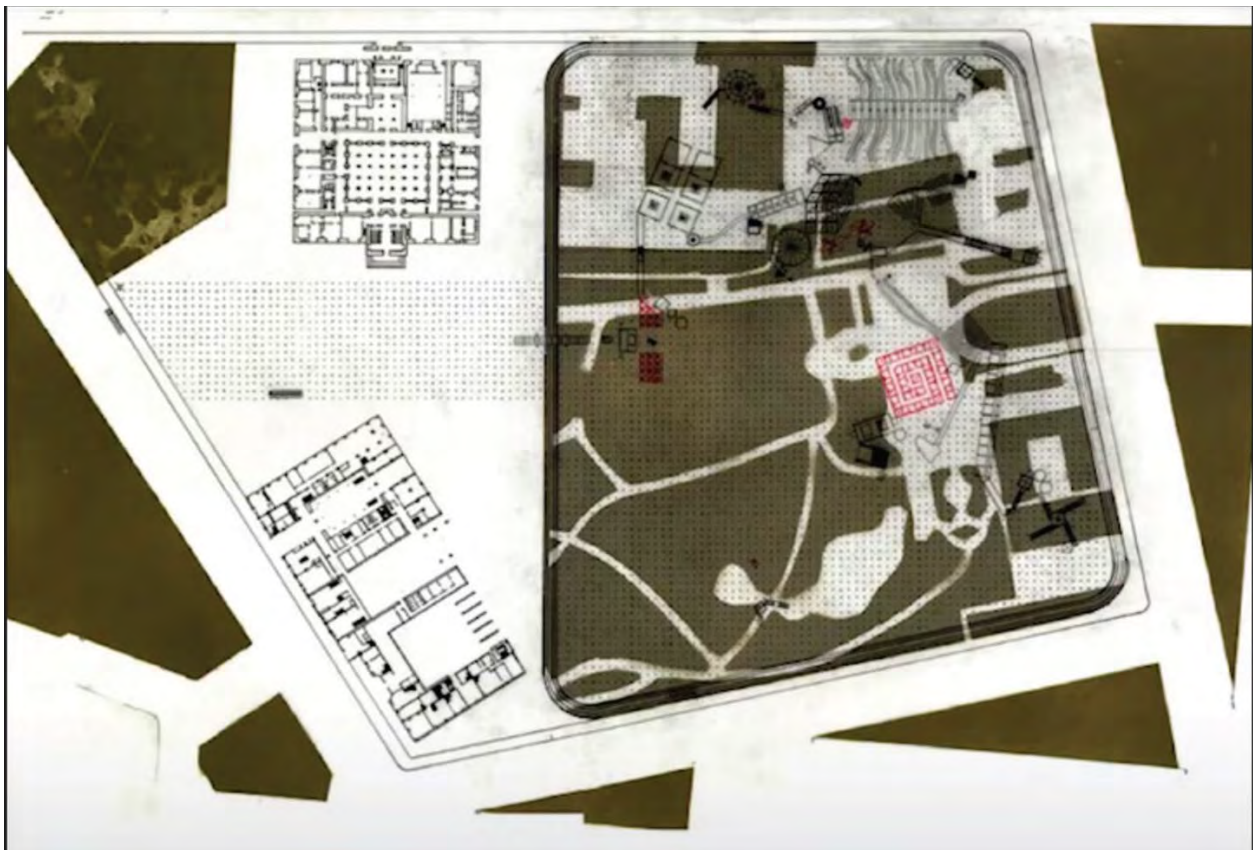
Figure 3.4.7: Victims Project Overlaid on Gestapo Headquarters
(Source: www.youtube.com/@cooperunion, 2019)

### 3.4.8 "An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris"

Georges Perec's work, particularly "*An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris,*" encourages us to pay attention to the often-overlooked details of everyday life. By meticulously recording the events of a single location, Perec sheds light on the intricate and multifaceted narratives that unfold in our surroundings. This simple act of observation reveals the richness of our environment and the complexity of human experience. I used this idea of capturing and highlighting the everyday moments of human connection in my project by framing specific views throughout the site.
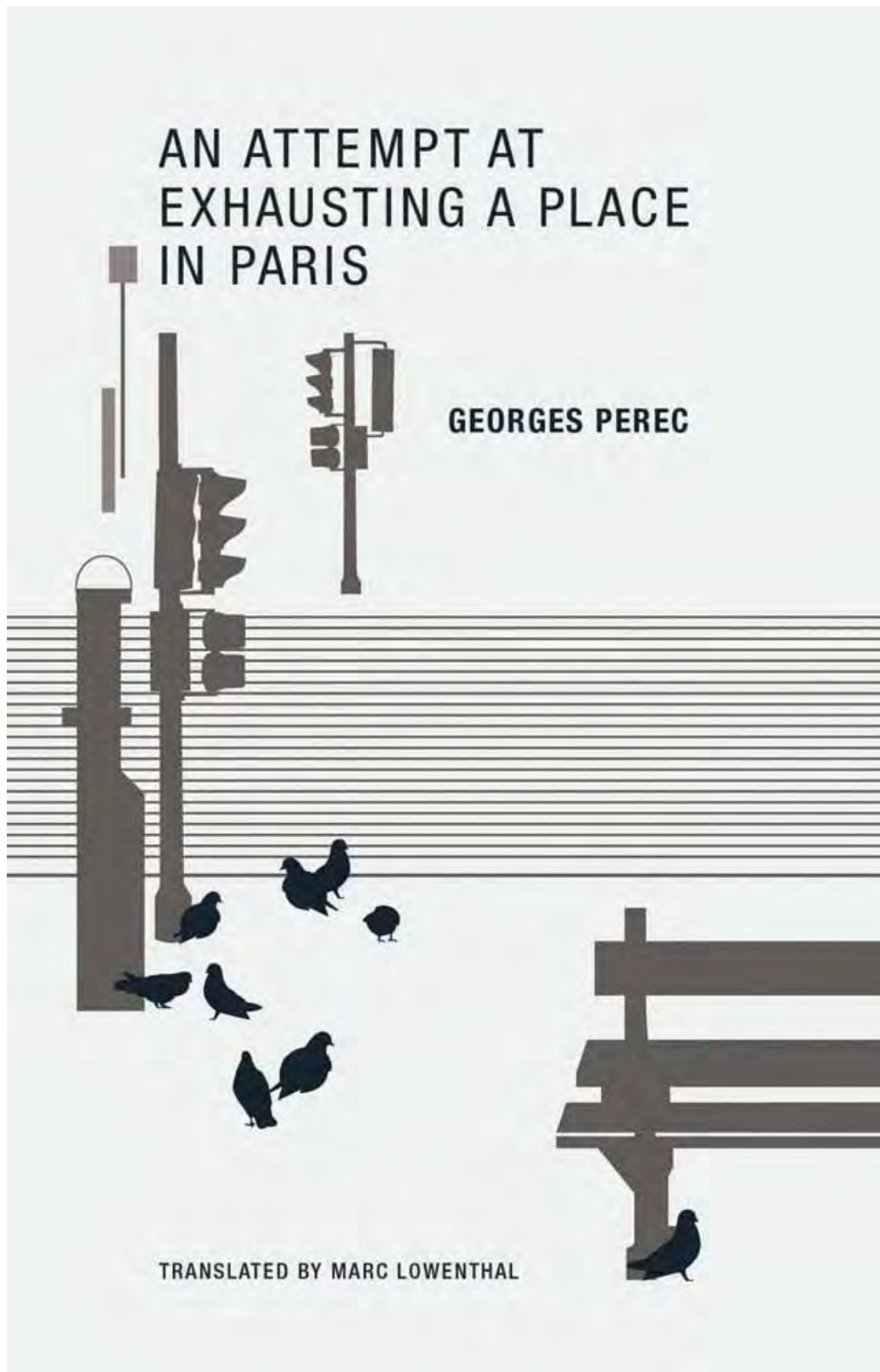
Figure 3.4.8: Georges Perec "An Attempt At Exhausting A Place In Paris"
(Source: "An Attempt At Exhausting A Place In Paris", 2010)

## 3.5 Program

### 3.5.1 Cabrini-Green Performing Arts Center

The Cabrini-Green Performing Arts Center is a vital hub for the community, offering a range of spaces to meet diverse artistic needs. The grand lounge area serves as a welcoming gathering spot, where guests can socialize and enjoy the lively atmosphere before and after performances. On the first floor, conversation pits surround live music areas, creating a dynamic ambiance. The second floor features information booths, concessions stands, and seating areas. The third floor offers stunning overlooks of the entire site and lobby, with access to the upper level of both wings. Additionally, all lobby/lounge floors provide access to restrooms, elevators, and entrances to the multiple floors of the large theater.

