

**Home in the Urban Void:  
The Changing Role of Obsolete Institutional Buildings**

by

Rhyland Taylor

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Architecture

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
June 2024

Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki,  
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.  
We are all Treaty people.

© Copyright by Rhyland Taylor, 2024

# Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Context and Ambitions.....	1
Vacant Institutional Buildings .....	1
Need for Housing.....	4
Adaptive Reuse .....	5
Direction and Scope .....	6
Scope of Study .....	6
Chapter 2: Method.....	12
Site Analysis .....	12
Site History .....	12
Public Interest for the Site.....	21
Various Stakeholders.....	27
Appropriate Intervention .....	29
Storytelling as a Concept.....	30
Chapter 3: Design.....	41
My Stories.....	41
The Tomb of 10,000 Bricks .....	41
The Shining City on the Hill .....	44
The Moving Garden that Stayed Put .....	46
From Poorhouse to Penthouse.....	49
Interpreting Stories into Architecture .....	52
The Memorial to the Forgotten .....	52
The Copper Soffit.....	55
The Spring Garden Community Bowl .....	60
The Sanctuary on Stilts.....	63
Chapter 4: Conclusion .....	68
References .....	71
Appendix: Supplementary Design Drawings .....	74



## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the changing role of obsolete institutional buildings and the urgent need for affordable housing in Halifax, Nova Scotia. An argument is presented for the adaptive reuse of abandoned buildings in efforts to meet the growing housing needs of the city. Additionally, a case is made for reclaiming culturally significant landmarks to serve the contemporary needs of the people, while also celebrating the rich history of the buildings and their place within the city.

This thesis uses the currently vacant Halifax Memorial Library as a test site to explore the feasibility of adapting a vacant institutional building into housing and a social support infrastructure for the unhoused. By interpreting the site's history through the method of storytelling the proposed intervention finds a balance between introducing a new utilization for the site while respecting its past.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Michael Putman and my advisor, Niall Savage for their guidance during this thesis, and my parents, Carolyn and Ricky Taylor for their constant support throughout my academic career.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Context and Ambitions

This thesis report revolves around the examination of two interconnected issues, the existence of vacant institutional buildings and the pressing demand for affordable housing in Halifax, Nova Scotia. By taking a clear stance on the future of the vacant architecture, this thesis asserts that they should be reclaimed and repurposed to address the urgent need for affordable housing. The argument unfolds in two main points. Firstly, by arguing that the rehabilitation of these obsolete buildings is feasible by preserving and even celebrating their cultural significance by assigning them a new civic purpose. By addressing a contemporary urgency, this approach will effectively breathe new life and purpose into the empty structures. Secondly, this thesis argues that the introduction of public housing programs can play a pivotal role in revitalizing and regenerating neighbourhoods. By doing so, it contributes to the improvement of the urban fabric and can foster increased public participation. In summary, this thesis explores the potential of repurposing vacant institutional buildings to meet the demand for affordable housing, presenting a multifaceted approach that considers cultural preservation, civic responsibility, and community revitalization. But first, let us begin by examining the issues of vacant institutional buildings and the pressing demand for affordable housing in greater detail.

## Vacant Institutional Buildings

The first issue this thesis examines is the significant challenge currently facing the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) revolving around obsolete, vacant institutional

buildings and the ensuing indecision about their future. For the sake of clarification, the term “institutional building” must be defined. In the context of this thesis institutional buildings are public buildings owned by the government or nonprofit groups that supply services, amenities or infrastructure to their communities, such as schools, libraries, places of worship, city halls, government facilities, recreation centres, hospitals, and health centres.

The issue currently facing the HRM is that there are numerous institutional properties, sites, and infrastructure that have remained empty for decades, with the municipality, often the owner, hesitating to make any substantial decisions (Grant 2023). Unfortunately, the prevailing trend is one of inaction, leading to further deterioration of these buildings and their respective sites over time. The typical solution involves demolition and replacement, wherein the land is eventually sold to a private developer (Grant 2023). This approach erases the historical and cultural significance of these sites, resulting in a loss of icons that once defined and contributed to their neighbourhoods (Architects Against Housing Alienation 2023b). The practice of new construction and replacing old buildings also contributes to rising rents and other associated living costs, leading to the gentrification of communities as locals are displaced by the escalating expenses associated with new developments (Architects Against Housing Alienation 2023b). Beyond the cultural and social impacts, this practice is environmentally wasteful, as demolition and reconstruction consume more resources compared to the more cost-effective, sustainable, and publicly supported alternative of adaptive reuse (Architects Against Housing Alienation 2023b). Local communities are deeply concerned about the future of these vacant

buildings, fearing demolition or the introduction of high-cost condominiums that could alter their neighbourhoods and living costs (Grant 2023). Additionally, many of these institutional buildings occupy valuable land within central locations of the city, surrounded by amenities and services, as they are situated in well-established commercial districts and residential neighbourhoods, making their underutilization appear wasteful and counterproductive.

### ***Obsolescence***

Now that we have discussed what these buildings are and why they are so valuable to their respective communities, let us now examine why these buildings are vacant. Each of these public buildings naturally have their own story and individual circumstances surrounding the reasons for vacancy, but they all tend to follow the same trajectory. A building is designed to cater to the needs of its community, serving that purpose for a certain period. Eventually, either the community's needs shift, rendering the building unnecessary and leading to its decommissioning or the structure becomes ineffective in fulfilling its intended service, resulting in its abandonment as obsolete, in favour of a modern replacement (Abramson 2016, 4).

In his book, *Obsolescence: An Architectural History*, Daniel Abramson defines obsolescence as the process of “growing out of” use or “being outperformed by newer alternatives” (Abramson 2016, 2). A fate that many buildings from the last century have eventually succumbed to, he explains. Abramson argues that architects have the responsibility to reject the concept of obsolescence and interrupt the perpetual cycle of demolition and new construction, by advocating instead for sustainable approaches and the

rehabilitation of older buildings (Abramson 2016, 107). The key to avoiding eventual obsolescence, Abramson explains, is either designing adaptable and resilient buildings in the first place or converting obsolete buildings with a concentration on versatility and flexibility.

### ***Opportunity***

Following Abramson's directions, we can examine the case of Halifax's vacant institutional buildings through the same lens and ask ourselves, how can these buildings be adapted to meet contemporary needs and be made more resilient against repeated obsolescence? These institutions once served the needs of their communities, supplying critical resources, services, and infrastructure, but have since been relieved of their responsibilities, and so, the question now is, can their roles be changed to fill a new need for a community? This is part of the questions this thesis has worked to answer.

### **Need for Housing**

The second issue addressed by this thesis is the need of affordable housing. This is a critical issue currently facing HRM, along with several other cities. This challenge is particularly pronounced for low to medium-income individuals and families within the HRM who lack access to affordable housing options (Architects Against Housing Alienation 2023a). While new constructions are underway in the municipality, many of these housing units are priced beyond the means of most of its citizens. Consequently, rising living costs force current residents to relocate to more affordable areas, leading to gentrification of these neighbourhoods as new, more affluent residents replace them (Architects Against Housing Alienation 2023a). The

scarcity of affordable rentals and properties for purchase in central HRM compounds the problem, with most affordable housing options located on the outskirts of the city, prompting downtown residents to leave the inner city in search of affordability. Additionally, the unhoused and displaced community in HRM is growing, urgently requiring resources and support programs (Grant 2023). Despite this pressing need, the Regional Council has taken limited action, offering few long-term solutions for this vulnerable population (Grant 2023). Addressing these interconnected issues is crucial for creating a more equitable and sustainable housing landscape in the HRM.

### **Adaptive Reuse**

Now that we have established the two concurrent issues facing the HRM, vacant institutional buildings and the urgent need for affordable housing, we can now propose a solution that could possibly satisfy both problems simultaneously, and that solution is adaptive reuse.

Adaptive reuse has the potential to transform deteriorating historical buildings into newly functional spaces, with an emphasis on enhancing the existing architecture (Wong 2016, 10). This approach advocates for reuse over demolition and new construction, promoting sustainability in architectural practices (Wong 2016, 10). The recycling of old architecture is not only a more sustainable alternative to demolition and new construction, but it is also method of conservation, by preserving the cultural and historic significance of structures, and potentially amplifying their impact by providing a second life (Wong 2016, 10). This is precisely the prime objective of the methodology applied in this thesis. In essence, the adaptive reuse strategy applied

in this thesis is focused on introducing new functionality while enhancing the existing architecture.

## **Direction and Scope**

Now that we have examined the issues of vacant institutional buildings and the pressing demand for affordable housing in Halifax, as well as the strategy of adaptive reuse, we can now focus on the specific direction and scope of this thesis. This thesis is taking a position on the future of these vacant buildings and arguing that they should be reclaimed and adapted for the purpose of supplying affordable housing to their communities. The primary question asked by this study is as follows, can these buildings be adapted for a new purpose while still retaining their social and historical significance? Now that we have addressed the direction of this thesis let us now discuss the scope of study, defining what, why, and how this thesis question will be pursued.

## **Scope of Study**

### ***What:***

This thesis tests the feasibility of repurposing vacant institutional buildings into affordable housing, with the particular focus on the test site of the vacant Halifax Memorial Library. The goal of this endeavour is twofold: to test the capacity of such a project to contribute to urban regeneration and to establish resilience against potential future obsolescence. The core strategy involves reclaiming under-utilized, yet highly valuable sites and buildings, adapting them to meet contemporary needs while ensuring the preservation of their cultural and historical significance. This multifaceted approach seeks to strike a delicate balance between honouring the past and introducing new



functionality. Ultimately, this thesis advocates for cultivating projects that not only repurpose existing structures but also contribute positively to the urban fabric by supplying new public amenities and infrastructure, thereby giving more than they take from the community.

***Why:***

The rationale behind the commitment to this thesis is rooted in a proactive stance, emphasizing action over inaction. Instead of passively waiting for the eventual sale, demolition, and redevelopment of these sites and buildings by private developers, this thesis advocates for a decisive approach in shaping their future. This involves recognizing the inherent value of these sites, often characterized by rich adjacent amenities and infrastructure, making them particularly attractive for conversion into affordable housing. By seizing the opportunity through financial investment this proposal would benefit the city's future, for example, a valuable outcome would be to broaden the residential income bracket of the urban core. Presented by these highly valuable sites, my aim is to address the pressing demand for affordable housing in our urban centers. In doing so, the focus is on timely intervention to repurpose these existing structures, fostering sustainable urban development, and meeting the urgent needs of our communities.

***How:***

To execute these initiatives, this thesis has employed a systematic approach that involves a thorough examination of site conditions, history, and the concerns of various stakeholders to develop a well-informed approach for intervention. By employing strategies outlined by practical case studies valuable insights inform the implementation

of these interventions to establish a robust framework for suitable approaches. Learning from past successes has enabled the identification of effective strategies and best practices. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of this methodology involves the development of a design tailored for a specific site. This design does not only address the unique characteristics of the chosen location but also serves as a model that can be applied to other similar sites, providing a practical guide for future adaptive reuse projects. Through this comprehensive and strategic approach, this thesis aspires to ensure the success and replicability of interventions aimed at repurposing institutional buildings into affordable housing across Halifax, and possibly elsewhere.

***Test Site:***

Halifax Memorial Library (Grafton Park) – 1500 Brunswick Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada (vacant since 2014).

I have specifically chosen this site and vacant building to test my theories, due to its central location in the city, and its rich cultural and social significance to the surrounding community. This property has suffered prolonged stagnation, due to long-standing indecisiveness by Regional Council, as well as public disapproval of several proposed developments, and the inherent sensitivity of the site. This site and building pose constraints and sensitive adjacencies, which is why it was selected. If my theory of adaptive reuse, which involves introducing new purposes while preserving social and historical significance, proves successful on this site, it will validate its potential applicability to other sites as well.

### ***Proposed Intervention***

This section outlines the extent of the proposed interventions within the scope of this thesis, including the purpose, user group, program, type of housing, site considerations and design priorities.

Purpose:

- Responding to the urgent needs of the community I.e., housing and cultural preservation

User Group:

- Un-housed and homeless individuals
- Local residents (encourage participation with introduced public programs)

Program:

- Short-term shelter (1-14 days)
- Long-term housing (2-52 weeks)
- Outdoor public gathering and leisure space
- Showers with safe storage of belongings
- Food and clothing donation and distribution centre
- Culinary training program for long-term residents
- Monthly non-profit community dinner program
- Residents' volunteer and education programming

Type of Housing:

- Mixed-use social housing: short to long-term housing and social programs

Site Considerations and Design Priorities:

- Maintain site's public space, keep existing footprint
- Maintain public circulation across site
- Maintain historically significant architectural elements of the existing building
- The proposed intervention shall directly respond to the to the site's history and the existing architecture, working to enhance the rather than overshadow

- Maintain the public's accessibility of existing building, introduce more transparency and interactive elements to invite public to participate on-site

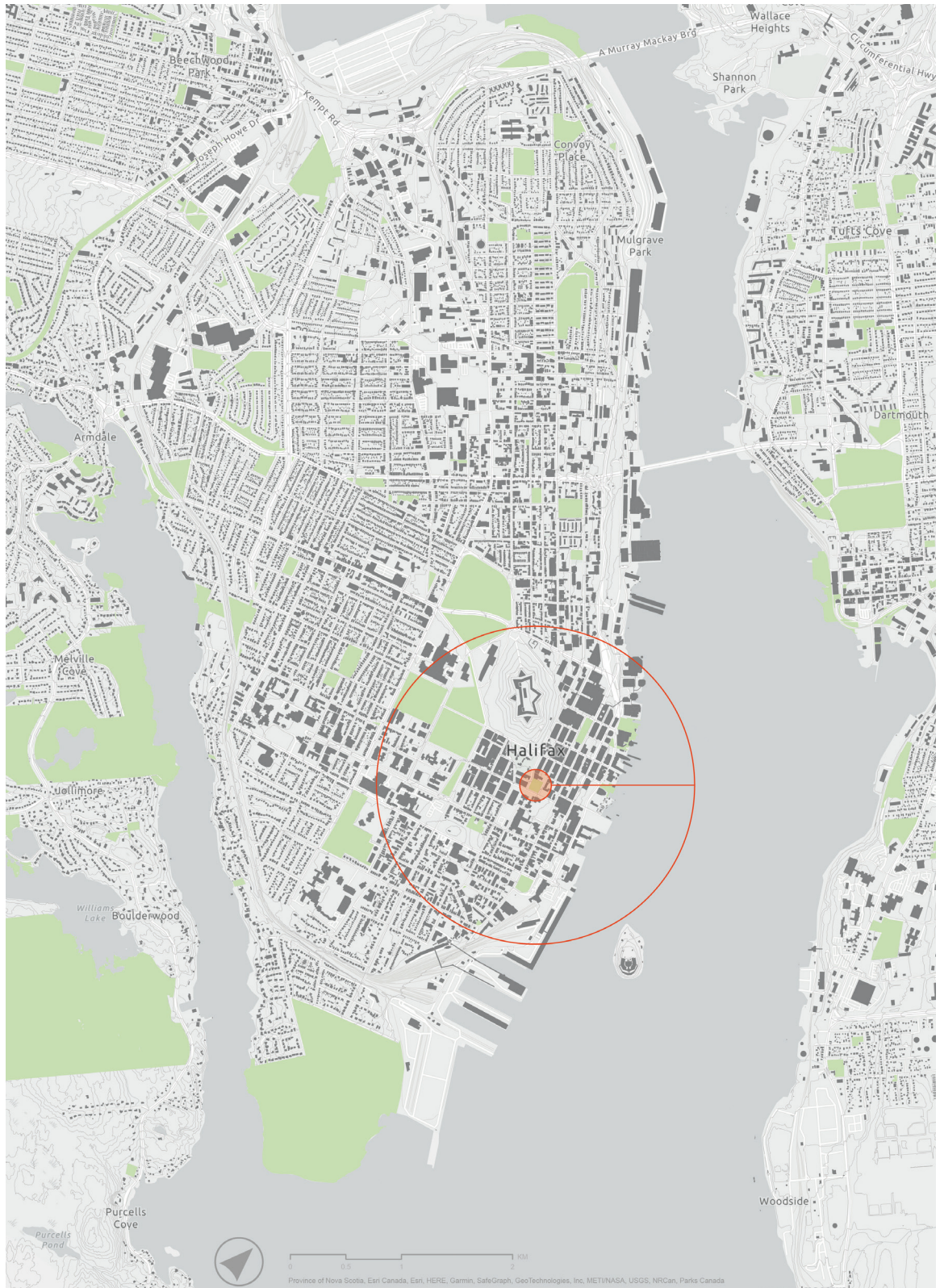


Satellite image of Site (HRM 2022).



