

**ACROSS 110th STREET: Breathing Life into
Harlem's Decaying Street Culture**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks to expand on the ways in which urban design can influence and foster the development of street culture. Gentrification has resulted in the deterioration of many cities that were well known for their rich and vibrant street culture. In particular, Harlem, New York City has experienced decay in its tradition of having a strong and lively street presence. With its busiest street lined with numerous vacant lots, W 125th St in Harlem is the ideal testing ground for a project that breathes life into a dying street culture.

Museums have the ability to spark urban regeneration and vitality. Taking cues from examples of successful museums, this project breaks free of the building envelope to create spaces that encourage and promote street culture activities. With a program that is heavily based in street and popular culture, a new cultural center provides support for this urban regeneration project.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

How can a new cultural center in Harlem encourage and promote the development of street culture and foster community development in the process?

Urban

Streets act as the corridors of our cities, weaving through and connecting fragmented elements of our urban fabric. Although their primary use is for circulation purposes, the activities taking place on the street cause a city to come 'alive' (Jacobs 1961, 72). The more people interact with each other and the urban environment, the better the city becomes.

Although the built environment has a profound impact on how we interact with the city, people have the ability to shape the world around them (Gehl, 2010, ix). The most successful examples of cities are those with streets bustling with activity and people, creating a dynamic and exciting environment to be part of. The Spanish steps in Rome, La Rambla in Barcelona, and the Nyhavn in Copenhagen (fig. 1, 2, 3) are all great examples of public streets that find their success in the interactions of people and the energy of the crowds that populate the sidewalk. Spaces that cultivate and celebrate street culture add richness and diversity to the composition and growth of modern cities. What was initially deemed an eyesore, the Federation



Fig. 1 Spanish Steps (Campbell 2008)



Fig. 2 La Rambla (BCN Rentals 2008)



Fig. 3 Nyhavn (Abrahamsen 1993) are examples of successful public corridors.



Fig. 4 Federation Square in Melbourne remains a popular public plaza despite its negative reviews from the architectural community (Sky Scraper City 2005).



Fig. 5 Skateboarders develop a better understanding of city and urban form through the interface of a skateboard (Harlemworld 2010).

Square project in Melbourne, Australia by LAB Architecture Studio has won several awards and is a popular destination for both tourists and locals (fig. 4). Its success is found in the public spaces created by the placement of the buildings that promote and encourage public interaction (Canizares 2005, 42). This thesis looks to focus on the urban aspects of street culture that originated on the streets of New York City and are highly influenced by hip-hop culture.

Culture and City

Street culture is a diverse and ever-changing subculture. Its widespread influences range from sport, art, music, and dance and it has had profound impacts on the evolution of these various streams of society. Street culture has the ability to shape the way a city is formed and can lead to a better understanding of how we understand the urban environment. Skateboarding is an activity that adapts to and exploits the physical environment (fig. 5) creating a heightened sense of awareness with the architecture of the city (Borden 2001, 203). The importance of the street culture in a city cannot be measured. In dense urban environments, street culture is accessible as soon as one ventures out their front door. Taking a cue from skateboarders and how they view and interact with the city, one can learn to appreciate the city around them. “The rich architectural and social

fabric of the city offers skateboarders a plethora of buildings, social relationships, times and spaces, many of which are free to access” (Borden 2001, 186). Our city streets provide people with the opportunity to experience a heightened sense of bodily and emotional awareness. When people take advantage of these opportunities, much like skateboarders do, it often results in a dynamic and exciting urban environment.

Skateboarding is only one of the many activities associated with street culture that finds participants more aware of their body and the world around them: streetball (playground basketball) which originated on the streets of New York City, finds the players running and jumping on hard asphalt courts; break dancers create spontaneous venues to turn and twist their bodies in various poses; graffiti artists use exaggerated gestures to create large bodies of work over urban canvases; markets find crowds clamoring with energy and excitement; and hip-hop artists translate their street experiences into lyrical prose that consist of the rhythm and beat of the streets. Street culture is not something that can be theorized or pinned down to one specific thing; it is only in the lived experience that street culture can be understood (Borden 2001, 202). It is therefore integral to the survival and development of street culture that people engage and interact with one another and the urban environment around them.

As a culture with a global influence, street culture has sparked the birth of many subcultures. In particular, sneaker culture has extremely close ties to street culture. The two are interchangeable and so closely related that it is often hard to distinguish between the two. All of the activities associated with sneaker culture have roots in street culture (fig. 6). Be it streetball, skateboarding, hip-hop music and dance or graffiti, sneaker culture has quietly grown over the past fifty years to become one of the world's largest subcultures (Garcia 2003, 12). Yet with its many popular influences, sneaker culture has evaded the spotlight and is still a relatively unknown entity. Influences from societal streams such as sport, music, dance, fashion, art, and the global market have made sneaker culture a phenomenon that has a wide crossover of interests. Although sneakers are the medium of the culture, it is the stories around them that make sneaker culture something worth learning about and experiencing. It is the symbiotic relationship between the two that forces people to experience sneaker culture while simultaneously experiencing street culture.

While a city's street culture is often one of the most exciting aspects of that city, its effect can have undesirable outcomes. As a city grows and expands, so to does society, which can result in the loss of street culture due to urban expansion (sprawl) and gentrification. Urban

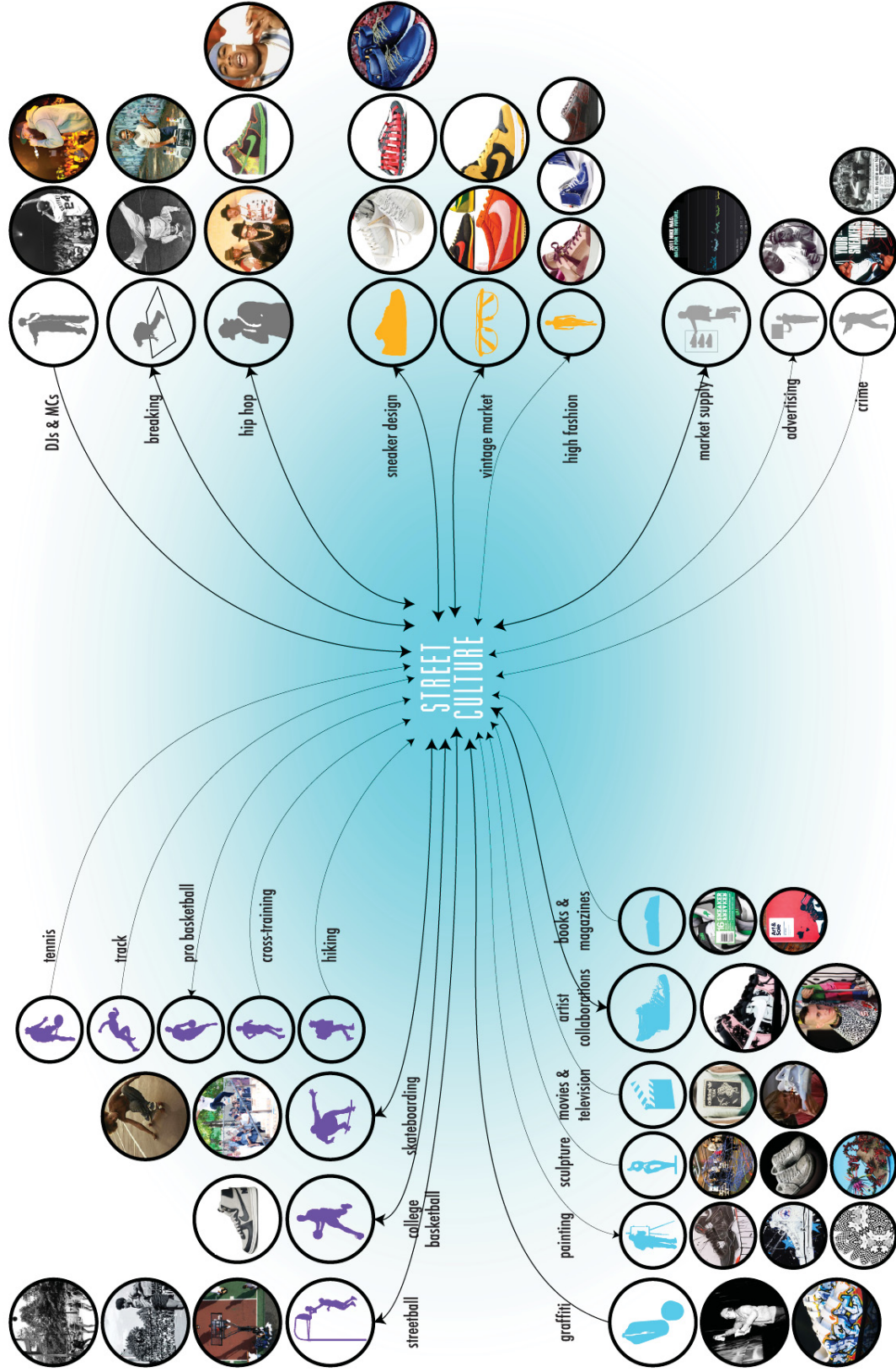


Fig. 6 Street culture influences 5

sprawl causes the deterioration of street culture due to its decrease in density and its cookie-cutter style housing that has minimal interaction to the street. Gentrification in cities, while maintaining a high density, forces ideals on a place, be it new residents or buildings. In recent years, Harlem, New York City has been going through a process of gentrification, which is detracting from its once rich and vibrant street culture.

Harlem

New York City fostered the development of street culture with its rich history of playground basketball (streetball), and as the birthplace of Hip-Hop, MCs, DJs, graffiti writers and B-boys and B-Girls (Garcia 2003, 12). New York City is often considered the mecca of street culture and by mapping the various elements which influence street culture, it is clear to see that there is a divide between Upper Manhattan and Lower Manhattan south of W 110th St (fig. 7). While tourism is a major part of New York City's economy, Harlem is seeing very little of this revenue. Tour buses that venture north of Central Park drive through Harlem in an attempt to showcase its rich history of street culture, but make no effort to experience it firsthand (Golden 2003, 127). As noted before, one must participate in the lived experience of street culture in order to really understand its true qualities.

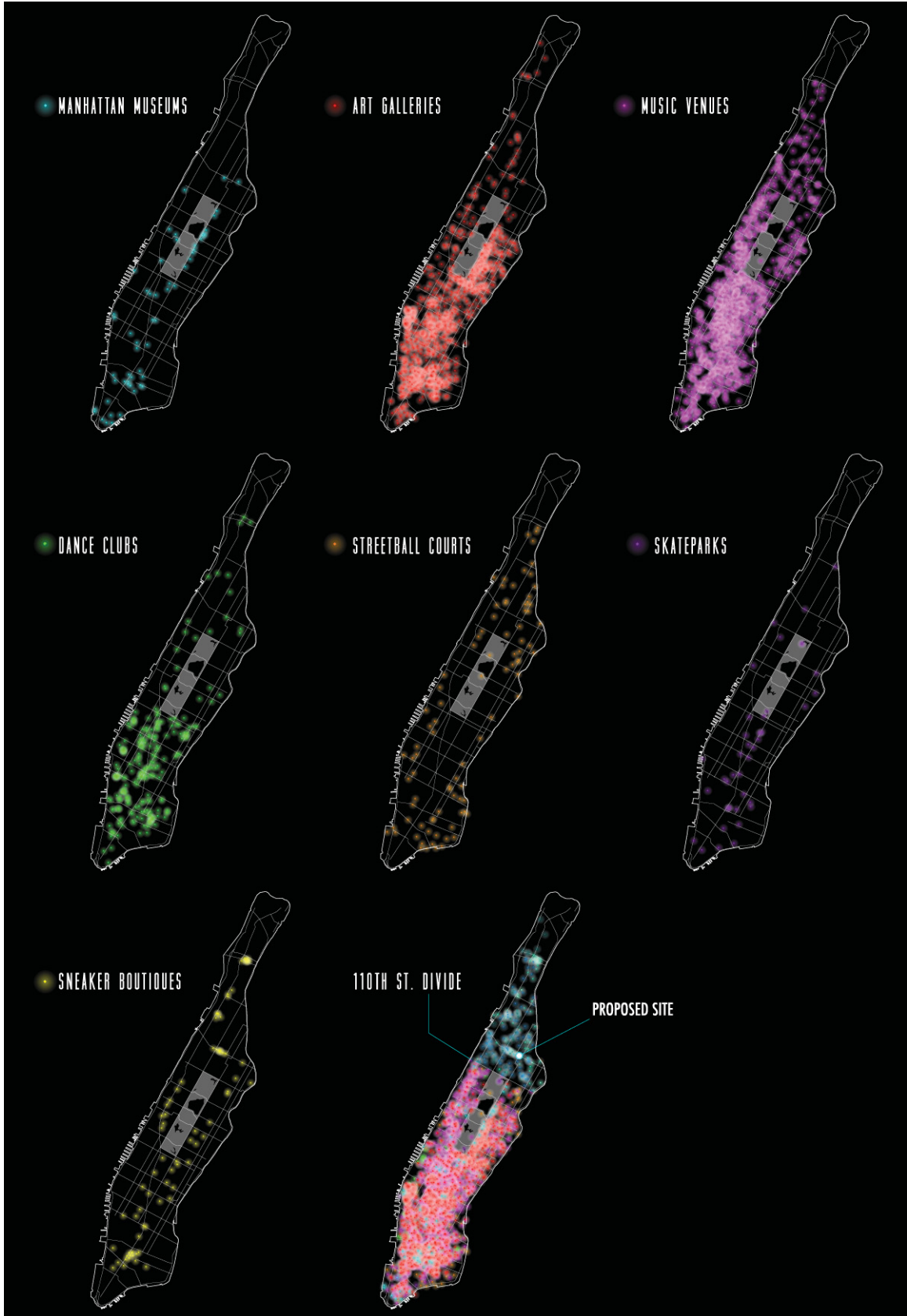


Fig. 7 Street culture in Manhattan

New York City is referred to as the birthplace of street culture; it was in Harlem that it found its foothold. The activities that are commonly associated with street culture share a symbiotic relationship with African American culture. Nowhere in the world is that more evident than in Harlem. It is important to note the relationship between street culture and African American culture as the two are so closely linked. It is because of African American culture, and the fact that there is a high concentration of it in Harlem that spawned its prominence in the street culture world.