The north wing houses several practice spaces, providing artists and musicians with dedicated areas to refine their skills and prepare for performances. The south wing features an intimate performance area designed for smaller, more personal shows. The centerpiece of the center is its large theater, seating approximately 1,000 people, suitable for various events like presentations, film screenings, comedy shows, plays, and recitals. These versatile spaces cater to a wide range of artistic expressions, enhancing the neighborhood's cultural vibrancy.

### 3.5.2 Covered Plaza and Studio Spaces

The covered plaza serves as a versatile indoor/outdoor space, seamlessly blending the boundaries between the interior and exterior environments. It features two community kitchens equipped for cooking demonstrations and communal meals, with adjacent seating areas for dining and socializing. Additionally, the plaza includes studios and workshops that offer

opportunities for skill-sharing and learning among community members. These spaces are

adaptable for various activities, such as cooking classes, pottery workshops, and other life skills

sessions, all of which are determined by community input and demand. When not in use for

classes or workshops, the studios can function as retail spaces, allowing owners to showcase and

sell their goods, further enriching the community's economic and social fabric.

### 3.5.3 General Public Space

Throughout the site, there are numerous inviting areas designed to accommodate both

individuals and groups, fostering community engagement and interaction. These spaces play a

crucial role in creating a sense of belonging and ensuring that community members have access

to spaces where they can meet, socialize, and connect with others. These areas promote

spontaneous encounters and facilitate the formation of new relationships. Whether residents are

looking to gather with friends, participate in community events, or simply enjoy the outdoors,

these public spaces provide a welcoming environment for various activities and social

interactions. Importantly, these spaces are designed to be accessible year-round, accommodating

all seasons, and are open at all times of the day to cater to the diverse needs and schedules of

community members.

### 3.5.4 Surrounding Space

Surrounding the central community space are the areas where the old towers once stood,

which are now ready for transformation into community-led plazas. The vision is to collaborate

closely with community members to design each of these spaces, tailoring them to become

unique areas for the community. This approach aims to empower residents by giving them

control over the development of these spaces, creating a sense of ownership and connection to their neighborhood. Additionally, there are other buildings surrounding these community plazas that will also be determined by the community. These buildings will be tailored to meet the specific needs of the residents, potentially including housing, shops, restaurants, libraries, resource centers, and other amenities essential for the community's well-being and connectivity.

### 3.6 Artefact

Creating an artefact for this thesis project has been instrumental in developing the architecture through an artistic and expressive design process. By transforming research into a physical object, the main ideas of theatricality, urban interventions, community participation, and highlighting everyday human connections were visually represented. The artefact uses light and shadow to illustrate layered and overlapping narratives, inviting users to participate by casting their shadows into the piece. This interactive element symbolizes the project's focus on remembering and acknowledging the vibrant community of Cabrini-Green that once inhabited the site. The artifact serves as a tangible manifestation of the project's central themes, providing a foundation for the architectural design to evolve.
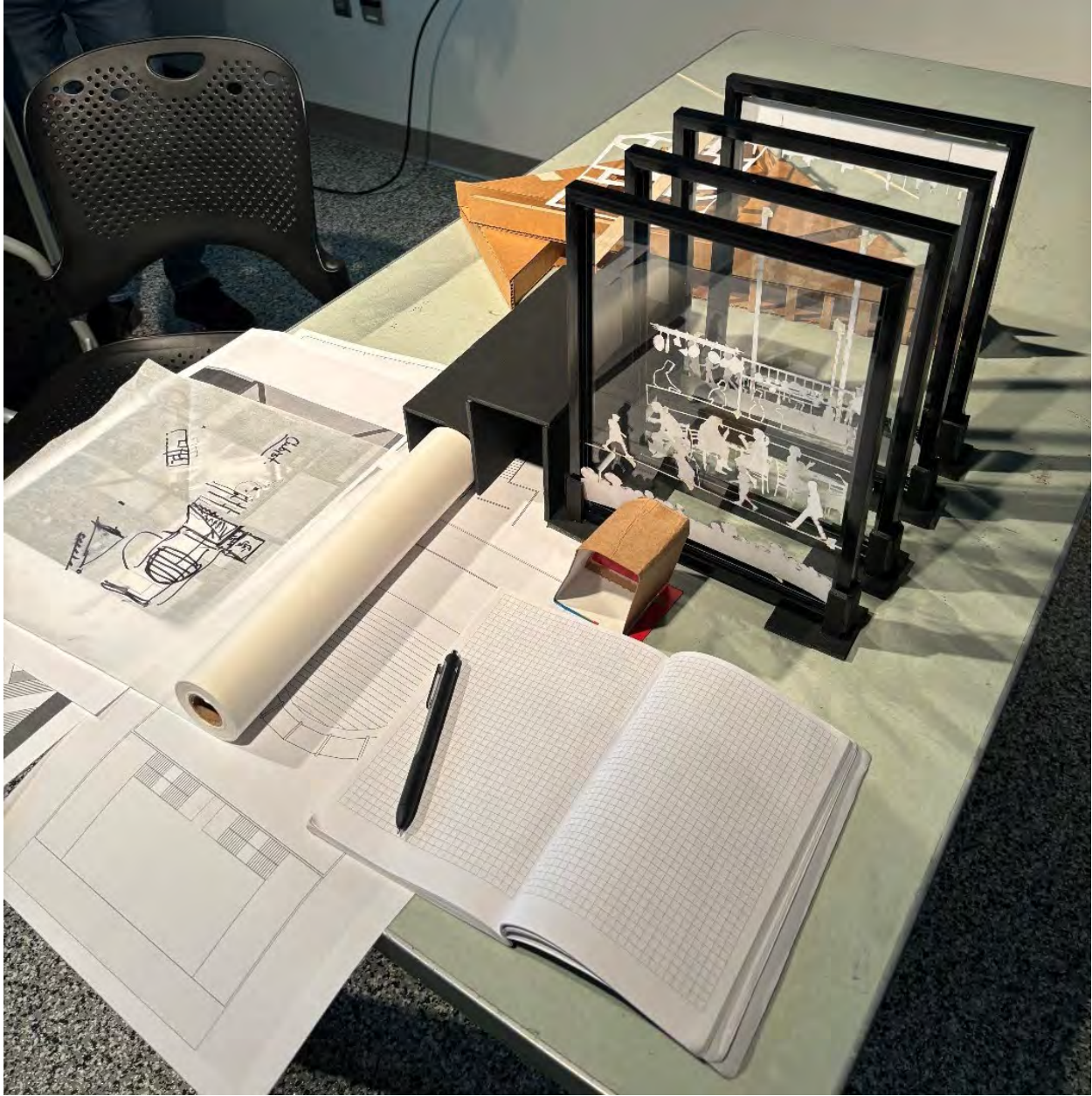
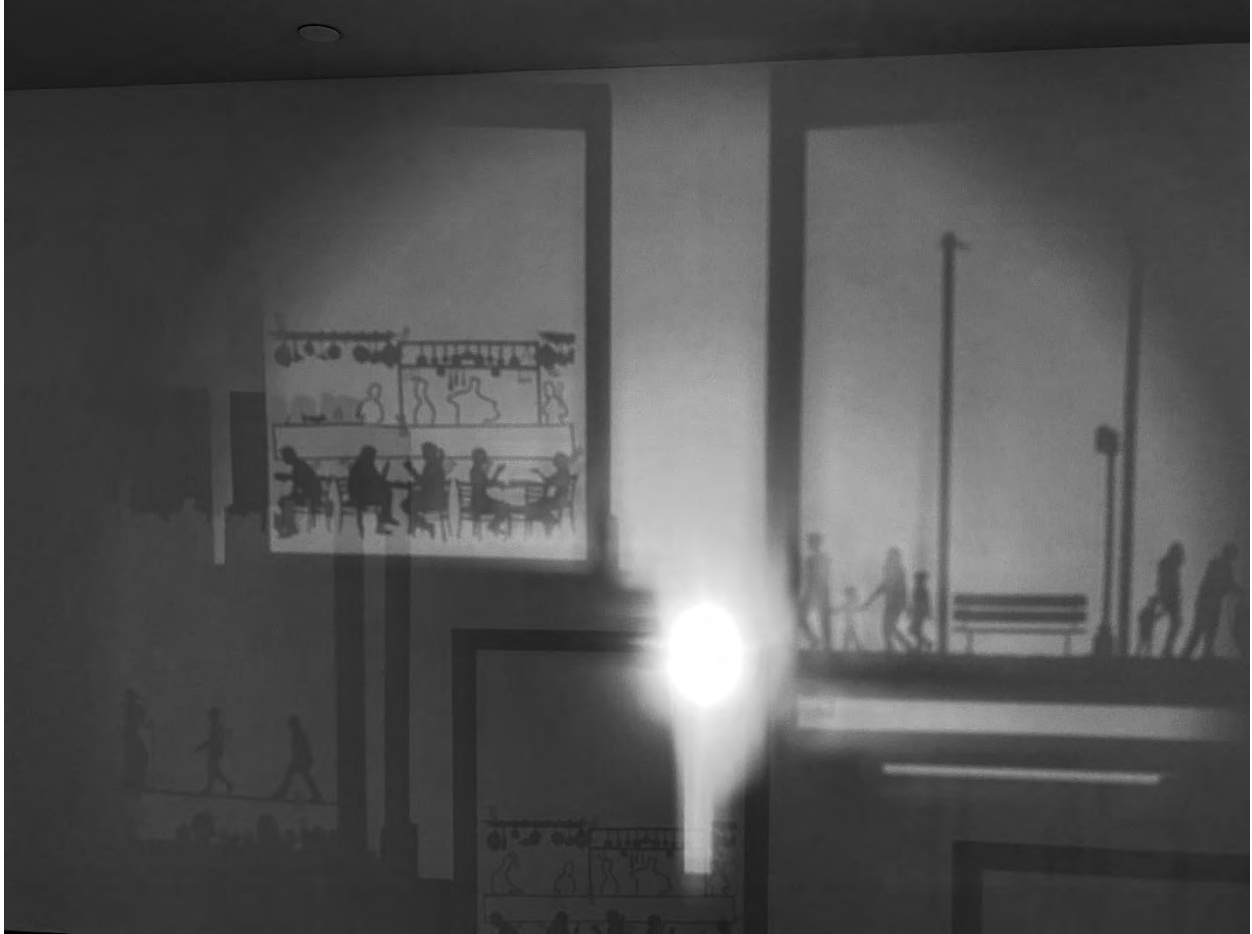Figure 3.6.1: Artefact 1

