

DIASPORA . DISLOCATION . DENIZEN
A CULTURAL CENTER IN LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

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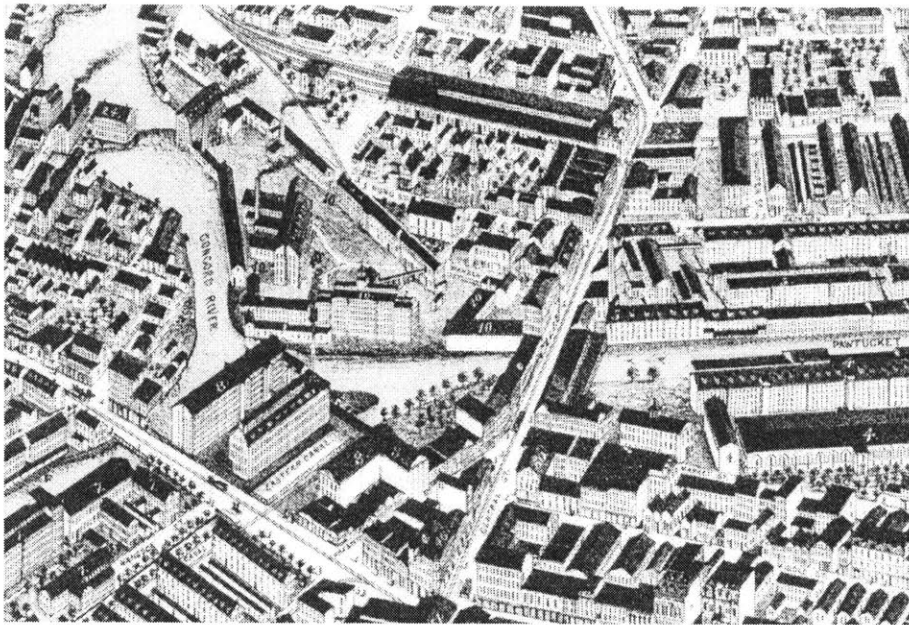
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Image courtesy of Lowell Historical Society

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Dennis Adams

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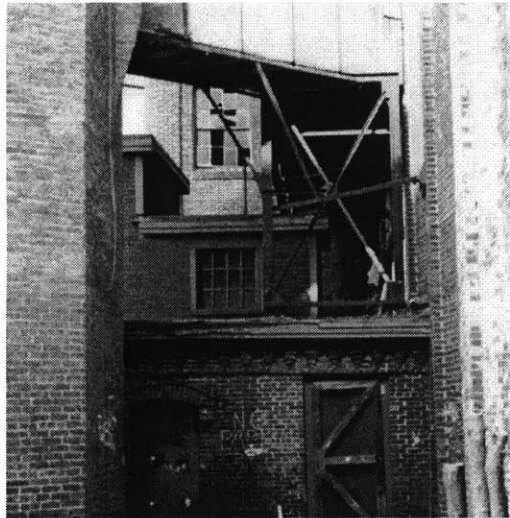
I am grateful for the initial research support from the town of Lowell, MA. In particular the Lowell Historical Society and the Lowell Visitors Center.

I am indebted to my thesis studio for their discussions, debates and support. Thank you all for being part of a rich and enlightening academic career.

My husband, Daniah Ahmed, for his support and encouragement.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Dilshad and Abdul Hamid. I have learned much from both their individual lives, the courage, vision and endurance of immigrating to a new homeland and restarting their lives many times. Their success is a dedication for their family and to each other.

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ABSTRACT

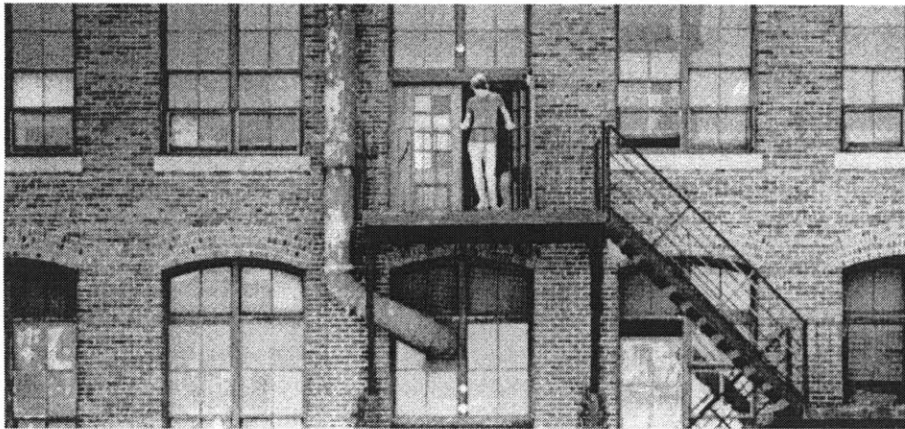
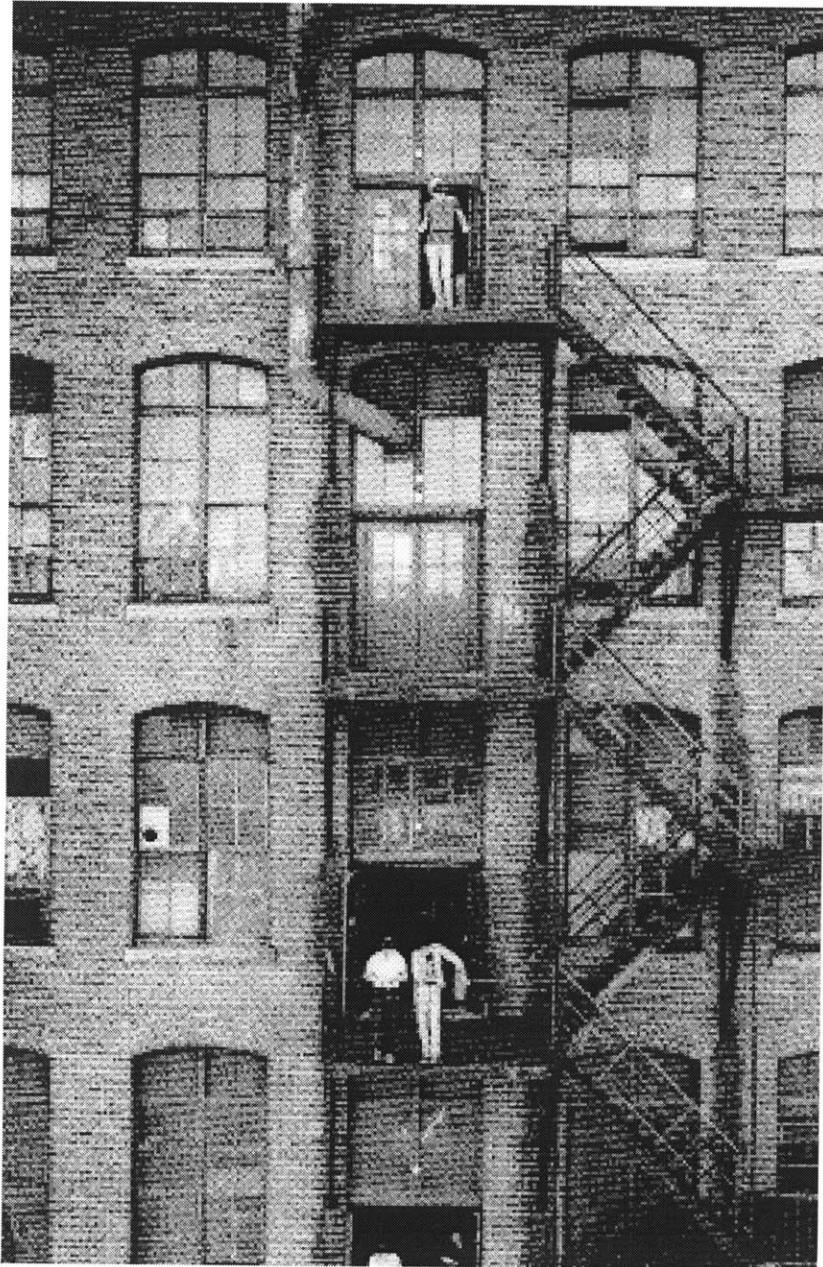


Image from The Continuing Revolution, p. 422

The identity of the stranger begins in dreams of hope and fear, and the dream of exile begets modernity. From here we must examine how this process of naming and the phenomenon of estrangement are integral to the cultural dynamics of modernity. The stranger is always located within society and we must ask what are the available categories for defining these levels of interaction.

*Modernity as Exile p.2
Nikos Papastergiadis*



DIASPORA . DISLOCATION . DENIZEN
A Cultural Center for Lowell, Massachusetts
by Afshan Hamid

Submitted to the Department of Architecture
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requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

The condition of being migrant is peculiar to modernity. Being migrant is often a result of political estrangement from one's homeland, or dislocation due to economic pressures. It is a status which requires the individual to be temporary, shifting and dynamic. If the position becomes static, the migrant becomes an immigrant alien in a new and unfamiliar geographical location. Thus immigrant is the radical instability of the modern experience. Immigrant is not only a consequence of modernity, but also a metaphor for the process of modernity. Being migrant has the trauma of dislocation, of relearning communication, rethinking a cultural dialogue. It is also an interiorized sense of loneliness, and even a longing for a return to a familiar place and time. Being immigrant is a journey, both mental and physical.