Harlem's rich history in African-American culture, music, streetball, and community pride are all factors that led to the emergence of its vibrant street culture. Hip-hop music and streetball embody the qualities of street culture in their emphasis on style and Harlem is often regarded as the birthplace of both of these. The Rucker Park streetball tournament on W 155th was the premier venue for Streetballers to showcase their skills in the 1960s (fig. 8). Hip-hop takes cues from jazz and soul music, both of which have deep roots in Harlem with the Apollo Theater and Lenox Lounge jazz club. My intention is to revive Harlem's decaying street culture and raise it to a level of prominence it held in years past (fig. 9).

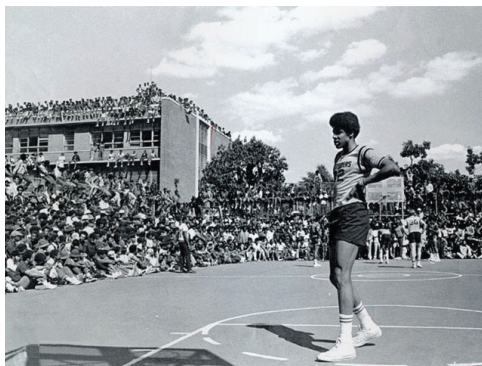


Fig. 8 Rucker Park in Harlem is considered the mecca of streetball (Purcell 2011).

This thesis embraces the aspects of street culture that originated in African American circles,

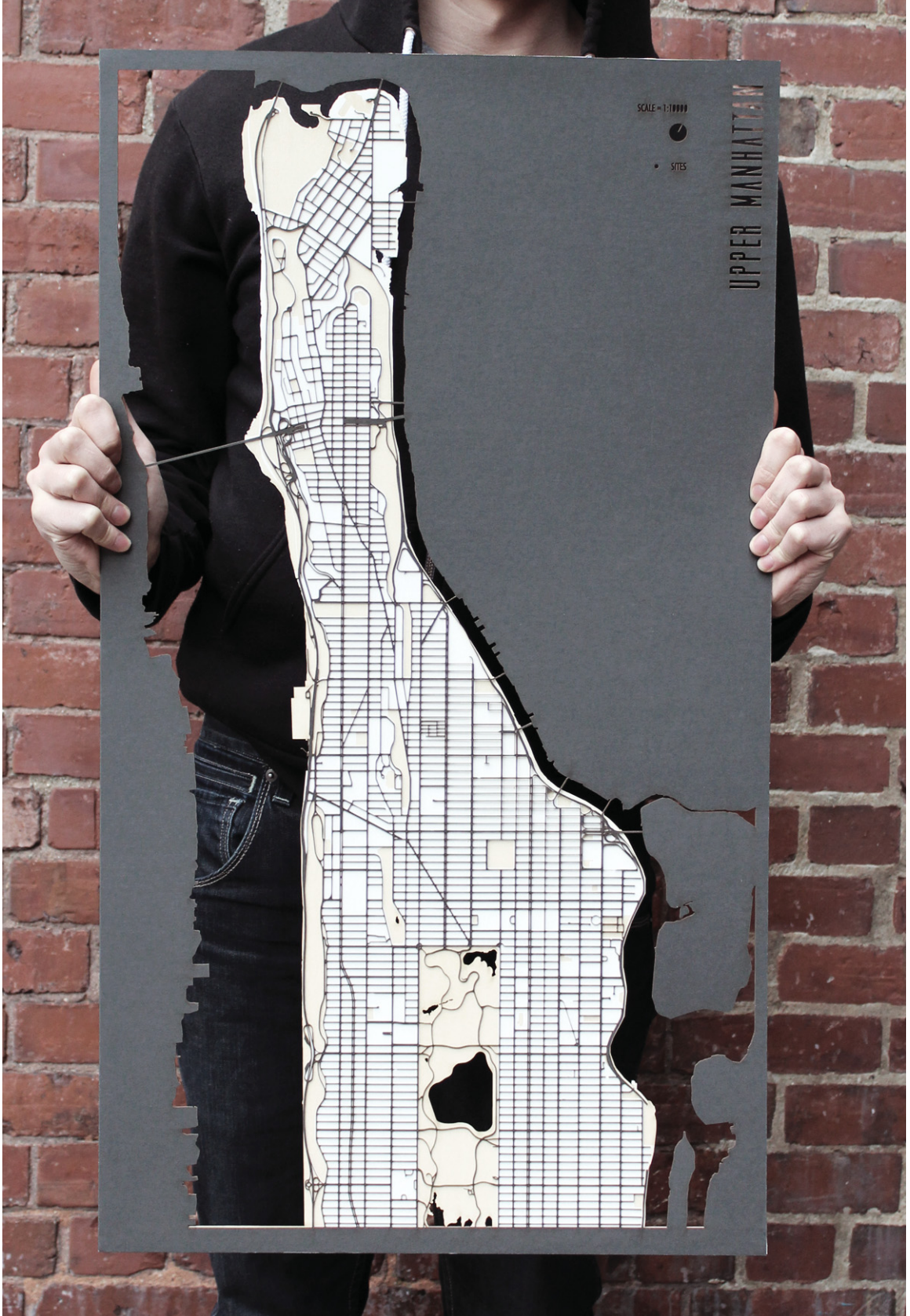


Fig. 9 Upper Manhattan

mainly streetball and hip-hop. The program responds to the observed evolution of these aspects of street culture. Acknowledgment of contemporary tenancies of racial diversification and inclusiveness led to further development of programmatic layers of street culture. These activities, skating, art appreciation, market trading, and shopping, are activities which have emerge from cultures that are not race specific. Although these activities tend towards a younger audience, they are widespread in their spectrum of interest. The culmination of which creates a dynamic mix of people that constitute a larger collective of street culture enthusiast.

The book *Harlemworld: Metropolis as Metaphor* published by the Studio Museum in Harlem, is a collection of essays, proposals, and documentations of Harlem by architects, planners and artists of African descent. Most of the accounts give an overview of the change Harlem is currently undergoing; middle-class white people moving into their neighborhoods. This shift results in high-rise condo developments which are detracting from what Harlem is best known for, its dynamic street culture.

In general, building designs in Harlem stifle exposure of its renowned street quality (Golden 2003, 115-116). Harlem is a fluid city within a metropolis, and the buildings should reflect that characteristic. One of the most exciting aspects of designing in Harlem is the ability to showcase



Fig. 10 West 125th Street in Harlem (bryan4887 2010).

its culture and make it an integral part of the design. To achieve the best exposure to a 'street experience' in Harlem, W 125th St. is the ideal testing ground for this project (fig. 10). While it remains the busiest street in Harlem, numerous vacant lots along the street are detracting from its once vibrant street culture. These lots offer exciting opportunities to introduce new urban elements that encourage and promote street culture related activities.

Museums

Interest in museums and museum culture is at a record level. On average, 2.3 million people visit an American museum per day, making it a great place to showcase cultural artifacts and educate users on various cultural aspects (Ragsdale 2009, 11). Throughout the last century, we have seen a shift in the societal role of museums and galleries. They have developed from single purposed display centers into today's culturally complex institutions that include such ancillary activities as: auditorium events, restaurants, shops, and libraries. The modern day museum has shifted from a tourist destination to a kind of cultural community center (Jodidio 2011, 17).

In looking at New York City as the potential site for a new cultural center, a general analysis of existing museums/cultural centers and their role in the community is necessary. While most museums in New York City are introverted experiences, there are recent examples that



Fig. 11 A public art festival put on by the New Museum of Contemporary Art (Daily 2011).

break free of the building envelope. The New Museum of Contemporary Art (NMCA) in the Lower East Side by architects SANAA, uses the city as a gallery and exhibition space (fig. 11). This provides a good example of a building that concerns itself with the ‘lived experience’ of street culture. By utilizing the street, the New Museum engages the public to raise awareness of the prominent art movement in the neighborhood. Similar to Harlem, the Bowery has also been going through a process of gentrification within the past decade and the level of community participation is all the more crucial in determining the success of the project. With its renowned collection of museums and galleries and its rich and vibrant street culture, New York City is an ideal testing ground for a ‘new’ cultural center, one that acts as both an educational tool and as a catalyst for community culture.

Museums have taken great strides in recent years to include additional programmatic elements oriented around neighborhood use and have, in some instances (such as the aforementioned New Museum), been successful in integrating the community. However, this integration only flows in one direction. While The New Museum engages visitors to experience the local community by holding festivals on the street, it makes little attempt to encourage local community members into the activities and use of the museum. Typically, visitors of museums are confined to the building, which allows very

little exposure to the external environment. This restricts users from experiencing the urban environment and the exciting cultural characteristics it has to offer. My intention is to both bring the local community in, and encourage users of the cultural center to explore activities beyond the building envelope.

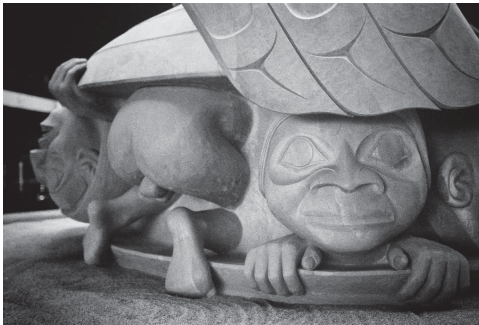


Fig. 12 The UBC Museum of Anthropology uses techniques of visual persuasion to convey a sense of importance (teneighty 2009).

Using techniques of visual persuasion, “museums have the unique ability to change the way people think and feel, affected indirectly through the manipulation of things” (Ragsdale 2009, 1). Through various design decisions, a museum can tell a different story based on the manner in which items are displayed, how users travel through the building, the quality of the space and the overall design and intentions of the museum. The UBC Museum of Anthropology uses techniques of visual persuasion to present its artifacts as fine art, conveying a meaning of importance (fig. 12). The roles of boutique museums (smaller, more programmatically focused museums) have the potential to make a stronger case for their contents (Ragsdale 2009, 77). This is due to their narrowed focus and clearer persuasive intent.



Fig. 13 The Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, Germany, uses the external environment as much as the internal to display its contents (Gonzalez 2011).

With a subject that is in its natural environment on the street, automotive museums have been very popular in recent years. The Mercedes-Benz Museum by UN Studio incorporates ideas to ‘place’ the contents of the museum in the outside world (fig. 13). Its fragmented façade

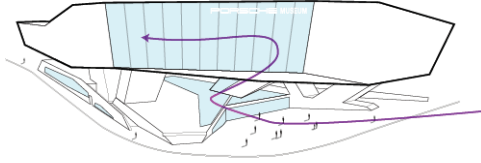


Fig. 14 The Porsche Museum is conceived as an extension of the urban landscape.

allows visitors to see past the cars in the exhibition to the road beyond, where the automobile is truly in its natural habitat. Similarly, the Porsche Museum by Delugon Meissl Associated Architects treats the interior of the museum as an extension of the urban landscape (fig. 14). Its large, open, flowing spaces are reminiscent of the external environment. With these two examples the museum experience fails in the fact that one can only experience a car by driving a car. For one to experience street culture, one needs to be on the street.

Landform Buildings

A project such as this concerns itself with the relationship between the street and built form and the merging of the two. Existing museums and buildings that emerge from and create landscapes provide tested examples. I look to expand and improve on some of these characteristics. The Yokohama International Port Terminal project in Japan by Foreign Office Architects creates occupiable spaces for the public to freely use (fig. 15). Its undulating faceted surface creates distinct zones that lend themselves to particular activities, from relaxing to performance spaces. Similarly the EWHA Women's University in Seoul by Dominique Perrault is more of a landscape project than a work of architecture. The large cut-out creates a valley that has a gentle slope at one end, and large stairway at the other, creating seating for

an open-air amphitheater (fig. 16). The connection with the ground is strong in this project, where the lines of each are blurred between landscape and infrastructure. This blurring of landscape and building is something I am incorporating in the design of a new cultural center. My intent is for the design to be a building of the site and not simply on the site.

Traditionally, museums have adopted the role of narrators, telling the story of a particular culture or subject. Author Sophia Psarra sees narrative as "a form of representation bound with sequence, space and time" (Psarra 2009, 2). I would argue that this is not the case and with the introduction of a new cultural center, I intend to reinforce the importance of street culture by letting the source (the street) act as the narrator. This allows people to experience the culture and interpret it for themselves.

