

# Notes In Improvisation

Spatializing Black Identity through Music

Esther Akintoye  
Master's Thesis Book  
Interior Architecture, Adaptive Reuse  
2022







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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Design in Interior Studies [Adaptive  
Reuse] in the Department of Interior Architecture of the  
Rhode Island School of Design.

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2022

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## Acknowledgements

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Found image taken on  
South 52nd Street in  
West Philadelphia.

*In celebration of Black culture  
across the globe.*



*"I know what it is to feel that urge to build a small heaven, or many small heavens. Ones that you cannot take with you, but ones that cannot be taken from you. A place where you still have a name." <sup>1</sup>*

*- Hanif Abdurraqib, They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us*

<sup>1</sup>Abdurraqib, Hanif.  
They Can't Kill Us until They  
Kill Us: Essays. Melville  
House UK, 2018.



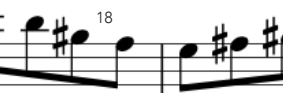
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The self-creation of Black spaces in America has been a form of resistance and reclamation, as well as a way to forge an identity and make room for community. This thesis argues for a use of improvisational African American music as a tool to create space. Additionally, through research and a design intervention, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how spatial creation within the framework of music and musical improvisation work as ways to expand, solidify and celebrate identity within Black and African-identifying people in America.

Fluid and improvisational techniques found in Black musical styles and genres such as jazz set the foundation for this thesis, which readapts into a contemporary setting the site of a historic jazz bar in West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania formerly called the Aqua Lounge. Restoration and adaptation are employed as intervention strategies within the site, which is currently used as a retail shop called the African Cultural Art Forum (ACAF). Portions of the site's cultural heritage will survive as it programmatically becomes a space informed by and for music, with improvisation employed as a design strategy to create flexible architectural frameworks. The design intervention uses overlapping programs to create spaces that create a dialogue within the interior of the building and also between the interior and exterior of the site. Doors are rehinged to also work as seating, new floors are inserted within the building to create "micro floors" for recording studios and the existing first, second and third floors become retail, archival and performance spaces that harken back to programs that have existed within this site over time. Reworking functions of architectural programs and existing materials creates an adaptable space open to new interpretation to the future users.

Noise, sound and rhythm inspire fluid and less rigid architecture, creating spaces that support the people and communities who contribute to Black cultural expression. Philadelphia is known as "The City of Murals" and in support of themes within this thesis the site will benefit from keeping its existing mural intact on the site. The Aqua Lounge jazz bar is considered the foundational palimpsest layer, and the expression of jazz as improvisational leads to new forms of unplanned expressions within the site. Through an architectural design the aim is to loosely design these programs in a way that can be re-written by future users of this site.



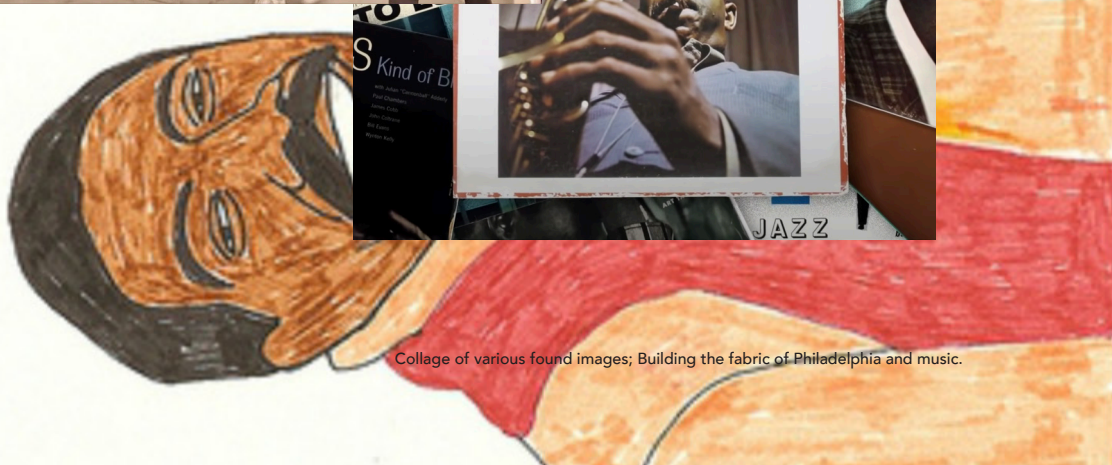
MR. S



GUS E. L

BUSINESSMAN  
\* YOUTH ORGA  
\* COMMUNIT  
I WILL BE YOU  
ASSEMBLYN

GUS E. LACY



Collage of various found images; Building the fabric of Philadelphia and music.

The built environment has the potential to foster creativity, build community, strengthen an identity and provide a space for the expression of a group of people. African oral and sonic traditions have evolved into expressions of music that have been pivotal in shaping the lives and culture of African Americans today. Spaces built almost as sanctuaries to hold and perform the activities related to sound—and even dance—have been valuable in the lives of African Americans. Elements of rhythm, repetition and sounds freely constructed and layered into new forms have led the way for new genres of musical expressions such as jazz and even hip-hop. If music is a huge part of African-diasporic identity and cultural production, how can architecture sustain this type of cultural expression and also its growth?

Examining African American cultural expressions and contributions through music will provide an understanding of self-made or even extemporaneous spaces in architecture. Within America, Black cultural production has existed at the margins of a society that embraces its aesthetics while denying the lives of those who create it. This pressure has led to the creation of Black spaces that tend to be in response to this societal and overt rejection, working in resistance to not being accepted. By looking at the improvisational techniques found in musical genres innovated by Black people, how can architecture create a space influenced by spontaneity and improvisation while celebrating the identities of those who produce and benefit from this type of expression? How might these spaces be sustained over time so that it is liberating and proactive? Also, how might the participation of activities in this space lead to new forms of expression?

1. Davis, Patrick. "The Origins of African American Culture and Its Significance in African American Student Academic Success." *Journal of Thought* 40, no. 1 (2005): 43–59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42589812>.

2. Wikipedia contributors, "African-American culture," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=African-American\\_culture&oldid=1057513146](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=African-American_culture&oldid=1057513146) (accessed December 5, 2021).

3. Rose, Tricia. "Soul Sonic Forces." Essay. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 68–68. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994.

4. Brown, David. "Speculative Leaps." Essay. In *Noise Orders Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture*, xiii–xiii. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

5. Campt, Tina M. "Constellations of Freedom: Assembly, Reflection, and Repose." Foreword. In *In Search of African American Space: Redressing Racism*, 12–13. Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2020.

6. Brown, David. "Speculative Leaps." Introduction. In *Noise Orders Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture*, xv–xxxi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. summary from pages xv, xvi, and xxxi

This thesis recognizes the impact and aftermath of slavery however its approach is providing a stance on how spatial creation—including appropriated spaces—continue to work as a form of expressing the right for freedom and ownership of self<sup>1 2</sup> for people in the African-diaspora and -descent and testing this approach on a site. Additionally, through an understanding of how rhythm, repetition and sound are used to create music in the lives of Black people, architecture might benefit from the use of improvisational elements to maintain an identity for my audience.

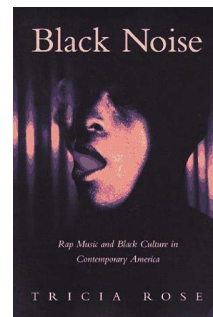
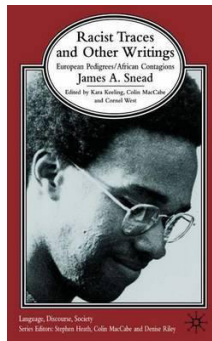
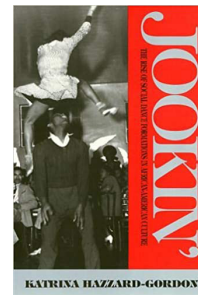
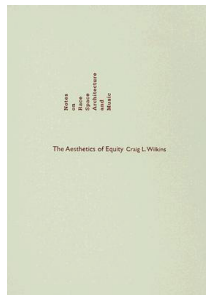
Citing the argument of author and cultural critic James A. Snead, Tricia Rose in her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* uses Snead's argument on repetition in Black music as "an important and telling element in culture, a means by which a sense of continuity, security, and identification are maintained"<sup>3</sup> and how certain techniques of this in Black music provide this sense of security. The extemporaneous and even improvised spaces of Black people are also related to forms and expressions found in specific musical genres. The site of this thesis is located at a former jazz bar called the Aqua Lounge and design research begins by understanding how jazz was used as a medium to create community and maintain identity during the active phase of this site. David P. Brown's book *Noise Orders* claims that jazz and architecture can be influenced by each other and Brown makes a case for improvisation within architecture. Through an analogy of sound he says, "order might in fact reside in what that system perceives as noise".<sup>4</sup> By advocating for a looser form of design that is contrary to the often found rigidity of architecture's "eurocentric discipline"<sup>5</sup> this allows for new forms of architectural making and theoretical practice for architects to work in innovative ways similar to this musical style. This is done to better understand how certain qualities can lead to actions and behaviors in architecture today that can be influenced through improvisation.<sup>6</sup> Through the techniques found in jazz and other improvised music, architecture might be able to take a cue from this type of spontaneity which will inform unexpected moments and actions in the built environment.<sup>7</sup> Similarly to Rose, Brown cites the understanding in Snead's essay *On Repetition*

in *Black Culture* in order to create a stance around improvised spaces. This thesis considers these three writings together. Additionally, Craig L. Wilkins' book *The Aesthetics of Equity* will be referred to in the application of potential architectural strategies. His proposed strategies are influenced by elements of hip-hop and a "palimpsestic" approach in order to make do with histories that exist and layer that with new strategies in order to create new meanings.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis focuses mainly on the cultural and spatial production of music however I'd be remiss to not mention the connection music and dance have together. Though dance will not formally be discussed theoretically, the application of music's response in the form of movement is considered. Dr. Katrina Hazzard-Donald's book *Jookin'* discusses dance as one form of cultural expression within the African American community. Taking a look at dances' evolution, spaces it formed in and the importance of dance within the Black community<sup>9</sup> will further support an understanding of improvisational music and sound. The reading of this book is important as dance is a form of cultural production and expression associated with music; both dance and music are often associated together within my user group.

My site is located in West Philadelphia and has a history that is relevant to a form of expression and cultural production through one popular genre of music—jazz—however, if music is important in the Black community how can spaces that relate to this be actualized architecturally? Where does architecture sit when it comes to creating and sustaining spaces

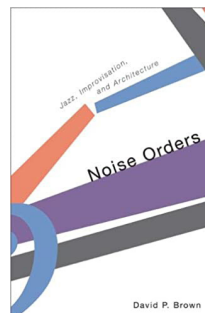
informed by the cultural creation of Black people? Additionally, how can improvisational techniques through certain styles of music be used as a way to create space and provide security for a group of people?



7. Ibid

8. Wilkins, Craig L. "Architecture—Motion." Essay. In *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music*, 202–. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

9. Hazzard-Donald, Katrina. "Preface." Preface. In *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*, ix–ix. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990.





"Music is liquid architecture; Architecture is frozen music."  
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

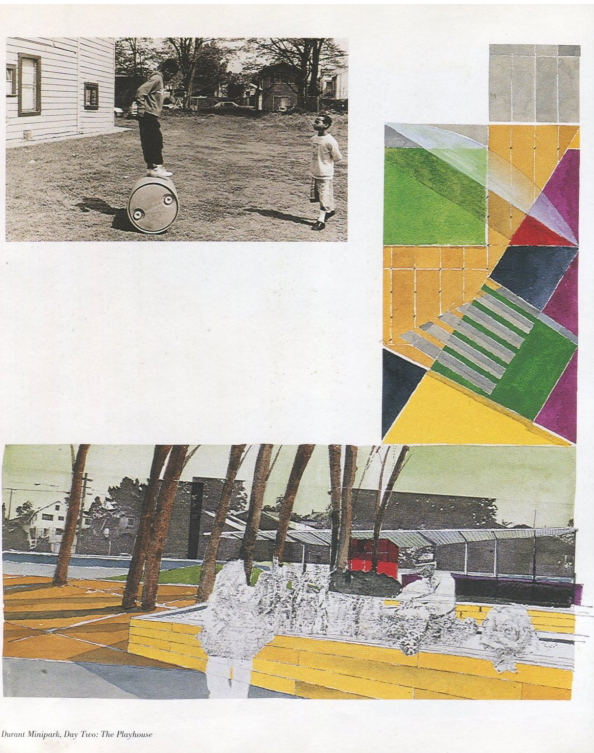


Precendents

Walter Hood's *Urban Diaries* includes theoretical and proposed design interventions on three different playgrounds located in West Oakland, CA. He uses improvisation as a design strategy to create new programs and functions for these public spaces. His use of improvisation is defined as something that "draws on cultural traditions of flexibility and adaptivity that emerge from marginal circumstances."<sup>1</sup> By observing the activities of groups of people and recording them through diary entries he considers how the current use and participation in the spaces might define a design that best fits with the needs and appropriated uses of the community. He separates each park into five "layers" that relate to weekdays<sup>2</sup>—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday—and uses the information compiled from his diary entries as layers of design interventions that inform the next. What results from this are new ways of use informed by the ways the community has informally used them. Each programmatic design layer can stand alone independently or be intermixed.

1. Hood, Walter. *Walter Hood: Urban Diaries*. Edited by Leah Levy. Washington, DC: Spacemaker, 1997. Images are scanned from pages 16 and 21.

2. *Ibid*



During Minipark, Day Two: The Playhouse

#### Day Two

*They never play on the old play equipment. When I pass by, I see them digging in the dirt or climbing the old sycamore tree. The chain-link fence has become a water-maker and the sandbox seat wall is the forum for Simon Says. They never use the standardized play equipment, at least I don't see them.*

#### Playground

The garden from Day One accepts the local children. The utility building becomes a clubhouse. Youth claim and inhabit this structure as part of their play. Seen as an architectural "hump" of material, the building can be transformed through the children's imagination to become something like a starship or a fort. A sandbox is also added. These new elements serve as the starting point to investigate the play environment for children. The space accommodates both activities: gardening and children's games.

In designing for children, playground equipment was intentionally excluded due to its single use, overriding safety concerns, and studies that indicate its limited appeal to children. Mark Rios, a designer of children's play environments, argues that the prefabricated play apparatus "dictates a certain way to use it, which is climbing. But developing physical skills accounts for only 10 percent of all activity at the playground."<sup>10</sup> In Day Two, children are seen as adventurous, curious, and imaginative. Games are played on various surfaces: turf, sand, decomposed granite, asphalt, and concrete, and the children have access to various spaces. The sandbox is the only feature that is sacred: it is a place for the smaller tots to mold and make things under the watchful eyes of guardians. The play yard, with its diversity for play, learning, and new experiences, allows children to invent by creating connections between real objects and their environment.



#### The Playhouse

*The two girls have a tea party on the plane of sloping grass. They pretend the playhouse/food shed is their home. In the sandbox, two kids build a castle with tools borrowed from the gardeners. The two girls yell at their brothers who are busy playing a game something like tag, cops-and-robbers, and hide-and-seek all rolled into one. Their activities transform the whole scene into a playground.*



Amanda Williams' Color(ed) Theory explores the overlap of memory, identity and color theory. Her interventions focus on the distinct connection a color has to ignite a memory tied within the Black experience, and also at times experiences specific to living in Chicago. Color(ed) Theory appropriates the negative uses of color—such as redlining—that were targeted towards African Americans' access to housing by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). This strategy works to highlight memory and existence in the built environment<sup>3</sup>. Williams' use of color is a simple design intervention that also brings up topics such as recollection, opportunity, ownership of a narrative, celebration and reclamation<sup>4</sup>. Williams uses a specific color that is found on retail products or sites that has a majority Black consumership and applies it on homes that are tagged for demolition. This precedent uses themes of recollection, memory and identity relevant to my thesis and design strategies.

3. NPR/TED. "Amanda Williams: How Can Color Bring New Life To Old Houses?" NPR. April 09, 2021. Accessed October 20, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/09/985494970/amanda-williams-how-can-color-bring-new-life-to-old-houses>.

