Between Figure and Ground:
Articulating Heterotopia in the Suburban Paradox

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on exploring figure-ground within the amorphous suburban green space of Calgary, Alberta. It is an edgeless prairie city, flooded with unused space and tethered by freeways that stretch toward the infinite horizon beyond the mountains. The incessant need to own and parcel nature has created a landscape of excess where both city and nature are a blur at the edge of our distracted vision. Using expanded definitions of figure-ground as a design methodology, this thesis attempts to better understand this paradox and to act in its middle ground. Articulating a heterotopia between the ideal with the real, the public and the private, the natural and the artificial, this thesis explores a new imaginative space, delicately but firmly tethered to suburban ground and its elusive horizon. The results manifest in unexpected geometries on a thin strip of park between a backyard and a freeway in Calgary.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis is focused on exploring figure-ground within the amorphous suburban green space of Calgary, Alberta. It is an edgeless prairie city, flooded with unused space, tethered by freeways that stretch toward the infinite horizon beyond the mountains. The very inspiration and foundation of the city - its rolling prairie landscape at the base of the foot hills - is also its greatest failure to act like a "city" (defined here as shared space at the confluence of economic and cultural institutions). The incessant need to own and parcel nature has created a landscape of excess where both city and nature are a blur at the edge of our distracted vision. Banal built form and roads nearly sever the suburb's fundamental relationship to not only the city, but to the landscape and its inseparable horizon.

Using expanded definitions of figure-ground as a design methodology, this thesis attempts to better understand this paradox and to act in the blurry middle ground between ideal and real projections of space. Revealing the tactics of green space - as protector, serenity, and buffer – expresses versions of "figure" and "ground" loaded with theoretical and social meaning. The term "figure," in this thesis consider objects both moving and fixed such as buildings, bodies, and cars. The term "ground" also has several interpretations, yard, park and landscape. This exploration brings forth complex relationships of grounding, hinging, and tethering registered against the constant horizon. This work is grounded by two key theories; first, Gaston Bachelard's idea of "immensity" linking the infinite space of the prairie with our equally vast imaginative mind and second, Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" referring to spaces cre-

ated as by-products of a utopian projection.

Green space in the suburbs represents both the utopian ideal of this place and its contested reality. This "nature" exists in the form of edges, parks and yards, widely consumed as a surrogate for wilderness in the city and a symbol of affluence. It is also a visual and aural buffer between undesirable adjacent elements (such as a road or another house). Often misinterpreted as a banal terrain, it is rather a place of constant motion between ambivalent trajectories attempting to exist in isolation. Further exemplifying this paradox is the conflict between the space of the private domestic backyard to the serenity seekers on a surburban green belt parkway to commuters buzzing down the adjacent freeway carried off to distant suburban destinations. The contemporary suburb operates a strategic system of both introverted privacy and outward conformity using suburbanized "nature" as its primary spatial tool.

This thesis is inspired by the idea of tethering as an ephemeral, ever changing, but ever real connection between opposing elements in order to understand the spatial operations of nature in this context. Through theory and design, this thesis has tried to uncover and acknowledge the existing suburban condition and propose a re-ordering of social and spatial expectations within it. This is achieved by confronting the idea of figure-ground by not only lifting, hinging and tilting the ground toward the horizon and the sky, but also letting the ground fall away beneath you as you move across it. The broader inspiration for this lies not only in theory but in the topography of the city itself, positioned at the edge between the flat prairie and the rolling foot hills that lead up to the mountains one hundred kilometres away.

Exploring the limits where the suburbs fail to succumb to binary description creates a heterotopic place of passage and meeting. The suburbs are tied to their roots in both the city and in nature. The body, an infinite container for the imagination, is tied to place, to history, and to landscape. These terms culminate in rich figure-ground possibilities and unexpected geometry. This thesis attempts to exist at the convergence of the ideal with the real, the public and the private, the natural and the artificial to determine a new imaginative space, delicately but firmly connected to the ground and the unreachable horizon of the Alberta prairie.

Between Figure and Ground: Articulating Heterotopia in the Suburban Paradox
(thesis idea by collage, set in Calgary, Alberta)

CHAPTER 2: THE SUBURBAN PARADOX

Historical Context

The contemporary suburb exhibits a strategic set of operations of both introverted privacy and outward conformity with unprecedented success. The garden city plan, originally envisioned by Sir Ebenezer Howard appears to have been a key informant of this contemporary reality. In what ways are these relics or caricatures of the original garden city ideals and how might they suggest suburban reform for the future?

Transitions between public and private space in the suburbs are laden with social and cultural meaning. "Green space" can stand in as a surrogate for nature in the city, a symbol of affluence, as well as a visual and aural buffer between undesirable adjacent elements (such as a road or even another house). Understanding the compartmentalization of green spaces involves looking at the changing attitudes towards ownership, access, and privacy as well as the function of public space in the suburbs.

The Garden City

The prevalence of suburbanization on the North American bounty is undeniable, as is its reach on a world at large. The term "garden city" is often used as a quip to suggest its responsibility for the ills of urban sprawl. An investigation into the plan invented by Ebenezer Howard in 1898 reveals that little of the original idea still stands today. Howard's theory was a social and economic system for cooperative sharing of resources at a scale felt more appropriate and manageable than that of the uncontrollable city of its time (Hall

1988, 88). The distinguishing elements of the garden city plan was the provision of a green belt that served both the health and wellbeing of the residents and limited the growth of the city to a population of 30,000 in a relatively compact centre (relative to today's North American suburban standard). At the point of full occupancy, the intention was to grow another garden city and another, never exceeding the balance intended to be the measure of a successful city (Howard 1965, 54).

The urban stresses of Howard's time, particularly in London whose rapid growth had dampened its financial success with plummeting quality of life, gave way to acceptance of some version of the garden city. The British government "formally accepted the principles of decongestion of congested cities, of the dispersal of their 'overspill' of industry and population to new centres of life and work" (Osborn 1944, 17). This acceptance set forth the unfolding of the garden city over the twentieth century.

20th Century Response

By mid-century, prominent theorist Lewis Mumford, wrote about his displeasure with the degradation of Howard's idea to one of dislocated suburban development devoid of amenities and neighbourhood character. His criticisms were cognizant of the sanctity of Howard's original concerns (Mumford 1954, 257). Jane Jacobs on the other hand, while an advocate of Mumford, disregarded any vision of Howard's, stating,

> His aim was the creation of self-sufficient towns, really very nice little towns if you were docile and had no plans of your own and did not mind spending your life among others who had no plans of their own. As in all Utopias, the right to have plans of any significance belonged only

to the planners in charge. (Jacobs 1961, 17)

The Garden city was thought by many to be futile and impractical (Osborn 1944, 11).

Jacobs' criticism of the planners defining the limitations of the residents' dreams reflects present day concerns of suburbia as a generic fit for diverse people. Whether this concern is any fault of Howard's is doubtful but remains an issue. The original concept, as with all utopian concepts, suggested equity for all. However, it is difficult to see this equity in suburbia today when the driver of the development is based on private profits rather than the health and wellbeing of a community or a city. That said, Oliver Gillham, author of *Limitless City* points out that "houses on individual lots with their own gardens in safe neighbourhoods with good schools are more accessible to more Americans today than at any time in the past" (Gillham 2002, 71). In many ways, even in its adapted form, the garden city did give way to a certain level of individual freedom and wealth, particularly attainable in North American circumstances (Gillham 2002, 69).

During the first half of the twentieth century, adaptations of the garden city through suburban development introduced much needed breathing room for cities. It was in the 1940s and 1950s when the mass exodus to suburbia tipped the scales and so with it the reputation of its founding idea. "The progress and the alienation, the growth and the oppression – the fundamental polarities that signified modernity-were relocating to suburbia" states Becky Nicolaides in "How Hell Moved From the City to the Suburbs" (Nicolaides 2006, 82).

Naturally, in tandem with the commercial shift and the exo-

dus to suburbia were changes in cultural values particularly evident in the use of the domestic backyard. Macy and Bonnemaison in *Architecture and Nature: Creating the American Landscape* explain an ideological shift of the idea of private green space pre- and post-WWII and the shift towards inward looking space:

> Before the war, backyards were work areas containing basic utilities like outhouses, woodsheds, and cisterns. After the war, the backyards of the burgeoning middle class became spaces of leisure, furnished with barbecues from the campground or the war theater, fitted out with indoor-outdoor furniture and shady trellises. Once again, nature was commercialized. But this time, people were not looking for the pleasures of a simpler life, but rather learning to better themselves on their little plot of land - a relationship to nature that was intensely private and internal, we might even say paranoid. The government supported this suburban expansion with roads, highways and low cost mortgages for first-time homeowners.
> (Macy and Bonnemaison 2003, 3)

The focus here on private aims is clearly evident in the distribution of green space in suburbia, with the heavy emphasis on inward looking private (backyard) and semi-public (community park) green spaces. The feedback loop for this self-indulgent yet well-intending trajectory of modern suburbia is a result of an over-exploited landscape of boredom, or what Lars Lerup refers to as "dross" (meaning vast or waste) (Lerup 2009, 243).

These are not only results of imposing changes to residential life, but reflect, as Harris puts it, "a good deal about Canadian society: a belief in the primacy of laissez-faire development, individualism, the right to property, and the virtue of private domesticity" (Harris 2004, 33). Under mounting commercial success, Howard's garden city turned into vast suburban sprawl built on private success. These interests have reinforced social divisions through spatial

buffers, screens of trees, roads and fences. However, the main message of suburbia, the blend of city and nature, remain the accepted banner of suburban life.

Defining the Paradox: Nature and Privacy

The transition from private to public green space underscores the tension in the contemporary suburban condition. Values about personal privacy and reverence for nature determine the function of green space. "People ask for vibrant, connected, beautiful and efficient green physical places" writes Jill Grant, author of Planning the *Good Community: New Urbanism in Theory and Practice* (Grant 2006, 25). The subversive contradictions of this space, that make a version of the suburban utopia possible, contribute to its overwhelming success in consumer culture.

Nature (in a Suburban Green Belt)

Howard's plan was to blend town and country in the creation of a "new form of life, partaking of the nature of both" (Howard 1965, 46). The aim to reconcile nature and culture has always been in question and is particularly confusing in suburbia which seems to be neither urban nor wilderness but something difficult to describe in binary terms. Lars Lerup, author of *One Million Acres and No Zoning* writes,

> We came here to commune with nature. We thought gardening amongst the winding streets and cul-de-sacs would bind us to our new home. But we came here with our city ways, our technologies and a tendency to view all material as discrete building blocks: brick, tree, grass (trucked in on flat beds). The result may be even more artificial than the city we left behind. Ours is a bogus nature that can only be maintained with leaf-blowers and fertilizers, not to speak of the automobiles that shuttle us back and forth to central nodes. (Lerup 2011, 41)

The evocative image of transporting sod to a former piece

of farmland or prairie to complete a domestic montage begs consideration. It calls into question our desire to have our own private yard behind a green belt a stone's throw from the outskirts of the city. In the debate about sprawl, no one seems to question the relevance of green space, even at such excess. E.O. Wilson's *Biophilia* articulates the "culture/ nature" tension,

> The drive toward perpetual expansion - or personal freedom - is basic to the human spirit. But to sustain it we need the most delicate, knowing stewardship of the living world that can be devised. Expansion and stewardship may appear at first to be conflicting goals, but they are not. The depth of the conversation ethic will be measured by the extent to which each of the two approaches to nature is used to reshape and reinforce the other. (Wilson 1984, 140)

The role of "nature" here is critical. According to Lerup, "The presence of Nature is what makes Suburbia Suburbia" (Lerup 2009, 414). The green belt is a compelling example, being a fragment of a former landscape that we cling to with the idea of being closer to nature in order to reach urban salvation. "The image of a primordial nature fixes space and time to produce seemingly concrete cartographies of individual, household and state, all of which gain strength through their abilities to order waste and arrange geographies of exclusion" (Hinchliffe 1997, 204). The green belt is public but not easily *reachable* except from someone's backyard as the notion of "geographies of exclusion" suggest. It is not a destination, per se, but rather an edge and a left-over. In essence, it is *semi-public*.

Nature is Origin, Limit and Lawgiver

The green belt is a space that gives a view of nature to the resident from their yard. The resident in his/her yard is also carefully shielded from the view of others by trees and a

fence. This reflects the one-way privileges in suburbia. Further, Phelan provides definitions of nature as origin, limit, and lawgiver. He explains,

> Nature is a 'source of authenticity' and the 'primitive, the incomplete'. As a limit, the term nature is employed to halt a debate, to designate a fixed state of affairs and to privilege the world and word as given. As lawgiver, nature is a state of affairs to which things aspire… These are all ordering devices, performing labours of division, and share the quest for clarity, for certainty that dogs Western thought. (Hinchliffe 1997, 204)

This phrase encapsulates the assumed power of green space as totalizing importance. Calgary, Alberta, for example, is a city widely criticized for its sprawl and also vehemently proud of its parks. Green space represents the civil organization of society and a potentially false appreciation for nature. In her chapter, "Searching for Civility", Grant refers to John Friedman's work. He suggests that planning for just and equitable societies "would mean a radical form of practice as the moral option" (Grant 2004, 22). Green space in cities, originally used to promote health and freedom is a part of a moral idea about the wellbeing for all. Landscape Architect, James Corner, expresses that the increasingly popular "greening" that has come back into style might be a product of the rise in environmentalism and a re-ignition of cultural imagination. He writes, "Landscape, in the form of parks, greenways, street trees, esplanades, and gardens, is generally seen to provide salve and respite from the deleterious effects of urbanization" (Corner 2006, 24).

The ubiquitous suburban greenbelt flanks every major road in the outer city, thinly veiled as a public amenity and sacred remnant of wilderness. At a deeper level, the green belt operates as a strategic veil for obscuration of public to private zones. It is an allegedly banal apparatus for diminish-

ing the conflict between competing trajectories of home and highway.

Edges Emerge as the Grid Dies

The green belt is an outcome of the creation of the closed or "centrifugal" city, Albert Pope describes in his book, *Ladders*, where winding subdivisions have emerged and replaced the orthogonal grid with one of introverted road networks. "This closure produced a significant urban exterior by the imposition of a boundary condition" (Pope 1996, 45). In the original garden city model, Howard intended the green belt to be a limiting factor for the growth of the city as well as the green space amenity for residents. However, in the contemporary example of Canadian cities, the green belt may demonstrate what once was the edge of a suburb but is now enveloped by expanding sprawl. Therefore it acts less as an edge than a buffer between house and road or between two communities.

The Tactics of the Green Belt

The green belt creates a safe distance between house and road so that cars can be neither seen nor heard. Likewise, rarely is the house or human visible from the road making the presence of the human scale all but lost to the driver on a suburban freeway. The greenbelt is left in a more or less "natural" state, mowed in the summer and ploughed in the winter by City staff. One long, thin asphalt strip supposedly transforms these fragments of field into public parks.

Green belts often continue for many kilometres broken up by road after road that lead to different subdivisions as the freeway rolls on. Private residents emerge from their backyards to walk dogs or take a stroll. The green belt is publicly

available but not easily accessible as if it's not a destination in and of itself. Its proximity to the private terrain of the back-yard creates interesting questions about where the private realm begins or ends. Is the green belt an extension of the private backyard shared on an intermittent basis with the neighbours? What might this relationship signify?

Private to Public: Identity is Formed by Separation

In *Ideas of Difference*, Shane Phelan is quoted by Hinchliffe, "Human individuals become delineated by a degree of clos-ure" (Hinchliffe 1997, 204). This is reflected at numerous scales from that of the fenced-in yard to the edge of the sub-division enclosure which the green belt seals. Guy Debord writes in *Society of the Spectacle* that, "Separation itself is part of the unity of the world, of the global social praxis split up into reality and image" (Debord 1994, 7). This would suggest that privacy and ownership have become everyday cultural values, one that perhaps Howard anticipated and unsuccessfully attempted to circumvent in the garden city plan.

Mumford became very interested in the basic conditions that made good neighbourhoods. He suggested that close-ness may be determined through a minimum of visual con-tact or even a nod, expressing the friendly co-habitation of a space. He writes,

> To share the same place is perhaps the most primitive of social bonds, and to be within view of one's neighbors is the simplest form of association. Neighborhoods are composed of people who enter by the very fact of birth or chosen residence into a common life. Neighbors are people united primarily not by common origins or com-mon purposes but by the proximity of their dwellings in space. (Mumford 1954, 257)

Mumford's suggestion that a minimal amount of contact can

create a sense of community seems to explain why contemporary suburbanites are comfortable with large buffers and fences while still feeling satisfied with their amount of neighbourly participation. Concern is more about the family's quality of life and access to privacy and nature than the need to connect deeply with the neighbours. (This of course acknowledges that neighbourly behavior varies from culture to culture.) Community is no longer defined by proximity but by communities of interest spanning much larger geographic areas. The enclosure of the private space is then somewhat less troubling as a part of a greater social evolution, requiring new tools of theory and practice to understand it.

The Car

That the green belt operates as a buffer to hide the freeway, is a critical condition in the formation of the contemporary North American city. The car is a common antagonist in the critique of sprawl and a counterpoint to the dialectic of suburban green space. The residents want easy access to their homes by car but do not want to see or hear a major roadway. Ironically, the car actually represents a type of excitement associated with living in contemporary times in an urban environment. The ability to cover ground quickly represents the freedom of independence that founded North American society. Jacqueline Tatum, author of the essay, "Urban Highways and the Reluctant Public Realm", in The Landscape Urbanism Reader writes,

> Driver and pedestrian, commuter and neighbourhood resident, all build a cultural identity as city-dwellers through this quotidian intimation of the sublime. The juxtaposition of the experience of tranquility and speed in this landscape produces a kind of exhilaration for driver and stroller, a contemporary "rush" that is one of the attractions of urban life. (Waldhelm 2006, 188)

As the green belt attempts to diminish the contradictory speeds and trajectories of home and freeway, a possibility of reframing this conflict emerges.

One of the greatest critiques of suburbia is the lack of quality public space, generally overlooked in the efforts to make a profit by maximizing the privatization of space. Howard's garden city was essentially founded on the idea of quality public space. Gillham writes,

> Most of the open space in the suburbanized world has been divvied up among the myriad of private lawn of the individual property owners. The nearest public open space are often drainage swales, highway ramp slopes and buffer zones. These spaces provide wide, green tracts of relief to an otherwise unbroken field of development. (Gillham 2002, 163)

The suburban green belt at the edge of the private backyard is a narrowly accessible, semi-public "natural" space, hiding a major road and revealing a most interesting tension.

Shifting Paradigms

Not unlike Jacob's critique of fifty years ago, James Corner writes, "the failing of 20th century planning can be attributed to the absolute impoverishment of the imagination with regard to the optimized rationalization of development practices and capital accumulation" (Corner 2006, 32). Jacobs and Corner's concerns are not unfounded but also spark possibilities for response. Expectations about human need for privacy and ownership should be carefully considered as an existing condition. Lerup writes, "The suburb is the "guilty conscience" of the city (since the city couldn't satisfy the fleeing middle class) thus making the two umbilically connected. A new consciousness under the rubric of urbanism emerges" (Lerup 2009, 319).