Site plan diagram depicting site adjacencies and urban form (base map from HRM 2022).





Context map depicting the location of the study site relative to the Halifax Peninsula (HRM 2022).

## Chapter 2: Method

### Site Analysis

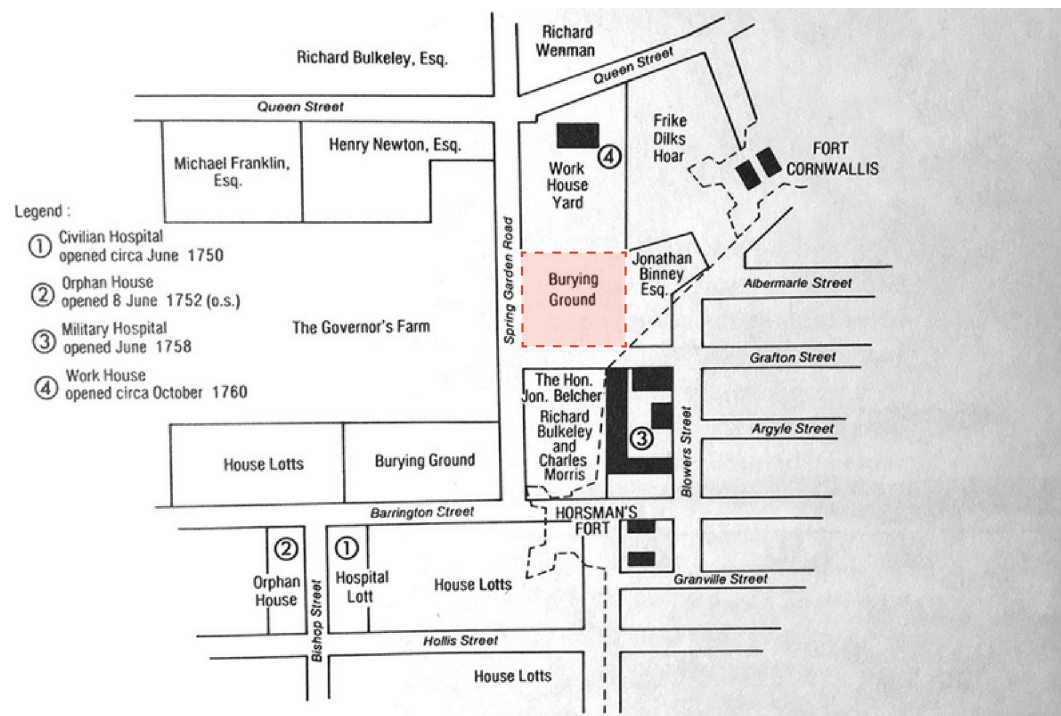
Before we can begin to plan the future of this site, we must first understand its history in the attempt to successfully respond to its historical and cultural significance. First, we will examine the significant events with the history of the site from the early days of Halifax to the present day. Second, we will examine a series of development proposals and public interest for the site since its vacancy. Finally, we will discuss the various stakeholder's concerns and visions for the future of the site.

### Site History

#### ***Poor Asylum (Work House / Poor House) Burial Grounds c.1762 - 1869***

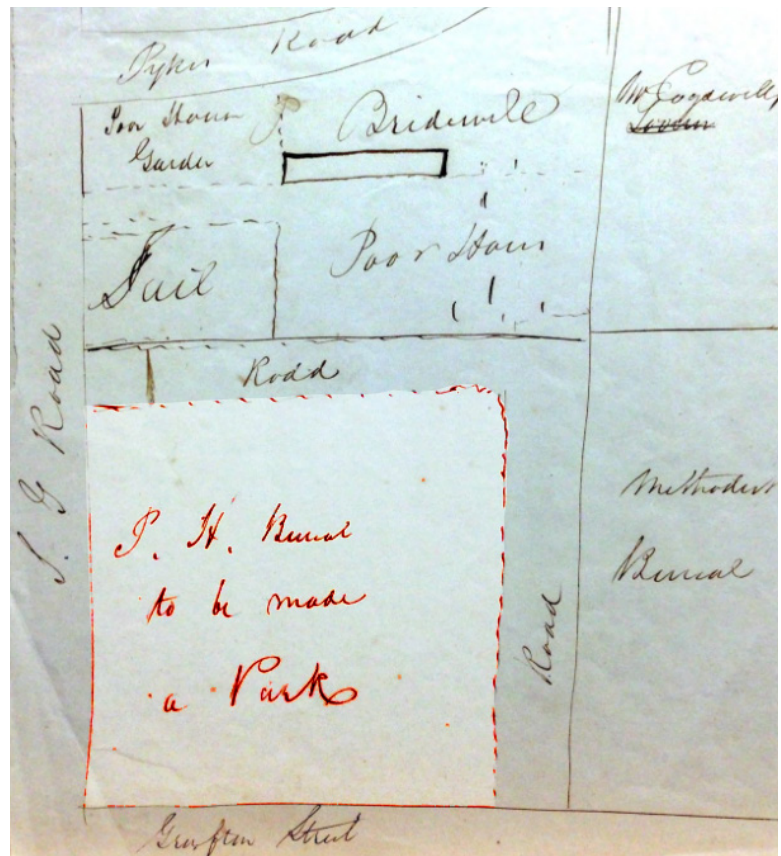
The first mention of this site in Halifax civic records was in 1762 when it was officially designated as the "Paupers Graveyard", the burial grounds for the adjacent "Poor Asylum" that was located immediately to the west along Spring Garden Road (Glen, McKillop, and Smith 2018, 53). The poor asylum or "workhouse" was a place where people, who had fallen on hard times, could find shelter and the occasional meal. Life in the poor asylum was described as "no better than the city's prison". Residents included the city's poor, the seasonally unemployed, as well as elderly individuals, mentally and physically disabled people of all ages, and the shared tight quarters included unwed mothers and their children (Glen, McKillop, and Smith 2018, 52). In exchange for shelter residents of the poor asylum were put to work in various industries on the grounds such as the coffin factory, cow house, barn and stables, bakery, and

the cooperage (Glen, McKillop, and Smith 2018, 55). By all records, life in the poor asylum was unimaginably difficult. While not all individuals who sought refuge died there, the dense living conditions facilitated disease transmission; additionally, people suffered from inadequate nutrition, and the overall debility prevalent among these impoverished people implied that many perished within its walls and were buried there. (Glen, McKillop, and Smith 2018, 53). The poor asylum remained in this location and burials continued in the Paupers Graveyard for over a century until in 1869 when the facility was moved to a new building across town, at the corner of Robie and South Street. It is unknown how many people were buried in this graveyard during the operation of the poor asylum, as most graves were unmarked, and little indication remains today; however, it is speculated that it could have been for as many as 4,500 people (Fowler 2020).



Halifax poor relief and health care infrastructure during the 1760s, depicting the Work House (Poor Asylum) and the Burial Grounds adjacent to the south (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a).





Hand drawn map from 1814 of Poor House property, showing the location of the main Poor House building, jail and garden, located on the corner of Spring Garden and Queen Street, with the burial grounds across the road to the south. Notice the words “to be made a Park” over the burial ground’s location (Glen, McKillop, and Smith 2018, 54).

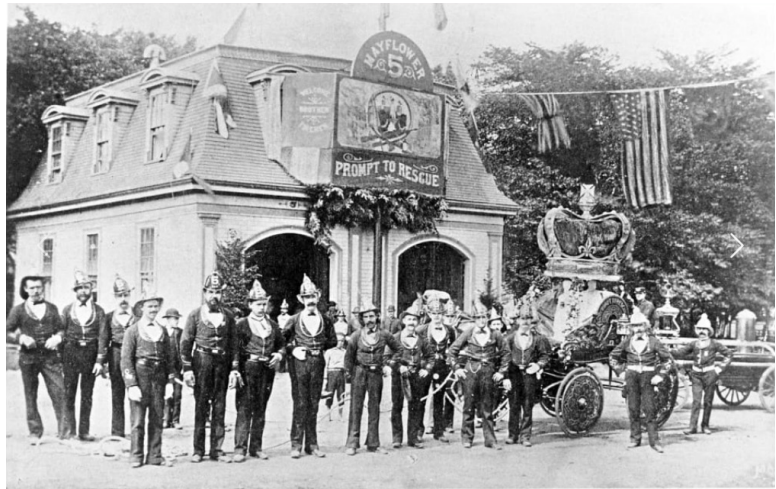


Map from 1835 of Poor House burial grounds overlaid on modern satellite image of the Halifax Memorial Library site (Glen, McKillop, and Smith 2018, 56).



### ***“Mayflower Station” Fire House 1859 -1919***

From 1859 until 1919, the southwest corner of the site was occupied by a Union Engine Company Fire House, named the “Mayflower Station”. This station housed the hand engine “Alma”, along with the very first steam fire engine in Canada, “Victoria 1”. The Fire House included officer’s quarters on the second floor and the engine garage below. This fire house and its fire fighters served Halifax for nearly 60 years before being decommissioned in 1919 (The Halifax Fire Historical Society n.d.).

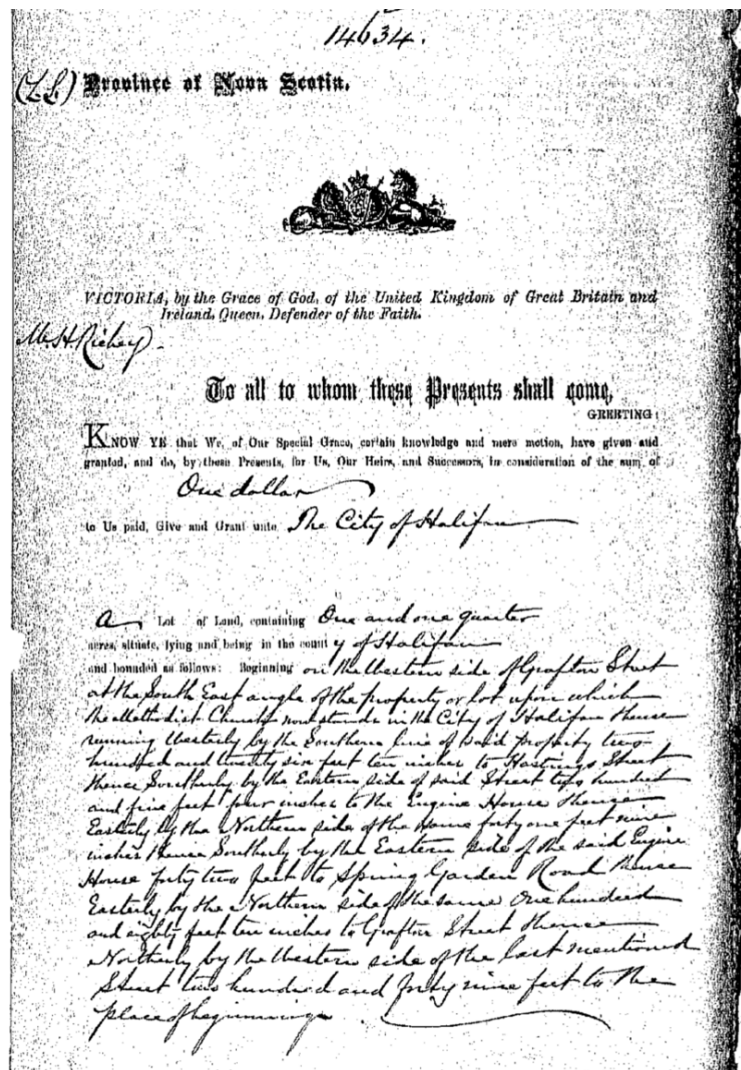


Photograph from 1886 depicting the “Mayflower” Station Fire House no.5, on the southwest corner on the current site. Built in 1859, the fire house remained in service until 1919 (The Halifax Fire Historical Society n.d.).

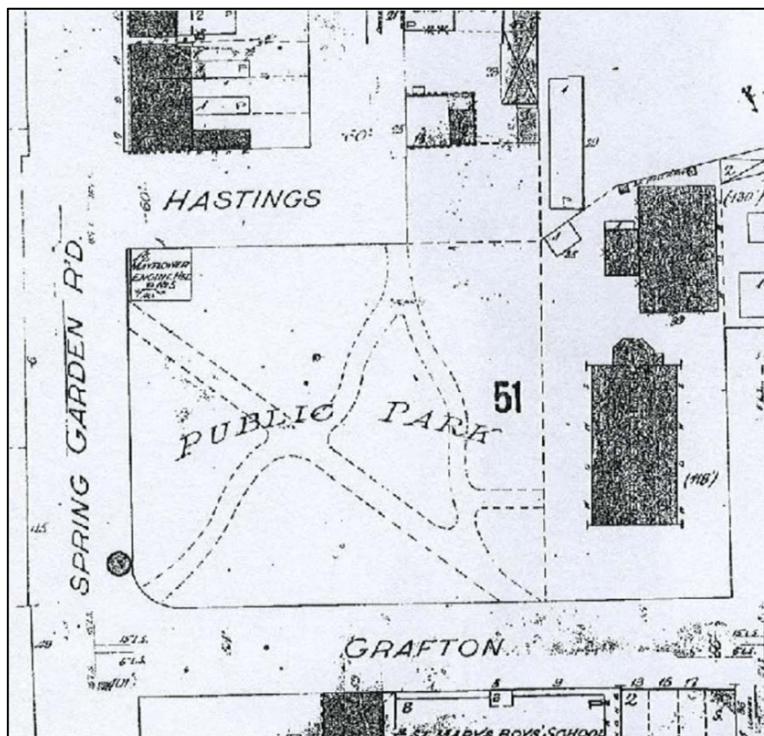
### ***Grafton Park 1882 - present***

In 1882, after the site had been used as a burial site for nearly a century, the grounds were formally designated as a public park. Under a special grant negotiated between the province of Nova Scotia, the Council of Halifax, and the British Crown, the site was recognized as “Grafton Park”. The grant from the Crown presented the city of Halifax a permanent lease for the property under the condition that the site be “held for the use and enjoyment of the citizens

of Halifax as a public square or garden forever and for no other purposes whatsoever.” (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a). As stipulated, Grafton Park remains in the same location today, serving the people of Halifax. Few changes have been made to the park, except for the construction of the Halifax Memorial Library in 1951, and its subsequent addition, which consumed the northwest side of the park (The Heritage Advisory Committee 2020).



Grant from Queen Victoria formally gifting the property of Grafton Park to the City of Halifax, with the condition that the land be used as a “public space or garden” (The Heritage Advisory Committee 2020).



