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Spring 5-1-2014

### A New Suburban Elysium: A Headstone for the Dying Periphery

Samuel David Chertock

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# **A New Suburban Elysium: A Headstone for the Dying Periphery**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

Samuel David Chertock  
Candidate for Bachelor of Architecture  
and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Architecture

Capstone Project Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Alan Smart

Capstone Project Reader: \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Robert Svetz

Honors Director: \_\_\_\_\_  
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: 05.06.2014

## **Abstract**

The proposed “cemetery” and retail center for the Idora neighborhood of Youngstown, Ohio is the result of one research semester and one design semester.

The design proposal arose from dissatisfaction with the architectural community’s propensity for using jargon and clichés when describing the contemporary suburban condition. Many critics and commentators understand suburbia through the lens of the postwar period. It has been suggested that suburbia was developed for use as a media weapon – and thus, at the conclusion of the Cold War, should have been rendered architecturally irrelevant. However, suburbia has remained stagnant. Design standards employed by developers continue to operate in support of an image-making regime. The image of domestic bliss suggests that Americans are capable of only one, homogenous form of existence.

My thesis argues that a contemporary notion of suburbia can in fact be achieved by embracing its history and recognizing the overall ex-urban fabric as an occupiable historical document. A retail center – modelled on the strip mall typology – can behave as an antidote to suburban anxiety, when paired with a specific architectural language that establishes a ground-plane manipulation in which suburban homes can be recalled.

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## **Executive Summary**

### **CONTENTION:**

Contemporary architectural understandings of the urban periphery are anachronistic; for the postwar American suburb to avoid extinction, it must adjust formally in response to change in social considerations while still recalling its genesis.

### **BACKGROUND:**

The Millennial American Eden is clad in aluminum siding.

Such is the architectural rhetoric considering suburbia: pessimistic, punitive, and temporal. Today's prevailing architectural thought asserts that the postwar exodus of (predominantly white and affluent) Americans to meticulously curated ex-urban communities was generated by anti-Soviet sentiments and hyper-capitalist ideals. This is not necessarily disputable. Indeed, the construction of suburbia and its continued development have been predicated by an onslaught of media designed to create a distinctly American lifestyle that would aesthetically and pragmatically clash with the Soviet way of life. The visual and aural weaponry employed by American governing forces comprise a fascinating case study on passive behavioral control. Americans want "it" and want "it" delivered to them with as little effort as possible in a timely manner.

The resulting seamless visual field in which the ex-urban operates encourages the fetishization of domesticity.

### **THE QUESTION:**

The period of American history that can be described confidently as “postwar” ended in 1972 with the conclusion of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks; SALT was the point at which two immovable forces signed into treaty a protracted stalemate. Animosity remained, of course, but the threat of total annihilation was significantly reduced. One would think, then, that Americans would be comfortable in their return to major urban centers (which, in theory, were no longer targeted).

Instead, the government’s visual campaign proved too effective: to this day, Americans are obsessed with postwar notions of domesticity.

Moreover, suburban constructs served a specific and temporal purpose in the American postwar period; today, more than six decades later, new considerations have arisen.

Does there exist a contemporary understanding of American suburban life that takes into account the ‘leftover’ or residual architectural form?

THE STANCE:

Although the postwar lifestyle assumed homogeneity in its subjects, it presented a bastion in support of the basic human rights to privacy, happiness, and property. Yet it is exactly the ignorance of America’s heterogeneous proletariat that has brought about contemporary suburbia. There exists a distinct pattern language (perhaps most discernable from the air) describing an acceptance of a prescribed American dream. The vision of the suburban dream is ubiquitous: a home, built with minimal personal involvement, surrounded on all sides both by its manicured lawn and nearly-identical siblings.

However, these Millennial conceptions of suburban life stop just short of employing the scientific method. It is universally agreed-upon that there is a problem with suburbia (unfortunately, however, understandings of the ‘problem’ are determinately undercooked). Suburbia is indeed homogenous, repetitive, and similar both aesthetically and as is reflected by the demographic of its participants. This belief is nearly ubiquitous among theorists and commentators, architectural or not. But is the American urban not similarly repetitive? Are not American cities decidedly similar to one another, at least when viewed through the same critical lens used to berate suburban structures?

Instead, American suburbs should be considered as the transitional force between two disparate understandings of the occupiable environment. The ex-urban, at its core is the point at which pastoral America meets cosmopolitan America. It need not mediate this transition, but rather must at the very least responsibly marry the two environments. Postwar suburbia is concerned with only itself as an object of half-urban and half-pastoral density.

#### METHODOLOGY:

The natural architectural manifestation of these considerations would be one that both referred to the past while also providing a usable program for suburban revitalization. The periphery of Youngstown, Ohio was chosen as the site due to its peculiar suburban condition: as the city’s population has dwindled, the built urban fabric has been removed in varying densities. In the Idora neighborhood, for example, many abandoned homes have been bulldozed and left as empty lots.

The design proposal introduces a retail center into the “missing teeth” of Idora’s fabric. Both recessed into the earth and perched above the ground plane, the new program intends to revitalize suburbia while also behaving as a “cemetery” for the postwar suburban home. The architecture can be a place where suburban homes “go to die” and their residents flock to remember.



# **A NEW SUBURBAN ELYSIUM**

## ***A HEADSTONE FOR THE DYING PERIPHERY***

**SAMUEL CHERTOCK**  
**CANDIDATE FOR B.ARCH DEGREE**  
**AND RENEE CROWN UNIVERSITY HONORS**

**HONORS CAPSTONE PROJECT IN ARCHITECTURE**

**CAPSTONE PROJECT ADVISOR: \_\_\_\_\_ (PROFESSOR ALAN SMART)**

**CAPSTONE PROJECT READER: \_\_\_\_\_ (PROFESSOR ROBERT SVETZ)**

**DATE: 05.06.2014**



# **A NEW SUBURBAN ELYSIUM**

## ***A HEADSTONE FOR THE DYING PERIPHERY***

**SAMUEL CHERTOCK**

**CANDIDATE FOR B.ARCH DEGREE**

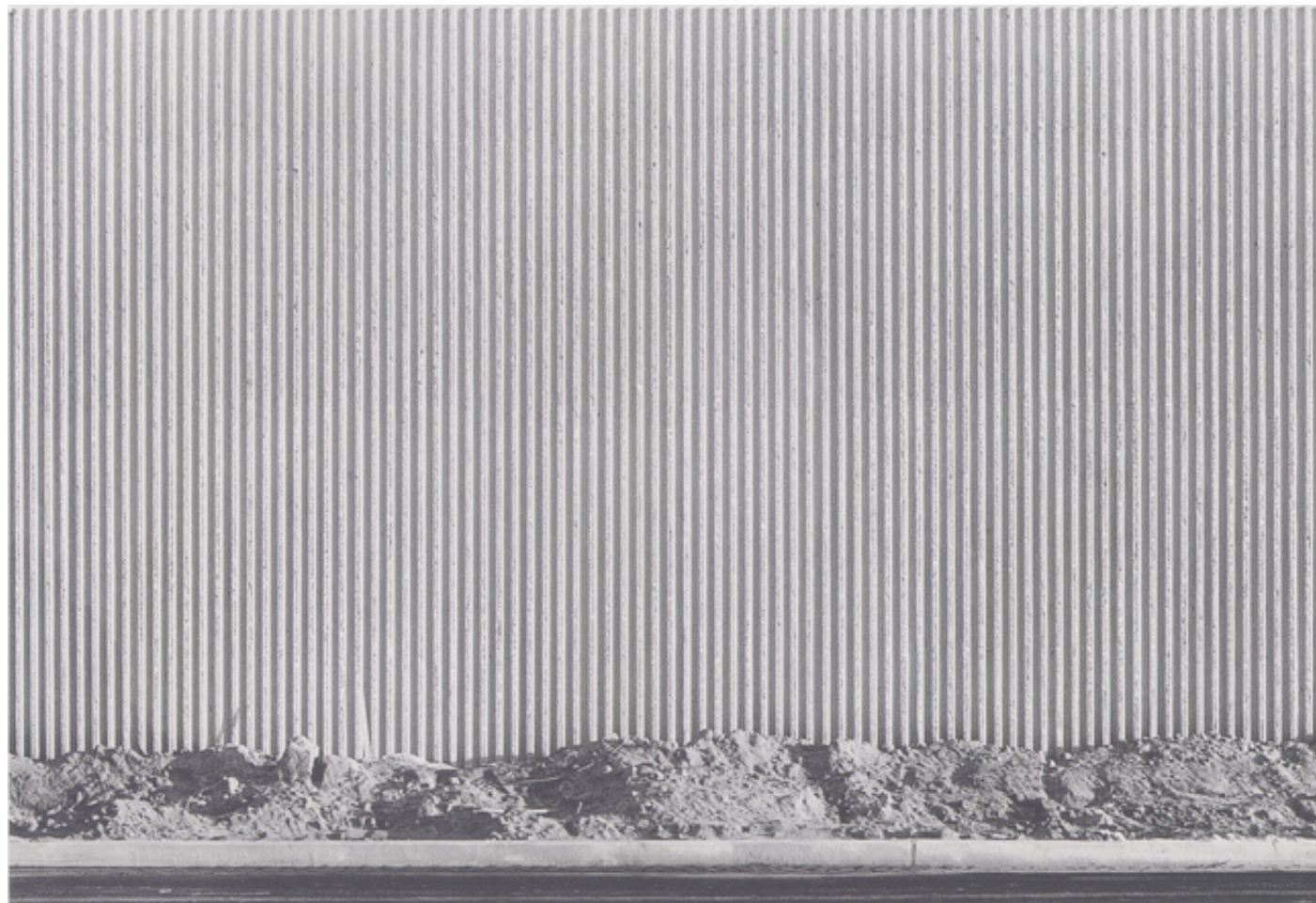
**AND RENEE CROWN UNIVERSITY HONORS**

**DATE: 05.06.2014**

previous (figure 1.1):  
William Eggleston  
*'Untitled'*  
Memphis, Tennessee  
1957

facing page (figure 1.2):  
William Garnett  
*'Grading, Lakewood, California'*  
1950





# THE MILLENIAL AMERICAN EDEN IS CLAD IN ALUMINUM SIDING.

facing page (figure 1.3):

Lewis Baltz

*'Notes on Recent Industrial Developments in Southern California'*

1974

Such is the architectural rhetoric concerning American suburbia: pessimistic, punitive, and temporal. The notion is shocking, given the near-ubiquitous delusional exuberance of postwar America. Today's prevailing architectural thought asserts that the postwar exodus of (predominately white and affluent) Americans to meticulously curated ex-urban communities was generated by anti-Soviet sentiments and hyper-capitalist ideals. This is not necessarily disputable. Indeed, the construction of suburbia and its continued development have been predicated by an onslaught of media designed to create a distinctly American lifestyle that would aesthetically and pragmatically clash with the Soviet way of life<sup>1</sup>. The visual and aural weaponry employed by American governing forces comprise a fascinating case study on passive behavioral control. Americans want "it" and want "it" delivered to them with as little effort as possible in a timely manner. Media is the avenue through which these imposed ideals can be imbued on society.



**THE RESULTING SEAMLESS VISUAL FIELD IN  
WHICH THE EX-URBAN OPERATES  
ENCOURAGES THE FETISHIZATION OF  
DOMESTICITY.**

However, at the same time, this is an assumption. To apply a single understanding to contemporary suburbia would be to operate in the generic, providing a breeding ground for the ubiquity from which suburban anxiety is generated.

Suburbia, as a whole, does not participate in a single, particular media campaign. Rather, the *image* of postwar suburban bliss was appropriated for such purposes<sup>2</sup>.

As such, the consensus is unsatisfactory; contemporary suburbia is a relic of architecture achieving political and social agency.

# **SUBURBIA IS NO LONGER A MEDIA WEAPON**



**IT IS A DEFINING OPERATIVE WITHIN THE  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LANDSCAPE,  
A HISTORICAL DOCUMENT RECALLING THE  
EARNEST PUSH FOR A PASTORAL IDEAL.**

What, then, are we to make of a still-operational and occupied artifact?

Suburbia has become an archive, one adapted and altered by its inhabitants as it has aged. The result is peculiar: original housing prototypes have been manipulated by its users, what with contemporary additions and removals locked in struggle with archival form-making.

Through a rigorous study of the formal and spatial applications related to suburbia at specific moments in time (while cross-referencing the architectural with the social and political) we can begin to consider the contemporary condition: that suburbia, today, is not simply the physical manifestation of postulations on the ex-urban; it is a patterned landscape<sup>3</sup>, one that accurately mediates the space between the pastoral and the built.

**SUBURBIA IS NOT A FAILURE, NOR IS IT DEAD**

---

**SUBURBIA IS A MULTI-FACED PATTERN OF  
ARCHITECTURE, THE RESULT OF  
INTERACTING SPATIAL FORCES.**

**IT IS A MICROCOSM OF A DOMINANT CULTURE.**

**THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE HARMONIOUS MODEL OF  
COMMUNITY AND THE DYSTOPIAN INVERSION OF THAT  
DREAM IS NO LONGER RELEVANT.**

**SUCH CONSIDERATIONS ARE REDUCTIVE AND TWO-  
DIMENSIONAL.**

**THE IDEALIZED AND INSULAR CAN PROVIDE A  
FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH THE HYPERBOLIC  
FANTASY CAN BE REACHED FOR.**

**THE PUSH FOR SIMILAR EXPERIENCES AND  
SHARED, COMMUNAL SPACE AND THE  
CONTRASTING OVER-THE-TOP CRITIQUE OF  
PROGRAMMATIC SOCIAL RIGIDITY ARE  
DURABLE SYMBOLS OF SUBURBAN  
ANXIETY.**

**THE CONTRIVED, DISPIRITING, AND ALIENATING  
REPRESENTATION OF SUBURBIA IS ANACHRONISTIC;  
THE CULTURALLY-CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT IS NO  
LONGER EMPTY OF CONTENT**

---

**IT IS A FIXTURE BETWEEN TWO  
CONTRASTING UNDERSTANDINGS.**



***CONTEMPORARY SUBURBIA IS A TANGIBLE  
HETEROTOPIA.***

**1804: Lewis and Clark Expedition** In finding a passable route to the Pacific coast, the two explorers participated in the establishment of pastoral America<sup>4</sup>.