This new consciousness must take into account how communities have changed. "When place-based community was not present, [Jacobs and Mumford] perceived it as a social failure rather than a sign that community might be manifesting in other, non-local ways," Nicolaides writes (Nicolaides 2006, 81). Nicolaide's makes the paradox of suburban green space even more compelling. First, the "nature" in suburbia exists as a stand in for nature, not nature itself. Second, the open space is not appropriately developed or programmed. Third, not only is privacy a primary cultural value but communities are no longer localized, but digital or distant, changing the role of localized public space. In the retrofitting of existing suburban edge conditions and leftover spaces, this thesis tries to manifest an adaptable form that is appropriately scaled based on an assumption of impending and constant change in human patterns of living. This challenge frames the paradox at hand.

The lasting remnant of the garden city with its symbolic parcels of nature - a dialectic between public and private territory in suburbia - is not a fading concern. Global environmental issues rise as well as awareness about how environment affects health. How suburbia is read and understood demands close attention. The true mechanics of green space in suburbia deserves a thoughtful approach to engage reform. The answer cannot be a total overhaul of suburbia, as total overhauls have usually had negative repercussions (such as urban renewal of the 1960s) nor is an overnight densification possible or even desirable. The key to understanding the current and potential operations of suburbia is in looking at its green space, in particular, one of the last icons of Howard's revolutionary invention.

CHAPTER 3: THEORY

Figure-Ground in Theory

Theory grounded and inspired this thesis. All design research has been interwoven with explorations of theory. The aim was to explore what figure-ground means in suburbia, with its green space as the vehicle for study. The primary theory incorporated is Michel Foucault's heterotopia, landscape urbanism, the Rice school, and phenomenology. Secondary theory explored was post-modern criticism on Modernism and oblique architecture.

Theory reviewed suggests a critique of a range of suburban open spaces that expand and contradict the use of "greening" in the public realm. This expanded terrain of investigation reinforces the conflict in question at the heart of what drives suburbia and where its failings and successes present an opportunity for newly defined public spaces.

The Polarity of Modernity

In Waldheim's essay "Landscape as Urbanism", he presents a critique of the modern city for its inadequate contribution to a meaningful or livable public realm (Waldheim 2006, 38). He also explains that the contemporary horizontal city is no longer a place-making or condensing medium but rather a fragmented realm where public consciousness is rendered invisible. This relates to Rowe and Koetter's *Collage City* who break down modernism into two main discordant values: that of scientific problem solving (relevant, arguable, efficient) and modernism as an instrument of philanthropy towards the "greater good" of society. Rowe and Koetter paid particular attention to open and closed spaces,

the classical example of figure-ground in plan. They criticize modern city planning for its attempt at totalitarian form and claim there is an inhumanity and impossibility to a uniform idea of city (as a failed utopian idea). Rowe and Koetter's phrase "sparse anticipatory [cities] of isolated objects and continuous voids" describes Calgary well (Rowe and Koetter 1978, 63).

The chapter, "Landscape as Theatre" in *The Necessity of Ruin*s further explain the influence of modern thought on the formation of landscape and culture. The author suggests that one might think that the rise of science and with it a general increased awareness of the natural world might have increased society's interest in nature. However beautiful nature may be, "it was nevertheless seen essentially as a background, the realm of myth and magic" (Jackson 1980, 70). Landscape was relegated to the *background* of a picture and "an element in a composition which gave it form and suggested location but which was not the main body of the argument" (Jackson 1980, 71).

The landscape urbanists, such as James Corner and Charles Waldheim, call for a paradigm shift: a repositioning of the conflict inherent in the modern (sub)urban realm. This conflict is built on a form of urban mythology predicated by polarity. The representation of system complexity assumes the conflict (between landscape and urbanity) is itself material for research and design.

Space

The introductory essay "The Primacy of Space" by Albert Pope in *Everything Must Move* presents an evocative and perplexing message: that open space has dominated form

which is now utterly subordinate in the contemporary city. He explains,

> While the built form is clearly subordinate, the dialectic between space and form remains operative, if not actually heightened, by the primacy of space. By forgoing attempts to regain its privileged status, built form can emerge as a strictly secondary or subordinate intervention that is never the less capable of engaging the primacy of space. (Pope 2009, 19)

Pope suggests that design potential lies somewhere between primacy of form and irrelevance of form (Pope 2009, 19). His claim includes a raw but fair criticism that is directly applicable to Calgary, "what passes for the city is a field of unloved buildings persisting at the edges of a heedless and distracted vision" (Pope 2009, 19). The contemporary (suburban) city is *not* an assortment of identifiable entities, "but rather absences, gaps, lacunae, hiatuses, ellipses that our commodity-bound words, buildings and places are unable to account for" (Pope 2009, 19). This suggests an underlying theme throughout theory reviewed here, that the field of architecture - traditionally a search for form - has been ill-equipped to encounter emergent cities of primarily open space versus building. The landscape is filled with spaces of the transient indescribable and the notion of a solution embedded somewhere on a spectrum rather than at a polar extreme.

Kenneth Frampton in his essay "Megaform as Urban Landscape" supports the suggestion that architecture's over-inflation of its own importance is not going to achieve progress in the spacious "built" world. He states, "Owing to the dissolution of the city as a bounded domain, dating from the mid nineteenth century, architects have long since been aware that any contribution they might make to the urban

form would of necessity be extremely limited" (Frampton 1999, 2). The suggestion that cities are no longer bounded, resulting in the disappearance of form, is critical in investigating sprawl which represents growth without limits.

Navigating a Prairie Sea

Lars Lerup has written and studied extensively the limitlessness of suburban form of Houston, Texas which is often compared to Calgary. Lerup describes the contemporary (sprawling) city as a "field room", at once an open field but also an expansive room demarcated by mottled urban form with blurry edges. He focuses his investigation on the horizon between the "ground plane" and the "aerial field." The place of focus and design is that surface tension that defines the horizontality. This directly frames my thesis investigation by outlining the figure-ground relationship beyond the architectural plan, projected into section and three dimensional space and the relationship between figure and ground, body and horizon.

Lerup refers to the limitless landscape as a sea similar to how Michel Foucault refers to a ship moving across an ocean, as a placeless place. "This is a navigational space," Lerup writes, "forever emerging, never exactly the same, liquid rather than solid, approximate rather than precise, visual but also visceral in that it is felt by the entire body - not just through the eyes and soles of the feet. There in this liquid, space is suspended, held and urged-on by the trajectory" (Lerup 2009, 248). The interest in this statement is that it assumes that the suburban landscape may look banal and fixed but is actually part of a dynamic flowing topography of relationships and circumstances.

Phenomenology

Lerup's words connect with Bachelard's notion of immensity and the opportunity to connect our minds to the endless-ness of the land, sea or sky as a doorway to our infinite imaginative space. Immensity refers to the deep sensations evoked by responding to and contemplating vast condi-tions of space such as the ocean or expansive landscape disappearing into the horizon. He also suggests that this sense of infinite space can trigger our endless daydreaming space, "since immensity is not an object, a phenomenology of immense would refer us to our imagining consciousness" (Bachelard 1969, 183). Another interpretation of Bachel-ard's immensity comes from Michel Foucault, who claims that Bachelard and the phenomenologists prove that people do not live in empty or homogenous space (as one might harshly call the suburbs) but rather a space that is "saturat-ed with qualities... pervaded by an spectral aura" (Foucault 1997, 351). This again infers that site specificity requires sensitivity rather than polarity.

While phenomenology is focused on an "inner space", Michel Foucault is concerned with its companion "external space". He writes about this external space, "The space in which we live, from which we are drawn out of ourselves, just where the erosion of our lives, our time, our history takes place, this space that wears us down and consumes us, is in itself heterogeneous" (Foucault 1997, 351).

Heterotopia

The ambiguous "blurriness" between nature and culture, utopia and reality, love or hate of suburbia is analogous to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a key theory driv-

ing this thesis. Heterotopia are places that present an alternative ordering other than the prevailing or utopian idea of order. Kevin Hetherington writes in *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* that heterotopias are sites of all things displaced, marginal, novel, rejected, or ambivalent (Hetherington 1997, 48). In his essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," Foucault explains that the juxtaposition of incompatible real spaces is the power behind heterotopia (Foucault 1997, 354). It is the relationship between the incompatible parts rather than the parts themselves (Hetherington 1997, 49). As mentioned in a discussion of Lerup, Foucault refers to the ship at sea and associates its placeless place with our collective imagination. He concludes his essay by saying, "In civilizations where [heterotopia] is lacking, dreams dry up, adventure is replaced by espionage and privateers by the police." (Foucault 1997, 356)

Georges Teyssot in his essay, "Heterotopias and the History of Spaces" further elaborates that a heterotopia constitutes a counter arrangement of effectively realized utopia, resulting in a space facilitating acts of resistance and transgression (Teyssot 1998, 300). Teyssot continues in this vein regarding discontinuity and time, "The term requires dual significance - spatial as well as temporal. It signifies a "discontinuity" of time, an interruption of sorts, a sudden rupture within the order of 'knowing' and - at the same time - a detached heterogeneous place disposed against a background of the spatial continuum" (Teyssot 1998, 300). Design explorations in this thesis attempt to create an interruption in one view and in another, articulates a hidden convergence of forces already in the site.

These discussions of heterotopia reflect this thesis study in its pursuit of the space between figure and ground and the inherent contradictions of green, "natural" and open space. Lars Lerup in *Everything Must Move* presents a contemporary way of looking at the relevance and need for heterotopia;

> With globalization, a certain cosmopolitanism has arrived in our lives, something the elite in the 19th century could only dream of in their Parisian cafés. The human condition has itself become cosmopolitan, says Ulrich Bech. A sense of boundarylessness, an every day, historically alert, reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions emerges. It reveals not just the 'anguish' but also the possibility of shaping one's own life and social relations under the conditions of cultural mixture. (Lerup 2009, 332)

The cultural mixture (Lerup on boundarylessness) and the seemingly invisible and sensual spatial qualities (Bachelard on immensity) represent the raw material of suburbia despite its seemingly redundant spatial features of semi-openness, warped perceptions of nature, and inefficient automobile focused transit. The contradictions of this place are difficult to fully identify or locate oneself within and are fertile ground for an intervention. Lars Lerup describes the situation from the point of view of both its cleanliness and its mess,

> The common view of sprawl is that it is chaotic, disorderly, ugly and confusing - an additional example of the bias in favor of totalizing views of the environment. This doesn't negate the potential of increasing shapeliness, or better, finding more effective uses or functions for the ungainly in-between, at the perimeter of each unit of Sprawl. (Lerup 2009, 247)

One can draw an association between the articulation of heterotopia and the ambivalent figure-ground terrain of landscape urbanism with topological semiotics. In *The City and the Sign*, Algirdas Julien Greimas explains that an understanding of two binaries is achieved only through a translation of the in-between material. To call the subject

from either of two opposing poles (good/bad, ugly/beauti-
ful) is to create drama or urban mythology (Gottdiener and
Lagopoulos 1986). He suggests that place is only located
by establishing its relation with other places. In the same
vein, he says, "the appropriation of a 'topia' is possible only
by postulating a heterotopia" (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos
1986, 27).

In conclusion, this thesis utilizes the strong associations of
heterotopia in revealing, acknowledging and celebrating
certain spaces of discontinuity within the suburban spec-
trum and treatment of "green" space. Relating to the quote
mentioned from *Biophilia*, it is human nature to expand and
exploit, however, the over-exploited leaves behind frag-
ments that are not absence, but rather the true material of
our urban arrangements.

CHAPTER 4: DESIGN

Figure-Ground in Process

The process of this thesis took advantage of four insepar-
able modes of research; is the integration of *theory*, the dis-
covery of *site* from the urban to the minutiae, the playfulness
of heterotopic *program* and the exploration of *geometry*.

Site

Calgary is the site of this thesis. It is a city of just over one
million people located in Southern Alberta, just east of the
Rocky Mountains. Much of this thesis could apply to many
suburban conditions around North America. Calgary, how-
ever, has compelling reasons to be of particular interest.

The city has an intriguing topography where the flat prairie
turns into foothills, the long gateway of the ominous Rocky
Mountains to the West. It is a frontier city, built by pioneers,
soaked in Aboriginal history, and propelled by an entrepre-
neurial spirit. It remains a city of conquest and this is evident
by not only its prosperity but the consumption of land.

Calgary, Where the Prairie Ends and Foot Hills Begin
Map of Southern Alberta (Google 2012)

Calgary is often used as an emblem of the sprawl issue, often compared to Houston, Texas. At the same time, Calgary boasts more than double the amount of public green space per person than any other city in Canada (Evergreen 2004).

Driving in Calgary, the road seems to go on forever in a peaceful continuum. Green belts on either side of the road most effectively hide the city from itself. There are few signs of urban life, and yet it does not resemble a landscape either, broken up by suburban limits and forms on either side.

Calgary on Google Street View (Google 2012)
(middle and lower image are of thesis site)
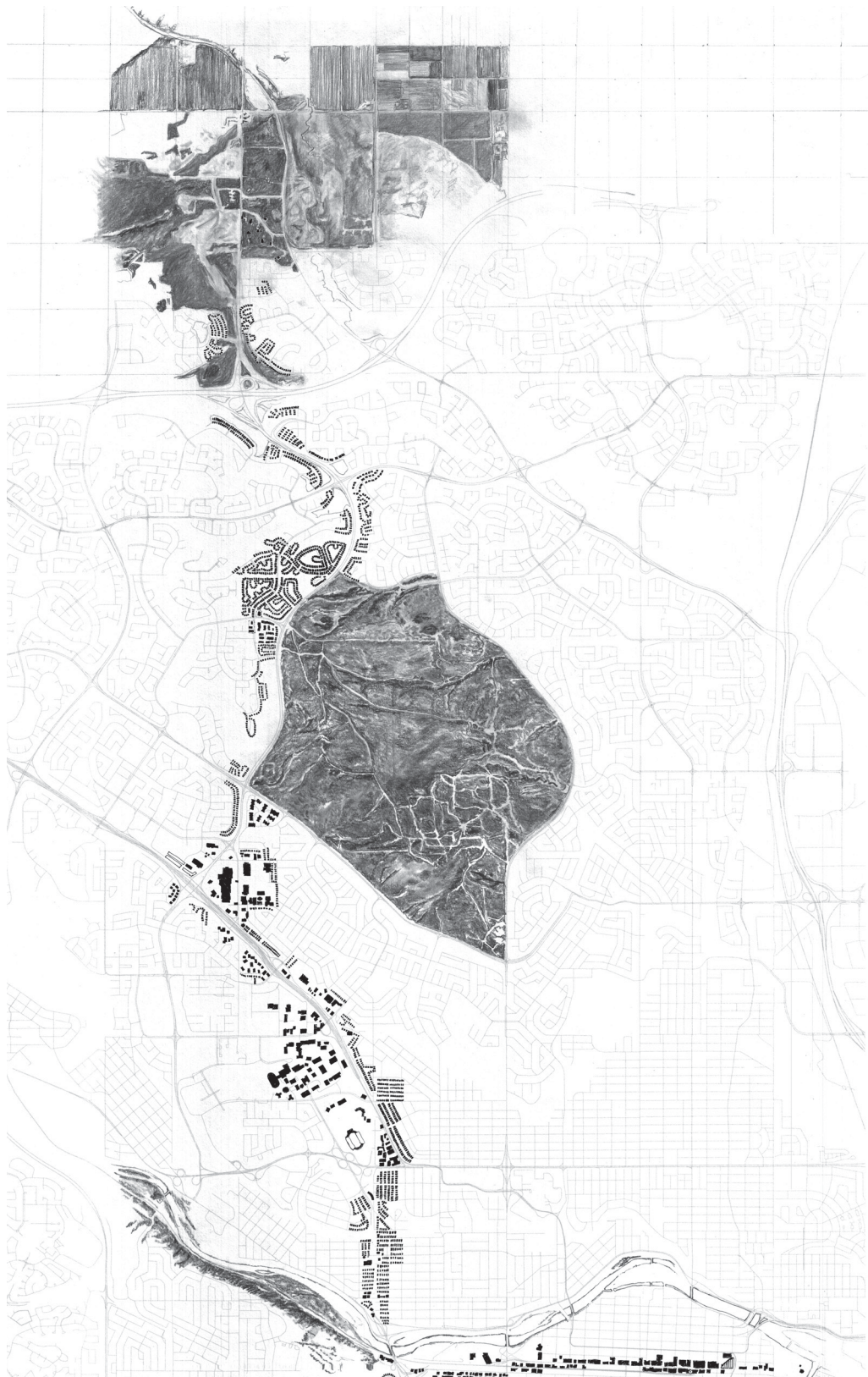
Figure-ground in plan view from origin to outskirts: streets, green space, and built form to the city's edge, drawing of north west Calgary, 1 to 20,000 (original scale)

Figure-Ground in Section

A section drawn through a suburban condition helped to consider the relationship between adjacent elements in a suburban condition in Calgary. It also called for the postulation of what was ground below the surface suggesting the limitation of a plan view. The drawing on the following page shows a common set up of space in Calgary's suburbs.

Two houses face each other in a cul-de-sac. A tiny island of trees form the turning radius for cars in the cul-de-sac circle. The front yards are the faces of the two houses, though hardly ever is anyone seen there. The back yard is the usable space, shielded from view by nosy neighbours. One house backs onto a shallow green belt, the only buffer between the domestic space and a major road. Across the road is a major public park.

Russell Wangersky, author of *Whirl Away*, writes about the prairie in Calgary reflecting the spirit of this site,

> You couldn't see the new grass if you looked directly at the ground, he thought, but if you looked across the whole prairie and let your eyes go, you could see the green fuzz of spring coming. (Wangersky 2012, 45)

While making the previous drawing, I was researching Aspen trees which are native to this area. I discovered an interesting fact that the Aspens were a single colony, separate and pristine above ground and interconnected in a complex network below ground. On the page after next, a one to twenty section drawing of the roots explores this further.

