

Identities of Self and Place in Sunset Park: The Unmaking of the Gowanus Expressway

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Abstract

This project explores the intersecting qualities of place, time, and identity through the work of a graduate design studio at Rice School of Architecture. "Identities of Self and Place in Sunset Park: The Unmaking of the Gowanus Expressway," challenges students to activate a residual urban space through a broad reading of its surrounding cultural, physical, and programmatic site conditions. The project site, located beneath the Gowanus Expressway in Brooklyn's Sunset Park, is a typical example of how transportation infrastructure of the past bifurcated communities and sent neighborhoods into decline. Architecture designed through the lens of Place, Time, and People can produce responsive spaces that address historical injustices while allowing for multiple readings and experiences.

Students began their research with a design methodology based in both direct and remote observation of the project site. They examined the local conditions and expanded into the surrounding neighborhoods, searching for patterns in the constructed environment that reflected a community ethos, or a shared sense of belonging. Responding to the context, students identified and isolated found patterns that held potential for development as spatial experiences.

These exercises became the basis for the design of a community center annex for the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. Using the spatial patterning developed through their research, the students articulated different facets of their selected patterns to generate a range of spaces and conditions—intimate and communal, private and public, interior and exterior. The designs expressed a cohesive reading of the project that emphasized the experience of shared community within a complex and diverse urban environment.

Images from the studio's final projects, including photographs, sketches, renderings, and architectural drawings, will be presented along with the students' written descriptions to convey their specific design intent and personal methodology within the broader course framework. The products of the studio's work over the course of the semester show a clear relationship between the methodologies employed and the resultant synthesis of identity, place and structure. The work highlights the possibilities available to designers and architects in working to transform aging infrastructure into spaces of social interaction and community.

Project and Site Background

The Gowanus Expressway, a section of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (Route 278), designed by Robert Moses in 1941, was a solid mass of concrete slab, almost double the width of the former elevated train track structure. The highway led to the abandonment of a formerly vibrant commercial district, bifurcating Sunset Park into an industrial zone to the north-west and residential neighborhoods to the south-east. Efforts have been made with the rehabilitation of Bush Terminal Park and Industry City to connect the differing sectors, but the site remains blighted by parked cars and poor maintenance.



Figure 1. Jessica LaBarbera Sunset Park Context Map

The studio project site is located within the space of the underpass, along Third Avenue and between 39th Street and 40th Street. The students have been asked to design an annex location to the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. Bounded by two lanes of local traffic on either side, students are asked to use urban interventions to mitigate the effects of a vehicular dominated city and to design spaces that have multiple entry points for interaction and connection between two urban scales.



Figure 2. The Gowanus Expressway from below.

Design Approach

To establish a relevant design process for the project, the studio used overlapping aspects of Place (perceived space), Time (conceived space) and People (lived space) as expressed in Lefebvre's Production of Space (1991). Place (perceived space) was defined as the built environment – the physical considerations of the project and the project site. Students considered site boundaries and zoning regulations, existing materiality, construction methods as well as height, typology and use. Time (conceived space) was the aspect of the project related to the historical and present-day context. Students attempted to understand the cultural relevance of the site in order to address historical injustices and transform the site into a space that balances traditional hierarchies of power. Finally, the experience of People (lived space) became a critical factor in the students' work. The studio discussed the perception of space as experienced by the body and how we can design spaces to welcome a broad range of physical abilities.

Drawing Patterns

In the first phase of the project students examined the local conditions and surrounding neighborhoods to identify patterns that reflected the Time, Place and People of Sunset Park.

Kelly Yu's project, *Flow State*, draws on the shifting patterns of the existing urban grid and the linear flows of people and traffic in the neighborhood to create a dynamic community space. It uses elements of the Gowanus' visual language to merge with the existing structure and transform it into a space for gathering and connection rather than its historic function as a tool for division.

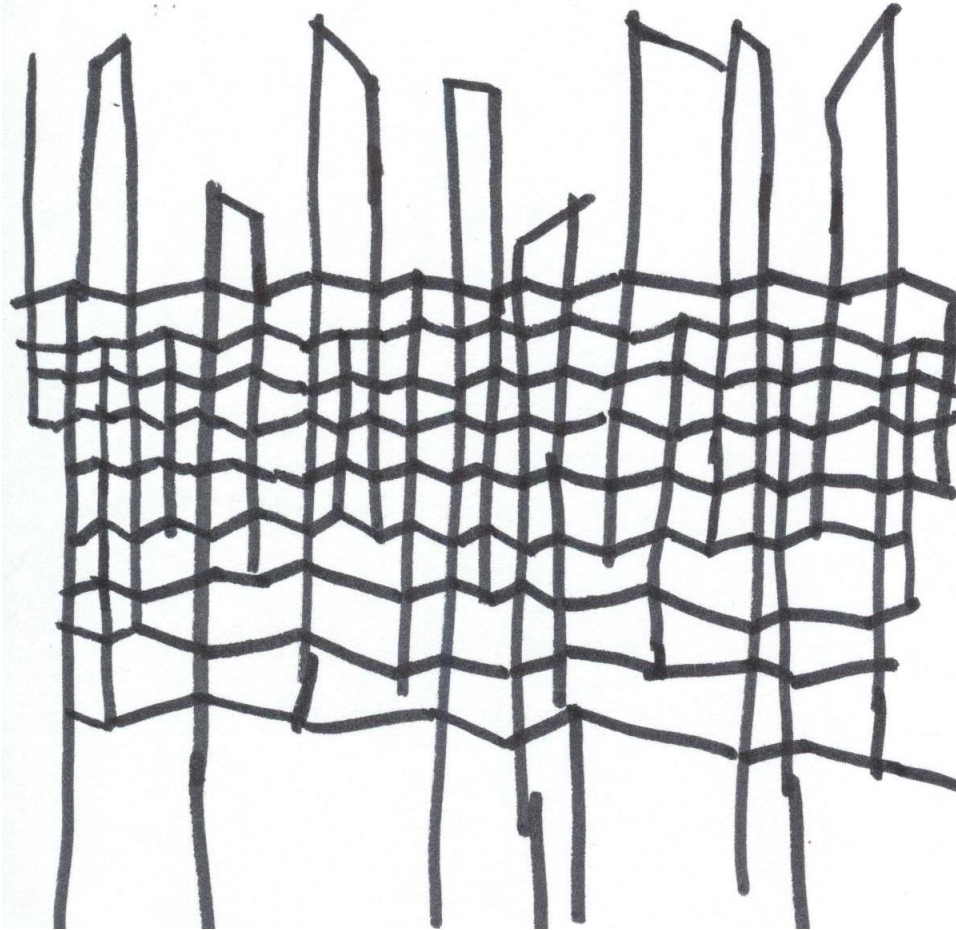


Figure 3 Kelly Yu "Flow State" Drawing no. 1.

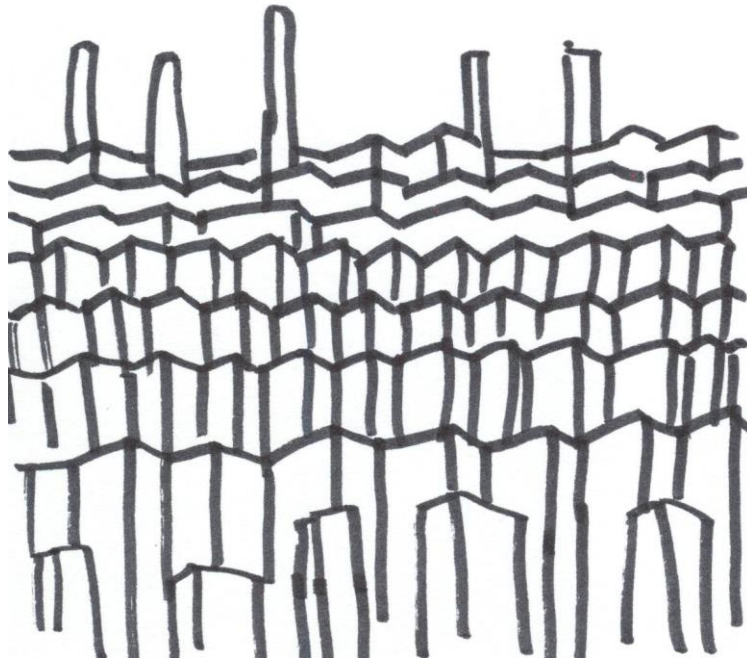


Figure 4 Kelly Yu "Flow State" Drawing no. 2.

