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Title

DREAMING OF HOME : CONNECTED, EMOTIONAL, AND INSPIRING DWELLING
IN NEW YORK'S SUPERBLOCKS

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NEW YORK'S SUPERBLOCKS

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ABSTRACT

In the past, homes provided a way to connect to the world, the community and oneself. Moving through time, the house changed shape and these connections became weaker, yet the longing for a home where one belongs stayed. A reimagining is needed, as homes today lack meaningful bridges to this desire to dwell. Nowhere is this needed more than affordable housing superblocks that provide essential homes. As these houses age, the future of housing will depend on the reaction to worsening conditions. Can an architectural intervention prevent a reset of New York City's housing stock and learn from the surrounding area to create a stronger sense of home in an urban area? With the existing framework of these superblocks, the aim of this project is a reimagining of the poetic potential of the Riis Houses. A dream to have a home that is more connected, more inspiring, and more emotional.

DEDICATION

To the people in studio - late nights, card games and conversations. To the girl who thought an egg wouldn't break if she squeezed with only one hand. To the Oaxacan Omelet I had in Washington D.C. on September 28th, 2023. To Burger Time, you weren't as good as I was hoping. To Haruomi Hosono, Shigeru Suzuki, and Tatsuo Yamashita for releasing Pacific, one of the best albums of all time.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NYCHANew York City Housing Authority

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Problem Statement

Today, homes across the American continent appear identical. Apartments built in Seattle are no different than the ones built in Nashville, Denver, Phoenix, or New York. Anne Kodé writes, “It’s anytown architecture, and it’s hard to know where you are from one city to the next.” (Kodé, 2023, para. 11). Homes have become bland, repetitive, placeless, and ruthlessly efficient. Material, form, layout, and pattern repeated without consideration for the character of place. Martin Heidegger expands on this asking, that even though these places are “well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun . . . do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs in them?” (Heidegger, 1954, p. 1). Simply living in a home does not mean one is dwelling. To dwell, Heidegger states “that mortals ever search anew for dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell” (Heidegger, 1954, p. 10). Homes need to assist in this ever-present learning to dwell, to be at home.

In parallel to this issue is the aging of affordable homes built in the last century that are similarly bland and repetitive to the homes being built today. Luis Ferré-Sadurní (2018) writes, “Public housing in New York City has become synonymous with the dilapidated living conditions many of its more than 400,000 residents have endured in recent years.” (para. 2). In stark defiance of the blank walls, repetitive building blocks and worsening conditions, the people inside have made this place a home. Despite this there is now a precedent for the blocks to be demolished and replaced with the type of housing mentioned above. (Carson-Holt, 2023). As public superblocks age the future of housing will depend on the reaction of today to their worsening conditions. Should the blocks follow precedent and fall or is there a way to keep the character of the blocks and bring forth the life there?

1.2. Objective

1.2.1. Aim

The objective of this proposal is to create a home that improves lives through the joining of poetic spaces. A home that engages the wonders of the natural world, mortality, and relationships with others. A home in New York's Superblocks that reflects the beauty, connection, and warmth within. This proposal reimagines the current homes with additions onto and a keeping, altering, and reusing of current elements of the buildings and site. While not entirely realistic, the proposal's main goal is ultimately to inspire thoughts on what home is and ways that architecture can better embody its inhabitants in urban areas.

1.2.2. Significance

This proposal addresses the concerning lack of influence place has on homes being built today, the dangerous cycle of housing in New York City and what home means in an urban environment. Through research into the history, philosophy, and poetry of home this proposal learns from past examples and ideas to apply them into a modern context and embed a home with stories and reflections of the place it occupies. New York City flattened the tenements after their failure and are now warming to the idea of repeating that destruction with public housing superblocks (Carson-Holt, 2023; Ferré-Sadurní, 2018). Can an architectural intervention prevent another reset of New York City's housing stock and learn from the surrounding area to create a stronger sense of home in an urban area?

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Background

The research done in this proposal focused on a greater cultural and historical scope of home and dwelling. Through a focus on how homes have connected their inhabitants to the world throughout time, a greater range of influences generates a greater range of ideas to implement in the final design.

2.2. Literature Review

2.2.1. Building, Dwelling, Thinking

In his essay, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Heidegger uses the example of a Black Forest farmhouse to illustrate what it means to dwell. He begins by saying, “The nature of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature in the raising of places by joining of their spaces. Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.” (Heidegger, 1954, p. 9). He begins his essay with this quote to establish housing and dwelling as separate. That simply being in a home is not dwelling. Dwelling is an action, not a set place. In his own essay addressing *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Brian Rogers (2023), clarifies stating “While we humans can never not be the kinds of creatures who dwell, our dwelling can become impoverished as we become forgetful of the gift of being.” (para. 17). In terms of the farmhouse, while it is not a dwelling it allows the inhabitants to dwell through reminders of the gift of being. To be capable of meaningful dwelling and remember that gift of being, one must understand and stay within Heidegger’s concept of the fourfold.

The fourfold is comprised of four fundamental pieces that define what it means to be human. Those pieces are Earth, Sky, Mortality and Divinity. Earth is the ground that supports

humans physically and supports life. Through this recognition of humanity's dependence on the Earth, it is understood that without the Earth humans cannot live. Sky is:

The vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night - the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether (Heidegger, 1954. p. 3).

Mortality is the contemplation that just as one lives, one dies. An acceptance and appreciation of this finite existence. How inescapably one's life is one's own. Divinity is an idea different for everyone, but universal in that everyone is part of something greater. Or as Karsten Harries (1996) beautifully states, "a love that lets us experience ourselves as essentially incomplete, in need of others, in need of community." (p. 107). When homes provide connections to these four fundamental pieces, the ability to dwell is nurtured. This connection is written through Heidegger's use of a bridge.

The fourfold can be brought near through a bridge. Heidegger (1954) states:

The place is not already there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands, there are of course many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a place, and does so because of the bridge. Thus the bridge does not first come to a place to stand in it; rather, a place comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge (p. 6).

A bridge serves to connect something outside of an object's immediate purpose. The bridge brings forth, revealing something new about what already exists in a new light, bringing the far near to create new poetic realities that help one better understand the world they live in. Quite literally a bridge connects two separate pieces of land, allows for unique views of the sky, ages with time and provides a path for the eternal flow of human connection and culture. The bridge is

a device metaphorical and literal the stays within the fourfold and connects two distinct objects into a new understanding. (Heidegger, 1954).

Heidegger's ideas on dwelling, the fourfold and the bridge provide a basis on which to begin thinking about the design of a home. Karsten Harries (1996) states

Such buildings would provide interpretations of our place in an ongoing historical context. - Just as buildings establish regions, wrest place from space, so they establish temporal situations, place the individual in time, and not just in time, but in a communally shared time, in history (pg. 107).

This home must stay within the fourfold, bridging each piece to the inhabitants so that they can interpret the gift of being and learn to dwell.

2.2.2. History of Home

Often the first home is thought of as a dome made of mud, sticks and leaves. Yet, humans felt the feeling of home long before the first structures. The feelings of warmth, comfort, and dreaming. In Gaston Bachelard's *Psychoanalysis of Fire* he states,

The fire confined to the fireplace was no doubt for man the first object of reverie, the symbol of repose, the invitation to repose. To be deprived of a reverie before a burning fire is to lose the first use of and the truly human use of fire. To be sure, a fire warms us and gives us comfort. But one only becomes fully aware of this comforting sensation after quite a long period of contemplation of the flames - It leads to a very special kind of attention which has nothing in common with the attention involved in watching or observing. Very rarely is it utilized for any other kind of contemplation. When near the fire, one must be seated; one must rest without sleeping; one must engage in reverie on a specific object. (1938, pp. 14-15).

In this hypnotized condition one is whole taken into themselves and existence. Fire was a catalyst for language, stories, and culture. Early humans shared stories of their lives, stories of their ancestors, stories of the earth and stars. It allowed them to connect with each other and something greater than themselves. It is through fire that civilization began and through which humans started to materialize their stories and culture into a house.