Figure 3.6.2: Artefact 2

Figure 3.6.3: Artefact 3

# 4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

## 4.1 Project Objective

The project achieved its primary objective of reducing loneliness and fostering connections within urban neighborhoods through the design and implementation of a community hub that integrates theater and urban intervention to create spaces that encourage social interaction and community engagement.

One key aspect of the project was the creation of various community spaces, including a performing arts center, public gathering spaces, and community kitchens. These spaces were designed to bring residents together and facilitate social interaction, providing opportunities for individuals to connect.

Another important objective was to promote cultural exchange within the community. This was achieved through the inclusion of a performing arts center for members in and outside of the community to share stories and culture. These spaces serve as platforms for residents to showcase their talents, share their stories, and engage with others, fostering a sense of community pride and belonging.

Additionally, the project aimed to revitalize public spaces within the neighborhood. By transforming underutilized areas into vibrant community hubs, the project encourages residents to participate in educational and recreational activities and engage with their surroundings.

Lastly, the project sought to preserve community history by integrating the footprints from the original towers that once stood on the site. This feature, along with interventions along the path to promote reflection and exploration, helps to strengthen residents' connection to their neighborhood and its history.

## 4.2 Project Design and Documentation
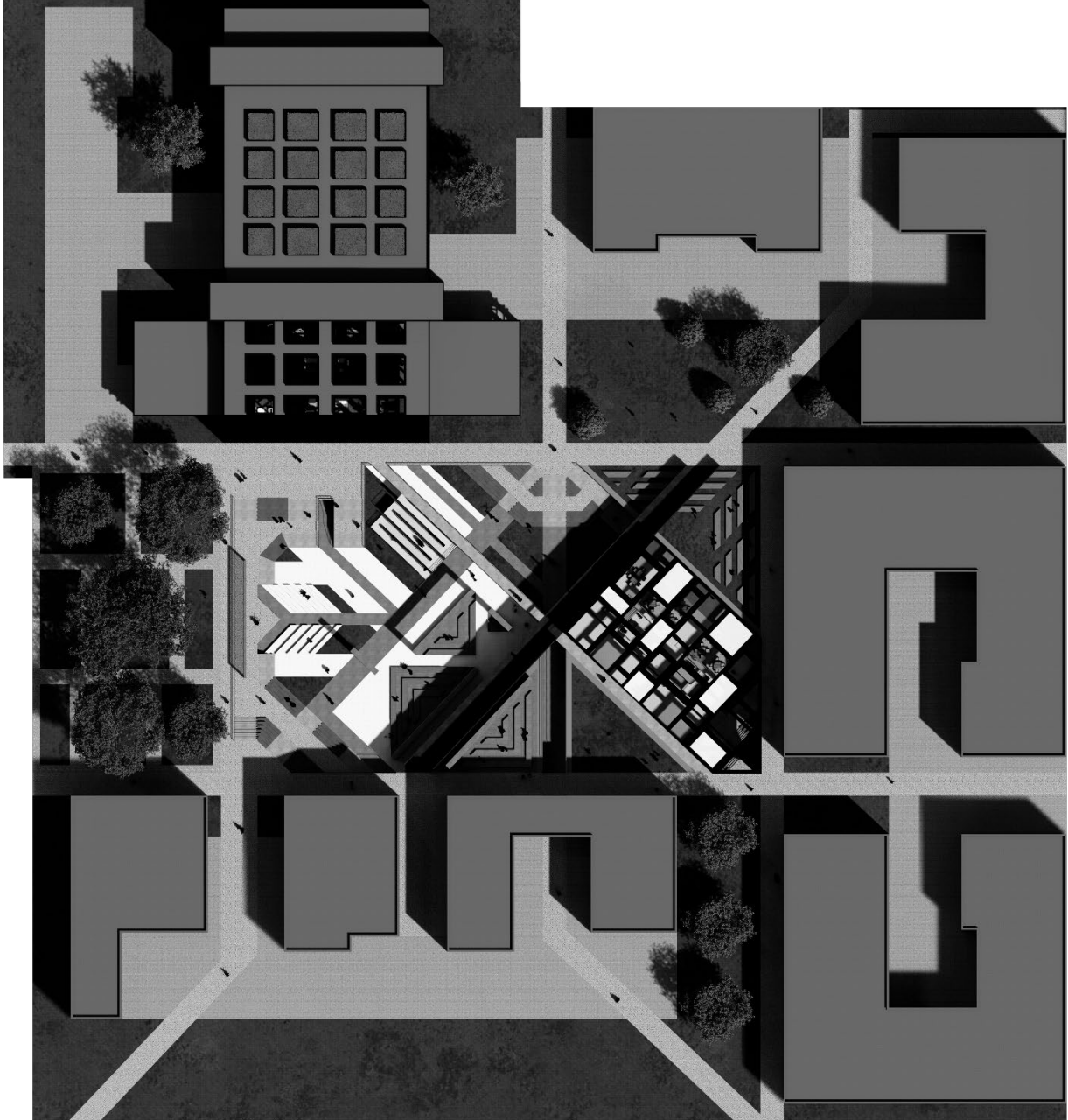
### 4.2.1 Site Plan



Figure 4.2.1.1: Site Plan
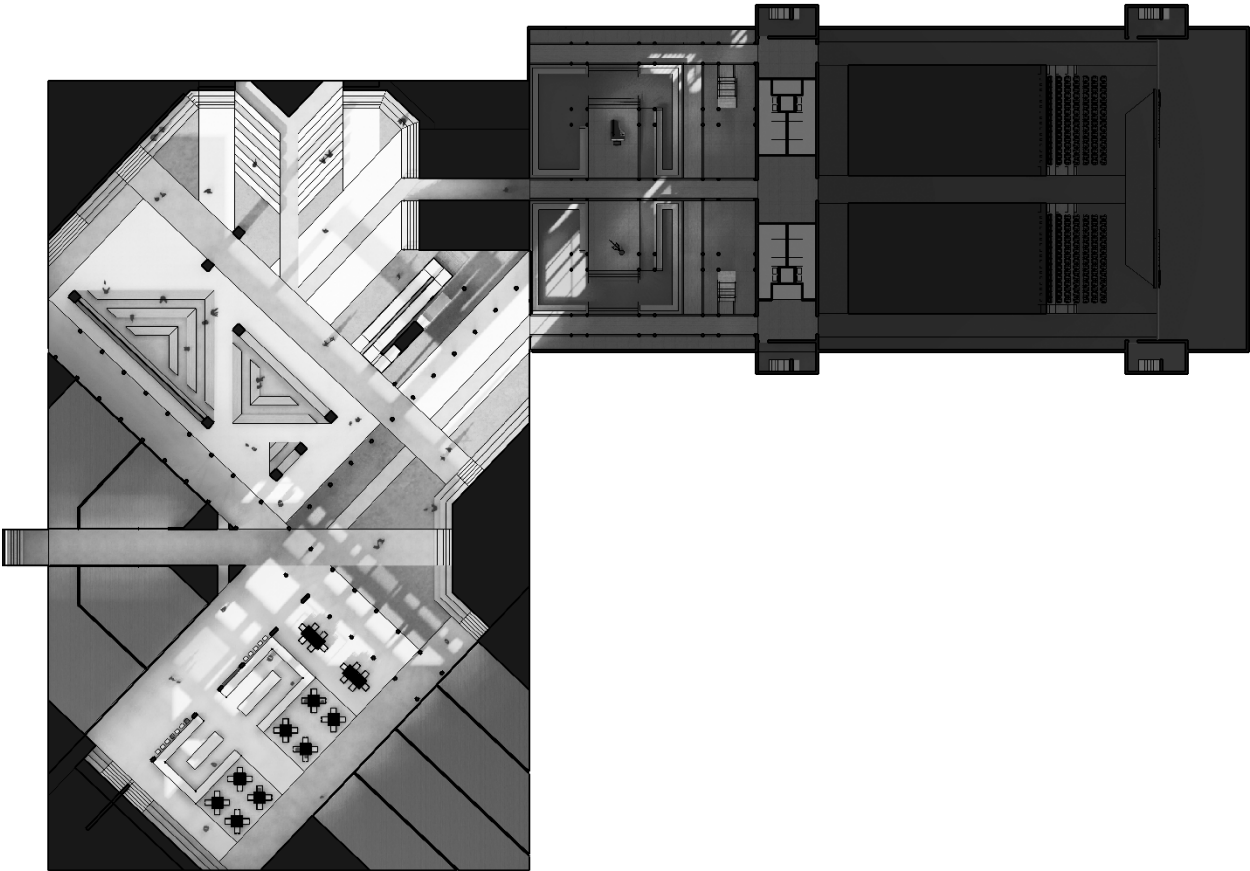
**4.2.2 Floor Plans**
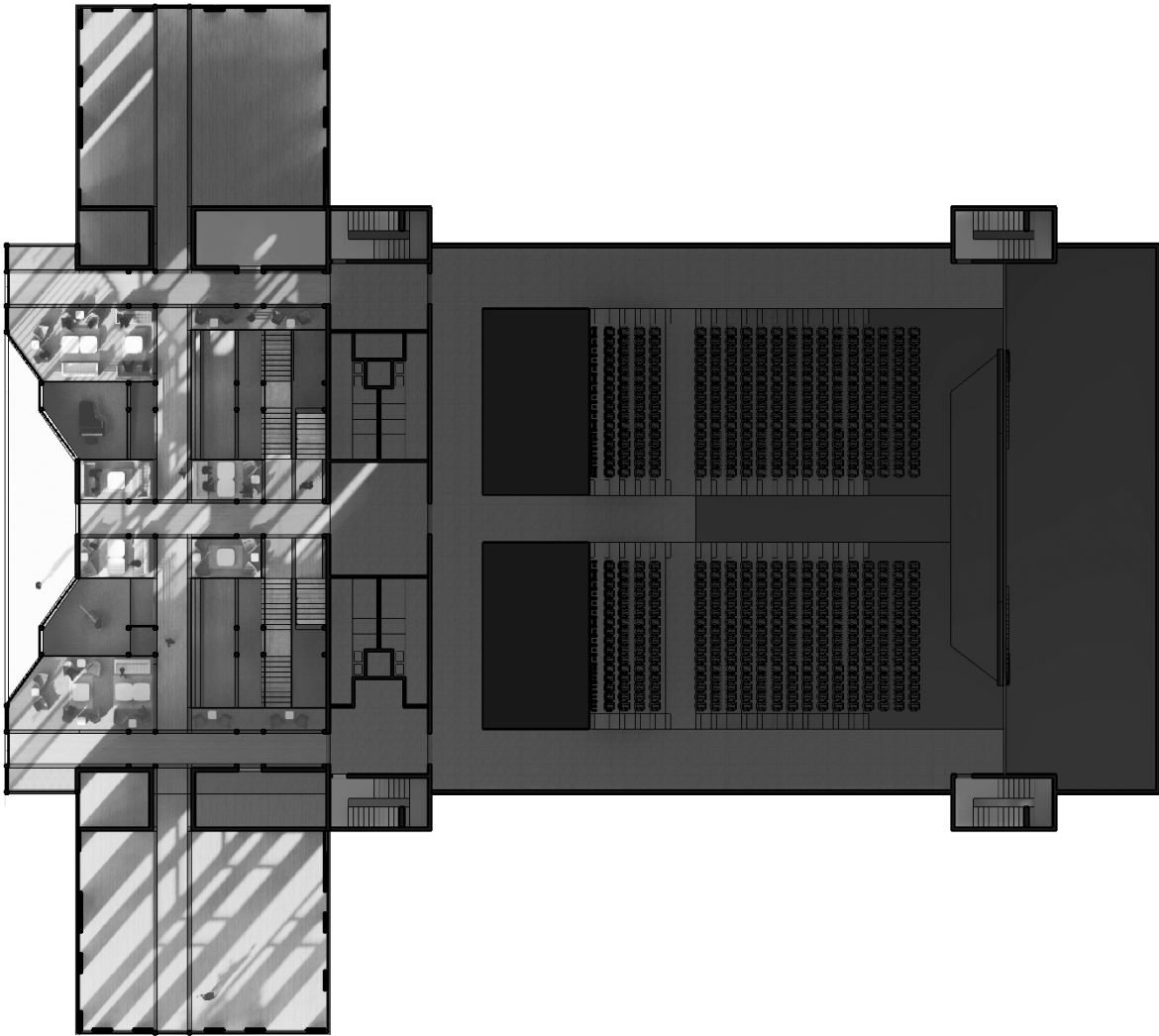