At that scale, the idea of the ground plane all but disappeared and became a thickness of an indiscernible yet highly functional system. The ground plane is more than a shallow line weight or an opaque mass.
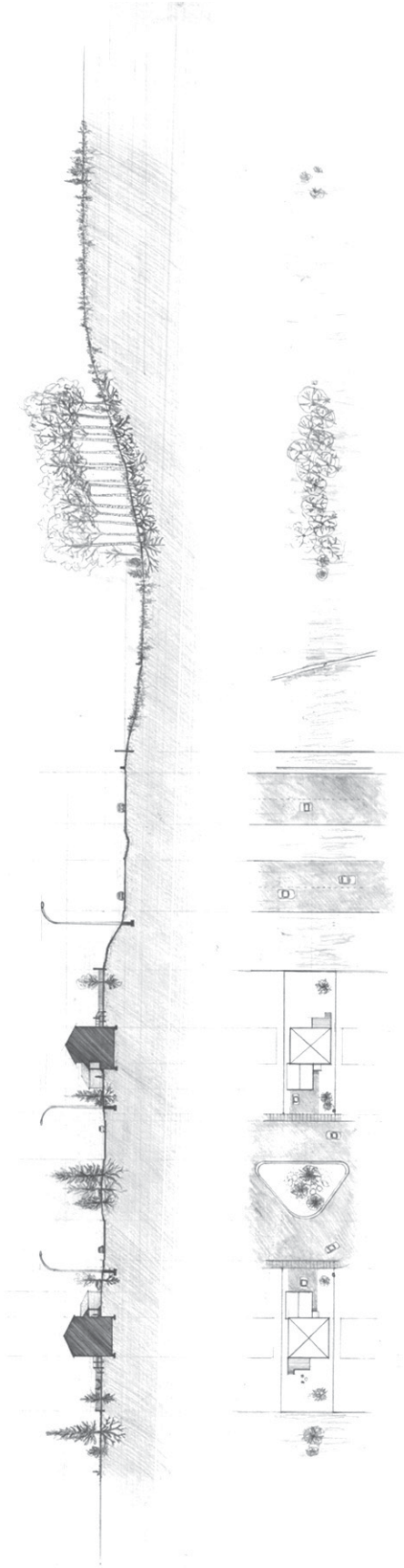
Figure ground in section and plan from the backyard to the public park, showing above and below ground, 1 to 500 (original scale)

Figure ground in section part two, Aspen roots system, 1 to 20 (original)

Green Belt Parkway

The specific thesis site is a green belt on John Laurie Boulevard in north west Calgary on a stretch sandwiched by the Brentwood Community and Nose Hill Park. The greenbelt continues for many kilometres broken up by road after road leading to different subdivisions as the freeway heads west towards the Rocky Mountains. This particular green belt section is approximately five hundred metres in length and eighty metres wide. Along the south edge of the green belt is an alley and a row of backyards, from which private residents emerge to walk their dogs or stroll in the greenbelt. The green belt is just high and wide enough that the residents cannot not see or hear the freeway from their homes.

thesis site
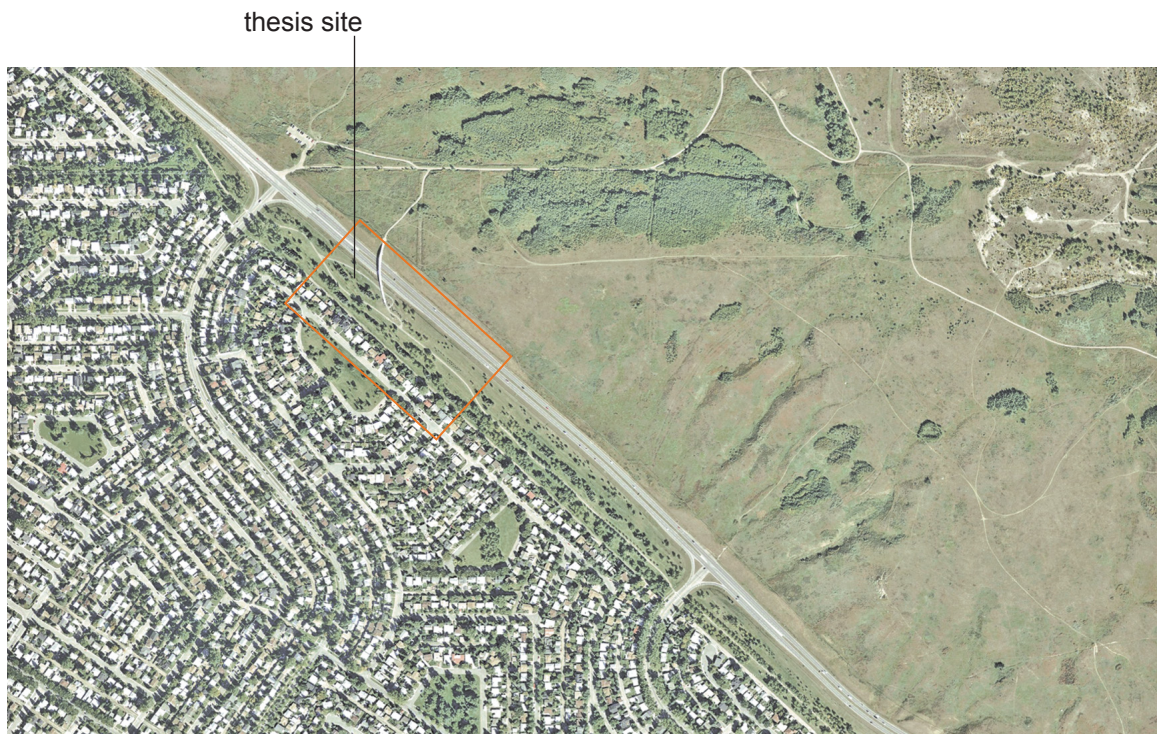
Green spaces in a suburb at the edge of Nose Hill Park
Map of Brentwood Community, Calgary (Google 2012)

Beyond the green belt (across the freeway to the North) is Nose Hill Park, a 2700 acre 'natural area urban park' of protected prairie grasslands. The park has been completely surrounded by suburban development since its protection in the 1970s. Typically the green belt is accessed by the alley, from the fenced backyards or by a cross-walk at either end of the five hundred metres, where by crossing a road one can continue walking along the green belt. In this particular case, there is a pedestrian bridge that provides pedestrian and cyclist access from the green belt to Nose Hill Park. The green belt is a typical condition between a backyard and a major road. The bridge and the large public park are an anomaly.
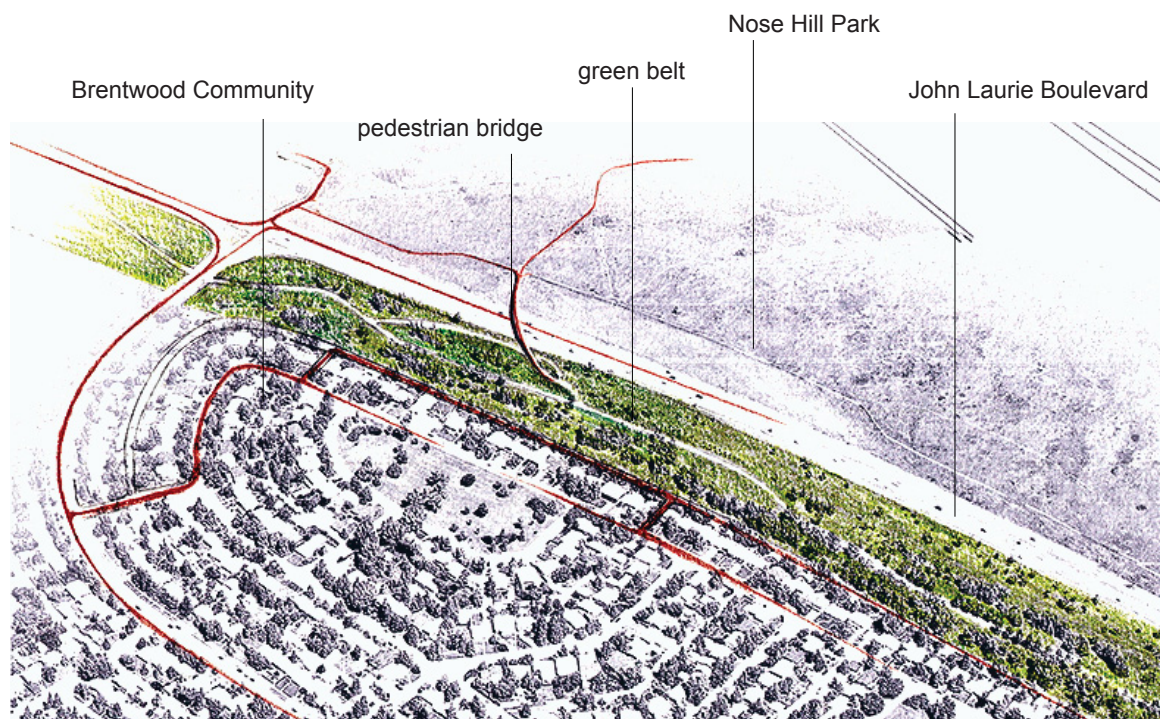
Site and access, edited map of Brentwood, Calgary (Bing Maps 2012)

mountains

suburbs

city

In between city and wilderness, photo collage from Nose Hill park overlooking greenbelt

Green belt site photo collage

Program

Program emerged as a combination of site analysis and theory through Foucault's heterotopia. The program choices answer the thesis: a cinema and a botanical garden.

The cinema is an indoor/outdoor cinema projecting our collective imagination, making explicit a celebratory voyeuristic space in the public domain. The second program is a "hyper-natural" environment of a botanical garden, juxtaposed within the "semi-natural" environment of the green belt. The garden space will offer an indoor/outdoor landscape for planting year round, tending, daydreaming and connecting with both horizon and sky. Both cinema and garden represent and reflect on paramount successes of suburbia: the home entertainment system and the private garden. Bringing them to the public realm, it is a heterotopic act of juxtaposition and a re-ordering of expectations of public activities on a suburban green belt.

Both the garden and the cinema are, for a reason, at the heart of this thesis. Both can be enjoyed by few or many and their success is not dependent on density. This is often a failure of new public spaces in suburbia that are expected to be magnets of density. Rather, part of the reason suburbia thrives is that isolation is either a choice or an accepted condition, happiness appears not to depend on density. It's clear, density is not the way of this place, even in all its obscure curiosity.

It is useful here to take another look at Foucault's ideas about heterotopia to describe the relevance of the garden and the cinema program in this context. Foucault writes, "The cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of

which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space" (Foucault 1997, 353). The surreal nature of the cinema reflects the surreal nature of the suburban condition, aspiring to be one thing, being viewed as another and the reality is a third unknown heterotopia. Foucault continues, "One of the oldest examples of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity" (Foucault 1997, 353). Both the cinema and the garden put reality in question whilst celebrating reality's ambiguity.

PRECEDENT. CELEBRATED. PRIVATE. ⟹ PROPOSED. JUXTAPOSED. PUBLIC.

The Botanical Garden

The Backyard Garden

Home Entertainment

The Outdoor Cinema

Program collage
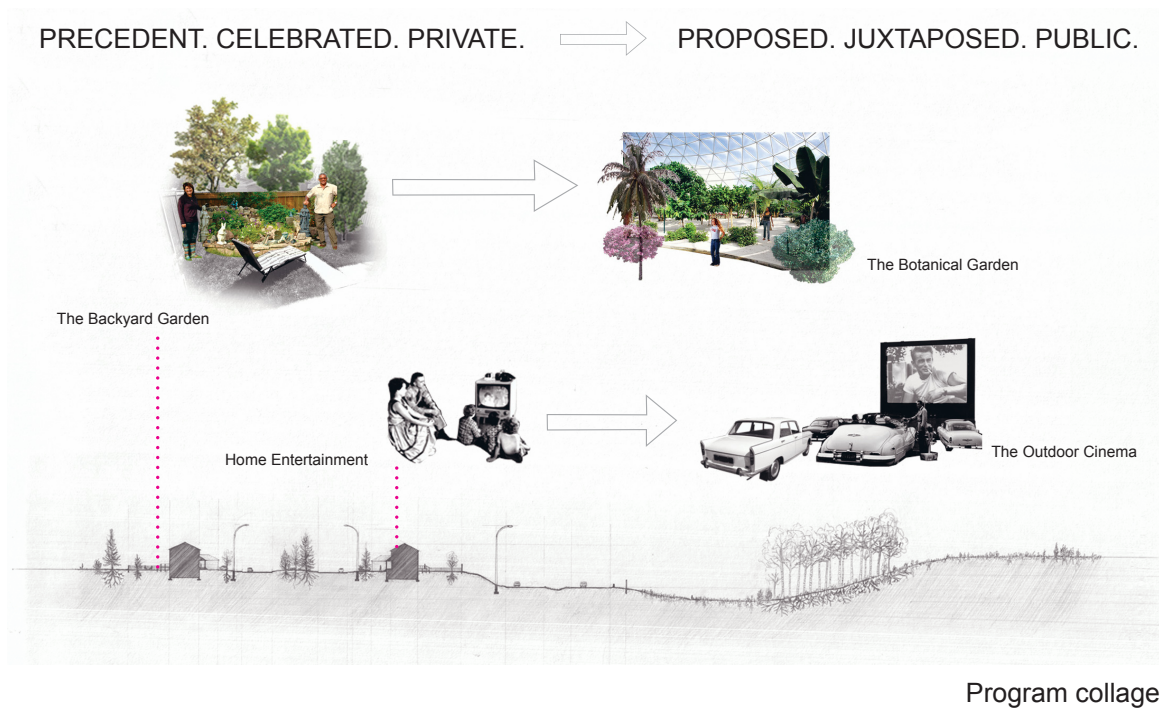
Geometry

It became apparent that as outsiders we tend to think of the suburbs as a flat black and white sprawling inverted Nolli map. The truth is that this space is far from flat, thin nor black and white. In exploring figure-ground it seemed apparent that disrupting an expectation of a flat surface was paramount in testing thesis ideas. Therefore I began exploring tilted planes which led me to a range of geometric possibilities explored both inside and outside digital space. I looked at Claude Parent's and Paul Virilio's ideas about oblique architecture for reference (Johnston 1996, 5). Triangulation became a theme that developed throughout the thesis.
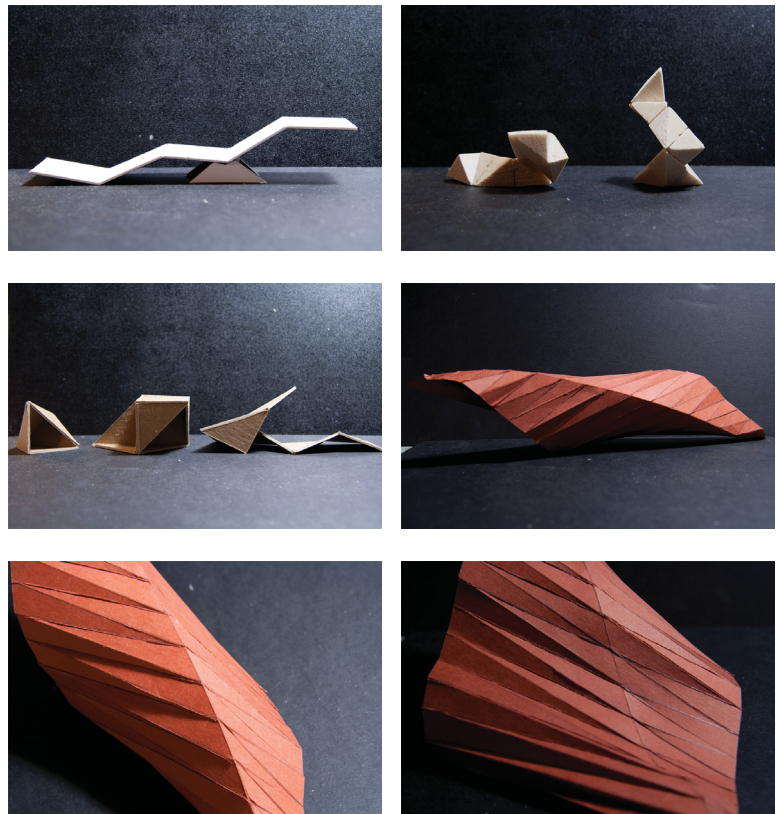
Exploration of geometry and form, model studies

Exploration of digital geometry and form, 3D voronoi studies
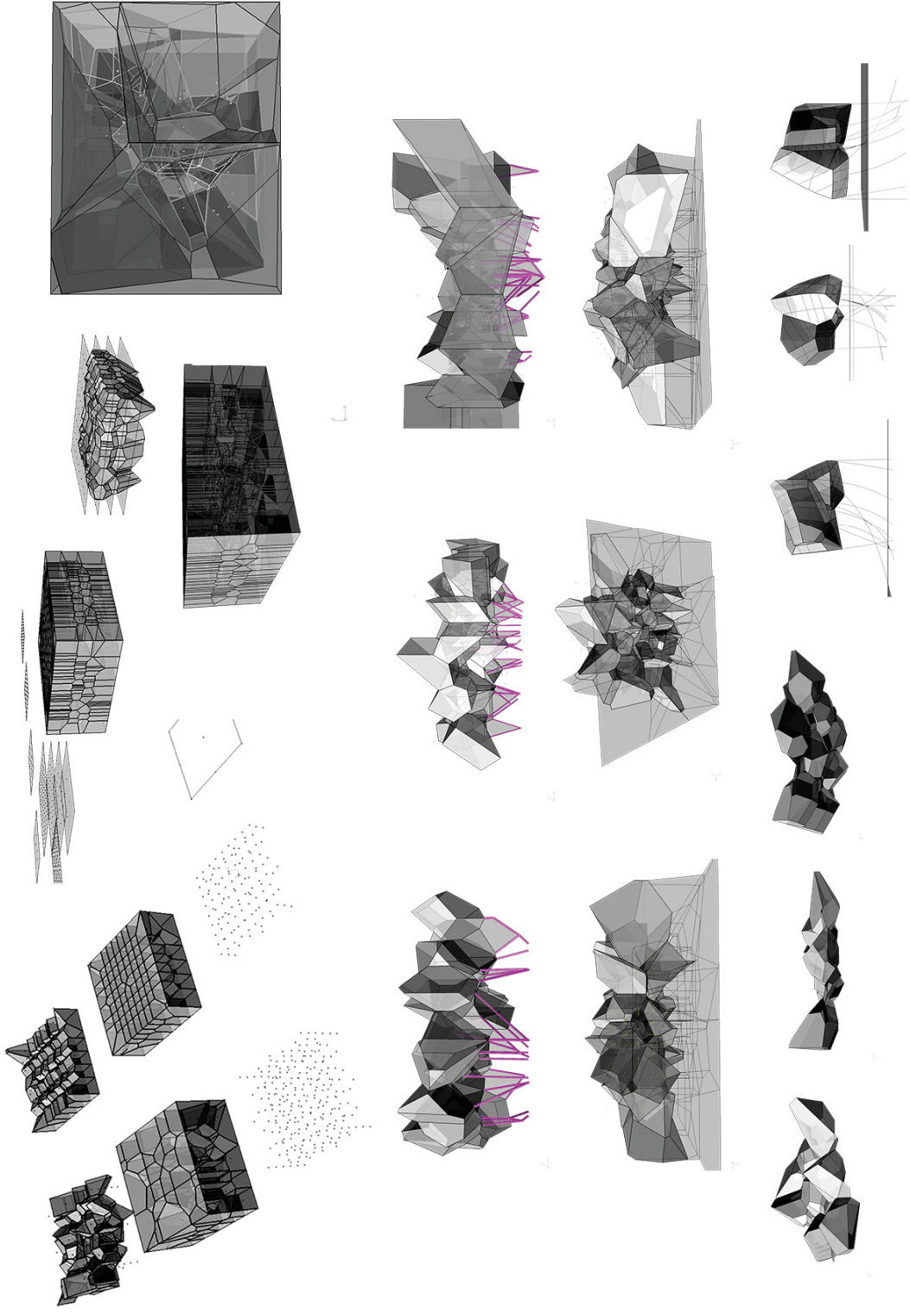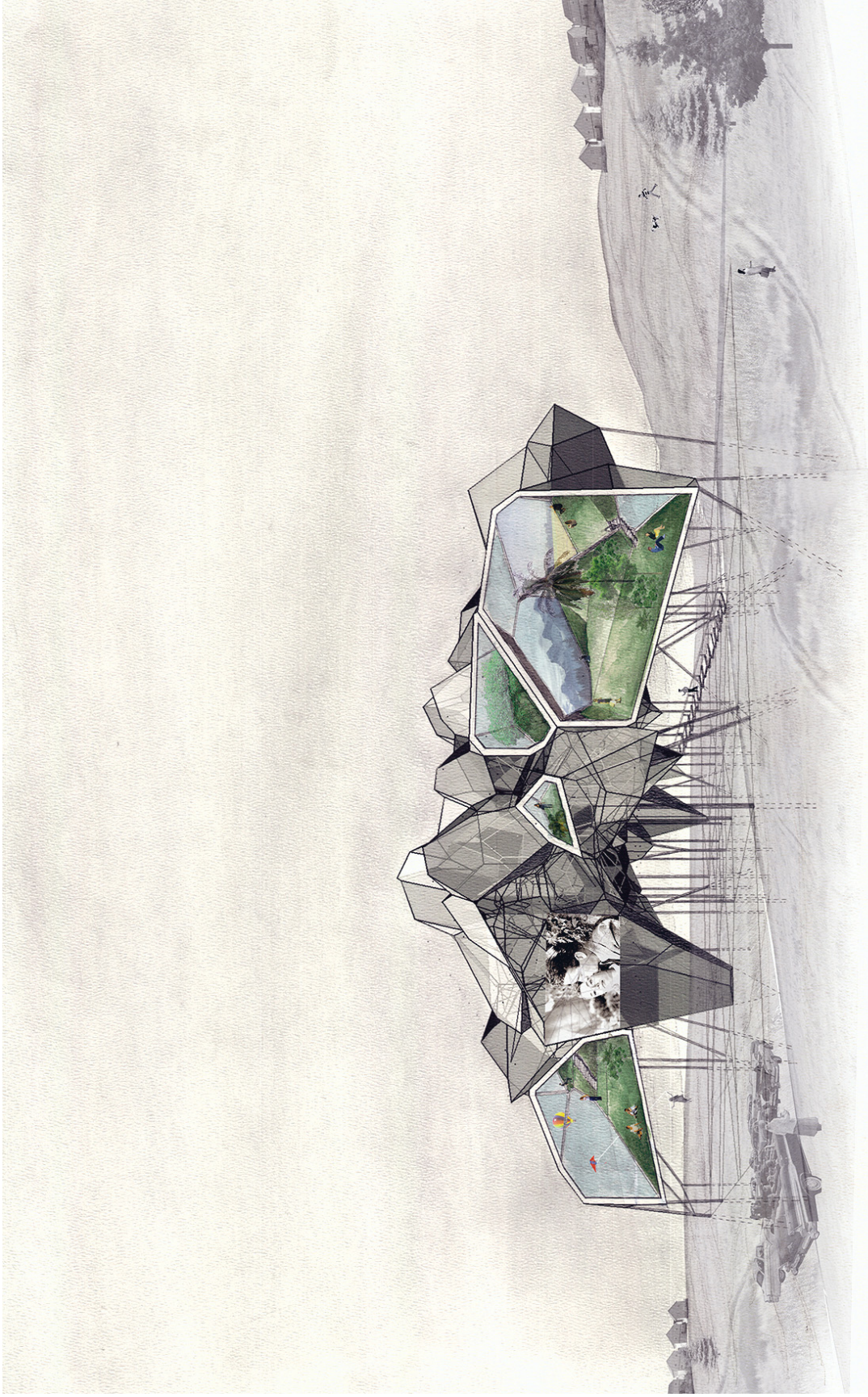
Conceptual rendering of program, geometry and theoretical suburban site suggesting interior landscape and confusion about idea and reality