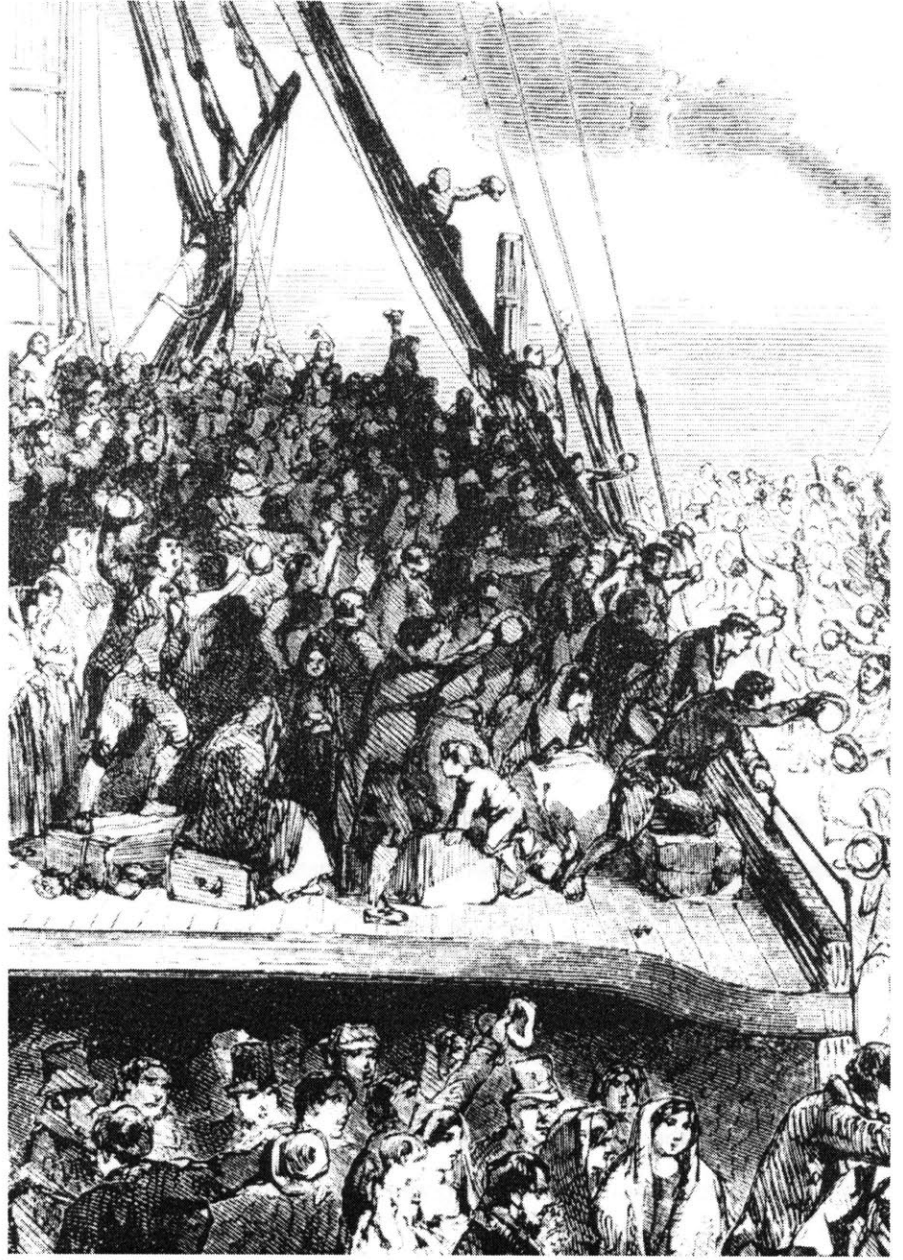
This thesis concerns itself with the issues of being an immigrant. In particular, the debate will revolve around immigrants of the last twenty years, the Asian community. I am interested in this group because they are still struggling to assimilate themselves into the American experience. The town of Lowell, Massachusetts has a community of recent immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia and Korea. These people have been encouraged to resettle their lives due to government programs and a strong manufacturing industry in Lowell. They inhabit a part of Lowell known as Acre and the Lowlands. These areas have been home to the first Irish settlers in Lowell in the 1850s. The site for the project is itself a borderland condition, precisely where the existing Lowell community stops development and the immigrants begin their settlement. The area is currently a residential fabric on one side and an industrial locality on the opposite. The Pawtucket Canal, a man-made canal, runs through the site, acting both as a boundary and a seam.

Thesis Supervisor: Ann Pendleton-Jullian
Title: Associate Professor

ANALYSIS



Image from Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City, p. 69



Lowell's rise to rapid success as New England's first mill town was due in large part to its unorthodox work force. The mill fathers recruited Yankee daughters from agricultural areas in New England. These young women flourished in the new environment gaining money for their own dowrys as well as independence. Under a very paternal system, their day shifts as well as free day off was regulated by the mill bell and strict curfew. The young women were housed in mill run board rooms.

The building of the canals, railroads, dams and mills were relegated to the new immigrants, the Irish. These new laborers settled in Lowell in the mid eighteenth century. As the new foreigners they settled in the periphery

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

of the city, the Acre area or New Dublin. Here they built their own neighborhoods and established their own tenement housing. Because the mill district was reserved for the Yankee daughters, the Irish as well as other immigrant groups settled in areas outside of the mill. These communities became a quilt of immigrant districts.

In 1880 rebellions streaked across the town. The young Yankee women demanded wage increases and shorter work hours. The new settlers took on lower paying wages and were quickly sought as the replacement labor for the Yankee women. Following the

Image from The Continuing Revolution, p. 427



THEORETICAL FRAME

Proposition 187 was a publicly endorsed decree in California in 1995. It mandates illegal immigrants from receiving public assistance, such as education and non-emergency welfare. This public decree is especially alarming since Los Angeles county is a major mecca for new settlers. More than one third of the population of Los Angeles city is foreign born, four times the figure of the nation as a whole. "The issue confronting the region is whether this newly polyglot metropolis can work, and that is not a question for the region alone. In L.A., late 20th Century America finds a mirror to itself."³ On a national level this years welfare reform bars legal

immigrants from receiving public assistance. A reading of these propositions has profound measures on our national outlook. Publicly the criteria acknowledges differences in our social makeup. As citizens we propagate that which is unacceptable into a circumscribed definition. We proclaim that which is foreign should remain foreign. In merely translating the contemporary dilemma we reveal ourselves to be at the limits of our own ideas of otherness.

In Lowell, Ma the situation is even more vexing given its historical precedent of immigrants. The government re-location of a new class of citizens into the Acre and Lowlands Area describes a contemporary dilemma. In the mid seventies a shortage of labor combined with a bleak economy led to a recession in the American system. Lowell was particularly hard hit because the textile mills required cheap labor to operate. Beginning in 1979, skilled foreign textile workers were lured to Lowell. The incentive was a temporary H-2 visa and enough income earned to send home to their families. The new labor force was considered essential to the survival of the mills and Lowell's economy. This new labor force characterized Lowell's prosperity in the 1980s. In addition, high tech companies such as Wang Laboratories and microchip industries started moving into Lowell. This rapidly evolving microchip industry also required the service of cheap labor to remain competitive. Lowell resurfaced with the combi

nation of cheap labor and a new growing industry.

Another cultural dynamic also came into play. Between 1966 and 1978 the citizens of Lowell established the historical mill district as part of a National Park program. This incentive promoted the restoration of many mill buildings and also invigorated Lowell with a tourist economy. Grants were afforded by federal agencies for a downtown revitalization program. Federal National Endowment for the Arts and the Historic American Engineering projects supported planning for the canal system and conversion of mills into museums and public buildings. The consultants hired for the revitalization program focused their efforts on planning the downtown structures, the majority which were built before 1850. As a result, this critical phase in Lowell's rise framed a view of the city concentrated on the mill district. "Although consultants were periodically reminded by Lowell residents to take note of ethnic history, it did not provide for the inclusion of structures in the park which would mandate interpretation of the immigrant experience."⁴ The Lowell commission team along with its consultants placed the needs of downtown revitalization ahead of neighborhood, ethnic and school programs. In reference to the inclusion of immigrants as part of Lowell's history and growth the Park Commission and its consultants remained indifferent.

*To support this choice , the appeal of departing from a traditional Park Service concern with mansions of the elite in isolated neighborhoods and moving toward a concern with “working class” mill environments in the downtown was highlighted. Nevertheless the version of Lowell history presented in the commission’s final report to Congress had largely removed the conflict from Lowell history which th e Historical Society, in its anthology, and Lowell Museum, in its exhibition, had begun to address.*⁵

Edward Said argues, exile is comprehensible through the internalization of rupture. Thus modern exile is not exclusively confined to the massive displacement of peoples from their homelands but can also be located in the specific forms of silencing opposition without expulsion.⁶ The relevance of any contemporary examination of exile can only be secured if it is located in the broader cultural dynamics of displacement in modernity. The diaspora of the current local condition of Lowell negates an understanding of an aprior condition. It also accentuates that yesterdays immigrants can proclaim more residency and affluence than immigrants of today.

From their arrival in 1822 until the turn of the century the Irish constituted the largest single ethnic group in the city of Lowell. This rapid expansion was supported by the establishment of distinct neighborhoods set apart from Yankee mill districts. These areas expanded to what today is known

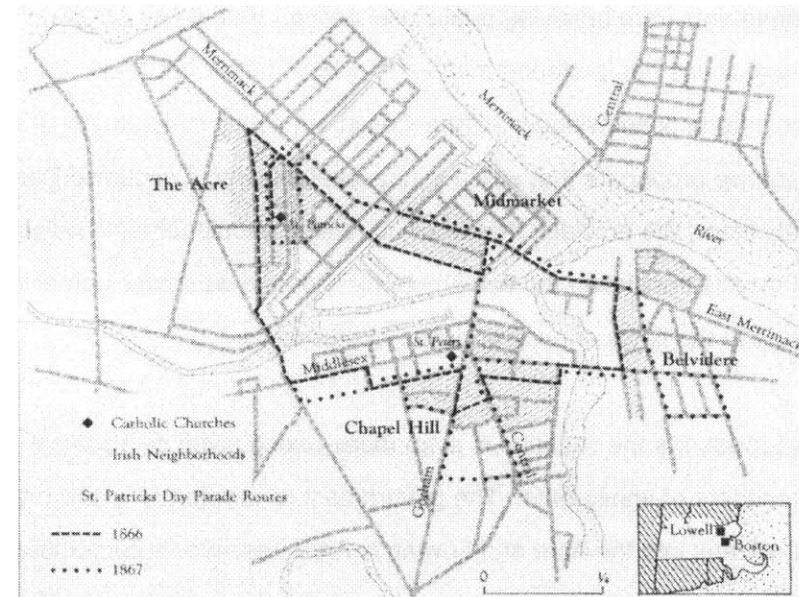


Image from The Continuing Revolution, p. 226

as Belvidere, Andover, Acre, Midmarket. Within these neighborhoods group identity was fostered through the founding of a Irish Catholic church and schools. These were reinforced through voluntary associations and also local saloons. The resultant of these establishments was a distinct identity set apart from the dominant American community. Yet, the Yankee response was not always favorable.

There were incidents of outright physical harassment and brutality by the Yankees which the Irish often returned in kind. Other forms of

*Yankee dominance were more subtle and pervasive. For example, Irish women were kept in the lowest paid jobs in the mills while Irish men were employed in occupations with the lowest status in the city.*⁷

There was fostered outright antagonism and hostility towards the Irish settlers. In Lowell the Yankee population outnumbered the immigrant population, a discord of racial and ethnic boundaries became established

For the Irish an annual parade became a voice to actively promote their identity and to rally their political concerns. The parade became a vehicle through which to display social antagonism and conflict. On one level the parade was a means to establish the importance of an Irish past and heritage. On another the parade became the vehicle through which the Irish could voice their inclusion as workers and exclusion as denizens. The parades in effect became a means through which political, social and economic conditions could be antagonized. In a Yankee dominated town, the parades were a way to publicly display community and solidarity.

Each year the route taken by the St. Patrick's Day parade encompassed areas beyond the Irish neighborhoods. It included the four

main neighborhoods of the Irish district and also the main thoroughfare of Lowell. The procession moved down the main commercial streets of the city, past the mill districts, and the Yankee residential areas. It passed by the corporate boardinghouses, City Hall, and the Irish residential areas. "John Berger argues that the route that such a procession takes is symbolically important because it signifies a capturing or taking over of various parts of the city. The marchers, because of their sheer numbers, transform the areas through which they march into a "temporary stage on which they dramatize the power they still lack".⁸

For the Irish in Lowell, the parade symbolized that it was they who had built the city and continued to maintain it.

The historical and contemporary events in Lowell only negate homogeneous urban and national cultures. If Lowell is a sensor for the larger urban network, then a redefinition of binary terms is required. No longer can we describe the ambivalent situation in terms of exclusion/inclusion, boundary/seam, marginal/tolerance. In a sense the metropole of the next century is being redefined through new communities.