4. Ibid



Mixing, intermixing and sampling to create new meaning are potential elements this thesis can explore. Marshall Brown's Ziggurat begins with 2-dimensional images of notable architectural buildings from Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid pieced together like a puzzle to create a new form<sup>5</sup>. Translated architecturally into a 3-dimensional installation the structure comes together in a way that is cohesive; elements of dimension that can only be understood are resolved through instinct<sup>6</sup>. What becomes of this is a new cohesive form that can not be detached into its original constituents<sup>7</sup>. Though the motivation for this installation slightly varies from this thesis, the meaning created from the action of mixing and sampling is similar and fusion between art and architecture is established.

5. Brown, Marshall.  
"Ziggurat." Marshall  
Brown Projects. Accessed  
February 13, 2022. [https://  
marshallbrownprojects.com/  
ZIGGURAT](https://marshallbrownprojects.com/ZIGGURAT).

6. *Ibid*

7. *Ibid*



Sekou Cooke's *We Outchea* exhibition draws from hip-hop's use of "sampling" music to create a design approach that addresses issues of displacement of a black community in Syracuse, NY<sup>8</sup>. Cooke's work sees the influence music—specifically rap—can have on the built environment and intervenes in a way that draws from the fluidity of rap's musical structure and flow. He believes "that the way we use public space is really the way that we express freedom and in freedom is joy and in joy is ultimate self preservation."<sup>9</sup> Though *We Outchea* focuses on public housing, the parallels of music, its influence within the Black community and bridging that with the built environment is of influence to my thesis. This precedent's design strategy of mixing music into architecture is relevant to my thesis and design strategy.

8. Cooke, Sekou. "Sekou Cooke. *We Outchea: Hip-Hop Fabrications and Public Space*. 2020: MoMA." *The Museum of Modern Art*. Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/312/4036>.

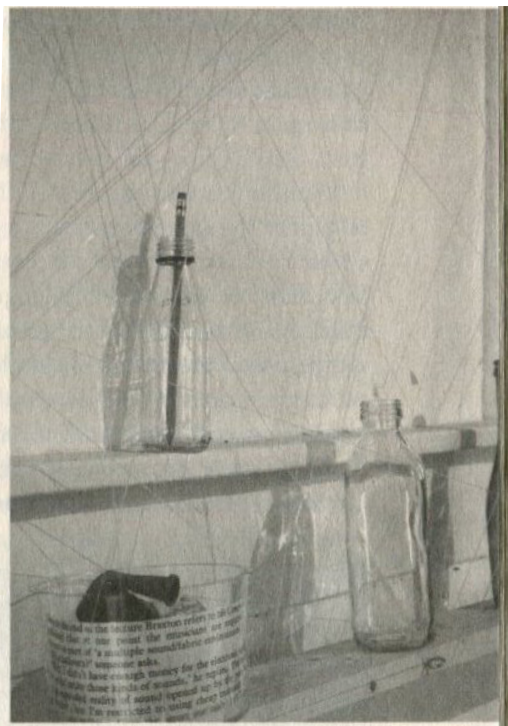
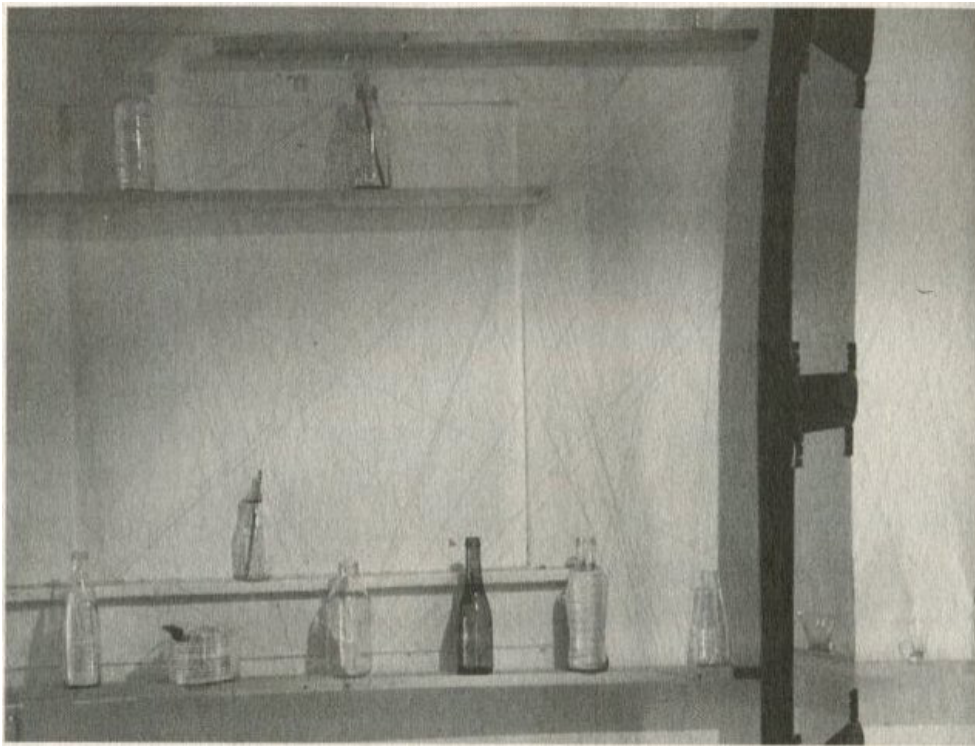
9. *Ibid*



The installation *Little Instruments* (2001) displays and discusses the appropriated use of mundane objects—bottles, wire, nails—as tools for new instrumental expression<sup>10</sup>. This precedent works to analyze how latent objects might be appropriated for new use or even intertwined with architecture. Member Wadada Leo Smith from the Advancement of Creative Musicians, Inc. (AACM) discussed "how children in Mississippi stretched wire between nails in the walls of their homes to create makeshift guitars."<sup>11</sup> This thesis will benefit by not fully bridging ideas between form and function in order for each individual participant of the space to create their own new meaning.

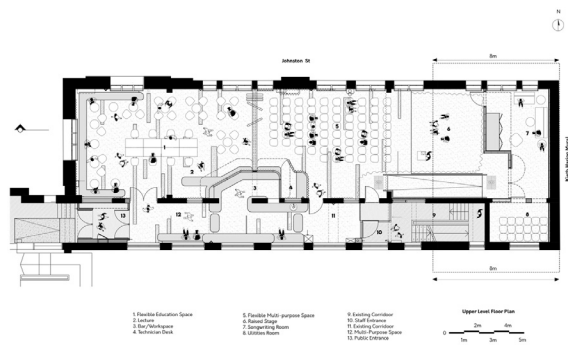
10. Brown, David.  
"Function, Flexibility,  
and Improvisation."  
Essay. In *Noise Orders*  
*Jazz, Improvisation, and*  
*Architecture*, 98–99.  
Minneapolis, MN: University  
of Minnesota Press, 2006.  
Images are scanned from  
pages 98-99.

11. *Ibid*



Philadelphia is known as “The City of Murals” and the city’s vast collection of murals work as public art. Considering how my site might start to be activated from the exterior involves incorporating this artistic identity to my site. The Music Market Cultural Center in Collingwood, Australia programmatically is a cultural space for music, performance, education and entrepreneurship<sup>12</sup>. Of note, on the exterior of the building is a Keith Haring mural that works to activate the site from the exterior and murals will continue to activate West Philadelphia. Given the history of the Aqua Lounge, this thesis will also benefit from a similar direction.

12. Abdel, Hana. “Music Market Cultural Center / Sibling Architecture.” ArchDaily. ArchDaily, January 21, 2022. [https://www.archdaily.com/975398/music-market-cultural-center-sibling-architecture?ad\\_medium=gallery](https://www.archdaily.com/975398/music-market-cultural-center-sibling-architecture?ad_medium=gallery).



*Veil Craft* by Figure is a scaffolding park wedged in between two buildings on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, CA.<sup>13</sup> Scaffolding, a common construction fixture, blends in with the ever-changing architectural landscape of Los Angeles. The site of this thesis currently sits next to an empty lot that is in dispute for development, which some people in the neighborhood are against because it promotes gentrification. Informally occupying this open space with scaffolding as a temporary structure will allow it to be used by residents, invite more interaction around the site and encourage a public program that is more familiar to the community rather than another new development. This temporary structure can easily be built, rearranged and eventually taken down if the community deems so.

13. Frearson, Amy. "Figure Creates Pocket Park Disguised as a Building Site on La's Wilshire Boulevard." *Dezeen*, March 30, 2022. <https://www.dezeen.com/2021/08/13/veil-craft-installation-craft-contemporary-figure-materials-applications/#>. Images sourced from *Dezeen* article





Interviews

Gregory McDonald is a Jazz musician and drummer from West Philadelphia. The following is an excerpt from a phone interview held on December 5, 2021.\*

Esther Akintoye:

52nd Street was known for its jazz venues and an active music scene. The site of my thesis used to be The Aqua Lounge. Could you talk about your memory and experience visiting this area? What was it like?

Gregory McDonald:

Black music—R&B, Jazz, Gospel, Acapella—was always a part of 52nd street. I went to The Aqua Lounge growing up and my earliest experience was when I was about 13 years old. My mom—knowing that I had an interest in music—took me to The Aqua Lounge to see the musicians play. The Aqua Lounge was a bar, not a nightclub, and because I was young she would take me during the matinees in the afternoon. I was excited to hear the influential Jazz musicians who were known internationally. Some people who played at The Aqua Lounge were drummers Max Roach and Art Blakey. Blakey spawned a lot of famous people like Wynton Marsalis. Blakey hired trumpeter Valery Ponomarev and I played with Valery.

## Music is

52nd Street was culturally vibrant with a lot of businesses. The experience was exciting. I'm not entirely sure but I think some of the businesses were Jewish-run. After the Civil Rights and riots they became more Asian-run businesses. There were Black businesses on 52nd street: Hakim's Bookstore, Nevin's Beauty Shop, Foo Foo's Steakhouse and Black-run bars like Mr. Silk's.

On 52nd street there was a movie theater called Locust Movie Theater on 52nd and Locust Street which now is called the Bushfire Theater. When I started playing for compensation I played in a musical group. One of my earliest places I played was at Nevin's Beauty Shop on 52nd and Chancellor, which was across the street from The Aqua Lounge.

EA:

Why was jazz important to Philly? What did that mean to West Philadelphia?

GM:

Philly was like a mecca of jazz second to New York City in the 1950s and 1960s and a lot of influential Jazz musicians came to Philly. There weren't many places that had the prestige like The Aqua Lounge who could bring in these international jazz artists. Jazz was not the only genre of music exclusive to West Philadelphia. There were various genres people would listen to and jazz was one of them. There used to be a niche group of people who listened to jazz, which was even smaller than R&B and Gospel. Jazz, with roots in the Blues and field hollers, is a unique type of music specific to the Black experience in America. Jazz is more widely acceptable now than originally.

Music is the life blood of the Black community and was used for vehicles of social change. An example of this was James Brown's Say It Loud, I'm Black & I'm Proud. A cultural shift started to happen then and people expressed it through appearance wearing their afros out and dashikis.

# the life blood of the Black community

*\*Questions and responses come from annotated notes and are lightly edited for clarity within this thesis. The intent and meaning of the interviewee is not compromised by the interviewer.*

Steve Rowland is a historian and documentary producer<sup>1</sup>. He produced the documentary *Tell Me How Long Trane's Been Gone*, which covers the life and work of jazz saxophonist John Coltrane. Rowland grew up in Philadelphia and is currently based in Seattle, WA. The following interview was held via Zoom in April 2022 and is edited for length.

On jazz and Philadelphia in the late 1970s:

Steve Rowland:

The city at that time was seedy...It wasn't a vibrant, healthy scene even for the music. I used to manage a jazz club in the late 1970s and 1980s in West Philadelphia called the Foxhole Cafe. It was on [the University of] Penn's campus in the basement of a church called St. Mary's Church. It wasn't a bar, it was a venue to just play music which was only open on Friday and Saturday nights and was run by a multicultural collective that was all volunteer labor, including mine. We booked all different kinds of shows. We were people that were very focused on the political statement that was made by the existence of jazz. Jazz was a form of expression from African American people that was very important to America. And we as a group felt it was really important for White Americans to understand the Blackness of Black music, that it wouldn't exclude White people from being part of that music world either as listeners or as performers but they should understand its roots as a form of Black music and Black art.

These musicians from Philadelphia—like Archie Shepp, Rashied Ali, Sonny Fortune, Reggie Workman, Odean Pope, John Coltrane, Lee Morgan, Dizzy Gillespie—[...] I'm not talking about good jazz musicians. I'm talking about great jazz musicians. These guys were the highest pinnacle of this art form on the whole planet and they came from Philadelphia. And then you have women too—Trudy Pitts and Shirley Scott—who were both great piano players, who are performing there. So you have a very high level of intellectual advancement and the advancement of art.

At the Foxhole we were trying to present music and make a statement. We were enamored by what was a little bit more mainstream jazz at that time. We presented people like Sonny Rollins, Max Roach and Betty Carter. But we also were very interested in free jazz and modern jazz as a form of abstract music. So we presented Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Odean Pope Saxophone Choir, and Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell, who were a fabulous duo. We did a lot of shows there. And that's the time when I went to the Aqua Lounge.

1. Rowland, Steve. *Steve Rowland Media*, April 6, 2022. <http://www.steverowlandmedia.com/>.

I went to hear Philly Joe Jones play, he was one of the great bebop drummers of all time and he played in Miles Davis' band. I also saw singer Little Jimmy Scott and Elvin Jones who was Coltrane's drummer at the Aqua Lounge.

On the difference noticed between the avant-garde movement of jazz and contemporary jazz from the 1950s and 60s.

Steve Rowland:

We called ourselves "cultural workers". What we meant by that—as we were people who were progressive trying to push back against racism, sexism and inequity of all kinds—is that we were trying to build a multicultural community of Black people, White people and other people working, living and developing ideas together. We really looked up to the modern jazz musicians. It's an interesting thing, because you have a musical evolution and a cultural evolution at the same time that are intertwined.

# I'm talking about *great* jazz musicians.

In the late 1950s several musicians created a revolution in jazz. The three probably most important ones were Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman. Part of their message was, number one: this is black music, don't forget it. Number two: Bebop is a form of music that's based on reinterpretations of standard music. So the standard song forms, Broadway show songs, things that came out of shows like Oklahoma and My Fair Lady and big popular shows jazz musicians were reinterpreting those works. The new music said, "Why should we be reinterpreting that music, why don't we make our own original music? And why does the music have to be structured this way?" Bebop and song form is a structure. It's almost like building. You have the frame of the house and then you put on all of the walls, roofs and decorations. That's sort of what bebop is. Whereas the New Jazz musicians were saying, well, we don't necessarily want a house. We want to kind of have a freeform sculpture in the middle of a park. It could go up and down, the roof could go this way or that way. It could be totally creative. So the people who embraced bebop hated new music. There was a big controversy, people were fighting and having arguments over it. But the point was that it was pushing along society in a political way because it was these issues of self determination, self worth and claiming space in the world that Black musicians were doing.



# Site Analysis

The African Cultural Art Forum (ACAF) located at 221 South 52nd Street in Philadelphia, PA, is the site of an architectural design intervention. ACAF is a retail shop established in the late 1960s and in the 1990s they relocated to South 52nd street.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, this site was known as the Aqua Lounge from the 1960s to the mid-1970s and it was a place to hear emerging Jazz trends.<sup>2</sup> Now adapted into ACAF, the current program of the site focuses more as a retail center aimed at circling the financial economy of the community through products sold.<sup>3</sup>

South 52nd street used to be a "thriving entertainment center"<sup>4</sup> and aside from going to the Aqua Lounge to listen to music it was a space to connect and stay up to date with what was going on in the community<sup>5</sup>. Around the mid-1970s the Aqua Lounge closed. Based on my formal and informal communication with neighborhood and community members it's uncertain exactly why. Regardless, the former Aqua Lounge site proves to be important because of its historical significance, reputation in the community and memories recalled by those who went to this venue while it was an active music bar. Ingenuity and creativity has sustained Black people in America<sup>6</sup> making the activity of music making in this site that much more important. Based on my research there are little to no musical venues in the neighborhood making this site that much more relevant for a design intervention.



1. "About Us." African Cultural Art Forum. Accessed November 5, 2021. <https://acaf.us/pages/about-us>.

2. "Aqua Lounge, The." "Video Center. Accessed November 5, 2021. <https://www.scribe.org/catalogue/aqua-lounge>.