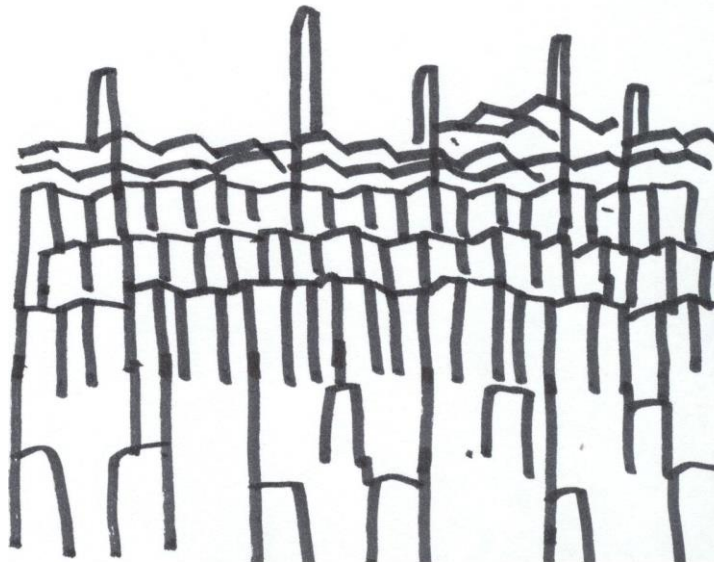


Figure 5. Kelly Yu "Flow State" Drawing no. 3.

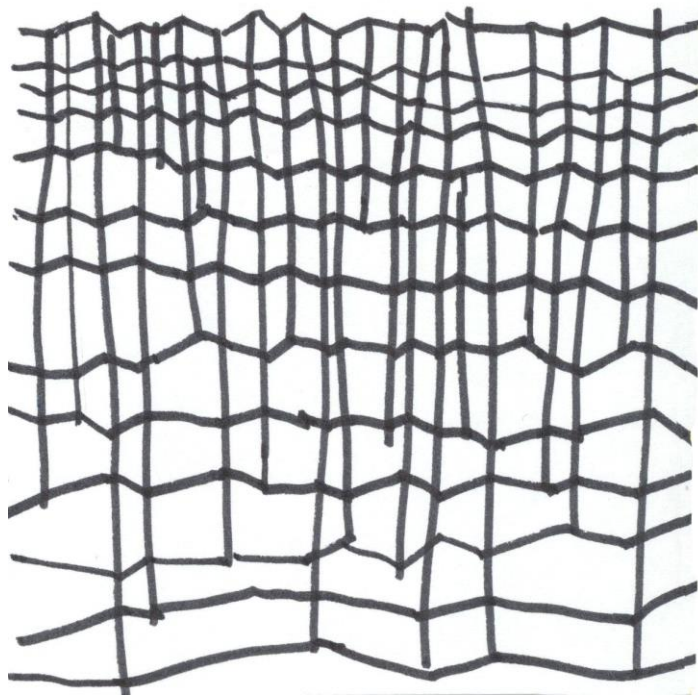


Figure 6 Kelly Yu "Flow State" Drawing no. 4.

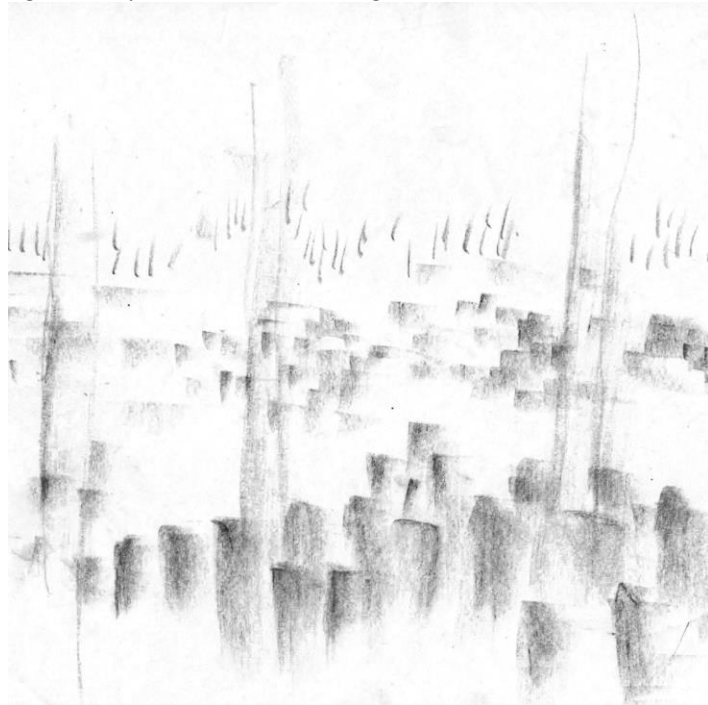


Figure 7. Kelly Yu "Flow State" Sketch no. 1.

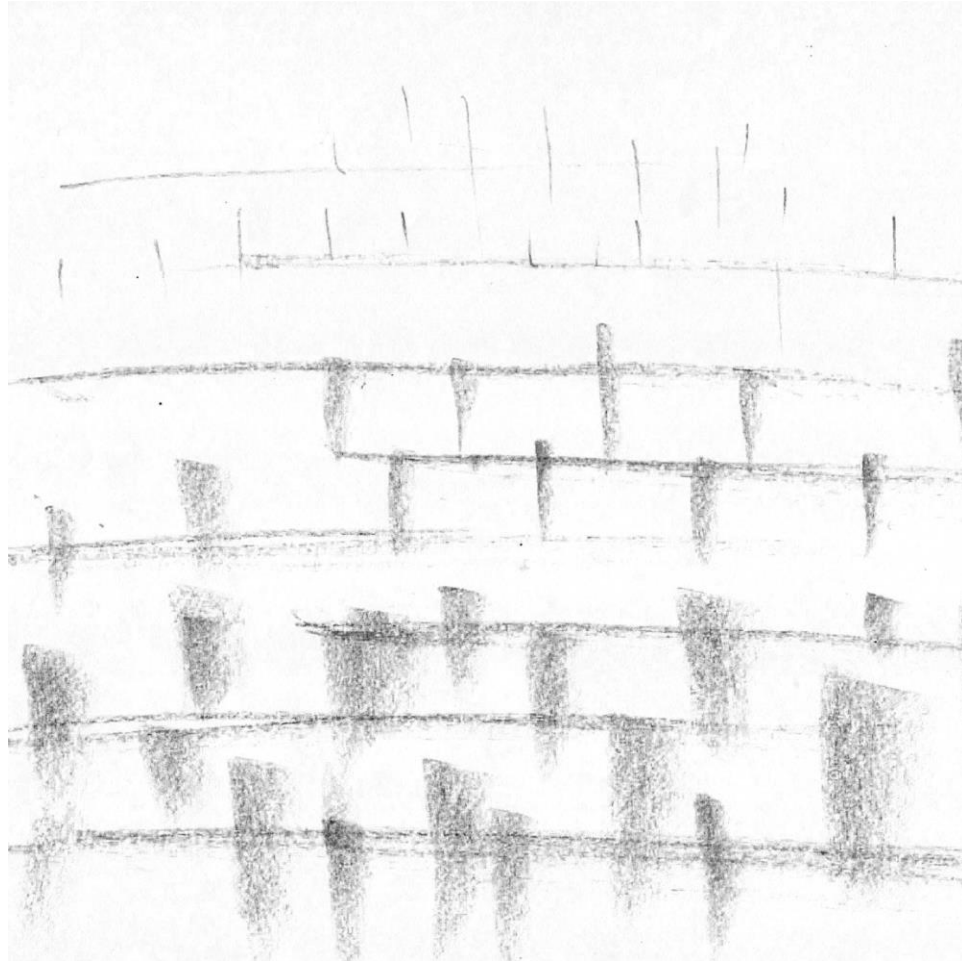


Figure 8. Kelly Yu "Flow State" Sketch no. 2.