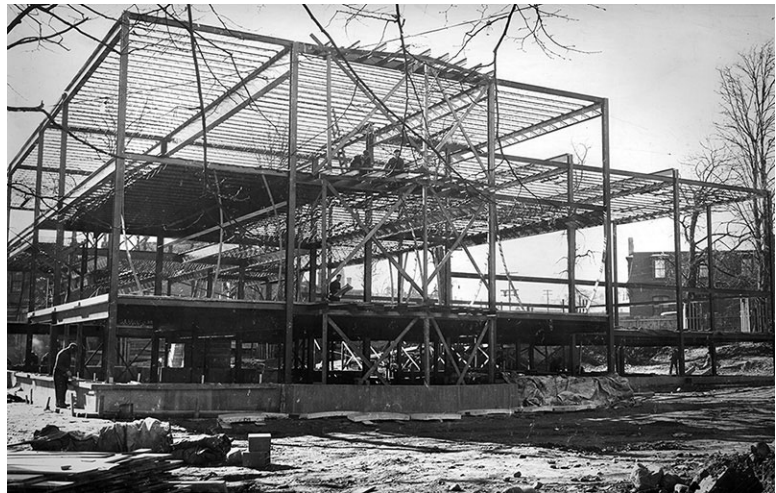
Fire insurance plan from 1895, depicting Grafton Park with pedestrian pathways, located on the former site of the Poor House Burial Grounds. The footprint of the Mayflower Station fire house can be seen at the top left corner on the park (The Heritage Advisory Committee 2020).

### ***Halifax Memorial Library 1951 - 2014***

In 1945, the City of Halifax lacked a public library, and after extensive public appeal for the commission of one, it was decided that Grafton Park would be the site for the construction of the city's first public library. Construction began in 1949, despite concern for the desecration of the graves on the site. Even to this day there has been no public acknowledgement of the desecration of the graves on the site. In 1951, the Halifax Memorial Library opened and also received the designation to serve as a war memorial and cenotaph for WWI and WWII Halifax veterans (later to include the Korean War) (The Heritage Advisory Committee 2020). In 1974 an addition was added to the north side of the original building to provide more space for



a growing number of visitors. The library remained in service until August 30, 2014, when it finally closed its doors and operations moved to the newly constructed Halifax Central Library across Spring Garden Road (The Heritage Advisory Committee, 2020).



Library under construction 1949, steel post and beam structure, designed by architect Leslie Fairn. (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a).



Grand opening ceremony 1951, when the building was bestowed the memorial designation to serve as a war memorial and cenotaph for WWI and WWII Halifax veterans (later to include the Korean War) (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a).



Exterior of the library after completion 1951 (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.).



Photographs of library interior, depicting the main reading room shortly after opening 1951 (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a).

### ***Vacancy and Encampments 2014 - present***

Since the closure of the Halifax Memorial Library in the fall of 2014 the building has remained vacant. The property is still owned by the Halifax Regional Municipality, and there have been no approved plans for either development or sale (Grant 2023). Since the vacancy, amidst a growing housing crisis in the province, the grounds of Grafton Park surrounding the building has become home to many members of the unhoused community in Halifax, with shelters and tents springing up across the site (Grant 2023). On August 18, 2021, after repeated demand from the Halifax Regional Council for the homeless to vacate the site, Halifax Regional Police forcibly removed them and their

shelters. The police were met by significant resistance from community protesters and residents of the encampment, resulting in several arrests and police employing the use of pepper spray (Ryan 2021). The events of August 18 sparked widespread criticism of the Regional Council's decision regarding how they dealt with the issue of homelessness and unauthorized encampments throughout the municipality (Ryan 2021). Since August 18, 2021, the Regional Council still has not authorized any form of encampment on the site, yet numerous members of the unhoused community have returned and erected their shelters despite disapproval from the municipality (Grant 2023).



Encampments of unhoused citizens on the library site 2020 (Ryan 2021).



Clash between protesters and police as encampments are forcibly removed by order of Halifax City Council, August 2021 (Ryan 2021).

## **Public Interest for the Site**

Since the Halifax Memorial Library closed its doors in 2014 there have been several proposals brought forward in the effort to reclaim the site for a new purpose, but they have all either dissolved before formal consideration or have been formally denied by Regional Council. To gain insight into the community's desired outcomes for this site, as well as their points of contention, let us examine several proposed plans and explore the reasons behind their failure to materialize.

### ***Proposal from Assembly of Mi'kmaq Chiefs - 2013***

In June 2011, months after the Halifax Public Library announced that they would be vacating the Memorial Library, the Assembly of Mi'kmaq Chiefs presented their desire to secure the Memorial Library building as a Centre for Mi'kmaq Governance and Culture to Halifax Regional Council (Halifax Regional Council 2013). The Council granted this group an option period until December 2011. This was an opportunity for the Chiefs to develop potential conditions of occupancy and present it to the Council for review. Later, an extension to the option period was granted until June 2014. After this point there is no record of this proposal ever being discussed formally again. It is unknown why this proposal dissolved, or if the Assembly of Mi'kmaq Chiefs have any plans on pursuing it in the future (Halifax Regional Council 2013).

### ***Dalhousie School of Architecture & Planning Proposal - 2014***

In the fall of 2018 Dalhousie University brought a proposal to the Halifax Regional Council for the Memorial Library building to be adapted into a university building with combined commercial space, and public space (Patil 2018).



The proposed plan would be a three-way partnership between the university, the province and the regional municipality sharing ownership of the property. The plan was to retain most of the original library building and add 45,000 square feet to facilitate new lecture halls, classrooms, public gathering space, and retail spaces at street level (Patil 2018). Although, this proposal was significantly developed and repeated conversations ensued between the university and the municipality over several months, eventually this plan met a similar end as the proposal brought forward by the Assembly of Mi'kmaq Chiefs years earlier. It is unclear if Dalhousie University withdrew their proposal or if the municipality and the province decided to go an alternative route with the property. All that is clear is that the plans dissolved, and no public explanation was given.



Render of proposed redevelopment of the library site by Dalhousie, which would combine public program and commercial space with the expanded university campus (Patil 2018).

### ***War Memorial Proposal - 2018***

In the fall of 2019, the Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society (HMHPS) brought forward their proposal for the site of the Memorial Library. The proposal was for the building to be demolished with the exception of the front



façade which would be adapted into a memorial cenotaph with a surrounding amphitheatre for ceremonies, while the remainder of the site would be dedicated to public green space. Members of the Society indicated that there had not been proper public consultation on the future of the site, and further discussion was needed. Representatives of HMHPS further explained that they were concerned by the proposal brought forward by Dalhousie University, criticizing the proposal for not acknowledging the hundreds of graves on the site, nor was there any consideration given to the continuation of the library building being utilized as a memorial to Canadian veterans (CTV Atlantic 2019). The HMHPS expressed their position that the most appropriate future for the site would be the construction a war memorial on the location of the current building with the rest of the site being reclaimed as a public park. Additionally, their highest priority would be to minimize soil disturbance (CTV Atlantic 2019). Once again, like the prior two proposals for the site, the HMHPS proposal was never carried forward. The HMHPS still holds this proposal as their position for the future of the site, but there has been no approval from the municipality or further discussion of pursuing these plans (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a).



Renders of the proposed war memorial depicting the preserved facade and amphitheater (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a).



Site plan of proposed war memorial for Grafton Park, featuring a plaza and amphitheater (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-a).

### ***Heritage Site Designation - 2020***

Since its vacancy in 2014, there has been discussion amongst Regional Council for the Halifax Memorial Library to be demolished as it incurs a growing financial obligation on the city as an aging vacant building (Halifax Heritage Advisory Committee 2019). These talks of demolition have raised concern from different members of the community and in response the Heritage Advisory Committee in 2019 formally proposed to Regional Council that the site and associated building be considered for a Heritage Site designation in efforts to preserve the architecture (Halifax Heritage Advisory Committee 2019). The next year, in 2020 the proposal was approved, and the site was granted a heritage designation giving the building limited protection from demolition (McKenna 2020). The designation as a heritage site, versus just a heritage property, “means that all elements of the property, from the criss-cross pathways, the old wall surrounding it, and the buried bodies

beneath the ground will qualify under heritage protection” (McKenna 2020). The designation does not mean that a future development on the site is prohibited, it simply means that the architectural elements highlighted under the designation must be preserved if the site is developed in the future (McKenna 2020). The intervention proposed in this thesis will pay attention to the heritage designation when introducing new elements to the site.

### ***Public Call for Conversion to Affordable Housing – 2023***

In 2023, as the housing crisis in the province continued to escalate, many members of the community publicly called for the vacant Halifax Memorial Library to be converted into affordable housing in the effort to meet the growing need (Thomas 2023). Perhaps the most notable proponent was that of the President of The Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, Sandra Barss. Barss argued that leaving large public buildings, like the former Halifax Memorial Library to sit vacant and fall into disrepair at a time of a housing crisis, “borders on negligence” and stated it’s not too late to repurpose the building (Thomas 2023). Heritage Advisory Committee member, Pam Lovelace, added to Barss’s concerns, “the longer that we ignore heritage buildings and just let them stand over time, the more they will become an issue”, agreeing with the Heritage Trust that the building should be used for housing (Thomas 2023). In response to these documented concerns Halifax Mayor, Mike Savage stated that converting the old library building into housing is an exciting idea, but it is not financially feasible, and the process would take years, when citizens need housing options immediately, and so the concept was dismissed (Grant 2023). The position of this thesis is that the

provincial and municipal governments should allocate funds to allow this plan to come to fruition as a possible solution to supply affordable housing to downtown Halifax while also rejuvenating and repurposing this vacant site. Access to affordable housing is an issue that the municipal, and provincial governments cannot continue to ignore as the pressing needs of the unhoused require a resolution to their current circumstances. Although this requires funding not currently designated this thesis recommends that it be the responsibility of the government to allocate sufficient funds to implement the plan.



Anniversary of August 18, 2021 evictions, Rally held on the front steps of the library, protesters calling for more housing support from HRM and less interjection from police (Renić 2022).



Protesters in front of Provincial Assembly calling for affordable housing in Nova Scotia, 2023 (Woodford 2023)

### **Various Stakeholders**

There are many stakeholders invested in the future of Halifax Memorial Library site. These are groups who have publicly expressed interest as to what they believe should be done with the vacant building and property, as well as the adjacent properties that will be directly impacted by any changes made to this site. To further understand the social context of this site, let us now examine a few of these groups in detail.

The Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society (HMHPS) is a volunteer educational society that works to promote public awareness of and the appreciation for Halifax's extensive and diverse military heritage (Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society n.d.-b). The Society has expressed their concern for the preservation of the veteran's memorial designation of the site. In addition, they have asked for official acknowledgement of the unmarked graves on the site (CTV Atlantic 2019).

The Mi'kmaq Community, on whose unceded lands the site is located, expressed their interest in the property in 2013 (Halifax Regional Council 2013), although there is no record of the Assembly of Chiefs pursuing the plan any further, possibly their interest may resurrect in the future.

The Halifax unhoused community is another notable group who have expressed interest in the site. With various encampments across the grounds since the building became vacant in 2014, members of the unhoused community have chosen to call this site their home for extended periods during the last 10 years (Grant 2023). The connection this community has with this site and their presence on the grounds for past decade establishes that they are active participants in the context of the site and should be part of the conversation about the site's future.

The Halifax Regional Municipality is a primary stakeholder in this equation, being the owner of the property, they hold a great deal of control over the future of the site. Although they have not announced any formal plans for the site's future, they have displayed their concerns for conserving the historical significance of the site and library building, as demonstrated in their approval of the historical site designation in 2020 (McKenna 2020).

The Presbyterian Church of St. David and St. Mary's Basilica are both immediate neighbours to the Halifax Memorial Library. St. David Church is located to the north, along Grafton Street, and St. Mary's Church is located to the east, on Spring Garden Road. There is no public record of either church formally expressing their expectations for the future of the site, but it should be noted that these neighbours

would be impacted by any changes made to the vacant site and should be part of the discussion moving forward.

There are two organizations that have been actively working to support members of the Halifax homeless community, and more specifically directly working on this site for several years are P.A.D.S. (Permanent, Accessible, Dignified, Safe Housing for All) and Halifax Mutual Aid. P.A.D.S. is a community network that advocates for housing rights in Nova Scotia. They have been critical of the Regional Council and Halifax Police in their treatment of the unhoused community, specifically the violent removal of encampments on the library site on August 18, 2021 (Peddle 2022). One year after the removal of the encampments P.A.D.S. organized a rally on the site to remember the calamitous events and call on the Regional Council and the province to respond to the housing crisis in Nova Scotia with realistic solutions, and to end forcible evictions by police officers (Peddle 2022). Halifax Mutual Aid is a nonprofit group committed to acting against houselessness in Halifax by building small crisis shelters for those in need. This group supplied several shelters to people living on the library site in the past (Halifax Mutual Aid. n.d.). Both P.A.D.S. and Halifax Mutual Aid are invested in the future of the unhoused community in Halifax, and both have worked to further the living conditions on the library site specifically. Therefore, they should also be part of the conversation about the site's future and the rights of the unhoused people who have called this place home.

### **Appropriate Intervention**

What can be rationalized as an appropriate approach for an architectural intervention with this site and building that have such a long and storied history, along with various



stakeholders who hold conflicting opinions on what should be done with the property? Perhaps one way forward is through the method of storytelling, an approach that can address the complicated history of the site and work towards satisfying the various concerns and ambitions of the stakeholders. Rather than one story taking priority, perhaps many stories can be spun together to form a rich fabric that tells more of a complete chronicle of this piece of Halifax.

## **Storytelling as a Concept**

### ***What is a Story?***

In his article, *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin the cultural critic explains that storytelling is quite simply the “exchange of experiences” from one person to another, a very human act, one that is deeply tied to the human experience, and a practice that goes back to early human existence (Benjamin 2002). A story Benjamin describes, can come in many forms, it can be oral, moving from mouth to mouth, it can be written, passing through time as a poem, novel, or fairy-tale, or it can be visual, a painting, film, or photograph. A good story is not limited to its physical form or media, if it carries a narrative that expresses an experience to the observer (Benjamin 2002). An experience can also come in different forms, it can be a tale from a traveller from afar, telling stories of exotic lands and distant cultures or, it can be a tale from a neighbour who has never ventured far, repeating local folktales and traditions to the next generation. As Benjamin writes, “in it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place” (Benjamin 2002). One distinction Benjamin makes in his article is that a story is never concerned with an explanation of factual



information, but rather an interpretation of events. As Benjamin explains, “actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. It is left up to him [the listener] to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (Benjamin 2002). This is precisely what makes a story so interesting, it is not so important to convey specific information but rather to invoke an emotional response, allowing the listener to craft their own conclusions, therefore the interpretation of a story is subjective to the listener. (Benjamin 2002). This interpretation is not limited to the story being told once, but rather the interpretation is amplified each time it is retold by a new person, slowly changing, becoming distant from where it first began. This is exactly what makes stories so rich with emotion and personality, with each retelling comes the unique fingerprints of the conveyer, as it is never told the same way twice. A story carries with it not only the personality of the present teller but also the impressions of the past storytellers. As Benjamin explains, “that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.” (2002). The story might be completely different than what it once was but that is what makes it so interesting, a story is a piece of the person telling it. A story is like a memory, the facts might change or even fade as it is retold again and again. Relaying information is not what stories are about, much like memories, stories are not concerned with accuracy but with emotions and sensory responses that make them so memorable in the first place (Benjamin 2002). Like a memory, a story has the unique

ability to hold significance over time. Benjamin writes, “the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new... a story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (2002). A story never stops changing as it is passed forward it continues to grow and develop with time, it never loses its potency but rather offers a new stimulus with each retelling (Benjamin 2002).