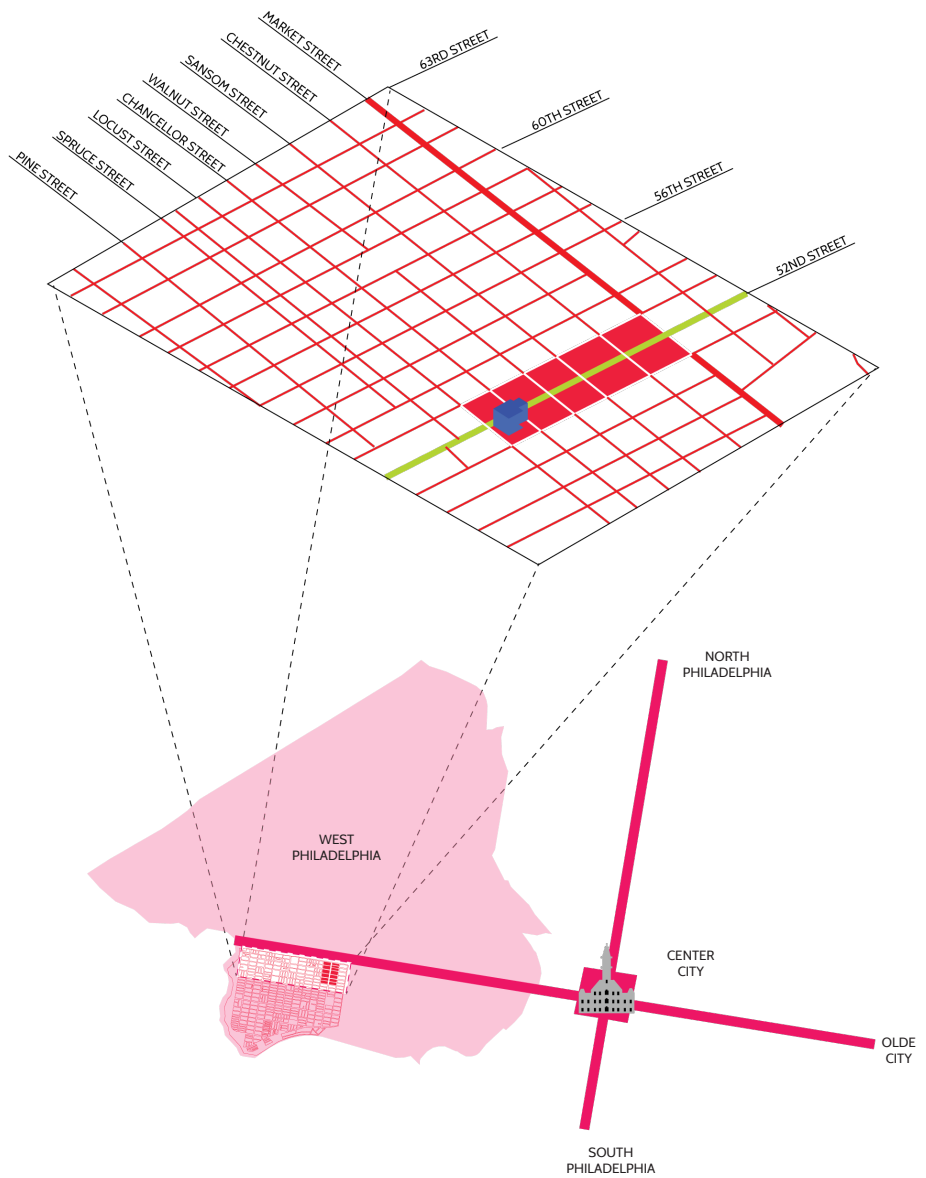
3. "About Us." African Cultural Art Forum. Accessed November 5, 2021. <https://acaf.us/pages/about-us>.



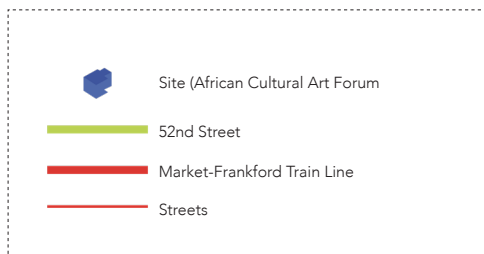
4. African Cultural Art Forum with Scribe Video Center. Aqua Lounge, The. DVD. United States, 2005. Precious Places Community History Project Vol. 1 Scribe Video Center 3908 Lancaster Avenue Philadelphia, PA 19104 215 222 4201 [www.scribe.org](http://www.scribe.org)

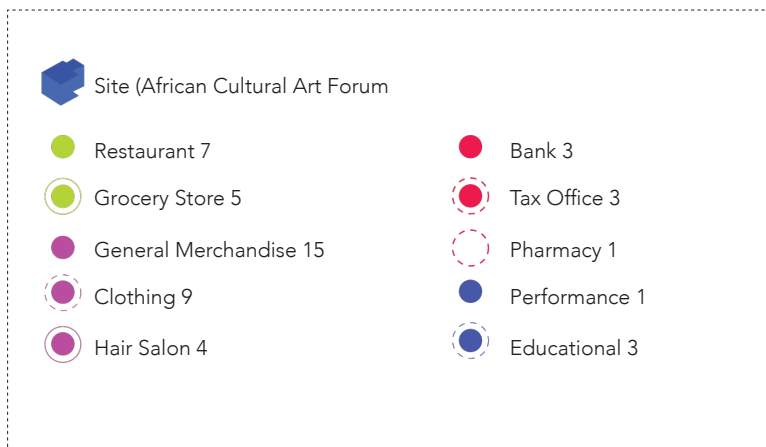
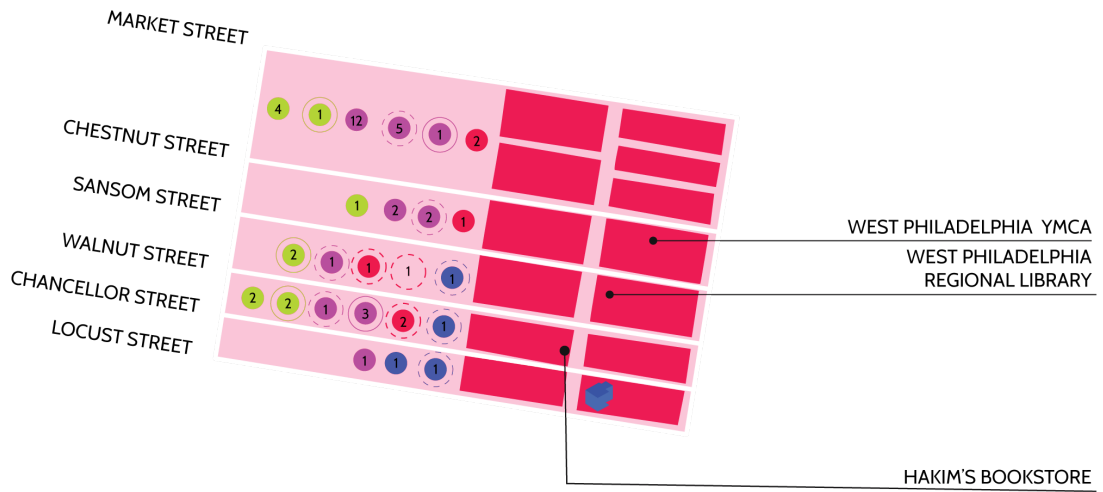
5. Ibid

6. Ibid



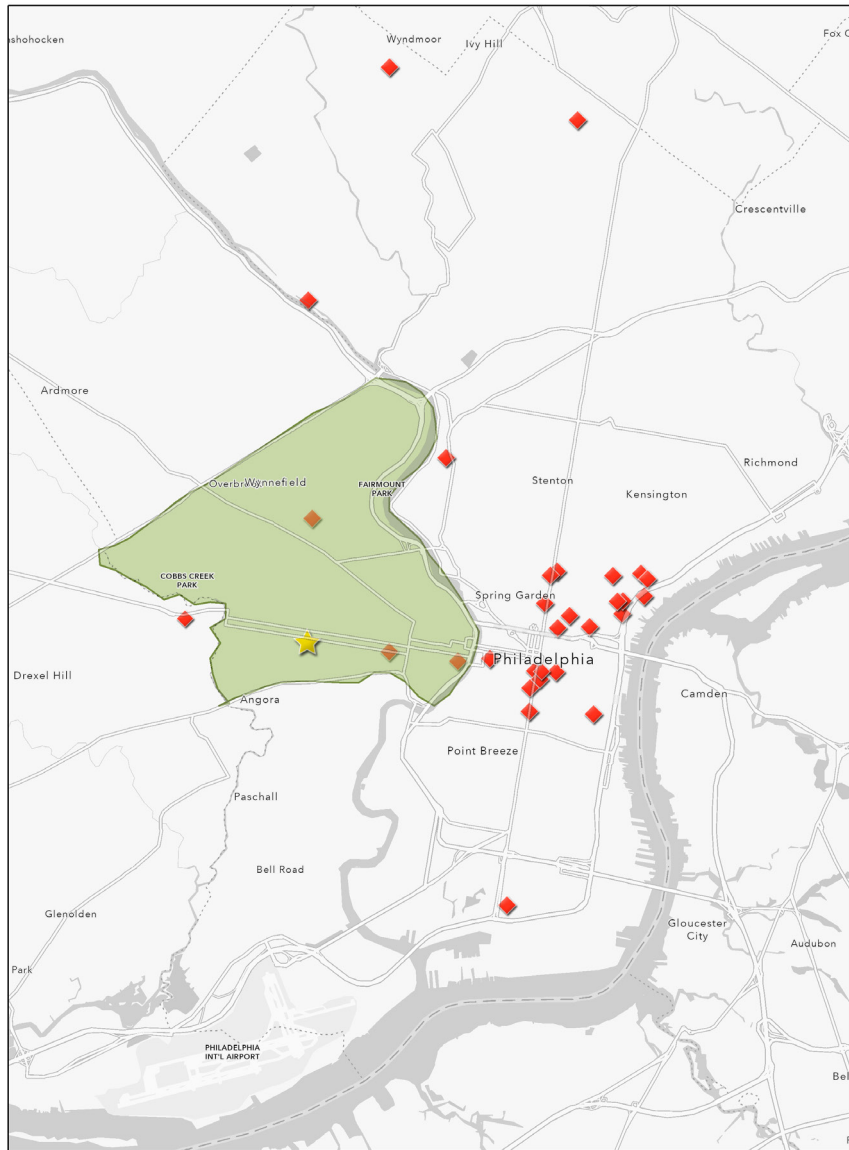
The former site of the Aqua Lounge (now ACAF) is situated off the 52nd Street Market-Frankford subway stop. South 52nd Street used to have a number of entertainment venues during the active phase of the Aqua Lounge around the 1960s.





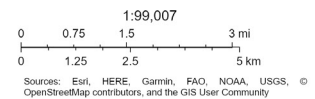
South 52nd Street is currently a business district. The following diagram maps the current businesses on South 52nd Street as of 2022 using Google Maps. Of note are the high number of general merchandise stores situated between Market and Chestnut Streets. Performance and pharmacy businesses make up the least at 1 each.

Additionally a few local community areas are mapped like the public library and the YMCA. Hakim's Bookstore is an iconic store in the area and has existed for decades at this location.



★ Site (African Cultural Art Forum)

◆ Performance venues

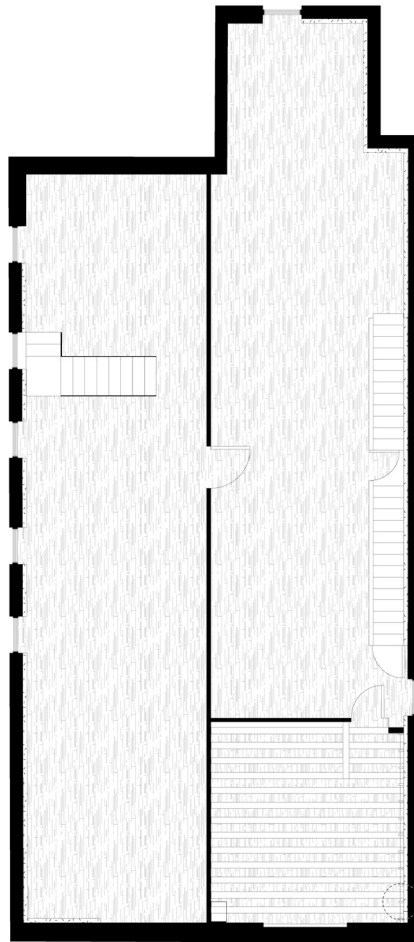


An overview of music venues and performance spaces situated in neighborhoods close to West Philadelphia.

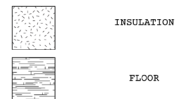
Using a Google Maps search a number of these types of venues and performance spaces are clustered close to the Center City district (which is located east of West Philadelphia).

## 53

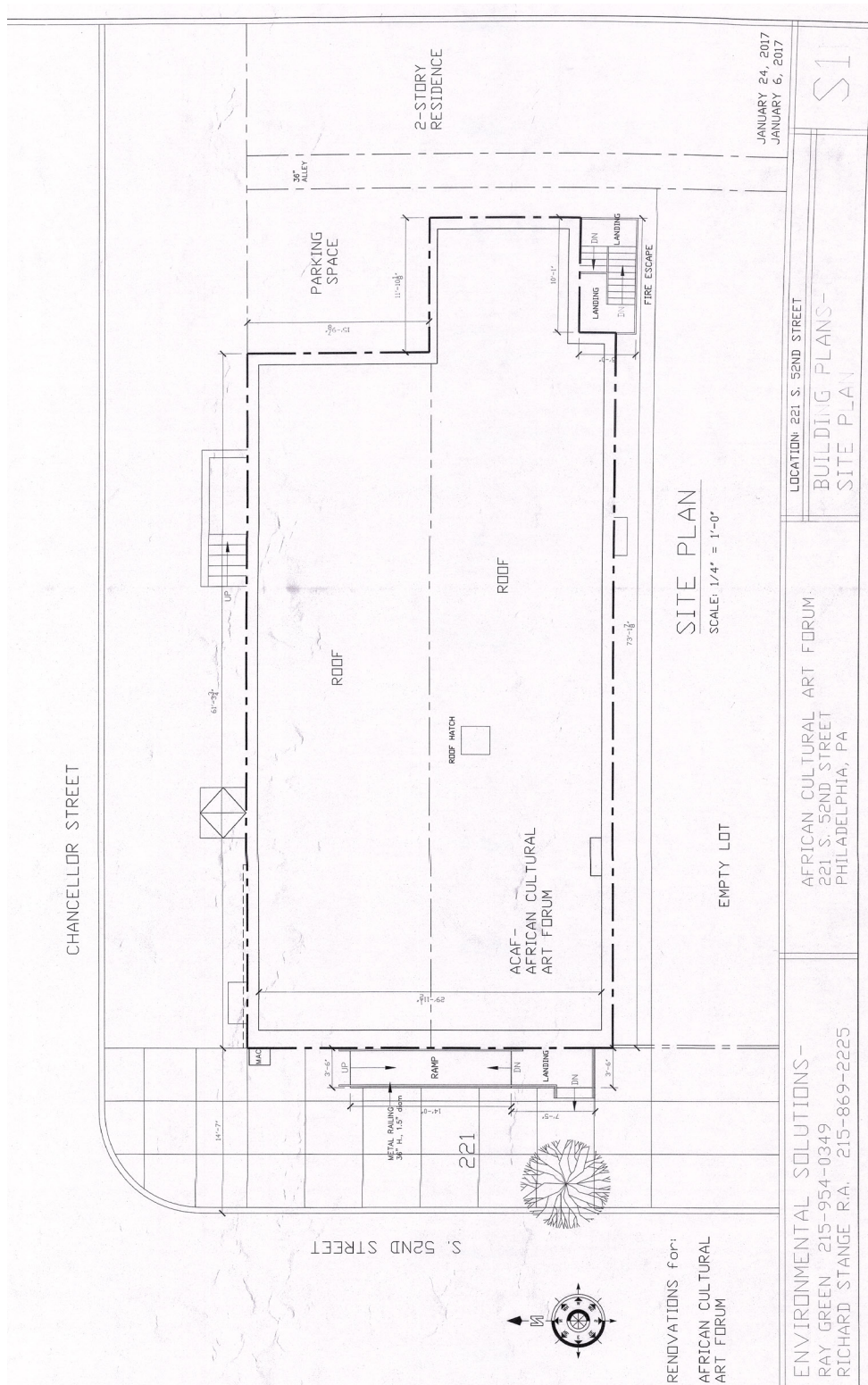




SCALE 1/4" = 1'0"