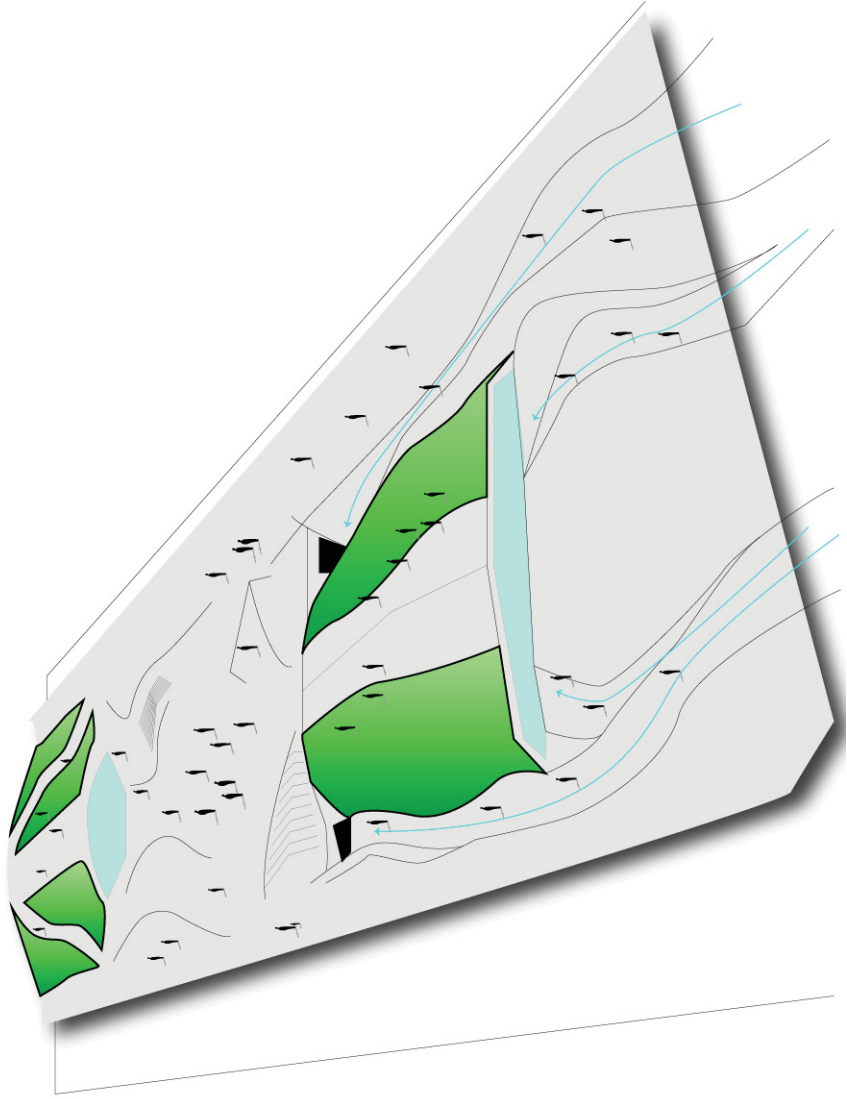
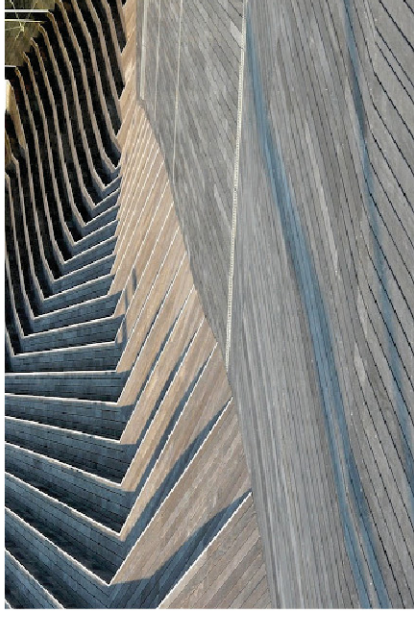


Fig. 15 Yokohama International Port Terminal by Foreign Office Architects in Yokohama, Japan 16

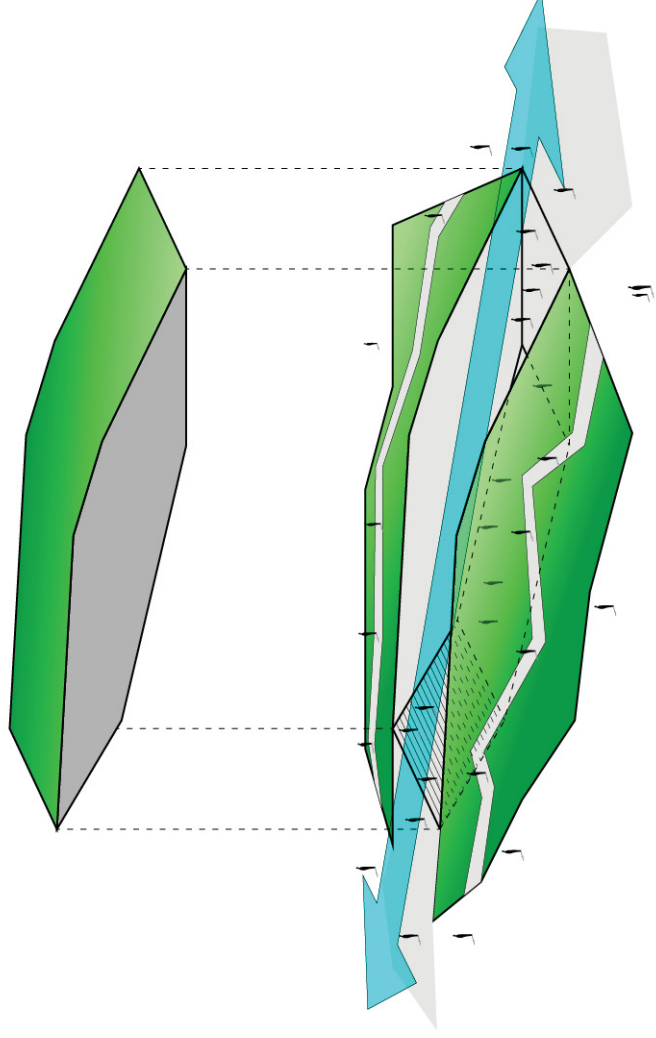
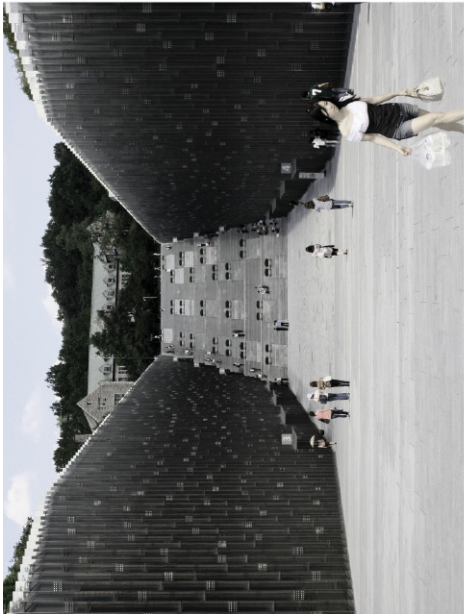


Fig. 16 EWHA Women's University by Dominique Perrault Architects in Seoul, Korea

Proposal/Program

To address Harlem's decaying street presence, this thesis introduces a new cultural center. It engages both the street culture and surrounding neighborhood in an attempt to preserve the richness and rhythm of the community and breathe new life into a slowly decaying street culture. The importance of street culture is paramount in any city, and in Harlem that importance is even greater. Throughout its history, Harlem has been known for its rich and vibrant street and as a result is often considered the capital of African American culture. For that culture to fade away as a result of gentrification, New York City would not only lose one of its most exciting and diverse areas, but America would lose an important piece of cultural history. This new cultural center aims to communicate, cross-culturally, a sense of street culture's quality, meaning, and importance in society (Clifford, 1997, 121).

In the earlier analysis of street culture activities it was clear to see the divide between Upper Manhattan and Lower Manhattan south of 110th St. By introducing a new major street culture node into Harlem, I look to create a catalyst for other street culture hotbeds which would grow from W 125th St. and eventually tie into the existing network of street culture found in Manhattan (fig. 17). This new network typology is a hybridized version of a decentralized and

distributed network.

“The many empty sites and condemned properties [that line W 125th St.] are gaps in the story of the place [that] offer exceptional sites for these narratives” (Golden 2003, 116). As a three-phase plan, I propose to develop one of these vacant sites as the initial phase (fig. 18). This will act as main hub for the project, providing a reference point as the secondary and tertiary stages begin to unfold. The secondary phase looks to introduce urban elements along W 125th St. that will spark the rebirth of street culture and its many activities. These include such ordinary elements as benches, bus stops, kiosks, signage, pedestrian bridges, and bike racks. The difference being that these elements will be designed to encourage the many activities related to street culture, such as: streetball, skateboarding, graffiti writing, hip-hop music and break dancing. The third phase of the project expands from W 125th St. bleeding into other areas of Manhattan, eventually creating a series of nodes where street culture flourishes. The density of the city provides a highly walkable path between the sites, giving the user ample opportunity to experience the dynamic street culture of Harlem and New York City. This network creates a sequence of object – space – object - space rhythms that are reminiscent of successful skateboarding areas (Borden 2001, 195).

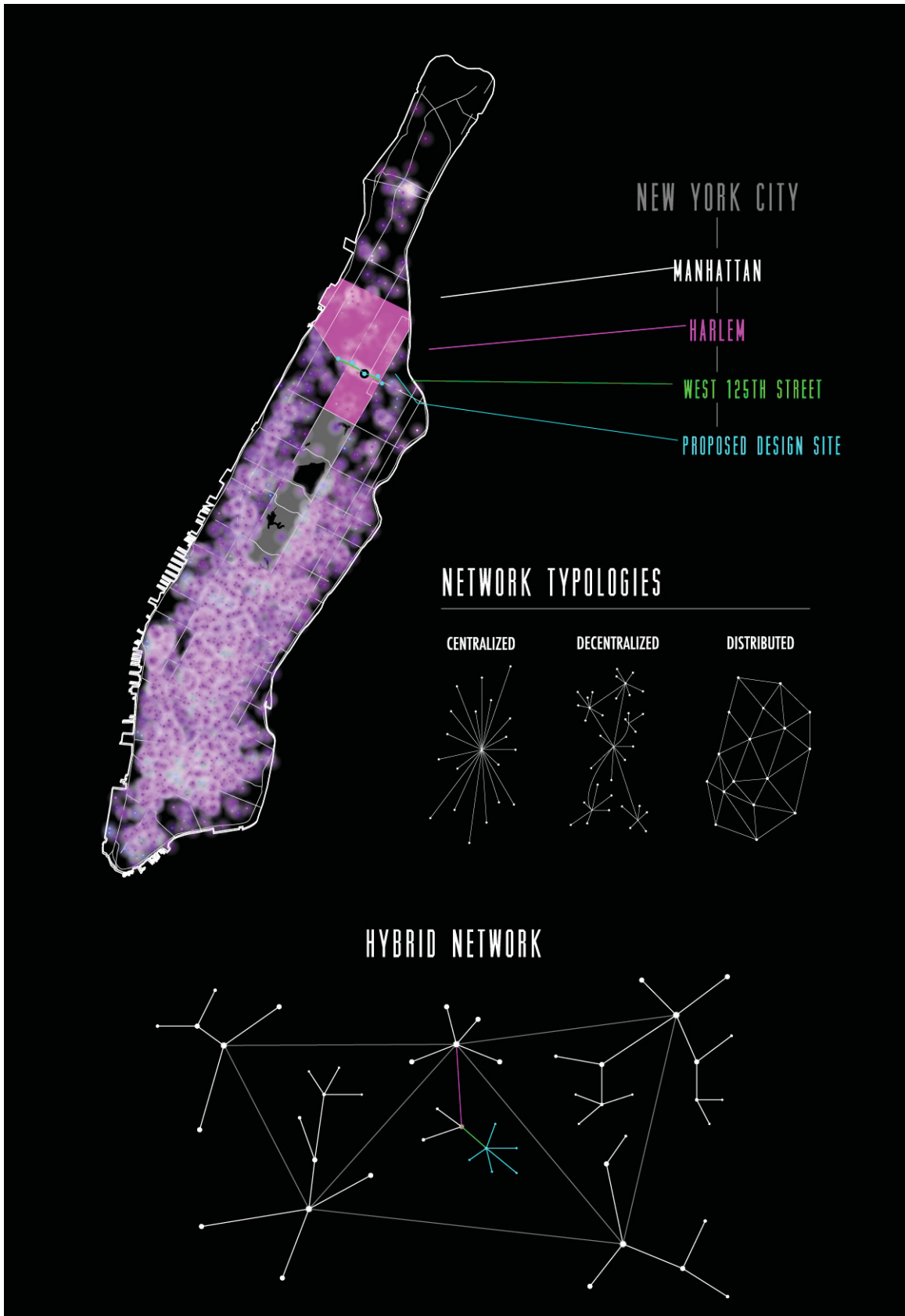


Fig. 17 How Harlem fits within the existing street culture network of Manhattan.



Fig. 18 Urban expansion

In its initial stage, the cultural center's various elements will be located in close proximity to one another along the many vacant lots that line W 125th St. By breaking up the program, visitors are given enough time to get a feel for the street culture that Harlem has to offer. Due to the urban nature of the program, the time spent on the street offers the opportunity to showcase street culture in its natural environment. The street not only becomes a corridor to get from one event space to the next; it becomes part of the cultural center as an ever-changing display of street culture.

By expanding the program of the project, using the street as an integral part of the design, user groups are immersed in the "the shifting flows of pedestrians on [W] 125th Street, [which] comprise a dynamic street of neighborhood life that has, in many instances, eluded the watchful eye of the architect and planner" (Golden 2003, 28). In addition, by including outdoor activity space in the program, the cultural center will act as a hub for the public creating a strong sense of community. The open space also addresses one of the concerns laid out in Harlemworld.