Their journals, both pragmatic and eloquent, demonstrate an interest in the unknown realm so inextricably tied to the ex-urban ideal. The America Lewis and Clark passed through as investigators soon became the unadulterated landscape desired and chased by suburban proponents. **1898: Garden City Movement**

Ebenezer Howard's investigations on the urban periphery reveal a methodology for urban planning that places emphasis on the non-place<sup>5</sup>; the text is a proponent for a town/country hybrid that might mediate the urban and natural forces.

Howard argues that prospective homeowners need not debate the pros and cons of the periphery, for a successful medium exists between the regular and the untamed. **1932: Broadacre City** Regarded as the apotheosis of suburbia, Frank Lloyd Wright's lifelong project deifies the periphery and villifies the urban.

The plan is hardly transit-oriented, instead insisting on the proliferation of individual and ubiquitous land plots<sup>6</sup>. The final model, which itself celebrates the development of a comprehensive pastoral language, presents an approach receptive to lateral (rather than vertical) development. There is comfort in sameness,

and anxiety can be tamed by individual plots. **1951: Levittown, Pennsylvania** Arguably the poster child of suburban development, Levittown established the standard for ex-urban development driven by economic prosperity<sup>7</sup>. William Levitt's master plan could exist only as a whole; community was formed by the strengths of similarity and shared experience. His tabula rasa afforded the architectural team an opportunity to consider an insular and protected residential environment, while also incorporating wartime technologies for expedited and efficient construction. The housing prototypes, now almost constantly altered, offered consumers an off-the-shelf housing unit. **1962: Sea Ranch, California** Al Boeke's plan for Sea Ranch considers a return to the suburban pastoral. The design team compiled a linear grouping (instead of a centrally-focused community) that would formally and experientially respond to the natural environment. The architecture employed hybridizes the vernacular and modern<sup>8</sup>. Presented is not a optimized building process or community plan but an approach that embraces the landscape as a pattern language worth incorporating. **1964: The Machine in the Garden** The musings of Leo Marx suggest (perhaps more so than tangentially) that suburban constructs not only intrude on the romantic pastoral

scene but also identifies the contradictions inherent to the American periphery. The physical landscape -- otherwise unpredictable -- is presented as the battleground between the rustic, sentimental model of American living and the industrial forces that cloud any critical investigations of the "middle ground"<sup>9</sup>. **1965: A City Is Not a Tree** Christopher Alexander, taking issue with the established modes of urban planning, insists that any urban formation cannot be broken down into individual parts that contribute to a whole through a hierarchical relationship. Alexander's proposal operates through a series of inter-related spaces, which do not adhere to an inflexible pyramidal structure. The "semi-latticed"<sup>10</sup> city instead behaves informally and naturally. When applied to the periphery, Alexander's theory considers the effectiveness of master planning and community building. **1990: Celebration, Florida** In many ways, Disney's new urbanist ideal participates in the dialogue between corporation, consumer values, and the periphery. The town contrasts with Wright's Broadacre, championing transit-oriented development, while also re-appropriating the imagery and phrasing employed by William Levitt. This aspirational facade is potentially less earnest than it might have been in the postwar social environment; the construction

onus is placed in the hands of a master planner rather than giving the responsibility to the final user. **2008: Youngstown, Ohio** A city's ability to adjust in scale alongside changes in population and social order may be its ticket to longevity. Rather than remaining fixed, a city that employs a dynamic urban form can retain its vitality in the face of economic hardship. Unlike other Rust Belt cities in the American midwest, Youngstown embarked on a half-decade-long plan to contract its city limits<sup>11</sup>. As the population and industry contracts, so does the city, placing a greater importance on the transitional zone. For now, however, the periphery will be allowed to return to that which is distinctly ex-urban (as the landscape reclaims former housing tracts). **2010: Subprime Mortgage Crisis** Banking corporations have proven to consider the home an instrument for distributing economic risk. In gambling against the homeowner, banks collected the collateral offered upon the initial sale<sup>12</sup>. Contemporary suburbia has developed into the crux of these financing struggles, as the very notion of homeownership as been called into question. A mortgage is not necessarily proof of ownership; rather, it is collateral that can be collected when payments remain unpaid. **2013**



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PASTORALIA

OPTIMISM

CRITICISM

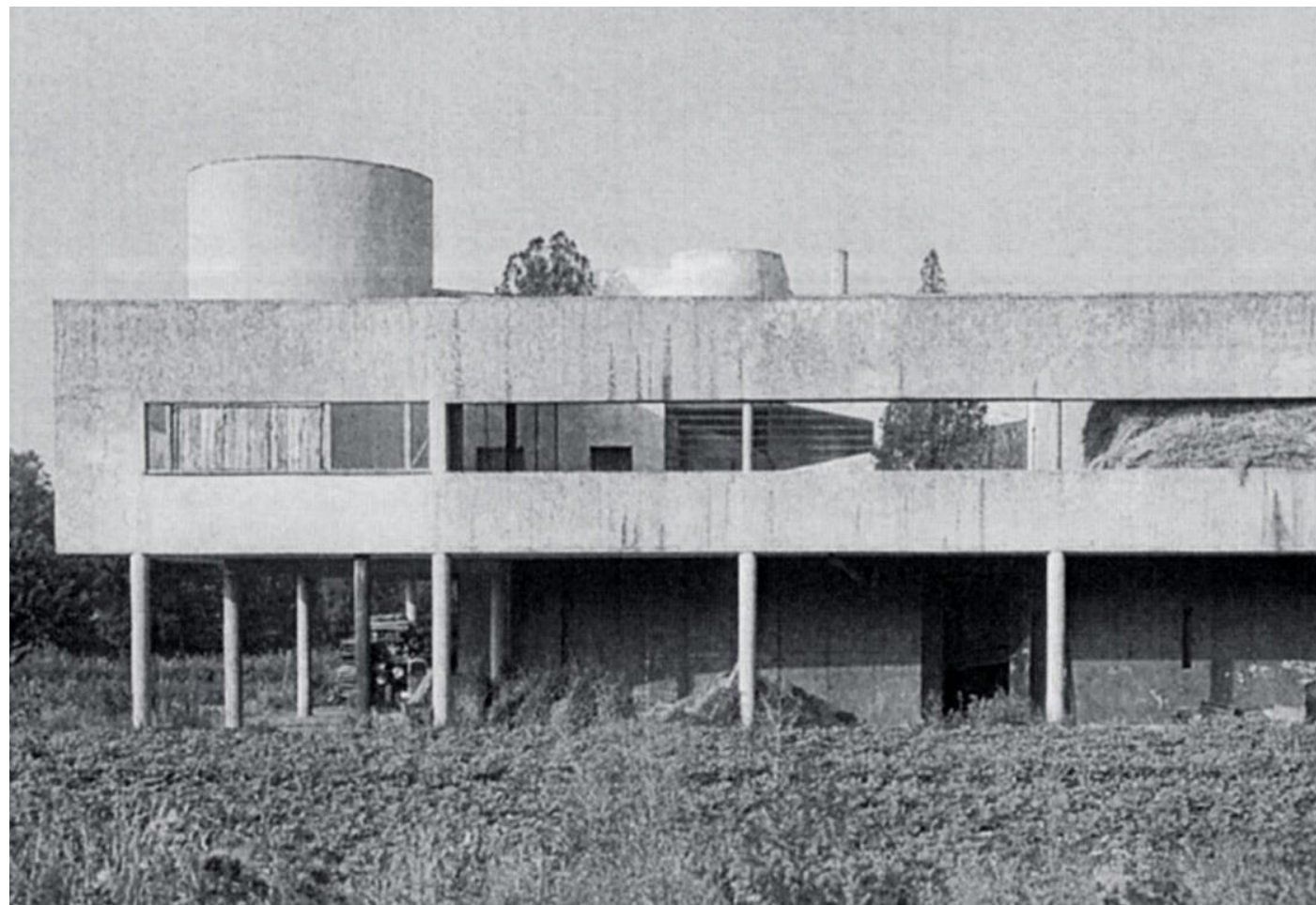
THE IN-BETWEEN

facing page (figure 1.4):  
Shannon Rankin  
*'Tessellation (Condon)'*  
2013

# PASTORALIA

facing page (figure 2.1):  
Photographer Unknown.  
*'Villa Savoye, Abandoned'*  
1940s





**THE LAWN IS THE SITE MOST CHARGED WITH THE  
STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE DOMESTIC COLLECTIVE AND  
THE FIGHT FOR INDIVIDUALITY --**

**THUS CONFIGURING THE FORCES AGAINST AND IN  
FAVOR OF SAME-NESS.**

One's front yard -- perhaps more so than a front elevation -- is the common facade in suburbia. At once distinctly private (but also esoterically a public mediator) the lawn recalls many a homeowner's primordial desire for open space<sup>13</sup>.

But the lawn is controlled by the blades of a lawnmower and societal standards alike. In a domestic act imbued with referential and menial flavor, taming and controlling grass -- the ubiquitous weed -- encourages a homeowner's mastery of nature. And yet, at the same time, it is a space that only hints at (and thus suppresses) the basic human want for untouched and unsullied natural environments.

The bizarre ritual of mowing the lawn -- in which hired help, peace-and-quiet-seeking adults, and chore-completing children participate -- offers homeowners a sense of community. Control over one's domain is a shared, public effort in the battle against crabgrass<sup>14</sup>. To allow for overgrowth or the rise of weeds is to self-ostracize.

**CONTROLLING THE PRIVATE  
IS A *PUBLIC* RESPONSIBILITY.**

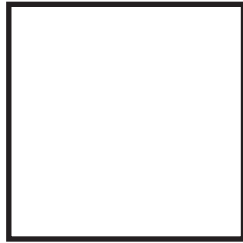
Indeed, the lawn (or garden, for that matter) provides an approximation of the town and the country. It is a microcosm of multiple, varying environments, juxtaposing them in a heterotopia<sup>15</sup>.

Suburban 'farming' suggests that mowing the lawn enhances this sentiment: mowing, gathering the trimmings, and placing the leftovers at the curb reminds the community of one's involvement in the shared suburban patterning. Grass is the nation's single largest crop, and is a uniting force.

The ubiquitous blanket of green refers to the pastures of the English bucolic; it is an unused grazing space, no longer 'mowed' by animals necessary for Arcadian sustenance. It is considered a natural realm, but is distinctly unnatural -- when well-manicured, it hints at a historicist pastoral existence lost in the residential composition.

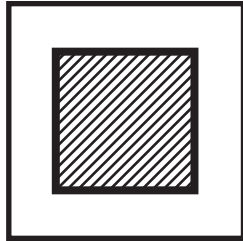
This existence houses a number of heterotopias, while still operating at multiple scales and varying understandings.

**PASTORAL**



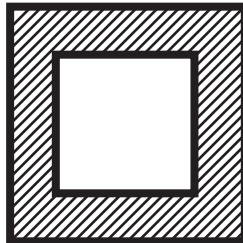
**TOPOGRAPHICAL SURFACE**

**MIDDLE  
LANDSCAPE**



**OBJECT IN THE FIELD**

**URBAN**

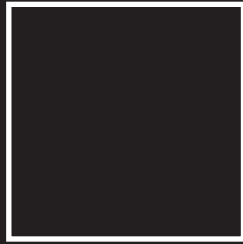


**FIELD IN THE OBJECT**

Michel Foucault's musings regarding the classification of space produced his theory for heterotopias. Foucault noted that there exists a series of overlooked and phenomenological spaces in which either hidden or invisible activity takes place; citing "the space of a telephone call,"<sup>16</sup> Foucault explained that certain spaces are by their very nature simultaneously physical and mental. As such, a heterotopia is either a representation of a utopia or makes a utopian approximation possible. A prison, for example, houses the undesirables that would otherwise interfere with an attempt at utopia. A motel, too, might be advertised as a roadside stopping point for the weary when in fact it serves as the defacto home base for prostitution or drug use; the crisis takes place out of view<sup>17</sup>.