*Floor 2: Architectural Floor Plan of the 2nd Floor of the African Cultural Art Forum. The previous architect's floor plan was not available so this floor was generated after a site visit made in November 2021.*



*Floor 3 Architectural Floor  
Plan of the 3rd Floor of the  
African Cultural Art Forum.*



User Group

There exists three main user groups of my site:

#### Local Community:

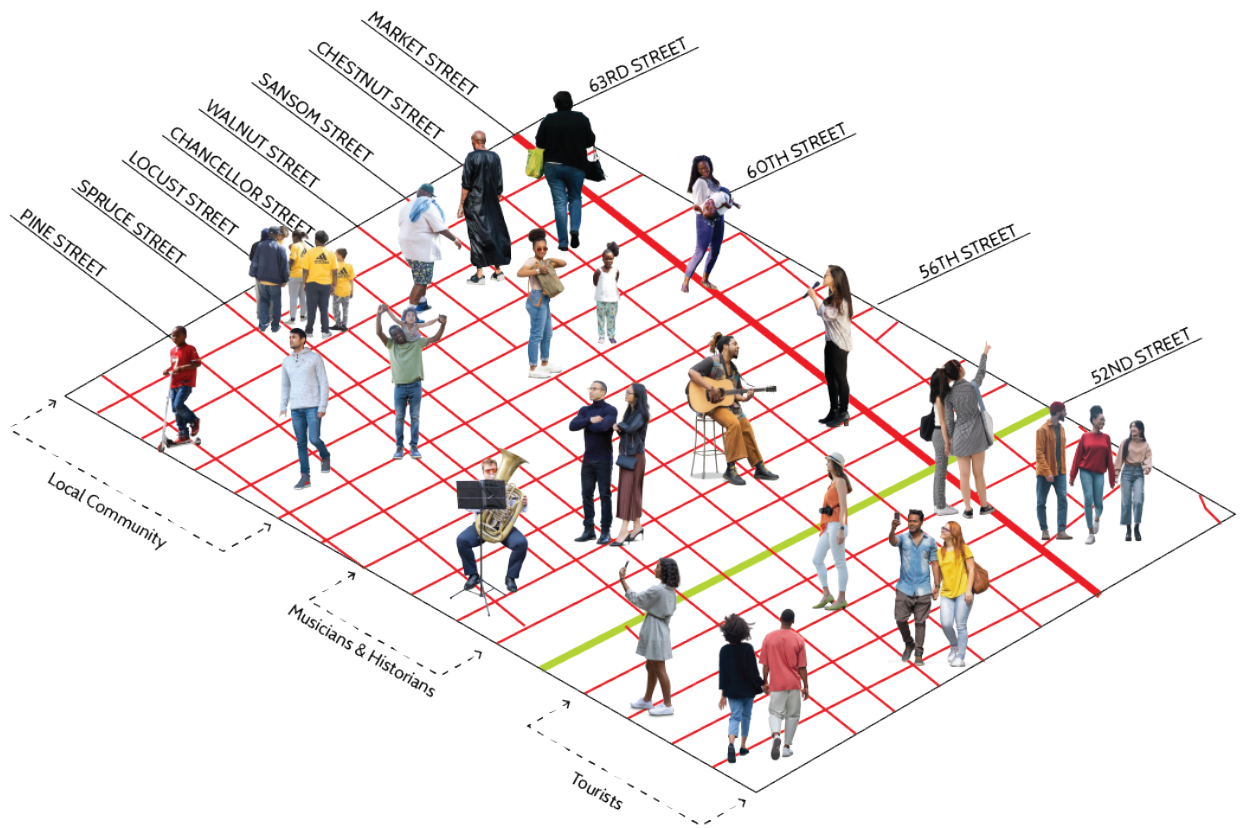
West Philadelphia is a large neighborhood spanning from University City on the east, Overbrook Park on the northwest and runs north up to Fairmount Park. My site is located towards the southern part of this area and I imagine my user group as residents that live around Cobbs Creek neighborhood within West Philadelphia. South 52nd Street is a business district (see diagram on page 45) with residential homes on the perpendicular streets making children, youth, young to mid-age adults (18-50) and families a part of my user group. Since my site is situated in a predominately African American neighborhood I also see them as a part of my user group demographic.

#### Tourists & Visitors:

The site is accessible off the 52nd Street Market-Frankford train line making the site very accessible by train and public transportation. Based on my research of musical venues in Philadelphia, the Center City district (located east of West Philadelphia) has a higher concentration of musical venues and programs that relate to this type of entertainment (see map on page 46). Philadelphia is known as the "City of Murals" due its the vast number of murals throughout the city. Tourists and visitors who are already inclined to mural walks around the city—both independently and through the Mural Arts Philadelphia organization—will benefit as a user group.

#### Historians & Musicians:

The reactivation of the Aqua Lounge as a former music venue program is important. Therefore an understanding of the past will need to be apparent. It will be necessary for those who visit the site to be aware of the site's history, which is a marker of my thesis' stance on establishing identity and place making. Therefore, I see historians and music aficionados participating in this site.





When people come together it creates the opportunity for community and this happens within a space. In this way, space helps to shape identity<sup>1</sup>. Music can be a facilitator to promote community and therefore needs to be supported in a space that is on a human scale, encouraging interaction. Within the stance of this thesis, an understanding of the evolution of African oral and sonic traditions stemming from the diaspora provides further insight into how music has supported the cultural identity and traditions of African Americans. These traditions have created an expression of layered extemporaneous sounds and "noise."<sup>2</sup> Shaped by a rich and hybridized form of improvised music they work as a palimpsest, one layer added over the next.

Connecting research and concepts related to improvisational music<sup>3</sup> with architecture must lead to a permeable space that exists within a fixed architecture, fluid between interior and exterior and how programs relate to one another. Spaces must be ephemeral and even extemporaneous, allowing for integration of other programs and activities to move in<sup>4</sup>. Programs also can be impacted by one another, beside or within close proximity of each other. By thinking on a human scale, this Black notion of space instead of architecture works to shape a flexible design narrative in the site, reinforcing identity.

1. In an interview I held with Germane Barnes from the Black Reconstruction Collective he discussed a distinction between how space, rather than architecture, helps to shape identity. As the interactions and activities in a space relate more closely to us we have more agency over space and in this way provides more of an impression to our identities than an architecture that tends to be built out of our control.

2. "Noise" in Tricia Rose's book allows for palimpsest and progression. It is not noise but a foundation for new ways of making. (Rose, Tricia. "Soul Sonic Forces." Essay. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 62–70. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994.).

3. *Black Noise*: "These oral traditions and practices clearly inform the prolific use of collage, intertextuality, boasting, toasting, and signifying in rap's lyrical style and organization" (Rose, 64)

4. In James A. Snead's writing *On Repetition in Black Culture*, he discusses the idea of the "cut" which works as a point for others to join in but also works as a form of "cultural coverage" in the Black community which makes room for and accepts "accidents" (Snead, 20) I understand Snead's writing as a way of "making room" that can be used applied to the design intervention of this thesis

(Snead, James A. "On Repetition in Black Culture." *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4 (1981): 146–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904326>.



Design Approach

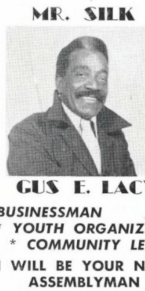
What does Philadelphia sound like? This is the leading question in the Design Approach phase. Each city has its own rhythm, sound and personality that make it unique. Translating research into a design language is the first approach to an intervention. A mixture of images and newsletter clippings weave together jazz culture, improvisation, Black culture and music making as it relates to Philadelphia.



The images on the opposite page include a photo of jazz enthusiasts in front of the John Coltrane home in North Philadelphia, an image of two youths walking outside the iconic *Hakim's Bookstore* on South 52nd Street in West Philadelphia, illustrative images of Mr. Silk—who operated a popular Black-owned jazz bar called *Mr. Silk's* on 52nd street—an archival newsletter clipping from *The Jazz Blast* and an archival image of South 52nd Street facing north (date unknown). These images help to provide a visual and sonic portrait of Philadelphia.

Pages 63-64 begin to extract sonic and aural dimensions that exist around the site. By highlighting rhythm, sounds and noise that exist around the site it provides an understanding of frameworks that exist and ways to improvise over them.



9/5/95



 LIVE JAZZ IN THE DELAWARE VALLEY 

QUA LOUNGE - 223 S. 52nd Street, Philadelphia, Penna. GR 2-9393

Three shows nitely: 9:30, 11:00, 12:45 p.m.

Matinee every Saturday 4 to 7 p.m.

August 31 (one week only) Johnny Lytle Quartet

September 7 thru September 12th - Richard "Groove" Holmes & Co.

September 14 thru September 19th - New York Art Quartet

Joe Chambers, drums; Ron Carter, bass; Wayne Shorter, sax;

Sonny Greenwich, guitar.

Opening September 21st - Lee Morgan



# JAZZ WORLD NEWS

Grants totalling \$20,050 for projects in the field of jazz were announced in December. These are the first awards under a pilot program in jazz established by the National Endowment for the Arts several months ago.

The program, though modest in terms of funding, "recognized jazz as an indigenous American art form which has been among the liveliest contributors to the arts in our country."

OCTOBER 1970

## ELECTRONIC-JAZZ

the salient features of jazz during its eighty-year history. The willingness of its musician-creators to experiment. In techniques have been subjected to a continuous process of evolution. And there have been many other changes in the music. The most recent 'revolution' in free jazz is the use of electronically amplified instruments. These innovations are effective changes in the sound and structure of the music. It may be to consider how much 'heart' and 'soul' can effectively be expressed in the medium of electronics. Personal expression has always been a part of the best jazz performances.

## House of Jazz Imports

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RED DOT RECORDS  
210 MARKET ST., PHILA.

CK-JAZZ & R&B ALBUMS  
3 For \$5  
SELECTION of BLUE NOTE  
Reg. \$5.98 only \$2.49 ea.

CHART ALBUMS  
Reg. \$4.98 2 For \$6  
RED DOT RECORDS  
210 MARKET ST., PHILA., PA.

AQUA LOUNGE - 223 S. 52nd St., Philadelphia, Pa. GR  
Three shows nightly: 9:30, 11:00, 12:30  
Contemporary Jazz Groups, usually w

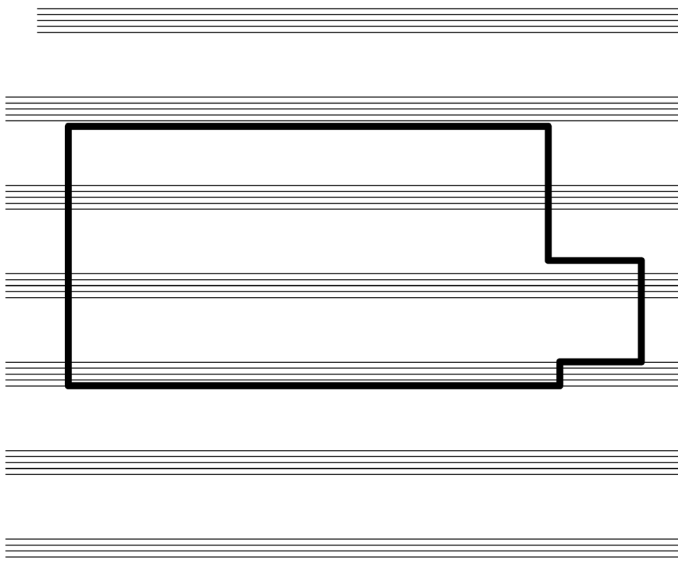
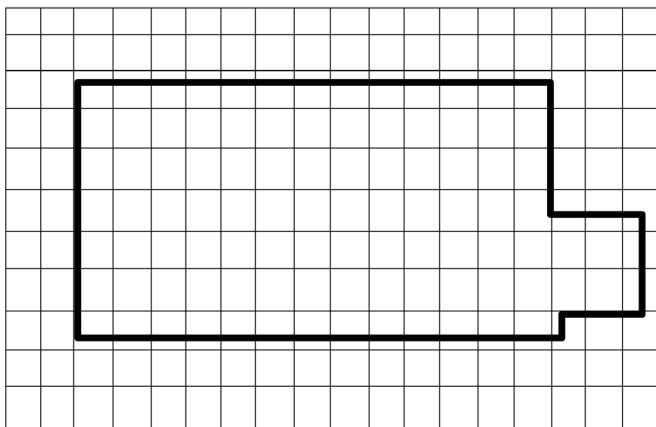
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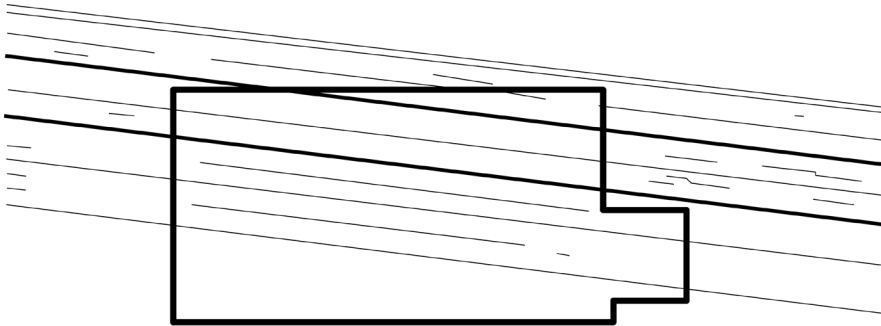
It was a small house  
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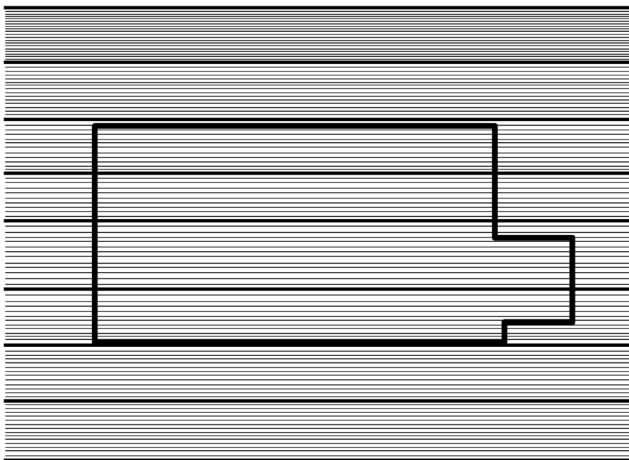
An architectural grid is a framework used by architects to draft a drawing. This 2D drawing is extracted from the existing architectural blueprint of ACAF. Juxtaposing the architect's drafting method with the existing site's exterior envelope highlights a framework that is gridded, predictable with a boxy and symmetrical rhythm.



Staff lines are a basis for organizing musical pitch. The organization of notes along a staff create different types of music. What might an organization of a new set of "notes" mean to the site? This empty set of staff lines invite new architectural curiosities and suggest a new rhythmic framework.

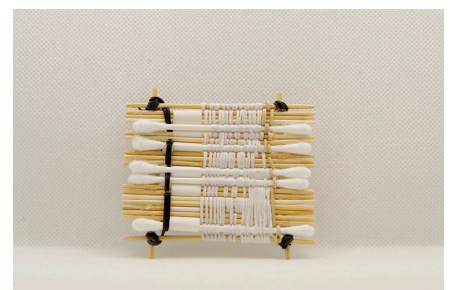
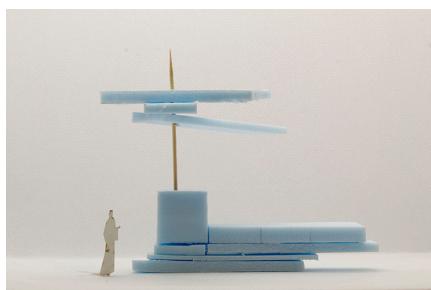
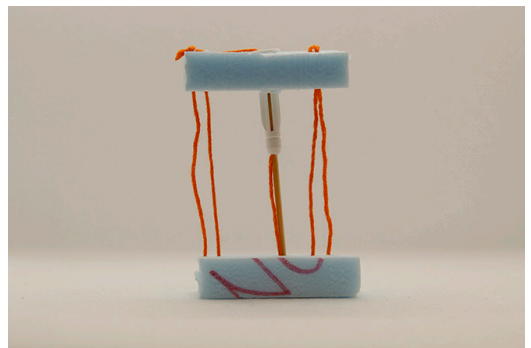
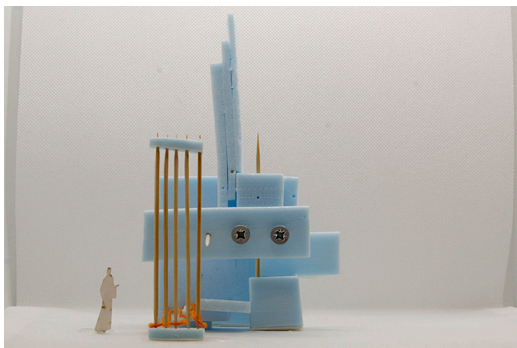
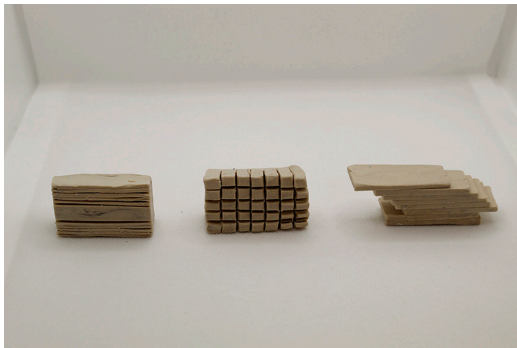


The city of Philadelphia is proportionally organized wider laterally (West/East) than it is longitudinally (North/South). This drawing highlights the streets surrounding ACAF. By extracting these lateral streets an angled yet linear rhythm with sporadic breaks appears.