### ***Anatomy of a Story***

Now that the concept of storytelling has been addressed, we can examine the anatomy of a story, and the key elements required to form a story. In his book *Basic Element of Narrative*, Dr. David Herman explains that all stories traditionally consist of five elements: plot, setting, characters, point of view, and conflict (typically with an eventual resolution). Although most stories contain these five elements, a story does not require all five to be considered a story, many contain only three or four of these elements (Herman 2009). The plot is the events or actions that drive the story, it describes the “what” of the tale. The plot lets the listener or reader know what’s happening, describes the problems the characters are trying to solve, and gives the details on how they attempt to solve them (Herman 2009). The setting is where and when the story is happening. The setting represents both the physical location and the time (i.e. past, present, future) as well as the social and cultural conditions in which the characters exist (Herman 2009). The characters can be people, animals, or really anything personified. There can be one main character or many, and they may have a backstory that has shaped and molded them. Secondary characters may also play a role, though not always. Characters can be described in terms

of their physical appearance, personality, background, and motivations. They can also be dynamic or static throughout the story (Herman 2009). The point of view describes the lens through which the story is being told, this is “who” is telling the story, or through who’s perspective are we seeing the story unfold. Point of view can be limited to one character’s perspective, multiple characters’ perspectives, or omniscient where the story is told by an all-knowing narrator. The choice of the point of view can greatly impact the listener’s experience of the story and can affect how they relate to the characters and events (Herman 2009). And lastly, every story must have a conflict, a challenge or problem around which the plot is based. Without conflict, the story will have no purpose or trajectory. Conflict can take many forms, such as person vs. person, person vs. nature, person vs. society, and person vs. self. The conflict should be well-developed and add tension and drama to the story. Although not mandatory, the characters of the story typically reach a resolution with the conflict by the end of the story, when the problem is resolved, and lessons are learned. However, in some story structures the conflict is never meant to be resolved and rather the characters succumb to the obstruction of the conflict and the story ends (Herman 2009).

### ***Examples of Storytelling in Architecture***

Now that we have addressed the concept of storytelling and the anatomy of a story, we can now turn our attention to storytelling in architecture. The Russian architect, Alexander Brodsky and the artist, Ilya Utkin implement the art of storytelling into their work. As part of their outspoken criticism of Soviet architecture in the late 20th century, Brodsky and Utkin became internationally recognized for

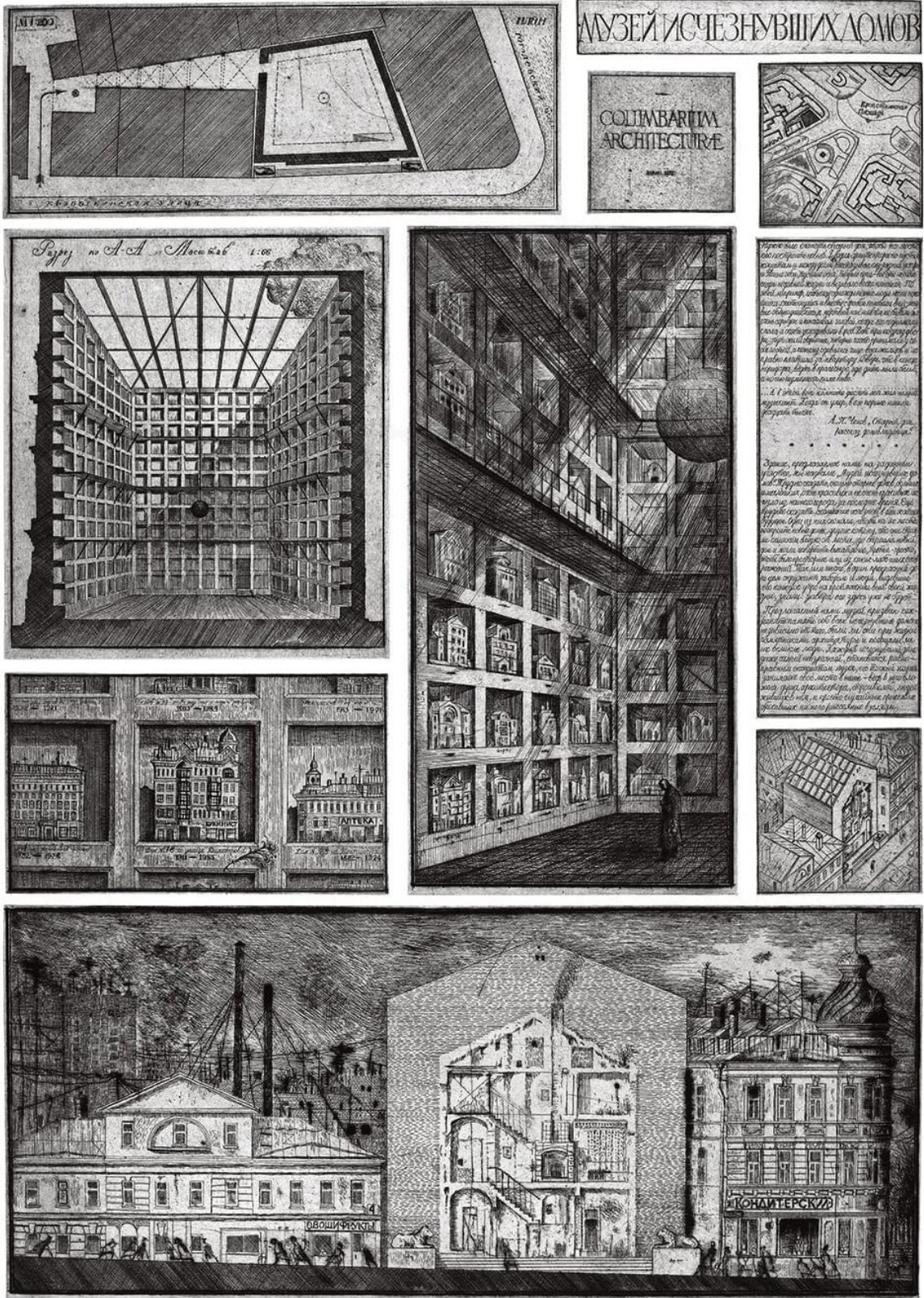
their work in “paper architecture”, where they and their peers created detailed architectural designs that were inherently imaginative and dystopian in theme. These designs were meant to directly criticize the dehumanizing nature of the Soviet architecture that filled their cities (Niculae et al. 2021). Their designs were never intended to be accepted by the Soviet government nor were they ever meant to be built, but rather they were a blatant form of protest displaying a direct reaction to being artistically suppressed (Nesbitt, Brodsky, and Utkin 2003). Each of these designs consist of multiple, highly detailed etchings displaying various representations of the architecture arranged on a single sheet of paper, called “plates” (Nesbitt, Brodsky, and Utkin 2003). These plates often contained interpreted fragments of written poetry into design solutions containing a witty and poetic story, meant to conjure outlandish and whimsical stories fueled by imagination (Niculae et al. 2021). Through their work Brodsky and Utkin displayed a profound ability to craft unique and compelling stories, by merging the process of storytelling with architecture. They were able to tell rich stories that provoked deep emotional responses and critical interpretation (Niculae et al. 2021). As a result, their work has been used as a precedent for the methodology of this thesis.

Now that we have examined Brodsky and Utkin’s work from a distance let us take a closer look at three of their “plates” to understand the structures of the stories they have crafted and to learn from their methodology.

***Columbarium Habitabile (Museum of Disappearing Buildings)***

The first plate we will examine is titled “Columbarium Habitabile” or its English translation, “Museum of Disappearing Buildings”. In this story, the plot involves a museum created to mourn the death of various communal apartments torn down to build modern, high-rise apartment buildings in the city. The suggestion of the story is that the protection of these old buildings parallels with the way one would venerate the ashes of a loved one. The story is that each of these buildings begs for the attention of the visitors to the museum so much so that if someone overlooks one of them, the massive ball in the middle swings to destroy it (Brotsky and Utkin 1989). The setting is a museum in a generic city in late 20th century Soviet Russia. The characters are the buildings themselves that sit on display in the museum, having been replaced by government mandated modern high-rise apartment complexes, and the visitors to this museum who have come to observe the relics in their new location. The point of view of this story is that of a visitor to the museum, as they walk the halls and view the various old buildings, they witness the slowly fading architectural character of their city, crumbling before them. The lens this story is seen through is that of nostalgia for a time before modernization when people were perceived to have more individuality and self-expression (Brotsky and Utkin 1989), like the buildings they lived in. And lastly, the conflict of this story is that the city is slowly losing its architectural vernacular character and cultural heritage. There is no resolution, we are meant to simply observe this process and mourn for the death of these old buildings.



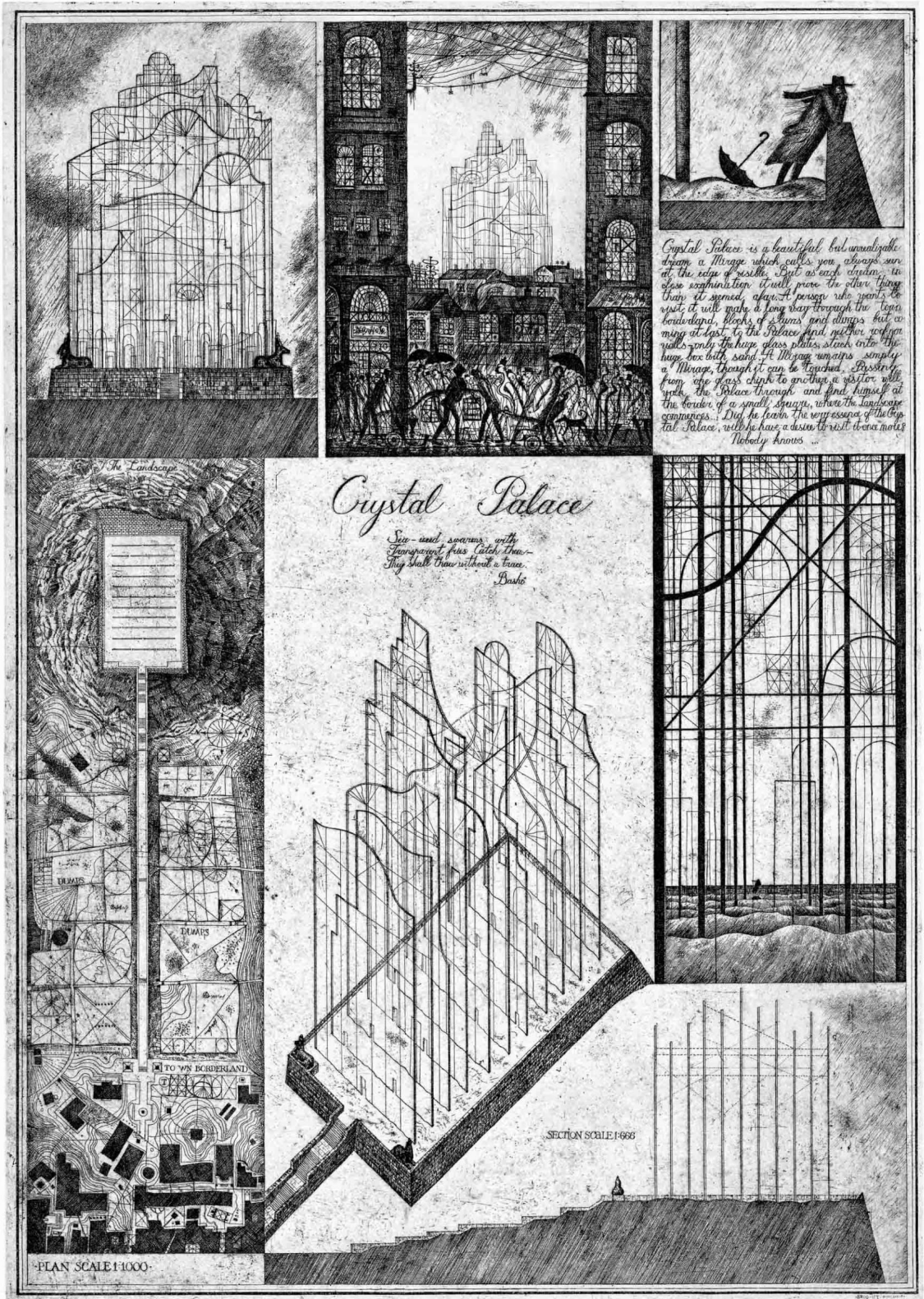


Columbarium Habitable (Museum of Disappearing Buildings), Alexander Brodsky & Ilya Utkin, 1989. (Brodsky and Ulkin 1989)

### ***Crystal Palace***

The second plate is titled "Crystal Palace". In this story the plot is that a great Crystal Palace can be seen at the edge of a city, as "a mirage which calls you always" (Brodsky and Utkin 1982). When a man sees the palace, he is compelled to visit it, but he must travel a long way across the city, through the borderlands and slums, to reach this place. Once he arrives at last to the palace, he finds neither roof nor walls, only the huge glass plates, stuck into an enormous box of sand. Upon reaching his destination the man discovers that "a mirage remains simply a mirage" (Brodsky and Utkin 1982); what he thought was a complete building is not in reality what he envisioned from afar. The setting is generic bustling city, where a great palace can be seen in the distance and little else is told. The character of this story is a nameless man who sees the palace from a great distance, he is captivated by its beauty, and is compelled to walk towards it in hopes of experiencing what he sees. The point of view of this story is that of a man who is in an almost trance like state, possessed by the call of the distant palace, like a thirsty man in a desert he is seeing a mirage and does not have the awareness to realize the ruse. Lastly, the conflict of this story is that the Crystal Palace is a beautiful but unrealizable dream. The man travels so far to get to this palace only to realize that in fact it is not a palace at all, it is simply plates of glass standing in sand. Did he find what he was looking for? Is he satisfied? "Will he ever return? Nobody knows..." (Brodsky and Utkin 1982). One will recognize that the conflict has not been resolved in this story.





Crystal Palace, Alexander Brodsky & Ilya Utkin, 1982. (Brodsky and Utkin 1982)

***Villa Nautilus – Bulwark of Resistance***

The third plate is titled “Villa Nautilus – Bulwark of Resistance”. In this story there is an ocular-shaped island amid the main traffic thoroughfare of an industrial city. The island is the top level of a subterranean house. On this island a single man, a “hermit”, stands at the prow of the island, facing into the traffic that flows, like a dangerous river around him. The rooflines of the cars merge in the drawing into waves and the hermit’s pipe leaves a smoke trail as if he was on a ship at sea. The hermit’s ongoing presence in the traffic is, during the day at least, a testament to his ingenuity and stoic resistance. However, at night, he can climb inside his home and descend a spiral stair to access his comfortable oasis, four levels deep and well-provisioned as though for on a long voyage (Brodsky and Utkin 1985). The setting is an overcrowded, dense, industrial city, but in the very middle of a busy street sits the hermit’s subterranean abode. The character of this story is the hermit, a steadfast and resilient man, who against all forces resists the changing city that grows around him and his solitary home. The point of view of this tale is from that of the hermit. We see the towering buildings that surround him, and the sea of cars that swarm around him, yet he and his small home stand firm, like a great boulder in a river, the island cuts through the raging current which is the city. This is the point of view of resilience and commitment that is unwavering and immovable. The conflict of this story is that the city is trying to swallow the hermit and his home, but he never gives in, he will continue to resist evermore.





## Chapter 3: Design

### My Stories

Now that we have examined the story structure of Brodsky and Utkin's work, we can now apply these principles to my own story plates, drawing inspiration from Brodsky and Utkin's method. In the following section we will discuss four stories; The Tomb of 10,000 Bricks, The Shinning City on a Hill, The Moving Garden that Stayed Still, and finally, From Poorhouse to Penthouse, each inspired by the different parts of this site's history.