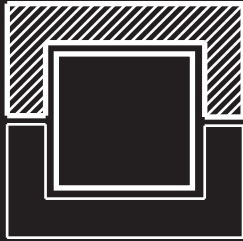
**SIMILARLY, THE SUBURBAN CONDITION EXHIBITS THE QUALITIES OF A HETEROTOPIA.**

**THE LAWN**



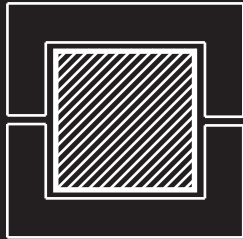
**TOPOGRAPHICAL SURFACE**

**THE FRONT**



**ARCHITECTURAL  
STAGE**

**THE OBJECT**



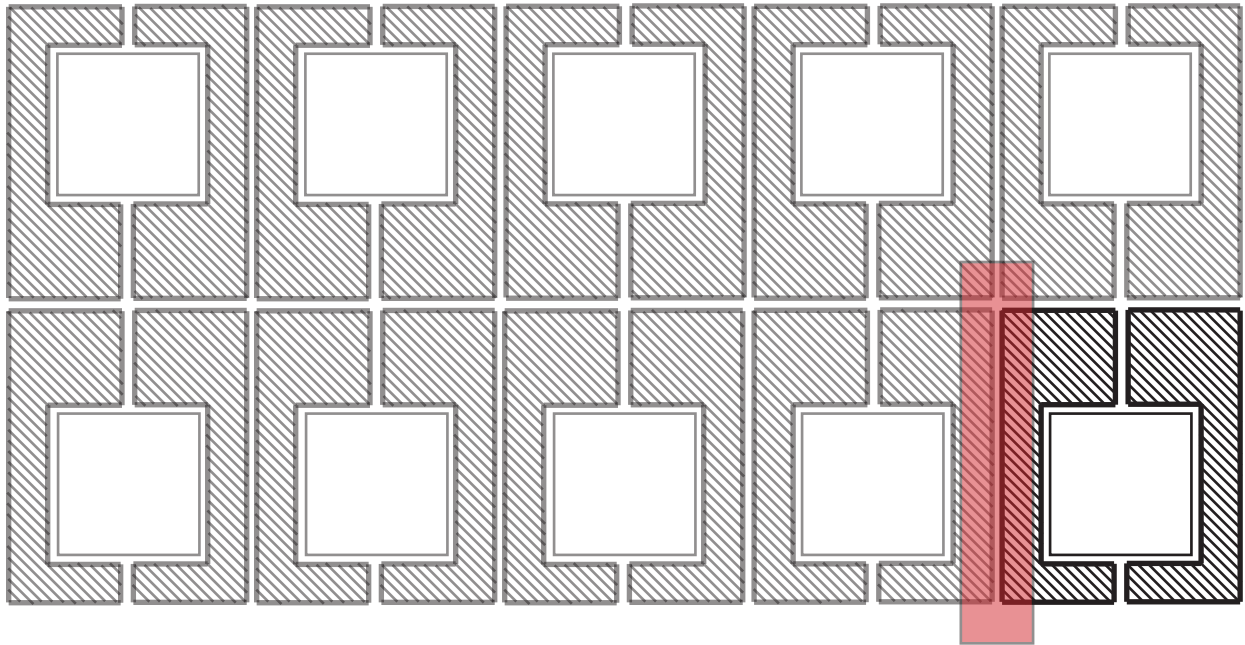
**DUALY-WRAPPED  
MONUMENT**



While the suburban home (the object in the field) is surrounded on all sides by pseudo-bucolic carpeting, the lawn can be deconstructed into a series of interlocking and multi-scaled actors. The front yard, as explained previously, operates as a stage for imitating the pastoral and communal alike<sup>18</sup>. Meanwhile, the backyard is more personalized, behaving as the setting for play equipment, barbeques, pools, gardens, and unfinished yard work.

The bracketing of the object by two (functionally and spatially) **distinguishable fields is what places the utopian ideal within reach**. This interaction between what are otherwise agency-free participants produces a heterotopia; the front lawn, in opposition to the back, takes part in a large-scale operation crucial to the behavior of suburbia. The common (shared) exterior space, despite belonging to different homeowners, gives a pastoral spine to the American Eden.

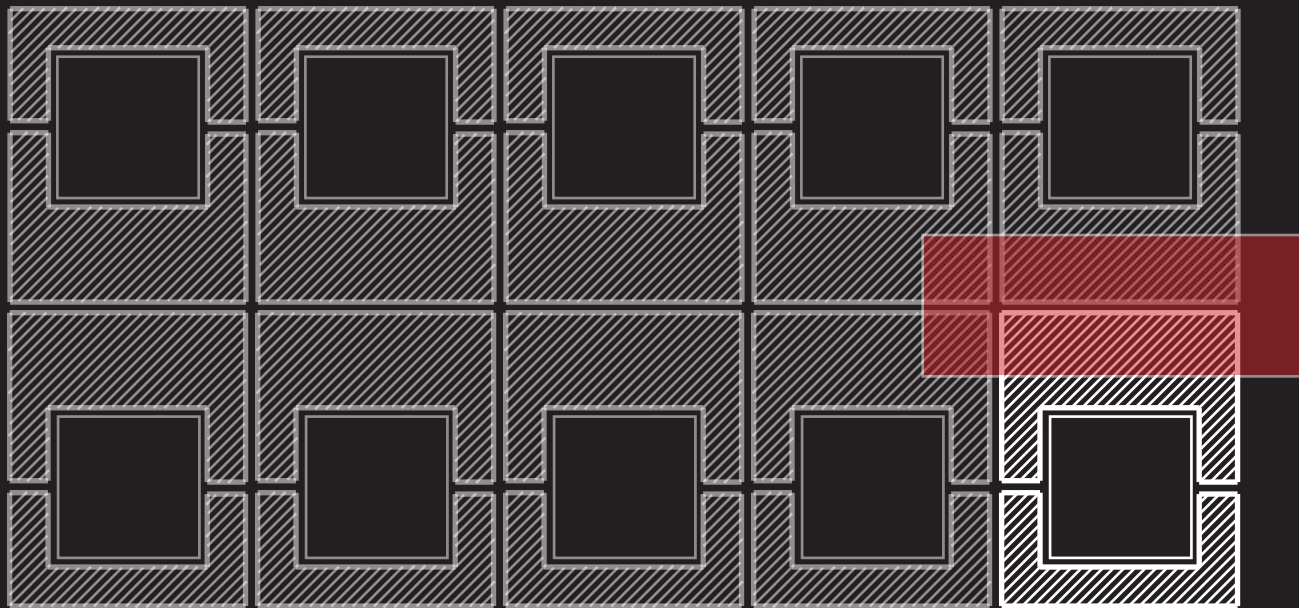
This symbiotic relationship of front and back (as prescribed by the domestic object) assists in the cultivation of the suburban utopia.



**THE SUBDIVISION BOUNDARY IS DEMARCATED ON THE SHARED EDGE BY PASTORAL SIGNIFIERS.**

The boundary between two plots is perhaps a more convincing heterotopia: if unmarked by a physical condition (a picket fence, for example), the two opposing properties may be distinguished by an unbuilt phenomenon (differing grass lengths and treatments). Moreover, because the boundary between indoors and outdoors is marked by the built enclosure alone, a heterotopia emerges when describing the lawn as outdoor living room.

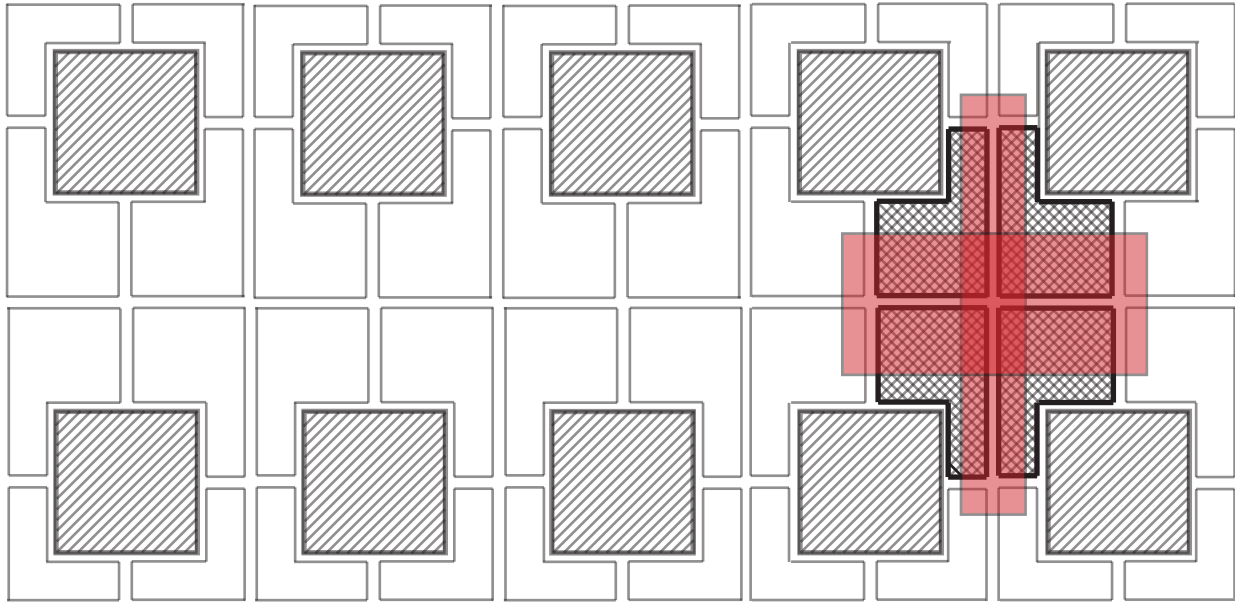
If domestic space extends beyond the enclosure, and if it participates in a **greater field of activity**, then it is an **enabling heterotopia**; such is the case in many suburban tracts.



**OPPOSITION CAN BE FOUND IN THE ADJACENT  
(COMMON) BACK-OF-HOUSE BUCOLIC FIELD.**

**WHAT HAPPENS TO THESE HETEROTOPIAS WHEN THEY  
OVERLAP?**

**HOW MIGHT THEY BEGIN TO BEHAVE WHEN  
CONSIDERED AS LATENT PHYSICAL SPACE?**



**THE (PHENOMENOLOGICALLY) SHARED PASTORAL  
OFFERS A CONTENTIOUS (HETEROTOPIC) OVERLAP.**

**IS THE CURE FOR SUBURBAN ANXIETY  
RIGHT IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD?**

One case study in particular jumps from the page in its treatment of the pastoral. Sea Ranch, California was planned as a whole in 1963 as a response to the ex-urban subdivisions celebrated elsewhere; rather than treat the architectural site as a manipulable condition, developers such as William Levitt made sure to raze the landscape and build anew<sup>19</sup>.

The architects involved in Sea Ranch -- William Turnbull Jr., Charles Moore, Al Boeke, and Joseph Esherick -- were determined to impede on the landscape as little as possible, while still providing a framework and system within which they could operate.

The end result is perhaps the most bucolic and pastoral suburban planned community that was designed within a large-scale interconnected system<sup>20</sup>.





# OPTIMISM

facing page (figure 3.1):  
William Garnett  
*'Subdivision, Lakewood, California'*  
1950



**THE ARCHITECTURAL CONDITIONS THAT PARTICIPATE  
IN THE EGALITARIAN AND SUPPRESSIVE SUBURBAN  
REGIME WERE DEVELOPED UNDER AN OPTIMISTIC AND  
COMMUNAL GUISE.**

**THE FORCES THAT WENT INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE CURRENT PATTERN WERE A COG IN THE NATION-  
WIDE POSTWAR PERIOD OF EXUBERANCE.**

Seeking a certain honesty in construction methods and materials, wealth-backed developers saw not only a business opportunity (what with the housing crisis coming to a head) but also an opportunity to assist in the shaping of a distinctly American ex-urban experience.

**While there exists a paradox in the relationship between the communal and individual suburban conditions, early subdivisions succeeded for the most part in the venture. The visual onslaught that pervaded media in the first part of the 1950s was in many ways an accurate portrayal: nuclear families (juxtaposed alongside their carefully manicured lawns and efficient homesteads) were eager to take part in the cultivation of an ex-urban America<sup>21</sup>.**

**If the city denied freedom, suburbia was liberating; if the urban condition was overwhelming and portrayed as dangerous, embodying a lifestyle on the periphery allowed for a claim of moral superiority.**



William Levitt (arguably the primary figure behind the revolution) was certainly aware of the existential dangers inherent to suburban activity<sup>22</sup>. He identified a housing problem and went about the built implementation of America's desires in an environment particularly conducive to its development. With the assistance of an architectural team (chaired by Levitt's brother Alfred) he created a catalogue that would respond to his target audience's requests for domesticity both pastoral and communal<sup>23</sup>. Achieving the best of both worlds was within reach through a series of architectural and technological manipulations.

Levitt's homes are a lesson in marketing a mass-produced good. Their simplicity in both formal and pragmatic terms meant that construction could mimic the war machine's production methods; breaking house construction down into components allowed for a new standard that could be applied to any plot of land.

facing page (figure 3.2):  
William Garnett  
*'Grading, Lakewood, California'*  
1950

**LEVITT'S SITELESS ARCHITECTURE WAS TO BE THE  
DOMESTIC PLAYGROUND, A LABORATORY FOR A NOVEL  
LIFESTYLE...**

**EFFECTIVELY RENDERING SUBURBIA AS A CONDITION  
WITHOUT FIRM ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT.**



The Levitt homes exhibit an architectural rigor that one would hardly expect from a mass-produced product; employing the jargon of modern architecture (Levitt's preference for "the machine" rather than "the home" in describing his approach to domestic life is well-documented<sup>24</sup>) Levitt advertised floor plans supposedly optimized in functionality for family living.

The public's response was wholly euphoric.

Levitt's catalogue included a number of customizable homes that were purported to fit any family's desires. The Country Clubber, Jubilee, Levittowner, Pennsylvanian, and Rancher models (first put into action at Levittown, Pennsylvania) typify the domestic architectural intent of the mid-century period.