NOTES

1. Robert Weible, ed., *The Continuing Revolution*, (Lowell Historical Society, 1991), p. 239
2. Ibid, p. 241
3. Karen Brandon, *L.A. Immigration Story Signals U.S. Urban Changes*, The Chicago Tribune, November 16, 1996
4. Ibid p. 387
5. Ibid p. 387
6. Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile", *Marginalization and Contemporary Culture s*, (MIT Press, Cambridge, Ma 1992), p. 164
7. Robert Weible, ed., *The Continuing Revolution*, (Lowell Historical Society, 1991), p. 217
8. Ibid p. 227

SITE

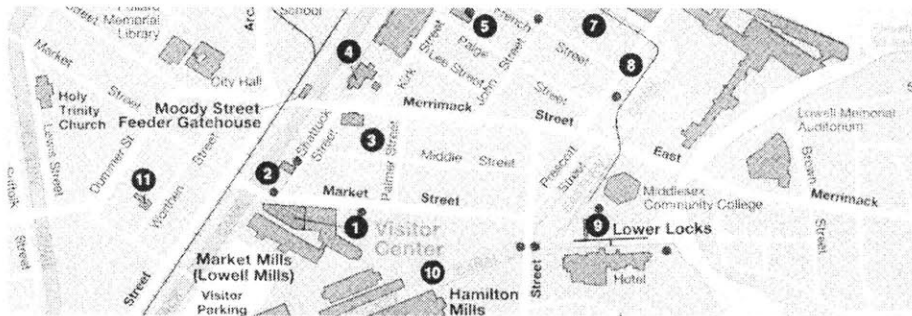
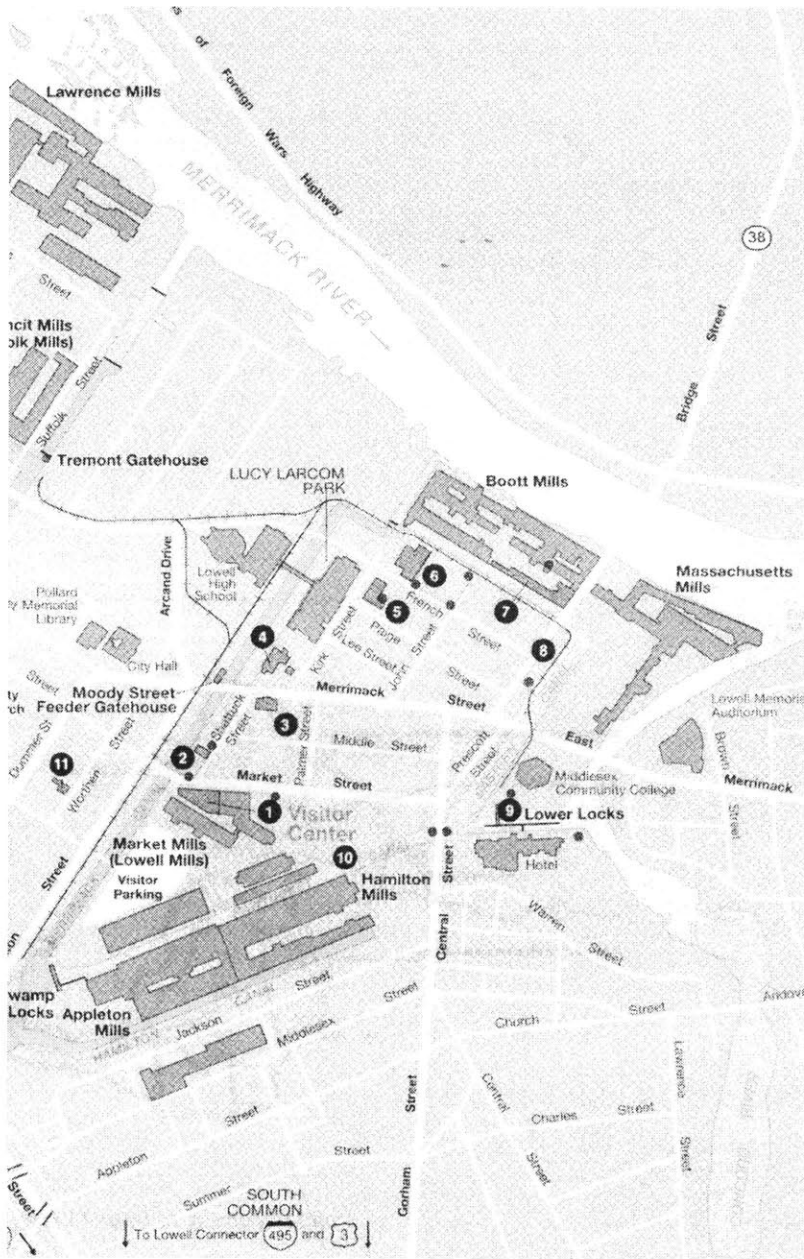


Image from Lowell The Story of an Industrial City p. 99

The foreigner's speech can bank only on its bare rhetorical strength, and the inherent desires he or she has invested in it. But it is deprived of any support in outside reality, since the foreigner is precisely kept out of it. Under such conditions if it does not founder into silence, it becomes absolute in its formalism, excessive in its sophistication - rhetoric is dominant, the foreigner is a baroque person.

*Julia Kristeva
Strangers to Ourselves, p. 21*



FROM BOSTON

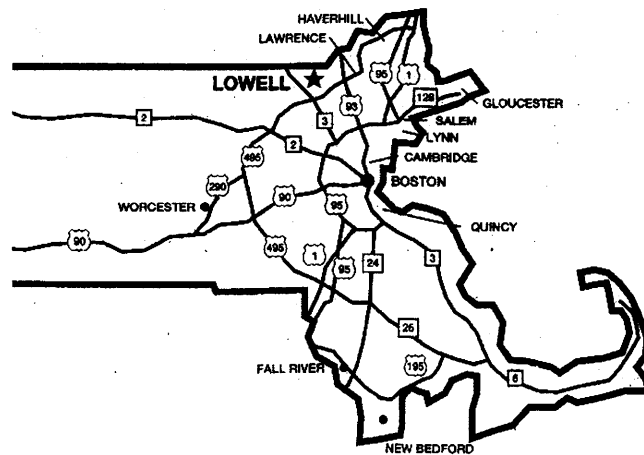


Image courtesy of Lowell Visitor Center

I rented a car from the Budget on Mass Ave, as a typical tourist may do. I was positioning myself into two frames, that of tourist visiting New England's first industrial mill town, and that of an alien setting foot into foreign territory. The journey from Boston took roughly a half hour on 93 North. The signs for Lowell were an exit 38. I took the ramp and then a right into a thoroughfare of K-marts, McDonald's, Chevrolet of Lowell and a Marshalls. This was the outskirts of Lowell. As I continued the neighborhood became more residential and hills in the terrain began to reveal themselves. I could also see in the distance the mill district of Lowell. A split in the road directed me to Park Visitor's Center. It



led me through one-way streets through Lowell's prestigious community of victorian stately homes. It wound itself onto Merrimack Street, the heart of downtown. On either sides were historic commercial buildings, the Sun, the Bon Marche, past the Old City Hall. Merrimack Street crosses over Merrimack Canal and is also on axis with the New City Hall, a robust stone, turn-of-the-century building. The Park Visitor's Center sign gave me a quick glimpse of everything to be seen, then I took a right and parked the car.

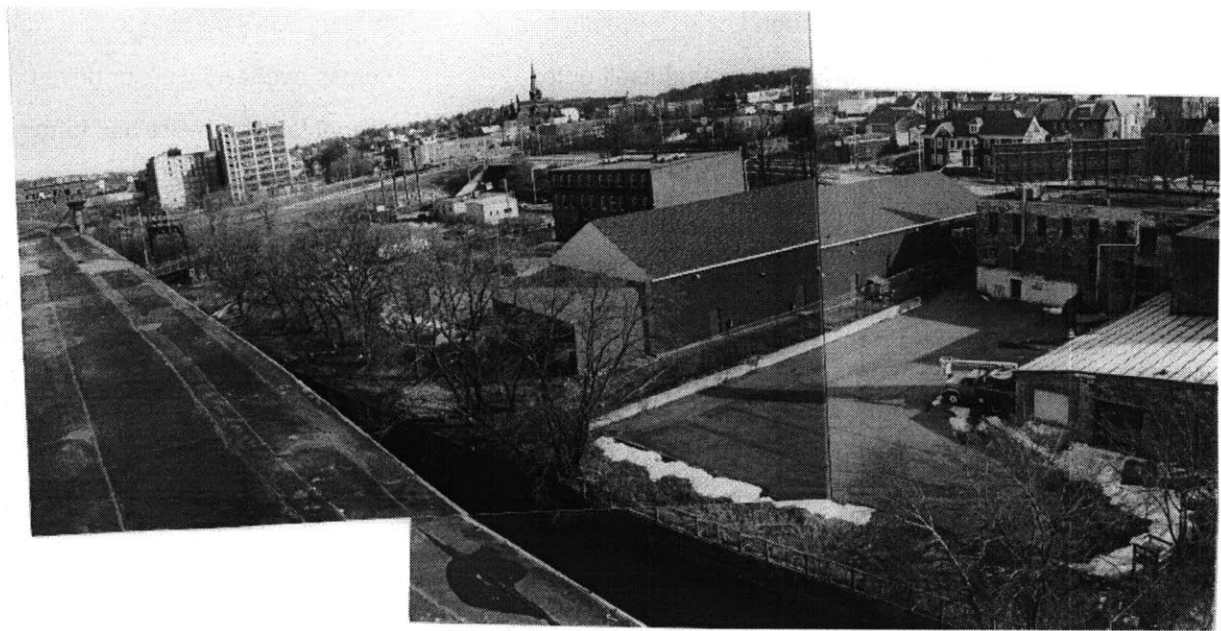
The Visitor's Center is itself located in a historic mill. Where

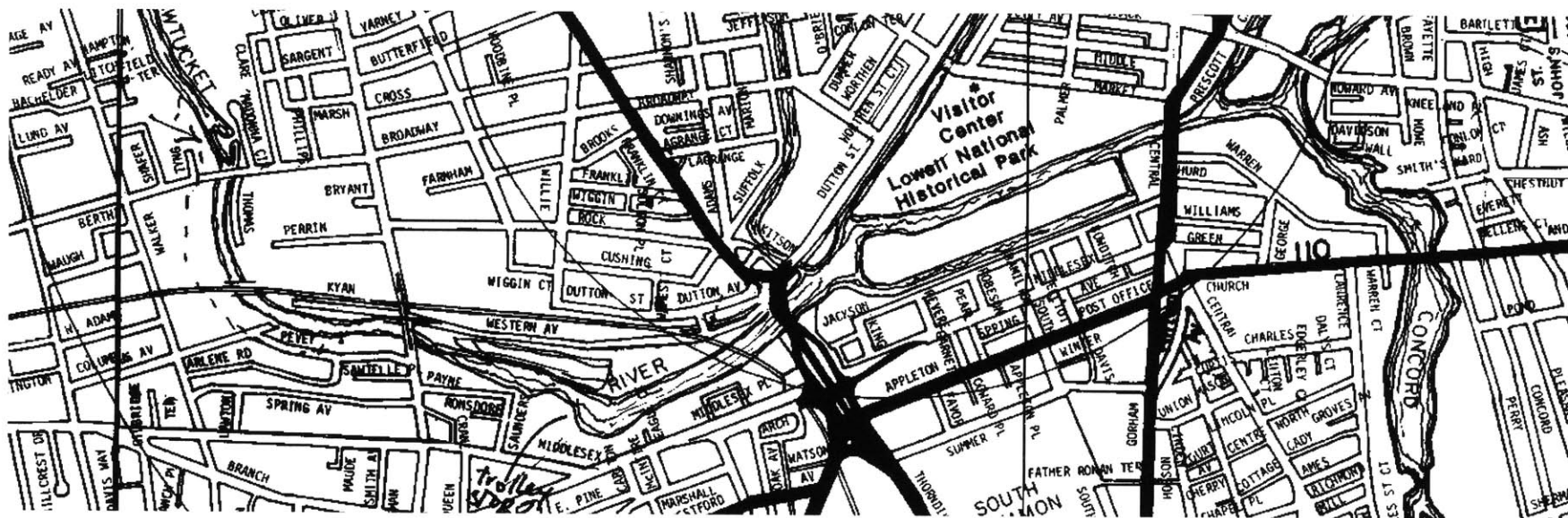
there were once textile workers there is now an artist's guild and tourism information. The tourist map is precise in locating the mills, museums, buildings of historic importance and trolley and canal tours.