Paper Model Studies

While at this point the thesis had found its theory and program, it needed to ground itself in its specific site and find its own geometry. As such, I created a series of study models and sketches. These models and sketches were made in attempt to draw conclusions from the site adjacencies (house to road), the physical topography of the green belt, transverse directionality of the car to the pedestrian and utilizing the existing pathway and pedestrian bridges.

Paper was used as a representation of the ground surface as malleable terrain, one that can shift, lift, lower or tilt.

The paper models evolved to conform and respond to site conditions, exploring parallel divisions and eventually triangulation.
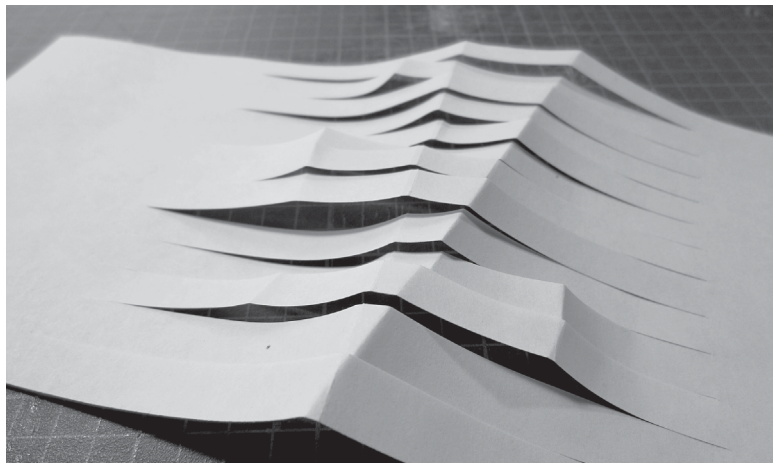
Conceptual idea about changing the ground plane
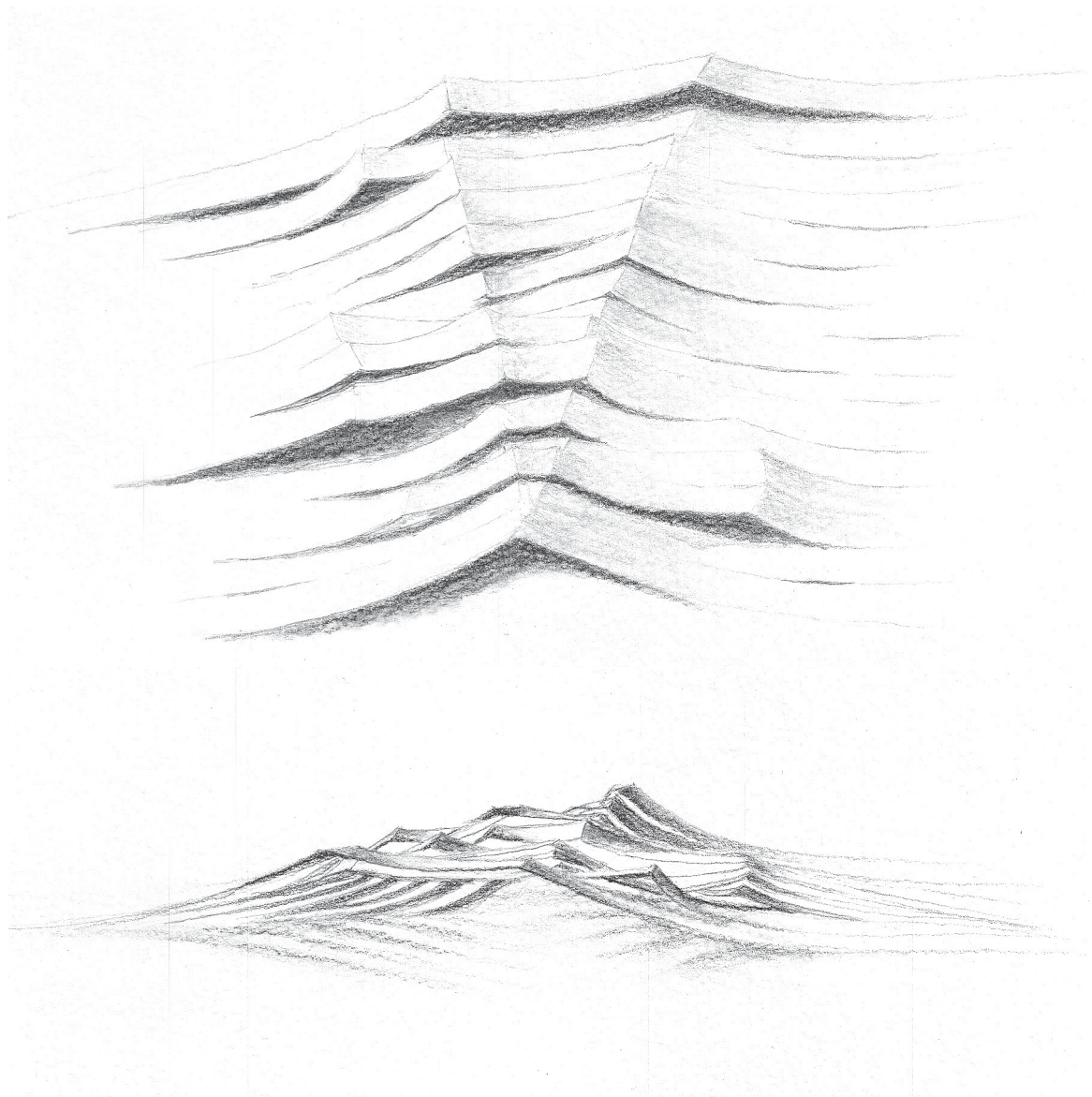
Sketches of paper model to analyze potential of model concept
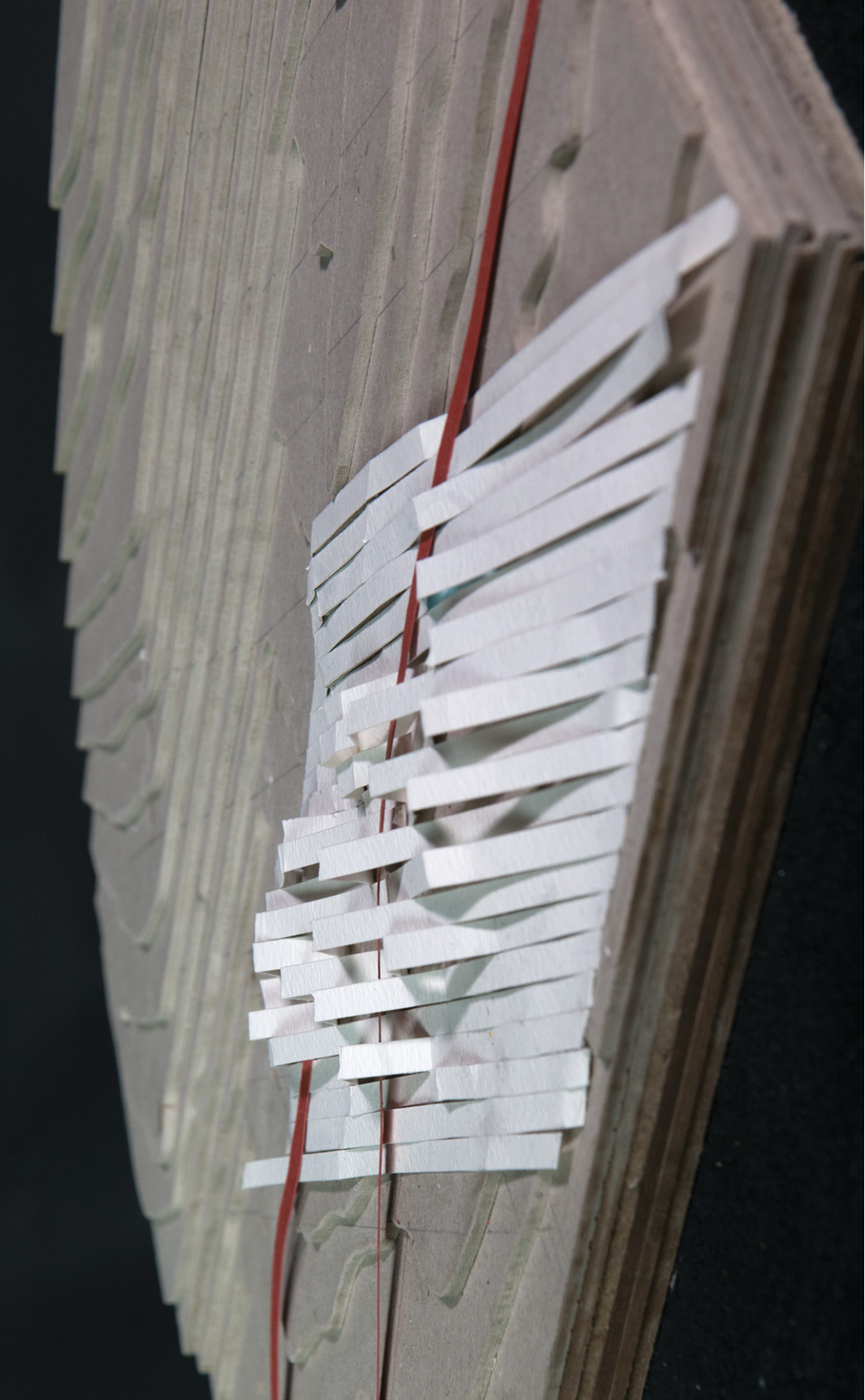
Triangulation

As a way of negotiating the transverse trajectories of road and home, triangulation became a tool for incorporating diagonal lines into a linear site.

The triangulation began to suggest a way of grounding the project partially under ground and partially above. It also enabled an exploration of a form integrated into the surface of the green belt and suggesting a green roof. In the image of the model on the following page, it has shown where this thesis began to explore the parallel division of the lot line.

The Lot Line

The suburb is an agglomeration of individual lots of green space, house and drive way. The green belt, a difficult to access left-over space, is a semi-public extension of the backyard meant to buffer the experience of the road. By drawing the lot lines across the green belt to the road, it formalizes the awkwardness of the existing boundaries and places an invitation of back yard dweller to extend into the green belt space.
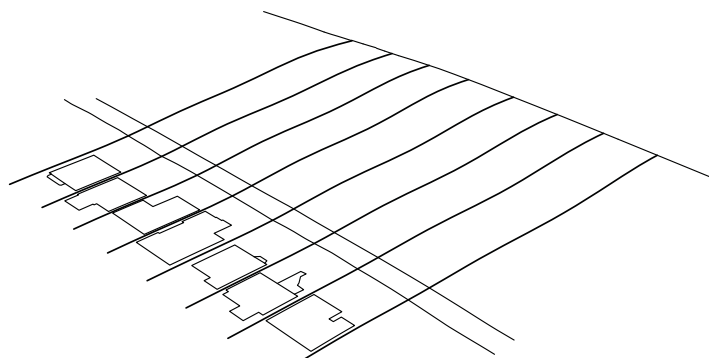
Lot lines
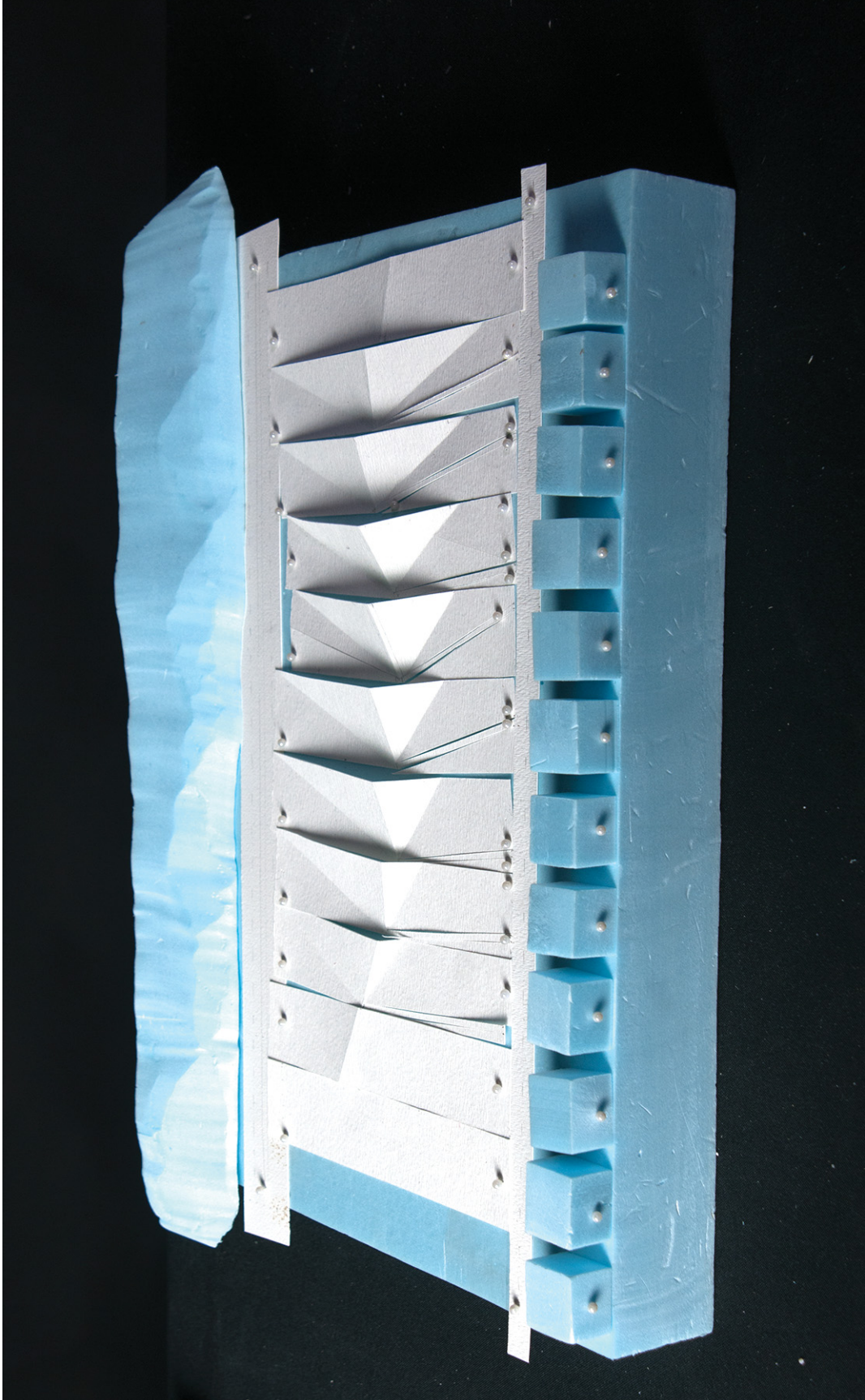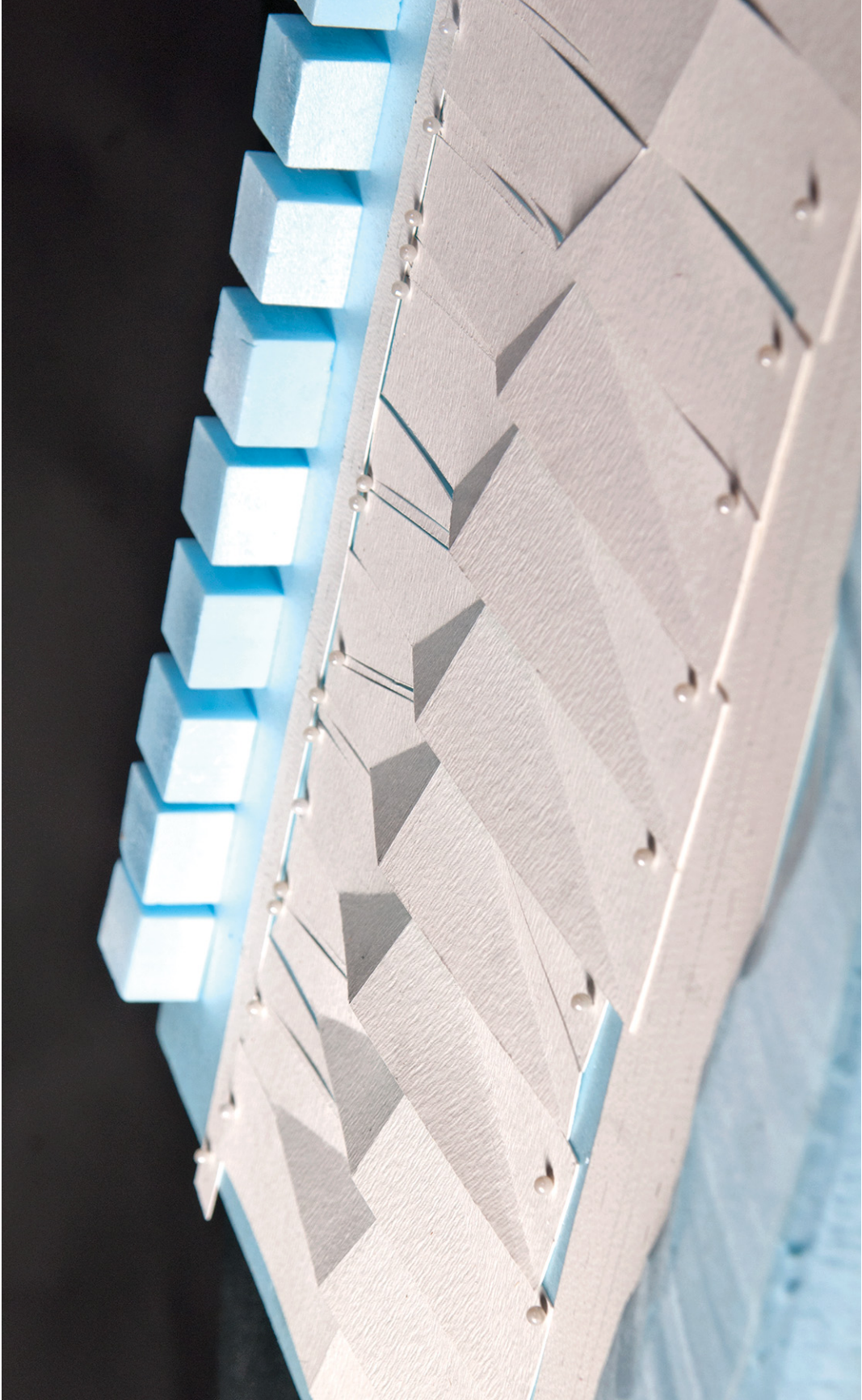
The conceptual section model below shows an exploration of a "unit" of botanical garden as it might exist below and above ground. (This model is cut at the lot line of the nearest house.) The green belt pathway is shown here below "grade". It would pass through garden to garden below ground.