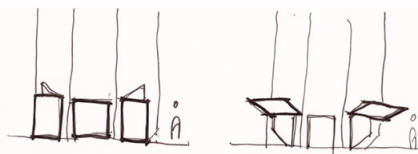
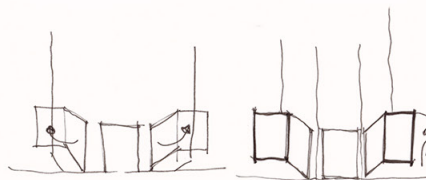
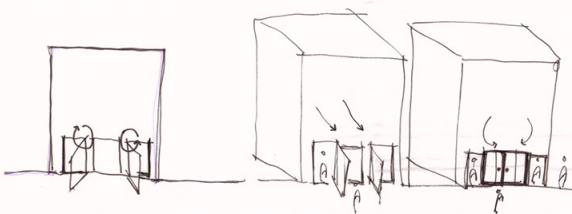
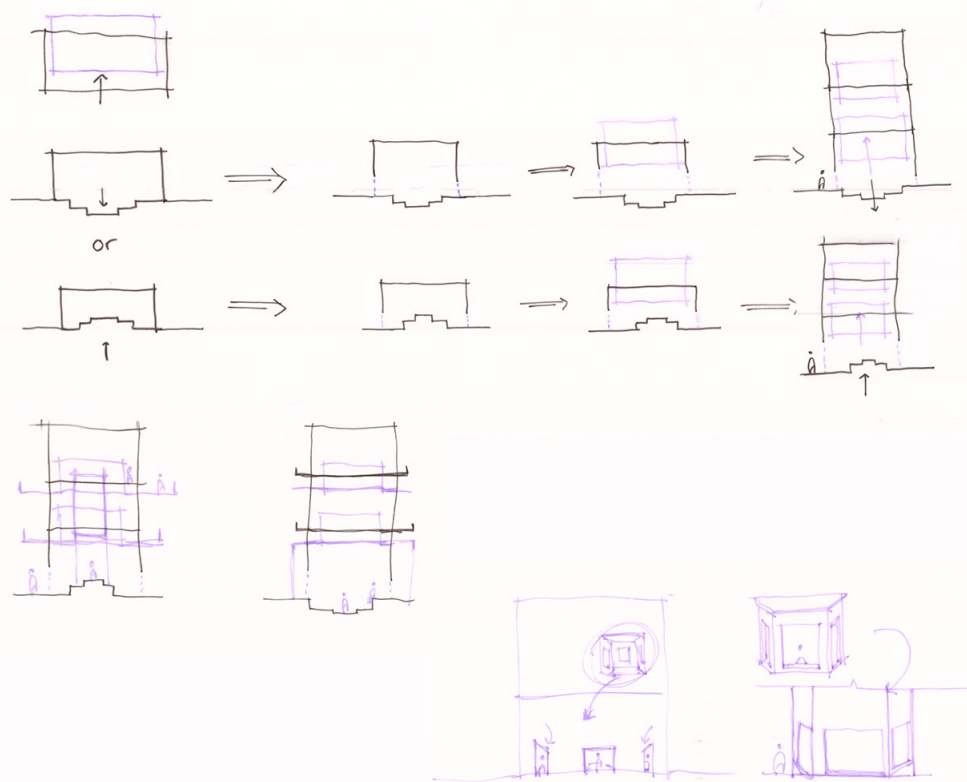


This drawing explores sound through public transportation. Public transit creates a sense of rhythm which adds to the noise and sound of a city. The South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) is the public transportation system in Philadelphia. This graphic represents a weekend train schedule arriving at 52nd Street on the Market-Frankford Subway line—which is the train that run East/West through Philadelphia. Each block is divided into a set of line segments at intervals starting from 20, 15, 12, 10, 12, 12, 13 to 15. This visual representation of time and movement create a sense of rhythm, speed and reference the frequency of people taking public transportation.

As people arrive and depart at 52nd Street density and sparsity are created.



Beginning to pull out  
2D drawings (see pages  
63-64) these models are  
3-dimensional explorations  
of noise, sound and rhythm  
and how it might start to  
relate on a human scale.

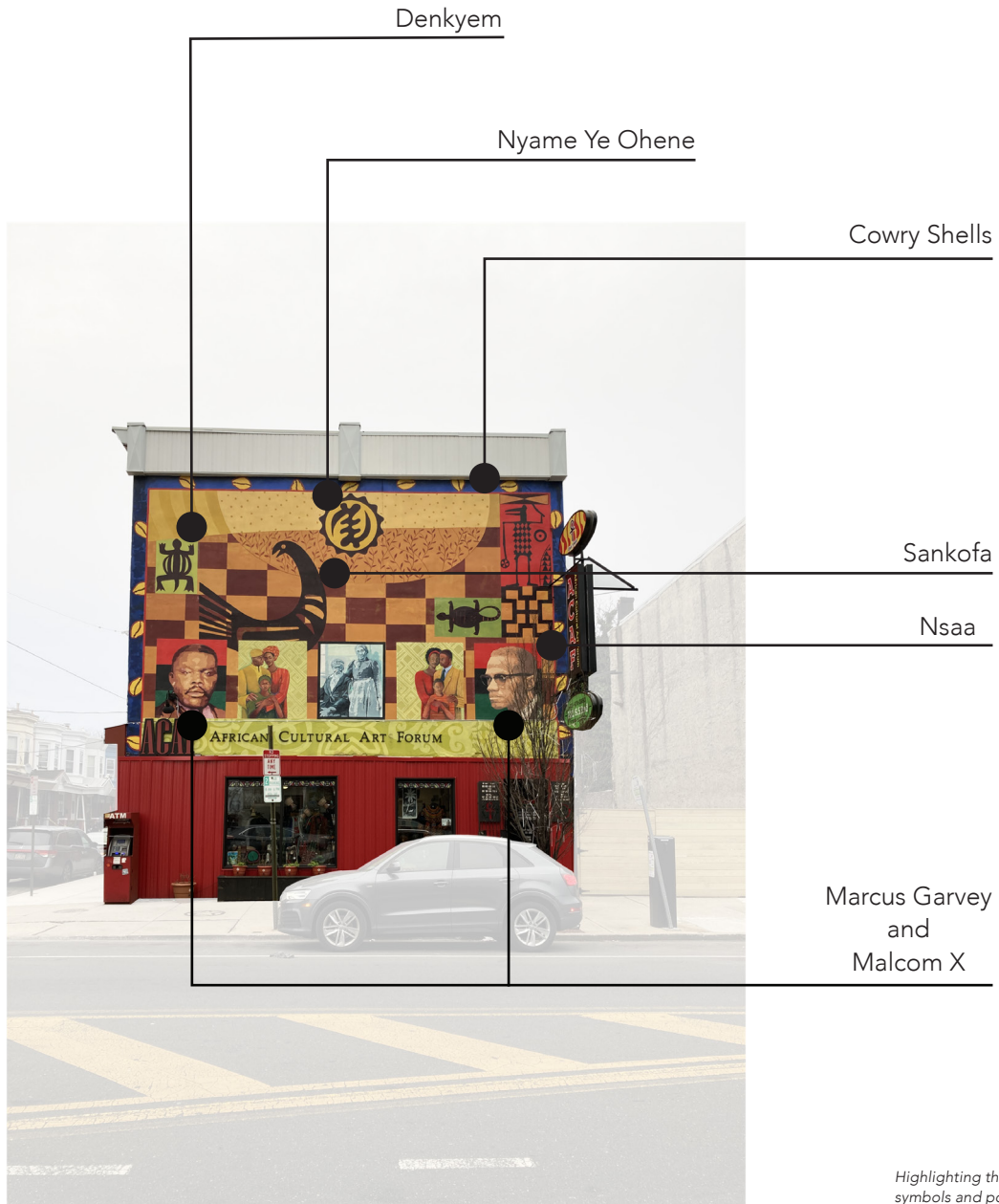


Sketches exploring the idea of inserting a new program within an existing framework and how the existing framework might start to be improvised over through the idea of "rehinging" traditional ways of using architectural features like a door.

Understanding the importance of sound and "noise" the design approach begins with the exterior of the site, understanding how it can dialogue with the interior and also deciding what areas should be kept or become intervened upon. The goal of the design is not to change the appearance of the exterior of the site so much that it becomes foreign to the neighborhood. Using existing materials and simple design strategies will allow for the success of this design intervention.

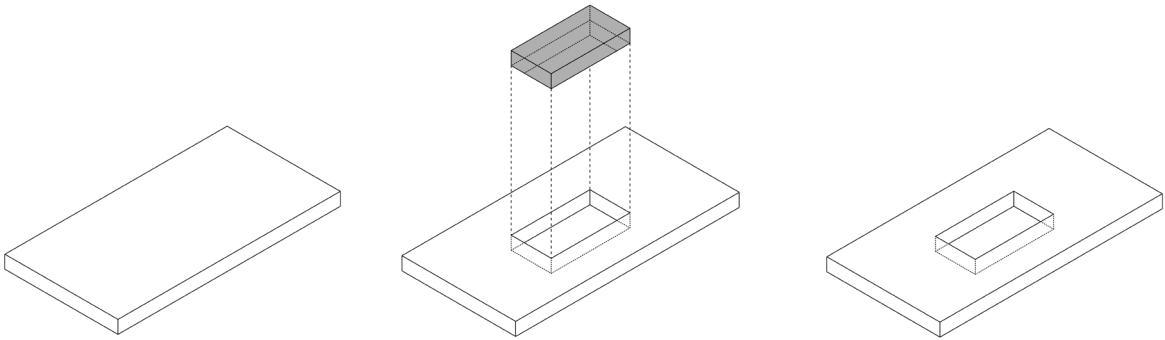
Philadelphia is known as the "City of Murals" due to the amount of murals on buildings throughout the city. Incorporating a mural to the design intervention must consider the site's context and also provide a sense of its history. Because of its symbolism that relates to identity the existing mural will remain intact. Adinkra symbols splayed throughout the facade, portraits of historical figures and also portraits mirroring African culture to African American culture reveal meanings that are specific to African and African diasporic identities.

In order to mediate an exchange between the exterior and the interior of the site the ground floor will be intervened and incorporate more exposed entry ways. The interior will have new and overlapping programs inserted into it continuing dialogue that can even lead to unplanned activities.

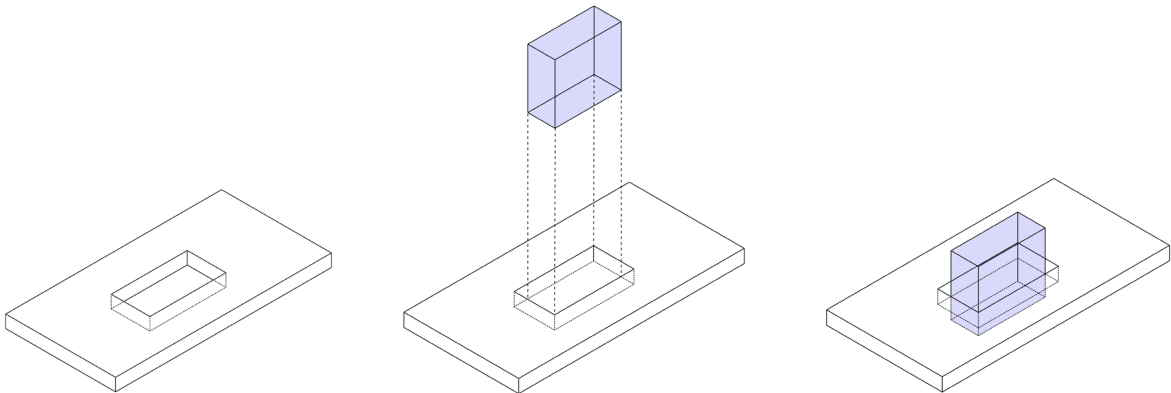


*Highlighting the Adinkra symbols and portraits on the façade of the existing ACAF site there is meaning within the mural that relates to identity. The Sankofa bird represents the importance of knowing your past in order to move forward, cowry shells reflect wealth and Black leaders such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X are historical figures in African American history.*

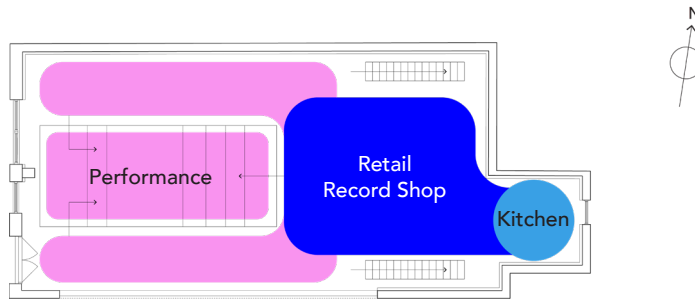
## 1) Extract from existing



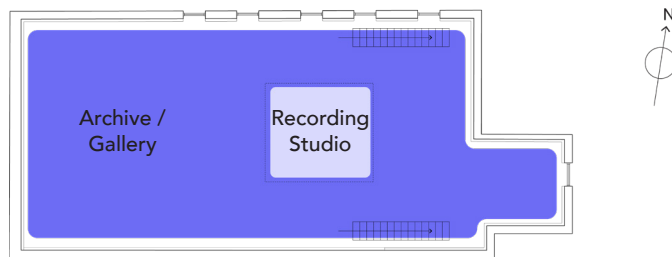
## 2) Replace into existing



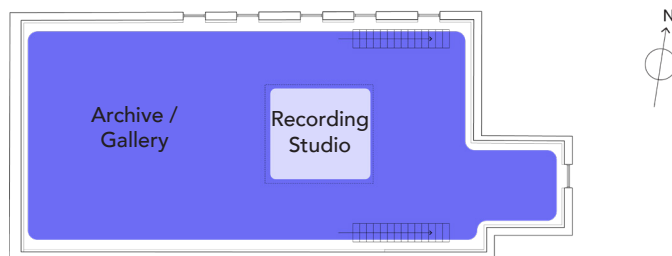
*The interior of the site will have a minimal architectural opening to allow for the insertion of a new program. This space will hover between the existing floors in order to overlap activities within the site.*



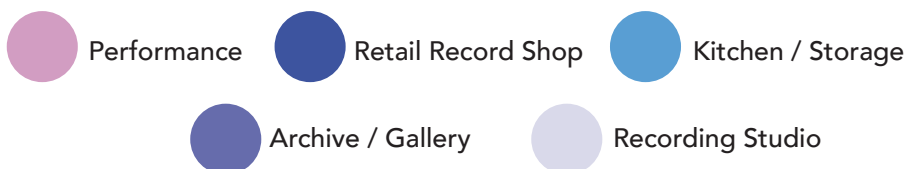
Ground Floor (Floor 1)



Floor 2



Floor 3



The new programs consider the history of the site as a music venue, the targeted user group and South 52nd Street as a business district. The ground floor incorporates a performance space in close proximity to the exterior of the site, a retail record shop and a kitchen / storage space to entertain in special events. The second and third floors include the recording studio and the archive / gallery spaces.