Anna Fritz, in *Doppelganger*, explores the duality and the friction that occurs when sister objects are placed in parallel with one another. By creating a series of nearly identical twin bars, an imperfect bi-symmetry is formed that serves to create a third unique space between the two. In this way *Doppelganger* addresses the tension between the commercial and residential sectors of Sunset Park by creating a new type of space that welcomes social interaction and activity.

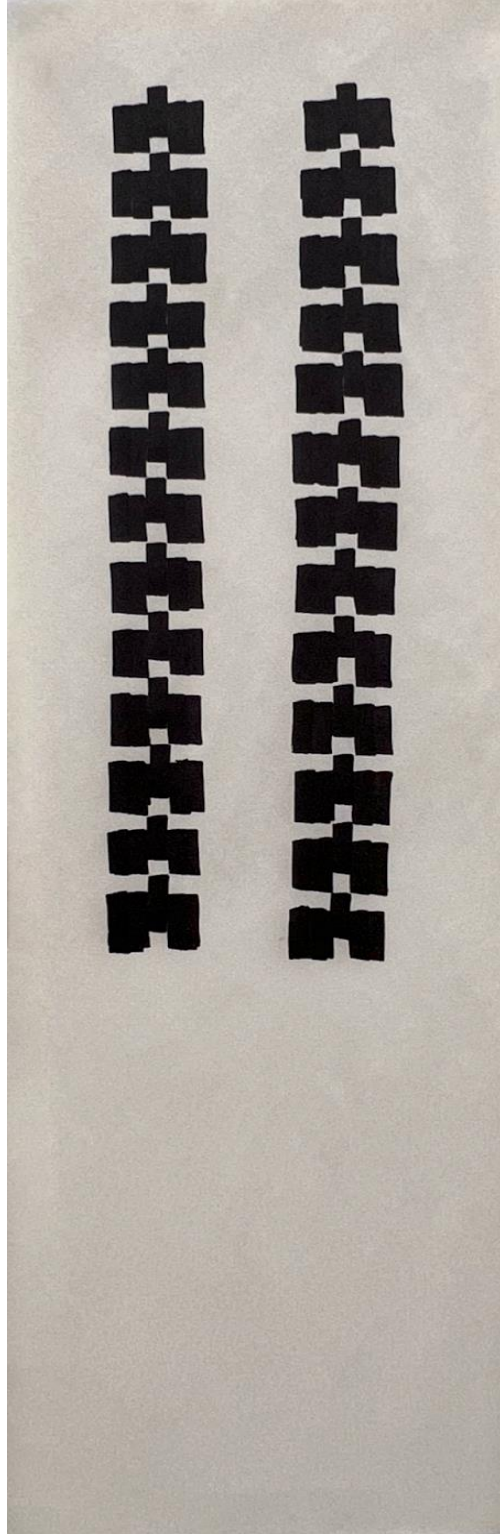


Figure 9. Anna Fritz "Doppelgänger" Initial Pattern.



Figure 10. Anna Fritz "Doppelgänger" Building Isometric.

In the Colors of Sunset Park by Amy Zhang, the multifaceted communities and places within Sunset Park are highlighted by a system of patterning colors referenced from the infrastructure and nature in the area to represent the diversity of the people in the neighborhood and its history.

Colors of Sunset Park

ARCH 602
Amy Zhang

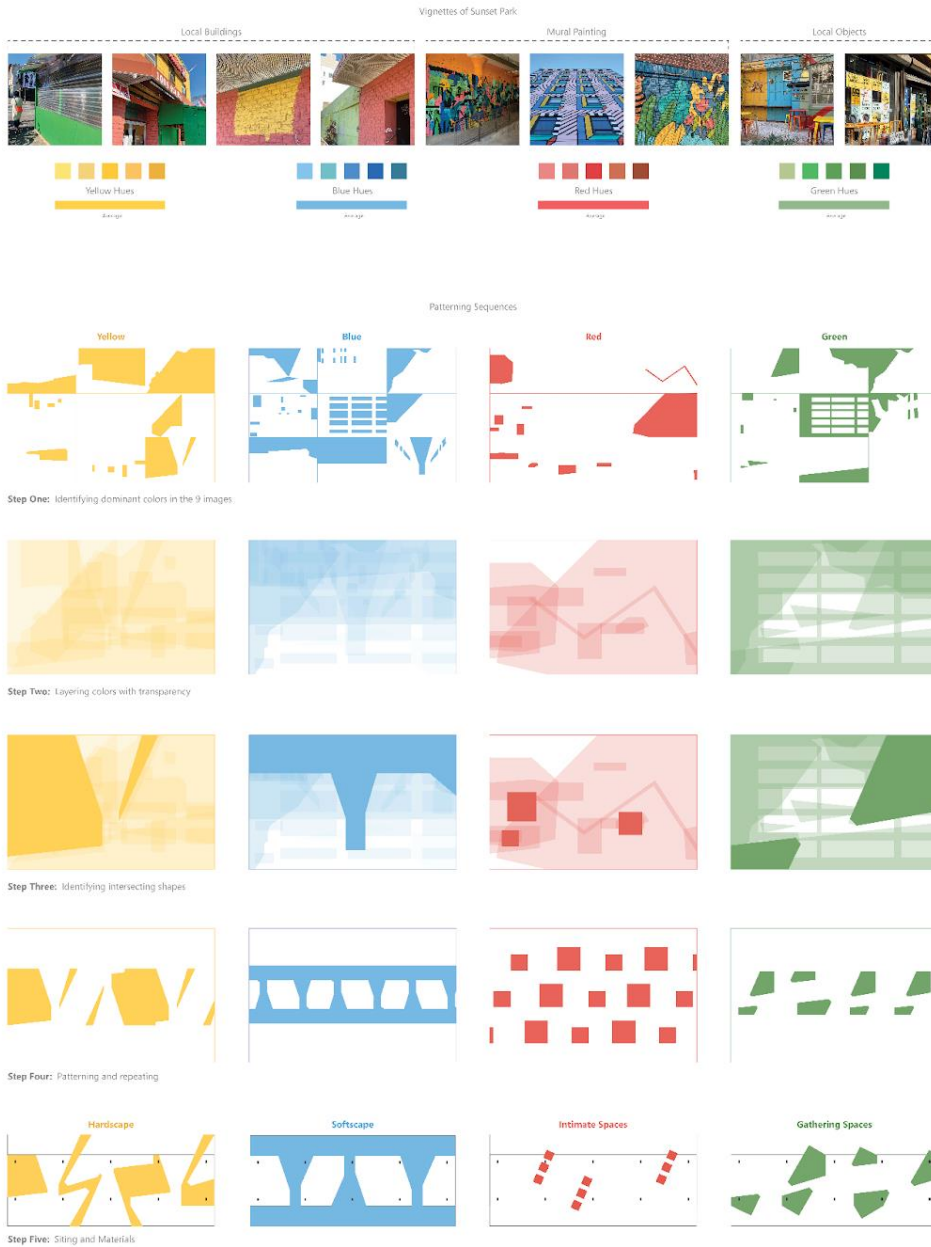


Figure 11. Amy Zhang "Colors of Sunset Park" Patterns Identification and Development.



Figure 12. Amy Zhang "Colors of Sunset Park" Site Plan 1/8" = 1'-0".

Design Development

As students responded to the built environment (perceived space), temporal context (conceived space) and the experience of the user (lived space), students expanded their initial patterns into volumetric forms. They began considering materiality, circulation and connection. Gowanus Commons, by Kim McGlone, offers a gathering space between industrial and residential neighborhood zones. The complex becomes the connection to mitigate the divisive effects of the expressway.



Figure 13. Kim McGlone "Gowanus Commons" East Elevation.

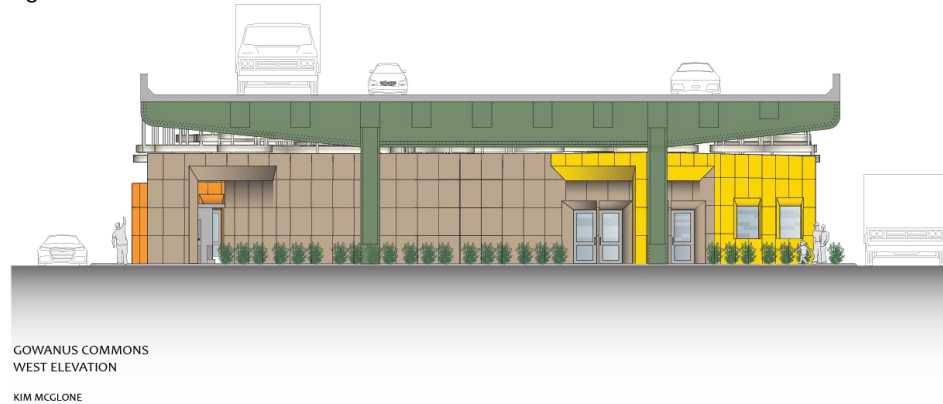


Figure 14. Kim McGlone "Gowanus Commons" West Elevation.