The investigation for the site started at Pailin Plaza, which is not located on the tourist map. In a very circumscribed way your route into the city leads you out of the city and onto the highway to Boston once more. It happened four times to me.

Once out of the Visitor's Center on Dutton Street you can walk past the Swamp Locks, where four canals converge. If you follow the main canal, the Pawtucket canal, downstream you'll come onto an elevated position where you'll be able to see worn-down industrial buildings. Once you cross over and walk or drive down into this neighborhood, you'll see the canal take a severe dip, forming an acute curve in the landscape. On either side is Acre and the Lowlands. This is the settlement area of the new immigrants of Lowell. It is a hybrid of three cultured, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Korean. Pailin Plaza itself does not speak written english, the immediate signs are in figures.

SITE





Map courtesy of New England Map Co.



THE MILL & THE CANAL

The canal is now mostly used by tourists to revisit Lowell's past, but it has also gone from being functionalist to being a commodity. The canal in its linearity serves the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion, past/present, inside/outside.



PROGRAM



Image from The Continuing Revolution, p. 181

In Square Feet

115' x 40'

Seating Capacity for 150

5 units: 15' x 25'

115' x 45'

For 25 vehicles

Gallery

Film Center/Auditorium

Restaurants

Library

Parking

7 units: 38' x 32'

3 units: 38' x 32"

55' x 30'

2 units: 45' x 35'

120' x 30'

3 units: 25' x 20'

2 units: 35' x 30'

20' x 50'

Housing for Families

Housing for Scholars

Adult Lounge

Lecture Center

Youth Center

Learning Labs

Playing Field

Multipurpose Rooms

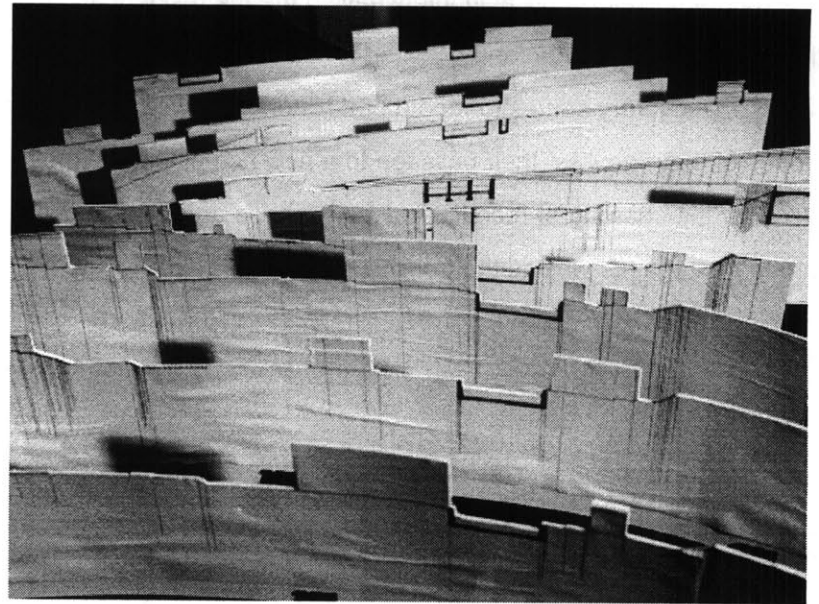
Day Care Center



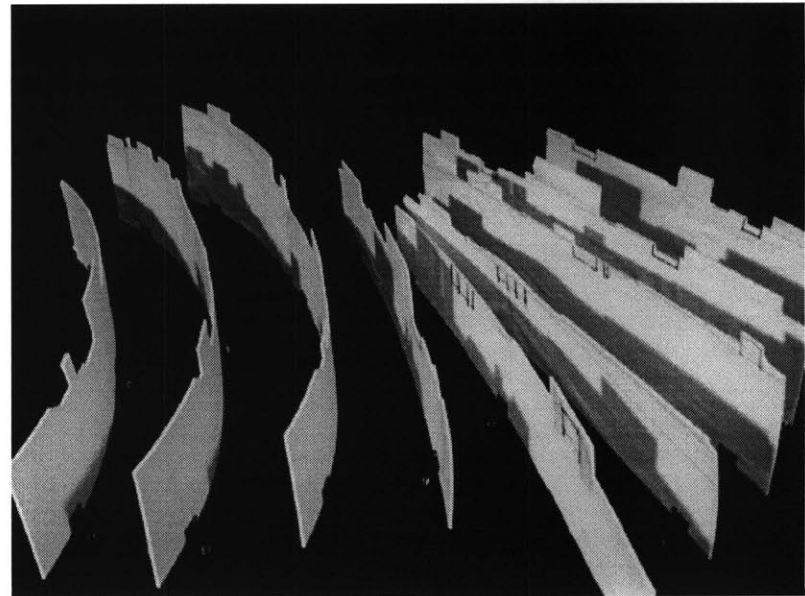
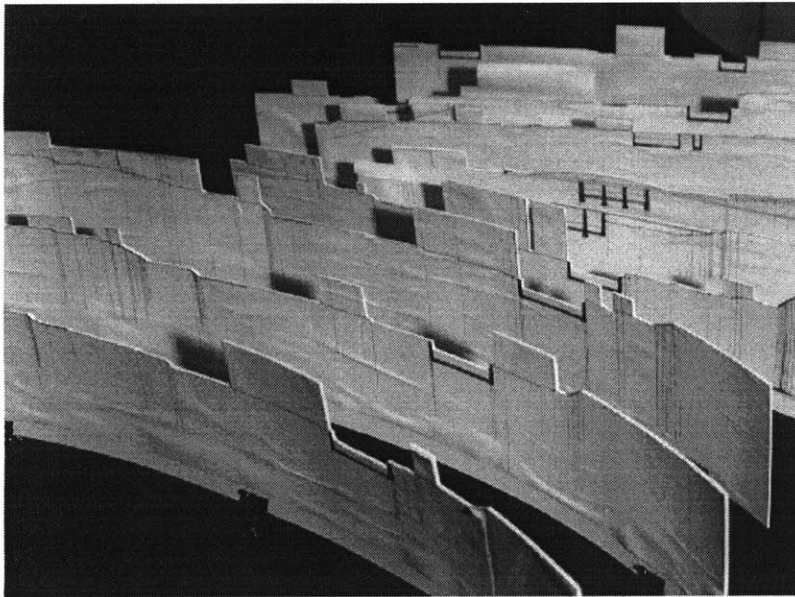
The program itself is critical in interweaving the the resident and the visitor. The components of gallery, film center/auditorium, library are activities run by the residents for the visitor. The film center, gallery, and library are key to displaying, and preserving the cultural heritage of the immigrants. The library serves to record oral histories as well as map a collection specifically for and about the immigrants. Their political histories, stories of their families, their passage to a new homeland, their fears and doubts, successes, and importantly their transition. The film center is a place for the showing of recent releases by these artists. The gallery houses primarily the work of exiled artists. The connection is rooted to a strong heritage, as well as the transition to a new.

DESIGN METHOD

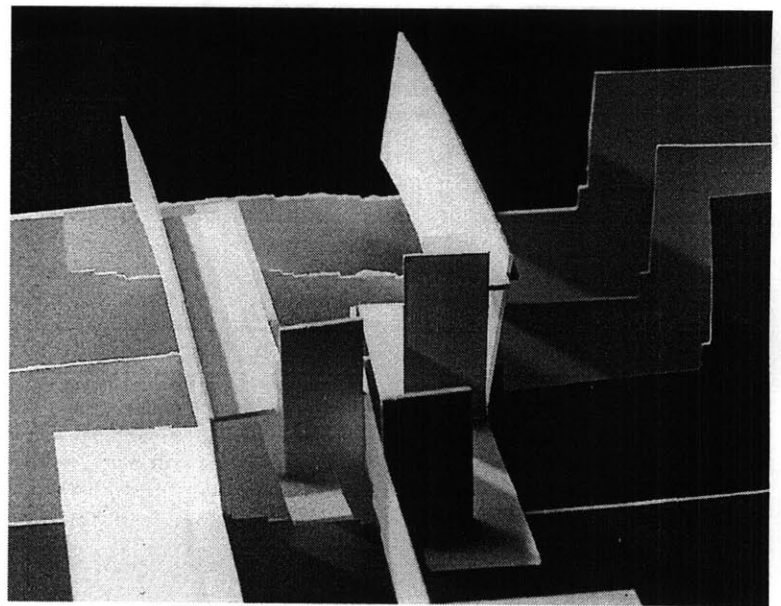
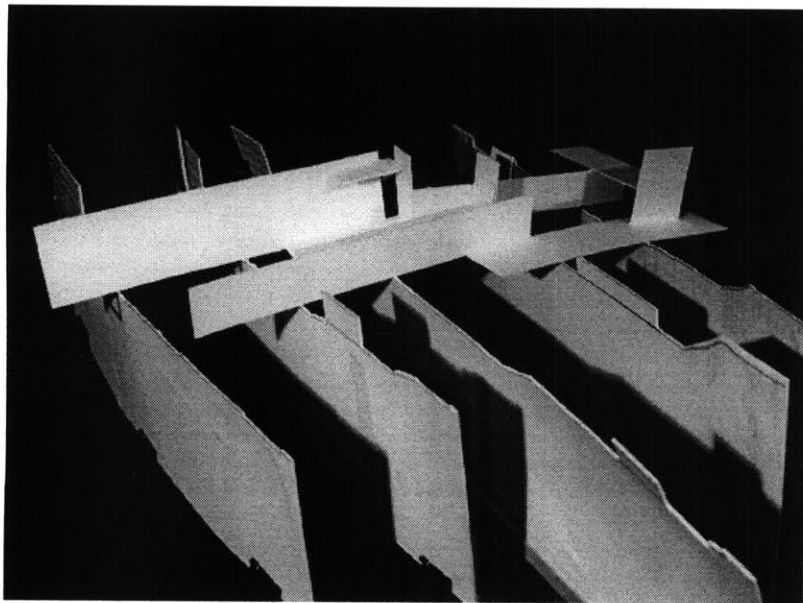
SECTIONAL STUDIES