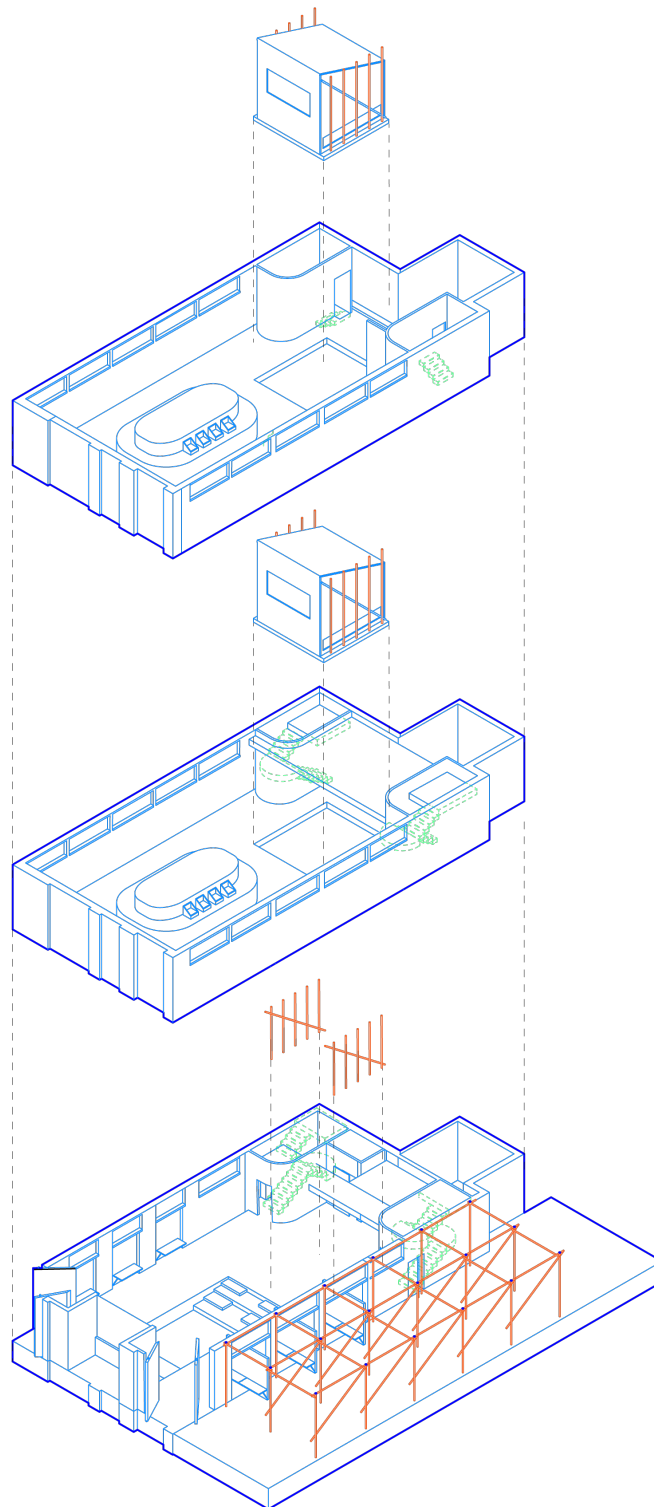
Considering how improvised music palimpsests from the past, the recording studio remains in close proximity to the archive / gallery space. New recorded music uses the past to create new music and being situated in close proximity these two programs promote investigation between the two spaces in order to probe new ideas and creativity.



Design Intervention

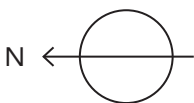
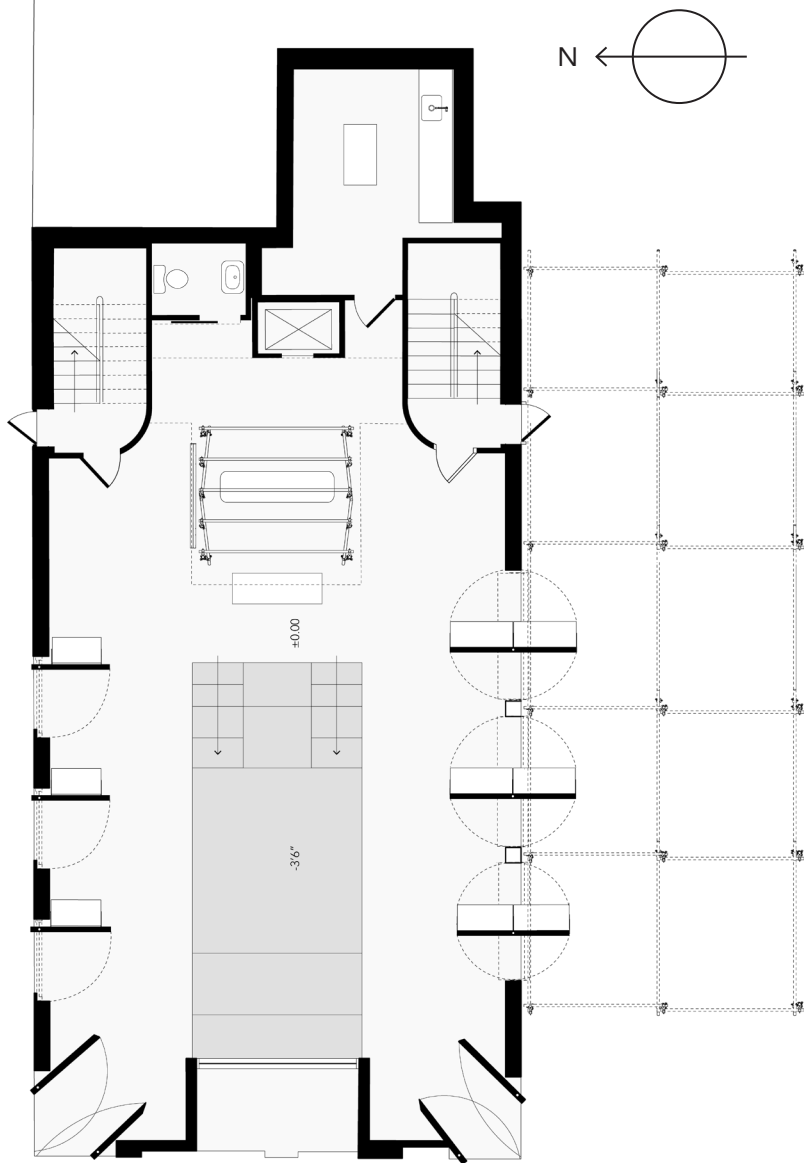
Developing a new rhythm within an existing framework, the design intervention uses the envelope of the site to rework new architectural functions.

Currently the empty lot on the south side of the building is in debate for new development. Petitions have been signed to avoid new development due to fears it might lead to gentrification. By temporarily appropriating the use of this empty lot through scaffolding (see pages 38-39) the community and the public can start to incorporate this shared outdoor space; independent vendors and food trucks along South 52nd Street can also set up space here to sell items and food. Scaffolding is used as a temporary material in the empty lot and also in the structure that supports the interior recording studios. The idea is that these spaces can change, should the owner or community deem so. Nothing remains too permanent in order for future users of the site to add their own layer of use to it, should they decide to.



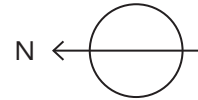
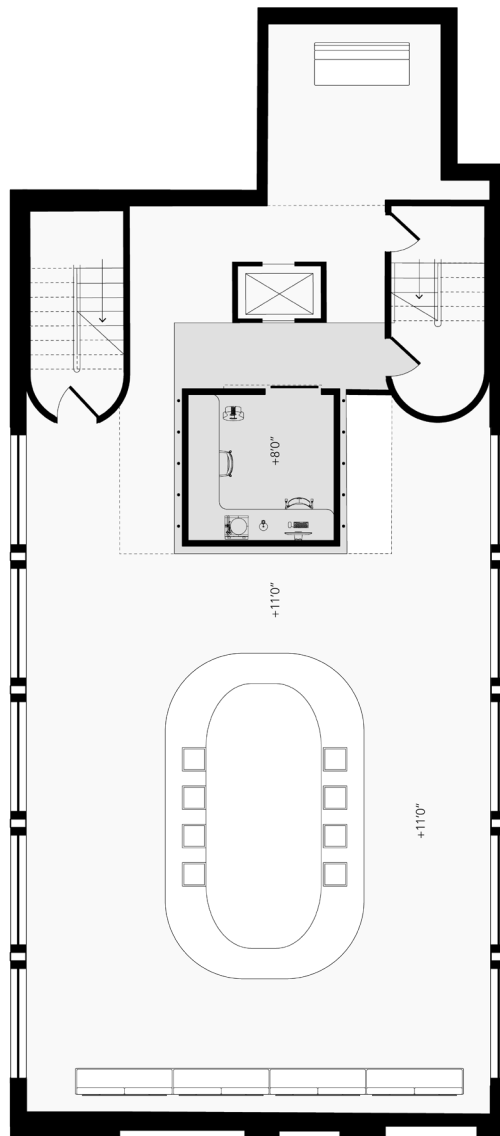
Similar to the way jazz musicians play around an existing framework to create new rhythms, the design intervention works within the existing architectural framework to create a new program that heavily relies on past use.

CHANCELLOR STREET



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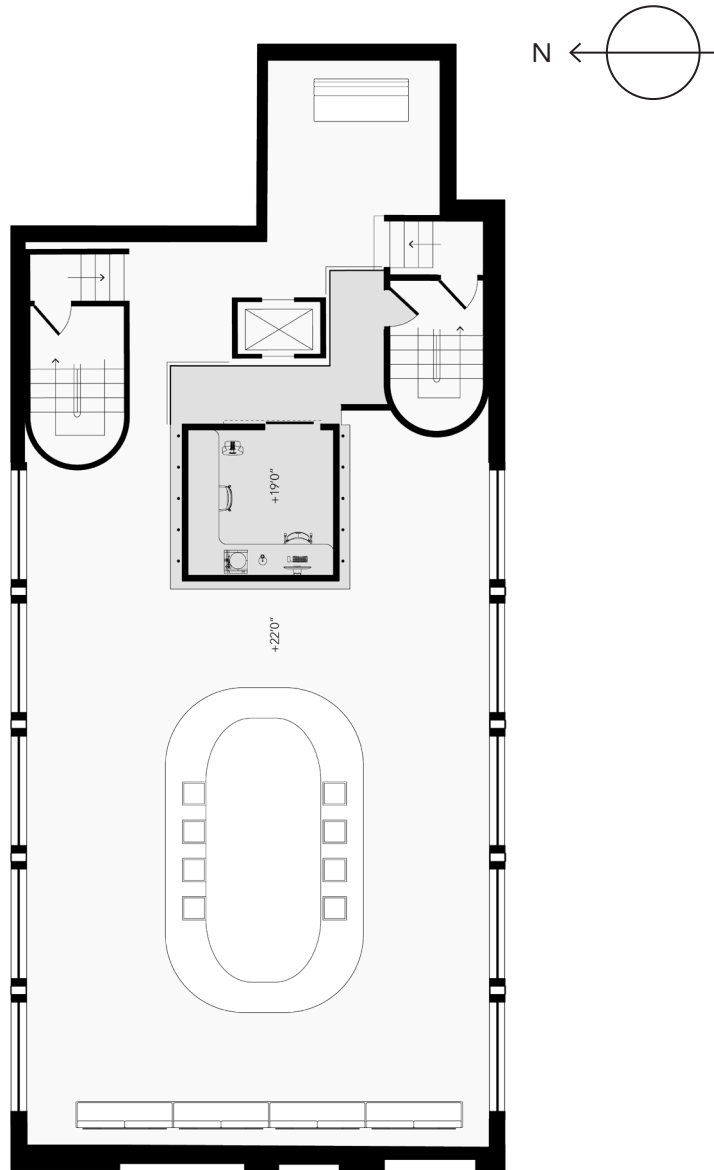
SOUTH 52ND STREET



Scale: 1/4" = 1'0"

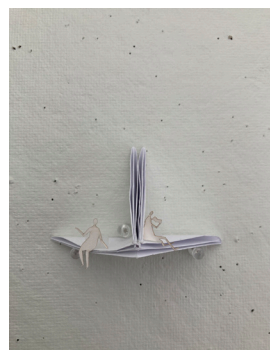
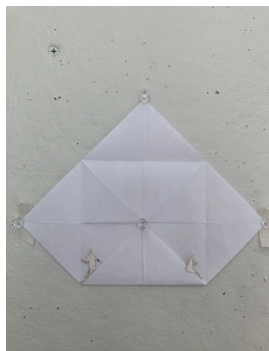
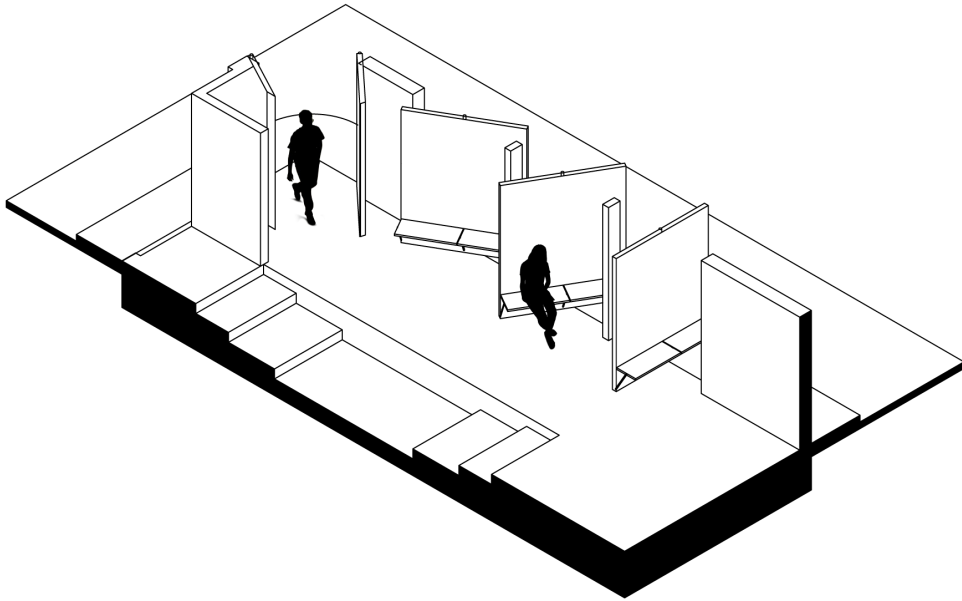
*Opposite page: The intervened ground floor has a performance space that descends partially into the first floor, which is seen from both the ground floor and the second floor. Other features include rotating doors on the façade provide circulation between the street and the adjacent empty lot, a record retail shop, kitchen, restroom and elevator*

*This page: the intervened second floor contains an archive and gallery space for recorded music. The inserted recording room is accessible through the south stairwell.*