Figure 4.2.2.1: First Floor Plan
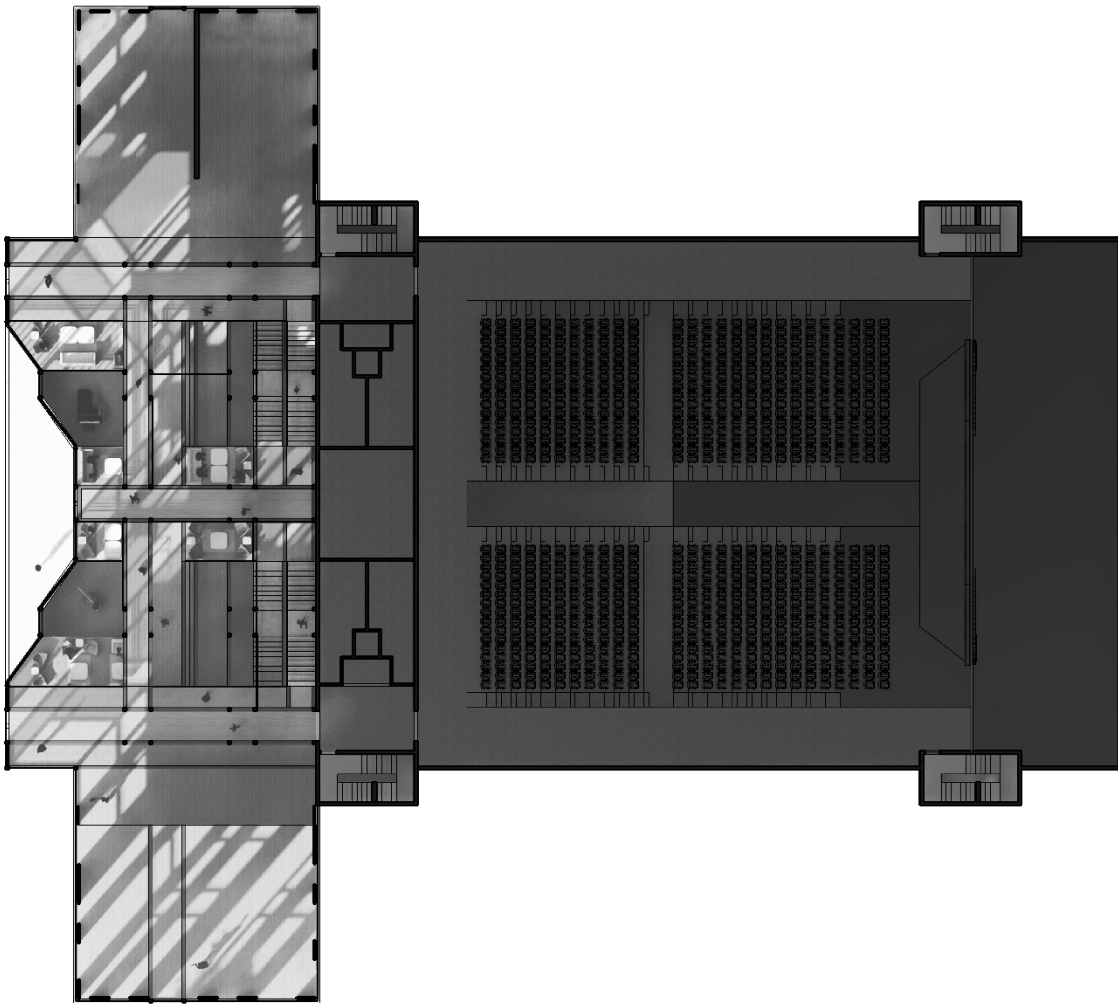
Figure 4.2.2.2: Second Floor Plan
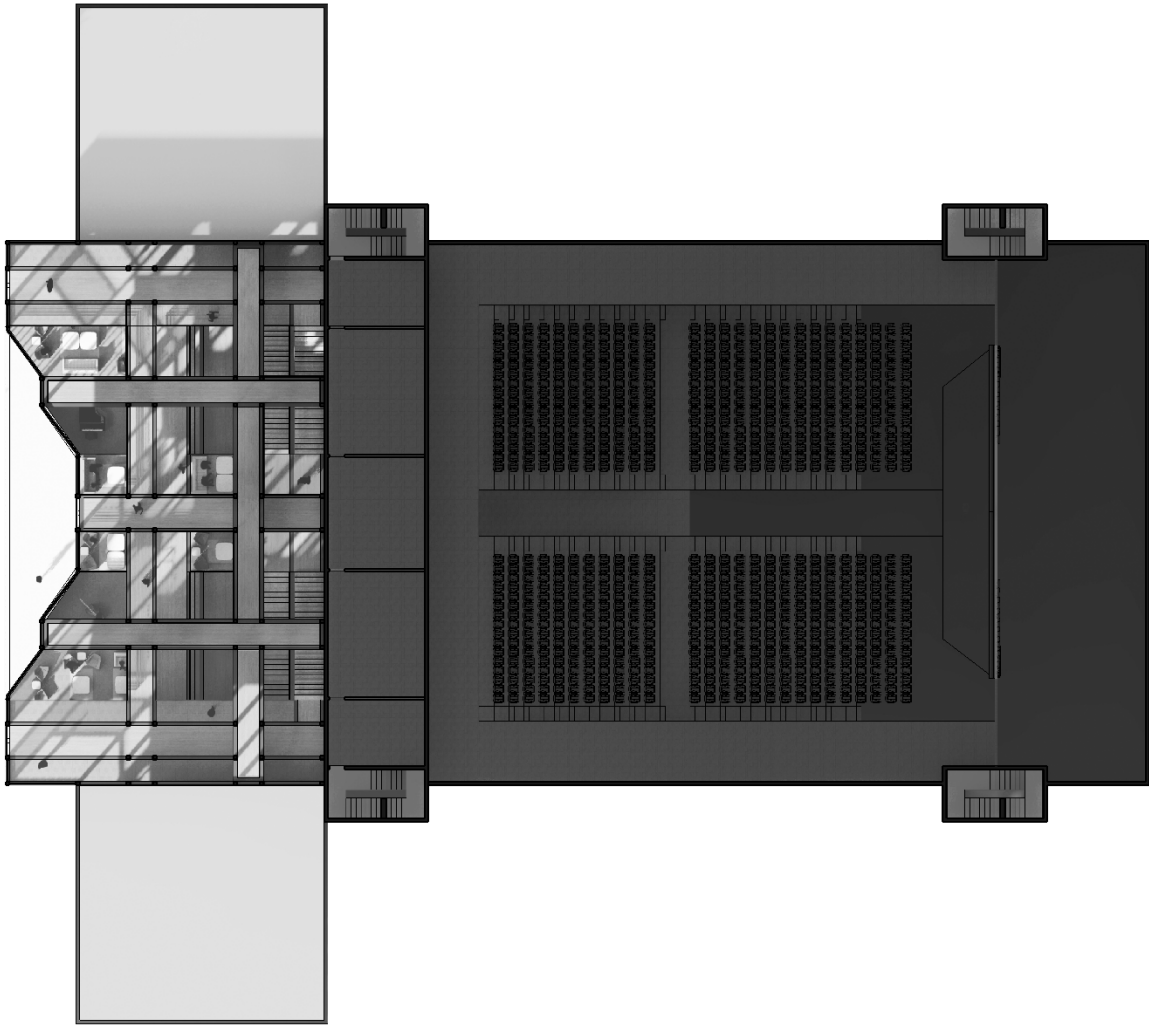
Figure 4.2.2.3: Third Floor Plan