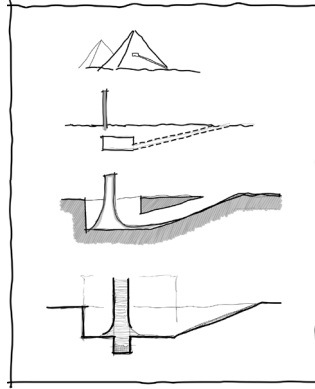
### The Tomb of 10,000 Bricks

The first story we will examine is "The Tomb of 10,000 Bricks". This story is inspired by the site's past use as a graveyard. The plot of this story is that of descent. A great tower is seen from afar, as one approaches the ground begins to slope downwards, pulling visitors into a steep pit below street level. As one walks further downwards over a surface of bricks, unbeknownst to them, they are walking over the unknown graves of many people. At the bottom of the pit a structure rises from the ground and forms an immense brick tower. Entering the tower, one is met by the sheer height of it stretching above. Visitors experience the feeling that one is lying in a deep grave and gazing at the sky above. At the centre, under the tower, lies a deep cavity with no visible bottom, which represents the endless abyss of death. The setting is the deep depression in the landscape, that descends deep underground, and from its depths rises a soaring monolith that stands tall and mighty. This is a monument of remembrance, contemplation, and mortality. The characters of this story are the unmarked

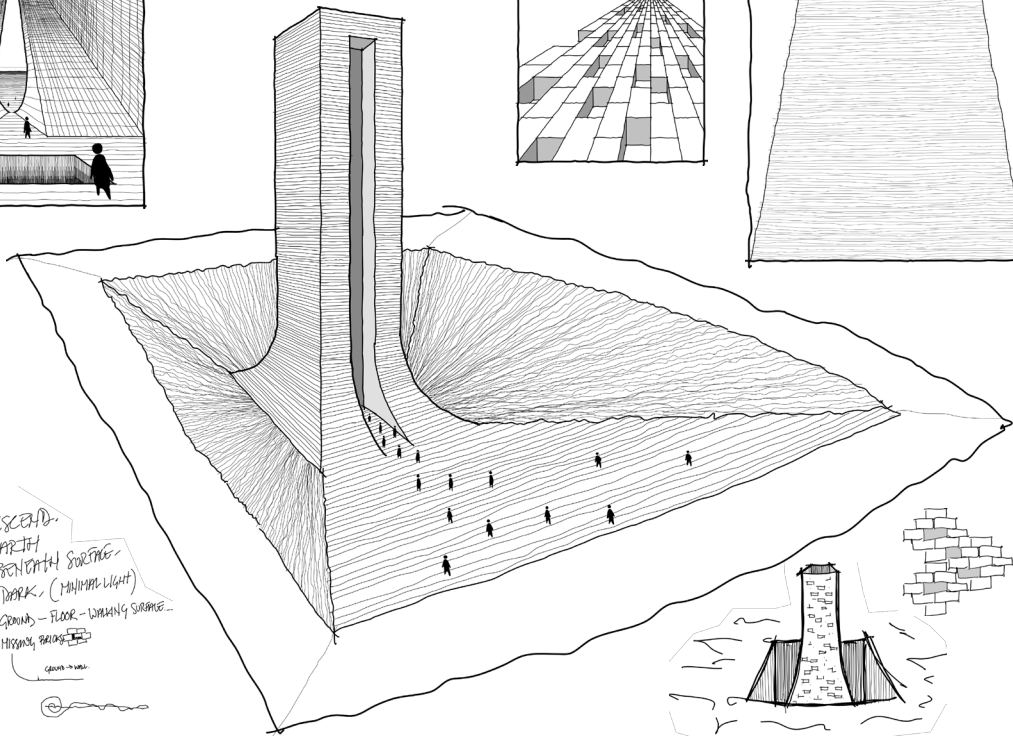
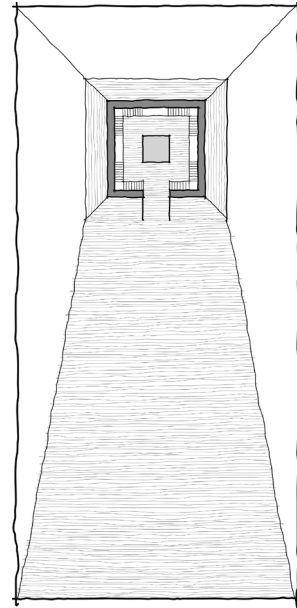
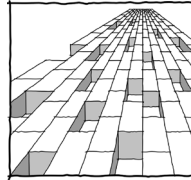
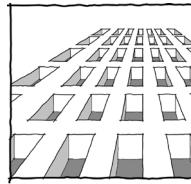
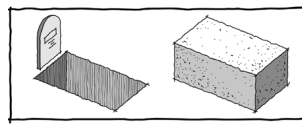
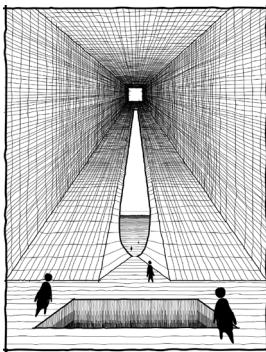
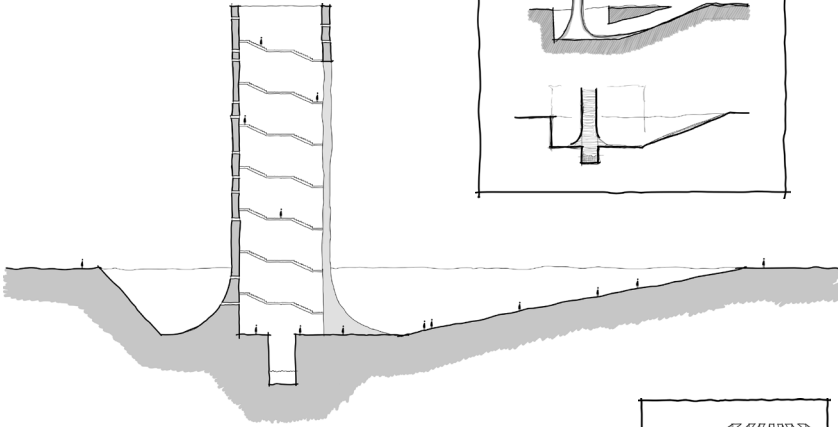


graves that lie beneath the site. The point of view of this story is that of the visitor to the site, as they are drawn to the great monolith that is the tomb. Walking on the brick surface they will begin to notice missing bricks, which represent unmarked graves under their feet. One is meant to recognize that this is a metaphor of hallowed ground, and the vast number of graves that lay there. The conflict of this story involves the unmarked graves that lack recognition to commemorate their presence. There is no way of informing visitors of the grave's existence or the part they play in the site's history.

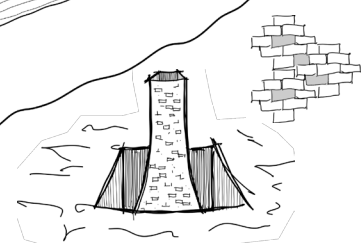
THE TOMB OF  
10,000 BRICKS



THERE IS A TOMB OF 10,000 BRICKS.  
A GREAT MONUMENT IT RISES FROM A DEEP HOLE IN THE EARTH AND REACHES HIGH TO THE HEAVENS. THE TOMB STANDS IN PLACE TO REMIND OF THOSE THAT WERE ONCE HERE BUT NO LONGER ARE. THE GREAT STRUCTURE IS FORMED FROM THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF INDIVIDUAL BRICKS, THE TRUE NUMBER IS NOT KNOWN. BUT IT IS THE BRICKS THAT MISSING THAT SEEM TO REHIND. FOR EACH PERSON HERE HAS A LAST SON THAT HAS LEFT EARTH ON THESE GROUNDS. TO APPROACH THE TOMB, ONE IS LED DOWN A SLOPED LANDSCAPE, DESCENDING INTO THE EARTH. THE GROUND IS BRICK, FOR AS YOU WALK THIS HOLLOW LAND, YOU LOOK ON THE GROUNDS OF COUNTLESS SOULS. THE GROUND RISES UP TO FORM THE TOWER. HERE, FOR THEY ARE ONE, THE GROUND BENEATH YOU ARE WHAT IS REMEMBERED HERE, AND SO, THEY ARE THE TOMB ITSELF.



WORDS:  
TOMB  
MATERIAL  
BURIAL  
TOMB STONES  
BRICK  
MISSING  
DESCEND  
NEARBY  
BENEATH SURFACE  
BRICK (MATERIAL LIGHT)  
GROUND - FLOOR - WALKING SURFACE  
MISSING BRICKS  
GROUND - WALL



Story Plate No.1 : The Tomb of 10,000 Bricks.

## **The Shining City on the Hill**

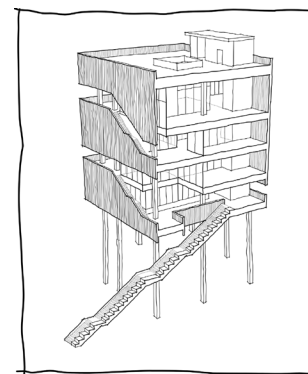
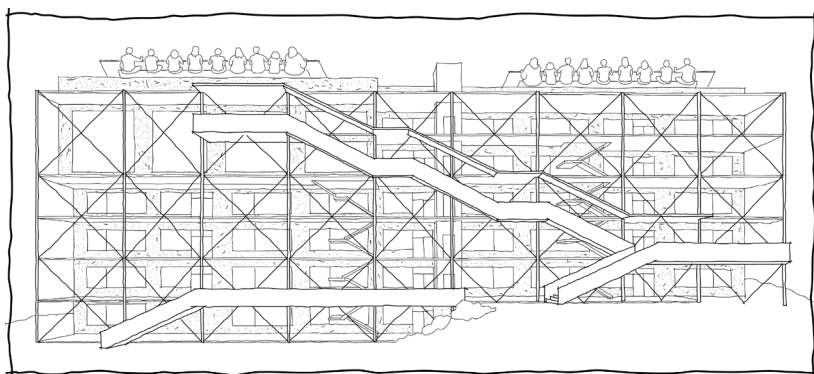
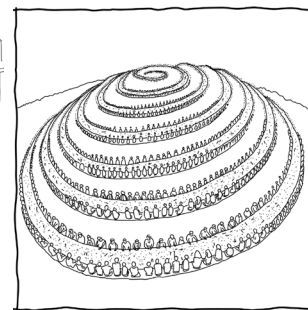
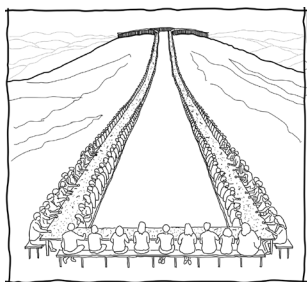
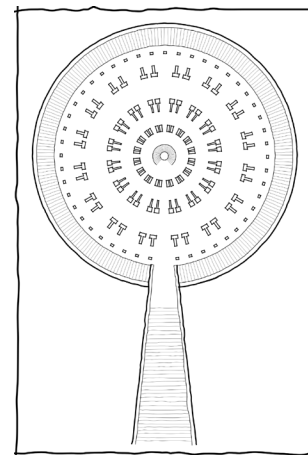
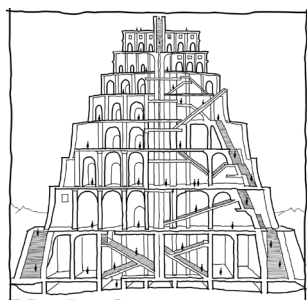
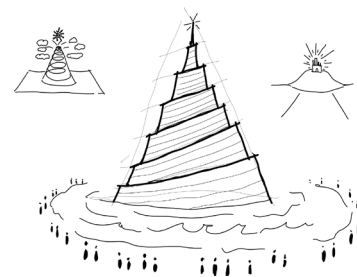
The second story we will examine is “The Shining City on the Hill”. This story is inspired by the site’s past use for civic institutions, such as, the poor house, the fire hall, and the library. The plot of this story is one of refuge. Amidst a harsh city stands a beacon of hope, a shelter for all. A tall hill rises from the city to form a sanctuary that calls all weary souls. With a great arm it reaches down and pulls one home. This is a place where all are welcome, where we all share what we have with our neighbours, a place where one always has a seat at the table, a place where we are all family. The setting of this story is a vast sprawling city, where a soaring tower rises above all other buildings reaching high into the sky above, a city within the city, a place of refuge and sanctuary from the harsh environment that surrounds it. The characters of this story are the tired and hungry mass of people that walk the streets of the vast city, they are called to the hill, for they seek shelter, nourishment, and rest. The point of view of this story is from the wary travellers that approach the city on the hill. These tired souls seek the refuge and safe harbour of this place and are called from far and wide by its bright beacon of hope. The conflict of this story is that these travellers have been forgotten and discarded by their fellow people and by their city, they seek shelter and nourishment. The resolution to this story is that they find what they need at the shining city on the hill. A place that welcomes all, a place that has not forgotten them, this is a sanctuary that feeds the hungry and protects the weary.



# THE SHINING CITY ON THE HILL

**STORY:**  
 - RISING TO HIGHER STANDARDS OF LIVING.  
 - ASHILL "REFUGE"  
 - "SANCTUARY"  
 - "SHINING CITY"  
 - BRIGHT?  
 - LUMINOUS?  
 - REFLECTIVE?  
 - MITIGATING?  
 - FOOD?  
 - DINING TABLE  
 - COMMON GROUND + EXCHANGE  
 - SHARING

THERE IS A SHINING CITY ON A HILL. SEEN FROM FAR AND WIDE, FROM EARTH TO SKY IT STRETCHES, A BEACON OF REFUGE AND HOPE TO THE WEARY MASES. WITH A GREAT ARM IT REACHES DOWN A PULLS YOU HOME. THIS IS A SAFE PLACE THIS IS A SANCTUARY, A PLACE TO EAT AND REST, A PLACE OF SHARING, A PLACE WHERE YOU ALWAYS HAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE. THIS PLACE IS HOME. TOGETHER IN THIS PLACE WE ARE FAMILY.



Story Plate No.2 : The Shining City on the Hill.

### **The Moving Garden that Stayed Put**

The third story we will examine is “The Moving Garden that Stayed Put”. This story is inspired by the site’s history as Grafton Park. The plot of this story is one of adaptation. In the heart of the city there is a moving garden that remains in the same place where it always has been. A piece of the city that has resisted change for generations. This garden will forever hold its position as it is a constant in the city. However, its grounds are anything but static, moving and changing constantly, shifting to new configurations and arrangements to suit the needs of its users. This is a garden that is meant to move and shift, a place for all people to adapt and to use as they see fit. This is a versatile place, a place to lay, sit, grow, cultivate, congregate, eat, rest, celebrate, observe, play, and stroll. A place at the people’s disposal. A place that welcomes all citizens to use as they please. This is the people’s garden. The setting of this story is a bustling, ever-changing city where the garden resides, as centuries pass the city morphs and develops further but the garden remains constant. The characters of this story are the garden itself personified, and the users of garden, who adapt it to their needs. The point of view is that of the garden as it steadfastly serves the needs of its users. As the city grows and changes around it the garden continues to serve its purpose. The users come and go as do their needs and the garden remains ever present. The conflict of this story is change, this garden is in an ever-lasting battle with change, it may adapt its form to better serve its users, but it never abandons its post. Perpetually holding on to its original purpose, as the needs it satisfies never disappear, the purpose of offering public space to all citizens, to rest,

congregate, or play. As a dutiful servant the garden will always be there to serve its purpose.