A path on the exterior would be linked to the back gate of the adjacent house. As one approaches the form, the ground seems to fall away beneath you as you cross it. A ramp would connect to this path and descend into the garden space.

Conceptual section model

Articulating a Heterotopia

Figure-Ground in New Geometry

From there, conceptual design development continued on the path of articulating and converging site conditions. These elements are supported by theoretical and historical references, such as landscape urbanism, with its reorientation toward the ground plane as a field of action and as a synchronistic space of human compatibility with nature. It is also where the project is inspired by the surreal space of heterotopia as the program takes a physical form.

The green belt, created as an edge, is also the centre of competing zones. David Karle, author of the essay "Detroit Beyond the Figure-Ground" repositions the meaning of the *middle* of something,

> …The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. BETWEEN things (at the leaks) does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one AND the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (Karle 2013, 4)

The design evolved from a set of points and vectors that are drawn from site conditions and attempt to take their existing social order and propose new arrangements. These variables are relatively constant along all the green belts in the city, therefore making the project prototypical. The project has a set of main design "moves" which create the primary form: the lot line, the human to car relationship, the footpaths, and the sun angle.

sun angle

paths

speed factor
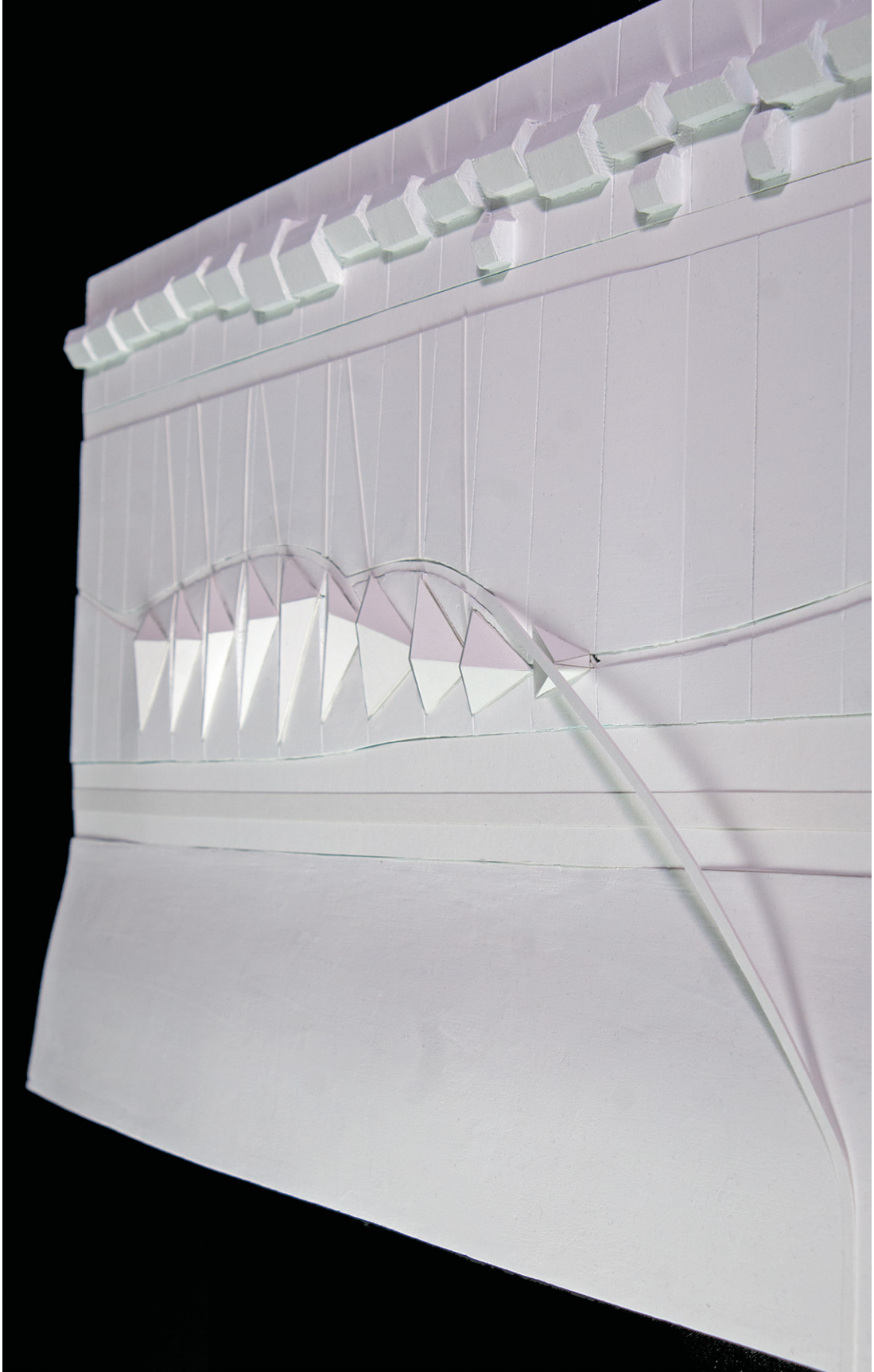
lot lines

base site

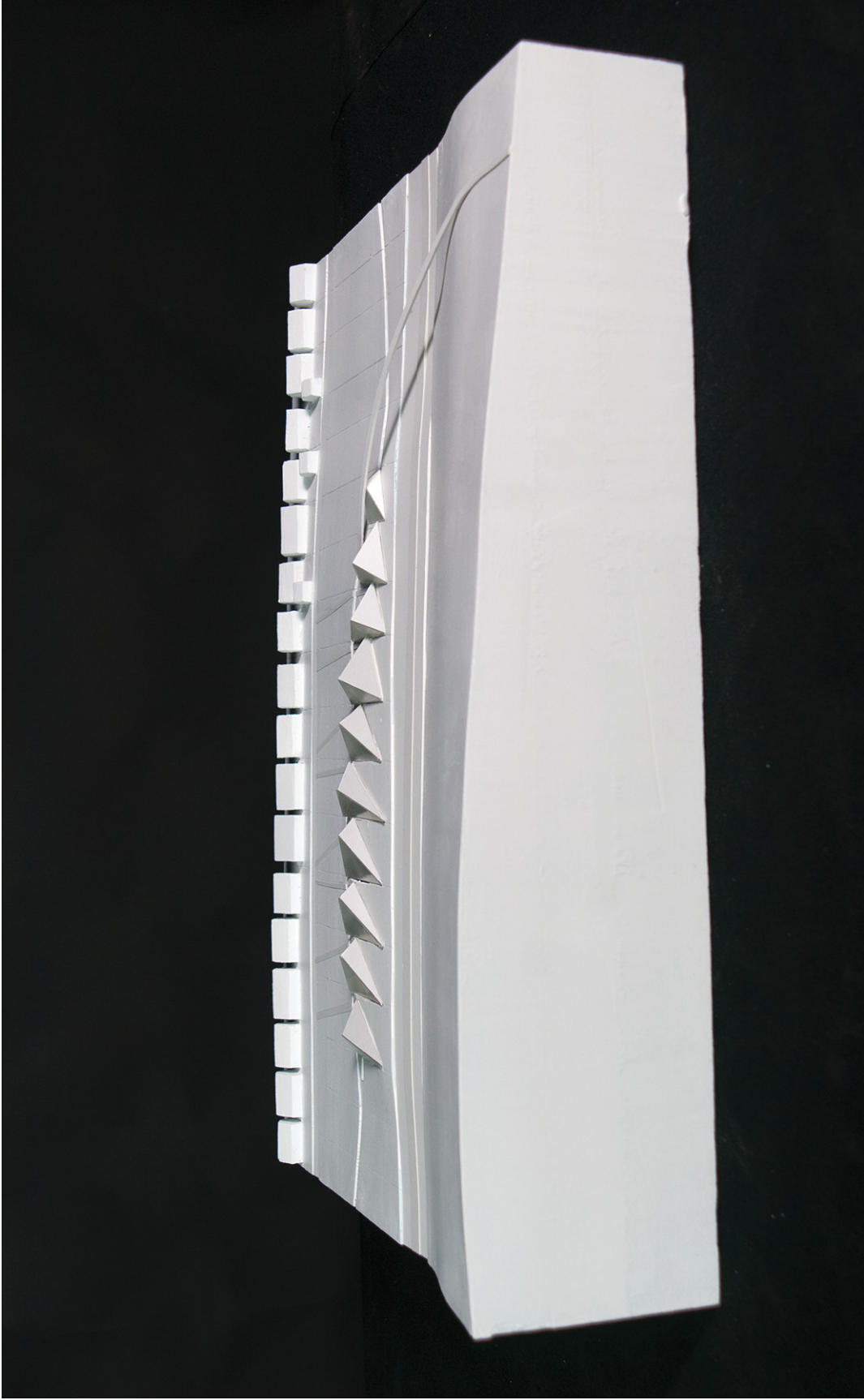site access
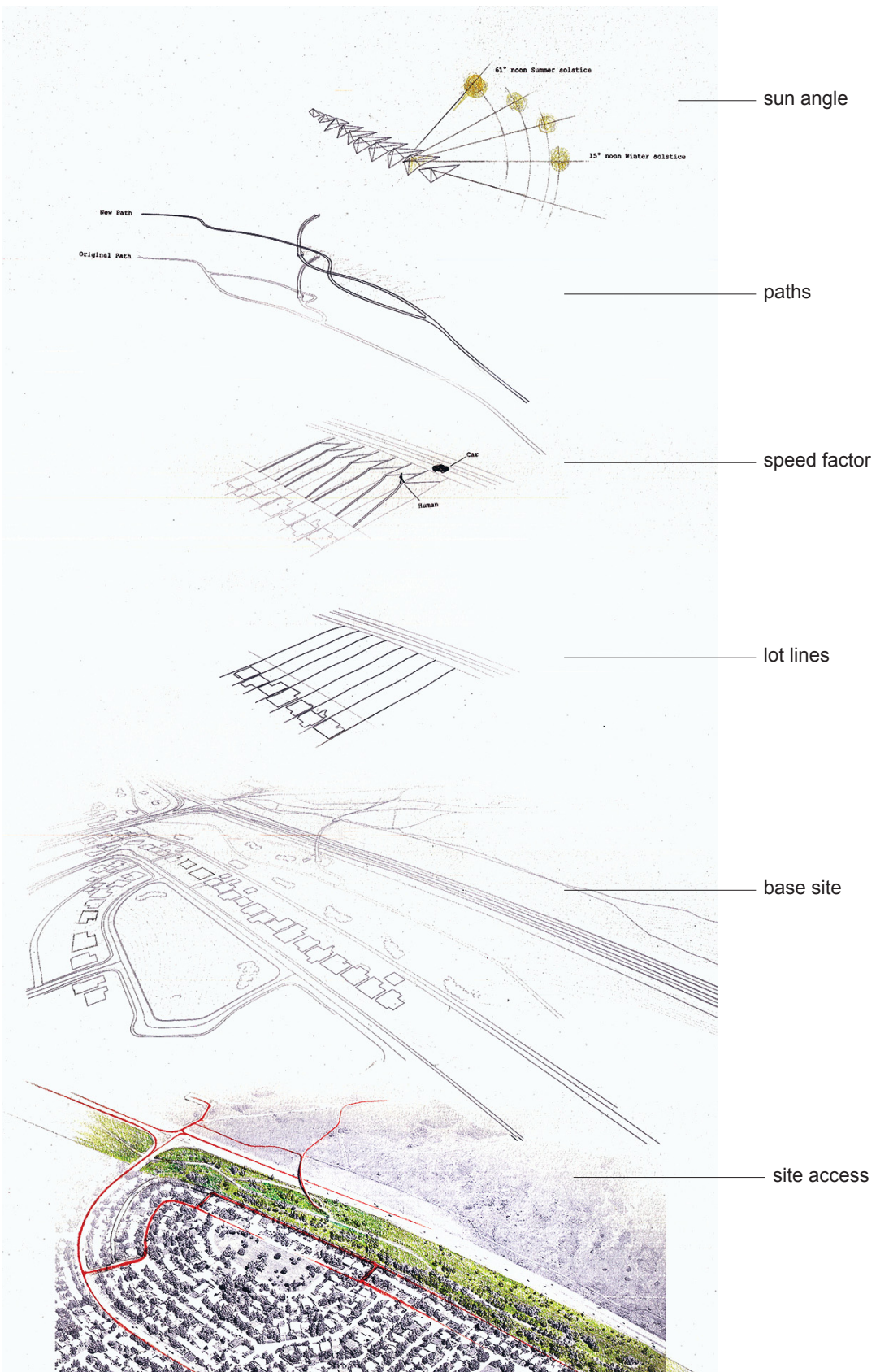
Design strategy exploded diagram

Site model showing design embedded in the green belt between a row of houses and a highway

Site model looking east

Site model showing design profile from Nose Hill Park looking south towards the houses

Site model showing paths

Site plan view

The Paths

In order to make a connection from the private threshold to the public space in the green belt, I have drawn a path from the gate of each back yard stretching from this limit diagonally to the back (or westernmost point) of their lot where the path meets the new foot path of the green belt.

The new foot paths use the existing paths as a basis, mostly only changing their z-axis in space. Rather than the paths following the contours of the green belt, this thesis has taken two strands of the path and submerged them inside the garden space. Each path has an alternative route above ground which creates the southernmost limit of the botanical garden. While one path descends into the garden, the other is lifted to follow the topography of the park. An intersection exists at one point (shown to the left in the centre of the image) at approximately the middle of the building. This space serves as a lobby for the garden to the east of that point and the cinema to the west.
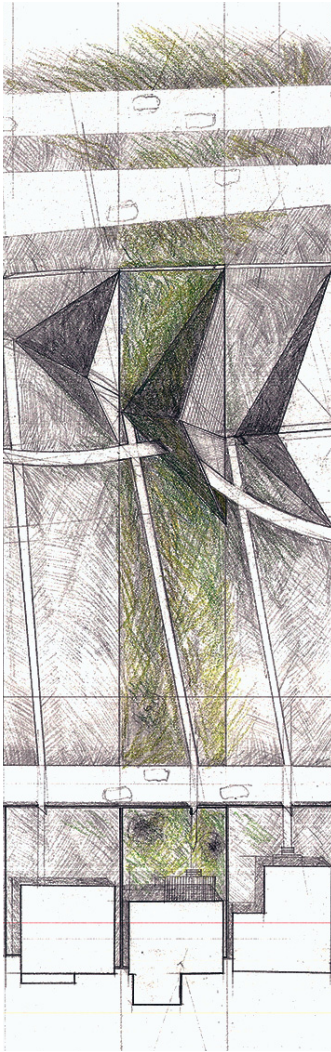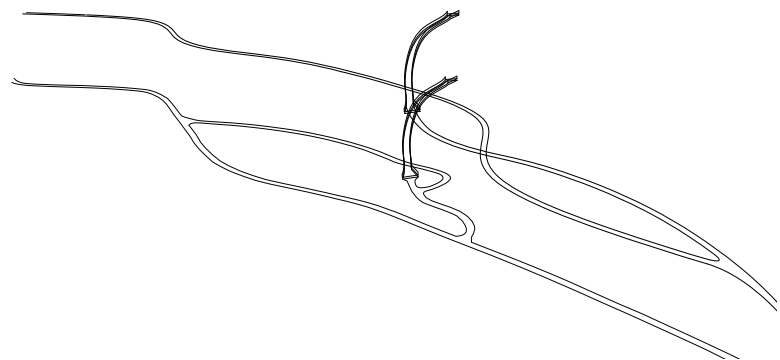