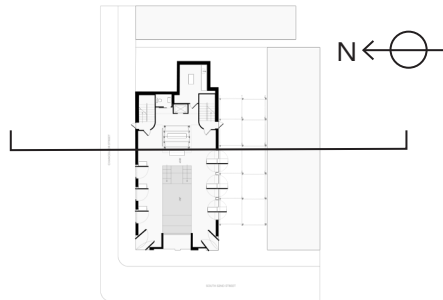
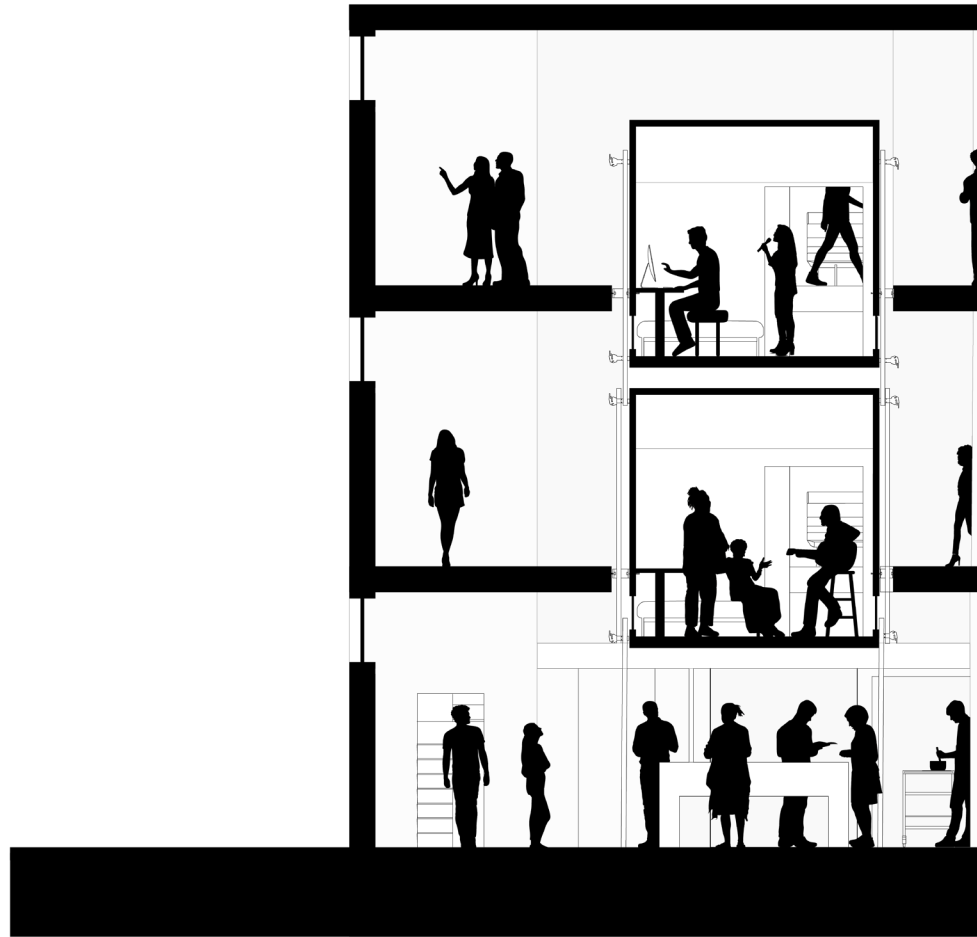
*The intervened third floor is similar in program to the second floor. The recording space hovers between the second and third floors and is accessible through the south stairwell.*

Scale: 1/4" = 1'0"

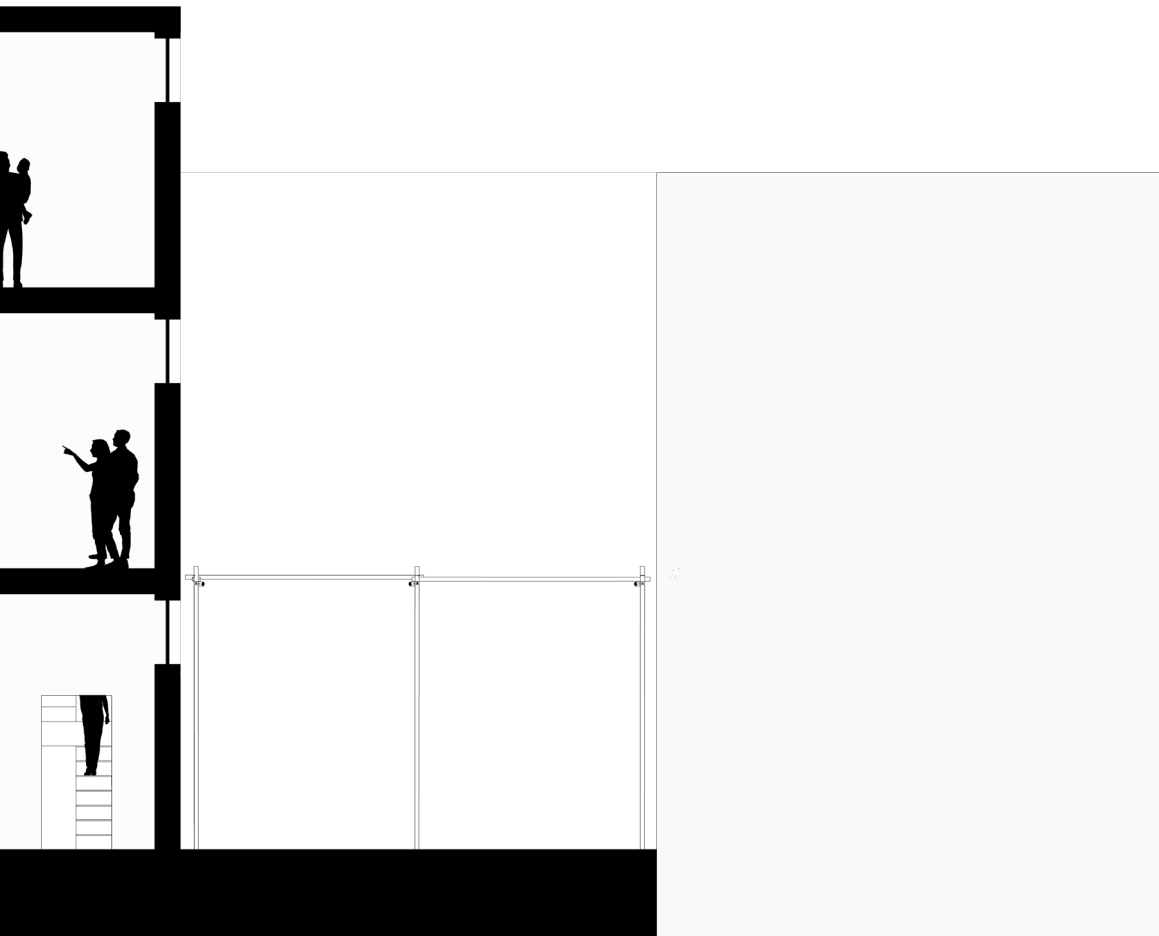


The top diagram is a closer look at the entry and façade doors on the ground level. A simple move, such as moving where a screw on a door is placed, creates a new way to open a door by rotating it instead of swinging it open. Taking advantage of the fact that the site sits on the corner of two streets—South 52nd and Chancellor Streets—the corners of the building are now opened up to create a new entry paths for people coming in from either direction as well as the empty lot.

The bottom images are sketch models that consider the idea of how a hinge can work as a common point of axis. It can be rotated, folded or bended to create new use.



Section View looking east

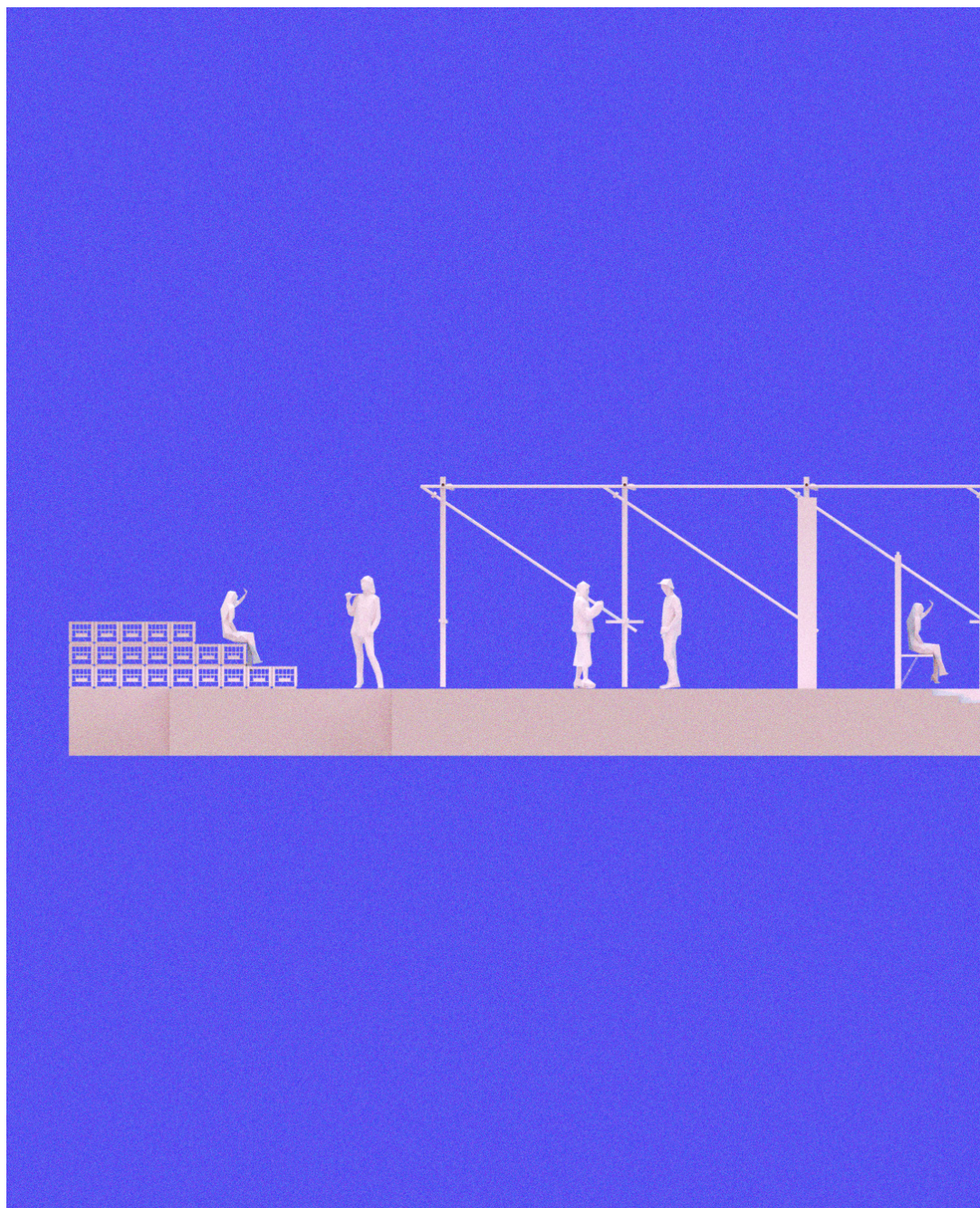


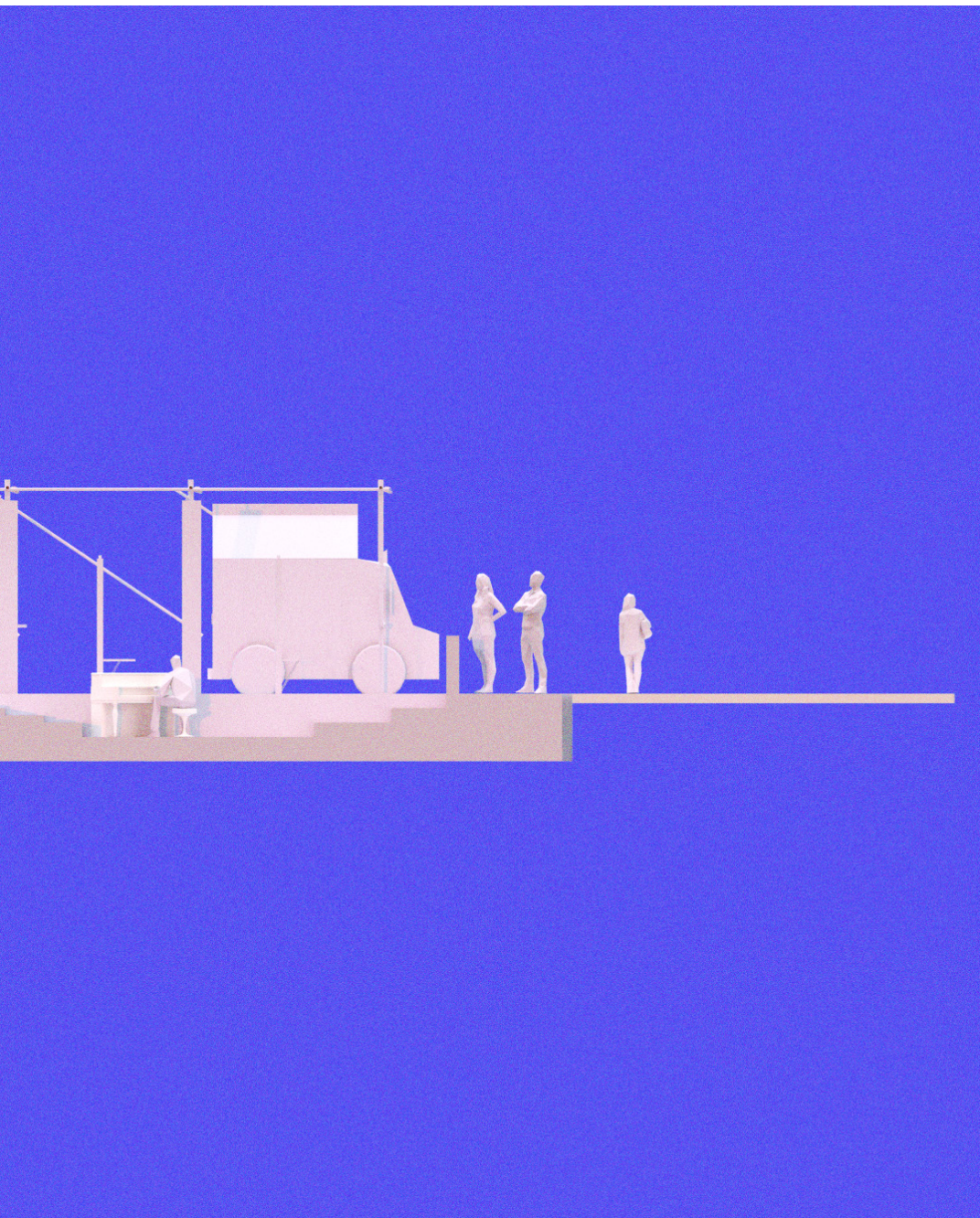
Scale: 1/2" = 1'0"



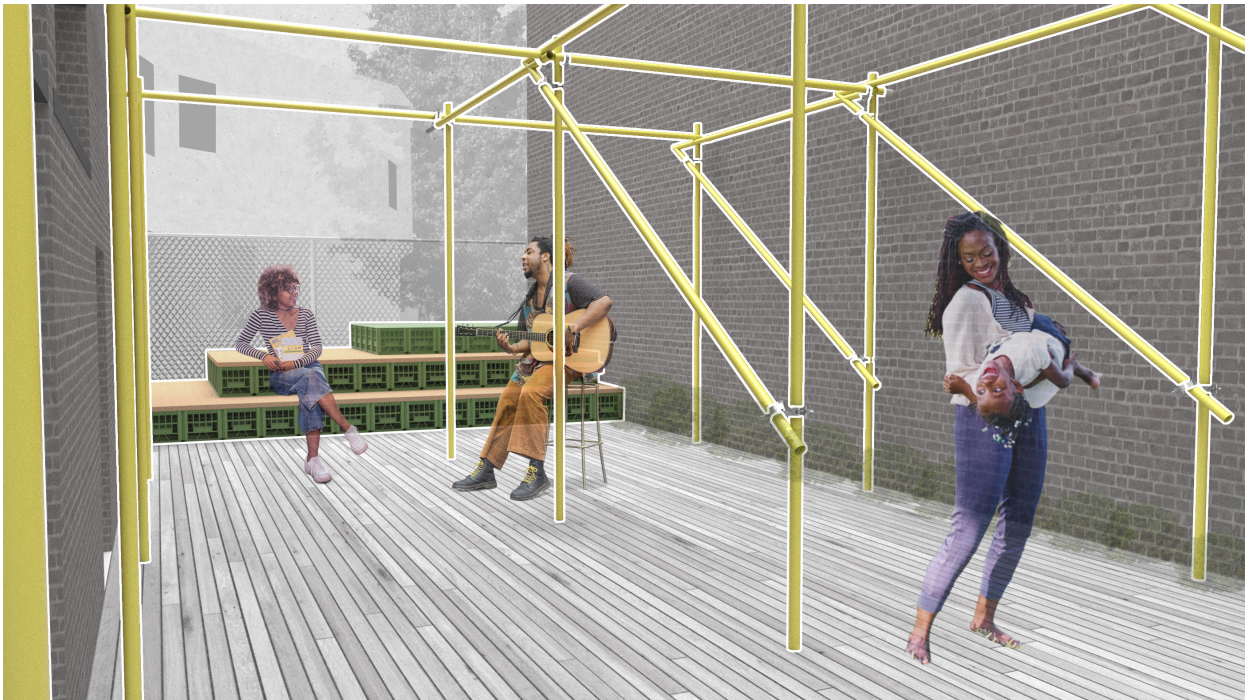


*The design intervention of the African Cultural Art Forum employs strategies of restoration and adaptation. Considering its past programmatic use to its current use, these layers of history are utilized in the intervention. Scaffolding is incorporated on the outside and inside of the building as temporary structures.*