In Rita Xiong's Inverse project takes inspiration from the unique form and materiality of the Gowanus Expressway. The results are intended to be a visual monument that respects its infrastructural context. The project also serves as a hub for the community through its porosity and transparency, the use of glass and breaking down of volumes and generosity of public space.



Figure 15. Rita Xiong "Inverse" Pre-event Entrance.



Figure 16. Rita Xiong "Inverse" Playground View.

Jessica LaBarbera's Annex for Sunset Park Center for Family Life takes its cues from the active hidden gems of Sunset Park's green spaces. The series of sightlines and gestures from architectural to urban scales emphasize an appreciation for Sunset Park's distinct communities and public spaces which characterize this unique neighborhood of New York City.

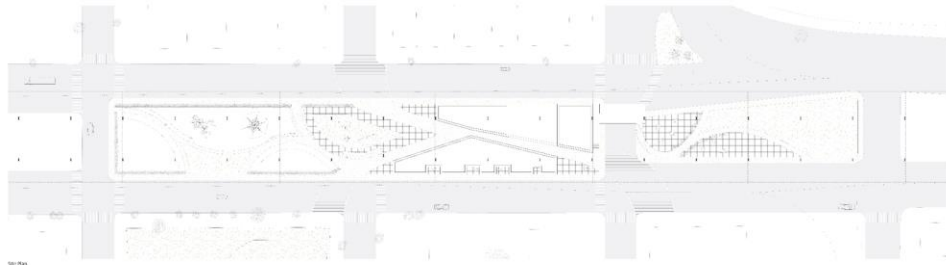


Figure 17' Jessica LaBarbera "Annex for Sunset Park Center" Site Plan 1/16" = 1'-0"

Final Projects

Andrew Clifton "Residual Grid"

"Residual Grid" reclaims the displaced urban fabric to support pedestrian movement and provide community-oriented programs including playgrounds, a skatepark, cafe, offices, and an outdoor market. An underlying grid provides structure for circulation and flexible use gathering space. On either side a "residential" and "industrial" edge are formed by the repeating rhythm of steel grids and brick walls. The grids tilt up and down to welcome food trucks and host events, while the brick walls face directly with storefronts across the street. The strategy of alignment and misalignment between these two languages creates moments which celebrate the uniqueness of the context and re-establishes a sense of movement, gathering, and place for the community.

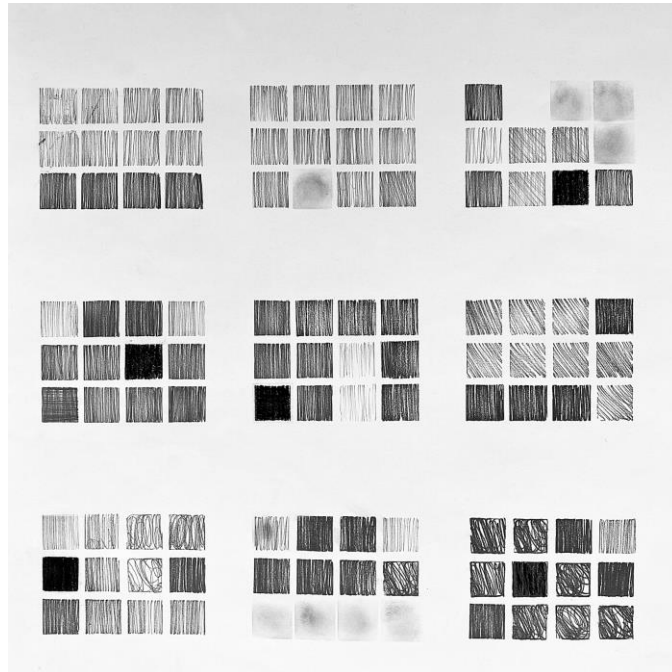


Figure 18. Andrew Clifton "Residual Grid" Patterns Study.

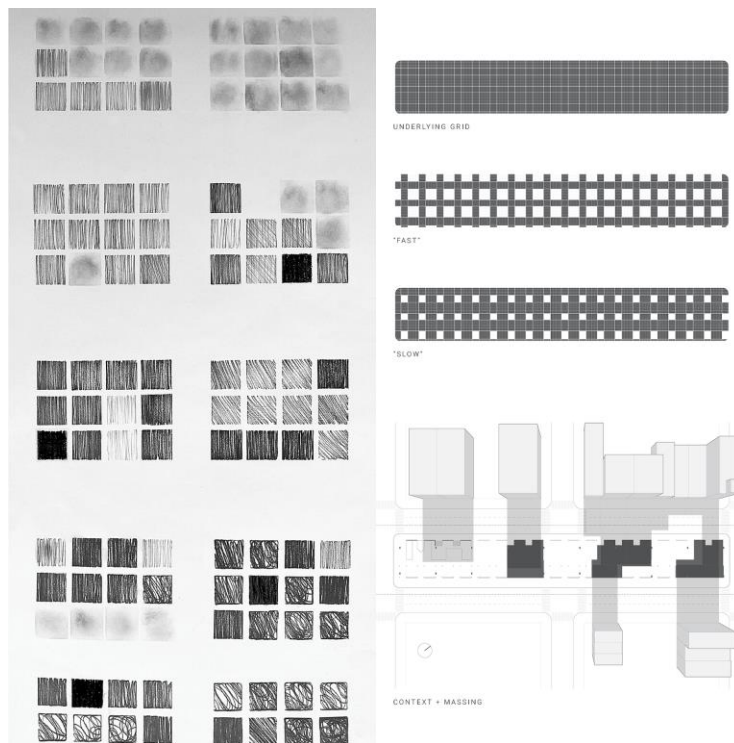


Figure 19. Andrew Clifton "Residual Grid" Pattern Development.

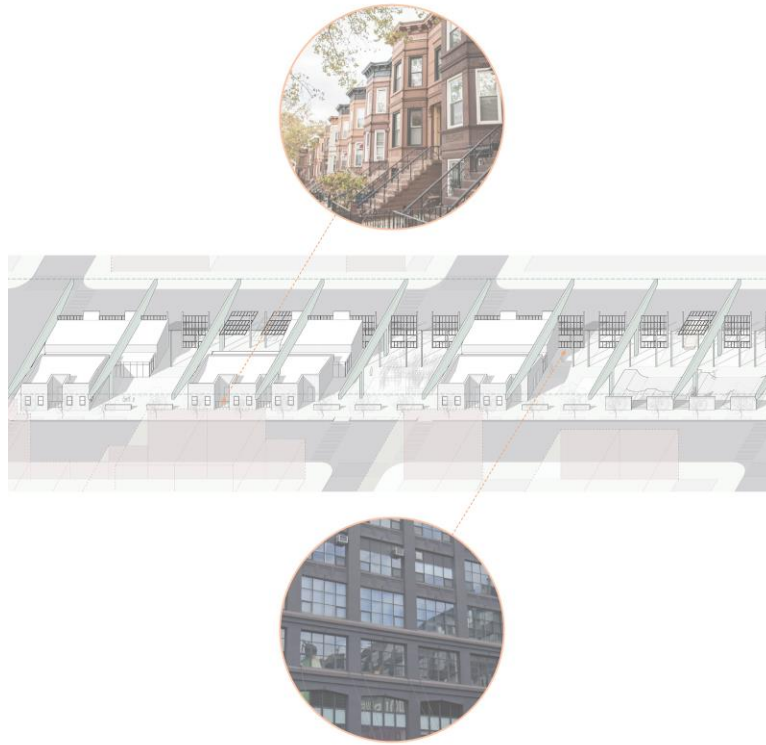


Figure 20. Andrew Clifton "Residual Grid" Project Full View.