New path above old

On the west end, a pedestrian approaches a fork in the path, one wrapping the south edge of the garden and one that enters the garden directly. Approaching the garden from the east, you are either on the existing path and enter the cinema space from there or you are coming from the pedestrian bridge that connects to Nose Hill Park. The descent of the bridge approaches the path intersection but points directly at the garden entrance. Instead of just continuing along the redundant scene of the green belt parkway, the path in the garden sweeps you into an unexpected interior environment, blooming and sunny year round.
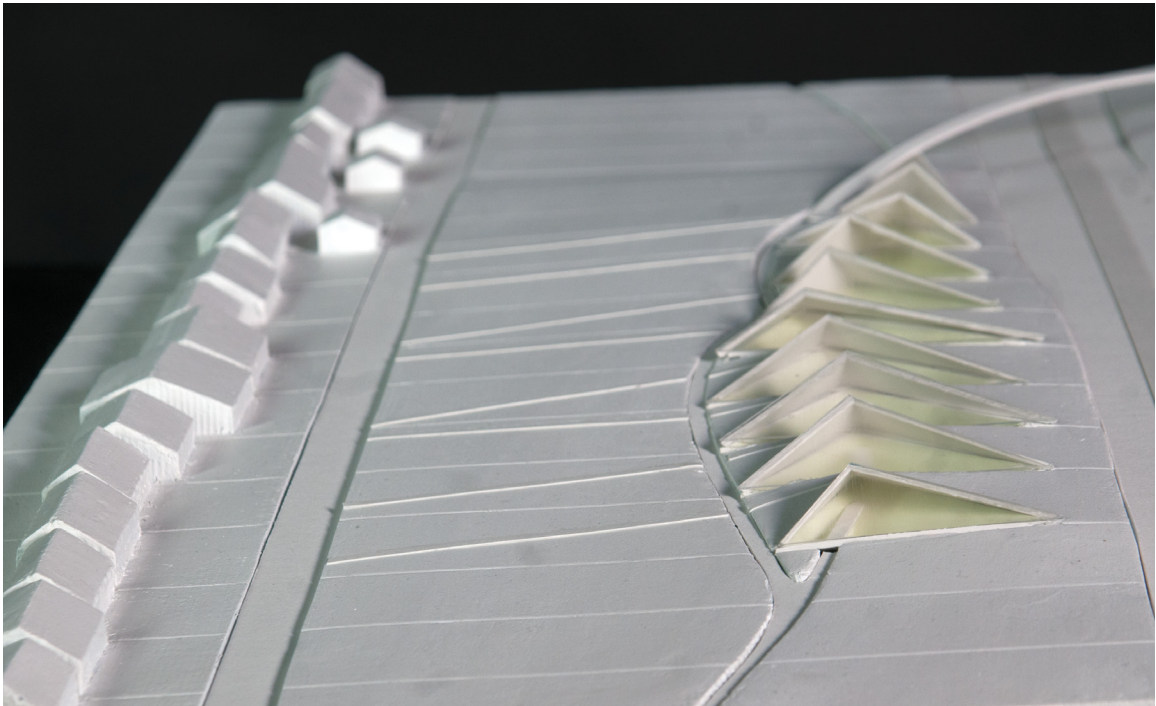
Model view looking east showing fork in the path as you approach

Limits, Spine, and Foot Print

The northernmost limit of the garden is the "safe" limit to the road, currently determined by a chain link fence. Therefore the foot print of each garden unit at grade is between lot lines in its short section and between the exterior path to the south and the roadway fence to the north. The submerged pathway creates a spine for the garden. In plan, a diagonal line is drawn from the front corner of the lot where it meets the exterior path to the back of the lot where it meets the position where the submerged path and the backyard path meet. Then another line is drawn from that point to the front of the lot, where the lot meets the road fence, therefore creating a triangle in plan. This is done for each lot in the set which in this case spans ten lots but could span more or less which emphasizes the project's prototypical nature.

the road

the fence

interior path
(spine)

exterior path

backyard path
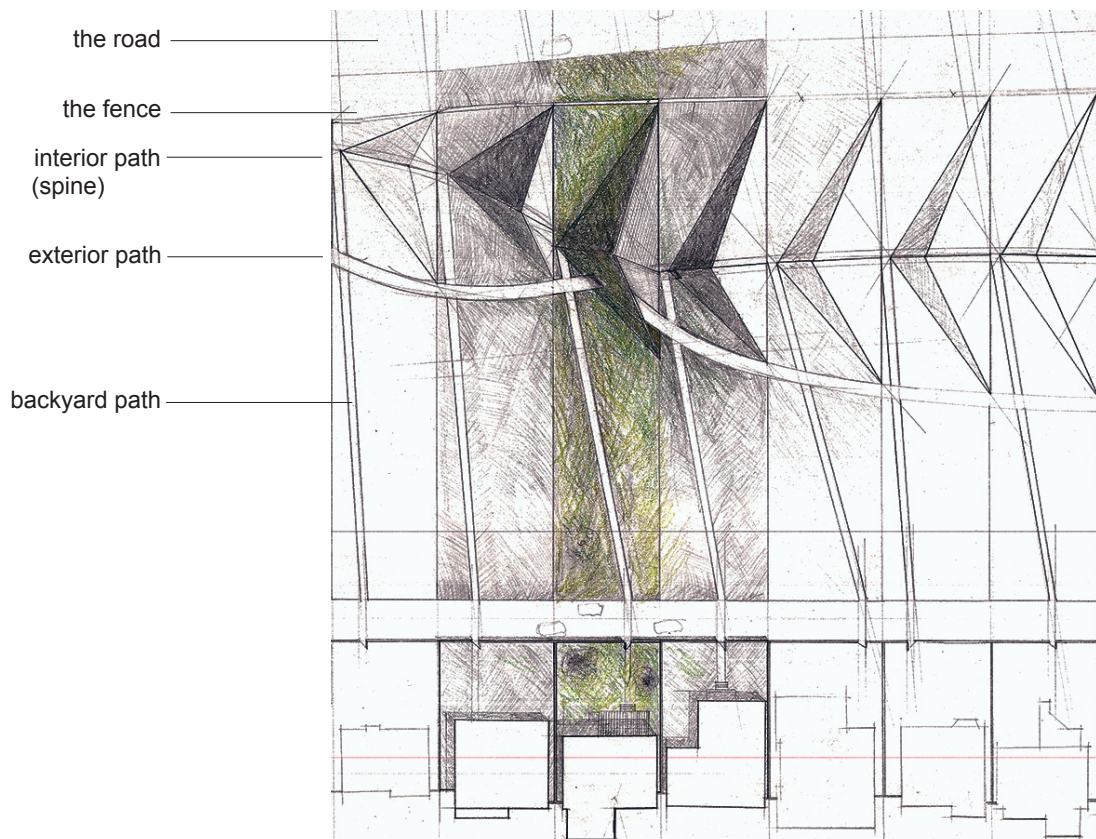
Plan view used to explain site geometry

The Relationship to the Road

The height of the point at the rear of the triangle is determined by the height of the road at that moment. The green belt is meant to conceal the road from the houses. A straight line is drawn from the height of the road at the back of the lot to the point where the paths meet. This point is raised or lowered so that an individual standing there will be in direct line with the car, which is currently the condition the green belt tries to prevent. See image below and site section on the following page.

Photograph of view from backyard toward roadway
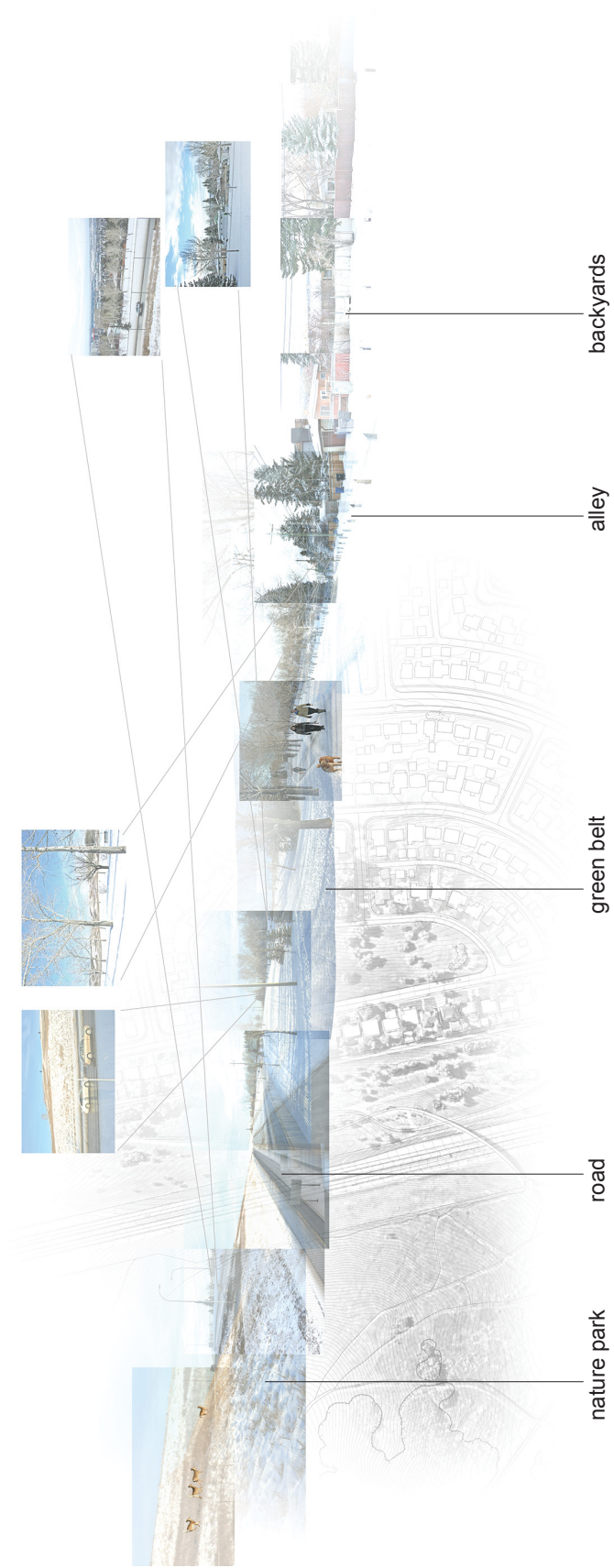
Photo collage site section showing views from park to road to green belt to backyards

backyards

alley

green belt

road

nature park

Photo montage of all the backyards along the site

Human-Car Synchronization

The width of this point (which is also the distance between the triangles in plan) is determined by a ratio of speed synchronization between the human and the car. The car traveling at seventy kilometres per hour travels ten times faster than the average pedestrian walking. The width of this point at the back of the triangle is made one tenth the width of the lot. What this means is that for a brief moment, just over one second, a human can pass this point for the exact length of time that a car can pass the lot, making their speeds synchronized for only a moment. The competing speeds of domestic activity and the car on the freeway are one of the main reasons for the green belt itself, and also part of the mode of concealing unwanted elements in our domestic scheme. The road way is one of the main reasons the suburbs can exist at such distances from the city centre and also make up part of the excitement of the essence of urbanity since the car existed.
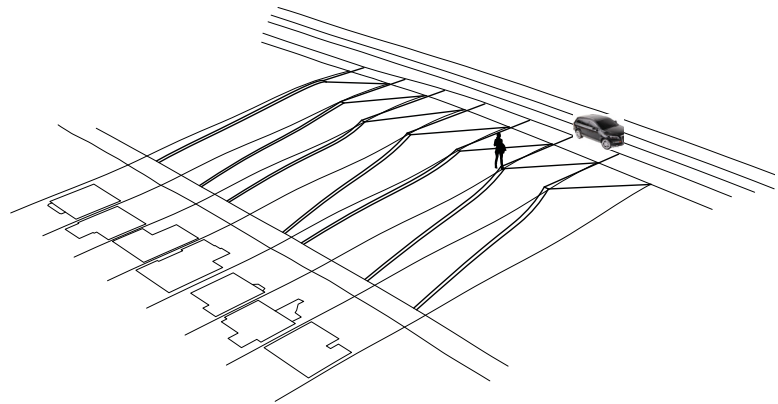
Human to car ratio
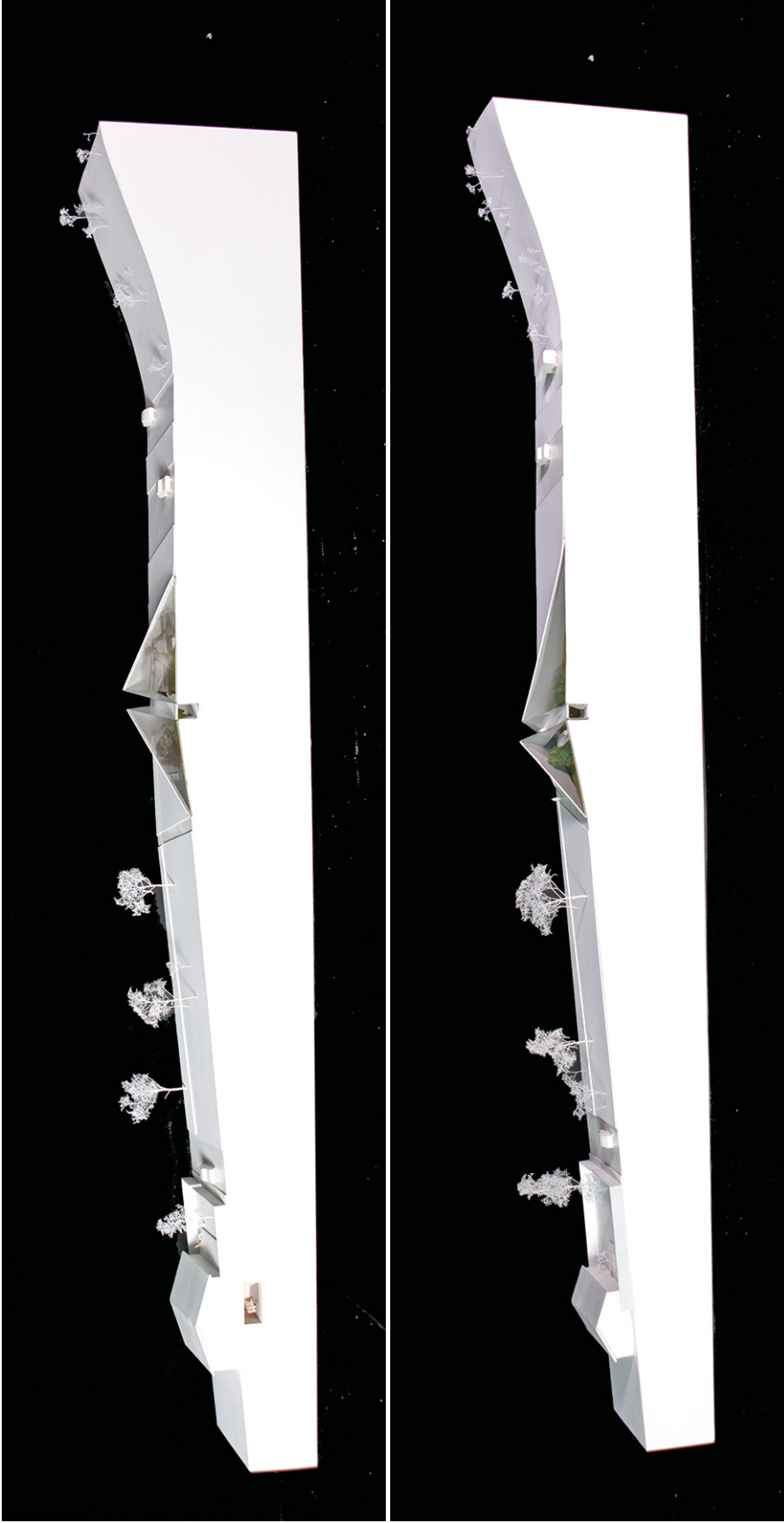
Model showing two lots: the cinema next to the home theatre (in the basement of the house) and the botanical garden next to the private yard

Private or Public Entrance

The point where the paths meet provides an entrance to the garden at the back of the triangular garden. This entrance is public, but suggests it is private as a small foot path leads from this door directly to the backyard gate. At this point a pedestrian would be at eye level with the car. It brings into question where this garden is privately owned by the home owner whose lot has been gesturally extended to meet this point, or whether it belongs to any passerby on the pathway heading east or west.

semi-private garden entrance

path from backyard

private backyard
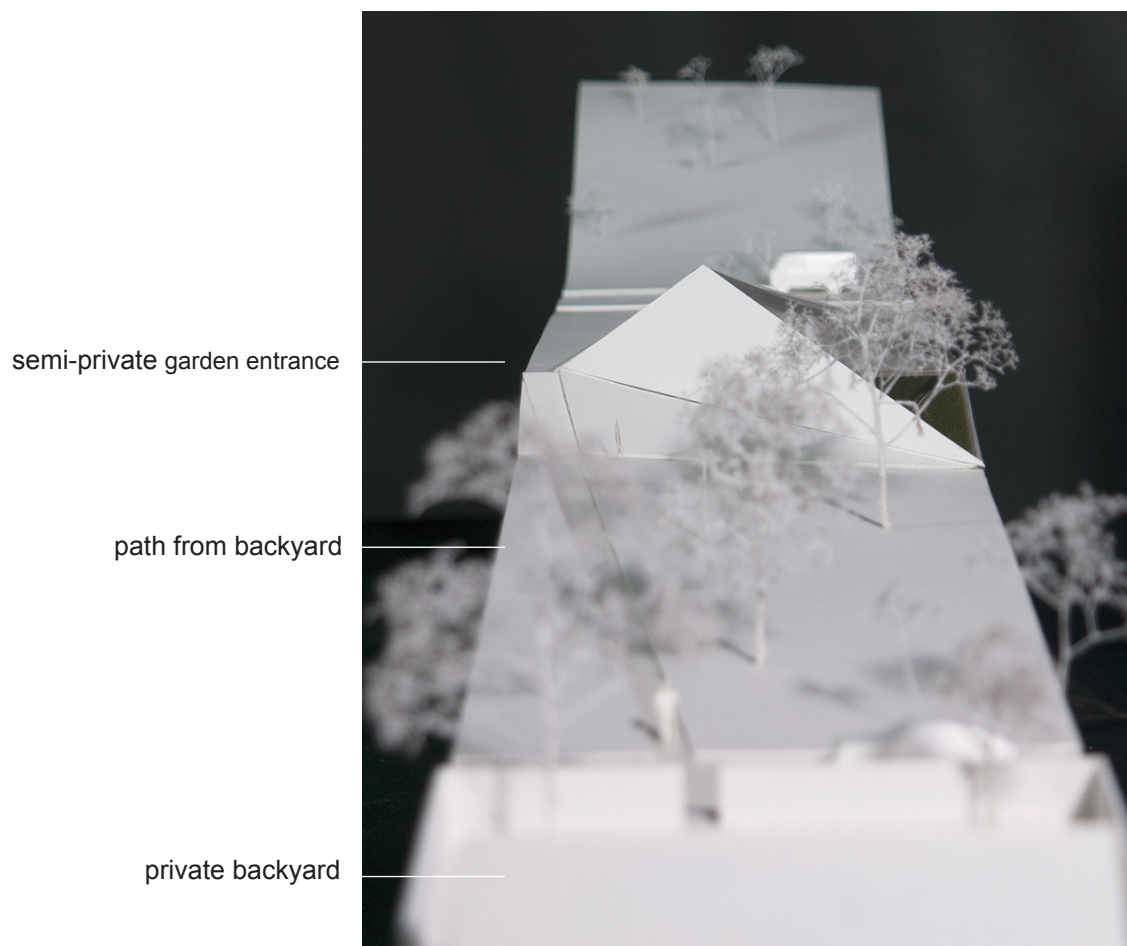
1 to 200 model of one lot and botanical garden unit
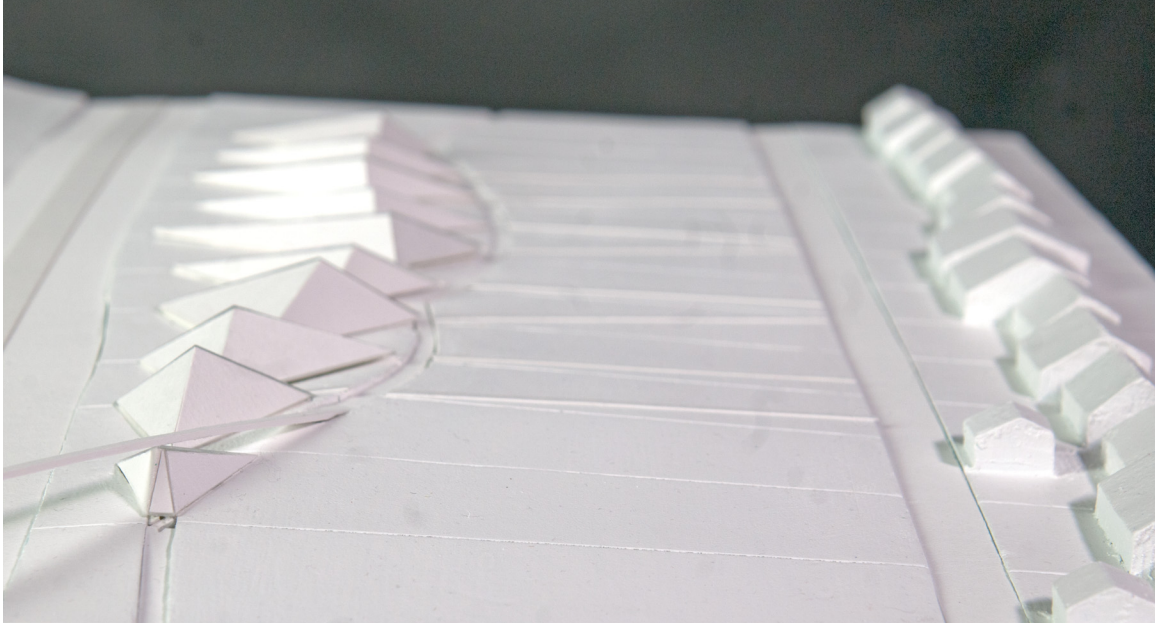view from the back yard