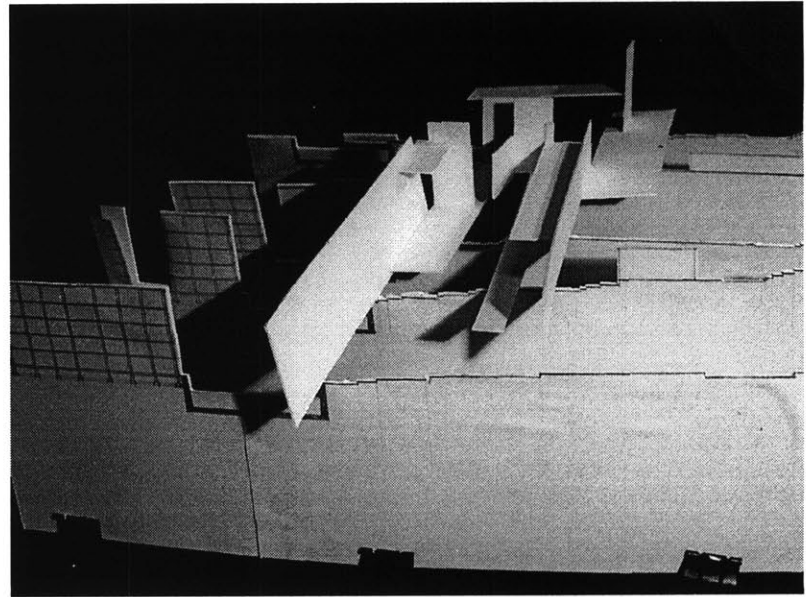
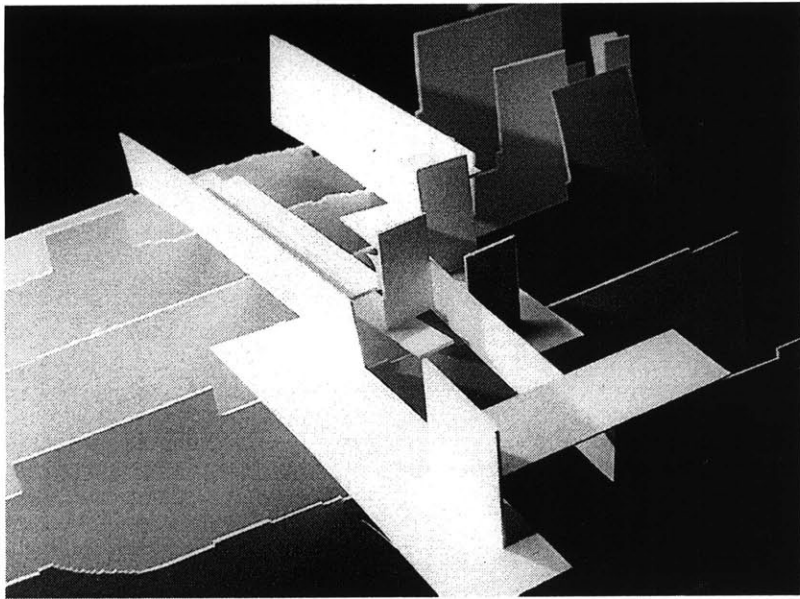
The section is a method of collecting data and mapping the site. The data collection uses two devices, the frame of the camera and the body. Starting in the chosen site, the site where the tourist city/historical mill district ends and where the immigrant city/Acre and Lowlands begins, paces of every twenty steps were taken. At the limit of each pace a photograph recorded the event. This summation of paces gave a precise recording of the canal, swamp locks, and the surrounding urban fabric, the larger site. The next part of the analysis was to map the data with the use of a survey map and the photos. The survey map located the buildings, canal and roads in a linear manner. The photos were then used to translate the singular reading into a vertical dimension. Each vertical dimension becomes a sectional plate. When a collective of plates is placed on the survey map, it begins to reveal the dimensions of the city. The first dimension was the relationship of the canal to the land contours. In the tourist part of town the swamp locks change the level of the water so that it is closer to the surface of the city. In the immigrant part of the town, the water retreats to a depth of ten feet. The next relationship is that of the major road that crosses the site, Thorndike Street. Thorndike Street becomes in section a vertical delimitation of the historical city from the immigrant city. Thorndike Street acts as a prime divider in section of the two parts of the city. The urban fabric of the city is recorded on the plates in relation to the canal and the roadways.



SECTIONAL RESPONSE

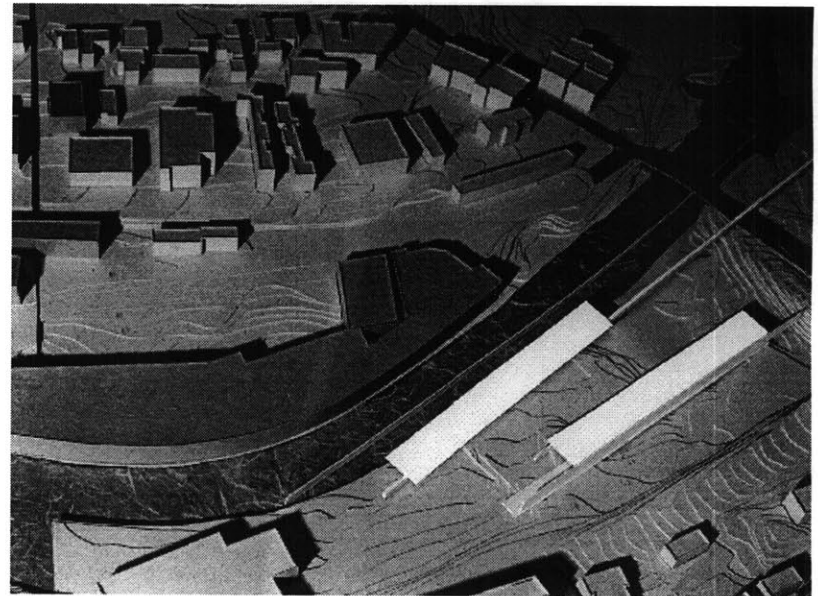


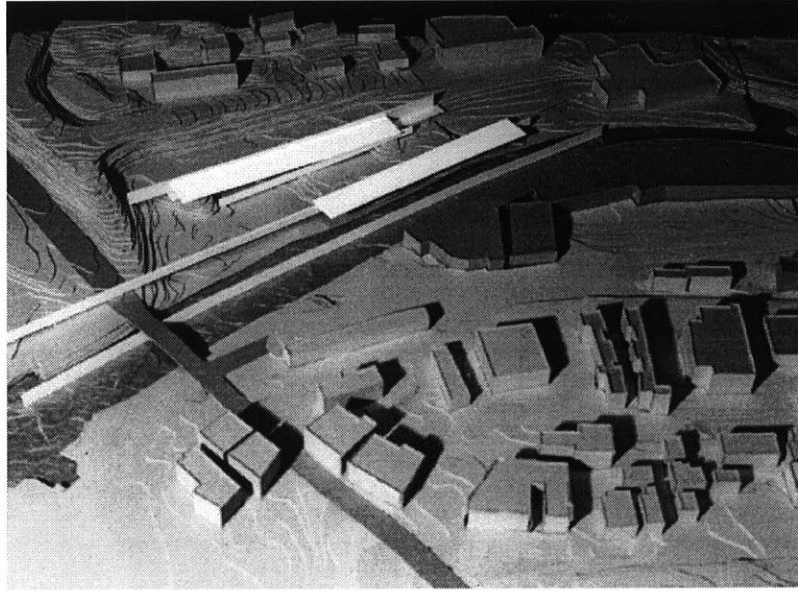
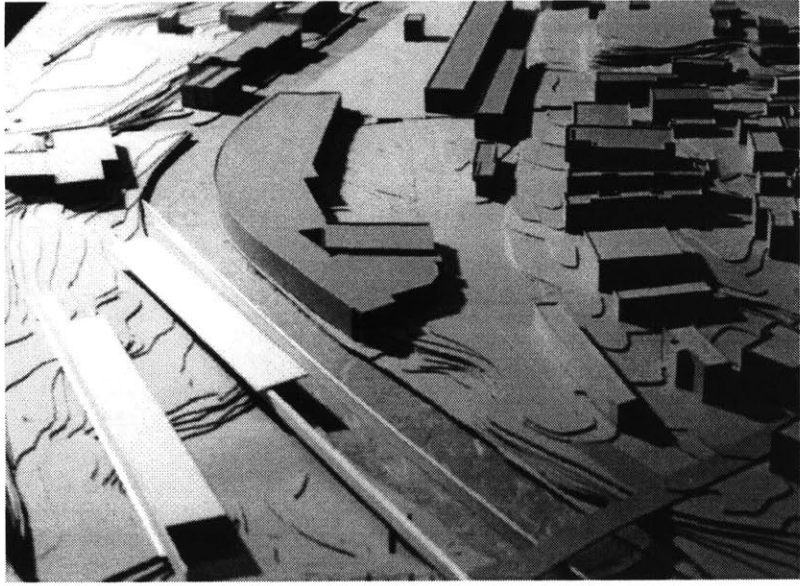
Following a survey of the larger site, the next level of understanding is the site itself. Here sectional plates once again are used to map the location of the canal, urban fabric, and roadways. An intuitive, linear response follows. The gesture is to act to the mill and the canal in a horizontal way, and at the same time to interweave components of the larger site.



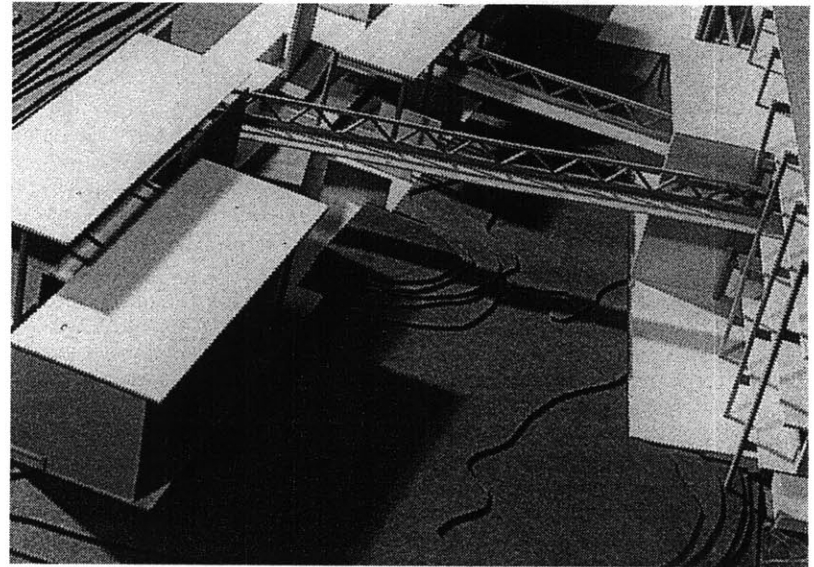
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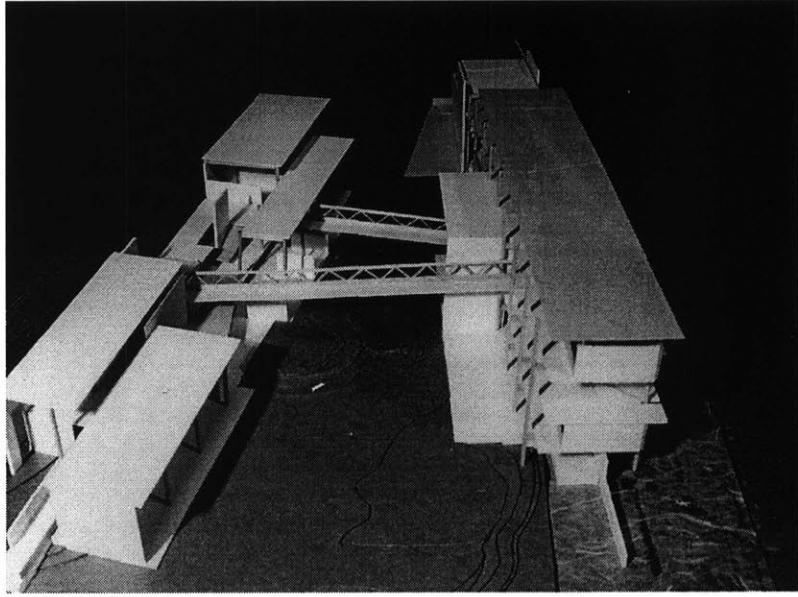
VIEWS OF THE SITE MODEL