Norbert Schoenauer's *6,000 Years of Housing* guides one through time and space to experience the shape of homes through changing circumstances and the underlying connections of home regardless of time or place (Schoenauer, 1981a). To be clear this is not a linear progression that has led to an ideal home, but the influence of time and external factors on different cultures and their homes. Schoenauer groups the homes into three categories, not explicitly separated by time, but by density and function. The three volumes are pre-urban, oriental and occidental.



Figure 2.2.2.1: Pre-Urban House – Bushmen Skerm

Figure Note: Schoenauer, N. (1981d). *Bushmen Skerm* [Drawing]. Garland STPM Press.

Pre-urban homes began as circular, domed and beehive shaped structures, shown in Figure 2.2.2.1. As Schoenauer (1981a) states, “The concave shape is womblike and maternal: it invites, harbors, and shelters, and the concave circular plan is an “intuitive” form, in sharp contrast to the square and rectangular forms, which are rationally or intellectually devised” (p. 206). These early dwellings established home as the center, to relate and connect with the broader world, bridging early humans to each other and their environment. As Thomas Barrie (2015) states, “simple acts of building, of making home in an inherently unstable world, serve to connect us with ourselves and our place in the cosmos while simultaneously revealing the vast contexts of which we are a part” (p. 39). As homes grew, the circular shape lost relevance due to the need for more space and structural limitations, some believe the smoke hole expanded with the home resulting in the courtyard or oriental home.

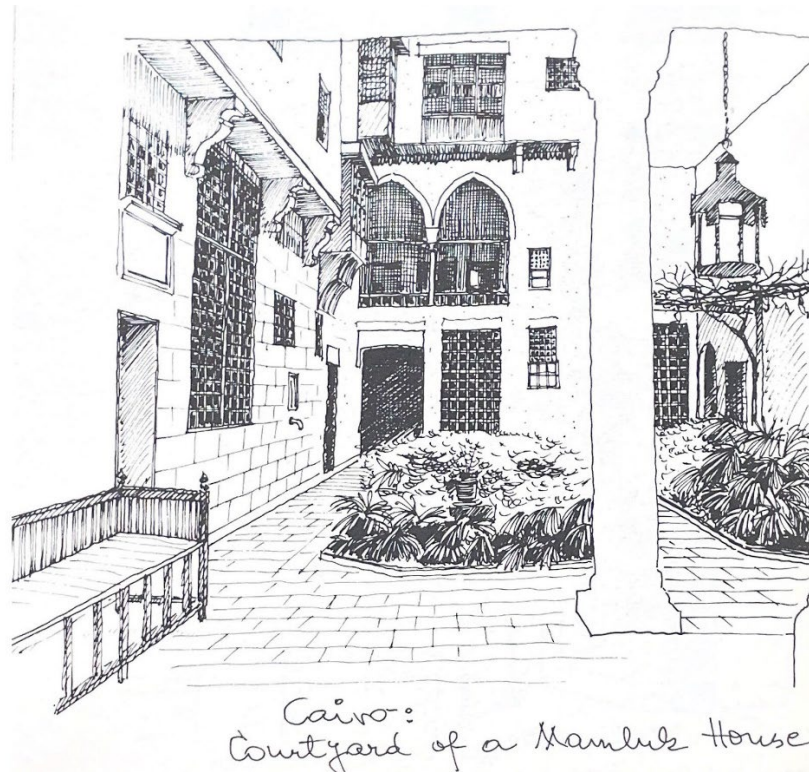


Figure 2.2.2.2: Oriental House – Mamluk House

Figure Note: Schoenauer, N. (1981e). *Cairo: Courtyard of a Mamluk House* [Drawing]. Garland STPM Press.

Schoenauer cites four reasons for the acceptance of the oriental courtyard dwelling, but the most interesting is spiritual. As Schoenauer (1981b) says, “the open interior court garden had an affinity with man’s image of paradise or oasis in the wilderness; its two lateral dimensions were defined but its third dimension, its height, was limitless” (p. xxiii). In Egypt, the home allowed light to illuminate the closed cool interiors, seen in Figure 2.2.2.2. In China, the sheltered court garden is known as the “well of heaven”. In Greece, and later in Rome, this was adopted as the peristyle house with the courtyard surrounded on several sides by colonnades. The courtyard was the heart of these homes, and their inward-looking nature would have inspired personal reflection.



Figure 2.2.2.3: Occipital House – San Gimignano

Figure Note: Schoenauer, N. (1981f). *San Gimignano* [Drawing]. Garland STPM Press.

As the Roman Empire fell and the Dark Ages began, the inward looking oriental urban house and for a time, urban life, disappeared in Europe. As cities began to heal, the inward oriented home was replaced by the occidental, outward oriented home found as towers or gabled homes, an example seen in Figure 2.2.2.3. The northern climate may have affected the loss of the courtyard, but Schoenauer (1981c) says, that “In an age marked by ongoing hostilities, defense was the primary concern” (p. xvii). This occidental home reflected the mood of the age it became popular in and brought those reservations of the world with it into the future. The occidental home is later associated with externalism as the facade of homes turned towards the streets and the views from the windows are oriented towards the distance. This change from in to out changed the way homes bridged the world from being within the home to something being viewed.

The vast differences between cultures and time show the importance, meaning and symbolism of home, not merely just as a place to live but as a bridge connecting one to the fourfold. These connections range in scale as shown through Thomas Moore's definition of home as three layers. Psychic, Domestic and Cultural. Psychic as the interior that houses the soul, memories, dreams, and self-definition. Domestic as the place of the intimate and sensual, the setting of the drama, pains, and joy of one's life. Cultural as one's place within a homeland, time, universe, and the interconnections with others and the world. The layers of home adjacently relate to the fourfold and their importance in homes. Just as bridges serve to connect inhabitants to the fourfold, bridges do the same for the layers of home. Through this recognition, the layers of home offer a multi-level connection to the home one inhabits. The stronger these bridges are the stronger the sense of home is. (Barrie & Bermúdez, 2015, p. 46).

2.2.3. Time's Trace

In Chora 7, Anne Bordeleau's essay *Monumentality and Contemporaneity in the Work of Tarkovsky, Goldsworthy, and Zumthor* addresses ways to bridge the layers of home while in the fourfold. Particularly the psychic and cultural layers, through the eternal struggle between the contemporary and the monumental (Bordeleau et al., 2016).



Figure 2.2.3.1: The Trinity

Figure Note: Rublev, A. (1411). *The Trinity* [Painting]. Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow.

Bordeleau's first example is *Andrei Rublev*, Andrei Tarkovsky's film (1996) on the painter of *The Trinity*. *The Trinity*, Figure 2.2.3.1, depicts three figures at a table that represent a particular realm. The painting invites one to the table and "as suggested by the eight-century monk Saint John of Damascus, the icon is conceived as a threshold between the mortal and eternal" (Bordeleau et al., 2016, p. 4). Tarkovsky utilizes unique film techniques transporting one into an unfamiliar perspective to skew the sense of space and time. The film "continuously reflects on movement and questions what is temporal, mortal and eternal" (Bordeleau et al., 2016, p. 5). The introduction of the film addresses Tarkovsky's concept of cinema, sculpting in time. The film collects time through layers of stories leading to the depiction of *The Trinity*, the only object in color. As Bordeleau (2016) writes, these stories act as a "harmonious mosaic of different temporalities, undeniably rooted in time" (p. 8). Tarkovsky utilizes his film to translate the goal of the painting into a new medium, bridging time and eternity for the viewers.



Figure 2.2.3.2: Rain Shadows

Figure Note: Goldsworthy, A (1991). *Returning from work, began to rain, stopped, laid down*. [Photograph]. AGA. <https://sirjohnlawesart.blogspot.com/2008/01/andy-goldsworthy.html>

Bordeleau's second example is Rain Shadows by Andy Goldsworthy. She writes, "his work engages natural phenomena that are brief, daily, seasonal, or continuous, such as an afternoon storm, a sunset, a thaw, or the flow of a stream" (Bordeleau et al., 2016, p. 9). Human temporality is measured against the unforgiving cycles of nature. Though the actual shadow, shown in Figure 2.2.3.2, is short-lived, the image and related memory live on far longer. Bordeleau (2016) continues stating "while the traces of the human body are bound to disappear, the beauty of art lies in the quasi-reverential bow that nature - makes briefly to the body that was present" (p. 9). Goldsworthy's engagement with time and natural cycles bridges mortality and divinity. The awareness of one's own body and flow of the Earth's system creates wonder and reflection.