As a means of supporting this exhibition of street culture, the program of the cultural center focuses on sneaker culture (fig. 19). Whereas street culture is by-in-large something that cannot be pinned down and does not have a particular focus, sneaker culture invariably always

1. Hip-Hop Dance Platform
2. Service Core
3. Graffiti Wall
4. Male Restroom
5. Female Restroom
6. Hip-Hop Dance Studio
7. Storage + Mechanical Access
8. Administration
9. Street Culture Art Gallery
10. Exhibition
11. Reception
12. Main Entrance
13. Streetball Court

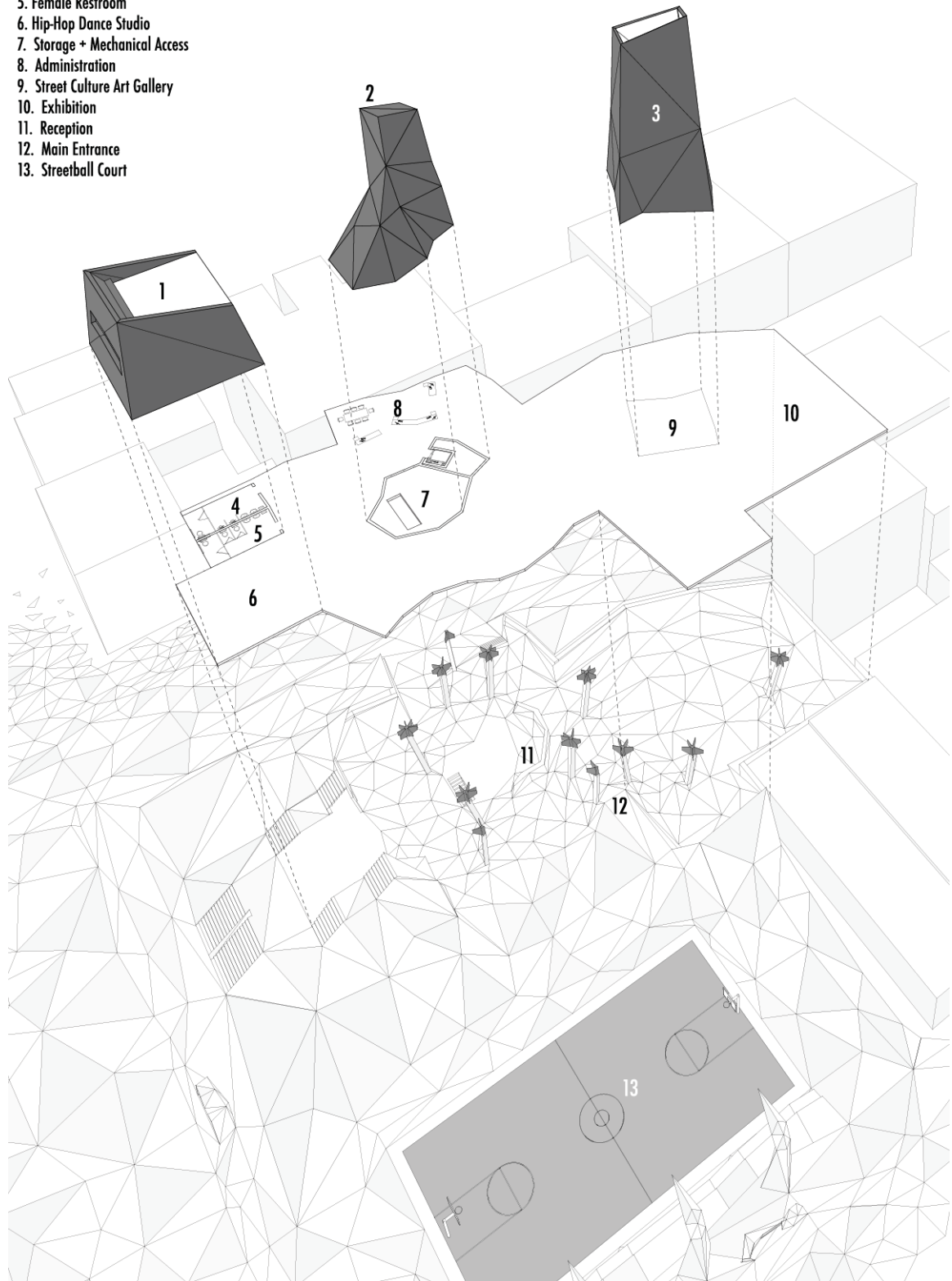


Fig. 19 Programmatic elements

comes back to the love of a particular piece of everyday clothing: the sneaker. Due to the array of influences that sneaker culture draws from, and the fact that it is heavily rooted in street and popular culture, user groups of a museum of this nature are just as varied. One need not be a sneakerhead (a sneaker fanatic) to have an interest in this cultural center. Those concerned with music, fashion or art, for example, will find something stimulating. Just as the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto describes the experience, a program such as this is 'for the curious.' By breaking up the program into separate components, one can visit one of the sites based on their specific area of interest. My aim is that people will be surprised and excited about what they have seen; enticing them to visit other elements in this urban design.



Fig. 20 One of Parc de la Villette's 'activators of space' (Paris-Aurelien 2011).



Fig. 21 A cultural festival on the parks grounds engages local community members (Entrée to Black Paris 2010).

As a way of engaging the local public, the cultural center will include activity space for events that help in the fostering of community pride and development. Just as Bernard Tschumi did in Le Parc de la Villette in Paris (fig. 20, 21), the design incorporates 'activators of space,' promoting use in less direct ways than programmed buildings (Tschumi 1987, 16). Outdoor recreational space will provide areas for these activities to occur while giving Harlem much needed open space in the process (Golden 2003, 7).

An inventory of the existing cultural buildings

in the area and what they offer the community was integral to developing the program for a new cultural center. The Apollo Theater offers programs to the community for those interested in performing arts such as music and theatre, and the Studio Museum in Harlem provides art classes for all age ranges. These account for a few of the activities associated with street culture. In order to cover all areas, the cultural center will include a hip-hop dance studio and spaces for the athletic aspect of street culture to thrive (streetball court and skateboard friendly surfaces).

While some people may not directly associate themselves with street culture, they may support one of the numerous activities that exhibit its many facets. By including outdoor activity space within the program of the cultural center, I am providing public grounds that showcase these various aspects: streetball tournaments, skateable surfaces, outdoor Hip-Hop concerts, canvases for street art and flexible/market space. These activities both engage the community members and nurture the development of street culture. The addition of market space as an element offers a location to host national sneaker conventions (sneaker pimps, dunkx-change, sneaker con, etc) and pay homage to Harlem's street market culture that finds crowds clamoring with energy (fig. 22) (Golden 2003, 128). Street kiosks are included in the set of urban elements which will be scattered through-



Fig. 22 Sneaker conventions are reminiscent of street vendor shopping, similar to those found on W 125th St. (Mahvee-clothing 2011).

out Harlem, as the program grows and expands I hope to introduce the street style vendors into other areas of the city. The introduction of open space on the site also creates a new venue for the W 125th St. Farmers Market, where people can buy fresh local produce and help support local businesses in a comfortable environment. The current site of the Market is on a barren concrete plaza outside of the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building just 300m from the museum's central building. The tough, hard surfaces of this plaza lend themselves to skateboarding rather than a Farmers Market and as one of the sites of the second phase, I intend to take full advantage of these qualities in creating an environment that is appealing to skateboarders.

At the corner of W 125th St. and Malcolm X Blvd, the main building will house event spaces, outdoor activity space, administration, and additional support spaces. It will serve as the 'headquarters' of the cultural center and is the central hub for future growth. It is here the user will learn about the history and progression of sneaker culture as a local movement to its present influence at a global scale. The site lends itself to accessibility to local residents and community members as it is along major transit routes and within walking distance to other cultural buildings in Harlem. This freedom offers opportunities to create outdoor spaces that promote use in less direct ways than programmed

buildings.

Other programmatic elements include a permanent art gallery, temporary exhibition space, possible sneaker boutiques, and outdoor public space. These elements of the program are distributed along the vacant lots on W 125th St., creating a cultural spine that runs through Harlem. These sites that line W 125th St. offer great locations for both public urban spaces and new exciting design opportunities. An example being the vacant lot located adjacent to the historic Apollo Theatre (fig. 23). A permanent art gallery would compliment the creative energy of the area as a result of such cultural buildings as the Apollo and the Studio Museum in Harlem.



Fig. 23 Neighboring the Apollo Theater, a gallery would gain exposure to both locals and tourists (Woods 2009).

As sneaker customizations rose in popularity from the '80s to its legitimized business of present day, artists have played an integral role in the development of sneaker culture. Sport brands have shifted from looking to athletes to add credibility to their products and now look to artists and designers (Intercity 2008, 8). Artist-brand collaborations have often lost associations with footwear and crossed over into the wearable art realm. There have been many exhibitions where sneakers are the subject and/or the medium of art, but they tend to be temporary exhibitions that have limited exposure (fig. 24). By housing these pieces in a permanent art gallery, my intent is to showcase the recent trend of artist interpretation of sneakers.



Fig. 24 One of the many examples of sneaker inspired art (Radcliff 2009).

The Apollo Theater acts as a valuable resource

for hosting functions, and screenings for films showcasing aspects of sneaker/street culture (*Just For Kicks*, *Style Wars*, *Air Force 1: The Anatomy of an Urban Legend*, etc).

The other sites that line W 125th St. are envisioned as public spaces that provide both green space and act as meeting grounds for street culture activities and as support for the surrounding businesses. It is in these types of spaces that skateboarders flock, adopting and exploiting the built environment in a heightened interaction with the city and its built manifestations (Borden 2001, 200). In addition to appealing to skateboarders, these spaces offer exhibition areas for graffiti and street art to happen and make the transition from what is often thought of as a crime to works of art. The scattered areas are conceived as elements that unfold from the cultural spine of W 125th St. and as the program and cultural center expand over time, the system evolves from a series of distributed elements into a network of sneaker/street culture nodes throughout New York City. Using these new spaces, I hope to bring visitors who might feel alien to street culture into a higher state of urban awareness. What initially starts by doing and looking, evolves into seeing and feeling (Borden 2001, 202). Visitors are encouraged to interact and engage with the city, developing a better understanding of the culture and helping to foster its development in the process.

CHAPTER 2: DESIGN

Building of the Site

The function of sneakers has changed since its first instance as a tennis shoe in the 1890s' to its cultural iconic status of present day (Vanderbilt 1998, 9). As an item that takes design inspiration from many different things, it borrows heavily from the language of automotive design. Cars are often designed with sleek curves that suggest the car is in motion even when it is still. Sneakers are very similar, appearing as though they are in a state of perpetual motion. As a compliment to the dynamic and rhythmic street presence on W 125th St., the design of the building and the supporting urban elements will suggest movement in their composition. Much like car manufacturers conduct wind tests to streamline the shape of cars, I have analyzed and deconstructed the sneaker, drawing inspiration for a design language that compliments the animated nature of Harlem. Based on this analysis, I found that a sneaker is constructed of multiple components that work together to form an overall structure. Primary, secondary, and tertiary elements are layered together to create a singular object. Through abstraction, the essence of the shape and characteristic of a sneaker can be found (fig. 25).

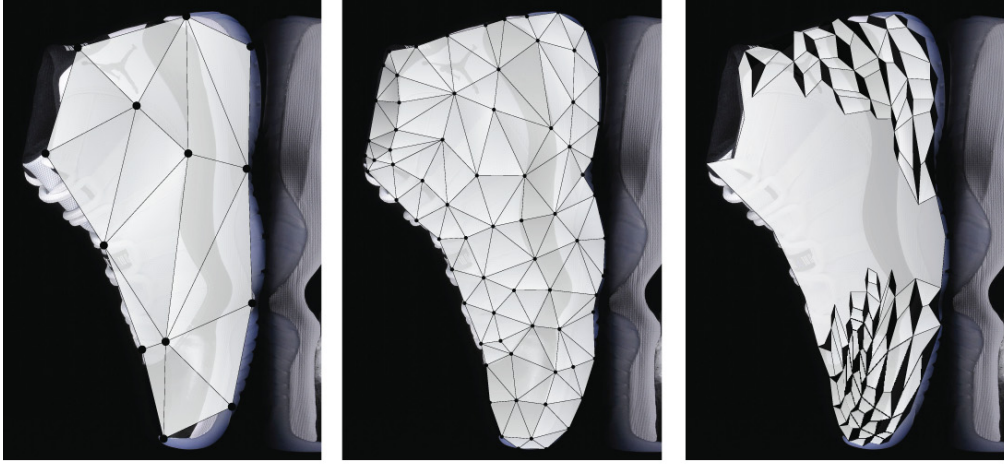


Fig. 25 Sneaker deconstruction and analysis 30

Finding the balance between curved surfaces and a planar language, the design will be conceived as an articulated surface composed of many facets. The built environment consists largely of horizontal and vertical elements (ground plane and buildings). Our manufactured landscapes of roads, sidewalks, and parks is by in large how we move through the city and the transition to vertical buildings is a harsh one that denies occupation or use of the building envelope. Diagonal elements mediate the horizontality of the ground and the verticality of the building, creating an interstitial space where “the distinction between occupiable surface and enclosing surface is minimized,” (Allen and McQuade 2011, 78) activating the building envelope and bridging the distinction between figure and ground.