VIEWS OF THE FINAL MODEL

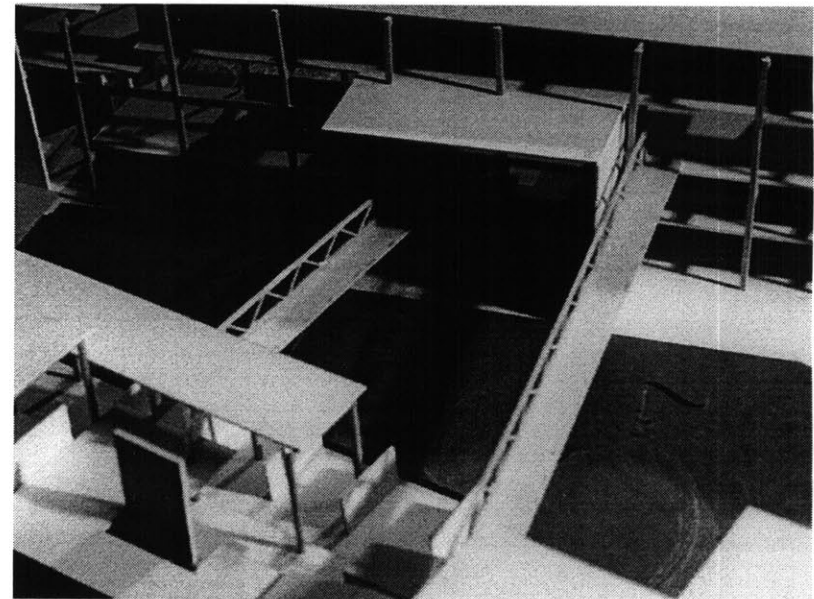
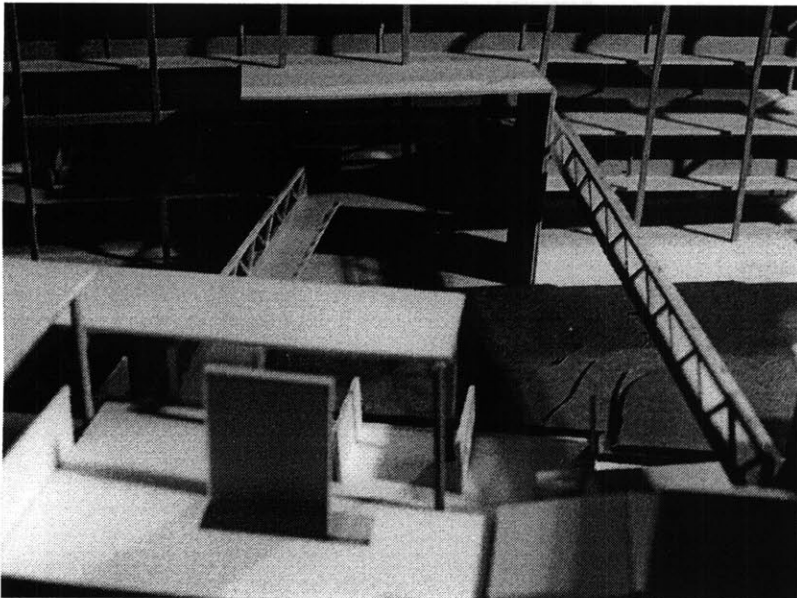


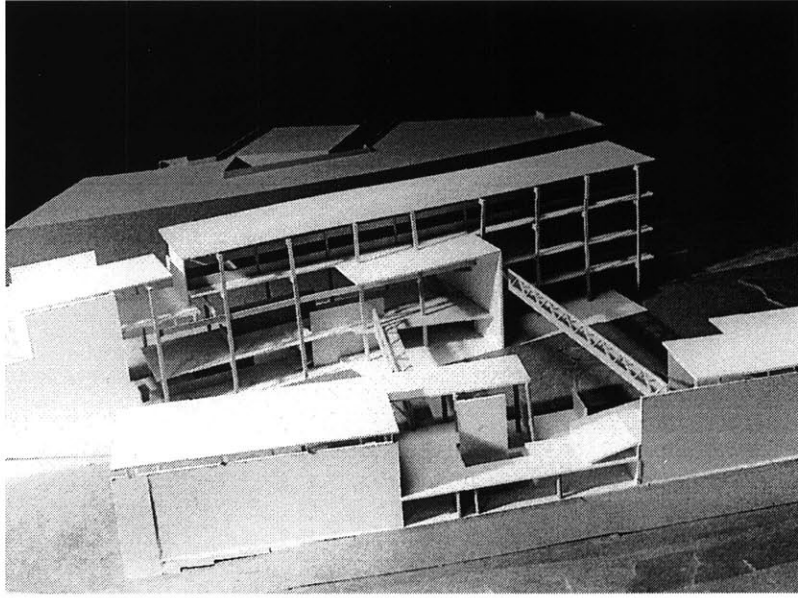
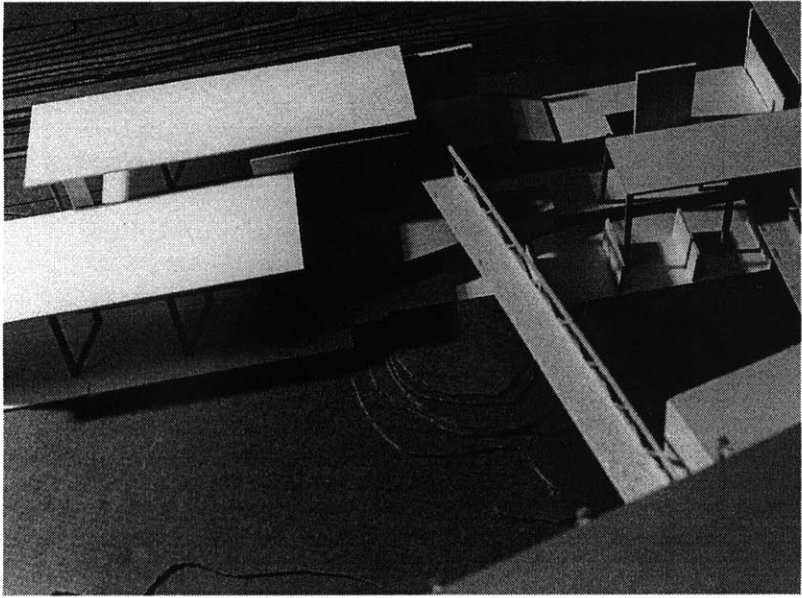


For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of post-colonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and economic refugees. It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that I have drawn out: "Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks...The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses."

M. Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*
quoted in *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha p. 4

THE URBAN PLAZA



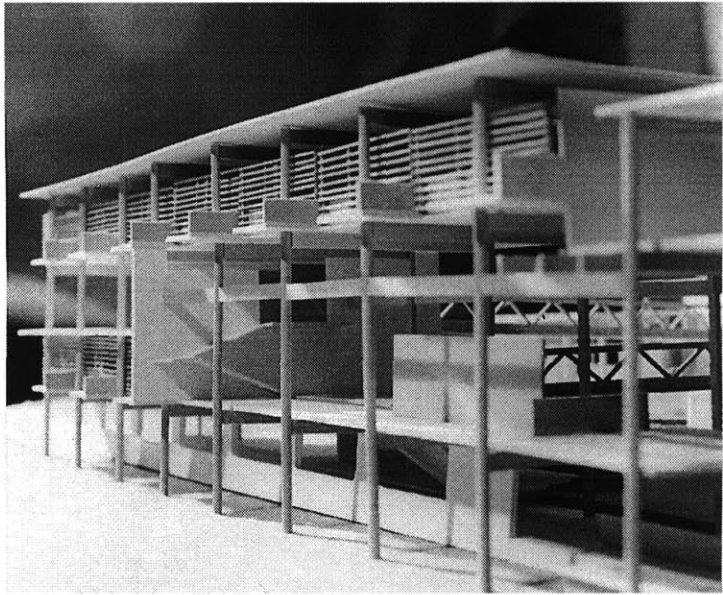
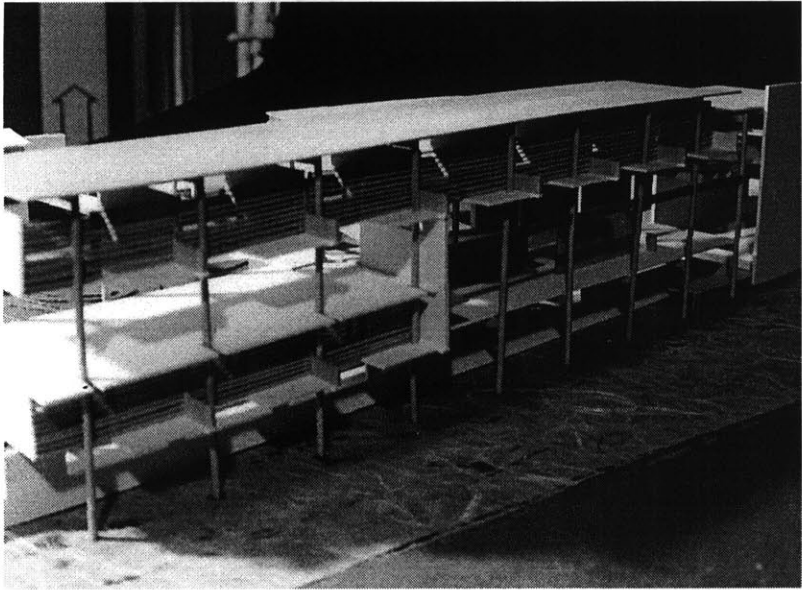


The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

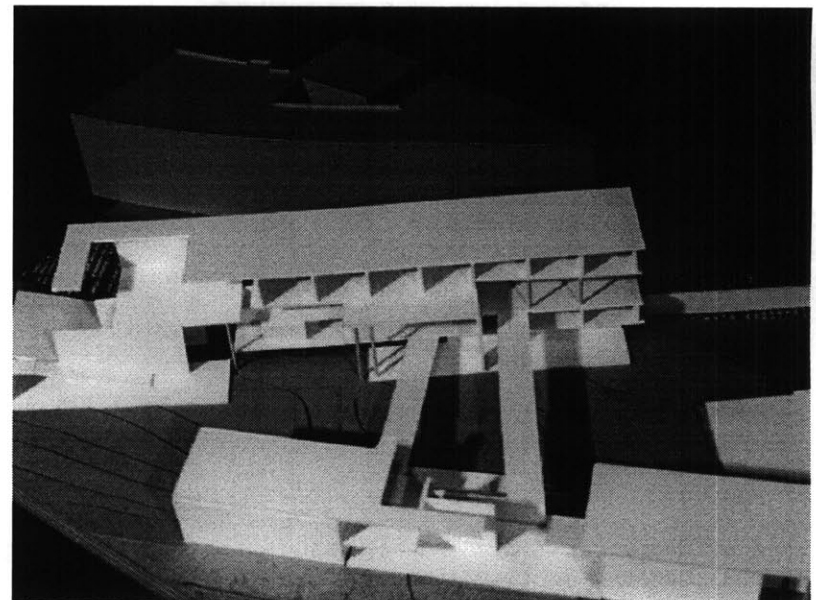
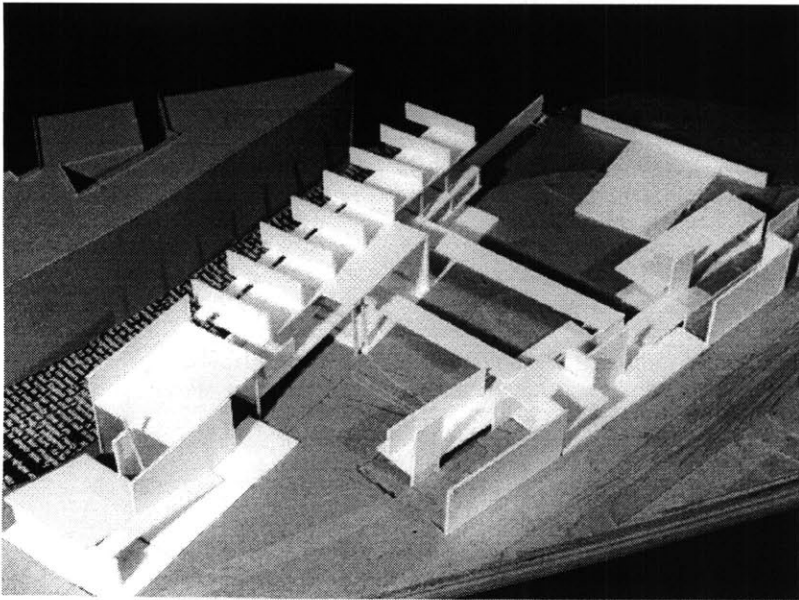
The Location of Culture, Homi K. Bhabha, p. 4