Figure 2.2.3.3: Gugalun House

Figure Note: Binet, H. (n.d.). *[Gugalun House]* [Photograph]. *Peter Zumthor Works: Buildings and Projects 1979-1997*. Lars Müller Publishers.

Bordeleau’s final example is the work of Peter Zumthor. At the Gugalun House, an addition onto an older house creates beautiful contradictions. Bordeleau (2016) writes, “the contrast between the weathered wood and the new planks already withholds expectations of a quasi-seamless joint in a remote future” (p. 13). As seen in Figure 2.2.3.3, Zumthor’s use of one material from two times brings attention to both and creates exaggerations of their differences.



Figure 2.2.3.4: Shelter Roman Archaeological Site

Figure Note: Binet, H. (n.d.). [*Shelter Roman Archaeological Site*] [Photograph]. *Peter Zumthor Works: Buildings and Projects 1979-1997*. Lars Müller Publishers.

The second building Bordeleau cites is the Shelter Roman Archaeological Site. This building stands beside history, “the building measures and bridges time : advancing, turning, ascending, descending, and pausing, even when visitors are absent” (Bordeleau et al., 2016, p. 15). Here one is truly able to experience two times at once. The addition floats above the ruins as to almost disappear, to touch the earth lightly. The black cloth, seen in Figure 2.2.3.4, separates time as the building provides a bridge between modern times and the past. Bordeleau (2016) states that:

In the past century, monumentality acquired a bad name due to its associations with reductive and universalizing narratives. For thousands of years, architecture’s cultural role relied on durability and continuity, but in a modern world that seeks progress, change, and novelty, this very durability has threatened architecture’s relevance (p. 17).

Through these three artists Bordeleau shows the importance of time's traces on art and its ability to connect across nature's scales. Today's homes must be poetically relevant today, tomorrow and until they are nothing more than rubble and ruins. They need to gather time and inspire.

2.2.4. Language and Home

Species of Space and Other Pieces by George Perec takes one on a journey from the page to the bed, to the bedroom, slowly expanding step by step and filling every corner with poetic and imaginative thought. Through the growth of the space, one forms connections from past spaces through the current stories providing new insights into already established ideas. Poetic thought fills the mind with new worlds as Perec takes one into thoughts on the essence of truly inhabiting space:

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question Spaces are fragile: time is going to wear them away, to destroy them Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds (Perec, 1974, p. 91).

His only solution is to write, to retain something from the void. Through Perec's words one can inhabit the world written. . Inhabiting stories is very similar to inhabiting space.

The Poetics of Space by Gaston Bachelard seek to understand, or at least inspire thought onto what makes a home. At the beginning of the book, he states his goal:

Transcending our memories of all the houses in which we have found shelter, above and beyond all the houses that we have dreamed we lived in, can we isolate an intimate,

concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all our images of protected intimacy? - Not a description of the picturesque - reveal an attachment that is native in the function of inhabiting. (Bachelard, 1958, p. 3).

Through a wide range of literary sources on the feeling of home, Bachelard expands the conventional ideas of home. The poetry recalls memories of one's own home and intensely specific memories tied to feelings, times, and spaces. Language colors the world enhancing feelings and allowing for a deeper connection with space. Language is uniquely able to inspire this understanding of space and intensifies the feelings tied to home.

2.2.5. New York City's Superblocks

New York City is facing a housing crisis, historically has always faced this issue in different forms.

Long ago it was said that "one half of the world does not know how the other half lives." That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat. There came a time when the discomfort and crowding below were so great, and the consequent upheavals so violent, that it was no longer an easy thing to do, and then the upper half fell to inquiring what was the matter. Information on the subject has been accumulating rapidly since, and the whole world has had its hands full answering for its old ignorance. (Riis, 1890, p. 1).

This is the introduction to Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*. This book describes the overcrowded and exploitative nature of the tenements in New York City.



Figure 2.2.5.1: *Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement - "Five Cents a Spot"*
Figure Note: Riis, J. (1888). *Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement—"Five Cents a Spot"* [Photograph]. ICP. <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/jacob-riis?all/all/all/all/0>

These buildings featured rooms of families with little to sleep on, with little or no light and poor air flow resulting in consistent sickness, shown in Figure 2.2.5.1. Through his photojournalism, Riis inspired social change as reform came about to improve the conditions of the tenements. These homes, having no respect for those inside, made no attempt to bridge their inhabitants to a better sense of self, improved conditions, or a greater meaning in life.



Figure 2.2.5.2: The Vladeck Houses

Figure Note: Arnold & Kellogg. (n.d.). *The Vladeck Houses, built in 1940 on Manhattan's Lower East Side, were a series of six-story plain brick buildings with generous open spaces* [Photograph]. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/nyregion/new-york-city-public-housing-history.html>

This is the beginning of the New York City Housing Authority. As the era of the tenement closed in New York, in their wake were public housing superblocks, an example shown in Figure 2.2.5.2. These apartments started off as favorable, proving that the Housing Authority could build large and cheap buildings. As these ideas were expanded across New York, they became even larger, more repetitive and finished at lower quality. As the reach of the Housing Authority grew, so did the work of maintaining all these buildings. By the turn of the century, funding declined as the government as landlord grew less popular. As Ferré-Sadurní (2018) writes in his article *The Rise and Fall of New York Public Housing: An Oral History*, “The housing authority’s operating deficits and mounting costs to maintain and renovate its aging 2,462 buildings quickly impacted living conditions. Hurricane Sandy’s wrath and last winter’s frigid temperatures further exposed the buildings’ vulnerabilities.” (para. 28).



Figure 2.2.5.3: The Riis Houses

Figure Note: Masuike, H. (n.d.). *The Riis Houses on the Lower East Side of Manhattan* [Photograph]. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/nyregion/new-york-city-public-housing-history.html>

After which, mismanagement led the Housing Authority to admit to lying in inspections and deceiving inspectors. Elaine Walker, a resident of Queensbridge Housing since 1958, said:

In my day, the staff was the best. They had their job, they did their job, and they were qualified for their job. You'd call, and it would be fixed right away. Now, it's different. It takes time because there's a backlog. I called for a paint job in May and they're coming in August. It can take months for anything. (Ferré-Sadurní, 2018, para. 12).

The Agency is in dire need of help, with a desperate need for repair within its over 2,000 buildings. These are the conditions of today, a crisis of disrepair, lack of funds and a need for even more homes.

2.2.6. Gap Identification

The amount of research on home and dwelling is rich, yet there is a gap within the typology. There is a lack of attention paid to the nature of dwelling and being at home within public housing apartments, specifically superblocks. The scale of the superblocks brings up questions of what home means in that space. How can public housing provide essential homes to support lower-income households and provide connections to ever learning to dwell?

2.3. Project Type

This project seeks to reimagine a New York City superblock into a home that bridges its inhabitants to the fourfold, the layers of home and ever learning to dwell. A home that learns from the rich history of housing, time's trace, and the use of language to inhabit spaces. A home that reflects the beauty, connection, and warmth within. The project is several apartment buildings ranging from six to thirteen stories tall and the site surrounded by the towers.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Approach

This thesis' approach takes inspiration from stories, poetry, and history to establish an atmosphere of home. Through researching sources that inspire deeper introspection that relate to home, a design progressed that embodied those feelings. An artefact will begin this process to create an understanding of the fundamental purpose of this thesis. The artefact is an embodiment of the purpose of the project in a medium that isn't architecture. This will open new ideas and paths to create the architecture afterwards. After the artefact, a narrative developed alongside drawings and models. These three pieces simultaneously influenced each other to create a final design of images and stories that enhance each other and the atmosphere of home.

3.2. Project Location

3.2.1. Large Scale

This proposal is in the lower east section of Manhattan in New York City, New York. Manhattan is involved in the housing crises of the tenement and now the falling reputation of NYCHA discussed in Section 2.2.5 (Ferré-Sadurní, 2018; Riis, 1890). As a place with a rich history of addressing housing conditions, it is the perfect place to reassess the meaning of dwelling assisted by public housing. To be clear, those living in public housing have made the superblocks home despite the architecture. This proposal seeks to provide ideas on the future of these superblocks in opposition to the current precedent of destruction (Carson-Holt, 2023). The specific location in Manhattan is shown in Figure 3.2.1.1.