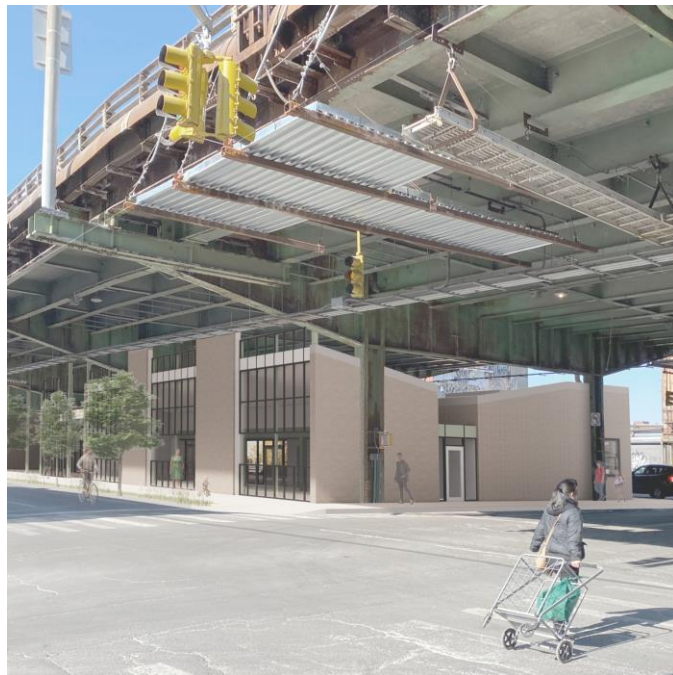


Figure 21. Andrew Clifton "Residual Grid" Perspective View North-East.



Figure 22. Andrew Clifton "Residual Grid" Entrance View.

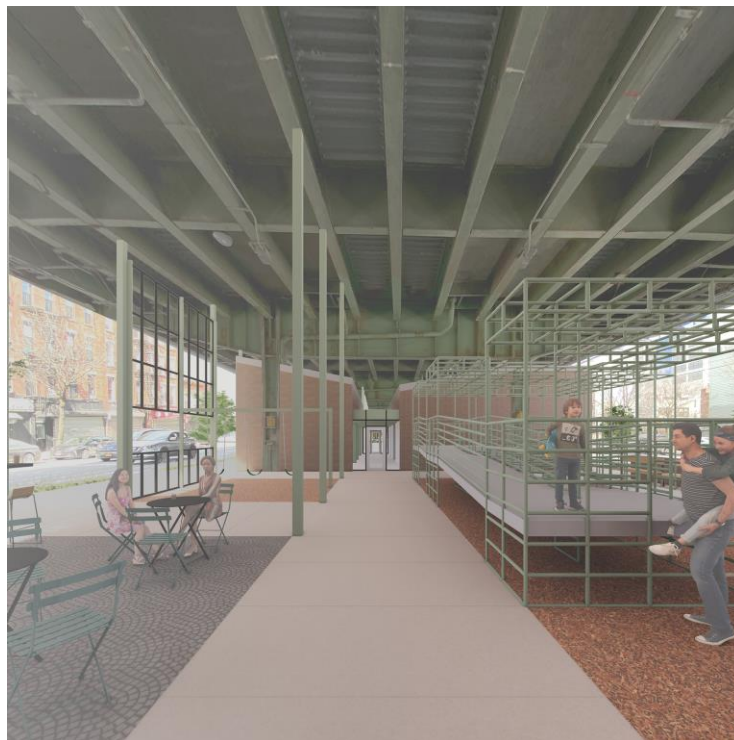


Figure 23. Andrew Clifton "Residual Grid" Youth Play Area.

Henry Talbi “Brooklyn Stoop”

The front stoop is one of the quintessential elements of Brooklyn. My project uses the stoop typology as a driver for the design of the Center for Community Outreach. It served as the generator for the pattern that I developed as part of the studio design process, and remained an important formal gesture as I shaped my building. Extending on the idea of a Community Outreach Center, creating a civic space for all of Sunset Park was of the utmost importance for my design. Through the use of the stoop typology, my building can serve as a civic anchor for Sunset Park, revitalizing the sidewalk as public/private gathering space.

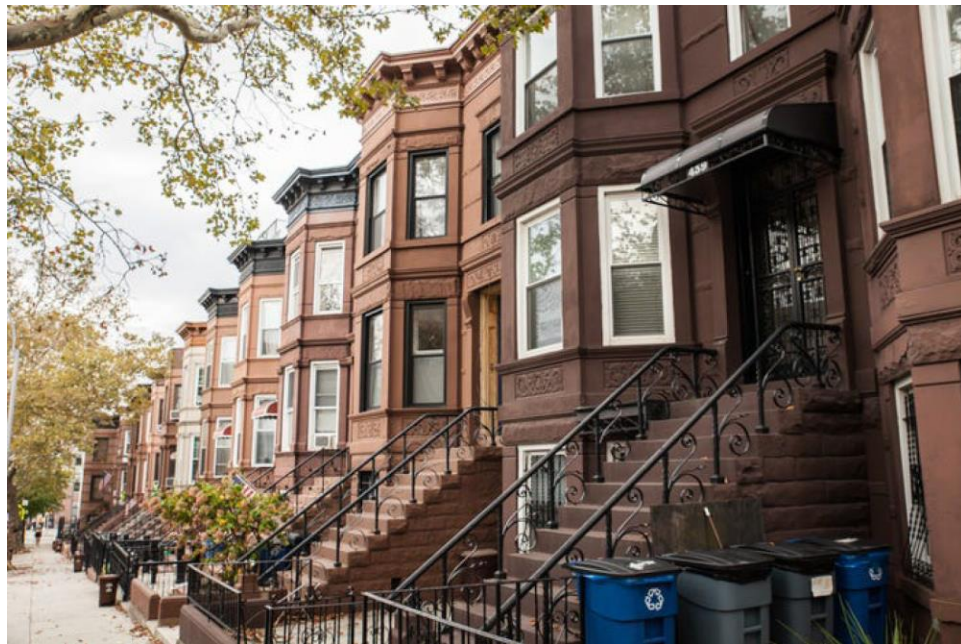


Figure 24. Henry Talbi “Brooklyn Stoop” Reference Image.

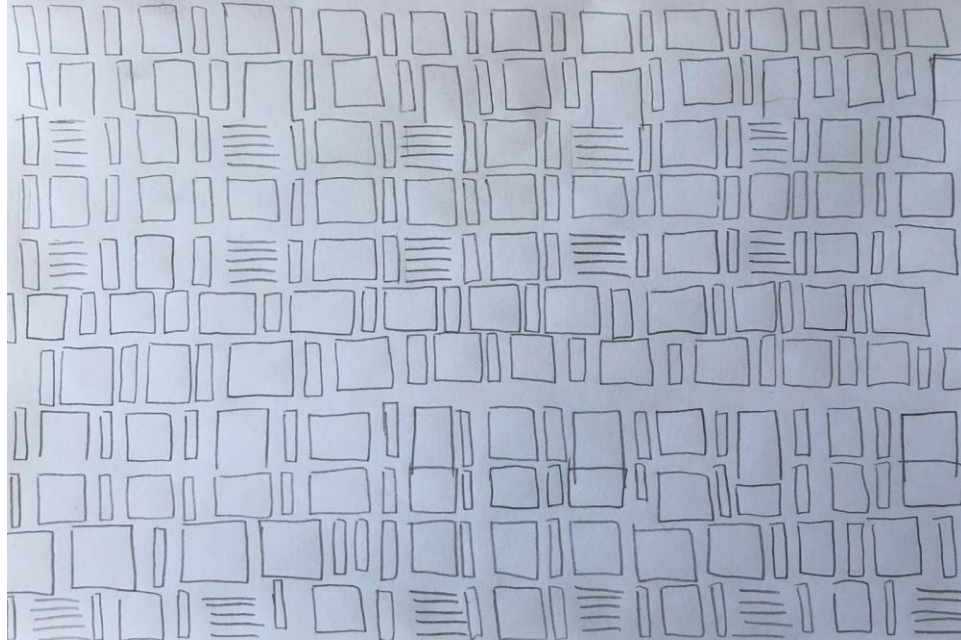


Figure 25. Henry Talbi "Brooklyn Stoop" Hand Drawing Distilled Pattern.