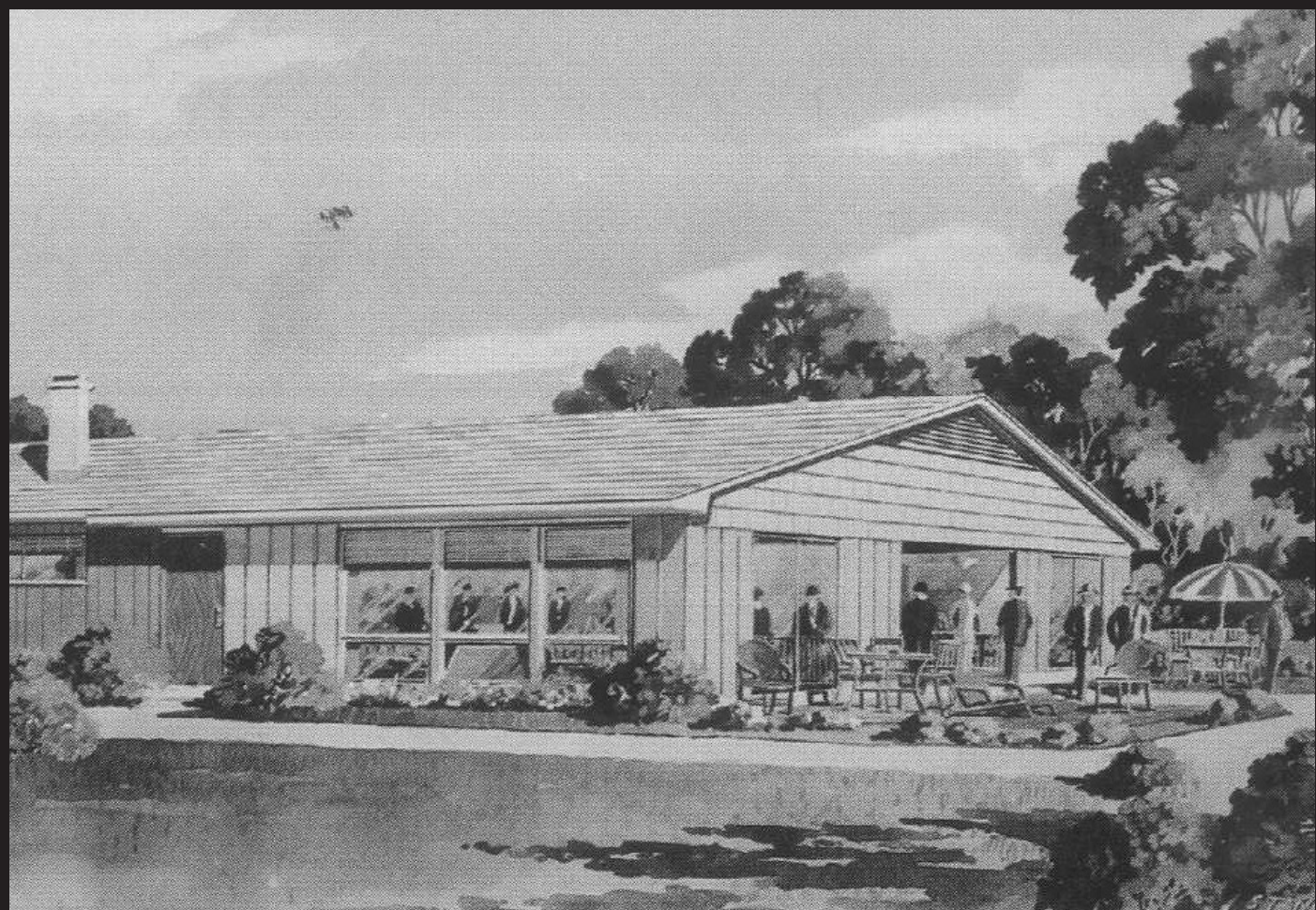
**WHEN SYNTHESIZED AS PART OF AN ENVIRONMENT  
OR PATTERN, THE HOMES EXHIBIT OPPRESSIVE  
SENSIBILITIES -- BUT IT IS ALMOST A CERTAINTY  
THAT THEY COULD NOT FUNCTION ALONE: THEY ARE TO  
EXIST IN RELATION TO ONE ANOTHER.**

facing page (figure 3.3):

William Garnett

*'Grading, Lakewood, California'*

1950



Just as optimistic as Levitt was the design team behind Disney's Celebration, Florida. With the benefit of hindsight, the committee embraced New Urbanist ideals and tailored their design to a group who still desired suburban economy: Disney World employees<sup>25</sup>.

Conceived of in 1994, Celebration was to be a community first and foremost (although it has been proven through practice and implementation that the comingling of work and play in such a community is not sustainable), while operating within regional conditions more so than Levitt had<sup>26</sup>. Each home was to participate in the overall system unapologetically.

The 'more sustainable' New Urbanist community emphasized pedestrianism and transit alike. The architecture celebrated local history and community values, making great effort to consider diversity. The varying housing sizes and typologies (surrounding a clearly discernible community center) overtly place the design emphasis on the whole rather than on the individual.

**THE CELEBRATION HOMES REVEAL AN ATTENTION TO  
DETAIL THAT EXISTS TO AMPLIFY A *COMMUNAL* SENSE  
OF DOMESTIC BLISS.**

Just as the postwar suburban tract was infused with a certain political and social ideology, so too was Celebration's development driven by large-scale economic pressures and motivations. Inextricably linked to Disney's EPCOT postulations, Celebration had the funds backing it to put theory into practice.

If Levittown demonstrates architectural practice immediately identifiable as postwar, Celebration (what with its postmodern design articulation) is very obviously the latter portion of the 20th Century's response.

Similarly, if Levittown was subconsciously informed by Levitt's economic dream, Celebration was overtly and openly controlled by Disney's vision. It is a money-making device at its core, described by residents as "a theme park without the rides"<sup>27</sup>. The proximity of services (a calling card of New Urbanist subdivisions) may have been motivated by corporate intent.

At the same time, Celebration reached toward the future of ex-urban planning, optimistically attempting to provide a framework for future development.

**CELEBRATION AND LEVITTOWN -- DESPITE THE 40  
YEAR GAP -- SIT ON THE SAME SIDE OF THE TABLE.**

**REGARDLESS OF ECONOMIC INTENT, THE TWO  
RESIDENTIAL CENTERS ATTEMPTED TO CURE THE EX-  
URBAN ILLS SEEN IN AMERICA.**

**YET IN MAKING THAT EFFORT, THESE TWO  
SUBDIVISIONS MAY HAVE ENCOURAGED THE  
PERPETUATION OF CERTAIN SUBURBAN BELIEFS.**

# CRITICISM

facing page (figure 4.1):  
Dan Graham  
*'Video Projection Outside Home*  
1978





Use of the image has played a significant role in the changing perceptions of the ex-urban. Once employed as part of a military and economic campaign<sup>28</sup>, portrayals of suburbia have become punitive and reductive (while potentially lacking any sort of criticality). It could be said that image-making over-corrected from one optimistic side of the spectrum toward something more condemning, resulting in a visual culture only partially accurate.

As it was in the postwar years, the image of suburbia is ubiquitous; contemporary visuals embody the sameness they purport to reject. The rhetoric, so primary to an understanding of millennial America, allows for one-sided opinions and hard stances. Where it was once en vogue to imagine and sell the image of postwar domestic bliss (and thus put it to work as a marketing device) it is now the norm to criticize the regime of sameness.

**As the overtly critical and hopeful participate in a dialogue on the virtues of the ex-urban, is there a middle ground?**

**WHAT LIES IN THE SPACE BETWEEN THESE TWO  
OPPOSING UNDERSTANDINGS?**

**CAN IT BE EXPLOITED ARCHITECTURALLY?**

The original images of postwar domesticity partook in the cultivation of an overarching image; suburbia operated exclusively as a counterpart to Soviet lifestyles and residential techniques. Understanding the Cold War as a conflict of wills and imagined worldwide influences contextualizes postwar suburbia as a weapon<sup>29</sup>. American propaganda suggests that the ideal ex-urban existence is both attainable for all creeds and still a desired product.

The typical image employed for this purpose portrays a nuclear family, overcome with domestic bliss, in a technologically and pragmatically optimized unit. Although the image is at once emasculating and perpetuates reductive female roles, it provides insight as to the manner in which suburbia was conceived. The postwar ex-urban established one view of what it mean to be American at a time when such guidance was desired.

facing page (figure 4.2:  
Photographer Unknown (Levittown Promotional Material).  
*'The Country Clubber Model'*  
1953





Coupled with popular sitcoms of the day (such as 1957's *Leave It to Beaver*) the image within the carefully-coordinated campaign makes clear the intentions of suburban subdivisions; marketing strategies reveal a great deal about the product's purpose.

Of course, this understanding of suburbia generated a great deal of backlash, for it was not particularly difficult to identify the image regime's practices. The response (initially seen in films such as 1969's *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*) claimed that optimized and economical images of suburbia encouraged a lifestyle devoid of individuality and personal identity. Critiques of the past half-century push postwar image-making to the absolute edge<sup>30</sup>; satirical films such as *Ordinary People* (1980), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *The Truman Show* (1998) imagine suburbia as an oppressive architectural environment. The Stepford-like rhetoric stated that suburbia was all bad with no good, a reversal from 1950s exuberance; suburbia was exclusively painful<sup>31</sup>.

facing page (figure 4.3):

still from

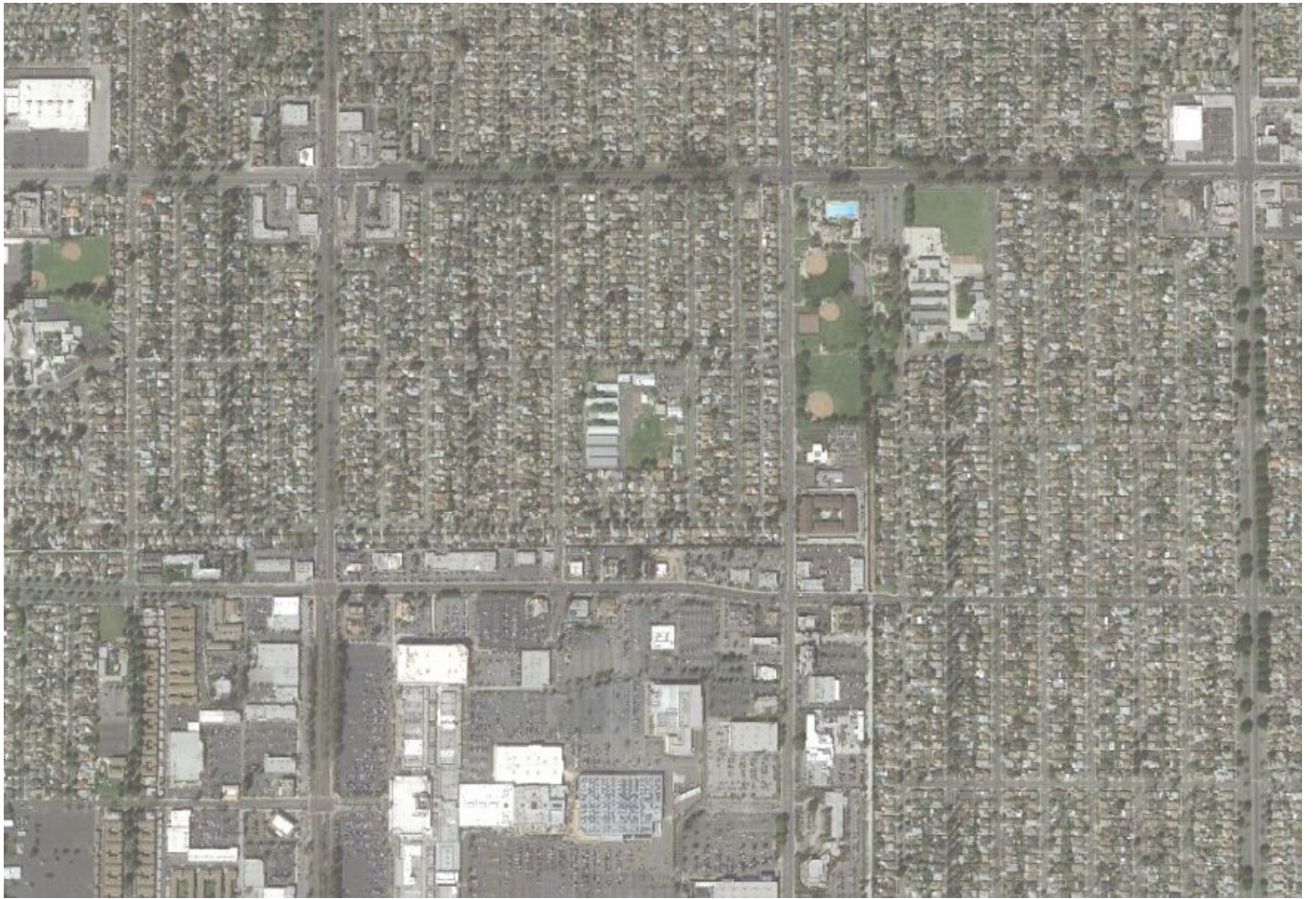
*Edward Scissorhands* (dir. Tim Burton)

1990

At the same time, Christopher Alexander contextualized and broke down the image regime in *A City Is Not a Tree* (1965). Lamenting the rise of “artificial cities”<sup>32</sup> built en masse through techniques in mimicry, Alexander suggested that **our obsessive-compulsive desires for neatness and avoidance of conflict** built an environment conducive to the proliferation of subdivisions. Conversely, “natural cities” harbor a “semilattice”<sup>33</sup> about which a complex and lively fabric functions. Planned cities are perfectly straight and symmetrical around their center (which itself exists only to serve our collective capitalist latencies).

**Ambiguity, overlap, and formal diversity create true experiential bliss; the artificial and forced image of suburbia does not allow for such complexity.** The “extreme compartmentalization”<sup>34</sup> so feared by Alexander had become the norm by the time *The Truman Show* and its brethren lamented its existence.





**WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SUBURBAN IMAGE,  
THERE EXISTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO  
WELD THE ARTIFICIAL TO THE SEMILATTICE.**

**THE ARCHITECTURAL GUIDELINES ARE ALREADY  
IN PLACE, AND ONLY REQUIRE MANIPULATION.**

**RATHER THAN SUGGEST THAT SUBURBIA  
EXISTS IN TWO DISPARATE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT,  
CONSIDERING THE HETEROTOPIAS INHERENT  
TO EX-URBAN STRUCTURE AS SITE MAY YIELD  
SURPRISING SYNCHRONICITIES BETWEEN  
PASTORAL AND DOMESTIC SPACE.**

# THE IN-BETWEEN

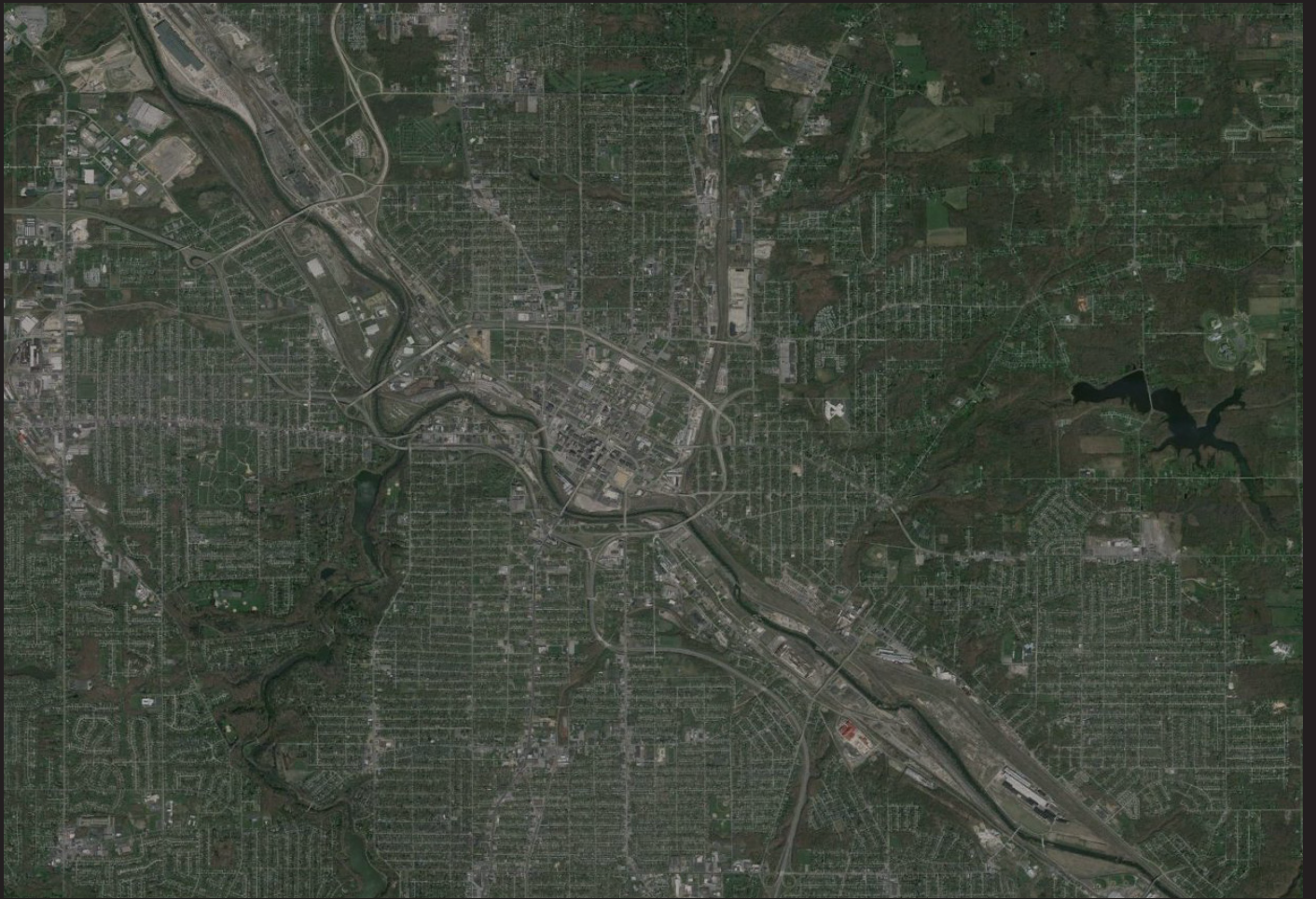
facing page (figure 5.1):  
Alexander MacLean  
*'Princeton, NJ'*  
2003



In 2008, the city council in Youngstown, Ohio drafted a plan alongside Mayor Jay Williams that would abandon existing re-development strategies<sup>35</sup>. They had, for the most part, failed to initiate the economic and domestic activity necessary to sustain a city of Youngstown's size. The Rust Belt town had been hit particularly hard in the three decades preceding Mayor Williams' radical plan.

Youngstown consists of a central downtown core, which is comfortably urban. But radiating from the shopping district, alongside the Mahoning River, are a series of subdivisions lacking contextual adherence<sup>36</sup>.

The suburban structure, while within the city limits, behaved for quite some time as the postwar suburban image prescribes<sup>37</sup>. Serving the local mills and factories, they together formed a bucolic suburban environment.



The shutdown of these factories in 1977 precipitated the departure of half the city's population (once as high as 150,000 residents)<sup>38</sup>.

In order to survive, the city has gone about demolishing unowned and abandoned suburban homes, effectively shrinking the city. It has begun to dynamically respond to changes in population, yielding to the ebbs and flows of city size, reacting to change not as a fixed relic but as a capricious participant in a new movement<sup>39</sup>.

The project has been extremely successful.