Figure 3.2.1.1: Location in Manhattan

3.2.2. Small Scale

This project specifically reimagines the Riis Houses. This superblock is in Lower East Side Manhattan's neighborhood Alphabet City. The complex features two types of buildings. An X-Shaped, 13 story building and an H-Shaped, 6 story building. There are 12 X-Shaped buildings and 7 H-Shaped buildings. While only the X-Shaped buildings on the northern half of the site are considered, see Figure 3.2.2.1, the ideas of this thesis could be applied to the buildings on the site and any other superblock sites within the light of their specific conditions and stories. The Riis Houses have a complicated history with water. Located near the East River, the beauty of the flowing water can be seen from the site and several of the apartments. But, Hurricane Sandy damaged the buildings physically and a recent arsenic scare in the Riis Houses water supply damaged the buildings reputation (Ferré-Sadurní, 2018; Riddle, 2022). Like many NYCHA apartments, the Riis Houses are in need of repairs and the residents are in need of stability.

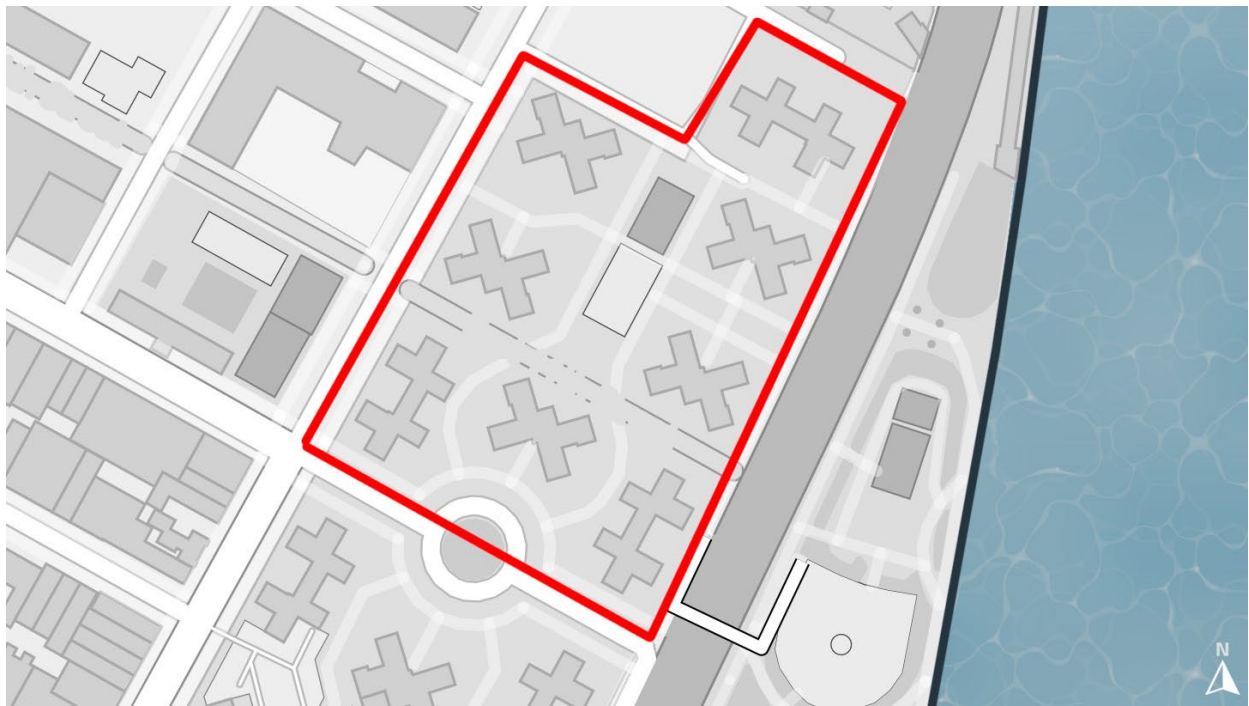


Figure 3.2.2.1: Site Location

3.3. Precedents / Case Studies

3.3.1. Endless House



Figure 3.3.1.1: Endless House

Figure Note: Penn, I. (1960). *Frederick Kiesler with the model of the Endless House, New York, 1959* [Photograph]. Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.

The Endless House by Fredrick Kiesler is a marvel of everyday living, revealing its magic in a fight against indirect living. Kiesler believed that, “Architecture should shelter those endless mutations of life-force, which seem to be part of the ‘practical’ as well as of the ‘magical’ and could offer its inhabitants an exuberant life” (Sioli et al., 2016, p. 265). Nothing should be taken for granted, walls, floors, light, people. The home featured curvilinear floors on slopes creating an active engagement with the familiar task of walking. He stated, “We should learn to live not only on the floors, but with the floors” (Sioli et al., 2016, p. 271). With this focus in mind, he left the space open, so that the inhabitants could occupy the home as they best inhabit space. He placed openings according to the orbit around the sun and prevailing winds.

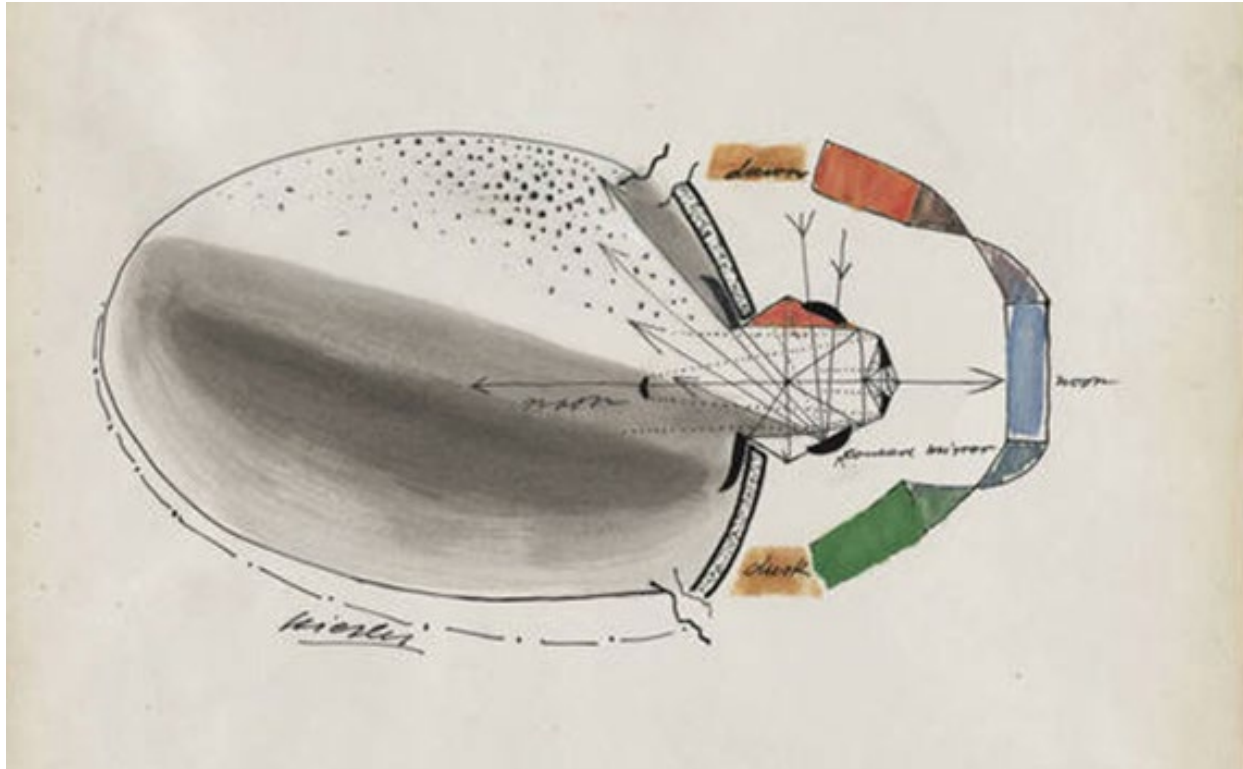


Figure 3.3.1.2: Endless House's Color Clock

Figure Note: Kiesler, F. (n.d.). *Frederick Kiesler, Endless House project, study for color clock, 1951*. [Ink and gouache on paper]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. [Digital Image]. The Museum of Modern Art / 2013 Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.