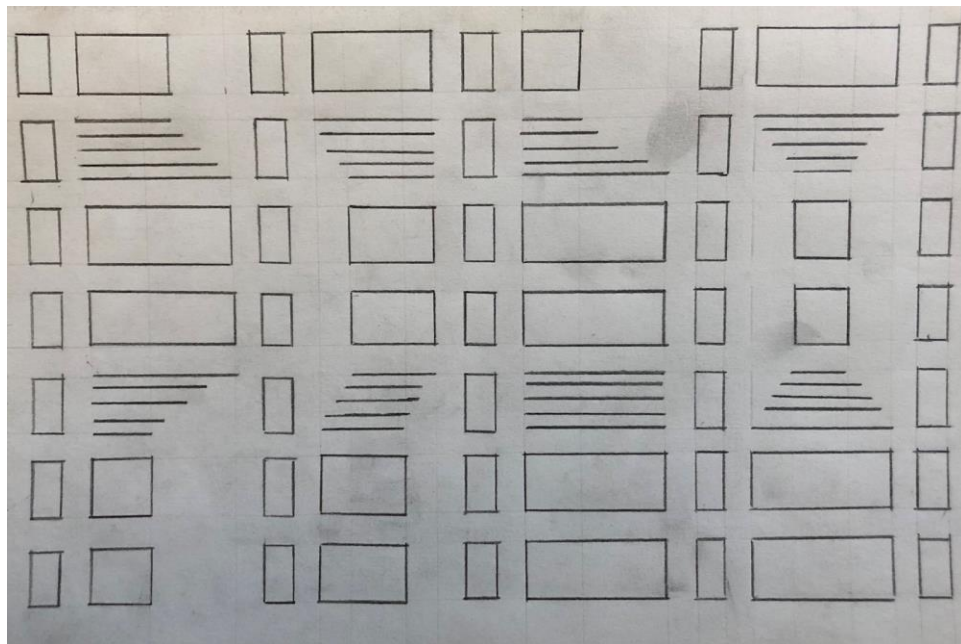


Figure 26. Henry Talbi "Brooklyn Stoop" Hand Drawing Manipulated Pattern.

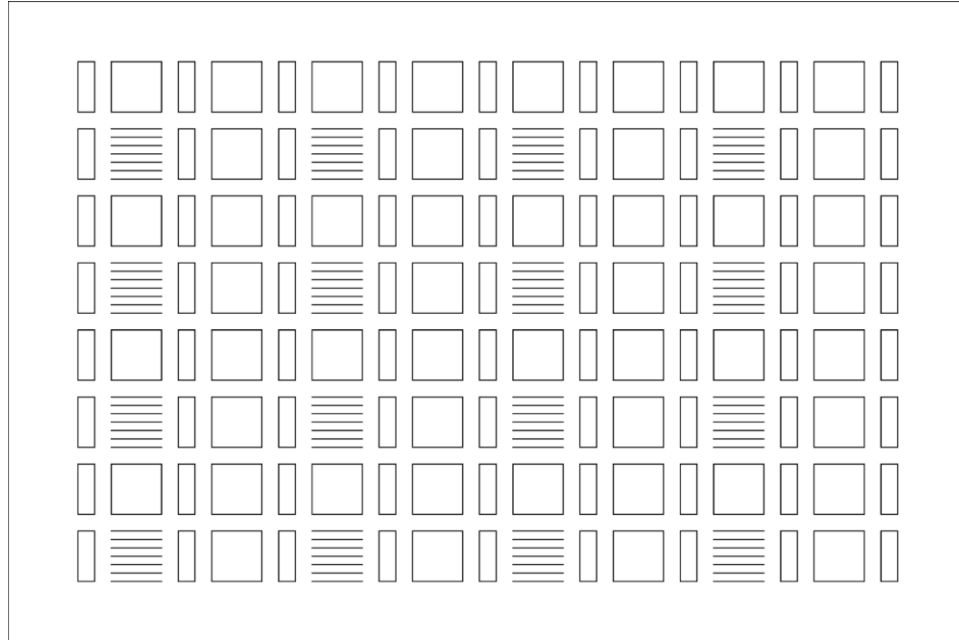


Figure 27. Henry Talbi "Brooklyn Stoop" Digital Drawing Standard Pattern.

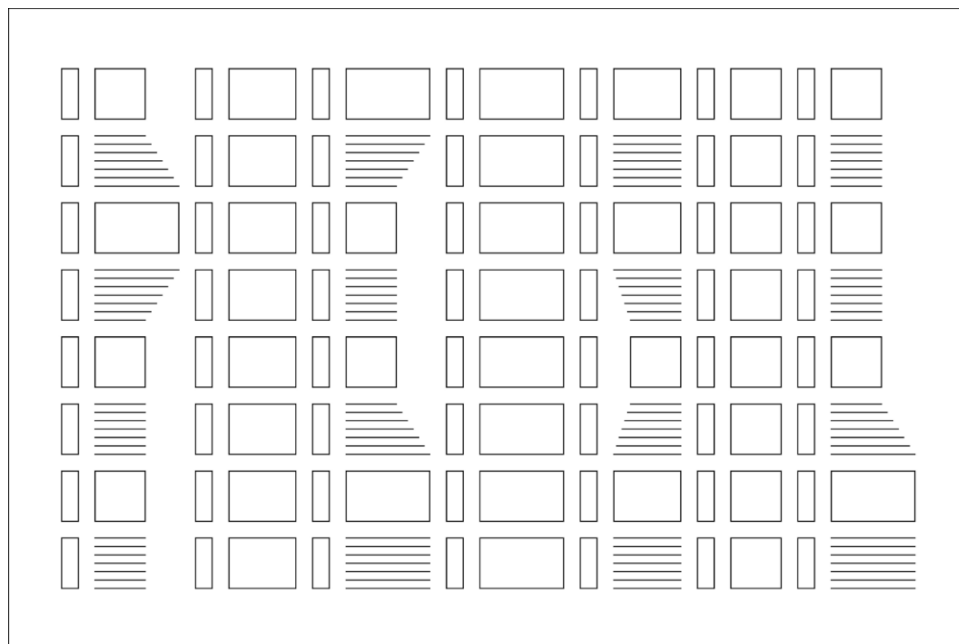


Figure 28. Henry Talbi "Brooklyn Stoop" Digital Drawing Negative Space Expansion.

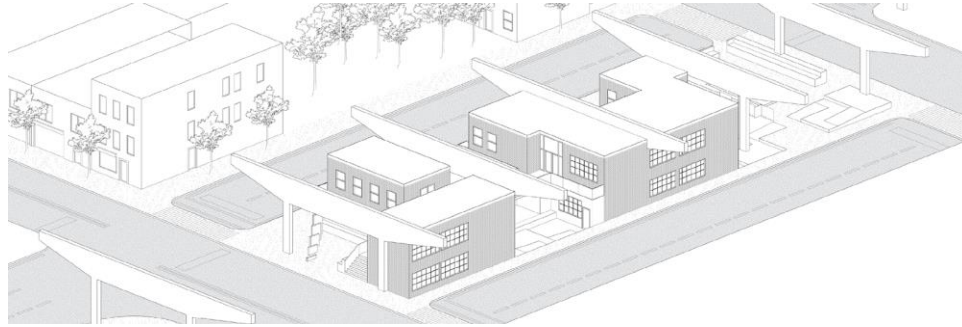


Figure 29. Henry Talbi "Brooklyn Stoop" Axonometric Industry City Facing Façade.

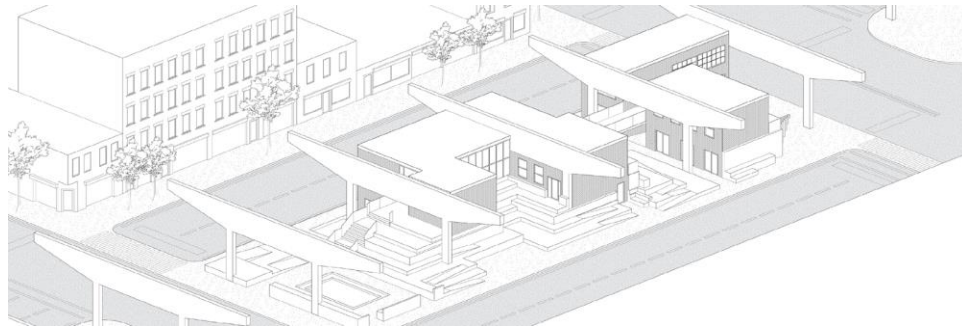


Figure 30. Henry Talbi "Brooklyn Stoop" Axonometric Residential Facing Façade.