## **From Poorhouse to Penthouse**

The fourth story we will examine is “From Poorhouse to Penthouse”. This story is inspired by the site’s history with the Poorhouse. The plot of this story is one of ascent. There once was a Poorhouse, a place for the weary and discarded. A place that was overlooked and forgotten by most. This was a place one could find shelter and meals in exchange for labour. This was a hard place where one was only welcome if they worked and proved their worth. People laboured exhaustively which often led to sickness and their eventual death. There was no other option for those in this desperate situation. Then amazingly, there came liberation, a solution for the needy, a place of salvation. This place rose above the ground and the people were lifted from the depths of their suffering and misfortune, ascending to a new living situation—a safe place. This is a place of equality, respect and dignity. A better place where all are welcome, admission is free and unconditional. Now, high above the ground, safe in their new home, they look back to where they came from, witnessing their journey and realizing their liberation from the Poorhouse. The setting of this story is a city where the destitute are marginalized and ignored, hidden from sight and left to languish in an undignified shelter. The Poorhouse was such an appalling, cold and hostile environment, a last resort for the needy, but unfortunately the only choice for most who were forced to call this place home. The characters of this story are the disenfranchised and forgotten citizens of the city, those who needed a helping hand and safe harbour who once lived within the desolate halls of the old Poorhouse. The point of view of this story is that of the residents of the old Poorhouse struggling to survive in a harsh world that had



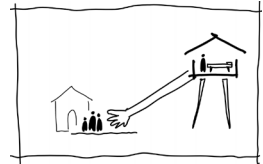
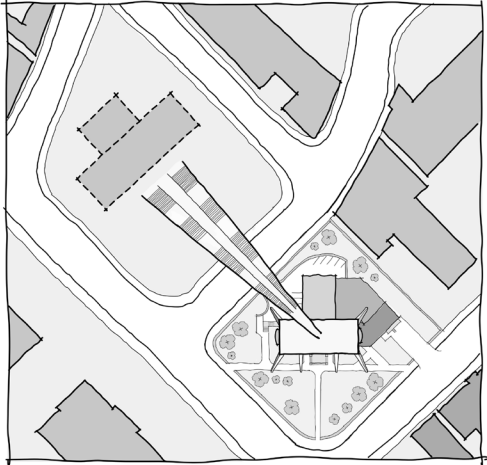
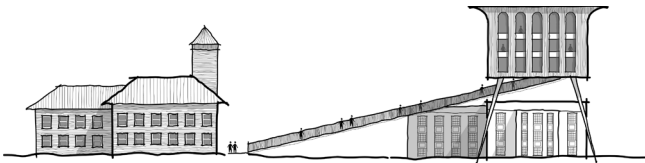
little to offer. Now a new sanctuary is calling, a haven that can offer what these citizens deserve, shelter, nutrition, respect, and safety. The conflict of this story is dignity, the people who lived in the old Poorhouse were never given the dignity they warranted as human beings and as members of their community. These people were pushed aside and forgotten, until one day dignity was delivered to them by way of a new home. A home they deserved where they could feel comfortable and safe and receive the assistance they so rightfully deserved.

# From Poorhouse to Penthouse



THERE WAS A POORHOUSE. A PLACE FOR THE WEARY AND DISCARDED. A PLACE THAT WAS OVERLOOKED AND FORGOTTEN BY MOST. THIS WAS A PLACE ONE COULD FIND SHELTER AND MEALS FOR LABOUR. THIS WAS A HARD PLACE WHERE ONE WAS ONLY WELCOME IF THEY WORKED A PROUD THEIR WORTH. WORK HARD AND WORK LONG, UNTIL SICKNESS AND EVENTUAL DEATH. THERE WAS NO OTHER OPTION FOR THE DEEPERATE. BUT PLUS, THERE CAME LIBERATION. A NEW ANSWER FOR THE HEED. A PLACE OF SALVATION. WITH A GREAT ART IT REACHED DOWN AND PULS YOU TO YOUR NEW HOME. LIFTING YOU FROM THE DEPTH OF YOUR SUFFERING AND MISFORTUNE, RAISING YOU HIGH TO A SHAR, LIGHTER PLACE. A PLACE OF EQUALITY, SAFETY, AND REFUGE. A BETTER PLACE WHERE ALL ARE WELCOME AND ADMISSION IS FREE AND UNCONDITIONAL. AND NOW HIGH ABOVE THE GROUND IN YOUR NEW HOME, YOU LOOK BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM, WITNESSING YOUR JOURNEY AND REAFFIRMING YOUR LIBERATION.

Story:  
 "GIVING SHELTER"  
 "FROM POOR HOUSE TO SPAC HOUSE (PENTHOUSE?)"  
 "STAYING AS YOU GO"  
 "A WAREHOUSE"  
 "TRAILING DOWN"  
 "SPACE HARBOUR" (LAWSON)



Story Plate No.4 : From Poorhouse to Penthouse.

## Interpreting Stories into Architecture

Now that we have examined the four stories that I have created, let me reveal how these stories might be experienced architecturally and reinterpreted into four interventions.

### The Memorial to the Forgotten

The first interpretation is entitled, “The Memorial to the Forgotten” that will share traits with the story of “The Tomb of Ten Thousand Bricks”. The theme of the two stories is descent. Our perspective will be that of Julia, a visitor to Halifax, this is her first time in the city, and she has no knowledge of this site’s past use as a graveyard. As Julia enters the site she is met by a long, gentle ramp, as she walks further, she is lead on a descending pathway. The surface is paved with thousands of stone bricks. The path leads slowly down below street level taking her deeper into the ground. Passing through a short tunnel the ramp leads her underneath the existing building.



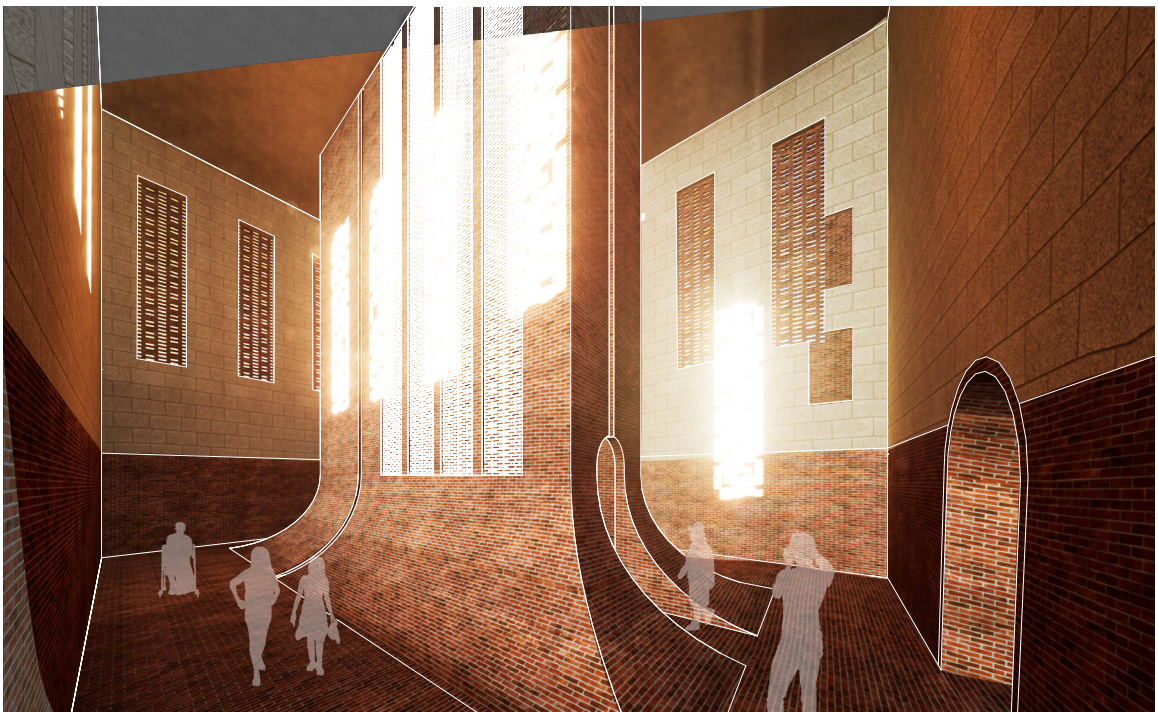
View as one approaches the Memorial to the Forgotten.

As Julia moves forward the space begins to narrow and darken. Eventually she emerges from the tunnel into a great chamber, where tall windows line the high walls of the room.





View as one emerges from the tunnel.



View from within the great chamber.

Looking closer, Julia notices that the windows have been in-filled with bricks but there are numerous pieces missing, voids in the surface that allow daylight to pass through from outside. The light is minimal, but it's enough to illuminate the room with a mosaic of scattered light. In the center of the room, she sees a monolithic structure emerging from the ground. The tower is constructed of the same bricks that form the floor below her feet, it slowly curves upward and stretches to the ceiling.

Julia notices a doorway at one end of the tower, passing through, she finds a smaller, quieter room. In the center of the room's floor sits a pool of dark water that is seemingly endless, she is unable to see the bottom, the reflective surface bounces light in all directions. As she cranes her neck upwards, the bright light of the sky is seen framed high above. Julia now realizes that this tower stretches far beyond the ceiling of the first room, reaching high, seemingly touching the heavens above.



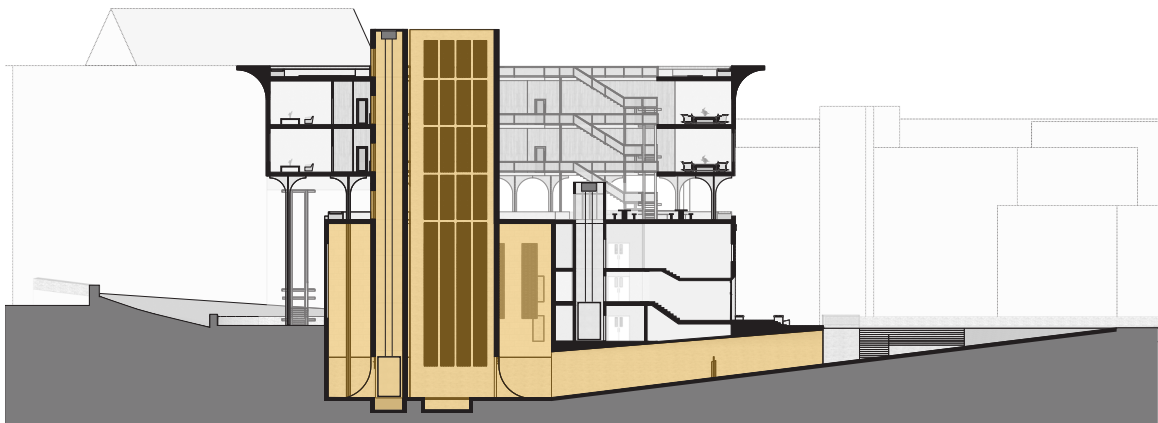
View of the dark pool inside the tower..



View looking up to the sky from inside the tower.



Julia is convinced this room she has discovered is a sacred space, a memorial that is intended to be a place of remembrance, contemplation, and honour. The descent into the earth symbolizes the burial places of hundreds of souls who lie beneath the site. The dark pool with no visible bottom, represents the endlessness of death. And the sky framed high above represents the connection between death and the afterlife. Julia exits the tower and returns to the great room, a doorway at the back of the monolith provides access to an elevator that lifts her to the rest of the building above.

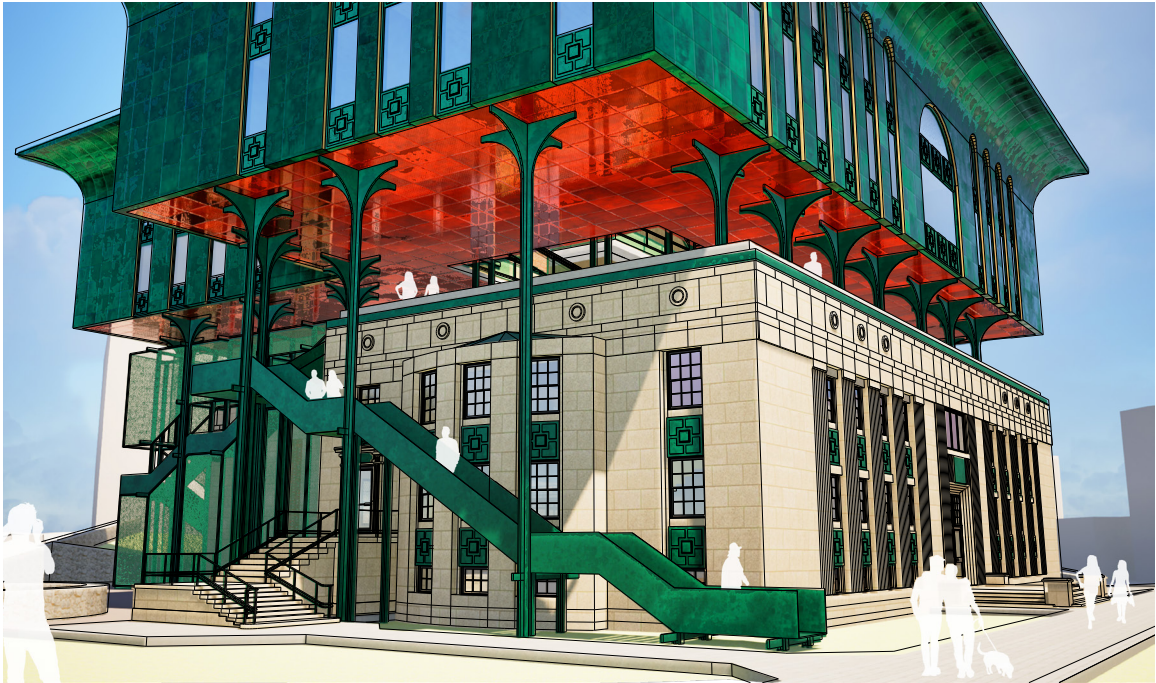


Site section depicting the Memorial to the Forgotten highlighted in yellow.

### **The Copper Soffit**

The second interpretation is “The Copper Soffit” which is inspired by the story of “The Shining City on the Hill”, a story of refuge. Our perspective throughout this interpretation will be that of Felix, hungry young man who is in search of a hot meal. As Felix walks down the street his attention is suddenly caught by the sounds of lively conversation, and the rich odour of delicious food. Looking upwards he sees bright polished copper panels that clad the soffit of the building that stands before him, he is mesmerized by the sight, like a beacon he is pulled towards it. As Felix approaches, he

is met by a wide staircase that rises from the ground and stretches upward towards its shining beacon.



View as one approaches the Copper Soffit.



View as one climbs the stairs and arrives at the rooftop terrace.

After climbing the staircase, Felix is met by a bright and welcoming space, a rooftop terrace with a view of the surrounding neighbourhood, it is an elevated plane under a copper crown. The space is filled with people, some stand around the terrace talking in animated conversation. At the center there are long tables where people sit and share a bountiful meal, and above there are a few people observing the scene from the balconies.



View of the terrace with dining tables in the center and balconies above.

Hungry and eager to participate Felix ventures closer when he notices an older gentleman sitting at one of the tables with a large grin on his face who is waving and gesturing Felix to come and join. He walks to the table and takes a seat where he is met by full plate of food. There are welcoming faces all around. While he eats, he begins to talk with his neighbours, they take turns sharing stories and laughs. Felix quickly feels at home in this place, as if he were sitting at his childhood kitchen table during a holiday meal, surrounded by family. He is experiencing familiar and comforting feelings. It occurs to Felix that not only is this a place to find nourishment, but also a place to find mutual support, conversation and to meet new friends. Towards the end of the meal, Felix notices a small group of musicians setting up their instruments between the tables in the center of the courtyard. As the band begins to play, people begin gather round, filling the tables and the surrounding terrace, and people line the balconies above listening to the music performed below.