A uniquely Kiesler intervention in the house is the color clock, which features prismatic glass and mirrors reflecting colors into the house. As described by Angeliki Sioli (2016):

The sunlight at dawn would be diffused by a deep yellow mirror, filling the interior of the house with a warm ochre light to revitalize the body. As the sun climbs higher in the sky, the light inside the house would change from an intense red to a darker brown, following the intensity of activities during the morning. At noon, the color clock would create a smooth blue light; a cooling atmosphere during the lunch break. In the afternoon, the interior of the house would be illuminated with a turquoise light, then a green light that

calms the eyes and prepares the body for the end of the cycle and the coming of night. At dusk the color of the interior would return to a deep yellow (p. 274).

Kiesler does this in response to the monotone and bland lighting of homes to bridge the inhabitants' internal rhythms and the cycles of nature.

While the home acts as a bridge to a more magical mode of living, it is not entirely realistic or comfortable for modern life. What the Endless House does is provide a reimagining of home and serves as inspiration for how to make the everyday more magical through Kiesler's goal of promoting active and conscious living. He states that "architecture is striving - to be even more emotional, more than 'aesthetic' for when our buildings are less than that, less are we too" (Sioli et al., 2016, p. 280).

3.3.2. Wall House 2

John Hejduk says, "Architects today are organically responsible today to have their language run parallel to their structure. - It's not just building per se. It's building worlds" (Blackwood, 1992). This Wall House was built for a different client, on a different continent, after the death of the architect, John Hejduk. Yet the home was approximately as he envisioned it. Not as the traditional shell enclosing rooms, but as physically isolated spaces and circulation separated by a wall. As Hejduk states:

It is the greatest moment of repose, and at the same time the greatest tension. It is a moment of passage. The wall heightens that sense of passage, and by the same token, its thinness heightens the sense of it being just a momentary condition... what I call the moment of the present. (Hejduk, 2001, para. 8).



Figure 3.3.2.1: Wall House 2

Figure Note: Yusheng, L. (2003). [*Wall House 2*] [Photograph]. Liao Yusheng.

The wall serves as a threshold, a physical reflection of the change of function and mood. In this sense the wall is a bridge between spaces but more importantly a bridge that allows one to recognize time through a passing reflection in one everyday life. Hejduk's use of language creates unique projects that are elevated by the process of writing about the world of the space instead of the space directly.

3.3.3. The Waste Land

The Waste Land is a short, yet profoundly impactful poem from 1922. Through Elliot's words, the broken era of post-World War I Europe is captured through fragments of conversations and scenes. In his introduction to *The Waste Land*, Paul Muldoon writes "Part of

what gives *The Waste Land* its impact, though, is the power of what happens interstitially, between the lines. There's a sense that we are about to glimpse, if only through the cracks, some great arrival or departure" (Elliot & Muldoon, 1922, p. 17).

Elliot creates atmospheres that embody incredibly complex and human feelings through referencing the world of literature. Through these references, bridges connect familiar works to the issues of today by changing the context in which they are traditionally viewed. The familiar becomes twisted to Elliot's goal of immersing the reader into the character's lives. Elliot harnesses language's power to immerse readers within fictional worlds that reveal truths about the one they live in.

3.3.4. Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café

Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café is a collection of poems from the influential and inherently New York, Nuyorican Poets Café. Nuyorican is a combination of New York and Puerto Rican, a new identity for the migrants that arrived from the island. The community of Nuyoricans is the largest population of Puerto Ricans outside of the island (Lorenzo-Hernandez, 1999). The Nuyorican Café, as described by one its founders, Miguel Algarín on the back cover of *Aloud*, is in response to the urgency that, "We must listen to one another. We must respect one another's habits. And we must share the truth and integrity that the voice of the poet so generously provides" (Algarín, 1994). Described by David Vidal, the Nuyorican Poets Café embodies "a new, intensely cathartic poetry that was born on New York's streets" (León, 2018, para. 2). The book features a wide range of artists and poems that relate to experiences uniquely found in New York, Alphabet City, and some in NYCHA superblocks.



Figure 3.3.4.1: Founders of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe

Figure Note: Hosefros, P. (n.d.). *From left to right, the poets Miguel Algarín, Lucky CienFuegos and Richard August, three of the original founders of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* [Photograph]. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/06/style/nuyorican-poets-archive.html>

The book's language not only creates worlds to inhabit but involves the readers in the experience of living in these specific scenes and emotions. *Aloud* and the Nuyorican Poets relate Alphabet City better than any physical medium could represent.

3.4. Artefact

The artefact is an invitation to daydream, wonder and explore home and the history of the Riis Houses. A challenge to think about space as a poetic collection of worlds full of life borrowing from written language. Imagining poetically relevant spaces now and tomorrow. In the same spirit of the project as a reimagining and reuse, all pieces (except acrylic and flowers) of the artefact were borrowed, recycled, or reused and will have a future life after this process. The artefact is comprised of three different layers acting together to create one experience.



Figure 3.4.1: Artefact in Gallery

The first layer is the table and chairs. The table is a bridge to the domestic layer of home, inviting one into the world created through the familiar action of taking a seat. The ritual of sitting at a table implies a separation from other activities or spaces in the area. The table is inspired by a quote from *The Waste Land*:

Reflecting light upon the table as

The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,

From satin cases poured in rich profusion;

In vials of ivory and coloured glass (Elliot & Muldoon, 1922, lines 83-86).



Figure 3.4.2: Artefact Under the Light of the Fourfold

The second layer is four colored lights shining onto the table. The lights bridge the cultural layer of home through the fourfold. Each light, shining a different color, symbolizes each fundamental piece. Green for Earth, blue for Sky, gray for Mortality and gold for Divinity. The illumination of the table interacts with the final layer to create worlds for inhabitation.