Figure 31. Henry Talbi "Brooklyn Stoop" Perspective Terraces Elevation.

Anna Cook "Conduit Collective"

This project deepens the relationship between the many communities that make up the neighborhood of Sunset Park by connecting an industrial center to a residential neighborhood. Colorful conduit hugs the facades of the buildings and turns into light fixtures on the underside of the Expressway. This underscores the industrial nature of the site and highlights the value of infrastructure as a connecting device. These fixtures are reminiscent of a subway map and symbolize a network of connectivity within the Sunset Park neighborhood. The layering of conduit over the buildings represents the layered history and people groups who make up this neighborhood.

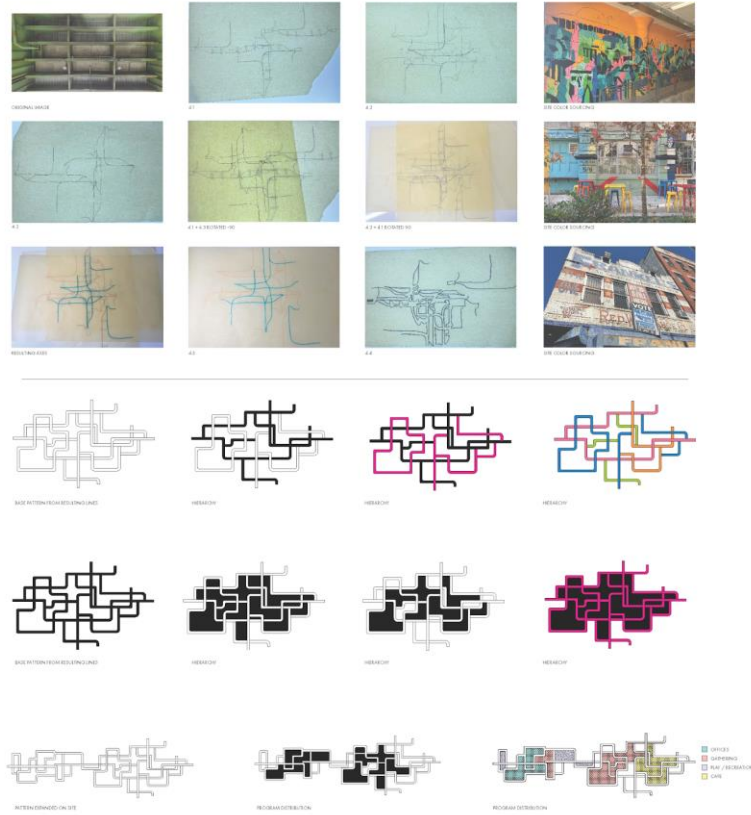


Figure 32. Anna Cook "Conduit Collective" Pattern Development.

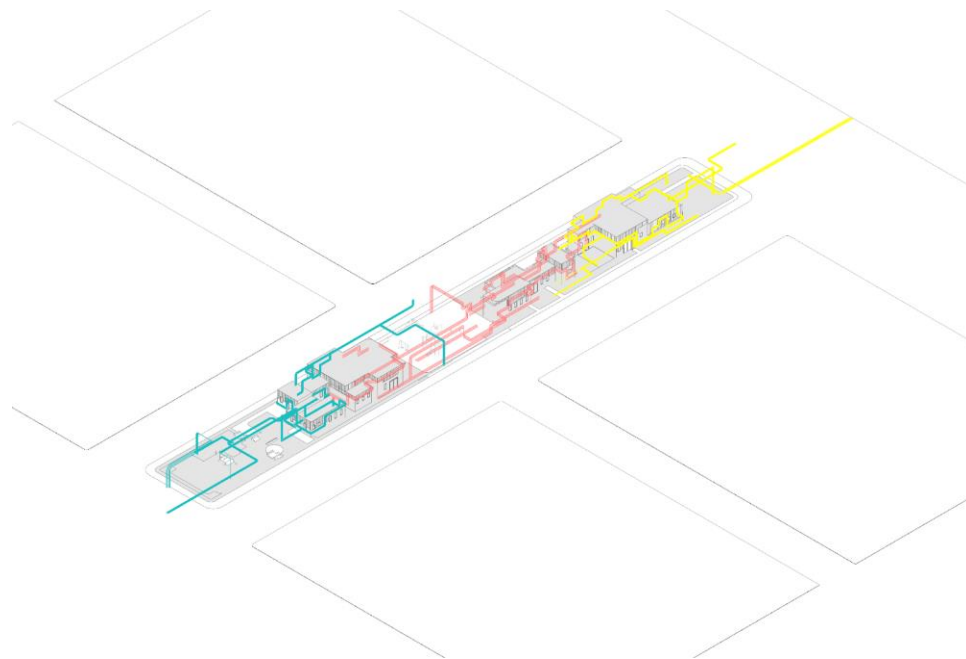


Figure 33. Anna Cook "Conduit Collective" Overhead Axonometric.



Figure 34. Anna Cook "Conduit Collective" Street View Perspective.

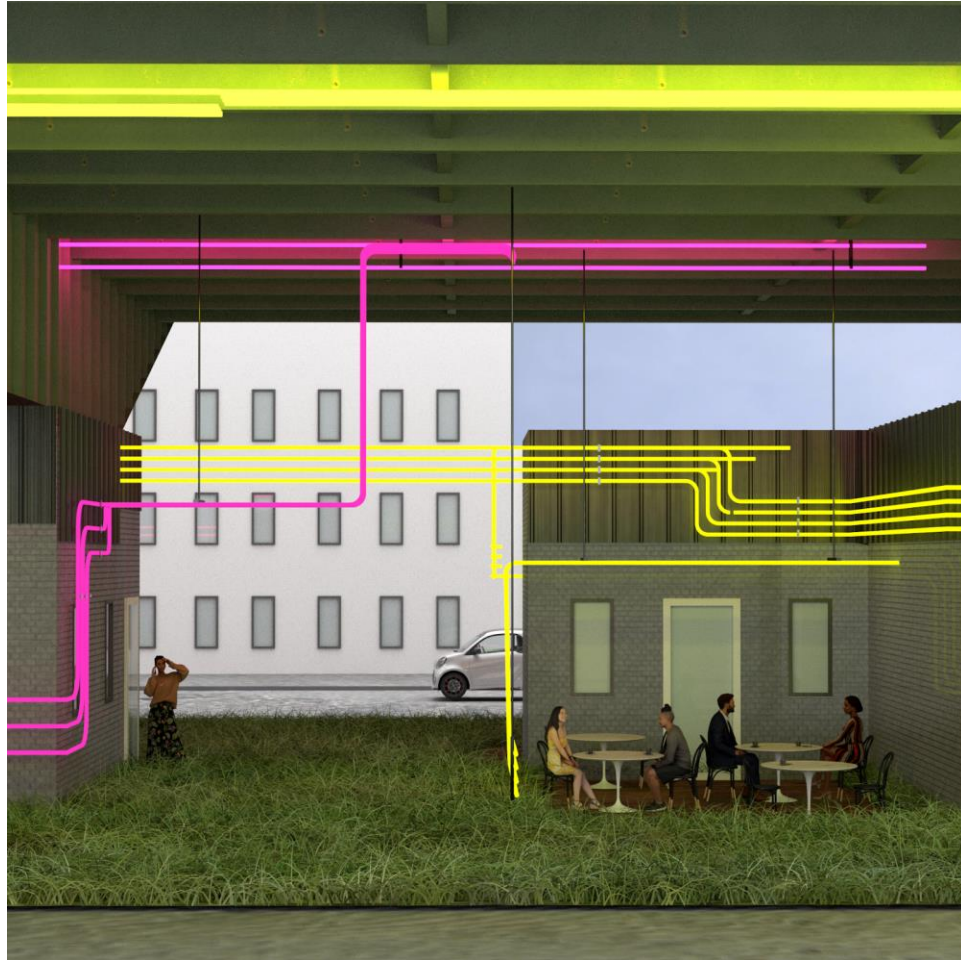


Figure 35. Anna Cook "Conduit Collective" Café Render.