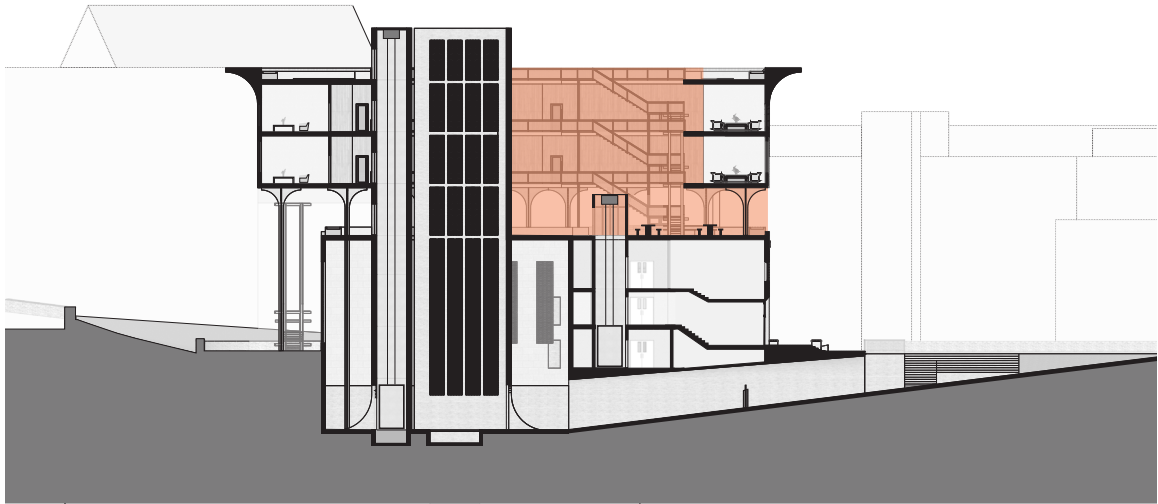


View from a seat at the table.

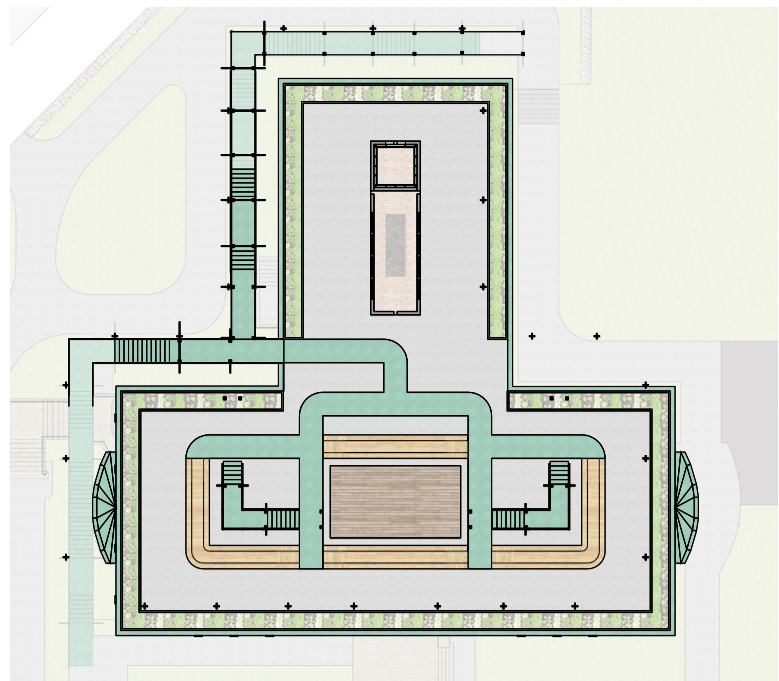
This space can host more than communal meals; it can also function as a venue for gatherings and public events. Speakers or performers can take the stage at the center of the courtyard and address people sitting on the terrace and on the balconies above. It truly has been a wonderful evening for this young man, not only has he found food to fill his stomach, but he has found new friends in a community that offers unconditional support for those in need. After tonight he is part of a new family, where he always has a seat at the table.

The Copper Soffit is a place to congregate, meet neighbours, to talk and to eat. This place is the community's kitchen table where people can gather, relax and interact. The primary intention of this space is to provide communal meals for the site's residents, as well as host regular public engagement dinners with the greater community. A place where neighbours are invited each month to join in shared meals prepared by the residents of the building, where

strangers can interact, share stories, and learn from each other. Effectively working to form social bonds between the building's residents and members of the greater community. The "Copper Soffit" is proposed to be a gathering place to assist in reducing the stigma attached to the unhoused who reside within facility above. It truly is the community's kitchen table, not only a place to find nourishment and mutual support, but also a place of conversation and socializing.



Site section depicting the Copper Soffit highlighted in orange.



Plan of the Copper Soffit.



## The Spring Garden Community Bowl

The third interpretation is “The Spring Garden Community Bowl” which draws reference to the story of “The Moving Garden that Stayed Put”, a story of adaptation. This is a public space that is meant to move and shift its purpose, a place for all people to adapt and to utilize as they see fit. Our perspective through this interpretation will be that of Robyn, young woman who is looking for a place to enjoy her lunch on a sunny afternoon. Robyn works in an office in downtown Halifax, and on her lunch break, during a summer day, she decides to walk through the city to find a comfortable place to eat her meal. Robyn leaves her office and walks down Spring Garden Road. She decides to take a shortcut through the old Memorial Library property. As Robyn crosses along the diagonal path that has characterized the site for generations, her attention is caught by the sounds of laughter and children playing. Looking to the side, she observes a wide piazza stretching across the grounds in front of the building. It is a hardscaped surface, where many activities are taking place simultaneously; children riding bicycles, families enjoying picnics, teenagers skateboarding, and retired couples stroll.



View from the diagonal path looking across the Spring Garden Community Bowl.

Intrigued by the bustling environment Robyn ventures closer. The ground turns from path to a smooth brick plane that fans wide across the ground. The surface slowly slopes downwards in the direction of a building, creating a self-contained bowl shape. Walking forward she notices terraced planter boxes that step down one side of the bowl. As she passes by, there are some people picking herbs and collecting flowers.



View from the edge of the bowl.



View of the terraced planter boxes and adjacent steps.



On the opposite side she notices a wide set of seating steps where a variety of people sit or lounge enjoying the generous public space. Looking around she notices a platform not far above; a woman stands before a microphone speaking to a crowd, it appears to be a political protest that is taking place.



View from the centre of the bowl.

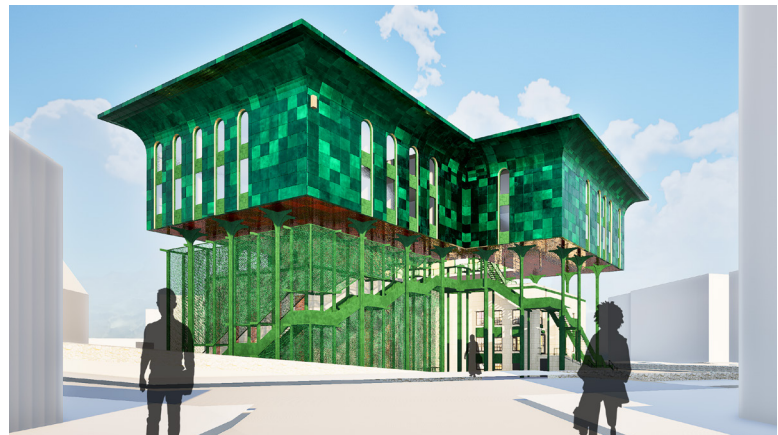
Robyn walks towards the seating steps and finds an unoccupied area; she takes a seat and pulls out her lunch from her bag. Pausing for a moment to appreciate her surroundings, she is amazed with the versatility of the space, there are at least a dozen different activities that are happening at the same time. This space is not only attractive to a person like herself, seeking rest for a moment, but it is also a place for play and gathering. This truly is the peoples' park, meant to serve a variety of needs, and to be used and adapted as people need.



Site axonometric drawing depicting the bowl in relation to the rest of the site.

### The Sanctuary on Stilts

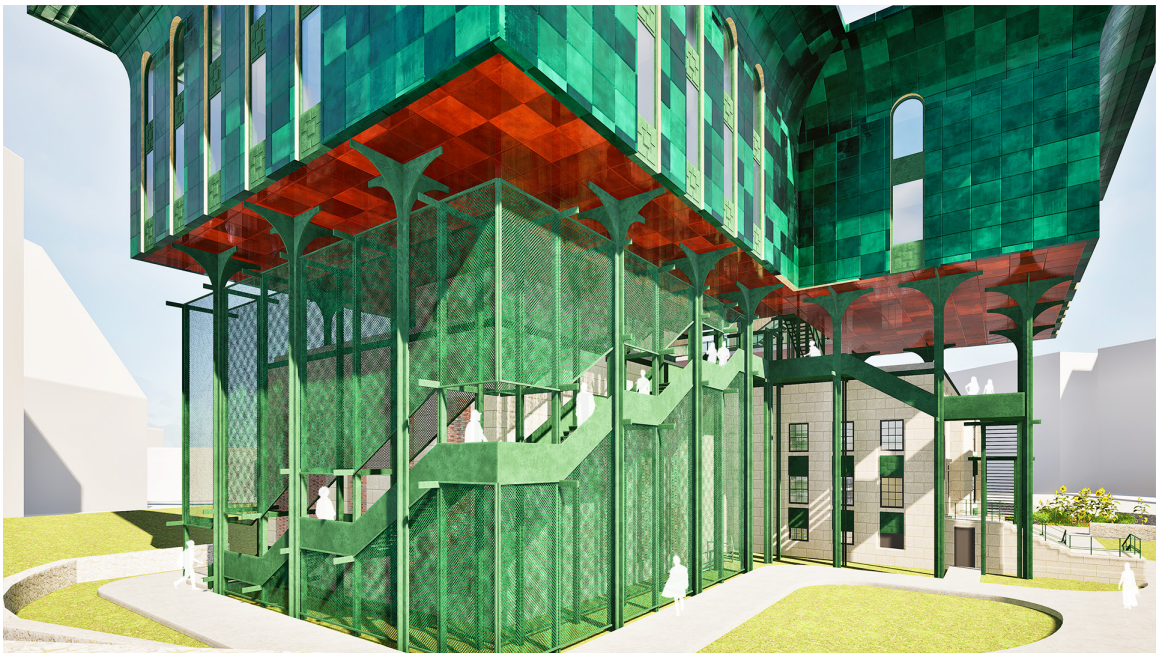
The fourth interpretation is “The Sanctuary on Stilts” and like the story “From Poorhouse to Penthouse”, it is one of ascent. Our perspective through this interpretation will be that of Charlie, a previously unhoused gentleman who is new to this housing facility and is arriving for the first time to discover his new home. As Charlie walks down the street he can see his destination clearly, this sanctuary stands out like a bright emerald on the horizon, calling him from afar.



View as one approaches the Sanctuary on Stilts.



For too long Charlie has been forgotten and overlooked by society, desperately in search of refuge and a helping hand. But fortunately, he has found his salvation. Upon arrival Charlie stands before his new home in astoundment, now able to see the full extent of the building. Rising from the ground, on high stilts, the sanctuary sits proudly above the old library building. Approaching closer, he is met by a grand staircase that reaches to the ground and pulls him upwards. Effectively moving him and his circumstances to a higher elevation, he ascends to his new living situation.



View as one stands before the buildings.



View from within the staircase.



Continuing onward, Charlie climbs further up the stairs, ascending higher and higher, almost as if rising into the clouds, the spaces become brighter and brighter.



View from the apartment corridor leading to the private units.

Eventually Charlie reaches a space of his own, his personal sanctuary, his new home. A home that is rooted in equality, respect and dignity for all its residents. A home he deserves where he can feel comfortable and safe to receive the assistance that he so rightfully deserves.



View from inside an apartment.

In addition to the long-term residence, this sanctuary offers other supportive infrastructure services to the unhoused community. On the lower floor, of the existing library building, is a donation and distribution centre where one can find food and clothing free of charge. On the next level, there is a short-term shelter for those who prefer a different form of housing, along with bathing facilities and safe storage for personal possessions, providing access to clean water and electricity. Lastly, the third floor of the existing building, has been converted into an operational commercial kitchen, as well as a training kitchen for the residents. These spaces facilitate a culinary training program which teaches residents employable skills for the food service industry. In addition to training, the residents also use the commercial kitchen to prepare meals for all residents, as well as monthly community meals under “The Copper Soffit”, where the facility’s residents and their neighbours are invited to share a meal together, tell stories and get to know one another, while enjoying a healthy meal. This sanctuary is a place of dignity, support, growth and equality, a place where everyone is welcome, and no one is turned away.



Site section depicting the residential units highlighted in green, and the kitchens in purple, the shelter in yellow, and the donation and distribution center in pink.



Floor plans depicting the residential units highlighted in green, and the training kitchen in purple, the commercial kitchen in red, the shelter in yellow, the bathing facilities in blue, and the donation and distribution center in pink, green and light blue.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In conclusion, the intervention I have proposed with this thesis study might be quite fanciful and considered only an imaginative story. But that is precisely what I believe is necessary when considering the future of these vacant buildings. As architects we must not view vacant institutional properties simply in terms of their constraints, and label them as “lost causes”, we should dream larger and act as storytellers in our profession. Firstly, by recognizing the rich stories these sites can tell. And secondly, by asking ourselves, how can this story be continued, and how best can I tell this story through architecture? This I believe, is the path to introducing new functionality to the sites while retaining and respecting their cultural and historical significance.

In this thesis I have set out to answer the question; how can vacant institutional buildings be adapted for a new purpose while still retaining their cultural and historical significance? After exploring this topic in detail, I believe that I have demonstrated that through the application of storytelling, an architectural intervention can be developed that is rooted in the celebration of the site’s specific history, and character. Through this approach, I believe that a site’s cultural and historical significance can not only be retained, but even amplified.

This method of addressing a site’s history, through the process of storytelling, could be applied to a variety of potential sites. This approach can be utilized with properties that have a myriad of sensitivities and require careful design options for established conditions and a well-tailored approach to architectural intervention.

Furthermore, for properties whose historical and cultural significance remains largely unexplored, where the narrative is poised to be revealed and honoured, storytelling could be employed to unveil their hidden importance.

In addition to exploring the use of storytelling in adaptive reuse, this thesis also presents a new way of addressing the issue of social housing. By utilizing these vacant buildings for the specific use of social housing, we can explore restructuring of the way we think of social housing. Through employing three distinct strategies, we can develop housing that aims to cultivate a positive atmosphere for its inhabitants while contributing positively to its community, and actively promoting public involvement and interaction.

Firstly, this can be achieved by bringing social housing to the forefront rather than the fringe. Historically the unhoused have been repeatedly pushed to the periphery, as often undesirable land has been allocated for the location of social housing. This thesis takes a different approach, one that affords the disenfranchised people the dignity, respect, and attention they deserve. Offering the homeless a new home situated in a prime city location, characterized by superior quality and beauty, this will provide them with a place they can take pride in.

Secondly, by addressing the stigma faced by the site's residents and implementing a supportive social infrastructure that promotes interaction with community, we can foster social bonds between residents and the community.

Thirdly, by making this project about the public realm and what a civic building can give back to its city we can realize the restructuring of our perceptions of social housing. This proposed intervention is not only about adapting an old



institutional building for a new role in serving the public, but we can also introduce more public programming to expand upon the original capacity. Providing new public amenities such as social housing, social support infrastructure for the unhoused, recreation and assembly spaces, a public courtyard, and garden. Through this method social housing can foster a comfortable, safe, and constructive place to call home, and the project can encourage public participation and effectively work to revitalize its neighbourhood.