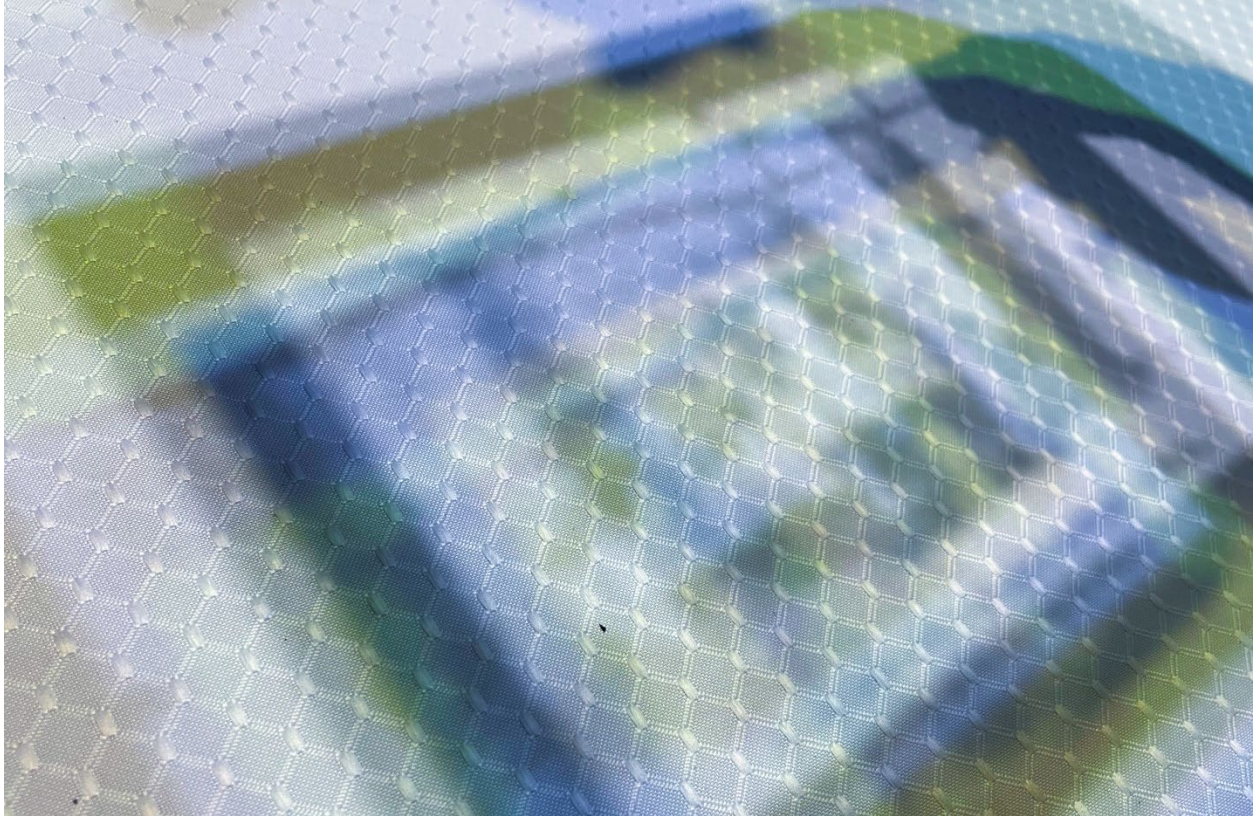


Figure 3.4.3: Artefact Shadow

The table is set with objects and frames that borrow imagery from several sources to connect to the psychic layer of home. The frames feature acrylic etched with an image adjacently related to the poem etched onto it. This relation allows for a deeper understanding of both the image and the word as they work together to better reflect the intent behind them. The objects manifest on the table creating connections between the world physically and the one imagined.

With fragments from *House of Leaves*, *The Poetics of Space*, *The Waste Land*, *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, and history of the site, the domestic opens into the psychic and cultural. Through the light of the fourfold - domestic items and cultural stories cast shadows that act as echoes, which as Danielewski (2000) says “can return a different and more meaningful story, in spite of telling the same story” (p. 42). These shadows allow for a physical depiction of the intangible fourfold, bridging to truly dwelling.



Figure 3.4.3: Artefact's Center

Within these frames, poems, and shadows connections open creating new meanings and worlds through a sequence of space and story. Through play, reflection and imagining the artifact creates an invitation to find the magical in the everyday while inhabiting atmospheres that bridges to truly dwelling in home.

4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Final Project Description

This project proposes several changes to the Riis Houses to provide places to attach inhabitants to the space as a home. This description will follow the scale of the project from entire site to individual apartments.

The site has been transformed for a take over of New York's native plants. The superblock features plenty of open space for regional trees, shrubs, and grasses to reclaim what once was concrete. This reconnection allows the inhabitants to learn and become immersed in a small representation of the beauty of the land. Within this reconnection are paths that allow for a wandering through the site connecting to the tower. These paths outline two public squares that act as a courtyard for the Riis Houses.

The two squares feature two rings of colonnades around the square defining a new space in the site. Between the colonnades is a wide path for tables and benches allowing for gathering, observation and connection. The columns that make up the colonnades are assembled with bricks from the old towers. The twisting of the columns reflects the twisted narrative of bricks once used as a home. Inside the northern square is a basketball court, a feature on the existing site, framed by the colonnade the basketball court becomes a more intimate experience. Inside the southern square is a reflecting pool meant to be a reminder of Hurricane Sandy and the arsenic scare. The pool normally holds a small amount of water, but swells after storms to manage rain runoff and bring attention to the great storms that afflicted the towers.

Surrounding the square are the five larger towers that this reimagining focused on. The old façade and form influenced the new and the new form is mirrored across the center of the building. Through keeping the shell of the old towers, the memories of the past weave in and out

of the new, bridging generations that lived here before and generations to live here in the future. The new buildings are assembled through a random compilation of four variations for the nine apartments. This puzzling allows for all apartments to have their own intimate moment independent of any other across the whole superblock forming a deeper connection. The rooms have another variation for a larger scale of home and connections with others. Community rooms occupy the space of two rooms on two levels. The old tower's openings are expanded to let in more light for the new form and cut away in relation to the community rooms within. These cut aways act as eyes focusing views towards other eyes, the East River or specific buildings and sites in Alphabet City. Connecting the towers on multiple levels for access to the community rooms across the towers are bridges.

Bridges span the towers into community spaces, twisting to open new perspectives across the familiar city. Across the glass poetry is etched so that discoveries can be made within each trip no matter how many times it has been traversed. Poetry, similar to bridges, connects familiar points to create wonder. By standing over and within Riis Houses, inhabitants intimately experience stories on the glass creating connections to that seen in the distance. Similar to the square, bridges provide a path and a space for the eternal flow of human connection and culture.

The smallest scale of the proposal is the apartments. Since each apartment features four variations, intimate moments feel personal. The arrangement, height and orientation of each tower ensures each room has a moment unlike any other across the entire site. The apartments range in size from one bedroom to three bedrooms, although the interior could change to accommodate larger families by combining apartments. Within the apartment the collision of old and new, the aged bricks bridge mortality and divinity into the rooms inspiring thought of all the rooms it crosses and the homes it previously enclosed. To allow for more personalization and a

feeling of creating a home, rooms could be painted to fit the inhabitant's style. These apartments establish moments of home and allow for personal choices to influence their home.

4.2. Embodying Home

This proposal successfully achieves the objective of joining poetic spaces to improve the sense of home. Through multiple layers of experiences, inhabitants have several places to connect to and establish a sense of home. Home could be the bridges, the square or an apartment.

This proposal additionally successfully bridges inhabitants to the wonders of the natural world, mortality, and relationships with others. Spaces are specifically designed with the fourfold to inspire thoughts on Earth, Sky, Mortality and Divinity. Each are represented through specific design choices. Earth is represented through the transformation of the site and the reuse of the old building shell. Sky is represented through the portals in each apartment providing unique views, creating intimate moments of wonder and reflection. Portals act as a bridge in the domestic setting while the eyes in the community space act as a bridge to the cultural. Mortality is represented through the second life of the current exterior shell and the reuse of the form. While the shape stays the same, by mirroring the new form the intersection and interruption between the two shapes imposes the past into the homes of today. The stark blank walls are contrasted by the new facade which features a mixture of apartment faces. Divinity is represented by two squares framed by the towers and the bridges that connect the towers. The squares and bridges provide a path and a space for the eternal flow of human connection and culture.

Through all the ideas mentioned above, the proposal inspires thoughts on the ideas of home and embodying a place within space. While this proposal is limited in the length of time envisioned, the proposal rouses thoughts of additional touches that could reflect home.

4.3. Project Design and Narrative



Figure 4.3.1: Site Plan

The site plan shows the dramatic change of the native New York vegetation, the guiding paths, the squares, bridges and building footprints. The connections between the buildings are immediately apparent through the paths below and the bridges above. The squares provide a perfect place to gather, people watch and be in the presence of others. The site plan provides a brief overview of the spaces and places to follow.