**The image of suburbia need not remain fixed; it can change, adapt, and mature as does the built environment.**



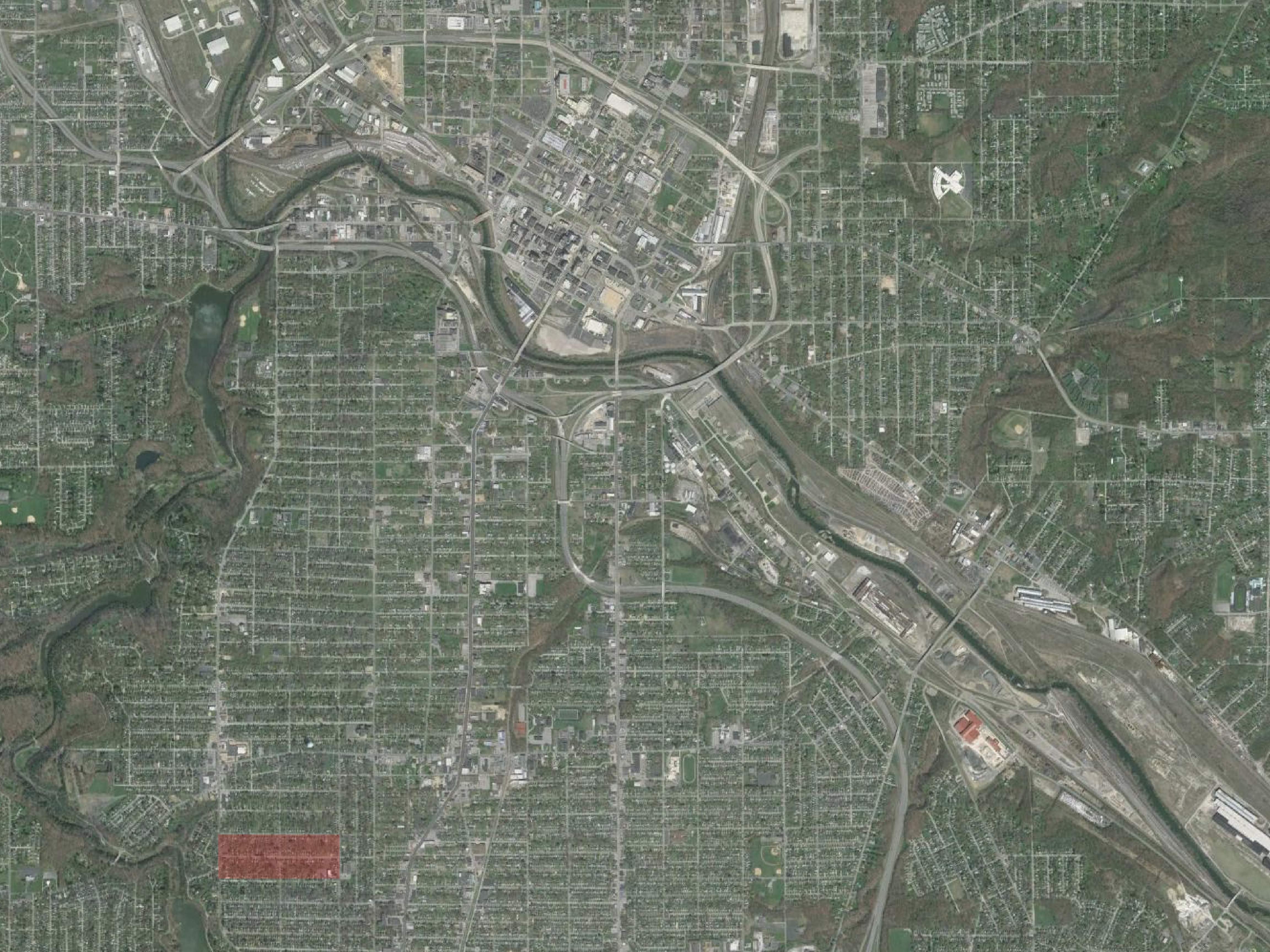


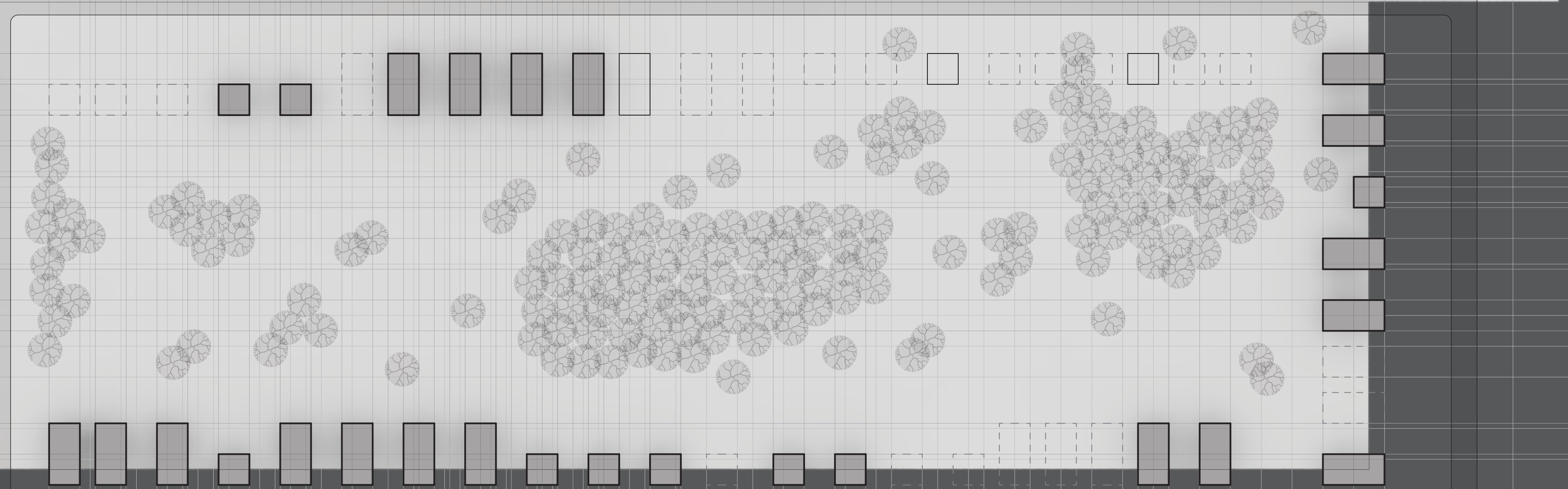
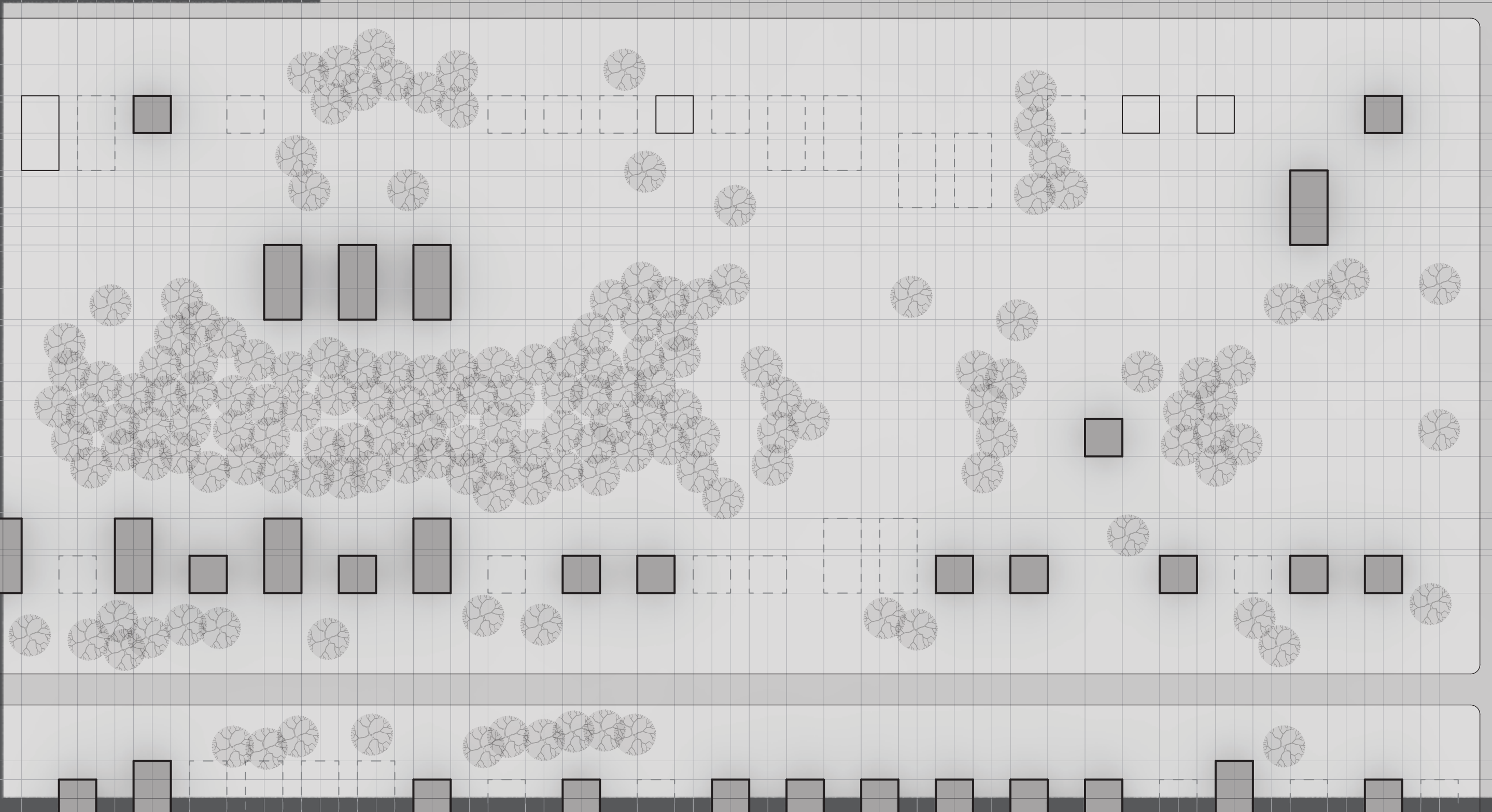
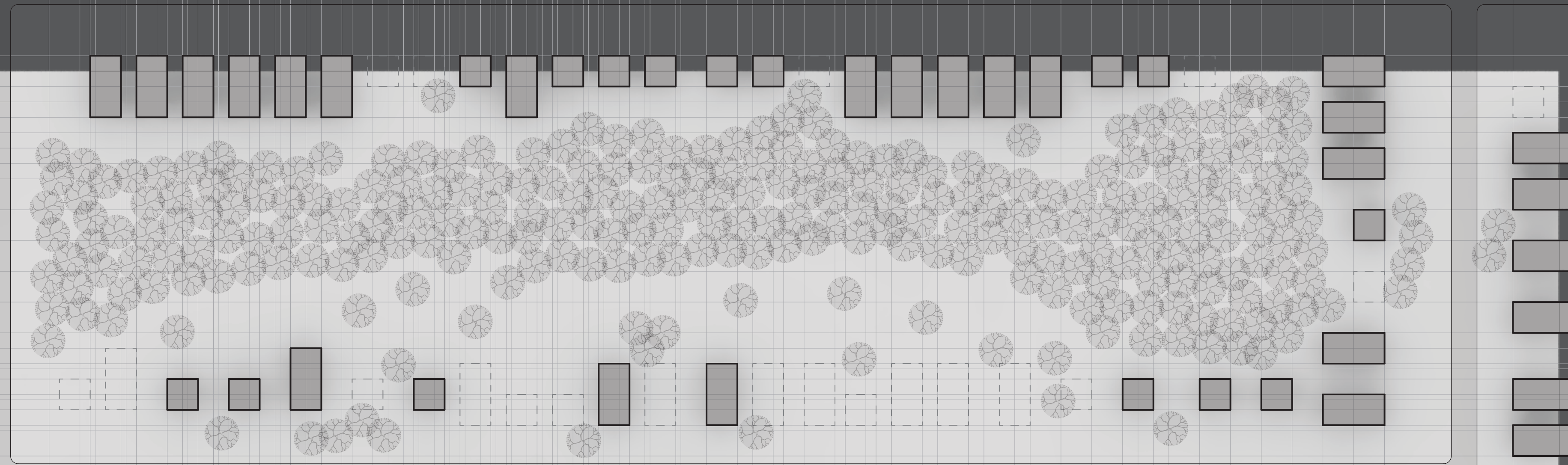
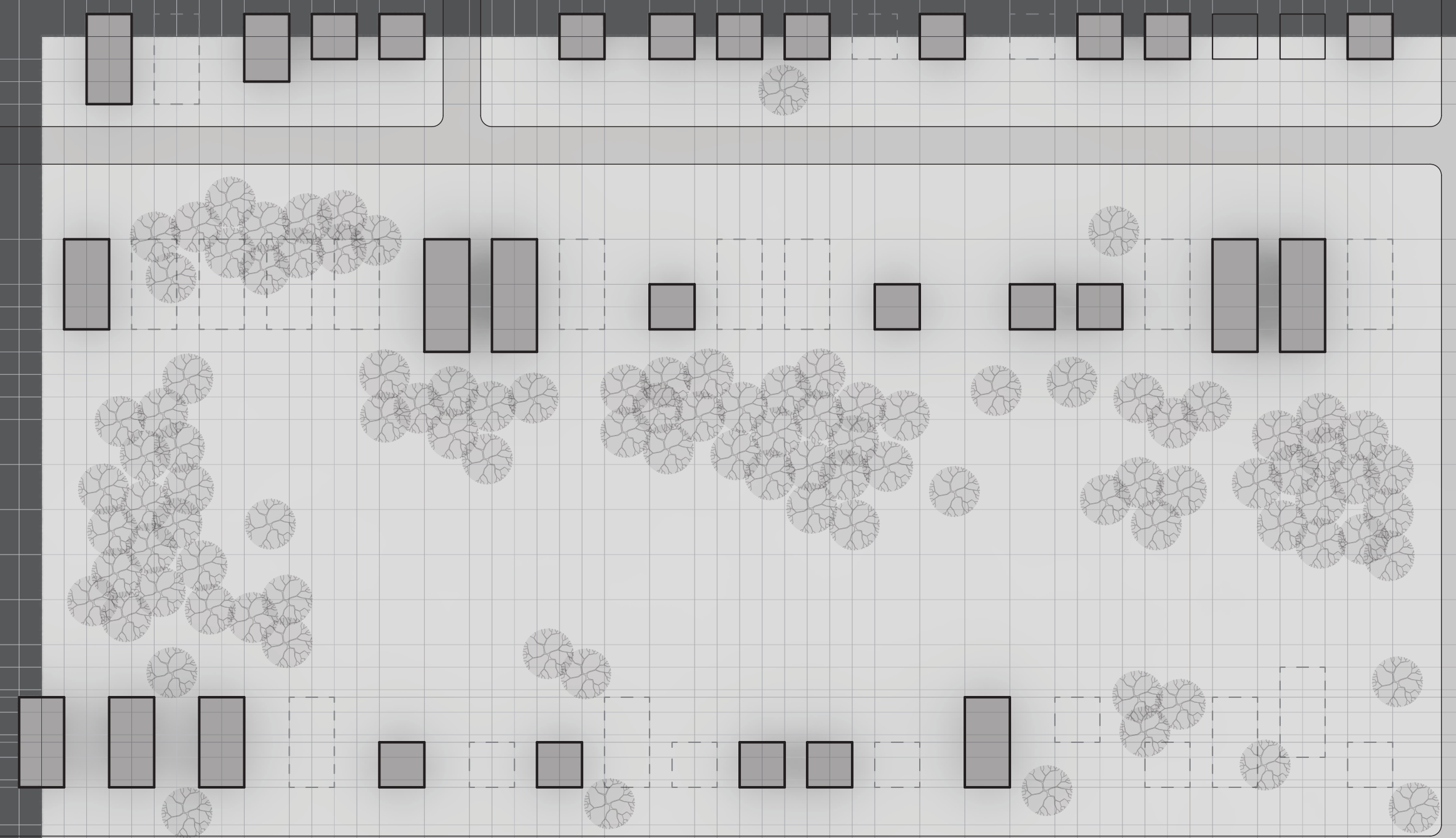
**SUBURBAN HETEROTOPIAS -- THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TWO ADJACENT OR SYSTEMICALLY-RELATED PLOTS, THE SPACE WEDGED ALONGSIDE THE DOMESTIC AND THE PUBLIC WITHIN EACH PROPERTY, AND A VISUALIZATION OF THE HYPERBOLIC ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF AND AGAINST SUBURBIA -- OFFER A NUMBER OF ARCHITECTURAL OPPORTUNITIES.**