Kit of Parts

The planar language of the design finds its success in the accessibility of occupying the building envelope. In order to facilitate a number of different uses, a set of gradients are developed with specific uses in mind and lend themselves to adaptability in an ever changing and evolving urban environment such as New York City (fig. 26). The set of gradients are the constituents of a ‘kit of parts’ used for the design buildings and other various urban elements. The interchangeability between the gradients offer limitless iterations of design, while its expressive formal

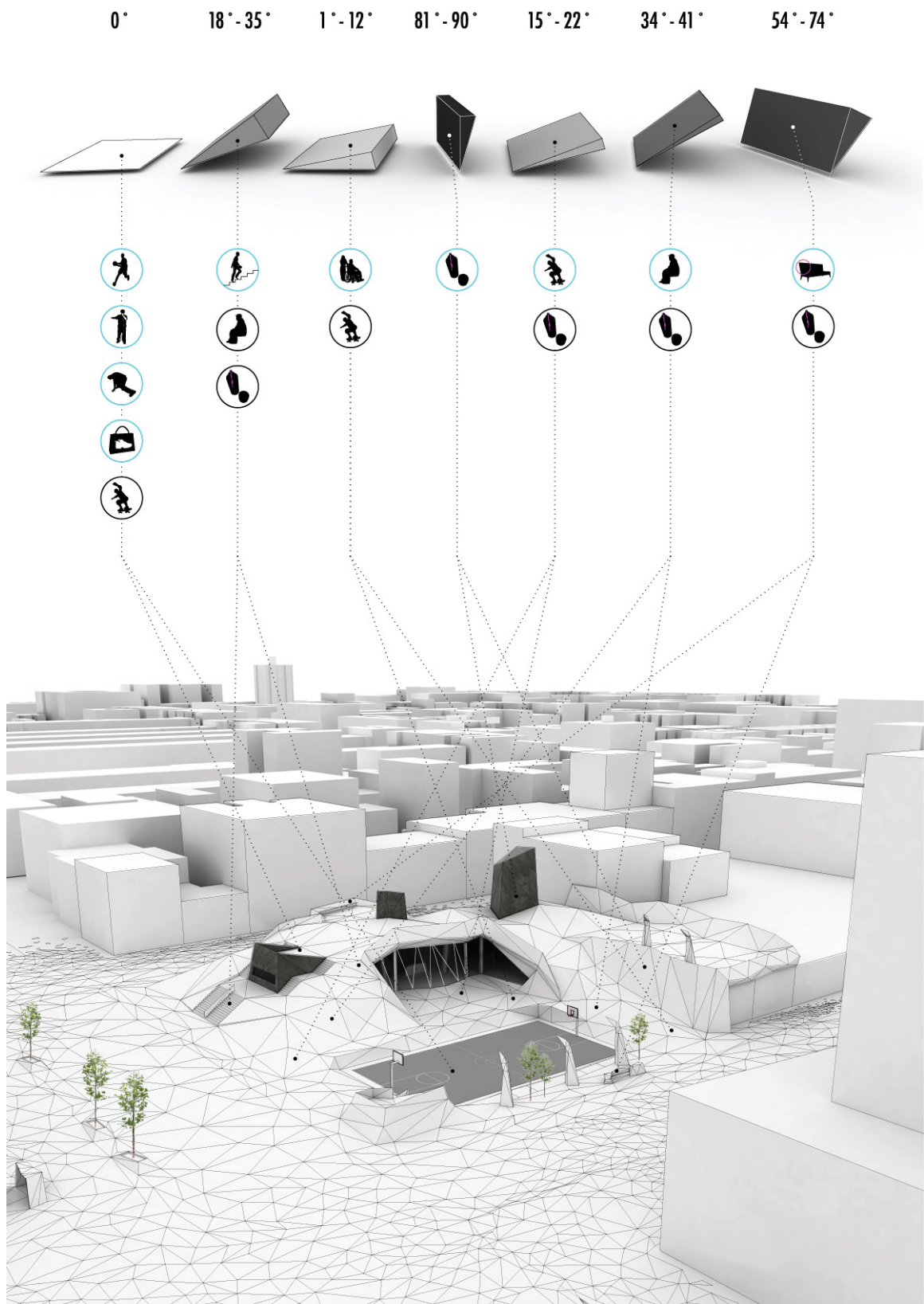


Fig. 26 Kit of parts

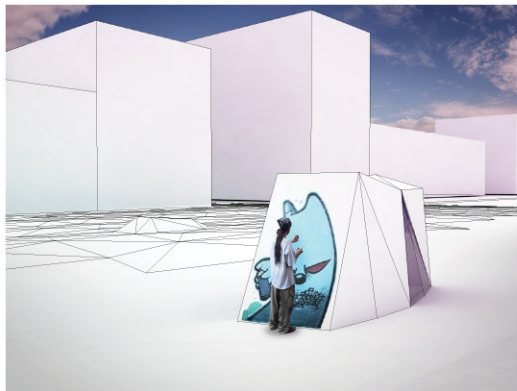
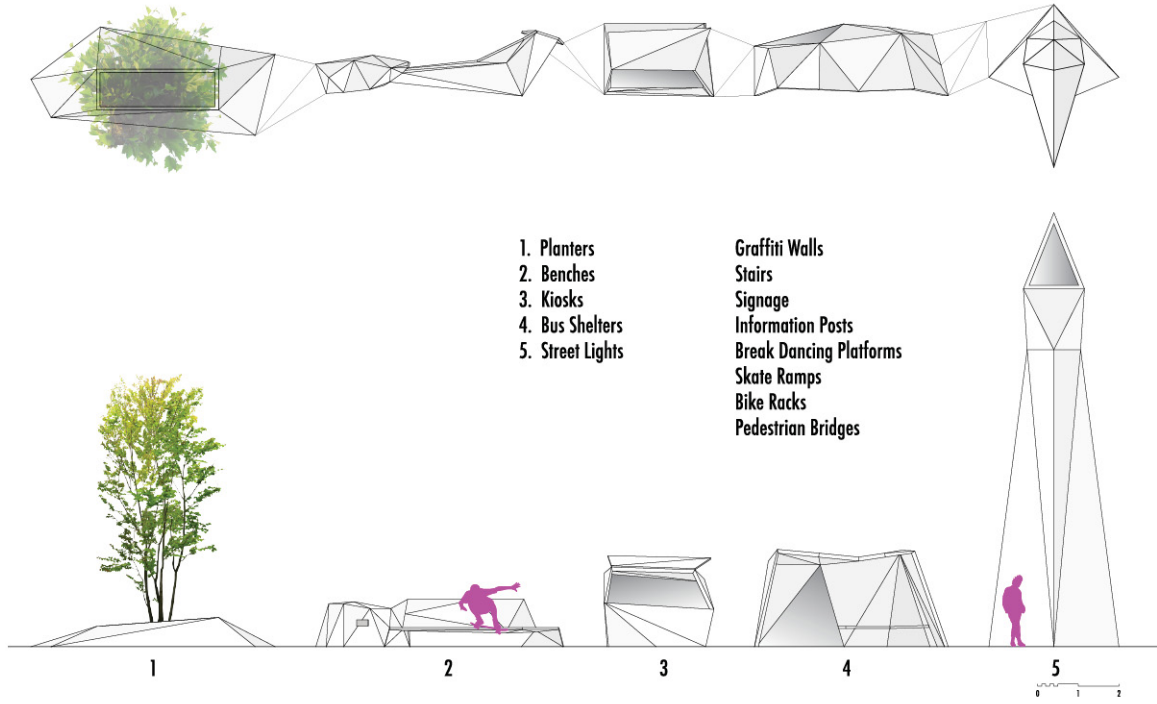


Fig. 27 Urban elements

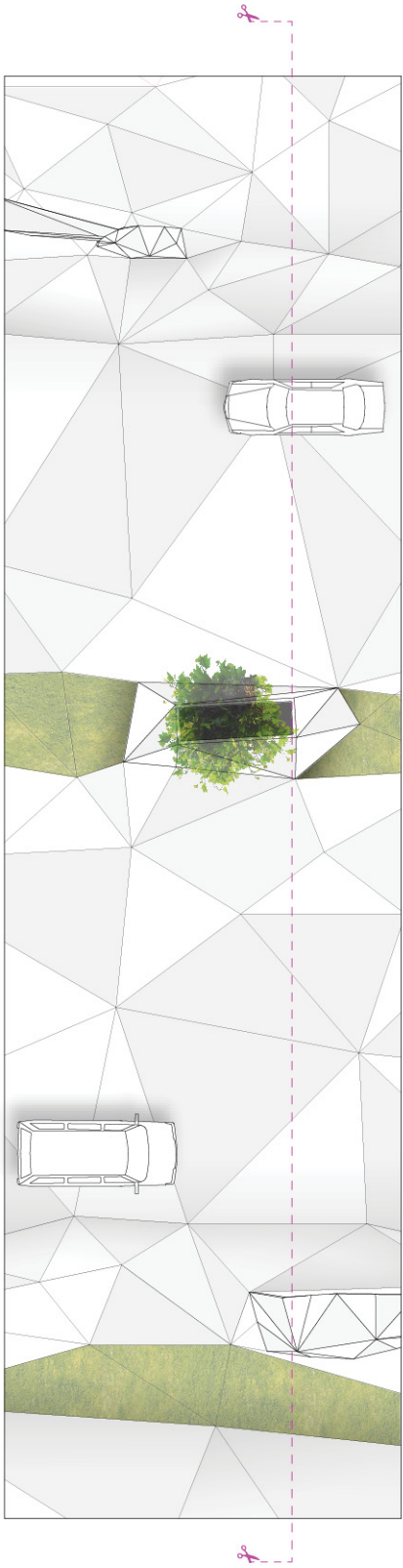
language creates a strong visual connection, linking the elements together even if they are scattered throughout the city. Furthermore, the planar language of the design is highly flexible; one that can be applied to both the scale of a building or that of a bench (fig. 27).

Cultural Center Design

Due to the urban nature of the program, the exchange between the interior and exterior environment is a critical threshold that must blur the notions between street and building. The building is conceived as an extension of the urban landscape, creating a faceted form that emerges from the street. The design goes so far as to alter the hardscape elements surrounding the site, manipulating the surfaces of such things as curbs and in turn, creating 'shared space' (fig. 28). This concept was developed by Dutch traffic engineer Hans Monderman which strips the roadway of regular traffic controllers such as curbs, signs, lights, and traffic markings creating a shared space where driving, walking, cycling, become integrated activities. Subtle differences in grade, along with the strategic placing of urban elements define car lanes and provide points of reference for pedestrians in this shared space (fig. 29). These slight changes blur the line between where the street ends and the building begins, strengthening the relationship between the two elements. As a means of unifying the various sites, the articu-



Fig. 28 Perspective showing shared space. 35



Road Construction: 200mm Concrete Slab
 225mm Crushed Stone Base
 500mm Gravel Sub-base
 Soil Sub-grade

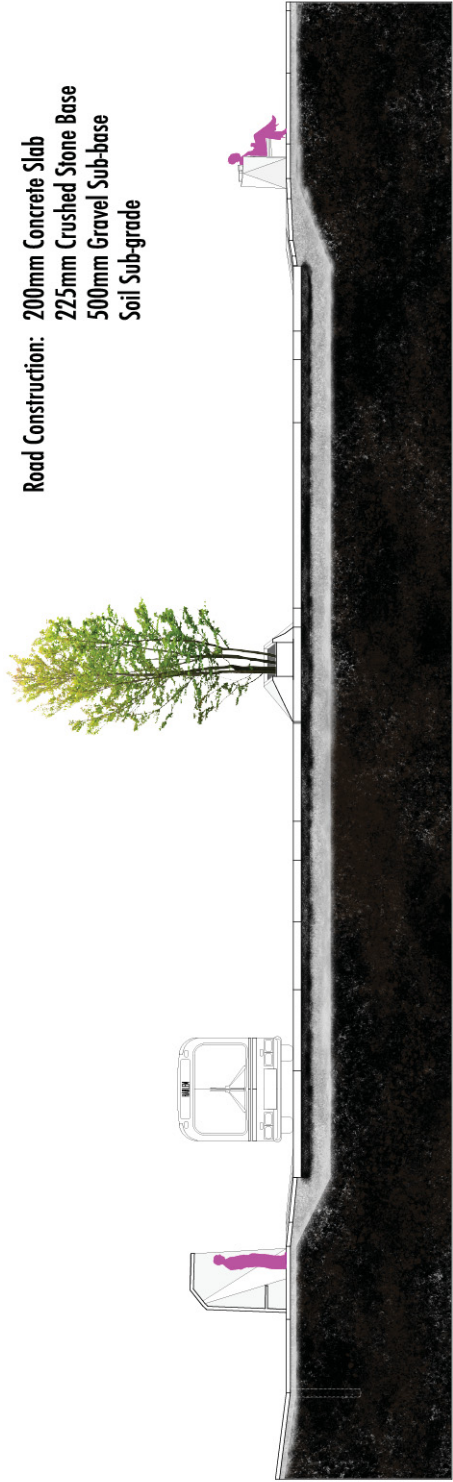


Fig. 29 Traffic zone markers 36

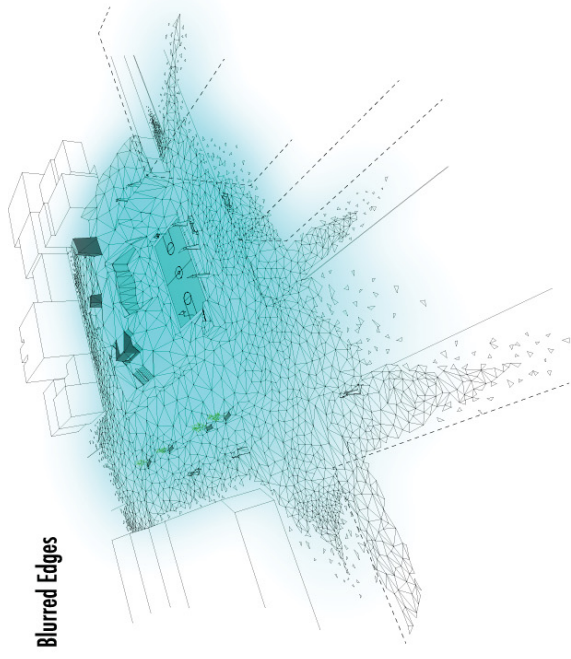


Fig. 30 Site plan 37

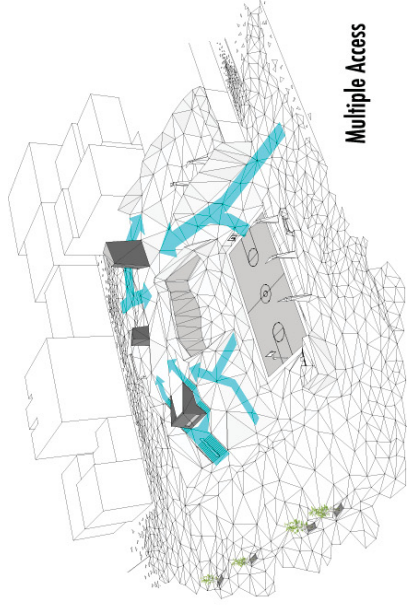
lation and manipulation of surface will physically connect the sites and provide users with wayfinding in the process (fig. 30). What initially takes place along W 125th St., will eventually run throughout the city, connecting each of the different nodes within the street culture network. What initially takes place along W 125th St., will eventually run throughout the city, connecting each of the different nodes within the street culture network.