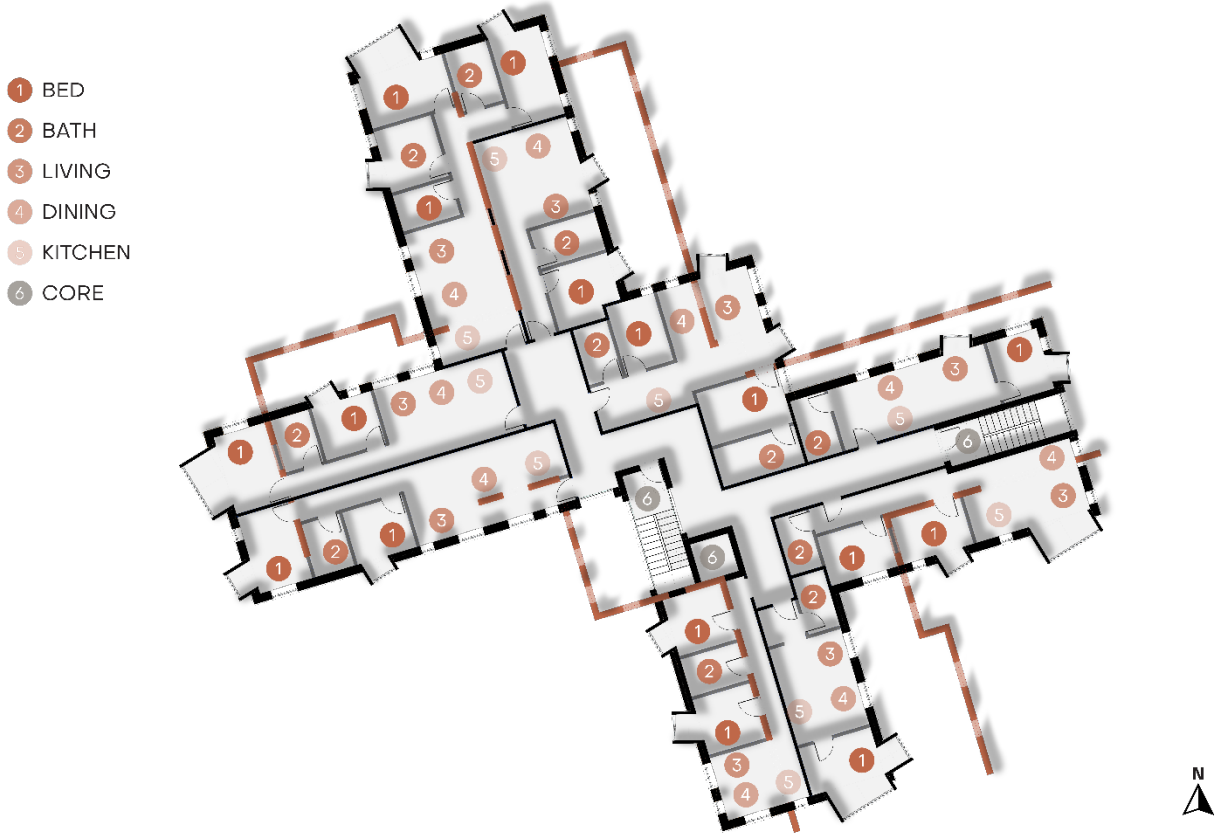


Figure 4.3.2: Typical Floor Plan

The typical floor plan shows the potential layout of the nine apartments and the flow of the old shell into the new. The contradiction between the new form and the old provides dialogue on what inhabiting space really means and the people who did so before the current residents. The spaces broken and created by the old shell results in unique spaces within two times. Also shown in Figure 4.3.2 is the drama of the portals within the apartments. Each portal was placed in accordance with sightlines, daylight or which room became extended. The floor plan provides insight about the space that would be inhabited.

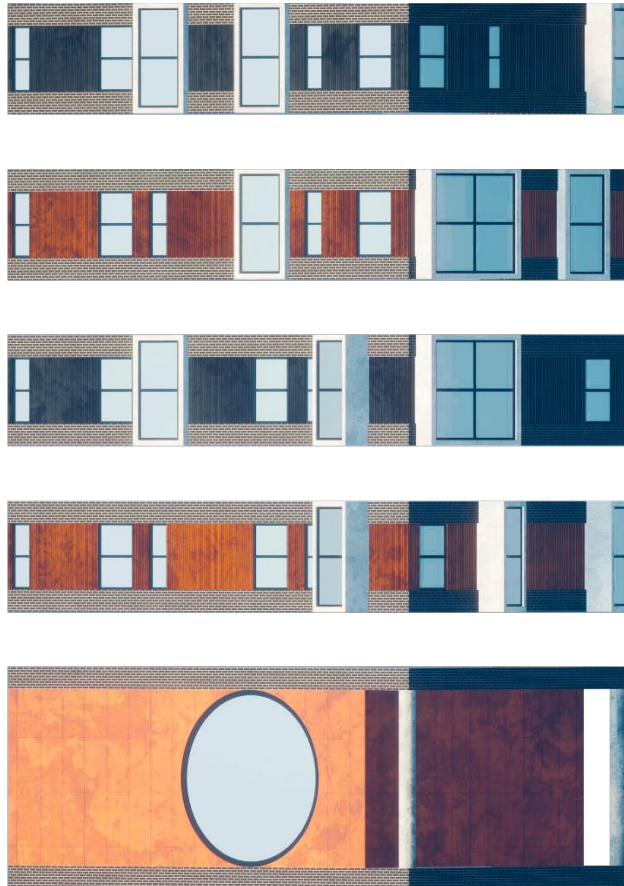


Figure 4.3.3: Apartment Variations

As mentioned in Section 4.1, the apartments feature four variations plus one alternative community room face. Figure 4.3.3 is an example of one of the apartment's options. The portals change between each variation and the siding changes hue. All these decisions create a unique experience inside and out.



Figure 4.3.4: Section Axon

The building is a collection of apartments and people that results in a mosaic of spaces. Figure 4.3.4 shows a section of one of the buildings and a representation of possible interior paint colors for each apartment. The section shows the height of the community room and the focus of the eye. Through cutting away the exterior, the space of the magical every day is revealed. In the background the connection and relation between the towers are seen.

Following this section, the figures are accompanied by the narrative developed alongside the design. Inspired by the process of the artifact, words would accompany the images. The story populated the site with people, objects, and atmospheres. This dynamic allowed for an active participation into the project, just as someone living here would be an active participant in making this place home.



Figure 4.3.5: Square

In the warmth of the June sun, under the sapphire sky

We sat in our usual spot between the concentric colonnades of twisted columns

Between columns, artwork floated, showcasing the talent of the people who lived here and the beauty of the Riis Houses

Spread about the square were metal tables found from across the city

Jade wire picnic tables, brushed metal dining tables with their red umbrellas, and tiny circular tables of every color, covered in stickers from every group, band, borough and movement

What was not wanted anymore ended up here, a little museum of New York's finest dining

We were surrounded by New York's native plants alive with the joy of summer,

We sat to talk and people watch

The square was the perfect place to pause and observe

Many were out to do the same, enjoy the buzz of the square and the community that gave it life

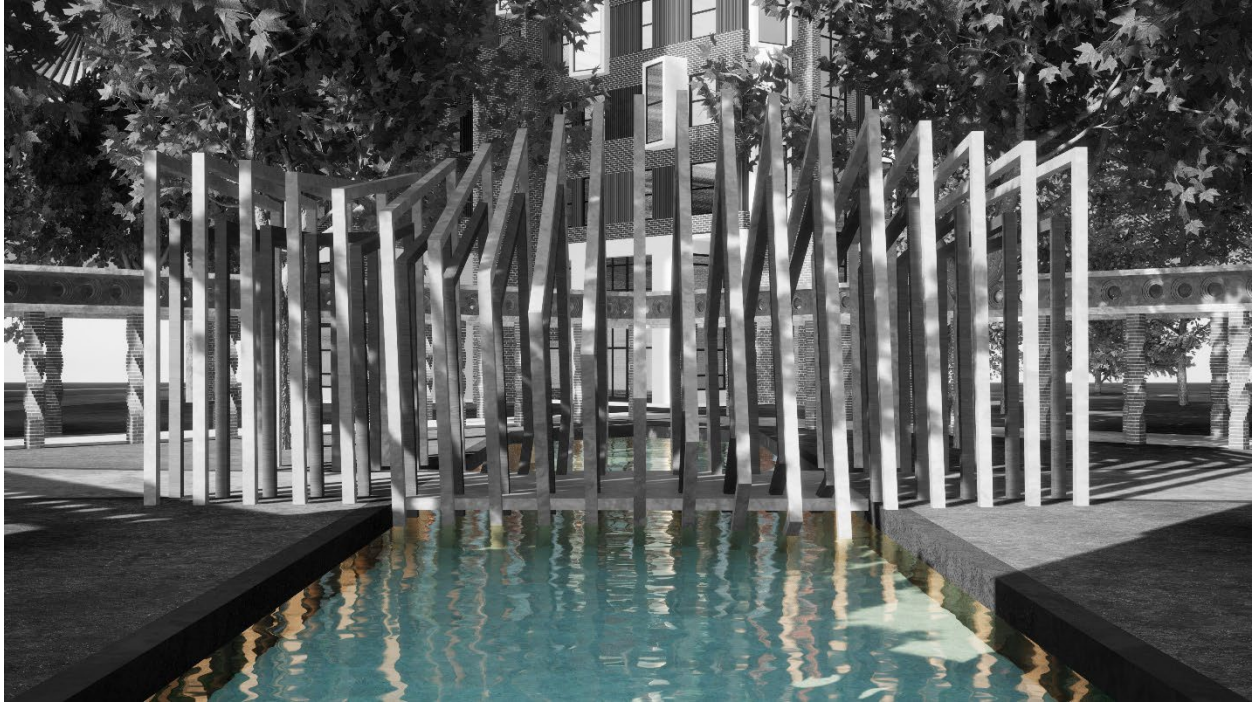


Figure 4.3.6: Reflecting Pool

In the center of the south square, rain flowed in from the whole site

Reflecting the towers

Reflecting the sky, the seasons, the weather

Reflecting the people who flowed in from the whole site

The pool only filled with great storms

A reminder of the memories of Sandy

A reservoir to buffer similar fates

The square swelled with life after the storms,

Of today and of echoes from the past



Figure 4.3.7: Entrance

75 years of Riis opened as the tower touched the ground

The aged bricks gave way to tinted, slightly emerald glass, black steel and a new generation of bricks