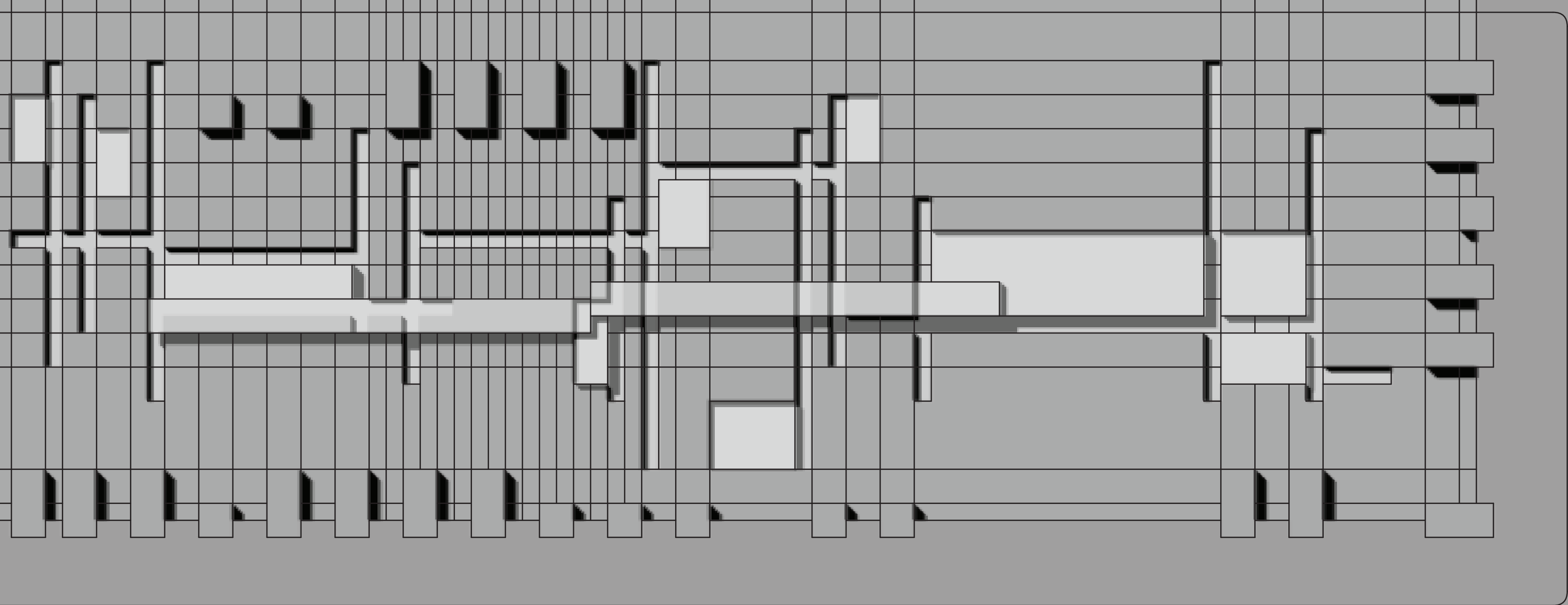
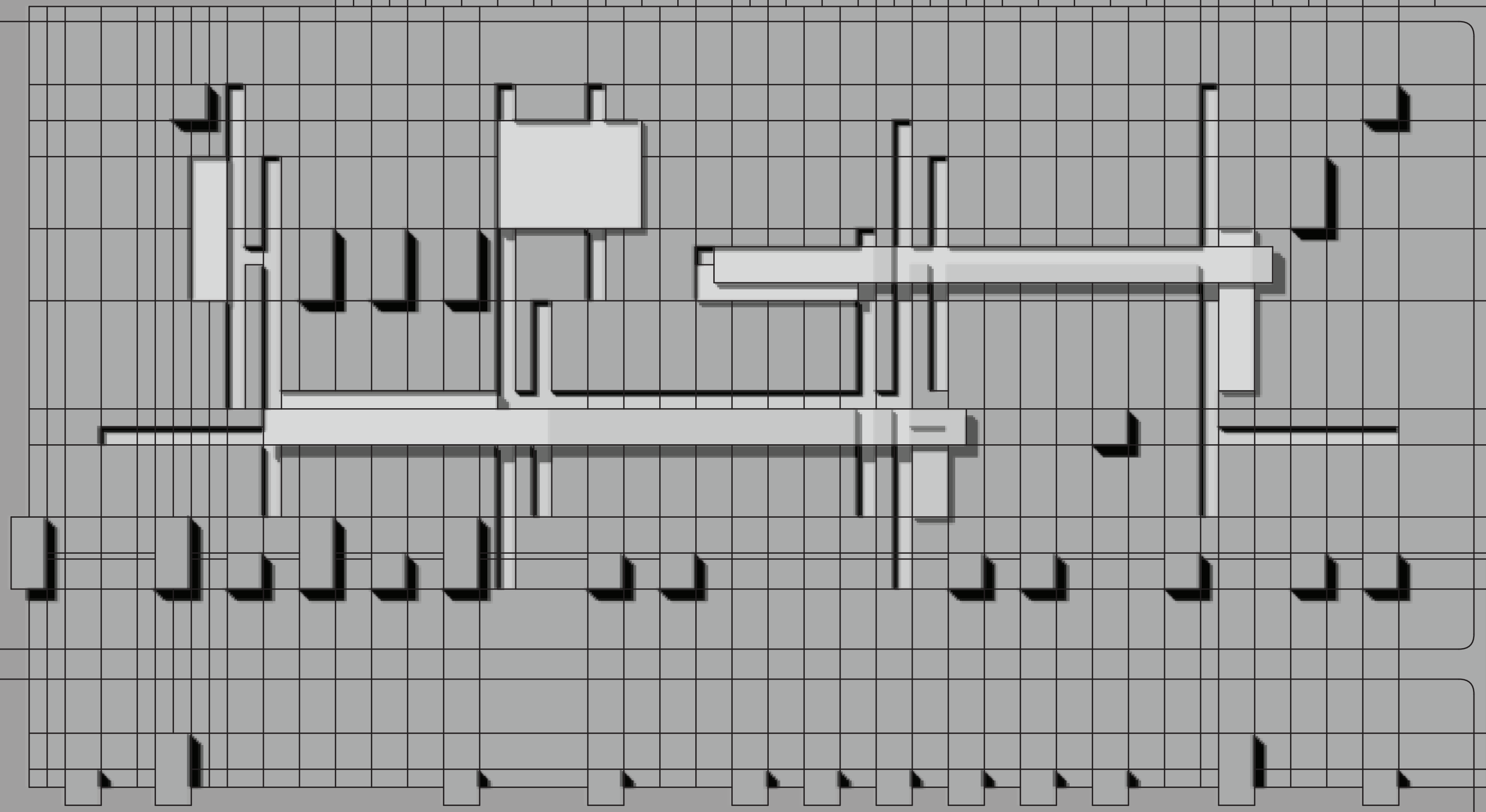
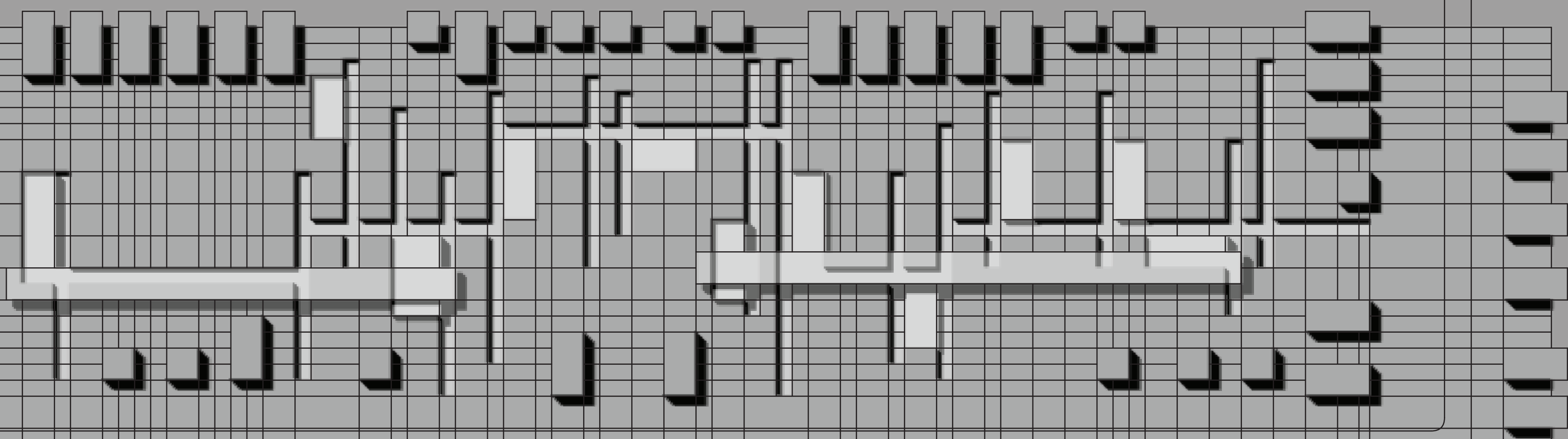
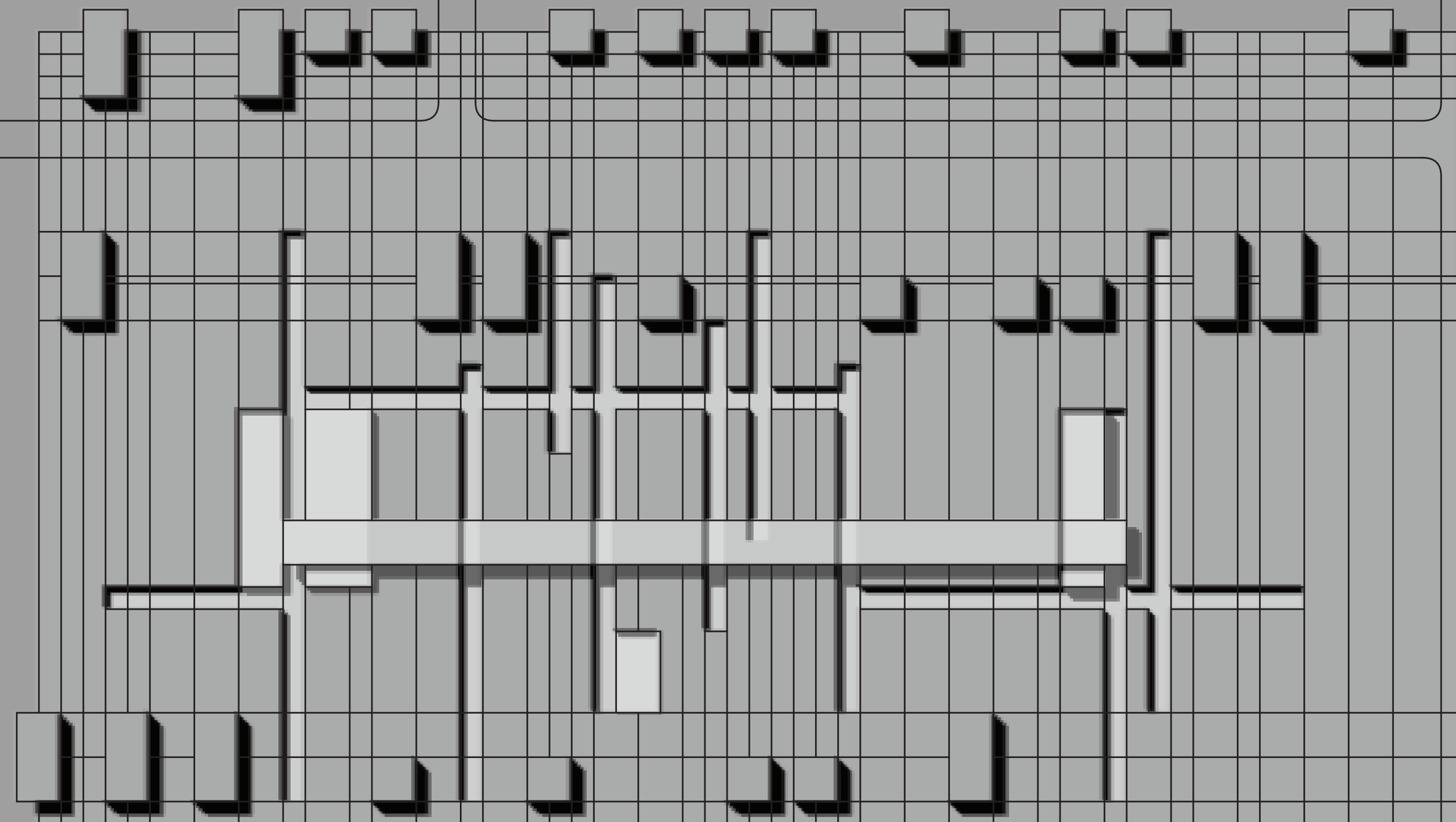
**THE IMAGINED PHYSICAL SPACE FOR THAT WHICH IS  
OTHERWISE UNBUILT IS THE SITE.**

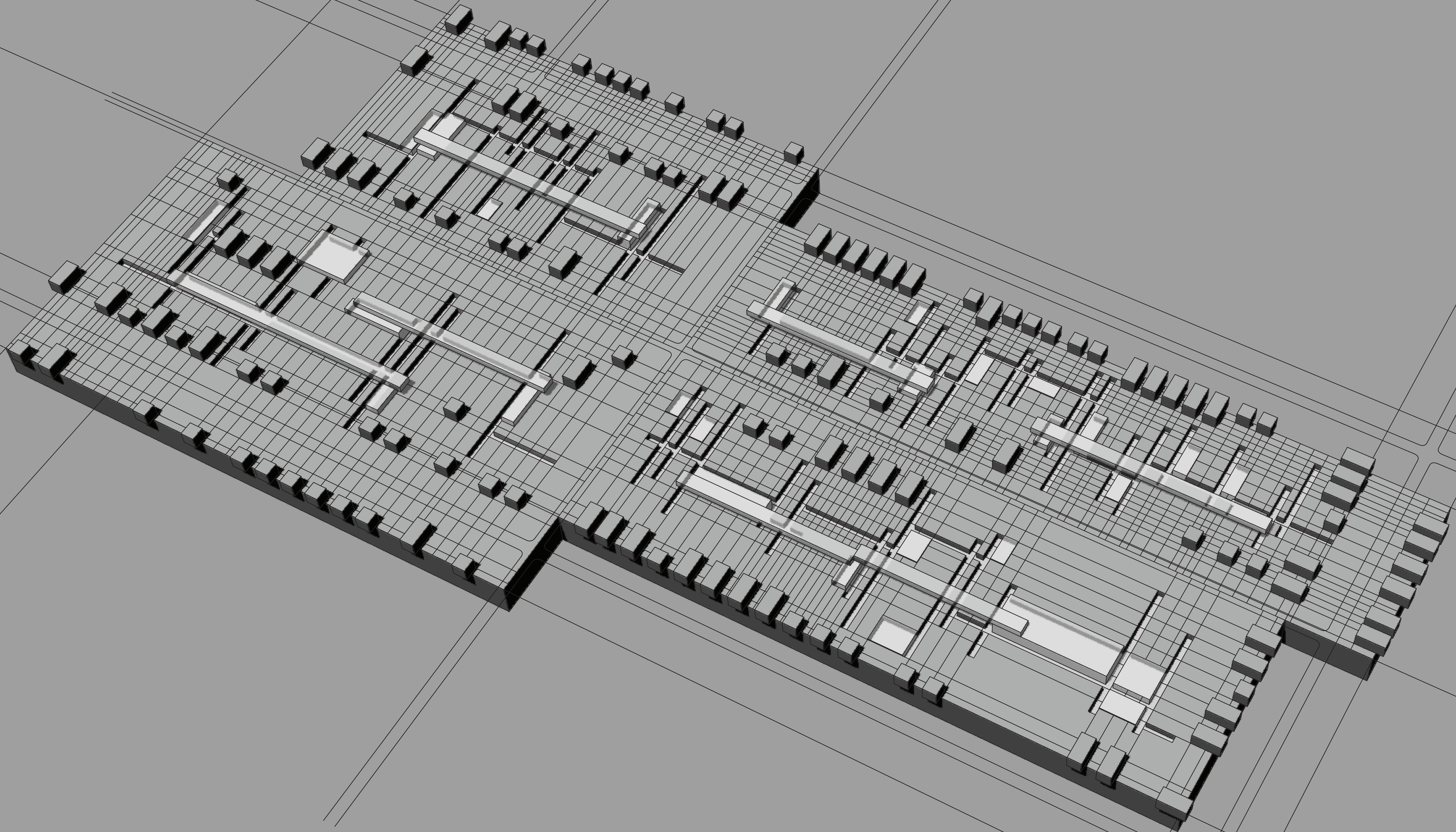
**THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE EXISTING  
HETEROTOPIAS CAN GENERATE AN ARCHITECTURAL  
STATEMENT THAT PULLS FROM EACH STANCE AS THE  
HETEROTOPIA REQUIRES.**