The Garden Form

The triangular footprint of the garden hinges up from the ground to create a diamond shape with an extension the width of the submerged path. The front faces of the diamond are glazed to let the sun into the garden space. The high point of the diamond is determined by the maximum sun angle during the summer solstice ensuring that direct sunlight enter the garden at all times during the year. The back faces of the diamond are composed of a steel structure acting like a structural arm hinging at the earth through a concrete beam along the rear perimeter of the structure.
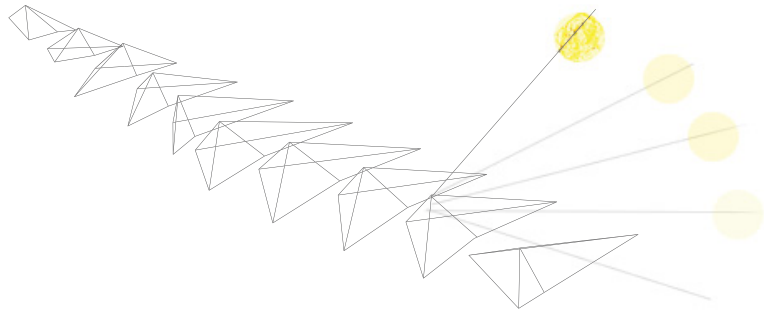
Sun angle and roof line

The exterior face is a green roof with planted sod creating a continuous grass surface across the width of the green belt from back yard to road, hinging at the path to expose a subterranean garden embedded in the green belt. The diamond above ground is mirrored below ground. Just as the diamond rises to invite the sun in to the garden, the ground drops away from you as you enter from either path. This creates a sloped interior floor, reminiscent of natural hills and valleys but within the contained envelope of the building. Visitors can remain on the pathways or walk directly down the slope among the plant life and palm trees, pausing for a time to bask in the sun or to watch a film in the cinema space.

Site model looking east

The Botanical Garden

The garden is half underground and half above ground. It looks like a unique unit confined to the width of the private lot line in the view from the backyard. However, below the surface, puncturing lot to lot, is the submerged path which links all of the gardens. In essence, the garden looks private but is public. It is an inversion of the condition of much of the green space in the suburbs, such as the front yard or even the green belt: these spaces look accessible but aren't really due to either social or physical barriers. The garden contains a three hundred and sixty-five day a year climate-controlled green space, fed by the incessant prairie sun, and warmed and cooled through the thermal mass of the earth and concrete elements of the structure. The garden itself is a symbol of the desires of suburbanites to own their own private nature retreat but takes it further to create a space that is enjoyably warm and lush year round unlike their Canadian winter reality.
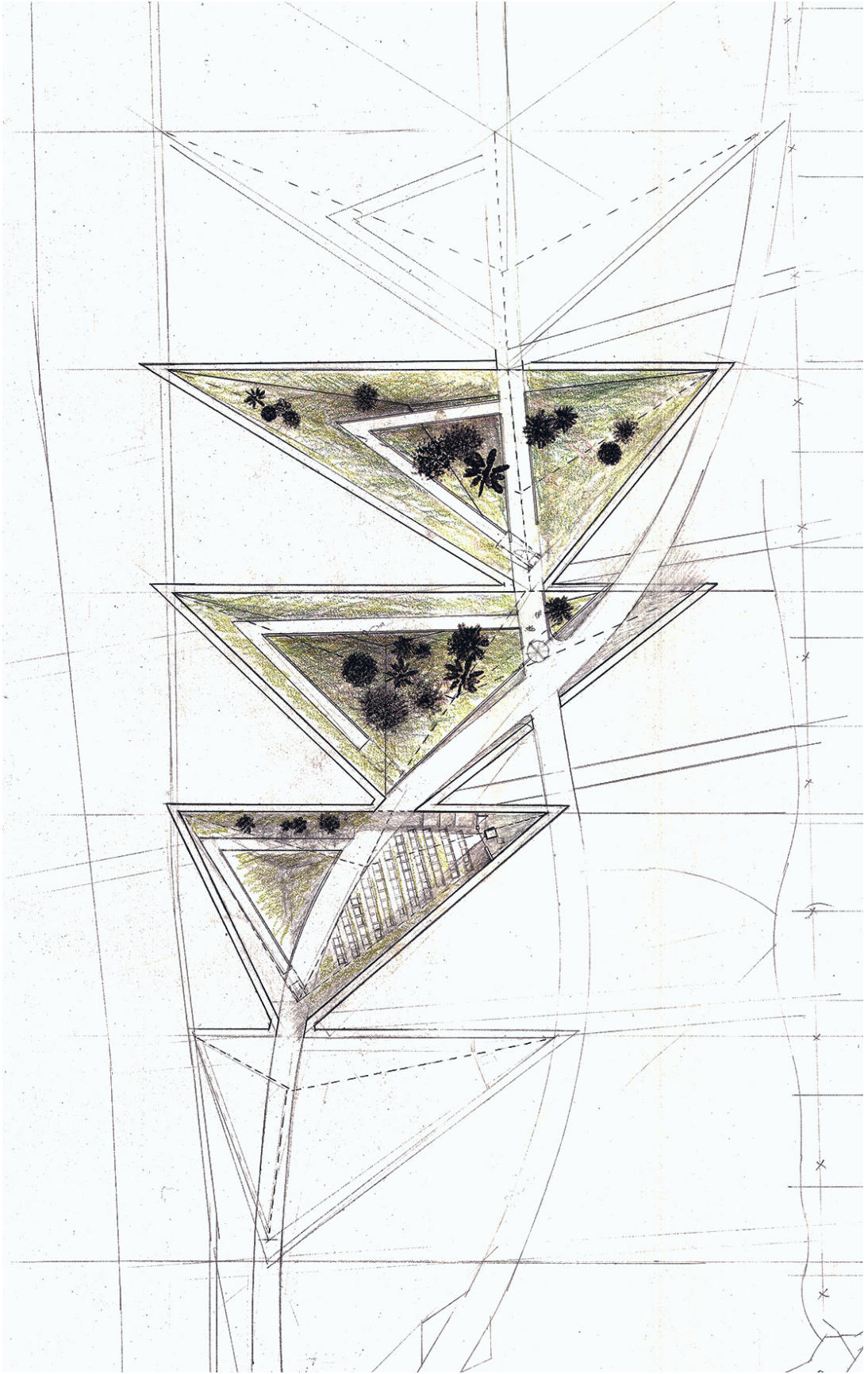
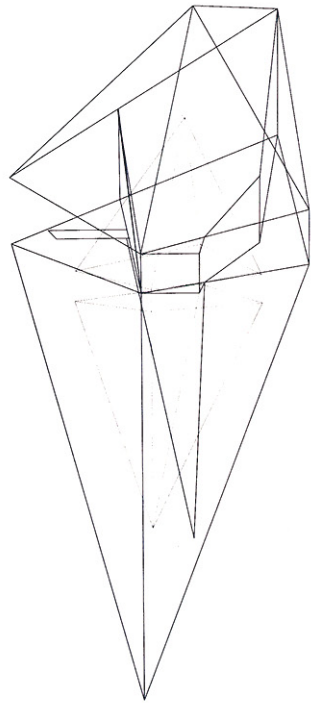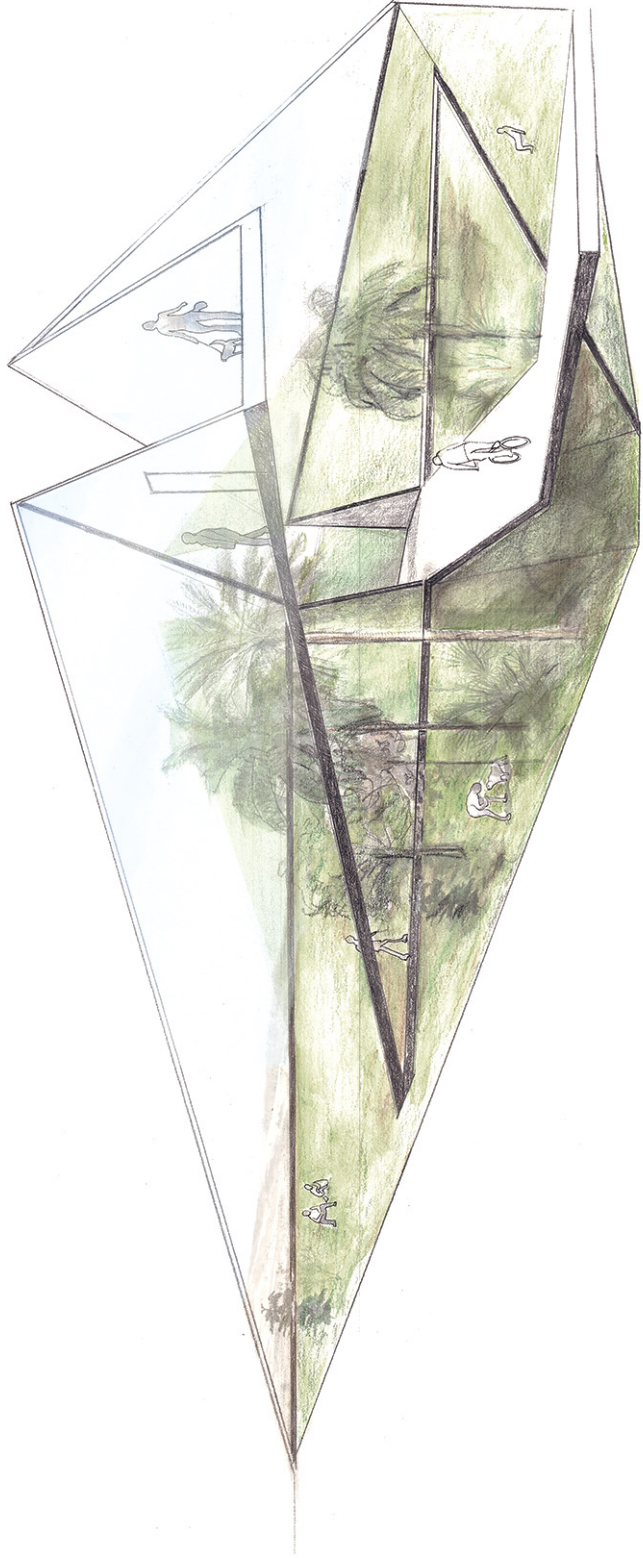Selected floor plans: cinema (left), lobby at path intersection (centre) and garden (right)

Selected short sections: garden below and cinema above

The Cinema in the Garden

The cinema form is similar to the garden space with a planted surface but fewer trees to provide seating on the interior hills. Movies are projected onto the translucent surface of the diamond above, set against the night sky, reminiscent of a drive-in movie theatre, but experienced even in winter and without a car. The film projection is visible in reverse from outside the cinema space. Both nighttime strollers and cars driving to the west can see the film movement and light as they pass by. The cinema projection channels our collective imagination to the screen set against the night sky. For a brief moment, as neighbours or strangers we are swept into the same imaginative space through the film. This is a contrast from the private home entertainment space of the house just steps away. It is bringing the successful private act of watching movies at home to the intermediary public environment of watching movies inside a garden, outside on a green belt.

Perceptions from the Road

Just as the private home owners are shielded from the view of the road in the existing condition, the drivers are more or less unaware of the houses beyond the green belt berm. The path along the road is long and monotonous with a continuous strip of green on either side, sometimes a large wall, and intermittent road offshoots, heading hill over hill towards the horizon with barely a hint of urban dwelling. This thesis design disrupts the monotonous experience with an emerging triangular form piercing the otherwise subtle green edges of the road. Heading west the driver sees the botanical garden with palm tree tops peaking out above the ground behind glass. Further down, at night the cinema glows against the sky. Heading east the building is a monolithic surface of green hills rotating slightly from lot to lot as the driver speeds by. In a matter of ten seconds, the driver flies by ten peaked hills of geometric crispness, made of the same sod and grass as the hill itself.

Perspective from the road heading west

### *Expression of Figure-Ground Through Geometry*

The following drawings and model images show how the geometries manifested in this thesis, from plan through section, have created repeating forms embedded in the ground.