Their duality provided a glimpse into the towering home

A glimpse of history and hope for the future

Each tower had a unique one

One glimpse provided care

One glimpse provided a meal

One glimpse provided a place to talk, organize and be in the presence of others

Here we all converged before heading out or up

It was a showcase of the life that thrived in defiance of the old blank walls

Above, concrete portals sprouted through the new industrial face



Figure 4.3.8: Portal

In my apartment the portal let in new light and life

The portal stepped out into the air, as if one were potentially flying

Above the Riis Houses, the New York air, the East River or Alphabet City

The shadow from the portal covered my parent's old oak coffee table

On top sat assorted coffee cups, my favorite book featuring work from Nuyorican poets, photos of my family who lived here for over half a century, lilies, and colored glass vases

Which created beautiful shadows across the white tablecloth

Although this moment was brief

It reminded me of the beauty of the sky

And a memory I shared within it

With five of my friends



Figure 4.3.9: Bridge

They were always on time

We met in one of the smaller bridges up nine floors

The frames twisted across the towers

Unexpectedly focused views formed, unlike anything I've seen in NYC

Captured moments of what made Alphabet City beautiful

The ruby maple leaves falling onto the basketball court, the fire escapes of potted plants and

street legends walking Avenue D



Figure 4.3.10: Bridge View

Stories etched on the glass amplified the feeling
One from Victor Herandez Cruz, a Nuyorican poet, read
“There was still no central heating in the tenements
We thought that the cold was
The oldest thing on the planet earth
We used to think about my Uncle Listo
We’d picture him sitting around
Cooling himself with a fan
In that imaginary place
Called Puetro Rico” (Cruz & Algarín, 1994, p. 315)

I read this as I stared out at the flowing East River, my version of the Caribbean
The language aloud me into the world on the glass and beyond

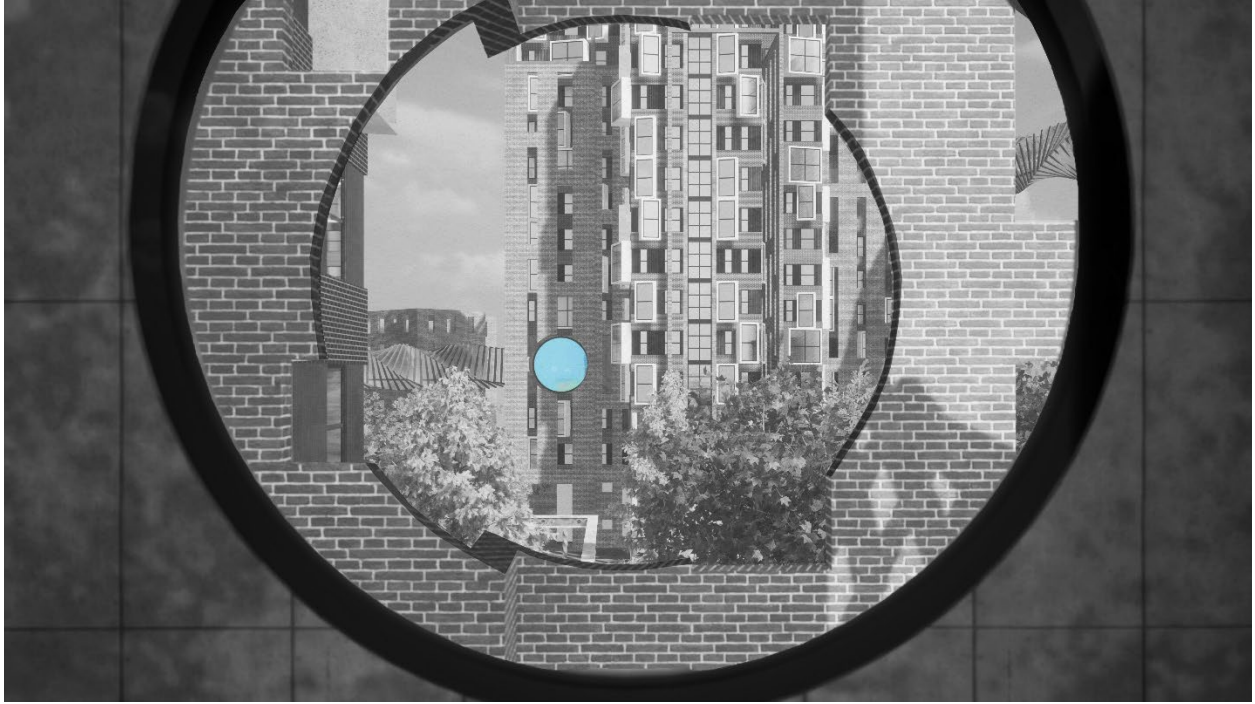


Figure 4.3.11: Eye

As we entered the room connected by the bridges

We met the eye of the building

Through this we dreamed

Through the eye I could see into the rain and leaves

Where my eyes led me to the other echoes and eyes across Riis



Figure 4.3.12: Menagerie

The new face featured variations of each apartment

The assembly created a menagerie of shadows, portals and patterns that reflected the diversity of people, personalities and dreams within

We dreamed of the echoes that wove in and out of the tower

5 generations of bricks spoke of Riis

Their voices interrupted living rooms, hallways and doorways

The echo was a reminder of the distance



Figure 4.3.13: Eyes

Yet the eye looked to another and connected us

We immediately understood the other eye and the other eyes within doing exactly as we were

Dreaming

Dreams of the World

Dreams of Riis

Dreams of Home

We were full of them

Some shared, others uniquely ours

We kept them close

And in return our dreams kept us hopeful

4.4. Future Development of Concepts

This proposal, limited in scope, brought forth ideas that would benefit from future research and development. The square featured in this proposal serves as a representation of a modern courtyard within an urban area. The ways in which these feelings differ from individual courtyards and the way in which the square can better embody those feelings may provide different solutions to its design. Additionally, the concept of the courtyard house within a skyscraper was considered for this project but never pursued. How would an apartment with few external windows, but an inward facing courtyard function in a tower?

The concept of variations in apartment faces brought individuality to the Riis Houses. This concept could be pushed further with more variations of form, color, or materiality to dramatically change the appearance with a set kit of parts. The use of geometry to create an aperiodic façade may further push these ideas. Additionally, variations in the interior of the apartments as well as the exterior further emphasizes the idea of puzzling. Each apartment becomes even more individually particular and results in a mosaic of spaces.

The Riis Houses features more buildings and more building forms than explored in this proposal. The application of these ideas onto those buildings may reflect a more complete complex and several versions of the ideas would prove the success or failure of them. How might these ideas and practices manifest in other building shapes within the Riis Houses or other NYCHA superblocks? Could these ideas realistically give public housing superblocks bound for destruction a second chance? And what ideas are inspired from the ones within this proposal applied into a new context? What additions, subtractions and interconnections populate other sites to contribute to each unique sense of home and dwelling?

4.5. Conclusions

Historical and modern ideas of home blend in the context of a superblock that has fallen under time's trace. This is a reimagining of the poetic potential of the Riis Houses that allows the inhabitants to shine in the light of the fourfold. A home that embodies the beauty of New York, the beauty of those who live in the Riis Houses and the beauty of being alive. Through a narrative into the project, images become inhabitations and the idea of home at the Riis Houses is interpreted into the future. A dream for a future that is more connected, more emotional, and more inspiring.

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