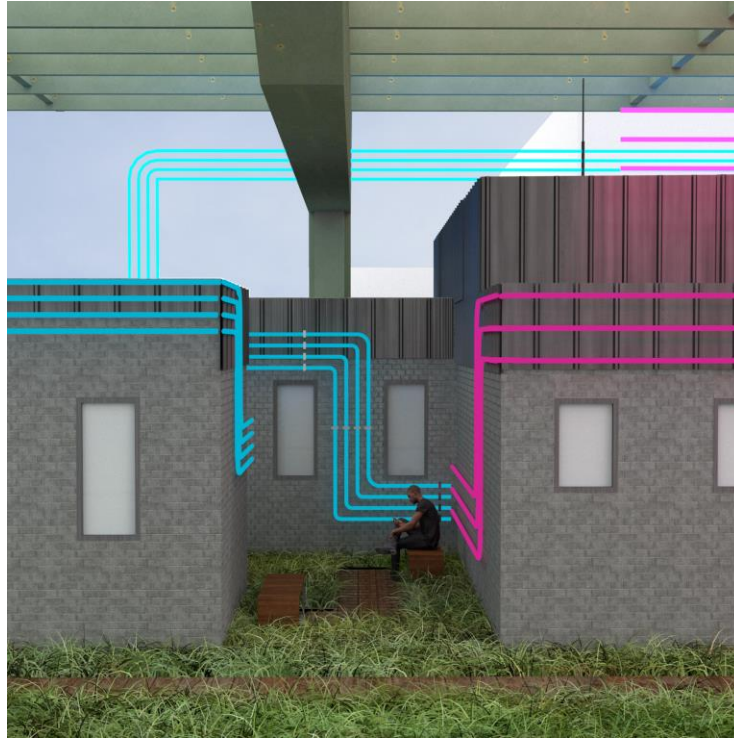


Figure 36. Anna Cook "Conduit Collective" Courtyard Render.



Figure 37. Anna Cook "Conduit Collective" Playground Render.

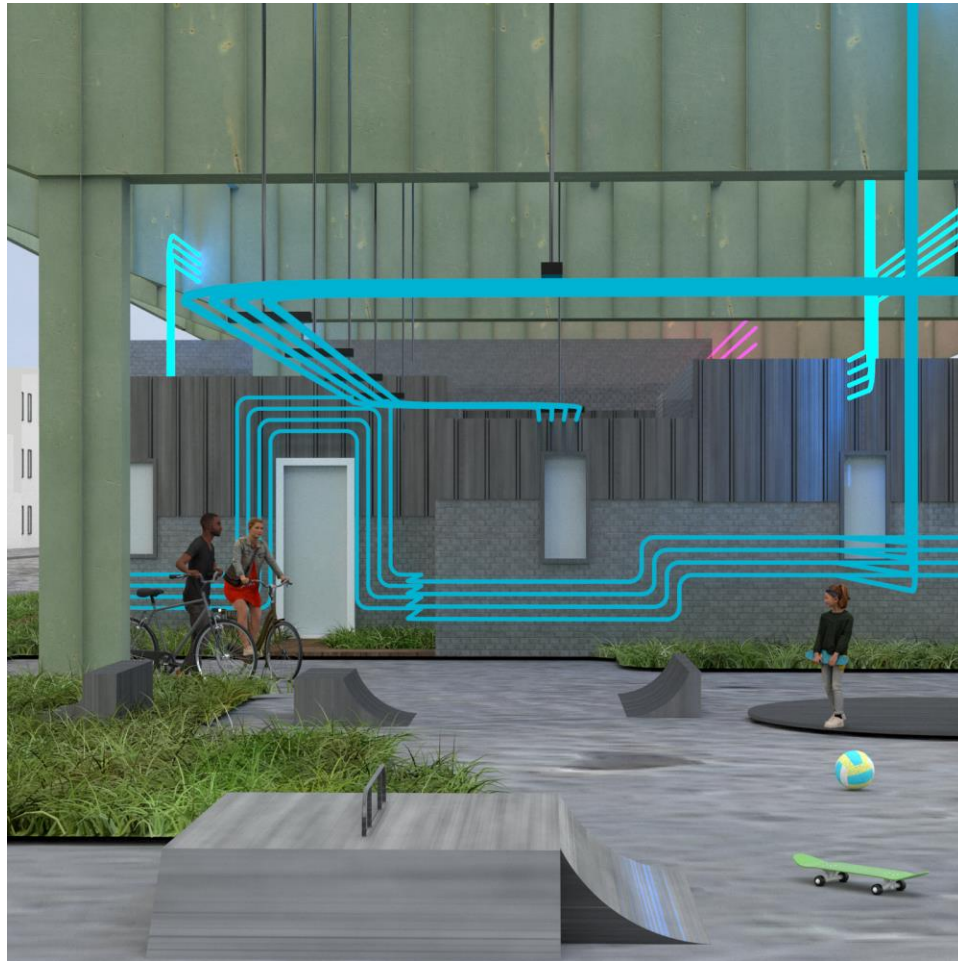


Figure 38. Anna Cook "Conduit Collective" Youth Recreation Render.

Conclusion

The products of the studio's work over the course of the semester show a clear relationship between the methodologies employed and the resultant synthesis of identity, place and time. The work highlights the possibilities available to designers and architects in working to transform aging infrastructure into spaces of social interaction and community. Architecture designed in the context of this complexity of vying concerns has the potential to produce responsive spaces, containing multiple readings and the possibility for multiple experiences.

About the authors

Yen Ha is an architect, artist and writer. Born in Saigon, she lives in New York City, where she co-founded an architecture firm, Front Studio. She has an undergraduate degree from Carnegie Mellon University and a graduate degree from L'École d'Architecture in Paris. A licensed architect, Yen's work has been featured in Interior Design, Icon Magazine, Wallpaper and the NY Times. She has taught at Washington University in St Louis and Rice University, and has served as an invited juror at Parsons, the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University.

Yen has been awarded artist residencies by the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, MASS MoCA and the Arctic Circle. Most recently Yen's artwork was featured on a full-size billboard in New York City as part of the "Asians Belong Here" public art campaign.

Lauren Phillips acted as Teaching Assistant for Ha's graduate design studio before receiving his Master of Architecture from Rice University. He is currently a lecturer at Texas Tech's College of Architecture in Lubbock.

Andrew Clifton graduated from Rice with his Bachelor of Architecture and plans to develop his passions in art, fabrication, and the outdoors. He returned home to Minneapolis, Minnesota where he currently works with a residential design-build business operated by his family.

Anna Cook is a graduate of Texas A&M and is currently completing a Master of Architecture at Rice School of Architecture. She has studied in Paris and Tuscany, and previously worked in Texas and Montana. She is interested in many areas of design, including architecture, graphics, and materials.

Anna Fritz received her Bachelor of Arts in Architecture, Studio Art, and Art History from Rice University, where she graduated summa cum laude. She recently completed her Bachelor of Architecture, and is moving to Zürich, Switzerland where she will be working as a junior architectural designer at Karamuk Kuo.

Jessica LaBarbera graduated from the University of Arizona with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film & TV Production. She is an active member of the Art Directors Guild and currently resides in Houston, TX where she is pursuing a Master of Architecture at Rice University.

Kim McGlone, after 27 years in finance, chose architecture as a second career path. Receiving a Summa Cum Laude Bachelor's Degree in Science in Architecture from Texas Tech with an additional certification in Historic Preservation she is currently working toward her Master of Architecture in Architecture at Rice University.

Henry Talbi graduated from Rice University. He currently is working as an emerging professional at IKM in Pittsburgh.

Rita Xiong is from Beijing China and she graduated from Rice University with a Bachelor of Architecture. She stayed in New York for a year, and she is excited for possibilities in urban transformation and revival.

Kelly Yu is a graduate of Rice University, an architectural designer, and a big fan of walkable urbanism.

Amy Zhang, a Rice Architecture graduate, was born in Beijing and grew up in the Pacific Northwest. A second-generation Chinese immigrant, her creative mind and colorful tendencies contribute to her interest in design for a more inclusive and sustainable future, especially within urban settings.