VIEWS FROM THE CANAL



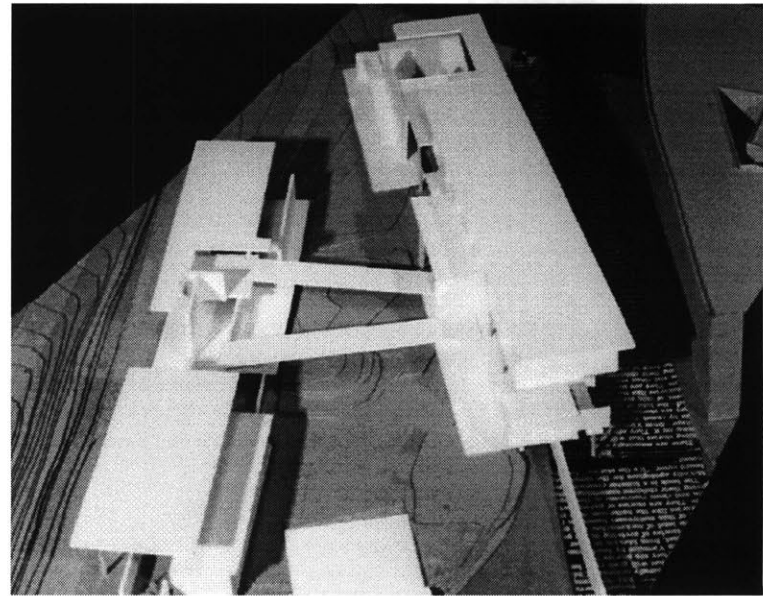
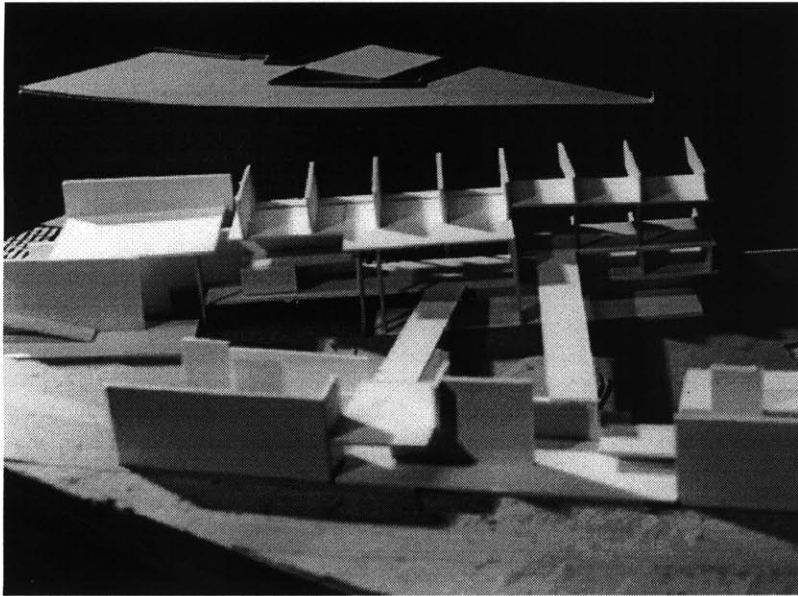


DIAGRAMMATIC BIFURCATION & PROGRAMMATIC BIFURCATION

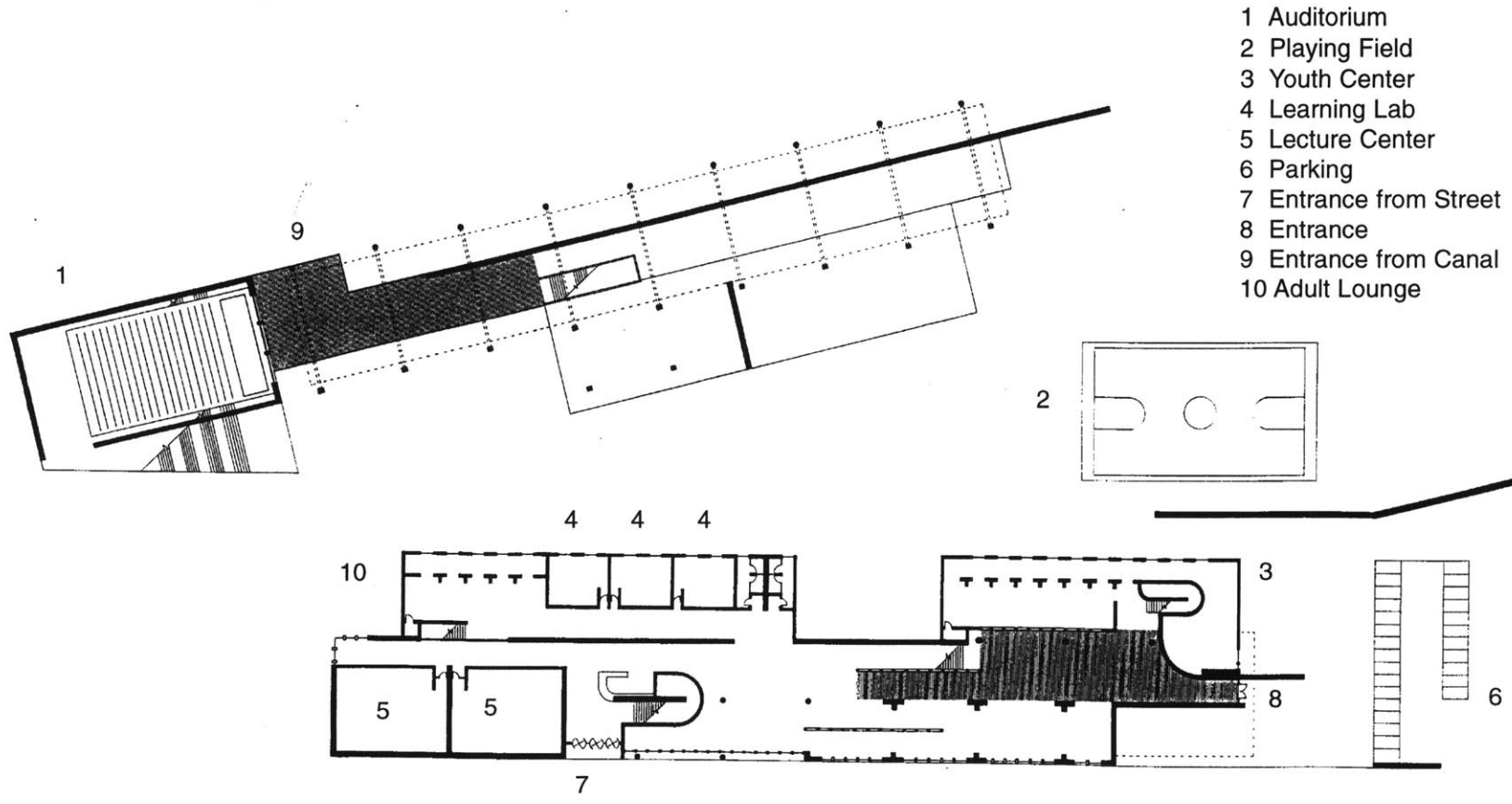


Programmatically the building is bifurcated on many levels. The first relationship of understanding is that between the tourist/visitor and the resident/immigrant. The second division is a generational bifurcation, between the youth population and the adult population.

The generational bifurcation is an understanding of the adult population to learn a new language, adapt to a foreign culture, and to provide a community to transition into. The youth center allows for the autonomy and independence of a younger population, struggling in its own way to adapt and transition.



PLANS



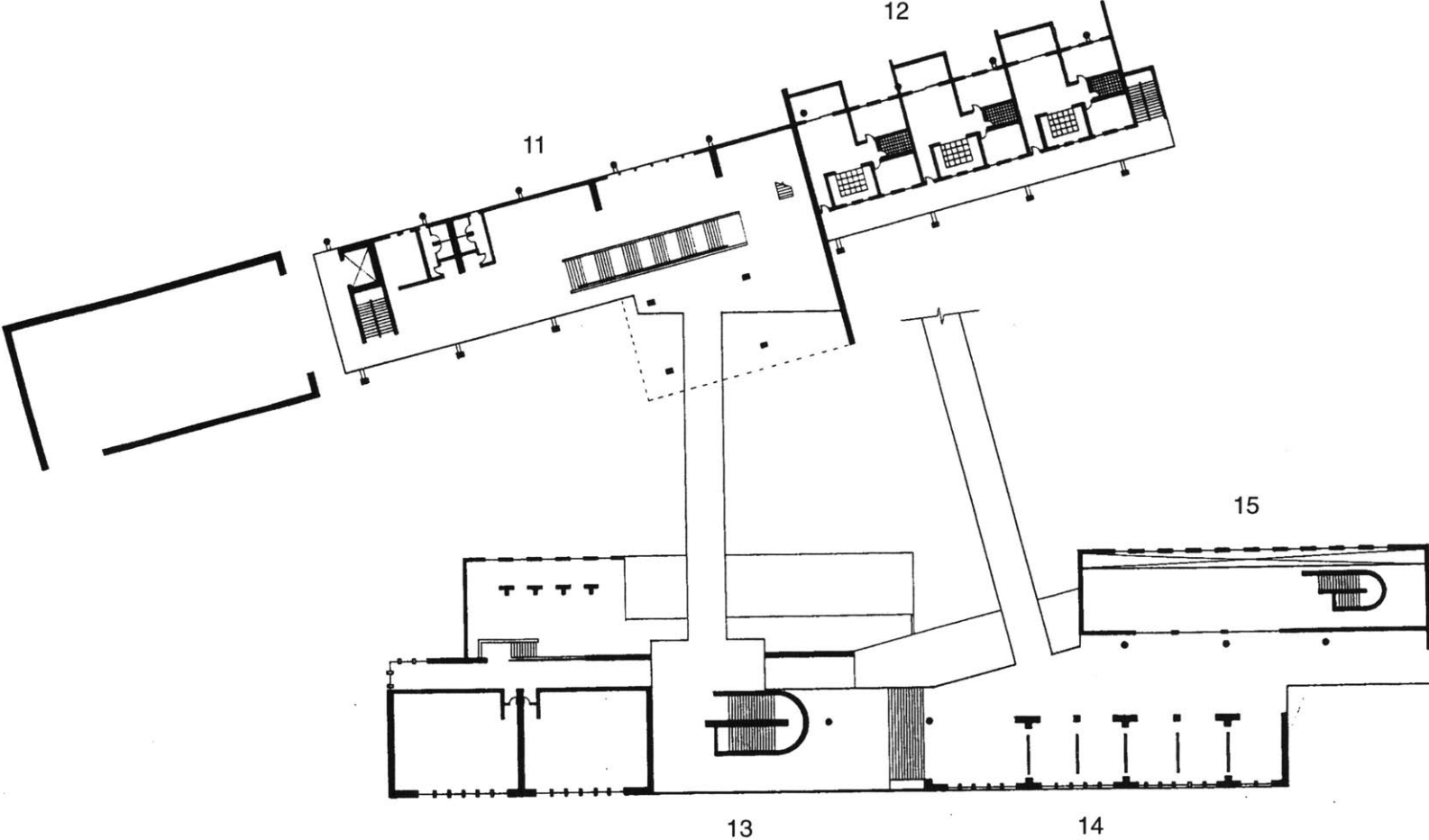
- 1 Auditorium
- 2 Playing Field
- 3 Youth Center
- 4 Learning Lab
- 5 Lecture Center
- 6 Parking
- 7 Entrance from Street
- 8 Entrance
- 9 Entrance from Canal
- 10 Adult Lounge