## References

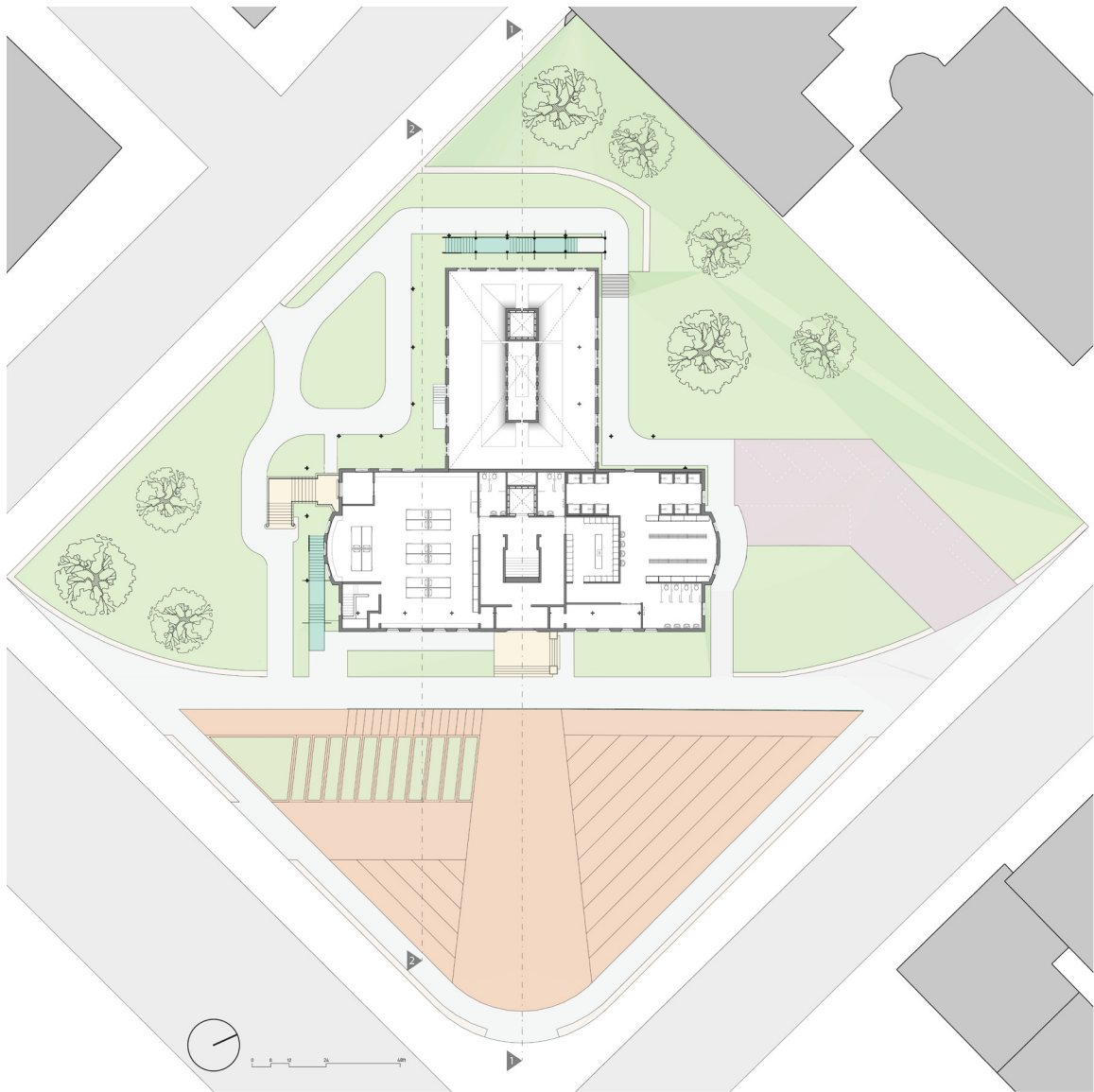
- Abramson, Daniel. M. 2016. *Obsolescence: An Architectural History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Architects Against Housing Alienation. 2023a. Manifesto - End Housing Alienation Now!. <https://aaha.ca/en/page/aaha-manifesto>
- Architects Against Housing Alienation. 2023b. We Demand Surplus Properties for Housing. <https://aaha.ca/en/demand/surplus-properties-housing>
- Benjamin, Walter. 2002. "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." *Selected writings* 3: 1935-1938.
- Brodsky, Alexander, and Ilya Utkin. 1982. "Crystal Palace". Etching on paper, Moscow.
- Brodsky, Alexander, and Ilya Utkin. 1985. "Villa Nautilus Bulwark of Resilience". Etching on paper, Moscow.
- Brodsky, Alexander, and Ilya Utkin. 1989. "Columbarium Habitabile". Etching on paper, Moscow.
- CTV Atlantic. 2019. "More Consultation Needed on Future of Old Halifax Memorial Library." May 24, 2019. <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/more-consultation-needed-on-future-of-old-halifax-memorial-library-1.4436972>
- Fowler, Jonathan. 2020. "Thousands of People are Buried Under Downtown Halifax. What are they owed?" *CBC*, February 23, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/jonathan-fowler-halifax-burial-ground-cemetery-archeology-1.5471209>
- Glen, Courtney, Vanessa McKillop, and Vanessa Smith. 2018. "Schematic Design of Spring Garden" Archaeological Resource Impact Assessment, Davis MacIntyre & Associates Limited, 52-57, <https://hnhps.ca/pdf/Spring-Garden-Archaeological-Report-2018.pdf>
- Grant, Taryn. 2023. "Calls mount for vacant Halifax buildings to be turned into housing" *CBC*, November 26, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-vacant-buildings-adaptive-reuse-affordable-housing-1.7040263>
- The Halifax Fire Historical Society. n.d. Spring Garden Rd. U.E.C. Accessed on May 25, 2024. <https://www.hfxfirehistory.ca/stations/spring-garden-rd-uec>
- Halifax Heritage Advisory Committee. 2019. *Committee Proceedings. Item No.9.1.1. Case H00469: Request to Include 5381 Spring Garden Road, Halifax in the Registry of Heritage Property for the Halifax Regional Municipality*. Halifax, NS: Halifax Regional Municipality, November 27, 2019. <https://cdn.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/boards-committees-commissions/191127hac911.pdf>

- Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society. n.d.-a “Halifax Memorial Library and Grafton Park.” Accessed on May 25, 2024. <https://hmhps.ca/sites/halifax-memorial-library-and-grafton-park>
- Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society. n.d.-b. Who are We? Accessed on May 25, 2024. <https://hmhps.ca/>
- Halifax Mutual Aid. n.d. What We Do Accessed on May 25, 2024. <https://www.halifax-mutualaid.com/>
- Halifax Regional Council. 2013. *Council Proceedings. Item No.11.1.7. Halifax Memorial Library - Assembly of Mi'kmaq Chiefs*. Halifax, NS: Halifax Regional Municipality, December 10, 2013. <https://legacycontent.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/documents/131210ca1117.pdf>
- The Heritage Advisory Committee. 2020. *Heritage Hearing Case No. H00469 5381 Spring Garden Road Former Halifax Memorial Library Site*. Halifax, NS: Halifax Regional Municipality, February 11, 2020, <https://cdn.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/regional-council/200211rc121pres.pdf>
- Herman, David. 2009. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- HRM (Halifax Regional Municipality). 2022. *Building Outlines*. Halifax Open Data. Map from GIS data, using ArcGIS. <https://data-hrm.hub.arcgis.com/search?q=buildings>
- McKenna, Caora. 2020. “Halifax’s old memorial library gets heritage status from regional council” *The Coast*, February 13, 2020. <https://www.thecoast.ca/news-opinion/halifaxs-old-memorial-library-gets-heritage-status-from-regional-council-23464842>
- Nesbitt, Lois, Alexander Brodsky, and Ilya Utkin. 2003. *Brodsky & Utkin: The Complete Works*. New York City: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Niculae, Lorin, Jorge Mejía Hernández, Klaske Havik, and Mark Proosten. 2021. “Narrative Methods for Writing Urban Places.” *Writingplace: Journal for Architecture and Literature* Volume 5.
- Patil, Anjuli. 2018. “Council discusses future of old Halifax Memorial Library” *CBC*, November 13, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/council-discusses-future-of-old-halifax-memorial-library-1.4903919>
- Peddle, Stuart. 2022. “Rally held at former Halifax library to mark one year since evictions of homeless campers” *Saltwire*, August 18, 2022. <https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/news/rally-held-at-former-halifax-library-to-mark-one-year-since-eviction-of-homeless-campers-100764585/>

- Ryan, Haley. 2021. "Protesters arrested, pepper-sprayed as Halifax police clear shelters from city land" *CBC*, August 18, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/arrests-made-as-halifax-protestors-stand-against-clearing-of-shelters-from-city-land-1.6144592>
- Renić, Karla. 2022. "Housing rally held in Halifax a year after police-lead encampment evictions" *Global News*, August 18, 2022. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9069862/housing-rally-halifax-homelessness/>
- Thomas, Jesse. 2023. "Pressure grows to turn vacant Halifax library into public housing" *CTV*, November 30, 2023. <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/more/pressure-grows-to-turn-vacant-halifax-library-into-public-housing-1.6668163>
- Wong, Liliane. 2016. *Adaptive Reuse: Extending the Lives of Buildings*. Switzerland: Birkhäuser.
- Woodford, Zane. 2023. "Halifax housing rally calls for more non-market homes, no fixed-term leases, real rent control" *The Halifax Examiner*, April 5, 2023. <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/government/province-house/halifax-housing-rally-calls-for-more-non-market-homes-no-fixed-term-leases-real-rent-control/>



## Appendix: Supplementary Design Drawings



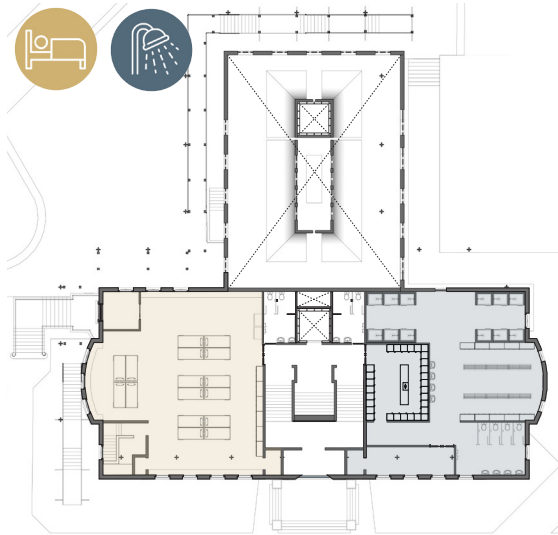
Site plan depicting proposed intervention.



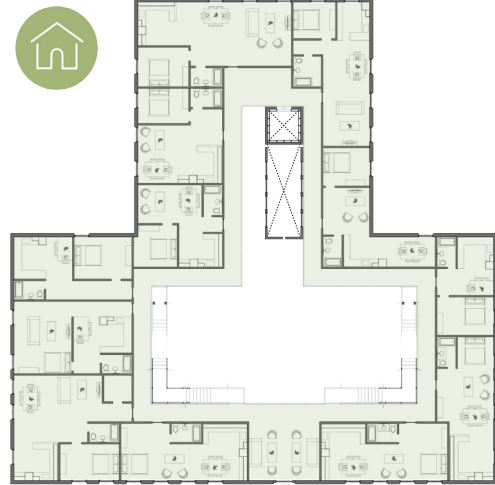
FLOOR 3 - COMMERCIAL KITCHEN & TRAINING KITCHEN



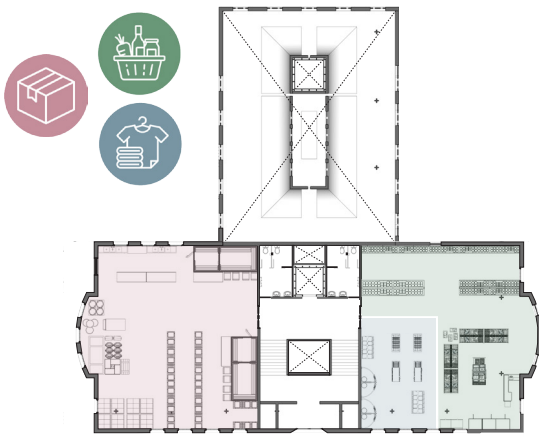
FLOOR 6 - LONG-TERM HOUSING



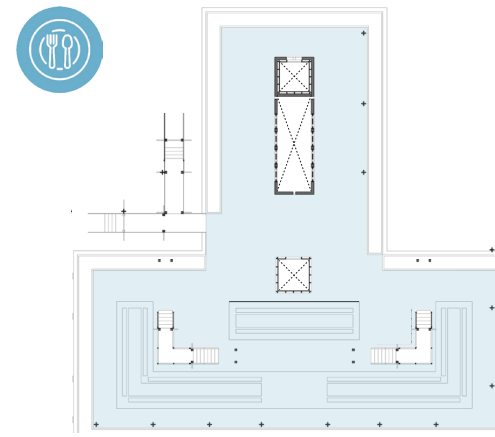
FLOOR 2 - SHORT-TERM SHELTER & BATHING FACILITIES



FLOOR 5 - LONG-TERM HOUSING

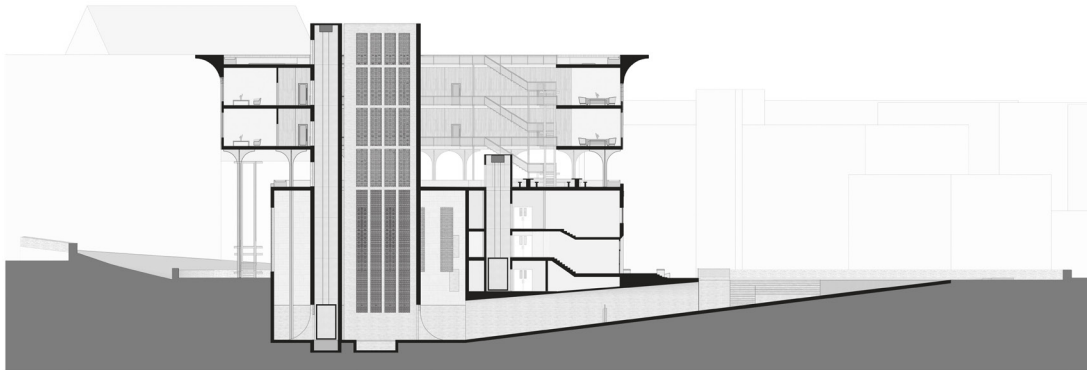


FLOOR 1 - DONATION DISTRIBUTION CENTER



FLOOR 4 - COMMUNITY DINING AREA

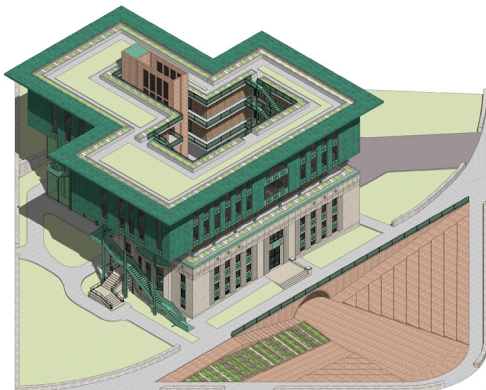
Floor plans depicting each level of the proposed intervention.



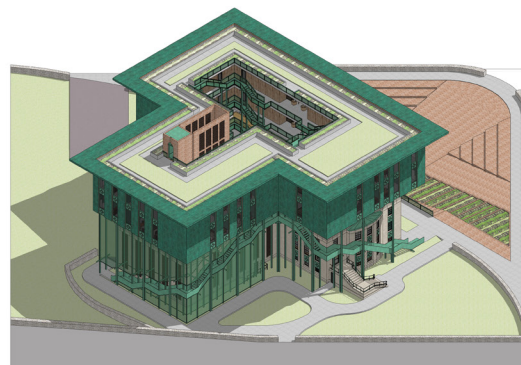
SITE SECTION - 1



SITE SECTION - 2



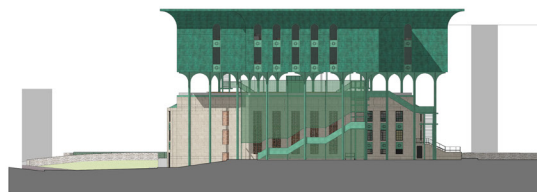
SITE AXONOMETRIC - SOUTHEAST



SITE AXONOMETRIC - SOUTHWEST



ELEVATION - EAST



ELEVATION - WEST



ELEVATION - SOUTH



ELEVATION - NORTH

Site sections, axonometric projections, and elevations depicting the proposed intervention.