Figure 4.2.2.4: Fourth Floor Plan
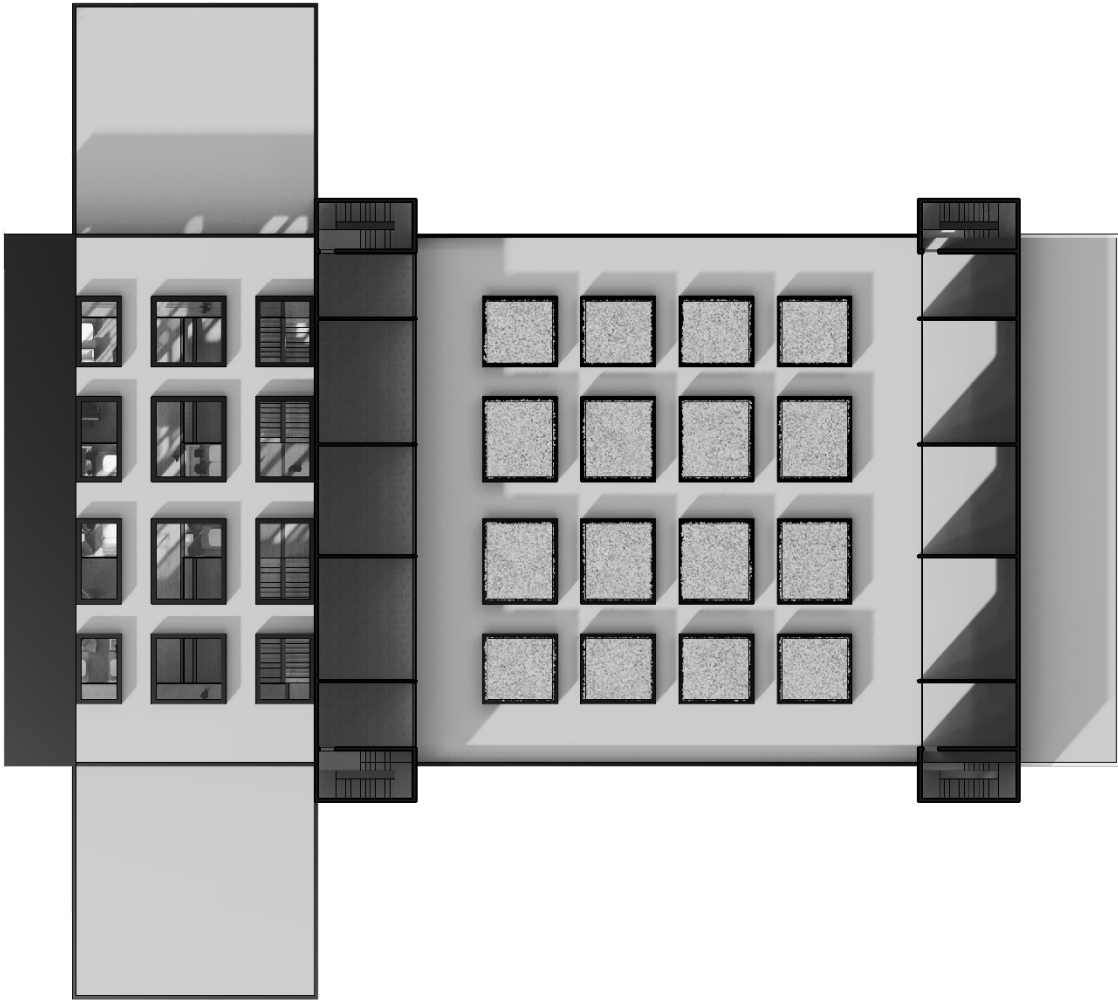
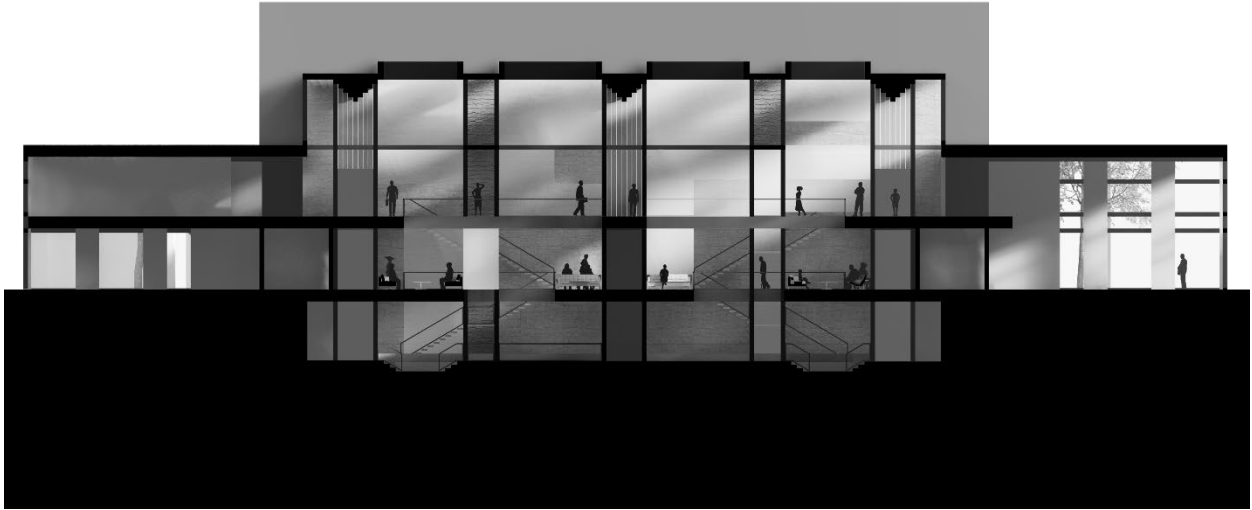Figure 4.2.2.5: Fifth Floor Plan