40 & 41



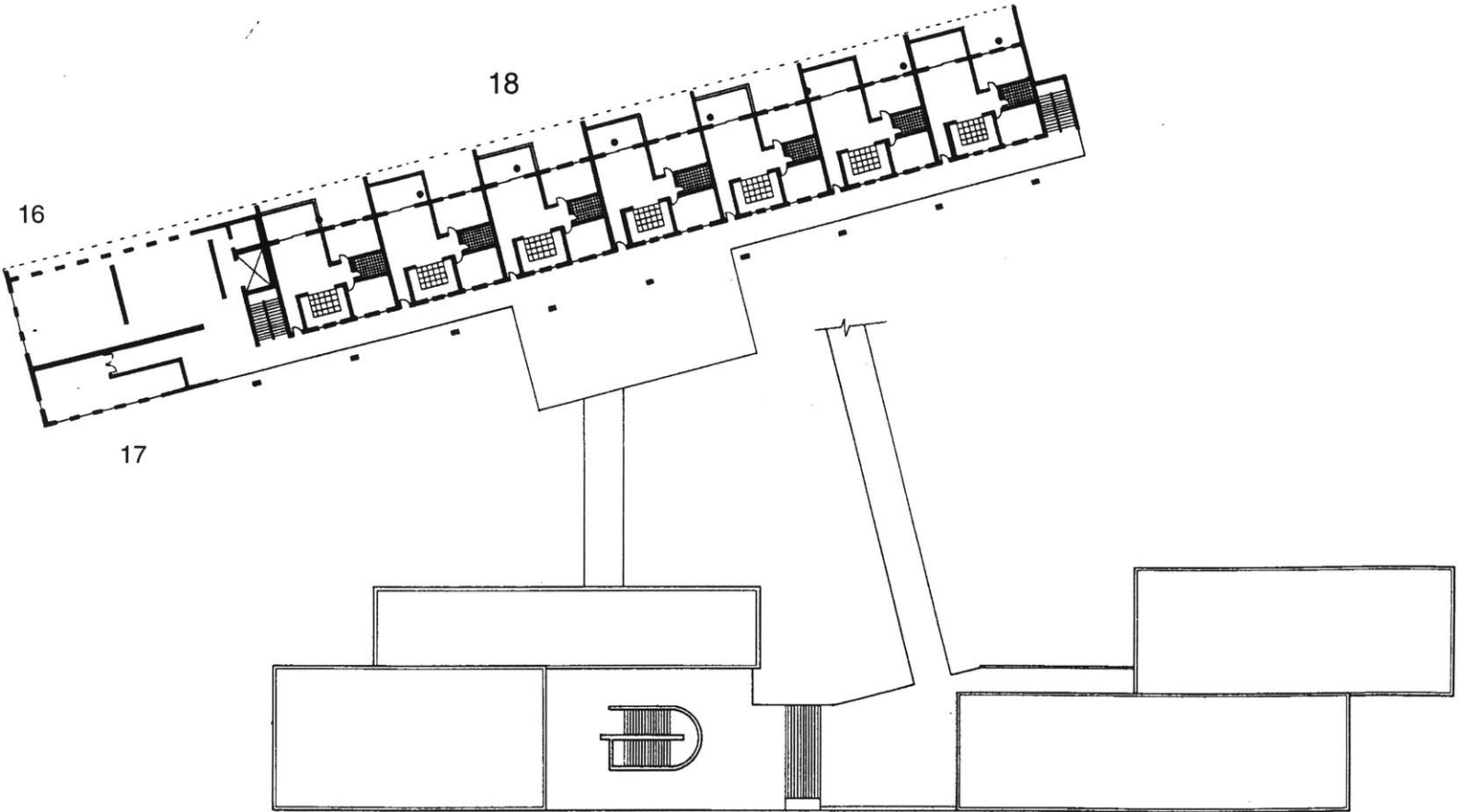
PLAN OF THE GROUND FLOOR

- 11 Gallery
- 12 Housing for Scholars
- 13 Urban Plaza
- 14 Restaurants
- 15 Youth Center



PLAN OF THE SECOND FLOOR

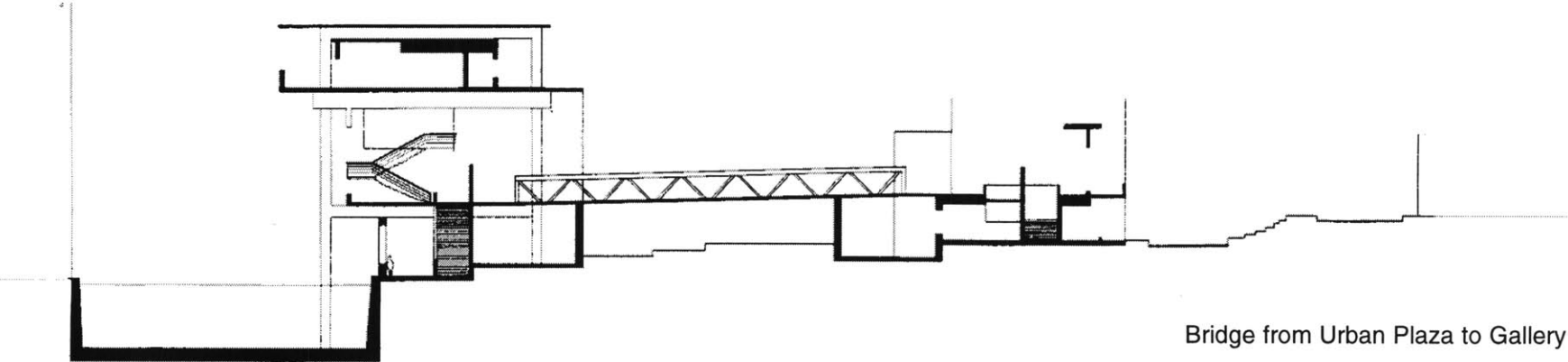
16 Multi-Purpose Room
17 Daycare Center
18 Housing for Families



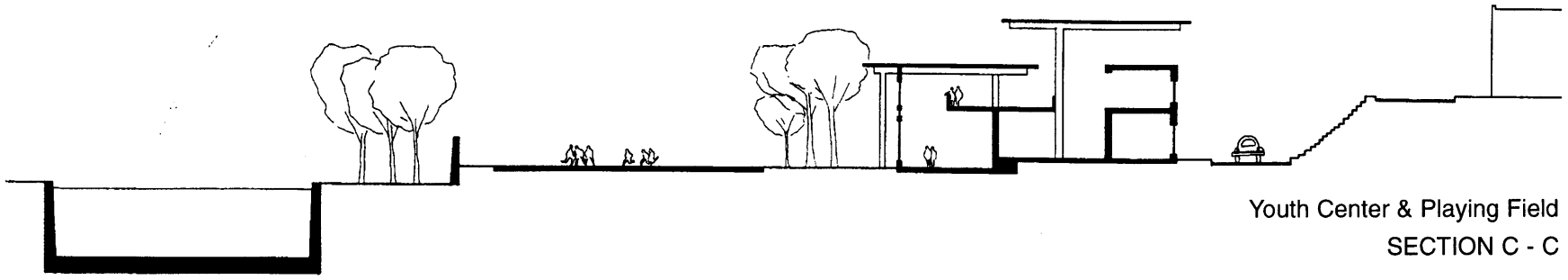
42 & 43

PLAN OF THE THIRD FLOOR

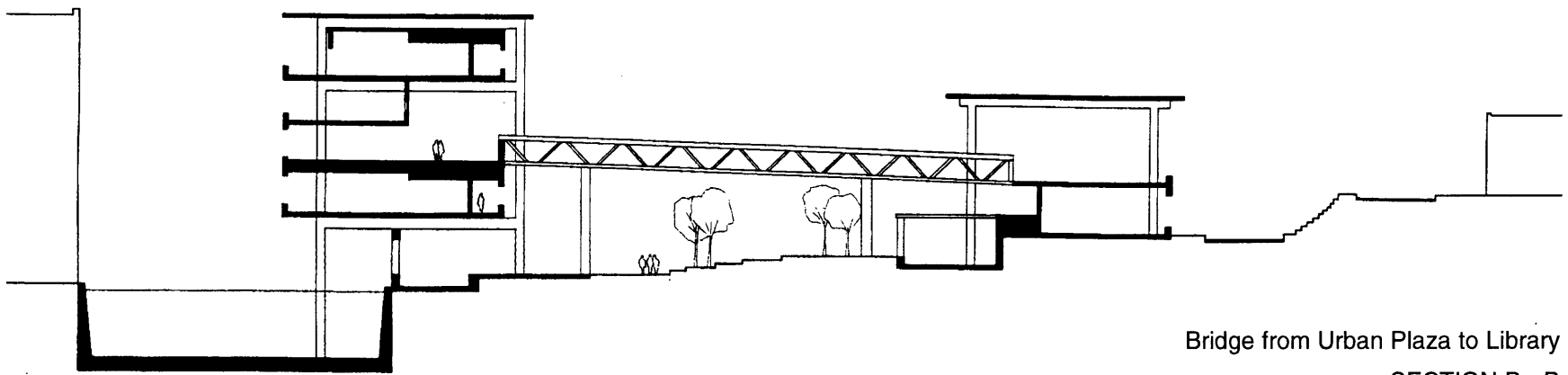
SECTIONS



Bridge from Urban Plaza to Gallery
SECTION A - A



Youth Center & Playing Field
SECTION C - C



Bridge from Urban Plaza to Library
SECTION B - B

CONCLUSION

The scope of this thesis covered a cultural and political issue. It was with this agenda that I sought to discover how architecture may serve a broader part of our culture.

I am concerned, more importantly, with how architecture can become a dialogue of what is foreign, accepted and tolerated. Potentially, architecture is a medium which can translate the tension of being an alien, unfamiliar, uprooted people into the fabric of the city. The tension of familiar and unfamiliar raises issues on both sides, how is an immigrant population tolerated by the city, as well as how an immigrant population assimilates itself into a city. Architecture can then ask what is it to be a stranger in our midst, and also what is it to be categorized as a stranger. Architecture can engage the diversities of publics to reveal critical moments in the life of our city.

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