The program of the cultural center focuses on street and sneaker culture and is very much something that is ever changing and in motion. As a way to emphasize this quality, I have raised the first level of the museum to eye level of the passersby on the street. Leaving pedestrians' sightlines focusing on the cultural center users' feet. This simple design decision creates a dynamic exhibit of the users footwear. The permanent exhibition is complimented by the exhibition of sneaker culture in its native environment.

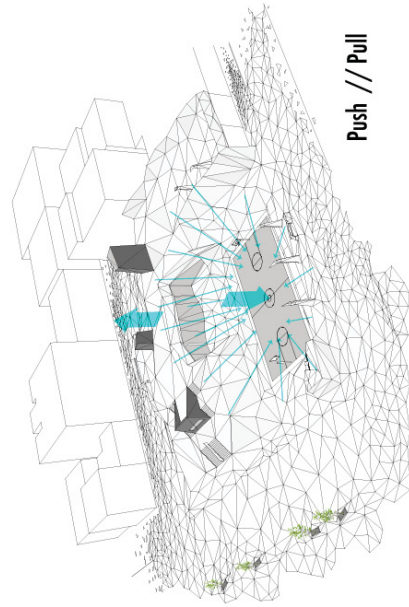
The articulated surface of the ground plane covers the site and extends into the building, obscuring the distinction between external and internal environment. Folded glass walls provide unobstructed views (fig. 31), creating a strong visual connection to the street outside. In doing so, users are able to "fully engage with architecture as a reproduction of the rhythm of the urban life" (Borden 2001, 112).



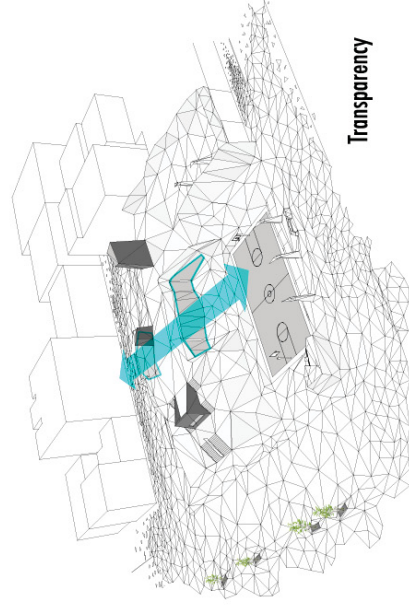
Blurred Edges



Multiple Access



Push // Pull



Transparency

Fig. 31 Urban design strategies 39

The form rises from the ground, creating a platform where users have a better vantage point to the street, and streetball court. This provides seating for one of the many spectator events associated with sneaker culture, be it a streetball game, hip-hop concert, hip-hop dance performance, or the everyday dynamic activity of W 125th St. (fig. 32 - 36).



Fig. 32 Cultural Center as concert

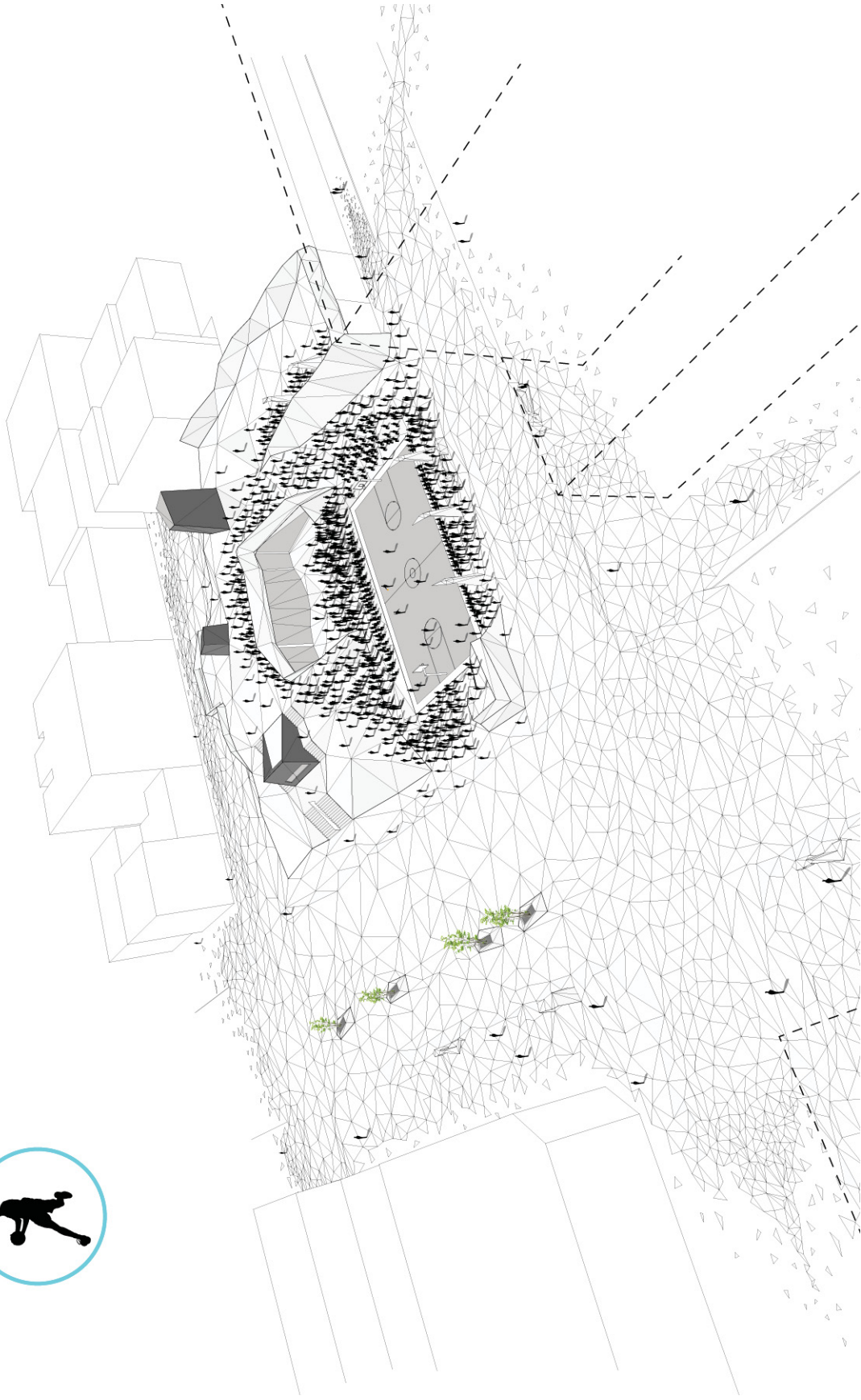


Fig. 33 Streetball tournaments 42

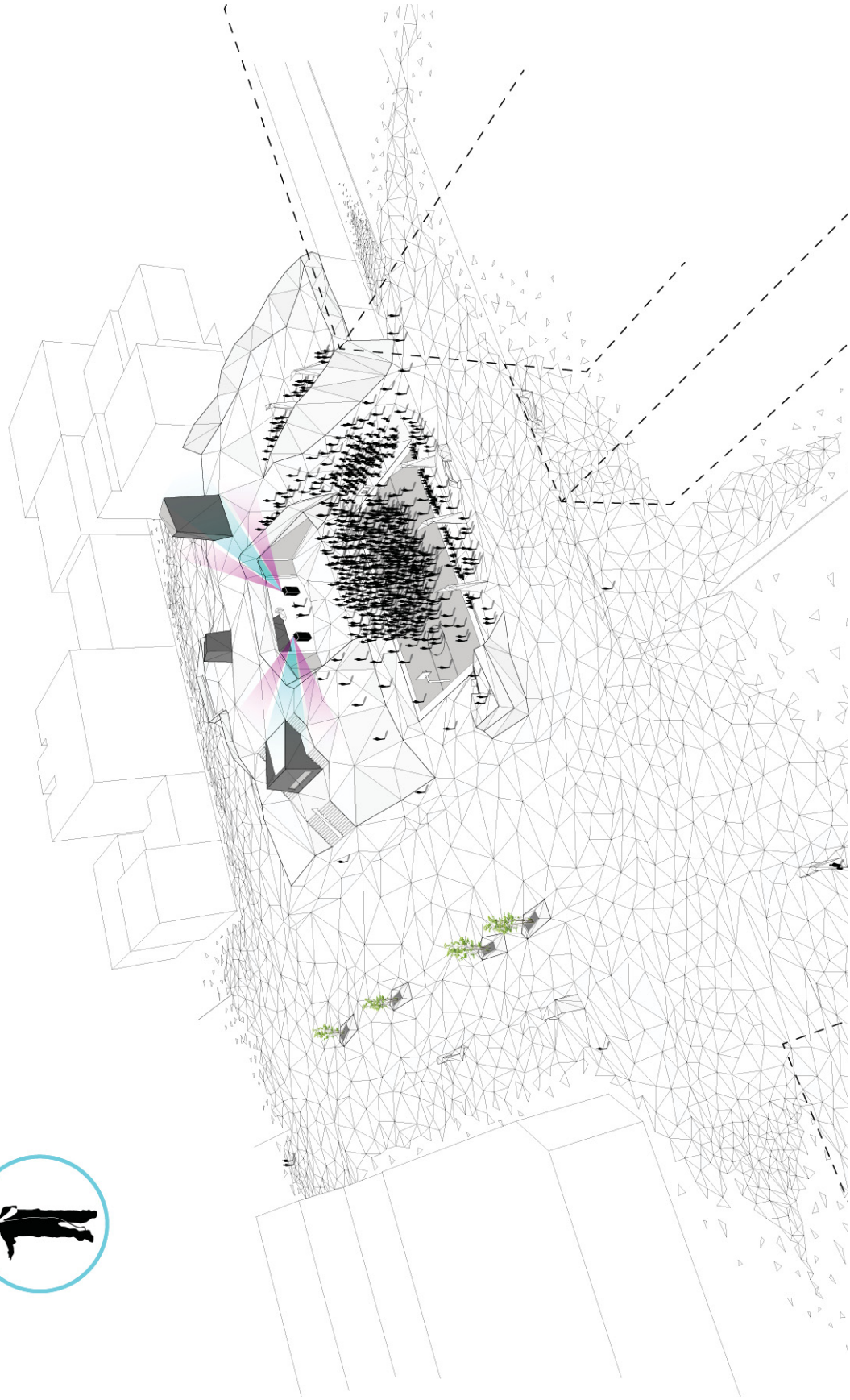
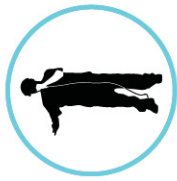