The long and short sectional drawings show site context and the employment of the parallelogram in section along the spine.
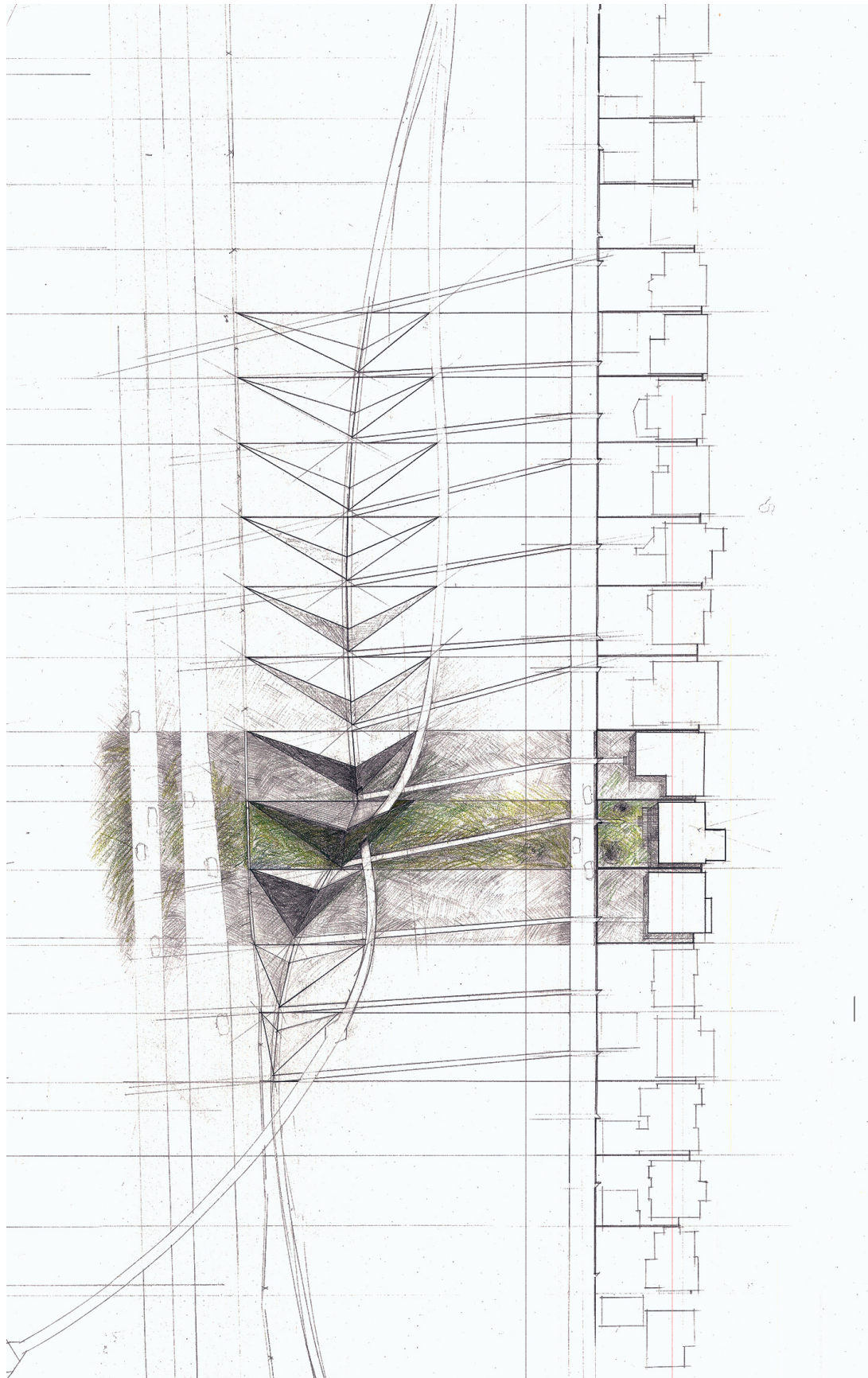
The next image shows the over all site strategy, while the others look at the project in its entirety through model and drawing.
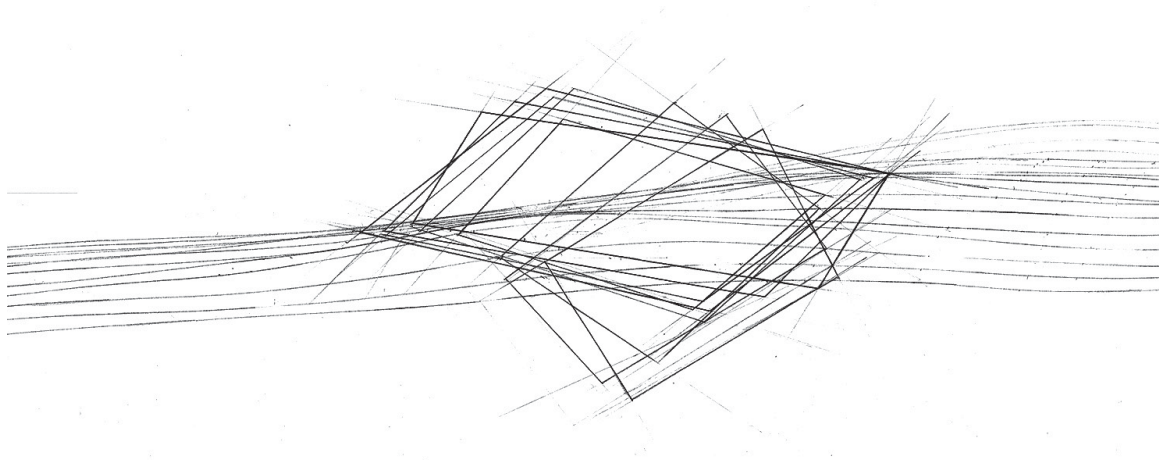
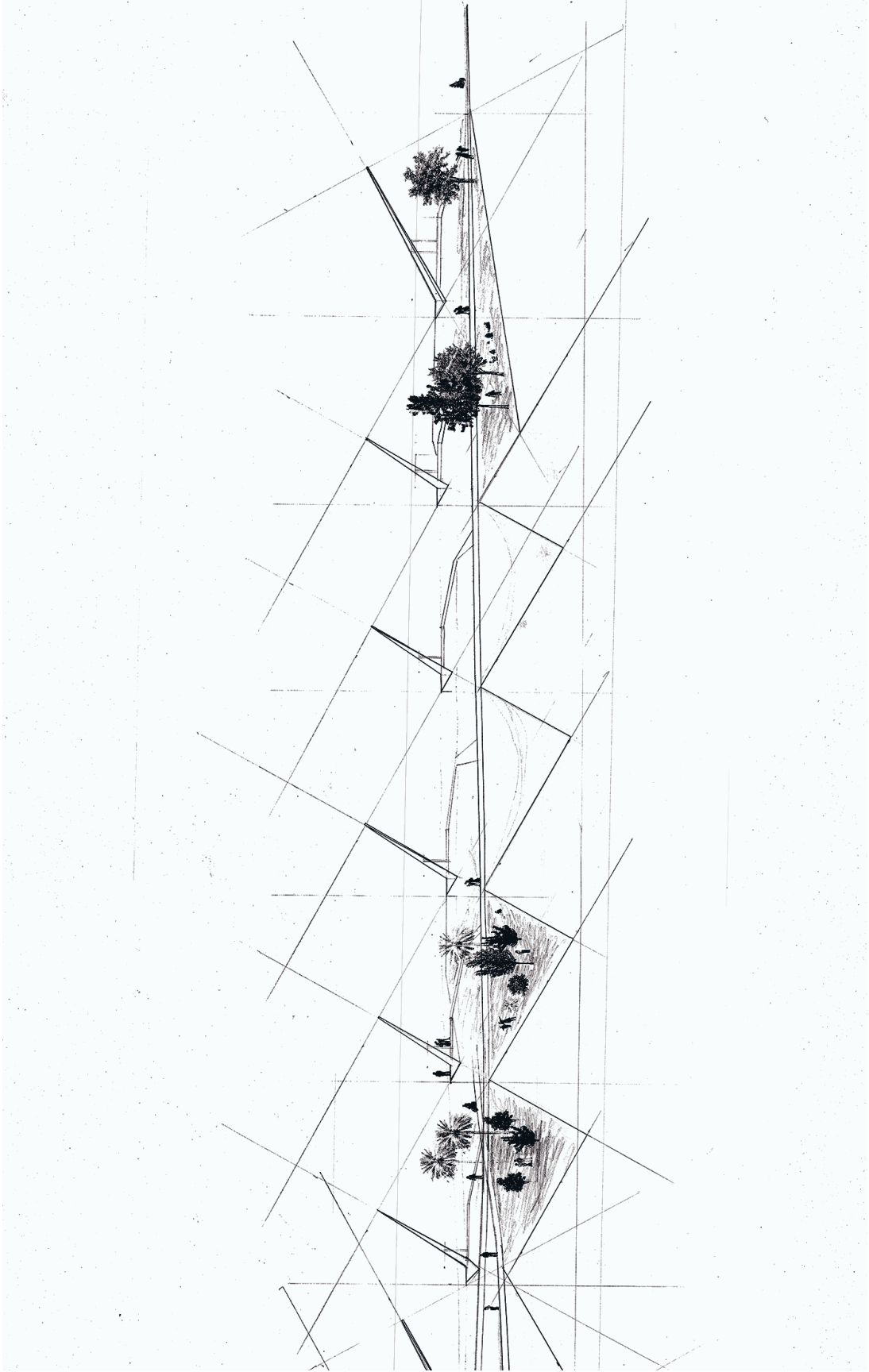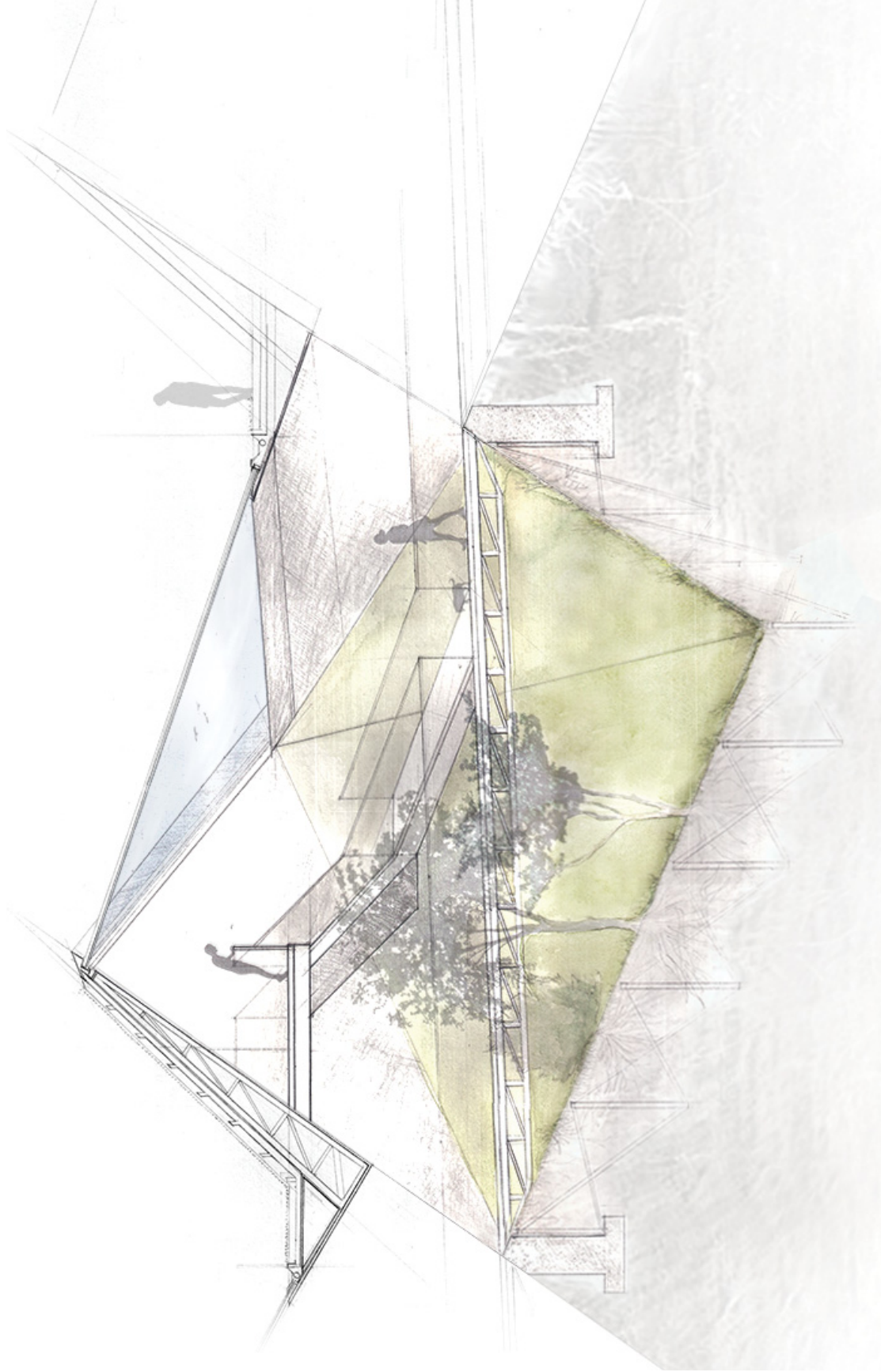Conceptual drawing of all sections overlaid

Conceptual short section and selected short sections
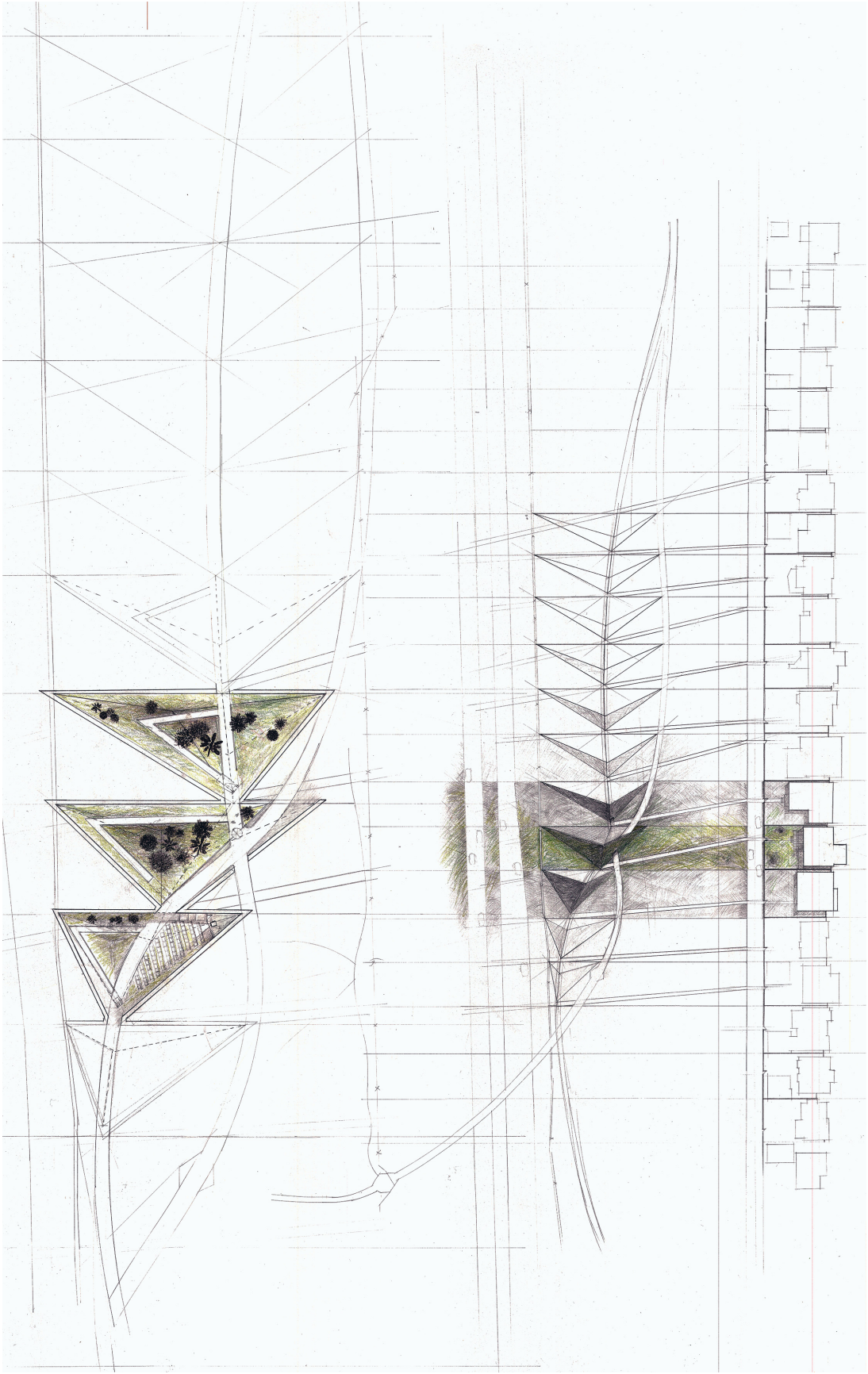
CHAPTER 5: REFLECTIONS

Perhaps the dialogue in this thesis may seem at times rhetorical but, in truth, it is interested in the real dissonance about the North American suburbs. What is it about this place that is so compelling to those who live there and so repelling to those who don't? The real question here is in regards to the priority towards nature in the city. Most would agree that in suburbia, there is excess… in the backyard, the green belt, the school yard, the nature parks. However, nature as an instrument of other means is not confined to the suburbs who demonstrate this paradox as a prime example.

Another discussion might explore how a reverence for nature is used to cover up all other kinds of urban ills, not least of which is a resistance to investing in the design of the public realm. A patch of grass with a paved bike path is supposed to stand in for public space in many Canadian cities. While notions of community in the digital age have changed the public realm dramatically, so have new levels of paranoia and fear. However, the basic need for human contact remains and demands thoughtful attention. The "green" edge between the public and private space in suburbia is a very real and intriguing territory where the expression of our changing culture and values are played out.

Bachelard's concept of immensity suggests that the imagination is alive and well and need only connect to something larger than itself – a landscape, the horizon or a sea - in order to be activated. Opportunities to reignite our cultural imagination using the broader frame of the landscape, does not diminish the pragmatic day to day of contemporary life, but re-orients the image. This thesis is interested in taking

the seemingly banal space of the green belt buffer and articulating a heterotopia born from (hidden) site geometries. The result is intended to bring utopian ideals and left over realities into juxtaposition.

The sublime interior garden embedded in the raw, wintery green belt parkway creates an odd clash of expectations, as does the third element of the projected cinematic dream space. The layering of projected topias onto one another is full of potential, both imaginative and real. Further, the project proposed in this thesis exists where the brink of this imagined potential meets an intended materiality, physicality and even a prototypical possibility. Ideas are founded on site, forever moving and changing like the people who live there, but forever tied to the image of who we are and how we create the space we live in.

Foucault, on the heterotopic relationship between a subject and a mirror, explains,

> I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. (Foucault 1997, 353)

If design theory and practice is to operate in this space of the existing suburbs, it must acknowledge that the truth is somewhere between the image and its reflection as a manifestation of reality. It is also like squinting your eyes in order to focus on something you can't quite see or make out, while blurring out the rest in order to comprehend the whole.

Architecture, at its best, compels you and releases you at the same time, responding to who you truly are, but also reflecting the ideas of what you believe you could be. This thesis proposes an interior garden wrapped around the foot print of an existing path in a green belt. In a way, it does not disrupt flow, but possibly offers a reason to pause, or to change the direction and pace of movement. It is a point of both passage and reflection; possibly the strange juxtaposition of dream and reality in one space.
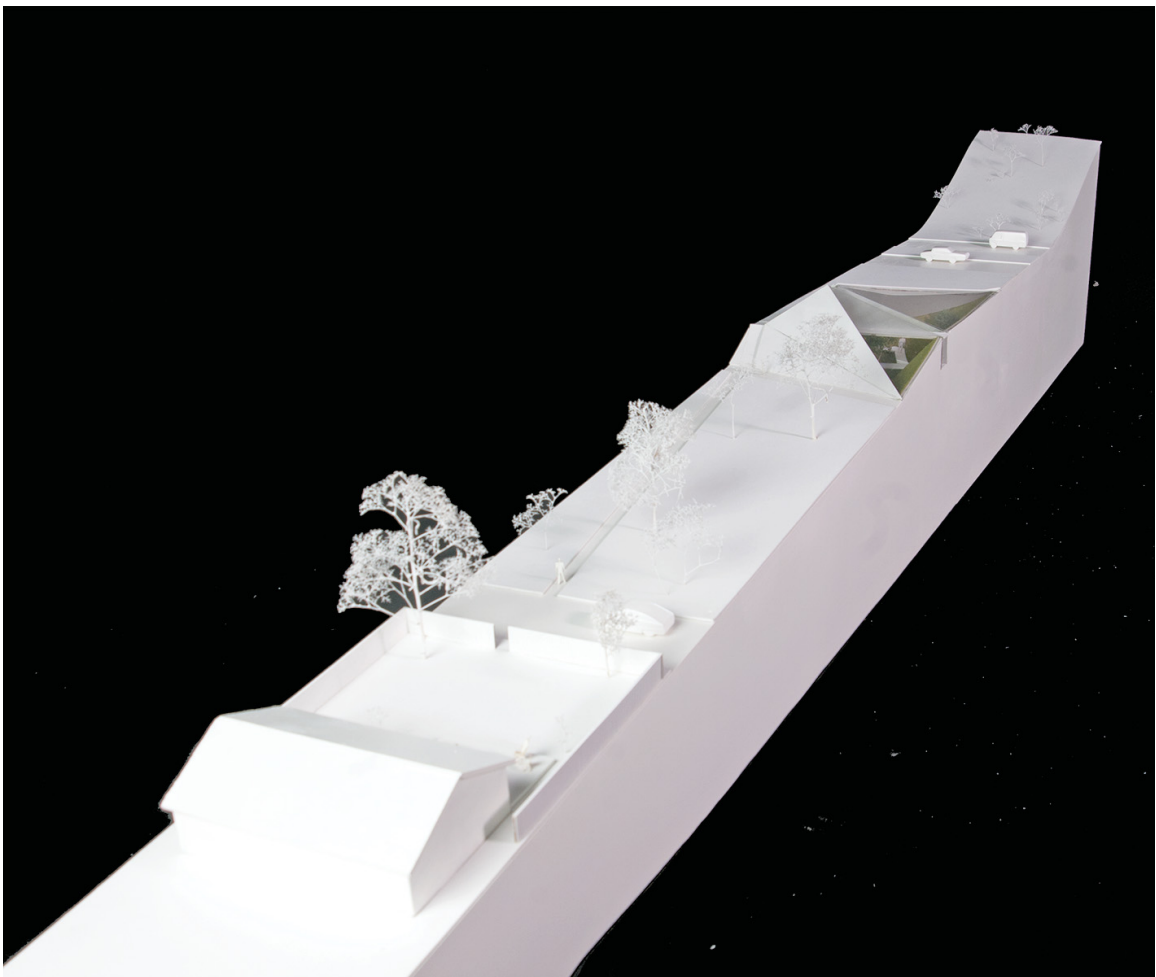

View of the backyard to Nose Hill Park

It is a boundless space of connections, the unreachable point of possibilities that offers a glimpse of the 'other side of the sky'. It is a space into which social relations are extended, beyond their own limits, into a gap that is betwixt and between, unlocatable, unrepresentable and impossible.

And yet that gap is an obligatory point of passage for different forms of social ordering. It is a space of integration and disintegration, of combination, resistance and disorder. It is a space of ordering... Yet no matter how quickly one moves towards it, the horizon always recedes from us at the same speed.

To reach the horizon would be to achieve a social order, an order in which order and goodness, order and resistance, agency and structure were in harmony.

(Hetherington 1997, 2004)
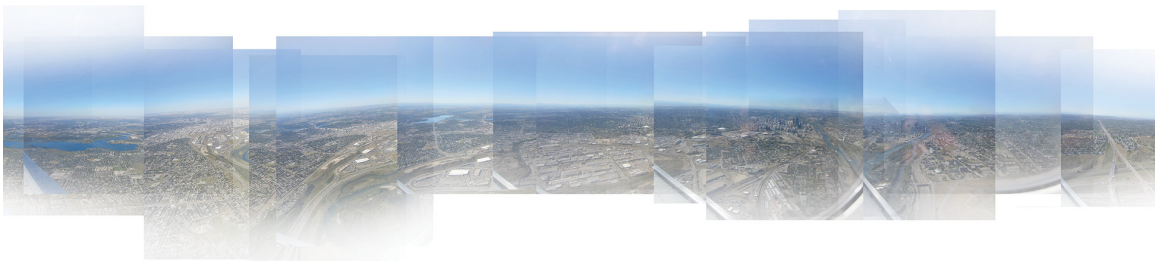
View from an airplane descending into Calgary

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