# THE EXPERIMENT:

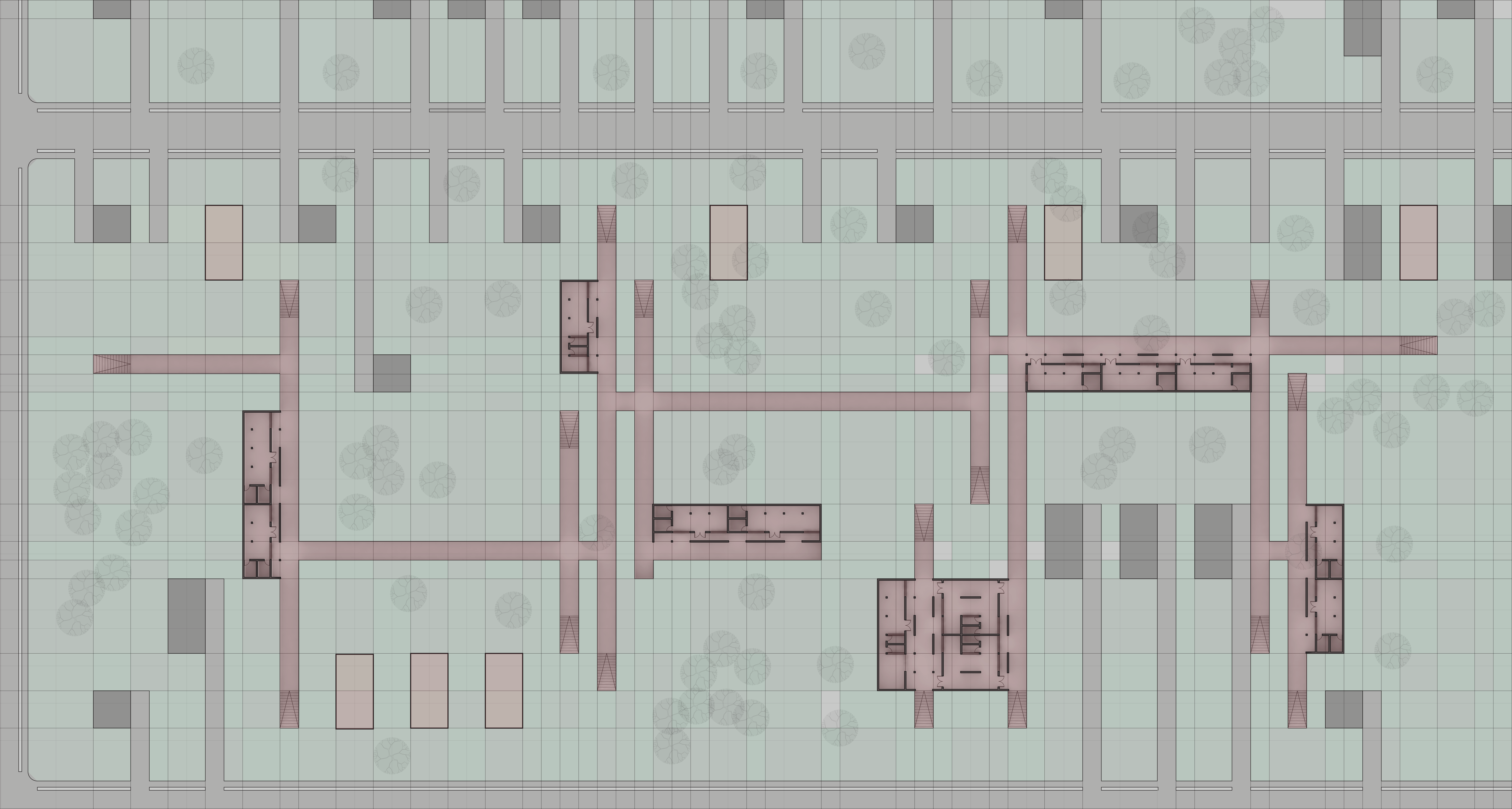


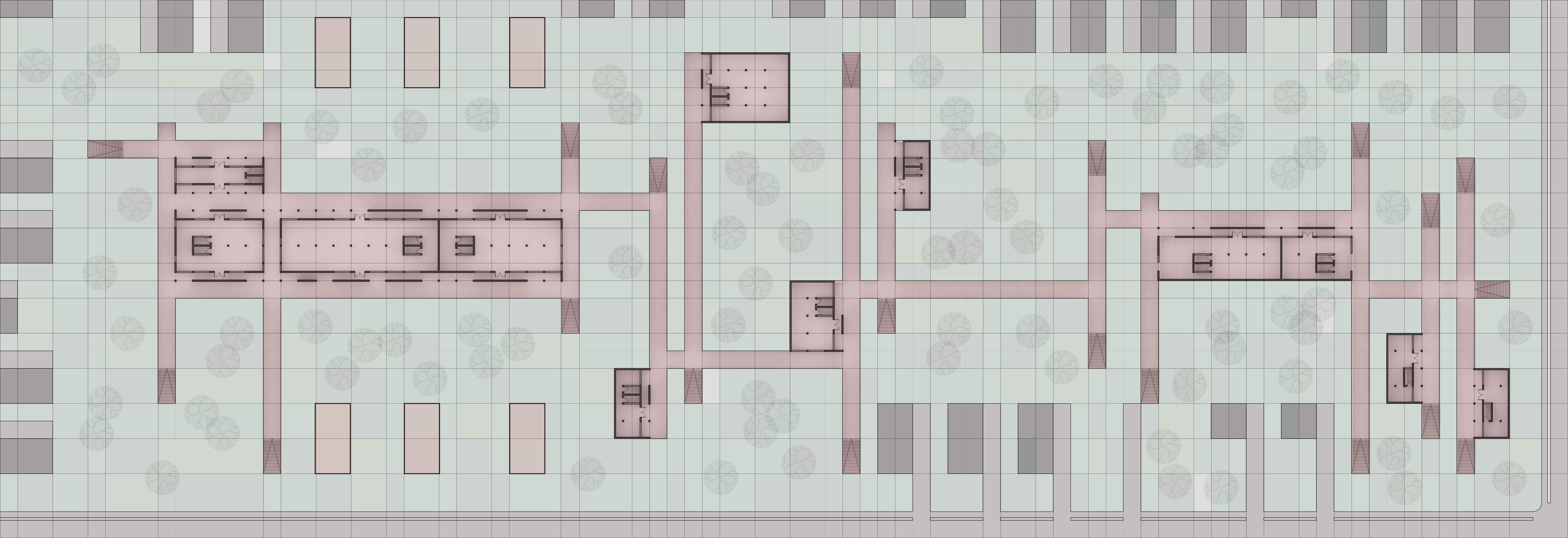


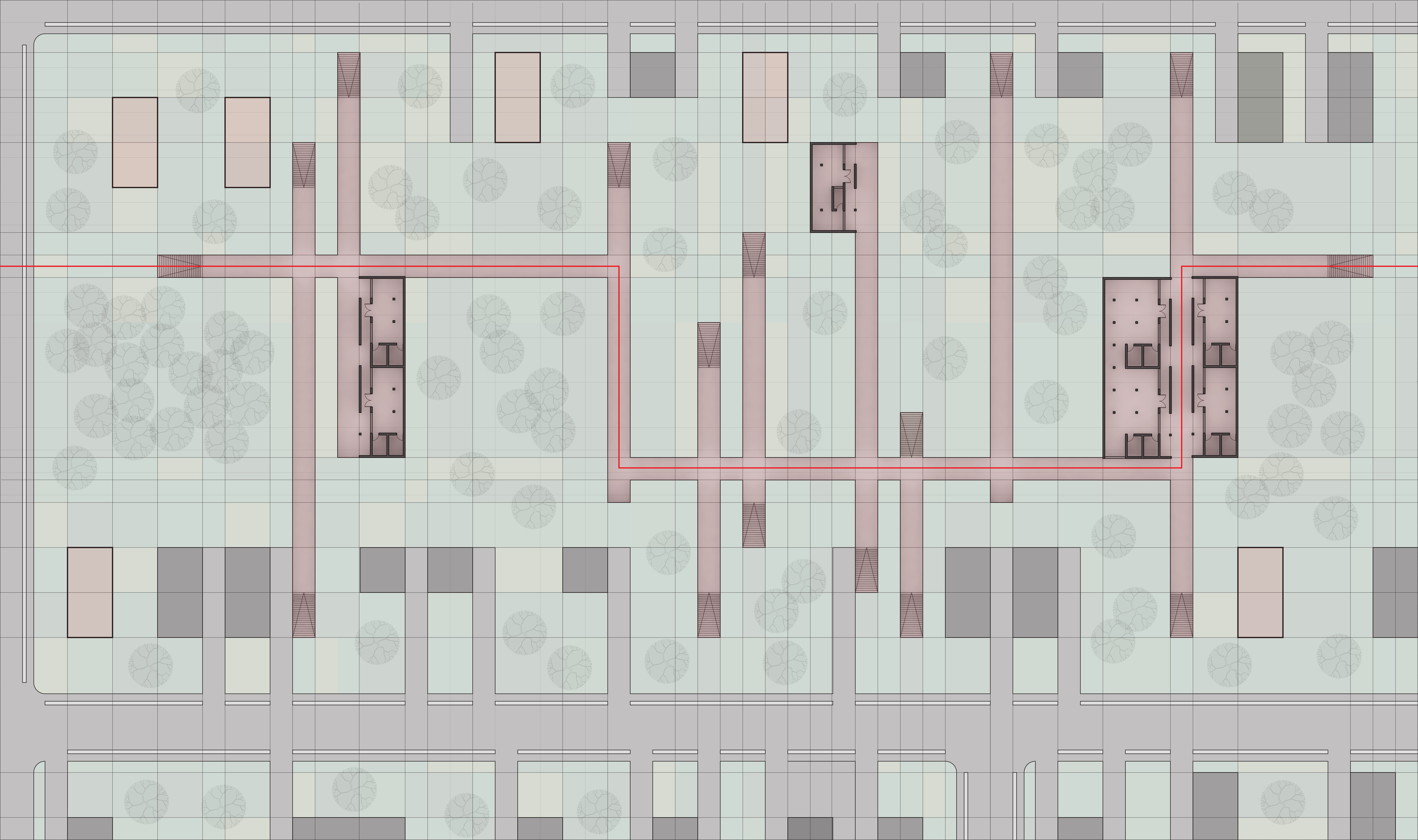


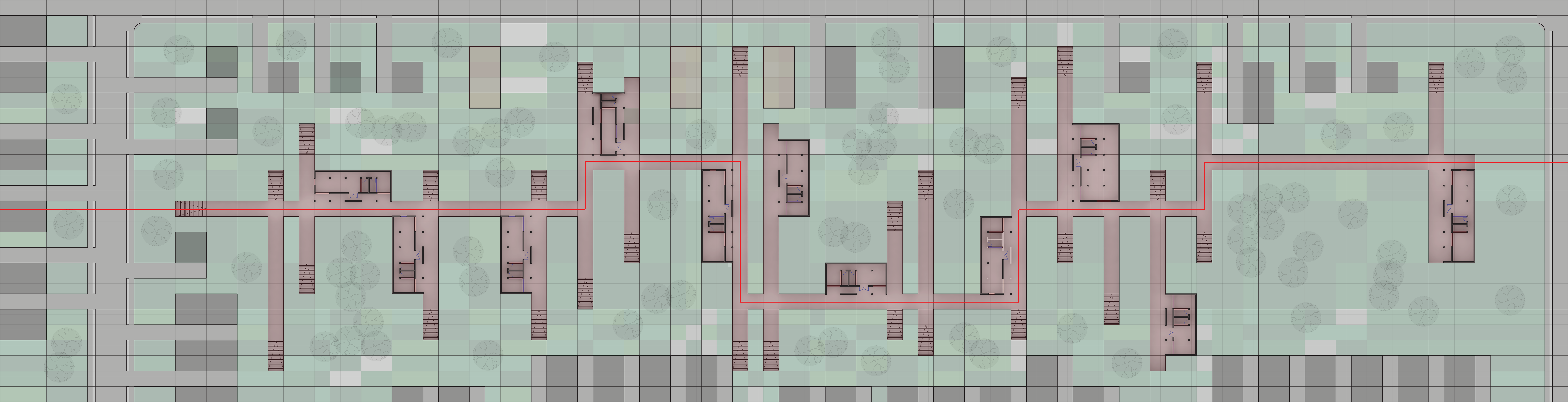












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Barnett, Jonathan. *The Fractured Metropolis*. New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

Arguing that American cities are splitting apart, Barnett suggests that new suburban centers are no longer satellites of the urban; rather, the developing new city lacks the systemic fortitude exhibited in traditional city centers. Whereas urban centers have often been constructed within a single framework, suburban clusters compete and operate under a Capitalist tabula rasa.

Bell, Dale and Harry Wiland. *Edens Lost and Found*. White River, VT: Chelsea Green, 2006.

Bell and Wiland make efforts to propose a 'solution' to sprawl by presenting a series of urban case studies. While the content is presumptive, it offers a discussion regarding urban identity and individuality.

Colomina, Beatriz. *Domesticity at War*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007.

After establishing the various connections between modern architecture and armed conflict, Colomina argues that the postwar form of domesticity was itself a means of controlling the masses. Images of domestic happiness, she suggests, are part of an expansive and orchestrated campaign.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1970.

Debord's opus is a critique of consumer culture and the curated Capitalist image. The author laments the homogenization of society and its affect on political discourse, insisting that postwar cultures are passively and subconsciously controlled by visuality.

Delillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1984.

A canonical work of postmodern fiction, Delillo's work discusses the relationship between suburban melancholy and one's knowledge that one day he or she will die. The novel comments extensively on the forces and systems both in and beyond our control that so closely dictate our behavior.

Gallagher, Leigh. *The End of the Suburbs*. New York: Penguin, 2013.

Gallagher's investigation looks into the economic and political forces that have reversed the flight from cities that marked postwar suburbia. With a background in both real estate and investigative journalism, Gallagher has the chops to break down an identity crisis in understandable terms.

Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

Arguing that Americans no longer desire a sense of community when choosing a home, Jackson presents a series of case studies which each provide a great deal of information regarding permanence, domesticity, and landscape.

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Suggesting that American suburbia is unique, Jackson attempts to identify the ex-urban experience as substandard. While briefly describing the forces under which suburbia was created, he focuses on the upper class's psychological and social attraction to anything non-urban.

MacLean, Alex S. *Designs on the Land: Exploring America from the Air*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003.

MacLean's aerial photography explicitly points to the pattern language inherent to America's landscape. At the same time, a number of critics contribute informal discussions on urban sprawl and the relationship between geography and space-making.

Rupnik, Ivan. *A Peripheral Moment: Experiments in Architectural Agency*. Barcelona: Actar, 2010.

This record of exchanges between the author and various architectural historians (Kenneth Frampton and Aaron Betsky included) regarding an intense period of architectural experimentation in Croatia over the last decade. Many of the projects were devised as responses to political and social considerations, questioning the force architecture may hold in practice.

Saunders, George. *Pastoralia*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2000.

Saunders's compilation of his own short stories provides a (fictionalized) look into the quirks and behaviors resultant of suburban isolation. The stories, while at times intentionally un-real, still establish believable characters who themselves are driven towards insanity by the cultural, social, and political forces embedded in suburban life.