Fig. 34 Hip-hop concerts 43

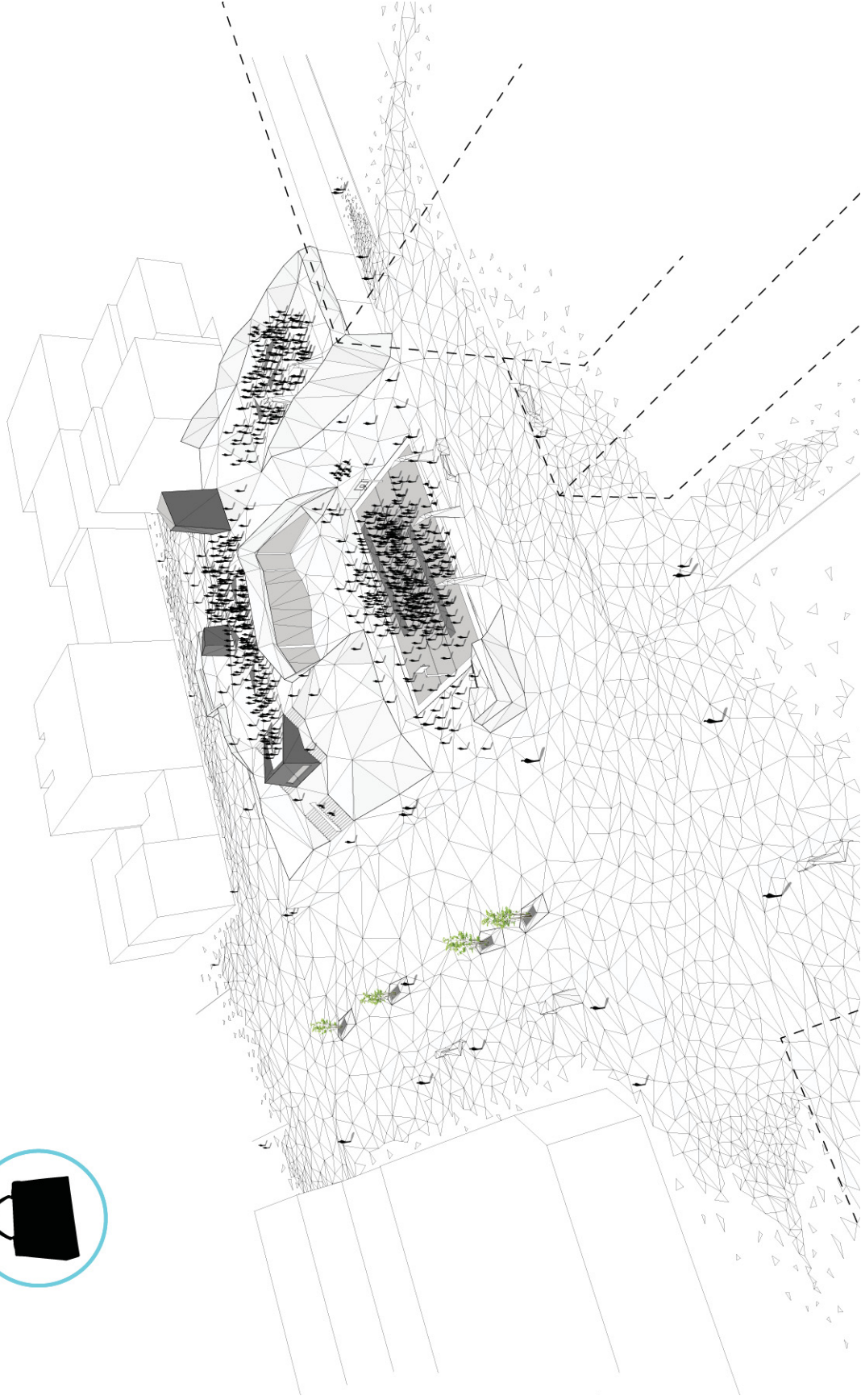
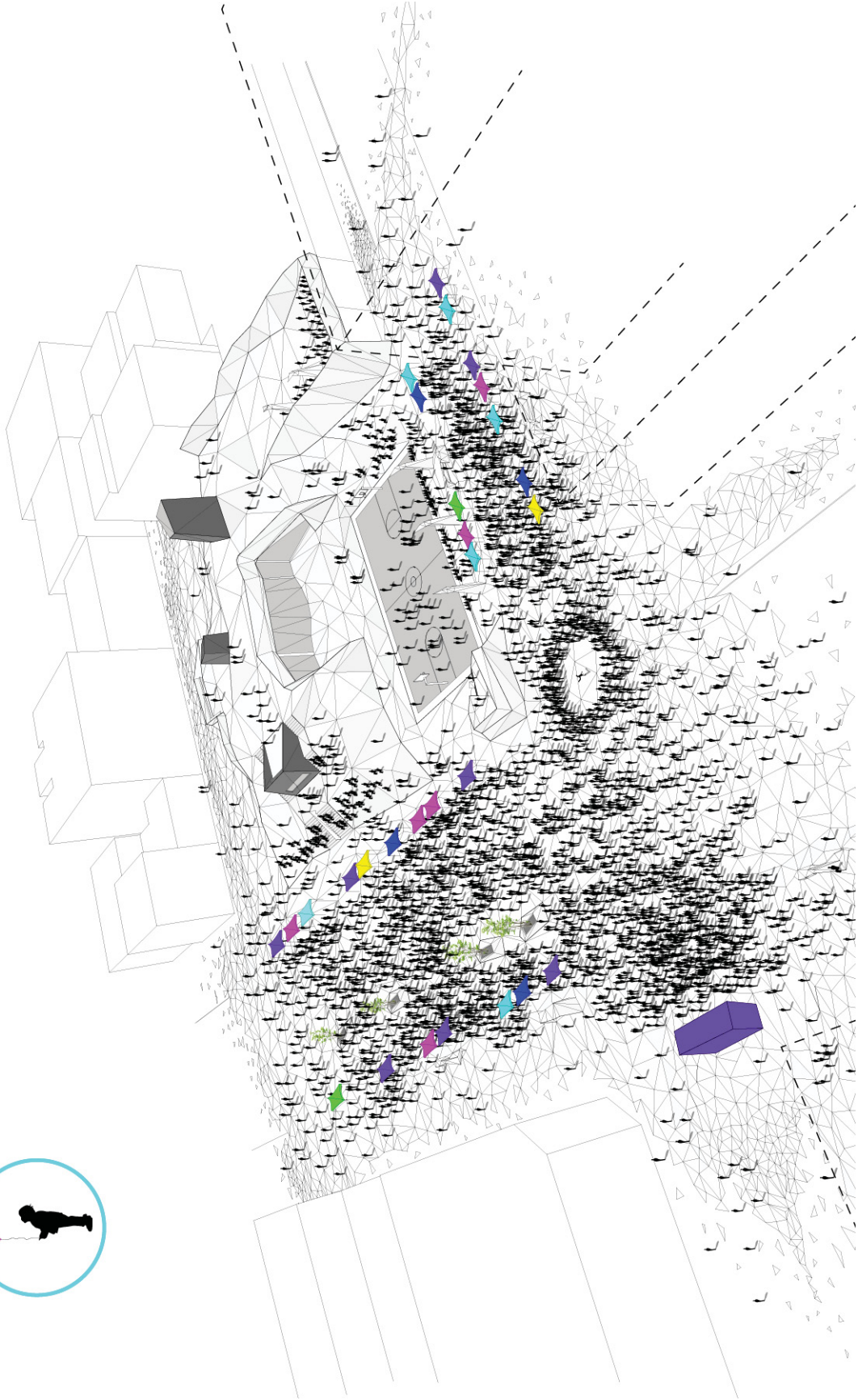
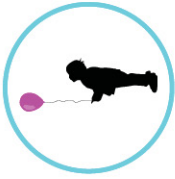


Fig. 35 Outdoor market space 44



45
Fig. 36 Street festivals



Fig. 37 The landscape of the UK Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai Expo offers visitors a space to sit down and relax (Baan 2010).

Based on the 'kit of parts,' the undulating faceted surface creates distinct zones with specific activities in mind while remaining open to interpretation. Similarly, the UK Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo 2010 by Heatherwick Studio creates a faceted landscape that provides open space for visitors to rest from the fast pace of the expo (fig. 37). The new cultural center also allows users to pause and reflect on the urban environment surrounding them (fig. 38).

1. Road Construction: 200mm Concrete Slab
225mm Crushed Stone Base
500mm Gravel Sub-base
Soil Sub-grade
2. Subway Entrance
3. Streetball Court: 25mm Concrete Slab
200mm Gravel Base
4. Main Entrance
5. Hip-Hop Dance Studio
6. Reception
7. Facet Construction: 175mm Concrete Slab
500mm Steel Ground Beams
Concrete 'Dead men' Piles

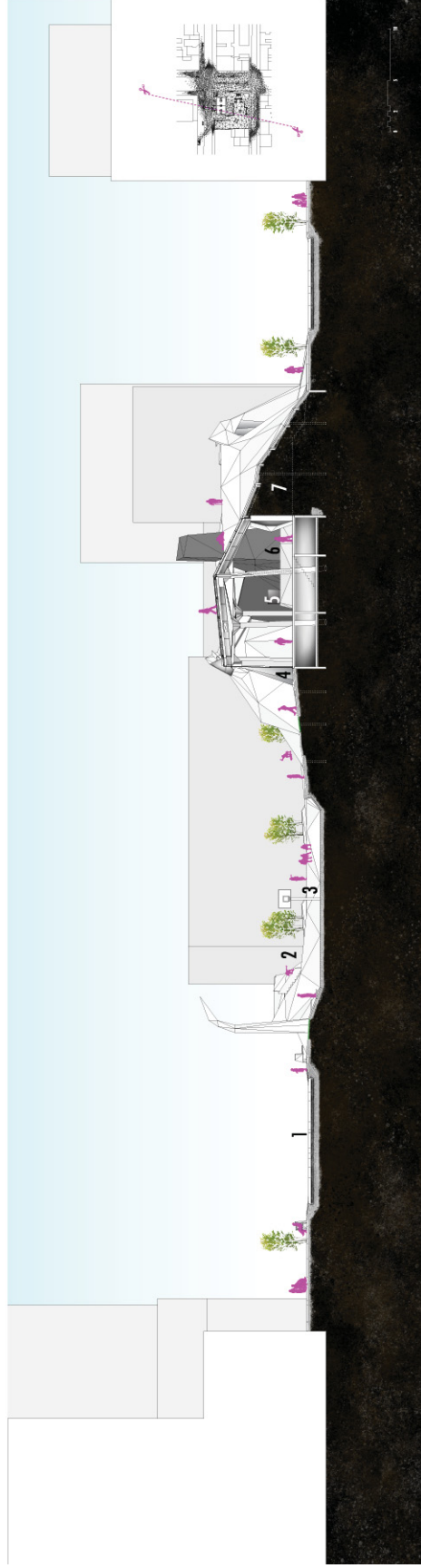


Fig. 38 Cross section 47

Concrete volumes pierce the articulated surface of the building, breaking up the space. This object – space – object – space rhythm is reminiscent of the fragmented objects within a homogeneous space that create successful skateboarding environments (Borden 2001, 195). It is also true of the design concept at the urban scale, where the objects are the built environments of the cultural center (plazas, parks, buildings) and the spaces between are the streets linking them (fig. 39). The volumes provide flat surfaces for break dancing, and vertical canvases that encourage graffiti work (fig. 40). In addition to providing practical uses to the exterior environment, the volumes reflect the same qualities on their interior (fig. 41). The east volume contains a dance studio for hip-hop dancing workshops, while the north volume acts as a gallery for street artists to showcase their skill in a more controlled environment. A third volume located between the two others acts as a service core, containing support spaces and vertical circulation (fig. 42).

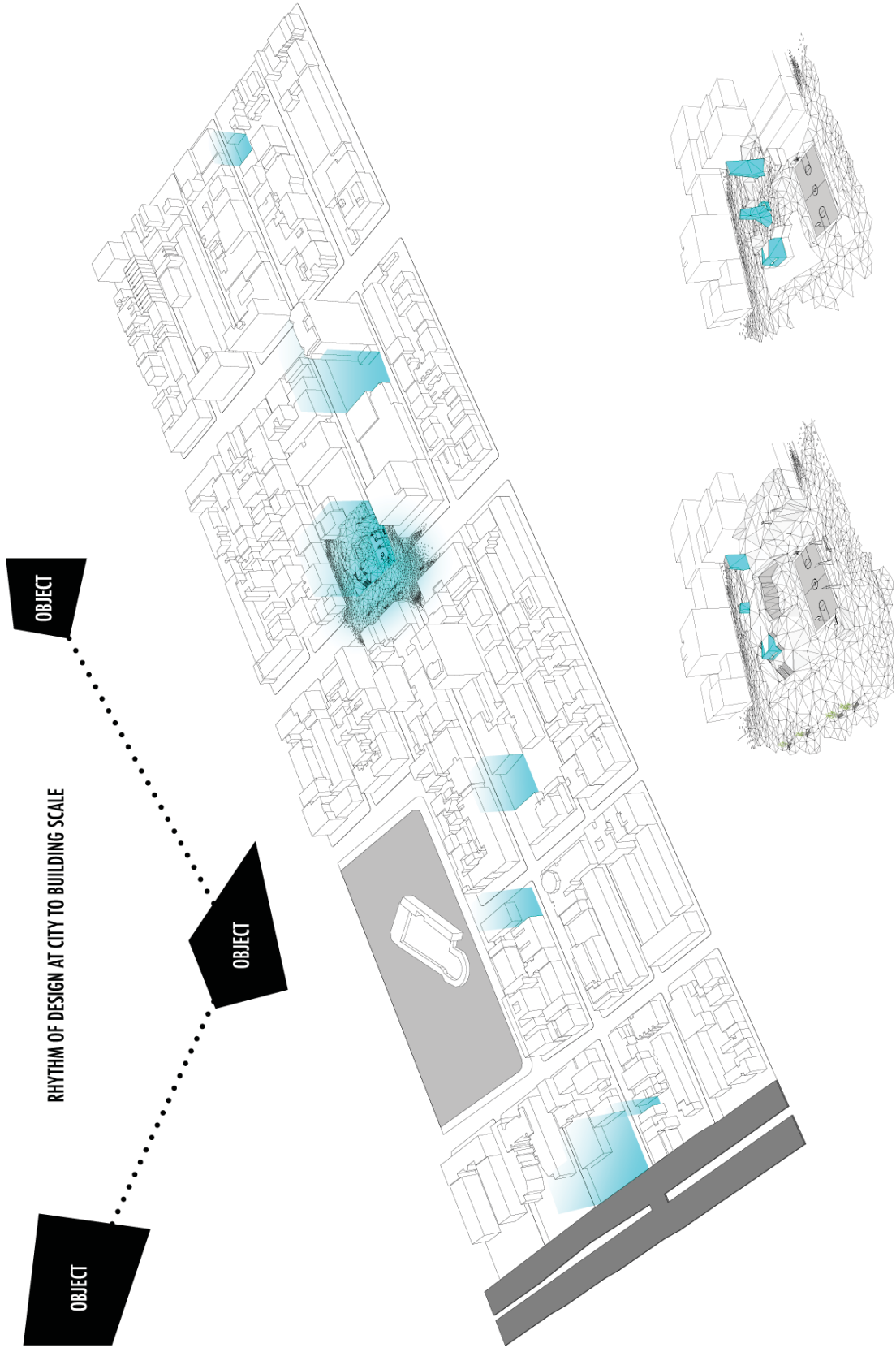


Fig. 39 Design rhythm at street and building scale. 49



Fig. 40 Street art festival

1. Hip-Hop Dance Studio
2. Bathrooms
3. Service Core
4. Administration
5. Reception
6. Art Gallery
7. Permanent Exhibition
8. Graffiti Walls
9. Storage + Mechanical Basement