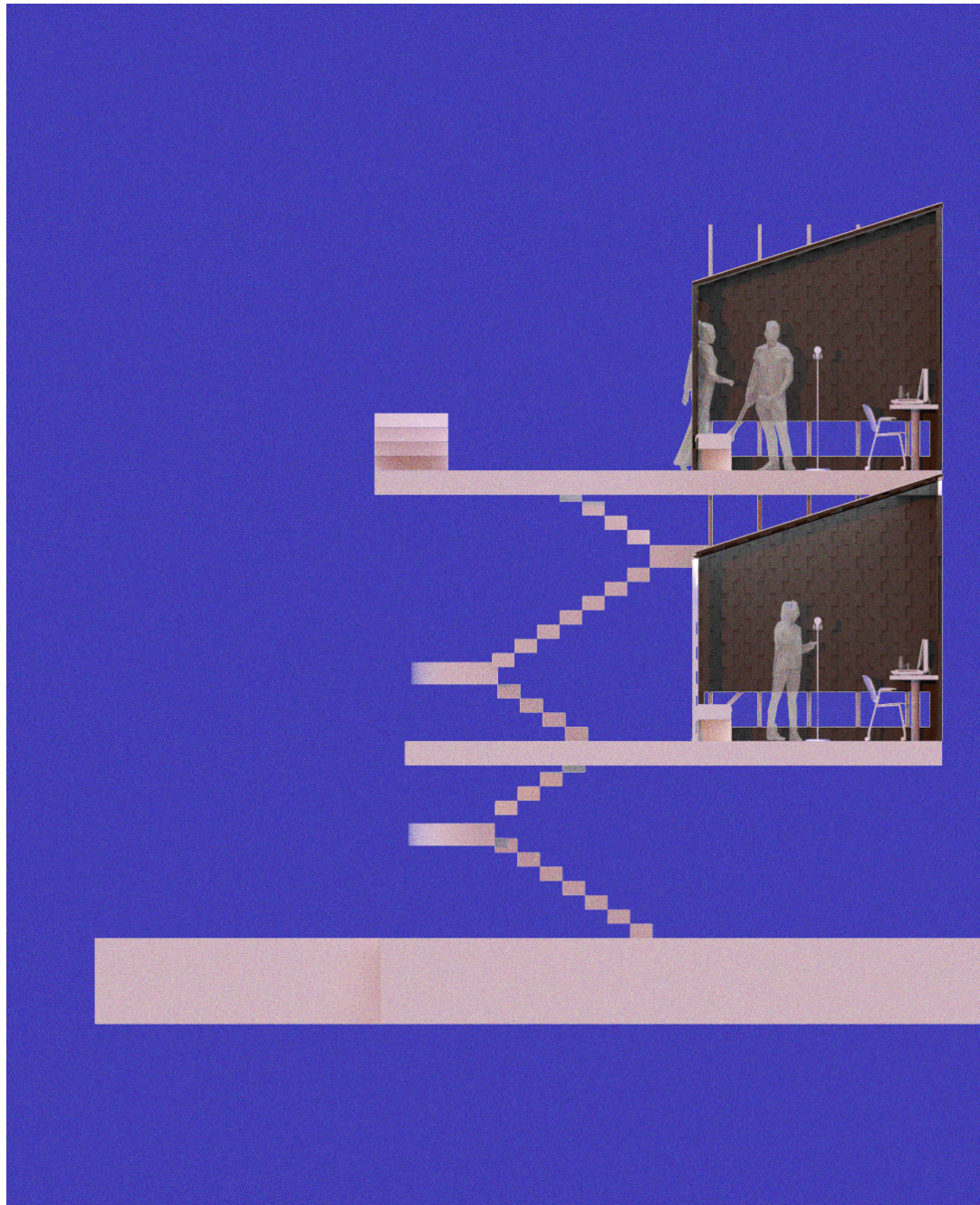


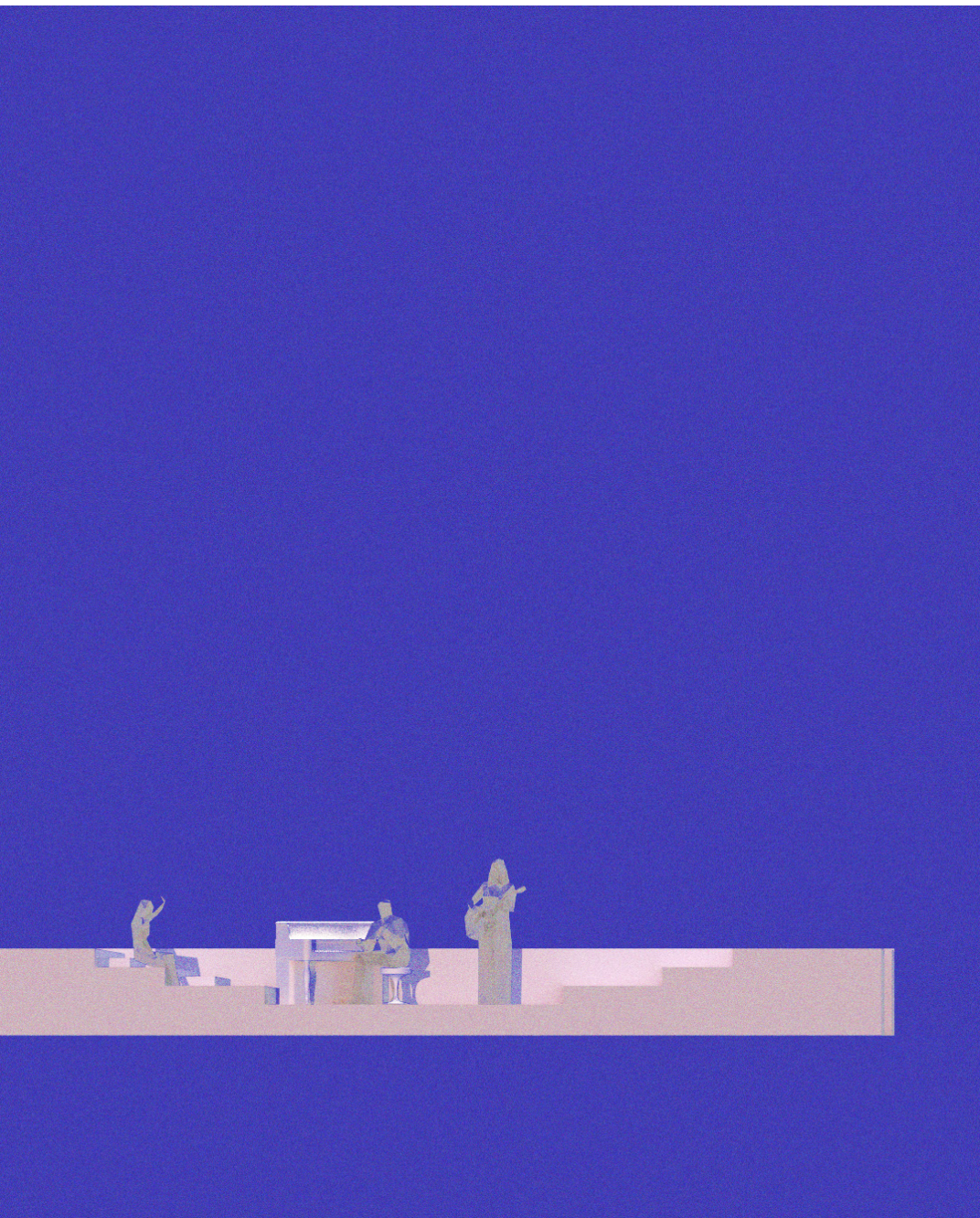






*The empty lot next to the building is appropriated as a public space. It's open to the community as a space they can engage in.*

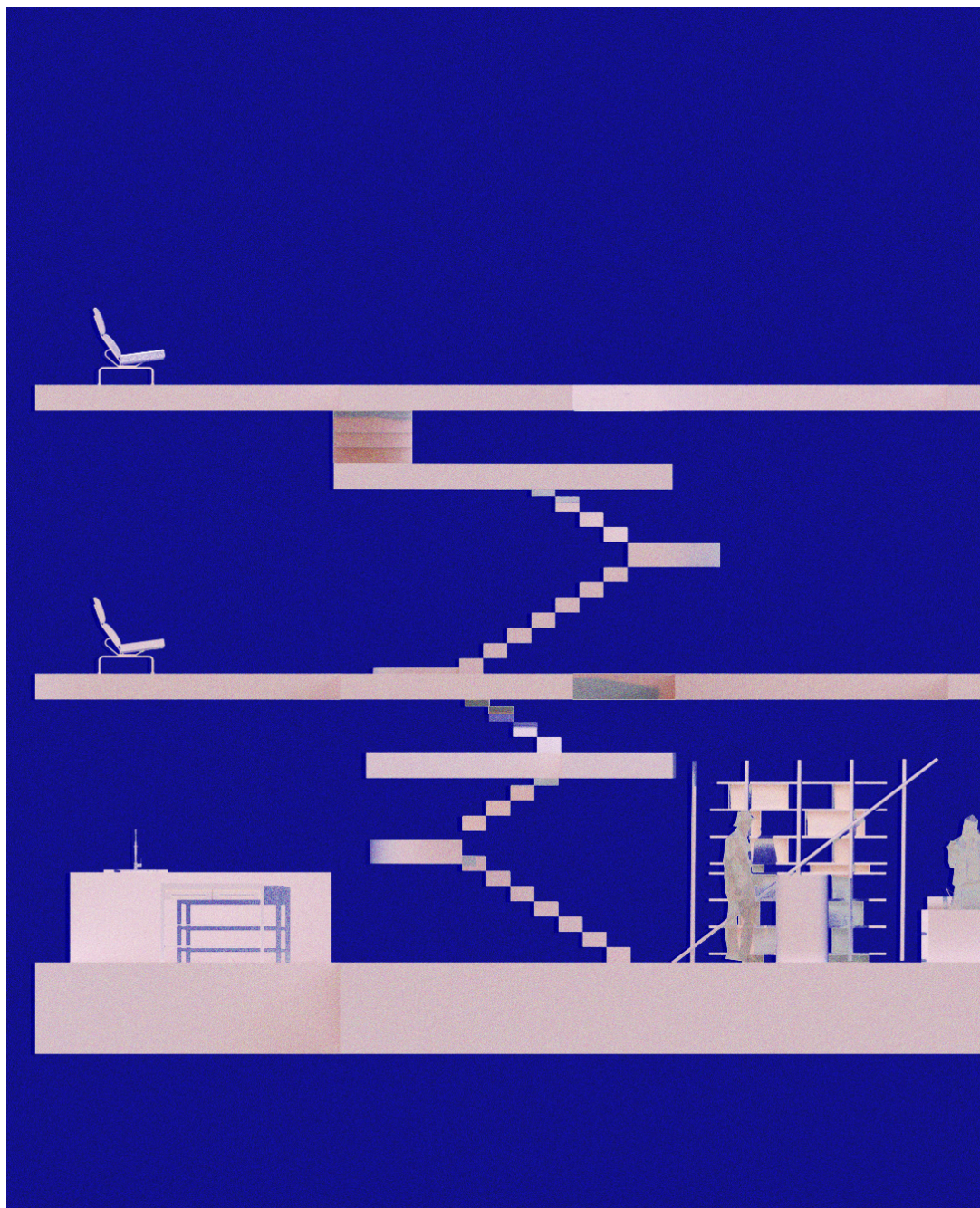


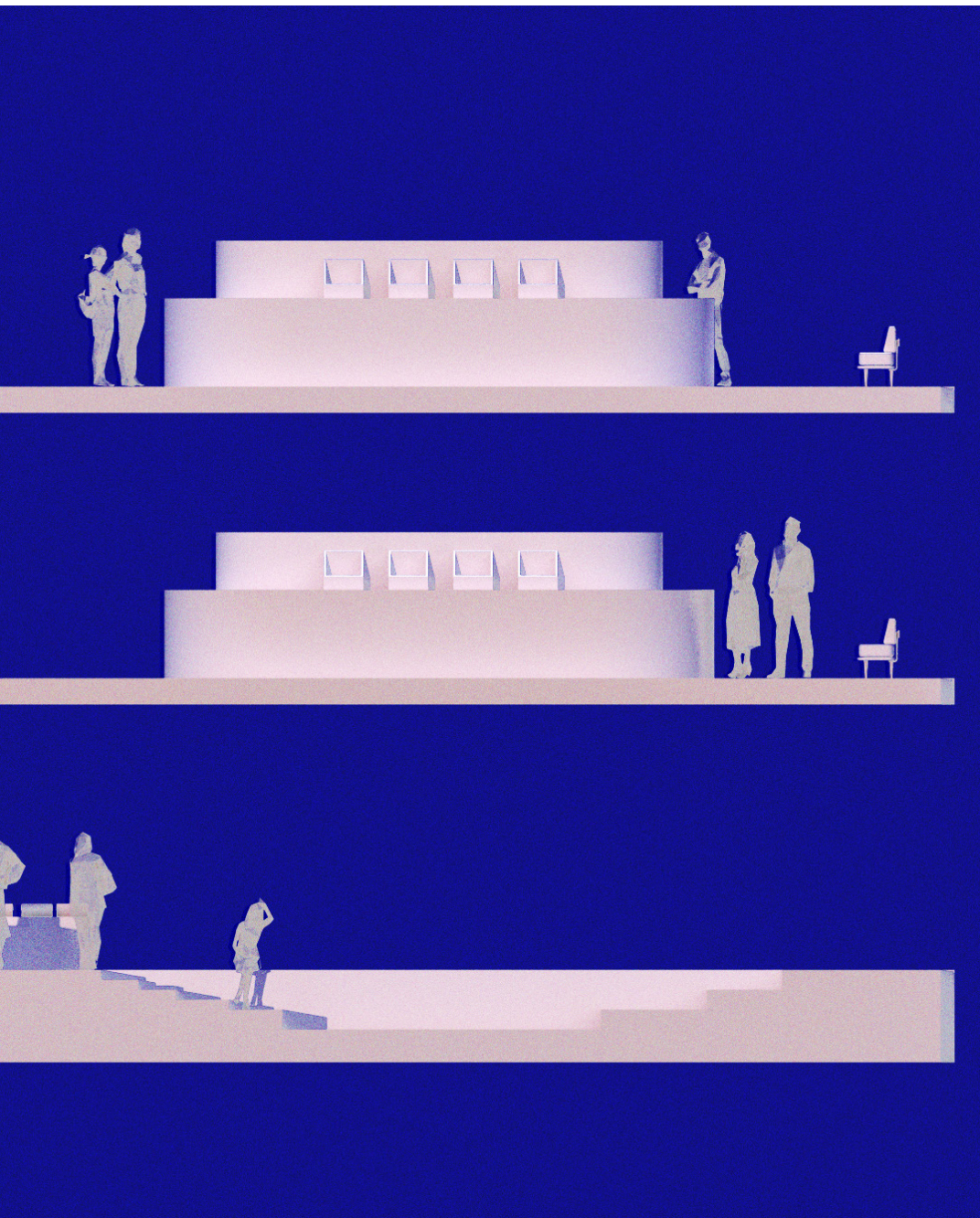






*The recording rooms are spaces where musicians of all levels can gather to record their music. It looks out onto the archive / gallery space. The recording rooms are in close proximity to the archive / gallery spaces as a reminder of how the past influences music today.*







Special Thanks



A special thank you to the following individuals and organizations who supported research done throughout this thesis or were gracious to be interviewed. Thank you for your time and willingness to support this thesis' direction.

Black Reconstruction Collective Members:

Germane Barnes  
Felecia Davis  
Mario Gooden  
Amanda Williams

Interviewees:

Suzanne Cloud  
Yvonne Blake  
Jack McCarthy  
Gregory McDonald  
Steve Rowland  
Veronica Underwood  
Pearl Williams

Guest Critic

Amari Johnson

Grants & Funding:

RISD Graduate Commons Grant



Specialist Advisor





Christopher Roberts  
Assistant Professor  
Departments of Theory +  
History of Art + Design and  
Experimental Foundation Studies  
The Rhode Island School of Design

Thank you Christopher for your  
patience, support and always finding  
a way to provide new insight to our  
conversations. Without your help this  
thesis would not be what it is.



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Designed at the Rhode Island  
School of Design

Typeset in Avenir

Printed at the Rhode Island School of  
Design and Minuteman Press

Bound by Esther Akintoye

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academic purposes only.