## 4.2.3 Sections
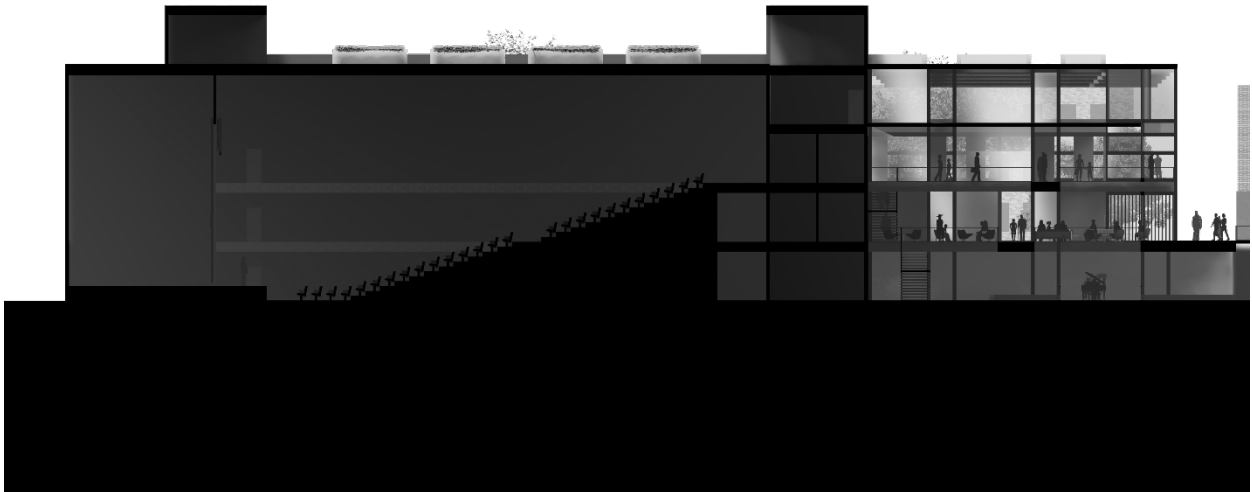


Figure 4.2.3.1: Performing Arts Center Section 1



Figure 4.2.3.2: Performing Arts Center Section 2

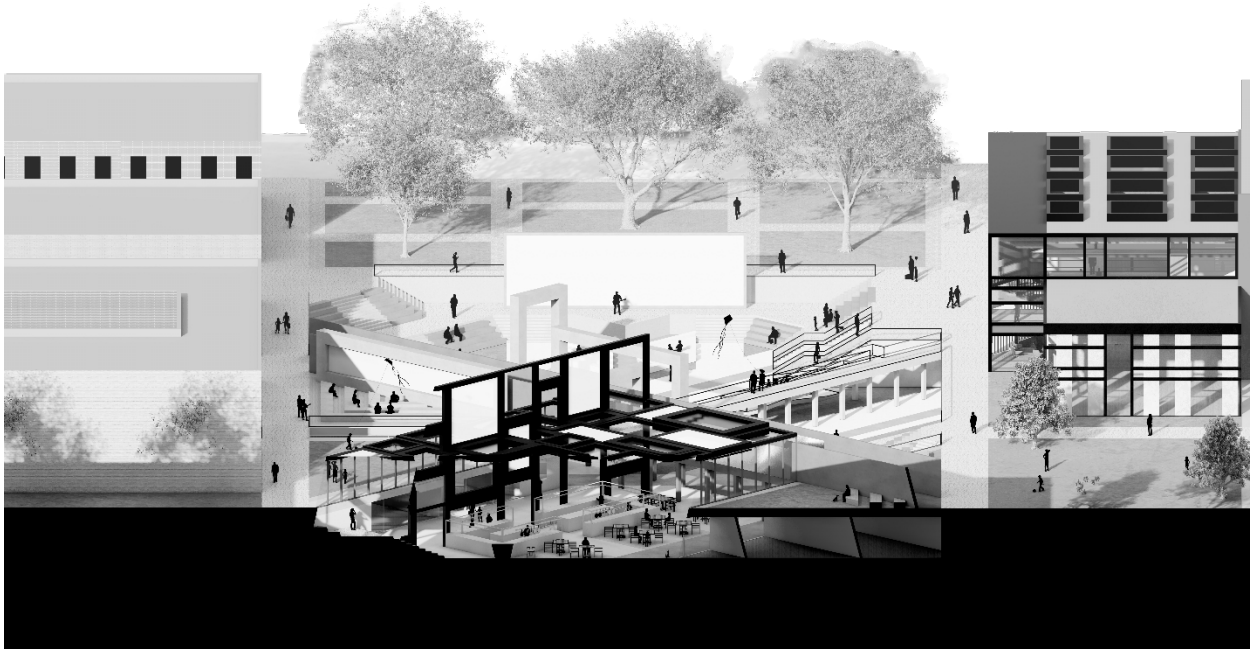**4.2.4 Site Sections**



Figure 4.2.4.1: Site Section 1
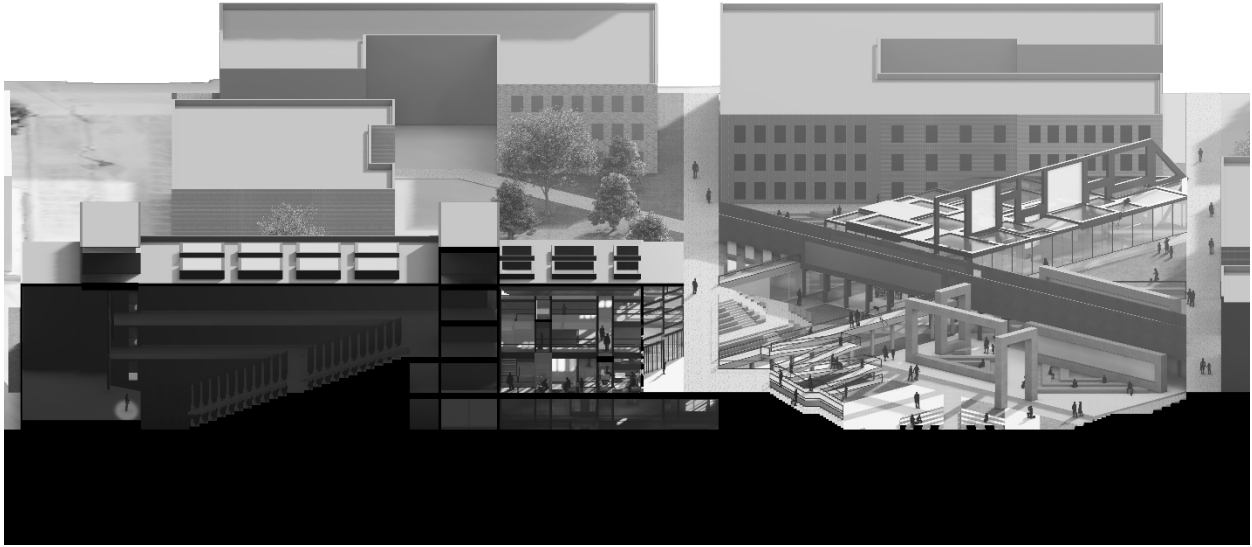


Figure 4.2.4.2: Site Section 2

Figure 4.2.4.3: Site Section 3

## 4.2.5 Renderings



Figure 4.2.5.1: Outdoor Plaza 1

Figure 4.2.5.2: Outdoor Plaza 2
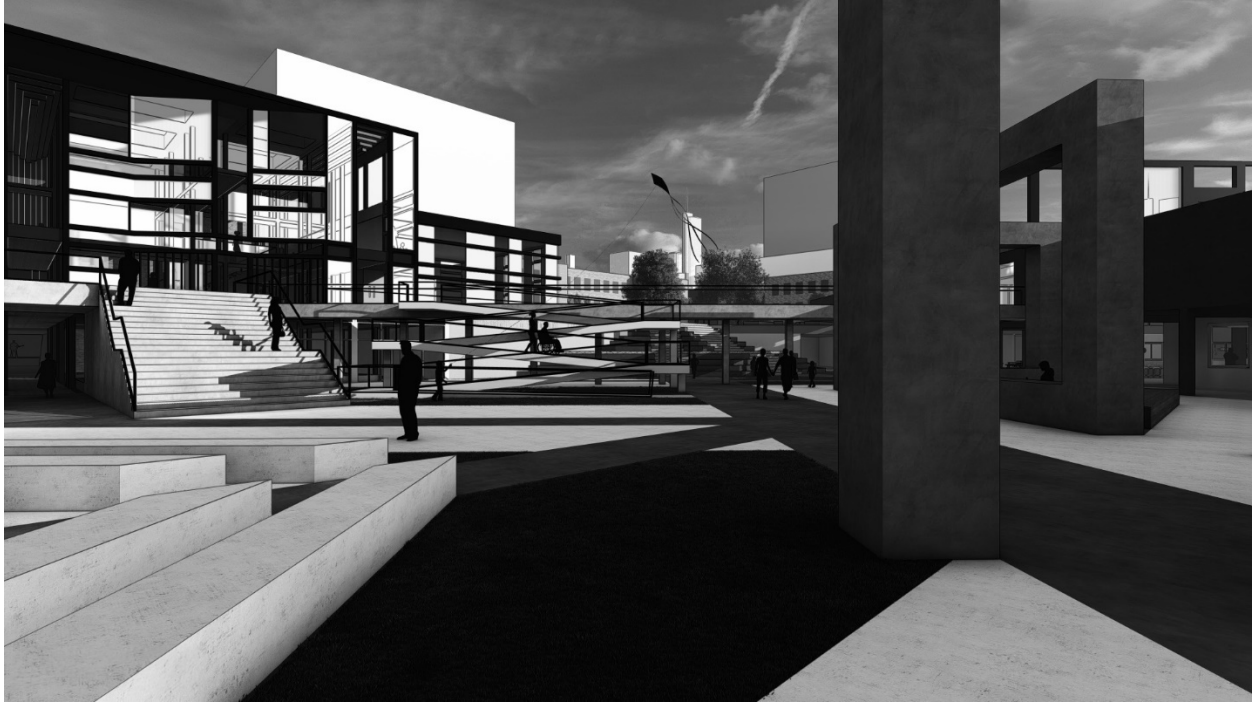


Figure 4.2.5.3: Outdoor Plaza 3

Figure 4.2.5.4: Outdoor Plaza 4



Figure 4.2.5.5: Outdoor Plaza 5

Figure 4.2.5.6: Outdoor Plaza 6



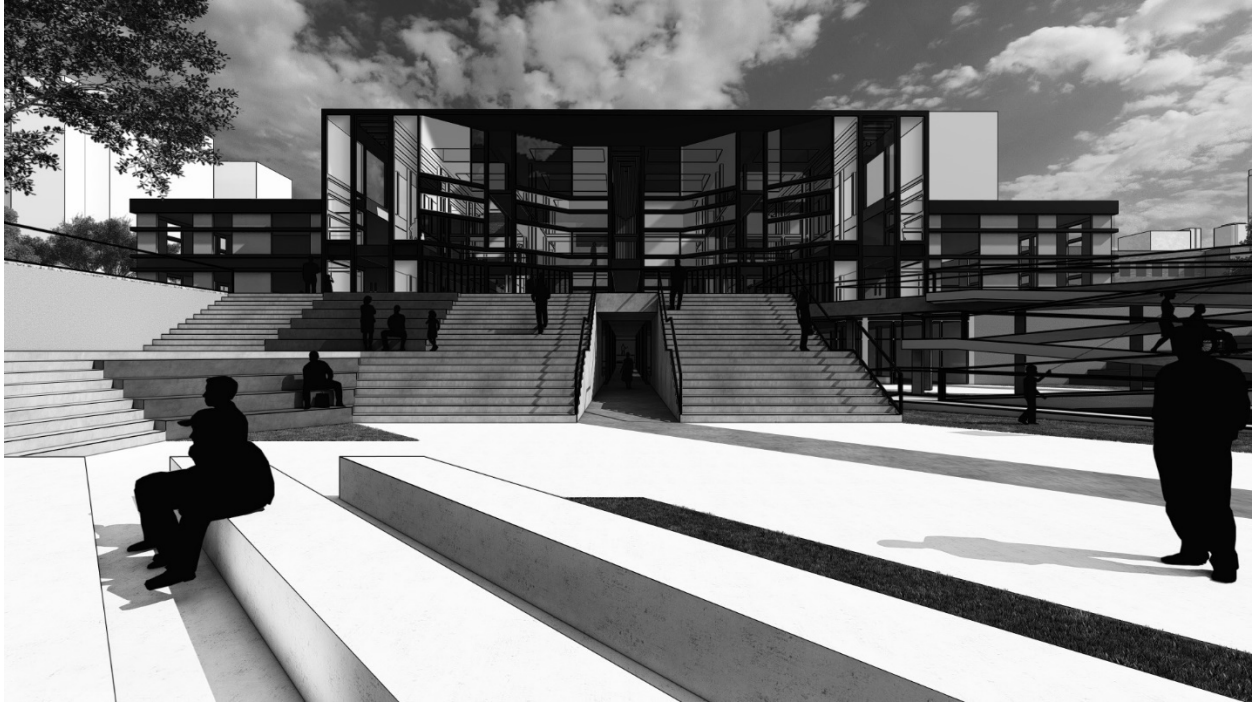Figure 4.2.5.7: Outdoor Plaza 7
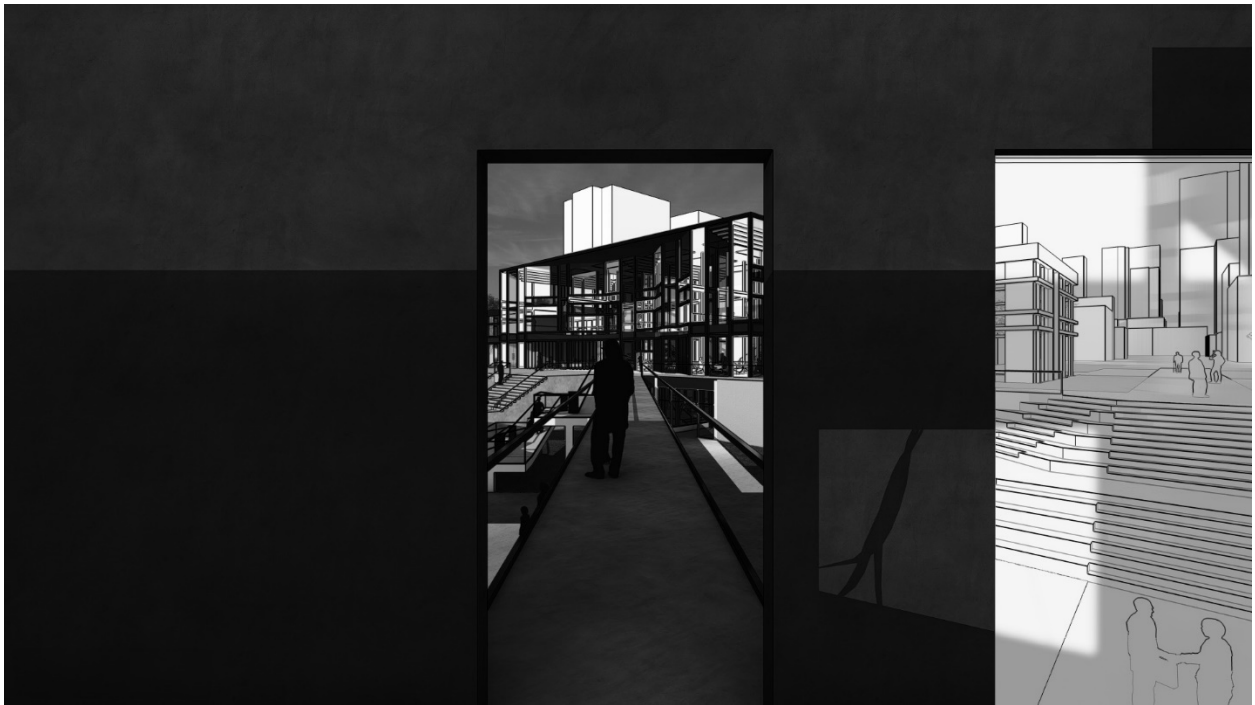
Figure 4.2.5.8: Outdoor Plaza 8



Figure 4.2.5.9: Original Path 1

Figure 4.2.5.10: Original Path 2



Figure 4.2.5.11: NW Perspective

Figure 4.2.5.12: W Perspective



Figure 4.2.5.13: SW Perspective

Figure 4.2.5.14: SE Perspective



Figure 4.2.5.15: E Perspective