Fig. 41 Longitudinal section 51

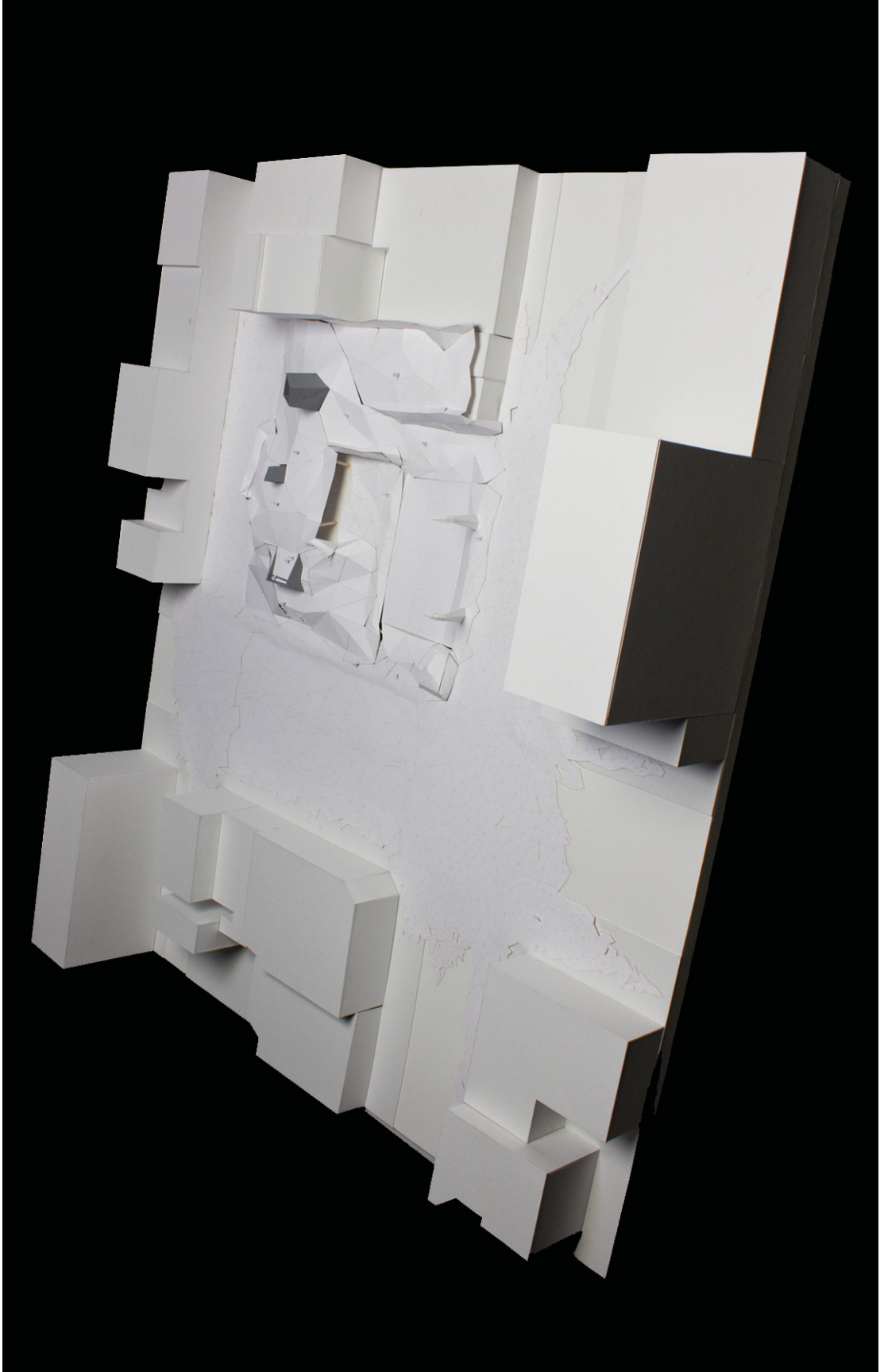


Fig. 42 Final model

Construction

As the project is considered an extension of the urban fabric, it shares the same characteristics in its construction. The smoothness of the pavement and the hard surfaces that must meet the demanding abuse from such activities as skateboarding are best suited for concrete construction. Concrete lends itself well to the expressive and angular language of the building, and with the mixture of green areas can create pleasant spaces that suit the needs of street culture related activities.

Working with the existing triangulated surface, the primary structure consists of the piercing volumes and concrete columns (fig. 43). Each column is fitted with a custom connector which supports a network of double beams. The secondary roof structure consists of a series of faceted concrete deck slabs with one of three different penalization finishes. Railings cap the roof structure providing safety, seating and hiding all of the detail work of the gutters and glazing fittings.

  Concrete + Steel Construction

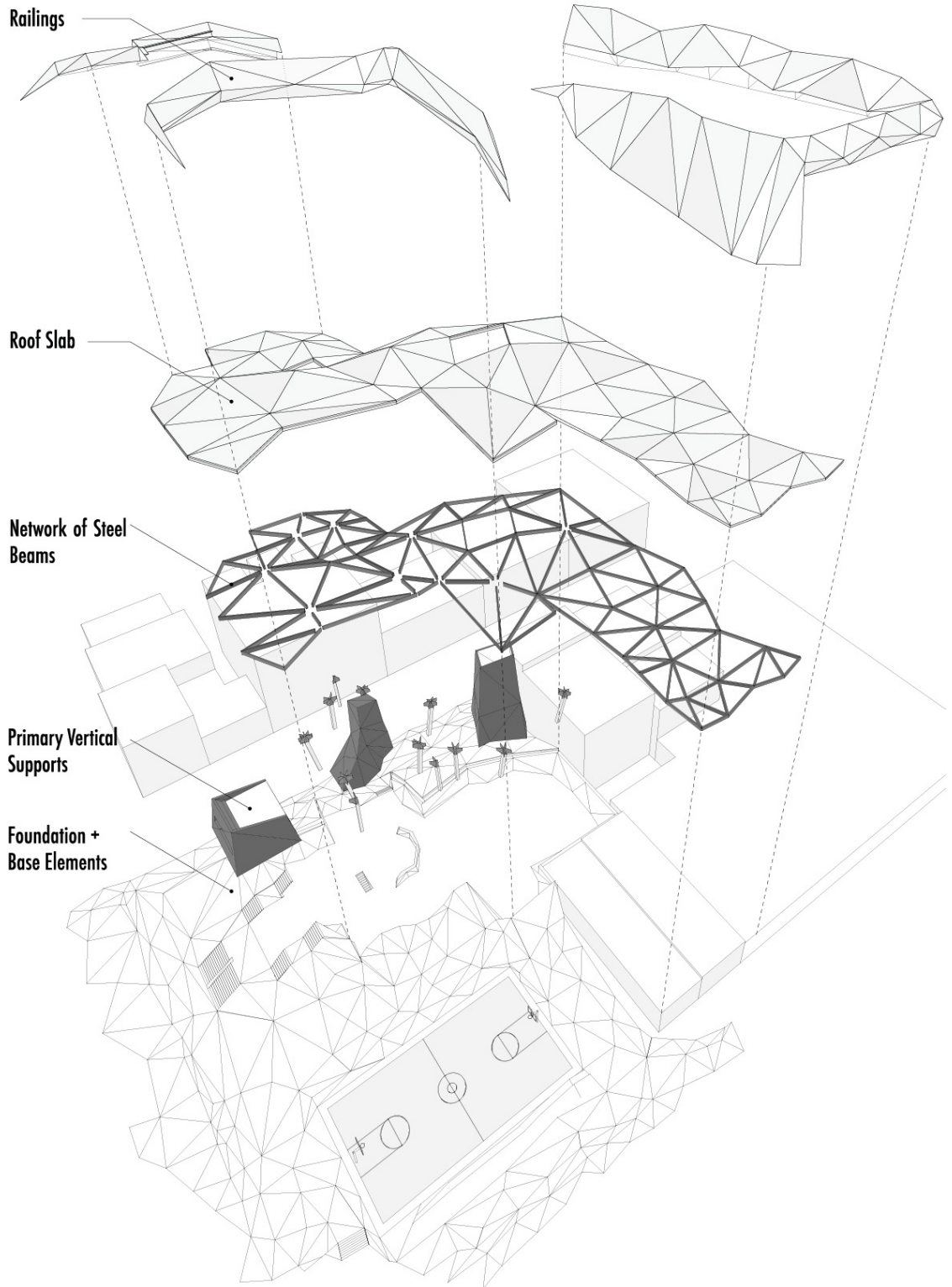


Fig. 43 Structural strategy



Fig. 44 The roof of the Yokohama Port Terminal by FOA uses wood to provide a hard landscape, that still invites people to sit and lounge (TKY - JP 2010).

Pre-fabricated panels make of the occupiable roof membrane. As such, a variety of materials are used to break up the continuous concrete surface. Wood is used to add warmth to the space and add a softer element in contrast to the rigidity of concrete (fig. 44) and perforated metal is used as a reference to a commonly used material for streetball net backboards (fig. 45). These panels can also be used to delineate some of the various programmatic qualities of the 'kit of parts' mentioned earlier.

The expressive formal language of the building is continuous throughout the exterior environment. Taking it a step further, the faceted roof structure will be expressed on the interior of the building, creating a dynamic space that reflects qualities of the street. I have taken a cue from automotive designers who have been pushing the boundaries in conceptual car design and the idea of surface. "The once clear distinction between what is structure and what is surface has given way to more stylized exploration of surface as structure" (Lynn and Foster Gage 2010, 76). As such, the faceted surfaces provide multiple uses, strengthening the argument for the expressive formal language. The network of double steel beams is clearly articulated in the interior and is exaggerated by flaring the connectors of the columns (fig. 46).

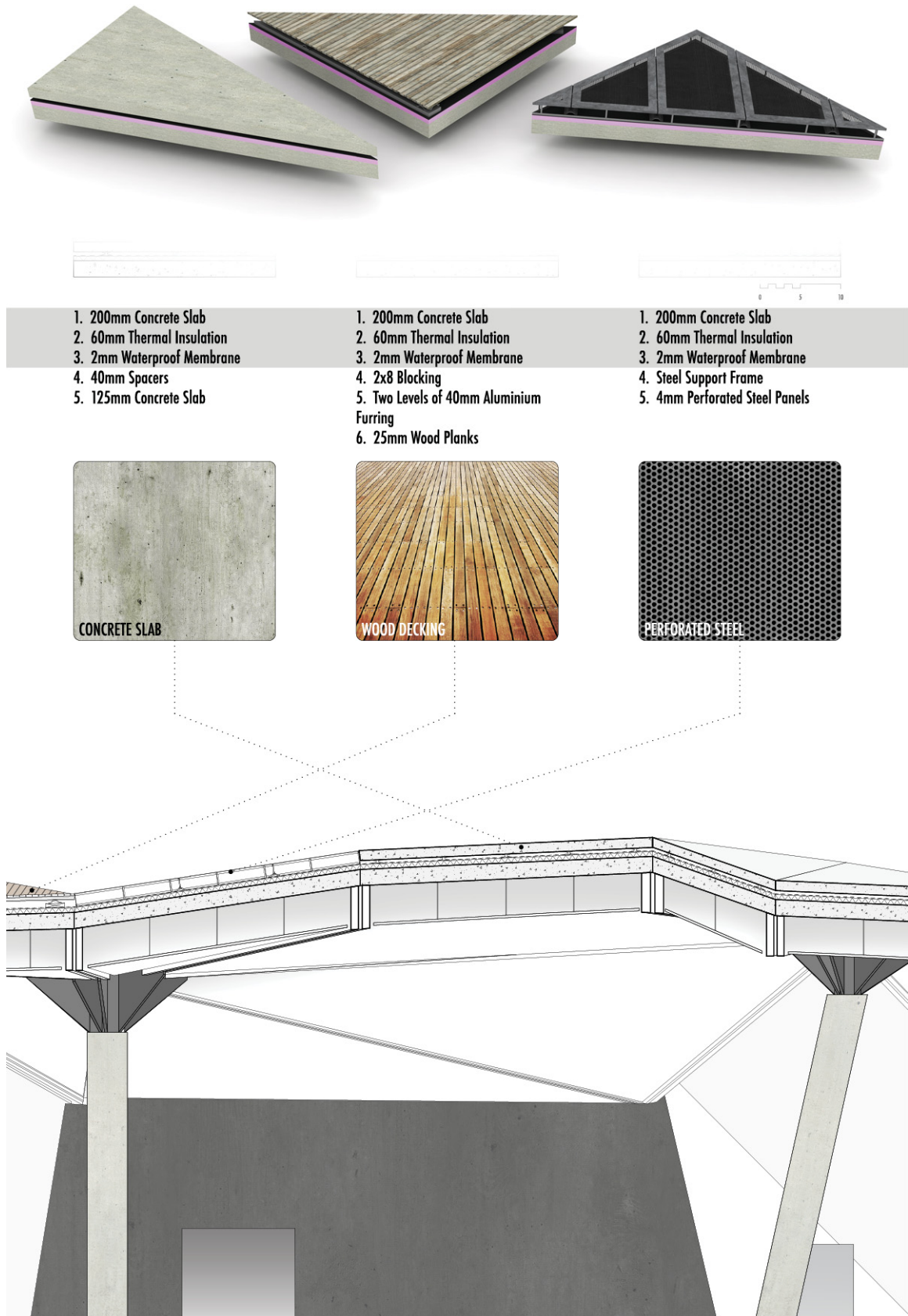


Fig. 45 Panel construction



Fig. 46 Interior perspective 57

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

Harlem is unlike any other city in the world. Its community pride and rich history are quickly deteriorating as a result of gentrification. As a way to give something to local residents, the design of a 'new' cultural center will spark the resurgence of Harlem as a hotbed of street culture. This project looks to "catalyze an irreversible transformation in the imaginations of a community that is otherwise asleep," (Jodidio 2011, 153) and provide Harlemites with a foothold for the future.

Through my thesis, I hope to have shed light on the untapped potential of using the street as a means of urban regeneration. In the process, it is my goal to educate people about the exciting phenomenon that is street culture and its vast array of influences. The main challenge of this project was dealing with the issue between street and building and how that interaction occurs. I feel by taking the approach of a building of the site, I was able to express my intentions more clearly. In completing this thesis I now have a greater appreciation of street culture and its possibilities as a vehicle for community development and revitalization.

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