Figure 4.2.5.16: Covered Plaza 1



Figure 4.2.5.17: Covered Plaza 2

Figure 4.2.5.18: Covered Plaza 3



Figure 4.2.5.19: Covered Plaza 4

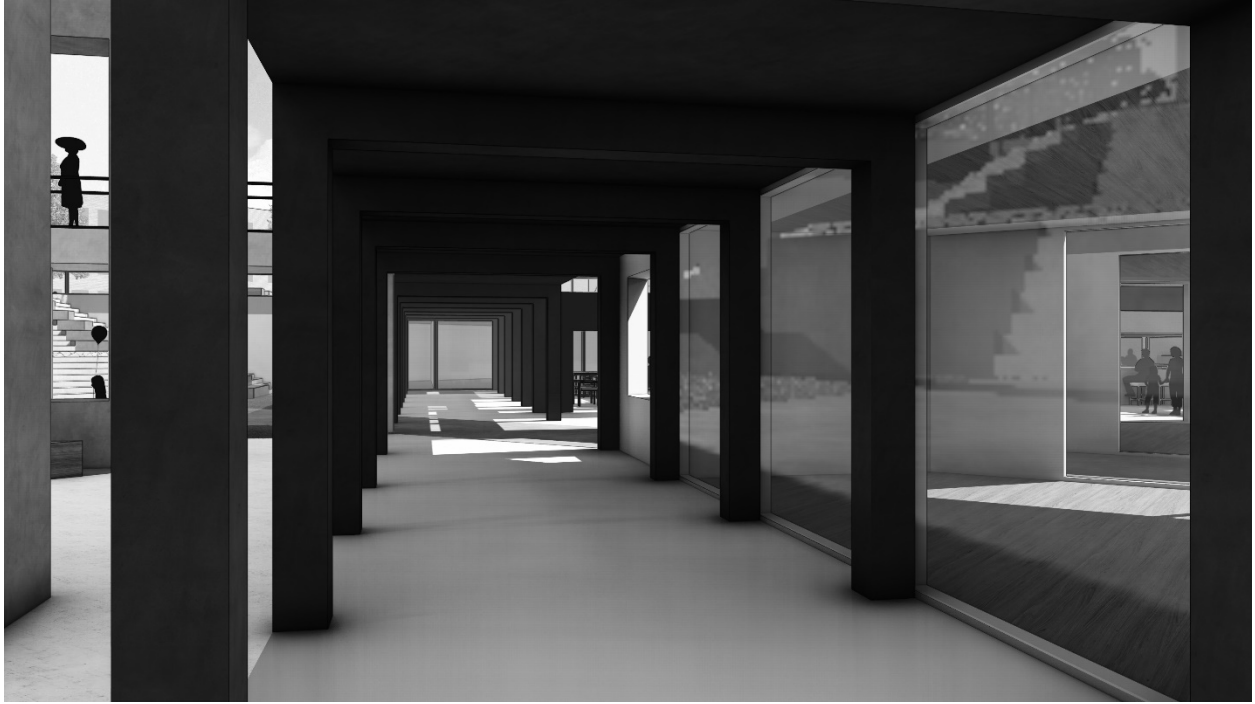Figure 4.2.5.20: Covered Plaza 5



Figure 4.2.5.21: Covered Plaza 6

Figure 4.2.5.22: Covered Plaza 7



Figure 4.2.5.23: Interior Lobby 1

Figure 4.2.5.24: Interior Lobby 2

## 4.3 Conclusions

Designing public spaces that truly meet the needs of a community requires the direct involvement of the people who will use them. This project is my vision of what a community hub could be, informed by research on the historical and current community of Cabrini-Green. However, the desires and requirements of the Cabrini-Green community can only be fully understood and realized by collaborating directly with its residents in the creation of their ideal community hub. Without their input and involvement, any attempt to fulfill the community's needs would fall short of their true aspirations.

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